



NEGRO ENSEMBLE COMPANY

MECCA IS BURNING

WORLD PREMIERE

WEDNESDAY, **FEBRUARY 15** @ 7:30 PM

THURSDAY, **FEBRUARY 16** @ 7:30 PM

FRIDAY, **FEBRUARY 17** @ 8 PM

SATURDAY, **FEBRUARY 18** @ 2 PM

SATURDAY, **FEBRUARY 18** @ 8 PM

Annenberg Center, Harold Prince Theatre

There will be an intermission.



This project is made possible with lead support by the William Penn Foundation, and is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts. | Additional support has been provided through an Extended Artist Residency grant from The Sachs Program for Arts Innovation. | The Negro Ensemble Company Residency in the 22/23 season is made possible in part with support provided by the Penn Live Arts Accelerator Program at the University of Pennsylvania. | The Negro Ensemble Company is the 22/23 season artist-in-residence of the Brownstein Residency for Artistic Innovation.

PROGRAM NOTES

CAST

CANDACE Yohanna Florentino

MARCUS Benjamin Rowe

A'BRIAN Alton Ray

DEE' JA-RAY Kenya Wilson

ALICIA BONN Imana Breaux

KYLA BONN Ashlee Danielle

HENRY Steven Peacock Jacoby

DOMINICA Alyssa Carter

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER & ARTISTIC DIRECTOR Karen Brown

ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS Tracy Mack, Jessica Prince

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER/SET DESIGNER Patrice Davidson

DIRECTOR Karen Brown

COLLABORATIVE PLAYWRIGHTS & POETS Cris Eli Blak, Karen Brown, Lisa McCree, Levy Lee Simon, Mona R. Washington

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER Fulton Hodges

DRAMATURG A. J Muhammad

LIGHTING DESIGNER Melody A. Beal

SOUND DESIGNER David Wright

COSTUME DESIGNER Rhonda Lucas

GRAPHICS DESIGNER Damita Miles

PRESS REPRESENTATIVE Jonathan Slaff

Mecca is Burning is our perspective on the tenuous climate facing and plaguing our community in the current divisive political atmosphere. This new work, from the point of view of four Harlem families, presents the personal and universal realities of fear, anger, hope and love. We/They are just trying to live. This time is a time unlike any other in American society and *Mecca is Burning* is the journey of community and family. Actors, playwrights and poets, in concert, marking the passage of time and defining our present.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

The mission of the **Negro Ensemble Company, Inc.** (NEC) is to provide African American, African and Caribbean professional artists with an opportunity to learn, to work, to grow and to be nurtured in the performing arts. The overall mission of the NEC is to present live theatre performances by and about Black people to a culturally diverse audience that is often under-served by the theatrical community.

Karen Brown (Executive Producer, Artistic Director, Director)

Brown has been Executive Director for the Negro Ensemble Company, Inc. for the past three years. Brown has worked as a stringer reporter for a daily paper and weekly paper and as a TV news associate producer. She began her theatrical career in theatre/arts administration with the Kalamazoo Civic Theater, where she was the second director/manager for the Black Civic for two seasons. She established the Inner City Youth Summer Theatre Project, generating successful proposals to the IBM Corporation, which ran for two consecutive summers. The project served 50 primarily African American children ages 5 to 18, giving instruction in theatre, creative writing, dance, voice and journalism. Brown became the producing/director of the Theatre Arts and Broadcasting Skills Center, a Chicago-based production company touring theatrical productions and creating and performing scripts for television and video. In the 1990s, Brown worked with Boarshead Theatre in Lansing, MI as a Teaching Artist working with middle and high schools. Brown worked as a lead team teacher in the Urban Writes program with American Place Theatre, producing theatrical scripts with middle and high school children. She spent four years working as a producer and promotion writer with NBC affiliate WOODTV8 and ABC41in Grand Rapids, MI. She also served as news

associate producer and liaison for programming with NBC and ABC corporate, along with on-air talent coordinator and coordinator for audience development. In 2001, Brown became the Associate Producer for the National Black Touring Circuit, Inc. and she was on the professional development staff teaching playwriting and marketing with the renowned Ensemble Studio Theatre in New York. In 2004, she relocated to Bakersfield, CA, to serve as Director of the Spotlight Theater School for the Performing Arts, where she taught classes, designed curricula, generated grants and administrated the student component of the community theatre organization. In 2004, Brown was employed as a Teaching Artist with the Bakersfield Arts Council. There, she created performances with various schools, teaching theatre and drama. She also taught English to students grades 9-12 in the Kern School District. She relocated to Kalamazoo and was engaged as a screen and stage writer. She also was a program developer, grant writer and fund and program developer for four organizations involving supplemental educational programs in theatre arts, drama and literature. She was Executive Director for New Horizons Learning Center and Fresh Fire Empowerment Center. She has recently been promoted to Executive Director of the Negro Ensemble Company, Inc. after having served as Program and Fund Developer. She has been an adjunct professor at Medgar Evers College, Robert Morris College in Chicago, Western Michigan University, Miami of Ohio, and Kalamazoo Community College, teaching TV production, journalism, English composition, literature, theatre, research writing and humanities. Brown holds a BA in journalism from Western Michigan University and a MA from Miami of Ohio, with dual majors in theatrical directing and theatre and arts management.

