PlayNotes

Season | 47 Issue | 5

Where We Stand

by Donnetta Lavinia Grays

PS
PORTLAND STAGE

Discussion Series

Due to Covid-19 our regularly scheduled discussions are moving online. Head to portlandstage.org/show/where-we-stand/ to view our discussion schedule and Zoom links.

Curtain Call
These discussions offer a rare opportunity for audience members to talk about the production with the performers. Through this forum, the audience and cast explore topics that range from the process of rehearsing and producing the text to character development to issues raised by the work.

The Artistic Perspective
Hosted by Artistic Director Anita Stewart, is an opportunity for audience members to delve deeper into the themes of the show through conversation with special guests. A different scholar, visiting artist, playwright, or other expert will join the discussion each time.

All discussions are free and open to the public. Show attendance is not required.

Interested in addtional discussions?

Portland Stage strives to be a forum for our community. While we can't currently gather in the same ways we're used to, we are adding some exciting new opportunities to connect to our community near and far. Stay tuned to portlandstage.org for more info, and if your group would like to discuss plays at Portland Stage feel free to email literary@portlandstage.org and we'll see what we can work out.

A talkback with the playwright, director, and cast of Marianas Trench *by Scott C. Sickles as part of the 2020 Digital Little Festival of the Unexpected.*

Where We Stand

by Donnetta Lavinia Grays

***PlayNotes* Season 47 Editorial Staff**
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Portland Stage Company Educational Programs, like *PlayNotes*, are generously supported through the annual donations of hundreds of individuals and businesses, as well as special funding from:

Maine Arts Commission

George & Cheryl Higgins
Susie Konkel
The Onion Foundation
The Virginia Hodgkins Somers Foundation

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Focus Questions

by Sophia B. Diaz & Jordan Wells

1. *Where We Stand* utilizes call and response, with the performer guiding the audience to respond. Why do you think a playwright would involve the audience in this way?

2. The Townspeople in *Where We Stand* have things they'd like to change about their town. What are things you'd like to change about where you live, and what are ways that you could start to make a difference?

3. *Where We Stand* includes several songs that are interspersed between spoken sections. How did the use of songs impact your experience?

4. The Man explains the pain and loneliness he feels at the beginning of the play, which prompts the Stranger's arrival. If you were in the Man's position, do you think you would have made the deal with the Stranger? Why or why not?

Pre-Show Activities

by Sophia B. Diaz & Jordan Wells

1. The playwright says, "We are not 'audience' and 'performer' in a hierarchical set up. We are a community." What does community mean to you? Make a list of characteristics that you feel make up a strong community.
    a. Using your own meaning of community and the list of characteristics you made, brainstorm how these ideas could apply to a piece of theater. What could a play do to make you feel like you were a part of the play's community?

2. This play describes the concept of justice in different terms, including "compassionate," "love," "punishment," and "tool." Which of these words do you most strongly associate with justice, and why? Write about what justice means to you, and talk about it with a partner.

3. In the script it says the space in which this piece takes place should be "a center for civic engagement" with the stage being as level with the audience seating as possible, with "as little tech to the design as possible." Using this description, create a set design for *Where We Stand*.

Use this box to design your set for Where We Stand

Thoughts from the Editors:
What is your favorite fable?

My favorite fable, Aesop's "The Tortoise and the Hare", is about a race between a tortoise and a hare. The Hare, arrogant in his abilities to win the race, takes a nap, falls asleep, and ends up losing the race to the slow and steady Tortoise. The Hare's loss reminds us to not slack off when we feel confident, while the Tortoise's victory teaches us that taking things at whatever pace we feel comfortable yields worthwhile results. In a time where there's so much pressure to get things done quickly, it's important to remind ourselves that it's okay to take things slowly if we move consciously and confidently. After all, *slow and steady wins the race*.

- Sophia B. Diaz, Education Intern

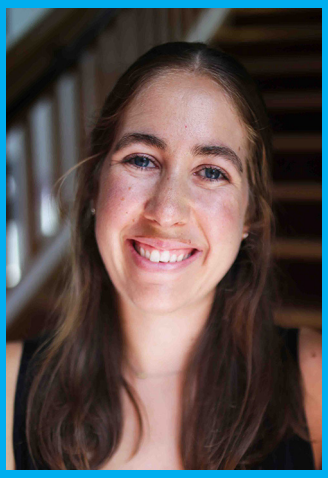
I grew up reading the fable-inspired book *Serendipity* by Stephen Cosgrove. *Serendipity* is a short story about a creature who emerges out of a lonely pink egg frozen in the Antarctic. The animal, which looks like a pink sea serpent, is found by a walrus. He declares that she isn't like anyone he has ever seen before, and names her Serendipity, which means to find valuable things you are not looking for. Serendipity and the walrus travel to the Island of Capri, a place where all the fish in the world meet, in an attempt to discover what type of animal Serendipity is. On their way, Serendipity saves a dolphin caught in a fishing net, learning to always help where she can; she splashes garbage out of the sea, learning not to run away from her problems; and when they finally make it to the Island of Capri, Serendipity learns that the walrus and dolphin were the leaders of the fish all along. They tell Serendipity that her journey proved she is brave and kind–– and *that* is what she is. They make Serendipity the guardian and protector of all the seas. The book ends with a lesson:

"If you ever
Throw your garbage
In the ocean,
Lake or sea
You'd better start
To rowing
For there will be...
Serendipity."

- Macey Downs, Directing & Dramaturgy Intern

My favorite fable is "The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing", which was originally told by Aesop over 2000 years ago! This story is about a wolf who can never find a sheep to eat because the shepherds are always watching over them, so he disguises himself as a sheep to fool the shepherds. When night falls, the wolf is locked in the pen with the sheep, but the shepherds mistakenly kill him for mutton before he can eat any of them. The moral of the story is that evil people often meet their doom through their own deceit.

- Zach Elton, Directing & Dramaturgy Intern

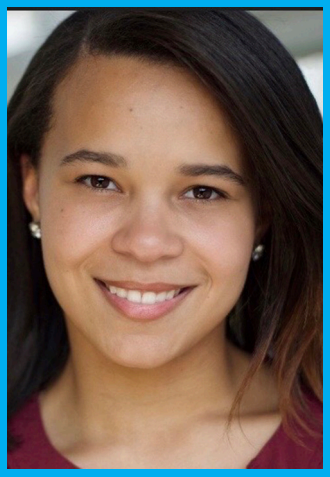


My favorite fable is "The Crow and the Pitcher" by Aesop. It tells the story of a thirsty crow who comes across a pitcher of water. But when the crow tries to take a drink, her beak cannot reach the water. Instead of giving up, she has an idea, and begins collecting pebbles and dropping them into the pitcher which causes the water level to rise. The crow does this until the water is high enough for her to quench her thirst. The lesson of the fable is that you should not give up! Persistence and creative thinking are key to success. It might take time to achieve your desired outcome, but with hard work and perseverance you will get there!

- Meredith G. Healy, Directing & Dramaturgy Intern

My favorite fable is "The Ants and the Grasshopper" by Aesop. It's about a grasshopper who comes to a family of ants asking for food. The ants, who worked hard all summer to save food for themselves, ask the grasshopper why he has nothing to eat. The grasshopper confesses that he spent his summer making music and did not work at all, and the hardworking ants leave the grasshopper to continue making music with no food. The lesson is that there is a time for work and a time for play. We should all have fun and do things we enjoy, but we also need to make sure we'll be able to do so by setting aside time to work.

- Jordan Wells, Education Intern



About the Play

byMacey Downs

"Then come back around
Then come back around
We all come back around
To the edge of this street."

"Then Come Back Around," the opening song of *Where We Stand*, invites the audience to join the storytelling character of the Man as members of his community. The audience is then immediately dropped into a trial, which soon turns into a confession. The Man tells us about his lonely existence on the outskirts of town, and the Stranger in gold who answered his wishes for salvation. The Man is finally celebrated by his fellow townspeople as the Stranger arms him with tools for prosperity, but there's a catch: going forward, this town will forever be named after the Stranger. The music, poetry, and transformative dialogue of this one-person play have eerie undertones of deja vu—have we been on the edge of this street before? *Where We Stand* encourages us to reexamine our roles in our own community, and to consider those who have been pushed to the outskirts.

Donnetta Lavinia Grays both wrote *Where We Stand* and originated the role of the Man. Critics have praised Grays's knack for storytelling, her charisma on stage, and the play's interrogation of its audiences. Maya Phillips of *The New York Times* described *Where We Stand* as "a Pied Piper story that doubles as a boldfaced allegory about class and community. It is rich in its language...bouncing with rhyme, alliteration, and wordplay."

The premiere of *Where We Stand* was co-produced by New York City's WP Theater and Maryland's Baltimore Center Stage in February 2020. Grays was nominated for a Lucille Lortel Award, a Drama League Award, and three AUDELCO Awards, and she was an O'Neill Center National Playwrights Conference semifinalist for her work writing and performing in *Where We Stand*. Portland Stage's version will be the play's first in-person production since its premiere, and the first time Grays will not be performing the role of the Man at any point during the run of the show. A filmed performance of *Where We Stand* starring Grays will also stream through the Chicago-based Steppenwolf Theatre Company in late June 2021.

Donnetta Lavinia Grays in Where We Stand, *WP Theater, 2020.*

About the Playwright: Donnetta Lavinia Grays

by Macey Downs

Donnetta Lavinia Grays.

Donnetta Lavinia Grays grew up in Columbia, South Carolina, and is now a Brooklyn-based playwright, television writer, and actor. Her playwriting credits include *Warriors Don't Cry*, *Last Night and the Night Before*, *Laid to Rest*, *The Review or How to Eat Your Opposition*, *The New Normal*, and *The Cowboy is Dying*. In April 2021, she received the Whiting Award for emerging writers, which cited her work's "portrayal of family—its complicated manifestations of love, its convoluted sense of responsibility… we come to know her characters as deeply as anyone in our lives."

Grays has also worked with Portland Stage multiple times in the past: she performed as Intisar in the 2013 workshop and 2014 world premiere of *Veils* by Tom Coash, and her play *Sam* (which became *Last Night and the Night Before*) was workshopped and performed for the Little Festival of the Unexpected in 2015. Directing and Dramaturgy Intern Macey Downs spoke with her about her artistic journey, the creation and growth of *Where We Stand*, and the communities she hopes this play will reach in the future.

