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#DevilLTC

## Lantern Theater Company Presents World Premiere of *Me and the Devil* by Steve H. Broadnax III and Charles Dumas

***Professionally Filmed Production Premieres Today and  
Streams on Demand Through October 17, 2021***

PHILADELPHIA (September 9, 2021) – **Lantern Theater Company** is thrilled to launch its Fall 2021 Digital Season with the newly filmed production of *Me and the Devil*, which marks the Lantern's first collaboration with nationally prominent director and playwright **Steve H. Broadnax III**. Written by Broadnax and **Charles Dumas** and directed by Broadnax, this world premiere play with music shows the dramatic confrontation between the great American blues musician Robert Johnson and the Devil from whom, legend has it, Johnson received his extraordinary talent. After being poisoned in a juke joint by a jealous husband, Johnson – who wrote such blues classics as “Crossroad Blues,” “Love in Vain,” and “Me and the Devil Blues” – must use all his wit in a final contest with the Devil to keep his soul. *Me and the Devil* **premieres today and streams on demand through October 17, 2021**. Tickets and information are available online at [www.lanterntheater.org](http://www.lanterntheater.org).

Broadnax's directing credits include the upcoming Broadway premiere of **Keenan Scott II's** *Thoughts of a Colored Man*, which he directed in its 2019 world premiere co-production at Baltimore Center Stage and Syracuse Stage. He also directed *The Hot Wing King* by Katori Hall at Signature Theatre in New York, which closed in March 2020 due to the pandemic and went on to win the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Other recent projects include directing the world premiere of *The First Deep Breath* by Lee Edward Colston II at the Victory Gardens Theater as well as conceiving, directing, and choreographing *The Hip Hop Project*, his own award-winning full-length play that has toured nationally and was showcased at the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival in Washington, D.C. Broadnax is a tenured professor in the School of Theatre at Penn State University and co-head of the MFA directing program. Locally, he was recently named resident director at People's Light in Malvern.

Originally created two decades ago as his Penn State thesis project, Broadnax credits acclaimed actor **Lawrence Stallings** – who plays Robert Johnson – with helping him re-develop *Me and the Devil* for film in 2021. “I could not have done it without Lawrence,” said Broadnax. “When [the Lantern] introduced me to Lawrence, it was like a perfect fit. He’s so talented as an actor, singer... he sounds and looks like Robert Johnson. We started the first two weeks or so on Zoom, and we would just work with the script. I would give him my research. He would do research. We would come together and go through all the characters in the play... It’s like a writer’s dream, a director’s dream.”

Stallings previously appeared at the Lantern in the 2004/05 season production of *Death and the King’s Horseman* by Wole Soyinka and in the title role in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona in the 2008/09 season. His Broadway credits include *The Book of Mormon* (original cast), *Hair*, and *Passing Strange*, and the first national tour of *Hair*. He has also worked regionally with American Repertory Theater, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, American Heartland Theatre, and played the title role in *Sam Cooke: Forever Mr. Soul* at Milwaukee Rep and Delaware Theatre Company. Now based in L.A., Stallings’ film and television credits include *The Rebound* opposite Catherine Zeta-Jones, *Singing to the Earth Until a Tree Grows*, *Diagnosis X*, *1000 Ways to Die*, and *A Royal Birthday*.

**Robert Johnson**’s life and legend are shrouded in mystery. His guitar playing was revolutionary, considered by many to be the basis for rock and roll. But his early death at age 27 in 1938 and a lack of reliable records from the Jim Crow era mean that we know more of his legend than of the man himself. Born in Mississippi in 1911, he discovered the Delta Blues style at a young age and learned to play harmonica and guitar. Other Delta blues artists remember a young Robert Johnson as eager but unskilled. But after a stay in Arkansas – accounts differ, but it was anywhere from six months to two years – Johnson returned to the Delta Blues scene with a deep mastery of the guitar that had been unimaginable just months earlier. This sudden explosion of skill and creativity fed the myth that outlived the man: that at a lonely crossroads at midnight, Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil in exchange for incredible talent at blues guitar.

