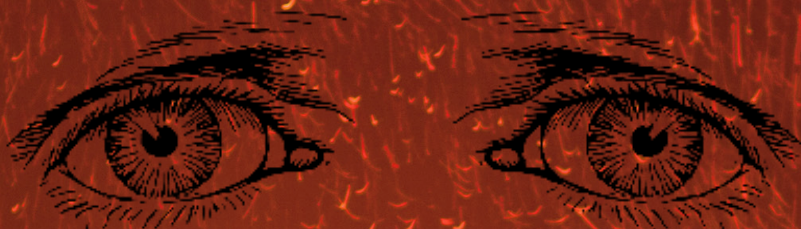




# SANKOFA

AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE COMPANY



# Pretty Fire

by

## Charlayne Woodard

Content Advisory: brief use of N-word; brief depiction of smoking; portion of play references 1950's & 1960's and some content may be insensitive to modern audiences; brief depiction of sexual assault (after intermission at the end of first scene).

## July 30 - August 8, 2021

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# Pretty Fire by Charlayne Woodard



## WELCOME

EXECUTIVE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, SHARIA BENN

“People generally see what they look for, and hear what they listen for...”

- Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

“What you feed will grow”, “Out of every bad thing, something good comes”

—Sharia (stuff my Grandmothers would say)

WELCOME, Sankofa African American Theatre Company is still here! I am excited as Sankofa returns to the stage after sixteen months of pandemic and social disruption. In the midst of these crises that are attacking our humanity, civility, and souls we must resolve to somehow move forward into better-ness while the acrid taste of bitterness still lingers in our throats. Easier said than done, I know. I believe that the strength for the journey to become better begins with uncovering the truths that lie hidden under a blanket of discarded, dishonored, and distorted history. History is not behind us, it is present and informs our person, our family, our culture, community, our everything. It is imperative that we uncover and explore history, not to relive it, but to share the experiences and perspective, both beautiful and painful, so that we see through another set of eyes. This will allow us to imagine and create new pathways and plant new seeds of to grow a healthy community in which we treat each other with concern, compassion, and care.

*Pretty Fire* by Charlayne Woodard, embodies the Sankofa principle of looking back to move forward. Charlayne uses the African tradition of griot (oral storytelling) to share her experiences of growing up in the North with deep family roots in the South. Her stories are not all pretty, but she beautifully illustrates how focusing on the people and things that lift you up, rather than on the ones that bring you down, will bring you through.

Lyeneal Griffin, a new directing talent for Sankofa, has created a powerful and beautiful re-imagining of *Pretty Fire*. The cast and crew have been uber-generous with their time, talents, and hearts. Sankofa Board members, staff, partners, and volunteers have gone above and beyond to make sure Sankofa moves forward with power and purpose. My family, especially my husband William, and friends have been sacrificially supportive. Thank you seems too simple and over-used, but I am thankful down to the core of my soul to each of you who had a part in making this milestone production happen.

May this production of *Pretty Fire* help you fix your focus and inspire hope, healing, and JOY, which we so desperately need right now.

Peace and Blessings,  
Sharia

# Pretty Fire by Charlayne Woodard



## DIRECTOR'S NOTE DIRECTOR, LYENEAL GRIFFIN

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." - Maya Angelou

I had not heard of *Pretty Fire* before this opportunity. I will never forget my first read. The experience was visceral. It was vivid. It was personal and it felt like home. Charlayne Woodard lays at the altar an offering of history that many of us, whether personally or relatively, will affix. When I finished, I sat for a moment in silence. It was a thrill from which I did not want to detach. It left me with many questions, primarily for myself. *Pretty Fire* is a story about the power of community and a testimony to the love, joy, and resilience of our African American predecessors.

I think of it as a ceremony of honor, but instead of receiving a nicely designed, embroidered trophy, Charlayne offers the transformative power of storytelling as tribute.

