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PLOWSHARES THEATRE COMPANY THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS

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PLOWSHARES THEATRE COMPANY THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS

By

Myron Wade Curenton

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ABSTRACT

PLOWSHARES THEATRE COMPANY THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS

By

Myron Wade Curenton

The objective of this study is to discuss the history and origin of the Plowshares Theatre Company based upon an interview with the current artistic director Gary Anderson and his assistant Dr. Addell Anderson. The interview includes a wide range of discussions on the Plowshares Theatre Company and how it has sustained itself and remained relevant over the past two decades.

Gary Anderson also discusses the organizations objectives and mission to seek out talent in regards to local African American playwrights and actors. This study also describes Gary Anderson's hopes of enhancing Detroit's city's arts and cultural scene by producing African American plays.

The second part of this study includes a series of critical reviews found in local Detroit news papers and from surrounding suburbs which highlights the fine productions developed through the Plowshares Theatre Company.

This portion of the study also includes a series of production photos which offers a visual insight to the creative talent of Gary Anderson and various cast members. This study is an attempt to bring to light the importance of African American theater not only within the city of Detroit Michigan, but also throughout the United States of America.

DEDICATION
To My Father and Mother Mr. & Mrs. Robert and Shirley Curenton
and
My Very Dear Friend
Brenda Brooks
They set the Sun ablaze above me.

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Introduction

The Plowshares Theatre Company can be defined as an African American Theatre Company, or as a Black Theatre Company. African American theater companies are fully committed to seeking out African American playwrights African American talent, and producing African American plays. African American theater has had a long and varied history that began in the 1800s. It includes minstrel companies' musicals, drama, vaudeville and variety companies.

Throughout the history of African American theatre and still today many African American theater companies struggle with the fact that they are unable to acquire permanent venues. Plowshares Theatre Company is a major example of an African—American theatre company in this dilemma.

The Plowshares Theatre Company emerged nearly 20 years ago in Detroit, Michigan at a time when black artistic enterprises had achieved national recognition These include pioneering organizations such as the Alvin Ailey Dance Company, Motown Record Company, and the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Plowshares Theatre Company is approaching its twentieth anniversary and continues striving to be a recognized as an important institution both in Michigan and the Midwest.

For the most part the written history of black theater in the US is incomplete, largely because, although hundreds of years old, black theater did not receive extensive coverage in newspapers and other periodicals.

Given the above, and as a native Detroiter and African American as well I have a special interest in documenting the origin and development of The Plowshares Theatre Company. Toward that end I have largely utilized articles from the Detroit newspapers and materials generously given to me by Mr. Gary Anderson, the current director of the Plowshares Theatre Company. I also have personally seen three Plowshares Theatre Company productions while informally following their activities over the past many years.

My thesis has two main parts. Part I includes an extensive interview with Gary Anderson, Plowshares Theater Company's current managing director and his professional partner (and wife) Dr. Addell Anderson. The interview covers the origins and development of The Plowshares Theatre Company. As well as its current and future challenges. Part II centers on how the Plowshares Theatre Company enacted its mission. As evident in critical reviews and a collection of additional production photos follows.

PART I

Figure 1. Curenton Dr. Anderson Anderson 2008

I conducted the following interview June 4th, 2008 in Detroit, Michigan with Mr. Gary Anderson and his wife and assistant, Dr. Addell Austin-Anderson.

Curenton: How did the Plowshares Theater Company originate?

Anderson: Plowshares kind of started as an idea of mine and another college student at Wayne [State University] by the name of Michael Garza. We had been adversaries to a certain extent. We were both directing students at Wayne and hadn't really gotten along very well when we knew each other earlier and over a few years in the late eighties we began to have a real appreciation and awareness about one another, and really created a strong bond. So like in '87 and '88 we started, we both had aspirations of owning our own theater company. That's what we really wanted to do.

Both of us were getting our masters of theater with the specialization in directing. Neither one of us wanted to stage manage. Which is what a lot of directors do coming out of college. I don't want to carry coffee for somebody. I didn't want to, I didn't necessarily want to take down somebody else's blocking and I actually wanted to do it. Being young and arrogant with a whole lot of energy, I'm sure the only way we would be doing it was by running our own theater. So we kind of started out that way.

The theater had a different focus when we were discussing it. I had, early in my undergraduate career, not really seen Black theater as something that I necessarily was interested in. I will explain that, when you grow up in a

community, and I grew up in Ypsilanti, when you grow up in a community where you are, it's conscious that you are the minority and the work that you are able to do in high school productions has no relevance whatsoever to your ethnic background. Even when you get into college, you are really exposed to the world of theater from a European-Western perspective although they may offer specialized classes in Asian theater, Indian theatre, or some other ethnic community.

The vast majority of the works you are going to read and be exposed to are going to be from culture that is not your own. So like any other student and undergraduate, I pretty much embraced that. Then over time it became apparent to me that there were achings, there were achings, because I started out as an actor. There were achings in regards to not having roles available to me. Not having plays that really spoke to me. Not having work that I thought was edifying to a conversation that really hadn't even been begun, which was how we lived together in an extremely diverse country where ethnicity and regionalism has an impact on perspective. And so in my graduate studies I started looking, I had changed by that point to somebody who wanted to direct as opposed to act. Because I felt, I started feeling more compelled to be a story teller as opposed to be an aspect of the story. Not to be a writer, but be a director. That was what pushed me into doing the theater.

Michael had, there were some similarities in regards to his growth, he wanted to be a director, he liked the concept of controlling the path of the story, not interpretive aspect of directing and both of us were looking at doing a theater that would combine our interests. So I came in with a desire to tell African-American stories and he came in with a desire to tell everything else. But together we had a social consciousness that kind of connected the work. We wanted to tell specific stories that reflected certain social issues and topics. It wasn't going to be your *Dad's Frivolous Theater Company*; it was going to be something that had some weight to it. So that is where we kind of met and Plowshares became the theater vehicle because the name was synonymous with what we were doing. The Bible verse from Isaiah, we were beating our swords into plowshares, we had one time been adversaries, and now we were friends. So that was really the impetus behind the name.

Later on, after Michael left, [the company] I was very interested in doing new work. Working with writers of color, who were in the process of creating a work and doing world premiers and we have done that through the lifetime of the company. So, the name still has real relevance and that like a plowshare, we break new ground, we till the field, to seed it for the cultivation of a new harvest in the next season, and our work with new writers has continued that process. So it still has relevance even though the original reason for the name of the company was more personally focused; it has a broader relevance now.

Curenton: That actually answered my next question, which was, how was the name determined, whose idea was it, and how did it happen? So I will jump to the next question.

Anderson: Sure. I will tell you the other name that the theater company had at one time. Michael jokingly thought that we ought to name it the Not Dead Theater or the Undead Theater. That was a little Gothic and I wasn't really into that. So we eventually agreed on Plowshares.

Curenton: That's pretty good, the Not Dead Theater. OK, what is the driving purpose for funding this theater?

Anderson: Well, I think like any venture the driving purpose is to fulfill the mission. For me the mission has always been to focus on the cultivation of talent, to display stories and perspectives on stories that you won't find anywhere else.

I look back at my life and although my children have it far better than I did, I had it far better than my parents did. There are still these milestones that occur in your life that help you have appreciation of who and what you are. One of those for me was the original miniseries of *Roots*. You know you really have had major TV network broadcasting the story of a family that looked like me, and telling it in a perspective that really focused on the aspects of that story that came from the Black focus as opposed to looking at it from some other direction.

I can't identify with *Gone with the Wind.* It's a fine film and I can appreciate it for all its calling, but I can't identify with the scenes specifically after the burning of Atlanta when you have the Blacks walking through town, talk about how they're going to fight with the confederacy. I can't identify with people who are oppressed, wanting to support their oppressors. *Roots* told the story of the greatest challenge this country has ever had the legacy of slavery, in a way that was so different from anything else at that time and done so well that it still resonates to me.

I think that you ought to tell those stories repeatedly. The other thing about it that I think is extremely important is that you ought to provide opportunities for the growth and development of other artists. You ought to be inspiring a generation that follows you. There is a lot beyond you, and you should prepare the way for those that follow you even as you are doing your work. Now, in my fourth decade, I'm starting to think seriously about what the next generation of this organization needs to be. We really need to solidify those things and it needs to be a place where artists of a younger generation find themselves reflected. It should be the place that I was looking for when I was in my twenties and couldn't find. And that's the reason why I created Plowshares. So that's the impetus for the funding. You need to be relevant and responsive to your community, at the same time you need to be constantly thinking about how you stay relevant and responsive for the generations going forward.

Curenton: Next question. What obstacles did you encounter in getting the Plowshares Theatre Company off the ground?

Anderson: Well, a couple of them, I mean, well, there are several and I can list them all. Our own ignorance Michael and I, I think for the first couple of seasons talked repeatedly about how we, if you looked at it like we were in college, we were one chapter ahead of the teacher. The teacher was the theater. So, whenever we were approached with things that we just didn't know, we had just finished reading that paragraph in the text book. So you don't always get the things like insurance. Things like getting your 501C3 status, which we did a year before we actually began producing.

Things like making sure that when we dealt with Equity, making sure we dealt with Equity appropriately. We were bonded, we produced Equity since inception. The first show we did had Equity presence and that has been pretty fairly consistent going forward. Cause at that time, when we started, you couldn't get a review in this town from the critics unless your show was an Equity production. It's changed significantly over the last twenty some odd years.

Looking at some of the other obstacles, we were trying to find people who would believe in your idea. It's easier to talk about something when it's right there. When you're talking about a dream, you're talking about a dream that hasn't even been defined, or a dream that people may not even know that they believe is important. You really have to have a different

conversation with them. So that is an obstacle. A couple of the obstacles that we faced have been funding, the challenges of sustaining a cultural organization, specifically, a culturally specific organization are really hard.

It's very clear you can just do the numbers, but the vast majority of wealth in this country is held by people who don't look like me. Institutions of color that have been successful, that are culturally specific organizations, like the Alvin Ailey have been able to garner dollars from people of very diverse backgrounds, more representation of very diverse backgrounds. That's a challenge in a community like Detroit, and a state like Michigan that is still extremely stratified on ethnic and racial lines.

Some parts of this country have had conversations around that or have addressed it in ways that have made it far easier for those institutions to exist than here. That doesn't mean it's not possible but the other challenge is then, there's no tradition here. And what I mean by that is a number of great artists have come out of Michigan, but they have gone to be successful elsewhere. And that's not to say that that doesn't happen in other cities, but Detroit doesn't have a major regional theater on the level of the Guthrie like in Minneapolis or the Goodman like in Chicago or at the Alliance like in Atlanta and without that kind of major hub or in the case of Chicago, you've got more than one major regional theater and without that level of tradition, you really find it challenging, because people start wondering why, because the reality is if, and I have to be very frank about this, if white folks haven't

been able to accomplish it, the question is why can you? Does that make sense?

Curenton: Yes, ok, next question. What kind of resources, financial and otherwise did you have access to?

Anderson: Well, we were fortunate when we started, it's kind of interesting, the year we started producing with the company was the same year John Engler was elected governor this changed a lot in regards to the scope. You may remember, he ran on a campaign of eliminating the, at that time, the Michigan Council for the Arts. He was going to get rid of the whole department because it was a separate department in the State Government. And most people didn't believe him, in fact, a number of the Republicans who supported the art institutions in this community didn't believe him. Then, after he took office, he made an executive order and he got rid of it. So that happened the very year that we began to produce and it sent a signal in regards to where our support was going to start having to come from. He eventually re-established it, but as an aspect of another department and it kinda got moved around.

Dr. Anderson: Let's talk about how much Michigan used to be to the arts, as far as their ranking.

Anderson: Michigan used to be number two behind New York State in regards to funding of art. Now it's some place around below American Samoa.

Dr. Anderson: Well, up in the 30's, it's like 35 or 36.

Anderson: I'm joking, it's not. It's in the latter tier of states in this country. That's really a challenge too, when you think about it, because it's not to say that state funding is the, be all, but it sends a signal to the sensory [sic] about the significance that arts take. Also, there have been significant changes in the last twenty years about tax policy.

There will be people who may disagree with me, but I think part of the challenges has been that if you change part of the pressure, that encourages people to give charitably to non-profits. It's always been known, there has been the ability to benefit from that in tax deductions. When you start reducing those deduction opportunities or you've changed the codes so that they're less likely, what you find is that many people are less inclined to give, and I'm not talking about the top tier folk, people who have large disposable income, like a Bill Gates, or you know like a Ford will give because they understand the benefit out of that.

I'm talking about that middle class or average citizen, there are challenges there and I think we're just now at a point where we're starting to see a shift in that, that individual giving now is starting to increase in a way that will

hopefully affect a number of us. I mean, I think the campaign that Barack Obama has been waging where he's raised all this money, and the average donation is $96. It changes the conversation in regards to giving.

Curenton: Can you describe the early years and seasons of Plowshares Theater Company?

Anderson: Well, I just graduated with my Masters, I was newly married so I tell everybody, I started a theater company, and I got married the same year.

Dr. Anderson: Good thing for you.

Anderson: With arrogance, which is something I would not suggest to anybody else. You have a lot of tension. So you've got, I've got a collaboration with my partner at the time and there were a lot of challenges for us. It became very apparent over time that what we wanted, what we really wanted Plowshares to be was not similar and we eventually end up having to part ways after the third season.

You know I guess I was naive. At 28, when the theater first opened, I was filled with a lot of spit and vinegar, and I already decided that a lot of what motivated me was the arrogance that I could do this without any question. And you really do need those two things. You need arrogance and ignorance because if you didn't believe you could do it better than anybody else had, why get up in the morning and try? If you didn't have ignorance about how difficult it was going to be you wouldn't take on half of the challenges. I

don't suggest that you keep those things going forward but they do help you start off.

So I think I was naive about how we could keep this collaboration going where we had, we had what eventually developed into two different artistic visions that were, that we found it very hard to mesh. It's much easier in a classroom at Wayne State to talk intellectually about it than it was to actually do it on the ground. His [Michael's] perspective was more, frankly, very Western, very European and I'm not talking about American writers, I'm talking about your legitimate European writers. Which is fine, but for the audience that we were trying to build, there was a divided identity.

People were not really sure what Plowshares was, and on top of it, realistically, I think, at that time, there were a couple of other theaters around here like the Attic Theater which was the theater that had a regional reputation. It became apparent to me at some point that if Michael had gotten a really good opportunity to direct there, he would have walked away, or some kind of permanent relationship there, he would have walked away. And I don't begrudge him that, I really don't because you change, I mean, you think you know what you want to do and then you get in the middle of it and you realize the challenges that beset you, and you change.

It becomes hard for you to really realize. It's like a marriage you have a tendency to think that the relationship is gonna be this way. Then reality hits and you have to realize where you have to give and take to either continue

the relationship or decide to sever it. I think that's where we got after three seasons of working together. We realized that what we were doing, how we were doing it, really wasn't working for both of us in a way that was gonna be beneficial. It wasn't gonna get better unless we worked out a way of making it better. Not just for us but for the audience we were seeking to cultivate, and so it just became clear we had to decide to break up as partners.

Dr. Anderson: It was more than just artistic differences. It also had to do with not only the vision of what should be produced, but also, are we working towards building a theater company, or is this really just a hobby and we're just doing the plays that we want to do? I felt that his partner was more interested in, I really like this play, I'll borrow money so that we can put it on. Rather than really building towards an institution which is what needed to happen. Because then you're doing two different things. On the one hand its self gratifying, but it's not really building the company and the company's reputation. The company's not really going anywhere; it's just known for; oh we're doing some interesting plays. The plays get good reviews, but it was stagnant, artistically it was critically acclaimed, but as a company it wasn't going anywhere.

Curenton: My next question Were there peak seasons, that's the first part of the question. The second part, did the Plowshares Theater Company grow steadily?

Anderson: No, any organization grows like that unless of course, if you would look at the growth chart on most for-profit businesses. Ford Motor Company is a perfect example, or the Ford companies that Henry Ford developed before he became Ford Motor Company. You'd see peaks and valleys in there and or you see a flat line, which is why he kept having great companies because he couldn't stick with the old names.

In the arts this is something that I think most people don't realize, and I didn't realize it because it was never said when I was in school. You can make a killing in the theater, but you have a very hard chance making a living at it. I don't mean to say that people don't do that, but the circumstances around building a theater company and sustaining it requires you to be, or either do one of two things. Build and sustain an audience that sees the validity of your mission and sticks with and supports it in every way possible, or you refashion the mission to meet the tastes of an audience broadly enough to sustain and support an organization.

Many of the regional theaters we have in this country follow down those two tracks. Depending on geographically where they are on the planet really kind of dictates which path they take. I'm not saying that there is anything wrong about either one of them, but you have to be clear on how you are going to keep it going. What I mean by you can't make a living. Is that you even after all the great efforts put forth to put good art on the stage. Or entertaining art on the stage that would widely appeal to by and large a

segment of the community, and you do everything you can to increase the awareness and all that. You can't guarantee that all those efforts will turn into profits. Or that the effort gone forth in making the show as good as it can be, providing that the talent at a well compensated rate and advertising it to make it work, will make a profit.

Because the way theater is designed, the business model of theater is designed, is really working against you. So you rarely have the *Producers*, you know, you rarely have those kind of big, huge hits where you've got people fighting over paying you $400.00 to get a good seat for an evening. Because see, a couple of guys do a musical that was based on a movie that was a flop in the late 60's, you know what I am saying? Likewise, and there is no guarantee that even after you had that hit, you're going to end up having another one right afterwards. That's the thing that really kind of compels you to understand that it's a mercurial existence. So that's a long winded way of saying it goes, its peaks and valleys in relation to growth. We have had some great seasons like '95, '97, '98, 2003, 2004, but its all a span of the life of the organization, you have to live even when you have those poor seasons.

Dr. Anderson: Are you talking about artistically, or are you talking about as far as the number of audience, the audience or what are you talking about specifically?

Curneton: Well, I guess both because I always include the audience in whatever is happening with the art; whatever productions is going on because if the audience isn't involved someway, somehow, that they're not there, then I don't think you have something to base it on.

