VICTORY GARDENS THEATER PRESENTS

THE FIRST DEEP BREATH

A PLAY BY
LEE EDWARD COLSTON II

DIRECTED BY
STEVE H. BROADNAX III*

FEATURING
PATRICK AGADA, DAVID ALAN ANDERSON*, GREGORY FENNER*, JALEN GILBERT*, MELANIE LOREN, CLINTON LOWE*, DEANNA REED-FOSTER*, CELESTE WILLIAMS*

REGINA GARCÍA†
Scenic Designer

CHRISTINE PASCUAL†
Costume Designer

JASON LYNCH
Lighting Designer

JOSH SCHMIDT†
Sound Designer & Original Music

JENNY PINSON
Props Designer

GABY LABOTKA
Fight & Intimacy Director

RICKY HARRIS
Music Director

BREON ARZELL
Choreographer

KANOMÉ JONES
Associate Producer

ERICA L. SANDVIG
Production Manager

DONALD E. CLAXON*
Production Stage Manager

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* Denotes a member of Actors’ Equity Association, the union of professional actors and stage managers
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‡ Denotes a member of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society, a national theatrical labor union

Originally created as part of I Am Soul—Playwright Residency Program at Dr. Barbara Ann Teer’s National Black Theatre in Harlem, NY.
THE FIRST DEEP BREATH

CAST
AJ (Alexander Michael Jones) .... Patrick Agada
Pastor Albert Melvin Jones III ............... David Alan Anderson*
Leslie Carter .......... Gregory Fenner*
Tyree Fisher .......... Jalen Gilbert*
Dee-Dee (Denise Jones) ......... Melanie Loren
Abdul-Malik (Albert Melvin Jones IV) ...... Clinton Lowe*
Pearl Thomas .......... Deanna Reed-Foster*
Ruth Jones .................. Celeste Williams*

PRODUCTION
Dramaturg ....................... Kat Zukaitis
Assistant Director ...... Lanise Antoine Shelley
Floor Manager .......... Caitie Noller
Run Crew ...................... Emma Lipson
Assistant Costume Designer ...... Joyanna Cox
Wardrobe Supervisor .......... Annaliase Voci
Sound Engineer .......... Nora Simonson
Wig Consultant .......... Johnny Jamison
Assistant Props Designer .. Samantha Rausch
Assistant Fight Director .... Thomas Russell
Assistant Intimacy Director .. Jyreika Guest

Understudies: Donald Fitzdarryl, Kenesha Reed, Jermaine Robinson, Michelle Renée Thompson
Understudies will not substitute for listed players unless a specific announcement is made at the time of the performance.

SETTING:
Mother Bethel Baptist Church & The Jones Residence, Germantown, Philadelphia.

RUN TIME:
3 hours and 30 minutes, two intermissions.

Access Services
The Access Project is supported by a grant from The REAM Foundation. This project is partially supported by a CityArts Grant from the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events, with Year of Chicago Theatre funding from BMO Harris Bank and the Robert R. McCormick Foundation. Caption equipment made possible by support from Alfredo & Pamela Capitanini.

Victory Gardens Theater is a professional theater producing in accordance with Actors’ Equity Association Chicago Area Theaters Contract. Victory Gardens is a founding member of the League of Chicago Theatres and a constituent of Theater Communications Group (TCG), the national service organization of the American theater, and a founding member of the Producers Association of Chicago Theater (PACT). Our Ushers are provided by the Saints, Volunteers for the Performing Arts. For information visit saintschicago.org or call 773.529.5510.

Latecomers will be seated at the discretion of the House Manager. Cameras and recording equipment are strictly forbidden in the theater. Patrons with cell phones or any electronic devices that make noise are requested to either turn off the device or check it with the House Manager prior to show time.
VICTORY GARDENS WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS AND FOUNDATIONS FOR THEIR SPONSORSHIP SUPPORT OF THE FIRST DEEP BREATH

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THE FIRST DEEP BREATH 3
PLAYWRIGHT’S NOTE

Thank you for coming to experience my play.

