

DISCOVERY Ep. 15 - English

[00:01:06] Hello and welcome to Discovery Knight Foundation weekly program on the Arts. I'm Priya Sicar, and today we'll be discussing historical racial inequities in the field of theater and how to remake theater for an equitable future beyond COVID 19. Thank you for joining us. Our guest today is Gary Anderson, producing artistic director for Plowshares Theater Company in Detroit and co-founder of Black Seed, a new unprecedented national initiative to address historic inequities in the theater field and to transform black theater for growth and sustainability.

[00:01:48] Hello. Hi. How are you?

[00:01:50] Hello, Gary. Doing great. How are you?

[00:01:53] I'm fine. One point of clarification, Blackstreet is an initiative led by Billie Holiday. I and two other individuals are partners with the Billie Holiday. And in regards to the functioning of Blacks. So I just wanted that point of clarification.

[00:02:12] Thank you. We definitely want to acknowledge all the partners who are involved. And I would love for you to share more about that when we're learning more about the boxes. Thank you for clarifying that for myself and our viewers. So real quick, before we dove into conversation, Gary, I just want to let viewers know that we will have a brief Q&A at the end. Please feel free to drop your questions into the Zoom chat. If you're watching by Zoome or into the Facebook live chat. And we will do our best to get to questions before we wrap up. So first, scary for those who may not be familiar.

[00:02:56] Could you please tell us a little bit about Usher's theater company where Michigan's only professional African-American theater company? We've been in existence since 1989. We began producing in 1990. We've had a whole slew of programs that have been designed on really providing opportunities for local or local African-American artists, playwrights, actors, directors over the course of our lifetime. And it's been very beneficial to me, as well as to a lot of the other artists that are in the Detroit area to have this kind of nurturing institution. I've been having a conversation with my son about the formation of it because he's actually 27 and starting his own business now. I was twenty eight when I started Plowshares.

[00:03:51] That's right. Thank you. Thank you for that context. So when we spoke earlier this year, it was shortly after Plowshares had done some training on adaptive capacity, and it was just after the onset of the pandemic. And so I know you were in a very different place than we are right now. Detroit as a community was in a different place as well. And can you share

just a little bit about what that experience has been for you in plowshares of the last few months?

[00:04:27] Well, you know, it's been very eye opening for a lot of reasons. Detroit was one of the hot spots early on the course of the pandemic and how it impacted. I've told people this before between my wife and I. We know a little over 100 people who were contracted sick eventually die. People who the last time I saw them was the middle of March and I wasn't able to go to the funeral. And it's not just here, but across the country. Detroit also was a for well, for the state. A third of the deaths actually came out of the Detroit area. And so it was really devastating. And you got a different appreciation of the issue and the disease. But being here, you also got a different attitude towards what the vitality and importance of connecting community while we were still dealing with this. And in fact, the adaptive change workshops has really helped me weather this storm for the most part. But, yeah, it was a very dire part of the period. And we were really looking in and trying to reassess how we as a theater company could be of service to our patrons. And in the end, the community of Detroit. Mm hmm.

[00:05:53] And yes, so so many artists and organizations have been going through a similar process and kind of asking themselves that question, where did you land or have you landed? You know what? What if you kind of decided or left?

[00:06:08] Well, again, this is this pause. In fact, though, the whole event since the middle of March has provided us with a beautiful opportunity to pause and think about who we are, why we are and what we need to do going forward. I've come back with a much stronger commitment to us as artists, as servants, to the community. That's not usually the way we look at ourselves. We look at the picture of the selfish as self-centered our artists is what the general public has for the most part. But in this time, we need to find ways in which the theater and the other disciplines help us communicate our grief. Help us communicate our fear and help us process how we move forward. And so that's what I've been looking at in regards to the work that we've chosen. This summer, we did a virtual concert that was designed to showcase some of our the work that we have been doing on a new musical that we began last year. And originally we're going to do a concert. But you're going to sell tickets and then people come in. We're going to do a whole score. But we still thought that there was a value in sharing that experience with our audience. And so we take we in turn turned it into an event that we put online that's still available. And it helped us actually reconnect with people because people wanted to see that, you know, I mean, they really it was important for them to continue to believe that the art of creativity could continue to be maintained and also that we had something to share with them. So like and that actually was the way we looked at it. So now we're

looking at other ways in which we can bring programming to our audience before we're able to be in a theater again. The main point that I wanted to get across was that we believe that there's a life for plowshares afterwards, that we'll come out of this stronger than we women to it, and that we're only going to do it together. We're not going to do it separately.