Anderson: That's not true. One of our best awarded and recognized productions in the history of this company was the show called *East Texas Hot Links,* which had twenty people in the audience for opening night.

Dr. Anderson: The lowest, was it 6?

Anderson: umm hmm.

Dr. Anderson: The rule was, is usually if there are fewer people in the audience than there are on the stage then you don't do the show. In that case we actually did it just because that show had... There were only a few nights where we had groups where....

Anderson: Actually, word of mouth and the review, the four star review we got changed it around, but that show garnered us huge recognition. Got a lot of award nominations the year that it came out.

Dr. Anderson: People won best actor...

Anderson: People got recognized with awards, and it was poorly attended so that's what I'm talking about. You can't say that just because the audience wasn't there the show wasn't any good. There is a lot of great art in the

history, in the world that had small audiences, but I mean, that's the challenge. The assumption that we have this movie theater model that we've got to now but, regardless of how good the film quality wise how good the film was, on Monday, we announce who was the box office hit of the previous weekend. That doesn't mean the show wasn't any damn good, it just means that it was well attended, the marketing worked well.

Dr. Anderson: I would say another thing about Plowshares that every time there was momentum in the company as far as whether it's critical success or whether it was that the audience has increased. What always stopped the momentum had to do with the issue of not being able to control your own space. Because that's when you would see all of these disruptions in the way the company was going and that's still an issue today. I would say, from my point of view that was a major impediment as far as the success of the company has gone.

Curenton: OK, next question, How has the Plowshares Theater Company changed over the last two decades?

Anderson: I think I have already said some of those. It went from a theater that had a more social conscious theme at the beginning. Trying to merge this African-American interest with this more world theater interest. Always dealing with social issues to a theater that eventually became at one point a signature theater around here for doing musicals, and at the same time also doing new work and at the same time, trying to cultivate new talent. So what

the theater company is now, when I look at it going forward being one that is focused on that primary mission of cultivating and tilling the field, seeding for a new harvest for the next season, of developing new talent both on the stage and behind the scenes.

Curenton: You as the founder, producer and director, are there more advantages, or disadvantages to holding those responsibilities all at one time?

Anderson: Well, you get a different energy from somebody who is the founder and the artistic administrative leader. Than you do of somebody who is hired in to take on the leadership of an organization. Unfortunately what occurs, I mean, there's benefits and disadvantages to this. The institution becomes synonymous with the individual to the point depending upon how strong a presence they are. That it becomes very difficult for anybody coming in after them. But, if you didn't have as a founder, the kind of personally driven individual, you probably wouldn't take on as many risks as you do in regards to creation of the organization.

It's different with an ensemble where you have a group of folks. Steppenwolf is an example. Where you have a group of artists who say we want to work together, we want to create a venue, a forum for us to work on work together. We have respect for one another and we want to build a craft and a career with each other. Because then the burden of responsibility is shared not always evenly, but it doesn't go across more than one set of shoulders.

When you become the artistic administrative leader of an organization as well as the founder of that organization, all of that responsibility sits on those shoulders. Its success and failures are attributed to you, usually more the failures than the success. People try to find ways of attributing success to other folks. But, you do have to deal with that and it becomes your responsibility how the organization is crafted as it goes forward.

Curenton: How do you think that the ups and downs of the theater company affected you personally?

Anderson: I've joked with a number of people, as I've said, Addell and I got married, and we produced our first show the same year. The theater company has been in our marriage since day one. I probably would defer to Addell to talk about that more than I would.

Dr. Anderson: Well, I want to go back, you talked about somebody wearing all those different hats. What it does, it puts a lot of pressure on that person because they become synonymous with the company. People attribute success and failure with you because you're the face of the company and you do wear all those hats. He has from time to time had to take on other full time jobs to support the family. He's built really good relationships with funders and the artistic community and with civic leaders. So he's well known, but at the same time again it does put a lot of pressure on him.

Early on because of where the company had started off it was not something that you could just leave at the office. It was never something you could leave at the office because initially we were running Plowshares out of our home. So the phone number that people called to find out about the show was our home number, yes, yes. We did the mailings, thousands of cards which we learned the hard way how to do a proper bulk mailing, was at our house. Everything was always there, so there was no separation between that. As the company has gone through peaks and valleys of course that has affected the family because it's this inability to separate, well this is Plowshares and this is our family. The company has gone through some difficult situations, that are also brought home, and so it affects everybody, that's the difficulty.

Curenton: What are the major changes the Plowshares Company has undergone most recently?

Anderson: Meaning what specifically?

Curenton: I made some contact with you via the e-mail a few months ago because I wanted to see *King Hedley;* I thought it was going to be redone. The website said that you were making some decisions or choices at that point in time and that someone would contact me later. I did get a contact via the e-mail, but then I didn't hear anything else beyond that.

Anderson: We had suspended operation production this season in order to focus on dealing with some serious ongoing financial problems with the company and so the last twelve months have really been used to address that issue.

Dr. Anderson: But, again, I would like to reiterate that this problem, this most recent problem, as well as other crises that the company has faced throughout its history, have again been about not being able to control its own space. Because there have been very many times there was a lot of good momentum, and we're in the black and things look good. The phone is ringing all the time at the office, because people want to buy tickets, they wanna bring their groups there, etc, etc. But every time the company had this really, really great momentum, it's then slapped up against this fact that they don't have their own space. The company has been reliant on others to understand the importance, the value of this institution.

Anderson: I think we have said enough on that.

Dr. Anderson: OK, but, but, but I think...

Anderson: What's your next question?

Dr. Anderson: I'm gonna finish my statement, excuse me.

Anderson: OK

Dr. Anderson: My point is, is that, that's been the crux; the company has been not being able to own its own space.

Anderson: What's your next question?

Curenton: Where is the Plowshares Theater Company headed, near term and long term?

Anderson: Well, near term is to reestablish ourselves with productions beginning this summer and moving in through the fall. We're in negotiations, actually, no not negotiations. We're going to be mounting a show in a couple of months next door at the Max M. Fisher with our musical revue, "Soul Fest." Then we're going to be mounting a season going forward that will include some of the works that we had scheduled to do earlier on, but were not able mount before that. Along with some new works that we've been developing. So that is where we are. Then the other thing that we've focused on and the board has been very serious about addressing this is that we move forward with the establishment of a permanent location for the theater.

Curenton: That was going to be one of my next questions; would Plowshares be acquiring a space? I know you had been at various venues over the years.

Anderson: What we're looking at is consistent performance. We're looking, we're trying to identify a venue, a location that would be centrally located in an area that already has activity, and find partners with whom which we

could occupy that location. That would bring not only foot traffic for the theater, but also generate some retail.

If you look at the model that Twentieth Century Fox used as a movie studio when they started building all these movie theaters around the country, like our Fox [Theatre] here, you'll see that what they used was, they built a movie theater that also had a legitimate stage in a building surrounded by office space. So the theater never really had to make any money provided there was enough office space around to generate revenue. So occupancy of the office building was really the primary thing.

What we're looking at is giving us a centrally located destination that has an opportunity for retail on the first floor. That provides us with a place where some commercial venture can be there that would generate foot traffic, and a comparable audience that would be inclined for what we do. Have at least three levels so that one of those levels can be targeted towards offices and an education center for us. Then there'd be one level for the theater. We've found a couple of options like that over the last couple of years and now we're just trying to target towards raising the money to make it happen.

Curenton: Next question does Plowshares Theater Company receive its fair share of government funding?

Anderson: What do you mean by fair share? I could say no, but that's a relative term.

Curenton: I've been doing a lot of reading in regards to grant writing, and some of the information that I've looked at in regards to Black theater companies in comparison to white theater companies, they tend to give a certain amount of funding to certain companies; then other companies. . .

Anderson: Don't get any, I know that. The grants writing like to the NEA [Nation Education Association], that's based on peer review. I've been on those panels and sometimes it's about being aware of the organization. So the panelists have to be aware of your organization. This means, you not only have to have a reputation in your own community, but you have to have a reputation across the country. That means you've got to get out and be involved in national organizations, participate and collaborate with other people and in that case, a lot of us don't do that. I'm not saying that's the argument for every reason, but, if you want to get support, you have to be on people's radar, and you have to make them aware that what you're doing is relevant. And it has to meet what that politician specifically or that agency specifically wants to achieve.

Dr. Anderson: I think what Gary was getting into is that if you want serious government money, which some arts organizations are able to access, you have to do a lot of lobbying. You're not suppose to lobby because you're non-profit, but you do have to make contact and get to the point where they're going to earmark money for your organization, and that's when you

get into the real money. Not like the level of the arts project grant which gets smaller and smaller every year.

The other thing is that in this state the art community has shot its own self in the foot. By being willing to be the ones to be cut back and their strategy has been; oh well, if we don't take the hit, if we don't voluntarily take the hit. Then they'll just take all of it away, and that first year that Jennifer Granholm had her budget and she said; "Well, you have to think of it this way. Is it between funding the arts, or funding a family of four who needs to eat." But that wasn't really the choice, but that's the way it's presented to the public as though that was her choice. So the surplus she was talking about are mandated programs which can't be changed anyway. There really needs to be more of a campaign with the general public about why the arts are important. That's if you want to bring businesses to the state, that's something they look for. What is the climate for your arts and cultural community? If it's poor, they're not going to settle here because their people are not going to want to come.

Anderson: Plowshares has been very appreciative of every public grant, public funding grant we received in the history of the organization. However there have been some significant challenges to public funding in this state. I think the comment that Addell made about Governor Granholm, she's kind of erased the notion that Democrats are far better on arts funding than Republicans. There was actually more arts funding done during his [Englar]

twelve years than has been done during her ten years in office, and that's a sad statement to make. Specifically with a guy, when he came into office he didn't get it, somebody must have given it to him when he got here, but he didn't have it. Her comment when she started off in her first term was that the arts are important, they're not vital. And I disagree with that.

Dr. Anderson: I do too.

Anderson: The arts are extremely vital to the way we live or else we wouldn't have had them as an aspect of our self expression throughout civilization.

Curenton: Next question can you describe the Plowshare Theater Company's marketing style?

Anderson: We've depended on word of mouth and direct marketing. Direct marketing has been a primary source. We have a mailing list that we have accumulated over the years that we directly funnel information about our shows to. We are looking at other ways now that we can approach. I'm very excited about the whole social networking component that comes with a lot of these online services like Face book, My Space, and even our website is that way. A lot of people use their websites as basically brochures where they put their information up. People come to see the information, they get the accessed information they want and they go away, as opposed to finding ways

of building and creating community. I think those kind of tools can be used to engage people for theatre, because it is really about building community.

Dr. Anderson: You sent a lot of e-mails; you did a lot of that.

Anderson: Well, that was the same thing. That e mail blast that we did, all of that is connected; it's about trying to connect the people, breaking through the barriers. If you can't afford print ads, you can't get into the magazines that folks read, you can't do television, how else are you going to get information to them? You have to get it in the most immediate, most inexpensive way possible.

Dr. Anderson: Another trend that you see is that, it used to be that Plowshares was able to get at least several feature stories about what they were doing every year. Because of the changes in newspaper management with the two major papers, they have fewer and fewer, if I could say, local theater stories. It is very, very difficult for anybody to get that.

Curenton: In regards to main stage productions. What would you consider for each season of Plowshares Theater Company to be the most significant productions?

Anderson: People have asked me that repeatedly. I can't do that. You want to know why? Because the ones that, it's kind of like the *East Texas Hot Links*. There were people who didn't really care for that show that were involved in the organization or liked it less well than I did. I pick every play

because I think it has something to say. There have been some plays I have been less interested in that have been more successful. I'm not a big fan of *A Soldiers Play*. I don't like the ending, the real ending, not the ending of the movie. There are some aspects, but that was a successful work for us.

Then we did this show called *The Trial of One Short Sighted Black Woman versus Mammy Louise and Safreeta Mae.* Because of scheduling at the museum [of African American History] we only were able to run for three weeks, when we usually run our shows for four weeks if not more. That show. There was never a dry eye in the audience after every performance. The opening night because of some snafu, we had to delay the show for half an hour and no one got up and left. We usually start our shows with a six o'clock curtain. We ended up starting at six-thirty. At the end of the performance you didn't have to ask anybody to stand up they immediately leapt to their feet, and it was a full house.

That was a work that really addressed stereotypes, specifically African-American female stereotypes in popular media. It challenged them and it challenged how they reflect on women who want to hold positions of authority in the world. I take great pride in having done that. We also did *A Raisin in the Sun* which I know a lot of people loved us doing, and we've done the works of August Wilson. I can't pick between those, there is merit in everything that we've done. Have we done them all as well as we could? No,

have we done some far beyond the quality of the script? Yes, we have. It's art.

Curenton: Being a Black theater company, how does Plowshares Theater Company open a season, how do you go about starting your season, what is an opener like for your seasons, I mean, is it a lot of fanfare or is it just you put the show together and now we're putting it up and now it's ready.

Anderson: It depends; we have done events connected with the openings of our shows. We have done activities around the productions to help connect them. We did a play called *The Story* a couple of seasons ago, and at the end of the first, at the end of the opening weekend we had a symposium with people from the media. The play dealt with the media and African-Americans in mainstream media and perspectives, and really challenged the reality verses assumptions, because it dealt with a writer who made up facts. And so we had a panel of people in the media talking about that subject, and I find it very interesting.

We've done galas before the opening of our shows. It really does depend upon how we see getting it together. I think it is critically important for us to always try to make it an event. But, the idea is the event; the party ought to continue throughout the rest of the season. There was a model when I was in school. There was a model of starting out big, doing small, small and then ending big and that's a pretty, that's a more of a regional theater that wants to fit the tastes of its audiences, its communities, kind of model. It doesn't

always work because you can blow your wad on a big show at the beginning and lose it and not be able to even afford to do the small shows in between.

Dr. Anderson: I think though you have been conscious of picking a show. It didn't have to be big, it didn't have to be like an expensive show, but you still picked a show that you felt was going to be challenging. But you felt was going to be popular with the audiences so that because, again a lot of Black theater is word of mouth. As far as getting people in you want to draw the people in and then get them interested in the rest of your season.

And so, I'd like to say that, and I'd also like to say that the beginning of the season is always at the end of the last season. Because that's when he (really in the programs and so forth) always announces what's gonna happen, and tries to get people interested because you're trying to pull in season ticket holders so that you would have that money to use for your next season.

Curenton: Will you discuss the fact of being a non-profit organization, its ups and downs?

Anderson: I think I already have. Non--profit is a tax debt, it's not a way of life; you don't do this not to make money. What you do is the idea; the concept is that the money has been funneled back into the business. But, For-- profit companies do that too. They just don't consciously do it at the rate a non--profit is designed to do. The thing is that none of the board of trustees gets a check at the end of the year if we had a profit. I don't get a

raise at the end of the year if we have a profit. It's really designed to try to sustain your organization or seed the next season.

Because the deficit, if you have a deficit in a non--profit, you do ask people to take cuts. I've known of a number of theaters who have like furloughed or just told them, or come to the conclusion that their entire staffs will not take its paycheck for two weeks to try to erase a deficit so the books can be black at the end of the fiscal year. Or solicit additional donations from the part of the board members and key donors to address those kinds of things. You get the money from different areas, but you do basically the same thing.

If I'm Ford Motor Company and I've had record losses not just for the last three years, but for the last ten, or twelve and I'm talking about restructuring. I'm talking about stabilizing, then where am I getting the money to build next year's cars. I'm getting it from somebody who has either given me a loan or willing to trust on my work against the realities of the past several fiscal years, same thing with a non--profit organization.

In the middle nineties the DSO [Detroit Symphony Orchestra] came out and announced that they had an 8.9 million dollar deficit. At the same time they were talking about building the Max M. Fisher [Theatre], and what we became aware of was that; the 8.9 was really much larger. You have to figure out a way to continue to do what you do. At the same time solicit people to support it in spite of the numbers.

But it's no different for me than it is for Rick Wagoner at GM to make that same argument. I mean, he may be able to make it to a completely different group of people, but we have to do the same thing. We just have to convince people that what we're doing and why we're doing it deserves some level of support. Now, in their case, they're gonna promise that there is going to be generation of some profit on the loan that they're gonna get. I'm not asking for loans, per se, I'm asking for people to give me money outright and that's what I have been doing the last year.

Curenton: One of the articles that I was reading noted non--Profit Theater groups as "the welfare theaters." And I think I take a little offense to that.

Anderson: What article was this?

Curenton: I will e-mail it to you. It bothered me because I thought that non--profit meant a certain thing, I couldn't understand the phrase and what it was about.

Anderson: Hospitals are non--profits. I mean, I don't get that. I don't get that. Church is a non--profit, are you going to call a church welfare institution? No, it's not. The tax code states that, and the reason why you are considered a non--profit is that you are a charitable organization that does some good for the community. That is the reason why you exist. It's not about welfare, that's an attitude of somebody who is extremely uninformed, ill-informed, ill-informed.

Curenton: What is the purpose of the Plowshares One Thousand?

Anderson: It's designed to develop small donors that meet people who may have given five, ten, twenty-five dollars to giving $120.00 over a year. So you could do that by writing out a $120.00 check or giving ten dollars a month, or doing it on a quarterly basis. But that's really what the math, that's what it is designed to do.

Curenton: What is the Plowshares Partner Campaign?

Anderson: That is a major gifts approach of giving $1000.00 or at least $1000.00 a year over five years from an individual. It is designed to develop this level of giving necessary to really sustain the organization from an individual. People, who are, believe in being engaged with what we do and where we're going.

Curenton: OK, in regards to education and community, will you discuss your classes, workshops, workshop programs and private lessons?

Anderson: We have, over the life of the organization we've had some interesting experiences with education, educational programming. My philosophy behind educational programming is that, it should not be seen exclusively as a remedy generating aspect of the organization. In my own opinion; I think a lot of people perceive it that way. They don't really care about the experience of the kids; they really are more interested in makin' a dime off of them because everybody wants to put their kid on the stage.

