

# THE PUBLIC.

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THE PUBLIC. + NATIONAL  
BLACK  
THEATRE



Nikki Crawford



Chris Herbie Holland



Billy Eugene Jones



Adrianna Mitchell



Calvin Leon Smith



Marcel Spears



Benja Kay Thomas

**PHOTOS: CAST & CREATIVE HEADSHOTS**

**THE PUBLIC THEATER  
AND NATIONAL BLACK THEATRE  
ANNOUNCE  
CASTING FOR THE  
NEW YORK PREMIERE OF  
*FAT HAM***

**Written by James Ijames**

**Directed by Saheem Ali**

**Co-Production with National Black Theatre**

**Complete Cast Includes Nikki Crawford, Chris Herbie Holland,  
Billy Eugene Jones, Adrianna Mitchell, Calvin Leon Smith,  
Marcel Spears, and Benja Kay Thomas**

**Performances Begin With a Joseph Papp Free Performance  
On Thursday, May 12 and Run Through Sunday, June 12;  
Official Press Opening on Thursday, May 26**

March 23, 2022 – The Public Theater and National Black Theatre (NBT) announced complete casting today for the upcoming New York Premiere of **FAT HAM** written by **James Ijames** and directed by Public Theater Associate Artistic Director and Resident Director **Saheem Ali**. Following an exciting and innovative filmed production produced by The Wilma Theater in 2021 during the shutdown, **FAT HAM** will make its live New York premiere this spring in the Anspacher Theater. Performances will begin with a Joseph Papp Free Performance on Thursday, May 12 and run through Sunday, June 12. **FAT HAM** will officially open on Thursday, May 26.

Critically-acclaimed playwright **James Ijames** reinvents Shakespeare's masterpiece with his new drama, **FAT HAM**. Juicy is a queer, Southern college kid, already grappling with some serious questions of identity, when the ghost of his father shows up in their backyard, demanding that Juicy avenge his murder. It feels like a familiar story to Juicy, well-versed in Hamlet's woes. What's different is Juicy himself, a sensitive and self-aware young Black man trying to break the cycles of trauma and violence in service of his own liberation. From an uproarious family barbecue emerges a compelling examination of love and loss, pain and joy. **FAT HAM** is a delectable comic tragedy directed by The Public's Associate Artistic Director **Saheem Ali**.

The cast of **FAT HAM** will include **Nikki Crawford** (*Tedra*), **Chris Herbie Holland** (*Tio*), **Billy Eugene Jones** (*Rev/Pap*), **Adrianna Mitchell** (*Opal*), **Calvin Leon Smith** (*Larry*), **Marcel Spears** (*Juicy*), and **Benja Kay Thomas** (*Rabby*).

"**FAT HAM** is an extraordinary new play riffing on Shakespeare while staying decidedly in the voice of James Ijames, its brilliant playwright," shares Saheem Ali, Associate Artistic Director and Resident Director of The Public and director of the production. "What James has created is as exciting and original as it is an homage to *Hamlet*. I'm also thrilled to be partnering once more with the National Black Theatre in bringing another of James' plays to fruition, following *Kill Move Paradise* which had its world premiere at NBT in 2017."

The production will feature scenic design by Maruti Evans, costume design by Dominique Fawn Hill, lighting design by Stacey Derosier, sound design by Mikhaal Sulaiman, hair and wig design by Earon Chew Nealey, prop management by Claire M. Kavanah, illusions by Skylar Fox, fight direction by Lisa Kopitsky, and choreography by Darrell Moultrie. Jereme Kyle will serve as the Production Stage Manager and Ryan Kane will serve as the Stage Manager.

The Public Theater and National Black Theatre have a long-standing partnership and history of collaboration which dates back to the 1960s. Most recently, the two organizations co-produced National Black Theatre's *Stage for Healing and Resilience* as a part of the Mobile Unit's *Summer of Joy*, a pop-up experience around New York City that took place last summer. **FAT HAM** will once again reunite National Black Theatre and The Public in a celebration of Black storytelling and community.

"I'm thrilled that my play **FAT HAM** is being produced in collaboration between The Public Theater and National Black Theatre in Harlem," says playwright James Ijames. "It feels both like a new beginning and a reunion all at once. Both theaters represent the very best that theater can offer to its community and I'm honored to be invited into these two artistic spaces. I am also beyond excited to reunite with my long time collaborator and friend Saheem Ali to bring this production to life and finally present it in front of an in-person audience."

