

2026/27 SEASON

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stage

**STEP AFRIKA!**

# *The* **FRUITS** *of* **OUR LABOR**



**SEP 10 – NOV 1**



2026/27 SEASON

**Coming Up Next**

# Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?

AN AMERICAN DOCUDRAMA

BY  
**ERIC BENTLEY**

DIRECTED BY  
**ANNA D. SHAPIRO**



**STARTS OCTOBER 17**

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*Defend their integrity, protect their careers, or betray their peers.*

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## ARENA STAGE

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## ARENA STAGE'S MISSION

Arena Stage is the voice of American theater resident in our nation's capital. Focused on American artists, our productions are innovative and representative of stories from across the country. We nurture new plays and reimagine classics. We celebrate our democracy and diversity through a multitude of voices in our productions and community engagement programs to inspire people to action. We produce all that is passionate, exuberant, profound, entertaining, deep and dangerous in the American spirit.

## OUR LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Arena Stage is built on the land of the Nacotchtank and Piscataway people of the Algonquin-speaking tribes, as well as the lands of the Native American people of the greater Anacostia, Potomac, and Tidewater regions.



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# FROM THE EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

When my daughter was a toddler, she knew that I worked at Arena Stage and asked me a very astute question: “What do you do over there, Dad?” My answer was that my job is to keep the drama on the stage.

Those of you who are old friends know that Arena and our community have recently had its share of drama off the stage, on the White House lawn and through 185-mile-per-hour races down Pennsylvania Avenue. Any period of transition calls on our collective reservoirs to persevere. Sometimes organizations refer to their staff and supporters as a family. Artistic Director Emeritus Molly Smith said Arena Stage is not a family, but a tribe—one group made of many different groups. I prefer to think that we here at Arena are a team, each player with valued expertise working together in support of the art. It takes a team to deal with the drama and move it back to its rightful home on stage.

If you were with us last season, you may recall in my notes I had the pleasure of highlighting a few members of the Arena team, those who report to me in my capacity as Executive Producer. Teammates and friends. I am pleased to share that during this interim time, our team will also be supported by long-time Arena artist and friend Tazewell Thompson, an internationally acclaimed director for opera and theater, award-winning playwright, librettist, teacher, and actor. Tazewell's history with Arena goes back to his time as Associate Artistic Director with Zelda Fichandler. He was also a close artistic colleague of Molly's and has directed 20 productions at Arena over the years, including three of his own plays (*Constant Star*, *Mary T. & Lizzy K.*, and *Jubilee*). Most recently, he directed *Seven Guitars* in the 2021/22 Season. How wonderful to have Tazewell on the bench with our team.

Our friends extend to the inspiring artists you are here to see today, Step Afrika!, led by C. Brian Williams. Arena is a proud collaborator of the company's new production, *The Fruits of Our Labor*. Like Arena, Step Afrika! is rooted in the value of being resident and present in our community. This profound performance piece responding to the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the United States of America brings our communities to life.

Please know that Arena Stage remains committed to our vision: to galvanize the transformative power of theater to understand who we are as Americans. You will continue to find all that is passionate, exuberant, profound, entertaining, deep, and dangerous within our spaces.

Thank you for sharing this important season with us. Knowing you are on this journey with us provides the necessary confidence to stand strong and look to the future.

**Edgar Dobie**  
Executive Producer  
President of the Corporation

---

# ABOUT STEP AFRIKA!

Founded in 1994 by C. Brian Williams, Step Afrika! is the world's leading authority on the art form of stepping. The Company has toured more than 60 countries across the globe and reaches tens of thousands of Americans each year through a 50-city tour of colleges and theaters as Washington, DC's one and only Cultural Ambassador.

Step Afrika! blends percussive dance styles practiced by historically African American fraternities and sororities, traditional African dances, and an array of contemporary dance and art forms into a cohesive, compelling artistic experience. The Company is a leader in the field of arts education and promotes stepping as an educational tool for young people. Through critically acclaimed programs like *Stepping with Step Afrika!* and *Step Afrika! Reads*, the Company teaches principles of teamwork, academic achievement, and cross-cultural understanding to more than 50,000 K-12 students each year.

