

HYMN

by lolita chakrabarti

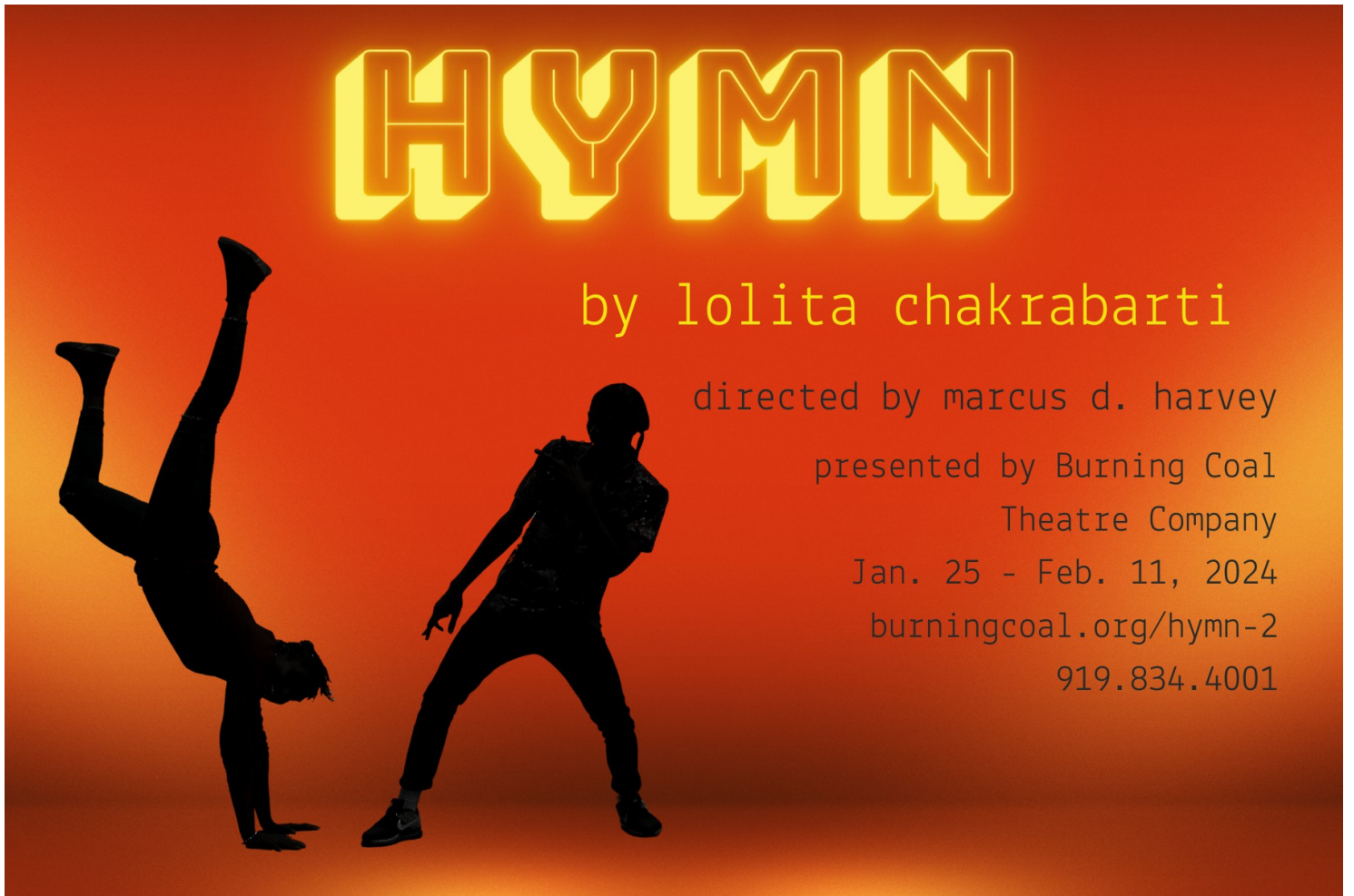
directed by marcus d. harvey

presented by Burning Coal
Theatre Company

Jan. 25 - Feb. 11, 2024

burningcoal.org/hymn-2

919.834.4001



A Study Guide

Presented by Burning Coal Theatre Company

Synopsis

Hymn portrays a growing friendship between two men who meet for the first time at the funeral of their father. Gil delivers a cover of *Lean On Me*, leading into a eulogy about his father while we see Benny at the front of the stage drinking. As Gil's eulogy comes to an end, we see Benny lurking at the back.

