

JUST ONE MOMENT TO SHINE

Despite the hardships of the world they live in, the characters in *Venice* still have dreams—they dream of a world where “we can stand as one” and where each individual has their own moment of greatness, a “moment to shine.”

- How are these two dreams connected? How are they conflicted? If we stand together will that make it easier for each of us to follow our individual dreams? Can individuals taking the risk to shine help move us closer to a world where we are unafraid to stand together?
- How would you define a “moment of greatness”? Have you ever witnessed or experienced a moment of greatness? What do you need to risk or overcome to allow yourself to shine?
- Imagine it is your moment to shine, your moment of greatness. What do you do, say, feel, create, change in this moment?

About Us

Center Theatre Group's mission is to serve the diverse audiences of Los Angeles by producing and presenting theatre of the highest caliber, by nurturing new artists, by attracting new audiences, and by developing youth outreach and education programs. This mission is based on the belief that the art of theatre is a cultural force with the capacity to transform the lives of individuals and society at large.

Education and Engagement

Theatre is an enduring and powerful tool for communicating ideas, stories, emotions and beliefs that fuel the intellect, imagination and creative spirit. Center Theatre Group believes that stimulating awareness, creativity, dialogue and an inquisitive mind is integral to the growth and well-being of the individual and the community; and that nurturing a life-long appreciation of the arts leads inextricably to an engaged and enlightened society.

Center Theatre Group's education and community partnership programs advance the organization's mission in three key ways:

- **Audiences:** Inspiring current and future audiences to discover theatre and its connection to their lives;
- **Artists:** Investing in the training, support and development of emerging young artists and young arts professionals who are the future of our field; and
- **Arts Education Leadership:** Contributing to the community-wide efforts to improve the quality and scope of arts education in Los Angeles.

Education and Community Partnerships

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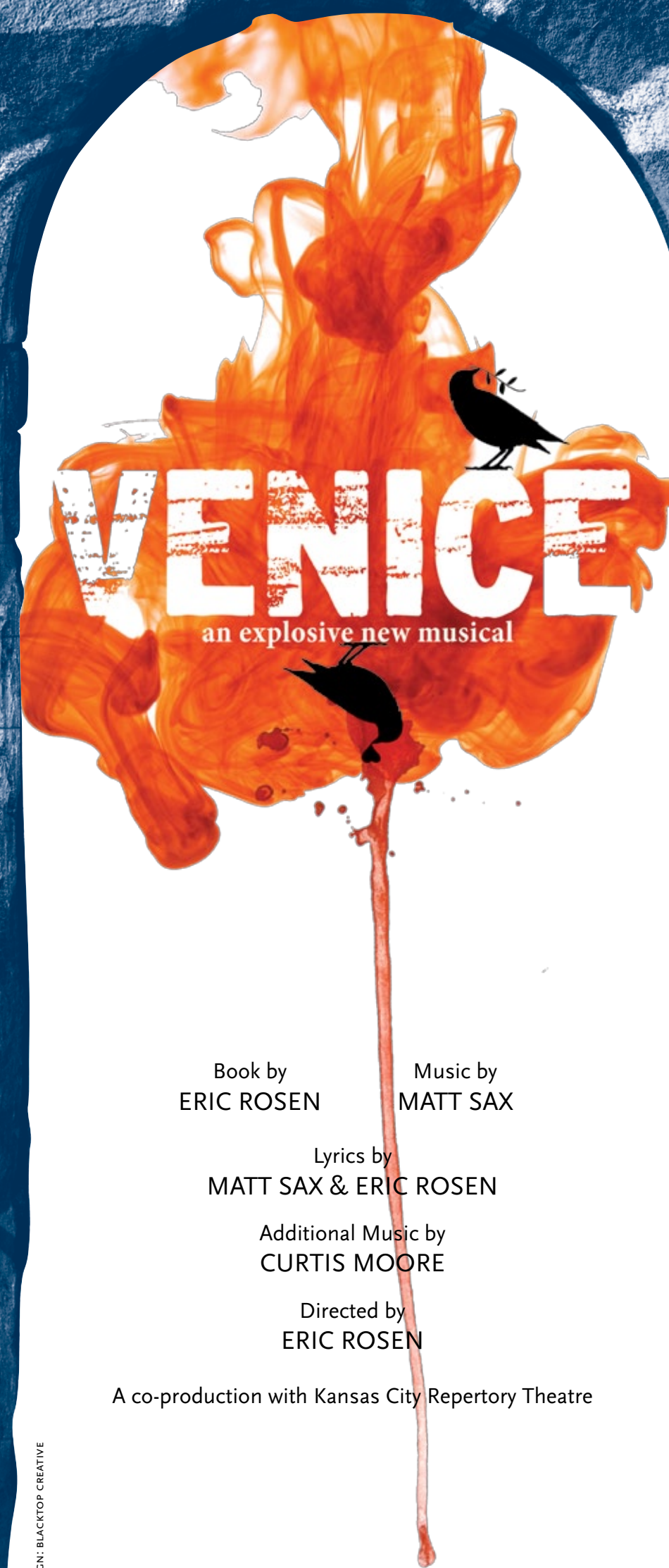
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Discovery Guide

PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH

Welcome to Center Theatre Group and *Venice*, a new musical by Eric Rosen and Matt Sax.



Venice, a story of war, love, betrayal and the quest for peace, features a powerful score that fuses elements of hip hop, R&B and opera. Set in the not-too-distant future, two brothers clash over how to save their city in the aftermath of a 20-year war. One brother seeks a new era of peace and restoration while the other tries to seize power by keeping the city mired in violence. *Venice* dares us to imagine if peace is possible. What risks are needed to bring change to our world and ourselves? Are human beings capable of standing together as one?

Before we tell you more, take a moment and think about what happens to young people who have lived their entire lives surrounded by violence. What might happen to them when there is suddenly hope for peace? Would they trust peace? Would they fear it? Can you envision our own world at peace? Do you trust that vision?

Turn the page to explore *Venice*. Learn about the journey to create this new musical; how the choreography and music further the story; and discover the connection between hip hop and Shakespeare. Think about why humans tell stories and how, while forms evolve, our human stories remain constant.

Theatre raises questions and challenges audience members to discover their own answers. See what questions this information raises for you and what questions and answers the performance provides. Thank you so much for joining us for *Venice*. We look forward to seeing you at the theatre!

Book by
ERIC ROSEN

Music by
MATT SAX

Lyrics by
MATT SAX & ERIC ROSEN

Additional Music by
CURTIS MOORE

Directed by
ERIC ROSEN

A co-production with Kansas City Repertory Theatre

If you dream of peace,
follow us.
If you dream of an end
to the war, follow us.
If you know these are not
the same thing, well—
Are you ready? —*Venice*

October 7–November 14, 2010
Kirk Douglas Theatre

Discovery Guide

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VENICE

ABOUT THE PLAY

From the darkness of an empty stage, Clown MC emerges with a laptop in hand. He types, and his words are projected upstage. The music begins. Clown MC raps as he tells us a story of Venice, a fictional city in the “not-distant future.” After twenty years of war, terrorism, and military occupation, the bombs have suddenly stopped and now the city struggles to be reborn. Music is nearly constant throughout;

the language of the characters is sometimes rapped, sometimes sung, sometimes spoken in free verse. This is a fable about war and peace, the haves and the have-nots, destruction and re-birth, truth and deception, love and hate—set to a soundtrack of hip hop, R&B, opera and poetry, colored with fast-paced dance numbers, flashing lights, and video projections.

