

PLAYBILL

THE HOWARD PLAYERS PRESENT...

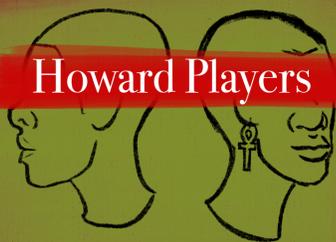
21 Strings

A RHYME

a new play by
NSangou Njikam

March 12-13, 20-21 | 2021

Howard Players



21 Strings

a digital world premiere

March 12-13, 20-21 | 2021

The Howard Players' production of *21 Strings* runs for approximately 90 minutes with no intermission.

Covid-19 Note

The creation, development, and execution of this process was entirely remote in adherence with social distancing protocols due to the COVID-19 virus.

PRODUCERS

Lo Williams

Autumn Angelettie

ASSOCIATE

PRODUCER

Amberrain Andrews

EXECUTIVE

PRODUCER

Friends of Theatre and Dance
at Howard University



Howard Players

21 Strings

Creative Team

Playwright NSangou Njikam

Director Jaucqir LaFond

Assistant Director Amberrain Andrews

Dramaturg Mya Hunter

Stage Manager Jazmyn Roberson

Assistant Stage Manager Mesgana Solomon

Technical Director Jaida Gillespie

Editing Team Jazmyn Roberson

Jaida Gillespie

Sajada Heard

Set Designer Sajada Heard

Sound Designers Daks McClettie II

Sajada Heard

Composer Elijah Brittingham

Costume Designer Alexandria Morgan

Lighting Designer Donte' Bynum

About the Play

Mali's running out of ideas. After organizing a peaceful protest at the Harlem Black Lives Matter mural, an unidentified person threw a Molotov cocktail into the crowd, inciting fights, shootings, and a riot. Mali escaped to the 116th street train station, tired, nearly shot, and feeling defeated. Nearby, a Kora Player plays peacefully. But as Mali's anger intensifies, so does the music, sending Mali into some altered state of consciousness.

Mali regains her senses, only to find herself no longer at the train station, but what seems to be an alternate reality. With her are four other individuals, all of whom are unsure how they arrived. Now, Mali and these four strangers must work together, not just to return to their realities...but to go back with the key to helping their people...and their worlds.

Please be advised *21 Strings* includes

Mature Content such as:

Explicit language

Violence

Racism

Mention of Suicide

Mention of Death

A Note from the Playwright

“This is How it should be done.”

In the summer of 2020, Amberrain Andrews reached out to me asking if I'd written any plays in the genre of afrofuturism. The Howard Players were looking for plays for their mainstage production. I said, “no, but I'll write you one.” After a series of conversations with members of the Howard Players, I sat down and began to write what would become *21 Strings*. Why do this? I think of a line from Eric B. & Rakim's “I Know You Got Soul.” The line goes “this is how it should be done/'cause this style, is identical to none.”

We are Howard Players. Our legacy is to make work that doesn't resemble everyone else's. We are the ones who delve deep into our own cultural traditions and use those lessons to build new work that both honors the past and envisions the future. You need no other examples than works that first began in ETS. Plays like *Rhymed Deferred* by Kamilah Forbes, *Bootleg Blues* by J. Kyle Manzay, *Hieroglyphic Graffiti* by Chadwick Boseman. These works and others are the soil from which *21 Strings* grows. In this play are resonances of such Ancestors as Dr. Sherrill Berryman Johnson, Baba Djimo Kouyate, Mike Malone, Reggie Ray. Living teachers of mine like Professors Sybil Roberts-Williams, Tony Starnes, Kim Bey. And friends like Kamilah, like Logan Coles, like Chad...who continues to speak to me even now from the Divine realm with phrases he'd say to me over and over and over again. “Bruh...when you do... what you do... how you do...then it's done. And the rest just comes.”

I pray I am honoring the lessons I've learned with this play. I pray my teachers will recognize I have absorbed at least some of their wisdom and I pray this contributes to the kind of change we need in theatre and with our people right now. And I thank the Howard Players for welcoming me back home to give to a new generation that must continue the Legacy. This is how it should be done. We are Bison...and our style is identical to none. Play on, Players.