The Public will require proof of a complete COVID-19 vaccination AND proof of a booster dose (for those eligible in accordance with CDC guidelines) by the date of attendance for access to the facility, theaters, and restaurant. Approved face masks will be required at all times, including while watching a performance, with exceptions for attendees in Joe's Pub and The Library at The Public, who are actively eating and drinking. For complete health and safety protocols, visit [Safe At The Public](#).

The Library at The Public serves food and drink Tuesday through Sunday, beginning at 5:00 p.m. and closing at midnight. The Library is closed on Mondays. For more information, visit [publictheater.org](http://publictheater.org).

## **BIOS:**

**JAMES IJAMES** (*Playwright*) is a Philadelphia-based playwright and educator. Ijames is the recipient of the F. Otto Haas Award for an Emerging Artist, a Pew Fellow for Playwriting, the Terrence McNally New Play Award for *White*, the Kesselring Honorable Mention Prize for *....Miz Martha*, a Whiting Award, a Kesselring Prize for *Kill Move Paradise*, and a 2020 Steinberg Prize. He received a BA in Drama from Morehouse College in Atlanta, GA, and a MFA in Acting from Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. Ijames is an Associate Professor of Theatre at Villanova University and a co-artistic director of the Wilma Theater.

**SAHEEM ALI** (*Director*) is a proud immigrant from Kenya. He is the Associate Artistic Director/Resident Director of The Public Theater. Recent productions include *Merry Wives*, *Romeo y Julieta*, *Richard II*, *Twelfth Night* (The Public); *Nollywood Dreams* (MCC); *Shipwreck* (The Public, Woolly Mammoth); *Fires in The Mirror* (Signature Theater); *The Rolling Stone* (Lincoln Center Theater); *The New Englanders*, *Sugar in Our Wounds* (MTC); *Passage* (Soho Rep); *Fireflies* (Atlantic Theater Company); *Dangerous House*, *Where Some Storms Are Born* (Williamstown Theater Festival); *Tartuffe* (Playmakers Rep); *Kill Move Paradise* (National Black Theater); *Nollywood Dreams* (Cherry Lane); and *Dot* (Detroit Public Theater). He is a Usual Suspect at New York Theater Workshop, Sir John Gielgud SDCF Fellow, and a Shubert Fellow.

**NIKKI CRAWFORD** (*Tedra*). Regional credits include *The Most Spectacularly Lamentable Trial of Miz Martha Washington* (Steppenwolf); *Fairview* (Woolly Mammoth Theatre); *Stormy Weather* (Pasadena Playhouse); *Spamalot* (1st Las Vegas Co); *Man of La Mancha* (La Mirada Theatre); *Immediate Family* (Mark Taper Forum); *Showboat* (Sacramento Music Circus); and *Play On!* (Arena Stage). TV credits include "NCIS: LA," "9-1-1," "NCIS," "Selena: The Series," "United States of AI," "Criminal Minds," "PBS Great Performances: Play On!" Crawford received a NAACP Best Actress Theatre Award and LA Ovation Best Featured Actress nomination for *Stormy Weather*, as well as a Helen Hayes Award Best Supporting Actress nomination for *Play On!*

**CHRIS HERBIE HOLLAND** (*Tio*). Regional credits include *White Noise* (Berkeley Rep), *Soft* (Williamstown Theatre Festival), and *The Box* (Z Space). Holland received a MFA from NYU Grad Acting and a BFA from Dartmouth College.

**BILLY EUGENE JONES** (*Rev/Pap*). Public Theater credits include Free Shakespeare in the Park's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Jones' Broadway credits include *A Soldier's Play*, *The Book of Mormon*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Trip to Bountiful*, *The Big Knife*, *The Mountaintop*, *Passing Strange*, *Radio Golf*, and *Gem of the Ocean*. Off-Broadway credits include *On SUGARLAND* (NYTW), *Pitbulls* (AUDELCO nomination for Best Actor/ Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre), *The Jammer* (Atlantic Theatre Company), *In the Footprint* (The Civilians), *Waiting for Godot* and *Three Sisters* (Classical Theatre of Harlem). Regional credits include *Seven Guitars*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Good Faith*, *Richard II*, *Breath Boom* (Yale Rep), *Macbeth* (Berkeley Repertory Theatre), *The Good Negro* (The Goodman), *Stick Fly* (Elliot Norton nomination for Best Supporting Actor/ Arena Stage and Huntington Theatre Company), *Othello* (CalShakes), *Spunk* (Actors Theatre of Louisville), *The People Before the Park* (Premiere Stages). Other stage credits include productions at Two River Theater, Alliance Theatre, Hartford Stage, and numerous productions at The Dallas Theater Center. Jones is a graduate of Yale School of Drama.

