

MAR 29-APR 20

Pamela Friedman & Ronald Bailey present

Virginia Premiere

FIREFLIES

By Donja R. Love

Sponsored by
The City of Charlottesville
Department of Social Equity

Directed by
Ti Ames



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STUDY GUIDE



FIREFLIES

Written by Donja R. Love

March 29–April 20, 2024, in the Founders Theater

Presented by Pamela Friedman and Ronald Bailey

Sponsored by the Office of Social Equity of the City of Charlottesville

Directed By Ti Ames

*The play runs for approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes
with a 15-minute intermission.*

"This is language as lush catharsis, language as endurance, language as empowerment ... It feels like going to church—the kind of church where the minister thunders and rhapsodizes, aiming both to appall and exalt." – *New York Magazine/Vulture*

"A jaw-dropping and explosively dramatic two-hander. Love crafts an intimate story that comes to feel cosmic in its enormity." – *Theatermania.com*

"Using an artful mix of naturalism and expressionism, playwright Donja R. Love weaves (many) themes into a compelling 95 minutes that ... beautifully express the psychological weight on those who seek to sustain people's optimism and hope amid relentless violence and grief."
— *Chicago Sun Times*





Study Guide compiled for Live Arts by Education Director Ti Ames



Promotional photo by Will Kerner featuring Arianna Jones.





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Plot Summary

Somewhere in the Jim Crow South, the sky is on fire. A pregnant Olivia's fierce speechwriting is the true force behind her charismatic husband, Charles, and his successful Movement, galvanizing people to march toward freedom. When four little girls are bombed in a church, Olivia and Charles' marriage is threatened—as this tragedy and years of civil unrest leave Olivia believing that “this world ain't no place to raise a colored child.”

Note from the script: FIREFLIES is part 2 of a trilogy, *The Love* Plays*, that explores Queer love through Black History (slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Lives Matter movement). Part 1 is *Sugar In Our Wounds*. Part 3 is *In The Middle*.

Time & Setting

Fall, 1963





Somewhere down South, where the sky is on fire

Characters

- **OLIVIA:** Woman, Black, early 30s; she's weary—it's as if she's carrying the weight of this fiery world. She writes a lot, she smokes a lot, she stares off a lot, she hears bombs a lot.
- **CHARLES:** Man, Black, early 30s; Olivia's husband, he's a preacher. Though he drinks a lot, it's something about him that we like—that makes us feel like he's the type of man that can lead people through the smoke and into the promised land.





Rehearsal photo by Madison Patterson, featuring (l-r) Simeon Brown and Arianna Jones.





About the Playwright

DONJA R. LOVE (he/him/his) is Black, Queer, HIV-Positive, and thriving. A Philly native, he and his work examine the forced absurdity of life for those who identify as Black, Queer, and HIV-Positive—a diverse intersection filled with eloquent stories that challenge the white supremacist, heteronormative structures that exist in American culture. He's the recipient of the Antonyo's inaugural Langston Hughes Award, the Helen Merrill Award, the Laurents/Hatcher Award and the Princess Grace Playwriting Award. Other honors include The Lark's Van Lier New Voices Fellowship, The Playwrights Realm's Writing Fellowship, and the Philadelphia Adult Grand Slam Poetry Champion. He's the co-founder of The Each-Other Project, an organization that helps build community and provide visibility, through art and advocacy, for LGBTQ+ People of Color. He's a graduate of the Lila Acheson Wallace American Playwrights Program at The Juilliard School.



Select stage-plays include: *The Love* Plays*, *Soft*, *The Trade*, *The North Star*, *A Ugandan Family*, and *One in Two* (Terrence McNally Award winner). Select film work: *Modern Day Black Gay* (web series), and *Once A Star* (short film).







Performance History

The world premiere of FIREFLIES was presented by Atlantic Theater Company. FIREFLIES was developed in part with the support of Rising Circle Theater Collective at the INKtank Play Development Lab for Emerging Artists of Color.



Rehearsal photo by Madison Patterson featuring (foreground-rear): Simeon Brown and Arianna Jones.





