

## WHO WE ARE

Portland Ovations is a nonprofit cultural organization based in Southern Maine dedicated to gathering communities to share in the power of live performance. Ovations connects artists and audiences both onstage and off — making the arts an integral part of community life.

Our unique array of live performances for the public and school audiences are curated to delight, inspire and educate. Venues used throughout greater Portland include historic and modern theaters, clubs, galleries, and classrooms — chosen carefully to ensure the best possible experience for both audiences and artists.

### Our Vision

To inspire a curious and imaginative community where the experience of the performing arts is a vital part of every day life.

### Our Mission

Portland Ovations propels the artistic, social, educational and economic wellbeing of communities through the power of the performing arts.

## RACIAL EQUITY STATEMENT

At Ovations, we recognize that promoting racial equity and anti-racism in the arts and culture sector is essential to showcasing the brilliance and artistry of diverse and multicultural communities from around the globe. Our commitment to inclusion, diversity, equity and access extends to all aspects of our operations, including governance, programming and community engagement. We aim to include all voices, stories and perspectives in our programs and inspire similar efforts in the Portland, Maine area, resulting in a more just and equitable society where everyone's contributions are valued.

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Portland Ovations' programs are presented on Wabanaki land, home of the Maliseet, Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy, Abenaki and Penobscot Nations, their elders past and present, and future generations.

Created and written by Dr. Liz Schildkret

Designed by Katie Day

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## PLAN YOUR VISIT

Plan your visit to Merrill Auditorium

<https://www.porttix.com/plan-your-visit/merrill-auditorium/>

Learn more about accessibility at Portland Ovations

<https://portlandovations.org/about/accessibility/>

Get the latest health and safety information for Portland Ovations productions

<https://portlandovations.org/about/health-safety/>



# Audience Guide

## *Beautiful Blackbird Live!*

Welcome from Portland Ovations! I'm so excited to welcome you to Westbrook Performing Arts Center for *Beautiful Blackbird Live!* presented by Alliance Theatre of Georgia. One of the national leaders in producing innovative theater for very young audience members, Alliance Theatre's funky adaptation brings Ashley Bryan's beloved book to vibrant, joyful life.

Audience members like you play a special and important role in the performance. The performers are very aware of the audience while they perform. Sharing their hard work and joy with you is one of the best parts of being a performer. The cast of *Beautiful Blackbird Live* highly encourage clapping along and may even invite you to sing with them.

Thank you so much for joining Portland Ovations to experience live theater today. I hope you have a wonderful time. After the show, don't forget to tell us about your experience! Find us on social media @portlandovations, or email us at [offstage@portlandovations.org](mailto:offstage@portlandovations.org). I can't wait to hear from you.

Enjoy the show!

Liz



Liz Schildkret

Director, School and Family Programming



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashley Bryan was a renowned artist, writer, storyteller, and humanitarian. He published more than 50 books, most of them for young people. Born in 1923, Ashley was raised in the Bronx, NY. He wrote his first book at the age of 5 for his Kindergarten class. At seventeen, he entered the tuition-free Cooper Union School of Art and Engineering, having been denied entry elsewhere because of his race. Drafted out of art school into the segregated US army at age nineteen, Ashley preserved his humanity throughout World War II by drawing, stowing supplies in his gas mask when necessary. After the war, Ashley completed his Cooper Union degree, studied philosophy and literature at Columbia University, and then went to Europe on a Fulbright scholarship.

Throughout his career, Ashley taught art at several schools and universities in the United States. He retired in the 1980s to Maine's Cranberry Isles as professor emeritus of Dartmouth College. *Beautiful Blackbird*, published in 2003, is perhaps his most well-known and beloved book. He continued to write, create art, and publish books throughout his life. He passed away in February 2022.

Ashley's books won numerous awards and honors, including the Coretta Scott King—Virginia Hamilton Lifetime Achievement Award, Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal, and the New York Public Library's Literary Lions award. Libraries, children's rooms, and literary festivals are named for him all over the United States and in several countries in Africa. Works like *Beautiful Blackbird* sing out Ashley Bryan's philosophy that connection is what matters most. In Ashley's own words, "At every moment I strive for connection. If you are in the moment, you are stretching out to reach that which you recognize in others. That's my secret."

