

CENTER REPERTORY COMPANY PRESENTS
ROOF-RAISING MUSICAL CELEBRATION
CROWNS

By Regina Taylor

Adapted from the book by Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry

Directed by Delicia Turner Sonnenberg

September 9 – October 6, 2023 (opening night: September 12)

LESHER CENTER FOR THE ARTS, WALNUT CREEK

WALNUT CREEK, CA (8 August 2023) — **Center Repertory Company** will present *Crowns*, a jubilant musical celebration of cultural history and glamorous hats. With imaginative storytelling and songs tracing from Gospel through contemporary hip-hop, *Crowns* centers on a community of Black women who don brilliant bold hats for all of life’s occasions. When Chicago-born Yolanda is sent down South, she is welcomed into their world, exploring the powerful rituals and rich history connected to their stunning headgear. Written by Golden Globe Award-winning actor/director/playwright **Regina Taylor** based on the book by **Michael Cunningham** and **Craig Marberry**, *Crowns* is an inspirational and roof-raising musical play that will lift spirits and have audiences leaping to their feet. Helmed by celebrated regional theatre director **Delicia Turner Sonnenberg**, *Crowns* will perform **September 9 – October 6, 2023** at the Leshar Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Dr, Walnut Creek. For tickets (\$45-\$70) and more information, the public may visit LesharArtsCenter.org or call the box office at **(925) 943-7469** (open Wed-Sun, 12:00pm-6:00pm).

Center REP offers Pay What You Can tickets (suggested price of \$25) for the September 9 & 10 preview performances of *Crowns*, increasing access to theatre and inviting audiences to see the show at whatever price they can afford. ASL interpretation for deaf and hard of hearing patrons is offered at the 2:30 pm performance on Saturday, October 1, 2023.

Making its World Premiere in a co-production by McCarter Theatre Center and Second Stage Theatre, *Crowns* has dazzled critics and audiences alike with *The New York Times* calling it “delightfully celebratory” and *The Star-Ledger* deeming it “warm, wise, and wonderful.” *TheaterMania* says “Taylor pulls off a Hat Trick: She scores thrice, turning *Crowns* into an artful amalgamation of oral history, fashion show, and musical theater...Hats off to Regina Taylor for a considerable achievement.”

Director Sonnenberg has assembled a talented cast to bring this vibrant musical play to life. Seen in Center REP's *A Christmas Carol* as Flora Fezziwig, **Antonia Reed** (she/her) returns as Yolanda, a young Black woman who goes down South and discovers a vibrant community of women wearing fabulous hats. She has also previously performed with Diablo Valley College Drama in their productions of *Madwoman of Chailot*, *Freaky Friday*, and *The Addams Family*.

Juanita Harris makes her Center REP debut as Mother Shaw, the matriarch of the group. Harris is a Bay Area vocal coach, director, vocal and music director, musician, vocalist, and actor. Her stage performances include roles with San Jose Playhouse, 42nd Street Moon, New Conservatory Theatre Center, African-American Shakespeare Company, City Lights Theatre Company, Sunnyvale Community Players, The Tabard Theatre Company, Dragon Productions Theatre Company, Lyric Theatre, and Foothill Music Theatre. She was voted "Best Jazz Singer" by KDFC Radio's "Best in the Bay" for 4 years running from 2018 to 2022 and was nominated twice for Theater Bay Area Awards in 2017 and 2018.

Seen in Center REP's *Rock of Ages*, **Erica Richardson** (she/her, aka Yaadi Erica) returns as Wanda, a ladylike woman who is concerned with propriety, decorum, and wearing the most appropriate hat. A bi-coastal artist and educator, Richardson has been nominated for and has won awards for her theatrical performances throughout the Bay Area, including a Shellie Award for Best Supporting Actress as Motor Mouth Maybelle in *Hairspray* at Woodminster Summer Musicals. She has also performed with 42nd Street Moon, Hillbarn Theatre, Contra Costa Musical Theatre, Custom Made Theatre Company, and Cutting Ball Theater. Known for her electric blend of Neo-soul, Jazz, and Reggae, Yaadi Erica has performed as a soloist, with her band Kah Liberation, and with the legendary LGBTQ+ icons The Cockettes. She is currently recording her first album "Different Shades of Blue (A Blaque Woman's Journey)."

