

Mosaic Theater Company of DC Press Release

Ari Roth, Founding Artistic Director • Serge Seiden, Managing Director & Producer
• Victoria Murray-Baatin, Associate Artistic Director



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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March 5, 2019

Press Night for *Native Son*: March 31, 2019 at 7:30 pm
Press Night for *Les Deux Noirs*: April 15, 2019 at 7:30 pm

Mosaic Theater Company Announces *Native Son Rep* • March 27 - April 28, 2019

Richard Wright's iconic novel, *Native Son*, streamlined into a blazing 90 minute adaptation by actor/playwright Nambi E. Kelley, will run in repertory with *Les Deux Noirs: Notes on Notes of A Native Son*, inspired by James Baldwin's blistering critique of Wright's controversial work. Award-winning director and playwright Psalmayene 24's stages the innovative take on Wright's masterpiece while authoring a modern reimagining of Wright's real-life meeting with Baldwin in 1953 Paris.

WASHINGTON, D.C — Mosaic Theater Company of DC presents an in-depth look at Richard Wright's classic novel *Native Son* with an adaptation by Nambi E. Kelley, staged by 2018 Helen Hayes Award winning director Psalmayene 24, running in repertory with the world-premiere of *Les Deux Noirs: Notes on Notes of A Native Son* by Psalmayene 24 and directed by Raymond O. Caldwell, the new artistic director of the Anacostia-based Theatre Alliance.

Mosaic is producing *Native Son* at The Atlas Performing Arts Center's Lang Theatre from March 27 through April 28, with an Opening Press Night of Sunday, March 31 at 7:30 pm, and *Les Deux Noirs: Notes on Notes of A Native Son* from April 7 to April 27, on the same Lang Theatre stage, with an Opening Press Night of Monday, April 15 at 7:30 pm.

Adapted with theatrical ingenuity by Nambi E. Kelley, this *Native Son* captures the power of Richard Wright's novel for a whole new generation. Suffocating in rat-infested poverty on the South Side of Chicago in the 1930s, 20 year old Bigger Thomas struggles to find a place for himself in a world whose prejudice has shut him out. After taking a job as a chauffeur for a wealthy white family in a nearby upscale neighborhood, Bigger unwittingly unleashes a series of events that violently and irrevocably seal his fate.

“What we have with Nambi Kelley’s kinetic, compressed, highly theatrical adaptation,” notes Mosaic Founding Artistic Director, Ari Roth, “is a novel transformed for 21st Century staging. With full cooperation from the Richard Wright estate, Kelley has taken a menacing element of tenement housing – a black rat that scurries about the Thomas apartment – and expanded that identity into a full-fledged character and expression of Bigger’s externalized perception of how white society views him. The Black Rat is an alter ego, a dreamer, an image buster, and a warning. And Bigger becomes both an idealist and a dreamer too, reacting to the racism around him and the lack of avenues available to escape his circumstances.”

Roth extolls the team bringing Kelley’s theatricalization to life: “In Psalmeyne 24, we’re working with a triple threat – director, playwright, and performer – who’s staging the work of a triple threat in her own right, Nambi Kelley; Off-Broadway actress, adapter and fast-rising playwright. Together with a stellar design team that collaborated with Psalm on the award-winning “Word Becomes Flesh,” you’re going to see a new generation of theater makers grapple with an Ur-Text – a literary achievement of monumental dimensions that successive generations of African American artists have wrestled with, beginning with James Baldwin, both coming to terms with *Native Son*’s dreadful power, while continuing to shudder at its terrifying portrait of a man making a set of increasingly troubling, destructive decisions.”

Les Deux Noirs: Notes on Notes of a Native Son, originally part of Mosaic’s Season Four Workshop Reading Series, is now a full production and World-Premiere directed by Raymond O. Caldwell. Set in the legendary Parisian café Les Deux Magots in 1953, it reimagines the meeting between Richard Wright and James Baldwin and explores the tension between Baldwin’s searing critiques of “Native Son” and Wright’s unbridled indignation in response, presented in the context of a modern-day rap battle.

Les Deux Noirs director, Raymond O. Caldwell notes, “*Les Deux Noirs* brings Baldwin’s and Wright’s arguments into the 21st century. Using elements of hip-hop culture that are interwoven with known historical facts, this new-work explores the complex relationship of two literary giants who hold divergent opinions around race politics.”

