



ANNUAL REPORT

2020 - 2021



"ONE OF OUR FAVORITES IN CHICAGO"

DEAN RICHARDS, WGN

"FEELS LIKE HOME"

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**"A TRIBUTE TO THE LIBERATING POWER
ART HAS IN PEOPLE'S LIVES."**

PICTURE THIS POST

**“ONE OF CHICAGO’S MOST VENERABLE
OFF-LOOP THEATERS.”**

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

**“EVERYTHING THAT IS SO REMARKABLE, SO RICH AND
TREASURABLE ABOUT CHICAGO’S STOREFRONT THEATER
SCENE IS EMBODIED IN AMERICAN BLUES THEATER.”**

CHICAGO ON THE AISLE

**“THE ENTIRE TROUPE’S TALENT IS
MATCHED BY ITS GENEROSITY!”**

THE LYNN SAGE FOUNDATION

Season 35 - "Home Sweet Home"

From the Literal to Figurative

We extend our gratitude for your support of American Blues Theater. Your belief in our artistic programming, community service, and our artists kept us going this year. We named Season 35 - "Home Sweet Home" in celebration of our 35th anniversary. We never expected the entire season to be homebound—literally. The pandemic decimated our industry and shelved the careful curation of our milestone season.

The unexpected pause in programming led to fundamental and existential questions. We contemplated whether to pursue a season at all. Had we reached the pinnacle? Should we celebrate our past achievements and sunset gracefully? Fortunately, the resounding response was Beckettian, "You must go on; I can't go on; I'll go on." Spoiler alert: the next thirty-some pages demonstrate our commitment to survival.

Our figurative artistic home resides in our hearts and minds. We quickly accepted the constraint: produce live programming from our personal homes. We eschewed archival videos and recordings. We challenged ourselves to create one-time live viewing events. We connected our artists to audiences through audio, video, and written participation.

We believe the power of live performance lies in its ephemeral quality.

We created *The Room* staged-reading series; *The Garage* concert series; continued our anti-racism education; fulfilled our civic-minded responsibilities through *Our Home, Our Vote*; continued the *Ripped Festival* and *Blue Ink Award*; created *Classes for the Masses* for industry workers and the general population; provided \$60k+ in stimulus payments to our Ensemble and Artistic Affiliates; and we presented *It's a Wonderful Life: Live [on Zoom]* for an entire run.

We received a gift during Season 35—the confirmation to continue.



GWENDOLYN (WENDY) WHITESIDE

Artistic Director



ABOUT AMERICAN BLUES THEATER

Winner of American Theatre Wing's prestigious National Theatre Company Award, American Blues Theater is a premier arts organization with an intimate environment that patrons, artists, and all Chicagoans call home. **American Blues Theater explores the American identity through the plays it produces and communities it serves.** American Blues Theater follows three guiding values both on and off its stages—to be **accessible, responsible, and true.**

We are Chicago's **second-oldest Equity Ensemble theater.** As of 2020, our theater and artists received 221 Joseph Jefferson Awards and nominations that celebrate excellence in Chicago theater and 40 Black Theatre Alliance Awards. Our artists are honored with Pulitzer Prize nominations, Academy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, Emmy Awards, and numerous other accolades. Our artists work throughout the nation - including Broadway and regional theaters - and loyally return to our stage.

American Blues Theater is committed to developing the classic plays and musicals of tomorrow. More than half of our mainstage productions are world and Chicago premieres. Our new play development consists of a variety of programs – including world and Chicago premieres, the nationally-recognized *Blue Ink Playwriting Award*, commissions, *The Room* staged readings, *The Garage* concerts, and annual *Ripped Festival* of new short-plays.

We believe it is an honor and duty to serve our community. We raise awareness of other non-profit organizations' commendable causes through creative collaborations. We hold food drives, distribute promotional materials, offer free post-show discussions, provide complimentary tickets, honor military personnel, hold exclusive performances for underserved communities, and raise awareness for children's surgeries. We donate proceeds from "Pediatric Previews" to St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital.

American Blues Theater is your Chicago home for bold, exceptional, and relevant performances. **Your ticket purchases and donations help us make Chicago the first city in all our hearts.**



Pictured: the American Blues Ensemble; top row: Dawn Bach, Matthew Brumlow, Manny Buckley, Dara Cameron, Casey Campbell, Darren Canady, Austin Cook, Ian Paul Custer, and Elyse Dolan; middle row: Jared Gooding, Marty Higginbotham, Philip Earl Johnson, Lindsay Jones, Steve Key, Ed Kross, Warren Levon, Michael Mahler, and Heather Meyers; bottom row: John Mohrlein, Christopher J. Neville, Cara Parrish, Suzanne Petri, Camille Robinson, Editha Rosario-Moore, Chuck Smith, Wandachristine, and Gwendolyn Whiteside.



IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: LIVE IN CHICAGO!

THE CHICAGO ORIGINAL as a LIVE INTERACTIVE SHOW on Zoom

NOVEMBER 12, 2020 - JANUARY 2, 2021

FROM FRANK CAPRA'S "IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE"

DIRECTED BY ARTISTIC DIRECTOR GWENDOLYN WHITESIDE

MUSIC DIRECTED BY ENSEMBLE MEMBER MICHAEL MAHLER

ORIGINAL COMPOSITION BY ENSEMBLE MEMBER AUSTIN COOK

FEATURING ENSEMBLE MEMBERS MANNY BUCKLEY, DARA CAMERON, IAN PAUL CUSTER, MICHAEL MAHLER, AND JOHN MOHRLEIN, ARTISTIC AFFILIATES AUDREY BILLINGS AND SHAWN GOUDIE, AND BRANDON DAHLQUIST

READ THE
DIGITAL PROGRAM



George Bailey – the Everyman from small town Bedford Falls whose dreams of escape and adventure were stopped by family obligation and civic duty – has fallen onto desperate times. Only a miracle can save him from despair. This is the second longest-running holiday play in Chicago! For 19 years, the American Blues Ensemble has treated Chicago audiences to a live 1940s radio broadcast. The incredible cast recreates the entire town of Bedford Falls with Foley sound effects, an original score, and holiday carols.

"The Don't-Miss Show this Holiday Season" - Chicago Tribune

"Heart-warming and Entertaining. Delivers plenty of holiday cheer, virtually" - Chicago Sun-Times

"Stellar. This warm, sincere Chicago holiday tradition—reimagined live via Zoom—still bursts with homespun charm." - PicksInSix

"Holiday Delight" - Highly Recommended by Let's Play

COMMUNITY SERVICE

We honor one healthcare service worker per performance with a "Healthcare Hero" tribute. We proudly partner with NAMI Chicago, USO, and U.S. Dept. of Veteran Affairs. We offer complimentary tickets to CPS teachers, the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention (IL chapter), and American Indian Center.



American
Foundation
for Suicide
Prevention



38

PERFORMANCES

16

ARTISTS

1,907

PATRONS



WATCH THE TRAILER



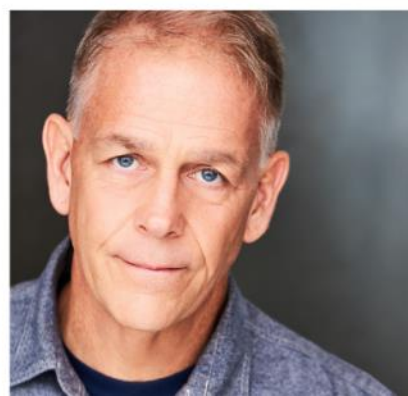
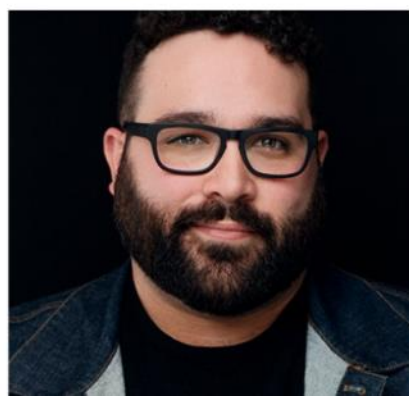
WATCH THE ACTORS BUILD THEIR SETS IN THEIR HOMES



THE ROOM

A READING SERIES

via
ZOOM



THE ROOM

The Room is an online reading series that brings original work, plays in-development, and new stories to Chicago audiences. Offering in-depth discussions as well as action steps for patrons that intersect with themes of the plays. *The Room* ran virtually throughout the 2021 fiscal year.

