



CROWNS

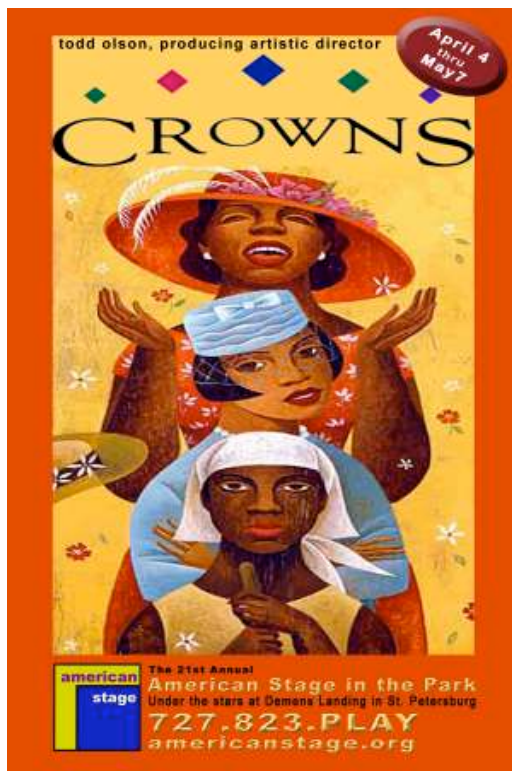
Newspaper in Education learning activities
for use with the *St. Petersburg Times*

Looking for a crowning experience as an end-of-year field trip?

How about an entertaining and educational performance at a queenly discount for NIE participants?

After 20 years of producing Shakespeare at Demen's Landing in downtown St. Petersburg, American Stage Theatre Company kicks off a new tradition in the park with *Crowns*, Regina Taylor's soul-stirring, hip-swaying musical, running through May 7. Adapted from the beloved book, *Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats*, *Crowns* tells the story of Yolanda, a streetwise kid from Brooklyn sent to live with her grandmother in South Carolina. Through uplifting music and hilarious yet moving stories, Yolanda's grandmother and her female friends help Yolanda find inner strength and her own unique voice in the world. *Crowns* can serve as an excellent cross-curricular learning experience, inspiring discussion and providing educational activities for language arts, social studies, life management and fine arts classes.

Teachers and students who participate in the *St. Petersburg Times* NIE program can use the \$3 discount coupon attached below – which means you can bring a small group, classroom or your entire school for only \$7 per person! If you teach elementary or middle school, the price is even better – kids 12 and under are free on the lawn! General admission lawn seats are \$10 for Thursday and Sunday performances and \$13 for Friday and Saturday performances. Tickets are \$25 for reserved chair seating and \$20 for premium blanket seating. Wednesday performances are Pay-What-You-Can nights.



Newspaper in Education teacher and student discount

This coupon entitles bearer to
\$3 off regular ticket price.

If ordering by phone, ask for NIE discount.

Box Office: 727-823-PLAY
American Stage address:
211 Third Street South
St. Petersburg, FL

Entrance to Demen's Landing is at the intersection of Beach Drive and First Ave South in downtown St. Petersburg. Performances begin at 8:00 p.m. Wed.-Sun. from April 6 to May 7, 2006.

For more information about *Crowns* or American Stage Theatre's education programs, contact: Julie Rowe
Director of Education, American Stage Theatre Company,
727.823.1600 x 201 or julierowe@americanstage.org



CROWNS

A Newspaper in Education study guide
for use with the *St. Petersburg Times*

Lesson plans for *Crowns* using the *St. Petersburg Times*

Crowns centers around Yolanda, an African American girl trying to figure out who she is and how she fits into the world and her culture. A tough girl from Brooklyn, N.Y., Yolanda is sent to South Carolina to live with her grandmother after her brother is killed in a shooting. She enters wearing her brother's baseball cap, rapping her lament. Yolanda's grandmother welcomes her into a circle of women. As they prepare for church on Sunday morning, they tell stories of their own connections to hats. At church, echoes of slave songs surround Yolanda. The congregation tries to embrace her with messages of love and their stories of loss; and gradually, she accepts the legacy of the women and her ancestors.

"The more I study Africa," Yolanda concludes, "the more I see that African Americans do very African things without knowing it. Adorning the head is one of those things."

