

VIRGINIA STAGE COMPANY ANNOUNCES AMERICAN SOIL, A MULTI-YEAR NEW PLAY PROJECT

Series to focus on the many layers of American life that shape
the Hampton Roads region the Nation.



Virginia Stage Company (VSC) is proud to announce the launch of **American Soil**, a multi-year new play project that will dig into the cultural and historical foundations of Hampton Roads. The Company will commission and produce a wide range of plays that explore the rich layers of "earth" this community is built upon; layers that act as markers of our progress - spanning race and religion, commerce, democracy and beyond.

As America's first region, **Hampton Roads** has given birth to many of the major issues this country has faced. The strongest forces of American life converged on this area first, leaving a cultural landscape as distinct as the many inlets, rivers and peninsulas that comprise its geographic landscape. Just as waves have shaped our shores, the vibrant

conversations between all citizens of Tidewater - be they whites and African Americans, fundamentalists and progressives, soldiers and pacifists - has added texture to the land on which our communities are built. The result of this continual dialogue can be felt in the tremors stretching across the country, like the aftershocks of continental plates shifting beneath us.

"Southeastern Virginia is one of the oldest and most history-rich areas of the country. American Soil will explore the subtle layers of life in Tidewater that have built up over the past 400 hundred years and how these same layers serve to inspire and lead the nation to this day," said Keith Stava, VSC's Managing Director. "Just like the rich soil of the Tidewater area that nurtured America's first colony, Virginia Stage Company's American Soil project reflects our Company's commitment to nurture new plays that will not only tell our area's stories, but will also add to the national repertoire of plays".

The inaugural play of the American Soil series, *Line in the Sand: The Norfolk Battle of Massive Resistance*, will premiere at VSC's performance home, the historic Wells Theatre in downtown Norfolk from February 24 through March 15, 2009. Written by Artistic Director **Chris Hanna**, the play explores one of the most significant struggles of the civil rights movement. When Norfolk citizens fought to reopen their public schools that had been shut in defiance to racial integration, Virginia's infamous policy of **Massive Resistance** made national headlines. Hanna's play weaves excerpts from original media coverage, court documents, and individual interviews with imagined scenes and characters to examine the legacy Massive Resistance provides our region - and the nation, today.

Line in the Sand received its first workshop in May of 2008. As will be unique to all of the plays in the American Soil project, VSC solicited community involvement and feedback throughout the creation and writing process. Hanna first put community dialogue and response on stage in creating the 2005 VSC production of **King Lear: the Storm at Home**, his successful retelling of Shakespeare's story through the lens of elder care in Hampton Roads. He believes the success of *Line in the Sand* and VSC's American Soil project will lie in the vibrancy and sincerity of that dialogue.

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"The first community reaction to the development of *Line in the Sand* had been a loud unified cry of, 'Don't go digging there, please!'", said Artistic Director Chris Hanna. "It means so much that the project has now been embraced so fully. It required hard work from our staff and tremendous courage from our community, but it worked. These are the very qualities that earn this production its stage voice and will provide unusual power to all the plays created through the American Soil series."

The director of *Line in the Sand* will be the nationally renowned artist, **Timothy Douglas**. Mr. Douglas was an Associate Artistic Director at Actor's Theatre of Louisville and is a much sought after regional director. His work has been seen at Milwaukee Rep, South Coast Repertory, Berkeley Rep, Guthrie Theatre, American Conservatory Theater among many others and was the director for the world premiere of August Wilson's final play, *Radio Golf*, at Yale Repertory Theatre. Playing the lead role of Vivian Carter Mason is **Caroline Clay**. Ms. Clay was the recipient of the 2008 Helen Hayes Award for Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of Mrs. Muller in John Patrick Shanley's Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Doubt*. She is a native Washingtonian and graduate of the Duke Ellington School of the Performing Arts and has been seen at many regional theaters including Shakespeare Theatre of DC, Woolly Mammoth, Yale Rep, and the Goodman Theatre.

The second play of the American Soil project is Kenny Finkle's play *Alive and Well*. Following the successful production of his comedy *Indoor/Outdoor* at VSC in 2005, Finkle was commissioned by VSC to write a play addressing the vast and often humorous differences between the Northern and Southern cultures. It received a developmental workshop in spring of 2008 and **will premiere as the opening production in VSC's upcoming 2009-10 season.** *Alive and Well* uses two characters to dramatize the impact of their collision and explore how little has changed in the nearly 150 years since the Civil War.

The third and fourth plays in the American Soil project are in the early stages of development and are planned to premiere in the Company's 2010-11 and 2011-12 seasons.

