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BLACK MASKS

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LHTSF Artistic Director Margo Hall

Arts Hotline

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Steely Resolve and Exceptional Promise

Margo Hall

From Detroit to San Francisco Bay

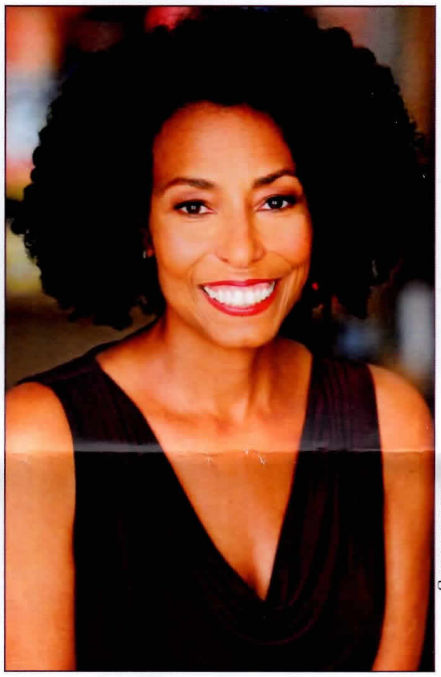
by Stephanie Anne Johnson

Wedged between the New York and the Los Angeles models of "success," the San Francisco Bay area has largely been ignored as a powerful place where numerous artists including Danny Glover, Whoopi Goldberg, and Ntozake Shange began their careers. Black theatre companies such as Cultural Odyssey, Oakland Ensemble Theatre, the African American Shakespeare Company, the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre, Berkeley Black Repertory Theatre, Afro Solo, and others have provided a haven for designers, actors, administrators, and backstage personnel. Among these West Coast notables is Margo Hall, a multifaceted theatre artist, a legend, a revered figure and one of the San Francisco Bay Area theatre's long-time treasures.

In 2020, Hall became the first female artistic director of the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre. Founded in 1981 by Stanley E. Williams and Quentin Easter, it is one of the oldest theatre companies in San Francisco. She brings a purposeful approach to her role. "My focus is Black theatre that reflects culture, history, and family legacy. I like plays," she says, "that do not provide answers—conflict-filled texts that challenge me intellectually, work that brings mystery and invites audiences to make their own decisions."

Although now an esteemed Bay area theatre artist, Margo Hall was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1963, merely five years before the tragic death of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, a devastating event for the African American and global communities. The youngest of three girls, she was five years old, when her parents divorced; her mother remained a single parent until Hall was ten years old. She remembers her early years in Detroit fondly. "Even though we only had a little, I never felt poor. I grew up in a lively family surrounded by vocal aunties, uncles, and a strong Christian grandmother." At a young age she was introduced to the entertainment world through her stepfather, conductor and composer Dr. Theodore "Teddy" Harris, who worked with Motown artists such as Martha and the Vandellas, The Supremes, and Aretha Franklin. She recalls, "My stepdad was appearing at The Flamingo with the Supremes (post Diana Ross), and Diana Ross sat at our table. It was like a fantasy world filled with glitz, glamour, and fantastic music. The world of Motown was my family. I was considered the fourth Supreme and performed onstage with them." These experiences with entertainment set her on a path toward a life in the theatre. As an adult, Hall paid tribute to Teddy Harris's influence with her play *Be Bop Baby,* a collaboration with composer and bandleader Marcus Shelby. She owns up to being "compelled to be part of projects which represent folks I know."

Hall began her academic journey at the University of Michigan, changing her major from pre-med to theatre. She transferred to Adelphi University in New York, where she received her BFA and continued on to Catholic University in Washington, DC, earning an MFA. While in DC, Hall worked at Arena Stage and a year later moved to California. "My first show in California was at The Magic Theatre around 1993," she reminisces.



