Flyin’ West

written by Pearl Cleage
directed by Chuck Smith*+

Scenic Design............................................................................................................Grant Sabin*, U.S.A.
Lighting Design........................................................................................................Jared Gooding*
Costume Design ......................................................................................................Lily Grace Walls
Sound Design ..........................................................................................................Rick Sims*, U.S.A
Properties Design....................................................................................................Kevin Rolfs
Production Stage Manager......................................................................................Marcus Carroll

* Ensemble member or Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater
+ Member of Stage Directors & Choreographers Society

OCTOBER 5 – NOVEMBER 3, 2018 (previews Oct 5 – Oct 10)

FLYIN’ WEST is presented by special arrangement with Dramatists Play Service, Inc., New York.
FLYIN’ WEST was originally commissioned and produced by the Alliance Theatre Company, Atlanta, Georgia, Kenny Leon, Artistic Director and Edith Love, Managing Director, in association with AT&T: On Stage. The play was developed with support from the Lila Wallace – Reader’s Digest Fund Resident Theatre Initiative.

American Blues Theater
4809 N. Ravenswood Ave., Suite 221, Chicago, IL 60640
Phone: (773) 654-3103 AmericanBluesTheater.com

American Blues Theater is a constituent of the Theatre Communications Group, Inc – the national organization for nonprofit professional theaters, the League of Chicago Theaters, Arts Alliance Illinois, and Lakeview Chamber of Commerce.

American Blues Theater operates under agreements between Producers’ Association of Chicago Area Theatres, Actors’ Equity Association – the union of professional actors and stage managers, Stage Directors & Choreographers Society, and United Scenic Artists of America, Local 829 – AFL-CIO.
Welcome to American Blues Theater’s Season 33 “Home Sweet Home”. We proudly present a revival of Pearl Cleage’s *Flyin’ West*, directed by Goodman Theatre’s Resident Director and American Blues’s Artistic Affiliate Chuck Smith.

Ms. Cleage is a highly-successful writer and regarded as one of the most influential African-American contemporary playwrights in the United States. The daughter of civil rights activist Bishop Albert Cleage, she learned to use her voice from a young age. She writes, “My response to the oppression I face is to name it, describe it, analyze it, protest it, and propose solutions to it as loud[ly] as I possibly can every time I get the chance. I purposely people my plays with fast-talking, quick-thinking black women since the theater is, for me, one of the few places where we have a chance to get an uninterrupted word in edgewise.”

The characters in *Flyin’ West* are as relevant in 2018 as when they first appeared in The Alliance Theater’s world premiere (1992). Ms. Cleage’s characters are complex, fiercely independent, and unforgettable. They speak their truths and claim ownership of their stories. In the first scene, you’ll hear Miss Leah say, “Colored folks can’t forget the plantation any more than they can forget their own names. If we forget that, we ain’t got no history past last week.”

Ms. Cleage and our production team will transport you back to the late 1800s. You’ll encounter references to the Homestead Act and timeless themes of freedom and identity from perspectives that should be required learning in schools. American Blues Theater proudly partners this production with Chicago Public Schools and Connections for Abused Women and Their Children. We give each organization complimentary tickets and materials for educational growth.

In the famous words of Ms. Cleage, “You can’t know the meaning of the lesson until the class is over!”

- Gwendolyn Whiteside
CAST (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

Fannie Dove..................................................................................................................Sydney Charles^ 
Frank Charles....................................................................................................................Wardell Julius Clark 
Minnie Dove Charles.......................................................................................................Tiffany Renee Johnson 
Miss Leah.......................................................................................................................Joslyn Jones^ 
Sophie Washington.........................................................................................................Tiffany Oglesby 
Wil Parish............................................................................................................................Henri Watkins

^ Member of Actors’ Equity Association – the union of professional actors and stage managers

As a courtesy to the actors and your fellow patrons, please turn off your phone before the performance. The taking of photographs and the use of any type of recording device are not allowed in the theater during the performance and is a violation of state and federal copyright laws. Digital media will be deleted and tape or film will be confiscated.

TIME AND PLACE

TIME
Fall, 1898

PLACE
Outside the all-black town of Nicodemus, Kansas.