Les Deux Noir playwright and *Native Son* director, Psalmeyene 24 says, “I’m ultra excited to be directing Nambi Kelley’s sizzling adaptation of Richard Wright’s towering novel. After pulling inspiration from James Baldwin’s now legendary critique for my directorial interpretation of *Native Son*, I’m doubly thrilled to have the opportunity to explore and imagine the relationship between Baldwin and Wright in *Les Deux Noirs*. Through both of these productions, I’m hoping audiences at Mosaic will experience anew the beauty and power of these soulful literary icons.”

Native Son features Clayton Pelham, Jr. in the role of Bigger (*Charm* at Mosaic, *The Brother’s Size* at 1st Stage,) with Vaughn Midder flanking him as the Black Rat

(Mosaic's *Milk Like Sugar* and *When January Feels Like Summer*). Family members in the ensemble include Lolita Horne (as Bigger's mother, Hannah), Tendo Nsuguba (as younger brother, Buddy), and C. Renee Elizabeth Wilson (as the young women in Bigger's life, Bessie and Vera). Melissa Flaim plays the matriarch of the mansion where Bigger works (Mrs. Dalton) alongside Madeline Joey Rose (Mary Dalton) and Drew Kopas (as Jan, Mary's Communist boyfriend). Stephen Schmidt (of Ford's Theatre's *Parade*) plays a variety of roles including investigator Britten.

Les Deux Noirs: Notes on Notes of A Native Son features Jeremy Hunter as James Baldwin (Mosaic's *Hooded, or Being Black for Dummies*), James J. Johnson (Theater J's *Our Suburb*) as Richard Wright, with Musa Gurnis (Ludivina), and RJ Pavel (Jean-Claude) as two Parisian waiters.

Native Son and *Les Deux Noirs* both boast incredibly talented design teams. Reunited from Psalmayene 24's Helen Hayes Award winning production of *Word Becomes Flesh* include Set Designer Ethan Sinnott (*Native Son* and *Les Deux Noirs*), Lighting Designer William K. D'Eugneio (*Native Son* and *Les Deux Noirs*), Sound Designer Nick Hernandez (*Native Son*), and Movement Specialist/Choreographer Tony Thomas (*Native Son*). Other designers on the team include Properties Designer Willow Watson (*Native Son* and *Les Deux Noirs*), Projections Designer Dylan Uremovich (*Native Son*), Costume Designer Katie Touart (*Native Son*), Costume Designer Amy MacDonald (*Les Deux Noirs*), and Choreographer Tiffany Quinn (*Les Deux Noirs*).

Key Artistic Bios:

Nambi E Kelly (Playwright *Native Son*) is an award-winning actress/playwright, Kelley has performed across the country, including many shows at the Goodman Theatre & Steppenwolf Theatre, has been seen on several television shows, including *Elementary*, *Person of Interest*, *Madam Secretary*, *Chicago PD*, *Chicago Justice*, and has toured internationally. Most recently she appeared in MacArthur Genius Awardee Dominique Morisseau's *Pipeline* in the lead role (City Theatre), the critically acclaimed Off Broadway two-hander production of *Kunstler* (59 E. 59) and *Two Trains Running* (Goodman Theatre). Kelley just made her directorial debut at TheatreWorks Colorado Springs, the first African-American female to helm a production in their over 40 year history. Also an accomplished playwright, Nambi is currently serving in residence at New Victory Theatre and is a fellow at The Dramatists Foundation in New York City. Kelley served as playwright in residence at the National Black Theatre in New York, was a recipient of the 2018-19 Writers Alliance Grants from the Dramatists Guild Foundation, a finalist for the Francesca Primus Award, The Kevin Spacey Foundation Award, and is working on an adaptation of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* which is slated for several regional productions in coming seasons. Her adaptation of *Native Son* (Sam French) was the highest grossing production in Court Theatre's 60 year history, has enjoyed productions across the country, most notably, at Yale Repertory Theatre, and

will premiere in NYC in 2019. Nambi is working on several commissions, including commissions from Marin Theatre Company, Court Theatre, North Carolina Rep, American Blues Theater (proud ensemble member), and is also in development with several television and film projects. www.nambikelley.com

