

AMERICANTM ARTSCAPE

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Celebrating the Centennial of Women's Suffrage



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This issue

In honor of the centennial of women's suffrage, the National Endowment for the Arts is celebrating the many ways the arts have empowered and elevated women, as well as the many ways that women artists have shaped and elevated American art. As part of the agency's commemoration of this event, we encouraged applicants for fiscal year 2020 grants to submit funding requests for projects that celebrated women's suffrage and equality. We are featuring a number of those projects in this issue of *American Artscape*, ranging from a festival that highlights the creativity of women filmmakers to a play for young audiences that outlines the history of the suffrage movement.

As part of our commemorative efforts, we have also published a book highlighting the role that the arts played in the suffrage movement, and ultimately, in the successful passage of the 19th amendment—an excerpt from that book is included in this issue. We are also encouraging federal agencies and arts organizations across the country to light up public buildings and landmarks in purple and gold on August 26, 2020, as part of the Forward Into Light campaign, which has been spearheaded by the Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission. We are working with the commission to support a nationwide public mural project celebrating women's suffrage as well.

Women in America have certainly celebrated many triumphs since our nation's founding, but we know that there is still work that remains to be done, both within the arts industry and elsewhere, and especially for women of color. We are hopeful that through our commemorations we are not only celebrating a milestone in our nation's history, but also helping women today advance our continued march toward full equality.

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and Megan Massie at the final
moment of *Lawbreakers!*, at
StageOne Family Theatre in
Louisville, Kentucky. Photo
courtesy of StageOne Family
Theatre



HONORING THEIR VOICES

StageOne Family Theatre's Production of *Lawbreakers!*

BY REBECCA SUTTON

All photos courtesy of StageOne Family Theatre

Playwright Diana Grisanti has vivid memories of seeing plays at StageOne Family Theatre in Louisville, Kentucky, as a child, including *Number the Stars*, *Tuck Everlasting*, and *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. So she jumped at the chance to write a new play for StageOne about women's suffrage, which premiered on February 1, 2020, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts. The production, which also featured an all-female

creative team, was part of the agency's call for projects that celebrated the centennial of the passage of the 19th amendment.

"There's a reason I remember going to see plays at StageOne when I was a kid and not, you know, the day I learned the Pythagorean theorem," said Grisanti, who is still based in Louisville. "The arts have the power to lift up lessons from our history books and put them in three dimensions, and inject them into the brains and memories of the next generation."

▲ Ebony Jordan, left, as a high school teacher and Ernaisja Curry as her student Kiara, during a scene from *Lawbreakers!* (A *Fast and Furious History of Women's Suffrage*).



▲ Ernaisja Curry and Ebony Jordan during a scene in *Lawbreakers!* where young Kiara, a high school student, listens as her Grandma Ida breaks the fourth wall, and asks an audience of young people who among them is eligible and registered to vote.

With her new work, Grisanti hoped to not only make the history of the suffrage movement memorable and alive, but to show its relevance to young people today. *Lawbreakers! (A Fast and Furious History of Women's Suffrage)* focuses on two teenage step-sisters in modern-day Louisville, Maya and Kiara, whose differences have made for a fraught relationship. While Maya is studious and interested in history, Kiara is apathetic about school and the political process in general. The two girls travel back in time to the 1851 Akron Women's Rights Convention in Ohio, before zipping

to other milestone events (and continents) important to the suffrage movement.

When first approached about writing the play, Grisanti said she immediately knew that she wanted to dig beyond well-known white suffragists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who are perhaps the two women most likely to be learned about in school. "I don't envy people who write history textbooks," she said. "You have to simplify, you have to boil things down, and you absolutely have to leave stuff out. For any paragraph in a history book, probably 100 plays could be written about all of the nuances that glimmer out from that paragraph."

Lawbreakers! enlarges those glimmers by focusing on the role played by suffragists of color such as Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells, as well as on the intersections between the labor and suffrage movements. The sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting voices of various groups reveal a more complicated historical narrative than is often taught in school, and shows how a movement that aimed

to empower women was in many ways marked by the same inequalities and tensions as society at large.

"Part of what we see as our responsibility as a theater is not just to tell the stories people want to hear, but to tell people the stories that they *need* to hear," said Andrew Harris, producing artistic director at StageOne. Harris said that student matinees make up 95 percent of the theater's audience, which presents the theater with a unique opportunity to complement what children learn in the classroom. By the end of its run, *Lawbreakers!* was seen by 10,000 middle and high school students from Louisville's minority-majority school system, 2,800 of whom saw the production free of charge. "It's important that we put information out there that helps us learn, understand, and navigate the world around us," he said.

Lawbreakers! accomplishes this by showing a direct link between the history we read about and the lives we lead today. The experiences of Maya and Kiara, who are Black, not only show that the battle for gender and racial equality remains far from over, but that seeing oneself reflected in history—as Maya and Kiara do during their Bill and Ted-style journey—can be an empowering, motivating discovery.

"I haven't seen a lot of stories that feature Black girls and specifically talk about the different things that happen to them in their world," said *Lawbreakers!* director Sydney Chatman. Chatman has taught theater in Chicago's charter school system for 17 years and noted, "I know [young people] well enough to know that when we tell their stories, we honor their voice and we make them feel as if they are a part of the conversation."