I was struggling to find the “right words” for this ‘Note from the playwright’ thingie. But, for some reason, nothing I wrote down seemed to make sense. So, instead of trying to write something to prepare an audience for the experience of my play, I figured, “why don’t I just share the 10 most important lessons I learned while writing it?” Okay, here goes...

1. Don’t wait for an apology in order to start your healing. It may never come. Make the choice to begin your healing on your terms.

2. Don’t wait for others to heal first so you can break free of toxic generational cycles. They may never heal and you deserve to breathe NOW.

3. You have a right to tell your story even if others are not ready to hear it.

4. Truth without deep compassion is cruelty and violence. Don’t be cruel. The truth is not a bludgeon, it’s a scalpel.

5. Don’t wait for permission before you write—anything that can be destroyed by telling a compassionate truth should be. If the truth can destroy it, then whatever it destroyed was likely built on lies.

6. Ask yourself: do you want to heal or do you want to be right? Most times, you cannot have both. Choose.

7. Forgiveness is surrendering the hope that the past could have been different.

8. A person can only love you to the depth and extent they know how to love themselves.

9. Don’t allow someone to hand you their box of limitations and call it unconditional love. If someone cannot love you unconditionally in the way you need, then you must get up from the table and find the love you seek somewhere else.

10. If a person’s love for me is contingent on me being who they want me to be instead of being myself, then that isn’t love, it’s ransom—and I won’t be held hostage by anyone.

This is the journey I am on currently—choosing to heal. Learning to forgive. Choosing to love myself on my own terms. It is difficult for me, but necessary.

I wrote this play to help all of us find our own personal Easter resurrection. It’s certainly helped me find mine. Writing this play has taught me how to be a better person. It taught me deeper empathy and compassion. It’s teaching me the life-altering power of making the decision to heal and the freedom that follows. I hope you find something in it that speaks to you. I hope it reminds you to be kinder to those you love and those you don’t. I hope it reminds you to be gentler to you.

In the tradition of the black churches that helped raise me, I invite you to share this space with us: feel free to be vocal. Say “Mmmm” if you feel it and “Amen” if you receive it. I encourage you to laugh, cry, stomp, sing and shout! I want us to make this theatre sound like one part “shout music” and two parts Game 7 of the NBA Finals. But most importantly, I invite you to just breathe.

I’m so glad you’re here. Let’s make this space a gorgeous celebration of black people, family, and better understanding ourselves. Let’s all take our first deep breath, together.

Thank you,

LEE EDWARD COLSTON II
DEAR FRIENDS,

Welcome to *The First Deep Breath*, a world-premiere play by playwright Lee Edward Colston II.

Developed as part of our 2018 IGNITION Festival of New Plays, *The First Deep Breath* is a bold American family drama for our times. Following in the footsteps of giants of the genre such as August Wilson, Eugene O’Neill, and Tracy Letts, Lee has written a work that is both intimate and epic in scope. Rooted in the experience of the Black American family, Lee’s play tackles expansive questions of trauma, healing, and heritage.

When I read *The First Deep Breath*, I was struck by the ferocious passion and courage—as well as empathy—that Lee brought to every beat of the story. A master storyteller, Lee confronts the bonds of religion, sexuality, secrets, and lies that threaten to tear apart the Jones family when their eldest son returns from prison. In this play, the ties of family can be as suffocating as they are supportive, and love is inexorably intertwined with grief. He compassionately examines the wounds that parents leave on their children, despite their best efforts, alongside the sometimes steep cost of trying to be a good child. Through each twist and turn of this searing drama, Lee confidently leads an audience through the secrets and revelations of a group of people who painfully learn to breathe on their own terms. I’m thrilled to share this incredible play and to introduce Lee to Chicago audiences.

In its complexity and rawness, this play is in many ways a celebration—a celebration of the nuanced Black American experience seen in the microcosm of the family unit, and mirrored in the social and racial climate of the nation at large. Now more than ever we must listen to one another, lean into the discomfort, and learn how to heal and forgive.

We also welcome the gifted director Steve H. Broadnax III and his wonderful Chicago cast—Patrick Agada, David Alan Anderson, Gregory Fenner, Jalen Gilbert, Melanie Loren, Clinton Lowe, Deanna Reed-Foster, and Celeste Williams—to Victory Gardens as they breathe life into this vital, powerful new play.