Macey Downs (MD): *What has your journey as a theater artist been like?*

Donnetta Lavinia Grays (DLG): This is always kinda a funny question just because, where's the beginning of a thing? I started doing theater in a real way during high school, which is not terribly unique. I was a shy kid and theater was where I found my voice and community. I learned everything in high school in South Carolina. I think a lot of people think about how we find success when we move away from the places that melded us, but for me it was taking that first class and doing that first improv, just making myself vulnerable. So that to me was a tremendous success. That vulnerability was the thing that I really locked into as far as the creation of things—it's one of the pillars inside *Where We Stand* as well because it requires vulnerability from the performer and also the audience. If it's working on all cylinders, everyone should feel exposed in some way. Not in an aggressive "we're gonna tear each other down" sort of a thing, but being present is a thing that we don't really require all the time when the lights are down and I'm over here and you're over there—you get to be a passive audience member. With this particular play, you have to be here, with the Man. There's something about how I started with that vulnerability that I've been trying to get back to.

After starting in high school I went to Charleston for my BA, did a crapload of theater there. It was there that I really sat with the traditional Southern storytelling—which was basically West African storytelling—that involved really circular forms of oral history, rhythms, sounds. So there's something about that Carolina land, the rhythm, the ways we speak and communicate, that I like to put into my work. I kinda found that in the last few years of storytelling with *Where We Stand* and with *Last Night and the Night Before*. I've

really been settling in who I am as a Southern storyteller. Then I went to UC Irvine and got an MFA for acting. That's where I got the bones of like, "How do you do eight shows a week? How do you manipulate your voice? How do you stretch your body in different ways?" I came out of school feeling as though I could perform anything, and then realizing there's such a thing as casting directors! And the availability of productions, and that you're actually limited to what you can do. So I turned to creating my own work, not necessarily to perform it, but to expand on the creative energy that I had. And also, being this Black queer lady from the South up here in Brooklyn, I was like, "You know what? I feel like there's a gap in the storytelling here that I can fill." So I started to really write about that, not just from my experience, but using my experience as a catalyst to broaden the stories that I told.

When I first moved to New York, there was this theater company called Coyote Rep that a bunch of UC Irvine alum started. Two of our three productions I had to write for. The then-artistic director, Jeanne LaSala, was like, "You need to write something for our solo show, do you have anything?" And I was like, "I guess I can come up with something." And so I wrote a solo show. That was more of a traditional solo show where it was semi-autobiographical, like: "This is my story, I'm offering you something, and that's it." Like it's a tell-all, and sometimes it borders a little bit on therapy?

Prior to writing that solo show, called *The Cowboy is Dying*, I had worked with Lisa Kron and did the Broadway production of *Well*, and got to dive into her work. She gave me some really beautiful advice about solo shows: something has to happen! A solo show is a play! Something has to change for the performer, something has to change for the audience member. So I really took that to heart, and I really took the first steps into making something happen in *The Cowboy is Dying*. The lights went up and I came out of the production a little bit—I broke the fourth wall in these interesting ways. That evolved into *Where We Stand*, which—that's a play. But to make something happen in a solo performance—and I consider *Where We Stand* a "Solo-Community Exploration" so it's like I'm not alone—goes back to that vulnerability. You think that you're being vulnerable by telling your story, and you are. But to have someone experience the story in real time is a different thing. To rest the performing of it in some energy, in a connection that has to be there every night that you go along with, rather than in the delivery of it—that's scary! Oh my god, that's so scary.

MD: ***Yeah! It's so great to hear about how you use theater as a means of connecting with these vulnerable pieces of yourself.***

DLG: Yeah, I'm scared of everything by the way. So, with *The Cowboy is Dying*, that had singing in it as well, because my greatest fear is singing in front of people! So I said, "You know what? Throw it in. Throw it in!" I don't know why I do those things to myself. "Throw it in, and don't sing with any accompaniment. It's just gonna be your voice." Why would I do that, that's psychotic? It's crazy! It's crazy. But it's vulnerability. And what's the worst that'll happen, I'll get a bad review? That's not gonna make or break me. I tried the thing, the success is in the building and the attempt at the execution of it. Because it got me closer and closer to this rawness. I'm always trying to expand what the possibilities of theater are.

Donnetta Lavinia Grays in The Cowboy is Dying.

Donnetta Lavinia Grays as Feste in Twelfth Night, *Public Theather's Mobile Unit, 2017.*

MD: *You definitely do a lot of that in* Where We Stand. *Can you talk about what inspired* Where We Stand *and what the process of creating this piece was like for you?*

DLG: So oral tradition and Southern storytelling were kinda embedded in my body of art. And just in the writing of it—I always wrote poetry, like a little angsty teenage boy. And I keep it because it's sooooo bad but so good at the same time! I was really working toward something, I was trying to figure out what the mechanisms of poetry were—I always found poetry more comfortable to write than dialogue and prose.

I did a production of *Twelfth Night* for the Public Theater's Mobile Unit. What we do is take truncated versions of Shakespeare's plays and go into all five Boroughs in NYC and communities that lack access to the theater either economically, because of transportation, or scheduling. That also includes homeless shelters, women's shelters, schools, and incarcerated communities of different security levels. The wonderful thing about the Mobile Unit is that we go in, we set down this square carpet, and we have audience members on all sides of us. There's no barrier between the performer and the audience. Prior to the show, the performers go into the audience, talk to people, we're laughing with them, jiving with them, asking them questions, and just being regular folks. So the hierarchy is taken away. You get to know who you're talking to. You take that stuffiness out of the room—it lets them know we're here to play, and helps the audience become available.

I also like to think about access, not just in regards to economics, but also in the perception of what theater is. We can see it as this fine art, which it is, but it's also for people. There are ways in which we make that divide bigger. Let me tell you something: my dad is a retired military, retired postal worker. My mom, she just retired yesterday as a telecommunicator for Blue Cross and Blue Shield. I grew up with working-class folks, working retail for most of my life, too. And theater is for them. But we don't package theater in that way. So I'm interested in making theater for working-class folks.

So the woman who led the Mobile Unit at the time I did *Twelfth Night* was Stephanie Ybarra, who's now the artistic director at Baltimore Center Stage. At the same time, she was leading the producing arm of the WP Lab, which I was a part of. We were in two worlds together at the same time! She was like, "You're a writer and an actor? We gotta do something about that!" So she commissioned me to write something for the Mobile Unit. I took all these elements of what the Mobile Unit was—this community-centered theater where the hierarchy is gone—while also keeping this heightened language. So this is why the play is in verse.

I was also really moved by those incarcerated folks, and I've wanted to place them at the center of this piece. What would it be for them to be at the center of this room, asking a community for mercy, forgiveness, asking what is justice? And asking what is our responsibility to each other? Because I don't think that we get to where we are alone. If this is a person asking for community, being motivated by this want of love—what does that mean? What do we owe this human being who we've exiled, who came back and who we uplifted to our benefit because he's now made this deal? And then we find out that he's made a shoddy deal, but we understand his motivations around it. And we understand that we've already dismissed him—not for anything he had done, but for who he was—before he made the deal. He's on the outskirts of town, poor, lonely, he's that guy that we just ignore. And in order to be seen, to be elevated in his community, he wants to give them what they want. It's an interesting little dilemma. That's kinda how it manifested, I wanted to maintain what those things were in the Mobile Unit.

Here's the crazy thing: we got the production, co-produced by the WP Theater and Baltimore Center Stage. WP's theater is a proscenium. So we couldn't really shift it in the way I imagined it. So we did that as our trial run, got the New York premiere out of our systems. And then what was set up at Baltimore was that we were gonna tour! We were going to go to prisons, schools, women's shelters. And that for me is where the show really lives. That's the show. That's why there's this minimal production in these touring shows, you grab what you can and you do a show. So there's not this huge theatrical element of it, it really is a personal experience. The language is the theatricality, the music when you get folks together to start singing—that's the theater. I'm making the theater in real time. But as soon as we got revved up to do the Baltimore production: COVID. Everything was locked up. Even the show at the theater (which was gonna be in the round!)—we didn't get to do that. To this day I'm still trying to figure out: how do I get that tour? How do I get it on the ground?

Donnetta Lavinia Grays in Where We Stand, *WP Theater, 2020.*

So we filmed the show at Baltimore Center Stage, and what was so eerie and ironically lovely about it was, because it was in the round, they had already had the theater set up for us. It was kinda half-way built. As we filmed it, I sat there in the audience as I would have in a production, in this empty theater, and the camera pans around the theater and it's completely empty. You have this Man longing for community. And don't you know, I just broke out into tears. I was like, "Okay, we need to start over." I couldn't anticipate, of course, a year and a half of being sequestered in the house, but there was this panic. Everything's shut down, there's no theater community here.

MD: ***What was it like to perform in your own work?***

DLG: I didn't want to perform it, to be honest with you! I don't write to perform. Acting takes a lot out of you! I'm an old lady! I'm not really that old...but I feel like an old lady!

There's something about writing that I just really dig, and when I write, I write from a performer's perspective. But I also had a different actor in mind when I was writing *Where We Stand*. The deciding factor in me doing it was that I knew this was gonna be different, and it was gonna be hard to communicate to an actor what I wanted them to do. And if it failed, I wanted it to fail on my body, and not because of lack of

communication from my director to another body. Hopefully it's communicated inside of the script now based off of the experiment of having it on Donnetta's body.

It's meant to be in different communities, be understanding those communities, and it's meant to foster conversation. There are no answers in that play, and there shouldn't be. It really is: here are the questions, you as the community of Portland—what has changed? What is your gold referencing? Who have you left on the outskirts of town?

MD: And you've worked at Portland Stage before. What was that experience like for you?

DLG: When I did the Little Festival of the Unexpected, there was a play there that was about Mainers [*Papermaker*]. It was about these working-class, poor Mainers. And there was a survey after, in the talkback, and the question was: "Is this Maine?" So many folks raised their hands and said, "No, this doesn't feel like Maine." It was really telling. Now, from what I remember, if you walk down a certain street, isn't there a center to help folks around the corner there?