The performance runs 2 hours with an intermission.

PRODUCTION STAFF

Production Manager ........................................................................................................Shandee Vaughan*
Assistant Stage Manager ..............................................................................................Breana Young 
Associate Lighting Designer .........................................................................................Hara Kumaran 
Technical Director .........................................................................................................Daniel Staggs 
Master Electrician ..........................................................................................................Rachel West 
Scenic Painter ....................................................................................................................Eileen Rozycki

* Ensemble member or Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater

Starts at $27! 
Tickets never expire.

Call (773) 654-3103 or visit AmericanBluesTheater.com to learn more.
COMMUNITY SERVICE FOR FLYIN’ WEST

American Blues Theater believes it is an honor and duty to serve our community. We raise awareness of other non-profit organizations’ great causes through creative collaborations. We’re proud to partner with Northwestern University’s The Family Institute, Chicago Public Schools, Connections for Abused Women & Their Children, and League of Black Women. We’re thrilled to launch our “Pediatric Previews” that donate proceeds of preview performances to St. Jude’s Children’s Research Hospital. To enrich your experience, visit AmericanBluesTheater.com.

SEASON SUPPORTERS


SPECIAL THANKS

The biggest Hoosier fans, Michael Brosilow, Cathy Taylor Public Relations, Paula Conrad, Michael Levinson, The Saints, X-Man, and the staff of Stage 773.

Video production services provided by The Stage Channel. Our ushers are provided by the Saints—Volunteers for the Performing Arts. For more information visit Saintschicago.org or call 773-529-5510.
SYDNEY CHARLES
(Fannie Dove) is an award-winning actress hailing from Chicago, IL who committed her life to acting after years as a banker and operations coordinator. *Flyin’ West* marks her American Blues Theater debut and her first time appearing in a play by Pearl Cleage, and she is deeply grateful for the opportunity. Selected theater credits include *Father Comes Home From the Wars* (Goodman Theatre), *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (Court Theatre), *Insurrection: Holding History* (Stage Left Theatre - original run and Theater on the Lake), *Lottery Day* (Goodman Theatre - New Stages), three editions of *The Fly Honey Show* (The Inconvenience), *Spamilton* (Royal George Theatre), *An Octoroon* (Definition Theatre), “Dorothy” in *The Wiz* (Kokandy Productions), “Zora” in the world premiere of *Prowess* (Jackalope Theatre), and the title role in *Dessa Rose* (Bailiwick Chicago). Her directing debut was with Wildclaw Theatre with their yearly *Deathscribe Festival of Horror Plays*, and she just served as Associate Director for *The Shipment* at Red Tape Theatre. Sydney can also be seen in episodes of *The Haven* (web series), *The T* (web series), and *Shameless* (Showtime). She is particularly proud to be an Artistic Associate with Firebrand Theatre—the recently formed feminist musical theater company. Sydney thanks God for every opportunity she is given and her circle for supporting her every step of the way. Represented by Stewart Talent.

WARDELL JULIUS CLARK
(Frank Charles) hails from Fairfield, Alabama. Select acting credits include *Suddenly, Last Summer* (Raven Theatre); *Silent Sky* (First Folio Theatre); *Apartment 3A* (Windy City Playhouse); *The Gospel According to James* (Victory Gardens Theatre); *Gem Of The Ocean* and *Invisible Man* (Court Theatre); and *A Raisin in the Sun* (TimeLine Theatre). Regional credits include *Othello* and *Macbeth* Theater at Monmouth. Directing credits include *The Shipment* (Red Tape Theatre); *Insurrection: Holding History* (Stage Left Theatre); and *Surely Goodness and Mercy* (Redtwist Theatre). TV credits include *Chicago Fire* seasons 1 and 4, and *Shameless*. Wardell is a company member and teaching artist with TimeLine Theatre, as well as a teaching artist for Victory Gardens Theater. BFA Acting, DePaul University. He is represented by Gray Talent Group.

