

Different Strokes Interview

Recently the plane of Earth's equator passed through the center of the sun. The vernal equinox marks the beginning of spring in the northern hemisphere, a time of renewal and fresh starts. Tiny flowers start to appear announcing their readiness to be pollinated, the days get longer, and the weight of winter starts to lift.

Not all beginnings are so gentle, some fucking suck. Like starting chemotherapy or starting a second job because your first one doesn't pay the bills. Other beginnings are revolutionary, like say when citizens organize to overturn an evil government (I'm looking at you 45). And yet other beginnings are completely unperceivable from the outside, they take place entirely in the mind; a shift in perspective, a dislodging of an old belief, a new provocation.

Different Strokes! Performing Arts Collective works tirelessly to deliver these sort of unperceivable, but powerful internal shifts. Each play presents an opportunity to experience a new perspective, consider an underrepresented point of view, or engage with fresh ideas.

Their mission is...to *increase and sustain opportunities for more diversity within the Western North Carolina performing arts community, by producing, and working with other performance artists or groups to present works which confront issues of social diversity in a provocative way; and by providing opportunities for audiences to explore visions of our diverse world.*

Since 2010 they have stayed true to this mission taking on difficult issues including LGBTQ rights, systemic racism, mental illness and gender inequality in sometimes subtle and sometimes palpable ways through plays as diverse as *The Laramie Project*, *Glengarry Glenn Ross*, and *Rasheeda Speaking*. After each performance the actors and director welcome the audience to stay for a talk back session where all are encouraged to explore the deeper issues presented in the play.

I sat down with *Different Strokes!* Co-founder and Managing Artistic Director, Stephanie Hickling Beckman to learn more about this local creative force.

How long have you lived in Asheville? I moved to Asheville from Atlanta in 1997 for the same reason many people move here – to reinvent myself, to start fresh. In Atlanta I worked in the insurance industry for 20 years; working my way up from a file clerk to a department manager.

Was the transition from Atlanta to Asheville a difficult one, particularly as an African-American lesbian?

Atlanta is so fast pace, and at heart I'm a small town girl, so the slow pace of Asheville was a welcome change. It was difficult to get used to the severe lack of racial diversity, and segregation in Asheville. In Atlanta I could walk into just about

any public place and feel surrounded by people of color, however I was in no way a 'walking down the street holding hands lesbian'. Things reversed when I moved to Asheville.

I understand that the African-American population in Asheville has been steadily declining for the past decade-why do you think that is?

There is a legacy of pain in Asheville that has to do with gentrification. It has been passed down from generation to generation. I think the people who move away are generally young and want to get a different perspective, and start a life they design for themselves. Also, over-all there's not much opportunity in Asheville if you're not a wealthy transplant. The cost of living is high, good jobs are few and salaries are low. And it's just nice to be able to walk around and see people who look like you.

Did you move here to start a theater company? No, not at all. I acted in high school and really enjoyed it, so as part of my reinvention I decided to audition for a play called *The Children's Hour* at a socially conscious theater company called *Consider The Following*, and that was it - I was bit, again, by the acting bug.

I started to audition for more plays that were put on by activist oriented theater groups, first it was *Consider The Following*, then *Scape Goat Theater* - both would put on provocative plays that asked big questions and would partner with non-profits to share the proceeds from each production. Unfortunately, by 2010 both theater companies folded.

So did you start *Different Strokes!* as soon as *Scape Goat Theater* folded? No. I still didn't want to direct, I was actually against the idea of directing; I love acting and going to the theater but I couldn't imagine directing. I don't like actors that much (ha)! But I was reading *Love! Valor! Compassion!*, a play I have read several times and really enjoy. While I was reading I started to envision how I would set up the scenes, what the set would look like and slowly it occurred to me that actually I *do* want to direct. As I started to really think about how to do this the first problem was that the lead in this play is Latino and I didn't know a single Latino actor in Asheville. So one night, my partner and I were eating out and our server was Latino, and she just asked him - are you an actor? He said, well I do spoken word...and that was it, that got the ball rolling. But I still had the problem of not being able to afford to produce an entire play. My partner looked at me and said, well we have this credit card with no balance on it...

That's amazing, you took a big risk: Ya, I took a big risk, but we did the play, paid off the credit card, and split the proceeds with Western North Carolina AIDS Project. The response to the play was incredible, people were coming up to us saying they had seen the play on Broadway and ours was better and we got several great reviews in local papers and it was like...this feels good.

When *Scape Goat* folded in 2010 I felt like the work they were doing was too important to lose. There was no other theater company in the region doing this

sort of work so after the success of this play I decided it was time to take up the mantel, and formed *Different Strokes!* with a very similar mission.

This sort of activist theater seems particularly important now. How has the recent election effected your organization? This has been our best fundraising year yet. I think people realize that they need to support what is important to them and it is not a given that we will always be around.

Does theater really matter? Can it contribute to social change? Theater changes lives and minds. I have seen it happen. It's interesting, you know if you sit down and have a conversation with someone about a controversial topic and you disagree, it usually results in an argument and you feel challenged or defensive. But when you are able to let people watch the lives of characters unfold on stage, they are more able to imagine themselves in their shoes. I always tell people if you come to the play you might as well just plan to stay for the talk back, because you are going to be talking about it anyway, and don't talk about it in the safety of your car on the ride home, with people who think like you do, stay and have a conversation with people who may disagree with you. We will have a conversation together. And it is usually very beautiful.

How did you choose the name *Different Strokes!*?

Contrary to what some people think, we were not named for the TV show. That would be *Diff'rent Strokes*. When we first started talking about names, all I could think of was *Everyday People* by Sly and the Family Stone, and that led me to think about the lyrics - "Different Strokes for Different Folks, and so on and so on...". I wanted us to be different, to break away from the norm, and be accessible to all kinds of people.