MD: *Yeah, are you talking about the Hope House?*

DLG: Yeah! I always saw people in need around there, and I was like, "I feel like this is a play about them." These folks who are in the theater are not seeing those folks, and then when they see this play are saying, "That's not Maine." And here I am, coming in from the outside and saying, "That's the Maine that I see!" So that's what I'm interested in poking at a little bit. You don't see these people, and why? Why? So those will be the people who will be at the center of this story. There's the idea of who we are, and then there's who we are. This play takes a survey of who we are, or who we believe we are. That's the conversation I want to have.

I've always thought of theaters as community centers. I'm on a mission to bring theater to the people. And with this play, it's necessary.

Donnetta Lavinia Grays workshops Sam, *Portland Stage Company, 2015.*

An Interview with the Director: Kevin R. Free

Edited for Length and Clarity by Macey Downs

Directing and Dramaturgy Intern Macey Downs spoke with Kevin R. Free, the director of *Where We Stand*, about his artistic journey, work with Portland Stage, and what *Where We Stand* means to him.

Kevin R. Free.

Macey Downs (MD): ***Can you tell me about your journey as a theater artist?***

Kevin R. Free (KRF): In junior high and high school I trained to be an opera singer. And then, I saw my brother in a play and I wanted to be just like him, so I decided that I wanted to be an actor. That was how it all started for me. My first semi-professional acting job was in college. I went to school at Duke University and in 1988 I did a production of James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* that was directed by a professor who was also my first acting teacher. He was the closest thing I ever had to a mentor, his name was Edward Hill. He directed it and I played David. I always knew that I was going to be an actor, I assumed it would be in musical comedy on a Broadway stage and I would burn bright, then fizzle out. When I moved to New York in the mid 90s and my musical comedy career didn't take off in the way that I had always expected it would, I ended up basically saying yes to every job in the theater that people asked me to do. That led me to doing everything: writing, teaching, sometimes stitching a costume, sometimes doing sound. I knew a little bit about everything, but not enough to say I could do those things that aren't acting or directing. I had always directed, I directed all through college, but it was never the thing that I focused on because I just thought it wasn't a thing I wanted to do. I thought that being an actor and being the center of attention was the way it would be for me. Then I got into writing because I never identified with a character that I saw or played, in a good way, in a way that was challenging and exciting. Often it was challenging and not exciting, or exciting but I wasn't identifying with the character. So I started writing because of that. Doesn't every actor/writer start writing because they're not getting the roles that they want? That's cliché, sorry.

I realized around 2013/2014 that my super power was leadership, and that I could do that without feeling crazy ego or feeling insecure about anything. And that every cast that I had been with—and as I was getting older it happened more often—looked to me for my leadership. I think around 2016 was when I decided that I wanted to be a leader. I wasn't sure what that meant. I wasn't sure if that meant that I wanted to lead a theater, or if I wanted to start thinking about directing. But around the same time people started offering me work as a director without a lot of interviews. It was the only part of my career where the hustle was nonexistent. It was not the same thing as getting an acting job or trying to get people to take me seriously as a writer. In 2016 I was doing a play at a major regional theater and there was a question in the show about nudity, because the director had assumed that we were all going to be nude at one point. But it was not in any of the audition notices, it was not in any of the contracts, it was not in anything. I was playing a Civil Rights leader in the show and at the

same time it was natural that I was the person who talked about it. I synthesized all of the actors' thoughts about it and then said it to production. And when there were meetings I was the representative from the cast even though I was not the Equity Deputy. So that was when I thought, "Oh, people look to me for this kind of thing."

That's basically it. While I still do acting projects and love being an actor, I think I really love directing because I get to be an eagle and not like a mouse. Not that there is a bad thing to being a mouse, but I've always been the eagle and I've never been a detail-oriented person even though I know I like things the way I like them. I've always been sort of a "What is the big picture here? What am I trying to say about this entire thing? What is this whole thing?" And then it takes really good collaborators like Tracey—we work together really well, because she is like, "Details! I need to know this! I need to know all of these details!" And I'm like, "Okay, let's think about them." But because I don't have an ego about being a leader, I don't care if you question me. I like to be questioned. I want to clarify what my position is. I think that having been an actor, and having been a playwright, and having done all of these other things that are about detailed work helped me to not have ego about being questioned. I never feel like you're questioning my leadership, I feel like you're questioning a decision that I've made.

MD: ***In 2017 you started working with Portland Stage. Can you talk about what else you've done here and what that was like?***

KRF: Well in 2017, Tracey was coming here to do *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill*, and they were looking for a director. My manager—who is also Tracey's manager—sent me a quick message saying, "Send me your resume really quickly. I don't think this is going to work out, but send it to me." I called him to ask what was going on, and he told me it was for Portland Stage. Todd Brian Backus [Portland Stage's Literary Manager] was the assistant director on *Night of the Living N-Word*, and he did our marketing, and he worked with me on *The Fantasticks*, so I told my manager to tell whoever he was talking to that Todd knows me and he can vouch for me. He did, and I got the job. That experience turned out to be really great.

I came back in 2019 the next season, and I directed *The Last Five Years*, which was beautiful. I like to credit that production

Tracey Conyer Lee, Kevin R. Free, and the cast and crew of Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill, *Portland Stage Company, 2017.*

as helping me solidify what I like about collaborating with people. I always tell people, "Don't be afraid to speak up, let's talk about it." So when I did that in 2019, right when I left I acted in a play in San Francisco and it was the greatest role I've ever played in my life. There will never be a role like it. I was creating the role, and it was the first time I felt like I was performing in the role of a lifetime, and I loved every moment of it. When that was done, I came back to New York and directed a production of *Pipeline*, and when we got to tech for that show, we were in a very small space. During tech all of the designers were just around, there were no headsets, and it was the greatest tech of my life because we were all working together. We worked out the final moment of the play together. It turned out to be one of the best things I've ever directed. It was well reviewed, and people that I respected came and saw it, and I watched it several times and I thought "I love this." So coming back here in 2019 to do *The Last Five Years* actually solidified the way I like to work, and when I went to San Francisco to act in that play, it reminded me that not everyone was going to feel the same way about the work we were doing. I was in bliss, but maybe some other people were not, and how do I love what I do, and also love the people who love what they do but maybe don't love what they are doing right now? It reminded me that we are all in different places, and then I did *Pipeline* and put it all together. I did a couple of other jobs and then the pandemic happened, but I wanted to talk about 2019 because of how working at Portland Stage helped me solidify my process.

Then I was hired by Todd and Portland Stage to direct a reading in *The Little Festival of the Unexpected*. It was a virtual zoom reading, and it was a beautiful experience. You know, the pandemic was good because I got to hire people who wouldn't usually do this kind of work, so I had really cool people that I loved doing this thing. It was the same time as the George Floyd uprising, and we all talked about whether we should do the play or not, and we all said "Yes we should do it." So we did it, and now we are here.

MD: ***Also, speaking to the pandemic, you mentioned to me previously that*** **Where We Stand** ***was the last show you saw before the pandemic and now, a year later, here you are. What did that show mean to you when you saw it the first time, and what does it mean to you now?***

KRF: I have made what I like to call "political theater" my entire career. There are sometimes that I like to sit and just be entertained and that, generally speaking, is when I watch TV because it's not like I'm in the room with other people. But when I make theater, I like to feel like we are all in the same room, and we are all experiencing this live event together. So when I saw WP Theater's production of *Where We Stand* on stage in New York, it looked to me like a Black man on stage who supported a movement that was not popular, trying to plead his case to people who have found out or discovered. A Black man who has brought this stranger—who believed in this fringe, unpopular movement—to a town, or to a family of people, who believed in him and then were sorely mistaken. And I was really moved by it because I thought, "I knew that guy," and I wondered how it would be taken other places.

Doing the play here in a time where I imagine people just want to be entertained, it reflects a different way of thinking for Portland Stage—which is that we are a community for better or for worse. Right now we are in "for worse," and we are in it together. The idea that a Black character stands on stage and says to a predominately white audience—because that is primarily the theater—that we are in this together and we did this together, please let me stay so we can continue to stay in this together, I think is admirable and courageous. I think it is the kind of thing that I wanted to do my entire career. So the fact that we are doing it here in this community is really cool. I am super grateful to be here doing that.

MD: ***What excites you most about getting to do this with your longtime friend and collaborator Tracey Conyer Lee?***

KRF: You know, if you're going to direct a solo show, make sure you are directing a show with a person you want to be in a room with all day. And I love being in the room with her. There was a time when she was subletting her apartment, and when she came home, she stayed with us until the sublet was over, and she is the only roommate we miss. We just love being with her, being in the same room with her and working with her. My partner and I love her as a human. But being there with her for her triumphant return to Portland Stage, and also doing theater in person, it just means the world to me. Take *Hamilton*, for instance. Thomas Kail and Lin-Manuel Miranda and Chris Jackson, they've worked together for years. *We Are Freestyle Love Supreme*—they were doing that for years. Before *In the Heights* they did that work together, and I think that when things start to hit for people, it's a community that hits. So it feels to me like we are hitting at the same time, and whether that means hitting our stride or the jackpot or whatever, I don't know, but it feels very much like I'm in the right place, she's in the right place, and that we are in the right place together. That's what it means to me, it makes sense that we would be doing this together because we are a community.

MD: ***Do you have any advice for young directors?***

KRF: It's the same advice that I was given as a young actor: audition everywhere. I think it's important to know first what your personal mission is in terms of leadership, and second, it's important to know that when you are putting yourself out there for work, it's never about the work at that moment. It's about the work over the span of your career, so even if they never respond, they have received a letter or email that has your name on it. They might not recall it later when you finally work with them, but then you remind them, "Hey, I sent you a letter a long time ago, and no you never responded, but I felt really good about sending that letter because I knew that I wanted to work with you, and I feel like this is a culmination of that." I think you just have to keep putting yourself out there.

