



ACTORS
THEATRE OF LOUISVILLE

The Art of Royalty
ENTERTAINMENT GROUP

2021



IMPACT REPORT



WELCOME



Actors Theatre of Louisville is an arts and culture organization as social enterprise, sharing experiences centered in a commitment to disrupt the cycles of oppression, marginalization, and exploitation. Grounded in anti-racism and the work toward our collective liberation, we strive to serve our mission to unlock human potential, build community, and enrich quality of life by engaging people in theatre that reflects the wonder and complexity of our time. We invite this engagement with a spirit of radical hospitality and extravagant welcome, and also by nurturing myriad partnerships and conversations with other cause-driven, aligned organizations throughout Greater Louisville.

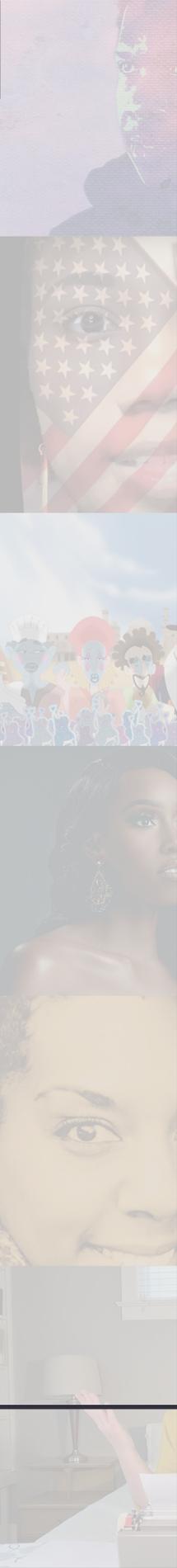
Over the past year, the adventurous storytelling for which Actors Theatre is known has taken on new dimensions as we've explored digital production while staying responsive to seismic cultural shifts, finding innovative ways to connect audiences to art and to each other. In our interdisciplinary laboratory, we've developed upwards of 30 projects since March 2020—including live events, digital streaming productions, animated shorts, radio plays, virtual reality, a video game, classics reimaged for this moment in history, a series featuring Kentucky musicians, lively forums for community dialogue, and more. Additional details about our current programming can be found on our website, ActorsTheatre.org.

To give a sense of the breadth and impact of Actors Theatre of Louisville's initiatives, and our dedication to service, this report is filled with highlights from our work over the past year. We're grateful to everyone who is joining us as we reimagine a 21st-century theatre where art, technology, and social transformation meet for a storytelling (r)evolution.

Robert Barry Fleming
Executive Artistic Director

Photo by Andrew Cenci

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DRAMA LEAGUE AWARDS

2021 NOMINEE

WHERE DID WE SIT ON THE BUS?

OUTSTANDING DIGITAL THEATER, INDIVIDUAL PRODUCTION

Gabriel Stelian-Shanks *Bevin Ross*

GABRIEL STELIAN-SHANKS, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR BEVIN ROSS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

THE 87TH ANNUAL DRAMA LEAGUE AWARDS

“Abigail Bengson sings, in that wide-open balladeer’s voice of hers, ‘We have to make it up as we go.’ That’s the general credo of this 50-minute piece, which is about nothing more or less than continuing to exist when everything feels both static and in endless flux... I guarantee it will keep expanding your mind later in ways that should drive you mad. But for me, it felt like some much needed reassurance.”

— *New York Times* Critic’s Pick review of *The Keep Going Song*



TOP PHOTOS: Satya Chávez in *Where Did We Sit on the Bus?*
 BOTTOM PHOTO: The Bengsons in *The Keep Going Song*.



47 STATES

10 COUNTRIES

NATIONAL AND GLOBAL REACH

Actors Theatre of Louisville's work has been seen in 47 states and 10 countries outside the U.S.—including Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia and Mexico—reaching audiences across our region, the nation and the globe.

We've received national attention: The Bengsons' *The Keep Going Song* was a *New York Times* Critic's Pick and was picked up by Broadway on Demand, a premier performing arts streaming platform. And our production of Brian Quijada's play *Where Did We Sit on the Bus?*, a digital creation by performer Satya Chávez and director Matt Dickson, was named a 2021 Drama League Award nominee for Outstanding Digital Theater.

