

MEDIA RELEASE

MOLLY SMITH ARTISTIC DIRECTOR EDGAR DOBIE EXECUTIVE PRODUCER ZELDA FICHANDLER FOUNDING DIRECTOR



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ARENA STAGE NAMES HANA SHARIF AS ITS NEW ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

TRAILBLAZING LEADER OF THE REPERTORY THEATRE OF ST. LOUIS WILL TAKE CENTERSTAGE IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL FOLLOWING MOLLY SMITH'S RETIREMENT

(Washington, D.C.)—Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater today announced that its Board of Trustees has unanimously selected **Hana Sharif**, Augustin Family Artistic Director of The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, as its next Artistic Director. She will succeed **Molly Smith**, who is retiring at the end of June after 25 years with the company. Joining Executive Producer **Edgar Dobie** at the helm of the landmark regional theater, the trailblazing **Sharif** will be only the fourth artistic director in the company's history.

"I have the honor of following three visionary leaders, two of whom are women who have led the organization for 65 of its almost 75 years," said **Sharif**. "I see my appointment as a natural and exciting extension of that leadership; creating, presenting, and producing art that continues to explore how we tell the story of an evolving America. Staying rooted in the American voice is really important, and a mission that truly excites me. There are many theaters, but there's only one Arena, and I can't wait to begin the journey."

"Hana is a brilliant artist and transformative leader who honors history, builds on legacy, and looks to the future," said **Decker Anstrom**, Chair of Arena Stage's Board of Trustees. "We set out to find the best artistic director in America to write the next chapter of Arena Stage's story, and we did."

Catherine Guttman-McCabe, Arena Stage Board Chair-Elect and Search Committee Chair, commented on **Sharif's** ability to weave stories that transcend space and time. "Hana's embrace of Arena's mission, vision and values is wonderfully ambitious, and I have no doubt she will fill our theaters and communal spaces with deep, meaningful, and joyful artistry. Under Hana's and Edgar's tremendous leading partnership, Arena will soar to even greater heights."

As Augustin Family Artistic Director of The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis (The Rep), **Sharif** shepherded the organization through a cultural transformation *also* after the retirement of an iconic leader. Her directorial debut at The Rep was with an adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*, which turned out to be the highest grossing show in the company's history. She expanded the theater's commitment to produce world premieres each season, including *Dreaming Zenzile*, *Feeding Beatrice*, and *House of Joy*, and her production of Ken Ludwig's stage adaptation of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* in The Rep's recently concluded 2022/23 season received rave reviews.

Among other firsts to her credit, **Sharif** diversified The Rep's programming to reflect the region's spectrum of genre, thought, form and culture, including its first all-Femme design team (*The Gradient*, also a world premiere). She piloted a range of new programming during the COVID-19 pandemic, including a drive-through illuminated puppet experience (*Glowy Snowy Day*), and a virtual theatrical series that brought together famous

local chefs, mixologists, local bands, and media personalities (*Cooking, Carols, and Cocktails*). She also produced high-quality streams of The Rep's mainstage productions in its 2021/2022 season.

"Hana's own origin story has prepared her like no other artist for this moment at Arena," said **Edgar Dobie**, Arena Stage Executive Producer. "It's a great day when human values, grace, and authenticity—which Hana owns in abundance—rhyme with the rich opportunities available at our about-to-be 75-year-young enterprise. Hana brings joy with her, and our arms, minds, and hearts are wide open to that joy."

Sharif's origin story dates back to 2003, when she joined Hartford Stage as an entry-level artistic assistant. In just seven years, she was serving as Associate Artistic Director, as well as Hartford's Director of New Play Development. The seeds were sown for the brilliant generative, interpretive, and curatorial artist that **Sharif** has grown to be, combining the roles of playwright, director, and producer to bring to life the stories of our humanity that transform our communities and society. While at Hartford Stage, **Sharif** broadened its commissioning program, expanded its Brand: NEW Play Festival, co-created the Aetna New Voices Fellowship for playwrights of color, and launched a training partnership with the University of Hartford's Hartt School.

