

Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival and Ghana stage troupe bring production to downtown Worcester

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WORCESTER — Tennessee Williams and Ghanaian theatrical flair will come together Friday right on the block in downtown Worcester.

Chances are, people will stop and look, said David Kaplan, director of Williams’s mesmerizing one-act play “Ten Blocks on the Camino Real,” which will be performed outside on the Worcester Common Oval behind City hall at 5:30 p.m. Friday.

That’s what’s been happening as the play has been touring. “One of the things I like about it, people are walking down the street and it’s colorful. I have pictures taken of people stopping and turning and paying attention, and cops explaining plot points like it was soap opera,” Kaplan

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In “Ten Blocks,” an American boxer abroad in a strange dead-end Spanish-speaking town falls in love with a gypsy and maintains an open heart even though the world is ruthless. The story is related in song, dialogue and dance. The play has been called an impressionistic melding of action, poetry, music, masks and dance that Williams believed captured the world we live in with a new kind of “plastic theater.”

Kaplan is the dynamic and innovative link bringing all the diverse elements here. Originally from New York City, he is a 1976 graduate of Clark University where he was a double major in theater and philosophy before going on to a diverse and distinguished theater career.

Plays directed by Kaplan have been performed in 40 of the 50 United States and around the world. He has directed “King Lear” in Uzbekistan, performed in the Uzbek language, and Genet’s “The Maids” in Ulaan Baator, Mongolia, performed in Mongolian. In Russia he staged the first Russian-language productions of “Auntie Mame” and Eugene O’Neill’s “Ah, Wilderness!”

Kaplan is also curator and co-founder of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival and has staged Williams’s plays worldwide.

The production of “Ten Blocks” performed by Abibigromma “is a very long-term project,” Kaplan said. He had just directed “King Lear” in Uzbekistan in 1992 when someone suggested that it should work in Ghana. “I said why?” Kaplan recalled, and he was told there is a theater tradition there in which a company pulls up to a given area such as a marketplace, sets up

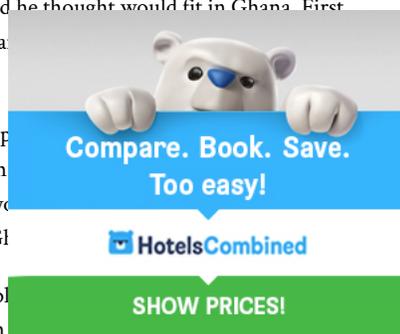
a stage, dances, puts on a play, then strikes the set and moves on to another location. "I began to investigate," Kaplan said.

The Ghanaian traveling form of theater is known as concert party, a sort of "homegrown version of commedia dell'arte" with colorful and recognizable characters.

"Ten Blocks" was a piece Kaplan said he thought would fit in Ghana. First however, he staged it in Uruguay, "and then in Ghana even more."

Ghana has a history of creatively appealing to the world. After a long quest for independence from British rule, the country staged performances that the authorities were uncomfortable with. The troupe was formed in 1983 and became the resident troupe of the National Theatre of Ghana.

Kaplan was finally able to take the production to Abibigromma. The troupe performed "Ten Blocks" at different outside places in



The Abibigromma performance of "Ten Blocks" takes on a West African perspective of Williams's story, weaving in music and Ghanaian words to the songs in an experimental marketplace setting. But the play has a universality. "The guy loses his heart, loses his wallet. Everybody who's been a stranger in a city can relate," Kaplan said.

"I had really wanted to bring it back to the festival," Kaplan said of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival and touring stateside with the production. "We're very lucky we had partners in Worcester who wanted it. Every time we can celebrate something joyous that comes out of Africa we should put it up ..."

"The thing that's great about Worcester is its Ghanaian population. I was very moved and interested that there's such a large Ghanaian population in Worcester, and I hope they will come and be charmed," Kaplan said.

"We are delighted to host the National Theatre of Ghana here at City Hall," said Erin Williams, Worcester's cultural development officer. "It's a great addition to the city's efforts to build creative collaborations which actively engages the community."

Jack Foley, Clark's vice president for government and community affairs, said, "Not only will this be an exciting presentation of this Tennessee Williams production, but also a great celebration of the Ghanaian community of Worcester."

Besides Worcester, Kaplan has formed partnerships to bring "Ten Blocks" this month to St. Louis, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor with performances in Detroit, and Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. The production was also staged at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival in Provincetown. The Thursday and Friday dates in Worcester are the last of the tour.

For Kaplan, it will be the first time he has brought a production to Worcester since graduating from Clark.

"It's been so long," he said. "When I was there the big mall had come and killed the downtown area, and now I'm told it's coming back again so I'm interested to see it."

Kaplan noted that "Clark was very involved (and still is) in the local community" and he will be intrigued to take in his former stomping grounds. "It's like seeing an old friend again. I'm looking to see if she still smokes and has lost weight."

Williams wrote "Ten Blocks on the Camino Real" around 1946/47 after "The Glass Menagerie" and before "A Streetcar Named Desire." It has long been in obscurity compared to those two works. Williams expanded the one-act play into the full-length "Camino Real" in 1953, but more recently, "Ten Blocks" has been rediscovered and appreciated and performed in its own right.

Kaplan said "Ten Blocks" includes Williams' first use of phrases that would become famous in other works - "flowers for the dead" in "Streetcar," for example, and "cat on a hot tin roof," which became the title of a play. "There's a private mythology that becomes public," Kaplan said.

Kaplan directed a production of Williams' "Suddenly Last Summer" while at Clark, and also directed with the former Worcester Children's Theater.

"Clark is very much with me as I work," Kaplan said. "My professors encouraged me to go ahead on my own. I was allowed and encouraged to break rules and allowed and encouraged to think for myself."

Kaplan recalled walking along a Worcester street with some friends after a rehearsal when they went by a building and heard gospel music. They checked it out. "I was blown away. It really changed my work," Kaplan said. He subsequently directed a production of the Cole Porter musical "Anything Goes" that gave the songs a gospel treatment.

He's been gratified to see the reaction to "Ten Blocks" revealing a similar sort of spirit. The pictures of people stopping and turning were taken during a performance in St. Louis.

"It's pretty infectious. I'm pretty sure the same thing will happen in Worcester," Kaplan said.

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