

For Immediate Release

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Stage Left Theatre announces Season 35 and departure of Artistic Director Vance Smith

Chicago, July 6, 2016– Stage Left Theatre is pleased to announce the programming for its 35th season. The season begins with the world premiere of *The Bottle Tree* by Beth Kander directed by ensemble member Amy Szerlong. *The Bottle Tree* was developed through Stage Left's Downstage Left program, at the Ashland New Plays Festival and has received an Honorable Mention on The Kilroys List for the past two years. Next, in the winter, Stage Left and Cor Theatre present a co-production of *What of the Night?* by María Irene Fornés, directed by Carlos Murillo. This epic meditation on poverty in America was a Pulitzer finalist in 1990. Cor Theatre Artistic Director Tosha Fowler says of the partnership, "With admiration for Stage Left's longevity and the exciting opportunities they provide to artists through their strong commitment to mission, we at Cor are thrilled to announce a collaboration of theatre that is bound to leave you breathless. Combining Stage Left's strength with our fearless aesthetic, Fornés' poetically primal voice, and Carlos Murillo's passionate vision, *What of the Night* is going to be our biggest leap yet." Finally, the company will present LeapFest, its annual developmental festival featuring workshop productions of new plays, at a time to be announced later.

For the past four seasons, Stage Left has produced three mainstage plays plus LeapFest. This abbreviated season allows room for a leadership transition spurred by the departure of Artistic Director Vance Smith. Says Smith, "When I first started in this position, the company had smartly programmed one slot off so I would have time to get my bearings and make plans. I thought it wise to offer my successors the same advantage."

Season 35

a world premiere

The Bottle Tree

by Beth Kander

directed by ensemble member Amy Szerlong

October 15 – November 20, 2016

In *The Bottle Tree*, gun violence in America is explored through the story of a small-town girl with a dark family legacy. Twenty-something Allison Mason has reluctantly agreed to be filmed for a documentary about school shootings. Answering the documentarian's questions brings her back to her high school years, when she had to navigate life in Maple County, Mississippi, as the younger sister of a school shooter. As a teenager, all Alley wants is to be someone else, somewhere else - especially as she realizes she's not the only one still traumatized by her brother's actions. The ghosts of her past haunt her; young love, old guilt, laughter, family loyalty and lingering scars all keep the girl and her symbolic bottle tree on the verge of shattering. Will finding forgiveness and a way to move forward prove as elusive for Alley as an adult, just as gun culture in her community and country continues to evade any easy answers? Or will something shift enough to finally allow for hope and healing?

The Bottle Tree was developed in part through one of our Downstage Left Playwright Residencies in the fall of 2014, then in LeapFest in the summer of 2015. The script also received development at the 2015 Ashland New Plays Festival, and has received an Honorable Mention on The Kilroys List for the past two years.

Beth Kander (*Playwright*) is a Chicago-based writer with Southern and Midwestern roots. Recent playwriting awards and activities include Ashland New Plays Festival (2016 and 2015), The Ruckus' 2016 summer festival, BechdelFest 2016, The Kilroys List (Honorable Mentions 2015 and 2016), The Writers Room at The New Colony, LeapFest 2015, Downstage Left Residency, Charles M. Getchell New Play Award 2012, and three Eudora Welty New Play awards. She has scripts represented by Stage Rights in Los Angeles and Chicago Dramaworks. In addition to playwriting, Kander writes novels, screenplays, and children's literature. She is pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at Mississippi University for Women, and has degrees from Brandeis University and the University of Michigan. She and her husband, Danny Dauphin, are welcoming their first child in summer 2016; the new addition will be mercilessly subjected to the arts from day one. www.bethkander.com

Amy Szerlong (*Director*) is a Stage Left Ensemble member where her credits include directing for LeapFest (*Handled, The Bottle Tree*), the Belarusian Dream Theater Festival and Drekfest. She also served as the Assistant Director for *Impenetrable* and LeapFest (*Witches Vanish, Blue Whitney*). Outside of SLT, Amy has directed for the Saturday Series at Chicago Dramatists and various short play festivals at American Theatre Company, Commission Theatre Company, the side project, and Something Marvelous. Amy has also worked as an Assistant Director at Step Up Productions (*Barefoot in the Park*), Redtwist Theater (*Opus*), Theater on the Lake (*Opus*), and American Theatre Company (*The Amish Project, The Original Grease – Jeff Award for Outstanding Musical, Midsize*). By day, Amy works in Development at Goodman Theatre. She is a graduate of the University of Richmond, where she majored in theatre with a concentration in arts management.

