DAVID MAMET’S RACE: PROVOCATIVE PLAYWRITING AND POLITICS

TALKING RACE: A CONVERSATION WITH DIRECTOR CHUCK SMITH

The World of The Convert: Zimbabwe in the Nineteenth Century

An Interview with Danai Gurira and Emily Mann
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Why *Race*?

It begins as a mystery: A white business leader—wealthy, articulate, powerful—has a sexual encounter with an African American staff member. Although he insists it’s consensual, she charges him with rape. The executive, who is told by every major law firm in town that his case is unwinnable, ends up in a small legal office headed by two lawyers: one black, one white. Although at first they refuse the case they eventually relent, due largely to the actions of their assistant, also a young African American woman. But as they prepare their client’s defense, the lawyers soon face a fundamental issue more incendiary than the simple truth of what happened: in the racially charged, politically “correct” world of America in the twenty-first century, can such a case ever be decided on facts alone?

This is the bare outline of the starkly titled *Race*, one of the most provocative works of arguably the most provocative playwright now writing for the theater, David Mamet. In true Mamet form, an everyday setting is transformed into the site of an explosive examination of human frailty. Just as a professor’s office provides the backdrop for a searing investigation of sexual politics in *Oleanna*, or a real estate firm becomes the setting for an indictment of America’s bankrupt ethics in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, a boutique law firm is transformed in *Race* into a crucible in which disparate responses to America’s most agonizing social dilemma are mixed and ultimately ignite. Typically, Mamet introduces his central theme within moments of the play’s beginning, as the black attorney asks his white client, “Do you know what you can say? To a black man. On the subject of race?”

Such bald frankness has made David Mamet among the most celebrated writers of his generation, as well as one of the most controversial. Throughout his career Mamet has always eschewed plays which proffered vague optimism in the face of overwhelmingly complex social ills, saying that in his dramatic worlds, “people are confused...trying to do good…but no one knows how.” Such confusion, Mamet suggests, lies at the heart of every social and political debate in America and, despite the plethora of programs and initiatives designed to end racism, continues to plague our thoughts and actions surrounding this most confounding of issues.

Like the rest of Mamet’s work, *Race* offers its viewers neither consolation nor ready answers. But under the able guidance of Resident Director Chuck Smith, I know that it will engender much discussion, continuing an ongoing dialogue that is essential to us individually and collectively. It is without doubt one of the most galvanizing American plays of this century so far—and I am very proud to present it to our audiences.

Robert Falls
Artistic Director
David Mamet’s Race: Provocative Playwriting...
“I do not think that people are basically good at heart,” David Mamet proclaimed in a 2008 article in the Village Voice. “Indeed, that view of human nature has both prompted and informed my writing for the last 40 years. I think that people, in circumstances of stress, can behave like swine, and that this, indeed, is not only a fit subject, but the only subject, of drama.”

A quick overview of Mamet’s work confirms that the illustrious and prolific writer has rarely concerned himself with human nature’s rosier side. Viewing the world through dust-colored glasses and relying on his inimitable acerbity, Mamet creates characters who are invariably and tragically flawed. Whether they are real estate salesmen, junk shop deal- ers, college students, or the president of the United States, they fail to live up to our moral expectations—and often their own. As Mamet explained in a 1997 interview with the Village Voice, “My plays are about people trying to become connected. People who are confused…trying to do good…but no one knows how. No one ever quite makes it.”

Writing since the late 1960s, Mamet has penned dozens of plays and several screenplays. After his breakout hit, American Buffalo, premiered at the Goodman in 1975 and later enjoyed a successful Broadway run, Mamet followed up with plays like Dark Pony, A Life in the Theatre and The Woods. One of his best-known successes came in 1984, when he won the Pulitzer Prize in Drama for Glengarry Glen Ross; this triumph greased the wheels for his career as a Hollywood screenwriter. In the years since, Mamet has worked in both theater and film, churning out such acclaimed and controversial plays as Speed-the-Plow and Oleanna, and such screenplays as House of Games, Wag the Dog and State and Main. He has also adapted plays by Anton Chekhov, another writer whose characters are often “trying to do good…but no one knows how.” Mamet’s work is characterized by its distinctive use of language (his staccato rhythms are at once poetic and pedestrian, profound and profane) and by its diversity of subject matter. His topics range from relationships between the sexes to the dynamics in a cut-throat real estate office, to the rewards and challenges of practicing Judaism in a Christian-dominated society. Often, his plays take place in a single location and involve only a handful of characters—which allows him to zero in on the interpersonal dynamics which comprise the heart of his work. Provocative, incendiary and rough-edged, Mamet’s plays have long provided theatergoers with ample fodder for heated post-play conversations—some love Mamet’s work and some are angered by it, but, much to the playwright’s credit, it rarely engenders indifference.

In Race, which premiered on Broadway in late 2009, Mamet depicts Jack, a middle-aged white attorney who has worked for many years with Henry, a black attorney. They’ve recently hired Susan, a black woman in her 20s, as their associate. The trio has been asked to represent Charles, a middle-aged white man who has been accused of raping a young black woman. As the plot unfolds, it becomes evident that Charles, whether guilty or not, isn’t the only character with the capacity to behave poorly. Susan, the young black woman, plays the role of subservient colleague, but takes for granted that Charles—by virtue of being a white man—is guilty. Meanwhile, both Jack and Henry make assumptions of
...*Race* is distinctive in that it implies that our society’s efforts to create level playing fields and equal opportunities will fail because anyone offered a small advantage will use it to pursue a larger one.

their own about Susan. Though the characters attempt to put aside their biases, none is able to refrain from making judgments based on race and gender; in creating a situation in which prejudice and assumptions can mean the difference between a guilty or innocent verdict, Mamet raises the stakes sky-high. Everyone, in the world of *Race*, is capable of exploiting others—and they don’t hesitate to use another person’s race or gender as a reason to take advantage. All of the characters—black or white, male or female—seem ultimately to be working towards their own agendas, using any available means.

While Mamet is not alone in his pessimistic view of humanity, *Race* is distinctive in that it implies that our society’s efforts to create level playing fields and equal opportunities will fail because anyone offered a small advantage will use it to pursue a larger one. Inevitably, in Mamet’s world, as individuals and groups compete for the upper hand, the playing field tilts constantly, never achieving equilibrium. Jack explains this worldview to Susan: “You tell me that you might not exploit being black? Or that any human being whatever might not, when pressed, exploit whatever momentary advantage he or she possessed. Tell me that, and I’ll give my life to Christ.”

