

# ARENA STAGE MEDIA RELEASE

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

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**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 18-21, 2016 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 10 different youth ensembles. The festival will bring together more than 100 artists, ages 11-18, from D.C., Maryland and Virginia who have been working with professional theater artists from Arena Stage to devise original one-act plays. This year's festival will also feature a special video presentation of work devised by young adults from Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia and Albania as part of a September 2015 trip that sent three Arena Stage teaching artists to Zagreb, Croatia. **The 2016 ensembles will come together May 18-21, 2016 to perform and discuss their work in the Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle at the Mead Center.** Please see below for the full event schedule.

Currently in its 13th year, [Voices of Now](#) (VON) is an internationally renowned, yearlong drama program that works with ensembles of middle, high school and adult artists to devise autobiographical theater pieces. Each ensemble's play poses challenging social questions relevant to the artists' communities and investigates those questions by recounting the artists' personal stories. This year's plays examine topics including issues of race and ethnicity, self-identification, mental health and illness, heroes and role models, adjusting to a new culture, risk-taking, the magnitude of our actions and implications of language used surrounding grief and death. All performances will be followed by a talkback.

"Voices of Now is a unique program with a profound impact. These young people really dive into difficult topics and controversial terrain in order to find understanding—of each other and of the world," shares **Artistic Director Molly Smith**. "It's amazing to witness. The truth that these students find is remarkable, and there is no better way to find these truths than through theater. Arena is fortunate to be able to help these voices be heard."

This year's program features a new ensemble at **South County Middle School** in Fairfax, VA, as well as the second year of the **Key World Ensemble** at Key Middle School, which was formed to explore the experience of ELL (English Language Learner) students in Fairfax, VA.

VON formed its first partnership 13 years ago with **Jefferson Middle School Academy** in Southwest D.C. Several Fairfax County Public Schools will again take part in the festival, including **Glasgow Middle School**, **Key Middle School** and **Robinson Secondary School**. Returning for its sixth year is an ensemble in partnership with the **Wendt Center for Loss and Healing**, which is made up of young artists who have experienced the death of a loved one.

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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, but don't have a VON program at their school, as well as the **Mentor Ensemble**, which is made up of alumni from previous ensembles whose role is to mentor the younger artists in the program. For the past six years, the Mead and Mentor Ensembles have performed at the Youth Summit as part of Atlas Performing Arts Center's Intersections Festival, which highlights the intersection of art and the real world. The **Advocacy Ensemble**, which is made up of emerging artists who are interested in using theater as a tool for advocacy, includes participants from throughout the D.C.-metro area.

### 2016 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 18—7:30 p.m.**

*Chain Reaction* by the Mentor Ensemble  
*Now You See Me* by the Advocacy Ensemble  
*Free Fall* by the Jefferson Academy Ensemble

#### **Thursday, May 19—7:30 p.m.**

*Upside Down* by the Key Middle School Ensemble  
*Culture Shock* by the Key World Ensemble  
*Now You See Me* by the Advocacy Ensemble

#### **Friday, May 20—7:30 p.m.**

*Equal Sign* by the Glasgow Middle School Ensemble  
*Prize Fight* by the South County Middle School Ensemble  
*Book Mark* by the Wendt Center Ensemble

#### **Saturday, May 21—7:30 p.m.**

*Action Figure* by the Robinson Secondary School Ensemble  
*Shelter* by the Mead Ensemble  
*Chain Reaction* by the 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** or at <http://tickets.arenastage.org/single/psDetail.aspx?psn=22484>.

Voices of Now was designed by Arena Stage's Director of Education Ashley Forman. In addition to performing at Arena Stage, ensembles perform throughout their own communities. Past ensembles have performed at Atlas Performing Arts Center's Intersections Festival, Imagination Stage, American Alliance for Theatre and Education's National Conference, Association of Theatre in Higher Education Conference, 2013 International AIDS Conference and the Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage.

