



the mead center
for american theater

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**STEP AFRIKA!'S DRUMFOLK BEGINS MAY 31ST AT
ARENA STAGE AT THE MEAD CENTER FOR AMERICAN THEATER**

Immersive production kicks off a multi-year collaboration between Step Afrika! and Arena

Washington, D.C. – Inspired by the Stono Rebellion of 1739, Step Afrika!'s critically-acclaimed *Drumfolk* will play at Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater from May 31 – June 26, 2022. *Drumfolk* will take center stage in the iconic in-the-round **Fichandler Stage**, kicking off a multi-year collaboration between the two arts organizations, while also bringing Arena's 2021/22 Season to a close. For more information and to buy tickets, please visit www.arenastage.org/drumfolk.

"What a thrill to welcome Step Afrika! for the first production of a multi-year engagement between our two performing arts organizations," says **Molly Smith**, Arena Stage Artistic Director. "Working with C. Brian Williams has been a flat-out pleasure and I know our audiences will be viscerally moved by *Drumfolk* which promises to take the roof off our complex. I can't wait to share their brilliant and iconic work with Arena audiences."

A remarkable and powerful exploration of the shaping of American culture as well as of stepping, *Drumfolk* takes audiences back to the Stono Rebellion of 1739, when 20 enslaved Africans in South Carolina rebelled against Colonial law, using drums to communicate. Their brutal defeat was followed a year later by the Negro Act of 1740, which prohibited enslaved people from learning

how to play musical instruments, as well as to write, grow food and assemble in groups. Deprived of these fundamental human rights, they began to use their bodies as percussive instruments instead.

This act of survival and activism earned them the name of “Drumfolk,” a term coined by famed folklorist Bessie Jones. Their percussive movement gave rise to some of the country’s most distinctive art forms, including the ring shout, tap, hambone and stepping, as well as hip hop and African American social dance. Step Afrika!’s *Drumfolk* explores this pivotal moment in history and honors the ensuing cultural evolution.

“Grounded in over 28 years of percussive practice and research, *Drumfolk* is Step Afrika!’s intention to reclaim the history of African activists who fought so bravely against tyranny and injustice many years before American colonists revolted against England at the Boston Tea Party,” says **C. Brian Williams**, Founder & Executive Producer of Step Afrika! “For more than 20 years, I have sat in the seats and enjoyed outstanding performances at Arena Stage. Now, I am beyond honored to see Step Afrika! seize the stage at the Mead Center for the American Theater.”

Drumfolk highlights include:

- Step Afrika!’s first presentation of movement and drumming traditions from Angola, birthplace of the Stono Rebellion leaders
- an exploration of the ring shout, a 200+ year-old African American dance rarely seen on our country’s stages
- Step Afrika!’s first exploration of traditional African masked dances informed by Founder C. Brian Williams’s extensive travel across the African continent; and
- an innovative merger of stepping with vocal percussion also known as beat-boxing, featuring DC’s own and Grammy-nominated Christylez Bacon.

Drumfolk will play from May 31 through June 26, 2022, in the Fichandler Stage at Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater. Tickets range from \$41 to \$95 (plus fees) and can be purchased online at arenastage.org/drumfolk, over the phone at 202-488-3300 or in person at the Mead Center. For more information, please visit arenastage.org.

Prime Sponsorship for *Drumfolk* is generously provided by **AARP**.

Supporting Sponsorship for *Drumfolk* is generously provided by **AT&T**.

The presentation of *Drumfolk* is made possible by the **New England Foundation for the Arts’ National Dance Project**, with lead funding from the **Doris Duke Charitable Foundation** and **The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**.

PRODUCTION INFORMATION

***Drumfolk* by Step Afrika! | In the Fichandler Stage | May 31 – June 26, 2022**

Electrifying percussive dance fused with contemporary art forms fuels Step Afrika!’s latest production, *Drumfolk*, inspired by the Stono Rebellion of 1739 and the Negro Act of 1740 in South

Carolina. State laws mandated that enslaved Africans could not assemble or use their drums which were used to signal the uprising. They took away the drums, but they could not stop the beat.

This is the “poetic, choreographically rich” (*Washington Post*) story of a movement that could not be stopped and transformed African American culture from then to the present day. The immersive production will be the first of three as part of a multi-year collaborative partnership between Step Afrika! and Arena Stage.

CAST & CREATIVE TEAM: For full company biographies, please visit arenastage.org/drumfolk.

***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 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

***Step Afrika!** Founded in 1994 by C. Brian Williams, Step Afrika! is the world’s first professional company dedicated to the tradition of stepping—a polyrhythmic, percussive dance form that uses the body as an instrument. Step Afrika! promotes stepping as a contemporary dance genre through critically acclaimed performances and arts education programs. Creatively engaging audiences in this nascent art form, the Company creates new full-length productions that expand on stepping’s unique American history.*

*With 14 full-time dancers and administrative team of 6, Step Afrika! is one of the top 10 U.S. African American dance companies. The Company reaches thousands each year through a 50-city tour of American colleges and theaters and performs globally as an official U.S. Cultural Ambassador. New work, such as *The Migration: Reflections on Jacob Lawrence and Drumfolk*, tour to major U.S. cities. Step Afrika! is featured at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History & Culture with the world’s first interactive stepping exhibit. stepafrika.org*

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