



Melissa Cardona

VESSELS

PROGRAM

There will be an intermission. The performance will be followed by an experiential, interactive processing space.

Thursday, March 7 @ 8 PM

Friday, March 8 @ 8 PM

Saturday, March 9 @ 8 PM

Sunday, March 10 @ 7 PM

Harold Prince Theatre

This performance is part of The Philadelphians: Migrations That Made Our City.



The presentation of *Vessels* was funded in part by the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Theatre Project, with lead funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.



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Vessels is a National Performance Network/Visual Artists Network (NPN/VAN) Creation & Development Fund Project co-commissioned by Junebug Productions in partnership with Annenberg Center Live and NPN/VAN. The Creation & Development Fund is supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts (a federal agency). For more information: npnweb.org.

Vessels is also made possible with support and funding from: Alternate ROOTS; Arts Council New Orleans; The Contemporary Arts Center of New Orleans; The MAP Fund; the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; Global Connections-IN the LAB program, funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; and administered by Theatre Communications Group. *Vessels* is also made possible by hundreds of individual donors.

PROGRAM NOTES

Movement 1: Descent

Movement 2: Gathering

Movement 3: Integration

A Note from the Co-Shapers

Rebecca Mwase & Ron Ragin

Vessels has been guided by spirit and our ancestors from the beginning. The idea arrived in response to a query from poet Nikki Giovanni about how millions of enslaved ancestors arrived on this shore sane. We believe it was the singing, particularly women singing, that helped make those arrivals possible. The question “What does freedom sound like in space of confinement?” served as the foundation of our research and development process and guided our explorations.

In *Vessels*, we conjure two worlds: the carceral world of the slave ship, a physical and psychic floating prison; and the world of the spirit, an ephemeral place of freedom. Over the course of the ritual performance’s three movements—Descent, Gathering and Integration—we journey between them. We imagine that many, if not most, of the people who were sold into the Transatlantic Slave Trade came from peoples whose cultural practices included community ritual, incorporating song, dance, drumming, and other elements that could invoke spiritual power and ignite altered states of consciousness. Enslaved African people, packed into ships and stripped of many of these tools for enlivening their spirits, still had their voices. We offer *Vessels* as a possibility model for how singing can create pathways for people to exist apart from or deeply inside of themselves and how transcendence can be utilized not only to leave, but to stay; to shore up our current practices of survival and to support our collective thriving to be whole.

Our research began in Zimbabwe, Senegal, Benin, and Ghana, studying songs and dances associated with community recognition of traditionally important moments in women’s lives—birth, death, menstruation, marriage, and war. In further study, we deepened our knowledge of the repertoires of the Ewe, Dangme, Ashanti, Fante, and Ga people of Ghana, and integrated music from Equatorial Guinea and soundscapes and devised movement invoking the ensemble’s own ancestral memory. Alongside that research and studio-based work, we partnered with New Orleans organizations Women With A Vision and STAND with Dignity to co-create *Freedom Chamber*, song-story workshops with formerly incarcerated Black folks, primarily women. These workshops explored the relationship between voice/singing and liberation, and creatively built connections between the Middle Passage, slavery, and mass incarceration. Mutations of the carceral state have long been barriers to freedom for Black people in the U.S. and across the African Diaspora, and our workshops sought to amplify the current-day manifestations of our attempts to get free through/with our voices, our bodies, and our songs.

With our many collaborators, we’ve co-created *Vessels* as an exercise in speculative history. We do not seek to re-stage the Middle Passage, and we know that most accounts and histories of the Middle Passage come directly from the mouths and hands of white men, who sought to uphold or dismantle the institution of slavery. Through performance creation, an act of embodied remembrance and imagination, we’ve attempted to transmute a part of the Middle Passage’s cultural, psychic, and spiritual wounds, and to contribute to intergenerational healing. We want that healing to extend to the stories, places, spaces, and bodies swept into the currents of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

In keeping with this analysis, we believe it is necessary to center Black women in our work. We believe our ancestors’ freedom tools live in our bodies and can be activated. We believe that healing is a continuous and intentional practice rooted in the relationship of the individual to the collective and to the divine. We believe that a wound must be named and encountered to be healed. We believe that the past holds lessons and dreams for the present that allow us to grow into a liberated future. We believe that *now* is the place to practice freedom.

