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# THE SHED Press Release

THE BLOOMBERG BUILDING  
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Renée Fleming and Ben Whishaw in a specially commissioned new work by Anne Carson titled *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy*, directed by Katie Mitchell with music by Paul Clark. Photo: Stephanie Berger © 2019. Courtesy The Shed.

## ***Norma Jeane Baker of Troy*, a Spoken and Sung Performance Piece Specially Commissioned by The Shed, Opens April 9, 2019, in The Griffin Theater**

**NEW YORK, APRIL 6, 2019** — In its opening week, The Shed inaugurates its 500-seat Griffin Theater with the world premiere of *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy*, a radical interpretation of Euripides’s *Helen* as conceived by **Anne Carson**, the acclaimed poet, essayist, and scholar. A spoken and sung play, this specially commissioned production runs from April 6 through May 19 and stars **Ben Whishaw** and **Renée Fleming** in an exploration of the lives and myths of Marilyn Monroe and Helen of Troy—iconic beauties who lived millennia apart.

Despite the star power of the play’s two leads—Whishaw’s credits range from *The Crucible* on Broadway to James Bond films to *Mary Poppins Returns*, while Fleming is a full lyric soprano generally considered to be the preeminent opera singer in the world—*Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* is an unconventional choice for The Shed’s first theatrical production. “We’re launching the theater with a dramatic monologue—a poem, really, that is spoken and sung,” says Alex Poots, Artistic Director and CEO of The Shed. “Storytelling in a poetic, single-narrative way.”

In addition to her distinguished academic career, which has included positions as a classics professor at McGill, Princeton, and the University of Michigan (as well as her current appointment as poet-in-residence at NYU), Carson is an award-winning author. “I’ve yet to meet an artist who doesn’t hold Anne in the highest regard,” says Poots.

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It was Carson who decided that a Euripides drama first produced in 412 BCE was the right stuff for transformation into a contemporary piece. “I first read *Helen* when studying ancient Greek at school years ago, and have, at various times for various reasons, attempted to translate parts of it,” says Carson. “It always eluded me. But when Alex Poots asked me to write a monologue for an actor, I thought this might be a context in which I could attempt something strange and new with the text, by compressing the whole action of a tragedy into one voice.”

Carson had originally demurred at Poots’s request, but later agreed to write the monologue on one condition: “She said, ‘I’m going to write it for a particular person, for a particular voice—Ben Whishaw,’” recalls Poots. “I said, ‘I don’t know if he’s going to be free,’ and she said, ‘Well, I’ve already asked him and he said yes.’ Anne did my job for me—brilliant!”

It was a striking decision to rewrite *Helen*, a play told mainly through a female voice, as a male role. To Carson, however, the choice was natural. “I don’t think of Ben Whishaw as primarily a male actor,” explains Carson. “He is iridescent. The needle jumps. This polyvalence has been evident in various of his movie roles, but more particularly when he played Dionysos in a version of *Bakkhai* that I translated for production at the Almeida a few years ago. His Dionysos seemed to combine all genders in a sort of dangerous flotation.”

Carson was also inspired to connect the story of Helen of Troy with Marilyn Monroe—or, more specifically, with Norma Jeane Baker, Monroe’s birth name. Carson drew links between the two female icons’ “unearthly beauty” and what she terms “doubleness.” “Both women were fixed by the cultural imagination of their time into the single, simple role of sex icon, but both were far more complicated,” says Carson. “Marilyn had many inner selves, and underneath them all, her original identity as Norma Jeane Baker. Helen, legendarily the harlot of Troy and cause of the Trojan War, here repudiates that story and claims to have never gone to Troy at all—it was a cloud that went to Troy, she says.”

Carson notes that the two women share a tragic outcome. “Marilyn Monroe seems a person broken by circumstances that could so easily have been otherwise. At the same time, her life story acts out the sort of locking together of character and circumstance that makes Greek tragic plots appear inevitable,” she says. “Euripides’s *Helen* is more ambiguous. She may seem a winner by the end of his play, but her brokenheartedness has been transferred to sorrow over her daughter Hermione, and behind all this hangs the spectre of a world war fought for the sake of a cloud.”

As production on *Norma Jeane of Troy* began, key elements were still undecided, including its director. It was Whishaw who suggested **Katie Mitchell**, whom *The Guardian* called “Britain’s greatest living theater director.” Under Mitchell’s guidance, the setting of the play was transplanted from ancient Greece to 1963, which also recast the dynamics of the interaction between Whishaw’s and Fleming’s characters. “You’re going to be in an office,” explains Mitchell, “and you’re going to watch a manager, later at night, outside office hours, dictate his version of Euripides’ *Helen*. Bit by bit, as the evening progresses, you’re going to see the secretary take more and more of a

creative role, until they are co-creators of that text. And you're going to move between the spoken and the sung in a very complex way. Sometimes Ben will sing and he'll do a lot of talking, sometimes Renée will talk and sing. It's a complicated weave, but it's a simple situation and a simple story."