You can learn more about Yolanda and the other characters in *Crowns* in the American Stage study guide. The following lessons are designed to be used with *St. Petersburg Times* articles that were written about *Crowns* and American Stage Theatre Company. The articles are reprinted at the end of this document.

Crowns skill lesson: Summarizing

- A summary gives the main ideas of an article, or it tells what happened in a story.
- A summary is short, and it doesn't include unimportant details.
- A summary will help you recall and organize information.

1. Carefully read the articles from the *Times* written about *Crowns*. Which article did you find most interesting? Once you have made a selection, write a 3-4 sentence summary about the main idea of your favorite.

2. Now, write a "teaser" for the article you selected. Teasers can be found on the front page of the *St. Petersburg Times*. A teaser briefly summarizes something that is inside the newspaper, and it usually includes a photograph. Read some of the teasers on the front page (right column) to get the idea. Then, write your own for your favorite article. Your teaser should be a summary of what the article is about – and it should be interesting as well, so people will want to look inside and read it!

Crowns skill lesson: Fact and opinion

- A statement of fact tells something that can be proved true or false.
- A statement of opinion tells your ideas or feelings. It cannot be proved true or false, but it can be supported by facts and reasons.
- Sometimes, statements of opinion begin with clues such as I believe, I think, etc.
- Some sentences contain both facts and opinions.

3. People who write about the theatre, movies, music and food are often called "Critics." This does not mean that they are negative, only that they are full of facts AND opinions! John Fleming is the *Times* Performing Arts Critic and he has written a review of *Crowns*. Read it carefully. As you read it a second time, use colored pencils to circle all the facts in red and all the opinions in blue. What clues did you find to tip you off about the opinions? Circle any key opinion words in green. On a separate piece of paper, write down three facts and three opinions that you find.



CROWNS

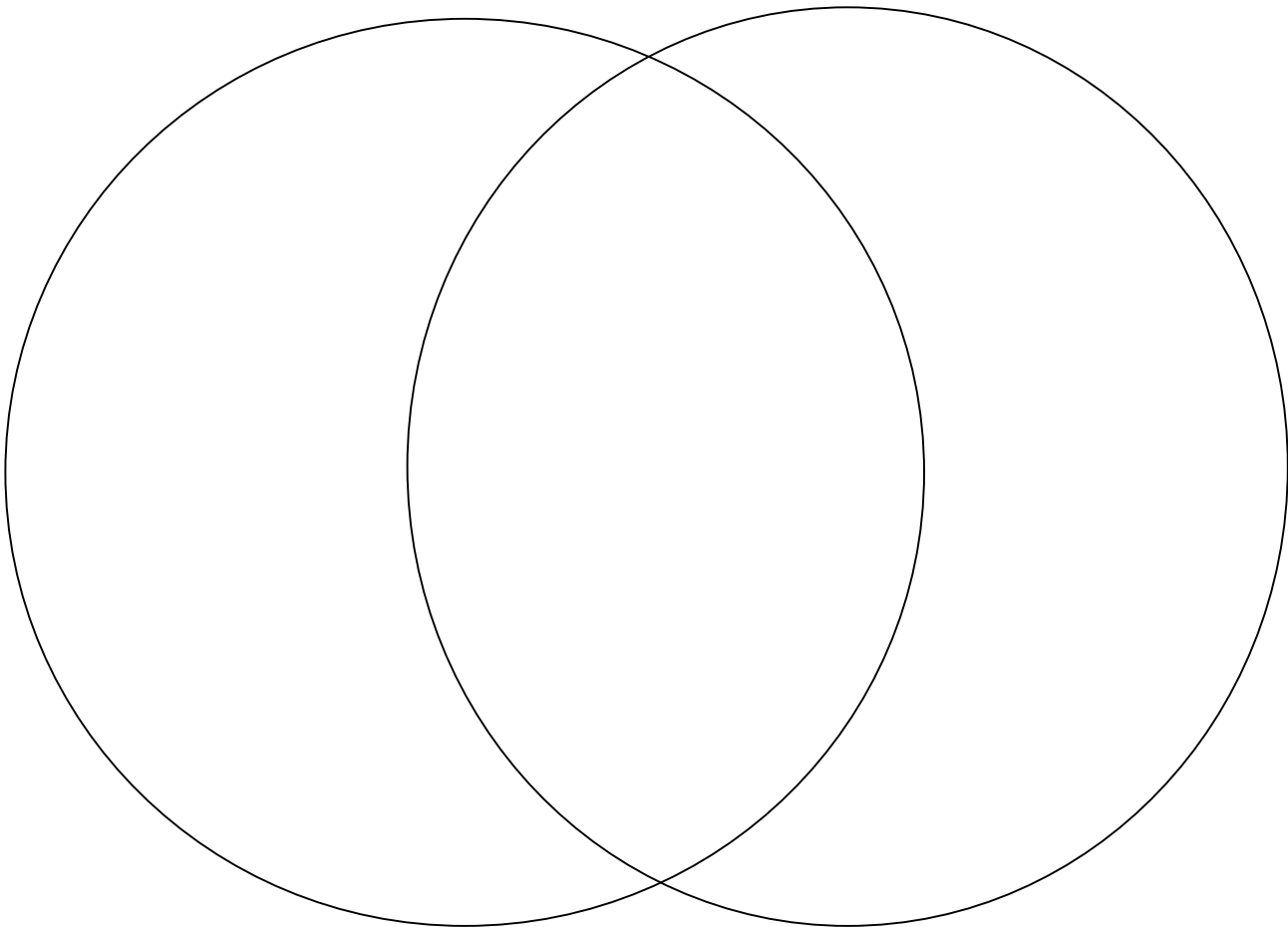
A Newspaper in Education study guide
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Crowns skill lesson: Compare and contrast

