

Williamston Theatre explores the enigmatic ‘Mrs. Harrison’



In Williamston Theatre's production of "Mrs. Harrison," Aisha (left), played by Janai Lashon, and Holly, played by Alysia Kolascz, find themselves trapped in a restroom together during a 10-year college reunion. A "chess game" of conflict and confrontation slowly unfolds.

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Posted Thursday, March 30, 2023 12:01 am

As the stars of "Mrs. Harrison" at the Williamston Theatre, Janai Lashon and Alysia Kolascz have some of the most enviable jobs in local theater right now.

But explaining the show may be more difficult than anyone can truly admit. No one wants to spill the beans about the slowly unfurling dialogue between the two women, revealing their past and present realities.

“It’s a chess game,” said Lashon, 35. “You feel it from the moment the two characters see each other – something interesting is happening here.”

Kolascz, 38, said the “two-hander” – theater slang for a two-person show – drew her attention because of its well-written, complicated characters.

“These two women are kind of going at each other and learning things about each other, and they’re both interesting but flawed and human,” she said. “I love the script.”

The story takes place during a 10-year college reunion. Lashon’s character, Aisha, is a successful playwright, while Kolascz’s character, Holly, is a middling stand-up comic. The two come together in a basement bathroom. A well-appointed bathroom, but a bathroom nonetheless. This setting allows the characters to block each other from exiting, forcing conflict and confrontations.

“I think (Holly) has less awareness than you would hope to see in those situations. She’s looking at it through her experiences and beliefs, and she has those blind spots and isn’t able to see past them,” Kolascz said. “I think there’s some of that with Aisha as well. They both have their truth, and those truths conflict, but there’s some fact in there. Each person is right and wrong, but they’re fighting for their own truth and may be unable or unwilling, at times, to take a step back and see it from the other person’s perspective, maybe to the detriment of them both.”

To a man, setting the show in a restroom seemed odd. There are unspoken rules in the men’s room. You don’t talk to each other, and you rarely look at each other.

Both women said that’s not the case in women’s restrooms.

“There’s an inherent vulnerability when you’re in a bathroom – your guard is down to a certain extent,” Kolascz said. “It’s a personal space, and some of the conversations and the things that come out and the places they go emotionally do get very vulnerable.”

“In my experience of using the lady’s room, there can be a lot of intimate conversation,” Lashon said. “I mean, from the bar, I’ve met new friends by helping somebody hold their hair, consoling someone who’s crying or overhearing a private conversation. So, I think our playwright is just a genius.”

The intimate setting sent Lashon’s mind swirling, considering other snippets of life she might be missing.

“It’s like, ‘Oh, there’s drama that happens there,’ and it makes you start to examine some of those flyaway moments in our lives,” she said. “Like working at a gas station. I feel like someone who works at a gas station probably sees so many different people. There are so many stories that are happening there.”

Lashon still labels herself a recent graduate of Ohio University's master of fine arts program for performance. She concluded her training in 2021, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when theaters were closed to the public. But she was still able to watch others create and perform, despite social distancing requirements.

She said it was affirming "to know that the world was breathing and artists were crafting in new, innovative ways, and, really, we were hitting a new stage of a renaissance."

Her start in professional theater coincided with a national focus on the Black Lives Matter movement and a reckoning over sex and sexualization in the local theater community. Women and artists of color stood up and pushed back against a system that had ignored sexism, sexual harassment and racism for decades.

Lashon said she was part of that activism long before the Black Lives Matter movement hit its stride, and it began to influence a large cultural conversation about racial equity in theater and the performing arts in general. While it was exciting to see the conversations she and many other Black actors had been engaging in for years finally be welcomed by other performers, it was a process.

"We hit this other phase, or this other notch, on the roller coaster, where we had to do some surgery," she said. "You had to talk about accountability. You had to talk about performative allyship."

That included challenging theaters to hire more Black actors and technical staff and select shows that feature and honor Black lives.

"We tell stories about humanity," Lashon said. "So, it's great that theater is realizing that there's room to grow within its humanity as it relates to practitioners and the process."