

**The Hermitage Artist Retreat
Announces
Writer and Director Radha Blank
as the Inaugural Recipient of the
\$35,000 Hermitage Major Theater Award**

The Hermitage Major Theater Award recognizes a playwright or theater artist with a commission of \$35,000 to create an original work, in addition to providing a residency at the Hermitage and an inaugural workshop of the newly created play, anticipated for the fall of 2022 in New York.

“In a theatrical landscape hobbled by COVID, the Hermitage has done something heroic; they have instituted a brand new, financially generous commission for a playwright of demonstrable achievement to draft a new work. It is one of the premier commissions of its kind and could not come at a more auspicious, even urgent time.”

—Doug Wright, Hermitage Major Theater Award Committee

(December 14, 2021) Andy Sandberg, Artistic Director and CEO of the Hermitage Artist Retreat, announced today that playwright and director **Radha Blank** has been selected as the inaugural recipient of the **Hermitage Major Theater Award**. This national jury-selected prize, newly established by the Hermitage earlier this year with generous support from the Kutya Major Foundation, offers one of the largest non-profit theater commissions in the country. Blank will receive a cash prize of \$35,000, as well as a residency at the Hermitage (Sarasota County, Florida) and a developmental workshop in New York. Blank’s critically acclaimed debut feature film, *The Forty-Year-Old Version* (Netflix), was awarded the 2020 Sundance Film Festival’s Vanguard Award and the U.S. Dramatic Directing Award. Blank’s play *Seed* received a Helen Merrill Award, and she has written

for the television series *Empire* (Fox) and Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (Netflix). Blank is also known to many audiences as RadhaMUSprime, performing her unique brand of hip-hop comedy performance around the world.

"I am thrilled to receive this kind of support from the theater-making community, and honored to be the first recipient of this awesome award," said **Radha Blank** on receiving the Hermitage Major Theater Award. "This recognition is very affirming. This commission answers the question: how can I continue to do my work and not jump into a system that is constantly asking me to conform and change who I am? Having a destination and an actual place and community to create is a gift. I don't take it lightly. I really appreciate this."

The Hermitage Major Theater Award (HMTA) was established this year to recognize a playwright or theater artist with a \$35,000 commission to create a new, original, and impactful piece of theater. HMTA winners are nominated and selected by a jury of nationally recognized arts leaders in the field of theater. The inaugural HMTA Award Committee included **Doug Wright**, Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning playwright, and past president of the Dramatists Guild of America; **Leigh Silverman**, Tony Award nominee and Obie Award-winning director; and **Liesl Tommy**, Tony Award nominee and Obie Award-Winning stage and screen director.

"The theater needs Radha's voice more than ever, especially in the current cultural moment," said HMTA juror **Doug Wright**, a past Hermitage Fellow himself.

"Radha has passion and heart, and she crosses so many different genres and traverses so many different mediums," remarked HTMA juror **Leigh Silverman**. "At this moment in the theater, we're all coming out of a time of being frozen in amber. The idea of this award from the Hermitage – and what this offers – is hope, as well as a sense of community, time, and space.

"This is a pure gift of support for Radha and her writing, with no strings attached," added HMTA juror **Liesl Tommy**. "It's an opportunity for Radha to be free in this moment, which is why these kinds of commissions are so important to us as artists."

Three finalists for the 2021 Hermitage Major Theater Award include **Luis Alfaro**, an accomplished playwright and MacArthur 'Genius' Fellow; **Eisa Davis**, an Obie Award-

winning multi-disciplinary theater-maker; and **Madeleine George**, an Obie Award-winning playwright. Each will receive a Hermitage residency, in addition to a cash prize of \$1,000.

“Amidst an extraordinary and competitive field of finalists, Radha Blank stood out as an innovative and exciting artist who impressed the award committee with her passionate and inspired vision,” said Andy Sandberg. “While many audiences have come to know Radha through her work on film, our hope is that this opportunity recognizes, inspires, and embraces Radha as an exciting and important voice in the American theater. We thank our brilliant award committee Doug Wright, Leigh Silverman, and Liesl Tommy for their leadership and thoughtfulness, and we congratulate all of our finalists. Luis Alfaro, Eisa Davis, and Madeleine George are exceptional artists of the theater, with bold voices and thrilling ideas. We are excited to welcome all four of these extraordinary talents into the Hermitage family.”

