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FLORIDA STUDIO THEATRE ANNOUNCES LINEUP FOR SUMMER PLAY READING FESTIVAL

(Sarasota, FL) –Florida Studio Theatre announces its **Summer Play Reading Festival**, presenting three staged readings of new works by contemporary American playwrights. This summer's Festival features ***The Suffragette's Murder* by Sandy Rustin, *Baton* by Deneen Reynolds-Knott, and *Master of the Revels* by Jeffrey Couchman.** The staged readings will take place in FST's Keating Theatre on July 8, July 15, and July 22 at 3PM each day. Subscriptions to all three readings range from \$15-25. Single tickets are \$10. Subscriptions and single tickets are now on sale at FloridaStudioTheatre.org or by calling FST's Box Office at 941.366.9000.

As Sarasota's Contemporary Theatre, New Play Development is the lifeblood of FST, providing a forum for new works to be heard, discussed, and workshopped. Two of the artists highlighted in this Festival—Sandy Rustin and Jeffrey Couchman—are members of **FST's Playwrights Collective**, a select coalition of artists dedicated to developing new work for FST's stages. Deneen Reynolds-Knott, the third playwright featured in this Festival, is new to FST. Her work has been developed by theatres across the country, including Liberation Theatre Company, Project Y, and Rising Circle Theatre Collective.

Each playwright will travel to Sarasota and take part in one week of rehearsals and development sessions with FST's artistic staff. At the end of each week, a staged reading of each of their plays will be performed for a live audience, followed by a conversation about the work in progress. Following each staged reading, audiences will have an opportunity to share their experience of the play with the playwrights. These discussions also give FST the opportunity to understand if and how each play connects with the audience. Several plays that have been part of FST's previous new play festivals—*America in One Room* by Jason Odell Williams, *Honor Killing* by Sarah Bierstock, and *Wednesday's Child* by Mark St. Germain—went on to have their World Premieres on FST's Mainstage.

"We're excited to share these stories with the audience," said **Catherine Randazzo**, who leads the theatre's New Play Development program. "This Festival's lineup includes three distinct plays that will both charm audiences and make them think at the same time. *The Suffragette's Murder* by Sandy Rustin features her one-of-a-kind humor, but also encourages us to consider how far we have come—or not—since the fight for women's suffrage first started. Deneen Reynolds-Knott is an up-and-coming playwright whose work packs a powerful punch. We're looking forward to discovering how her play, *Baton*, resonates with our audience. *Master of the Revels* blends history, Shakespeare, and family drama into one piece that is full of theatricality and tension. This Festival is vital to our New Play Development efforts and helps FST's artistic team identify areas of growth for each play."

The Festival begins on Friday, July 8, with *The Suffragette's Murder* by Sandy Rustin, whose previous plays include *The Cottage, Rated P...for Parenthood*, and *Houston*. FST commissioned Rustin to write this play as part of the theatre's **Suffragist Project**, an artistic celebration of the 100th anniversary of

the ratification of the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote. In Rustin's latest play, *Loralee Hart*, an orphaned suffragette, turns up murdered after a gang riot on the Bowery in the summer of 1857. This brings her fellow residents of The Mayhew Boardinghouse—an eccentric group of unlikely women's rights activists—under suspicion. Each woman must face a morning of interrogation from an unknown officer while gang leader, Chucky the Moose, looms large on the streets of Manhattan.

Following *The Suffragette's Murder* is *Baton* on July 15, a modern drama about hard choices and today's pressing issues. *Baton* opens on Ava and Tim's date at a sports bar in Hell's Kitchen, which seems to be going well...until the TV screens suddenly all light up with breaking news. Images of unrest in Baltimore, Maryland, are seen on every screen—it is the night of Freddie Gray's funeral. Flashbacks run rampant through Ava's mind, and she finds herself suddenly so far away from Tim, from the sports bar, and from the date. When the young Black couple's differing feelings about the case come spilling out, the past and the present collide, unleashing an evening of accusations, confessions, and questions.

"*Baton* examines whether or not there is anything that can change how you feel about the people you love, even when dark secrets are uncovered," said Randazzo. "The play helps round out the comedy of *The Suffragette's Murder* and contrasts with the period-style drama of *Master of the Revels*."

