

Meet Kyle Bass, the first resident playwright at Syracuse Stage



Kyle Bass is the first playwright in residence at Syracuse Stage. Photos taken on the set of his play 'Possessing Harriet' at Syracuse Stage in October 2018. Photo by Brenna Merritt.

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Kyle Bass seemed destined to become Syracuse Stage's first resident playwright.

"It feels like this is where I was heading all along," Bass said.

Bass' expansive playwrighting career; long-standing relationship with Syracuse Stage and Salt City roots made him a distinguished voice in the theater and Syracuse communities.

The playwright began working with Syracuse Stage in 1994. He held a number of roles over his tenure, including literary manager,

dramaturge, and, most recently, associate artistic director.

Bass approached Robert Hupp, artistic director of the theater, with a request to step back from the day-to-day duties as the associate artistic director so he could focus more on teaching and writing. In addition to writing plays, Bass teaches playwriting full-time at Colgate University. However, Bass still wanted to contribute to the mission and community of Syracuse Stage.

Hupp said the solution was obvious: resident playwright.

“That position has existed historically in some of the world’s great theaters,” Hupp said. “It’s just nothing that we’ve had at Stage.”

To Hupp, the role allows Syracuse Stage to continue its mission to support new work. It also allows Syracuse Stage to support Bass who has contributed greatly to the successes of the organization over the past several years. Syracuse Stage produced Bass’ work in previous seasons. Additionally, Bass started the “Cold Read Festival” to champion emerging playwrights, and he has contributed his artistic knowledge to play selection.

To Bass, it demonstrates Hupp and Syracuse Stage value playwriting.

“It’s like the family has built me a special wing on the house,” Bass said.

“I write the play I want to see”

Bass’ latest work “salt/city/blues” will be his first work produced by the theater under his new title. The production was originally scheduled for Syracuse Stage’s 2020-21 season, but the pandemic forced the theater to reschedule. Hupp, though, sees the new June 2022 show dates for “salt/city/blues” as serendipity.

That’s because I-81 serves as an important background to Bass’ play-- and groundbreaking [on phase one of the highway’s construction](#)

[project](#) is set to begin next year. Both Bass and Hupp expect the play to spark conversations.

“We will be really centering what’s happening in our community on our stage,” Hupp said.

“salt/city/blues” isn’t explicitly about the highway. Rather, the play focuses on race, classism and their intersections. Bass also challenges tropes surrounding race in class in the play. I-81 provides a setting to what Bass describes as the story of a private life thrust into the public.

“I think that’s a metaphor for what happened with I-81 when it came through 60 years ago,” Bass said. “Black people in Syracuse, their private lives were made public as they were impacted by this public works project. Private lives were turned upside down, and racist ideas were imbued into policy and the promise of progress.”



Bass oversees a workshop for “Possessing Harriet. From left, actor Daniel Morgan Shelley, director Tazewell Thompson, playwright Kyle Bass, actor Nicole King.

Bass doesn’t see himself as a political playwright. “I write the play I want to see,” he said. He doesn’t think of himself as a Black

playwright; rather, he thinks of what he's observed and experienced then translates that to the stage.

"Invariably, I'm a Black man living in America, and that does exert a kind of pressure that obviously I respond to as a person," Bass said. "And it comes through in my work, and it's in the orchestration of characters in my plays."

His full-length works all include Black and white characters, including "Possessing Harriet," based on the historical figure Harriet Powell, a mixed-race enslaved woman who escaped her Southerner oppressors during a visit to Syracuse in 1839.

"Possessing Harriet" debuted at Syracuse Stage in 2018. In 2019, Leslie Noble, co-artistic director of Franklin Stage Company in Franklin, New York, directed a production. Noble said the audience response was overwhelming, especially during their post-show talkbacks.

"He takes the political or the historical and so beautifully connects that to an intimate personal story," Noble said.

Noble taught as an adjunct for the SU Drama Department in the early 2000s alongside Bass. She attributes Bass' ability to reach audiences to his graceful command of language and his connection to the community.

Bass' knowledge of the history, people and culture of Syracuse invites audiences to see themselves in his work. When he centers the Salt City in his plays, Bass allows the community to connect with what's onstage. He understands the power that local connection has on audiences.

"It's like if you're seeing a movie and the pan down the street on the camera goes by your house," Bass said. "Suddenly, this movie means something different when you see your mailbox in it."

Bass' past work also has this community connection. He worked on ["Cry for Peace: Voices from the Congo"](#) and ["Separated"](#) in 2010 and 2017, respectively. "Cry for Peace" was co-written with interdisciplinary theater artist Ping Chong from interviews with Syracuse's Congolese refugee community, and Bass devised "Separated" through interviews with military veterans attending Syracuse University. For both productions, the interviewees also performed their words, further connecting Bass' work to Syracuse's community.

"salt/city/blues" will be another opportunity for Syracuse to see themselves reflected onstage. Through Bass' skilled storytelling, audiences will engage in a familiar story as well as complex topics of race and class. Bass' words will hold a mirror up to the Salt City.

"He grew up around here. He's lived here his whole life," Hupp said.

"He's seen the amazing side of these stories. He knows what our challenges are. He knows what our blessings are, and he can really examine them in an unvarnished way."

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