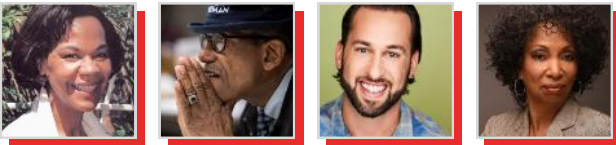
A SHOT: #A LOVE STORY INSPIRED BY BLACK LIVES MATTER

BY GLORIA BOND CLUNIE DIRECTED BY ENSEMBLE MEMBER CHUCK SMITH

STARRING ENSEMBLE MEMBERS IAN PAUL CUSTER AND WANDACHRISTINE

AUGUST 7, 2020

When Mrs. Nettie Morris goes to the storefront campaign office of congressional hopeful Jeffrey Talbott determined to save her grandson from Chicago's violent streets and incarceration with an ingenious plan – a very personal life and death struggle takes a surprising turn.



READ THE
BACKSTAGE GUIDE



YES... MY NAME IS LUCY!

BY ENSEMBLE MEMBER WANDACHRISTINE DIRECTED BY ENSEMBLE MEMBER CHUCK SMITH

STARRING DEANNA DUNAGAN AND ENSEMBLE MEMBER CAMILLE ROBINSON

SEPTEMBER 18, 2020

To earn extra cash, Sarah James, a young, struggling Black filmmaker, decorates the set for an upcoming documentary on the life of deceased Chicagoan and Civil Rights activist, Lucy Hassell Montgomery. While busily making last minute changes, Sarah has an unexpected visitor...Lucy herself.



READ THE
BACKSTAGE GUIDE



11

READINGS



41

ARTISTS



1,091

PATRONS

Pictured on previous page: the writers and directors of *The Room*; top row: Gloria Bond Clunie, Chuck Smith, Wandachristine, Benjamin Benne, and Ana Velazquez; second row: Zachary Stevenson, Caridad Svich, Lavina Jadhvani, Manny Buckley, and Kristoffer Diaz; third row: Ian Paul Custer, Shannon Pritchard, and Karissa Murrell Meyers; bottom row: Andrew Coopman, Philip Earl Johnson, and Ada Cheng

THE ROOM

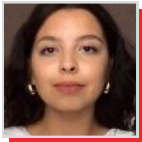
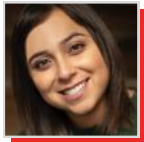
ALMA

BY 2019 BLUE INK PLAYWRITING AWARD WINNER BENJAMIN BENNE DIRECTED BY ANA VELAZQUEZ

STARRING JAZMIN CORONA AND KEREN DIAZ DE LEON

OCTOBER 18 & 19, 2020

Working mom Alma has single-handedly raised her daughter, Angel, on tough love, home-cooked comida, and lots of prayers. But on the eve of the all-important SAT, Alma discovers her daughter isn't at home studying. A sacrifice from Alma's past weighs heavy on their present. Will the American Dream cost them a life together?



READ THE
BACKSTAGE GUIDE



HEAR FROM PLAYWRIGHT BENJAMIN BENNE

DAYS OF DECISION—the music of Phil Ochs

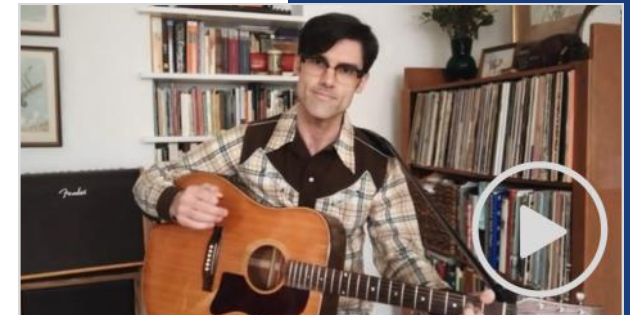
DEvised AND PERFORMED BY ARTISTIC AFFILIATE ZACHARY STEVENSON

NOVEMBER 1 & 2, 2020

A virtual Phil Ochs tribute concert performed by award-winning Artistic Affiliate Zachary Stevenson ("Buddy" in *The Buddy Holly Story*). Featuring powerful songs and incredible stories, Zach reveals his personal journey into the music of this legendary folk singer who stood for freedom, equality, and social justice.



READ THE
BACKSTAGE GUIDE



HEAR FROM CREATOR & PERFORMER ZACHARY STEVENSON

RED BIKE

BY CARIDAD SVICH DIRECTED BY LAVINA JADHWANI

STARRING AUGUST FORMAN

December 9, 2020

What kind of future will you have living in these here United States? Remember when you were eleven years old and you had a bike, one that made you dream about a world bigger than the one in which you live? This is that memory. Except it is now.



READ THE
BACKSTAGE GUIDE



WATCH AN EXERPT PERFORMED BY AUGUST FORMAN
AND HEAR FROM LAVINA JADHWANI & CARIDAD SVICH

THE ROOM

THE LION

WRITTEN AND PERFORMED BY ENSEMBLE MEMBER MANNY BUCKLEY

JANUARY 15, 2021

The Lion tells the compelling story of arguably the nineteenth century's most famous African-American civil rights activist, Frederick Douglass. Douglass rose from beginnings as a slave in Maryland to become a self-taught writer, publisher, orator, abolitionist, and politician.



READ THE
BACKSTAGE GUIDE



HEAR FROM PLAYWRIGHT & PERFORMER MANNY BUCKLEY

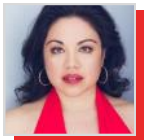
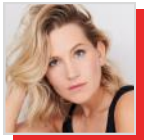
FOOTBALL, FOOTBALL, FOOTBALL, FOOTBALL (Or I Love Lave Dash)

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY KRISTOFFER DIAZ

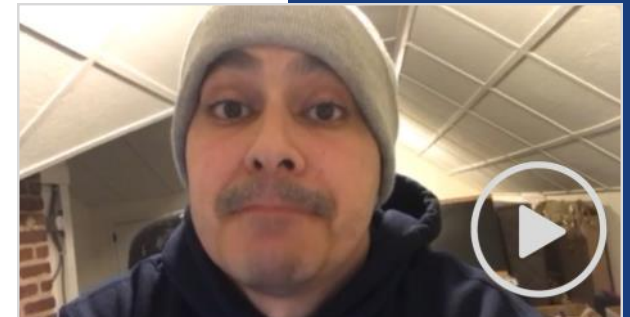
STARRING LORA LEE GAYER, SULI HOLUM, MARIN IRELAND, TAWNY NEWSOME, MARIA-CHRISTINA OLIVERAS, AND MAUREEN SEBASTIAN

FEBRUARY 5, 2021

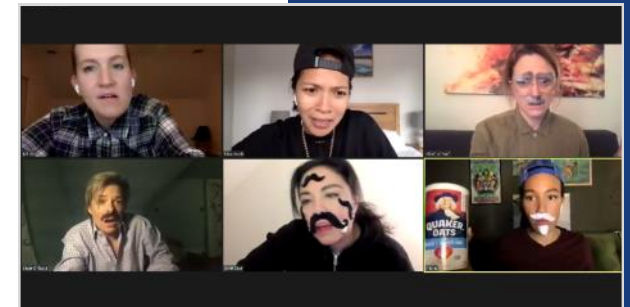
One professional football team must choose between two potential top draft picks: charismatic multiethnic finesse machine Lave Dash and salt-of-the-earth muscle monster Mervin Gufflinson the First. But when these two young legends join forces, it not only changes the game, but also all sports, and also the whole world, and maybe the entire universe. An insane comedy about masculinity, featuring an all-female cast.