To enhance your experience of this play, we have curated a comprehensive Public Program series that is specifically designed to deepen your experience with the issues that surround *The First Deep Breath*. Please check your program for listings. You are welcome at any and all events. Please join us.

In true Chicago theatre community spirit, Victory Gardens is pleased to collaborate with About Face Theatre to present world-premiere plays about our collective American LGBTQ+ experience. At the time of writing, we are reminded of Matthew Shepard’s brutal homophobic murder twenty years ago and the many murders and suicides of our transgender brothers and sisters of color while the Supreme Court debates over LGBTQ+ civil rights. Our fight is far from over. Please support the world premiere of Scott Bradley’s *Packing*, now running at Theatre Wit through December 7. For more information, visit aboutfacetheatre.com.

With *The First Deep Breath*, and all of our productions, we welcome you to Victory Gardens to be inspired and challenged as you see your world on stage.

Warm wishes,

CHAY YEW
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Public Programs is an event series designed to enhance your experience by exploring themes and issues within Victory Gardens’ productions. Connecting our theater to the world beyond the stage and rehearsal room, Public Programs bridge ideas, provoke dialogue, and deepen the relationship between our audiences and our productions. All Public Programs are free and open to the public!

AFTERWORDS
AFTER SELECT PERFORMANCES OF THE FIRST DEEP BREATH • POST-SHOW CONVERSATION
Join us for one of our intimate post-show conversations led by members from the Victory Gardens community, reflect on what you’ve seen, and share your response.

PANEL: THE POC LGBTQ+ INTERSECTION
SUNDAY, NOV 17 • 5:30PM • POST-SHOW CONVERSATION
This program is supported by the David Rockefeller Fund
In The First Deep Breath, Abdul-Malik lives in the intersection between queer identity and black culture. Many queer people of color face discrimination in one of these communities because of their association with the other. What does it mean to be a queer American of color? How does the damage caused by systems of oppression and privilege differ between marginalized communities and uniquely affect those belonging to multiple? Join us in examining the complex intersection of the LGBTQ+ communities and those of color in 2019.

CONVERSATION WITH PLAYWRIGHT LEE EDWARD COLSTON II
THURSDAY, NOV 21 • 10:30PM • POST-SHOW CONVERSATION
Join The First Deep Breath playwright Lee Edward Colston II for a special post-show conversation about bringing this epic piece of theatre to life.

BLACK BEAUTY FESTIVAL: A SOULFUL HOLIDAY
SATURDAY, NOV 23, 1:00–8:00PM • SUNDAY, NOV 24, 12:30–6:00PM
Victory Gardens is thrilled to bring the Black Beauty Festival, in partnership with Black Women’s Expo, Black Owned Chicago, and Circles & Ciphers back for the fourth edition of this incredible event. Black Beauty Festival: A Soulful Holiday is a two-day event that uplifts Black-owned businesses, engages our community in conversations around art and social justice, and celebrates the beauty of being Black. Featuring shopping, performances, mimosas and manicures, fashion, and more! For a full schedule of events, visit victorygardens.org/event/black-beauty-festival. RSVPs for this event are encouraged, but not required.

PANEL: LEADING THE CONGREGATION
SUNDAY, DEC 1 • 5:30PM • POST-SHOW CONVERSATION
This program is supported by the David Rockefeller Fund
In The First Deep Breath, Albert compromises his values for the greater good of the congregation. In polarized 2019, how do religious leaders balance the social and political needs of the institutions with their own personal values? How do they balance religious tradition with the responsibility to evolve and adapt with society? Join us in conversation with religious leaders from across Chicago as we dive deep into the challenges of leading a house of worship in an ever-transforming world.

PANEL: RE-ENTERING SOCIETY
SUNDAY, DEC 8 • 5:30PM • POST-SHOW CONVERSATION
This program is supported by the David Rockefeller Fund
In The First Deep Breath, Abdul-Malik struggles to find his personal and professional footing after a six year prison sentence. What are the economic and psychological challenges of re-entering society after prison? How is this process exacerbated for low-income families and people of color? And how does one recover from wrongful conviction? Join us as we explore the re-entry process and how the formerly incarcerated can be better supported by their community.

