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THE BLOG

Mosaic, Hastings Street and Miller High: History Hiding in Plain Sight

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Founder and CEO, Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit

As artistic director of Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit, I have had the opportunity to create or commission several plays exploring Detroit history — especially the history of Detroit teens. To date, Mosaic has produced *Now That I Can Dance — Motown 1962*, about the Marvelettes and the early days of Motown; *Northern Lights 1966* by Michael Dinwiddie, about a student walkout at Northern High School; and *City in a Strait* by Oyamo, about the history of racial division in Detroit. But before all of these came *Hastings Street*, a play about teenagers in Detroit’s Black Bottom neighborhood in the 1940s. In 2001, Mosaic was commissioned by *Detroit 300* to create a play that would showcase Detroit’s rich history, in honor of the city’s 300th anniversary celebration, and this play was the result.

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I must admit that at first I was very resistant to the idea of doing a historical play: it sounded very dry and academic — and completely inconsistent with the high energy and dynamic plays upon which Mosaic had built its reputation. Until that point, our productions were all adaptations of classic plays and theatre styles, reimagined to explore the lives of teenagers. So, if we were going to take on this history challenge, it was imperative to do it from a teen perspective. We partnered with the University of Michigan’s Arts of Citizenship program and Residential College to do the research. (Professor Charles Bright has written [a wonderful article](#) about that research process.) We set out on doing oral history interviews with the one question in mind, “What was the most interesting time in Detroit history to be a teenager?”

After numerous interviews, the young artists of Mosaic (predominantly African-American youth ages 12-18) decided that the 1940s were by far the most exciting era for Detroit teens — especially for African-American teens. They had heard stories of the vibrancy and energy of Hastings Street and Paradise Valley, and the incredibly tight-knit community within the slum-dwellings of the Black Bottom neighborhood. While they heard much nostalgia expressed by the senior citizens they interviewed, they also heard about terrible discrimination and one of the worse race riots in history of the country in 1943 — not like 1967, which was based more on economics and police brutality than race, but an actual white vs. black riot. It was fascinating that in the exact same interview, our young artists would hear a senior say, “Things were so wonderfully better back then, so much better than today” and also “Things were so terrible back then, you are so lucky to be living today.”

Several powerful moments stood out during the research process. Some of our

had known their whole life. We learned that Miller High School was the school which most Black Bottom teens attended, and that famous people such as Coleman Young and many athletic and entertainment greats had attended Miller. The University of Michigan students uncovered a youth group called “The Y-Gees” (standing for Youth Guidance) made up mostly of Miller students, meeting at a building known as Schiller Hall a couple blocks away from their school. In the Y-Gees we had found a Mosaic equivalent in the 1940s, an organization that was youth-led and full of creative energy. And then we found that some of the grandparents of the Mosaic teens had been members of the Y-Gees!

This research process also caused anger among our young artists: Why hadn't they heard about any of this before? Why didn't their parents and grandparents tell them about this rich history? And why wasn't this taught in schools? One young artist said that all they were taught about Detroit history in school could be summed up in this way: “Cadillac founded Detroit and then there was a riot in 1967.” They could not understand how no one could have told them that Detroit was maybe the most happening place in world at one point. Their anger was echoed by the seniors we interviewed; anger that their story had been ignored, that their neighborhood had been wiped out as part of an “Urban Renewal” effort in the '50s. In fact Hastings Street itself — the commercial and entertainment epicenter of their world — had been demolished to make way for the Fisher Freeway. More than once we heard from seniors: “It's as if we never existed.”

The debut of *Hastings Street* in 2001 was a huge success. More than 7,000 people jammed into Music Hall over one weekend to see the show — still a Mosaic attendance record. Audiences cheered and cried and yelled out in recognition. We then toured *Hastings Street* to Ann Arbor, Flint, Battle Creek, Mount Clemens, and Benton Harbor. It turns out that the African-American communities in these Michigan cities all had roots in the Black Bottom neighborhood. The Michigan Central Station was a sort of “Ellis Island” of the Great Migration and Black Bottom was the African-American equivalent of what the Lower East Side of New York was for European immigrants. And to think I had once balked at the idea of putting on history-based theatre! It wound up being an exploration in growth and reconnection for students and audience alike.

We remounted *Hastings Street* again in 2006 and are excited to be presenting it again this month (May 9-19) at the Detroit Institute of Arts. This is such an important story, we feel we need to re-tell it every six or seven years so that each new generation of young people can tell and hear this story.

Last week we decided to take the current Mosaic performers on a “Reality Tour” of all of the things that are mentioned in the play. The four remaining blocks of Hastings Street still exist just a few blocks away from Mosaic's current home. The blocks could not be more desolate or empty, consisting mostly of



that was left of a street that they portray in the play to be as exciting as any strip from Times Square to Las Vegas. And now: nothing. We continued along the service drive of I-375, identifying where all the famous locations on Hastings Street once had been. We visited Schiller Hall where the Y-Gees met, now owned by the International Brotherhood of Masons, at the corner St. Aubin and Gratiot. Many of the young artists had gone through the drive-thru of the Burger King next to it, never realizing the history that was in their sight. We visited Miller High, now under renovations to become University Prep Science and Math Elementary School.

Finally, we went along Woodward to the locations where the 1943 race riot was the most intense. These were areas most of them had passed countless times. In photos we saw burning overturned cars in front of the Mayfair Theatre — now Wayne State University's Bonstelle Theatre. We saw photos of white mobs pulling African Americans out of streetcars in front of the Fine Arts Theater, whose marquee still exists across from Atlas Bistro. We saw photos of the National Guard walking south down Woodward past the Detroit Institute of Arts — the venue where the young artists will be performing the play — to quell the riot.

What has become clear to me in this process is that Detroit has an enormous amount of fascinating history — perhaps more than any other city in the nation, barring New York — and yet, we struggle to retain this history. Mosaic's young artists were blown away by how much history was around them “hiding in plain sight.” They gained a new sense of purpose and determination to do their ultimate best to bring this history to life in *Hastings Street*.

At the end of the tour, we came back to our rehearsal space and made an announcement to our young artists. Mosaic would be moving into a new long-term home, which would include a black box theatre, a choral rehearsal room, a recital hall and a computer lab. And the location of this new home... within the historic Miller High School. Mosaic will partner with University Prep Science and Math to be an “Arts Organization in Residence” within the Miller building for the next 20 years.

I didn't know how the Mosaic young artists would react to this announcement. They erupted in joy. As much as they were excited by the shiny new spaces they would inhabit, they were moved by the fact that Mosaic would now be firmly connected to the history of Detroit. They got chills thinking that they will be walking the halls in the same building where singer/actress Della Reese and Jazz greats Yusef Lateef, Milt Jackson and Kenny Burrell dreamed of pursuing lives as artists. And, as these young artists tell the story of the lives of Miller High students in the 1940s in *Hastings Street*, they will reconnect with the history of their city. Opening night on May 10th will be “Millerite Night” where anyone who ever attended Miller will be given a special gift from Mosaic. It's the least we can do, considering the legacy that they have provided for Detroit's young artists of today



Hastings Street plays at the DIA May 9-19 with performances on Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 4 p.m., with student/senior matinees on Thursdays at 10 a.m. Tickets are available at the DIA, by phone at 313-833-4005 or at the Mosaic website: www.mosaicdetroit.org.

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