

# The Mercury News

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2010

## New Director Peter Callender Has Big Plans for African-American Shakespeare Company

By: Pat Craig Correspondent



It was a brilliant idea -- staging George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion" with an all-black cast, with Professor Henry Higgins studying the black dialects of Oakland instead of the British dialects of London.

It was more than a decade ago that San Francisco's African-American Shakespeare Company staged the play, and L. Peter Callender, an actor well known to theater fans across the Bay Area for his powerful portrayals in classic works, recalls it vividly.

"Yes, yes, I do remember," says Callender. "I was impressed. I thought, 'Wow!' It was a wonderful play." And now, as African-American Shakespeare's artistic director, Callender can explore his own ideas in classic and contemporary theater.

Ibsen? "Think about what happened to Nora in 'A Doll's House,'" he muses. "Why couldn't that be a black, middle-class family?"

Tennessee Williams? "Oh, I'm already thinking about 'A Glass Menagerie.'"

Arthur Miller? "I've talked with Stephen Anthony Jones and Margo Hall about playing Willy and Linda in 'Death of a Salesman.'"

Meredith Willson's "Music Man?" "Hmm, hmm. I hadn't thought about that one, but you know, it just might ..."

### Lots of ideas

Callender drifts off into thought. In the few weeks since he became the artistic director of the theater company, he's talked to lots of people -- actors and directors, major league theater players eager to work with him, companies looking to collaborate, people with ideas, artistic directors ready to commiserate.

"I remember during the groundbreaking at Cal Shakes, Jon Moscone (artistic director there) saying to me, 'Anyone who wants to be an AD is crazy.' And I tend to agree with him at times," Callender says. "But I did it because I believe in the vision of the company; I want to lift the company a bit; I believe actors, white and black, need another venue; I believe actors of color coming out of ACT (American Conservatory Theater), PCPA (Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts), Solano College, Laney College, Chabot College need a place to showcase their talents in the Bay Area before going to New York or elsewhere."

On the other hand, artistic directors have problems and concerns much different from those of actors.

"I remember giving a (preshow) speech and looking out at the audience, and the first thought that came to me is, 'Why aren't we selling more tickets, oh my gosh, why aren't we selling more tickets?'" He says. "So it is going to be challenging."

Right now, Callender agrees, is an exceptionally good time for black theater, especially in the Bay Area. The new Brothers/Sisters Trilogy plays by Yarell Alvin McGraney, playing this fall at three area theaters, are proving to be big hits, and Aurora Theatre's recent revival of the civil rights themed play "Trouble in Mind" was a hit with critics and theatergoers. Meanwhile, classic plays, such as "The Glass Menagerie," with black casts are being staged on Broadway.

And for Callender's acclaimed acting career, there have been huge theatrical opportunities in such top regional theaters as Cal Shakes, ACT, Berkeley Rep and TheatreWorks, as well as theaters throughout the country. As

### Staying on the stage

Callender will continue his acting. He is currently performing with his own company in "IPH ..." by Colin Teevan, an interpretation of Euripides tragedy "Iphigeneia at Aulis," having its American premiere in a collaborative production of Brava Theatre and African-American Shakespeare Company.

He also wants to see that the existing black theaters in the area remain vital. He is particularly interested in seeing the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre come back strong after the deaths of its founders, Quentin Easter and Stanley Williams.

"I miss them," says Callender. "They are the grandfathers; they've been around for years and it's sad that at this point they were taken away from us. Nobody wants that theater to go away."

He figures the fact he is well-known in the Bay Area will help him redefine the African-American Shakespeare Company and to make a dent almost immediately in the local theater scene. It will also help him forge alliances and collaborative projects with other local theater groups.

"I think it is absolutely necessary to seek collaborations with companies like SF Playhouse and with companies like Cal Shakes, Berkeley Rep and ACT," he says. "I have to have a few successes under my belt to have something to share and to be able to make bold choices showing a bold vision. I have to build up that trust."

Callender plans to play a big role in the local theater scene, and continue, when he is able, to work with other companies, even if it is as the only black face in a cast. He recalled when a woman walked up to him following his performance as the physician Dr. Frederick Treves in a matinee production of "The Elephant Man."

"She came up to me and shook my hand and I thanked her," he says. "Then she said, 'I didn't know Dr. Treves was a black man.' I told her, yes, he was. It isn't me playing a white role if I can make her rethink everything she knows about black doctors."