Available through digital streaming, our many free and pay-what-you-choose offerings have increased access to our work and have broadened our reach. Additionally, we partnered with Overture Plus, a streaming platform that has made some of our productions available to affiliate theatres to share with their audiences. For instance, patrons of Philadelphia's Act II Playhouse were able to see Louisville-based actor Jessica Wortham's wonderful solo performance in Actors Theatre's production of *Erma Bombeck: At Wit's End*.

Our Learning and Creative Engagement programs enriched the lives of students across the country, with virtual field trips and classroom residencies as far away as The Bronx Latin School in New York and the Alabama School of Fine Arts.

Over the course of this past year, Actors Theatre has built an entire library of digital work available to stream, as well as offering live, online experiences designed to create connection and community. In a time of pandemic-induced isolation and upheaval for so many, it's been important to us to continue finding ways to build critical consciousness and community, while also bringing some joy.

REIMAGINING A THEATRE TRULY OF (AND FOR) LOUISVILLE

At the same time that our work is finding national and international audiences, our focus is on building community in Greater Louisville, and responding to the historic events unfolding in our city.

For example, a trio of spoken word performances presented on Facebook Live—*Fix It, Black Girl*; *Finding Black Boy Joy*; and *OKOLONA HABLA (okolona speaks)*—lifted up the perspectives and resilience of local Black and Latinx artists.

We also responded to the moment by engaging in civic dialogue on our platforms, producing numerous panel conversations as part of our *Unscripted* series that brought together voices from our community for lively, candid discussions viewed by thousands on Facebook and YouTube. Just a few of the conversations we hosted included “Latinidad in Kentucky,” “Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange,” “Why We Riot/Why We Write: Art & Protest in the 21st Century,” and many more.

We produced a podcast, *Borrowed Wisdom with Robert Barry Fleming*, a series of 17 conversations to date with leading figures from a variety of disciplines. The guests spoke about a wide range of social justice and community wellness-related subjects, ranging from redlining, to COVID-19 and systemic racism, to the connection between church and theatre, and many other topics.



From *OKOLONA HABLA (okolona speaks)* by Marcos Morales.



Lance G. Newman II in *Finding Black Boy Joy*.



Robert Barry Fleming and Dr. Monalisa Taylor record a *Borrowed Wisdom* podcast.

Our new membership program provides access to these projects through the Member Library—a free collection of audio and video content.



Fix It, Black Girl, written by nationally recognized poet and author Hannah L. Drake, was viewed by a live audience larger than a sold-out Bingham Theatre when it opened Actors Theatre's 2020-21 virtual season, and has reached more than 10,000 unique viewers. A 2021 screening was held at Christy's Garden in partnership with Kentucky Performing Arts/Connecting for a Cause.



LOUISVILLE SESSIONS is a new series that celebrates the vast sound, feel, and artistry of our state, featuring Kentucky musicians responding to the current moment through an original song and video. The series—ten videos to date, released on Facebook Live—has expanded our intergenerational and demographic reach, as 30-40% of the audience are viewers who don't already follow us on social media.



Chanson Calhoun

JONJOHN

Sasha Renee



Rob Lee

Coyia

Tez of 2Deep



Tiny Tiny



Bridge 19

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

In conjunction with our programming, Actors Theatre of Louisville has partnered with organizations throughout the city in order to raise funds and awareness in support of their work. Our **Community Donation Partners** have included:

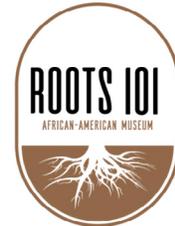
THE BAIL PROJECT



eji Equal Justice Initiative



BLACK LIVES MATTER LOUISVILLE



Actors Theatre has also collaborated with a host of other local organizations and businesses on various initiatives surrounding our programming this year, including:

- **Preston Arts Center**
- **Sis Got Tea**
- **Poppin' Flavors**
- **Change Today, Change Tomorrow / Feed the West**
- **Louisville Public Media**



Artwork by Precious Stallings, created for Actors Theatre of Louisville's windows on Main Street.



“What I have seen in Robert is his commitment to making sure that our arts community represents the depths of diversity that we have in our community. Actors Theatre of Louisville reached out to LACE and the Louisville Community Grocery, and said that they wanted to help us raise money for our project. It was great for us to be exposed to a different audience, and for a different audience to hear about the work that LACE is doing to build a cooperative ecosystem of community-owned businesses. Actors raised a few thousand dollars on our behalf, but more importantly, it was the relationship that we built with Actors that we appreciate and we’re glad to continue to support.”

