

EYES ON BROADWAY

UPSTATE NEW YORK THEATRES GRAPPLE WITH DIVERSITY

by **Kelundra Smith**

As professional regional theaters in Upstate New York prepared for the 2012/2013 season, many artistic directors had their eyes on Broadway to determine which way the pendulum would swing. According to Theater Communications Group, the umbrella organization for professional regional theaters, most theaters make their season decisions based on Tony Award nominations and wins. For instance, *Good People* by David Lindsay-Abaire was nominated for a 2011 Tony Award for Best Play, and is the most performed play of the 2012/2013 season. John Logan's *Red* won the Tony Award for Best Play in 2010 and was the most performed play in the 2011/2012 season.

This practice is justified by Peter Flynn, former artistic director of Hangar Theatre in Ithaca, New York. "I feel like I have an opportunity as well as a responsibility to present a to community that is four and a half hours away from New York City really quality, entertaining, successful theater," he states. "So in bringing a popular name from Broadway I'm saying 'Here's what's going on and what's popular and I'd like you to know what that is.'"

In 2011/12 plays with Black protagonists and/or all-Black casts were preva-

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lent on Broadway, with musicals and dramas including Suzan-Lori Parks's adaptation of *Porgy and Bess*, starring Audra MacDonald; *A Streetcar Named Desire*, featuring Blair Underwood and Nicole Ari Parker; *Sister Act, the Musical*, with Whoopi Goldberg; plus the musical *Fela!* written, directed and choreographed by Bill T. Jones and produced by Jay-Z, Will Smith and Jada Pinkett-Smith. Ed Sayles, artistic director of Merry-Go-Round Playhouse in Auburn, New York says that African American music has always been on Broadway starting with *Porgy and Bess* and moving on to *Hello Dolly!* starring Pearl Bailey and *Ain't Misbehavin'* after a long gap. [Editor's note: African American musicals have been on Broadway since the turn-of-the twentieth century—*The Sons of Ham* (1899) and *In Dahomey* (1903) with the immensely talented Bert Williams and George Walker, *The Red Moon* by Bob Cole and J. Rosamond (1909), and *Shuffle Along* (1921), Eubie Blake's big hit, to name a few. Then, as now, White producers became interested in Black musical work for the reason mentioned by Sayles below.] Sayles says producers started to see that they could make money off of African Americans on Broadway, which is why shows such as *The Color Purple* and *Memphis* exist now.

Director Kenny Leon, who is also artistic director of True Colors Theatre in Atlanta, had two plays on Broadway last season: *The Mountaintop* by Katori Hall and *Stick Fly* by Lydia Diamond, with musical composition by Alicia Keys. *The Mountaintop* is about the last night of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life with a supernatural interpretation of King's coming to grips with his impending death. *Stick Fly* is a soap opera-esque comedy about the secrets and lies of an



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Roderick Covington as Oshoosi and Sam Encarnación as Elegba in Syracuse Stage's production of *The Brothers Size* by Tarell Alvin McCraney.

upper-class Black family that come into play while they are in their vacation home on Martha's Vineyard. It is a rare occasion for a Black director to have two shows on Broadway running concurrently, something that probably has not happened since Lloyd Richards' simultaneous productions of August Wilson's *Fences* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* in the 1980s. However Leon's achievement has been scarcely acknowledged by mainstream media. Is this a sign of progress that his Blackness no longer matters? Is this the Obama effect, where since we have a biracial President, other Black achievements do not matter? Or is it simply that no one cares?

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Right now, there are no Black plays or musicals on Broadway, and the prospects for 2013 are dim. *Motown*, the musical written by Berry Gordy and directed by Charles Randolph-Wright, and a new version of Horton Foote's *The Trip to Bountiful*, starring Cicely Tyson are due on Broadway in spring 2013. Musicals about Nelson Mandela and Ray Charles are in development, as well as a musical adaptation of the film *The Nutty Professor*, but the expected dates have not been released.

The trickledown effect of fewer shows featuring actors of color on Broadway leads to fewer opportunities for Black actors to go on Equity auditions and therefore receive Equity roles in professional regional theaters. Despite some forays into non-traditional casting by some theaters, an article titled "Color-blind Casting or Color Consciousness?" written by Dominique Morisseau on The Public Theater's blog recently incited a lot of discussion about opportunities for actors of color. Morisseau wrote that "there is an unspoken rule in the theater that no one is talking about. Character descriptions in plays, which may eventually be shared in casting breakdowns, are coding a tone of racial inequality in the theater. Unless race is specified, we actors of color (yes, I am also one of them) know that we are most likely not going to be seriously considered for the role, because 'no' racial specification usually translates to '[W]hite.'"

