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**‘Beyond Conversation: Red Summer’
Connects the Chicago Race Riots of 1919 to Present Day America:
Inspiring action through art, discussion, and education
Saturday, March 26, 2022**

University Park, IL (March 16, 2022) Governors State University’s Center for Performing Arts invites community members to preview a brand-new drama on March 26, ‘RED SUMMER’, which will premiere on the Center’s stage in September 2022.

[‘Beyond Conversation: Red Summer’](#) gives community members an intimate glimpse at the creative process, while encouraging reflections on the legacy of 1919 – and how little has changed in the past 100 years. Attendees will be the first to view a staged musical number from the show and hear from a panel of artists and community partners, followed by facilitated conversations with educators and community activists that go beyond conversation.

‘RED SUMMER’ takes place during the Chicago race riots of 1919. The protagonists are two WWI soldiers—one black, one white—who return from the battlefields of Europe only to find themselves caught in the violence of a Chicago that is struggling to accommodate the Great Migration, the return of WWI veterans, a

downturn in the economy, and long-standing ethnic tensions. Having fought on the same side in The Great War, they are now pitted against each other as their friends, family, and neighbors wage block-by-block warfare, and the city's ethnic enclaves rage and burn.

Playwright Andrew White observes, "Today, more than 100 years later, the same issues still simmer in every metropolitan area in America."

Playwrights Shepsu Aakhu and Andrew White have been friends and colleagues in the Chicago theatre scene for more than 30 years. They sought an opportunity to collaborate but had not found the right project until 2017. It was then that Aakhu and White began co-writing 'RED SUMMER' as a response to America's continued racial divisions.

Shepsu Aakhu is a prolific African-American playwright and founder of MPAACT (Ma'at Production Association of Afrikan Centered Theatre); he has written many plays chronicling the black perspective of growing up in Chicago. Several of these plays have been presented at the Center in seasons past including 'Speaking in Tongues: The Chronicles of Babel' and 'Starting Over'. White is a Jewish-American playwright, who has placed race relations at the heart of his writing as well.

The plot of 'RED SUMMER' in some ways mirrors the stories of its two authors. It is about two men whose histories and fates are co-written by historic elements outside of their control, but who make choices that are within their power. Despite similar points of view, the two men often find themselves on different sides of the fickle coin of opportunity as they face similar choices about how best to bridge the racial divide and make the world a little less brittle and mean.

The Spark That Set the City Ablaze

On July 27, 1919, Eugene Williams and three friends went for a swim in Lake Michigan, launching their homemade wooden raft from the one beach in Chicago where black beachgoers could enjoy the lake.

It had been hot, with no rain for a month, and tensions ran high throughout the City. The Great Migration had brought thousands of black families who were fleeing Southern terrorism and Jim Crow laws, and seeking jobs in Northern factories during WWI. Now that the war was over, decommissioned soldiers—both black and white—were home and looking for work, just as factories experienced a post-war slowdown. Labor relations were tense, and a transit strike was looming. Street gangs of every nationality guarded their respective neighborhoods, often with violence. Prohibition, the Suffragette movement, and the chronic fracas and fray of Chicago politics had the city abuzz.

Eugene and his friends drifted on their raft within a stone's throw from the white-designated beach at 29th Street. George Stauber, a white man, began throwing stones, one of which hit Eugene in the forehead. Eugene slipped under the water. His friends swam to shore to get a lifeguard, but it was too late—Eugene

had drowned. The white police officer on hand refused to arrest Stauber and began to argue with a black police officer while crowds of black and white beachgoers grew angry. The white police officer, instead, arrested a black man, and soon bricks and rocks were flying, followed shortly by bullets. The race riots had begun, and would last eight brutal days, leaving 38 dead (23 black, 15 white), more than 500 injured (60% black) and more than 1,000 black families' homeless after whites torched their residences.

Aakhu says: “[The year] 2019 was the centennial of the ‘Red Summer,’ which earned its name due to the blood that ran freely in the streets of Chicago (and many other American cities). Yet these events are largely forgotten and unknown to the general populace—even to those who live in the cities in which they took fierce hold. As the saying goes, those who forget history are doomed to repeat it—and, arguably, one of the reasons racial conflicts continues to erupt in Chicago (and in every other urban metropolis in America) is because we choose to bury this history rather than look at it and understand it. This story must be told because it sheds light on a chapter of our shared history that is too often overlooked, in the hope that an honest look at our past will make it possible to have a clearer vision of our future.”

