



INVISIBLE THEATRE - PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Invisible Theatre continues its 48th Anniversary Season
with Award Winning Stage and Film Star**

Vanessa Bell Calloway

In

LETTERS FROM ZORA

by

Gabrielle Denise Pina

Directed by Anita Dashiell-Sparks

TWO PERFORMANCES ONLY!

Saturday, April 6, 2019 at 7:30 PM

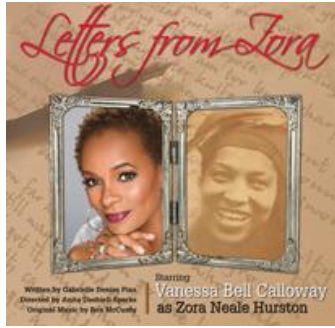
Sunday, April 7, 2019 at 3:00 PM

**The Berger Performing Arts Center
1200 W. Speedway Blvd. Tucson, AZ 85745**

(March 14, 2019, Tucson, Arizona); The Invisible Theatre continues its 48th Anniversary Season with **LETTERS FROM ZORA** by Gabrielle Denise Pina. The Harlem Renaissance is magically brought back to life through the phenomenal performance of stage and screen star Vanessa Bell Calloway. Zora Neale Hurston stands out as a literary giant and pioneer who deeply influenced American culture through her writings by provoking new conversations about race and what it means to be black in America. Her life and career are gloriously illuminated in this award-winning multi-media production directed by Anita Dashiell-Sparks.

**This production is made possible in part through the generous support of
Sonora Investment Management**

*"Letters from Zora is an important piece of theater not to be missed."
-BroadwayWorld*



The Arizona Premiere of LETTERS FROM ZORA
Starring Stage and Film Star Vanessa Bell Calloway
Written by Gabrielle Denise Pina
Directed by Anita Dashiell-Sparks

April 6 - 7, 2019

Berger Performing Arts Center
1200 West Speedway, Tucson, AZ 85745

The single show ticket price for **LETTERS FROM ZORA** is \$45. All seats are reserved. Additional discounts are available for groups, seniors, active military and students. Rush tickets are available for purchase at half-price one half hour prior to performance time and are subject to availability.

Tickets are available for purchase by calling the Invisible Theatre Box Office at (520) 882-9721 and are also available 24/7 on-line through OvationTix at www.invisibletheatre.com.

The running time is 90 minutes with no intermission.

THE INVISIBLE THEATRE

The Invisible Theatre (IT) of Tucson, a 501(c)(3) organization, is dedicated to producing quality theatre and arts education experiences for all facets of the community in an intimate setting that showcases local professional talent and guest artists. IT takes its name from the invisible energy that flows between a performer and audience, creating the magic of theatre. Started in 1971 as an arena for local playwrights, the theatre has expanded its programs to include adaptations of classics and recent Off-Broadway plays and musicals, while continuing to encourage new playwrights through both full productions and staged readings.

Under the leadership of Managing Artistic Director Susan Claassen, Associate Artistic Director James Blair, and PR Director Cathy Johnson, IT is strongly committed to community service and outreach programs. The company's current season includes a six play Main Stage season, many special events, a world class cabaret series, organizational collaborations, educational tours, seminars that encourage community dialogue and Project Pastime – an educational theatre program for mentally challenged youth.

The Invisible Theatre, the recipient of the first Arizona Theatre Association Award for Best Producing Theatre Company, is a member of the Theatre Communications Group and has long enjoyed both local and national recognition for its strong leadership role in the arts community. Productions take place in an intimate 80-seat converted laundry building. IT celebrates its 48th season with an even greater commitment to professionalism, artistic excellence, accessibility, freedom of expression, diverse programming and creative challenge – thus making the Invisible Theatre a very visible force in Tucson's cultural community.

