

Portland Black Repertory Theatre: The beginning

By Nyewusi Askari

(Editor's Note: Rosemary Allen, director of Portland Black Repertory Theatre, is dedicated to the development, growth, and stability of Black Theatre in Oregon. In part one of an interview with the Observer, she speaks openly about the Theatre's beginning, its ups and downs and purpose.)

Observer: Just what is the Portland Black Repertory Theatre?

Allen: The Black Repertory Theatre was started so there could be some form of Black theatre happenings in Portland. It's a group of dedicated artists who provide a platform for actors, writers, dancers, visual artists, musicians, from which they can work and develop their art. It also provides culture that reflect Black people in Oregon; something that doesn't happen too often here in Portland.

Observer: What is the philosophy of the Black theatre?

Allen: The philosophy of the Black theatre here, is kind of hard to explain because its been changing every year.

We started out with the philosophy that we as artists, were not only going to develop ourselves, but that we were going to contribute as much as possible to what could be called the "Black theatre." We felt that we could contribute a unique technique and try to do things for the Black theatre that had never been done before, and there were many things that had not been done before. If anything is to be called the philosophy of the Portland Black Repertory Theatre, it is for whatever we do; whether it be a comedy, drama or a musical, just as long as it present a true picture of Black life, or the Black experience.

Observer: What developments have occurred since the Theatre's inception, in terms of technique. Also, what have been some of the plays produced, since the beginning, that allowed these techniques to be used?

Allen: We started out as a group of students in 1975. We decided to do our own production. You see, we had problems getting parts. We either had to play white characters, or a maid or a butler. We got very few chances to do anything to develop ourselves.

So, we decided to do our own production, and the first production we did was "Five On The Black Hand Side." We had a lot of opposition from the theatre department at Portland State University. As you know, there are times when theatre people tend to become snobbish if you haven't had twenty or more years of experience. They act as if you don't exist, or that you don't have the right to be doing theatre.

Black theatre, to a lot of Europeans or people doing European theatre, is non-existent.

To them there is no such thing as Black theatre, and at that time they didn't feel that we were legitimate. So, we didn't get very much support from the theatre department. But we did "Five On The Black Hand Side," and it was a success!

"Five On The Black Hand Side," is a comedy by Charlie Russell. Some people might have seen it on late night TV, around 2:30 in the A.M. Anyway, the play was a success. The cast was composed of people from the Black community; people who had never acted before, and students who had some acting ability. It was a combination of people with a thirst to show their talents.

This was the first real, legitimate production of the Theatre, and we performed for three weekends. This was the first time that had ever happened in the history of Portland. There had been Black productions before, but they only ran for a day, or a week at the most. So this was the very first time that we legitimately performed as actors; as Black artists.



Laverne Springer at rehearsal as Lady In Red "For Colored Girls..."

Next, we performed "The River Niger." It was a real heavy drama. Again, we didn't get very much support. It seemed that everyone loved "Five On The Black Hand Side," both Black and white, mainly because it was a comedy. "The River Niger" was a little too heavy; it had a lot of blood in it, but it had a lot of truth also...a whole lotta truth in it. People couldn't get to that right then, so we didn't get a lot of support.

There were times when we only had 2 or 3 people in the audience. But...the actors were committed, especially in the production of "The River Niger." It was like we had an opportunity to do something that



Cast and understudies of "Wine In The Wilderness" with Director Rosemary Allen (Center). Cast includes, (Back) Otto Ruterford, Vanessa Deborah Hicks, Al Jamison; (Front) Flooney, Cheryl Wilson, Richard Jones. (Marvin Johnson is not pictured.)

we might never get another chance to do in our life time. We all respected the writer of the play, Joseph Walker. The parts were real heavy. It was about a Black father who was a poet and a painter. It reflected the trials he went through while trying to keep his family together. We just put so much into the play, and we look out into the audience and see 2 or 3 people. At no one time did we ever have more than 100 people in the audience. But everyone who came to see it, appreciated it.

I don't know...it sort of gave me a signal that Portland wasn't really ready for the realism that some Black plays had to offer.

So, we started to go in a different direction. At that time, I left and went to the University of Iowa. I was gone for about a year, and came back in 1977. Upon my return, we did a musical called "Stardust" which I adapted. It was about Black Broadway musicals; the trials and tribulations that Black people went through and how much they contributed to musicals which was the only real American form of theatre. Black people built the musicals, but didn't get very much credit for doing so. "Stardust" dealt with that and had a lot of dance and song and that's where we got our spark for dealing with music and dance, rather than with straight drama by itself.

It was very successful and had a large cast. At the time, we still didn't have a theatre. We weren't even thinking toward a theatre, because our biggest problem was just to do it...We had no backup. We had to get funds from wherever we could for costumes, the set, and all that kind of struggle. None of us were getting paid, but we were getting free time to develop, so it was successful. We traveled the state. We went to Portland Art Museum, Lewis & Clark College, and all around the city performing the play.

We got a lot of good feedback. We turned our Art Quake in its first year, and our production was one of the best received by the audience. So that started a tradition.



Steve Lee played Gideon and Rosemary Allen played Stormy Monday in "Five."