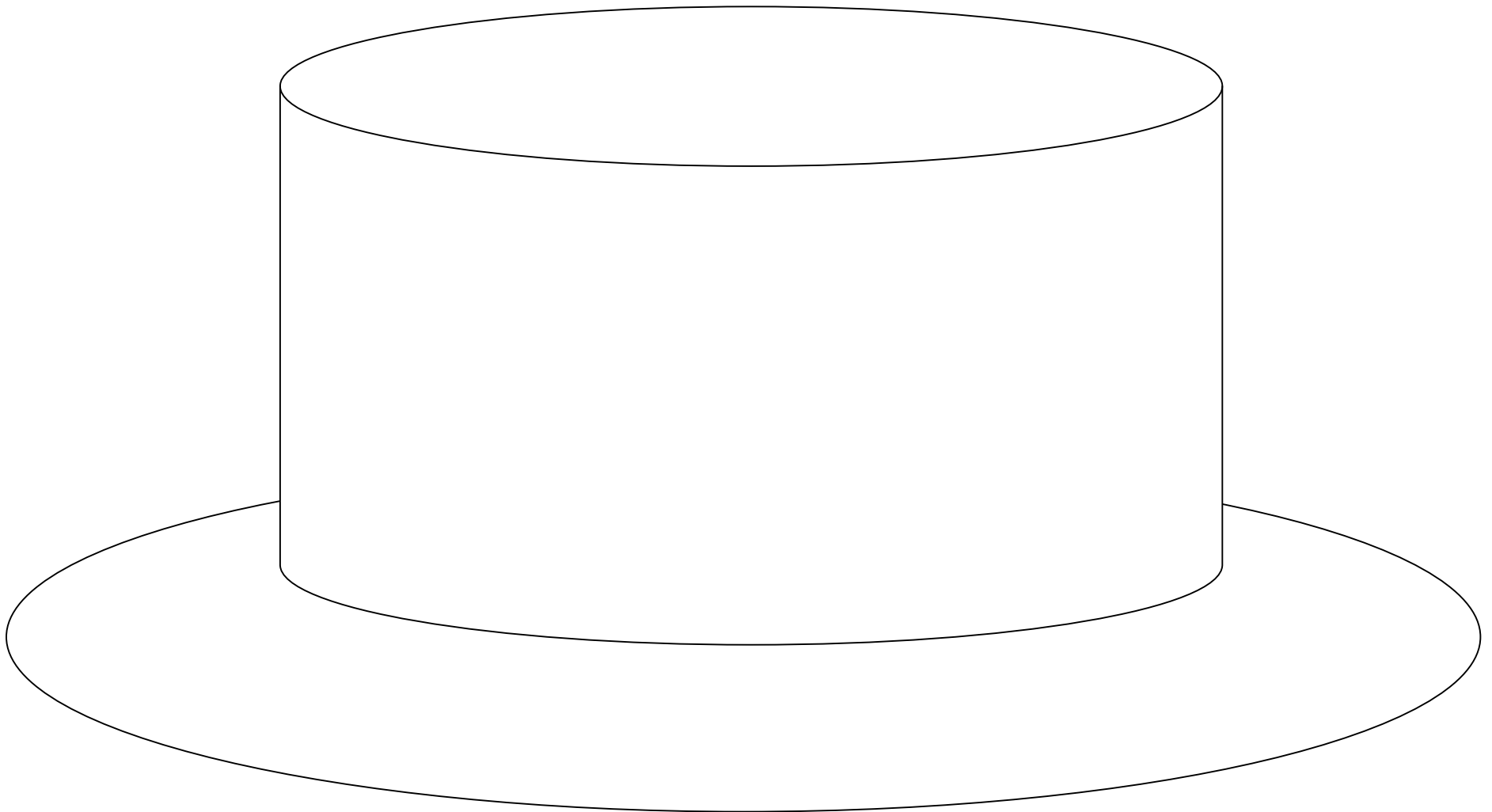
- To compare is to tell how two or more things are alike. Clue words such as like or as show comparisons. Other clue words are words of comparison, such as smaller and more slender.
- To contrast is to tell how two or more things are different. Clue words such as but, instead, and unlike show contrasts.
- Often authors don't use clue words. Readers must make comparisons for themselves.

