

NEWS FROM PENUMBRA THEATRE

For Immediate Release

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Tickets: Penumbra Theatre Box Office at 651-224-3180 or penumbratheatre.org

Black Nativity: Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!

A holiday gospel tradition

November 16, 2007; St. Paul, MN: Penumbra Theatre Company, the nation's preeminent African American theatre, proudly announces the opening of ***Black Nativity: Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!***, conceived by T. Mychael Rambo and Lou Bellamy, directed by Austene Van, musical direction by Sanford Moore on **Thursday, November 29, 2007.**

This powerful gospel journey includes old favorites such as, "No Room at the Inn," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "Silent Night," "Joy to the World," and several new arrangements by Sanford Moore including "My Way's Cloudy," "Christ is Born," and "Go Tell it on the Mountain." The performance features live music by award winning musicians, original dance choreographed by the renowned Uri Sands of TU Dance Company, and a stellar gospel choir ensemble that includes members of Moore by Four and the Grammy award-winning Sounds of Blackness.

Featured vocalists include Ansa Akyea, Jamecia Bennett, Aimee K. Bryant, Ginger Commodore, Cameron Hughes, Tonia Hughes Kendrick, Greta Oglesby, Thomasina Petrus, T. Mychael Rambo, Dennis W. Spears, Jennifer Whitlock, and Jack Yates.

For the fourth year in a row, this spectacular holiday production plays on the Penumbra stage, marking the 20th year of this popular Twin Cities' Christmas tradition. Over the years, *Black Nativity* has undergone continual change. Under the artistic guidance of Lou Bellamy, Penumbra has shaped and re-shaped *Black Nativity* by framing it within different critical points in African and African American history. These moments have included the Reconstruction period, featuring a journey of recently emancipated African Americans northward, biblical times in North East Africa, and most recently, a contemporary setting in Saint Paul. In this incarnation, we are taken into the home of recently widowed Grandma Walker, whose family brings the spirit of hope and holiday cheer to her, filling the house with song, dance, presents, and the tradition of quilting. With this year's focus on the quilting tradition, Penumbra brings attention to an integral and lasting African American skill. Both *Black Nativity* and quilting have served as ways of preserving, telling, and recreating the stories of African Americans in this country. The quilt in this year's production has been a community creation of local artists dedicated to keeping those stories –biblical, ancient, and recent –alive. Penumbra's Education and Outreach Department partnered with the Textile Center and 20 women came together to create a unique quilt that is featured in this year's production.

Penumbra's 2007-2008 Season presented by Star Tribune and Minnesota Monthly

ARTIST BIOS:

LOU BELLAMY (Founder, Artistic Director & Co-conceiver) has been a member of the University of Minnesota's faculty for 31 years and is currently appointed to the rank of Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance. Recent awards include the 2007 OBIE for Direction and the 2006 McKnight Distinguished Artist Award. Recent directing credits include *Two Trains Running* at the Signature Theatre in New York, and *Jitney* at Kansas City Repertory Theatre and Arizona Theatre Company. Recent directing credits at Penumbra include *REDSHIRTS*, *Get Ready*, *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, *Zooman and the Sign*, and *Black Nativity-A Homecoming*.

DOMINIC TAYLOR (Associate Artistic Director) has been a New York based practicing theatre artist for the past 20 years, who has recently relocated to Saint Paul. He has directed a variety of theatre projects and musicals including the new opera *Fresh Faust* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the cantata *The Negro Burial Ground* at The Kitchen in New York City. He has worked with Goodman Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, The Public Theatre, New York Theatre Workshop, Crossroads Theater, Rites and Reasons Theatre, Playwrights Horizons, and Ensemble Studio Theatre among others. He holds both a Bachelors and a Master of Fine Arts from Brown University. He has been appointed Assistant Professor in Directing at the University of Minnesota.

