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***The Bishop Arts Theatre Center has commissioned nine, new one-acts that take on America's history of racism and its many legacies — including a sci-fi future.***

The New York Times feature, "The 1619 Project," has become an ever-expanding blaze in the political firestorm over 'critical race theory.' That's the argument that slavery was fundamental to the establishment of the United States and still influences our politics and culture.

In fact, the Times ran the magazine section in 2019 to mark the 400th anniversary of the first slave ship's arrival on these shores — a year before the Pilgrims landed in Massachusetts, the traditional marker for the country's origins.

Since then, journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones' effort has won a Pulitzer Prize, become a best-selling book, an illustrated children's book and currently is streaming as a TV series on Hulu.

And starting Thursday, The 1619 Project will be a one-act play festival in Dallas. Hannah-Jones herself will be attending the Feb, 17th performance for a post-show talk-back. That performance is sold out.

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Bishop Arts Theatre Center in Oak Cliff commissioned nine playwrights, both local and national, to write short plays — riffs, if you will — on anything that inspired them in Hannah-Jones' efforts. Her original magazine effort and the subsequent book are akin to an anthology or family album, with not just journalism and essays on history but also poems, photos and personal memoirs. Four of the young dramatists are in the Bishop Arts playwriting lab; another is Soul Rep Theatre's Anyika McMillan-Herod.

Gabrielle Kurlander is the director of the festival. She notes the nine playwrights include Black, Latino and Jewish writers. They could take inspiration from anything in the book, she said. They could dramatize it, put it into a different context — even address their own or their family's experiences with racism and its legacy.



Kurlander said, this is what the Bishop Arts festival adds to the many manifestations of The 1619 Project and the controversies it's generated: "These very talented playwrights reflected the book through their lens. And so I think the result is that it not only adds to the work, it really deepens it."

The plays include science fiction, personal remembrance, humor, even an imagined debate between Shirley Chisholm — the first Black woman to be elected to Congress and to seek the presidential nomination — and George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Georgia who was an independent candidate for president before he was paralyzed by a would-be assassin.

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The political furor that The 1619 Project has kicked up over the book's accuracy and relevance has led to it being targeted by state legislatures, governors and individual school boards. In some cases, the proposed bills would deny state funds to schools that teach lessons even "derived" from the book.

But plenty of the attacks have been aimed directly at banning The 1619 Project itself. The argument has even entered the jockeying for possible presidential candidates. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted, "1619 project is a slander on the American people. It's a false narrative, and it has no place in our schools."

Best known is Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' "Stop WOKE" Law (Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees) which built on an earlier bill by the Florida legislature that specifically banned any material from The 1619 Project in any educational curriculum.

In response, Hannah-Jones tweeted, "Our history has long been treated as illegitimate. It has always been contested."

Kurlander said the festival is one way of countering such efforts at silencing people and preventing others from learning.

She quoted the festival's dramaturg, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, the director of the Institutional Antiracism and Accountability Project at the Harvard Kennedy School. He wrote that these nine plays aren't simply acts of "truth-telling" but are "an act of resistance against erasure and denial."

Dr. Muhammad's note will be included in the festival program — and will be performed onstage

**The 1619 Project One-Act Play Festival at the Bishop Arts Theatre Center in Oak Cliff, Feb. 9-26.**

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