

Langston Hughes' Summer Musical Hits The Big Stage With "Chocolatized" Version Of Snow White

By Lornet Turnbull
Special to The Medium

On a recent afternoon, a group of young people assembled near the playground at the Seattle Center and suddenly broke into dance — staging a flash mob.

Visitors who had stopped to watch this high-energy performance couldn't have known that what they were getting was a sneak peek into a musical production set to open this Thursday at the Seattle Repertory Theater (The Rep).

This was the cast of *Snow White and the Seven: Each One, Teach One*, a theatrical production by the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute (LHPAI). The popular teen summer musical features 82 children in its first full-scale run in years.

LHPAI's "chocolatized" adaptation of the Brothers Grimm classic is scheduled to run Aug. 20-23.

Written and directed by Isiah Anderson Jr., *Snow White and the Seven*, is a story of a young woman in search of her foundation and heritage. On a trip to Africa, where she'll meet her father for the first time, she falls asleep when the flight is delayed. She dreams about what her trip will be like, an adventure filled with both worry and wonder.

"Integrated throughout are words and phrases that give light to the words and wisdom of Martin Luther King, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela," Anderson said. "There are segments where the kids enlighten the audience. They are under me for eight weeks as students and then they get on stage and become the teachers to everyone in the audience."

In 2010, the city of Seattle closed what at the time was the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Center to complete a two-year, \$3.4 million renovation that included seismic and electrical upgrades. In 2013, the center was transferred from the Parks and Recreation Department to the Office of Arts & Culture, to better support its mission as an arts-focused space.

As a result, "Institute" replaced "center" in Langston Hughes' name and a smaller cohort of students produced scaled-down summer musicals, including last year's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, which they performed on the Langston stage.

Steve Sneed, artistic director for cultural programs at Seattle Center, said he helped create the summer musical about 25 years ago when he was executive director at Langston Hughes, because he was disappointed to see the kinds of negative roles in which children of color were being cast.

"Here, they get an opportunity to play a role they are not normally given a chance to play," Sneed said.

For his part, Anderson, who has been writing and directing plays at LHPAI for nearly 20 years, said he wanted a program that these kids could connect with. Too often, he said, they don't identify with many of the roles in popular fairytale classics, such as *Snow White* or *Cinderella*.

According to Anderson, his 2007



Participants in Langston Hughes' Summer Youth Musical

production of *Cinderella* — *A Love Story with the Sound of Motown*, was "one of the biggest hits ever." He recalls that Berry Gordy, record producer and founder of the Motown label, inquired about "this little theater group in Seattle requesting his music" and directed his staff to record the musical so he could see it.

Anderson has adapted a number of classics to fit a more diverse, primarily African-American cast — from *Soul of Beauty* and the *Beast* to *GREASE: The Way We Do It*.

"Every one of those classics can be chocolatized," he said.

And after devoting so many summers to working with youth to produce musicals at LHPAI, he said the five-year absence left him feeling unfulfilled.

"I walked around for five years — empty," he said. "I have to admit it's difficult for me to even say that ... because I hadn't really thought about it."

Word of the summer musical's return spread through social media and by word of mouth, as nearly 200 youth applied for this year's program. To be part of it, students don't audition in the traditional sense but must prove to Anderson and his team that they can keep up with the schedule, which includes eight weeks of eight-hour days, Monday through Friday and sometimes on Saturdays.

Anderson said he's disturbed and driven by the negative images he sees on the nightly news.

"I turn on the TV and I hear about another Black kid doing something crazy," he said. "Here I have 80 kids who are getting up every morning, bugging their parents to get to rehearsal."

Because it's a teen production, children 12 and under don't normally participate in the full program. But early on Anderson was allowed to put the younger students together in a small class and write a part for them that he incorporates into the play.

After nearly two decades, he's seeing some familiar faces: "We've come full circle," he said. "I have kids who are part of this program now, whose parents were kids in this program."

In the past, about 70 percent of the cast returned every summer, Anderson said. But following the hiatus, this year's program saw only one returning student. "Everything is

brand new," he said.

And while some have done theater on a small scale, "this is, for all these kids, the biggest stage they are going to be on."

Angel Mann, a student at Todd Beamer High School in Federal Way, was cast in the role of *Snow White*. The 16-year-old said she loves to sing but initially wasn't sure if she was good enough for the musical and was reluctant to audition.

Anderson and his team spend the first couple weeks observing the students to assess what part might be the best fit for them. And while she knew she worked hard, Mann said she was shocked when she was chosen for a lead role.

"I was so excited," she said. "I was hearing all the girl's names called first, those who were really good and I didn't hear my name and then he called my name..."

After rehearsals shifted from Langston Hughes to a smaller theater at The Rep, Mann said she stole a peek at the theater where they'll be performing. She was in awe.

"It's huge...so many seats," said Mann. "I'm very nervous right now. But I'm ready."

Jameel Williams, 29, who stopped by one day last week hoping to catch a rehearsal, said he began performing with the musical as soon as he was old enough.

"They were the best summers of my life," said Williams, as he reflected on his participation in the program.

Nyema Clark, another summer musical alum, said, "I always wanted to be in theater. I wanted to be in the show, to be able to go back stage, to be part of it all. And when I got a chance to actually be part of something like this...it was amazing."

So how do you get 82 kids to focus for eight straight weeks in the middle of the summer?

"It's about the relationship we build with them," Anderson said.

By "we" he is referring to himself and his team, which includes choreographer Tyrone Crosby and music director Michelle Lang, who wrote all the music for the show and moved from Portland for the summer to be part of the program.

Anderson said he expects the best from these kids and tolerates nothing less. There's no "sshing" in theater, he tells them. He

gets their attention by sticking a peace sign with his fingers in the air. Personal squabbles between cast mates are taken onto what has become known as "Front Street," where details of the dispute, whatever it is, are aired openly.

One requirement of the program is that parents and guardians must commit five hours of community service to the program or pay \$50 if they can't.

"We found part of our success is getting families involved because the kids are more excited about doing it because they want

their parents to be proud of them," Anderson said.

The musical is scheduled for 1:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. Aug. 20 – 22, with the final show set for 3:00 p.m. on Aug. 23.

Tickets are \$8 for youth (12 and younger) and \$10 for adults. Tickets can be purchased by contacting the LHPAI box office or online at Brown Paper Tickets.

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Written & Directed by Isiah Anderson, Jr. Music Director Michelle Lang

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AUGUST 20-23, 2015

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