



UMS ANNOUNCES NO SAFETY NET

THREE-WEEK THEATER FESTIVAL EMBRACES CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL ISSUES THROUGH FOUR DIFFERENT PRODUCTIONS

January 17–February 3, 2018

TWO U.S. PREMIERES & EXCLUSIVE U.S. APPEARANCES

FESTIVAL TO INCLUDE MULTIPLE PLATFORMS FOR COMMUNITY DIALOGUE, INCLUDING KEYNOTE CONVERSATION WITH CLAUDIA RANKINE AND P. CARL

ANN ARBOR, MI (September 14, 2017) —The **University Musical Society** of the University of Michigan (UMS) announces **No Safety Net**, a three-week theater festival of four productions that foster timely conversations around slavery, terrorism, transgender identity, and radical wellness and healing.

From January 17 to February 3, 2018, UMS will present four productions in Arthur Miller Theatre (1226 Murfin Ave, Ann Arbor) and the Stamps Gallery (201 S. Division St, Ann Arbor), with each title examining a different topic related to contemporary social issues. Two of the titles are U.S. premieres and will receive their only U.S. performances as part of No Safety Net.

In addition to the performances, UMS will present a suite of contextual programs, including workshops, lectures, panel discussions, and a keynote lecture/conversation by Claudia Rankine, author of *Citizen: An American Lyric* and P. Carl, the director and co-founded of HowlRound, a think tank and knowledge commons that is actively creating community across theater-makers worldwide. These activities, listed

in complete detail at the end of this release, are intended to encourage open and constructive dialogue, and to embrace the calls-to-action embedded in the theatrical presentations.

“No Safety Net is an idea, an initiative, and ultimately a new chapter in the way that UMS thinks about presenting theater. We’ve selected four works by very different theater artists with a goal of sparking debate and bringing our audiences on a journey around some very interesting — and sometimes troubling — areas that are socially relevant. We live in interesting times, and we want this work to spark important dialogue and conversations among our audiences and among members of our community,” said Matthew VanBesien, president of UMS. “This festival is for those who like to dig into the deeper and thorny issues of our time — but it’s also for those who are hesitant about those things. We really want to bring people together to think about how we’re moving ourselves forward as a community, as a country, and as a global society.”

No Safety Net will kick off with six performances of the Ars Nova production of ***Underground Railroad Game***, which runs in Arthur Miller Theatre from Wednesday, January 17 through Sunday, January 21. In the work, actors **Jennifer Kidwell** and **Scott Sheppard** perform the roles of two middle-school teachers who incorporate an interactive role-playing game into their lesson on the history of the Underground Railroad. Outside the classroom, their relationship turns romantic, offering the audience their own lesson about the cross-sections of race, sex, and power. *Underground Railroad Game* debuted at the Philadelphia Fringe Festival and was named one of the best theater productions of 2016 by the *New York Times*, which called it “the year’s most resounding testament to theater’s continuing power to shock.”

The following week, the Belgian theater company **BRONKS**, which produces theater for young audiences, will perform ***Us/Them*** in Arthur Miller Theatre, with five performances between Wednesday, January 24 and Sunday, January 28. *Us/Them* offers an exploration of the way in which children psychologically process trauma. The script was informed by interviews of children who survived the shocking event in 2004, when 1,200 schoolchildren and their parents were held hostage on the first day of school by a group of armed Chechen separatists in the small town of Beslan in North Ossetia. When the crisis ended several days later, more than 300 people had died, including 186 children. *Us/Them* is not an account of these tragic events, but about the individual way that children cope with extreme situations, contrasting their views with those of adults. In addition to the public performances,

UMS will host two special performances of this production on Thursday, January 25 and Friday, January 26 for area schools. This production, which was the hit of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2016 and recently completed a sellout run at the National Theatre in London, receives its U.S. premiere as part of No Safety Net and will not be seen anywhere else in the country this year.

