



# THINGS WITH KRISTOFFER DIAZ FRIENDS



## BACKSTAGE GUIDE

A publication of **COMMUNITY SERVICE**  
at **AMERICAN BLUES THEATER**

## BACKSTAGE CALLBOARD

# THINGS WITH FRIENDS

by Kristoffer Diaz\*  
directed by Dexter Bullard\*

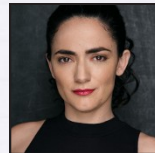
## FEATURING



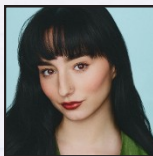
Audrey Billings\*



Casey Campbell\*



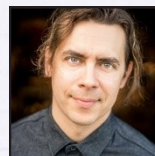
Cruz Gonzalez-Cadel



Maya Lou Hlava\*



Jon Hudson Odom\*



Nate Santana

Manhattan. Burt and Adele are hosting a dinner party. Steak is on the stove. The George Washington Bridge has collapsed into the Hudson. Kristoffer Diaz has written a play about it. We've already said too much.

Don't miss this thrilling, dark comedy. It's a full-bodied "Twilight Zone" blend with notes of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.

\*Ensemble member or Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater

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# NOTE FROM EXECUTIVE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR GWENDOLYN WHITESIDE



Gwendolyn Whiteside (Exec. Artistic Director)

Welcome to our 40th anniversary season. For four (4) decades, our Ensemble has embraced and championed World & Regional premieres. New work can be described as timely, provocative, and more experimental than classic fare. But think for a minute – even what we *now* consider a “classic play” had once been thought revolutionary in its life cycle.

American Blues Theater is committed to living playwrights by cultivating opportunities through our development programs, commissions, Ripped Festival (in its 18th year), Blue Ink Award (in its 16th year), presenting regional premieres, and put-your-money-where-your-mouth-is: fully-staged productions.

We’re thrilled to present the World premiere of Tony Award nominee, Pulitzer finalist, and Artistic Affiliate Kristoffer Diaz’s *Things With Friends*. **Kris takes the dinner party trope and makes it fresh with his originality, a touch of absurdism, and sets it against a catastrophic climate disaster.**

While this is not a climate change play, it asks you to consider your existence on this planet. Our interactions with friends, family, strangers, and the environment are all intertwined. Science shows us the consequences of industrialization, energy consumption, and neglecting nature’s prior warnings. And while we all realize our participation in Earth’s bigger picture, many of us haven’t changed our behavior. (For example, I cannot break my addiction to Amazon or fast-food.)

We all have the ultimate dinner guest coming.

How will you greet Mother Nature when she knocks at your door?

– Gwendolyn Whiteside

# INTERVIEW WITH KRISTOFFER DIAZ & DEXTER BULLARD

We asked award-winning Artistic Affiliates **KRISTOFFER DIAZ** (playwright) & **DEXTER BULLARD** (director) a few questions.

## WHAT EXCITES YOU ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION?

**KD:** *Things With Friends* is the only play I've ever written where I've had no idea what the final stage product would be. It's easy to imagine this play as a staged reading or a podcast, but how does a director pull off some of what I'm describing? Can the actors even physically do what I'm asking them to do? Will the audience join us on this odd little journey? I'm thrilled to have Dexter leading this remarkable cast into the challenges of this weird little play, and I've been beyond impressed with the whole team's approach so far.

**DB:** The team makes the game. American Blues, the acting ensemble, design and every person behind the project are mission-driven to make great theater and it shows. Forty years success takes forty years of working extremely well together and it's here up on Lincoln Avenue today.

## WHAT'S THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN PLAYWRIGHT & DIRECTOR LIKE ON THIS PROJECT?

**KD:** Dexter has gotten this play from the moment he read it. He's got a phenomenal amount of trust in both his team and in the work itself. As a result, I've got an incredible amount of trust in Dexter. The actors have been onstage since the first day of rehearsal; that never happens. We're all throwing ideas on the table without ego and with a whole lot of faith in each other. When the process works like this, it's magic.

