

# RED BULL THEATER

JESSE BERGER | FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

JIM BREDESON | MANAGING DIRECTOR

PRESENTS

## THE AFRICAN COMPANY PRESENTS RICHARD III

BY CARYLE BROWN

DIRECTED BY CARL COFIELD

FEATURING

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ANTOINETTE ROBINSON | CRAIG WALLACE | JESSIKA D. WILLIAMS

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THE AXE-HOUGHTON FOUNDATION

ORIGINALLY PRODUCED IN 1987 BY PENUMBRA THEATRE COMPANY  
LOU BELLAMY, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR.

PRODUCED BY ARENA STAGE, 1992, DOUGLAS C. WAGER, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR;  
TAZWELL THOMPSON, DIRECTOR.

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MONDAY, JANUARY 11, 2021 | A LIVESTREAM PRESENTATION

A RECORDING OF THE LIVESTREAM WILL BE AVAILABLE UNTIL 7:00 PM EST ON  
FRIDAY, JANUARY 15 – THEN IT DISAPPEARS.

RED BULL THEATER WISHES TO EXPRESS ITS GRATITUDE TO THE PERFORMERS' UNIONS: ACTORS' EQUITY ASSOCIATION, AMERICAN GUILD OF MUSICAL ARTISTS, AMERICAN GUILD OF VARIETY ARTISTS, AND SAG-AFTRA THROUGH THEATRE AUTHORITY, INC. FOR THEIR COOPERATION IN PERMITTING THE ARTISTS TO APPEAR IN THIS PROGRAM.

RED BULL THEATER IS SUPPORTED, IN PART, BY PUBLIC FUNDS FROM THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CITY COUNCIL, AND THE NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL ON THE ARTS, WITH THE SUPPORT OF GOVERNOR ANDREW M. CUOMO AND THE NEW YORK STATE LEGISLATURE.

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## CAST

IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Stephen Price.....EDWARD GERO

Sarah ..... JESSIKA D. WILLIAMS

Ann Johnson ..... ANTOINETTE ROBINSON

James Hewlett..... DION JOHNSTONE

Papa Shakespeare ..... CRAIG WALLACE

William Henry Brown ..... CLIFTON DUNCAN

The Constable..... PAUL NIEBANCK

## SETTING

NEW YORK CITY, 1821

—THERE WILL BE ONE 10-MINUTE INTERMISSION—



**THIS THURSDAY**

**JANUARY 14, 2021**

**7:30 PM EST | LIVESTREAM**

Join an interactive discussion with  
playwright CARLYLE BROWN, director CARL  
COFIELD, scholar MARVIN EDWARD MCALLISTER,  
and some of the other artists involved.