[00:08:23] Yeah, well, thank you. And we actually have the video of that and requirements at that concert. And we'd like to share. Share a couple of minutes of a clip. And I wonder if you could just maybe briefly tell us a little bit about this particular musical that.

[00:08:42] Yeah, yeah. It's the musical is called Hasting Street, and it's actually takes place as part of the history of Detroit. In nineteen forty nine, in forty nine, the federal government, would Congress have passed the Housing Act, which was the first set of legislation that was going to begin acquiring land in urban communities to develop the interstate? So all of your interstate highway that that this is how it began. And they began with claiming that certain parts of the cities were slums. In fact, the original title of it was slum removal. They found out how politically incorrect that was and they turned it into urban renewal. And it just so happens that in most of our communities, Detroit being one of them, but not the only one. A lot of the land that was acclaimed was in black neighborhoods. And so Hasting Street was the main thoroughfare of the black neighborhood. And so the play takes place right after a few months after that event that that legislation has passed. And so we're looking at a family that is the microcosm for the black bottom community, that black diamond was the name of the black neighborhood. And we saw the fear and apprehension of the future is reflected in them. And so we are looking at how that we address that issue. One more thing. So the idea was this piece was designed to also help us reflect on development that's going on in Detroit now because we're looking at similar patterns of disenfranchisement of African-Americans in the event with what we would call economic progress.

[00:10:30] Thank you. So let's take a look at that at that clip.

[00:10:42] Two separate communities, Black Bottom was a predominantly black neighborhood in Detroit.

[00:10:48] Everybody from Black Bottom Paradise Valley was hustlers. Detroit is a hustlin city.

[00:10:57] Both communities are gone.

[00:11:05] Droning and drowsy, sophisticated to rocking back and forth to a mellow room, swaying to and fro on his rickety stool. He played that old saggy

rag like musical. I don't know what Langston was listening to, but in his words, you can feel the music, the lilt of the melody, the pulse of the rhythm, the sounds of the city.

[00:11:26] DETROIT, 1948, nestled in the heart of the city, two neighborhoods straddled Rashied Avenue, Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. The sense of community, they pulsed with a rhythm all their own.

[00:11:40] And this is where our story begins with a family not too different from yours or mine.

[00:11:45] With a brother lost to a war, Renita struggles to balance the family business with her duties as a mother.

[00:11:51] But even through hard times, she sees the world through different eyes. She shares this vision with her young daughter as they walk through the streets of the city.

[00:12:08] If you come first person.

[00:12:31] Straight's.

[00:12:44] Take me straight.

[00:13:06] A paper on.

[00:13:28] And, Grevious, that's.

[00:13:40] Right. Gary, thank you for letting us share that. Yeah, yeah, we're really happy with that. I you know, I enjoyed watching it and I was struck by how it feels, you know, the fact that it's you know, so many people are experimenting with different ways to present, you know, live performance, of course. And that felt to me like sort of part, you know, you introduced us in a theater setting. So we kind of feel like we're in a theater. But it's sort of part news program, part documentary, part behind the scenes peek, part virtual concert. So it combined a lot of really interesting ideas together.

[00:14:25] And I want to give a shout out to both Chris Johnson and John Sloan, who are the collaborators on the piece. They're both Detroiters. They both have left Detroit. Chris was working at the University of Utah in Salt Lake. And John has been on the tour for Lion King for a number of years. And this project was able to provide them with something that they could work on at a scale where their talents could actually be reflected in. That goes back to the book. What Plowshares is really is a place where we can do this kind of work here. You don't have to leave and go to Chicago or New York or L.A.

We can do this here. So the talent can be maintained in the community. Mm
hmm.