Regardless of their background, many young audience members also likely saw themselves reflected in Kiara's feelings of disenfranchisement and apathy. Historically, young people in the United States vote at lower rates than any other age group. According to the U.S. Census, less than 50 percent of people ages 18-29 voted in the last presidential election, and only 36 percent voted in the 2018 midterm elections—which itself was an historic increase from previous midterm elections.

One of the goals of *Lawbreakers!* is to cut through these feelings of disenfranchisement. By showing how hard so many women fought to secure the 19th amendment, Grisanti hoped to instill young women with a sense of their own history, and to show young men that "women's problems are human problems." Rather than

take voting for granted, *Lawbreakers!* aims to show that exercising this hard-earned right is an act of political power of historic magnitude.

Judging from audience feedback, many took this message to heart. As part of every performance, the audience is asked mid-scene whether anyone needs a voter registration card, and one young person is then promptly handed a card by an actress onstage. Harris said that in performance after performance, this episode was met with enthusiastic cheers, as young people applauded their peers for taking a step toward voting.

Both Harris and Grisanti said that they have heard from students, teachers, and parents about how the play has motivated them or their children to take political action, whether it's writing to their representatives, donating to political candidates, or registering to vote. Even Chatman was empowered by the play. While she didn't vote in the last general election, due in part to her frustration with the Electoral College system, she said working on *Lawbreakers!* has inspired

her to cast her ballot in November by helping her "think about my heroes who came before me, who fought for our ability to vote," she said. "Taking on my civic duty *does* affect who comes after me. [This play] reawakened my responsibility and gave me this sense of wanting to vote again."

For Harris, it's this type of reaction that classifies a production as a success, more so than any sort of box office number. "When you can get a theater of 600-plus middle school and high school kids that sit there in rapt attention watching the story you're telling, and then you stand out in the lobby and listen and they can't stop talking about the experience they had—that's how I know we've been successful," he said. "How empowering for our young people to walk away going, 'Oh hey, I didn't know that,' or, 'Look at what they did. I can do that. That can be me. I have a voice. My voice matters.'"

Rebecca Sutton is the editor of American Artscape.

▼ Megan Massie, Ebony Jordan, and A.J. Baldwin portray Alice Paul, Ida B. Wells, and Angelina Weld Grimké in a pivotal moment where the inequality in the women's suffrage movement comes to a head.





THE GODDESS OF MOVING PICTURES

Barnard College's Athena Film Festival Elevates Women in Film

BY MICHAEL GALLANT

All photos by Lars Niki/Getty Images for the Athena Film Awards

▲ From l-r: Athena Film Festival co-founder Melissa Silverstein, Gloria Steinem, and Athena Film Festival co-founder Kathryn Kolbert at the 2020 Athena Film Festival awards ceremony.

If Ancient Greece's mythical deity of wisdom, justice, and the arts, Athena, were to see the state of film in the United States even two years ago, chances are she wouldn't have been happy. After all, talented women in cinema made up only a tiny fraction of the writers and directors credited on Hollywood's most lucrative pictures, and the percentage of lead characters who were women was only slightly better.

If that same mythical deity were to find herself in New York City this past February, however, she would likely have grabbed front-row seats for an uplifting, paradigm-shifting gathering that bears her name, honors her patron attributes, and is dedicated towards improving the troubling statistics surrounding women in cinema.

The Athena Film Festival, co-founded by the Athena Center for Leadership Studies at Barnard College and Women and Hollywood, celebrated its

tenth anniversary in February 2020. The festival gathered thousands of filmmakers and fans in New York City for screenings of blockbusters and indie films alike, as well as workshops, panel discussions, awards ceremonies, and more. The goal? To showcase the creative power of women in film and highlight themes of women's leadership, while forging community to provide opportunities and support for women.

The National Endowment for the Arts is proud to regularly support the Athena Film Festival, but the grant for the 2020 event carried particular significance. The Arts Endowment encouraged projects that specifically honor the centennial anniversary of women's suffrage, and the Athena Film Festival was among the outstanding programs chosen.

Kathryn Kolbert is co-founder and producing director of the festival, and served as founding director of the Athena Center for Leadership Studies until 2018. A renowned attorney focusing on women's rights, she also served as an executive producer for the NPR radio show *Justice Talking*. Here are excerpts from her conversation with the National Endowment for the Arts, where she spoke about the Athena Film Festival's goals and triumphs, and the intersection of film, women's suffrage, and a better future for all.

NEA: How do you approach selecting movies for the Athena Film Festival?

KATHRYN KOLBERT: Our theme is finding films that showcase women as leaders in a whole range of ways. And leadership, in our view, means agency—the ability to make a difference in the world. Women are doing that in all different professions and circumstances.

NEA: Especially with the anniversary of the 19th Amendment this year, that's a powerful and timely focus.

KOLBERT: Yes, and what's great about the festival is that so many of these movies are shown together. Occasionally, people may see one of these films alone—*Little Women* or another movie about women's leadership—but it's a singular experience. When you come to the festival, we have 50 films that are all on the same theme. It's a different experience and a unique chance to see, from film to film, the variety of women making a difference. It's also powerful to just come and sit together with an audience of people who care about women's leadership.



