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Tony, Emmy, and Grammy Award-Winner Billy Porter joins Pittsburgh Public Theater World Premiere Musical BILLY STRAYHORN: SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR as Producer

Billy Porter joins producing team led by Steven Tabakin in new jazz musical featuring Broadway stars, award-winning creative talent, nine-piece live jazz band

August 7, 2023 - Pittsburgh Public Theater (Artistic Director Marya Sea Kaminski, Managing Director Shaunda McDill) announced today superstar and local legend Billy Porter will join as a producer the upcoming world premiere jazz musical [BILLY STRAYHORN: SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR](#), on stage September 19 to October 8 at the O'Reilly Theater in Downtown Pittsburgh. The cast features Broadway star and "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel" regular Darius de Haas as Billy Strayhorn, along with J.D. Mollison of Broadway's *Les Miserables* as the incomparable Duke Ellington. Tickets are on sale now at PPT.org/STRAYHORN or by calling the Box Office at 412.316.1600.

Billy Porter is an Emmy, Tony, and Grammy award-winning actor, singer, director, producer, composer, and playwright. Porter has numerous theater credits, including the role of "Lola" in the Broadway musical *Kinky Boots*, for which he won the Tony, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle awards, as well as the Grammy for best musical theater album. He won his second Tony Award in 2022 for "Best Musical" as a producer on *A Strange Loop*. Porter released his first literary project, "Unprotected," in October 2021, which was published by Abrams Press. As a recording artist, Porter recently released his singles "Fashion," "Baby Was A Dancer," and "Children" under his record deal with Island Records (UK) and Republic Records (US). His forthcoming album, *The Black Mona Lisa*, is due out this Fall.

"People don't know or appreciate who Billy Strayhorn was. He was an accomplished musical genius and an openly gay Black man back in the day. His story needs to be told, and Darius de Haas is the perfect person to bring Strayhorn to life," said Billy Porter. "This new musical, under the inspired direction of Kent Gash, deserves to have its world premiere in Pittsburgh where Strayhorn first discovered his love of music. I am proud to be a producer on this thrilling musical that finally tells his personal story."

[*Billy Strayhorn: Something to Live For*](#) kicks off the 2023/2024 season at Pittsburgh Public Theater and is written by **Rob Zellers** (*The Chief*) with **Kent Gash** (*Paradise Blue*, City Theatre) and directed by Gash, featuring music and lyrics by **Billy Strayhorn** and a nine-piece jazz band led by Yamaha-sponsored artist and jazz phenom **Matthew Whitaker**.

Billy Strayhorn was one of the greatest composers, lyricists and arrangers in the history of jazz. His body of work includes standards such as Take the 'A' Train, Something to Live For, Day Dream and Lush Life. His body of work spanned Broadway, Film Music, every International Jazz Festival and venues as varied as Carnegie Hall and Canada's Stratford Theatre Festival. He grew up poor in Pittsburgh, graduated from high school in 1933, then moved to New York where he settled in Harlem and joined the Duke Ellington orchestra. His 30-year collaboration with Ellington was one of the most prolific and groundbreaking in the history of American music. Strayhorn was also deeply committed to social and charitable causes, a strong supporter of the civil rights movement, and a personal friend of Martin Luther King, Jr. His life was tragically cut short; he passed away in 1967 at the age of 51.

Kent Gash (Director, Co-author) is an award-winning director and the Artistic Director of The Acting Company where he directed Kirsten Childs' new adaptation of *The Three Musketeers*, now playing at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. New York credits include Robert O'Hara's *Barbecue* at the Public Theater, *Lockdown* for the Rattlestick Playwrights Theater, and its virtual co-production with WP Theater, *Langston in Harlem* (director and co-author, 2010 Audelco Awards Best Musical), the Off-Broadway premiere of *Miss Evers' Boys* and Ellington's *Beggar's Holiday* for the York.

Most recent regional productions include Tarell Alvin McCraney's *Choir Boy* at Steppenwolf (Three Jeff Awards), Dominique Morisseau's *Paradise Blue* for Pittsburgh's City Theatre, *Guys and Dolls* at the Guthrie, *The Wiz* at Ford's Theatre (Washington Post Ten Best, Broadway World Best Musical, Three Helen Hayes Awards) August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* at South Coast Rep (LA Times Ten Best), and *Topdog/Underdog* (Elliot Norton Award – Best Director).

Mr. Gash is the former Associate Artistic Director of The Tony Award-winning Alliance Theatre (2001-2009) and The Alabama Shakespeare Festival (1999-2001). Mr. Gash is the founding Director of The New Studio on Broadway at Tisch School of the Arts, NYU. Mr. Gash is a graduate of Carnegie Mellon School of Drama (BFA in Acting) and UCLA (MFA in Directing).

Matthew Whitaker, an internationally recognized 22-year-old jazz pianist and composer, began teaching himself how to play at 9 years old. He was named an official Yamaha Artist at 15 years old. Mr. Whitaker's compositions and performances have won awards, including two ASCAP Foundation Herb Alpert Young Jazz Composers Awards. He has been profiled on 60 Minutes, and his journey to become a working film composer and musical director was captured in the NY Emmy-nominated 2022 documentary film [Matthew Whitaker: About Tomorrow](#), directed and produced by Steven Tabakin.