In 2020, Blank was named as one of *Variety*’s “10 Directors to Watch” and hailed as “a brilliant filmmaker” by *The New York Times*. Her debut feature film, *The Forty-Year-Old Version* (Netflix) was the recipient of multiple prestigious awards and nominations, including recognition for Blank’s writing, directing, and performance. Blank was nominated for the Directors Guild of America (DGA) Award for Outstanding Directorial Achievement of a First-Time Feature Film Director and a BAFTA Award for Leading Actress. *The Forty-Year-Old Version* most recently received its New York City 35mm debut at the Paris Theater, where Blank made history as the first Black woman director showcased in the cinema house’s 75-year history. When not writing for the stage and screen, Blank performs as RadhaMUSprime, whose brand of hip-hop comedy has sold out shows from New York to Norway.

In addition to the \$35,000 commission, the recipient of the annual HMTA will receive six weeks of residency at the Hermitage’s historic beachfront campus to develop the new work, in addition to a reading or workshop in a leading arts and cultural center. This year’s commission is expected to receive a development workshop in New York in the fall of 2022.

In the spirit of the Hermitage’s commitment to the arts across multiple disciplines, recipients of the Hermitage Major Theater Award are encouraged to create a commission that directly or indirectly represents the role and impact of art – musical, literary, theatrical,

visual, or otherwise – in our culture and society. This distinguished recognition is not an award for an existing work, but rather it is designed as a commission that shall serve as a catalyst and inspiration to a theater artist to create a new, original, and impactful piece of theater.

Further, the prize is intended to bridge the connection between the Hermitage and Sarasota County, where the commission is born, and other leading arts and culture centers around the world, including New York, London, and Chicago – where great theater is frequently developed and presented.

“This award is designed to be transformational for its recipients, providing not only significant funds and recognition, but also invaluable time, space, and inspiration at the Hermitage, as well as an opportunity for these innovative theater-makers to workshop and develop their original ideas,” said Andy Sandberg at a Hermitage announcement event. A director, writer, and Tony Award-winning producer, Sandberg took the helm as Artistic Director and CEO of the Hermitage in early 2020. “In addition to introducing a new work of theater to the American canon each year, this is an exciting opportunity for the Hermitage to take a further step in supporting artistic development as we offer developmental resources to these extraordinary artists and their new commissions along their journey.”

The Hermitage Major Theater Award is made possible with a generous multi-year gift to the Hermitage from the Kutya Major Foundation.

“Anyone who values and appreciates the arts, across all disciplines, needs to invest in supporting artists in the earliest stages of their creative process — this is what the Hermitage does so well,” remarked **Flora Major**, founder and trustee of the Kutya Major Foundation. “I hope this new initiative will inspire others who are passionate about the arts to recognize and support the important work that the Hermitage is doing.”

In addition to this newly created commission, the Hermitage Artist Retreat annually awards the prestigious jury-selected Hermitage Greenfield Prize (HGP), a \$30,000 commission that rotates each year between the disciplines of music, theater, and visual art. Past recipients in theater have included **Aleshea Harris** (2021), **Martyna Majok** (2018), **Nilo Cruz** (2015), **John Guare** (2012), and **Craig Lucas** (2009). The 14th annual

Hermitage Greenfield Prize will be announced in January of 2022, with this year's prize awarded in the artistic discipline of music.

The Hermitage hosts artists on its Gulf Coast Manasota Key campus for multi-week residencies, where diverse and accomplished artists from around the world and across multiple disciplines create and develop new works of theater, music, visual art, literature, dance, and more. As part of their residencies, Hermitage Fellows participate in free community programs, offering audiences in the region a unique opportunity to engage with some of the world's leading artists and to get an authentic "sneak peek" into extraordinary projects and artistic minds before their works go on to major theaters, galleries, concert halls, and museums around the world. These free and innovative programs include performances, lectures, readings, interactive experiences, open studios, school programs, teacher workshops, and more, serving thousands in our community each year.

For more information about the Hermitage, visit HermitageArtistRetreat.org.

"An organization that does more for artists than any I have encountered."

