



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS

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UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS' *POLYPHONE* FESTIVAL RETURNS FOR THIRD YEAR

2 Venues – 4 Musicals – 12 Performances

'Festival of the Emerging Musical' to present four new musicals; Performances will blur the boundary between concert and musical – March 28-April 1

PHILADELPHIA (Feb. 14, 2017) – The University of the Arts' Ira Brind School of Theater Arts announces the lineup for year three of *Polyphone*, a "festival of the emerging musical" at UArts in Philadelphia. The 2017 *Polyphone* festival, March 28-April 1, will continue to challenge audiences with the question "What is a musical?" Each new work presented at *Polyphone* is stripped down to an off-book, staged concert with a full band, inviting audiences into the evolution of how musicals are made. The festival brings together artists-in-training, emerging composers, librettists, choreographers, and directors developing new works to present four musicals over five days.

"*Polyphone* is an opportunity to convene emerging and professional artists, UArts students, and the general public in a radical exploration of contemporary musical theater," said César Alvarez, a UArts visiting associate professor, composer, lyricist, performer and the festival's artistic director. "*Polyphone* lifts up musicals and artistic voices that are under-supported and under-developed by the musical theater establishment and seeks to be a home for young musicals and young artists. In doing this, both are pushed further because of their encounter with each other."

Bringing together artists, theaters, producers and students in Philadelphia and beyond, *Polyphone* represents an institutional effort by the University of the Arts to change how musicals are born. By transforming the education of young musicians and theater makers, *Polyphone* dedicates university resources to promising emerging artists in the field in an attempt to make a lasting impact on the quality and aesthetic scope of the musicals that get produced.

"Each musical presented as part of the festival explores a different path for what the musical form can be. And by distilling the musicals down to their essence, the resulting performances are explosions of song and story which vibrate on the boundary between concert and musical," commented Alvarez.

Now in its third year, *Polyphone* will feature performances of four new works including "Folk Wandering" conceived by Jaclyn Backhaus and Andrew Neisler, book and lyrics by Jaclyn Backhaus, directed by Andrew Neisler; "Normativity" with book, music and lyrics by Jaime Jarrett, directed by Rebecca Wright; "The Real Whisper" with music and lyrics by Greta Gertler Gold, book and lyrics by Akin Salawu, directed by Nell Bang-Jensen, and choreography by Amy Smith; and "The Best Songs in the World Show," a new musical by Red 40 and The Last Groovement, with music, book and lyrics by Martha Stuckey in collaboration with The Last Groovement, and directed by Anisa George. Alvarez has served as *Polyphone's* artistic director since its founding in 2015.

On Saturday, April 1, Shakina Nayfack, actor, writer and artistic director of the Musical Theater Factory in New York, will deliver the Polyphone keynote address on the topics of community, identity and activism in musical theater at 10 a.m. at the Arts Bank. **April 1 will also feature a marathon day in which audiences can view all four works beginning at 12 p.m.**

All performances will take place at the Merriam Theatre (250 S. Broad Street) and the Arts Bank (601 S. Broad Street) which are located in the heart of Philadelphia on the Avenue of the Arts.

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS:

Folk Wandering

(March 28 & 31 at 8 p.m.; April 1 at 12 p.m.; Merriam Theater)

Conceived by Jaclyn Backhaus and Andrew Neisler

Book and Lyrics by Jaclyn Backhaus

Music and Additional Lyrics by Blake Allen, Mike Brun, Andrew R. Butler, Joel Esher, Alex Fast, Jo Lampert, and Annie Tuppe

Arrangements by Mike Brun and Joel Esher

Orchestrations by Mike Brun

Additional Orchestrations by Blake Allen

Directed by Andrew Neisler

Description: Tales from tenement Manhattan, Depression-era Utah, and rural 1950s Indiana are woven together in this new folk musical. With a book by critically acclaimed playwright Jaclyn Backhaus and a score developed by a group of New York's emerging singer/songwriters, Folk Wandering is an American celebration of the untold grief that moves us forward.

Normativity

(March 28 & 31 at 8 p.m.; April 1 at 9 p.m.; Arts Bank)

Book, Music and Lyrics by Jaime Jarrett

Director: Rebecca Wright

Music Directors: Jaime Jarrett and Ellen Winter

Choreographer: Eppchez

Description: Taylor is sick of the stereotypical portrayal of queer characters in the media. When she meets Emily, a lesbian book character who has come to life, together they fight to rewrite her story and redefine "normal." Through an exhilarating pop rock score and radical queerness, Normativity explores love, identity, and what it means to be out right now.