About the Cast & Characters

by Macey Downs

Name: Tracey Conyer Lee
Character: The Man, a Used To Be who realizes he Still Could Be.
He impersonates:
The Stranger, adorned in a suit of gold
Townspeople including Sarah, Davey, Bobby, and Doc Humphrey; they have the fate of a town in their hands

Post Show Activities

by Sophia B. Diaz & Jordan Wells

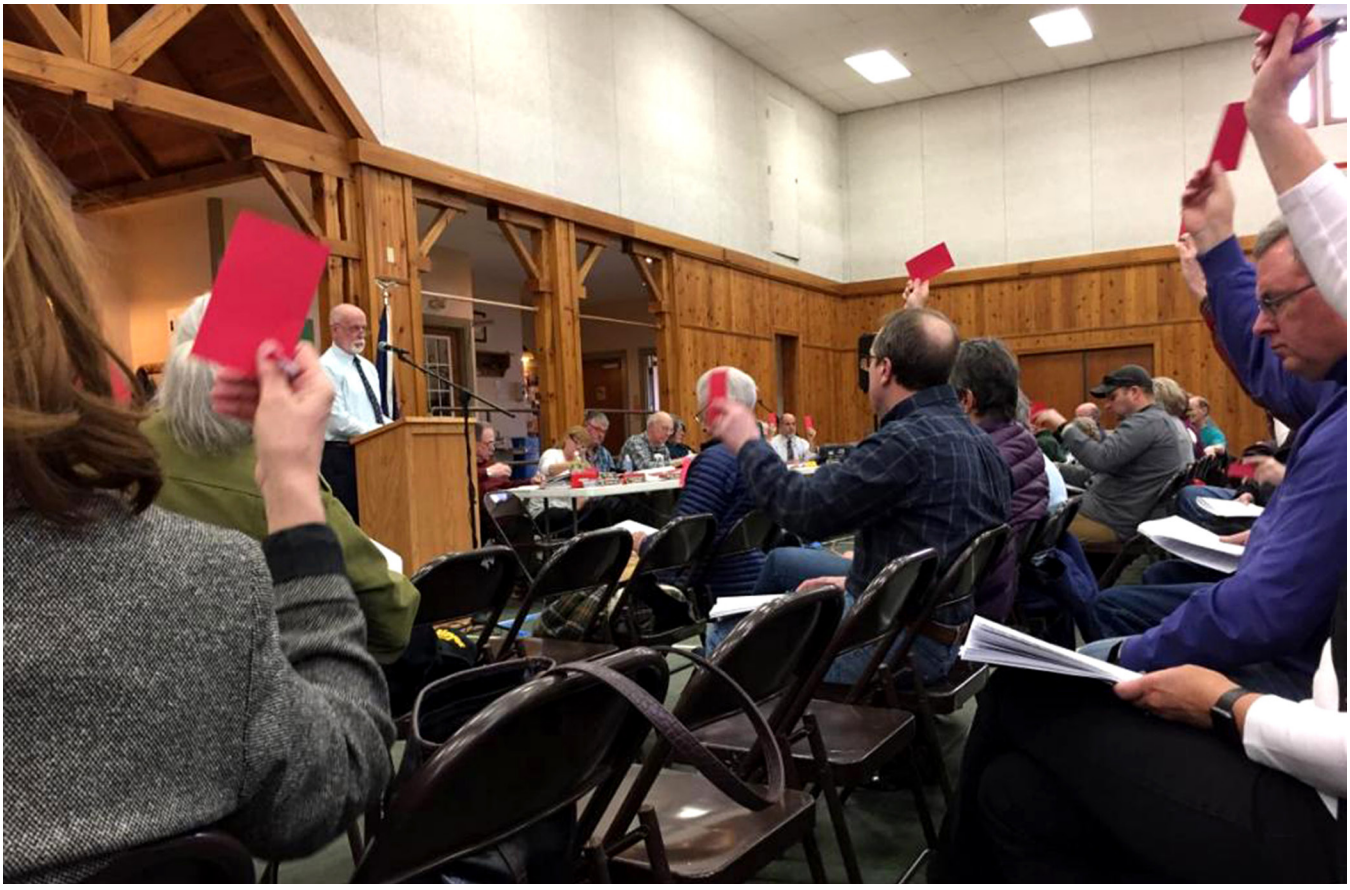
1. Revisit your definition of community. Did this performance change your definition? If so, how? If not, why not?

2. When the gifts from the Stranger are revealed, the Townspeople begin giving reasons to "TEAR IT DOWN." If given the opportunity, do you think you'd tear down your town and start over? List reasons why or why not.

3. *Where We Stand* is a piece of participatory theater that gave the audience the power to determine what happened to the characters in the play. If you could design your own experience that allowed for audience participation, what would it be like? What aspects of the experience would you make interactive, and how?

4. Write about your experience as a member of the community of the play. Consider how it felt being addressed directly as well as having the opportunity to provide your own input.

5. At the end of *Where We Stand*, the audience is given the chance to vote on whether they want to punish the man by sending him away or absolve him by keeping him in the town. How would you vote, and why?



Residents vote during a town hall meeting in Belgrade, ME.

Glossary

by Macey Downs

Bacchanal: An occasion of wild and drunken revelry; derived from the Roman god of wine, Bacchus.

Beale: A street in Memphis that is one of the most iconic streets in America, known for its vibrant music scene of Delta blues, jazz, rock and roll, R&B, and gospel.

Beale Street in Memphis, TN.

Beveled: Cut at an angle that is not a right angle; having a slant.

Brethren: Referring to the members of a profession, society, or religious denomination, used chiefly in formal or solemn address.

Burlap'd: To have the quality of burlap, a coarse, heavy, plain-woven fabric usually made of rough fibers like jute or hemp.

Callouses: Hard, thickened areas on skin, often developing on hands and feet from long use.

Cheshire grin: A wide smile made by someone who's up to something; named for the Cheshire Cat in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Illustration of the Cheshire Cat.

Crick: A painful spasmodic condition of muscles (as of the neck or back).

Dissent: To differ in opinion.

Downtrodden: Suffering oppression.

Edifice: A large or massive structure.

Emerald City: A nickname for Seattle, Washington; named after the abundant greenery in the area that persists all year long, due to all the evergreen trees nearby; home of the observation deck and floating restaurant known as the Space Needle.

Seattle, Washington.

Fabrication: A falsehood; something made up for the purpose of deception.

Fare: A paying passenger on a public means of transportation.

Fickle: Marked by lack of constancy or stability; given to erratic changeableness.

Grind City: A nickname for Memphis, Tennessee; derived from "Grit and Grind," the motto of the city's NBA team, the Grizzlies.

Hep: A marching cadence.

Inference: A conclusion or opinion that is formed because of known facts or evidence.

Manifestation: The act, process, or an instance of making something evident or certain.

Melancholia: Severe depression characterized especially by profound sadness and despair.

Mudras: One of the symbolic hand gestures used in religious ceremonies and dances of India and in yoga.

Ochre: An earthy tone, usually red or yellow; often impure iron ore used as a pigment.

Pauper: A person destitute of means except such as are derived from charity; a very poor person.

Perchance: Perhaps, possibly.

Pied Piper: A folktale character who used a musical pipe to rid a town called Hamelin of rats and plague, but was not given the ten bags of gold he was promised as a reward. He then enticed all of the town's children into a cave, and only freed them after being paid twenty bags of gold in advance. The town celebrated him because he taught its leaders to be less greedy and selfish.

Illustration of the Pied Piper.

Reap: To cut crops with a sickle or scythe for harvest.

Resourcing: Providing resources to.

Revered: Regarded as worthy of great honor and respect.

Righteous: Morally right or justifiable.

Sagacious: Of keen and farsighted judgment; discerning.

Salve: A remedial or soothing influence or agency.

Scythe: A tool used for mowing grass, grain, or other crops that features a long curving blade fastened at an angle to a long handle.

A farmer with a scythe.

Seersucker: A light fabric of linen, cotton, or rayon, usually striped and slightly puckered.

Sow: To plant seed for growth, especially by scattering.

Stooped: Describing the body or a part of the body bent forward and downward, sometimes simultaneously with the knees bent; often a metaphor for yielding or submitting.

Tenant: One who holds or possesses property temporarily.

Toiling: Working hard and long, with laborious effort.

The Music That Inspired Where We Stand

by Macey Downs

Donnetta Lavinia Grays wrote *Where We Stand* as a play with music—the Man tells various parts of his story through song, oftentimes inviting the audience to sing along with him. Grays dictates in stage directions that the whole event of the play, including its spoken dialogue, "should feel lyrical in nature… Think of Jazz, Blues, Gospel, Spoken Word and American Musical Theater traditions for guidance." What are the roots and characteristics of all these different genres that come together in *Where We Stand*?

Owner Willie "Po' Monkey" Seaberry in front of Po' Monkey's juke joint, Bolivar County, MS.

Blues

History: Blues music developed in the Mississippi Delta in the late 1800s. Following the Civil War, oppressive Jim Crow laws maintained racial segregation in the United States. As wealthy white people continued to hoard money and power during one of the most economically unequal eras in US history, many previously-enslaved African Americans and their descendants were systemically barred from accumulating enough wealth to rise out of poverty. Black farm workers developed blues music to both cope with their circumstances and preserve oral connections to African American work songs, field hollers, and spirituals. Musicians gathered at blues bars, or "juke joints," at night after work, where typically a solo singer would play on a guitar. The blues followed Black Americans during the Great Migration—a period where many Black Americans fled from the highly segregated South and gathered in northern cities—and shifted into the Chicago-style blues, which uses electric guitars, piano, and drums to create a more energetic sound.

Characteristics: Mississippi Delta blues is often played on a harmonica or bottleneck slide guitar, which is when a solid object is held or slid against the strings on the neck of a guitar. The blues is based around a six-note blues scale and a twelve-bar chord progression, where musicians alternate between three different chords in a specific order for twelve measures of music. Lyrically, the blues often follows an A-A-B structure, in which the first, or "A," line is repeated, and then the third "B" line answers, mimicking the call-and-response style of African American work songs and spirituals.

