

Passage Theatre Looks Homeward

by Meir Rinde, May 8, 2010

TRENTON -- Downtown Trenton's Passage Theatre Company has become much more locally focused in the last year, drawing more of its actors, designers and directors from the Delaware Valley and performing works by local playwrights. Its newest show, the musical play "Trenton Lights," takes that local emphasis to the limit.



Martin Griff / The Times of Trenton
Rodney Gilbert and Kala Moses Baxter during a rehearsal for the play Trenton Lights at Passage Theatre in Trenton on Thursday, April 29, 2010.

To create the play, artistic directors June Ballinger and David White recorded hundreds of hours of interviews with more than 40 city residents from a wide range of backgrounds, including young people and senior citizens, artists, clients at the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, and members of the Jew-

ish Community Center, Shiloh Baptist Church, the Guatemalan Civic Association and several other groups, they said.

They distilled the interviews down to their essence and molded them into a script for five actors, each of whom plays multiple roles. Through the stories of a multiplicity of characters, the play tells the story of Trenton -- what it means to its residents, whether they feel safe in the city, and how their perspectives have changed over the years, they said.

"Every one of the people we talked to, we realized, had identified a time in their life when they had a choice for how they would perceive or explain Trenton, or their destiny in Trenton," said Ballinger, the company's executive artistic director and a performer in the play. "Every one made a choice based on hope, or positiveness."

"One question was, what was the turning point in your personal life in Trenton, when things changed for you, when this sort of age of innocence turned?" she said. "For a lot of people it was the riots, when their perception changed of the city."

As they drew out people's stories, Ballinger and White said they made a point of asking about the 1968 riots that scarred and transformed the city, and the "elephant in the room," the perception that



Martin Griff / The Times of Trenton
Intern Kaila Burgess and Director Adam Immerwahr during a rehearsal for the play Trenton Lights at Passage Theatre in Trenton on Thursday, April 29, 2010.

Trenton is a dangerous place to live.

"They don't think there's too much crime," said White, the company's associate artistic director. "Not that they don't notice. But the people who get so upset about the crime in Trenton are the people who don't live here. They just read about it."



Martin Griff / The Times of Trenton
Playwright David Lee White during a rehearsal for the play Trenton Lights at Passage Theatre in Trenton on Thursday, April 29, 2010.

Along they way they collected stories from the late artist Tom Malloy; from a white prison guard and a black convict who became lifelong friends; and from an Ecuadoran immigrant who became a community leader and mother of a political candidate.



Playwright June Ballinger during a rehearsal for the play Trenton Lights at Passage Theatre in Trenton on Thursday, April 29, 2010.

Martin Griff / The Times of Trenton

While Ballinger and White have both worked on documentary-based projects, the collaboration represents a new kind of work for the company. They said it's part of a trend toward more community-based ensemble productions around the country, such as The Laramie Project, an interview-based play about the 1998 murder of a gay college student, Matthew Shepard.

Trenton lends itself well to that approach, they said.



Ross Beschler during a rehearsal for the play Trenton Lights at Passage Theatre in Trenton on Thursday, April 29, 2010.

Martin Griff / The Times of Trenton

“Trenton is certainly a city with all the advantages and problems that any kind of urban center that went through the Civil Rights Movement had. But because it’s smaller, you can examine the personal stories more closely,” White said. “In Newark, they had however many people killed in the riots. In Trenton, it was just one.”



Martin Griff / The Times of Trenton
Devon Jordan and playwright June Ballinger during a rehearsal for the play Trenton Lights at Passage Theatre in Trenton on Thursday, April 29, 2010.

“It’s like a big family, and when you’ve lost one person in that family, it’s more resonant,” Ballinger said.

The play runs May 20 through June 6. In addition to Ballinger, the cast includes Devon Jordan of Princeton, Rodney Gilbert of Newark, and Kala Moses Baxter and Ross Beschler of Philadelphia.

The play is directed by Trenton resident Adam Immerwahr,



Martin Griff / The Times of Trenton
Director Adam Immerwahr, right, works with clockwise, Ross Beschler, Devon Jordan, June Ballinger, Rodney Gilbert, Kala Moses Baxter, David Lee White and intern Kaila Burgess (hidden) during a rehearsal for the play Trenton Lights at Passage Theatre in Trenton on Thursday, April 29, 2010.

merwahr, with original compositions by Vince di Mura, a musical consultant at Princeton University and professor of jazz piano at The Lawrenceville School, and musical direction by Cris Frisco, a faculty member at Westminster Choir College in Princeton.

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