PICTURED: TYLA ABERCRUMBIE, NAMIR SMALLWOOD, A.C. SMITH AND KELVIN ROSTON, JR. PHOTO BY SAVERIO TRUGLIA.
Dear Friends,

We’re pleased to welcome Resident Director Ron OJ Parson back to WT for this, the second production in our 25th Anniversary Season—East Texas Hot Links.

Many of you may be familiar with Ron’s work here at WT, across Chicago and across the country. We have been in discussions to mount a production of this play with Ron at the helm for a number of years, and it seems an important time for us, as a country and a community, to have the conversations that it engenders. We look forward to talking with many of you about your experiences with the play and hope that you’ll take advantage of multiple opportunities for discussion—before and after the performance.

In this edition of The Brief Chronicle, you’ll learn a bit more about East Texas in the 1950s and gain a deeper understanding of the circumstances surrounding the events of the play. You’ll meet the playwright, Eugene Lee, who sat down to talk about his career and the inspiration for East Texas Hot Links with our production dramaturg, Reginald Edmund. We’ll also take a look back at the storied career of director Ron OJ Parson and how he has emerged as one of the most respected theatre directors in the country.

Finally, we’ll introduce you to some new WT staff members who have recently joined the organization, as well as some familiar faces taking on new roles as the Theatre continues to grow. And we’ll fill you in on some of the amazing work our Education Department is doing as our innovative Novel Series prepares for another year of serving Chicagoland schools and students.

Our 25th Anniversary promises to be a season filled with celebration and compelling, provocative and engaging work. We’re thrilled to have the opportunity to share this story with you and look forward to engaging with you throughout this 2016/17 Season!

Yours Sincerely,

Michael Halberstam
Artistic Director
Kathryn M. Lipuma
Executive Director
IN CONVERSATION:
EUGENE LEE

Dramaturg Reginald Edmund interviews playwright Eugene Lee about his approach to writing and conveying the world of East Texas Hot Links.

For a young black kid from Houston, Texas, interested in one day becoming a playwright, Eugene Lee was a legend. He was proof that my stories could travel outside of my small community and be taken seriously. He was proof that as an artist of color from the South, my stories matter just as much as the person from New York or Chicago. Eugene Lee was proof that you could get out and be a success. I idolized this man as an artist. So when I had the pleasure to meet him at the Black and Latino New Play Festival at Texas State University, where he leads as Artistic Director, he didn’t diminish in size but grew to Texas-sized proportions.

He became more than just the artist whose voice was able to get out of Texas. He became to me a role model of what a father, a husband and a leader in the arts should look like; most importantly, he became a mentor to me, helping me to grow into a better artist and a better human being. East Texas Hot Links, in my opinion, easily qualifies as a great black theatre classic of our times. When the opportunity arrived for me (that young black kid from Houston who once idolized the man and now has the pleasure of calling him a mentor) to interview Eugene Lee, I jumped at the opportunity to talk to him about his life as an artist, East Texas Hot Links and how this play speaks to our current political climate.
Reginald Edmund: Actor, Director, Playwright, Television Writer, Husband, Father, Teacher, Artistic Director of a New Play Festival for Black and Latino writers: My big question is... is there anything you don’t do?

Eugene Lee: Yes. I don’t eat okra.

RE: How did you get your start as a professional actor?

EL: It’s been so long ago, man, I’m not sure how to answer that. My first professional gig was in college in a commercial for a bank in Austin, Texas. After college I worked a lot in Dallas in theatre and doing commercials and training videos and as an extra in the early episodes of the original Dallas and other films as well as working as a news announcer for KKDA radio, “Soul for the Southwest.” Ron Howard cast me in his directing debut of a television movie called Cotton Candy in 1978, and after filming that I packed up and moved to L.A.

RE: What made you want to start writing your own plays?

EL: Working with the Negro Ensemble Company doing only new plays, I decided to try my hand at creating some work during a downtime. The process of finding a play intrigued me and we were essentially taking plays off of folks’ typewriters and standing them up on stage. I wanted to try my hand at storytelling.

