

ORLANDO

WRITTEN BY

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WILL DAVIS

FEATURING

TAYLOR MAC



STUDY GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Synopsis

Orlando's adventures begin as a young man, when he serves as courtier to Queen Elizabeth. Through many centuries of living, he becomes a 20th-century woman, trying to sort out her existence. An adaptation of the "longest and most charming love letter in literature," written by Virginia Woolf for her lover, Vita Sackville-West, *Orlando* is a theatrical, wild, fantastical trip through space, time, and gender.

Time Periods

Act I: The Elizabethan Age

Act II: The 17th Century

Act III: The 18th Century

Act IV: The 19th Century

Act V: The 20th Century



Taylor Mac and Janice Amaya. Photo by Joan Marcus.

The Ensemble



Orlando

A passionate, charismatic, and inquisitive individual with aspirations of becoming a poet. Orlando spends the first thirty years of his life as a man, after which she wakes up one morning as a woman. Orlando defies time, living over 300 years while only aging to 36. Orlando is inspired by Virginia Woolf's lover, Vita Sackville-West.

Queen Elizabeth

The Queen of England. She brings Orlando to court as a member of her cabinet and her lover, giving him a house and land to further elevate his status. The Queen is strong-willed but insecure. She quickly grows possessive of Orlando, though she ultimately cannot control him.

Sasha

A Russian princess, and Orlando's first love interest. Sasha has both feminine and masculine characteristics, and Orlando finds her androgyny deeply seductive. While Sasha and Orlando's love affair is brief, her memory stays with Orlando throughout the rest of their life.

The Archduke / Archduchess

A Romanian noble with an overwhelming tendency to hee-hee and haw-haw. The Archduke is completely besotted with Orlando and poses as a woman (the Archduchess) to try and win his fancy. After Orlando and the Archduchess have an affair, Orlando escapes to Constantinople to get rid of her. Upon returning to England as a woman, Orlando is visited by the Archduke, who reveals he had posed as the Archduchess in the hopes of wooing Orlando while he still presented as a man.

Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire

A sea captain who finds Orlando when she falls on the moors. At first, both Orlando and Shel wonder if their new lover is truly the gender they say, as each has qualities associated with both masculinity and femininity. Shel and Orlando quickly become engaged, though Shel remains committed to his life at sea.

And a chorus of others including:

Shakespeare, Miss Penelope Hartopp, a washerwoman, Favilla, Clorinda, Euphrosyne, A Russian Sea-Man, Othello, Desdemona, A Sea Captain, A maid—Grimsditch, a maid—Dupper, a Salesperson

A CLOSER LOOK



A Note from Sarah Ruhl

My encounters with Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, a queer classic, have been encounters with joy. Woolf apparently wrote *Orlando* with more joy, buoyancy, and speed than any of her other novels. The character of Orlando, based on Virginia's lover Vita Sackville-West, famously begins life as a man in the Elizabethan era, trots through a couple more centuries, dodging various lovers, and in the 18th century, after a long sleep, wakes up, a woman. Woolf wrote in a letter, "I have written this book quicker than any; & it is all a joke; & yet gay & quick reading I think; a writer's holiday."

Woolf apparently had so much fun writing the book it felt like a holiday, like not-work, a triumph over the melancholy and writer's block that sometimes plagued her. Woolf wrote in a letter to Vita, "Yesterday I was in despair...I couldn't screw a word from me; and at last dropped my head in my hands; dipped my pen in the ink, and wrote these words, as if automatically, on a clean sheet: *Orlando: a biography*. No sooner had I done this than my body was flooded with rapture and my brain with ideas. I wrote rapidly until 12." That spark of joy in the work is what first attracted me to the novel—the palpable feeling of joy in the speed of Woolf's invention—that rush of language—an incandescent and yet almost physical quality. For one thing, it's funnier than her other books. I can almost feel Virginia willing Vita to laugh over her shoulder while reading the pages.

Orlando was light years ahead of its time (1928) in terms of its expansive, fluid, liberatory views of gender and sexuality. Conversations around gender have changed monumentally in the culture since I first adapted this novel in 1998. At times it feels as though we are only now catching up to Virginia Woolf, who wrote in *A Room of One's Own* that the "androgynous mind is resonant and porous... transmits emotion without impediment...is naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided."

Though I added one word to *Orlando* last week, I wrote the first draft relatively quickly, twenty-five years ago, aided by the intrepid speed of youth. I was asked originally to adapt the novel when I was just out of Brown University, where I had studied with the great Paula Vogel, and where I decided to become a playwright. Another mentor, Joyce Piven, with whom I had studied acting, asked me to adapt *Orlando* for her theater company in Evanston. At my tender age, I already was a Woolf devotee, and had devoured and loved the novel. I had looked to literary models of expansive non-fixed desire and liberatory views of gender to make sense of my own growing-up self, and I had already inhaled Woolf. I said yes to Joyce immediately. Lucky for me, I was too young to be daunted by the epic scale of the novel. When people ask me how I distilled the novel, I answer that, though there were complexities along the way, the first draft was simple: I chose my favorite, most theatrical bits and then put them in an order.

What a profound joy to finally land here at Signature Theatre, twenty-five years later, with the incredible director Will Davis. When I first met Will for coffee to discuss *Orlando*, among other possible theatrical ventures, and we talked, and talked, and talked, I thought: where has this artistic collaborator been all my life? We seemed to share a language and a mission. Working with Will post-pandemic, he reminds me why I ever wanted to do theater in the first place—a conjuring of joy, possibility, community, and transcendence.

Building an ensemble production around the divine center of Taylor Mac has been a profoundly

happy experience. I've known Taylor since we were at New Dramatists (down the block) together as playwrights. I'd always admired Taylor as a writer and performer, and when I saw the seminal 24-Decade History of Popular Music, with Taylor moving through the centuries and in and out of genders, in Machine Dazzle's epic costumes—I gasped inwardly, thinking—Taylor Mac must play Orlando someday! This production has managed to include so many writer/performers I have long admired, including Lisa Kron—fitting for a story with writing at the center of it.