**REGISTER at REDBULLTHEATER.COM**

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHTS

Writer/performer and artistic director **CARLYLE BROWN**'s first professional theater production was his *Little Tommy Parker Celebrated Colored Minstrel Show* at Penumbra Theatre Company in 1986. The next year Penumbra premiered his now famous *The African Company Presents Richard III*. With a Penumbra premier of *Buffalo Hair* in 1994 and a National McKnight Fellowship, Brown moved to the Twin Cities and it has been his artistic home ever since. Other Twin Cities productions: *Beggars' Strike* at the Children's Theater Company, the Mixed Blood production of *Pure Confidence* that moved to off-Broadway in New York and *American Family* at Park Square Theater. His plays include *The Negro of Peter the Great*, *A Big Blue Nail*, *Dartmoor Prison*, *The Pool Room*, *Yellow Moon Rising*, *Down in Mississippi* and others. He has received commissions from Arena Stage, the Houston Grand Opera, the Children's Theatre Company, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Actors Theatre of Louisville, The Goodman Theater, Miami University of Ohio and the University of Louisville. He is recipient of playwriting fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, McKnight Foundation, the Minnesota State Arts Board, Jerome Foundation, Theatre Communications Group and the Pew Charitable Trust. Mr. Brown has been artist-in-residence at New York University School of the Arts Graduate Acting Program, The James Thurber House in Columbus, and Ohio State University Theater Department. He has been a teacher of expository writing at New York University; African-American literature at the University of Minnesota; playwriting at Ohio State University and Antioch College; African American theater and dramatic literature at Carlton College as the Benedict Distinguished Visiting Artist, and "Creation and Collaboration" at the University of Minnesota Department of Theater. He has worked as a museum exhibit writer and story consultant for the Charles Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, and the Kentucky Center for African American Heritage in Louisville, Kentucky. Mr. Brown is a Core Writer at the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis and he is an alumnus of New Dramatists in New York. He has served on the board of directors of Theatre Communications Group, the national organization for the non-profit professional theater. He is a member of the board of directors for the Playwrights' Center and the Jerome Foundation and a Trustee of the Camargo Foundation. He is the 2006 recipient of The Black Theatre Network's Winona Lee Fletcher Award for outstanding achievement and artistic excellence, a 2008 Guggenheim Fellow, a 2010 recipient of the Otto Rene' Castillo Award for Political Theatre, and 2010 United States Artists Fellow. Before his career in the theater, Carlyle Brown was a specialist in outdoor adventure education working with such organizations as Outward Bound, a maritime educator, and, for nearly twenty years, a licensed master of sailing vessels specializing in 19th century schooners in the North Atlantic Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, and the Baltic Sea.

## ABOUT THE PLAY

### **THE AFRICAN COMPANY: CULTURE MAKERS OF EARLY AMERICA**

As its author *The African Company Presents Richard III* is both a blessing and an embarrassment for me. It is an embarrassment because it represents to me the writer I used to be. And I suppose, like all artists, one would like to be known for the artists they have become or the artists they are becoming. But given its long and persistent life the play is always there to constantly remind me of my neophyte beginnings. *The African Company* was my second professionally produced play and it was born in the shadow of the first, a play titled *The Little Tommy Parker Celebrated Colored Minstrel Show*, which to my good misfortune was rather a very good play that explored what would become of African-American theatrical enterprise at the end of the 19th century. Lou Bellamy, Artistic Director of Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota, where *Little Tommy Parker* premiered, suggested to me that he would be interested in a play around the subject of the African Company. I shared with Lou my fears on taking on the subject after the success of *Little Tommy Parker* and he asked me what I needed. I was too green to the business to say I needed money, and instead I said isolation and a place to work. And so Lou put me up in a basement apartment in his home in a remote suburb and for 4-6 weeks I whacked it out so to speak with Lou's lovely wife, Colleen, leaving my meals outside the door.

*The African Company* premiered at Penumbra Theatre, Minnesota's only Black Professional Theatre Company, in February 1988, during the same time that The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis was presenting Shakespeare's *Richard III*. The parallel and the irony of that event went completely unnoticed. And the play, hence the production itself, was awful. Sitting there watching it was sheer agony. I wanted to leap up and scream, "Stop! Please stop!" and beg the audience to put me out of my misery. In that version of the play, the character Stephen Price had a wife named Hannah. She was played by a most beautiful actress who had a voice like an angel and because she was so lovely, I believed every word that came out of her mouth... each one saying to me, "boy you're a genius". In truth every word that came out of her mouth was a mountain of exposition. At the opening reception the theater's janitor came up to me and whispered in my ear, "You need to lose the wife". He was right of course, but it was of no consequence because in my mind I was never going to see *The African Company* again. This of course was not to be the case.

*African Company* was resurrected four years later at Arena Stage in Washington, DC in 1992. It had emerged from rewrite hell with Hannah gone, a new ending and a leaner structure. With an excellent cast, a notable creative team, and gorgeous production values it was a success. A review was featured in a two page spread in

the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday edition of the New York Times, there would be productions all over the country, The Acting Company took it on tour for two years in a row, people I didn't even know began to call me a playwright. It seemed that now *The African Company* and I would be joined at the hip for as long as we both shall live. Second chances...second chances.

