

ALLEY THEATRE

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Alley Theatre Receives NEA Grant for \$20,000

Grant accelerates Alley Theatre's effort to celebrate a more equitable and inclusive environment in conjunction with *The Odyssey*

HOUSTON TX - The Tony Award®-winning Alley Theatre is proud to be a recipient of a 20,000 NEA Grant for Arts Projects. This month, the grant will support the launch of a new initiative that culminates during Afro Caribbean poet and Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott's, *The Odyssey*. *Heroes Within: A Celebration of Victorious Journeys*, is a project connecting the Epic play's hero's journey to the heroic experiences pertinent to Houston's Black community.

With this NEA grant, Alley Theatre will deliver a culturally specific package of Education and Community Engagement (ECE) activities in conjunction with the April 2023 production in Alley's Neuhaus Theatre. Collaborating with Prairie View A&M University and two local partner high schools, this source material will engage young Black students to explore the heroic themes of the play in relationship to their own lives. Through pre-show and community discussions, workshops in personal narrative, slam poetry, and playwriting, plus a culminating event at Alley Theatre, this project will highlight the heroic stories within our own community.

Beyond the work with schools, ECE will engage community members through a robust \$10 ticket program and a series of three community discussions in partnership with local businesses and community leaders - highlighting the themes of the play and their relationship to the Black community.

"Derek Walcott's adaptation of *The Odyssey* is a brilliant telling of Homer's epic - one of the greatest adventure stories ever told," shares **Rob Melrose**, Alley Theatre's Artistic Director. "It is quite faithful to all the events of the original story and it is told in this Nobel Prize-winning poet's language filled with the sights and sounds of his native St. Lucia. This NEA grant is to help introduce new audiences to the Alley and this work, most especially Black audiences. Something I have heard often from Black artists and audiences is, 'Do the plays by Black writers that theatres produce always have to be about our trauma and oppression? Must we always be the oppressed ones? Can't we be the heroes, lovers, and adventurers having a wider range of human experience?' I thought what better play to answer these questions than to produce this joyful adventure story written by a Black Nobel-Prize-winning author, directed by a brilliant Black director (Christopher Windom), and featuring a good number of Black actors and theatre artists. I'm also a deep believer that the classics belong to everyone and this is a great way of showing how Derek Walcott makes this classic his own. I saw the world premiere of this play and met Mr. Walcott at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1992 and it remains one of my best experiences in the theatre. I can't wait to share it with the city of Houston, both the audience who regularly comes to the Alley and many new audiences this play will reach through the generosity of this NEA grant."

"Providing a platform to honor and bring Houston's Black stories to life is paramount to Alley Theatre's commitment to the diverse Houston community. Walcott's play articulates an arduous and victorious journey brought alive through an artful Afro Caribbean lens. We hope it will be an inspiring jumping-off-point to bring contemporary stories to the light," says Chief Education and Community Engagement Officer, **Mary Sutton**.

Alley Theatre Artistic Director Rob Melrose selected Derek Walcott's adaptation of *The Odyssey* as a celebration of Black artistry. The adaptation, published in 1993, chronicles Odysseus's familiar journey, from Troy to his home in Ithaca, as he encounters a myriad of obstacles that continuously extend his voyage. Walcott's reinvention of Homer's epic brings Caribbean language and characters to the heart of the story in beautiful poetry and sets a perfect stage for Director Christopher Windom to feature a diverse cast to tell the story of a sailor who just wants to get home. The large production, including a cast of 13, will play in Alley Theatre's 310-seat Neuhaus Theatre March 24 – April 16, 2023.

ABOUT ALLEY THEATRE:

Alley Theatre, one of America's leading nonprofit theatres, is a nationally recognized performing arts company led by Artistic Director Rob Melrose and Managing Director Dean R. Gladden. The Alley is committed to developing and producing theatre that is as diverse as the Houston community. The Alley produces up to 11 plays and nearly 400 performances each season, ranging from the best current work and classic plays to new plays by contemporary writers. Home to a full-time resident company of actors and expert artisans in all theatre crafts, the Alley engages theatre artists of every discipline – actors, directors, designers, composers, playwrights – who work on individual productions throughout each season as visiting artists.

Alley Theatre performs at the Meredith J. Long Theatre Center which is comprised of two state-of-the-art theatres: the 774-seat Hubbard Theatre and the 296-seat Neuhaus Theatre. The Alley reaches over 200,000 people each year through its performance, education, and community engagement programs.

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