



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Milwaukee's First Stage and
Ko-Thi Dance Company in collaboration present
THE DANCING GRANNY**

-A fun, interactive First Steps production that kids and adults will enjoy together-

Milwaukee, WI – January 27, 2022– Next up in First Stage's 2021/22 season will be THE DANCING GRANNY, a play by **Mansa Ra** adapted from the children's book by beloved author/illustrator **Ashley Bryan**. The production is part of First Stage's First Steps Series which introduces younger audiences to live theater. Based on an African folktale, the play is a joyful celebration of storytelling, song, movement, community and the beauty of everyday life. First Stage Director of Inclusion and Community Engagement **Samantha D. Montgomery** will direct this production and Ko-Thi Dance Company Artistic Director **DeMar Walker** provides choreography, as well as plays the roles of Old Man and Ananse the Spider. The production will also feature live drumming with **Kameron "Keon" Sykes**. Kids and adults will be dancing in their seats as Ananse, the clever spider of African folklore, tries to trick Granny into dancing away from her garden so he can take her vegetables. But his plan backfires when he is drawn into the dance himself. "Shake it to the East, shake it to the West, shake it to the one that you love best!" Sponsored by **PNC**. *Performance runtime is approximately 45 minutes, with no intermission. Suggested for families with young people ages 3-7+.*

THE DANCING GRANNY runs **February 12 – March 6, 2022** at Goodman Mainstage Hall at the Milwaukee Youth Arts Center, located at 325 W. Walnut Street in downtown Milwaukee. Tickets are \$15. Tickets are available online at firststage.org or through the First Stage Box Office at (414) 267-2961.

Director **Samantha D. Montgomery** had this to say about THE DANCING GRANNY: "I am excited about First Stage and Ko-Thi collaborating and working together to share Mansa Ra's adaptation of Ashley Bryan's THE DANCING GRANNY with the community. This is a wonderful

opportunity for families to share, laugh, strengthen their bond and enjoy one another as they listen to the voice and move to the rhythm of this African folklore.”

Choreographer/Ko-Thi Artistic Director **DeMar Walker** also commented: “THE DANCING GRANNY will bring together two Milwaukee artistic forces celebrating the amazing cultural legacy of oral tradition and storytelling within the Black theatrical experience. I feel this production runs in tandem with the conceptual works that Ko-Thi Dance Company has performed in recent years for audiences of various ages and backgrounds. We are beyond thrilled to showcase our versatility and virtuosity during this unprecedented time with the incomparable First Stage children’s theater.”

Added First Stage Artistic Director **Jeff Frank**, “We are honored to work with our friends at Ko-Thi Dance Company to bring to life this adaptation by beloved author/illustrator Ashley Bryan. This show will make you want to get up and move!”

BIOGRAPHIES

Mansa Ra (Playwright) was born Jiréh Breon Holder, in Memphis, Tennessee. He is the only child of a first-generation undergraduate and doctoral degree recipient, single mother and beloved community leader. He made his debut as a playwright with TOO HEAVY FOR YOUR POCKET. *The New York Times* named him a “Marquee Name, Now in the Making” while *New Yorker* praised him as “a gifted writer who will be amazing to watch as his work grows.” After the pandemic, he returned to New York City with IN THE SOUTHERN BREEZE (Rattlestick Theater, NYC). The play pulls from the author’s own suicide letter to give encouragement to other queer Black men. *TheaterMania* named it one of their “6 Favorite Theater Productions of 2021” while *The New York Times* praised it as “formally ambitious” and a “tender tribute to previous generations of Black Americans.” His precise poetic realism for the stage has also carried into his work in film and television, which includes NBC’s hit drama *New Amsterdam*. In Spring 2022, the Roundabout Theatre Company will present ...WHAT THE END WILL BE, a meditation on generational trauma. It asks a potent question: how can we rebuild our families in the face of tragedy? The production will feature Keith Randolph Smith (JITNEY, Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X*) and Erik King (*Dexter, Oz*) as an estranged father and son trying to reconcile in the face of Covid and cancer. Mansa Ra was educated at Central High School, Morehouse College, Spelman College, Emory University and earned an MFA in Playwriting from the Yale School of Drama. Between plays, he teaches at Emory University in Atlanta, GA. Mansa Ra lives in West Hollywood with his fiancé and their beautiful dog, Harriet.