VENICE — Or How It Got This Way

Our story starts in the “not-distant future”, but like many fables, we need to go to the past to understand the world in which these characters live. Clown MC tells the story of a city that was founded as a Utopian refuge from racial and cultural tensions, political unrest, and terrorism:

“THE CITY ONCE GREW LIKE A FLOWER FROM THE PAVEMENT ALL ACROSS VENICE YOU COULD FEEL THE CHANGES THE WHOLE WORLD FLED TO THESE SHORES THE ENVY OF THE WORLD—VENICE WAS ADORED AND THOUGH WAR RAGED ON ABROAD THE CITY OF PEACE WAS BORN —*Venice*”

Anna Monroe, the mother of General Venice Monroe and Captain Markos Monroe, was the city’s founder; and as a leader she preached non-violence and unity in the face of a world torn apart by war. As Clown MC tells it, Anna’s Utopian dream soon gave way to a dystopian nightmare when enemy outsiders invaded the city, bringing terrorism and violence. In the face of a massive terrorist attack and growing fear, the military took over, forming a police state, where anyone deemed a “foreigner” was a threat, and civil liberties were stripped away in the name of domestic security. Venice became a place where the government watched and regulated a citizen’s every move, where public gatherings and free speech were against the law, and even dancing was strictly prohibited—all in the name of protecting the safety of the people. Twenty years before the start of the story, a catastrophic terrorist attack killed most, if not all, of the adults. The rich and privileged youth of Venice (among them Willow Turner, Theodore Westbrook, and Michael Victor) were

swept away to a “Safe Zone,” where they were presumably free from the perils that haunted the city of Venice. Those in the Safe Zone became known as “The Disappeared.” The other youth, like Venice and Markos Monroe, Clown MC, and Hailey Daisy, were left to grow up in the city, forced to forge their own survival amongst the ruins, constant violence, and military control. As the story begins, Venice Monroe, the idealistic General of the Army and de facto leader of the city of Venice, promises to bring about “change” to the war-torn city. He is committed to restoring his mother’s vision for the City of Peace.

His brother Markos has other plans. The people of Venice want to believe peace can happen but have lived with war for so long that they are unsure. They sing, “*How can you trust the silence when all you know is war?*” Venice challenges the audience to imagine if peace and change are possible in this fictional world and in our own.

THE CHARACTERS



VENICE MONROE

The new military leader and political icon who stands for hope and change. He was named in honor of the city. Venice Monroe was conceived when his mother was raped by the “enemies” who opposed her peace efforts. Venice deeply desires to honor the legacy of his late mother who had great dreams for her younger son, as his birth was a symbol of hope in opposition to the enemies of the city of Venice.



WILLOW TURNER

The daughter of the late president who was assassinated in the attack that launched the war. For the past 20 years, Willow has lived in the “Safe Zone” with the others known as The Disappeared. Her return marks the return of beauty to the war-ravished city.

ANNA MONROE

The deceased mother of Venice Monroe and Markos Monroe. She was an important peace activist and founder of the city of Venice, nicknamed “The City of Peace.” Anna perished in the catastrophic attack that killed most of the city’s adults 20 years before this story starts. Her ghost is present throughout the story.

MARKOS MONROE

The captain of the army and Venice’s half-brother. Markos has long held a grudge towards his younger brother. Because Anna put all of her hopes on Venice, often overshadowing Markos, their sibling rivalry grew worse as the brothers got older. After Venice passes up Markos for a promotion, Markos puts into action a revenge plot with tragic consequences.

EMILIA MONROE

Markos’ wife and Willow’s former maid. She has blind faith in her husband, but how far will her trust take her?

MICHAEL VICTOR

The newly appointed Lieutenant General for Peace Deployment (he got the job over the envious Markos). Like Willow, he was also one of The Disappeared. Although he graduated at the top of his class from a prestigious military school, his youth and lack of actual combat experience make his promotion surprising to many, particularly Markos. He is one of General Venice’s allies in this place where few can be trusted.

HAILEY DAISY

A pop icon and political pawn of the military.

THEODORE WESTBROOK

The son of the late war profiteer. Because he was born into privilege, like Willow, it was assumed that he would marry her. He is heartbroken when he finds out of Willow’s intent to marry Venice. He goes to Markos for help to stop the wedding.

