

ARENA'S PAGE

STUDY GUIDE



the mead center
for american theater

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THE PLAY

On a high, grassy hill, a man in a ragged military uniform is lying down next to a tall tower branded with the letters "OSU." He is on Standpipe Hill, a historical marker in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and below him are the ruins of the Greenwood District: a neighborhood many Black citizens used to call home. His name is **Soldier**.

Flashback to the beginning of the 20th century: the Greenwood District was a financially flourishing Black community, also known as "The Black Wall Street." It had a populous residential area with successful Black-owned businesses at its center. On May 31, 1921, the community was attacked and destroyed by droves of White Tulsans who robbed Greenwood's stores, killed many of the residents, and burned the once thriving community to the ground.

In 2023, Soldier stands watch, refusing to move from his spot. Three characters stop by: **Victoria**, the friend; **Vicky**, the police officer; and **Vee**, the lover. They each make a visit to the hill to convince Soldier to come down.

Suffering from trauma, memory loss, and his growing suspicions of the world around him, Soldier attempts to hold his ground against opposing forces. Will he prevail? Will he be able to remember who he was? Can Victoria, Vicky, and Vee gain his trust and persuade him to step down from the tower?



THE HIGH GROUND

BY **NATHAN ALAN DAVIS**

DIRECTED BY **MEGAN SANDBERG-ZAKIAN**

KOGOD CRADLE | **FEBRUARY 10 – APRIL 2, 2023**

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This project is supported in part by the NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

The High Ground is the recipient of an Edgerton Foundation New Play Award.

**"It was all burnt to ashes, yes, but that is not
the same thing as dying, no, far from it."**

— Soldier, *The High Ground*



MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT: **NATHAN ALAN DAVIS**

“What I’m trying to get at as a writer is perhaps altering our perspective of the social landscape itself, to the extent that I can. I’m tired of seeing history repeat itself. I’m asking, ‘How can I open up a pocket of understanding that will allow something new to happen?’”

— Nathan Alan Davis

Nathan Alan Davis was born in Illinois to a **Baha’i** family of creatives, ultimately inspiring him to try out the arts as well. He started acting at a young age and eventually earned his bachelor of fine arts degree from The University of Illinois. In college, he started writing plays, but never knew quite how to finish them. After graduation, he performed in Chicago for six years, but was struggling with booking roles. He decided to return to his passion for writing with a mission to increase the representation of Black voices in theater.

He went to Indiana University for his master’s degree and later attended The Juilliard School for playwriting. Davis is currently the Associate Professor of the Practice of Playwriting at Boston University and has expanded his work into television. Some of his other plays include *Nat Turner in Jerusalem*, *Dontrell Who Kissed the Sea*, and *The Wind and the Breeze*. He is also the father of three daughters and credits them for inspiring a lot of his writings.

Baha’i: Founded in Iraq in the 19th century, the Baha’i faith emphasizes the unity of all religions and people.



Standpipe Hill: Tulsa’s first water tower and the setting of *The High Ground*. Today, it is marked with the letters “OSU” for Oklahoma State University.

METATHEATER IN THE HIGH GROUND

Have you ever heard someone say “That’s so meta”? What they mean is that something is self-aware or self-reflective. *The High Ground* utilizes “metatheatrical” elements, meaning it purposely emphasizes the fact that it is a play. For example, the model of the set is on the stage. Additionally, crew members can occasionally be seen handing props to actors. The actors on stage are aware of all these things both as actors and as the characters they play.

MEET THE **CHARACTERS**

While there are five named characters in *The High Ground*, there are only two actors cast in the play. One actor plays Soldier, the main character, and the other actor plays four different characters: Victoria, Vicky, Vee, and The Woman in Black. While there are only two actors, there are other people deliberately visible during the production.



PHILLIP
JAMES BRANNON



NEHASSAI
DEGANNES

NEW PLAYS

WRITING, REHEARSING, AND PRODUCING THE HIGH GROUND

Bringing a new play to the stage for the first time is a team effort. Some of the key players are the playwright, director, dramaturg, and actors. Here are their roles in creating *The High Ground*.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Playwright Nathan Alan Davis was commissioned in 2016 to write a Power Play (see article) about the 1920s. A new play commission is when a theater company pays a playwright to write a script. The theater can then decide whether they want to be the first theater to produce the play.

After writing and research, an important part of a playwright's process is hearing the play read aloud by actors. Therefore, a play will receive readings, in which actors perform the script, usually with little action and no design elements—just the script and a music stand. This allows the playwright to hear the text come to life, which helps them to figure out what adjustments need to be made. When this play had its first reading, it was called *Memorial Day*, and the plot was very different. One scene involved a soldier standing on a hill. That scene inspired the decision to rework the script into *The High Ground*.