[00:15:13] And and it shares a story that, as you said. Is something that has taken place in communities across America. Many black communities can identify with. Even though this particular story happened in Detroit and that your local audiences can connect with potentially very personally. And I guess, you know, I'm thinking about this in context of, you know, the other word that you're also doing that might take us to kind of talking about the Black Seed Initiative. You know, the events of the past several months have really focused a magnifying glass on systemic racism. But obviously, you know, black theater organizations have been making theater in the context of that for decades, for many, many, many years, at least decades. And I wondering if you could talk a little bit about. You know that maybe we can talk a little bit about your journey over the past at least a year. You know, even before. You know, well before the pandemic, working with your collaborators, the Billie Holiday Theater and others on this journey that has now led to watching the Black Sea.

[00:16:38] Sure. Sure. So roughly about a year ago. Indira kind of brought the theory up with myself. Dr. Monica Do and Shay Wakeford of Waco Theater Center in L.A. brought us together to bring to Brooklyn, where Billie Holiday Theater is to begin. Actually, it's developing what eventually evolved into the Black Sea. We all have been concerned about the challenges that we were finding or the work that the field was finding in regards to both sustaining itself and being able to be more engaged in the creation of the theater. So we came together to try to figure out if we could develop a proposal that might actually attack that. And in fact, that was at that first meeting in Brooklyn at the Billie Holiday, where we came up with the idea of a name, the Black Sea. So and it was designed not to be serving us as individual organizations, but really try to provide a game changing event for the field. I had been doing some study before, and you probably know this as well. And the whole thing on the communications report that was done for the foundation's Holly Sifford had identified that that 50 percent of all arts funding went to two percent of the organizations and that the remaining 98 percent of the arts field is fighting, or 42 percent of the rest of the funding. And so when we see that, we see that there are challenges in regards to specifically institutions of color being able to build themselves out. And I have been doing some conversations traveling around the few years prior, talking to my peers. And I found that in many cases, a lot of us didn't have a significant portion of our income that was directed coming from individual giving or corporate support or even foundation support had a feeling on it. And so our organizations can grow. In many cases, we were more connected to earn income, which was having a drag to a certain extent on our ability to take risks with new work. So the black seed is designed to really kind of provide us with resources that can

potentially change the circumstances for a whole host of theaters to do things that they may not have been able to have mentioned there, that they had the capacity to beforehand to maybe engage in development opportunities for interns, find resources for specific projects, plays development programs that can enhance them or find ways of actually enhancing their management, their financial management. This is not for us to design. It's for them to imagine what they want to do. But the resources being brought to bear provide them with an opportunity to imagine the possibilities of what they can do.

[00:19:55] That's great. And I mean, it's just as a person who's not involved in the initiative and learning about it. It's really inspiring and inspiring initiative that I also like to ask you to talk a little bit more about the different prongs of that, but also want to acknowledge because as you said, it has been and we've had conversations about this in the past, it has been sometimes a challenge in terms of, as you said, getting institutional support to provide that kind of risk capital or innovation capital that then lets you take chances, maybe grow, you know, bring audiences in certain ways or even just try different things that could then help you to develop your audiences and develop artistically. And I just want to also acknowledge that this initiative has been seed funded by Mellon Foundation. They're the lead funder, I guess, with five million dollars. And could you tell us a little bit more about the different prongs of this initiative? Because it sounds to me like a holistic approach.

[00:21:13] Yeah, it is. So part of it is the black theater fund, which is the majority of the money. This race is going to actually go into implementing that. So the goal is 10 million dollars, of which a five percent of that is going to go into re re granting dollars to theaters across the country for whatever projects that they want to present. And they are adjudicated by an audience, by panel separate from myself and the other executive committee members. Mellon also is assisting us in creating the black theater think tank, which is going to come out of those grantees that will be housed at is part of the Black Feeder Networks annual conference. Bringing convening these people to do it to assist us in actually been rewriting the future of black theater does. Going forward. And there is also the cohort network where we've found we've been able to give resources one hundred and fifty thousand dollars to a number of organizations that cropped up Black Theater United. We see you white American Theater, Black Theater, Commons and the Black Theater Network. Black Theater Network, because they're taking on additional responsibilities, will be giving an additional hundred and fifty thousand as well for their efforts. And then there will be all as part of this, a national public awareness campaign that my partner, QEI Wafer, will be leaving. And that will be done in a fashion where we'll try to raise the public awareness across the gym across the country about the importance and impact that black theater provides. And these are the things that if we address both the penetration and promotion of

it, you've addressed funding of it. And we address the use the talent in the room to think critically about what the future is we can actually address. We hope that we can address a number of the issues that are existing now with a better relationship with the funding community going forward that we can address the issues of equity and real inclusion.