Gratitude & Special Thanks

We are building our work with, for, and in conversation with the brilliance and guidance of

so many amazing people. We are also practicing in a Black Feminist ethos that affirms the inherent value of Black women and uplifts a commitment to our care, survival and thriving.

Our creative process spans four years, two continents, four nation-states, seven devising and development intensives, and innumerable dreams and prayers. It has included the curiosities, questions and creativity of more than 20 Black women from across the African Diaspora—New York, Chicago, Ghana, and New Orleans. *Vessels* has only come into existence because of their genius, commitment, and willingness to embody these difficult and beautiful stories. We are eternally grateful. In addition, we've worked with a circle of phenomenal Black women who have provided spiritual support and guidance to create a strong container for this work. And, our fabulous production and design team has helped make all of the logistics and materials realities work.

For supporting and guiding the spiritual container that is this work, we extend deep appreciation to our healers, space holders, and grounders: Sula "Spirit" Janet Evans, Michaela Harrison, Nana Sakara Kemilla, Nana Anoa Nantambu, Aesha Rasheed, and Menhati Singleton.

For inviting us to partner and spearheading the organizing for *Freedom Chamber*, special thanks to Toya Lewis of STAND With Dignity and Dianne Jones of Women With A Vision.

We would not have been able to make *Vessels*, or do much of what we do, if not for the legacies of Black Southern cultural organizing and Black feminist performance upon which we build. In each of these practices, it's important to name and honor your teachers. We draw upon the wisdom of Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, who said, "You cannot sing a song and not change your condition." Thank you for that guiding knowledge, which has been fundamental to this work. Our dedication to accessing embodied ancestral memory and ritual was taught to us, learned with and from Ebony Noelle Golden, Dr. Gee Love, Stephanie McKee, Tufara Waller Mohammed, and Amara Tabor-Smith, among many. Thank you for your teaching and your critical feedback.

We want to offer special thanks to Adawa & Michael Agyepong, Sho Owusu Boateng, Emilia and Alfred Nortey and Dr. Rashida Rosario for making our repeated trips to Ghana possible with their hospitality, connections, and deep love.

For the generous in-kind support of food, lodging, labor, and rehearsal space for our New Orleans intensives, we want to shout out to Selma Alamin, Stephanie Burns, Kris Ford and JP Picard, Rachel Lee, Hannah Pepper-Cunningham, Erin Roussel, Diana Searl, Nick Slie, Caroline Sommers, Elizabeth Steeby, Pagoda, 1000 Figs, Catapult, Dancing Grounds, The Joan Mitchell Center, Newcomb Art Museum and the Contemporary Arts Center.

And, for facilitation of our generative post-sharing dialogues that informed our work, appreciation to Maria Cherry Galette Rangel, Pam Nath, and Hannah Sadtler.

Thank you to our ancestors in whose memory we walk. Thank you to everyone, named and unnamed, who has in some way touched this piece. You have our eternal gratitude.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Rebecca Mwase (Instigator, Co-Shaper, Co-Producer & Ensemble Member)

Mwase is a Zimbabwean-American multi-disciplinary theatre and performance artist, creative consultant, producer, and cultural organizer working at the intersection of art and social justice. In both creative process and performance, Mwase works to discover physical methods to release the toxic, stagnant energies of systemic oppression while transforming and transmuted that energy into joy, desire, love, self-worth, adoration and esteem. They have cultivated their craft with ArtSpot Productions, Dah Theater, the Highlander Center for Research & Education, Urban Bush Women and Junebug Productions in cultural organizing, devising and storytelling. Immense love and gratitude to my boo, Selma for all you've done to support me and *Vessels*.

Ron Ragin (Co-Shaper & Co-Producer)

I write, sing, compose, and make interdisciplinary performance work that integrates sound, text, and movement. My creative interests include music of the African Diaspora,

embodied ancestral memory, improvisational creative processes, liberation aesthetics, and the development and maintenance of spiritual technologies. I grew up in Perry, Georgia and received my earliest musical training at the Saint James Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. I've had the honor of performing with brilliant souls like Amara Tabor-Smith and Grisha Coleman, studying my crafts with luminaries such as Joy Harjo and Brenda Wong Aoki, and being a soloist on Christopher Tin's Grammy® Award-winning album *Calling All Dawns*.

