

From the Ending Racism Task Force

All the City's a Stage for Black Theater

By Leigh Buchanan

Philadelphia's stages are bursting with Black talent. As curtains once more rise around the city, close to half the productions announced on theater web sites are by and about people of color.

Theater is the ideal environment for people respectfully to listen and to learn. Audiences share space with live actors, whose humanity is not blunted by the scrim of print or screens. Plays are stories; and storytelling is the most powerful way to build empathy. Audiences of all races are at once caught up by and implicated in the Black lives unfolding before them.

In *Fairview*, whose run at the Wilma ended in June, a character breaks the fourth wall to make explicit that connection. "But if I could ask the folks who call themselves white to come up here, do you think they would?" asks Keisha, the teenage daughter of a middle-class Black family. "Could I ask them to come up in here, so that we could go down there?.... To switch for a while?.... Look out from where I am. And let me and my family go out to where you've always been.... If I asked, would they do it?"

Like some other Ethical Society members, I was inspired to return to the theater by our (sadly former) Community Life Director, Reva Stover, who is ubiquitous in Philly's drama scene. Crawling from my pandemic hole, I saw two first-rate productions in the course of a few weeks. *Fabulation: or the Re-Education of Undine*, at The Lantern, chronicled the comic misadventures of a glamorous Black entrepreneur compelled to return to her working-class childhood home. *Reverie*, at the Azuka, related the visit by a bereaved father to the man he believes was his dead son's lover. (Both *Reverie* and *Fairview* are by the destined-for-stardom

James IJames, a Black Philly playwright and freshly minted Pulitzer winner.)

Eager for more, I trolled the web sites of local theaters and was both surprised and encouraged by the abundance of plays written and performed by Black artists. Of the 47 productions listed on the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 schedules of 10 prominent Philly theaters in mid-June, 22 were stories of people of color. (That includes work by and about Latino and Asian people.) I found comparable results in other big theater cities: Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Atlanta, and Louisville, KY.

I passed on New York as unrepresentative. But this year's historically diverse Tonys—which included Best New Musical honors for *A Strange Loop*, about a Black, gay theater artist—speak volumes.

Theater is a great way to teach history. Philly productions recount, among other things, the experiences of woman pioneers in the first U.S. all-Black settlement (*Flyin' West*); and the story of an artist and his muse enduring the 1964 Harlem race riots (*Wine in the Wilderness*). There are plays about individual struggle, among them *The Royale*, about a boxer's quest for the heavyweight title in 1905, when the sport was segregated; and *A Hit Dog Will Holler*, depicting the trauma heaped on two Black women, an activist and a social media influencer. Comedies include *Clyde's*, set at a truck stop staffed by the formerly incarcerated; and *The Ever Present*, by local up-and-comer R. Eric Thomas, who unfolds his fantastical events in a South Philly vacant lot.

One more advantage theater holds over books, film, and other media: the opportunity to interact. Many Philadelphia theaters offer post-show talk-backs and Q&As with performers, playwrights, and directors. Often, artists mingle with audiences in lobbies. White theatergoers may not accept Keisha's challenge to change places with Black characters. But they can learn from the artists who imagine and embody them.

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