We keep those who have left this earth alive through the stories that we tell about them. Their physical presence may not be with us, but they live within us, within our memories. And without realizing it, I was in a trance; memories of childhood flooded me. I began time-traveling through my own personal experiences. With each memory came the reliving of sensations. A few reads later, I gained clarity and a fresher perspective of my own personal life experiences, and how those experiences have shaped who I am today. *Pretty Fire* is a story about victory, victory during a time of impossible odds.

Charlayne Woodard wrote *Pretty Fire* originally as a one-woman show; however, in her latest edition of the play, she invites directors, theaters, and theatre groups to stage *Pretty Fire* using multiple actors. The Griots of West Africa and the early works of Shadow Theatre from the Egyptian and Arab theatre in North Africa became my inspiration. I cast for actors to play multiple roles of many ages, shapes, and sounds, and I wanted to explore ways to connect the two. After reading Nora Amin's essay in *The Theatre Times*, "Shadow Theatre: The Performance and The Imaginary in Contemporary Egypt," my conceptual search came to an end.

*Pretty Fire* is a collection of personal memories that will feel like home for so many of us. Charlayne Woodard has woven together music, history, and storytelling in a way that I hope will leave audiences uplifted and inspired by our personal life experiences, gaining a deeper perspective and gratitude for how those experiences have shaped who we've become in the world at present. Victories.

Enjoy,

# About the Playwright Charlayne Woodard



Charlayne Woodard is a two-time Obie Award winner and Tony Award nominee.

Ms. Woodard's new two-character play, *The Garden*, a commission of the La Jolla Playhouse, has productions scheduled in 2021 at both Baltimore Center Stage and The La Jolla Playhouse. Her first solo play, *Pretty Fire*, was produced at the Fountainhead Theatre in Los Angeles, where it received LA Drama Critics and NAACP awards for best play and best playwright; Manhattan Theatre Club; Seattle Rep (directed by Dan Sullivan); and the La Jolla Playhouse (directed by Michael Greif). Her second solo play, *Neat*, was developed at Seattle Rep, and subsequently produced at Manhattan Theatre Club, where it received the Irving and Blanche Laurie Theatre Vision Award and an Outer Critics Circle Award nomination; Seattle Rep and the Mark Taper Forum (both directed by Dan Sullivan), where the play received a Backstage West Garland Award. Her third solo play, *In Real Life*, was a co-commission by Center Theatre Group and Seattle Rep, and developed at the Sundance Theatre Lab. *In Real Life* (directed by Dan Sullivan) was produced at: Seattle Rep; the Mark Taper Forum, where the play received a Backstage West Garland Award and NAACP Awards for best playwright and actor; and Manhattan Theatre Club, where Ms. Woodard received an Audelco Award and was nominated for Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle Awards for best solo performance. Her fourth solo play, *The Night Watcher*, was developed at the Ojai Playwrights' Conference and the La Jolla Playhouse's Page To The Stage. *The Night Watcher*, directed by Dan Sullivan, was produced at Seattle Rep; Primary Stages; and the Kirk Douglas Theatre, where the play received LA Drama Critics and NAACP Awards for best solo performance, as well as nominations from both for best play. *Flight*, Ms. Woodard's multi-character adaptation of African and African-American folktales, was commissioned by Center Theatre Group. Productions include the Lincoln Museum, Springfield, IL; Kirk Douglas Theatre in Los Angeles; and ACT in Seattle. Her plays are published by Dramatists Play Service and performed at regional theatres around the country; and audio versions are available at Audible.com.

Ms. Woodard's ten-minute play, *Phenom*, was performed as part of the Car Plays series produced by the La Jolla Playhouse. *Grace* a solo musical, written with Kristin Childs, was commissioned and produced by Inner Voices in New York City.