RE: How did growing up in East Texas affect how you approach playwriting?

EL: I like to think I am writing about some people I had never seen or heard about on the American stage. My family and their stories and histories were compelling and made of Texas-sized love and hate, which seemed perfect for the theatre in that they are dramatic and funny and poignant and worthy of celebrating. The rhythms in their language; the dignity in their character; their flaws, the food, the music that nourished my spirit, the village that raised me.

RE: Do you consider any playwrights your idols or mentors? Who had the most influence on your writing?

EL: August Wilson definitely influenced my storytelling. He told me once that, “It’s alright to let them talk.” In fact, it’s important that I get out of the way and let them talk. I’m also influenced by the classics and their structure as paradigms for dramatic literature. And the absurdist as well as the likes of Rod Serling and Paddy Chayefsky. And of course Samm-Art Williams and Douglas Turner Ward.

RE: Where did the idea for East Texas Hot Links come from?

EL: That’s a long story, man, but essentially the metaphor is in the title: “Links” in the food chain. The play is about how we feed off of each other.

RE: What about East Texas Hot Links captivated you as something you wanted to work on?

EL: I never sat in a room with a white person or had a real conversation with a white person until I was in high school when they integrated the schools. So beyond Jim Crow laws and attitudes, white people didn’t have a physical “presence” in my life very much (in fact, I preferred to avoid them whenever I could and segregation made that easy). So the antagonist is this play is not white people but the Judas goat that sits amongst us.

RE: Tell us about the world that these characters live in. Who are these people, and the times they live in?

EL: Man, this is Texas in the 1950s. In the days and years before integration. Up in town there were white and colored-only drinking fountains (we always thought the white-only fountains had Kool-Aid in them). There were colored schools and white schools. Separate but by no means equal. The Piney Woods of East Texas and a little black hole in the woods (The Top o’ the Hill Café), where these characters come together to nourish each other in the shadows of the majestic pine forest. There’s blues on the box and cold beer and moonshine and lies and truths to feed on. And just up the road a piece the Klan is burning a cross in a field.

RE: What about East Texas Hot Links is going to be turned into a film by Samuel L. Jackson. Has that gotten underway yet, and if so, how has the process of adapting this amazing play into a screenplay been?

EL: When I sat down to write this I originally intended to write an episode of The Twilight Zone, so adapting the screenplay wasn’t very hard to do at all. I always loved what Rod Serling was able to accomplish with one setting and sometimes just one character. Compelling narratives and character arcs, nuanced and complex storytelling. Sam has come on board as executive producer and we’re in the process of securing financing to make this adaptation.

RE: What do you hope an audience will walk away with after seeing East Texas Hot Links in 2016?

EL: This community comes together to save the life of this young man. Delmus Green (fruit that’s not quite ripe for picking) has dreams of being more than this landscape will allow. He certainly will become a major figure in the Civil Rights movement as a result of the events of this night in this little cafe in the woods. Hope, at the expense of life and this place that has been shelter for so many. Justice, as survivors eliminate the snake hissing amongst them as the sun comes up the next morning. A new day...
East Texas Hot Links takes place in the early summer of 1955 “in the Piney Woods” of an unspecified area somewhere roughly halfway between Houston and Dallas. Ninety years after the conclusion of the Civil War, black Americans were still harshly marginalized and legally discriminated against. Although the Civil Rights movement would begin in earnest later that year, the regulars at the Top o’ the Hill Cafe depicted in the play still live in a world of ever-present racial hatred and under the threat of violence.

Following the 1896 Supreme Court ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson, “separate but equal” had become a constitutional reality in the United States, and Texas was no exception. Separate washrooms, separate seating on buses, separate rail cars, separate libraries, separate waiting areas: all were legal in the Lone Star State. Actions beyond the scope of the law were, horrifically, also commonplace. “In the 1880s, white men in East Texas used violence as a method of political control, and lynching became the common form of retaliation for alleged rapes of white women or for other insults or injuries perpetrated upon white society,” according to the Texas State Historical Association. “The Ku Klux Klan, the White Caps, law officials, and the Texas Rangers, all acting as agents of white authority, regularly terrorized both Mexican Americans and black Texans.” An article in the East Texas Historical Journal states “approximately 340 African Americans were lynched in Texas from 1885 to 1942, Northeast Texas was one of the most lawless and lynching-prone areas in the state.”

