

## Tracing the Deep Imprints of Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay and Geoffrey Holder in New York



**(From L-R: Andrene Bonner, Paul Campbell, Dr. Michael Wiltshire)**

By Faith P. Nelson

Playwright Andrene Bonner and veteran actor and director Paul Campbell are pulling from the annals of American history to celebrate Harlem's massive contribution to the world with a Broadway-style musical at Brooklyn's Boys and Girls High School on June 14, 2015. Listening in on their discussions about plot, scene structure and production elements, one can't help but imagine the process of discovery, the quiet excitement that would have permeated the literary salons of 1920s Harlem.

Jumping forward half a century, Bonner and Campbell prompt some meditation on the power duo - legendary director choreographer Geoffrey Holder and one of his chief collaborators, actress and dancer Carmen de Lavallade. West Indians have long made permeable the cultural boundaries between the island nations and New York, the US's most powerful and populous city. Following in the footsteps of Trinidadian Geoffrey Holder and his Broadway legacy, creative virtuosos Bonner and Campbell, fluent in the language of both cultures, have no problems crossing the divide to honor, on a grand scale the long gone Renaissance heroes.

The idea for the project was the brainchild of Dr. Michael Wiltshire, executive principal of Boys and Girls High School and Medgar Evers College Prep in Brooklyn. He invited Bonner to come up with a concept to celebrate the Centenary of the Harlem Renaissance. The result was *Ruby the Musical* penned in a very short time by the novelist and high school teacher.

This June revival comes very soon after the initial one-day run in Spring 2015. Reviews of the earlier production were so encouraging that Wiltshire decided to hire Paul Campbell to bring a world view to the production. This go-round, Sweet Honey in the Rock alumna Tulani Kinard has teamed up with the playwright to create original music in the Jazz, Blues and African tradition. Fitting the rich contributions of this period of American history into 90 minutes is no small feat. When asked what her priorities were for the script, Bonner said that her approach was to “anchor Ruby in ancestral Africa where it all began and to cover the different vocabularies – visual art, music – that articulated the political perspective of the time. A proponent of education and women’s rights she intentionally built the lead character “to take agency of her own life as a young woman.”

Magical realism at its most entertaining and educational, the play follows Ruby from a freedom starved south to the lights of New York and artistic expression in Harlem. In one evening, the audience experiences with Ruby, the transforming narratives of Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Robeson, James Baldwin, W E B Dubois, Marcus Garvey and Ethel Waters among other figures.

Paul Campbell’s superior teaching skills are in evidence as he takes romantic leads Javia Richards and Hyven Charles and the rest of the 120-member cast through their paces in scene study and technical rehearsals in this ambitious production. Nothing escapes his attention whether costume improvement or the need for a quick huddle with choreographers Michael Forde and Wilhelmina Taylor. Bonner gushes at the opportunity to continue to open her students to this level of creative production.

There is more to the night than the staging of Ruby the Musical. Like Geoffrey Holder before him, Paul Campbell is an accomplished visual artist. He picked up painting while at the Jamaica School of Drama and never abandoned his brushes. His large canvases are a blend of surrealism and cubism, a nod to modern African art and lush elegant Caribbean vernacular. Some of his work will be on display at the student and staff exhibition and reception which precedes the performance. Bonner herself, post the School of Drama and well paid acting jobs, collected more degrees in theatre arts and literature in California and New York. Her activities extend beyond the stage. When asked what she will do after the play, Bonner replied, “I will return to my other babies, my two fiction novels that are pining for attention during this production.” She further confided that both herself and Campbell have their own stage productions in development and plan to tackle other projects as a team. That collaboration is promising for theatre on New York soil.

The art reception and play launch on June 14, 2015 at Boys and Girls High School.

Faith Nelson is a freelance writer in Washington DC.

Andrene Bonner, Playwright  
Photo Credit: Yvonne Taylor

Paul Campbell, Director  
Photo Credit: Ray Balgrove

Dr. Michael Wiltshire  
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