Do you remember the first play you experienced that changed your life? Yes! I was 14 years old my mom's best friend wanted to introduce me to theater so she took me to see *Timbuktu!*. And oh my god it was incredible, visually it was like *The Lion King*; people walking on stilts with giraffe heads, beautifully elaborate set design and costumes. And when Eartha Kitt appeared...she did not just appear...she was carried out slowly wearing a big head dress and the first thing she did was let out a loud Eartha Kitt purrrrrr...and that was it, I was in love...I knew in that moment that theater was for me. (If you have not seen Eartha Kitt's entrance in *Timbuktu!* please go [here](#) right now, it is amazing)

Did you watch the Oscars this year? Yes.

What was your take on the whole *La La Land*/*Moonlight* debacle? I have an unpopular opinion. I did not like *Moonlight*. It relates to a belief I have that I see played out in Asheville especially, that sometimes the bar gets lowered for African-Americans. I think if *Moonlight* was created by and starred white people it would not have been nominated. And if you notice every time the Oscars get's criticized, like they were in 2016, for being so white the committee reacts in the following year by over compensating and nominates as many people of color as possible. I mean

Moonlight was ok, it was nice to see a coming of age story about a black man because you never see that, and seeing how people in his life dealt with him being gay, that was interesting but I thought the acting was mediocre. But I didn't like *La La Land* either. I mean there were so many other good movies last year; *Fences* was great, *Hidden Figures* also, those two movies were worthy of awards. The acting in *Fences* in particular was amazing. Viola Davis, she is my queen, what makes her such a fabulous actor is that she is not afraid to ugly cry, you know, snot dripping and everything, she doesn't care, she is so there, so present.

Many activist oriented arts non-profits struggle with the idea of only appealing to folks who already agree with their mission, effectively speaking to the "choir". Because the mission of *Different Strokes!* is clear to anyone purchasing tickets, do you fear that the plays are only speaking to the "choir"?

I have heard this question MANY times, mostly in the form of a statement, however I always think 'just because they're members of the choir doesn't necessarily mean they're singing'. Our shows offer an opportunity to step into someone else's shoes, to gain a new or expanded perspective. We aren't asking our audiences to think one way or another; we are asking them to think more deeply on a given topic, and consider what part they play in this world and how they can make a difference. Most of that takes place during the post show discussions. It is then that we occasionally find opposing opinions; we encourage healthy discussion between our audience members. Sometimes it feels as if two people saw two different plays or the same play supporting opposite sides of an argument. There are no absolutes.

I love that you have talk backs after each play, are there certain issues people seem more at ease discussing than others? People are thrilled to talk about LGBTQ issues, they love it. But when you bring race to the table, people can't get out of the theater quick enough. I have been pleasantly surprised however with *Rashida Speaking* and *Submission* by the number of people willing to stay for the talk back, and I think it has to do with the election. People who maybe thought race was passé, you know the idea that 'racism is so 80s', that we are past all that and now. After the election they were like hold up, this *is* still a problem.

Why do you think people are more able to discuss LGBTQ issues-even if they are not gay, but still have a hard time talking about race? Race is so complicated, you are battling against how people are raised, your personal experience, and those things are fighting against what you think you know. We all have prejudices, I don't think we are all racist, but I do think we have bias, and preconceived ideas about other people. With race the reaction is often more unconscious, we see someone and have an immediate response and that often scares us. And because it is such a sensitive topic people would rather say nothing than say the wrong thing.

Are there any topics that you will not take on? With the right script, we will take on any topic. There is one I am considering right now that I am not sure about yet. It is a play called *Frozen* and it is about this child that runs away and the mom is frozen

at her kitchen window waiting for her child to return. It turns out that the child is abducted, molested and killed. When the mother finds out she decides to visit the perpetrator on death row. At first she wants to see him die, she hates him, but she keeps going back and eventually, over time she starts to understand the perpetrator and what happened in his life that lead him to where he is and forgives him. This would be a challenging one to do, especially as a parent. I think it would be asking a lot of the audience. And we in no way want to be seen as sympathetic to pedophiles.

Has there ever been a topic that was really too difficult for an actor?

We talk about the topics at hand so much during the rehearsal process that even if they come in the door being a little uncomfortable they are usually transformed by opening night. We've had a few straight guys cast as gay and you know in the auditions we are upfront that the role will have a same sex kiss or what have you and we ask the actors to rate on a scale of 1-10 how comfortable they are and most actors give them selves a 10 (totally comfortable), but when it comes time to actually do the scene they will be awkward and ask if they can wait until tech week for the kissing scene.

Interestingly enough I have had some difficulty with a few parts. *Rashida Speaking* was difficult for me because I identified so strongly with Jacqueline (the lead character) that during talk backs it was hard to hear people describe her as crazy, that was uncomfortable.

Do scripts usually specify race in the casting descriptions? When the play is based on a historical event or specifically about race then yes. But usually it is not explicit in the casting description but will be implied in the script like " she pulled her blonde hair from her cap..." in those situations you are not locked into casting a white woman for that part because the description of the character did not say "white woman", it just said 21 year old woman...this is one of the things we are trying to combat and I think was one of the things that #oscarssowhite was trying to say - characters are assumed to be white unless they are specifically described as people of color.

As the earth itself tilts us towards new beginnings, perhaps it is the perfect time to consider what old assumptions and prejudices we have laying around, growing mold and collecting dust. And maybe *Different Strokes!* theater is just what we need for a little spring cleaning of the mind.

The next play by *Different Strokes!* opens on June 15, 2017 and is entitled *5 Lesbians Eating a Quiche*. For more information and to purchase tickets visit: [Different Strokes!](#)
