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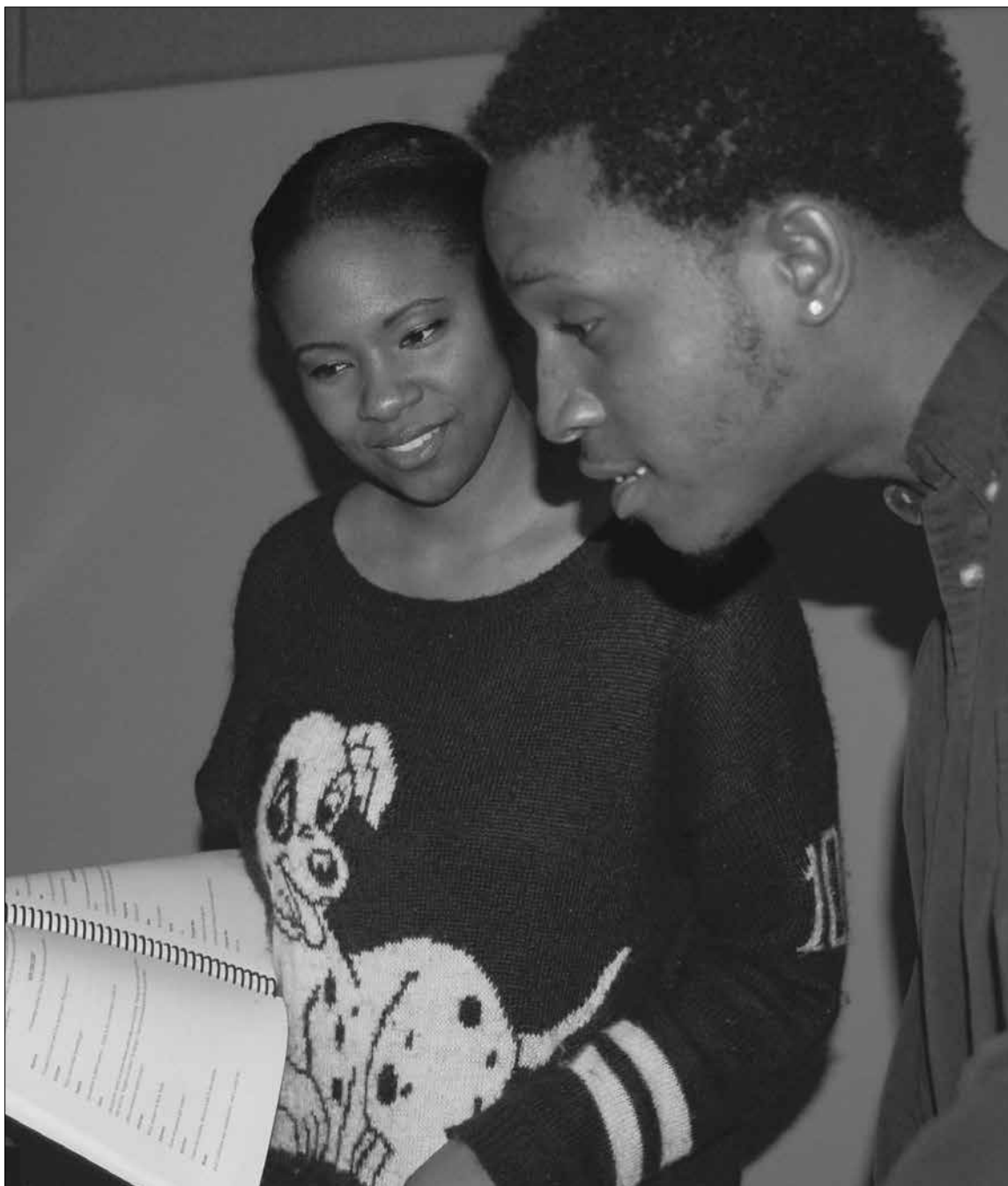


PHOTO BY OLIVIA OLIVIA/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Shanelle Leonard and De'Sean Dooley singing together at a rehearsal for 'Soul Harmony,' an original musical produced by Portland's Stumptown Stages.

## Soul Harmony

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and a member of Portland's African American community.

The effort dates back to 2011 when Greil Marcus and Alan Berg, a Portland writer, began a series of weekly interviews with Chessler a year before her death. Interviews continued with her surviving husband and daughter.

In 2013, *Soul Harmony's* artistic team was formed with Alan Berg, Kirk Mouser, Julianne R. Johnson-Weiss and Michael Alan Harrison, a popular songwriter and pianist with roots from northeast Portland.

The five had worked together on Stumptown Stages' award-winning *It's A Wonderful Life*. "Together the group had a breadth of experience in music, composing, theatre, writing and education; plus a shared affinity for the history of American music," said Mouser.

Stumptown Stages is known as a nurturer of new works and Mouser said *Soul Harmony* is not just another "jukebox musical." The concept was to create a seamless score with Chessler and the Orioles' classic R&B songs, pivotal period music, and their own original songs to enhance the drama of the characters and reveal their inner stories.

"As our work progressed we realized we were lacking the kind of in-depth information and the 'connection' with Sonny Til we felt we had with Deborah," says Berg.

"Then one night in the spring of 2013 Janet discovered a video of Sonny performing in his last year. Beneath the video a young man by the name of De'Sean Dooley, a graduate of The Duke Ellington School of the Arts and the American Musical Drama Academy had written, "It feels so wonderful to know that people really love

and respect my granddad's music."

The next day Dooley was called.

"Guess what? We're creating a musical that tells your grandfather's story," Berg recalled from that conversation.

From that day forward, Dooley and his father Ricky, and grandmother, Wanita have all helped enriched the many voices of *Soul Harmony*. Dooley traveled to Oregon twice from New York to participate for 10 weeks in Stumptown productions.

The script eventually did come together and so did the original music, and Stumptown Stages eventually had the full performance on their hands, which is now set to open here in Portland.

*Soul Harmony* premieres Thursday, April 16th and runs through May 3rd at the Brunish Theatre, part of Antoinette Hatfield Hall and Portland's Centers for the Arts. Tickets and more information are available at [stumptownstages.org](http://stumptownstages.org).