

# An Interview with Sheryl Carbonell and Avis-Marie Barnes

**Orlando Shakes:** When/what has been your most formative performance so far in your career?

**Sheryl Carbonell:** Understudying and then performing the role of Cleopatra [in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*], by far!! I'd also have to say portraying Rose Maxson in *Fences*.

**Avis-Marie Barnes:** There have been many productions over the course of the past years that have been formative and educational for me... it would be hard to pick just one. The performances I loved the best, include other factors that made them extra special – and those would be the people I worked with and the show itself – the material I worked with. Two that come to mind: *Best of Enemies* at Orlando Shakes in the role of Ann Atwater and the television production set of *Lodge 49* in the role of Anita Jones on AMC – fit that bill. I would also have to include the present production of *My Lord What a Night* – under trying circumstances this cast has stuck together, supported each other and when this show is finally presented, we will wow ourselves and others, that I am sure!

**Orlando Shakes: What's the biggest challenge about portraying a historical figure? How is that different from portraying an original character?**



*Portrait of Mary Church Terrell c. 1919*

**Sheryl:** Honoring their truth, their core beliefs, their mannerisms, their vocal quality and filling in the unknowns with choices that support what is known about them through thorough research. Finding what characteristics

they possess that are like my own, and contrasting them with my differences.

**Avis-Marie:** With an historical character you are always worried about getting, at the very least, the logic of their personality right. Mary Church Terrell was not the same visual iconic personality as was Anderson or Einstein, though she should have been; she accomplished so many things—so many firsts she achieved as a woman and as an African American. But learning about her, getting the essence of her right, was most important. Original characters are at the mercy of the writing and my imagination.

**Orlando Shakes: What was your initial reaction when cast as Marian Anderson?**

**Sheryl:** Honored! Then excited! Then frightened (a tad)! — in that order. Also having a tremendous responsibility to introduce her to people who know nothing about her through the play and through social media, while making known her contributions to American and world history.

**Orlando Shakes: What was your initial reaction when cast as Mary Church Terrell?**

**Avis-Marie:** Relief. For a second there, I thought I was being cast as Marian Anderson. Lord knows I do not sing.

**Orlando Shakes: Before you took this role, how well did you know your respective characters, this story,**

and what would you say you've learned about them through this process?



*Marian Anderson singing in Japan c. 1953*

**Sheryl:** I knew she was a tremendous contralto singer and I knew she was the first Black woman to sing at the Met Opera, but I knew nothing about her friendship with Albert Einstein. I did not make a strong connection to her being the catalyst for her work on behalf of civil rights in America. After having conversations with music professors and peers who are steeped in music academia, I realized, they too were unaware she had forged a friendship with Einstein and that it is she who stood next to Martin Luther King during his “I Have a Dream” speech! So I say to all who knew nothing about this amazing connection between formidable titans of their respective fields, do not feel uninformed, this is truly an unknown and untold part of history. I’m happy to be a small part in telling this remarkable story.

**Avis-Marie:** I did not initially know anything about her, but did the research and was very, very impressed by what I found out... Her father was the first African American millionaire in the South, part of the Black elite in Memphis. Terrell’s mother, Louisa Ayers, is believed to be one of the first African American women to establish and maintain a hair salon, frequented by well-to-do residents of Memphis. Mary Church Terrell was one of the first African American women to earn a college degree in a predominately White school, earning her degree on *The Gentleman’s Path* – a full four years of study as opposed to the usual two years for women at Oberlin College. She earned a Master’s Degree in Education. the first African-American woman in

the United States to be appointed to the school board of a major city, serving in the District of Columbia, First National president of the National Association of Colored Women... As far as firsts go for Mrs. Terrell, the list is long!

**Orlando Shakes: Without giving anything away, what's your favorite line of dialogue? And why?**

**Sheryl:** "They cannot deny me from using my voice. If I let them do that they'll take away the most powerful weapon we possess."

**Avis-Marie:** There is a line that explains to the character Mr. Flexner the conditions that confront Black people in our country and I marvel at how much of that has not changed... How some White people still, even thoughtful and intelligent ones, are unaware or downplay the existence of the obstacles we as Black people face... I have met and debated with people that would argue that those racial problems are in the past, that because they have no direct experience in these conditions, they do not exist. I like reiterating that point in the play – an admonishment that one should be aware of negative conditions other races face.

**Orlando Shakes: What would you say is the main message of *My Lord, What a Night*?**



*Photo by Christian Knightly features Avis-Marie Barnes and Sheryl Carbonell as Mary Church Terrell and Marian Anderson*

**Sheryl:** Each character has a strong lens in which they view the world. Through Marian's lens, I think it is that we each have a gift that ought to be used for good, according to the unique way in which it is given. And when it is, the good is multiplied in unimaginable ways benefiting the lives of many. She learned from her first voice teacher, to "never call upon your capital or you'll become depleted." Conversely, I believe she held firmly to the idea that trying to be useful, according to another's gift, was a futile mission leading to a path of self-destruction.

**Avis-Marie:** That despite laws, obstacles and prejudice, that the fight for true equality for all races is a correct and

noble effort and that struggle to rid our nation of racial discrimination still continues to this day.



