



Photo by Gittings.

MILESTONES:

SHAWN HAMILTON

We are proud to spotlight members of the Alley Theatre family as they reach milestones onstage and behind the scenes. Literary Assistant Noah Alderfer sat down with Resident Acting Company member Shawn Hamilton on the occasion of his 10th show at the Alley.

Noah Alderfer: Where do you hail from, Shawn?

Shawn Hamilton: I'm originally from here, Kashmere Gardens. I went to the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts (HSPVA). I was a saxophone player when I came out of high school. I played alto, tenor, and also flute, piccolo, clarinet and bassoon. I played with the Houston Youth Symphony in Jones Hall.

NA: How did that music background lead to a career in theatre?

SH: I wanted to do theatre and dance but at HSPVA, there's not a lot of room for hopping around. When I got to undergrad (at the University of North Texas), I kind of created my own arts program. I was taking modern dance, ballet, theatre classes, music classes, African dance, everything I wanted to do. I tried to figure out where I wanted to be between theatre and music, and it became mostly theatre, because I could get a lot of stage time, which is important if you want to develop as an actor. I wanted to audition for Ivy League graduate schools, and I had a buddy who went out on a trip, and I

went with him on a goof, really. I ended up getting into Yale, Julliard, and NYU. After I graduated from Yale, I went to the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis.

NA: What brought you back to Houston?

SH: My girlfriend, who worked at Minnesota Opera, ended up getting a job at Houston Grand Opera as a stage manager. We partnered and had a kid, so my daughter is here, and my dad is here, he's in his 80's. Then the Alley came along and made an offer, they started giving me more work, so it was just perfect.



Shawn Hamilton and Tiana Kaye Johnson in *The Great Society*. Photo by Karen Almond.

NA: You're one of the newest Alley Resident Acting Company members; this is your 10th show here. You've worked at theatres across the country, So how does being a company member here at the Alley compare to working other places?

SH: I think it's the idea of "company" itself. Yes, having that trust, but also being able to plan your life in relation to the work that you're doing. I never knew what I was doing three months ahead of time. Now, I know a year out, which is crazy. It allows you to prepare. You can take some risks, you can fix the roof, because you know you have a job in nine months. It's not just going to end.

NA: And I understand you're the recipient of a Fox Foundation Fellowship. Tell us more!

SH: The Fox Foundation Fellowship is a two-year performance grant for an actor to work at their home theatre using the resources of the theatre and the community to explore their art and, since it's a later career grant, to see what they're going to do with the latter part of their artistic lives. I found out I had a relative named Gene Ammons who was a tenor sax, player in the 50's and early 60's. I thought I could make a show where I get to play tenor sax, and it could include some Houston history. Well, the Fox people went for it! So now I'm in the middle of researching and practicing



Shawn Hamilton (center) and cast at the Alley All New Festival Reading of *Amerikin*. Photo by John Everett.



Dylan Godwin, Todd Waite, Shawn Hamilton, and Torrey Hanson in *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. Photo by Lynn Lane.

and trying to come up with a way to make all that music stuff and theatre stuff and home stuff creatively come together in a theatrical show.

NA: Growing up in Houston, did you ever think that you would be acting professionally here?

SH: As a black actor, I didn't know if there was enough in the market to keep me busy, or if the market really wanted me around. I've seen plays at the Alley since I was a kid, but the types of shows they produced didn't necessarily seem to be about me or the people that I knew. I enjoy Alan Ayckbourn, I think he's terrific, but I didn't think I would be cast in an Alan Ayckbourn play. It didn't feel like the doors were really open.

NA: Does Houston feel different now than it did when you were growing up?

SH: It's much larger, traffic is worse, but the theatre has changed too, the Alley has changed. Especially with Rob (Melrose, Artistic Director) coming in. He's so sharp, he loves plays. And the literary department now, you guys are developing new works that you're actually putting onstage. That's an active core of a literary department. You are initiators of the theatre process. You're not just waiting for things to float down and see what lands. You're starting the stuff off, which makes the Alley a very exciting place to be.