The Real Whisper

(March 29 & 30 at 8 p.m.; April 1 at 6 p.m.; Merriam Theater)

Music and Lyrics by Greta Gertler Gold

Book and Lyrics by Akin Salawu

Director: Nell Bang-Jensen

Music Director: Amanda Morton

Choreographer: Amy Smith

Description: When Whisper, a teen runaway, breaks into a haunted Massachusetts Manor that hosts ghost tours, she finds herself entangled in a hidden killer's murderous rampage. As the body count rises with the Manor's supernatural thirst for blood, Whisper realizes she must team up with the 100-year-old ghost of a

Black American slave if she is ever going to make it out alive.

The Best Songs in the World Show

A New Musical by Red 40 & The Last Groovement

(March 29 & 30 at 8 p.m.; April 1 at 3 p.m.; Arts Bank)

Music, Book and Lyrics: Martha Stuckey in collaboration with The Last Groovement

Director: Anisa George

Music Director: Martha Stuckey

Choreographer: Melanie Cotton

The Last Groovement includes Martha Stuckey, Jess Conda, Caitlin Antram, Alice Yorke, Ben Diamond, Matteo Scammell, Jon Colvson, Ben Grinberg, Devin Coleman and a cast of University of the Arts students

Description: After her band is kidnapped and conscripted to Proxis' polka-playing army, Red 40 ventures out with her team of femme fatales and the audience to retrieve the abducted. In this world of googly-eyed soldiers and idiot spies, characters wear multiple identities in an effort to access each other and our own inner Star Stuff.

Marathon Day on Saturday, April 1

(12 p.m. – 11 p.m. at the Merriam Theater and Arts Bank)

Four new works in succession: *Folk Wandering, The Best Songs in the World Show, The Real Whisper, Normativity*

*** Musicals are currently in development and are not open for critical review at this time.**

ARTIST BIOS:

CÉSAR ALVAREZ is a nationally recognized composer, lyricist, and playwright. His musical *FUTURITY* received the 2016 Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Musical, four other Lortel Nominations, and the 2016 Off-Broadway Alliance award for Best New Musical. César also received the 2016 Jonathan Larson Award. Recent composition credits: *The Elementary Spacetime Show* (FringeArts/UArts, Ars Nova Uncharted); *FUTURITY* directed by Sarah Benson (Soho Rep/Ars Nova, A.R.T, Walker Art Center, Mass MoCA); Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' *An Octoroon* (Soho Rep, TFANA. Drama Desk Nomination); *Washeteria* (Soho Rep); The Foundry Theater's *Good Person of Szechwan* (LaMaMa, Public Theater. Drama Desk Nomination); In development: *The Universe is a Small Hat*, a multi-player participatory musical (Berkeley Rep Ground Floor, Civilians R&D Group, PRELUDE NYC, Babycastles, Sarah Lawrence College) and *NOISE* (NYU Playwrights Horizons Theater School). César is a visiting associate professor at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, and artistic director and co-founder of Polyphone, a festival of the emerging musical at UArts.

www.musicisfreenow.org

AKIN SALAWU (*The Real Whisper* Book and Lyrics) is a two-time Tribeca All Access Winner with a BA from Stanford and a Screenwriting MFA from Columbia. At Stanford, Akin founded ergo student theater troupe and was awarded the Sherifa Omade Ego Prize for mounting culturally diverse theatre. Akin was a member of The Public Theater's Inaugural Emerging Writers Group and wrote Chapter 5 in the book, "The Obama Movement." Akin also wrote 2 short plays on Ferguson for Chicago's American Theater. Developing *The Real Whisper* in Ars Nova's Uncharted residency has led to Akin writing the book for an upcoming Muhammad Ali Musical.

