

Ebony Road Players: Edye Evans Hyde
Long Haul Productions // MCACA Creating Connection project

Edye Evans Hyde: My name is Edye Evans Hyde, and I'm the executive director and founder of Ebony Road Players, and we are located in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

MUSIC

I was probably in about the fifth or sixth grade. My mom was doing my hair in the kitchen, and she had the radio on. And James Brown's Say It Loud, I'm Black and Proud came on.

MUSIC

I was totally hit by that. My mom's combing my hair, and my eyes, I think were like teacups 'cause I'm like, "What is this music? What is this song?" And to this day, I think was one of most powerful songs that I'd ever heard.

And secretly, I liked singing. I wanted to move to L.A. and be some kind of star. But I didn't know what that looked like. And I was a little embarrassed about it, so I never really talked about it. I would be in my bedroom with my little hairbrush microphone in the mirror pretending I'm Diana Ross. [LAUGHS]

MUSIC

Diana Ross, to me, was probably one of the first African-American women that I really noticed. You start noticing different things in junior high that make you understand where you stand in the world. And here is Diana Ross and the Supremes. These three beautiful women who are singing, and glamorous, and dancing, and they're on The Ed Sullivan Show.

MUSIC

There was something internally that made me realize it was special, maybe just looking in the mirror at myself and then finding someone who looked like me that everyone sees? Also, there's a lot of insecurities

about being a girl when you're in seventh and eighth grade, and feeling positive that you're seeing not only someone black on television being loved and admired by the world, but also a woman, and how they're presenting themselves and making you feel better about who you are as you're going through your physical transitions.

MUSIC

I went to college and said, "Oh, there's a music program here!" That encouraged me, and once you finally see someone else doing it, there's always a possibility that you can do it as well. There are people who are performers. Before then it was just a little dream of mine.

I ended up joining an outside band, and that was amazing to me. So I got married and my husband and I moved to California for a little while. When we came back, there was a black theater here in Grand Rapids called the Robeson Players doing these shows that would empower women directors and be a theater for people who don't normally get a chance to be in that atmosphere.

And someone said, "Hey, Robeson Players is doing this really cool musical called *Ain't Misbehaving*. It's the music of Fats Waller, and Edye, you sing jazz." So I sang my little jazz tune, and ended up in this wonderful musical. I did a song called *Keepin' Out of Mischief*. It was my solo in the show. I don't know if I remember all the words. It's been so long.

Eyde (SINGING): All my flirting days are gone
On the record, from now on,
I'm keeping out of mischief, now

I remember seeing it on video for the first time, and I thought "I look kind of good!" It was a great experience. And that same theater company decided to do *Dreamgirls*, based around Diana Ross and the Supremes. I auditioned knowing this was just like the perfect thing for me to be in and ended up being the character who basically was Diana Ross.

And it was one of most amazing experiences I have ever had, and got so bit by the theater bug that every year I did a show or two shows while I was working full-time with two kids and a husband.

NEWS REPORT SOUND: Seven people were shot and killed in Grand Rapids ...

Eight years ago I was on my way to a singing job and had the radio on. And for some reason that summer in Grand Rapids there had been a lot of gun violence, kids being killed, and I was struck by how many it had been. Even if it's one, it's a terrible thing. But on my way to my job, I was wondering why this was happening. What did my generation have that these kids were not having? Why are you out in the street? Why do you have a gun? And I came up with my own theory that there wasn't a lot of other things for them to do. There wasn't anything to strive for, there wasn't a project that they could be doing. Just being involved in the arts in some form and feeling like you are succeeding in something.

So I got a bunch of artist friends together and we decided, not knowing what the heck we were doing, "Hey, let's just have a black theater company and every year we'll just do a theater production!" That grew from just having fun, to an opportunity for kids and adults to have somewhere to go, and to be able to see themselves onstage, and be able to tell their own stories. The first play we did was *For Colored Girls Who've Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Was Enough*. And we did it as a staged reading because we didn't have the money to do a whole full-out production.

TAPE FROM COLORED GIRLS: Imagine all the stories we could tell about the funny looking little colored girls, and the sophisticated little colored girls, and the pretty little colored girls, the ones just like you.

And it was full. It was the most diverse group of people I'd ever seen in an audience, ever. It was amazing.

APPLAUSE

And then from that, people gave us money to do the next one. And so we just kind of grew with it.

Ebony Road Players does not have a theater stage. So we have been using different facilities. We collaborated with an organization called Site Lab who takes all these old buildings and makes art installations out of them. And they gave us a space to do the play. Sometimes it's hard. [LAUGHS] One was a building that had been closed for many years, so

it didn't have electricity and it didn't have a bathroom in it. It was crazy because you have to really be creative on how you make those things work. But I just like the fact that the community doesn't have to always come to us. We can be close to them. And I think that starts to reach out to those communities that don't normally go to theater.

Having those opportunities for the community as a whole to go and hear the stories, hear the histories, experience being around a diverse group of people makes us more connected. And right now, I think that's the most important thing for our country to try to achieve is this connectedness that we are pulling apart. And there's so many people who don't understand anyone's history because they're not really presenting that in school.

We're thinking about doing a show about Anne Frank and Emmett Till. And when I told this young lady about it, she knew who Anne Frank was. She had no idea who Emmett Till was. She is a biracial child who was raised in a white family and had no idea about it. So she went home and looked it up and she emailed me back, "How do I not know this story?" And when you start showing those types of things to the community, there is a discussion to be had. Let's not make these mistakes again just because we don't know each other's history. And doing it in an artful way presents it in a way that's not terrorizing to people. So I think it's important for everyone to be able to have those opportunities to see those types of shows.

MUSIC

There is this quote on our website, Ebony Road dot org, from Maya Angelou. And it says, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." And the reason that I love the quote is because underrepresented voices hold these stories inside, and they don't get a chance to express them in any form. It's an agony they walk around with all the time, and having someone understand gives everyone a little relief and a little freedom, like, "I didn't know this existed," or "How can we make things better?" The story is freeing. A story is important. Everyone's story is important.

MUSIC

Right after we started meeting for Ebony Road Players, I was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and so I had to have surgery right in the middle of everything. While I was in the hospital, one of the things that kept me going was the fact that I had Ebony Road Players to come back to and put together. So I guess it was kind of a healing aspect of it for me. “I have a theater. I can't stay here. We're going to do our therapy, whatever I need to do, because I got to get back to what I think is important for the community.” I love making theater that affects people.

One little girl was with us couple days ago at a fundraiser and she showed up to do a performance, and we interviewed her. And during the interview, she said, “I'm going to own one of these. I am going to own a theater company. And we are going to take this theater company to New York. And it's just gonna be mine.” And it was the cutest, funniest, yet, wow, seeing-into-the-future thing that I had experienced from an individual. It was cool. I can't imagine it not growing from here.

MUSIC