CLOWN MC

The narrator.

ENSEMBLE OF SOLDIERS, REPORTERS, PARTIERS, GHOSTS, ETC.

These are the “shades” that help Clown MC tell the story.

WORLD WITHOUT PARENTS

Venice is a society of children who lost their parents to war. The terrorist attacks 20 years before the play begins, killed most of the adults and forced the children to grow up on their own with only the ghosts and the memories of their parents to guide them.

- What happens to children when their parents are lost to war or violence? Do you think they grow up faster or would it be hard for them to grow up at all? Do we need someone to show us the way(s) to be an adult?

HOME

Venice is home to those left behind, but it also remains a symbolic idea of home for The Disappeared, who, despite their secure life in the “Safe Zone,” long to return to Venice.

- Would you rather be safe and far from your home or remain at home even if your home is filled with war or violence? Why?
- Where is home for you? What makes a place a home?

SHAKESPEARE & HIP HOP?

Sampling

Like the hip hop music that provides the beat for this new musical, *Venice* samples from older, classical works. In hip hop music, when one song samples another, the newer song borrows beats, melody, or sometimes lyrics from the older work as a way of quoting the source material in order to create something new. The creators of *Venice* were initially inspired by William Shakespeare's tragedy, *Othello*, and as such, *Venice* samples from the older text. Although the plot and characters differ between the two works, you might be able to see some of their similarities. The most obvious example comes from the title *Venice*, which is the name of the city in which Shakespeare's play is set. In *Venice* the musical, it is both the setting and the name of the protagonist. Other examples appear in the plot and the characters. Like the character of Othello, Venice (the character) is the General of the Army, and some of the citizens of Venice see him as an outsider. Shakespeare's villain Iago is re-created as Venice's half-brother Markos Monroe. Much like the way Iago manipulates Othello, Markos takes advantage of Venice by preying on his brother's jealousy and insecurities. Can you point out other ways in which these two plays are similar? If not, that's okay—it is not necessary to be familiar with *Othello* in order to understand or appreciate *Venice*.

Verse

Shakespeare and hip hop might not seem like an obvious fit, but they have more in common than one might think. You might already know that Shakespeare's plays were primarily written in verse, but did you realize that the use of meter and rhyme in rap is similar to the way in which meter and rhyme are used in Shakespeare's plays? In their lyrics, rappers commonly make use of wordplay and puns, alter the pronunciation of words to illustrate the various uses of rhyme, and change stress on syllables to fit into a particular musical rhythm (which is not all that different from the way some characters speak in Shakespeare's plays). Also, just as Shakespeare deliberately chose when a character was to speak in verse or prose, the same holds true for the characters in *Venice*, whether they are rapping, singing, speaking in verse, or speaking in prose. In an interview that appeared in the Kansas City Repertory Theatre program for *Venice*, director and creator Eric Rosen explains it like this:

Even with hip hop, Venice's characters are Shakespearean in that they speak in pentameter, free verse and blank verse. Like Shakespeare, we've used character status to give a reason for who speaks in couplets and we've given different voices to different characters to make sense of who they are and what their relationships are. Certain characters rap because that's what their heart is and what their station in the play is about. It's almost always true that they speak in rhymed couplet verse without rapping if they are colluding, and they speak freely when romance is happening.

"I'll Tell You A Story"

History

"With its celebration of language, meter, poetic structures, verbal play and display, [hip hop] harkens back to earlier traditions of oral expression in African-American culture... and even to classical theatrical conventions and the productive wordplay of William Shakespeare."