Just before we started rehearsals at Signature, I had the pleasure of seeing (and hearing) my almost grown-up daughter, Anna, in the play, playing the violin and the bass, at her high school. To see kids I had known since kindergarten now inhabiting these roles with such life-affirming playfulness was a trip. I thought of Orlando's line "This must be middle-age. Time has passed over me..." I know of no better definition of growing up than the one provided by Woolf in *Orlando*: "I am growing up. I am losing some illusions, perhaps to acquire others." The director of that high school production, Laura Barnett, pointed out that the word "love" is used thirty-six times in the text, and Orlando is thirty-six years old by the end of the play.

I have always been a sucker for a good love story. Vita Sackville-West's son Nigel Nicholson said of *Orlando* that it was "the longest love letter in history." I am beguiled by artistic works of dedication that are intrinsic gifts before they ever reach a wider audience. I am of the belief that the wider audience gets a taste of the initial gift. Thanks to this extraordinary group of performers and collaborators for putting this work into your hands, in the present moment.

Acknowledgments:

I would love to acknowledge with gratitude the many productions I've seen of *Orlando* over the years that have shaped the text, some with dear collaborators like Polly Noonan, Jessica Thebus, Rebecca Taichman, David Greenspan, Esperanza Rosales Balcarcal, Annie-B Parsons, Frankie F, Tom Nelis, Katie Lindsay, the guiding wisdom and friendship of P. Carl, with the greatest of gratitude to Joyce Piven for asking me to do this in the first place!

– Sarah Ruhl

A CLOSER LOOK

↪ An Interview with Sarah Ruhl (she/her) and Will Davis (he/him)

Signature: To kick us off, would both of you introduce yourselves briefly?

Sarah Ruhl: I'm Sarah Ruhl, I'm a playwright, and I write other things like poetry and essays as well. I am at my Signature Residency—this is my second play in a series of three. It's my first time working with Will, which I'm so happy about.

Will Davis: I'm Will. I'm a director and a choreographer. This is my first time working with Sarah, and this feels like a profoundly special opportunity.

Sarah: The first but not the last, right?

Will: Yeah, my god, yes. I'm primarily a new play director. Sometimes I like to do old plays in new ways, when I want to try something new. But it's actually quite rare to have the opportunity to have a true collaborator in the writer. Different playwrights operate in different ways. All those ways are good, but it's a particular treat to have someone to build the world with, and to ask questions with, who has a sense of humor that I admire. So yeah, the first, and I very much, very *much*, hope not the last, because it's a treat.

Sarah: Not to just plunge into a conversation, but I do find that young theater students ask a lot, "How do you know if you and a director will get along in the room? What makes a good collaboration?" What you said about sense of humor—I think what makes for good chemistry between collaborators is often as simple as the same things make you laugh.

We're in the room working, and Taylor Mac and the ensemble are all so funny. There are so many clowns in the room. I feel like I get to come to work and laugh. And Will is open to some of my



Mel Brooks-inspired provocations, like, "Could Lisa Kron mime eating a drumstick?" Then we get to see Lisa Kron eating a fake drumstick, and that makes me really happy.

Will: I have found that plays get more complex and richer when we let go of any fear about, "I don't know if that's the right choice." If something is occurring to the playwright, to Sarah—same with the actors—my response is, "Well, we definitely need to try it."

I feel totally comfortable with the idea that this is a curiosity and an adventure, and we let things ride for a little while and just take note of, "This doesn't feel quite right. I don't know what to offer it next." So, we'll just let it be, or ask a "what if" and put that up there [as an option].

There's always plenty of time. That's my opinion. There's always plenty of time because you get to decide how you think about time. I'm stuck alone with my own brain all the time, but I'm not always with Sarah's brain. So, I'm just far more interested in what [Sarah's] thinking about.

Sarah: I love when you say things like, "We're going to audition this idea," or, "I'm not even sure I believe this yet, but let's try X, Y, or Z." I think the feeling in the room that the company has is playful and curious, and I do think we come to

“I think what makes for good chemistry between collaborators is often as simple as the same things make you laugh.”

the theater for that sense of play. It’s the spark that brought me to the theater in the first place.

Things haven’t been so fun or playful in the last three to four years because of the pandemic. So, it’s been great to be with a company, an ensemble, a room, that feels steeped in that sense of curiosity and play.

Signature: Absolutely. I love what you’re saying about “yes and-ing” choices and curiosity within the ensemble. I’m wondering if you can talk about working with your collaborators in the rehearsal room and how they’ve influenced the world you’re building for this production?

Sarah: Well, one thing I’d say is this text was built for an ensemble. It was my first professional commission when I was 23 or 24 for a small theater in Chicago—the Piven Theater Workshop—that has a long tradition of ensemble-generated and literary texts. Will knows that world from spending time in Chicago. I really think ensemble building is a way for the art form to grow into brave aesthetic places because an ensemble protects you. The ancient beginnings of theater were very much ensemble driven. So, I love how fast this particular *Orlando* ensemble has cleaved together. This is the kind of show that, in a perfect world, you work with an ensemble for a long time. This is a compressed rehearsal period, so we’re lucky that they gelled as a company really fast.

In a normal New York rehearsal period, you pretty much know what your lines are going to be on the first day. With this script, the text just says “chorus,” which has to be designated and bespoke for each production. So [the actors] have to be open to, “I’m saying this today, I might not be saying this tomorrow,” which is an egoless place to be in.

Will: Yes. I went to undergrad in Chicago. I stuck around for a while, I went back for a couple of years to run a theater, and so I’m familiar with this particular company that Sarah was talking about. I’m also familiar with the aesthetic and values around ensemble theatre making. Chicago is an ensemble theater kind of town.

Sarah: Were you an actor?

Will: I was. But I originally came to theater through dance, particularly ballet. So, this idea of: you take class together, you have a set of movements and a physical grammar that you all understand.

As a director, a two hander scares me. The more people in the room, the better. I’ve learned over the years how to set the right conditions. I’m not looking for a library or a temple in rehearsal. I want to model playfulness, curiosity, adventure, and a lightness with holding onto choices. I try to be very particular when I can of saying, “I’d like to try this, I don’t know if I believe in it.”

There are some tenants. One of them is—as long as it’s not going to hurt a person, mentally or physically—we are so lucky to have an actor say, “I have an idea.” It feels like a sacred responsibility to say, “Try it!” I’m being given an opportunity to learn something. More than half the time I’m like, “Oh, I never would have thought of that.” That’s the power of ensembles. The brain trust just gets deeper and deeper when they cohere.

