# DIGGERS

By Donna-Michelle St. Bernard

A co-production with Black Theatre Workshop





Feb 27 - Mar 10 / 2024 PTE.mb.ca

# WELCOME TO THE SHOW



Diggers began as a Prairie Theatre Exchange and Black Theatre Workshop co-commission. The prompt that we gave to Donna-Michelle St. Bernard (DM) was to think about the climate crisis. It was then that we realized Diggers had begun long before we reached out to this extraordinary playwright.

For years, DM has been working on a project titled the 54ology. Her goal is to write a play set in/inspired by each of the countries in Africa.

There was an image she had discovered of grave diggers in Sierra Leone, and she knew that this picture would be the basis for a new play. To our delight (PTE and BTW), our invitation to accept a commission was the catalyst for the writing to begin.

Now, four years later, we are witnessing the world premiere production. A play created across three provinces, and throughout a pandemic and eventual reopening of life and society. A play set during an Ebola epidemic, mirroring many of experiences and questions that arose from the COVID-19 pandemic. Included in these questions was and is, "What value do we place on the lives of essential workers?"

What we find so brilliant and often astonishing is that DM has written this play full of life. It is often challenging and sad, but wonderfully it is also replete with hope, resilience, community, laughter and music. It is a critique in many ways, but it is also a celebration of life. A celebration of lives. The play champions essential workers, and the journey we are all on in learning how to move together, communally, through crisis.

As Diggers invites us to see, the way forward is together in community.

With love,

Thomas Morgan Jones

Artistic Director

Lisa Li

Managing Director

13ah

#### PRAIRIE THEATRE EXCHANGE IS PROUD TO PRESENT

# **DIGGERS**

# By Donna-Michelle St. Bernard

A co-production with Black Theatre Workshop

#### Featuring:

JAHLANI GILBERT-KNORREN Bai

**CHANCE JONES** Abdul

CHRISTIAN PAUL Solomon

WARONA SETSHWAELO Sheila

PULGA MUCHOCHOMA Director

LYDIE DUBUISSON Associate Director

**COURTNEY MOSES** Set Designer

GEORGES MICHAEL FANFAN Costume Designer

TIM RODRIGUES Lighting Designer
ELENA STOODLEY Sound Designer

**SHOPDOGS** Production Manager & Technical Direction

**ELYSE QUESNEL** Stage Manager

PAIGE LEWIS Assistant Stage Manager

#### **RUNTIME: 90 MINUTES, NO INTERMISSION**

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard is a member of Playwrights Guild of Canada.

Diggers is produced by arrangement with Kensington Literary Representation, 34 St. Andrew Street, Toronto, ON, M5T 1K6, kensingtonlit@rogers.com.

# DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

First of all, I would like to welcome you to this moment of witnessing this amazing play written by Donna-Michelle St. Bernard.

Diggers is about self-questioning our position in society during times of struggle. When disaster strikes, we are faced with both sorrow and the chance to determine where our hope lies. This play also incites us to deepen our understanding of what support really means and how we provide that assistance.

I am very privileged to have had the opportunity to create this work in collaboration with so many talented artists. Black Theatre Workshop and Prairie Theatre Exchange have created a safe space for us to continue searching for ways to reflect on issues that are, most of the time, ignored or just spoken of less. This creation was a very collaborative process. I therefore would love to give a shout out to everyone who supported and continues to support this work.

Donna-Michelle takes us to that place of ongoing query, while thrusting us forward, towards understanding. I hope we can sit down and enjoy the show but also, once the show is over, ask ourselves what part of this play educated us the most and where should we go from here.

#### Yeboo

#### Pulga Muchochoma

Each season, we prioritize making space for Indigenous stories. This is our answer to the calls of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. To make space, to support, and to be led by Indigenous collaborators.

This is our way of honouring Treaty 1 Land, the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Dakota and Red River Métis nations and the home of many other Indigenous nations and Peoples.

All of us at PTE are committed to reconciliation, and to moving forward, together, in a good way.

You are welcome here in this space on Treaty 1 Land. Thank you for supporting Indigenous voices, and for supporting the live performing arts in Winnipeg.

# PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

I remember being a child, watching my mother stay up late over lesson plans, taking professional development weekends, locking herself in the basement at year-end to finish report cards. I remember her bundling up in warm clothes to walk the picket line, and the disdain people had for these teachers who "had it so easy and always wanted more." The narrative persists that a teacher's day is short, their summers wide open, that they have it all and cannot be satisfied. I always knew that they didn't have it easy because they had to deal with me, and I was a menace. I learned very early what it meant to be taken for granted.

