



Photographer Nathan Berry coordinated the photo shoot with Ashley S. Jordan on the fourth floor of the Marcus Performing Arts Center — Ashley works on behind-the-scenes production projects at the facility — in front of a wall display with many of the shows produced there. / Photo by Nathan Berry

Ashley S. Jordan

Theatre Artist/Director/Administrator

Milwaukee actress/director/writer Ashley S. Jordan took over as director of arts and cultural programming for Black Arts MKE a year ago, and she brings with her an innate love of theater and a very connected resume.

“My great uncle founded King Solomon Missionary Baptist Church in Milwaukee’s Bronzeville area, and my grandmother made me do public speaking there on Black history,” she says. “And I was one of the first Black girls in the Milwaukee Ballet School.”

Jordan began classes at First Stage when she was in 7th grade, and got her first gig as a paid actor with the Milwaukee Chamber Theatre’s Young Playwrights Festival at age 18.

She later returned to First Stage as the organization’s first Fellow, teaching and acting as an understudy in its mainstage productions. “I worked with kids and little children, and that’s where my programming background starts,” she says.

After doing community theater in MKE and Chicago (“It’s hard to get paid work being a person of color,” she notes), in 2013 Jordan co-founded the non-profit theater Lights! Camera! Soul! With DiMonte Henning.

“We came up with the concept because there was such a lack of Black roles before DEI [diversity, equity and inclusion] existed,” she explains. “We did fundraising and wrote our own shows.”

Feeling there wasn’t enough opportunity in Milwaukee, she stepped down in 2014 and went to Atlanta to do some film work. “I came back and Milwaukee Rep asked me to spearhead their Next Narrative Monologue Competition for young people to perform monologues by different playwrights of color,” she says. “I started by recruiting students from partnering schools and neighborhood centers and working with them — then COVID-19 happened.”

Casting about for other involvement in the arts, she connected with Black Arts MKE and started as an artistic associate. “We looked at our needs, and one of the things that stuck out to me was community outreach,” Jordan says. “A lot of people know about ‘Black Nativity’ or other events we do, but they don’t know Black Arts MKE is the producer. My role is to focus on our presence in the community and about our school and educational programming, our internship program, and developing the next generation.”

Black Arts MKE has been a constant participant in the Milwaukee Black Theatre Festival, but this the organization’s second year producing it. “Our focus is artist development and culturally relevant work,” Jordan says, citing the partnership with Marquette University on the August Black Arts MKE production of Dominique Morisseau’s “Mud Row.” “We’re looking to partner with more university theater programs because that’s our next generation.”

Meanwhile, Jordan continues to audition and to take calls for roles. “I’ll do the role if it has substance,” she says. “If it doesn’t fuel my soul, I can’t do it. Community feels my soul. Knowing artists feel they’re supported and uplifted — that fuels my soul. Hearing children say, ‘Miss Ashley, I want to do what you do. How do I get there?’ That fuels my soul.

“I always say, if you’re not bringing the solution, you’re part of the problem. That’s a cliché, but I think it’s what we have to live by.”

2023-24 Season Notes

- Black Arts MKE is finalizing its 10th anniversary season with its mainstage performances. The company’s acclaimed production of “Black Nativity” returns in December with dancer Wanyah Frazer as artistic director and Jordan as stage director. **MKE**

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