

Fostering Real Connection

A Noise Within calls on 'better angels' for 35th season

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For 35 years, Pasadena-based theater company A Noise Within has worked to summon the better angels of its community.

For its 2026-27 anniversary season, the classical repertory company has made that idea explicit. Inspired by Abraham Lincoln's appeal to "the better angels of our nature," the season brings together plays and musicals about courage, kindness, community and the difficult work of recognizing one another's humanity.

Co-founders and producing artistic directors Geoff Elliott and Julia Rodriguez-Elliott said the theme emerged as they considered both the plays they wanted to produce and the moment in which audiences would encounter them.

"We want our community to be able to come together in a space, experience something together, and know that there is within all of us a much better angel than what seems to be happening when you read the newspaper or watch CNN," Elliott said. "There is a deep sense of humanity in all of us, and if there was ever a time that we need to be reminded of that, it's now."

The season will include "Come From Away," August Wilson's "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," a newly refreshed production of "A Christmas Carol" and, next spring, a return to "Great Expectations," a

work Rodriguez-Elliott associates with the emergence of A Noise Within's distinctive artistic identity. Other shows will include "As You Like It" and "Trouble in Mind."

The company began in 1991 with what Elliott described as an experiment: a production of "Hamlet." The response from Southern California performers was so strong that the founders began to imagine a continuing company. Years later, moving into Pasadena and building a permanent home gave the organization deeper roots and a clearer role in the community.

Rodriguez-Elliott traces A Noise Within's artistic identity to an early production of "Great Expectations," when she began to recognize a style distinct to the company. The work combined gifted actors with stories that demanded an active imaginative partnership from the audience.

Rather than presenting classic texts as polished museum pieces, the company approached them physically and theatrically, using movement, athletic transitions and a strong ensemble vocabulary to animate the language. She described the resulting productions as "muscular," particularly when working with plays built on heightened language and expansive dramatic canvases.

That sensibility still shapes what the company means by "classics up close and personal." The phrase refers not only to the thrust stage, which places actors and



A Noise Within's 35th season features plays and musicals that highlight kindness and courage.

(Chris Mortenson/Staff)

audiences in close proximity, but to an approach that treats classic works as living conversations rather than remote artifacts.

A Noise Within filters those plays through contemporary concerns, fears and joys, trusting that Shakespeare, Dickens, Wilson and other canonical writers can speak directly to 21st-century audiences.

"We're always in conversation with the world today," she said. "When we look at these plays, we're looking at what our pre-occupations are, our concerns are, our fears, our joys in the 21st century."

That combination of scale and intimacy has become one of the company's signatures. The plays may be sweeping in theme, language or historical scope, but the staging keeps them human-sized. For Rodriguez-Elliott, the company's aesthetic rests in that tension: large-canvas stories performed with enough physical immediacy that audiences can see the effort, breath and emotional stakes of the people carrying them.

That intimacy extends beyond the stage. A Noise Within maintains a resident company of roughly 25 actors and designers, some of whom have worked with the founders for decades. Patrons come to know the artists, and the artists develop a shared creative vocabulary.

"It's always so joyful to me when people come in and they say, 'When I'm here, I feel like I'm home,'" Rodriguez-Elliott said.

That sense of home carries particular weight after the isolation of the pandemic.

While theaters experimented with streaming and remote programming, both founders said nothing could replace the shared experience of live performance.

"We collectively, both the performers on stage and the audience together, experience something profound," Elliott said. "I can feel it rippling through the audience, and all of us being together spiritually in the same space. That's what makes live theater different than anything else."

The musical "Come From Away" serves as an anchor for the anniversary season and its "better angels" theme. The show recounts how residents of Gander, Newfoundland, welcomed thousands of stranded airline passengers after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"It's a community that opened their hearts and their homes to strangers," Rodriguez-Elliott said. "That became central to our thinking."

For Elliott, its moral vision is direct: "It doesn't matter to me what you look like. It doesn't matter to me where you come from. It doesn't matter to me how culturally you were raised. You're in need. I'm going to help you."

Rodriguez-Elliott believes the musical is particularly suited to A Noise Within because its theatrical scale is matched by deeply personal storytelling. In the company's intimate space, the audience can feel surrounded by the action rather than watching it from a distance.



A Noise Within reaches between 18,000 and 19,000 students annually.

(Chris Mortenson/Staff)



Artistic directors Julia Rodriguez-Elliott and Geoff Elliott have selected plays and musicals that promote courage and kindness for the 35th season of A Noise Within.

