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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**The Wilma Theater Concludes its 2015-2016 Season with
Lucas Hnath's *The Christians*, Directed by Timothy Bond,
Co-Produced with Syracuse Stage**

Over the course of two decades, Pastor Paul has turned a modest storefront of a church into a Megachurch complete with a coffee shop and bookstore in the lobby, a congregation of thousands, and a baptismal font as big as a swimming pool. On the celebratory day that the church's debts are paid off, he decides to preach a controversial sermon. It shakes the foundation of his church's beliefs, as well as his marriage, and congregants begin to question his motivations. The Wilma has cultivated a relationship with Syracuse Stage over the past two years, and is thrilled to co-produce *The Christians* with them in a production that includes a live community choir.

***The Christians* begins on Wednesday, May 4, 2016; and opens on Wednesday, May 11, 2016.** A fact sheet about the production's cast, production team, and performance dates is included at the end of this release. For critics and members of the press interested in attending Press Night on Wednesday, May 11 at 7:30pm, contact Alison Ehrenreich at aehrenreich@wilmatheater.org or 215.893.9456 x102.

The Wilma's co-production of *The Christians* with Syracuse Stage will be directed by Timothy Bond, Syracuse Stage's Artistic Director, with whom the Wilma has cultivated a strong working relationship over the past several years. "For me, *The Christians* is very much a play of ideas, arguments, and dilemmas that are quite brilliantly unanswered," described Bond. "Our design team and acting company have approached the world of this play like an installation piece: without commentary, we have designed a real church, with real people, struggling with profoundly difficult issues. The bones and structure of the text are in many ways Greek; we are quite clearly in a church and witnessing a prolonged sermon, yet the experience is also like being at a public forum or in a courtroom." The production requires the realization of a full-blown mega-church, designed by Wilma HotHouse Associate Artist Matt Saunders, which will be installed at the Wilma immediately following the Syracuse production.

The cast of the Philadelphia production of *The Christians* will feature a full community choir of local-area residents across all ages, demographics, and races. “Folks have come from all over the city of Philadelphia, from all walks of life, and unique cultural backgrounds, to share their beautiful voices and spirits with us,” explained Bond. “This choir, under the direction of our music director and composer Michael Keck, consists of individuals who are all different people of faith, believers and non-believers.” While some of these community members knew of the Wilma from attending past productions, many of them were experiencing it for the first time when they auditioned. “I was intrigued by the name of the production, as I believe it may be one that I can personally relate to and can identify with,” wrote one choir member; “I love to sing, and especially when it is for God’s glory,” wrote another; and many wrote that they had sought out the choir as a way to meet community members who shared their interest in music.

In directing the play, Bond has been motivated thematically by the following phrase, uttered by *The Christians’* Pastor Paul: “I have a powerful urge to communicate with you, but I find the distance between us insurmountable.” As Bond describes, “This idea can be applied to any number of subjects that create rifts between people.” With its balanced depictions of how personal faith can reach a crossroads, “this is a play that for me encourages community, invites people of all faiths, and consciously takes no sides in showing the personal costs of trying to overcome the seemingly insurmountable divides evident in so many aspects of our contemporary world.”

About the Playwright:

Lucas Hnath’s plays include *The Christians* (2014 Humana Festival, Playwrights Horizons), *Red Speedo* (Studio Theatre, DC), *A Public Reading of an Unproduced Screenplay About the Death Of Walt Disney* (Soho Rep), *Nightnight* (2013 Humana Festival), *Isaac’s Eye* (Ensemble Studio Theatre), *Death Tax* (2012 Humana Festival, Royal Court Theatre), and *The Courtship of Anna Nicole Smith* (Actors Theatre of Louisville). His plays are published by Dramatists Play Service. Lucas has been a resident playwright at New Dramatists since 2011, and is a proud member of the Ensemble Studio Theatre. Lucas is a winner of the 2012 Whitfield Cook Award for *Isaac’s Eye* and received a 2013 Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award Citation for *Death Tax*. He has also received commissions from the EST/Sloan Project, Actors Theatre of Louisville, South Coast Repertory, Playwrights Horizons, New York University’s Graduate Acting Program, and the Royal Court Theatre. Lucas holds a BFA and an MFA from New York University’s Department of Dramatic Writing.

