

Evelyn Tyler gets 'Sing On' dancing onto FAMU stage

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Even as the moon wanes in the wee hours of the morning, you might still find Evelyn Tyler joyfully buzzing around backstage. Tyler feels theater is interwoven with her DNA whether she's starting on a new prop or organizing the costume shop.

As an Assistant Professor of Theater at Florida A&M University, she dons many hats both onstage and offstage as a "theater generalist," with a list of duties that spans from acting to photography to event planning.

Recently, she's stepped into her newest role as director of the FAMU Essential Theatre's workshop production of "Sing On, Ms. Griot." FAMU's own professor and playwright, Beth Turner, wrote the production, which will show from Nov. 2-4, and Tyler is excited for the chance to restage the newly updated script.



Evelyn Tyler

"Dr. Turner presented the script to the faculty three years ago," says Tyler. "I read it and loved it. I voiced an interest of wanting to stage it, and I knew I would, I just waited for opportunity."

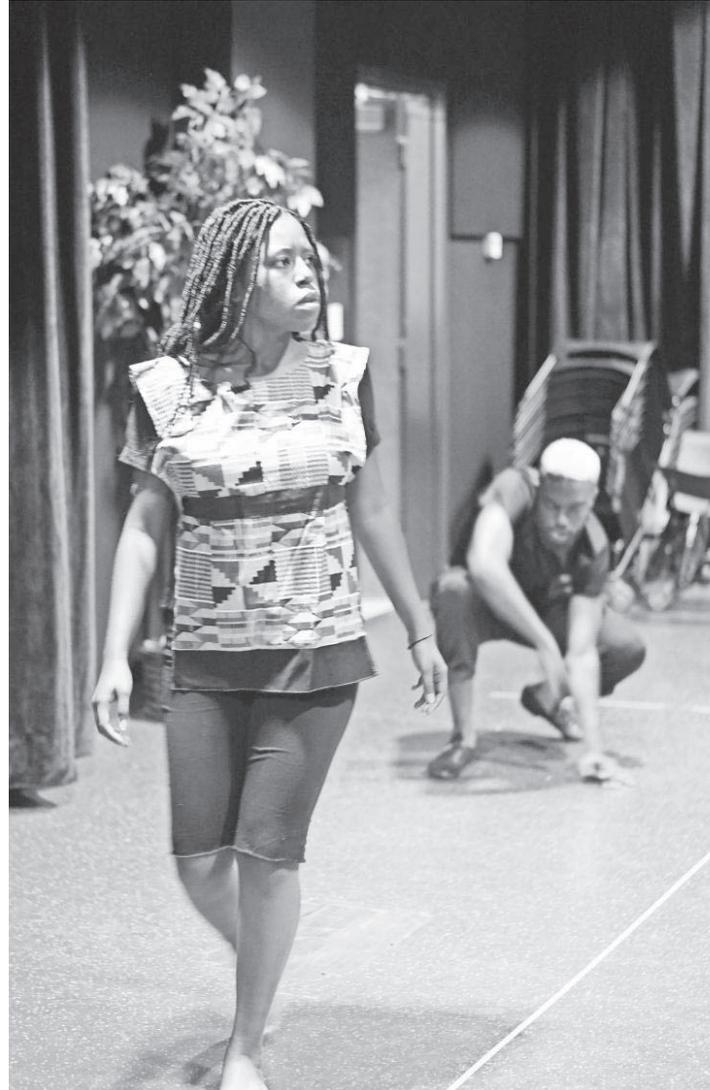
Tyler became smitten with the theater world as a child growing up in South Carolina. Her late father, a pianist, singer, and composer, alongside her mother, a culinary artist and baker, provided her with many artistic outlets. Tyler's first performance was at age three in a tap dance number. The "acting bug" bit her hard in sixth grade however, and from high school through college, theater became her main focus.

