

*For Immediate Release, MAY 6, 2024*

**“Ella The Ungovernable,” a play about 15 year-old Ella Fitzgerald’s incarceration in Hudson, NY, in 1933, to make its New York City debut JUNE 20 to JULY 7, 2024, at Greenwich Village’s Theater For The New City**

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“Ella The Ungovernable,” a play based on the true story of 15 year-old Ella Fitzgerald’s incarceration and eventual escape from The New York Training School For Girls in Hudson, NY, in 1933, will be making its New York City debut at Theater For The New City between June 20 and July 7, 2024.

The play will occupy Theater For The New City’s Main Stage, The Johnson Theater. Showtimes for the play will be Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights at 8, and Sunday Matinees at 1.

This will now be the fourth iteration of “Ella The Ungovernable,” a play whose ascent has been impacted by the pandemic at each and every step.

The play originally debuted in February, 2020, at The Valatie Community Theatre in Valatie, NY, literally *two weeks* before the outbreak of the pandemic . A month-long engagement was then planned at the self-same Theater For The New City, only to be quashed by the pandemic. Finally, in 2022, the play was set to be performed at the 1,000-seat Bardavon 1869 Opera House in Poughkeepsie, only to be once again thwarted by the pandemic. So, in many senses, not only will this be the play’s New York City debut, but also, its post-pandemic debut!

## THE ORIGINS OF THE PLAY

Playwright David McDonald first heard about the story while living in Hudson, NY, the place of Fitzgerald's previous incarceration some 90 years before.

"As a resident of Hudson, I had heard rumblings about this story for *years*," recalls Mr. McDonald. "However, I always sort of presumed it was only Hudson lore – I mean, if Ella really *had* been incarcerated there, wouldn't the world have known about it?"

After doing some digging, however, McDonald, a long-time journalist and documentary filmmaker, found unimpeachable sources for his material. The first was a 1996 article in The NY Times that came out just a few weeks after Ella's death called: "Ward Of The State: The Gap in Ella Fitzgerald's Life":

<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/06/23/weekinreview/ward-of-the-state-the-gap-in-ella-fitzgerald-s-life.html>

The second, "The Ungovernable Ella Fitzgerald," was prepared by a group of historians studying the prison system in and around Hudson, NY:

<https://www.prisonpublicmemory.org/blog/2014/the-ungovernable-ella-fitzgerald>

These two articles established the basic facts of what we know today about Fitzgerald's incarceration as a fifteen year-old girl in 1933:

- That while living in Yonkers, Fitzgerald's mother had died, leaving Ella in the care of her reputedly abusive stepfather;

- Ella had ended up living on the streets of Harlem, serving as a lookout for a numbers runner for a bordello;
- She was then snapped up by the police and eventually sent up to Hudson;
- She had been incarcerated for almost a year before escaping back to Harlem, and a few weeks later, a friend convinced her to perform at the first-ever Amateur Night at The Apollo Theater in Harlem.
- Ella ended up winning. Bandleader Chick Webb was sitting in the audience, and he basically ended up hiring her on the spot, and she was eventually paroled by the state of New York to the Chick Webb Orchestra.

After reading all of this material, McDonald became convinced that the story of Ella Fitzgerald's incarceration was an incredibly powerful double-headed allegory, first, of African American incarceration throughout the centuries, but also for life under Trump. He deliberately wrote the script in an effort to empower and uplift a demoralized public, and particularly to inspire kids with the play's mantra of never giving up.

To garner support for the project, he then proceeded to make the following narrative trailer, which has ended up having quite a bit of a life of its own, being accepted into three international film festivals this year and winning best trailer at The Madrid International Short Film Festival.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uoyQg2clOOE&t=18s>

## **THEATER MEETS ACTIVISM/ACTIVISM MEETS THEATER**

McDonald originally wrote "Ella The Ungovernable" as a movie screenplay, with the intention of filming it in Hudson, right where it all originally

happened. However, after being unable to raise the money to make a film, he then switched his focus to doing it as a piece of community theater, and that's when the scope and vision for the project began to morph .

“I quickly realized that this play is an extraordinary vehicle for both community growth and empowerment,” says McDonald. “ In a way, it's democracy in action, giving people an understanding of what it means to work together, support each other, and uplift each other. In our first iteration, we had people off the streets directing the play, building the sets, and playing the main roles. It was incredibly uplifting. It was like theater meets activism meets theater. What I eventually started envisioning is the possibility of using the play as an instrument of community building and community empowerment in towns and cities around the world.”

## **THEATER FOR THE NEW CITY/A PERFECT PARTNER**

According to playwright McDonald, “If I had to dream up a perfect partner for “Ella The Ungovernable,” it would be Theater For The New City. Who they are and what they do – it perfectly aligns with the vision and philosophy of the play.”

**TNC** is a unique Cultural Institution that has earned a nationwide reputation for its dedication to nurturing established and emerging playwrights who experiment with new forms and to presenting other experimental and developmental theaters with a very active program of Community Art Services and Festivals which continue to expand theater accessibility. Since its foundation in 1971 by the legendary Crystal Field, Theater For The New City has been considered to be one of New York City's greatest incubators of new talent, showcasing new works by Sam Shepard, Charles Ludlum and many others.

Tickets are deliberately affordable for people of all ages, with a peak ticket price of \$18. Go to TheaterForTheNewCity.net and EllaTheUngovernable.com for tickets and information.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

Playwright David McDonald's two websites are:

[Luminescentmedia.org](http://Luminescentmedia.org)

<https://ellatheungovernable.com/>

## **PRESS INQUIRIES:**

*For all press inquiries, please contact:*

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## **DOWNLOADABLE POSTERS BELOW:**



ELLA THE  
UNGOVERNABLE

JUNE 20 TO JULY 7

THEATER FOR THE  
NEW CITY

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RADIO CITY,  
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presents

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**WEBB**  
*and his Orchestra*

*featuring*  
**ELLA FITZGERALD**

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**COMING JUNE 20TH**  
**THEATER FOR THE NEW CITY**

