

Q & A with **SHELDON EPPS**



Los Angeles theater luminary Sheldon Epps sat down with The Wallis Post to discuss his break-out hit *Blues in the Night*, which is being revived later this month in the Lovelace Studio Theater.

Q: What was the genesis of *Blues in the Night*?

EPPS: The show started way back in my Off-Off Broadway theater days. I worked for the production company at Playhouse 46 in the late '70's. One of our ideas was to do late night cabaret shows on the weekend that reflected whatever play we were doing at the time. In the spring of 1980, we were doing a play about a blind jazz musician on the mainstage. I had the thought of doing something about jazz. In my research, I came upon a Billie Holiday quote in which she said, "Blues is to jazz what yeast is to bread." I then became excited about exploring the influence the blues had on jazz writers, and *Blues in the Night* was born.

Q: What did that early production look like?

EPPS: The show was always a revue, not a book musical. But I never wanted singers just standing at a microphone in a club. We always had four actors who performed from a sense of character. The songs were chosen to not only entertain and explore the music, but to reveal specific characters in a particular place and time. That specificity was recognized in an early review from *The New York Times*, and the show was produced on Broadway, where it was Tony-nominated for Best Musical.

Q: *Blues* was then produced all over the country, with tours that starred Della Reese and Eartha Kitt. There was also an acclaimed London production. That's where Wallis Artistic Director Paul Crewes first experienced your work.

EPPS: Yes, there was a West End production in 1987 at the Donmar Warehouse, which then moved to the Piccadilly Theatre for nearly a year. And I've just found out that it will be revived in London next year.

Q: How are you approaching this new production in the Lovelace?

EPPS: On the theatrical side, I'm intrigued by returning the show to its roots in a smaller space. I love intimate theater experiences, when the cast and the audience are really sharing the same room together. Although I've done this show many times, it's always new and different with each cast.

Q: And you have a great cast at The Wallis: Yvette Cason, Bryce Charles, Paulette Ivory and Chester Gregory.

EPPS: We have a tremendous cast, many of whom I've worked with before and know their strengths. I've never wanted to tell any actor, "This is how so-and-so did this before," even though I've worked with many great actors in the roles. It's always about creating the show anew with the four people.

Q: How do you feel *Blues in the Night* speaks to audiences in 2018?

EPPS: It's always been a show about female empowerment. Many people think the blues is about lying down on the bed and complaining about how badly you feel, but it's really about survival and fighting back. The show itself is chiefly authored by women, and serves as a showcase for lyricists such as Bessie Smith, Ida Cox and Ann Ronell. A number of things have transpired in our culture since Paul and I first discussed this revival, and it's an opportune time to hear from these women and their stories.

***Blues in the Night* begins performances on April 27.**