**DB:** It has been – almost unnaturally true – that Kristoffer and I “get” what this play is fighting to be. Our process has been full mutual trust to let the writing shine through as fresh theater. Even looking from our two perspectives, we both think this play is intriguing, complex, funny, layered and important.

## WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE PART OF CREATING A WORLD PREMIERE?

**KD:** World premieres are, at their best, are pure happy terror. There's literally no way to know how audiences are going to respond (let alone critics, which is a whole different story). And not to be rude, but we can't really think about that when we're making the show. We focus on what excites us about the work, what questions it



Kristoffer Diaz (Playwright)



Dexter Bullard (Director)

raises for us throughout the process, what brilliant talents and insights our collaborators reveal as we work. World premiering a new show is kind of the platonic ideal of making theater. It's a gift.

**DB:** I am privileged to exclusively direct world premieres and Midwest premieres. I love collaboration on something truly free to form by discovery as we go. To me, new work from living, fresh hearts and minds has always been theatrically more interesting and current than “reviving” anything...

## WHAT'S NEXT – EITHER PERSONALLY OR PROFESSIONALLY?

**KD:** So much, and not much I can talk about! I've got the world premiere of another new play called *Football Football Football* in South Carolina next year. It's nothing like anything I've written before: a live action cartoon with something like forty characters played by six women. I'm working on two new musicals that I can't discuss. And we're bringing my musical *Hell's Kitchen* — featuring the music of my friend Alicia Keys — all over the country on our national tour (including a stop right here in Chicago in November).

**DB:** I hope to be directing a play bound for Broadway in 2026/27 (fingers crossed emoji here) pushing three new musicals, drafting a new holiday play, and developing a solo show/series with writer/actor and friend Dominic Conti. Always love getting back into travel, martial fitness, archery, dinner parties with my evolving intergenerational and interspecies family, and a kayak.

## DESIGNERS' CORNER: SCENIC DESIGN

Scenic Designer Grant Sabin shares his design and some details about his process for *Things With Friends*.



*Things With Friends* scenic model by Grant Sabin

“Things that felt familiar and safe and places where we once could take shelter from ‘The Storm’ are being pushed farther away from our grasp. We are on an island that has broken free from its mooring lines, as we drift into a future of uncertainty.

As we started building the world of *Things with Friends*, I was drawn to visual imagery of buildings like NYC’s 432 Park Avenue condominiums. Notorious for their many structural flaws and the penetration of weather, spaces that should be fortified by affluence and wealth are still vulnerable. I also drew inspiration from local sources, in imagery of Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House, a box of white steel and glass raised high on stilts by the banks of the Fox River. Designed to protect its inhabitants, even structures like the Farnsworth house that were designed a little over a half a century ago to withstand a hundred-year floods, are no longer safe.

Threads of these design elements are incorporated within the structure of the set. As we take shelter in a glass box in the sky, we all must redefine what is safe, as we band together to face a new reality. “

- Grant Sabin, Scenic Designer



# DESIGNERS' CORNER: COSTUME DESIGN

Costume Designer Lily Walls shares a sneak peek of her inspiration collages for the characters of *Things With Friends*.



"Adele" (played by Audrey Billings)



"Burt" (played by Casey Campbell)



"Joony" (played by Maya Lou Hlava)



"Vy" (played by Cruz Gonzalez-Cadel)



"Chabby" (played by Jon Hudson Odom)



"NYC" (played by Nate Santana)



# ABOUT THE BLUE INK AWARD

*Things With Friends* by Kristoffer Diaz was the winner of the 2023 Blue Ink Award for playwriting, and received a staged-reading at American Blues Theater in August 2023.

The nationally-renowned Blue Ink Award for playwriting was created in 2010 to support new work. Since inception, we've named 15 Award winners, 172 finalists, and 258 semi-finalists. Nearly \$20,000 in cash prizes and development were distributed to playwrights in 2025.

