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East meets South

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East meets South

Southern Writers' Project production set in Russia

A kidnapped African prince, a Russian czar and 18th-century Russia add a new dimension to the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's Southern Writers' Project.

The projects are usually new works focusing on Southern issues and topics, including works that emphasize the African-American experiences.

"This production ('The Negro of Peter the Great') is not about the South, but it covers one of the issues our theater explores," ASF artistic director Kent Thompson said. "It is about restricting someone because of their background, their identity."

"The Negro of Peter the Great" was written by Carlyle Brown. ASF's 13th Southern Writers' Project premiere and the second 2001 repertory production, it previews at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday and opens at 8 p.m. Friday.

"Peter the Great' is an unusual story based on a real unusual story," Thompson said.

Brown based his work on an unfinished novella by Russian poet Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin. The poet was inspired by his maternal great-grandfather Ibrahim's experiences in Peter the Great's court.

"Pushkin took great pleasure in his mixed heritage," said Brown, who lives in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area but is in Montgomery until opening weekend.

When Ibrahim's father failed to pay his taxes, the youngster was taken from his home in Abyssinia and sent to the court of Peter the Great.

"At that time (17th and 18th centuries), it was fashionable to have little Negro boys in your court," Brown said. "But later, Peter adopted Ibrahim as his godson, and sent him to

France for education. He became a military engineer and

returned as one of the most highly skilled people in

Russia."

Casting the role of Ibrahim was not an easy job, said

ASF associate artistic director Kent Gash, who is

directing the production.

"This play requires extraordinary language skills. It is set in the 18th century," Gash said. "It is a classical leading man who is heroic in stature but capable of plummeting into considerable depths."

And selecting New York City-based actor Johnny Lee

Davenport for the role was "a no-brainer," Gash said.

Davenport said after reading the script, he knew he wanted the role.

"I didn't want anybody else's stamp on it," said Davenport, whose credits include films such as "The Fugitive" and television shows such as "Law and Order," in addition to his theatrical experience. "I didn't want anybody to mess this character up." As for the language skills required, Davenport said he has had considerable experience with language in the 20 Shakespearean plays he has done.

And, he said, he believes in the power of the spoken word.

"When the sounds I make fall on ears, I want them to mean something, and this play is just amazing," he said.

It is about honor, about belonging, and both of these themes are universal, Davenport said.

Gash said this is the kind of play that will be around for a

long time.

"The fact it offers such a strong character for an African-American actor is all the more reason to make this contribution to not only Alabama, but to national theater," he said.

The premiere production's cast also features Philip Pleasants as Peter the Great along with Brian Kurlander, John Triana, Michael J. Reilly, Greta Lambert, Paul Hebron, John Rensenhouse, Sonja Lanzener, Scot Mann, Rodney Clark, Susan Wands, Jenny Wales and Jen Faith Brown. Because of its fairly large cast, Brown had doubts about the play's future.

"The chances of having it produced in an American theater were slim," he said. "A new play has greater economic risks."

But ASF recognized its relation to the objectives of the Southern Writers' Project, he said.

Thompson said, "'Peter the Great' does speak to who we are and where we are in the South. And that is ever changing."

WANT TO GO?

What: "The Negro of Peter the Great" by Carlyle Brown

When: Previews 7:30 p.m. Tues day-Thursday; opens 8

p.m. Fri day; regular repertory run is at 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 and 7:30 p.m. March 11, 8 p.m. March 16,

2 and 8 p.m. March 17, 2 p.m. March 18, 7:30 p.m. April 12, 8 p.m. April 13, 2 and 8 p.m. April 14, 7:30 p.m. April 17-18, 8 p.m. April 27, 8 p.m. May 4-5 and 11-12, 2 p.m. May 13, 7:30 p.m. June 7, 8 p.m. June 15, 2 p.m. June 17, 7:30 p.m. June 21, 8 p.m. June 23, 2 p.m. June 29, 8 p.m. June 30, 7:30 p.m. July 5, 8 p.m.

July 6, 7:30 p.m. July 11, 2 p.m. July 13 and 15

Where: Alabama Shakespeare Festival

Cost: Tickets are \$20-\$30, depending on date and time

Theatre in the Mind: Two free pre-show lectures are planned: Author talk with Carlyle Brown, noon March 10; Pushkin's Ancestor: History and Fiction, noon March 17. Tickets required

Information: 271-5353

SOUTHERN WRITERS' PROJECTS PAST

"The Negro of Peter the

Great" is the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's 13th

Southern Writers' Project since 1994. Here is the list, in order:

"Grover" by Randy Hall, 1994

"Lizard" by Dennis Covington, 1994

"The Moving of Lila Barton" by John MacNicholas, 1995

"Ain't Got Long to Stay Here" by Barry Scott, 1996

"Thunder Knocking on the Door" by Keith Glover, 1997

"The Coming of Rain" by Richard Marius, 1998

"Vernon Early" by Horton Foote, 1998

"Fair and Tender Ladies" Adapted from Lee Smith's novel by Eric Schmiedl, 1998; toured fall of 2000

"Lurleen" by Barbara Lebow, 1999

"Sockdology" by Jeffrey Hatcher, 1999

"A Lesson Before Dying" Adapted from Ernest J. Gaines'

novel by Romulus Linney, 2000

"A Night in Tunisia" by Regina Taylor, 2000

CALL TO WRITERS

Are you an Alabama high school student who enjoys writing?

The Alabama Shakespeare Festival invites all Alabama ninth- to 12th-graders to enter its Young Southern Writers' Project 2001.

"Talk about being a Southerner," said Gwen Orel, ASF literary manager and program coordinator. "Tell us your story; let your characters talk."

Top three winners will receive cash prizes and tickets to ASF's world premiere of "The Negro of Peter the Great," the theater's latest Southern Writers' Project production. Teachers of the top winners also will receive prizes.

Each play submitted will be read and evaluated by ASF's literary staff, and finalists will be judged by artistic director Kent Thompson and playwright in residence Carlyle Brown. Thompson and Brown will send a written assessment to each participant.

All plays must address the subject of being a Southerner in some way through the plot, character(s), setting or theme. All plays must be written in one act between 10 and 50 pages. All plays must be original and written by one person.

Scripts must be typed with numbered pages and securely fastened. Include a removable cover sheet with author's name, address, phone number, date of birth, grade, school and teacher's name. Playwrights should keep a copy because scripts will not be returned.

Deadline is April 15.

Send scripts to "Talking About Being a Southerner," Gwen Orel, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, 1 Festival Drive, Montgomery, AL 36117.

For information, call 271-5342 or e-mail her at gorel@asf.net.

Robyn Bradley Litchfield, who covers food and arts for the Montgomery Advertiser, can be reached by calling 240-0182 or faxing 261-1548 or e-mailing rlitchfi@montgomeryadvertiser.com

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