



# The



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# Portland Observer 41

years of community service

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## Playhouse Keeps the Diversity

### Church theater speaks to the community

BY MINDY COOPER  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

A local theater production directed by and featuring a cast of local African-American actors has found a home with a new theater group that wants its production to reflect the diversity of northeast Portland.

Portland Playhouse is a small and funky 95-seat venue that was converted from an old church at 602 N.E. Prescott St.

The theater recently extended their performance season and current production of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, a play written by renowned black playwright August Wilson that opened last April to full and diverse audiences.

Set in Chicago in 1927, the production brought to the stage a day in the life at a recording studio, where a group of African-American musicians and a record producer share emotional displays of both will and circumstance.

The Portland Playhouse, which has only been around since 2008, was founded by brothers Michael and Brian Weaver, and Brian's wife Nikki.

"From the beginning, one of our goals was to expand the traditional theatre," explained Michael Weaver, who is also the business manager of the playhouse.

Although there is a pattern of traditional



PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Brian Weaver (from left) with his wife Nikki and brother Michael work at keeping the diversity of northeast Portland reflected in their theater productions staged in the old church they converted into the Portland Playhouse at 602 N.E. Prescott St. Now showing is the local African-American theater production of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.

theatre often catering more towards an older and more affluent, non-minority demographic, Weaver explained, they work hard at keeping the diversity.

Their commitment to choosing plays that directly speak to the community appears to be successful when looking around the performances of Ma Rainey, where the eclectic seats of the playhouse are filled with people from all walks of life.

"We wanted to have a diverse audience across age, economics and race," said Weaver. "This is why Ma Rainey seemed to be the perfect play for us to do."

The production, directed by Kevin Jones, a local African-American director and playwright, is both intimate and honest, capturing the emotional attention of the audience from the opening scene.

Although the production's set is minimal in design, the direction of the scenes make those attending feel as though they are hanging out with the characters in real time, which creates a true connection between the actors and those in the audience.

The play is the third installment of August Wilson's chronicle of the lives of African Americans in the 20th century. Set in a time often known as the Chicago Renaissance era, the performances shed light on the lives of musicians singing and playing the blues as a means of self expression and a way of life.

Frequent threads of music are interwoven throughout the performance and the architecture of the former church carries the acoustics of the music naturally.

Weaver explained his further excitement in

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## Appeals for Better Schools on the Line

### Ballots due on building remodels; operations

BY MINDY COOPER  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

The buzz surrounding Portland's public education system is becoming louder as Tuesday's May 17 vote-by-mail election nears.

Ballots were mailed to residents almost two weeks ago and many believe the upcoming election will serve as a critical milestone in the fight for better schools across the city.

The vote will fill four-seats on the Portland Public School's Board of Education, as well as decide on two money measures: one that could protect the number of teachers in local classroom and another that asks voters to increase property taxes to help rebuild schools.



The average PPS is 65 years old, and therefore a number of school buildings throughout the city face multiple infrastructural issues.

The school facilities bond, measure 26-121, would pay for these needed upgrades by asking residents for a bond rate of about \$2 per \$1,000 of taxable assessed value, which would cost the median homeowner roughly

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