— **Cassia Herron**, President,
Louisville Association for Community Economics (LACE)
and Louisville Community Grocery



The McAtee Community Kitchen, housed in the former MilkWood Restaurant in Actors Theatre’s Main Street complex, was launched through a partnership with the LEE Initiative to provide healthy meals and groceries to families across Louisville’s West End, Shelby Park, and Smoketown neighborhoods.

In addition to amplifying the valuable work being done by these community organizations, Actors Theatre is a major driver of economic activity from the arts and culture industry in Louisville. According to the Arts and Economic Activity Calculator from Americans for the Arts, during the 2018-2019 season, Actors Theatre generated:

\$634,764 IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVENUE

\$802,144 IN STATE GOVERNMENT REVENUE

\$14,059,789 IN TOTAL EXPENDITURES

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY LABORATORY

We've created new opportunities for artists to collaborate across disciplines and with new technologies, embracing transmedia storytelling on many virtual platforms. This year has brought innovative new artmaking partnerships as we've engaged playwrights, directors, composers, performers, spoken word poets, musicians, radio producers, visual artists, animators, video game developers, virtual reality storytellers, and many others.

On these pages, and throughout this report, we highlight a varied sampling of the projects that have resulted from this expansive thinking.

ANIMATION PROJECTS INCLUDE:

With animator Yehudah Jai Husband, a 21st-century take on Apollinaire's 1903 surrealist fever dream, ***THE BREASTS OF TIRESIAS*** (left), produced as part of *COVID-Classics: One-Act Plays for the Age of Quarantine*.

WHEN I READ MY DAUGHTER RUDYARD KIPLING (left) by Manik Choksi, in which a daughter's perceptive questions prompt her father to see Kipling's *Just So Stories* in a new light.

THE YELLOW WALLPAPER (below), an animated suspense-thriller based on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist masterpiece, from cinematographer and editor Christopher Gerson and actor/associate producer Tarah Flanagan.



ROMEO & JULIET: LOUISVILLE 2020 is one of several feature-length productions created this past year that combine new media techniques, video art, and edited footage of performances to create storytelling that is uniquely cinematic and theatrical at the same time. Filmed with the entire cast working remotely, this visually captivating interpretation of Shakespeare's classic narrative also used documentary footage from the local protests that followed the murder of Breonna Taylor, bringing a 16th century play into a heightened contemporary world.



TWO HOLIDAY AUDIO PLAYS: *Fifth Third Bank's Dracula: A Radio Play* and *A Christmas Carol: A Radio Play*, listening experiences created in collaboration with award-winning audio producers, reinvented longstanding traditions—and the Dickens classic was broadcast on WFPL in partnership with Fifth Third Bank and Louisville Public Media.



“The mediums are not exactly the same, but the processes started to overlap, and I really started to see how the process of theatre can be interjected into animation production. And it was a wonderful experience; it changed the way that I look at the medium, especially in this time when we cannot be onstage.”

—**Yehudah Jai Husband**,
NAACP Award-winning animator and
Louisville-based theatre artist

IN THE LAB: THE 2021 HUMANA FESTIVAL

“The language, mixing earthy jargon with breakbeat poetics, is as much a collage as the visuals and does a good job of setting the tone of urgent reflection... *Ali Summit*, directed by Robert Barry Fleming, mines emotion from the pressurized implications of its transitional moment, a moment we are somehow still living through.”

— Jesse Green of the *New York Times* on Idris Goodwin’s play *Ali Summit*, initially realized as an audiovisual experience with graphic art by Andy Perez

“What a great way to engage with theatre, instead of passively spectating... It gave us a much-needed sense of connection, both with the actors and with the people in our quite-involved breakout room.”

— An enthused *Block Association Project* audience member

The Humana Festival of New American Plays has always been about bringing together innovative artists and expanding the possibilities of form and content, and this year we transformed our celebration of world premieres into a virtual exhibition of new work and emergent technologies. There are eight [Humana Festival projects](#) that we’ve launched or are in the process of developing as part of our new work laboratory.