NEA: How did the anniversary of women's suffrage influence the planning of this year's festival?

KOLBERT: Since the notion of women's suffrage is centered on women's ability to come together and push for change in the world, we beefed up this year's activism efforts. We created a whole room dedicated to sharing information for activists, held a panel on women voting and women in office, and had an excellent discussion of the differences that women are making in the political arena. From a programming perspective, we have always focused on films that tell that story—*Suffragette* came out a couple years ago and was honored with an award and showing at

▲ Effie T. Brown onstage during the 2020 Athena Film Festival awards ceremony.

the festival. Last year, *Knock Down the House*, which is a story of three women running for office, was shown. This year, we showed clips of *Surge*, another documentary about women running for office.

NEA: So women holding office is just as important to you as having the right to vote.

KOLBERT: The whole point of suffrage is seeing women become equal participants in society by becoming formal citizens, and one of the most important roles any of us can play in our society is influencing who takes leadership in the political arena. Having women elected to office is critically important. We want women to bring a fresh range of perspectives, instead of having decisions singularly made by white men. It's vital for people of color to hold office as well. A diversity of viewpoints makes for a more robust society.

NEA: How was the public reception to the festival this year?

KOLBERT: This was our tenth season and our audience has continued to grow every time we do it. In many of our venues, we sold out, which is extraordinary—the fact that people keep coming back, and that the festival keeps getting bigger, shows us that we're doing something right. We are also very thankful that the festival was at the end of February, before the difficulties began with this virus that has caused so much damage and closed so many festivals across country.

NEA: Some recent blockbuster movies, like *Wonder Woman*, were made by female directors and featured female protagonists as well. Are those anomalies, or do you see the numbers related to opportunities for women in film getting better?

KOLBERT: The numbers are getting better, though it's a glacial increase. One reason for the improvement is that more women are becoming film directors, and the more that women direct, the more they bring other women into every aspect of the filmmaking experience. Though it's not anywhere close to parity, this year the numbers of women in film have gone up significantly. The increases are also partly a result of the #MeToo movement and public sentiment about the importance of increasing women's ability to participate equally in all aspects of life. Seeing the push for women's equality in a variety of ways has affected Hollywood. It's not where it needs to be, but we're making progress.

NEA: Are there any other recent Hollywood films that have been major turning points when it comes to gender equity?

KOLBERT: *Frozen* was a huge breakthrough in terms of animated films. Not only was it a great story focused on women characters, it was also a blockbuster. The fact that female characters were leading the film—and that it also made a lot of money—was really key in opening doors for women in film.

▼ The 2020 Athena Film Festival awards ceremony in New York City.



NEA: How so?

KOLBERT: Up until even five or six years ago, the popular sentiment in Hollywood was that every film had to be geared towards 18- to 25-year-old guys, since it was commonly believed that they were the ones who chose which movies people went to see. It was also believed that they were the ones who filled theaters for action flicks and went to see them over and over.

NEA: But those are flawed assumptions.

KOLBERT: The reality is that 50 percent of filmgoers are women, and the people who make decisions about what movies to see are most often women as well. So when Hollywood studios, as well as smaller-screen entities like Amazon and Hulu, see women as an important market force, that opens doors for even more movies featuring women, and created by women, to be developed.

NEA: There's also the myth that movies made by women can only really be for women.

KOLBERT: At the festival, our philosophy is that women shouldn't be held back by stereotypes of what they can and cannot make. Women are as creative as men and everyone approaches subject matter in different ways. There's no single female gaze any more than there's a single male one. An important part of opening up filmmaking for everyone is ensuring that women have the opportunity to express creativity however they want to, rather than being hamstrung by expectations of romantic comedies, stories where the girl has to get married and be happy in the end, and so on.



▲ Arianna Afsar performs during the 2020 Athena Film Festival.

NEA: Finally—how has your personal background as a women's rights litigator influenced the identity of the Athena Film Festival?

KOLBERT: My background has always emphasized the importance of culture as a change agent. While it's important that law itself change things in our society, changes in law are furthered by changes in culture. So coming to Barnard to lead the Athena Center, and helping to found the festival, I brought that philosophy with me. If we are going to engender new leadership in young women and provide them with skills that are so crucial, we also have to create a climate that understands. We need to build a culture that sees women as leaders.

Michael Gallant is a composer, musician, and writer living in New York City. He is the founder and CEO of Gallant Music.



◀ Greta Gerwig and Beanie Feldstein attend the 2020 Athena Film Festival awards ceremony.



CREATIVITY AND PERSISTENCE

Art that Fueled the Fight for Women's Suffrage

AN EXCERPT

In August 2020, as part of the centennial celebration of women's suffrage, the Arts Endowment published a book commemorating how the arts helped bring about the passage of the 19th Amendment. This excerpt from *Creativity and Persistence: Art that Fueled the Fight for Women's Suffrage* introduces how women artists used their talent to elevate the image of women and highlight the importance of their full participation in society and politics. A PDF of the full book is available on the Arts Endowment website, [arts.gov](https://www.arts.gov).