READ THE
BACKSTAGE GUIDE



HEAR FROM PLAYWRIGHT KRISTOFFER DIAZ



THE CAST OF FOOTBALL, FOOTBALL, FOOTBALL, FOOTBALL

THE ROOM

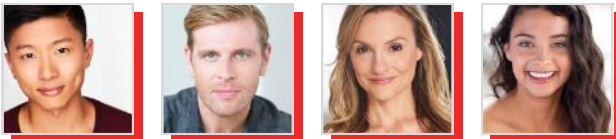
SANCTUARY CITY

CREATED AND DIRECTED BY ENSEMBLE MEMBER IAN PAUL CUSTER WRITTEN BY SHANNON PRITCHARD

STARRING ENSEMBLE MEMBERS IAN PAUL CUSTER, PHILIP EARL JOHNSON, AND CAMILLE ROBINSON; ARTISTIC AFFILIATE CISCO LOPEZ; AND YUCHI CHIU, BRANDON DAHLQUIST, MARIKA ENGLEHARDT, AND MOLLY HERNANDEZ.

MARCH 26, 2021

It's the last city in the country where you can become an American. Sanctuary City opens its gates to hopeful immigrants from around the world, who work and live in the city in order to gain citizenship. Anyone can get in, it's just hard to get out. This is the pilot episode of a neo-noir podcast in development.



READ THE
BACKSTAGE GUIDE

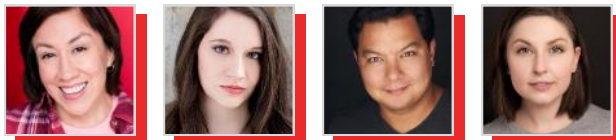
ON THE GREENBELT

BY KARISSA MURRELL MYERS DIRECTED BY ANDREW COOPMAN

STARRING ENSEMBLE MEMBER PHILIP EARL JOHNSON; ARTISTIC AFFILIATE J.G. SMITH; AND ISA ARCINIEGAS, JAZMIN CORONA, JESSICA ERVIN, PETER SIPLA, AND KARIN TERRY.

APRIL 30, 2021

Jules saw something in the Idaho hospital the night her mom died, but she'll never say what it was. Not to her ex, Olivia, and especially not to her brother, Jake, who keeps trying to convince her to go with him to the Greenbelt to spread their mom's ashes with their father, Alan. But try as she might, Jules can't shake the memories of the past that haunt her like a gin-soaked hangover as the day unravels the past events surrounding her mother's death come to light. *On the Greenbelt* explores family, love, memory, and the question of "how do we process grief?"



READ THE
BACKSTAGE GUIDE



HEAR FROM WRITER SHANNON PRITCHARD



HEAR FROM PLAYWRIGHT KARISSA MURRELL MYERS

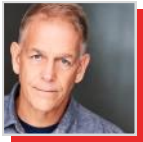
THE ROOM

THERE'S A CLOWN IN MY BUBBLE

WRITTEN AND PERFORMED BY ENSEMBLE MEMBER PHILIP EARL JOHNSON

MAY 14, 2021

Our physical, social network – or “bubble” – isn’t a new concept, but it certainly has been more relentless lately. Inspired by the idea of being inside the bubble – comedian, storyteller, and award-winning Ensemble Member Philip Earl Johnson turns to stories about the original bubble: family. Whether it’s with the family we came from or the one we helped create, life in the bubble is filled with certain moments of adaptation. And that’s when it gets ridiculous.



LOVING ACROSS BORDERS

WRITTEN AND PERFORMED BY ARTISTIC AFFILIATE ADA CHENG

June 25, 2021

Solo performer Ada Cheng explores how one learns womanhood, love, and abuse in different sociopolitical and cultural contexts through personal stories. An intense personal journey and autobiographical, this solo show weaves tales of breaking rules and broken hearts across borders. This performance is relevant to current debates about gender equality and women’s status in American society and across the globe.



READ THE
BACKSTAGE GUIDE



THE ROOM - COMMUNITY PARTNERS





THE GARAGE

The Garage is an online music series featuring the musical talent of Ensemble members and Artistic Affiliates. Following every concert, patrons are invited to stay in the virtual space to meet the artists. *The Garage* ran virtually throughout the 2021 fiscal year.

DEAD RINGER

PERFORMED BY ARTISTIC AFFILIATE ZACHARY STEVENSON

JANUARY 22, 2021

A live, interactive concert by award-winning Artistic Affiliate Zachary Stevenson, featuring highlights from his stage career including the music of Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, Phil Ochs, Hank Williams, and more.

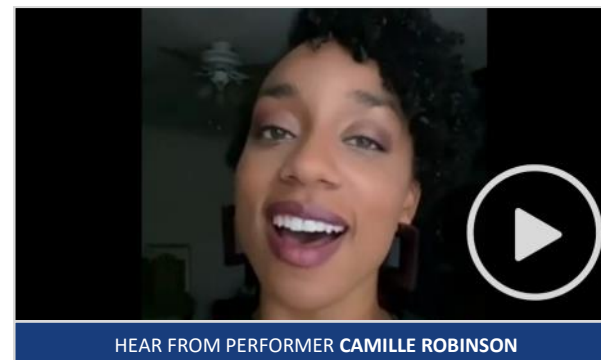
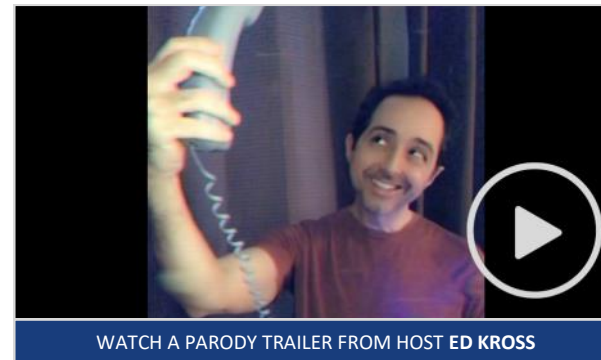


VALENTINES

PERFORMED BY AMERICAN BLUES ENSEMBLE MEMBERS AND ARTISTIC AFFILIATES

FEBRUARY 12, 2021

Celebrate Valentines with us – a little romantic, a little vengeful, and a whole lotta laughs. Hear songs from our American Blues artists' first love or first heartbreak. Live & interactive with audience participation and hosted by Cupid Ed Kross.



READ THE
DIGITAL PROGRAM



6
CONCERTS



18
ARTISTS



623
PATRONS

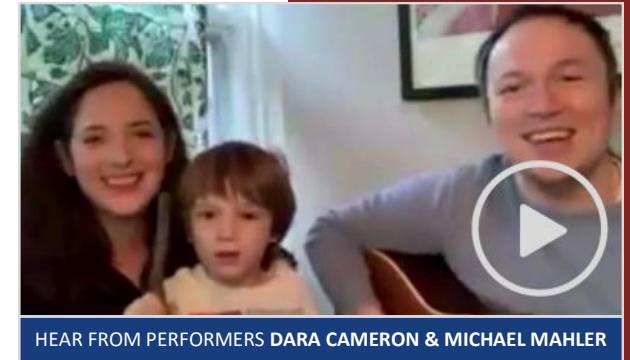
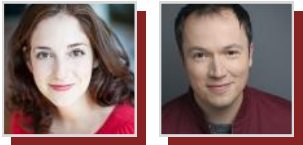
THE GARAGE

CALIFORNIA DREAMIN' - THE SONGS OF LAUREL CANYON

PERFORMED BY ENSEMBLE MEMBERS DARA CAMERON AND MICHAEL MAHLER

MARCH 12, 2021

Award-winning Ensemble Members Michael Mahler and Dara Cameron go on a musical journey through the scene that changed songwriting forever. Featuring songs by The Mamas and the Papas, James Taylor, Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon, Neil Young, and more. Relive a moment in American history when collaboration and camaraderie created classic albums and timeless music.

