YALE SUMMER CABARET

MEZA

Where Pathways Meet

by a.k. payne

July 30th, 7:00pm
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Creative Team

DIRECTOR       Christopher D. Betts
DRAMATURG      Faith Zamblé
STAGE MANAGER  Edmond O’Neal
SOUND DESIGNER Liam Bellman-Sharpe

Cast

MINNIE        Abigail C. Onwunali
JACKSON       Anthony Brown
DWIGHT        Seun Soyemi
BETTS         Anula Navlekar
SARGENT       Thomas Pang

Stage directions read by Alexandra Maurice
“English is my mother tongue. A mother tongue is not a foreign language. I/anguish
— a foreign anguish.”

“Me and time never got along so good—we just sort of ignore each other…”

M. NourbeSe Philip, "Discourse on the Logic of Language"

Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra, John F. Szwed

1619—or somewhere like it. When enslaved Africans first arrived/survived to this country, slave owners discovered a stowaway had come with them: language. The discovery was met with violence. Those stolen from the same tribe were quickly separated so they could not speak to each other—and subsequently devise their escape. Speak in English (or French or Spanish) and/or do not speak at all. Those caught violating this rule were severely punished, until eventually, English (or French or Spanish) took hold of the mind, slowly destroying any connection to a time beyond present pain. Yet, some gifts were smuggled from one generation to the next: blood memory, rhythm, and a root-deep longing for freedom.

1960—or sometime like it. The streets of the southernmost shores are on fire. Then, as now, blackness is a dangerous prospect. But, for Minnie and Dwight, whose love compels them to dance amidst chaos, blackness holds the key to their liberation, and makes a future on another planet possible. Ultimately, the success of their flight owes less to NASA than it does to the mythical, phantasmagorical, intergalactic world imagined by avant-garde jazz artist Sun Ra (né Herman Blount) and his kaleidoscopic Arkestra. Sun Ra understood that the world given to him and the language provided to describe it were both hopelessly inadequate. Declaring himself from another dimension, he—like Minnie and Dwight—used music to find his way back to that place of boundless freedom. However, the question is, and remains: what do you do with freedom once you find it? Do you cling to the fears of the past/future? Or, do you relearn the tempos of earth and sky, until your language is in tune with gravity?

The answers to these questions—and the answers found in this play—are dependent on our commitment to the funk, to cut time, to cut tongues, to new melodies, to an understanding of love and time that defies physics, and most of all, to finishing this sentence:

“If there were a land where we were free…”
MEZA’s Story

We’re so grateful that you’ve decided to join us this summer. We are two directing students, Christopher Betts and Alex Keegan, and three theater management students, Carl Holvick, Sami Cubias and Jason Gray. We came together earlier this year with an aligned purpose - we wanted to be part of a Summer Cabaret that was radically inclusive, artistically daring, and community-oriented. We articulated a set of values that resonated deeply for each of us: a reclamation of space by giving voice to narratives that have been overlooked or distorted in mainstream theatre, liberation to think and create freely, outside the confines of a busy academic year; curiosity to investigate brave, challenging work, community built through season programming as well as a host of readings, workshops and events aimed to engage greater New Haven, and celebration; celebrating the human spirit in all aspects of our theater making.

We called our season A Seat at the Table, and were raring to go with artists and creative staff engaged and finances mapped out.

Then Coronavirus hit.

And we all took a big step back. We gave ourselves grace and time to take in the moment, to process the grief and frustration, and the endless questions - at the core of which was/is: what does theater mean in this moment?

We surveyed the community to ask you essentially the same thing. We meditated on your amazing responses and used them to fuel an exciting retreat with our artistic collaborators where we were able to reimagine what the Summer Cabaret could be and who we might serve.

