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THEATER

Flooney's fancy

Flooney's Theater Company presents
 The Langston Hughes Project

BY ANTHONY DAVIS



PHOTO BY ANTHONY DAVIS

"He was a true intellectual," says Benjamin "Flooney" Hardy of Langston Hughes, "one who understood complicated things and simplified them, making them available to many others"

Welcome to the year that marks the 101st anniversary of the birth of Langston Hughes—famed African American writer (and alleged homosexual) of the 20th century and central figure in the 1920s Harlem Renaissance. A prolific writer, he chronicled the African American experience through both poetry and prose.

Flooney's Theater Company, founded in 1972 by Benjamin "Flooney" Hardy, has dedicated itself to presenting African American authors and, more specifically, its signature piece, The Langston Hughes Project.

The theater group's concept is based on what Hughes called "The Suitcase Theater"—put a production in a travel bag, take it with you, open it up, and have a show. Flooney and a number of local actors have been doing it for 30 years.

Flooney's love affair with theater and Hughes began in 1970 when he volunteered to play Black Panther Bobby Seal in a street performance with Portland's Storefront Theater. He had read Hughes' work before majoring in African American history at Baltimore's Morgan State University, but eventually a professor introduced him to a different Hughes. "He presented Langston in an academic environment, which required that I would do some reading and writing and intermingling with the material."

Flooney went on to New York state for a post-graduate degree at Cornell University's African Studies and Research Center. Returning to Portland, he acted in other local productions until he started his own troupe and began performing African American playwrights. Flooney can also channel the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in performance, but The Langston Hughes Project, which runs Feb. 7 to 9 at the Old Church, is his pride and joy.

With a life and work so rich in material, Hughes gives players plenty to work with. "What we do is not about his life; it's his work being performed," Flooney explains. "I try to educate and entertain—that's my concept of my theater group."

Part of this education is opening up the lives and work of African Americans to the greater public. "I have a degree in African American history, and I'm Afrocentric," says Flooney. "I seek out writers and poets...of African origin because that's where my interests lay intellectually. Not just because I am black or physical brown, but that's where my intellectual and cultural curiosities are."

Flooney opens The Langston Hughes Project with a talk about the writer so people will know who he was. Then poets perform dramatic readings, and one of the actors brings alive one of his most popular characters, "Jesse B. Semple" (as in "Just Be Simple," Hughes' preferred writing style). There are variations to each show.

This play-of-sorts does not openly discuss Hughes' sexuality because, Flooney says, they don't feel the need to. "He never did," he notes.

However, actors perform poems like "The Negro Mother," in which Hughes wrote from the perspective of a woman in the first person. They leave it to the audience to make any type of conclusions.

Flooney himself is heterosexual but has both a daughter and nephew who identify as gay. "The fact that [Hughes] was gay is kind of irrelevant," he asserts, "but if we look at it in the context of the times...people were in the closet and not open about their sexuality. He was a privately gay person, but you could read it in his autobiography—not that he said it openly, but he left room there for you to read it."

Be like Flooney

Reading this stuff will make anyone a Langston Hughes scholar:

- *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel
- *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* by Langston Hughes



The poet laureate of 1920s Harlem

- *The Life of Langston Hughes Volume 1: 1902-1941: I, Too, Sing America* by Arnold Rampersad
- *The Life of Langston Hughes Volume 2: 1941-1967: I Dream a World* by Arnold Rampersad
- *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem* by Faith Berry