There was no political recourse to be had against this injustice. “By the late 1920s, Texas politicians had effectively immobilized African-Texan voters through court cases that defined political parties as private organizations that could exclude members. Some scholars have estimated that no more than 40,000 of the estimated 160,000 eligible black voters retained their franchise in the 1920s.”

Midway through the 20th century, there were rumblings of change. 1.2 million black Americans were serving in the armed forces at the end of the Second World War. In 1948, President Truman officially ended segregation in the military. The first big change on the domestic front arrived in 1954, when a case brought before the United States Supreme Court would overturn 60 years of Jim Crow laws. In Brown v. Board of Education, the Court stated “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” and de jure segregation was ruled a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution. Schools would be forced to integrate their students.

One early attempt at school integration occurred just outside Dallas in 1955. Brian Behnken, author of Fighting Their Own Battles, explains: “In Mansfield, a group of African American parents represented by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sought the admission of three black teenagers to the white high school. The school’s superintendent denied the request. When the NAACP filed suit, the district court ruled for the school district. The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans [...] reversed the district court and [...] ordered the superintendent to integrate the town’s high school. In response, a mob of segregationists—four hundred strong—marched on the school and prevented the students from enrolling, hung several effigies of African Americans, and threatened to kill NAACP leaders and destroy the black section of town. Fearing the crowd, blacks bought guns and guarded the homes of important NAACP officials. Governor Alan Shivers ultimately sent in the Texas Rangers to defend the segregated system. When President Dwight D. Eisenhower declined to intercede, the district returned to the status quo. Thus Texas’s version of the Little Rock crisis, which occurred two years later, passed into history.”

On December 1, 1955, months after the fictionalized events of East Texas Hot Links, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. In response, a local minister named Martin Luther King, Jr. helped organize a boycott of the bus system by the black community that lasted for 381 days. On June 4, 1956, the federal district court ruled that the Alabama laws were unconstitutional, a decision the Supreme Court upheld in November. King immediately became the leader of a new movement towards equality for black and other marginalized peoples, joining with some of the other ministers who participated in the boycott to soon form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

This very early stage of the Civil Rights movement is the backdrop against which East Texas Hot Links is set, but its relevance transcends that setting. Even though President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law in 1964, the movement for racial equality is not over. Just last year, the questionable arrest and subsequent suicide of Sandra Bland, a black woman, took place outside Houston. The troubled history between African Americans and white authority in East Texas and elsewhere continues.
AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Join us for these exciting engagement events, tailored to enhance your WT experience! For more information and to RSVP visit writerstheatre.org/events.

SUNDAY SPOTLIGHT

Are you curious about the world that surrounds your favorite productions? Our Sunday Spotlight series offers you access to the finest speakers, academics and cultural leaders. Each event extends the conversation on our stages by featuring an expert in an area connected to the play. Past audiences have learned about the future of artificial intelligence in *Marjorie Prime* from Northwestern University professor Douglas Downey and explored the landscape architecture in *Arcadia* with garden historian Cathy Maloney.

Save the date for the Sunday Spotlight for East Texas Hot Links on Sunday, December 4th.

THE MAKING OF…

Have you ever wondered what goes on behind the scenes? The Making of… series offers you an insider view of what goes into creating each production at WT. Past events have explored the workings of the WT costume shop for *Death of a Streetcar Named Virginia Woolf: A Parody*, how the choreography of *Company* came together, and what it was like for the cast of *Arcadia* to be the first performers in the new Nichols Theatre.

Save the date for the The Making of…East Texas Hot Links on Monday, December 19th.

