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THEATER

At Camden Rep: 'Unfinished Women'

By Jane M. Von Bergen
For The Inquirer

"Because our stories aren't told, it's easy for us to be invisible," said Desi P. Shelton, artistic director of Camden Rep, who founded the company in 2005. She is talking about Black women and girls from the neighborhood, not the privileged middle or upper class, and not the ones depicted in plays written by men, Black or white, Shelton said.

Camden Rep's latest production, *Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage*, written by Aishah Rahman, takes a step back in history to tell the story of teenage pregnant girls living in a home for unwed mothers, trying to decide whether they'll keep their babies and struggle alone, or give their babies up for adoption, leaving a permanent hole in their hearts.

"Birth is painful," Shelton said, and so is the birth of art. In the play, the story of the unwed teenagers is juxtaposed against the last days of Black jazz saxophonist Charlie "The Bird" Parker, wasting away in his gilded cage, his mistress' boudoir.

"It hits me, the sacrifices African Americans have made for the arts," Shelton said, before paraphrasing Parker's words from the play, "I can't even go into these clubs and

people are getting rich trying to sound like me."

It's heavy stuff, but Shelton doesn't want a visit to Camden Rep to feel overburdened.

"It's supposed to be a good time out, a good time for you and your friend," she said. The theater itself is a rowhouse, necessitating an intimate experience. There's even a band.

"It's like you come out to someone's house," Shelton said. "You offer them something to eat. You offer them something to drink. You have great conversations and hopefully you see good art and that becomes a point of discussion about what the playwright brought up."

Through March 12, *"Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage," Camden Rep, 445 Mechanic St., Camden, 856-438-8430 or camdenrep.com*



"Unfinished Women" at Camden Rep, with Alani Burke (from left), Shaleah Navarro, and J'lynn Henry. Kamile Kuntz Photography