They, Themselves and Scherm, a one-person show written and performed by transgender artist **Becca Blackwell**, will come to Arthur Miller Theatre with four performances between Wednesday, January 31 and Saturday, February 3. A New York-based trans actor, performer, and writer who prefers the personal pronoun “they,” Becca recounts their personal experience being adopted into a Midwestern religious family, trained to be a girl, and plagued by the question “How do I become a man, and do I even want that?” Inspired by a self-produced video by the late actor Corey Haim called *Me, Myself, and I*, the production details the tragi-comic transitions in life, family, sex, and gender while asking what it truly means to be authentic. Becca last appeared at UMS as part of the Young Jean Lee Theater Company’s production of *Untitled Feminist Show*.

The Glasgow-based performance artist **FK Alexander**’s sonically immersive production of ***(I Could Go On Singing) Over the Rainbow*** will run from Friday, January 26 through Saturday, February 3 in the Stamps Gallery in downtown Ann Arbor. FK Alexander identifies as living in recovery from drug addiction and mental collapse. Her work is concerned with issues of wounds, recovery, aggressive healing, radical wellness, industrialization, and noise music, an “outsider music” that still exists on the fringe. In this unique experience with the **Okishima Tourist Association**, self-selecting audience members are invited into an intimate, personal experience, where they take Alexander’s hand as she sings alongside a distorted recording of the last time that Judy Garland sang “Over the Rainbow,” just months before she died. The music is played through a wall of noise by the abrasive noise band Okishima Island Tourist Association. This deeply personal experience is intended to create a therapeutic space through ritual, repetition, and intimate connection. The performance on Saturday, January 27 will be a three-hour durational presentation; other performances will last about an hour. *(I Could Go on Singing) Over the Rainbow* also receives its U.S. premiere as part of No Safety Net and is currently not scheduled to be seen anywhere else in the country this year.

Tickets to individual events go on sale Monday, September 25. A No Safety Net Pass with all four titles is available for \$120 until Tuesday, October 31. Additional information can be found at ums.org/nosafetynet.

A full listing of performances and activities is included below. All events are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted.

PERFORMANCES

The Ars Nova production of

Underground Railroad Game

By **Jennifer Kidwell** and **Scott Sheppard**, with **Lightning Rod Special**

Directed by **Taibi Magar**

Wednesday, January 17 // 7:30 pm

Thursday, January 18 // 7:30 pm

Friday, January 19 // 8 pm

Saturday, January 20 // 2 pm & 8 pm

Sunday, January 21 // 2 pm

Arthur Miller Theatre

Tickets: ums.org/nosafetynet or 734-764-2538

Us/Them

BRONKS and Richard Jordan Productions

with Theatre Royal Plymouth and Big in Belgium

Written and directed by **Carly Wijs**

Featuring **Gytha Parmentier** and **Roman Van Houtven**

In association with Summerhall

Wednesday, January 24 // 7:30 pm

Thursday, January 25 // 7:30 pm

Friday, January 26 // 8 pm

Saturday, January 27 // 8 pm

Sunday, January 28 // 2 pm

Arthur Miller Theatre

Tickets: ums.org/nosafetynet or 734-764-2538

They, Themselves and Schmeer

Written and performed by **Becca Blackwell**

Directed by and developed with **Ellie Heyman**

Wednesday, January 31 // 7:30 pm

Thursday, February 1 // 7:30 pm

Friday, February 2 // 8 pm

Saturday, February 3 // 8 pm

Arthur Miller Theatre

Tickets: ums.org/nosafetynet or 734-764-2538

(I Could Go on Singing) Over the Rainbow

Created and performed by **FK Alexander** and the **Okishima Tourist Association**

Friday, January 26 // 8 pm

Saturday, January 27 // 8 pm*

Wednesday, January 31 // 7:30 pm

Thursday, February // 7:30 pm

Friday, February 2 // 8 pm

Saturday, February 3 // 8 pm

Stamps Gallery (201 S. Division St.)

