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# STILL HAVING THEIR SAY - Words, feelings reveal lives of Delany sisters

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*By Michael Grossberg Dispatch Theater Critic April 8, 2002 Publication: Columbus Dispatch, The (OH) Page: 08B Word Count: 966*

A play that seeks to dramatize a century of history usually requires multiple characters from different generations. *Having Our Say* needs only two centenarians: Sadie and Bessie Delany.

The real-life sisters, born in 1889 and 1891, overcame the odds, becoming middle-class role models.

"It's a chance for the audience to be exposed to 100 years of American history through the richness of the lives of these two old women," said A. Lorraine Robinson, director of the Contemporary American Theatre Company production, which opened Friday. "This is a different kind of play, based on oral history about sisters who lived through so many periods, from post-slavery and the jim-crow era to the civil-rights movement.

"It's very simple, with just two characters speaking to us, but the spoken word is very powerful." The 1995 Tony nominee for best play was adapted by Emily Mann from the best-selling 1993 autobiography *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*.

After growing up in North Carolina, the sisters moved to New York.

Sadie graduated from Columbia Teacher College in 1920 and took a job at a school in Harlem.

Bessie graduated from Columbia Dental School in 1923 and became a dentist.

After finishing a master's in education at Columbia University, Sadie became the first black teacher of domestic science in a New York high school.

The sisters moved in 1957 to a house in Mount Vernon, N.Y. -- the setting for the play.

Bessie died in 1995; Sadie, in 1999.

"For black people, the play is a lesson in honor that shows the dignity of this black family," actress E.J. Murray said. "For white people, too, it's more of an eye-opener."

The Chicago actress plays Bessie opposite Sarallen as Sadie.

To portray the centenarians, the actresses wear wigs and put on extensive makeup -- which takes about a half-hour before each show.

"I'm never going to look like I'm 101," Murray said, "but I add shadows, highlights, wrinkles, shadings -- anything that will help me to create that illusion."

The sisters were something of an odd couple, with Bessie "very outspoken" and Sadie more "mild-mannered," Murray said.

"Bessie didn't hold back her feelings. Whatever she felt like saying, she said it. She was angry at the injustice that she witnessed and felt throughout her life, living through the days of Jim Crow."

In two acts, with only the two actresses onstage, the play becomes a "volleyball game," Murray said.

"You have no one to rely on but yourself and each other, and you have to listen, listen, listen. You really have to be on your toes because there's no room for mistakes."

When she was cast as Sadie, New York actress Sarallen had to overcome some doubts.

She had seen the play on Broadway with Mary Alice and Gloria Foster.

"In real life, I'm Bessie. I'm not a sweet person, and I don't accept things easily. That's the character of Bessie, but I'm playing the other one -- so that makes it the most challenging

character I've developed.

"Everyone thinks Sadie is so sweet, but I see a few other levels to her personality. Yet Sadie can't be too spunky, because that would undercut Bessie's strength."

Sarallen also had second thoughts because of the age of the character -- older than any other she has played.

"Most of my life I've spent playing old women, but now that I'm really an old woman I don't understand the oldness," said the actress, who acknowledged being in her 60s. "I'm getting too close to these older characters, so I haven't been able to do the theatrical stretch that I used to do."

Sarallen had qualms, too, about the sheer magnitude of the role.

"There are a lot of words to carry the show for 2 1/2 hours onstage. Just learning the lines, and then trying to understand them and make them a part of you, doesn't leave too much time for the development of the eccentricities and physicalities."

Upon accepting the assignment, she found ways to connect the role to her life. She particularly identified with a long monologue about teaching, the profession of her mother and grandmother.

"My mama used to talk about that, I knew people like them, and I've heard many of the same type of stories from my family," she said. "Both of them are very wise old women who've lived a long time, and that puts a lot of credence into what they're saying."

Sarallen found support by forging a bond with Murray.

"This is a piece you should never do unless you trust the other actress, because the play depends on that.

"We have honed this so we can balance each other."

Murray played Bessie several years ago with the Chicago Theatre Company.

"Anytime you get a chance to play a role a second time, you do -- because you can do it better

the second time," the 48-year-old said.

One of the biggest challenges in playing someone more than twice her age is adjusting her gestures, posture and movements.

"You have to slow down," Murray said, "and be very aware of how these women walked, how they sit, how they pick up a utensil.

"When I did the Chicago production, my partner and I just prayed every night before going on. We said whatever came into our hearts and asked that we be guided to do justice to these inspiring women."

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