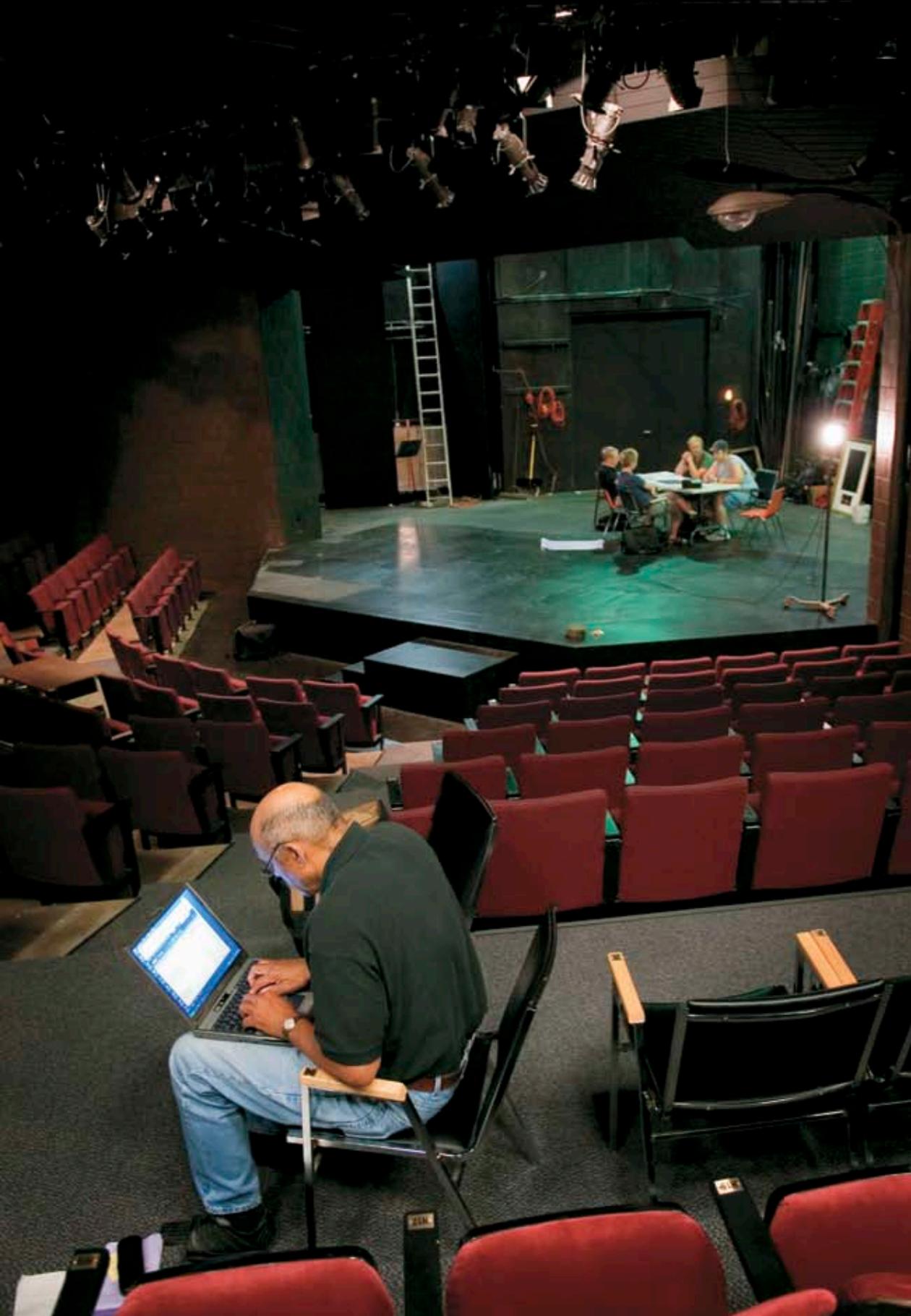


Lou Bellamy

2006 Distinguished Artist









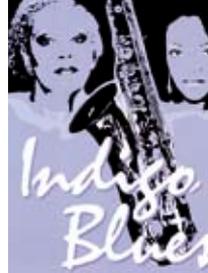
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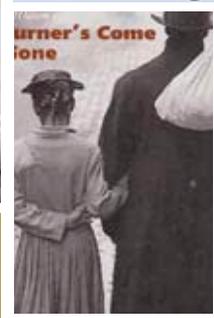




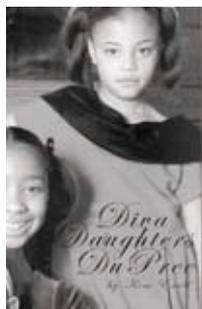
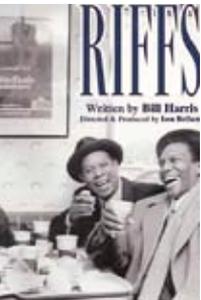
Blues
for an
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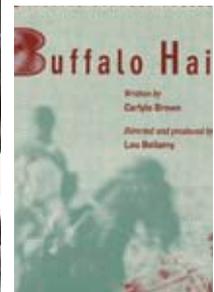
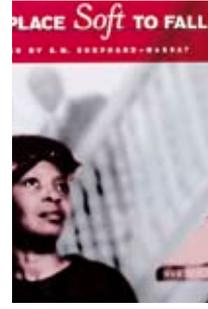
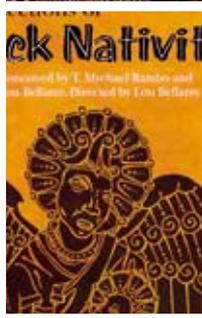
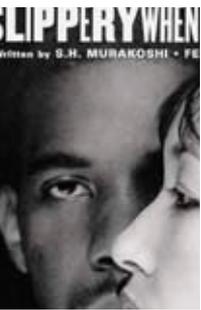
Penumbra Theatre
Mandi L. Leath's
The Trial of One
Short-nighted
Black Woman
-195-
Jimmy Louise and
Safreeta Mae
Directed by
Paul Carter Simons



Penumbra Theatre Com
for
colored girl
who have
considered
suicide/when
the rainbow
is enuf



ACT I
ACT II
pice



Introduction

A spotlight is a funny thing. It holds great potential to expose and clarify whatever lies within its glowing circle—but for that to happen, eyes outside the pool of light must be focused on what’s unfolding within. Theater gains meaning only through the community that generates, participates in, and witnesses it.

For McKnight Distinguished Artist Lou Bellamy and his Penumbra Theatre Company, using one’s talents to connect important messages to community is what art is all about. Bellamy believes that theater’s purpose is to focus the community’s attention and engage people in the issues we face together. He relishes the opportunity life has presented to him: to work in an African American neighborhood and develop art responsive to that neighborhood, while presenting ideas that are universal enough to encourage a world of diverse neighborhoods to take notice.

This is not a spectator sport. Bellamy is a strong proponent of active art, art driven to do something. Ideally, audience members should see what’s onstage and listen to the message, then carry that message with them when they leave the theater. “You put all these people in a room,” he has said, “turn out the lights, and make them all look at one thing. . . . You’ve got something powerful in that room.” More than 40,000 people experience that power annually, in Penumbra’s 265-seat theater in St. Paul.

Universal messages are not crafted through European American templates only, and Bellamy recognizes that presenting a multifaceted reality means showing all the rays of light that pass through it. As with many other artists, his self-assigned mission is to plumb the depths of what it means to be human; for him, that mission includes focusing those discoveries through the rich prism of the African American experience.

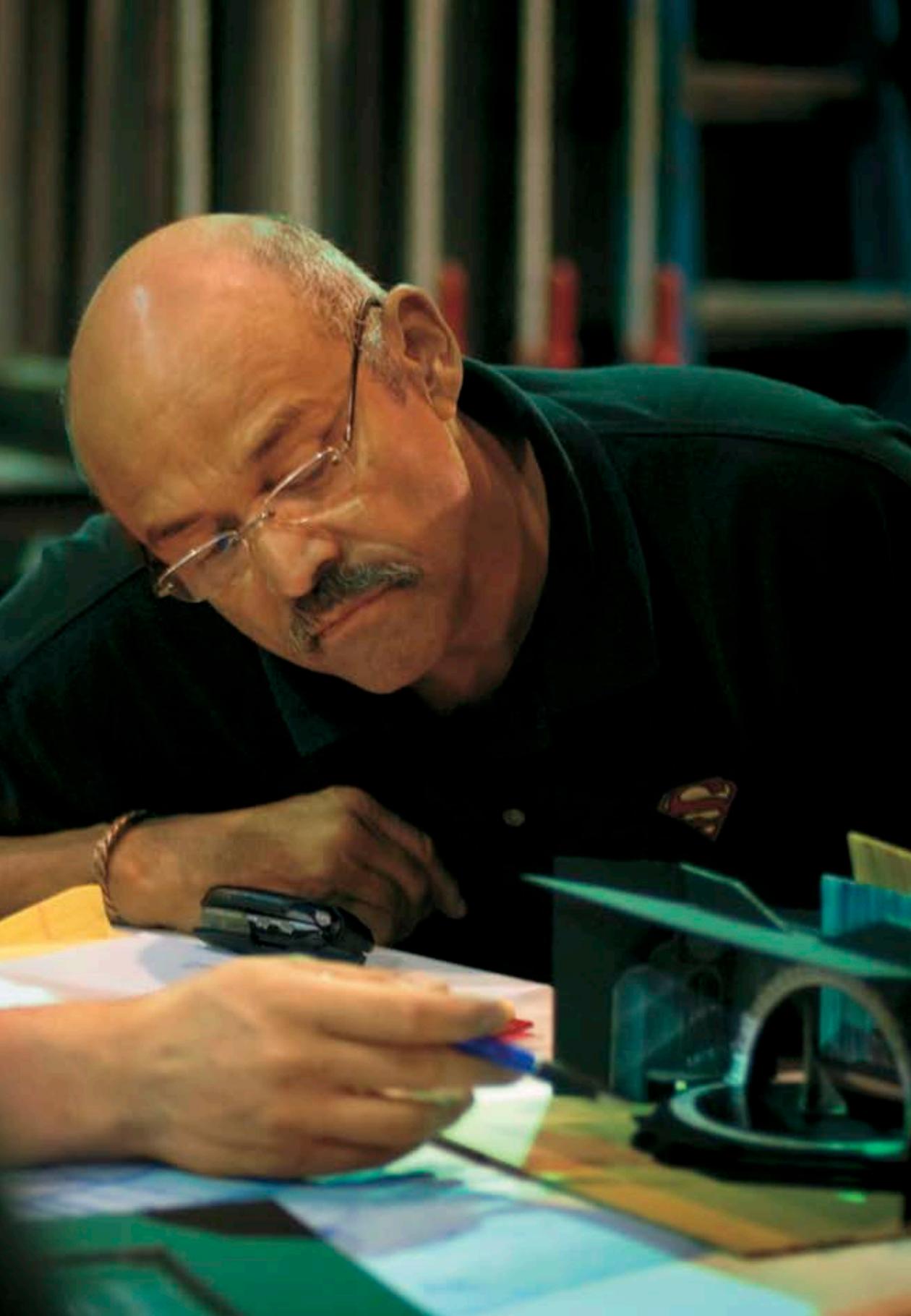
As defined by Bellamy’s 30 years with Penumbra, the spotlight in which he stands is ever widening to embrace society. His artistic process, pairing art with community to strengthen both, is the cornerstone of his career and inseparable from his humanity. On his stage, the artist is the audience. Our state—indeed, the entire nation—has been enriched by the enduring presence and profound vision of Lou Bellamy.