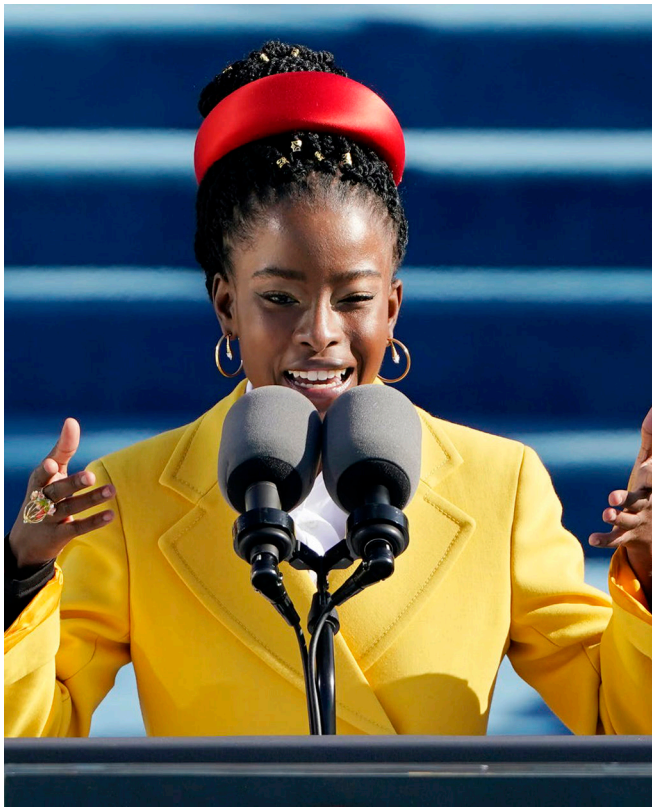
Famous Artists: Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Ma Rainey, B.B. King, Bessie Smith

Jazz

History: As blues musicians traveled across the country, their music began to mix with other forms of music to create new genres. During the early 1900s in New Orleans, Black musicians blended the blues with ragtime music and the sounds of parade horn sections to create jazz. Ragtime had also been developed by African American communities in St. Louis in the 1890s, adding syncopated rhythms to the sounds of European marches. Early forms of jazz music also traveled with the Great Migration, quickly breaking into mainstream music and captivating millions of Americans who would go out dancing at jazz concerts or listen to jazz on their radios. Jazz would become one of the earliest forms of integration between Black and white Americans, as musicians of different races

would sometimes play together in the same bands. Jazz has since evolved into countless distinct styles, such as Dixieland jazz, bebop, cool jazz, and fusion.
Characteristics: Jazz is known for its complex harmonies, improvisation, and syncopated rhythms. Musicians find their own signature styles, causing even musicians who play the same instrument to sound drastically different from each other. Jazz bands typically include a mix of brass instruments, like trumpets and trombones; string instruments, like the guitar and bass; a four- or five-piece drum kit; saxophones; and, most commonly, a keyboard.
Famous Artists: Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis, Mary Lou Williams, Duke Ellington

Gospel
History: African musical elements like call and response, improvisation, and percussive rhythms combined with Christian hymns to create gospel music. Gospel originally developed during the 1700s—on plantations where religion was forbidden, enslaved African Americans would secretly gather in the woods and have church. Black churches were also institutionally established, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1787, and provided homes for the spirituals that had been developed by African Americans over the previous two hundred years. Similar to blues and jazz, gospel music migrated across the country with Black folks, revealing again the depth with which American culture is rooted in Black culture.
Characteristics: Gospel music features dominant vocals and strong harmonies with Christian or biblical lyrics. Dance, hand-clapping, and foot-tapping are encouraged, allowing for a physicalization of both the music and the prayer. Four dominant styles of gospel have emerged: the use of a large choir in traditional gospel, a focus on solo artists in contemporary gospel, the tight harmonies of the quartet-style, and the praise and worship style that brings together a choir, soloists, and responses of a congregation. Gospel singers attribute their music to getting so caught up in prayer that their individual selves become secondary to the spiritual experience.
Famous Artists: Mahalia Jackson, Thomas A. Dorsey, Sallie Martin, Aretha Franklin



Amanda Gorman speaks at the 2021 Presidential Innauguration.

Spoken Word
History: Also called performance poetry, spoken word can be traced back to the ways in which oral storytelling was used by enslaved Africans from different nations to communicate, maintain identity, resist oppression, and achieve freedom. Spoken word artists use words as vehicles for feelings, inspiring a sense of a shared experience that can call listeners to action. For example, spoken word was used as a tool for protest during the civil rights movement—Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have A Dream" speech used elements of performance poetry to inspire individuals across the nation to create change.
Characteristics: Spoken word uses metaphor, alliteration, rhythm, and wordplay to tell stories with dynamic language and speaking styles. These poets also physicalize their verses, using facial expressions and gestures to punctuate their words. The content of the poems tell stories of a poet's personal experience, often turning a seemingly ordinary moment into an extraordinary lesson.
Famous Artists: Saul Williams, Ntozake Shange, Laurie Anderson, Amanda Gorman

American Musical Theater

History: American musical theater developed during the 1800s, most directly from minstrelsy, which was when white men would put on blackface and perform dangerous caricatures of Black Americans, helping reinforce many of the stereotypes that maintained social inequalities and Black oppression. Out of minstrel shows grew vaudeville, which was a variety show that had many different skits and songs without a unified plot or story. Around the same time, operetta became popular, which were lighter, more joyful versions of opera with dialogue interspersed between songs. Out of these forms, musical theater began to develop, in which catchy songs were tied to the plot, characters, or mood of the piece to create a more cohesive story. Musical theater now remains one of the few distinctly American art forms. Its early roots in minstrelsy is a reminder of one of the many ways in which American music traditions cannot be disentangled from the enslavement and oppression of Black Americans.

Characteristics: Musical theater uses a combination of solos, duets, and ensemble songs to move a story along. Songs and spoken dialogue are accompanied by dance, stage spectacles, and costumes to create the world of the musical on stage. Traditional musical theater songs often follow a 32-bar format, and repeat a catchy chorus that conveys a central message to the story.
Famous Musicians: Stephen Sondheim, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Jeanine Tesori

As a self-proclaimed Southern storyteller, Grays blends each of these performance traditions that originated in Southern Black communities to create the rhythmic soundscape of *Where We Stand.* Just as several of these performance styles were developed to share and preserve stories of generations of Black Americans, the Man uses them to share his own story, on his own terms, with the community that he longs to feel seen by.

Sydney Lucas, Beth Malone, and Emily Skeggs in Fun Home, *Circle in the Square, 2015, Photo by Joan Marcus.*

Folklore and Fables

by Zach Elton

"Old men's stories from front porches cast off into the wind..."

With these words, the Man in *Where We Stand* begins to describe the town he lives in, and invites the audience to listen to his story. Storytelling is one of the oldest traditions in the world, and it is essential to our understanding of community, culture, and the human condition. Scholars study the stories we tell, which fall under a broad category of folklore, to examine the impact they have on society.

Folklore refers to the beliefs, customs, and traditions of a community passed down through generations by word of mouth. This encompasses multiple forms of storytelling such as folktales, proverbs, rituals, dances, and even jokes. These beliefs and customs are not taught; they are simply stated verbally or picked up by demonstration. For example, in traditional western wedding ceremonies, customs such as wearing white, sharing a cake, and exchanging rings are never taught, but these elements are embedded in our culture's collective mind. One of the most essential parts of folklore, though, is the stories that are passed down.

Folk literature has served a myriad of purposes in the course of humanity. There are a handful of reasons that scholars, called folklorists, believe these stories have developed. Overall, these tales seem to meet some type of human need or answer an essential question. They contain universal human truths in a format that is simple and easy to understand. Some folklorists would say that to be a successful piece of folk literature, a story needs to entertain; explain the mysteries of the natural world; articulate fears and dreams; impose order on the apparent random nature of life; and help children develop a sense of morality, tradition, and community. A story does not have to include all of these, but most well-known ones contain most of these elements. The most popular branch of folk literature is probably the folktale, which are stories from a specific culture that begin in the oral tradition. No one is sure how these stories develop, they are retold and solidified over time. Folktales are usually broken up into five subcategories: fairy tales, fables, myths, legends, and tall tales.

Fairy tales gain their name because they often have fairies or mythical creatures in them. The main character is usually royalty, or comes in contact with royalty over the course of the story, and they are helped along the way by some kind of magic. Thematically, these stories always deal with a battle between good and evil. A classic fairy tale is "Cinderella," which contains all of these necessary elements. Cinderella is abused by her wicked stepmother, but through the help of her magical fairy godmother, she meets a prince and falls in love.

Illustration of Cinderella.

Fables, on the other hand, usually don't have humans in them and are relatively short and simple stories that have a clear lesson at the end. The main characters are typically animals that act like people. One of the animals attempts to solve a problem by using trickery or deception, only to have the tables turned on them in the end. Though he did not create the fables, Aesop is given credit for cataloging them. His story "The Tortoise and the Hare" is probably his most famous. One day, a hare challenges a tortoise to a race. Because he is so far ahead, the hare takes a nap, but while he is

sleeping, the tortoise crosses the finish line. The lesson at the end of the story is that "slow and steady wins the race."

Myths often teach an important life lesson or answer a question about humanity or some natural phenomenon. These stories are often set in ancient times and contain gods and goddesses. Myths hold the past, present, and future together by teaching us about the past, showing us how that informs the present, and offering advice for the future. For example, almost every civilization has some form of a creation myth, making it one of the most common myths on Earth. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, practitioners believe God made the world in seven days, and when the humans broke their promise to obey God, they became mortal. In this way, this myth shows the creation of the earth (the past), warns people to be obedient to God (the present), and informs the listener that death is an inevitable part of life (the future).

Legends are about a heroic person or some incredible place that contain some elements of truth. King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table is one of the most well-known legends in the world. Not much is known about the man who inspired the King Arthur stories, but it is speculated that he was an extremely skilled warrior who led British military forces against the Saxons in the 5th or 6th century. In the following years, the legends around Arthur would only grow. Soon, stories developed about the glorious kingdom of Camelot, Arthur's undying honor, his association with the mystical figure Merlin, his trusty sword Excalibur, his wife Guinevere, and the Lady of the Lake. Although the Arthur who was the inspiration for the story was a real person, the legend has been embellished over time and is highly fictionalized.

Finally, one of the most popular branches of folklore in America is the tall tale. These are stories that contain unbelievable or mystical elements in them, but they are recounted as if they were absolutely true. There are predominantly two types of tall tales: ones that are based on historical figures and ones that are completely made up. For example, John Henry was a real railroad worker in the 1800s who was praised for his strength and speed while laying the railroad tracks. Over time, word spread about him, and the story became that one day he raced against a steam-powered hammer and won, only to die from exhaustion afterwards. There are few that believe John Henry actually raced and died, but most folklorists believe he was a real person who worked on the railroad.

