

NEWS RELEASE

THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

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THEATER PRODUCER/DIRECTOR LOU BELLAMY RECEIVES MCKNIGHT 2006 DISTINGUISHED ARTIST AWARD

Theater professional has made impact on the arts in Minnesota for nearly 30 years

EMBARGOED UNTIL JUNE 28, 2006 — Every year, more than 40,000 people are moved and challenged by the thoughtful work of Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota. The McKnight Foundation has named Lou Bellamy, Penumbra's artistic director, as the 2006 McKnight Distinguished Artist, in recognition of artistic excellence spanning three decades as a producer and director at the nation's preeminent African American theater. The annual award includes a \$40,000 cash prize, and recognizes individual Minnesota artists who have made significant contributions to the quality of the state's cultural life.

"Lou Bellamy embodies the spirit of the McKnight Distinguished Artist Award," said Erika L. Binger, board chair of The McKnight Foundation. "The excellence of his craft is evident in Penumbra's loyal following and critical acclaim. Lou's commitment to the community, however, is what truly distinguishes him among exceptional Minnesota artists." Among Bellamy's other numerous awards are The W. Harry Davis Foundation Award for Excellence in Afro-centric Education and The Minnesota Martin Luther King, Jr., Humanitarian Award.

Bellamy graduated with a BA from Minnesota State University, Mankato, and received his MA from the University of Minnesota. He has been a member of the University of Minnesota's faculty for 29 years and currently serves as associate professor in the Department of Theatre Arts and Dance. His extensive directing credits include *Zooman and the Sign*, *King Hedley II*, and *Two Trains Running*; acting credits include lead roles in *Fences*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Talking Bones*. In addition to his extensive work at Penumbra, Bellamy has directed for Kansas City Repertory, Arizona Theatre Company, the Guthrie Theater, and Trinity Repertory Company. He also serves as an executive board member of The African Grove Institute for the Arts.

Bellamy's involvement in theater arose because, in his estimation, he's "always been a show off." At college in Mankato, his main extracurricular activity was running for the school's track team. In 1962, however, Professor Ted Paul sought out black actors for a staging of the racially charged *Finian's Rainbow*. Paul found Bellamy in an on-campus dorm, and invited him to join the cast. With positive feedback from his performance, and because "there were more girls in theater than there were on the track team," Bellamy's lifelong theater career began in earnest. To this day, Paul attends theater productions with which Bellamy is involved.

Looking back, Bellamy explains, "I was really impressed with people who were more concerned about your talent and so forth than they were about your color. And I began to notice the power of theater to make change in people and I've been at it ever since." A decade and a half later, in 1976, Bellamy created Penumbra Theatre Company.

Bellamy founded Penumbra on the shoulders of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and '70s. A key tenet of the movement is that ethics and aesthetics share one moral code, and from this union is borne mission-driven art with the power to define and sustain communities. "We cannot be misled or seduced by efforts, noble as they may be, to impersonate, distort, or pacify this kind of work," says Bellamy. "It is only at a place like Penumbra, a theater housed *within* the African American community, that the work can be both critical and celebratory, marking milestones of our growth, our survival, and our history." One of few surviving theaters that emerged during the Black Arts Movement, Penumbra strives to present the African American experience as rich, dynamic, and essential to the history and breadth of American theater.

Today, Penumbra is the nation's premier African American theater, and one of only a few that offer a full season of performances. It is recognized for development of educational and outreach programs, as well as contributions to the development of creative talent. Bellamy notes that, over the years, "Penumbra's *raison d'être*—producing artistically excellent, thought-provoking, well-appointed productions that probe the human condition with stories told from an African American perspective—has been constantly refined and refocused." In a region rich with performing arts, Penumbra ranks as St. Paul's oldest professional theater company of any kind.

Under Bellamy's leadership, Penumbra has produced 20 world premiers and presented more plays by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson than any other theater company in the world. The theater's national significance was recognized in New York City in January 2000,

when Danny Glover presented it with the Jujamcyn Award for development of artistic talent, a distinction it shares with superb regional theaters like the Yale Repertory Theater and The Mark Taper Forum. In recent years, *City Pages* has named Penumbra the “Best Theater for Drama,” and *Stage Directions Magazine* has named it “One of Ten Companies that Make a Difference.”

“Our work at Penumbra seeks to engage our audiences and our community in cross-cultural dialogue, in order to address and deal with specificity and difference,” says Bellamy. “I believe that we—as people, as a society, as citizens of the world—need to learn to see difference not as a threat, but as the key to understanding humanity. Cross-cultural dialogue offers us the opportunity to recognize the power of difference.”

ABOUT THE MCKNIGHT DISTINGUISHED ARTIST AWARD

The McKnight Distinguished Artist Award recognizes individuals who helped lay the foundation for Minnesota’s rich cultural life. Despite opportunities to pursue their work elsewhere, they chose to stay—and by staying, they have made a difference. Previous recipients are composer Dominick Argento (1998), ceramic artist Warren MacKenzie (1999), writer Robert Bly (2000), choral conductor Dale Warland (2001), publisher Emilie Buchwald (2002), painter Mike Lynch (2003), orchestra conductor Stanislaw Skrowaczewski (2004), and sculptor Judy Onofrio (2005).

The McKnight Foundation will formally present the 2006 Distinguished Artist Award to Bellamy at a private reception later this year.

NOTE TO EDITORS AND PRODUCERS

High-resolution photos of Bellamy and select productions may be downloaded from www.mcknight.org/daa2006 or obtained by calling the Foundation at 612-333-4220. To arrange for interviews with Bellamy or McKnight staff, please call Tim Hanrahan at the Foundation.

ABOUT THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

Founded in 1953 and endowed by William L. McKnight and Maude L. McKnight, The McKnight Foundation has assets of approximately \$2 billion and granted about \$90 million in 2005. McKnight is an independent private philanthropic organization; the Foundation has no relationship with the 3M Company, although Mr. McKnight was one of 3M’s early leaders.