<https://www.charlaynewoodard.com/>



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## “Life Lessons” Dramaturgy Note by Lyeneal Griffin

Pretty Fire is a play filled with history. As we journey through Charlayne's youth, we receive a very personal experience of her life growing up in the 1950s and 1960s America. Charlayne travels from the North in Albany, New York to rural South, Rosignol Hill, Savannah, Georgia, encountering two very different experiences of the treatment of Black people during this period in time. There comes a time when African American families have to decide when to speak to their children about the history of Black people in America. Charlayne's family protected her, and they made decisions to keep Charlayne and her sister Allie safe from the trepidation of threat and violence that many Black Americans faced during the period of her youth.

In Pretty Fire, Charlayne's view of the world is limited and almost naive through the innocence of her youth. When Charlayne travels to Rosignol Hill, she shares a story about the “Life Lessons” that her Grandmother, Grace Harris, would share with her and her sister Allie on the front porch of Grace's home in Rosignol Hill. Through these “Life Lessons,” Charlayne gains a deeper understanding and clarity about the world around her.

Charlayne attended public school in the 1950s following the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling in 1954. While desegregation of schools in Albany did not escalate to violence and federal intervention as its counterparts of the South, there were still significant concerns that the North had to grapple. As a result of the Great Migration, Albany began to see an increase in its population of African-American communities.

In Joshua Levine's, *A Good Education for All? Desegregation and Education Reform in Albany Schools*, Levine states that “When Southern blacks came to Albany, they settled in the Arbor Hill and South End communities. At the arrival of Southern blacks, Arbor Hill had been inhabited predominantly by the Irish than the Polish. This large increase in Albany's black population caused many white immigrants to leave the neighborhoods they were inhabiting. This decrease in the white proportion and the increase in the black proportion of these neighborhoods, along with government policy and relator efforts, not only caused the housing to become increasingly segregated, but the schools in these neighborhoods became segregated as well” (Levine 9).

To remove the “racial imbalance” in public schools in Albany, Dr. James E. Allen, State Education commissioner in the 1960s, noticed a problem where certain districts were dividing schools based on residence rather than academic ability.

He urged schools and school boards throughout New York State to create plans to solve this problem. Thus, School districts in Albany constructed the "Proposed Plans for the Removal of Imbalance in the Public Schools." The proposal consisted of three plans; school boundaries, open registration, and exchange of pupils.

In the third grade, around 1962, Charlayne most likely was selected to be a part of the Exchange of Pupils plan because of her reading ability, which focused on "moving whites and non-whites in opposite directions" (Levine 13). She went from School Six, which had a majority black student population in Arbor Hill, to being bussed and integrated into School Twenty, where she quickly noticed that she was one of two black students in the entire school.

"Charlayne, if anybody wants to call you a rabbit pellet, you just let them. And secretly laugh to yourself: How silly they are!" - Mommy

When the summer approached, black and white television classics like *Lassie* and *Shirley Temple* became Charlayne and Allie's favorite pastimes. "Dixie," a tune created to conclude the finale of minstrel performances, and a popular song amongst the Confederacy during the Civil War, became young Charlayne's favorite song to belt at the top of her lungs. She and her sister Allie loved "Dixie" because Dixie meant the "South." And the South meant our grandparents --". Charlayne associates Dixie with freedom, a word many Black Americans living in rural South, Rosignol Hill would not equate.

I tell you, Woody, I just can't take this. I'm not used to this anymore. I just can't stand Jim Crow! - Mommy

In Edward A. Hatfield's journal, *Segregation*, he states that "under Jim Crow, Black Georgians suffered from a system of discrimination that pervaded nearly every aspect of life" (*Segregation*, Hatfield).

Charlayne had not come to face the hardship and turmoil that her grandparents would experience during the seasons when she didn't visit, and I believe that her family made sure of this for Charlayne's protection. For young Charlayne, the South was a place filled with love because, to her, it was only a place where she was "spoiled silly" by her grandparents.

White supremacists used forms of intimidation to keep Black Americans inferior. Fear tactics, such as cross burning, lynching, and enforcement of legal segregation under Jim Crow, made the South a place of continual threat.

