



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
**CIVIC ACTOR STUDIO**  
Office of Civic Engagement



The Civic Actor Studio at the University of Chicago is a civic leadership retreat designed to help strengthen the performative aspect of civic leaders and accelerate civic trust through Classic Theater.

**SPRING 2025 COHORT**

**CIVIC ACTORS**



**SHEERINE ALEMZADEH** is co-founder of Healing to Action, a nonprofit that addresses gender-based violence by building community-led leadership and systemic solutions



**ADRIAN DANZIG** is a Chicago-based theater artist and leadership facilitator focused on ensemble practices that foster collaboration, trust, and shared authority in diverse contexts.



**KIMBERLY COLLIER** is an educator and trainer who works to eliminate inequities affecting Black women and girls, helping them thrive across all areas of life.



**JERRY DAVIS-EL** is executive director of GRO Community where he provides trauma-informed services for justice-involved individuals. He specializes in supporting youth and adults facing dual diagnoses and systemic challenges.



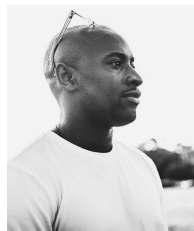
**DUNNI T. COSEY GAY** is deputy director of asset management at IHDA. She brings decades of leadership in housing, arts, and public service to create inclusive and vibrant communities.



**KIMBERLY DIXON-MAYS** is a playwright and strategist who empowers creative teams and individuals. She helps groups discover how their work can spark transformation and connection.



**MAKEDA CRAYTON** is executive director of Deeply Rooted Productions. She brings a business-savvy lens to the arts, building innovative and sustainable strategies for growth.



**GEORGE ELLZEY JR** is a screenwriter and director at Cottage Grove Production LLC. Based in Chicago, he creates layered, emotionally resonant films that uplift overlooked narratives and inspire healing and social change.

## CIVIC ACTORS

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**JESSICA GILLESPIE** is a publicist, actor, and engagement producer. Her work centers on storytelling that uplifts community voices and amplifies causes through media, art, and performance.



**AKEEM SHEPHERD** is a community-based researcher focused on evaluating public and nonprofit resources that serve Chicago neighborhoods, helping communities track outcomes and influence policy.



**BRADLY JOHNSON** is chief community officer at BUILD Inc., where he guides engagement strategy and leads the Peace and Justice Center, serving youth and families on Chicago's West Side.



**MARYA SPONT-LEMUS** is a writer and interdisciplinary artist focused on environmental justice, reflection, and creative collaboration. Their work builds awareness, empathy, and action through community-based practices.



**JIA JOHNSON** is founder of Freedom Dream Collective and Freedom to Flourish. As a coach and healer, she supports changemakers through mind-body practices that center wellness and collective liberation.



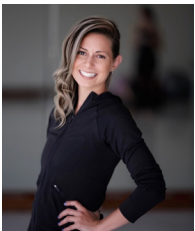
**SAM THOUSAND** is a performing artist and social entrepreneur. Through ChiBrations, he fosters community by connecting creatives via shared events, mobile tools, and resources, supporting Chicago's performing arts landscape.



**RAYMOND LAMBERT** is a Peabody Award-winning filmmaker and founder of the Mic And A Stool Collective. His films include Punch 9 for Harold Washington and Maya Angelou: And Still I Rise. He is also the founder of the legendary comedy club All Jokes Aside.



**LANDON WILLIAMS** is a veteran marketing and development strategist focused on racial equity and entrepreneurship. He partners with nonprofits and funders to promote wealth-building and community development.



**ALIA MONTIJO** is a dance artist and the founder of Dance Avondale. Her work explores movement through the lens of physics and identity, championing access and equity in dance education.



**ACASIA WILSON FEINBERG** is chief philanthropy officer at Chicago CRED. She draws from her background in education policy and instructional leadership to advance community-based violence prevention.



**EMMA RUTH** is a policy manager at Cabrini Green Legal Aid. She leads efforts in organizing, education, and policy advocacy to reduce harm caused by the criminal legal system.

## CIVIC FACILITATORS

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**CHRISTOPHER ANDREW** is a photographer and video artist with an improviser's approach.



**NICOLE JORDAN-REED** is the founder of Nicole Jordan Catering, LLC. After a 20-year corporate career, she entered the culinary world in 2016. Her company is known for exceptional service across event scales, and her work reflects a strong commitment to excellence and community impact.



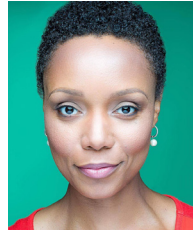
**NICKIE BROOKENS** is the founder of PLAN4SUCCESS, a youth-focused organization offering mentorship, college prep, leadership training, and scholarships. Her work has impacted over 350 students annually and helped build a national network of College Success Guides.



**YOHANCE JOSEPH LACOUR** is an artist and activist committed to the liberation of Black people in the United States and globally. His work centers on justice, storytelling, and healing through creativity and community engagement.



**JOANIE FRIEDMAN** is a founding leader and facilitator of the Civic Actor Studio. She brings decades of experience in leadership development, civic practice, and creative engagement to support transformative dialogue and community connection.



**MALKIA STAMPLEY** is a theater-maker and storyteller who believes in the healing power of theatre for individuals and communities. Based in Chicago, she uses her work to connect art with social impact and collective growth.



**CHARLES ANDREW GARDNER** is an actor, educator, and president of the SAG-AFTRA Chicago Local. He teaches on-camera acting at DePaul and Roosevelt universities and is passionate about helping people reimagine their potential—whether through performance, teaching, or sharing stories by the grill.