Johnson completed just two recording sessions during his life – 29 songs for two albums recorded in 1936 and 1937. As captured on his recordings, Johnson’s playing was innovative and revolutionary; he was using elements of what would become rock and roll a full two decades before the genre was invented. His chord structures and his tunings were unique as well – he used four tunings and as a capo to blend modern and traditional styles to his liking. He is credited with transforming the loneliness and suffering of the Black experience in the South during the Great Depression into powerful music with universal relevance. He influenced musicians from his contemporaries Son House, Johnny Shines, and Muddy Waters to later folk, country, and rock and roll bands and singer-songwriters, including the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton,

and the Allman Brothers. Johnson was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 1980 and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986. His songs were reissued in 1991 on the album *The Complete Recordings*, which sold half a million copies and won a Grammy. Despite his enduring musical influence, Robert Johnson himself remains a mystery.

“Robert Johnson’s enduring story plays on an ancient narrative architecture: a human being makes a deal with supernatural forces so he can excel beyond human capability, but he pays a heavy price for it,” said Lantern Artistic Director **Charles McMahon**. “There are examples of this kind of story around the world, among all peoples and all eras, but there is something utterly compelling about this one for us. Perhaps it is because Johnson’s story forms a kind of bridge between the mythic past and the modern world. Unlike Achilles or Faust, Robert Johnson was a real person. However he came by his unique abilities, we know that they were real and that they were every bit as good as myth would have it because we have the recordings of his songs. In Steve Broadnax’s telling of this tale, there is an extra dimension that makes it particularly satisfying. We see the hero not just as a figure who has adventures and overcomes obstacles but as a moral agent who grows before our eyes from a callow child to an admirable man, capable of great empathy and self-sacrifice. The blues is an art form that takes suffering and transforms it into something good – into wisdom, humor, and perseverance. The version of Robert Johnson that Steve Broadnax has imagined understands that his suffering in this world has meaning if he can pass on his hard-won wisdom to a world full of people he will never meet. Each new generation rewrites the hero’s journey to fit its own needs. Ours is an age in desperate need of wisdom, empathy, maturity, patience, and generosity of spirit. It is a great joy for us at the Lantern to bring you Steve’s telling of this classic American story that so embodies these qualities.”

*Me and the Devil* also includes appearances by Philadelphia actress **Ebony Pullum** as The Woman, musician **James Herb Smith** as the stand-in for guitar closeups, and Broadnax himself as the voice of the Devil. The design team includes scenic designer **James F. Pyne, Jr.** (recent Lantern credits include *Othello* and the upcoming *The Plague*), costume designer **Marla Jurglanis** (*Othello* and *The Heir Apparent*), lighting designer **Shon Causer** (*Don’t Dress for Dinner*, *The Tempest*, *The Gospel According To...*, and many others), and sound designer, music arranger, and guitarist **Curtis Craig** making his Lantern debut. Newcomer **Isabella Gill-Gomez** was the associate lighting designer and longtime Lantern stage manager **Rebecca Smith** served as associate producer.

Lantern Theater Company will delve into the themes of *Me and the Devil* on its **Lantern Searchlight blog**, available online at [lanterntheater.org/searchlight](http://lanterntheater.org/searchlight). Published articles will explore the enduring legacy of Robert Johnson, the pioneers of the Delta Blues scene, the pursuit of glory, behind the scenes interviews with the artists, and much more. New content will be added throughout the production’s streaming run.

