

**LA JOLLA PLAYHOUSE'S 2024 PERFORMANCE OUTREACH
PROGRAM (POP) TOUR, *ABEBA IN THE TALL GRASS*,
TO TOUR SCHOOLS MARCH – APRIL,
WITH FREE PUBLIC PERFORMANCES AT 2024 WOW FESTIVAL**

***PLAYHOUSE CONTINUES 30+ YEAR TRADITION OF COMMISSIONING WORK
FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES WITH NEW PLAY BY JONATHAN NORTON***

La Jolla, CA – La Jolla Playhouse announces the tour of its 2024 Performance Outreach Program (POP) Tour production, ***Abeba in the Tall Grass***, by **Jonathan Norton**, directed by **Nikki Mirza**. This heartwarming new play for young audiences will tour San Diego County elementary schools throughout March and April. The Playhouse will also present two free public performances of *Abeba in the Tall Grass* on **April 6** and **7** as part of the 2024 WOW Festival, presented in association with UC San Diego.

The cast features **Kailey Agpaoa** as “Abeba,” **Victor B. Lang** as “Baba,” **Abby Leigh Huffstetler** as “Coolio” and **Giancarlo Lugo** as “Gonzalez,” along with understudy **Kandace Crystal**.

The creative team for *Abeba in the Tall Grass* includes **Jazmine Logan**, Dramaturg; **Keira McGee**, Costume Designer; **Nicholas Ponting**, Scenic Designer; **Eliza Vedar**, Sound Designer; **Jared Halsell**, Stage Manager; and **Brian Salvanera**, Production Assistant.

Abeba in the Tall Grass, a world-premiere play, tells the story of a fifth-grade aspiring horticulturist and the urban garden that has become her sacred space. Through encounters with the school goof-offs, she realizes that, like plants need water and light to flourish, people need friendship and community to thrive.

“We’re both proud and excited to once again share a new POP Tour production – the heart of our Learning and Engagement programming for over three decades – with young audiences in San Diego this Spring. *Abeba in the Tall Grass* is a delightfully original new play that employs humor, heart and lively characters to convey the importance of accepting others for who they are and nurturing one’s connections with friends and community,” said **Christopher Ashley**, the Rich Family Artistic Director of La Jolla Playhouse.

Launched in 1987, the POP Tour travels throughout the county, touring schools, libraries and community centers. The set, costumes and props are designed to fit into a 16-foot truck and, in just 60 minutes, can be unloaded, placed in nearly any space and be ready for children to experience. Prior to each performance, a Playhouse teaching artist visits each school to engage students in an interactive workshop to explore issues and themes at the core of the play. The Playhouse also provides schools with a standards-based online engagement guide that enables educators to integrate the play into their existing curriculum. After each performance, the cast and crew conduct a question-and-answer session with the audience.

The Playhouse is one of the few theatres in the country that annually commissions world-class artists to create a bold new play for young audiences. Playwrights create an innovative, 45-minute piece for the POP Tour that addresses issues in students’ lives and is typically seen by tens of thousands of young people, teachers and families each year.

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La Jolla Playhouse offers the **Adopt-A-School** program which provides funding for POP Tour performances at schools that could not otherwise afford it. For more information, contact Keely Daximillion at kdaximillion@ljp.org.

Free public performances of the POP Tour on April 6 and 7 at WOW Festival 2024 will be available for RSVP beginning March 12 at WOWFestival.org. For more information about booking the POP Tour for a school performance, please contact Hannah Reinert at hreinert@ljp.org.

La Jolla Playhouse is a place where artists and audiences come together to create what's new and next in the American theatre, from Tony Award-winning productions, to imaginative programs for young audiences, to interactive experiences outside our theatre walls. Founded in 1947 by Gregory Peck, Dorothy McGuire and Mel Ferrer, the Playhouse is currently led by Tony Award winner Christopher Ashley, the Rich Family Artistic Director of La Jolla Playhouse, and Managing Director Debby Buchholz. The Playhouse is internationally renowned for the development of new plays and musicals, including mounting 105 world premieres, commissioning more than 60 new works, and sending 36 productions to Broadway – including the hit musicals *Jersey Boys* and *Come From Away* – garnering a total of 38 Tony Awards, as well as the 1993 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre.

Artist Biographies

Kailey Agpaoa (Abeba; she/they) is an actor, singer, and theatre creative based out of San Diego. She grew up moving back and forth between Japan and Hawaii. You may remember her as Cora in the 2023 POP Tour production of *Jin vs. the Beach*. As a lover of TYA, she is thrilled to be back for seconds! She is passionate about telling important stories, being a proud representative of the LGBTQ+ and global majority communities in her work, accessibility and EDIB, and all around, spreading joy and truth through creation. She has done work at various theatres around San Diego (including La Jolla Playhouse, Moxie Theatre, New Village Arts, Blindspot Collective, Bocón Arts and Coronado Playhouse) and is represented by Shamon Freitas Model and Talent Agency.

