



WORLD PREMIERE

RELENTLESS

by TYLA ABERCRUMBIE

directed by RON OJ PARSON

Timeline
Theatre Company

BACKSTORY YOUR GUIDE TO TIMELINE PRODUCTIONS



Dear Friends,

Welcome back to a new beginning at TimeLine.

At long last, we're thrilled to launch our 25th Season with Tyla Abercrombie's *Relentless*, a passion project developed through our Playwrights Collective and heralded at our inaugural First Draft Festival.

Originally slated for its world premiere two years ago, we were days away from starting rehearsals when stages went dark in March 2020. Since then, among a sea of societal and industry uncertainty, two motivating lights that have guided TimeLine forward have been your unwavering support and our ardent belief in the power and importance of *Relentless*. And while history unfolded in the intervening months, the prescience and resonance of Tyla's writing only intensified.

For years, she's been known as one of Chicago's most esteemed actresses, with performances in *Paradise Blue* and *In Darfur* at TimeLine plus extensive credits across Chicago's major stages and an ever-growing body of work in TV and film, including a recurring role on Showtime's *The Chi*.

Now, her playwriting voice shines through in what already has the feel of an American classic, yet with a burning relevance that unmistakably illuminates our here-and-now.

Talking about her inspiration for *Relentless*, Tyla said: "As a child, my favorite literary period was the Harlem Renaissance. I was obsessed with

the artists, musicians, and revolutionaries of that time. I found myself learning a great deal about the American Black experience before then and during the Edwardian and Victorian era. Their existence had been ignored and often hidden, and seeing them in pictures made me want to know those people.

"Over the years, I became more surprised by the absence of awareness of this period. Even more disturbing was the belief that Black Americans hadn't contributed exponentially to the benefits we all enjoy today. The fact that those Americans were not slaves, and not poor, and not uneducated, became the spine of the journey to create *Relentless*. I tell this story, this way, because I feel it is necessary, and it's a beautifully rich period to be remembered, experienced, enjoyed, and relentlessly respected."

Set in 1919, the play reveals a nation reeling from two pandemics—the recent outbreak of influenza and the enduring scourge of racism. In a city on edge, two sisters gather together, in the wake of their mother's death, to settle her estate. Each on a course to change history, they're unprepared for what they uncover in a series of diaries left by the woman they thought they fully knew.

It's a story that exemplifies TimeLine's mission—providing a lens into how our culture was, juxtaposed with truths about how it is.

Following a prolonged hiatus from live performances, we're elated to return to the stage led by Tyla and her longtime collaborator and fellow TimeLine Company Member, director Ron OJ Parson.

Much has happened since we last welcomed you to the theatre, and we don't call the past two years any sort of an intermission. No respite was had; our work continued with deepened humility, attentive listening, full hearts, and immeasurable appreciation.

We begin a new chapter with eyes cast wider, arms open broader, and with a renewed reverence for this most-holy-of-platforms known as the theatre.

Here, we gather for revelation. For understanding. For questioning. And for celebrating our respective and collective humanity.

We've missed you dearly.
We're so glad you're here.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

TYLA ABERCROMBIE AND *RELENTLESS*

"Here we are in 2022, still fighting against many of the same injustices that the characters in *Relentless* deal with" — Tyla Abercrombie

Playwright Tyla Abercrombie is a TimeLine Company Member and 2016-2018 Playwrights Collective member whose plays include *Who's Afraid of Deepak Chopra*, *Asylum (aka Life)*, *Psychological Terrorism*, *Only Women Bleed*, *Naked and Raw*, *Affair of Ambiguity*, *Normality*, and *The Straw*. Her work has been produced by Pittsburgh Playwright's Theatre, MPAACT Theatre, and Chicago Cultural Center, and she was a recipient of the Raven Theatre Playwrights Initiative 2021.

Relentless received its first public reading in December 2018 as part of TimeLine's inaugural First Draft Playwrights Collective Festival. In March 2020, rehearsals were about to begin for its planned TimeLine world premiere when the production was postponed due to COVID-19.

In September 2020, the play was showcased in an online event titled "*Relentless: The Journey from the Black Victorian to Black Lives Matter*" as part of TimeLine's virtual Setting the Stage public program series. An edited version of that program may be viewed at youtube.com/timelinetheatre.

