



MEDIA RELEASE

SOULPEPPER ANNOUNCES NEW ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Toronto, ON – October 11, 2018: Soulpepper Theatre Company is pleased to announce the appointment of award-winning director and dramaturge **Weyni Mengesha** as the company's new Artistic Director. Mengesha began her association with Soulpepper twelve years ago; she was a member of the Soulpepper Academy, and since then has won several awards as a director, dramaturge and teacher.

*"This has been a rigorous and extensive search process," said **Vanessa Morgan**, Chair of the Board. "We had the privilege of meeting with qualified, talented professionals from across Canada and beyond. The Board is delighted that the search has resulted in the appointment of Weyni Mengesha, who brings her truly unique set of values, passions, talents and leadership qualities to shape Soulpepper's artistic vision and direction."*

Mengesha started her career directing *da Kink in my Hair* across North America and in London – a production that sold out some of the largest houses. At Soulpepper, she has directed some of the company's most successful productions, including: *A Raisin in the Sun* (2008); *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (2017) which won the Dora Award for Best Production; as well as *Kim's Convenience* (2012), one of the most successful shows at the box office in the company's history, which has since gone on to become a successful CBC television series. She has been an instructor at the National Theatre School of Canada, and Co-Artistic Director and teacher with The A.M.Y. Project for nine years. Other recent directorial work has been seen in New York City and Pasadena, garnering a NAACP nomination for Best Direction; *Breath of Kings* at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in 2016; and Why Not Theatre's national touring production of *Butcher*, for which she won a Dora for best direction.

Prior to embarking on the search for a new Artistic Director, the Soulpepper Board consulted extensively with company members, donors, and staff. The search committee, consisting of six Board members, as well as artist advisors, set out to look for a leader with clear artistic vision and ambition, a passion for a broad range of theatre that explores social and political issues, as well as theatre that engages and entertains. Working with Searchlight Canada, the committee sought candidates with a genuine commitment to creating new opportunities for diverse voices; a demonstrated expertise in both classical and contemporary practice; and the capacity to build trust through personal integrity and empathy. Soulpepper looked for a leader who was an entrepreneurial risk-taker, and was also knowledgeable and deeply engaged in Canadian and international theatre.

"Weyni's professional experience, commitment to inclusion, and passion for community building will be valuable at Soulpepper as we embark on the next stage of our journey," said Morgan, "Her background with the Soulpepper Academy, her award-winning productions at Soulpepper and beyond, her experience in developing new plays coupled with her understanding of our shared classical tradition, and her interest in digital platforms and new media point to her eminent qualifications for the position. We were privileged to have met with many fine professionals during the interview process; it is evident that there is a wealth of visionary senior talent in Canada today. For Soulpepper, as we look to the future, it is evident to us that Weyni Mengesha is the right person to inspire and lead our artistic vision and direction."

*"I feel my entire professional career has been leading towards this opportunity," said **Weyni Mengesha**. "I am absolutely thrilled to build on the company's existing talent, and shepherd it towards national and international collaboration. Soulpepper has been a place where I've had some of my most fulfilling artistic experiences. I'm excited to be coming back home to this city that I love and work with artists I've admired for years. I believe in the company's vision, and I look forward to fostering its legacy of excellence and innovation and helping to shape its next chapter. I want to acknowledge the incredible leadership Alan Dilworth has shown in guiding the company during the recent difficult period, continuing to produce world-class work, and building an exciting season ahead. I look forward to collaborating with him for years to come."*



Mengesha, who is currently based in Los Angeles, grew up in Vancouver, BC and Scarborough, ON. She and her family will be returning to Toronto to take up her new role in January 2019. In August 2018, the Soulpepper Board announced the appointment of Emma Stenning as the new Executive Director. Emma is a UK-based arts leader, who brings a wealth of experience, ideas and energy to her role. The Artistic Director and the Executive Director will each report directly to the Board. One of their first priorities will be to develop and co-lead a new five-year Strategic Plan with input from artists, staff, a highly engaged Board, donors and stakeholders in the broader community.

