

Forgiveness for black church arsons theme of new drama

December 9, 2010

WASHINGTON (RNS)—For playwright Marcus Gardley, the theater is his pulpit, and plays are his sermons.

His latest production, [Every Tongue Confess](#), seeks answers to the questions that swirled around the spate of arsons that hit black churches in the South in the 1990s.

“How deep does your forgiveness go?” Gardley asks in an interview. “Do you have the capacity to forgive someone, even if they burn down the church?”

Phylicia Rashad stars in *Every Tongue Confess* at Washington’s Arena Stage.
(RNS PHOTO/Courtesy of Joan Marcus/Arena Stage)

As a high school senior, Gardley, now 32, would rush home to check the latest news on the fires between reports on the O.J. Simpson murder trial.

“That decade, 300 churches burned in the South. Three hundred,” he said. “I thought, well, why is that not getting at least the amount of coverage (as the Simpson trial) or more? They haven’t found the people that are burning these churches. Why is this not considered a big deal?”

Actress Phylicia Rashad, best known for her role as Clair Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*, portrays Mother Sister, the preacher of a church in Boligee, Ala., whose members fear the next arson could hit them.

Her character echoes Gardley’s sentiments as the church faces the fires

that burn around and within them.

“Three hundred churches have burned in the last 10 years, and the government ain’t done nothin’ but turned its back,” Mother Sister preaches. “They can’t see that our church is all we got. It’s where we baptize our babies, marry our young’uns, bury our dead. It’s where we embrace God.”

The play, commissioned by Washington’s Arena Stage, premiered Nov. 9 and is scheduled to run through Jan. 2.

Rashad called the play “epic” in its treatment of broad themes of recognition and forgiveness that transcend beyond the arsons that shook the South a decade and a half ago.

“The church burnings, yes, that’s a very big part of it, but it’s more about what’s going on in people that leads to church burning,” she said in an interview. “How is it that you profess love for God but can’t accept another human being?”

As he researched the fires, Gardley was struck by the news accounts of Timothy Welch, a member of the Ku Klux Klan who was convicted of burning two churches. Years earlier, he had sat outside a church he later torched, listening to the service inside.

“He didn’t realize he had community all along,” said Gardley, who believed the church should have been his community instead of the Klan.

The playbill includes a note of forgiveness from a burned church’s pastor to Welch.

Rashad and Gardley compared the outreach to rebuild the churches, which spanned racial and regional lines, to the play’s message about discovering how people are more alike than they are different.

“I felt like the big message of the play is these are all our churches,” said Gardley, the son and nephew of ministers.

Rashad said the play aims to build human, not just racial, understanding, commenting: “I think the real understanding comes when we recognize our humanity in each other. That’s not just between blacks and whites. That’s between all religions as well.”

Clocking in at just under two hours, *Every Tongue Confess* captures the ethos of the black church, with recordings of gospel artist Shirley Caesar, a tambourine-playing black woman and a white female soloist who comforts Rashad’s character with a stirring rendition of “His Eye is on the Sparrow.”

As his characters struggle with interracial relationships, lynchings and dreams of a better life in the big city, Gardley demonstrates how interconnected they all are.

Their names invoke both the church and the fires around them: Gossiping church members are called Brother and Elder. Mother Sister’s son, Shadrack, and Benny Pride, the daughter of an arsonist, are plays on the names of Shadrach and Abednego, two of the three men who survived the fiery furnace in the Old Testament book of Daniel.

As the title implies, every character has a confession to make. And as the fires grow, they do.

Gardley said the play was shaped by his experience as a teenager attending a Foursquare Gospel church in Oakland, Calif., where the words of Martin Luther King Jr. hit home.

“What I learned at the church is more about the power of diversity,” he said, “and about what it really means to accept people for the content of their character.”

