



Interview: Theatre Life with Jennifer L. Nelson

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by Elliot Lanes Feb. 23, 2017



Jennifer L. Nelson. Photo by Fern Seiden.

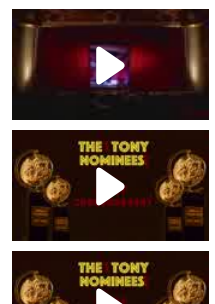
Today's subject is living her theatre life in many places around town and the country. Jennifer L. Nelson's current project is directing *The Gospel at Colonus* for WSC Avant Bard. The show begins performances this evening and runs through March 26 at Gunston Arts Center.

Jennifer is Resident Director of Mosaic Theater Company-where she recently directed *The Gospel of Lovingkindness* and *Milk for Sugar*-and she brings more than 40 years of experience as an actor, playwright, administrator, professor, director, and two-term president of the League of Washington Theatres. She is Senior Advisor for Programming at Ford's Theatre, and previously served for eleven years as the Producing Artistic Director of the African Continuum Theatre Company (ACTCo), where she directed more than twenty full productions and readings. She is a 26-year veteran of Living Stage Theatre Company, the former community-outreach program at Arena Stage. Nelson has directed productions at Ford's Theatre (where she is the Artistic and Legacy Project Advisor), Round House Theatre Company, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Theater of the First Amendment, Theater J, and more. As a playwright, Nelson won the Helen Hayes/Charles MacArthur Award for Most Outstanding New Play for *Torn From the Headlines*.

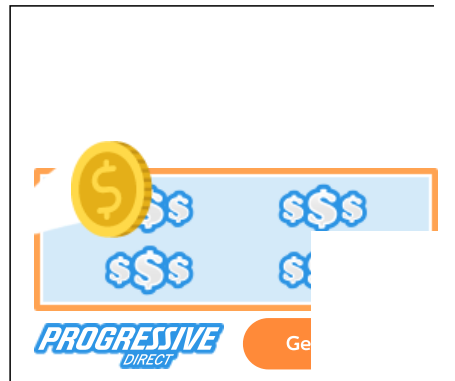


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As if that isn't enough, she has taught at UCLA, George Washington University, and American University; and most recently teaching "Theatre for Social Change" as an adjunct lecturer at Georgetown University. She also helped assemble the material for The Theatre Lab School of the Dramatic Arts' *Lifestories* production that played at the Kennedy Center. The project was documented in the film *How I Got Over*.



As you can tell, Jennifer is a woman with many talents. *The Gospel at Colonus* isn't seen very often so that alone is an impetus to attend. The fact that the multi-talented Jennifer L. Nelson is associated with the project should make your decision to go see the production even easier. She has a history with the show and she is ready to share it with you. Gunston Arts Center isn't that far of a schlep even for those who live in DC, so make *The Gospel at Colonus* one of your must-see theatre productions for the next month.

Had you been working in theatre elsewhere before coming to DC?

I did some theatre in California before coming here, but I've been in Washington for longer than anywhere else.

You ran African Continuum Theatre Company for many years. When it started, was the idea that it would be DC's answer to Negro Ensemble Company and other black theaters in NYC?

There was no thought that we might be DC's answer to anything other than a gap in local programming. Washington had several African American theatre companies before ACTCo.

The gospel choir and cast of WSC Avant Bard's production of *The Gospel at Colonus*. Photo by DJ Corey Photography.

I'm told you and *The Gospel at Colonus* go back a ways. Can you please tell us about your history with the show?

The first iteration of *Gospel* came through Arena Stage before it went to Broadway. I was working at Arena at the time (must have been mid-80's), so I was able to see it many times! It was one of the best things I had ever seen on stage. That production was much bigger than what we are doing at Avant Bard-but the score and story are completely intact in our more compact version.

***The Gospel at Colonus* isn't performed a whole lot. Why do think this is? Do the production requirements scare people?**

It might be that people find it hard to conceive a smaller version of the original. After all, my estimate is that the original had at least thirty people on stage. I'm very proud of the fact that the Avant Bard version, while compact, still packs a powerful punch.

William T. Newman Jr. as Preacher Oedipus in WSC Avant Bard's production of *The Gospel at Colonus*. Photo by DJ Corey Photography.

Most of us know this show as a large spectacle like when it was performed at Brooklyn Academy of Music. Avant Bard's version, I imagine, is smaller than the original for budgetary reasons. Can you please tell us what will make this production stand out from the larger version of the show?

First, we have the astoundingly talented E'Marcus Harper-Short as music director. He will be conducting and playing keyboards with a three-piece ensemble. E'Marcus was given the lead in assembling a compact group of outstanding singers-who-act, plus we have a small chorus of singers from The Women's Ecumenical Choir of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, who will augment the sound in select places. Wait until you hear this assemblage rock the house! Along with the musicians and singers, we have two local professional actors to handle some of the spoken parts. Believe me when I say it rocks!



CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN

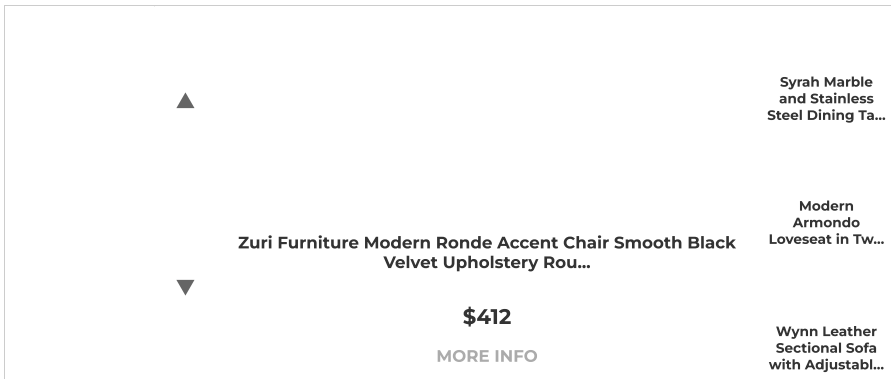
You've been working in DC theatre for many years. What are some of the most exciting changes you've seen since you came here?

The biggest change is the quantity and variety of companies that have emerged. Washington is now a destination city for many young artists coming out of major training programs.

What does 2017 hold in store for you after *The Gospel at Colonus*?

My next project will be *Red Velvet*, a play about the legendary Ira Aldridge, who became a star in early the 19th century at the African Grove Theatre in downtown New York City. When envious whites burned the African Grove Theatre down, Aldridge relocated to Europe, became a star, and never returned to the States. This production will be at Theatre Monmouth in Monmouth, Maine. Later in the year I will direct a Caryl Churchill piece at the University of Maryland. There may be one more show between those two...phew! Lucky me!

Special thanks to WSC Avant Bard's Director of Communications John Stoltenberg for his assistance in coordinating this interview.



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Adrian Ries is currently living his theatre life as the musical director for the U.S. National Tour of The Band's Visit. The show runs through July 17th in the Eisenhower Theater at Kennedy Center. For those who can't see the tour in DC, it will conclude in Richmond VA playing from July 26th to the 31st.

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