The arts have been such a critical aspect of what has developed me, and I've seen it also with my own children. But I think that they have a great power and ability to transform people's lives in a legitimate way, and I think that the educational programming needs to be focused on that.

Some of our programming has been extremely exciting with getting people engaged and understanding the fact of the full process of putting on a show. And giving them an opportunity to develop and create work at the end so there's a culminating event. Some of the private lessons have really been about giving exposure to somebody who may have an interest and they have not ever taken a chance to approach the work.

And the workshops can be on several different levels; they can be conversations with experts in certain aspects of the theater, as well as focused around developing a project, a theater piece. We've used for a number of plays, for a couple of the plays we have done in the last eight years, we've used workshops. We've brought actors together not compensating them at all, and had other people work in a room listening to a reading of his play per se and soliciting advice that would assist the writer in crafting the play, or had conversations. That's really the scope if you are looking for some qualified programming.

I have a desire to do ongoing fully engaged and exciting educational programming for kids, but it's directly connected with that desire to sustain and maintain consistent performance space.

Dr. Anderson: Yea, it can't be done without it. We did have, as he was saying, we've definitely had programs throughout the years that have dealt with education for adults and for youth. The problem has been. There was one youth program we had in particular that was a summer camp...

Anderson: I wasn't gonna go there.

Dr. Anderson: Ok, I'm just gonna finish that. There was a summer camp, but, as he was saying, if we can't do it well we don't want to do it. It was very profitable. We had lots of kids, but when we evaluated the end, it wasn't something that we wanted to continue, unless there were certain changes.

Anderson: Controls...

Dr. Anderson: Controls and we had the right personnel.

Anderson: A major part of it was the controls. I think it's important that the artistic quality that people come to expect when they see a show should be consistent in every other aspect of our programming.

Dr. Anderson: That's right.

Anderson: Some of our educational programming has been targeted toward engaging the audience in a better, a deeper awareness of what makes theater. With conversations of meet the playwright, conversations with specific artists. And so we look at it, I look at education in a far broader way than

just, you know, we're gonna teach Billy how to sing a song and he's gonna do it in a revue that we do at the end of the class.

Curenton: Will you discuss the Plowshares Theater Company's New Voices Program?

Anderson: New Voices is a way of building a program around the desire to cultivate new talent and new works, and it produced as it was running, we were being funded through the State. There was a time when you could get more than one grant from the State of Michigan, and we constantly were able to support that program with a grant that we got for development of new writers. And it produced a number of works that we initially put on the stage.

And not only that, but it also helped cultivate a relationship with writers from across the country that has been able to assist us in building not just doing one play by a writer, but see you can usually get, I won't say that. If you get one reading or one production of a work the question then is, where is the second production? And my whole thing is I want to build relationships with the writers. I'm not just interested in doing your play once. I'm interested in trying to do a series of your works. If that's a collaboration that we both think works and is mutually beneficial.

New Voices was a way for us to try to build those relationships, and we were, when it was running it was very successful. It gave us a chance to present

stage readings and works in front of an audience, solicit input, help or rather rewrite and move the piece forward. And it was a really good way of doing R and D for the Theater Company [Research and Development]. With budget cuts we had to discontinue, but on an ongoing basis we've been able to sustain it in ways. One of the pieces that we're looking at next year is a piece that I've individually worked with a writer on. That we did separate from the work with the company, but we used a similar process.

Curenton: Will you discuss the Plowshares mission statement and the origins and the significance?

Anderson: I think I did when I was talking about the reason why I wanted to do this theater. The whole point of presenting stories and perspectives that you wouldn't necessarily find elsewhere, providing an opportunity to cultivate artists, African-American artists. And also use the theater as a tool to build bridges of understanding between communities. I think it is very important for us to affirm, to entertain, and to educate people.

I think, again, you know, talking about the social issues that we exist with in this country. We have a lot of work still to do on comprehending how our differences don't inhibit us from being allies on issues on development of a community on education of our children. Our differences aren't really barriers if we understand that we both have similar goals and objectives. I think we sometimes allow the artificial differences to create barriers where they don't exist. I try to use the theater, my collaborations with other

cultural innovations, the topics that we address that really kind of open up conversation along those lines.

Curenton: Will you describe memberships, volunteers, internships and corporate support in regards to Plowshares Theater Company?

Anderson: OK, membership, we don't have a subscription; we had a subscription for awhile. But what we found through our studies is that our audience specifically African-American audiences are less inclined. And not just African-American audiences I think the modern audiences are less inclined to be dictated that they have to come this date, to see this show before they invest in giving you money in advance to purchase a subscription.

Subscriptions just aren't solving the issue in fact if you look at most, if you do research of most regional theaters. You will find that although they may be able to maintain them, they're seeing a decline in subscriptions. Because current audiences with TV on demand, with podcasts, and the ability to access information whenever you want to, are taking a different approach to entertainment, theater as an entertainment.

What we have found is that the membership allows people to come see a production once throughout the run of the show. So they really dictate when they come see it. Now, if they say well I missed that show, I still lost my money. What we are able to do because they have invested in us in advance; we provide them with vouchers as opposed to tickets. So what they are then

able to do is in the course of a season, (I missed the first two shows, but I really want to see the third one.) What they can do is use the two previous vouchers that they didn't use bring a couple of friends, and go see that third show. That way it provides them with an opportunity in helping us cultivate audiences.

Curenton: What is the cost of a membership?

Anderson: It depends upon a number of productions that we do. We try to keep it around roughly twenty four dollars for each show. So if we do five shows that's $120.00, but you have the vouchers that run from, the clock is running, first performance and it doesn't stop running until the last performance, and that's really when it ends. You can't roll them over for next season because if you're just lazy that's on you but we try to provide as much flexibility to people as possible. Does that answer your question?

Curenton: Did you already talk about internships?

Anderson: Internships we've had on an inconsistent basis. What we wanted to do is really provide us with production support, and also provide them with real world experience of engaging with a professional company to work on. Some aspect of either assisted directing, or production crew, or in marketing, or box office, administrative areas so they get some on hand experience working with that. It's not about the money. It's not about the

money. It's gotta be about the experience which is hard to get over to a younger group of people.

Curenton: What about corporate support?

Anderson: What about corporate support?

Curenton: Did you talk about that?

Anderson: Corporate support has changed over the twenty years the company's been around. I think it started changing around the time we got off the ground. But prior to that the philanthropic aspects of companies was far more, was far stronger than it is today. Or at least the focus of the philanthropic aspect was different. At that time corporations really did see a civic benefit in being generous to a community because it increased their profile. People saw they were engaged in organizations in that community, and they gave with varying degrees. I'm not going to say every corporation is like that, but most corporations saw a benefit in supporting cultural organizations that had public good.

Today a lot of corporate giving whether it comes from the philanthropic area or from other aspects of the company is really about marketing. It's really a marketing initiative on the part of the company. No doubt about it. GM giving to a major cultural organization is really about product placement for GM whether it's brand identity or if it's really about identifying General Motors. And so they become far more circumscribed about who they give

that money to, and what they ask you to do for it. Today they give far less than they may have done ten, twenty years ago but they ask more of the entity that is receiving it in return for that gift.

Dr. Anderson: We had to show that the audience that they want to reach is your audience.

Anderson: What they want to attract.

Dr. Anderson: What they want to attract. One thing that is helpful about Plowshares is that they have a younger audience than you would see in other theater groups. And people with disposable income and that is a plus for them.

Curenton: Who have been some of your largest supporters over the years?

Anderson: We have several individuals that have been very generous to us. One of them is our board chair [Leroy C. Richie]; Chrysler has been generous to us over time. We've been very appreciative of the foundations support we've received from Skillman Foundation, and the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan. From the Hudson River Foundation; MASCO [Corporation] has been very generous as well. What was formerly known as LaSalle Bank which is now Bank of America has been good as well.

Curenton: Will you discuss your board and their significance to Plowshares Theater Company?

Anderson: Well, the board is designed to do one of two things it really depends upon where you are as an organization. The board has to be a representative of the community in which you reside, or it's better if it is. And when you get into larger organizations like say an Alvin Ailey then it benefits you to have people who may not even reside in your community. But because you have a national presence then you have representatives from around the country. And they do that for several reasons for continued awareness advocacy for the organization, but also for reach for fund development. The primary purpose of organizational board today which is different than it may have been thirty years ago what is really about helping sustain the organization.

There is a policy advising capacity to the board and they are very important in that, but in large part, a board is there to help support the organization. If they are not doing that then you don't have a very healthy organization. And that's really when you look at a lot of Black theaters throughout the existence of the field you will see where those organizations failed, or succeeded based on the quality of the board that they have.

Dr. Anderson: We call it the three "G's". They either have to give, get, or get off. The give could be financial, they all have a minimal that they have to give to be on the board. Also expertise, you're looking for a board that's going to be diverse so they can provide that expertise on various aspects of the company. Since the company has its business side as well as its artistic

side. So if you find that somebody's not giving or getting then you have to look for ways to ease them off the board.

Anderson: You have different people serving different needs on a board capacity. But everybody should be there to engage in the process of making the organization stronger. Boards are critical to the development both primarily in fundraising, but also as an advisory on policy, bringing their expertise to bear on the organization. That's really where the firewall is they should not really be engaged with specifically deciding programming. That's the purview of the artistic leaders.

Curenton: Do you work with a regular team of designers and technicians, who are they, and how long have you been working with them?

Anderson: There's a group of artists that have been here and we keep losing a lot of them because they are looking for other opportunities that we've worked with. Some of them are people with sustained jobs at some of the Universities around. So that's the group of artists, group of designers we work with and some of them go back eight, nine, ten, fifteen years. Others we've worked with on a more sporadic basis, but it depends upon with whom you are referring to.

Again, going back to that thing about not having a major regional theater we have had a challenge. And I'm not just talking about Plowshares, but, the whole theater community has been challenged with retaining people who

graduate from schools like Michigan State with degrees and abilities to maintain themselves in this market to work here. Because not having as many opportunities to be compensated at a certain level as they would have going somewhere else.

Curenton: What are you most proud of and what do you wish you could be more proud of in regards to Plowshares Theater Company?

Anderson: I am most proud of the reputation of the company it has an artistic quality. There's nobody, who can speak about the company who doesn't talk glowingly about the quality of the work this group put on stage over the life of the organization. And that has helped us develop, cultivate a national reputation. What am I less proud of, what I would like to be more proud of, I would have liked to have already solved the venue issue by now. I would think that coming in on our twentieth anniversary; we should have solved that issue. That's what I would like to, I shouldn't say should. I would like to have solved this by this point.

Curenton: Has Plowshares Theater Company received any local or national awards and if so, what are they?

Anderson: Well, the organization has received recognition from the State and from the City. I have received recognition from organizations both here and abroad. Like, one of the writers that we helped cultivate we submitted his script to the Kennedy Center when they were running funds for new

American plays and that play was recognized. It even received a cash award plus a plaque and so it depends, the answer is yes.

Curenton: How would you describe the Detroit theater scene at this time?

Anderson: I think it's challenged; we kind of have an interesting circumstance in this community. With regards to the institutions that gets top recognition our Symphony, our Opera, our Art Institute and even the Henry Ford Museum. They really have been able to cultivate the attention of a large portion of civic leaders, politicians, and in many cases, corporate support for various reasons. What has been really challenging for the theater, and I'm going back even before the existence of Plowshares. Of a theater company coming along to really kinda breakthrough and get into the crew. The last one that made an attempt was the Attic [Theatre] and they had, like I said, a regional representation awareness, people really talked about the quality of their work highly. It had developed a number of artists; it had people go to Chicago, people knew about the Attic. Other parts of the country people knew about the Attic; it had that kind of recognition. But, after twenty some odd years, it had not been able to garner the level of support that would have sustained it at the time to make it an ongoing entity.

Dr. Anderson: And they also have a venue problem.

Anderson: They had a venue problem, because theater Real Estate in the theater is diametrically opposed when you think about it. A theater is a

building that you use a specific number of weeks out of the year to do a play. The rest of the time that large portion of the Real Estate really goes unused, or you have to find other ways to generate revenue for that. Different than an auto plant, different than a bakery shop, different than a shoe store, and so you really have to, you really have to find ways to draw people there even when you're not doing a productions. And a lot of theaters have not been successful at doing that. Or they have not been able to sustain significant amount of support to sustain them when they weren't running a production.

If you look at the model that the Michigan Opera Theater now runs with the Detroit Opera House, they are constantly programming, not just their own work but having other activities come in there on a regular basis. They treated it pretty much like the Fox [Theatre] or any other touring houses in regards to constantly having activity in the building. And thirty years ago the Attic was not, and other regional theaters were just not following that model. If they didn't have a show up the theater was dark, and that means that those are weeks sometimes a month where the theaters are not generating any kind of revenue and you just can't do that today. So the sustaining of a venue has to be on consistent programming, whether by you, or by other entities with whom you work.

We have a perception of ourselves as kind of blue collar. You know beer and a shot type of community. The theater hasn't always been seen as the type of thing that people would naturally be attracted to. And so you have to come

at it in a different way. Some people have used religious theater to connect, other ways people have done it based upon a broader appeal. So if musicals work all the time, then you need to have them folks singing and dancing as often as you possibly can. Although the work is very good we have some really strong talent here.

We haven't been able to get a sustained level of support, and the kind of attention that would help us build ourselves into a vibrant community. And I'm not just talking about Detroit I would go all the way talking about BoarsHead [Theatre] in Lansing, some of the theaters that run in Ann Arbor and communities between there and here. We're all fighting to get recognition, to get people here to recognize the quality of the organizations. I think that's what the community is like, and that's my perspective on it.

Dr. Anderson: There's only one company that has a budget of over a million dollars.

Anderson: That's not true, Purple Rose has a budget over a million dollars.

Dr. Anderson: Oh, I forgot about Purple Rose. But that's not Detroit.

Anderson: No, but you have to be broader than just talking about Detroit itself. If you are looking at Equity Theater that's produced in Detroit, there's Plowshares, there's Detroit Rep that's it. There are no other Equity theaters that produce in the city's borders. Most of the other theaters that exist in this state exist outside of the city going as far as, like I said to Lansing

to Ann Arbor. There's more Equity in Oakland County than there are in Detroit.

Curenton: OK. What position/role did you plan for the Plowshares Theater Company to hold in the Detroit theater scene?

Anderson: To be a cultivator of talent, to be a regional destination for artists from around the country to come here.

Dr. Anderson: And a regional attraction for visitors.

Anderson: Right, but to be, you know, to also be a beacon to assist in changing the national impression about Detroit.

Curenton: Has the Plowshares Theater Company ever conducted audience surveys and what did you learn from them?

Anderson: Yes. We learned that we had a predominantly female audience. We learned that they wanted us to have our own home, but they weren't necessarily inclined to help fund it.

Dr. Anderson: In between thirties and fifties.

Anderson: They ranged between thirty and fifty-five. And most of them had been fairly consistent in their attendance over three to five seasons.

Curenton: What other artists played an important role in the development of Plowshares Theater Company?

Anderson: A whole host of people. I never say, I mean, Michael played a part in the development of the company. Michael, Michael had actually played a part in even after he left in that, that experience was a life lesson for me in regards to what I really, how the company needed to move forward. Addell has played a significant role. There have been some other arts people who have been involved one of them being Janet Cleveland who has had an impact on the organization for quite some time she was with us for sixteen years. Writers that we worked with, actors that we worked with, and designers that we worked with, and Board members have all played an important role in the development of the company.

Curenton: Can you summarize Dr. Austin's [Anderson] contributions to the Plowshares Theater Company?

Anderson: At one point, she was managing director. She didn't make any salary. She served at kinda getting us on a financial footing, that to be completely honest was not something I was interested in doing when I started the company. I knew what I wanted to do in regards to putting on the plays; I knew how I wanted to see the artistic program in the works. I was less interested in filling out tax forms and dealing with the IRS, all that jazz. Which again, I go back to that ignorance, that's where that is. That's part of it. But she was immensely important to that. Actually, immensely important in regards to helping me, come to my awareness about how educational programming really needed to be done.

Curenton: How do you select your plays for each season?

Anderson: I have connections with a lot of the artistic directors around the country. And I read all those papers, and I used to read all those papers in large part to find out about what other theater companies were doing. Through New Voices I was able to connect myself with a lot of writers and still do have relationships with writers around the country. To find out what had already been developed that Plowshares might be interested in producing. On the other side, now I start to look more at what can Plowshares assist in helping create.

We're looking at the possibility of raising dollars to commission work that would provide us with opportunities to fund the development of specific rough work. Not just doing a second or third production of a new play which we have done, and which we're gonna continue to do. But also continue with the world premiers. But again try to take the essence of what New Voices was and making it far more functional in the programming.

Dr. Anderson: Also usually just one classic play in Black Theatre each year.

Anderson: But my interest is really in the development of new work.

Curenton: What types of theater production does Plowshares Theater Company want to be known for?

Anderson: Excellent Theater.

Curenton: Excellent Theater. Yea.

Anderson: Theatre that's engaging, and that's intimate that really connects you that you think about two to three days, weeks afterwards. That was one of the biggest compliments that someone gave me after having seen our first production. I ran into, and I didn't even recognize the guy, I ran into somebody who was in the audience from the very first show Plowshares did two months after we had done it. And the guy said, he recognized me because he had seen me on the stage talking before the show. And he said how he was still thinking about a lot of the issues that the play had raised.

Curenton: Are there any types of theater plays that Plowshares Theater Company is not interested in doing?

Anderson: Yes.

Dr. Anderson: I can answer that one really quickly; he has never been interested in taking a play that was not specifically written for Black people and doing it with Black people in those characters.

Anderson: There would be no Black *Odd Couple* in Plowshares. It's not color blind. It's not color blind. You can't do a production of a work by another ethnic community and not bring who you are to it. I don't know how do white. I can't teach Black people how to act white. So whenever I get a cast of Black people doing a play by Tennessee Williams or Sam

Shepherd. They will be doing it as Black folks because that's all they know. Even if it's Black folks trying to be white it's still Black folks.