Relentless is the second play brought to full production through TimeLine's Playwrights Collective, launched in 2013 to support Chicago-based playwrights in residence and create new work centered on TimeLine's mission of presenting plays inspired by history that connect to today's social and political issues. The first was the 2018 world premiere of Brett Neveu's *To Catch a Fish*.

Playwright Tyla Abercrombie and Literary Manager Ben Thiem during a discussion following the first public reading of *Relentless* at the inaugural First Draft Festival in 2018.



THE TIMELINE: THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE OF 1919

1919 Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, a sculptor and stage designer, debuts her sculpture, "In Memory of Mary Turner: As A Silent Protest Against Mob Violence," in honor of the horrific lynching of Mary Turner and her unborn baby in 1918.



Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller's sculpture, "In Memory of Mary Turner: As A Silent Protest Against Mob Violence." (Museum of African American History, Boston and Nantucket)

1919 Jesse Redmon Fauset becomes literary editor of *The Crisis* magazine, the official periodical of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). As a literary editor, she will be credited with fostering the careers of several noted writers of the Harlem Renaissance, including Countee Cullen and Nella Larsen.

January 16 The 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, prohibiting the "manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors," is ratified.

Playwright Tyla Abercrombie explains that *Relentless*, at its core, is a story about family, loss, love, and revolution. Pretty much a mirror image of today. The difference is that the play takes place in 1919 with affluent African Americans.

After the sudden death of the matriarch, sisters Janet and Annelie return to their childhood home in Philadelphia. They discover who they are and who their mother was by taking a trip backward through her private and secretly kept diaries.

Around them, the world is changing. The first world war has just ended in 1918, the influenza virus—also referred to as the Spanish flu—is ravaging the country, race relations are strained, the suffragette movement is at its height, Red Summer is about to explode, Prohibition is less than a year away from becoming law, and newly freed Blacks are creating a new America.

In his seminal work published in 1903, *The Souls of Black Folk*, sociologist, historian, and activist W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” While Du Bois was pointing out the gruesome experiences of Black Americans as a result of the devastating effects of racism, he also signaled the rise of activists committed to social equality. As such, the first quarter of the 20th century witnessed both an upheaval in racial tensions as well as a surge, to quote scholar Glenn C. Loury, in “enlightened legislation, courageous leadership, and greater progress than many Americans thought possible.”



The front page of the Chicago Defender on August 2, 1919, announced the turmoil in the city and listed the names of those who were slain and injured.

As the 19th century ended, Black women began to organize themselves into clubs due to being disenfranchised and, in some cases, left out of the clubs originated by the white women leading the women's suffrage movement, which aimed at fighting for the right of women to vote. For instance, in 1896, the National League of Colored Women and the National Federation of Afro-American Women joined together to form the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). At the helm of the association and its first president was Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954), an educator and activist.

While voting was a significant issue for Black clubwomen, their primary goal was to fight for social justice for all Black people. One example is the journalist and organizer of the Alpha Suffrage Club, Ida B. Wells, and her anti-lynching crusade. Other Black women leaders of the suffrage movement include Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), Janie Porter Barrett (1865-1948), and Mary Talbert (1866-1923), among others.

One of the first major events to mark a change in racial dynamics during the early 20th century was World War I. While more than 350,000 African Americans served in the war, fulfilling their patriotic duty with the hope that it would bring aid in their quest for equal rights on American soil, Black soldiers returned home to the mayhem of racial violence. Lynching continued. Poverty was rising. Housing discrimination remained.

However, Black Americans found ways to resist oppression and forge ahead by taking flight in the Great Migration, moving beyond the confines

of the South and seeking economic opportunities in major cities such as Philadelphia and Chicago. But while Blacks were making headway in their new cities, the angst of white people grew, and racial tensions increased.

A second event to mark the increase of racial tensions between Blacks and whites was the “Red Summer” of 1919—the months between April and November of that year when an outbreak of vicious riots and massacres occurred in major cities including Elaine, Ark.; Chicago, Ill.; and Washington, D.C.

For instance, a four-day riot took place in Washington, D.C. after a rumor that a group of Black men had assaulted a white woman, which impelled white mobs made up of primarily off-duty sailors and recently discharged veterans to incite violence within African American neighborhoods and onlookers on the street. During a parade celebrating the return of an all-Black troop from Europe, white mobs attacked the crowd and two Black servicemen were killed.