*Photograph of singer Marian Anderson, the Reverend George W. Anthony, Director Newton Drury of the National Park Service, and Eleanor Roosevelt c. 1946*

**Orlando Shakes:** Even though it's a play based on a historical event, how do you hope the modern audience receives it? What do you think they will take away from the production?

**Sheryl:** I hope audience members leave the theatre, log onto their phones and devices to google Marian Anderson, Mary Church Terrell, Abraham Flexner, and Albert Einstein.



And then... I hope coffee dates are made, devices are laid down, and conversations take place about these historical figures.

**Avis-Marie:** There are so many things that I hope people take away from this play. There are many parallels in this production that relate to what is happening today. The blight of racial prejudice raising its ugly head these past four years in full force, some media outlets focusing on sensational and biased reporting, if not outright lies; while other media programs and newspapers are maligned and blocked from performing responsible, informative and impartial news. That our government and its representatives should believe in just and fair leadership for all in this great nation and thru example, demonstrate that belief by doing what is best for everyone and not just for their own political currency. Recognizing what the good fight is, and perhaps being inspired to participate in that fight when they leave the theater. That is what I hope they take away.

**Orlando Shakes: What issues does the script confront?**

**Sheryl:** Racism, making assumptions about others, difficulty decision making. Really difficult decision making.

**Avis-Marie:** Racial discrimination and Social activism are the primary issues of the play. Since I am intellectually and personally acquainted with both, understanding the role of Mary Church Terrell, as to her motivation for following the path she did in opposing segregation and fighting for

women's rights was something I easily understood, making the choices for her portrayal almost a no brainer.

**Orlando Shakes:** What has your experience been like working on a new script? Was there much development during the rehearsal process?

**Sheryl:** Yes, development is happening and line changes occur. New monologues were written. It's a welcomed challenge, one that is quite exciting to me. Having the playwright in the room listening and fine tuning during the rehearsal process and even lending my voice in the form of opinion as to how to further shape the work, was quite a thrill!

**Avis-Marie:** The script was wonderful, and when Deborah Brevoort came to hear it and make changes, it became even more so, as it streamlined and made more authentic the points we were trying to drive home. It was my first time working on a new script and incorporating changes in a stage production, though it does happen more often than not with teleplays.



*Photo by Christian Knightly features Eric Zivot, J.D. Sutton, Avis-Marie Barnes, and Sheryl Carbonell*

**Orlando Shakes: How is working on a World Premiere unique from other experiences?**

**Sheryl:** Not having previous knowledge about the work, the fact that the work is evolving while we are working on it, and not knowing how it will be received by audiences makes this experience unique. From a marketing standpoint, I realize that audiences will be introduced to the play for the first time and may need a reason, in the form of background knowledge, to purchase a ticket and come to see it. Most people know who Albert Einstein was and his contribution to the world as far as physics, but many do not know how passionate he was about civil rights. Most people know very little about the remaining characters, and therefore, educating audiences beforehand about their key roles in history, is vital.

**Avis-Marie:** I do not believe it is unique from any other experience I have had in theater... as an actor, you read the play, know your blocking, learn your lines, rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. It is the same approach as any other production.

**Orlando Shakes: How do you consider this play as an example of showing the historical solidarity between the Jewish community and the African American community?**

**Sheryl:** I could write a dissertation as an answer. I'd say, see the play first, and then let's talk!

**Avis-Marie:** This play touches on the similarities each group had in the form of discrimination; the Jews under Nazi oppression, Blacks under Jim Crow Laws. The discussions between Marian Anderson and Albert Einstein further expounded and compared their experiences...Both being famous personalities being judged by their covers – Anderson being compared to a chocolate bar, Einstein as to whether or not he used a brush... Flexner’s and Terrell’s musings about each racial group’s horrible experiences on trains. Einstein sums it up in the play by stating simply: “The treatment of the Negro here differs little from the treatment I received in Germany.”

**Orlando Shakes:** What has been some of the most rewarding experiences of *My Lord, What a Night* so far and in what ways do you feel the production is rewarding for patrons?

**Sheryl:** Exploring the endearing friendship between her and Professor Einstein is simply delightful! It’s unheard of that a white Jewish male and an African American woman could have forged a platonic deep friendship against the backdrop of Nazi Germany, World War II, Jim Crow, racism at Princeton University, and The Daughters of the Revolution’s refusal to allow Marian Anderson to sing at Constitution Hall due to her color. There’s more to the story but I don’t want your brains to explode!

**Avis-Marie:** So far, my most rewarding experiences have been working with this wonderful cast and equally great crew, the support we have received from Orlando Shakes

during this whole virus crisis and their commitment to presenting this play. Theatergoers will enjoy the play because despite the seriousness of the issues, it is geared to educate, but first and foremost, it will most certainly entertain! There are lots of wonderful and fun moments. It will be a joy to present!

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### 3 responses to “On Playing Marian Anderson and Mary Church Terrell”



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Cindy Karr

January 21, 2021 at 1:08 pm

Very thought provoking comments by two great actresses who insightfully analyze this interesting script!

Reply



- 
- Anne Gardepe
- January 21, 2021 at 2:30 pm

I enjoyed reading the interview. Can't wait to see the show!

Reply



- 
- Marian Price
- January 21, 2021 at 6:39 pm

I have forwarded the notices of this play to every list of people in Orlando that I have in my computer. What an exciting prospect to see this brand-new play—and especially another performance by the delightful Sheryl Carbonell.

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