PANEL: HEALING ON YOUR OWN TERMS
SUNDAY, DEC 15 • 5:30PM • POST-SHOW CONVERSATION
This program is supported by the David Rockefeller Fund
In The First Deep Breath, a Black American family grapples with the effects of chronic illness, long-term caretaking, incarceration and death—all issues which take a toll on the mental health of the individual and the family. How do racism and systemic oppression complicate the process of healing? How have stigmas against seeking therapy evolved in recent generations? What other sources of healing or emotional support do communities and individuals rely on? Join us as we break down the dynamics at work in the landscape of mental health care for Black Americans.
PATRICK AGADA
AJ (ALEXANDER MICHAEL JONES)
Victory Gardens debut. Chicago: The Brothers Size (Steppenwolf) Something Clean (Sideshow/ Rivendell Theatre-Jeff nomination), You For Me For You (Sideshow Theatre); Dutch Masters (Jackalope Theatre-Jeff Award); Choir Boy, The Play About My Dad (Raven Theatre); Superior Donuts (Open Door Theatre); Dunsinane, Q Brother’s Christmas Carol, Shakespeare’s Greatest Hits (Chicago Shakespeare Theatre); Jabari Dreams of Freedom (Chicago Children’s Theatre). Regional: Blue Man Group (Astor Place Theatre). Film & TV: “Chicago Fire”. Patrick is with Shirley Hamilton.

DAVID ALAN ANDERSON*
PASTOR ALBERT MELVIN JONES III

GREGORY FENNER*
LESLEI CARTER
Victory Gardens debut. Chicago: Richard III, Hang Man, Hamlet, Cosmologies (The Gift Theatre); Megastasis (Eclipse Theatre-Jeff nomination); A Small Oak Tree Runs Red (Congo Square Theatre); IQ out of I2 (Theater Wit); Love and Information (Remy Bumppo Theatre); Native Son (Court Theatre, u/s). Regional: Pass Over (Curious Theatre Company); Angels in America: Parts I & II, Six Degrees of Separation (Stray Dog Theatre); The Whipping Man (New Jewish Theatre); Fully Committed (Stray Dog Theatre-St. Louis Theatre Circle Award Winner: Best Leading Actor in a Comedy). Film & TV: “The Chi”, “Empire”, “Chicago Fire”, “Chicago P.D.”. Ensemble member at The Gift Theatre, graduate from the Second City conservatory, proudly represented by Paonessa Talent.

JALEN GILBERT*
TYREE FISHER
Victory Gardens: Mies Julie. Chicago: Too Heavy For Your Pocket (Timeline Theatre); Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom (Writers Theatre); Hooded, or Being Black for Dummies (First Floor Theater-Jeff nomination); Dontrell, Who Kissed the Sea (First Floor Theater). Film & TV: “Work in Progress” “The Exorcist,” “Chicago Med,” “Knives and Skin”.

MELANIE LOREN
DEE-DEE (DENISE JONES)
Victory Gardens debut. Chicago: The Color Purple, Little Shop of Horrors (Drury Lane Theatre); The Mountaintop (Court Theatre-Jeff nomination); A Small Oak Tree Runs Red (Congo Square Theatre); IQ out of I2 (Theater Wit); Love and Information (Remy Bumppo Theatre); Native Son (Court Theatre, u/s). Regional: Pass Over (Curious Theatre Company); Angels in America: Parts I & II, Six Degrees of Separation (Stray Dog Theatre); The Whipping Man (New Jewish Theatre); Fully Committed (Stray Dog Theatre-St. Louis Theatre Circle Award Winner: Best Leading Actor in a Comedy). Film & TV: “The Chi”, “Empire”, “Chicago Fire”, “Chicago P.D.”. Ensemble member at The Gift Theatre, graduate from the Second City conservatory, proudly represented by Paonessa Talent.