(Chris Mortenson/Staff)

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"I want the audience to feel part of that community because it's a show about community," she said. "That's hard to accomplish in a proscenium house."

The season's theme also runs through "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," the seventh production in A Noise Within's commitment to staging all 10 plays in August Wilson's American Century Cycle.

Rodriguez-Elliott noted that Ma Rainey's determination to maintain her artistic authenticity in a world shaped by racial exploitation represents another form of courage. The play examines who is permitted to speak, who profits from an artist's voice and the price of insisting upon being heard.

The Wilson cycle has become one of the company's defining achievements. Rodriguez-Elliott said audiences now anticipate each new installment, while students increasingly encounter Wilson's work both in classrooms and at the theater.

Elliott calls Wilson "the American Shakespeare."

"His craftsmanship is unparalleled," Elliott said. "It's been transformative for us, for our acting company, for our community."

The cycle has expanded the company's relationships with Black artists and audiences. Rodriguez-Elliott said Wilson's

plays helped open A Noise Within's doors to performers who might previously have assumed that a classical theater company had no place for them.

"These classic plays belong to everyone," she said. "No matter who you are and where you come from, they belong to you."

For its Wilson productions, A Noise Within hosts Black Out Night, an evening created to center and celebrate Black audiences while remaining open to anyone who wishes to attend.

Elliott described the event as more than a performance, calling it a spiritual experience shaped by the energy of a community seeing its history, language and lives reflected onstage. The evening has become one of the most powerful expressions of how the Wilson cycle has expanded A Noise Within's relationship with Black artists and audiences, Elliott said, creating a gathering place as well as a theatrical event.

The company has watched Wilson's work gain ground in local classrooms. When A Noise Within began producing the cycle, only a small number of schools included his plays in their curricula, Rodriguez-Elliott said. Now, student matinees for the Wilson productions fill quickly, and more teachers are building the plays into their coursework. For the company, introducing younger audiences to



The cast of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" is already rehearsing for their upcoming show in August.

(Chris Mortenson/Staff)

Wilson has become part of the cycle's legacy, giving students a chance to encounter a century of Black history through the intimate, personal stories that make up his American Century Cycle.

A Noise Within reaches between 18,000 and 19,000 students annually and presents approximately 30 school-day matinees each year. Many of the students are seeing live theater for the first time.

Elliott tells performers to remember that responsibility.

"The performance that those students are going to see will be remembered for the rest of their lives," he said. "You, as a performer, keep in mind that you're going to be in this young person's mind for the rest of their lives. That's a really big deal."

The performances often complement classroom study, but Rodriguez-Elliott said their value goes beyond helping students understand plots or literary devices.

"It humanizes these plays," she said. "The students begin to form deep connections with the story that they're experiencing in a way that I think is harder to achieve in a classroom context."

The post-show discussions can reveal that transformation almost immediately. Students ask questions of the actors and education staff, connecting the work to their own lives and developing the empathy and compassion Rodriguez-Elliott considers urgently necessary.

The company's annual "A Christmas Carol" offers another expression of transformation. Now entering its 15th year, the production has become a Pasadena tradition, but the founders refuse to let it become automatic.

"We both made a commitment that if it

ever became something that we did by rote, we wouldn't do it anymore," Rodriguez-Elliott said.

The company has refreshed the production gradually, revisiting the music and projections in recent years. This season brings a broader reimagining of its sets, costumes and props while preserving the production's essential spirit. Elliott, who has played Scrooge for much of the production's history, calls Dickens' tale perhaps "the greatest story of transformation" in the English language.

As A Noise Within looks back on 35 years, both founders speak with pride about the work onstage. Yet their strongest reflections focus on the people and relationships that grew around it.

"When Julia and I first started doing this, we thought that it was about the work, purely the work that we presented onstage," Elliott said. "Within a few years, as we began to meet more and more people in the community, we began to realize that's not really the gig."

The company's journey introduced them to patrons, board members, artists, teachers, students and neighbors whom Elliott described as "quite literally angels." For Rodriguez-Elliott, one of the greatest accomplishments is building an institution that can continue beyond its founders while still providing artists with a home.

"To have started where we started and to have an institution that's going to be here beyond the two of us is a big accomplishment," she said.

A Noise Within is located at 3352 E. Foothill Boulevard, Pasadena. Learn more at anoisewithin.org. ■