Sierra Leone ("Lion Mountains") is located on the West Coast of Africa, open to the sea via the natural harbour in the capital city, Freetown. It is a nation rich in culture and minerals, home to 18 indigenous peoples admixed with Portuguese settlers and formerly enslaved freedmen from England, Jamaica, and Nova Scotia.

In Sierra Leone, as elsewhere, gravediggers' work persists through pandemic, through seasonal flooding, Ebola outbreak and the casualties of political upheaval. Like all essential workers, they don't do it because they are made for it, or because it is easy, but because it needs to be done and they are willing. Most of us will eventually require their labour. We must be willing to look at their lives.

Co-commissioned by BTW and PTE, *Diggers* is a part of the 54ology, a project in which a new performance work is inspired by a story from each of Africa's 54 nation states. These stories originate in Africa, but they come to life here, on Turtle Island by the collective effort of many minds. I'm inspired by the work of my collaborators, who breathed life into this text. I am grateful that you've come. I hope that this story speaks to you, here, now.

#### Donna-Michelle St. Bernard

Diggers was commissioned in 2021 by Prairie Theatre Exchange and Black Theatre Workshop and workshopped with NAC, BTW & PTE in 2022, with dramaturgy from Yvette Nolan and Thomas Morgan Jones.

Thanks for contributions to development from Cherissa Richards, Charlie Petch, Tawiah Ben M'Carthy, Kobèna Aquaa-Harrison, Quincy Armorer, Damien Broomes, Virgilia Griffith, Roy Lewis, Warona Setshwaelo, Jahlani Gilbert-Knorren, Christian Paul, Pulga Muchochoma, Lydie Dubuisson, Erick Oryema, Marie Benjamin and Bailey's Funeral Home.





Jahlani Gilbert-Knorren (he/him)

From 17 years dedication to football, to a random theatre class taught by an inspiring professor, to graduating from Concordia University with a Major in Theatre, Jahlani's path is just getting started in the arts. Suggested for his first role by local theatre director/professor, Liz Valdez, Jahlani landed his first role in Tableau D'Hôte Theatre's Blackout, co-directed by Tamara Brown and

Mathieu Perron and choreographed by Rodney Diverlus. Jahlani is excited to return to the stage after a two-year hiatus during the pandemic.



Chance Jones (he/him)
Abdul

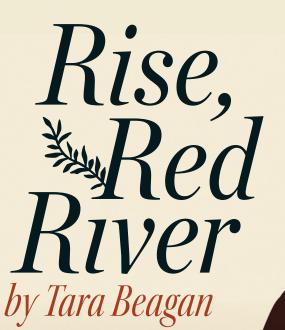
Chance Jones is a John Abbott Professional Theatre Alumni. He signed with DaVinci Talent after graduating. Quickly booked various roles walk on speaking roles on television series and movies such as: Transplant, Wong and Winchester, The Bold Type, Best Sellers. Became the Voice for Dr.Pepper commercials, featured in various Commercials: Ruffles, Moslen, Lotto 6/49. Despite all the multi-

media exposure, theatre is where Chance began his acting journey. Working with Black Theatre Workshop has always been a goal of his, and for this to be his first professional theatre debut is a dream come true.



Christian Paul (he/him)
Solomon

Christian Paul has been performing in Theatre, TV and Film for over 25 years. He is excited to be back at BTW for *Diggers*. His last theatre credits include *She Said/He said* and *The Meeting* where he played Dr. Martin Luther King. You can catch him on a French TV series called *Avant Le Crash*. He is currently finishing his short film *Maljo* to be released in 2024.



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Warona Setshwaelo (she/her)
Sheila

Warona Setshwaelo is a Tio.tia:ke (Montreal) based artist, with Tswana and Zulu roots. She moved to North America 16 years ago to pursue her career. Thus far she has been fortunate enough to have worked in TV; shows such as *The Disappearance*, 19-2 and *Quantico*. Some of her film credits include *Death Wish*, On the Basis of Sex and White House Down, and video games: Assassin's

Creed Origins, Valhalla and Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon to name a few. Her first love, the stage, still featured prominently in her life and she has formed healthy relationships with theatre companies across Canada, such as Imago, Centaur, Segal Centre, Teesri Duniya, RMTC, The Belfry, Tarragon, Repercussion and Scapegoat Carnivale. Warona is a mother and activist and is so excited to finally work with Donna-Michelle St. Bernard, a Canadian icon.