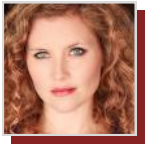


SHE WRITES THE SONGS

PERFORMED BY ARTISTIC AFFILIATE LIZ CHIDESTER

APRIL 23, 2021

Critically-acclaimed Artistic Affiliate Liz Chidester (*Buddy – The Buddy Holly Story*) highlights her favorite and most influential female singer / songwriters, including Joni Mitchell, Dolly Parton, Norah Jones, Tracy Chapman, Alanis Morissette, and more!



PIANO MAN - CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF MUSIC FROM BILLY JOEL

PERFORMED BY ENSEMBLE MEMBER IAN PAUL CUSTER

MUSIC DIRECTED BY ARTISTIC AFFILIATE ZACHARY STEVENSON

MAY 21, 2021

In 1971, Billy Joel debuted his first album. Fifty years later, award-winning Ensemble Member Ian Paul Custer pays tribute to one of the most iconic American singer / songwriters of all time by playing hits from *Cold Springs*, *Piano Man*, *Turnstiles*, and *The Stranger* for one-night only, live on Zoom.



THE GARAGE

AN EVENING OF LEGENDS - CELEBRATING THE MUSIC FROM THE 50s & 60s

PERFORMED BY ARTISTIC AFFILIATE **DENZEL TSOPNANG**

MUSIC DIRECTION & GUITAR BY ARTISTIC AFFILIATE **ZACHARY STEVENSON**

KEYBOARD BY ENSEMBLE MEMBER **IAN PAUL CUSTER**

JUNE 18, 2021

Award-winning Artistic Affiliate Denzel Tsopnang performs an unforgettable 60 minute tribute concert to America's 1950s/60s legends of Rhythm & Blues, Jazz, and Rock & Roll. Featuring incredible music from icon Sammy Davis Jr, "the most popular black female recording artist of the 50s" Dinah Washington, "The High Priestess of Soul" Nina Simone, and much more.



AN EVENING OF LEGENDS IN REHEARSAL



THE LIVE BROADCAST OF AN EVENING OF LEGENDS



AN EVENING OF LEGENDS ON ZOOM

THE GARAGE - COMMUNITY PARTNERS



ANTI-RACISM COMMITMENT

We grieve for the Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other underrepresented communities who have lost lives to racist violence and hatred. We support the demands for justice.

We know statements are not enough. We've reflected since our [statement of solidarity](#) (May 30, 2020), and understand that we, like so many other American theaters, profited from systemic racism in this country. Our privilege must be acknowledged. We must do better.

We must create a culture of racial equity across all areas of our organization. This is not a quick fix. **American Blues Theater commits to these lifelong pursuits:**

- to produce and amplify more voices from Black artists and artists of color in our mainstage programming.
- to increase representation in governance; to hire more Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and other underrepresented communities in staff and artistic positions.
- to further invest in our community service and arts education in under-resourced schools and neighborhoods.
- to deepen our public discussions and forums, providing pathways and opportunities for change.
- to educate and train the American Blues Theater family in becoming an actively anti-racist organization.
- to provide space and care for our Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and other underrepresented artists and patrons.
- to undergo an annual, organizational audit by third-party anti-racism professionals to hold ourselves accountable.

[Read Our Response to the We See You White American Theater Demands](#)

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The offices of American Blues Theater are located in Chicago, the traditional homelands of the Council of the Three Fires: the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi Nations. City of Chicago was founded by the son of an enslaved African woman who was regarded as the first non-Indigenous settler. His name was Jean Baptiste Point du Sable.

Many other nations including the Myaamia, Wea, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Thakiwaki, Meskwaki, Kiikaapoi, and Mascouten peoples also call this region home. This land has long been a center for Indigenous people to gather, trade, and maintain kinship ties.

Today, Chicago is home to one of the largest urban American Indian communities in the United States, and the country's oldest urban-based Native membership community center, the American Indian Center Chicago (AIC).

American Blues Theater makes this acknowledgment as part of our commitment to dismantling the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism.

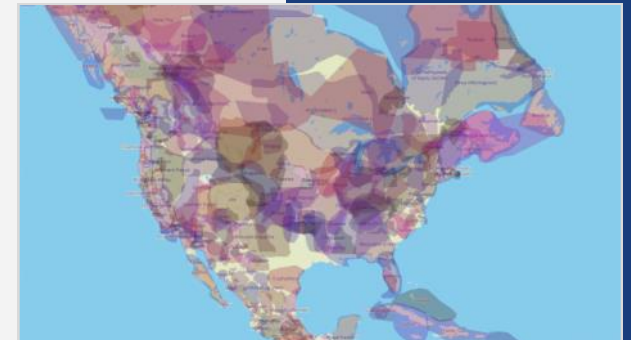
To learn more about land acknowledgements visit nativegov.org.

To learn more about & engage with the American Indian Center Chicago, visit aicchicago.org.

To learn more about the map, visit native-land.ca.

IN A RACIST SOCIETY,
IT IS NOT ENOUGH
TO BE NON-RACIST,
WE MUST BE ANTIRACIST.

— ANGELA DAVIS



IDEA WORKSHOPS & INITIATIVES

As part of our commitment to Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access (IDEA), American Blues Theater staff, artists, and Board of Directors participated in the following workshops and took the following action steps in the 2021 fiscal year.