Ifalaje NSangou Njikam

A Note from the Dramaturg

“Our skin is the universe. Dark Matter. Strongest of any kind.”

- Malidoma

In the world premiere of *21 Strings* by NSangou Njikam, we are taken on an exploration of the significance of Blackness through a journey of transformation and understanding. In this piece, we explore the questions that we oftentimes face in our society as Black individuals: How do we navigate through a world that oppresses us? How do we pave the way to success, in spite of the boundaries that are imposed upon us simply because of the color of our skin? How do we learn from our experiences and apply them to achieve our goals?

Set in present day, *21 Strings* follows Mali Kamau Jennings as she faces the reality of a young Black activist fueled by the Black Lives Matter movement. She struggles with determining the next steps that must be taken to cultivate the world she wants to see. In this, she is exposed to others much like her, while being challenged to take on different paths that might aid her in her journey.

Drawing upon his own background in Yoruba Spirituality, Njikam incorporates the principles of Ifa to assist these characters in finding the answers to their questions. This piece introduces Poppa, the Orisa Esu, who intervenes as a guide and catalyst of change through a series of metaphors, tricks, and riddles.

In *21 Strings*, the Kora is representative of the entire system of Ifa between Olorun (the Divine Creator), the Orisa (messengers of Olorun), the Ancestors, Egbe (spiritual companions), and Ori (inner self). In playing the Kora, every string is used in the telling of the story; if one string is out of alignment, the whole story is out of alignment.



Pictured: Kora Instrument, Encyclopedia Britannica

A Note from the Dramaturg

cont.

The Kora is a string instrument native to the Malinke, a West African people occupying parts of Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Senegal, The Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau. It is composed of 21 strings, gourd, leather, and wood. The Kora is used in storytelling, to accompany a spoken or sung story about a person or family. In various traditions, the 21 strings of the Kora represent a variety of things:

In one tradition,

7 to bring the past to life.
7 to sound the moments of the present.
7 that will call the future.”

In another,

7 strings remain for the mother,
7 strings for the father,
7 strings for the child.

Also throughout the course of the play, you may take note of the heavy Hip Hop and spoken word influences in choices revolving language, delivery, and cadence. As Black people, we carry the natural ability of storytelling stemming from ancestral traditions founded in Africa. For example, when one is retelling a lived experience, have you ever noticed how often they may use their entire body to recreate a specific situation? Or have you ever heard of the phrase “You know what I mean?” or “You feel me?” as an effort to check back in with the audience? Black people are, and have always been provided with the God-given ability to share stories for others to experience through them.

As we are faced with the constant consumption of crimes and acts of violence against Black bodies, I find that it is so important to be reminded of the strength and resilience that remains ingrained in our DNA, our melanin. We always have the answers within us, and we are supported by our ancestors and the presence of God through us.

Asè.

Mya Hunter, Dramaturg

A SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR SPONSOR

FRIENDS OF THEATRE AND DANCE AT HOWARD UNIVERSITY

for their generous grant to the Howard Players to create 21 Strings.



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A Note from the Director

The summer heat of 2020 came from boiling blood. It was the heat of riots, protests, marches, and mourning. The mourning of the diaspora. The mourning of loved ones. The mourning of old ways before the world stood still. It was the mourning of a community for the death of another. *21 Strings* turns mourning into action and turns heat into explosiveness.

21 Strings is not about a singular Black death. It is about the imbricate nature that death has to Black life. Death at the hands of police violence and white supremacy reminds us that we, as Black people, live in a world actively opposed to our existence. The agitation of lockdown and the political tension of a tumultuous election year heightened the oft-felt hopelessness that comes because of the constant consumption of violence against our communities. However, there are two reactions to this hopelessness. People either act in the face of oppression or succumb to the exhaustion of political movements. This summer, I found myself undulating between the two responses.

I have never considered myself a very politically active person, but ever since I arrived at Howard University, I have tried to define my politics more. Going from a primarily conservative environment to a campus with a progressive-leaning climate rapidly forced me to confront and determine what I believe. I am still defining a lot of that for myself, but I can say, without a doubt, that I believe in at least one thing: Myself. This is not a selfish revelation or coming from a place of arrogance (at least not all the time), but this belief in myself is a proclamation that I am responsible for myself. No one else is steering this vessel.

