

TAG Sets the Stage

African-American plays are rarely performed in Honolulu. The Actors' Group is changing that—and finding box-office success.

■ Q, Michele Dalton, Jeane Wynne Herring, and Pono Jones of *The Piano Lesson*.



IN 2004, The Actors' Group (TAG) debuted its first African-American-themed play, *Two Trains Running*, written by Pulitzer-Prize-winning playwright August Wilson. It was the beginning of an annual tradition. "This will be our seventh African-American drama, our fifth by August Wilson," says Frankie Enos, TAG's vice-president of the board, referring to the group's latest Wilson offering, *The Piano Lesson*, which opens this month, coinciding with Black History Month.

TAG's decision to stage African-American dramas was prompted by the persuasions of Leonard Piggee, founder of the Honolulu African-American Repertory Theatre. "He told me that he had gone to all the theaters in town and hadn't been successful in getting them

to do an African-American show," says Enos. "Then he found out about TAG, and called me up one day. And it sounded interesting." The show was a smash success, as were the group's subsequent efforts, including the classic *Raisin in the Sun*. "Our African-American shows have been our mainstay," says Enos. "They have really helped to keep us going."

The plays' success has come despite some real challenges—most notably, the task of finding actors to fill the mostly African-American casts. "The consensus at the time," says Enos, "and to some extent, I think it's still out there, is that there just weren't enough black actors to fill out a whole show." While some theater groups might have cast other ethnicities in African-American roles, TAG has

refused. "We never considered casting anyone but an African-American in an African-American role," says Enos.

Fortunately, TAG has managed to find actors, even if it has meant resorting to unconventional casting methods. "So many people say there are no African-American actors on this island," says Jeane Wynne Herring, the director of *The Piano Lesson*. "People only look in the theater community, which is a big mistake. They need to go outside the theater community because you don't know what you'll find." Wynne Herring discovered some of her actors for *The Piano Lesson* while handing out flyers around town. For her part, Enos found Curtis Duncan, who is currently cast in *The Piano Lesson*, walking past the Honolulu Academy of Arts. Other actors have been found in similar kismet fashion: while attending First Friday events, checking out an art gallery or outside the theater taking pictures.

While their perseverance has definitely paid off, both Wynne Herring and Enos attribute some of their good fortune in finding their actors to Honolulu's increasingly diverse population. "We're becoming more and more the melting pot," says Wynne Herring. "We have everyone here. It's so wonderful to see that."

—JENNY QUILL

▶ The Piano Lesson

Feb. 12 to March 7. General admission: \$20 (students, seniors, military get a discount). Call 722-6941 or visit www.taghawaii.net for tickets.

PHOTO: JOE MARQUEZ