Abby Leigh Huffstetler (Coolio; they/them) thrives within the intersections of creative expression, arts education and mental health. They recently earned their MFA in Theatre & Dance from UC San Diego. Abby holds certifications in multiple weapons within The Society of American Fight Directors. They are an actor, educator, intimacy choreographer, actor combatant and clown. UC San Diego credits: *DANCE NATION*, *Hells Canyon*, *Twelfth Night*, *End Days*, *Uncle Vanya*. Regional credits: *Streetcar Named Desire*; *Miles For Mary*; *How to Defend Yourself* (Humana Festival of New American Plays) *Dracula*, *The Many Deaths of Nathan Stubblefield* (Actors Theatre of Louisville); *Free Free Free Free* (Exponential Festival); *Noises Off* (Rome Little Theatre). Film credits: *Redrum*, *Dirt*, *CBGB*. Intimacy Direction credits: *900 Years* (UCSD); *Two Kids That Blow Shit Up* (Endless Summer Productions); *Staged Intimacy & Violence* (Teaching Assistant, UCSD). Abby is an Actors Theatre Professional Training Company alum. They hold a BFA in Performing Arts from SCAD. There is no space for the perpetuation of white supremacy in their process and exploration.

Victor B. Lang (Baba) is a native of Savannah, GA who spent 18 years in the United States Marine Corps, where he obtained the rank of Gunner Sergeant (E-7), traveled the world and served as a recruiter working with high school students, parents and educators. Currently, he is enrolled at City College to complete his education, majoring in Communication Studies. He is also involved with Voices of Our City Choir, a non-profit organization committed to amplifying the voices of people impacted by homelessness through music and the arts and connecting their unhoused members to employment, safe shelter, wellness programs and other resources.

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Giancarlo Lugo (Gonzalez; he/him) is thrilled to have the opportunity to perform in the 2024 POP Tour with such an incredible company! He is currently performing in *Fiddler on the Roof* at San Diego Musical Theatre. He has also previously been seen as Tiny Tom in *Urinetown, The Musical* (San Diego Musical Theatre), Martirio in *La Lucha* (Optika Moderna and La Jolla Playhouse), Earthworm in *James and The Giant Peach* (Southwestern College), Victor Guerra in *The Pros and Cons of Feeding Stray Cats* (Playwrights Project). He would like to give many thanks to his family and mentors for the constant guidance. IG: @giancarlo.lugo

Kandace Crystal (Understudy; she/her) is a multi-hyphenate theatre maker who graduated with a BFA in Acting from Florida State University and is the new Youth Programs Manager at Playwrights Project. This is Kandace's first opportunity with the POP Tour, and she is ecstatic to support this team. She was recently nominated for a Craig Noel Award for Outstanding Lead in a Play for *Neat* (Scripps Ranch Theatre) and was the candidate in the Emmy Award winning informational for *Democracy Dollars* with Imageworks. Selected acting credits include San Diego Memoir Showcase (International Memoir Writers Assoc.), *A People's Cuban Christmas Tale* (Onstage Playhouse) and *Safa's Story* (*Imagine Brave Spaces*).

Jonathan Norton's (Playwright; he/him) work has been produced and developed at Dallas Theater Center, Jacob's Pillow, Actors Theatre of Louisville (44th Humana Festival), National New Play Network, TheatreSquared, PlayPenn, Pyramid Theatre Company, Black and Latino Playwrights Conference, Bishop Arts Theatre Center, Kitchen Dog Theater, Undermain Theatre, Theater Three and South Dallas Cultural Center. Jonathan's play *Mississippi Goddamn* was a Finalist for the Harold and Mimi Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award and won the 2016 M. Elizabeth Osborn Award. He is a member of The Dorothy Strelsin New American Writers Group at Primary Stages. Jonathan is proud to serve as the Playwright in Residence at Dallas Theater Center.

