



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: September 29, 2026

[Cal Performances Press Room](#)



A photo of William Kentridge (left) and production images from *The Head & the Load* (right) are available for download from the Cal Performances [Press Room](#).

A video excerpt of *The Head & the Load* can be viewed on [Vimeo](#).

William Kentridge speaks on camera about Cal Performances' *Illuminations* theme, "Innocence and Experience," in [The Crucibles of Experience video](#).

CAL PERFORMANCES AT UC BERKELEY PRESENTS A FEATURED PERFORMANCE IN THE *ILLUMINATIONS*: "INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE" SERIES

**West Coast Premiere of
William Kentridge's *The Head & the Load*
Thursday–Sunday, November 12–15
at the Henry J. Kaiser Center for the Arts in Oakland**

Monumental production features dance, projection, speech, song, shadow play, costumes, and music to explore the complex story of African involvement during World War I

This presentation inaugurates Cal Performances' initiative to present interdisciplinary works by William Kentridge each season for five years

Designed for a massive, purpose-built stage, the production is presented at the newly remodeled Arena at the Henry J. Kaiser Center for the Arts in Oakland

Berkeley, CA, September 29, 2026—Cal Performances presents the West Coast premiere of **William Kentridge's** *The Head & the Load*, an epic theater work drawing on the stories of African soldiers in World War I, representing the first performances in a new initiative to present a Kentridge interdisciplinary work during each of the next five seasons. Appearing in its West Coast premiere November 12–15, Kentridge's massive creation will be presented over four performances at the newly remodeled arena of the Henry J. Kaiser Center for the Arts near Lake Merritt in Oakland.

South African artist **William Kentridge** returns to Cal Performances with this expansive work that chronicles—through dance, projection, speech, song, shadow play, costumes, and music—the untold history of the more than two million Africans who labored, fought, and, in many cases, died during World War I. Drawing its title from a Ghanaian proverb, “The head and the load are the troubles of the neck,” *The Head & the Load* continues Kentridge's exploration of history, language, and artistic and political movements through richly layered and inventive performance works. The sonic world created in this production is particularly symbolic. According to the production notes, “One of the striking aspects of colonialism is Europe's incomprehension of Africa—not being able to hear the very clear language that was being spoken by Africa to Europe. There is the sense of language breaking down into nonsense, which is what Dadaism was very much about.” Pulling from this avant-garde tradition, the libretto draws from an equally wide set of sources, from Frantz Fanon to Tristan Tzara to Setswana proverbs, cut up and reassembled. The score, composed by **Philip Miller** and **Thuthuka Sibisi**, uses collage as a tool to reflect the many varied and unpredictable sounds that commingle during wartime, here including traditional African songs, European compositions, war chants, and percussive interjections.

As Kentridge has said of the work, *The Head & the Load* is “about all the contradictions and paradoxes of colonialism that were heated and compressed by the circumstances of the war. ... The colonial logic towards the Black participants could be summed up: ‘Lest their actions merit recognition, their deeds must not be recorded.’ *The Head & the Load* aims to recognize and record.”

The Head & the Load premiered in 2018 at the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in London and its only US performances were held at New York City's Park Avenue Armory later that same year. An immense 180-foot stage, specially constructed at the arena at Henry J. Kaiser Center for the Arts, offers a large enough setting to accommodate the unique production demands of the work, which intentionally offers a different view of the action from every seat.

This presentation inaugurates a major new Cal Performances initiative to champion Kentridge's interdisciplinary works by presenting a different program during each of the next five seasons; and builds upon the organization's robust history with the artist, dating back to its 2015 presentation of the Handspring Puppet Company's performances of *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. It is a relationship that has seen the co-commission and Bay Area premiere of Kentridge's *The Great Yes, The Great No* in 2025, the US premiere of his *Sibyl* in 2023, and Kentridge's role as UC Berkeley's campus-wide artist in residence in 2023, a residency that also included Kentridge's solo performance of *Ursonate*, Joanna Dudley's performance of his *A Guided Tour of the Exhibition: For Soprano and Handbag*, an Arts + Design talk on video art and social intervention by William Kentridge and Judith Butler, and a film series of Kentridge's work presented at BAMPFA.

About the ambitious commitment to bring Kentridge works to the Bay Area annually, Executive and Artistic Director Jeremy Geffen said, "Cal Performances' recent presentations of stage works by the internationally renowned artistic polymath William Kentridge have been among the most compelling and satisfying evenings in the theater for so many in our audiences, so it with great pride that we embark on a five-year commitment to engage even more deeply with his output. To inaugurate this ambitious undertaking with his *magnum opus*, *The Head & the Load*, a profoundly affecting work of extraordinary scale, reflects Cal Performances' enduring commitment to presenting the most fascinating artists of our time, while creating unparalleled opportunities for UC Berkeley and Bay Area audiences to engage with work that challenges, inspires, and resonates far beyond the stage."

