

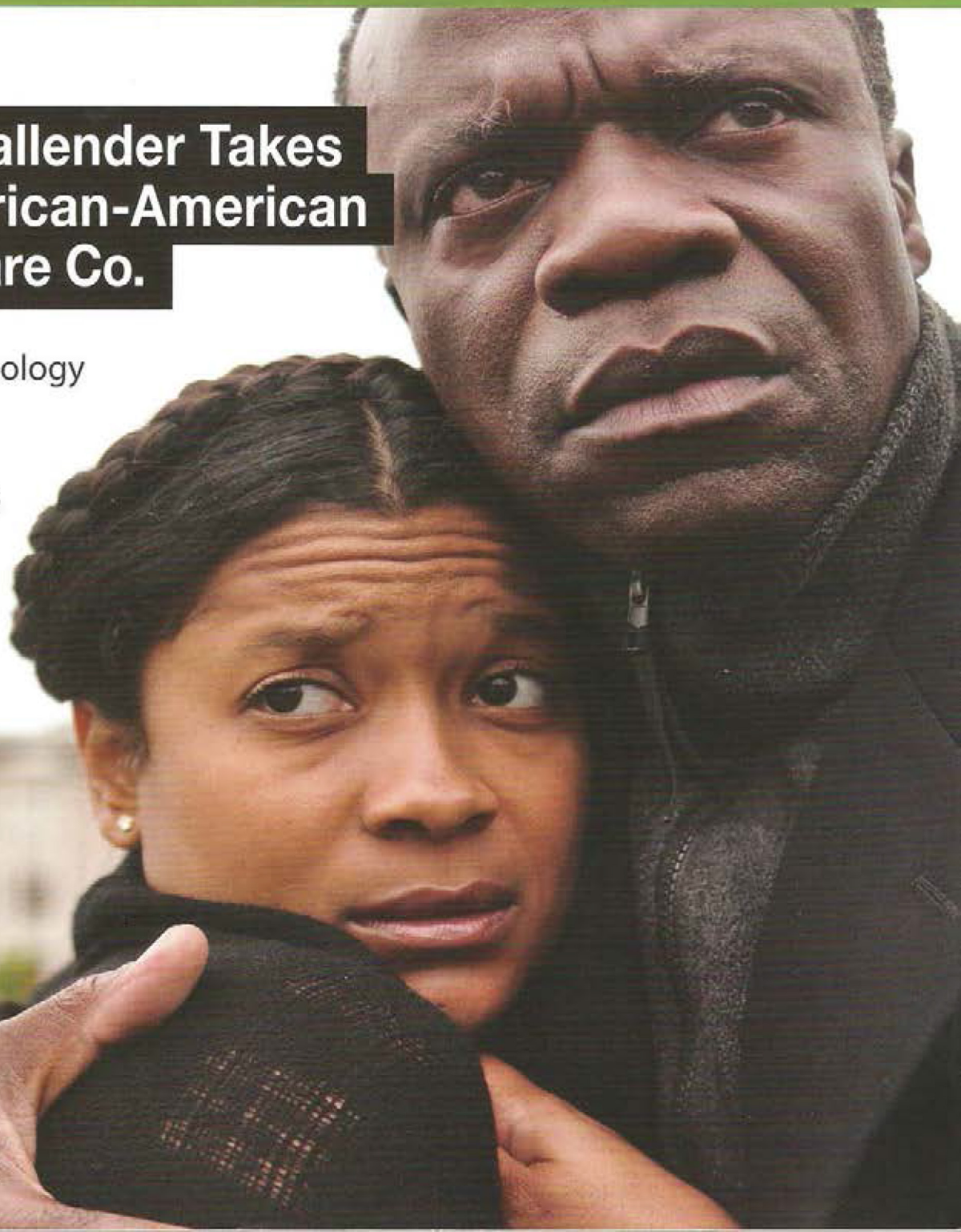
OCTOBER 2010

theatre

BAY AREA

L. Peter Callender Takes Over at African-American Shakespeare Co.

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OCTOBER 2010

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Heightened Language:

AN INTERVIEW WITH

L. Peter Callender

NEW AFRICAN-AMERICAN SHAKESPEARE COMPANY artistic director L. Peter Callender (the "L" stands for Lear) announces right off he's a hugger, not a handshaker. He has just burst energetically into the small office that he shares with executive director/founder Sherri Young in the Western Addition's African American Art & Culture Complex. It's a cool day, and he's wearing a black sweater and jeans. Pulling up a stool and leaning forward attentively, he's an engaging mix of warmth and intensity.