“That is not pretty! That is ugly! That is the ugliest thing you will ever see!” - Grace Harris

“While the experience of Jim Crow was no less harsh in rural areas, and in fact may have been more so, it did lack the rigidity that characterized urban segregation. In Georgia’s cities, segregation developed as a solution to the problems posed by modernization and urbanization. However, rural Georgia remained a largely premodern society, making many features of segregation unnecessary or even problematic” (Segregation, Hatfield).

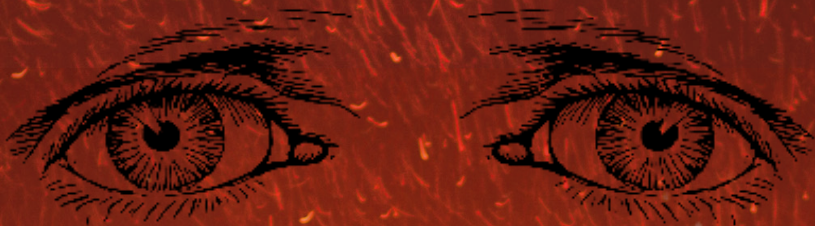
“Generations and generations of Woodard women have always had the opportunity to work like a man, at a man’s job. Oh, we have all worked in the fields, chopped wood, driven trucks, and tractors, and busses. I myself, I worked on the railroad during the war. A woman must always be prepared to do whatever she has to do, for the sake of her family and her loved ones.” - Grandmama, Leola McCann

In conclusion, Charlayne ends *Pretty Fire* with what I describe as a tribute to her grandmother, Leola McCann. Charlayne says that *Pretty Fire* is “a celebration of my heroes--.” As Leola speaks about life pre and post-World War II and the fight for equal rights of women, Charlayne learns to have gratitude for her life because of her ancestors that have laid the groundwork for her. Music played a pivotal role in Charlayne’s life, and she credits Leola to be the reason she became the performer that she is today.

The personal joy I received from writing the play and performing it, as well as its success, is, I believe, due to the healing effect it has on audiences at a time when we, as a country and as a world, are torn by racism and brutality. - Charlayne Woodard

Hatfield, Edward A. “Segregation.” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. 20 July 2020. Web. 28 July 2021.

Levine, Joshua, “A Good Education for All? Desegregation and Educational Reform in Albany’s Schools” (2019).



# Pretty Fire

by

## Charlayne Woodard

Producer.....Sharia Benn  
Director .....Lyeneal Griffin  
Production Manager.....Alyx Nornhold  
Technical Director .....Ross Carmichael  
Stage Manager.....Jess Ross  
Costume Designers.....Janet Wood, Sharia Benn  
Lighting Designer .....Tristan Stasiulis  
Sound Designer.....Kelsey Benn  
Projections Designer/Sound Technician.....Martin Kolb  
Music Director.....Johntrae Williams  
House Manager.....Aleax Olivera  
Head Usher.....Maggie Ruoro  
Business & Box Office Manager.....Donald Alsedek  
Dramaturg.....Lyeneal Griffin

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SHARIA BENN



CHARLAYNE

SHARIA BENN (Charlayne) is a native of Baltimore, MD, a graduate of Towson University and Co-Founder, President and Executive Artistic Director of Sankofa African American Theatre Company. Sharia is a winner of the Broadway World Best Actress Award for her portrayal of Ma Rainey in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Selected credits include: *Do You Know Me?* (writer/co-director); *Voices of the Eighth* (writer/director); *Bridge (the gap)* (writer/director); *for colored girls...* (director); *Voices of F.E.W.* (writer, director, role of Frances Harper); *Akeelah and the Bee* (co-director); *Death of a Salesman*; *Red Velvet*; *To Kill A Mockingbird*; *A Raisin in the Sun*; *Fences*; *A Christmas Memory*; *Peter Hook and the Darlings*; *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*; *The Piano Lesson*; *Doubt*; and *Crowns*.