**ADRIANNA MITCHELL** (*Opal*). Off-Broadway credits include *What To Send Up When It Goes Down* (Playwrights Horizons) and *runboyrun* (NYTW). Regional productions include *Romeo and Juliet*, *Taming of the Shrew* (Chautauqua Theater Company); *Noises Off* (Two River Theater); *Hamlet*, *A Christmas Carol* (American Conservatory Theater); and *Measure for Measure* (Actors' Shakespeare Project). Television credits include "Queens," "Snowfall," "Harlem's Kitchen" (Pilot), "The Blacklist," "Bull," "The Good Fight," "Lincoln Rhyme," and "Little America." Mitchell attended American Conservatory Theater (MFA), Spelman College (BA), and British American Drama Academy (London Theater Program).

**CALVIN LEON SMITH** (*Larry*). Public Theater productions include *Sweat* (Mobile National Tour). Regional credits include *On the Grounds of Belonging* (Long Wharf Theatre); *A Christmas Carol*, *A Christmas Story*, *Dracula*, *Oh, Gastronomy!*, *The Ver\*\*on Play* (Actors Theatre of Louisville); *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Amadeus*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (The Clarence Brown Theatre); and *Macbeth* (Shakespeare on the Sound). Film/TV credits include "The Deuce," "High Maintenance" (HBO), "The Underground Railroad" (Amazon), *Better Man*, *Paper Friends*, *RSVP*. Smith was awarded Best Actor in a Narrative Short Queens World Film Festival. He is a graduate of The Juilliard School, BADA, and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

**MARCEL SPEARS** (*Juicy*) stars as Cedric the Entertainer's son "Marty" in the CBS hit-comedy "The Neighborhood." The popular series was recently renewed for season 5, and is currently airing season 4 which returned on September 20, 2021. In addition to "The Neighborhood," you may have seen Spears as "T.K. Clifton" on the ABC comedy "The Mayor" and co-starring in the BET film *Always a Bridesmaid*, on Netflix. Spears was forced out of his hometown of New Orleans by the devastation Hurricane Katrina brought to his beloved city. To this day, his strong affinity for New Orleans remains along with his second home, New York City, where he attended and received a Master of Fine Arts in acting at Columbia University. Spears spent many years delving into theater roles, including the title role of the Classic Stage Company's production of Shakespeare's *Othello* and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Tyne Rafaeli, for which he was awarded the Rosemarie Tichler Fund Grant for his performance. Spears also played a prominent role in an adaptation of August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

**BENJA KAY THOMAS** (*Rabby*). Broadway productions include *Skeleton Crew*. Off-Broadway credits include *Halfway Bitches Go Straight To Heaven* (Atlantic Theater), *Booty Candy* (Obie Award; Playwrights Horizons), and *Barbeque* (The Public). Regional credits include *Jazz* (Baltimore Center Stage), and *Booty Candy* (Wilma Theater). TV and film work includes "FBI," *Discord*, *Gotham*, *A Beautiful Distraction* (Netflix), *Detective Chinatown 2*, *Warrior Class*, *A Gun For Jennifer*. Thomas is a member of SAG/AEA/AFTRA and active member of The Actors Center.

