

Charlie Robinson Explores *Desire Under the Elms*

By Deborah Behrens

Photos: Chris Kane

CHARLIE ROBINSON LOOKS MORE LIKE a suave R&B icon than an actor wrestling with the soul of a pious 1850 Connecticut farmer.

That the farmer under scrutiny is playwright Eugene O'Neill's rigid protagonist Ephraim Cabot from his 1924 classic *Desire Under the Elms* or that Robinson indeed founded the 1960's soul vocal group The Drells before Archie Bell took it over merely fuels further fascination with the ironic pairing.

Especially when you consider that his early childhood calling had more to do with hymns than four-part harmonies.

"I wanted to be a minister since I was five years old," admits the veteran series television, film and stage actor on a late afternoon at Odyssey Theatre Ensemble prior to *Desire's* opening night and one week after closing a critically lauded performance in the world premiere of *My Wandering Boy* at South Coast Repertory directed by Cornerstone Theatre co-founder Bill Rauch.

"I was raised in a church in Houston," said Robinson, looking every inch the soul crooner in sleek dress slacks, silk shirt and vest. "As a kid I would watch the ministers up there and I thought it was so great to see them control the congregation. I decided, man, that's what I want to do!"

Robinson tried out the pulpit as an adolescent preacher but changed course when the lure of rhythm and blues led him to form The Drells instead.

"I actually started the group in the 8th grade," he explains. "At that time it was myself, two other boys and two girls. We would sing at the various talent shows and local schools. That's basically how I got into the business."

Robinson left The Drells to join the Army at 18 and returned to Houston three years later to

tour with the gospel group Southern Clouds of Joy. Internal bickering led him to quit and take a job with a local manufacturing firm. Acting didn't enter his mind until he saw Bill Cosby in an episode of *I Spy*. The show inspired Robinson to enroll in acting classes at Studio 7 under the late acting teacher Chris Wilson despite ribbing from co-workers. He lasted two weeks.

"I said what am I doing?" admits Robinson. "I can't do this. Guys at work thought I was crazy. Two weeks passed before Chris called me at home. She said, 'You came in my office and said you really wanted to do this and now you're walking out? Come back.' I said OK. If she had not called me, I never would have gone back. That's what saved me and that's what kept me in the theatre for 40 years."

From *Fences* to *Desire*

Today Robinson is best known to audiences for his work as a series regular on such popular sitcoms as *Buffalo Bill*, *Night Court*, *Love & War*, *Ink* and *Buddy Faro* plus films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *The River*, *Set It Off*, *Antwone Fisher* and *Even Money*. His local theatre credits include *Ajax* (Taper Too), *Hamlet* (Mark Taper Forum), *Promises, Promises* (Reprise! Broadway's Best), *The Piano Lesson* (South Coast Repertory) and *Fences* (Odyssey Theatre Ensemble) as well as various productions at Actors Studio, Inner City Cultural Center and LA Theatre Works.

It was his role as former Negro League baseball player Troy Maxson in August Wilson's *Fences* that earned Robinson the 2006 Ovation Award as Lead Actor in a Play. Helmed by veteran television and theatre director Jeffrey Hayden, the popular production was co-produced by the

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Odyssey and the Saint/Hayden Company headed by Hayden and his wife, Academy Award winner Eva Marie Saint.

The trio first met at the LA branch of Actors Studio where Robinson and Saint performed together in a workshop staging of *Touch the Names* at the Tiffany Theater under Hayden's direction. They developed *Fences* under the same process before transferring it to the Odyssey where it enjoyed a critically acclaimed two-month run. When it closed none of the cast wanted to go home.

"They simply didn't want to disband," admits Hayden. "So I searched my mind in terms of what play could I do that would both utilize the wonderful talents of these very fine actors and make sense for me. So I came up with the idea of



Desire Under the Elms because Charlie is truly a giant of an actor and this is a giant of a part.”

