

NEWS FROM PENUMBRA THEATRE

For Immediate Release

November 21, 2006

Contact: Julie McGarvie, Director of Marketing
651-290-8686 x250
julie.mcgarvie@penumbratheatre.org

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



Black Nativity--A Homecoming A Holiday Gospel Extravaganza!

November 21, 2006; St. Paul, MN: Penumbra Theatre Company, the nation's preeminent African American theatre, proudly announces the opening of ***Black Nativity--A Homecoming***, conceived by T. Mychael Rambo and Lou Bellamy, co-directed by Austene Van and Lou Bellamy with musical direction by Sanford Moore on **Thursday, November 30, 2006**.

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 added this year, "Rise Up Shepherd & Follow," "Children Go Where I Send Thee," and the "Little Drummer Boy." 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, Aimee Bryant, Ginger Commodore, Cameron Hughes, Tonia Hughes, Greta Oglesby, Thomasina Petrus, T. Mychael Rambo, Xavier Rice, Dennis Spears, Jennifer Whitlock, and Jack Yates.

For the third year in a row, this spectacular holiday production plays on the Penumbra stage, marking the 19th year of this popular Twin Cities' Christmas tradition. Over the years, patrons have witnessed many incarnations of the production which celebrates the story of the birth of Christ as told through the lens of African American gospel music. The 2006 production, set in the present, preserves the intent of the very first show in 1987 by bringing together the African American gospel tradition with traditional community values as it celebrates the bonds of family and the power of faith through story, song and dance.

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ARTIST BIOS:

ANSA AKYEA (Ensemble) has most recently been seen in *Vestibular Sense* at Mixed Blood, and *The Watson's go to Birmingham 1963* at The Children's Theater Company, and *The God of Hell* at Frank Theater.

AIMEE K. BRYANT (Ensemble) is a co-founding ensemble member of Congo Square Theatre in Chicago. After graduating from Howard University she moved to the Twin Cities where she has been building a lengthy theatre resume. She is excited to be returning to Penumbra for *Black Nativity A Homecoming*. Other Penumbra credits include *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Jar the Floor*, *Black Nativity, for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, *Con Flama*, and *Ain't Misbehavin'*.

GINGER COMMODORE (Ensemble) is a singer, songwriter and actress. She has been a member of the Twin Cities music scene for many years, and is an original member of the Grammy Award winning Sounds of Blackness. Ginger has appeared as part of the gospel groups Sam Davis and The Twin Cities Gospel Ensemble, and the JD Steele singers. She's also an original singer with Women Who Cook, and performs with the local jazz ensemble Moore By Four. Ginger has shared the stage with such greats as Doc Severenson and Patrice Rushen, and has toured Europe with The Chiffons. Her theatrical credits include the world premiere of *Death in the Family* with the Minnesota Opera Company, *Black Belts* at the Mixed Blood Theatre, *Stamping, Shouting & Singing Home* at the Children's Theatre Company, *Smokey Joe's Cafe* at Hey City Theater, and *Selma* with Penumbra Theatre Company.

CAMERON HUGHES (Ensemble) was last seen at Penumbra in *Black Nativity Celebration of Family, A Celebration for the Soul...Testify!* 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. Cameron's personal aspirations include gaining staying power and singing music that is meaningful and appeals to the masses.

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TONIA L. HUGHES (Ensemble) began singing at the tender age of two, developing her vocal talent through singing opportunities at family gatherings, school, and weekly church services. Tonia moved to Minneapolis in 1995 where she joined the national recording group Minneapolis Gospel Sound which has opened for many national acts including Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles and Little Richard. Now flying solo, Tonia continues to broaden her musical horizons. She's performed background vocals for Mary J. Blige's "No More Drama," opened up for national gospel recording artist Fred Hammond, and showcased her talent on the nationally televised "Bobby Jones Show." In 2004, Tonia was nominated by the Minnesota Music Academy for Gospel Artist of the Year.