After Davis finished writing *The High Ground*, Arena Stage included it in its season. Because this is a new play, Davis had the opportunity to be involved in the production process. He attended the auditions in New York and D.C., worked with the designers and director directly, and shared his thoughts and feedback during the rehearsal process.

THE DIRECTOR

Directors for new plays are often chosen because of an existing relationship with the playwright or because they directed an early reading of the script and were asked to stay on the team for the full production. Nathan Alan Davis, the playwright, and Megan Sandberg-Zakian, the director, have previously worked on plays together. Directors of new plays have the unique opportunity to go straight to the playwright and discuss the play and, with the playwright's permission, occasionally rearrange the text and/or content to create the final production.

In 2016, when *The High Ground* was first commissioned, Davis and Sandberg-Zakian were working on *Nat Turner in Jerusalem*, which starred Phillip James Brannon, the actor that plays Soldier.

Phillip James Brannon in *Nat Turner in Jerusalem* by Joan Marcus.



THE DRAMATURG

Otis Ramsey-Zoë, the dramaturg for *The High Ground*, helped to support playwright Davis in its development through research and conversation about the play, its structure, its characters, and its choices. According to Ramsey-Zoë, “A dramaturg is to a playwright as an editor is to an author.” As a dramaturg, he approached the text on behalf of the audience, asking questions and starting conversation to ensure that the audience gets a clear understanding of the play. During rehearsals, he offered his historical research to help the actors make choices within the world of the play.

THE ACTORS

Upon entering the rehearsal room, actors in new plays know that at any point things can shift: lines can be altered, scenes can be cut or moved, characters can change or be cut, among many other possibilities. Since the playwright is in the room, actors can pose questions or concerns directly to the person who wrote them, which can lead to script or character changes. While most new plays go through readings with different actors, only the actors of the first full production are known as the originators of the role. Some actors are involved with a new play throughout the full process.





AN INTERVIEW

WITH TERESA SAPIEN

Arena receives hundreds of new play submissions throughout the year. Teresa Sapien, the Associate Artistic Director at Arena Stage, along with the Artistic Team, is tasked with reading through each new play to see which could fit well in Arena's season. We sat down with Sapien to discuss the topic of new plays.

WHAT IS A NEW PLAY?

S: A new play is a piece by a living writer (or group of writers) in which the writer is still actively working on the story and does not consider it finished. Although, in many ways, all plays are never truly finished, the text of new plays is still in a state of flux or being discussed in some way. The writer is still "grappling" with the story.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT NEW PLAYS?

S: New plays deal with the poetry of the current moment. They are still being influenced by today's essence. New plays are being written for the now because we are in the now. If I could only work on new plays for the rest of my life, I'd be happy because it just feels so much more dynamic and like we are actively conversing with the world around us.

WHAT HAS ITS IMPACT BEEN ON YOU?

S: That new plays existed and were something that one could work on was something I learned in my 20s. For me, it was a revelation that there were writers who were having experiences like me writing. Look, I love classic plays as much as the next girl, but many times their worlds are only tangentially related to my own. In many ways, the most vibrant collaborative processes that I've been lucky to be a part of have happened on new plays. I would hope that more students get exposed to new plays sooner.

THE POWER PLAYS INITIATIVE

The Power Plays Initiative is Arena Stage's plan to commission 25 new plays and musicals over 10 years. Each Power Play takes place in a specific decade from the official beginning of America to the present day (1776-2023). *The High Ground* was commissioned in 2016 for the 1920s. As of today, Arena only has 3 plays left to commission to reach the 25-play goal.

The Power Plays focus on five cycles: Presidential Voices, African-American Voices, Insider Voices, Musical Theater Voices and Women's Voices. *Exclusion*, which will open in the beginning of May, is the second power play that will be produced in the 2022/23 season.

LEARN MORE:

Read about the Power Plays Initiative on our website: <https://www.arenastage.org/about-us/artistic-initiatives/power-plays/>

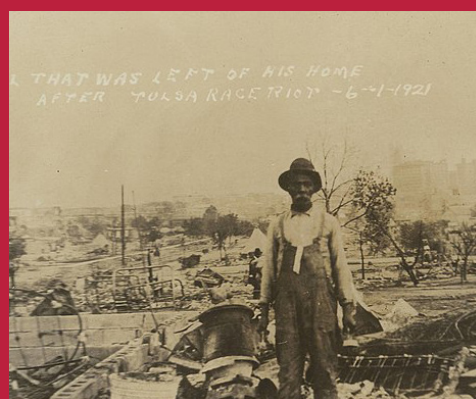
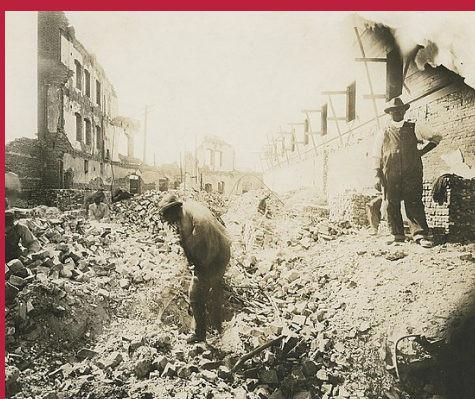
FROM THE DIRECTOR'S NOTEBOOK



"My wife's family has very long roots in Washington D.C. This play is about what happens when a historically Black community is bulldozed and erased by gentrification. Walking to Arena today, I was reminded of some of the ways that that occurred in this city. I'm hopeful that this story which takes place in Tulsa, Oklahoma is also felt as being for this city and this neighborhood".

