

# GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE

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### CAST ANNOUNCED FOR GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE WEST COAST PREMIERE OF “*THE FIRST DEEP BREATH*”

FEATURING OPA ADEYEMO, LEE EDWARD COLSTON II, BRANDON MENDEZ HOMER, ELLA JOYCE, DEANNA REED-FOSTER, CANDACE THOMAS, TONY TODD AND KEITH A. WALLACE

WRITTEN BY LEE EDWARD COLSTON II AND DIRECTED BY STEVE H. BROADNAX III

PREVIEWS BEGIN FEBRUARY 1 - OPENING NIGHT IS FEBRUARY 9

LOS ANGELES (January 3, 2023) – Geffen Playhouse today announced the full cast for its West Coast premiere of *The First Deep Breath*, written by **Lee Edward Colston II** (*Roost*, *Fargo*) and directed by **Steve H. Broadnax III** (*Thoughts of a Colored Man*, *The Hot Wing King*).

The cast includes **Opa Adeyemo** (*ALIEN/NATION*, *Gint*) as AJ (Alexander Michael Jones); **Lee Edward Colston II** as Abdul-Malik (Albert Melvin Jones IV); **Brandon Mendez Homer** (*Uncle Vanya*, *Wolf Play*) as Leslie Carter; **Ella Joyce** (*King Hedley II*, *Roc*) as Ruth Jones; **Deanna Reed-Foster** (*A Raisin in the Sun*, *Fences*) as Pearl Thomas; **Candace Thomas** (*Nina Simone: Four Women*, *Man of La Mancha*) as Dee-Dee (Denise Jones); **Tony Todd** (*King Hedley II*, *Candyman*) as Pastor Albert Melvin Jones III; and **Keith A. Wallace** (*The Bitter Game*, *Junk*) as Tyree Fisher.

Previews for *The First Deep Breath* begin Wednesday, February 1 in the Gil Cates Theater at Geffen Playhouse. Opening night is Thursday, February 9.

Pastor Albert Jones and his family are proud leaders of the Mother Bethel Baptist Church and pillars of their community. Plans are being made for a special memorial service to honor their late daughter Diane on the sixth anniversary of her passing. But when Abdul-Malik, the eldest son whom Albert blames for her death, returns home from prison, the family’s veneer begins to crack as shocking revelations come to light. A ferocious new epic written by Lee Edward Colston II, *The First Deep Breath* chronicles the depths families will go to hide their skeletons from the outside world and each other.

#### THE FIRST DEEP BREATH

Written by **Lee Edward Colston II**  
Directed by **Steve H. Broadnax III**

**Previews:** February 1, 2023 – February 8, 2023

**Opening Night:** February 9, 2023

**Closing Night:** March 5, 2023

**CAST**

**Opa Adeyemo** as AJ (Alexander Michael Jones)  
**Lee Edward Colston II** as Abdul-Malik (Albert Melvin Jones IV)  
**Brandon Mendez Homer** as Leslie Carter  
**Ella Joyce** as Ruth Jones  
**Deanna Reed-Foster** as Pearl Thomas  
**Candace Thomas** as Dee-Dee (Denise Jones)  
**Tony Todd** as Pastor Albert Melvin Jones III  
**Keith A. Wallace** as Tyree Fisher

**PRODUCTION TEAM**

Scenic Designer **Michael Carnahan**  
Costume Designer **Eduardo Castro**  
Lighting Designer **Pablo Santiago**  
Sound Designer **Curtis Craig**  
Composer **Rashad McPherson**  
Choreographer **DJ Smart**  
Fight Director **Steve Rankin**  
Dramaturg **Lindsay A. Jenkins**  
Production Stage Manager **Alyssa Escalante**  
Assistant Stage Manager **Amber R. Dettmers**  
Casting Director **Phyllis Schuringa, CSA**

**PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE**

|                   |                    |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| Monday            | No performance     |
| Tuesday – Friday  | 7:30 p.m.          |
| Saturday – Sunday | 1:00 and 7:00 p.m. |

**LOCATION**

Gil Cates Theater at Geffen Playhouse  
10886 Le Conte Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024

**TICKET INFORMATION**

Tickets currently priced at \$30.00 - \$129.00. Available by phone at 310.208.2028 or online at [www.geffenplayhouse.org](http://www.geffenplayhouse.org). Fees may apply.

Currently, children under six years of age will not be admitted. Masks are no longer required—but are encouraged—for audiences in our theaters and lobby/courtyard areas for all future productions. Select performances of *The First Deep Breath* have been designated as “Masks Required” to accommodate patrons who feel more comfortable attending with an audience that is fully masked.

Rush tickets for each day’s performance are made available to the general public one hour before showtime at the box office. \$35.00 General/\$15.00 Student.

**COLLEGE AUDIENCES**

Through a variety of events and other opportunities, Geffen Playhouse welcomes college students to experience the live storytelling presented on our stages. We are proud of our association with UCLA’s

School of Theater, Film, and Television, and open our doors to all college students throughout Los Angeles. More information is available at [www.geffenplayhouse.org/college](http://www.geffenplayhouse.org/college).

