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### THE PLAY

**G**reedy, selfish, bloodthirsty, excessive and tyrannical: Nero, Emperor of Rome, is in need of some serious public relations help! So, he hires a washed-up playwright, Scribonius, to write a play about his life for the upcoming Neronia festival. The play will give Nero a new public image, rewriting history and making the people love him.

Scribonius gets caught up in the seduction, lies and danger of the palace. Everyone has their own agenda and their own way they want the story told ... or else! Scribonius also has his conscience to deal with: how can this play show Nero the error of his ways and save Rome?

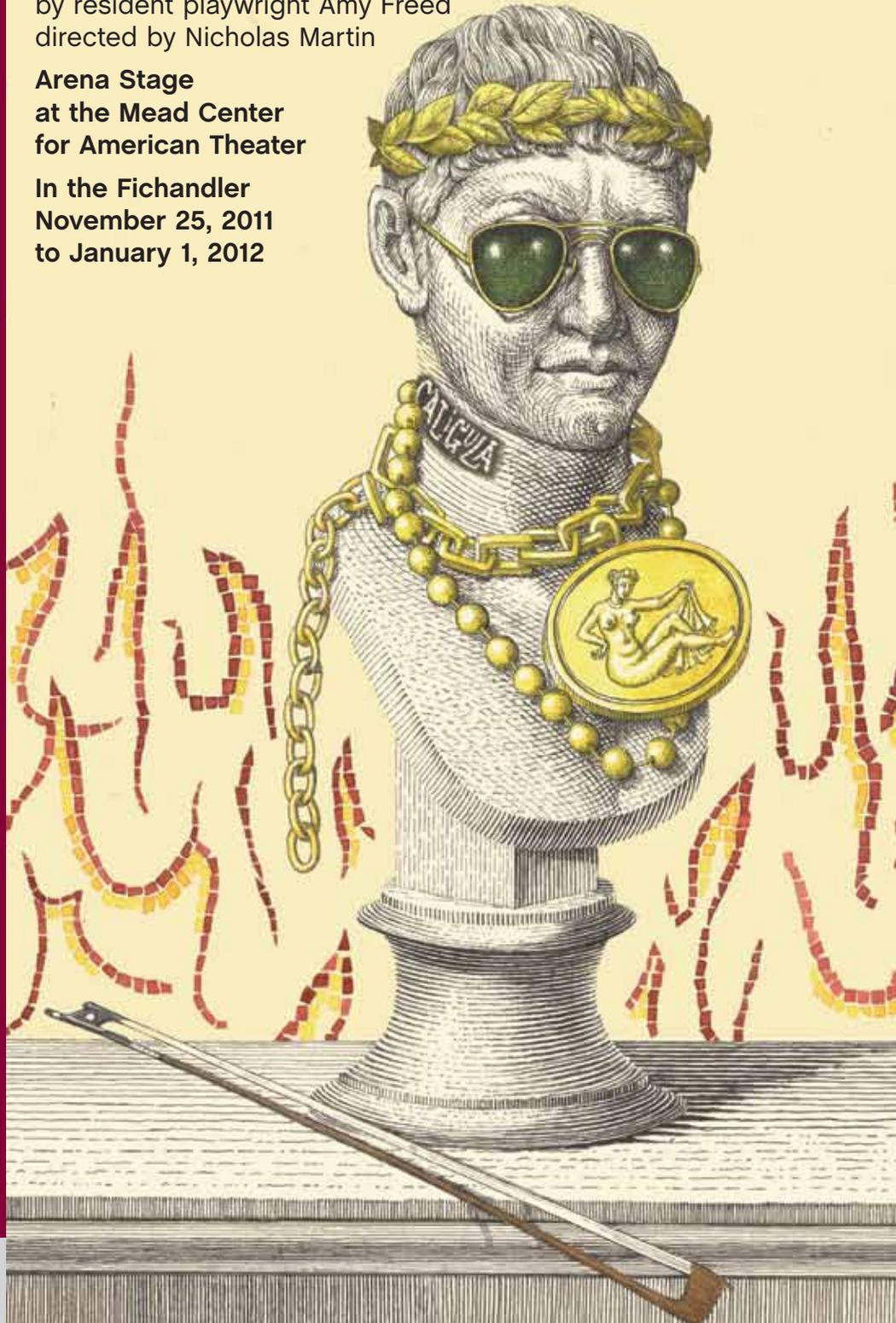
How should he write the play? What story should he tell? Only one thing is certain: if he gets it wrong, Scribonius is dead.

# YOU, NERO

by resident playwright Amy Freed  
directed by Nicholas Martin

**Arena Stage**  
at the Mead Center  
for American Theater

In the Fichandler  
November 25, 2011  
to January 1, 2012



## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



*"I never set out to write comic plays. My themes as a writer are usually serious, even though the delivery is not."*

**A**my Freed was born in New York City to an architect and theater professor. She studied acting at Southern Methodist University and then attended American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco.

