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Harlem Stage Launches *Good Ground* to Power the Next Generation of Women+ Arts Leaders Worldwide

New York, NY (May 6, 2026) At a moment when the cultural sector stands at a profound crossroads, Harlem Stage announces *Good Ground: The Next Generation of Women+ Leaders in the Arts*; a bold, global initiative that is built to shift who leads, to strengthen leadership sustainability, and to unlock a more expansive future for the arts. Rooted in urgency and possibility, *Good Ground* confronts a stark reality: women comprise the majority of the nonprofit arts labor force, yet leadership remains overwhelmingly concentrated among white men, leaving women of color largely excluded from positions of power. *Good Ground* is planting seeds for a future the field has yet to fully imagine.

Harlem Stage is proud to team up with partner institutions that nominated the Inaugural 2026 Fellows: **The Billie Holiday Theatre** (Brooklyn, NY), **The Ensemble Theatre** (Houston, TX), **Howard University** (Washington, DC), **North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University** (Greensboro, NC), **Spelman College** (Atlanta, GA), **The Theater Offensive** (Boston, MA), and **tiata fahodzi** (Watford, UK).

Through the inaugural 12-month pilot Fellowship - designed as a beta model for future expansion - *Good Ground* cultivates a global network of visionary early-career women+ leaders from performing arts institutions and HBCUs, providing the mentorship, resources, and community long denied to them. This is not your typical professional development. Participants will engage in immersive residencies, leadership labs, masterclasses, site visits, and one-on-one mentorship with some of the most accomplished women leaders across the arts and beyond. *Good Ground* provides a sanctuary for bold, new ideas to inform the future of the arts.

The initiative includes a two-week summer intensive, fittingly with week one at the **Mary Schmidt Campbell Center of Innovation & the Arts at Spelman College**; a center led by **Barbara Chirino**, Inaugural Artistic Director. The following week is in NYC to meet with leaders in arts and culture, tour arts institutions, and present a public forum on Thursday, July 30.

Tony Award-nominated actress and director **LaTanya Richardson Jackson**, Chair of the *Good Ground* Circle and Spelman College Alumna, underscores the stakes: "Leadership inequity is not a question of capacity; it is a question of support. *Good Ground* is about building the systems that ensure brilliance is not only recognized, but sustained. Mentorship, networks, and knowledge are not luxuries, they are lifelines."

Dr. Indira Etwaroo, Artistic Director & CEO of Harlem Stage reflects: “*Good Ground* is a direct response to a field that continues to ask women leaders of color to navigate systems never designed for us. I created it because that cycle - this fugue of repetition - cannot define our future. We must move beyond the monolith of ‘women of color’ and toward intersectional leadership that reflects the full complexity of our lived experiences. *Good Ground* equips women leaders to transform systems or build new ones entirely, fully as ourselves. This work changes the ground we stand on.”

In collaboration with socially-engaged institutions, including the Tony Award-nominated, The Theater Offensive (TTO) in Boston, MA, **Giselle Byrd**, Executive and Artistic Director of TTO emphasizes, “As the first Black trans woman to lead a regional theater in the U.S., I have often encountered expectations to erase parts of my identity in the name of progress. What must be acknowledged is that the power of the arts lies in bringing our full selves to leadership. *Good Ground* stands as a powerful testament; refusing fragmentation and insisting that the beauty of our full identities be the divine source of our vision.”

Chinonyerem Odimba, the Artistic Director and Chief Executive of the British African theater in the UK, **tiata fahodzi**, speaks to the deeper narrative shift embedded in the initiative: “We inherit systems, but we also inherit the responsibility to reimagine them. *Good Ground* is an act of collective authorship; one that centers voices too often pushed to the margins and insists that new stories of leadership are not only possible, but necessary.”

The program is fully funded for all Fellows, including travel, housing, and stipends. *Good Ground* removes the financial barriers that have historically excluded emerging leaders of color from access and advancement.

