

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—Hear Again the Christmas Story!
A holiday gospel tradition

November 7, 2008; St. Paul, MN: Penumbra Theatre Company, the nation's preeminent African American theatre, proudly announces the opening of ***Black Nativity—Hear Again the Christmas Story!***, conceived by T. Mychael Rambo and Lou Bellamy, directed by Austene Van, with musical direction by Sanford Moore on **Friday, November 28, 2008.**

For the fifth year in a row, this spectacular holiday production plays on the Penumbra stage, marking the 21st year of this Christmas tradition. This season, 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, and presents.

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 Yolande Bruce, Aimee K. Bryant, Ginger Commodore, Tonia Hughes Kendrick, David Hurst, Greta Oglesby, T. Mychael Rambo, Samuel G. Roberson, Jr., Cydni Shepard, Namir Smallwood, Dennis W. Spears, and Jennifer Whitlock.

Joining the vocal ensemble are TU Dance Company members Alanna Morris and Marciano Silva dos Santos, with live music by Sanford Moore and David Hurst on keyboards, Jay Young on bass, and Erick Ballard on drums.

For the second year in a row, a community of local artists have come together to create the quilt featured in "Black Nativity." Penumbra's Education and Outreach Department partnered with the Textile Center to organize a quilting circle of over 30 members. These talented women built and stitched the quilt, based on the original artistic design of Penumbra Company member, Seitu Jones.

Penumbra's 2008-2009 Season presented by Star Tribune and Minnesota Monthly

ARTIST BIOS:

LOU BELLAMY (Co-conceiver & Producer) is the founder and artistic director of Penumbra Theatre. He 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. His most recent directing credits include *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson* at Penumbra, and *A Raisin in the Sun* staged at Cleveland Play House, co-produced by Penumbra, Cleveland, and Arizona Theatre. This co-production will also be staged at the Guthrie Theater this season.

DOMINIC TAYLOR (Associate Artistic Director) has directed a variety of theatre projects and musicals including the new opera *Fresh Faust* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, the cantata *The Negro Burial Ground* at The Kitchen in New York City, and *The Wiz* at the University of Minnesota. 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.

SARAH BELLAMY (Education Director)

is Penumbra Theatre's Education Director. A playwright and educator, she holds a BA in creative writing and post-colonial theory from Sarah Lawrence College and a Masters degree in Caribbean history and the trans-Atlantic Slave trade from the University of Chicago. She is currently working toward her doctorate in cultural studies and critical discourse at the University of Minnesota.

AUSTENE VAN (Director & Ensemble Choreographer) directs Penumbra's *Black Nativity* for the second year. She recently performed in Penumbra's production of *Gem of the Ocean*, staged at the Guthrie. Other select Penumbra credits include *Zooman and the Sign*, *Dinah Was*, *The Trial*, and *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. She has also performed at The Children's Theatre, Mixed Blood, Guthrie Theater, Pantages, and The Saint Louis Repertory Theatre. Television credits include *Vernie* and *The Shakedown*. Musical endeavors include singing on tour with Karyn White, and writing and co-producing her own album.

T. MYCHAEEL RAMBO (Co-conceiver & Ensemble) returns for his 17th year in *Black Nativity*. Other recent Penumbra credits include *The Piano Lesson* and *Gem of the Ocean*. T. Mychael has performed with the Guthrie, Illusion, Minnesota Opera, The Ordway, Mixed Blood, Park Square and Hey City. He has performed at Carnegie Hall with the Minnesota Orchestra, throughout the United States and Canada as well as Europe, Africa and Brazil. Television and film credits include HBO's *Laurel Avenue*, *Endeavor*, *She Led Two Lives*, *Mighty Ducks*, *Crossing the Bridge*, *Grumpy Old Men*, *The Cure*, *Equinox*, *Wooly Boys* and *Justice*. T. Mychael is the recipient of a 2008 Emmy Award for the regional KTCA documentary/community programming series, *Minnesota Minute*.