ABOUT THE PEOPLE



VANESSA BELL CALLOWAY (*actress*) has earned eight NAACP Image Award nominations. She won the NAACP Theater Award for Best Actress for her role as Zora Neale Hurston in her one-woman critically-acclaimed play *LETTERS FROM ZORA*. Vanessa was invited to become a 2018 member of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences for her contribution to the entertainment industry.

Vanessa is co-starring in Focus Feature's much anticipated film "Harriet", featured in "Dragged Across Concrete" starring Mel Gibson and Vince Vaughn, Universal Studios feature "Unbroken, Path to Redemption", as well as an independent thriller entitled "Thriller". Some of Calloway's other film credits include "South Side With You", "Coming To America", "What's Love Got To Do With It", "Biker Boyz", "Daylight", "Crimson Tide", "Cheaper By The Dozen" and "The Inkwell".

Calloway is currently starring in Bounce TV's one-hour hit-drama "Saints & Sinners" as the matriarch Lady Ella, now in its fourth season. She directed a few of the episodes as well. Vanessa is in Showtime's new hit "Black Monday" and she will soon be seen in Netflix's "Unbelievable". Her other TV credits are many, including: "Love is", "Survivors Remorse", "Shameless", "Grey's Anatomy", "Real Husbands of Hollywood", "Hawthorne RN", "The Closer", "NCIS", "Castle", and "The Temptations" ... to name a few.

An original cast member of the Broadway Hit *DREAM GIRLS*, Vanessa has also starred in *SEVEN GUITARS* at The August Wilson 20th Century Theater Festival held at The Kennedy Center, the Los Angeles productions of *THE PIANO LESSON*, *THE DIVORCE*, *CROWNS*, and she was reunited with *LETTERS FROM ZORA* playwright Gabrielle Denise Pina in her new play *DREAMING OF HARLEM UNDER A HIGH SOUTHERN SKY*.

A professional concert dancer for many years, Vanessa can now be seen dancing a trio with her two beautiful grown daughters, Ashley and Alexandra, in a viral video on You Tube to the song "If I Could" by Regina Belle.

Vanessa has two hit web series that she created, directed and produced, "In The Company Of Friends" and "Cookin' & Hookin' Up" as well as her Blog Talk Radio Show, "That's so Very Vanessa". All are on demand anytime at www.inthecompanyoffriends.tv. Calloway has been married to her anesthesiologist husband Dr. Tony Calloway for 30 years and they live in Los Angeles, California.

You can follow Vanessa at www.vanessabelccalloway.com. IG: @vanessabelccalloway, Twitter: @nessabccalloway, FB: Vanessabelccalloway.





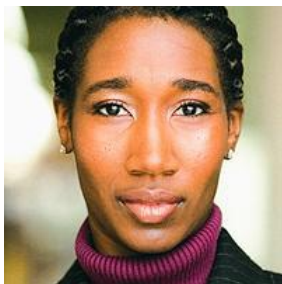
GABRIELLE DENISE PINA (*playwright*) is a poignant and masterful storyteller. Ms. Pina's novels have been described as "ever suspenseful" by *Black Review* and "a spectacular effort" by *Written Magazine*.

Pina was viewed as "the writer to look out for" when she published the acclaimed short story *Uncommon Revelations* for the ESI Anthology. That year also featured the birth of her thesis project, *Bliss*, into her first novel which culminated in a three-book deal with Random House and a national book tour. Pina's long-awaited sophomore novel, *Chasing Sopheia*, was released in October 2006 and has become a book club favorite.