Samantha D. Montgomery (Director/Director of Artistic Inclusion and Community Engagement) is a performance artist who is committed to the process of learning. She has worked in both traditional and non-traditional educational settings. Teaching is her passion, connectivity is her goal and working collaboratively in unity to nurture trust, acceptance, inclusion and community is her commitment. She has enjoyed working at First Stage as a Teaching Artist and is grateful for the opportunity to work as the Artistic Inclusion and Community Engagement Director. Samantha is a member of Actors’ Equity Association. She

holds a BA from Alverno College in Professional Communication, a MS from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in Administrative Leadership and Supervision in Adult Education and a MA from Alverno College in Education.

DeMar Walker (Choreographer, Old Man/Ananse the Spider) is the Artistic Director of Ko-Thi Dance Company. He has performed and choreographed in the following productions: WORDS FROM THE SOLE, THE SWEET GRASS PROJECT, IMANI: A TRIBUTE TO WEST AFRICA, VIBRATIONS: RHYTHMIC MOTION, UJIMA and the recent production of JUBA-LEE which premiered in August 2019, celebrating the company's 50th anniversary. He is primarily trained in West African and Afro-Caribbean techniques. He has also received training in hip hop/social, jazz, ballet and contemporary dance techniques. From 2014 – 2021, DeMar served as an Associate Lecturer of African Diasporic dance at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee – Peck School of the Arts/Department of Dance. DeMar has performed with Wildspace Dance Company and Fist & Heel Performance Group. He has traveled to the countries of Guinea and Senegal to train, research and perform in international workshops with Youssouf Koumbassa, Patrick Acgony, Alesandra Seutin and Thomas Talawa Presto at Ecole Des Sables. DeMar is also a contributor to the 2020 publication entitled *Black in the Middle: An Anthology of the Black Midwest*. In Fall 2021, he directed and released his first dance short film *The Beckoning* which has been screened in multiple local, national and international film festivals. It has received several accolades including the 2021 Mozaik Philanthropy Future Art Award, as well as Best Film and Best Director at the VOICES HEARD segment at the 2021 Milwaukee International Short Film Festival. Currently, DeMar is also a first-year graduate student pursuing a master's degree in English at Marquette University with a research focus in Black performing arts history within the Midwestern United States.

Jeff Frank (Artistic Director) is recognized as one of the top directors in the field with an expertise in developing new work for the theater for young audience field. He holds a BFA in Theater from the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, and an MFA in Child Drama from the University of Utah. Having served as First Stage's Education and Academy Director from 1996 – 2003, Jeff remains committed to the power of theater to transform lives and forever thankful to call First Stage home.

ADULT CAST

Marina Murphy (Anika the Granny); **DeMar Walker** (Old Man/Ananse the Spider); **Kameron "Keon" Sykes** (Musician/Sun who Drums); **Sonya Thompson** (Understudy for Marina Murphy); **Christopher DeAngelo Gilbert** (Understudy for DeMar Walker) and **Deonte Ellis** (Understudy for Kameron "Keon" Sykes).

YOUNG PERFORMER CASTS

Young Performer roles are double cast. Young Performers in the Whirl Cast include: **Kiomara Thompson** (Wauwatosa) as Earth and **Genevieve Gaertner** (River Hills) as Wind.

Young Performers in the Twirl Cast include: **Terynn Erby-Walker** (Milwaukee) as Earth and **Abbie Cashman** (Shorewood) as Wind.

The Artistic Staff for THE DANCING GRANNY includes: **Samantha D. Montgomery** (Director/ Director of Artistic Inclusion and Community Engagement); **DeMar Walker** (Choreographer); **Sydney Lynne Thomas** (Scenic Designer); **Sarah Hamilton** (Lighting Designer); **Sonya Thompson** (Costume Designer); **Dane Urban**, Member of Actors' Equity Association, (Stage Manager) and **Carrie Johns** (Assistant Stage Manager).

Tickets are \$15 – Tickets may be purchased at firststage.org/ or by phone (414) 267-2961.

Special events for THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM – 1963

Pay What You Choose Performance: Sunday, February 20, 2022 at 2 p.m.

Pay What You Choose tickets are available on a first come, first served basis with a minimum suggested donation of \$5 per person. Doors open at 1:00 p.m. on the day of the performance. Patrons are encouraged to arrive early.

ASL Interpreted Performance: Sunday, March 6, 2022 at 2 p.m.

This performance will be sign language interpreted for patrons who are deaf or hard of hearing. Assistive listening devices are also available at the Todd Wehr Theater.

Sensory Friendly Performance: Sunday, February 27, 2022 at 2 p.m.

