

molly smith
artistic director

stephen richard
executive director

zelda fichandler
founding director



About Arena Stage

Can it be that we have the beginnings of an American version of a national theatre without being aware of it? I am speaking, of course, of the regional theaters in the United States of which Arena is certainly one of the oldest and finest.

—Arthur Miller, 1990

Since its founding more than fifty years ago, Arena Stage has become widely renowned as one of the most robust not-for-profit theaters in the United States. The theater has garnered a reputation for artistic excellence on its stages and for its long-standing commitment to building an audience that mirrors the diverse communities that populate the Washington, D.C. region. Arena was the first racially integrated theater in Washington; the first to create a training program for artists and administrators of color; the first theater to create audio-described performances for blind and visually-impaired patrons; the first regional theater to transfer a production to Broadway; and the first resident theater to win the coveted Tony Award.

History

In 1950, the American theater was practically synonymous with Broadway. There were touring companies, to be sure, but these were generally substandard reproductions of Broadway premieres. With very few exceptions, American cities other than New York had no homegrown theater. Determined to remedy that situation in Washington, D.C., Zelda Fichandler (then a twenty-four-year-old graduate student in the drama department of The George Washington University), Tom Fichandler, and Zelda's professor, Edward Mangum, converted The Hippodrome, a former burlesque and movie house at Ninth Street and New York Avenue, NW, into a 247-seat theater-in-the-round. The program for Arena Stage's opening night on August 16, 1950, read:

Arena Stage plans to bring to its audience the best of plays both old and new as well as worthwhile original scripts on a permanent, year-round repertory basis. Local in origin, it was founded in the belief that if drama-hungry playgoers outside of the ten blocks of Broadway are to have a living stage, they must create it for themselves. Arena Stage was financed by Washingtonians — students, teachers, lawyers, doctors, scientists, government workers, housewives — who love theater and who want to see it flourish in the city in which they work and live.

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After five artistically accomplished but financially trying seasons at The Hippodrome, Arena began the search for a larger performing space and permanent theater. The company settled temporarily into the converted Hospitality Hall of the Old Heurich Brewery — then dubbed "The Old Vat" in reference to the brewery's huge kettles and London's famous Old Vic theater — where Arena found both artistic success and financial stability. By 1960, the theater had found the site for its new home — a plot of land on D.C.'s newly redeveloped Southwest Waterfront. Arena's new space, an

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827-seat theater-in-the-round designed by architect Harry Weese (who also designed Washington's Metro stations), opened in October 1961 to rave reviews. Ten years later, Arena added the 514-seat Kreeger Theater (named for Washington philanthropist David Lloyd Kreeger), which featured a modified thrust stage and fan-shaped house, as well as a new cabaret space nostalgically christened The Old Vat Room.

Arena Milestones

With Zelda as its champion, Arena's 1967 production of Howard Sackler's *The Great White Hope* became the first major regional production to transfer to Broadway, where it garnered Tony Awards for leading actors James Earl Jones and Jane Alexander as well as the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony for Best Play. Described by critic Martin Gottfried as "the most important new American play ever to come out of a resident theater and certainly the most impressive one that I have ever seen anywhere in a long time," *The Great White Hope*, perhaps more than any other previous accomplishment, put Arena Stage on the national map.

Not long thereafter, Arena received the 1971 Margo Jones Award, given yearly to a regional theater that has made the most significant contribution to dramatic art through the production of new plays. Five years later, Arena became the first theater outside of New York City to be honored with a Tony Award, inaugurating the category of Outstanding Regional Theater. As he presented the award before a national television audience, actor Christopher Plummer described Arena as "a shining example of the excellence of the American theater."

International Renown

In 1973, Arena became the first American resident company ever to tour behind the Iron Curtain. At the invitation of the U.S. State Department, Arena presented *Our Town* and *Inherit the Wind* at the Moscow Art Theater and Leningrad's Pushkin Theater, where both the productions and the actors were warmly received. Arena was also the first American theater company to appear at the Hong Kong Arts Festival, at which the company performed *You Can't Take It With You* and *After the Fall* in 1980.