TIFFANY RENEE JOHNSON
(Minnie Dove Charles) is a Chicago native with a BFA from Howard University, and is very excited to make her American Blues Theater debut! Her theater credits include *Red Velvet* (Chicago Shakespeare Theater), *Saint Joan* (Poetic Forum Collective), the US premiere of *truth and reconciliation* (Sideshow Theatre), the world premiere of *VANYA (or, “That’s Life!”)* (Rasaka Theatre Company), *Coming Home* (Erasing the Distance), *Hairspray* (Drury Lane Theatre), and *The Nativity* (Congo Square Theatre). Regional credits include *Race* (Next Act Theatre) and *The Bluest Eye* (Environmental Theatre Space). Television credits include *Chicago Med*, *Chicago P.D.*, *Chicago Fire* (NBC), *APB* (Fox), and *Embeds* (Go90). Tiffany is represented by Gray Talent Group. “The sun is my limit, and I will not stop reaching until I hold it on my hands,” she always says. To God be all the glory.
JOSLYN JONES (Miss Leah) Theater credits: Steel Magnolias (Theatre at the Center); Intimate Apparel (Theatre Squared); Andromeda (Theatre Squared); The Project(s) - Jeff Nomination, Best Production (American Theater Company); The Delany Sisters: Having Our Say - The First Hundred Years (Fleetwood Jourdain Theatre); Once On This Island (Marriott Theatre); 12 Ophelias (Trap Door Theatre); Weekend (TimeLine Theatre), Bourbon At The Border - BTAA Nomination, Featured Actress (Eclipse Theatre); Escape (Live Bait Theatre); Flyin' West and Raisin (Court Theatre); Spunk (Court Theatre's Artist in School Program); Bee-Luther-Hatchee (The University Of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign); Fabulation: Or, the Re-Education of Undine (Next Theatre); Relevant Hearsay (MPACCT: Theater on the Lake); Bee-Luther-Hatchee and Smokey Joe's Café (Open Door Theater); Meshuggah Nuns! (Chicago Jewish Theatre); The Kurt Weil Revue: Songs of Darkness and Light - Jeff Nomination, Best Musical Production (Theo Ubique Cabaret Theatre); To Kill A Mockingbird (Metropolis Performing Arts Centre); and 2002 Class of The School at Steppenwolf. She has understudied: Head of Passes and Carter's Way (Steppenwolf Theatre); The Snow Queen (Victory Gardens Biograph Theater); Having Our Say and Crumbs from the Table of Joy (Goodman Theatre). Television: South Side (Comedy Central) and Chicago P.D. (NBC).

HENRI WATKINS (Wil Parish) says he couldn't be happier to be working with the great Chuck Smith, again, although the last two times were in Sarasota, Florida. “But the fall is a great season to work in Chicago, Chuck,” he quickly adds. A retired journeyman electrician from the automobile plants of his hometown of Flint, Michigan, Henri moved to Chicago in 2014. Chicago credits include Jitney (Court Theatre), Misanthrope (Court Theatre), Waiting for Godot (Court Theatre), and CCX (Modofac Productions at Rivendell Theatre). He also had the pleasure to have worked at The Black Ensemble Theater in The Marvin Gaye Story. As mentioned before, he enjoyed working with Chuck Smith in Sarasota, Florida in the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe’s productions of Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom and Piano Lesson. Recently, Henri appeared in Pegasus Theatre production of The Green Book. His film credits include Sundance award winners Chameleon Street and Detroit Unleaded.

TIFFANY OGLESBY (Sophie Washington) is thrilled to make her debut at American Blues Theater. She was recently seen in The Light (Non-Equity Jeff and Black Theatre Alliance Award nominations). Other theater companies include Definition Theatre, Writers Theatre, Lifeline Theatre, Congo Square Theatre, Sideshow Theatre, About Face Theatre, and Theater Wit. TV credits include Chicago Med, The Chi, and Empire, as well as national commercial and voice over radio spots. Tiffany received her BFA from the Savannah College of Art and Design and her MFA from The Theatre School at DePaul University.

