

ARENA STAGE MEDIA RELEASE

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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CONTACT:

Anastasia St. Hilaire, Arena Stage
asthilaire@arenastage.org

Amy Killion, Bucklesweet
amy@bucklesweet.com, 703-559-9714

ARENA STAGE'S NEW DRAMA RESPONDS TO TULSA RACE MASSACRE OF 1921

AND ANNOUNCES CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM FOR FIRST POWER PLAY OF 2023

THE HIGH GROUND

By NATHAN ALAN DAVIS

Directed by MEGAN SANDBERG-ZAKIAN

(Washington D.C.) Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater announced today the cast and creative team of *The High Ground*, a visceral new drama inspired by the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. Written by award-winning playwright **Nathan Alan Davis** and directed by longtime collaborator **Megan Sandberg-Zakian**, *The High Ground* will run **February 10 – April 2, 2023** in the **Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle**. Press Night will be held on **Thursday, February 23 at 8 p.m.** For information and tickets, please visit arenastage.org/highground.

After first learning of the Tulsa Race Massacre, **Davis** knew he had to tell its story. “The thing that sparked my interest was that I was shocked that I had never heard about it before,” he shared. “Storytelling is the work that I love most in the world. The fact that such a large scale of death and destruction had happened—and I’d never even heard about it—that really disturbed me. And this play was born.”

In *The High Ground*, a Black man in army garb still stands his ground on present-day Tulsa’s Standpipe Hill more than a century after the Tulsa race massacre killed hundreds and destroyed the prosperous Greenwood District. This new play is an unexpected love story that traverses space and time, and reminds us of what it takes to re-emerge from the devastation of a century, long after the embers have turned to ash.

“The play is about what happens when you get stuck in a loop of historical trauma, and are unable to process it,” explained **Sandberg-Zakian** at the production’s first rehearsal. “But it’s also a romance. It’s a love story. It asks ‘what kind of telling of this story could get us unstuck? Is it possible to hold onto our legacies of love and connection in spite of, or in addition to, our legacies of trauma and violence?’”

Originally planned as a part of Arena Stage’s 2020/21 Season, *The High Ground* is as timely as ever in 2023. “We have seen time and time again that decades of repercussions follow after violence is perpetrated on a community,” said Arena Stage Artistic Director **Molly Smith**. “Nathan’s elegant and

moving writing is a visceral reminder of this. *The High Ground* is a beautiful play. It's an evocative play. And, ultimately, it's a hopeful play, as well."

The High Ground is the ninth addition to Arena's Power Play series. Launched in 2016, this is a 10-year initiative commissioning original works on politics and power, reflecting American diversity and challenges through five cycles and voices—presidential, African American, insider, musical theater, and women's voices. Previous Power Plays include Lawrence Wright's *Camp David* (2014); John Strand's *The Originalist* (2015); Jacqueline E. Lawton's *Intelligence* (2017); Bob Banghart, Georgia Stitt, and John Strand's *Snow Child* (2018); Mary Kathryn Nagle's *Sovereignty* (2018); Aaron Posner's *JQA* (2019); Eduardo Machado's *Celia and Fidel* (2021); and Craig Lucas' *Change Agent* (2022). The tenth Power Play, Kenneth Lin's *Exclusion*, will premiere in May 2023.

The National Endowment for the Arts announced earlier this week that *The High Ground* is the recipient of a 2023 grant through the NEA's Grants for Arts Projects program. This follows the play receiving a prestigious Edgerton Foundation New Play Award in 2022.

"The three Edgerton New Play Awards granted to Arena Stage across our current and upcoming seasons are critical to Arena's mission to uplift American artists and nurture the theater canon," explained Arena Stage Executive Producer **Edgar Dobie** last year, referring to *The High Ground*, as well as last season's *Change Agent* and *American Prophet*. "The Awards give us additional rehearsal time for these new works, which are critical in ensuring each production premieres in the best form possible. We thank the Edgerton Foundation and Dr. Bradford Edgerton for this tremendous support and their continuing belief in the power of new works."

Making their Arena Stage debuts in *The High Ground* are cast members **Phillip James Brannon** (Broadway's *Macbeth*), **Nehassaiu deGannes** (Shakespeare Theatre's *Much Ado About Nothing*), **DeJuan Christopher** (A Noise Within's *Radio Golf*), and **DeShawn White** (New Federal Theatre's *Gong Lum's Legacy*).