4. Read two or more articles about *Crowns* and American Stage Theatre company that have run recently in the *Times*. Compare and contrast these articles using a Venn diagram. Write ways the articles are different in the outer circles. Use the inner circle of the Venn Diagram to write how the articles are the same. After you have collected your information in your graphic organizer, write one paragraph about how the articles are alike (2-3 sentences) and another paragraph (2-3 sentences) about how they are different. Use the comparison and contrast words listed above in your writing!

Venn Diagram



6. In the *Times* recent article, *Its not the Bard, sister*, reporter Jon Wilson explains that hats are not just something to wear. They often can represent a person's character, pride and culture. The play *Crowns* features about 100 hats, many decorated with ribbons, feathers and baubles. Now we want you to decorate your own hat using pictures, images and words that you will cut and paste from the *St. Petersburg Times*. Make sure your hat represents your personality and family culture!



St. Petersburg Times

It's not the Bard, sister

[STATE Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

Author: JON WILSON

Date: Apr 2, 2006

Start Page: 6

Section: NEIGHBORHOOD TIMES

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Ella Mary Holmes learned about the wonder and grace of a fine hat when she was a child going every Sunday to the 10th Street Church of God.

"My dad saw to it that Mother bought her little girls hats. He always wore a hat and always wanted us to have pretty hats. I've been wearing hats all my life," said Mrs. Holmes, 89.

Hats, say those who love them, are more than apparel. They speak to character, pride and culture.

A theme of American Stage's production of *Crowns*, which opens Wednesday outdoors at Demens Landing, helps define the idea: Any hat can be a crown, and its wearer a queen.

Crowns is a rollicking, gospel-singing musical in which women contemplate love, men and spiritual matters. Yolanda, a city kid, comes to live with her grandmother in the South. With the help of her elders, she finds strength, identity and direction.

The play represents a spring departure for American Stage, a professional theater company whose roots here date to 1977. For 20 years, it produced Shakespeare in the Park at Demens Landing. Declining attendance and a desire to try something new led to the tradition's departure.

Those who love the Bard will be able to see American Stage productions of his work in other venues.

Meanwhile, *Crowns*, by Regina Taylor, brings a new vision to drama in the park. It will be at Demens Landing through May 7.

The play promises to be an adventure in music and cultural exploration.

"I'm a male, white, Unitarian from Iowa. But there was something in this that really moved me, and in a lot of ways transcends the specificity of the Southern black Baptist evangelical particulars of the story," said Todd Olson, the director.

The choreographer is Paulette Johnson, artistic director of Soulful Arts Dance Academy. An ensemble lead will feature seven actors, six of them female. One is Sharon Scott, known to local audiences for her roles in *Black Nativity* and *The Manhattan Casino*.