Sharif's innate abilities as a strategic and cross-functional leader saw her recruited from Hartford Stage to Baltimore Center Stage (BCS), where she helped guide a multi-million-dollar renovation and cultural transformation over her 5-year-tenure. This included launching the "Third Space," a 99-seat theater dedicated to adventurous and thought-provoking art, creating immersive preshow experiences for its mainstage audiences, and prototyping its signature community programs, *BCS Mobile* and *BCS Park*.

Sharif continued to explore new artistic territory while at BCS, directing acclaimed productions of *Pride and Prejudice* (Christopher Baker's world premiere adaptation), *The Christians*, and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. She also guided development of the world premiere of Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Marley* and the East Coast premiere of Kemp Powers' *One Night in Miami*; both plays enjoyed celebrated commercial runs in London's West End and Birmingham, England, respectively, with *One Night in Miami* being nominated for a Laurence Olivier Award (Best New Play).

The quest for Arena Stage's new Artistic Director began on July 21, 2022, when the Search Committee of its Board of Trustees met to chart the roadmap to find the company's new artistic leader. Comprised of dedicated voices from Trustees, staff, and artists, the committee held as its North Star that Arena's current mission, vision, and values statements would drive the search, with the expectation that the new Artistic Director would interpret creatively how each is fulfilled. The search process was supported by **Management Consultants for the Arts (MCA)**.

Sharif's commitment to programming vibrant, provoking, and engrossing art is matched by her dedication to expanding community connections and correcting inequitable practices industry wide. She holds leadership roles with the Theatre Communications Group (TCG), including its Executive Board and Breaking Barriers Taskforce, and sits on the Advisory Committee of the Black Theatre Taskforce (BTC); organizations and positions that are intrinsically aligned with Arena Stage's long-standing commitment to diversity, equity, representation, and community.

Sharif was also a planning team member of the Professional Nonprofit Theater Coalition, which helped secure access to \$16 billion of federal SVOG (Shuttered Venues Operators Grant) funding for tens of thousands of theater workers across the country during the early months of the COVID-19 global pandemic. She is the recipient of numerous accolades, including USITT's 2023 Distinguished Achievement Award for Management, Spelman College's 2022 National Community Service Award, TCG's New Generations Fellowship, and the Aetna New Voices Fellowship.

"I was scheduled to direct *Intimate Apparel* at Arena Stage before the pandemic," said **Sharif**, "so this is a homecoming of sorts for me. It is a gift to follow **Molly Smith's** outstanding tenure and join the Arena Stage family. The richness of Arena's unparalleled legacy is inspiring, and I can't wait to get started with this once-in-a-lifetime chance to lead the next evolution of **Zelda Fichandler's** dream for the American theater."

Sharif's arrival at Arena Stage will be all the more meaningful as she will officially ascend to the ranks of a small but mighty group: Arena's celebrated artistic directors, all of whom have been national leaders. Co-founder **Zelda Fichandler** was a pioneer of the American regional theater movement and served as producing director until 1990; **Douglas C. Wager** led the organization from 1990 to 1998, capping off a distinguished 25-year tenure at Arena across a variety of roles; and current artistic director **Molly Smith** has been at its helm since 1998, producing more than 200 productions and driving the design and development of the Mead Center for American Theater over her 25 seasons.

"For the last 25 years, I have held magic in my hands," said outgoing Arena Stage Artistic Director, **Molly Smith**. "From the first moment 25 years ago, when I came to Arena, I was blessed with a top-notch production staff and dynamic administration. We can create *anything*, and we have; and we've changed America along the way. Now, it's time to pass that magic on to the next generation—to Hana. I know her magic will be mesmerizing and I, for one, will be cheering from the audience."

As Arena Stage turns the page to its next chapter, it is indeed an exciting time for theater in the nation's capital and nationwide, as **Sharif** explores her unique interpretation of the question Arena poses to all its patrons: "What does it mean to be an American?"

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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