

BLACK NATIVITY by Langston Hughes A Gospel Music Celebration





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pennsylvania COUNCIL ON THE ARTS

EXECUTIVE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR SHARIA BENN



"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Greetings and welcome to Sankofa's annual production of Black Nativity a Gospel Musical by Langston Hughes. I am delighted to share with you our vision and mission for this season.

Sankofa is a word from the Akan language of Ghana that means "go back and get it". It is often symbolized by a bird that flies forward while looking backward, carrying an egg in its mouth. The egg represents the future, and the bird reminds us to learn from the past to build a better future. This is the essence of Sankofa: to honor our history, celebrate our culture, and inspire our community. Theatre is a collaborative art form, and we are proud to partner with other local theatre companies to bring you stories that challenge, inspire, and entertain.

This season's plays reflect this essence in different ways. Our first play, "Between Hevan and Eartha a not-so-tall tale about climate change" was born out of a beautiful collaboration of playwrights, partnerships and artists who put the success of the project over personal pride and gain. This timely and relevant story explores the impact of climate change on our lives and our relationships. It is a play that challenges us to listen to each other, to understand each other, and to work together for a common cause. (Continued on page 6) Sankofa is currently presenting its annual production of "Black Nativity" by Langston Hughes, the iconic gospel song play that retells the Christmas with an African American perspective. It is a play that celebrates the joy and hope of the Christmas season, as well as the rich and diverse traditions of the African diaspora. It is a play that reminds us of the power of faith, music, and community.

In February, Sankofa will collaborate with Gamut Theatre to produce "The Jackson Rooming House", "The Jackson Rooming House", is an original and new work set against the backdrop of a welcoming rooming house or Black travelers and entertainers coming through Harrisburg during the first half of the twentieth century. This play honors our local history, as well as the contributions of African Americans to the music, culture and hospitality industry of our nation and invites us to explore the stories behind the names and faces that shaped our society.

In June we will partner with Theatre Harrisburg to stage "Intimate Apparel" by Lynn Nottage in this moving drama that follows the life of Esther, a seamstress who makes lingerie for women of different backgrounds in New York City in 1905. It is a play that portrays the struggles and dreams of a woman who seeks love and fulfillment in a changing world. It is a play that challenges us to question the stereotypes and prejudices that divide us.

I wholeheartedly agree with the phenomenal playwright Lynn Nottage who said, "I think theater can be used as an instrument for social change because it's one of those rare places where people can gather together collectively and have their hearts opened." Sankofa African American Theatre Company is on a mission to open hearts, deepen understanding, foster healing, and create a truly inclusive community by bringing diverse voices and stories to the stage.

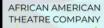
Thank you for being part of our Sankofa family. Enjoy the show!

Peace & Blessings, Sharia Benn



Scan QR Code for Full Program and Study Guide.





BLACK NATIVITY

A Gospel Music Celebration by Langston Hughes

Directed by Sharia Benn Music Arranged by Aaron Robinson **Music Directed by Cheryl Hawkins** Choreography by Cierra Woods Additional Music Arranged By Cheryl Hawkins

Cat & Castania Distance	Charles Day
Set & Costume Designer	Sharia Benn
Costume Seamstress	Frances Witt
Light Designer	Nate Oakley
Projection & Sound Designer	Nate Oakley
Set Construction	
Stage Manager	<mark>Najuma</mark> Norman
Asst. Stage Manager	Micah Gantt
Props	Sharia Benn
Dramaturgy	Anne Alsedek
Post Show Discussion Facilitator	
Operations Manager	Don Alsedek
Box Personel	Chudney Lewis, Cindy Witt
Program Designer	Lyeneal Griffin
Graphic Designer	

BLACK NATIVITY by Langston Hughes is being produced by special arrangement with Dramatic Publishing Service of Woodstock, IL



Scan QR Code for Full Program and Study Guide.