After a busy career as a multi-award-winning actor (on and off-Broadway, in regional and local theatre and also in Japan, England and France) and sometime director, including many years as associate artist at California Shakespeare Theater, he is clearly fired up about this new job. He's determined to raise the profile of the 16-year-old company, producing "classics with color," offering a variety of classes for young people and establishing a contract with Equity. He's realistic about the challenges ahead but optimistic as well.

His very slightly mid-Atlantic inflections are a reminder of his classical background: He trained formally at Juilliard and studied mask technique with Julie Taymor and Suzuki Technique with Tadashi Suzuki's company in Japan.

You're originally from Trinidad.

Yes, a village there, where my grandmother had her house and where I grew up. I recently went back and the house is still there, made of mortar and mud and wood and

galvanized roof. I was amazed. And people live there! And the yard seems so small now.

Then my mother went to London to study midwifery, and she sent for me when I was about 8, and I lived there for a couple of years and came to the states in 1969 to live with my auntie in Brooklyn.

Then I moved to the Bronx with Mother.... My first acting teacher and coach took us to see *Gemini*, *Godspell*, all the shows that were on Broadway. The first show I saw was *Man of La Mancha*, and the first lead role I played, in school, was Don Quixote. I started my career doing musical theatre. I went to the performing arts high school and didn't do any musicals after that.

Why did you take this job at this time?

This theatre has been on my mind for a while. I was a big fan and knew it needed to make a shift. I hadn't thought about being artistic director until Sherri called me with the idea. I thought, wow, that would be interesting. Sherri talked about the need for a change, for broadening the company's footprint, moving the company forward. I thought this could be the opportunity I've been waiting for, loving the Bay Area as much as I do.

I spoke with a bunch of friends and colleagues. Jonathan Moscone was the first; he said, "This would be a perfect match, they need you there." I also talked to Tony Taccone and Tom Ross and Jasson Minadakis. These people were so

supportive, pushing me in that direction, and I thought, why not? I submitted my artistic statement, met with the board and a decision was made.

This is an opportunity to take what I've learned from Jonathan Moscone and my fellow actors at Cal Shakes in the way of making Shakespeare more accessible to everybody that wants to come see it.

What are your programming plans?

To do Shakespeare and also classic American plays—Williams, Miller. Margo Hall is slated to direct one of them. ... I love August Wilson; I've acted in August Wilson, I'd do it twice a year if I could, those are extraordinary plays. But the mission of this theatre is to do the classics with color. And certainly that's what I'd like to stick with. Yes, if someone comes up to me with a brand new play similar to the August Wilson plays I would certainly consider it.

I say this in deference to the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre. They're in flux right now.... I don't want to take over their genre, their style—that's what they did and I support that. If called, I would go back to the Lorraine Hansberry and act or direct. I love what they were doing, and I certainly hope they come back. But for us, we want to do the classics. *A Doll's House*—that could be done with a black couple going through marital or financial problems and a wife who makes the wrong decision to borrow money from somebody else. Certainly *Death of a Salesman*, *Glass Menagerie*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*.... I'm reading an adaptation called *King Macbeth*. I don't like taking Shakespeare and changing the words. If it's a completely new adaptation of the play, bring that to me, I love that. But if I'm doing *Othello*, I don't want to mention Obama. I may edit it; Shakespeare needs to be edited, certainly. I like doing *Romeo and Juliet* in jeans and T-shirts, but give me that heightened language. I want to showcase multiracial casts certainly, with a lean toward African American.

What about more coproducing, the way you're currently coproducing *lph...* with Brava?

