

Profile
Progress Theatre
A Touring Ensemble Company

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Photos by Akintoye Moses & Leslie Hewitt

If you stick a knife nine inches into my back and pull it out three inches that's not progress. Even if you pull it all the way out, that's not progress. Progress is healing the wound. America hasn't even begun to acknowledge the knife.

~Malcolm X [El-Hajj Malik Shabazz] (1964)

We agree with Malcolm. Progress is about healing and healing begins with acknowledgement. We see progress as tireless dedication to the process of healing old societal wounds by embracing the lessons of the past and of mending new social divisions by examining the struggles of our times and promoting understanding, reconciliation and unity in diversity. Progress Theatre strives to participate in that process.

Mission and Programs

Our passion for social change and creating dialogues about the issues that affect our communities keeps us humble about continuing what we do and driven to reach more and more people.

~Dana Bowles, Founding Ensemble Member (Porter 5)

Founded in 2001, Progress Theatre [PT] is an interfaith, international touring ensemble of multi-disciplined performers committed to using theatre to encourage positive change through social consciousness, cross-community dialogue, and cultural awareness. By engaging various communities onstage and off, Progress Theatre strives to change the make-up of average theatergoers, encouraging audiences diverse in race, age, gender, and spiritual background. With a growing touring repertoire of 4 original

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musical theatre works, Progress Theatre's aesthetic is rooted in African American performance traditions and aesthetics. Fusing theatre, music, storytelling, movement, spirituals, and spoken word, our work aims to explore the social concerns and insights of today's generation.

PT also sponsors two outreach programs to engage the communities where we tour and to inspire dialogue beyond the stage. With The Open-Stage, PT presents upcoming and veteran artists through a pre-show performance segment in an effort to share our stage and exchange audiences with community-based performers in the cities we tour. Generation Progress, PT's arts and education program, is used to engage, support, and inspire young people to contribute to the progress of their communities. Programming targets students from primary school to university, through discounted school matinee performances (equipped with lesson plans for educators), post-show talkbacks, and performance opportunities where students perform as part of The Open-Stage. In-school programs include arts workshops and in-class performance presentations to further introduce theatre as a powerful tool for self-expression and social involvement. Since its launch in 2006, Generation Progress has proudly reached more than 4000 students nationwide and abroad exclusive of our programs for universities.

Founding and Roots

My favorite memories are the reactions of audience members who have stereotypes in mind of who we are and preconceived notions about our work; and after the show, hearing their testimony of how those assumptions have disappeared. It's a mixture of surprise and fulfillment. Many walk away with new perspectives on the experience they can have with art as activism, with Muslim artists and with an interfaith company.

~Maiesha McQueen, PT Musical Composer/Founding Ensemble Member (Deen 30)

PT's inaugural piece *PEACHES* was mounted as my independent project as a student at the Experimental Theatre Wing, one of several training studios part of the Department of Drama at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Tisch casting practices favor a color-blind approach with earnest efforts to accommodate its diverse student population. However, many students of color, like myself, craved acknowledgement of diversity through more culturally-specific performance opportunities. Independent student projects often filled this void. Inspired in part by Nina Simone's classic song "Four Women," *PEACHES* spans U.S. history from slavery to the present to breakdown stereotypes of African American female identity and deepen perceptions of the woman who may, at anytime in her life be called "Peaches," an "angry" Black woman.

PEACHES was the first collaboration between myself and PT's musical composer Maiesha McQueen, then a student at Tisch's musical theatre studio, Cap 21. Our partnership seemed undeniably destined, so seamless was—and still is—the connection between my words, her music, and our parallel passion to use art as activism. *PEACHES* is not an autobiographical piece, nor is its treatment of the stereotype based in college experiences. But as students, myself, Maiesha, and the cast of *PEACHES* were looking to stage a campus intervention—boldly, unapologetically confronting the stereotype we felt victim to should we speak too passionately in our classes, question the cultural sensitivity of a director's vision, or simply fall silent and inactive in our studios due to lack of interest in yet another "color-blind" approach. We didn't want blindness,

we wanted acknowledgment—that first step to healing our campus cultural woes.