—from "Getting the Spirit" by Harry J. Elam, Jr., Professor of Drama, Stanford University

Although the terms "hip hop" and "rap" are often used synonymously, rap is only one of the original four elements of hip hop (the other three being graffiti art, DJ'ing, and B'boying/breakdancing). As an art form, rap traces its roots back to African-American oral traditions, particularly the African-American poetic form known as the toast. In the form of a rhymed-monologue, toasts tell stories, recounting the adventures of heroes who use wit, bravado, or just plain trickery to overcome some type of obstacle. Like in rap as we know it today, the artistry in toasts relies on rhythmic displays of innuendo, sharp wordplay, and bravado. Toasting was popularized in places where the residents knew all too well about feelings of disenfranchisement and societal obstacles like racism, poverty, and unjust incarceration. The art of toasting evolved into the protest poetry of the 1960s and 1970s, as popularized by poets like Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and especially the music-infused records by Gil-Scott Heron and the Lost Poets. In the 1970s, DJs in the Bronx like Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash were spinning turntables and scratching beats, sometimes accompanied by rappers who rhythmically chanted to the unique sounds being created while dancers spun on their heads and moved their bodies in ways that made it look like they were going to break something—and hip hop was born.

FABLES

Venice is narrated by a character known as Clown MC. Clown MC continually breaks the fourth-wall, stepping out of the action on the stage to directly address the audience throughout the play. When Clown MC breaks the fourth-wall, he intentionally calls attention to the fact that this is a theatrical presentation. Clown MC tells the audience this story is a "fable."

The word "fable" is often used synonymously with "allegory." An allegory is a story that uses symbolic fictional figures and actions to represent truths or generalizations about human existence. Political allegories tell stories about political systems or figures, using extended metaphors, so as to avoid addressing the people or incidents by name.

Fables and allegories, sometimes also known as myths, have been told throughout human history, from ancient times to the present, as a way for cultures to pass on traditions, to teach important life lessons, and sometimes to question, investigate, or criticize the culture itself. Some contemporary allegories include the novels *Lord of the Flies* and *Animal Farm* and the blockbuster films *The Matrix* and *Avatar*.

THE CLOWN

The Clown/Fool was intentionally witty, and often the smartest character in the play. This character appears prominently in plays such as *King Lear*, *Twelfth Night*, and even in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the character of Puck. Here in *Venice*, Clown MC, like the traditional Shakespearean fools, comments on the actions of the story. He is all-knowing and is able to give the audience insight into the inner-thoughts of the other characters. In popular culture today, many writers, comedians, and television personalities are like Shakespeare's fools: on the outside they function to make us laugh, while simultaneously speaking truths meant to comment on the world-at-large.

- Why do clowns often have the ability to say things that no one else can? How does humor give a clown the freedom to speak the truth, even unpopular truths?
- Who are some of our modern day clowns? How do they use comedy to comment on our world? What do we learn from our clowns?

"I AM THE BATTLE'S EYES. HIDDEN THROUGH THE CLOWN IT'S MY BATTLE DISGUISE" —Clown MC, *Venice*

- How might humor be a valuable weapon or witness in the midst of war?

English Elizabethan clown Will Kempe dancing a jig from Norwich to London in 1600. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

"SO YOU WANT A STORY? WELL I'LL TELL YOU A STORY CAUSE IT'S SORT OF MANDATORY— IN THIS LIFE WITH NO GLORY.."

NOW TONIGHT WE'RE GONNA TAKE YOU ON A LITTLE ESCAPE LEAVE THIS WORLD BEHIND— A NEW ONE TAKES ITS PLACE IT'S A FABLE, IT'S A STORY, AND I HATE TO MENTION— TURN OFF YOUR CELLPHONES, YOU GOTTA PAY ATTENTION."

—Clown MC, *Venice*

STORYTELLING

While storytelling forms change and evolve, the story content remains constant. Love, jealousy, war, peace, safety and freedom are themes found in stories throughout history. Artists are continually experimenting with new ways to share stories. The musical *Venice* reaches back to Shakespeare for inspiration and forward to hip hop and technology to tell this story.

- Why do human beings tell stories?
- How does the form of the story shape our understanding? Why do you think artists continue to create new ways to tell human stories? What do you imagine will be the storytelling techniques of the future?

