



## MEDIA RELEASE

# WEYNI MENGESHA'S INAUGURAL SEASON OF ARTISTIC PROGRAMMING JANUARY-AUGUST 2020: BREAKING GROUND

Toronto, ON – September 24, 2019: Soulpepper Theatre Company today announced the inaugural season of artistic programming under the leadership of Artistic Director **Weyni Mengesha** and Executive Director **Emma Stenning**, marking a new chapter for the organization. Built on the unifying theme: **Breaking Ground**, the new season includes a collection of six powerful plays, four extraordinary concerts, and two pioneering partner presentations, running from January to August 2020. The company also launched a new program offering free tickets to patrons 25 and under, and announced updates on artist training initiatives, and board appointments.

*“As we plan the future growth of this company, I was inspired by looking at plays that broke new ground when they premiered. What I found was a body of work that continued to speak profoundly to our community today. This season brings together well loved classics, with modern masterpieces, as well as the latest in virtual reality technology. These are stories of identity, struggle, passion, and change. Music also continues to be a powerful way that we explore stories and our Concert Series transports our audiences to share the rhythms and poetry of different eras and experiences. As I’ve widened our programming lens, I’ve been asking myself, ‘Whose story are we telling, and who is doing the telling?’ In this my first season as Artistic Director, I couldn’t be happier to invite this group of artists together, some familiar, some new to our stages, to tell these stories that entertain, engage and provoke,”* said **Weyni Mengesha**, Artistic Director.

*“From timeless classic to digital future, we truly believe this season offers something for everyone. An opportunity for you to see work that feels familiar, and also to push yourself a little; stepping into a theatrical experience that might pull you from your comfort zone just a step or two. Because, we believe that theatre should be both comforting and new. Reassuring and entertaining, yes, but also serving to open our hearts and minds to other versions and visions of the world. This is our first step towards what will become annual seasons of work, announced each spring. We encourage you to book early, and look forward to seeing you here,”* said **Emma Stenning**, Executive Director.

Mainstage programming begins in January with Kate Hennig’s contemporary and fiery portrayal of women and power with ***Mother’s Daughter***, directed by **Alan Dilworth** after a successful World Premiere at the Stratford Festival. Artistic Director **Weyni Mengesha** directs the gripping ***Jesus Hopped the ‘A’ Train*** by Pulitzer Prize-winner Stephen Adly Guirgis. In March, Soulpepper will produce Anton Chekhov’s masterpiece ***The Seagull*** for the first time, translated by Simon Stephens, directed by **Daniel Brooks**. Soulpepper is pleased to partner again with Necessary Angel Theatre Company in a co-production of the Canadian Premiere of Roland Schimmelpfennig’s timely and cautionary play ***Winter Solstice***, directed by **Alan Dilworth**, in his inaugural season as the new Artistic Director of Necessary Angel, who previously directed Schimmelpfennig’s ***Idomeneus*** to critical acclaim.

Soulpepper’s popular Concert Series, led by Slight Family Director of Music **Mike Ross**, continues in June with two brand new concerts. ***Revolutions: Songs that Changed the World*** is a new concert created and hosted by Amanda Parris (CBC’s *Exhibitionists*), Mike Ross, and Weyni Mengesha celebrating the songs of protest and progress that have fueled social movements with the power to inspire, inform, and instigate. ***Revolutions*** will play in rep with the return of Soulpepper’s sold-out tribute to one of Canada’s most beloved artists ***The Secret Chord: A Leonard Cohen Experience*** created by Frank Cox-O’Connell, Marni Jackson, and Mike Ross. ***Behind The Bars: Legendary Prison Songs*** is a new concert about the songs and stories of artists hitting rock bottom, and the road to redemption, created by Frank Cox-O’Connell, Mike Ross, and Sarah Wilson, and will play in rep with the return of Mike Ross and Tom Allen’s sold-out hit about the “king of the instruments” ***88 KEYS***.