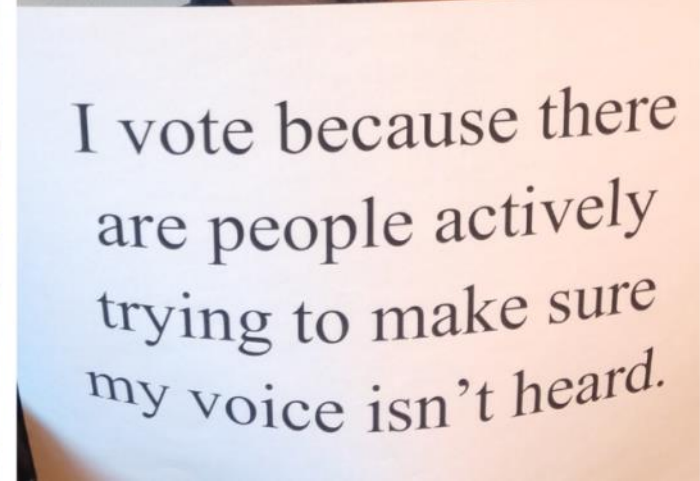
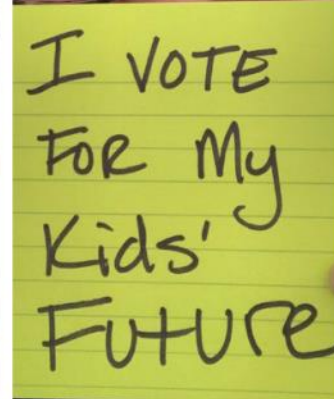
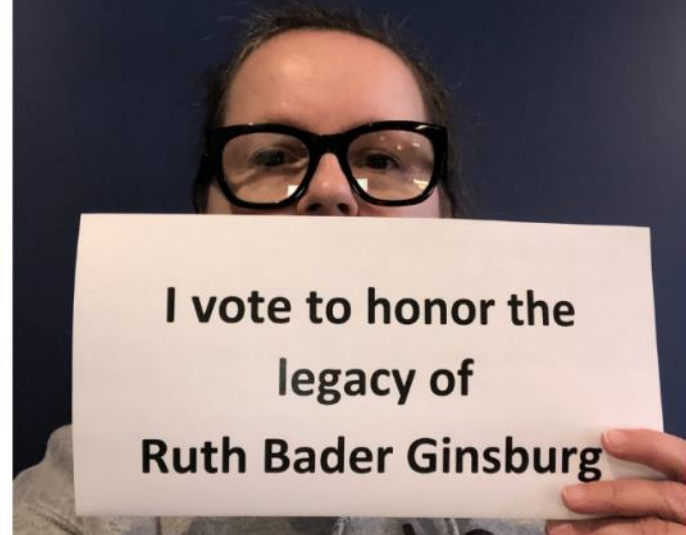
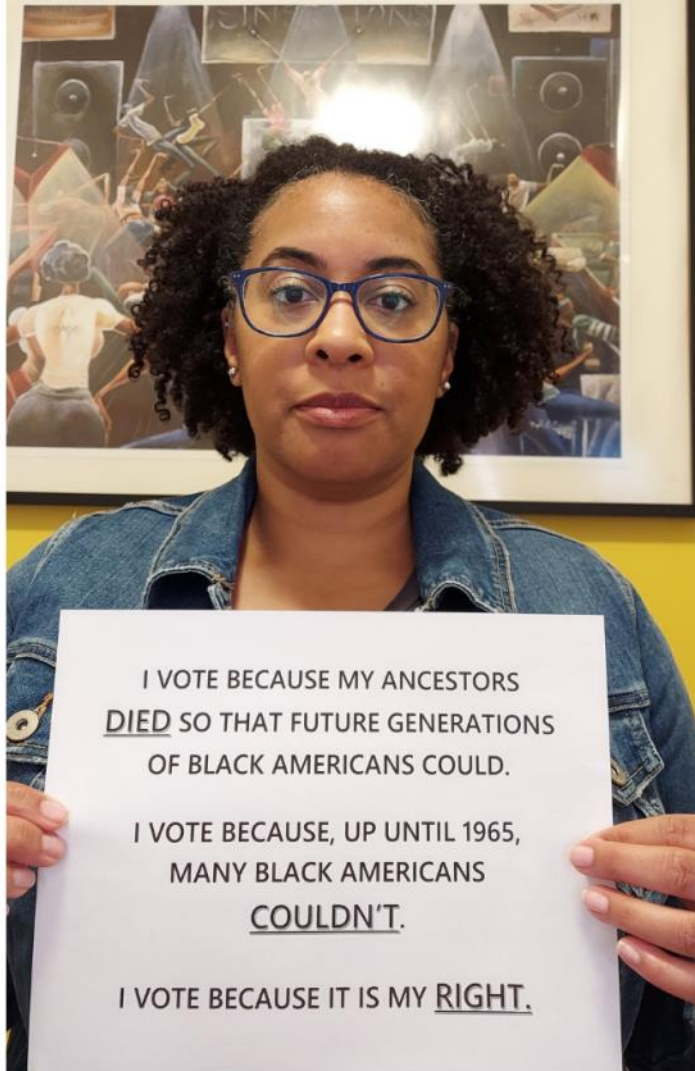
WORKSHOPS AND TRAININGS

- Seyfarth at Work - Diversity & Inclusion Training
- 16 week Cultural Equity Learning Course - EDI Training
- Implicit Bias Training
- Crisis Intervention & De-escalation Techniques
- Equity Centered Organizational Goals with Cardozie Jones
- Accessibility Workshops for audience
- Accessibility Workshops for workers (staff & artists)
- 1619 Project—study group
- Anti-Racist Theater with Nicole Brewer
- Bystander Intervention Training
- Sexual Harassment Prevention Training
- Disability Justice in the Arts
- Equity Quotient Dismantling Racism Lab

INTERNAL ACTIONS AND INITIATIVES

- Hired Anti-Racism part-time staff, who hosted a full company keynote and works with staff & artists
- Established an EDI committee & peer-to-peer education groups for continued learning and growth
- Curated an EDI library of resources for whole organization
- Established BIPOC Affinity groups
- Established Equity based values
- Offered fiscal education training to staff
- Created policies and SMART goals



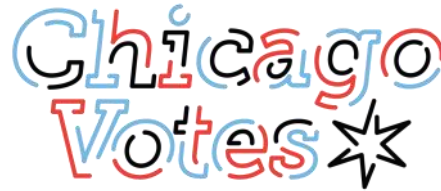


OUR HOME, OUR VOTE

OCTOBER—NOVEMBER 2020

Our Home, Our Vote was a nonpartisan get-out-the-vote campaign, which included:

- An extensive voter resource guide, including registration deadlines, polling locations, voter rights, and other voting information
- Voting information posters distributed across the Chicagoland area
- Civic-minded merchandise with proceeds supporting Chicago Votes
- A social media campaign of American Blues Ensemble Members, Artistic Affiliates, board members, and staff sharing messages about why they vote



OUR HOME, OUR VOTE FEATURED IN AMERICAN THEATRE MAGAZINE:

“Chicago’s American Blues Theater went straight to the nitty-gritty and created an extensive online voter registration guide with information about how to register to vote, order mail-in ballots, and find polling places. “We’re also inviting folks to spread the word on their own and to print out posters that we’ve made available to encourage everyone to exercise their fundamental right,” says Francisco Lopez (he/him)...Posters have also been distributed to local aldermen, city leaders, and businesses across the Windy City.

With onstage performances paused, many community partnerships are also on hold, and this project gave American Blues the opportunity to collaborate with other local organizations. As part of the *Our Home, Our Vote* initiative, American Blues Theater is selling civic-minded merchandise, including “Vote” T-shirts and hoodies, with proceeds supporting the nonprofit organization Chicago Votes.”



2021 BLUE INK PLAYWRITING AWARD

The nationally-renowned *Blue Ink Playwriting Award* was created in 2010 to support new work. Since inception, we've named 11 Award winners, 95 finalists, and 139 semi-finalists.

2021 WINNER

Refugee Rhapsody by Yussef El Guindi

Refugee Rhapsody was selected from a pool 820 submissions. As part of the award, playwright Yussef El Guindi (Seattle, WA) received a \$2,000 cash prize and virtual reading with American Blues Theater.

"We're so excited to announce Yussef El Guindi's script *Refugee Rhapsody* as the 2021 winner," notes Artistic Director Gwendolyn Whiteside. "Yussef is an important voice in theater. We are honored to share this powerful and unforgettable story."

ABOUT REFUGEE RHAPSODY

Sakinah, an Arab American woman, undergoes a mental health evaluation to determine what led to the violent crime she committed against Emily, a rich heiress. The play explores race, class, privilege, and how those factors collide and play out in today's culture.

2021 BLUE INK PLAYWRITING AWARD FINALISTS & SEMI FINALISTS

Featured Finalists: Juan Alfonso (*An Educated Guess*), Matthew Libby (*The Machine*), Wendy MacLeod (*The Good Samaritan*), chandra thomas (*The Buzzer*).

Finalists: Jaisey Bates (*When We Breathe*), Mardee Bennett (*CANE*), Xavier Clark (*backstroke boys*), Gina Femia (*the thing about air*), Nancy Garcia Loza (*RUST*), Keiko Green (*wad*), Zora Howard (*Hang Time*), Kristin Idaszak (*Tidy*), Sam Kebede (*Jericho*), Matthew Paul Olmos (*that drive through monterey*), Audley Puglisi (*the salt women*), Caridad Svich (*Albamarle*).

