



Scott Parker and several of the teen actors rehearse earlier this week.

Having Their Say

Teens preparing to debut latest Black Rep production

BY LAYLA FARMER
THE CHRONICLE

The North Carolina Black Repertory Company will showcase the talents of some of the city's next generation of thespians beginning April 30, when members of the NCBRC's Teen Theatre program will stage the original play "Valued Voices."

Penned by Elon University Professor Dr. Jean Rohr, "Voices" is centered around the experiences of Jamal Harris, a 16-year-old ninth grader who is intellectually bright but often misunderstood by his teachers.

"Not only is it entertaining, but it's educational," Artistic Director Mabel Robinson said of "Voices." "...It's a play that is of great value to see."

The NCBRC launched Teen Theatre in 2008, in homage to the NCBRC's late founder Larry Leon Hamlin's lifelong dedication to educating youth through theatrical experience. The program is presented in two 6-8-week sessions that include a stage production as well as dance, acting and speech classes for participants, who range in age from 13-18.

The group presented a reading of "Voices" at Elon College last fall, but the spring showing marks the first time the full production has been brought to the Teen Theatre stage, Robinson said.

"I think it's outstanding," said 18-year-old Chris Harper, who stars as "Jamal" in both productions. "It's very realistic, and it's true. It's very inspiring and I feel that it's something that everybody can enjoy."

Chris, a junior at Winston-Salem Street School who has worked with Teen Theater for three years, says he doesn't have to look far to find his inspiration for the role.

"It's like I'm playing myself because I relate to the character," he commented. "He's 16 and in the ninth grade; I was also 16 in the ninth grade ... so I kind of understand what the character is going through."

Toni Williams plays Ms. Washington, the main character's grandmother who is raising him, in the play. Williams, 54, says she has performed as a singer since she was a child but didn't delve into the theater world until she was in her early 30s. Williams has played in several Black Rep productions, including "Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope," "Mahalia" and "The Black Nativity."

Williams, a language arts teacher at Meadowlark Middle School, says she jumped at the chance to appear in "Voices."

"I was glad when they asked me to be a part of this because as a teacher, I live it everyday," said Williams, who has more than 20 years' classroom experience. "Hopefully, it will be well attended so the message can get out, because that's what's important."

Robinson says she seeks out productions that she believes will resonate with the actors and the audience.

"In all the productions, we try to find something that is going to be a learning process, something that they will encounter in the community or in school," she said. "...We look for the right forums, the right methods, something that we think will be valuable for the community to know and for the young people to learn."

Scott Parker plays the

teacher, Barry Strickwood. Parker, a longtime actor, has appeared in more than 50 films and plays. The Greensboro resident's debut on the NCBRC stage occurred earlier this year, when he starred in Ted Lange's "Four Queens, No Trump." Parker describes being in "Four Queens" as "one of the highlights of my life."



Harper

"I had such a wonderful experience with Mabel and the actresses," he related. "There are certain groups that you want to work with, and this is definitely one of them."

Seventeen-year-old Cayla Mahome, a junior at Parkland, says working with Teen Theatre has boosted her confidence off-stage as well as on.

"I've become more of a leader," related Cayla, a member of the Winston Lake Family YMCA's Jazzy Jumpers and Parkland

Marching Band's DIB (Dancer in the Band) squad. "I think I inspire a lot of people because I've gotten a lot of my friends in this (program)."

Working with experienced talent like Williams and Parker gives the youth a deeper understanding of and respect for the craft, Robinson believes.

"It's been exciting for me to see the young actors and the mainstream actors come together to communicate because that's what we are trying to do," Robinson remarked. "...It's a good thing to see them grow, and that's what's been happening during this production."

"Valued Voices" will be staged on April 30 at 8 p.m., May 1 at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. and on May 2 at 3 p.m. at the Arts Council Theater, 610 Coliseum Drive. Tickets are \$10. For more information, call (336) 723-2266 or visit www.nbf.org.

Griffins

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Finkelman spent over two years researching the case against brothers Thomas and Meeks Griffin, two wealthy African Americans who were executed in South Carolina in 1915 for allegedly murdering a white Civil War veteran.

Wake Forest Law Professor Michael Curtis called Finkelman, the President William McKinley Distinguished Professor of Law and Public Policy at Albany Law School, "one of the preeminent legal historians of slavery and race in America."

Finkelman's research helped secure a posthumous pardon - the first one ever granted in the state of South Carolina, and possibly the nation - for the Griffin brothers last year. The brothers, who were only 24 and 26 years-old at the time of their executions, were the great uncles of radio talk show host Tom Joyner. Harvard Scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. discovered the men's story while researching for the PBS documentary show "African American Lives 2." The pardon made international headlines when it was granted.

"I see this as a victory for all people who have been wrongfully convicted," Finkelman said. "...I think it's a pretty important precedent. If you are concerned about the killing fields of America, then it's worth noting that at least South Carolina is saying, 'We made a mistake.'"

Finkelman believes the Griffin brothers were victims of circumstance. They



Michael Curtis

had recently inherited over 100-acres of land from their father, making them likely the wealthiest African Americans in the Chester County, SC, where the murder of former Confederate Army soldier John Lewis occurred. The motive for the crime was said to be robbery. Based on later discoveries, Finkelman believes the Griffin brothers' wealth was what led their accuser Monk Stevenson - who Finkelman said was likely involved in the crime himself - to choose them as his scapegoats.

"Monk Stevenson figured out a way to avoid execution and that is to cast blame on two people who are prominent, people who are black," Finkelman said. "(Stevenson) later said ... 'I gave the police their names because they are the richest black people in the world.' He figured they could afford to get an attorney and get off."

What made the case unusual, Finkelman said,

was that the Griffin brothers were well liked and respected by members of both the black and white communities. The injustice of their trial caused an outrage that was virtually unheard of in those days, he said.

"They are described in the most laudatory ways from blacks and whites in South Carolina," Finkelman revealed. "In the newspapers of South Carolina they had literally hundreds of signatures of white citizens in South Carolina ... saying that they were innocent. I have never encountered a situation where significant numbers of white people are petitioning people in power for clemency for an African American who was convicted of killing a white person."

The South Carolina governor ignored the pleas of the public and executed the two young men in 1915, Finkelman said.

"In some ways, it was worse than a lynching because a lynching is the act of a hysterical mob," he declared. "This was something that was thought out and weighed and yet it played out the way it did."

Finkelman is hopeful that the 2009 pardon will be food for thought for modern prosecutors across the nation.

"What I would like to see is that people who are involved in prosecuting capital cases ... realize that human frailties, vindictiveness, racism, mistakes and economics all play a function in convictions and executions, and that these cases are sometimes wrong," he said. "...Even if you have no ethical problems with a state taking a life, you want to make sure that you get the right life."

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