Levy Lee Simon (Playwright)

An award-winning writer, actor and director, Simon is originally from Harlem and a graduate of the University of Iowa Playwright's Workshop MFA. His award-winning plays include *For the Love of Freedom* the trilogy, produced by the Robey Theatre Company and Greenway Arts Alliance, LA (two NAACP Nominations for Best Playwright and an Ovation Nomination for Best Full-Length Play); *The Bow Wow Club* (Lorraine Hansberry/Kennedy Center Award for Best Full-Length Play and National Black Theatre Festival selection); *Same Train*, Algonquin Productions (OOBR Award for Best Play and NBTF selection); *Smell the Power* (New Voices Playwriting Award for Best Play); and *The Guest at Central Park West*, The Workshop Theatre and the H.A.D.L.E.Y. Players (Audelco Award for Best Playwright and Dramatic Production of the Year.) Other productions include *The Stuttering Preacher*, *Caseload*, *God, the Crackhouse and the Devil*, *The Last Revolutionary* and *The Magnificent Dunbar Hotel* (The Robey Theatre Company, 29 straight sold-out performances.) He was commissioned to write *A Heated Discussion* by the Robey Theatre Company, which premiered in 2022 in Los Angeles to rave reviews. Simon is the recent recipient of the Playwright of the Year award by the San Diego Writers Festival 2022, honoring his body of work and his two productions in 2022. In 2020, he was invited into the Actor's Studio Playwrights/Directors Unit where he developed his latest play, *Fractured*, which received a workshop production in 2022 by the New Circle Theatre Company, NYC.

Cris Eli Blak (Playwright)

Blak's work has been performed off-Broadway, in London, Canada and Ireland. He's currently the recipient of the Emerging Playwrights Fellowship from The Scoundrel & Scamp Theatre and a selected participant of The Kennedy Center Playwrights Intensive. He strives to create work that reflects the world we live in.

Mona R. Washington (Playwright)

Washington is an award-winning playwright, librettist and activist. A 2021 New Jersey Artist Individual Fellowship recipient, her plays have been performed in Italy and France, as well as the United States.

Lisa McCree (Playwright)

McCree's work has been produced and/or developed by Harlem Theater Co., New Perspectives, Silver Trane, Theater Outlet (Allentown, PA), Access Theater (NY), The Genesis Guild, Saint Mark's Theater, The Henry Street Settlement (Women of Color Festival), The Atlantic Theater, Neighborhood Playhouse (NY), CUNY College Radio (NY) and WBAI 9905FM (NY). Commissioned works include theatrical pieces for The Medicine Show, Sea Island Nightmare, The Miserable Matter of Slavery, Russel Simmons and Def Comedy Jam (comics Rob Stapleton and Tha Stuff). Commissioned full-feature screenplays include *The Spirited Actor*, *Asylum Down* and acting challenge scripts. Published works include *And My Name Ain't Peaches*. Readings of McCree's plays were performed at Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (NY), Billie Holiday Theater (Brooklyn, NY), Brooklyn N. Slims, New Perspectives, NYU Ten Minute Play Festival,

The Heritage Heights Village Project Co., Youth Empower Movement and the Frederick Douglass Creative Arts Center. Through the playwright's production company, The Writer's Clique, she has self-produced more than a dozen of her works in restaurants, lounges and black box theatre spaces throughout Harlem. Awards and top honors include a Humanitarian Award (Allentown, PA), New York University's 1-2 Idea into Action Playwriting Competition, Frank Silvera's Writers' Workshop and the National Black Theater Festival (Winston-Salem, NC). McCree is a member of NAACP and a past president and active member of Phi Theta Kappa. McCree is a graduate of Housatonic Community College and was also an artist-in-residence at the Genesius Guild.

Yohanna Florentino (Candace)

Florentino is excited to work with NEC. She is a Black artist born in the Dominican Republic who intends to represent the broadness and brilliance of Black people from the diaspora to help unite, heal and inspire. Select credits: *The Old Settler* (Morningside Players Theater, AUDELCO Award), *Fractured* (New Circle Theatre Company), *The Cooking Project* (New York Theatre Workshop), *48 Hours in...El Bronx* (Harlem9), *Luciernagas* (The Parsnip Ship Podcast), *Pegao* (HartBeat Ensemble), *Zooman and the Sign* (Frederick Loewe Theatre), *Dark Seed* (Deep Water Productions, Peacock) and *FBI: Most Wanted* (CBS). Florentino is a member of AEA, trained in Capoeira and is an aspiring writer.

