

Paul Robeson Theatre Festival celebrates the Harlem Renaissance and LA's Central Avenue

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Ben Guillory is the co-founder of the Robey Theatre Company which will present the Paul Robeson Theatre Festival at the Los Angeles Theatre Center Aug. 25-27. Photo courtesy of Robey Theare Company.

By [Michelle Mills](#), San Gabriel Valley Tribune

Posted: 08/19/17, 11:30 AM PDT | Updated: 1 week, 2 days ago

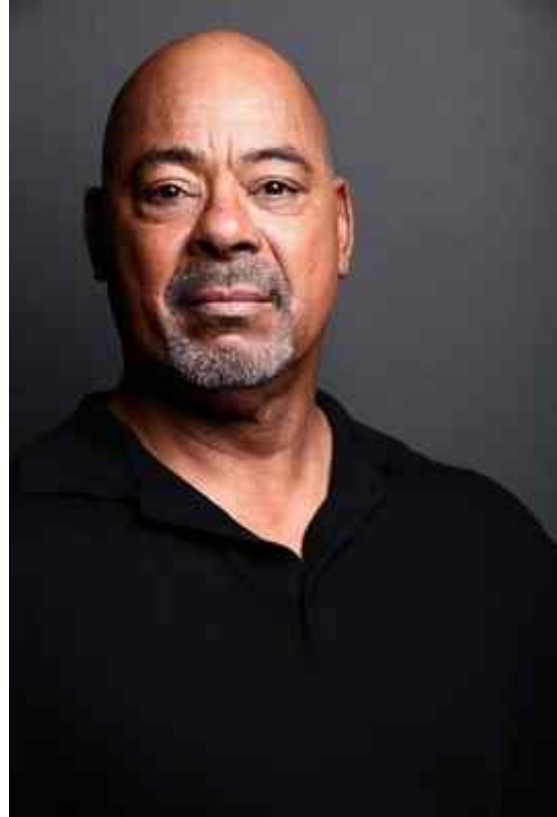
When actor and director [Ben Guillory](#) came to Los Angeles in 1983, there were more than 200 theaters.

There was also a notable lack of diversity, with few Latino, Asian or African-American companies, he said.

It took nearly a decade, but in 1994 Guillory and his friend actor-and-producer [Danny Glover](#) launched the [Robey Theatre Company](#), its name inspired by singer, actor and activist Paul Robeson.

"We wanted to do a certain kind of work that came from the black point of view, through a black prism," Guillory said. "So Danny and I thought we needed to start our own theater, because that point of view was not prevalent in mainstream."

A scene from the Robey Theatre Company's production of "Dr. DuBois and Miss Ovington," starring Ben Guillory and Melanie Cruz. The company will present the Paul Robeson Theatre Festival at the Los Angeles Theatre Center Aug. 25-27. Photo by Matthew Leland.



The Robey Theatre Company's goal is to develop and produce new works about the global black experience, as well as to present classic theater. The company also offers a variety of programs, such as a play writing laboratory, acting workshops, theater outreach for youth and play reading throughout the community.

The Robey Theatre Company will be presenting its second [Paul Robeson Theatre Festival](#) at the Los Angeles Theatre Center Aug. 25-27. The event, themed "Harlem to Central Avenue," will kick off with a gala reception and reading of "Birdland Blues" and continue with three opportunities to see a performance of 15 original 10-minute

plays and discussions about play writing and the rehearsal process.

Exploration is the core of the festival's theme

PAUL ROBESON THEATRE FESTIVAL

When: Aug. 25-27

Where: Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring St., Los Angeles

The Harlem

Tickets: Free-\$35

Renaissance was an explosion of performing arts, visual arts, music, literature and culture in

Information: 213-489-0994, <http://thelatc.org/event/the-robey-theatre-company-presents/>

the early 1920s to mid-1930s. Guillory said that although the artists at the core of the movement accomplished many things, racism limited the attention and support they received.

“Many who should have and would have had careers in the modern day couldn’t, didn’t have those careers then,” Guillory said. “They wrote a book, published it in their basement, so to speak, and moved on to work at the post office because there was no real support. That was an extreme, but not too extreme.”

Still, the Harlem Renaissance made an impact on the rest of the country, including Los Angeles, where, in the 1940s, Central Avenue flourished with some of the world’s best jazz and bebop artists performing in its clutch of clubs.

“I wanted to explore a little bit about how the Harlem Renaissance affected Central Avenue and how they complemented each other,” Guillory said. “The plays are moments into some of the lives that developed out of all that.”

The Robey Theatre Company will next join with the [East West Players](#) to present a revival of the play “Yohen” at the David Henry Hwang Theater in Los Angeles Oct. 26-Nov. 19. [Philip Kan Gotanda](#) wrote the piece with Danny Glover in mind, and it was originally produced as a collaborative effort between the two companies in 1999. This time Glover will reprise his role and star opposite [June Angela](#) with Guillory directing. The play follows what happens when the wife of an interracial couple married for 37 years asks her husband to move out and court her again.