



Spring 5-2003

Creating Crumbs: The Process of Play Production in a Collegiate Setting

Roshaunda Denise Ross
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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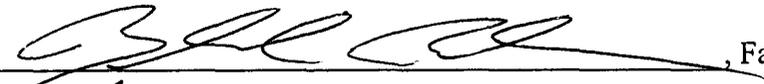
Name: Roshaunda Ross

College: Arts & Sciences Department: Theatre

Faculty Mentor: Blake Robison

PROJECT TITLE: Creating Crumbs: The Process of
Play Production in a Collegiate Setting

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: , Faculty Mentor

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Creating Crumbs:
The Process of Play Production
in a Collegiate Setting

A Narrative Synopsis

By Roshaunda Ross

Senior Honors Project
University Honors Program
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Faculty Mentor: Blake Robison, Head
Theatre Department

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Enclosures

- Approval form
- ‘Crew Assignments’ sheet
- Budget and copied receipts
- Audience attendance sheet

Abstract

This goal of this project was to produce a full-length play on the campus of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The challenges that arose included finding funding and dedicated participants, both actors and stagehands. The selected play was *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* by African-American playwright Lynn Nottage. This show was produced through Strange Fruit On Stage Productions, a fairly new student organization whose mission is to expose the Knoxville community to works by minority playwrights. The show ran from April 10-13, 2003 in the Clarence Brown Lab Theater. With the help of Strange Fruit members and the UT Theatre Department, the process went fairly smoothly and very successfully. There were only a few conflicts that arose due to some people's lack of dedication. In the end, though, the project was a success, and it left the audience thinking.

Play Selection

One of my main goals when selecting a play was to choose a script that would make the audience think. The play had to present issues that are still relevant today. In the beginning, I chose the play *Paper Dolls*. That play intrigued me because it explored issues of beauty and self-worth among Black females. In today's world of sexual advertisements and illusions of perfection, I felt that *Paper Dolls* would surely affect its viewers. It also had moments of blackface use. Seeing the historically negative connotation of blackface performance was relevant to the UT audience in particular because of the Kappa Sigma incident that incited so much controversy in the Fall, 2002 semester.

Unfortunately, *Paper Dolls* was simply too big for this collegiate setting. The script called for a very complicated set and elaborate costumes and technical elements. The two main characters are elderly women; thus, two college-aged women playing those roles would need very intricate make-up and wigs. Moreover, there had not been many productions of *Paper Dolls* even though it was a fairly older play. That raised the question of how workable the script was in general.

So, with the help of the director, I chose *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* by Lynn Nottage. The first good indication about the play was that I read it in one sitting with great interest. The plot was engrossing. The characters are full of life and very believable. And even though it is set in 1950, it has themes that are still relevant today. The play deals with issues of coping, religion, family loyalty, alcoholism, the struggle to be accepted, and interracial love. The interracial love aspect is especially relevant to the UT audience because of all the interracial couples in Knoxville. Moreover, the set was fairly simple, and the technical elements did not seem demanding. Thus, *Crumbs...* was the final selection.

Crew Assignments

I was the main producer of the show. The term “producer” is often used without much knowledge of the actual role of the title. Most people confuse a producer’s role with that of a director or even a stage manager. A producer’s role is actually more business-oriented than artistic. It is the producer’s job to raise funds for a project and hire all the necessary people involved in a show, including the director and stagehands. When the money is raised, the producer must budget it out and monitor whether that budget is being followed. In a professional setting, that is the majority of a producer’s job. In a collegiate setting, the producer takes on more than just financial responsibilities. I also had oversee the coordination of the audition process, verify rehearsal spaces, sign the theater rental contract, meet with the Theatre Department administrators on a regular basis, help to publicize the show, make playbills for the show, and delegate responsibilities to members of Strange Fruit On Stage Productions. (Strange Fruit is a student-run organization on UT’s campus that strives to expose the Knoxville community to works by diverse playwrights. I took on the role of president of Strange Fruit in Fall, 2002.) Basically, as a collegiate producer, I made sure that everything got done when it needed to get done. In some cases, the student producer even directs the show. However, I chose to act instead of direct. Fortunately, my load was lightened because of support from different administrators, especially the advisor of Strange Fruit, my faculty mentor, Blake Robison. He guided me through the process, and he made sure that our needs were met.