Art has always reflected the world in which it was created, from the ancient Greeks, whose surviving poetry and sculpture attest to their humanism, to mid-20th-century American art, which broke with tradition by engaging with popular and consumer culture. Art has also always had the power to do more than simply reflect—it can make social commentary to effect change. Much of the art made across history involved such critiques, but the Enlightenment is especially associated with doing so. Artists like Eugène Delacroix and Jacques-Louis

David famously depicted the tragedies of war in their art, raising awareness of important social issues. Similarly, satire was used by writers like Jonathan Swift and artists like Honoré Daumier, both of whom made scathing commentary in their work. Their goal, of course, was to call attention to the ills of society with the hope of correcting them.

With the birth of the women's suffrage movement, American artists made the same kind of social commentary by working with the activists who were fighting for women's rights at the ground level. Without a doubt, the women's suffrage movement would not have had the success it did had the arts not brought the valiant efforts of the suffragists into the spotlight.

In the earliest days of the movement, the spoken, sung, and written word played a leading role: suffragists understood the persuasive power of language, which could not only be shared at gatherings but also published and widely disseminated. The early focus on language aligned with the ethos of American culture in the second half of the 19th century when American literature was coming into

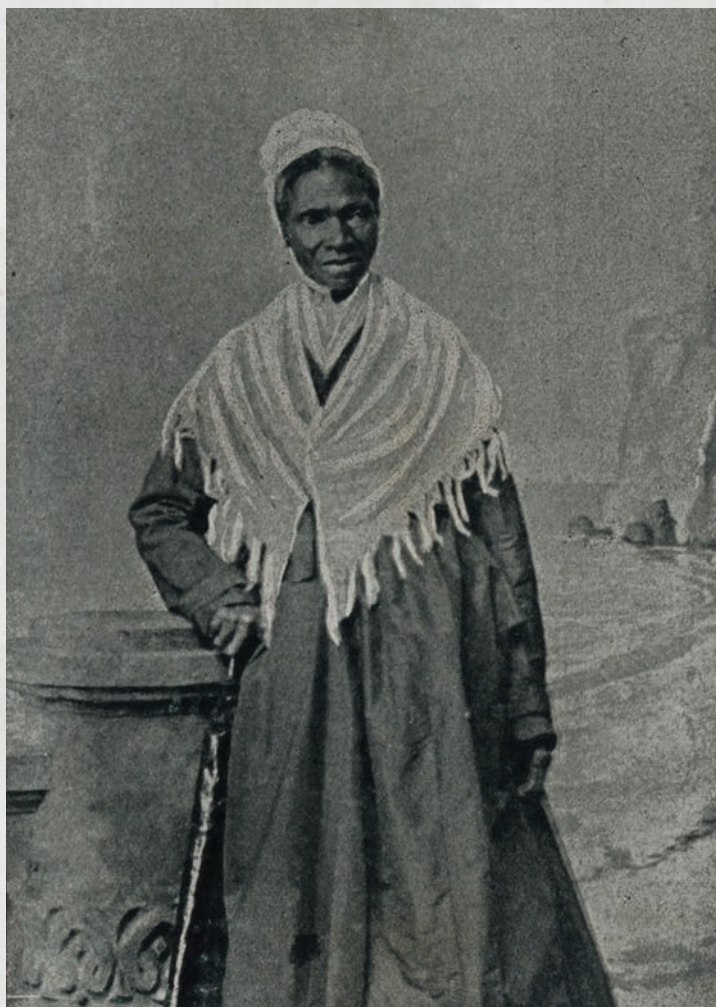
its own. As America was finding its voice, the suffrage movement participated, with the powerful voices of women like Sojourner Truth leading the way.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the suffrage movement in the U.S. began to work more actively with the visual arts to spread its message, creating striking cartoons, paintings, posters, postcards, films, and even sculpture. These images permeated American culture, changing the perception of what it meant to be a woman and to be a suffragist.

Without these compelling words and images, the work of the suffragists might have gone largely unnoticed. After all, only the very staunchest devotees of the movement followed the details of legislative successes and failures. It was the arts that rendered the unseen work of the suffragists visible and important to the average American. Art put a human face on a political issue, it empowered American women, and, in the end, it helped to reshape the face of American democracy for the better.

◀ Henry Mayer, *The Awakening, Puck*, centerfold illustration, 1915, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC

▼ Portrait of Sojourner Truth, undated, photomechanical reproduction, Library of Congress, Miller NAWSA Suffrage Scrapbooks, 1897-1911 Rare Book And Special Collections Division, Washington, DC



► Evelyn Rumsey Cary, *Woman's Suffrage*, 1905, oil painting, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University



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GIVE HER OF THE FRUIT
OF HER HANDS, AND LET
HER OWN WORKS PRAISE
HER IN THE GATES.

Close-up of *High Tide* (2016) by Tasha Lewis. Cardboard, paper, plaster, found fabric, glass beads, thread.



EBBS AND FLOWS

AN EXHIBITION OF SCULPTOR TASHA LEWIS
IN NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

BY EMMA EVERITT

All photos by Tasha Lewis

Stepping into the east gallery of Nashville's Parthenon museum in Centennial Park, you might think you have been transported to an abstract Grecian bathhouse. Surrounded by pedestals and fixtures imitating the architecture of ancient Greece, the deconstructed bathers and overflowing vessels resemble relics dragged up

from the depths of the sea. Gradients of pink and blue cover their soft organic forms, reminders of where the water has touched. Inspired by classical literary masterpieces, Grecian design motifs, and coastal living, *Flood Lines* explores the female experience, both past and present, and the challenges of confronting and conforming to gender expectations.