Step Afrika! has earned Mayor's Arts Awards for *Outstanding Contribution to Arts Education*, *Innovation in the Arts*, *Excellence in an Artistic Discipline*, and was inducted into the National Association of Campus Activities (NACA) Hall of Fame, the first Dance Company to earn this honor. Step Afrika! headlined President Barack Obama's Black History Month Reception in the legendary East Wing and performed at the first-ever Juneteenth Celebration at the White House. The Company is featured prominently at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History & Culture with the world's first stepping interactive exhibit and is the GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS™ title holder for the "largest STEPPING dance".

## ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM

C. Brian Williams, Founder & Executive Producer

Lamar Lovelace, Executive Director

Mfoniso Akpan, Artistic Director

Conrad R. Kelly II, Assistant Artistic Director

Pascha Barnwell, Company Manager

Margo Cunningham, Senior Marketing Manager

Milen Matthews, Manager, Arts Education and Community Programs



## LEARN MORE

SCAN THE QR CODE OR

VISIT [STEPAFRIKA.ORG](https://stepafrika.org)



# STEP AFRIKA!

## FOUNDER'S NOTE

**Welcome to the world premiere of *The Fruits of Our Labor*!**

Thank you for joining us for this landmark moment in Step Afrika!'s journey. It is especially meaningful to premiere this new work here at Arena Stage, a place that has become an artistic home for our Company and a space where we have shared so many unforgettable stories with audiences over the years.

As our nation commemorates 250 years of history, ***The Fruits of Our Labor* invites us to reflect on the people, traditions, and collective efforts that have shaped America**—and to consider the work that still lies ahead. This production is not intended to provide easy answers. Instead, it offers an opportunity to listen, to celebrate, to question, and to imagine what is possible when we move forward together.

Over more than 30 years, Step Afrika! has **invested more than \$30 million in artists, choreographers, directors, and arts educators, sustaining full-time careers for young dancers in the field**. Step Afrika! is the world's leading authority on the art form of **stepping**, and what we have collectively done with this uniquely American art form is extraordinary. Deeply rooted in African American traditions and enriched by influences from around the world, Step Afrika! reminds us that every movement carries history, every rhythm tells a story, and every voice has the power to contribute to something greater than itself.

This production represents an exciting new chapter for the Company. Created in conversation with two outstanding artists, **Jakari Sherman** and **Conrad R. Kelly II**, *The Fruits of Our Labor* draws inspiration from a powerful dance work created in 2024 by **Vusi Mdoyi**. Based in Johannesburg, South Africa, Vusi Mdoyi's artistic practice uses rhythm, movement, and the sounds of industrial labor to create fascinating percussive soundscapes. Today's performance represents just a first taste of the inventive collaborations to come...

I must give special thanks to **Reg Brown** and **Tiffeny Sanchez** for their pioneering leadership and support. Creating new work requires people who truly believe in the arts, and we are honored to have them with us. I am also thankful to our Lead Commissioners, **ASU Gammage** and the **Charleston Gaillard Center**, as well as our Co-Commissioners, The Modlin Center for the Arts at the University of Richmond, Performing Arts Houston, and the Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts. These incredible partners will help to bring this world premiere to cities across the United States months after our historic run at Arena Stage ends.

Thanks so much for dedicating your evening to both culture and the arts in Washington, DC. Your presence means the world to me, the dancers, and everyone who makes productions like this possible.

Now, please enjoy *The Fruits of Our Labor*.

Sincerely,

A stylized, handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of the letters 'CB' followed by a long, sweeping horizontal line.

**C. Brian Williams**

Founder & Executive Producer, Step Afrika!

ARENA STAGE PRESENTS

**STEP AFRiKA!**

# *The* **FRUITS** *of* **OUR LABOR**

DIRECTED BY  
**JAKARI SHERMAN** WITH  
**CONRAD R. KELLY II** AND **VUSI MDOYI**

SET DESIGNER  
**COLLEEN DOTY**

COSTUME DESIGNER  
**CIERRA COAN**

LIGHTING DESIGNER  
**YANNICK GODTS**

SOUND DESIGNER  
**GW RODRIGUEZ**

SHOW CALLER  
**CHRISTI B. SPANN**

STEP AFRIKA!  
FOUNDER & EXECUTIVE PRODUCER  
**C. BRIAN WILLIAMS**

STEP AFRIKA!  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
**LAMAR LOVELACE**

STEP AFRIKA!  
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR  
**MFONISO AKPAN**

STEP AFRIKA!  
ASSISTANT ARTISTIC DIRECTOR  
**CONRAD R. KELLY II**

*The Fruits of Our Labor* is made possible through the extraordinary generosity and visionary support of  
**Tiffany Sanchez and Reg Brown, Lead Sponsors of the production and national tour.**

Lead Commissioning Support provided by **ASU Gammage** and the **Charleston Gaillard Center**.