And on July 27 in Chicago, a riot erupted after a Black teenager drowned due to being hit with stones after drifting into the whites-only portion of the beach. Casualties from the Chicago riots included 38 deaths, more than 500 injuries, and about 1,000 Black families made homeless due to African American neighborhoods destroyed by fire.

James Weldon Johnson, the activist and writer most notably known for penning the lyrics to the Black National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” coined the term “Red Summer,” referring to the bloodshed of these and other events during 1919.

During riots in Chicago, the police force—owing both to understaffing and the open sympathy of many officers with the white rioters—was ineffective. Only the long-delayed intervention of the Illinois National Guard brought the violence to a halt. (Photograph by Jun Fujita)



February 20 *The Homesteader*, a film by Oscar Micheaux, is released in Chicago. Micheaux will become a prominent Black filmmaker over the next 40 years, producing and directing 24 silent films and 19 films with sound.



Newspaper promotion for *The Homesteader*, 1919. (The Department of Afro-American Research Arts and Culture Archive)

March 2 Claude A. Barnett founds the Associated Negro Press on Chicago's South Side, a publication which will become the longest-lived Black news service, “supplying 150 Black newspapers in the United States—and another 100 in Africa—with opinion columns, reviews of books, movies, records, and poetry, cartoons, and photographs.”

March 17 Singer Nathaniel Adams Coles, who will become publicly known as Nat King Cole and father to singer Natalie Cole, is born.

April The NAACP publishes the pamphlet, “Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States: 1898–1918,” a report to appeal to lawmakers to end the social, political, and economic terrorism associated with lynching.

May 3 The National Association of Negro Musicians is established.

May 10 Reports of the inciting incident will differ, but after a Black man allegedly wrongs a group of white

During the late 19th century, Black Americans began to adopt traditions and values associated with Victorian culture. It is no secret that these traditions and values were steeped in white American culture, which, subsequently, was the conduit to respectability politics for Black Americans. What may not be as evident is that Victorian culture in America was heavily influenced by Queen Victoria's reign of Great Britain (1837-1901).

In addition to mirroring white, upper-class culture, Black Americans were also introduced to Victorian culture by Blacks born in England who traveled to North America with white settlers. Even more, as slavery decreased (noting that slavery still existed even after the Emancipation Proclamation designated enslaved people as free), free Black people "maintained aristocratic appearances, based on their white employers or local culture."

Alden Whitman—a *New York Times* journalist who also wrote on American Victorian culture—notes that although it was imported from England, "Victorianism was nonetheless distinctively American in its manifestations here. For one thing, it was more intense, and for another, it was more diverse. Even so, although there were various subcultures and countercultures, the official culture was stoutly Victorian. It expressed itself in religion, art, literature science, public morality, the theater, and in public opinion."

Gender distinction, too, was a significant trope to emerge during the Victorian era, particularly as it pertained to Black women. Shirley J. Carlson, in her article "Black Ideals of

"Victorianism was nonetheless distinctively American in its manifestations here. For one thing, it was more intense, and for another it was more diverse."

— Alden Whitman

Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era," published in *The Journal of Negro History* in 1992, contends that much of the ideals of Victorian culture for Black folk can be observed through the experiences of Black women—notably referred to as Black Victoria.

"The ideal Black woman embodied the genteel behavior of the 'cult of true womanhood,' as espoused by the larger society," Carlson wrote. As such, Black Victoria, "like her white counterpart," was devoted to her role as a dutiful wife and mother, thus upholding a "virtuous and modest" home.

Carlson continues: "In addition, as an African American, her thoughts and actions exemplified the attributes valued by her own race and community. ... This ideal woman spent her leisure time in a variety of social activities, including attendance at teas and luncheons, parties and church activities, among others. Morally unassailable, she was virtuous and modest. Her personality was amiable—or 'sweet' to use Black parlance—she

Black activist Mary Church Terrell. (Library of Congress)



Ida B. Wells in Chicago in with her children, circa 1909. (Archivio GBB/Redux)

was also altruistic and pious. In appearance she was well groomed and presentable at all times. Her hair was carefully arranged and her costume was immaculate and appropriate for the occasion. In public she wore the traditional Victorian attire: A floor-length dress, with fitted bodice, a full skirt, and long sleeves often trimmed with a ruffle or lace. ... She was a 'lady.'"

