

ARENA STAGE MEDIA RELEASE

Molly Smith Artistic Director Edgar Dobie Executive Producer Zelda Fichandler Founding Director

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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April 15, 2014

**ARENA STAGE HOLDS THE VOICES OF NOW FESTIVAL
A FOUR-DAY EVENT SHOWCASING ORIGINAL PLAYS WRITTEN AND PERFORMED
BY MORE THAN 100 YOUNG ARTISTS FROM THE D.C. AREA
MAY 14-17, 2014 AT THE MEAD CENTER FOR AMERICAN THEATER**

(Washington, D.C.) Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater will host the Voices of Now Festival, a four-day event featuring original works of theater written and performed by nine different youth ensembles from the internationally renowned Community Engagement program. The festival will bring together more than 100 artists, ages 11-24, from D.C., Maryland and Virginia who have been working with professional theater artists from Arena Stage for the past year to devise original one-act plays. **The 2014 ensembles will come together May 14-17, 2014 to perform and discuss their work in the Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle at the Mead Center.**

Voices of Now (VON)—currently in its 11th year—gives young artists the opportunity to devise and perform autobiographical theater pieces that pose challenging questions relevant to their communities and investigate those questions by recounting personal stories. A primary goal of the program is to create positive change within the artists' community by empowering young people to engage in dialogue centered on their daily experiences of their world. This year's plays examine topics including gender equality, sexual identity, mental health, self-esteem, the ramifications of the civil war and the questions that emerge when grieving a loss, among others. All performances will be followed by a talkback.

Ensembles will have an additional opportunity this spring to perform their plays for the communities for which their pieces were devised, including the [National Civil War Project Conference](#) at **George Washington University**, the Art and Spirit Coffeehouse at **St. Augustine's Episcopal Church** in Southwest, D.C., the 2014 Grief Forum hosted by the **Wendt Center for Loss and Healing** and a Teach for America professional development opportunity for first year D.C.-area teachers at **Gallaudet University**.

"Voices of Now is a source of great pride for Arena Stage," shares **Arena Stage Artistic Director Molly Smith**. "What else is more passionate, exuberant, profound, deep and dangerous in the American spirit than the voices of our youth? The plays from these young people are powerful because they give voice, in a unique way, to their concerns, fears, and ideas. We all grow to be better people when we listen to their voices."

"Over the past decade Voices of Now has undergone a dizzying transformation, and it has been both humbling and fortifying to see the program at work in D.C. and around the world," adds **Director of Education Ashley Forman**. "Each season, VON artists are presented with new challenges and sources of inspiration, and I am particularly excited about the Mentor Ensemble's work as part of the National Civil War Project as they create a play that examines what they see as social and cultural 'fault lines' caused by the Civil War. As we push the boundaries of what we can do with Voices of Now, the stories we hear on stage become even more compelling and evocative."

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Voices of Now formed its first partnership 11 years ago with Jefferson Middle School in Southwest, D.C. This season the **Jefferson Ensemble** will be joined by **Burke School, Robinson Secondary School** and **Key Middle School**, who are participating for their fourth year in partnership with the Fairfax County Public Schools and Voices of Now program. Returning for its third year is the **Wendt Center for Loss and Healing**, and joining Voices of Now for the first time is **Glasgow Middle School**. Additional ensembles include the **Mead Ensemble**, a program located at the Mead Center that is designed for students in grades 7-11 interested in devised theater, as well as the **Mentor Ensemble**, which is made up of alumni from previous Voices of Now ensembles and whose role is to mentor the younger artists in the program. The **Advocacy Ensemble**, which is made up of emerging artists that participated in free community workshops hosted at Arena Stage this fall, includes select participants from a variety of community organizations including D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (DCFS), Metro TeenAIDS, Promising Futures, Next Step Public Charter School and Teens Against the Spread of AIDS (TASA).

2014 Voices of Now Festival Schedule

All performances take place in the Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle in the Mead Center, 1101 Sixth St., S.W.

Wednesday, May 14—7:30 p.m.

Jefferson Middle School Ensemble, Mentor Ensemble and Advocacy Ensemble

Thursday, May 15—7:30 p.m.

Burke Ensemble, Wendt Center Ensemble and Advocacy Ensemble

Friday, May 16—7:30 p.m.

Jefferson Middle School Ensemble, Key Middle School Ensemble and Glasgow Middle School Ensemble

Saturday, May 17—7:30 p.m.

Mead Ensemble, Robinson Middle School Ensemble and Mentor Ensemble

TICKETS: Tickets for the Voices of Now Festival are **FREE**, though reservations are required through the Arena Stage Sales Office at 202-488-3300.

