
L. Peter Callender isn't playing it safe

By Emily Wilson | November 2, 2016

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Photo: Courtesy Aurora Theatre Company

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L. Peter Callender (left) is directing "Safe House" for Tom Ross (right), Aurora Theatre Company artistic director.

L. Peter Callender takes on a lot. Besides being artistic director of San Francisco's African American Shakespeare Company, he regularly appears in shows with companies including Berkeley Repertory, Marin Theatre Company and California Shakespeare Theater, where he is an associate artist.

He also teaches classes in acting as well as doing private coaching. Recently, he directed "We Are Proud to Present a Presentation

About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as South West Africa, From the German Südwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915" at the San Jose Stage Company.

Born in Trinidad, Callender moved to England when he was a boy so his mother could study to be a midwife at Oxford. When she graduated, they went to New York, and he lived for a while in Brooklyn before moving to the Bronx. Callender attended the High School of Performing Arts before going to the Juilliard School.

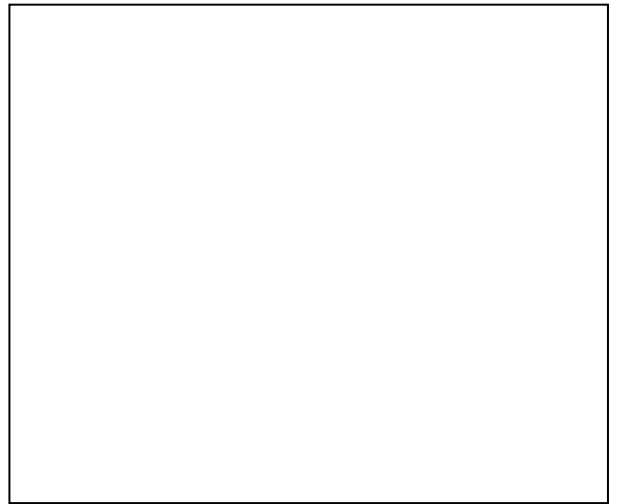
Now Callender, 60, is directing his first play at the Aurora Theatre in Berkeley, where he's acted in multiple productions. The play, "Safe House" by Keith Josef Adkins, tells the story of two brothers — one a free man of color trying to open a shoe business and the other helping slaves escape.

So how does Callender choose his projects when he has so much going on? He takes on ones that challenge — or actually, terrify — him.

"It scared the heck out of me," he said cheerfully about directing "Safe House," sitting in the Aurora as the tech crew worked on the play. "I try not to take on things that don't scare me anymore."

Callender had never heard of the play or Adkins' work when Tom Ross, the artistic director of the Aurora, sent it to him. Callender loved the play, set in Kentucky before the Civil War — but he found plenty to scare him.

"Oh, my," he says. "The topic itself, the slavery issues — although it's not a play about slavery. It's about family and about brotherhood and sibling rivalry and about dreams. Directing it here in



this place made me nervous, and wrapping my puny little brain around this massive topic about abolitionism and antebellum America and the Underground Railroad and the upcoming Fugitive Slave Act — it's huge."

Ross has no worries about Callender, who appeared in the first show at the Aurora in its current space, "Saint Joan." As an actor, Ross calls Callender "thoroughly committed, detail oriented and enthusiastic." Without Callender, he says, he wouldn't have been interested in putting on the last two plays the actor appeared in at Aurora, "Breakfast With Mugabe" and "Master Harold and the Boys."

Also from seeing Callender onstage, Ross had faith he could do this.

"There are some actors — and Peter's one of them — that are very internal, but he also sees himself in space," Ross said. "He's sees himself from the outside looking in, and that's the sign of a director."

Sherri Young, the executive director and founder of the African American Shakespeare Company, agrees that Callender has something special. When she was looking for an artistic director six years ago, he immediately came to mind because of his national, as well as local, reputation, having performed on Broadway and traveled around the country, performing with many regional theater companies.

"I call him the fixer," she said. "Working with Peter is like having a master class in acting."

Callender, who has been in 26 of the 38 Shakespeare plays, loves the writer's precision and brilliance.

"It's still vibrant like he wrote it yesterday," he says. "You can make it as contemporary as you wish — you can set it in the White House or in Berkeley or in the ghetto. You could do 'King Lear' in a homeless encampment."

A teacher in middle school got him excited about Shakespeare and theater, Callender says. He wants to do that for others. That's one reason he took the job at the African American Shakespeare Company — which also terrified him, since he'd never been an administrator before.

“It’s such an important organization,” he said. “It’s necessary. It serves actors of color and gives them an opportunity. People gave me a chance to do major Shakespeare roles as a dark-skinned actor in major theaters, and I wanted to give that back. It fit into my sense of what I wanted to leave on this planet, to make it a little shinier. It’s been incredibly fulfilling.”

Having Callender involved has moved the organization forward, Young says. Along with doing a Shakespeare play, and “Cinderella” at Christmastime, he added another classic play as well. This season, it will be August Wilson’s “Jitney.” The Shakespeare play will be “The Winter’s Tale.”

“He’s brought a whole new level of professionalism and resources and a standard of quality,” Young says. “He demands it.”

That’s what Callender tries to do with all his work. His favorite quote comes from the late football coach Vince Lombardi: “Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection we can catch excellence.”

Emily Wilson is a Bay Area freelance writer.

Safe House: Thursday, Nov. 10-Dec. 4. Aurora Theatre, 2081 Addison St., Berkeley. \$32-\$65.
www.auroratheatre.org