About the Director

TI AMES (they/them) is an educator, singer, and theater maker with ancestral roots in Charlottesville. A graduate of Oberlin College, Ti is the education director at Live Arts and has taught theater and African-American history at the Renaissance School. When not working, they can be found directing, writing, and adapting plays at Live Arts and with the Charlottesville Players Guild or performing gigs with Richelle Claiborne, Leslie Scott Jones, and Vibe Riot. Ti is most passionate about their work with children and young adults, specifically teaching the importance of consent, healthy boundaries, and self/community care. Directing credits include: *The Brothers Size*, *Olympus* (Oberlin College); *She Kills Monsters: Virtual Realms* (Renaissance School); *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (Charlottesville Players Guild); RENT; CRUMBS FROM THE TABLE OF JOY; and YOU DON'T KNOW JACKSH*T ABOUT THE MOTHMAN (Live Arts).





Rehearsal photo by Madison Patterson featuring (l-r): Ti Ames, Arianna Jones, and Simeon Brown.

The 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing of 1963

Although FIREFLIES is loosely based on the private lives of Civil Rights leaders of the later '50s and '60s, the play begins on September 15, 1963—the same day as the historic 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. In the play, Olivia constantly hears and sees bombs going off in her head, alluding to the 16th St Baptist church bombing and other racially motivated attacks on Black communities at the time.





The following article details the fatal attack, which killed and injured many Black church congregants, including four Black girls who are mentioned by name in FIREFLIES: Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley.

This article was originally published by the National Park Service. It was last updated on November 22, 2023.

The 16th Street Baptist was a large and prominent church located downtown, just blocks from Birmingham's commercial district and City Hall. Just before 11 o'clock on September 15, 1963, instead of rising to begin prayers, the congregation was knocked to



Photo credit: IndieWire

the ground. As a bomb exploded under the steps of the church, they sought safety under the pews and shielded each other from falling debris.

On September 15, 1963, the congregation of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, greeted each other before the start of Sunday service. In the basement of the church, five young girls, two of them sisters, gathered in the ladies room in their best dresses, happily chatting about the first days of the new school year. It was Youth Day and excitement filled the air; they were going to take part in the Sunday adult service.





Just before 11 o'clock, instead of rising to begin prayers the congregation was knocked to the ground. As a bomb exploded under the steps of the church, they sought safety



*16th St Baptist Church bombing
Photo credit: IndieWire*

under the pews and shielded each other from falling debris. In the basement, [four little girls were killed—14-year-olds Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and 11-year-old Cynthia Wesley](#). Addie's sister Sarah survived, but lost her right eye.

In the moments after the explosion, questions hung in the air—'Where is my loved one?' 'Are they ok?' 'How much longer can this violence last?' They did not ask if this was an accident, they knew that this was a bomb that had exploded as it had dozens of times before in "Bombingham."

The Aftermath

Upon learning of the bombing at the Church, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., sent a telegram to Alabama Governor George Wallace, a staunch and vocal segregationist, stating bluntly: 'The blood of our little children is on your hands.' The brutal attack and the deaths of the four little girls shocked the nation and drew international attention to the violent struggle for civil rights in Birmingham. Many whites were as outraged by the incident as Blacks and offered services and condolences to the families. Over 8,000 people attended the girls' funeral service at Reverend John Porter's Sixth Avenue Baptist Church.





The deaths of the four girls was followed two months later by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, causing an outpouring of national grief, galvanizing the civil rights movement and ensuring the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

Why This Church?

16th Street Baptist was a large and prominent church located downtown, just blocks from Birmingham's commercial district and City Hall. Since its construction in 1911, the church had served as the centerpiece of the city's African American community, functioning as a meeting place, social center, and lecture hall. Because of its size, location, and importance to the community, the church served as headquarters for civil rights mass meetings and rallies in the early 1960s.



*16th St Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama
Photo credit: Jay Reeves*

Birmingham was the most segregated city in the United States, and in April 1963, after an invitation by Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth to come help desegregate Birmingham, the city became the focus of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The desegregation campaign conceived by





Shuttleworth was known as "Project C" and was to be a series of nonviolent protests and boycotts.

Despite resistance from some of the church's leadership and members of the congregation, the 16th Street Baptist Church joined the SCLC in their campaign. The church became the departure point for many of the demonstrations that took place in the city. On May 2, 1963, students ranging in age from eight to 18 gathered at the church to march downtown and talk to the new mayor about segregation. After leaving the church they were met by police and many were jailed. By the time the "Children's Crusade" and the ensuing demonstrations ended on May 10, thousands of children and adults had been injured by fire hoses and attack dogs and incarcerated by order of Commissioner of Public Safety "Bull" Connor.

The church came to be viewed by many as a symbol and a rallying place for civil rights activists; and it became the focal point for racial tensions and white hostility toward the civil rights movement in Birmingham.