Chanice Holmes (Ensemble)

Holmes is a New Orleans native. She is an alum of Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia, where she obtained her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in dance. She has performed works by various notable artists and companies. She feeds her artistry through collaborating with other brilliant artists.

Tenaj Levinnia Jackson (Ensemble)

Jackson is a SAG-AFTRA member and has been acting for over 10 years. She studied acting and dance at the Neighborhood Playhouse in NYC and has appeared in various television, film, commercial and theatre works. Jackson is excited and grateful to be a part of *Vessels* and can't wait to share such an important piece of work.

Mykia Jovan (Ensemble)

Jovan is a vocalist and songwriter from New Orleans, Louisiana. Her unique voice has drawn natural comparisons to the great Billie Holiday and Erykah Badu, while her original compositions and live performances have established her as a singular voice in the modern progressive soul scene. Her debut record is entitled *Elijahu* and features eight original compositions. The album was named one of *Offbeat Magazine's* top 50 albums of 2017.

Jalisa Roberts (Ensemble)

Roberts is a Black studies scholar, singer and choreographer. With more than 20 years of dance experience, she has most recently trained in modern and African forms of dance. Currently, she is an arts educator in New Orleans and is the founder of The Cocoon: Youth Empowerment Program.

Mahalia Abéo Tibbs (Ensemble)

Tibbs is a writer/performing/recording artist native to Chicago's South Side. She attended Howard, Wells College (Arts in Paris), and received her BA in Inner City Studies (minor in dance) from Northeastern Illinois University in 2013. A singer/songwriter/composer, Tibbs is a student of Oscar Brown, Jr. and Katherine Dunham, and has performed internationally and been featured in live theatre, film and music videos. Tibbs ties her work to the dismantling of systemic oppression and is grateful for the opportunity to do so.

Jaimé Yawa Dzandu (Ensemble)

Dzandu is a movement artist, choreographer, educator and community arts practitioner from Hampton, VA. She creates participatory art-based experiences, rooted in an African Diasporic movement practice. Her ritual choreographic work reflects the sacred in performance and investigates nature, black womanhood, justice, healing, peace building and transformation. Dzandu holds a BFA in dance & choreography from Virginia Commonwealth University and resides in Brooklyn, NY.

Jazmine Butler (Musician)

Butler is a songwriter, producer, recording artist and musician. The New Orleans native and creative force is well balanced in the world of rhythm, playing drum set, hand drums and other percussion instruments. She has recently released her first solo project, "Light In The Dark" under the alias, Mookie Butler, which carries the sentiments of a nickname given to her by her late grandmother, Shirley Brown. This project turns life-changing experiences into art and tells a story of determination to heal and be victorious.

Design Team**Costume** AYA DESIGNS - Janese Brooks-Galathe & Dana Leon**Set & Environment Design** Jeff Becker**Photographer** Melisa Cardona**Crown Adornments** Saphira "Safi" Contreras**Sculpture** MaPo Kinnord**Choreographer** Maritza Mercado-Narcisse**Lighting** Evan Spigelman**Production Team****Co-Producer** Sage Crump**Technical Director** Nathan Lemoine**Co-Producer** Kiyoko McCrae**Stage Manager** Becka McLaughlin**Past Collaborators**

MK Abadoo, Mysti Adams, Evelyn Galle-Ansah, Abigail Sena Atsugah, Anita Wendy Dzikunu, Audrey Hailes, Jarrell Hamilton, Denae Hannah, Michaela Harrison, Marguerite Hemmings, Beatrice Nyarko, Phoebe Sey, Benedicta Sowah, Stacy Can-Tamakloe, Martine Whitehead

(Every person listed here has contributed choreography and sonic composition for *Vessels*. We extend deep appreciation and gratitude for all of the co-creative energy, passion and love they have offered *Vessels*. We cannot have done this without you)

Past Stage Managers Lauren Fitzgerald, India McDougale**Dance & Song Teachers**

David Quaye, University of Ghana, Legon; Kyerema Kwamena Pra; Gideon Alorwoyie

Drummer Prosper Ablordey