GRETA OGLESBY (Ensemble) has performed in several productions at Penumbra including *Black Nativity A Celebration of Family, A Celebration for the Soul...Testify!*, *Dinah Was*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and *A Love Song for Miss Lydia*. Last year, she starred in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Greta was stand-by for Phylicia Rashad for the recent Broadway production of *A Raisin in the Sun* at the Royal Theatre. She has also performed at the Guthrie Theatre, Goodman Theatre, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Steppenwolf Theatre, Dreamstreet Theatre, ETA Theatre, and the Chicago Theatre Company, and played the role of "Aunt Ester" in the world premier of *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) has performed in the Twin Cities for the last 15 years, portraying lead characters on Penumbra, Mixed Blood, Illusion, and Old Arizona Theatre stages. Most recently, Thomasina was seen at Penumbra in *Ain't Misbehavin'*. A true "hometown girl," she has 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, Stokley, 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. She is looking forward to her February 2007 production of "Hot Chocolate," her annual Valentine's Day concert.

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T. MYCHAEL RAMBO (Ensemble) is an actor, vocalist, and educator. He has performed at Penumbra since 1989, and has been seen in *Tambourines to Glory*, *Don't Bother Me I Can't Cope*, *Spunk*, *Last Minstrel Show*, *Jitney*, *Dinah Was*, *Zooman and the Sign*, *Ain't Misbehavin'* and several performances of *Black Nativity*. He has also performed with Guthrie Theatre, Illusion Theatre, Minnesota Opera, Ordway Music Theatre, Mixed Blood Theatre, Park Square Theatre and Hey City Theatre. T. Mychael has also performed with a number of regional theatre companies, several national and regional tours, and internationally throughout Canada, Europe, Africa and Brazil. Television credits include national and local commercials, the HBO mini-series "Laurel Avenue," "Endeavor," and "I Led Two Lives." Film credits include *Mighty Ducks*, *Crossing the Bridge*, *Grumpy Old Men*, *The Cure*, *Equinox*, *Wooly Boys* and *Justice*, winner of several national independent film festival awards and nominated for a NAACP Image Award.

XAVIER RICE (Ensemble) recently appeared on stage at Penumbra in *Ain't Misbehavin'*. Other theatre credits include Hud in *Hair* at Pantages, Nice-Nicely in *Guys and Dolls* at Paul Bunyan Playhouse, and as Ed Bishop in *Floyd Collins* with Theatre Latte Da. Xavier will perform a one-man show, *I Can't Believe I set my Alarm for This!* in January at the Bryant Lake Bowl. He will also perform in *Don Giovanni* at the Theatre de la Jeune Lune.

DENNIS W. SPEARS (Ensemble) most recently performed in Penumbra's *Ain't Misbehavin'*. He has also performed with Actor's Theatre of Louisville in *Ain't Misbehavin'*, The Guthrie Theatre in *Crowns*, and Hey City Theatre in *Smokey Joe's Café*. An accomplished jazz vocalist, Dennis made his splash in jazz as a featured vocalist with the jazz vocal ensemble, Moore By Four. Minnesota Jazz Music Awards named him Best Male Jazz Male 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. After two successful solo recordings "I Hear It" and "Why Try to Change Me Now," his first National release, "Evening Candlelight" (romantic ballads) hit Target stores everywhere on October 8th.

JENNIFER WHITLOCK (Ensemble) is celebrating her 16th production year as an ensemble member of Penumbra's *Black Nativity* cast. 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 29 years. She directed and performed in the 2003 – 2005 productions of the *Night Before Christmas a Musical Fantasy*, and performed vocals on *Unity*, *Soul Symphony*, *Reconciliation*, and *Time for Healing*, *Africa to America*, *The Night Before Christmas* and *The Evolution of Gospel*. She has also provided vocal support on "Rural Renewal" - Crusaders "Handel's Messiah – A Soulful Celebration" - Quincy Jones, "Conversation Peace" – Stevie Wonder to name a few. Motion picture soundtrack credits include *Batman*, *Mo' Money*, *Posse*, *Panther*, *Rabbit Ears Project*, and *John Henry*. Jennifer has also served as Road Manager for Sounds of Blackness.