Benjamin Rowe (Marcus)

Rowe is a New York-based actor in his second production with the Negro Ensemble Company. He is honored and thrilled to be returning for this production. Rowe was recently nominated for best actor in the play *Leaves* in the New York Theatre Festival's Winterfest. He also appears in the feature film *Stash the Movie*, currently streaming on Tubi. Rowe wishes to thank his wife, Dawn, and their children, Julian, Da'Wren, Jahanna and Indirabelle. They sacrifice and share him with the creative world!

Alton Ray (A'Brian)

Ray is a northern CA native, who moved out to NY to get his BFA from the Acting Conservatory at SUNY Purchase. He was last seen onstage in August 2022 in *The Chosen Ones* at 48 Hours in Harlem Inc. In May 2022, he portrayed Wayne Miner in *The Buffalo Hero of WW1* at The American Theater of Actors. He is also the creator of the web series, *Day One*, about a self-taught Black coder who came from the inner city and hopes to leave his mark in Silicon Valley. Additional theatre credits include Neil Simon's *Rumors* at The Blank Stage, Los Angeles and Sam Shepard's *Cowboy Mouth* at The New Collective Theater, Hollywood. Instagram: @rayalityshow

Kenya Wilson (Dee' Ja-Ray)

Wilson trained at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy. Recent 2022 New York stage credits include: *Wait Until Dark* (Susy Hendrix) produced by Theatre For The Living Word; *Picking Up The Pieces* (Lucy Rushen), *Black Love* (Samantha) and *Oya* (Agemo) at the Black Spectrum Theatre; and *The Slave Who Loved Caviar* (Jennifer Blue and the Shadow Dancer) at Theatre For The New City. Her next role will be Melody Wells in *The Conductor*, written by Ishmael Reed. She'll also be reprising her lead role as Vera in Klehotas Tshyre's *When Knights Fall* this year.

Imana Breaux (Alicia Bonn)

Breaux hailed from Houston, TX and is a graduate of the American Musical and Dramatic Academy. Work includes the Audelco Award-winning *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion* (NEC); *Black Sparta* and *Girls of Summer* (NY, PA); the award-winning film *The 3rd Try*; and a feature in the final season of *Shameless* (Showtime). Follow @imanayvette on Instagram for all of the latest updates and projects! Breaux is delighted and excited to be a part of Penn Live Arts' *Mecca is Burning*.

Ashlee Danielle (Kyla Bonn)

Danielle is a New York-based actress, writer, director, content creator and teaching artist. She has produced/starred in several independent projects and enjoys teaching arts education in countless schools across NYC! She is excited to work with the Negro Ensemble Company again and is honored to bring this incredible work to life! AshleeDanielle.com

Steven Peacock Jacoby (Henry)

Peacock Jacoby was born and raised in New York City and became an actor while studying and living abroad in London and Oxford, England during his undergrad years. After graduating college, he was accepted to the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute in NYC and was placed under the tutelage of the late Irma Sandrey, a member of the Actors Studio and protege of Lee Strasberg. Peacock Jacoby has many various bicoastal professional credits in theatre, film, commercial and print and is in the SAG-AFTRA & AEA unions. He is very proud to be a part of another Negro Ensemble Company production.

Alyssa Carter (Dominica)

Carter is a recent graduate from SUNY Purchase BFA Acting Conservatory, and this is her second time working with Negro Ensemble Company! Recent credits include *What If...?* (NEC), *I Don't Do That* (NEC), *Henry IV Part I* (Lady Percy), *Life Is a Dream* (King Basilio) and *Passage* (H/F, Purchase Repertory Theater). She is grateful to be here, with these actors, at this time. Thanks to her friends, family and conservatory members whom she keeps in her heart. Instagram: @asapalycat

Fulton Hodges (Production Stage Manager)

Hodges is an actor, director, stage and house manager, playwright and teaching artist. He recently directed *Picking Up the Pieces* at Black Spectrum and played the role of Sharp Jackson in the *Twas the Night Before Kwanzaa*. Upcoming events include performing in the touring production of *Justice on Trial in Texas* (February/March) and *Baton Rouge* (April); portraying the role of Felix Unger in the production of *The Odd Couple* in May/June; and stage managing *Thurgood* in May. He is has been nominated for an AUDELCO Award 11 times and won seven, and is also a recipient of AUDELCO's prestigious Board of Directors Award for overall Excellence in Black Theatre.

Rhonda Lucas (Costume Designer)

Lucas is an established fashion designer that has been in the industry for over 20 years. During that time, she has had designs featured in *Essence Magazine*, *Glamour Magazine* and *Victoria's Secret*. Her background is comprised of women's wear, men's wear, children's apparel, bridal and accessories. Her design house, Renyea, is a celebration of art and ipseity, born from her love of multi-culturalism and styles from near and far. Lucas' designs from her core line are conversation starters and collector's items. She has constructed pieces for Dance Theatre of Harlem, Black Spectrum Theatre and Negro Ensemble Company as well as for various singers, dancers and actors. Instagram: @renyeaofficial