Why Then?

Due to the success of the Birmingham Campaign, the city agreed on May 10, 1963, to desegregate lunch counters, restrooms, drinking fountains, and fitting rooms, to hire African Americans in stores as salesmen and clerks, and to release the jailed demonstrators. White segregationists opposed desegregation, however, and violence continued to plague the city.

On May 11, a bomb destroyed the Gaston Motel where Martin Luther King, Jr., had been staying, and another damaged the house of King's brother, A. D. King.





NAACP attorney Arthur Shores' house was firebombed on August 20 and September 4 in retaliation for his attempts to help integrate the Birmingham public schools. On September 9, President John F. Kennedy took control of the Alabama National Guard, which Governor George Wallace was using to block court-ordered desegregation of public schools in Birmingham. Around that time, Robert Chambliss, who would later be named as a suspect in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, foreshadowed the violence to come when he told his niece, "Just wait until Sunday morning and they'll beg us to let them segregate."

Eventual Justice

The FBI office in Birmingham launched an immediate investigation. In a 1965 memo to J. Edgar Hoover, FBI agents named four men as primary suspects for the bombing—Thomas Blanton, Robert Chambliss, Bobby Frank Cherry, and Herman Cash. All four men were members of Birmingham's Cahaba River Group, a splinter group of the Eastview Klavern #13 chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. Eastview Klavern #13 was considered one of the most violent groups in the South and was responsible for the 1961 attacks on the Freedom Riders at the Trailways bus station in Birmingham.



Martin Luther King Jr. at the Lincoln Memorial for his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington, D.C., Aug. 28, 1963. Photo credit: Talking Points Memo



The investigation ended in 1968 with no indictments. According to the FBI, although they had identified the four suspects, witnesses were reluctant to talk and physical evidence was lacking. In addition, information from FBI surveillances was not admissible in court. Hoover chose not to approve arrests, stating, "The chance of prosecution in state or federal court is remote." Although Chambliss was convicted on an explosives charge, no charges were filed in the 1960s for the bombing of the church.

In 1971, Alabama Attorney General Bill Baxley reopened the case, requesting evidence from the FBI and building trust with witnesses who had been reluctant to testify. Investigators discovered that, while the FBI had accumulated evidence against the bombers, under orders from Hoover, they had not disclosed the evidence to county prosecutors. Robert Chambliss was convicted of murder on November 14, 1977; however, it would be decades before the other suspects were tried for their crimes. In 2000, the FBI assisted Alabama state authorities in bringing charges against the remaining suspects. On May 1, 2001, Thomas Blanton was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. In 2002, Bobby Frank Cherry was convicted as well. His boasts that he was the one who planted the bomb next to the church wall helped send Cherry to prison for life. Herman Cash died in 1994 having never been prosecuted for the murders of the four girls.

A project through the [African American Civil Rights Grant Program](#), which works to document, interpret, and preserve the sites and stories related to the African American struggle to gain equal rights, is funding ongoing rehabilitation work at the 16th Street Baptist Church.



For more information on this article, please see [16th Street Baptist Church Bombing \(1963\)](#) (U.S. National Park Service).

Emmett, the "Firefly": Racialized Violence Against Black Youth in the 20th Century

In Scenes 2 and 3 of FIREFLIES, Olivia and Charles discuss a young Black boy, James Tilbert, in Charlotte, North Carolina who was accused of touching a white woman and thrown in jail because of it. James' mother, Francine, calls Olivia to ask Charles to come to Charlotte and speak with James and his family. Before Charles is able to make it to Charlotte, Olivia receives a call from Francine that James was found dead in his jail cell, most likely for nefarious reasons.

Even if James Tilbert is a fictional character, his story is not unheard of in 20th century America, especially in the Jim Crow South. Black people, young and old, men and women, were constantly accused of disrespect and abuse toward their white counterparts; these accusations were often baseless, but because of the political and racial climate at the time, Black people were incarcerated unjustly.

It can be argued that the most infamous case that parallels James' in FIREFLIES is that of Emmett Till. The following article tells his story, and how his community rallied behind him and his memory to fight injustice, even today.



This article was originally published by the Smithsonian's National Museum of





African American History & Culture. It is entitled, “Emmett Till's Death Inspired a Movement.”