AUSTENE VAN (Director and Ensemble Choreographer) is a Penumbra Theatre Company member. Last season, she co-directed *Black Nativity-A Homecoming*. Select acting credits at Penumbra include *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Zooman and the Sign*, *Dinah Was*, *The Trial*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, and several productions of *Black Nativity*. She also performed in Penumbra's co-production with the Guthrie of *The Darker Face of the Earth*. She has performed at the Children's Theatre Company, Pantages, Mixed Blood, the Guthrie, and The Saint Louis Black Repertory Theatre. Austene has performed throughout the United States and internationally as a singer, dancer and actress. Musical endeavors include singing on tour with Karyn White, and writing and co-producing her own album.

SANFORD MOORE (Musical Director) Recent musical direction credits at Penumbra include *Get Ready*, *Blue*, *Black Nativity-A Homecoming*, and *Ain't Misbehavin'*. Select musical direction credits also include *Crowns*, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, *Triumph of Love*, and *As You Like It* at the Guthrie Theater and *Two Queens*, *One Castle* at Mixed Blood Theatre. Sanford is an adjunct professor at the University of Minnesota School of Music, and Minister of Music for Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church.

URI SANDS (Choreographer) A principal dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for five years, he also danced with Minnesota Dance Theatre and James Sewell Ballet, as a guest artist with Complexions under the direction of Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson, and as a principal dancer with North Carolina Dance Theatre. Recent choreographic commissions include *Zenon Dance*, *North Carolina Dance Theater*, and *Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*. He was awarded a 2004 McKnight Artist Fellowship, and a 2005 Princess Grace Award in choreography. Uri Sands and Toni Pierce-Sands received the 2005 Sage Cowles Best Performance Award and were named 2005 Artists of the Year by the Star Tribune.

T. MYCHAEL RAMBO (Co-conceiver & Ensemble) is an actor, vocalist, and educator. He has performed at Penumbra since 1989 and is now a company member. His most recent Penumbra credits include *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Black Nativity-A Homecoming*, and *Get Ready*. He has performed with the Guthrie Theater, Illusion Theatre, Minnesota Opera, Ordway Music Theatre, Mixed Blood Theatre, Park Square Theatre and Hey City Theatre, a number of regional theatre companies, at Carnegie Hall with the Minnesota Orchestra and internationally throughout Canada, Europe, Africa and Brazil. He has appeared in several local and national television commercials, HBO mini-series including *Laurel Avenue*, *Endeavor*, and *I Led Two Lives*. Film credits include *Mighty Ducks*, *Crossing the Bridge*, *Grumpy Old Men*, *The Cure*, *Equinox*, *Woolly Boys* and *Justice*.

MARY K. WINCHELL (Stage Manager) is in her 21st season with Penumbra. Her most recent Penumbra credit is *Get Ready*. Other select Penumbra credits include *Fences* at Penumbra and the Guthrie, *The Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars*, *Jitney*, *Two Trains Running*, *King Hedley II*, and *Dinah Was*. Mary has also stage managed at the Orpheum Theatre, State Theatre, Pantages Theatre, Children's Theater Company, Jungle Theater and the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami. She has also lent her talents to the Aveda Corporation, Macy's Glamorama, and served as production stage manager for *Dorothy Hamill's Nutcracker on Ice*. Recently, she stage managed *Home* at Pillsbury House Theatre.

ANSA AKYEA (Ensemble) appeared as the angel in Penumbra's 2006 production of *Black Nativity-A Homecoming*. Recent acting credits include *Kirby* at the History Theatre, *Huck Finn* at Children's Theatre Company, and *Vestibular Sense* at Mixed Blood Theatre.

JAMECIA BENNETT (Ensemble) is a manager, singer, songwriter and producer who has sung background for superstars like Janet Jackson, Luther Vandross, Patti Labelle, and Lionel Richie. She is an original member of the Grammy award-winning group Sounds of Blackness, and is a featured soloist on the hit by James Grier & Co, "Don't Give Up." Jamecia has also performed in several Tyler Perry shows including, "I Know I've Been Changed," "I Can Do Bad All By Myself," and "Madea's Family Reunion." She has two sons, Shakur and Jamez, and one daughter, American Idol's Paris "Princess P" Bennett. Jamecia and her family own Community Fitness Today, a non-profit organization that assists AIDS patients and raises awareness of this disease.

