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- Toys, SAVE 10%-30%

*Camping not at Chambersburg or Winchester. Sporting Goods Clothing not at Arlington, Annapolis, Salisbury, Hanover, Petersburg, Richmond Eastgate, Chambersburg, Hagerstown, Charlottesville, Frederick, Fredericksburg, Cumberland, Winchester. Toys not at Wisconsin Ave., Annapolis, Hanover, Petersburg, Richmond Eastgate, Chambersburg, Charlottesville, Frederick, Fredericksburg, Cumberland, Winchester, Westminster

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*Men's outerwear not at Chambersburg, Winchester, Westminster

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THE ARTS

PARADISE LOST

Black Actors Playing White

Baltimore native among 18 characters

By Elisse Wright
Special to the AFRO

Charles Dumas and Denise Diggs are just two of the 18 actors appearing in the Center Stage revival of the Clifford Odets' "Paradise Lost" which begins tonight and runs through Feb. 28.

But their contribution to the production is unique since the play was written for an all-white cast.

Their participation in the drama is the result of a fairly recent movement in American theater to experiment with what is known as "Non-Traditional Casting." In non-traditional casting" ethnic actors play parts written for white actors and vice versa.

More importantly, non-traditional casting provides minority actors with the opportunity to perform some of the theater's most challenging roles which had always been reserved for white males.

Actors in non-traditional roles can, with the consent of the director, choose to either incorporate or ignore the obvious differences between the character and the actor playing him or her.

Both Dumas and Diggs have chosen, in varying degrees, to acknowledge and incorporate the ethnic perspective they bring to their roles in "Paradise Lost." On other occasions, however, both have practiced what Dumas calls the "Do The Character, Race Be Damned" methods and delivered a straight portrayal in order to maintain the integrity of the character as written by the playwright.

In "Paradise Lost," Dumas plays Mr. Pike, a homeless man during the Great Depression, who survives by tending furnaces. According to the script, Mr. Pike is a Yankee blueblood. A White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant proud of his ancestry.

Dumas says that as a light-skinned black actor he has chosen to both incorporate his African heritage and acknowledge his white heritage, however remote, in his portrayal of Mr. Pike. He says that while the racial references in the play are few, those that remain are, suddenly, more meaningful because of the presence of black cast-members.

Diggs plays a factory worker named Lucy who, despite the monotony of her job, feels lucky to be working at all and therefore accepts the fact that she is exploited by her bosses.

Diggs says that the challenge in doing the role has been in "re-educating myself in the oppressive nature of poverty. I've made an effort to really look at depressed and impoverished neighborhoods. I've really had to overcome my middle class upbringing in order to identify with this woman."

Dumas insists the importance of non-traditional casting cannot be over-emphasized.

He says "non-traditional casting is important for black actors because there're not that many parts written specifically for black actors. The 'Colored Museums' are rare."

"In the past, roles for blacks in predominantly white productions were usually maids and butlers. Now black characters are non-entities like policemen, public officials, and lawyers. They're racially neutral with no life outside of the occupation. You play the job, not a character."

"Now that there is a pool of highly trained black actors, it takes forward thinking artistic directors like Stan Wojewodski, here at Center Stage, to make sure that black actors work. That way when a great play like 'Fences' comes along black actors are available."

Ideally the purpose of non-traditional casting is to stimulate the audience, not to distract it.

"The initial jolt is okay," Dumas said, "but hopefully the audience moves past it. If the audience, after the first act, is still saying, 'Wait a minute, this black guy can't have white kids,' something's wrong with the production."

"I think the public is willing to accept black actors in many capacities. The reality of the changes in our lives, our society has led to the possibility of changes within the theater."

Diggs, a native Baltimorean, feels that non-traditional has provided her with some of her most memorable roles.

As a member of the Actors Ensemble, she played Lady Macbeth in the 1985. While studying acting at Towson State University in the early 1970's she performed Cordelia in "King Lear" and Helen of Troy in "Troilus and Cressida."

"When I played Helen I didn't think whether this was a white or black interpretation," Diggs said. "My culture came with me. My portrayal was believable because I believed it. My faith made it work. But when I played Lady MacBeth, I felt very strongly about her blackness. I could see her strength coming from black roots. There are times when you can use your culture to help enrich the part, I guess it depends on the character."

Dumas, a graduate of the Yale Law School, is a former corporate lawyer, legal activist, and teacher. He is currently in the Masters program in playwriting at Hunter College in New York.

He has authored several plays and his current musical which explores the Constitution's view of women, blacks, and American Indians, "Years of Struggle, Years of Freedom," is scheduled to tour the Soviet Union in the Spring.

As an actor, Dumas specializes in historical portrayals and originated the roles of Charles Gilpin, Broadway's first black actor; Paul Robeson and Booker T. Washington in several New York productions.

Dumas jokingly calls himself "the poor theater's James Earl Jones" because he favors the actor in voice and stature and is known for playing what he calls "large character" parts.

Dumas enjoys historical research and his latest project is to locate Clifford Odets' only play written for blacks which was performed during the Harlem Renaissance. This "lost" play is the only play which does not appear in Odets' portfolio.

Dumas says that despite the Depression setting and outdated political rhetoric of "Paradise Lost" he thinks Odets' play is still powerful and relevant in light of the country's economic state.

"There's a lot of homeless people out there," Dumas said, "We're almost back to living the way we did in the 1930's."

DIFFERENT HUES — Actors Denise Diggs and Charles Dumas says blacks can play whites, a departure from traditional casting.

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>
> —Charles Dumas

JAN 1988