Curenton: Is there a step by step process you prefer to follow when developing a production?

Anderson: Yea, if you can start off with a good script as far as getting everybody involved with the production as early as possible and interested in talking about the perspective and vision that you have for the play. Even before you have the cast, really making sure that everybody understands where we are on the page. And what is the intent behind the production. There have been times when we have been less successful, there are a few times not a lot, but there have been a couple of times when we have been less successful in getting that process going than we had on others before. For the most part you need to have early conversations with design staff to move that effort forward, and then to be consistent in the process when you are in the rehearsal hall.

There is a different conversation with the actors, and it's not too say I come in with the vision and this is it. It's really more about, this is the framework in which we're working and the creativity of the individual artist whether it's the designer or the actor is able to be part of that. But it's kind of like playing in the Sand lot; it's kind of like being at the Playground. We're shaping it together, but this is the frame in which we're working and we

can't change the frame unless there is a strong, strong argument for that being modified.

Dr. Anderson: I just want to add, one thing that Gary does that you see less and less of is that Gary does a lot of background research. And so it's important for him to do a lot of analysis with the script, but he's going to pull in social commentary, political commentary. Just a lot of research before he will put on a production, and when he feels comfortable with it then he can go on. When you asked earlier about, what has been his most successful production, I'll say the ones that he has directed personally, but definitely his interpretation of the August Wilson scripts. Just because he's been able to bring something to it, to me, that's always really fresh. And you see one of his productions of August Wilson, it is unlike any other production you've ever seen and it really speaks to the day and time that you are in even if it was set in the forties, twenties, or thirties.

Anderson: She's being kind.

Dr. Anderson: But, it's true, it is true.

Curenton: OK, in regards to sexuality, nudity and language, does Plowshares Theater Company limit itself to how edgy a production can be?

Anderson: Well, we've done a play that had nudity on stage. We did a play that had a rape occur on stage *Fun West.* The reaction to the one with the rape was far different than the other one with the nudity. But I don't

attribute it to the edginess of the piece. We opened it the week that Bush went to war in Iraq so I don't think anybody across the country did very good business that week or for the next couple of weeks after that. I'm not against it. I am not against challenging my audience to get out of their own comfort zone.

One play that we thought would have a greater reaction negatively was the play *Blues for an Alabama Sky.* Which has a very openly gay character on stage, but that wasn't the reason why I didn't want to do it. I wasn't completely set with some of the arguments that they made in the play, but we did it and it was extremely successful for us. And what I found was that I would have known this if I had been directing it, I would have had greater analysis on it. The character's gay, gayness, or its gay quality was far more acceptable because he never acted upon it onstage. You didn't see him kissing another man. You never saw him displaying love and affection for another man on stage which became evident to me was the step that would have been the line that he would have had to cross. That would have alienated our audience and would have, but by doing that play, we were able to cultivate a gay audience that we had not had prior to that.

Dr. Anderson: And it won an award.

Anderson: It won an award, so the recognition. I'm not against getting our audiences out of their comfort zone. I just don't want to do it just for the

sake of doing it, and you need to be clear about why you're presenting a work.

Dr. Anderson: He's never changed language for an adult audience, but you'd do it for a student. If you have like school matinees the languages is changed.

Anderson: It's like the one you talked about *Bourbon at the Border.* I mean, there's "M.F." this. I use all those words on a regular basis, but I didn't change any of that in the script so it's a very abrasive play. I mean, there is a Black man killing white folks indiscriminately on the streets of Detroit. And he justifies that because of the experiences that he had. So, no, I don't have a problem with edginess. I would prefer that.

Curenton: OK, last two questions. Maybe you've answered this already. What is on tap for the future of Plowshares Theater Company? And being that your twentieth anniversary is upon us what would you close with at this point in time? W hat would you like for someone to really understand about Black theater or the Plowshares Theater Company?

Anderson: I think it's important that we respect and celebrate anybody's story. The church I have been attending for the last sixteen, eighteen years, once had Cornell West as a guest speaker. And he made a very profound statement to me that rings a lot, and actually I've adopted. He said; the ability to have self love, Black love, to love oneself as a Black person, does not

mean to be hateful of anyone else. And we don't seem to assume in this country, or at least I find that there are challenges still in this country, of being prideful and respectful, and really appreciative of the achievements of my, the people, who I share an ethnic background with. There seems to be in some part that for one of us to be successful at something that means that there is a whole slew of white counterparts that were not successful. So we took something from them.

And I really don't believe that love and appreciation of what the struggles, challenges, and opportunities Black people have had in this country, and what they've been able to do in spite of the obstacles should be taken away, and assume that's a recognition of well; I hate everybody else because of it. I don't hate other people. I just really appreciate how much my people have been able to accomplish. And I think that's what the theater is in parts. That's one of the things I want people to understand. And become greatly aware of, is that my appreciation of the literature of African--Americans in the theater means that I'm really happy about what we have been able to develop. Not at the expense of anyone else, but, because of our own creative abilities. Does that make sense?

PART II

Part II focuses on representative productions to demonstrate how the Plowshares Theatre Company enacted its mission which it continues to do today. Interspersed among that discussion are numerous production photos which show the production standards and professional quality of the enterprise.

According to their website the "Plowshares Theatre Company exists to produce plays and programs that inspire, affirm, and exhibit African American life." Furthermore, that undertaking is guided by its six fold mission to:

1) present honest depictions of African American life and culture;

2) provide a professional and nurturing environment for artists to create exciting and evocative work;

3) educate our children by using theatre as a tool for enhancing learning and knowing;

4) develop new works, present the best of existing works, and share our artistic resources with other theaters--locally and throughout the country--to promote the talents existing in Detroit;

5) enlighten the public in support of professional African American theatre, and the belief that African American Theatre and culture is relevant to all people; and

6) uphold the highest standards of excellence in the production of professional, relevant African American theatre.

This six fold mission is certainly ambitious particularly given the trials and tribulations that normally inform the process of founding such a theatrical enterprise--an enterprise that still today has not succeeded in securing a home venue notwithstanding the economic doldrums that Detroit and Michigan has endured for decades. Yet the fact that the Plowshares Theatre Company has persisted and can count itself today as an important part of the Detroit theatrical scene and an emerging voice nationally is testimony to the dedication and commitment to its diverse host of supporters whom Gary and Addell-Austin Anderson referred to in the preceding interview.

The purpose of this part of the thesis is to demonstrate, with occasional photos, how representative productions have addressed the purposes of the Plowshares Theatre Company. The treatment which follows is chronologically arranged and, while not complete, has utilized virtually all the materials which Plowshares Theatre Company has made available for my research at this time. The primary materials largely include information culled from Detroit city newspapers, Plowshares Theatre Company news releases, and other miscellaneous programs and related Plowshares Theatre Company documents.

Season One: 1990-1991

Curiously, for its first production season which offered only two shows, the Plowshares Theatre Company opened with *Woza Albert!* a play

described by the theater critic Lawrence DeVine in the Detroit Free Press 16 December 1990. Apparently it achieved a kind of histrionic tour de force, albeit a kind of rough theater.

> ***Woza, Albert!* is a quick hit of fantasy with two extraordinary actors in 72 [sic] minutes playing a cross-section of Johannesburg blacks, who all are expecting the second coming of Jesus there in South Africa. The redeemer reportedly is coming in by jet from Jerusalem.**
>
> ***Woza Albert!* By Mbongeni Mgema, Percy Mtwa and Barney Simon is slam-bam Street-corner theater, long on hustle and sure on subtlety, that looks designed to be highly portable, these actors-- or any actors, here at 1515 Broadway or there in Soweto-- could pick it up and move it if the cops came.**
>
> **Both Tim Rhoze and Luray Cooper are comic actors, straight out of the Middle Ages, when performers in dusty town squares figured out quickly that comedy got the audience by a nose faster than flailing and preaching did.**

Figure 2. ***Woza Albert!:*** **12/30/1999** **Courtesy of PTC**

Rhoze and Cooper by turns portray open--air barbers, young meat vendors, old beggar women, policeman, soldiers, the Prime Minister (on television, with a red rubber nose) and two comical guys in a Brickyard. The show is fantasy, which is cartooning raised one dignified notch, and that allows Rhoze and Cooper to play a score of roles apiece, imitate entire bumpy train compartments with a couple of crates, and mimic prison sirens, jackhammers and, in a terrific scene, a jazz combo with Rhoze on the drums and Cooper on everything else.

Kenneth Jones characterized *Woza Albert!* as a "potent political satire" which "skewered apartheid" in The Detroit News 30 December 1990.

Frustration. Anger. Humiliation. [sic]. Hope. These gut feelings are the emotional building blocks of *Woza Albert!*, a two-man drama in which the black South African struggle is concentrated into its most potent terms.

Woza, at 1515 Broadway through the end of the month marks the striking debut of a new independent troupe in Detroit called Plowshares Theatre.

The play, originally developed for the market theater of Johannesburg by Percy Mtwa, Barney Simon and Mbongeni Mgema, was the first of several anti-apartheid theater pieces that toured internationally in the last decade. Ngema's Asinmalin and Mtwa's Bopha! followed [sic] *Woza's* example of approximating in stage terms at least a fraction of the intensity and obscenity of life under apartheid.

Each of these plays has in common a presentational quality that serves to make the issue at hand--apartheid--more immediate and unforgettable, and Gary Anderson's staging takes full advantage of *Woza's* often rollicking skewed concept of a mad system.

In telling *Woza's* satiric fable of Christ's Second Coming in modern-day South Africa, Anderson's two excellent players, Tim Rhoze and Luray Cooper, address the audience directly, assume multiple roles and make onstage costume changes.

The compact 70 minute production is made up of feverishly performed episodes often connected by cinematic jump cuts created when Rhoze or Cooper simply change positions or climb onto spare set pieces like wooden crates abruptly changing the character and setting.

Anderson's fluid staging is enhanced by Keith Jackson's atmospheric lighting design, which spills purple color into a jail cell to suggest lonely oppression and later use his white lights to evoke the voice of liberation.

Rhoze and Cooper vividly approximate the fierce and comic Mgema--Mtwa performance style, which draws from the European clown theater and vaudeville traditions. Their South African accents are technically impressive as well.

As headlined in an article by theatre critic Kenneth Jones in The Detroit News 5 June 1991, "freedom is put to the test in *Hunting Cockroaches.*" Its theme of inspiration might still resonate with audiences today.

The Polish émigré artist in Janusz Glowacki's *Hunting Cockroaches* suffer [sic] a surreal kind of the European insomnia--sleeplessness a la Franz Kafka.

In their tiny, roach infested apartment on New York's lower East side, playwright Jan Krupinski and his actress wife, Anka, squirm in their narrow bed haunted by a yesterday of secret police and martial law, and faced with a tomorrow of bill collectors and homelessness.

The Plowshares Theatre Company production of *Hunting Cockroaches* at 1515 Broadway conjures a couple's worst nightmares: A U.S. immigration's officer slides out from under the bed, a pair of secret police spring from the icebox and a street person stepped out fro him as was as if he is m behind the shower curtain.

Michael Garza's low impact production, the second presentation by the fledgling Plowshares company at 1515 Broadway, is hampered by some unimpressive, [sic] unformed performances will. It's the kind of work that separates professionals from semi-professional actors. Debra Napoleon and David Drycnik aren't commanding or menacing enough as those nightmarish intruders.

Center stage, however, Galasso and DePetris bring off a lean and hungry quality that feels as natural to them as their Polish accents. There's a genuine sense of marital chemistry to this couples, too--affection mixed with respect, criticism followed by kisses.

Part of the Plowshares programming mandate is to reflect the cultural diversity of Detroit. Perhaps the greatest achievement of *"Hunting Cockroaches"* is that it addresses the experience of Detroit's prominent Polish community, heretofore underserved by our indigenous professional theater.

In the Detroit Free Press 9 May 1991 Lawrence DeVine expanded on the relationship of the production to the Plowshares Theatre Company mission of reflecting the culturally diverse city of Detroit.

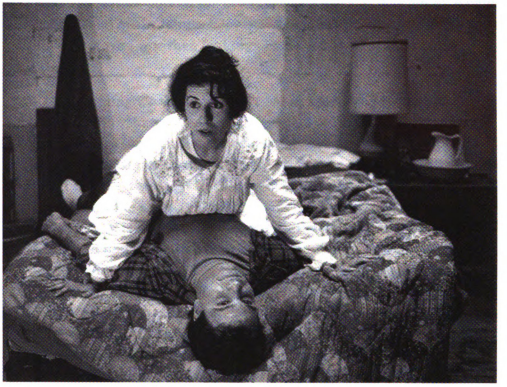

Figure 3. ***Hunting Cockroaches:*** **05/06/1991 Courtesy of PTC**

Once you get past the daunting title, *Hunting Cockroaches* turns out to be a shrewd little comedy about two émigré artists who trade oppressive Poland for bewildering America. Written by written by the jovial cynic Janusz Glowacki back in 1985, it is the quirky slant of a writer who was then looking cross eyed at both sides of the Atlantic.

***Hunting Cockroaches* is staged at 1515 Broadway by the fledgling Plowshares Theatre, the project of director Michael Garza and partner Gary Anderson, who surely are too young, too poor and too starry-eyed not to take a shot at an arcane show by a little-known writer set in a tenement flat in lower Manhattan. What they've got is a show with the clang of truth to it. What they also have is a bell-ringer of a performance by Annette DePetris, who keeps getting better and better, as the former Warsaw stage star married to a bogged-down novelist. The theme: it's not easy being an artist, and it is even queerer trying to deal with American building superintendents, the immigration service and old country phantoms.**

Glowacki, way down the line, is the stepchild of the old European absurdist like Ionesco and Frisch. Polish Secret Service men come bursting out of the refrigerator in a cloud of smoke, immigration agents sliding out from underneath the bed, a smarmy American couples squeeze in to the cupboard. Then, to get back to reality, New York cockroaches scatter throughout the floorboards.

There are some very slight insides when it comes to the couple's deciding whether emigration was the best move. Thomas Galasso, as the writer doing battle with a Polish accent, muses for instance about the bad old days in his hometown.

DePetris' character, Anka, is a dramatic tractor here, pushing the hubby to the typewriter and also being quite funny as a classical actress with a thudding Polish accent who wonders why she can't get cast in the American Shakespeare. There is a lot of history, trust me, to *Hunting Cockroaches,* which in '85 was first essayed by a small theater in Woodstock, N.Y. in it then was the émigré Polish leading lady Elzbiata Czyzewsk, who had come to the United States married to a writer, David Halberstam. The player then came in second (to August Wilson's "Fences") for the American theater critics association's best regional production that year in a gaping split among jurors who voted it everything from 100 to 0.

The jury, at Plowshares Theatre, is back in on *Hunting Cockroaches.* It is a visually shabby enterprise at 1515 Broadway, as

tenement plays tend to be. But Glowacki is a keen writer with a warm heart for what's good in both countries and a cool eye for what's lacking. His script provides a virtuoso turn for DePetris, who could fool you into thinking she just cleared customs.

Concluding, the Plowshares Theatre Company's 1991 season, was *Pill Hill.* As described by Lawrence DeVine in the Detroit Free Press 19 November 1991 it depicted lives of African American steel mill workers.

The young Detroit director Gary Anderson plays the cards he's dealt in a play at 1515 Broadway called "Pill Hill," and he comes this close to a slam. His presentation of the erratic fortunes of six buddies in a Midwestern steel mill is so full of shouts, pipe dreams and male sweat that it seems like a play on speed. Down the line, though, you see that what Anderson is not holding is a script that will keep up with his actors.

In the three-act *Pill Hill,* playwright Samuel Kelly is writing in a groove that is either a tradition or a rut, depending on how generously you look at it. Six friends, five in their 20s and one in his 40s, start even: on the Mills floor. Then, through the 1970s and 80s, in increments of five years per act we see where grabbing for handholds out of the pit leads them.

***Pill Hill* starts high, with Tim Rhoze and Luray Cooper back slapping each other with the gusto of lion cubs, waiting for the others to show up for the card party. It rises even higher. The pacing is marvelous. It seems like Anderson is turning up the steam in direct ratio to the characters' turning cooler.**

A play with Rhoze in it is a grenade with the pin pulled out. As the central bullslinger, Rhoze gives off so much heat that the others seemed to catch the sheen. Rod Johnson, an actor with a lot of brute strength as the lamed halfback, roars right past one of those I-could-have-been-a-contender speeches and turns out to be a grand eloquent thug.

Cooper, who was so extraordinary with Rhoze in last season's two man "Woza Albert!" has a zest to his acting that truly makes something interesting out of his relentlessly upward goody-goody.

For the next six years the Plowshares Theatre Company grew more ambitious leading to a collaborative effort with Rochester Michigan's

Meadow Brook Theatre, an established institution in the Rochester cultural scene. The play *I Am a Man* by OyamO, a local artist, fit well into The Plowshares Theatre Company mission to support emerging African American dramatic talent and melded with the goals of Meadow Brook's new artistic director, as noted by Lawrence DeVine in the Detroit Free Press 24 February 1997.

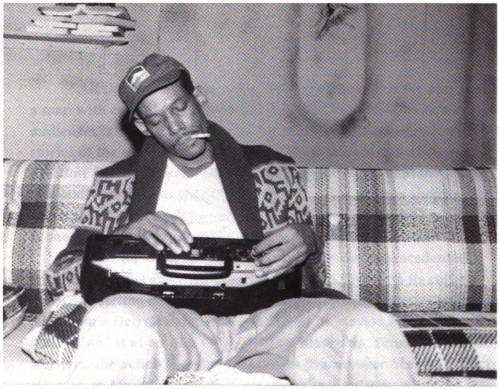

Figure 4. ***Pill Hill:*** **11/19/1991** **Courtesy of PTC**

All that some people knew in advance was that the play was by a man with capital O's at both end of his name. Clued-in or not, audiences last week took part in one of the liveliest, most meaningful stories of the season it is one that unrolled both on and offstage at Meadow Brook Theatre with the premiere of "I Am a Man" by the unusually christened playwright OyamO. "What I was shooting for was it should be engaging and entertaining," said OyamO, who at 53 is one of the modern pioneers of African-American theater.