Emmett Till and his mother, Mamie Till Mobley
Photo credit: Smithsonian

The alleged teasing of white store clerk Carolyn Bryant by the 14 year-old African American Emmett Till led to his brutal murder at the hands of Bryant’s husband Roy and his half-brother J.W. Milam, forcing the American public to grapple with the menace of violence in the Jim Crow South. According to court documents, Till, who was visiting family for the summer in Money, Mississippi, from Chicago, purchased two-cents worth of bubble gum from the Bryant Grocery store and said, “Bye, baby” over his shoulder to Carolyn Bryant as he exited the store.

That night, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam ran into Emmett’s uncle’s home, where he was staying, dragged Till from his bed, beat him to the point of disfigurement, and shot him before tossing his body into the Tallahatchie River with a cotton-gin fan attached with barbed wire laced to his neck to weigh him down. Bryant and Milam maintained their innocence and would eventually be acquitted of the murder by an all-white, all male jury. They later sold their story for \$4,000 to *Look* magazine—bragging about the murder as a form of Southern justice implemented to protect white womanhood.

For African Americans, the murder of Till was evidence of the decades-old codes of violence exacted upon Black men and women for breaking the rules of white supremacy in the Deep South. Particularly for Black males, who found themselves under constant threat of attack or death for mostly imagined sexual advances toward white women, Till’s murder reverberated a need for immediate change. Carolyn Bryant





testified in court that Till had grabbed her hand, and after she pulled away, he followed her behind the counter, clasped her waist, and using vulgar language, told her that he had been with white women before. At 82, some 60 years later, Bryant, confessed to Duke University professor Timothy B. Tyson that she had lied about this entire event.

Members of Citizens' Councils (white supremacist civic organizations that used public policy and electoral power to reinforce Jim Crow), celebrated the acquittal, further threatening those who had testified against Bryant and Milam and members of the local NAACP. But rather than bending to the intimidation and psychic horror caused by the savage murder, Till's family, along with national newspapers and civil rights organizations—including the NAACP—used his death to strike a blow against racial injustice and terrorism.

A boycott of the Bryant Grocery caused its closure shortly after the trial, and the Bryants and Milam moved to Texas. Till's mother, Mamie Till Mobley insisted on an open casket at his funeral services, which were attended by more than 50,000 people and chronicled by *Jet* magazine. The photo of Till with his mother earlier that year alongside *Jet's* photo of his mutilated corpse horrified the nation and became a catalyst for the burgeoning civil rights movement.

One hundred days after Till's murder, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery city bus and was arrested for violating Alabama's bus segregation laws. Reverend





Jesse Jackson told *Vanity Fair* (1988) that “Rosa said she thought about going to the back of the bus. But then she thought about Emmett Till and she couldn’t do it.”

Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks

Photo credit: Smithsonian

The Women's Democratic Council, under Jo Ann Robinson, called for a citywide bus boycott and asked a young, 26-year-old minister to help. His name was Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. King was deeply impacted by Till’s abduction and murder, delivering a sermon just days after Bryant and Milam’s acquittal (“Pride Versus Humility: The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican,” at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church), in which he lamented Till and the lack of moral piety among violent segregationists.

“The white men who lynch Negroes worship Christ. That jury in Mississippi, which a few days ago in the Emmett Till case, freed two white men from what might be considered one of the most brutal and inhuman crimes of the 20th century, worships Christ. The perpetrators of many of the greatest evils in our society worship Christ. This trouble is that all people, like the Pharisee, go to church regularly, they pay their tithes and offerings, and observe religiously the various ceremonial requirements. The trouble with these people, however, is that they worship Christ emotionally and not morally. They cast his ethical and moral insights behind the gushing smoke of emotional adoration and ceremonial piety,” King said.

Dr. King would use the momentum of outrage to galvanize the nation against social and racial injustice, invoking Till’s murder when talking about “the evil of racial injustice” in several speeches, as well as “the crying voice of a little Emmett C. Till, screaming from the rushing waters in Mississippi” in a 1963 Mother’s Day sermon.