Following her celebrated productions of August Wilson’s ***Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom***, and Tarell Alvin McCraney’s ***The Brothers Size***, Academy Graduate **Mumbi Tindyebwa Otu** returns to Soulpepper in July to direct the pioneering South African play ***Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*** by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona. This pivotal anti-apartheid work blends humour and pathos with political bite, such that following their world tour, the creators were arrested when they returned to their home country. Capping off the season is the Tony Award-winning play ***M. Butterfly*** by David Henry Hwang, the first Broadway play to be written by an Asian-American, directed by **Nina Lee Aquino**, Artistic Director of Factory Theatre, in her directorial debut at Soulpepper.



Soulpepper is pleased to include works by two genre-defying partners in the new season. Following the success of her 2017 show *I'm Doing This for You*, **Haley McGee** returns to Soulpepper with *The Ex-Boyfriend Yard Sale* which builds on the show's critically-acclaimed engagements both at home and abroad, and represents the company's first co-production with Outside the March. In collaboration with the National Film Board of Canada and the National Theatre of Great Britain, Soulpepper presents the North American Premiere of **Jordan Tannahill's** form-bending virtual reality performance *Draw Me Close*. This is a solo interactive virtual reality experience where patrons take the role of the protagonist, Jordan, and experience the relationship between a mother and her son, in the wake of her terminal cancer diagnosis.

Beyond the artistic season programmed, 2020 will be a year of bold growth for Soulpepper.

## ARTIST TRAINING

Soulpepper is proud to play an educational and artist-training role in our community. The company is sharing plans to relaunch its esteemed **Soulpepper Academy** in the autumn of 2020. Pending confirmation of government funding and donor support, the call for submissions and the national search process will commence in the spring. The Academy has played a significant role in the development of future generations of actors, designers, directors, and playwrights, including Artistic Director Weyni Mengesha in the inaugural class, and many other alumni who have gone on to play leadership roles across the industry. Known for its focus on ensemble theatre making and rigorous multi-disciplinary practical experience, the Soulpepper Academy is Canada's only multi-year, full time, paid, professional training program.

Soulpepper announced the launch of a new pilot program called **The Training Room**. Programmed by **Gregory Prest**, Soulpepper's Baillie Fellow, The Training Room is a series of workshops and master classes aimed at providing accessible artist training regardless of professional experience. The first two series include *Audition Monologue Workshop* with guest instructors **Philip Akin, Maev Beaty**, Founding Member **Martha Burns, Daren A. Herbert, Jani Lauzon**, and Founding Member **Joseph Ziegler**; and *Masterclass Series: Hedda Gabler* with Founding Member **Nancy Palk**. Applications are open now, and more details can be found at: [soulpepper.ca/trainingroom](http://soulpepper.ca/trainingroom).

*"We're very excited about piloting this new initiative. There is so much expertise and passion within our ensemble and we are excited about finding ways to share that with the community – both professionally established and emerging. If the city responds positively, we look forward to growing the program in the future"* said **Gregory Prest**, Soulpepper's Baillie Fellow.

Further training extends beyond the stage. This year, Soulpepper has joined with the National Ballet of Canada to be the first theatre company to be a part of their Emerging Arts Critics program. Aspiring arts reviewers will attend performances through the year and write reviews to be published online on Intermission Magazine, with mentorship from seasoned theatre critic Robert Cushman.

Beginning spring 2020, Soulpepper will introduce a new series of **Scratch Nights**. Building on the success of these events in Europe, Scratch Nights invite audiences to experience new works in their earliest stages of development. Audiences will be able to hear readings and see workshop presentations from new pieces that Soulpepper is involved with developing. Details, including participating artists, will be announced at a later date.

These training initiatives join the company's existing and ongoing educational programming, including: The City Youth Academy; March Break Programming; Curtain up Program; Alumni Program; ESL In-the-Schools Program; the Play Creation In-The-Schools Program; and the Ada Slight Youth Link Program; which are all delivered free of charge.

## THEATRE FOR ALL

In celebration of Weyni Mengesha and Emma Stenning's inaugural season, Soulpepper unveiled two new programs to address financial barriers for patrons wishing to attend the theatre.

Starting January 14, 2020, the **Free 25 & Under** program will offer patrons 25 years old and under, two tickets to all Soulpepper



mainstage and concert productions at no cost. Starting at 8:00am, all remaining tickets for that day's performances become available for online booking. Participants are allowed to book two tickets to bring a guest of any age. Some conditions apply, please visit [soulpepper.ca/waystosave](http://soulpepper.ca/waystosave) for full details.