He approaches Gil and they lightly, and awkwardly discuss the death of Benny's father, Gus. Benny then shifts the conversation and reveals that Gus is also his father, Gil being his half-brother. Gil refuses to believe it and he requests that Benny take a DNA test to see if this is indeed true.

They meet for dinner and Benny tells Gus about his life, his wife and three kids (Louis, Ella, and Miles). He talks of his mother, her distance, her unwell state and how their father abandoned her after finding out she was pregnant with Benny. Benny asks what their father was like and Gil tells him. They continue to talk and Benny prepares to leave after a bit longer. Gil insists on staying, as he has the results of the test and that they have come back positive. They are indeed brothers.

We then see a time skip where we see both men at the gym, sparring together with *Soul II Soul's Back To Life* playing in the background. Gil discusses an experience he recently had with a woman in a parking lot. The two talk about Rose and the toll her condition has taken on Benny and his family. They carry on sparring.

The show moves on to Benny in a school office, alone, reprimanding his son for his absence in school. We are then shown Benny and Gil together in a spare room going through unpacked boxes and pulling out mega 80s style wigs and clothing pieces. Gil gifts Benny with a pair of tickets to an old school throwback at the Apollo Theatre for his 50th Birthday. They continue to open boxes and find some records and Gil discusses the prospect of starting a new business with Benny, to which he agrees, and they decide to celebrate with some karaoke. They bust out old goodies like *Alice I Want You Just For Me* (Full Force), *Rapper's Delight* (Sugarhill Gang), *Another One Bites The Dust* (Queen), *Double Trouble* (Street Tuff), and *I Could've Danced All Night* (Jaime Cullum), dancing and enjoying their company.

We move again to a public square where Benny stands, joined by Gil who asks if he is alright. Benny tells Gil that his son Louis was caught on CCTV smashing a store window at a demonstration that turned violent. The police came to his home and when he confronted his

son about this, Louis walked up to him and said “The world is burnin’ and you're not doin’ anythin’, Dad. We have to smash their power.” Benny talks about how he understands the system is corrupt but it's always been that way and everything he has given his children doesn't just happen and he feels inadequate for his son. Gil says that's not the case, that Louis is just angry at everyone, not his father, and he says that Louis challenging people that wont change is a good sign of progress.

They then move into discussing the new business and Gil states that he wished their father had known Benny, that it was his greatest loss. We move once again to Gil’s living room where he and Benny look at the supplies for their new business together. Gil then gifts Benny with a new jacket, hyping him up to the tune *Gettin’ Jiggy Wit’ It* (Will Smith). They laugh together. The tone then turns more serious as we see Benny and Gil together at a police station, Benny asking Gil how much it was and talking about a lamppost, all this leading to the belief that Gil was drunk in a car accident. Gil starts to lash out at Benny, angry and intoxicated.

The scene moves to a cafe where Benny tells Gil he was right about Louis not being charged. Gil says he's not the “big man” Benny believes he is, that it's all smoke and mirrors. He had everything planned and ready, the store rented, but when he passed it, it was being fitted for a chemist. When Gil went to discuss this with the man whom he’d rented from, It turns out his office did not exist. Gil confides he lost \$8,000, which Benny realizes was his savings and Gil says he has lost everything, his father’s store and house included. The scene ends with them singing *Carol Of The Bells* (Mykola Leontovych) as it is Christmas Eve.

The next scene, we see Gil alone in the dry cleaners with a bottle of whiskey on Christmas Day, talking to his father and singing *Down Here On The Ground* (Diane Reeves) . He takes an envelope out of his pocket and writes on as he continues to sing. The final scene, we see Benny standing in a church and reading from some handwritten pages and we learn that Gil took his life in the back of the dry cleaners that night, and this is his funeral, having returned to where we began.



Production History

Written by Lolita Chakrabarti and originally directed by Blanche McIntyre, the show debuted in early 2021 at the Almeida Theatre in London to virtual audiences via livestream with the roles of Gil and Benny being originated by Adrian Lester and Danny Sapani. The show was praised and acclaimed, with reviews stating “first rate and perfectly balanced”, “a thoughtful black bromance that shuns convention”, with numerical ratings from 3-5 stars. It became available for on demand watch during March 2021 and returned to the stage in-person for a three week run back at the Almeida in London.

