

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

INTRODUCING THE 2022 SOULPEPPER ACADEMY ENSEMBLE SEE THE NEW MEMBERS ON SOULPEPPER'S STAGES THIS SUMMER

Toronto, ON – June 8, 2022: Soulpepper Theatre Company is pleased to announce the five selected members taking part in the esteemed **Soulpepper Academy – Will Dao, Varun Guru, Annie Luján, Shaquille Pottinger, and Kiana Woo.**

Following the successful return of the program in 2021 the Soulpepper Academy continues to develop and grow to support the needs of the next generation of leaders in Canadian theatre. The Academy will focus on the member's disciplines while exposing them to a variety of theatre making skills. This intake will provide training in **Acting & Performance** and **Directing**. Varun Guru, Annie Luján, Shaquille Pottinger, and Kiana Woo will take to the stage alongside some of the most celebrated Canadian artists in Soulpepper's production of **King Lear**, while Will Dao joins Directors Kim Collier and Weyni Mengesha as an Assistant Director on **King Lear** and **Queen Goneril**.

Under the guidance of Artistic Director **Weyni Mengesha** and the new and returning faculty members including d'bi young anitafrika, Ins Choi, Kim Collier, Ravi Jain, Gregory Prest, Lorenzo Savoini, and Guillermo Verdecchia, the five vibrant emerging artists will gain hands-on professional theatre experience through Soulpepper's Mainstage programming, and will further develop their artistic voice with original creations throughout the 24-week paid training program. The Academy curriculum will be taught through rehearsals, classes, studio intensives, and workshops, with more exciting Canadian and international instructors to be announced.

"As an Academy Graduate myself it was so meaningful to work with the Academy that graduated in 2021. To watch them take risks and hone in on skills they had not had the chance to explore. It only reinforced my belief in the importance of a program like this, to ensure the next generations voices are supported and amplified" said **Weyni Mengesha**, Artistic Director. *"These five new Academy members are exceptional artists whose curiosity and bold creativity will help us shape the future of the company. I'm excited to watch them learn and grow and share their work with our audiences."*

In their applications, each of the selected artists expressed common desires: to find their voice, build a sense of community, invest time and space in exploring new areas of their craft, and to authentically represent themselves and their communities on Canadian stages. The new Academy members were selected out of a national talent pool of applicants by the selection committee: Raquel Duffy, Rohan Kulkarni, Jani Lauzon, Diego Matamoros, Weyni Mengesha, Gregory Prest, Luke Reece, and Guillermo Verdecchia.

Artistic Director **Weyni Mengesha**, a graduate of the inaugural class, and Executive Director **Gideon Arthurs**, a notable leader in Canadian artistic training (National Theatre School) continue to champion the renewed principles of the re-established Soulpepper Academy. Soulpepper's ambition to be a civic leader and provide a supportive home for all artists is brought into focus through the Academy, and it has played a significant role in the development of generations of Canadian artists and arts leaders since 2008.

As with all past Academies, the members will be paid during the 24-week training program. It is thanks to the generosity and commitment to supporting future generations of Canadian artists shared by the RBC Emerging Artists Project, the Government of Canada through the Canadian Arts Training Fund, long-time donor Sylvia Soyka, and the Kingfisher Foundation that this is possible.

"At RBC, we care about investing in the places where we live and work. Our support of the arts has been a long-standing priority as we recognize that the arts plays an important role in building vibrant communities and strong economies. Through RBC Emerging Artists, we are thrilled to continue our support of the Soulpepper Academy and its commitment to provide artists the opportunity to advance their career trajectory in a meaningful way" said **Ramin Fazel**, Regional Vice President, RBC Downtown Toronto.

Classes, studios, rehearsal and workshops are planned to be held in person, in adherence to any public health guidelines, but given the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual learning may be incorporated as required.

MEET THE ARTISTS

WILL DAO - DIRECTOR

"I am excited to engage in dialogue with all the artists at Soulpepper: to learn, to unpack, and to question. I hope to interrogate who we make our theatre for and how we can recalibrate our work to reach the audiences that we want to reach. I'm interested in intergenerational exchange both in the rehearsal room and with the audience," said **Will Dao**.

Will Dao is a theatre artist, video artist and emerging filmmaker who primarily works as a director and a dramaturge. Dao was born and raised in Toronto, but has worked with many theatres across Canada in various productions and workshops for script development. Some companies include Outside the March, Factory Theatre, The Shakespeare Company, Buddies in Bad Times, Coal Mine Theatre and Urban Ink. In 2021, he co-created a series of short videos titled *Bathroom Break* for Soulpepper's Queer Youth Cabaret, and had a film titled *What Are You Supposed To Be?* in the Toronto Fringe Festival. He has also written a short story titled *music to watch boys to* which was presented by the Historic Joy Kogawa House and the ArQuives.

He is a graduate of the University of Toronto's Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies. During his time in university, he directed several productions that garnered awards at the U of T Drama Festival, including winning the President's Award for Best Production three times, and the Robert Gill Award for Best Direction twice.

VARUN GURU - ACTOR

"I feel grateful and am most excited to start this journey at the Academy, and look forward to jumping into the rhythm of learning, creating and sharing with my fellow members and director. I hope to gain confidence in my artistic vision, and create and perform with conviction," said **Varun Guru**.

Varun Guru is an actor-composer-voice actor born in Chennai and raised in New Delhi, India and currently based out of Toronto. He's passionate about telling and being a part of compelling stories about experiences of immigrants and people of color, culture and decolonization, climate change, and science fiction.

