PassinArt

THEATER COMPANY

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PassinArt Theatre Company Announces 2026 Show Dates for Black Nativity at Alberta Abbey

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PORTLAND, OR – On Friday, November 27, at 7:30 p.m., PassinArt invites the community to the 2026 production of *Black Nativity: A Gospel Songplay* at Alberta Abbey. This event marks the 18th annual production and tells the story of the Nativity from an African American perspective through a combination of scripture, poetry, dance, and song with griot-style narration. *Black Nativity* is full of spirited musical performances, powerful storytelling, and cheer just in time for the holiday season. On stage through December 13, *Black Nativity* is the perfect family holiday adventure. Alberta Abbey is located at 126 NE Alberta St. in Northeast Portland.

Black Nativity is written by Langston Hughes, directed by Jerry Foster, music directed by JerMichael Riley PhD, and choreographed by Kemba Shannon.

For tickets and more information about this year's cast, visit passinart.org.

ABOUT PASSINART

PassinArt's mission is to entertain, educate, and inspire artists and audiences while addressing critical issues facing our community. Founded in 1982 in the Albina neighborhood, PassinArt follows in the tradition of the Black Theatre Movement, which began in the United States in 1821 with roots in many African traditions of oral history and story to pass along knowledge and grow subsequent generations.

As the oldest, continuously producing Black theatre company in Oregon, PassinArt remains dedicated to the founders' commitment to pass on art, history, and culture from one generation to the next. For four decades and counting, PassinArt Theatre Company has provided training and opportunities for emerging and established Black artists and artists of color of all ages, abilities, faiths, and genders. By providing a unique stage for emerging and established African American artists and artists of color, PassinArt makes empowering Black theatre available to everyone, especially welcoming youth, young adults, and people new to our communities.

Link to download photos: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1sEZQWTu47x4FYMZaBJbOw-6PEkMis_zG?usp=sharing

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Jerry Foster

DIRECTOR

Jerry Foster is an actor and director actively involved in the arts within the Portland Metropolitan area for more than 30 years. Jerry co-founded the Inner City Youth program in 1992. In 1995, he became PassinArt: A Theatre Company's Artistic Director and currently serves as Board President.

His stage credits and performances include *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, A Soldiers' Play, Deceptive Love, The Pews, Pill Hill, A Sunbeam, Ragtime, A Raisin in the Sun, Driving Miss Daisy, Big River*, and *Two Trains Running.*

Directing credits include *Black Nativity*, Juneteenth & Kwanza Celebration for the North Portland library, and the Peace Festival for Black Women for Peace.

Jerry has worked in news media for over 28 years. In 2019, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Zeta Sigma Omega Chapter presented Jerry with the prestigious Emerald Award for the Arts honoring African American Men for community contributions and leadership.

JerMichael Riley, PhD.

MUSIC DIRECTOR

Dr. JerMichael Riley, originally of Greenville, MS is former Music Director at the Jerusalem Temple Church of God in Christ. JerMichael also serves as Music

Director for the Greenville District of the Churches of God in Christ and as a state director for the Northern Mississippi Jurisdiction where Bishop William Dean, Jr. is the prelate; Former Music Director for Jackson State University's Gospel Choir, former director of the Greenville-Weston Voices of Liberation, executive board member of the National COGIC music department, and is a lead vocalist of the Grammy/Stellar Award-winning and world renown Mississippi Mass Choir.

JerMichael has shared the stage, worked with, and introduced many of today's gospel artists such as the Clark Sisters, Kurt Carr, and Carolyn Traylor. He has also shared the stage with Pattie LaBelle, The Williams Brothers, Donnie McKlurkin, Richard Smallwood & Vision, Vanessa Bell Armstrong, John P. Kee, Vickie Winans, Kim Burrell, Kierra Sheard-Kelly, Smokie Norful, Debbie Allen, Beverly Crawford, Marvin Sapp, the late Rev. James Moore and many more.

Kenneth Dembo

STAGE DIRECTOR, JOSEPH/NARRATOR

Kenneth Dembo is a native Oregonian with 30 plus years of acting, directing, and stage-managing credits. Some of his on-stage credits include, *As You Like it, Black Nativity, Blues for An Alabama Sky, Hamlet, Two Trains Running, The Misanthrope, Tartuffe, To Kill A Mockingbird, You Can't Take It With You, Measure For Measure, Othello, Of Mice & Men, Driving Miss Daisy, Master Harold And The Boys* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Stage managing credits include Passinart's productions of *Black Nativity, Seven Guitars, A Song for Coretta* and *Neat*.

Directorial credits include *The Misanthrope, Lullaby* and *Bourbon at the Border*.

Kenneth is also a member on the Board of Directors for Passinart: A Theater Company.

Kemba Shannon

CHOREOGRAPHER

Kemba is a celebrated dancer and educator whose career spans various facets of the performing arts. With extensive training in different dance styles, she has made significant contributions to both stage performances and dance pedagogy locally and globally. Kemba holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) from Towson State University. Her training is extensive and diverse, having honed her skills at the Alvin Ailey American Theater and Martha Graham School. Kemba has shared her passion for dance through teaching positions at UCLA, Loyola Marymount University, El Camino College, Maryland Dance Academy, and Portland State University, among others.