In addition, Soulpepper has introduced an accessible tier ticket price of \$25 to all its Mainstage and Concert performances. A limited-number of these tickets are available to everyone at every mainstage and concert performance of the season in addition to the company's standard range of ticket prices. This initiative further demonstrates Soulpepper's commitment to inviting people from all communities to the theatre.

These accessible pricing programs compliment the company's existing Artsworker, StagePlay (Under 30), Rush, Youth Rush, and Student Group pricing initiatives.

Launching big, bold programming and transformational initiatives under the leadership of Weyni Mengesha and Emma Stenning is made possible through the unwavering support from Soulpepper's Board of Directors. Soulpepper announced the appointment of three new board members: Beverley Flynn, Ghazala Parvez, and Melissa Martin.

*"Soulpepper has a tremendously supportive Board of Directors who are generous with both their time and resources. I'm thrilled to welcome these three leaders and I know their insights and expertise will help shape the future of this company. I am also pleased to share that with these appointments we have a gender-balanced board,"* said **Vanessa Morgan**, Board Chair.

While this is a vital commitment to the executive leadership team, Soulpepper acknowledges there is still meaningful work to do in ensuring a representative and diverse Board.

After a tremendous first experience offering Relaxed Performances to select productions, Soulpepper will be expanding its commitment to accessibility with Relaxed Performances at every Mainstage production in the 2020 season. This includes: *Mother's Daughter* on January 26; *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* on February 9; *The Seagull* on April 12; *Winter Solstice* on May 24; *Six: We Banz! Is Dead* on July 26; and *M. Butterfly* on August 30, 2020. Relaxed performances are intended specifically to be sensitive and welcoming to all patrons who may benefit from a more relaxed theatre environment. For full details about the Relaxed Performances see [soulpepper.ca/access](http://soulpepper.ca/access).

## BREAKING GROUND – JANUARY TO AUGUST 2020

### MAINSTAGE PROGRAMMING

#### ***MOTHER'S DAUGHTER***

**Kate Hennig**

**Originally Produced by The Stratford Festival**

**Directed by Alan Dilworth**

*Keep your enemies close, and your family closer.* The Tudor throne is empty, and three would-be Queens contend for the crown. Sisters turn against each other in a deadly struggle that threatens to tear the country apart. With Hennig's trademark style and wit, the story of 'Bloody Mary' becomes a thrilling contemporary exploration of women and power. The cast includes Beryl Bain, Fiona Byrne, Jessica B. Hill, Andrea Rankin, Shannon Taylor, Maria Vaccratsis, and Gordon Patrick White. *Mother's Daughter* design team includes Lorenzo Savoini (set and costume), Kimberly Purtell (lighting), and Debashis Sinha (sound).

**NNNN** *"Bloody Good" – NOW Magazine*

*Mother's Daughter* runs from January 14 to February 9, 2020. Opening night is January 16, 2020.



***JESUS HOPPED THE 'A' TRAIN***

**Stephen Adly Guirgis**  
**Directed by Weyni Mengesha**

*When justice locks you up, what sets you free?* Gripping from start to finish, two notorious men await trial for murder, only to discover justice and goodness where it is least expected. Pulitzer Prize-winner Stephen Adly Guirgis delivers an uncompromising drama about contradiction, contrition, and hypocrisy. The cast of *Jesus Hopped the 'A'-Train* includes Diana Donnelly, Daren A. Herbert, Xavier Lopez, Tony Nappo, and Gregory Prest. The design team includes Ken MacKenzie (set) Shannon Lea Doyle (costumes), and John Gzowski (sound).

*Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train* runs from January 23 to February 19, 2020. Opening night is January 30, 2020.

***THE SEAGULL***

**Anton Chekhov**  
**Translated by Simon Stephens**  
**Directed by Daniel Brooks**

*The stage is set for a little family drama.* Unrequited love. Creative jealousy. Guns. Vodka. Art. A summer weekend at a lakeside estate falls apart when celebrities come to visit. Switching effortlessly between the ridiculous and the profound, this masterpiece of the modern era examines the burning need to create art and the destructive power of love. The cast is a remarkable ensemble of Soulpepper mainstays including Soulpepper Founding Member Stuart Hughes, Academy Graduates Ghazal Azarbad, Raquel Duffy, Hailey Gillis, Paolo Santalucia, and familiar faces including Oliver Dennis, Daren A. Herbert, Alex McCooeye, and Michelle Monteith. Design for *The Seagull* will be crafted by Lorenzo Savoini (set and costume), Kevin Lamotte (lighting), and Thomas Ryder Payne (sound).

