

Artistic Directors Note

Antaeus Theatre Company has always been known as a “classical” theater company, featuring playwrights such as Shakespeare, Chekhov and Shaw. But a question that fascinates, confounds and inspires us is: What is a Classic? What makes a piece of writing timeless and fresh? What does a particular story have to say about our time, to our audience, to our community *right now*? We are always challenging ourselves to answer those questions.

When we came across Nambi E. Kelley’s new adaptation of Richard Wright’s groundbreaking novel *Native Son* on the Kilroys List of un- and underproduced plays by female and transgender writers, we knew we had found a piece that would both answer – and expand – our definition of “What is a Classic?”

Ms. Kelley has distilled a vast, sweeping narrative into under 90 minutes of visceral theater. In a cinematic style she cuts between the present and the past, from the rough streets of pre-war Chicago, where the iconic main character “Bigger Thomas” is trapped, to the interior spaces of his tortured subconscious.

The archetypal struggle in which Bigger finds himself is absolutely classical. Our tragic hero is trapped in circumstances beyond his own making, no less so than Oedipus is locked into his own tragic spiral. All the elements of fate force him to hurtle down a violent path toward its inevitable – yet empowering – conclusion. As an audience, we watch with both fear and compassion as Bigger’s tragic fate unravels before us.

What makes *Native Son* so particularly impactful for us today are the societal forces in America that have built the world that crashes down upon Bigger. It doesn’t require much power of observation to discern that “post-racial” America is hardly that at all. While many things have improved for people of color in the United States in the 75 years between the publication of Mr. Wright’s novel and Ms. Kelley’s adaptation, it is woefully and painfully clear every day that many things have not improved at all. The crushing vise of institutional racism, economic barriers and the continued lack of opportunities for people of color continue to create modern-day Bigger Thomases throughout our nation.

We believe that stories with these kinds of rich, enduring themes are Classics, which is why we are so proud and excited to produce Ms. Kelley’s work in Los Angeles. We think *Native Son* will compel us to open our eyes and ears to the truths around us as we immerse ourselves in Bigger’s world.

Bill Brochtrup, Rob Nagle and Kitty Swink
Co-Artistic Directors