



**StarTribune** **Rock the house; Playwright Djola Branner uses music, dance and humor to sweat out the demon of addiction in "The House That Crack Built." (FREETIME)**

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Djola Branner has watched the cold chill of addiction run shivers through his family and friends. He has sought to understand the jagged trail it leaves in the form of ruined lives, uninformed reactions and futile efforts to stem its insidious creep into all parts of America.

The Twin Cities playwright responded to the pain in his comrades by using his art to develop the notion that addiction knows no limits and that people have other choices. But for Branner, it's more complex than a slogan like "Just Say No."

Five years ago, "an accumulation of incidents" drove Branner to embark on interviews with people in 12-step programs to explore the nature of addictive demons. His work has crystallized in "The House That Crack Built," a poetic multidisciplinary stage show that drags addiction over razor-sharp humor, music and dance. It opens tonight at Pillsbury House Theatre in Minneapolis.

"You see underneath addiction a lot of pain," Branner said before rehearsal the other day. "Addicts are avoiding something painful in their lives - a difficult childhood, sexual abuse. The journey of walking through that pain is not an easy one."

Touched by the impact that crack has had in the African-American community, Branner said he came to understand that the drug hasn't stopped there, but has burned a path through boundaries of gender, age, race and class. He also decided to drench his work not in the dry texts of experts, but in the fragile experience of recovering addicts. Early in the process of putting this show up at Pillsbury House, for example, a recovery group was brought in to talk about addiction with the cast and crew.

"Now that was theater," said Heidi Hunter Batz, who's directing the show. "Theater means more than just pulling the classics off the shelf and getting some actors to put it on stage. This is life."

Batz and Branner had collaborated on "Where I'm At," a play about adolescence that was presented four years ago by Pillsbury House, Stages Theatre and the Southern Theater.

"I like working with the musicality of his language," Batz said. "And I know addiction. I was addicted to food and I understand the pain that encompasses the beating heart and makes it hard to see the next day."

Perhaps it is because addiction causes such pain and heartache that Branner has chosen an upbeat approach.

"Music is universal, and I could hear the piece best that way," he said. So he enlisted his composer friend Aaron Barnell to write tunes that reflected the mood of the character-driven text.

"I visualized what mood I wanted," said Barnell. "Djola did want some certain things, like at one point a campy salsa show song, and then another one where the mood had to match releasing demons from the inner soul. I tried to match that with the music."

Branner first workshopped the piece at Patrick's Cabaret in 1996. "I loved the music and the energy of it," said Noel Raymond, co-managing director of Pillsbury House, who saw it there. "Last year we talked with Djola because we wanted to work with him and we brought this up."

It fit the theater's desire to incorporate more original work in its repertory.

"It's important for Pillsbury House to start relationships with local playwrights," said Faye Price, Pillsbury co-artistic director. "One of the wonderful things about this work is that it's not based in naturalism, and I'd like to see this theater do more of that."

Price also likes that this work "stretches the actors out of their comfort zones. They're playing instruments, dancing, singing."

As some of those actors drifted in for rehearsal, Branner announced that he'd work with whomever was ready.

Actor Gavin Lawrence took the bait and soon he and Branner were discussing the choreography for a Haitian folksong that Lawrence is responsible for in the show.

"There's a bounce underneath that needs to happen," he told Lawrence, snapping his fingers and singing the song softly. "Open your palms here. That's much better."

After a few minutes, Branner took his lanky, supple body across stage to move Gregory Smith and Antu Yacob through a salsa dance number. Soon Smith was huffing and puffing in his drag queen get-up, grimacing at his mistakes but celebrating his little victories.

"I'll get it," he said, hands on knees.

Batz watched from up in the theater seats as she waited to take her turn with the actors.

"The heart and beauty of this is the pain of addiction, but we approach it with fun. It rocks the house," she said. "In one evening we have loads of fun. We have an artistic process that involves director, playwright, composer, actors. The next partner in the collaboration will be the audience."

#### THE HOUSE THAT CRACK BUILT

Who: Written by Djola Branner, directed by Heidi Hunter Batz.

When: 7:30 p.m. today-Sat.; 7:30 p.m. Wed.-Sat., thru Nov. 18. (No show Nov. 10, added show Nov. 6.)

Where: Pillsbury House Theatre, 3501 Chicago Av. S., Mpls.

Tickets: \$10-\$15. 612-825-0459.

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