CLINTON LOWE*
ABDUL-MALIK (ALBERT MELVIN JONES IV)
Victory Gardens debut. Broadway: Holler If Ya Hear Me (musical workshop inspired by Tupac Shakur, directed by Tony Award winner, Kenny Leon). Off-Broadway: Kill Move Paradise
BIOS

(Chicago Shakespeare Theatre); A Lesson Before Dying (Clarence Brown Theatre); A Raisin in the Sun, Wedding Band, A Christmas Carol (Milwaukee Repertory Theatre). Film & TV: Rose White (Breakwall Pictures); “Boss” (STARZ!); “Empire” (FOX). Celeste is an adjunct instructor at Columbia College Chicago and is a proud 32-year member of Actors’ Equity Association.

LEE EDWARD COLSTON II

PLAYWRIGHT

Lee Edward Colston II is a Philly native, former prison guard turned actor, playwright, director, acting and writing coach, and author. Selected acting credits include: Intimate Apparel, The Color Purple (Nat’l tour), Seven Guitars, Hoodoo Love, In Arabia We’d All Be Kings, Hadestown (New York Theater Workshop), The Sign In Sydney Brustein’s Window, The Winter’s Tale, Uncle Vanya, Merchant of Venice, Othello, Avenue X, and Sweat (The Public Theater, reading). Television credits include: “The Black List: Redemption” (NBC), “Mr. Robot” (USA). Playwriting: Roost, Solitary, and The First Deep Breath. His new plays currently in development include: For Which It Stands, This Is My America, and Station. His play Solitary was winner of the 2008 Philadelphia Theater Workshop. His play Roost won the 2010 Life Media Award in the Philadelphia Urban Theater Festival and the 2013 Hidden River Arts Award for Best New Play. He was a 2017 Finalist for the Shonda Rhimes ‘Unsung Voices’ Playwriting Commission and a 2017 recipient of the National Black Theatre ‘I Am Soul’ playwriting fellowship. In 2018, Lee’s play The First Deep Breath was selected to be a part of the Victory Gardens IGNITION Festival of New Plays as well as being a semifinalist for the Page 73 playwriting fellowship and a finalist for Barrington Stage Company’s Burman New Play Award. As a teaching artist he trains actors and writers in both one on one and classroom settings with a special focus on classical training and preparing actors and writers for the industry as well as undergrad and grad school audition preparation. MFA: The Juilliard School. Follow him on Instagram: @ThatsMrColston2U

DEANNA REED-FOSTER*

PEARL THOMAS

Victory Gardens debut. Chicago: Mill Fire, Marvin’s Room, Be Here Now (Shattered Globe/ Ensemble Member); Nina Simone: Four Women (Northlight); A Christmas Memory, All Shook Up (Theatre At The Center); Marvelous Marvelettes, The Other Cinderella, Mama Said (Black Ensemble); The Watsons Go To Birmingham (Chicago Childrens). Regional: Fences (Judy Baylor). Touring: A Piece Of My Soul (Lewis Productions). Film & TV: Last Flag Flying, Widows, Southside With You, Rollboune, “Chicago Fire”, “Chicago P.D.” (NBC); “Sense8”, “Southside”, “Joe Pera Talks With You”. Represented by DDO Chicago.

CELESTE WILLIAMS*

RUTH JONES

Victory Gardens: Mies Julie, Tree (Black Theatre Alliance nomination); Knock Me a Kiss (Black Theatre Alliance nomination), Emma’s Child, Pecong (Jeff nomination). Chicago: Familiar (u/s), How Long Will I Cry?, Harriet Jacobs (Stepenwolf Theatre Company); Drowning Crow, A Raisin in the Sun, A Christmas Carol, Miss Evers’ Boys, stop.reset (u/s) (Goodman Theatre); Permanent Collection, 84 Charing Cross Road (Northlight Theatre–Jeff nomination); In the Blood (Next Theatre Company); Eastville (Writers’ Theatre–Black Theatre Alliance Award); Playboy of the West Indies (Jeff nomination), All’s Well that Ends Well (Court Theatre); King Lear and Macbeth (The National Black Theater in Harlem, New York Times Critic’s Pick). Regional: The Brother’s Size (Luna Stage, Top 10 Best NJ Productions of the Year); Romeo & Juliet (TheaterWorks USA, National Tour). Film & TV: American Gangster (dir. Oscar nominee, Ridley Scott, starring Oscar winners, Denzel Washington & Russell Crowe); Time Out of Mind (starring Golden Globe winner, Richard Gere); Louder Than Bombs (starring Oscar nominee, Jesse Eisenberg); “The Hustle” (Fuse TV, Series Regular, NAACP Image Award); “Law & Order: SVU” (NBC, Guest Star); “Blue Bloods” (CBS, Guest Star). Training: William Esper Studio (New York), Open City Acting Studio (Los Angeles). Purchase College, B.A. Philosophy. For more, Instagram/Twitter: @clinton_lowe or visit www.clintonlowe.com.

