

Red Bank's Two River Theater to Premiere Updated Version of Musical Play about All-Female Bebop Band

By Sanford Josephson

The actress Regina Taylor moved to New York from Dallas in 1981, after graduating from Southern Methodist University. Her first professional role, shortly after arriving, was in a CBS made-for-TV movie, *Crisis at Central High*. She is probably best known, though, for her Golden Globe-winning role 10 years later as housekeeper Lilly Harper in the TV series, *I'll Fly Away*, which aired on NBC from 1991-93.

Sometime during the '90s, Taylor was invited by a friend to hear her great-great aunt play jazz piano at the Novitel Hotel. "We listened to her play," she recalls, "and she was telling me about her background in jazz and traveling around with these all-female bands. I loved jazz, but she was telling me about people I never heard of such as (trumpeter) Valaida Snow. I went to the Schaumburg Library in Harlem and started looking up these women. Just like Rosie the Riveter and female baseball players, these female jazz musicians were stepping into all male territory as men were fighting World War II. And, at this time, bebop was rising up, music was changing and taking on an African-American identity; and these women were taking the stage and playing the music."

The result of Taylor's discovery and subsequent research was a play, *Oo-Bla-Dee*, written by her and staged in 1999 at the Goodman Theater in Chicago. It told the story of an all-female bebop band trying to convince people in the United States that black women could play musical instruments mostly associated with men. "It was okay to play a piano," Taylor says, "but not slobbering over a horn or beating on drums or plucking strings between their legs."

The music in the 1999 production was recorded. In its review, written on April 5, 1999, *Variety* said, "This potentially powerful show is begging to be a full-blown musical..." Twenty years later, it will be performed with live music. On June 8, *Oo-Bla-Dee* will premiere at the Two River Theater in Red Bank, NJ, with original music by Diedre L. Murray. It will be directed by Ruben Santiago-



Playwright Regina Taylor



Bassist Mimi Jones

Hudson, winner of an Obie Award for directing the 2013 Off-Broadway play, *The Piano Lesson*, written by August Wilson.

In the new production, there will be an onstage band with four musicians who will be visible throughout the show. According to a spokesperson for the Two River Theater, the idea is to "create a dynamic theatricality between the actors and the band." At presstime, three of the musicians had been hired: pianist George Caldwell, who will also serve as music director; bassist Mimi Jones; and percussionist Eli Fountain.

Caldwell, director of student jazz ensembles at the University of Buffalo, was the pianist on *Count Basie Orchestra Live at the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild* (MCG Jazz: 1996), which won a Grammy Award for Best Large Jazz Ensemble Performance. Jones, a protege of the late Milt Hinton, has released three albums as a leader on the Hot Tone Music label. *JazzTimes* called her 2014 CD, *Feet in the Mud*, a "spirit-infused celebration of music and life." Fountain is the leader of Percussion Discussion, an ensemble playing a variety of percussive instruments from all over the world. He was a member of M'Boom, a jazz percussion group founded by the late drummer Max Roach.

Oo-Bla-Dee, Taylor emphasizes, "is not just about inserting more music, but now the music is the why of this show, and the play will ride on the music and poetry of the piece. I've also taken another look at the characters. It reflects my feelings and how I've grown up in the last 20 years as an artist and an African-American. All the ladies are composites of different women historically, those women that I researched."

Murray is a classically-trained cellist who has played in jazz groups led by trumpeter Marvin Hannibal Peterson and saxophonist/flutist Henry Threadgill. She won an Obie Award for her score, co-written with Cornelius Eady, for the 1998 jazz opera, *Running Man*. "I was the only woman with Peterson and Threadgill," she recalls. "It was like being an honorary member in an all-boys club. Both of those

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musicians,” she stresses, “were very visionary in their thinking.” Growing up, Murray recalls, “I played baseball instead of playing with dolls.” As for music, “women were mainly vocalists and pianists, but slowly and surely we’ve been seeing change.”

One of the pioneers, Murray points out, was trombonist Melba Liston, who played in Dizzy Gillespie’s band in 1948 and later toured with Count Basie. In 1958, she formed her own all-woman quintet, Melba Liston & Her Bones.

Starting in 1946, the height of bebop, the play continues to the present. “We’ll have music from that (bebop) era and more modern music as well,” Murray says. “There is some African-based jazz, some spirituals, blues, more modern jazz.” But, recognizing that she is identified with some musicians such as Peterson and Threadgill, who may be considered avant-garde, she assures that, “For all those people who wonder about that, it’s not going to be way out.”

In the original play, the role of a pot-smoking drummer named Lulu was played by Margo Moorer, best known for her role as the housekeeper Louise in the movie, *Forrest Gump*. “Margo’s daughter, Amber,” Taylor recalls, “was a child 20 years ago and would come to rehearsal with her mother.” In the new production, Moorer’s daughter, Amber Iman, will be playing the role of Luna C., a narrator who functions as the “spirit of the music.”

The play, Taylor says, “speaks to generations, past, present and future. It speaks in terms of empowering women to own their own narratives in the spirit we create ourselves, constantly scraping from the bottom and recreating ourselves. That is an understanding that has deepened in me over the last 20 years. I’m very excited.”



Composer Diedre L. Murray

The catalyst in the revival and transformation of this play from its Chicago beginnings 20 years ago is John Dias, who has been artistic director of the Two River Theater since the 2011-2012 season. Taylor knows Dias from his 12 years in a variety of capacities at The Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival.

“The Public Theater,” she says, “is where I got

my first break as an actor and as a writer. My first workshop was there.”

Oo-Bla-Dee will be performed in the Two River Theater’s Joan and Robert Rechnittz Theater from June 8-June 30. The theater is located at 21 Bridge Ave. in Red Bank, and tickets can be ordered by logging onto tworivertheater.org or calling the box office at 732-345-1400..



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