

## OCTOBER ALMANAC

### 260 YEARS AGO (1751)

Three days after opening its inaugural production of *Richard III*, Walter Murray and Thomas Kean's Company of Comedians posts a notice in the *Virginia Gazette* imploring subscribers to help cover the costs of its newly constructed playhouse, the Second Theatre of Williamsburg. The Company of Comedians will sparsely produce Shakespearean tragedies at this theatre over the next decade while continuing to tour the colonies.

### 130 YEARS AGO (1881)

Tony Pastor opens his 14th Street Theater in New York City, announcing a bill "catering to the ladies, and presenting for the amusement of the cultivated and aesthetic Pure Music and Comedy, Burlesque and Farce." By taking the variety act out of men's saloons, Pastor reaches a wider audience, successfully transforming vaudeville into family entertainment. Despite being the most popular theatre of the 1880s, by 1908 the 14th Street Theater will become a motion-picture theatre, and Pastor will not renew his lease.

### 60 YEARS AGO (1951)

The Interplayers of San Francisco stages its last production—*Fanny's First Play*. The innovative company was formed in 1946 by a group of artists who met as detainees at Camp 56 in Oregon, where they were being held as conscientious objectors to WWII. Its founding members—Kermit Sheets, Martin Ponch, Joyce Lancaster and Adrian Wilson—are credited with contributing greatly to the San Francisco renaissance of the late 1940s and the Beat movement of the 1950s.

### ■ NEW YORK CITY

**RADHA BLANK WAS RAISED IN** Brooklyn. "But I came of age in Harlem," she says, and she lives there still: "You can stand on one corner and see how the community is changing and fighting to maintain some of its cultural identity." That shifting neighborhood is the setting for Blank's play *Seed*, which was workshopped at last year's **Hip-Hop Theater Festival**. It gets its premiere through Oct. 9, directed by Nigel Smith, in a co-production with **Classical Theatre of Harlem**.

The pitfalls and possibilities inherent in gentrification is an overt theme in two other scripts Blank hopes will soon be staged—*HappyFlowerNail*, a return to her solo-performer roots, and *Casket Sharp*, about gang troubles in a crumbling town. In *Seed*, class issues set the conditions for

### ■ AUSTIN



LETTUCE TURNIP

## RIDDLEY ME THIS

Workshop puppets by Connor Hopkins for *Riddley Walker*.

the possibilities of a more antiquated form of human simulacra: puppets. Who better to tackle the subject than Austin's **Trouble Puppet Theater Company**?

The inventive Texas troupe adapts Hoban's ambitious novel for the stage through Oct. 16 at **Salvage Vanguard Theater**. "One of the things that intrigues me the most about this story is the scale of it," says Trouble Puppet's artistic director, Connor Hopkins, "the fact that it's looking back over several thousand years, but takes place over the course of about four days." The story also features a 12-year-old protagonist—small in stature, but profound in influence.

To this end, Hopkins and his comrades will experiment with scale, not only radically implementing the tabletop version of a play within a play, but incorporating shadow puppetry and puppets that serve as puppet masters. "We have three layers of depth," Hopkins says. "It's one of the gifts of puppetry that you can create actual physical changes of scale that you can't do with human beings."

Alluding as it does to the myriad failings of the "Puter Leat" (computer elite), and particularly in light of this year's nuclear disaster in Japan, *Riddley Walker* is a work with new relevance. According to producing partner Kathryn Rogers, "People are coming back around to this book because it did a lot that was before its time."

Take scholar Victoria Nelson's belief that puppets are the embodiment of our unconscious desire for deities; marry that to E.E. Cummings's lyrical assertion that "nothing recedes like progress;" and the resultant progeny is *Riddley Walker*. "Iwl yes to that," quips Hopkins, and Rogers concedes that the two have taken to texting each other in Riddley-speak. It is further proof (as if we needed any) that the symbiotic relationship between life and art is a complicated matter, indeed. —*Stacy Alexander Evans*

## PRICE CHECK



RUTH SOTOMAYOR

Bridgit Antoinette Evans as Anne, left, and Pernell Walker as past client Rashawn in *Seed*.

a moral tug-of-war over a 12-year-old child's future.

*Seed*'s leading characters, ambitious social-worker Anne and Duane Reade cashier Latonya, are both black residents of Harlem, but the sole thing they seem to have in common is an interest in Latonya's prodigiously smart son Chee-Chee. To state it lightly, the women don't see eye to eye on what's best for the kid. When tensions bubble up, the characters occasionally break into rhythmic cadences—a device Blank traces to *Seed*'s origin as a series of character monologues. At work, Latonya is snared in a staccato, repetitive loop: "Hold up! / Price check! / This is \$3.49, you still want this miss?" And Anne's remembrance of a traumatic chapter of her career accelerates into an urgent litany of numbers and rhymes. In these departures from everyday dialogue, the women's frustrations and insecurities are revealed, suggesting that perhaps the two are more alike than they first appear. —*Nicole Estvanik Taylor*