What of the Night?

by María Irene Fornés

directed by Carlos Murillo

January 7 – February 12, 2017

a co-production with Cor Theatre

The celebrated Cuban-American writer María Irene Fornés's play, *What of the Night?*, is about sex, power, institutional failure, human frailty, betrayal, dreams and madness. A Pulitzer Prize finalist, it follows an extended family whose lives are intertwined even as they try to escape the ties that bind them. When the just-married 14-year-old Birdie leaves her impoverished home to seek a better life, she unwittingly sets in motion a sprawling epic told in intimate vignettes that spans across time and geography. Rainbow finds love. Charlie finds solace in loyalty. Ray finds the trappings of success. Though their yearnings are briefly rewarded, the lyrical story lays bare the difference between the hunger of the soul and the hunger of the ego.

Cor Theatre (cortheater.org) debuted in September 2012 with a vision to create theatrical experiences that are rarely presented in Chicago by artists who seek to defy expectation. Cor's mission is to explore the inner truth of the human experience through storytelling that defies convention, and to engage audiences by telling stories that take courage to tell. Cor Theatre derives its name from the Latin root of courage – meaning heart.

María Irene Fornés (*Playwright*) is a Cuban-American avant garde playwright and director who was a leading figure of the Off-Off-Broadway movement in the 1960s. Fornés' themes frequently focused on poverty and feminism. Moreover, on personal and artistic levels, her lesbian identity has been central to her art. Her family moved to the United States in 1945, and she became a painter before beginning to write plays in the early 1960s. *The Widow*, Fornés' first professionally produced play, was staged in 1961. Fornés acted as the director for many of her subsequent works, including *There! You Died* (1963; later retitled *Tango Palace*, 1964), *The Successful Life Of 3: A*

Skit In Vaudeville (1965), and *Molly's Dream* (1968), among others. In 1973 she founded the New York Theatre Strategy, which was devoted to the production of stylistically innovative theatrical works. Fornés has held teaching and advisory positions at several universities and theatrical festivals, such as the Theatre for the New City, the Padua Hills Festival, and the INTAR (International Arts Relations) program in New York City. She has received eight Obie awards — in such categories as distinguished playwriting and direction and best new play — for *Promenade* (1965), *The Successful Life Of 3, Fefu And Her Friends*, *The Danube* (1982), *Mud, Sarita* (1984), *The Conduct Of Life*, and *Abingdon Square* (1987). Fornés has also received numerous other awards and grants for her oeuvre, including Rockefeller Foundation Grants in 1971 and 1984, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1972, National Endowments for the Arts grants in 1974, 1984, and 1985, an American Academy and Institute of Letters and Arts Award in Literature in 1986, and a Playwrights U.S.A. Award in 1986. She has also produced several original translations and adaptations of such plays as Federico Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding* (1980), Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *Life Is A Dream* (1981), Virgilio Piñera's *Cold Air* (1985), and Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (1987).

Carlos Murillo (Director) is a Chicago-based, internationally produced and award winning playwright as well as a director and teacher, of Colombian and Puerto Rican descent. As a director, he has staged the Chicago premiere of Julia Cho's *Durango* at Silk Road, as well as productions and workshops of his own work in New York, Chicago and Minneapolis. He has also staged plays at The Walker Arts Center/Intermedia Arts in Minneapolis, The Public Theatre New Work Now! Festival, the Mazer Theatre and Makor in NY. For DePaul University, he directed the world premiere of Ike Holter's *Good Worker* for the New Playwrights Series, for which he has staged two previous productions (Andie Arthur's *In Common Hours* and Alex Perry's *eikon*). As a playwright, his body of work has been widely produced throughout the United States and Europe. His best known play *Dark Play or Stories for Boys* premiered at the Humana Festival at Actors Theatre of Louisville, and has been performed throughout the US, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Lithuania. His plays have been commissioned by The Goodman, the Public Theater, Playwrights Horizons, Berkeley Rep, South Coast Rep, Steppenwolf, and Adventure Stage and developed by The Sundance Theatre Lab, The Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis, the Bay Area Playwrights Festival, New Dramatists and others. Carlos Murillo is the recipient of a 2015 Doris Duke Impact Award and a Mellon Foundation National Resident Playwright Program grant funding a three year residency at Adventure Stage. From 1993 to 1995, Carlos served as the Associate Literary Manager at The Public Theater in New York. Carlos heads the BFA Playwriting Program at The Theatre School of DePaul University, and is a proud alumnus of New Dramatists. Carlos lives in the south side of Chicago with his wife, the director, Lisa Portes, and their two children Eva and Carlitos.