Semi-finalists: Ian August (*Everything You Can Do [To Make the World a Better Place]*), Melda Beaty (*Coconut Cake*), Brysen Boyd (*RD/Suite Meeting RM, 204*), Toccara Castleman (*Maybe a Mexican*), Harold Ellis Clark (*Back in the Day*), Greg Congleton (*High Ground*), Messiah Cristine (*The Topography of Dreams of Where Wolves Go to Whisper*), Angela J. Davis (*AGATHE*), Spenser Davis (*Underdogz*), Raul Garza (*Running Bear*), Patty Kim Hamilton (*Peeling Oranges*), Amina Henry (*Burned*), Michele Kushner (*Somewhere in My Sunset*), Rachel Lynett (*Apologies to Lorraine Hansberry [You Too August Wilson]*), Rajendra Ramoon Maharaj (*[Un]Documented*), Madeline Mahrer (*Arcade*), Eric Marlin (*Denial*), Katarzyna Muller (*American Monster*), Karissa Murrell Myers (*On the Greenbelt*), Paloma Nozicka (*Enough to Let the Light In*), Daniel Olivas (*Waiting for Godinez*), Zack Peercy (*Essential Starlite*), Kira Rockwell (*The Tragic Ecstasy of Girlhood*), Lia Romeo (*The Agency*), Andrew Rosendorf (*One-Shot*), Marcus Scott (*Sibling Rivalries*), Scott Sickles (*Pangea*), Kristen Spencer (*Dutch Kings*), Nathan Yungerberg (*THEA*), Emily Zemba (*But if the Train Comes to Her*).



820

SUBMISSIONS



16

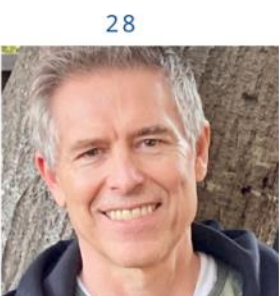
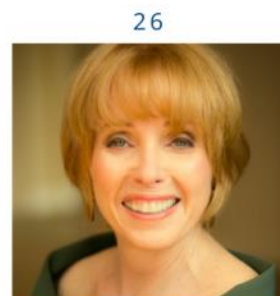
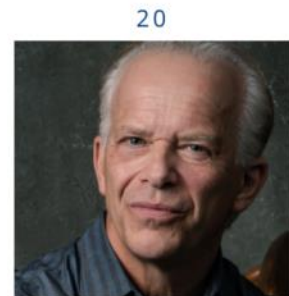
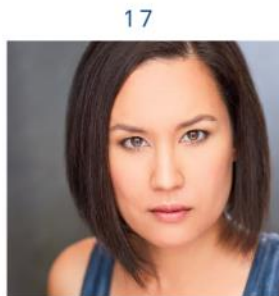
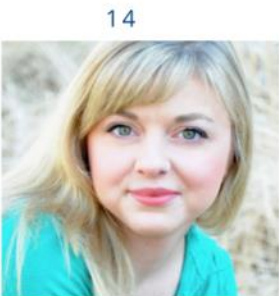
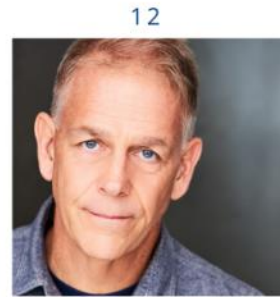
FINALISTS



30

SEMI-FINALISTS

JUNE
2021



30 PLAYS
IN 30 DAYS

THE RIPPED FESTIVAL

20th EDITION

JUNE 1 - JUNE 30, 2021

Our *Ripped: The Living Newspaper Project* began in 2009 with a series of staged readings of short plays based on the 1930s WPA era program “The Living Newspaper” and Federal Writers’ Project, enabling artists such as Ralph Ellison, Susan Glaspell, Zora Neale Hurston, Eugene O’Neill, Studs Terkel, and Richard Wright. Since our inaugural 2009 launch, we’ve presented 21 events and utilized 610+ artists that feature short plays *ripped from today’s headlines*.

In 2013, we expanded our staged readings into the sold-out, one-night-only, annual event – *The Ripped Festival*. All proceeds of these annual events benefit our free arts education program, including “The Lincoln Project” in Chicago Public Schools. In addition, we showcase short plays from CPS students who’ve completed our course.

Due to the 2020-2021 pandemic and industry shutdown of live events, we presented *The Ripped Festival* as an online library, featuring 30 short plays throughout the month of June. Selected scripts were used during a theater course at the University of California – Berkeley.

Our annual festival cultivates new material and allows audiences to discuss topical issues together. American Blues Theater provides community service and raises awareness through creative collaborations. The following organizations have been supported by *Ripped* events since its inception in 2009: AgrAbility, American Indian Chicago, Chicago Public Schools, Greater Chicago Food Depository, Illinois Farm Bureau, Lincoln Park Community Shelter, NAACP Legal Defense & Education Fund, No Kid Hungry, University of Chicago’s Urban Education Teachers Program, and more.

2021 PLAYS

^Classes for the Masses students *Blues Ensemble Member or Artistic Affiliate

- ***Mission Impossible*** by McKennzie Boyd^
- ***Loveland Village*** by Silvie Wylde^
- ***The Shark Tank*** by Edward Berber & Julie Gutierrez^
- ***Zack Comes Alive*** by Emily Moreno^
- ***Jackalope*** by River Viets-Strel^
- ***Window on America*** by Caridad Svich
- ***Call-And-Response*** by Marcus Scott
- ***Season Planning*** by Wendy MacLeod
- ***Let Them Not Be Your Ten*** by Ada Cheng*
- ***Thespian Killers Anonymous*** by Yussef El Guindi
- ***Salud*** by Editha Rosario-Moore*
- ***Cafeteria Clown in Crookston*** by Philip Earl Johnson*
- ***The War That Could Almost Drink*** by Franky D. Gonzalez
- ***Continued on Page 12*** by Elisabeth Giffin Speckman
- ***Fact Unchecked*** by Ben F. Locke
- ***We Opened Gifts on Christmas Morning*** by Katarzyna Müller
- ***Pink*Blue*Green*** by Karissa Murrell Myers
- ***Death in Venice*** by Lawrence Dukore
- ***How Do I Explain My Blackness To You?*** by Wandachristine*
- ***Floating*** by Steven Dietz
- ***Upside-Down*** by Rohina Malik
- ***The Mantrap*** by Scott Carter Cooper
- ***Rise*** by Warren Levon*
- ***The Flight of the Hummingbird*** by Heather Meyers*
- ***Crow*** by Ed Shockley
- ***Touch in the Time of COVID*** by Rita Dragonette
- ***First Sunday Back*** by Darren Canady*
- ***In Praise of Being Light*** by James Still*
- ***Fishy*** by Eric Berg
- ***The Weight of Whiteness*** by Tania Richard

Pictured on previous page: the playwrights of the 2021 *Ripped Festival* in the order listed above.



5

STUDENT PLAYS



25

PROFESSIONAL
PLAYWRIGHTS



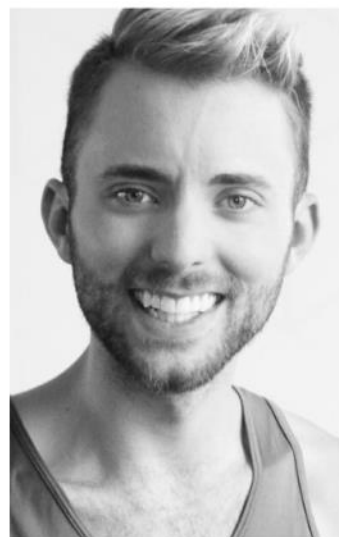
989

VISITS TO THE
THE RIPPED FESTIVAL
ONLINE LIBRARY



ARTS EDUCATION

2020 - 2021



CLASSES FOR THE MASSES

Pay-what-you-can classes in acting, music, yoga, and more taught by American Blues Ensemble members and artists. All classes are taught through one-on-one, individualized consultations in order to best fit participants' schedules and learning styles.