Erika L. Binger

Chair, The McKnight Foundation

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Artist's Statement

Because I am the artistic director of a producing theater, my artistic philosophy is consistent with that of the organization I lead. Over the past 30 years, Penumbra Theatre's raison d'être has been the production of artistically excellent, thought-provoking, well-appointed shows that probe the human condition with stories told from an African American perspective. This philosophy has been constantly refined and refocused. I believe that theater in the community must function as a sounding board, where comments concerning community values, aspirations, and clarifications are made lovingly—yet critically. Since its founding, Penumbra has provided Minnesotans with responsible and provocative stories that cleave to the heart of the human experience, using as its template African Americans and



the living of their day-to-day lives.  Penumbra's consistent adherence to this philosophy has solidified, attracted, trained, provoked, and supported a strong African American performing-arts community that now leads and serves not only Minnesota but the entire nation. Whenever I see or hear glowing reports of African American drama that pays great attention to detail, cultural nuance, and ensemble production, it is with the greatest pleasure that I look down the list of participants and consistently find a Penumbran in a critical position. Indeed, the course, style, and presentation of African American drama have been indelibly shaped by individuals who call Penumbra home.

Lou Bellamy

Founder and artistic director, Penumbra Theatre Company



Note on Commercial Theatre

You've taken my blues and gone —
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up
with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my
blues and gone.

You also took my spirituals and gone.
You put me in *Macbeth* and *Carmen Jones*
And all kinds of *Swing Mikados*
And in everything but
what's about me —
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me —
Black and beautiful —
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.

Langston Hughes



Far left: Yolanda
Bruce in *Rollin' on
the T.O.B.A.*, 2005
Langston Hughes
(1902-1967)

Beyond the Great White Way

BY PAUL CARTER HARRISON

It would seem unlikely that Minneapolis–St. Paul, an ethnically Nordic Midwestern metropolis far from the madding crowds and the bright lights of the Great White Way in New York, could be the nurturing ground for the Africentric cultural enterprise of Penumbra Theatre. And that after 30 continuous years of illuminating production, Lou Bellamy, its visionary founder, could emerge from the protective shadow of Penumbra to be recognized on the national theater radar screen as a distinguished luminary in the field.

We who have been engaged since the 1960s at the epicenter of the cultural wars to sustain Black Theatre as a legitimate performance practice had heard faint mumbles, even grumbles, about Bellamy for many years, but distance had not accorded us opportunities to meet the man. In 1998, however, 40 leaders of the Black Theatre Movement assembled for a national summit in New Hampshire, sequestered for a

Bellamy has had to come to grips with the Othello complex—a noble warrior, yet an alien in Venice—viewing himself only through the eyes of the dominant culture.



week to identify problems of management and marketing, interrogate issues of aesthetics, and proffer remedies for obstacles to survival. It was a transforming experience for everyone there, and it was an opportunity to encounter Lou Bellamy.

Meeting Bellamy, a spiritual blend of Henry David Thoreau and Marcus Garvey—an avid outdoorsman who roams the Midwestern prairie on

the hunt while voraciously consuming literature to fuel intellectual challenges—prompted an adjustment in what one might have expected from an icon of Black Theatre. Absent was any hint of ghettoized hip-hop swagger or any provincial uneasiness that would have him engage in a practiced effort at cultivated urbanity. Instead, we were surprisingly greeted with an unpretentious demeanor of discernment, a forthright honesty that put us on notice that his heels were firmly dug into the firmament of the Nordic Midwest. Nonetheless, Bellamy has had to come to grips with the Othello complex—a noble warrior, yet an alien in Venice—viewing himself only through the eyes of the dominant culture.

In 1903, in his landmark work *The Souls of Black Folk*, the venerable

sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois identified the manifestation of a “double-consciousness,” a social malady afflicting the African American who finds himself in “a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

Bellamy faced a dilemma like the one articulated in Psalms 137:1–4:

*By the waters of Babylon
There we sat down and wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willow there
we hung our lyres.
For there our captors
Required of us songs
And our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How shall we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land?*

Born in Chicago yet largely raised in Minnesota from infancy, Bellamy grew up in a social milieu that, however welcoming, remained culturally distant, setting him on a lifelong path in pursuit of the ethnic moorings that would reveal what August Wilson referred to as “the blood memory,” the collective ethos of the African continuum. Bellamy set himself on a path well-worn by others, like Pauline Hopkins, an African American writer of the early 1900s who observed that art is “of great value to any people as a preserver of manners and customs—religious, political, and social—a record of growth and development from generation to generation.” However, much of African American culture has been absorbed into the dominant culture, its value systems and encoded mythologies subordinated to power relationships that arrest growth and development. Thus, it has been difficult for African Americans to control and propagate the traditions of their culture in a manner that promotes an authentic self-image in an alien, often hostile, land.

Bellamy’s journey toward the reconciliation of double-consciousness began in the mid-1960s when he was an undergraduate in the humanities

at Mankato State College, a small institution in a southern Minnesota hamlet. In response to the history of racial tension in the town, Bellamy became involved with a campus theater that mounted plays such as Martin B. Duberman's *In White America*, in an effort to change the social consciousness of the community. Amid the national emergence of the Black Arts Movement that advocated art for social change as opposed to art for art's sake, Mankato State began a defining involvement that was to have a lasting impact on Bellamy's artistic vision. Encouraged by

The task of retrieving African traditions from the American social landscape in order to reconstruct a self-validating moral universe for an African American image contained many minefields.



the establishment of the Actors' Equity accredited Negro Ensemble Company in New York in 1967—the year he graduated from Mankato State—and buttressed by a mandate from the Black Arts Movement poet Larry Neal (who urged black artists to jettison the Western aesthetic and replace it with a separate African American–inspired mythology, iconology, symbolism, and critique), Bellamy was to pursue as his mission the creation of “artistically

excellent, thought-provoking, well-appointed productions that probe the human condition with stories told from an African American perspective.”

Despite the creative vigor of the Black Arts Movement, there were many challenges from the mainstream, which opposed the rhetoric of black self-determinism. Bellamy was soon to discover that the task of retrieving African traditions from the American social landscape in order to reconstruct a self-validating moral universe for an African American image contained many minefields—none worse than the ambivalent preoccupation of black artists with castigating and/or pandering to the

From the Wings

When I first arrived in the Twin Cities during the early 1970s, there was no place where performers of color could train and practice their craft on a consistent basis. Over the past 30 years, Penumbra, under the leadership of Lou Bellamy, has provided a safe and nurturing home for performers, especially those of color, to discover, develop, practice, and perform their craft. Penumbra's dedication and commitment to the cultural development in the Twin Cities is immeasurable, but it is for its enormous contribution to the performing arts that I am truly grateful.

Ernie Hudson

Actor

Los Angeles



T. Mychael Rambo and Greta Oglesby in *Black Nativity: A Celebration of Family, A Celebration for the Soul... Testify!*, 2005

white public. In his 1971 work, *The Black Aesthetic*, critic/scholar Addison Gayle lamented the fact that the “black artist of the past worked with the white public in mind. The guideline by which he measured his production was its acceptance or rejection by white people. . . . The invisible censor, white power, hovered over him in the sanctuary of his private room—whether at the piano or the typewriter—and, like his black brothers, he debated about what he could say to the world without bringing censure upon himself. The mannerisms he had used to survive in the society outside, he now brought to his art. . . . The result was usually an artistic creation filled with half-truths” that did not threaten the expectations of the dominant culture.

Bellamy nevertheless persisted in the struggle to raise the consciousness of a new generation with teachable moments that undergirded the aesthetic foundation of Black Theatre as a unique cultural

expression. He pursued his mission with a deep commitment to African culture but also with a keen appreciation that culture is not static and thus must be reinvented so as not to slip into nostalgic window dressing—or worse, burlesque—of the past, which leads to reductive, essentialized modes of expression.

While attending graduate school at the University of Minnesota, Bellamy discovered several local theaters attempting to tell the African

American story onstage. He understood very well that the mere spectacle of black bodies onstage, framed in social history without attention to specifics of cultural voice, did not constitute Black Theatre, since *black* is merely a color, and *theater practice* requires a culturally specific aesthetic approach. Bellamy witnessed what Nobel laureate Derek Walcott has described as the difficulty of finding voice and articulation in an alien space: “Our bodies think in one language and move in another. . . . I sighed up a continent of

Bellamy controlled the images projected into the community (and thus the world) by mounting provocative, cutting-edge plays that allowed black actors to stretch beyond stereotypes with portrayals of complex characters who exposed the depths of black humanity.



Desean Terry and Katrina Toshiko in *Slippery When Wet*, 2005

envy when I studied English literature, yet, when I tried to talk as I wrote, my voice sounded affected, too raw. The tongue became burdened, like an ass trying to shift its load.” However unimpeachable the intentions of these local efforts, they were deficient in the culturally specific signifiers of the African oral tradition—a tradition guided by spontaneity and shifts of tone and rhythm that alter the semantics of storytelling.

As Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka reminds us, “When you go into any culture, I don’t care what the culture is, you have to understand the language, by that I don’t mean what we speak, you’ve got to understand the interior language of the people, you’ve got to speak the metalanguage of the people.” It is necessary, then, to have an understanding of the metalanguage of a culture driven by the mechanisms that reveal manners and customs for subsequent generations. In 1976, Bellamy, feeling the angst of Caliban, whose language was usurped by Prospero’s volumes of Western knowledge, set about the challenge of rescuing the black experience from its colonized condition when he accepted an invitation to be the cultural-arts director of the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center, located in the heart of St. Paul’s African American community.

Appreciating that *blackness* is a quality of consciousness and not a reaction to *whiteness*, he established Penumbra in the center’s 265-seat theater. Committed to telling the stories of black experience from an Africentric perspective, he controlled the images projected into the community (and thus the world) by mounting provocative, cutting-edge plays that allowed black actors to stretch beyond stereotypes with portrayals

From the Wings

Lou Bellamy took me in, as he has so many others, as an assistant at Penumbra when I first moved to the Twin Cities almost 20 years ago. Lou is a remarkable presence—a grounded artist who radiates both humility and openness and who has the ability to see, with great clarity, where and what and who we African Americans are. The Distinguished Artist Award celebrates this vision, which lives in him as it does in a wonderful griot, an African song-praise singer.

As an artist, I have learned that the more specific you are, the more universal your message. Penumbra, by specifying the experience of African American people, creates an opportunity for us to embrace, universally, the whole community. Lou Bellamy has helped us to see the beauty, the glory, the majesty, the wealth, and the richness of who we are—not only as African Americans but as people who live in these Twin Cities and on this planet.

T. Mychael Rambo

Actor/singer

St. Paul



Left to right: Gavin Lawrence, David Allen Anderson, Marvette Knight, Terry Bellamy, and Adolphus Ward in *Two Trains Running*, 2003

of complex characters who exposed the depths of black humanity.

In 1978, Bellamy was joined by two peripatetic black artists from Pittsburgh in search of a nurturing home for their craft: an engaging stage director, Claude Purdy; and a poet who was to become a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, August Wilson. Typical of his usual generosity and willingness to embrace fledgling talent, Bellamy brought Purdy and Wilson under the umbrella of Penumbra, where both were to become his intimate collaborators. They shared much in common philosophically and aesthetically, as reflected in August Wilson's "The Ground on Which I Stand"—his famous/infamous keynote speech at the 1996 Theatre Communications Group national conference, where he declared:

I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters, and find the ground to be hallowed and made fertile by the blood and bones of the men and women who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth. As there is no idea that cannot be contained by black life, these men and women found themselves to be sufficient and secure in their art and their instruction.

With August Wilson in residence, Penumbra had the distinction of producing more of his works than any other theater in the world. On such

fertile ground, the work received nurturing care and attention to detail, thereby achieving greater illumination than most of the commercially contrived productions launched by the national regional theaters on the path toward Broadway.

Bellamy's direction of *Two Trains Running* is a case in point: trusting the cadences of ordinary black speech and the rhythmic insinuations of gestures without the filters of popular culture that mock and burlesque black imagery, he was able to reveal a complex story about black life that had profound universal resonance. In addition to Wilson's work, Penumbra has produced during its 30-year existence a widely diverse collection of playwrights who are central contributors to the contemporary repertoires of black theaters nationally, including Steve Carter, Oyama, Richard Wesley, Carlyle Brown, Aishah Rahman, Lonnie Elder, Charles Fuller, Shay Youngblood, Gus

A vibrant institution with a national reputation for the quality of its work, Penumbra has become a talent feeder to many major regional theaters throughout the country, sharing the gifts of writers, directors, actors, and designers.



