

# THE SHED Press Release

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The Shed Opens Its 2020 Season with the World Premiere of Claudia Rankine's New Play *Help*

Directed by Taibi Magar, Starring Roslyn Ruff

The Shed's Griffin Theater

March 10 through April 5, 2020

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**New York, NY February 10, 2020—** *Help*, a new play examining white male privilege by acclaimed author and poet **Claudia Rankine** (*Citizen: An American Lyric*, *The White Card*) and directed by Obie Award-winner **Taibi Magar** (*Is God Is*, Soho Rep), makes its world premiere and launches The Shed's 2020 season on March 10 with performances through April 5 (previews begin Tuesday, March 10 and opening night is Saturday, March 21). Commissioned by The Shed and performed in its Griffin Theater, *Help* stars **Roslyn Ruff** (Theater: *Fairview*; Film: *Marriage Story*; TV: *Divorce*, *Pose*).

A new play, *Help* consciously centers whiteness in order to address, engage, and ultimately confront it. The Narrator (Ruff) recounts Rankine's real-life conversations with white men about their privilege that take place in transitional spaces like airports. The stories unfold through a set of monologues and staged scenarios, with Ruff supported by a cast of 19 white male actors and dancers. 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 led to further discussion and contemplation.

"*Help* is more or less a monologue. It is the anatomy of multiple conversations that I have had with white men over the course of a line of inquiry where I asked them about their privilege. It is an attempt to think about those conversations, to think about myself in those conversations, and to think about those questions in the world," said Claudia Rankine, writer. "These conversations help me understand why it's so frustrating to speak about white privilege. I'm not thinking about privilege as tied to economics and money, but that seems to be how white people think about it. Privilege to me is about the ability to live a life without being surveilled, without being stalked, without feeling as if you're being questioned at any turn."

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

The newly commissioned script derives from Rankine's deep inquiry and ongoing investigation into white male privilege, elements of which were shared in her *New York Times Magazine* essay, "I Wanted to Know What White Men Thought About Their Privilege. So I Asked" (July 17, 2019).

"*Help* is a conversation about whiteness," said Taibi Magar, director. "Whiteness has long had the privilege of being a 'neutral baseline.' However, when you examine the history and present state of whiteness, it is anything but neutral. The piece is an investigation of the history of whiteness through to its present state, as observed from the indispensable perspective of a Black woman."

*Help* includes movement choreography by **Shamel Pitts**, set design by **Mimi Lien**, costume design by **Dede Ayite**, lighting design by **John Torres**, sound design by **Mikaal Sulaiman**, and original music composition by **Jerome Ellis**, along with **Casey Llewellyn**, dramaturg.

“It is our honor to commission one of America’s most renowned poets, Claudia Rankine, to write a new play and open The Shed’s 2020 season, with Taibi Magar directing and Roslyn Ruff giving voice to this dramatic monologue,” said **Alex Poots**, Artistic Director and CEO of The Shed. “*Help* takes a necessary look at what it 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 male privilege in this critical work and the dedication throughout her career to addressing these issues.”

“Claudia Rankine has written *Help* in order to demystify the social constructs of race and whiteness,” said **Tamara McCaw**, Chief Civic Program Officer. “Claudia’s play deliberately brings the audience into the conversation about how we see ourselves and others. Claudia places the responsibility of carrying this urgent conversation forward specifically on white men in the audience, asking them to take a deep look inward about what it truly means to exist within one’s privilege.”

Press images available [here](#).

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### **Ticket Information**

Preview performances of *Help* are March 10 – 15 and 17 – 20. *Help* opens March 21 and continues through April 5 with performances at 7:30 pm Tuesdays through Saturdays and Sundays at 3 pm. Running time is approximately 80 minutes with no intermission and limited late seating. Tickets start at \$35 and are available at [theshed.org](http://theshed.org) or by calling (646) 455-3494.

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Photo Caption: Back row: Chris Tierney, Matty Oaks, Nick Wyman, Matt Gibson, Chris Kipiniak, Ned Noyes; Middle row: John Hickok, Michael Gorman, Richard Daniels, David Beach, Joey Sorge, Tom O’Keefe, Michael Paternostro, Roslyn Ruff, David E. Harrison, Jim Borstelmann; Front row: Jacob Fishel, Joe Medeiros, Jim Stanek. Photo: Kelly Marshall.

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### **About The Artists**

#### **Claudia Rankine**

Claudia Rankine is the author of five collections of poetry, including *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) and *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* (2004). Her most recent play, *The White Card*, which premiered in February 2018 (ArtsEmerson / American Repertory Theater), was published by Graywolf Press in 2019. Her next publication, *Just Us*, is a collection of essays forthcoming with Graywolf Press in 2020. Rankine is also the editor of several anthologies including *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the*

*Life of the Mind*. In 2016, she 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 Yale University as the Frederick Iseman Professor of Poetry and lives in New Haven, Connecticut.