Freed wrote her first play, to finish her graduate degree, while standing up at the cash register in the hotel bar where she worked as a waitress.

Since then she has written many more plays (sitting down!), including *The Beard of Avon*, a play about the controversy over who wrote Shakespeare's plays. Her plays have been seen at theaters around the country. Her play *Freedomland* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize (a prestigious writing award). She lives in San Francisco and teaches at Stanford University.

# WHO'S WHO IN *YOU, NERO*

**M**any of the characters in *You, Nero* are based on real people who lived during the Roman Empire.



**Nero:** Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus was born in the year A.D. 37 and became heir to the throne in 50, when his mother married her uncle, the then-Emperor **Claudius**. Nero married his stepsister (and cousin) Octavia just before becoming emperor at age 16. Nero was known for cruelty, excess, madness and a love of the arts. The army rebelled against Nero in 68, and he committed suicide. Rome fell into a state of civil war because Nero had no heirs.

**Agrippina:** Empress and wife of Emperor Claudius, mother of Emperor Nero. Historians believe that she had Claudius poisoned to ensure Nero's rise to power. It is also believed she and Nero had an incestuous sexual relationship. Nero had her killed in 59 for plotting against him.



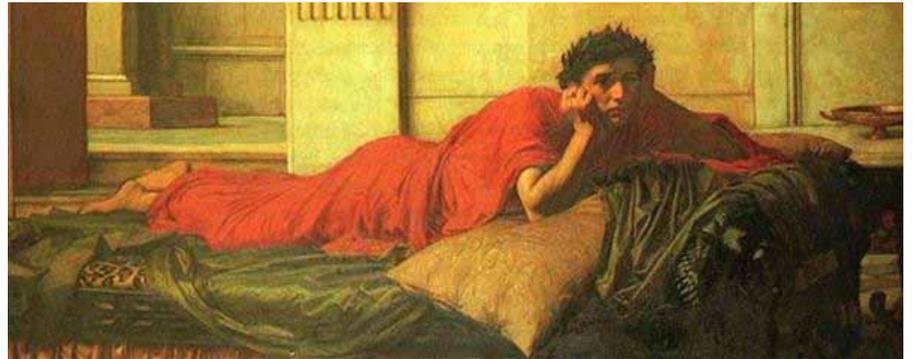
Roman coins depicting Agrippina and Nero.

**Poppaea:** Nero's mistress until they were married in 62. She likely died from complications from childbirth in 65, but some suspect Nero was involved. One historian, Suetonius, writes that she was kicked to death by Nero.



**Seneca:** Playwright, philosopher, and politician who served as Nero's tutor. He retired from public life in 62 and committed suicide in 65 when he was accused of plotting to overthrow Nero. Many of his writings survive as examples of Roman literature, thought, and records of daily life.

This painting, *The Remorse of Nero* by John William Waterhouse, shows Nero after the murder of his mother ... the murder he ordered. How does the artist portray Nero? Do you agree with this portrayal?



## PANEM ET CIRCENSES

**L**atin for "bread and circuses/games," these were the frequent holidays that provided free food and entertainment in Ancient Rome. They included chariot races, violent gladiatorial combat, and festivals, like Neronia. Rulers and politicians would pay for these extravagant events to get the support of the masses. A Roman writer, Juvenal, thought Romans were addicted to these holidays and the pursuit of pleasure. As a result, they became lazy, self-absorbed citizens who could be easily manipulated by the government. ●

**Activity:** What would *panem et circenses* look like today? Imagine you are a public figure. Plan a day of free food and entertainment that would win over the public. Once they are on your side, what would you convince them to do?

# A SLICE OF ROMAN CIVILIZATION

**A**my Freed sets *You, Nero* during Nero's reign in ancient Rome, so an understanding of Ancient Roman places, events and practices is a helpful foundation for seeing the play.

**a!** **Activity:** The play includes anachronisms as well as history. Anachronisms are objects, words, phrases or events from another time. The modern language of *You, Nero*, for example, is an anachronism, but it is part of the fun of the play! Watching the play, see what other anachronisms you notice.

## Places



Inside the Coliseum



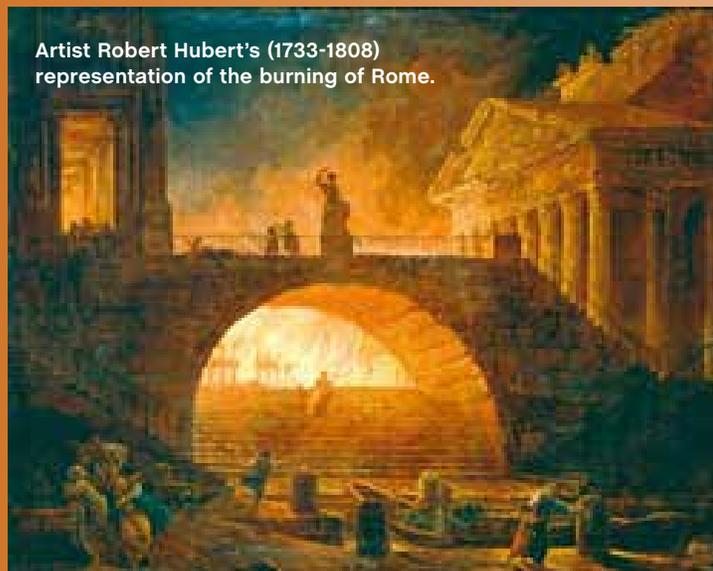
The Circus Maximus was a chariot racing stadium in Ancient Rome, also used for religious rites and other festivals.