Another barrier for Black actors is the tendency to cast celebrity on Broadway. *The Mountaintop* starred Samuel L. Jackson, who is sixty-three, as a thirty-nine-year-old Martin Luther King Jr. and Angela Bassett, fifty-three, as the young maid in his Memphis hotel room. *Stick Fly* starred Mekhi Phifer (*ER*), Dulé Hill (*Psych*), Ruben Santiago-Hudson (*American Gangster*) and Tracie Thoms (*Rent*), although the standout performance was by the youngest and lesser known Condola Rashad, daughter of Phylicia Rashad (Clair Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*). Likewise, *A Streetcar Named Desire* starred Blair Underwood (*The New Adventures of Old Christine*), Nicole Ari



Joe Schuyler

(l. to r.) Jeannie Jones as Black Pearl, a prisoner whose voice and knowledge of Black slave songs capture the attention of Susannah Mullahy, a Library of Congress ethnomusicologist played by Jessica Wortham in Capital Repertory's production of *Black Pearl Sings*.

Parker (Showtime's *Soul Food*) and Wood Harris (*The Wire*).

Since many theaters also employ directors of color when they stage their one Black play, this means opportunities are also limited for Black directors. In a Q & A by Gretchen Michelfeld in the November/December 2011 newsletter of The Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (the professional union for directors and choreographers working on Broadway and in professional regional theaters in the US), Sharon Jensen, executive director of the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, said: "The issue is also what messages we send about who counts, about what stories deserve to be told....If the purpose of the theater is to illuminate the capacity of the human spirit, the theater (of all places) is a place to include and reflect the full spectrum and dimension of humanity."

The lack of representation is additionally problematic because it designates the arts, specifically stage directing, acting and writing, as being a profession reserved for White people. According to the 2010/2011 Actors' Equity annual report, 7.3 percent of members identify as African American, while 84.6 percent identify as Caucasian. The numbers are even less for Latino and Asian representation in American theater,

which are separate issues in themselves. These numbers account for working Equity actors and stage managers, but do not account for the 20 percent of members who choose to withhold their racial identities altogether.

Still, if the usual patterns held, with all the Broadway Black productions in the previous season, the 2012/13 regional seasons should be teeming with Black shows and opportunities for Black actors and crews. But, Black stage professionals are haunted by the number one. That's the number of plays with African American casts that appear in the seasons of most professional regional theaters. The plays are usually by Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*) or August Wilson (*Fences*, *Gem of the Ocean*, *Jitney*), or maybe George C. Wolfe (*The Colored Museum*).

There are some exceptions to the rule of "one." Geva Theatre in Rochester staged *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Superior Donuts* by Tracy Letts in its 2011/12 season. Syracuse Stage produced Tony Kushner's *Caroline, or Change* and *The Brothers Size* by Tarell Alvin McCraney in their 2011/12 season. Capital Rep in Albany staged three Black-themed productions: *Uptown Downtown*, Leslie Ug-

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gams's one-woman show, Frank Higgins's *Black Pearl Sings*, and Tracy Letts's *Superior Donuts* in their 2011/12 season. However, of all these plays only two were written by Black playwrights, and only one, *The Brothers Size*, by a living Black playwright. Moreover, Hangar Theatre in Ithaca and Merry-Go-Round Playhouse in the Finger Lakes region



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Gabrielle Porter (Radio 3), Christina Acosta Robinson (Radio 2) and Caitlaine Rose Gurreri (Radio 1) in Syracuse Stage's production of Tony Kushner's *Caroline, or Change*.

(both summer stock theaters) did not produce any plays with Black protagonists or by Black playwrights in the 2011 or 2012 seasons.

The 2012/2013 season does not look much different. Capital Rep is staging *Race*, written by David Mamet, a decision made based on the play's appeal to twenty-to-thirty year old theatergoers as revealed by a staged reading that the theater held in the fall. It is also producing *Ella* by Rob Ruggiero, Dyke Garrison, and Jeffrey Hatcher. Geva Theatre is staging Matthew Lopez's *The Whipping Man* and *No Child* by Nilaja Sun. Syracuse Stage is producing August Wilson's *Two Trains Running* and the world premiere of *Cry for Peace: Voices from the Congo*, a play derived from Syracuse's Congolese refugee community, written by Ping Chong and Kyle Bass, with Sara Zatz.

Other plays were under consideration. Both Capital Rep and Syracuse Stage considered Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park*, a modern sequel to *A Raisin in the Sun* that opened at Walter Kerr

Theatre on Broadway last April. Syracuse Stage and Hangar Theatre also considered *Stick Fly*, just as Capital Rep considered *The Mountaintop*, but decided otherwise. Thus, only one of the plays scheduled to be produced in 2012/13 is by a living Black playwright, Nilaja Sun.