The presentation of *The Head & the Load* is also a central performance in Cal Performances' *Illuminations* programming, which annually connects extraordinary artistry with the groundbreaking scholarship at UC Berkeley to explore pressing topics of today. In 2026–27, *Illuminations*: "Innocence & Experience" considers how these intertwined forces transform each other and influence our sense of the world. The six different *Illuminations* presentations this season tell poignant and transformative stories. Kentridge's *The Head & the Load* explores what it means to retain "innocence" in the context of egregious war-time violence; and how a person can process encounters with war and colonialism at the same time that the lived "experience" they impart is being minimized and covered up by those in power.

On Friday, November 13, William Kentridge will participate in a pre-performance conversation with [Debarati Sanyal](#), director of UC Berkeley's Center for Interdisciplinary Critical Inquiry. Over the course of the hour, the two will explore the creative and historical context of *The Head & the Load*, as well as its relationship to Cal Performances' 2026–27 *Illuminations* theme, "Innocence & Experience." This event is free to all ticket holders that evening.

Further Learning

Cal Performances' *Beyond the Stage* blog features many additional insights into *The Head & the Load*. William Kentridge, choreographer Gregory Maqoma, and composers Philip Miller and Thuthuka Sibisi are interviewed for a [program book article](#) about the work. The "[Philosopher's Guide](#)" delves into *The Head & the Load* and the other five presentations on this season's *Illuminations* series to explore their connection to the "Innocence & Experience" theme. And William Kentridge and other artists on the season speak on camera about "Innocence and Experience" in [The Crucibles of Experience video](#).

CALENDAR EDITORS PLEASE NOTE:

CAL PERFORMANCES PRESENTS

Thursday, November 12, 7:30pm

Friday, November 13, 7:30pm

Saturday, November 14, 7:30pm

Sunday, November 15, 3pm

Henry J. Kaiser Center for the Arts, Arena

10 10th Street, Oakland

Theater

William Kentridge's *The Head & the Load*

With music composed and conceived by Philip Miller with Thuthuka Sibisi

William Kentridge, *concept and director*

Philip Miller, *composer*

Gregory Maqoma, *choreography*

Thuthuka Sibisi, *music director and co-composer*

Program:

Visionary South African artist William Kentridge returns to Cal Performances after two recent visits that featured the US premiere of *Sibyl* (2023) and the Bay Area premiere of *The Great Yes, The Great No* (2025). This time, he brings the West Coast premiere of a seminal work that—through dance, projection, speech, song, shadow play, costuming, and music—chronicles the untold history of more than two million Africans who labored, fought, and died during the First World War. *The Head & the Load* takes its name from a Ghanaian proverb, "The head and the load are the troubles of the neck," and continues Kentridge's exploration of history, language, and artistic and political movements through richly layered and inventive performance works.

Kentridge's production unfolds on a massive, purpose-built stage, weaving together texts by anticolonial authors and Dada poets in multiple languages, with original music by Philip Miller and Thuthuka Sibisi that intermingles traditional African songs with quotes from WWI-era European music by Satie, Hindemith, and Schoenberg.

An *Illuminations*: "Innocence & Experience" event. Visit calperformances.org/illuminations for details.

***Illuminations* Pre-performance Conversation**

Friday, November 13, 6–7pm

Henry J. Kaiser Center for the Arts, Arena

Prior to the Friday, November 13 performance, creator and director William Kentridge will participate in a conversation with [Debarati Sanyal](#), director of UC Berkeley's Center for Interdisciplinary Critical Inquiry. Over the course of the hour, the two will explore the creative and historical context of *The Head & the Load*, as well as its relationship to Cal Performances' 2026–27 *Illuminations* theme, "Innocence & Experience." The talk is free to all ticket holders that evening.

Tickets: \$50–\$175 (prices subject to change)

Tickets for all performances are available at calperformances.org, by phone at (510) 642-9988, or in person at the Ticket Office at Zellerbach Hall, Tuesday–Sunday, 12–5pm.

There is a \$15 per order service charge on ticket purchases made by phone or online that are not part of a subscription package; there is no fee for tickets purchased in person at the Zellerbach Hall Ticket Office. There is a \$20 service charge on all subscription orders.

UC Berkeley students can access exclusive discounts, including half-price tickets in all sections of the theater, and are also eligible to purchase a limited number of \$10 tickets for the best seats in the house for the opening-night performance of *The Head & the Load* on Thursday, November 12 through the [Golden Bear Circle](#) program beginning at noon on Thursday, October 22, online only. Information about all UC Berkeley student tickets and discounts is available at calperformances.org/ucb-students; information about other discounts can be found at calperformances.org/discounts.

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