Such a revelation is bound to happen when the value of your life is in constant debate. The increased tension of 2020 cranked up this burning question in both my mind and the public consciousness. Where do we go from here?

A Note from the Director

cont.

How do we, as Black people, reconcile with the fact that nothing seems to be working? For every different approach to confronting injustice comes another way that we face suppression. It is this realization that kept me in a back-and-forth between political engagement and political apathy. Our hero, Mali Jennings, is faced with the same dilemma.

I find comfort in Mali Jennings because she has no other choice but to act on this dilemma. She is catapulted into a journey of external and internal discovery that brings her face to face with the best and worst parts of herself, something that the pandemic has made me do as well. In this journey, Poppa leads Mali to an incredibly important discovery: change is not a gift.

Change is not something to be waited on or a tangible thing to ask for. Change is action. Not just awareness. Not just protests. Not just reflections. Action. And it is where the action begins that this piece encourages us to consider. As abolition became one of the many prominent conversations last summer, I began my research on the violent institution that is the American prison system. The text that started my journey was *Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Dr. Angela Davis. Davis concludes the book by recalling Linda and Peter Biehl and their decision to forgive the murderers of their daughter. She describes how the Biehls were motivated by their desire for restorative justice and a sense of radical love. I believe that the quest for radical love is essential to answering the great question of how to progress, and we must act out of love for our communities. However, it is also crucial that we be motivated by the love we have for ourselves. Once we embrace our individuality and accept every aspect that comprises our being, then and only then can we deal with the heat.

Jaucqir LaFond, Director

A Note from the Producers

The Howard Players Board elected to produce a new, imaginative work that could debut on a virtual stage as our annual Mainstage Production. Never before premiered, this piece was generously gifted to our organization by our very own Howard alumnus and former Howard Players President, NSangou Njikam. His loyalty to and passion for the Howard Players is unlike any other, and his active role in the process was instrumental in developing the work you will see today. Words cannot express our gratitude for him.

The provoking message of this play is a response to the increasing political and racial tensions in our society, and directly correlates to our mission to cultivate art for social change. The uprisings of Summer 2020 informed our decision to move forward with a stimulating, Afrocentric piece with hopes to open conversation steered toward answering the pervasive question, where do we go from here? Presenting 5 different approaches to Black life set in alternate realities, *21 Strings* dares its audience to promote the freedom for scope of thought, another pillar of the Howard Players organization in the 2020-2021 Season.

Over a period of 4 months, *21 Strings* has come to life. Through improvisational recording sessions on Bandlab, workshops on African cosmology, collapsing green screens, and intense rap battles over Zoom, our team has undergone a production experience like no other. It has been brought to you today through the great combined efforts of our General Body Members, the Howard Players Executive Board, the *21 Strings* Creative Team, and our *incredible* team of Editors supporting our pursuit of high-quality theatre in a virtual world.

The Howard Players especially thanks the Friends of Theatre and Dance at Howard University for their generous sponsorship, and sincerely hopes you enjoy the show!



Lo Williams



Autumn Angelettie

CREATIVE TEAM



NSangou Njikam, he/him (Playwright)

is an actor and playwright originally from Baltimore, MD. NSangou is the author of *Syncing Ink* (Alley Theatre/Flea Theater/Joe's Pub), *21 Strings, When We Left Part 1, Re:Definition* (Hip Hop Theatre Festival, directed by Chadwick Boseman), *I.D.* (Penn State University) and is one of the playwrights for *Hands Up: 7 Plays; 7 Testimonials*. Recently NSangou partnered with Harlem Stage to curate *The Renaissance EP: A Theatrical Mixtape*, a series of Hip Hop radio plays celebrating the centennial of the Harlem Renaissance. As an actor, NSangou's credits include *Syncing Ink, Re:Definition* (LaMama Theater), *Henry V* (Classical Theatre of Harlem), *Hands Up: 7 Plays; 7 Testimonials* (National Black Theatre), and *Ameriville* as a member of UNIVERSES. NSangou has also collaborated with and wrote for Grammy-award winning artist Common on his *Let Love* album tour, *Bluebird Memories* for Audible.com, the 2020 NBA All-Star Game Opening Performance, and the new Audible series *Mindpower Mixtape*. His play *I.D.*, commissioned by Penn State University, received its premiere at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa. NSangou is a member of the 2015 Emerging Writers Group at the Public Theater. He received his BFA in Acting from Howard University. In 2015, after tracing his African Ancestry to the Tikar people of Cameroon, he returned home and received the name NSangou from King Ibrahim Mbombo Njoya, 19th king of the Bamum kingdom.