Phaedra Tillery Boughton (she/her) makes her Center REP debut as Mabel, a minister's wife who owns about 200 hats. Boughton is a Bay Area based actor, director, playwright, casting associate, and arts advocate. She has performed with New Conservatory Theatre Center, Hillbarn Theatre, Ray Of Light Theatre, Woodminster Summer Musicals, and Palo Alto Players.

Seen in Center REP's *Smokey Joe's Café* and *BEEHIVE: The 60's Musical*, **Constance Jewell Lopez** (she/her) returns as Velma, a tough funeral director with "hattitude" in spades. As a vocalist, she performed as a backup singer for Huey Lewis and the News. She also joined forces with rapper Lyrics Born and has traveled with him nationally as a vocalist for 15 years. Her theatre performances include roles with Woodminster Summer Musicals, Celebration Theatre, DOMA Theatre Company, Civic Light Opera, East West Players, and Ensemble Theatre Company. On television, she has appeared on "Melissa & Joey" and "The Office."

Janelle LaSalle (she/her) makes her Center REP debut as Jeanette, a fun, flirty, and brassy woman. Stage credits include roles with Ray of Light Theatre (Theatre Bay Area and San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle Best Actress Nominee), Berkeley Playhouse, Palo Alto Players, Broadway By the Bay, New Conservatory Theatre Center, and The Tabard Theatre Company (TBA Best Actress Nominee). Film/TV credits include Pixar Animation Studios' *Twenty Something*.

After directing Center REP's *The Devil's Music: The Life and Blues of Bessie Smith*, **Darryl V. Jones** (he/him) makes his onstage debut as The Man, playing different roles in the women's stories. Jones recently appeared as The Tin Man in American Conservatory Theater's acclaimed production of *The Wizard of Oz*. In 2022 Jones co-wrote, directed, and performed in *Halie! The Mahalia Jackson Musical* for Lorraine Hansberry Theatre. Jones was TBA Award nominated for supporting actor in Theatre Rhinoceros' first production of *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*. He has appeared onstage at The Old Globe, Arena Stage, and Ford's Theatre. He has also directed productions with San Francisco Playhouse, Shotgun Players, and Aurora Theatre Company.

Crowns features musical direction by **Leigh Scarritt**, choreography by **Kendra Barnes**, scenic design by **Nina Ball**, costume design by **Ulises Alcalá**, sound design by **Lyle Barrere**, lighting design by **Ben Rawson**, props design by **Alyssa Tryon**, and technical supervision by **Kelly James Tighe**.

Regina Taylor (Playwright) is the author of *Oo-Bla-Dee*, which received the American Theatre Critics/Steinberg New Play Award. *Drowning Crow*, her adaptation of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, was presented by Manhattan Theatre Club on Broadway. Her other works include *Crowns*, *The Trinity River Plays*; *stop. reset.*; *The Dreams of Sarah Breedlove*; *Magnolias*; *Between the Lines*; and *Bread*. She has performed on Broadway in *As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, and has also acted in

productions Off-Broadway and at numerous regional theatres. Her film credits include *All Day and a Night*, *Saturday Church*, *Clockers*, *Lean on Me*, *Courage Under Fire* (with Denzel Washington), and *The Negotiator* (with Samuel L. Jackson). Television credits include “Lovecraft Country,” “The Unit,” “The Good Fight,” “Elementary,” “Grey’s Anatomy,” “The Wonder Years,” and “Blue Bloods.” For her role as Lilly Harper on the television series "I'll Fly Away," Ms. Taylor won an NAACP Image Award and received the Golden Globe Award for Best Leading Dramatic Actress. She is currently serving as the playwright in residence at Repertory Theatre of St. Louis.

Craig Marberry’s (Original Book) books include *Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats*, *Spirit of Harlem: A Portrait of America’s Most Exciting Neighborhood*, and *Cuttin’ Up: Wit and Wisdom from Black Barber Shops*. A former television reporter, Marberry has written for *The Washington Post* and *Essence*.