Tickets for *Me and the Devil* are **\$20 per household/device** and are available online at [www.lanterntheater.org](http://www.lanterntheater.org) or by calling the Lantern Box Office at **(215) 829-0395**. Closed captioning is available. Ticket buyers will receive an email confirmation with a private ticket access link, which will provide on-demand access to *Me and the Devil* for one viewing during the September 9 – October 17, 2021 streaming period. The play can be viewed on most internet-connected devices with email/web browser access, including desktops, laptops, tablets, smartphones, and select smart TVs. Closed captioning is also available. The Lantern Box Office will be accessible by phone and email for extended hours throughout the streaming period to provide assistance. A **Digital Fall Pass is also available for \$35**, which includes one ticket for *Me and the Devil* and *The Plague* (streaming October 7 – November 7, 2021).

## **About Lantern Theater Company**

Founded in 1994 and now in its 28th season, Lantern Theater Company's mission is to produce plays that investigate and illuminate what is essential in the human spirit and the spirit of the times. The Lantern serves the Philadelphia region with artistic and educational programming, notably partnering with middle schools and high schools in the Philadelphia School District to provide in-classroom residencies in support of curricular learning. Throughout the Covid-19 health crisis, the Lantern has continued to provide artistic programming on both a free and paid basis, including readings of Shakespeare plays in spring 2020; filmed versions of fully realized theatrical productions of *Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol* in December 2020 and *Molly Sweeney* by Brian Friel in January-March 2021; and this spring's Plays from the Lantern Archives series, which included professionally filmed and edited versions of its 2017 world premiere production of *The Craftsman* by Bruce Graham and three recent Shakespeare productions: *Measure for Measure* (2019), *The Tempest* (2018), and *Coriolanus* (2017).

Following *Me and the Devil*, the Lantern's Fall 2021 Digital Season will continue with a newly filmed American premiere production of *The Plague* by Neil Bartlett, adapted from *La Peste* by Albert Camus and streaming on demand October 7 – November 7, 2021. In its recently announced 2021/22 Mainstage Season, the Lantern will return to live performance in December 2021 with its original adaptation of *Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol*, co-created by theater artists Anthony Lawton, Christopher Colucci, and Thom Weaver, followed by the Philadelphia premiere of two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner Lynn Nottage's satirical *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine*, the Philadelphia professional premiere of Robert Bolt's award-winning classic *A Man for All Seasons*, Tom Stoppard's Tony Award-winning comic masterpiece *Travesties*, and a fourth play to be announced soon.

More information about the Lantern is available online at [www.lanterntheater.org](http://www.lanterntheater.org).

**Lantern Theater Company – Fall 2021 Digital Season**  
**FACT SHEET**  
*Me and the Devil*

**WRITTEN BY:**

World Premiere by Steve H. Broadnax III and Charles Dumas

**DIRECTED BY:**

Steve H. Broadnax III

**CAST:**

Lawrence Stallings as Robert Johnson  
Ebony Pullum as The Woman  
Steve H. Broadnax III as The Devil  
James Herb Smith as Guitarist Stand-in

**CREATIVE TEAM:**

James F. Pyne, Jr., Scenic Designer  
Marla Jurglanis, Costume Designer  
Shon Causer, Lighting Designer  
Isabella Gill-Gomez, Associate Lighting Designer  
Curtis Craig, Sound Designer & Music Arranger  
Rebecca Smith, Associate Producer

**PRESS INFORMATION:**

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**TICKET INFORMATION:**

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By Phone: (215) 829-0395

**TICKET PRICING:**

\$20 per household/device  
\$35 Digital Fall Pass, which includes access to *Me and the Devil* and *The Plague*  
Closed captioning is available for all streaming productions

**STREAMING ON DEMAND:**

Thursday, September 9 – Sunday, October 17, 2021

**PLAY SYNOPSIS for LISTING EDITORS:**

Have you ever wanted something so much that you'd make a deal with the Devil? Legend has it that Robert Leroy Johnson struck a deal with the Devil to be the best blues musician who ever lived. In this dramatic play with music, Johnson aims to break that deal as his spirit calls his family, friends, and lovers to bear witness to his superlative talent and fearlessness.