[00:23:30] Mm hmm. Thank you. And I'm going to start pulling in a few questions from viewers as well. And people, as you can imagine, are very excited to learn about this. So one question is from Sheila. Is there an educational component to this initiative? And I'm not sure if she's talking about awareness, as you mentioned, or is there arts education or higher education?

[00:23:55] There has to be in that may be through individual projects and also through the work that the Black Freedom Network between us between has a strong community of educators as the leaders of that organization, and may have a long term 30 plus year experience of being the conduit for black theater educators to find a place for themselves to work. And so we're already I'm on the board of the PTA and one of the and we're already looking at ways that we can use the resources that we have to address a number of our situation needs. From my personal opinion, I think that we need to start looking at doing black theater the same way we do baseball. My son started playing baseball, which was T ball, which is a ball put on a pole and then a sling at it. Right. He could today is creating a media company of which part of their focus will be talking about sports. That's something that started when he was three or four or five. And I don't think that we necessarily look at the arts in the same fashion. We may think it's cute to put our daughters or sons in a dance class or an art class, but we don't think about theater as a traditional thing. And I think that that's one of the ways where the theater institutions can also create. We assume that we have to wait till they're in high school to start approaching them. And I think that we can begin much earlier with an exposure, if for nothing else, to expose them to the power of storytelling from people about people who look just like them. And so they can find examples of heroes in history where it actually is culturally based. And it's not something from somebody else or you have to figure out extrapolated and see how it fits your life. And so that's that that would be a major aspect of what we're looking at doing going forward. But again, it's going to probably be through the PTM and through individual projects.

[00:26:13] Okay. What you just said brings to mind you know, and you mentioned several organizations like Macnee and others that are involved in cultivating black theaters. And I wonder if you could talk just a bit about, you know, why why is it important to know what are the specific benefits perhaps that come from cultivating black theater and black stations? Culturally specific theater. Perhaps alongside, you know, there's other diversity, equity, inclusion

that happens in the broader theater fields, or it perhaps predominantly white theater organizations.

[00:26:58] Can you talk a little bit about those two things that maybe how they really it is different to have a story told from someone who understands the experiences from an intimate personal basis. In 1926, I'm going to a little bit of history and I don't promise they won't get boring. 1926 WB, The Boys was editor of Crisis magazine and he took it upon himself to initiate a black theater, literally a number of literary contests of which part of it was also getting people who were may not have been playwrights to write plays for this competition. Out of that came. Langston Hughes is a playwright. Zora Neale Hurston as a playwright. Whole host of other people of Georgia. Douglass Johnson. All these folks who had been poets or short story writers became playwrights because of this initiative. And part of the reason why he said it was important is because you need to be someone who from birth and continual association understands the African-American experience, because I can only tell my story from my perspective in an authentic way. I can't expect you to do that if we look at it on a gender basis to assume that men can write stories that get all of the aspects of what it is to be a female at all ages of the wife of a young woman is a real assumption and arrogance, I think. And we and I don't believe that. I don't believe that that's something that we need to invest in in that context. I don't know the life of Alaskans who live, you know, but the majority of the year in very cold climates. I also don't know what it's like to live in the tropics. I can learn about it. I can research it, but I don't know it from an intimate perspective. And likewise, with black theater, you need to have been in constant, constant association that the boys talks about from birth to the great to understand exactly what the experiences are. You can do that. I feel best in institutions that are mission driven towards that cause. I guess there are works that are done by predominately white institutions. There are many celebrated writers who work with good only white institutions. And in some cases I think that that's more based on the resources that are available to those institutions, which goes back to that that that imbalance in regards to how organizations are funded. So I but I don't think that the experiences is particularly all that better. If. We go back to a few months ago and we started hearing stories from black artists who were telling you the experiences of going to creating a new work in a probably white institution with predominately white directors or other artists. And they won't be told they told stories of frustration and challenge because. We have to understand we live in a society where our perspectives are sometimes marginalized in the general context. We assume this is that this is a democracy where everybody understands and appreciates everybody. But we've seen quite clearly that all lives don't matter and they really never have. In this context of the history of this country. And so if we don't see that in the general public, if we don't see that when you're just driving your car, you get pulled over because you look like a suspect in a crime. Then why do we expect our art field is going to be

any different than our general field? You're saying what I'm saying? Yeah, and I'm not trying to say anything pejorative about the artists that work in those organizations. We are all fish in the water, but we don't know where we're until. And the thing about these last several months is that we've come to realize exactly what how wet we are because it's given us a chance to pause, to look at it. But those things.