POST-SHOW CONVERSATION: THE WORD

Join us after every *Tuesday*, *Thursday evening* and *Wednesday matinee performance* (excluding previews and any extension weeks) for a 15-minute discussion of the play facilitated by a member of the WT Artistic Team.

POST-SHOW CONVERSATION: THE ARTIST

Join us after every *Wednesday evening performance* (excluding previews and any extension weeks) of every production in our 16/17 Season for a 15-minute discussion with actors from the production facilitated by a member of the WT Artistic Team.

AUDIENCE EXCHANGE

Remember that our Concessions Center is open for an *hour before and after our performances*. You are welcome to enjoy a snack or beverage and discuss the play in the Litowitz Atrium, on our Grand Gallery Walk or on the Stephanie and Bill Sick Rooftop Terrace.
Consider this a Standing Ovation.

BMO Harris Bank is proud to be 25th Anniversary Season Sponsor of Writers Theatre.
REVISITING A PERSONAL TRIUMPH

Resident Director Ron OJ Parson returns to East Texas Hot Links after 20 years

By Bobby Kennedy, Literary Manager

Ron OJ Parson is one of the busiest and hardest working directors in Chicago. In addition to his work at WT, this season alone he will also direct plays at Windy City Playhouse, Court Theatre, TimeLine Theatre Company and American Blues Theater. With East Texas Hot Links, the award-winning director gets to revisit the play that launched his career.

Parson started acting as a child in Buffalo, New York, later attending the theatre program at the University of Michigan before returning East to work as an actor and director. But in 1994, Parson would make a move that would change the course of his career. He recalls, “I was in New York and my friend Alfred Wilson [who will be playing Columbus Frye in East Texas Hot Links] was working at the Goodman.

Pictured: Director Ron OJ Parson leads the first rehearsal for East Texas Hot Links at Writers Theatre. Photo by Joe Mazza, Brave Lux.
He told me he could get me an audition at the Goodman if I wanted. I’d been in New York for several years and kinda really got out of the business and moved back to Buffalo to regroup. So he said come give it a shot in Chicago.”

Parson got the part and started to find success as an actor in Chicagoland. However, his heart was still set on directing, and so he and Wilson decided to found their own company, Onyx Theatre Ensemble. “We didn’t have any plays in mind or anything. We just thought, ‘let’s get some money together and do a play.’ We didn’t have a board or a staff or any of that.” In addition to Parson and Wilson, other key founding members included Celeste Williams, Philip Van Lear, Lydia Diamond and Marsha Estell.

The first production Onyx ever produced was Eugene Lee’s East Texas Hot Links. “We were looking for a play to produce,” remembers Parson, “and I knew Ruben Santiago-Hudson who was in the New York production at the Public Theatre in 1994. I called him and said, ‘Hey man, I’m in Chicago now; we got this theatre company. You got any plays you can think of we can do?’ And he suggested it. That was the first one. That’s what really got us going.”

East Texas Hot Links was a confident and successful debut for the new company in 1995, with strongly favorable notices appearing in the Chicago Tribune and Chicago Reader. The production was so successful that Onyx produced the play again in 1998 to equal acclaim. Onyx Theatre Ensemble performed in the Edgewater Presbyterian Church on Bryn Mawr Avenue in Chicago (which is now the home of City Lit Theatre) and helped launch the careers of many African-American theatre artists working in Chicago and elsewhere before shutting down. “We were around for five years, did about six or seven shows, and then everybody was becoming too busy,” explains Parson. “We didn’t have a structure. We were just a bunch of people who wanted to put on a play. It was enough for a little while but after a while that falls by the wayside.”

Parson’s directing career would continue to soar after the demise of Onyx. He began directing plays at such reputable theatres as The Black Rep of St. Louis, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Alliance Theatre and South Coast Repertory. He has been a Resident Artist at Court Theatre for almost 10 years, and in 2008 became the first African American to direct a play at Canada’s esteemed Stratford Festival. Parson has directed three plays for Writers Theatre prior to this one: the world premiere tour of The MLK Project: The Fight for Civil Rights by Yolanda Androzzo in 2007 and again in 2008; John Henry Redwood’s The Old Settler in 2009 at the previous Woman’s Library Club theatre, and a brilliant production of Harold Pinter’s The Caretaker in 2011 in the previous Books on Vernon venue.