Because we only get three weeks [to rehearse], an important part of the first week of rehearsal is saying and modeling over, and over, and over again, “I don’t know what’s going to happen, let’s try this. Great. I don’t know what’s going to happen, let’s try this.” You know, to get the engine going, of like [as a collaborator], “Oh, I don’t know what’s going to happen...why don’t I try this?”

Sarah: Will had a vision, and asked to rehearse in the theater space itself early on, rather than in a rehearsal room. It felt qualitatively different to be playing around in the theater space as opposed to a room. I think because *Orlando* has a theatricality and isn’t realism, it was wonderful to interact

with the theater’s architecture early on, instead of being around a table being like, “What did Virginia Woolf mean?”

Signature: I wonder too, not to ask, “What did Virginia Woolf mean?” but you mentioned modeling behavior, particularly not knowing and asking questions. I’m curious, are there questions that have come up in the room about the script, or about the way the ensemble lives within the script, that have made you think differently about the text or reconsider your own understanding of the work?

Will: We have, very intentionally, a gender expansive cast. The gift of a cast like that to any text is that it immediately opens up dimensions you weren’t considering. That’s very true here, as well. The comment is in the casting, that’s always true. But working with this text, which has this iconic moment of transition in it, with a group of people who have a lot of rigorous thought about the idea of being in transition, has unfolded a depth to it that feels so great.

Sarah: Agreed.

Signature: Something else you mentioned earlier is time, specifically time within the room. I think a lot of students will be interested in how time

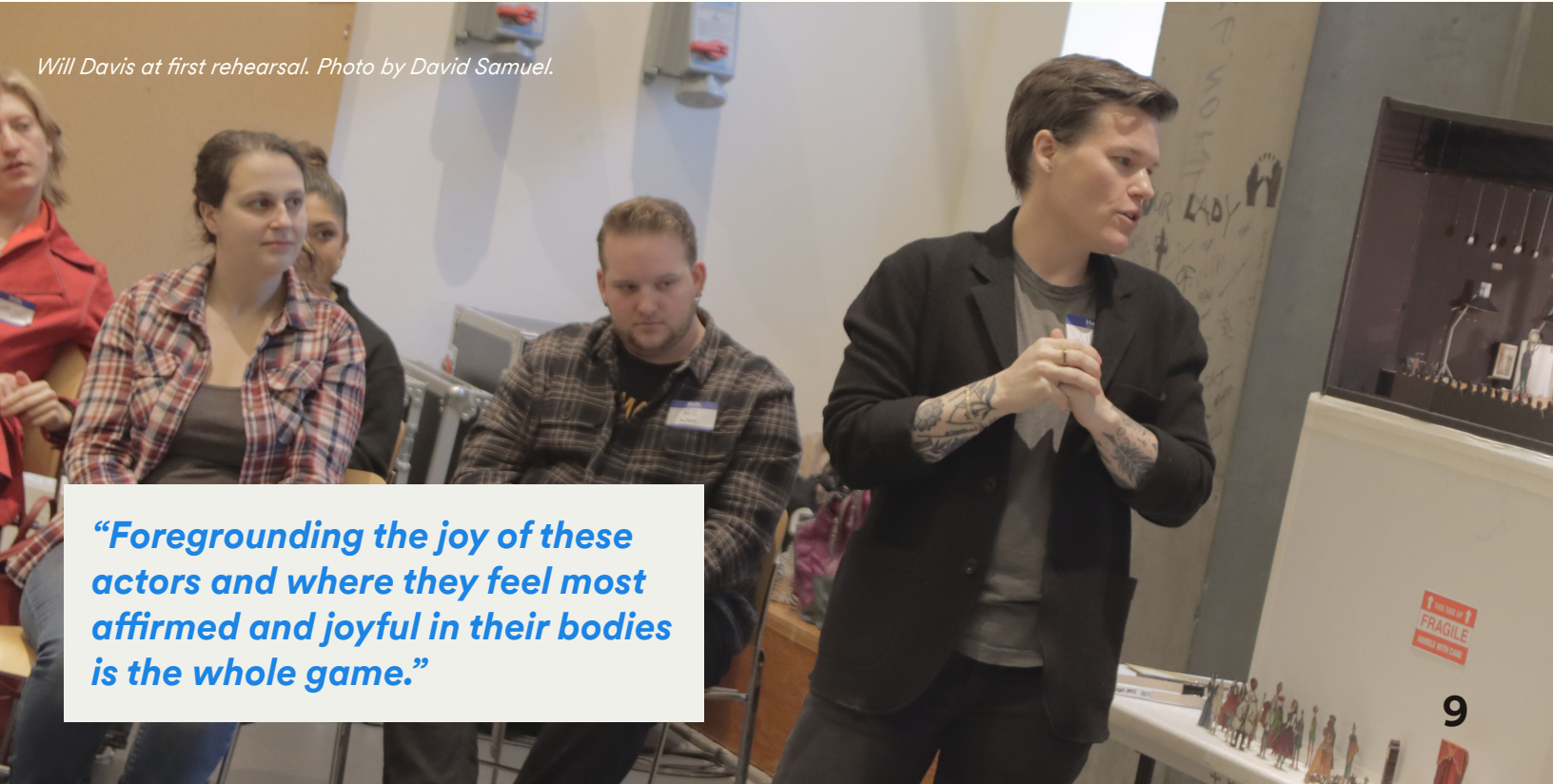
works in this play. Can you share how you’ve approached time in *Orlando*, both in the writing and adapting, Sarah, and the direction, working with the cast and in incorporating movement, Will?

Sarah: It’s one of the things I love about the novel—Woolf fluidly moving through time, and fluidly moving through gender. It’s interesting to think about: why both? Because she could have chosen one. She could have chosen time, or she could have chosen gender. She didn’t. She chose to move fluidly through both.

I think novel time works differently than theatrical time. When you have prose to move around in time, that’s different. In theater, you can move around time in an interesting way just through the change of costumes.

Then there’s the duration of the piece itself, which always puts you squarely in the present moment. You’re always watching how a play moves through time. Interestingly, *Orlando* the novel ends with the date of publication, which was 1928. Woolf wanted to write up until the moment of publication. I was thinking, in a theater, what is that? You’re writing up to the moment of sitting in your seat watching. That, to me, is something that’s profound about moving a novel into the

Will Davis at first rehearsal. Photo by David Samuel.