Hats, as might be expected, will be the centerpiece symbols - by the dozen.

Milliner Amy J. Cianci and assistant Angela Hoerner made 200 of them, said Andy Orrell, American Stage marketing director.

Audience members will have a chance to buy a favorite. The hats will be sold through a silent auction at each show, Olson said. At the end of the five-week run, high bidders win.

Mrs. Holmes knows about hats in great numbers. She owns many. Some she bought; others were gifts from friends, who remember Mrs. Holmes when they vacation. She said she has gift hats from California, Las Vegas, Thailand and "from across the Atlantic."

How many?

"I've never taken the time to count them, but there are closets full of them," she said.

Her roots run deep in St. Petersburg. Her father was Chester James Sr., an early civil rights activist for whom the Jamestown neighborhood was named. Her mother was Rachel E. James, a teacher who taught in a private school at the Church of God.

A Gibbs High School graduate, Class of 1934, Mrs. Holmes was an educator for 42 years, retiring as principal of Euclid Elementary.

She has read and enjoyed the book on which the play is based, *Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats*, and is hoping to attend the play.

It's a good bet she will wear a hat.

IF YOU GO

For information about *Crowns*, ticket prices and show times, call (727) 823-7529 or visit www.americanstage.org.

Ella Mary Holmes, an avid hat collector, hopes to attend *Crowns*, after reading the book it is based on, *Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats*. The former educator once said, "I'll buy a hat before a hamburger."

[Illustration]

Caption: (2002) Ella Mary Holmes poses with many hats.; Photo: PHOTO, JAMES BORCHUCK

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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Double, double toil and trouble

How a rock 'n' roll Macbeth doomed Shakespeare in the park.

By JOHN FLEMING, Times Performing Arts Critic
Published April 2, 2006

ST. PETERSBURG

Many actors consider Macbeth an unlucky play. They won't say the name of Shakespeare's tragedy, instead referring to it as "the Scottish play." To utter the name is thought to jinx a production.

There might be something to that old superstition. In 1997, American Stage had one of its greatest successes with Macbeth, a punk rock version of the play that set attendance records for the theater's annual production of Shakespeare in the park, a springtime tradition on St. Petersburg's downtown waterfront.

Almost 20,000 turned out for that rowdy treatment of Shakespeare, with a hard-driving score by Joe Popp, whose band played the Witches, sporting shaven heads, flowing robes and combat boots. At the time, the production, directed by Lisa Powers, seemed like a sign of theatrical renewal, a fresh interpretation of a classic that brought a lot of young people to the park for the first time.

But it was actually the beginning of the end. Subsequent park productions didn't match the energy and excitement of Macbeth. Attendance declined, hitting bottom at less than 12,000 for last spring's double bill of *The Bomb-itty of Errors*, the revival of a hip-hop version of *The Comedy of Errors*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

In December, the theater announced that it would end its 20-year run of staging Shakespeare under the stars and put on other shows in the park. The first will be Regina Taylor's *Crowns*, an acclaimed musical about the church-hat tradition of African-American women that opens this week.

With a new era about to begin, it's worth remembering Macbeth, which was a pivotal chapter in the history of American Stage, the largest and longest-running professional theater in the Tampa Bay area, whose signature event has always been the park show. The Popp-Powers production was an undeniable triumph. But, in retrospect, it also strikes me as a kind of Faustian bargain, in which the theater sold its Shakespearean soul for a hit.

As brilliant as that production was, it now seems like an omen of bad things to come, including the board's ham-handed ouster a month or two later of Powers as artistic director, a painful, bitter experience that set the theater back for years. Among other fallout, it effectively broke up the team of Paul Mullins and Lee Ahlin, whose collaborations represented the artistic high-water mark of musical Shakespeare in the park. From 1994 to 1996, director Mullins and songwriter Ahlin, along with choreographer Rick Castillo, went from strength to strength, with their inventive adaptations of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *As You Like It* and *All's Well that Ends Well*.

But after Powers was fired, Mullins refused to work for the theater again. Castillo died of AIDS. Ahlin did other park shows, but something was missing. He later had another smash, though not for American Stage, his collaboration with playwright Bill Leavengood on Webb's City.