## **ABOUT THE ARTISTS**

### **Lee Edward Colston II (Playwright) (Abdul-Malik [Albert Melvin Jones IV])**

Philly native Lee Edward Colston II is a Black, Queer, former prison guard and MMA Fighter turned actor, writer, director, teacher, and author. He was a finalist for the 2017 IAMA Theatre Company's Shonda Rhimes Unsung Voices Playwriting Commission and a recipient of the National Black Theatre's I AM SOUL Playwrights Residency. *The First Deep Breath* received critical acclaim as "...one of the best Chicago plays of the decade..." after its world premiere at Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago, earning Colston a 2020 Jeff Award for Best New Work as well as a 2020 Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award given by the American Theatre Critics Association. Past winners include Lynn Nottage, August Wilson, and Horton Foote. Some of Colston's other plays include: *Roost*, *For Which It Stands*, *Solitary*, *Holla*, and *Birthday Cake*. Colston previously wrote on *Fargo* (FX) starring Chris Rock. His episode "East/West" was named one of the top TV Episodes of 2020 by *The Hollywood Reporter*. Colston has developed television projects at HBO with Academy Award winners Laura Dern, Eric Roth, and Alex Gibney. He has also developed with Emmy Award winners Joe Fields and Joel Weisberg at FX. Most recently, Lee is a co-producer on Ryan Murphy's *American Sports Story: Gladiator* and is developing a new series with Emmy Award-winning *The Handmaid's Tale* producer Warren Littlefield. Colston earned his M.F.A. in Acting at The Juilliard School and is reprised by Jonathan Knight and CAA.

### **Steve H. Broadnax III (Director)**

*Thoughts of a Colored Man* (Broadway), Suzan-Lori Parks *Sally & Tom* at the Guthrie Theater (world premiere), Katori Hall's 2021 Pulitzer Prize world premiere *The Hot Wing King* at the Signature Theatre, Lee Edward Colston II's *The First Deep Breath* at Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater (world premiere and winner of the Jeff Award for Best New Work), Dominique Morisseau's *Blood at the Root* at the National Black Theatre (winner of Kennedy Center's Hip Hop Theater Creator Award), and William Jackson Harper's world premiere *Travisville* at Ensemble Studio Theatre in NYC. Ensemble Studio Theatre member and serves as the Associate Artistic Director at People's Light Theatre and a Professor of Theatre at Penn State University; Co-Head of M.F.A. Directing.

### **Opa Adeyemo (AJ [Alexander Michael Jones])**

Opa Adeyemo is a recent graduate from The Juilliard School with a B.F.A. in Drama. He starred in *ALIEN/NATION* at the Williamstown Theatre Festival under Michael Arden's direction. Select credits while at Juilliard include "Joe LeVay" in *Stick Fly*, "Bertram" in *All's Well That Ends Well*, and "Gint" in *Gint*. He also shot a supporting role on one of the final episodes of *The Good Fight*, as well as the short film *The Extenders*, written by Eboni Booth.

### **Brandon Mendez Homer (Leslie Carter)**

Geffen Playhouse debut. Brandon is a former banker turned multi-hyphenate artist; actor, writer, director, teacher; awarded the Juilliard Career Advancement Fellowship which "recognizes an artist with tremendous talent, innovation, entrepreneurial mindset and potential to make a significant impact on the performing arts." Drawing on multi-ethnic roots within the Black diaspora, he is the creator of *Mirthamerica*, an epic historical fantasy IP built on blockchain technology; integrates NFTs, DAOs, audio, digital, theatrical and comic-book-driven storytelling (9/10 Premise, Blacklist Evaluation). Faculty: IDSA LA; teaches movement through the "Homer Pedagogy," researched and developed at Juilliard, hedge funds, tech companies, law offices, and high schools around the world. *The Good Fight* (Paramount+), *Blue Bloods* (CBS), *Uncle Vanya* (Pasadena Playhouse), *Wolf Play* (critically acclaimed sold-out Soho Rep

production), *On That Day in Amsterdam* (Ted Snowdon/Primary Stages), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare on the Sound). Workshops: The Public Theater Emerging Writers Group, Roundabout Theatre Company, Almeida Theatre UK. Juilliard: *Othello* (Producer/Director/Adaption). Short: *Souvenir Drunk* (Producer). The Juilliard School, Michael Chekhov Actors Studio Boston. @zhomerbrand