MEGAN RUORO



ALLIE/ENSEMBLE

MEGAN RUORO (Allie/Ensemble) Megan is a sophomore studying Theater and Political Science at Yale University. This is her fourth production with Sankofa. She appeared in *Voices of the Eighth*; for colored girls... and *Akeelah and the Bee*. She has also written and performed in productions at Yale, Open Stage, and Theatre Harrisburg.

# JOHNTRAE WILLIAMS



## DADDY/ENSEMBLE

JOHNTRAE WILLIAMS (Daddy/Ensemble) hails from Harrisburg, PA, and is a proud graduate of Harrisburg High School. He received his BFA in Theater from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, PA. After over 30 years of experience, Johntrae is thrilled to finally be able to utilize his talent with Sankofa. He would like to thank his wife DeAnna for her continual support, as well as all other friends and family that have supported him over the years.

# MEREDITH GREENE



## MOMMY/ENSEMBLE

MEREDITH GREENE (Mommy/Ensemble) is from Harrisburg PA. Meredith has appeared with Sankofa and Gamut Theatre Group in *Voices of F.E.W.*; *Vote*; *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre*; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and for colored girls...



## WHO'S WHO in the CREW

**LYENEAL GRIFFIN** (Director) is a Mississippi native and theatre artist currently based in Harrisburg, PA. He serves as a Core Company Actor with Gamut Theatre Group, where he serves as an Actor, Teaching Artist, and Public Relations Manager for the company. Sankofa African American Theatre Company has become a second home for Lyeneal, and he is grateful for the opportunity to share his talents and his love for storytelling with this phenomenal cast and crew. He has much gratitude for every single person that lent hands, suggestions, time, and creativity to this production. Lyeneal's other directing credits include *The Last Train to Nibroc* (Regent Theatre, VA); *See Rock City* (Zeiders American Dream Theatre, VA); *Suessical JR.* (Rich Theatre, VA); *Highschool Musical JR.* (Rich Theatre, VA)

**JESS ROSS** (Stage Manager) has appeared locally in *The Laramie Project*; *Charlotte's Web*; *Wiley and the Hairy Man*; *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*; *Murderess*; and *Doubt*. Jess is so thrilled to be working with this talented group!

**ALEXANDRA NORNHOLD** (Production Manager) is a professional stage manager and lighting designer in the Central Pennsylvania area. She stage-managed *Machinal* with Penn State Harrisburg and *Hamlet* and *Chekhov Comedies: Love Hurts* with Gamut Theatre Group. She also designed *Chekhov Comedies: Love Hurts*. Alexandra graduated from York College of Pennsylvania in 2016 with BA's in Theatre and Professional Writing.

**ROSS CARMICHAEL** (Technical Director) graduated from York College of Pennsylvania with a B.A. in Theatre. Since then, he has worked professionally as an actor, a director, and in technical theatre. Technical credits: *Scenic Designer* (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; *As You Like It*; *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*; *Robin Hood*; *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *Production Manager* (*Powerhouse Apprentice Company: Medea*; *Comedy of Errors*; *Julius Caesar*). *Head Carpenter* (Gamut Theatre, York College of PA). *Directing credits:* *Food-play* (FoodPlay Productions); *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* (York College of PA).

**TRISTAN STASIULIS** (Lighting Designer) was Lighting Director for *Hamlet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *All the King's Men*, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Our Town* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* at Gamut Theatre Group. At Open Stage, Tristan has been Lighting Designer for *Amélie*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Wolves*, for colored girls..., *A Christmas Carol*, *Carrie*, *Fun Home*, *Red*, *Bill W. and Dr. Bob*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Gidion's Knot*, *Fences*, *Clybourne Park*, *Joe Turner's Come And Gone*, *Frost/Nixon*, *Talk Radio*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and others from 2011 to present.