Featuring the sculptures of artist Tasha Lewis, the exhibition opened on January 24, 2020, and was funded in part by an Art Works grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The award was part of an agency initiative to support projects honoring the women’s suffrage centennial.

“With suffrage being part of the national conversation this year, [Lewis] was thinking, and we were too, about the idea of the patriarchy,” said Wesley Paine, director of the Parthenon museum. “Though women have come a long way since antiquity and the freedoms they had then versus what women have now, we’re still pushing for equality.”

Lewis’ work promotes equality by challenging patriarchal perspectives and breaking down society’s concepts of ideal beauty. By modeling figures from her own body, Lewis creates sculptures that look like real women, complete with curves and body hair. “I can only really start with thinking about my own body and trying to process my own anxieties and feelings about being a bodied woman,” Lewis said. “Dealing with that physicality and trying to replicate that through my sculptures [leads to] installations that feel open and welcome for people to come in and see themselves in the figures or the classical Greek elements or the hand-sewn elements and be tied to parts of their own female identity.”

The representation of women in classical Greek sculpture seems to invoke a timeless beauty. Even when sculptures are broken and weathered, they are still regarded as masterpieces. “She has lost arms and the stone has been worn away through time, but we have her up on this pedestal in these museums,” said Lewis, imagining the

ancient sculptures of women that have survived through the ages. “I was thinking about that as a reflected mirror for how I feel in our culture as a woman. It’s represented as a kind of resilience and beauty that isn’t an idealized beauty.” The pairing of classical Greek aesthetics with real bodies shows visitors that regardless of societal expectation, women’s bodies have an inherent beauty that should be celebrated.

Lewis’ work not only challenges standards of beauty, but gives women a sense of agency. Her sculptures acknowledge the destructive and disfiguring power of water, while reclaiming this force of nature as a source of liberation from the expectations for women in society.

“I was thinking about the new ecosystem that’s revealed when the tide goes out,” said Lewis, in reference to the title, *Flood Lines*. “I was thinking a lot about hybridity and using fish scales to denote that on my figural forms. They’re like these mermaids or sirens. They play into classical myths of women being these seductive beings, but in my space, they’re very much in control of their own identities and they’re not being written into these stories. They’re actors in their own lives.” This kind of freedom and influence instilled in Lewis’ figures is especially reminiscent of the suffragists, women who paved the way for future generations to be in control of their rights and have their voices heard.

The techniques used in Lewis’ sculptures also share an interesting connection to the suffrage movement and women of the past. Arts such as stitching, beadwork, and dying cloth were historically done by women across many diverse cultures. For Lewis,

► *Tidal Bather VII* (2018). Plaster gauze cast from mold of artist’s body, wood, mesh, fabric, glass beads, felt, thread.



employing these techniques has allowed her to reflect on the female experience. “It’s connecting to a kind of timeless woman’s handwork that takes skill, but [also] takes labor and time and loving devotion,” she said. She also hopes these techniques might resonate with visitors who might have learned how to cross-stitch or sew from their own mothers or grandmothers. “I want to pay homage to that and highlight that in a contemporary art context,” she said, referring to what she described as “these beautiful lineages of women makers.”

While some of these crafts and their association with women have existed since ancient times, women were expected to continue these activities well into the 20th century. “The beadwork, the art, the hand-workmanship on these is exactly the kind of thing—although very elaborate—that people said, ‘Once women get the vote, they’ll never be at home again. They’ll never do the domestic work that they do now,’” said Paine, in reference to Lewis’ work.

Lewis navigates that tension by challenging societal expectations for women while preserving these art forms. “I think a lot of my work is interested in not just reclaiming the actual craft of doing these things, but really trying to assert that they are very relevant and nuanced art forms,” she said. “I both want to embrace that idea of moving up in society, while also valuing that labor of craft, of textile, of fiber, and showing that they have a place in contemporary society for modern women.”

In conjunction with the exhibit, the Parthenon also offered several museum programs to help visitors further reflect on—and challenge their



own perceptions of—women in Ancient Greece, the early 20th century, and today. For younger visitors, the museum developed several programs for an Art Cart that was stationed in the gallery where young people could engage with museum staff about some of the themes in the exhibit. “There was one about Persephone and how she can be considered a queen or a victim, depending on how you read that story,” said Paine. “We wanted people to think about transformation and about women in particular and how the stories from Ancient Greece resonate today.”

For older audiences, the museum hosted a panel featuring four female speakers, who discussed the freedoms of women from Ancient Greece compared to modern-day Tennessee, with consideration of the civil rights movement and Black suffragists. *Flood Lines* provided a unique opportunity for the Parthenon to engage visitors in discussing these issues. “That this is so reflective of both 20th-century American history and Ancient Greek history and ties them together is a little unusual,” said Paine, whose own museum is a replica of the Parthenon in

▲ Close-up of *Tidal Bather III* (2018) by Tasha Lewis. Plaster gauze cast from mold of artist’s body, wood, mesh, fabric, laser-cut fabric, wire, cotton cord, embroidery floss, thread.

