

SCENE BY SCENE

VOLUME 53, ISSUE 3

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Season marketing illustrations by Kenton Brett.

ABOUT PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE is the pre-show publication of Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park. It is published as a service to Playhouse season ticket holders, donors and others.

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2024-25 Moe and Jack's Place – The Rouse Theatre Season presented by



2024-25 Rosenthal Shelterhouse Theatre Season presented by
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DEDICATED SUPPORT BRINGS ACCLAIMED WORK TO THE STAGE

By Sneja H. Tomassian



Clockwise from top left: Jessica Lancaster, Christopher Kelly and Robert Elliott in *Proof* (2003); Caitlin O'Connell and Ted Deasy in *Doubt* (2008); Cast of *Clybourne Park* (2014) — Photos by Sandy Underwood; Cast of *A Chorus Line* (2023) — Photo by Mikki Schaffner.

Bringing the best of American theatre to the Greater Cincinnati community often means producing award-winning plays. In addition to many Tony Award-winners, we've brought more than 20 Pulitzer Prize-winning plays to the stage in our long history, including Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Bruce Norris' *Clybourne Park*, John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt*, David Auburn's *Proof*, Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, *A Chorus Line* and more. This season, we add two more to that list with *Primary Trust* and *English*. Sanaz Toossi's *English* won the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and *Primary Trust* by Eboni Booth won the same award in 2024.

We could not bring these acclaimed works to our stages without dedicated supporters who share our vision for how the Playhouse can enhance the cultural vibrancy of our region with new and diverse stories on our stages, and connect our community through great theatre.

Moe and Jack Rouse and Randolph Wadsworth share not only a love for theatre and the Playhouse but also select the plays they support as above-title sponsors together. This season, they are supporting *Primary Trust*. Through the years, they have co-sponsored the productions of *Clyde's*; *School Girls Or, The African Mean Girls Play*; August Wilson's *Two Trains Running*; and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Moe and Jack were also the lead donors for the recent capital campaign that built the new theatre complex. Jack Rouse describes how they choose the works and why they support them, "We read a synopsis of *Primary Trust*, and it sounded like a fascinating play, so that's why we chose it. I think it's always important to bring exciting, challenging, thoughtful, entertaining plays to the Playhouse. *Primary Trust* really seemed to us to be a play that genuinely covered all those bases."

Ellen and Ray van der Horst, who are supporting *English* as above-title sponsors, generously underwrote the recent production of *Vietgone* and were part of the consortium of donors who supported *A Chorus Line*, the opening production of the new theatre complex in March 2023. Ellen says, "Ray and I were very intrigued by *English* when Blake first described it at the Season Announcement and even more so after we read a copy of the play. It's a very compelling, thought-provoking work about language, identity and human connection, topics that couldn't be more timely. As with other plays of Pulitzer Prize-winning caliber, I think our audiences will be talking about this one for a long time to come."

We are truly grateful to donors like Moe and Jack Rouse, Ellen and Ray van der Horst, and Randolph Wadsworth for their invaluable support in helping us create exciting theatre.

To learn more about how you can support the Playhouse as a sponsor of a play, please contact Sneja H. Tomassian, Chief Philanthropy Officer, at sneja.tomassian@cincyplay.com or 513-977-2081.

Moe and Jack Rouse and
Randolph Wadsworth present

PRIMARY TRUST

By EBONI BOOTH

Directed by TIMOTHY DOUGLAS

Moe and Jack's Place – The Rouse Theatre

FEBRUARY 1 – 23, 2025



A NEW AMERICAN CLASSIC By Tatiana Godfrey

Primary Trust captured the hearts of audiences and critics alike when it premiered off-Broadway at the Roundabout Theatre Company in 2023. *The Observer* wrote of the play that it “will restore your faith in theatre’s elemental storytelling powers,” and the *Daily Beast* called the play a “buffed-to-gleaming jewel.” Written by the talented playwright Eboni Booth, this heartwarming play was then awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2024. In this American theatre season, *Primary Trust* is one of the most performed plays in the country. But what has audiences and critics so enthusiastic about this play?

At the heart of *Primary Trust* is Kenneth, a shy and introverted 38-year-old Black man living in a small town in upstate New York. After working at a local bookstore for 20 years, his life takes an unexpected turn when the owner decides to close the store. While Kenneth drinks his usual mai tai at the local Tiki bar, Wally’s, a waitress suggests he looks for work at a new bank that’s opening, the titular Primary Trust. As Kenneth navigates working at a new job, he forms unlikely friendships and discovers the power of human connection.