Each year American Blues Theater accepts worldwide submissions of original, unpublished full-length plays. The winning play will be selected by Executive Artistic Director Gwendolyn Whiteside and the theater's Ensemble.

The winning playwright receives a monetary prize and a staged-reading in Chicago. Cash prizes are awarded to finalists and semi-finalists too. There are no submission fees to enter.

The staged-reading is presented as part of the Blue Ink Festival, presented annually in August. In addition to featuring the winner of the award, the festival also showcases the work of select finalists.



Staged-reading of *Things With Friends* in the 2023 Blue Ink Festival (pictured from l to r: Flaco Navaja, Manny Buckley, Sandra Delgado, Karen Aldridge, & Steve Key)



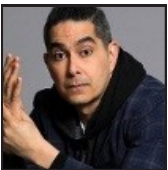
# PREVIOUS BLUE INK AWARD WINNERS



**2025 – *You Should Be Lucky***  
by Alyssa Haddad-Chin  
world premiere: American Blues Theater, Chicago, 2027+



**2024 – *The Conquered***  
by Ken Urban  
world premiere: American Blues Theater, Chicago, 2026-2027



**2023 – *Things With Friends***  
by Kristoffer Diaz  
world premiere: American Blues Theater, Chicago, 2025



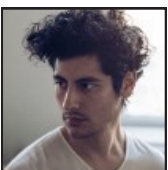
**2022 – *The Reapers on Woodbrook Avenue***  
by Mardee Bennett



**2021 – *Refugee Rhapsody***  
by Yussef El Guindi



**2020 – *Recent Unsettling Events***  
by Andrea Stolowitz



**2019 – *Alma*** by Benjamin Benne  
world premiere: American Blues Theater, Chicago, 2022; Center Theater Group, L.A., 2022; subsequent productions: ArtsWest Playhouse, Seattle; Curious Theatre Company, Denver; Central Square Theater, Cambridge, MA; The Spot, Ketchum, ID; Chance Theater, Anaheim, CA; Passage Theatre Company, Trenton, NJ



**2018 – *Welcome to Matteson!***  
by Inda Craig-Galván  
world premiere: New Jersey Repertory Company, 2023; Congo Square Theatre, Chicago, 2023; subsequent productions: Orlando Shakes, Florida



**2017 – *Hype Man*** by Idris Goodwin  
world premiere Company One, Boston, 2018; select subsequent productions: Wilbury Group, Providence, RI; Flea Theater, NYC; InterAct Theatre, Philadelphia; The Fountain, LA; Actors Theatre of Louisville



**2016 – *The Wind and the Breeze***  
by Nathan Alan Davis  
world premiere: Cygnet Theatre, San Diego, 2018; subsequent productions: West Side Show Room, Rockford, IL



**2015 – *Other Than Honorable***  
by Jamie Pachino  
world premiere Geva Theatre Center, New York, 2017



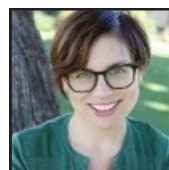
**2014 – *Comden Mall Community Activists***  
by Douglas Post



**2013 – *Graveyard of Empires***  
by Elaine Romero  
world premiere 16th Street Theater, Chicago, 2015



**2012 – *American Myth***  
by Christina Telesca  
world premiere American Blues Theater, Chicago, 2014

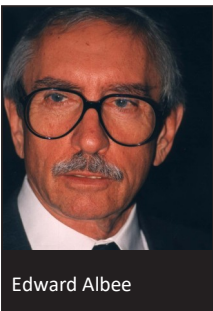


**2011 – *American Home***  
by Stephanie Walker  
world premiere, Pasadena, CA, 2017

# FAMOUS DINNER PARTY PLAYS

“Dinner parties, real or imagined, have long been a highly reliable source of drama: Whether joyful, combative, filled with laughter or dread, they offer filmmakers, playwrights and novelists a chance to explore what happens when characters who’ve known one another their whole lives — or who only just met — face off across a table. And since even the most informal dinner party is a kind of ritual, with its own customs and practices, it can be especially thrilling when the rules are shattered as easily as a wineglass.” - Juan A. Ramírez, *The New York Times*

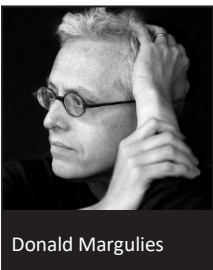
Kristoffer Diaz’s *Things With Friends* is an unconventional riff on the classic “dinner party play”. Below are a few of the most famous examples of the genre.



## WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF (1962)

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a play by Edward Albee first staged in October 1962. It examines the complexities of the marriage of middle-aged couple Martha and George. Late one evening, after a university faculty party, they receive unwitting younger couple Nick and Honey as guests, and draw them into their bitter and frustrated relationship.

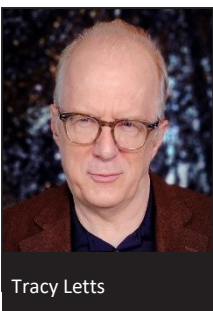
The play won both the 1963 Tony Award for Best Play and the 1962–1963 New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play. It is frequently revived on the modern stage.



## DINNER WITH FRIENDS (1998)

*Dinner with Friends* is a play by Donald Margulies that premiered at the 1998 Humana Festival of New American Plays and opened Off-Broadway in 1999. The play received the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

In the play, two married couples have been best friends for years. But when one marriage unexpectedly crumbles, the couples' lives begin to veer in opposite directions.



## AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY (2007)

*August: Osage County* is a tragicomedy play by Tracy Letts. That premiered at Steppenwolf Theatre in June 2007 and opened on Broadway later that year. It was the recipient of the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

The action takes place over the course of several weeks inside the home of Beverly and Violet Weston outside Pawhuska, Oklahoma. When the Weston family unexpectedly reunites after Dad disappears, their homestead explodes in a maelstrom of repressed truths and unsettling secrets.



## DISGRACED (2012)

*Disgraced* by Ayad Akhtar premiered in Chicago in 2012 before opening on Broadway in October 2014. The play explores a dinner party among four people with very different backgrounds. As discussion turns to politics and religion, the mood quickly becomes heated.

The play won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and earned a nomination for Tony Award for Best Play in 2015.

Sources: [The New York Times](#), [Wikipedia](#) ([Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf](#), [Dinner with Friends](#), [August: Osage County](#), [Disgraced](#)); [Photo of Albee by John Mathew Smith](#), [photo of Margulies by Donald Margulies](#), [Photo of Letts by Philip Romano](#), [Photo of Akhtar by Larry D. Moore](#)



# ABOUT THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

Kristoffer Diaz's *Things With Friends* also shares some elements in common with absurdist theatre. Below is a brief overview of Theatre of the Absurd and some of the playwrights that are often associated with the designation.

The Theatre of the Absurd is a post–World War II designation for particular plays of absurdist fiction written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1950s. It is also a term for the style of theatre the plays represent. The plays focus largely on ideas of existentialism and express what happens when human existence lacks meaning or purpose and communication breaks down. The structure of the plays is typically a round shape, with the finishing point the same as the starting point. Logical construction and argument give way to irrational and illogical speech and to the ultimate conclusion—silence.

Plays within this group are absurd in that they focus not on logical acts, realistic occurrences, or traditional character development; they, instead, focus on human

beings trapped in an incomprehensible world subject to any occurrence, no matter how illogical. The theme of incomprehensibility is coupled with the inadequacy of language to form meaningful human connections. According to Martin Esslin, absurdism is "the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose". Absurdist drama asks its viewer to "draw his own conclusions, make his own errors". Though Theatre of the Absurd may be seen as nonsense, they have something to say and can be understood". Esslin makes a distinction between the dictionary definition of absurd ("out of harmony" in the musical sense) and drama's understanding of the absurd: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."