SANFORD MOORE (Musical Director) Recent musical direction credits at Penumbra include *The Piano Lesson, 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. He has choreographed for 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*.

MARY K. WINCHELL (Stage Manager) is in her 22nd season with Penumbra. Most recently, she stage managed Penumbra's *Fences* and *Gem of the Ocean*. Other Penumbra credits include *The Piano Lesson, Get Ready, Black Nativity: Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!, Seven Guitars, Jitney, Two Trains Running, King Hedley II, and Dinah Was*. She has stage managed at the Orpheum Theatre, State Theatre, Pantages Theatre, Children's Theatre Company, Jungle Theater, the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami, Macy's *Glamorama*, Dorothy Hamill's *Nutcracker on Ice*, Aveda's 20th Anniversary Celebration at Radio City Music Hall, and Super Bowl XXVI *Winter Magic*.

STEPHANIE LEIN WALSETH (August Wilson Fellow) is an MA/PhD candidate in Theatre Historiography at the University of Minnesota. Previously, she served as the Managing Director of Mu Performing Arts. She has worked professionally as a theatre administrator, actor, director, dramaturg, and stage manager with several theatres including Mu, Mixed Blood Theatre, the Guthrie Theater, The Playwrights' Center, Frank Theatre, Theatre in the Round, Starting Gate Productions, Theatre Unbound, Chaos Theories, CLIMB Theatre, and the Portland Stage Company. Her writing has appeared in the *Baylor Journal of Theatre and Performance*.

ERICK BALLARD (Percussionist) made his theater 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. Erick is the drummer for Shilo Baptist Church and an endorser for SILVERFOX Drumsticks. Previous band credits include GB Leighton and Catchpenny.

YOLANDE BRUCE (Ensemble) has performed in several productions at Penumbra, most recently *Rollin' on the T.O.B.A.* She has also worked with Illusion Theater, Mankato State University and the Guthrie Theater. Yolande has performed nationally and internationally as a member of the award-winning jazz group Moore by Four. She has opened for legendary acts that include Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughan, and BB King. Yolande sings at venues throughout the Twin Cities and has been a featured vocalist at many churches both locally and abroad.

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.

GINGER COMMODORE (Ensemble) has performed with the Grammy award-winning Sounds of Blackness, the JD Steele Singers, Women Who Cook, The Minnesota Opera, Moore By Four Jazz Ensemble, and in several productions at Penumbra. This year marks her fourth 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 recently released a live recording that includes "My Funny Valentine" and "Unchained Melody."

DAVID HURST (Ensemble & Keyboards) is a songwriter, musician, and actor. He is 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," and 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 many gospel artists including R. Kelly, Brian McKnight and Mary J. Blige, and has performed with The Clark Sisters, Kirk Franklin, John P. Kee, and Kim Burrell.

TONIA HUGHES KENDRICK (Ensemble) has been a featured soloist in numerous concerts and recordings, including background vocals for Mary J. Blige's single "No More Drama," vocals for gospel artist Judith McAllister, and opening for gospel artist Fred Hammond. Tonia also has a solo project, "Just For Hymn," and was nominated by Minnesota Music Academy for the 2004 Gospel Artist of the Year. She appeared in the debut of *Encounters* at Minneapolis' Southern Theater. This is Tonia's fifth consecutive year performing in *Black Nativity* at Penumbra Theatre.

ALANNA MORRIS (Dancer) is a native of Brooklyn, NY, and received her B.F.A. from The Juilliard School. This year marks her second season with TU Dance.

GRETA OGLESBY (Ensemble) has performed in several productions at Penumbra including *The Piano Lesson*, *Black Nativity – A Homecoming*, *Dinah Was*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and *A Love Song for Miss Lydia*. She has 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 premiere of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*. Television and film credits include *Early Edition* and *Unsolved Mysteries*, *Passing Minds*, *Time Saved*, *Four-way Stop*, *The Fugitive*, *My Life*, and *Conversations with God*. Awards include the Joseph Jefferson Award and two Black Theatre Alliance Awards for Best Actress.