A Sensory Friendly Performance with accommodations for families with children on the autism spectrum will take place on **Sunday, February 27, 2022 at 2 p.m.** Sensory accommodations include lower sound, house lights up, a quiet area staffed by an educator experienced with the care of students on the autism spectrum and other developmental differences, and more. Tickets for Sensory Friendly Performances are \$10. Order by phone at **(414) 267-2961**, weekdays 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. to reserve tickets. To learn more visit: firststage.org/plan-your-visit/sensory-friendly-performances/.

COVID Protocols: First Stage COVID safety protocols and updates can be viewed here: [firststage.org/plan-your-visit/safety-security/ - performances](http://firststage.org/plan-your-visit/safety-security/-performances)

FACT SHEET

What: First Stage presents THE DANCING GRANNY

A collaboration with [Ko-Thi Dance Company](#)

By **Mansa Ra**, adapted from the book by **Ashley Bryan**

Directed by **Samantha D. Montgomery**

Choreography by **DeMar Walker**

Sponsored by PNC

Location: The Milwaukee Youth Arts Center, 325 W. Walnut Street, Milwaukee

Dates: February 12, 2021 – March 6, 2022

Description: Kids and adults will be dancing in their seats as Ananse, the clever spider of African folklore, tries to trick Granny into dancing away from her garden so he can take her vegetables. But his plan backfires when he is drawn into the dance himself. “Shake it to the East, shake it to the West, shake it to the one that you love best!” *Performance runtime is approximately 45 minutes, with no intermission. Suggested for families with young people ages 3-7+.*

Performances:

- Saturday, February 12 at 11:00 a.m. (SOLD OUT) & 2:00 p.m.
- Sunday, February 13 at 11:00 a.m.
- Saturday, February 19 at 11:00 a.m. & 2:00 p.m.
- Sunday, February 20 at 11:00 a.m. & 2:00 p.m. (PAY WHAT YOU CHOOSE PERFORMANCE AT 2:00 P.M.)
- Saturday, February 26 at 11:00 a.m. & 2:00 p.m.
- Sunday, February 27 at 11:00 a.m. & 2:00 p.m. (SENSORY FRIENDLY PERFORMANCE AT 2:00 P.M.)
- Saturday, March 5 at 11:00 a.m. & 2:00 p.m.
- Sunday, March 6 at 11:00 a.m. & 2:00 p.m. (ASL PERFORMANCE AT 2:00 P.M.)

Ticket and information: Tickets are \$15. Call (414) 267-2961 or online at: firststage.org

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About First Stage

First Stage is one of the nation’s leading theaters for young people and families. First Stage touches hearts, engages minds and transforms lives by creating extraordinary theater experiences through professional theater productions that inspire, enlighten and entertain. Its Theater Academy, the nation’s largest high-impact theater training program for young people, fosters life skills through stage skills and serves nearly 2,000 students each year. As Wisconsin’s leader in arts-integrated education in schools, First Stage’s dynamic Theater in Education programs promote literacy, character building and experiential learning throughout the curriculum, serving over 20,000 students each year. First Stage was selected to participate in the Partners in Education program of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (2012) and was the recipient of the *Milwaukee Business Journal’s* Eureka Award, recognizing creativity and innovation in business, education and the arts for its Next Steps program for students on the autism spectrum (2013, 2015). First Stage is a member of TYA/USA, the American Alliance for Theatre and Education, the Wisconsin Alliance for Arts Education, Milwaukee Arts Partners and is a cornerstone member of the United Performing Arts Fund (UPAF). firststage.org.

About Ko-Thi Dance Company

Ko-Thi Dance Company inspires discovery and community celebration through African and Caribbean dance and music. Their mission is to passionately preserve, teach and present these cultures to multiple generations, to celebrate the beauty of traditional African and Caribbean art by translating these diverse cultures for modern audiences; to support teachers and curricula in social studies, geography, math and language, and to help foster greater passion, acceptance, cultural pride and respect.

Founded in 1969, Ko-Thi Dance Company was developed during a time in American history when Black Americans were searching for their roots and connections to the continent of Africa. The arts played a crucial role in this re-connection, recapturing and rediscovering history and culture through dance, song, music, visual arts and theater. Nearly fifty-three years later, KTDC continues the work begun at its inception: to train and develop Wisconsin-based artists in traditional African and Caribbean arts. KTDC inspires artists who are dedicated to African and Caribbean music and dance – artists who are nurtured and enriched by its artistic and educational programming. Learn more at ko-thi.org.

Ko-Thi Dance Company gratefully acknowledges the ongoing support of CAMPAC, the Milwaukee Arts Board, Forward Community Investments, the Highpoint Fund, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, the Wisconsin Arts Board and the National Endowment for the Arts, whose recent support includes an American Rescue Plan grant in the amount of \$150,000.