ABOUT BLACK NATIVITY

"Black Nativity" is an adaptation of the nativity story by Langston Hughes, performed by an entirely black cast. Hughes was the author of the book, with the lyrics and music being derived from traditional Christmas carols, sung in gospel style, with a few songs created specifically for the show. The show was first performed on Broadway on December II, 1961, and was one of the first plays written by an African American to be staged there. The show had a successful tour of Europe in 1962, one of its appearances being at the Spoleto Festival of Two Worlds in Italy. The tour revisited New York for an encore performances at Lincoln Center.

The original name for this play was "Wasn't It a Mighty Day?" You might find it interesting that original cast members like Alvin Ailey and Carmen de Lavallade quit the production before opening day because they objected to the use of the word "black" in the title. The rationale at the time was that this word might be too divisive for a Broadway production aimed at keeping things harmonious with all audiences. Ultimately, black in the title did not matter. This liberating and energetic musical opened to rave reviews.

In 2004, a documentary film was made about the world premiere performance, production, and creation of the best-selling gospel Christmas album "Black Nativity – In Concert: A Gospel Celebration," and the cast, under the direction of Aaron Robinson, brought it to life at the Immanuel Baptist Church in Portland, Maine.

A film version directed by Kasi Lemmons and starring Forest Whitaker and Angela Bassett was released on November 27, 2013.

You'll find a production of this musical performed in churches, theaters, on college campuses, and more in almost every major U.S. city and other regions. It is a joyful retelling of St. Luke's story of the birth of Christ by way of gospel music, dance, poetry, and narrative.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

We welcome you to this tabernacle, this sanctuary. This invitation is found in the lyrics of one of my many favorite songs in Sankofa's presentation of Black Nativity. I am thankful that Langston Hughes invited creatives to insert music and movement to make the play relevant for the time and place being performed. That was over forty years ago and his gospel-song play, Black Nativity is still as relevant and needed today as it was in 1961. Langton's Black Nativity established a new genre of theatre, the Gospel Song-Play, which is a deeply spiritual musical experience with some narration that mainly serves to connect the songs rather than carry out a strong story line. Langston's note for the set is that there be none, only a platform of various levels and a star and the mood be one of reverence, awe, joy and jubilation. In addition to establishing a new play genre with Black Nativity, Langston's reimagining of the Nativity with Black folks as kings, wise men, and the virgin Mary, uplifts a truth that Black culture and people have a beautiful worthiness that transcends the oppressive narratives that suffocate greatness and joy in people of color. Black Nativity has now become a staple Christmas performance in churches and theaters.

I'm overjoyed that Sankofa African American Company is carrying on the tradition with our 2nd annual production of "Black Nativity". To honor the original work of Langston Hughes, many of the original songs in the play, which were not scored until over twenty years after the play was performed, will be presented in Act I. Langston Hughes invited the community of performers to make it their own, which is what we have done in Act 2 with moving arrangements of contemporary gospel songs that move us from the celebration of the birth of Christ to the worship of a risen Savior who gives access to the Kingdom. I have reimagined the narrative so that it gives space and respects the voices and perspectives of the many creatives involved in this show so the story is not just being interpreted and heard from a single point-of-view. If only we could get this right offstage, in the real world. That's where real change and healing can take place. Until then, our production of Black Nativity is an experience and space to learn, celebrate, and heal as we collectively experience the wonder of the Christmas story.

I have been blessed to work with this village of actors, dancers, and singers who vary in age, experience, and culture to tell this story. I am also thankful to Sankofa's dedicated Board and friends and family who step in to give a helping hand and encouraging word. But none of this would have been possible without God and my husband, William Benn, who sacrificially supports me in all I do.

Enjoy the show!

