Interview: Harry Lennix Directs the New Play ‘A Small Oak Tree Runs Red’

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CHICAGO – Mention the name Harry Lennix, and images of his many character roles are bound to emerge – Harold Cooper in the TV series “The Blacklist,” General Swanwick from “Batman v Superman” and Commissioner Blades from Spike Lee’s recent “Chi-Raq.” The deeply knowledgeable Lennix brings his years of dramatic expertise, as he directs the Congo Square Theatre Company’s world premiere stage play “A Small Oak Tree Runs Red.’

The play is an allegory set in purgatory, the weigh station between heaven and hell. Three African-America characters – two men, and a woman – are in this space, trying to remember what brought them there. They all three have nooses around the necks, the victims of the 1918 Georgia Lynch Riots. With ramifications all the way to the present day, “A Small Oak Tree Runs Red” is a stark reminder of the hatred that has burned in the soul of America since its inception. For details and to purchase tickets, click here. [19]



Actor/Director Harry Lennix, Walking the Red Carpet Last Year for ‘Chi-Raq’
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Harry Lennix is a 17 year board member of the Congo Square Theatre, while he continues his career as a working actor. Born in Chicago, he studied acting and direction at Northwestern University. He broke into films with 1989’s made-in-Chicago “The Package,” and has steadily climbed the career ladder since then. Film highlights include “The Five Heartbeats” (1991), “Get on the Bus” (1996), “Love & Basketball” (2000), “The Matrix Reloaded” (2003) and “State of Play” (2009). He has had recurring or regular character roles on the TV series “ER,” “Diagnosis Murder,” “24” and “Dollhouse.” He appeared in Chicago on the Goodman Theatre stage in 2000, as Walter Younger in “A Raisin in Sun.” He is currently seen on the NBC-TV series, “The Blacklist.”

Harry Lennix sat down for a comprehensive interview with HollywoodChicago.com, to be divided into two parts. For part one, Lennix talks about directing “A Small Oak Tree Runs Red,” and its deep resonance to the issues facing African Americans – and all Americans – today.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the origin of your involvement with this drama, and once you took the assignment, what did you want to bring to the play that would fulfill the drama within it?

Harry Lennix: I joined Congo Square Theatre around the same time I was doing ‘A Raisin in the Sun’ at the Goodman Theatre. At the time, they were a fledgling theatre company, and I’ve been an advisor on the board ever since. This play came along as a winner of the August Wilson Playwriting Initiative a year ago, and I was intrigued by it because it was so poetically written.

The subject matter that I wasn’t too keen to tackle within it, because I’m one of those persons who think that watching black people suffer is

not an idea of entertainment. I know a lot about African American history, which is just American history, it’s always been very fascinating to me. The premise of the play is remembering and honoring those persons whose stories would never be taken into account.

HollywoodChicago.com: How do you think it ties into that American history?

Lennix: I think that one thing that America is guilty of is not ever apologizing for the greatest sin of the country, which is slavery. The story is worth telling because it’s not literal, it’s an allegory, and there was a great opportunity for me to do something artistic with it. I was very curious about approaching it in this way.

HollywoodChicago.com: The notion of lynching seems impossible to understand in this day and age – how do you think the play helps us to understand it better?

Lennix: Well, there was a lynching case as late as 2011, so it’s not as far away as we think. I think persecution by powerful structures, on a people who are marginalized, is not new. The idea of lynching is well known, and the way we present it in the play makes the lynching somewhat of a relief, compared to the barbaric treatment they were receiving as sharecroppers.

HollywoodChicago.com: When an all-African American creative team gets together, to do a race sensitive play like this, how does the casts’ inner access of their own encounters with racism help to inform the struggles of the characters?

Lennix: We have crew that are white, so it’s not an all-black production, which in a way served us, because we weren’t completely engulfed in this very serious subject. With the cast, however, it didn’t need to be discussed. Racism is a common thread among people of color, even though each experience with it is different.

My primary purpose, and one of the first things I said to the cast, was that we had to find the safe place in this presentation. I didn’t want them to suffer, go into a pit of despair or take it home with them at night. The idea was to ‘technique’ our way through the material, and at some point the cast was able to put the blood in their veins and the skin on the bones of their characters.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you say ‘technique,’ what specifically are you referring to?

