



Diverse Culture at Towne Street Theatre

[Tracey Paleo](#) October 9, 2016 [Leave a comment](#) 800 Views



This month [Towne Street Theatre](#) hit the Hollywood radar with *Passing Solo*, a memory play set in the 1920s about two African American women who share a secret: Their birth certificates read “Negro” but both can – and do – pass as white.

Footlights took the opportunity to speak with company co-founder, artistic director, and star, Nancy Cheryl Davis-Bellamy, to get some insight about this company and on the subject of diversity.

You started a theater company twenty-three years ago...

My co-founder Nancy Renée and I met doing the Scottish play at Stages Theatre. We were young actresses playing prostitutes and such...and what else do you do when you're an ingénue, right? I remember my sister saying, “Wow. Are you always going to play a prostitute?” And I thought, “Well I hope not.”

Nancy and I shared the frustration of being classically trained – I'm from [A.C.T. San Francisco](#). She's from [American University](#) – and not being able to do the kind of roles we wanted to do.

After the riots of 1992, the City of Los Angeles put out an RFP asking the arts to help heal L.A. It gave Nancy and I the idea of putting on a free reading series that featured writers of every ethnic group with a theme of shared human experience. So we borrowed photographer Nathaniel Bellamy's downtown loft. It was such a success, we asked Nathaniel if we could start a theater there. He said yes, came on board as a co-founder and we launched our first diverse season. It was the beginning of multi-cultural casting in the industry – the buzzword back then – and that was our mandate. Of course, we found out when you're asking people to pay versus when they're coming for free, it was very difficult to get audiences to cross over.

When we first opened downtown someone said that Town Street was an ‘oasis’ for audiences and artists alike. That's what we continue to strive to be. So many people walk out of here with something they've never had before.

Each play that had a purpose of serving a certain ethnic group attracted mostly only that audience. Eventually, we decided to just focus on African American stories which in and of themselves are diverse because of our shared ethnic history.

Since that time have you had crossover audiences?

Mainly a mix of African-American and Caucasian audiences. Our audiences tend to be largely black females ages thirty to seventy. In large part, that has to do with many of the female themed stories we tell. Caucasian audiences are also more used to going to the theater. Whereas, it's a different kind of a cultural experience I think for other groups.

What is it going to take for other cultures to crossover more?

It always starts with the play. If you have a play that has more diversity casting, attracting diverse audiences can start to be accomplished. People tend to go to what they know and where they feel they'll best be served.

How is Town Street bringing people into the experience?

Our ten-minute play festival for example, is a wonderful opportunity for diversity, which is a mandate for the festival. Because the casts are varied, the audiences tend to be also. We can really mix it up. And that's important because if we don't get everybody in the same room, having a conversation, it's always going to be this 'us versus them' kind of thing.

What's been your experience as an African American woman producing theater?

It has its drawbacks. If there are other female artistic directors of color in Los Angeles there aren't that many. If there are, they're new. In the beginning, I didn't have much of a voice. I had to overcome that. I had to stop being *polite*.

How have you been able to keep the company going?

We're a non-profit. A lot of our company is actor-based rather than producer-based. Our core talent wears a lot of hats. The money goes up and down year after year. But we're very fortunate. Since leaving downtown we've formed a wonderful partnership with the Stella Adler Theatre where we're in residence.

Passing Solo is a show about women that highlights race and gender. What would you like to be its purpose?

For people to come away with a bit of American history overall. People don't get enough of history. But it's so important. It's a part of everything we do. I would love for them to rediscover the Harlem Renaissance. To look into the works of Nella Larson whose book the play is based on. And for women, to think about the fact that the choices you make at a certain point determine the trajectory of your life. Who do we really want to be? How the past affects the present, because it always does. You know, we don't just operate in a vacuum.

About Tracey Paleo



Tracey Paleo is Associate Editor at FootLights Magazine. She's also the Founder and Chief Editor of the arts and culture site, [*Gia On The Move*](#), where she often reviews live performance events.