

# *A Complicated* **WOMAN** A NEW MUSICAL

## NOTES FROM THE CREATIVE TEAM



### IANNE FIELDS STEWART (*Book*)

In December 2017, Sam Salmond reached out to me saying that he was working on a project about John Kenley with Jeff Calhoun and Jonathan Brielle. He asked me to look over Kenley's unpublished memoir *My Other Gender*. The material intrigued me. I was particularly intrigued by the relationship Kenley described having with their best friend who was transitioning in a way that it seemed Kenley both admired and judged. I also had a feeling, either because of intuition or the time period, that if I was going to interact with this story at some point, I would come across blackface.

Not long after that, I found myself sitting in a restaurant with Jeff, Sam, and Jonathan. We talked for a little over two hours and by the end of the dinner, we had plans to go to the Johnny Mercy Writer's Grove. Two weeks later, I came to Goodspeed where I worked alongside three almost complete strangers. Over the next two years, the writing collaboration grew and flourished. We would return to the Writer's Grove, eventually Jonathan and I would create a first draft.

There have been three readings of this piece. One, an informal one day reading. The next was a more formal reading in February 2020 which preceded a long break due to the pandemic. And our most recent 29 hour developmental reading in December of 2023. Now the show is alive and well and thriving back at Goodspeed where it first began.

There is no greater honor than being entrusted to tell someone's story. Jeff's relationship with Kenley and the gift he was given in being asked to tell this person's story has always humbled me. I can only hope to be so loved by someone that they would entrust me with a final wish like "telling their story". Through Jeff, it is my honor to uphold that wish and offer the world

and Kenley a moment to remember and learn about this person.

This show is also important to me because it employs, celebrates, and honors the artistry of trans people, particularly Black trans women. In an industry riddled with narratives that tote themselves as being for trans people but are really about cis people's imaginations of trans people, I believe *A Complicated Woman* displays the immense artistry and capacity of trans people in all our glory. We are brilliant. We are beautiful. And we are more than ready and able to entertain.

I hope audiences will be moved to think about the life of John Kenley. To reflect on their resilience. To question the need for that resilience. And to explore ways in which the theatre and our world can create more space for other John Kenleys, Nina Maes, Diamonds, and Muhlaysias to shape our art and society free from discrimination, prejudice, and violence. I hope audiences will see themselves onstage. I hope they will feel both uplifted, welcomed, and challenged. And of course, I hope audiences will enjoy what a brilliant show we've created (if I do say so myself- which I do).

Selflessly, I hope you have a beautiful and life-changing night in the theatre when you come to the show. Selfishly, I wanna win the Tony for book. And neither of those things can happen if you don't come see *A Complicated Woman*. So, I hope to see you there!



### **JONATHAN BRIELLE (*Music & Lyrics*)**

Jeff Calhoun and I were working together on my show, *Nightmare Alley* when he shared his history with John Kenley. I told him I thought Mr. Kenley's story would make a great musical. He said he hoped I would say that. As a composer/lyricist, it sang to me of Golden Age musicals to 1960's R&B, the world I love and was nurtured by. What I didn't expect in 2016, was how this musical would transform me and help me understand the transgender and intersex communities and learn so much about my collaborator Ianne and the community she comes from. With Jeff at the helm, we are creating something that not only entertains, but might also transform our audiences as

much as it has changed each of us.

Our hope is that with the wonderful help of Goodspeed, this is the beginning of the journey for *A Complicated Woman*. It actually began at the JMF Writers Grove here, and a great deal of the songs were written here. Goodspeed is a magical place for me, and I've spent a month each year here for the last twelve years as the perfect place for developing new work.