Athens, which was constructed in the 5th century BC. “We don’t often run across things that stitch together the antiquity that we represent and contemporary art forms and subjects of national discussion like suffrage.”

Despite the continual progress being made for women’s equality, there is still a ways to go. In two studies of prominent U.S. art museums, it was found that 87 percent of artists represented in permanent collections were male, just 11 percent of new acquisitions were by female artists, and 14 percent of exhibitions showcased women artists. According to the Arts Endowment’s own research, there are also gender disparities in income: female visual artists earned 74 cents for every dollar earned by male visual artists.

But in an increasingly hopeful development, women now account for nearly half of leadership roles at American museums, and make up the majority of other museum administration roles. “I think that the national landscape is changing,” said Paine, of women and the arts. “It’s gradual, but it is changing, as is the national landscape

for women in jobs of every description, not just museums and nonprofits.”

Just like the rise and fall of water, progress ebbs and flows as women continue to negotiate their place in society. As positions change like the tide, and the transformations of time are revealed, we come closer to a world of gender equality. “We haven’t achieved it yet,” said Paine, “but we are much farther along than we used to be.”

Emma Everitt was an intern in the National Endowment for the Arts Office of Public Affairs in spring 2020.

▼ Gallery view of *Flood Lines*, an exhibition of Tasha Lewis’ work at Nashville’s Parthenon museum in Centennial Park.





Removing the Hurdles

A Virtual Look at the DesignPhiladelphia Festival

BY PAULETTE BEETE

All photos by Chris Kendig

Since 2004, the nonprofit Center for Architecture and Design, an offshoot of the Philadelphia chapter of the American Institute of Architects, has hosted the annual DesignPhiladelphia Festival to both celebrate the city's design sector and educate the general public about the range of design disciplines. In light of the 2020 women's suffrage centennial, the center's executive director Rebecca Johnson and her team found themselves wondering if there was a connection between American women gaining the right to vote and the festival's goals of celebrating design. It quickly became clear that there was a parallel between women's suffrage as a step toward equality for women and the role that the art of design can play in creating and fostering equality for all.

With support from the National Endowment for the Arts, this year's festival will highlight projects that promote autonomy for women, as well as recognize the knowledge and skills women bring to the design world because of their lived experiences. "We want to look at projects and ideas that move towards equality, but we also want to acknowledge the women who have actually made an impression through the work that they do," said Johnson.

In explaining how design can promote equality, Johnson said, "In fashion design, equality is making sure that all clothes fit all sizes and shapes of people [and looking at] how folks in wheelchairs dress, making sure that they have clothes that are adaptive to their body and the way they move through the world." She added, "I think that equality in architecture and urban



▲ Cherry Street Pier, the public hub of DesignPhiladelphia.

design is [about asking] how are you creating spaces that are accessible and open so that everybody uses them.”

Throughout the festival, exhibits focused on women designers will place the women’s work in the context of their times, highlighting the ways in which their achievements—like those of the suffragettes—were both historic and transformative.

As an example of the type of design project the festival hopes to highlight, Johnson described a new pregnancy test that was recently honored for its design excellence. The test, which is not yet on the market, is flushable, biodegradable, and inexpensive. “It’s something to know if you’re pregnant or not, especially for women [for whom] being pregnant might endanger their lives in different places around the world, and even in the U.S.,” Johnson said, explaining the test’s significance.

While she acknowledges that women do not hew to a homogenous experience, Johnson does maintain that by their very natures, women—like other groups that can be and have been marginalized—bring something extra because of their distinct lived experiences. It is this very distinctiveness that Johnson wants the festival to not only highlight but celebrate. “We think it’s important to say that design or any other profession isn’t going to help the problems of the

world or of our country without multiple people being involved. [A group of only] white men can’t and won’t successfully solve and create equality through their work because their experiences in the world are different. And so women and people of color and people who are disabled have different experiences, and those are extra tools that they have in their toolkits,” said Johnson.

DesignPhiladelphia is usually held at various sites across the city, including Cherry Street Pier and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Johnson called it “an explosion of activity over ten days.” Although the idea for the festival originated with architecture students at Philadelphia Textile and Design University (now part of Thomas Jefferson University), the festival in its current

form spotlights a number of design disciplines in addition to architecture, including product design, industrial design, fashion, and graphic design. Comprising talks, workshops, hands-on experiences, installations, and exhibitions, past festivals have welcomed more than 30,000 people at the Cherry Street exhibits alone. At other festival sites, participants have been able to join open-house tours or visit design showrooms that are usually closed to the public, making it a truly citywide festival.

Because of ongoing concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, Johnson is reimagining this fall’s festival as a digital one. She noted that it was important to move forward with the festival despite the challenges, particularly because of its focus on Philadelphia-based designers. “We feel like if we’re not highlighting local designers, who is?” she said.