The embrace of style over content exemplified by Macbeth led to misbegotten efforts to pump up Shakespeare, such as a disco version of Twelfth Night, which not only alienated theatergoers with its vapid concept but also caused conservative sponsors to pull their funding over some mild racism. Oh, there were successes along the way the last few years. The Bomb-itty of Errors was a delight the first time around, and it went on to even bigger things, including a run in London's West End. A straight production of Romeo and Juliet featured an appealing young cast and did well at the box office.

But the gild was off the lily. The genteel lure of a night of theater and picnicking on the waterfront wasn't sufficient anymore to draw the size of crowd needed to sustain productions costing as much as \$200,000. The family feeling of park shows, with favorite actors returning year after year, faded as artistic regimes came and went, bringing in a new set of performers with each show.

In many ways, Macbeth expanded the market, and the theater had to find a way to satisfy it. There is more than a little irony in its ultimate decision that to do so it had to abandon Shakespeare.

I think Crowns was an inspired choice by American Stage and its producing artistic director, Todd Olson. With an all-black cast and gospel score, it could draw a more diverse audience than the overwhelmingly white one that goes to the theater.

Taylor's musical sets an ambitious programming standard by being new and different. It would have been all too predictable to go from Shakespeare to Gilbert and Sullivan not to mention foolhardy, given the performance demands of operetta or Rodgers and Hammerstein. The commercial appeal of schlock like Forever Plaid must have been tempting, but thankfully was resisted. Next year's park production is similarly offbeat, the Tampa Bay premiere of Tick . . . Tick . . . Boom!, a rock musical Jonathan Larson wrote before Rent.

Nor has Shakespeare been completely lost, just moved indoors. Olson promises regular Shakespearean productions, starting with Othello in the 2006-07 mainstage season.

Still, there is much riding on Crowns. The park show is American Stage's largest project of the season, dwarfing productions in its 140-seat mainstage theater and taking a chunk of the budget and countless overtime hours by the staff. A flop would be like an albatross around the company's neck.

It has to be scary to give up a known quantity like Shakespeare, the strongest brand name in theater. Advance sales for Crowns - very much an unknown quantity - were not especially good, and that had Olson worried.

But after Macbeth and all the change that came in its wake, there's no turning back now.

John Fleming can be reached at fleming@sptimes.com or (727) 893-8716.

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A coronation of 'Crowns'

In replacing Shakespeare in its outdoor program, American Stage decides to go with a musical celebration.

By JOHN FLEMING, Times Performing Arts Critic
Published April 6, 2006

If you're in the market for an Easter bonnet, here's some advice:

"You shouldn't wear a hat wider than your shoulders. Elongated or oval faces look better with wide brims. Round faces look better in the derby style. Hats should be simply decorated. Some women think that the more stuff you can fit on your head the better, and I've seen hats that look like lamp shades."

These hat-wearing tips are from one of the characters in *Crowns*, which inaugurates a new era this week for American Stage. Regina Taylor's gospel-flavored musical with "hattitude" is the first non-Shakespearean production the company will put on in a downtown St. Petersburg waterfront park, Demens Landing.

Todd Olson, the company's producing artistic director, thought long and hard about what sort of show should break the 20-year tradition of Shakespeare under the stars. He decided one that combines a concert with a story would be ideal for the park, where the picnicking and socializing are as important as the theatergoing.

"*Crowns* is driven by music, but there are entertaining stories as well, and it's not without substance either. It's this kind of musical celebration. I think *Crowns* has it all," Olson said. Taylor, best known as an actor who played the maid Lilly Harper in the civil rights-era TV series *Ill Fly Away*, adapted her musical from *Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats*, a coffee table book of photographs and interviews by Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry. She incorporated the stories of many of the women in the book into characters in the show, fashioning a plot about a street-smart girl from Brooklyn named Yolanda, who, after her brother is shot, is sent to her grandmother's house in South Carolina. There she is taken under the wings of a group of hat-proud church ladies.

"I was raised by my grandma and grandpa in Florida," said Sharon Scott, one of six women in the all-black cast, who plays Mabel. "My grandpa was a Primitive Baptist minister, and all of these ladies, I know. This is like coming home. It's a joy to experience this young girl going through what she needs to go through to get to a place of comfort. To watch someone grow up and the village extend itself to her."

The production features about 100 hats, including elaborate, colorful concoctions bedecked with baubles and ribbons and feathers. Fantastic they may be, but the hats are not fantasies.