 Appropriately, Mamet dedicates the play to writer Shelby Steele, a self-described black conservative. Steele, who currently serves as a senior fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, a public policy think tank, writes frequently about racial issues, fervently opposing programs such as affirmative action because he believes they cast racial minorities in the role of “victim” rather than treating all people equally. Steele protests, “The great ingenuity of interventions like affirmative action has not been that they give Americans a way to identify with the struggle of blacks, but that they give them a way to identify with racial virtuousness quite apart from blacks.” In Steele’s view, black people use their victimhood as a currency, or as Mamet’s character Jack might say, they “exploit whatever momentary advantage” they possess. This currency, in Steele’s view, ultimately serves them poorly because it is fleeting and illusory—and meanwhile, Steele theorizes, Americans assume we are atoning for past wrongs. Steele calls for black people to value themselves based on their achievements and merits, rather than relying on “set-asides and entitlements,” and calls for the government to refrain from dangling misleading carrots in black Americans’ faces. Ultimately, both Steele and Mamet question whether the programs intended to aid racial minorities actually cement their status as oppressed groups and subject them to a new form of subjugation.

Since 2008, Mamet—who formerly described himself as a liberal Democrat—has publicly decreed that his politics have moved towards conservatism. Mamet explained this ideological shift in a 2008...
essay in the Village Voice entitled “Why I Am No Longer a Brain Dead Liberal.” He wrote:

“As a child of the ‘60s, I accepted as an article of faith that government is corrupt, that business is exploitative, and that people are generally good at heart. These cherished precepts had, over the years, become ingrained as increasingly impracticable prejudices. Why do I say impracticable? Because although I still held these beliefs, I no longer applied them in my life. How do I know? My wife informed me. We were riding along and listening to NPR. I felt my facial muscles tightening, and the words beginning to form in my mind: “Shut the fuck up?” she prompted. And her terse, elegant summation, as always, awakened me to a deeper truth: I had been listening to NPR and reading various organs of national opinion for years, wonder and rage contending for pride of place. Further: I found I had been—rather charmingly, I thought—referring to myself for years as “a brain-dead liberal,” and to NPR as “National Palestinian Radio.”

This is, to me, the synthesis of this worldview with which I now found myself disenchanted: that everything is always wrong. But in my life, a brief review revealed, everything was not always wrong, and neither was nor is always wrong in the community in which I live, or in my country. Further, it was not always wrong in previous communities in which I lived, and among the various and mobile classes of which I was at various times a part.”

This political shift explains Mamet’s reasons for dedicating Race to Steele, and his recent interest in exploring topics frequently addressed by conservative writers and thinkers. But, along with Mamet himself, critics and casual theater fans alike have questioned whether Mamet’s worldview ever fit within a liberal framework. Is it possible that Mamet’s decades-long status as a provocateur can be chalked up to the thinly veiled conservatism in his plays, which collides messily with the liberal ideals held dear by many theatergoers?

Indeed, in writing Race, Mamet did not tread into unfamiliar thematic territory. He similarly depicted issues surrounding oppressed groups in his 1992 play Oleanna, which deals specifically with gender rather than race. In Oleanna, a college student, Carol, pays a visit to her professor John’s office. When she professes confusion about the course material, and in particular about a book John wrote which questions the value of higher education, John agrees to help her and puts his arm around her. In the next scene, Carol has filed a sexual harassment charge against John, citing his seemingly innocuous side hug. John, who is up for tenure, can ill afford such a charge on his record, but his attempts to mollify Carol fail; finally, in a moment of anger, he grabs hold of her. In the play’s final scene, John has been fired from his job but has agreed to speak to Carol one last time. She reveals that she belongs to a campus “group” that disagrees with John’s position on higher education and aims to oust professors who hold such ideas, then offers to withdraw her charge if John agrees to remove his book from “inclusion as a representative sample of the university.” John then learns that Carol has elevated her charge from harassment to attempted rape. John loses his temper and beats Carol—and as she cowers on the floor she utters the play’s last line: “yes, that’s right.”
In writing Oleanna, Mamet never totally favors either character—while it’s obvious that John did not literally attempt to rape Carol, it’s less clear whether he takes advantage of the power he wields as a professor and a male. Carol, by virtue of her status as a student and a woman, finds herself in the more vulnerable position, by traditional standards—but it’s uncertain whether such standards apply. As Carol and John discharge their verbal ammunition, each makes a few valid points, leaving the dizzied audience to figure out whose side they’re on. But, as critic Frank Rich argues in his 1992 review of the play, Mamet ultimately “stacks the ideological deck” in favor of John. He “is given an offstage life that he may lose if found guilty. He is up for tenure, has just made a deposit on a new house and has an apparently loving wife and son. By contrast, Carol is presented alternately as a dunce and a zealot….She is given no offstage loved ones that might appeal to the audience’s sympathy.” What Rich could not foresee when he reviewed the play in 1992 was that Mamet would eventually declare his agreement with John’s controversial opinion that higher education is worthless: Mamet recently equated college with “Socialist camp.” Perhaps, even back when he wrote Oleanna, Mamet sympathized with his character’s ideas.

Indeed, the cunning and aggressive Carol strikes most as the more despicable character because she is the one who more explicitly “exploits whatever momentary advantage she possesses.” Prior to the late twentieth century, a sexually harassed young woman received little sympathy—but the feminist movement of the 1970s and beyond shifted society’s viewpoint and, in turn, institutional policies changed. By 1992, when Oleanna premiered, professors who in decades past wantonly harassed undergraduates now at last faced consequences. This otherwise admirable reversal of policy creates, as Mamet unapologetically points out, fresh opportunity for those selfish and stealthy enough to exploit it. Though she plays innocent, Carol enters John’s office with an agenda, and uses her gender’s newfound ability to “cry rape” to bring about her desired outcome. And although John’s flaws are indisputable (he beats Carol, after all), his deplorable behavior is spurred by Carol’s destructive and unrelenting attack—his outbursts are provoked rather than premeditated, and thus more forgivable.