"JUST MAKE BELIEVE THAT MAKES BELIEF" —Clown MC, *Venice*

- The Clown MC says that it is "make believe that makes belief"? What do you think he means by that? What is the power of "make believe" to make us believe?
- Can make believe be practice for imagining the world we want to live in? How can a made up story help us believe in and then move towards a new future?



Matt Sax in the new musical Venice. PHOTO BY DON IPOCK.

Desdemona and Othello. PHOTO FROM <http://etc.usf.edu/clipart>.

MUSICALS

The Next Generation

What comes to your mind when you think of musicals? Are musicals strictly comedies, or can you think of examples of musicals about serious subjects? Although traditional American musical theatre has its roots in the comedic entertainments of vaudeville, there is actually a long history of the musical deliberately being used to convey messages about society. With its combination of modern musical styles and intentional use of allegory, *Venice* fits right in with many musicals that were considered daring or edgy when they first premiered. Musical like *Show Boat*, *South Pacific*, *West Side Story* and *Hair* stood out by challenging common held conventions about the construction of a musical, and by commenting on serious issues like politics, racism, and classism. In recent years, shows like *Rent*, *Spring Awakening*, *Next to Normal*, Green Day's *American Idiot* and *In the Heights* continue to particularly engage young people with their integration of contemporary musical forms, and their strong social commentary by and/or about young people of this generation. *Venice* aims to reach a younger generation of theatre audiences by mixing classical theatre traditions and the language and music of today. Matt Sax, lyricist/composer of *Venice*, perhaps put it most succinctly, "All of these styles are fused in the world of *Venice* and reflects a generation that can marry the mash up of these forms." *Venice* is the next stage in the evolution of a long line of major musicals by, for, and about the current generation of young adults.

THE JOURNEY TO VENICE

In an interview in *The New Yorker* writer/performer Matt Sax stated, "The first rapper I heard, when I was thirteen, was Biggie, probably the best rapper ever. Angry. Like me. I had teen-age angst." Influenced by his experience as a suburban kid with interests in hip hop and angry over not being cast in a school production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, Matt began writing the one-man hip hop musical *Clay* as a student at Northwestern University. He later teamed up with director Eric Rosen. By the time he was twenty years old, he would take the show to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. In 2007, *Clay*, written and performed by Sax and directed by Rosen, was produced at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City. *Clay* follows the story of a young, white suburban boy who becomes a famous rapper. Center Theatre Group commissioned Sax and Rosen to work on a new piece after the success of *Clay*. In an interview with *The Jewish Journal*, Eric Rosen said about the CTG commission, "We had been inspired by *Othello* to create a play about the politics of the moment." He added, "Long before Obama won the presidency, we were writing about a charismatic leader trying to save his people and the love-hate relationship they develop with him." What started out as a post-apocalyptic hip hop musical adaptation of *Othello* has grown into an expansive contemporary fable that also includes elements of Greek tragedy, political commentary and the language and music of this generation.

TOP TO BOTTOM Matt Sax and Eric Rosen at the DouglasPlus workshop of *Venice*. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

BACKGROUND Cast at the DouglasPlus workshop of *Venice*. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.
LEFT TO RIGHT Angela Willflower Polk and Matt Sax in the new musical *Venice*. PHOTO BY DON IPOCK.

Interview with Choreographers TANISHA SCOTT & JOHN CARRAFA

Center Theatre Group Teaching Artist Marcos Najera talks to the *VENICE* choreography team.



MARCOS NAJERA: Tell me how you got from Toronto, Canada to here. What's your story Ms. Tanisha?

TANISHA SCOTT: My story seems literally so cliché, but it was a little girl who had a dream to dance and was seen at the right place, right time. I actually went to school for Physical Therapy, but my passion has always been to be a dancer. I started 'battling' [improvised dance floor competitions] in clubs, going as a kid, to nightclubs and stuff. When I went away to college I joined this dance troupe at my University. One performance we opened up for the artist, Mya. Her choreographer was in the audience watching. And he came up to us after and he pulled me aside and he said, "You're really good. Have you ever thought of doing this professionally?" And I'm "Oh my god, that's like, a dream of mine!" He got my information and no word of a lie, like a month later, he called me and I booked the job and it's been history ever since. And that was about ten years ago.