What he brought off came about with the unprecedented collaboration between the suburban Meadow Brook in its rolling collegiate setting in Rochester and the scrambling Plowshares theater [sic] from a Detroit neighborhood Center at Meyers and Curtis. "I Am a Man" is about the 1968 strike by Memphis, Tenn., sanitation workers, the action that drew would-be peacemaker Martin Luther King Jr. to Memphis and the Lorraine Motel balcony where he was killed.

Little known before it opened the play drew only average advance interest and sales, said managing director Gregg Bloomfield. But its story and style turned out to be as engaging and entertaining as OyamO hoped. Everyone came off looking like a star.

Meadow Brook artistic director Geoffrey Sherman, 47 starts to fulfill the promise to "do very, very good plays to establish a dialogue with our audience" that he made when he came from Portland two years ago.

Director Gary Anderson, 34 head of Plowshares, after six years of good reviews in church halls, storefront theaters and the ill-equipped Northwest activity Center, demonstrates his ease with larger integrated audience is and larger cast.

For the amiable OyamO, the new production is the second time recently that he has drawn attention distant from his low-profile teaching post in Ann Arbor.

The coming together of OyamO, Plowshares and Meadow Brook happened on a stage that in 30 [sic] years had presented one black playwright.

The first step came in 1995 when Plowshares' Anderson met the freshly arrived Sherman at a mixer for the new Meadow Brook boss. "He expressed an interest in doing plays by African-American writers," Anderson said. "I had just directed ('*I Am a Man*') [sic] at

Karamu House in Cleveland. It was fresh in my mind. About a year ago I took the script to Geoffrey with an eye to the possibility of the two companies working on it together..."

And that is what happened with OyamO on hand from his home in Ypsilanti, Sherman producing, and Anderson directing regulars from past Plowshares shows-- Luray Cooper, Philip Sekou Glass, Clyde Harper, along with Jennifer Jones and Meadow Brook actors Robert Grossman, Paul Hopper, Phillip Locker. The star, as the Memphis sanitation garbage hauler T.O. Jones, is Lou Beatty Jr., a big man with a comfortable waistline going up against the Memphis power structure.

The tradeoffs are all good, said the people involved. Meadow Brook pays the production cost such as actors' salaries, sets and promotion. It gets any profits after the Plowshares actors and director are paid.

As for Plowshares, "we increase our profit in the community and it's an opportunity to broaden our development activities. (It) also allows me to provide some legitimate opportunities for some of the local actors," said Anderson.

The production is hot, "It has lots of music, blues numbers, the guitarist Memphis Charles Bevel. You take the audience response, it really creates an electricity in the community when you see what theater collaboration can do here."

Season: 1998-1999

The season opener *Talkin' Bones* addressed the Plowshares Theatre Company's mission to present the honest depictions of African-American life and culture. As this play is described by the theater critic John Sousanis in the Oakland Press 16 February 1998 the plate touches on issues of social and cultural identity of African American women.

In Shay Youngblood's *Talkin' Bones,* a family of three women struggle to come to terms with each other and a house full of ancestry spirits. Grandma Ruth, her 40-year-old daughter Bay Bay, and Bay Bay's daughter Eila lives and work together in their home/bookstore, where each has an open line of communication with their dead ancestors.

Ruth is hoping to see her daughter and granddaughter find happiness before she dies. But her biggest concern is that once she's gone, the store and the ancestors she's about to join will wallow in neglect.

***Talkin' Bones* is not an important text in the sense of breaking new dramatic or thematic ground. The play touches on issues of social and cultural identity, and the importance of literature and history, but never delves deeply into any of them. References are made to touchstones of African culture, such as Griots (tribal storytellers and historians) and a respect for ancestors without discussion of their importance.**

***Bones,* communicates its overriding tones of love for family and community despite these conceptual shortcomings. For one thing, Youngblood**

Figure 5. ***Talkin' Bones:*** **02/16/1998 Courtesy of PTC**

knows how people speak, and from Ruth's razor-sharp barbs To Mr. Fine's satiny whispers, the play is full of wonderful language and smart humor. Furthermore, except for those moments mentioned, Youngblood' pallet is mostly an emotional one, and she artfully paints the internal lives of her characters in subtle hues.

Director Janet Cleveland and a wonderful technical staff have created an enchanting space. Cleveland weaves slick sound design, Neil Carpentier-Altin's magical lighting, Melinda Pacha's scenery, and Linda Cleveland Simmons' wildly unique choreography into a single beautiful tapestry.

Add to that a singularly appealing cast and *Talkin' Bones* becomes a joy. Beyond question of talent, and there's plenty here, this cast is just plain hard not to like. Charlotte Nelson as Bay Bay and Linda Boston-Gilbert as Ruth are both feisty and freewheeling [sic], and their showdowns are entertaining and often very funny.

Roosevelt Johnson gives Mr. Fine such smooth charm it's easy to see how Bay Bay falls for his tired pickup lines and see-through lies. It's a smart performance that will have you booing Mr. Fine's and cheering Johnson.

Then there are the romantic leads. Toya D. Brazell as Eila is perfectly cast. Strikingly pretty, she exudes a confident strength as well as a coy playfulness. As Oz, Walter Lindsey bubbles with sprite--like charisma. This couple is so full of vitality you want them end up together the moment they appear on stage.

***Talkin' Bones,* strives to be many things. But while it misses some of its loftier targets, it would be a mistake to ignore its one surefire achievement. It will make you feel good. And there is nothing wrong with that. Very enjoyable [sic].**

By ending the season with August Wilson's *Joe Turner Come and Gone* Plowshares Theatre Company further addressed its mission to present the honest depiction of African-American life and culture, and the best of existing works. Described by theater critic Lawrence DeVine in <u>The Detroit News</u> 4 May 1998 it is a cross current of rough realism alongside handed-down spells and magical visions.

Plowshares Theatre ends its season with a sensitive production of August Wilson's extraordinary tale. There are wonderful roles for everybody in "Joe Turner," and you wish it came around annually, like a black "A Christmas Carol."

Most everyone in director Gary Anderson's ensemble is in tune with Wilson's crosscurrent of rough realism alongside handed--down spells and magical visions, set in a 1911 Pittsburgh boarding house owned by the son of a freed slave.

The story of *Joe Turner* is the resolution of the long northward odyssey of Harold Loomis (Luray Cooper), who searches the road and towns for his wife who disappeared during his seven--year captivity on a southern kidnappers work gang. Just as rich a character as Harold Loomis is the boarding house regular, Bynum (Anthony Lucas), a conjurer with a bag of charms on his belt who takes like an ancient Greek soothsayer.

The Hollys' boarding house is an apt metaphor for Wilson's wanderers trying to find a family. Bynum has lived there three years, but the others are transients: a happy-go-lucky guitar player, Jeremy; a lovelorn young Mattie, and a fancy woman named Molly (Jennifer Jones). They are looked after by the maternal Bertha, played by Rhonda Freya English, a stage presence like few others.

Dustiest of all is Cooper's Loomis a dark doomsday figure in a long gray coat and wide-brimmed black hat and heavy boots worn from the road. He looks fierce, but he is holding the hand of his 10-year-old daughter, Zonia, whom he has kept neat in a pinafore and a little straw hat.

The way Coopers plays him, Loomis is a banked bonfire; you wait for the flameout. In the Anderson's staging, no one immediately wants to rescue him. Herman McCain as know--it--I'll Seth is ornery and lively and is having none of Loomis' stony glare. One can not fear too much for Loomis' song, however, with glowing little Danielle Carter as A Zonia who speaks right up when spoken to.

***Joe Turner Come and Gone* was described by theater critic John Sousanis in The Oakland Press 13 May 1998, fitting the Plowshares Theatre Company's mission of presenting an honest depiction of African American life and culture at the beginning of the twentieth century is by turns terribly funny and deeply compelling.**

August Wilson's *Joe Turner Has Come and Gone,* is a wonderful finish to a wonderful season for the Plowshares Theatre Company. The play about the experiences of African-American life at

the beginning of the 20th century is by turns terribly funny and deeply compelling.

Director Gary Anderson has crafted an extremely tight, well paced production of Wilson's tale.

Seth Holly (Herman McCain) is a second--generation black capitalist. With his wife Bertha (Rhonda Freya English) he also runs the boarding house he inherited from his father.

Among his boarders are Bynum (Anthony Lucas), a spiritual wiseman who performs magic rites Holly's garden, a young musician who recently moved to the city from the south (Jeffrey Chastang) and the mysterious Harold Loomis (Luray Cooper) who has come in search of his missing wife.

***Joe Turner* focuses most of its attention on the many sides of love as demonstrated by the life and loves of the houses boarders. The pain of abandonment, the hardship of searching for love, the excitement of new love, the comfort of long-term relationships and the heartache caused by hanging on to the wrong partner are all central to the play and expounded upon by wise Bynum.**

But while Wilson provides plenty of insight into the machinations of love, it is the seemingly secondary storyline of Harold Loomis' born in the South after slavery, under the impression that he was a free man. But a terrible experience, separating him from his wife and daughter, put Loomis in touch with the devastation of slavery, nearly debilitating him spiritually.

McCain's performance as Seth gives the play much of its comic relief, and the actors timing is perfect. And Loomis Cooper's intense, powerful performance is one of the season's best. He conveys both menace and vulnerability, the truthful mix of a man who is both scared and mystified by the terrible way of the universe he lives in.

Bridging the play's two poles is Anthony Lucas as Bynum, who also serves as a bridge between the spiritual and the physical world in *Joe Turner.* It is both an expertly comedic performance and a wonderfully soulful inhabitation of a complex character.

In addition to the three strong leads the supporting cast turns in a number of grand performances including Jennifer Jones spirited performance as the sly Molly and Chastang wildly charismatic, guitar playing Jeremy.

Sheila Alyce Slaughter gives a smart performance in the role of the loving, naive Mattie, looking for love in all the wrong places, and Bruce Gnegy's performance as the white salesman who is both friend

and stranger to Seth is nuanced and engaging.

There is a joyful dance scene, choreographed by Kimberly Jones, but the entire play feels as though it's been choreographed. Each scene flows from the last, and the ebb and flow of the productions emotional tide are almost symphonic.

Wilson's *"Joe Turner Has Come and Gone"* [sic] is an intellectual, emotional and spiritual work. Wilson's production is also wonderfully entertaining. Very good.

This theater critic James McGinty in The Monitor (a community news paper) 14 May 1998, described Plowshares Theatre Company's production of *Joe Turner Come and Gone* as fascinating and powerful. This play touches on various aspects of African-American life post-Emancipation Proclamation.

Plowshares Theatre Company is presenting a fascinating and powerful play in its beautiful theater space at the Museum of African American history. First performed in 1988, the setting for *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is 1911 in a black boarding house in Pittsburgh which allows the playwright, August Wilson, to reach back to a time since the Emancipation Proclamation and documents some of the chain gangs slavery perpetuated against "free" blacks.

Harold Loomis (Luray Cooper) is just such a black man searching for his wife with his daughter, Zonia (Danielle Cooper), after seven years of hard labor. He's embittered and gets on the bad side of the man of the boarding house, Seth (Herman McCain), after having a violent outburst and breaking up the house Sunday Jubilee. Seth says he's "a wild eyed, mean looking Negro," and orders him to leave after his week's rent is used up.

Another tenant in the house and an important character in the play, Bynum, attempts to reach out to Loomis and does talk him through one of his tumultuous visions. Bynum, who is also called a binder, is part philosopher and part conjure man and uses stones and herbs and chicken blood to help people with their "connection" problems. Bynum is wonderfully brought to life by one of Detroit's treasures, character actor Anthony Lucas.

The playwright has cleverly created two worlds and a dynamic tension between them. There is the everyday domestic world of the

interplay between the characters at the boarding house, which is fun and comfortable. The characters may have faults but they are likable and Wilson has written many a humorous lines for them.

The young would--be guitar player, Jeremy (Jeffrey Chastang), is interested in women just a little too much and runs out on his brand-new conquest, Mattie (Sheila Alyce Slaughter), with a flashier Molly (Jennifer Jones). Mattie's heartfelt goodbyes to the departing Zonia are almost palpable and the two children Scenes between Zonia and Ruben (Lamar Javon Davidson) are disarmingly charming. Supporting everyone is earth mother Bertha (Rhonda Freya English), wife to big mouth Seth. Wilson also generously gives the traveling salesman and only white man in the play, Rutherford Selig, a great comedic scene. Selig is also a man-finder and is hired by Loomis to find his wife.

The mystical and spiritual world created mostly by the mythological language of Bynum is unsettling and challenging but it nags at us just the same. The big existential questions lies in the back of all of our minds and we wonder what our lives mean and is there more to life than what we see? Through Bynum, Wilson tells us that every man must have his song and some men have this song written all over them. Loomis has to see his wife after 10 years separation "... to find his starting place in the world." When she is found and it seems like we are marching towards a great redemption scene, Loomis hears a different drummer. But can he live in the world of men?

Go see this great play filled with wonderful performances at the Museum of African American history through May 24. You will not be disappointed.

Season: 2000-2001

The Plowshares Theatre Company opened its 2000 2001 season with *A Soldiers Play* the well-known drama by Charles Fuller which presents an honest depiction of African--American life, and develops the best of existing works. As described by theater critic Martin F. Kohn in the Detroit Free Press 24 January 2000. It is a tale of segregation which surrounds the lives of African-American soldiers during the World War II.

Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play,* the first production of Plowshares Theatre's new season, concerns itself with conflict, hostility and killing, as befits a drama that takes place during World War II. All the combat, psychological and otherwise, takes place in or near barracks at Ft. Neal, La., where the rank-and-file soldiers are black, their officers are white and nobody is very happy about it.

Two characters are central to *A Soldier's Play*: Sergeant Waters, shot to death as the play begins, but who returns throughout in flashback, and Captain Davenport, who investigates the slaying. In classic mystery fashion, everybody seems to have a motive for wanting Sergeant Waters dead.

And the detective work is carried out according to the basic Agatha Christie set up, as Captain Davenport sets himself up in the barracks and summons a possible suspect one by one.

Playwright Fuller has written his story so that his two most intriguing characters never have a scene together. This gives the play two power sources, and there is plenty of dramatic tension to go around. The demanding abrasive Sergeant antagonizes everyone he meets. The self-confidence, quietly intense Captain generates resentment by his mere existence. The black enlisted men mistrust him because he's an officer; the base's white commanding officer can't accept Davenport because he is black.

In Janet Cleveland's muscular production, characters literally get in each other's faces when it seems necessary.

Anthony Lucas plays Waters with a combination of pride and rage that befits the character.

Chris Carothers' Quonset hut of a set seems to close in on the soldiers

Figure 6. ***A Soldiers Play:*** **01/24/2000 Courtesy of PTC**

physically, the way racism condescension and exclusion close in on them physically.

Theater critic Michael H. Margolin in The Detroit News 24 January 2000, concludes this play is a simple plot that deals with the 1944 segregated armed forces, racial prejudice, self-hatred, mockery, cruelty and anguish all of which affected the lives of African--Americans of the time.

> **Detroit -- Plowshares Theatre has taken on Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play* in a strong but narrowly focused production in the new temporary quarters in northwest Detroit.**
>
> **The 1981 play is famous in the genre of African-American plays; part polemic, part melodrama, he crosses lines in racial discourse. The plot is simple: it begins in 1944 in a U.S. Army camp in Louisiana. The armed forces are still segregated, and a black sergeant is killed.**
>
> **The discovery of racial prejudice among the black rank and file and the white ruling class is filtered through a black investigating officer, Capt. Davenport. The captain in charge, Taylor by name, greets the visiting investigator by asking what college he went to, then says Howard University? [sic] You're daddy a rich preacher?**
>
> **Many lines are racially barbed or insinuating. The dead man who comes to life as a character in flashback scenes is as thoroughly prejudiced as some of his white cohorts.**
>
> **The paths the playwright leads us down are not pretty ones. Self-hatred, mockery, cruelty and anguish are guidepost or on the journey. When the murderer is discovered, we are dismayed that hatred is so virulent. Plowshares' production is helped by a spare evocative set by Chris Carothers and lean muscular staging by Janet Cleveland.**
>
> **The star of the show is Anthony Lucas as the murdered man Sgt. Waters. Michael Hays is sly and yet vulnerable as Capt. Taylor. Serving the play well in other roles are James Bowen, Jeffrey Chastang, Steve Dixon, Michael D. Ellison, Walter L. Lindsay Jr., Andrew Glaszek and Bruce Gnegy.**
>
> **As Capt. Davenport, Victor Douglas gives a quirky performance. Sometimes he delivers readings like Morse code; sometimes he explodes in anger while his physique is slack; a few**

times he seems to be in another play. Still, within the excellent ensemble work it matters less rather than more.

The other flaw in this production is its one-note take on Fuller's play. There are slip–currents and undertones in the relationships among the characters and in some of the soliloquies that are not drawn into play. Cleveland has gone for the straightforward storytelling approach.

Successful theatrically, still the play as presented is less than the sum of its parts.

Pursuing its mission to show African-American life and culture accurately Plowshares Theatre Company launched Detroit playwright Jeffrey Chastang's, first full length play "Full Circle." John Sousanis in the <u>Oakland Press</u> **10 June 2000 noted its huge success.**

Full Circle, Detroit's playwright Jeffrey Chastang's first full-length play is an unmitigated success. The story of a dysfunctional middle–class family on the verge of heartbreak distinguishes itself by revealing the humanity of each of its characters, "good" or "bad," in a style that calls to mind Tennessee Williams' odes to broken dreams and Arthur Miller's meditations on truth.

Like these authors, Chastang uses characters whose hearts are overflowing with love, hate, envy, misery and joy to tell a story of love and wild despair. "Full Circle" takes place in the home of the Yvonne and Jacob Russell (Jennifer Jones and Herman McCain) just after the suicide of their youngest son.