A Roman engineering marvel built in A.D. 72, the Coliseum was the site of gladiatorial games. These games included fights between gladiators (slaves trained and forced to fight), animal fights (using exotic creatures like lions and bears), and the execution of criminals and Christians, who were usually mauled by wild beasts. The games were ended in A.D. 404 because of mounting disapproval of violence as entertainment.



**a!** **Activity:** The Fichandler Stage, where *You, Nero* will be performed, is a theater-in-the-round, with the audience sitting on all sides. Draw how you would transform this stage into an Ancient Roman set. Consider what you know about Ancient Roman arenas.

## THE BURNING OF ROME



Artist Robert Hubert's (1733-1808) representation of the burning of Rome.

*"Someday Rome is going to be one great heap of RUINS if someone doesn't do something ... drastic."*

– Nero

In 64, a fire burned in Rome for almost a week and destroyed much of the city. The details of the fire vary and feel more like a legend than history. The fire began near the Circus Maximus (pictured), where Nero was holding a public performance. The myth that Nero "fiddled while Rome burned" refers to this performance, though he was actually playing a lyre (a harp-like instrument). Nero was blamed for the fire, causing the public to turn on him. Nero blamed the Christians for the fire, and he had hundreds of them killed – some by wild animals, others crucified and burned. ●

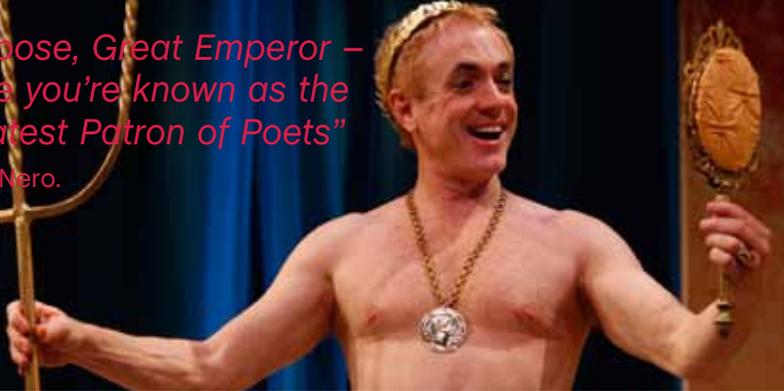
# PATRONAGE

**A**rtists need money to make their work and to survive. Enter the patron! A patron is a person or organization who supports artists financially, often by commission. A commission is an original work of art made at the request of a client.

Patrons have existed throughout the world and history. They are often wealthy or ruling families or religious institutions. Patrons in Ancient Rome commissioned works of art and architecture and hosted public entertainments to display their wealth to the public. ●

*“What I propose, Great Emperor – to you, since you’re known as the world’s greatest Patron of Poets”*

– Scribonius to Nero.



## THREE BIG QUESTIONS

What do you think and why?

**ONE.** What responsibility do artists have to themselves and society?

**TWO.** In what way is *You, Nero* a satire? (Grab a dictionary!)

**THREE.** What similarities do you see between Nero’s Rome and today?

## ARENA’S RESIDENT PLAYWRIGHTS PROGRAM

**A**rena Stage is a patron for a select group of playwrights who are developing new plays. Each playwright receives housing and funding for three years to write a new play. During those three years, Arena will pay the playwright to spend time writing plays, and Arena will also produce one of their plays.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Books

*Ancient Rome: An Introductory History* by Paul A. Zoch

### Film

*Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*: BBC One, 2006

*Ancient Rome*: Discovery Channel, 2008.

### On the Web

*Ancient Rome*: [history.com/topics/ancient-rome](http://history.com/topics/ancient-rome)

*The Roman Empire: The First Century*: [pbs.org/empires/romans/](http://pbs.org/empires/romans/)

*A History of Ancient Rome*: [historylearningsite.co.uk/a\\_history\\_of\\_ancient\\_rome.htm](http://historylearningsite.co.uk/a_history_of_ancient_rome.htm)

*The History of Rome* (a series of weekly podcasts): [thehistoryofrome.typepad.com](http://thehistoryofrome.typepad.com)

## Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.

Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum.

Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

**Enjoy the show!**



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Arena Stage productions  
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