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**The Hermitage Presents a New Musical Commission from
Imani Uzuri, 2022 Recipient of the
Hermitage Major Theater Award in November,
in Partnership with New York Theatre Workshop**

Casting for the workshop reading of **Imani Uzuri's** new musical, ***Lighthouse of the Singing Birds***, includes Tony Award winner **Lillias White** (*The Life, Hadestown*), Broadway's **Nichelle Lewis** (*Ragtime, The Wiz*), **Charlie Burnham**, **Starr Busby**, **Jared Wayne Gladly**, **Yayoi Ikawa**, **Polanco Jones**, **Marla Lou**, **Matthew D. Morrison**, and **Mercy Viola**.

Presented November 18th at **New York Theatre Workshop** (New York, NY)

Imani Uzuri was selected as the third HMTA recipient by **Christopher Burney**, **Patricia McGregor**, and **Jeanine Tesori**

The **Hermitage Major Theater Award** (HMTA), presented by the **Hermitage Artist Retreat** and made possible with support from the Kutya Major Foundation, recognizes a theater artist with a commission of **\$35,000** to create an original work, as well as providing a residency at the Hermitage's beachfront campus on Florida's Gulf Coast, and an inaugural workshop of the newly created work in a notable arts capital.

October 31, 2024 (New York, NY / Sarasota, FL) — **Andy Sandberg**, Artistic Director and CEO of the **Hermitage Artist Retreat**, announced today that **Imani Uzuri**, the 2022 recipient of the \$35,000 **Hermitage Major Theater Award** (HMTA), will have a workshop presentation of her newly commissioned musical this month at **New York Theatre Workshop** on Monday, November 18th. **Imani Uzuri** is an award-winning composer, vocalist, librettist, improviser, and lyricist, and the Hermitage is collaborating with NYTW to present this concert reading of Uzuri's new musical ***Lighthouse of the Singing Birds*** to an invitation-only audience. Her original commission is coming to fruition less than two years from the date the recipient learned of her recognition.

The **Hermitage Major Theater Award** was established in 2021 to recognize a playwright or theater artist with a substantial commission to create a new, original, and impactful piece of theater. This national, jury-selected award, established by the

Hermitage with generous support from **Flora Major** and the **Kutya Major Foundation**, offers one of the largest nonprofit theater commissions in the country. Uzuri receives a cash prize of \$35,000, as well as a residency at the Hermitage (Sarasota County, Florida), plus developmental and financial support for these upcoming developmental readings in New York. The prize is intended to bridge the connection between the Hermitage (Sarasota County, Florida), where the commission is born, and other leading arts and culture centers around the world, including New York, London, Chicago, and notable arts capitals where great theater is frequently developed and presented.

HMTA winners are nominated and selected by a jury of recognized arts leaders in the field of theater. The 2022 Award Committee that selected Imani Uzuri includes two-time Tony Award-winning composer **Jeanine Tesori**, Tony Award-nominated producer, educator, and artistic director **Christopher Burney**, and New York Theatre Workshop Artistic Director **Patricia McGregor**.

“It has been thrilling to see the work that’s come to life from past HMTA recipients **Madeleine George** and **Shariffa Ali**, and it is incredibly exciting to be seeing **Imani Uzuri**’s original musical now coming to fruition,” said Hermitage Artistic Director and CEO **Andy Sandberg**. “Imani is an extraordinary talent who engages fellow artists with light and innovation, and we’re honored to play a role in supporting her artistic journey. Bringing original works to life through this commissioning program is a true honor and a gift to the theater, made possible by the generosity of Flora Major, who has entrusted the Hermitage with this invaluable opportunity.”