Additional Commissioning Support provided by the **Modlin Center for the Arts** at the University of  
Richmond, **Performing Arts Houston**, and the **Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts**.

# PROGRAM

FANFARE BY CONRAD R. KELLY II  
EAGLE BY JAKARI SHERMAN  
ANTHEM BY JAKARI SHERMAN  
FLAG BY JAKARI SHERMAN  
SALUTE BY CONRAD R. KELLY II  
VOICE BY JAKARI SHERMAN  
TAPS BY JAKARI SHERMAN  
STAND BY CONRAD R. KELLY II

*The Fruits of Our Labor runs approximately 80 minutes without an intermission.*

# CAST

KWADJO BEDIAKO — NYA CHRISTIAN — JEROD COLEMAN  
ARIEL DYKES — TERRENCE JOHNSON — CONRAD R. KELLY II  
JAYDEN KING — JEMEEMA S. MONTROSE — KEONDRE PASCAL  
KEANU POWELL — ERICKA STILL — JOSEPH VASQUEZ  
PELHAM WARNER JR. — ROBERT WARNSLEY  
WITH: AGYEI KEITA EDWARDS

# FOR THIS PRODUCTION

Artistic Consultant ..... NIKKOLE SALTER  
Show Caller..... CHRISTI B. SPANN  
Production Assistants ..... TIFFANY KO,  
ZORA ALLISON (8/26–10/7), NATASHA SANCHEZ (10/6–11/1)  
Stage Supervisor ..... HANNAH MARTIN  
Deck Carpenter..... MEGAN AMOS  
Props Technician ..... ERICA FEIDELSEIT  
Light Board Programmer ..... KELSEY SWANSON  
Light Board Operator ..... NICOLE TRANTUM  
A1 ..... ALEX CLOUD  
Wardrobe Supervisor ..... SABRINA SIMMONS  
Wardrobe Technicians..... LAURA ASMUSSEN, ARIEL HULVEY  
Wardrobe Coverage..... JAIME BAGLEY  
Crew Swing..... DAVID PHILLIP

*Philippe Chow*

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| Sunday       | 4 - 9:30PM  |

### SPECIAL DAYS

|                         |               |
|-------------------------|---------------|
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| Jazz (Sundays)          | 5:30 - 8:30PM |



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# CAST



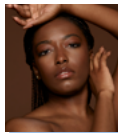
**KWADJO BEDIAKO** is a native of Queens, NY, and holds a BA in Psychology from Stony Brook University. A proud Ghanaian educator, he brings the high-energy Azonto dance style to schools and studios across the tri-state area. Kwadjo began his step training with Francis Lewis High School's nationally ranked Nu Gamma Psi Step Team and later performed with Stony Brook University's Cadence Step Team. He expanded his Afro training as a member of Stony Brook's L'Afrique Dance Team before joining the professional Afro dance company Afro-Afrique. He is also a member of P.L.A.Y.E.R.S. Club Steppers and has worked on projects with artists including Davido, Ms. Lauryn Hill, and Koffi Olomide. This is Kwadjo's second season with the Company.



**NYA CHRISTIAN** is a native of Cleveland, OH, and holds a BA in Political Science with minors in Sociology and Dance Arts from Howard University. A proud member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, she has served as Parliamentarian, Step Mistress, and Stroll Captain of the Alpha Chapter. Nya has choreographed for the White House Initiative on HBCUs and Howard University's 2022 Homecoming Step Show. She is formally trained in ballet, tap, jazz, hip hop, modern, and West African. Nya was a member of ELEVATED Dance Crew's award-winning National 1st Place Championship team at the World of Dance competition, and she has performed on *Good Morning America* as part of the Black History Month segment "The Story of 9 Historically Black Fraternities and Sororities." This is Nya's fourth season with the Company.



