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THE HERMITAGE
artist retreat



PHOTO RELEASE:

**The Hermitage Presents “Lighthouse of the Singing Birds,”
a New Musical Commission from Hermitage Major Theater Award
Winner Imani Uzuri, at New York Theatre Workshop**

*The third recipient of the **Hermitage Major Theater Award** — **Imani Uzuri** — shared the first presentation of her newly commissioned work at **New York Theatre Workshop**.*

LIGHTHOUSE OF THE SINGING BIRDS

(a magical realist musical)

With Music, Lyrics, and Book by **Imani Uzuri**

Cast: Tony Award winner **Lillias White** (*The Life, Hadestown*), **Nichelle Lewis** (*Ragtime, The Wiz*), **Charlie Burnham**, **Starr Busby**, **Jared Wayne Gladly**, **Yayoi Ikawa**, **Polanco Jones**, **Marla Louissant**, **Mercy Viola**

Imani Uzuri was selected as the third HMTA recipient by an Award Committee that included: **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.

Photo Link:

https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/6mr1rgac8x4i8h83m61e2/AOsw460L1IUNkpLJfbL_zXw?rlkey=ek4esbudir5kheq7tnn2acno6&st=px0uszct&dl=0

Photo Credit: Natalie Powers & Danny Bristoll / Hermitage Artist Retreat

November 19, 2024 (New York, NY / Sarasota, FL) — **The Hermitage Artist Retreat** (Andy Sandberg, Artistic Director and CEO), today released photos from the premiere presentation of newly commissioned work by **Imani Uzuri**. The third recipient of the \$35,000 **Hermitage Major Theater Award** (HMTA), Uzuri shared a workshop presentation of her newly commissioned musical *Lighthouse of the Singing Birds* at Off-Broadway’s **New York Theatre Workshop**, an institution noted for its long history of producing new and groundbreaking work, on November

18th. Imani Uzuri is an award-winning composer, vocalist, librettist, improviser, and lyricist. 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 international, 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 United States. Uzuri received a cash prize of \$35,000, as well as a residency at the Hermitage Artist Retreat, plus developmental and financial support for this developmental reading 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 where great theater is frequently developed and presented, including New York, London, and Chicago.

Lighthouse of the Singing Birds is a magical realist musical with book, music, and lyrics by Hermitage Major Theater Award winner **Imani Uzuri**. Monday's presentation was introduced by Hermitage Artistic Director and CEO **Andy Sandberg** and NYTW Artistic Director **Patricia McGregor**. Told through 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. The cast the first concert reading of *Lighthouse of the Singing Birds* included 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 Louissaint** (Theater Producers of Color 2023, *Hometown*), **Mercy Viola** (cultural worker/performance artist), and dramaturgy by musicologist **Matthew D. Morrison**.

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 included 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**.

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 is currently 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. 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.

Olivier Award-winning playwright and librettist **Chris Bush** (*Standing at the Sky's Edge*) was announced in January of 2024 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. California-based playwright **Naomi Iizuka** was announced earlier this month as the fifth recipient of the HMTA, and her work will receive its first workshop presentation in Chicago in the fall of 2026.

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:

Hermitage programs are supported, in part, by the National Endowment for the Arts; Sarasota County Tourist Development Tax revenues; the Welles Murphey Fund at Gulf Coast Community Foundation; Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation; and the Community Foundation of Sarasota County.

IMANI UZURI

Imani Uzuri is the third 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

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"The Hermitage breeds something unique, and without it, I cannot tell you how much work would not happen. This award is so incredibly powerful and unlike anything out there. There are very few recognitions which give structure and freedom at the same time as capital — there is a graciousness, generosity, and elegance to this award."

Jeanine Tesori, 2022 HMTA Award Committee, Two-Time Tony Award-Winning Composer

"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