

## Wendell Pierce and Charlie Robinson Star in James Anthony Tyler's *Some Old Black Man*

### Newly Filmed Theater Performance in Pandemic is part of UMS's Digital Artist Residency Program

#### Free Digital Premiere Will Air in January, On-Demand and Viewing Options to follow

ANN ARBOR, MI (November 19, 2020) -- Acclaimed actor **Wendell Pierce** (*The Wire*, *Treme*, *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan*, Olivier nominee for Best Actor for *Death of a Salesman*) will make his University Musical Society (UMS) debut with a Digital Artist Residency that will feature a filmed, fully-staged production of **James Anthony Tyler's** 2015 play, *Some Old Black Man*. The two-person play also features veteran actor **Charlie Robinson** and is directed by Berkshire Playwrights Lab founder **Joe Cacaci**. **HMS Media**, based in Chicago, filmed the production.

*Some Old Black Man* will be available at [ums.org](http://ums.org) beginning in mid-January and will be accessible on demand for an extended period following the premiere.

The members of the production — Pierce, Robinson, Cacaci, Tyler, and stage manager Tiffany Robinson — came to Michigan for a four-week production period, quarantining as a group during rehearsals in Ann Arbor for the three weeks leading up to the play's filming at the Jam Handy in Detroit. As part of a safety plan approved by several unions representing those involved in the production, participation required the team to follow rigorous safety protocols, including testing before arrival; additional extensive, regular testing frequently throughout the rehearsal and production period; continued testing and oversight in the filming phase (which involved more personnel); and a designated COVID supervisor to ensure compliance with all

safety protocols. Special consideration was made to accommodate the group for everything from food delivery to exercise equipment to ground transportation. UMS received significant guidance and generous support from University of Michigan leadership and public health officials, and was able to utilize the newly developed saliva-based testing that has been adopted by the University.

“We are extraordinarily proud and humbled to present theater once again — albeit without in-person audiences and by using the digital frame — for the first phase of our Digital Artist Residency with acclaimed actor Wendell Pierce,” said **Matthew VanBesien**, President of UMS. “*Some Old Black Man* resonates with both social justice themes and with intergenerational conflict, making it a very fitting title for our times, when the reality of more togetherness also unveils some of the tensions underlying even the closest of relationships. We continue to build capacity at UMS, exploring new ways of bringing the performing arts into people’s homes, and we sincerely thank the many funders, supporters, and key partners here at the University of Michigan who have made this ambitious and groundbreaking work possible.”

**Wendell Pierce**, who is one of UMS’s Digital Residency Artists during the 20/21 season, noted, “When we started envisioning this project, we were focused on developing something that will be an answer to these difficult times. I believe this special experiment and experience will be an answer to performance during a pandemic but also UMS demonstrating a legacy of vanguard performances and the importance of artists to our community as a whole.”

Playwright **James Anthony Tyler** added, “Working with this incredible creative team has been a highlight of the pandemic for me, and it’s wonderful to see them interrogate the work and explore the intergenerational nature of the relationship with such grace under trying times. I’m fascinated by how little we know about what our elders encountered in their lives, and how that leads to misunderstandings and hurt in our closest relationships. I’m thrilled that this play will be seen again through the Digital Artist Residency program at UMS.”

**Tim Petersen**, UMS Board Chair and lead supporter of the project, added, “I’ve been continually inspired by the can-do spirit and willingness of Wendell and the entire cast and crew — aka the ‘Quaranteam’ — to experiment in how to make live theater and performance come to life during this unique time, utilizing the latest technology in regular COVID testing and rigorous safety protocols.”

The production of *Some Old Black Man* is made possible with leadership level support from **Tim and Sally Petersen, Michigan Engineering, DTE Energy Foundation** (Wendell Pierce provides the voice for all DTE radio and television commercials), **Newmarket LLC**, and the **Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan**. Additional support was provided by the **UMS Sustaining Directors group** and the **Jerry and Dale Kolins Endowment Fund**. In addition, several individuals and corporations advised on and contributed to the safety protocols for this project, including Keith Dickey, Preeti Malani, Michigan Medicine, and LynxDX. The Ford Motor Company Fund provided PPE for those involved in the rehearsal and filming period, and special thanks to Bridget McCormack and Steve Croley for their generous housing assistance.

### **ABOUT SOME OLD BLACK MAN**

When college professor Calvin Jones (played by Wendell Pierce) moves his 82-year-old doggedly independent, blue-collar, ailing father (played by Charlie Robinson) from Greenwald, Mississippi into his Harlem penthouse, an argument over what to eat for breakfast turns into a generational clash over race, opportunity, and a decision that Calvin made years ago. ***Some Old Black Man*** explores the personal trauma of a family's history, as father and son try to rectify past hurts enabled in a racist world that has damaged their personal relationship. Written only a few years before the history-making events of 2020, the play invites audiences to consider and re-evaluate notions of fairness, equality, rights, and justice through a deeply personal, intimate relationship between father and son. *Some Old Black Man* challenges people of all ages to learn about the unique perspective of elders whose lived struggles created opportunities for future generations and to confront the experiential divides that can grow larger due to generational differences.