Edwards, Pearl Cleage, Amiri Baraka, Marsha Leslie, Ossie Davis, and Ntozake Shange. During the 2004-2005 season, in response to Shange's admonishment to Black Theatre producers about cultural insularity and xenophobia, Bellamy launched Penumbra's first touring production, in partnership with the Trinity Repertory Company of Providence, Rhode Island. *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, a work

From the Wings

In one way or another, I guess I've always been a student of Lou's. My student/teacher relationship with him began many years ago, during the first season at Penumbra, when I—the young, inexperienced actress—couldn't for the life of me figure out what to do with my hands onstage. Lou—the young, inexperienced director—told me to put them on my hips. And I think they stayed there for the duration of the play. Jump cut to years later, when I find myself literally in the classroom with Professor Bellamy at the University of Minnesota as he discourses passionately on the role of Bigger Thomas in the African American dramatic canon. And I think we have all sat in the audience of one of his productions and felt “schooled” regarding some essential human truth. The man just can't help himself. He shares what he knows. And we are all the richer for it.

Faye M. Price

*Co-artistic producing director, Pillsbury House Theatre
Former August Wilson Fellow, University of Minnesota
Minneapolis*



Fredome Bradley and Maya Washington in *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, 2005

Bellamy developed with Native American playwright William S. Yellow Robe, Jr., about the offspring of an American soldier and a Native American woman, led to wide critical acclaim for Bellamy’s direction.

Perhaps Bellamy’s most remarkable achievement is having sustained a professional Black Theatre institution for more than 30 years, surviving

a ’60s boom of professional companies whose number has now dwindled to as few as a half dozen. Bellamy has attributed the demise of these institutions to their dependence on funding agencies that have redirected their resources to support marginal development of black projects at major regional companies, as well as a tendency for black institutions to become “conditioned to looking outside of their own milieu for criticism and approbation.” A formidable institution builder, Bellamy finds comfort in his belief that when “we nurture or

Penumbra Theatre has flourished over the past 30 years under the inexorable artistic stewardship of Lou Bellamy, establishing itself, in diversity of repertoire and quality of performance, as the preeminent professional Black Theatre institution in the United States.



discover a talent which has the voice, the insight, craft, and courage to scale new artistic levels, we should be healthy enough to provide the technical, dramaturgical, marketing, critical, administrative, financial,

and audience support necessary to allow that talent to realize itself. In short, we should be capable of gratifying our own interests.”

While Bellamy provides artistic leadership, vision, and initiation of projects that ensure the general welfare and growth of Penumbra Theatre Company, he shares managerial tasks with an energetic, multiethnic staff of young professionals in an enterprise that requires him to wear many hats in his role as artistic director: administration, grant writing, acting, directing, dramaturgy, mentoring, teaching, marketing and audience development, literary management of a national playwriting competition, and curriculum development for Penumbra’s summer institute and training programs.

A vibrant institution with a national reputation for the quality of its work, Penumbra has become a talent feeder to many major regional theaters throughout the country, sharing the gifts of writers, directors, actors, and designers. However enviable Penumbra’s acclaimed stature, Bellamy is abundantly aware of the potential drain on his talent base: “I now have to fight to keep Penumbra from becoming a ‘farm team’ where well-funded artistic directors come to do ‘one-stop shopping’ for new ideas, talent, and craft—and where managing directors seek replacements for their dwindling and blue-haired white subscribers.”

Though situated at a distance from the shadow of the Great White Way, Penumbra Theatre has flourished over the past 30 years under the inexorable artistic stewardship of Lou Bellamy, establishing itself, in diversity of repertoire and quality of performance, as the preeminent professional Black Theatre institution in the United States.

Paul Carter Harrison, an award-winning playwright/director who lives in New York, is professor emeritus at Columbia College Chicago and the author of *The Drama of Nommo*, an influential work on African American performance aesthetics.





Joining the Dance

BY WILLIAM S. YELLOW ROBE, JR.

There are many words to describe the work of Lou Bellamy, but how to describe Lou Bellamy as an actor, instructor, director, or community activist, or as a father and a husband, or as just a human being? There is a word that is very simple that comes from the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota Indigenous/Tribal Nations. It seems to fit quite well: *was'-te*.

In August of 2005, at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Community Center in St. Paul, I had the chance to see something unique in Lou Bellamy. It was in one of many dance rehearsals for *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, a play I wrote several years ago. What made this rehearsal and production process exciting was what was happening. It was not about Lou Bellamy directing a play being coproduced by Penumbra Theatre Company and Trinity Repertory Company of Providence, Rhode Island. It was about Lou Bellamy trying to tell a story that is so common and shared by all tribal and ignored Americans, and doing it in an artistic medium to which some people still do not have access: the stage.

This dance rehearsal wasn't modern, jazz, ballet, or folk, but Native American. Lou had sought the help of a young woman who was a champion fancy shawl dancer. It was her job to teach Maya Washington, a member of our cast, the steps to a dance that people often photograph but never really see in person. With the young woman, Maya, and the cast dancing in a circle over and over again in this carpeted room, I turned my attention to the CD player to make sure the disc was



Opposite: James Craven and Maya Washington in *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, 2005 . Above: George A. Keller and M. Cochise Anderson in *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, 2005

As I looked up from the player, there was Lou Bellamy, dancing behind the cast members. He had been watching this rehearsal process go on for several days, and with this small group he ventured into the circle.



life, and it was a sight I haven't seen from many theater artists, be they directors, actors, or fellow playwrights. Lou did what he did because it was the right thing to do. He expanded his circle of art and life.

It reminded me of a word. A word used by our older people when you asked them for a word to describe something that was simple and said something positive about a person or about a people. It is *was'-te*. This is what Lou Bellamy did for people that day and when the play toured the country. He took a Native American playwright's play, a Native American cast, and toured the country to bring them to communities that rarely see such a thing. Today, I hear comments from people within the communities where we played, and they still talk about their experience. They say that it was *was'-te*.

William S. Yellow Robe, Jr., is a playwright, creative writing teacher, and enrolled member of the Assiniboine Tribe.

Lessons

BY SARAH BELLAMY

Iwish more Americans had the opportunity to work beside their parents. It might make us appreciate our history and heritage more. More important, it is a gift to engage a parent through the lens of his or her true passion. My relationship with my dad is so nuanced: I've come to understand him as a father, a husband, an artist, an educator, a director, a founder, an advocate, a commentator, a prankster, a problem solver, an ambassador, an interlocutor, a leader, a fundraiser, and an elder. And I see now the sacrifice he's made so that I can live a good life. He often says, "Don't underestimate the power of one life lived well." What an example he's set.

Ever since I was little, I've gone fishing with my dad. Back then, on the way to the lake we'd point out hawks, observe deer grazing, as indifferent as cattle, inspect roadkill . . . you know, the usual. At the public access point, he'd deposit me on the dock, and I'd stand in my life jacket, feeling like a marshmallow on two toothpicks. He'd maneuver the trailer into the water, slip off the boat, and hand me the rope tied to the Alumacraft, purchased even before I was born—a boat, mind you, he still uses every time he goes fishing. Time dragged while I waited for him to go park the trailer and truck. I'd wonder if he'd left me. Just when I'd get nervous, out from around the trees he'd come, rubber boots knocking against his shins. He'd wade into the water, lift me into the boat, climb in himself, and we'd be off, cutting through the glassy surface of the lake. Sometimes he'd point to a spot on the horizon and let me drive, occasionally glancing upward to ensure that I hadn't veered too far off course. At his signal, I'd ease up on the throttle, and we'd cruise the water just offshore, bobbing along with vast threads of green cattails. He'd nod to me, and I'd cast out my line.

During those mornings on the lake, I learned about the earth, how to tread it lightly, to be respectful of the environment and the balance that allows some creatures to surrender their living to the survival of others. My dad untangled countless knots in my line, freed my lure from logs and craggy rocks on the bottom, even from trees onshore. I marvel at the patience my father has shown me over the years, the confidence he has demonstrated in my ability, and the expectation for me not just to coast but, as a woman of color, to strive for excellence. He's taught me to be



strong. Coming back from fishing, with the tackle rattling around in the truck and the gravel road stretching into oblivion, my father would often say, “Beautiful day. Good day to die.” I’d nod, stare out the window, and feel something slippery move around in my stomach. I didn’t understand what he meant. To me it seemed like a day you wouldn’t ever want to miss. It seemed like a good day to be alive.

There was a time (and I think that most young people go through this) when I was plagued by the idea of my parents dying. I’d think about it and have to occupy myself immediately. Then, in 1990, I had an experience that changed my life and altered the way I saw my father forever. I was 11 years old. It was *Fences*.

Fences is the story of a baseball legend, Troy Maxson, whose career in the Negro Leagues went largely unnoticed as white ballplayers were nationally celebrated for what in comparison could only be called mediocrity. He is clumsy and caring, jovial and mean, courageous but world-weary. He is one of August Wilson’s most complex, brilliant characters, and for six months my father played Troy Maxson. I played



Left to right: With James A. Williams and William Byrd Wilkins in Penumbra's production of *Fences* at the Guthrie Theater, 1997

I watched my father, my guardian, valiantly interpret a man facing death. It was a cruel thing I swallowed hard against. Worse yet, it was spectacular! It was poetic!



over home plate; he raises his bat, tells Death to come on, that he's ready. The lights brighten, steal all the color in the room. Troy stands alone onstage, all but swallowed in a wash of white light. He swings. Blackout.

That moment was both terrifying and magnificent for me. I marveled at the magnitude of this archetype's fall from grace; the havoc wreaked on a man seduced by a system of values that did not include him and his accomplishments. I watched my father, my guardian, valiantly interpret a man facing death. It was a cruel thing I swallowed hard against. Worse yet,

Troy's daughter, Raynell.

It is surreal to experience all the nuts and bolts of a production but get swept up in the story anyway. I'll never forget watching my father from backstage. Throughout the show, mortality bears down on Troy, symbolized by the baying of distant hounds. Finally, during the second act, Death comes for him. The chorus of barking dogs grows louder and louder. Troy squats down as if

it was spectacular! It was poetic! I would turn away from the stage, from the story, forcing the feeling into the pit of my stomach, where it knocked around with a queasy persistence.

I always lost the battle to steel myself against the power of the story. Even as I tried not to let it, my brain lobbed forth images of my happy memories as a kid, of fishing and learning to ride a bicycle and walking through the woods looking for morels with my dad. I distracted myself from the hard kernel that clogged my throat by watching the audience through a peephole backstage as white streaks appeared and carved up the living darkness. Men and women alike brought tissues to their eyes, the silence heavy as they gulped against a similar ache stuck somewhere in the meat of their throats.

Night after night, I watched my father swing that bat from backstage, and every time Crazy Horse's battle cry came back to me: "It is a good day to die." I understood finally that it is about being grateful, about feeling wholly connected in your spirit to the earth, your loved ones, the power of your community and culture. In this, you are prepared; you have everything that you need to leave the world at peace. You've learned your human lessons. Your spirit is free.

Live theater has a way of binding people together in the immediacy of the experience. During that moment in *Fences*, the actors and the audience were united, woven together with luminescent thread, a gentle net in which we were held, captivated, moved, and then released as the lights rose. Everyone emerged wet and shining. They took that luminosity out into the world, where it changed people, where it lived some more all over again.

Sarah Bellamy is the associate producer of Penumbra Theatre Company.





A Man, a Talent, a Believer, a Friend

BY DR. JOSIE R. JOHNSON

This essay is about a man of courage, a talented artist, a believer in his people, a man who dreams grand dreams and has the tenacity to see them through. This essay is about a man who is willing to sacrifice personal acclamation in order to keep his eye on the mission and the vision of the theater he created—a mission that brings professional productions of artistically excellent material to a broadly diverse public and attempts to educate about the contributions and the complexity of people of African descent living in America. This essay is about a modest and shy man who shines the light on the mission and the vision of his theater and dims the light on himself.

