



*Cameo*

# A Christmas Story, Reborn

After 20 years, a holiday classic by native son Langston Hughes returns to St. Louis. *SLM* spoke to Black Rep founder and producing director Ron Himes about the making of this month's *Black Nativity*. **BY MARGARET BAUER**

**F**or many African-American theater companies across the country, the performance of Joplin-born Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes' *Black Nativity* is a yearly affair, an opportunity to revisit a familiar story and reach out to local churches. The longest-running version, performed by the National Center of

Afro-American Artists at Boston's Tremont Temple Baptist Church, celebrates its 40th season this month.

But in St. Louis, this month marks the Nativity play's first performance since before The Black Rep relocated to the Grandel Theatre in 1992. To the best of his knowledge, says director Ron Himes, no other company has done it here in the intervening years.

That nearly 20-year gap puts him in the unique position of being able to completely rethink the holiday play, which tells the story of the Nativity in two acts, the first set in Biblical times in Bethlehem and Africa, the second portraying the celebration of Christmas in a latter-day African-American church.

"I can't even remember what we did before," says Himes, laughing. "Which is part of the problem. I've spent a lot of time and energy trying to remember. So it's like, 'Oh, let's just forget it, you know? Let's do it totally new and start from scratch.'"

One of the biggest differences: When *Black Nativity* was last performed here (at CASA, now COCA), musical director Diane White (now White-Clayton) was still a Washington University undergrad. In the years since, she's traveled Europe as a solo gospel performer, earned her master's degree and Ph.D. in music, and ultimately found a home as director of choral music at L.A.'s Faithful Central Bible Church (whose congregation numbers more than 12,000) and a conductor under Grammy Award-winning pastors Andraé and Sandra Crouch at New Christ Memorial Church. Those experiences, says Himes, allow her to bring an entirely new perspective to the piece—which this time will be brought to the stage by a company that's weathered many storms to attain status as the nation's largest professional African-American theater company.

"I think the times have changed," says Himes, adjusting his plaid fedora and smoothing his blue ombre shirt. "I mean, one of the things that Diane and I were talking about and actually laughing about is when we did it in the late '80s, for one of the first productions, we had the little shepherd boys as rappers, which was really, really novel then. And we were all concerned about how the church folk who came to see the show were going to react to rapping shepherds." He flashes a grin. "Now that's just part of contemporary music."

Though plans for the show were very much in their nascency when we spoke to Himes in October, the director hoped to resurrect at least one of the original production's stylistic flourishes: sung narration. As originally written by Hughes, the narration is a spoken-word tour de force by a single actor (often a local minister), guiding the audience. The Black Rep's late-'80s productions did away with the omniscience, making music and movement the show's constants and keeping audiences in the moment.

"When we did the production of it," says Himes, "we scored the narration. So all the narration was sang, and it was really more operatic in terms of the music sort of never stopping, and the story being told

purely and thoroughly through song and dance." He speaks a line by way of example, then sings it in a syncopated rhythm, his voice moving fluidly up the minor scale: "And it came to pass in those days...that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus." This narrative voice is a restless one, flitting between actors and across octaves and actively driving the story's pace, rather than resting with one person.

Keyboards, bass, drums, and handclaps will all come into play, Himes hopes, accompanying what has sometimes been done as a purely a cappella show. With luck, the collaboration with White-Clayton will also recapture the musical flexibility of the company's early days.

"One of the great things I remember about working with Diane in the past—and when we met, one of the things that she held onto

in her memories and was excited about approaching again—is the amount of spontaneity that we just got in rehearsal," he recalls. "So we would come into rehearsal with a program and an idea, and...might wind up with something completely different. I'd walk up to the piano and say, 'Well, Diane, try this. What would it sound like if we did this?' So there were things that started out one way, and I'd come up and say, 'Well, what would that sound like in a minor key?' And so we'd try something different. It's great to be able to know you're going into rehearsal with some-

body who is really, really creative and really, really open and flexible, and it makes it exciting to think about what the end product *could* be, as opposed to going in knowing what the end product is *going* to be."

Beyond that, Himes wants to make sure the experience is open to everyone, not just those who share the Christian faith—whether that means bringing in younger cast members and telling the story from a children's perspective or ensuring that musical and dance numbers are varied in style.

"It is a very old story, it's a very simple story, it's a story that everybody knows. It's not a story that ultimately you need to do a lot to tell," he says slowly. "But then again, I'm also cognizant of the fact that it's not everybody's religious story, and it's not everybody's religious or holiday celebration.

"Yet I think that there are things about the story and the music and the production that we could mount that appeal interdenominationally, multiculturally, and spiritually, on a level that I think will appeal across the board."

*The Black Rep's 33rd season opens with Black Nativity, which runs December 2–27 at the Grandel Theatre, 3610 Grandel Square. For tickets, call 314-534-3810 or visit theblackrep.org.*



OPPOSITE PAGE: BLACK REP ARTISTIC DIRECTOR RON HIMES, WITH COSTUMES FROM THE SHOW. ABOVE: CAST MEMBERS KAREN HYLTON, HERMAN GORDON, AND HEATHER BEAL.