GRETA GERTLER GOLD (*The Real Whisper* Composer) is a composer, lyricist, performer and music producer. Originally from Australia, she now lives in Brooklyn with her husband, Adam Gold and their baby daughter, Lila. She is currently writing songs for a new album by her band The Universal Thump, and working on *The*

Real Whisper (Ars Nova Uncharted, with playwright Akin Salawu); a musical adaptation of Shaun Tan's children's book *The Red Tree* (National Theatre of Parramatta, Sydney, with playwright Hilary Bell, 2017) and musical *Anna Hit* in collaboration with Stew (*Passing Strange*). GretaGertlerGold.com. Greta is so honored and grateful to be participating in Polyphone.

NELL BANG-JENSEN (The Real Whisper Director) is a Philadelphia-based theater maker. She is Associate Artistic Director of Pig Iron Theatre Company and has worked as a director, dramaturg and performer for The Wilma Theater, Applied Mechanics, Hedgerow Theatre, Plays & Players, and InterAct, among others. She served as Artistic Associate at The Wilma Theater for three years during the creation of the Hothouse Company. Nell is an Adjunct Professor at The University of the Arts and a graduate of Swarthmore College. Since 2010, she has co-created three original works (*Makeshift/Looks Like Everyone Has Left/Road May Flood*) and was awarded a 2011 Thomas J. Watson Fellowship for independent study and travel in seven countries. Nell is a current participant in the Leadership U: One-on-One program, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and administered by Theatre Communications Group.

AMANDA MORTON (The Real Whisper Music Director) is a freelance Music Director and Senior Lecturer at University of the Arts and Drexel University. Select credits include: *A New Brain, Into the Woods* (Barrymore Award recipient), *Spring Awakening* (Theatre Horizon); *A Year With Frog & Toad, The Secret Garden, Passion, Parade* (Arden Theatre Company); *Kiss of the Spider Woman, A New Brain, Side Show* (11th Hour Concert Series); *Malpractice Makes Perfect* (York Theatre Company); *Peter & I* (American Theatre of Actors); *We Tell the Story: The Songs of Ahrens & Flaherty* (Lortel Theatre). Amanda is featured on the album "Sheldon Harnick: Hidden Treasures (1949-2013)" in collaboration with Brian D'Arcy James and Sheldon Harnick. She has a B.F.A. in Musical Theatre from Ithaca College.

AMY SMITH (The Real Whisper Choreographer) is a founder and Co-Director of Headlong. Since 1993, Headlong has created collaborative dance theater works, and toured nationally and internationally. Recent projects include *W*LM*RT Nature Trail*, an experiential journey for one audience member at a time. Amy has danced for Deborah Hay, Ishmael Houston Jones, and others. She has also performed extensively in theater and cabaret, and has won two Barrymores and a "Bessie". In 2008, Headlong started the Headlong Performance Institute, a semester long performance training program for young artists offering full college credit. Amy is active in the community, serves on boards, and teaches financial literacy to artists.

ANISA GEORGE (The Best Songs in the World Show Director) grew up performing with her parents' theater company, Touchstone Theater. In 2005 she graduated from Columbia University and was granted a Tow Fellowship to study theater in Iran. In 2008 she was granted the Jack Kent Cook Fellowship to pursue an MFA at the London International School of Performing Arts. Upon graduating in 2010, she founded George & Co – a company dedicated to the creation of original theater and film. To date, she is the writer and director of several plays, documentaries and short films, including "Animal Animal Mammal Mine" (Philadelphia International Festival of Arts), "The Seer" (Nominated for Best Ensemble at the Edinburgh Fringe), and "Holden". She was a 2014 TCG – Global Connections grant recipient and has worked as a writer and director in Philadelphia with such organizations as Pig Iron, Opera Philadelphia, The Bearded Ladies, Lightning Rod Special and Swarthmore College.

MARTHA STUCKEY (The Best Songs in the World Show Music and Lyrics) is an artist based in Philadelphia, PA. She leads Red 40 & The Last Groovement. The band was in residency at FringeArts from 2014-16. In 2015, Ars Nova Theater selected the band to perform in ANTFest. In 2016, Red 40 released their album "She's Keen To Feed." Stuckey devises with Pig Iron Theater Company, Team Sunshine, SwimPony, Cynthia Hopkins and The Bearded Ladies. In 2014, Stuckey performed with Martha Graham Cracker at Joe's Pub in New York City. She held a bi-weekly jazz series, "Moonlighting," at FringeArts in 2016. She holds an MFA in Devised Performance from the Pig Iron School and UArts.