PEARL CLEAGE (Playwright) is a fiction writer, playwright, poet, essayist, and journalist. She grew up in Detroit, Michigan, where her father was a church pastor and played a prominent role in the Civil Rights Movement. Cleage's first novel, What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary
Day, was an Oprah Book Club selection in 1998 and appeared on the New York Times best-seller list for nine weeks. Cleage has received numerous awards in recognition of her work, including the Bronze Jubilee Award for Literature in 1983 and the outstanding columnist award from the Atlanta Association of Black Journalists in 1991. Cleage's theatrical works include Flyin' West (1992), which was the most produced new play in the country in 1994. Her other plays include Blues for an Alabama Sky (1995), Bourbon at the Border (1997), A Song for Coretta (2007), What I Learned in Paris (2012), and Tell Me My Dream (2015). Blues for an Alabama Sky was performed in Atlanta as part of the 1996 Cultural Olympiad in conjunction with the 1996 Olympic Games. In 2014 Cleage published Things I Should Have Told My Daughter: Lies, Lessons, and Love, which chronicles her early years as a writer in Atlanta's turbulent political climate of the 1970s and 1980s. In 2013 she was named playwright-in-residence of Atlanta's Alliance Theatre. The initial three-year term was renewed for an additional three years in 2016.

CHUCK SMITH (Director) is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater where he previously directed Leroi Jones’ Dutchman. He is a member of Goodman Theatre’s Board of Trustees and is Goodman Theatre’s Resident Director. He is also a resident director at the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe in Sarasota, Florida. Goodman credits include the Chicago premieres of Pullman Porter Blues; By the Way, Meet Vera Stark; Race; The Good Negro; Proof; and The Story; the world premieres of By the Music of the Spheres and The Gift Horse; James Baldwin's The Amen Corner, which transferred to Boston's Huntington Theatre Company, where it won the Independent Reviewers of New England (IRNE) Award for Best Direction; A Raisin in the Sun; Blues for an Alabama Sky; August Wilson's Two Trains Running and Ma Rainey's Black Bottom; Objects in the Mirror; Having Our Say; Ain't Misbehavin'; the 1993 to 1995 productions of A Christmas Carol; Crumbs From the Table of Joy; Vivisections from a Blown Mind; and The Meeting. He served as dramaturg for the Goodman’s world-premiere production of August Wilson’s Gem of the Ocean. He directed the New York premiere of Knock Me a Kiss and The Hooch for the New Federal Theatre and the world premiere of Knock Me a Kiss at Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater, where his other directing credits include Master Harold... and the Boys, Home, Dame Lorraine, and Eden, for which he received a Jeff Award nomination. Regionally, Mr. Smith directed Death and the King's Horseman (Oregon Shakespeare Festival), Birdie Blue (Seattle Repertory Theatre), The Story (Milwaukee Repertory Theater), Blues for an Alabama Sky (Alabama Shakespeare Festival), and The Last Season (Robey Theatre Company). At Columbia College he was facilitator of the Theodore Ward Prize playwriting contest for 20 years and editor of the contest anthologies Seven Black Plays and Best Black Plays. He won a Chicago Emmy Award as associate producer/theatrical director for the NBC teleplay Crime of Innocence and was theatrical director for the Emmy-winning Fast Break to Glory and the Emmy-nominated The Martin Luther King Suite. He was a founding member of the Chicago Theatre Company, where he served as artistic director for four seasons and directed the Jeff-nominated Suspenders and the Jeff-winning musical Po’. His directing credits include productions at Fisk University, Roosevelt University, Eclipse Theatre, ETA, Black Ensemble Theater, Northlight Theatre, MPAACT, Congo Square Theatre, The New Regal Theater, Kuumba Theatre Company, Fleetwood-Jourdain Theatre, Pegasus Players, the Timber Lake Playhouse in Mt. Carroll, Illinois, the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, and the University
of Wisconsin in Madison. He is a 2003 inductee into the Chicago State University Gwendolyn Brooks Center’s Literary Hall of Fame and a 2001 Chicago Tribune Chicagoan of the Year. He is the proud recipient of the 1982 Paul Robeson Award and the 1997 Award of Merit presented by the Black Theater Alliance of Chicago.