In the beginning the reviews were mixed, but over the course of time the critics who once savaged me now in reviewing my subsequent plays refer to *African Company* as my now famous play. David Richards in that first breakout review in the New York Times, after outlining what he viewed as the play's deficiencies, praised the play's theatricality and love of theater, without which he said the play would otherwise "simply have been a tale of racial injustice." I marvel at this sentence to this day, because no one who has ever experienced racial injustice could possibly write such a sentence. At the other extreme were reviews like the one in the African-American newspaper The Amsterdam News which called *The African Company* the greatest play ever written. I suppose the truth is somewhere in between. More recently, the play is viewed by many critics as a story of hope in its time...Same play, different times and different perspectives in its reviews.

Still, I am continually amazed at myself at how detached I am from it all, and this is because I encounter *The African Company* nearly all of the time since its 1992 Arena Stage Production. And not just its reoccurring productions since that time or those in a nick of time royalty checks that come surprisingly in the mail, but rather its African-American characters that I meet in New York, Chicago, Ohio, London, and now here in Ashland, Oregon. It is as if I am a roving father who runs randomly into his children who have come to tell me, "Look dad, I've done well because of you." There is an Ann in New York who uses a scene from *African Company* to audition for Julliard. A middle-aged Papa Shakespeare in Chicago who once toured as Jimmy Hewlett in his youth; Billy Brown in London pounding back pints in a pub; a Sarah at an after party in DC dancing, her arms in the air, spinning in an unabashed joy. What always becomes clear to me is that these characters and the world of the play don't belong to me anymore. It is the exclusive property of these people and the audiences that they perform them for. And although this makes me feel somewhat melancholy this is what plays are for. We playwrights write them so that we can give them away.

You see, I believe that all actors' training is culturally based. What the actor is doing is trying to inhabit the archetypal persona of his/her culture. For African-American actors in American Acting Conservatories, where the Western canon and Western aesthetics are the basis for training and discourse, there is a chasm that separates the African-American actor from his/her true potential, because the African-American in American society is both part and not a part of the culture. This paradox

is the dilemma that is at the root of American identity, race relations and our social and political history. As an African American playwright I feel that it is my duty and responsibility to create plays and roles that compensate for the lack of our own conservatories; to shape opportunities for African American actors to inhabit more than handkerchief head stereotypes and the usual urban suspects, but rather to reveal to all the deeper resources of our culture and our contributions to our national identity and to humanity.

When OSF Artistic Director Bill Rauch called to tell me that the Festival was producing *African Company* I asked him why. I know it was rather a strange response, but I'm a writer, I curious about these things. Bill told me that some patrons were puzzled by the appearance of Black actors in Shakespeare's plays and hoped that *The African Company* would open up that discussion. This was very gratifying to me because I always wanted the play to be useful and I should like to add my perspective to that discourse.

One of the things that I find interesting and challenging about writing history plays is that it forces me to engage in worlds of the past where many of the ideas and ways of living that I daily take for granted had not yet been imagined. The people of the past did not know what we know and without a road map were struggling to arrive where we all are now. That is why we describe the past where it is useful to us as legacy. The world of the African Company, that is to say the world of early 19th America is difficult for us to imagine.

The time of the play around the 1820s was not 50 years after the birth of our republic. America was a slave nation and the wealth acquired from that agrarian enterprise, fortified with free labor was in the process of industrializing a new nation. The war of 1812 was of recent memory and America had fought for and won a place in world affairs. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 had ceded to the new Nation from Napoleon Bonaparte at the cost of 15million dollars a sprawling, three-thousand-mile-long prime piece of real estate that would eventually become the continental United States of America. It was a time of great opportunity for the nation. Yet, it was still a new nation. A nation that had not yet found a real national and cultural identity except that they were once English. This vacuum, this cultural identity void if you will, was being filled with competing desires for new opportunities from European immigrants, Native Americans and Africans who themselves or their forebears came to America as slaves. No place could bear better witness to the existence of this multicultural world than New York City circa 1821. Now as always New York was a major city because it was a port city. It was the foremost important place in the world for investing, capitalizing and outfitting in the Atlantic Slave Trade. On its cobblestone streets, you could find walking, sailors of all complexions, veterans of

