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Black Nativity Pittsburgh 2011: A 23-Year Old Tradition Continues

Themes change but the positive message remains

(Pittsburgh, PA) October 31, 2011 – Black Nativity, a production based on Langston Hughes' musical dramatization of the Christmas Story, has been running in Pittsburgh for almost a quarter of a century! This year's performance, in December at **Alumni Hall in Oakland**, marks twenty-three years of creatively expressing the birth of Christ and relating it to our lives today.

Langston Hughes' "song play," as he called it, provides the lines for groups and organizations all over the country to color in with their own interpretations, without losing the common threads of faith, hope and love. The musical gives the community an opportunity to celebrate and experience some of the richest aspects of African-American culture: the oral tradition of storytelling, the synergy of communal worship, the energy of Gospel music and the vitality of dance.

Black Nativity is a meeting of the past and present in an explosion of music, dance, and narration. The production is known for bringing some of the cities greatest talents together. Through combined effort and collaboration, a legacy continues that began on Broadway in 1961 and here in Pittsburgh in 1988.

One Performance gave birth to many

The curtains were rolled back to reveal act 1 of Black Nativity to Pittsburgh at the Wilksburg Arts Council, choreographed by Miss Shona Sharif, performed by her African Drum and Dance Ensemble. Miss Sharif made it her mission to return the show to the stage each year. Over the years, the cast grew and changed, as did the song list, dances, length of play and venue. By 1993, what began with an ensemble, encompassed more vocalists, dancers and musicians, both acts of the musical were performed, and the location was moved to the University of Pittsburgh.

Miss Sharif passed in 1999 and her son Oronde Sharif took the baton and continued running both the African Dance and Drum Ensemble as well as the yearly production of Black Nativity. With the dance and drum ensemble renamed after his mother, Oronde made it his responsibility to perpetuate both traditions.

The Ensemble

The Shona Sharif Dance and Drum Ensemble was formed in 1982, led by Miss Sharif from 1986 to 1999, and is now led by Mr. Sharif. The ensemble is and has been co-sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh's Africana Studies Department from the very beginning.

The Play and its Author

Hughes is probably most known as a Poet though he wrote everything from columns to books, and several plays and musicals, including *Black Nativity*. Hughes retells Luke's account of the birth of Christ with Africa as the setting in the first act. Act two lands the audience in the middle of a church service celebrating the Christmas Story and the hope it gives us presently.

It was 1961 when *Black Nativity* hit the stage for the very first time. It was one of the first African-American plays to run on Broadway. The show was first entitled *Wasn't It A Mighty Day?* Changing the title to *Black Nativity* may have cost the show some of its well-known performers but it certainly did not stop the show. In fact, a tour of Europe followed the Broadway run. *Black Nativity* went on to be revived during the Christmas season year after year in cities all over America.

This Time Around

Part of the thrill of going to see a show that runs every year is the wonder of how the same story can be told in such ingenious ways from year to year. This year, *Black Nativity* in Pittsburgh continues under the direction of Parish Davenport with Michael Rue as Musical Director. Both are returning for a second time to collaborate with Mr. Sharif.

Black Nativity is scheduled to run December 3 through December 23, Fridays and Saturdays at 8pm; Sundays at 5pm. Visit <http://www.facebook.com/#!/events/391191747626526/> for more information, directions and photos.

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