AIMEE K. BRYANT (Ensemble) is a founding ensemble member of Congo Square Theatre in Chicago, Illinois, and a graduate of Howard University. Recent theatre credits include *Two Queens*, *One Castle* with Mixed Blood Theatre, *Seussical the Musical* at the Children's Theatre Company, and *Ain't Misbehavin'* at Penumbra. www.aimeekbryant.com

GINGER COMMODORE (Ensemble) has performed with the Grammy award-winning Sounds of Blackness, the JD Steele Singers, Women Who Cook, Minnesota Opera Company, Moore By Four Jazz Ensemble and in several productions at Penumbra. This year marks her third production of *Black Nativity*. Other theater appearances include *Smokey Joe's Café* at Hey City Theater and *Stampin' Shoutin' & Singin' Home* with the Children's Theatre Company. Ginger can be found performing around the Twin Cities with her quartet Ginger Commodore & GCQ. She has just released a live recording that includes "My Funny Valentine" and "Unchained Melody." www.gingercommodore.com.

CAMERON HUGHES (Ensemble) was last seen at Penumbra in *Black Nativity-A Homecoming*. Cameron has been a featured performer on the nationally syndicated *Maury Povich Show*. In 2003, Cameron won first place in the Minnesota State Fair Talent Competition, and also performed the National Anthem at a Minnesota Lynx WNBA game. Cameron's most renowned accomplishment to date is a personal invitation from Stevie Wonder to perform at his annual House of Toys Event in Los Angeles, California in December 2003. Cameron shared the same stage with Stevie Wonder, Natalie Cole, Michael McDonald, India.Arie and a host of other artists and legends.

TONIA HUGHES KENDRICK (Ensemble) has been a featured soloist in live concerts and recordings, including background vocals for Mary J. Blige's single "No More Drama," vocals for gospel artist Judith McCalister, and opening for gospel artist Fred Hammond. This propelled Tonia into a full-fledged career as a gospel artist. Tonia released her solo project, "Just For Hymn," and was also nominated by Minnesota Music Academy for the 2004 Gospel Artist of the Year. Tonia seized the opportunity to add theatre to her list of accomplishments. She landed a supporting role in the debut of *Encounters* at Minneapolis' Southern Theatre. This is Tonia's fourth consecutive year performing in *Black Nativity* at Penumbra Theatre.

GRETA OGLESBY (Ensemble) has performed in several productions at Penumbra including *Black Nativity—A Homecoming*, *Dinah Was*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and *A Love Song for Miss Lydia*. She has also performed at the Guthrie Theater, Goodman Theatre, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Steppenwolf Theatre, Dreamstreet Theatre, ETA Theatre, the Chicago Theatre Company, and played the role of "Aunt Ester" in the world premier of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*. Television credits include *Early Edition* and *Unsolved Mysteries*. Film credits include *Passing Minds*, *Time Saved*, *Four-way Stop*, *The Fugitive*, *My Life*, and most recently, *Conversations with God*. Awards include the Joseph Jefferson Award and two Black Theatre Alliance Awards for Best Actress.

THOMASINA PETRUS (Ensemble) was most recently seen at Penumbra in *Ain't Misbehavin'*. She has also performed at Mixed Blood, Illusion, and Old Arizona Theater. Thomasina cultivated her talents as an actor and jazz vocalist through mentorship and friendship with some of the Twin Cities most beloved artists including James "Cornbread" Harris, Sr., Jevetta Steele, Stokely, Regina Williams, Prince, T. Mychael Rambo, and Lou Bellamy. Thomasina established her own production company where her first production, *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill* by Lanie Robertson, allowed her to portray Billie Holiday, her musical muse. Her tribute CD "If Only...Billie Unsung" continues to sell locally and worldwide. Thomasina can be seen regularly performing in local jazz venues.

DENNIS W. SPEARS (Ensemble) has appeared on the Penumbra stage last season in *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Black Nativity-A Homecoming*, *Blue* and *Get Ready*. Other acting credits include *Ain't Misbehavin'* at Actor's Theatre of Louisville, *Crowns* at the Guthrie Theater and *Smokey Joe's Café* at Hey City Theatre. An accomplished jazz vocalist, Dennis made his splash in jazz as a featured vocalist with jazz vocal ensemble Moore By Four. Minnesota Jazz Music Awards named him Best Male Jazz Vocalist. He has performed in jazz festivals nationally and internationally with such legends as Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Joe Williams, Carmen McCrae and Dee Dee Bridgewater. Solo recordings include "I Hear It," "Why Try to Change Me Now," and his first national release, "Evening Candlelight."

