

3/15/17

Dear representatives of the City of Burnsville and the Ames Center,

My name is Derek Washington and I am an actor, director, and playwright. I've been involved with many theatres in the Twin Cities area for over the past twenty years and have in recent years developed a strong working relationship with the Burnsville based Chameleon Theatre Circle. Earlier this year, Chameleon reached out to me to express an interest in having a play I wrote and starred in become a part of their upcoming 2017-2018 season. That play is *Caucasian-Aggressive Pandas* and other *Mulatto Tales*.

Pandas is a play inspired by my experiences as someone who is a mixed race African American and Caucasian man. It is a humorous but heartfelt look at my struggles with identity, prejudice and intolerance told with a focus on representing people in an "other" category on stage while bringing education and understanding to those that fit more comfortably into a demographic box. *Pandas* was initially produced by Fearless Comedy Productions in the fall of 2015 at the Bryant Lake Bowl Theater to very strong reviews and has been Fearless Comedy's most successful show so far. It was remounted in the Minnesota Fringe Festival this past summer and was not only critically well received but was also the 10th highest grossing play in the festival. On the Broadway World Minneapolis website I was voted Best Actor in a Play for my performance in it and the show also received nominations for Best Play and Best Director. I believe it is this success, coupled with an appreciation of the work itself that inspired Chameleon to reach out to me about bringing the project to Ames.

I was really excited by the proposal to bring the show to Burnsville as I had so many people come up to me after performances or throughout the Fringe Festival telling me they wished I would bring the show out of the city to their home towns in the suburbs. They felt it would be very valuable to their communities and that this tale of race would have a positive impact on their residents regardless of their demographic background. This made Burnsville an optimal place for this show to launch after two successful runs in Minneapolis.

Sadly that isn't going to happen. I was very disappointed to learn that the Ames Center and the City of Burnsville had decided to step in to keep the show from being produced. I'm told that members of the city took concern with the word "mulatto" being in the plays title. Mulatto is a word that represents someone that is the offspring of a white parent and a black parent. It is deemed by many to be a derogatory word as its origins stem from a Spanish or Portuguese word for mule which is the cross between a horse and a donkey. This show does not ignore the word's derogatory origins and in fact addresses them in the first few minutes of the show. In a large way discussing those origins is a lot of what the show is about. As a person who is both black and white it is a word I still hear even if it isn't quite as present in modern vernacular. I put a lot of thought behind this word when writing this show. Could I have changed it to "Mixed Race Tales"? Possibly, but it is a show specifically about my experiences of being both black and white. I felt like saying "Mixed Race Tales" included a much larger subset of people whose experiences may or may not have represented my own. I can't accurately speak to the experiences of someone who is both Asian and Latino for example, and while I have found that many people of other mixed race groups have also strongly identified with this piece of work, I don't feel like I know their experiences close enough to have the title be that general. There really is no other term

that suits. A title like "Caucasian-Aggressive Pandas and other Tales from Someone who is the Descendant of Parents who are Both White and Black" isn't very good from a marketing standpoint.

So when I was asked by the city if I would change the title, I said no. Not only did it not make sense for the show, it also meant it would be difficult to leverage the show's previous success operating under that title. Before the Fringe I did have one or two people express concern about the word which I believe I was able to lessen with a few sentences of conversation. I didn't hear any concerns from anyone who actually saw the show. I wanted to explain this to those in the city with concerns, and I'm told Chameleon encouraged them to talk to me about them, but the city declined to do so and has instead chased a performer of color with a strong message of inclusivity away from their city.

I am encouraged by Chameleon Theatre Circle who has been nothing but sympathetic and supportive during this process. I know it angered them that the Ames Center has insisted on more and more involvement in the season planning of the company. I was very proud of them when they told me that after this decision they had decided to inform the Ames Center that they would not be renewing their relationship and that at the end of the current season they would not be producing anymore shows there, ending a relationship with the center that has existed since the center was built eight years ago.

I hope the city and the center understand the cost of their decisions. Your citizens and community are the ones that lose in the long run. I'm not sure what the future of Chameleon will be, whether they will keep producing somewhere else or dissolve the company, but it stands that a company that has committed themselves to producing work specifically for your residents for almost twenty years is likely not going to be doing so anymore. I don't see any way that the show not being produced benefits your residents at all and I urge you to take more care with these decisions in the future.

Sincerely,



Derek Washington