

Theater

WINTER LEAGUE
Brooks, top, and her cast do the dugout at Wrigley Field.



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Artful Dodger

Lookingglass reflects on Jackie Robinson and baseball's color barrier. By **Kris Vire**

Ed Asner doesn't know it, but Lookingglass Theatre Company has him to thank for its latest production.

"Ed Asner makes my heart stop. I've been the biggest fan of him since I was a little girl," J. Nicole Brooks says. Asner has been a frequent contributor to L.A. Theatre Works, the Los Angeles-based nonprofit that makes audio recordings of contemporary and classic plays, often using actors well known from film and television.

"One Saturday night, my boyfriend's like, 'You've gotta listen to this play, this is the dopest thing I've ever heard,'" Brooks, a Washington Park native who now lives in L.A., says over drinks at Petherino's. The play was a 1996 Theatre Works recording of *Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting*, a 1989 work by Ed Schmidt about Jackie Robinson and the integration of baseball. Asner

played Brooklyn Dodgers president Branch Rickey.

Brooklyn scribe Schmidt imagines a 1947 summit among Rickey and some of the leading black cultural figures of the day: Jackie Robinson, heavyweight champion Joe Lewis, legendary tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and actor-singer Paul Robeson. "I listened to the play and just became sort of obsessed with it," Brooks says. "I was like, What is this play and why have I never heard of it before?"

Actor and playwright Brooks became Lookingglass's newest ensemble member in 2007, after the company produced her *Black Diamond: The Years the Locusts Have Eaten*; she also played the title role in her own *Fedra: Queen of Haiti* in 2009. A two-decade-old script seemed an unlikely choice for Lookingglass, a company that almost

exclusively produces original works or new adaptations.

"I said, I'm going to propose this to Lookingglass [and] they're going to say no," she says with a laugh before taking a sip of her Ketel One (with two ice cubes and a twist of lemon).

"Sometimes I still say 'they' because I'm the junior member. Those guys

have been fucking around with each other for years; they have a great brother-sisterly bond, and I still feel like the cousin."

Brooks proposed a reading. "I was like, just let me bring in the best blacktors in the city and let me get it done!" she says. Andy White, Lookingglass's artistic director, hesitated. "When I first read the play, it's a lot of talking. It read like a lot of great arguments, but it doesn't read like a quote-unquote Lookingglass play," White says. "Staging wise, it wasn't clear to me on the page how it would come to life."

But Brooks's reading at Lookingglass's December 2010 retreat convinced the company. "The cast just blew it out of the water," White says.

"Every one of those arguments that felt brainy and cerebral to me now is jumping off the page."

"It went from 'maybe not' to 'you're in, kiddo,'" says Brooks, who's directing solo for the first time. (She and David Catlin codirected *Black Diamond*.) Much of her cast from the 2010 reading returns for the

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production, including James Vincent Meredith as Robeson, Larry Neumann Jr. as Rickey and Ernest Perry as Bojangles.

Days before starting rehearsals, Brooks says her excitement

manifested itself as insomnia. "All these memories from my childhood started floating back to me, about baseball and my family. It's sort of serving as inspiration—I know that's so romantic and corny," says Brooks, who is black. "But my nerves can't compare to the nerves of Jackie Robinson. I'm not directing in a theater with Jim Crow signs up, y'know?"

Mr. Rickey Calls a Meeting starts previews Wednesday 4 and opens January 14. See Resident companies.

PHOTO: SEAN WILLIAMS

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