**Voices of Now International:** Following a successful partnership with the U.S. Department of State in 2012, which sent four teaching artists from Arena Stage's Community Engagement (CE) department to **India**, VON continued its international expansion with three additional partnerships during the 2013/14 season. In December 2013, four staff members traveled to **Zagreb, Croatia** to create a play with young adults with physical disabilities. In January 2014, all nine staff members of the Arena Stage CE 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. In June 2014, the **United States Embassy in Lima, Peru** brought two CE staff members to partner with **Arena y Esteras**, a local organization comprised of artists, educators and leaders

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committed to using art as a tool to contribute to human development and social transformation. In September 2015, three CE staff members returned to Zagreb, in partnership with the **U.S. Embassies in Zagreb, Croatia and Ljubljana, Slovenia**, to create a unique theater piece with young adults from vulnerable communities across the region.

For more information on Voices of Now, visit [arenastage.org/education/voices-of-now](http://arenastage.org/education/voices-of-now).

#### Feedback from Voices of Now Participants:

“Voices of Now does more than just put young voices on stage, it provides a platform for their art to be seen and truth to be validated. The program allowed me to explore the artist within myself and gave me the permission to use my personal stories to examine the world around me and scream the words ‘I deserve to be heard.’”

**–Ky'Lend Adams, seven-year VON participant and current teaching artist**

“I decided to do Voices of Now because I really wanted to get my story out there and talk about grief with other people and share what it really is. We shouldn't avoid grief like it's the plague. It's really nice to actually connect with people who know what you are going through.”

**–Jessye Jairrels, three-year VON participant, speaking about the Wendt Center Ensemble**

“Voices of Now lets me be comfortable with sharing my thoughts on big life ideas. It also allows all of us to create beautiful pieces that illustrate these ideas. I have made so many great friends through this program and it's great to see them return throughout the years as well as meet new people.”

**–Montgomery Nichols, two-year VON participant with the Mead Center Ensemble**

“Making a play with Voices of Now in Zagreb last September was a wonderful experience. I always knew how powerful art can be, but I thought that making a difference through words, pictures or moves was a privilege of genius artists with extraordinary talents. VON showed me that all it takes for you to change the world with art is making it. Doing it. When it's out there it can touch people, it can make them think. And even if it doesn't impact others, it changes the world, because it's changed you.”

**–Ema Meden, VON Slovenia participant, speaking about the 2015 VON ensemble in Croatia, which worked with young adults from Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia and Albania**

“The way that Voices of Now empowered the Croatian ensemble, a group of young people with disabilities, to tell their own stories in their own words was incredibly powerful. It gave the participants a voice and opened the audience's eyes to the challenges people with disabilities face in Croatia, and the courage they show in overcoming those barriers. One of the participants expressed how much he valued the opportunity to tell his story to the public, adding that, ‘The biggest misperception is that people see us only for what we cannot do.’”

**–Elizabeth Blumenthal, Cultural Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Zagreb, speaking about the 2013 VON ensemble in Croatia, which devised a play featuring participants with physical disabilities**

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Additional support of Arena Stage's Community Engagement efforts is made possible by the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities; Paul M. Angell Family Foundation; AT&T; Harman Family Foundation; Max and Victoria Dreyfus Foundation, Inc.; The JBG Companies; Alice Shaver Foundation; Robert & Natalie Mandel Family Fund; Dimick Foundation; Friends of Southwest D.C.; Hattie M. Strong Foundation; Nora Roberts Foundation; Venable Foundation; Weissberg Foundation; GEICO; Rockwell Collins; Toni A. Ritzenberg; Edington, Peel & Associates; Jean Schiro-Zavela and Vance Zavela; Actors' Equity Foundation; Theatre Forward; Foley & Lardner LLP; and Youth Activities Task Force (YATF) of the Southwest Neighborhood Assembly, Inc. Additional support for the program is provided by the U.S. Department of State.

***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 over 10,000 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](http://arenastage.org).

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