the war of 1812, Irish and German emigrants escaping the poverty, persecution and wars of Europe. And then there were the old French families who had escaped the slave rebellion in Haiti. That same Black Haitian army that took bloody revenge on their slaveholders and went on to defeat an invasion of Napoleon's army; and in building their island fortress, the Citadel created one of the first major engineering feats in the Hemisphere. Racism as we know it did not exist. The average New Yorker would see Native Americans, not as indigenous savages in loincloths, but a collection of complex and powerful nations like the Mohawk, Iroquois and Heron who were only recently competitors for the same resources and control of the lucrative fur trade in the northeast. It was the fur trade in fact that caused the wealth of John Astor who contributed to the building of the Park Theater.

It is my personal observation of our collective humanity that there are those among us who for all of their lives work hard and tirelessly to achieve wealth and success and when they have come to the attainment of that wealth and success there grows a desire to be remembered and to do something that is for the sole good of the community. That desire will often not be manifest in the construction of a structure that will house and display some kind of art. Likely that structure will bear that person's name...a memorial and a display of power. This has been going on since the beginning of organized society. It is the existence of such structures that record the history of humankind. John Astor and John Beekman who built the Park Theater clearly must have been in that moment. They decided on building a theater and of course it had to be splendid. It had to be the newest most innovative theater structure of its time, a place that would shine a light on the achievements of the new nation for the world to see. When you look at the long list of plays and entertainments presented at the Park Theater you think to yourself, the building might have been built knowing what it wanted to say, but the material in it was all over the place. What we recognize as distinctly American performance art forms did not exist. The bill of fare on the stage of the Park Theater was playing to an audience that did not yet have a collective cultural identity, and what John's Astor and Beekman were doing when they built the Park Theater was an act of making culture.

Across town free Blacks were doing the same thing. They didn't have wealth but they were clearly resourceful. Just as white New Yorkers they too wanted to spend what little leisure time they had in entertainments and social fellowship. And although they were welcome to sit way upstairs in the back of the Gallery of the Park Theater some of them decided to make a theater of their own. I won't bore you with the fascinating details of the history of this enterprise. There are others who can do that far better than I. I recommend this very readable book with the rather amusing title; *White People do not know how to behave at entertainments designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of color*, by Marvin McAllister. I would rather talk about The African



Company as an exploration in historical fiction, what fascinated me and what parallels I found between me and their world.

If you travel down the West Coast of Africa as I have you will find such a cacophony of languages, cultures and ethnicities so different from each other that the categorization "African" becomes meaningless. The Slave Trade was very aware of this diversity and in what must have been the first school of American anthropology studied it diligently to get the best value out of their human purchases. Pastoral and agrarian people were preferred, herders and farmers. Rice growers from the "Grain Coast" who would go to the rice plantations of the South Carolina Sea Islands, Yoruba iron workers to New Orleans to make and design the iron work that decorated the city. More over the differences between the Africans provided the slave traders with a means for social control. Shipped indiscriminately to one tribe in the midst of another they shared no common language or more ways of behavior and beliefs to bring them together and rebel. Coming to these shores the Africans had only three commonalities; the color of their skin...black, the state of their condition...slavery, and the need to learn a new language...English. So what do they do to endure and survive? Well, they do what is natural to humankind, they make it cultural. They make it because it is in our nature. Spiders make webs, bees make honey and people make culture. But how and what culture should they make? The existing Euro-American culture was of little use to them, they were trying to make culture themselves. And they couldn't use their former cultures, because like the banning of drums and drumming much of their former cultural practices were against the law. They had to make something new and they had to make it subversively. They had to make culture in a world where culture was denied them. We now know that the culture these Africans began to make would become the most distinctive, enduring and original elements of American culture. Music, language, social style you name it, if you take Africanism out of American culture what have you got? I myself cannot imagine what that would be.