Yvonne vacillates between shutting down completely and near hysteria. She refuses to go near the room where she found her son and screams when she sees one of his sweaters. But she refuses to talk about his death, and withdrawals from her husband and her older son Jake, Jr. (Michael D. Ellison).

The loss of his brother, his own lack of direction, and his mother's distance have [sic] left Jake adrift. Though his father loves him dearly, both men are clearly lost. The closest thing to a stable force in their lives is Yvonne's best friend and sister-in-law, Cal (Charlotte J. Nelson). She has been a constant presence in their homes since the death of her own husband years before.

The household is preparing for the visit of Yvonne's father Roy

(Council Cargle) an imposing man who bullies both Jakes and orders his daughter around as though she were still a teenager. Roy's thundering presence signifies one more dark cloud in the gathering storm. But this confrontational personality serves as the catalyst for the deluge that follows. As small arguments turn into big ones, Yvonne, Jacob, Roy and Cal each reveal long-hidden truths.

Theater critic Martin F. Kohn in the Detroit Free Press 6 June 2000, describes "Full Circle" as a world premiere production that touches the lives of an African American family confronting the suicide of a family member.

As they confront the suicide of Max Russell, the young man who was their brother, son, grandson and nephew, the five survivors in Detroit playwright Jeffrey Chastang's "Full Circle" must face the cause of their longstanding familial discomfort.

The play, receiving its world premiere production at Plowshares Theatre, does, as its title implies, come around to examining the things that went wrong among and between Max's parents, Yvonne and Jacob; they're of the son, Jacob Jr.; their sister-in-law Cal, and Yvonne's father, Roy. Among and between is also how Chastang has structured his play. In the first act, characters group and regroup; the second act is a series of probing one-on-one conversations between just about every pair of characters.

At the heart of "Full Circle," set in the Detroit, is the long but uneasy marriage of Yvonne (Jennifer Jones) and Jacob (Herman McCain). Yvonne's demanding father, Roy (Council Cargle), has never thought much of Jacob or of Jacob Jr. (Michael D. Ellison).

Feeling ignored by his parents, Jacob Jr. is for ever running off to other cities and has his sights on Vancouver. In the 1960s free-spirited Jacob might have gone to Canada to avoid the draft; in 1990 he heads for Canada to dodge the cold wind of disapproval. The only one who appreciates him unreservedly is Aunt Cal (Charlotte J. Nelson), his mother's sister.

Chastang characters and situations aren't unique but he draws them well and his ending is unexpected. He could make it clearer sooner just how everyone is connected, [sic] and not every pair of character needs to converse. It does give the each actor time in the spotlight, though, and under Gary Anderson's assured direction each makes the most of the opportunity.

Next Ron Milner's play *Jazz Set* was a rhythmic production that meets Plowshares Theatre Company's mission to present the best of existing works. As described by theater critic Martin F. Kohn in the Detroit Free Press 21 August 2000, the production of *Jazz Set* and its cast bring to life various images of African American life, culture and challenges.

> **Although they play a variety of characters, the six actors in *Jazz Set* consistently returned to portraying a band on stage in much the same way that a jazz tune, no matter how far afield it may range, finds its way back to the melody.**
>
> **Besides offering a sense of reassuring familiarity to an audience, this thematic restatement illustrates how much Ron Milner intriguing play, being produced by Plowshares Theatre is structured like jazz. Besides a recurring spoken and visual melody, *Jazz Set* is built on solos, duets, whole-ensemble statements riffs, fragments, harmonies, discord, rhythm and, sometimes rhyme. That the characters are identified not by name but by their (unseen) instruments – tenor, pianist, Bassist, drummer, alto and trumpet -- suggests that individual personalities are playing back up on this gig.**
>
> **Indeed, this is the case. Each actor plays several parts; some are individuals, others are more generalized. As pianist, Jill Cortney Chennault (the only woman in the band) is a young woman pursuing a career in music over her father is opposition, the wife of a junkie, a sharecroppers [sic] at it again wife in the segregated South and the mother of a young man in prison.**
>
> **As Drummer, George Johnson Jr. also plays a soldier fleeing enemy fire in a truck during the Korean War. James Bowen, as trumpet, portrays an aging musician who doesn't have the chops he once possessed but who still holds his own with the young players; he also plays the sharecropper. As Bassist, Moneo Marshall also plays a troubled youth who goes to prison.**
>
> **Soldier, sharecropper, jailbird, a junkie ... the types, archetypes and stereotypes reflect some aspects of the African-- American experience in which jazz is rooted. Their stories are told briefly and a major challenge for most of the actors is how to build characters out of material that is more than fragmentary but less than complete. For the most part they, and director Gary Anderson, follow**

the advice about music that Milner puts in the mouth of Drummer: "It's not about the volume, it's about the intensity." Additionally, Milner emphasizes collaborative nature of jazz and of life itself. No single character or vignette matters as much as a whole.

The closest thing to a plot is a battle of the saxes [sic], the rivalry between cool, patriarchal tenor (Lynch are Travis) and upstart and angry Alto (John E. Woolridge III). In the way he carries himself and the deliberate way he speaks, Travis makes it clear that he has come through difficult times to reach his level of serenity. It also implies that Tenor is a musician who makes every note count.

Travis is the only actor whose every word makes it beyond the first 10 rows. Good thing it's about the intensity, not the volume.

In celebration of its tenth season, Plowshares Theatre Company presented the reputed *Ain't Misbehavin'*. This production celebrates the life and music of Thomas (Fats) Waller. Theater critic Martin F. Kohn in the Detroit Free Press 5 November 2000 described this production as uncharacteristic for the Plowshares Theatre Company's season opener.

The night 10 years ago that Plowshares Theatre made its debut, "we couldn't give tickets away," Gary Anderson recalls.

To mark its 10th anniversary Plowshares itself is doing something uncharacteristic for its season opener the theater is staging *Ain't Misbehavin'* the joyful anthology of songs by (or associated with) Thomas (Fats) Waller.

Plowshares has [sic] done plays with music before, "but this is the first full musical revue with no social message per se" says Anderson, 38 [sic].

In this case, the medium is the message "We wanted to begin our tenth anniversary season with a bang," Anderson says "We wanted to send a signal to the people: Get ready to have fun, because you're going to have fun this season.

"We want to send a strong signal that there's no time for weepin.' "

Weeping may never have been an issue for Michigan's pre-imminent African-American Theatre Company, but during his decade Plowshares has provided a time or two for worrying -- not about the product on its stage but about its own existence.

Since that first production of "*Woza Albert!*" [sic] In December 1990 at Detroit's 1515 Broadway Plowshares has produced its plays at six other venues: at the Magic Bag, in Ferndale; at Central Unity Methodist Church, The Northwest Activities Center, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American history and the Holistic Development Center in Detroit; and at Henry Ford Museum's Anderson's theater (no relation to Gary), in Dearborn.

So, besides kicking off the season with a high-visibility show, Plowshares is announcing its 2000-2001 schedule [sic] with a full color 20-page brochure.

"We really needed to do something to send a signal that this theater was far from dead," Anderson says.

For *Ain't Misbehavin'* Plowshares finds itself back at a former home, the Museum of African American history. The Henry Ford Museum will host the seasons remaining four plays: *"Mule bone,"* [sic] by Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, Jan 18-Feb 18; *"Sisters,"* [sic] by Marsha Jackson-Randolph, March 8-April 8; *"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"* [sic] by August Wilson, April 26-May 27; and "Continued Warm" [sic] by Jeffrey Chastang, July 12-Aug. 8 .

Plowshares predominantly African--American audience is loyal -- but as Anderson observes "there are parts of my audience not really excited about having to drive to Dearborn to see the work that I do." So finding a permanent home for Plowshares remains Andersons' long-term goal.

Figure 7. ***Ain't Miss behave in:*** **11/15/2000Courtesy of PTC**

Anderson estimates that 100,000 people have attended Plowshares plays over the years during its 1997-98 season [sic] at the Museum of African American history, Plowshares attracted 20,000 playgoers. The following season it drew 28,000 patrons. With a change in administration in 1999, however, the museum decided it wanted exclusive use of the theater, leaving Plowshares temporarily homeless and delaying its 1999-2000 season.

Ever resolute, Anderson and his cohorts mounted a full season, staging the first played at the Holistic Development Center, a former church in Palmer Park, and the remainder at Henry Ford Museum. The late start made for a bit of confusion: "The Old Settler," performed Sept. 21-Oct. 22 of this year at Henry Ford Museum, wasn't the first show of this season but the final show of last season.

Further leadership change at the Museum of African American history resulted in Plowshares' being invited back to stage its season's first show.

Looking forward to Plowshares second decade Anderson says he never doubted his theater would reach the 10-year milestone. "I didn't have any problem believing we would be around. We know it was meeting a need that was going unmet," he says.

Besides staging plays in which black audience members find themselves reflected, Plowshares provides work for black theater artist in and around Detroit. Anderson mentions several alumni of Plowshares productions would have gone on to busy careers in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. For example Luray Cooper and Tim Rhoze, the cast of 1990s "*Woza Albert!*," [sic] are working in Los Angeles and Chicago respectively. And Monrico Ward, last seen in a pair of 1999 Plowshares productions, "In Living Colors" and "*Jitney*," [sic] is working in New York.

"That shows me that I was right, that the talent pool did exist and that there are more people here who can do that," Anderson says.

Likewise, he is pleased that Plowshares is incubating new playwriting talent. Inkster played right Chastang developed "Full Circle" and "Continued Warm," set at the time of Detroit's 1943 race riot will have its premiere at Plowshares in July.

"I like to get new scripts," Anderson says. "If you look at the history of theater, the thing that makes any theater significant is the development of writers." The provincetown players, he notes, became famous for developing Eugene O'Neill; Yale Repertory Theatre work with August Wilson.

Anderson would like to see Plowshares in that company someday he says. "That's really important to me.

Martin F. Kohn in the Detroit Free Press 16 November 2000, describes the Plowshares Theatre Company's production of *Ain't Misbehavin'* as a tribute to pianist, songwriter Fats Waller. Plowshares Theatre Company received praises for including students from the Detroit High School for the Fine and Performing Arts. This production also depicted the harsh realities of the African-American community of the time.

> **They are spreading rhythm around, just as the song says, in Plowshares Theater's production of "*Ain't Misbehavin.*" [sic] If they'd spread the light and sound around more evenly, they would do it even better by the man this review celebrates.**
>
> **That would be Thomas Wright Waller (1904-43), popularly known as Fats, pianist, singer, songwriter and -- in his own words --" my mother's 285 of jam jive and everything."**
>
> **Jam, jive and everything is what five singers and three musicians, codirected by Barbara Martin and Mayowa Lisa Reynolds, pack into this tune-field to our tribute to Mrs. Waller's little boy.**
>
> **In his short life, Waller composed or popularized enough material for two or three revues. This one, put together in 1978 by Murray Horwitz and Richard Maltby Jr., is all A-list: "Honeysuckle Rose," "The Joint Is Jumpin'," "You Feet's Too Big," "Handful Of Keys," "I've Got a Feeling I'm Falling," "Ain't Misbehavin'," and a couple of dozen others.**
>
> **As for the singer-actor-dancers, two of the better moments are these: William McLin III slinks around in a green (not purple) haze, singing "The Reefer song" and swaying in gleefully stoned character even as he makes his exit. And Lea Charisse Woods and Sheila Alyce saying the heck out of the vamp "Find Out What They Like," shaking their boas so vigorously that they leave the stage scattered with red and black feathers. It looks like the aftermath of a game between the Cardinals and the ravens.**
>
> **Everyone gets to sing the delightful "Hand Full of Keys," which was a piano solo when Waller composed it in 1938. Horwitz and Maltby added clever words explaining the rudiments of the piano style known as stride which Waller didn't invent but refined.**
>
> **An added treat is the presence of five tap dancers from The**

Detroit High School for the Fine & Performing Arts who hoof up a gust on "How Ya Baby."

Like Waller, "*Ain't Misbehavin'*" is not all fun and frolic. The plaintive "Black and Blue," from the 1929 show "Hot Chocolates," is a chilling reminder of racism's psychological wallop. Having the cast hold up cartoonish blackface mask makes the statement even more pointed and painful.

With a melody of pop songs that Waller recorded, things conclude on, literally, a happier note.

Season: 2002-2003

***Home* as described by theater critic Judith Cookis in the Oakland Press 1 November 2003, explored the honest depiction of African-American life and culture in the segregated 1950s.**

Turns out, you can go home again. In fact sometimes that's exactly where you belong. That's an idealistic message in lyrical lines of "Home," now at Detroit's Plowshares Theatre Company.

Cephus Miles is a young black farmer from crossroads, N.C., a child of the land who appreciates its bounties-even more so when he loses the family farm and his own freedom.

Cephus was a churchgoing boy in the segregated 1950s. He knew his commandments and respected his elders. He also liked a little fun now and then with girls, bootleg liquor and shot dice. But it's his later refusal to fight in Vietnam ("thou shalt not kill," he argues unsuccessfully) that lands him in jail and brands him a communist.

After losing his girl and his land, Cephus is tempted by the bright city lights, with promises of all-night jazz clubs, sophisticated women and factory money. But this promised land [sic] proves just a myth. He can't outrun his record, and hustlers, pimps and drugs lurk around every corner.

Thoughts of God are just passing, scornful ones now. He must be vacationing in Miami Cephus reasons, because the big guy isn't calling him back. Playwright Samm-Art Williams, "Home" (written in the late 1970s and perform later on Broadway) never stoops to cheap sitcom laughs. They are smart, funny scenes mixed with fluid prose

they captured the sounds, scents and scenery of the changing south.

Only three actors play the many characters in a mostly bare stage. With only a few hats and scarves, John Woolridge III, Ebony McClain and Rhonda Freya English slipped easily into townspeople, main characters and narrators. English (Woman Two) delivers many memorable moments as a bratty neighborhood girl, a snotty welfare caseworker and a filthy gold digger. Plowshares' newcomer McClain (Woman One) holds her own as Cephus' confused sweetheart and pulls out some surprising toughness as a crazy drug dealer.

Woolridge (Cephus) has great comic timing. But he's not as convincing when his character is down and out.

Lighting and music help imagine each setting, illuminating the Friday fish fry on the river banks and the city's smoke-field jazz clubs.

Director Gary Anderson also weaves the action together nicely, steering a touching tale that's also a subtle American history review.

The play however, isn't so subtle in its depiction of the South as man's savior-versus the cold North with its elusive promises.

And playwright Williams makes it clear that crossroads soil can yield family, stability and happiness someday-if tended properly.

Season: 2004-2005

Plowshares Theatre Company demonstrated its desire to showcase newcomers like first-time playwright Janet Cloe who wrote an exciting and evocative work called "Sarah, Ella & Pops." Theater critic Donald V. Calamia in Between the Lines 29 January 2004, described this production as a musical tribute that depicts the lives of African American jazz vocalists and musician Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong.

In a discussion with Gary Anderson of Detroit's Plowshares Theatre Company, it was mentioned that he was staging an original production set to open in early February. "Sarah, Ella & Pops."

"Sarah, Ella, & Pops" is a musical tribute that celebrates the lives of three of the most influential jazz artist ever. Sarah Vaughn,

Ella Fitzgerald, and Louis Armstrong [sic]. The world premiere production produced incorporation with Lansing's BoarsHead Theatre where it will run after closing in Detroit, is set between 1931 and 1954 and uses the songs these artists made popular to chronicle their amazing careers. The lives of these three legends are case studies and the evolution of popular American music during the middle of the twentieth century. In this wonderful play we go from the tail end of early jazz to swing and big band up to the emergence of bebop "Gary Anderson said in a press release "it's a touching tribute to the music they made and how they made it."

Figure 8. ***Sarah, Ella & Pops:*** **02/05/2004 Courtesy PTC**

Gary actually told me much, much more during our interview, such as jazz legend Marcus Belgrave makes a guest appearance in the production; an excellent troupe of local performers round out the cast including Linda Boston, Lydia Willis, William McLin and recent Wilde Award nominee Augustus Williamson; and although playwright Janet Cloe is a first-time playwright, she is a noted poet and director with numerous local, regional and international credits.

Gary also emphasized that Plowshares prides itself in developing and staging of original works that depict African American life and culture. It's part of the mission and they do it well!

Blues for an Alabama Sky **another well known show focused on the honest depiction of African-American life and culture of the period--Harlem in the 1930s-appeared next. As described by theater critic Martin F. Kohn in the Detroit Free Press 7 April 2004, this play by Pearl Cleage explores issues of homosexuality, dreams, love and hopes for the future.**

It's a New York sky, not an Alabama firmament, that [sic] hangs over Harlem in 1930, the setting of Pearl Cleage's *"Blues for and Alabama sky."* For that matter, there is only a moment of blues singing. This is hardly an exercise in misdirection however.

Cleage's play is more about things missed or hoped for than what is actually present. One of its characters waxes nostalgic for the starry heavens over his native Alabama; another is a singer who's out of work. As the title suggests happiness isn't overflowing.

Not for the characters anyway. Audiences, though, should be well pleased with Janet Cleveland's riveting production at Plowshares Theatre. The principal source of joy is an actor named Mark Young who plays the leading male role Guy, an unabashedly homosexual (the term "gay" wasn't used in 1930) costume designer with an indomitable spirit.

Witty, kind and, as a minority among a minority, more than a little tough, Guy clings mightily to his dream of designing for Josephine Baker. He keeps sending costumes to the fabled chanteuse in Paris and waiting for her to summon him with a steamship ticket and money to make the trip in style.

