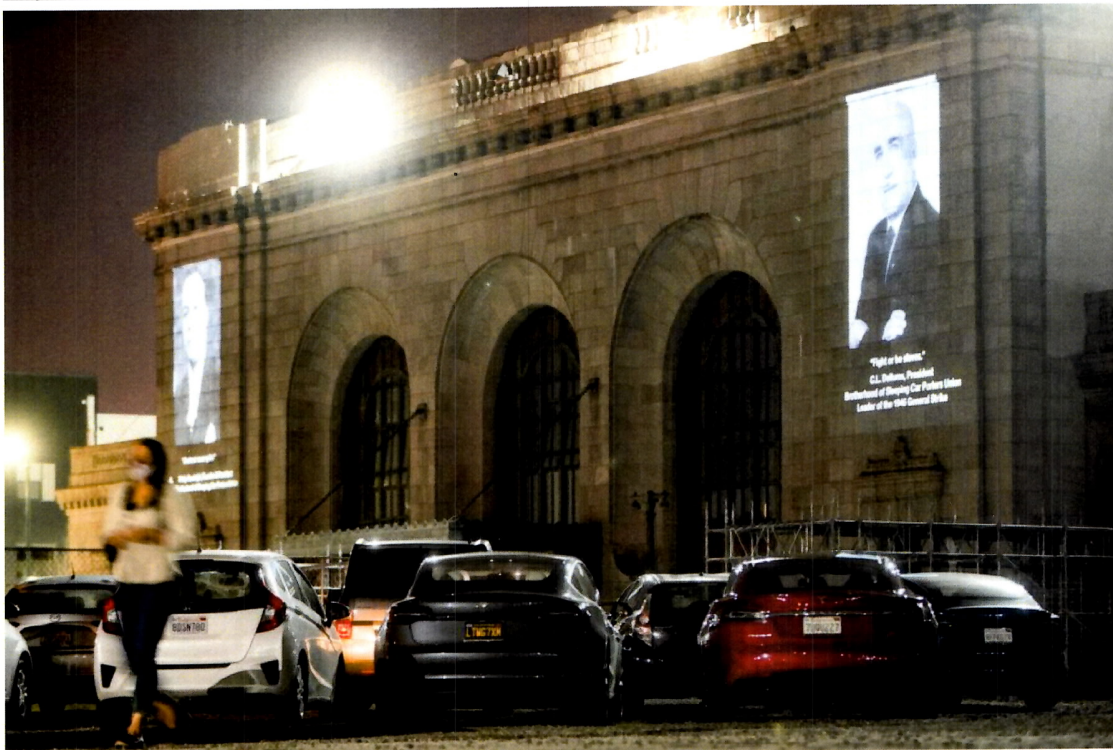


# San Francisco Chronicle

**THEATER** Review: Oakland Theater Project's 'Binding Ties' makes 16th Street Station come alive

Oakland Theater Project's drive-in, site-specific show uses projected slides, an FM station and an in-person actor.

Lily Janiak February 13, 2021 Updated: February 14, 2021, 11:03 am



Audience members inside their cars watch “Binding Ties: The 16th Street Station” during the 30th anniversary production of the drive-in show, presented by Oakland Theater Project. Photo: Santiago Mejia, The Chronicle

No train has stopped at Oakland’s 16th Street Station since 1994, when tracks were moved after damage from the Loma Prieta earthquake. But you might think you see and hear one chugging toward the grand Beaux Arts structure during “Binding Ties: The 16th Street Station.”

Oakland Theater Project’s drive-in, site-specific production, which opened Friday, Feb. 12, projects slides of historical images on either side of the station’s three grand front windows. Meanwhile, you parked in your car (enclosed vehicles are required) and tuned in to an FM station for recordings of interviews with local retired workers of color — Southern Pacific Railroad porters, maids, cooks — conducted for the show’s 1991 premiere, alongside a clickety-clack soundscape by Kevin E. Myrick.



Margaret Schultz (right) and BZ Lewis park to watch “Binding Ties: The 16th Street Station” by Oakland Theater Project. Photo: Santiago Mejia, The Chronicle

The show, created by Stephanie Anne Johnson with Michael Copeland Sydnor (who died in 2012), so awakens the station’s ghosts that when a car’s headlights beam from a side street, your brain might momentarily think the light comes from a Southern Pacific engine, especially if you happen to feel a rumble underneath your car seat.

