

THE SHED Press Release

THE **BLOOMBERG** BUILDING
545 West 30th Street
New York, NY 10001

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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**A new play by
CLAUDIA RANKINE**

Top row (left to right): Jim Borstelmann (not in cast), Tina Benko, David Beach; Middle row (left to right): Rory Scholl, Jeremy Webb, April Matthis, Nick Wyman; Bottom row (left to right): Michael Gorman, Rona Lotan (not in cast), Joseph Medeiros, Sean Elliott Harris (not in cast).

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*

Angeles, 1992, Signature Theater; *Is God Is*, Soho Rep). *Help* stars **April Matthis** (*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 Radar Festival/The Public Theater, co-directed with Tyler Dobrowsky), *Blue Ridge*, starring Marin Ireland, *The Great Leap* starring BD Wong (Atlantic Theatre Company), *Is God Is* (Soho Rep, 2018 Obie Award), *Master* (The Foundry, 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

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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

Major support for *Help* is provided by M&T Bank, Founding Bank of The Shed.

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.