



An Interview with the Team behind *An Appeal to the Woman of the House*

We gathered Playwright Christie Perfetti Williams, Director DeLisa White and Producing Artistic Director of Retro Productions Heather Cunningham for this interview about the process of bringing *An Appeal to the Woman of the House* to Retro Productions this spring. Following is the conversation that followed.



- What spawned the inspiration for *Appeal*?

HC: Christie approached me about writing for Retro and we had a long discussion about what that would entail, what makes a play retro, what parts of 20th Century history or the American experience were of interest to her. The conversation started in 2011, right around the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Rides and one night we were emailing back and forth on our mobile devices and I was watching a documentary about the Rides and I mentioned this in one of my emails. Soon we were watching together when this former Freedom Rider happened to mention that she and some others had been left on the side of the road by a Sheriff at midnight and had asked for shelter at a farmhouse.

DW: What inspired me to get on board was the longstanding admiration I've had for Retro Productions, a particular love of helping to develop new works of the stage, especially ones which give new insight into the human condition and its history and a script I immediately fell in love with and that touches me more deeply with every incarnation.

- Is it based on real events?

HC: I prefer "inspired by." So no, not really, it is a work of fiction, but the rides and some of the experiences of some Freedom Riders did inspire the play.

- Do you consider it to be a political piece?

DW: Every piece is a political piece whether it intends to be or not, that is the nature of perspective. What the piece is not, is a play with a political agenda. Everything we understand about the human condition, particularly history and – without exception – hope, we understand through the telling of stories. The political and ideological choices we all make are informed by the simplicity or complexity of our understanding of historical events and social justice issues. A great play – and I believe this to be one – does not tell us what to think, but asks the questions we all need to ask and with such immediacy and accessibility that we can begin to understand how our social fabric changes, as well as our own perspectives and paths.

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Heather Cunningham



Christie Perfetti Williams



DeLisa White

- *Why make it a work of fiction?*

CPW: Most everything I've ever written at its core has a seed of reality. Real people or real events, certainly real emotions. But then I build a pretend world around it. I think that's what artists do. We observe and then we interpret.

HC: There's a difference between historically accurate and historically realistic. I don't think Christie was ever interested in writing a documentary or that's what she would have done. So if you're not going to write something completely accurate then you should fictionalize it – but it is possible to do so without losing the historic reality of the piece.

DW: A story is not just important because of the way it happened yesterday, but the way it *MAY* happen tomorrow. Fictionalizing these events make the characters and their journeys live in our imaginations as contemporaries, rather than faded photographs from a newspaper whose accuracy we are distracted by.

- *What makes this story worth telling?*

HC: I think any story in which people's lives are changed is worthy of exploration. The fact that this one happens to also remind us what it takes to stand up for what you believe makes it even more compelling to me. What the Freedom Riders did took immeasurable courage – to stand in the face of racism and hate and say “you're wrong” to people wielding weapons – that takes great courage. What Rose does – standing up to her husband and saying “we cannot turn our backs” is just as courageous – just on a smaller scale.

DW: The course of history changes not just by the powerful actions of a few courageous activists, but by the ripple effect they have on those who encounter or even become aware of them. A large and strong rock can drop in the middle of a lake, but until that ripple hits the shore, the sands have not shifted. So many historical pieces about social justice focus on the rock dropping. This piece shows us how powerful that ripple remains while appearing to diminish.

- *What drew you to this project?*

HC: As an actor I have the distinct pleasure, for the first time in my life, of having a role written just for me. As a producer I've actually been hoping to do a great Civil Rights play for some time.

CPW: Honestly? This first motivation? I really wanted to write a play for Retro. I'm a huge fan. And I knew that Heather was interested in producing a piece inspired by the Civil Rights Movement. And then, of course, after I started researching – reading and watching the documentaries – I was blown away. There was so much I didn't know, especially about the Freedom Rides. I was captivated.

DW: I always ponder why, in the face of gross injustice, how change and progress occur. This project illuminates so much of that process. It is stories like this that help us understand the world better, and helps us *be* better.

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- *How has your individual role influenced the development of Appeal?*

DW: As a director, my role is to help the playwright navigate the distance between the story on the page and the experience of the audience. In development of a new play, the director serves as a defacto audience first, clarifying what seems to be communicated by the text solely and then comparing that with the playwright's intent. If the text adds up to a different number than the one of the playwright is intending to hit, we look for ways to add clarify text which adjusts the arc of the piece in the proper direction.

HC: As a producer I hired a director with a great amount of experience and expertise in work shopping new plays as well as a dramaturge to make sure we remain historically realistic. Then I set up the schedule that would allow for the right number of readings, both private and public, with plenty of re-write time in between for the playwright to get the feedback, research and reflection she needs to make the script the absolute best it can be.

- *How has the project been received at readings?*

DW: With great interest, intrigue and pathos. I am confident in its power.

HC: We have only had private readings so far; our first public reading will be in March. I think it says a great deal that the people who have experienced the play thus far have all agreed that it is a powerful piece, that the emotional arc of the play is strong, and that the criticisms have all been small or historical in nature – if all we have to do is fix the history I believe we're in really good shape. It's when you have to fix the heart of the play that you run in to trouble.

On January 25th we presented Act I Scene 7 to a small gathering of people and the response was amazing – nearly all of them told me afterwards that they couldn't wait to see the full production; they found that one scene so strong and compelling.

- *Where do you see this story being told in 5 years?*

HC: I would love to see it take off in regional theaters.

DW: I think this is a play that could be done regionally, in high schools and colleges for decades.

HC: I can definitely see appeal in *Appeal* to students of the Civil Rights Movement – because even though it is fiction it takes you in to the souls of these people, what they were fighting for, why they did what they did.

CPW: It belongs on college campuses. It belongs in community theatres. It belongs on Broadway. It's a timeless story that's entirely relevant today. And has kick ass characters for both men and women, black and white, young and old. When I write, I write as much for the actor as I do for the audience. We're all in it together!

- *Who do you feel this project speaks to most?*

DW: Anyone who wonders how the human race evolves socially.

CPW: My hope is that it speaks to everyone who has a beating heart!

HC: I agree! I also hope that those who lived through this struggle will be reminded of the bravery of their friends and neighbors who fought for equality and I hope audiences who were not yet born will have renewed respect for those who came before them.

CPW: I think mothers – of all ages, all backgrounds – will be especially moved by it. It's not a piece about motherhood per se but there is a strong thru-line of maternal love and loss. And most definitely that instinct to protect.

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- *What line in Appeal speaks directly to you?*

DW: "It was of the time." It shows how we are all responsible for our history and our future.

HC: That's such a good one – and absolutely the reason for Retro's mission.

CPW: One of the lines that I'm most proud of is in Act I, scene 7 when Rose turns to Claire and says, "Havin' nothin' ain't somethin'. It's everything." Classism – the divide between the haves and have nots and the really have nots – is a much a part of this story as racism. And sexism for that matter. And the way that Heather delivers that line... Man, she gets it.

HC: Christie, stop! I have four favorites (so far, ask me again in May!):

"Havin' nothin' ain't sumthin'. It's everythin'."

"We'd have a record player and I'd play music all of the time. Noisy-up the quiet a bit." Christie's use of music in this play is so important.

"If you're not doing this for love then why on Earth are you doing it at all?" Seriously, why?

"And just when everything is all scrubbed and set, you go to bed. And then you wake up. And you do it all over again. That there is what life is. Cleanin' up." That goes for just about everything, don't you think?