STEVE H. BROADNAX III*

DIRECTOR

Theatre Company, Apollo Theatre NYC, Classical Theatre of Harlem, Atlantic Theatre NYC, Detroit Public Theatre, Baltimore Center Stage, The Black Theatre Troupe in Phoenix, AZ, Arkansas Repertory Theatre, Moore Theatre in Seattle, Market Theatre in Johannesburg, The Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland, National Arts Festival in South Africa, and The Adelaide Arts Festival Australia. The Hip Hop Project, an award-winning, full-length, original play directed, choreographed, and conceived by Steve, has toured nationally and was showcased at the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival in Washington, D.C. Other writings include the award-winning American Taboo, and Camouflage (Eugene O’Neill semi-finalist). Training: Conservatory of Fine Arts Webster University and Penn State University.

REGINA GARCIA†
SCENIC DESIGNER
Victory Gardens: Fade. Chicago: Rivendell Theater Ensemble, Court Theatre, Steppenwolf, Teatro Vista, among others. Regional: Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Denver Center for the Performing Arts, Arizona Theatre Company, among others. Regina is a fellow of the NEA/TCG Career Development Program for Designers and the Princess Grace Awards, USA. She is a Regional Associate Member of the League of Professional Theatre Women, and Advisory Board member of the Latinx Theatre Commons. She teaches at the Theatre School at DePaul University. www.GarciaPortfolio.com

CHRISTINE PASCUAL†
COSTUME DESIGNER

JASON LYNCH
LIGHTING DESIGNER
Victory Gardens debut. Chicago: School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play (upcoming), Lottery Day (Goodman Theatre); The Recommendation (Windy City Playhouse); The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963, The Very Hungry Caterpillar Show (Chicago Children’s Theatre); Kill Move Paradise (TimeLine Theatre Company, upcoming); The Total Bent (Haven Theatre); Black Ballerina, Sunset Baby, A Home on the Lake (Fleetwood-Jourdain Theatre). Regional: Hairspray (Oregon Shakespeare Festival); Fetch Clay, Make Man (Dallas Theater Center); Skeleton Crew (Alley Theatre); Feeding Beatrice (Repertory Theatre of St. Louis); The Wild Party, Drag On, A Doll’s House, A Doll’s House, Part 2 (Denver Center for the Performing Arts). Mr. Lynch is the recipient of the 2019 Michael Maggio Emerging Designer Award which recognizes emerging theatrical designers. He is a member of The Association of Lighting Designers and alumnus of The Santa Fe Opera. www.jasonlynch.com

JOSH SCHMIDT†
SOUND DESIGNER & ORIGINAL MUSIC

JENNY PINSON
PROPS DESIGNER
BIOS

GABY LABOTKA
FIGHT & INTIMACY DIRECTOR
Victory Gardens debut. Chicago: A Doll’s House (Intimacy, Fight, and Movement Director, Writers Theatre); X (Sideshow Theatre Company); Oslo (TimeLine Theatre Company); Kiss (Intimacy Director, Haven Theatre); Desire in a Tinier House (Pride Films & Plays); La Ruta (Fight Director, Steppenwolf Theatre Company); In the Blood (Red Tape Theatre); Hamlet (Fight Director, The Gift Theatre Company); A Story Told in Seven Fights (Fight Director, ALTA Award, The Neo-Futurists), among others. Regional: Indecent (Associate Intimacy Director, Oregon Shakespeare Festival); Romeo and Juliet (Assistant Fight Director, Shakespeare Festival St. Louis); among others. Gaby is a Certified Intimacy Director with Intimacy Directors International, an Advanced Actor Combatant with the Society of American Fight Directors, and a member of the Alliance of Latinx Theatre Artists (ALTA). gabylabotka.com