Notwithstanding, race played a significant factor in how Black Victorian women navigated the social world. Make no mistake about it: Black American women who embodied Victorian ideals and beliefs did not simply aim to emulate white women.

Carlson again: "Black Victoria had other qualities: Qualities which were emphasized by her own Black community. First and foremost, she was intelligent and well-educated. She displayed a strong community and racial consciousness, often revealed in her work—whether paid or unpaid ... Self-confident and outspoken, she was highly esteemed by her community which frequently applauded her as a 'race woman' and role model for young people. In these areas, the Black community's expectations of the ideal woman differed from those of the larger society."

Thus, many Black Victorian women were enlightened activists committed to uplifting the Black race. Notable Black Victorian women include Black suffragists, anti-lynching activists Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell, and opera singer Marie Selika Williams.

sailors in Charleston, S.C., the sailors go to a local Black restaurant to find the man. Upon leaving the restaurant, they attack multiple Black people on King Street, shooting and killing two men and destroying a barbershop.

May 25 Madam C.J. Walker, an entrepreneur of hair care products and the first African American woman self-made millionaire, dies.



Madame C.J. Walker.

June 4 The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, granting women the right to vote, is approved by Congress. Though this amendment will mean women can vote, Black women still face many challenges when it comes to getting to the polls.

July Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay publishes his poem, "If We Must Die," in *The Liberator* Magazine.

July After local distributor and school teacher Samuel L. Jones is concluded to be the author of an article in the *Chicago Defender* detailing the lynching of Lemuel Walters as part of the Longview, Texas Race Riot, he is targeted and beaten by a white mob, who also burn down his house.

July 27 Eugene Williams, a 17-year-old African American, drowns in Chicago's Lake Michigan after being hit with rocks by white beachgoers who are offended that Williams drifted to the white side of the shoreline.

September 28 The Omaha Race Riot begins after the lynching of Will Brown, a Black man accused of raping a white woman who is given no opportunity to defend himself.



During rehearsals for *Relentless*, dramaturg Khalid Y. Long (KL) posed a few questions to playwright Tyla Abercrombie (TA) about her inspiration for writing the play, being gobsmacked by the parallels between 1919 and today, and how this story fits into a larger narrative still to come.

(KL) What was your inspiration for writing *Relentless*?

(TA) My inspiration for *Relentless* was a love of the Harlem Renaissance. That might sound odd, but my favorite time in literature was the Harlem Renaissance. As a young girl, I read all the poets and authors and writers of that time, but what became significant was when I read the works of Zora Neal Hurston, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and so many more. I became fascinated with how they came to be. Where did this amazing generation of poets and writers descend from, and how were they inspired?

That led me backward to the Victorian Era, Edwardian Era, and so on. I discovered on my own that my heritage was so much more elaborate, intriguing, extraordinary than just bondage. The system we currently learn under and teach the kids of the future perpetuates lies that suggest Black folk had three—

now four—central moments in history: slavery/bondage, civil rights, Obama, and now, George Floyd. We are and have always been so much more than that. Our place in history begins with the beginning of time.

Researching backward from the Harlem Renaissance inspired me profoundly when I saw the affluent, educated, well-traveled, intensely well-versed, Black Victorian.

(KL) Although *Relentless* is set in 1919, the play is quite relevant today.

(TA) When I began writing *Relentless* during my time with TimeLine's Playwrights Collective in 2016 and completed it in 2018, I had no way of knowing how prescient the work would be. In fact, after we were postponed in 2020, as the news of the pandemic and unrest, women's movement, Times Up, and Black Lives Matter unfolded, we were constantly gobsmacked by the literal mirror image of the time. I chose 1919 for *Relentless* because it was such a pivotal year in the escalating change after the end of World War I. So much was on the horizon, including hope, but so much change exploded. 1919 was a time to be reckoned with; the world woke up in 1919 just as the world woke up in 2020.

(KL) Are there any playwrights who inspire your style of playwriting?