About the Director:

Timothy Bond is in his ninth season as producing artistic director of Syracuse Stage where he has directed *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Other Desert Cities*, August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*, *The Whipping Man*, *Two Trains Running*, *The Brothers Size*, *The Boys Next Door*, *Radio Golf*, *No Child...*, *Fences*, *The Price*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. He has 27 years’ experience in leading regional theatres throughout the country. Previously, he served for 11 years as associate artistic director of the famed Oregon Shakespeare Festival where he directed 12 productions, including works by

Shakespeare, August Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks, Edward Albee, Lorraine Hansberry, Lynn Nottage, Octavio Soliz, and Pearl Cleage. Prior to that, Bond spent 13 years with the Seattle Group Theatre, serving as artistic director from 1991 – 1996. While there, he directed more than 20 plays including a number of world and West Coast premieres, and he oversaw the largest capital campaign in the company's history, culminating in the completion of a new theatre complex in the Seattle Center. Bond has also directed at such prestigious theatres as The Guthrie, Arena Stage, Seattle Repertory Theatre, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, The Cleveland Play House, A Contemporary Theatre, Indiana Repertory Theatre, and Geva Theatre. Bond received a Theatre Communications Group/National Endowment for the Arts Directing Fellowship Award and has twice won *Backstage West's* Garland Award for Outstanding Direction for *Les Blancs* (1998) and *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (1997). He served on the board of directors of the Theatre Communications Group from 1993 to 1997. Bond holds a BFA from Howard University and an MFA in directing from the University of Washington. This production marks Bond's final directorial effort as Syracuse Stages' producing artistic director. In July, he moves to the University of Washington in Seattle where he joins the theatre faculty as a full professor

Cast and Design Team:

The Christians' cast includes **Ames Adamson** as Elder Jay, **Paul DeBoy** as Pastor Paul, **Julie Jesnick** as Jenny, **Erika LaVonn** as Elizabeth, and **DeLance Minefee** as Joshua.

The artistic team includes Set Designer **Matt Saunders** (*An Octoroon, The Hard Problem, Hamlet*), Costume Designer **Helen Q. Huang** (*The Convert*), Lighting Designer **Thom Weaver** (*An Octoroon; The Hard Problem; Rapture, Blister, Burn*), Arrangements and Original Music by **Michael G. Keck** (Wilma Theater debut), and Projection Designer **Kate Freer** (Wilma Theater Debut). The production's resident stage manager is Patreshettarlini Adams, and its production manager is Clayton Tejada.

Special Events and Opportunities:

College Night: Wednesday, May 4, 6:30pm

College students are invited to join classmates and meet students from other colleges and universities for a complimentary pre-show reception. Before the show they can enjoy food, friends, and win prizes!

Beer Tasting pre-show reception with Naked Brewing Company: Friday, May 6, 7pm

Join us for a pre-show beer tasting in our lobby from 7 to 8pm with Naked Brewing Company—complimentary for ticket-holders to that evening's performance!

Directors Gathering Dialogue: Tuesday, May 10

Immediately following the performance, a member of the Directors Gathering will join *The Christians* director Timothy Bond for an audience-led conversation to discuss the behind-the-scenes process of directing *The Christians*.

Post-Show Chats: May 12 and 19

Learn more about the production through discussions with artists and audience members following these evening performances.

Coffee Chat: Wednesday, May 25

Chat with literary staff about *The Christians* and enjoy complimentary coffee from Saxbys Coffee following Wednesday's matinee performance.

Young Friends pre-show reception: Friday, May 20, 7pm

For audience members 40 and under, this performance includes a complimentary pre-show food and drink reception at the Wilma from 7 to 8pm!

Open Captioning: Saturday, May 28, 2pm

Tickets: Under our new Wilma WynTix initiative all tickets, including subscription tickets, for all days and times throughout the full four-week mainstage run will be enjoyed by the general public at the subsidized rate of \$25 or \$10 for students and theater artists with valid ID. Tickets are available at the Wilma's Box Office by calling 215.546.7824, visiting wilmatheater.org, or coming to the theater, located at 265 South Broad Street in Philadelphia.

Mission: The Wilma Theater creates living, adventurous art. We engage artists and audiences in imaginative reflection on the complexities of contemporary life. We present bold, original, well-crafted productions that represent a range of voices, viewpoints, and styles.

FACT SHEET:

What: *The Christians*, by Lucas Hnath
Directed by Timothy Bond
Co-Produced by Syracuse Stage

Where: The Wilma Theater
265 South Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19107

When: May 4 – May 29, 2016. Opening Night: May 11, 2016. *For critics and members of the press interested in attending Press Night on Wednesday, May 11 at 7:30pm, contact Alison Ehrenreich at aehrenreich@wilmatheater.org or 215.893.9456 x102.*

Summary: Over the course of two decades, Pastor Paul has turned a modest storefront of a church into a Megachurch complete with a coffee shop and bookstore in the lobby, a congregation of thousands, and a baptismal font as big as a swimming pool. On the celebratory day that the church's debts are paid off, he decides to preach a controversial sermon. It shakes the foundation of his church's beliefs, as well as his marriage, and congregants begin to question his motivations.

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Erika LaVonn as Elizabeth
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Artistic Team:

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