—Craig Lucas, Tony Award Nominee & Hermitage Greenfield Prize Winner

"It was like someone opened the door and invited me to create a work that is responsive to this time, a work that can be reflective of this time..."

I am super grateful for that."

—Aleshea Harris, Playwright and 2021 Hermitage Greenfield Prize Winner

"Because of the Hermitage, some of the most beautiful plays have been written, and the most beautiful music has been made."

—Emily Mann, Playwright, Director & Tony Award Winner

"A spark plug for ideas and collaborations: a miraculous co-mingling of music, literature, visual art, theater, nature, and wildlife."

—Claire Chase, Flutist, MacArthur Genius & Avery Fisher Prize Winner

The Hermitage Artist Retreat

(Sarasota County, Florida)

Andy Sandberg, Artistic Director and CEO

The Hermitage is a nonprofit artist retreat located in Manasota Key, Florida, inviting accomplished artists across multiple disciplines for residencies on its beachfront campus, which is on the National Register of Historic Places. Hermitage artists are invited to interact with the local

community, reaching thousands of Gulf Coast residents and visitors each year with unique and inspiring programs. Hermitage Fellows have included 14 Pulitzer Prize winners, Poets Laureate, MacArthur 'Genius' Fellows, and multiple Tony, Emmy, Grammy, Oscar winners and nominees. Works created at this beachside retreat by a diverse group of Hermitage alumni have gone on to renowned theaters, concert halls, and galleries throughout the world. Each year, the Hermitage awards the \$30,000 Hermitage Greenfield Prize for a new work of art, the newly announced \$35,000 Hermitage Major Theater Award for an original theater commission, and the Aspen Music Festival's Hermitage Prize in Composition.

For more information, visit HermitagArtistRetreat.org.

The Hermitage is supported by:

Hermitage programs are supported, in part, by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts; by Sarasota County Tourist Development Tax Revenues; and by the Department of State, Division of Arts and Culture, the Florida Council of Arts and Culture and the State of Florida (Section 286.25 Florida Statutes), as well as the Gulf Coast Community Foundation, Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation, and the Community Foundation of Sarasota County.

BIOS

WINNER OF THE 2021 HERMITAGE MAJOR THEATER AWARD

Radha Blank

Radha Blank is a director, performer, writer, and proud native New Yorker. Winner of the 2020 Sundance Vanguard Award, Blank's debut feature film, *The Forty-Year-Old Version*, was one of the most acclaimed debuts of the year, for which she was awarded The Sundance Film Festival's U.S. Dramatic Directing Award, The Gotham Awards' Best Screenplay, The NAACP Image Award for Best Writing in a Motion Picture, The New York Film Critics Circle's Best First Film, The Los Angeles Film Critics Association's New Generation Award, The National Board of Review's Spotlight Award, The Black Film Critics Circle's Rising Star Award, The African American Film Critics Association's Award for Breakout Performance, and The San Diego Film Critics Society's Award for Breakthrough Artist and Best Comedic Performance. Blank was also nominated for The DGA Award for Outstanding Directorial Achievement of a First-Time Feature Film Director, The BAFTA Award for Leading Actress and The Independent Spirit Award for Best First Film. In 2020, she was named as one of *Variety's* "10 Directors to Watch" and hailed as "a brilliant filmmaker" by *The New York Times*. A Helen Merrill Award recipient, Blank's acclaimed play *Seed* was deemed "fresh, lively, and poetic" by *The Huffington Post*. She has written for the hit television shows *Empire* (Fox) and *She's Gotta Have It* (Netflix). *The Forty-Year-Old Version* most recently made its New York City 35mm debut at The Paris Theater, where Blank made history as the first Black woman director showcased in the cinema house's 75-year history. When not writing for the stage and screen, Blank performs as RadhaMUSprime, whose brand of hip-hop comedy has sold out shows from New York to Norway.

