

Letter from the Director, Rodney Hicks

I first encountered this show back in 2007 when I saw it in previews at The Public Theatre in New York City. My friend Tracie Thoms and I sat in our seats, awestruck throughout the entire piece, like “What are we watching!?” Greatness. We were watching greatness unfold in front of our eyes with a cast that sat in the material so visceral and deep. This original new musical moved me to the core.

During this time in my life, I was working as an actor uptown as Benny in the closing cast of Broadway’s *RENT*, so I would see *Passing Strange* multiple times throughout its Broadway run in 2008, they were just up the block from us so I would go on my days off to watch it. The original cast, all friends that I knew were not only great singers but also fiercely talented actors. With all of my unbridled love for the show I never saw myself wanting to be in it. I just knew I loved it and would listen to the soundtrack or put on the Spike Lee film of the Broadway show after it closed.

It was August of last year, I was home in Denver gardening when I began thinking about taking a trip to Portland this year to see dear friends. I saw that the Playhouse was doing *Passing Strange* in their season so I texted Brian Weaver to see who was directing it since it was listed as TBD on their website, funny enough I wasn’t texting Brian with interest, I was texting to see if I should plan a trip to Portland around the time of the show so I could see it as it is my all-time favorite musical. I always loved the music and felt as if the story was all of ours.

Well, Brian texted me back almost immediately saying they had lost their director quite recently, in fact, I learned it was the week prior and they had just decided to put fillers out and then I texted. Divinely met, I believe. This whole process has been just that. Working with this cast, company, and creative team has been one of the biggest joys in my 30-year career. When offered the job I immediately said Yes. When it was agreed that I would be the new director of *Passing Strange* here at Portland Playhouse, I immediately knew that the Stew role for this production would be portrayed by a female and that it should be an immersive experience. I would figure out the why later, and I am so glad that I did. We did. Together.

This narrator role now takes on the persona of an archangel who helps Youth cross over by walking him through his life until he gets it right and finds “the real”. I thought about the impact of death, grief, healing, the afterlife and went from there. I chose to tell a black queer coming-of-age story that’s intimate, abstract, surreal, and immersive with three-quarter staging. That seed of an idea snowballed into what you will see, a musical

about people, a love story between a mother and her son, a son and his mother, a queer coming-of-age story about love and healing. It's a wonderful life kind of tale now versus a concert-like show. I am super excited for audiences to see and experience this new version of an extraordinary musical with an all-Portland cast of brilliant artists.

Working with our stage manager Kim Harding was incredible. Working with our musical director, Kennedy Verrett, and our choreographer Muffie Delgado-Connelly is a dream come true. Collaborative bliss, joy, and originality. We had the luxury of spending 5 months in pre-production over Zoom to create, collaborate, uncover, and discover. Muffie and Kennedy immediately said YES to this new concept of the show and soared with it, our entire team did. I am in awe of their talents. Thank you also to Keela Johnson as our culture & competency consultant. I hope that you enjoy this new retelling of this ahead-of-its-time musical that I believe transcends race, people, music, and everything in between, it's for us all. A healing. A balm. I am forever grateful. EnJOY!

Namaste-shanti-peace

Rodney Hicks, Director of *Passing Strange* at Portland Playhouse