### **ABOUT NATIONAL BLACK THEATRE:**

**NATIONAL BLACK THEATRE** (NBT), the nation's first revenue-generating Black arts complex, was founded in 1968 by the late visionary artist Dr. Barbara Ann Teer. NBT is the longest-running Black theatre in New York City, one of the oldest theaters founded and consistently operated by a woman of color in the nation, and most recently included in the permanent collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. NBT's core mission is to produce transformational theater that helps to shift the inaccuracy around African Americans' cultural identity by telling authentic stories of Black lifestyle. As an alternative learning environment, NBT uses theater arts as a means to educate, enrich, entertain, empower and inform the national conscience around current social issues impacting our communities. Under the leadership of Sade Lythcott, CEO and Jonathan McCrory, Executive Artistic Director, NBT's three core programs—the Theater Arts Program, Communications Arts Program, and Entrepreneurial Arts Program—help reshape a more inclusive American theater field by providing an artistically rigorous and culturally sensitive space for artists of color to experiment, develop and present new work. Working with trailblazing artists from Nona Hendrix to Jeremy O. Harris, and helping to launch the careers, most recently, of artists such as Dominique Morisseau, Radha Blank, Mfoniso Udofia, Saheem Ali, Lee Edward Colston II, and Ebony Noelle Golden, and incubating Obie Award-winning companies like The Movement Theatre Company and Harlem9's 48Hours in Harlem, NBT's cultural production remains unparalleled. Located in the heart of Harlem, NBT welcomes more than 90,000 visitors annually; has produced 300+ original works; won 56 Audelco Awards; received a CEBA Award of Merit; and has been nominated for multiple Drama Desk awards. NBT is supported by grants from the Ford Foundation, New York Community Trust, Shubert Foundation, Howard Gilman Foundation, Jerome Foundation, Andrew Mellon Foundation, City Council of New York, City of New York Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, Columbia Service Society, and private donations. Visit

[www.nationalblacktheatre.org](http://www.nationalblacktheatre.org) or follow NBT on Facebook (@NationalBlackTheatre) and Twitter/Instagram (@NatBlackTheatre).

### **ABOUT THE PUBLIC THEATER:**

**THE PUBLIC** continues the work of its visionary founder Joe Papp as a civic institution engaging, both on-stage and off, with some of the most important ideas and social issues of today. Conceived over 60 years ago as one of the nation's first nonprofit theaters, The Public has long operated on the principles that theater is an essential cultural force and that art and culture belong to everyone. Under the leadership of Artistic Director Oskar Eustis and Executive Director Patrick Willingham, The Public's wide breadth of programming includes an annual season of new work at its landmark home at Astor Place, Free Shakespeare in the Park at The Delacorte Theater in Central Park, the Mobile Unit touring throughout New York City's five boroughs, Public Forum, Under the Radar, Public Lab, Public Works, Public Shakespeare Initiative, and Joe's Pub. Since premiering *HAIR* in 1967, The Public continues to create the canon of American Theater and is currently represented on Broadway by the Tony Award-winning musical *Hamilton* by Lin-Manuel Miranda. Their programs and productions can also be seen regionally across the country and around the world. The Public has received 59 Tony Awards, 184 Obie Awards, 55 Drama Desk Awards, 58 Lortel Awards, 34 Outer Critic Circle Awards, 13 New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards, 58 AUDELCO Awards, 6 Antonyo Awards, and 6 Pulitzer Prizes. [publictheater.org](http://publictheater.org)

The Public Theater stands in honor of the first inhabitants and our ancestors. We acknowledge the land on which The Public and its theaters stand—the original homeland of the Lenape people. We acknowledge the painful history of genocide and forced removal from this territory. We honor the generations of stewards and we pay our respects to the many diverse indigenous peoples still connected to this land.

**The LuEsther T. Mertz Charitable Trust** provides leadership support for The Public Theater's year-round activities.

### **TICKET INFORMATION**

**FAT HAM** begins performances in The Public's Anspacher Theater on Thursday, May 12 and will run through Sunday, June 12, with an official press opening on Thursday, May 26.

Public Theater Partner, Supporter, and full-price single tickets can be accessed by visiting [publictheater.org](http://publictheater.org), calling **212.967.7555**, or in person at the Taub Box Office at The Public Theater at 425 Lafayette Street.

The Public's Joseph Papp Free Performance initiative will offer free tickets to the performance on Thursday, May 12 through TodayTix. The Lottery will open for entries on Thursday, May 5 and will close at 12PM Noon on the day of the performance. Winners will be notified by email and push notification anytime from 12PM to 4PM, and if selected, winners will have one 1 hour to claim their tickets.

The performance schedule is Tuesday through Sunday at 8:00 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday at 2:00 p.m. (*There is no 2:00 p.m. performance on Saturday, May 14 or Sunday, May 15.*)

The **American Sign Language Interpreted** performance will be at 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, June 4. The **Open Captioned** performance will be at 2:00 p.m. on Sunday, June 5. The **Audio Described** performance will be at 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, June 11.

The full performance calendar and complete ticket distribution details can be found at [publictheater.org](http://publictheater.org).

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