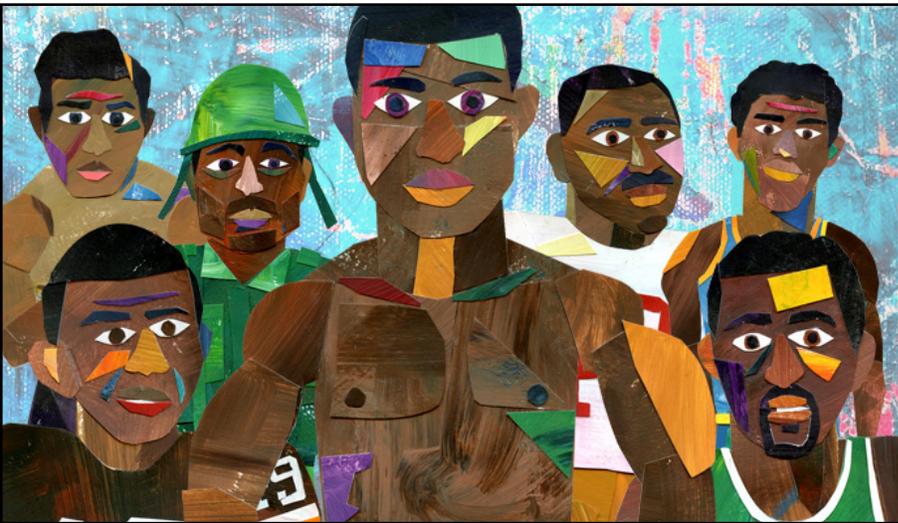
ALI SUMMIT is inspired by the 1967 summit of prominent Black athletes who met to question Muhammad Ali about his conscientious objection to military service. This project is a collaboration between playwright Idris Goodwin and director Robert Barry Fleming, with graphic art by Louisville-based artist and illustrator Andy Perez. An immersive virtual reality experience is also in development for later this year.

Ali Summit was supported by a Building Demand for the Arts Grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.

BLOCK ASSOCIATION PROJECT brought audience members together on Zoom for the inaugural meeting of a group of neighbors fired up to work for the common good. This thought-provoking, interactive comedy took a look at what makes a community, and what breaks it. Written by Michael Yates Crowley and directed by Michael Rau, this project was a collaboration with the narrative technology company Wolf 359. All of the performances were captioned and American Sign Language interpreted.

THE PROFESSIONAL TRAINING COMPANY PROJECTS, presented as two distinct video compilations, were boldly imaginative short pieces—the culmination of the company’s season spent learning how to create, film, edit, and produce their own work.

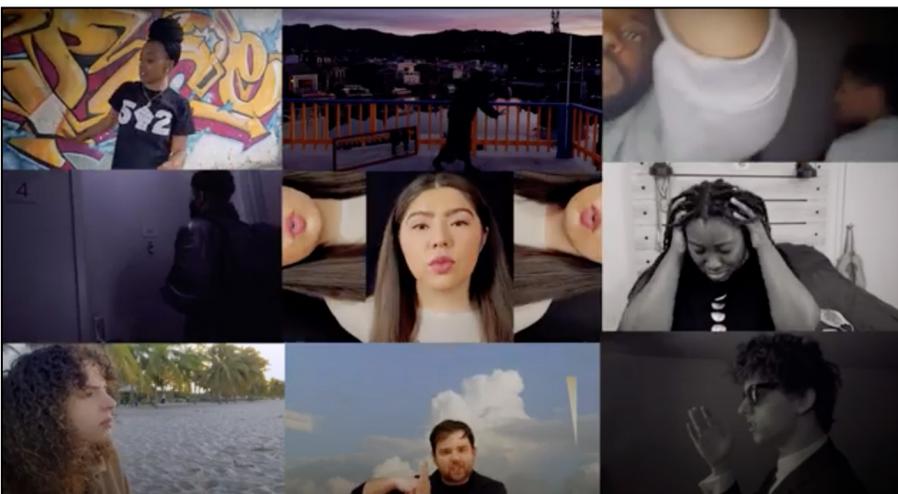
BEYOND THE CROSSROADS is a project we developed in collaboration with Crux Cooperative, a Black-led home for artists working in extended reality (XR). In this interactive adventure from the minds of two remarkable Black women—playwright Candrice Jones and creative media technologies thought leader Ruffin—audiences can journey with a young Blues singer as she charts her own path.



Andy Perez's artwork from *Ali Summit*.



