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Eight Playwrights Win Helen Merrill Award

September 20, 2009 – Eight playwrights will each receive \$20,000 awards from the Helen Merrill Fund in The New York Community Trust on October 2nd, 2009 at the Algonquin Hotel. This is the 10 year anniversary of the awards, which were established by Helen Merrill, a theatrical agent who devoted her life to nurturing the careers of playwrights.

The 2009 winners for **Distinguished Playwright** are:

Nilo Cruz, Michael Weller, and Lanford Wilson

The 2009 winners for **Emerging Playwright** are:

Zakiyyah Alexander, Bathsheba Doran, Michael Golanco, Deborah Laufer, and Justin Sherin

Chris Durang, award-winning playwright and member of the selection committee, recalled Merrill's dedication to the theater. "Helen was my first agent, and I stayed with her for 22 years, until her death. She would often offer to loan money to clients who were feeling strapped, and when I was ill, she surprised me by making the most delicious chicken soup and then sending it to me by messenger."

"She didn't worry about her commissions, she just believed in the theater and in the individual playwright's voice," Durang continued. "Helen lived so frugally—in a second floor walk-up and with a tiny half-kitchen—that I was surprised to learn how much money she had amassed to leave to The Trust." By the time she passed away in 1997, she had spent little of the money she had earned from her career as photographer and theater agent, and had left the bulk of her estate to create the Helen Merrill Fund in The New York Community Trust.

Gay Young, director of donor relations at The Trust, said "Helen Merrill came to us to ensure that her legacy would be carried out in the way that she wanted, as we have done for so many generous New Yorkers. We think Ms. Merrill would be extremely happy to know that her unwavering support and dedication to the theater lives on."

The selection committee includes:

Christopher Durang, Obie Award-winning playwright, professor and actor, co-chair with Marsha Norman of the Playwriting Program at the Juilliard School in Manhattan

Susan Hilferty, Tony Award-winning costume designer for theater, opera, and film
Morgan Jenness, Creative Services/Literary Division, Abrams Artists Agency; former Associate Producer for the Public Theater

Emily Morse, Director of Artistic Development at New Dramatists

Richard Nelson, Olivier Award-winning playwright, former chair of the playwriting department at Yale University

Maurice Greenbaum, Esq. *in emeritus*, Helen Merrill's lawyer and financial advisor

Mel Gussow, *in memoriam*, the late *New York Times* theater critic

Past winners of the Helen Merrill Playwriting Award include:

David Adjmi, David Auburn, Tanya Barfield, Neal Bell, Brooke Berman, Constance Congdon, Kara Lee Corthron, Jorge Ignacio Cortinas, Angela Eisa Davis, Margaret Edson, Will Eno, Marcus Gardley, Gina Gionfriddo, Jessica Goldberg, Noah Haidle, Robert Handel, Amy Herzog, Albert Innaurato, Len Jenkin, Robert Kerr, Oni Faida Lampley, Tina Howe, Victor Lodato, Deborah Margolin, Dael Orlandersmith, David Rabe, Adam Rapp, Keith Reddin, Sarah Ruhl, Wallace Shawn, Theodora Skipitares, Victoria Stewart, Gary Sunshine, Samuel Brett Williams, Tracey Scott Wilson.

About The New York Community Trust

Since 1924, The New York Community Trust has been the community foundation of the New York metropolitan area, an aggregate of 2,000 funds created by charitable individuals, families, and corporations to improve the quality of life for all the area's residents. Grants made from these funds meet the changing needs of children, youth, and families; aid in community development; improve the environment; promote health; assist people with special needs; and support education, arts, and human rights. In 2008, The Trust made grants of \$168 million from assets of \$1.5 billion.