But coming here [to America], and becoming a dancer for Mya, becoming a professional dancer, there is a lot of discipline involved. There's discipline in learning choreography very quickly. Learning how to pick up somebody else's style, not dance for yourself, but dance like everybody else on that stage.

I had to learn how to actually perform in a show, not just dancing. And I think because of my passion, my drive and I wanted it so bad—that's why I was able to do it. That is why Mya said she hired me. She said "I just saw so much passion in you, it didn't even matter that you got some of the steps wrong. I just wanted to have you on stage with me."

MARCOS: Did you take dance classes as a kid before you started working with the troupes?

TANISHA: No, I didn't. I never took a dance class. I always wanted to, but I was heavily into sports. And for my parents school was very important. They encouraged me to focus on sports because they thought maybe I might get a college scholarship through track or volleyball. So that is why I didn't end up going to tap class or jazz class.

Now that I have been a professional dancer and choreographer, just two years ago, I actually did Ballet 101, I did Jazz 101. Because as a choreographer and a dancer I believe I need to know all styles. I don't have to be the best in all of them, but if you are going to own a craft you need to know all aspects of it. That's the only way I can call myself a choreographer. So my understanding of movement has broadened so much more.

You can speak so much through dance. And it's a "wordly" thing. Everyone in the world can express themselves through movement.

Just because you are a dancer, that doesn't mean you can choreograph. There's an art form to it. And I didn't know I could do it. But I found out by doing a [Sean Paul] music video that I could. It was "Gimme The Light." That was the first video I choreographed. That became my visual template. People would be like "Who did that? I want her to do my video." Because of that video I worked with Beyoncé [Upgrade U, Check Up On It, Baby Boy], Eve, The Pussycat Dolls. I've even worked with Whitney Houston and Papa Roach!

MARCOS: Is *Venice* your first theatrical production?

TANISHA: It is my first theatre production. I didn't even imagine I could do something like this. What I love about it is what I love about dance. I'm able to work not only with amazing actors, but actors who don't have a huge dance background. So I'm working with people who are fresh. I'm working with people who appreciate it. I'm working with artists who have, not just something to say, but something to say with a meaning and a purpose. Every

note that they sing, every word that they speak is for a reason. So all the movements I'm giving them is for a reason. It is for a purpose. It is telling a story.

MARCOS: When you got the *Venice* script, what images hit you?

TANISHA: I was free styling. After reading the scene, I listened to the song. And I danced from my heart like I was that person singing it. What would I do?

A part of one song says "So alone in this world, so disregarded" and in that movement for "Alone in this world" you look up to God or you look up like I'm so alone, you feel you are by yourself looking for a friend. Or for "Help, we need your help, help..."

MARCOS: What you are doing physically is reaching out and grabbing for help?

TANISHA: Yes, because it's a panic. It's like when you're a child and you need help, the first thing you are going to do is run to a parent and literally latch on to them. When they sing about freedom, their arms become lighter. They're lifted. I literally go through each song from the beginning of the show and figure out what needs to be said through dance. I need to tell a story through dance.

You know, I can't write a poem or I can't write lyrics or I can't sing a song, but I can move. And I can teach other people how to move. So, we are speaking it out through dance.

Tanisha heads back into rehearsal, and John Carrafa takes a break to talk in the Kirk Douglas Theatre lobby.

MARCOS: John, can you tell us what your job is and what it means?

JOHN CARRAFA: A choreographer is the person who makes the dances. Makes the steps and where the steps are done on the stage. And who does what steps and how many times they do them and how it fits with the music and the words. The choreographer builds the dances.

