

# A stage for diversity

‘Art is a way that people will stop and listen’

**Amanda Sieradzki**  
Council on Culture & Arts

Carol Hill joined and co-founded the Essential Theatrical Associates (ETA) for many reasons. Among them, she was excited to find a place to continue honing her theatrical skills outside of her role as the Director of Development of the FSU Foundation for FAMU-FSU Engineering.



**Carol Hill**

Her main motivation, however, was to provide tools and resources for the next generation of thespians, and in particular, black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) artists in the Tallahassee area.

Hill says a petition circulated late last year that asked organizations to boycott Tallahassee theaters who were cited for a lack of diversity and inclusion in providing roles for BIPOC actors. Instead of signing, ETA chose to host a roundtable with the theater houses listed on the petition, including the Monticello Opera House, Theater Tallahassee and Theater A La Carte.

As a result of this open and honest discussion, ETA has partnered with the Southern Shakespeare Company to host a Diversity Town Hall on Thursday, Jan. 21. The conversation will center on representation of Black artists in the Tallahassee theater community and inroads for change.

“The goal for the town hall is to have a discussion about what is out there and available from a grant standpoint, as well as getting personal background from actors that have been in the community,” says Hill. “We want to set the stage and then follow up with the remaining parts of what’s going on with an understanding there’s more that our theaters can do to bring diversity.”

Hill’s own journey with theater has taken her in various directions, but she never lost the feeling she first experienced standing onstage in her high school theater production. Even as she attended FAMU with designs of becoming a physical therapist, her passion reignited after attending a show at a local Tallahassee theater. She visited the theater department at FAMU and quickly switched majors.

Hill holds a degree in theater performance as well as an MBA from FAMU. She appreciates the strong mentors she’s had in Valencia Matthews, the Dean of Arts and Sciences at FAMU, as well as arts administrator Kimberly Harding, an associate professor in theatre management at FAMU. Both helped her to grow as a thespian entering leadership roles.

“Both of those women were very instrumental in supporting me and helping me maneuver through this theater world,” says Hill.

When it comes to the art form itself, Hill is swept off her feet by the language of William Shakespeare and August Wilson. In particular, Wilson’s play “The Piano Lesson” takes her home to southwest Georgia with its vernacular and dialect.

She sees her grandmother, aunts and uncles in his characters. When Hill performed monologues from “The Piano Lesson,” she identified with her mother in particular. Hill always begins with a personal connection when researching a role, then incorporates other resources into the character. One of her most memorable experiences was playing Mama Euralie in “Once on This Island.” She enjoyed learning techniques for speaking in a West Indies dialect and being put through the paces for the big dance routines.

“When stepping into any role, I pull from my

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## If you go

**What:** Diversity Town Hall: A Conversation on Black Representation in Tallahassee Theater

**When:** 7-9 p.m., Thursday January 21

**Where:** Online

Contact: For more information on how to register, visit <https://southernshakespearefestival.dm.networkforgood.com/forms/diversity-town-hall-registration>.

# Diversity

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experiences first,” says Hill. “I have that firsthand empirical research that I pull from, then I do other research. If I want to have a character that has a specific walk, I study people in the community or my surroundings. I pull from several different places, but I start with my family and friends.”

For the Diversity Town Hall, Hill will follow a similar process and take on the role of producer. She assembled the panel based on what each person will bring to the conversation.

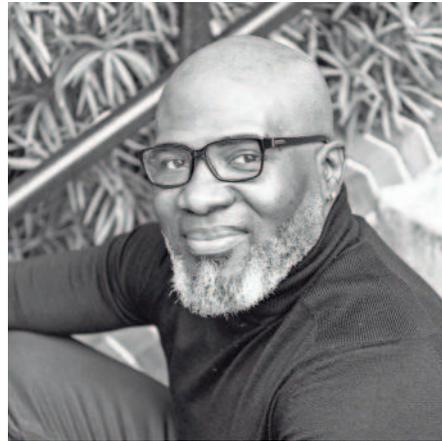
One of the panelists is Antonio Cuyler, an FSU professor and author of “Access, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Insights From the Careers of Executive Opera Managers of Color in the U.S.” Hill says Cuyler’s economic study will be a key centerpiece to the education and subsequent conversation.

She is also looking forward to having COCA’s Executive Director, Kathleen Spehar speak on current grant opportunities for artists in the area. She says that Keith Hamilton Cobb will round out the panel by speaking to his own journey in the industry as a professional actor. Hill says there will be time at the end of the call for questions and answers, which viewers will be able to type into the chat.

Hill is proud to have several school board members, legislators and county commissioners already signed up to participate on the call. While systemic issues of racism are not something that can be easily solved or overcome in just one town hall, she is hopeful that this will open up a bigger and productive conversation at the local level for all.

“Everything started to change immediately after George Floyd and Black Lives Matter, so I think art is a way that people will stop and listen,” says Hill. “Unfolding these layers and seeing what we can do as artists to rectify the situation is key. We want to show that we can have an amicable conversation and do our best to invoke change.”

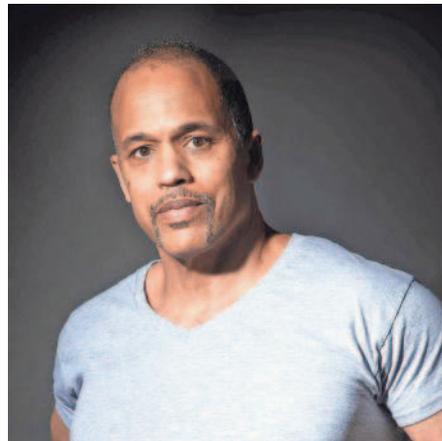
*Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).*



**Dr. Antonio Cuyler, MA Program Director at the Florida State University Department of Art Education and Associate Professor of Arts administration. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT**



**Kathleen Spehar is Executive director of Tallahassee's Council on Culture and Arts. KIRA DERRYBERRY**



**Keith Hamilton Cobb is an actor and a playwright. NINA WURTZEL**