**JEROD COLEMAN** is a native of Columbus, Georgia, and holds a BA in History from the University of South Alabama. While in college, he crossed into the Theta Delta Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., where he served as Step and Stroll Master. Jerod has performed with the entertainment teams of the Atlanta Braves and Atlanta Falcons, and has competed in Red Bull Dance Your Style and DreamHack ATL. He also taught at Thomas H. Brewer Elementary School in Columbus, GA, where he founded and led an all-boys step team called the B.L.U.E. Steppers. This is Jerod's fourth season with the Company.



**ARIEL DYKES** is a native of Gainesville, FL, with an Associate of Arts in Musical Theatre from Santa Fe College and a BFA in Dance from the University of Florida. She is a member of the Iota Lambda Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., where she choreographed step routines for her chapter and UF's National Panhellenic Council. Ariel has trained in ballet, jazz, West African, and post-modern dance, as well as voice and acting. She has worked with notable artists such as Ailey Dancers Nathaniel Hunt and Samantha Barriento; Tony Award winner Scott Coulter; and Grammy Award-winning Gospel artist Smokey Norful. This is Ariel's fifth season with the Company.



**TERRENCE JOHNSON** is a native of Broward County, FL, and holds a BA in General Studies from the University of Central Florida. He has over a decade of stepping experience, serving as a founding member of Hazard Step Team in Orlando, FL, and previously performing with the Adimu Men of Excellence, Inc. Step Team. In 2015, he was inducted into the UCF Chapter of Progressive Black Men, Inc. Terrence began his journey with Step Afrika! in 2023 as a guest artist and now enters his fourth season with the Company as a full-time artist.



**CONRAD R. KELLY II** is a native of Fort Lauderdale, FL, who studied Criminal Justice at Florida A&M University. During his time at FAMU, he performed with the Marching 100 and The Strikers. Conrad later became a soloist for The Rolle Project in Las Vegas and a dance instructor at Studio 305, where he taught hip-hop, contemporary, and jazz. He has won numerous awards as a choreographer and dancer, including being a two-time recipient of the DC Commission on Arts and Humanities' prestigious Arts and Humanities Fellowship Program. A long-standing member of the Company, Conrad serves as Step Afrika!'s Assistant Artistic Director and recently choreographed *The Movement*, an epic tribute to Black Lives Matter and the wave of activism in 2020. This is Conrad's ninth season with the Company.

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# CAST



**JAYDEN KING** is a native of Miami, FL, and a graduate of Florida A&M University with a Bachelor of Science in Pre-Physical Therapy. She has trained extensively in

ballet, jazz, contemporary, modern, and hip hop at Artistic Soul, ICTalent Dance Studio, Arthur and Polly Mays Conservatory of the Arts, and New World School of the Arts. Jayden is a former member of Mahogany Dance Theatre under the direction of Shepiro Hardemon, where she served as Assistant Rehearsal Director, Rehearsal Director, and President. She has performed works by Conrad Kelly, Tyrelle Rolle, Christopher Huggins, Clarence Jones, Allyne Gartrell, and others, and has trained with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Dance Theatre of Harlem through summer intensives. This is Jayden's second season with the Company.



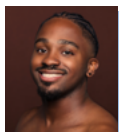
**JEMEEMA S. MONTROSE** is a native of Brooklyn, NY. She attended ASA College, where she studied Health Information Technology. Jemeema is a proud

member of Swing Phi Swing Social Fellowship, Incorporated, and has served as the Chair Facilitator of the National Step and Stroll Committee. She has led performances on numerous college campuses across the country, and Jemeema has also served as a step coach for middle and high school students. This is Jemeema's third season with the Company.



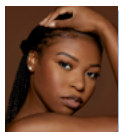
**KEONDRE PASCAL** is a native of Broward County, FL, and an alumnus of Dillard Center for the Arts. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Music Education from

Florida A&M University, where he was a member of the world-renowned Marching 100 and Images Modeling Troupe, later serving as Trainer. A proud member of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia Fraternity of America, Inc., Keondre held multiple leadership roles and also served as Mr. Alpha Kappa Alpha and the university's beloved mascot, the FAMU Venom. His dance training includes mentorship from Shepiro Hardemon and Manny "Fresco" Acosta, with performance credits including World of Dance, Kenny Haiti, and EverythingArlon. An educator and mentor, he launched a business to train young dancers, and his work has been recognized in *Shoutout Miami* and *Bold Journey*. This is Keondre's second season with the Company.



