

More Than Just a Play About Breast Cancer

By Brian Stimson
Of *The Skanner News*

PassinArt: A Theater Company will be premiering their production of Oni Faida Lampley's "Tough Titty" – a story about one African American woman's struggle to deal with a breast cancer diagnosis.

But don't let the play's main theme fool you. Director A. Nannette Taylor says the performance isn't just for those women – and men – who have experienced breast cancer in their lives. The play is about much more than that.

The performance runs March 11 to 26 on Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. at the Ethos at Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, 5340 N. Interstate Ave. Matinees run at 3 p.m. on weekends.

Playwright Oni Faida Lampley's play is, for all practical purposes, an autobiography of her battle with malignant breast cancer – with names and some details changed.

Lampley's real-life struggle was a chronic one. Her cancer moved from her breast to her brain and other parts of her body – eventually taking her life in 2008.

"When I read the script, I thought, yes, this is a story that needs to be told," Taylor told *The Skanner News*. "Also, my sister is a breast cancer survivor, so there's some personal kinds of things involved. After reading the script I liked what it said and the way it said it. It focused on a certain segment of the population, but everything that is said in it, applies to everybody."

When Lampley was first diagnosed, she was in extreme denial. After all, every one of those faces on breast cancer pamphlets were White. Hers wasn't. Writing in an article for *Self* magazine in 2007, Lampley said she had no risk factors, her lifestyle strictly avoided any behavior or substance that could cause cancer. She was mostly a vegetarian.

But yet, it still happened.

Lampley's character in the play – Angela – mirrors the frustrations of a person who did everything right in life, says RaChelle Schmidt, who plays Angela in the PassinArt production.

"Her main way of dealing with everything, is to minimize the circumstances," Schmidt says. "What she's getting from her loved ones, is how she should be dealing with it. I think she's pretty frustrated with the people in her life. She's looking for an answer, she wants to know how this thing's going to be solved, and everyone from her best friend, to her husband, to God, she keeps wanting them explain to her, but they keep explaining that it just happens."

Anya Pearson, who plays Angela's long-time friend Rashida, says she's one such character in Angela's life. Pearson's Rashida is convinced that Angela should be dealing with the cancer her way or no way.

"But really, she doesn't know what she's talking about," Pearson says of Rashida. "So she's one of those friends. She's really fun to play."

Drammy Award-winner Kenneth Dembo, who plays Angela's husband Shaka, says the couple's love story is complicated by their new reality.

"It's easy for him to come off as extremely angry, but I don't think he's angry at all," Dembo said. "He's hurt, he's confused, he doesn't know how to show those emotions without going to those old stereotypes of being weak. So he's really trying to be strong, and it's coming across, for lack of a better word, as an asshole."

As Shaka feels left behind in his relationship with his wife, he picks up the slack at home, taking care of the kids and house work.

"He really loves his wife and it really terrifies him that she's not going to be there," he said. "He's really ticked off about that. He wants to take away this pain but he does-



n't know how. He can't."

While the play has been described as a breast cancer pamphlet for Black women, Taylor says she's also tried to make it appeal to the universal impact breast cancer has on everyone who knows someone with the diagnosis. She also doesn't want it to be unfairly pigeonholed.

"The subject matter is what it is," she said. "It's also a beautiful love story. It's a story of friendship, of discovery, of exploration and honestly it has something to say to everybody."

Many of the actors in the play – including Pearson – play more than one role, with shifting ethnicities and relationships with Angela. Isha Tell told *The Skanner News*

it's been a great challenge to take on such a range of roles.

"At first I didn't think I'd be able to do it," Tell said. "Especially when you switch up the characters, you want one character to be so different from the other. And incorporating different accents and things like that. It was a big challenge."

Taylor said some of the biggest challenges for a director are to find and assemble the right cast.

"It's a hugely collaborative effort," she said. "It's a very moving piece, it's a very powerful piece and it's a very honest piece. ... And one of the things I wanted to do is allow the characters to be created so there is a real true humanity and reality."

For Schmidt's Angela, there was a real life person to deal with. Although the playwright was an actor who had been featured on several television shows, Schmidt said she didn't watch any archival footage.

"I found a lot of information of stories that happened to her that seem to be verbatim to things in the play," she said.

Many of the cast members say their own experiences with cancer have impacted their devotion to the production. For Schmidt, a real-life crisis may affect her performance in unknown ways.

This Thursday, her mother died unexpectedly.

"Ironically, 14 years ago when my father died, I was at the same exact point in a show," she said. "It was a completely different show, it was a farcical comedy. I know that it saved my sanity to go and do the show and immerse myself."

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