Rob Zellers, a favorite of Pittsburgh audiences for *The Chief* and *Harry's Friendly Service*, has developed plays at Pittsburgh Public Theater, Urban Stages, Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, The Lark, PlayPenn, New Harmony Project, Youngstown Playhouse, and Carnegie Mellon, Wake Forest and Youngstown State Universities.

Zellers said Pittsburgh is a perfect city for the premiere of this new musical since it is where Strayhorn first discovered his love of music.

Billy Strayhorn: Something to Live For brings to life the remarkable true story of one of the greatest composers of all time. From his impoverished beginnings in Pittsburgh to his lifelong collaboration with Duke Ellington, this world-premiere new musical follows the highs and lows of Billy Strayhorn's career, the joys and heartbreak of his personal life, and the challenges he faced living as an openly gay Black man in mid-20th century America at the dawn of the civil rights movement. Through his collaborations with Lena Horne, Billie Holiday, and the greatest jazz orchestra of all time, Billy Strayhorn transcended racial and sexual barriers and brought a unique fusion of jazz and classical music to the world with all-time favorites including "Take the 'A' Train" and the immortal "Lush Life."

Cast

Darius de Haas (Billy Strayhorn)
Charl Brown (Aaron Bridgers)
Taylor C. Collier (Bessie Dudley)
Tracy Dunbar (Ernest Brown)
Keziah John-Paul (Lillian Strayhorn, Ivie Anderson)
Richard McBride (Mercer Ellington)
Joseph McGranaghan (Lennie Hayton, Mickey Scrima, Sailor)
J.D. Mollison (Duke Ellington)
Arielle Roberts (Lena Horne, Billie Holiday)
Joseph Fedore (Production Understudy)
Saige Smith (Production Understudy)

Creative Team

Dell Howlett (Choreographer)
Jason Sherwood (Scenic Designer)
Rui Rita (Lighting Designer)
Jahise LeBouef (Costume Designer)
Shawn Duan (Projections Designer)
Zach Moore (Sound Designer)
Tenel Doresy (Hair and Wig Designer)
Bruce Coughlin (Orchestrator)
Heather Ankley (Stage Manager)
Ellie Handel (Assistant Stage Manager)
José Pérez IV (Fight Director)
Marty Ashby (Orchestra Personnel Manager) .



Pittsburgh Public Theater is grateful to presenting sponsor **Highmark** and **Dr. Richard W. Moriarty** for helping make this production possible. In addition, The Public thanks **John & Nancy Traina** and **Anonymous donors** for their generous contributions.

Billy Strayhorn: Something to Live For is presented by special arrangement with Swee Pea LLC (**Steven Tabakin**, lead producer).

Performance Schedule and Ticket Information

Billy Strayhorn: Something to Live For runs for 22 performances from September 19 to October 8 at the O'Reilly Theater in Downtown Pittsburgh.

Tickets are available now at www.PPT.org/Strayhorn or by calling the Box Office at **412.316.1600**. For discounted group tickets (10+) contact Pittsburgh Public Theater's Group Sales partner, the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, by calling **412.471.6930** or via email at **GroupSales@TrustArts.org**. For student matinee inquiries, please email the Pittsburgh Public Theater education department at edu@ppt.org.

September 19 – 8:00 p.m. (First Preview)
September 21 – 8:00 p.m.
September 22 – 8:00 p.m. (Live Audio Description)
September 23 – 8:00 p.m. (Opening Night)
September 24 – 2:00 p.m. & 7:00 p.m.
September 26 – 7:00 p.m.
September 27 - 10:30 a.m. (Student Matinee)
September 28 – 8:00 p.m.
September 29 – 8:00 p.m.
September 30 – 2:00 p.m. & 8:00 p.m. (ASL Interpretation Series)
October 1 – 2:00 p.m. & 7:00 p.m.
October 3 – 7:00 p.m.
October 4 – 8:00 p.m.
October 5 – 2:00 p.m. & 8:00 p.m.
October 6 – 8:00 p.m.
October 7 – 2:00 p.m. & 8:00 p.m.
October 8 – 2:00 p.m. (Closing Performance)

ACCESSIBILITY

Pittsburgh Public Theater is dedicated to making its performances accessible to all audiences and offers an American Sign Language Series, assistive listening, I-Caption®, and D-Scriptive® services at select performances. Tickets for these performances can be purchased online or by



calling the Box Office at 412.316.1600. For more information on our accessibility offerings, please contact Director of Education and Engagement Parag S. Gohel at pgohel@ppt.org.

Pittsburgh Public Theater strives to serve as a true public theater to the Pittsburgh region, producing more than 120 performances each season and welcoming more than 70,000 guests through the O'Reilly Theater's doors every year. The theater is renowned for its exceptional mix of programming, featuring international classics, fresh new works, and favorite musicals. Its commitment to education and engagement initiatives is a hallmark and includes the signature Shakespeare Monologue & Scene Contest and innovative community partnerships. The organization, under the leadership of Artistic Director Marya Sea Kaminski and Managing Director Shaunda McDill, celebrates its 49th season in 2023.