In an interview, Booth commented on what she believes is driving the play. “The antidote for me has been really feeling connected and seen by other people. It sounds so Mickey Mouse, but we need each other, and I think that’s important, and to be able to let people in is crucial.” It’s this concept that guides Booth’s exploration of loneliness, the complexities of modern relationships, the importance of empathy, and the transformative nature of kindness. “One of the things that people responded to is that we all felt so alone, and we all lost so much. And what is the antidote to this? I think some sense of connection [is what] we were all really craving.”

Directed at the Playhouse by fan favorite Timothy Douglas, the upcoming production will no doubt be as well-loved as others occurring across the country. Douglas offered his take on why *Primary Trust* is so beloved.

“I ... will venture to say that the play’s humanistic, often humorous, and equally contemplative journey is a wholly inviting one. On a fundamental level the play reflects an ongoing reassessment of having to navigate one’s priorities in a post-pandemic America. Although packed with incident, the gentle way in which the storytelling unfolds, perhaps provides a meditative balance to other playgoing experiences that may demand a more intense rigor from its audience.”

Although set in a “time before cell phones,” Kenneth’s story proves especially poignant today, in a world that often feels increasingly isolated. Booth believes that, in addition to Kenneth’s story, the theatre also serves as

a medium of connection. “I go to art for a feeling of community and that sort of recognition of ‘oh, shoot, I’m not the only person who thinks that! I’m not the only person who does that.’ You know, I belong to a bigger world.”

Ultimately, *Primary Trust* is a testament to the enduring power of human connection. As Kenneth navigates unexpected changes and forges new bonds, audiences are invited to reflect on their own lives and the connections that shape their experiences. Under the direction of Douglas, this production promises to be a moving and unforgettable theatrical experience.

“Both very funny
and piercingly
moving.”

The Daily Beast

PRESENTING SPONSORS **MOE AND JACK ROUSE
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100%

RUNNING TIME

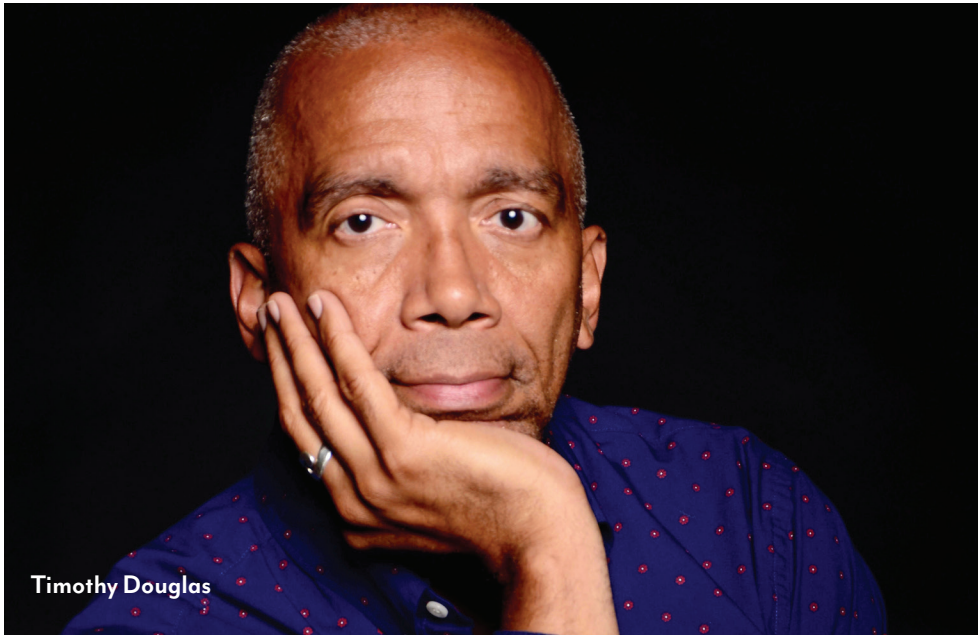
An accurate running time will be posted on our website on Jan. 31.

CONTENT ADVISORY

Primary Trust is recommended for older teenage and adult audiences. The characters navigate life’s complexities with very strong adult language and mature themes including childhood trauma, alcohol use and mental health issues.