### **Taibi Magar**

Taibi Magar is an Egyptian American, Obie-winning director based in New York, and a graduate of the Brown / Trinity MFA program. Her New York credits include *Is God Is* (Soho Rep), *Underground Railroad Game* (Ars Nova), *Master* (The Foundry), and *Blue Ridge* and *The Great Leap* (Atlantic Theatre Company). Magar has directed regionally for A.R.T. (Boston), Seattle Rep, the Guthrie, Woolly Mammoth Theatre, Chautauqua Theatre, the Alley, TUTS Houston, Trinity Rep, Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival, Playmakers Rep, and Shakespeare & Company, and internationally for Hamburg Festival, Edinburgh Fringe, Soho Theatre, and Malthouse Theatre (Melbourne). Magar has also developed work with the Public Theater, New York Theatre Workshop, Playwrights Horizons, and Theatre for a New Audience. She has received a Stephen Sondheim Fellowship, an Oregon Shakespeare Festival Fellowship, a Public Theater Shakespeare Fellowship, and the SDC Breakout Award 2019. Upcoming work includes *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* (The Signature Theatre).

### **Roslyn Ruff**

Roslyn Ruff's credits include, on Broadway: *All The Way*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Fences* (standby for Viola Davis); Off-Broadway: *Fairview*, *X or Betty Shabazz v The Nation* (2018 Drama League Nomination), *Death of the Last Blackman in the Whole Entire Word aka The Negro Book of the Dead*, *Macbeth*, *Familiar*, *Scenes from a Marriage*, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, *Things of Dry Hours*, *The Piano Lesson* (2013 Lucille Lortel, Audelco Award; Drama League nomination), *Seven Guitars* (2007 Obie Award), *The Cherry Orchard*; regional: Williamstown Theatre Festival, Two River Theatre, Berkeley Rep, Long Wharf, People's Light and Theatre Company (Barrymore Award), The Kennedy Center, Indiana Rep, Old Globe, Alliance Theatre, McCarter Theatre, ACT, Yale Rep; in film: *Marriage Story*, *The Help*, *Salt*, *Life During Wartime*, *Rachel Getting Married*; and on TV: *Lincoln*, *The Godfather of Harlem*, *The Code*, *Pose*, *Divorce*, *Red Blooded* (ABC pilot), *Madame Secretary*, *Doubt*, *Elementary*, *Masters of Sex*, and *The Big C*.

### Shamel Pitts

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Shamel Pitts began his dance training at LaGuardia High School and the Ailey School, receiving his BFA from the Juilliard School. He began his professional career with BJM\_Danse Montreal and Mikhail Baryshnikov's Hell's Kitchen Dance. He continued his career at Batsheva Dance Company until 2016. Pitts created the poetic dance performance *Black Box: Little Black Book of Red* (performed in Israel, Brazil, Berlin, and New York). In September 2016, Pitts moved to Brazil to create a duet with performance artist Mirelle Martins called *Black Velvet: Architectures and Archetypes* (Audience Choice Award, 2017 Stockholm Fringe Festival). Pitts has taught at Netherlands Dance Theater Summer Intensive, SUNY Purchase, the Juilliard School, and Harvard University. For his choreography, he received a 2018 Princess Grace Award and a 2019 NYSCA / NYFA Artist Fellowship. Pitts is the artistic director / founder of TRIBE, the Brooklyn-based multidisciplinary visual performance collective.

### Mimi Lien

Mimi Lien is a designer of sets / environments for theater, dance, and opera. In 2015, she was named a MacArthur Fellow; she is the first stage designer ever to achieve this distinction. Lien is a company member of Pig Iron Theatre Company and co-founder of JACK, a performance / art space in Brooklyn. Selected projects include *Natasha and Pierre and The Great Comet of 1812* (Broadway), *Fairview* and *An Octoroon* (Soho Rep.), and *Die Zauberflöte* (Staatsoper Berlin). She is a recipient of a Tony Award, Bessie, Drama Desk, Lucille Lortel, Outer Critics Circle Award, American Theatre Wing Hewes Design Award, LA Drama Critics Circle Award, and an OBIE Award for sustained excellence.