JENNIFER WHITLOCK (Ensemble) is celebrating her 17th production year as an ensemble member of Penumbra's *Black Nativity*. Other Penumbra credits include *Purlie*, *Tambourines to Glory*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Selma*, *Bubblin' Brown Sugar*, and *A Soldiers Play*. Jennifer has been a member of the Grammy award-winning Sounds of Blackness for 30 years. She directed and performed in the 2003 – 2005 production of *The Night before Christmas a Musical Fantasy*, and performed vocals on "Unity," "Soul Symphony," "Reconciliation," "Time for Healing," "Africa to America," "The Night Before Christmas," and "The Evolution of Gospel." She has provided vocal support on recordings for the Crusadors, Quincy Jones, and Stevie Wonder to name a few. Motion picture soundtracks include *Batman*, *Mo' Money*, *Posse*, *Panther*, *Rabbit Ears Project*, and *John Henry*.

JACK YATES (Ensemble) is a member of the renowned James Gear and Company of Minneapolis where he serves as one of the lead singers and staff songwriters of GearCo Productions. He has toured and recorded extensively with this ensemble. Several of these recordings have reached national acclaim. Jack has worked with the famous duo, Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, performing on *The Prince of Egypt* and *Emperor's New Groove* soundtracks. He is well known for his vocals on "Don't Give Up (1998)," "Set Me Free" (2000) and "Peace Be Still" (2002), all of which he recorded on the James Gear Projects. Jack provided the lead vocals on a remake of Youngblood's classic from the 70s, "Get Together," which has received rave reviews in both the gospel and mainstream markets. Jack graduated from St. Olaf College in 1994.

MARCIANO SILVA DOS SANTOS (Dancer) is a native of Brazil. He started to dance formally after a choreographer saw him perform for an acting course he was taking at the Escola de Teatro e Dança FAFI and invited him to intern with the Afro-Brazilian dance company, Negra. After this experience he also began to study ballet and modern dance. He has danced as a member of Negra, Homen Cia de Dança Contemporânea and Balé da Ilha. Marciano joined TU Dance in June of 2006.

ALANNA MORRIS (Dancer) is a native of Brooklyn, NY, and received her B.F.A. from the Juilliard School. She makes her professional debut with TU Dance this season.

ERICK BALLARD (Percussionist) made this theatre debut at Mixed Blood in *Two Queens, One Castle*, with Jevetta Steele. Current band credits include Christy Love, You know Who, The R Factor, and Lady Shayde. In addition, Erick is the drummer for Shilo Baptist Church and an endorser for SILVERFOX Drumsticks. Previous band credits include GB Leighton and Catchpenny.

DAVID HURST (Keyboard) is a songwriter, musician, and actor. A member of the 2002 Stellar award-winning and 2003 Grammy-nominated Excelsior Choir, and the Grammy award-winning Sounds of Blackness, David made a guest appearance on James Grear and Company's "Celebrate." He performed at President Clinton's New Year's Celebration at the White House, along with Will Smith, Luther Vandross, Usher, Patti Austin, BeBe Winans, and Tom Jones. He has worked with both secular and gospel artists, including R. Kelly, Brian McKnight, Mary J. Blige (on "No More Drama") and performed with The Clark Sisters, Kirk Franklin, John P. Kee, and Kim Burrell. David played Santa Clause in 'Twas *the Night Before Christmas* with the Sounds of Blackness.

JAY YOUNG (Bass) studied with C. Scott Hood of Indiana State University and at the School of Music at the Navel Academy. He is a free lance performer, music educator, founder and president of Cartouche Records, and founding member of jazz ensemble Moore by Four. Locally, he has performed at the Ordway Center, Guthrie Theater, Children's Theatre, Walker Art Center, and the Kool Jazz Festival. He has performed internationally in numerous concerts and in several local and national television and radio commercials. He has received recognition and awards from the Minnesota Black Music Awards and the Minnesota Jazz Music Awards.