Master of the Revels by Jeffrey Couchman brings FST's Summer Play Reading Festival to a close on Friday, July 22. This new play is based on the true story of William Henry Ireland, a 17-year-old boy who forged notes and letters—and even entire plays—in the name of Shakespeare. In Couchman's play, Ireland is an aspiring young author who dreams of finding success through his storytelling, but his father is not supportive of his son's aspirations. Vying for his father's approval, he concocts a plan to give his father exactly what it is he is searching for: the works of Shakespeare. *Master of the Revels* is a gripping story about truth, lies, and the tales we create to protect ourselves.

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ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHTS

JEFFREY COUCHMAN (Playwright of *Master of the Revels*) is co-author (with Scott Alan Evans) of the play *Three Wise Guys*, based on Christmas stories by Damon Runyon, which premiered Off-Broadway at the Beckett Theatre. He has written the book and lyrics for two musicals: *Battleship Potemkin*, based on Eisenstein's classic film, and *Blood and Fire*, about the beginnings of the Salvation Army in Victorian London. He has written screenplays for Imagine Films, Warner Bros. TV, and other studios. His fiction has appeared in many literary journals. He is author of the book *The Night of the Hunter: A Biography of a Film* (selected by the *Financial Times* of London as a Best Book of the Year) and editor of an annotated edition of two film scripts by James Agee, *The Night of the Hunter* and *The African Queen: First and Final Screenplays* (University of Tennessee Press). Couchman teaches screenwriting at the College of Staten Island.

DENEEN REYNOLDS-KNOTT (Playwright of *Baton*) is a member of Clubbed Thumb's 2019-2020 Early-Career Writers' Group and received a finalist grant from their 2018 Open-Application Commission. She is a New Georges-affiliated artist and has developed work with Liberation Theatre Company's Writing Residency, Project Y's Playwrights Group, Rising Circle's INKtank Development Lab, and Frank Silvera Workshop's 3in3 Playwright Residency. Her full-length play, *Baton*, was selected for the 2018 Premiere Play Festival

and received a workshop reading at Premiere Stages, the 2017 Playfest at the Orlando Shakespeare Company, and was a finalist for the 2017 PlayPenn and Bay Area Playwrights conferences. Deneen's play, *Ante partum*, was presented at the 2020 Fire This Time Festival as part of their signature ten-minute play program. She received her MFA in film from Columbia University.

SANDY RUSTIN (Playwright of *The Suffragette's Murder*) is an actress and award-winning playwright who has been named as part of Broadway Women's Fund's inaugural "50 Women to Watch" list. Her comedy, *The Cottage*, is in development for a Broadway production directed by Jason Alexander. Sandy created and wrote the Book & Lyrics for Mattel's *American Girl Live*, a musical that toured 47 cities in the U.S. In 2019, Sandy (and collaborator, Sarah Saltzberg), gave a "thorough feminist scouring" (*NY Times*) to Rogers & Hart's *I Married an Angel*, which they adapted for NYC's City Center's Encores! Her sketch comedy musical, *Rated P... For Parenthood*, opened Off-Broadway at the Westside Theatre, and was optioned for TV development with ABC Studios. Sandy's play, *Struck*, enjoyed critically acclaimed productions at NJ REP and Theatre Raleigh. Her play, *Houston*, was the recipient of the New American Musical Award, and Sandy's comedy, *Elijah*, recently won "Best Play" in the Midwestern Jewish Plays Project. Sandy is the Founding Co-Artistic Director of Midtown Direct Rep and an advocate for the Meredith Cowden Foundation. She is a Northwestern University graduate and a member of ASCAP, SAG, AEA, and the Dramatists Guild, and is represented by Abrams Artists. sandyrustin.com

ABOUT FLORIDA STUDIO THEATRE

Florida Studio Theatre (FST) is Sarasota's contemporary theatre. Founded in 1973, FST has grown to a village of five theatres located in the heart of Downtown, Sarasota. Each theatre is small in size and large in impact— providing intimate and engaging settings for high-quality, professional performances.

Today, FST has established itself as a major force in American Theatre. FST is the largest subscription theatre in the state of Florida and among the largest in the country, serving more than 230,000 live attendees each year across its diverse programs: Mainstage, Cabaret, Stage III, Children's Theatre, The FST School, New Play Development, and FST Improv.

Even with its growth, Florida Studio Theatre remains firmly committed to making the arts accessible and affordable to as many people as possible. Under the leadership of Producing Artistic Director Richard Hopkins, FST develops theatre that speaks to our living, evolving, and dynamically changing world. Hip and historical, entertaining and challenging, we are the theatre where the street meets the elite — where everyone is welcome to engage in the art of theatre.

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