### **THE CREATIVE TEAM**

**Wendell Pierce** (Calvin Jones) has had a successful television and stage career, most recently receiving an Olivier Award nomination for Best Actor for his acclaimed run and West End debut at the Young Vic as Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. He stars opposite John Krasinski in Amazon's series *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan*, which is currently filming its third season; starred opposite Kerry Washington as Clarence Thomas in the HBO feature *Confirmation*; and has held a variety of television roles on *Chicago PD*, *Unsolved*, *The Odd Couple*, *Ray Donovan*, *Suits*, *Treme*, *The Wire*, *Law and Order*, and others. Pierce is a four-time NAACP Image

Award Nominee for Best Actor in a television drama for his work on *The Wire* and *Treme*, and won the 2008 Image Award for best actor in a television movie for HBO's "Life Support" (opposite Queen Latifah). He has won five Emmy Awards for his narration of *Golden Days*, *Purple Knights: 50 Years of the Los Angeles Lakers*. His memoir *The Wind in the Reeds* was published to rave reviews in 2015.

**Charlie Robinson** (Donald Jones) is an American theater, film, and television actor. He is best known for his role on the NBC sitcom *Night Court* as Macintosh "Mac" Robinson, the clerk of the court and a Vietnam War veteran. Robinson's acting credits include appearances in *Black Gestapo*, *Emergency!*, *The White Shadow*, *Flamingo Road*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *The Game*, *Touched by an Angel*, and *Antwone Fisher*. From 1992 to 1995, Robinson co-starred on the sitcom *Love & War*. Robinson played character Bud Harper in *Home Improvement*, and has appeared in many other television shows including *House*, *The Bernie Mac Show*, *My Wife and Kids*, *Soul Food*, *Charmed*, *Hart of Dixie*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *My Name Is Earl*. In 2010, Robinson worked at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and co-starred in the film *Jackson*. He portrayed Troy in August Wilson's *Fences* at South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa in 2010 and returned in 2013 to portray Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*.

**James Anthony Tyler** (playwright) has an MFA in Film from Howard University and an MFA in Dramatic Writing from New York University, where he concentrated in Playwriting. He is also a recent graduate of the Playwrights Program at The Juilliard School, which accepts only four or five writers each year for its graduate fellowships. Selected honors include the Paul Robeson Award and John Golden Award for Excellence in Playwriting. His plays have been developed at La MaMa and Berkshire Playwrights Lab, Classical Theatre of Harlem, Asolo Rep, Ars Nova, The Drama League, Finborough Theatre in London, and LAByrinth Theater Company, among others. He was a member of Harlem's Emerging Black Playwrights Group, a 2014-2015 Dramatists Guild Fellow, a 2015-2016 The Playwrights Center's Many Voices Fellow, a 2016-2017 Ars Nova Play Group Resident, a 2016 Working Farm Playwrights Group Resident at SPACE on Ryder Farm, and a 2016 Theatre Masters Visionary Playwrights Award recipient.

**Joe Cacaci** (director), co-artistic director of Berkshire Playwright's Lab, was the founding director of East Coast Arts, where he produced 20 world premiere plays over seven seasons, and the Producing Director, with Dan Lauria, of The Playwrights Kitchen Ensemble in Los Angeles, where over 500 new plays were given staged readings. Cacaci co-produced David Mamet's Obie-winning play *Edmond* at the Provincetown Playhouse. His own plays have been

produced at The Public Theater and The Coconut Grove Theatre, where he also directed, and at the Long Wharf Theater and The Alley Theatre. He has also directed at the Westport Playhouse and commercially in New York and Los Angeles. Joe teaches television writing in the graduate program of the Film School at Columbia University and undergraduate coursework at Wesleyan University.

*Some Old Black Man* was workshopped at the Berkshire Playwrights Lab, co-founded by Joe Cacaci, and had its Off-Broadway premiere in 2018.

## **ABOUT UMS**

A recipient of the 2014 National Medal of Arts, UMS (also known as the University Musical Society) contributes to a vibrant cultural community by connecting audiences with performing artists from around the world in uncommon and engaging experiences. One of the oldest performing arts presenters in the country, UMS is an independent non-profit organization affiliated with the University of Michigan. During the coronavirus pandemic, UMS has continued to connect audiences and artists through digital presentations and a robust Digital Artist Residency series, giving audiences a window into the creative process through six different projects by Wendell Pierce, Tarek Yamani and the Spektral Quartet, Tunde Olaniran, Cleo Parker Robinson, Brian Lobel and Gweneth Ann Rand, and Joyce DiDonato. All digital presentations are being presented free-of-charge to enable access to audiences everywhere, supporting UMS's commitment to bold artistic leadership, engaged learning through the arts, and access and inclusiveness. Matthew VanBesien became the organization's seventh president in July 2017.

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