

Entertainment

A Holiday Cinderella Story

By: Georgia Rowe
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Ever notice how much of America's Christmas theater tradition takes place in Europe? Between German "Nutcrackers" and British "Christmas Carols," it often seems there's little homegrown about the holiday.

The African-American Shakespeare Co.'s "Cinderella" offers an alternative.

Set in the Louisiana bayou, the classic fairy tale has a regional twist in the show presented by the San Francisco-based company. Executive Director Sherri Young directs the production, which runs Thursday through Dec. 27 and opens the group's 15th-anniversary season.

"This is my third time directing the show," says Young, who founded the company in 1994. "It's always been my favorite. It's like our 'Christmas Carol.'"

This is a different kind of "Cinderella." Young's version of the mistreated maid and the Prince Charming who rescues her includes music and a masquerade ball choreographed by Patrik Gallineaux from the Cheryl Burke Dance Studio. It's all done with a distinctively Southern touch.

"We're setting it in the French Quarter, with Grandmother sitting in a rocking chair telling the story to the grandkids," Young says. "We've added some Cajun characters and a little French cadence."

That's a characteristic approach for African-American Shakespeare. Young, a graduate of the American Conservatory Theater's master of fine arts program, started the company when she noticed that many local theater productions didn't reflect the Bay Area's diverse population.

"There were all these great stories, but I could see that a lot of African-Americans in the audience were put off," she says. "They



didn't see themselves in the picture. That was a shame, because these stories have the human emotions and traits that represent all of us."

Since then, she's staged more than 30 productions, giving actors of color opportunities to hone their skills in classical works.

For "Cinderella," Young cast a wide net for children to play the grandkids.

"We have four sets of kids," she says, "and they're coming from as far as Napa, Pittsburg and San Jose to be in the show."

Also appearing are Delina Brooks as Cinderella, Detroit Dunwood as Prince Charming and Belinda Sullivan as Grandmother.

Young says good things are happening for African-American Shakespeare. Acclaimed Bay Area actor Peter Callender recently was appointed the company's new artistic director, and the group's home base at the African American Art & Culture Complex is reopening after a yearlong, \$1 million upgrade. The season will continue in May with a production of "Othello."

Mostly, though, Young says she's pleased that the company has survived. "When I first started in 1994, I planned for a two-day showcase," she says. "I never thought we'd still be here. I'm so

proud of our tenacity and gumption, that we're still doing something people said we couldn't do."

If you go:
Cinderella
Presented by African-American Shakespeare Co.
Where: African American Art & Culture Complex, 762 Fulton St., San Francisco
When: 8 p.m. Thursday, 1 and 8 p.m. Friday, 3 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 20 and 27, 8 p.m. Dec. 19; closes Dec. 27
Tickets: \$20 to \$30
Contact: (800) 838-3006,
www.African-AmericanShakes.org

For more information go to
www.examiner.com