[00:31:14] Yeah. Gary, in that you mentioned that a few things to you. You talked a little bit about personal experience and an end reference place a couple of times in that, too, and so much. I want to bring in a question from George. What do you hope this initiative means in the context of place so far from the communities where these theater companies may be based, in the communities where the companies may not be based?

[00:31:45] In many cases, black theaters exist in our surrounding and sustained by significant black communities. That's why you go to New York. You'll see a number of black theater organizations in existence because there's a large percentage of African-Americans there. In fact, shout out to Brooklyn. Brooklyn is the largest concentration of African-Americans in this country. When you think about me, just the number, the sheer number. But that's usually been the case. We develop these institutions in places where we have a strong proximity of a black community that can sustain it and nurture it. But there is validity in that work being seen by all sorts of communities. There are some cases where the percentage of African-Americans are extremely low. So Des Moines, Iowa, has a much right to see a great work of art by an African-American writer, as Atlanta does. I guess I hope I'm getting to the point that I'm trying so. So, yes, the institutions have to be sustained by being in close proximity to the black folks. The work can travel outside of it, but there has to be awareness or an openness of those communities to actually receive that information.

[00:33:05] Right. And I guess in the example of Hastings Street, that's a sort of hyper-local story, but that has potential for resonance in a lot of different places.

[00:33:16] Yeah. St. Paul. Cleveland. Boston. Chicago. Everywhere across Miami. Everywhere where the interstate. Where you can usually find that when they when, the city fathers went and looked for the land, it deserved to be raised. It was overwhelmingly. We and communities of color. And that goes back to this other issue of not being able to sustain generational wealth because it's in the benefit of the government to get the price of that land as low as possible. So you may have owned the house. My father in law, he owned a house and in honor in the black bottom. He was a boarding house when they sold it. He didn't get top dollar for that land. And they ended up moving to Romulus, which is a community outside of city of Detroit borders.

But a number of African-Americans that were displaced by Hasting Street ended up in another section of Detroit. That 20 years later in 67 when we had riots. That's where that was the epicenter of those riots and that displacement in four forty-nine through the 50s was the powder keg that had been set because the children of the people who had been displaced were now rioting at 67, rebelling and 67 because they were saying clearly that enough is enough, that they had that and they were trying to address a series of issues that had been that had not been addressed by the community towards them. So, yeah, there's a whole host of things about location having have an impact, but that those stories not necessarily being all about the location, but can be identifiable to other communities around the country.

[00:35:08] Yeah. And you in the generally your point about the barriers to building generational wealth relating to, as you said before, you know, communities that are served, for example, by these organizations that are telling the stories, being able to sustain those organizations through buying tickets, whether it's earned revenue or, you know, leaving, you know, donating to or leaving sort of estate kind of gifts. Right. Oh, you know, to these organizations. And so the sort of. The cycle continues. We have time for one more question from the audience before we start to wrap up. Jane asks, Do you envision a research component to Black Sea perhaps growing a next generation of artists and educators, researchers?

[00:36:05] It's my hope that that's actually one of the things that comes out of that. Think, think. I think that one of our challenges throughout the last 20 to 30 years has been, you see, where the black talent falls off. In many cases, African-Americans that graduate out of four universities immediately looked for work and they thought the work is almost exclusively available in predominantly white institutions. So these people go to these proud of the way institutions define low level jobs to make begin making a living. Or if they're writers, they end up going into the writing units for those theaters. They don't initially come to black figures like myself because the resources are we're haven't always been there. So but we need to address that pipeline initiative of trying to get both that talent deferred in large part, if we want to see this aspect of the field sustained. Specifically, if you're looking at the next generation of leaders, because one of the things right now is that in many case, a lot of black creators, not all of them, but a lot of black leaders have leadership that's in its 60s, 70s and 80s. And unlike their white peers, they didn't eventually move on from their theater to having a professional Broadway career or move to run another regional theater around the country. They may have invested themselves long term in the institution, but they found it and they find themselves. Economically strapped is the way they can go. That puts a roadblock on the development of younger talent to take over those roles and leave those organizations in a completely new direction for the future. Well, one of the things I told my board this year was that in five

and within 10 years, I see myself no longer running plowshares. And so our efforts are really designed on raising the level of financial support we get from our audience, as well as our general corporate and foundation support so that I can provide. I can spend this over to somebody who'll actually find the job attractive and appealing, and they'll be able to make a living doing it as well. So I think that's incumbent upon us really doing it. And part of that's going to be the research of continually finding out what are the fault lines in our part of the field.

