

PLAYBILL

NEDA WANTS TO DIE

A play commissioned by the World Bank Art Program for the
'1 in 3' exhibition on gender-based violence

Nairobi, June 2015



Luigi Laraia
Playwright and Director

Luigi has written several plays. His latest works include *Heard*, on the intricacies of a consultation meeting among development partners; *Neda* on sexual violence and is currently working on a play on climate change which would, along with *Heard* and *Neda Wants To Die*, complete his 'Development Trilogy'. His next work will be a play about the signing of the 1944 Bretton Wood Conference. He also wrote *Esmá*, a play on the *desaparecidos* (disappeared) during the "dirty war" in Argentina. He is Italian and has worked with the World Bank since 2010.

In 2014, I was intrigued but extremely apprehensive when asked to write a play about gender-based violence. How to do justice to such a somber topic? I felt tested, pushed and uncomfortable—but in the right way. After a period of research, once I was able to shape and discipline the emotions I wanted to convey, the story came to life almost by itself.

Neda Wants to Die tries to understand how the lines between criminal and victim are blurred by the confusion and cruelty of war. It is a look at aspects of gender-based violence that are often obscured by personal fear, political convenience, limited knowledge. I invite you all to avoid or delay condemnation and sympathy and focus on those forces that pull the good, the evil and the neutral together. My intent is not to justify unspeakable crimes but to explore and possibly humanize the minds of those involved. In spite of all the evident violence, desperation and failures, this is still of tale of humanity.

The three brave actors that you will see today have worked very hard to explore the complexities of the moral dimension of the three characters. I am very proud of what they have done. Directing them on stage through this entire process, has been an incredibly rewarding journey for me.

I thank you for being here today and I hope that whether you enjoy the play or not, you will be moved to act.

The Cast:



Richard Tanenbaum, Ph.D., BCC
(John Leighley)

Having established my independent clinical psychology/leadership development practice in 1985 (Behavior Consultants, Global Learning Partners, LLC), I have been privileged to be an executive coach at the World Bank since 2003. As a coach, my goal is to help people realize their potential and maximize their success, satisfaction and effectiveness, and to remain resilient. I am honored to have the opportunity to work with so many passionate, talented and committed professionals. In addition to coaching at the World Bank, I work with leaders from a wide variety of public and private organizations, with special expertise in the international financial, health-care and federal sectors.

With respect to the performing arts, I continue to perform as a classical singer and actor and have co-founded an opera company (Teatro Lirico of DC). Producing educational television programming and guest hosting on television and radio talk shows are other interests of mine. Using a “business theater” model, I also write and produce training videos for businesses and academic institutions. I am extremely excited to have the opportunity to merge my experience and interests, and take the stage to perform the role of John Leighley, a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Case Officer, in this original production of *Neda Wants to Die*.

Simply put, gender based violence (GBV) destroys lives – physically and psychologically, and often only leaves a shell of a person to live out the rest of their life, haunted every moment by the trauma they have endured. The fact that anyone can survive this ordeal is indeed a testament to the human condition. Having worked with servant leaders in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina, and health care professionals in all branches of the military over the last 15 years, I am well acquainted with trauma and its impact on people’s lives. As a mental health professional and executive coach, I am extremely interested in the intersection of trauma, resiliency and courage. Moreover, I believe it is our moral obligation to educate the public about circumstances, situations and actions that endanger and/or destroy lives whenever we have the opportunity to do so. Especially when coupled with the World Bank’s commitment to gender equality and gender rights, theater provides an invaluable opportunity to educate and sensitize persons to the reality of GBV. I am very honored to be a part of this extraordinary project.



