

ARENA STAGE MEDIA RELEASE

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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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For additional information, visit:
arenastage.org/tickets/arenariffs

ARENA STAGE'S COMMISSIONED FILMED MUSIC SERIES, *ARENA RIFFS*, BEGINS NEXT WEEK

(Washington, D.C.) Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater is excited to debut the first installment in the [Arena Riffs](#) series on **Wednesday, March 17 at 7 p.m.** The three-part series begins with a musical memoir composed and performed by award-winning indie-folk duo **Abigail and Shaun Bengson**. The Bengsons will premiere their new, original work *My Joy is Heavy!*.

The music piece brings together story and song in an intimate portrait about cultivating joy during difficult times. Filmed from their home in Vermont, this intimate, narrative performance is filled with humor passion and sorrow. The 27-minute piece is self-filmed and captures their experiences of dealing with chronic pain and pregnancy loss during the lockdown.

"Making *My Joy is Heavy!* with Arena Stage was a huge gift for us. We became pregnant and then went through a miscarriage during the making of this piece and creating this together was a way for us to metabolize our fear and hurt into joy together," shares **Abigail and Shaun Bengson**. "We offer it as an honoring of our shared community pain and as a way to celebrate together too."

The Bengsons, who are based in New York City and Vermont, have performed across the country and around the world. Their video, "[The Keep Going Song](#)", has been viewed over 4 million times.

As previously announced, *Arena Riffs* is a three-part commissioned music series that features three different composer and lyricist teams with musical selections infused with sounds of folk, indie and hip-hop. Each artist was given free rein in terms of what they wanted to compose. *Arena Riffs* are self-produced, self-contained finished pieces presented by Arena Stage. The idea for the programming started when Arena Stage's Artistic Director **Molly Smith** was speaking to **Jocelyn Clarke**, Arena's Senior Dramaturg, about the online programming. Clarke suggested musical theater and the idea caught fire. The artistic team began looking for wonderful artists and figuring out ways this ambitious idea could be accomplished.

"*Arena Riffs* started out as an almost impossible dream to commission three composers and their collaborators to create 20 - 30 minute musical pieces that each artist would film. It is a crazy idea and each artist has come out with distinctive, unusual, provocative, vulnerable pieces – each wholly different, reflecting their individual styles. They have succeeded beyond our expectations," shares **Smith**.

The second and third installment in the series will premiere on March 31 and April 14 created by artists **Psalmayene 'Psalm' 24** and **Rona Siddiqui**, respectively.

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Continuing as part of the series is the debut of *The Freewheelin' Insurgents*, written and directed by award-winning playwright, director and actor **Psalmayene 'Psalm' 24** (Arena's *The 51st State*, May 22, 2020). Serving as a love letter to the Black Lives Matter movement and an elegy for theater, this musical piece examines the grief and void the pandemic, combined with the nationwide reckoning on racial injustice, has created for theater artists and audiences. The story unfolds through hip-hop and movement and explores issues of violent versus nonviolent protest, love and mental health during this unprecedented moment in history. The cast and creative team include **Louis Davis, Michael Donnay, Shannon Dorsey, Nick "tha 1da" Hernandez, Jeremy Hunter, Gary L. Perkins, Psalmayene 'Psalm' 24, Danielle Preston, Tony Thomas, Aaron Tucker and Justin Weaks.**

"It was glorious collaborating with some of my favorite artists to bring *The Freewheelin' Insurgents* to life. This dream project is a distillation of enormous love — love for the Black community and love for theater. I can't wait to share this pandemic-era hip-hop musical with Arena Stage's audience," states **Psalmayene 24.**

Arena Riffs will conclude with a new music piece, *A More Perfect Union*, written by award-winning composer **Rona Siddiqui** (*Salaam Medina: Tales of a Halfgan, One Good Day*). Drawing on inspiration from concept albums, her story will be told through a visual audio piece that showcases the different phases of the emotional life cycle of a relationship, such as bargaining and acceptance. The cast and creative team includes **Doug Fitch, Em Goldman and Raja Feather Kelly.**

"*A More Perfect Union* examines the complexities of my relationship with the United States through the intimacy of personification," shares **Siddiqui**. "If you listen to the album without the visual component, it could be construed as a couple's journey. The visuals clue the audience into the fact that it's grappling with exceptionalism, isolationism, blind patriotism and the denial of our history rooted in racism."

