

# Play's 'I Want My Ham' is More Of A Deeper Message Than A Menu Item

By Anna Grace

It isn't only on stage in the dialogue of the characters that the themes of August Wilson's award-winning play, "Two Trains Running," get explored. The ideals of determination, persistence and resilience also revealed themselves in the capricious process of getting this production ready for its month-long run at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center.

Four-hour weekday rehearsals, which began Jan. 30, stretched to eight hours on Saturdays and six on Sundays. PassinArt: A Theatre Company recruited from Texas the play's director, William Earl Ray—who has been directing and performing on stage for 40 years. During rehearsals, Ray was brutally honest and relentless in making sure the actors met his expectations.

"You need to counter her," Ray instructed Portland-based actor James Dixon, who plays Sterling, who was just released from prison on a bank robbery conviction. Throughout the play, Dixon's character clumsily tries to woo the belittled waitress, Risa, masterly performed by experienced film and stage actress Cycerli Ash of Atlanta.

Ray continued: "You need to move quicker when she says, 'Go on, Sterling' ...and then I need you to stop fid-

getting. This ping pong shuffling, you need to get over that."

The play, with its profound metaphors and intense language, was written to reflect a slice of life in the midst of the Civil Rights movement. At that time, racial tensions were high. Urban renewal programs were forcing black people and the black-owned businesses that depended on them out of their neighborhoods. And, hastily organized rallies brought people into the streets to send up a call for justice to the new president in the White House.

And, then there's now: 2018 and America has a

character, self-made businessman Memphis Lee, portrayed by stage veteran Wrick Jones. "Supermarket gone. Two drug stores. The five and 10. Doctor done moved out. Dentist done moved out. Ain't nothing gonna be left but these (folks) killing one another. That don't never go out of style."

The deeper meaning of the play's title "Two Trains Running" refers to the tracks of life and death, and how we all, at one point, ride them both. To emphasize that point, one of the characters, West, is a funeral director and land owner, portrayed by Jerry Fos-

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relatively new president. Black Lives Matter rallies across the country are demanding justice for marginalized communities. And Portland, where city policies have endorsed the razing of hundreds of Black homes since the 1950s, is now one of the top U.S. cities pushing Black and low-income people outside of its core neighborhoods and into the margins.

"Ain't nothing gonna be left around here," noted the play's central

ter, artistic director of PassinArt. At the same time Foster is acting in "Two Trains Running," he is also co-directing "And in This Corner Cassius Clay," produced by Oregon Children's Theater.

PassinArt is also partnering in May 2018 with the Rose Community Development to produce a play "Repulsing the Monkey" by Michael Eichler, which is about the impact of gentrification on White business owners. PassinArt is the



James Dixon (Sterling), Jerry Foster (West), Cycerli Ash (Risa), and Wrick Jones (Memphis) perform a scene in August Wilson's 'Two Trains Running' on stage now through April 1.

oldest African American producing theater company in Oregon. It was established in 1984 with a mission to entertain, educate, and inspire artists and theatergoers, while celebrating Black culture and highlighting critical issues that impact the Black community.

"We talk about gentrification and how it displaces families," Foster said. "but, it also displaces businesses, which impact the overall health and sense of community."

This is the fifth time that Ray, a Texas resident, has been a part of a "Two Trains Running" production. Most of his experiences were as the character Memphis, who is being forced by the city to sell his restaurant to make way for urban

renewal. Memphis' eatery, though, has been a gathering spot for black residents to find connection, share gossip and make sense of their lives, while dealing with discrimination, poverty and displacement.

"I love this play," Ray said. "It's one of my favorites by (Wilson) because it's so dense in its language and the humor in it is just fascinating."

PassinArt's production is the second time that unforeseen circumstances have forced Ray to move out of his director's chair in order to replace an actor on stage just before opening night. Ray says it took him about a week to memorize half of the lines of the steady character of Holloway. He plans to be completely

off book well before the show ends April 1.

"With August Wilson, it's not easy to do his plays," Ray noted. "You've got to get it into your body."

Before directing any production, Ray said he listens to jazz and rhythm and blues music in order to set a certain mood with how the play's seven characters "of loud voices and big hearts" interact. "This play for me is like a symphony and each character is a musical piece," Ray said. "How they fit into that is on their own terms. I'm just trying to stage it; you need to find your own way."

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