But, why Shakespeare? I asked myself as I began the journey of writing *African Company*. And the more I thought about it the more it became perfectly clear why Shakespeare. He was perfect. With Shakespeare they can actively learn the peculiarities and subtleties of the new language. They learn to organize themselves around a singular endeavor. The plays give them a structure to explore their own allusive forms. And Shakespeare gives them cover so as not to appear to be engaged in any activity that might remotely be construed as rebellious. Doing the plays must have been a way to imagine the unimaginable, to have a sense of possibility, and to dare to dream, crave and desire to have the power to have sovereignty over one's own life. Back across town over at the Park Theater, producer Stephen Price is saying that these were nothing more than imitative performances

of a bunch of wholly headed inmates from the City's kitchens and the pantries, but what the Blacks were doing was nothing short of something completely new and original and remarkable and soon Stephen Price would come to regard it as tantamount to an act of rebellion.

Two separate societies each searching for their individual cultural identities... one white the other black...one rich, the other lowly... one with resources, the other resourceful. It is as if they were cultural combatants on a cultural dueling ground. And the second approaches the Black duelist, who is the injured party and says, "Choose your weapons" ... or play as it were. And the Black duelist replies, "My weapon of choice is *The Tragedy of King Richard III* by William Shakespeare".

It is ironic enough that The African Company and the Park Theater were doing the same play at the same time, but for that play to be *Richard III* makes irony beg for mercy. It was not the Richard III that we know or the Richard III that Shakespeare wrote. A gentleman with the rather unfortunate name of Colley Cibber took hold of it in the 18th century and went to renovate it. He cut it, edited it, rearranged things, eliminated characters, eliminated scenes and generally made it so you didn't need a genealogy chart to be able to understand it. And it was small. I mean an actor manager could take on tour. The role is big and ambitious. Cibber's version of Richard III was one of the most popular Shakespeare plays throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries with a role for an actor who desires to cast himself among the greats.

James Hewlett must have been such a Black man. And the man he is going to be compared to is none other than that great and famous English actor renowned throughout the English-speaking world, Junius Brutus Booth. And if I may pause to lay another irony upon our other ironies, this is the same Booth whose son John Wilkes would in some 40 years-time assassinate President Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theater in the nation's capital. ...For James Hewlett to play the part of the hunchback of Gloucester was an ambitious thing to do, dangerous and possibilities for humiliation are almost certain in the atmosphere in which he performed the role. But he had his audience and his audience must have sustained him. Together they must have shaped the conventions of the performance through a kind of mutual exchange which you would call "talk back", you know like talking back, talking back to the actors while they're performing. For example someone shouting out from the audience as Hewlett enters to do Richard's opening monologue, "Hey Dick, what's wrong with your back?" An audience that believes that they are directly part of the entertainment, and that their participation is required. This is not just a Black thing, it's an African thing. Whatever we might call "performance" in African culture is created with the expectation of that kind of participation in mind. Where in Western culture audience expectation and convention calls for a dignified and

respectful silence; in African culture the audience convention is to get up and do your thing. And this audience if it had any cultural identity at all in that moment, that identity was African. It is through those lenses, an African lens their attraction to this particular play makes perfect sense, the kingships, royalty, lineages, and clan wars where things in the play that must have reminded them of where many of them came from. The map of early 19th century West Africa was a map of Empires with all the political intrigues, murder and bids for power that Shakespeare shows them in his play. In Africa they would have been accustomed to those periodic celebrations where the royal story-teller, the Griot, sings, dances, recites and performs the history of the people. *The Tragedy of King Richard III* must have been a play that was deeply accessible to them. They were not imitating anybody, they were making something bold and completely new. They were not adapting Shakespeare's Richard III; they were appropriating Shakespeare's Richard III for their own uses. This disparate group of former African people taken in chains to a strange new land where making a journey of self-discovery and cultural affirmation. One might say that the beginnings of what it means to be African-American started more as an idea than a biological reality. This to me is a marvelous true story. A story as beautiful and universal as all the stories of the making of culture, of the making of a people as all the stories ever told of culture making from antiquity to this present moment. It speaks to the power of the creative force.