Lisa Keating

Significant among the origins of her art practice is being a member of Campo Santo ("Sacred Ground"), a cooperative theatre company founded in 1996 by a group of San Francisco collaborators including Hall. She fondly recalls: "Creating and running Campo Santo, we did the hands-on work. There was no hierarchy (i.e. no artistic director) and a lot of grassroots funding. We were all equal parts of the puzzle."

This on-the-ground, hands-on manner of producing new work for the stage is serving Hall well in her role now as artistic director at Lorraine Hansberry Theatre. "Doing the work, "she says, "has always

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Stephanie Anne Johnson is a lighting designer, visual artist, and educator. She celebrates fifty years as a professional designer who has worked locally, regionally, and internationally since 1974. Dr. Johnson is also a founding faculty member of The Visual and Public Art Department at California State University, Monterey.

Hall...

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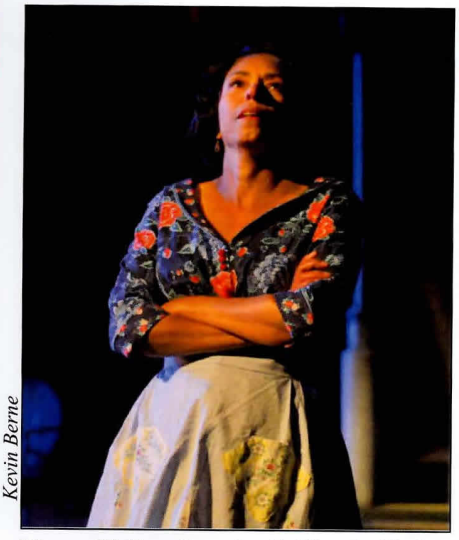
been my focus. It's a challenge, creating our own work, in our own way, outside of the given restrictions, creating work when it is time and when it's needed." With Hall as an active member, Campo Santo continues to be a thriving multicultural performance organization.

A versatile theatre worker, Hall displays her skills as a playwright, educator, and actor. Besides, *Be Bop Baby,* the tribute to her stepfather, Hall has written several plays. In April 2005, the world premiere of *The People's Temple* was produced at The Berkeley Repertory Theater, winning the Glickman Award for best new play in the Bay Area for 2005. Hall was a part of a collaborative team of four writers who used the interviews of survivors, and archival materials to form a play that explored the People's Temple movement and their tragic ending at Jonestown in 1978. The play moved on from Berkeley Repertory Theatre to The Perseverance Theater in Juneau, Alaska, then on to the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Hall was also one of the actors in the ensemble.

As an actor, Hall also displayed her eclectic range in shows such as: *The Good Person of Szechwan, Black Odyssey, A Raisin in the Sun, Twelfth Night, A Winter's Tale, American Night: The Ballad of Juan Jose, Spunk, Jazz, Skeleton Crew,* as well as *Unquestioned Integrity: the Hill/Thomas Hearings*. Particularly close to her heart are *Fences, Seven Guitars*, and *Gem of the Ocean*, the August Wilson plays in which she was a performer. In addition to The Magic Theatre, home of Campo Santo, venues where Hall has appeared include: Marin Theater Company, California Shakespeare Theater, American Conservatory Theater, the Aurora Theatre, and Shotgun Players. She is also a film actor, who played Leslie White in *All Day and a Night* with Jeffrey Wright, Marsha Watkins as Blind Witness in *Nash Bridges,* with Don Johnson, Nancy in *Blindspotting* with Daveed Diggs and Helen in *Chances* with Hugh Laurie.



Kevin Berne

Margo Hall as Rose in California Shakespeare Theater's 2016 production of August Wilson's *Fences.*

A gifted educator, Hall has taught at Chabot College (Hayward, California) for over twenty-five years. Nine years ago, she began teaching at U.C. Berkeley, and is still a valued adjunct professor in the Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies Department there. She is also an active member of the Department's Equity and Inclusion Committee. "I started investing in the youth of this community," she states. "I value this community a lot. I value the people of this community. I value the people of color of this community."

