



FLY

By Trey Ellis and Ricardo Khan

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Pasadena Playhouse, Pasadena

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Fly tells the story of the first African American Army Air Corps pilots, known as the Tuskegee Airmen, who flew over Europe and North Africa during World War II. The play is set in both 2009, when more than 180 of the Tuskegee Airmen attended the inauguration of President Obama, and 1943, during World War II. *Fly* is a work of fiction based on history. It was written by Trey Ellis and Ricardo Khan with input from former Tuskegee Airman Roscoe Brown.

THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

The Tuskegee Airmen is the nickname of a segregated group of African American military pilots who flew for the United States Air Forces in World War II. They were the first African Americans to serve as combat pilots in the U.S. military.

African Americans had previously been denied admission to the U.S. Air Forces on the basis of a 1925 study commissioned by the Army War College that claimed, in a clear example of scientific racism, that African Americans lacked the intelligence to operate aircraft. African Americans had fought in every U.S. war in segregated units, “with the generally unrealized expectation that patriotism and courage would demonstrate their right to first-class citizenship back home” (*Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*). Roscoe Brown, a former Tuskegee Airman who served as a technical consultant on *Fly*, says, “When World War II started, the black press and the black community wanted blacks to be able to fly because in 1925, the military had done a study that said that blacks didn’t have the intelligence, ability, or coordination to fly airplanes.”

A single program was authorized to train African American pilots: the 66th Air Force Flying School at the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. In response to pressure from the NAACP and the black press, the War Department created the 99th Fighter Squadron, an all-black flying unit. African Americans had wanted to be part of the regular U.S. Air Forces, but a segregated unit was the compromise the military was willing to make.

The first class began training to be pilots in 1941, in a program run by white officers. According to *Africana*, “Since those in charge both expected and wanted African Americans to fail, the black trainees were expelled for the slightest reason, resulting in a high drop-out rate.” Five members of the original class of 13 graduated. One of them was Benjamin O. Davis Jr., who would become the first black three-star general in the U.S. military. Ultimately, about 1,000 men won their pilot wings through the program, and another 1,000 graduated with support skills.

About 450 of the Tuskegee pilots eventually flew combat missions as the 332nd Fighter Group, a segregated unit comprising the 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302nd squadrons. They fought mostly in Italy, and their record was impressive. The Tuskegee Airmen escorted bombers on their way to Europe, with significantly fewer losses than other groups. They sank a German destroyer in Trieste harbor, marking the first time such a ship had been sunk solely via machine-gun fire. By the end of the war, the group had lost 66 men and been awarded more than 100 Distinguished Flying Crosses.

The Tuskegee Airmen were actually men and women. In addition to the fighter and bomber pilots (who were all men), the name “Tuskegee Airmen” also applies to the ground crews, navigators, nurses, instructors, and others who supported the pilots, some of whom were women.

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After the war, many of the Tuskegee Airmen went on to become leaders in other fields. Coleman Young became the first black mayor of Detroit; Albert Murray became a literary and music critic; Roscoe Brown (the technical consultant on *Fly*) became the president of Bronx Community College; and Percy Sutton became a lawyer who represented Malcolm X and the president of the borough of Manhattan, making him the highest-ranking black elected official in New York City at the time (1966–1977).

It was not until 1948 that President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, eliminating racial segregation in the U.S. armed forces.

In 2007, the Tuskegee Airmen were collectively awarded a Congressional Gold Medal.

CROSSROADS THEATRE COMPANY

Crossroads Theatre Company was co-founded in 1978 by Ricardo Khan and L. Kenneth Richardson to celebrate the culture, history, spirit, and voices of the African diaspora. Today, the New Jersey-based company is one of the premiere African American theatre companies in the nation. They have produced more than 100 works, many of them premiere productions by top African and African American artists. Crossroads won the 1999 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre Company.

PASADENA PLAYHOUSE

The Pasadena Playhouse is a historic venue that grew out of the Little Theatre Movement of the 1910s. As the new medium of film was beginning to replace theatre as a source of large-scale, spectacular entertainment, in cities and towns across the United States, theatrical companies formed to focus on more intimate and non-commercial entertainments. The Pasadena Community Playhouse, founded in 1916 by actor-director Gilmor Brown, marks a high point of the Little Theatre Movement: what started as a community theatre became the most prolific theatrical organization in the world in the early 20th century, at its peak boasting six stages and featuring a new production every two weeks.

Making the most of committed volunteer labor, widespread community support, and the directorship of Martha Allan (a powerhouse who is credited with almost singlehandedly starting the modern Canadian theatre scene), the Pasadena Community Playhouse's achievements were monumental: they staged the entire canon of Shakespeare for the first time on a single stage in the United States (1937) and presented the first full production of Eugene O'Neill's epic *Lazarus Laughed* (1928), with 250 primarily local amateur actors. The non-professional, community spirit of the organization, and the way Pasadena residents enthusiastically supported it, prompted George Bernard Shaw to call Pasadena "the Athens of the West," drawing a connection between the Pasadena Community Playhouse and the ancient Greek festival Dionysia.

In 1924, the Pasadena community raised funds to build a new theatre for the organization. Completed in 1925, the Spanish Colonial Revival-style theatre in which *Fly* is being performed today was designed by Pasadena artist and architect Elmer Grey, who also designed the Huntington Art Gallery and Wattles Mansion. The fire curtain was painted by Pasadena Impressionist artist Alson S. Clark. At the time of its construction, it was the largest theatre complex west of Chicago.

Founding director Gilmor Brown died in 1969. Around the same time, the growth of university drama departments and changes in actors-union policies altered the landscape of U.S. theatre, and the Pasadena Playhouse fell on hard times. The theatre was dormant for the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, and then was reopened by real-estate developer and new building owner David Houk in 1986. Over the past three decades, the Pasadena Playhouse has reestablished itself as a prominent player in the national theatre scene.