*“I am deeply grateful to the Board for inviting me to join part of the search process this past August,” said **Emma Stenning**, Soulpepper’s incoming Executive Director. “It was a wonderful opportunity to listen to the ideas and inspiration of the best of Canadian artistic talent, and to hear of their deep passion for Soulpepper’s future. Weyni’s vision for the company filled me with excitement. Her breadth of understanding of the company’s work, her commitment to diversity and teaching, her international perspective and her exceptional skill as a director represents a strong foundation for the company. I can’t wait to work alongside her in shaping the next chapter for Soulpepper.”*

“As we prepare to welcome our next Artistic Director,” said Morgan, “we would like to express our gratitude and acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Alan Dilworth, who has been Acting Artistic Director through these past nine months. Stepping into the transitional role at an extremely difficult point in the company’s history last January, Alan continues to lead the company with professionalism, generosity, thoughtfulness, collaboration, and vision. He has planned inclusive and transformational seasons despite severe constraints, overseen the capstone projects for the Soulpepper Academy artists, directed a critically-acclaimed production and provided guidance to young directors, always with an eye to the best long-term interests and health of the company. The Board and everyone at Soulpepper are deeply grateful to Alan. We would not be here today without his remarkable leadership. We look forward to the continuation of his work in 2018, the plays he will be directing with us in 2019, and to an ongoing collaborative relationship.”

*“I heartily congratulate Weyni,” said **Alan Dilworth**, Acting Artistic Director, “and I look forward to working with her and the entire Soulpepper team in this transition period and beyond.”*

Soulpepper is pleased to share that through the success of the Board-led Transition Fund, sold-out table sales at our upcoming Signature Soulpepper gala, strong annual fundraising campaign, and a strong contribution from our foundational supporters, and truly visionary leadership support, the organization is well positioned to move into the future in a strong and stable financial position.

“We are so grateful for the donors, sponsors, foundations and stakeholders that have stood by this company and come forward with their generous support at this important time. This outlook provides a strong foundation upon which Emma and Weyni will be able to achieve their future vision for this company,” said Morgan.

Earlier this month Soulpepper posted an update regarding steps it has taken to strengthen workplace culture and good governance. This update includes the **Code of Conduct** which was adopted by the company on September 10, 2018. This document includes a **Statement of Promises** – a powerful pledge the company makes to one another and its community. These documents can be found at: Soulpepper.ca/updates

Vanessa Morgan continued, *“There is no doubt that this past year has been a challenging time, but it has also been a time of learning, listening, and transformation. This important work will continue to expand through our strategic planning process. With today’s news, we believe we have put in place all the key ingredients. The company is financially sound. We have a committed Board and an exceptional team. We have robust policies and practices in place. Our artistic activity continues to deliver excellence, and we have exceptional artistic and executive leadership in place. Taken collectively, these are the indicators of a company moving confidently into a new chapter. We are a company looking forward with renewed vigour and excitement.”*

Soulpepper’s 2018 season continues with the Canadian premiere of Marco Ramirez’s *The Royale* on stage starting October 12; the Canadian premiere of Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* in co-production with Necessary Angel Theatre Company; and the



presentation of Obsidian Theatre Company's *Oratorio: A Theatrical Mixtape*, and Silk Bath Collective's World premiere *Yellow Rabbit*.

BACKGROUND

- Weyni Mengesha has been nominated for 9 Dora Awards (winning 3); and has won 2 Toronto Critics' Awards.
- Weyni Mengesha has directed an episode of the hit CBC TV comedy *Kim's Convenience*.
- Weyni Mengesha is married to actor Eion Bailey, and the couple has two young children.
- The Search Committee of the Board was gender-balanced and included persons of colour. Of the many expressions of interest received, a short list of 9 were interviewed - all were Canadian, 44% were women, and 33% were persons of colour.
- Searchlight Canada was instructed to focus on recruiting Canadians at home and living abroad.

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. Tickets to Soulpepper productions are available by calling the Young Centre Box Office at 416.866.8666 or by visiting soulpepper.ca.

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 New 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.

Soulpepper gratefully acknowledges annual operating support from the Ontario Arts Council, the Toronto Arts Council, and the Canada Council for the Arts. Soulpepper is pleased to recognize the donors of transformational gifts to its Creative Capital Campaign: The Michael Young Family Foundation; The Slight Family; The Government of Ontario; Gail Drummond and Bob Dorrance; Kevin and Roger Garland; Ada Slight; and Richard Wernham and Julia West. Support for the Soulpepper Academy is provided by the RBC Foundation, and the Canada Arts Training Program at the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Soulpepper is grateful for the major sponsorship support of:

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TD Bank – StagePlay + ASL Interpretation

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