Mamet’s depiction of this warping of feminist ideals prompted many to slap him with the label “misogynist,” a charge he denies. In his view, it’s not that women are more weaselly than men, but rather that they are not less weaselly. In Race, when Susan asks Jack if he thinks black people are stupid, Jack responds: “I think all people are stupid. I don’t think blacks are exempt.” This worldview likely informed Mamet’s enigmatic and intriguing title in 1992: Oleanna is the name of a
Norwegian folk song which describes a failed utopia, also called Oleanna. Our own society’s goal of creating an egalitarian world, Mamet implies, may be equally impossible to realize. “A free-market understanding of the world meshes more perfectly with my experience than that idealistic vision I called liberalism,” Mamet wrote in 2008.

Though Mamet’s conservativism doesn’t render him unique among Americans, it marks him as unusual among playwrights. A year before Race premiered, Patricia Cohen penned a New York Times article entitled “Liberal Views Dominate Footlights,” which details the scarcity of plays with conservative points of view. Cohen concedes that defining a “conservative” play is an impossible task, as most plays don’t deal explicitly with politics, and those that do often aim to remain neutral in their presentation of ideologies. And of course, the multifarious ideas that comprise “politics” rarely conform tidily to categories of liberalism, conservatism or any other –ism. Still, she argues that many plays champion, for example, gay rights, multiculturalism and abortion rights, yet few plays exist that question or condemn them. For the past few decades, many theaters, including the Goodman, have made diversity a keystone of their missions—but while many theaters now successfully produce work that presents the perspectives of women, the LGBTQ community and people of color, they still lack the ideological diversity that conservative viewpoints would bring. Some theater leaders express a desire to find and produce such plays. But in her article, Cohen quotes playwright Jonathan Reynolds, who asserts that on the rare occasion when writers create works that lean right, few theaters wish to put them on. Reynolds’s play Stonewall Jackson’s House, a stinging critique of political correctness and what Reynolds sees as a lack of black leadership in America, centers around a contemporary black woman who asks a white couple to take her in as a slave. (Goodman audiences will compare this storyline to that of Mary, Thomas Bradshaw’s incendiary play that premiered in the Goodman’s Owen Theatre in early 2011.) Stonewall Jackson’s House had its first reading at the Actors’ Studio in the mid-1980s with Elia Kazan and Norman Mailer; afterwards, Mailer commented to Reynolds, “If you put this on, you’ll get lynched.” Indeed, more than a decade passed until a theater agreed to produce the play—in 1997 it finally went before the footlights at the American Place Theater in New York.

Race, therefore, presents an opportunity for Goodman audiences to grapple with points of view that are an integral part of the national conversation about racial issues, yet are seldom conveyed on stage. And in addition to all its political resonance and relevance, Race also explores themes that cut far deeper than contemporary political discourse: it investigates age-old questions about whether people are inherently good or malevolent, narcissistic or generous, opportunistic or eager to contribute to a fair and just society. It’s unsurprising that these complex ideas are tackled by the intrepid David Mamet, whose bluntness and candor propelled him to playwriting success more than three decades ago, and have since maintained his status as a preeminent American playwright. And although Mamet’s writing style remains much the same as 30 years ago, his public declaration of his changed politics enables audiences to view his work through a fresh lens. This master of tightly woven plots and unflinching dialogue is now also a prime example of that seldom glimpsed creature: the conservative playwright.
In the Albert

Goodman Theatre Resident Director Chuck Smith has made a name for himself as one of Chicago’s preeminent directors in large part by staging plays that offer nuanced portraits of the twentieth-century African American experience (including Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, The Amen Corner and The Good Negro). With Race, he takes on a different type of drama, as David Mamet’s present-day tale of two lawyers—one black, one white—who find themselves entangled in a high-profile case portrays the contemporary state of racial politics with shocking directness.

Just before rehearsals for Race began, Mr. Smith sat down with the Goodman’s Lesley Gibson to discuss Mamet, the role of theater in society and America’s final taboo.

Lesley Gibson: What initially drew you to Race?

Chuck Smith: The subject matter. The play is about exactly what the title says—it’s about race. To me this is the most in-your-face play that I’ve dealt with on the subject of race in America. And it’s done in such an intriguing way: David Mamet has structured this play beautifully because this law firm consists of a white guy, a black guy and a black woman (who is new to the firm), and they’re struggling to figure out whether or not to take on the case of this white man accused of raping a black woman. The two male lawyers have their own niche. They’re good together, they’ve been together for a while, they know that they’re good at what they do, and the fact that one is black and one is white and they get along so well and talk about race freely with each other—that’s the major thing that drew me to the piece. They’re so open about it and they don’t hold anything back. And David Mamet is incredibly blunt as a writer; he doesn’t hide anything beneath the covers in this play.

LG: What intrigues you about Mamet’s work in general?

CS: David Mamet is one of those writers that has a specific style. His work is about thinking and acting on your feet—sharp, precise, right to the point and moving on to the next beat. That’s David Mamet, and that’s also very much Chicago-style theater. That’s what audiences should expect to see in this production: in-your-face, Chicago-style theater. There are uncomfortable questions raised in this play, but you can’t get around them, you can’t try to side-track them, they’re right there in your face and you’ve got deal with them right here, right now. No putting it off to tomorrow—what’s the answer right now? I’ve never directed a Mamet play but have always wanted to. For me this particular play, with its racial subject matter, is a dream come true.

LG: Do you think audiences in 2012 will be receptive to a play that deals with the subject of race so bluntly?

CS: I think initially they’ll be drawn to the title, because the word “race” is one of those words like “sex.” You know, imagine a play titled Sex (laughs). I think people will see the title, Race, and think, “Well, at least I’m going to check it out.” You’re going to look at it—it’s a grabber. Whether or not the audience is going to be pleased with what they see on stage, I think hopefully it will just open their

Talking Race: A Conversation with Director Chuck Smith
eyes to what might be the next step in furthering the relationships between blacks and whites in American society.

LG: Do you think there is still a need for us to have an honest conversation about race in 2012?

CS: There’s always going to be a need for us to have this conversation. Think of it this way: Imagine that you’re sitting on a crowded bus in the city of Chicago. You’ve got all kinds of people on the bus in Chicago, and the last thing you’re going to talk loudly about on this bus with a friend of yours is race. Because you’re afraid you’re going to step on somebody’s toes. It’s just a taboo subject. And I think sooner or later we’re going to have to un-taboo it. Things are never going to get better until it’s no longer taboo. Whatever I can do to make that subject not taboo—I’m all for it. This is just one more step along that road of taking those layers off.