### **Ella Joyce (Ruth Jones)**

Regional theatre credits include: *Having Our Say* (Goodman Theatre), August Wilson's *King Hedley II* (as "Ruby" at The Matrix Theatre, and in the world premiere as "Tonya" alongside Tony Todd at Pittsburgh's O'Reilly Theater), *Two Trains Running* (Yale Repertory Theatre), *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* (Second Stage Theater, South Coast Repertory, and Goodman Theatre), *Bossa Nova* (Sundance Institute Theatre Lab), *Checkmates* (Bermuda Festival of the Performing Arts), and *Fences* (alongside Tony Todd at the Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival). She is an original founding member of the National Black Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem, NC. Ella is also known for her role of "Eleanor" in the sitcom *Roc*, which earned her an NAACP Image Award nomination. Other TV and film roles include: *My Wife and Kids*, *The Jamie Foxx Show*, *Seinfeld*, *Eve*, *Being Mary Jane*, Tyler Perry's *Temptation: Confessions of a Marriage Counselor*, *Preacher's Kid*, *Lucky Girl*, *Bubba Ho-Tep*, *Set It Off*, *Selma*, *Lord, Selma*, *Nina*, *Catfish Christmas*, *Holiday Hideaway*, *Haus of Vicious*, BET's *Story Porch*, and the MTV Video Music Award-winning music video for TLC's "Waterfalls." [www.ellajoyce.com](http://www.ellajoyce.com)

### **Deanna Reed-Foster (Pearl Thomas)**

Deanna Reed-Foster is thrilled to be making her Geffen Playhouse debut and to be reprising the role of "Pearl." Deanna is an Emmy Award-winning actor and ensemble member of Shattered Globe Theatre. Her SGT credits include: *Rasheeda Speaking*, *Mill Fire*, and *Marvin's Room*. Other credits include: *The First Deep Breath* (Victory Gardens Theater), *Nina Simone: Four Women* (Northlight Theatre), *HeLa* (Sideshow Theatre Company), *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (Chicago Children's Theatre), *Barbecue* (Strawdog Theatre Company), and *Even Longer and Farther Away* (The New Colony). Regional credits include: *A Raisin in the Sun* (American Players Theatre), *Nina Simone: Four Women* (Merrimack Repertory Theatre), and *Fences* (Judy Bayley Theatre/UNLV). Deanna can also be seen in many films and television shows. She is a proud member of AEA and SAG-AFTRA. She is represented by DDO Artists Agency.

### **Candace Thomas (Dee-Dee [Denise Jones])**

Candace is proud to be making her Geffen Playhouse debut! Recent theatre credits include Arizona Theater Company (*Nina Simone: Four Women*), Forward Theater (*Feeding Beatrice: A Gothic Tale*), Milwaukee Repertory Theater (*Nonsense; Man of La Mancha; A Christmas Carol*), The Wallis and Black Rebirth Collective virtual co-production of *UNMASKED: A Theatrical Celebration of Black Women's Liberation (Jezelle the Gazelle; G.O.A.T.)*. Television credits include NBC (*Chicago Fire*), Netflix (*Easy*), and Lifetime (MOW). She has an M.F.A. in Acting from the University of South Carolina. @candi\_reign on Instagram.

### **Tony Todd (Pastor Albert Melvin Jones III)**

Tony is proud to be part of the Geffen Playhouse production of *The First Deep Breath*. Theater credits include August Wilson's *Fences* at the Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival, August Wilson's one-man show *How I Learned What I Learned*, Dominique Morisseau's *Sunset Baby*, *Ghost in the House* one-man play about boxer Jack Johnson, world premiere of *Black Odyssey*, *The Captain's Tiger* (Helen Hayes Award nomination), *Zooman and the Sign* at Second Stage Theater, and originated the role of *King Hedley II* at Pittsburgh Public Theater, Huntington Theatre Company, and Seattle Rep. Tony trained at Eugene O'Neill Theater Center and Trinity Repertory Company. Tony is known for his iconic roles in *Candyman*, *Final Destination*, *Platoon*, *The Rock*, *The Crow*, and recently starred in *Traveling Light* and

*All Gone Wrong*. Tony is prolific in the voice over universe including the upcoming *Venom*. Tony is proud of his daughter Ariana and dedicates this performance to her and Shawn. Twitter: @tonytodd54

**Keith A. Wallace (Tyree Fisher)**

Keith A. Wallace is an actor/writer/director and proud North Philly native “all day, everyday.” His acclaimed solo play, *The Bitter Game*, directly confronts racialized police violence and has toured extensively throughout the US and UK, garnering the Princess Grace Theater Award, the United Solo Festival Avant Garde Award and a San Diego Critics Award nomination for Outstanding Solo Performance. Select regional credits: La Jolla Playhouse (*Junk* world premiere, directed by Doug Hughes), The Public Theater, Wallis Annenberg Center for the Arts, The Kennedy Center, ART. He has been a commissioned playwright at the La Jolla Playhouse and The Old Globe as well as a finalist for the Sundance Theater Lab, the Eugene O’Neill Playwrights Conference and the New Dramatist Van Lier New Voices Fellowship. He was also the Associate Director of Model Land with The Tyra Banks Company. Keith has been a featured panelist at SXSW, TEDx, The Kennedy Center and the U.S. Embassy in Dublin for his work in police reform and social justice. Training: M.F.A. UC San Diego and Morehouse College. [www.thebittergame.com](http://www.thebittergame.com)

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**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 Executive Director Gil Cates, Jr., Artistic Director Matt Shakman and Board Chair Adi Greenberg. 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. [www.geffenplayhouse.org](http://www.geffenplayhouse.org)

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