

MEDIA CONTACT:

Joshua Ford

Director of Marketing and Communications

jford@olneytheatre.org

MELODY A. BETTS JOINS THE CAST OF *FELA!* AS FUNMILAYO

Before joining the Broadway-bound tour of [The Wiz](#), Betts will spend the summer playing Fela's martyred mother.

Themba Mkhathshwa also joins the ensemble playing the djembe.

Olney, MD — June 14, 2023 — Chicago-based actor, Melody A. Betts has joined the cast of **Olney Theatre Center and Round House Theatre's** co-production of *Fela!*, which, **begins previews on Olney Theatre's Roberts Mainstage, July 7. Running through August 13**, the Tony Award-winning musical uses the songs of **Fela Kuti** and a book created by **Bill T. Jones and Jim Lewis** to tell the story of the Pan-African superstar's final concert at the legendary Afrika Shrine. The revival, the first full production since the National Tour closed in 2013, is directed by **Lili-Anne Brown**, who recently received the **Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Director of a Play** for her work on Woolly Mammoth's *Ain't No Mo'*. **Duain Richmond** tackles the titular role, which he played both on Broadway and in subsequent "Fela: The Concert" presentations. Nova Y. Payton, who had originally been announced to play Funmilayo, had to withdraw from the production for a family matter.

Press is invited to request two tickets to the Opening Night performance on Thursday, July 13 at 8:00 pm by emailing sstraub@olneytheatre.org. Tickets cost \$47-\$100 and are available at olneytheatre.org or by calling the box office (301-924-3400).

Betts was last seen as Chantel in the sold-out World Premiere of *The Factotum* (now streaming on YouTube) at the Lyric Opera of Chicago where she also played Grandma Tzeitel/Fruma Sarah in the most recent production of *Fiddler on The Roof*. **Regional Theater credits include:** *FANNIE*, *The Nativity*, *Ragtime*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *The Boys from Syracuse*, *Seussical the Musical*, *ELF*, *Once on this Island*, *Nunsense*, *All Shook Up*, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, *Comedy of Errors*, *Pinocchio*, *The Secret of My Success*, *Rock of Ages*, *The Color Purple*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Smokey Joe's Café*, *Hairspray*, *Witness Uganda*. **Broadway/Off Broadway:** *Waitress the Musical* (Brooks Atkinson); *Invisible Thread* (Second Stage). **National Tours:** *The Sound of Music*; *Waitress*. **TV:** *Jesus Christ Superstar LIVE*, *Chicago PD*, *Chicago Fire* (NBC), *I Can See Your Voice*, *Chicago Code* (FOX); *Power* (STARZ), *Southside* (HBOMax). **IG:** @melodybettspage **Unions:** AEA, SAG-AFTRA, BMI. Check out her single **ABUNDANT LIFE** on all music streaming services.

Also joining the ensemble as the djembe player is **Themba Mkhathshwa**, a percussionist and instrumentalist from Baltimore, Maryland. Mkhathshwa has worked with the remarkable Maimouna Youssef, Christian Scott's Grammy-nominated album "Ancestral Recall," and toured

alongside Leon Bridges. Currently, Themba finds himself in an exciting apprenticeship, where he is studying drum making under the expert guidance of Baile's African Drum Works.

The rest of the ensemble includes **Bryan Archibald, Terrence J. Bennett, Simone Brown, Patrick Leonardo Casimir, Jyreika Guest, Bryan Jeffrey, Raquel Jennings, Emmanuel Kikoni, Raven Lorraine, Vaughn Ryan Midder, Ywande Odetoyinbo** (also Funmilayo Understudy), **Jantanies Thomas, Galen J. Williams** (also Fela Understudy), **Jalisa Williams** and **Kanysha Williams** (also Sandra Understudy). Swings for the production are **Malachi Alexander** and **Shawna Williams**.

Joining Brown's creative team are Music Director **S. Renee Clark**, Choreographer **Breon Arzell**, Scenic Designer **Arnel Sancianco**, Costume Designer **Rueben Echoles**, Lighting Designer **Sherrice Mogjani**, Projections Designer **Kelly Colburn**, Sound Designer **Matt Rowe**, Intimacy Consultant **Jyreika Guest**, Dialect Coach **Kim James Bey**, Cultural Consultant **Abi Jinadu**, Out of Town Casting Director **Sarah Cooney**, and Production Stage Manager **Jamie Berry**.

EVENT DETAILS

Fela!