She graduated from South Carolina State University with a BA in Theater Studies, and earned her MFA from the University of Central Florida. For three years Tyler was a performing artist and supervisor in Orlando's biblical theme park, The Holy Land Experience. She most enjoyed the passion plays, as well as working in the children's area teaching and writing guests' names in hieroglyphics.

All the while, Tyler quietly cultivated her many interests inside the theater, arts, and crafts worlds. She arrived in Tallahassee in 2010, and started working at FAMU as an adjunct professor teaching introductory classes. Soon thereafter, she began volunteering for jobs that fulfilled her interests, and blossomed in the multi-faceted position she holds today.

"Growing up, my mother would always tell us to get as much information and knowledge as we could so that we could shift easily and keep the rhythm of our lives going," recalls Tyler. "I was once afraid to even explore and dabble in the various things I now get paid to do. I feel very fortunate now to work as a theater generalist, which didn't exist at one point, but is someone who does multiple things in the theater arena."

She refines these many gifts through



Ms. Griot (Ilesha Robertson) wonders as Anase (Treyon Sargent) sneaks in for FAMU's production of "Sing On, Ms. Griot." EVELYN TYLER



various community classes like those provided at the Lafayette Park Arts & Crafts Center. Tyler has taken courses in drawing, painting, sewing, and polymer clay class, and is grateful for the chance to train and network with professionals. Most of all, her work is inspired by life's go-getters. She looks up to her friend Rasheen Jamison-Richardson and motivational speakers like Les Brown and Eric Thomas, all role models whom she considers to be "not

afraid to be vulnerable, make mistakes, and get back up."

Amongst her many responsibilities at FAMU, Tyler is the Essential Theatre's prop master, which includes buying, systematizing, and designing props for various shows. Additionally, she is the planner for cast parties and special events, a second set of hands around the costume shop, a set painter, the photographer for productions, the organizer behind posters and postcards, and now, director. Regardless of the outlet, her creative process remains the same.

"I always have a vision of a final product in mind," says Tyler. "Before you start, you need an understanding of what you need to do and be able to dissect that thing down. I create a blue-

If you go

What: Writing for Life Play Reading Series Presents A Workshop Production of "Sing On, Ms. Griot"

When: 7:30 p.m. on Thursday and Friday, Nov. 2-3; 2 p.m. on Saturday, Nov. 4

Where: Ronald O. Davis Acting Studio/FAMU Theatre, 515 Orr Drive

Cost: \$5 (seating is limited)

Contact: For more information please call 850-561-2425.

print or a roadmap of how to get there."

Much of her work relies on anticipation and meticulous planning. Tyler will comb through a script multiple times and highlight props and sub-props—a term she coined for the items that aren't spelled out in the script and can be hidden underneath the main prop. If she's taking production stills, she'll first watch the show to see where to stand, and what angle or shots are vital to capture. As a painter and jeweler, she enjoys the freedom that being an artist provides in terms of adding personal flair, as well as sharing work with others and hearing their interpretations.

"Your artwork becomes a learning tool once people start to encounter it, and you start to see from their perspective and get inspired all over again," remarks Tyler.

Feedback from the audience for "Sing On, Ms. Griot," will be a key part in the upcoming workshop performances, and Tyler has been invigorated by the many discoveries she and her cast have made along the way within the rehearsal process. She describes the show itself as a "folktale within a folktale" that gives life to fictional staples of African and African-American traditions, while telling universal stories that can be appreciated by all audiences.

Collaborations with Longineu Parsons from the FAMU Music Department and drummers from the African-Caribbean Dance Theater add rich layers to the newly updated show, and Tyler has enjoyed immersing her players in peeling back the many topics inside the story. The musical contains singing, dancing, and drumming, with numerous surprises along the way, and centers on themes of respect and unity, which Tyler sees as being a timely and important aspect of the revival.

"One of the most important themes in the story that rings so true is that, at the end of the day, if you want to embrace it or not, the human race is all one and we need to come together as one," says Tyler. "We may have our varied practices and cultural differences, but you understand love as I understand love, and your heart beats as mine does. It's a fruit that is well in season, and it is for everyone."

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).