2014 Additional Voices of Now Performances in the Community

Each ensemble will have an additional performance for their particular communities. The performances taking place at the Mead Center for American Theater and St. Augustine's Episcopal Church are open to the public and do not require advance registration.

Tuesday, April 22—4:30 p.m.

Dorothy Betts Theater in the Marvin Center at George Washington University

Mentor Ensemble, performance of their play *Free For All* as part of the National Civil War Project Conference.

Sunday, May 18—6:00 p.m.

Mead Center for American Theater

Wendt Center Ensemble, performance of their play *Answer Key*, followed by a post-show discussion featuring the performers and a panel of experienced professionals, facilitated by the Wendt Center's child and family therapist Stephanie Handel. At the end of May the Wendt Center Ensemble will also perform at Covenant House in Washington, D.C.

Wednesday, May 21—7:30 p.m.

St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, 600 M St., S.W.

Mentor and Jefferson Ensembles, performance at the Art & Spirit Coffeehouse event.

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Saturday, May 31

Kellogg Conference Center at Gallaudet University

Advocacy Ensemble, performance for nearly 100 first-year Teach for America teachers as part of their end of year professional development.

Following a successful partnership with the U.S. Department of State in 2012, which sent four artists from Arena Stage's Community Engagement department to India, Voices of Now continued its international expansion with two additional partnerships in the past year. In December 2013, four teaching artists traveled to Zagreb, Croatia to create a play with young adults with physical disabilities. In January 2014, all nine members of the Arena Stage team traveled to Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai and Hyderabad, India to create original plays based on the lives of the local participants and inspired by the cities in which they took place. For more information about Voices of Now International, including photos, video and personal accounts, visit arenastage.org/education/voices-of-now/international/index.shtml.

Voices of Now (VON) is a year-long, internationally recognized drama program designed by Arena Stage's Director of Education Ashley Forman. Currently in its eleventh year, Voices of Now utilizes creative writing, improvisation, collaboration, movement and performance to devise autobiographical theater pieces with ensembles made up of middle school, high school and adult artists. Each ensemble's play poses challenging social questions relevant to the artists' communities and investigates those questions by recounting the artists' personal stories. The VON curriculum has successfully created plays with middle school, high school and adult community groups and is available for schools and community groups throughout the D.C. metro area. In addition to performing at Arena Stage, ensembles perform throughout their own communities. Past ensembles have performed at the Atlas Performing Arts Center's Intersections Festival, Imagination Stage, the American Alliance for Theater Educators' National Conference, The Association of Theater in Higher Education Conference, the 2013 International AIDS Conference and the Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage.

For more information on Voices of Now, visit arenastage.org/education/voices-of-now.

2014 PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Burke School, Burke, VA (FCPS)

Child and Family Services Agency's Office of Youth Empowerment, Washington, D.C.

Children's National Medical Center: Teens Against the Spread of AIDS (TASA), Washington, D.C.

DC Creative Writing Workshop, Washington, D.C.

Glasgow Middle School, Alexandria, VA (FCPS)

Jefferson Middle School, Washington, D.C. (DCPS)

Key Middle School, Springfield, VA (FCPS)

Robinson Secondary School, Fairfax, VA (FCPS)

St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, Washington, D.C.

The Wendt Center for Loss and Healing, Washington, D.C.

Promising Futures, Washington, D.C.

The Next Step Public Charter School, Washington, D.C.

Voices of Now is made possible by support from AT&T, Share Fund, Friends of Southwest D.C., GEICO, the Mark & Carol Hyman Fund and Toni R. Ritzenberg. Additional support for the program is provided by the U.S. Department of State.

Additional support of Arena Stage's Community Engagement efforts is provided by the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation; Max & Victoria Dreyfus Foundation, Inc.; Robert & Natalie Mandel Family Fund; Corina Higginson Trust; Toni A. Ritzenberg; Friends of Southwest D.C.; the Anthony Lucas-Spindletop Foundation; Edington, Peel & Associates; Mars Foundation; Jean Schiro-Zavela and Vance Zavela; and the Youth Activities Task Force (YATF) of the Southwest Neighborhood Assembly, Inc. Without the extraordinary support of all our supporters, VON and our other Community Engagement program offerings would not be possible.

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Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater, under the leadership of Artistic Director Molly Smith and Executive Producer Edgar Dobie, is a national center dedicated to American voices and artists. Arena Stage produces plays of all that is passionate, profound, deep and dangerous in the American spirit, and presents diverse and ground-breaking work from some of the best artists around the country. Arena Stage is committed to commissioning and developing new plays through the American Voices New Play Institute. Arena Stage impacts the lives of more than 20,000 students annually through its work in community engagement. Now in its seventh decade, Arena Stage serves a diverse annual audience of more than 300,000. arenastage.org.

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