PRESERVING THE MEMORY

Images of the destruction left in the wake of the Tulsa Race Massacre.



Read the "The Massacre of Black Wall Street," a recounting of this history and a resource for this article told in a graphic-novel style.

www.theatlantic.com/sponsored/hbo-2019/the-massacre-of-black-wall-street/3217/



THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

VOCABULARY

GENERATIONAL WEALTH:

Money, property, stock, and any other financial assets passed down through a family

GENTRIFICATION:

The process of businesses and residents moving into a poorer neighborhood, thereby raising the overall expenses in the area, displacing the original residents, and changing the general makeup of the neighborhood. Oklahoma State University and the highway in Greenwood are currently contributing to its gentrification.

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER:

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that is activated by stressful and horrifying event(s). Previously referred to as “shell shock” and “combat fatigue” after the World Wars, it is commonly related with war veterans although PTSD can occur in anyone who has experienced anything traumatic.

Mayo Clinic gives a detailed description of the symptoms of PTSD: intrusive memories (such as flashbacks), avoiding things that remind the person of the traumatic event, negative changes in thinking and mood, and changes in physical and emotional reactions.

THE TULSA RACE MASSACRE

“Storytelling is the work that I love most in the world. The fact that such a large scale of death and destruction had happened—and I’d never even heard about it—that really disturbed me. And this play was born.” — Nathan Alan Davis, playwright

THE BLACK WALL STREET

Built in the beginning of the 1900s, the Greenwood District was a thriving, wealthy Black community of around 10,000 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It is commonly referred to as “The Black Wall Street” because of the financial successes of its many businesses. Churches, stores, medical offices, clubs, theaters, hotels, barbershops, salons, firms, among many other businesses, stood on the blocks of the district.

Only 60 years post-slavery and 40 years pre-integration, Black people were still viewed and treated as inferior in Tulsa, and many White Tulsans felt that the growing success of Greenwood was a threat. On May 31, 1921, an angry mob of White Tulsans stormed the blossoming community and sparked what is known as the deadliest civic massacre in U.S. history.

BEFORE THE MASSACRE

MAY 30, 1921: THE DAY BEFORE THE MASSACRE

Dick Rowland, a teenage Black shoe-shiner, entered an elevator on the morning of May 30. Teenager Sarah Page was working in the elevator as its operator. While there are many stories about the events that took place, it is commonly believed that Dick stepped on Sarah’s foot when walking inside. Sarah ran from the elevator. Dick also ran, knowing what could be perceived from White Tulsans seeing a White girl running from a Black boy, and what the consequences could be.

MAY 31, 1921: THE MASSACRE

Two officers arrived at Rowland’s house to arrest him the next morning. By 3 p.m., a Tulsa newspaper featured an article about Rowland’s “attack” on Page. As the rumors spread through the city, hate and death threats began. Recognizing the trouble Rowland was in, Black Tulsans gathered at Greenwood’s beloved Dreamland Theatre to discuss the situation. They journeyed to the courthouse, offering to assist in protecting Rowland while he was being held by police. A White mob, already gathered at the courthouse, became upset by the Black Tulsans’ appearance. A member of the mob reached for a Black Tulsan’s gun, causing it to shoot. This shot is believed to be what started the massacre.



In the span of 18 hours, over 300 Black Tulsans were murdered, and the community was burned to the ground. Among the weapons used that day was the Gatling gun, an early machine gun that could shoot 200 rounds per minute. In addition to the ground warfare, Greenwood was also attacked from the air in small planes with some accounts of turpentine balls or dynamite being dropped from above. The members of Greenwood worked to fight back, supported by their World War I veterans, but they were unsuccessful. The White mob that attacked Greenwood District worked with National Guard members, the sheriff and his deputies to arrest 6,000 Black Tulsans and detain them under armed guard in places like the Convention Hall, the Tulsa Fairgrounds, and McNulty Park.



restaurants and galleries. Some feel that these new renovations contribute to the gentrification of Greenwood and the erasure of what was.