Good Ground is ultimately about building a leadership ecosystem so strong, so interconnected, that isolation is no longer possible and inequity is no longer sustainable. The message is clear: the future of arts leadership will not be asked to make room. It will build the room. **The time is now. The future is hers+.**

FUNDERS

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ABOUT HARLEM STAGE

For more than 43 years, Harlem Stage has played a critical role as a preeminent global performing arts institution in New York City's cultural arts scene and has consistently defied expectations, delivering groundbreaking artistic programming and cultural leadership despite the enduring shadows of historic disinvestment and systemic inequities in the arts, culture, and humanities fields. When Harlem Stage was founded in 1983, Harlem, long revered as a cradle of Black intellectual and artistic brilliance, was reeling from decades of systemic disinvestment, urban neglect, and cultural erasure. This historic epicenter of the Harlem Renaissance, once pulsing with art and revolution, had become a symbol of what the broader society had chosen to abandon. Yet amid that decline, Harlem Stage emerged as a radical act of vision and resistance. The Global STAGE to set untold stories free.

BOARD AND STAFF OVERVIEW

Harlem Stage is led by Dr. Indira Etwaroo, CEO & Artistic Director, award-winning arts and culture executive, scholar, and producer. Dr. Etwaroo brings a record of transformative leadership across the cultural sector. Previously, she served as the Inaugural Director of the Steve Jobs Theater at Apple; Executive Artistic Director of The Billie Holiday Theatre, where she led the institution to receive the Presidential Medal of the Arts under President Biden; and Founding Executive Producer of The Greene Space and NPR Presents, expanding public media's connection to diverse, global audiences. She also led the launch of The Black Seed, securing and investing \$10.5M into the field to support the first National Strategic Plan for Black Theaters in the country.

The Harlem Stage Board of Directors is composed of extraordinary leaders, artists, and changemakers from various fields. Led by Board President Courtney Lee-Mitchell, Vice President Mark Thomas, Treasurer Larry McRae, and Secretary Michael Young, the Board includes Ronald K. Alexander, Angela Glover Blackwell, Jamila Ponton Bragg, Hugh Dancy, Claire Danes, Dr. Indira Etwaroo, Channing Martin, Tamara Tunie, Heather Wagoner, Blair Washington, Alisha Johnson Wilder, and Todd Wilder. Together, they are united by a shared mission and commitment to bringing powerful, transformative stories to the world.

The Historic Landmark

Harlem Stage, neighbor to The City College of New York at the corner of Convent Avenue and 135th Street, welcomes audiences from all walks of life to its home, the historic site in West Harlem that was once a part of the Croton Aqueduct system - a great engineering feat of the 19th century - which supplied much needed fresh drinking water to New York City, beginning in 1890, twenty-seven years following the Emancipation Proclamation. The Romanesque Revival style accounts for much of the building's grandeur and monumental beauty.

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Inequity in Performing Arts Leadership Stats Sheet

Black Women & Women of Color (U.S.) | *Current through 2025–2026*

LORT Theaters (Regional Theater Power Structures)

Historic exclusion of women of color in top roles.

A landmark study of LORT (League of Resident Theatres) found a “virtual absence” of women of color in executive leadership roles.

- 0 women of color
- 28 white women
- 46 white men

Pipeline inequity persists.

- Even in “next-in-line” leadership roles (artistic/executive tracks), women of color were only a small fraction of candidates, signaling structural barriers to advancement.
- Systemic barriers remain embedded in hiring and governance.
- Field response acknowledges the gap; but also its persistence.

The “Great Breakup” in the Arts

- **Women leaders of color are leaving at disproportionate rates.**
The post-2020 leadership exodus, which is often called the “Great Breakup” has been especially pronounced among Black women and women of color in performing arts leadership.
- **Pattern: hiring without structural support.** Arts organizations have increased hiring of women of color into leadership, but many are leaving shortly after due to lack of institutional support, board alignment, and resources
- **Common factors driving exits:**
 - Disproportionate burden of DEI labor
 - Pressure to “transform” organizations without authority/resources
 - Misalignment with boards
 - Isolation within overwhelmingly white leadership ecosystems
- The issue is no longer just access to leadership, but retention and sustainability of leadership for women of color.

Artistic Leadership & Creative Power

Women, especially women of color, remain marginalized in artistic authority.

In ballet and classically rooted performing arts, women occupy only ~30% of artistic director roles, with men holding 70%, reinforcing gendered control over artistic vision and commissioning.

Creative pipeline inequity mirrors leadership gaps.

Historically, only 3.8% of produced plays were written by women of color, demonstrating how representation in leadership directly impacts whose stories are produced.

Black women and women of color remain underrepresented, under-resourced, and under-supported in the leadership of performing arts institutions, especially within influential ecosystems like LORT theaters. Even as hiring increases, structural inequities continue to push these leaders out, reinforcing a cycle of exclusion at the highest levels of cultural power.