*The Seagull* runs from March 26 to April 22, 2020. Opening night is April 2, 2020.

***WINTER SOLSTICE***

**Roland Schimmelpfennig**  
**Translated by David Tushingham**  
**Co-production with Necessary Angel Theatre Company**  
**Directed by Alan Dilworth**

*Fascism doesn't kick down the door; it waits for an invite, then makes itself at home.* During the longest night of the year, a charming guest arrives at the home of a polite intellectual family, who aren't quite as happy as they seem. The inescapable presence of the past reverberates through this razor-sharp comedy about the seduction of extremism. The cast includes Founding Members Nancy Palk, and Diego Matamoros, as well as Cyrus Lane. The design team includes Lorenzo Savoini (set and costumes) and Debashis Sinha (sound).

*Canadian Premiere*

*Winter Solstice* runs from May 7 to June 3, 2020. Opening night is May 14, 2020.

***SIZWE BANZI IS DEAD***

**Athol Fugard, John Kani & Winston Ntshona**  
**Directed by Mumbi Tindyebwa Otu**

*What is your name worth?* In apartheid-era South Africa, the only way for Banzi to survive is to seize opportunities and fake his own death. From one of the world's great playwrights Athol Fugard (*Master Harold' ...and the Boys*), comes a soaring and personal comedy of identity, memory, and the resilience of the human spirit. The cast includes Tawiah Ben M'Carthy as Sizwe Banzi, and who will play opposite Daren A. Herbert as Styles/Buntu. The design will be done by Ken MacKenzie (set and costume) and



Melissa Joakim (video/projections).

*Sixwe Banzi is Dead* runs from July 9 to August 5, 2020. Opening night is July 16, 2020.

***M. BUTTERFLY***

**David Henry Hwang**

**Directed by Nina Lee Aquino**

*Love can transform you.* Puccini's opera is turned upside down when a married French diplomat meets a mysterious Chinese opera singer. Based on a remarkable true love story of international espionage and personal betrayal, the result is a modern classic that blurs boundaries while redefining the nature of love and the devastating cost of deceit. The cast includes Jeff Ho as Song Liling, Oliver Dennis, Diana Donnelly, and Louisa Zhu. The *M. Butterfly* design team includes Camie Koo (set), Joanna Yu (costumes), and Michelle Ramsay (lighting).

*Pulitzer Prize for Drama*

*Tony Award for Best Play*

*Drama Desk Award for Best New Play*

*M. Butterfly* runs from August 13 to September 9, 2020. Opening night is August 20, 2020.

## **SOULPEPPER CONCERTS**

Each original Soulpepper Concert revolves around a time, place, or artist crafted by a team of incomparable performers. The Concert Series is led by Slight Family Director of Music Mike Ross.

***THE SECRET CHORD: A LEONARD COHEN EXPERIENCE***

**Created by Frank Cox-O'Connell, Marni Jackson, and Mike Ross**

**Music Directed by Mike Ross**

**Directed by Frank Cox-O'Connell**

**Narration by Frank Cox-O'Connell and Marni Jackson**

After two sold-out engagements, Soulpepper's tribute to one of Canada's most beloved artist returns. Cohen constantly reinvented himself throughout his long career, helping generations of fans understand the changing society around them. His extraordinary life, music, and poetry will be remembered and celebrated by a company of remarkable artists.

*The Secret Chord: A Leonard Cohen Experience* runs from May 8 to June 7, 2020.

***REVOLUTIONS: SONGS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD***

**Created by Amanda Parris, Mike Ross, and Weyni Mengesha**

**Music Directed by Mike Ross**

**Directed by Weyni Mengesha**

**Narration and Hosted by Amanda Parris**

At the heart of every revolution there have been artists who can inspire, inform, and instigate. From Pete Seeger to Tracy Chapman, from gospel to punk, these are the anthems of protest and progress. Amanda Parris (CBC - *Exhibitionists*) and Mike Ross share the stories behind the songs that helped shape our world, and spotlight the voices we need to hear today.