The creative team also includes Set Designer **Paige Hathaway**, Costume Designer **Sarita Fellows**, Lighting Designer **Sherrice Mojgani**, Original Music and Sound Design **Nathan Leigh**, Hair and Wig Designer **Tommy Kurzman**, Dramaturg **Otis Ramsey-Zöe**, Dramaturg **Jocelyn Clarke**, Casting Director **Joseph Pinzon**, Stage Manager **Christi B. Spann**, and Assistant Stage Manager **Jalon Payton**.

CAST BIOGRAPHIES

Phillip James Brannon (*Soldier*) is making his Arena Stage debut. A South Carolina native, but raised in the DMV area, Phillip has looked forward to working at Arena since he was in high school. He made his D.C. debut in 2011 at Woolly Mammoth in the world premiere of Robert O'Hara's *Bootycandy*. Phillip received his BFA in Acting from DePaul University in Chicago where he began his professional career, doing numerous productions at Steppenwolf, the Goodman, Chicago Shakespeare Theater, and more. He is now a New York resident, living in Harlem for the last 11 years, where has worked non-stop on Broadway and Off-Broadway. He was last seen as Ross, and one of the witches, in *Macbeth* on Broadway. Phillip also works in film and TV—you can currently see him recurring on Apple TV+'s *Servant*. He has also appeared on *The Sinner*, *The Good Fight*, *The Blacklist*, and more. This is his second world premiere with playwright Nathan Alan Davis, the first being another two-hander, *Nat Turner in Jerusalem*, which premiered at New York Theatre Workshop in 2016—which to this day one of Phillip's most favorite artistic ventures he's ever been on.

Nehassaiu deGannes (*Victoria/Vicky/Vee/The Woman in Black*)'s D.C. credits include *Much Ado* (STC), *Gorn Galaxy* (Arena Flash Acts Festival), and *Kings* (Studio Theatre). She appeared Off-Broadway in the world premieres of *Is God Is* (Soho Rep) and *SEAGULLMACHINE* (La MaMa). Recent regional credits

include *Three Musketeers* and *Sweat* (Cleveland Play House); *My Lord, What A Night* (Florida Studio Theatre's rolling world premiere); *Romeo & Juliet / Our Town* (Alabama Shakespeare Festival); *Measure for Measure*, *Intimate Apparel*, and *Or*, (Shakespeare & Co.); *The Last Wife* (WAM); *Marisol* (Luna Stage); *The Convert* (Underground Railway); and *King Lear* (Chicago Shakes). Other highlights include the Canadian premiere of *Never Not Once* (Theatre Aquarius) and a principal season at Stratford Festival of Canada. Nehassaiu appears in the feature film *Equal Standard* and is a published poet. nehassaiu.com

DeJuan Christopher (*Male Understudy*) This is DeJuan's first appearance at Arena Stage. His most recent theater credits include *Radio Golf* (A Noise Within Theatre), *Seven Guitars* (A Noise Within Theatre), and *Metamorphoses* (A Noise Within Theatre). DeJuan recently starred in the film *Malleable*, which made its debut at Tribeca Film Festival. Twitter: @dejuanchristoph, IG: @dejuanchristopher

DeShawn White (*Female Understudy*) is a Prince George's County native and theater alumni of the University of Maryland Baltimore County who is thrilled to be a part of her first show at Arena Stage. Her Off-Broadway credits include originating a lead role in *Gong Lum's Legacy* (New Federal Theatre) and the NAACP Award-winning play *The Girls of Summer* (Actors Temple Theatre). Select regional theater credits include *The Mountaintop* (The Hippodrome Theatre), *I Just Stopped by to See the Man* (New Stage Theatre), and *The Metromaniacs* (Shakespeare Theatre of NJ). DeShawn's select film & TV credits include guest-starring roles on *Wu-Tang: An American Saga* (Hulu), *The Deuce* (HBO), and alongside Edward Norton in *Motherless Brooklyn*. IG: @deshawn.andrea.white www.deshawnwhite.com

For full company biographies, visit arenastage.org/highground.