DONALD E. CLAXON*
PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER
Victory Gardens debut. Chicago: Goodman Theatre, Teatro Vista, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Chicago Opera Theater, Windy City Playhouse, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Silk Road Rising, Grant Park Music Festival, Court Theatre, Paramount Theatre, The Second City, About Face Theatre, Regional: Mobile Opera, Peninsula Players, Yale Opera, Florentine Opera, Glimmerglass Festival, Barrington Stage Company and Yale Repertory Theatre. Donald is a graduate of Wabash College and the Yale School of Drama.

ERICA DANIELS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Before joining Victory Gardens Theater as Executive Director, Erica Daniels was President of Second City Theatricals where she shepherded the remount of The Art of Falling with Hubbard Street Dance Company, as well as Black Side of the Moon with Woolly Mammoth Theatre, Second City’s collaboration with Slate on Unelectable You: The Second City’s Completely Unbiased Political Revue, and The Second City’s Guide to America at The Kennedy Center. Previously, Erica was The Associate Artistic Director at Steppenwolf Theatre Company. She joined the company in 2001 as the casting director and director of the School at Steppenwolf. Erica did the original casting for Manhattan Theatre Club’s Broadway production of Airline Highway, and the Broadway production of Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. She also cast the original production of August, Osage County (also for Broadway, The National Theatre of London and Sydney Theatre Company) and the Broadway production of Superior Donuts. Prior to that, Erica worked as an agent for Geddes, Arlene Wilson and Shirley Hamilton, and spent a year as The Theatre Department Coordinator at William Morris in New York. Working under George Lane, she worked with such writers as John Patrick Shanley, Richard Greenberg, and Edward Albee and directors such as Michael Mayer, Robert Falls and Daniel Sullivan. Erica began her career as a casting assistant at Jane Brody Casting. She has freelanced with various Chicago companies, including Lookingglass, Collaboration and About Face. Erica cast the independent film Imperfections for Coin Op productions. Erica is on the board of the League of Chicago Theatres. She holds a degree in Performance Studies from Northwestern.

BIOGRAPHIES

RICKY HARRIS
MUSICAL DIRECTOR
Victory Gardens debut. Chicago: Lyle, Lyle Crocodile (Lifeline Theatre), Cardboard Piano (Timeline Theatre), Hoodoo Love (Raven Theatre), The Winter Wonderettes (Beverly Arts Center), Direct from Death Row: The Scottsboro Boys (Raven Theatre). Ricky is the host of “Places! Live!” on Facebook Live and YouTube. Instagram: @places_live

