



Press Release

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The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
announces

Mo Willems as the Kennedy Center's First Education Artist-in-Residence

Across two seasons, the beloved author and illustrator will invite kids and former kids into the creative process with original productions and hands-on, interactive moments

(WASHINGTON)—The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts today announced that **Mo Willems**—the beloved author and illustrator best known as the award-winning creator of The Pigeon series, Knuffle Bunny, and Elephant & Piggie—will serve as its first **Education Artist-in-Residence**. Throughout the two-year residency, Willems and the Kennedy Center will develop new works for children, *former* children, and their families; curate collaborative experiences across artistic genres that spark creativity and invite hands-on, multigenerational audience engagement; and consult with the Center's Education division, which serves students, adults, and communities nationwide. Visit www.kennedy-center.org/mowillems for performance and ticketing information.

“Mo brings energy and joy to all he does,” stated Kennedy Center President **Deborah F. Rutter**. “With this residency, the Kennedy Center is spotlighting a gifted artist’s body of work, capturing creative energy, and inspiring new art and experiences. Most importantly, we are making a statement to families: You belong here, we want you to explore and play here, because art is about making connections.”

“Being a kid is serious work. Children are constantly told to be creative, work well with others, and try new things,” reflected Willems. “Talk about a challenge! Well, thanks to the Kennedy Center, I get to try to live up to those kid-standards by meeting and playing with an astounding array of artists in the worlds of dance, jazz, classical music, comedy, theater, and more. Our job will be to inspire each other to create exciting new work for you and the kids in your life. Maybe we’ll even get to collaborate with you. This is going to be fun!”

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Multidisciplinary collaboration with artists and with audiences across generations is a cornerstone of the residency. In his first year, beginning in July 2019, Willems will partner with leading members of the comedy community, Kennedy Center Artistic Director for Jazz Jason Moran, and the National Symphony Orchestra's Artistic Advisor, Ben Folds. The Center and Willems have planned four major programs, including:

- *Mo Willems and the Storytime All-Stars present: Don't Let the Pigeon Do Storytime!*, a celebration of reading that features a cast of celebrity comedians performing sketch based on a selection of Willems's books.
- A world premiere musical theater adaptation of Willems's Caldecott Honor book *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*, which will debut at the Kennedy Center and immediately embark on a national tour.
- An interactive *Jazz Doodle Jam!*, hosted by Willems with curation by Kennedy Center Artistic Director for Jazz Jason Moran.
- In partnership with the National Symphony Orchestra, a concert adaptation of Willems's book *Goldilocks and the Three Dinosaurs (a Symphonic Spectacular)* for actors and orchestra. Willems himself will write the book and direct the production, and NSO Artistic Advisor Ben Folds has been commissioned to write an original score.

Additional activities and appearances in development for the 2019–2020 season include Willems's participation in opening festivities for the REACH, the Center's expansion project, in September 2019, and a large-scale visual art project with the NSO tied to the Orchestra's performances of all nine Beethoven symphonies in spring 2020. The second year of the residency will feature at least four additional programs, including new work in dance, puppetry, classical music, and educational outreach. *A calendar of 2019–2020 events tied to Willems's residency is below and additional programmatic details will be announced at a later date.*

The residency is an initiative of the Center's Education division, which serves children and adults locally and nationwide. Willems previously worked with the Kennedy Center on theatrical adaptations of his work. Commissioned by the Center's Education division as part of its Theater for Young Audiences series, *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical* (2010) and *Elephant & Piggie's We Are in a Play!* (2013) had their world premieres at the Center before touring nationally.

Commenting on the impetus for the residency, Kennedy Center Senior Vice President for Education Mario Rossero said, "When our team dreamed up this residency, our first goal was to extend and deepen intergenerational audience experiences by providing not just kid-friendly art, but family-friendly art. We knew that if we found the right partner—someone who appeals to children and adults, and someone who could help us push creative boundaries—we'd increase the ways that family and student audiences engage with the Center. In *Mo*, the Kennedy Center has found the voice of a generation—actually, several generations. He has a clear vision for the ways we can explore the arts together."

Under the leadership of President Deborah F. Rutter, the Center has forged numerous artistic partnerships resulting in enhanced audience engagement and new artistic outputs. These include Renée Fleming's *Sound Health* in partnership with the National Institutes of Health, Yo-Yo Ma's work with the inaugural class of Citizen Artist Fellows, Damian Woetzel's popular *DEMO* series, and Ben Folds's *DECLASSIFIED* with the NSO.

Education Artist-in-Residence 2019–2020 Engagements

Mo Willems and the Storytime All-Stars present: Don't Let the Pigeon Do Storytime!