Well-known absurdist playwrights include Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days*), Eugène Ionesco (*The Bald Soprano*, *Rhinoceros*), Jean-Paul Sartre (*No Exit*), and Harold Pinter (*The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Homecoming*).

As an experimental form of theatre, many Theatre of the Absurd playwrights employ techniques borrowed from earlier innovators. Writers and techniques frequently mentioned in relation to the Theatre of the Absurd include the 19th-century nonsense poets, such as Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear; Polish playwright Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz; the Russians Daniil Kharmis and Nikolai Erdman; Bertolt Brecht's distancing techniques in his "epic theatre"; and the "dream plays" of August Strindberg.

One commonly cited precursor to Theatre of the Absurd is Luigi Pirandello, especially *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Pirandello was a highly regarded theatrical experimentalist who wanted to bring down the fourth wall presupposed by the realism of playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen. According to W. B. Worthen, *Six Characters* and other Pirandello plays use "metatheatre—roleplaying, plays-within-plays, and a flexible sense of the limits of stage and illusion—to examine a highly-theatricalized vision of identity".



*Waiting for Godot* at Festival d'Avignon, 1978. Photo by Fernand Michaud.

# CLIMATE CHANGE & CLIMATE DISASTERS IN NEW YORK CITY

*Things With Friends* takes place during a fictional climate disaster in New York City. Below is a brief look at the impact of climate change and climate disasters on the city.

Climate change in New York City could affect buildings and infrastructure, wetlands, water supply, public health, and energy demand, due to the high population and extensive infrastructure in the region.

According to the National Centers for Environmental Information, From 1980-2024, there were 95 confirmed weather/climate disaster events with losses exceeding \$1 billion each to affect New York. These events included 4 drought events, 5 flooding events, 1 freeze event, 48 severe storm events, 16 tropical cyclone events, and 21 winter storm events. The 1980–2024 annual average is 2.1 events (CPI-adjusted); the annual average for the most recent 5 years (2020–2024) is 6.2 events (CPI-adjusted).

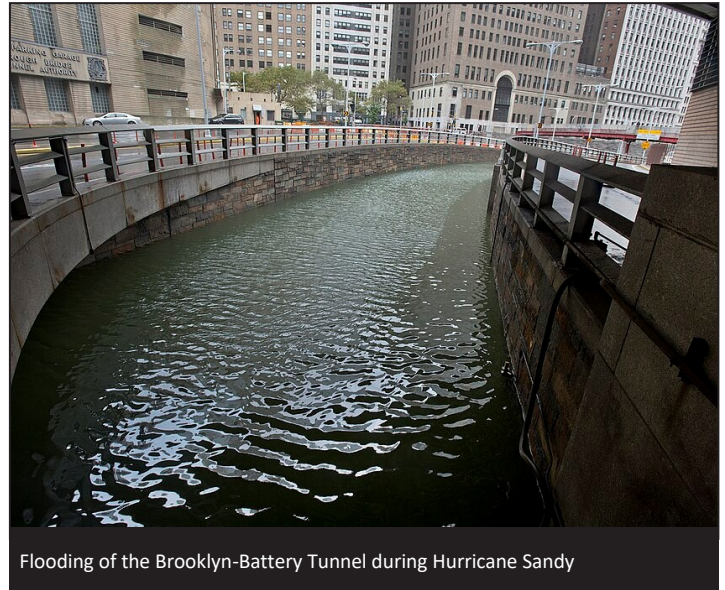
In June 2019, New York City declared a climate emergency.

## COASTAL FLOODING

As a seaport, New York is especially at risk from rising sea levels due to its many bridges and tunnels. Major aviation facilities in the New York metropolitan area, along with the New York Passenger Ship Terminal, are also located in areas vulnerable to flooding. Flooding would be costly to remediate. Tide gauge records indicate a rise in sea level of about 50 cm (20 inches) since 1860.