MELANIE COTTON (The Best Songs in the World Show Choreographer) is a Philadelphia native, is a graduate of the Freedom Theater Performing Arts School. She was a principal dancer and contributing choreographer for Montazh PAC. From 2008-2013 she was a principle dancer with *Rennie Harris: Puremovement*, with whom she performed and taught hip hop all over the world. Melanie has been featured in Bill Irwin's *Happiness Lecture*, 1812 Productions' *It's My Party: The Women in Comedy Project*, *In The heights at Walnut street theater*, co-collaborator/ performer for *Pig Irons The Swamp is on* as part of the Philadelphia Fringe Festival and most recently choreographer for Arden Theaters production of the *Legend of Georgia McBride*. In 2016 She was a recipient of the Independence Foundation Fellowship in the Arts.

JAMIE JARRETT (Normativity Book, Music and Lyrics) is a Philadelphia-based playwright, composer, and lyricist who is currently studying Directing, Playwriting, and Production at the University of the Arts. UArts: *The Elementary Spacetime Show*, *Sometimes in Prague*, Michael Freidman's *American Pop*. Writing credits include *Aubade*, *Brief Connection(s)*, and additional music/orchestrations for *Hear Me War*. They are the recipient of New York Musical Festival's Outstanding Emerging Artist Award as well as NVOT's Outstanding Original Score Award. Projects currently in development include *Hearts, Brains, and Other Organs: A Song Collection* and *Wonder Boi*. They are particularly enthusiastic about bringing queer stories to the stage.

ELLEN WINTER (Normativity Co-Music Director) is a Brooklyn based composer, writer, and performer. She's collaborated with Dave Malloy (*BEARDO*, Pipeline Theatre Co.), César Alvarez (*Noise*, PHTS; *The Elementary Spacetime Show*, Philly Fringe; *The Universe is a Small Hat*, SLC), and Heather Christian (*Annie Salem*, Polyphone). Her nerd-rock group Chamber Band, premiered their show *In the Time Traveler's Attic* at ANT Fest 2016, and will be releasing their H.G. Wells inspired album in Spring 2017. She is a company member of the Electric Eye Ensemble and Daughters of Elysium. Currently, she is developing a musical podcast produced by TwoUp. ellenwintermakesthings.com

REBECCA WRIGHT (Normativity Director) is a Philadelphia-based director-creator, and the artistic director of Applied Mechanics, with whom she has created ten original immersive plays. Recent credits include *Marcus/Emma* at InterAct Theater Company, *At Home With the Humorless Bastard* with Annie Wilson at FringeArts, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Shaw's *St. Joan* with Quintessence Theater Group, *Sarah Flood in Salem Mass* at The Flea, *Sophie Gets the Horns* with The Riot Group, and *FEED* and *We Are Bandits* with Applied Mechanics. Rebecca has created work with students at the University of Michigan, Columbia University, and the University of Minnesota, among others.

KATI DONOVAN (Normativity Dramaturge) is Assistant Professor of Musical Theatre and Head of the Musical Theatre Minor at UArts. A UArts alum, she's also a proud graduate of San Diego State University's MFA in Musical Theatre program, and Villanova University (MA in Theatre, dramaturgy focus). Kati has taught, directed, and dramaturged students in a number of different academic settings and presented papers at the Association of Theatre in Higher Education, American Literature Association, Philadelphia Theatre Research Symposium, and Music Theatre Educators Alliance conferences. Her scholarship has been published in *The Eugene O'Neill Review*, and the international journal, *Studies in Musical Theatre*.

EPPCHEZ (Normativity Choreographer) is a Quaker theater maker, musician, and activist based in Philadelphia. Ey received eir bachelors in Theatre and Writing from Wesleyan University. In 2013 Eppchez started up Alma's Engine; a process focused production company/creative ministry for self-produced work in music and theater. Alma's Engine has released the original album "Self-Realized-Nation; a song cycle of the occupation" and produced Eppchez's plays "Junk Redemption" and "They Extract!". Eppchez has collaborated with several Philly theater companies, and works out of the collective artist's studio Panorama.