“Foregrounding the joy of these actors and where they feel most affirmed and joyful in their bodies is the whole game.”

space of the theater and something that I was thinking about too in my last production, *Letters from Max*.

What does it mean to be in the present tense in the theater, and what about a particular piece has that need? What needs to be in the present tense? I think Woolf is such a great teacher of present tense-ness. In all her work she's searching, searching, searching for the moment. These performers we have and are so lucky to work with have a deep understanding of what that is.

Will: We talk a lot about one of the core qualities of theater being its ephemeral nature. As Sarah's saying, I think another way for us to think about ephemerality is to think about presence. This is a form that offers a present tense in a very particular way, and lives in both the performance (whatever the fiction world is), and literally in the performer's body together, always. Theater's the third thing that gets made.

I also think that time is a language we speak on stage. I like to think about the basic, crass mechanics of the form. Time is one of those, space is one, bodies...texts...those are all languages, and so we can manipulate them in that way. One of the easiest ways to begin that conversation about, "How can I manipulate time?" [laughs] is that it feels similar to a conversation Woolf is having—I try and get in touch with what I think the velocity of the production is.

I was bringing this up for the first time with the actors this morning very intentionally as we get into the end of week two. In a definitive way: what is the rate of change over time? How is that related to the emotional and psychological landscape of the world of the play and the truth of the presence of the of the body performing it? Because velocities shift. We drop in and out of rules around time because of something that's happening in our heart. So, it's a very special material that we get to work with in the theater.

Sarah: Adding on to all of that, which I love, I feel like, in some ways, our present moment is catching up to where Woolf was with gender. But

there's also this enormous cognitive dissonance in the present moment because many people have caught up to Woolf and other people are sending us way, way back in time in terms of gender. So, it feels like a meaningful time to work on this play.

Signature: We've started to talk about gender, and you spoke about the amazing actors coming in bringing their own perspectives here. We also talked about how this play is joyful and brings a sense of play. I wanted to ask about making space for joy and curiosity. Sarah, something I love that you pulled from the novel is how desire isn't shamed at all. So many conversations about gender, both in the past and presently, are based in shame rather than joy. How are you exploring the joy and curiosity of desire in the play?

Sarah: It's such a beautiful question and such a beautiful noticing of the novel, that the desire is expansive and lacks shame. P. Carl, a friend who's a dramaturg and a playwright, wrote something beautiful in his program notes about the idea of euphoria. Another word for that in the Woolf text is ecstasy. The word ecstasy appears several times in the novel.

Carl was talking about the euphoria of being through a transition and feeling euphoria in his body, and the text as a vehicle for that kind of joy and lack of shame. Even more than lack of shame, it's celebratory. Maybe *because Orlando* was a love letter to Vita Sackville-West, there was that sense of celebratory gift. The novel was sort of a shared joke between Virginia and Vita at first. Virginia basically asked, "Can I write a little mini biography of you, Vita?" and then she had Vita travel through the centuries.

Will: Yeah, I agree. The novel is written from desire. As you're saying, it's not written from a tortured place of having desire and being afraid of it. Talk about velocity, it does have the velocity of desire. It has a big appetite. I think that's wonderful.

The euphoria comment is so great, foregrounding the joy of these actors and where they feel most affirmed and joyful in their bodies is the whole game. Always. In this production, we've talked a

lot about joy and trying to create in a joy forward space. [We] think about that being the container that's holding the show.

Joy can also be quiet and can also be a moment of (*mimes realization*) understanding something. Joy in the making. Joy in the show, and that being given as a gift to the audience.

Over the years, I have heard from people who sat down in a show of mine and have initially been like, "I don't recognize that as being the handsome leading man. I don't recognize that person as being that." If you present the work with joy, and with a fullness of these people, and you give it as an invitation, ten minutes in or so, no one worries about it anymore. Then it's more the question of, "Will they fall in love?" So, that's my quiet little Trojan horse.

Sarah: I love what you said. I think there's a kind of dramaturgy that centers: "I have a need, and I have an obstacle," or "I have a flaw, and I mess up and it's a tragedy." This play is more a dramaturgy of transformation and discovery, and the pleasure of both of those things.

It's interesting thinking (in terms of shame, and secrets and tragedy) of *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, which was published the same year as *Orlando* and was censored. Because Woolf was using metaphor, and not realism, Woolf could get queerness through the censor. It's interesting to me, thinking about the radicalism of metaphor, and using pleasure and desire as change agents rather than shame.

Will: The world of this production is also meant to help lift up that joyful idea. We're just starting to see some of the costumes coming together. There has been real intentionality about a richness, a sumptuousness...just a fullness, both in what people are wearing and in the way that the world transforms. This production should not feel starved of anything. That's part of what feels lightly radical: starting from a place of fullness and sharing that with an audience. I feel like the invitation is always along the lines of, "I'm having an amazing time where I am. You're very welcome to come here." As opposed to, "Look, I know

you're having some trouble, and I'll come over and help you," it's like, "You're very welcome to join us."

Signature: Our time is almost up, and I want to make sure there's time for any closing thoughts you have.

Sarah: I want to share one thought for young people. I just got to see *Orlando* at my daughter's high school, which was a revelation. I've seen it at colleges before, and it can be a great play for colleges to do because it's built for ensemble. I've never seen it at a high school. They were totally up to the task.

That director, her name is Laura Barnett, said, "I noticed that the word love is used 36 times in the play. Is that intentional because Orlando is turning 36?" I didn't even notice that! But, for me, thinking of *Orlando* as a love story is meaningful.

I don't know if you want to say anything about what you said the first day of rehearsal about love and the play?

Will: Yeah. I don't know if this is what you're thinking of, but what's coming to mind for me is: what a wonderful opportunity this is to connect us all living in this present moment with something that feels like it's part of a queer archive. It feels incredibly special because, more often than not, that lineage is intentionally erased.

Orlando, and Sarah's adaptation does this so beautifully, is not a threshold play of, "I was one thing, and now I'm another thing." That moment of transition and transformation deepens Orlando as a human being. That's all. Makes them more themselves. And that, I think, is the euphoria feeling. Feeling more yourself, feeling not at war with the external space.