Pina has taught in the Master of Professional Writing Program at the University of Southern California for the past ten years, where she also received a Master of Arts degree. In March of 2012, Pina premiered *LETTERS FROM ZORA: IN HER OWN*

WORDS starring Vanessa Bell Calloway, a play that showcases the artistic and literary triumphs of the venerable Zora Neale Hurston at the University of Southern California to a sold-out crowd of over twelve hundred. *LETTERS FROM ZORA* premiered and sold out all five shows at the Pasadena Playhouse in August of 2013 and was back by popular demand at the Pasadena Playhouse the following year for eight shows. Both Gabrielle Denise Pina and Vanessa Bell Calloway were nominated for NAACP Theater Awards for Best Playwright and Best Actress respectively in 2014. *LETTERS FROM ZORA: IN HER OWN WORDS* also opened the DC Black Theater Festival in June of 2015 to rave reviews and was selected to open at the National Black Theater Festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina last August. Her second play *DREAMING OF HARLEM UNDER A HIGH SOUTHERN SKY* premiered to a sold-out house as part of the Visions & Voices: Arts and Humanities Initiative at the University of Southern California in March of 2015. This summer WACO Theater, owned by Tina Knowles Lawson and Richard Lawson, hosted *LETTERS FROM ZORA* to a sold out back by popular demand run. Further *LETTERS FROM ZORA* premiered at Karamu Theater in Cleveland, Ohio (the oldest African American theater in the nation) this past June. *DREAMING OF HARLEM UNDER A HIGH SOUTHERN SKY* will also open there for the 2019-2020 season.

Ms. Pina is also hard at work on her third novel, *A Season for Hummingbirds*, and she just completed her third play, *SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME*, a riveting innovative work about the prolific life of Ella Fitzgerald, which will premiere Summer of 2019 in Washington DC. She is also the author of *Bucking the Line*, an authorized biography of the Clougherty family, the founders of the Farmer John Brand, and she is currently penning the authorized biography for Gina Rivera, founder of Phenix Salon Suites which will be made into a feature film upon completion. Further, Ms. Pina delivers lectures on the Harlem Renaissance and teaches master classes on writing at various colleges and universities all across the country.



ANITA DASHIELL-SPARKS (*Director*) is an actor, director, Associate Professor of Theatre Practice, and Associate Dean of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion for the USC School of Dramatic Arts. She has also taught at Barnard College, NY; guest lectured in undergraduate drama at New York University; and has performed and presented at St. Mary of the Woods, Indiana State University and DuPauw University and at national conferences such as the AATE and Imaging America.

As an actor Dashiell-Sparks has performed on Broadway in *NIGHT MUST FALL* starring Matthew Broderick and *THE SUNSHINE BOYS* starring Tony Randall and Jack Klugman. She has also guest starred in numerous television shows (*West Wing*, *Lincoln Heights*, et al.) and independent films. Among her LORT regional theatre credits she has performed in productions of *BLUES FROM AN ALABAMA SKY*, Zora Neale Hurston's *SPUNK* and in the Mark Taper Forum's production of *HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA* with Chita Rivera. She has also recently performed in world premiere productions of *HELEN* at the Getty Villa, *LAWS OF SYMPATHY* and *SICK* at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, *MEMOIRS OF A PREACHER'S DAUGHTER* at the Ebony Repertory Theatre and the workshop of *Massoud: The Lion of Panjshir*, commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum, directed by Dominique Serrand.

(continued)

Anita directed *LETTERS FROM ZORA* at the Tony Award winning Crossroads Theatre and two critically acclaimed engagements at the Pasadena Playhouse. She has directed original performances featuring at-risk youth for *Voices of Our Children* at The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels and *GIRL-UN-INTERRUPTED* for Eve Ensler's V-Day Celebration in New York. She served as co-director & performer of musical segments in *ACTS OF LOVE* at the Geffen Playhouse. She has also directed five plays for the USC School of Dramatic Arts, including *AN OCTOROON* by Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins, Paula Cizmar's *ANTIGONE X*, Kia Korthon's *BREATH BOOM*, Lynn Nottage's *INTIMATE APPAREL*, Toni Morrison's *THE BLUEST EYE*, adapted by Lydia Diamond (honored with NAACP Theatre Award); and *VENUS* by Suzan-Lori Parks.