From *Block Association Project*.



From *The Professional Training Company Projects*.



“This was my first time stepping into the virtual reality world... I already had an idea of what I wanted my story to be, but once I was exposed to all of these different techniques that other creatives had used, it helped me to see how I could reimagine what I see as theatre. This has been an amazing experience. Being from rural Arkansas and not necessarily having access growing up to theatre on a regular basis, this actually kind of gives me hope that if people want, then they can have the benefit of a theatre experience.”

—Writer **Candrice Jones**



Still Ready creators and performers Christina Acosta Robinson and Ken Robinson.



Plague Doctor: Contagion 430 BCE - 2020 AD



The Clinic. Photos by DW Burnett.



Kiana & the Sun Kings and Chanson Calhoun from Louisville Sessions.

STILL READY was created and performed by the versatile hyphenate artists Christina Acosta Robinson and Ken Robinson. This three-part musical docuseries was fueled by the creative sparks that fly between this married couple, who've both navigated careers as Black performers on the Great White Way, inspiring each other with their art and music. The culminating production, *Still Ready: Originals*, blends Ken's gorgeous musical compositions and Christina's artwork and poetry to celebrate love, joy, and expansive Black artistry.

PLAGUE DOCTOR: CONTAGION 430 BCE – 2020 AD is being developed in partnership with the Louisville-based studio Two Scoop Games. In this new interactive video game, players can explore the profound upheaval unleashed during four public health crises that changed history—and race against time to control the outbreaks for the sake of humanity.

THE CLINIC is a partnership Actors Theatre of Louisville is developing with nurse and dancer Tara Rynders, artistic director of The Clinic, to support nurses in our region. Through immersive experiences and resiliency moments that counteract compassion fatigue and burnout, this work helps frontline healers rediscover the joy of caregiving. (For more, see page 17.)

LOUISVILLE SESSIONS FULL JAM caps off the first ten sessions in our new series celebrating the vast sound, feel, and artistry of our state, featuring Kentucky musicians responding to the current moment through an original song and video. This live, in-person event, planned for August 2021 at the Paul Owen Production Studio, brings together these phenomenal bands and solo artists for an energetic outdoor concert.

LEARNING AND CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT



“I discovered that Actors Theatre was producing the play *Where Did We Sit on the Bus? I’m a New York City public schoolteacher. Most of the students that I teach are Latino and Latina, and it seemed to me that it was a perfect opportunity to allow them to see their own experience reflected back to them, which is a rarity... I was able to purchase tickets for all of my eighth grade students... Even living in New York City, the theatre capital of the world, a lot of my students in the South Bronx have never been to a play. A lot of my students have basically seen nothing but their own four walls since March. They were completely enraptured.”*

— **Amanda Rinzel**, teacher,
Bronx Latin

Through its Learning and Creative Engagement programming, Actors Theatre of Louisville has provided educational residencies to 14 Jefferson County Public Schools this season. Through our Virtual Field Trips, 2,105 students experienced our productions, and 845 participated in classroom residencies. For the first time, we also launched a Virtual Summer Musical Theatre Camp with 21 teen participants.

Also a first, this past spring we engaged the Kentucky School for the Deaf in a five-week Playwright Discovery residency that culminated in a reading of the students’ ten-minute plays. Two Humana Festival guest artists—actor John McGinty and director of artistic sign language Alexandria Wailes—played key roles in the play readings and discussion, all in American Sign Language.

Our work around the Humana Festival project *Ali Summit* has been focused on young people and community-building, and we’ve been working with six community groups who have participated in our *Ali Summit* residency: Sowing Seeds with Faith, St. George Community Center, Prominent Youth of America, Parkland Boys and Girls Club, Louisville Central Community Center, and Nativity Academy.

Outside of Louisville, students engaged with Actors Theatre of Louisville’s work as far away as The Bronx Latin School and Alabama School of Fine Arts.



Students participate in Actors Theatre’s Virtual Summer Musical Theatre Camp.



“Thank you, Actors Theatre! Fifth grade Auburndale students loved Word Play so much! The students laughed and enjoyed themselves while learning.

Thank you for making your content so student-centered. We appreciate Actors Theatre’s inclusive, hard and intentional work.”