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JACK YATES (Ensemble) is a member of the renowned James Grear and Company of Minneapolis where he serves as one of the lead singers and staff songwriters of GrearCo 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 Grear 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.

YVONNE GLENN (Dancer) was born in Amherst, Massachusetts. She began her dance training in college and received her B.A. in Dance from the University of Minnesota. At the U of M, Yvonne performed works by choreographers such as Merce Cunningham and Jawole Will Jo Zollar. She has danced with Ballet of the Dolls, Black Label Movement, and TU Dance. She is currently dancing with Lula Washington Dance Theatre and Santa Monica Contemporary Ballet.

GERMAUL BAINES (Dancer) is a graduate of South Mountain High School of the Arts, Phoenix, Arizona. He went on to perform in *A Chorus Line* and *Guys & Dolls* with Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts, and continued his dance education at the University of the Arts/ Philadelphia where he received a University Creative Grant that provided the opportunity to produce an evening of his choreography *Viewsic Expression*. In 1991 Germaul formed *Viewsic Expressions*, now based in Brooklyn, New York. A former principle dancer with Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company for nine years, he received the New York Dance and Performance Award-The Bessies, and the Arts International Grant in 2003 which fostered his anthropology study in a small village called Kwahu Tafo in Ghana, West Africa. Germaul has assisted and demonstrated for the legendary Katherine Dunham and has performed around the world including Berlin, Germany and Graham Town, South Africa.

KENYARI JACKSON (Percussion) has been playing drums professionally since the tender age of eight. He has performed with Minnesota's first family of Soul, The Steeles, James Greer and New Friends, the U of M Gospel Choir and the National Baptist Convention. He has performed in national houses like the Historic State Theater, Ordway Center for Performing Arts, The Guthrie Theater and O'Shaunessy Auditorium. Kenyari has studied under some of the nation's best drummers including Michael Bland, formerly of Prince and New Power Generation, Trenaugh Grahm, formerly of the Grammy Award winning Sounds of Blackness and Larry Robinson and Darryl Boudreaux of The Steeles and The Sounds of Blackness. He is currently heard every Sunday at Progressive Baptist Church in St. Paul. He attends Dunwoody College of Technology and after transferring to Florida A&M University next year he hopes to become a music producer and an accomplished song writer.

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J. YOUNG III (Bass) studied with C. Scott Hood of Indiana State University and at the School of Music at the Naval Academy. Mr. Young contributes his musical talents to the Twin Cities as a freelance performer, music educator, and founder and president of Cartouche Records. Locally, he has performed at the Ordway Center, Guthrie, Children's Theatre, Walker Art Center, and the Kool Jazz Festival. He has performed internationally in numerous concerts. He has also performed on television, radio, and in commercials. He is a recognized clinician, having appeared with Ray Brown and Malachi Favors. Mr. Young is in demand as a recording artist, and appears on scores of local and national recordings. Personal accomplishments include recognition and awards from the Minnesota Black Music Awards and the Minnesota Jazz Music Awards. Mr. Young is a founding member of the nationally recognized group, Moore by Four.

LOU BELLAMY (Producer, Conceptualizer, Co-Director) is Founder and Artistic Director of Penumbra Theatre Company. He has been a member of the University of Minnesota's faculty for 28 years and is currently appointed to the rank of Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance. Awards include the W. Harry Davis Foundation Award for Leadership in Afro-centric Education, Links Award in Recognition of Excellence in Black Theatre, a doctorate from Hamline University, the 2005 Ivey Lifetime Achievement Award, and The 2006 McKnight Distinguished Artist Award. Recent directing credits include *Jitney* at Kansas City Repertory Theatre and Arizona Theatre Company, and *Two Trains Running* at the Signature Theatre in New York. Recent directing credits at Penumbra include *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, *Zooman and the Sign*, *Black Nativity A Celebration of Family*, *A Celebration for the Soul...Testify!*, and *Reflections of Black Nativity*. Acting credits include lead roles in *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Waiting in Vain*, and *Talking Bones*.