"I have been in several of the black churches in St. Pete, and you see some really wonderful hats," said costume designer Amy Cianci, who made all but a few of the hats in the show. "Most African-American women, when they get dressed up, they feel naked without a hat. They have hats to go with most of their

outfits. A lot of women have collected hats over the years and own hundreds of them. They'll buy six, seven, eight hats a season. At a couple of hundred dollars a pop, that's a lot of money."

Cast members can relate to the passion of "hat queens ."

"Growing up in Columbia, S.C., and going to church all the time, I was always seeing people in hats," said Fredena Williams, who plays Wanda. "My mom never really wore hats, but she had a collection of hats that had been passed down to her. So we have this collection of vintage hats. I think, after this show, I'll start wearing them."

Yolonda Williams, playing Velma, attends Beulah Institutional Baptist Church in Tampa, and doesn't wear a hat to services. "It's like an age thing with the hats. You don't see a lot of young women wearing hats. Once they get past 30, they start wearing hats," she said.

"It is definitely generational," said LaDonna Burns, a New York actor who goes to Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem and plays Jeanette. "The church just had Women's Day, and you should have seen the hats. Just huge hats, tilted to the side, and the colors were red and black."

Crowns has been a hit at theaters around the country, in large part because of the infectious appeal of its score, a collection of spirituals such as *Wade in the Water*, *We're Marching to Zion*, *If I Could Touch the Hem of His Garment* and *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*. The arrangements (by Linda Twine, music director of *The Color Purple* on Broadway) are true to musical styles ranging from field hollers to hip-hop.

"We represent various types of church music," said Ranney, who plays all the male characters. "We're Marching to Zion, for instance, is very Southern Baptist. Contemporary gospel has R&B, blues and jazz, but it's always rooted in the older oral tradition. There's room in the phrasing that allows for what is considered praise."

The singers are backed by music director Vince di Mura on keyboard and Errol Wise on drums. Di Mura, whose American Stage credits include *My Way* and *I Left My Heart*, is a jazz musician at heart.

"Gospel music is not jazz, and I owe a lot to the ladies in this room," di Mura said during a rehearsal at the theater. "Yolonda took me to her church and introduced me to the organist there. This is the only time I've been the student as music director. I've learned more than I could ever learn in a classroom. Gospel is a fascinating vernacular. It feeds your soul."

Gospel choirs from Mt. Zion Progressive Church, 10th Street Church of God, Macedonia Church, Rock of Jesus Baptist Church and other Tampa Bay area churches will sing from 7:15 to 7:45 p.m. before some performances of *Crowns*.

Olson's ambition is to draw a diverse audience to the park. American Stage has an overwhelmingly white audience, and even black-themed plays, such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Spunk*, have not brought much diversity to the theater. "I saw a production of *Crowns* in Dallas, and the audience was the most racially mixed I've seen in a regional theater," he said. It's possible that *Crowns* could reach black theatergoers who enjoy touring gospel shows tailored for them. These include *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, *Momma Don't* and *Wicked Ways*, which are often booked into Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center or Mahaffey Theater.

"I think that audience will love it," Yolonda Williams said. "They might be a little surprised that it may not be as over the top as some things they've seen, but that's okay. One thing about the black community

is that we will turn out for something like this, because we are so hungry for positive images of ourselves in the arts."

Fredena Williams hopes that Crowns will cross-pollinate the theater's audience.

"People who go to the traditional touring gospel musicals won't necessarily come to see musical theater," she said. "And vice versa. The musical theater audience won't go to the gospel musicals. But this show rides that fine line. I think we'll have a mix of two audiences, and that's the unique and uniting thing about Crowns. It can bring people from two separate worlds together."

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St. Petersburg Times

Joyful noise

[SOUTH PINELLAS Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.
Author: JOHN FLEMING
Date: Apr 9, 2006
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African-American church hats in all their splendor supply the rationale for *Crowns*, the Regina Taylor musical that launched a new era when it opened Friday night at Demens Landing on the downtown waterfront. The hats are terrific, but the best thing about the show is its vibrant mix of gospel songs.

With a cast that includes the amazing Sharon Scott, there is some major vocal firepower at work in exhilarating numbers such as *When the Saints Go Marching In*, *Wade in the Water* and *I'm on the Battlefield for My Lord*.