—Ms. Smith and Auburndale Students

A SYNTHESIS OF ART & SERVICE

THE CLINIC is an initiative at the nexus of our aspiration to connect the arts and service, health and wellness. Actors Theatre of Louisville is developing a partnership with nurse and dancer Tara Rynders (right) of The Clinic, to support nurses in our region. Through immersive experiences and resiliency moments that counteract compassion fatigue and nursing burnout, this work helps frontline healers rediscover the joy of caregiving.

We plan to collaborate with the Kentucky Nurses Association in the initial phase of the project, which has received funding from South Arts as part of their Cross-Sector Impact Grant program.



Photo by Adam Bove.



“Robert introduced us to Tara Rynders. It really caused us to be grateful for the work that she’s doing to help heal so many of our nurses, and to take a pause and really reflect on our lives and amazing work, and to honor that. And all of that is going toward helping to promote our mental health and wellness... Just a few minutes to enjoy the arts can really build up that emotional bank account, and you’re helping all of us to become stronger. And when we become stronger, that’s not only good for us, it’s good for others—our students, our patients, our communities, and our very own families.”

—Janie Heath, Dean of Nursing, University of Kentucky

NOW BECOMES THEN

We've developed projects specifically designed to facilitate human connection and counter social isolation, such as *Now Becomes Then*, created for senior adults. This intimate, interactive experience took place on a video call, and connected young artists in our Professional Training Company with older generations, inviting moments of self-reflection and conversation as participants were led through a series of questions, prompts, poems, or mini-adventures.



Images captured while creating and sharing *Now Becomes Then*.

THE WOLVES

by **Sarah DeLappe**

directed by **Regina Victor**

produced by **Actors Theatre of Louisville** and **Charlie Hano**



AN ALL-TRANS & GENDER NON-CONFORMING (TGNC) BENEFIT READING IN SUPPORT OF THE **ACLU OF KENTUCKY**

WE ARE TRANS. WE ARE THE WOLVES.



An all-trans and gender non-conforming benefit reading of *The Wolves*, in support of the ACLU of Kentucky

On June 29, 2021, Actors Theatre partnered to co-produce a reading of Sarah DeLappe's play *The Wolves*—about an indoor soccer team wrestling with adolescence—featuring an all-trans/gender non-conforming cast and creative team. This special event was organized as a benefit for the ACLU of Kentucky, for their advocacy and support of trans rights.

LOOKING AHEAD

This time of reinvention has been a chance to investigate new kinds of cross-disciplinary collaborations between artists, and to reimagine how a 21st century theatre can serve and be part of its community. As we begin to reincorporate in-person events in 2021, we look forward to ongoing exploration in the digital space, and to discovering new possibilities for storytelling form and content in our laboratory.

Our vision for the future positions Actors Theatre of Louisville as a leader in multiplatform entertainment centered in theatrical experiences. As social gathering becomes safe, we plan to develop a hybrid model that allows us to continue to innovate on stage, online, and beyond. Programming in the coming year will include digital content and virtual reality projects, as well as in-person experiences such as plays, live music, and new work.

Actors Theatre of Louisville will also continue to focus on our commitment to service, through meaningful partnerships and working alongside organizations who are also invested in the good of Greater Louisville. Our team will remain nimble and adaptive, looking for intersectional connections and new ways of working that encourage innovative structural and systemic change. And we will strive to truly live into our mission to unlock human potential, build community, and enrich quality of life by engaging people in theatre that reflects the wonder and complexity of our time.

For a lively overview of all our work over the last year, and a taste of many of the projects we've produced, we invite you to watch *Convergence! An Actors Theatre of Louisville Celebration*. Held in February 2021, this virtual event was created to share how we're working in service of our mission and the many ways we're telling stories and engaging in civic dialogue. You can watch here: <https://www.actorstheatre.org/giving>



Thank you to everyone who has supported our work this year. We're grateful to our institutional partners, whose generosity is acknowledged here:

ActorsTheatre.org/partners.

If you're inspired by our work, please join us! We invite you to contribute to our mission by joining our community of local and national supporters in making a donation that is meaningful to you at ActorsTheatre.org/giving.

As part of our effort to democratize our art, we've launched a new membership program, with options that start at no cost to participate. Memberships support everything we do, and they include unlimited access to our Member Library—a collection of free audio and video content—as well as other perks like early access to tickets for in-person events. For more details about becoming a member, and all of our current programming, please visit ActorsTheatre.org/memberships.

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