AUSTENE VAN (Co-Director & Ensemble Choreographer) is a Penumbra Theatre Company member. Select Penumbra credits 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*. Other stage credits include *Smokey Joe's Café*, *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* and *Once on This Island* at the Children's Theatre Company, *The Dance on Widow's Row*, *Point of Revue*, *Two Queens One Castle*, and *Vices* at Mixed Blood, *Crowns* and *A Christmas Carol* at the Guthrie, *The Colored Museum* and *Spunk* at The Saint Louis Black Repertory Theatre, and *Hair* at Pantages. Television credits include *Vernie* and *The Shakedown*. 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.

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SANFORD MOORE (Musical Director) Musical Direction credits include *Crowns*, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, *Triumph of Love*, and *As You Like It* at the Guthrie Theater, *Rollin on the T.O.B.A.*, *Dinah Was*, and *Ain't Misbehavin'* at Penumbra Theater, *2 Queens 1 Castle* and *Point of Review* at Mixed Blood Theater in Minneapolis, MN and at Horizon Theater, Atlanta, GA., *The Last Minstrel Show* at History Theater, and *Smokey Joe's Café* at Hey City Theater. He is also Co-Creator of *Always and Forever* and *2-Gether and Living Beauty* at Illusion Theater. 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) is currently a principal dancer and choreographer with the North Carolina Dance Theatre. He has received recognition as a dancer and choreographer locally and nationally. His choreography fuses classical elegance with edgy contemporary action, pulsating intensity with poetic lyricism. A principal dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre for five years, he was featured in works by Alvin Ailey, Talley Beatty, Donald McKayle, Ulysses Dove, John Butler, George Faison, and Judith Jamison, among others. He has also been a principal dancer with Minnesota Dance Theatre, as well as a dancer with James Sewell Ballet, and continues to choreograph and appear as a guest artist with Complexions under the direction of Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson. In addition to several film and television credits, Mr. Sands has taught dance extensively throughout the United States and Europe.

MARY K. WINCHELL (Stage Manager) is in her 20th season with Penumbra. She has just returned from Assistant Directing *Jitney* at Kansas City Repertory Theatre and Arizona Theatre Company. Her most recent Penumbra credit is for the world premiere and national tour of *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*, produced in collaboration with Trinity Repertory Theatre. Other Penumbra credits include *Fences* at Penumbra and the Guthrie, *The Last Minstrel Show*, *Tracers*, *Mighty Gents*, *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars*, *for colored girls...*, *The Darker Face of the Earth*, *Jitney*, *Black Nativity*, *Two Trains Running*, *King Hedley II*, *Reflections of Black Nativity*, and *Dinah Was*. In addition to her work at Penumbra, Mary has stage managed at the Children's Theater Company, Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami, and Jungle Theater. She has also lent her talents to the Aveda Corporation, Moore by Four, Marshall Field's Glamorama, and served as company manager for Dorothy Hamill's Nutcracker on Ice.

MAY MAHALA (Dramaturge) is a PhD candidate in Theatre Arts at the University of Minnesota. Her writing has appeared in *The Blue Earth Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Colere*, *NYU's Women and Performance Journal*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Xcp: Cross Cultural Poetics*. She has worked with The Illusion Theatre, New World Theatre, The Pillsbury House Theatre, The San Francisco Mime Troupe, Theatre Unbound, and Works/Plays. Her fellowships and awards include The August Wilson Fellowship at Penumbra Theatre, two Many Voices residencies from the Playwrights' Center, and 1st place in Garrison Keillor's Festival of Romantic Writing.