Peace and Blessings, Sharia Benn

Meet our Music Director Cheryl Hawkins



Singer-songwriter Cheryl Hawkins' music infuses a mixture of sweet, contemporary jazz and war-cry rhythms - creating unique soulful psalms, spiritual melodies and upbeat praises that uplifts and inspires. Cheryl's single, This Is Our Land, was a 2010 recording project in honor of a Pennsylvania State Capitol gathering with the late Darrell Fields, author of Seed of a Nation. Born and raised in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Cheryl Hawkins is a forerunner and one of Harrisburg's gospel legends currently serving as psalmist and pianist at Legacy Faith Church, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for 20 years. As lead musician, served with Christ Community Church for 10 years, and also performed with Christian Ballet Company, Ballet Magnificat, and with Integrity Music artists Randy Rothwell and Alvin Slaughter.

Cheryl served as psalmist and keyboardist for Ruwach International Conference in Cape Town, South Africa, and has been serving as concert/rehearsal musician and assisting as one of the music directors with Capital Area Music Association aka CAMA since 1985. Cheryl served seven years as music director for Curtain Call Inc., under the direction of Felicia and Reginald Haywood. She has strong skills in classical, anthems, traditional hymns, jazz, country and western, gospel, contemporary praise and worship, and renaissance styles. Cheryl has over 50 years' experience as music director for adult, youth and children's choirs, including mass choirs, ensembles, bands, mime, dance and praise teams. Cheryl is skilled in developing, planning, and teaching praise and worship workshops and conferences. She recently worked as vocal director with Sankofa African Theatre Company on Crowns, as music director with Black Nativity 2022, Voices of the Eighth Chronicles II and 29th Theatre Arts Awards. Cheryl is also a songwriter for Greater Glory music guild in York, Pennsylvania.

Cast in Order of Appearance

Zari McCullers - Harpist Jade Jarrell - Mary Cierra Woods - Dancer Jamar Johnson - Narrator, Elder Jasmine Graham - Shepherdess Kevin Willis - Narrator, Shepherd Caleb Adman - Joseph, Shepherd Griffin Kent - Shepherd

Ensemble

Jasmine Graham Laniyah Ingram-Hamilton Brooklyn Robertson Tanya Allen Kathy Charles Evelynne Brown Kenza Noma Micah Gantt

15 Minute Intermission Post Performance Discussion Is Immediately After The Show

Music Director - Cheryl Hawkins

Musicians Keyboard - Brian McGrady Percussion - Thomas Bryant Lead Guitar - Curtis Andrews III Bass Guitar - Efraim Fernandes Drummer - David Carter Harp - Zari McCullers

BLACK NATIVITY

A Gospel Music Celebration by Langston Hughes

Directed by Sharia Benn Music Arranged by Aaron Robinson Music Directed by Cheryl Hawkins Choreography by Cierra Woods Additional Music Arranged By Cheryl Hawkins

Act I	
Prelude to Joy to the World	
Joy To The World (Traditional and Gospel)Jasmine Graham
No Room at the Hotel	
Most Done Travelling	
Poor Little Jesus/Wasnt That a Pity and a Sha	meMicah Simms-Gantt •
Mary, Mary, What You Gonna Name Your BabyBrooklyn Robertson, Laniyah Ingram-Hamilton, Kenza Noma	
Wasn't That A Mighty Day	Caleb Adman
Jesus, Oh What a Wonderful Child	Brooklyn Robertson, Laniyah Ingram- Hamilton, Kenza Noma
O Holy Night	Evelynne I. Brown
Go Tell It On The Mountain – Gospel	
Rise Up Shepherd	
What Month Was Jesus Born In	Brooklyn Robertson, Laniyah Ingram - Hamilton, Kenza Noma
Sweet Little Jesus Boy	Jasmine Graham
Oh Come All Ye Faithful	Jasmine Graham
	Ensemble
	Minute Intermission

