

Front Porch Collective Aims To Change Boston: 'We're One Of The Few Major Metropolitan Cities That Doesn't Have A Black-Run Theater Company'

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"Thank you. You people are part of a movement," Maurice Emmanuel Parent said as he stood on a chair in the lobby of Cambridge's Central Square Theater last night, glass of wine in hand, to lead the crowd in a toast. "Let's take over Boston!"

The Front Porch Arts Collective was concluding a year of staged readings of seven plays by African-American author Marcus Gardley, who teaches playwriting at Brown University in Providence, with a recitation of his crackling comedy "A Wolf in Snakeskin Shoes."

"I have touched so many people with these hands, even healed some, too" actor Reggie Gibson joked as the Righteous Reverend who is about to lose his church to bankruptcy and hatches a plan to con a fried-chicken-check-cashing-funeral-parlor tycoon out of his fortune. "Come give to me your money. Give your money to God, I mean."

After the applause quieted at the end of the show, Parent, an actor and Front Porch's executive director, took to the stage to announce the company's plans to stage full productions beginning next fall: "Breath and Imagination" by Daniel Beaty with the Lyric Stage Company; "Black Odyssey" by Marcus Gardley at Central Square Theater; and "The Three Musketeers," Alexandre Dumas's famous 1844 tale reworked by Catherine Bush, with the Greater Boston



Stage Company. The Lyric and Greater Boston Stage approached Front Porch after seeing the staged readings, Parent says. The companies plan to raise funds for the productions together, he says.

“Over the last 15 years that I’ve been here there have been many attempts at black and brown theater in Boston to varying degrees of success,” Front Porch Artistic Director Dawn Meredith Simmons says. Some have moved away. Sometimes the money didn’t work. Sometimes day jobs got in the way. “Right now the timing is right, the support is right. We’re one of the few major metropolitan cities that doesn’t have a black-run theater company. And we should.”

The goal, Parent says, is more “black and brown voices, increasing the number of black and brown people on stage, off stage [in the audience], back stage and in the board room.”

Simmons says Front Porch wants to create “a place where the stories are being told continuously. So it’s not just a one-off for the theater. So we can create a better ecology of these stories.”



Front Porch Arts Collective Executive Director Maurice Emmanuel Parent announces the company’s plans at Cambridge’s Central Square Theater, March 19, 2018. (Greg Cook)

The idea for Front Porch arose from conversations after Simmons directed an all-black cast in “Saturday Night/Sunday Morning” for Boston’s Lyric Stage Company in October and November 2015. “It would be great if there was a theater that did this work year-round,” Parent recalls them saying. By the following summer they’d found a home—and fiscal agent—at Central Square Theater, he says. (Victoria A. George serves as Front Porch’s executive producer.) They won a Live Arts Boston grant from The Boston Foundation to fund the reading series.

“People know the value of this kind of company that focuses of these types of stories,” Parent tells me. “A company focused on this type of work is needed in the Boston area.”



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Front Porch leaders point to The Boston Globe’s Spotlight series last December highlighting the continued disparities—in opportunity, in economics—between white folks and people of color here. As well as “the lack of black leadership in Boston in general,” Parent notes. “There just needs to be a space made for us, for leaders of color.”

Meanwhile, Donald Trump’s administration has made the nation’s racism more starkly apparent. “In this space, we resist each time we applaud,” Front Porch playwright-in-residence and reading series curator Liana Asim told the crowd before last evening’s show began. “We resist each time we sit next to each other. ... We prove the outside world wrong.”

In recent years, Company One Theatre, Harvard’s American Repertory Theater, Huntington Theatre Company, ArtsEmerson and other local theaters have increasingly featured diverse casts, playwrights of color, and stories of diversity.

But the Front Porch Collective is perhaps the only actively producing theater company in greater Boston led by black folks and focused on the stories of people of color. (Another local theater leader of color is Christopher V. Edwards, who became artistic director of Actor's Shakespeare Project last August.)

Front Porch aims to be the first black-led company staging productions with Actor's Equity Association (the union of actors and stage managers) casts.

"We don't want to be the only company doing this work," Simmons says, stressing Front Porch's support for other theaters in the region. "We want more opportunity, not less." "Here's a time where everybody's working to break down those walls of theater that have kept them so white for so long," Parent says. "We're applauding it, while hoping that will feed into the next logical step, which is a black theater company."

"The hope is while we may be the first company in a while to focus on black and brown theater," Simmons says, "it will kick open the door for other culturally-specific theater companies and hopefully they can make their mark as well."



Front Porch Arts Collective Executive Director Maurice Emmanuel Parent leads a toast in the lobby of Cambridge's Central Square Theater, March 19, 2018. (Greg Cook)

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