

175 YEARS AGO (1838)

American actor John Wilkes Booth is born. Son of actor Junius Brutus Booth, and brother to actors Junius Brutus Jr. and Edwin, John Wilkes will make his New York acting debut in Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Killed by investigators after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, he will live on as an infamous historical figure and a character in the musical *Assassins*.

100 YEARS AGO (1913)

Three hikers stumble upon a natural amphitheatre on Mt. Tamalpais in Mill Valley, Calif. One of those hikers, Garnet Holme, will direct plays at that amphitheatre from 1913 to 1926, going on to become a director at the University of California—Berkeley. Known for transporting audiences, sets and props using a railway gravity car—aka “the crookedest railroad in the world”—this hiker’s dream-scene will become known as the Mountain Play Association, and its stage the Cushing Memorial Amphitheatre.

50 YEARS AGO (1963)

The Twin Cities answer British director Tyrone Guthrie’s call to start a U.S. resident theatre. The Guthrie Theater opens its doors on May 7, welcoming audiences with a production of *Hamlet*. The Guthrie will eventually win the 1982 Regional Theatre Tony Award with artistic director Liviu Ciulei at the helm. Its second home, designed by Jean Nouvel and opened in 2006, will be named one of *GQ* magazine’s 10 most important buildings of the 21st century.

■ WASHINGTON, D.C.

# No Present Like the Past



POSTER ART BY GREGORY FERRAND

**HISTORY HOLDS NO TERRORS FOR**

Jacqueline E. Lawton. The Washington, D.C.–based dramatist has written scripts about John Wilkes Booth and about a restaurateur caught up in a 1835 race riot. In *Anna K*, she transplanted Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* to 1920s Paris, giving the eponymous heroine a passing resemblance to Josephine Baker.

Now, in *The Hampton Years*—debuting at D.C.’s **Theater J** on May 29—she evokes a seminal moment in the lives of two trailblazing African-American artists: the celebrated muralist John Biggers and the printmaker and art historian Samella Lewis. During World War II, both were young students at the Hampton Institute, a historically black college (now Hampton University) in southeastern Virginia. There

they studied with Viktor Lowenfeld, an Austrian Jewish refugee scholar who was doing groundbreaking work in the field of arts education.

*The Hampton Years* explores the inspiring and occasionally tension-fraught interactions between the three figures as they struggle to realize their visions in a racially segregated, and sometimes artistically risk-averse, America. In naturalistic scenes and dream-like sequences that bring canvases to life, the play ponders art’s social function, political nature and emotional charge.

The script’s conception dates back to an evening, a few years ago, when Lawton and her friend Shirley Serotsky, now Theater J’s associate artistic director, found themselves discussing the shared stories of Jewish and African-American history. Galvanized by the conversation, Lawton began looking for such stories, and she soon came across the tale of the Hampton Institute circle. She was particularly fascinated by Biggers’s and Lewis’s artistic boldness. “Their very act of creating art on their own terms—putting black people in their art, painting about black culture and the everyday life of blacks—was revolutionary,” the playwright observes.

*The Hampton Years* received a staged reading in Theater J’s inaugural Locally Grown: Community Supported Art Festival in early 2012. Serotsky is directing this year’s premiere, running through June 30.

The play “tells a complex and layered story of two different groups of people fighting their own kinds of oppressions,” Serotsky says, adding that the script displays Lawton’s flair for making historical material “urgent and playable, and filled with life and surprises and still-unanswered questions...the kind of theatre that we really want to see.” —*Celia Wren*

■ SAN DIEGO

## BIG CHOICES

**LOOKING AT CUBAN HISTORY**

through the eyes of ordinary people isn’t a new recipe for David Ellenstein, artistic director of San Diego’s **North Coast Repertory Theatre**. In 2006, he directed Melinda Lopez’s *Sonia Flew*, about a woman living in two realities: the Cuban “Pedro Pan” exodus of the early 1960s and the post-9/11 war on terror. That was the beginning of an artistic relationship that has since strengthened.

So when North Coast Rep board mem-



ETHAN BACKER  
Lopez

ber Jenie Altruda decided to commission a playwright, Ellenstein called Lopez. He recalls that she said to him, “I have three plays in my mind right now: a comedy, a family thing and a bigger, scary one.”

The “scary one” turned out to be Lopez’s newest: *Becoming Cuba*. It received a workshop last fall, and Ellenstein will direct its premiere May 29–June 23. “The scary part was the size of it,” Lopez says. “It involved my favorite geopolitical chess pieces: the

U.S., Cuba and the colonial world power of Spain. Plus I had this personal connection—a great-grandmother who had lived through it.”

The story, set in 1890s Cuba, features a young widow who runs a local pharmacy and faces decisions of huge personal and political dimensions. “The play is about dilemma: the dilemma of priority, of family, of country,” says Ellenstein. Lopez’s work fuses fierce urgency with nostalgia. Her heroines struggle with a sense of inaction that ultimately affects their inner and outer world. “I was always taught that big choices come at the beginning of a play,” Lopez remarks. “But my characters are very often in rebellion against that.”

—*Georgina Escobar*