To help bring it to life, Mitchell suggested the participation of her longtime collaborator, composer **Paul Clark**. It was Clark, artistic director of the interdisciplinary performance group, Clod Ensemble, who came up with the innovative element of creating the play's entire soundtrack out of Fleming's voice: he recorded her singing small clusters of notes, then digitally processed and constructed every sound heard on stage. "There are no other instruments—it's all made out of her voice, even when she's not physically singing," says Clark. "I've made her voice into air-conditioning units and police sirens and the sound of the sea. It was a preposterous project! Everything you hear, apart from the phone ringing—that's the only thing we failed to do—is Fleming."

For Poots, *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* is the ideal chance to create more unexpected, provocative situations and possibilities. "There's a lot of talk about collaboration as 'mashing it up' or 'genre-bending,'" Poots says. "But we really need to get away from that language. What we're doing here is not that. There's the moment when it starts, and then the idea takes life, and you let it grow. Of course, you nurture it and take care of it, but it has its own journey, and you mustn't damage it or denature it. It's about creating opportunities rather than giving instructions. I think The Shed can create opportunities."

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Anne Carson** was born in Canada and teaches ancient Greek for a living.

**Ben Whishaw** is an award-winning actor. He starred as Grenouille in the critically acclaimed *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*. Other film credits include *My Brother Tom* (Most Promising Newcomer, British Independent Film Awards), *I'm Not There* (The Independent Spirit Awards' prestigious Robert Altman Award), *Enduring Love*, *Layer Cake*, *Stoned*, *The Tempest*, *Brideshead Revisited*, *Bright Star*, *The International*, *Suffragette*, *The Lobster*, *The Zero Theorem*, *In the Heart of the Sea*, *Lilting*, *Cloud Atlas*, *The Danish Girl*, and the role of Q in the latest James Bond films *Skyfall* and *Spectre*. Whishaw also voiced the title role of Paddington Bear in *Paddington* and *Paddington 2*. Whishaw's television performances include *A Very English Scandal* (2019 Golden Globe Award for Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role in a Series, Limited Series, or Motion Picture Made for Television; Critics Choice Award for Best Supporting Actor in a Movie or Limited Series), *Criminal Justice* (2009 Emmy Award for Best Performance by an Actor and the Royal Television Society, UK [RTS] Award for Best Male Actor), in addition to a BAFTA TV Award nomination. Further credits include ITV's *The Booze Cruise*, *Nathan Barley*, BBC's *The Hour*, *Richard II* (BAFTA Winner for Best Leading Actor), and *London Spy*. For stage, Whishaw received an Olivier Award nomination for his performance in *His Dark Materials* (Old Vic, following transfer from National Theatre). Other theater credits include *Mojo* (Harold Pinter Theatre), *Peter and Alice* (Noel Coward Theatre), *The Pride* (Lucille Lortel Theatre), *Cock* (Royal

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Theatre), *Some Trace of Her* and *The Seagull* (National Theatre), *Leaves of Glass* (Soho Theatre), *Hamlet* (Old Vic), *Bakkhai* and *Against* (Almeida Theatre), *Julius Caesar* (The Bridge Theatre), and *The Crucible* on Broadway. Whishaw appeared as Michael Banks opposite Emily Blunt and Emily Mortimer in the sequel to Disney's *Mary Poppins*, *Mary Poppins Returns*, and has since completed filming Armando Lanmucci's *The Personal History of David Copperfield*.

**Renée Fleming** is one of the most highly acclaimed singers of our time, performing on the stages of the world's greatest opera houses, theaters, and concert halls. In 2013, President Obama awarded her the National Medal of Arts. A four-time Grammy Award winner, she has sung for momentous occasions including the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony and the Diamond Jubilee Concert for Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace. In 2014 Fleming became the first classical artist ever to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the Super Bowl. In 2008 she was the first woman in the 125-year history of the Metropolitan Opera to solo headline an opening night gala. Fleming earned a 2018 Tony Award nomination for her appearance in *Carousel* on Broadway. Heard on the soundtracks of *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* and the 2018 Best Picture Oscar winner *The Shape of Water*, she also provided the singing voice of Julianne Moore in the film *Bel Canto*. Fleming's 2018–19 tour schedule includes concerts and recitals in Boston, Chicago, Barcelona, Amsterdam, and Paris. This June, she will make her London theater debut in *The Light in the Piazza*. In September, Decca released Fleming's latest album, *Renée Fleming: Broadway*. She has recorded everything from complete operas and song recitals to indie rock and jazz; her album *Signatures* was selected by the U.S. Library of Congress for the National Recording Registry as an "aural treasure worthy of preservation as part of America's patrimony." As artistic advisor to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Fleming spearheads a collaboration with the National Institutes of Health focused on music, health, and neuroscience. Among her awards are the Fulbright Lifetime Achievement Award, Germany's Cross of the Order of Merit, France's Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, and Honorary Membership in the Royal Academy of Music.