It became very clear that we needed to use our platform to address the Black Lives Matter movement and do our part to lend energy, engagement and nurturing to the monumental change taking root in our country and around the world to fight racial injustice. It also became clear that instead of asking for a Seat at the Table, we wanted and needed to build a table of our own, both as a leadership team and as citizens of a fundamentally flawed society. And so this summer’s project, MEZA, was born. Meza, a Swahili word meaning Table, is offered as a unifying theme for our season, and by larger implication, as a way forward for all of us.
Our Purpose

Yale Summer Cabaret: MEZA sets out to rediscover the fundamental joy of theater making during a time of great uncertainty, and to reimagine the American theater as a site of true equity and inclusivity. Rather than mourn what we’ve lost, we believe in the power of this moment to crack open systemic practices and ideologies meant to serve a privileged few. By committing our artistic season to the development of new works by Black women playwrights, we aim to play a small role in laying the groundwork for a new table, one that centers Blackness unapologetically, and makes room for nuanced explorations of the Black experience. As part of a season that combats anti-Blackness, MEZA also endeavors to shine a light on local organizations and businesses that lift up the Black community through our Community Spotlight series, and to educate the next generation of socially conscious theater makers through our MEZA’s Makers youth workshops.

Leadership Team

ARTISTIC DIRECTORS
Christopher D. Betts
Alex Keegan

MANAGING DIRECTORS
Sami Cubias
Jason Gray
Carl Holvick

This season is made possible through the generous support of our sponsors

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Creative Team

Christopher D. Betts - DIRECTOR

Christopher’s recent credits include, *Is God Is, littleboy/little man, We are Proud to Present…, Fireflies and School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play* (Yale Cabaret). Collaborations include Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors* (PopArt Johannesburg/Market Theatre Lab); a series of new works with the Obie Award-winning Fire this Time Festival; the workshop of *Goodnight Tyler* (Kennedy Center/Alliance Theatre); *The Cave: A Folk Opera* (New York Premiere); *CARRIE* (2015 BroadwayWorld Best Musical nomination) and *Barbecue* (The Public Theatre). Betts is a recipient of the Julie Taymor World Theater Fellowship, the 2019 Richie Jackson Artist Fellowship and a two-time recipient of the SDCF Observership. Christopher received his BFA in drama from New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts and is pursuing his MFA in directing at Yale School of Drama. He is an Artist-in-Residence at both Kampala International Theater Festival and Pop Art Johannesburg and a teaching artist at The Market Theatre Lab. christopherdbetts.com IG: @chris.tagram

a.k. payne - PLAYWRIGHT

a.k. is a student, artist-theorist and theatriemaker whose people are rooted in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her plays love on and engage the interdependencies of Black pasts, presents and futures and seek to find/remember language that might move us towards our collective liberation(s). She holds a B.A. in English and African-American Studies from Yale College and is currently pursuing an M.F.A. in Playwriting from Yale School of Drama.
Creative Team

Faith Zamblé - DRAMATURG

Faith is a dramaturg, writer, and multidisciplinary artist hailing from the Midwest and various corners of the African diaspora. She graduated in 2017 from North Park University with a BA in Media Studies and Fine Art, eventually finding her way to advocacy work in Washington D.C. and, later on, a residency at Trestle Art Space in Brooklyn, NY.

She would like to remind you that black lives have always mattered.

Liam Bellman-Sharpe - SOUND DESIGNER

Liam is a recent graduate of the Yale School of Drama's MFA program, where his composition and design credits include Mr. Burns: A Post Electric Play, as U Like it, The Tempest, Bakkhai, and Elon Musk and the plan to Blow Up Mars the musical. Additional credits include composition for I Am My Own Wife at Long Wharf Theatre, from/to nothing at the New Haven Festival of Arts and Ideas, as well as scores for dance and theatre in Australia and Hong Kong.

