

ARENA STAGE MEDIA RELEASE

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ARENA STAGE VOICES OF NOW ARTISTS RETURN FROM TRIP TO CROATIA AND BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA TO PROMOTE COMMUNITY BUILDING AND ACCEPTANCE THROUGH THEATER

*****Trip marks Arena Stage's sixth trip abroad with Voices of Now through partnerships with the U.S. Department of State and U.S. embassies abroad*****

(Washington, D.C.) Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater, in partnership with the **U.S. Embassy in Zagreb, Croatia and the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina**, sent four Arena Stage Voices of Now (VON) devisers/directors to **Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina for three weeks beginning January 26, 2019**. The artists worked with three ensembles of young people, two in Croatia and one in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and through workshops and rehearsals, three original plays were created and performed by the ensembles. The U.S. Ambassador to Croatia attended one of the performances featuring the Croatia ensemble's piece, and much to the students' delight, they were featured on the evening news.

"Voices of Now is a fantastic program that shows young people how to express their inner thoughts, feelings and ideas in a creative way through drama," shares Artistic Director **Molly Smith**. "This is an important time in our world to encourage empathy and express free speech. Arena is a proud partner with the State Department in sharing Voices of Now with young people in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and making a positive impact on their lives—and on our lives too."

"We were delighted to host Voices of Now in Bosnia and Herzegovina," says Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo **Elizabeth Blumenthal**. "The program is an incredible way for young people to learn about each other and develop relationships by exploring issues they all face and then creating something together."

Arena Stage's Director of Community Engagement and Senior Artistic Advisor **Anita Maynard-Losh**, along with Director of Education **Ashley Forman**, School Programs Manager **Rebecca Campana** and Master Teaching Artist **Psalmayene 24**, worked with teenagers and young adults to create unique theater pieces that bring light to important social issues facing the participants. The unique content of each Voices of Now piece comes from each ensemble's collaboration. Some of the questions explored by the ensembles included: How do you know when to hold your ground? When do you compromise? What gets in the way of doing what's right? They also wanted to investigate what keeps people apart, brings them together and how can people who have been separated, connect?

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Page 2— Voices of Now artists return from international trip

“Regarding the play, I'm really glad that it brought us all together, made us work as one and really managed to connect us,” says **Marko Šarkotić**, VON participant in Trebinje. “We all became more aware of our bodies and their capabilities, as well as each other, and [the directors] gave us the knowledge to make the group look well and aesthetically pleasing on stage, for which we are eternally grateful. I'm also really pleased with the reception in Trebinje, as it's talking about some very modern concepts in a very traditional community.”

“Voices of Now was such an amazing experience,” shares **Ana Križanić**, VON participant in Petrinja. “We met wonderful people, learned a lot of acting skills and most importantly, had fun. It was nice to be listened to, and we felt like we could [say] anything we wanted without being judged. We worked and communicated like a group, and although we are all very different, we made it work. If we could turn back the time, we wouldn't change anything and we would apply for this project again.”

This marks Arena Stage's sixth Voices of Now trip abroad through partnerships with the U.S. Department of State and U.S. embassies abroad. Following an initial partnership in 2012, which sent four devisers/directors from Arena Stage's Community Engagement department to four communities in India, the program 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, which has continued to be performed in the region. In January 2014, all nine staff members of the Arena Stage Community Engagement team traveled to Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai and Hyderabad in 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 Arena Stage artists to partner with Arena y Esteras, a professional theater company comprised of artists, educators and leaders committed to using art as a tool for social transformation. In September 2015, VON brought young adults from Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania together in Zagreb, Croatia to create a play about reconciliation after a history of warfare.

For more information about Voices of Now International, including photos, video and personal accounts, visit arenastage.org/education/voices-of-now.

Currently in its 15th year, Voices of Now is a season-long drama program that devises autobiographical plays with ensembles of middle-school, high-school and adult artists locally and internationally. Voices of Now plays are fast-paced, collaboratively-written physical theater pieces that pose challenging social questions relevant to the ensemble of artists and their communities. The plays investigate those questions through poetry, movement and the recounting of the artists' personal stories. One of the primary goals of the Voices of Now program is to create positive change within the artists' communities by engaging in dialogue centered on the artists' experiences in their worlds.

Voices of Now is made possible by support from the Hattie M. Strong Foundation, Rockwell Collins, Friends of Southwest D.C., Washington Nationals Dream Foundation, Raytheon, GEICO, the Weissberg Foundation and Wells Fargo & Company.

Page 3— Voices of Now artists return from international trip

Arena Stage's community engagement efforts are generously sponsored by AT&T; Exelon; Denie and Frank Weil; the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation; Joanne Barker; the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities; The Coca-Cola Foundation; Robert and Natalie Mandel Family Foundation; Max and Victoria Dreyfus Foundation, Inc.; JBG Smith; Alice Shaver Foundation; Hattie M. Strong Foundation; Dimick Foundation; The Bay & Paul Foundations; Friends of Southwest D.C.; Exelon Corporation; Venable Foundation; Washington Nationals Dream Foundation; Weissberg Foundation; The Albert & Lillian Small Foundation; Eileen Fisher; Raytheon; GEICO; Wells Fargo & Company; Rockwell Collins; Edington, Peel & Associates; Foley & Lardner LLP; Jean Schiro-Zavela and Vance Zavela; Actors' Equity Foundation; Theatre Forward; and Youth Activities Task Force (YATF) of the Southwest Neighborhood Assembly, Inc.

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 and 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

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