The second type of American tall tales are ones that are not based on real people but often deal with elements of America's culture or land. For example, one of the most famous tall tales is that of Paul Bunyan. According to the story, Paul Bunyan is a giant lumberjack based in New England who kept a blue ox named Babe as a pet and could knock down a fully grown tree with just one swing of his ax. This story was originated by lumberjacks in the 1800s in New England and Canada before it made its way into popular culture. Today, Bangor, Maine, claims to be the birthplace of the Paul Bunyan story. It even has a statue of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox in town, as well as a birth certificate on display at the city hall with a birthdate of February 12, 1834; however, Bunyan didn't really exist, and the tales told about him are completely made up.

Folklore is an essential part of every culture. Through these rituals, beliefs, and stories, a person is able to learn more about themselves and their community. Though *Where We Stand* is a completely new story, Donnetta Lavinia Grays uses many elements from folklore to make this piece feel familiar. Through her use of storytelling, audience interaction, and music, she creates an environment that makes an audience reflect on their own community and sense of morality.

PAUL BUNYAN STATUE IN BANGOR, ME.

Deals with the Devil

by Zach Elton

"Remember this town's soul is mine...the moment you get started."

Illustration of Faust and the Devil.

After stating that ominous promise, the Stranger disappears and the Man has to make a choice. Will he risk the soul of the town to gain respect and wealth, or will he continue to live his life completely alone? Can he trust this stranger he invited into his house? This is what Donnetta Lavinia Grays makes the Man wrestle with in her play *Where We Stand*. While the Man is not wise enough to see he shouldn't trust this stranger, the audience can tell Grays is employing one of the most well-known motifs in folklore: the deal with the Devil.

This motif can be found in stories all across the world, including in the United States, Europe, Africa, and more. In these stories, someone who is down on their luck makes a bargain with an evil spirit to obtain some type of worldly gain, such as money, fame, or power, in exchange for their soul. Most scholars agree that in western Europe, stories about making deals with the Devil began emerging during the Middle Ages. This is when the Catholic Church gained a lot of power in Europe, and with its ascent, it brought stories of the Devil, demons, and witches. Soon, tales began to be woven about these evil beings. These stories were used as a tool to warn people against coveting worldly gain, and instead encouraged them to focus on their eternal spirit.

This motif became solidified with the development of the legend of Faust. As the story goes, Faust was a very successful man, but he was always dissatisfied with his position in life. One night, as luck would have it, he meets an evil being (sometimes this character is the Devil himself, and other times it is a demonic figure) and exchanges his soul for unlimited knowledge and pleasure. Depending on the version, sometimes the devil character reappears and takes his soul at the end of his life, or sometimes angels of God intervene and take his soul to heaven. Either way, Faust has been the inspiration for multiple folktales, songs, and plays, including Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* and Goethe's *Faust*.

As Faust's story became ingrained in Europe, stories about deals with the Devil developed simultaneously in other cultures. Though there are many variations on this story throughout the world, certain elements remain the same fairly regularly. For example, one of the most consistent parts of these fables is that a person meets an evil being at a crossroads. Crossroads are liminal spaces, meaning they are places that connect two areas, such as bridges and stairways, but they themselves are betwixt and between. These spaces represent the need for a choice. Will you go forward or go back? What road will you take? In liminal spaces, people are always forced to make a decision. Crossroads often play an integral part in these stories because many cultures believe that unearthly creatures reside there. In Hoodoo, a form of African magical spirituality practice in the United States, the crossroads represents the human cycle of death and rebirth; the center of the crossroads is also where conversations with

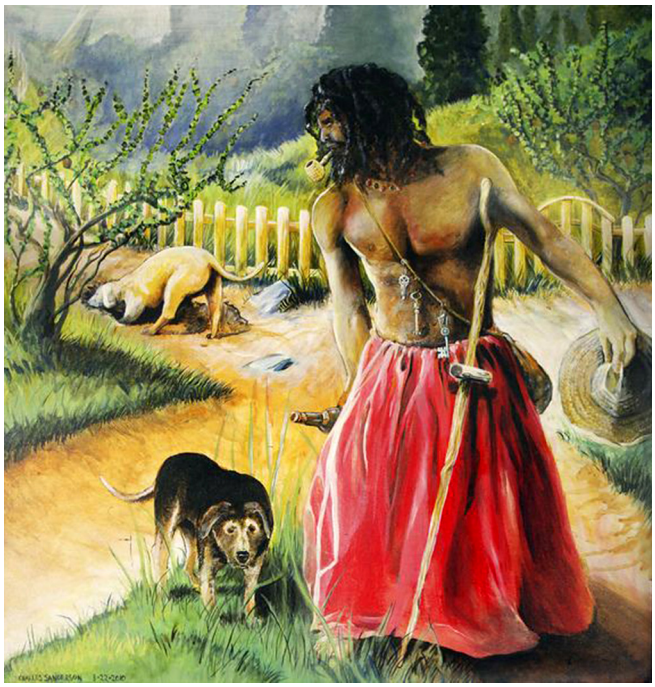


Illustration of Papa Legba.

spirits can take place. The Yoruba people of western Africa believe that the trickster deity Eshu-Elegba resides at the crossroads and will leave offerings at the crossroads for him. In the Haitian Vodou and Louisiana Voodoo traditions, Papa Legba is the messenger between the spirit world and our world who resides at the crossroads.

Tales about deals with the Devil are found all throughout the United States, and are especially popular in the South. Some famous ones include "The Delta Legend" and "The Deal at the Crossroads," which follow a frustrated guitarist who meets Satan and trades his soul for talent and fame. No one knows who the protagonist of the story originally was, but over the years, the tales have been conflated and are now mostly associated with the early-twentieth-century blues guitarist Robert Johnson.

Johnson was a Black American guitarist, singer, and songwriter. The story goes that he yearned to play the guitar like his idol, Son House, but he possessed little natural ability. Many of his friends and colleagues picked on him because of his lack of talent, and they refused to play with him in public. One version of the story claims that one day, a stranger told Johnson to take his guitar to the crossroads near Dockery Plantation at midnight, and he would find someone there who would be able to help him. That night, he met a strange man who took his guitar from him, tuned it, and when he handed it back, Johnson could play any song he wanted to. Another version of the story says that Johnson disappeared for months with no words to anyone, and when he reemerged he had an unrivaled proficiency on the guitar. This led many to speculate that he had made an unnatural deal with the Devil to get his skill.

Whether or not he actually made a deal with the Devil, the fact remains that Johnson is one of the most proficient and influential blues guitarists of all time. He had an unparalleled talent and, though he only recorded about 30 songs, he had a loyal following during his lifetime. He died at the age of 27, which made the rumors of his association with the Devil only grow. Famous musicians such as Bob Dylan, Keith Richards, and Eric Clapton have praised Johnson, and Clapton even called him "the most important blues singer that ever lived."

No matter if you hear a story about Faust or Johnson, about the Devil or Papa Legba, the basic elements of the story remain the same, and the story never ends well. The lesson is always not to make a deal with the Devil unless you are willing to give up more than you gained.

Robert Johnson.

Community and Mutual Aid in Portland

by Meredith G. Healy

"The piece demands equity; a democracy of space not usually attended to in theater. We are not 'audience' and 'performer' in a hierarchical set-up. We are a community. Townspeople."

One of the most unique aspects of *Where We Stand* is playwright Donnetta Lavinia Grays's demand to have equity in the performance space, in order to have the performer and audience exist on equal footing. Grays establishes this during the performance by incorporating participatory elements such as call and response and the vote at the end of the show. The discussions sparked about community and acceptance can move from discussion to action when the audience re-enters their own community and supports their neighbors through mutual aid initiatives.

What is mutual aid?
In an article published in *The Cut*, Amanda Arnold defines mutual aid as "a form of solidarity-based support, in which communities unite against a common struggle, rather than leaving individuals to fend for themselves." The concept of mutual aid was first articulated by the Russian revolutionary Peter Kropotkin in his essay collection, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. In his essays, he expressed that solidarity and support within a community is much more beneficial than individualism.

Mutual aid networks have existed in the US for many decades. One notable example is the Free Breakfast For School Children program established by the Black Panther Party. This program, created in 1969, was responsible for distributing meals to tens of thousands of children. It grew from a single group working in an Episcopal church in Oakland, CA, to over 45 groups working across the country before it was shut down by the federal government due to concerns about the "threatening" nature of the Black Panther Party. Most recently, mutual aid networks have been critical for supporting people impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Movement for Black Lives. Local grassroots organizations have identified the needs of the community and have worked to provide food and medication assistance, money for rent, and other basic necessities.

PARTY MEMBER BILL WHITFIELD SERVES BREAKFAST IN KANSAS CITY.

A crucial aspect of mutual aid is that it is not the same as charity. Whereas charity often responds to the effects of inequity or a singular crisis in a community, it doesn't spend as much time focusing on what has contributed to these problems. Mutual aid networks seek to both address the root cause of problems in the community and provide services to address the problems. These networks also establish a symbiotic relationship in that members of the community are both providers and recipients of the services; everyone has something to contribute. They are volunteer-run and horizontal, with lots of transparency and no one person calling all of the shots. Another difference between the two is that charity models often work under the assumption that need and poverty are grounded in personal deficiency. This results in beneficiaries having to meet eligibility requirements, such as staying sober, attending career counseling, or adhering to curfews to receive aid. These

requirements place a stigma on those receiving assistance, and further perpetuate the idea that poverty is the result of the bad decisions made by the impacted people.

How can I help or get involved with a mutual aid group in my community?
Since mutual aid groups are community-based and community-driven, there is not an exhaustive list that exists. The best way to get connected to established networks is to do your own research online or on social media platforms such as Instagram or Facebook. It is important to connect with and learn from the individuals who have already been doing the work in local communities. These existing groups likely have established networks in the area, and have spent time addressing existing inequities. There is much to learn from people who have been committed to doing this work. However, if you know of an unmet need in your community, you could also start your own network by reaching out to friends and family. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and organizer Mariame Kaba have created a useful toolkit that provides resources and information about creating new mutual aid networks.