SESSION 2 - JULY-AUGUST 2020

"Guitar Lessons with Your 'Buddy'"

Taught by Artistic Affiliate Zachary Stevenson

Whether you're a beginner or intermediate guitarist, award-winning actor and North America's theater-rock royalty Zachary Stevenson will elevate your skills. Private instruction delivered with a Canadian's kindness? Yes, please! Chords, tips, & tricks - we'll take that "Everyday"

"Auditioning in the Chicago Market"

Taught by Ensemble Member Manny Buckley

Award-winning actor Manny Buckley helps you navigate Chicago's audition process for theater, tv, and film. Choose the right monologue, physically prepare for the character, analyze scenes, he prepares you to hit your mark and slay your slate. A safe place to discuss any and all issues.

"The Competitive Edge—Speech for Teens"

Taught by Ensemble Member Dawn Bach

Want to edge out your competition? Prep for the upcoming season! Dawn Bach - professional actor, Chicagoland speech coach, and former State Champ in Oratorical Declamation - knows what it takes! Learn how to create the perfect cutting and slay in every round!

"Breaking into Musical Theater"

Taught by Ensemble Member Camille Robinson

From small theaters to large regional houses, Camille Robinson - one of Chicago's leading musical theater talents - will help you navigate the world of musical theater. Ask her about your headshots, resume, song choice, building your book, auditions, and getting representation.

"Center Yourself - Yoga & Meditation"

Taught by Ensemble Member Christopher J. Neville

Self-care is critical. Whether you're looking to begin your mind-body-spirit practice or continuing at home due to social-distancing, Yoga Instructor Christopher J. Neville can meet you at your level. You'll choose from a group class or one-on-one instruction with his soothing soul.

SESSION 3 - FEBRUARY-MARCH 2021

"Piano Lessons for All Levels"

Taught by Ensemble Member Ian Paul Custer

Whether you're a beginner or intermediate pianist, award-winning actor Ian Paul Custer will elevate your skills. Private instruction delivered in a relaxed and friendly environment. Chords and tips to help you tickle the ivories.

"How to Book Your Commercials & Voice-Overs"

Taught by Ensemble Member Wandachristine

Beginning, intermediate, and advanced artists learn voice-over techniques from Chicago legend Wandachristine. She'll answer all your questions and share insider information from producers, agents, and casting directors.

"New Beginnings: Yoga, Mindfulness, & Meditation"

Taught by Ensemble Member Christopher J. Neville

Yoga instructor Christopher J. Neville will virtually guide you through one hour sessions that incorporate a gentle yoga practice, meditation, and discussions on incorporating a mindfulness practice into your everyday life.

"Auditioning for Musical Theater"

Taught by Artistic Affiliate Denzel Tsopnang

From small theaters to large regional houses, award-winning actor Denzel Tsopnang will help you navigate the world of musical theater auditions. From headshots, resume, song choice, building your book, and more!

"Ten-Minute Plays for Kids & Teens"

Taught by Teaching Artist Carolyn Minor

Unleash your child's creativity! Teaching artist Carolyn Minor shares playwrighting techniques from our highly-lauded arts education program. Your child will write a short play and hear it aloud at a Zoom private reading.



10

PAY-WHAT-YOU-CAN
CLASSES



38

STUDENTS IN CLASSES
FOR THE MASSES



22

TEACHING ARTISTS,
PROFESSIONAL ARTISTS,
CPS TEACHERS, &
STUDENTS IN #ENOUGH

#ENOUGH

PLAYS TO END GUN VIOLENCE

American Blues Theater participated in the Nationwide Reading of the seven winning plays of **#ENOUGH: Plays to End Gun Violence**, a national short play competition for middle and high school students. On Dec 14, 2020 — the 8-year remembrance of the shootings at Sandy Hook — the winning titles were performed and directed by American Blues teaching artists, professional artists, Chicago Public School teachers and students, as well as 50 communities, theatres, and schools across the country and abroad.

FY21 FINANCIALS

Statement of Financial Position June 30, 2021

	Without Donor Restrictions	With Donor Restrictions	Total
Current Assets			
Cash & Cash Equivalents	\$ 339,435	\$ 40,524	\$ 379,959
Investments	1,274,267	0	1,274,267
Grants Receivable	10,000	58,500	68,500
Accrued Interest Receivable	3,991	0	3,991
Prepaid Expenses	39,255	0	39,255
Deposit	5,745	0	5,745
Total Current Assets	1,672,693	99,024	1,771,717
Total Fixed Assets	22,562	0	22,562
Other Assets			
Grants Receivable	0	48,500	48,500
Security Deposit	1,050	0	1,050
Investments	0	2,974,932	2,974,932
Total Other Assets	1,050	3,023,432	3,024,482
TOTAL ASSETS	\$ 1,696,305	\$ 3,122,456	\$ 4,818,761
Current Liabilities			
Accounts Payable	\$ 2,481	\$ 0	\$ 2,481
Deferred Revenue	816	0	816
Total Current Liabilities	3,297	0	3,297
TOTAL LIABILITIES	\$ 3,297	\$ 0	\$ 3,297
TOTAL NET ASSETS	\$ 1,693,008	\$ 3,122,456	\$ 4,815,464
TOTAL LIABILITIES & NET ASSETS	\$ 1,696,305	\$ 3,122,456	\$ 4,818,761

From the most recent audit conducted by IL NFP Audit & Tax.

FY21 FINANCIALS

Statement of Activities June 30, 2021

REVENUE

CONTRIBUTED

Individuals	\$	183,099
Foundations		199,975
Corporations		28,348
Government		325,515

EARNED

Net Investment Return	\$	840,300
Special Events		188,363
Performance		93,142
Miscellaneous		21,456
Merchandise Sales		1,759
Rental income		50

Net Assets Released from Restrictions	\$	271,463
TOTAL REVENUE	\$	<u>1,882,007*</u>

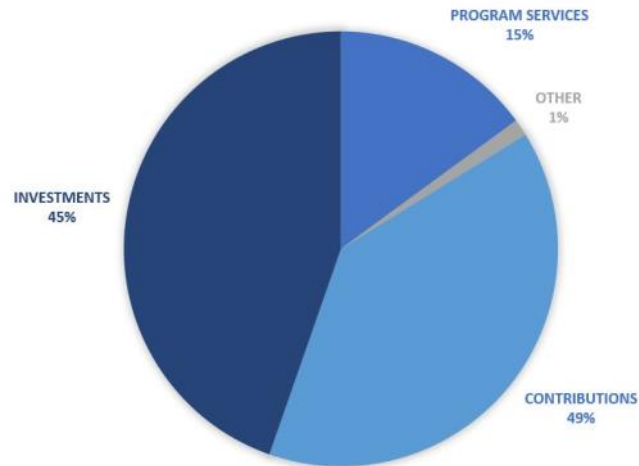
EXPENSES

FUNCTIONAL EXPENSES

Program Services	\$	425,445
Administrative		143,549
Fundraising		93,132
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$	<u>662,126</u>

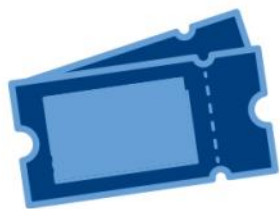
Change in Net Assets	\$	1,219,881
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Net Assets,		
Beginning of Year	\$	3,595,583
End of Year	\$	4,815,464^



* We moved \$400,000 from a savings account into an investment account. The market surpassed all expectations.

^ Of the \$4,815,464 net assets, 2,974,932 is a restricted endowment from the Ruth D. & Ken M. Davee General Operation Support Fund. The allowable, annual draw is 4% —with an exception made for the pandemic.