I am not sure when or how I first met Lou. I do know that when I returned to Minnesota after having lived for several years in Colorado, the University of Minnesota held a welcoming reception for me where Lou was one of the first colleagues to extend a warm smile and greeting. I soon learned about the exciting and creative theater that he had added to

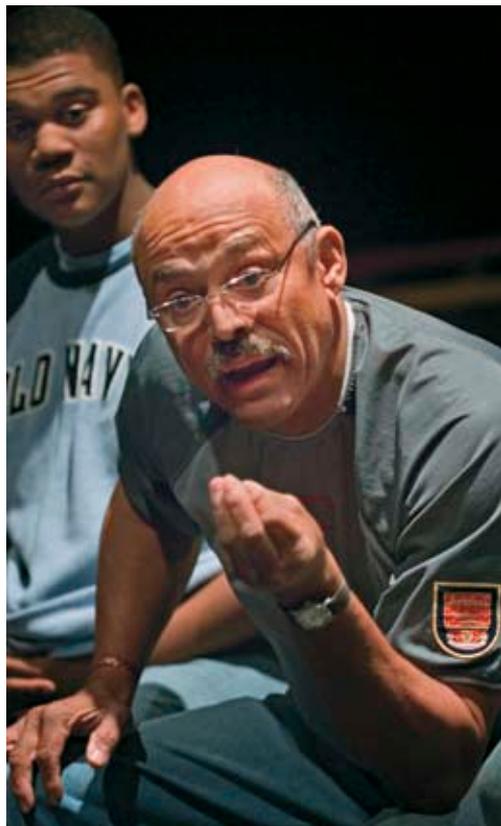
the cultural landscape of our Twin Cities in 1976; I began attending the plays and became a regular season-ticket holder. And when a colleague in the university's Department of Theatre Arts and Dance shared with me the department's efforts to hire Lou as an associate professor, I gladly endorsed the idea and was able to help make the hire possible, thanks to the administrative position I held.

While I might not remember my first meeting with Lou, I will always remember the first time I saw Penumbra's production of *Black Nativity*. The actors, the beauty, the power, and the delivery of this very important religious story made a deep impression on me. I have seen every version of the play and have never been disappointed in Penumbra's genius in telling the Christmas story.

Lou is unselfish with his talents; he shares freely with his students and is an inspiration to young people. He is loyal to his friends and, in the tradition of the Black Arts Movement, fiercely protective of his community. Lou gave Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson an environment to develop his craft and the encouragement he needed to become confident in his brilliance of word and thought. When I had the privilege of co-chairing, with Cornell Moore, Penumbra's 20th-anniversary campaign in 1996, Wilson, the "son of Penumbra," was brought back to share in the celebration.

Lou Bellamy is disciplined, focused, and a believer. He struggles each season to keep the lights on and to keep the Penumbra actors and staff paid. It is his belief in speaking to the complexity of the Black experience and dramatizing that complexity, season after season, that has made Penumbra a premier American theater.

Lou is Blessed with a family who loves, respects, supports, and believes in him and his dream. We are Blessed, as a community, to have Lou Bellamy in our lives.



Dr. Josie R. Johnson is a former University of Minnesota regent and associate vice president for academic affairs.

The Jazzman Cometh

BY ROHAN PRESTON

When actor, director, theater founder, and professor Lou Bellamy reads some recent postmodern scripts by the likes of Lynn Nottage (*Intimate Apparel*), Dael Orlandersmith (*Yellowman*), and Suzan-Lori Parks (*. . . A*), he shakes his head. It's not that these playwrights are bad people or that they have crafted dramaturgically suspect plays—the above-named scripts have been celebrated with awards and major productions all across the country. It's just that Bellamy doesn't see how these “problem plays” further his cause.

His project, pursued over a lifetime of tenacious, steadfast devotion, is simple: to light the noble and redemptive souls of African Americans. It's the same goal that was once expressed by his playwright friend and colleague August Wilson: “to show a people with the learning, the manners, the culture to carry them through anything, any experience or horror that may be visited upon them.”

Bellamy's aim is not a Pollyannaish one. A brilliant director who is perhaps the most soulful, skilled interpreter of Wilson's oeuvre, Bellamy appreciates how difficult it is to put art in its rightful place at the center of our culture.

The world in which Bellamy's ethics and aesthetics were forged has changed radically. His artistic foundation crystallized in the crucible of the civil-rights revolution of the 1960s, whose attendant sprout, the Black Arts Movement, held that black artists should deliver liberating work rooted in authentic African American culture. These ideals have become diffuse and diluted today, a time when the n-word, for example, is now tossed around by nonblacks with seeming impunity.

But Bellamy, in his staging of plays at Penumbra, has continued to distill the blues and soul, the grit and grinding that, like an Al Green song or a Curtis Mayfield harmony, melt a stone face and lift the spirit.

“Black people are some tricky folks,” he says with wonder. “People think of black folks as simple, like they can be easily figured out. But when you think you've got their number, they turn and twist and are gone.”

A great play needs someone with vision, insight, and protean creativity to stage it. Bellamy, steeped in jazz, brings music and more. After nine years of watching his work, I can easily name elements of his genius. He informs his text with shorthand mythopoetic idiom that clues viewers in immediately. And at a time when theater is competing

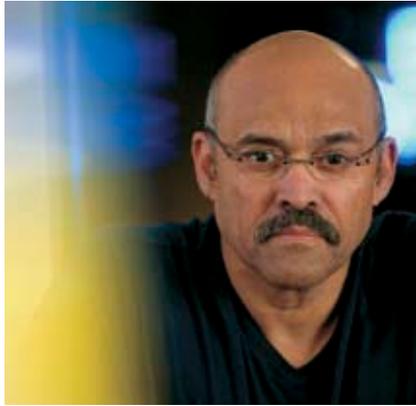
against pervasive broadcast images of bug-eyed, clowning blacks who are good for jokes and songs, Bellamy allows his actors to bring their authentic selves to their roles. He reclaims and redefines these images, allowing us as viewers to laugh, but *with* the characters, who retain their dignity. Most important, he frames his characters, even the rascals and reprobates, with humanity. None of the bad guys is ever a hulking shadow, and none of the protagonists is a simple do-gooder.

You can see his genius in almost any of his productions, but his standouts include Pearl Cleage's *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and the Wilson cycle. "What August does in all those plays is give us some highly critical takes on black people, but he's doing it from a position of love," says Bellamy. "These are not buffoons or folks who're just problems; they're humans with hopes and big dreams. That is what we have to celebrate."

Rohan Preston is the lead theater critic for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*.



T. Mychael Rambo and Benny S. Cannon in *Rollin' on the T.O.B.A.*, 2005



Visions of Community, Imperatives of Art

BY JOHN S. WRIGHT

Tracing my perspective on Lou Bellamy's evolution from student athlete to actor to theater founder to professor and award-winning artistic director—and now to McKnight Distinguished Artist—takes me back almost 35 years. Before I knew him very well, Lou was, by his own confession, a skinny introvert who overcompensated in high school by attempting to become the class clown and showoff. As he tells it, he was navigating college as a track athlete at Mankato State in the early 1960s when he found himself lured onstage into the *Finian's Rainbow* fantasy of a white man who turns black after falling down a well—hardly a foretaste of Lou's artistic future.

When he and I encountered each other in some depth during the early 1970s at the University of Minnesota, I was a doctoral student navigating my first teaching mission in African American literature; Lou was one of a handful of black students enrolled—and the most visibly engaged of all. I recall him galvanizing one class session on the oral tradition with a dramatic recitation—at my request—of Rudy Ray Moore's street-corner epic *Dolemite*, a specimen of the bodacious urban folk poesis that Black Arts Movement warrior-poets such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal were exploring at the time as a possible vernacular key to a new aesthetic in black theater. Lou was not showing off anymore; he was elucidating.

As fortune would have it, Horace Bond was pushing the same dramaturgical envelope in graduate seminars on black theater history

and theory that Lou and I both took hungrily. By that time, Lou had long since surrendered his track career to the demands of the thespian's craft. But commanding literary voices such as John Oliver Killens's were calling nevertheless for "long-distance runners in the struggle for liberation," who would upstage flashy sprinter prototypes with the more grueling logistics, pacing, discipline, and stamina necessary to construct hundred-year freedom plans and community institutions capable of serving generations yet unborn. Lou was now metaphorically and metaphysically made to order for that kind of race.

In short order indeed, he had turned his novitiate as a performer into an instrument of self-discovery and social commitment—and himself into an actor of subtlety, power, and impressive range. With the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center as a community base of operations and a Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) grant as a financial catalyst, he and a cluster of arts activists took the next step toward unifying their artistic imperatives and their visions of community by founding Penumbra Theatre.

Thirty years later, it is hard not to marvel at the miracles Lou's little theatrical juggernaut has wrought, and at the man he has crafted of himself in the process. As the whirl and the weight of responsibility have moved his own performing farther from the center of his artistic life, Lou has created his own signature as an orchestrator and interpreter of drama, forging a directorial style that is not monoschematic and almost never auteurish but that can be by turns exactly confrontational, lovingly austere, wryly jocular—yet always devoted to treating actors and audience as thinking selves mutually engaged in public acts of communal ritual and revelation. He has had to become a virtual tightrope walker, too—balancing his theater's continuously compromised resources against a refusal to compromise artistically, while

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balancing both of these against the need to forge a many-hued audience larger than Penumbra's community of aesthetic reference and to lead his theater's African American audience out of working- and middle-class black ambivalence about the psychic and social functions of art.

He has somehow done all this against the backdrop of a Black Theatre Movement that, in the decade before Penumbra's founding in 1976, saw more than 600 African American theater companies come into existence across the country, the majority of which survived no more



Promotional photo for *Rollin' on the T.O.B.A.*, 2005; Benny S. Cannon, T. Mychael Rambo, and Yolanda Bruce

Lou is an artist disciplined by craft and guided by a sense of perspective, theme, and history won from having immersed himself so long and so intensely in the experiences of his community that it is as if he had lived them himself throughout all the generations.



than two years and less than a handful of which are still standing alongside Penumbra today. The magic and the majesty we have witnessed here are due in no small part to Lou's rich sense of theater tradition and poetics and to the orienting precedents of W. E. B. Du Bois's Krigwa Players, Langston Hughes's Karamu House, Baraka's and Neal's Black Arts Repertory, and the Negro Ensemble Company. Lou still draws aesthetic mantras from Du Bois's insistence that black theater be "by us, for us, near us"; from Hughes's Karamu House exertions to purge self-abasement while purveying what is both "beautiful and ugly, too," about the human condition;

and he draws sustenance as well from Baraka's and Neal's fiery devotion to art that is "functional, collective, and committing."

There has been salvific mystery, too, along the way—the improbable serendipity yet inexorable logic that transported Claude Purdy and August Wilson and Laurie Carlos and so many other visionaries from afar into the magic circle and that, in Lou's long colloquy with Wilson especially, has endowed Penumbra with a poetics of theater and a *genius loci* of poetry in the theater that is no mere artifact of some vanished oral culture but a living ancestral fulcrum of wisdom, myth, and spiritual cosmology. The collagist apprehension of history that Wilson gleaned from Romare

Bearden's lush visual poetry and from the blues arias and arpeggios of Bessie Smith has been a perfect partner through the years to Lou's own poetic sensibilities; and the seeds they sowed together in one small community playhouse have regerminated in the wide world outside.

Lou himself has been acclaimed often by now as one of St. Paul's luminary native sons; but he is Richard Wright's native son too—oh, not as Wright's adolescent prototype of bitterness and murderous disillusion, but rather as a full-grown incarnation of Wright's intellectual blueprint for the African American artist that our times call for so desperately: an artist disciplined by craft and guided by a sense of perspective, theme, and history won from having immersed himself so long and so intensely in the experiences of his community that it is as if he had lived them himself throughout all the generations. Whatever its ultimate roots, Lou Bellamy's sense of community is as ancient as Tertullian's concept, "we who are united in heart and soul"; as pragmatic as that Rondo* anywhere in which people plan and work together, bound by a cohesive past and future; and as reverent as the simple faith that by community alone can an artist's work be made universal and eternal in its results.