Jaucqir LaFond, he/they (Director)

is a third year acting major and classical voice minor from Atlanta, Georgia. Jaucqir is thrilled to make their full-length directing debut with *The Howard Players!* You can find them on Instagram @jaucqir and in Young Playwrights' Theatre's upcoming production of *Silence is Violence: The Future of the Field*.



Amberrain Andrews, she/they (Assistant Director)

is a Sophomore Acting Major pursuing a career in Acting and Directing. This is their first time on the other side of the table as Assistant Director of *21 Strings!* Some of Amberrain's other credits include performing Off-Broadway on shows *Winnifred and Myrtle Go to High School, Foreign Bodies*, and *The Rebellious Rhymes of J Nice*.

CREATIVE TEAM



Mya Hunter, she/her (Dramaturg)

is a sophomore Musical Theatre major from Houston, TX. This is her first production with the Howard Players and she has learned so much throughout her experience. Mya would like to acknowledge the creative team for everything they've put into this show. She extends her love and appreciation to her friends and family for their constant support.



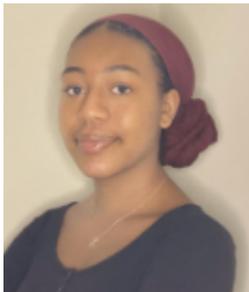
Jazmyn Roberson, she/her (Stage Manager/Editor)

is a sophomore Acting major from Southwest Philadelphia. She is stage managing for the first time! Jazmyn is most excited to see her classmates perform and looks forward to participating in more HP productions. Jazmyn enjoys journaling, dancing, singing (loudly), and spending time with her family at home.



Mesgana Solomon, she/her (Assistant Stage Manager)

is a sophomore IDS: Bioethics major. She is the Assistant Stage Manager for *21 Strings* and has been a member of the Howard Players since she was a freshman. She has had a love for theater since childhood and is very excited to be a part of the Howard Players' amazing production.



Jaida Gillespie, she/her (Technical Director/Editor)

is a freshman Acting major from Chadds Ford, PA by way of South Africa. This is her first time being on a production team. She enjoys collaborating with other members of the Howard Players and learning what it takes to run a play. Jaida enjoys spending time with friends, watching tv & film, and exploring new things.



Sajada Heard, she/her (Editor/Set Designer/Sound Designer)

is a freshman Acting major from Miami, FL. This is her second production with the Howard Players, following the 8x10 Play Festival. She looks forward to working with them again in the future. In her free time, Sajada enjoys recording her podcast, baking, and reading poetry.

CREATIVE TEAM



Daks McClettie II, he/him (Sound Designer)

is a Junior Acting Major from Charlotte, North Carolina. This is his first time sound designing and he is excited to help with the show. He also enjoys making music, acting, and playwriting.



Elijah Brittingham, he/him (Composer)

is a sophomore marketing major from Milwaukee, WI. He is working as a sound designer and composer for HP for the first time. He is really excited to be part of this HP production and can't wait to see the end result. Elijah enjoys producing music, spending time with friends and family, and snowboarding.



Alexandria Morgan, she/her (Costume Designer)

is a junior TV and Film major and a French Minor from Chicago, Illinois who serves as the Costume Designer for *21 Strings!*



Donte' Bynum, he/him (Lighting Designer)

is junior Acting Major, Howard '22. This is his third time participating in a Howard Players MainStage production. He wants to thank God for guiding him on this path, and his loved ones for supporting him unconditionally.

CAST



Autumn Angelettie, she/her (Poppa) is an actor, director, playwright, and producer from Greater Philadelphia in her third year studying Theatre Arts.

Recent credits: *100% All That* (Story District), *Silence Is Violence: The Future of the Field* (Young Playwrights' Theater), *Klytmnestra: An Epic Slam Poem* (Theater Alliance). She proudly serves as the President of the Howard Players.