3,621

patrons attended live performances via Zoom

\$61,232

in Blues artist relief



218

artists in 2020-2021 season



27



"Healthcare Heroes"



1

staff pet adopted



82

"Bedford Boxes" distributed

2020-2021 Snapshot

820

Blue Ink submissions



16



week EDI class taken by staff

46

live performances via Zoom



35

years of producing live theater

FUNDRAISING & SPECIAL EVENTS



American Blues Theater Resolution to Honor Burton X. Rosenberg

We, the Board of American Blues Theater, want to formally, and profusely, honor the 10-year Director reign of one Burton X. Rosenberg:

Whereas, Burt was one of the founding Board Members of the re-birth of American Blues Theater in 2010 with his cohort, and fellow Wendy superfan, Chip Pringle when American Blues had annual Revenue of \$150,000, no fairly-paid employees, and a dream to be a significant Chicago storefront theater company;

Whereas, Burt tirelessly mentored Wendy, the Board and others over the past decade and, as a result, American Blues grew artistically winning numerous Joseph Jefferson Awards; socially with its support of community-based service programs including *The Lincoln Project* in Chicago public schools; and financially with additional patrons and additional funds;

Whereas, American Blues Theater today has annual revenues of nearly \$1 million; has talented full-time staff members who are paid fairly; continues to be a prominent, and critically-acclaimed, ensemble-led theater company in the Chicago arts community; and possesses an endowment, reserves, and assets of \$3.5 million;

We, the Board of American Blues Theater, **violently agree** that Burt is, and will always be, the official **American Blues Theater Mensch**. We honor his tireless, thankless service as the heart and soul of this theater organization's Board for the past decade. Burt is always welcome at American Blues, and we will listen, whenever and wherever, he speaks. In fact, we would like Burt to become our **inaugural Lifetime Director** (with no obligations other than our continuing to love and respect him).





We are honored to recognize the following contributors who enable American Blues Theater's artistic programming and community service. This list includes donations from our True Blue Annual Fund, GutterBall, Blue Bash, production sponsors, and other contributions given from July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021.

\$25,000 and above

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Michael Mahler
Camille Robinson
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Zachary Stevenson
Wandachristine

American Blues Theater is grateful for every contribution. We regret that due to space limitations we are unable to list donations under \$99.

Please accept our deepest appreciation as your donation makes a difference!

We make every effort to keep this list as accurate and complete as possible. Please contact us at info@AmericanBluesTheater.com to correct any unintentional errors or omissions.

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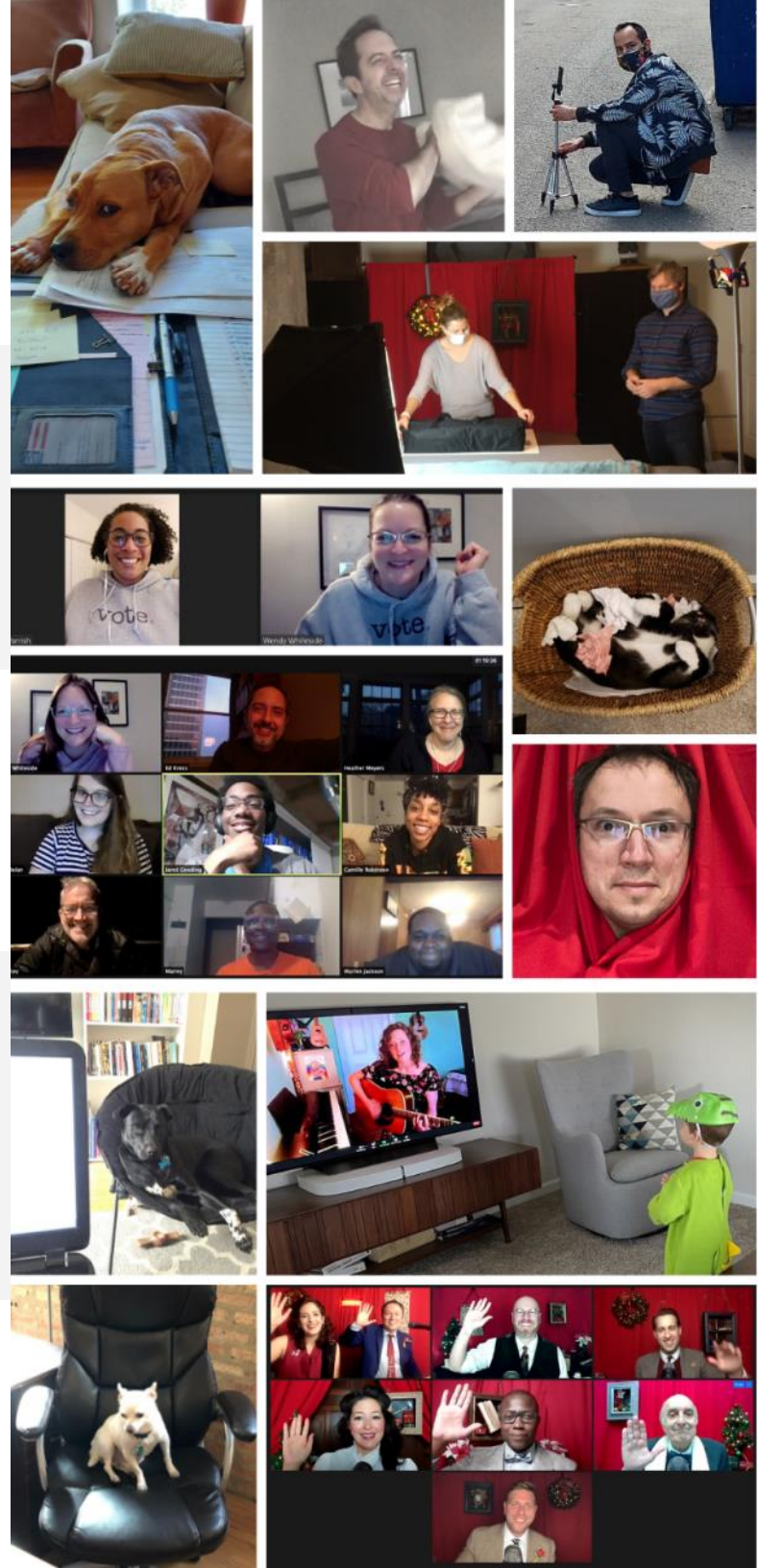
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Staff - PR, Marketing, & Design

Francisco Lopez, *Marketing Consultant*
Cathy Taylor PR, *Public Relations*
Michael Brosilow, *Photography*
The Stage Channel, *Video/Media*
Natalie Bontumasi & Sam McCay, *Graphic Designers*

Pictured on previous page, top row: Ada Cheng, Camille Robinson, Ian Paul Custer, Jared Gooding, Shandee Vaughan, Manny Buckley, Brandon Dahlquist, Dara Cameron, and Michael Mahler; bottom row: Sarajane Johnson, Wendy Whiteside, Yussef El Guindi, Zachary Stevenson, Caridad Svich, Philip Earl Johnson, and August Forman.

Pictured to the right, top row: Buddy Parrish, Ed Kross, and Cisco Lopez; second row: Shandee Vaughan and Grant Sabin; third row: Cara Parrish, Wendy Whiteside; and Stanley Van Handel; fourth row: Wendy Whiteside, Ed Kross, Heather Meyers, Elyse Dolan, Jared Gooding, Camille Robinson, Manny Buckley, Warren Levon, and Michael Mahler; fifth row: Shadow Dolan-Brackenburg; Liz Chidester, and a fan; bottom row: Bruiser Johnson and the cast of *It's a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago*: Dara Cameron, Michael Mahler, Shawn Goudie, Ian Paul Custer, Audrey Billings, Manny Buckley, John Mohrlein, and Brandon Dahlquist.



*American Blues Theater honors the lives
of our dear supporters, guest artists, and others
who have died during the pandemic.*

*We send our love, respect, and condolences
to your families and friends.*





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