

GEVA THEATRE'S 2026 ESSIE CALHOUN DIVERSITY IN THE ARTS AWARDS

Rochester, N.Y. — Geva Theatre's annual Essie Calhoun Diversity in the Arts Award ceremony will take place at Geva on Thursday, March 5, 2026. This year's "Essie" Award recipients are the **Puerto Rican Festival of Rochester, Luvon Sheppard, Javannah Davis, and Tina Chapman DaCosta.**

The Essie Calhoun Diversity in the Arts Award recognizes that art allows for expression of truth and beliefs and helps us gain an understanding of one another and the world. It is presented annually by Geva Theatre to individuals and organizations who embody these values in their work.

The Essie Calhoun Diversity in the Arts Awards began in 2011 and was named in honor of Essie Calhoun-McDavid, Retired Chief Diversity Officer, Director of Community Affairs, Vice President of Eastman Kodak Company, and Chair of the 2011 United Way of Greater Rochester Campaign. She was the first recipient of the award which has been given annually to people or organizations that promote and encourage diversity in the arts.

Essie Calhoun-McDavid shared, "It is a tremendous honor and privilege to recognize the outstanding achievements and contributions of this year's honorees, each of whom have consistently demonstrated their commitment to diversity and inclusion in the arts. This award underscores the vital importance of celebrating and uplifting voices that enrich our cultural landscape and inspire future generations to embrace the power of unity and representation."

Past Essie Award winners and members of Geva Theatre's Engagement Committee are invited to submit nominations for the awards each year, which are then selected by a committee consisting of past award members and Geva staff. The 2026 Essie Awards Selection Committee consists of Thomas Warfield, Annette Ramos, Essie Calhoun-McDavid, Nancy Gong, Elizabeth Williamson, and Jaqueline Raymond Wegman.

The 2026 Essie Calhoun Diversity in the Arts Award statue was created by glass artist Nancy Gong.

[Learn More about Our Award Recipients:](#)

Puerto Rican Festival of Rochester

"Today, we celebrate more than a festival. We celebrate a movement that began in 1970 — when Rochester's Puerto Rican community established the first festival of its kind as a direct response to a need for cultural belonging and visibility. At a time in our country when identity and history can feel fragile or contested, remembering this origin matters. This festival was born from resilience. It was built by families who understood that culture is not optional — it is essential. For more than five decades, this gathering has declared that Puerto Rican heritage — rooted in Taino, African, and Spanish traditions — belongs fully and proudly in Rochester's story."

- Nydia Padilla-Rodriguez, Founder and Artistic Director, Borinquen Dance Theatre

“55 Years of Puerto Rican Pride! Congratulations to the Puerto Rican Festival of Rochester, the longest running ethnic festival in Western New York. You have brought a vibrant fusion of live music, cultural performances, dance, and a rich celebration of heritage and community. Thank you for providing hundreds of local Latinx Artists a stage to showcase our talents from Borinquen Dance Theatre, the Rochester Latino Theatre Company, and hundreds of emerging Latinx spoken word performers, visual artists, storytellers and Hispanic Cultural champions.”

- Annette Ramos, Executive Director, Rochester Latino Theatre Company

Luvon Sheppard

“Luvon has been an inspiration in our community and to me personally. A brilliant artist, educator and activist. He embodies a spirit of generosity, humility, and vision. He is truly a great one!”

- David Shakes, theatre director, writer, actor, and activist

Javannah Davis

"Javannah Davis is a social activist whose very life is a revolutionary act emphasizing the interconnectedness of liberation and visibility."

- Thomas Warfield, Director of Dance and Professor of Practice, NTID

Tina Chapman DaCosta

"Through her work as a filmmaker, Tina Chapman DaCosta uses storytelling as a powerful tool to uplift diverse voices and foster meaningful conversations, not only at RIT but also internationally, around equity and inclusion. Her films not only reflect underrepresented experiences but also inspire audiences to embrace and advocate for a more just and inclusive world."

- Essie Calhoun-McDavid

About Geva Theatre

Founded in 1972, Geva Theatre is a not-for-profit, professional theatre company dedicated to creating and producing professional theatre productions, programs, and services of a national standard.

Geva offers a wide variety of educational, engagement, and literary programs, nurturing audiences and artists alike. Geva Theatre sits on the ancestral and unceded territory of the O-non-dowa-gah, or “the people of the Great Hill.” In English, they are known as the Seneca people, “the keeper of the western door.” They have stewarded this land through generations, and Geva pays respect and gives thanks to their elders, past and present.

Geva is under the leadership of Artistic Director Elizabeth Williamson and Executive Director James Haskins.

Find out more about Geva Theatre at GevaTheatre.org or by connecting with us on social media. Facebook: facebook.com/gevatheatrecenter, Twitter: [@gevatheatre](https://twitter.com/gevatheatre), Instagram: [@gevatheatre](https://instagram.com/gevatheatre), LinkedIn: linkedin.com/company/geva-theatre-center.

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