LG: In your career you’ve directed a lot of historical dramas that depict the African American experience. Do you consider this a bit of a departure for you, thematically?

CS: I love historical dramas, as an African American and as an African American artist. I think that, unfortunately, we don’t teach history well in this country, and there are a lot of young African Americans that have no idea who they are or where they come from. And it all goes back to slavery, which is why we don’t want to talk about race, because it always goes back there and nobody wants to go back there, so we just want to bury it and move on. But you can’t—you’ve got to discuss it, because it’s a part of the history, so anything I can do to bring the history out, I’m all for. In that regard Race is sort of a departure for me, but at the same time I also think of it as something of a continuation of that interest, because it carries on the conversation. And I especially love that it brings intelligent black characters to the forefront.

LG: Do you think it’s our responsibility at the Goodman to use theater as a platform to address contemporary social issues?

CS: I think it’s every theater’s job to address contemporary issues. Theater is and should be a mirror of the society. People should come to the theater not only to be entertained but also to learn things, and also to be able to identify with what they see on the stage. And this is a play that I think fulfills all of that.

LG: What do you hope audiences will take away from this production?

CS: All I want the audience to take away from it is a desire to talk to someone about race, and to keep the debate going. That’s my desire for this production. I want people to leave the theater and want to talk. To me that’s the sign of a good play: if that discussion goes on for a day, or a couple of days, and keeps on going. In the best of all possible worlds, after the curtain goes down I hope members of the African American community will look over at white people and say, “Come on, let’s go have a drink and talk about this.” [Laughs.] That’ll probably never happen. But at least when they leave the theater I want them to think that we’ve got to talk to each other.

“To me this is the most in-your-face play that I’ve dealt with on the subject of race in America. And it’s done in such an intriguing way...”

—Chuck Smith

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In Danai Gurira’s arresting new drama, *The Convert*, the fictional 15-year-old Jekesai, an African girl in the region that would eventually become Zimbabwe, finds herself caught in a tug-of-war between her native family and culture and a new Christian religion and way of life. While the characters and actions depicted in *The Convert* are solely the playwright’s creation, the factual events of that explosive moment in history—the late months of 1895—permeate every aspect of the story, coloring-in the world around Jekesai as it changes before her eyes. In the history of the region, the last years of the nineteenth century would prove to be a critical turning point between long-held ways of living and a new, permanent reality.

For centuries, the region of present-day Zimbabwe had been home to a number of sophisticated native states, civilizations of mostly Shona-speaking people with established art, religion and commerce. But major change began to set in in the 1830s, when the Ndebele people fleeing violence in their native region, arrived in the southwestern part of the country. They proved to be a powerful force and quickly seized control of much of the south by overthrowing many long-standing Shona chieftancies. The Ndebele eventually established a home, Matabeleland, in the southwestern portion of the region, while many Shona-speaking people remained in Mashonaland, to the north, which became Matabeleland’s subject-state.

Around this time, the European presence in Africa was steadily increasing, European political and business interests were scouring the continent for opportunities, while permanent missions—both Protestant and Catholic—had begun to take root. One of the first British missionaries, Robert Moffat, befriended the Ndebele king, Mzilikazi Khumalo, as far back as the 1820s. Moffat and his party earned the trust of the locals and introduced them to Christian values and Western customs. Though technically independent of the political and commercial British interests, the missionaries cast a subtle influence in the colonization of the area and the lives of its people, and often provided the locals with weapons while familiarizing them with Western values and education, for better and for worse.

As the century progressed, European governments and the missionaries’ business-minded contemporaries continued splicing up the continent. By the 1880s...
German, Portuguese, Dutch and British settlers were aggressively vying for the land and resources of southern Africa, and Zimbabwe became a prime target in the “scramble for Africa,” as its promise of mineral resources and rich ranching and farming land made it a desirable prize. The Ndebele king at the time, Mzilikazi Khumalo’s son, Lobengula, found his state swarmed with Europeans and their growing influence.

In 1888, under the leadership of politician and businessman Cecil John Rhodes, the British sent John Smith Moffat—the son of Robert Moffat—to meet with King Lobengula. Moffat convinced Lobengula to sign the Moffat Treaty, which prevented him from dealing with other foreign powers, and the Rudd Concession, which gave Rhodes “complete and exclusive charge of all metal and mineral rights,” as well as commercial and legal powers. Sending Moffat to negotiate with Lobengula was a cunning strategy: Lobengula trusted him—their fathers had been friends—and signed the concessions as a means of both protecting his people and keeping the foreign presence in his kingdom at a minimum. He knew he could not win an outright war with the settlers, and was led to believe his people would receive British protection from other European states. Additionally, he was verbally promised that no more than ten white men would be mining in his state at one time. In exchange, he received monthly payments, rifles and ammunition. On the strength of these concessions Rhodes was granted a charter by Queen Victoria, and his British South Africa Company (BSAC) became the administrative power in the region. The BSAC was given complete imperial and colonial power, and with it they established police forces, built roads, railways, harbors and banks, and sent the Pioneer Column, settlers protected by BSAC forces, north from South Africa to occupy the Zimbabwe plateau. In 1890, the Pioneer Column raised the British flag over what would become Salisbury (which would later become Harare); among their party was a Jesuit missionary. In 1895, the colony was dubbed “Rhodesia” (later Southern Rhodesia).

But the oral and written portions of Lobengula’s concessions differed. He eventually tried to appeal to Queen Victoria and failed. In 1893, war erupted between the Ndebele and BSAC forces; the Ndebele were defeated and Lobengula fled north. At that time the...Zimbabwe became a prime target in the “scramble for Africa,” as its promise of mineral resources and rich ranching and farming land made the plateau a desirable prize.
settlers believed the unrest was under control—the people of Matabeleland were defeated and the colonists assumed those in Mashonaland were content. They were wrong, and tensions escalated. The locals were angry over the unbalanced appropriation of the land, and the introduction of the hut tax in 1894 forced them, a majority of whom had previously held their wealth largely in cattle, to work for colonists for currency so that they could pay taxes. Further complicating matters, an epidemic of rinderpest wiped out cattle. Religious leaders, spirit mediums who communicated with the ancestors and gods, urged a rebellion. From 1896 through 1897 first the Ndebele and then the Shona rose up against the colonists. Dubbed the first Chimurenga (“revolutionary struggle” in Shona), it was notable for the show of unity among tribes, but its early successes—some estimate that nearly half the white settlers in the region lost their lives—forced settlements into a siege mentality. But reinforcements of men and equipment from the south soon gave the settlers the advantage, and the leaders of the rebellion, including spirit mediums, were captured; many were executed.