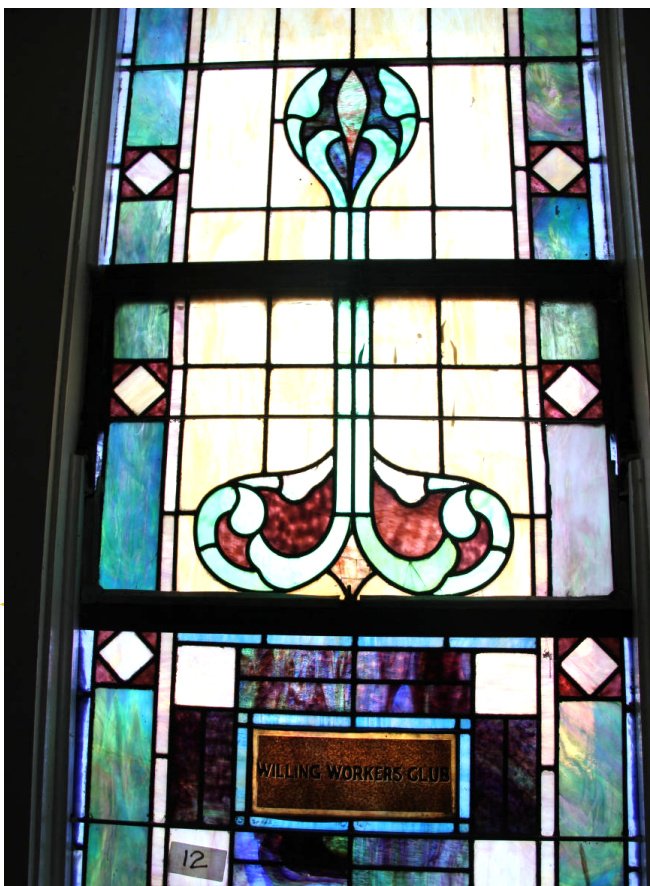
Eight years later, on the anniversary of Emmett Till’s murder, Dr. King delivered his iconic “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington.

For more information on this article, please see [Emmett Till's Death Inspired a Movement | National Museum of African American History and Culture](#).

From Selma to Birmingham: Stained Glass Memories of the Civil Rights Movement

Scenic Designer Bee Smith designed a beautiful set for FIREFLIES. After many talks with FIREFLIES Director Ti Ames, Bee decided to include several surrealist elements into the scenic design to give the illusion that the set itself had been affected by the bombings that Olivia hears in her head. For example, the walls of the set are old and worn, sooted and weathered by explosions and decay. The set itself sits on cement

blocks, commonly used to provide stability to structures that have been destroyed. The doorways that lead into the kitchen and into the bedroom of the Grace household were designed to look like church door archways, tying together Olivia and Charles’ connection with the church. The set is built away from any supporting wall, creating a “floating island” effect that illustrates Olivia’s mental state.





Bee also chose to include an homage to 20th century Baptist churches by designing a stained glass window that hangs over the sink in the kitchen. The window is slightly askew, a nod to the surrealist aspects to the scenic design. The stained glass pattern itself is directly inspired by a stained glass window found at the Green Street Baptist Church in Selma, Alabama. According to [Middle Tennessee State University's Center for Historic Preservation](#), the window was originally constructed in 1922. The featured

window pane design features, “an abstracted, art nouveau-style flower motif extending up the center of both panes.”

Green Street Baptist Church: interior view of stained glass window 12
Photo credit: Carroll Van West

Here is an excerpt from the historical notes from MTSU's Digital Collection regarding the Green Street Baptist Church: *“During the 1960s, the church enjoyed a thriving congregation, and its kitchen was used to prepare meals for marchers in the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965. The considerable space in both the education wing and the main sanctuary were also used to provide temporary housing for civil rights workers. On June 5, 1964, the church hosted a mass meeting featuring Ralph Abernathy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Following the meeting, someone threw a rock at some of the deputized possemen who had surrounded the church during the meeting. The possemen responded by attacking the crowd as it tried to exit the church, using night sticks and tear gas. The riot continued in the neighborhood, injuring many of the Black residents and putting some in the hospital. Homes up to a block and a half away from the church were damaged, with broken windows and porch lights. Two white journalists were targeted and their cameras destroyed by possemen.”*

In Bee's FIREFLIES scenic design, the stained glass window has a warmer color palette to match with the set. The stained glass design itself is a replica of the original window at Green Street Baptist Church. The window is a beautiful homage to the churches of





the Civil Rights Movement which were integral in supporting Black communities fighting for equity in the 20th century.



Promotional photo by Will Kerner featuring Arianna Jones and Simeon Brown.