[00:38:44] Yeah. So. So you've described the research component, think tank component, the black theater fund. What are how can people get involved with the black seed if they'd like to somehow get involved?

[00:38:58] Well, there's a couple of ways where there is an application process available. In fact, it's been open for a few days now that you can go to the Billie Holiday Theater or work and on their site, they clearly have it listed if you want to apply for a grant. You must be a black lab, black mission driven organization that serves the Black community primarily. And all the other restrictions are all the criteria. Live. Live there if you want to donate to the black fund. That's what we you can do that, too. We are going to be taking individual donations. The idea is for this ten million dollars to be a game changer and get people to see how they can invest in the future of sustaining black theater. And if you're interested in finding out more as we develop the campaign, the think tank and the other efforts, I would suggest that you make your contact information available through the Billie Holiday so we can begin building a database along with the one we currently have of theaters around the country so that we can stay in contact with you. But all these things are going to be critical. Join the Black Theater Network. The membership chair. So I have to say that it's also important to do if you want to stay abreast because Black Beauty is going to be one of the ways in which you'll be receiving information about the Black Sea and its activities going forward as well.

[00:40:27] Thank you. That's great. And I and I hope the folks watching well or watching or who will watch. And if you're tuning in, please share it with anyone in your networks who might be interested. But I hope folks will get involved. Thank you for telling us about this important and exciting initiative that you and your collaborators have developed. And, you know, before we sign off. I would love for people to know what's next for plowshares. What do you have coming up?

[00:40:59] Washer's is going to be doing a series of concerts before the end of the year. We are calling them Arts Fall concerts with Google Fall. The young woman who was there in the clip from Hastings Street. She's going to be featured in those four concerts. It's just going to be voice two piano. What

we're trying to do is, again, provide some entertainment that we can for our audience right now, even though we can't be in the theater following that. And those all will be virtual and online. So if you want to get more information about that, you can send your contact information to Plowshares at info at Cloches Theater dot org. And we'll put you on our mailing list to keep you abreast of those. And we have two scripts by two, every American women. I'm Denise Hart and Karen Schulte chipped in that we're going to be developing their spare plays over the next couple of months as well. And we'll put that up on the line where we design and trying to continue to provide programing, even though we've we can't be in a theater sitting and enjoying ourselves.

[00:42:11] That's great. Thank you. And folks, you can see, I think we're dropping the links to Plowshares YouTube channel so that you can see the rest of their Hastings Street concert and the upcoming performances as well. Gary, thank you so much for taking time to join us today and to talk about the important work that you're doing. We really, really appreciate you having you here.

[00:42:35] Oh, thank you. Thank you for the opportunity. And again, I just want to I know this is Knight Foundation. We really just have to say once again, we really appreciate the leadership support of. And this initiative, because without them, this none of this would be possible.

[00:42:49] We agree and we also want a shout out to our colleagues at Mellet Foundation. It's very exciting.

[00:42:57] And, you know, we appreciate the vision that all of you have had shown. So folks at home. Thank you so much for tuning in and sticking with us. We invite you to find more information about feature shows on our Web site. Please join us again Thursday, October twenty nine. So that's a change. It's not going to be next Friday, but Thursday, October twenty ninth for the next episode where my colleague Chris Bar will be talking about the findings of a new study released today by Knight Foundation. You can find on our Web site and perhaps through a link in the chat on digital readiness in museums, the very same Chris Bar composer, our intro music, Our Exit Music is by ACRON jazz artist Aaron Brown.

[00:43:47] Thank you to all my colleagues at Knight Foundation who work on this show. Until next time, we wish you good health, safety and joy in art. Thank you. And take care. Bye, Gary. Bye.