The Author

Lolita Chakrabarti was born in Kingston-Upon-Hull, England in 1969. She attended the Royal Academy for the Dramatic Arts (RADA) and has since been involved in both writing and acting, with roles in *Hamlet*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, *Born To Kill*, *Hustle*, and *Forgiven* among others. Lolita’s plays include *Red Velvet* in 2012, which told the story of Ira Aldridge, her work in progress adaptation of *Hamnet* by Maggie O’Farrell, and her current Broadway adaptation of *Life of Pi*. Her works have earned her a spot in the OBE (Order of The British Empire), an order that recognizes contributions to the arts and sciences.



Racial Discrimination

Racial discrimination, while not as prevalent as mental illness and health is within this show, is still a part of both men's identity. When we visit Benny and Gil at the gym together, we hear Gil discussing with Benny an incident that had occurred fairly recently, in which this woman was holding everyone up for parking and he got out of his car to go and speak with her. She proceeded to profile him as a dangerous man and make a scene. This was obviously profiling of Gil by the woman because he is a larger Black man. Racial discrimination can take many forms and profiling is indeed a major one. In their discussion of Gil's encounter with this woman, says how she had said he was being aggressive and she was frightened, whilst not making an active or physical motion to get away or show her fear. She just sat there, defiant.

Generational Divide

This a very brief topic in the show, but a prevalent one nonetheless. When we hear of Benny's son Louis being involved with a demonstration that turned violent. Benny discusses how Louis was against how nonchalant his father seemed about the world and the wrongs people are causing, how Benny accepts it for what it is instead of fighting for change. Benny states that he believes that survival is more important than change. Here we see a very obvious generational divide between Benny and Louis that is still applicable to this day. Generational divides have been something we have seen throughout time and while only brief in this show, they still provide characteristics insight to both Benny and Louis and their beliefs as people.



Mental Illness

The topic of mental illness is a very prevalent one throughout the show. It is discussed with Benny's mom and her mental distance, her medication, and the toll it takes on his family. We also hear of Benny's entrance into therapy, as well as AA, and his experience with his feelings and thoughts. This topic is incredibly prevalent due to the high stigma surrounding mental illness within the Black & African American communities, and the bigger stigma surrounding getting treated for the mental illness.

Statistics state that **only 25% of African Americans receive treatment for their mental illness, compared to 40% of white people**. This is attributed to many different factors, like the fact that **10% of African Americans do not have health care**. There are other prevalent factors, such as the lack of Black therapists (**only 2% of psychologists are Black or African American**) and a distrust of the health system due to past experiments on Black patients and that the system was built for the white, middle-class family.

Suicide & Alcohol Abuse

Throughout the show, Benny is very open about his struggle with drinking and how he was involved with AA, the strain it put on his family and how getting help has improved his way of life. Later on, as conditions worsen and their plans fall apart, we see Gil start to head into a downward spiral with his mental health. We see him feeling hopeless, sinking into a depressive state and as a result, he starts to drink erratically, only worsening his condition, up until he decides to take his own life in the back of his father's store. Suicide and alcohol abuse often go hand in hand. Alcohol is often used as self medication by those going through depressive states or just having a hard time that they cannot seem to deal with. Gil turns to alcohol as a way to cope with his financial stress. However, often times the alcohol makes the struggle worse, isolating the individual from their friends, family, job, etc. and ultimately worsening their condition and their suicidal ideation. Below are some statistics from Mental Health America and Minority Health HHS that demonstrate the role of substance abuse and suicide in the Black community.

- **Adult African Americans are more likely to have feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness than white adults**

- Black and African Americans' are less likely to die by suicide but are more likely to attempt it
- Binge drinking, smoking, illicit drug use, and prescription pain reliever misuse are more frequent among Black and African Americans with mental illnesses
- Black and African American men are more prone to stigma surrounding mental illness
- In 2020, the third leading cause of death for Black and African Americans, ages 15-24, was suicide
- The death rate by suicide is higher in Black and African American men than women
- ⅓ deaths by suicide were linked to alcohol consumption
- 29% of suicide victims were found with alcohol in their system
- African-Americans are 20% more likely to report serious psychological distress

Additional Activities

- Describe a time when you have had a conflict with your parents. How did you resolve it?
- Reflect on a time in your life where you felt hopeless and received help OR where someone close to you needed help.

