

# NEW PLAY WORKSHOP

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## “SONS”

### Director's Note:

I met Oni Faida Lampley in the Summer of 1994. Fresh from my first-year in the UW's MFA Directing Program, I returned to my native CT to direct a staged reading of Aishah Rahman's *The Mojo And The Sayso*. It was my first work at the Hartford Stage, my first work with Actor's Equity actors, my first invitation into a completely professional situation. The cast for that reading was amazing. Keith Randolph Smith, Leland Gantt, Akili Prince, and the incredibly gifted Oni Faida Lampley. What I remember most about that introduction to Oni was how open and courageous and vulnerable and funny and powerful she was—all at once. Those first impressions held up over the years. She was all of that and more.

*Sons* is a play about 17-year-old Artest as he struggles to find his place in a world that offers limited choices for young black men. If you listen closely you can hear Oni's hopes, dreams, and fears for her own sons echoing through it. Once again, Oni's brilliance is showing through. Unlike most of the readings in this series, we didn't have the gift of a living playwright with whom to collaborate. But the opportunity to present Oni's work was too great a thing to pass up. And for me, it feels like coming full circle.

-Valerie Curtis-Newton

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### READING OF “SONS”

written by Oni Faida Lampley  
directed by Valerie Curtis-Newton

#### Cast:

*Artest*.....A.J. Friday  
*Sham*.....Thomas J. Foster  
*Mom*.....Porscha Shaw  
*Dad*.....Russell D. Cotten III  
*Genesis*.....Bria Henderson  
*Sergent Q*.....Tyler Trerise  
*Ensemble*.....Allen Miller & Andre Brown  
(and the cast above)  
*Reader*.....Aaron Cammack



## About the Playwright:

**Oni Faida Lampley** (1959-2008) was born Vera Anne Lampley in Ogden, Utah April 15, 1959. She received a bachelor's degree from Oberlin College in Ohio and earned a graduate degree at New York University. Ms. Lampley was an award winning actor and writer. Her first play, *Mixed Babies*, won her the 1991 Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding New Play. Her next play, *The Dark Kalamazoo*, received acting nominations for both a Helen Hayes and Barrymore Award for "Outstanding Leading Actress."

In 1996, Lampley was diagnosed with breast cancer in her left breast. Where this tragic diagnosis would paralyze a lesser person, for Lampley it fueled her fire. In 2001 she scripted and performed "Shame the Devil" at the Carnegie Hall benefit Artists for a Cure. She revived the piece for a 2003 performance in Brooklyn for the second installment of the series "My Soul To Keep," a cancer awareness show. When she took the stage in Brooklyn, she fearlessly showed her bald head, caused by chemo, and made the crowd aware of her age. This act showed Lampley's defiance in the face of adversity and strength of character—characteristics which have driven her career.

The 2003 play, *Tough Titty*, concerned her then seven-year struggle with breast cancer. It premiered in 2005 at the Williamstown Theatre Festival. In it, a woman who is diagnosed with breast cancer tries to stay married, raise two small sons, and endure poisonous treatments. She was a 2006 Susan Smith Blackburn Finalist (for *Tough Titty*), and recipient of the Boomerang Fund Grant and the Helen Merrill Award.

Throughout her career as an actor and especially as a playwright, Lampley explored the issues of race, gender, identity construction, and cancer survivorship. Her performances moved audiences to the heights and depths of emotion and her words speak to young and old alike.

## About The Hansberry Project:

Founded in 2004 and officially launched in 2006, The Hansberry Project was created as an African American theatre lab, led by African American artists and designed to provide the community with consistent access to the African American artistic voice. A Contemporary Theatre (ACT) was our first incubator and in 2012 we moved out on our own as an independent organization.

The Hansberry Project is rooted in the convictions that black artists should be at the center of the artistic process, that the community deserves excellence in its art, and that theatre's fundamental function is to put people in relationship to one another. Our goal is to create a space where the entire community can be enriched by the voices of professional black artists, reflecting autonomous concerns, investigations, dreams, and artistic expression.

## About the New Play Workshop Series:

The School of Drama New Play Workshop Series is a celebration of new work and new voices in the American theatre. Each play in the series is workshopped for 7–9 days with UW Drama students and guest artists. At the end of the process, each play is presented in the form of a public reading.