PEACHES was a rewarding success at NYU. Our fellow students attended in large numbers, eager to participate in dialogue and to share their insights. Supportive professors invited New York theatre producers to our humble, black-box production and by summer, we began our first tour with a feature slot at the National Black Theatre Festival and a co-commission grant from the National Performance Network in support of performances at New York's Performance Space 122 and New World Theatre in Amherst, Massachusetts. At some theatres in our early touring, audiences often lacked cultural, generational, spiritual, and class diversity. Since then, PT has been very active in audience building, working with theatres and within our own networks to produce audiences that not only represent regular theatergoers and fellow artists, but also reflect communities who may not normally attend theatre or who theatres may not consider as their target market. We take pride in the diversity of our audiences and celebrate that some of our greatest supporters are people who look differently than us, who believe differently than us, who belong to a generation different than ours as a testament to our work in building bridges.

By 2003, a 2nd piece '*MEMBUH* was added to the repertoire and our core ensemble with myself, Maiesha, and 2 fellow Tisch students Dana Bowles and Aaron Goodson was solidified. Like *PEACHES*, '*MEMBUH* (as in "Remember") is an *a capella* musical—one of the aesthetic mainstays of our work. It was written post-9/11, focusing on the stereotypes of being a Generation X-er and bringing those insights to the stage through the themes of legacy and remembrance. Since 2001, PT has toured to over 100 theatres including The Kennedy Center in D.C., Harlem's Apollo Theatre, and recently the 2008 World Music theatre Festival in Europe. Two new plays premier in our 2008-9 season: *The Rain*, examining the complexities of spirituality, race, gender, and community during times of survival in the backdrop of a great storm; and *Shahadah*, seeking to examine the often clichéd rhetoric around religious conversion and look at the psychological, emotional, cultural, and social journey of those who embrace Islam.

On Embracing a Muslim-Centered, Interfaith Identity

We are definitely held together by our love for each other and our love for this work and our commitment to striving both artistically and spiritually.

~ Aaron Goodson, Ensemble Member (Porter 13)

Three of us—myself included—had become Muslims by the time we graduated from NYU. PT always considered our love for God connected to our love for seeing activism and healing in society. But, with PT's dramatic themes being more social than religious and our aesthetics more culturally inspired than by any particular faith—"faith-based" was never fitting label. Our costumes are decidedly modest, but creatively designed for Muslim performers to portray non-Muslim characters as needed; so perhaps only a Muslim or the discerning audience member might wonder if the costumes reflect company practice rather than character choice. However, as our interfaith identity became more visible (from our post-show *hijabs*¹ to the Muslim characters in '*MEMBUH*), our audiences grew curious—excited even—and questions abounded. From utter confusion: *So, you are NOT in the Nation of Islam? How does it work between the Christians and Muslims? But, I thought Muslim women couldn't [insert any number of commonly assumed*

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prohibitions], to endearing questions: *What exactly do Muslims believe?* or, from the Muslims: *Which way is the Qibla² in this theatre?* Without any effort or planning on our part, a new opportunity emerged for dialogues in embracing an underserved market in diversity work—spiritual diversity. In dialogue with our audiences across the nation, we realized just how necessary and neglected conversations of spiritual diversity are. As our Muslim following grew rapidly, the theatre lobbies after our performances saw interaction between communities who tend to avoid each other or, at best, honestly believe that they can not relate to one another. In a pivotal identity movement, PT began to use the intersection of our spiritual identities with our identities as African American, as male, as female, as young—as an asset forwarding our mission of diverse audience building, cross-community dialogue and healing.

The Future

On the timeline of progress, I have often thought that if the generation of our parents was the generation of acknowledgement and “pulling out the knife,” then our generation must continue the next step of progress, encouraging a generation of healing. But perhaps understanding progress as linear assumes an “end,” the possibility of world without challenges, a generation without faults. Perhaps progress is better understood as an evolutionary cycle that every generation must engage and improve upon to successfully heal from the trials of its time. Seeing the cycle of progress as infinite, Progress Theatre strives towards lasting contributions.

To learn more about Progress Theatre visit www.progresstheatre.com or contact info@progresstheatre.com.

Notes

1. The head scarf worn by Muslim women.
2. The direction of the Muslim prayer facing Mecca.

Works Consulted

Deen, Jameelah Zahra, K. Fatima Woolfolk & Tayyibah Taylor. “Creative Minds.” *Azizah Magazine* 5.1 (2008): 28-30.

Porter, Asuzana. “Voices of a New Generation.” *Black Masks Magazine* 17.6 (2007): 5-6, 13