**KEANU POWELL** is a native of Decatur, GA, with a BBA in Management from Howard University. While at Howard, Keanu became an active member of Phi

Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., serving as 2nd Vice President and Step Master. He is also a member of Kappa Kappa Psi National Honorary Band Fraternity, Inc., through the Eta Omega Chapter, and served as Drum Major for the 2021-2023 seasons. Keanu was prominently featured on *Good Morning America* representing Howard University. He has also performed nationally with Howard's band at major events, including Nike Headquarters and the inaugural NBA HBCU Classic. This is Keanu's third season with the Company.



**ERICKA STILL** is a native of St. Petersburg, FL, and holds a BS in Health Science, Pre-Occupational Therapy, with a minor in Rehabilitation Management

from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University. She previously stepped with KAdemy Exquisite Gems and trained under Paulette W. Johnson at SADA and Shepiro Hardemon as a member and Co-Assistant Artistic Director of Mahogany Dance Theatre. This is Ericka's fifth season with the Company.



**JOSEPH VASQUEZ** hails from Guttenberg, NJ, and has a BA in Exercise Science from Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ. In college, Joseph danced with

the Rutgers Bachata Performance Team, where he choreographed and led the team for four years. He is a member of Lambda Sigma Upsilon Latino Fraternity, Incorporated—the first Latin fraternity to step and stroll—and The Revels Stroll Team, where he was led by former team captains Francisco Pozo and Carlos Zapata. This is Joseph's fifth season with the Company.



**PELHAM WARNER JR.** is a native of the Bronx, NY, and holds a BA from Dutchess Community College. Pelham is a member of

The Order of the Feather Fraternity, where he served as the team's Step Master and captain for five years, and he has previously danced with The Players Club Steppers. Pelham has worked as a dance instructor in the greater New York City area

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## CAST

and recently performed in the a cappella musical *The Movement* by Kathy D. Harrison at The National Black Theater Festival. This is Pelham's eighth year with the Company.



**ROBERT WARNSLEY** is a native of Chicago, IL, with a BS in Information Technology from Illinois State University. A member of the Eta Tau chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Robert served as the step and stroll master for four years and organized, competed, and placed first in numerous step shows. He has partnered with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America to teach stepping, and he actively participates in community service projects in Chicago. Robert also studies, practices, and teaches dancehall and various Afro styles in the Chicagoland, DMV, and NYC areas. This is Robert's eighth season with the Company.

## SPECIAL GUEST



**AGYEI KEITA EDWARDS** is a professional drummer, percussionist, choreographer, and performer whose dynamic debut began at the age of three. With more than two decades of experience in West African percussion, he has performed on premier stages including the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage. Agyei has appeared alongside legendary artists such as Sheila E. and, in 2021, showcased his triple-threat talent—choreographer, dancer, and drummer—at the MTV Video Music Awards with Busta Rhymes. He serves as co-Musical Director of Farafina Kan, touring nationally and internationally, and coaches performers of all ages through his enterprise, Top Notch Training Facility. A graduate of Frostburg State University with a degree in Exercise and Sport Science, Agyei also holds a Pain-Free Performance Certification (PPSC) and is a Stick Mobility specialist, blending physical training with performance artistry to inspire holistic excellence.

## CREATIVE

**JAKARI SHERMAN** (*Director & Choreographer*) is a passionate choreographer, ethnochoreologist, and performer whose experience extends over 20 years. Rooted in the African American tradition of stepping, his work pushes the boundaries of percussive dance using technology, storytelling, and diverse musical scores. Jakari served as Step Afrika!'s Artistic Director for seven years. He directed *Drumfolk*, *Green is the New Black*, and *Symphony in Step*, among others. Jakari received an M.A. in Ethnochoreology from the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance and is undertaking groundbreaking ethnographic work related to structural analysis, teaching methodologies and historical archiving of stepping in the U.S. Jakari has lectured on stepping throughout the world, including Greece, Kazakhstan, the U.K., and Belgium.

**CONRAD R. KELLY II** (*Choreographer*)

See bio on page 11.