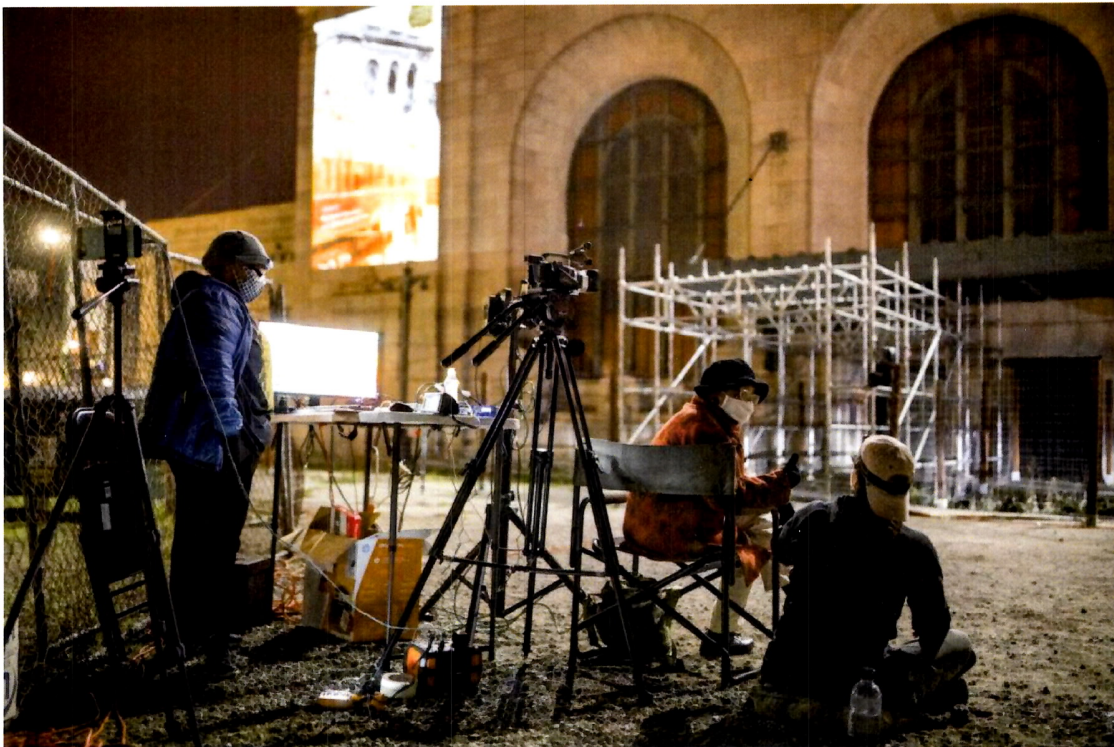
“Binding Ties” was also a drive-in show for its 1991 premiere at the station; it now opens a whole drive-in season for Oakland Theater Project (which was renamed from Ubuntu Theater Project last year). A key difference this time around is the addition of an in-person actor, William Oliver III, for a prologue and epilogue. If his script can veer trite, the way he enters will probably surprise you, even if you know to expect him. That blend of film and flesh and blood suggests the magical possibility that what you see projected might somehow take corporeal form.



William Oliver III in “Binding Ties: The 16th Street Station” by Oakland Theater Project. Photo: Santiago Mejia, The Chronicle

The interviews themselves attest to workers' ability to find dignity and humanity in their hard labor even under demeaning circumstances — when you had to supply your own silk uniform; when you weren't supposed to look a white passenger in the face; when Black porters formed their own union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, amid racism dominant elsewhere in the labor movement.

