

**MORGAN FREEMAN AND JEFF SKOLL
HONORED AT GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE ANNUAL FUNDRAISER**

***Star-Studded, Sell-Out BACKSTAGE AT THE GEFFEN Raises More Than \$1.4 Million
Benefitting Arts and Education Programs and New Play Development***

LOS ANGELES, May 23, 2016 – Sunday’s (May 22) *Backstage at the Geffen*, star-studded fundraiser at the Geffen Playhouse and the pre-show host committee dinner grossed over \$1.4 million for the Geffen Playhouse’s education, outreach and artistic initiatives. **Norman Lear** presented the **Distinction in Service Award** to social entrepreneur **Jeff Skoll**. Walt Disney Studios Chairman **Alan Horn** presented the **Distinction in Theater Award** to Oscar-winning actor **Morgan Freeman**.

Actress **Dana Delany**, a Geffen Playhouse alum, served as Master of Ceremonies for the by-invitation-only fundraiser that gathers superstars from the worlds of stage and screen to share often irreverent, behind-the-curtain stories of the struggles and surprises that memorably shaped their lives and careers. This year’s 14th annual fundraiser featured “backstage” memories by **Rainn Wilson, Aaron Sorkin, Garry Marshall, Kristin Davis, Amy Landecker** and **Jaeden Lieberher** with musical performances by **Ellis Hall, Frenchie Davis** and **Jon Boogz & Lil’ Buck**.

“The lovely thing about theater, film and television,” said Delany in welcoming the more than 500 guests, “is that they attract people crazy enough to build lives around them, and if you spent your life in this community, you’ve seen enough drama on and off stage to think, ‘If these walls could talk,’ but tonight they don’t have to...our storytellers will do that for them”

David Geffen served as Honorary Chair of the 20th Anniversary event. **Martha Henderson** and **Pamela Robinson** Co-Chair the Geffen Playhouse Board of Directors. The evening was beautifully produced by **Gil Cates, Jr.** and **Kevin S. Bright** and directed by **Randall Arney**.

Funds raised are earmarked for a host of Geffen Playhouse endeavors including new play development, playwright commissions, second productions and artistic risks, as well as the theater’s award-winning education and community engagement programs, which help bring the excitement of live theater to more than 15,000 disadvantaged youth, seniors, veteran and community members annually.

Backstage at the Geffen title sponsor **City National Bank**, returning for the seventh year, was joined by presenting sponsors **Audi of America**, returning for the 11th year, **Apollo Jets, Douglas Elliman Real Estate** and **Participant Media**, with special thanks to **UCLA** and **CAA**.

Event Highlights:

- The curtain rose to “Ambassador of Soul” Ellis Hall performing *Seasons of Love* from *Rent*, accompanied by a nine-member choir, while images representing 20 years at the Geffen, were projected in the background.
- **Be Yourself:** Rainn Wilson talked about how bombing in his first Broadway show was a transformative experience. “I decided I’m never going to pretend to be some classical actor guy to fulfill some idea of what it is to be on Broadway. I have to be myself. I need to be quirky and odd and weird looking and embrace that.”
- **Formative Years:** Honoree Morgan Freeman waxed nostalgic about his early days in the theater. “My first real career break was on Broadway in 1967 when I landed a part in *Hello, Dolly*. I know what you’re thinking--Morgan Freeman was Dolly Levi?? That led to work on TV on the Electric Company—groundbreaking work—remember, I was the first

African American to play a Vegetable Vampire. This brings me here to the Geffen, the heart and soul of the Los Angeles theater scene for over 20 years.”