As Lou well knows, in Langston Hughes's jazz and blues-toned worldview, the art of drama offers us one incommensurable route to discovering and staking a claim on the New Land the slave songs once imagined. In *Note on Commercial Theatre*, Hughes's oracular everyman resolves that, to help get us there, "someday somebody'll/Stand up and talk about me,/And write about me—/Black and beautiful—/And sing about me,/ And put on plays about me!" In deep, full-throated chorus, Lou Bellamy has been affirming over the decades, to this community and the world beyond, alongside Hughes's oracle, that "I reckon it'll be/Me myself!/ Yes, it'll be me." And in the repertoire history created across the years from Penumbra's inaugural 1976–1977 season to today—from *Heartland Louisiana* to the spiritual hunting grounds of the *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers* and through all the dramaturgical twists and turns, disappointments, and triumphs along the way—we have been bequeathed a fascinating map, spread out before us through the prism of Lou's intermingled vision and pragmatism and long-distance running, a map that charts the complex cosmography of one very palpable imaginative community working its way, play by play, scene by scene, line by line, in search of that New Land.

* *Rondo*, a historically African American neighborhood in St. Paul, was destroyed in the 1960s by the construction of I-94. The site where Penumbra Theatre is located was once part of Rondo.

John S. Wright is the Morse-Amoco Distinguished Teaching Professor of African American and African Studies and English at the University of Minnesota.

Invited In

BY STEWART WIDDESS

Lou Bellamy's rehearsals are always open to the public. This is a testament to the confidence he has in his craft. One needs to see Lou at work in rehearsal, breathing life into a character or a scene, to understand his talent. His give-and-take with an actor or actress to develop a character and his ability to infuse a scene with small details that engage the audience are surprising: a sugar jar that's continually raised but never reaches the coffee cup, in *Two Trains Running*; a match that's continually struck but never lights the cigarette, in *Someplace Soft to Fall*.  Lou deserves greater attention than he has been accorded to date. He is the prizefighter on the undercard who astonishes the crowd but has yet to be promoted to the main event. Lou is at his best with the plays of August Wilson. His understanding of Wilson's African symbolism and the vernacular of Pittsburgh's Hill District is uncanny. I have seen Wilson's plays produced in San Francisco, in St. Louis, and on Broadway. None can compare to Lou's interpretations in St. Paul. I am so grateful to The McKnight Foundation for this outstanding recognition of Lou's talent. He is a giant in theater. He deserves a giant's acclaim.

Stewart Widdess was on the Penumbra Theatre Company board from 1988 to 2004.







From *Black Nativity: A Celebration of Family, A Celebration for the Soul... Testify!*, 2005

As Children

BY GABRIELLE K. McDONALD

Although I had moved east with my mother, until I was a teenager I spent my summers in St. Paul with my father and grandparents. I shared many fun-filled days with my friend Skeeter, playing hide-and-go-seek or May I, or just sitting on the steps gazing at lightning bugs in glass jars—until the streetlights came on, when we would be hustled inside. We were both skinny (black) kids in the (black) neighborhood. He loved to fish; I was afraid of worms. But we were both spooked by the boy who turned his eyelids inside out! We were too engrossed in our childhood games to share secrets.

One day, that changed. Skeeter, whose real name was Louis, told me he was my brother. I kept that confidence for many years; I don't know why. Maybe I just assumed it was something to be kept between us. Several years later, I shared this with my father. His response was straightforward: yes, Skeeter was his son—my brother. He told me

that when Skeeter admitted to his mother that he had a crush on me, she said: “No. That can’t be. Gaby is your sister.” Not only did I gain a brother, but through these and related conversations I gained an even better understanding of, and greater respect for, our father.

Years passed. Each of us married and had two children. I became a civil-rights lawyer and then a judge. Louis established the Penumbra

Theatre Company and became

a professor at the University of Minnesota. I returned to St. Paul to visit, spending more and more time with Louis and his family.

Several years ago, when I delivered a speech at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, Louis

Louis has remarked that the advice of Booker T. Washington, “Cast down your bucket where you are,” rings true for him.



was there to support me. During the speech, I acknowledged my father and stepmother by name and also mentioned that my brother was in the audience. It was a private recognition; I did not use Louis’s name, for I did not know his position on the “politics” of our relationship in his home territory, but for me it was a way to publicly honor the relationship I so cherish. A photograph of us hugging in the church that day is in the family gallery in my living room.

With each visit to the Twin Cities, I saw firsthand how Penumbra was developing, and our father, who keeps news clippings about Louis, often sent me copies of the latest press. Louis has excelled professionally, yet I believe that he would not want his life’s work to be cast only in terms of a personal achievement. Rather, he would prefer the success of Penumbra to be heralded as an ongoing effort to have the black experience acknowledged as vital to the fabric of our country. The McKnight Foundation Distinguished Artist Award is recognition, long overdue in my estimation, of the contributions Louis has made to this effort.

With the award, he joins an esteemed group of Minnesotans, yet I believe his gifts are unique. His choice to build a career in the community where he grew up is uncommon in his field. Typically, a “local boy” who does well in theater chooses not to remain local; instead, he gravitates to the bright lights of Broadway. Louis has been able to develop a style that the rest of his field respects and emulates without leaving home—and he believes that this reflects the tenets of the Black Arts Movement, which prescribed that artists stay connected to their communities. Louis has remarked that the advice of Booker T. Washington, “Cast down your bucket where you are,” rings true for him.

I attended my first Penumbra production more than a decade ago. As an avid New York theatergoer, I was impressed with its high artistic quality. It made me proud to see the black community telling its story with such depth and meaning. And that is how I thought of it: the black community, channeled by a creative visionary who had the courage, tenacity, and intellect to see that the story was told. My heart warmed to know that it was my brother at the helm of this theater—which was housed on the same spot as our childhood playground.

My heart warmed to know that it was my brother at the helm of this theater—which was housed on the same spot as our childhood playground.

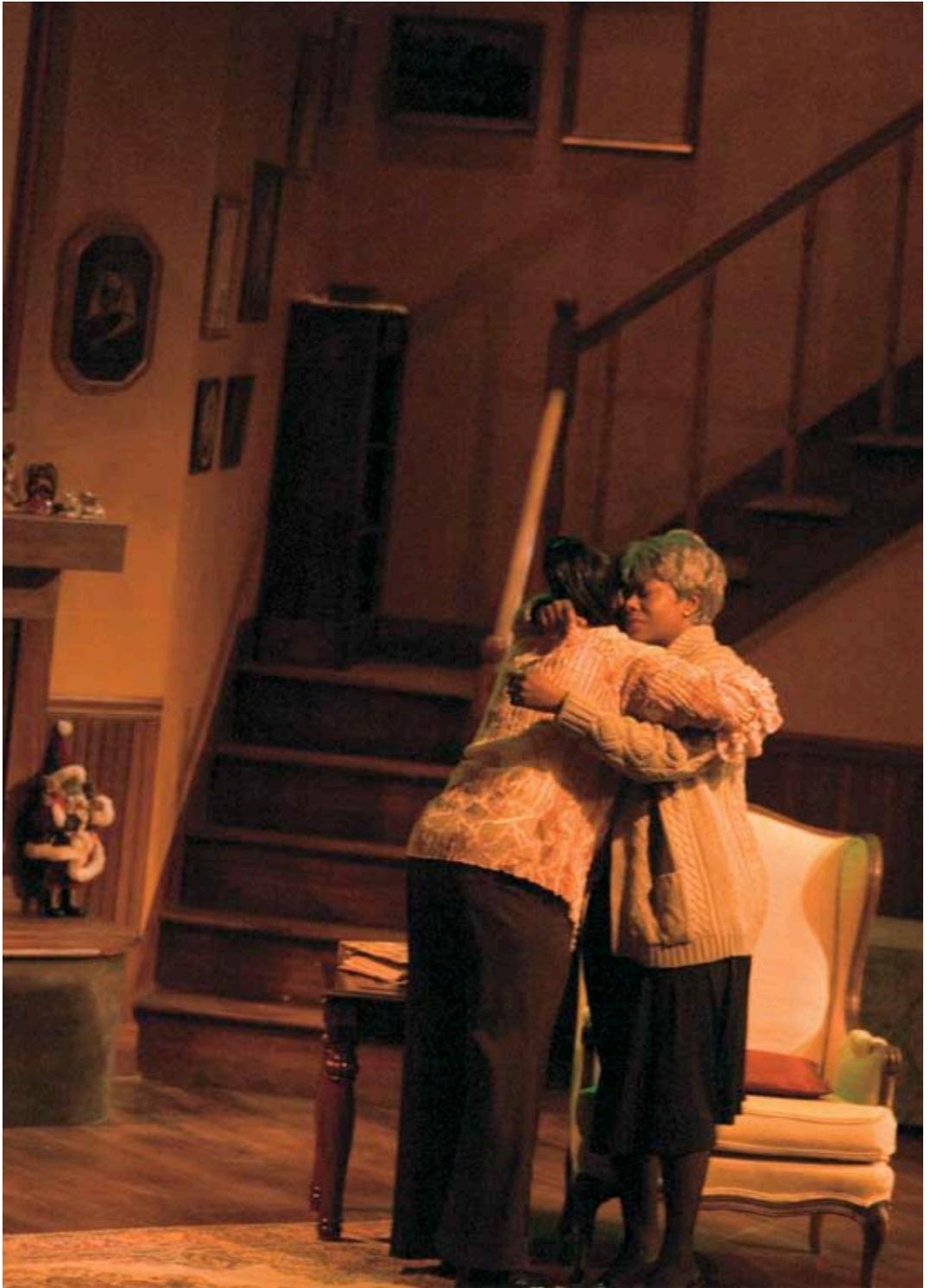


I saw Louis receive the 1999 Jujamcyn Theaters Award in New York City, at a ceremony where August Wilson praised his work. I joined them for dinner afterward and sat in awe as these two friends exchanged experiences and views on the importance of having the black reality reflected in theater. Years ago, Louis was thrilled to overhear a black teenager say, “I want my ham,” echoing a line from Wilson’s play *Two Trains Running*. He explained that he was thrilled because the literature of the unique situation of Africans living in America had found its way into the everyday conversation of a young black teenager. The young man’s saying “I want my ham,”

Louis said, demonstrated an understanding that some sort of payment was due African Americans for their hard work and contributions toward making America what it is today. The awareness reflected in that simple statement placed the young man firmly in history. I believe this is what makes Louis’s life’s work so fulfilling. Genes must mean something, for this is the same journey I took in the 1960s as a civil-rights lawyer traveling the South, challenging racially discriminatory employment practices.

As Louis and I deepened the connection between us, we came to love each other as brother and sister. We felt the need for our children to share in this love—for my Stacy and Michael and his Sarah and Lucas to come to know one another as family. As Louis and I talked about the importance of this relationship, he said that knowing who you are, who your family is, is of particular importance for African Americans. American slavery and a host of economic and cultural events have had the effect of scattering the black family. He wanted our children to know all—perhaps because they might understand themselves better by looking into the eyes of a relative and seeing the continuity, the possibility, that is somehow shared by family.

Gabrielle K. McDonald began her career as a staff lawyer for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. She is the former president of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague.



Patricia Lacy-Aiken and Greta Oglesby in *Black Nativity: A Celebration of Family, A Celebration for the Soul... Testify!*, 2005

Notes

It was with the indomitable spirit associated with pioneers and visionaries that Lou Bellamy took a handful of actors over 20 years ago and challenged them not only to believe in themselves but to have a belief larger than anyone's disbelief.