(TA) Wow! Great question. Yes. Lorraine Hansberry first and foremost inspires me. I was introduced to her by my elder sister, and *A Raisin in the Sun* remains my favorite play to this day.

I, of course, love August Wilson and all he gave me in the last 20 years in my theatre experience.

The Relentless cast and production team gather—masked in the room and remotely via Zoom—for the play's first rehearsal at TimeLine in December.



“1919 was a time to be reckoned with; the world woke up in 1919 just as the world woke up in 2020.”



Tyla Abercrombie at the first rehearsal of Relentless.

I also loved novels whose characters lived inside their novels like plays. I read Langston Hughes' Jesse B. Semple, and every chapter was like the scenes of a play. Other playwrights include P.J. Gibson, Pearl Cleage, and Zora Neale Hurston. But too ... I really love the work of Tennessee Williams. And Shakespeare. Damaged people navigating life and circumstance. That's who I want to watch on stage.

(KL) What do you hope audiences take away from a play so steeped in history?

(TA) I hope audiences take away so much intrigue that they go home moved to learn more about the period. I want the conversations over dinner after the show or after the second time seeing these excellent actors perform, that they ask serious questions about what they have perceived to be true in history and why they are enlightened by what they now know. I want audiences to have a good time but a visceral reaction; they won't let the play leave them for a few days. It's to be discussed, lived, digested, experienced.

(KL) *Relentless* is part of a larger trilogy. Can you share what audiences can expect in the future?

(TA) Well ... I researched these characters and created such complete backstories, it felt unfair for that work to be mine and not shared. Thus, it became the inspiration to start a conversation between generations. Just like we're examining 1919 in the theatre now, many other plays are steeped in history this season. I am intrigued by the conversation continuing. The second play explores the descendants of *Relentless*. Thus, how do we set our lineage up to succeed or fail? And what does that look like in 2022? The third play is a mystery.

October 1–3 In Elaine, Arkansas, the bloodiest race riots of this “Red Summer”—as the period of racial violence between late winter and early autumn of 1919 will become known—break out. Mob violence quickly ensues after a shooting incident at a Progressive Farmers and Household Union meeting. While the exact number of deaths will remain unknown, an estimated 200 or more African Americans lose their lives in Elaine.

October 14 Civil rights activist Marcus Garvey is shot by George Tyler in an assassination attempt.

December 23 Alice H. Parker files a patent for her natural gas furnace invention.

BACKSTORY: THE CREDITS

Dramaturgy & Historical Research
by Khalid Y. Long

Written by Khalid Y. Long, *with contributions by* PJ Powers, Chelsea Smith, and Lara Goetsch

Editing and Graphic Design
by Lara Goetsch

Relentless promotional image design by Michal Janicki

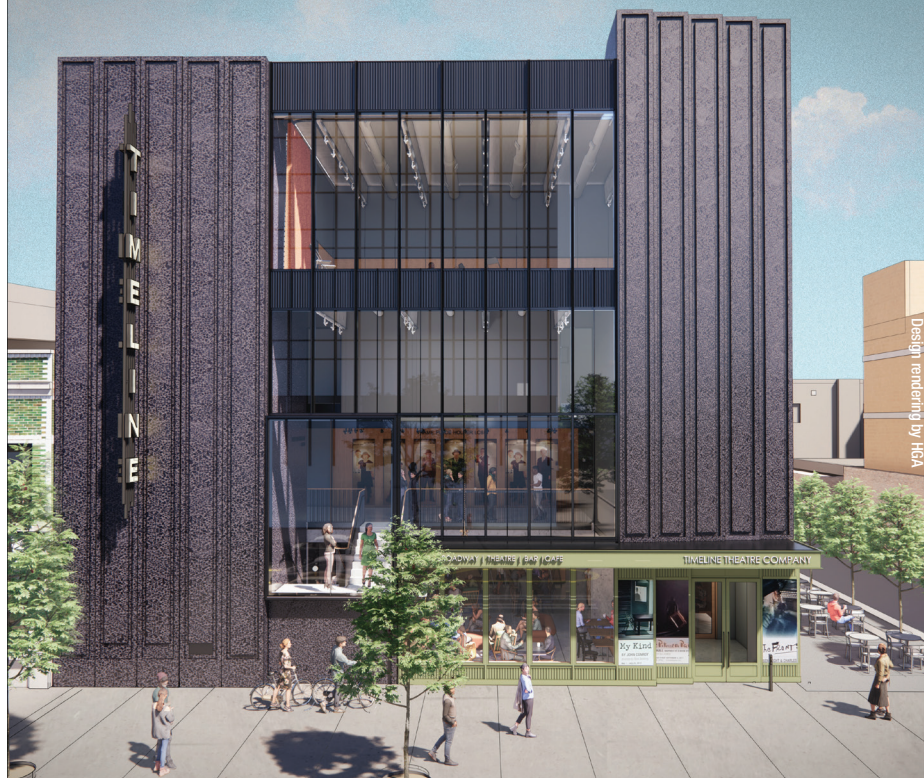
Event and Rehearsal Photography
by Jenny Lynn Christoffersen

