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**American Century Revives *Native Son*, the Mercury Theater Company's
Famed 1941 Adaptation of Richard Wright's Controversial Novel
*Beginning April 14 at Arlington's Gunston Arts Center***

Novelist Richard Wright's searing novel *Native Son* aroused violent controversy from the moment it was published. The saga of a young American black man who becomes an unrepentant killer, the book was hailed as an uncompromising indictment of the nation's racial divisions and social injustice, and condemned as feeding white bigotry while excusing crime. Naturally, Orson Welles, then the most dynamic force in American theater, thought it was just the kind of story his Mercury Theater needed to tackle. He commissioned Wright to do a stage adaptation in collaboration with playwright Paul Green, and the production, much to Welles' delight, was as controversial as the novel.

At a very different time in our nation's history, The American Century Theater (TACT) is giving Washington area audiences a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience *Native Son*, in a new production of the Wright-Green-Welles adaptation that still raises disturbing and important questions. The production opens April 14 and will continue through May 9 in Theater II, at the Gunston Arts Center in Arlington, Virginia.

"TACT's previous productions of Orson Welles projects---*The Cradle Will Rock* and *Moby Dick Rehearsed*---reflected the energy and daring of Welles as well as his skill at telling difficult stories theatrically. Add to that Green and Wright's provocative and gut-wrenching adaptation of the novel, and it equals a play every American needs to experience," says TACT Artistic Director Jack Marshall.

As one historian wrote, "The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever."

Bob Bartlett, who delivered a smashing production of Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!* two seasons ago, directs *Native Son*, working with a cast of 21. Bartlett is a member of the theater faculty in the Department of Fine and Performing Arts at Bowie State University, Maryland.

Because of the importance of the novel, its controversial themes, and to provide historical and critical context for audiences, the company will hold a post-show program after every performance, featuring guest scholars and critics as well as the cast, director, and designers. It will also be hosting several groups from area schools. And thanks to assistance from the Arlington County Cultural Affairs Division, TACT will hold a **national tele-symposium** on the play and the novel, in which a panel of distinguished scholars will join the *Native Son* artistic team in an hour-long discussion, available to listeners free, via a toll free number. Among the participants will be **Hazel Rowley**,

author of the acclaimed biography Richard Wright: Life and Times. (Note: the time and date of this special program is yet to be set, and will be announced in a separate release.)

About the Cast of *Native Son*

Washington, D.C. actor **JaBen A. Early** makes his TACT debut as Bigger Thomas, the impoverished young black man who is unable to understand, much less overcome the forces of society and destiny that destroy his life.

The strong supporting cast includes TACT standouts in past productions: **Bruce Alan Rauscher**, a Helen Hayes nominee for his role in *The Andersonville Trial*; **Evan Crump**, the affecting young lead in *Ah, Wilderness!*; **Mick Tinder**, most recently the versatile host of *An American Century Christmas*; **Brian Razzino**, whose talents were on display in *Cops*, *The Titans*, and *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*; and **John Geoffrion**, TACT veteran last seen in *Desire Under the Elms*. Joining them are TACT newcomers **Renee Charlow, Hannah Thomas, Megan Graves, Iman Hassen, Kalon Hayward, Christine Hirrel, Jivon Lee Jackson, Farah Lawal, Mark McKinnon, Paul Andrew Morton, Kofi Owusu, Julie Roundtree, Danni Stewart, Bud Stringer and Rob Weinzimer**.

Native Son producers are **Rip Claassen** and **Sherri Perper Haddad**.

Performance Information:

NATIVE SON opens Tues., April 14, 2009 and runs for 22 performances through Sat., May 9, 2009 at Theater II, Gunston Arts Center, 2700 S. Lang Street, Arlington, Virginia 22206. Performances most weeks are Wed. through Sat. evenings, with weekend matinees at 2:30 PM on April 18, 19, 25, 26, and May 2 and 3. Three “pay-what-you-can” performances will be given on the following dates, for which no advanced reservations are taken: Wednesdays, April 15, 22, and 29.

The press is invited to the show’s performance on Fri., April 17.

PLEASE NOTE: the April 14 Opening Night performance will begin at 7:30 PM. All other evening performances begin at 8 PM; matinee curtain time is 2:30 pm. All performances are in the Gunston Arts Center’s Theater II.

More information is available at www.AmericanCentury.org or by calling the theater at 703-998-4555.

The American Century Theater is a 501(c)(3) professional nonprofit theater company dedicated to producing significant 20th Century American plays and musicals at risk of being forgotten. TACT is funded in part by the Arlington County Cultural Affairs Division of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Services, the Virginia Commission for the Arts, numerous foundations and many generous donors.

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