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USC FACULTY COLLABORATE ON *LETTERS FROM ZORA*, A NEW PLAY TO BE PRESENTED AT THE PASADENA PLAYHOUSE ON AUGUST 15-18, 2013

Production features music by Ronald McCurdy of the USC Thornton School of Music, an original script by Gabrielle Pina of the USC Dornsife College, and stage direction by Anita Dashiell-Sparks of the USC School of Dramatic Arts

Letters from Zora is a one-woman play, featuring star of stage, screen and television Vanessa Bell Calloway

(Los Angeles, CA) – When three USC faculty members agreed to share a conference stage in 2012, it turned out to be so much more than a typical academic panel. It became the catalyst for a lasting collaboration – and an opportunity to more fully celebrate the life of legend Zora Neale Hurston, in a new play opening August 15 at the Pasadena Playhouse.

The one-woman play, *Letters from Zora*, features music by **Ronald C. McCurdy**, Professor of Jazz Studies at the USC Thornton School of Music; a script by playwright **Gabrielle Pina**, lecturer at the USC Dornsife College; and state direction from **Anita Dashiell-Sparks**, assistant professor of theatre practice at the USC School of Dramatic Arts.

The trio was initially brought together in a public forum sponsored by USC Visions and Voices – the Arts and Humanities Initiative, to speak about Hurston and the impact of her life during the Harlem Renaissance as a legendary author, playwright and anthropologist. The event ignited a spark among the artists, and a new play was born using Hurston’s letters as a platform and turning her powerful voice into an extraordinary story of the African American experience in the 1920’s.

Letters from Zora will be presented at the Pasadena Playhouse August 15-18, 2013 starring stage, screen and television actress **Vanessa Bell Calloway**, the recipient of Eight NAACP Image Award nominations. Calloway is best known for her roles in the Box office smashes *Coming to America* with Eddie Murphy, and *What's Love Got to Do With It* starring opposite Angela Bassett and Laurence Fishburne,

“*Letters from Zora* showcases a life that was both filled with artistic and literary triumphs and stagnated by abject poverty and self- doubt. Her prose, her life, her distinctive array friends and foes, as well as her unique view of a jazz age world permeate this work,” Pina said.

Pina first viewed the letters of Zora Neale Hurston on a visit the California African American Museum, and was moved by the sight of words in Hurston’s personal manuscripts. When she shared this with McCurdy, “I immediately realized that this was a very powerful story that needed to be told,” said McCurdy, who teaches a course titled, *The Music of Black Americans* at the USC Thornton School of Music. The class focuses on the musicians, dancers and poets of the Harlem Renaissance, including Hurston, Langston Hughes, WEB DuBois and Richard Wright, among others.

“Pina and I had many conversations on how to present *Letters From Zora* knowing our challenge was to expose the tragedy and triumphs of a life that was lived to the fullest rather than present simply a history lesson,” McCurdy said. “This collaboration with Pina has also allowed me to transform my scholarship into performance art.”

Letters from Zora offers a series of dramatic vignettes incorporating theater, musical ensemble and videography, “a multimedia presentation . . . that chronicles the complex and prolific life of Zora Neale Hurston,” Pina said. The production explores, analyzes and dramatizes approximately fifteen letters written by Hurston and selected excerpts from her impressive body of work.

For more information about *Letters from Zora*, please visit www.pasadenaplayhouse.org.

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Dr. Ronald C. McCurdy is Professor of Music in the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California (USC) where he served as chair of the jazz department for six years (2002-2008). Prior to his appointment at USC he served as Director of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz at USC. He has served as Professor of Music and chair of the Afro-African American Studies Department and served as Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Minnesota. Dr. McCurdy is in demand as a guest clinician, soloist, speaker, director of honor Jazz Ensembles and Choirs throughout the United States, Canada, Europe and South Africa. He has directed All State Jazz Ensembles in New York, Texas, Arizona, Vermont, Nebraska, Ohio, Nevada, Illinois, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Florida, among others.

Dr. McCurdy’s latest CD *April In Paris* features his new vocal, funk band called the Ron McCurdy Collective. His first CD, *Once Again for the First Time* on the INNOVA label enjoyed

critical acclaim as well. He is co-author of a vocal jazz improvisation series titled *Approaching the Standards*, published by Warner Bros. Dr. McCurdy authored, *Meet the Great Jazz Legends* published by Alfred Publishing Co. In 2008 he premiered the orchestral version of *The Langston Hughes Project, Ask Your Mama: 12 Mood for Jazz* with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra with rapper and television actor, Ice-T. The multimedia presentation features jazz quartet, spoken-word and images from the Harlem Renaissance.

Dr. McCurdy is a consultant to the Grammy Foundation educational programs including serving as director of the National Grammy Vocal Jazz Ensemble. A few of the guest artists he has worked with include Joe Williams, Rosemary Clooney, Leslie Uggams, Arturo Sandoval, Diane Schuur, Ramsey Lewis, Mercer Ellington, Dr. Billy Taylor, Maynard Ferguson, Lionel Hampton, and Dianne Reeves. Dr. McCurdy is a performing artist for the [Yamaha International Corporation](http://www.yamaha.com). <http://www.ronmccurdy.com>

Gabrielle Pina is the winner of the 2002 Pacificus Foundation Literary Prize for achievement in short fiction. Ms. Pina was viewed as “the writer to look out for” when she published the highly acclaimed short story *Uncommon Revelations* for the ESI Anthology, recently re-released by Amazon Shorts. That year also featured the birth of her thesis project, Bliss into her first novel, which culminated in a three-book deal with Random House and a national book tour. Pina’s long awaited sophomore novel, *Chasing Sopheia* was released in October 2006 and has become a book club favorite.