July 13, 2019 | Concert Hall

Join a Concert Hall Storytime like you've never experienced before, featuring your favorite performers from TV, movies, and stand-up. Presenting Mo's books as sketch comedy, these hilarious performers will invite the audience to laugh along, sing, and draw! An expanded, fancy-dress version of the sold-out performances at the annual San Francisco Sketchfest, this hysterical concert variety show is not to be missed by fans of comedy, books, or pigeons desperate to do Storytime! Hosted by Willems himself, this event will include musical numbers and drawing demonstrations for family audiences. *Casting will be announced at a later date.*

The REACH Opening Activities

September 2019 | The REACH

Mo Willems joins in select festivities for the opening of the REACH, the Kennedy Center's expansion project. *More details will be announced at a later date.*

Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! (The Musical)

November 23, 2019–January 5, 2020 | Family Theater

Whatever you do, don't let The Pigeon star in his own musical production! It's not easy being The Pigeon—you never get to do ANYTHING! But when the Bus Driver has a crisis that threatens to make her passengers late (gasp!), maybe that wily bird CAN do something. Starring a mix of actors, puppets, songs, and feathers, *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! (The Musical)* is sure to get everyone's wings flapping. With a script by Mo Willems, the creator of the #1 *New York Times* bestselling, Caldecott Honor-winning Pigeon picture books, and longtime collaborator and Disney Jr.'s *Muppet Babies* executive producer Mr. Warburton, and featuring music by Deborah Wicks La Puma, the composer behind *Elephant & Piggie's We Are in a Play!*, this comedic musical is even more fun than staying up late and having a hot dog party!

Jazz Doodle Jam!

Winter 2020, date TBA | The REACH

An intimate jazz concert where you collaborate with the band! Sit down at a table covered with paper, grab a marker or crayon, and join host Mo Willems for a new kind of participatory musical experience, as kids and grown-ups doodle to the music, played by an onstage jazz ensemble, including Kennedy Center Artistic Director for Jazz Jason Moran. The band will react and improvise to the audience's explorations, jamming together with pictures and music while blurring the lines between artists and audience! *Performance date and additional details to be announced.*

National Symphony Orchestra: *Goldilocks and the Three Dinosaurs (a Symphonic Spectacular)*

April 19, 2020 | Concert Hall

Once upon a time, there were three hungry Dinosaurs: Papa Dinosaur, Mama Dinosaur... and a Dinosaur who happened to be visiting from Norway! That's just the beginning of this hilarious, fractured symphonic

take on the classic *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, as retold by Mo Willems. A new classic performed by favorite performers and the National Symphony Orchestra, featuring original music composed by indie pop icon and NSO Artistic Advisor Ben Folds. This performance is part of the NSO's Family series.

About Mo Willems

Number one *New York Times* bestselling author and illustrator Mo Willems began his career as a writer and animator for PBS's *Sesame Street*, where he garnered six Emmy Awards for his writing. During his nine seasons at *Sesame Street*, Mo also served as a weekly commentator for BBC Radio and created two animated series, Nickelodeon's *The Off-Beats*, and Cartoon Network's *Sheep in the Big City*.

While serving as head writer for Cartoon Network's #1 rated show, *Codename: Kids Next Door*, Mo began writing and drawing books for children. His debut effort, *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*, became a *New York Times* bestseller and was awarded a Caldecott Honor in 2004. The following year, *Knuffle Bunny: a Cautionary Tale* was awarded a Caldecott Honor. The sequel, *Knuffle Bunny Too: a Case of Mistaken Identity*, garnered Mo his third Caldecott Honor in 2008.

In addition to picture books, Mo created the Elephant & Piggie books, a series of "Easy Readers" that were awarded the Theodor Seuss Geisel Medal in 2008 and 2009 and Geisel Honors in 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015. For older audiences he has published an illustrated memoir of his year-long trip around the world in 1990–1991 entitled *You Can Never Find a Rickshaw When It Monsoons* and *Don't Pigeonhole Me!*, a collection of 20 years of his annual sketchbooks. His books have been translated into more than 20 languages.

Mo's drawings, wire sculptures, and sculpture have exhibited in numerous galleries and museums across the nation, including major retrospectives at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, MA, the High Museum in Atlanta, GA, the New-York Historical Society, the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, and the Seongnam Arts Center in Seoul, South Korea. His graphic story for DC Comics about his family experiences during the September 11 tragedy resides in the Library of Congress's permanent collection.

Mo has been heard on NPR's *All Things Considered*, where he briefly served as the broadcast's "Radio Cartoonist." Mo voices and produces animated cartoons based on his books with Weston Woods Studios which have been screened at festivals around the world and won Best Film during the New York International Children's Film Festival and three Carnegie Medals from the American Library Association.

Mo has written the script and lyrics for *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical* and *Elephant & Piggie's We Are in a Play!* Both plays were commissioned by and debuted at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., and consistently run in productions around the nation. His rock experience, *Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed*, premiered at the Seattle Children's Theater in 2018.

His monumental sculpture, *The Red Elephant*, can be viewed in the courtyard of the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art.

Mo lives in Massachusetts with his family.

About Kennedy Center Education

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts sets a national standard for arts learning. Working through model programs and a nationwide network of partners, the nation's cultural center harnesses the power of the arts to address education challenges, accelerate best practices, and uplift citizen artists. Across all its programs, the Kennedy Center is committed to increasing accessible, inclusive opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds to participate in, learn about, and learn through the arts.

Highlights of the 2018–2019 season include the 50th anniversary of the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival, which impacts thousands of college-aged theater students across the country; the expansion of *Any Given Child* into two new communities; and *Long Way Down*, a Kennedy Center–commissioned work based on the young adult novel of the same name. On September 7, 2019, the Kennedy Center will open the REACH, an immersive arts and learning center with significant space and programming for arts education.

As an essential component of the living memorial to President Kennedy, the Center’s Education programs utilize the arts to embrace President Kennedy’s ideals of service, justice, freedom, courage, and gratitude. By cultivating the citizen artists in everyone, the Kennedy Center brings the arts and creativity to the center of our lives. For more information, please visit kennedy-center.org/education.

FUNDING CREDITS

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