

A Matter of Faith



Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre puts the development of actors and writers center stage.

By Tawanda W. Johnson

With clasped hands and bowed heads, the actors with the Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Co. never miss an opportunity to ready their hearts for performances they hope will dazzle their audiences.

“We always have a circle before the show. We take turns saying a prayer or positive message,” said Mark Clayton Southers, the theater group’s founder and producing artistic and executive director.

“We pray for a positive show and for allowing us to be able to perform and for the safety of our cast, crew and patrons,” he said.

Mr. Southers has great reverence for faith – a virtue that helped sustain him following a 2015 car accident that severely injured his left leg and nearly killed him. During a coughing spasm, Mr. Southers passed out, resulting in his car crossing the yellow line, veering into opposing traffic, and hitting a school bus. He endured weeks of unconsciousness, multiple surgeries and a long rehabilitation.

“I broke my back, hip and leg, and I had three or four major surgeries. I was also in a medically induced coma,” he recalled. “Having faith helped me. I understand that everyone has different ways of looking at faith, and I write about it with my characters. It gives them some realness and truth.”

One might infer that faith played a role in his life nearly 20 years ago after Mr. Southers opened the Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Co. at Penn Theater in the Bloomfield/Garfield neighborhood. Before opening the theater, Mr. Southers was working as an actor, playwright and truck driver at a steel mill, where he struggled to tap into his creativity. A divine intervention, perhaps, but he had a friend who sold him a 99-seat box theater that was going out of business. And with a home equity loan and the moral support of his then-girlfriend-now-wife, Neicy, Mr. Southers was in business.

“I was in a mental prison at the steel mill,” he said. But after opening the theater, and having “artistic mind, I finally had a playground to live out my dreams, which gave me peace.”

Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Co.’s first play opened to acclaim in 2003. It was “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” written by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson, who died in 2005.

“August was there, and I just knew it was a great production. We had a great cast, and I felt confident about it,” recalled Mr. Southers, now an award-winning playwright, stage director, scenic designer, photographer and theatrical producer.

Before the list of titles that now trail his name, Mr. Southers met Mr. Wilson during the 1980s while the two attended a play festival in South Africa. The serendipitous meeting transformed Mr. Southers’ life, cementing a relationship with Mr. Wilson that he cherishes.

“It was the first time that we really got to know each other, and he encouraged me to write plays,” said Mr. Southers, who had met Mr. Wilson previously while working as a photographer for Kuntu Repertory Theatre, a Black theater company co-founded during the 1970s by Vernell Lillie and Rob Penny. Mr. Wilson had a long association with Kuntu, and one of his first plays was produced by the group.

Pittsburgh Playwrights mission is to “produce the works of local racially and culturally diverse playwrights as well as Pittsburgh-themed plays,” according to its website. “We provide a nurturing environment for all who work on and off the stage, and build and serve a culturally diverse audience that can strengthen our civic community. We believe that bridges are built when diverse groups of people work together to make and experience the arts, and the stories that are told through the art.”

With a \$250,000 grant from The Heinz Endowments and the Ford Foundation through the Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures Initiative, Mr. Southers plans to hire “maybe two more staff members” to help build the bridges that enable Pittsburgh Playwrights to keep living out its mission by making “a small dent in strengthening the community” through its plays.

“We know there’s going to be a lot of new stuff coming out of [the grant],” he said, but he’s hoping to stay the course and not be wasteful.

“Theater is a minority compared to music concerts and sporting events. We only touch a small percentage of people, but now that we’ve moved into our new space (the former Madison Elementary School), we’re trying to increase that dent by working on lowering our ticket prices to make it more inclusive,” he said. The new Madison building will be fully open in summer 2023, Mr. Southers said.

Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre descends from a long history of Black theater. One of the first Black professional theater groups – the African Company, founded by a man named William Brown in the 1820s – performed Shakespeare as well as work touching on anti-colonial and anti-slavery themes. The origins of Black theater extend back to slavery when enslaved Africans entertained themselves using folktales, dances, songs and improvisation. Their own faith that they would transcend the brutality of slavery was central to those early performances.

With its roots firmly planted in the Black community, Pittsburgh Playwrights draws on the origins of local African American theater, such as Pittsburgh’s New Horizon and Kuntu Repertory theater companies, which were built with the influence of not only Mr. Wilson but also of Kuntu’s Mr. Penny, also a longtime poet and activist, and a good friend to Mr. Wilson.

“While working as an actor with Rob on his plays, I learned about the African oral tradition,” said Mr. Southers, “and this was history that we weren’t taught in school. African Americans come from an oral tradition that has been broken, and we are trying to fix it.”