Discussion Questions

Pre-Show

1. What is the meaning of the word "hymn"? What is its origin and/or history?
2. What is your definition of family?
3. How do you view mental health and mental illness?

Post Show

1. How would you have ended the play?
2. How does the title connect to the play?
3. Reflect on the importance of family, communication, and mental health.

Cast & Crew Bios

Byron Jennings, II (Gil/Choreographer) is excited to be returning to the stages of Burning Coal! Previous credits include Marc in "Art," Bruce in "The Normal Heart," Colin Powell in "Stuff Happens," the one-man show, "Until the Flood," and Bernard in "Arcadia" (all with Burning Coal Theatre Company), Coalhouse Walker, Jr. in NC State University Theatre's production of "Ragtime," Henry Drummond in Justice Theatre Project's "Inherit the Wind," Lopakhin in Little Green Pig's "Cherry Orchard," Othello in Bare Theatre's "Othello," and Williamson in Deep Dish Theater's "Glen Garry Glenross." All of the thanks and love to supporters of local theater.

ColeTrain (Shop Dog "Paint Assistant") is excited to be a part of another production at Burning Coal Theatre. He has been "assisting" his Scenic Artist Mom in several theatres since he was 7 weeks old. He has no formal training in Scenic Art, but will retrieve a paint brush occasionally. He is great at supervising projects, looking cute, and tries to leave a paw print on every set. ColeTrain is a 10/10 good boy.

Briana Farrar (Properties). This is Briana's first time working for Burning Coal Theatre. She has graduated from university with a degree in technical theatre and fine arts and is excited for what that career has in store for her.

Addison Florio (Board Op) attends Score Academy and joins Burning Coal's production of Hymn as board op. Addison was assistant stage manager in Burning Coal's latest productions of Moonlight and Arcadia. Addison has been a part of the arts from a young age starting with North Carolina's Theatre Conservatory's production of Oklahoma and Joseph and The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. She then joined Cary Arts Center's production of Charlotte's Web. Addison continued in Martin Middle School's production of The Lion King, Beauty and The Beast Jr., Mary Poppins Jr. and The Very Unmerry Adventures of Robin Hood. Addison was a competitive dancer at Premier School of Dance as she continued with theater at Athens Drive High School's technical crew. She was a part of the Scenic Design in Athens Drive's production's of Beehive, Grim and Gruesome Grim and Suessical. In Spring of 2023, Addison was selected as a winner for Burning Coal's Kids Write Festival with her play Velious. Along with Addison's play being included she assisted stage managed the Kids Write Production. As she continues working with Burning Coal's 27th season productions, she hopes to continue her work in the technical department of theater.

Julianna Frasca (Production Stage Manager) is excited to be returning to Burning Coal Theatre for Hymn after recently stage managing the 2023 Second Stage Series. Before Burning Coal, she stage managed for Eastline Theatre on Long Island in their productions of Angels in America (both parts), In the Next Room, and Being Earnest, a queer adaptation of The Importance of Being Earnest. Other credits include stage manager for Canned Laughter at the Downtown Urban Arts Festival, and assistant stage manager for Malefactions at Cradle Theatre Company. Julianna would like to thank her wonderful husband, William, and loving dog, Nacho, for supporting her while she takes the car every night for rehearsals.

Marcus d. Harvey (director) is making his Burning Coal debut. He is an award-winning performer, writer, director, educator & cultural strategist. He holds his MFA in Acting from Brooklyn College, MA in Dramatic Writing for Social Change from NYU and dual undergraduate degrees in Dramatic Arts and Performance Studies from UNC-Chapel Hill.

As an actor, he has performed for such companies as Lean Ensemble (Hilton Head, SC), National Black Theatre (Harlem, NY), Triad Stage (Greensboro, NC), The Old Vic (London), Playmaker's Rep (Chapel Hill, NC), Illinois Shakespeare Festival (Normal, IL), WAM Theatre (Lenox, MA), and TADA! Theatre (New York). He has been on the small and big screen.

As a writer, he has written three solo shows, *homegrown*, *Are We Not Men?* and *baba: a black boy's cry*. He is currently at work on a play, *a bright light*, centered around suicide/depression and mental health in Black & Latin communities in Trenton, NJ commissioned by Passage Theatre in Trenton, NJ due for a world premiere in 2027.