But the director never lost his passion for East Texas Hot Links. “I’ve been trying to do the play again every year,” he says. “I’ve done it in Buffalo, New York at a theatre I helped start, and then at Karamu House in Cleveland, which is the oldest black theatre in the country. I get people that come up to me even now and they say, ‘When are you going to do East Texas again?’ Twenty years later, they’re still like, ‘We want to see that play again.’”

Parson had actually been talking to Writers Theatre in 2008 about producing the play but he and Artistic Director Michael Halberstam chose The Old Settler instead, largely due to the election of President Obama being seen as a transformative moment in the history of race relations in this country. Reflecting on that decision now, Parson confirms, “It’s as relevant today as it was back [in the ‘90s]. Except for that little period where we thought there’s hope for change. We realize now that the President can’t do everything. That period when I was pitching [the play], everybody had all this hope with Obama being president. Even when we did it [in 1998], there were people in the audience at post-show discussions saying, ‘Today’s world is different. That couldn’t happen today.’ But the week we opened, James Byrd, Jr. was dragged by a truck in East Texas. White supremacists tied him to the back of their truck and killed him. That happened where the play takes place. We dedicated the show to Byrd. It shows you stuff hasn’t changed that much. And now this whole ‘make America go back to what it was’ idea… I think it’s important to show some history.”

In addition to its topical relevance, Parson is excited to revisit what he knows is an exceptionally gripping and moving piece of theatre. “I call it a thriller,” he says. “It’s a train ride. You get on the train at the beginning. The train’s moving kinda slow but then it picks up speed and then finally crashes. The play is very important to me because it’s the first show I did in Chicago. It really started my career. It’s very close to me so I really appreciate WT wanting to do it. A 20-year reunion! It’s going to generate a good energy.”
In preparation for the world premiere of *The Hunter and The Bear: A Musical Folktale*, which debuts at Writers Theatre later this season, PigPen Theatre Co. spent time in residence this summer to further develop their script and music as well as begin to create the puppets, shadow images and other visual elements that bring their plays to life. Joining PigPen—which consists of members Alex Falberg, Arya Shahi, Ben Ferguson, Curtis Gillen, Dan Weschler, Matt Nuernberger and Ryan Melia—for their residency were co-director Stuart Carden (former Associate Artistic Director at WT) and designers Collette Pollard, Lydia Fine, Bart Cortright and Mikhail Fiksel. Over the course of their nine days with us, the team experimented with many elements they intend to use in their production, including testing out the puppet they built for the Hunter’s son Elliott and investigating different ways to manifest the titular Bear on stage. They will all continue their work at a second workshop in October before starting rehearsal on the world premiere production in November.

Giving playwrights the opportunity to test and refine their new work prior to a full production is one of the main endeavors of WT’s new work program, the Literary Development Initiative. For more information on new work at Writers Theatre, visit writerstheatre.org/LDI.
SPOTLIGHT ON THE NOVEL SERIES

In WT Education’s flagship residency program, the word reveals the artist in each student

As students across Chicagoland are heading back to school, WT Education is hard at work preparing for another school year filled with our award-winning arts education programs—and one program in particular is already moving full-steam ahead.

This past season, The Novel Series reached 782 students in 28 classrooms across 10 Chicago schools—our largest reach to date. We look forward to another successful year with The Novel Series!

The Novel Series is WT Education’s pillar residency program in Chicago Public Schools. It is an arts-integrated theatre and literacy program designed to allow students to explore literature and the artistry of bringing text to life. Students engage in a layered investigation of text and enter an arts-integrated process by working in small groups on “Corners”—or small group projects—designed to merge academic rigor in the areas of writing, vocabulary and discussion with arts-driven inquiry. Each 10-session residency culminates in a final presentation of student work.

