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TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

La Crosse native's play commemorates Sister Thea Bowman's commitment to Black joy, racial justice

Gavin Michaelson

Apr 24, 2024



The Apollo Theater marquee announces Nathan Yunkerberg's upcoming show of "Thea" in New York City.

Nathan Yunkerberg, Contributed

Gavin Michaelson

Sister Thea Bowman entered the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in 1953, the first African-American woman to do so, and dedicated her life to fighting for civil rights, leaving a lasting impact on Catholicism in the United States.

Now, her life is being commemorated by the Apollo Stages at The Victoria Theater in New York City this weekend.

The play "THEA", written by La Crosse native Nathan Yunkerberg, serves to continue Bowman's work as an advocate for Black joy, racial justice and equality – a journey that was cut short.



Sister Thea Bowman photographed in 1988.

Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, Contributed

In his late teens and before leaving La Crosse to follow his creative dreams, Yungerberg attended a Viterbo University symposium that Bowman spoke at in La Crosse shortly before she died from breast cancer.

Yungerberg reflected on the experience, remembering himself sitting with his girlfriend in the main floor as Bowman came out in her wheelchair, wearing a dashiki dress and proudly showing her bald head.

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“She saw us sitting there, singled us out and brought us up on stage. It was a really pivotal moment in my life because it was the first time someone had acknowledged my blackness in that way,” Yungerberg said. “There’s a certain kind of interaction you have as a person of color with other people of color that is unspoken – so she didn’t even say anything other than just like reach out, point at us and then motion for us to come up. There was so much built into that action of like, ‘I see you brother, you’re one of me.’ The choir, I believe, was all white, so she was kind of alone in this also. It was just a really magical moment.”

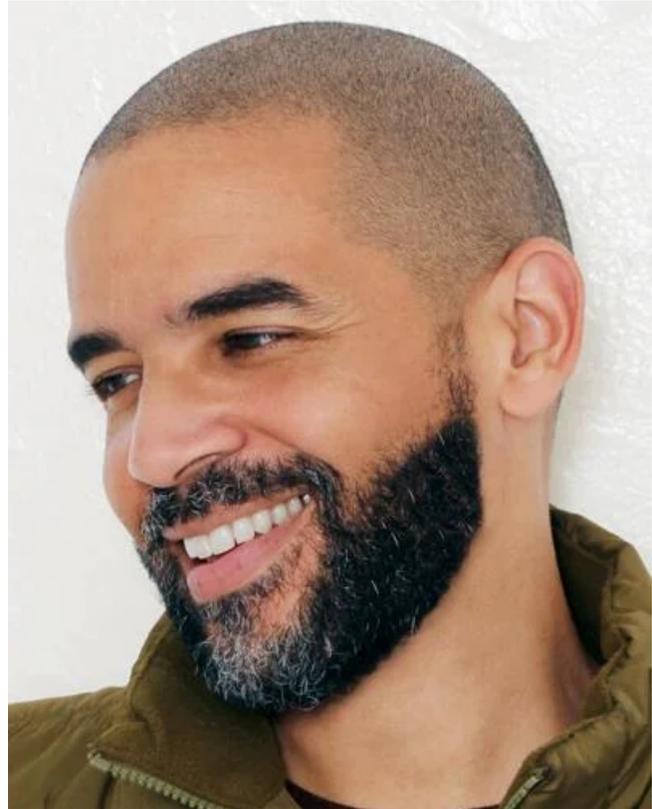
In 2018, decades after this experience, the idea to honor her life in the form of a play came to Yungerberg, and he connected with people across the country who keep Bowman's legacy alive.

"There's this whole international tribe of people that love and adore Thea and still really keep her image and commitments to inclusion and acceptance alive," he said.

After meeting with several people and learning Thea's story, he went on a month-long artist's retreat at a ranch in northern California, just months before he was set to showcase the unwritten play at The Sheen Center for Thought & Culture, a Catholic performing arts complex in New York City. Within one week of arriving, he wrote the first and only draft of the play, totaling 90 pages long.

"It was a really daunting task, but it just came out of me – it just flowed out of me," Yungerberg said. "The magical thing about it is that I've never touched it since then ... I don't want to change anything."

The play Yungerberg created captured what Bowman stood for – inclusion and racial harmony.



Yungerberg

Robert Feliciano, Contributed



Sister Thea Bowman is pictured in 1988.

Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, Contributed

“Just people coming together, celebrating themselves first and then celebrating together as a community,” Yungberg said. “I think that’s really what the premise of the play is, you know, really coming together as one and celebrating the joy and the love that we can cultivate and create together as a community.”

This sentiment was praised by many who were close to Bowman.

“I finally read every word of (your) ‘THEA,’” said Sister Charlene Smith, a former classmate of Thea and author of “Thea’s Song: The Life of Thea Bowman.” “Warm tears of joy for me. Amazed with your world of fantasy. Love Thea’s ‘speeches’ at the end. You captured her heart, her light, her spirit.”

There will be three performances of THEA this weekend at The Apollo Stages at The Victoria Theater. The first performance is on Friday, April 26, for an industry night, which is invite only. On Saturday, April 27, there is a 2 p.m. matinee and a 7 p.m. evening performance. Tickets are on sale for \$20.