

Arena Stage to launch 10 play season in July

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Arena Stage's ten-production 2016-2017 season will feature theatrical presentations of true events (including a new play by local playwright Jacqueline Lawton), as well as a two-play Lillian Hellman festival, another appearance by Kathleen Turner, and a couple of old favorites, the company announced.

One of those based-on-a-true-story stories launches the Arena season on July 1, 2016: the world premiere of *Born for This: the BeBe Winans Story*. BeBe, the youngest sibling in the gospel-singing Winans family, is a prodigious talent with a dramatic life story, which includes a tour through the world of celebrity gospel preaching and singing but also involves a lawsuit against his manager and a domestic assault charge, later dropped. It is unclear how much of this will be in the musical, though. Winans has written an original score for this musical, and has co-written the book with Charles Randolph-Wright. Through August 28.

The first part of Arena's Lillian Hellman festival will come in the form of a September 23 — October 30, 2016 production of *The Little Foxes*, a tale of a family of schemers seeking to build and control a cotton mill in the deep South. Nathan Award-winner Chris Jones of the Chicago Tribune called *The Little Foxes* a "juicy morality melodrama." With Emmy winner Marg Heldenberger (*CS!*).

Kathleen Turner, seen at Arena in the Molly Ivins bioplay *Red Hot Patriot* in 2012, returns with another solo show in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion's meditation on the death of her husband and the near-death of her daughter (who died shortly after the book was published.) Jayne Blanchard, commenting on a recent production at Baltimore's Strand Theater in [this review](#), called the award-winning memoir and the play it was based on, a story of "one of those years—you know, the kind where catastrophes become the warp and woof of everyday life and the only thing you can do is hang onto routine until it almost takes on a mystical dimension." From October 7 to November 20 of this year.

Overlapping *Year* will be a production of *Carousel*, Rodger's and Hammerstein's second show (after *Oklahoma!*). Ferenc Molár's novel about a young man who turns to armed robbery to support his growing family must have seemed like an unlikely path for a musical comedy to take, but R&H, after transferring the venue from Hungary to Maine, managed to create an enduring classic. (Jayne Blanchard, [reviewing the Olney Theatre production](#), called it "a big sigh of a musical, accent on the big—big emotions, big songs, big music.") Director Molly Smith, Nicholas Rodriguez and E. Faye Butler — all standouts in Arena's 2011 *Oklahoma!* — will be in this production as well. From October 28 to December 24.

On November 28, The Tony-winning Lookingglass Theatre Company of Chicago will present *Moby Dick*, which it is doing with The Actors Gymnasium, the Alliance Theatre and South Coast Repertory. Nancy Bishop of Gaper's Block gives a vivid account of Lookingglass' approach: "Dark blue silk fabric becomes the waves of the sea and a splendid white cloud of fabric floats over our heads and the great white whale finally appears to the crew of the Pequod. Three female actors...perform dozens of roles, flinging off cloaks to become fish and swooping around and over the stage to become wind or waves." Through December 24.

Arena will kick 2017 off with a world premiere production of Lisa Loomer's *Roe*, a story of what happened to the

principals after the Supreme Court ruled in *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973). As you may know, the pseudonymous appellant later became a committed anti-abortion activist.. Loomer's story follows her, as well as the lawyer who argued her case before the High Court. *Roe v. Wade*'s 44th anniversary will occur during the show's January 12 — February 19 run.

The company delivers the second production of its Lillian Hellman festival starting on February 3, 2017 with *Watch on the Rhine*, featuring Marsha Mason. Hellman's story of a Nazi-fighting family in suburban Washington, D.C. won broad approval in 1941, when it premiered. The Nation noted that it "avoid[s] the flat didacticism and the thinness of characterization usually so evident in thesis plays" and New Masses praised "the sincerity of purpose of a dramatist who possesses potentialities far beyond the grasp of any other writer on the contemporary theater scene." Through March 5.

Jacqueline Lawton's world premiere play, *Intelligence*, is about CIA agent Valerie Plame Wilson, a highly-trained CIA operative tasked with protecting the national security of the U.S. and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction post-9/11. Inspired by true events, *Intelligence* explores the cost of deception and the consequences of speaking truth to power. It will run from February 24 to April 2.

Lorraine Hansberry's American classic *A Raisin in the Sun* follows a 1950s African-American family as they struggle to satisfy their dreams with the \$10,000 proceeds of the patriarch's life insurance. The play revolutionized American theater when it opened in 1959; no other production had given such a full look at black lives. The Younger family's effort to integrate a white Chicago neighborhood paralleled the struggle of Hansberry's father to get a restrictive covenant struck down. (It went all the way to the Supreme Court; he won.) Tazewell Thompson directs; from March 31 to April 30, 2017.

Arena wraps up its 2016-2017 season with *Stick Fly* author Lydia Diamond's *Smart People*, in which four highly educated people try to figure out how big a role race plays in their lives. Marilyn Stasia of *Variety* calls *Smart People* "a sexy, serious and very, very funny modern-day comedy of manners." *Smart People* will run from April 14 to May 21 of next year.

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