**Donna-Michelle St. Bernard** (she/her) *Playwright* 

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard aka Belladonna the Blest is an emcee, playwright and agitator. Her main body of work, the 54ology, includes: The First Stone, Cake, Sound of the Beast, A Man A Fish, Dark Love, Roominhouse, Salome's Clothes, Gas Girls, Give It Up, The Smell of Horses, and Diggers. Commissioned works include: Reaching For Starlight (Geordie Theatre), Say the Words (Wrecking

Ball), The House You Build (GTNT). Opera libretti include: Forbidden (Afarin Mansouri/ Tapestry Opera) and Oubliette and Nucleosynthesis (Ivan Barbotin/Tapestry Opera). DM has collaborated on the creation of The Only Good Indian with Jivesh Parasram and Tom Arthur Davis, Hope Is a Story with Sunny Drake, They Say He Fell with Nir Bareket and 501: Toronto in Transit with Justin Manyfingers and Bob Naismith. She is co-editor with Yvette Nolan of the Playwrights Canada Press anthologies Refractions: Solo and Refractions: Scenes, as well as editor of Indian Act: Residential School Plays. DM is currently the associate artist at lemonTree Creations, and artistic director of New Harlem Productions.



Pulga Muchochoma (he/him)
Director

Pulga Muchochoma was born in Mozambique. His dance career and training began in Quelimane with Montes Namuli Dance Company. In 2006, he came to Toronto with the company for the International AIDS Conference. With Montes Namuli/Shakespeare Link Canada, he performed in several shows in venues in Toronto and Mozambique. When Montes Namuli returned to Mozambique, Muchochoma stayed

in Toronto to study at the School of Toronto Dance Theatre. In 2009, he joined the company Toronto Dance Theatre where he danced for 11 seasons under the leadership of Christopher House. With TDT, Pulga worked with many local and international artists, and he also participated in the 2015 Opening ceremony of the Toronto Pan Am Games, with Cirque du Soleil and NBS. He's also the creator and the founder of Pulga Dance since 2015.



**Lydie Dubuisson** (she/her)
Associate Director

Lydie Dubuisson is a stage director, playwright, curator and dramaturg from Tiohtià:ke/ Montreal. Her work examines intersectionality, dystopian reality, collective memory and multilingual creative processes. Over the years, she has directed projects with Just for Laughs, Collectif Potomitan, Imago Theatre and Teesri Duniya Theatre. Dubuisson wrote Quiet/Silence and Sanctuary/Sanctuaire, and co-

wrote *Blackout: The Concordia Computer Riot*, which is published by Playwrights Canada Press. She is currently writing a new play commissioned by Théâtre Tableau d'Hôte. Lydie Dubuisson had her Stratford Festival debut in 2023, as a script consultant. Dubuisson was the first artistic associate at Black Theatre Workshop (2020-23). She is a curator with the Arrival Legacy Project. She graduated with distinctions from Concordia University's Theatre Program.



Courtney Moses Orbin (she/her)
Set Design

I am a set designer specializing in themes of societal decay and most recently reimagining traditional theatre works told from the perspective of characters of color. I am a cis-gender Black woman of American heritage. I started my career as a costume design assistant for music videos and continued learning as an art department assistant on both film and television. I am an

industry professional with dual degrees in both Film Production (Brooklyn College) and most recently, Scenography (Concordia University). A native of Brooklyn, New York, now residing in Montréal, I worked for companies such as CBS, HGTV, and Paramount. I enjoy designing for theatre because of its collaborative nature and intimate symbiotic relationship with community and my peers. My journey led me to finding a family with Black Theatre Workshop and look forward to continuing that important relationship as the set designer for Black Theatre Workshop's 2022 AMP Ensemble, which premiered at the NAC in June of 2022. My pursuit in design is to offer an alternative to the European-saturated constructs by elevating the Black gaze. Collaboration, sustainability, and generative cultural reference are integral to my creative process. I relish the chance to support stories with a new and innovative visual representation. It is my core belief that we must continue to do the vital work of utilizing the arts as substantial catalysts for change.