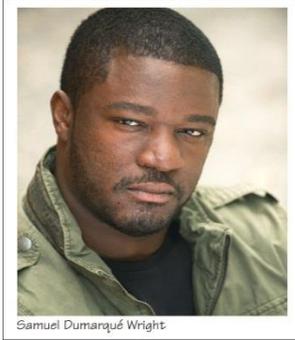
Karen Elle (Neda)

Karen Elle is an actress and playwright from Washington, DC. She has lived in the District since she first came from Dayton, Ohio, to attend college at Howard University. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in English and has been pursuing her theatre passion with gazelle intensity. She has appeared in several productions in the area, including *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (African Continuum Theatre Company; Forum Theatre Company); *The Arabian Nights* (Perfect Love and Others—Silver Spring Stage); *The Last Day of Judas Iscariot* (St. Monica, Simon the Zealot, Centurion—Silver Spring Stage); *The Vagina Monologues*; *Burning Her Name*; *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (Theatre Lab). She has also performed in the Capitol Fringe Festival (iLust for G-Love: An AutoEthnography; Table 8); the Delaware Fringe Festival (*Special Ed*); and the DC Black Theatre Festival (*The A Chronicles, Special Ed*) and has participated in several readings (*Tea Leaves, Devil's in Bed-Stuy, Monteggia Fracture, Ms. Frances and the Bamboo Garden, Tea with Michelle, Unspoken Word, Seed, The Agony of David*). In 2011 her short play, *A Sexual Play*, won the Adult Category of the DC Black Theatre Festival's One Act Battle. Her role of St. Monica in Silver Spring Stage's production of *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* earned her a 2011 WATCH nomination for Best Actress in a Play.

Aside from performing and writing, Karen has been involved in other areas of theatre. She was a literary volunteer for Arena Stage and worked as the Assistant Dramaturge on their 2010 production of *Duke Ellington's Sophisticated Ladies*. She currently serves on the Claque at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company.

Aside from theatre, Karen enjoys working with children. She volunteers with the children's ministry at her church. She also enjoys learning about other cultures and travelling. One of her most memorable trips was a cultural tour of Cuba she took in 2012. There she was exposed to various aspects of Cuban art and culture. While she has always appreciated other cultures, the trip influenced her to become a cultural artist. Her art is her gift, and she will use it to advance social justice and build cultural bridges.

I don't think I realized the impact of war and gender violence until I read the play *Ruined* by Lynn Nottage. Back then I was volunteering at a theatre in DC that was producing the show, and I researched information relating to the play for the theatre's blog article. As I read accounts of women who had suffered sexual violence as a result of war, my heart cried for them. I wanted to do more than feel empathy. Thankfully, five years later, I can do that by being a part of *Neda Wants to Die*. I love theatre and performing; most of all, I love theatre that pushes for change, theatre that takes us from our comfort zones and opens our eyes to perspectives and circumstances of which we are unaware. *Neda Wants to Die* is one such play, and I am proud to be a part of it. I also love plays with a strong female character, which is another reason why I was drawn to this project. Part of my personal mission as an actress is to tackle projects that will have a positive impact on people, and I am so honored and excited to be cast in this play.



Samuel Dumarque Wright (Captain Laurent Sasa)

Samuel is an actor from the District of Columbia. He attended Fairmont State University in West Virginia where he graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice and a minor in Sociology. Samuel also graduated the two year acting program at the National Conservatory of Dramatic Arts in Georgetown, Washington D.C. Samuel has been acting professionally for the past 5 years. He has been seen locally in shows *The Arabian Nights* at S.S stage, *Top Dog Underdog* at Actors Repertory Theatre and *An Adult Evening* with Shel Silverstein at Studio Theatre, *The Diaries of Adam and Eve* at Actors Repertory Theatre, *Mr. Marmalade* at Actors Repertory Theatre. He also has a few film credits on his resume, *Evil Kin* on discovery i.d, the 48 hour film festival and some industrial films. Samuel is of West African descent (Liberia), both parents were born in Liberia and came to the U.S in the late 70s.

I am excited to be part of this great ensemble. This play has a very powerful message and I look forward to doing my part in providing a format for these topics to be talked about. I appreciate the opportunity to be part of this production of *Neda Wants To Die*. As an African, I recognize that equality of women is important for development. I am grateful to learn more about the issue of violence against women through my participation in this play. Although putting on a play won't end gender based violence I hope this production will give people some thought and insight to the atrocities that we must help eradicate.