Edmond O’Neal - STAGE MANAGER

Edmond is a third-year M.F.A. candidate at Yale School of Drama, where his credits include Fun Home, Hamlet, and The Tempest, and Assistant Stage Manager on Measure for Measure, Locusts and Seven Spots On the Sun. His other credits include Is God Is, We Are Proud to Present, School Girls; or, the African Mean Girls Play (Yale Cabaret); Latinos Who Look Like Ricky Martin (Verano Cabaret); Grey Gardens, Peter and the Starcatcher, The Flick, The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged) (Lyric Repertory Company); and Gertrude and Claudius (Orlando Shakespeare Theater). He holds a B.A. in Theatre Studies from the University of Central Florida.
Abigail C. Onwunali - MINNIE

Abigail is a rising second year at the Yale School of Drama. Credits include: *it’s not a trip it’s a journey* at the Chautauqua Theatre Company, *The Salt Women* and *Swimmers* at the Yale School of Drama, *Is God Is* at the Yale Cabaret, *Girls* (Understudy) at the Yale Repertory Theatre.

Anthony Brown - JACKSON

Anthony is excited to make his Summer Cab debut! He is a native of Cleveland, Ohio and a rising second year MFA acting candidate at YSD. Recent credits include: *Is God Is*, *Swimmers*, *Ain’t No Dead Thing*, and *The Salt Women*. Follow him on IG/twitter @anthxnybrown

Thomas Pang - SARGENT

Thomas is a 2nd Year Acting MFA Candidate at the Yale School of Drama.

Thomas is Filipino Chinese.
Anula Navlekar - BETTS

Anula (MFA Acting ’20) is an actor from India where her past credits includes Netflix’s original film Brahman Naman, B. A Pass and series What the Folks. Her recent theater credits include the Yale Repertory show Girls, YSD productions of Measure for Measure, Locusts, Tempest, The Last Days of Judas Iscariot amongst other Yale Cabaret credits. Lover of animals and a full time food enthusiast.

Seun Soyemi- DWIGHT

Seun is a Nigerian-American actor, writer and multi-faceted artist from Atlanta, Ga. In addition to his work at several award winning theaters including Dallas Theater Center, Alliance Theatre, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Actors Express, and Aurora Theatre, you may have seen him recently in Is God Is at the Cab. A dedicated actorist and new works artist, he’s excited to be working again with playwright a.k. and director Christopher. He’s going into his second year at Yale as a part of the FOLKS Leadership Team and the YSD Rep for Yale’s Equity Diversity and Inclusion mission. In all his work he hopes to be a mirror to your soul. IG: @seunshxw
Turn the Page is a collective striving to ignite a community of readers who commit to decolonize their bookshelves, to redistribute wealth into black communities and to take actions toward Black liberation.

The founders of Turn The Page watched as Amazon sold out of books featured on anti-racist reading lists, while Black bookstores, who have committed to Black storytelling for years, struggled to stay open during the Covid-19 pandemic. This inspired us to question our definitions of allyship and activism, and Turn The Page was born with the simple challenge to our community: buy and read a book from a Black-owned bookstore each month.

We are grounded in practices of grassroots activism and radical Black collectives that have and continue to do the work of Black liberation. Turn The Page Collective is comprised of young artists across the African diaspora and those allied with them in pursuit of Black liberation. Our work is about easing the workload of the bookstores with whom we partner, and counter the ways capitalism has consistently worked to stifle Black-owned business.

Turn The Page efforts center Black literature, artists, and of course Black-owned bookstores. With our partnered we develop bi-monthly Black Literature Collections for our Community of Readers. We encourage our readers to not only purchase books, but engage with them in conversation and community. We uplift the philanthropic projects of our patterned bookstore and help deepen their roots in their communities. Help uplift Source of Knowledge, our current partnered bookstore’s annual Read and Feed event taking place this Fall.

Our next Collection launches on August 7th! Learn more about the books from Source of Knowledge owners Ma-sani Barnwell and Patrice McKinney at a talk sponsored the Princeton Lewis Center for the Arts in conjunction with Turn the Page.

Starting August 2nd, all Turn The Page book purchases and any donations for our Read & Feed fundraiser can be made at turnthepagemovement.org/move. Follow us on Instagram @turnthepagemovement for all updates, or email us at turnthepagemovement@gmail.com!
Up Next

**Daughters of the Confederacy**
by Angie Bridgette Jones
August 8 at 7:00pm EST

**Blessings**
by Gloria Majule
August 14 at 7:00pm
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