Anita Dashiell-Sparks is the founder and director of *Building Bridges: Communication, Expression, and Empowerment Theatre Arts Program*, teaching self-expression, self-presentation, and self-empowerment to at-risk youth. Her outreach and arts education programs have been supported by several University Neighborhood Outreach grants at USC, the Fox Foundation in New York, and the U.S. Department of Justice Westside Story Project. She has professional affiliations with AEA, SAG, and is a member of SDC. Anita Dashiell-Sparks received her MFA from the acclaimed NYU Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Acting Program and in addition to teaching and directing, she currently serves as the Diversity Liaison Officer for USC School of Dramatic Arts.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON was a world-renowned writer and anthropologist. Hurston's novels, short stories, and plays often depicted African American life in the South. Her work in anthropology examined black folklore. Hurston influenced many writers, forever cementing her place in history as one of the foremost female writers of the 20th century.

Zora Neale Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama on January 15, 1891. Both her parents had been enslaved. At a young age, her family relocated to Eatonville, Florida where they flourished. Eventually, her father became one of the town's first mayors. In 1917, Hurston enrolled at Morgan College, where she completed her high school studies. She then attended Howard University and earned an associate's degree. Hurston was an active student and participated in student government. She also co-founded the school's renowned newspaper, *The Hilltop*. In 1925, Hurston received a scholarship to Barnard College and graduated three years later with a BA in anthropology. During her time as a student in New York City, Hurston befriended other writers such as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. Together, the group of writers joined the black cultural renaissance which was taking place in Harlem.

Throughout her life, Hurston dedicated herself to promoting and studying black culture. She traveled to both Haiti and Jamaica to study the religions of the African diaspora. Her findings were also included in several newspapers throughout the United States. Hurston often incorporated her research into her fictional writing. As an author, Hurston started publishing short stories as early as 1920. Unfortunately, her work was ignored by the mainstream literary audience for years. However, she gained a following among African Americans. In 1935, she published *Mules and Men*. She later collaborated with Langston Hughes to create the play, *MULE BONE*. She published three books between 1934 and 1939. One of her most popular works was *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The fictional story chronicled the tumultuous life of Janie Crawford. Hurston broke literary norms by focusing her work on the experience of a black woman.

Hurston was not only a writer, she also dedicated her life to educating others about the arts. In 1934, she established a school of dramatic arts at Bethune-Cookman College. Five years later she worked as a drama teacher at the North Carolina College for Negroes at Durham. Although Hurston eventually received praise for her works, she was often underpaid. Therefore, she remained in debt and poverty. After years of writing, Hurston had to enter the St. Lucie County Welfare Home as she was unable to take care of herself. Hurston died of heart disease on January 28, 1960. At first, her remains were placed in an unmarked grave. In 1972, author Alice Walker located her grave and created a marker. Although Hurston's work was not widely known during her life, in death she ranks among the best writers of the 20th century. Her work continues to influence writers throughout the world.

TO PURCHASE TICKETS OR FOR INFORMATION:

To charge tickets by phone, call our Box Office at (520) 882-9721.

You may also visit the Box Office in the Invisible Theatre Lobby (1400 N. First Avenue at Drachman).

To buy tickets online 24/7, go to www.invisibletheatre.com and click on the OvationTix logo.

Visa, MasterCard, Discover and American Express are accepted.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:

The Berger Performing Arts Center is fully accessible to patrons using wheelchairs or with other mobility challenges. Seating areas to accommodate persons using wheelchairs are located in the theatre. If patrons require special seating they should inform the Box Office at (520) 882-9721.

ABOUT THIS PRESS RELEASE:

This mailing list is for members of the professional media and allied organizations who have requested e-mail press releases from The Invisible Theatre. If you no longer wish to receive e-mail press releases or if there is someone else with your organization that should be added to our list, send a message to cathy@invisibletheatre.com or phone Alayna at (520) 884-0672 with your request.

ONLINE MEDIA MATERIALS:

Photos of Vanessa Bell Calloway are attached to this press release. This press release and Vanessa's photos (Photo credit courtesy of the artist) will also be available at www.invisibletheatre.com/press beginning March 15, 2019.

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