The African-American Shakespeare Company Has a Deeper Purpose

By Gary Carr

For more than a decade, local theater buffs looking for well-produced stage work have set their sights on 62 Fulton Street: the African-American Art & Culture Complex, home to the African-American Shakespeare Company. The company stages plays by the Greeks and Shakespeare, as well as contemporary productions.

This month, opening March 8, the company will present eight performances of Euripides' Medea, the 2,400-year-old tale of a jilted wife exacting the ultimate revenge on a cheating husband. Performances will be held on Saturdays and Sundays through March 30.

The troupe's tagline, "Envisioning the Classics With Color," conveys its mission of providing entertainment with a deeper social purpose.

“Our goal is to open the realm of classic theatre to a diverse audience and provide an opportunity for actors of color to hone their skills in mastering some of the world's greatest classical roles,” says executive director Sherri Young.

Young founded the African-American Shakespeare Company in 1993 and has been its executive director since. Out from behind her desk, she has directed 17 of the company's productions.

This season's offerings included a production of Driving Miss Daisy, the play that was made into an Academy Award-winning film starring Morgan Freeman and Jessica Tandy.

“We strive to produce plays that are lively, entertaining and relevant,” says artistic director L. Peter Callender, a much sought-after director and actor who is a favorite with Bay Area audiences. Callender drew raves for his portrayal of Miss Daisy's chauffeur — acclaim that carries over to his work with Cal Shakes and the Berkeley Rep.

The company's performance of Cinderella has become its signature.

“Our Cinderella is a holiday show that children can take adults to,” Callender says. “For me, it's exciting to watch the kids in the audience becoming overjoyed at seeing a prince and a princess who look just like they do.”

The African-American Shakespeare Company also strives to uplift its community onstage. Its Shake-It-Up program teaches literacy skills to students using theater games and drama techniques. The program addresses the educational needs of students in fun and creative ways, helping students develop a positive relationship with complex reading materials.

Over the years, the troupe has staged more than 30 productions, toured to nearly 100 schools, and reached more than 100,000 patrons through its mainstage performances and arts education program.

Coming up in May, the company will present a modern take on one of Shakespeare's comedies, Much Ado about Nothing, that will include a tribute to the music of Ella Fitzgerald.