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Two Groundbreaking Arts Commissions Coming this Spring to Sonoma County

Two innovative, multidisciplinary performance projects commissioned in Sonoma County prepare for their debuts this Spring. Acclaimed choreographer Liz Lerman will premiere *Wicked Bodies (Sonoma)* at Sonoma State University's Green Music Center this April, and then in June, internationally-renowned Hungarian director Árpád Schilling will premiere *S D A* at the Imaginists performance laboratory in Santa Rosa. Both projects were awarded Hewlett 50 Arts Commissions, an initiative of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. These \$150,000 grants fund work with world-class artists across five performing arts disciplines. The ultimate beneficiaries of the new programs are local audiences, who will be among the first to see important new works in their communities.

The Green Music Center has helped commission a number of new works since it opened in 2012, and this spring marks the world premiere of their most ambitious commission to date. An original theater, dance, and multimedia piece, *Wicked Bodies (Sonoma)* questions why some knowledge is celebrated, some criminalized, and some erased altogether. Lerman created *Wicked Bodies (Sonoma)* over two and a half years with deep engagement from the communities of Sonoma County and designed it specifically to be performed at the Green Music Center's Weill Hall. In Lerman's words, *Wicked Bodies (Sonoma)* "provides a history of sly, grotesque, sensual, wildly creative women that every culture carries in cliches, stereotypes, and fictions, because they are actually very real, and very present." *Wicked Bodies (Sonoma)* by Liz Lerman will have its world premiere in Weill Hall on Thursday, April 14, 2022.

The Green Music Center presented Lerman's first work-in-progress performance in October 2019. This presentation offered the audience excerpts from the piece, as well as Lerman's commentary on the process. In November 2020 - in accommodation with the pandemic - *Wicked Bodies (Sonoma)* went online as part of *The Green Room*, an online series of performances and conversations with artists.

Since these preliminary performances, Lerman and her company have been active on campus, in classrooms, and in our communities, leading passionate conversations about the performing arts, and the challenging ideas of our time. With a total of 38 engagement activities, Lerman reached more than 1,200 Sonoma State University students, faculty, and staff, as well as individuals around the community. These included dance classes, conversations with students enrolled in an ethnomathematics course, roundtable discussions with faculty about interdisciplinary research, workshops on how to approach critique in a constructive way using Lerman's own Critical Response Process, guest lectures to gender and ethnicity courses, demonstrations to student teachers, and even interactive interviews with donors on the process of creating *Wicked Bodies (Sonoma)*. Lerman describes each of these interactions as building toward the

performance, whether the experience is directly incorporated into the piece, or indirectly influences the direction of its creation.

As Lerman continues to generously share her knowledge, passion, and process, the Green Music Center is gearing up with excitement for the premiere of *Wicked Bodies (Sonoma)*.

Two months following the premiere of *Wicked Bodies (Sonoma)* at the Green Music Center, another original work funded by a Hewlett 50 Arts Commission will take place less than 10 miles away at the Imaginists in Santa Rosa. A performance laboratory located on Sebastopol Avenue, the Imaginists began in 1994 with a vision to break from traditional theater models. Since that time they have gone on to re-imagine theater and honor live performance as a vital space for imagination, ideas, and freedom.

The Imaginists have commissioned acclaimed Hungarian theater director Árpád Schilling to create *S D A*, a new work that brings his outsider's eye to the role that guns and gun violence play in American society. Building on a longstanding artistic collaboration between the Imaginists and Schilling, the new work highlights a shared artistic sensibility that prizes risk-taking, experimentation, and theater as instigation and provocation. The Imaginists continued their unwavering commitment to community engagement on *S D A*, working with youth organizations and holding community conversations throughout the development and premiere of the play.

Árpád Schilling works throughout Europe, creating and directing for theater, opera, film, and community-specific social art projects. His productions have premiered at renowned theaters like the Berliner Ensemble, Opera Stuttgart, Opera Basel, Chaillot National Theatre, and the National Theater of Lithuania, to name a few. Schilling's work and educational initiatives address pressing societal issues, from racism and xenophobia to freedom of speech and expression. In his native Hungary he became a national figure of the opposition to the divisive and oppressive regime under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his right-wing Fidesz party, organizing huge social justice actions through his now defunct production company Krétakör. A lightning rod for the ultranationalist right in his native country, Schilling and his family left Hungary for France in 2018.

"I'm a theater director, but I'm ultimately interested in everything that connects us humans in coexistence, community, and society," said Schilling. The piece will premiere on May 20th in San Francisco with partners at Z Space, and will show from June 2-11 at the Imaginists in Santa Rosa.

About the Hewlett 50 Arts Commissions

An initiative of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Hewlett 50 Arts Commissions were launched in 2017 to celebrate the foundation's 50th anniversary. The five year, \$8 million initiative supports the creation and premiere of 50 new works from outstanding artists working in five performing arts disciplines. The largest commissioning effort of its kind in the country, the initiative is a symbol of the Hewlett Foundation's longstanding commitment to supporting art that matters to the people and communities of the San Francisco Bay Area. The Hewlett Foundation has supported the arts in the region for more than 50 years, and currently makes grants of roughly \$20 million per year to more than 200 nonprofit arts organizations, mostly in the form of long-term general operating support.

About the Green Music Center

The Green Music Center is the performing arts center at Sonoma State University, a regionally serving public university committed to educational access and excellence. As a cornerstone of Sonoma State University's commitment to the arts, the Green Music Center is a place to witness artistic inspiration through year-round programming, serving as home to the Sonoma State University Music Department, the Santa Rosa Symphony, and Sonoma Bach.

The mission of the Green Music Center is to present the most compelling artists of our time, to investigate ideas, and to provide access to diverse artistic experiences that educate, connect, and inspire Sonoma State University and neighboring North Bay communities.

Built to bring together artists, students, families, music-lovers, and more, the Green Music Center at Sonoma State University is a gathering place for our diverse communities in Sonoma County to explore and enjoy the things that move and inspire us. The center includes the 1,400-seat Weill Hall, with a rear wall that opens to lawn seating for a unique summertime experience, and the intimate 240-seat Schroeder Hall.

About the Imaginists

The Imaginists completely rethink theater: who participates, where it happens and - *what* is it? We honor the power of live performance to create a vital space for imagination, ideas, and freedom.

The Imaginists is a performance laboratory investigating the intersection of art and community. We explore the possibilities of theatre, from new works & classics to bilingual & site-specific works. We engage new audience through community-based theatre projects and unexpected collaborations inviting diversity and new artistic voices. We invite the New, understanding that culture erupts, changes, and responds to the here and now.

The Imaginists began in 1994 as the performance collective KITUS (Knights of Indulgence Theatre United States) whose vision was a break from traditional and regional theater models. In 2001 the original group disbanded. Brent Lindsay and Amy Pinto went on to create the Imaginists.

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