Guy's roommate is Angel (Mayowa Lisa Reynolds), his friend from savanna who is either his [sic] cousin, a childhood pal or an old chum from a less savory past. Angel, too, is a dreamer, a nightclub singer unlucky in love, unlucky in employment and hoping for a break in one or the other

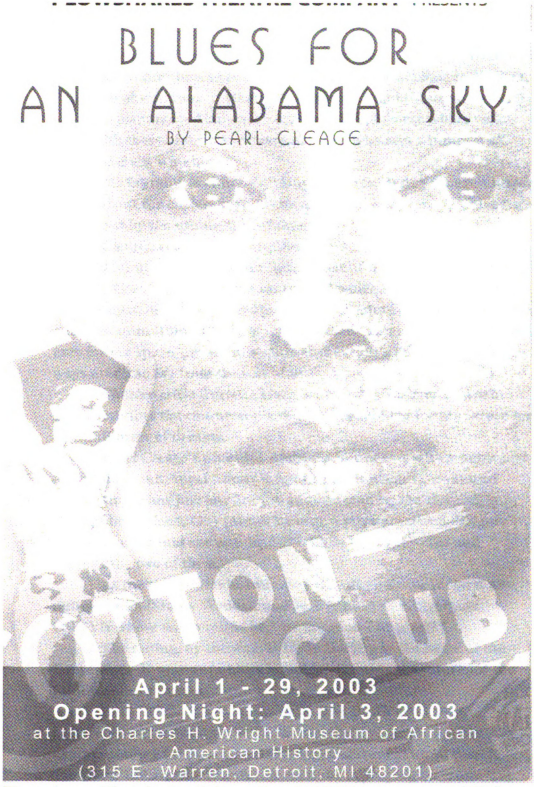

Figure 9. ***Blues for An Alabama Sky:*** **04/17/2004 courtesy of PTC**

Three other characters fill out the world onstage, each a person in his or her own right as well as a representative of the greater ferment of the Harlem Renaissance. Delia (Stacey J. Weddle) is a social worker hoping to establish a birth-control clinic in Harlem. Sam is an obstetrician at Harlem Hospital. Leland (Mateen Stewart) is a transplant from Alabama, a conservative widower whose values clash with those of the other characters but who sees a future with Angel, and she with him.

"Everything is either/or," Guy says articulating Cleage's major theme about the choices individuals make and how those decisions are influenced by the people around them.

Cleveland has made excellent choices, in casting and in how she deploys her actors to make optimal use of the stage. With the help of Chris Carothers handsome set most of which represents Guy and Angel's apartment, Cleveland positions her actors downstage near the audience or in front of the stage, even closer. The result, an intimacy rare for the space, promotes a sense that Cleage's people in many ways aren't so far from the rest of us.

Theater critic Curtrise Garner in the Metrotimes 14 April 2004, describes the characters in this play as looking for the future for the fulfillment of dreams.

Pearl Cleage's Blues for Alabama Sky begins with trouble and disappointment. Angel Allen (Mayowa Lisa Reynolds), a vamped lounge singer has just lost her job and her man on the same night. But her best friend, Guy (Mark Young), a young costume designer who shows her that she can depend on him to pay the rent and support the two of them.

As the story unfolds, two more friends enter the picture, an uptight Delia (Stacey Weddle) and Sam (Cameron Knight), an OBGYN whose motto might be," let the good Times roll."

The setting, by the way, is 1930s Harlem in the midst of the Depression. Everyone in blues is looking towards the future for the fulfillment of a dream.

Angel is looking to marry or at least find a good man, preferably a rich one. In the meantime, she'll settle for finding another singing the job. Guy has shipped several of his dresses to Josephine Baker, who is a star in Paris; he is praying for a one-way trip to design dresses there. Delia wants to start a birth control clinic in Harlem because she believes that "a woman shouldn't have to make a baby every time she makes love," and 40-year-old Sam simply wants

a little love in his life.

Blues not only weaves a tale of partnership, love and trust, but also reintroduces us -- through conversation -- to various figures of the Harlem of the time, including Langston Hughes and Adam Clayton Powell. There isn't much actual singing here -- though Angel belts out "St. Louis Blues" -- but the blues are omnipresent as the frustrations of these friends become more and more apparent.

Guy asks Angel, "what are your plans for the future? To sing for gangster?" [sic] Angel retorts that Guy is living a dream waiting for Josephine's call. Sam tells Delia, "When I deliver babies, the parents ask about jobs not birth control."

Despite the bickering, they are a tight foursome. As things progress, Sam and Delia, for instance, find love -- with each of the -- and Delia's clinic opens.

But the relationships are forever changed after Leland (Mateen Stewart), a wet behind the ears Southern boy, enters the picture.

When Leland calls on the Angel, it's apparent that they are from two different worlds, Leland has never been to juke joint and Angel hardly, if ever, attend, church. But they each feel a need for the other: Leland, a widower, sees a future with Angel while Angel realizes that she can have a happy life outside of the confines of the seedy Harlem club scene.

Then the fifth will starts squeaking, and things turned topsy-turvy. When the friends have tea one afternoon and invite Leland, Guy recounts a night of love between himself and another man. Leland calls Guys homosexual lifestyle "an abomination" and storms out. The argument between Guy and Leland forces Angel to choose between them -- between Leland, whose child she is carrying, and Guy, the doting friend about to start a new life in Paris. As Angel grapples with her next step, the audience starts to see Angel for who she really is through the eyes of Guy.

As with all of us, these characters are the sum of their decisions. And when Angels finally and firmly takes action, the consequences are grave for all.

As Marvin Gaye saying in "Trouble Man," "There's only three things for sure -- taxes, death and trouble." Blues for an Alabama Sky delivers two of them with a bang.

Next, as described by theater critic Martin F. Kohn in the Detroit Free Press 2 June 2004, *7 Guitars* by August Wilson explores the life and death of bluesman Floyd (Schoolboy) Barton.

Only one guitar appears in August Wilson's *Seven Guitars,* a blues singer's story, which raises an obvious question. Yes, the play has seven characters, but the answer is more complex and requires a discerning ear. This is exactly what director Gary Anderson possesses -- it's crucial if you're going to direct any August Wilson's play -- and he has communicated what he's heard to the actors at plowshares Theatre.

What Anderson has heard is this: at one point or another, every character speaks lines that sound like the beginning of a blues song: "Try me one more time and you carry no regrets"; "Make me a mattress, naked soft and low"; "You ain't the only one with the little book I got a little book, too." [sic] The actors speak, they don't sing, they don't chant, they don't intone, and they don't repeat the lines. They speak conversationally, but if you're attuned you're hearing the blues. In *Seven Guitars,* the blues is to Wilson what iambic pentameter was to Shakespeare.

Wilson revisits some of the themes he touched on in "*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,*" and other play about African-American musicians fighting the white-control recording industry for the fruits of their own labor. As in "Ma Rainey," frustration or of exploitation can easily turn into a rage.

Set in Pittsburgh in the 1940s *Seven Guitars* begins with the funeral of its central character, bluesman Floyd (Schoolboy) Barton. In an eloquently staged opening scene, each of the other characters silently take his or her seat at the funeral, exchanging or avoiding glances, touching or not touching, entering purposefully or hesitantly, and one man sits a bit apart, all of which connotes their relationship to each other and to the deceased subsequent scenes depict Floyd's life and times.

As Floyd, Markeus kitts embodies the disappointment of the frustrated artist. Cameron Knight is effective as Canewell, his harmonica--playing sideman and rival for the woman they both care for, Vera. Michelle Wilson plays Vera as a gentle soul who is really, really tired of being done dirty.

Charlotte J. Nelson as friend and neighbor Louise; Anthony

Lucas as the blues groups drummer; Sydney Skipper as a semi-coherent chicken vendor, and Stacey J. Wedd as a woman who has come to visit from Alabama, contribute a scene of ensemble vital to good theater or, for that matter, playing the blues.

***Spunk* by Zora Neale Hurston and adapted by George C. Wolfe is a trilogy dealing with African American life and culture based upon Harlem blues and narrated folktales, as described by theater critic Judy Cookis Rubens in the Oakland Press 29 May 2005.**

> **Call it resilient spirit, call it spunk. It's whatever keeps many of Zora Neale Hurston's characters alive and moving beyond their pain.**
>
> **For Delia a young washer woman, it's the pain of abuse at the hands of her cheating husband. For a pair of Harlem hustlers, it's the pain of having plenty of style but no money. And for one devoted husband it's the pain of his young wife's betrayal. Playwright George C. Wolfe adapted a trio of early Hurston stories in "Spunk." From their beginnings in a short story published by the Harlem Renaissance writer in 1925, they're part drama, part musicals, part narrated folktale.**
>
> **In Plowshares Theatre's well-crafted staging, director Janet Cleveland presents a fluid story that sings as powerfully as its performers do.**
>
> **The stories of *Spunk* are inventively delivered by four performers and two narrators (known only as Blues Speak Woman and Guitar Man), though all performers act narrate and saying at various points. As Blues Speak Woman explains, you're about to hear "tales of survival, told in a key of the blues."**
>
> **Of the three tales, the third *"The Gilded Six Bits,"* leaves the greatest impression. In it, adoring husband Joe (Mateen Stewart) must learn to forgive his young wife, Missie Mae (Danye Evonnte Brown), who cheats on him with a sharp dressed Con man flashing fake golden promises of wealth. Stewart and Brown, as the tender couple finding a way back to one another, have great chemistry.**
>
> **The second tale, *"Story in Harlem slang,"* is a richly comic look at two Harlem hustlers, dressed in fine zoot suits, bragging 'bout their wealth while trying to woo the same woman. Here, Stewart and**

Walter Lindsay toss off the lively dialogue with ease and attitude to spare.

The opening story, *"Sweat,"* about an abused wife who finally gets her revenge, is delivered with quiet rage.

The rich vocals of Felecia Taha, as Blues Speak Woman, and Michael Turner as Guitar Man, adds [sic] spunk to the musical interludes between stories. Actor Cornelius Harris and pianist/musical director Marvin Thompson Jr. round out this talented cast [sic]. Christopher Carothers' deceptively simple set, terrifically lit by Ron Burns, is highly effective. And Mary Copenhagen's bold zoot-suited costumes definitely have the requisite spunkiness for these survival stories.

***Paul Robeson,* a biographical play by Philip Hayes Dean presented a view of African-American life and culture when it attracted young audiences. As described by theater critic Martin F. Kohn in the Detroit Free Press 23 February 2005, Plowshares Theatre Company debuted *Paul Robeson* with a student matinee at Music Hall.**

Most young people have no idea "just what they owe to Paul Robeson and his constant quest to fight for the downtrodden," Plowshares' Gary Anderson says.

They will after they've seen "Paul Robeson," the biographical play by Philip Hayes Dean, which Anderson is directing this week at the Music Hall. Los Angeles screen actor Lou Beatty Jr. returns to his native Detroit to play Robeson. Detroit musician Carl Clendenning accompanies on piano.

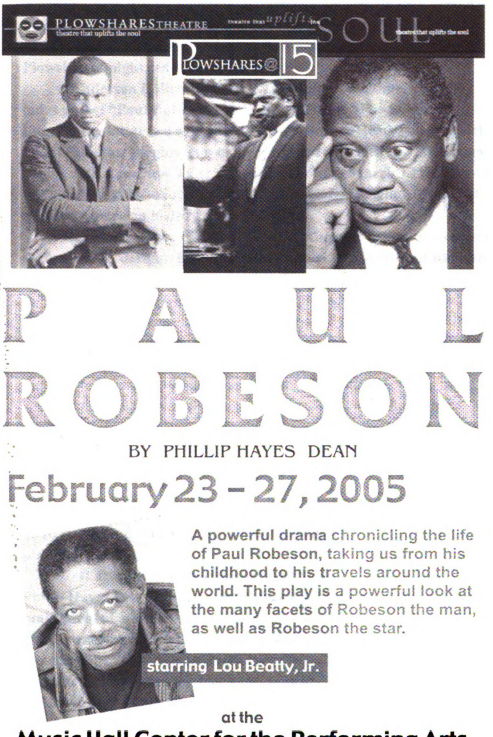

Figure 10. ***Paul Robeson:*** **02/23/2005 Courtesy of PTC**

As Plowshares Theatre Company celebrates its 15th season, founder and artistic director Gary Anderson is determined it will survive him Anderson is 42, but at the paces of maintaining this week, Plowshares might outlive him any day.

Anderson is directing two plays at the same time, some 90 miles apart: "Paul Robeson" at Music Hall and "The Story" in Lansing the latter is a coproduction with Boars--Head Theatre [sic]. "Paul Robeson" begins Tuesday with a student matinee. "The Story" begins with a preview Thursday, plays through March 13 then moves to Plowshares' 313-seat home at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American history.

Staging different plays in separate theaters at the same time is very much by design. But it can also be seen as a symbol of itinerant nature that has been as much a part of Plowshares' first 15 years as the important mission-driven and original works it has produced. As it has sought a permanent home, it has moved from place to place, always looking to reach more people. Although it hasn't succeeded in all its goals -- it doesn't have a permanent home and it's still looking for that consistent audience -- Michigan's full-time professional African American theater company has succeeded in the most important aspect: survival "Paul Robeson" is an obvious choice for Plowshares, but not so obvious at Music Hall. Plowshares has [sic] done shows at the 1,700 seat Music Hall on occasion, but they've been musicals like "*Sophisticated Ladies*" and "*It Ain't Nothin But the Blues,*" shows with a good--sized casts and bands. ("*Ladies*" had a cast of 16 and a 12-piece orchestra.) "*Paul Robeson*" has one actor and a pianist [sic].

"It actually takes us back to our roots," Anderson says of Philip Hayes Dean's biographical play about the brilliant, principled, multitalented and persecuted Robeson. "The idea was to begin this anniversary celebration with a play that I thought focused more on our mission." Throughout its history, Plowshares has focused on subjects important to the black community that haven't been otherwise tackled on local stages.

"It's important that our entertainment have some substance" Anderson says. He's confident entertainment of substance can draw crowds.

In Lou Beatty Jr.'s [sic] excellent portrayal, Robeson is also a natural storyteller his character begins the play as an old man tired but indomitable, and is soon recapping his life, starting out with his

vigorous youth. In the fashion of a good storyteller, Beatty takes on aspects of different people -- Robeson's father [sic], the football coach at Rutgers University, the college cafeteria worker who say is she doesn't serve "colored food" -- with accents, inflections and mannerisms, not full-out characterization.

The focus is on Robeson, but it wouldn't be correct to call this a one-man play. The second man is Robeson's piano accompanist Larry Brown, played by Carl Clendenning. You might call Clendenning and unusual hero, it worked for the fact that he sings. Indeed, he possesses a rich bass-baritone reminiscent of Robeson's.

Beatty sings but Clendenning sings more. Clendenning sings "old Man River," Beatty harmonizes. Nobody is complaining.

Adhering to the chronology of Robeson's life the play lacks the dramatic arc a work of fiction would have. The most compelling and poignant scene has Robeson telling a story to a sad little girl in Germany before World War II.

Robeson's life was a major event. The play that bears [sic] his name is a testament to that, and Plowshares' production does it honor.

Showing its mission in broader terms, the production of Plowshares Theatre Company's *The Story* dealt with the African-American community life, culture and its connection to White America, sharing the fact that African-American theater and culture is relevant to all people. Plowshares also shared its artistic resources with other theaters locally. Theater critic Lawrence B. Johnson in The Detroit News 6 April 2005, describes *The Story* is a sharply drawn ensemble play, tight, fast-paced and clever.

In Tracy Scott Wilson's play "*The Story,*" the patches of life's facts and fictions blur together to the point where it's hard to tell truth from fiction. That can be especially messy if you happen to be a journalist, a story-Teller by trade. You're supposed to be dealing with certified facts.

But what happens to a writer when the facts just get in the way, and the convenience of one invention suggests the expediency of another?

Such is the moral, ethical and personal predicaments of Yvonne, the ambitious young reporter at the center of "The Story," which Plowshares Theatre Company offers in a polished and provocative staging at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American history.

Yvonne, played with a flair and chilling purpose by Cassandra Freeman, has just been hired by a major daily newspaper and assigned to its Outlook section, which means her beat is the African-American community. But Yvonne's view she might as well be wearing shackles. She doesn't want to be a black reporter, she wants simply to be a reporter -- and write for the Metro section, where she can cover "real" news.

Her big chance comes when an affluent white man is murdered in one of the worst sections of town, and the cops are stumped. Yvonne comes up with an informant, breaks the case and gets her promotion. But then serious questions begin to emerge, and not only about Yvonne's remarkable story. Or rather the questions touch all the forged strands of her story, personal and professional. But the glass of scrutiny soon proves to be a mirror as well. For Yvonne's inquisitors -- her African-American boss and fellow reporter in Outlook and the white editor in Metro who's also Yvonne's lover -- reveal a stunning tangle of self-serving "truths" about themselves.

As all this might imply, "The Story" is a sharply drawn ensemble play, tight, fast-paced and clever.

As we observe the fast rising newsroom tension, we here stereophonically contrasted reports on what this reporter said or what the editors said. And we're reminded how often agendas shape human into action and how "truth" is little more than the information we perceived as plausible, consistent and convincing.

Director Gary Anderson has his cast -- including Charlotte J. Nelson as the Outlook editor, Mateen Stewart as Yvonne's rival reporter, Jason Richards as her lover -- locked in and cruising.

The show is nearly stolen by Ginneh Thomas' personable yet chameleon portrayal of Latisha, the elusive "source" of Yvonne's scope, and the enigma at the heart of her story.

Theater critic Donald V. Calamia in Between the Lines 3 April 2005 concludes that it's the uniformly excellent performance by Anderson's talented cast of *The Story* that especially keeps the show focused.

Imagine that you're a reporter who stumbled on what could be the story of a lifetime. Would you fight to tell the story in the manner you believed is most accurate? Would you diligently check your facts? And would you be willing to go to jail rather than reveal the source you promised to protect?

Or would you get too close to your story? Would you allow your own desires to color your judgment? And when the story begins to unravel would you admit the truth? Or would you do what ever is necessary to save your job and your reputation --despite its impact on others?

That's the premise behind *"The Story,"* a fascinating newsroom drama by African-American playwright Tracey Scott Wilson now playing at Lansing's BoarsHead Theater. It's a timely tale about integrity and ethics, yet shaded with the not-so black-and-white politics of race and age.

And in the hands of director Gary Anderson, it's a powerful and riveting drama that delivers no easy answer. Instead, it leaves you with much to ponder!

