



StarTribune **Djola Branner: Jack of all stage crafts, and master of them, too.(ENTERTAINMENT)**

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For many artists who define themselves through a string of bridged disciplines, the hyphens represent weakness and indecision.

But Twin Cities actor-dancer-director-choreographer-singer-playwright Djola Branner has excelled in fusing his specialties, becoming one of the area's most successful multidisciplinary artists.

A magnetic creator and performer who won a coveted \$40,000 Bush Foundation fellowship last year, Branner has rendered soaring falsettos in his self-penned paean to disco icon Sylvester; has choreographed August Wilson's "Seven Guitars," and has played important roles in "Angels in America" and "Blues for an Alabama Sky."

He also recently directed the modern dance and gospel-music production "Journey/Sanctuary (The Gospel Project)," which featured the sassy, celebratory choreography of Cathy Young, the spirited music of Robert Robinson and his choir and the movement of a dozen of the Twin Cities most skilled dancers. Its sold-out audiences at the Southern Theater stopped the show early with standing ovations.

Now the 6-foot-3 Branner is dancing as one of the three kings in Penumbra Theatre Company's "Black Nativity," which he narrated in 1999.

"I started as a dancer, as a choreographer, so coming back with visioning through movement - that's very exciting for me," Branner said. "As I learned through my mentors, such as Laurie Carlos and Marlies Yearby, the movement language is as important as the aural language and the music."

"Art has been a vehicle for me of self-exploration, and a way to articulate what's going on in the world," he continued.

Breaking tradition

It has been a roundabout road to the stage for Branner, a Los Angeles native who moved to the Twin Cities seven years ago. An only child, he tried to fulfill his mother's aspirations for him, thinking he would become a lawyer or doctor.

"I was really a misguided artist from an early age," he said. "My father was always into music as a lyricist and songwriter, and he really encouraged my creativity. But my mother found no use at all for my interests."

Branner did undergraduate work in psychobiology at the University of California at Santa Cruz. After college, he worked for a year in a research lab, studying diabetes. One day, a friend asked him: "When are you going to become the artist that you are?" That question prompted a year of soul-searching that eventually led him to graduate school at San Francisco State University, where he earned a degree in interdisciplinary art.

"I was mostly doing dance and creative writing, trying to figure out how to combine those things," he said.

Branner lived in the Bay Area for 15 years, becoming part of the performing-arts scene. He stepped into theater with Pomo Afro Homos ("postmodern Afro-American homosexuals"), his self-described "trial by fire." The searing troupe, with whom he performed for four years, did politically tinged comic sketches about the double marginalization of being black and gay. The group was a big success, touring North America, Europe and the South Pacific.

"I first saw Djola some years ago and he just amazed me," said Penumbra founder and artistic director Lou Bellamy, who has hired Branner as an actor, choreographer and teacher. "Because of his many skills and because of who he is as a free, comfortable

and charismatic gay black man, he's laid the groundwork for a lot of us to do a truthful depiction of this whole experience that we're all heir to. But to talk about him as a gay artist would be a disservice; it's just one facet of many talents."

It was while performing in Australia that Branner fell in love with Twin Cities cabaret impresario Patrick Scully. He moved to the Twin Cities in 1994 after their very public wedding in San Francisco. Nearly four years later, they had a much quieter divorce.

While Branner's relocation was mostly because of the relationship, it has offered a lot of artistic growth.

"I was also ready to do different work from what we were doing in Pomo Afro Homos," Branner said. "Most of our pieces were short sketches, and most directed in the style of broad political statements with humor. I wanted to do longer character development stuff and to change the tone of my work. I wanted to do plays."

Mining stories

Branner explored his relationship with his mother in "Sweet Sadie," a bittersweet piece that has been presented by San Francisco-based director-performer-producer Idris Ackamoor, who has known Branner for almost a decade.

"He really mines stories, particularly his own," Ackamoor said. "'Sweet Sadie' was a profound exploration of his relationship with his mother; it's profoundly personal."

But is he simply into uncovering stuff?

"Djola really works to lift any veil. He goes very deep inside to bring everything out front for an audience to see," Ackamoor said. "He brings the personal into the public domain in a way that enriches us, not to show off."

For Branner, who teaches writing at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, dance at Macalester College and acting and voice at the University of Minnesota, coming to the Twin Cities has been highly rewarding.

"I feel like I've matured here as an artist, developing my own voice as a writer, as an actor-performer," he said. "The community is really vibrant and, if you are able to translate human experience so that it touches people's hearts, then they're willing to listen."

Said Bellamy: "Djola is a wonderful example of a fabulous artist who orbits us elliptically, coming closer at times, touching us, then going off to light other parts of the scene. It's important that Penumbra thrives so that we can be an anchor, a base for these kinds of artists to bless the community and country."

- Rohan Preston is at rpreston@startribune.com.

Black Nativity

- Who: Based on a script by Langston Hughes. Directed and choreographed by Kevin Ilega Jeff. Produced by Lou Bellamy for Penumbra Theatre Company.

- Where: Fitzgerald Theater, 10 E. Exchange St., St. Paul.

- When: Previews 7:30 p.m. Tue.-Wed., opens 8 p.m. Thu. Runs 7:30 p.m. Wed.-Thu., 2 & 8 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 2 & 7:30 p.m. Sun. Thru Dec. 23.

- Tickets: \$10-30. 612-673-0404.

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