2021 HMTA FINALISTS

Luis Alfaro

Luis Alfaro is a Chicano playwright born and raised in downtown Los Angeles. He is the Associate Artistic Director of Center Theatre Group, the resident theater company of the Music Center of Los Angeles County, home of the Mark Taper Forum, Ahmanson Theatre, and Kirk Douglas Theater. Alfaro is the recipient of a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, popularly known as a “Genius Grant,” awarded to people who have demonstrated expertise and exceptional creativity in their respective fields. He has also received recognition from the PEN America/Laura Pels International Foundation Theater Award for a Master Dramatist; United States Artist Fellowship; Ford Foundation’s Art of Change Fellowship; Joyce Foundation Fellowship; Mellon Foundation Fellowship; and the Annenberg Artist-in-Residence for the city of Santa Monica; among others. He is the only playwright to have received two Kennedy Center ‘Fund for New American Play’ awards in the same year. Alfaro spent six seasons as the inaugural Playwright-in-Residence of the ninety-year-old Oregon Shakespeare Festival (2013-2019); a member of the Playwright’s Ensemble at Chicago’s Victory Gardens Theatre (2013-2020); a resident artist at the Mark Taper Forum (1995-2005); an inaugural member of the Latinx Playwrights ‘Circle of Imaginistas’ at the Los Angeles Theatre Center (2021). and has worked with the Ojai Playwrights Conference since 2002. His plays and performances include *Electricidad*, *Oedipus El Rey*, *Mojada*, *Delano*, *Body of Faith*, *Straight as a Line*, and have been seen at regional theatres throughout the United States, Latin America, Canada and Europe. Alfaro spent over two decades in the Los Angeles Poetry and Performance Art communities. He is an Associate Professor with tenure at the University of Southern California (USC). Previously, he taught at California Institute of the Arts (Cal-Arts), and in the Writers Program at UCLA Extension. He has an Emmy-nominated short film, *Chicanismo* (Best Experimental Film, San Antonio CineFestival, Best Short, CineAccion San Francisco) and an award-winning recording, *Downtown*, on SST/New Alliance Records (Best Spoken-Word Release, National Association of Independent Record Distributors).

Eisa Davis

Eisa Davis is an award-winning, multi-disciplinary artist working on stage and screen. Notable television and film work includes *Mare of Easttown*, *Pose*, *Betty*, *Bluff City Law*, *God Friended Me*, *The Looming Tower*, *Succession*, *Rise*, *House of Cards*, *Hart of Dixie*, *The Wire*, *First Match*, *Welcome to The Rileys*, and *After The Wedding*. She has originated stage roles in *The Secret Life of Bees* (AUDELCO Award), *Kings* (Drama League nomination), *Remembrance* (Afrofemmonomy), *Grace Notes*, *Preludes*, *This*, *The Call*, *Luck of the Irish*, *Angela's Mixtape* and *Passing Strange*. Davis has written thirteen full-length plays and released two albums of original music. Her plays include *Paper Armor*, *Umkovu*, *Angela's Mixtape*, *Six Minutes*, *Warriors Don't Cry*, *Hip Hop Anansi*, *The History of Light*, *Ramp*, *The Essentialisn't*, *||: Girls :||: Chance :||: Music :||*, and *Mushroom* (upcoming 2022 at People's Light). She wrote the narration for Cirque du Soleil's *Crystal* and episodes for both seasons of Spike Lee's Netflix series *She's Gotta*

Have It. Distinctions include three Lortel nominations, an Obie Award for Sustained Excellence in Performance, a Creative Capital Award, and the Herb Alpert Award in Theatre. She is currently producing and co-writing two episodes for the upcoming sequel to *Justified* for FX, and executive producing and creating a limited series with UCP, Fuzzy Door, and Xception Content based on the memoir of the youngest member of the Little Rock Nine. Davis was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize with her play *Bulrusher*.

Madeleine George

Madeleine George's plays include *Hurricane Diane* (Obie Award), *The (curious case of the) Watson Intelligence* (Pulitzer Prize finalist; Outer Critics Circle John Gassner Award), *Seven Homeless Mammoths Wander New England* (Susan Smith Blackburn finalist), *Precious Little*, and *The Zero Hour* (Jane Chambers Award, Lambda Literary Award finalist). Honors include a Whiting Award, the Princess Grace Award, and a Lilly Award. Madeleine's translation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* will premiere at Two River Theater in 2022, and her audio adaptation of Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* is forthcoming from Audible Originals. Madeleine is a founding member of the Obie-Award-winning playwrights' collective 13P (www.13p.org), the Mellon Playwright in Residence at Two River Theater, and a writer on the Hulu mystery-comedy *Only Murders in the Building*. Since 2006, she has worked with the Bard Prison Initiative at Bard College, where she currently serves as Director of Admissions.