Negotiations at the end of 1896 allowed for some amnesties, and a promise of the removal of troops from Matabeleland settled the situation in the west. But the conflict in the eastern part of the country, which includes Salisbury/Harare, continued through the early twentieth century. These tensions and the strict rejection of traditional ways by missionaries also led to the emergence of independent African churches in the late nineteenth century, incorporating and blending traditional and Christian rites.

It would be another 80 years before Zimbabwe permanently broke free of colonialism. In 1922, BSAC rule formally ended and the region was annexed by the British government. The white minority opted for self government, and shortly thereafter, restrictions to land access forced many blacks into wage labor; over the next several decades black opposition to colonial rule grew and nationalist groups emerged. In 1965, the government unilaterally declared Rhodesia independent from Great Britain, setting off a civil war with nationalist groups that lasted until 1979, when British-brokered peace talks led to a new constitution. In February, 1980, Robert Mugabe won the country’s first independent elections, and two months later Zimbabwe became an internationally recognized country.

This triumph and the hopeful years that immediately followed it were later marred by corruption, violence and economic deterioration. Mugabe has continued to win elections amid charges of electoral violence, corruption and intimidation. At the turn of the twenty-first century, inflation exceeded 1000%, government-sanctioned land redistribution programs that seized white-owned land were plagued by corruption and violence and opposition politicians were beaten or charged criminally. Since 2008, Mugabe has shared power with Morgan Tsvangirai, the opposition leader who now serves as prime minister, but criticism and tensions remain.

Carrie Hughes is the literary director at McCarter Theatre and the dramaturg for The Convert.
An Interview with Danai Gurira and Emily Mann

In the preface to *The Convert*, playwright Danai Gurira describes a precise moment in the late months of 1895, when, in the region of Africa now known as Zimbabwe, “Western cultural impositions and ancient African traditions [were] making strange bedfellows, indeed, never sleeping with both eyes shut—for fear the other will strike.” It is from within this charged environment that Gurira introduces us to the character Jekesai, a 15-year-old girl who escapes a forced marriage by becoming the protégé of a passionate African Catholic catechist. Though Jekesai gains protection, education and a new name, Ester, she finds herself pulled between her old family and culture and a new religion and lifestyle. The Goodman’s Lesley Gibson recently spoke with *The Convert* playwright Danai Gurira and director and McCarter Theatre (Princeton, New Jersey) Artistic Director, Emily Mann, to discuss the creation of this riveting new play.

Lesley Gibson: What is the basic premise of *The Convert*?

Emily Mann: *The Convert* takes place in 1895 in colonial Rhodesia. A young girl escapes her native village so that she does not have to be the 10th wife of an old man. She lands on the doorstep of a black catechist who takes her in, and she suddenly realizes, “Oh my goodness, he says he will not give me to my uncle because the great Jesus Christ does not believe in polygamy,” so she decides it would be very good to become a Catholic, and that’s what she does. And with great humor and compassion we see this brilliant teenage girl come into herself and find a new way to live. But then the uprisings against the colonists come, and she has to choose between her family and village and blood, and her new culture, and that’s what the play is about—how it rips her apart.

LG: What was the initial inspiration for this story?

Danai Gurira: I am both a Zimbabwean and an American. My parents came to the US from Zimbabwe in the 1960s, and I was born in Grinnell, Iowa; my father was a chemistry professor at Grinnell College. Around the time I was born, the people of Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, were fighting for independence against the colonizers. When the country obtained its independence [in 1980], a lot of the Africans who had emigrated (to Germany, the US, Russia and Australia) returned to their home countries. This was also what my parents decided to do. I was around five when we moved back, and I was raised in Zimbabwe. Years later I returned to the US for college. I have lived half my life in both countries, and now I call myself a “Zimerican.” And therefore I am always interested in African stories, both past and present.

A few years ago I was asked to write about the current political situation in Zimbabwe, and at that time I didn’t feel that I was qualified to be the voice to discuss such a complicated situation. I’m a playwright; I’m not a journalist. I write stories about experiences that are real, but through stories which I can use creatively to form my point. So rather than writing a journalistic piece about the current situation, I decided to go back in time to trace the beginnings of the tensions and the issues that exist now in Zimbabwe to the inciting incident: the time when these cultures and people clashed on this little piece of land.

LG: Emily, how did you get involved in this project?

EM: I initially read *The Convert* when Danai sent me her first draft just to hear
my response to it, and I could not put it down. It was one of the best reads I’ve had of a new play in decades, and I immediately said, “We have to do it,” which happens rarely—maybe once in a decade—to an artistic director, or at least, certainly to me. And I just knew immediately that she was writing something that needed to be done, that had so much humanity and truth to it and so much depth, and I knew our audience would absolutely flip for it. So without hesitation, and this is rare, I said, “We must produce this play.”

LG: What specifically about this story makes it so powerful?

EM: Danai gives us the opportunity to access a story which we would never be able to access ourselves. She is writing about history, and also about being human, specific and particular. She is bringing the African colonial experience right to us. Commonly, the stories of colonizations are told from the colonizers’ point of view, but *The Convert* tells the story from the colonized point of view, and it does it in a way that is so fresh and alive. In this play you get inside the heart and mind of an African teenage girl who finds herself in a difficult situation. I can’t imagine people not being swept away by this play and this character as she struggles with making a life-changing choice.

LG: This play chronicles a very specific historical moment—a span of a few months in 1895. Danai, how did you go about researching this period?