No major plans yet. I hope there'll be more collaborations with Brava. I'd love to collaborate with SF Playhouse. I hope Lorraine Hansberry gets back on its feet so there can be some collaborations there. And with the Magic—Loretta [Greco] and I are friends; I've known her for years. And Cal Shakes. Jonathan is one of my advisors, an amazing leader, producer, friend, colleague.



L. Peter Callender.

Photo: Ben Krantz

What are your plans regarding casting?

The first thing I did when I took the job was sit down with Sherri and see what we can do with Equity actors. Here [at the Buriel Clay Theatre] we have to get a special contract. We're in talks with Equity and they're in support of the company.

Since I've been assigned the job, so many calls have come in: "I want to work for you." Aldo Billingslea wants to direct and act with the company. I've spoken to noted actors such as Steven Anthony Jones. When I called C. Kelly Wright [about appearing in *Iph...*], I said, "It's not going to be a great deal of money as far as Equity contracts." She said, "I don't care about that right now. I just want to be in on the ground floor."

My intention is to lift the theatre artistically, bring in award-winning directors who are willing to work with

"I want to take a giant leap, give the company a national footprint.... Things are happening."

young actors, with some non-Equity actors. I want to ask the professionals to mentor young actors, because we need to keep some of those actors in the Bay Area. Young people coming up need that helping hand. I've been there. I've been an intern. It shouldn't be about "e-go"; it should be about "let's go." Hey, I like that.

What do you value in actors in general?

Passion. Professionalism. Respect for themselves, the space, the craft itself, the playwright. Take it seriously but don't take yourself too seriously. Respect your fellow actors and the director you're working with. Give 110 percent. Be on time and know that what you're doing is a very special thing, that very few people can do it as well as you, that you're in a very special place. That's how I was brought up in the business and what I've learned, from Broadway to the Bay.

As an actor, what do you like in directors?

Directors who like actors, who know how to communicate, who have a vision, but when they're going down that road maybe there's a little side road they didn't anticipate but are willing to go down it. A good listener, a good communicator who knows when to veer off from the vision a little bit.

What are you like as a director?

I like to think I'm fun, creative, inventive. I have no qualms in saying, "I need a little help here, let's work it through." I like to ask a lot of questions of my actors: "What do you think is going on here?"

I don't know all the answers but I know how to talk to actors because I'm an actor and I know how actors respond. I [hope to] bring in a lot from the best directors I've worked with [such as] Mark Wing-Davey, Tony Taccone, Sharon Ott. I've learned a great deal from these incredible directors.


How you see African-American Shakes fitting into the big picture?

I want to take a giant leap, give the company a national footprint.... Things are happening. We've received calls from the National Black Arts Festival to participate. A director from France is interested in doing *Othello*.

See this huge staff? [Gesturing to Sherri Young, laughing.] This is the hardest-working woman in show business! But we do have interns coming in to help out. Great things are happening. We're going to be taking a lot more chances. We're talking to funders all the time. It's about having people believe in what you're doing and willing to support it. Once we're out there and successful, I think success breeds success. The buzz is out there. It's invigorated me to no end.

What is on your wish list?

Funding, funding, funding. Developing a strong, acting, energized board with individuals who care and have a passion for theatre. Getting the rights to all the plays I want to do, without problems.

My ultimate wish is to have a theatre of our own. Buriel Clay is a lovely space, but it's not our own. There are restrictions here that are a little tight for us. I want a space that has our marquee. That we can stay in until two in the morning. Actors who will stay with the company, support it, and when they move on they'll come back [at times] and work with the company. We'll get there. We have to have successes first. 

Iph... runs through Oct. 16 at Brava Theatre, 2781 24th St. The following two productions are at the Buriel Clay Theatre, 762 Fulton St.: *Cinderella*, Dec. 3-19, directed by Velina Brown, and *Twelfth Night*, Apr. 1-May 1, directed by Callender with original music by Marcus Shelby. Visit African-AmericanShakes.org.

Jean Schiffman is an arts writer based in San Francisco.