As for Mr. Wilson’s influence, Mr. Southers said his mentor’s poetic language and down-to-earth characters have inspired him. Mr. Wilson, after meeting Mr. Southers in South Africa, read some of his protégé’s early poetry and encouraged him to follow his creativity.

Despite his admiration for his mentors, Mr. Southers is quick to point out that he has too much respect for both Mr. Penny and Mr. Wilson to copy their styles.

“As a playwright, I tell unique stories based on original ideas,” he said. One of those plays, “Savior Samuel,” from the theater company’s 2019 season, tells the story of a Black family trying to survive in the Midwest during 1877. The production was recently featured at the National Black Theatre Festival in North Carolina. Through Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre, Mr. Southers has produced more than 160 full-length and one-act plays, including Mr. Wilson’s 10-play American Century Cycle, which depict the struggles of Black life in the 20th century.

Mr. Southers remains committed to helping young artists. Along with several artists and with support from the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, he helps high school students learn character development through 45-minute workshops.

“We write skits and have the students perform them. We tell them to imagine that they’re at a Pep Boys, and someone sits down across from them. We ask them to think about what the person is wearing and how they sound,” he said.

Kim El is a Pittsburgh playwright who started with the theater company in 2004 at its Festival in Black and White, which aims to bridge the divide among various cultural groups through theater. She said her experience with the organization has been integral to her growth as an artist.

“Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre has provided space to mentor and assist the creative growth of many emerging playwrights in this city for the past 18 years,” she said.

There is an abundance of “silent talent” in the city, Ms. El said, and Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre has enabled them to shine.

“I am a storyteller who believes that it is necessary to tell the life stories of African Americans in our own narrative,” she said. Her favorite roles with the theater company have been performing “Black Mary” in Mr. Wilson’s “Gem of the Ocean” and appearing as seven characters in her one-woman show, “Straightening Combs.”

Carter Redwood is an actor who grew up in Pittsburgh and has performed in several productions with the company, including playing the role of “Cory” in Wilson’s “Fences.”

One of Mr. Redwood’s first roles was appearing as the character Andre in Mr. Southers’ “When the Water Runs Clear.” He’s now an actor in Hollywood, appearing on the television show “FBI: International.”

He recalled that Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre was a special place that gave emerging artists “the opportunity to learn and hone their craft.”

Both Ms. El and Mr. Redwood said the theater company’s training program is crucial to helping artists learn the ins and outs of the theater world, including backstage and design roles under the direction of Monteze Freeland, a local actor, director and playwright.

With support from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, Pittsburgh Playwrights Ground Up Theatre Training program is an opportunity for artists to work with award-winning local teaching artists and learn skills that will help them in their career, said Ms. El.

In mid-August, the theater again showcased its partnership with recently opened August Wilson House, a community art center built in the Hill District house where Mr. Wilson was born and lived the first 13 years of his life. On the backyard stage there, Pittsburgh Playwrights presented Mr. Wilson’s play, “Jitney,” which depicts the lives of three cab drivers in the Hill District during 1977.

Mr. Southers, a former member of the board of August Wilson House, described working at his mentor's childhood home like working on "holy ground."

"We want to honor him. These are the streets he walked, and doing the play there is a great honor," said Mr. Southers.

The backyard of the home also provides the intimacy that Mr. Southers' theater company is known for – enabling the audience to become fully immersed in the play.

And that is the goal of the new home for Pittsburgh Playwrights, too.

"At the Madison, we will have about 125 seats on a main stage and 75 seats on a smaller stage," he said. "We've always wanted our plays to be intimate."

According to Steven Doerfler, the theater's communications director, about 2,000 people attend Pittsburgh Playwrights most successful productions, including Mr. Wilson's and Mr. Southers' plays. And although the COVID-19 pandemic curtailed attendance, the theater company rebounded by filming some productions, including one featuring Cyril Wecht, the famed forensic pathologist and former Allegheny County coroner.

Mr. Doerfler said as the pandemic conditions improved, so has audience attendance, and the theater company is completing its first, full season since returning to in-person productions.

"We want to continue to reach even more people," said Mr. Southers, who said that word-of-mouth promotion tends to work well within the Black community to encourage theatergoers to attend productions.

"The Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre continues to grow not only because of the financial support we have received but because of the talent pool that is present in Pittsburgh, said Michael Ramsay, president of the theater's board of directors, "and because of our theater's role in producing new works that provide a voice for the future."

As Mr. Southers looks forward to new works, he's grateful for the ancestors on whose shoulders he stands and who made it possible for him to be here "by their resilience, and for the artists who have had to struggle to be able to do their art," he said. "We have a space for them, whether it be acting, directing or doing visual or technical work."

Whatever their craft, whatever their dream, Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre has a future for them, he said, that is filled with excitement and a positive message or prayer before every show.

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