This is why Shakespeare is great. Writing for his time for a 16th century English audience he gave them their history for understanding their contemporary context, comedies for laughter, tragedies to embrace their grief, insight and the worship of nature, and still if Shakespeare belonged to anybody, he belongs to everybody.

We now live in an era that is reflective of early 19th Century America. We are becoming a world as our early American world began as a multicultural world. We are living in a world, where at the very least artists anyway, are making culture out of cultures. And we are seeing in the world today not just a clash of cultures, but unification. Who owns Shakespeare one might ask? You might as well ask who has the right to breathe, to dream, to express themselves, to be themselves, to live in and make a meaningful contribution to their world. I submit to you that as human beings this is an obligation and responsibility for all of us.

In closing I would like to read an edited quote from the 20th century French Playwright Jean Giraudoux writing on the importance of theater and I might add the importance of culture.

*"Tragedy and drama are the confession which humanity--this army of salvation and ruin--must... make in public, without reticence and in the loudest tones...toward*

*the illuminated confession of its petty and great destinies... Epochs have not come to terms with themselves unless crowds dressed in their most striking costumes of confession...come to these radiant confessionals called theaters...to listen to their avowals of cowardice, sacrifice, hatred and passion. ...Reveling to men these amazing truths—that the living must live, that the living must die, that autumn follows summer, spring follows winter, that there are four elements, happiness, millions of catastrophes, that life is a reality, that life is a dream, that man lives by peace, that man lives by blood; in short, (that) what (we) will never know. Of such is the performance of a play.”*

Well, those are all the shots in my locker.

Thank you for listening.

**—CARLYLE BROWN**

*From a lecture by the playwright at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival*

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### **WE WEAR THE MASK**

*We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.*

*Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.*

*We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask!*

**— PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR**



JESSE BERGER | FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

JIM BREDESON | MANAGING DIRECTOR

Red Bull Theater brings rarely seen classic plays to dynamic new life for contemporary audiences. Our work unites a respect for tradition with a modern sensibility.

Red Bull Theater is named for the rowdy Jacobean playhouse that illegally performed plays in England during the years of Puritan rule, and was the first London theater to reopen after the Restoration. This bold spirit is central to our identity. With the Jacobean plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries as our cornerstone, Red Bull Theater is New York City's home for dynamic performances of great plays that stand the test of time. The company also produces new works that are in conversation with the classics.

Red Bull Theater delights and engages the intellect and imagination of audiences. A home for artists, scholars and students, we strive to make our work accessible, diverse, and welcoming to all theatergoers. Educational as well as entertaining, our work keeps a rich and vital tradition thriving.

Red Bull Theater believes in the power of great classic stories and plays of heightened language to deepen our understanding of the human condition. We believe in the special ability of live theater to create unique, collective experiences. And we believe in the timeless capacity of classical theater to illuminate the events of our times.

Founded in 2003 with a production of Shakespeare's *Pericles*, Red Bull Theater has been acclaimed by *The New York Times* as "a dynamic producer of classic plays" and by *Time Out New York* as "the most exciting classical theater in New York."

Red Bull Theater serves adventurous theatergoers with OFF-BROADWAY PRODUCTIONS, REVELATION READINGS, and the annual SHORT NEW PLAY FESTIVAL. The company also offers outreach programs including SHAKESPEARE IN SCHOOLS, bringing professional actors and teaching artists into public school classrooms, BULL SESSIONS, free post-play discussions with top scholars, and MASTER CLASSES in classical actor training led by veteran theater professionals.

In our 17-year history, Red Bull Theater has produced 21 Off-Broadway Productions and nearly 200 Revelation Readings of rarely seen classics, serving 5,000 artists and providing quality artistic programming to an audience of 65,000. The company's unique programming has received ongoing critical acclaim, and has been recognized with Lortel, Drama Desk, Drama League, Calloway, Off Broadway Alliance, and Obie nominations and Awards.

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