PRODUCTION INFORMATION

THE HIGH GROUND

By Nathan Alan Davis

Directed by Megan Sandberg-Zakian

In the Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle | February 10 – April 2, 2023

ABOUT:

More than a century after the Tulsa race massacre killed hundreds and destroyed the prosperous Greenwood District, a Black man in army garb still stands his ground on present-day Tulsa's Standpipe Hill. *The High Ground* is an unexpected love story that traverses space and time, and reminds us of what it takes to re-emerge from the devastation of a century, long after the embers have turned to ash.

CAST:

Soldier: Phillip James Brannon*

Victoria/Vicky/Vee/The Woman in Black: Nehassaiu deGannes*

Male Understudy: DeJuan Christopher*

Female Understudy: DeShawn White*

CREATIVE TEAM:

Playwright: Nathan Alan Davis

Director: Megan Sandberg-Zakian

Set Designer: Paige Hathaway

Costume Designer: Sarita Fellows

Lighting Designer: Sherrice Mojgani

Original Music and Sound Design: Nathan Leigh

Hair and Wig Designer: Tommy Kurzman

Dramaturg: Otis Ramsey-Zöe

Dramaturg: Jocelyn Clarke

Casting Director: Joseph Pinzon
Stage Manager: Christi B. Spann*
Assistant Stage Manager: Jalon Payton*

*Members of Actors' Equity Association

The *High Ground* is made possible through generous funding from **Tiffany Sanchez and Reg Brown**. Additional support is provided by **JMA Solutions, AT&T, Sandy Bieber and Linda Rosenzweig**, and **PNC**. This project is supported in part by the **National Endowment for the Arts**.
The High Ground is the recipient of an **Edgerton Foundation New Play Award**.

PLAN YOUR VISIT

TICKETS: Tickets for *The High Ground* are \$72-95 plus applicable fees. Ticket prices and availability are subject to change. Arena Stage's many savings programs include "pay your age" tickets for those aged 30 and under, student discounts, and "Southwest Nights" for those living and working in the District's Southwest neighborhood. To learn more, visit arenastage.org/savings-programs.

Tickets are available at arenastage.org. Tickets may also be purchased by phone at 202-488-3300, or in person at the Sales Office at 1101 Sixth Street, SW, D.C., Tuesday-Sunday, 12-8 p.m.

Sales Office/Subscriptions: 202-488-3300
Group Sales Hotline for 10+ Tickets: 202-488-4380

PERFORMANCE DATES:

Tuesday, Wednesday, and Sunday at 7:30 p.m.
Thursday, Friday, and Saturday at 8 p.m.
Saturday and Sunday at 2 p.m.
Weekday matinees at 12 p.m. on March 9, 22, and 29
No performance on March 30

Early Curtains: Sunday, March 19 at 12 p.m. and Sunday, March 19 at 6 p.m.

Southwest Nights: Saturday, February 25 at 8:00 p.m. and Tuesday, March 21 at 7:30 p.m.

Audio-Described Performance: Saturday, March 11 at 2:00 p.m.

ASL-Interpreted Performance: Saturday, April 1 at 8:00 p.m.

Closed Captioning: GalaPro begins Saturday, February 25

Post-Show Conversations

Connect with the show beyond the performance at a post-show conversation with artists and staff on March 2 following the 8 p.m. performance; on March 7 following the 7:30 p.m. performance; and on March 9, 22, and 29 following the 12 p.m. matinees.

Full Calendar: arenastage.org/tickets/calendar

SAFETY: Arena Stage requires that patrons, staff, and volunteers wear facial masks inside the Mead Center, unless actively eating or drinking, regardless of vaccination status. These conditions are subject to change, and Arena continues to consult with medical professionals, monitor government best practice recommendations, and engage in industry trainings to ensure the health and safety of our patrons, artists, and staff. For up-to-date information, visit arenastage.org/safety.

TRAVEL: Limited parking is available in Arena Stage's on-site garage for \$18 to \$30, including drive-up valet parking for \$30. Call 202-488-3300 to purchase in advance. For more information on transportation and other parking options around the Mead Center, visit arenastage.org/transportation.

For complete 2022/23 Season details, visit arenastage.org/season.

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

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