DG: I go back to Zimbabwe all the time to do research; I was back twice last year. But research comes from everywhere, and the story of Zimbabwe is actually extremely well documented. There are a lot of historians in Zimbabwe working to document their history. The process of collecting information about Zimbabwe has not been difficult; I have even gotten hold of Rhodesian newspapers from 1895, which is the year the play takes place. And there is a lot of documentation in the US as well, and I have been working with and getting information from Princeton and New York University, among other places.

LG: What are some elements of that history that we’ll see in this story?

DG: I think this play taps into an untold realm of the experiences of Africans during colonial Africa and the hybrid nature that created Africa as it is right now. Africa is such a hybrid continent and I think that’s totally underexplored. One of the main themes in *The Convert* is the idea of grappling with finding one’s true self, when facing several institutional ideologies—I think that’s something that Africa as a whole still grapples with, and I think individuals struggle with that across the world but we rarely see that struggle dramatized, especially through a colonial African perspective. The play shows that a lot of Africa’s dynamics now are rooted in things that are portrayed by various characters in the play. So for me it was a very interesting thing to go back and say, “OK, where does it start?”

LG: Another thing that’s rarely explored on stage is the colonial experience from the point of view of a young woman. Do you consciously try to tell the stories of women in your work?

DG: When I made the decision to try to tell African people’s stories I basically wanted to tell African women’s stories.

“I can’t imagine people not being swept away by this play and this character as she struggles with making a life-changing choice.”

—Emily Mann
I will always tell African men’s stories as well; but it is the African women’s stories that are my passion right now. I do not fight that passion because I believe that their stories are worth telling and that their stories are something to explore.

LG: What drew you to Emily as a director for this play?

DG: I wanted Emily to direct this play because I admire her, I respect her work and because she had an instant understanding for the story. Early in 2010 I read the first scene of the play at the In-Festival at the McCarter Theater. She was very drawn to it and not just taking it as an assignment, and that is what I am looking for in a director. And I was not surprised by her liking the play, because it is both feminist and African, which are both subjects that Emily is extremely well versed in and passionate about. I feel supported by her both personally and professionally; she has really helped me as a playwright because she is, in addition to being a director, a writer herself. When reading my play, she managed to see my process of connecting the different elements of the play together into one piece.

LG: What should audiences expect from this production of The Convert?

DG: They should expect to step into an unexplored and interesting world. I am really looking forward to seeing my story on stage, too; it will be great to experience colonial Africa’s history from the colonized point of view. I have heard about it, I have read about it, but I have never seen this Zimbabwean story on stage. The facts of the history are dead on, but the characters are fictional. It will be interesting and exciting to see the play come to life: the set, the sounds, the people, the textures, the accents and the languages.

EM: The play is also hilarious. Danai has found a way to be funny around such a serious subject. We are given this authentic tale from someone like Danai who not only knows and understands it, but who also has the craft to write it; she has such a dramatic sense and her mature craft of writing blows me away. I also want the audience to have a great time and to be entertained. A friend of mine, the South African playwright Athol Fugard once said, “Real entertainment is the interplay between heart and mind.” The Convert is interplay between heart and mind because you become so involved in the life of these people. It is a play the audience will never forget.

OPPOSITE: Emily Mann (right) in rehearsal with Mercedes Ruehl and Bess Rous in Sarah Treem’s The How and The Why. Photo by John Baer. TOP: Danai Gurira in In the Continuum. Photo by Rubin Coudyzer.
Want to Learn More About What Inspires the Work on Our Stages?

Discover the *Insider Access* Series.

*Insider Access* is a series of public programs that provide insight into the Goodman’s artistic process. With *Artist Encounters*, you’ll meet the names and faces behind the work on our stages—actors, playwrights, directors, the gamut! *Context* offers a rich and fascinating exploration of the social issues related to our productions. And *PlayBacks* take place directly after selected performances; they’re the ideal chance for audiences and artists to interact and analyze the production right after the final curtain.

**RACE**

**ARTIST ENCOUNTER: RACE**

*Wednesday, January 18, 2012 | 6 – 7pm*

Healy Rehearsal Room

Join us as Director Chuck Smith and a distinguished group of artists discuss the artist’s role in advancing dialogue about race in America with *Race* Director Chuck Smith.

$5 for the general public
FREE for Subscribers and students with ID

**CONTEXT: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

*Monday, February 6, 2012 | 7pm*

Albert Theatre

Our understandings of sexual violence—and our notions about the victims—are shaped by entrenched ideology and recurring media messages and are inextricably intertwined with race, gender, sexuality, poverty, immigration and community. Even with the scandals of Penn State and Syracuse University in today’s headlines, men remain invisible as victims.

Join us for a conversation with activists, advocates, scholars and survivors to explore *Race* in its real-world context. Featuring Aishah Shahidah Simmons, producer, writer and director of *NO! The Rape Documentary*; Sharmili Majmudar, executive director of Rape Victim Advocates; Rachel Caidor, founder of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence and representatives from Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation and the Illinois States Attorney’s Office.

FREE

**THE CONVERT**

**ARTIST ENCOUNTER: THE CONVERT**

*Featuring Playwright Danai Gurira and Director Emily Mann*

*Wednesday, February 29, 2012 | 6 – 7pm*

Polk Rehearsal Room

The Artist Encounter series brings together audiences and the artists who create the work on our stages, in an intimate environment, for a behind-the-scenes look at the plays and the playmaking process. In this discussion we’ll meet the artists behind Danai Gurira’s new play, *The Convert*, before a 7:30pm performance.

$5 for the general public
FREE for Subscribers and students with ID

*BOTTOM: Artistic Director Robert Falls at the Red Artist Encounter. Photo by Brian Warling.*
Theater of War to Highlight Issues of Women Vets

The statistics speak for themselves: of the more than 1.7 million veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, 11 percent are women and, according to military officials, at least one in five of them suffer from depression, often succumbing to drugs, alcohol and suicide. Since 9/11, the effort by women in the US military to be treated as equal to their male counterparts has led to the involvement of unprecedented numbers of female troops in combat and, as a result, more women veterans than ever before are suffering the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. Female vets are four times as likely to be homeless as their civilian counterparts, and many experience psychological issues stemming from military sexual trauma, difficulties in readjusting to civilian life and frustration over not being regarded by many as “true” veterans.