BREON ARZELL
CHOREOGRAPHER
Victory Gardens: Rightlynd, The House That Will Not Stand. Chicago: The Brothers Size, We are Proud to Present... (Steppenwolf Theatre Company); The Color Purple (Drury Lane Theatre), Back in the Day (Urban Theater Company); Head Over Heels, The Wiz (Kokandy Productions); The Total Bent (Haven Theatre with About Face Theater); Marie Christine (BoHo Theatre); Scottsboro Boys (Porchlight Music Theatre); The Hairy Ape (Oracle Productions), among others. International credits include projects in: England, Italy, Germany, Denmark, and Singapore. Breon is also known from his acting work which can be seen on stage, television and film. breonarzell.com
CHAY YEWF
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Chay Yew is the Artistic Director at Victory Gardens Theater. Victory Gardens Theater: A Wonder in My Soul, Roz and Ray. The House That Will Not Stand, Hillary and Clinton, Death and the Maiden, An Issue of Blood, The Gospel of Lovingkindness, Mojada, Oedipus el Rey, Lettie, Universes’ Ameriville. Chicago: Dartmoor Prison, Black N Blue Boys/Broken Men (Goodman Theatre); Where Did We Sit On The Bus? (Teatro Vista/Victory Gardens, Boise Contemporary Theatre); Po Bay Tango (Northlight Theatre). Productions at The Public Theater, Playwrights Horizons, The Playwrights Realm, New York Theatre Workshop, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Rattlestick, National Asian American Theatre Company, Ma-Yi Theatre Company, Humana Festival at Actors Theatre of Louisville, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, The Kennedy Center, Mark Taper Forum, American Conservatory Theater, South Coast Rep, Long Wharf Theatre, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Huntington Theatre Company, Denver Center Theatre, Playmakers Rep, Empty Space Theatre, Mosaic Theatre Company, Curious Theatre Company, Cincinnati Playhouse, Round House Theater, Portland Center Stage, Southern Rep, Geva Theatre Company, Pillsbury Theatre, Gala Hispanic Theatre, Cornerstone Theatre Company, Singapore Repertory Theatre, Theatre at Boston Court, East West Players amongst others. His opera credits include world premieres of Osvaldo Golijov and David Henry Hwang’s Ainadamar (co-production with the Tanglewood Music Center, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic); and Rob Zuidam’s Rage d’Amors (Tanglewood Music Center). Chay is a recipient of the OBIE Award and DramaLogue Award for Direction. As a playwright, his plays include Porcelain, A Language of Their Own, Red, A Beautiful Country, Wonderland, Question 27 Question 28, A Distant Shore, 17, and Visible Cities. His other work includes adaptations of A Winter People (based on Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard), Lorca’s The House of Bernarda Alba, and a musical Long Season. His performance works include Vivian and Her Shadows and Home: Places between Asia and America. His plays have been produced at The Public Theater, Mark Taper Forum, Manhattan Theatre Club, Long Wharf Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse, Intiman Theatre, Wilma Theatre, Dallas Theatre Center, Portland Center Stage, amongst many others. Overseas, his plays have been produced by the Royal Court Theatre (London), Fattore K and Napoli Teatro Festival (Naples, Italy), La Mama (Melbourne, Australia), Four Arts (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia), Singapore Repertory Theatre, Toy Factory, Checkpoint Theatre, Theatre-Works (Singapore), amongst others. He is also the recipient of the London Fringe Award for Best Playwright and Best Play, George and Elisabeth Marton Playwriting Award, GLAAD Media Award, Made in America Award, AEA/SAG/AFTRA Diversity Honor, and Robert Chesley Award. His plays Porcelain and A Language of Their Own, and The Hyphenated American Plays are published by Grove Press. He recently edited Version 3.0: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Plays for TCG Publications. He was the founding director of the Taper’s Asian Theatre Workshop and producer of Taper, Too. Chay is also an alumnus of New Dramatists and serves on Chicago’s Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events’ Cultural Advisory Council and League of Chicago Theatres. He was awarded the 2016 Halcyon Theatre Iris Award for Outstanding commitment for connecting Chicago’s Communities and the Arts, and the 2017 Sideshow Impact Award for Bold and Inclusive Artistic Leadership.

* Denotes a member of Actors’ Equity Association, the union of professional actors and stage managers
† Denotes a member of United Scenic Artists, IATSE Local 829, AFL-CIO
‡ Denotes a member of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society, a national theatrical labor union
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NATIONAL ARTISTIC ADVISORY BOARD
Victory Gardens has assembled several national theater artists who will serve as our artistic advisors and ambassadors. They will raise more awareness across the country of the artistic and cultural importance of Victory Gardens Theater and open more doors to the advancement of our mission of new plays and diversity.

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Victory Gardens is grateful for the generous support of these corporations, foundations, and government agencies that provide funding for specific initiatives as well as general operating support. We thank the following organizations for gifts received from March 1, 2018–October 10, 2019.

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**VISIONARY CIRCLE ($50,000-$74,999)**

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**TONY CIRCLE ($15,000-$24,999)**

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**ANGELS’ CIRCLE ($10,000-$14,999)**

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**PLAYWRIGHTS’ CIRCLE ($2,000-$4,999)**

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*Indicates multi-year gift
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The Director’s Council is a group of extraordinary donors who contribute $15,000 or more annually. These donors help sustain VGT as a frontrunner in the Chicagoland and national theater communities. This list recognizes gifts received from March 1, 2018–October 10, 2019.

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