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All-black UA production excites director

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Many factors affect how the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance picks its season. Educational challenges weigh heavily. The costume department might get more intense work out of period finery; set or lighting designers might wish to bite into something vast but open to interpretation.

Actors want to get on stage.

It's complicated by the growth of the department. Enrollment soared in the past decade, not just because of the severed relationship with the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, which moved more grad students from Montgomery to Tuscaloosa. As the number of blacks grows in the department, directors blind-cast, racially, when they can. But that can't work in shows centered around racial issues, such as last season's "Othello" and "Show Boat." And antique pieces such as "Show Boat" often reflect decades-old attitudes that don't play as well with modern audiences.

"To even that out, I pushed to do an all African-American show," said Seth Panitch, who's directing August Wilson's "Seven Guitars," openingtonight in the Marian Gallaway Theatre. "I felt we had plenty of talent to do it. We want to take advantage of that, showcase that talent."

It also offers the chance to highlight the work of a master not often performed around here. "Seven Guitars" is the 1940s segment of Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle, chronicling lives of African-Americans decade by decade through the 20th century. The last Wilson work to be performed at UA was "The Piano Lesson," the 1930s entry, back in 2001.

"I like to deal with lyric playwrights, and Wilson is certainly one of the most accomplished lyric American playwrights of the 20th century," Panitch said. Also taken into account was the 50th anniversary of UA's integration; this production is part of "Through the Doors," a year-long series of events commemorating the pivotal events of 1963.

It isn't one of Wilson's more well-known works, such as "Fences" or "The Piano Lesson," but Panitch said he saw ways to make it skew to a young cast. "Seven Guitars" centers around blues singer Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton, who after hitting serious lows returns to his hometown to find what's truly important in life. There he hooks up with his improvised family, including musician pals and his long-lost love.

"Also for me, I love blues," Panitch said, noting that Muddy Waters and other

Delta-style performers show up in the sound design. As with many of Wilson's works, sadness undercuts, something the cast and crew seek to ameliorate,

somewhat.

“When I read it the first time, my first take was how the end seemed like the end of 'King Lear.' Just desolate,” he said. On second read, he saw the fighting spirit offering a way out.

Graduate acting student Jay Jurden, who plays drummer Red Carter, helps alleviate the misery; Red's a good-time- loving guy, he said.

“For Red Carter, this is a celebration of his friend's triumph; his friend is on the cusp of making it. He's already been in the Army, he's already been to jail, but some things are starting to come together. Everything seems to be looking up,” Jurden said. Carter likes his clothes, and loves the ladies. But like any good drummer, Carter is there to back up the front man.

“(Barton)'s album starts getting played, so he goes back to the area where he's from, to try and capture the woman of his dreams,” Jurden said.

Barton, played by Nick Rashad Burroughs, left that love for a big-city floozy. Now he's back to try to re-earn trust, to be the leader the band needs him to be.

“He's a charming, impetuous young guy, but the clothes are too big for him,” Panitch said. “He grows into them in the process of the play. The problem is, as he grows into those clothes, racism keeps shortening the sleeves.”

The UA production focuses less on fracturing dreams, and more on the courage to get up off the ground and start again, “that continual rebirth, that decision to go after it, that incredible tenacity of the human spirit,” Panitch said.

Wilson famously didn't care for white people directing his works; the playwright, who died in 2005, probably killed a proposed Hollywood version of “Fences” by insisting a black director be hired, though rumors are the project will be revived in 2015, starring Denzel Washington. Wilson said: “I declined a white director not on the basis of race but on the basis of culture. White directors are not qualified for the job. The job requires someone who shares the specifics of the culture of black Americans.”

But the cultural divide doesn't concern Panitch, who's dealt with other differences recently, working with Cuban professionals.

“I no more understand the African-American experience than I understand Bassanio (a nobleman from Shakespeare's 'Merchant of Venice'). I don't know what it was like to be Henry the Fifth,” he said. “As a director, you're an alien, no matter what. But I understand what dreams mean to an improvised family — which is what a theater company is — and how lives so often go differently than dreams.

“I'm full of excitement about this, just as I was to work with the Cubans, another culture I'm not from, but a world for which I have great respect. That journey fuels me.”

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