Arena Riffs is free and open to the public to watch, but reservations are encouraged by visiting [here](#). Each original musical will be available to stream at arenastage.org.

Media interested in interviews, including photo/video requests, should please e-mail press@arenastage.org for further information.

Arena Riffs Composers

Abigail and Shaun Bengson are a married composing and performing duo based in New York City and Vermont who have performed across the country and around the world. Their video, *The Keep Going Song*, has been viewed over 4 million times. Three of their singles have been featured on "So You Think You Can Dance" (FOX). Their theater work includes *The Keep Going Song* (Actor's Theatre of Louisville), *Hundred Days* (La Jolla Playhouse, New York Theatre Workshop, U.S. Tour), *The Lucky Ones* (Ars Nova), *Where the Mountain Meets the Sea* (ATL's Humana Festival), *Anything That Gives Off Light* (Edinburgh Theatre Festival), *You'll Still Call Me By Name* (New York Live Arts, Jacob's Pillow) and *Iphigenia in Aulis* (Classic Stage Company). They have received the Jonathan Larson and Richard Rogers awards and nominations for the Drama Desk, Drama League and Lucile Lortel awards.

Psalmayene 24 is an award-winning playwright, director and actor. Psalm, as his colleagues call him, is currently the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Playwright in Residence at Mosaic Theater and the Doris Duke Artist in Residence at Studio Theatre. Directing credits include *Pass Over* by Antoinette Nwandu at Studio Theatre, *Native Son* by Nambi E. Kelley at Mosaic Theater Company, *Word Becomes Flesh* (recipient of five 2017 Helen Hayes Awards, including Outstanding Direction of a Play) by Marc Bamuthi Joseph at Theater Alliance and *The Shipment* by Young Jean Lee at Forum Theater. Psalm was one of the writers of Arena Stage's film, *May 22, 2020*, and he was one of the directors of Arena's film, *The 51st State*. He wrote "Double Entendre", the fifth episode of Roundhouse Theatre's ten-part pandemic influenced web series *Homebound*. His play, *Les Deux Noirs* (2020 Charles MacArthur Award Nomination for Outstanding Original New Play or Musical and Venturous Capital Grant recipient), is inspired by a legendary 1953 confrontation between famed writers Richard Wright and James Baldwin in a Paris café and received its world premiere production at Mosaic Theater Company. Psalm has received commissions from the African Continuum Theater Company, Arena Stage, Imagination Stage, The Kennedy Center, Theater Alliance, Solas Nua, Mosaic Theater Company and Theatrical Outfit. His one man play, *Free Jujube Brown!*, is recognized as a seminal work in hip-hop theatre and is published in the anthology, *Plays from the Boom Box Galaxy: Theater from the Hip-Hop Generation* (TCG). His new play, *Dear Mapel*, a series of letters to his deceased father, will receive its world premiere production at Mosaic Theater this fall.

Rona Siddiqui is a composer/lyricist based in New York City. She is a recipient of the Jonathan Larson Grant and Billie Burke Ziegfeld award. She was named one of Broadway Women's Fund's Women to Watch. Her show *Salaam Medina: Tales of a Halfghan*, an autobiographical comedy about growing up bi-ethnic in America, had a reading at Playwrights Horizons (directed by Raja Feather Kelly). Other musicals include *One Good Day*, *Hip Hop Cinderella* and *The Tin*. She is the recipient of the ASCAP Harold Adamson Lyric Award, the ASCAP Foundation Mary Rodgers/Lorenz Hart Award and ASCAP Foundation/Max Dreyfus Scholarship. She has written pieces for *Wicked's* 16th anniversary commemoration *Flying Free*, 24 Hour Musicals, Prospect Theater Company, The Civilians, and has performed concerts of her work at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and Feinstein's/54 Below. Rona music directed the Off-Broadway Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Strange Loop* for which she received an Obie along with the cast and creative team (*Playwrights Horizons*). She has orchestrated for Broadway Records, Broadway Backwards, NAMT and Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera.

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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 groundbreaking work from some of the best artists around the country. Arena Stage is committed to commissioning and developing new plays and impacting the lives of over 10,000 students annually through its work in community engagement. Now in its eighth decade, Arena Stage serves a diverse annual audience of more than 300,000. arenastage.org

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