Sarah: It's such a beautiful place to end... being more yourself and being on the brink of understanding; that's just how the play ends. ✨

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND VITA SACKVILLE-WEST



WHO WAS VIRGINIA WOOLF?

Virginia Woolf was born in 1882 in London to an affluent literary family. Often regarded as one of the most influential writers of the 20th century, Woolf is celebrated for her contributions as a novelist and an essayist. An early feminist, Woolf's writing engages with questions of gender expression and repression. Among her most famous works are *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *A Room of One's Own*, and *Orlando: A Biography*. Woolf married Leonard Woolf, a political theorist and writer, though she also maintained an ongoing affair with Vita Sackville-West, her inspiration for *Orlando*. Throughout her life, Virginia Woolf suffered from bouts of depression. In 1941, she took her own life.

WHO WAS VITA SACKVILLE-WEST?

Vita Sackville-West was an English novelist and poet from an affluent family with noble lineage. She spent her early childhood at Knole, a country estate that had been given to her ancestors by Queen Elizabeth I. Sackville-West maintained many affairs with women throughout her life and had an open marriage with fellow writer and diplomat Harold Nicholson. She also experimented with cross-dressing, creating an alter-ego named Julian. Her affair with Virginia Woolf lasted ten years, and the period is often regarded as the most artistically fruitful for both women. Both Vita and Virginia were also part of the Bloomsbury Group, a collective of writers, artists, and intellectuals whose work explored and influenced expansive representations of gender, sexuality, feminism, and pacifism.



EXCERPTS FROM LOVE LETTERS: VITA AND VIRGINIA

Letter from Virginia

52 Tavistock Square
9 October

Yesterday morning I was in despair [...] I couldn't screw a word from me; and at last dropped my head in my hands: dipped my pen in the ink, and wrote these words, as if automatically, on a clean sheet: Orlando: A Biography. No sooner had I done this than my body was flooded with rapture and my brain with ideas. I wrote rapidly till 12 [...] But listen; suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and it's all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind, suppose there's the kind of shimmer of reality which sometimes attaches to my people, suppose, I say, that Sibyl next October says 'There's Virginia gone and written a book about Vita' [...]

Letter from Vita

Long Barn
11 October

My God, Virginia, if ever I was thrilled and terrified it is at the prospect of being projected into the shape of Orlando. What fun for you; what fun for me. You see, any vengeance that you ever want to take will lie ready to your hand. Yes, go ahead, toss up your pancakes, brown it nicely on both sides, pour brandy over it, and serve hot. You have my full permission.

Letter from Virginia

52 Tavistock Square
20 March

ORLANDO IS FINISHED!!!!
Did you feel a sort of tug, as if your neck was being broken on Saturday last at 5 minutes to one? That was when he died - or rather stopped talking with three little dots... The question now is, will my feelings for you be changed? I've lived in you all these months - coming out, what are you really like? Do you exist? #ave I made you up?

GENDER IN *ORLANDO*

Orlando spends the first 30 years of his life as a man, after which she wakes up one morning as a woman. While Orlando isn't fazed by her transition, she begins to feel the constraints of society weighing down on her. In his youth, Orlando is curious and adventurous, ducking under the rope to escape the royal enclosure on ice skates with Sasha, or wandering bored through the servants' quarters, encountering poets.

After her transition to womanhood, Orlando finds herself attuned to the performance of gender and the ways she must mold her appearance and inflection to society's expectations. She realizes she will never again be able to draw her sword or lead an army, and worries that all she can do is, "pour out tea and ask my lords how they like it." Upon her official return to England, she is informed that she is the victim of two lawsuits: one that she is dead, and one that she is a woman which, "amounts to much the same thing."

Through *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf challenges us to see the difference between societal gender roles, biological sex, and personal identity and expression. While Orlando isn't immune to the pressures of society, she pushes back against letting the gender binary define her. As the chorus remarks, "the change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity." No matter where they fall on the spectrum of gender or sexuality, Orlando remains Orlando.

What ways do you observe Orlando's transition? What other factors influence her development?

The Archduke is another character who experiments with gender when he dresses up as the Archduchess to woo Orlando. How did you interpret the Archduke's gender expression? What ways are the Archduke and Archduchess similar? What ways are they different?

WHAT IS GENDER?

Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.

Gender is hierarchical and produces inequalities that intersect with other social and economic inequalities. Gender-based discrimination intersects with other factors of discrimination, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, geographic location, gender identity and sexual orientation, among others. This is referred to as intersectionality.

Gender interacts with but is different from sex, which refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics of females, males and intersex persons, such as chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs. Gender and sex are related to but different from gender identity. Gender identity refers to a person's deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person's physiology or designated sex at birth.

World Health Organization Definition



Taylor Mac. Photo by Joan Marcus.

WHAT ABOUT PERSONAL PRONOUNS?

Pronouns reflect the person speaking or being spoken about. Most of us are first introduced to the pronouns she/her/hers and he/him/his, though there are many pronouns beyond the binary including they/them/theirs and ze/hir/hir. Some people prefer to use their name instead of a pronoun. As you can't always tell someone's pronouns by looking at them, it's respectful to ask a person which pronouns they prefer. More resources on pronouns can be found [here](#).

TIME IN ORLANDO

Much like gender, time remains fluid in *Orlando*. Orlando lives for more than 300 years, and yet we never see her older than 36. As the chorus says, “the true length of a person’s life is always a matter of dispute. Of some we can justly say that they live precisely the 68 years allotted them on the tombstone. Others are hundreds of years old though we call them 36.”

Yet, in Orlando’s adventures through time she remains most afraid of the present moment. What is it about the present moment that worries Orlando? She is haunted by the ticking and ringing out of clocks, though seems to navigate transitions between eras with ease.

Towards the end of the play Orlando has lived so long that her memories and senses have begun to meld. As she says, “How strange it is! Nothing is any longer one thing. I take up a hand-bag and think of a porpoise frozen beneath the sea. Someone lights a pink candle and I see a girl in Russian trousers.” In this way, time begins to form a circle, connecting pieces of Orlando’s past and of present.

How has Orlando reframed your own thinking about time? What marks the passage of time? How do we understand our personal relationships to time and the “time,” or era, we live in?