At this point we decided that the only thing we had to do was get our act together as an organization, and continue to pursue our dream. But we didn't know what all of the requirements were, in order to become a legitimate Theatre. So, we started approaching the various funding agencies; The Metropolitan Arts Commission; The Oregon Community Foundation. We found that these agencies were only interested in offering mainly lip service. They weren't interested in putting any money behind Black art, the Theatre, dance or Black music. We went in a lot of circles talking to those people. One minute it was "yes, there is a possibility that you can get some funds...that we'll support you on this project." The next minute we were hearing things like, "It looks like there is going to be a cut in our budget...it looks like we are not going to be able to get the funds together after all. But you go ahead, fill out the application, and possibly we may be able to find the funds somewhere."

Perhaps the most distressing thing of all was to hear words like, "yeah... we have \$500 here for you. Fill out the application, and we want to monitor your program, and everything you do, we want our name put on all of your publicity, and we want to know how many Black people come to see your show, how many white people come to see your show, and how much money you made." It became very clear that these people did not understand or know where Black artists were coming from.

You see, we have a very unique situation in Portland. There was very little going on in our community, that would've allowed our Black artists to receive recognition for their skills and professionalism.

These agencies were masters at double talk; I'm talking about agencies that have the funds but would rather make it as difficult as possible for Black artists to receive any type of public funding. Its very sad. I know for a fact, that if just a few of the Black artists of our community received any type of real support for the art they are doing, there would be a drastic change in both the Black and white community.

Black art affects everybody, its not just something for Black people, it's something created out of Black people...it's something that has helped to shape and mold what has become American culture. So, we made it our business to start doing some of the things that would make us become legitimate in the eyes of the public. We incorporated under the name of Portland Black Repertory Theatre. At the time there was just a handful of us; Richard Jones, Debbie Hicks, Bobby Foucher, Pat Steward and Kolleh Dura Suma.

All of us were artists in our own right and had something unique to contribute to Portland Black Repertory Theatre. After "Wine In The Wilderness" came "For Colored Girls..." and with "Colored Girls..." came the recognition we were seeking. With that recognition came money! And with the money, came a lot of problems.

At this point, we declared a moratorium on art agencies and on going through the motions of filling out applications, and answering questions that had no relation to Black art. We decided to try and gain more support from our community; to jump in with both feet; make things work; and creating situations where Black people could produce without the funds of a public agency.

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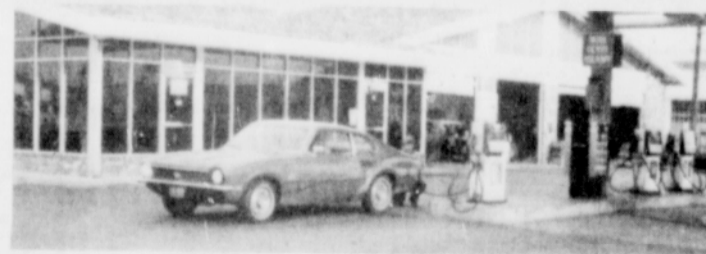
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Community Calendar

Roman Catholic Sister Sandra will speak on the current political situation in El Salvador on Sunday, January 18 at 1:30 p.m., at St. Patrick Catholic Church, 1623 N.W. 19th Avenue in Portland.

Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods: 7:30 p.m., King Neighborhood Facility, 4815 N.E. Seventh Avenue, January 20, 1981.

Portland School Board: Budget deliberations, January 20, 1981, 4:30 p.m., Administration Building, 501 N. Dixon.

Metropolitan Human Relations Commission: January 20, 1981, 7:30 p.m., Beaumont School, 5736 N.E. 33rd.

Portland School Board: Budget deliberations, 4:30 p.m., January 21, 1981, Administration Building, 501 N. Dixon.

Demonstration: U.S. out of El Salvador, Saturday, January 24, 1981, 1pm, Waterfront Park with speakers and music.

The Benson Hotel Dinner Theater presents the Mark Allen Players in Neil Simon's comedy, "Last Of The Red Hot Lovers," weekends through March. For information and reservations call the Benson Hotel - 228-9611.

EXHIBIT: Through Sunday, February 15, recent collages and inflatable sculpture by Harold Jacobs, former Museum Art School visiting professor from 1964 through 1966, will be exhibited in the North gallery of the Portland Center for the Visual Arts, 117 NE Fifth. The PCVA galleries are open to the public free of charge Tuesday through Sunday, 12:00 to 5:00 p.m.

Workshops: Beginning February 7 through February 28, Pacific Northwest Labor College will present a series of Saturday workshops especially pointed to new union members. Sessions will be from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., at the Musicians Hall, 325 N.E. 20th.

"The Art of Scientific Illustration," an exhibition of works of art that conform to the rigid standards of scientific realism, will be on view at the Museum Art School's Wentz Gallery from January 19 through February 14. For more information call the Museum Art School at 226-4391.

The Portland Women's Health Center is offering a self-help fertility awareness group on January 7 and February 10, from 7-9 at the Health Center. The cost is \$10 and pre-registration is required. For more information call 777-7044.

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