THOUGHTS FROM THE DIRECTOR OF *PRIMARY TRUST*

By Tatiana Godfrey



Timothy Douglas

In this interview, director Timothy Douglas delves into the creative process behind the Playhouse's production of *Primary Trust*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Eboni Booth. We explore the director's unique insights into the play's themes, the casting process and the collaborative efforts of the creative team in bringing this moving story to life.

What aspects of the play resonate with you personally?

What resonates most for me within *Primary Trust* is the unmentioned. Playwright Eboni Booth makes clear that the main character, Kenneth, is Black, and yet this fact is never given lip service. This, to me, is nothing short of a literary revolutionary act, for within almost every Black-centered American play I've directed or performed in, a sizable number, at some point its main character gives voice to how being Black in America influences their overall journey, perception-of-self and world view — all too often influenced by a white gaze perspective. In one deft storytelling gesture, the playwright compels both the actor and audience to consider for themselves how race and culture may or may not influence the main character and play's trajectory. This hyperawareness most definitely is a microcosmic

parallel to how I experience my professional journey within the mainstream American theatre.

Our main character, Kenneth, narrates his own story about how he lost his job at a bookstore and then found a job at a bank. What's the reasoning or importance behind Kenneth telling and framing his own story?

I think this device of direct address affords Kenneth a more comprehensive agency over his own story, and how he chooses to share it. Given my earlier musings on the primary identifying aspect of Kenneth's unspoken personhood, I believe by having him engage directly with the audience, it is the playwright's considered solution for fully arresting their engagement and investment in what is essentially a small, intimate story.

In the casting process, what qualities were you looking for in the actor who would portray Kenneth?

It was essential for me that the actor/character have the capacity to radiate a big-hearted nature that has the capacity of echoing a kind of world-

weariness. He has to be facile at walking with his often-unprotected vulnerability but do so with an unselfconsciousness, and an innate combination of grace, calm and natural wisdom.

How does the play's setting in a small town in upstate New York contribute to the overall atmosphere of the story?

A northern small-town setting evokes an air of a real-time, enigmatic mysteriousness, while radiating the classic truism that everyone's personal business tends to be known by most, though not necessarily their authentic truth. Kenneth has clearly been a staple in this town, yet very little is known about him ... he manages to pull off the act of hiding in plain sight.

What role did the creative team (set designer, costume designer, lighting designer, etc.) play in shaping the overall aesthetic of the production?

Toward making visual sense of *Primary Trust*, which includes the theatrical conventions of being a memory play, along with having characters directly address the audience, the design process is crucial for getting the manifestation of the play just right. While the respective design disciplines of scenic, lights, costumes and sound all come at their tasks from different angles of the storytelling prism, it is critical that the team work collaboratively ensuring that the overall effects are in harmony with one another. I have worked multiple times with three of the designers on this production, with one joining our merry band for the first time. From the beginning there has been a symbiosis in our group communication, which is mainly due to just how moved by the play we all are, and how our passion toward meeting the challenge of creating an evocative and fluid physical world for the play drives us. In addition, we are charged with revealing a specific point of view so that the audiences — and characters — remain mindful in knowing exactly where we are at all times.

SPECIAL EVENTS

PRE-PERFORMANCE TALKS

Tuesdays, February 4, 11 and 18 at 6:30 p.m.

Come early and hear about themes and background of the show from Literary Manager Tatiana Godfrey. The pre-performance talks are free and last approximately 20 minutes in the Kaplan Lobby. No reservation or additional ticket is required.

HUES COMMUNITY NIGHT

Friday, February 7

Join Black influencers, leaders and tastemakers for an incredible evening of entertainment that highlights Black voices and stories. Gather pre-show for conversation from 6–7 p.m. and enjoy an ArtTalk with members of the artistic team after the performance. The evening recognizes The DAD Initiative (dadinitiative.com) for its important work in the community. Cash bar. Open to all with tickets to that evening's performance.

Ellen and Ray van der Horst present
ENGLISH

By SANAZ TOOSI

Directed by KIMBERLY SENIOR

Rosenthal Shelterhouse Theatre

MARCH 1 – 30, 2025



CULTURE. IDENTITY. LANGUAGE. By Russell Florence Jr.

