

MEDIA RELEASE

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



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ARENA STAGE ANNOUNCES LEADERSHIP TEAM PROMOTIONS

Shonali Burke named Chief Marketing and Strategy Officer and Vice President, and Ryan E. Merkel named Chief Development Officer

(Washington D.C.) Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater announced today the promotions of two of its senior leaders, **Shonali Burke** and **Ryan E. Merkel**, effective July 1, 2023.

Burke has been promoted from Chief Marketing Officer to **Chief Marketing and Strategy Officer, and Vice President**. Her promotion reflects the work she has been undertaking since joining the company in 2021 to rebuild Arena Stage's Earned Revenue function, as well as overseeing its Audience Services and Marketing and Communications. Effective July 1, 2023, the existing Information Systems department is added to her portfolio, reflecting her leadership role in shaping and driving the company's growth strategies in a digital-forward world.

Merkel's role will expand from Director of Development to **Chief Development Officer**. His additional responsibilities will include the development and oversight of a comprehensive campaign designed to support advancement towards building a resilient organization supported by contributed income from all sources.

Commenting on the promotions, Arena Stage Board Chair **Catherine Guttman-McCabe** said, "Shonali has done an incredible job with Arena's marketing and communications. She is a strategic leader who understands the power of data and combines that with a strong sense of storytelling. As theaters rely less on the subscription model, the work of Shonali and her team is essential."

Guttman-McCabe continued, "Ryan brought his tremendous development skills and understanding of the arts in Washington, D.C., to Arena Stage in 2017 and has risen to every challenge. He builds deep human connections and leads a team that provides a critical lifeline for the organization. His joy for his work is contagious."

Added Arena Stage Executive Producer and President of the Corporation **Edgar Dobie** of **Burke**, "Shonali's promotion reflects an acknowledgment of her strong analytic and strategic skillset. She truly embraces our community, our values, and appreciates Arena's origin story. Add to that a great sense of humor and a gracious manner with everyone in her orbit, her instincts and talents will serve Arena well into the future."

Speaking of **Merkel, Dobie** said, “Ryan has demonstrated initiative well beyond an annual approach around Arena’s fundraising efforts. He has recruited and motivated a talented team, including through one of the most challenging times in the world’s history. Ryan’s new responsibilities reflect the value of his contributions and allow him to continue to build a robust development department.”

Retiring Arena Stage Artistic Director **Molly Smith** rounded out the comments on **Burke**: “Shonali came in like a fireball and gave Arena’s marketing and social media department a huge boost. She provides a steady heartbeat in this critical area, and her leadership is a strength for Arena.”

In closing, **Smith** said of **Merkel**, “In all my years at Arena, Ryan is one of my favorite people in this position. He is quick-witted, determined, and follows through. Arena will benefit from his expanded responsibilities and leadership.”

About Shonali Burke: Shonali is responsible for the brand and growth strategy of the historic Tony Award®-winning regional theater. Under her guidance, Arena sold out the 2022 world premiere of the critically acclaimed musical, *American Prophet: Frederick Douglass in His Own Words*, and its Washington, D.C. premiere of *Ride the Cyclone* (in association with Princeton University’s McCarter Theater Center) in spring 2023 was a runaway success; both welcome box office hits as the company continued to rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to joining Arena Stage, Shonali ran a successful virtual integrated marketing consultancy working with purpose-driven organizations including Oxfam America, the United Nations Foundation, and USA for UNHCR, for whom she designed its now-textbook digital “Blue Key” campaign. Earlier in her career, she led communications for the ASPCA, where she spearheaded its response to the 2007 pet food recall and Michael Vick case, and also launched its pet insurance product. The first Indian American woman to be named to *PRWeek*’s “Top 40 Under 40” list of U.S.-based PR pros, Shonali is adjunct faculty with The Johns Hopkins University’s M.A. in Communication, and a 2021 graduate of the Harvard Business Analytics Program. She is writing her first book, *The Non-Obvious Guide to Public Relations & Communication*.

About Ryan E. Merkel: Ryan has served as Arena Stage’s Director of Development since 2020, overseeing all aspects of contributed revenue to the theater. Before moving into this position, Ryan was the director of major gifts. Prior to finding a home at Arena, Ryan held a number of positions at the Newseum in Washington, D.C., culminating in service as the director of individual giving where his work included cultivation, solicitation and stewardship of mid-range and major donors, as well as special event coordination and management of all the Newseum’s annual membership programs. A devoted champion of the arts and culture sphere, Ryan has also held major gift positions at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the National Symphony Orchestra, and was a member of the Steering Committee of Emerging Arts Leaders of D.C. Ryan is also a Trustee of Synetic Theater in Arlington, Virginia, and a member of the Florida Cicerone Alumni Advisory Council at the University of Florida. Ryan earned a master’s degree in communication management from the University of Maryland, while he also worked as a public speaking instructor and an alumni relations coordinator for the Department of Communication. Ryan’s undergraduate education was at the University of Florida where he studied Business Marketing, Mass Communication, and Art History.

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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