Tickets: ums.org/nosafetynet or 734-764-2538

* *three-hour durational performance*

KEYNOTE EVENT & PENNY STAMPS SPEAKER SERIES

A Conversation with Claudia Rankine and P. Carl

Theatre Matters: Activism, Imagination, Citizenship

Thursday, January 18 // 5:10 pm

Michigan Theater

Can theater promote social justice? Can a play help its audience imagine — and then manifest — a more equitable America? How is art-making an act of engaged citizenship? Acclaimed poet, playwright, and MacArthur “Genius” Fellow Claudia Rankine (author of *Citizen: An American Lyric*) sits down with dramaturg P. Carl, the director of the online theater commons Howlround and co-artistic director of ArtsEmerson, to discuss the ways contemporary theater and performance can help catalyze and promote social justice issues. Rankine and Carl are currently collaborating on the upcoming world premiere of Rankine’s play *The White Card*, which will be co-produced by Arts Emerson and American Repertory Theatre at Harvard. *Presented in collaboration with the Penny W. Stamps School of Art & Design.*

WORKSHOPS: UNDERGROUND RAILROAD GAME

Speculative Histories

Facilitated by playwright and cultural leader **Jillian Walker**

Monday, January 15 // 7-9 pm

Location TBD

U.S. history is full of glorious gaps and unknowns. The *Speculative Histories* workshop will focus on using the powerful tool of imagination to see or to “speculate” truths residing in historical gaps for African Americans in order to envision a greater picture of the collective American past. Using books, personal narratives, ephemera, imagery, and other tools as fuel to “see” anew, *Speculative Histories* will guide participants through imaginative exercises intended to ignite creative ways to read what is there and build *what* is not there, thus weaving a more complex and complete historical view of African-American and collective American life.

Introduction to Systemic Racism with ERACCE

Saturday, January 20 // 10 am–5 pm

Location TBD

Registration Fee: \$15 for Students; \$50 for general public

Register: ums.org/nosafetynet

This all-day workshop facilitated by Kalamazoo-based ERACCE (Eliminating Racism & Creating / Celebrating Equity) is helpful for beginning the development of a common language necessary for having productive conversations about race and systemic racism. What can you do to eliminate racism? How does your own racial identity factor into larger systems of power and oppression? Ask questions, challenge your own perceptions, and extend your knowledge surrounding race and racism.

ERACCE believes that a mixed-race training team creates a safe and more liberating space for participants, so each training is co-led by one person of color and one white person. Facilitators intentionally seek to cultivate an atmosphere of mutual respect and caring, and are not based on confrontation, guilt, blame, or judgment.

LECTURES AND PANELS: US/THEM

Russia’s Complex Relationship with the North Caucasus: Past and Present

Tuesday, January 23 // 6-7:30 pm

110 Weiser Hall (500 Church St, Ann Arbor)

Panelists will present a brief history of Chechen-Russian relations and discuss the origins of radical movements in the North Caucasus that led to the Beslan School Siege of 2004, as well as ongoing attempts for justice by the victims’ families. Speakers include Tanya Lokshina, Russia Program Director for Human Rights Watch, and Ronald G. Suny, William H. Sewell Jr. Distinguished University Professor of

History at the University of Michigan. *Presented by the U-M Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies.*

Crackdown in Chechnya: Ramzan Kadyrov's Brutal Rule and International Human Rights

Wednesday, January 24 // 12 noon-1pm
110 Weiser Hall (500 Church St, Ann Arbor)

For more than a decade, Ramzan Kadyrov has led Chechnya through brutal repression with the tacit blessing of the Kremlin, gradually becoming a tyrant by ruthlessly eradicating even the mildest forms of dissent. In spring 2017, the authorities launched a massive anti-gay purge, during which dozens of men were held in unofficial detention facilities, where they were tortured and abused by local police and security officials. This repressive measure has brought international attention to the horrific human rights abuses in Chechnya. Presented by Tanya Lokshina, Russia Program Director for Human Rights Watch. *Presented by the U-M Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies.*