Lighthouse of the Singing Birds is a magical realist musical with book, music, and lyrics by Hermitage Major Theater Award winner **Imani Uzuri**. Told through ephemeral puppetry, song and immersive storytelling *Lighthouse of the Singing Birds* deals with themes of mysticism, death, liminality, ecology, Black American vernacular artistic culture (music, art, foodways, folklore healing modalities and so forth) as well as illuminating the sublimated history of Black lighthouse keepers and celebrating Black American vernacular sacred/secular song traditions. Somewhere in the Outer Banks of North Carolina on a Sound whose beach has purple sand (from coral), a bird sanctuary, a lighthouse, and elusive wild horses, Jasmine Songbird is on the precipice. Surrounded by her quirky intergenerational family who are singers, healers, quilters, foragers, instrument makers, moonshiners and more, along with their eclectic community, Jasmine lives where the mundane and mystical merge every day. The spiritual and ancestral realm are ever present. The veil is thin. The family's healing work is to lovingly sing people in hospice across the threshold. Their family song is "Every day is H O L Y."

Casting for the first full-length reading of *Lighthouse of the Singing Birds* includes Tony Award winner **Lillias White** (*The Life, Hometown*, Disney’s “Hercules”), **Nichelle Lewis** (*The Wiz* on Broadway, *Ragtime* at Encores), plus stage and screen talents **Charlie Burnham** (violinist/composer), **Starr Busby** (*Octet*, *The Beautiful Lady*), **Jared**

Wayne Gladly (*Aladdin, Frozen*), **Yayoi Ikawa** (jazz pianist/composer), **Polanco Jones** (*The Wiz*), **Marla Lou** (Theater Producers of Color 2023, *Hadestown*), **Matthew D. Morrison** (musicologist), and **Mercy Viola** (cultural worker/performance artist).

Upon announcing Uzuri as the third recipient of the HMTA, 2022 Award Committee member and NYTW Artistic Director **Patricia McGregor** noted, “When I think of the great orchestration of life, we might miss a note – but when that note reveals itself, when it is given the space to be a part of the orchestration, we are all richer. I’m excited for Imani and what this award can do for her and for this intimate, magical, liberatory, intergenerational piece. I’m also excited for *us*, and I’m very grateful to the Hermitage because this award is going to allow for this ‘note’ in the great orchestration of life, to sing, live, and breathe in a way that it legitimately might not have without this moment, this opportunity – and we will all benefit so greatly from that.”

Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning playwright, Hermitage Fellow, trustee, and HTMA Juror **Doug Wright** said of the Hermitage Major Theater Award: “In a challenged theatrical landscape, 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 it could not come at a more auspicious time.”

Past recipients of the Hermitage Major Theater Award include **Madeleine George** (2021), who is a Pulitzer Prize finalist for her play *The (curious case of the) Watson Intelligence*, and she currently is a writer and producer for Hulu’s hit series “Only Murders in the Building.” George presented the first full-length reading of her new play ***The Sore Loser*** to an invitation-only audience at MCC Theatre last winter. *The Sore Loser* is a Faustian comedy set in a bowling alley. It’s a play about power, domination, and the death of the patriarchy – as told through a small-town bowling tournament. Theater-maker and director **Shariffa Ali** was selected as the second recipient of the Hermitage Major Theater Award. Ali shared an in-process presentation of her newly devised work ***Hero*** for an invitation-only audience on in November of 2023, also at MCC Theater. Ali provided an overview and excerpts from this heartwarming and inspiring new play with music, set in a small South African town and inspired by the true story of Shariffa’s longtime friend and collaborator Vuyo Sotashe.

Olivier Award-winning playwright and librettist **Chris Bush** (*Standing at the Sky’s Edge*) was announced in January as the fourth recipient of the Hermitage Major Theater Award, and the Hermitage will present a workshop reading of her original commission in London in the fall of 2025. The fifth recipient of the HMTA will be announced soon.

In addition to the Hermitage Major Theater Award commissions, the Hermitage Artist Retreat annually awards the jury-selected Hermitage Greenfield Prize (HGP), a distinguished commission that rotates each year between the disciplines of theater, music, and visual art. Past recipients in theater have included **Deepa Purohit** (2024)

Aleshea Harris (2021), **Martyna Majok** (2018), **Nilo Cruz** (2015), **John Guare** (2012), and **Craig Lucas** (2009).

A leading national arts incubator, the Hermitage is the *only* major arts organization in Florida's Gulf Coast exclusively committed to supporting the development and creation of new work across all artistic disciplines. 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, film, and more. As part of their residencies, Hermitage Fellows participate in free year-round 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 galleries, concert halls, theaters, and museums around the world. These innovative programs include performances, conversations, readings, interactive experiences, open studios, school programs, teacher workshops, and more, serving thousands in our regional community each year.

