

ARENA STAGE MEDIA RELEASE

Molly Smith Artistic Director Edgar Dobie Executive Director Zelda Fichandler Founding Director

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MOLLY SMITH ENTERS 20TH ANNIVERSARY SEASON AS ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF ARENA STAGE AT THE MEAD CENTER FOR AMERICAN THEATER

***** In nearly two decades at Arena Stage, Smith has positioned company
as national center dedicated to American voices and artists *****

(Washington, D.C.) With the official opening night of the critically-acclaimed political drama *The Originalist*, Artistic Director Molly Smith enters her 20th anniversary season at Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater. *The Originalist*, directed by Smith, has been extended

With Smith's arrival in 1998, she became the third artistic director in Arena Stage's history, following Zelda Fichandler (Founding Artistic Director, 1950-1991) and Douglas C. Wager (Artistic Director, 1991-1998). Smith has been instrumental in leading the re-invention of Arena Stage, positioning the company as a national center dedicated to American voices and artists and spearheading the creation of the Mead Center for American Theater, a breathtaking expansion of the former campus that has become an architectural landmark for D.C.'s revitalized and renewed Southwest Waterfront.

In addition to *The Originalist*, Smith will also direct two deeply personal projects as the culmination of her 20th season—the world premieres of Mary Kathryn Nagle's *Sovereignty*, about a young Cherokee lawyer fighting to restore her Nation's jurisdiction (January 12-February 18, 2018), and *Snow Child*, a magical new musical set in the 1920s Alaskan wilderness and based on Eowyn Ivey's debut novel (April 13-May 20, 2018). Smith spent more than 25 years in Alaska, including nearly two decades at Perseverance Theatre in Juneau, Alaska, which she founded and ran for 19 years, and these upcoming projects tap into her passion for Native American stories and shedding light on the history and character of Alaska.

"I often say I have the best job in the world, and I mean it," says Executive Director **Edgar Dobie**. "Working alongside Molly for about 40% of her remarkable 20-year tenure is a big part of the equation. Successful theaters are driven by ambition. Molly has great ambition and a keen eye for superb projects that engage audiences and expand boundaries. It's a joy to work with Molly, and I am confident Molly's artistic leadership will deliver many victories in the seasons to come to match the myriad we have already proudly enjoyed."

Snow Child will mark Smith's 33rd production to direct for Arena Stage, where her directing repertoire includes everything from classic American plays by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill to contemporary work by Sarah Ruhl, Paula Vogel and Wendy Wasserstein. Her keen interest in reinventing the gold-standard American musical has led to celebrated productions of *South Pacific*, *Oklahoma!*, *The Music Man*, *My Fair Lady*, *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Carousel*. Her 50th anniversary production of *Fiddler on the Roof* remains the highest-grossing production in Arena Stage's history, a record previously held by her groundbreaking and wildly successful *Oklahoma!*, which served as the inaugural production in the newly refurbished Mead Center for American Theater and returned for a reprise engagement the following year.

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A great believer in new work, Smith has placed new-play development at the company's artistic center, focusing on both world premieres and second and third productions. Under her tenure, Arena Stage has produced 39 world premieres by writers who represent the diversity of America, workshopped more than 120 new plays and, in an unprecedented move, added 10 resident artists to the company's payroll.

Under Smith's leadership, Arena Stage has played an important role in nurturing 35 productions that have gone on to theaters across the United States and nine projects that went on to have a life on Broadway, including *Dear Evan Hansen*, winner of the 2017 Tony Award for Best Musical, and two recipients of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama—*Sweat* (2017) and *Next to Normal* (2010). Smith made her Broadway debut in 2014 directing *The Velocity of Autumn*, following its critically-acclaimed run at Arena Stage.

Arena Stage served as one of seven originating theaters in the 2015 D.C. Women's Voices Theater Festival, a two-month festival dedicated to presenting new work by female playwrights and featuring participation from more than 50 theaters in the nation's capital region. The Festival was designed to address the fact that far fewer female writers' plays receive full productions on American stages than those of their male counterparts—only 24% of productions in the 2014-2015 season (*American Theatre Magazine*). Arena Stage will participate in the second installment of the Festival, January 15-February 15, 2018.

Smith's continued role as a citizen activist has led her to program politically-charged and socially-relevant work since her arrival in 1998, with half of each season devoted to projects that are political in nature. Of her pioneering thirst for political theater, the *Washington Post* said, "And in the nation's capital, where until very recently political work was regarded as a tough sell, few have been as personally and professionally aggressive as Smith."

In 2016, Smith launched Arena Stage's largest commissioning project to date—Power Plays, an ambitious initiative that will commission and develop 25 new plays and musicals over the course of 10 years, focused on stories of politics, power and personalities who have made America what it is. The initiative will feature one story per decade, beginning with 1776 and ending in the present decade.

Power Plays includes three plays previously produced at Arena Stage—Lawrence Wright's *Camp David*, John Strand's *The Originalist* and Jacqueline E. Lawton's *Intelligence*. As previously announced, *Sovereignty* will receive its world premiere in January 2018 as the fourth production to debut as part of Power Plays, and *Snow Child* has been added as the fifth production and first musical to be produced as part of the initiative.

"Set in the 1920s Alaskan wilderness, *Snow Child* draws us into the world of homesteading in rural Alaska," says **Smith**. "The show's focus is on a young couple who struggle to survive in the unforgiving wilderness and try to tame what is better left wild. This musical offers a unique perspective on frontier life and the far north. It's a story about the wilderness and its brutal effect on human beings who don't understand their place in the world. At its heart, *Snow Child* is a love story between human beings, their community, their imaginations and the wild."

Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater, under the leadership of Artistic Director Molly Smith and Executive Director Edgar Dobie, is a national center dedicated to American voices and artists. Arena Stage produces plays of all that is passionate, profound, deep and dangerous in the American spirit, and presents diverse and ground-breaking work from some of the best artists around the country. Arena Stage is committed to commissioning and developing new plays and impacts the lives of over 10,000 students annually through its work in community engagement. Now in its seventh decade, Arena Stage serves a diverse annual audience of more than 300,000. arenastage.org

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