**KELSEY BENN** (SOUND DESIGNER) is an audio engineer who has done sound tech, music, music composition, sound design and video editing for *Crowns*; *Father Comes Home From the Wars*; *Do You Know Me?* and *Gather at the Crossroads*.

MELISSA NICHOLSON (Gamut Theatre Producer) has worn many hats in her professional theatrical career, including actor, director, stage manager, playwright, and teacher. In addition to creating Popcorn Hat Players Children's Theatre and Harrisburg Shakespeare Company with her husband, Clark, she is also a past president of the Shakespeare Theatre Association International, a founding Board member of Harrisburg Area Theatre Alliance, and serves on the Arts & Entertainment committee of the Ned Smith Center.

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Jade Gerrell  
Aaron Bomar  
Judy Roseborough  
Najuma Norman

PRETTY FIRE was originally produced by the  
Manhattan Theatre Club on March 26, 1993.

PRETTY FIRE was first performed as a work-in-progress  
at the Fountainhead Theatre Company, Hollywood, California.

PRETTY FIRE is presented by special arrangements with Dramatists Play  
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“All Blues”

by Miles Davis

Sony/ATV Songs LLC

“Climbing Up the Mountain”

by Mattie Moss Clark

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“Give Up to Jesus”

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“The Mighty Mouse Theme (Here I Come to Save the Day)”

Words by Marshall Barer

Music by Phillip Schieb

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## About Sankofa African American Theatre Company



In late 2015, members of Open Stage of Harrisburg leadership and actors from the cast of several August Wilson productions began to seriously dialogue about the need for a theatrical arena in which actors of color could take ownership of telling their own stories.

This dialogue led to the formation of a founding strategic planning committee that worked for over nine months on developing a strategic plan for the organization, now known as Sankofa African American Theatre Company. The strategic planning process included a survey of the internal and external strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with implementing an African American theatre company.

From this strategic planning exploration, the organization's mission and vision were developed to focus on the activities of Sankofa and develop and prioritize strategic objectives to ensure the sustainability and success of the organization. Sankofa African American Theatre Company was incorporated on June 6, 2017, and is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization.

Sankofa African American Theatre Company exists to engage and enrich the Harrisburg region around the African American perspective on relevant issues through thought-provoking theatre that reflects artistic excellence.

Our mission is to produce theatre that illuminates the history, culture, and life experiences of African Americans, creating safe spaces for education, engagement, and empowerment around the African American experience.

---

## Step Up and Invest in Transforming Lives

Sankofa African American Theatre Company exists to engage and enrich the Harrisburg region around the African American perspective on relevant issues through thought-provoking theatre that reflects artistic excellence. Your contribution will help provide funding for Sankofa's theatre and educational programs and its operational support. Sankofa African American Theatre Company is an approved 501 (c) (3) nonprofit corporation. Contributions are tax-deductible to the extent permissible by law. Please consider making a contribution to Sankofa. [Click here to donate.](#)



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Sankofatheatrehb.com 717-214-3251 Facebook.com/SankofaTheatre

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January 1, 2020 - March 30, 2021

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Paula Green

Wes and Debi Johnson

Jeremy Aluma

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Green Wagner

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Jessica Yahner

Joshua Schwartz

Laura Dugan

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Lydia Graeff

Myneca Ojo

Sean Adams

Tyler Chick

Wayne Landon

William O'Donnell

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Jenifer Wiley

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Arleen Shulman

Carol Howard

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## Season 29 Auditions

Tuesday, August 17  
Thursday, August 19  
Friday, August 20

Audition for Season 29

Gamut Theatre Group is holding  
general open auditions for Season  
29.

Auditions will be held at Gamut  
Theatre at 6 p.m. on Tuesday,  
August 17; Thursday, August 19;  
and Friday, August 20.

For more information on Season  
29 Auditions, visit  
[gamuttheatre.org/auditions](http://gamuttheatre.org/auditions).

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