Psalmayene 24 (Playwright *Les Deux Noir*/Director *Native Son*) is an award-winning director, playwright, and actor. His directing credits include *Word Becomes Flesh* (Helen Hayes Award, Outstanding Direction, Play), *The Shipment*, *Not Enuf Lifetimes*, and *Read: White and Blue*. Psalm, as his colleagues call him, has received commissions from The African Continuum Theater Company, Arena Stage, Imagination Stage, Theater Alliance, The Kennedy Center, and Solas Nua. His play, *The Frederick Douglass Project*, co-written with Deirdre Kinahan, is nominated for six 2019 Helen Hayes Awards, including the Charles MacArthur Award for Outstanding Original New Play or Musical. Psalm is the recipient of an Individual Artist Award in Playwriting from the Maryland State Arts Council and has received grants from the DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities and the Boomerang Fund for Artists Inc. He received the 2014 Imagination Award from Imagination Stage (past recipients include Dr. Jane Goodall, Christopher Reeve, and Dennis Haysbert). As an actor, he has appeared on HBO's critically acclaimed series *The Wire*, been nominated for a Helen Hayes award, and is a member of Actors' Equity Association. Psalm is currently the Master Teaching Artist at Arena Stage and is the Artist-in-Residence at Bowie State University. Infinite love to Diana ...

Raymond O. Caldwell (Director *Les Deux Noirs*) has served as Producing Artistic Director of Theater Alliance since January 2019, and served as the Associate Artistic Director at Theater Alliance from 2017-18. He is a resident-director and lecturer in the Department of Theatre Arts at Howard University. Raymond develops applied theatre curriculum for BroadFutures, a non-profit that advances the inherent potential of young adults with learning disabilities through workforce training. He recently joined the board of the Children's Chorus of Washington DC. He holds an MFA in acting with a focus in community outreach and developing new work from The Ohio State University and a BFA in acting from the University of Florida. In 2009 he was the recipient of the Arena Stage Allen Lee Hughes Fellowship, after which he joined Arena's staff for six consecutive seasons. In March Raymond traveled to India to work with artists and local NGO's from Kolkata, Bangladesh, and Nepal to develop new-work that challenged sex trafficking and gender-based violence through digital performance. A DC-based director, he most recently directed *Blood at the Root* at Theater Alliance and *The Frederick Douglass Project* with Solas Nua. Raymond has toured nationally and internationally as a performer and directed/developed work throughout the United States, India, Ukraine, Greece, Germany, and the UK.

Following select performances of *Native Son* and *Les Deux Noirs*, Mosaic will host a series of post-show discussions exploring resonant themes present in both works with a diverse set of panelists. These free post-show discussions, beginning immediately after the performance, will cover topics such as:

“Double Consciousness: How Racial Oppression Impacts the Souls of Black Folks”

“Foreign Daughters: Depictions of Black Femininity on Stage”

“For Whose Gaze?: From Subject, to Object, Back to Subject Again”

“Richard Wright in His Own Words: How Bigger Was Born”

A full list of discussions will be posted shortly on our website at:

<http://www.mosaictheater.org/discussions>

Dramaturgical Notes for each production can be found here:

Native Son by Dramaturgs Khalid Y. Long and Isaiah M. Wooden:

<http://bit.ly/NativeSonDramaturgy>

Les Deux Noirs by Dramaturg Isaiah M. Wooden:

<http://bit.ly/LesDeuxNoirDramaturgy>

Additional Information about *Native Son*:

Pay What You Can Preview: Wednesday, March 27 at 8:00 PM

Opening/Press Night: Sunday, March 31 at 7:30 PM

Closes: Sunday, April 28 at 7:30 PM

Ticket Prices: \$20-\$65

Additional Information about *Les Deux Noirs: Notes on Notes of A Native Son*:

Pay What You Can Preview: Sunday, April 7 at 7:30 PM

Opening/Press Night: Monday, April 15 at 7:30 PM

Closes: Saturday, April 27 at 8:00 PM

Ticket Prices: \$20-\$65

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

<https://www.mosaictheater.org/native-son>

<https://www.mosaictheater.org/les-deux-noirs>

VALET PARKING AVAILABLE AT 1360 H ST NE on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings, as well as Saturday and Sunday matinees.

About Mosaic Theater Company of DC

Independent, intercultural, entertaining, and uncensored, Mosaic Theater Company of DC is committed to making transformational, socially-relevant art, producing plays by authors on the front lines of conflict zones, and building a fusion community to address some of the most pressing issues of our times. Dedicated to making our theater a model of diversity and inclusion at every strata, on stage and off, Mosaic invests in the new as we keep abreast of our changing and challenging times to ensure that our theater is a responsive gathering space, all the while nurturing and producing art of the highest order. Visit us at mosaictheater.org