

LATEST NEWS FEBRUARY 14, 2015 12:00 AM

UNC Charlotte Theater Department's performances explore urban issues

HIGHLIGHTS

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By Lisa Thornton - Correspondent

This month, UNC Charlotte's theater department will present "The Purple Flower and Other Plays," a collection of one-act stories focused on urban violence, oppression and racism, as seen through the eyes of African-American citizens.

Performances will run Feb. 18-22 at UNC Charlotte's Belk Theater and will feature guest artists Khalid Hill and Ricardo Foster Jr. in lead roles.

Hill, a professional tap dancer, has toured nationally in "Bring in Da' Noise, Bring in Da' Funk." Foster is a choreographer and dancer whose past collaborations include endeavors with performers Jay-Z, Usher and Britney Spears.

The four one-act plays touch upon recurring themes in America.

Harlem Renaissance writer Marita Bonner penned "The Purple Flower" in 1927 as an allegorical response to the oppression of minority groups – particularly African-American women – at the time.

"They (the characters) are voicing all of the tangents of the African-American struggle to that point, and one of them is obviously dissatisfaction with social progress," said James Vesce, associate professor of directing at UNC Charlotte.

"The Great MacDaddy," written by Paul Carter Harrison in 1974, draws on the dehumanizing effects of racial stereotypes, such as tap-dancing African-American waiters, pimps and Southern white sheriffs.

Two other plays, "The Toilet," by Amiri Baraka, and Cherry Jackson's "In the Master's House There are Many Mansions" focus on violence – including black-on-black, black-on-white, police brutality and violence toward homosexuals.

Vesce was inspired to stage the four works in light of recent conflicts that echo the past, including the shooting deaths of African-American teens Trayvon Martin in Florida and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo.

"It's part of the national conversation right now," said Vesce. "These plays are 30 years old plus, so I think there's this continuity of these issues we've yet to resolve in our culture."

Vesce has a passion for issues concerning inner-city youth that began when he was a graduate student in Boston. While there, he co-founded a multicultural inner-city performing arts company called Dimock Street Voices, which attacked topics such as gang violence and substance abuse in some of Boston's roughest neighborhoods.

In 2001, he launched Twilight Repertory Company, an outreach program aimed at providing theatrical training to underrepresented kids in Charlotte.

Many of the plays Vesce chooses for the stage are underrepresented as well.

Bonner's "The Purple Flower," considered experimental in the 1920's, has rarely been produced. Bonner never saw it performed onstage during her lifetime.

"It's really challenging as a piece of theater, because it's an allegorical surrealistic play. If you are familiar at all with Greek tragedy, this has the elements of chorus, the elements of declamation and voicing," said Vesce. "There's not a lot of dramatic action, so it's better suited on a college stage than a regional theater."

Ricardo Foster . Jr @ cambridge dance complex Chris Brown - Trumpet lights (choreo)