Above: August Wilson at the Gem Theatre in Kansas City for the opening of the Kansas City Repertory Theatre's production of *Two Trains Running*, directed by Lou Bellamy, 2005

I did not know then what Penumbra Theatre would come to mean to me and that there would come a time when Penumbra would produce more of my plays than any other theater in the world. And that their production of *The Piano Lesson* would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work. We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of Penumbra Theatre Company enlarged that possibility. And its corresponding success provokes the community to a higher expectation of itself. I became a playwright because I saw where my chosen profession was being sanctioned by a group of black men and women

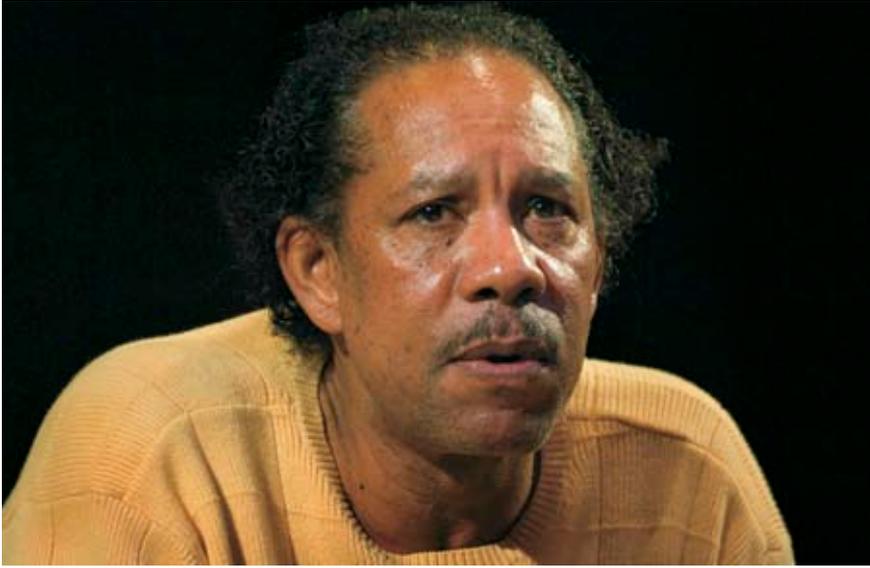
who were willing to invest their lives and their talent in assuming a responsibility for our presence in the world and the conduct of our industry as black Americans.

August Wilson

Playwright

1945–2005

*Written to mark the 20th anniversary
of Penumbra Theatre Company in 1996*



James Craven in Penumbra's tribute to August Wilson, 2005

Over the years, when I've called Lou at sunrise, he's often concluded our conversation by saying, "Got to meet the mule." Both weariness and joy in his morning voice: "Got to meet that mule!" We artists of color on the stage, in pursuit of *ars magna*, have Lou Bellamy working both for and with us in the fields of our communal truth, clearing stone obstacles so our story can be told in our way. Sometimes, he's out there all alone, cursing at the cold, bleeding in the heat, whipping that mule and meetin' the Man. He doesn't do it for self-gratification, either. He's after what no one else will give us: a place where we can be dignified and find dignity.

James Craven
Actor
Minneapolis

Penumbra Theatre Company is a rare and wonderful place—a theater with a clear and powerful mission that has survived three decades in our often difficult artistic landscape. Lou Bellamy has created a place where artists can flourish and prosper, where vital stories are told, where our culture can be enriched by the voices of theater that are usually marginalized and discarded. The American theater would be dramatically impoverished without Penumbra.

Oskar Eustis
Artistic director
The Public Theater
New York, N.Y.

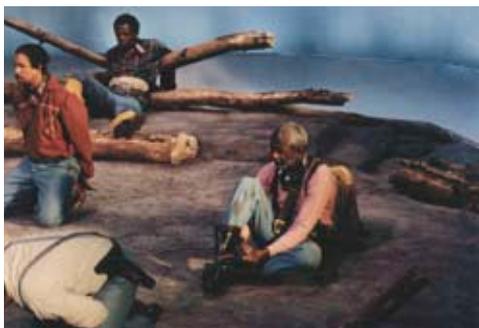


From *Zooman and the Sign*, 2006: Sarah Bellamy, left; James Craven, right

The success of Penumbra's work is a testament to the leadership of Lou Bellamy and to the versatility of the many artists who have graced the Penumbra stage through the years. Penumbra Theatre has a special place in the hearts of Minnesotans and has earned its national reputation through the quality of its work and the power of its mission.

Joe Dowling

*Artistic director, The Guthrie Theater
Minneapolis*



Clockwise from lower left: William Byrd Wilkins, James Craven, Lester Purry, and Adolphus Ward in *Buffalo Hair*, 1993

In his work, Lou displays a keen understanding of the writing and staging of drama. His acutely inquisitive mind, coupled with his skill in communicating with actors and students, makes him a remarkable teacher and mentor. His encouragement and respect for my work have enabled me to challenge myself, and I feel that I have gained a supportive friend in the process. By acknowledging Lou's incredible achievements, this award honors his passion, his intellect, and his desire to use theater to engage with complex social issues.

Joanne Zerdy

*Ph.D. student
Department of Theatre Arts and Dance
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis*

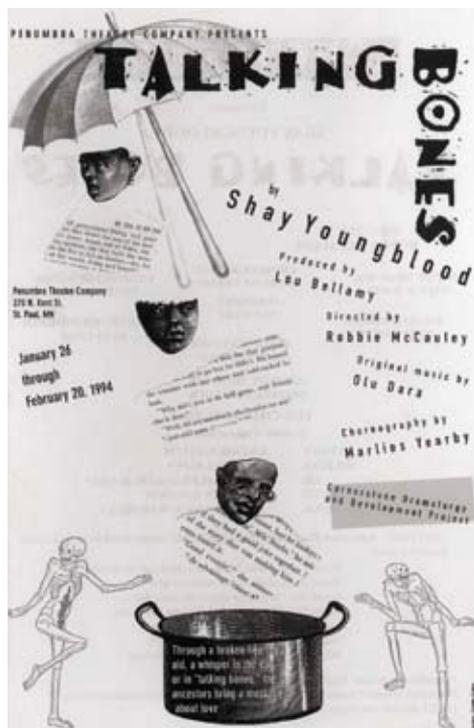
“Race man.” I am not sure when the term was first used, but I know that it has been used off and on for the last hundred years. Growing up in the 1950s, I heard the term and knew what it meant when it was applied to African Americans in leadership positions. “Race man” and “race woman” are terms that are uniquely American, that are used to describe those men and women who were antiracist, promoted democratic ideals, celebrated African American culture, and worked actively for institutional change. Lou will tell you that he became a “race man” just because he lived long enough to end up there. But it is more than that. Lou’s love of African American culture comes from a deep family tradition and passion that, along with the love and support of his family, gave him the strength to work against great odds to establish an institution with worldwide significance.

Seitu Jones
Visual artist
St. Paul

I met Lou Bellamy when I stayed after a Penumbra performance to thank him for enriching my spirit and bringing back to mind the joys and the struggles of my childhood in West Tennessee. I remember how impressed, excited, and wide-eyed I was after the performance, having felt my first magical moments of professional theater through the eyes of its “really cool” director. I had never truly known or appreciated real theater before that experience.

Even today, when I attend Penumbra and bear witness to Lou’s art, it just makes me want to go out and testify that everyone should feel the spirit and feelings that he evokes in producing artistically excellent, thought-provoking and well-appointed theater. I consider Lou Bellamy to be a very special gift to St. Paul, the metro area, and the entire state of Minnesota. Personally, he makes me just darn proud to know him.

Phyllis Rawls Goff
Board member, Penumbra Theatre
St. Paul



Playbill for *Talking Bones*, 1994



Above: Lou Bellamy, James Williams, James Craven, and Leslie Mohn, *Fool for Love*, 1986

I treasure the time I spent working closely with Lou. From him, I learned a lot about the importance of being humble and of holding to your vision despite the odds. I also learned that the artistic director of a theater company is called on to accomplish tasks that range from sublime to ridiculous—but it is in accomplishing the ridiculous that the measure of a person can be seen! I will never forget that on the same day as his Guthrie directorial debut, Lou was personally ensuring the completion of the substantially less glamorous minutiae of cleanliness in Penumbra’s space. Lou, we cherish you!

Jan Plimpton

*Executive director
Minnesota Habitat for Humanity
Board member, Penumbra Theatre, 1990-1999
St. Paul*

Penumbra Theatre Company is a truly important home for material all too often neglected by large theaters, and the artists Lou Bellamy has nurtured are his lasting legacy. The outstanding productions he directs are inevitably, like all theater, ephemeral, but they intangibly will also long represent his profound achievement.

Peter Altman

*Artistic director, Kansas City Repertory Theatre Company
Kansas City, Missouri*

In *Finian’s Rainbow*, Lou played a servant in a southern aristocrat’s home—making his entrance with dignity and then responding to his haughty employer by shifting gears into a flawless Stepin Fetchit impersonation. Lou’s mother, who didn’t see the satire, immediately got up and walked out of the theater. Later, when we did *In White America*, I had the cast jump off the stage and greet the audience at the end of the show. One of Lou’s friends, a young white woman, ran up and kissed him on the cheek in the midst of the applause. Lou was so popular with everybody on campus, I believe that kiss pushed race relations forward about 30 years in Mankato.

Dr. Ted Paul, Jr.

*Director, 1950-1980
Department of Theatre and Dance
Minnesota State University, Mankato*



Left: Tonia Jackson and Santino Craven in *Talking Bones*, 1994

Opposite top: With Laurie Carlos and Kathryn Gagnon in *Talking Bones*

Bottom: Handwritten script for *Waiting in Vain* by Rebecca Rice, 1993

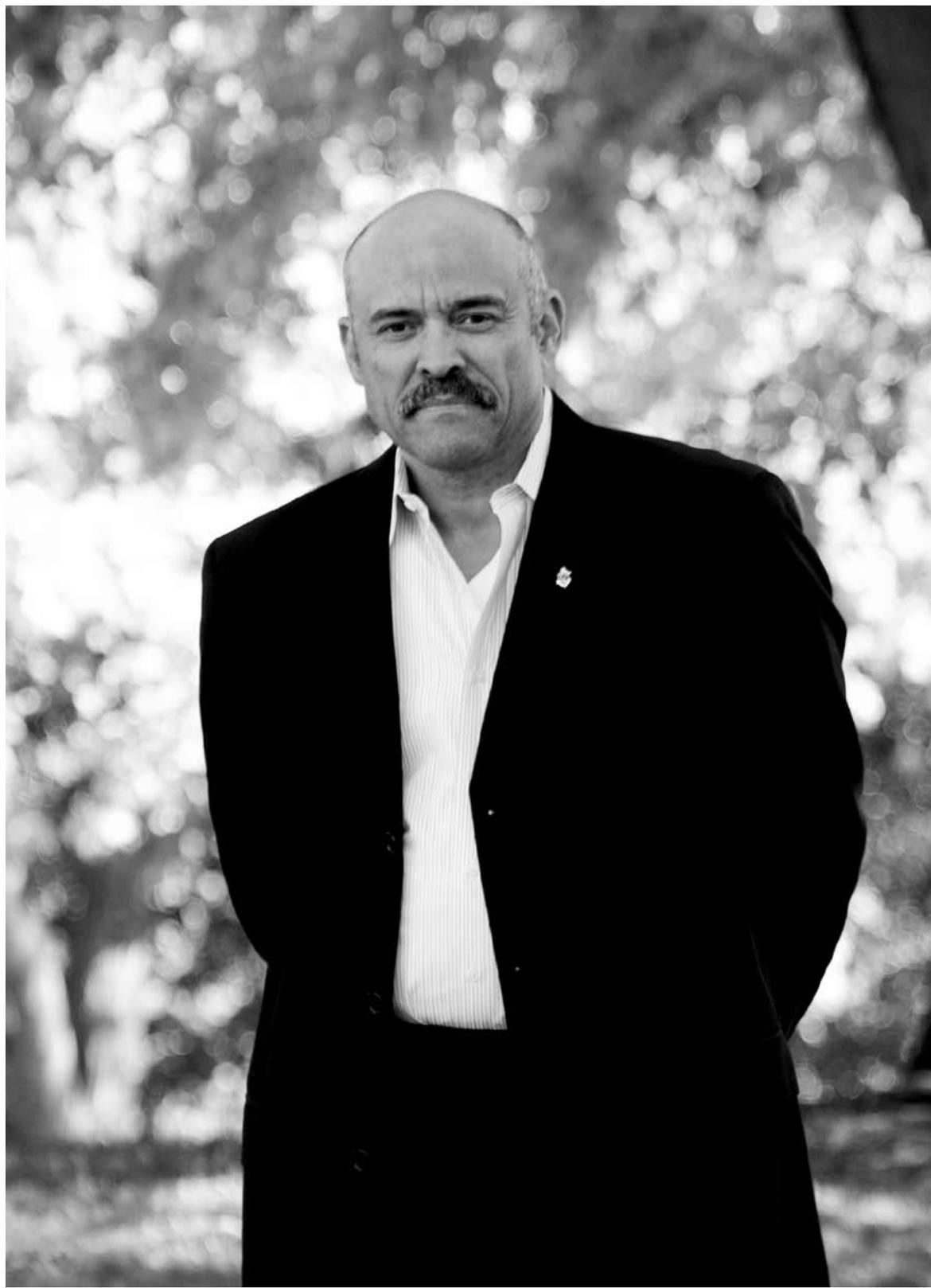


SUDEKA'S MONOLOGUES

OPENING :

I AM 15 YEARS OLD AND I AM BECOMING A POET.
MAMA SAY LINDA TO ME. SUDEKA MY NAME.
SOMEBODY. SOMEBODY. I'M GONNA BE A BOOK PER-
SON. I'M GONNA BE SOMEBODY. SUDEKA, SUDEKA,
SUDEKA. THAT'S ME.