## ABOUT THE MUSIC

Composer and music director Eugene H. Russell IV calls the music in *Beautiful Blackbird Live!* "funky soulful family music." When setting out to create the music for *Beautiful Blackbird Live!*, Russell wanted the music to reflect the rhythm and spirit of the book. "I wanted something that grooved that was fun enough for the kids but funky enough for the parents," he said in an interview with Alliance Theatre. Russell decided that what the show needed was music that went beyond traditional children's music and musical theater. It needed Funk. According to Russell, "When you look at the book that inspired *Beautiful Blackbird Live!*, the book by Ashley Bryan, the rhythms are obvious. And the colors as well. There's something about the colors that said funk to me, as well as the rhythm of the language."

When he began composing *Beautiful Blackbird Live!*, Russell started with Ashley Bryan's words. He focused on the rhythm and story of Bryan's poetry, creating music that moved in the same way, following the rhythm of Bryan's words and writing musical lines that rose and fell with the story. In an interview, Russell described his process as a journey following Bryan's words:

"It's fun because you get to say, 'Okay, let's see where this piece takes me!' Often, if you kind of get out of the way as the composer, songs will write themselves. And I don't mean that literally; I wish it was that easy! But if you keep yourself out of it and keep the stories centered, then the story will inform you of what the sound should be, and it will only make sense. I'm like, 'Oh my goodness, of course, that makes sense! Of course this should be in 5/4 time! Of course this needs this instrument or that instrument, because that only makes sense!'"

From: *The Color of Rhythm in the Air* by Sally Henry Fuller, Alliance Theatre, March 26, 2021

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Visit the Beautiful Blackbird Children's Book Festival's Website



Learn about Ashley Bryan, his philosophy, and his work at the Ashley Bryan Center:



Read composer Eugene H. Russell IV's process of creating Beautiful Blackbird Live:



## BOOK LIST BEAUTIFUL BLACKBIRD CHILDREN'S BOOK FESTIVAL 2024

The following books were selected for the 5th Annual Beautiful Blackbird Children's Book Festival. The book list features titles for a wide range of readers. Find them at your local library or at our partner bookstore, Print: A Bookstore.

### *The Adventures of Aku*

Adapted and illustrated by Ashley Bryan

### *Beat the Story-Drum, Pum Pum*

Adapted and illustrated by Ashley Bryan

### *Beautiful Blackbird (Board Book)*

Adapted and illustrated by Ashley Bryan

### *The Ox of the Wonderful Horns and Other African Folktales*

Adapted and illustrated by Ashley Bryan

### *When I Wrap My Hair*

Written by Shauntay Grant  
& illustrated by Jenin Mohammed

### *Something, Someday*

Written by Amanda Gorman  
& illustrated by Christian Robinson

### *My Name is Sangoel*

Written by Karen Williams  
& illustrated by Khadra Mohammed

### *Ellen's Broom*

Written by Kelly Starling Lyons  
& illustrated by Daniel Minter

### *Frizzy*

Written by Claribel A Ortega  
& illustrated by Rose Bousamra

### *Swim Team: A Graphic Novel*

Written by Johnnie Christmas

## ACTIVITIES

### DRAWING SONGS

If you love the music in today's performance, continue the beat at home with this fun activity that encourages active listening. You'll need:

- art supplies like paper and crayons
- a playlist of the songs from *Beautiful Blackbird Live!*, which you can find on Spotify posted by Alliance Theatre

Begin by playing a song from the *Beautiful Blackbird Live!* Studio album. With your art supplies, create a picture that represents the sound of the music. Use your creativity to draw what you hear. Share your art with us @portlandovations or email it to us at offstage@portlandovations.org.

### CREATE A PAPER CUT-OUT COLLAGE

Ashley Bryan created the colorful illustrations for *Beautiful Blackbird* by cutting shapes and birds out of colorful paper and arranging them to in collages to bring the story to life. Try this yourself at home to create your own stories. You'll need:

- colorful construction paper
- white or black paper (your collage base)
- scissors
- glue

Start by drawing shapes onto your colorful construction paper. Once you're satisfied with your drawings, cut them out. Save your scraps! The outlines your shapes leave behind can be used to fill out space in your collage and create a more dynamic picture. Arrange your shapes on a piece of black or white paper. Once you're satisfied with your collage, glue your shapes in place. Share your art with us @portlandovations or email it to us at offstage@portlandovations.org.

### QUESTIONS FOR THE JOURNEY HOME

After you watch the performance, consider these questions.

- What did you notice about the performance?
- What instruments did you see and hear?
- How did the musicians work together while they performed?
- What were some similarities you noticed between the songs? What were some differences?
- How was the performance you saw similar to the book *Beautiful Blackbird*? How was it Different?