



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hi-ARTS Names Aaron L. McKinney as Its New Executive Director

The appointment comes as the nonprofit, formerly the Hip-Hop Theater Festival, celebrates its 20th anniversary with grant from the Howard Gilman Foundation to establish Hi-ARTS' first-ever operating reserve

NEW YORK (July 19, 2021) — The Board of Directors of Hi-ARTS — an urban arts incubator that has helped develop acclaimed works of art from creators including Dominique Morisseau, Radha Blank, Alex Alphaaroh and Ebony Noelle Golden — announced today the appointment of **Aaron L. McKinney** as executive director. McKinney is the organization's third executive director, and brings more than two decades of experience in the arts sector including positions at world-renowned institutions such as 651 ARTS, the Stella Adler Studio of Acting and Sankofa.org. McKinney has been serving as Interim Executive Director since April when former Executive Director **Dr. Raymond Codrington** assumed the role of president and CEO of Weeksville Heritage Center.

McKinney, born on the land of the Cherokee people (Greenville, SC), obtained his Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Performance from Florida A&M University and Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Management from California Institute of the Arts. He has held various management positions throughout his career from small community theaters including Tallahassee Little Theatre in Florida to large regional theaters like Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles. McKinney's professional leadership in performing arts and producing has been aimed at centering the dialogue that has always existed between the arts and social justice activism, highlighting how the intersection of these worlds serves as a vessel for addressing some of our most pressing social issues. Among the projects he has produced are the Off-Broadway debut of Theatre Evolution's *The Contract*, a drama addressing the intersection of spirituality and sexuality, and the development phase of the musical *Lunatic Sun* about the effects of consumerism and gentrification. He served as the inaugural producer in residence of #LoveHustle, an artist-led performance and dialogue series that captures the tensions of pursuing one's dreams as an artist. Under his guidance as General Manager since October 2016, Hi-ARTS has increased its annual operating budget by more than \$200,000, co-produced Liza Jessie Peterson's *The Peculiar Patriot* and Alex Alphaaroh's *WET: A DACAmended Journey* and cultivated more than 250 artists.

The appointment comes at an exciting time for Hi-ARTS, which was founded as the Hip-Hop Theater Festival in 2000 by **Kamilah Forbes, Danny Hoch** and **Clyde Valentin**. As the nonprofit celebrates its 20th anniversary, it has remained resilient and has even grown during a world-changing pandemic that has disproportionately impacted its community of Black artists and artists of color and neighbors in East Harlem, where Hi-ARTS is based. To accommodate its growing staff and to usher in new opportunities for artists to create and present work, Hi-ARTS is moving into a larger space at its longtime home, El Barrio's Artspace PS109, later this year.

Hi-ARTS has also received \$60,000 in seed funding from the **Howard Gilman Foundation** to establish Hi-ARTS' first-ever operating reserve to proof the organization against unanticipated

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losses in funding or one-time unforeseen expenses, which most arts organizations experienced in 2020. This investment in long-term sustainability is a major milestone, particularly for an institution that has always had Black leadership, when most private funding supports white-led arts institutions with multimillion-dollar budgets.

“We are thrilled to officially welcome Aaron L. McKinney as our executive director. He has a vision to deepen and expand artist relationships, as well as build local and national partnerships, to take Hi-ARTS to the next level,” said Hi-ARTS Board Chair **Constance Mortell**. “I also want to thank the Howard Gilman Foundation, Ford Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone Development Corporation for their exceptional support over the years.”

Hi-ARTS provides a safe space for artists to develop their work. It is the only institution in New York City, and one of the few in the country, exclusively dedicated to supporting and developing Hip-Hop and the urban aesthetic.

“I’m grateful to the Board of Directors for this opportunity, and I look forward to building on the strong foundation set by Kamilah Forbes, Danny Hoch, Clyde Valentin and Raymond Codrington,” said McKinney. “Together with our artists and community, I will work to strengthen the Hi-ARTS brand and secure its legacy for the next 20 years and beyond.”

As live theater and performance return in New York City, Hi-ARTS will cautiously bring back in-person audiences in 2021 with such artists as **LINDALA, Alexander Lambie, Tanika I. Williams, Sydnie L. Mosley, Sissi Liu and Kirya Traber**.

About Hi-ARTS:

Hi-ARTS is a leading cultural hub within the urban arts movement. Through artistic development residencies, vibrant multidisciplinary creative programming and civic engagement opportunities, Hi-ARTS empowers artists to develop bold new work while creating a positive, lasting impact on the community. For more than 20 years, Hi-ARTS has provided unique development opportunities to artists from historically marginalized groups, primarily people of color, always placing issues of equity and social justice at the forefront. To date, Hi-ARTS has supported works by more than 1,000 emerging and acclaimed artists, including The Illustrious Blacks, Kristoffer Diaz, Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Nona Hendryx and Zoey Martinson. [@hiartsnyc](http://www.hi-artsnyc.org)

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