I TELL THEM MY NEW NAME. THEY LAUGH, THESE JOKES
I GOT A DIARY FOR CHRISTMAS. I WILL WRITE EVERYDAY,
LIKE JAMAL SAY. I'M GONNA WRITE SMART THINGS HERE
LIKE I HAVE SENSE. LIKE DREAMS AND ASPIRATIONS.





An Artist's Life: In His Own Words

1944

I was born at Provident Hospital in Chicago—the same hospital where African American surgeon Dr. Daniel Hale Williams conducted the first successful open-heart surgery—to ElVeeda Betsey Luckett and James George Kirk.

1945–1949

I spent these years living in St. Paul with my mother and grandparents, Richard and Maude Chapman, at 1119 Sherburne Avenue. A cross was burned outside the house.

1950

My mother married Maurice Leonidas (Tiny) Bellamy. I remember standing in the hall, crying because I wanted to marry my mother. Soon after, my stepfather adopted me; from that moment until his death in 1982, he was always there for me. Over the next 12 years, he and my mother added three brothers and one sister to the family.

I attended Hill School Kindergarten in St. Paul, where a good many of the students and my neighbors were from Eastern Europe and spoke English as a second language. It seems that during those years neighborhoods and communities stayed intact: perhaps one quarter of this kindergarten class graduated with me from St. Paul Central High School 12 years later.

By now, we were living at 959 Carroll Avenue. The Lees lived next door; my godfather, Jimmy Lee, is the man after whom the community center on St. Paul's Lexington Parkway is named.

1951–1957

I attended St. Peter Claver School, where I studied under the Oblate Sisters of Providence. Founded in 1829, it was the world's first congregation of nuns of African descent. The nuns taught, mothered, disciplined, and played baseball with me in my most formative years. I was baptized Catholic, received my First Holy Communion, and became an altar boy.

Also during this time, I secured my first paid employment, setting pins at St. Peter Claver bowling alley for 10 cents per line. I've not been unemployed since. I saved feverishly, and with the first real money I can remember being in charge of I bought my mother a mink stole for a style show she was modeling in.

1957–1958

I moved to Niles, Michigan, with my grandparents, Margaret and Cohen Gaillard, and attended St. Mary Elementary School. Momma followed, and soon Daddy did as well. Niles was a very small town with a significant population of African American men working for, or retired from, the New York Central Railroad. I had spent a few summers in Niles before we moved there—summers filled with fishing and catching lightning bugs and frogs.

My very first role onstage took place here: I played a quasi-master of ceremonies/magician whose duty it was to move the Christmas show along.



Left to right: Lou's mother, ElVeeda Betsey Luckett, in front of the family's Sherburne Avenue home, 1940s

Eighth-grade graduation photo from St. Mary Elementary School, Niles, Michigan, 1958

From *John Brown's Body*, a summer-stock production at Mankato State College, early 1960s





Left: With Jack Reuler and the Mixed Blood Theatre company, 1976

Bottom, left to right:

With Warren Bowles in *Othello* at the University of Minnesota, 1973

High-jumping at Mankato State College, early 1960s

Colleen and Lou Bellamy's wedding photograph, 1972

the next five years, I spent summers and Christmas vacations working in the dining car with black men (including my adoptive father, Maurice) who, while working for meager salaries and good tips, provided for their families and became the stewards who ushered me through my rite of passage into manhood.

1962–1967

I attended Minnesota State University, Mankato (then called Mankato State College). I was cast in my very first play, *Finian's Rainbow*, directed by Dr. Ted Paul. My mother, offended, walked out on the production, completely missing the satire that my performance was meant to convey. I went on to do several socially conscious plays under Ted Paul's direction.

To pay for my education, I continued to work summers and vacations on the railroad and picked up any odd job I could find in Mankato: everything from bulldozer driver to fry cook to bartender. I even unloaded sheet metal from boxcars, which was the hardest I've ever worked. I earned a B.A. degree with majors in psychology and sociology.

1958–1962

I moved back to St. Paul and attended St. Paul Central High School, where I took to the stage a second time: in a speech class, I did a matador routine, pantomiming a fight with a bull to "America" from *West Side Story*.

During these years, I worked several jobs: stocking shelves in grocery stores, general labor at the State Fairgrounds, shining shoes in the locker rooms of the St. Paul Athletic Club and Hillcrest Golf Club with my biological father, Jim Kirk.

When I was 17, I lied about my age and got a job as a waiter on the Great Northern Railway. Someone reported me and I was fired before the summer was over. I was rehired after graduation, when I was 18. For



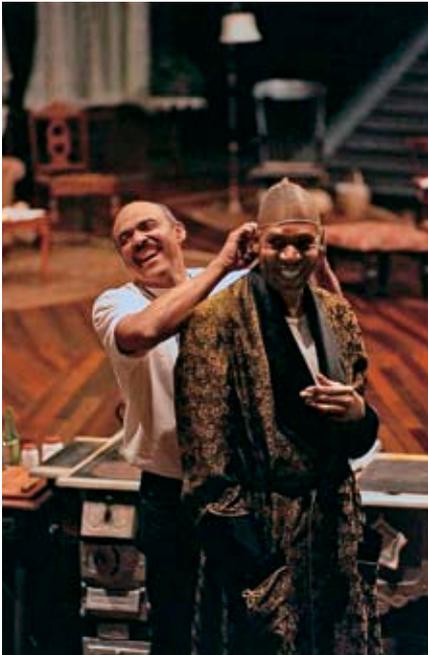
1967–1976

I returned to St. Paul and helped my mother run her business, the Ebony Lounge, located at University and Avon. I worked for Univac, tried selling insurance, washed the backs of buses for Metro Transit, and taught at the Twin Cities Opportunities Industrialization Center, a job-placement program. It was there that I met my wife, Colleen. We were married on April 15, 1972.

Still acting occasionally, I was cast in *Blues for Mr. Charlie* at United Theological Seminary and *The Boys in the Band* at Chimera Theatre. I also began to establish myself as a director, directing *River Niger* at Theatre in the Round and Mixed Blood's first production ever, Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*.

I was hired as a counselor/instructor at the University of Minnesota's General College. Because I was employed at the university, I had an opportunity to attend graduate school there. It was during that time that I took my first African American literature course, taught by Professor John Wright, now a very good friend. The experience was transformative.

On the way to my M.A. degree, I acted in the last show in the old Scott Hall (*Othello*, directed by my acting teacher and friend Louis Dezseran) and the first show at the new Rarig Center (*My Kingdom Come*, written by Ernie Hudson and directed by Horace Bond). Horace Bond was to become a great friend and another of the significant shaping forces in my life.



1976–1982

The Hallie Q. Brown Community Center in St. Paul hired me to administer a \$150,000 grant for a dramatic arts project. Penumbra Theatre Company grew out of this project. I played the lead in our very first show, *Eden*, written by Steve Carter and directed by Claude Purdy.

In 1977, August Wilson visited St. Paul for the first time and attended Penumbra's production of Samm-Art Williams's *Home*, in which I played the lead. The following year, I produced the first version of what has become a Twin Cities holiday classic, Langston Hughes's *Black Nativity*, directed and choreographed by Lewis Whitlock. I also earned my M.A. in theater arts from the University of Minnesota that year. My daughter, Sarah Prentice, was born in 1979, and my son, Lucas John, in 1981. As part of Penumbra's 1981–1982 season, I produced August Wilson's first professional production: *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, a collection of satirical poems set to music.

1983–1989

Penumbra had its first runaway hit, Micki Grant's *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope*, directed by Horace Bond and choreographed by Marvette Knight. This production marked the Twin Cities theatrical debuts of Jevetta Steele, Jearlyn Steele Battle, Dennis Spears, Ginger Commodore, and Hassan El-Amin. It was followed shortly by our second and third hits, *Jitney* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, both written by August Wilson.

In 1986, I received a DWI citation, which brought my alcoholism to the fore. The reality of my predicament and the utter embarrassment forced me to stop drinking. Been dry ever since.



1990

I played the lead character, Troy Maxson, opposite Rebecca Rice as Rose in August Wilson's *Fences*. My daughter, Sarah, played Maxson's daughter, Raynell. The production ran for six months.

1991–2000

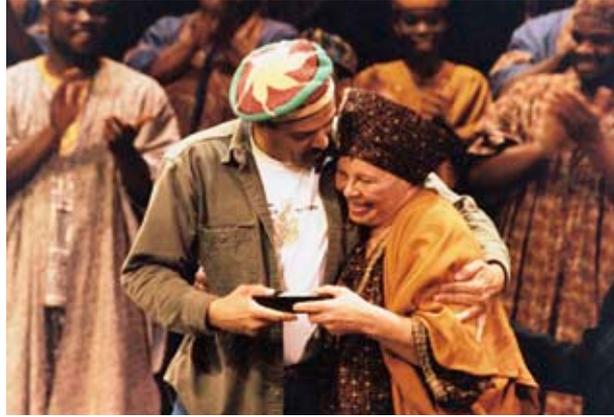
I directed some of my very favorite productions: *The Mighty Gents*, *Two Trains Running*, *Jar the Floor*, *Big White Fog*, *Seven Guitars*, *Buffalo Hair*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, *On the Open Road*, and *Jitney*. I also acted the role of Doaker alongside Rebecca Rice as Bernice in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, directed by Marion McClinton. Wilson called the production "not only my favorite staging but a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work."

In 1994, I was appointed as an associate professor with tenure in the University of Minnesota's Department of Theatre Arts and Dance, and in 1999 was named Scholar of the College.

In 1997, I was appointed to the Salzburg Seminar on Theater for Social Change, convened in Schloss Leopoldskron, Austria. I sat on a panel with Africans from all over the continent who were dressed in their countries' traditional clothing. At the panel, I was introduced by an Austrian woman as "an African living in the United States of America." I broke down in tears and couldn't present my paper.

2000–2005

Administrative stability at Penumbra has made it possible for me to begin to accept directing assignments outside of the Twin Cities, in Kansas City, Missouri; Indianapolis; Tucson and Phoenix, Arizona; San Francisco; New Brunswick, New Jersey; and New York City. In 2005, Penumbra, with its partner, Trinity Repertory Company of Providence, Rhode Island, mounted the first-ever national tour of a play by a Native American playwright: *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, by Assiniboine playwright William S. Yellow Robe, Jr.