Kemba's stage credits include performances in the LA cast of *The Lion King*, the Broadway cast of The Color Purple, and Cirque du Soleil's Zumanity. She has worked alongside Madonna on the Drowned World Tour, P!nk during the Try This World Tour, Celine Dion on the Taking Chances World Tour, and Rihanna for the Nike RockStar World Tour. Kemba has also contributed her talents to performances with Kanye West, Fantasia, and Grammy Award winner Esperanza Spalding. Kemba has developed her distinctive dance methodology known as K-Technique; this innovative curriculum incorporates elements of Afro-Funk, Hip-Hop, Modern, and jazz dance. Kemba has choreographed various musicals throughout the Portland/Vancouver area. Kemba is excited to be a part of the dynamic production of *Black Nativity* this year.

Kenisha Blackman

FEATURE SINGER

Kenisha Blackman is a dynamic singer, entrepreneur, worshiper, and psalmist affectionately known as the "Songbird of the Pacific Northwest." With a voice that captivates the soul and a heart deeply rooted in worship, she ministers through music with authenticity, grace, and power.

She has performed as a lead soloist with DaNell Daymon & Greater Works on *America's Got Talent* and as a lead vocalist for *How Sweet the Sound*. She has appeared at the *Stellar Awards*, and has opened for Grammy Award–winning artist Le'Andria Johnson.

Beyond the stage, Kenisha is a passionate community advocate and the founder of Deeper Love Foundation, a nonprofit committed to transforming lives by serving families in need with compassion, resources, and advocacy.

A devoted wife and mother of two, Kenisha is a woman of faith, purpose, and resilience. Whether through worship or community service, she is committed to using her gifts and influence to uplift hearts, empower families, and make a lasting impact in the lives of others.

Jahana McCoy

FEATURE SINGER

Jahana McCoy was born and raised in Philadelphia, PA. She has been singing since the age of 3 and spent much of her childhood heavily involved with music. She began her singing career singing with her mother, brother and sister, formerly known as “The Jones Family”. Singing with her family afforded her the opportunity to appear on Showtime at the Apollo at the legendary Apollo Theatre in Harlem, NY.

Jahana uses her instrument in dedication to the message of Jesus Christ. She has shared the stage with both Gospel and R&B greats and traveled the world singing background with Patti LaBelle, The Roots, & Gospel artist JJ Hairston & Youthful Praise. These experiences laid the groundwork for the Christian artist and worship leader she is today. Jahana now serves as the Worship Leader at Mt. Olivet Baptist Church in Portland, Ore. and continues to travel and sing all around the world.

Black Nativity 2025 cast, photo by Antonio Harris

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OREGON ART BEAT

‘Black Nativity’ Lights Up Portland’s Holiday Season

By Jule Gilfillan (OPB)

Late autumn in the Northwest brings crisp air, soggy leaves and early nightfall. In Portland, ‘tis also the season for “The Nutcracker,” “A Christmas Carol” and “The Santaland Diaries.” But over the last few years, a new holiday performance has joined that must-see list.

“I thought ‘Black Nativity’ was uplifting, that’s why we decided to do it,” said Connie Carley, the managing director of PassinArt: A Theater Company.

Carley is a founding member of PassinArt, one of Portland’s oldest African-American theater companies. The nonprofit group was organized in the early 1980s around the mission of “passing art, culture and history to the next generation.” PassinArt’s productions seek to entertain, educate and inspire artists and audiences while addressing critical issues facing the African-American community.

“Black Nativity” is a retelling of the nativity story through the talents of Harlem Renaissance author Langston Hughes. It was one of the first plays written by an African-American playwright to be staged off-Broadway.

“Langston Hughes wrote the play because he didn’t see anything that dealt with the holidays that was for Black people,” said Jerry Foster, PassinArt’s artistic director. Foster also frequently acts in and directs the company’s productions.

“It was originally named ‘Wasn’t It a Mighty Day’ and it had people like Alvin Ailey in it,” Foster said. First performed in New York in December 1961, today “Black Nativity” is staged around the country as a recurring holiday celebration.

Back in Portland for its fifth year, “Black Nativity” presents a traditionally Christian story. But religion is not the point, Carley said.

“Historically you can’t talk about Black history without talking about the Black church,” she said. “The Black church historically wasn’t there just for enhancing your faith. It provided services to the community. A lot of the social justice movements came out of the Black church, a lotta the leaders came out of the Black church. And then of course it was a reprieve from the oppression that was going on from slavery.”

Last year, PassinArt’s production of “Black Nativity” was staged at Greater St. Stephens Missionary Baptist Church, a modest and picturesque neighborhood chapel in inner Northeast Portland.

Actors portraying Mary and Joseph wander through the assembly in a depiction of the Holy couple’s urgent search for lodging that culminates in joyful birth of the Christ child.

Set in the church’s intimate nave and filled with the soulful warmth and soaring voices of a gospel choir, the familiar story generates a palpable sense of unity in the diverse audience.

“Even people who are non-believers find themselves enjoying it,” Carley chuckled.

“The premise of ‘Black Nativity’ is to utilize the harmony — the rich, deep harmony that the group can bring, and I think that was one of the strong points of this past season,” said Foster, who directed the 2017 production.

Actor Kenneth Dembo, who played Joseph last year, agrees.

“The voices, and getting an opportunity to showcase people that live here,” Dembo said of his fellow Portlanders. “They’re talented and they’re wonderful and they’re accessible and they’re excited to be there. So how can you not be excited about that, you know? I love it.”

So does the audience.

“We saw ‘Black Nativity’ as a cultural event that could bridge communities,” Carley said.

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