ARTIST BIOS

Chris Hanna (Playwright) has dedicated 30 years to balancing the overlapping missions of developing new plays, breathing fresh air into dramatic classics, and engaging communities in the power of live theater. He currently serves as Artistic Director of Virginia Stage Company and Associate Professor of Theatre at Old Dominion University. Career highlights before arriving in Virginia include serving as Resident Director at the Juilliard School, working with the play development staff of London's Royal Court Theater, and eight seasons as Artistic Associate for the Chautauqua Theater Company in New York. He holds an MFA from the University of California at San Diego (UCSD).

Since moving to Virginia, Hanna has reset creative roadmaps for Virginia Stage Company and for theater study at Old Dominion. He has directed over thirty productions for the two institutions and has artistically guided nearly one hundred. His artistic motives have merged most succinctly with the VSC production of *King Lear: The Storm at Home*, which he wrote and directed. The play interwove Shakespeare's text with community interviews to explore the ways our community handles aging.

Chris was lucky in his early career to have been mentored by two leading pioneers in America's non profit theater movement, Joseph Papp and Alan Schneider. He values his responsibility towards our theaters as they refine their purpose and potential in the coming century. Virginia Stage Company will meet his personal vision towards that goal through its American Soil project.

Timothy Douglas (Director) most recently directed the world premiere of Charles Randolph-Wright's *The Night is a Child* for Milwaukee Rep, and the critically acclaimed west coast premiere of Sarah Treem's *A Feminine Ending* for South Coast Repertory in association with Portland Center Stage, as well as the world premiere of August Wilson's *Radio Golf*, (the final installment of the August Wilson cycle), for Yale Repertory Theatre. For Oslo Elsewhere he directed the premiere production of a new translation/adaptation of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* off-Broadway, as well as the workshop at Norway's

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National Theatre (Oslo). He served as the associate artistic director for Actors Theatre of Louisville (2001 – 2004) where, in addition to facilitating the Humana Festival of New American Plays in partnership with artistic director, Marc Masterson, he staged *A.M. Sunday*, *All My Sons*, *Art*, *Blue Orange*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, *Crimes of the Heart*, *Fences*, *Jitney*, *The Lively Lad*, and *The Piano Lesson*. Directing assignments include productions for American Conservatory Theater, Arden Theatre Company, ASK Theatre Projects, Berkeley Rep, Berkshire Theatre Festival, City Theatre, Crossroads Theatre Company, Downstage (New Zealand), Folger Shakespeare Library, Guthrie Theatre, Indiana Rep, The Juilliard School, Magic Theatre, Mark Taper Forum, O'Neill National Playwright's Conference, Pittsburgh Irish & Classical Theatre (Associate Artist), Pittsburgh Public Theatre, Portland Center Stage, RoundHouse Theatre, San Jose Rep, Shakespeare & Company, Syracuse Stage, Toi Whakaari (New Zealand), Utah Shakespearean Festival and Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company. He was an NEA/TCG directing fellow during which time he served as Resident Director for New Dramatists, as well as Assistant Stage Director on Handel's *Rodelinda* for Virginia Opera. In addition he served as a Director in Residence at the Mark Taper Forum under an Andrew W. Mellon fellowship. Timothy is a graduate of Marymount Manhattan College (BFA) and Yale School of Drama (MFA) (www.myspace.com/DouglasDirects)

Caroline Clay (Vivian Carter Mason): Winner of the 2008 Helen Hayes Award for Best Supporting Actress in a Non-Resident Production- Mrs. Muller in *Doubt*, The National Tour; B-WAY: *Doubt* (Principal), *Drowning Crow* (Principal), *Come Back Little Sheba* (Standby); Off B-Way: Signature Theater, Playwrights Horizons, MTC Public Theater, Roundabout, Atlantic Theater Co.; Regional: Shakespeare Theater, Woolly Mammoth, Yale Rep, Goodman, Hartford Stage, Alabama Shakespeare Co.; TV: *Law and Order* (and *Criminal Intent*), *All My Children*, Recurring Character of Hazel; FILM: *Sherry Baby* (2006) w/Maggie Gyllenhaal, *Allergic to Nuts* (2006), *Heights* w/ Glenn Close, (2005) *Everybody's Fine* (2009) w/Robert de Niro, *Holy Rollers* (2009). A native Washingtonian and graduate of the Duke Ellington School of the Performing Arts. Website: www.carolineclay.com

Virginia Stage Company is the Southeast Virginia's only fully professional resident theater company, serving an audience of more than 90,000 annually. In the years since its founding, Virginia Stage Company has made significant contributions to the quality of life in Hampton Roads: presenting more than 125 plays through more than 2500 performances; revitalizing and renovating the historic Wells Theatre; providing educational programs for students of all ages; and preserving the legacy of live theater for future generations.

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