Lyric Burnett, she/her (Malinda) is a sophomore Legal Communications major, Theatre Arts minor from Raleigh, NC. This is her

first time performing in a Howard Players MainStage Production and she is looking forward to sharing this amazing play with everyone. When not performing, Lyric enjoys writing poetry, singing, and rehearsing dramatic monologues.



Colonel-Joshua Higgins, he/him (Maleek) is a sophomore Honors Marketing Major from Smithfield, VA by way of Cincinnati, Ohio. At

Howard, he serves as an involved student throughout campus. He is a self-taught spoken word artist and poet, and is currently in the process of writing and publishing his first anthology.



Amiah McGinty, she/her (Mali) is a sophomore Acting major and Psychology minor from Augusta, Georgia. Her freshman year, she played

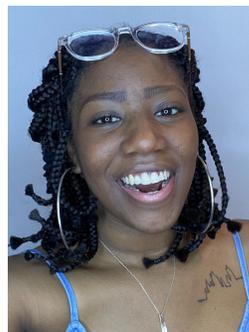
Felicité in the Howard Players' production of *Children of Killers* and has recently been in "Broadview," a devised project with Studio Theatre in residency at Howard University. Amiah is overjoyed to play Mali in the debut of *21 Strings*.



Rashad Davis, he/him (Malidoma)

is a sophomore acting major from Huntley, IL by way of Upper Marlboro, MD. *21 Strings* is his second

production with the Howard Players. Rashad enjoys making music and released his debut album, *STATIC* in 2020. He thanks his family and friends for their undying support and the Howard Players for allowing him to originate this role.



Lo Williams, she/her (Malika)

is an actor, director, poet and pen enthusiast from Los Angeles, CA. She is a junior Acting major at Howard and humbly

serves as the Howard Players Vice President. Recent credits include: *Miranda Family Fellows Showcase* (Virtual Premiere), *REP US ALL* (Rorshach Theatre), and *Daydream* (Kennedy Center).

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SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To **Friends of Theatre and Dance at Howard University** for sponsoring the production of *21 Strings* with a generous grant. Their unwavering faith in the Howard Players allows us to continue creating without limits in order to make our ambitious dreams a reality.

To **Professor Ricky Ramón** for serving as the Howard Players advisor. His unremitting dedication to the organization has continuously ensured our success. We thank him for every effort he has made for us.

To **Dr. Ofosuwa Abiola**, the Department of Theatre Arts Chair, for supporting us as we continue this growing legacy into the 2020-2021 Academic Year.

To our wonderful Howard Players alumna, **Goldie Patrick**, who graciously served as the host of our March 13 Post-Show Conversation.

To **Adesola Osakalumi**, for his willingness to educate the Howard Players on the principles of hip hop theatre and the Ifa divination system in order to nourish the soul of the show.

To **NSangou Njikam**, for his incomparable gifts to the Howard Players this year, including his invaluable help with 8x10, and especially his exceptional dedication to the journey of producing a virtual World Premiere alongside us.

And last, but never least, thank you to...**YOU!** Without the patronage of people like you, these shows would not be possible. Your presence serves as an encouragement and reminder to these creators that their work has worth. So, to all we say:

THANK YOU!

SPECIAL CREDITS

Special Credits Note

Some artistic elements of the *21 Strings* digital premiere were sourced from third party artists. Those artists are credited below.

Green Screen Effects

Clean Star Field

Motion Backgrounds by: "#AAvfx"

<https://www.youtube.com/dvdangor2011>

Multi-Color Galaxy

Motion Backgrounds by: "#AAvfx"

<https://www.youtube.com/dvdangor2011>

Bright Shining Stars in Night Sky and Milky Way Galaxy Time Lapse 4K UHD
60fps 1 Hour Video Loop by IncrediVFX <https://www.youtube.com/c/IncrediVFX>

Manhattan, NY Evening Time Lapse by: SlowTVRelax&Background

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHRGA07fn3RpmPvUD-qgE-A>

Sound Effects & Music

New York City Subway Sounds by Ben Semisch from Relaxing Recordings.

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCLl8EeZs_c84cwiGXySHEA

Canto a Elegua from Centro Yoruba

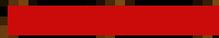
<https://www.youtube.com/c/Centroyoruba/featured>

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and we hope you enjoyed the show!

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