**VUSI MDOYI** (*Artistic Advisor*) is an arts entrepreneur, dancer, choreographer, educator, artistic director, and creative activist dedicated to advancing the South African art form of isiPantsula. He is the founding director of VAP Dance Academy Theatre and Studios, Katlehong Township's first dance academy and studio, which trains young artists in traditional dance forms. He is also a co-founder of Via Katlehong Dance Company and Impilo Mapantsula Global Movement, an advocacy organization that promotes, researches, documents, and strengthens the isiPantsula industry through coordinated leadership, education, and artistic practice. Inspired by his upbringing in Katlehong Township, Mdoyi's work explores the history, culture, politics, fashion, music, and language embedded within isiPantsula. A leading voice in expanding the art form's reach, he has introduced isiPantsula to traditional theatre, academic, and experimental performance spaces while championing its recognition on the global stage.

**COLLEEN DOTY** (*Set Designer*) has been the Scenic Charge Artist at Arena Stage for the past two seasons and is thrilled to be making her debut as the Set Designer with Step Afrika!'s *The Fruits of Our Labor*. Previous Scenic Charge Artist credits include Kansas City Repertory Theatre and Actors Theatre Louisville. She's worked as a scenic artist in the New York/New Jersey and Chicago areas and has a BFA in Scenic Design from Boston University.

# CREATIVE

**CIERRA COAN** (*Costume Designer*) is the Associate Costume Director at Arena Stage and is proud to be the Costume Designer for Step Afrika!'s *The Fruits of Our Labor*. Previous design credits include *Heathers: The Musical* at Red Branch Theatre and *Hold These Truths* at Arena Stage. She has previously worked on TV shows such as *Turn: Washington's Spies* and *Mercy Street*. She was the Allen Lee Hughes Costume Fellow at Arena Stage in 2015. She has a BFA in Costume Design and Technology from Virginia Commonwealth University.

**YANNICK GODTS** (*Lighting Designer*) is a lighting designer based in Washington, DC, working in theater, opera, and dance. His designs in DC have been seen at Theater Alliance, Imagination Stage, In Series Opera, Step Afrika!, and GALA Hispanic Theatre. In New York, his work has been seen at the Joyce Theater, Catapult Opera, La MaMa, Fall for Dance, and the New Victory Theater. He previously toured with renowned modern dance company Pilobolus as their Lighting Supervisor, and in his time with them designed lighting or props for three repertory works as well as innumerable special projects. He is currently pursuing his MFA in Lighting Design from the University of Maryland.

**GW RODRIGUEZ** (*Sound Designer*) has a BA in technical theatre from Cal State San Bernardino and a MFA in sound design from Boston University. He has worked at such places as Utah Shakespeare Festival, PCPA, South Coast Repertory, Children's Theater of Madison, Forward Theater, and other assorted theaters across the country. Currently he works as the Sound and Video Supervisor at Arena Stage. [www.gwrodriguez.com](http://www.gwrodriguez.com)

**CHRISTI B. SPANN** (*Show Caller*) has been working as a stage manager in DC since 2011. Recent productions include *Damn Yankees* and *Inherit the Wind*. She previously spent 12 seasons on the stage management staff at the Denver Center Theatre Company and has also worked with The Great River Shakespeare Festival in Winona, MN, and Virginia Repertory Theatre in Richmond, VA.

# STEP AFRIKA! LEADERSHIP



**C. BRIAN WILLIAMS**  
(*Founder & Executive Producer*)

is a native of Houston, Texas, and a graduate of Howard University. Brian first learned to step as a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. – Beta Chapter, in the Spring of 1989. While living in Southern Africa, he began to research the percussive dance tradition of stepping, exploring the many sides of this exciting, yet under-recognized American art form, and founded Step Afrika! in 1994. Williams has performed, lectured, and taught in Europe, Central and South America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and throughout the United States. Through Williams' leadership, stepping has evolved into one of America's newest cultural exports and inspired the designation of Step Afrika! as Washington, DC's official "Cultural Ambassador." In 2022, the National Endowment of the Arts designated Williams as a National Heritage Fellow, the nation's highest honor in folk and traditional arts. He is the recipient of numerous artist fellowships; the World Alive! Distinguished Artist Award by ArtsEmerson; the Mayor's Arts Award for Visionary Leadership from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities; Distinguished Arts Award from the Coalition for African Americans in the Performing Arts; and the Pola Nirenska Award for Contemporary Achievement in Dance. He is also featured in *Soulstepping*, the first book to document the history of stepping. He also earned the Mayor's Art Award for Innovation in the Arts and has led the company to multiple Metro DC Dance Awards for "Outstanding New Work," "Excellence in Stage Design/Multimedia," and "Outstanding Group Performance." Williams has been cited as a "civic/community visionary" by *NV Magazine*, a "nation builder" by the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, and a "minority business leader" by the *Washington Business Journal*. His work is featured prominently at the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC.



