



Clockwise from left: Arena Stage founders Zelda and Thomas Fichandler during construction of the Kreeger Theater in 1970; current Artistic Director Molly Smith; the first ticket sold at Arena Stage 70 years ago.

New Is the New New

MOLLY SMITH RINGS IN ARENA STAGE'S 70TH SEASON WITH AN EYE ON ORIGINAL PROGRAMMING.

BY MICHAEL M. CLEMENTS

"When I first got to Arena, our company would do new work once every two or three years. Now a third to a half of our work is new or premieres," proudly explains Arena Stage Artistic Director Molly Smith, who celebrates two decades at the award-winning theater company this year.

Smith has witnessed a number of major changes during her tenure—most notably when Arena moved into the Mead Center for American Theater in 2010. "It was a thrilling moment for Washington, finally a signature venue focused on being a center for American theater," she says. Before that, the company had been nomadic for two and a half years. Its debut play, which I had the pleasure of seeing, was *Oklahoma*. "It is a story with a huge amount of heart and pioneer spirit, which

perfectly summed up Arena Stage at that moment," she shares.

The push for new work began shortly after Smith's arrival. "We did a big conference for the whole city called 'Who Needs New Plays?'" she recalls. It's not that Washington theaters weren't producing new work before then, but in the years since, the entire local theater community has leaned into debuting fresh work. "Washington is a hotbed of new work now, and I go back to that period and just think about the effect that little conference had," Smith says.

Arena Stage impacted Southwest DC, too. "The Mead Center has been instrumental in a lot of development. Suddenly this forgotten quadrant was forgotten no more," she adds.

Smith was equally instrumental

in advocating for women playwrights with the successful launch of the Women's Voices Theatre Festival. Before the festival only 20 percent of the plays produced in the U.S. were written by women. "We wanted as many theaters to produce new plays by women—50 companies joined up and they all did premieres," she says. Many of the productions went on to run in second, third

and fourth productions across the U.S. "This kind of collaboration can only be done in Washington because the artistic directors like each other and we have conversations with each other," Smith explains. "What can happen when people bond together?" she asks. "Magic," she answers, not surprisingly—manifesting magic is, of course, the trick of her trade. 1101 Sixth St. SW, DC, arenastage.org