Act 2

Glorious	Ensemble
	Simms-Gantt, Jasmine Graham, Evelynne I. Brown, Jamar Johnson
Now Behold the Lamb	Jasmine Graham
Changed	Jasmine Graham Tanya Allen
I Know It Was the Blood	Jamar Johnson
Leak in the Building	Laniyah Ingram-Hamilton, Kenza Noma, Brooklyn Robertson
There Is None Like You	
Because of Who You Are	
	Ensemble ,
I Won't Complain	Jamar Johnson
	Evelynne I. Brown
I Feel Like Going On	Tanya Allen
I Said I Wasn't Going Tell Nobody	Jade Jarrell
My Soul Is Anchored	Jamar Johnson
When the Saints Go To Worship	Evelynne I. Brown
Ride On King Jesus	
Till We Meet Again	Ensemble Ensemble
Total Praise	Ensemble









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Meet The Cast of "Black Nativity"





Jade Jarrell (Mary) is a 20-year-old actress in Harrisburg PA. She is a student at Harrisburg Area Community College majoring in Film and Theatre. This is her 6th show with Sankofa African American Theatre Company and she's thrilled to be working alongside such amazing people! Some of her shows include Echoes of Voices of the Eighth (Della Carter), The People That Could Fly (Ensemble), and Between Hevan and Eartha A Not-so-Tall Tale about Climate Change.

Caleb Adman (Joseph, Shepherd) is excited to be in his first Sankofa production! Recent productions have been Seussical (Horton) & Matilda (Featured Ensemble). I would like to dedicate this production to my high school choir director, Mr. Eric Mansilla, who introduced me to Sankofa and their wonderful director, Sharia Benn. He inspires me, to be everything I dream to be and to break the glass ceilings that try to stop me from doing so.



Jamar Johnson (Narrator, Elder) is very excited to hit the stage with the cast of the "Black Nativity" with Sankofa. This is his 2nd production, in May he starred in The Wiz production with the Second Baptist Worship Center of Coatesville playing the Lion. Outside of acting, he is a husband, youth pastor/educator, union president, and a Community Leader who wants to see better for the Black and brown communities at large. Stay tuned because this will not be the last time you see or hear the name Jamar Johnson, I'm living out my desires that I've had since I was a child which was to be on stage bringing stories to life.



Kevin Willis (Narrator, Shepherd) is a native East Texan and has always had a passion for acting. He comes from a past of community theatre and is now currently apart of the core company of Gamut Theatre Group. This is his first show with Sankofa African American Theatre, but he is excited to be apart of the family. With such a great cast and crew, he is excited to be among such a passionate group of individuals.



Jasmine Graham (Shepherdess) "Black Nativity" is Jasmine's second show with Sankofa after having the pleasure of performing in "Crowns" as Yolanda last May. She's also played Dorothy in Weary Arts Groups production of "The Wiz", Joan the Goat in Open Stage's "Treasure Island", and Cleopatra in Orangemite's "Antony and Cleopatra". Performing with Sankofa has been a huge blessing and opportunity to bring to life stories and characters that reflect her community and to join others in worship and fellowship. Jasmine is thrilled to be able to sing and share her love of music with audience members. Thank you to everyone who has been supportive as she steps onto the stage once again and a special thank you to Miss Sharia and Miss Cheryl for allowing her to have these opportunities and pursue her passions.

Meet The Cast (continued)



Griffin Kent (Shepherd) This is Griffin's first show with Sankofa. Earlier this year, he graduated from Capital Area School for the Arts with a focus on Theatre and Creative Writing. Before working on "Black Nativity", he wrote, produced, and starred in "Not Coffee (because it's a Neofuturist show)" as a part of the first Annual Harrisburg Fringe Festival. He decided to join "Black Nativity" after being inspired by Sharia's past plays as well as seeing the community and representation in each of her shows.



Reverend Tanya D. Allen (Ensemble) has a ministry that encompasses being the State President of the Eastern Pennsylvania & Northern Delaware Christian Women Connection of the Church of God, Praise and Worship Leader, Choir Director, and member of the Doxa Gospel Ensemble, now known as Freshwind. She also became the first African-American female EMT in Berks County. Other achievements include becoming the Associate Minister of Renewed Vision Christin Center under the leadership of Pastor Dean G. Faulkner. Tanya has a heart for women and children and her desire is to be effective in her service to God and preach and teach all who are willing to listen to her.