TL Thompson, Lisa Kron, Taylor Mac, and Jo Lampert. Photo by Joan Marcus.



BEHIND THE SCENES



An Interview with Actor Nathan Lee Graham (he/him)

How did you get your start in theater?

How I got started in theater...or, I should say, show business!? Well, to be honest, it's rather basic and boring, but important too! My grandparents and my parents recognized that I had a passion and actual talent, so they put me in every after-school program, summer camp, and church choir they could! What's important about this is manifold. First of all, they supported me, which is HUGE at any stage in life, but especially at the beginning! And secondly, they didn't have the words to articulate it at the time, but they knew they had a queer kid on their hands, and they wanted to protect me in any way they could! So, the theater and the arts were it, baby!

What drew you to working on *Orlando*? What leapt out at you when you first read the script?

What drew me to *Orlando*!? Well at this stage in my career, I'll be totally truthful! The director Will Davis, the playwright Sarah Ruhl, the phenomenal cast and, finally, the Signature Theatre! When you have worked in the business as long as I have, whom you work with becomes one of the most important things! Sarah's script is incredible!

You have the exciting charge of playing a host of characters across gender lines, time periods, and styles. Can you tell us which characters you play, and how you've gone about finding each character's unique voice?

I'm principally playing Queen Elizabeth, the first! I really don't think any further comment is required LOL! I mean... come on!

***Orlando* is a true ensemble piece—can you give us a window into your collaboration**



Nathan Lee Graham

with your castmates and creative partners in the rehearsal room? How have you worked together to strengthen your work as a group? Have there been certain conversations or exercises that have helped you collectively build the world of this play?

95% of any great piece of work depends upon casting! Will Davis and the creative team assembled an incredible ensemble who were ready to explore and "play" from the very start. Coming in with open hearts and minds and leading with respect. All ideas and thoughts are welcomed. We work very organically to find specific solutions to tell the story, letting the text be our guide. And our final scene partner, the "audience," can decide for themselves how they feel.

Orlando is often regarded as a seminal queer text, and one that encourages us all to look at gender along a spectrum with a sense of curiosity, play, and acceptance. Have you taken anything away, or brought anything with you, to this script as you're developing characters across the gender spectrum?

Listen, what I continue to be amazed by as I keep working and getting older on this earth is that nothing is new except technology. What I mean is, the questions of gender expression and sexual orientation and norms? Well, these questions have always been on spectrum for every age throughout recorded history. It actually makes me personally feel even more empowered to be my authentic self! The wheel was invented a long time ago, we're just adding a new spoke when it's our time. And it's very exciting!

There's so much rich comedy in this play, and you're such a phenomenal comedian! What's your process for finding comedy in a piece, and giving yourself permission to experiment with various comedic choices?

When you have a wonderful script, as we do, it's easy to show up, learn your lines, learn your blocking, listen and play. I always say that I'm not actually funny, but the characters I play sure can be! And that's definitely because everything works in concert. Collaboration is key. The set up!

Rehearsing full days and performing eight shows a week is exciting, but it can also be exhausting. How do you keep yourself nourished as an artist? Do you have other creative practices, or other passions outside the arts, that help you find balance?

Stay healthy! Only you know what that means for your body. Of course, there are some basic tenets for staying in good shape. I'm talking mind and body. But what I know for sure is, if you're not healthy, you don't do your best work. Trust there will always be another party to go too!

Do you have any other words to share with aspiring artists?

Remember the business (show) is not set up for you to fail, it's set up for you to quit! Let me break it down. No one wants you to fail, if you're winning baby, everybody's winning...but if you quit, well, that's one less person to worry about. Don't quit. Unless you want to... and that's another story. ✨

Nathan Lee Graham and Jo Lampert. Photo by Joan Marcus.



BEHIND THE SCENES

* An Interview with Costume Designer Oana Botez (she/her)

How did you get your start as a designer?

I'm an immigrant from Romania. As a child in communist-ruled Romania, I began attending an art school in Bucharest when I was ten years old. During that time, information was curated, and borders were closed. The television programs were carefully selected and curated to promote an oppressive worldview. Still, with a distorted eulogy discourse of the country's dictatorship, we had only up to three hours of TV. My family and I enjoyed attending the theater and the Cinematheque in Bucharest to watch art movies. I grew up watching movies by fantastic film directors like Andrei Tarkovsky, Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Akira Kurosawa, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and others.

The live performance was the catalyst for connecting and sharing life-changing ideas to survive an oppressive regime. However, live performances were under autocratic rules edited to serve the political climate and, most of the time, a delegated group of people applied censorship before the opening of a performance to ensure nothing was reactionary. After these people left, the performances would readjust their messages, where the director and the ensemble would put artists' subtle rhetoric in place to awaken the oppressed.

At 14, I became friends with a young girl whose mother was one of the significant theater directors. I would skip school to watch her create work in a dark theater. I am referring to the fact that even though the tumultuous years of the 80s and 90s were happening, we had a prolific female director, which was terrific. That's how I became very interested in theater and performance. We explored performative costumes at school and later at the university and created political



Oana Botez. Photo by Maria Baranova.

performance pieces. We performed in them, and they were more movement-based and less text. Before moving to New York in 1999, I had already left an extensive career in Romania. But that was a moment when I decided to go to a different world to do my work.

Before you begin working on your design, do you have a specific process for reading the script? Are you conducting any research to support your design vision?

A costume designer is an anthropologist. In addition to the text, you must know the piece's historical context, including time and space. You have to know everything! You have to be curious. You have to read books on different topics, from the daily news to visiting the museums, sitting and reading in the library, going to art galleries, listening to music, traveling, and watching people—all that goes into the costumes.

Nothing is decorative. It's a language. Costume design is not solely a craft. It begins with a conceptual point of view encompassing elements from art, history, culture, politics, aesthetics (shape, color, texture, movement, architecture), and dramaturgy.

Costumes are like the second skin of a performer. That's important to me. The movement and the body all go into understanding a character. It has fluidity. It's one thing when you start talking to the director, sharing ideas, researching and sketching, and making it happen. But then there are moments like tech, where people start moving in your costumes, and it starts being something else. How people are carrying themselves, how people are translating what you've created. It's ongoing. It never ends. Sometimes, the show opens, and I am already re-designing it in my head.

Building on the idea of fluidity, how have your design ideas for the production evolved over the course of the process?