Nikki Mirza (Director; she/her) is delighted to return to the POP Tour this year after previously performing in the 2019 POP Tour production, *Light Years Away*. She is multi-hyphenate artist who has regionally worked with theatres such as San Diego Rep, Scripps Ranch Theatre, Goodspeed Opera House, Signature Theatre, Olney Theatre Center, Round House Theatre, NextStop Theatre Company, 1st Stage, Constellation Theatre Company, Weathervane Playhouse, and Creede Repertory Theatre. She was last seen at La Jolla Playhouse as the Asst. Director and Swing performer on *Bhangin' It: A Bhangin' New Musical*. Nikkimirza.com

Jazmine Logan (Dramaturg) is a third-year PhD student in Theatre and Drama from University of California, San Diego. She holds a BA in Theatre Arts and a BA in Politics from University of California, Santa Cruz, and a MA in Theatre Arts from San Francisco State University. La Jolla Playhouse credits: *Manning* (2023 Latinx New Play Festival, Dramaturg). UC San Diego credits: *Thicker Than* (Wagner New Play Festival-Dramaturg), *Dance Nation* (Dramaturg), and *In the Red and Brown Water* (Dramaturg). San Francisco State University credits: *Spring Awakening: The Musical* (Assistant Director/Dramaturg). UC Santa Cruz credits: *Crowns* (Mabel/Assistant Director), *The Children's Hour* (Peggy Rogers), *Romeo and Juliet* (Juliet), *Hands Up: 7 Playwrights*, *7 Testimonies* (Co-Director), *A Raisin in the Sun* (Ruth Younger), *Zoot Suit* (Guera/Ensemble), *Detroit '67* (Bunny "Bonita"), *The Odyssey* (Trojan/Hecuba/Suitor), *A Dream Play* (Victoria/Ensemble) and *The Waiting Room* (Brenda).

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Nicholas Ponting (Scenic Designer; he/him) is a designer and stained-glass artist based out of San Diego, CA. Recent productions: *Radical, or are you gonna miss me?* (IAMA Theatre Company), *La Lucha* (Optika Moderna in collaboration with The La Jolla Playhouse & MCASD), *Everybody* (Antaeus Theatre Company), *Mud Row* (Detroit Public Theatre), *Animals Out of Paper* (Chautauqua Theatre Co.), *Grownup* (The Associates Theatre), *On Gold Mountain* (LA Opera). Nick is a frequent collaborator with David Reynoso and Optika Moderna, creating immersive installations / performances in San Diego, CA. His stained-glass work can be seen in San Diego at The Lafayette Hotel, recently remodeled and opened by Consortium Holdings Co. Nick is adjunct faculty at San Diego State University. MFA: UC San Diego. BA: Western Washington University. To learn more about Nick, his work and upcoming projects visit nicholasponting.com. IG: @nicholasponting

Keira McGee (Costume Designer) works in costume design and construction for both theater and film. Design credits include *Into the Woods* (New Village Arts), *The Servant of Two Masters* (New Village Arts), *Cabaret* (ION Theatre), *Iceman Cometh* (Target Margin Theatre), *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare & Company), and *The Tempest* (Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival). Film credits; Production Assistant for *Top Gun: Maverick* (Paramount Pictures). Keira currently works in the costume department of La Jolla Playhouse and runs her own sustainable clothing company called Keira Designs.

Eliza Vedar (Sound Designer; she/they) is a sound designer, composer, music director and pianist based in Southern California. Their work has been featured in theatrical productions at La Jolla Playhouse, TuYo Theatre, Diversionary Theatre, Moxie Theatre, Cygnet Theatre, New Village Arts, Common Ground Theatre and various educational institutions including San Diego State University, CSU San Marcos, and University of San Diego. Eliza holds a bachelor's degree in Music Performance: Piano from San Diego State University. elizavedar.com

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FACT SHEET

- WHAT:** 2024 Performance Outreach Program (POP) Tour: *Abeba in the Tall Grass*
World-Premiere; La Jolla
Playhouse Commission By
Jonathan Norton; Directed
by Nikki Mirza
- WHEN:** Touring Elementary Schools March - April 2024
Free public performances April 6 and 7 at 11am
At La Jolla Playhouse WOW Festival 2024, presented in
partnership with University of California, San Diego.
Website: <https://lajollaplayhouse.org/wowfestival/>
- ABOUT:** *Abeba in the Tall Grass*, a world-premiere play, tells the story of a fifth-grade aspiring horticulturist and the urban garden that has become her sacred space. Through encounters with the school goof-offs, she realizes that, like plants need water and light to flourish, people need friendship and community to thrive.
- BOOKING:** For information about booking the POP Tour, contact Hannah Reinert at hreinert@ljp.org
Visit: <https://ljpeducationandout.wixsite.com/pop-tour-2024/booking-information>
- SPONSORS:** La Jolla Playhouse is able to offer the POP Tour to the community at no cost due to the generous support we receive from individuals and institutions whose donations cover all expenses. We are pleased to thank the following corporate, foundation and government entities for their sponsorship:
- Corporate support provided by Morrison Foerster Foundation, Nordson Corporation Foundation, Qualcomm, ResMed Foundation, US Bank, and Viasat.
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- Foundation support provided by Samuel I. and John Henry Fox Foundation, Pratt Memorial Fund, and San Diego Scottish Rite Community Foundation.

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