Blake also hired the director for the show, Connan Morrissey. She had only directed one show before, and that show was not a full-length play. The students who were in that show thoroughly enjoyed her style. Moreover, she is a teacher at another university; so, Blake thought she would be a good fit for this student cast. Blake handled the salary for Connan. So, Strange Fruit was not part of her contract or paperwork at all. She turned out to be extremely dedicated and willing to explore. She was also very patient with the cast. I could tell that she is a teacher because she was very diligent about research for the characters. All and all, she was a good fit after all.

I appointed the majority of the crew. After the director, I still needed a stage manager, a costume designer, a set designer, a sound designer, a lighting designer, a props supervisor, and various stagehands and board operators. Because I produced this show through Strange Fruit, a lot of these needed people were readily available and willing to be dedicated to the show. I just had to speak with members to find out their niche and their preferences. Luckily, a good number of the members had had prior experience in different areas of the theater including stage managing, costume design, and props creation. There were also members who had performed various jobs in the Strange Fruit show from the previous year, including board operators and deck crew personnel. Thus, their jobs were assigned by their aforementioned knowledge. Those members who had never had any theater experience were basically given a choice according to what I thought they could succeed in. I knew that two of the less experienced members were trustworthy; so, I asked them to be house managers, the people who usually take money at the door when no real box office is available. Another was assigned to be in charge of

props during actual shows. Others were assigned to publicity. I tried to delegate the responsibilities so that everyone felt essential.

After pulling from Strange Fruit members, I still needed a lighting designer, a sound designer, a set designer, and a light board operator. I contacted the head of the Lighting Design graduate students, Kenton Yeager, for a lighting designer. He assigned one of the Scenic Design M.F.A. students who happened to be taking a lighting course to design the lights. That student, Biff Edge, was kind enough to organize our set as well as design out lighting. The resident CBT sound designer, Mike Ponder, agreed to help us with the sound as long as we made a list of what we wanted. Connan made that list for him, and the sound design was done. Mike even added a few things that he thought were appropriate.

The rest of the crew was actually offered to me by Laura Sims, the Production Manager of the CBT. She had two students who needed to fulfill a course requirement. So, one ended up being the light board operator, and the other was a member of the deck crew.

Auditions and Casting

The director, Connan, and I ran auditions. The stage manager, Camellia Townsend, also sat in on a number of the auditions. Various members of Strange Fruit served as runners during the process. They signed actors in and escorted them into the theater from the green room. I had to meet with Laura Sims to rent a space for the auditions. We decided on the Carousel Theater. Then, I had to publicize the auditions. I made flyers; I sent mass emails; and, I put blurbs in the Daily Beacon and Metro Pulse. For the actual audition day, I made sign-in and information sheets for those auditioning.

We were still focusing on *Paper Dolls* at the time of the audition. Thus, we were looking for different attributes in actors. Luckily, we took detailed notes. So, we were able to assign roles accurately even when we changed plays. It turned out that those who auditioned better fit the roles in *Crumbs...* than *Paper Dolls* anyway. So, the casting was very appropriate. The actors who were chosen even had some similar attributes as their character. It was a small cast of five people. After analyzing audition notes, there was still one role missing after the initial audition, though.

The missing role, Gerte, was to be played by a white female. Only one white female had auditioned on the original audition day. Connan did not feel that she was ready for such a role; so, we held another audition specifically to fill that role. I was unable to attend that audition. Connan made a good decision without me. (Ultimately, it is the usually the director's decision who gets cast in a show. I just put in input because I was steering heading the project in general.) One of the students in my honors seminar ended up being cast. I was glad about this because I knew that she would be dedicated and responsible.

The Diva Complex

Although the actors in the cast were dedicated in the long run, there were a few issues that arose during the process. One of the major issues is something that I have named the 'diva complex.' The diva complex occurs when an actor thinks that he/she is "too good" to help with any technical elements. They think that all of their work is done on stage. A few actors even had attitudes when we asked them to put up their own costumes. I believe that this occurred due to the lack of prior experience with this particular cast. But I know that it also occurs with experienced performers, especially famous ones. The difference is that famous performers have people who are paid to pick up after them, and we did not. It really irritated my stagehands and my stage manager. I had to calm everyone down a few times in order to keep peace on the set.

Support and Finances

Because the UT Theatre Department supports Strange Fruit, I did not have to really worry about numerous aspects of the show. The costume shop let my costume designer pull from their stock. The props shop let my props master borrow needed props; moreover, they let him have whatever materials he needed to make additional props. We were allowed to borrow all of our set pieces from the department's warehouse. All of the needed lights and sound equipment were made available to the crew. All of this was free of charge.