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JASON ALLYN-SCHWERIN (Scenic Design) also serves as technical director for Penumbra Theatre. Jason was the scenic designer for Penumbra's *Black Nativity* in 2002, *Reflections of Black Nativity*, and *Diva Daughter's Dupree*. He also served as scenic design collaborator for *Black Nativity A Celebration of Family*, *A Celebration for the Soul...Testify!* and *Slippery When Wet*. Jason received his Bachelor's Degree in Creative and Performing Arts from Grand View College, has studied at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities, and has a Masters of Fine Arts Degree from the University of Texas – Austin.

MARK DOUGHERTY (Light Design) has been the Lighting Supervisor and Facilities Manager at Penumbra Theatre for the past five years. Penumbra designs include *On the Open Road*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Two Trains Running*, *King Hedley II*, *Dinah Was*, and *Slippery When Wet*. He works as an Electrician at the Guthrie Theatre and The Children's Theatre. Mark has also designed at Theatre L' Homme Dieu, Guthrie Theatre 'Lab', and The Phipps Center for the Arts in Hudson, WI. He is a graduate of St. Cloud State University.

MARTIN GWINUP (Media & Sound Design) is an associate professor in the Theatre Arts and Dance Department at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. He teaches Audio and Video 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. *Black Nativity A Homecoming* is his tenth production with Penumbra Theatre Company. Recent design at Penumbra include, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *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*.

GREGORY J. HORTON (Costume Design) is an associate professor of Costume Design and Directing at North Carolina A&T State University. Design credits include *Sweet Charity*, *The Visit*, *A Woman from the Town*, *Something's Afoot*, *A Mid Summer Night's Dream*, *A Company of Wayward Saints*, *The Crucible*, *The Heiress* *The Glass Menagerie*, *Dream girls*, *Foreigner*, *The Wiz*, *The Colored Museum*, *Crowns*, *Fences*, *Tartuffe' Waiting to be Invited* and *My Fair Lady*. Mr. Horton has directed such plays as, *Pretty Fire*, *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum*, *Nunsense*, *Ain't Misbehavin'* and *Godspell*. Greg has worked as guest director and costume designer at Columbia Basin College, Western Washington University, Hampton University, The Ensemble, The Colorado Shakespeare Festival, Swine Palace, North Carolina Shakespeare Festival, Play House on the Square, Memphis Black Repertory, Kuntu Repertory, and the St. Louis Black Repertory Company.. He is a member of Black Theatre Network (BTN) and United States Theatre Technologist (USITT).

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QUICK REFERENCE

Production: *Black Nativity A Homecoming*
Conceived by: T. Mychael Rambo and Lou Bellamy

Producer: Penumbra Theatre Company & Lou Bellamy
Show Sponsor: Thrivent Financial for Lutherans Foundation

Co-Directors: Austene Van and Lou Bellamy
Musical Direction: Sanford Moore
Choreographer: Uri Sands
Ensemble Choreographer: Austene Van

Ensemble: Ansa Akyea, Aimee Bryant, Ginger Commodore, Cameron Hughes, Tonia Hughes, Greta Oglesby, Thomasina Petrus, T. Mychael Rambo, Xavier Rice, Dennis Spears, Jennifer Whitlock, Jack Yates, Gremaul Gaines (Dancer), and Yvonne Glenn (Dancer)

Musicians: David Hurst (Keyboards), Kenyari Jackson (Percussion), Jay Young (Bass)

Design Team: Jason Allyn-Schwerin (Scene Design), Mark Dougherty (Light Design), Martin Gwinup (Media & Sound Design), Gregory J. Horton (Costume Design)

Dates: November 30 – December 24, 2006
Previews November 28 & 29
Opening Night, Thursday, November 30, 2006 at 7:30 pm

Performances: Tuesdays 7:30pm
Wednesdays 2:00pm
Thursdays 7:30pm
Fridays 8pm
Saturdays 7:00pm and 9:30pm
Sundays 2:00pm and 7:30pm

Tickets: 651-224-3180 or penumbratheatre.org

Price: \$15 - \$40

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

Media Contact: Julie McGarvie, Marketing Director
julie.mcgarvie@penumbratheatre.org
651-290-8686 x250
NOTE: New phone (as of 11/27): 651-288-6784