Throughout the course of a Novel Series residency, students are given a diverse array of artistic avenues to explore as a tool to make meaningful text-to-self and text-to-world connections. Because of the incredible social-emotional, academic and creative growth that emerges in students who participate in the Novel Series, WT Education has been able to partner with several schools year after year on this program developing long-lasting partnerships with classroom teachers and providing students with layered, arts-integrated approaches to literature as they move through grade levels.

Teachers and students express their thoughts on The Novel Series:

“All [Novel Series] activities were cooperative and helped to build interpersonal skills and individual creativity. Many students expressed that they never knew they were able to perform on stage so well. They took risks and were pleased with the results.”
Teacher, Cleveland Elementary

“I’m proud that Writers Theatre helped me express myself for who I am.”
Student, Peirce Elementary

“I watched many students show a creative side of themselves that they rarely get to tap into in a school setting. I also witnessed the vast majority of students step outside their comfort zones and take risks in performances!”
Teacher, Rogers Elementary

Pictured left: Students at Crown Elementary perform personal narratives in response to the novel The Skin I’m In by Sharon Flake in a Novel Series residency.

Pictured above: Students at Peirce Elementary in Edgewater reflect following their final presentation.
## CONCESSIONS CENTER

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### LIQUOR

A selection of **Koval** and other premium liquors

**$5 FEATURE SPECIAL**

While supplies last

- Ford’s Gin
- Cana Brava Rum
- James Pepper 1776 Rye Whiskey
- Famous Grouse Scotch
- Rebel Yell Small Batch Whiskey

### PREMIUM SNACKS

**NOIR D’ÉBÈNE CHOCOLAT ET PÂTISSERIE**

- Chocolate Chip Cookies                   | $5.00  |
- Raisin Oatmeal Cookies                   | $5.00  |
- Toffee Popcorn                           | $5.00  |
- Chocolate Brownies with Marshmallow & Caramel | $6.00  |

### ADDITIONAL CONCESSIONS

- Coffee (Regular, Decaf)                  | $3.00  |
- Rishi Hot Tea (Chamomile, Earl Grey, Peppermint) | $2.00  |
- Soda (Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite, Ginger Ale) | $2.00  |
- Water                                    | $2.00  |
- Hershey’s Chocolate Bar                   | $2.00  |
- Pretzels                                 | $2.00  |
- Almonds                                  | $3.00  |
CUSTOM COCKTAILS

Enjoy a custom cocktail from our Concessions Center—specially created for each of our productions by Mixed metaPours!

EAST TEXAS HOT LINKS

THE TEXAS MOONSHINER

KOVAL Unaged Rye
Shiner Bock Beer
Unfiltered Apple Juice

All of our signature cocktail creations are designed by WT Cocktail Consultant Cheryl Rich Heisler & Glencoe-based Mixed metaPours.

312-613-7499 | www.mixedmetapours.com

STAY IN TOUCH WITH WRITERS THEATRE
JOIN THE CONVERSATION!

Share your thoughts on the show!

Take this survey about East Texas Hot Links: bit.ly/EastTXSurvey
Write a review of your experience on Yelp: bit.ly/WTonYelp
Find us on Facebook: facebook.com/writers-theatre
Follow us on Twitter: @WritersTheatre
Subscribe to our channel: youtube.com/writerstheatre
Check in to Writers Theatre on Swarm
Sign up for our email list to receive news updates, backstage stories, photos, videos and more: writerstheatre.org/email
Follow our company on LinkedIn: linkedin.com/company/writers-theatre
Join our circle on Google+

We look forward to hearing from you!
# East Texas Hot Links

## October

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- **Private Event**
- **D** Post-Show Conversation
- **M** The Making of...
- **S** Sunday Spotlight
Artistic Director
Michael Halberstam

Executive Director
Kathryn M. Lipuma

Student tickets only $20 (with valid student ID).

Ticket discounts are available for groups of 10 or more.
Call 847-786-3519 for more details.