**Katie Mitchell** has directed over 100 productions in a career spanning 28 years. She has directed 74 theater productions including in London, Amsterdam, Milan, Berlin, Stockholm, Cologne, Vienna, Salzburg, and Hamburg. She has directed 28 operas in the UK, Holland, France, Germany, and Denmark. In the UK, she has directed nine productions for the Royal Shakespeare Company, 19 for the National Theatre, and 12 for the Royal Court Theatre. She has been an associate director at all three organizations. Mitchell is currently resident artist at the Royal Court Theatre (London), the Schaubühne Theatre (Berlin), and the Deutsches Schauspielhaus (Hamburg). She has just finished a seven-year artist residency at the Aix-en-Provence Opera Festival (France). In 2015, the Stadsschouwburg Theatre in Amsterdam held a retrospective of her opera and theater work, presenting eight productions from across Europe. In 2005, Mitchell directed a stage adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves*, bringing theater and cinema together in a new art form called live cinema. She has subsequently directed over 15 live cinema productions, many of which have toured worldwide. These groundbreaking productions have changed the way in which video is used in theater. Mitchell makes work about climate change and is a feminist, supporting equal pay for women in theater and opera. As an associate director at the National Theatre, she was the first director to persuade the



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management to make a professional production for children under five. Mitchell has won numerous awards for her work. In 2009, she was presented with the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for her services to the theater.

**Paul Clark** is co-artistic director of the London-based performance company CLOD ENSEMBLE and has written scores for all of its productions to date—ranging from totally acoustic works to multi-speaker installations. Recent performances include *Silver Swan* (Tate Modern, Turbine Hall) for seven singers; *Under Glass* (Sadler’s Wells), a surround-sound installation; *An Anatomie* (Sadler’s Wells) for electronics, live orchestra, and a rock band; and *Must* (Public Theater, with Peggy Shaw) for a jazz trio. Clark has written music for and with a hugely diverse range of musicians from Opera North, Manchester Camerata, Österreichisches Ensemble für Neue Musik, and Welsh National Opera to Dangermouse, Yukihiro Issa, Caoimhín Ó Raghallaigh, and Mark E. Smith (The Fall). He has created numerous cross-disciplinary works in galleries, concert halls, and theaters. Clark has written dozens of scores for theater in the UK and internationally. He has a longstanding collaboration with Katie Mitchell, for whom he has written over 20 scores, and with Gare St Lazare, with whom he created *Here All Night* (Lincoln Center, and The Abbey, Dublin), an acclaimed words-and-music piece using texts by Samuel Beckett.

### **About The Shed**

Located on Manhattan's west side, where the High Line meets Hudson Yards, The Shed commissions original works of art, across all disciplines, for all audiences. From hip hop to classical music, painting and sculpture to literature, film to theater and dance, The Shed brings together leading and emerging artists and thinkers from all disciplines under one roof. The building—a remarkable movable structure designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Lead Architect, and Rockwell Group, Collaborating Architect—physically transforms to support artists' most ambitious ideas. Committed to nurturing artistic invention and bringing creative experiences to the broadest possible audiences, The Shed, led by Artistic Director and CEO Alex Poots, is a 21st-century space of and for New York City.

### **LOCATION**

The Shed’s The Bloomberg Building, The Griffin Theater  
545 West 30th Street, between 10th and 11th Avenues

### **PERFORMANCE DATES**

April 6 through May 19, 2019  
April 6 and 7 at 7:30 pm (previews)  
April 9 at 7:30 pm (opening)  
Tuesday – Saturday at 7:30 pm  
Sundays at 3 pm

### **DETAILS**

Running time: 90 minutes  
No intermission, no late seating

### **TICKETS**

Tickets start at \$45 and are on sale at [theshed.org](http://theshed.org) and via phone at (646) 455-3494.

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## CREDITS

### Commissioned Artists

Anne Carson, Writer  
Katie Mitchell, Director  
Paul Clark, Composer  
Renée Fleming, Performer  
Ben Wishaw, Performer

### Additional Credits

Lily McLeish, Associate Director  
Alex Eales, Set Designer  
Sussie Juhlin-Wallén, Costume Designer  
Anthony Doran, Lighting Designer  
Donato Wharton, Sound Designer  
Robert Currie, Collaborating Artist  
Lucy Martin, Assistant Costume Designer  
Lisa Hurst, Production Stage Manager (United Kingdom rehearsals and New York)  
Laura Deards, Production Stage Manager (United Kingdom rehearsals)  
John Higgins and Hugo Trebels, United Kingdom Production: Media Mayhem  
Katherine Dilworth, Deputy Stage Manager  
Claire Martin, Assistant Director  
Harry Johnson, Sound and Music Assistant

### The Shed Program Team

Alex Poots, Artistic Director and CEO  
Laura Aswad, Producer  
Marc Warren, Director of Production  
Isaac Katzanek, Production Manager  
Sarah Pier, Production Supervisor  
Joe DiMartino, Technical Director  
Stephanie Quaye, Associate Producer