“English Only” is the key directive in Sanaz Toossi’s compelling, humorous, intimate and touching play *English*, the 2023 recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Set in Karaj, Iran, in 2008, the story concerns four adult students preparing for the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Each of them has a different reason for wanting to speak English, whether gearing up for a green card interview or being accepted into medical school. In the classroom, diligent teacher Marjan asks her students to abandon Farsi, their native tongue, in order for true growth to take shape. Pop culture becomes a unifying thread of discussion but naturally miscommunication becomes the norm and takes its toll. However, genuine morsels of encouragement are offered along the way to bridge the frustrating divide.

“English isn’t your enemy,” says Marjan, who spent nine years living in Manchester, England. “English is not to be conquered. Embrace it. You can be all the things you are in Farsi in English, too. I always liked myself better in English.”

As the students cope with the difficulties of letting go of their native tongue to learn a new language and essentially transform, *English* invites an intriguing conversation about identity, belonging and immigration, themes which reflect Toossi’s upbringing as an Iranian-American raised in Southern California. Her mother immigrated to the United States after the Iranian Revolution.

“I knew that I wanted to write about being bilingual,” Toossi said in a CNN interview. “I, myself, spoke Farsi in the house growing up and English outside the house as many children of immigrants do. I felt that I wanted to write about how disconnected I was from both languages and how I had

witnessed my parents be judged for mixing prepositions and what not... I knew I could situate characters in a classroom who wanted different things from the language, who wanted very different reasons for immigrating.”

The New York Times heralded *English* as “A rich new play... both contemplative and comic, it nails every opportunity for big laughs as its English-learning characters struggle with accents and idioms. But the laughter provides cover for the deeper idea that their struggle is not just linguistic.”

In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, *English* is currently enjoying a run on Broadway. Playwright Toossi has received the Lucille Lortel Award, Horton Foote Award and Obie Award. Her plays include *Wish You Were Here*, and she also served on the writing staff of the Amazon dramatic comedy television series *A League of Their Own* based on the film of the same name.

Kimberly Senior, who directs the Playhouse production, views Toossi as a unique voice in contemporary American theatre. She also regards *English* as a strong testament to the Pulitzer pedigree.

“Hers is a voice we haven’t really heard before,” Senior said. “In my mind, a Pulitzer Prize-winning play reflects an American moment very powerfully so we can look back in history and say that’s what was happening at that time. *English* is drawing upon who we are in this world now and reflects to us the complicated relationship to what it means to be an American in the world.”

“A rich new play...
both contemplative
and comic”

The New York Times

PRESENTING SPONSOR **ELLEN AND RAY van der HORST**

HONORARY PRODUCER **Huntington**

DESIGN SPONSOR **TERRI AND JOHN BYCZKOWSKI**

ARTIST SPONSOR **WOHLGEMUTH HERSCHEDE FOUNDATION**

RUNNING TIME An accurate running time will be posted on our website on April 30.

CONTENT ADVISORY *English* is recommended for ages 13 and up. As they explore the trials and tribulations of learning a new language, the characters use some strong adult language and discuss themes of prejudice and discrimination.

THE LANGUAGE OF ACCEPTANCE

By Russell Florence Jr.



Kimberly Senior

Sanaz Toossi's *English* brings humor, sensitivity and insightfulness to the complexities of language and belonging. Director Kimberly Senior, whose credits include the Broadway production of Ayad Akhtar's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Disgraced*, shares her reflections on the play and artistic vision.

What makes *English* so unique for audiences of all backgrounds to ponder or consider?

No two characters in the play have the same incentive. So, our opportunity to witness first-hand the complicated relationship to English, the language, to America and to immigration is really on beautiful display in the play.

Which themes in the play strongly resonate for you?

Female identity and especially female identity in the Middle East, the untold stories and the invisibility. I think it's a population that's often erased. I'm also struck by the very universal thing in our cultural identities and innate tribalism which is an inherent self-loathing. So many people in this play are wrestling with the celebration and self-

loathing of their identity. A lot of what this play is about is how we often straddle this notion of what we know to be true about ourselves and then the projected notion of how we let the world perceive us. Ultimately the play is about becoming right with yourself and accepting who you are.

Which character resonates the most for you?

Marjan is presented as the ideal, the teacher. And then we see the fallibility of people we think know everything. I love plays that dive into the distance between who we think we are and who we actually are. Some of us tight rope over this canyon. Not that it's worse — it's just different. And I think the play brings this into sharp focus.

As you assess the characters and their situations, what are you hoping to focus on or illuminate?