In addition, Margo Hall has directed: *Thurgood; Rejoice!* and *In the Evening by Moonlight* at Lorraine Hansberry Theatre; *How I Learned What I Learned,* co-produced with Ubuntu and Marin Theater Company at Lorraine Hansberry Theatre; *Barbecue* and *Red Velvet* for San Francisco Playhouse; and *The Story,* co-produced by San Francisco Playhouse and Lorraine Hansberry Theatre. She also directed Sam Shepard's *Simpatico* and Luis Saguar's *Hotel Angulo* at The Magic Theatre. Further, she recently directed *Nollywood Dreams,* an amazing production I had the privilege of seeing twice at The San Francisco Playhouse.

A remnant from her early days in the theatre, Hall values collaborative directing. She says, "I learned about collaboration at Campo Santo. I learned about work that matters." Examples of her collaborative projects are: *Bulrusher,* a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize by Eisa Davis, co-directed with Ellen Sebastian Chang; *Mission Indians*, a new play by novelist Greg Sarris, co-directed with Nancy Benjamin; and Erin Cressida Wilson's *The Trail of Her Inner Thigh*, which Hall co-directed with Rhodessa Jones.

Kevin Berne

Margo Hall as Aunt Ester in Marin Theatre's 2016 production of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean.*

Margo Hall has received numerous accolades for her directing. The San Francisco Bay Area has two theatre organizations that produce annual award ceremonies for theatre workers: The San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle or SFBATCC, and Theatre Bay Area or TBA. SFBATCC, begun in 1976, consists of reviewers who cover the nine San Francisco Bay Area counties. TBA began in 1976. Currently, with 2,000 individual members and 300 theatre company members, TBA is known as the largest regional theatre association in North America. It provides members with professional information, education, financial resources, and networking opportunities.

SFBATCC has an annual awards ceremony each Spring that recognizes excellence in the theatre. Margo Hall has been awarded two Best Actress Awards, two Best Director Awards and in 2018 she was given their Lifetime Achievement Award. TBA also has an annual award for excellence in theatre directing, acting, design, and other areas of stage work. Margo Hall has been the recipient of two Best Director Awards, and four Best Actress Awards.

Particularly notable are the awards received for Campo Santo's *Joyride*, a play

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about Santa Rosa day laborers, which garnered the SFBATCC Award for Best Original Script; the *San Francisco Weekly's* Black Box Awards for Best Production, Best Ensemble, and Best Director; the Drama-Logue Awards–Northern California for Best Production and Best Ensemble; the *Backstage West* Garland Awards –Northern California for Best Production and Best Ensemble, and the *Bay Guardian* Goldie Award Winner for Stage.

As they map out their career, most theatre artists are unable to resist the professional seduction of the two giants—the New York City theatre scene (Broadway), and the Los Angeles film industry (Hollywood)—which are held out as the ultimate pinnacles of success. However, Hall has chosen to stay based in the smaller environment of the San Francisco Bay Area. During my interview, Hall's point of view became quite clear. she expresses her devotion to the area unequivocally: "I had my time in LA....It was great. I would fly in and do my thing and fly right back home." With deep conviction, she adds: "Every five minutes I am asked, 'Why don't you go do this. Why don't you go do that.' That's fine, and I can do that, and I can come home. If you pay me, I can do that." But there is a lot of work to be done in the Bay Area; there are opportunities for her there and she gets to choose what she wants to do. "I love living in Oakland. Staying here is important to me." She reflects: "It [The San Francisco Bay Area] reminds me of Detroit in that people here, the Black people here feel like home."

In 2015, Margo Hall was given TBA's Charles Dean award as public recognition of her deep commitment to The Bay Area. She has also been acknowledged for her dedication by being awarded the prestigious Rainin Grant, a $100,000 anchor artist award for commitment and legacy in the Bay Area. In short, from her Motown origins to her current home in Oakland, Margo Hall has come full circle as a theatre practitioner. She is a valuable part of the cultural, social, and art environments as an energetic, loyal, compassionate, and extraordinary artist from the San Francisco Bay area! ❄