In Scott Wilson's story Yvonne Robinson has the credentials every major newspaper in America lust after. She was graduated from Harvard summa cum laude, she speaks four languages, she's young, she's driven and she sees a bright and unencumbered future for herself in her chosen profession. Plus, she's black.

Her immediate supervisor [sic], however doesn't believe she's ready for such an assignment. That's partly because Pat Johnson, a seasoned newsroom veteran finds Yvonne's work sloppy and inaccurate; race and office politics also factor into the equation.

Although both women are black, they seemingly come from two different worlds.

From Yvonne's perspective, racial battles are a thing of the past; she'll succeed because of her talent and hard work. Pat, however, still sees race as the driving factor behind every decision that's made; her reality is a news room in which she's viewed as an affirmative action hire and relegated to a section of the paper with limited potential for advancement.

It's a working relationship that doesn't--work, that is; each views the other with disdain and distrust.

Yvonne is unexpectedly thrust into the limelight when a white couple gets lost in a poor dilapidated neighborhood. The husband stepped out of his car to get directions and is murdered. All his pregnant wife knows for sure is that the killer was a black man.

Neil, another black reporter in the Outlook section, suspects the victim's wife had something to do with the killing. But with few clues the police seemingly suspect every black male in town.

That is, until a teenage girl Yvonne meets at a community center admits to the killing. Armed with this "scoop," Yvonne gets

her transfer to the Metro section-thanks to her white boyfriend who manages the section-and writes the story.

Something doesn't ring true for Pat and in Neil, however, So Neil starts digging into Yvonne's background, and what he discovers is startling!

What makes playwright Scott Wilson's tale intriguing is not only its unique prospective-black-on-black stereotyping is rarely addressed in such a public forum--but how the story unfolds. Scenes and conversations overlap: while a detective questions the shocked widow shortly after the murder, the scene quickly shifts to the horrifying act; and when Yvonne complains to her boyfriend about the treatment she received from Pat, we concurrently observe that discussion, as well.

While such a theatrical convention can easily become confusing, director Anderson's precise staging keeps it clear at all times. It's a fast-paced production that never gets lost in the details.

But it's the uniformly excellent performance by Anderson's talented cast that especially keeps the show focused.

Cassandra Freeman excels as the young reporter who dismisses Pat as a relic of an earlier time and in Neil as the predatory black man who simply wants to sleep with her.

Charlotte J. Nelson brings depth to the role of Pat, a survivor who can be both extremely sympathetic and frighteningly cruel.

And Rico Bruce Wade shows there's more to Neil than his swagger suggest.

Fine performances are also given by Jason Richards as Yvonne's boyfriend Jeff, and Ginneh Thomas as Latisha, the girl gang-banger who's not as real as she claims to be.

***Crowns,* another portrait of American blacks, exposes the relationship, importance and beauty of African-American women's life and cultural style in regards to community and church hats, as described by theater critic Martin F. Kohn in the Detroit Free Press 4 August 2005.**

Regina Taylor's play "*Crowns*" is based on the book of the same title, a collection of photographs and interviews subtitled "Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats." This suggests the question if *"Crowns"* is about hats what are the hats about?

Well, as one of Taylor's characters says hats are like people: Sometimes they reveal, sometime they conceal. Gracefully, gradually, the play reveals that the fancy and colorful hats its women wear to church express faith, African roots, a sense of style, pride, resilience,

endurance and a rock-solid sense of community.

That sense of community is what Taylor, a prolific playwright, seizes upon. The book introduced readers to some 50 women, mostly from North Carolina. The play narrows the focus to one community in South Carolina and adds enough of gospel singing for *"Crowns"* to qualify as a musical, and to require actors who also sing well. In addition, there is a bear-bones story that ties everything together: Yolanda, a teenager from Brooklyn, has been sent by her mother to live with Yolanda's grandmother to escape the urban violence and connect with her roots -- "to open my eyes to how I fit in," says Yolanda, who isn't at all happy about being uprooted.

There are roots and there are roots. *"Crowns"* is never about what happens next but you can't predict where it's going.

As it emphasizes the communal nature of the play, Janet Cleveland's Plowshares Theatre production also remembers the story. For most of the play Yolande played by Danye Evonnte Brown, is a sullen presence, stubbornly not participating in the welcoming life all around her, steadfastly refusing to acknowledge that she's not in Brooklyn anymore.

Yolanda, her grandmother (Felicia Taha) and the Reverend (James Bowen) are the only distinguishable characters. Four other actresses -- Jahra Michelle McKinney, Takeesha Watters, Yolanda Jack and Shirley Hayden -- each play multiple roles; collectively they add up to the village it takes to raise a child.

Cleveland's production pulsates with life and rhythm -- pianist Marvin Thompson Jr. and percussionist Earl Orr Jr. contribute significantly -- and with color, thanks in large measure to costumes by Leslie Littell and, of course, those hats.

As described by theatre critic Lawrence B. Johnson in The Detroit News 11 November 2005, *Fences* is known as one of the most popular plays by August Wilson and deals with an African-American family of the 1950's.

The father has lived a bitter life. He once dreamed, only to see his vision shattered partly by racism but also by his own intractable anger. Now his son wants to go down a familiar road, towards some idea of achievement in the world of sports. But the father will have none of it.

The tragedy of this garbage collector, an African American

man called Troy, is the stuff of the late August Wilson's "Fences," winner of the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for drama [sic] and the most popular play Wilson ever wrote. One Saturday night, Plowshares Theatre Company, which has produced the most of Wilson's plays turns to

"Fences" for the first time at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American history.

Plowshares artistic director Gary Anderson says "Fences" reflects the restraint that a racist America imposed on African Americans in all walks of life in the 1950s.

"Troy played (professional baseball) in the Negro league, and by the time the major leagues were opened to black players, he was too old," says Anderson. "But that's just an example of the bigger picture. A whole host of African Americans of that period -- doctors, lawyers, scientists -- were never allowed to be recognized because of a racist society that limited them. They were immobilized, and consequently desensitized to the needs of others. That's what happened to with Troy."

It is the bondage of racism, says Anderson that turns Troy into a tragic character.

"Troy is so burdened by obligations -- he needs to pay for his roof, to keep food on the table, to pay for this, to pay for that -- and the day-to-day drudgery that he forgets the human need [sic]. And when a moment of solace comes his way, he grabs on to it with both hands."

That respite is an affair with a woman called Alberta. Anderson sees Troy's affair as a central paradox in the man's muddled life. "He should be sharing this dress with a Rose, his lifemate, but he can't look upon his wife in any other way except as another responsibility, another obligation."

Doggedly, angrily, Troy pushes through life reinforcing the fences that limit his life in perspective, whether those barriers are real or imagined.

A turning point comes early in the play, when the hopeful son Cory learns his father has told the high school football coach that his son must keep his grocery store job and cannot join the team. We see a hard man. Yet actor James Cowans, who plays the father, insists Troy is not mean--spirited.

"He doesn't want Corey to get hurt the way he was," says Cowans. "He doesn't consider that life goes on, that his children's

experience could be different from his. Troy talks about how his own father treated him harshly, so he doesn't have much understanding to draw on."

In a later crisis, an in raged Troy kicks his rebellious son out of the house for good. The play's last scene, eight years later, finds Cory back home in a Marine uniform to attend his father's funeral. There has been no reconciliation. But does the young man harbor resentment?

"Yes, he's still angry," says Christopher Jason Williams, who portrays Cory. "You can resolve anger at a friend, but this is harder. He believes his father took away his chances. But I think Troy taught Cory more than (the boy) thought."

"He never accepted the possibility," says actor Cowans, "an act of the people around him maybe right, that he should let go of his bitterness he harbors it to the end that this tragedy."

This Theatre critic Martin F. Kohn in the Detroit Free Press 17 November 2005, compared the *Fences* Troy Maxson to *Death of a Saleman's* Willy Loman.

August Wilson's "Fences" examines a trio of grand old American institutions: Baseball, racism and blaming everyone else for your problems.

That's an oversimplification [sic], of course, nothing that Wilson ever wrote lends itself to sound-bites summation. He shares that trade with Arthur Miller, and "Fences" does have things in common with the "Death of a Salesman."

Set in contiguous eras, the 1940s (*"Salesman"*) and the 1950s (*"Fences"*) [sic], each play has a main character who is a lousy husband, whose days of glory are behind him and who, despite many flaws, elicits empathy.

Miller gave us a salesman Willy Loman. Wilson gave us garbageman Troy Maxson, a former Negro league baseball star who peaked before the major leaguers were integrated and it never got his shot at the big show. Moreover, the only thing he learned from his own father was how to be a terrible parent.

In Gary Anderson's memorable Plowshares Theatre production, James Cowans succeeds intermittently. He displays Troy's rage and his fervent desire to remain in control of something,

even if it's only his own backyard. When he's not raging, Cowans sometimes speaks indistinctly, depriving Wilson's words of the clarity they deserve. Cowans comes through loud and clear, though in the major speeches, particularly Troy's explanation of why he's building a backyard fence out of "outside wood," hard wood, instead of soft "inside wood" that would be easier to work with.

To extend that metaphor, Troy's wife, Rose, is a combination of soft and hard wood; Rhonda Freya English's portrayal reflects that understanding.

Less multidimensional but no less human are Troys two sons, his friend Jim Bono, and his brother, Gabe, a brain-damaged veteran of World War II.

Hugh M. Duneghy II and Christopher Jason Williams are likable as Lyons and Corey; Herman McCain, as gentle, decent Jim Bono is everything that Troy Maxson is not. But it's Nelson Jones Jr., as childlike Gabe, who steals the show, clinging to his little treasures, showing off his very own house key As If It Were a Nobel Peace Prize. Among the Maxsons damage takes many forms. Troy may be beyond saving, but Wilson holds out redemption as a possibility in ways that will not be disclosed here.

Theatre critic Michael Jackman in the Metrotimes 11/16/2005, regards Plowshares Theatre Company's production of *"Fences"* as a night of compelling theatre.

October took a heavy toll on African American culture in addition to the death of Rosa Parks, acclaimed African American playwright August Wilson died on Oct. 2 at age 60 it is a fitting coincidence, then, that a posthumous staging of Wilson's Fences [sic], set in the 1950s should roughly coincide with the death of Rosa Parks and follow in her wake at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American history.

The play is the story of the Maxsons, a poor black family living in Pittsburgh in the 1950s. The family patriarch, Troy Maxson, a garbageman, is the master of his own modest domain, the small patch of yard behind a tenement. Any 50s, he feels a lingering bitterness over his failed career in a Negro league is resentment drives him to discourage children from following their dreams, lest they too experienced disappointment.

But rather than a character study [sic] of a cold-blooded a bastard, Fences is a study of divisions and barriers. A hallmark of Wilson's work is a kind of poetic symbolism; he has a knack for imagery that can suddenly cast spells over the seemingly realistic drama. In fact, it can become a post-theater again to try to identify all the symbols.

Like all great chroniclers of the American underbelly, Wilson has an understanding ear for vernacular. The language of the street gives to play a vital authenticity. As a playwright, a Wilson was a late bloomer who found his voice as a poet before he began writing for the stage. His characters speak in a way that is poetic without stiffness, artistic but natural, glittering with the meter and argot of urban speech.

This dramatic and symbolically rich text, under the direction of Plowshares Theatre Company's Gary Anderson, becomes a night of compelling theater. James Cowan gives a powerhouse performance as Troy Maxson, a man who guards his territory against every body and everything, sometimes swinging a bat and screaming out into the darkness to ward off death. Herman McCain turns in a nuanced performance as Troy's old pal Jim Bono, and makes it look easy. Rhonda Freya English, as Troy's beleaguered wife Rose, got the audience interjecting sympathetically about her plight young Christopher Jason Williams struggled with another complicated character, the dominated son Cory, who wants to rebel against his controlling father, but also seeks his love and approval. Unfortunately, Williams grimaces his way through his inner battle, often looking more confused than conflicted.

Technically, the show lets the actors do most of the heavy lifting. Warm, high-key lighting fits the setting well, and director Anderson's scenic design is simple but rich, conveying the ramshackle warmth of a ghetto tenement -- though marred by the use of shiny metal sawhorses that look like they just came from Home Depot.

That said, those looking for three-plus hours of entertainment can expect talented actors performing a timely play.

Finally and summarily,based upon the critical reviews found in local Detroit newspapers Plowshares Theatre Company is considered as one of Detroit's cultural jewels. The company has proven to be insightful, enlightening, educational and entertaining. Plowshares Theatre Company is a Detroit based organization that seeks new talent, and new works, and reaches out to various playwrights across the nation. Plowshares Theatre Company is a African-American theatre company that prides itself on developing productions that honestly depict African-American life and culture. Entering into its twentieth year Plowshares has created an achievement in the history of Detroit's cultural development that will not soon be forgotten. In an era of change Plowshares Theatre Company is a vivid reminder of where African--American Artists have been, and the trials and tribulations of emerging new theatres.

ADDITIONAL PHOTOS

Figure 11. ***Two Trains Running:*** **1996** **Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 12. ***It Ain't Nothin But the Blues:*****12/12/1999 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 13. ***Diva Daughters Dupree:*** **2000 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 14. ***Mule Bone:*** **2000** **Courtesy of PTC**

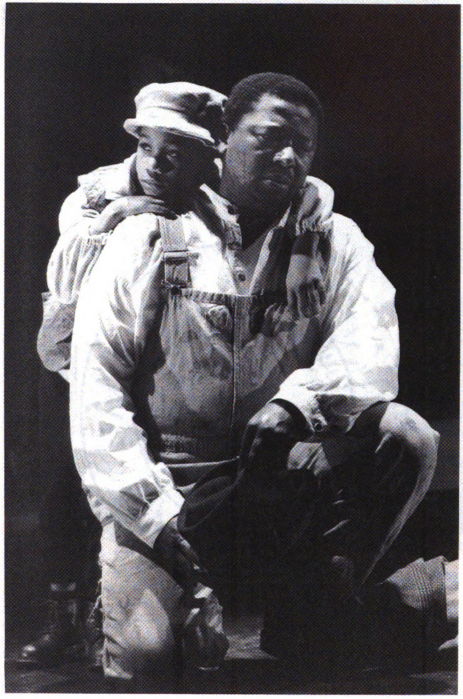

Figure 15. ***The Glow of Reflected Light:*** **2001 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 16. ***Sophisticated Lady*: 10/00/2002 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 17. ***Sophisticated Lady*****: 10/00/2002 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 18. ***Sophisticated Lady*****: 10/00/2002 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 19. ***Sophisticated Lady*****: 10/00/2002 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 20. ***Sophisticat*Figure 20 *Sophisticated Lady*: 10/00/2002**
Courtesy of PTC

Figure 21. ***Sophisticated Lady*: 10/00/2002 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 22. ***Sophisticated Lady*: 10/00/2002 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 23. ***Sophisticated Lady*****: 10/00/2002 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 24. ***Sophisticated Lady*: 10/00/2002 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 25. ***Sophisticated Lady*: 10/00/2002 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 26. ***Sophisticated Lady*****: 10/00/2002 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 27. ***Sophisticated Lady*: 10/00/2002 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 28. ***Sophisticated Lady*: 10/00/2002 Courtesy of PTC**

Figure 29. ***Sophisticated Lady*: 10/00/2002 Courtesy of PTC**

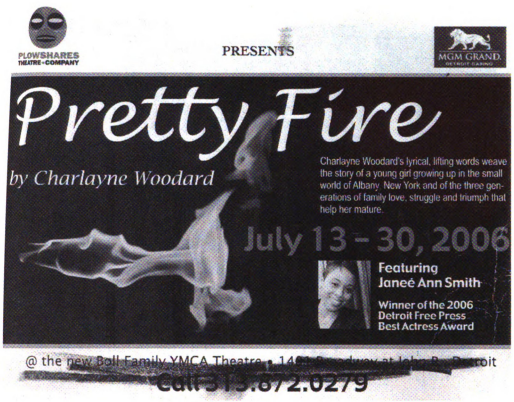

Figure 30. ***Pretty Fire*****: 06/13/2006 Courtesy of PTC**

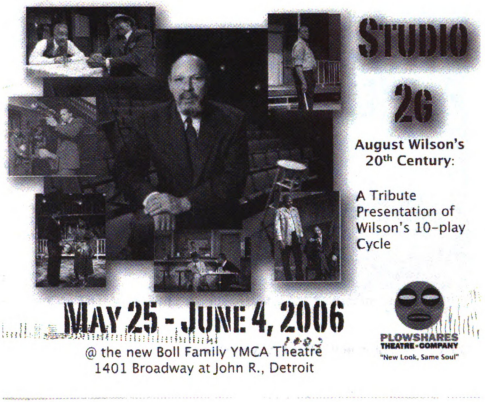

Figure 31. ***Studio 2G*: 05/25/2006 Courtesy of PTC**

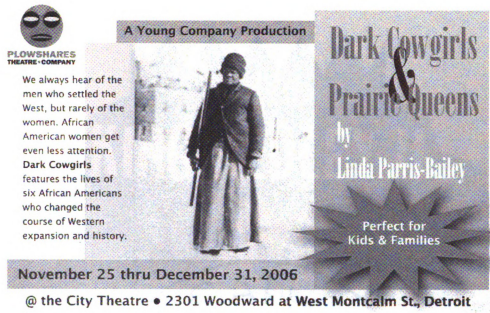

Figure 32. ***Dark Cowgirls & Prairie Queens:*** **12/30/2006 courtesy of PTC**

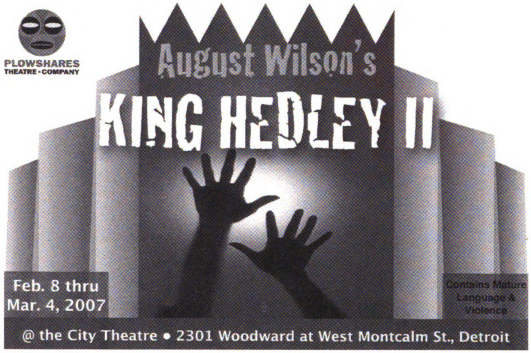

Figure 33. ***King Hedley II:*** **02/08/2007** **Courtesy of PTC**