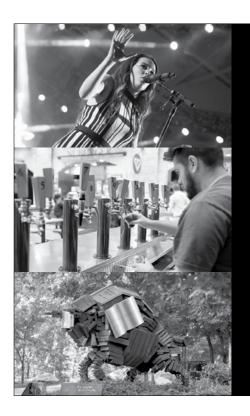


Georges Michael Fanfan (he/him)
Costume Design

Georges Michael Fanfan is a costume designer and stylist of Haitian descent based in Montréal. His fascination for garments led him to study fashion at Cégep Marie Victorin and later at L'École supérieure de mode (UQAM) where he created his last collection under the guidance of respected Montréal fashion innovator Ying Gao. Fanfan's passion for storytelling and sharing

compelling tales has steered him to use dress as a vehicle to encompass messages, thus pushing him to refine his skills in sewing, alteration, mood boards, and styling. As a costume designer, Georges Michael hopes to produce clothing that transcends the stage and the screen to connect the audience with the characters from a visual standpoint. His credits include *Providencia* directed by Marie Farsi and written by Mariana Tayler; *Dixon Road* directed by Ray Hogg and written by Fatuma Adara (The Musical Stage Company & Obsidian Theatre Company); *Cette Maison & Au Crépuscule* films directed by Miryam Charles; *Holiday Inn* for the Shaw Festival as a junior sewer; *Fanm Rebel* (Centaur Theatre 2020). Fanfan aspires to build dazzling wardrobes for the stage and the cinema, and to further the representation of people of color by developing attire that depicts their stories.





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Tim Rodrigues (he/him)
Lighting Design

A former dancer/choreographer turned lighting designer, Tim Rodrigues has worked with an array of companies on creation-based projects and international tours. Notable lighting designs include: Serving Elizabeth (Theatre Aquarius); English (Soulpepper / Segal Centre); Paint Me This House Of Love (Tarragon Theatre); The River (Magnus Theatre); Marjorie Prime (Segal Centre); How Black

Mothers Say I Love You (Black Theatre Workshop); From The Stars In The Sky, To The Fish In The Sea (Geordie Theatre). Tim is a four-time META nominee for Outstanding Lighting Design. In addition to his designs, he proudly serves on the Board of Directors for Mainline Theatre and Parts+Labour Danse.



**Elena Stoodley** (she/her)
Sound Design

Elena Stoodley is a singer, author, songwriter and sound designer half of the time, the remaining being spent in community organizing. Born in *Tio'tia:ke*, Montreal, she often blends her passion for social justice and black liberation with her art practices. She studied Creative Writing and Electroacoustic music and performed her music internationally, including in Cameroon and in the Republic of

Congo. She sometimes gives workshops or consults on topics of anti-oppressive work practices and intersectional inclusion. Her most recent sound design work was shown in the plays *The Mountaintop*, the Rootless tree, Manman LaMer, and Black Out (nominated for oustanding sound design for the META's - Montreal English Theatre Awards). Her most recent work was sound design for *Pipeline* by Black Theatre Workshop and M'appelle Mohamed Ali by La Sentinelle and L'amoure looks something like you by Eric Noël. She is currently working on the annual recap Chécké2023 and sound design for a documentary. In addition to *Diggers*, for Black Theatre Workshop, she recently did the sound design for *S'enjailler* by Stephie Mazunya.



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**Elyse Quesnel** (she/her) Stage Manager

Elyse (She/Her) is a Montreal-based stage manager. Selected stage management credits include: The Sound Inside, Between Riverside and Crazy, Category E and Orphans (Coal Mine Theatre); Cymbeline (Repercussion Theatre); Meet Me (LATP/Teesri Duniya Theatre), Extra / Beautiful / U, Omi Mouna (Infinitheatre), The Covenant (Theatre Ouest End), The Blonde, The Brunette and the Vengeful Redhead (Hudson Village/Lac Brome), Twelfth Night,

As You Like It, Taming of the Shew, The Three Musketeers and Anthony and Cleopatra (St-Lawrence Shakespeare Festival), 8 Ways My Mother is Conceived and In Search of Mrs Pirandello (Marybeth Productions) and Scotian Journey (Black Theatre Workshop). Selected assistant stage management credits include: At the Beginning of Time and Playing with Fire (Centaur Theatre), April Fools, Indecent and Top Girls (Segal Centre for Performing Arts) and The Snow Queen (Theatre New Brunswick). She has also worked as a technical co-ordinate for Just For Laughs. She is thrilled to be working with Black Theatre Workshop again on Diggers with this incredible team.



**Paige Lewis** (she/her) Assistant Stage Manager

Paige has worked in dance and theatre for over fifteen years. She has collaborated and toured with Royal MTC, Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers, The Canada Dance Festival, Q Dance, NAfro Dance Productions, Gearshifting Performance Works, Sick and Twisted Theatre, Winnipeg Comedy Festival and the School of Contemporary Dancers. Highlights

include; Toward Light: A Tribute to Rachel Browne, Billy Elliot: The Musical, By Grand Central Station (a Heavy Bell Production) and the Canadian Premiere of Angelin Preljocaj's Snow White with the RWB.

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