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**Broadway and “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel” Star Darius de Haas to lead  
World Premiere Musical *BILLY STRAYHORN: SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR*  
Written by Rob Zellers with Kent Gash | Directed by Kent Gash | September 19 – October 8**

*de Haas to play Billy Strayhorn alongside Les Miserables Star J.D. Mollison as Duke Ellington;  
Jazz phenom Matthew Whitaker to lead 9-piece band*

**July 17, 2023** - Pittsburgh Public Theater (Artistic Director Marya Sea Kaminski, Managing Director Shaunda McDill) announced today the full cast and creative team of its upcoming world premiere musical [Billy Strayhorn: Something to Live For](#), starring Broadway and “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel” regular Darius de Haas as legendary jazz composer Billy Strayhorn, along with J.D. Mollison of Broadway’s *Les Miserables* as the incomparable Duke Ellington. Single tickets are on sale now at [PPT.org/STRAYHORN](http://PPT.org/STRAYHORN) or by calling the Box Office at 412.316.1600.

***Billy Strayhorn: Something to Live For*** kicks off Pittsburgh Public Theater’s 2023/2024 season on September 19 at the O’Reilly Theater in Pittsburgh and will run through October 8. This new jazz musical, written by **Rob Zellers** (*The Chief*) with **Kent Gash** (*Paradise Blue*, City Theatre) and directed by Gash, features 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).

"The Black community of Pittsburgh (the Hill, Smoketown...) has nurtured some of our country's greatest musicians, entertainers and artists. From August Wilson to Lena Horne, Phyllis Hyman, Billy Eckstine and Billy Porter. *Billy Strayhorn: Something To Live For* dramatizes the story of one of the greatest musical innovators and singular stylists of the last century, the one and only Billy Strayhorn," Kent Gash said. "Billy Strayhorn's body of work, particularly with the Duke Ellington Orchestra, became the International Gold Standard of America's greatest cultural contribution – jazz. Forged in the Steel City and flourishing in the Harlem Renaissance, Billy Strayhorn's life is a surprising, timeless, and heroic behind-the-scenes saga of Black and Queer excellence that burns as brilliantly and as briefly as a comet. This is an inspiring story that belongs to everyone, and it's an honor to bring the Billy Strayhorn wit, humor, soul and swinging genius back home to the Pittsburgh community where it belongs! TAKE THE "A" TRAIN, NOW!"

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.

"This is a Pittsburgh origins story that not many people are aware of," Zellers said. "Strayhorn's life began in the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh. His gift for composing, arranging and performing jazz took him from Westinghouse High School to New York City at the pinnacle of American jazz music. Despite his decades-long partnership with Duke Ellington where he wrote music and lyrics for some of the band's best known work, he never received the recognition he rightly deserved."

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. His 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.

*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*) is known for his acclaimed Broadway performances and singing work on the Amazon Prime series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. He previously recorded his interpretations of Billy Strayhorn’s works in “Day Dream - Variations on Strayhorn.” National critics describe de Haas as a performer with “deep roots in jazz and soul” (New York Times) who has “plumbed the depths of the Billy Strayhorn legacy” (Variety) with more passion than any other performer.

**J.D. Mollison** (*Duke Ellington*) was in Broadway’s *Les Miserables* (Broadhurst Theatre) and *Venice* (The Public Theater New York). Mollison, a graduate of Carnegie Mellon University, has also appeared on Showtime’s *Shameless*, CBS’ *Madam Secretary*, and NBC’s *Law and Order: SVU*. He is a graduate of Carnegie Mellon University.

One of Strayhorn’s true loves, Aaron Bridgers, will be played in this world premiere production by **Charl Brown**, who was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Featured Actor in a Musical for his role as Smokey Robinson in *Motown: The Musical*.

**Keziah John-Paul** of Broadway’s *The Book of Mormon* will play Lillian Strayhorn and jazz singer Ivie Anderson.

Joining the cast playing Lena Horne and Billie Holiday is New York-based actor and singer **Arielle Roberts**.

**Richard McBride**, beloved by audiences as Starveling in Pittsburgh Public Theater’s 2023 production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream in Harlem*, returns to the Public stage as Mercer Ellington. **Joseph McGranaghan** of The Public’s *Barefoot In The Park* plays Lennie Hayton, husband to Lena Horne, among other roles. Pittsburgh-favorite **Saige Smith** returns to The Public as a member of the ensemble and understudy. **Joseph Fedore** also joins the ensemble as understudy.

*Billy Strayhorn: Something to Live For* will feature concert dancers **Tracy Dunbar** and **Taylor Collier**.

## **Creative Team**

The creative team for *Billy Strayhorn: Something to Live For* includes award-winning Choreographer **Dell Howlett**; Scenic Designer **Jason Sherwood** (Two-Time Emmy Award winner); Lighting Designer **Rui Rita** (Obie Award-winner); Costume Designer **Jahise LeBouef**; Projections Designer **Shawn Duan** (Lortel Award winner); Sound Designer **Zach Moore**; Hair and Wig Designer **Tenel Dorsey**.



Arrangements are by Musical Director **Matthew Whitaker**, who also conducts and plays piano and organ. Orchestrations are by Tony Award-winner **Bruce Coughlin**.

**Heather Ankley** is Stage Manager; **Ellie Handel** is Assistant Stage Manager; **José Pérez IV** is Fight Director; **Marty Ashby** is 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**

*Billy Strayhorn: Something to Live For* runs for 21 performances from September 19 to October 8 at the O'Reilly Theater in Downtown Pittsburgh. Tickets are available now at [www.ppt.org/strayhorn](http://www.ppt.org/strayhorn) or by calling the Box Office at 412.316.1600.

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 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](mailto:pgohel@ppt.org).

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*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.*