

“I want the words to swing.”

David Ornette Cherry designs music for *The Hillsboro Story*

By Lynn Darroch

David Ornette Cherry has collaborated with writer/director Susan Banyas before, on the play, *No Strangers Here Today*, about the Underground Railroad in Ohio in the 1850s. Now they've teamed up again – with choreographer Gregg Bielemeier – for a play set 100 years later, in the playwright's hometown of Hillsboro, Ohio near the Mason-Dixon Line.

It's a role Cherry been preparing for all his life.

You may have heard Cherry with his Ensemble for Improvisors, or his Organic Roots band. He organized a series of jazz performances at The Curious Comedy Club last year. Originally from Los Angeles, he came to live and work in Portland some four years ago. In the company of his father, the late Don Cherry, he has toured the world and played with many of the giants of 20th century jazz. He also wrote the score for Bielemeier's 2008 dance piece, *Half of Some, Neither of Either*.

The Hillsboro Story brings to life the first test case for *Brown v. Board of Education* (May 1954) in the North. A third-grade witness to a fire that burned the local “colored school,” and the five African-American mothers who took legal action, Banyas returned home 50 years later as a cultural detective, interviewing more than 50 community members and Civil Rights leaders to create this theatrical piece. Their voices form the heart of the play.

The Hillsboro Story opens October 15 at Artists Repertory Theater and continues through October 24, then tours Oregon and Ohio community centers. Portland Public Schools has developed curriculum using the script.

Before the October 23 performance, Cherry and his group, *Impressions of Energy*, will play live in the lobby beginning at 6 pm before the play begins.

David Cherry talked about the process of composing for the play and the experiences that prepared him for it.

Basically, the music for *The Hillsboro Story* came out of my experience writing for *No Strangers Here Today*. At the time we premiered that play, Susan was working on Hillsboro, so I had the chance to go to Ohio to see the sites of the Underground RR where her great-great-grandmother lived. It was my first time in Ohio, so I was digging the landscape. I started to see the flow of the town, the different cultures, the historical relevance of the town, in so far as where it was located on the Underground Railroad. And I

was helping with the transcripts of the interviews, so I was hearing the voices in the story. So as I started to hear the stories and the real people of *The Hillsboro Story*, I started to get a flavor, a texture.

And I wanted to do this one different from *No Strangers* ...because of the time period. I based my whole theme for that play on the diary of Susan's great-great-grandmother. And we're also talking about the music of 1865 that wasn't recorded. And it was a different emotional thing [for me]. I went to Ripley, where they had to cross the river from Kentucky, seeing where they put the lantern on the hills [imagining] I had to get to that lantern.

When I was in L.A. writing the music [for *No Strangers* ...], I went out in the Angles mountains about 3 am. I hadn't eaten all day, went with no water, hardly any clothes — I was trying to feel what it'd be like if someone was chasing me and put that in the music.

Now in the Civil Rights era, it's a whole other cultural experience. I'm from Watts, and I went through the Watts Rebellion in 1965, and I benefited from *Brown v. Board of Education*, even though I went to all African-American schools until I attended Cal Arts. So my studies made it easy to understand 1955 in that sense. But for the play, I'm looking at it from a white girl's view when she was in the third grade.

I wanted [the music for *The Hillsboro Story*] to stay behind the words so the story gets out about the five African-American women. The music is there, but people don't really notice it. If they come out talking about the story, I feel I've done my job as a sound designer. And if then they say, “Oh, the music ...” Well,

that's good, too.

I looked at how she wrote the words and how it's going to swing. I want the music and the words to swing. So I ask, how am I going to put that under that so the words swing, and the people move in and out of there swing, too? I have to go with Duke: all art, it doesn't mean a thing if it's not swinging.

I was brought up to think that all art is one. We thrive off that. The words, the visuals, the sounds, it's all one. The movement – ‘everyday dancing,’ Susan calls it – the words, the music: all mediums come together in this discipline we



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Nellie McKay

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call theater.

When I got the chance to do theater, I said "Yes, I can do this," because I was very well-prepared. When I was in Gompers Junior High, we had a drama group called Young Souls that did poetry, and we'd travel to other high schools and do shows. In the early 1980s, I quit playing music and just started painting to understand what colors were. What would that color be like if I'm composing? And then I started hanging with writers more.

And of course working with my father. My first tour was in 1980, and we had this show — Jim Pepper was in it, he would do his Pow-Wow — called the Magic Band. We had magicians, dancers, poets. It was like theater. This guys made these big masks, and people would do dances with them. All while we were playing music. It was jazz theater in Europe. And that prepared me, too.

We took the play back to Hillsboro Ohio this Spring. Usually, after the show we have a talk-back session. Can you imagine the townspeople that buried this story coming, and then start talking to each other?

It was one of the greatest things in art that I have done to see the process end and see people come together, white and black, people in this community coming to see this play that binds them together. I like that. The common grounds we all have. That's what we all talk about — that's what we're trying to do in our art.

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