SAMUEL G. ROBERSON, JR. (Ensemble) is making his Penumbra debut. Most recently he performed in *The Ballad of Emmett Till* at the Goodman Theatre, and he will be performing in

Living Green at Victory Gardens later this winter. He has also worked with the Children's Theatre, Pillsbury House Theatre, Illusion Theater, Imagination Stage, Source Theatre and The Studio Theatre. His first play, *Same Difference*, was co-produced by Illusion Theater and Pillsbury House Theatre. He is the recipient of a 2007 Jerome Many Voices Residency through the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis and a 2008 Cultural Community Partnership Grant through the Minnesota State Arts Board. Samuel is a graduate of Howard University.

CYDNI SHEPARD (Ensemble) is making her Penumbra Theatre stage debut. She is a junior at St. Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists and is interested in vocal performance and acting. Her stage credits include roles in *H.M.S. Pinafore*, *Pirates of Penzance*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *The Music Man*, *Peter Pan*, and *Evita*. Cydni is currently recording a demo of R&B and hip hop music.

MARCIANO SILVA DOS SANTOS (Dancer) is a native of Brazil. He studied theater at the Escola de Teatro e Dança FAFI in Vitória, Espírito Santo, Brazil and danced with the Afro-Brazilian dance company, NegraÔ. He has studied ballet, capoeira, modern and contemporary dance and is currently a member of TU Dance. He has also danced with Homem Cia de Dança Contemporâneo, Balé da Ilha and Stuart Pimsler Dance and Theater. He has choreographed a piece for four men, Chão, and presented it at Patrick Cabaret and the Ritz Theater in Minneapolis. This is his second consecutive year performing in *Black Nativity* at Penumbra.

DENNIS W. SPEARS (Ensemble) recently performed in Penumbra's *The Piano Lesson*. Other Penumbra credits include *Black Nativity: Twenty Years of Holiday Cheer!*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Black Nativity – A Homecoming*, *Blue* and *Get Ready*. He has also performed in *Ain't Misbehavin'* at Actor's Theatre of Louisville, *Crowns* at the Guthrie Theater and *Smokey Joe's Café* at Hey City Theater. Dennis is a member of Moore By Four and has been named by Minnesota Jazz Music Awards as Best Male Jazz Vocalist. He has performed with Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, 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."

JAY YOUNG (Bass) studied with C. Scott Hood of Indiana State University and at the School of Music at the Naval Academy. He is a freelance performer, music educator, founder and president of Cartouche Records, and founding member of jazz ensemble Moore by Four. 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.

JENNIFER WHITLOCK (Ensemble) is celebrating her 17th performance in *Black Nativity*. Other Penumbra credits include *Purlie*, *Tambourines to Glory*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Selma*, *Bubblin' Brown Sugar*, and *A Soldiers Play*. She is a member of the Grammy award-winning Sounds of Blackness. With Sounds of Blackness, she directed and performed in *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 Crusaders,

Quincy Jones, and Stevie Wonder to name a few. Motion picture soundtracks include *Batman*, *Mo' Money*, *Posse*, *Panther*, *Rabbit Ears Project*, and *John Henry*.

ERIKA K. DIXON-GOSS (American Sign Language Interpreter) has been the ASL Interpreter for Penumbra Theater for 11 years. Erika has had the pleasure of interpreting works by the late August Wilson including *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*, *The Piano Lesson* and *Gem of the Ocean*. Erika also interprets for Hopkin's Stages Theater, Plymouth Playhouse, Anoka's Main Street Stage, and The State and Pantages Theatres.

RICK JACOBSON (Audio Describer) has been describing theatre for 13 years and provides description for blind patrons at over 25 theatres in the Twin Cities. Recent shows include *Fences*, *Spamalot*, *The Rocky Horror Show*, and *Les Misérables*. He is the audio description coordinator for the Minnesota Fringe Festival. He describes the annual Flint Hills Children's Festival. Rick can be heard on Nickelodeon and PBS stations across the country. In 2006, he received an Access Arts Award from VSA Arts Minnesota. He also describes for blind and low-vision passengers on cruise ships, most recently in Mexico.

