

# WESTPORT COUNTRY PLAYHOUSE

MARK LAMOS, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR | MICHAEL BARKER, MANAGING DIRECTOR

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Westport Country Playhouse Hosts Virtual Storytelling about “Phenomenal Women” to Celebrate Women’s History Month**

In honor of Women’s History Month, Westport Country Playhouse will host a virtual storytelling of original works written by female members of the community about women who changed history, on Tuesday, March 30, at 7 p.m. Registration is necessary to access the broadcast on the Playhouse’s YouTube channel (WestportPlayhouse). The event will be the second presentation in the theater’s “New Works/New Voices” series; the first was in celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in January.

“Phenomenal Women Inspire” will feature stories about the following five outstanding women, each representing different periods of history: Constance Baker Motley, born in New Haven in 1921 and the first African American woman to be named a federal court judge in 1966; Mary Freeman, born in Derby, CT, in 1815, and who, with her sister Eliza, developed, bought, and sold real estate in Bridgeport before women had the right to vote; Mary McLeod Bethune, the daughter of former slaves, who became one of the most important black educators, civil and women’s rights leaders, and government officials of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; Gloria Steinem, writer, political activist, and feminist organizer, who was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Freedom Award from the National Civil Rights Museum; and Anne Bogart, a contemporary theater director and co-founder of SITI Company, an ensemble-based theater committed to international cultural exchange.

According to Jennifer Carroll, Playhouse community and sales manager, and event producer, “New Works/New Voices: Phenomenal Woman Inspire’ was created to shine a spotlight on the accomplishments of women throughout history through the words of those who are an inspiration in our community today.”

The stories are written by leaders of area nonprofit organizations and businesses, as well as teachers and artists, whose work has had an influence on the community. Their pieces will be paired with local theater artists who will perform the works in an hour-long program, filmed on the Playhouse stage under Covid-19 safety protocols.

The authors of the stories are Michelle Burns (who also will perform her own written work), Lana Gifas, Sheena Graham, and Bernicestine McLeod Bailey.

Michelle Burns, of New Haven, holds a B.A. in theater arts from the University of Arizona and is an alumna of the Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts in Santa Maria, CA. Locally, she has worked with Collective Consciousness Theatre.

Lana Gifas joined Women’s Mentoring Network in Stamford as executive director in 2015. She earned her MBA and undergraduate degree from The Gabelli School of Business at Fordham University. In 2020, Gifas won Moffly Media’s Light a Fire Women’s Impact Award.

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Sheena Graham has been a music educator since 1983. Graham's original compositions have been performed locally, at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and twice at the White House. She was Connecticut's 2019 Teacher of the Year.

Bernicestine McLeod Bailey is president and founder of McLeod Associates, Inc., an information technology consulting firm, and vice president for operations of Aisha & Co. LLC, a family gift company. In the volunteer arena, she has served on numerous boards throughout Fairfield County, and was a founding member of TEAM Westport. She is an alumna and trustee emerita of Brown University.

In addition to Michelle Burns, the theater artists who will relate the original stories are Betzabeth Castro, Kelley Knight, and Tamika Pettway.

Betzabeth Castro is a Housatonic Community College and Southern CT State University alumna. She was in Westport Country Playhouse's production of "Appropriate" as The Stranger, and also has performed locally with Collective Consciousness Theatre, Elm Shakespeare Company, and Play with Your Food.

Kelley Knight is an actor, writer, and director from the Greater New Haven area and an alumna of the American Musical and Dramatic Academy of New York. She has acted professionally in many theater productions across the tristate area.

Tamika Pettway studied theatre arts at Eastern Connecticut State University, and has been performing on various stages throughout Connecticut and New York for the past 10 years, including Collective Consciousness Theatre and Elm Shakespeare Company.

Director of "Phenomenal Women Inspire" is Jenny Nelson, who is the Roz and Bud Siegel director of education and community outreach for the Playhouse. Nelson received a master's degree in theater from the University of Arizona, and a second master's degree in education from Fairfield University. She is the associate artistic director of Collective Consciousness Theatre, a social justice theater in New Haven.

Tickets for "Phenomenal Women Inspire" are Pay What You Can, starting at \$2. Fifty percent of donations collected during the broadcast will be donated to the Playhouse's community partner, Women's Mentoring Network (WMN) of Stamford, which provides foundational skills for women to secure quality employment and pursue their educational goals. In addition to donating to WMN through a ticket purchase, viewers may text-to-give to WMN at 41444 during the broadcast, and until April 15. The Playhouse will use its portion of donations received to provide scholarships for upcoming education classes and camps, creating the next generation of theater artists.

To register and receive a link to access the broadcast premiere of "New Works/New Voices: Phenomenal Women Inspire" on the Playhouse's YouTube channel (WestportPlayhouse), visit <https://www.westportplayhouse.org/show/womeninspire/>. The event will be posted for later viewing on the Playhouse's website (WestportPlayhouse.org) and YouTube channel (WestportPlayhouse).

Women's History Month during March was established in 1987 to encourage the study, observance, and celebration of the vital role of women in American history.

All artists, dates, and titles are subject to change.

Due to the global pandemic, the Playhouse campus remains closed since March 2020. The Playhouse management will be following the science, and guidelines from theater artists' unions and the State of Connecticut Department of Health in deciding when and how to safely open its buildings to the public.

For Westport Country Playhouse information, visit [westportplayhouse.org](http://westportplayhouse.org), leave a message on the box office voicemail at (203) 227-4177, or email at [boxoffice@westportplayhouse.org](mailto:boxoffice@westportplayhouse.org). The Playhouse's physical box office is closed during the pandemic, but staff is working from home, returning phone messages and answering emails. Please understand with the high volume of inquiries, it may take up to

72 hours to respond. Stay connected to the Playhouse on Facebook (Westport Country Playhouse), follow on Twitter (@WCPlayhouse), and on YouTube (WestportPlayhouse).

### **ABOUT WESTPORT COUNTRY PLAYHOUSE**

The mission of Westport Country Playhouse is to enrich, enlighten, and engage the community through the power of professionally produced theater of the highest caliber and the welcoming experience of the Playhouse campus. The not-for-profit Playhouse provides this experience in multiple ways by offering live theater experiences of the highest quality, under the artistic direction of Mark Lamos; educational and community engagement events to further explore the work on stage; the New Works Initiative, a program dedicated to the discovery, development, and production of new live theatrical works; special performances and programs for students and teachers with extensive curriculum support material; Script in Hand play readings to deepen relationships with audiences and artists; the renowned Woodward Internship Program during the summer months for aspiring theater professionals; Family Festivities presentations to delight young and old alike and to promote reading through live theater; youth performance training through Broadway Method Academy, Westport Country Playhouse's resident conservatory program; and the beautiful and historic Playhouse campus open for enjoyment and community events year-round. Charity Navigator has recently awarded its top 4-star charity rating to the Playhouse in recognition of its strong financial health and commitment to accountability and transparency.

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