Michael Cunningham’s (Original Book) books include *Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats* and *Spirit of Harlem: A Portrait of America’s Most Exciting Neighborhood*. He is the executive director of Urban Shutterbugs, a photography and mentoring program for inner-city youth. His works have been featured in museums across the country.

Delicia Turner Sonnenberg (Director, she/her) is a director, artistic leader, and teacher. She is a founder and the former Artistic Director of MOXIE Theatre, which she helmed for twelve acclaimed seasons. During that time, she received the Des McAnuff New Visions Award for “Risk Taking Leadership and Body of Work,” as well as “2015 Director of the Year” from the San Diego Theatre Critics Circle. In addition to MOXIE, Sonnenberg has directed plays for The Old Globe, San Diego Repertory Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse, Actors Theatre of Louisville Humana Festival, Cygnet Theatre, New Village Arts, and Diversionary Theatre, among others. She has also directed countless workshops and staged readings of new plays for National New Play Network, The Old Globe, Bay Area Playwrights Festival, San Diego Repertory Theatre, and Arena Stage. Sonnenberg was twice a recipient of the Van Lier Directing Fellowship through Second Stage Theater, and is an alumna of the New York Drama League’s Directors Program and Theatre Communication Group’s New Generations Program. She has received NAACP Theatre awards and nominations for direction, a Women's International Center Living Legacy Award, awards for “Outstanding Direction of a Play” and “Outstanding Dramatic Production” from the San Diego Theatre Critics Circle, as well as KPBS “Patte” Theatre awards for the

same. Currently, she is a Resident Artist at The Old Globe and serves on the board of La Jolla Playhouse.

About Center Repertory Company

Led by Artistic Director **Matt M. Morrow**, **Center REP** is the resident professional theatre company of the Leshner Center for the Arts. Its season consists of six productions—a variety of classic and contemporary musicals, dramas, and comedies, presented with artistic excellence and high professional standards. Center REP’s mission is to celebrate the power of the human imagination by producing emotionally engaging, intellectually involving, and visually astonishing live theatre, and through Outreach and Education programs, to enrich and advance the cultural life of the communities it serves. As a producing theatre, its presentations are conceived and developed at the Leshner Center. Whether the production is a Bay Area premiere or a Shakespearean classic, each is devised to be a one-of-a-kind, artistic creation offering a unique theatre experience for audiences.

FOR CALENDAR EDITORS:

WHAT: **Center Repertory Company** will present ***Crowns***, a jubilant musical celebration of cultural history and glamorous hats. With imaginative storytelling and songs tracing from Gospel through contemporary hip-hop, ***Crowns*** centers on a community of Black women who don brilliant bold hats for all of life’s occasions. When Chicago-born Yolanda is sent down South, she is welcomed into their world, exploring the powerful rituals and rich history connected to their stunning headgear. Written by Golden Globe Award-winning actor/director/playwright **Regina Taylor** based on the book by **Michael Cunningham** and **Craig Marberry**, ***Crowns*** is an inspirational and roof-raising musical play that will lift spirits and have audiences leaping to their feet. Celebrated regional theatre director **Delicia Turner Sonnenberg** helms Center REP’s production.

WHEN: Previews: Saturday, September 9 – Sunday, September 10, 2023
Opening: Tuesday, September 12, 2023
Closing: Friday, October 6, 2023

ASL interpreted performance: 2:30pm Saturday, October 1, 2023

SHOWS: Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays: 7:30pm
Saturdays: 2:30pm & 7:30pm
Sundays: 2:30pm & 7:00pm

WHERE: Leshner Center for the Arts (1601 Civic Dr, Walnut Creek)

TICKETS: For tickets (\$45-\$70) or more information, the public may visit lesherartscenter.org or

call the box office at (925) 943-7469 (*open Wed-Sun, 12:00pm-6:00pm*).

Pay What You Can tickets (suggested price of \$25) are available for performances on September 9 & 10, 2023.

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PRESS: Contact Lauren Goldfarb, Carla Befera & Co.
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PHOTOS: Downloadable high-res photos are available: <http://cbpr.co/press/crowns>