JASON ALLYN-SCHWERIN (Scenic Design) is the technical director for Penumbra Theatre Company and has served as scenic designer for several Penumbra productions throughout his five season tenure. Jason received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Creative and Performing Arts from Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa. He has studied at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and has a Master of Fine Arts Degree from the University of Texas in Austin. Other theatrical experience includes Actor's Theater Company of Minnesota, Mixed Blood Theatre, and SteppingStone Theatre. He has also worked with Texas Scenic Company of San Antonio and VEE Corporation here in Minnesota.

MARK DOUGHERTY (Light Design) has been the lighting designer for Penumbra Theatre's *Black Nativity* for the past three years. He is currently the Master Studio Technician at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis.

MARTIN GWINUP (Sound & Video Design) is an associate professor in the Theatre Arts and Dance Department at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. He teaches audio and video technology, design and production. He has also worked in the Twin Cities area as a freelance sound/video designer and technician for the past 18 years. He has worked for companies such as the Frank Theatre, History Theatre, Children's Theatre, Cricket Theatre, and Eye of the Storm, to name a few. Recent design credits at Penumbra include *REDSHIRTS*, *Get Ready*, *Blue*, *Black Nativity—A Celebration of Family*, *A Celebration for the Soul... Testify!*, *Rollin' on the T.O.B.A.*, and *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*.

DEIDREA WHITLOCK (Costume Design) received her B.F.A. from the Minneapolis College of Art & Design. She has designed costumes for several Penumbra Theatre productions including the 1986 production of *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Tracers*, *Black Nativity*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Fences*, *Charlie Parker's Celebrated Colored Minstrel Show*, *African American Company Presents Richard III*, *Waiting in Vain*, and *Talking Bones*. Other design projects include T. Mychael Rambo's "A Christmas With Love," Laurie Carlos' *Marion's Terrible Times of Joy*, and AGAPE Praise & Worship Dance Ensemble. She has also worked with the Guthrie Theater, History Theatre, Illusion Theater, Walker Art Center, and the Minneapolis and St. Paul Public schools. In addition, she designs couture and ready to wear fashions for various artists and clients.

QUICK REFERENCE

Production: *Black Nativity: Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!*
Conceived by: T. Mychael Rambo & Lou Bellamy
Producer: Penumbra Theatre Company & Lou Bellamy
Show Sponsor: Thrivent Financial for Lutherans Foundation
Director: Austene Van
Musical Direction: Sanford Moore
Choreographer: Uri Sands
Ensemble Choreographer: Austene Van

Ensemble: Ansa Akyea, Aimee K. Bryant, Ginger Commodore, Cameron Hughes, Tonia Hughes Kendrick, Greta Oglesby, Thomasina Petrus, T. Mychael Rambo, Dennis W. Spears, Jennifer Whitlock, Jack Yates, Alanna Morris (Dancer), and Marciano Silva Dos Santos(Dancer)

Musicians: Sanford Moore (Keyboards I), David Hurst (Keyboards II), Erik Ballard (Percussion), Jay Young (Bass)

Design Team: Jason Allyn-Schwerin (Scene Design), Mark Dougherty (Light Design), Martin Gwinup (Media & Sound Design), Deidrea Whitlock (Costume Design)

Dates: November 29 – December 30, 2007
Previews November 27 & 28
Opening Night, Thursday, November 29, 2007 at 7:30 pm

Performances: Wednesdays, Dec 5 & 12 at 10:00am
Wednesdays, Dec 19 & 26 at 2:00 and 7:30pm
Thursdays at 7:30pm
Fridays at 8:00pm
Saturdays at 7:00pm and 9:30pm through Dec. 15
Saturdays 2:00 and 8:00pm Dec 22 & Dec 29
Sundays 2:00pm and 7:30pm

Tickets: 651-224-3180 or penumbratheatre.org

Price: \$15 - \$35

Theatre Location: 270 North Kent Street, Saint Paul, MN 55102

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