Leadership

In 1990, Zelda celebrated her 40th and final season as Arena Stage's Producing Director and became a Life Trustee of the theater. In 1992, Zelda's Associate Producing Director, Douglas C. Wager, was named Artistic Director and led the theater for seven seasons. Stephen Richard, Arena's current Executive Director, joined the theater in 1991 and continues to serve as the primary liaison to Arena's extraordinary Board of Trustees while managing all aspects of theater administration. Molly Smith, Arena's current Artistic Director, came to D.C. from Perseverance Theatre in Alaska, the theater she founded and led for nearly two decades. A leader in the development of new American plays for thirty years, Molly has made this passion central to Arena Stage's mission.

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Mission

Today, Arena Stage is the largest producing theater in North America that focuses on American plays. Our core purpose is to produce huge plays of all that is passionate, exuberant, profound, deep and dangerous in the American spirit. Arena has broad shoulders and a capacity to produce anything from vast epics to charged dramas to robust musicals. We produce American classics, premieres of new plays, and contemporary stories that elevate the stature of American writers nationally and internationally.

A Home for Writers

In focusing Arena's repertory on American voices, Molly Smith has committed to providing a home where writers of the future and established contemporary playwrights can develop new works in a nurturing environment. The *downstairs* program is Arena's artistic initiative dedicated to the development of new American plays. Since its inception, more than 50 plays have been read and workshopped in the program. Of those, more than half have gone on to receive fully-mounted productions at important venues. The playwrights working in *downstairs* have been recipients of Tony, Obie, Outer Critics Circle, Drama Desk, New York Drama Critics, and Helen Hayes awards. Indeed, not long after her *Passion Play, a Cycle* was workshopped in *downstairs* and subsequently produced as part of Arena's 2005-06 season, Sarah Ruhl received a MacArthur "Genius Award" in recognition of her exceptional promise as a young American playwright.

Arena Stage has also established a Writers' Council to direct its efforts at expanding the American canon. Conceived as a national think tank dedicated to exploring contemporary issues in American playwriting, the Writers Council comprises a leading group of dramatists — Nilo Cruz, David Henry Hwang, Moisés Kaufman, Eric Overmyer, Charles Randolph-Wright, Sarah Ruhl, Robert Schenkkan, Tazewell Thompson, Paula Vogel, Wendy Wasserstein (1950-2006) — who point the way to emerging, lost, or forgotten writers and champion on a national level Arena's new theater — called the Cradle — intended for new play development and world premieres.

The Next Stage

The Next Stage Campaign makes way for an innovative theater complex with state-of-the-art technology and modern amenities. It includes spacious workspaces for rehearsals, set design and construction; classrooms for education programs; expanded office space; community gathering spaces; twenty-one on-site artist apartments; a centralized lobby, box office, and concessions; adequate restrooms and underground parking; the restoration and preservation of the Fichandler Stage, Arena's original theater-in-the-round, and Kreeger Theater; and an additional 200-seat space, the Cradle, for productions of new American plays.

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From the Guggenheim Museum to the Sydney Opera House, the world's major cultural institutions are intrinsically associated with physical structures that complement their missions and embody their high level of artistry. These buildings reflect the stature of the organizations they house and, often, visually define their cities. The new Arena Stage will be a building of this caliber in Washington, D.C. Architect Bing Thom — a visionary with extensive experience in urban planning and waterfront communities — has designed an extraordinary facility that exemplifies Arena's central commitment to art: the three theaters are the architectural focal points, with a wide range of other activities swirling in constant motion around them under a magnificent, unifying roof.

This is a defining moment in the history of one of America's most important cultural institutions, one that has been a pioneer in American theater and drama since 1950. The successful rebirth of Arena Stage through The Next Stage Campaign will secure the future of a national leader and local treasure. Just as Arena's founding forever changed the course of American theater, so, too, will the achievement of these ambitious goals.

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