Originally adapted by O’Neill from the Greek classics, Euripides’ *Hippolyta* and Racine’s *Phedre*, the play centers upon the return of twice widowed patriarch Ephraim Cabot to the remote New England farm his three sons thought he’d abandoned to them with a new wife half his age in tow. Competition for the farm between Cabot’s wife Abbie and his youngest son Eben leads to lust, vengeance and ultimately tragedy.

“The play is a powerful piece of Americana,” Hayden points out. “Even though it was written in 1924, it’s totally relevant in terms of today’s dog-eat-dog culture. I mean lust is lust, greed is greed, passion is passion. It rocks!”

Other acting giants who have tried their hand at the harsh septuagenarian include Walter Huston in the original 1924 Broadway run, Karl Malden in 1952, Burl Ives with Sophia Loren and Anthony Perkins in the 1958 film, and a 1963 Circle in the Square production starring George C. Scott and Colleen Dewhurst. In 1974, Hayden directed Saint in a Kennedy Center mounting that

For Robinson, Ephraim’s religious dedication offers a complete moralistic contrast to that of Troy Maxson.

“Ephraim’s whole life is about living for God,” he notes. “In a lot of ways, after I work with the play and walk away from it, Ephraim is kind of scary. You know? For someone to be that closed in about his spiritual life. It seems to me that he would do anything for this feeling that he has toward God. God is what drives him.

“Troy was just the opposite. Religion didn’t faze him. It was a part of his life because he grew up with it. It’s crazy but I’m so different when it comes to playing characters like Troy and Ephraim. My kids run over me. I’ve always been that way. I’ve got one that’s 28, one that’s 26 and one that’s six. Nothing’s changed.”

Saint thinks it is important to present classic playwrights to young people. “They don’t know Eugene O’Neill. They don’t know Arthur Miller. They know Sondheim. For them to come here and see something like this is great. I love the *Odyssey*. It has good vibes.”

Hayden and Robinson agree that presenting an African American cast using the play’s original 1850 Connecticut setting is both historically accurate and an opportunity for audiences to witness the universality of O’Neill’s characters.

“We have researched it to a fare-thee-well,” says Hayden. “There were lots of African Americans up through New England during that period of time. This guy happened to get this land. Plus we have a cadre of talented African American actors who don’t get much of a chance to do important and exciting roles because the parts they play on television are mostly cops, lawyers, doctors and such.”

“It’s not about any color thing,” concurs Robinson. “It’s about trying to bring alive what O’Neill

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– JEFFREY HAYDEN

kicked off a 10 week summer tour co-starring James Broderick and John Ritter.

“We actually did this 30 years ago,” remembers Saint. “So when Jeffrey told these actors about it, I went right along. It’s a wonderful play. And I think it’s interesting for any director or actor to have done something and then, after you’ve grown older and had more experiences, to look at it again. It is almost a different play.

“Like in *Death of a Salesman*. When you see it and you’re younger, you align yourself with the brothers. As you get older, you think about that father and what he’s been doing. You think about your own father. I’ll see this now and probably agree with Charlie! Who’s that young whipper-snapper taking his wife away from him!”

put on the paper. So when you walk out of the theatre, you’ve seen a human being there not his color. If we get into a place where people ask why are these black actors doing this then we have a problem because they’ve missed what we’re trying to do.”

As for what Robinson plans to tackle next, it’s clear he sees the entire canon of theatrical literature at his disposal.

“If a playwright has written it then I’m going to try to do it. I want to open myself up to do anything I can where the work is concerned. I find myself growing as a person when I play these kinds of roles. That’s the real lesson of taking a risk and it’s my time to be able to do that.

“I’d like to do Willy Loman next year maybe. Who knows?” ■

Desire Under the Elms
Plays Thurs.–Sat., 8 pm;
Sun., 2 pm; through July 29
Tickets: \$24-\$26
Odyssey Theatre Ensemble
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www.odysseytheatre.com