As a director, he has directed for The Contemporary American Theatre Festival, The Working Theatre, Lean Ensemble, Bloomsburg University, Bernards High School, Passage Theatre Company, Marymount Manhattan College, LaGuardia Community College, The Potomac Theatre Project, The National Black Theatre, Luna Stage and Harlem 9 working with Obie-Award Winner Nikkole Salter.

Marcus is an Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging strategy consultant working with such organizations and individuals to create spaces that have often excluded the marginalized.

Marcus is an Assistant Professor of Theatre in the Department of Theatre & Dance at Montclair State University in New Jersey where he teaches in the BA/MA in Theatre Studies Program.

For black men everywhere, may we all heal! To learn more visit www.themarcusdharvey.com

Jennifer Ijeoma (Assistant to the Costumer) is excited to be a part of Burning Coal's production of Hymn. Jennifer is a resident costume designer for Pure Life Theatre Company. Additionally at Pure Life, Jenn works with Verlene Oates to support and further Pure Life's program: Revolutionary Voices Theatre Company (a young adult group). Her love for the arts has propelled her to dive more deeply into the theatre world. Jennifer loves hanging out with her sister-friend, Deb Royals, to find really cool costume pieces. For Pure Life Theatre, Jenn has costumed The Motown Sound Of Christmas, Fences, MaRainey's Black Bottom, and She Persisted. She has also created costumes for Pure Life Theatre and the Revolutionary Voices summer theatre camp working on the following shows: Newsies, and Beauty and the Beast Jr. Jennifer has worked in education for 27 years and is a strong advocate for the NAACP's ActSo program. She is working with Pure Life and Verlene Oates to broaden the reach and scope of the NAACP's ActSo programs here in the Triangle.

Juan Isler (Benny/Sound Designer), a native of Kinston, NC, grew up singing and earned a music-business degree at Winston-Salem State University in 1993. He worked as a deejay before coming to Raleigh, where he got a job as technical director at what is now Spectrum News in 2004. He has worked on more than 50 plays in venues across the Triangle on both sides of the stage, as actor, technician and director. He is the resident sound designer at Justice Theater Project. He also serves on various boards, NRACT and Beltline To Broadway and is on the core leadership committee at Pure Life Theater. He is an active member of the American Theater Critics Association and a recipient of the Raleigh Arts Commission's Medal of Arts award. He is the host of the show "TORN," where he is one of the public faces of the online hub Beltline To Broadway (beltlineto Broadway.org, formerly RDU On Stage). All this while working as event coordinator at NCSU.

Barry Jaked (Technical Director/Master Electrician) has been working as a Technical Director and Master Electrician for Burning Coal since 2011. Most recently he worked on Arcadia and Moonlight. If it plugs in and turns on he takes care of it. He would like to thank Jerry Davis for putting up with him for all these years.

Sydney Kain (Assistant Stage Manager/Assistant Properties Designer) is thrilled to be backstage again for her second Burning Coal Production as last January she was an ASM for Mlima's Tale. Her most recent acting credit was playing Savannah in Freaky Friday the Musical at NRACT. Additionally, she was awarded the Spotlight Performer Cantey Award at Raleigh Little Theatre for her role as Schwartz in The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. This fall she will be studying General Theatre at North Carolina Central University and is excited to continue her journey both on stage and behind the scenes.

Eric S. Kildow (Dramaturg). For Burning Coal: Man of La Mancha, Brigadoon, As You Like It, Shining City, Good, Ruined, The Heretic, (3 Man) Tempest, Jesus Fund, Diary of Anne Frank, Fayetteville Street, Outrunning Bullets, The Wiz, Blue Sky, Spoonface Steinberg, Oakwood, Skylight, Written on the Heart, Heisenberg, The Royale, Darkside, Peter Pan & Wendy, Normal Heart, King Charles III, Stuff Happens, Ashe in Johannesburg, The Container, Camelot, Animal Farm, A Hundred Words for Snow, Conversations I Always Wanted to Have, Evita, I & You, and The Road to Mecca. Eric is Associate Professor of Theatre at Kent State University and works as a freelance dramaturg & director. As an artistic associate of the London-based Loitering With Intent, he presented the devised work Turn Right/Turn Left: A Manual for the End of the World at Fleet Street Theatre in Hamburg, Germany. He is a member of Stage Directors & Choreographers Society, Literary Managers & Dramaturgs of the Americas, Lincoln Center Director's Lab and Burning Coal.

