

## ‘Sally’ brings power and promise to Wharton

By [Lily Cole](#) | February 20, 2026



Actor Sabrina Sloan, who plays Sally, runs through a scene during media day for the world premiere of “Sally: A Solo Play” by East Lansing resident Sandra Seaton at the Pasant Theatre in Michigan State University’s Wharton Center for Performing Arts in East Lansing, Mich., on Tuesday, Feb. 10, 2026. — Photo by [Ari Saperstein](#) | The State News

Impactful. Riveting. Dynamic.

3 different voices. 3 distinct reactions. All describing the opening night of MSU alumna and East Lansing native [Sandra Seaton](#)’s one-woman play, *Sally*.

In pre-show comments, Wharton Center Director Eric Olmscheid set the tone, guiding the audience into Sally Hemings’ perspective and lived experiences. He referenced a family tree compiled by Seaton in the program, which illustrates Hemings’ life as an enslaved woman owned by President Thomas Jefferson, with whom she had several children.

The narrative, directed by Hannah Ryan and starring Sabrina Sloan, unfolds at Monticello, Virginia in the days before Jefferson’s death on July 4, 1826, as he puts his affairs in order.

During the performance, audience members were thrust back into memories of before and witness Hemings’ central struggle to hold Jefferson accountable for his commitment to free their children at age 21.

“You’re really driving the train,” Sloan said. “The energy has to be there the whole time to bring the audience along on the journey.”

Through a series of moving scenes – shifting from joy to heartbreak and chilling, self-dueling dialogue performed entirely by Sloan – the piece unfolded as hauntingly beautiful.

For Michigan State University alums Robbin Bell and Lisa Edmonds, who graduated in 1980 and 1986, the play was great.

“This is the best (one-woman show) I’ve seen in years,” Bell said.

Edmonds thought the show was validating. She highlighted the family dynamics among the characters, adding that every family is different.

With a static set – Sloan alone moving across the stage, shifting between rooms, memories and using different props to evoke a life fully lived – the production felt simple in design. Yet that simplicity allowed the story to unfold seamlessly, tracing the history of a resilient woman.



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MSU interim chairperson of the theater program and set design professor Kirk Domer worked with Ryan to design the set, using Jefferson's written words projected onto a backdrop of documents.

“Working alongside Alison Dobbins, who’s the media designer, she is taking those otherworldly moments and illuminating on top of the written word backdrop,” he said.

Domer highlighted the ethereal quality of the projections, describing scenes in which the audience is in Paris with Hemings or in different memories of her childhood.

Global history and Russian sophomore Katherine Dyal got emotional during bows.

“I loved it,” Dyal said. “She was amazing.”

*Sally* was originally commissioned as an operatic libretto and premiered in 2001 at Coolidge Auditorium, located within the Thomas Jefferson Building at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Since its debut, the work has evolved through staged readings at New York University, the Aspen Theater Festival, and the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, along with presentations at other universities.

In the end, Sloan said Hemings has empowered her.

“This woman who had so many restrictions, obstacles, and was living in a time of great oppression, but was able to find her power and this agency to make a path for her children... As a parent, we’re in a time right now in our country, there’s a lot of unknown and a lot we feel is out of our control.”

“We can’t fix or make right, but finding those places where the little things that we can do to try to make change and make a way for the future, that’s one thing,” she said.

For more information about *Sally*, visit <https://www.whartoncenter.com/events/detail/sally-a-solo-play>.