**GRANT SABIN** (*Scenic Design*) is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater. A native of rural Illinois, Grant blends his rural roots with urban art. He’s a recipient of the 2015 Michael Maggio Emerging Designer Award. He’s a graduate of Columbia College with a BFA in theatre design where he was awarded the 2005 Michael Merritt student scholarship for collaboration in theatre design. He is known throughout Chicago for his keen eye in capturing atmospheric detail and his ability to design “impressively executed sets” on a storefront-theater budget. His designs have been seen at Northlight Theatre, Victory Gardens Theater, Steppenwolf Theatre, Next Theatre, The Royal George, Overture Center WI, Theatre Wit, Gallagher Bluedorn IA, American Blues Theater, American Theater Company, Christina Isabelle Dance, The Seldoms Dance, and A Red Orchid. He was nominated for a Joseph Jefferson Award for his design of American Blues’ production of *Yankee Tavern*, A Red Orchid’s production of *The Sea Horse*, and Dog & Pony’s production of *Mr. Marmalade*. He was recently named one of the Top 50 Players in Chicago Theatre by Newcity Magazine. Grant is currently a part-time faculty member at Columbia College.

**LILY WALLS** (*Costume Design*) is thrilled to be back working with American Blues Theater, this time for *Flyin’ West*. A Hoosier from birth, Lily graduated from Indiana University in 2015 with a BA in Theatre Arts and made the jump to the big city last year. Previously, she designed a number of shows in Bloomington, from *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (Ivy Tech Student Productions) to *the king lear project*, a world premiere original pronunciation production. Chicago credits include Akvavit Theatre’s English language premiere of *Bad Girls: The Stylists* and previous American Blues Theater production *Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story*. She would like to thank Michael (husband), as well as Bamba and Khoshekh (cats) for their respective support, love, and ankle bites.

**JARED GOODING** (*Lighting Design*) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater where he has designed *Buddy – The Buddy Holly Story, This Wonderful Life, Beauty’s Daughter*, and *The Columnist*. His other design credits include the Associate Design of *Lookingglass Alice* (Lookingglass Theatre Company), serving as the Lighting Assistant for *The Wiz Live* on NBC, designs for Victory Gardens Theater, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, UIC Theatre, Writers Theatre, Strawdog Theatre, The Hypocrites, TimeLine Theatre, Madison Children’s Theatre, Definition Theatre, Windy City Playhouse, Sideshow Theatre, First Floor Theater, About Face Theatre, MPAACT, Pegasus Theatre, Next Theatre, Congo Square Theatre, Citadel Theatre, ETA, and Fleetwood Jourdain Theatre. He is a company member with MPACCT. He spends his off time managing a DJ company for Chicago area bars. You can find his work at goodingdesigns.com

**RICK SIMS** (*Sound Design*) is a proud Artistic Affiliate with American Blues Theater. He has composed and designed sound for numerous Chicago-area theaters, including Steppenwolf Theatre, Lookingglass Theatre Company, American Blues Theater, Congo Square Theatre, Writers Theatre, Lifeline Theatre, Griffin Theatre, Chicago Children’s Theatre, The Hypocrites, House Theatre of Chicago,
Court Theatre, American Theater Company, Victory Gardens Theater, Raven Theatre, Steep Theatre, Northlight Theatre, and About Face Theatre. His additional credits include The Getty, Boston Playwrights’ Theatre, Arden Theatre Company, Playwrights Horizons, Actors Theatre of Louisville, and Portland Playhouse. Rick won Jeff Awards for Sound Design for Moby Dick and Hepheastus (Lookingglass Theatre Company), a Black Theatre Alliance Award for Brothers in the Dust (Congo Square Theatre), and has received several nominations for both awards. Rick also wrote the book, music and lyrics for Hillbilly Antigone at Lookingglass Theatre Company, where he is an Artistic Associate.

KEVIN ROLFS (Properties Design) is a Chicago based scenic and props designer thrilled to be working with American Blues Theater again on another fantastic production after prop designing for Buddy - The Buddy Holly Story. His prop and scenic design work can be seen around town in Zürich (props) at Steep Theater, Junie B. Jones is Not a Crook (scenic) at College of Lake County, and Love’s Labour’s Lost (scenic) at Invictus Theater.