MARCOS: And for *Venice*, you are working with a co-choreographer, Tanisha Scott. Can you help us understand how you both work?

JOHN: I love the way Tanisha says it. She says she builds the car, and I drive it. I think that is the best description. She builds it and I point it toward the story and steer it in the direction of a Broadway production number.

Tanisha and I know each other. [John and Tanisha once worked together on an Alicia Keys concert tour]. The way I think of it is that Tanisha is working on the vocabulary and the steps. I'm a Broadway and film choreographer, so what I'm doing is shaping the story to make sure the dance builds to a great climax. Because, you know, this show is many things. It is a hip hop musical, it's rap, but it also feels like a Broadway show. And it has songs that are sung as well as songs that are rapped. In a Broadway production number, there is a certain sense of build and excitement. I'm helping shape that experience in the songs.

MARCOS: I'm assuming you started as a dancer, is that true?

JOHN: I went to college first. I was pre-med. I wanted to be a doctor. I always danced. But nobody in my family ever danced, so I didn't really think you could make a career out of it. So I never even considered it. And then I saw the Alvin Ailey Dance Company when I was in college and I realized "Oh! You can actually do this for a living!"

So, after college I worked in a hospital. And I realized being a doctor wasn't really me. And pretty quickly got into Twyla Tharp's company and I danced with her for 10 years. I was thrilled because it was a chance of a lifetime. I was in New York City and dancing with what I thought was the best dance company in the world.

A dancer's life, though, is somewhat limited. So at a certain age, I thought, "Well, I'll have to stop dancing eventually and move to something else." I acted a little. And then started choreographing. It felt like a natural fit. Going from being a performer to being the one on the other side of the stage, was so, so completely different. I was surprised that when the curtain went up, that's when I had the least control [as a choreographer]. It used to be it was when I had the most control [as a dancer].

MARCOS: What is your process when you get a new script, for film or stage? How do you start?

JOHN: Read it. I look at what the story of the dancing is. And then I ask "What kind of dance is this? Is it a ballroom dance? Is it a ballet? Is it a folk dance, is it a fight scene dance?" For example, if it's a Tango, [I] look at all the Tangos that have been done and how the Tango is used to tell a story. I do lot of research.

The one thing I don't really do is hip hop. Which is great about what Tanisha does. Although I don't know if she even calls it hip hop. What she does is very contemporary.

MARCOS: She described it to me almost as a fusion style that includes hip hop, and swing, with some black fraternity stepping thrown in with a nod to the military precision moves of Janet and Michael Jackson.

JOHN: Right. And what's great about this show is that the director and I and Tanisha and the actors; everybody contributes in some way to the movement. It ends up being an interesting collaboration of everybody's brains.

MARCOS: When you opened the *Venice* script for the first time, what story made you envision movements?

JOHN: For *Venice*, the director [Eric Rosen] was also the writer. So as he wrote it, he also had staging in mind. So, I clicked in to the world of movement that he had already written into the world of the show. My job choreographically, is how does this musical intersect with Broadway, like splashy, Broadway production numbers. The thing about a Broadway show is that songs are being performed live in front of an audience and the songs are being used to tell a story. And that's different from seeing an MTV concert where you're really there to listen just to the songs and enjoy the choreography that goes along with it. For a Broadway show, the songs, the choreography and the set all connect to tell the story.

MARCOS: Here's a nuts and bolts question. What kind of notes do choreographers use to track the dance movements so you don't forget?

JOHN: People used to pass dances on with just a few notes from dancer to dancer. The person who was in the original *West Side Story* would teach the next person how to do it. It was based on dancers' memories and notes that people would jot down. Now, there's videotape. So we use tape a lot in rehearsal. But even with videotape, you have to know what you are looking at.

That's how dance is. It's very much communicated from one person to another. That's why this original cast of *Venice* will be particularly exciting to see. The piece was created on them. The dances were made for these actors. For what they can do. So they'll do it better than anybody who will ever do it.