

# Tommye Myrick:

## A Voice for Social Justice Through Theatre

By Dean M. Shapiro

Since returning to her native New Orleans in 1990 after lengthy sojourns in Michigan and New York City, Tommye Myrick has been a busy bee, directing dozens of stage productions, winning numerous awards and working diligently to further the cause of social justice through theatre.

Emerging recently from an involuntary two-year hiatus due to pandemic-related restrictions on live performances, this widely acclaimed, and much-in-demand theatrical director is eagerly hitting the ground running with her latest venture. Over the first two weekends in February, in conjunction with Black History Month, Myrick is directing the 90-minute stage play, "Fly," written by Trey Ellis and Ricardo Khan. The play is about the World War II-era Tuskegee Airmen, the first African American pilots in the U.S. armed forces, and it makes its Louisiana premiere at the Jefferson Performing Arts Center under the auspices of the Jefferson Performing Arts Society.

“Fly” unfolds in the thought-filled memories of an aging Tuskegee Airman who reminisces about the 900-plus members of the 332nd Fighter Group of the U.S. Army Air Forces. Attending the inaugural ceremonies of President Barack Obama, he reflects on his and other airmen’s experiences of racial discrimination and the injustices they faced, both in the military and upon their return to the U.S. after the war.

As Tommye explained, “When Dennis Assaf, (JPAS’ artistic director) first reached out to me in the summer of 2020, he asked me to direct ‘A Raisin in the Sun.’ I declined. So, when he reached out to me again, in January 2021, I told him I would like to direct for JPAS and I would like to do ‘Fly.’ I wanted to do something that educates the public about the contributions of African Americans to the freedoms of this country.”

Tommye’s agreement to direct this production was contingent upon several educational presentations accompanying the run of the play. They included a panel discussion about the production and the military service of African Americans in WWII, school day performances and the unveiling of a photographic exhibit in the theater lobby called “Souls of Valor.” There will also be a VIP event inviting local bigwigs and the media prior to opening night.

As Tommye explains, “All of the productions that I’ve done over the years have always focused on some type of a social injustice that needed a voice.”

Community activism is nothing new to Tommye. She got her start with Free Southern Theatre, training under John O’Neal and Robert “Big Daddy” Costley at the age of 18. While attending Xavier University she first got bitten by the theatre bug. In a production of “The Threepenny Opera, she starred opposite Vernel Bagneris who later became famous for his New Orleans-themed musical ‘One Mo’ Time.’ “As a matter of fact, I was his ‘Sweet Lucy Brown’ to his ‘Mack the Knife,” she said. “I was a music major

then. But once I got onstage it was like, ‘Okay, this is where I need to be.’ And so, I changed my major to theatre and never looked back.”

After graduating from Xavier, she went on to earn her Master’s degree at the University of Michigan in just nine months. There, while teaching at Eastern Michigan University and working on her PhD, a serious health issue derailed her from completing her doctoral dissertation. “After that I went to New York seeking fame and fortune. I found neither,” she laughed.

Arriving in the Big Apple, Tommye studied acting and directing under Obie Award-winning director/producer Gene Frankel. He became her mentor. She made her New York stage debut in a one-woman show titled “Zora” and her directing debut with New Orleanian Norbert Davidson’s “El-Hajj Malik” recounting the life of Malcolm X.

It was in NYC in the early ‘80s that Tommye was cast as Maria Mathis, the lead female role in a film titled “Cane River.” The movie explored the lives of a community of free people of color who lived in the area around Natchitoches in northwestern Louisiana. Filmed on location, the movie was shelved after the death of the producer and it lay dormant for nearly 40 years. Unearthed in a storage vault in 2013, it was restored and it aired five years later on Turner Classics. It received rave reviews for its sensitive treatment of issues among the Cane River settlers regarding shades of black.

After returning home Tommye built up her academic credentials, teaching theatre at the University of New Orleans and serving as artistic director for Southern University at New Orleans. She was also assistant director for the Center for African and African American Studies at SUNO and executive director of the New Orleans African American Museum. She is also the founding director/producer of Voices in the Dark Repertory Theatre Company.

In 2000, shortly after the D-Day

Museum (now the National World War II Museum) opened, Tommye authored a letter that was published in the Times-Picayune taking issue with the museum for hosting a WWII victory commemoration parade that featured exclusively white veterans. She contacted her Black friends in the New Orleans media and called for a boycott of the museum.



Miss Hilda Y. Lincoln - great aunt who raised Tommye



Actors Tasha Smith and Angela Bassett



Tommye receiving the “Roger Ebert Thumb’s Up Award” from Chaz Ebert



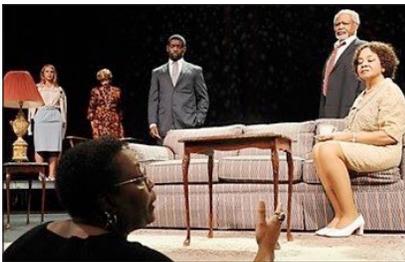
Tommye with co-stars of "Cane River" - Actors Carol Sutton and Richard Romain



Actor Blair Underwood- On the Seventh Day



Actor Courtney Vance



Tommye directing actors " Nicoye Banks, Gwendolyn Foxworth, Harold Evans and Janet Shea in "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner"

The museum officials requested a meeting. After they met with her and Hiram Cooke it was agreed there would be a "Double Victory" parade honoring the Black World War II veterans and a week-long tribute of related events. Several prestigious community organizations, including the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University and the Eisenhower School of American History at the University of New Orleans came on board, as did many elected officials, dignitaries and members of the media.

Renowned actor Ozzie Davis, himself a WWII vet, was the parade's grand marshal. Several Tuskegee Airmen were present, as well as Medal of Honor recipient Vernon Baker and hundreds of other African American WWII veterans, both men

and women. The parade inspired a handful of local Black photographers, among them Jim Thorns and Liberty Bank founder Alden McDonald, to take thousands of pictures commemorating that event.

Together with Tommye, they and other contributing photographers unveiled "Souls of Valor" at the Ernest N. Morial

New Orleans Convention Center in Spring 2001 Many of those same photographs will be on display at the JPAC during the run of "Fly," Tommye proudly noted. "That was my greatest production," she added.

Among the many awards Tommye has won in New Orleans over the past 30-plus years, she is especially proud of the Big Easy Lifetime Achievement Award in Theatre she received in 2020. Prior to that she won Big Easy Theatre Awards in 1992 (Best Drama and Best Director) for August Wilson's "Fences" at Le Petit Theatre, and the same awards again in 1999 for Pearl Cleage's "Flyin' West" for Southern Repertory Theatre.

"How are you able to do all these things?" Tommye was asked in a previous interview in Breakthru Media magazine. The answer was - and still is - "I do only the things I love to do. I no longer feel as if there are things I have to do or things I need to do. I only do the things I want to do. That's what makes life worth living."

For information on "Fly" see ad on the following page.

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