- **Honoring a Friend:** Famed producer Norman Lear introduced Participant Media founder Jeff Skoll by saying, “I knew he started eBay when he was 12 or maybe 14. Then this man came to this town to put the money he made to work in the entertainment business with a deep desire to use film and storytelling to make the world a better place.”
- **Stories That Matter:** Honoree Jeff Skoll reminded the audience, “Stories well told are the true catalyst for inspiration and change. Please keep telling stories that matter and supporting places like the Geffen that bring those stories to life.”
- **Not So Happy Days:** Director/producer Garry Marshall, in a bit of self-deprecating humor, spoke of his first play, which was a “miserable flop.” Subsequently, he was introduced as the Abraham Lincoln of the theater: “He’s tall, he likes to tell stories and he’s killed at the theater.”
- **High-Priced Talent:** In presenting the Distinction in Theater Award to Morgan Freeman, Alan Horn said, “Morgan Freeman doesn’t sound like God. God sounds like Morgan Freeman.” Horn also said that he’s been negotiating to get Freeman to work with the Disney studios, but was warned he was expensive. How much? “Scale plus 13 *Hamilton* tickets.”
- **‘Why I Love the Theater:** Kristin Davis recalled a story about how Angela Lansbury saved her when she reached for a line she forgot. Apologizing afterwards, the veteran actress graciously replied that, “Everybody forgets their lines.” “She was so generous,” said Davis, “Something always goes wrong and the person who saves you is usually another actor. That’s why I love the theater.”
- **Understudied:** Actress Amy Landecker confessed that as a 27-year-old at the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, she was the Blanche DuBois understudy—but had failed to master her lines. Her sometimes nervous, intense and wild ad-lib performance got great reviews anyway, “since Blanche was so out of her mind, anything I did was OK.”
- **Lucky Lunch Break:** Young actor Jaeden Lieberher appeared in *St. Vincent* with Bill Murray, who intimidated him until he found out that Murray didn’t really like kids. Yet during a press tour, they wound up as pals when Murray spirited him and fellow cast mates Melissa McCarthy and Naomi Watts away for a half-hour lunch that stretched to two and a half hours, keeping an impatient press corps waiting.
- **Spoken Word:** Jon Boogz, Lil’ Buck and dancers performed an interpretive dance to a spoken word piece by Robin Sanders inspired by the evening.
- **There’s No Place Like Home:** Broadway performer Frenchie Davis sang “Home,” from *The Wiz*, a song whose message encapsulates what many actors, donors and patrons feel about the Geffen—that it’s truly their home.
- **Arriving in Style:** Guests were greeted at the entrance by a 2016 Audi R8 Vio Spyder. Stunning, agile and possessing unrivaled power and performance.
- **Dining With The Stars:** Host Committee guests and honorees enjoyed a pre-show dinner catered by 2016 James Beard winning Chef Suzanne Goin of Lucques with wines provided by Sterling Vineyards.
- **Sweet Ending:** A post-show reception featured an array of luscious desserts from Ronen Levy, Richard Ruskell, Sprinkles Cupcakes, DeLuscious Cookies, The Dessert Tree, Bo Nuage and Kakigori Creamery.

ABOUT GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE

Geffen Playhouse has been a hub of the Los Angeles theater scene since opening its doors in 1995. Noted for its intimacy and celebrated for its world-renowned mix of classic and contemporary plays,

provocative new works and second productions, the not-for-profit organization continues to present a body of work that has garnered national recognition. Named in honor of entertainment mogul and philanthropist David Geffen, who made the initial donation to the theater, the company was founded by Gilbert Cates, and is currently helmed by Artistic Director Randall Arney, Executive Director Gil Cates Jr. and Co-Chairs of the Board Martha Henderson and Pamela Robinson. Proudly associated with UCLA, the Geffen welcomes an audience of more than 130,000 each year, and maintains extensive education and community engagement programs, designed to involve underserved young people and the community at large in the arts. Following a strong 2014/2015 season during which five productions extended, the company's 20th anniversary season has featured eight productions (two world premieres and three West Coast premieres) featuring some of the nation's leading playwrights and directors. For more information, please visit www.geffenplayhouse.org.

###

MEDIA CONTACT:

Katy Sweet/Pam Giangregorio
Katy Sweet & Associates, Inc.
(310)479-2333 / Pam@KatySweetPR.com