Shepsu Aakhu is a playwright, director, scenic designer, photographer, musician and Executive Director for MPAACT. As a playwright in residence with MPAACT, Shepsu has developed several critically acclaimed works in the Playwright's Laboratory, among them are: ‘Feral’, ‘Warm on he Coolin’ Board’, ‘Speaking in Tongues The Chronicles of Babel’, ‘Ghosts of Atwood’, ‘Ten Square’, ‘Trouble the Water’, ‘Relevant Hearsay’, ‘SOST’, ‘Kiwi Black’, ‘Kosi Dasa’, ‘Fascia’, ‘The Glow of Reflected Light’, ‘The Abesha Conspiracy; Beneath A Dark Sky’, ‘Piece-Meal Clan’, and ‘Otherworld Lovers’. Shepsu is also a four-time nominee for the Joseph Jefferson citation in multiple categories. In 2012 he was awarded the Joseph Jefferson citation for outstanding new work (‘Speaking in Tongues/Babel’). In 2003 the play ‘Kiwi Black’ was nominated in the same category. Shepsu was awarded two Joseph Jefferson citations for original music in 2002 and 2003 for ‘Kosi Dasa’ and ‘Kiwi Black’ respectively. Shepsu is a two-time recipient Theodore Ward Prize for Playwriting- ‘Ten Square’ (2008-9) and ‘Kiwi Black’ (2001-2002). He is a six time nominee for best Original Work (Aldridge Award) by the BTAA of Chicago. Shepsu received the Ira Aldridge Award in 1999 for ‘The Abesha Conspiracy’ and 2007 for ‘Trouble the Water’. Shepsu Aakhu was awarded the prestigious Artistic Fellowship in Scriptworks by the Illinois Arts Council in 2004.

Andrew White is a founding member of Lookingglass Theatre Company, where he served as Artistic Director from 2010-16, and currently serves as the Director of Community Engagement in the company's Department of Curiosity. As a Lookingglass ensemble member and performer, he has participated as an actor, writer or director in more than forty Lookingglass productions. He wrote the book and lyrics for Lookingglass' 2012 production of ‘Eastland: A New Musical’, received a Jeff Award for his 2004 adaptation of George Orwell's ‘1984’, and wrote and directed ‘Of One Blood’ for Lookingglass in 1989. Andy has worked in corporate, non-profit, and classroom environments, structuring and facilitating conversations with participants around organizational and community issues since 1990. He has worked in Lookingglass

Outreach and Education programs with students of all ages: developing and implementing arts-integrated units in elementary and high schools; facilitating faculty workshops in schools across the Chicagoland area; and working with teenagers across the city to use theater as a means of engaging their peers in dialogue about community issues, from HIV to racism. He has taught in various Lookingglass outreach programs and residencies, and in 2007 co-founded Mosaic Experience, a company which uses an arts-based approach to dialogue about diversity.

Shawn Wallace, composer

Shawn Wallace's musical styles range from Gospel to Jazz to Hip-Hop and beyond.

As keyboardist, he has worked with luminary artists such as Common, Ice Cube, Bobby Brown, Dwele, Johnny Gill, Jon B., Bilal, Estelle, Julie Dexter, Rene Neufville, Rakim, Eric Roberson, Maggie Brown, Ugochi and Cherrisse Scott. A native of Chicago's far Southwest side, Shawn studied Music Theory and Composition at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and currently serves as Musical Director for two New Thought congregations: The Emmaus Center and the Namaste Center for Spiritual Living-Chicago. His independent film score credits include; 'Severed Ties' (Showcase Productions/Lions Gate Films), 'Puzzle Love' (Storybox Productions) and 'Son of America' (Tanskin Productions/N'Spire Entertainment INC), and is also working as Musical Arranger and Musical Director on Charleston Olio by Ifa Bayeza, co-author of 'Some Sing, Some Cry' with Ntozake Shange.

For more information or to reserve your spot, visit www.govt.edu/RedSummer

PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE AND TICKET INFORMATION

Beyond Conversation: Red Summer

Saturday, March 26, 2022

1–2:30 p.m. Center for Performing Arts

- Performance Sneak Peek
- Panelists and Q&A with creative team

2:30 p.m. Hall of Governors*

- Refreshments
- Facilitated Conversations
- Resources

Governors State University, Center for Performing Arts 1 University Parkway University Park, IL 60484

****Tickets are free but reservations are required. To reserve your seat, visit***

www.govst.edu/RedSummer or call (708) 235-2222.

Reservations for the first portion 1-2:30 p.m. will be accepted through March 25. Reservations for both portions must be made by March 21.

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