Scott and her talented colleagues also have a flair for raucous down-home humor. Moms Mabley, the great vaudeville comedian whose cornpone shtick was a staple of 1960s TV variety shows, could have been the muse for this production.

For the first time in 21 years, American Stage is presenting something other than Shakespeare in the park, so *Crowns* might be seen as having a tough act to follow. But trying to come up with a fresh take on Shakespeare every spring had become a burden to the company, and Taylor's gospel musical is a bold departure that brings back energy to the park.

The show was inspired by a photo book by Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry that documents some remarkable headgear as well as quirky, often hilarious social history and customs. Take the "hat queen" rules: Don't touch the hat, don't knock the hat and don't hug too close.

Nothing succeeds like excess, apparently, when it comes to hats. As an exasperated husband says to his wife, "You don't need another hat. You only got one head," to no avail as her hat collection expands into the hundreds and requires the construction of shelves in the basement.

More seriously, Taylor's play seeks to turn these tales about hats into metaphors for life, pointing out, for example, that "the idea of adorning oneself for worship is a holdover from African traditions."

Crowns is loosely constructed around the story of Yolanda, a hip-hop home girl from Brooklyn. After her brother is shot, Yolanda is sent to live with her grandmother in South Carolina. There she is taken under the collective wing of the black matriarchy, a community of hat-proud churchgoers whose spirit transforms the young woman.

Annie Lee Moffett gives a touching performance as Yolanda, ranging from rap numbers to a folk song about how she doesn't know "how to be one of them who clap and pray and sing."

The other women in the cast - Scott, Rose Bilal, LaDonna Burns, Yolonda Williams and Fredena Williams - play less individually defined characters, functioning as a kind of chorus, though each has a star turn or two. Scott is like a force of nature in sensational blues shouters, and her comic timing as a holy-rolling minister's wife is perfect.

Yolonda Williams, a peppery belter, has a showstopper with her spoof of a snooty church soprano in *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*. Bilal lays down a great groove in uptempo songs such as *(This Joy) The World Didn't Give It To Me*.

Ranney is the only man in the cast, playing minister, father, husband and other characters with appealing warmth. He has a soulful solo worthy of the Rev. Al Green, *If I Could Touch the Hem of His Garment*, with the women as a powerhouse backup group.

A highlight is the wailing harmonies of *We're Marching to Zion*, which replicates the sound of a backwoods church congregation praising the Lord. The score's funky arrangements are deftly played by music director Vince di Mura at the keyboard and Errol Wise on drums.

Todd Olson directed, and he went for the broad humor in Taylor's play, making it more of a party piece than the serious-minded slice of African-American history that it could be in a different staging. Olson knows that park audiences want to have a good time.

American Stage has a new one-size-fits-all set, designed by Olson and John Malolepsy to be used in park productions for years to come. The huge scale of the structure diminishes the impact of costume designer Amy Cianci's colorful, outlandish hats as viewed from a distance.

At times the stories dragged, such as one about shopping for a hat at a formerly whites-only store, or another about putting tobacco worms in a sister's head scarf. Normally, Crowns is performed without intermission, which probably wouldn't work in the park, but with a break inserted about two-thirds into the show, the second act felt truncated.

Like many a Shakespearean romance or comedy that ends with a wedding for no reason other than to wind things up in orderly fashion, Taylor's musical concluded with a ceremony, Yolanda's baptism. It didn't seem very persuasive.

But no matter. There was more joyous gospel music to bring the crowd to its feet at the end.

REVIEW: The American Stage in the Park production of Crowns by Regina Taylor runs through May 7 at Demens Landing, 100 First Ave. SE, St. Petersburg. 8 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. \$10-\$25; Wednesday is "pay what you can." (727) 823-7529; americanstage.org.

[Illustration]

Caption: Annie Lee Moffett as Yolanda, Fredena Williams as Wanda and Yolonda Williams as Velma in a scene from the American Stage production of Crowns; Photo: PHOTO, WILLIAM DUNKLEY

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[Annie Lee Moffett] as [Yolanda], Fredena Williams as Wanda and Yolonda Williams as Velma in a scene from the American Stage production of Crowns; Photo: PHOTO, WILLIAM DUNKLEY

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