

Last month, Black Wall Street the Play reopened for two sold-out audiences at the Center for Creative Education. The play has now been performed 12 times at six different venues by a talented, passionate cast.

Early 20th century photographs show Greenwood as a proud and prosperous community in Tulsa Oklahoma. As this play recounts the story, Greenwood was shattered by rioting whites who committed arson, poisonous crop-dusting, and murderous rampages on its streets.

Black Wall Street the Play begins with a brief overview of slavery, including our country's delay in communicating the Emancipation Proclamation once slavery was to be ended. Narrator Carl Baber-Steele unflinchingly describes the history of white entertainment practices that often accompanied the horrific public lynching of black people. This is immediately followed by Hallie Balbuena's reenactment of Mary Turner's story, a pregnant woman whose husband was murdered and who was then gruesomely disemboweled before a crowd of malicious whites. The opening pulls no punches. It is our country's ugly history, but one that is important for Americans – both black and white – to know and painfully absorb.

The arc of the play moves from dark grief, to uplifting success stories, to the signature riot incident, to a message of hope for the future. Through a series of vignettes about remarkable citizens' efforts, the play introduces notable Greenwood business accomplishments – such as the 800-seat movie theater Dreamland, the Little Rose Beauty Salon and the fine Gurley and Stradford hotels. All throughout, the play communicates clear themes of the time and place: a pride in black self-sufficiency, the importance of caring for community, hard work and maintaining high standards.

One of the play's prominent features is its smart use of musical solos between action and narration. The music tenderly extends the impact of harsh scenes, such as when Iona Joseph Gamble desolately sings, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen..." after a 19-year old's unjust arrest. While the play beautifully illustrates black strength in the face of repeated adversity, it also makes clear the low-level fear the community has been forced to suppress in response to repeated undercurrents of white hatred across history. If one goal of the play is to make sure we know about Greenwood's successes, another thing it accomplishes is to bring to life a visceral understanding of the deep pain and distrust experienced by the black community.

Inspiration for the play, explained director and playwright Hallie Balbuena, came from Greater Antioch Missionary Baptist church's request to produce something for Black History Month. Since Balbuena has a long-standing interest in history as well as a degree in Communication with an emphasis in Theatre, this was a joyful task. In her words, the challenge of the play is to teach difficult history while motivating hope for the future. "If this community was able to achieve that level of success back in the 1920's, imagine what we could achieve today by their hope and example". 2021 is the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Riot: can we visualize more opportunities for this play?