Every character in a play carries their important values. And I'm excited to ask the actors about the values of their characters and what they hold dear, which might not be the same thing the actors value and hold dear. I want to start there because I feel like that's what these characters are

fighting for.

In what ways do you find the script challenging?

I only like to direct plays I don't know the answers to, which is the fun of the work. The challenge here is how to make sure all perspectives are being equally represented, especially wanting an American audience to not to see these (characters) as *The Other* but to recognize themselves in them.

As an artist and director, what kind of plays entice you the most? What do you look for when choosing a project and what are your chief priorities?

I look for something that I am trying to figure out or attempting to understand. I'm interested in things that are provocative for an audience and create conversation. I believe the theatre is a place that should be in advance of our culture, that makes us think about big ideas and how we become better people.

More diverse playwrights are having their stories produced across the country in various regional theatres. What do you attribute this shift to?

Theatres are wising up and catching up that our world is so much richer when we have all these stories represented on our stages. Think about cuisine — people love going out for Thai food. Why shouldn't we have Thai stories on our stages? Our world is better when we are celebrating all of the things that make us both the same and different.

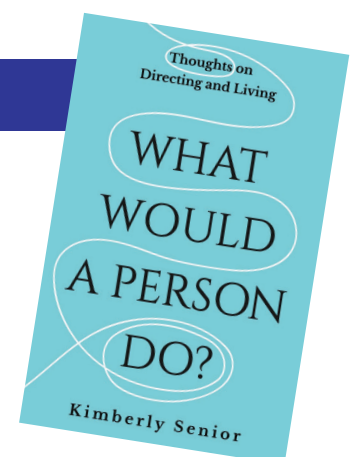
What do you hope audiences take away from experiencing *English*?

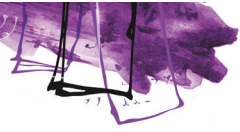
I want people to think about their own identity and the things they possibly compromise about who they are in order to try to obtain an ideal. I also hope people celebrate what makes them unique. There is a wonderful celebration of individuality that exists in this play, which is also so funny and entertaining.

DIVE DEEPER

Learn more about award-winning theatre director Kimberly Senior's thoughts on directing and living in her new book, *What Would a Person Do?*. It is a sharp, spirited collection of reflections brimming with heart and wisdom that bridge the gap between life and art. Senior offers a practical guide to effective theatre-making, leadership, teaching and personhood. From Chekhov to tennis, she shares profound and playful insights that inspire you to think deeply, act boldly and create with purpose — onstage and off. Warm and witty, this book is a fresh roadmap for anyone looking to live and lead with intention.

"Kimberly's demand for excellence made me drop all pretense and tell my story with clarity and authenticity. She taught me more than I have ever known about the art of performance." - Margaret Trudeau, author, activist and public speaker





ONE CHAPTER AT A TIME

By Kit Gladieux

This spring, the Playhouse will present *The Book Club Play* by Karen Zacarias and *Birthday Candles* by Noah Haidle. This duo of plays will invite audiences to explore the complexities of human lives and relationships as they round out the 2024-25 season with a perfect balance of witty comedy and thoughtful introspection.

In March, Moe and Jack's Place – The Rouse Theatre will present *The Book Club Play*, which was last seen at the Playhouse in 2013. The production will be directed by Osborn Family Producing Artistic Director Blake Robison, who called it “the funniest play I’ve seen in years.” Described by playwright Karen Zacarias as “...like *Lord of the Flies* but with wine and dip,” *The Book Club Play* follows the members of a devoted book club as they become the subjects of a documentary filmmaker. Long-standing group dynamics take a hilarious turn under the watchful eye of the camera as secrets are revealed, resentments form, and sparks fly.

In April, *Birthday Candles*, directed by Playhouse Associate Artistic Director Joanie Schultz, will wrap the season up with a neat bow in the Rosenthal Shelterhouse Theatre. Every year, Ernestine bakes a cake and celebrates with her family on her birthday — a delicious ritual that unfolds onstage over 90 years. We follow her from ages 17 to 107, getting glimpses of her life and the people she loves along the way. Recently performed on Broadway, this piece explores finding your place in the universe and runs the full gamut of emotions that life brings along the way—joy, fear, grief, hope, and most importantly, love.

Where *The Book Club Play* embraces hilarity and hijinks, *Birthday Candles* is more tender and reflective. Despite these differences, however, there is something here for everyone. Both pieces will make you think about the things that bind us together, the chapters that define our lives, and the people who are part of our story.