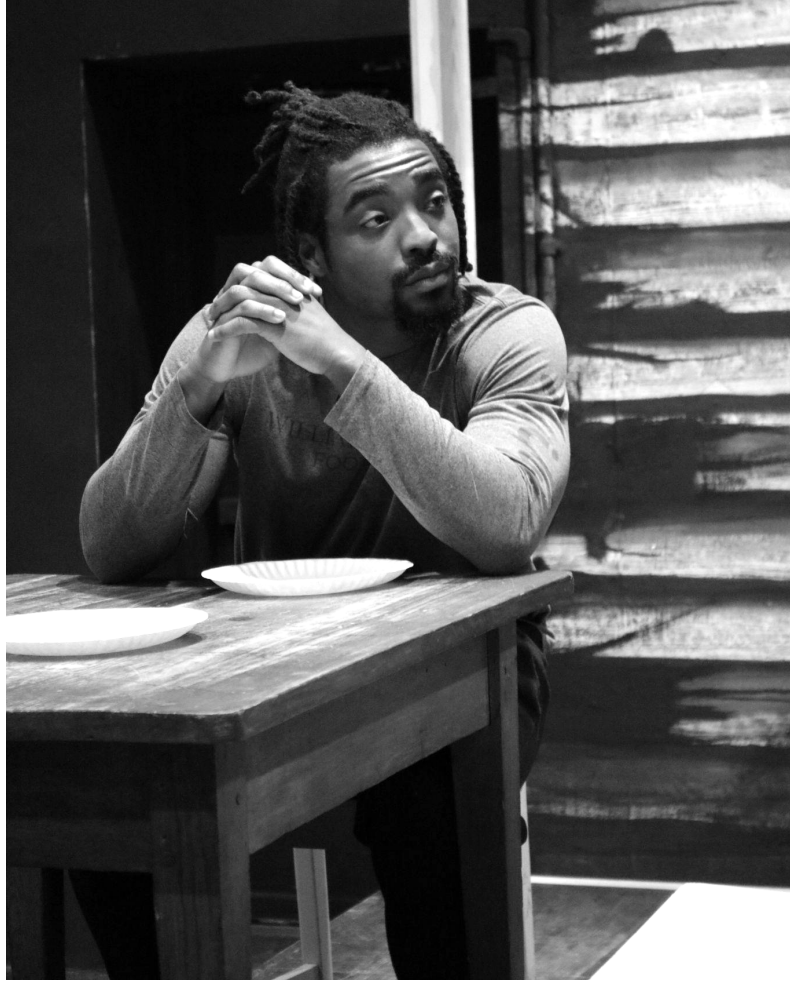
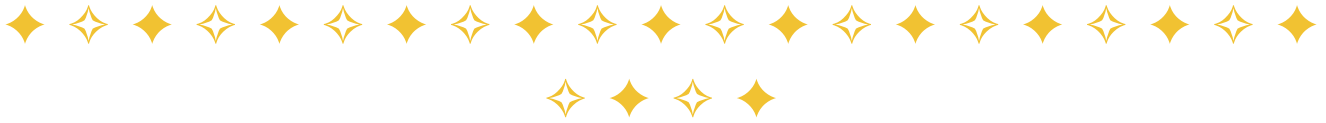




Talkback Information

The audience talkback with members of the cast and crew of FIREFLIES is scheduled for 9:30pm on Thursday, April 11, in the Founders Theater (123 E. Water Street, 3rd floor), facilitated by Education Director Ti Ames. You do not need to purchase a ticket to the April 11 show to attend the talkback. This program is provided free of charge to the Charlottesville community. Please email ti@livearts.org with questions about the event.





Rehearsal photo by Madison Patterson featuring Simeon Brown.

Additional Resources

- [Donja R. Love's intense and intimate play 'Fireflies' has its Virginia premiere in Charlottesville Friday](#)
- [Director Mikael Burke in conversation with Playwright Donja R. Love | FIREFLIES](#)





- [Dorie Ladner, Unheralded Civil Rights Heroine, Dies at 81 - The New York Times](#)
- [Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, & Cynthia Wesley | Learning for Justice](#)
- [Opinion: She admitted that her story was a lie. Now Emmett Till's accuser will never be brought to justice | CNN](#)

Works Cited

- [Donja R. Love.](#)
- [Donja R. Love - Curious Theatre Company](#)
- [16th Street Baptist Church Bombing \(1963\) \(U.S. National Park Service\)](#)
- [Emmett Till's Death Inspired a Movement | National Museum of African American History and Culture](#)
- [Green Street Baptist Church: interior view of stained glass window 12 - Southern Places - Middle Tennessee State University Digital Collections](#)





Promotional photo by Will Kerner featuring Arianna Jones and Simeon Brown.



