

# News

## PassinArt Presents 'The NO Play'

John Henry Redwood III's play, which runs through April 14, portrays Black and Jewish characters in a Southern town meant to be White-only

*The Skanner*

The racially charged words on a road sign placed at the entrance of a small Southern town is not only the title of the latest play in production by PassinArt. It is also a reminder of how America's racist history serves as a symbolic cipher of our future - if we allow it.

"Except for the fact you know it's 1949, the issues are the same as today," notes David Meyers, a longtime professional actor on stage, television and film and radio, who portrays the script's

only non-Black character. "What we thought we had conquered in this country simply went behind closed doors."

"The NO Play," which runs March 15 through April 14 at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, 5340 N Interstate Ave., centers around the pre-World War II experiences of an African American family, the Cheeks, living in the backwoods of a North Carolina town that was purposely created to be White-only. Meyer's character, a Jewish scholar, pays the Cheeks family to help him research

a book that compares the effects of anti-Black prejudice with anti-Semitism.

"I can hear the voices of my history in these characters," says Drammy Award-winning actor and director Andrea White, whose ethnicity is both Jewish and African American. In "The NO Play," she portrays the church-going, fiercely principled matriarch, Mattie Cheeks. "It's a daunting thing but it's beautiful, too, to give these people voice."

PassinArt, which was founded in 1982, tends to produce plays written by



James Dixon and Andrea White star in "The NO Play," which runs through April 14 in Portland.

Black playwrights about the Black experience and addresses critical - and at times, provocative - issues facing the Black community. PassinArt's artistic director, Jerry Foster, said he shelved "The NO Play" script for years before Foster decided to introduce it as the last production of PassinArt's 2018-19 season. It was written by John Henry Redwood III, who died in 2003.

According to Foster, Redwood didn't give the play a title until after he wrote it, which was his artistic process.

Foster then called on William Earl Ray of Texas to shape the production. Ray has directed several plays for Pas-

sinArt over the last 18 years, including August Wilson's "Two Trains Running" last year, for which Ray was nominated for a Drammy Award.

The second character in "The NO Play" is Rawl Cheeks, played by James Dixon - who was raised in North Carolina. Rawl wants to save enough money to send his two daughters to college. So, the Cheeks family begrudgingly develops a close relationship with Jack to supplement the income that Rawl earns by "digging up White folks' graves" in Alabama.

As the South was a dangerous place for non-Whites after dark, the characters in the

play develop a familiar chemistry and often encourage each other to "be safe." Once Rawl leaves the state, however, the females are left unprotected.

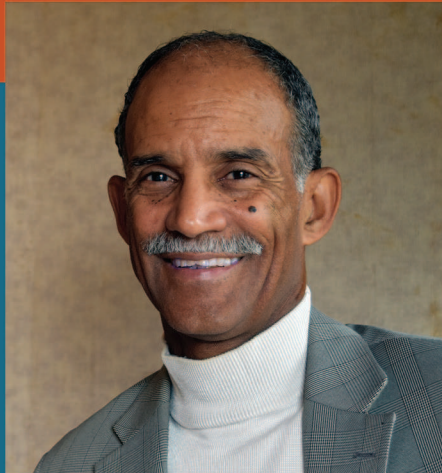
Overall, "The NO Play" is about an African American woman struggling to raise her two daughters and protect her marriage. It tests the strength of family bonds, love and elevates the issue of forgiveness.

"As our audiences in Portland are mostly White, I would want them to walk away acknowledging that people of different experiences have things that happened to them - just

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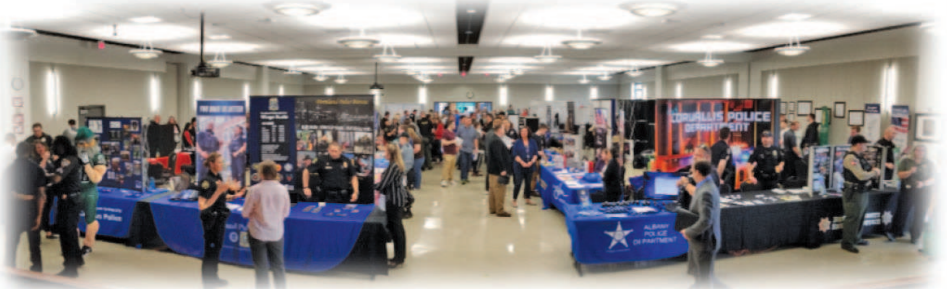
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