LeapFest XIII

Summer, 2016

See what's next in Chicago theatre - LeapFest's first thirteen years have so far graduated twenty six plays to world premiere productions in Chicago and beyond, with four of these receiving the Jeff Award for Best New Work. This annual new play development festival features workshop productions of exciting new plays in rotating repertory.

All performances will take place at Theater Wit: 1229 W Belmont.

Subscriptions

Subscriptions to Stage Left Theatre's 35th season are \$50 and include admission to both mainstage productions and LeapFest, as well as other advantages such as guaranteed seating and special subscriber-only events. For more information or to purchase a subscription, patrons should call 773-883-8830 or visit stagelefttheatre.com.

Departure of Artistic Director Vance Smith

Stage Left announces that Season 35 will mark the departure of Artistic Director Vance Smith. Smith announced his departure to the Board of Directors and Artistic Ensemble earlier this year. The process of selecting new leadership is

already well underway, and Stage Left expects to announce those names later this summer. Smith will maintain the title of artistic director into October, and will produce the fall production of *The Bottle Tree* with the assistance of the new leadership. He also plans to serve as a consultant for the winter co-production of *What of the Night?*.

Vance Smith joined Stage Left as Artistic Director in the fall of 2009 and presided over a period of steady audience growth for the venerable Chicago company. Overall attendance for the six seasons Smith programmed and produced was 80% higher than for the six seasons immediately prior to his tenure. In 2010, he shepherded the company in its move from its venue at 3408 N. Sheffield to its current situation as a resident company at Theater Wit. During his tenure, Smith has produced 17 mainstage productions; 7 editions of LeapFest, an annual festival of new work; four remounts; and one off-night production. In addition, Smith worked with the Literary Manager to overhaul the new play development program Downstage Left, notably creating a highly successful series of playwright residencies.

Of his departure, Smith said, "I am very proud of all that we've accomplished in the last seven years at Stage Left. During a period of intense transition for the organization and an economic recession and recovery, we managed to expand programming while maintaining a high level of artistry and nurturing the talents of many new company members and playwrights. As I look ahead to the necessary next steps, I feel like fresh energy would serve the organization well. I can move on confident in the knowledge that Stage Left will continue to grow, because I know we have the people with that energy, as well as the ability to maintain the high standards our patrons expect from Stage Left. I look forward to supporting the company as a patron, consultant, and friend."

As Artistic Director, Smith directed Stage Left productions of *Kingsville* by Andrew Hinderaker, *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw (a co-production with BoHo Theatre), *Farragut North* by Beau Willimon, and *The Coward* by Nick Jones. He also performed in *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* by Peter Nichols and *The Firestorm* by Meridith Friedman. Other notable productions during his tenure include *Principal Principle* by Joe Zarrow (a co-production with Theatre Seven of Chicago), *Rabbit* by Nina Raine, *Impenetrable* by Mia McCullough, *Mutt* by Christopher Chen (a co-production with Red Tape Theatre), and most recently *The Body of an American* by Dan O'Brien.

About Stage Left

Founded in 1982, Stage Left Theatre is committed to nurturing voices for the American theatre by developing and producing plays that inspire debate and challenge perspectives on political and social issues. Through a full subscription season and our new play development program, Downstage Left, Stage Left strives to ask provocative social and political questions by producing a mix of new works, regional premieres and timeless classics.

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