

# STAGING CLEVELAND

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**STORIES FROM THE FIELD**



**Artists and Audiences Gain  
from Diverse Theater Scene**

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## **NOT JUST BLACK HISTORY MONTH**

Cross-pollination among artists is always beneficial for everyone involved, including the spectators who experience the final results. Within the theater, Terrence Spivey, artistic director at Shore Cultural Centre and former artistic director at Karamu House, the oldest African-American theater in the US, knows the immeasurable value of collaboration.

“Diverse theater creates opportunities for artists of all races to work together,” Spivey says. “It’s particularly beneficial for African-American artists to work on classical plays like *Streetcar Named Desire* or *Death of a Salesman* that most of them have studied in school.”

Actors and theater artists grow by working in different theaters and spaces, adds Spivey, who believes that Cleveland theater is more diverse than it was when he relocated from New York to work at Karamu. He sees more black actors working at different theaters than when he first arrived.

Essentially, diversity fosters the ability of theater artists to grow from interacting with other actors, directors, stage managers and designers who have different training, skills, experiences and approaches to their work and the way a production comes together. In turn, audiences benefit from having stronger actors and from experiencing diverse performances and culturally enriched plays.

Preferably, theaters that choose to produce diverse programming are not just doing it for Black History Month, for example, or just to make a once-a-year hollow comment.

“As long as they’re not just trying to make a statement, which then goes away quickly, it’s good,” Spivey says. “They should be doing it because they want to do it, because it’s about art and theater in general, not just forced or contrived.”

## **NEW PLAYS NEEDED**

Writer, actor, multi-talented performance artist Chris Webb is a bit less satisfied with the diversity situation in Cleveland’s theater scene right now. “I definitely see a clear divide in the kind of racial and economic range of Cleveland arts,” he declares. “You can see a difference in participation, in access to resources and a difference in support between different Cleveland entities.”

A native Clevelander, Webb lived elsewhere for nine years before moving back, and he says he returned to a very similar situation. He sees his black actor friends struggling to find theater productions that are more contemporary, so they are often forced to choose between historic, Afro-centric plays or older plays with stereotyped characters.

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“It’s been rare to find work and pieces that speak to newer experiences for them, and by new experiences I mean as in from 1980 until now,” he says.

One solution, he believes, would be to have more opportunities for new plays to be produced that would deal with more current issues and situations in the African-American community and the world.

Playwright and director Michael Oatman sees a similar situation, since there are only two African-American theaters in Cleveland, Karamu House and East Cleveland Theatre. However, in response to a small number of opportunities to do new work there, he’s seeing more grassroots, self-produced and self-promoted productions sprouting up all over the region.

“There’s a burgeoning, almost renegade form of nontraditional theater that goes on all the time,” says Oatman, who has self-produced a few plays of his own in a Garden Valley housing complex in Cleveland and storefront theater in Cleveland Heights. “A lot of African-American playwrights are renting theaters to produce their work and just a lot of people standing up and saying, ‘I’m going to write a play and produce it in a hotel room or in a church or just put it up here or there.’”

He’s impressed by the fact that the shows don’t show up in the newspaper and don’t get traditional reviews, but the producers are leveraging social media and other promotional tools to drive people into spaces they’ve rented, from smaller venues such as the Garfield Heights City Schools Center for the Performing Arts to Playhouse Square. This hidden scene of untraditional theatrical shows is definitely thriving, he says, with all kinds of playwrights, actors, directors and designers playing their trade for packed audiences.

### **EXPANDING ROLES**

Citing the fact that a significant percentage of the audience for African-American plays at Karamu or one of the self-produced shows is roughly 60% or more female, Oatman would also like to see more training and development opportunities for black female directors. “The theater scene can be very male-centric,” he observes. “So, the diversity isn’t as robust as it could be.”

A recent CPAC study of Cleveland’s theater industry cited an important new partnership that will definitely enhance and augment diversity in theater here: “Linking Cleveland Heights back to the east side of the city of Cleveland itself, Dobama Theatre recently announced a collaboration with Karamu House.... With the new partnership with Dobama, Karamu is poised to begin its second century with a renewed commitment to artistic collaboration and civic engagement.”

Karamu’s new President & CEO sees diversity in Cleveland theater, but not in every place it needs to be. “Many of our theaters are diverse in what they put on stage,” Tony Sias believes. “But our theaters lack diversity in their administrative structure and their artistic, educational and leadership teams.”

Moving forward into that next hundred years of his storied theater, Sias says he plans to continue implementing color-conscious casting, which, he explains, takes the race and ethnicity of the actors into consideration in casting them in a nontraditional role to further inform and explore possibilities regarding

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the interpretation of plays, but still staying to the true intent of a playwright and the universal themes that may be found in that play.

“Ultimately, our theater community has become more conscious about doing pieces that speak to a broader community beyond black and white,” Sias says. “So, it’s great to see diversity evolving, because it goes along with giving value, and the diverse population of Cleveland can see itself on the stages of Cleveland.”