## LAMAR LOVELACE

*(Executive Director)* As Executive Director for Step Afrika!, Lamar Lovelace is responsible for the organization's strategy and operations, leading its staff, programs, and the execution of its mission. Working closely with Step Afrika!'s Board of Directors, he spearheads fundraising, marketing, operations, and long-range planning for the organization. He brings deep expertise from academia and has managed the organization's humanities-based partnerships. In July 2017, Lamar joined Step Afrika! as Deputy Executive Director, where he oversaw the dance company's communications and marketing strategy, fundraising efforts, and financial operations. Previously, Lamar spent eight years at Columbia University as Assistant Director in the Office of Community Outreach and Education and Director of Public Programs and Events. At the New York City-based campus, he managed community-based partnerships and special events and produced large-scale, humanities-based programming opportunities to engage students, faculty, and staff. At Broward College in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Lamar was Director of Cultural Affairs and Student Engagement, where he created arts-based social justice programs and exhibitions. He holds Master's degrees in Arts Management and Oral History from Carnegie Mellon and Columbia, respectively, and a BA in Speech and Hearing Science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Lovelace is a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.



## MFONISO AKPAN

*(Artistic Director)* is a nationally recognized arts leader, Artistic Director, choreographer, and educator whose career spans

more than two decades of advancing stepping and African diasporic movement traditions on stages across the United States and around the world. Since 2014, she has served as Artistic Director of Step Afrika!, leading the Company's artistic vision, developing repertoire and artists, and expanding the possibilities of stepping as a contemporary performance art form. Akpan joined Step Afrika! in 2005 as a performer and teaching artist and later served as Assistant Artistic Director before assuming her current role. During her tenure, she has helped shape the Company's artistic programming across more than 45 U.S. states and internationally throughout Africa, the Middle East, and beyond, including performances and cultural engagements at the White House. Her choreographic credits include *Umngane*, which received a 2010 Metro DC Dance Awards nomination for Outstanding New Work, as well as *Nxt/Step*, *The Migration: Reflections on Jacob Lawrence*, *Drumfolk*, and other works in Step Afrika!'s touring repertoire. She has also directed major Company productions and programs, including *Step Afrika!'s Magical Musical Holiday Step Show*, the *Home Performance Series*, and *International Step Camp-South Africa*. Trained in tap, ballet, jazz, modern, African dance, and step, Akpan began her dance training at the Bernice Johnson Cultural Arts Center and has performed at Carnegie Hall, the Apollo Theater, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Lincoln Center, and Avery Fisher Hall, as well as in the Off-Broadway production *Hoofin' 2 Hittin'*. She studied biochemistry at the State University of New York at Stony Brook where she developed her stepping practice as a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Through her artistic leadership and commitment to education, Akpan continues to honor the traditions of stepping while creating new pathways for the art form and the next generation of artists.



## CONRAD R. KELLY

*(Associate Artistic Director)*  
See bio on page 11.

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# ARENA STAGE LEADERSHIP

**EDGAR DOBIE** (*Executive Producer*) Born in Vernon, British Columbia, a village next to the Rocky Mountains (three years after Arena had its first performance in 1950), I am one of five brothers raised by my Dad Edgar, a mechanic and small businessman, and Mom Connie, a telephone operator and union organizer. I am the only Dobie to make a career in theater. Luckily for me, drama was an arts elective I was offered at the tender age of 12 so I hung up my hockey skates and joined the drama class, led by teacher Paddy Malcolm and her fledgling Powerhouse Community Theater after school. By the time I graduated from high school, we volunteers had built ourselves a 200-seat, fully equipped theater on its own piece of land in the center of town and found a sold-out audience for the full season of plays we had on offer. That experience taught me so many lessons about the power of theater to foster collaboration and share meaningful stories, as well as the public values that attach themselves to building a safe place where everyone is welcome. All those lessons served me well as a managing leader and producer both sides of the border and both sides of the commercial and non-profit theater divide. Arriving here in Southwest with my good wife Tracy and our daughter Greta Lee in 2009 makes me feel like I am well-equipped to do a good job for you all. I am honored to have been recognized for my service to, and leadership of, the Washington, D.C.-area theater community as a recipient of Theatre Washington's inaugural Victor Shargai Leadership Award in 2022.