I designed this piece three times for this production because we went through different approaches. We came to the beautiful conclusion that Orlando changes entirely, constantly. But the chorus isn't just treated as a chorus; they're archetypal extensions of different characters that combine the present times, the performers' uniqueness, and the threats of the period and keep coming into Orlando's life. They tell the story but also shift the grounds of the story when they're adding and subtracting pieces of

“Each character is a unique collage of different periods, requiring a breakdown of mental barriers and an exploration of architectural perspectives on the human form to design.”

costumes. It's the poetry of Sarah Ruhl—the fluidity of each of them transforming into these different characters.

Each character is a unique collage of different periods, requiring a breakdown of mental barriers and an exploration of architectural perspectives on the human form to design. Orlando's character beautifully reflects the period's structural and architectural threads.

Orlando encourages all of us to deconstruct the gender binary and question traditional definitions of male and female. Has working on Orlando impacted your understanding or approach to gender fluidity, experimentation, and/or celebration?

When I first moved to America, I was surprised that girls are associated with pink and boys with blue. Even after 24 years, this concept still confuses me. I find it interesting that we're having this conversation when, in the past, people had more fluidity in their gender expression. For example, in ancient Greece, people wore dresses or were naked, and in the 1700s, men wore corsets and wigs. However, at some point in

Costume Renderings by Oana Botez.



“Real power is rooted in vision, respect, kindness, and empathy.”

history, someone decided we needed to enforce a binary system. During Victorian times, this binary system became even more suffocating.

There is such a wonderful collaborative energy alive in this process. What has collaboration meant to you working on *Orlando*?

We are truly fortunate to be surrounded by a group of exceptionally talented artists, each of whom brings a unique perspective that inspires and nurtures us. The cast’s work is exceptional, and it’s beautiful to watch them play with the words, the lights, the set, hair and makeup, and the costumes. Their energy is inspiring and contagious.

Will Davis has created a nurturing environment, allowing everyone to be themselves and contribute ideas. It’s a perfect balance of freedom and structure that fosters our trust and respect. It’s inspiring to see everyone’s creativity flourish and to witness the mutual trust and support that underpins our collaboration.

Real power is rooted in vision, respect, kindness, and empathy.

Our communication is fantastic on this show, and healthy debates create something extraordinary. It’s a journey that we are all deeply invested in, and it’s a joy to be a part of such a remarkable team of artists.

Do you have any final thoughts to share with aspiring designers or theatermakers more generally?

I come from a visual background. Many of the people in the school I attended are visual artists who sit in their studios and do their work by themselves. It’s very different. What I liked was [sitting in] a dark theater and people bringing [the work] to life and transforming themselves. Everybody should try everything. For me, it’s

important when people have all these worlds—being able to draw, sculpt, paint—but then have that curiosity to work with bodies and personalities and translate architectural shapes into motion, molding humans and spaces into narratives in front of our eyes. ✨



TL Thompson, Taylor Mac, and Janice Amaya. Photo by Joan Marcus.

DEEPER DIVE



On Sarah Ruhl's *Orlando*

By P. Carl

Euphoria

Several years ago I transitioned genders. Though there was no finish line or single characteristic that signified I had transitioned, I distinctly remember it happening on March 17th. That day it was as if I had snapped my fingers and every “she” became a “he.” I had arrived. I was euphoric. Euphoria is a beautiful word. It combines a feeling, intense happiness, with a personality trait, self-confidence. My personal euphoria was the happiness that came from knowing my feet, my body were firmly planted for the first time in my life. I could finally begin to grow roots.

In Sarah Ruhl's beautiful adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, we follow Orlando through genders and centuries. As Orlando travels through time and circumstance their yearning to be a poet, to write one great poem about the Oak Tree travels with them. The words to the poem, however, remain elusive for most of the play.

Orlando would have given every penny to write one little book and become famous—and yet, all the gold in Peru would not buy him the treasure of one well-turned line.

Isn't this every writer's yearning, to write one great line, a string of words so perfectly crafted that they land and grow roots and those roots offer purpose and meaning for others? The well-written poem provides a reader insight and a place to rest where the unknown feels known, at least temporarily. Art, poetry, theater, books—can tether their audience in the strongest of winds, the tumult that inevitably comes with living. The roots anchor the tree. The poem about the tree, if it delivers that well-tuned line, can give its reader happiness and self-confidence—a euphoria that in the moment feels as if it will hold forever. When Orlando finally writes their poem toward the end of the play, they are overcome, “Done! Done! It's done!” Orlando has moved from one place to another, moving beyond binaries of time and gender. The poem finally takes shape, ready to be heard.

Sarah and Orlando are kindred spirits. As I move from one of Sarah's plays to the next, from one of her poems to another, I have moments of landing, of sinking deep, of transitioning from one view of the world to a new and brighter version. Sarah's adaptation of *Orlando* is grafted from Woolf's oak tree and a renovated version is produced.

As a transgender person that day, March 17, when I finally felt seen, I was anchored for the first time. I had roots. I landed as myself in time and space. But the winds never stop blowing, the earth is constantly shifting, and euphoria is a temporary state. It is the role of the poets, the playwrights, the Orlandos and the Sarah Ruhls, to return us to or to find our place in the world. In this place we can, like Orlando, be ready and open to the possibility of understanding.

P. Carl is a theatermaker, writer, and the founder of the online journal, HowlRound.

Discussion Questions

→ Pre-Show

- * The full title of Virginia Woolf’s novel is *Orlando: A Biography*. What are some of the characteristics that may make a story a biography? What might we find surprising to read or see in a biography?
- * *Orlando* invites us to get curious about how we shape our identity and the role others play in our own personal identity formation. What are some ways you identify? Do you ever feel friction between your own self-identification and the way peers, family, or society try to define you?

→ Post-Show

- * After seeing *Orlando*, how do you interpret Virginia Woolf’s use of biography? Does the piece align with your previous definition of biography? Or challenge it?
- * There’s a tremendous amount of humor in *Orlando*. Can you share a moment where the design contributed to the comedy of the action on stage? What about the design—whether costumes, wigs, sound, lighting, props, or set—enhanced the comedy of the moment?
- * What were some changes you noticed after Orlando transitioned from being a man to being a woman? How does Orlando see herself differently? How does the world treat her differently?
- * At the end of the play, Orlando is 36 years old, though hundreds of years have passed. While Orlando doesn’t seem phased by her passage through centuries, she remains fearful of the present moment. As the chorus says, “for what more terrifying revelation can there be than that it is the present moment?” Why do you think the present moment is the most difficult for Orlando?