Music and Lyrics by Fela Kuti

Book by Bill T. Jones and Jim Lewis

(Additional music by Aaron Johnson and Jordan McLean)

Directed by Lili-Anne Brown

Choreography by Breon Arzell

Music Direction by S. Renee Clark

Scenic Designer Arnel Sancianco

Costume Designer Rueben Echoles

Lighting Designer Sherrice Mogjani

Projections Designer Kelly Colburn

Sound Designer Matt Rowe

Intimacy Consultant Jyreika Guest

Dialect Coach Kim James Bey

Cultural Consultant Abi Jinadu,

Out of Town Casting by Sarah Cooney

Production Stage Manager Jamie Berry

Begins performances: July 7, 2023

Previews: July 7 -12, 2023

Press opening: Thursday, July 13 at 8:00 pm (RSVP to sstraub@olneytheatre.org)

Scheduled to run through: August 13, 2023

Performances Wednesday through Saturday at 8:00 pm, Saturday and Sunday at 2:00 pm, and Wednesday matinees at 2:00 pm July 12, 26, and Aug 2. No Saturday matinee on July 8.

Accessibility

GalaPro captioning on smartphones and tablets is available for all performances.

Audio-described performance for the visually impaired on Wednesday, July 19 at 8:00 pm.

Sign-interpreted performance on Thurs., August 10 at 8:00 pm.

ABOUT ROUND HOUSE THEATRE

Round House Theatre is one of the leading professional theatres in the Washington, DC area, producing a season of new plays, modern classics, and musicals for more than 40,000 patrons each year at our theatre in Bethesda. Round House has been nominated for 213 Helen Hayes Awards and has won 42, including four Outstanding Resident Play Awards and the Charles MacArthur Award for Original New Play in 2016. Round House's lifelong learning and education programs serve more than 5,000 students each year at its Education Center in Silver Spring, in schools throughout Montgomery County, and at our Bethesda theatre. Cornerstone programs include Free Play, which provides free tickets for students ages 13-college, the Teen Performance Company, which culminates in the student-produced Sarah Metzger Memorial Play, Summer Camp for students in grades K-12, and a full slate of classes for adults and youth.

ABOUT OLNEY THEATRE CENTER

Mission

Olney Theatre Center for the Arts produces and curates theatrical performance for the diverse audiences in our community, and educates, learns from, supports and inspires a more inclusive generation of theater-makers.

Vision

We strive to become an arts and culture powerhouse, redefining the American regional theater movement by cultivating and sharing the creativity of our community.

History

Founded in 1938 as a summer playhouse, Olney Theatre Center (OTC) now produces world and American premieres of plays and musicals, and reimaginings of familiar titles year-round; presents the work of leading companies and artists; tours nationally and locally; teaches students of all ages; and mentors a more inclusive generation of theatremakers. For more than 8 decades, OTC has brought impactful theater performance and education to our community, helping to grow the vibrancy and vitality of our home in the Washington, DC region.

Over the years, some of the biggest names in theater and film have appeared on our stages, including Tallulah Bankhead, Helen Hayes, Jessica Tandy, Hume Cronyn, Bob Fosse, Phillip Bosco, Eve Arden, Eva Gabor, Burl Ives, Jose Ferrer, Carol Channing, Olivia d'Havilland, Tony Randall, Paulette Goddard, Dorothy and Lillian Gish, Jane Seymour, Anne Revere, Frances Sternhagen, Arthur Treacher, James Broderick, Olympia Dukakis, Sir Ian McKellen, Marica Gay Harden, John Colicos, Uzo Aduba, Alan Cumming, Cheyenne Jackson, Robin de Jesus, Wilson Jermaine Heredia, among many, many others.

Olney Theatre is now the cultural anchor of a rapidly changing region and serves one of the most diverse, best educated, and wealthiest counties in the country. Situated on the unceded land of the Piscataway-Conoy people, the Olney area was once a rural farming community with a unique Quaker heritage. Now the area is occupied by every kind of family that makes up 21st Century America, along with major corporations, shopping districts, civic associations, non profit organizations and a diverse collection of houses of worship. Montgomery County's 1 million residents play a dynamic role in the Baltimore-Washington corridor, and are a driving force behind the region's creative economy.

Olney Theatre Center employs 40 full-time staff, 20 part-time positions, 26 early career apprentices and players, and more than 400 professional artists annually. The Theatre intends to continue expanding to better meet the needs of our community.

For more information, please visit olneytheatre.org/history

Follow Olney Theatre Center on Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok @olneytheatre and on Facebook at facebook.com/olneytheatre.

###