

Facing Our Truth: Part 2 | By DeeAnn Veeder
Berkshire Mosaic
A Multicultural BRIDGE Living History Project
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Last week a United Nations committee chaired by Mireille Fanon Mendes-France of France concluded that the United States should consider reparations to African-American descendants of slavery, establish a national human rights commission and publicly acknowledge that the trans-Atlantic slave trade was a crime against humanity. Mendes-France also told reporters, “Contemporary police killings and the trauma it creates are reminiscent of the racial terror

lynchings in the past. Impunity for state violence has resulted in the current human rights crisis and must be addressed as a matter of urgency.”

Yet it seems unfathomably difficult for many white Americans to comprehend the scope of destruction rendered over hundreds of years to African Americans. Often this is where art can step in to illuminate a harsh reality in a way that evokes compassion and humanity instead of denial. Facing Our Truth at the Colonial Theater in Pittsfield this Saturday, February 6th at 7:30 is an exciting collaboration among many Berkshire County residents that can do just that. Karen Zink from Berkshire Gas, a sponsor of the show, has this to say, “We are thrilled to support BRIDGE and we are especially excited about playing a supporting role in this incredibly important undertaking. BRIDGE is an important resource in our region and speaks to issues and topics that are not only timely but critical to the communities that we serve. We commend BRIDGE for their great work and we urge others to join us in becoming involved.”



The cast is large and diverse, and there are professional actors and community members. The six playwrights and the six directors are also diverse, as are the three partnering producers, Gwendolyn Hampton VanSant, Kristen van Ginhoven and Yvette “Jamuna” Sirker. Jamuna Sirker, who is also directing Dressing, is a theater activist. Besides her mission as a playwright, director, and producer to empower

women and people of color, Jamuna says, “Since moving to Berkshire County, there is an addendum to my mission: With my work as a playwright, director, producer and educator, I

now provide training and professional development opportunities for the local community of color with a goal of increasing our presence both onstage and within the ranks of writers, directors and producers.

“The reason I am drawn to Facing Our Truth is that life experience has shown me stories heal. Racism is synonymous with fear of that which is unknown. Telling stories of people of color in a theatrical setting helps dissolve the fear that leads to discrimination and hate crimes. Experiencing stories of those who are oppressed replaces that fear with understanding and compassion. Therein lies the power of theater.”

Kristen van Ginhoven, founder and artistic director of WAM Theatre, discovered Facing Our Truth through Winter Miller, playwright of *Colored*, which Kristen is directing. She had produced Miller’s play *In Darfur* at WAM in 2014 and is a big fan.

“Winter says it best: ‘Facing Our Truth is important to me because it’s 2015 and we need change and it’s coming too slowly.’ What she says is why Facing Our Truth is important to me,” said Kristen. “I need to step up. Just as men need to be part of the conversations about women’s issues, white people need to be part of the conversation about race. I feel very lucky to be partnering with Jamuna and Gwendolyn on this project. I learn from them every time we meet and look forward to continuing to learn from them and work alongside them into the future.

“The important thing is that WAM and other theaters take the lead and produce these types of plays and invite communities into the conversation. These aren’t plays for people of color; they’re plays that everyone needs to see. We want people of color to be seen and heard, and we also want white people to step up and be accountable for efforts to shift inequality and oppression. We all have to do our part and that means a lot of messy conversations and, for white people in particular – and men of all races – a lot of listening.” Kristen realizes the necessity of diversity in every workplace, including the theatre. “This is my hope; better days for all of us and a lessening of oppression and a raising of opportunities for people who are marginalized to really thrive.”

Multicultural BRIDGE is the beneficiary of this event, and there is no better match. The work Gwendolyn Hampton VanSant and BRIDGE do in nurturing education, advocacy, elegant enlightenment, and bringing us all closer to a country of united citizens in the name of humanity is urgent, because, really, what else do we have more important than our humanity?