Johnson also feels it’s important to balance the desire to celebrate Philadelphia’s role as a design center with the very real economic and resource challenges confronting many design businesses because of the health crisis. She noted, “We want to be supportive of the community here. What we envision right now is that there are going to be evening events, maybe six nights out of the ten-day festival, that will be either talks or panel discussions.” The proposed program may also

include an event, like a fashion show or public art happening, that Johnson described as “fun to watch but you don’t necessarily have to listen like it’s a talk. I think we need more fun in this time.” It is Johnson’s hope that even digitally, the festival will still include breakout sessions and networking opportunities, as well as access to normally private design gems, like the city’s historic homes, via virtual tours. She is also working on a partnership with a local nonprofit that works with girls so that the festival becomes a vehicle to introduce young people to the idea of design as a career choice.

Even though the festival will take a different shape this year, Johnson believes its objectives are still the same. “Our number one data point that we’ve had over the past 15 years is that non-designers who attend DesignPhiladelphia events say that it made them prouder of Philadelphia in [terms of] learning more about the design history and legacy of the city.” She added that there will be lots that the design community can take away from the festival as well. “For the design-savvy or design-interested and designers, what I’m hoping they get out of this project is to think about equality,” she said. “Equity/diversity/inclusion is all the rage, but [it’s important] to really have some concrete examples of how design got better because women were involved in the process.”

“I’m hoping that [festivalgoers] will walk away from this with increased awareness of the fact that



it’s been 100 years since women had the right to vote and also awareness that we have a lot more work to do,” she said. “There are a lot of ways that equality or achieving equality is blocked or there are hurdles in people’s way, but designers can help remove those hurdles.”

Paulette Beete is the social media manager in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.

▲ Housed in a custom Airstream, the project “CoLab Philadelphia: Building Healthier Communities Through Creative Placemaking” addressed issues of food access and education. The project received DesignPhiladelphia’s Social Impact Award in 2019.



◀ A visitor at DesignPhiladelphia explores the “Park in a Truck” initiative from Thomas Jefferson University. The project design proposed a simple, fast, and cost-effective way to help communities transform vacant lots into public parks.

Neema Bickersteth
as Treemonisha in
the Volcano Theatre
production. Photo by
John Lauener



Trying to Find Their Way

A Reimagining of Scott Joplin's Opera
Treemonisha

BY DON BALL

In 1911, noted Black composer Scott Joplin published a piano-vocal score of his opera *Treemonisha* with his own money—using up almost all of his savings—after being turned down by other publishers. There also were no takers for staging the production in New York, and the only performance of the opera in his lifetime was a concert recital in 1915 in Harlem, also paid for by Joplin. The music was much different from the ragtime compositions he was known for, and the story wildly progressive for its time: a young Black woman named Treemonisha is chosen to lead her community, using her education to defeat the conjurers who used superstition to prey on the people. Equally progressive, the opera was written to feature an all-Black cast. The rejection of the opera proved too much for Joplin, who suffered a breakdown and ended up in a pauper’s grave in 1917, his orchestrations to the opera discarded.

But Joplin’s opera wasn’t forgotten and was revived in the late 20th century, getting its first full staging in 1972 by Morehouse College, one of the nation’s historically black colleges and universities, with the Atlanta Symphony, followed by a professional premiere in 1975 by the Houston Grand Opera. In 1976, Joplin was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize for his contributions to American music, 59 years after his death.

In this centennial year of women’s suffrage, *Treemonisha* makes another revival with support from the National Endowment for the Arts and other international collaborators. Presented in a new, contemporary light, the production is being produced by the Canadian groups Volcano Theatre and Moveable Beast Collective, and was commissioned by Stanford Live, Washington Performing Arts, Minnesota Opera, the National Arts Centre and Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in Canada, and Southbank Centre in England.

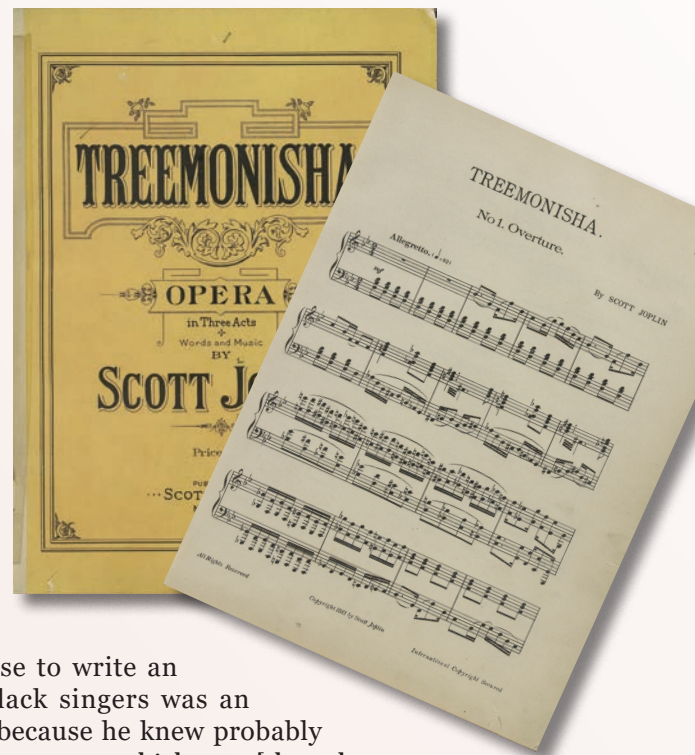
“*[Treemonisha]* is really centered around this idea of a woman being called on to lead people through a period of change and advocating for the needs of the community, which we thought was a really powerful message,” said Chris Lorway, executive director of Stanford Live, which organizes performing arts events at Stanford University in California.