Pina is a faculty member at the University of Southern California’s Master of Professional Writing Program, where she also received a Master of Arts degree, and an adjunct English professor at Pasadena City College where she developed innovative curriculum that addressed the matriculation rate of African American students on college campuses.

Anita Dashiell-Sparks is a graduate of the prestigious New York University's Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Acting Program. She is a Maryland Distinguished Scholar who pursued undergraduate work at the University of Maryland at College Park earning a degree in theatre. As an actor based in New York and Los Angeles, she has graced the stage on Broadway in *Night Must Fall* starring Matthew Broderick and *The Sunshine Boys* starring Tony Randall and Jack Klugman. She has also appeared in numerous off-Broadway and regional theatre productions, including *House of Bernada Alba* with Chita Rivera at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Her recent television appearances include "Huff," "Friends," "The West Wing," "The Division" and the Hallmark film "McBride: The Doctor Is Out."

In support of her community service as a performing artist, she was awarded a 1998-1999 Fox Foundation Grant to mount a tour of her solo performance piece entitled "Resurrection" for youth and community organizations in New York City. Ms. Dashiell-Sparks is the founder and director of Building Bridges: Communication, Expression, Empowerment Theatre Arts Program which teaches self-expression, self-presentation, and self-expression to at risk youth. Her program is supported by a University Neighborhood Outreach Grant at USC.

As an arts educator of theatre and dance, Ms. Dashiell-Sparks has taught and developed arts and arts therapy curriculum for: the Dream Yard Drama Projects in both New York and L.A.; The Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival; Vineyard Theatre; TADA! Theatre and Dance;

and most recently for the National Foundation for the Emotionally Handicapped/Penny Lane here in Los Angeles.

Vanessa Bell Calloway has also starred in films, *Biker Boyz*, *Love Don't Cost A Thing*, *Daylight*, *The Inkwell*, *Crimson Tide*, *The Brothers*, *Cheaper By The Dozen*, *Lakeview Terrace* and voiced the lead female role in the animated feature *Bebe's Kids*. Her television films include: *A Private Affair*, *Red Sneakers*, *Love Song*, *Memphis*, *The Cherokee Kid*, *America's Dream: The Boy Who Painted Christ Black*, and *The Temptations*, which earned her an NAACP Image Award nomination.

Calloway is a veteran of the stage. She has starred in *Seven Guitars* at The August Wilson 20th Century Theater Festival held at The Kennedy Center, and in the Los Angeles production of *The Piano Lesson*. She brought the house down in *The Divorce* written by Donald B. Welch, and starred in the LA stage production of *Crowns* at The Ebony Repertory Theater and The Pasadena Playhouse.

About Visions and Voices – The Arts and Humanities Initiative

Visions and Voices is a university-wide arts and humanities initiative that is unparalleled in higher education. Established in fall 2006 by President C. L. Max Nikias during his tenure as provost, Visions and Voices fulfills the goals set forth in USC's strategic plan; communicates USC's core values to students; and affirms the human spirit. Highlighting USC's excellence in the arts and humanities, the initiative provides an inspiring and provocative experience for all USC students, regardless of their major or class level, and challenges them to expand their perspectives and become world-class citizens who will eagerly make a positive impact throughout the world.

Emphasizing the university's commitment to interdisciplinary approaches, the initiative features a spectacular array of events conceived and organized by faculty and schools throughout the university. With presentations by critically acclaimed artists and distinguished speakers, the series features theatrical productions, music and dance performances, film screenings, lectures and workshops. In addition to the events held on the University Park and Health Sciences campuses, students are also offered a variety of opportunities to experience Los Angeles's dynamic cultural landscape at events throughout the city. Every Visions and Voices program invites students to dialogue and engage with artists, writers, professors and special guests. These interactions provide a dynamic experience of the arts and humanities and encourage active exploration of USC's core values, including freedom of inquiry, respect for diversity, commitment to service, entrepreneurial spirit, informed risk-taking, ethical conduct and the search for truth. This approach to the arts and humanities can make every future scientist a better scientist, every future lawyer a better lawyer, every future business professional a better business professional and every future artist a better artist, contributing to a better society as a whole.

About the USC Thornton School of Music:

The USC Thornton School of Music brings together a stellar faculty chosen from a broad spectrum of the music profession and gifted students from around the globe. Founded in 1884 and today the oldest continually operating cultural institution in Los Angeles, the Thornton School consistently ranks among the nation's top music schools and conservatories.

By blending the rigors of a traditional conservatory-style education with the benefits of a leading research university, USC Thornton offers an impressive range of performance opportunities and a curriculum designed to prepare students for successful careers in the 21st century. The Thornton School presents more than 500 concerts each year and is the only music school with a weekly radio broadcast in a major media market featuring student performances.

Located in the heart of Los Angeles, USC Thornton offers students every advantage of studying, performing, and networking in the world's most vibrant music industry hub. Every week, our students engage with leading professionals in all aspects of the music, recording, and entertainment industries, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, LA Opera, Los Angeles Master Chorale, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, the Grammy Foundation®, and The Recording Academy®. Our students also are a constant presence in local classrooms, reaching out to the next generation of musicians. For more information please visit www.usc.edu/music or call (213) 740-3233.