Flooding was the second-leading cause of weather-related fatalities in the United States in 2018. The projected 11-21 inches of sea level rise in New York City by 2050 and 4.17–9 feet by 2100 will compound the impacts of coastal flooding.

The damage caused by Hurricane Sandy in 2012 served as an impetus for policymakers and residents to more seriously consider coastal resiliency efforts. Since then, regulations have been strengthened to better protect the 400,000 New Yorkers in the one percent annual chance floodplain. Additionally, in May 2017, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced the construction of a 5.3 mile seawall along the Staten Island coastline capable of withstanding coastal flooding up to 15.6 feet - two feet higher than the surge caused by Hurricane Sandy.



Flooding of the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel during Hurricane Sandy

## IMPACTS OF EXTREME HEAT

The changing climate means rising temperatures and more frequent extreme heat events. In New York City, this is worsened by the “heat island effect.” Climate projections for New York City show some of the state’s largest increases in extreme heat, which can have direct impacts on people’s health. Humidity increases the danger of heat-related illness and death. Heat index, which is a measure that combines temperature and humidity, has historically peaked at around 100°F in the region. Maximum heat index values in the region are expected to increase throughout the century and reach “dangerous” or even “extremely dangerous” levels, as defined by the National Weather Service.

Because of New York City’s dense concentration of buildings and large areas of asphalt that trap and re-radiate heat, combined with a lack of green spaces, the city’s urban areas can be 3° to 9°F hotter than surrounding rural areas. New York City is already the warmest part of the state, and it is projected to continue to get hotter.

With warming temperatures comes an increased need for air conditioning. A 2021 study, however, found that almost 300,000 housing units across the city, or about 750,000



# CLIMATE CHANGE & CLIMATE DISASTERS IN NEW YORK CITY

residents, did not have air conditioning. From 2010 to 2020, 96 people died in New York City from heat stress.

New York City residents are less likely to have air conditioning if they live in older homes, have low incomes, or live in poverty. A 2011 study found that more than one-third of New York City seniors and adults in poor health surveyed did not own or use air conditioning during extreme heat events. Low-income households are also less able to pay for the electricity needed to run air conditioning. Equity issues around air conditioning may grow as climate change advances.

## EXTREME WEATHER DISRUPTIONS TO MASS TRANSIT

Millions of people in and around New York City use subways, trains, and buses to get to work, school, and other places they need to go. Climate change can affect all these forms of mass transit. For example, coastal storm surge and heavy downpours can flood subway stations and tunnels. Storms can also cause power outages that damage electric substations and equipment, which in turn can shut down subway and rail service. In 2012, Superstorm Sandy flooded several subway stations and tunnels and caused a power outage in lower Manhattan, forcing the New York City Transit Authority to suspend all subway service between Manhattan and Brooklyn for five days. During Hurricane Ida in 2021, flooding destroyed 28 buses parked at the Castleton Depot on Staten Island, causing an estimated \$8 million in damage and affecting service. Disruptions like this have disproportionate impacts on New York City residents who depend on mass transit and don't have an affordable alternative, such as many low-income workers, people with disabilities, and older adults.

To prepare for increasing transit impacts from sea level rise and coastal storm surge, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority is building climate resilience goals into its infrastructure replacement plans, specifically to help bridges and tunnels withstand harsher climate events.

## MITIGATION

The NYC Mayor's Office of Climate Policy and Programs, which also manages the OneNYC program, stated in 2018 that it was pledging to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by the year 2050 and align with the 1.5 degree Celsius target put into place under the Paris Agreement. Inroads have already begun, as the city's emissions have decreased 15% since 2005. The aim is to develop low-carbon transportation options and mandate retrofits to city buildings. In 2018, the team sued five companies (BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, Exxon Mobil, and Royal Dutch Shell) for being responsible for climate change, and divested the City's pension funds from fossil fuels, the first major US city to do so. Mayor Bill de Blasio supported the decision, stating "As climate change continues to worsen, it's up to the fossil fuel companies whose greed put us in this position to shoulder the costs of making New York City safer and more resilient."