JASON ALLYN-SCHWERIN (Scenic Designer) is in his 7th season as Technical Director for Penumbra Theatre. He has served as Scenic Designer for several productions and helped coordinate Penumbra's national tour during the 2005-06 season. Jason received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Creative and Performing Arts from Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa; studied at the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities; and received his Master of Fine Arts Degree from the University of Texas at Austin. Jason has worked with Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, Theater Latté Da, Mixed Blood Theatre, SteppingStone Theatre, Actor's Theater Company of Minnesota, as well as Texas Scenic Company of San Antonio and VEE Corporation in Minneapolis.

MARTIN GWINUP (Sound Designer) is an associate professor in the Theatre Arts and Dance Department at the University of Minnesota. 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 18 years. Martin has worked for the Frank Theatre, History Theatre, Children's Theatre, Cricket Theatre and Eye of the Storm. Recent design credits at Penumbra include *Fences*, *REDSHIRTS*, *Get Ready*, *Blue*, *Black Nativity – A Celebration of Family*, *A Celebration for the Soul...Testify!*, and *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers*.

KATHY MAXWELL (Lighting Designer) is the Master Electrician for Penumbra Theatre and has worked on *Fences*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Black Nativity*, and *REDSHIRTS*. She recently did the lighting design for *Lights Up!* at Illusion Theatre and was the assistant lighting designer for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* at the Ordway.

CAROL ANN WINTHER (Costume Design) is the resident costume designer for the College of St. Catherine where she also teaches Makeup and Costume for the Stage. Previously at Penumbra, she assisted the designer with costumes for *Black Nativity*, and she is a charter member of the Penumbra Quilting Circle. She is a member of the Technical Advisory Board at Theatre in the Round. Design credits include *Uncle Vanya*, *You Never Can Tell*, and *Ghost* at

Theatre in the Round. Recently she designed *I Remember Mama* for New Breath Productions, and *Vote for Pedro* at Teatro del Pueblo.

AARON CHVATAL (Assistant Costume Design) is a senior theatre major at Hamline University. His recent work includes designing costumes for *The Cherry Orchard*, directed by Zaraawar Mistry, *Fefu and her Friends*, directed by Jeff Turner, and *Words Words Words*, directed by Barbe Marshall.

QUICK REFERENCE

Production: *Black Nativity—Hear Again the Christmas Story!*
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: Erick Ballard (Percussion), Yolande Bruce, Aimee K. Bryant, Ginger Commodore, David Hurst (Vocalist and Keyboards II), Tonia Hughes Kendrick, Sanford Moore (Keyboards I), Alanna Morris (Dancer), Greta Oglesby, T. Mychael Rambo, Samuel G. Roberson, Jr., Cyndi Shepard, Marciano Silva Dos Santos (Dancer), Namir Smallwood, Dennis W. Spears, and Jennifer Whitlock, and Jay Young (Bass)

Design Team: Jason Allyn-Schwerin (Scene Design), Kathy Maxwell (Light Design), Martin Gwinup (Media & Sound Design), Carol Ann Winther (Costume Design)

Dates: November 28 – December 28, 2008
Previews November 25 & 26, at 7:30pm
Opening Night, Friday, November 28, at 7:30 pm

Performances: **Wednesdays through Saturday 7:30pm**
Sunday 2:00 and 7:30pm
NOTE: Wednesday, Dec 24 has a 2:00pm show only and
Thursday, Dec 25 there is NO SHOW

Additional performances include:
Saturday, Nov 29 at 2:00pm
Wednesdays, Dec 3 & Dec 10 at 10:00am
Wednesday, Dec 17 at 2:00pm
Wednesday, Dec 24 at 2:00pm
Friday, Dec 26 at 2:00pm

Tickets: 651-224-3180 or penumbratheatre.org

Price: Adult single is \$38 and Students are \$18

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

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