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Telling **BLACK** stories

LI stages spotlight diverse performers and ideas with plays old and new this month and beyond

BY BARBARA SCHULER
Special to Newsday

Directing was never on Sheila Barksdale's wish list. "I'm happy on stage," said the African American actress from West Babylon.

But when EastLine Theatre asked Barksdale to codirect its production of "Intimate Apparel," which runs through Feb. 27 at the BACCA Arts Center in Lindenhurst, she just couldn't say no.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement made her realize she needed to become more outspoken and active in pushing Long Island theaters to present stories that showcase the talents of African Americans. "This is something I've been asking for," she says. "For me to turn it down kind of makes me a hypocrite."

Co-director and board member Matt Rosenberg said EastLine is leading the charge to diversify Long Island theater and he hopes others will follow.

There are positive signs. Running through Feb. 20, Manes Studio Theatre's Bayway Arts Center in East Islip is dishing up the local debut of "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," the stage version of the iconic 1967 film co-starring Sidney Poitier that put issues of interracial marriage in the spotlight. And in May, Plaza Broadway Long Island will present the Long Island premiere of "The Color Purple," the hit musical about the trials and ultimate triumph of a young Black woman, at the Elmont Memorial Library.

'PURPLE' PASSION

Plaza founder and executive director Kevin Harrington says



Brandon Robinson, also on the cover, and Reggie Street in "Intimate Apparel." ■ Video: newsday.com/theater



Co-director Sheilah Barksdale during a rehearsal of Lynn Nottage's "Intimate Apparel" at the BACCA Arts Center in Lindenhurst.

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

he was drawn to "The Color Purple" because it's a universal story "that touched my heart," but that isn't the only reason he chose it. He believes the show speaks to what's happening now on and Off-Broadway, where a number of recent and upcoming plays by Black writers are exploring a multitude of racial issues.

"I would have chosen it anyway because it's a beautiful story and I've always wanted to do it," he said. "I was shocked to find out this was the Long Island premiere."

After seeing the 1985 Steven Spielberg movie, Harrington says he was taken with the story, based on the 1982 Pulitzer Prize-winning Alice Walker novel about an impoverished Southern girl who is abused by her father. Harrington saw the first Broadway production (2005 to 2008), which "I liked, didn't love." He became passionate about the

piece after seeing the 2015 Tony Award-winning revival, the version Plaza has licensed.

"I was so moved and drawn into the characters of the revival," he says. Harrington was also attracted to the smaller cast, the simplicity of the set with a dozen or so chairs creating all the locations, and the richness of the score that features jazz, ragtime, blues, gospel and African music.

"It was not overproduced," he says, "it's a beautiful story of a woman who's able to overcome such adversity in her life through the power of love and the power of forgiveness."

And it's of the moment, he adds. "We're living in such a divided world, it's such a strong and powerful message for today's challenging times . . . it's a human story that everyone can relate to."

'DINNER' IS SERVED

At Bayway, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" was selected in large part because it spoke to the theater's commitment "to do plays that address social issues," says executive artistic director Rick Grossman. And it met his personal goal to do plays not previously presented on Long Island.

"GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER"

WHEN | WHERE Through Feb. 20, Bayway Arts Center, 265 E. Main St., East Islip
INFO \$40, \$27 students, \$35 seniors; 631-226-8400, studiotheatrelongisland.com

"INTIMATE APPAREL"

WHEN | WHERE Through Feb. 27, EastLine Theatre, BACCA Arts Center, 149 N. Wellwood Ave., Lindenhurst
INFO \$25, \$20 students, seniors; 516-749-5047, eastlinetheatre.org

"THE COLOR PURPLE"

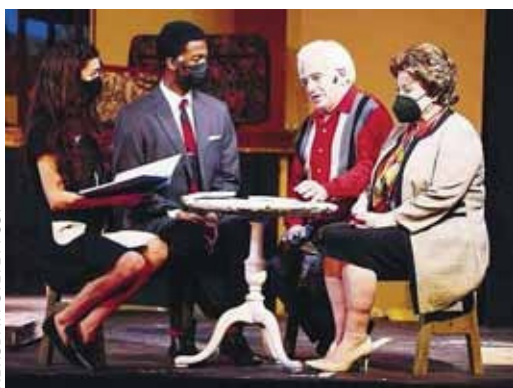
WHEN | WHERE May 21-June 12, Plaza Broadway Long Island, Elmont Memorial Library, 700 Hempstead Tpk.
INFO \$54-\$85; 516-599-6870, plazabroadwaylongisland.com

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Prince Parker, above, takes on Sidney Poitier's screen role in the stage version of "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner." At left, Jessica Murphy, Parker, Robert Budnick and Rosemary Kurtz, during a rehearsal.

'INTIMATE' DETAILS

EastLine also was inspired by a groundbreaking artist. The group decided on Lynn Nottage's "Intimate Apparel" to mark Black History Month after the theater's book club read the play and fell in love with it. The story of an African American seamstress in turn-of-the-20th century New York City was inspired in part by Nottage's great-grandmother. It deals with her love for an Orthodox Jewish man whose religion prevents marriage and a man from Barbados whom she eventually marries.

Every character, says Rosenberg, "is searching for intimacy . . . longing to be loved in some way. That's why it resonated with us." It's universal, adds Barksdale. Take the Black actors away and

it's still a good story."

Plus, "we love Lynn Nottage," adds Rosenberg.

Rightfully so — at one point in January the Pulitzer and Tony-winning Nottage had three plays running in Manhattan, "Clyde's," which closed Jan. 16; "MJ the Musical" (about Michael Jackson) which opened Feb. 1 on Broadway, and an operatic version of "Intimate Apparel" which opened Jan. 31 at Lincoln Center. As for Barksdale, she says she's happy she accepted the directing job, but wants to think beyond this show. "To put up a play in February during Black History Month, I'm grateful," she says. "But what about January and March and April . . . it needs to be integrated throughout the season."

Noting EastLine's goal of

putting on more plays by diverse playwrights for audiences, Barksdale says, "The more they're exposed, the more receptive they will be."

Rosenberg agrees that audiences are becoming more savvy and developing broader interests. It's not "one and done," he says, adding that EastLine has the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Anna in the Tropics" by Nilo Cruz on its September schedule for Hispanic Heritage Month.

"We are beginning the expansion of our community and getting the theater community to realize there's more than just four musicals with Black people in them," he says. "There's a wealth of authors and playwrights and artists whose stories are not being told. This is just a first step."

on Jan. 6, the day Poitier died at age 94, though he maintains he did not panic at the pressure of taking on a character played by the iconic actor. Parker calmly says "we're only given what we can handle. At least that's

what I keep telling myself." The actor, who says he hopes to originate his own role someday, considers the Academy Award-winning Poitier an inspiration. "He opened many doors with the work he took on," Parker says.