L-R Top: Jo Lampert, TL Thompson, Rad Pereira. L-R Bottom: Nathan Lee Graham, Taylor Mac, Janice Amaya, Lisa Kron. Photo by Joan Marcus.



Classroom Exercises

→ Biography Project

* Think about your own life, or the life of a loved one. What people and major life events made you/them who you/they are? As Virginia Woolf explored a fantastical retelling of Vita's life, try your hand at creating a new world for your own biography. Try to come up with three character or event descriptions inspired by your chosen history.

→ Dance It Out

* In this production of *Orlando*, director and choreographer Will Davis introduces each new time period with a dance. If Orlando were to live into the 21st century, what might the chorus dance be? Try your hand at choreographing a short introductory sequence for the 21st century.

→ Design at Work

* *Orlando* leaves itself open to interpretation, which is particularly exciting for the work of designers. If you were to design your own production of *Orlando*, which design element would you be most interested in exploring? What might you be interested in incorporating into your creative vision to best support the action on stage? Spend some time drawing out your ideas or researching images that best support your vision.

The Orlando company Nathan Lee Graham, TL Thompson, Jo Lampert, Rad Pereira, and Taylor Mac being led in an exercise by director Will Davis. Photo by David Samuel.



Additional Resources

Video and Audio

[Signature Behind the Scenes: Orlando Costumes](#)

[Why Should You Read Virginia Woolf? – Ted-Ed](#)

[The Origin of Gender - PBS](#)

Further Reading

Orlando, Virginia Woolf, and Vita Sackville-West

[The Fabulous Forgotten Life of Vita Sackville-West – The Paris Review](#)

[How Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* Subverted Censorship and Revolutionized the Politics of LGBT](#)

[Love in 1928 – The Marginalian](#)

[On *Orlando* and Virginia Woolf’s Defiance of Time – Lit Hub](#)

[The Queer Love Story Behind Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* – Art UK](#)

LGBTQIA+ Resources for Students

[The Trevor Project: Guide to Being an Ally to Transgender and Nonbinary Youth](#)

[Gender Spectrum: Understanding Gender](#)

[GLSEN: 12 Steps for Showing Solidarity from the National Student Council](#)

[GLSEN: Pronoun Guide](#)

LGBTQIA+ Resources for Educators

[GLSEN: Pronoun Form](#)

[NYCDOE Hidden Voices Project](#)

[Learning for Justice: Best Practices for Serving LGBTQ Students](#)

Lisa Kron, Jo Lampert, Taylor Mac, TL Thompson. Photo by Joan Marcus.



Plays by Sarah Ruhl

Letters from Max, a ritual

[Becky Nurse of Salem](#)

[For Peter Pan on her 70th Birthday*](#)

[How to Transcend a Happy Marriage](#)

Scenes from Court Life, or The Whipping Boy and His Prince

[The Oldest Boy*](#)

[Stage Kiss*](#)

[Dear Elizabeth*](#)

[Three Sisters*](#)

[In the Next Room \(or the Vibrator Play\)*](#)

[Dead Man's Cell Phone*](#)

Demeter in the City

[The Clean House*](#)

[Late: A Cowboy Song*](#)

[Eurydice*](#)

[Passion Play*](#)

[Orlando*](#)

[Melancholy Play*](#)

Novels by Virginia Woolf

[The Voyage Out*](#)

[Night and Day*](#)

[Jacob's Room*](#)

[Mrs. Dalloway*](#)

[To the Lighthouse*](#)

[Orlando: A Biography*](#)

[The Waves*](#)

[The Years*](#)

[Between the Acts*](#)

**Available at the New York Public Library*

Other Works

[Letters from Max: A Poet, a Teacher, a Friendship*](#)

[Love Poems in Quarantine*](#)

[Smile: The Story of a Face*](#)

[44 Poems for You*](#)

[100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write: On Umbrellas and Sword Fights, Parades and Dogs, Fire Alarms, Children and Theater*](#)



Essay Collections by Virginia Woolf

[A Room of One's Own*](#)

[On Being Ill*](#)

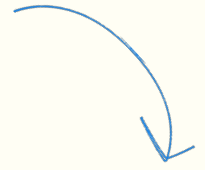
[Three Guineas*](#)

Other

[Love Letters: Vita and Virginia*](#)

ABOUT SIGNATURE

A HOME FOR STORYTELLERS. A SPACE FOR ALL.



The Pershing Square Signature Center. Photo © David Sundberg / Esto

Our Mission

Signature Theatre is an artistic home for storytellers. By producing several plays from each Resident Writer, we offer a deep dive into their bodies of work.

What We Do

Signature Theatre is a space for artists and audiences to call home. Signature creates opportunities through the spaces and support it offers the theater community. For playwrights, Signature's unique playwright-in-residence model offers the stability and support of home. For audiences, Signature offers access to all, offering a welcoming creative community and affordable ticketing programs. Only Signature Theatre offers an immersive journey through a playwright's body of work to theatergoers seeking intimate human connection and extraordinary cultural experiences.

Our History

Signature Theatre was founded in 1991 by James Houghton and its resident playwrights include: Edward Albee, Annie Baker, Lee Blessing, Martha Clarke, Will Eno, Horton Foote, María Irene Fornés, Athol Fugard, John Guare, Stephen Adly Guirgis, A.R. Gurney, Katori Hall, Quiara Alegría Hudes, Samuel D. Hunter, David Henry Hwang, Bill Irwin, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Adrienne Kennedy, Tony Kushner, Romulus Linney, Kenneth Lonergan, Dave Malloy, Charles Mee, Arthur Miller, Dominique Morisseau, Lynn Nottage, Suzan-Lori Parks, Sarah Ruhl, Sam Shepard, Anna Deavere Smith, Regina Taylor, Paula Vogel, Naomi Wallace, August Wilson, Lanford Wilson, Lauren Yee, The Mad Ones, and members of the historic Negro Ensemble Company: Charles Fuller, Leslie Lee, and Samm-Art Williams.

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