Regional theater producers also look to new plays or rarely produced playwrights to infuse diverse themes into their seasons. Says Sayles, "We are starting a Finger Lakes Musical Festival; we will be previewing twenty brand new shows. Each week two artists will be coming in to present a sketched out idea for a new musical. There's a musical about the Civil War I really want to take a look at." Hangar Theatre also has a Pilot Reading Series where playwrights are paired with Hangar alumni in NYC to workshop plays. Afterwards, there is a reading and talkback session with an invited audience and the board. The hope is to develop new work so it can be produced on the main stage. Seeking new work is especially important for regional theater artistic directors because shows often disappear just as quickly as they appear on the Great White Way, but regional theaters need to serve their communities continually.

All of the artistic directors expressed the opinion that diversity is important to them and that there is no shortage of

Black talent on stage or behind the scenes. When Sayles is casting, he says he has always looked for the best voices, regardless of race, even before non-traditional casting was popular. Sayles casts out of Upstate New York, Memphis, Boston, as well as New York City, where the most racially diverse auditions occur. Likewise, Flynn holds auditions in Ithaca, NYC, Washington DC, Pittsburgh, Sarasota, FL and Elon University in North Carolina. He also contracts many designers from Los Angeles and Washington DC.

Professional regional theaters are by no means the blame for lack of diversity in American theater. Cultural attitudes about the arts, socio-economic status and education are also large factors in this, and warrant separate articles. However, when business as usual is not working—which it evidently is not because theaters are still talking about diversifying their audience demographics—having only one play seems like obvious audience pandering, suggesting that Black people are only welcome at the theater when certain plays are on stage.

The lack of color on the stage is reflected in the make-up of regional theater audiences, with most patrons being older, White and middle class, some-

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Séamus Gailor (Noah Gellman) and Greta Oglesby (Caroline) against (set designer's?) backdrop in *Caroline, or Change*.



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thing something Maggie Cahill says has been a part of the conversation for the past fifteen years. "I think people like



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In Capital Rep's production of Tracy Letts' *Superior Donuts*, two bagmen Flynn (Patrick White) and Magee (Cornelius Gearney Jr.) shakedown donut shop employee Franco Wicks (Brooks Brantly).

going to places where they know other people." She continues, "If you go to a Chris Rock or Jerry Seinfeld show you know who's going to be in each audience. They're both fantastic comedians. So why? I think one of the reasons is that when you [an African American] go to a Chris Rock concert, you will feel a collegial atmosphere the minute you walk in. When you walk into a regional theater as an African American, you're going to be among fewer people of color." She continues, "And we're shocked when the only time people from XYZ community come [is] when this person [of color] is on stage. Well yeah. I think people relate best to stories about themselves."

Indeed, most artistic directors of these theaters complain about the gray-ing of their audiences and the lack of diversity. Syracuse Stage's producing artistic director Timothy Bond says, "I think the dearth of African American stories and stories by other people of diverse backgrounds in the American theater is a sad story in terms of how regional theater is producing work." Bucking the trend, he emphasizes that what is on Broadway may prompt him to

consider a play, but he is not driven by the Broadway cache because they produce for a commercial profit and regional theaters are connected to a mission in their communities. He notes, though, that having a successful connection to Broadway helps with the marketing.

Some of the artistic directors believe that marketing Black plays is difficult because there is a historical lack of support for work by artists of color. Others believe it is not. When Syracuse Stage produced *Crowns*, a musical about the legacy of hats in the Black church, they sent a photographer to do a photo exhibit of church ladies in fancy hats for the theater lobby so people could see themselves in the theater. Capital Rep, however, has a similar, but less successful story of offering discount tickets and reaching out to Black churches and sororities to promote *Crowns*. On the other hand, Sayles believes having music in his shows places him at a marketing advantage, versus straight dramas, which rarely go on tour. *Hairspray* is one of Merry-Go-Round's biggest sellers, and *Ragtime* sold out the day after it opened.

Says Cahill, "I think many regional theaters have given up on the idea that there is going to be an outpouring of peo-

ple from minority neighborhoods that are subscribers." She adds, "How we turn this around is something artistic directors want to do....We are in our neighborhoods. We are in our urban communities. We want to be a part of the urban landscape."

The issue of whether the reason race is still a part of the conversation in such a socio-politically progressive art form as theater is because too many people are not seeing their relationships with their identities encompassed on stage. So the conversation continues both on Broadway and in the regional theaters about the constant struggle to create a more inclusive theater culture for Black artists and audiences. It will take consensus from the theater community to push Black theater artists out of February, Black History month, and into the mainstream canon. Part of this is changing the mentality that producing plays by and with Black artists implies a racial context that makes the production not relatable to the mainstream. Non-traditional casting and producing new plays help, but in order to ensure lasting diversity in the theater a commitment to employ artists of all ethnic backgrounds all the time must be made.*