

Robey Theatre's 'The Talented Tenth'



Director and producer Ben Guillory on the left with his Robey Theatre actors at Soul Bites Restaurant post performance of *The Talented Tenth* (photo by Joanne A Calitri)

Santa Barbara Black Culture House's Founders **Darrell McNeill** and **Sally Foxen-McNeill** presented their two final cultural events of the month over February 24 and 25, at Soul Bites Restaurant.

First was a music performance by Los Angeles band The Funky Neighbors on Saturday. The band members are **Damon "Super Day" Wilson** (keyboards), **Terrence "Smoke" Huggins** (drums), and **Stevie "The G Roofa" Martin** (bass). The Funky Neighbors bridge the gap between BeBop and Hip Hop to keep the tradition of original music created and played by musicians alive. They have been in service as backing musicians, either individually or collectively, for a myriad of artists including **George Clinton**, The RZA of WuTang Clan (both touring and solo projects), **George Lopez**, Lakeside, Mallia Franklin, and others.

On Sunday, the renowned and award-winning African American theater arts organization, the Robey Theatre Company, performed a reading of Richard Wesley's *The Talented Tenth*. It was directed and produced by **Ben Guillory**, who co-founded the theater with **Danny Glover** in 1994, centering on the Black theatrical canon. It was incorporated as a nonprofit in 1996. The theatre is named in honor of Paul "Robey" Robeson, a respected humanitarian, artist, and activist.

Guillory explained to me how they came to perform at Soul Bites: "**Stirling Nix-Bradley** is an actor who performed in the play at the Robey Theatre November – December 2023. He would drive to L.A. to rehearse and perform in the play; and then drive back to Santa Barbara to manage Soul Bites, the restaurant that his family owns. Sterling suggested they perform the play at Soul Bites in conjunction with Santa Barbara Black Culture House's Black History Month Program there."

The actors that performed were Nix-Bradley as Ron, Guillory as Griggs, **Tiffany Coty** as Pamela, **Monte Escalante** as Rowena, **Nic Few** as Bernard, **Julio Hanson** as Marvin, **Jessica Obilom** as Tanya, and **Ezekiel Ajeigbe** as the Young Man.

Guillory introduced the play and taught us about it: "W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Talented Tenth* refers to the one in 10 Black men who have cultivated the ability to become leaders of the Black community by acquiring a college education, writing books, and becoming directly involved in social change. He argues that these men should sacrifice their personal interests to lead and better the Black community. As many of us understand, leadership skills are not exclusive to gender, type, class, and academically educated persons. We know that these do not always produce the kind of person who contains values and character to serve the best interest of the people. Wesley's play speaks of a commitment to something beyond oneself, of idealistic values and innocence that produced a social consciousness that had been compromised and how its attempted retrieval exacts a dear price."

The performance was straight up brilliant, even though they performed without costume changes, staging, professional lighting, and were certainly due a larger attendance. Unphased by these peripheral accouterments, the actors gave their performance seamlessly to the tiny audience as if we were at the Apollo Theater. The actors' dialogue timing was impeccable, with every emotion the intensely impactful play required of them. And they performed for three hours without intermission. The script gave us insight into Black Culture as well as touching upon circumstances one faces at various stages in life.

The attendees were overcome and feeling blessed for the gift brought here by this gifted ensemble and Santa Barbara Black Culture House.

Let's, as Guillory said, "Celebrate the history, the legacy of people of color every day."

Santa Barbara Black Culture House is sponsored by the Black Rock Coalition and made possible by a Towbes Fund for The Performing Arts grant through The Santa Barbara Foundation.

Wesley's The Talented Tenth, originally published in 2002, covers the life and career of Bernard Evans, a civil rights activist and Howard University graduate, and successful African

American radio executive whose midlife crisis has reached critical mass. Wesley himself is a prolific author, playwright, and graduate of Howard University, residing in New Jersey.

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Janna Ireland Exhibits at SBMA and MCASB

To round out Black History Month, the exhibit by **Janna Ireland**, titled *Janna Ireland: True Story Index*, is up through June 2 at both the Santa Barbara Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art SB. The exhibit was co-curated by SBMA Curator of Photography and New Work **Charles Wylie** and MCASB President **Frederick Janka**.

Ireland has been busy with interviews, museum member openings, and her work as an assistant professor at Occidental College in Los Angeles. One of her last public info sessions took place at the SBMA titled, "A Morning with Janna Ireland," on Sunday, February 25.

The talk was well attended, and highlighted by the presence of **Carmen Beals**, Nevada State Museum Associate Curator, and Outreach Manager for Ireland's series on Paul R. Williams.

Ireland presented details on her Pauline series, one of which clearly remains close to her vest as she explained, "A lot of my work deals with my family. Artists focus on three main things in their work. For me it is home, hands, and eyes. When my grandmother passed away, I inherited her photographs. I wanted to give them a second life. Doing the work in the darkroom was a part of the process – to add elements and overlay them to her original photographs like flowers, jewelry, and her signature and words. The work is about my mourning her and all my labor to do by hand took me five months as an expression of grief. There are 21 individual images, but I consider it one work. I teach my students about how a photograph itself survives and that the life of the image can continue."

Wylie, Janka, and the attendees posed questions after her presentation. Remarks made by Ireland included, "I don't spend a lot of time thinking about the future of my practice or the people looking at my images. My work on Paul Williams will not continue. It took me seven years and feels done."

The talk was followed by a walk through the SBMA galleries showing her works. The SBMA acquired 17 photographs for their permanent collection. The joint museum show has works selected from *Family Album: Dannielle Bowman*, Janna Ireland's personal collection, and her Contemporary Works from LACMA, *The Spotless Mirror* series, the *Milk and Honey* series, and her photography of the architectural works by Black architect Paul R. Williams, which were featured in exhibitions at the Nevada State Museum and the AIA Center for Architecture in NYC. There was a reception for Ireland and attendees of the talk at the MCASB afterwards.

Ireland's photographs are held in the permanent collections of institutions including LACMA, the Nevada Museum of Art, the California African American Museum, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago.

411: www.sbma.net/exhibitions/jannaireland
www.mcasantabarbara.org/exhibition/janna-ireland/

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Janna Ireland in conversation with SBMA Curator Charlie Wylie and MCASB President Frederick Janka (photo by Joanne A Calitri)