### John Torres

John Torres is a New York-based lighting designer working in theater, dance, motion, and print. In collaboration with Robert Wilson, productions have included *EDDA* (Det Norske Teatret, Oslo), *Cheek to Cheek Live! With Tony Bennett and Lady Gaga* (PBS Great Performances), and *Turandot* (Teatro Real, Madrid). Recent opera projects include *Tristan and Isolde* (La Monnaie de Munt, Brussels), and *ATLAS* by Meredith Monk (Los Angeles Philharmonic). Recent theater has included *Twelfth Night* (Shakespeare in the Park) and *The Black Clown* (A.R.T. Cambridge). In music, he has worked on *Taylor Mac: A 24 Decade History of Popular Music*, *Solange Knowles / Cosmic Journey*, and *Joni 75 / A Birthday Celebration*; in dance, *Toss and Rogues* (Trisha Brown, Théâtre National de Chaillot / Paris) and *Available Light* (Lucinda Childs, Walt Disney Concert Hall / Los Angeles); and in fashion, Givenchy S/S 2015 (New York) and Proenza Schouler and Yeezy 3 by Kanye West at Madison Square Garden.

### **Dede Ayite**

Dede Ayite is a costume designer whose Broadway credits include *A Soldier's Play*, *Slave Play*, *American Son*, and *Children of a Lesser God*. Select Off-Broadway credits include *Secret Life of Bees*, *FireFlies*, *Marie and Rosetta*, *Tell Hector I Miss Him* (Atlantic); *By The Way*, *Meet Vera Stark*, *JHAT* (Signature); *BLKS*, *Collective Rage...*, *School Girls...* (MCC); *Sugar in Our Wounds* (MTC); *If Pretty Hurts...*, *Mankind*, *Bella: An American Tall Tale* (Playwrights Horizons); *The Royale* (Lincoln Center); *Ugly Lies the Bone* (Roundabout); and *brownsville song [b-side for tray]* (LCT3). Regionally, Ayite's work has appeared at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Steppenwolf, American Repertory Theater, Denver Center, California Shakespeare, La Jolla Playhouse, Berkeley Repertory, Baltimore Center Stage, Arena Stage, Cleveland Playhouse, Signature Theatre, McCarter Theatre, and Hartford Stage. She has worked in television with Netflix, Comedy Central, and FOX Shortcoms. Ayite earned her MFA at the Yale School of Drama and has received Obie, Lucille Lortel, Helen Hayes, Theatre Bay Area, and Jeff Awards, along with four Drama Desk Nominations.

### **Mikaal Sulaiman**

Mikaal Sulaiman is a sound designer whose Off-Broadway credits include *Fires in the Mirror* (Signature Theatre); *Continuity* (Manhattan Theatre Club); *Passage* and *Fairview* (Soho Rep), *Recent Alien Abductions* and *Time's Journey Through a Room* (Play Co.); *Meet Vera Stark* (Signature Theatre); *Blue Ridge* (Atlantic Theatre), *The Thanksgiving Play* (Playwrights Horizons), *Rags Parkland* (Ars Nova), *Underground Railroad Game* (Ars Nova), *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (NYTW); *Master* (Foundry Theatre Co.); *Skittles: The Broadway Musical*; and *Black Artist Retreat* by Theaster Gates (Park Avenue Armory). Regional credits include Berkeley Rep, the Alley, Woolly Mammoth, Baltimore Center Stage, Trinity Rep, Pig Iron, Syracuse Stage, Arden Theatre, and Early Morning Opera. Sulaiman has received nominations from the Drama Desk Awards, the Lucille Lortel Awards, SF Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle, the Theatre Bay Area Awards, and the Audelco Awards. He is a recipient of the Henry Hewes Design Award.

### **Jerome Ellis**

Jerome Ellis is a composer, performer, and writer. Ellis's recent productions include *Passage* (Soho Rep), *Lab Rat* by A\$AP Rocky (Sotheby's/YouTube), *The Bluest Eye* (Arden Theatre Company), and *High Winds* (NYTW Next Door / Abrons Arts Center). He has also collaborated extensively with James Harrison Monaco as part of the duo James & Jerome. Their productions include *The Conversationalists* (Bushwick Starr), *Ink: A Piece for Museums* (Metropolitan Museum of Art / Under the Radar), and *Piano Tales* (Lincoln Center Education / La MaMa). Ellis is an artist-in-residence at Ars Nova and Lincoln Center Theater.

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### Casey Llewelyn

Casey Llewelyn is a New York-based playwright and theater artist whose work interrogates identity, collectivity, and form. Works include *O, Earth* (commissioned and produced by the Foundry Theatre, 2016), *Part 1: I'm Uncomfortable With What I'm Feeling* (collaboration with choreographer Morgan Thorson), *I Am Bleeding All Over the Place: A Living History Tour* (conceived by Brooke O'Harra, and co-written with her, La Mama, 2016), *The Body Which is the Town, Come in. Be with me. Don't touch me.*, *Obsession Piece*, and *The Quiet Way*. She is a member of the Advisory Board of the Racial Imaginary Institute.

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

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### 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.

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