THE AFTERMATH / COVERING UP THE MASSACRE

After Greenwood's destruction, 9,000 of its residents were displaced with tents as their only shelter against the following winter. Insurance companies denied coverage for the destroyed homes and businesses of Greenwood because it was labeled a "riot" rather than a massacre. City officials wanted to turn the site into a railroad station and industrial area. Therefore, they passed fire laws that wouldn't allow people to rebuild their homes and businesses. This law was eventually struck down, and some of the survivors persisted and rebuilt.

The city never officially acknowledged the events of May 31, 1921 until 76 years later. During that period, the massacre was hidden and denied. During the massacre, the two famous Black Tulsan newspaper companies were destroyed, leaving solely White outlets who painted an inaccurate account, shifting the blame to the Greenwood residents. Survivors who spoke up about it went largely unheard. Most Americans did not know the massacre occurred. In 1997, The Tulsa Race Riot Commission was created to research the events of the massacre and published its report in 2001. Even today, many still do not know the events that transpired or the impact they had on the community and their descendants.

The destruction of this Black community robbed many Black families of the generational wealth that was being built for them. Between 50-100 million of today's dollars were taken from the community that day. The government has denied all raised proposals for reparations.

THE GREENWOOD DISTRICT TODAY

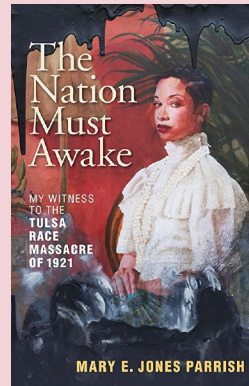
By the 1950s, Greenwood had rebuilt their community, dedicating serious efforts to restoring the success of the former Black Wall Street. However today, all that is reminiscent of the pre-massacre district is a block of Black businesses and the Vernon Chapel AME Church, making space for new developments like expensive

PRESERVING THE MEMORY

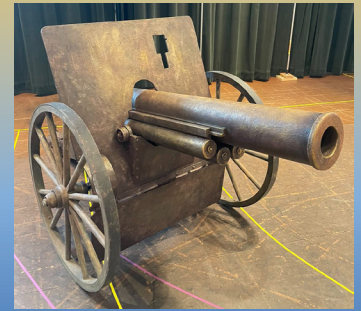
Our knowledge of the events of the Tulsa Race Massacre can be credited to the survivors who kept records of their experiences to ensure that history was not erased. Through the preservation of their recollections, historians were able to piece together the facts of the massacre.

Two women in particular should be recognized for their tremendous contributions to the information we have today: **Mary Parrish** and **Eddie Faye Gates**.

MARY PARRISH (1892-1972) was a teacher, writer, and journalist. Originally born in Mississippi, Parrish was attracted by the Black unity of Greenwood and eventually moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1919 with her daughter. There, she founded her school for typewriting and stenography, the Mary Jones Parrish School of Natural Education. There, they witnessed the Tulsa Race Massacre. After the massacre, Parrish began to interview survivors, gathering stories and research. In 1923, she published a book about the Tulsa Race Massacre.

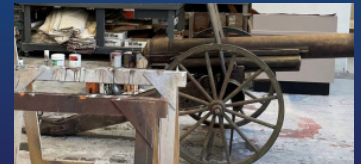


EDDIE FAYE GATES In the 1990s, Oklahoma sanctioned a committee to research and analyze the Tulsa Massacre. Eddie Faye Gates spent summers in Tulsa as a teenager and her passion for history led her to join the Tulsa Race Riot Commission. Gates was chosen to lead locating all the living massacre survivors, some of whom were as young as five on the day of the massacre. She and the commission found 118 survivors. Like Parrish, she interviewed survivors, recorded their accounts, and fought for policies that would provide support and reparations for the victims.



RECREATING THE GATLING GUN

The Gatling gun was invented in 1862 by Richard Jordan Gatlin. The cannon onstage was created by our head properties artisan, Niell DuVal. The pieces used to craft the cannon were mainly pulled from around the shop where Niell found and repurposed them.



ACTIVITY:

With the destruction of the Greenwood District also came the attempted erasure of Greenwood, its residents, and all of its success. Using old photos, maps, and research, the *New York Times* designed a 3-D model of the Marquee Block- one of the more popular streets in the formerly prosperous neighborhood.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/05/24/us/tulsa-race-massacre.html>

WATCH: In 2021, **Viola Fletcher**, the oldest living survivor of the massacre, sought out justice for Tulsa Race Massacre survivors and their families by making sure her voice was heard. Watch her testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tKSDYcvw9A>





THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

What is the importance of remembering?

2

In what ways can art contribute to social change?

3

Who controls the historical narrative and what is the impact?

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HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience.

To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the seat indicated on your ticket.
- Ushers are there to help you!
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms, and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games, or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end! During a musical, audiences sometimes clap after a song or dance. If you love the show or a performer, you can give a standing ovation. The actors bow to thank you.



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Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.

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