However, we did have a few financial needs. To cover these needs, we used funds left over from Strange Fruit's previous production (money we had collected at the door minus the scholarship money). That was about \$300. Then Blake allotted \$500 for us through the Seth Rowan Fund. The Seth Rowan Fund is used exclusively for student projects. That money was only to be used for technical elements; it could not be used for any salaries or scholarships. But, I did not have to worry about salaries because all the students involved were volunteering their time, and Connan had been paid directly by the department. I then made the budget with that \$800. The budget was as follows:

Props-\$50
Costumes-\$50
Photography-\$50
Publicity-\$350
Playbills-\$50
Reception/Dinner-\$150
<u>Misc.-\$100</u>
Total \$800

Unfortunately, everything ended up costing more than I had expected. Also, unexpected expenses kept coming up like paint for the floor. I had not even allotted any money for the set because I assumed that we would only need furniture pieces from the warehouse. Fortunately, we did not spend the whole \$350 for publicity; so, everything was covered. In the end, we still had \$162 left in the budget. We had spent \$638. We raised about \$300

at the door from donations. This low income occurred because I did not make an entry fee mandatory. I did not want anyone to be unable to see the show due to financial constraints. So, I suggested that Strange Fruit do a fundraiser show next semester in an effort to raise money for next spring's production.

We handled money on a reimbursement system. I decided that only Connan, the costume designer, and I should be able to physically get reimbursement money. However, I ended up handling all of the money transactions. In order to get reimbursed, we had to have a detailed/itemized receipt for the purchases. If an itemized receipt could not be given, a special form had to be filled out and signed by a store employee. This only occurred at thrift stores. When a crewmember gave me a receipt, I would immediately subtract that money from the appropriate category in the budget and make a photocopy of the receipt. Then, I would go to the CBT box office to get reimbursed from their petty cash fund. I used my personal credit card to make most of the purchases; so, it was not a problem when I had to wait a few days to get reimbursed. I tried to get everyone else reimbursed as quickly as possible, though.

I have suggested that Strange Fruit open up a bank account to alleviate the problems that the reimbursement system can have. A credit card may not always be available. Moreover, people may not be able to sacrifice their own personal funds without knowing exactly when they will be repaid. Thus, a bank account would cut out the middleman.

Publicity and Attendance

Another Strange Fruit member and founder, Marissa Weaver, was supposed to be in charge of publicity. However, due to changes of priority and/or lack of dedication, she did not actually do much for the show at all. She did photograph pictures for the posters and got the posters designed. The problem was that she did not do this until about a week before the show. Thus, the posters did not get hung in a very timely or strategic manner. She made handbills two days before opening night. Other than that, she did not help very much at all, and she did not welcome assistance when it was offered. I continuously asked about radio spots, but she did not do that research until the week of the show, and then we found out that they were too expensive. So, we could have spent more on newspaper advertisements and posters. (However, if we had spent all of the publicity money, we might have gone over budget.)

So, the rest of Strange Fruit and I had to take up her slack. I sent out mass emails on various distribution lists including the Theatre Department, the Honors Program, the Office of Minority Student Affairs, etc. Other members of Strange Fruit also sent mass emails to all their acquaintances without having to be asked. I wrote and sent press releases to the major newspapers: Daily Beacon, News Sentinel, and Metro Pulse. The Daily Beacon ended up running a blurb in the campus calendar section of the paper. None of their reporters actually got back to me. The News Sentinel put an announcement in their paper. The play critic for the News Sentinel, Doug Mason, responded to an email that I sent him saying that he would have loved to cover the play, but I had gotten in touch with him too late. And, the Metro Pulse had it listed in their theatre section. None

of their reporters responded to my emails. I also designed and distributed special invitations for any faculty or staff that the cast or crew wanted to invite.

The attendance for the show was extremely lower than the previous year. I attribute some of this to poor/late publicity. I also attribute it to the time of the run. There were numerous events happening on the same weekend as the show, including the CBT main stage production of *Romeo and Juliet*. I suggested that, if at all possible, Strange Fruit should schedule their show for next Spring on an emptier weekend. Moreover, we elected an official Publicity Chair so that, hopefully, there will not be such a problem with time management for advertisements in the future.

Conclusion

This year's Strange Fruit production of *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* was a success. The audience loved it, and they continue to discuss the issues displayed in the plot. A young man just asked me a question about my character two days ago, almost a month after the run. The UT Theatre Department has been extremely supportive. The members of Strange Fruit were diligent and tireless. The cast and crew sacrificed their time willingly and consistently. Even though there were a few difficulties, they were unnoticeable to the audience. And the audience is what matters.