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PERFORMING ARTS

From street to stage: Creator of 'Eenie Meanie' weighs in on racism

By LEO Weekly

BY STEPHANIE SALMONS

Los Angeles, 1992: Riots break out after the acquittal of four white L.A. police officers in the beating of black motorist Rodney King. More than 40 fires burn in the city, and by the time the violence subsides, nearly 40 people are dead and more than 1,000 are injured.



photo by James Czar/Rosetta Stone Studios: Teresa Willis wrote "Eenie Meanie" from her experiences in the 1992 L.A. riots. This week she brings her play to Walden Theatre.

Valley Station native Teresa Willis witnessed the chaos firsthand.

That experience ultimately inspired her to pen "Eenie Meanie," a one-woman play that focuses on racism via a journey through Willis' life, from her earliest childhood recollections in Louisville to the present, chronicling her experiences with African Americans. Willis, now 45, left Louisville in 1984 for New York and eventually landed in Los Angeles in 1988. She returns to town this weekend with her production of "Eenie Meanie" at Walden Theatre.

She says a scene depicting the 1992 riots is one of the play's most powerful, and emanated from a personal experience. Willis says while walking up a hill away from a fire, she passed an African-American man walking downhill and was stricken with a paralyzing fear, which she says surprised her.

"In that moment I examined myself, and it's the turning point for the character as well as a turning point in my life. I had to look at who I was with that issue," she says. "People of all societal backgrounds have been in a dicey situation where they had to decide, 'Is this danger or is this me?' I had to decide that in that moment, and I ended up having a very beautiful connection with this guy walking down the street."

Earlier this month, Willis performed her play as part of the Cincinnati Fringe Festival. Cincinnati experienced race riots in April 2001 after a white police officer shot and killed a black man whom he was attempting to apprehend. Several audience members came up to her afterward, she says, and said they identified intensely with the events in the play.

Willis, however, says she expects people in Louisville to identify more strongly with the play because one scene addresses court-ordered busing, which Willis says had a major impact on her life and the lives of people who lived in Louisville 30 years ago.

As a child growing up in the 1960s and '70s, Willis experienced the desegregation of Louisville schools that began in 1974 and culminated in busing. As a 15-year-old sophomore during the 1975-76 school year, Willis says she was taken from her original high school (Jesse Stuart High School) and was bused to Shawnee. That experience added to her adolescent confusion, which she portrays in the play.

Busing damaged communities and educational opportunities, she believes, due in part to riots and violence that broke out around it. Willis recalls that the threat of violence caused schools to cancel many community activities and traditions, such as homecoming parades.

A scene in "Eenie Meanie" starts with Willis preparing for school in the morning and progresses to her riding the bus, delivering a monologue about the riots and the violence around town, before finishing the monologue under the school bleachers.

"So many of the things that drew the community together around the school were just gone in a minute," Willis says. "I agree that these inner-city kids deserved a better shot at education than they were getting, but the solution to destroy our experience wasn't it. It did nothing but weaken the entire infrastructure, the entire community, and it never recovered."

Willis says another scene in the play revolves around a confrontation between her and her father over the differences in their attitudes about race.

'Eenie Meanie'
June 15-16
Walden Theatre
1123 Payne St.
(818) 631-6743
www.eeniemeanie.com
\$15; 8 p.m.

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"It's kind of a sad moment because he's the daddy and I'm not supposed to put him in his place," she says. "A lot of people in my generation have been through this. And other generations have as well when they see the personality of their parents shifting to something not so flattering as they get older."

In regard to contemporary racism, Willis believes society has made great strides but racism is still strong. She uses the term "conditioned racism" to describe how people are conditioned by their environment, upbringing and society to react, either positively or negatively, toward individuals who are different.

"The people who are white supremacists, who march in their hoods, we know how to deal with them," Willis says. "[Then] there's a type of bigotry that lives in the well-meaning hearts of the people who think they've got racism all figured out and know where they stand. There's a type of racism that's unconscious."

Willis says "Eenie Meanie" is not a call-to-arms, but a means to entertain and to make people aware of their unconscious attitudes about race so they can begin to resolve them by shifting them "toward love."

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