What are some existing mutual aid groups in Maine with whom I can connect?
Over the past year, mutual aid groups have formed across the country to address the racial and economic inequities with which the US continues to struggle. Here are some of the networks that are currently working within our community to help our neighbors.

Maine People's Housing Coalition:
"We are a broad coalition of residents working to end homelessness and guarantee access to safe, affordable housing for all Mainers. We are nonpartisan and believe that housing is a human right."

This group connects with members on Facebook and Instagram to secure emergency shelter and storage for community members.

Mainers Together:
"On March 16, days after COVID-19 arrived in Maine, the Maine People's Alliance launched Mainers Together, a community relief effort. Over six months, Mainers Together fielded more than 1,500 requests for help, organized more than 1,000 volunteers and sent more than 850 grocery cards to those who have needed help. We are proud of the work our response team has done to help so many neighbors in crisis. We are proud, but we are also frustrated. Our elected officials are not rising to the challenge of this moment. Our leaders in Augusta and Washington need to know that their constituents are still struggling and that there is much more they can be doing to keep people safe, housed and healthy. Please join this movement, share how COVID-19 has impacted your family and connect with others working on a campaign to push for the relief this moment requires."

The website includes opportunities to become connected to local community groups, an option to contribute to a donation fund that directly supports community response efforts, and information about local food pantries.

Mano en Mano:
"Mano en Mano works with farmworkers and immigrants to thrive in Maine. We envision a stronger, more inclusive Downeast Maine where the contributions of diverse communities are welcomed, access to essential services, education and housing are ensured, and social justice and equity are embraced."

Mano en Mano also has a mutual aid fund called the Estamos Aquí Fund which was established to help immigrants and farmworkers with financial difficulties that have resulted from COVID-19. Community members can request and receive funds for immediate needs including housing, utilities, and food.

Neighbors in Need:
"Neighbors in Need is a Facebook group of 2200+ mostly local residents who work together to assist immigrants new to the state. While our presence together is online, the work happens in person, masked, and 6-feet apart, from neighbor to new neighbor."

This group exchanges material goods and provides information regarding food resources for Mainers across the state.

The History and Tradition of Oral Storytelling

by Meredith G. Healy

Humans have always had an urge to communicate, to share, to learn, and to grow. Even before we had the tools to write down our histories and values, communities worked to pass down important stories, histories, and lessons from one generation to the next. This tradition is known as oral storytelling, and it is similar to what the audience witnesses in *Where We Stand*.

Oral storytelling can take many different forms, including fables, myths, songs, chants, and epic poems. It is unique as it relies solely on speaking and listening; thus, these traditions are reliant on a living culture. If the community that created the story ceases to exist, then that story is lost. Audience and community participation is integral to oral storytelling, and it is therefore a collective experience. The narrator is a vehicle for the information, and in many traditional settings, she relies on encouragement and response from observers to continue telling the story. One critical component of the form is repetition, which opens the door for more audience participation, particularly if there is music or song, and makes it easier for listeners to remember crucial moments of the tale. The latter aspect means that the story will be more likely to withstand the test of time and can continue to be passed along for generations to come. An example of repetition that is often utilized in oral storytelling is call and response. Call and response is incorporated frequently into songs during oral storytelling, just as the audience experiences in *Where We Stand* when the Man gives a statement—the call—which is then punctuated by a response from the listeners.

Even though oral storytelling is a tradition that is found in many different cultures throughout the world, the ways in which the tradition is executed vary from community to community. In ancient Greece, Homer and Aesop were known for their epics and their fables. Before *The Iliad* and "The Tortoise and the Hare" were written down, they were preserved orally. The Greeks were also known for lyric poems,

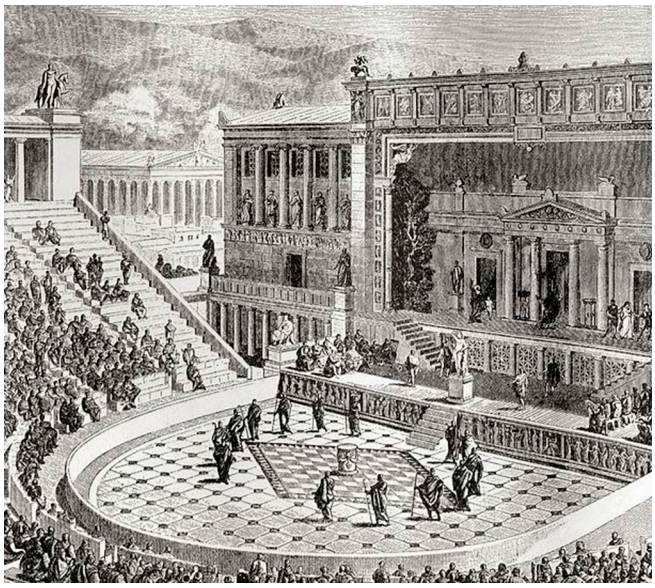


Illustration of an outdoor Greek Theater.

another type of oral storytelling, which were often performed by a chorus. These poems have been cited as a possible starting point for Greek dramas. The multi-person chorus was integral to delivering long passages and holding the interest and attention of the audience.

The styles and different forms of oral storytelling in the Indigenous American tradition are as varied and diverse as the nations themselves. Many tribes draw a unique distinction between narratives, folktales, and legends. Narratives are true accounts of the past; a tribe's creation story falls into this category. Folktales are passed down from generation to generation, but are not thought to be representative of literal truths. These stories are often told for entertainment. Legends are stories about the tribe's more recent past, and are not firmly fact or fiction. The Choctaw tribe, who reside in the southeastern United States, primarily utilize oral stories to educate the younger generation of the tribe's history, as well as to impart moral lessons and values. Native Hawaiians incorporate dance, chants, and song in their traditional stories to better engage with the community. Members of the Tohono O'odham Nation, primarily located in south

A member of the Tohono O'odham tribe tells stories in an outdoor ampitheater.

central Arizona, spend years memorizing their narratives word for word and take multiple days to tell a story, whereas members of the Cherokee Nation, who primarily reside in northeastern Utah, are encouraged to improvise elements of their storytelling.

Storytelling in Africa has been used for centuries as a means of passing on values, traditions, and maintaining social order. In African nations such as Cameroon and Ghana, communities gather after dinner to participate in storytelling rituals. In Cameroon, there is a specific structure to the event which always begins by engaging the audience with riddles or jokes. This encourages the audience to become more participatory when the storyteller begins to tell the folktale. The storyteller is responsible for portraying all of the characters in the story and the audience engages by joining in song, dance, or offering verbal reactions. In Ghana, stories are told within families and neighborhood settings. These tales do not follow any set sequential order and evolve based upon the moral that the group wishes to teach children. Many west African nations, including Mali, Niger, Senegal, and the Gambia, have a member of the society known as a Griot who fills a number of different roles in the community. Originally, Griots were counselors to the king, tutors to royal children, and responsible for remembering and preserving the history of the people. Today, the job involves even more responsibilities, including genealogist, messenger, ambassador, musician, and historian. The profession is inherited and passed down from parent to child. Children are trained by their parents before attending a specialized school and then going on to serve as an apprentice for an experienced Griot.

In *Where We Stand*, Donnetta Lavinia Grays uses traditional oral storytelling methods from across the world to tell her tale. The narrator embodies different characters, encourages audience participation through songs, chants, and recitation, and hopes to impart some knowledge onto the society that is composed of audience-goers by the end. This shared, lived experience is what makes oral storytelling so compelling, and it is what ensures that the stories live on.

Griots performing in Sofara, Mali.

Participatory Theater

by Zach Elton

At the end of *Where We Stand*, the audience has to make a choice. The actor poses two options to the audience, and they must decide how the play ends: are the characters punished or rewarded? In this way, the audience is brought into the story as an active participant. This convention is called participatory theater, a type of performance where the actors interact directly with the audience at some point during the show. In this style of theater, the performers break the "fourth wall" that typically separates the performer and the audience.

In a traditional, contemporary theater setting, the action of the play unfolds on stage while the audience is a passive observer, and the performers never acknowledge that the audience is present. The characters' actions continue seamlessly without ever needing to acknowledge the existence of the audience. In contrast, in participatory theater, the audience has a key role in moving the piece forward. The plot stops until a member of the audience, or the audience as a whole, performs some crucial action. This action can take multiple forms. For example, audience members may be asked to hold props and give them to the performers at a designated time in the show, or the actors may ask for suggestions about a time or place to set their next scene.

Additionally, audience members may be asked to steer the show in an entirely new direction. One example of this is in the musical *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The musical is based on Charles Dickens's mystery novel of the same name. Dickens planned to release the book in twelve installments; however, he passed away before he completed it. He left behind no outline or clear way to resolve the events in the novel, so the readers never solved the mystery. In 1985, Rupert Holmes adapted the novel into a musical, and decided that the audience should choose how the story ends. While they were in rehearsals, the actors learned seven different endings to the musical, and based on what the audience chose that night, the performers had to adapt quickly to conclude the show. It is incredibly exciting to watch and experience. Part of the fun as an audience member is not only letting your voice be heard and influencing the course of the show, but

The Broadway Revival Cast of
The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 2012.*

waiting to see if the actors can pull off not knowing how the play is going to end.

While audience interaction can be purely for entertainment purposes, like in *Edwin Drood*, more often than not, it is used to comment on current political, social, or ethical issues. By bringing the audience into the play as participants, they get to see how their voices can influence the outcome of the play, and, in many cases, how that influence can translate to their lives outside the theater. One example of this is Heidi Schreck's one-woman show *What the Constitution Means to Me*. In this play, Schreck talks directly to the audience as her present self and as her fifteen-year-old self at a constitutional debate that she competed in to win money for college. Over the course of the show, she discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the US Constitution, and eventually she invites a local high schooler on stage to debate whether or not the Constitution should be abolished. After the debate is concluded, the audience is asked to act as a jury, and based on the arguments they just heard, they have to vote to keep or abolish the Constitution. After the audience votes, one person is asked to act as the foreman to read the decision. This person is then given the

power to completely go against the majority vote, much like, as Schreck points out, the Supreme Court can rule against the will of the public majority. In showcasing throughout the production how the Constitution has benefited this country, and how so many people are still left out of constitutional protections, she has made these issues real and ever-present; by asking the audience to vote at the end of the play, she forces them to take a side. Schreck made it their civic duty to participate, and, hopefully, educated and empowered them enough through the course of the play to stand up for what they believe in, not only in the theater but also in the world.