*Revolutions: Songs That Changed the World* runs from May 16 to June 6, 2020.



### **88 KEYS**

Created by Tom Allen and Mike Ross  
Music Directed and Directed by Mike Ross  
Narration by Tom Allen

88 keys, 230 strings, and 7,500 working parts make up every piano. For three hundred years, it has been the vehicle through which genius is conveyed, from Beethoven and Chopin to Fats Domino, Ray Charles, and Billy Joel. Last summer's sold-out concert returns to celebrate the 'King of the Instruments'.

**88 KEYS runs from June 20 to July 26, 2020.**

### **BEHIND THE BARS: LEGENDARY PRISON SONGS**

Created by Frank Cox-O'Connell, Mike Ross, and Sarah Wilson  
Music Directed by Mike Ross  
Directed by Frank Cox-O'Connell  
Narration by Sarah Wilson

You can lock 'em up, but you can't cage the music! Featuring legendary artists like Johnny Cash, Billie Holiday, and Elvis Presley and more - these are the stories of the guilty and the innocent, hitting rock bottom, the road to redemption, and everything that followed.

**Behind The Bars: Legendary Prison Songs runs from June 27 to July 25, 2020.**

## **PARTNER PRESENTATIONS**

### **THE EX-BOYFRIEND YARD SALE**

Haley McGee  
A Haley McGee production presented by Outside the March & Soulpepper  
Directed by Mitchell Cushman

"How can we turn sentimental value into cold, hard cash?"

Haley McGee was on the phone with Visa, promising to pay off her bill by having a yard sale, when she realised the only things she could sell were gifts from her exes. Inspired by this call, *The Ex-Boyfriend Yard Sale* is a hilarious and daring show about the cost of love... or what love costs us. Following the success of *I'm Doing This for You* (2017) Haley returns to Soulpepper with a critically-acclaimed show that has sold out runs in London and Toronto.

NNNNN "one of the best shows of the year" - *NOW Magazine*  
\*\*\*\* "a powerhouse performance"- *The Stage*

**The Ex-Boyfriend Yard Sale runs from May 19 to June 7, 2020.**

### **DRAW ME CLOSE**

Written and Directed by Jordan Tannahill  
National Film Board of Canada and the National Theatre of Great Britain Co-Production  
Presented by Soulpepper and the National Film Board of Canada

After captivating imaginations around the globe, this pioneering work makes its North American Premiere. *Draw Me Close* blurs the worlds of live performance, virtual reality and animation to create a vivid memoir about the relationship



between a mother and her son, in the wake of her terminal cancer diagnosis. Weaving theatrical storytelling with cutting-edge technology, the performance allows the audience member to take the part of the protagonist, Jordan, inside a live, animated world.

*“Mind officially blown. Unlike any experience I’ve ever had” – Huffington Post*

*“Deeply affective and powerful” – TIME Magazine*

NOTE: This is a one-hour individual immersive experience, available in a series of timed admission slots. Please see website for details.

*North American Premiere*

**Draw Me Close runs from June 23 to July 12 2020. Opening night is June 23, 2020.**



Located in its multi-venue home, the Young Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto’s Distillery Historic District, Soulpepper is Toronto’s largest not-for-profit theatre company. Founded and guided by artists, Soulpepper has an integrated mission which includes: industry-leading youth and community outreach initiatives; artist training and mentorship programs; and a year-round diverse repertory season which is grounded in the classics and committed to the creation of new works, new forms, and innovative practices.

The artists and staff of Soulpepper and the Young Centre for the Performing Arts acknowledge the original caretakers and storytellers of this land - the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe, and the Wendat First Nations. We commit to honouring and celebrating their past, present and future.

Soulpepper believes all people have a right to express their individuality, to experience creative freedom, to feel safe at all times, and to be treated with dignity and respect.

Tickets for Soulpepper Productions and Concerts start at \$25. Tickets are available by calling the Young Centre Box Office at 416.866.8666 or by visiting soulpepper.ca. All ticket prices include a Young Centre facility fee, service charge and HST. Pricing is subject to change.

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