

CAMDEN THEATER BRINGS UNDERGROUND CLASSIC TO HEAL AND TRANSFORM LIVES

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Aishah Rahman's "Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage" is an underground classic that is rarely performed.

But it's a perfect fit for the Camden Repertory Theater, a professional company that uses the performing arts as social activism to encourage, heal and transform lives. The production is running now and continues through March 25.

Founded in 2005 by Desi Shelton, who was born and raised in Camden, N.J., Camden Rep took hold when Shelton was astonished to hear complaints from neighbors and friends about the lack of artistic outlets in Camden.

"One of their main complaints was that their stories were not being told," Shelton says. "I saw the need and decided to try to fill it."

And Shelton seemed to have the right credentials to do just that. Returning to her hometown after receiving her BA from Northeastern University and her MFA in Theater from Sarah Lawrence College, one of Shelton's goals in forming her company was to give these people a voice, and also

attract first time theatergoers in the African American community.

Shelton, who is also an actress and appears in this current production, admits she always wanted to be in the theater.

"I think it probably got real for me when I was in the fifth grade. I came from an artistic family so I think I just took it all for granted. You don't realize until later on that it was getting in your system and you just can't shake it."

But after a trip to London, and inspired by what she saw there, she decided she could help her community achieve what they felt was lacking.

"Starting out, I knew I wanted to act but I never realized there were so many other facets to the theater that I might be able to do — like producing and even starting a company of my own. But suddenly everything started to come together."

Able to produce three shows a year, Shelton describes her company as one that involves arts and education programs. "I would say our main goal is to tell women and girls stories to help them heal, help them transform their lives, and help them achieve upward mobility — both socially and economically."

First produced by Joseph Papp's New York's Shakespeare

Festival in 1977, "Unfinished Women..." was a product of the Black Arts Movement of the '60s and '70s. It features a live jazz band — a hallmark of Camden Rep's work — and centers on a group of young, pregnant teens, and at-risk teens — exactly the demographic that Camden Rep targets with its educational outreach programs.

The play's main setting is the Hide-A-Wee Home for Unwed Mothers, with another setting in a bedroom occupied by famous jazz saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker's "patroness."

According to Shelton, who plays Nurse Jacobs, an unwed mother herself, when you come see it for yourself it will all make sense.

Having recently completed the Woman and Power Program at Harvard University, and been honored with several awards, Shelton is proud of the fact that she will produce plays like this one that, if not for her and her company, might have fallen off the face of the earth.

"And I'm very proud of the fact that we have become an inspiration for people all around the world. In fact, I receive letters all the time telling me that!"

For more information, visit www.camdenrep.com/



Desi Shelton, founder of Camden Repertory Theater, plays Nurse Jacobs in the "Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage" production. — SUBMITTED