
‘Facing Our Truth’ In Berkshire County And Beyond

By Amy Krzanik

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Sirker, Hampton-VanSant and van Ginhoven.

We hear the word “privilege” thrown around a lot these days, specifically in relation to “white privilege,” but what does it really mean, what does it look like, and what can we do about it?

Three Berkshire County activists and educators have joined forces to explore this thorny issue in an artful way. **WAM Theatre** founder Kristen van Ginhoven, Gwendolyn Hampton-VanSant, CEO and founding director of **Multicultural BRIDGE**, and theater educator Yvette “Jamuna” Sirker will bring a staged reading of “Facing Our Truth: Ten Minute Plays on Trayvon, Race and Privilege” to Pittsfield’s **Colonial Theatre** on Saturday, Feb. 6 at 7:30 p.m.

In the wake of the George Zimmerman verdict in 2013, **The New Black Fest** theater festival, based in NYC, commissioned six diverse playwrights to explore topics of race and privilege, resulting in Facing Our Truth (FOT). Since then, the series has been performed around the country each year on or around February 5 — Trayvon’s birthday.

Van Ginhoven was introduced to FOT by one of the participating playwrights, Winter Miller, in 2014 when WAM produced her full-length drama, *In Darfur*, and a shooting took place in Pittsfield while they were working on it. “After the shooting, there was a lot of conversation about ‘what can we do,’” says van Ginhoven. “I sent an email to a few community leaders suggesting we do this staged reading.”



“*In Darfur* was an awakening for me about race issues,” says van Ginhoven. “I began to see all the issues happening in our own community and around the world in a different light. Storytelling, and theater, is a force for good in the world and is a great way to help people understand perspectives that are different from their own.”

The six varied plays of FOT include a folk opera, a satire about a white woman whose psychiatrist diagnoses her with “Negro-phobia,” and a piece told from the point of view of a mother much like Trayvon’s.

Yvette “Jamuna” Sirker is directing the latter, *Dressing* by Mona Mansour and Tala Manassah. “I chose it because it pulled on my heart, wrenchingly so. After living through the deaths of parents and two of my siblings, I’m very familiar with that moment when the funeral is over, everyone has gone home, and you’re alone with the pain.” The play, which is not specifically about Trayvon but suggests that the son dies a similar death, spotlights what it’s like for a mother left behind. Gwendolyn Hampton-VanSant and her real-life son, J.V., will be playing the parts. “My son and I have had, almost word for word, this same conversation about his safety,” she says. “The audience will be able to see what so many African American women have to deal with. I can really feel the intensity of the audience when I’m left for half the piece by myself on stage.”



Gwendolyn and J.V. Hampton-VanSant rehearse.

Hampton-VanSant's Multicultural BRIDGE organization, which aims to promote mutual understanding and acceptance among diverse groups, will be the recipient of proceeds from Saturday night's reading, and Hampton-VanSant will moderate a panel discussion after the performance. Panelists include Pittsfield police chief Michael Wynn, cultural proficiency coach and ROPE/Youth Alive director Shirley Edgerton and MCLA education professor Dr. Christopher Himes. The audience is invited to ask questions of them and the directors.

"Berkshire County has a lot of well-informed, compassionate people of all races who wish to be part of a paradigm shift," says Sirker. "The interest is there in this community to hear stories of people of color. A goal of ours is to galvanize these people who want to be part of that change."

A reception will be held at the end of the evening, where the community can continue the interaction and meet the cast, which consists of experienced local actors, as well as community members and activists who are stepping out of their comfort zone.

Says van Ginhoven, "I hope this reading can serve as another way to contribute to the conversations happening in our community so that, ultimately, we can all move forward together towards a more unified existence."

Facing Our Truth: Ten Minute Plays on Trayvon, Race and Privilege

A Staged Reading and Moderated Discussion

Saturday, February 6 at 7:30 p.m.

The Colonial Theatre

111 South St., Pittsfield, MA

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