While *Where We Stand* is not based on a true story, playwright Donnetta Lavinia Grays crafted a play that uses the audience in a very similar way to Schreck. By making the audience vote, she bonds them together, creating a community. Whatever they decide at the end of the play, they have decided it together. Their fate is sealed by the choice they have collectively made. By using audience participation at the end of the play, she stops the audience from being passive observers and she makes the audience just as culpable as the people in the play. Hopefully, as people leave the theater, they have conversations about the play's outcome and how this outcome relates to their own lives and their own community.

Heidi Schreck in What The Constitution Means To Me*, 2019.*

Ayes or Nays. No Half Ways: A Brief Overview of Town Halls

by Meredith G. Healy

"We are where we are. The space is as unique and is as simple as the space in which we are gathered. And wherever we are gathered, we are at this town's center. We are who we are. The people are as multifaceted as the people who have gathered in this space. And whoever is gathered, we are the people who make up this town."

This is an excerpt from the stage direction that playwright Donnetta Lavinia Grays offers at the beginning of *Where We Stand* to set the tone of the performance. It immediately introduces the idea that the audience will function as a community for this piece. One critical aspect of many communities across the world is discourse and participation, and Grays presents an opportunity for this action during the performance. By the end of the show, the physical theater becomes a town hall of sorts, and the audience members have an opportunity to become active participants.

Societies have long had centralized locations for meetings and events. An early example of this is the Roman Forum. Beginning in approximately 500 BCE, the site was used by citizens for political, religious, and social activities. In the northeastern US, this location is known as the town hall. Dorchester, MA, is home to the first town hall in the country, which was established in 1633. The townspeople gathered in the space to participate in regular meetings and to ensure their voices were heard with respect to local decision-making. These meetings are described as being a pure form of democracy because of the nature of the discussion and debates that they encourage. Records from the first town meeting state that, "for the general good and well ordering of the affayres (sic) of the Plantation there shall be every Mooneday...a generall meeting of the inhabitants of the Plantation at the meeting-house there to settle (and sett downe) such orders as may tend to the generall good as aforesayd; and every man to be bound thereby, without gaynesaying or resistance." Historians note that town meetings in colonial New England were likely used as a way to convince men to join the patriots' cause during the American Revolution. Revolutionary leaders held meetings in Faneuil Hall (Boston, MA) to organize and recruit minutemen.

The Roman Forum.

There are still towns and cities in New England that use traditional town hall meetings as a way to engage and talk about community issues. The ability to vote on those issues depends on the area. Some places require voter registration, others allow you to participate if you are a property owner, and there are also communities that have "open" meetings which, as the name suggests, are open to any resident. Participation varies greatly from place to place, and can also depend on what is being discussed on the agenda. For instance, in Harwinton, CT, the average number of people who attend a meeting is 100, but 400 attended a meeting that decided whether or not to build a dog pound.

A TOWN HALL MEETING IN UNITY, ME.

In recent years, some towns have noted diminishing attendance amongst the residents. This is thought to be due to several factors. In larger communities, individuals are less likely to engage in the meetings, and in some communities issues that were once discussed and decided upon in town hall meetings are now decided on the state level. However, small towns are still making an effort to bolster attendance. For example, in Bethel, VT, the location of the meeting has been moved to a local school, which is more accessible, and childcare is provided for any parents who wish to attend. The town hopes that these changes will result in greater attendance and participation.

Town hall meetings typically occur at specified, scheduled times. However, if a group of citizens comes together and gets 200 signatures, then the board is generally obligated to hold a meeting outside of the regular schedule. Each town has specific bylaws and charters that have been established regarding how the meetings should be run. Here in Portland, we have an opportunity to vote on June 8, 2021, for nine members from the community to serve on a charter commission, which will revise Portland's charter (the document that details the powers, functions, and organization of the city). At most town meetings, there is typically an elected moderator who grants attendees permission to speak, and ensures that those who speak stay on topic and do not resort to any personal attacks. This is known as deliberation, and allows participants to respond to each other, discuss differences in opinions, and make amendments to any proposals prior to voting. Once deliberation is complete, all those in attendance participate in the vote. Votes are not conducted in private, but rather each person receives a voting card and is asked to hold it up first if they are in favor of the proposal, and then if they are opposed to the proposal.

Now we vote on the fate of this community.
Ayes or nays.
No half ways.

In *Where We Stand*, the audience functions as a community and is asked to engage in a process similar to what we see in town halls. Different sides are defended, people speak for and against the accused. The audience has the unique experience of dissecting the story and deciding the fate of the Man, and in this experience lies the importance of listening, considering, reflecting, and participating.

Recommended Resources

by Editors

Books
The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales
The Devil and Tom Walker by Washington Irving
Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution by Peter Kropotkin
The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde
Theater of the Oppressed by Augusto Boal

Plays
Faust by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
Hadestown by Anaïs Mitchell
The Mystery of Edwin Drood by Rupert Holmes
Pippin by Bob Fosse, Roger O. Hirson, and Stephen Schwartz
What the Constitution Means to Me by Heidi Schreck

TV
Black Mirror: Bandersnatch
Derek DelGaudio's In & of Itself

Film
Clue
O Brother, Where Art Thou?

Derek DelGaudio in In & of Itself.

Portland Stage Company
Education and Outreach

Join Portland Stage as we discuss, debate, and explore the plays on our stage and in the classroom! Portland Stage is dedicated to bringing exciting theater, inspiring conversation, interactive experiences, and thought-provoking literature to a wide audience of youth and adult learners. Whether you take part in a discussion, subscribe to *PlayNotes*, take a class in our Theater for Kids space, or bring a group of students to see a performance, there is something here for everyone. How would you like to participate?

Student Matinee Series
The Portland Stage Student Matinee Program annually provides more than 7,000 middle and high school students from Maine and New Hampshire with discounted tickets for student matinees. This season, we are offering this program digitally. Portland Stage can send you the video in a way that works best for your group. We would be happy to do a workshop with you too!

Play Me a Story
Experience the Fun & Magic of Theater on Saturday Mornings at 10:30am with Play Me a Story: in your living room! All ages can enjoy a free performance of children's stories on Facebook live. Ages 4-10 are welcome to participate in an interactive workshop over zoom for $5. Build literacy, encourage creativity and spark dramatic dreams!

After School Classes
After school classes at Portland Stage produce a safe environment for young people to find a higher sense of play, stretch their imaginations, and gain valuable social skills such as listening, risk-taking, ensemble building, public speaking, and leadership through storytelling. These classes are wildly fun, creative, spontaneous, and begin to build skills for the young actor or non-actor's voice, body, and imagination. Visit our website for this year's offerings!

Vacation and Summer Camps
Our theater camps are fun, challenging, and enriching. We use stories of all kinds to fuel these active, educational and lively, process-based week-long school vacation and summer programs for youth. Theater for Kids works with professional actors, directors, artisans, and composers. Students are invited to think, speak, and act, and even sing imaginatively, critically, and creatively in an environment of inclusivity and safe play.

Virtual Portland Stage PLAY
An interactive dramatic reading and acting workshop for elementary school students in grades K – 5. Professional teaching artists perform children's literature and classic poetry for the entire school, and then work with select classrooms in workshops based on the stories. Actors actively engage students in small groups/workshops using their bodies, voices, and imaginations to build understanding of the text while bringing the stories and characters to life. PLAY helps develop literacy and reading fluency, character recall, understanding of themes, social emotional skills, physical storytelling, and vocal characterization. The program also comes with a comprehensive Resource Guide filled with information and activities based on the books and poems.

Virtual Directors Lab
Schools get access to a 50 minute filmed production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* performed by professional actors/teaching artists. After the performance, students engage directly with the text in an interactive virtual workshop with the actors and creative team. In these workshops, students practice effective communication, creative collaboration, rhetoric, and critical analysis. The program also comes with a comprehensive Resource Guide filled with information and resources about the play we are focusing on. Directors Lab puts Shakespeare's language into the hands and mouths of the students, empowering them to be the artists, directors, and ensemble with the power to interpret the text and produce meaning.

Portland Stage Company
2020–2021 Staff

Anita Stewart *Executive & Artistic Director*

Artistic & Production Staff

Meg Anderson *Props Master*
Todd Brian Backus *Literary Manager*
Daniel Brodhead *Production Manager, Lighting & Sound Supervisor*
Hannah Cordes *Education Director*
Doane Dorchester *General Manager*
Ted Gallant *Technical Director*
Myles C. Hatch *Stage Manager*
Julianne Shea *Education Administrator*
Susan Thomas *Costume Shop Manager*

Affiliate Artists

Ron Botting
Peter Brown
Daniel Burson
Maureen Butler
Ian Carlsen
Hannah Cordes
Moira Driscoll
Abigail Killeen
Callie Kimball
Daniel Noel
Ed Reichert
Hans Indigo Spencer
Dustin Tucker
Bess Welden
Monica Wood
Sally Wood

Administrative Staff

Paul Ainsworth *Business Manager*
Cody Brackett *Marketing Associate*
Chris DeFilipp *House Manager*
Nolan Ellsworth *Front of House Associate*
Marjorie Gallant *Graphic Design Associate*
Beth Given *Development Director*
Mical Hutson *Marketing Director*
Jennifer London *Company Manager*
Martin Lodish *Finance Director*
Renee Myhaver *Assistant Box Office Manager*
Donald Smith *Audience Services Manager*
Madeleine St. Germain *Front of House Associate*
Lauren Stockless *Development Assistant*
Nathan Sylvester *Front of House Associate*
Adam Thibodeau *House Manager*
Shannon Wade *Front of House Associate*

Intern Company

Sophia B. Diaz *Education*
Macey Downs *Directing & Dramaturgy*
Zach Elton *Directing & Dramaturgy*
Whitney Edmonds *Costumes*
Meredith G. Healy *Directing & Dramaturgy*
Audrey Kastner *Electrics*
Beth Koehler *Stage Management*
Mollie Lipkowitz *Costumes*
Lizzie Lotterer *Company Management*
Courtney Prentiss *Stage Management*
Jordan Wells *Education*