



## TALAWA ICONIC

# Star-studded lineup announced for Talawa Theatre's 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Showcase

Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> October 2026, 7pm

Black Carpet from 6pm

Hackney Empire, 291 Mare Street, London E8 1EJ

A spectacular lineup of some of the UK's most acclaimed Black theatre artists, from across Talawa's history, will come together to celebrate the company that championed them for one extraordinary 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary event. *Talawa Iconic* arrives at Hackney Empire on 13<sup>th</sup> October for an evening looking back on Talawa's profound influence on Black British theatre.

Set to open with a speech by Olivier Award-nominated actor and trustee of host venue Hackney Empire **Josette Bushell-Mingo OBE** (*The Lion King*, Lyceum Theatre; *Nina – A Story About Me and Nina Simone*, Unity Theatre), whose illustrious career reflects the excellence Talawa has championed for generations, the night's programme brings together excerpts from productions spanning Talawa's pioneering four decades. Performances include Talawa's inaugural production *The Black Jacobins* (1986), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1989), Talawa co-founder Yvonne Brewster OBE's history-making *Antony & Cleopatra* (1991), *King Lear* (2015), Theresa Ikoko's award-winning drama *Girls* (2016), immersive dance experience *Run It Back* (2019), *A Place for We* (2021), musical tribute to overlooked Black British history *Recognition* (2023), *Play On!* (2025) and its powerful fusion of dance and spoken word *Fragments of Us* (2026). Accompanied by music from *Chineke!* Quartet, the performances will celebrate the breadth of Talawa's work and its lasting influence on British theatre.

Bringing her formidable comic energy to *Talawa Iconic*, BBC screen star **Tameka Empson** (*Eastenders*, BBC; *Aladdin*, Hackney Empire) returns to Hackney Empire's stage joining longstanding Talawa actor **Ben Thomas** (*Antony and Cleopatra*, Everyman Theatre Liverpool)

whose own history with the company goes back three decades to revisit Oscar Wilde's witty *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Award-winning playwright and Talawa alumna **Theresa Ikoko** (*WAHALA*, BBC; *Girls*, Soho Theatre, Talawa) will showcase an excerpt from *Girls* (2016) which won the prestigious Alfred Fagon award, her powerful drama about three friends whose bond is tested after they are kidnapped from their Nigerian hometown. Talawa first supported Ikoko through its *Talawa Firsts* programme before producing the play, which won the prestigious Alfred Fagon Award. The programme continues today, reflecting Talawa's enduring commitment to nurturing vital new voices within the industry.

Original cast member **David Webber** (*After Sunday*, The Bush Theatre; *Chewing Gum*, Channel 4) reunites with **Laurence Ubong Williams** (*The Motive and the Cue*, National Theatre) for *A Place for We*, using humour and heart to explore belonging and cultural identity. While returning cast member **Lifford Shillingford** (*Britain's Got Talent*; ITV) serenades audiences in a snippet from Talawa's hit musical revival *Play On!*

In a particularly poignant homecoming, **Doña Croll** (*Antony & Cleopatra*, Bloomsbury Theatre; *All My Sons*, New Wolsey Theatre) will return to *Antony & Cleopatra* and the role that made theatrical history when she became the first Black actor to play Cleopatra professionally on the British stage. Originally directed by Talawa co-founder Yvonne Brewster OBE in 1991, the production will form one of several special tributes celebrating the visionary woman who helped make Talawa what it is today.

Artistic Director Michael Buffong comments, *It's a real joy and privilege for us to bring such a selection of phenomenal Black talent to the stage to celebrate our 40th anniversary. The evening will be uniquely Talawa, displaying the breadth and depth of talent and stories we have collaborated on over the years. This is one not to be missed.*

## Notes to Editors

Date                      Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> October 2026  
                                 Black Carpet, 6pm  
                                 Showcase, 7pm

Location                Hackney Empire, 291 Mare Street, London, E8 1EJ

Running Time         2 hours 30 mins, including interval

Box Office Available at [talawa.com](http://talawa.com) and [hackneyempire.co.uk](http://hackneyempire.co.uk)  
Tickets £40  
Hospitality packages available from £4,000  
£20 tickets available for under 25s and Croydon and Hackney locals

Website <https://talawa.com/productions/talawa-iconic-40-year-anniversary>

## **Talawa Theatre Company**

Talawa is the UK's outstanding Black British theatre company. Founded in 1986 by Black artists and activists Yvonne Brewster OBE, Mona Hammond OBE, Carmen Munroe DBE and Inigo Espejel, Talawa was created to address the lack of opportunities for Black actors on British stages. Talawa's ongoing mission is to diversify the theatre industry, making it fully representative of the UK population. Talawa is using their milestone 40th anniversary year to galvanise financial support and create specific channels for giving based on the incredible legacy of our founders.

Talawa is more determined than ever to be courageous and creative in its programming, shine a spotlight on Black creative talent, inspire dialogue across a diverse range of audiences and enrich the cultural life of all. To continue paving the way for the next 40 years, Talawa Theatre Company must be backed with the same support, strength and boldness it brings to the stage.

<https://www.talawa.com>

## **Hackney Empire**

Since 1901 Hackney Empire has been creating unforgettable experiences for audiences and artists, young people and communities, on and off its stage.

The iconic venue is recognised nationally for its transformational work with young people, developing the future arts workforce; and its continued commitment to creating access, opportunity, nurturing and championing global majority creatives and communities.

Each year more than 150,000 people are welcomed through its doors to watch theatre, comedy, music, opera and dance, in its Grade II\* listed building, recently named "London's most beautiful theatre" (Time Out); while more than 6,000 young people are provided a safe space to build their confidence and transform their aspirations.

Hackney Empire's pantomime is legendary, and the 2025 production of Cinderella received nominations for Best Director and Best Sisters at the UK Pantomime Awards. Hackney Empire's

co-production of Romeo & Juliet received two nominations at the 2025 Black British Theatre Awards; and in March 2026, the organisation signalled the ambition for its next chapter, premiering I'm Every Woman: The Chaka Khan Musical, starring Alexandra Burke.

As Hackney Empire approaches its 125th anniversary in December 2026, the organisation is excited to push forward again, making Hackney - and the Empire - ever more central to the UK theatre ecology and narrative.

[Hackneyempire.co.uk](https://hackneyempire.co.uk)

All enquiries, high res images and further information:

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