**TAZEWELL THOMPSON** (*Artistic Advisor*) is an internationally acclaimed director for opera and theatre, an award-winning playwright, librettist, teacher, and actor. His opera *Blue* with composer Jeanine Tesori won the 2020 MCANNA Award for Best New Opera in North America. *The New York Times* listed *Blue* as Best in Classical Music for 2019. He has more than 150 directing credits, including 30 world and American premieres, in major opera houses and theaters across the USA, France, Spain, Italy, Africa, Japan, and Canada, including Glimmerglass, New York City Opera, Teatro Real, La Scala, L'Opera Bastille, Cape Town, Tokyo, Vancouver, and San Francisco Opera. His award-winning play *Constant Star* has had 16 national productions, garnering nine Barrymore Awards, five NAACP Awards, and three Carbonell Awards; *Mary T. & Lizzy K.*, commissioned and produced at Arena Stage, is the recipient of the Edgerton Foundation New American Play Award; author of *Jam & Spice: The Music of Kurt Weill*; an adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*; and a contributing writer

to *Our War*, short plays for Washington, DC. His a cappella musical *Jubilee: Fisk Jubilee Singers* had its world premiere spring of 2019 and played to SRO audiences at Arena Stage. He has play commissions from Lincoln Center Theater, South Coast Rep, and People's Light & Theatre Company. His production of *Porgy and Bess*, broadcast live from Lincoln Center, received Emmy Award nominations for Best Director and Best Production: Classical Music. He holds the record for directing three productions: *Appomattox*/Philip Glass, *Lost in the Stars*/Kurt Weill, and his American premiere production from Glimmerglass Festival of *Cato in Utica*/Vivaldi all in the same season in three different theaters at The Kennedy Center. He was chosen to rewrite the libretto and direct the premiere staging of Aaron Copland's *The Second Hurricane* as part of a New York State-wide celebration of Copland's 85th birthday. A select list of operas directed: *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, *Death in Venice*, *Xerxes*, *Carmen*, *Don Giovanni*, *The Tender Land*, *Street Scene*, *Pearl Fishers*, *Norma*, *Margaret Garner*, *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, *Patience*, *Freedom Ride*. He is commissioned by Seattle Opera to write a song cycle and his opera *Blue* is rescheduled for future productions at Washington National Opera, Chicago Lyric, Minnesota Opera, and Mostly Mozart Festival. At schools and conservatories, he has directed productions and held master classes at NYU, Juilliard, Yale, Dartmouth, Columbia, Tulane, Indiana-Bloomington, and Kansas-Lawrence. Chair of Theater Department: St. Ann's School and Columbia Prep. His national theater directing credits include nearly every major theater across the country including the Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival, Roundabout Theatre, Manhattan Theatre Club, Arena Stage, Goodman, Seattle Rep, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Cleveland Play House, Hartford Stage, Second Stage, Guthrie, Indiana Rep, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Huntington Theatre, Delaware Theatre Company, Syracuse Stage, Playmakers Rep, City Theatre, Virginia Stage, and The Old Globe. He is a member of SDC, SAG, AFTRA, AEA, AGMA, and CAE.

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The cast of *My Fair Lady* (2012/13 Season). Photo by Suzanne Blue Star Boy.

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Artistic Advisor ..... Tazewell Thompson  
Founding Director ..... Zelda Fichandler  
(1924-2016)  
Founding Executive  
Director ..... Thomas C. Fichandler  
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Artistic Director Emeritus ..... Molly Smith

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Casting Director/Artistic Producer ..... Raiyon Hunter  
Artistic Administrator ..... Shannon Kelley  
Artistic Producing Fellow ..... Nayanna Simone\*  
Casting Intern ..... Tyandria Jaaber

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Maintenance Assistant ..... Tevin Smith  
Porter ..... Lawrence Wise  
Facilities Technicians ..... Silvin Alvarez,  
Juliza Aquice, Daron Cooper, David Oliveras  
Stage Door Attendant ..... Pam Hutton

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Associate Technical Director ..... Ryan Lasich  
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