Ross Manson, the artistic director at Volcano, became interested in staging a full production of *Treemonisha* after seeing an abridged concert version. When Volcano began putting together

the team for the opera in 2014, they wanted to not only maintain an all-Black cast as Joplin had originally envisioned, but to also have Black women lead the creative team.

“The fact that [Joplin] chose to write an opera only for Black singers was an artistic decision, because he knew probably that most white presenters—which were [the only presenters] at the time—would not be interested in presenting that,” noted playwright Leah-Simone Bowen, who adapted the story and was co-librettist with Cheryl Davis. “He knew that he probably would have to produce it himself, and he did it anyway. So it only makes sense that the [Volcano] team would be primarily a Black creative team. It really follows in the footsteps of what Joplin wanted to create.”

Bowen kept the core of the story intact: that *Treemonisha* is educated and uses her intelligence to lead the community. But what Joplin presented as ignorance—people rooted in superstition and conjuring—Bowen presents as being part of the African tradition that had been lost during slavery. “*Treemonisha*, as a leader, ends up holding onto both sides of herself and her people, which is the African and the American.” To enhance that connection between the African



▲ Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha* piano-vocal score, 1911, Library of Congress, Music Division.

▼ Part of the creative team for the *Treemonisha* production. Photo by John Lauener





▲ Sate performing as Nana Buluku during the score workshop for *Treemonisha* in 2019. Photo by John Lauener

and the American, the musical arrangers—Jessie Montgomery and Jannina Norpoth, both based in New York City—used both Western and African instruments in the arrangements. While Act One follows Joplin’s score, Acts Two

and Three depart from it with the addition of African influences. The all-Black, majority women chamber orchestra included a string quartet, jazz instruments such as trumpet and clarinet, and the kora, a 21-stringed instrument from West Africa. “The kora is such a versatile instrument: it can sound like itself and it can also sound like a harpsichord or a harp, so it can very seamlessly go back and forth through many styles of music,” said Norpoth. “From a historical standpoint, the kora is a storytelling instrument. The kora players in Africa come from generations of kora players, and they’re the historians.” The kora’s use enhanced the idea Bowen puts forth in the story about the importance of traditions that were lost when Africans were brought to America as enslaved people.

The arrangers filled out the story and smoothed out certain plot points by using several other songs by Joplin, including his ragtime composition “A Picture of Her Face.” “It’s very beautiful and reflectively joyful, but also with a twinge of sadness,” said Norpoth of the song. “Ragtime has a certain style, and even the sad



► Musical arranger Jannina Norpoth with kora player Yamoussa Bangoura at the score workshop in 2019. Photo by John Lauener

music still sounds happy. I think it's reflective of being a Black person during that time and having to be so repressed about the ways society was oppressing you, and having to show that in a very understated way."

While some might grumble about revising Joplin's work, Bowen thinks otherwise. "Shakespeare has lived on and is lauded, and people redo his work and change his work and do adaptations, because he was a genius," she said. "That work is used as a jumping-off point. I think Joplin is a genius and deserves that, and I wish more Black artists, globally, of this time period and before, would get this kind of tribute. I do feel like it is a tribute to him, and that we're honoring him."

Although the opera was scheduled to premiere at Stanford University in late April, the global pandemic interfered. "We were about three weeks from having the whole company land on our doorstep, and that's when everything essentially got called," said Lorway. "There have been a number of company workshops over the last few years, and different groups—both locally and internationally—have gotten together and have done a lot of planning. This was really going to be the home stretch and literally we just missed it by weeks." With the complexity of schedules involved, Lorway suggested that most likely they would postpone the production until 2022.

Norpoth is looking forward to that day. "I'm confident that it will happen in the future and it will be just as relevant and just as important and just as needed, and maybe more needed after all of this time where we haven't been able to experience live music."

While it missed premiering during the centennial of the 19th Amendment, it still connects with women's journey for equality. When Bowen was writing the story adaption, she was thinking about who would be the *Treemonisha* of Joplin's day. "A lot of my inspiration and research when I was looking at Joplin was also about [women's rights and civil rights activist] Ida B. Wells," she said. "There are wisps of Ida B. Wells all through *Treemonisha*. I think it's really important when we talk about these movements to remind ourselves that Black women have always had to fight not only for the equality of women's rights, but also as African Americans."

Joplin's story about a strong Black woman selected by men and women to lead their community—written a decade before women

could even vote nationally in the country—is a story that still resonates today. "The beauty of *Treemonisha* is that Joplin chose to write this [opera] about a story that was really happening in his community," Bowen said. "It is, of course, about America and the time of Reconstruction. But it's also about a group of people trying to find their way."

Don Ball is executive editor of American Artscape.



▲ Advertisement for Volcano Theatre's production of *Treemonisha*. Photo of Neema Bickersteth by Dahlia Katz, graphic design by Lost in the Island

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

CREATIVITY AND PERSISTENCE

Art that Fueled the Fight for Women's Suffrage



Read an excerpt

from the National Endowment for the Arts' new publication, *Creativity and Persistence: Art that Fueled the Fight for Women's Suffrage*, on page 8.