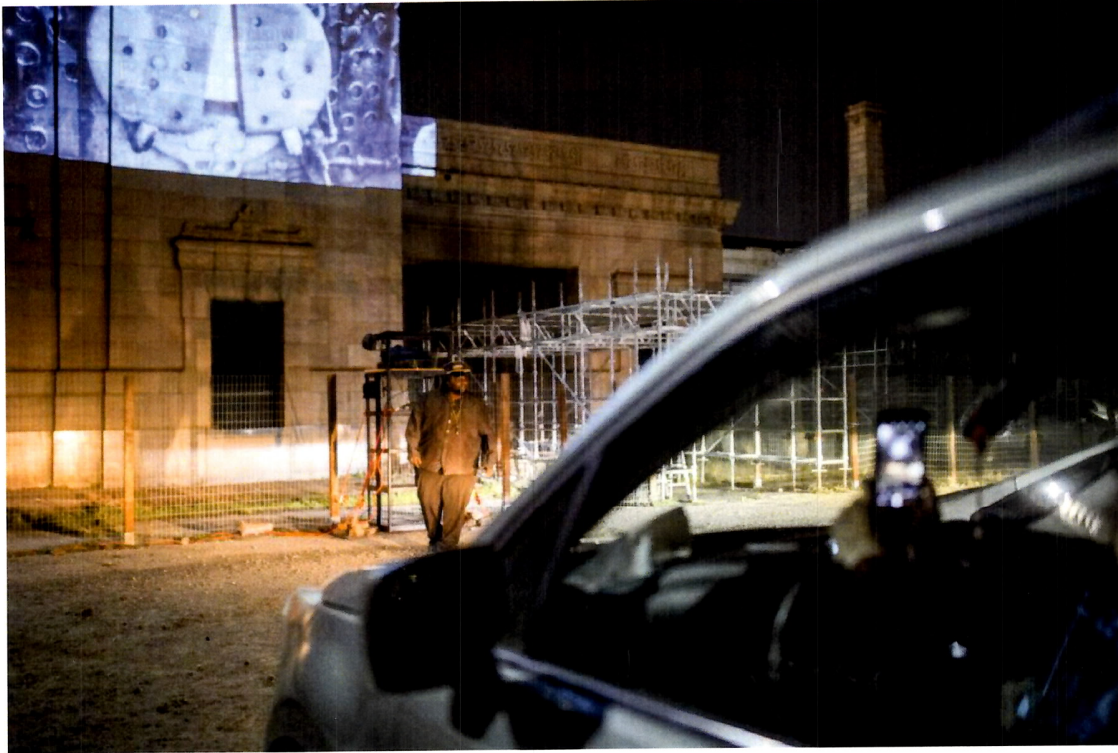
It's beautiful and humbling to hear workers, years into their retirement, still recite flawlessly all the stops on a line or its timetable. One maid (the title of stewardess, she recalls, was reserved for white workers) even remembers the times of day she fetched formula from cars' refrigerators for passengers with babies.



Stephanie Anne Johnson (second from right) with the production team before the start of Oakland Theater Project's "Binding Ties: The 16th Street Station." Photo: Santiago Mejia, The Chronicle

History is as etched into the cracks and rasps of their voices as it is in the show's incisively culled images. Workers stand mightily before the camera; neither boastful nor timid, they seem to say, "Here I am."

The show moves at a contemplative pace, with plenty of breath and often a haunting railroad tune before each new interview snippet and slide. At times you might wish for more context about speakers and photo subjects during those in-between moments — Who is this person speaking? Where did a particular strike fit into a broader labor movement? — Johnson and Sydnor also seem to trust that their interviewees can speak for themselves and that your imagination can fill in the blanks.



William

Oliver III in Oakland Theater Project's "Binding Ties: The 16th Street Station." Photo: Santiago Mejia, The Chronicle

"Binding Ties" summons a lost transit system and mostly lost transit ethos. In its world, some dining cars had white tablecloths, floral arrangements and teams of chefs slicing prime rib. Taking the train and working for the railroad were not defined by sardine-tin crowding, disinvestment and lack of vision. Working for and riding the train meant being a part of something. It meant building something grand and powerful. It meant a grown man could come from a long line of railroad men and say, as one of Johnson's interviewees does, "I'm crazy about trains," and have everyone understand what he meant.

M**"Binding Ties: The 16th Street Station"**: Created by Stephanie Anne Johnson with Michael Copeland Sydnor. Directed by Kimberly Ridgeway. Through Feb. 28. One hour. \$5-\$50. <https://oaklandtheaterproject.org>

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