As of 2018, The OneNYC program made progress toward renewable energy reliance; for instance, solar installations have increased six-fold since 2014, \$500 million was invested to improve building energy efficiency, and an additional \$1 billion allocated to preserving NYC's drinking water.



Solar rooftop in Queens

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



### **ILLINOIS ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL**

Since 1975, IEC has been at the forefront of environmental policy development and advocacy in Illinois. Today, IEC leads a powerful environmental movement dedicated to advancing equitable public policies that ensure a healthy environment across Illinois.



### **THE CLIMATE REALITY PROJECT - CHICAGO METRO CHAPTER**

Chicago area activists working to catalyze local solutions to the climate crisis.



### **NAMI CHICAGO**

Since 1979, NAMI Chicago has fought for families and individuals impacted by mental health conditions. They promote community wellness, break down barriers to mental health care and provide support and expertise for families, professionals and individuals in Chicago and beyond.

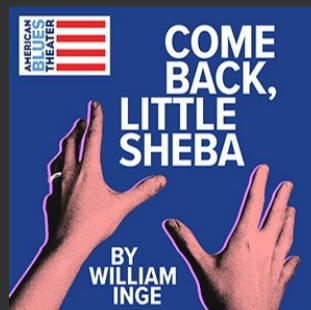
## AMERICAN BLUES THEATER **SEASON 40**



World Premiere  
**AUG 29 - OCT 5, 2025**



24th Annual Production  
**NOV 21 - DEC 28, 2025**



Reimagined Classic  
**FEB 6 - MAR 22, 2026**



Hit Jukebox Musical  
**MAY 1 - JUNE 7, 2026**

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# ABOUT AMERICAN BLUES THEATER

## MISSION

American Blues Theater is an Ensemble of artists committed to producing new and classic diverse stories that ask the question: “What does it mean to be American?”

## VALUES

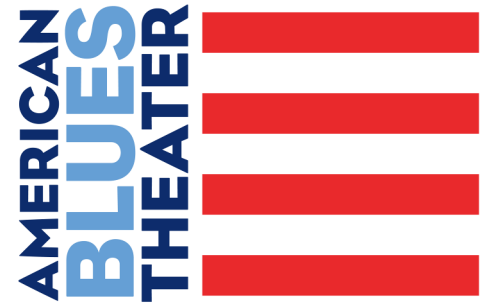
American Blues Theater *acts* on its values –

Accountability – we hold ourselves and each other responsible to do the right thing.

Courage – we have a fearless mindset and find strength in persevering.

Teamwork – we invest in collaboration and the success of others.

Service – we believe it’s an honor and duty to help the community.



## ABOUT US

Winner of the prestigious National Theatre Company Award from American Theatre Wing (Tony Awards), American Blues Theater is a non-profit arts organization that produces high-quality productions with a focus on stories that are relevant, timeless, and inclusive to the American spirit.

American Blues Theater is **committed to developing new work as more than half of the productions are world and Chicago premieres**. Play development programs include the nationally-recognized *Blue Ink Award*, commissions, readings, and the annual *Ripped Festival* of short plays.

American Blues Theater **believes in teamwork both on and off-stage**. A leader in community engagement for decades, the theater matches each play’s themes with other non-profits’ missions to raise awareness.

In addition to producing plays, American Blues Theater **offers a range of free services**, including continuing education programs, writing instruction and matinees for Chicago Public Schools, dramaturgical materials, and post-show discussions to widen access in the community.

American Blues Theater and its artists have earned 246 Joseph Jefferson Awards and nominations, 44 Black Theater Alliance Awards, and numerous industry accolades, including nomination and awards for the Pulitzer Prize, Academy Awards, Tony Awards, Golden Globes Awards, Emmy Awards, and more.



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American Blues Theater sits on the original homelands of the Council of Three Fires (Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa). Read full land acknowledgment at [americanbluestheater.com/location](https://americanbluestheater.com/location).