2021 AWARD COMMITTEE BIOS

Doug Wright

Doug Wright is a Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning playwright, longtime President of the Dramatists Guild, and a proud Hermitage alumnus. His play *Quills* premiered at Washington, D.C.'s Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in 1995 and subsequently had its debut Off-Broadway at New York Theatre Workshop. *Quills* garnered the 1995 Kesselring Prize for Best New American Play from the National Arts Club and, for Wright, a 1996 Village Voice Obie Award for Outstanding Achievement in Playwriting. In 2000, Wright wrote the screenplay for the film version of *Quills*, which starred Geoffrey Rush. Wright's *I Am My Own Wife* was produced Off-Broadway by Playwrights Horizons in 2003. It transferred to Broadway where it won the Tony Award for Best Play, as well as the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The subject of this one-person play, which starred Jefferson Mays, is the German transvestite Charlotte von Mahlsdorf. In 2006, Wright wrote the book for *Grey Gardens*. The musical is based on the Maysles brothers' 1975 film documentary of the same title about Edith Ewing Bouvier Beale ("Big Edie") and her daughter Edith Bouvier Beale ("Little Edie"), Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis's aunt and cousin. He adapted Disney's film *The Little Mermaid* for the Broadway musical, which opened in 2007. In 2009, he was commissioned by the La Jolla Playhouse to adapt and direct *Creditors* by August Strindberg. In another La Jolla commission, he wrote the book for the musical *Hands on a Hardbody*, with the score by Amanda Green and Trey Anastasio. The musical had a brief run on Broadway in March and April 2013 after premiering at the La Jolla Playhouse in 2012. For television, Wright worked on four pilots for producer Norman Lear and teleplays for Hallmark Entertainment and HBO. In film, Wright's credits include

screenplays for Fine Line Features, Fox Searchlight, and DreamWorks SKG. He is a member of the Dramatists Guild and serves on the board of New York Theatre Workshop. He is a recipient of the William L. Bradley Fellowship at Yale University, the Charles MacArthur Fellowship at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, an HBO Fellowship in playwriting and the Alfred Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University. In 2010 he was named a United States Artists Fellow. Wright lives in New York City with his partner, songwriter David Clement.

Leigh Silverman

Leigh Silverman is a Tony Award-nominated and Obie Award-winning director. Broadway credits include *Grand Horizons* (2nd Stage, Williamstown Theater Festival); *The Lifespan of a Fact* (Studio 54); *Violet* (Roundabout, Tony Award nomination); *Chinglish* (Goodman Theatre; Longacre Theatre); *Well* (Public Theater, ACT, Longacre Theatre). Recent Off-Broadway credits include *Soft Power* (Public Theater, Ahmanson Theater, Curran Theater, Tony Award nomination); *Tumacho* (Clubbed Thumb); *Hurricane Diane* (New York Theatre Workshop; Two River Theater); *Harry Clarke* (Vineyard Theatre/Audible, Minetta Lane; Lortel nomination); *Wild Goose Dreams* (Public Theater; La Jolla Playhouse); *Sweet Charity* (New Group); *On the Exhale* (Roundabout); *The Outer Space* (Public Theater). *Encores: Bring Me to Light; Violet; The Wild Party; Really Rosie*. 2011 Obie Award and 2019 Obie for Sustained Excellence. Upcoming projects include *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (The Shed) and *Suffs* (Public Theater).

Liesl Tommy

Liesl Tommy is an award-winning international theater director and director of the recently released MGM biopic *Respect*, based on the life of Aretha Franklin and starring Jennifer Hudson. She is also the director of the upcoming film *Born a Crime*, based on Trevor Noah's best-selling memoir, starring Lupita Nyong'o. Tommy directed the world premiere of *Eclipsed* on Broadway, for which she was Tony Award-nominated for Best Direction of a Play. She makes her Goodman Theatre directorial debut with the world premiere musical adaption of *The Outsiders*.