In January, 2012, the Goodman will explore some of the many issues facing women service members by partnering with New York-based Theater of War Productions to present The Female Warrior Program. This innovative public health project presents readings of classic Greek plays—notably Sophocles’ Ajax and Philoctetes—as a catalyst for discussions about the challenges faced by service men and women upon returning from deployment. Using these plays to forge a common vocabulary for openly discussing the impact of war on individuals, families and communities, these events are aimed at generating compassion and understanding among diverse audiences. The readings from the plays will be followed by panel discussions featuring military community members.

To date, Theater of War has presented 175 performances for military and civilian communities throughout the United States, Europe and Japan. Over the past two years, through a grant from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation in collaboration with the USO, Theater of War has been expanding the scope of its presentations to engage mixed civilian-military audiences in dialogue about the seen and unseen wounds of war through partnerships with prominent theaters throughout the US.

Bryan Doerries, founder and artistic director of Theater of War, describes the effort as a public health project designed to help service members and their families overcome stigmas about psychological injuries. “Through theater, we’re trying to offer opportunities for our troops and veterans to explore the private thoughts that they don’t feel comfortable opening up about,” Doerries notes. “Sophocles was himself a general, and Athens during his time was at war for decades. By performing these scenes, we’re hoping that our modern-day soldiers will see their difficulties in a larger historical context and perhaps feel less alone.”

The Goodman will co-produce the readings with Rivendell Theatre Ensemble, a local theater company committed to recognizing and cultivating the talents of women in theater. Admission to both performances is free of charge but reservations are required. In addition, the Illinois Humanities Council’s Public Square and the Neighborhood Writing Alliance will partner to convene discussions, GI cafés and writing workshops in a variety of locations around the city, focusing on war and its physical, psychological and economic impact on communities.

THEATER OF WAR STAGED READINGS
FREE, but reservations required.

Wednesday, January 18, 7pm
Owen Theatre
170 North Dearborn Street
Chicago, IL

Wednesday, January 25, 7pm
National Veterans Art Museum
1801 South Indiana Avenue
Chicago, IL

For reservations, further information and related community events visit GoodmanTheatre.org. For more information about Theater of War, visit OutsideTheWireLLC.com, or email Info@OutsideTheWireLLC.com

BELOW: Bill Camp and Elizabeth Marvel as Ajax and Tecmessa in Theater of War. Photo by Howard Kom.
Season Opening Breakfast

On September 10, 2011, Goodman invited Subscribers and Donors to a special breakfast and program in order to kick off the new “Red Hot” season. Guests enjoyed breakfast in the Goodman lobby catered by Petterino’s, followed by a wonderful program featuring Artistic Director Robert Falls, playwright John Logan, and the cast of Red—Edward Gero and Patrick Andrews. Our fantastic panel discussed the artistic process necessary to represent the life of legendary painter Mark Rothko and answered audience questions. This special event was our way of saying thank you to our Subscribers and Donors for their loyal and generous support!

Season Opening Benefit Featuring Red

Goodman Theatre kicked off its “Red Hot” Season on September 27, 2011 with a spectacular Opening Benefit at the Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago. Co-chaired by Sherry and Tom Barrat, Julie and Roger Baskes, Peter and Linda Bynoe and Sara F. Szold, the event hosted more than 430 people and raised a record total of $450,000 to support the Goodman. Kehoe Designs “paint-ed the scene” at the Modern Wing, with centerpiece designs that echoed the style of Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko. Guests enjoyed a cocktail reception, a three-course dinner, and were treated to the opening night performance of John Logan’s Red.

Honorees included Patricia Cox, who completed her two-year term as Goodman Theatre Chairman; Madeleine Grynsztejn, Pritzker Director, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; John Logan, playwright of Red; and James Rondeau, Chair and Frances and Thomas Dittmer Curator, Department of Contemporary Art, Art Institute of Chicago. Season Opening Benefit Honorary Co-Chairs were The Honorable Rahm Emanuel, The Honorable Pat Quinn and The Honorable Louis B. Susman; Corporate Co-Chairs were Rodney L. Goldstein and Elaine Leavenworth; Richard Gray, Lewis Manilow and Carol Prins were Contemporary Art Consortium Co-Chairs. Special thanks to our Season Opening Benefit Sponsor Partners Abbott, Sherry and Tom Barrat, Julie and Roger Baskes, Peter and Linda Bynoe, Joyce Chelberg, Patricia Cox, Ruth Ann M. Gillis and Michael J. McGuinnis, and Keith and Rodney Goldstein.

JOIN THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PARTNERS FOR CÁNDIDO TIRADO’S FISH MEN

Each season, Goodman Theatre highlights its commitment to quality, diversity and community with Community Engagement Partners—a group of donors dedicated to the promotion and celebration of the Goodman’s diversity initiatives. Community Engagement Partnerships are a unique way to give back to the theater with a tax-deductible $250 gift that comes with an array of benefits—including, but not restricted to, VIP tickets for related Diversity Night events, direct access to purchasing house seats and recognition as a Partners member.

A 2011/2012 Community Engagement Partners group is currently forming for Cándido Tirado’s Fish Men, the Goodman’s latest co-production with Teatro Vista. To pledge your support or for more information, contact Molly McKenzie at 312.443.3811 ext. 597 or MollyMcKenzie@GoodmanTheatre.org.

LEFT: Khai Yang, Jean Kim, Ivy Wen, Steph Ryter at Chinglish Diversity Night. Photo by Julia Nash.
NEW TRUSTEES

Kristine R. Garrett is Managing Director and Head of Private Wealth at The PrivateBank. Ms. Garrett is responsible for private banking, trust and custody services, and investment management. Prior to joining The PrivateBank in 2009, Ms. Garrett spent 20 years with JP Morgan Chase, most recently as National Banking Practice Leader for the private wealth management group after relocating to Chicago with the company in 2006. She held the roles of Regional Director for Private Client Services, Chairman and CEO of JP Morgan Chase Arizona, Chairman and CEO of Bank One Arizona and Regional Manager for Commercial Real Estate in Arizona and Nevada for Valley National Bank Arizona. Ms. Garrett held numerous civic and business leadership positions during her tenure in Phoenix.

