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African theater company presents '10 Blocks on the Camino Real' in St. Louis

By Kenya Vaughn Sep 6, 2017



The National Theatre of Ghana performing '10 Blocks on the Camino Real' last year in Accra, Ghana. The production will come to St. Louis this weekend thanks to the Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis.

Last year, famed international director David Kaplan realized an item on his professional wish list that was nearly 20 years in the making when he worked with The National Theatre of Ghana. In 1997, he was on a plane in Uzbekistan when a member of The Peace Corps recognized him from a television interview he had done while working on a play there.

"The man did his early Peace Corps work in northern part of Ghana," Kaplan said. "He said, 'There's a rich theater culture there and you should be a part of it.'"

Kaplan went about establishing a connection. No sooner than he started the relationship with Ghana through the U.S. Embassy, all of his contacts were voted out of office. The idea was put on the back burner until he was having a conversation with an American actor in Central Park a few years ago.

"I owed him a favor. He wanted to talk about work," Kaplan said. So they did. "I asked him the most interesting thing he had done professionally," Kaplan said. "He said, 'Oh, I worked with the National Theatre of Ghana for about nine months out of the year,'" Kaplan said. "My head almost spun off of my shoulders."

Through his actor friend, Kaplan formed a connection with The National Theatre of Ghana. Last year they presented Tennessee Williams' play "10 Blocks on the Camino Real."

"This is an unusual Tennessee Williams play because it was like street theatre," Kaplan said. "I knew that they would get this combination of music and dance and storytelling, because it's what they do. They wouldn't be coming to it in the same way that an American troupe would – with all of this baggage about 'The Glass Menagerie' or 'A Streetcar Named Desire.'"

This weekend, thanks to Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis, they will bring the show to various locations in St. Louis in a series of street theatre-style performances.

"What better place to bring it than the place where Tennessee Williams found his voice," Kaplan said.

Grand Center's Strauss Park, Soulard Farmer's Market and an outdoor common area on the campus of Webster University are among the places where the company will perform the play of the master playwright with St. Louis roots.

"The 19 years he spent here were very informative and have colored and influenced his body of work," said Carrie Houk, executive artistic director of Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis.

Kaplan describes this particular play as a man who lands in a strange town, falls in love and gets taken advantage of. And while it is different from his other works, it's in among the same vein.

"All of Tennessee Williams' work boils down to one simple thing: The summer is short. Love is short. Beauty is short," Kaplan said. "Because it doesn't last very long, there is an imperative to talk about it, the very fact that it is ephemeral is the reason that we have to keep talking about it and remember not to waste it."

Connecting continents through theater

"Theater provides a window to the world for people who don't have the opportunity to travel," Houk said. "With this production, I'm hoping to open a new window. I think that we need to constantly broaden our horizons as theatregoers."

Kaplan believes that seeing the production presented by the talented troupe will also serve to shed new light on the continent.

"The news out of Africa is always negative and as a whole tends to portray African people as victims – and it turns artwork that comes out Africa into stories of misery or pain," Kaplan said. "That's there, but to dwell in that exclusively is to stay in the bathroom of your house and never go into the living room or the dining room."

Houk was particularly interested in this production because she's also a professor at Webster University, and they have a newly opened campus in Accra, Ghana. The company will be in residency at Webster for the week of the performances and she hopes to generate enough excitement among the Webster student body on the St. Louis campus that it will spark interest for them to consider studying abroad in Accra.

Kaplan hopes that audiences will soak in the cultural bridge that takes place thanks to the troupe, which has existed as a company for nearly 35 years and reflects the rich, lively and unique experience of Ghanaian theater.

"This is a proud, skilled group of African professional actors who comes from a tradition that is over 100 years old and they are sharing this American story with an American audience," Kaplan said. "Not because they are the kids from the orphanage, but because they have something to say about it too. And that's something that I want people to see."

Free public performances of The National Theatre of Ghana's production of '10 Blocks on the Camino Real' presented by Tennessee Williams Festival St. Louis will take place from Friday, September 8 – Sunday, September 10 at various locations and times in the late morning and afternoon at Strauss Park in Grand Center, Soulard Farmer's Market and on the campus of Webster University. Thanks to a grant by PNC Arts Alive, the productions are free and open to the public. For full schedule and details, visit www.twstl.org.