MARCUS CARROLL (Stage Manager) is excited to be doing his first show with American Blues Theater! He is also the Production Stage Manager for Emerald City Theatre. PSM credits include Ken Ludwig’s ’Twas The Night Before Christmas, Magic Tree House: Showtime With Shakespeare, Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical, A Charlie Brown Christmas, and The Wiz Jr. (Emerald City Theatre). ASM credits: Prowess (Jackalope Theatre) and Alias Grace (Rivendell Theatre Ensemble). SM Intern credits: A Christmas Carol and 2666 (Goodman Theatre). Special thanks to my family, Ball State Department of Theatre & Dance, Shannon, Kathleen, Alden, and Old Joe!

BREANA YOUNG (Assistant Stage Manager) Born and raised in Chicago and its surrounding suburbs where the theater is full of life, Breana has grown to love theater in all of its forms. Since graduating from the University of Illinois at Chicago in the spring of 2017 with a bachelors in Theatre Design, she has since been working in theaters around Chicago and more recently found a home at American Blues. Surely, there will be more to come!

SHANDEE VAUGHAN (Production Manager) is a proud Artistic Affiliate of American Blues Theater and is delighted, as always, to be back in the room with American Blues. Recent Blues credits: Buddy - The Buddy Holly Story, The Columnist, It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!, and Little Shop of Horrors. Other recent Chicago credits include Time Is on Our Side (About Face Theatre), Deathscribe X (WildClaw Theatre), Night in Alachua County (WildClaw Theatre), and The Woman in Black (WildClaw Theatre). Shandee is a freelance stage manager and production manager from Arizona. shandeevaughan.com

GWENDOLYN WHITESIDE (Artistic Director) is a proud Ensemble member of American Blues Theater and has served as Artistic Director since 2010. Under her leadership, American Blues has nearly doubled the size of its Ensemble, added 30 Artistic Affiliates, and diversified its base of artists. She created the nationally-recognized annual Blue Ink Playwriting Award, Blueprint Development for new work, implemented community service into the company’s mission, and created the free arts education program The Lincoln Project for Chicago Public Schools which serves 3,000 students annually. She led American Blues through its 2009 rebirth and built the operational budget from zero to $1 million+ in seven years. Whiteside served numerous panels for the National...
Biographies cont.

Endowment for the Arts and sat on the national Board of Directors for Network of Ensemble Theaters. Currently she sits on the Board of Directors for The League of Chicago Theatres. She’s a graduate of Northwestern University (cum laude), The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (MFA), and a Kellogg Executive Scholar in Nonprofit management (Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University). She was nominated for “Chicagoan of the Year” in Chicago Magazine and named in Newcity’s annual Players list numerous times. In eight years, nine American Blues’ productions won or were nominated for production by the Joseph Jefferson Award committee. She’s received 14 Joseph Jefferson Awards, Citations, and nominations as an actress and Artistic Director. Her favorite performances include Jeff Award for Solo Performance (Grounded) and seven years as “Mary Bailey” (It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!). She’s the recipient of two After Dark Awards and numerous Broadway World Chicago Awards and nominations. She directs the Joseph Jefferson Award nominated annual holiday production It’s a Wonderful Life: Live in Chicago!

About American Blues Theater

Winner of American Theater Wing’s prestigious National Theatre Company Award, American Blues Theater is a premier arts organization with an intimate environment that patrons, artists, and all Chicagoans call home. American Blues Theater explores the American identity through the plays it produces and communities it serves. American Blues Theater follows three guiding values both on and off its stages – to be accessible, responsible, and true.

Our diverse and multi-generational artists have established the second oldest professional Equity Ensemble theater in Chicago. Our 36-member Ensemble has nearly 600 combined years of collaboration on stage. As of today, our theater and artists received 204 Joseph Jefferson Awards and nominations that celebrate excellence in Chicago theater and 35 Black Theater Alliance Awards. Our artists are honored with Pulitzer Prize nominations, Academy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, Emmy Awards, and numerous other accolades.

American Blues Theater is committed to developing the classic plays and musicals of tomorrow. Our new work development consists of a variety of programs – including world and regional premieres, the Blue Ink Playwriting Award, Blueprint commissions, and Ripped: The Living Newspaper Festival of new short-plays. More than half of our mainstage productions are world and Chicago premieres.