Lennix: I approached it as almost entirely mathematical. How were we to get from point ‘A’ to ‘B’? What is this setting we are in, that we were calling ‘purgatory’? What methodologies were we to use in the theatrical tradition, in order to exfoliate the play?

We had to work with archetypes, even though these were real historical people, but they were representatives of an entire experience. We used techniques like ideographs [a theater method that uses actions rather than words] and even circus traditions to get from here to there, in order to express the content.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you are a veteran actor, what do you think you notice as a director that non-acting directors can’t notice in a staging situationn, and do you have an example from this production?

Lennix: More than a non-acting director, I think I notice when an actor is not believing in themselves. Chicago actors in particular, they work very hard and are very talented, but sometimes they don’t trust how talented they are. I notice when they keep something in reserve. My role in this production was in part to say, ‘you’ve got it, now really let it go.’

I play piano, so when I’m learning a new or difficult piece, at some point I have to enjoy the music of the piece itself, and have confidence that my fingers know where to go. It’s the same with acting, there is a point where we had to enjoy the play.



Tiffany Anderson and Ronald L. Connor in ‘A Small Oak Tree Runs Red’
Photo credit: Marcus Davis for Congo Square Theatre Company

HollywoodChicago.com: This play is set in the after life. What do you think believers expect out of the afterlife that they don’t get on earth, and how is that played out as a philosophy in the drama?

Lennix: It’s interesting, because the concept of ‘purgatory’ is in Catholic Church dogma, and most black people are not Catholic – mostly their Christian realities focus on heaven or hell. Purgatory is for the expiation [atonement] of sin, the fact that you are there, and not in hell, means you’ll eventually work your way to heaven.

The experience of this play, and its psychological architecture, relies on its knowledge of that. We spell it out that they are there, but eventually heaven will come to them. And many black people believe that this life, within itself, is a way to work out whatever obligations we have, in order to get to a better place.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you come across a drama such of this, which deals with the long and horrible holocaust of blacks in America, what kind of emotions of history and family do you bring in approaching the material?

Lennix: It’s interesting that there has been a revival of the TV series, ‘Roots.’ When I experienced the original mini-series as a child, I remember being horrified by the history it presented. It was literally and figuratively history making for me.

My view is that this play is about putting people ‘on the record,’ who otherwise would have been forgotten, as a result of their bravery and love for one another. These characters demand justice, and they got punished for it. If we can correct that record in our artistic expression, in a poetic form such as this play, then that is our entire purpose and greatest benefit.

HollywoodChicago.com: How is that in contrast to real life?

Lennix: The United States Justice Department, in my opinion, hasn’t done a damn thing to alleviate this horrible manifestation of racism, bigotry and hate against blacks – the first African American President has done nothing. Even if he were inclined to do something to rectify what we are experiencing as a nation, I don’t know if can go as far as an artistic expression can go, as salve for the collected suffering of the people.

I hope that people will come and experience our play. I don’t want anybody to suffer, but I source the [18th Century] philosopher David Hume in association with the experience. He asserted that when we go to a tragic play, and when the form of tragedy is well put together, then we can experience a catharsis that is soul cleansing, and an anodyne to what our life would be like without it.

HollywoodChicago.com: As a director, which dramatist do you keep attached to you when you run into a dilemma, like a ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ bracelet, as in ‘What Would _____ Do?’

Lennix: Julie Taymor. She is my gold standard of stage directors. I think she has a comprehensive knowledge of theatrical form, since she lived in Indonesia, Java, Japan and France. Her knowledge of form is limitless. Whenever I get painted in a corner, I think about what form she would use, because that is what she practices. It’s about accessing the theater traditions of the whole world.

Click here **[20] for PART TWO of the interview with Harry Lennix, talking his role in Spike Lee’s “Chi-Raq” and the legacy of President Barack Obama.**

Congo Square Theatre presents the World Premiere of “A Small Oak Tree Runs Red” runs Thursdays-Sunday through July 3rd, 2016, at the Anthenaeum Theatre Studio Three, 2936 North Southport, Chicago. Featuring Ronald L. Conner, Tiffany Addison and Gregory Fenner. Written by Lekethia Dalcoe. Directed by Harry Lennix.

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By PATRICK McDONALD [22]
Writer, Editorial Coordinator
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [21]

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