Evelynne Brown (Ensemble) is a native of Harrisburg, PA. She graduated from the Harrisburg High School System and received a Baccalaureate in Music Education from Howard University, Washington, DC. Evelynne is the Minister of Music at the Christ Assembly Fellowship in Harrisburg, of which she is a member. Both Evelynne and her husband Rodney are retired and reside in Harrisburg.



Micah Gantt (Ensemble) has worked on Sankofa's Board as the Treasurer since June of 2020. She has also worked in the Box Office for various Sankofa productions and she was the Stage Manager for Sankofa's production of "Between Hevan and Eartha". This is Micah's first Sankofa stage role with the Ensemble in Langston Hughes " Black Nativity".



Kenza Noma (Ensemble) is a fifth grader at Elmwood Academy in Mechanicsburg, PA. This is her second production with Sankofa AATC. Recent productions: Between Hevan & Eartha (Hevan) She discovered her love of theater when she attended a summer theater camp. Her last performance was in an adaption of Tales of Myth and Magic. Kenza loves singing, dancing and playing the clarinet.

Meet The Cast (continued)



Brooklyn Robertson (Ensemble) is Sankofa African American Theatre. She is so excited to participate in this production because she can showcase her faith through songs based on the African American experiences. Thank you to my parents for always supporting me and allowing me to be me. Thank you Mrs. Sharia for believing in me.



Laniyah Ingram-Hamilton (Ensemble) is excited to work with Sankofa AATC. She is very passionate about music & dance and is happy that this show allows her to do both. I'd like to say thank you to my Aunt and uncle for all the love, support, and encouragement.



Kathy Charles (Ensemble) is a native of the state of South Carolina where she was raised in the Baptist church where her Mother was church organist. This is Kathy's second time working with Sankofa African American Theatre as a part of the Black Nativity play. Kathy loves working with Sankofa and particularly "Black Nativity" because of the talent it showcases in the community. Particularly for this year, Kathy is excited about the use of the young actors in the starring roles of the play. Also, Kathy is grateful to Sankofa African American Theatre for allowing her to sing as a part of this amazing performance.

Personal Message – to Sharia, Cheryl, and all the members of the Black Nativity family, you are a true inspiration and blessing to me and to my life. Thank you for embracing me and giving me this opportunity to further serve the community through the sharing of music that honors the birth of Jesus Christ my Savior.



Zari McCullers (Harp) is originally from Frederick, MD. Zari is a full-time student earning her Ph.D. in Biomedical Sciences at Penn State College of Medicine in Hershey, PA. She is a formally trained instrumental musician, having minored in Music Performance – Percussion at Towson University in Baltimore, MD. Zari began studying harp just two years ago, currently playing with the Harrisburg Harp Orchestra. Zari is new to the theatre, her theatrical debut was in May 2023 with Reclaim Artist Collective and Gamut Theatre in the original production of "HairStory: Reclaiming Our Crown" (Ebony Woman 3). Black Nativity is Zari's first musical and first production with Sankofa African American Theatre Company. Zari's favorite thing about Sankofa is the creative teams' ability to push boundaries and custom–craft roles that uplift and accentuate cast talent.

Meet The Cast (continued)



Brian McGrady Band (Leader/Keyboardist), Efraim Fernandes (Guitarist from Brazil), Thomas Bryant (Drums), and Curtis Andrews III (Bass). The Band specializes in live music production and studio production. BMB started forming in 2020 at the Rock Church Harrisburg. The Band has been able to work on the Unity STEAM showcase with Johntrae Williams and in 2023, they started working as the house band for The Singers Lounge where local artists perform monthly for the City of Harrisburg, PA. They are looking to take their individual and collective experience and raise the bar of excellence bringing Energy, Musicianship, and Showmanship to every opportunity.



