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***Nina Simone: Four Women* opens January 30 at Alabama Shakespeare Festival  
Play features Nina Simone's most powerful songs**

**"Music can't just be about the art, but it has to be an expression of the good, bad, and ugly in life."  
Excerpt from *Nina Simone: Four Women* by Christina Ham**

**MONTGOMERY, Ala.,** (January 14, 2019) — Alabama Shakespeare Festival presents [Nina Simone: Four Women](#), a musical play directed by Lydia Fort and written by Christina Ham, on the Octagon Stage January 30 through February 17, 2019.

Tickets are available online at [asf.net](#), or by visiting or calling the ASF Box Office at 334.271.5353 during Box Office business hours (Monday through Saturday from 12:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.). Evening performances begin at 7:00 p.m.; matinee performances begin at 2:00 p.m. on weekdays and Saturdays and at 3:00 p.m. on Sundays.

Nina Simone, a 2018 inductee to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, was an American singer, songwriter, and pianist whose early career spanned a broad range of musical styles, including classical, jazz, blues, R&B, and gospel. In 1963, the horrific bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, served as a catalyst to move Simone's career pursuits from popular music to political activism as the artist known as the "High Priestess of Soul" focused her musical talents on addressing civil rights issues. Simone famously said, "An artist's responsibility is to reflect the times."

*Nina Simone: Four Women* uses the framework of one of Simone's most powerful songs, "Four Women," to give a voice to four archetypes of Black womanhood; Aunt Sarah, Sephronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches. In the play, the characters take a personal and provocative musical journey that leads them down a path of discovery and healing with songs such as "His Eye is on the Sparrow," "Old Jim Crow," "Mississippi Goddam," "Go Limp," and "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black."

The cast of *Nina Simone: Four Women* includes Gabrielle Beckford (Sweet Thing), Darlene Hope (Sarah), Soara-Joye Ross (Sephronia), and Crystal Sha'nae (Nina Simone). Gabrielle Beckford is a graduate of Rider University whose regional theatre credits include *Crowns* (McCarter Theatre Center/Long Wharf Theatre), *Hair* (Geva Theatre Center), and *All Shook Up* (Laguna Beach Playhouse). Darlene Hope is best known as the title character in *A Visit from Aunt Flo*, winner at the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity, and many regional credits, including *Sistas the Musical*, *Normalcy*, and *After Midnight*. Soara-Joye Ross starred in Arena Stage's acclaimed production of *Anything Goes* and was seen in Broadway's *Les Miserables* and *Dance of the Vampires*, as well as on national tour in *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess* and *Smokey Joe's Café*. Crystal Sha'nae is known for *The Blacklist* (NBC) and *Unforgettable* (A&E), and many regional theatre credits, including *The Call* (Arkansas Repertory Theatre) and *Parade* (Merry-Go-Round Playhouse).

Playwright Christina Ham was recently recognized by *American Theatre* magazine for being one of the most produced playwrights in the United States for the 2018-2019 theatrical season. She is currently the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Playwright-in-Residence at Pillsbury House Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota, as well as a writer for the hit Netflix horror series *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*.

Director Lydia Fort received her MFA in Directing from the University of Washington. She has directed at Cygnet Theatre, Diversionary Theatre, Perseverance Theatre, Women’s Project Theatre, Women Center Stage, Urban Stages Theater, McCarter Theatre Youth Ink! Festival, New Federal Theatre, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Classical Theatre of Harlem, freeFall Theatre, Hangar Theatre, and Planet Connections Festivity, where she won the 2013 Best Director Award.

Other members of the creative team include Lindsay Benton (choreographer), Darrian Stovall (music director), Sean Fanning (set design), Kate Fry (costume designer), Reza Behjat (lighting designer), Sharath Patel (sound designer), Hannah-Jean Farris (stage manager), and Catherine Ranieri (production assistant).

On February 2, Alabama Shakespeare Festival will host a series of community engagement activities, including a conversation at the historic Kress building located at 39 Dexter Avenue at 10:00 a.m. The free event, [Civil Rights: Stories from the Movement](#), will explore takeaways of the Civil Rights Movement and how we as a society are still confronted by many of the same issues today. Panelists include Lisa McNair (public speaker/sister of Denise McNair) and Doris Crenshaw (Civil Rights icon/Rosa Parks protégé).

*Nina Simone: Four Women* will run concurrently with another title by Christina Ham, [Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963](#), a play on the Festival Stage. The production breathes life into the hearts of Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Cynthia D. Morris Wesley, and Addie Mae Collins while a full chorus sets the tone with spirituals and Civil Rights anthems, such as “Amazing Grace,” “Oh, Freedom,” and “Woke Up This Morning.” The presentation of these two plays marks the first time that Alabama Shakespeare Festival has produced two plays by a living playwright simultaneously. Both productions are sponsored by the [Alabama Tourism Department](#).

Critical acclaim for *Nina Simone: Four Women*:

“*Nina Simone: Four Women* ... is a stroke of artistry that shines a spotlight on one of our most gifted artists, her reaction to the killings of innocents, and shows how her bodacious talent stood to resist the destruction” – *DC TheatreScene*

“*Four Women* ... is imbued with beauty and pain. Ham’s writing is crisp and poetic.” – *Star Tribune*

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### **EMBRACING OUR COMMUNITY – ONE STORY AT A TIME.**

***Alabama Shakespeare Festival is a not-for-profit organization under the direction of Artistic Director Rick Dildine and Executive Director Todd Schmidt. Designated as The State Theatre of Alabama, ASF is a leader in education and outreach, serving more than 40,000 students annually with artistic programming. ASF is supported by grants from the Alabama State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.***