Opposite page, left to right:
With Abdul Salaam el Razzac
before a performance of *Big
White Fog* at the Guthrie, 1996

With Rebecca Rice in *Fences*, 1990

This page, above: With Kathryn
Gagnon in *Black Nativity*

Left, top: Tonia Jackson in rehearsal
for *King Hedley II*, 2003

Left, bottom: With Sarah Bellamy

Right, top: Sarah and Lucas Bellamy

Right, bottom: With Colleen Bellamy
in *Saxon Harbor*, Wisconsin



Selected Honors and Awards

Ameriprise Financial IVEY Award for Lifetime Achievement
 Billiegh Griffin Award for Excellence in the Arts
 Black Music Award for Dramatic Contribution
 Bravo Arts Break Commendation for Outstanding Support and Contributions to the Local Arts Community
 Doctor of Arts, Hamline University
 First Bank Sally Ordway Irvine Award for Artistic Commitment
 John Henry “Pop” Lloyd Humanitarian Award for Service to the Youth of America
 Jujamcyn Theaters Award
 Kappa Alpha Psi Humanitarian Award
 Lindbergh Lecturer, Minnesota Historical Society
 The Links Award in Recognition of Excellence in Black Theatre
 Local Hero National Black History Month Award
 Mankato State University Distinguished Alumni Achievement Award

Max Seham Award in Cross-Cultural Medicine, University of Minnesota
Minneapolis Spokesman-Recorder, Kuumba Kwanzaa Award
 Minnesota Martin Luther King, Jr., Humanitarian Award
 NAACP Arts and Drama Award
 National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc., Distinguished Contribution Award
 Outstanding Service to Black Students, University of Minnesota
 Phi Beta Sigma Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Black Performing Arts
 St. Paul Urban League Community Service Award
 State Arts Board Certificates of Appreciation 1988–1990
 Twin Cities Drama Critics’ Circle Award
 Twin Cities Mayors’ Public Art Award
 United States Institute for Theatre Technology Thomas DeGaetani Award
 W. Harry Davis Foundation Award for Leadership in Afrocentric Education



Above: With August Wilson, actor Danny Glover, and Jujamcyn Theaters President Rocco Landesman at the presentation of the Jujamcyn Theaters Award to Penumbra in New York City, 2000

Opposite, top: Rebecca Rice and William Byrd Wilkins in *The Piano Lesson*, called “the definitive production” by August Wilson, 1993

Bottom: With William Byrd Wilkins and Lester Purry in *The Piano Lesson*



Selected Directing Credits

Zooman and the Sign

PENUMBRA

A Raisin in the Sun

PENUMBRA
KANSAS CITY REPERTORY
THEATRE (MISSOURI)

*Grandchildren of the Buffalo
Soldiers*

PENUMBRA
TRINITY REPERTORY COMPANY,
(PROVIDENCE, R.I.)

Stage Directions

PENUMBRA

Two Trains Running

PENUMBRA
KANSAS CITY REPERTORY THEATRE

*Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and
Grill*

OLD ARIZONA (MINNEAPOLIS)

Reflections of Black Nativity

PENUMBRA

Dinah Was

PENUMBRA
ORDWAY CENTER FOR THE
PERFORMING ARTS (ST. PAUL)

On the Open Road

PENUMBRA

Diva Daughters DuPree

PENUMBRA

King Hedley II

PENUMBRA

Someplace Soft to Fall

PENUMBRA

A Love Song for Miss Lydia

PENUMBRA

Black Eagles

PENUMBRA

Riffs

PENUMBRA

Louie and Ophelia

PENUMBRA

Jitney

PENUMBRA

The Darker Face of the Earth

GUTHRIE THEATER

Indigo Blues

PENUMBRA
LORRAINE HANSBERRY
THEATRE (SAN FRANCISCO)

Blues for an Alabama Sky

PENUMBRA

One Acts: Geneva Catrell:

Hospice

PENUMBRA

The Day the Bronx Died

PENUMBRA

Seven Guitars

PENUMBRA

Angels in America: Millennium

Approaches

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA THEATRE

Portrait of the Artist As a Soul

Man Dead

PENUMBRA

Portrait of the Artist As a Soul

Man Dead

(STAGED READING),
CROSSROADS THEATRE
(NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J.)

A Lie of the Mind

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA THEATRE

Big White Fog

GUTHRIE THEATER

Three Ways Home

PENUMBRA

Coming of the Hurricane

PENUMBRA

*Gun Violence Youth Intervention
Project, "Patient Care Simulation
Script"*

ST. PAUL-RAMSEY MEDICAL CENTER

Tod, the Boy, Tod

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA THEATRE

Buffalo Hair

PENUMBRA

King of Coons

PENUMBRA

The Mighty Gents

PENUMBRA

Wedding Band

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA THEATRE

*Only When It Is Dark Enough
Can You See the Stars*

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
TENTH ANNUAL DR. MARTIN
LUTHER KING, JR., CELEBRATION

*Rondo Strykers and the Wishing
Pond Story*

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
NINTH ANNUAL DR. MARTIN
LUTHER KING, JR., CELEBRATION

*The African American Company
Presents Richard III*

PENUMBRA

*The Little Tommy Parker
Celebrated Colored Minstrel
Show*

PENUMBRA

Short Eyes

PENUMBRA

Harvest the Frost

PENUMBRA

Soul Alley

PENUMBRA

The Emperor Jones

METRO CULTURAL ARTS
(MINNEAPOLIS)

River Niger

THEATRE IN THE ROUND
(MINNEAPOLIS)

Dutchman

MIXED BLOOD THEATRE
(MINNEAPOLIS)

To Be Young, Gifted, and Black

MIXED BLOOD THEATRE

The Me Nobody Knows

CHIMERA THEATRE (MINNEAPOLIS)

Little Nell

PENUMBRA

The Hairy Falsetto

PENUMBRA

Five on the Black Hand Side

METRO CULTURAL ARTS

Opposite top, both
photos: Jay Jones and
Desmond Bing in *Stage
Directions*, 2005

Bottom: Phil Kilbourne,
Sam L. Landman, and
Carolyn Pool in *Sex Diaries
of an Infidel*, 2006



About the Award

The German playwright Bertolt Brecht said that “art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.” In 30 years of productions at Penumbra Theatre, from *A Raisin in the Sun* to *Zooman and the Sign*, Lou Bellamy and his company of actors and playwrights have shaped the way we see our world and see one another; like Brecht, Bellamy wants to inspire us to leave the theater and change our world. We Minnesotans are all the richer for it.

The McKnight Foundation Distinguished Artist Award, now in its ninth year, recognizes the artists who have chosen to make their lives and careers in Minnesota, thereby making our state a more culturally vibrant place. Although they had the talent and the opportunity to pursue their work elsewhere, these artists chose to stay—and by staying, they have made a difference. They have founded and strengthened arts organizations, inspired younger artists, attracted audiences and patrons. Most of all, they have made wonderful, thought-provoking art.

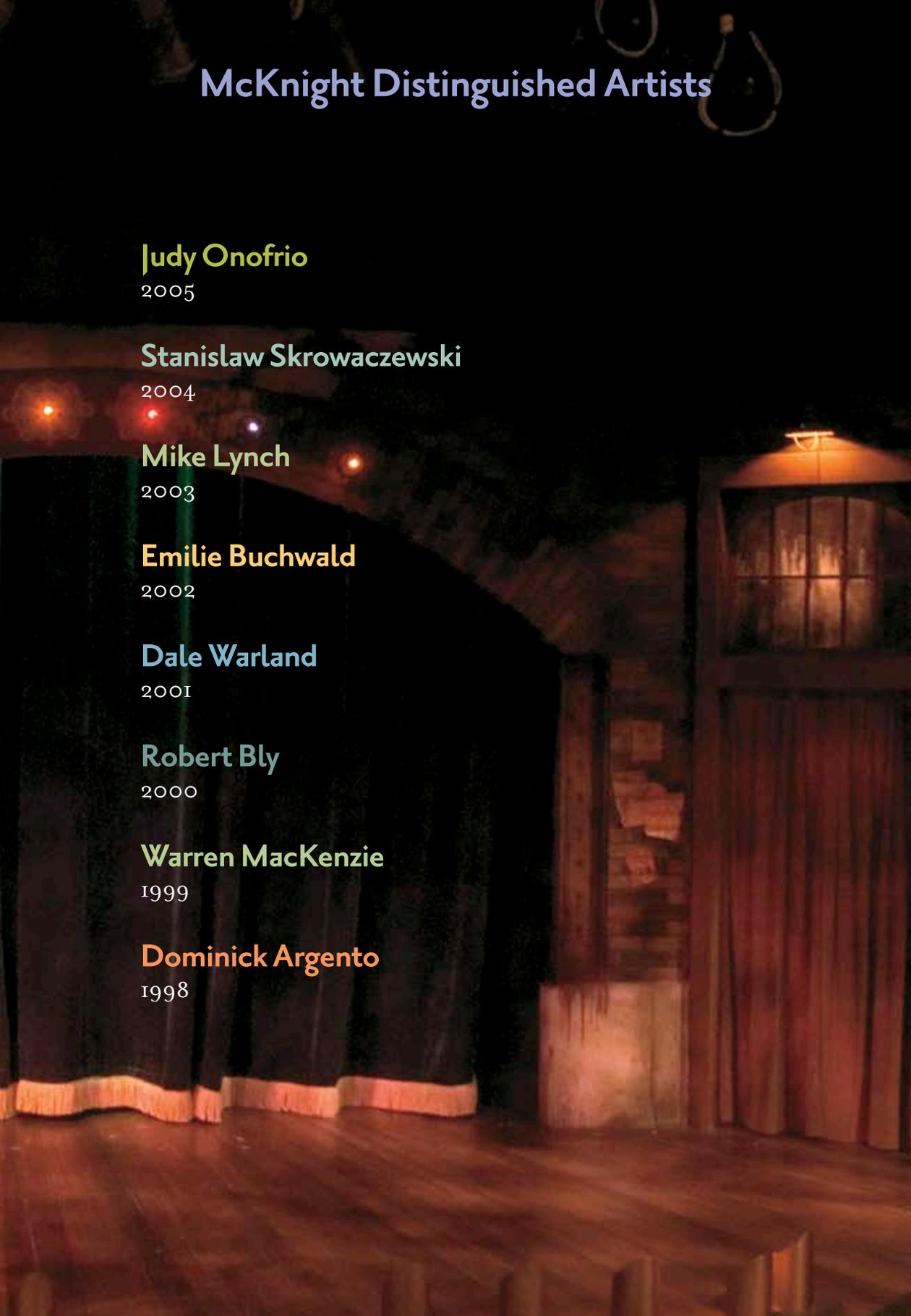
The award, which includes a \$40,000 stipend, goes to one Minnesota artist each year. Nominations are open to everyone, and those received by March 31 are considered the same year. The panel that selects the recipient is made up of four people who have longtime familiarity with the Minnesota arts community.

Our thanks go to panelists Linda Hoeschler, former executive director of the American Composers Forum; Linda Myers, executive director of the Loft Literary Center; Stewart Turnquist, coordinator of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts; and Dale Schatzlein, director of Northrop Auditorium at the University of Minnesota. Dale, a valued member of the selection panel since 2001, passed away in August 2006. His contributions to the panel and his passion for the arts will be deeply missed. The panel members’ high standards and thoughtful consideration make this award a truly meaningful tribute to Minnesota’s most influential artists.

Neal Cuthbert

*Arts program director and interim vice president of program
The McKnight Foundation*

McKnight Distinguished Artists



Judy Onofrio

2005

Stanislaw Skrowaczewski

2004

Mike Lynch

2003

Emilie Buchwald

2002

Dale Warland

2001

Robert Bly

2000

Warren MacKenzie

1999

Dominick Argento

1998

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ABOUT THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

The McKnight Foundation is a private philanthropic organization founded in 1953 by William L. McKnight and his wife, Maude L. McKnight. Mr. McKnight was an early leader of the 3M company. The Foundation, however, has no affiliation with 3M. In 2005, the Foundation gave about 10% of its total grants of \$90 million to the arts. The Foundation also makes grants in the areas of children and families, region and communities, the environment, research, and international programs.









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