Cierra Woods is a dancer, choreographer, and creative assistant born on the unceded land of the Susquehannock people, now called Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Woods began her dance training at the age of three, continuing her studies at Capital Area School for the Arts to then earning her degree from Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. Her artistic journey has led her to stages, including the Kennedy Center, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Harrisburg Fringe Festival, Grounds For Sculpture, Judson Memorial Church, and the Brooklyn Museum. Along the way, she has collaborated with esteemed visionaries, including Sidra Bell, Dara Meredith, BREathe Dance Project, Dwennimmen African Dance Community, Edisa Weeks, Merian Soto, MICHIYAYA Dance, and André Zachery. Woods is driven to fortify sustainable systems that create nurturing environments, allowing artistic and diasporic communities to thrive. She is beyond blessed to be a part of Sankofa's "Black Nativity" for the second year with wonderful spirits! Discover more of her work at <u>cwoodswork.xyz</u>



Visit our online Study Guide for more about Langston Hughes, "Black Nativity", and the Harlem Renaissance.

Langston Hughes' work, which was a significant part of the Harlem Renaissance ran from poetry, social activism, novels, plays, and working as a columnist. His innovative poetry was referred to as "jazz Poetry."

Post-Show Discussion Facilitator



Professor VALERIE A. GRAY teaches English at HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College. This year marks her 25 th year at HACC. She is a nonfiction children's author, a college textbook author, and the author of two biographies for the African American National Biography published by Harvard University. Jason Kidd: Star Guard (1998) and the Court Martial of Cadet John Whittaker (2000) were published by Enslow Publishing. Valerie's first textbook, Avoiding Plagiarism: Writing with Academic and Professional Integrity was published by Kendall Hunt in 2012. Her second textbook, Business Writing for Today and Tomorrow: From Memos to New Media was published by Apple in 2017. Her third textbook, Business Writing for Everyday Use, written in collaboration with several colleagues from the HACC English department, was published by LibreTexts in 2021. It is an open education resource (OER) textbook that is available for free.

Valerie has developed numerous projects and presentations that promote inclusive teaching. Her community and service leadership commitments include board member for Sankofa African American Theatre Company; volunteer for Highmark Caring Place; and a judge for the NAACP's Harrisburg region Afro Academic Cultural Technological Scientific Olympics awards (ACT-SO). Her passions do not end with teaching, writing, reading, and being of service to the community. She is a world traveler, becoming immersed in the culture of countries on five continents, and has visited much of the U.S. She enjoys gardening, preserving foods, finding objects to decorate her garden; and believes that there is no such thing as planting too many flowers.



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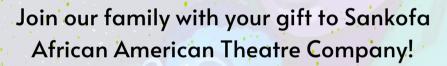
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ABOUT SANKOFA AATC

Sankofa is an Akan (Ghana) word that means, "We must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward;" so that we understand why and how we came to be who we are today, thereby gaining wisdom, power, and hope to make positive progress through the sharing of this knowledge.

MISSION

Sankofa African American Theatre Company exists to engage and enrich the Harrisburg region around the African American perspective on relevant issues through thought-provoking theatre that reflects artistic excellence.

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"AMERICAN SON" by Christopher Demos-Ward, A BLACK LIVES MATTER play Feb 2-4, 8-11,15-18th. Thurs-Sat performances at 7:30pm, Sundays at 2:30pm

"THE SPIRIT OF HISPANIA/EL ESPIRITU DE HISPANIA"

by Jules Tasca, A bilingual adaptation of Hispanic folktales for the stage April 5-7,11-14, 18-21st Thurs-Sat performances at 7:30pm, Sundays at 2:30pm

"DAY OF ABSENCE" by Douglas Turner Ward, a surrealist comedy about essential workers past and present, June 7-9, 13-16, 20-23rd. Thurs-Sat performances at 7:30pm, Sundays at 2:30pm

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