Carlos Montoya is the President and CEO of AztecAmerica Bancorp and its wholly owned subsidiary, Chicago-based AztecAmerica Bank. AztecAmerica provides a diversified lending and depository services environment that has distinctly positioned itself as a unique financial services bridge for Hispanic Americans. Previously, he served as President and CEO of Republic Bank of Chicago and Vice President and Senior Lending Officer at Founders Bank of Illinois. Mr. Montoya is the co-founder of the Hispanic Civic Committee of Chicago, a Vice Chairman and a member of the Executive Committee of the national Board of Directors for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and a Board member of the National Museum of Mexican Art, Scholarship Chicago, Loyola University Chicago, The Economic Club of Chicago and The Executive Club of Chicago. As a gubernatorial appointee, he is Chairman of the Board of the Illinois Property Tax Appeals Board. Mr. Montoya received his undergraduate degree in public policy from Loyola University Chicago and later attended the American Banker Association’s Stonier Graduate School of Banking at the University of Delaware.

GOODMAN THEATRE IS GRATEFUL TO THE FOLLOWING DONORS FOR THEIR SUPPORT OF A CHRISTMAS CAROL

HARRIS BANK

“All of us at Aon are proud to support Goodman Theatre. The performing arts are a vibrant part of what makes Chicago a great city. We look forward to sponsoring A Christmas Carol again this year—a fabulous tradition for the season!”
—Phillip B. Clement, Global Chief Marketing and Communications Officer, Aon Corporation and member of the Goodman Theatre Board of Trustees

A CHRISTMAS CAROL CELEBRATION

On December 7, 2011, sponsors and guests gathered to celebrate the Goodman’s annual production of A Christmas Carol. Following a festive dinner at Club Petterino’s, guests enjoyed a performance of the holiday classic in the Albert Theatre.

We are especially grateful for the sponsors, listed below, who made this year’s beloved Chicago tradition possible.

INDIVIDUAL SPONSORS FOR A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Goodman Theatre would like to thank the following individuals for their support of A Christmas Carol.

Ellen and Paul Gignilliat
Joan and Richard Lewis
Cynthia and Michael R. Scholl
Maria Wynne
Director’s Society Sponsors

Commitments as of December 13, 2011

KPMG

“All of us at KPMG work hard to be a civic champion for the youth and families of our community and to support the cultural institutions they enjoy. As active members of the Chicago community for more than a century, we are proud to sponsor this family classic in the spirit of the season.”
—Phil Rohrbaugh, Office Managing Partner Chicago and Vice Chair, KPMG LLP
**CENTER STAGE**

Charlene Raimondi has made a bequest in support of Goodman’s Endowing Excellence Campaign and its New Works Fund, in memory of her sister Lenore Swoiskin. She shares why she supports Goodman Theatre.

With all the options in Chicago, why do you attend Goodman Theatre?

I’ve always enjoyed the shows the Goodman puts on. I’ve been going for over 35 years. I used to attend with my sister, as my husband wasn’t interested in theater. One time he did go, though, and it was a big surprise to him! He really enjoyed it.

Why do you support the Goodman, the endowment and new works?

It’s an important organization in the city. I’ve enjoyed many new plays, though not so much the avant-garde. You never know what to expect with new work.

Which Goodman Theatre productions have been favorites in our history?

I loved *The Iceman Cometh* with Brian Dennehy (1990/1991 Season). I’ll have to catch it when it comes back in the spring.

**NEW WORKS ENDOWMENT**

Finding and nurturing new playwrights is labor intensive but vital to the future of American theater. Reviewing scripts, commissioning works of emerging writers, and mounting readings, workshops and full productions requires a substantial investment of resources. Many of the artists who launched their careers at the Goodman are now leaders of the American theater, including Rebecca Gilman, David Mamet and Mary Zimmerman. As the Goodman has demonstrated in its relationship with playwrights Luis Alfaro, Adam Guettel, Lynn Nottage, Sarah Ruhl and many others, time spent cultivating these voices will reap great rewards.

**BELLA BACINO’S CHICAGO**

“FIRST PLACE I THINK OF WHEN I ORDER A THIN CRUST PIZZA” —Pat Bruno, Chicago Sun-Times Food Editor

For an elegant pre- or post-theater meal, stop into the Goodman’s newest preferred partner restaurant, Bella Bacino’s Chicago. This cozy Italian bistro and pizzeria features delicious appetizers, creative pasta dishes, mouth-watering entrées and award-winning pizza.

Dine at Bella Bacino’s Chicago before or after a show for a free glass of wine or an appetizer with purchase of two entrées; simply show your Goodman ticket stubs or Subscriber card. Bella Bacino’s Chicago is within easy walking distance of the Goodman, at 75 East Wacker Drive, near Michigan Avenue. For reservations, call 312.263.2350. Valet parking is available.

To support Goodman Theatre’s Endowing Excellence Campaign or for more information on making a planned gift to Goodman Theatre, call 312.443.3811 ext. 220.

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**JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2012**

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Charlene Raimondi has made a bequest in support of Goodman’s Endowing Excellence Campaign and its New Works Fund, in memory of her sister Lenore Swoiskin. She shares why she supports Goodman Theatre.

With all the options in Chicago, why do you attend Goodman Theatre?

I’ve always enjoyed the shows the Goodman puts on. I’ve been going for over 35 years. I used to attend with my sister, as my husband wasn’t interested in theater. One time he did go, though, and it was a big surprise to him! He really enjoyed it.

Why do you support the Goodman, the endowment and new works?

It’s an important organization in the city. I’ve enjoyed many new plays, though not so much the avant-garde. You never know what to expect with new work.

Which Goodman Theatre productions have been favorites in our history?

I loved *The Iceman Cometh* with Brian Dennehy (1990/1991 Season). I’ll have to catch it when it comes back in the spring.

**NEW WORKS ENDOWMENT**

Finding and nurturing new playwrights is labor intensive but vital to the future of American theater. Reviewing scripts, commissioning works of emerging writers, and mounting readings, workshops and full productions requires a substantial investment of resources. Many of the artists who launched their careers at the Goodman are now leaders of the American theater, including Rebecca Gilman, David Mamet and Mary Zimmerman. As the Goodman has demonstrated in its relationship with playwrights Luis Alfaro, Adam Guettel, Lynn Nottage, Sarah Ruhl and many others, time spent cultivating these voices will reap great rewards.

**BELLA BACINO’S CHICAGO**

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CONGRATULATIONS
TO ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
ROBERT FALLS ON HIS
25TH ANNIVERSARY AT
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