Marie Laster (Scenic Designer) is a scenic designer based in New York City and Philadelphia. Scenic design credits include What the Constitution Means to Me (Arden Theatre), one drop cool (Moxie Arts NY & WP Theater), Chicken & Biscuits (TheatreSquared), All My Mothers Dream in Spanish (Barrymore Outstanding Original Production Nomination - Azuka Theatre), Robin Hood (Pittsburgh Public Theater), Wrong River (Flint Repertory Theatre), Death of a Driver (InterAct Theatre), Sandblasted (Theatre Horizon), Untitled (Barrymore Scenic Design Nomination - Inis Nua Theatre). Marie received a Bachelor of Architecture degree from Philadelphia University and enjoys channeling her creative energy through the scenic design process.

Valentina Moya (Lighting Designer) is a North Carolina native who is excited to return to Burning Coal for another show after designing the lighting for "Ona" (Odyssey Stage Theatre), a historical fiction play about Ona Judge, a freed black woman who was formerly enslaved by George and Martha Washington, and the sound for "The Cherry Orchard" at Burning Coal Theater. Recently, they have also sound designed for the 1940s comedy "Present Laughter" (Switchyard Theatre) at the Durham Arts Council and begun working as a librarian assistant in the Digital Media Lab at DH Hill Jr. Library. Valentina has a BA in Film Studies from NC State University and is a resident lighting and sound technician at the Fuquay Varina Arts Center. They would like to thank their partner Eoin and their two cats, Tamale and Yuca, for always supporting them.

Courtney Pisano (Assistant Stage Manager) For Burning Coal Theatre: Moonlight, Arcadia, Talley's Folly in London, The Life of Galileo, Art, Evita, A Hundred Words For Snow, Talley's Folly, Camelot, Oakwood Series (2019, 2018, 2017, 2016), KidsWrite (2018, 2013, 2009), The Great Celestial Cow, Ashe in Johannesburg, The Weir, As You Like It, etc. Courtney is a Burning Coal Company Member, and graduated from UNC Chapel Hill with a degree in Media Production – Go Heels! She would like to thank the grey cat that appears in her backyard, for no other reason, but that it sits on top of her fence like gravity means nothing.

Meredith Riggan (Scenic Charge Artist). Meredith is a North Carolina based artist and is excited to be returning to Burning Coal Theatre Company for the production of Hymn. Meredith has been with Burning Coal theatre for 7 seasons. After receiving her Bachelor's Degree in Scenic Art from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, Meredith has worked as the Scenic Charge Artist at several theatres around North Carolina including William Peace University, Half Pint Theatre, Sweet Tea Shakespeare, Triad Stage, City Arts-Greensboro Children's Theatre, The Winston Salem Theatre Alliance, ECU Loessin Playhouse, along with freelance jobs such as painting for The International Festival and painting custom pet portraits through her business, Riggan Originals.

Deb Royals (Costume Designer) has a BFA in Acting and Directing from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, an MA in Theatre and Performance Studies from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, and a Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in Performing and Cultural Studies. She completed her Ph.D. with honors receiving the Sherrill-Pence Award for Engaged Scholarship in the Community. In addition to working on the Death Penalty, she has worked with the Latina youth in Durham and throughout Eastern North Carolina to develop performance projects that examine identity, agency, and democratic citizenship. She has written extensively about these projects and has presented papers at the 2007 National Communication Association Conference in Chicago, Illinois, the 2008 International Cultural Studies Conference in Kingston, Jamaica at the 2008 National Communication Association conference in San Diego, California, and the 2011 National Communication Association Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. Deb helped found the Town of Cary's "Applause" Cary Youth Theatre and also produced three summers of Shakespeare productions for the Booth Amphitheatre at Regency Park in Cary.

Carry Vaughan-Sprouse (House Manager) has been with Burning Coal since 2013. She is a graduate of Appalachian State with degrees in Theatre Education and Creative Writing. Her most recent credits include I and You (Assist. Director), A Hundred Words for Snow (Assist. Director), and A Great Big Woolly Mammoth Thawing from the Ice (ASM).