Definition of “Ensemble”

An Ensemble theater is a group of individuals dedicated to collaborative creation and committed to consistently working together over years to develop a distinctive body of work and practices. Ensemble members, both artists and administrators, are empowered to help shape their theater’s artistic direction and organizational structure.
American Blues Theater was founded in July 1985 by a director, playwright, designer, and actor. The company dedicated itself to new and classic American plays. Richard Christiansen of the Chicago Tribune cited American Blues in his editorial “Chicago Theater Forges New Standards of Glory.” In August of 1993, the company leased a warehouse on Byron and Lincoln. In 38 days, James Leaming led a community-based 90+ volunteer crew to transform the space into an intimate 134-seat theater. From 1994-1997, the Ensemble was lauded with numerous Joseph Jefferson Awards and After Dark Awards.

Leadership From Outside the Ensemble
From 1997-2009, the company was led by Artistic Directors from outside of the Ensemble. Under the leadership of Brian Russell and Damon Kiely ('97-'07), the theater’s name changed to American Theater Company (ATC), the mission statement was revised, and the business expanded greatly. In 2008, under new management, the Ensemble theater practice was dismantled. After 18 months of talks with the new management, all four Founders and every Ensemble member prior to 2008 chose to leave the ATC organization in March 2009 citing “major administrative and artistic differences.”

Blue Skies Ahead
The Ensemble reformed under its original name American Blues Theater. Founding Board members reconstituted the Board, giving tremendous support and guidance. Ensemble member Gwendolyn Whiteside became the Artistic Director. Whiteside ushered in the annual Blue Ink Playwriting Award, Blueprint Development, implemented community service into the company’s mission, and adapted the arts education program The Lincoln Project for Chicago Public Schools that serves 3,000 students annually.

“One of our favorites in Chicago!” – Dean Richards, WGN
“Ensemble founded one of Chicago’s most venerable off-loop theaters.”
– Chris Jones, Chicago Tribune

American Blues Theater Ensemble Founded in 1985

Dawn Bach  Elyse Dolan  Warren Levon
Ed Blatchford  Joe Foust  Michael Mahler
Matthew Brumlow  Jared Gooding  Heather Meyers
Manny Buckley  Cheryl Graeff  John Mührlein
Kate Buddeke  Marty Higginbotham  Christopher J. Neville
Sarah Burnham  Jaclyn Holsey  Suzanne Petri
Dara Cameron  Philip Earl Johnson  Carmen Roman
Casey Campbell  Lindsay Jones  Editha Rosario
Darren Canady  Nambi E. Kelley  Sarah E. Ross
Rick Cleveland  Kevin Kelly  Gwendolyn Whiteside
Austin Cook  Steve Key  Dennis Cockrum, emeritus
Ian Paul Custer  Ed Kross  William Payne, emeritus
Lauri Dahl  James Leaming

Warren Levon  Michael Mahler
Heather Meyers  John Mührlein
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Dennis Cockrum, emeritus  William Payne, emeritus
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If you are interested in joining the Board of Directors at American Blues Theater, please call (773) 654-3103.

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Shandee Vaughan, Production Manager

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American Blues Theater is grateful for every contribution. We regret that due to space limitations we are unable to list donations under $99. Please accept our deepest appreciation as your donation makes a difference!

We make every effort to keep this list as accurate and complete as possible. Please contact us at info@AmericanBluesTheater.com to correct any unintentional errors or omissions.
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Managing Director ................................................................. Jack Short
General Manager ................................................................. Travis Barnhart
Facilities Manager ............................................................... John Craig
Development Manager ......................................................... Nicole Meunier
Rental Coordinator ............................................................... Meaghan Morris
Box office / Admin Assistant ................................................ Zach Abel
Front of House Manager ...................................................... Chris Chapin
Bar Manager ................................................................. Andrew McDermott
Box Office ................................................................. Zach Abel, Juan Castaneda, Ian McCulloch, Brittani Schiller
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Stage 773 is a member of the League of Chicago Theatres and the Belmont Theatre District.