LECTURE/PANEL: THEY, THEMSELVES AND SCHMERM

Gender Identity 101 & Being Transgender in Our Community

Saturday, February 3 // 6-7:30 pm
Location TBD

In the last five years, the visibility of transgender people has increased dramatically. From Laverne Cox's meteoric rise to fame portraying a transgender inmate on *Orange is the New Black* to the high profile gender transition of athlete and television personality Caitlyn Jenner, we've entered into a moment where gender identity is at the forefront of our cultural conversation. This combined lecture and panel will provide a basic primer on preferred language around gender identity, and explore the lived experiences of transgender people in our community. In conjunction with Becca Blackwell's performance, the panel will feature gender non-binary individuals (Blackwell identifies as non-binary and uses gender neutral pronouns) and also include the parent of a transgender person. *In collaboration with the U-M Spectrum Center's "My Voice" program which provides panels of trained LGBTQ+ speakers to share their personal stories with audiences. My Voice panels provide information about LGBTQ+ from personal experiences and facilitate vibrant discussions about topics of attractionality, sexuality, and gender.*

OTHER EVENTS

Opening Night Post-Show Q&A with Artists

Underground Railroad Game: Wednesday, January 17

Us/Them: Thursday, January 25

They, Themselves and Scherm: Wednesday, January 31

In conjunction with opening night No Safety Net performances, join us for post-performance artist Q&As to get a glimpse into the lives and minds of the artists who bring their creativity to the stage. *Must have a ticket to one of the performances to attend.*

Saturday Night Community Dialogues

Underground Railroad Game: Saturday, January 20

Us/Them: Saturday, January 27

They, Themselves and Schmerz: Saturday, February 3

Arthur Miller Theatre

After select Saturday night No Safety Net performances, UMS will invite a panel of community leaders, thinkers, and activists to engage with audience members around the themes of each performance. The floor will be open to panelists and audience members alike to reflect on, discuss, analyze, and respond to the performance they've just experienced. Panelists will be announced in January.

Frame

A salon series on visual art, performance, and identity

Monday, January 22 // 7-8:30 pm

Monday, February 19 // 7-8:30 pm

Monday, March 19 // 7-8:30 pm

202 S. Thayer Building (Atrium)

The U-M Institute for the Humanities and UMS will offer a series of open dialogues around contemporary visual art, performance, and identity. Discussions will be hosted by Detroit-based performance artist and U-M alumna **Jennifer Harge** and by art critic, curator, and co-founder of ARTS.BLACK **Taylor Renee Aldridge**. Harge, Aldridge, and a panel of discussants will attend performances from the UMS season, as well as exhibitions at the U-M Institute for the Humanities. In open discussions, they will respond to the exhibitions and performances, exploring how visual art and performance can be used as a tool for disrupting, organizing, lamenting, and building counter-narrative in response to the status quo. *Presented in collaboration with Harge Dance Stories, ARTS.BLACK, U-M Institute for the Humanities, U-M Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs, and U-M Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives.*

Decompress

A closing night celebration of No Safety Net

Saturday, February 3 // 9:30 pm-1am

Blind Pig (208 S. 1st St.)

Having important, often tough, and constructive conversations is worth celebrating. And after three weeks of No Safety Net, with over 20 performances and many community dialogues and workshops, we all deserve a little self-care. Join us for a relaxed closing night celebration featuring DJs and musicians from Detroit's Seraphine Collective, appearances by No Safety Net artists, mixing and mingling, snacks, and a cash bar. *Ages 18+ only. Free entry with a No Safety Net ticket stub, or \$5 cover; cash bar.*

ABOUT UMS

A recipient of the 2014 National Medal of Arts, UMS (also known as the University Musical Society) contributes to a vibrant cultural community by connecting audiences with performing artists from around the world in uncommon and engaging experiences. One of the oldest performing arts presenters in the country, UMS is an independent non-profit organization affiliated with the University of Michigan, presenting over 70 music, theater, and dance performances by professional touring artists each season, along with over 100 free educational activities. UMS is committed to bold artistic leadership, engaged learning through the arts, and access and inclusiveness. Since 1990, the organization has co-commissioned and supported the production of nearly 80 new or reimagined works. Matthew VanBesien became the organization's seventh president in July 2017.

MEDIA CONTACTS

Sara Billmann, Director of Marketing & Communications
734.763.0611 / sarabill@umich.edu

Mallory Shea, Marketing & Media Relations Coordinator
734.647.4020 / mschirr@umich.edu

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