JACLYN BACKHAUS (Folk Wandering Author) is an Indian-American playwright and one co-founder of Fresh

Ground Pepper. Her play MEN ON BOATS was a NYT Critics' Pick in Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks and Off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons, and recently had its regional premiere at Chicago's ATC. Other works include PEOPLE DOING MATH LIVE! (Under The Radar Festival, The Public Theater), THE INCREDIBLE FOX SISTERS (Live Source), and YOU ON THE MOORS NOW (Theater Reconstruction Ensemble, The Hypocrites in Chicago). She was the 2016 Tow Foundation Playwright-in-Residence at Clubbed Thumb. BFA: NYU. She hails from Phoenix, Arizona.

ANDREW NEISLER (Folk Wandering Director) is a Brooklyn-based theatre director and producer. Select directing credits include the world premiere of Cesar Alvarez's *The Elementary Spacetime Show* (FringeArts Curated Series), critically acclaimed *The Gray Man* (Pipeline Theatre Company), NY Times' Critics Pick *Clown Bar* (The Box), and Drama Desk nominated *Charlatan* (Ars Nova). He is a Creative Director of the non-profit arts incubation company Fresh Ground Pepper (www.fgpnyc.com) and a Teaching Artist at Playwrights Horizons Theatre School/NYU. He is an alumnus of the Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab and the Civilians' R&D Group. He was the 2014 Director-in-Residence at Ars Nova. BFA: NYU/Tisch.

MIKE BRUN (Folk Wandering Composer and Music Director) is a music hyphenate known for the wide range of his projects & skills. Theater credits include: Music Director/ Onstage Musician for *Mr. Burns* (Playwrights Horizons); Co-Arranger/ Orchestrator/ Onstage Musician for *Twelfth Night* (Delacorte); Music Director/ Arranger/ Onstage Musician for *Tumacho* (Wild Project); Co-Arranger/ Onstage Musician for *Old Hats* (Signature). Brun is composer of *Bull's Hollow* (in development as a commission for Ars Nova) and a co-composer of *The Gray Man* and *Folk Wandering*. He is an alum of the 2014-15 Civilians Research & Development Group and 2014 Johnny Mercer Foundation Songwriters Project. www.mikebrun.com

ANDREW NEISLER (Folk Wandering Director) is a Brooklyn-based theatre director and producer. Select directing credits include the world premiere of Cesar Alvarez's *The Elementary Spacetime Show* (FringeArts Curated Series), critically acclaimed *The Gray Man* (Pipeline Theatre Company), NY Times' Critics Pick *Clown Bar* (The Box), and Drama Desk nominated *Charlatan* (Ars Nova). He is a Creative Director of the non-profit arts incubation company Fresh Ground Pepper (www.fgpnyc.com) and a Teaching Artist at Playwrights Horizons Theatre School/NYU. He is an alumnus of the Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab and the Civilians' R&D Group. He was the 2014 Director-in-Residence at Ars Nova. BFA: NYU/Tisch.

BEN HOBBS (Folk Wandering Choreographer) is a NYC based theater artist. Select credits: *Fuerzabruta* (NYC); *Elementary Spacetime Show* (Philly Fringe/University of the Arts); *NOISE* (by Cesar Alvarez); *Traces* by Carolyn Dorfman (NJ PAC); *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (Brooklyn Loft Opera); *Underwater* (Bulgaria); *Red Wednesday* (Ice Factory Fest, BRIC Arts | Media Center); *Clown Bar* (The Box); *Nuclear Love Affair* (Roma Fringe, HERE, Prague Fringe, Ars Nova); *Drunkfish Oceanrant* (Prelude, Dixon Place). BFA, NYU/Tisch, Art History minor. He studied Chinese Opera at Shanghai Theatre Academy and Dance at Point Park University. Ben is Associate Artistic Director of Built for Collapse (www.built4collapse.org)

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About the University of the Arts

Currently celebrating its 140th anniversary year, the University of the Arts is one of the nation's only universities dedicated solely to educating students in the visual and performing arts, design and writing. UArts is a leader in educating creative individuals through an innovative, flexible, rigorous and well-rounded curriculum that prepares students to be the creative leaders of tomorrow, whether in a specific artistic discipline or by applying their arts education to virtually any career. The alumni of the University are leading some of the Philadelphia region's most important cultural institutions and positively impacting the creative economy nationally. With nearly 1,900 students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs on its campus in the heart of Philadelphia's Avenue of the Arts, UArts students collaborate across disciplines and benefit from being in one of the nation's most culturally vibrant cities.