He has a strong voice acting experience of over 18 years and is also an experienced music composer. Guru has undertaken training in Indian and Western Classical Music, whose influences are found in his compositions. He's proficient in Music Production and Sound Editing, Video Editing and musical instruments.

ANNIE LUJÁN - ACTOR

"I am thrilled to be joining the 2022 Soulpepper Academy! I'm so looking forward to being in the studio, at rehearsals and having the opportunity to create my own work. It is such a dream to be taught by the outstanding faculty at the Academy and I can't wait to get started," said **Annie Luján**.

Annie Luján is a Costa Rican-Canadian actor, clown and theatre creator with a passion for creating immersive work, born and raised in Toronto. After graduating from Concordia University's Theatre Performance BFA, she studied Commedia Dell'Arte in Italy with Teatro Arscmica. Annie has received the Canada Council for the Arts: Research and Creation grant and the Why Not Theatre Recommender grant to study, devise and create clown work with her troupe: The Raccoons, under the direction of Ken Hall.

Most recently, she served as Dramaturge for the immersive production of A Grimm Night by Transcendence Theatre and created a duo clown show called Shop L'Occult that was performed to passersby in a storefront window in Parkdale.

SHAQUILLE POTTINGER – ACTOR

“I'm excited to fail in front of my peers and be all the better for it, because I know I'll have a support system invested in helping me actualize the best version of myself. I hope to learn the intricacies of constructing professional theatre, and birthing my ideas into reality,” said **Shaquille Pottinger**.

Shaquille is an actor who hails from many places across this vast continent, but distinctly caught the acting bug in Barrie, Ontario. His mother would like you to know he is a Theatre and Drama Studies graduate from the University of Toronto and Sheridan College.

Now a denizen of Toronto, Shaquille does his best to stay busy, appearing in various theatre productions, workshops, short films, and a familiar commercial or two. When he isn't acting, Shaquille also enjoys writing, singing, and daydreaming about food.

KIANA WOO – ACTOR

“I am thrilled to have the opportunity to dedicate my time and focus to improving my craft, and to have the chance to work and create with an ensemble. I hope I will be able to take the skills I learn with the Academy and integrate them into all aspects of my artistic practice, and hopefully find new ways to tell the stories that I always longed to see growing up,” said **Kiana Woo**.

Kiana Woo is a Chinese-Canadian actor, mover and creator with a special love for clown, physical theatre, and classical works. She was born in Richardson, Texas and raised in Calgary, Alberta alongside her amazing younger brother by her two incredible parents. Growing up in a household where she was encouraged to explore her passions allowed Kiana to find her joy for the arts at a young age. She attained her BFA in Acting from the University of Alberta and has since had the privilege of working across Canada, spending time in Edmonton, Calgary and Toronto.

Most recently, she created her first long form solo clown piece, which was an exciting and thrilling new challenge. In her free time, she enjoys running, knitting and crochet, and playing the ukulele. She sends love to her incredibly supportive friends and family, who have stuck by her through every step of her artistic journey. Selected credits include: The Fiancée (Citadel Theatre), Alice in Wonderland (Guild Festival Theatre), Cymbeline (Shakespeare Bash'd), E-Day (Serial Collective/Theatre Network), That's Danger! (Alberta Workers Health Centre), The Two Gentlemen of Verona (Theatre Calgary/Shakespeare by the Bow), Doll House, The Lower Depths, and The School for Scandal (Studio Theatre).

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Located in its multi-venue home, the Young Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto's Distillery Historic District, Soulpepper is Toronto's largest not-for-profit theatre company. Founded and guided by artists, Soulpepper has an integrated mission which includes: industry-leading youth and community outreach initiatives; artist training and mentorship programs; and a year-round diverse repertory season which is grounded in the classics and committed to the creation of new works, new forms, and innovative practices.

The artists and staff of Soulpepper and the Young Centre for the Performing Arts acknowledge the original caretakers and storytellers of the land on which we are situated – the Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, and the Anishanabek First Nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit. We commit to honouring and celebrating their past, present and future. Soulpepper believes people have a right to express their individuality, to experience creative freedom, to feel safe at all times, and to be treated with dignity and respect.

MEDIA RELEASE



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Soulpepper is pleased to recognize the donors of transformational gifts to its Creative Capital Campaign: The Slight Family; The Government of Ontario; and Kevin and Roger Garland.

Support for the Soulpepper Academy is provided by the RBC Emerging Artists Project, Sylvia Soyka and the Kingfisher Foundation. The Academy has also been made possible in part by the Government of Canada through the Canada Arts Training Fund.

Soulpepper is grateful for additional major support from Scotia Wealth and The Catherine and Maxwell Meighen Foundation; and additional lead support from: CIBC; the TD Ready Commitment; Sun Life; BMO Financial Group; Canada Life; and Diane Blake & Stephen Smith.

Support on our Stages comes from: The Slight Family Foundation as Music Program Sponsor including for *The Golden Record* and the complement of Slight Music Residents; Middlefield Group as Production Sponsor for *The Golden Record*; the Soulpepper Board of Directors for *Pipeline*; Diane Blake and Stephen Smith for *Where The Blood Mixes*; Women Centre Stage and Sylvia Soyka for *Queen Goneril*; and Polar Asset Management Partners for *King Lear*.

Tickets are available at soulpepper.ca. All ticket prices include a Young Centre facility fee, service charge and HST. Pricing is subject to change.

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For more information please contact:

Milusha Copas, Media & Communications Officer, Soulpepper: media@soulpepper.ca

Media Gallery:

<https://www.soulpepper.ca/press/generalresources/2022-academy>

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