Claudia Rankine’s New Play, *Help*, Commissioned and Produced by The Shed, Confronts White Dominance

Directed by Taibi Magar, Starring April Matthis
The Griffin Theater at The Shed
March 15 – April 10, 2022

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*New York, NY – February 3, 2022* After closing during previews two years ago due to the pandemic, this March *The Shed* presents the world premiere of *Help*, a new play by acclaimed author and poet Claudia Rankine (*Just Us, Citizen: An American Lyric*), directed by Obie Award–winner Taibi Magar (*Twilight: Los*).
Help stars April Matthias (Toni Stone, Roundabout Theatre; Fairview, Soho Rep).

Derived from Rankine’s deep inquiry and ongoing investigation into white dominance, Help consciously centers whiteness in order to address, engage, and ultimately confront it. The Narrator (Matthis), a Black woman, recounts Rankine’s real-life conversations with white people about their privilege that take place in transitional spaces like airports. The stories unfold through a set of monologues and staged scenarios, with Matthis supported by a cast of actors including nine white men and two white women. With intentional and thought-provoking words, music, and movement, Help brings to life Rankine’s encounters in her travels and in everyday life that have gone right, wrong, or raise new questions about our fragile democracy.

“The play, Help, is a collage of encounters our Black narrator has with various white people, some ordinary citizens, some historical, some political. These conversations center around contemporary America’s continued commitment to the tenets of white supremacy,” said Claudia Rankine. “The play is an attempt to think about the fragility of our democracy in a moment when we seem to be doubling down on anti-Black racism and to have lost our hold on an aspirational vision of ‘we.’ This kaleidoscopic, fast-paced inquiry allowed me to touch upon many facets of society, moving through spaces both liminal and historical.”

Rankine’s body of work, for which she has been awarded MacArthur and Guggenheim fellowships, crosses lyric poetry and prose essays to navigate questions of race, healthcare, loneliness, and what it means for a life to matter in American society today.

Commissioned by The Shed and performed in its Griffin Theater, this production of Help also includes movement choreography by Shamel Pitts, set design by Mimi Lien, costume design by Dede Ayite, lighting design by John Torres, sound design by Lee Kinney, and original music composition by Jerome Ellis and James Monaco, along with Robert Duffley, Dramaturg, and David Lurie-Perret, Production Stage Manager.

“It has been our honor to commission one of America’s most renowned poets, Claudia Rankine, to write a new play,” said Alex Poots, Artistic Director and CEO of The Shed. “Despite the premature closure at the onset of the pandemic, we are proud to be back in the theater to tell this story germane to the times in which we are living. As we move through each new chapter of these ongoing health and racial crises, the themes in Help are a reflection of what it still means to exist in America today through the lenses of race, identity, and social interaction. I’m deeply appreciative of Claudia’s intentional examination of white dominance in this critical work.”

Tickets for Help are on sale now at theshed.org.
Ticket Information
Preview performances of Help begin March 15 (press may attend as of March 19). Help opens March 24 and continues through April 10 with performances at 7 pm Tuesdays through Thursdays, Fridays at 8 pm, Saturdays at 2 pm and 8 pm, and Sundays at 3 pm. Running time is approximately 90 minutes with no intermission and limited late seating. Tickets start at $29 and are available at theshed.org or by calling (646) 455-3494.

About The Artists

Claudia Rankine
Claudia Rankine is the author of five books of poetry, including Citizen: An American Lyric and Don’t Let Me Be Lonely; four plays including The White Card, which premiered in February 2018 (ArtsEmerson/American Repertory Theater) and was published by Graywolf Press in 2019; as well as numerous video collaborations. Her recent collection of essays, Just Us: An American Conversation, was published by Graywolf Press in 2020. She is the co-editor of several anthologies including The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind. In 2016, Rankine co-founded The Racial Imaginary Institute (TRII). Among her numerous awards and honors, Rankine is the recipient of the Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry, the Poets & Writers’ Jackson Poetry Prize, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Lannan Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, United States Artists, and the National Endowment for the Arts. She teaches at NYU in the Creative Writing Program.

Taibi Magar
Taibi Magar’s New York credits include Twilight: Los Angeles 1992 (Signature Theatre), Capsule by Whitney White and Peter Mark Kendall (Under the RadarFestival/The Public Theater, co-directed with Tyler Dobrowsky), Blue Ridge, starring Marin Ireland, The Great Leap starring BD Wong (AtlanticTheatre Company), Is God Is (Soho Rep, 2018 Obie Award), Master (TheFoundry, NYT Critics Pick), and Underground Railroad Game (Ars Nova, NYT Critics Pick). Regional credits include A.R.T., CTG, Baltimore Center Stage, Woolly Mammoth Theatre, the Guthrie Theater, and Seattle Repertory Theatre among others. International credits include Hamburg Festival, Edinburgh Festival, Malthouse Theatre (Melbourne), and Soho Theatre (London). Magar received a MFA from Brown University.

April Matthis
April Matthis is an Obie Award–winning actor and company member of Elevator Repair Service. Her credits include, Off-Broadway: Toni Stone (Roundabout; Lortel, Drama League, Drama Desk nominations, Outer Critics Circle, and OBIE Awards for
Outstanding Performance); Fairview, LEAR (Soho Rep); Signature Plays: Funnyhouse of a Negro (Signature Theatre); Iowa and Antlia Pneumatica (Playwrights Horizons); and On the Levee (LCT3). With ERS: The Sound & the Fury and Fondly, Collette Richland (NYTW); Measure for Measure (The Public); Everyone’s Fine with Virginia Woolf (Abrons Art Center); GATZ (Perth Festival); and Baldwin/Buckley at Cambridge (Philadelphia Fringe). Regional: Little Bunny Foo Foo (Actors Theater of Louisville) and A Streetcar Named Desire (Yale Rep). TV: EVIL, The Good Fight (Paramount+), New Amsterdam, and The Blacklist (NBC). Film: Black Card (HBO, Showtime) and Fugitive Dreams (Cinequest).

Support
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The creation of new work at The Shed is generously supported by the Lizzie and Jonathan Tisch Commissioning Fund and the Shed Commissioners. Major support for live productions at The Shed is provided by the Charina Endowment Fund.

From our Sponsor
“M&T Bank shares The Shed’s commitment to celebrating diverse perspectives and ideas that enrich the communities where we live, work, and play,” said Blair Ridder, M&T Bank’s regional president for New York City. “The arts are vital to the strength and vibrancy of our city and we’re honored to be a part of advancing important programming like Help.”

About The Shed
The Shed is a new cultural institution of and for the 21st century. We produce and welcome innovative art and ideas, across all forms of creativity, to build a shared understanding of our rapidly changing world and a more equitable society. In our highly adaptable building on Manhattan’s west side, The Shed brings together established and emerging artists to create new work in fields ranging from pop to classical music, painting to digital media, theater to literature, and sculpture to dance. We seek opportunities to collaborate with cultural peers and community organizations, work with like-minded partners, and provide unique spaces for private events. As an independent nonprofit that values invention, equity, and generosity, we are committed to advancing art forms, addressing the urgent issues of our time, and making our work impactful, sustainable, and relevant to the local community, the cultural sector, New York City, and beyond.