Note: The Hermitage recently experienced devastating impact from hurricanes Helene and Milton, and the organization is working to reopen its beachfront campus on Manasota Key as quickly as possible.

For more information about the Hermitage or to make a tax-deductible contribution to the Hermitage's hurricane repair efforts, please visit:

HermitageArtistRetreat.org.

The Hermitage Artist Retreat

Sarasota County, Florida

Andy Sandberg, Artistic Director and CEO

The Hermitage is a leading national arts incubator and multidisciplinary artist retreat located on Manasota Key, Florida. For more than two decades, the Hermitage has invited 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 17 Pulitzer Prize winners, Poets Laureate, Guggenheim and MacArthur Fellows, and multiple Tony, Emmy, Grammy, Oscar winners and nominees. Works created at this beachside retreat by a diverse and accomplished group of Hermitage alumni have gone on to renowned theaters, concert halls, and galleries throughout the world. Each year, the Hermitage awards the Hermitage Greenfield Prize for a new work of art, the Hermitage Major Theater Award for an original theater commission, and the Aspen Music Festival's Hermitage Prize in Composition.

For more information, visit HermitageArtistRetreat.org.

The Hermitage is supported by:

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IMANI UZURI

Imani Uzuri is the 2022 recipient of the **Hermitage Major Theater Award**. Raised in rural North Carolina, Uzuri is an award-winning composer, vocalist, experimental librettist, improviser, and lyricist. She composes, performs, and creates interdisciplinary works including concerts, ritual performances, albums, sound art installations, and compositions for chamber ensembles, film, voice, and theater (including experimental and musical theater), often dealing with themes of ancestral memory, magical realism, liminality, haunting, Black American vernacular culture, spirituality, and landscape. As a Jerome Foundation Composer/Sound Artist Fellow and a Camargo Foundation (Cassis, France) Composer-in-Residence, Uzuri made international sojourns to over 30 shrines in support of her forthcoming ritual opera celebrating the holy iconography of the Black Madonna. Uzuri has been commissioned by Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, The Ford Foundation, Harvard Fromm Players, The Flea Theater, and her recent Chamber Music America New Jazz Works commission *She Knows Suite* premiered at Lincoln Center Atrium. Uzuri's work has been featured at international venues/festivals including Performa Biennial, France's Festival Sons d'hiver, London's ICA, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Joe's Pub, LA Phil, MoMA, Carnegie Hall, NY Phil, and Lincoln Center. Her work has been called "stunning" by *Vulture*, and her ritual performance *Wild Cotton* was cited as one "with subtlety and vision" by *The New York Times*. Uzuri received her MFA from Goddard College Vermont and her M.A. in African American Studies from Columbia University. Uzuri was a 2019-2020 Harvard University W. E. B. DuBois Hutchins Center Fellow in support of her forthcoming chamber opera *Hush Arbor (The Opera)*. Uzuri is composer and co-lyricist for the new musical *GIRL Shakes Loose* (book and co-lyrics by Zakiyyah Alexander, featuring the poetry of the legendary Sonia Sanchez). Uzuri's theater work has received support from O'Neill National Music Theater Conference, NAMT, Goodspeed Musicals Writer's Grove, New Dramatist, and The Lark. Her theater credits include The Public Theater: (composer) Public Works *Troy*, Mobile Unit's *Hamlet*, O'Neill Center NMTI (National Musical Theater Institute) LAB: (Guest Director) *RENT*. Uzuri is the 2022 Lillys Composer Awardee.

[HermitageArtistRetreat.org](https://www.HermitageArtistRetreat.org)

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"My time at the Hermitage has been immensely productive for me, and also a kind of soul-reset. My time here helped me reconnect with my artistic instincts again."

— Madeleine George, Pulitzer Prize Nominee and 2021 Hermitage Major Theater Award Winner

"This gift at the Hermitage is the opportunity to dream big, come to the work with a full cup, and just be an artist. It's a true game-changer in the arts industry."

— Shariffa Ali, 2022 Hermitage Major Theater Award Winner