Backstory is published to accompany each production during the season

Our Mission:

TimeLine Theatre presents stories inspired by history that connect with today's social and political issues.

Our collaborative artistic team produces provocative theatre and educational programs that engage, entertain and enlighten.



IT'S TIME

THE CAMPAIGN FOR **TIMELINE'S NEW HOME**

“This new building is an investment in the future of TimeLine—a home for artists, audiences, and community members that will ensure the company and its mission can endure”

— Managing Director Elizabeth K. Auman

Even a pandemic couldn't deter TimeLine's progress toward establishing the first home of our own. Since purchasing property at 5033-5035 N. Broadway Avenue (near the corner of Broadway and Argyle) in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood, we've deeply engaged with architect HGA on the creative design process, worked on developing stronger community connections in Uptown and beyond, and continued to build tremendous fundraising support from our community of supporters who believe in creating this new cultural asset for Chicago and laying the foundation for TimeLine's next era.

TimeLine's \$35 million new home will fully support and enhance TimeLine's mission, featuring:

- 250-seat flexible black box theatre
- Dedicated space for education and further engagement beyond the stage
- Exhibit galleries to enhance the production experience
- Expanded social spaces, including a bar and café open day and night
- Office space for our growing staff
- Plus opportunities for future expansion, including a second theatre
- All in the heart of the historic Uptown Entertainment District.

We're excited to create a space and an organization where artists are supported in doing their best work, where the community can thrive, and where the next generation can see themselves throughout this welcoming, gathering place.

You can read more about this thrilling project—anticipated to be completed in early 2024—on page 16 of the *Relentless* program book, and online at timelinetheatre.com/its-time.

To learn more about supporting TimeLine's new home project, please contact Chelsea Smith, Director of Major Gifts, at chelsea@timelinetheatre.com or 773.281.8463 x16.



At TimeLine's new home, you'll experience:

A TRANSFORMATIVE PERFORMANCE SPACE

Pictured at right: Various configurations of the 250-seat flexible black box theatre. (Renderings by Jeffrey D. Kmiec)

ENCOURAGEMENT TO ARRIVE EARLY AND STAY LATE

Pictured above, top: First-floor lobby bar and café. (Rendering by HGA)

AND AN AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE TAILORED FOR INTIMACY

Pictured above, middle and bottom: Historical lobby exhibits that are a TimeLine hallmark, plus space for education, engagement, and community events. (Renderings by Jeffrey D. Kmiec and HGA)



OUR BIGGEST
EVENT OF THE YEAR
RETURNS!

AND THIS TIME
WE'RE CELEBRATING

25



STEP INTO TIME: CHICAGO 1997

CELEBRATE TIMELINE'S MILESTONE ANNIVERSARY

by stepping back 25 years for an unforgettable evening that raises funds vital to our work. We'll return in-person to the Ritz-Carlton to look back at that not-that-long-ago (but wow-so-long-ago) time when six founders each threw \$50 into a hat to launch a new venture called TimeLine. Join us for an elegant evening of cocktails, dinner, and special entertainment created exclusively for this anniversary event and culminating in a 1990s dance party. **Help us celebrate the moment that put TimeLine Theatre on Chicago's theatrical map, and the indelible memories that have defined 25 years (and counting!) of making history.**

Friday, March 11, 2022 | 6:00-10:30 pm

THE RITZ-CARLTON | 160 EAST PEARSON STREET | CHICAGO

INFO & TICKETS

timelinetheatre.com/step-into-time