

# WE ALL END UP STORIES



Ekundayo Bandele, founder of Memphis' Hattiloo Theatre brings  
the Black storytelling experience to life through the theatre landscape

Written by Amy Conry Davis / Photography courtesy Hattiloo Theatre



“ WE ALL END UP STORIES. WHILE WE TELL STORIES ON STAGE, THEY COME FROM SOMEWHERE, THEY REPRESENT SOMEONE. EVEN IF WE THINK IT’S COMPLETELY MADE UP THAT STORY HAS SOME FORM OF LIFE OR BACKGROUND. ”



Raised in Brooklyn’s Fort Greene neighborhood, Ekundayo Bandele grew up an only child, often left to rely on an inner world of books and imagination. He was an avid reader and content to fill his time writing his own stories. His parents divorced when he was young but despite being shuffled back and forth between two households, they did their best to impart important lessons. From his mother, an opera singer and piano player, Bandele discovered the cultural arts. From his father, he inherited his somewhat restless nature and penchant for moving from one new curiosity to the next. When it came to other sources of inspiration outside of his family, the author Richard Wright made a big impression early on. Wright, who wrote several novels such as “Black Boy” and “Native Son”, was influential in stoking Bandele’s desire to become a novelist. This culmination of influences in his formative years would shape his future identity as a Black man, artist, and storyteller. To listen to Bandele talk about creators and the creative process today, you can hear the energy in his voice. Words, in all their forms and function, are as essential as air.

“I’m a person who loves language. I love conversation,” says Bandele. “And there’s just something about creating a relationship between individuals based on circumstance and conversation.”

Bandele left New York in the 80s, headed for college at Tennessee State in Nashville. It was there that his next phase of education in the arts began. Not only did he read his first play, but he went to see his first play, ever, which was a rendition of Dracula in the round. It was also during this period that he discovered yet another person who would come to hold a prominent place in his literary landscape. His English professor, James Brydson, introduced him to the book “Five Black Plays” and gently guided Bandele toward playwriting. Later, Bandele would transfer to Morehouse College in Atlanta but he didn’t finish his courses. Instead, like many other creatives, he struck out on his own circuitous journey of trial and error,

gathering ideas through experimentation and experiences. Part of this search for identity and self-discovery even involved legally adopting a new name. ‘Ekundayo’ is a Nigerian word which means “to turn sorrow into happiness, as he reawakens hope through God.” Bandele traveled the country and bounced around from various ventures, living as a self-described ‘serial entrepreneur.’ He ran a car washing business, owned a vintage clothing store, wrote plays, and hosted spoken word events and concerts. Nine of those years were spent laboring over his first novel, “Tales Go ‘Round.” He also met and married his then-wife, Nicole, with whom he had two daughters. All the while the storytelling remained but Bandele found himself seeking out more collaborative efforts and stepping away from solitary writing pursuits. He was interested in learning from others and acquiring new skills and all roads seemed to lead to theatre.

“When you’re writing a novel or a short story you’re pretty much living up in your head. You give it to an editor, and they put their two cents in,” says Bandele. “But when you’re doing a play, you’re dealing with a director, stage manager, costume designer...you have a whole family of artists who are working together to bring your vision to life. That gives you a lot of different perspectives and various talents you may not have. That is what really drew me into theatre.”

It wasn’t until Bandele was living in Memphis that the most dramatic shift in his career arose. He had moved there in the mid-1990s to be closer to the paternal side of his family. He was doing quite a bit of theatre work independently and had started a popular spoken word series at the Jack Robinson Gallery called The Speakeasy which began garnering attention from the arts community. It was a chance encounter at one of the shows that he met Michael de Caetani, a local businessman, who happened to be attending.

“When I met Michael, he was very involved as a donor in the arts, especially



**Above:** In June 2014, Hattiloo moved from its 75-seat theatre to a newly-constructed stand alone facility in The Edge District. Hattiloo Theatre is the only freestanding Black repertory theatre in five surrounding states.

theatre. He knew that I was a playwright and loved The Speakeasy and we became fast friends. He asked me if I would consider opening a black repertory theatre in Memphis,” says Bandele. “Michael was the catalyst.”

Through de Caetani, Bandele would meet other people who would become mentors and eventually make up his founding board. Jackie Nichols, founder of Playhouse on the Square, was another pivotal individual who introduced Bandele to donors and let him borrow props and costumes for his shows. Everyone was eager to have Bandele lead the way for a new venue in the city, but he was hesitant. Memphis had already tried several attempts at Black Repertory Theatres, but they were short-lived. Even in a town with a 64 percent Black population, Bandele thought his endeavor might share the same fate.

“To be honest, I didn’t think it was going to last. I thought it was going to peter out after two or three years. With the absence of a Black theatre there really hadn’t developed an audience for that taste,” says Bandele. “The novelty, at some point, is going to wear off. That was my thinking. People are gonna be curious about it and interested in it but after they sample it and come to a show, they’ll go back to what they know.”

Yet, he persevered, and in 2006, Hattiloo Theatre opened its doors in the Edge District with Bandele at the helm as CEO. The venue was named for his two daughters, Hatshepsut (Hatti) and Oluremi (Loo). The first play was a production of Samm-Art Williams’s “Home” and Bandele feverishly worked the entire operation from usher to ticket taker to emcee. Two years later, a donation from the United Way was the turning point that allowed Bandele to feel the theatre was going to succeed. The Hattiloo received \$20,000, their largest one-time donation since opening, for a youth program called Camp Awareness.

Fourteen years later and the Hattiloo has managed to not only succeed but grow

and thrive. It’s coming into its own as a vital cultural hub and events center for the city. In 2014, they moved a few miles down the road into a larger, 10,000 square-foot space on Overton Square. The sleek, new venue is equipped with multiple dressing rooms, offices, and a 150-seat capacity.

Like hundreds of other theatres, the onset of COVID-19 last year dramatically changed their daily operations, schedules, and small workforce. Bandele was forced to make considerable adjustments like cutting his staff of 12 employees down to three and totally revamping his programming calendar. What would typically get planned 18 months in advance was now done ‘on the fly’ as city and state health mandates changed. And instead of the usual eight plays a season, he had to come up with creative alternatives instead. Though other theatres were choosing to film their performances, Bandele felt that took away from the reciprocal energy between audience and actors so he turned to virtual Zoom meetups. The Hattiloo hosted several online panel discussions and workshops which would turn out to be well-attended, sometimes more than 100 people per session. For instance, the Say It Loud program was a free Black History Speech Series in which local actors delivered important historical speeches by individuals such as John Lewis, Dick Gregory, and Marcus Garvey. Another successful project was the Women of Color Monologues which consisted of six videos highlighting women from the community, sharing their personal stories on race, identity, and the female experience. In March, the theatre reopened its doors to live performances with updated safety strategies in place. Aside from the usual mask wearing and social distancing, all of the shows are one-person plays and audience members are seated in pods with people they have quarantined with.

Bandele is always looking for ways to expand Hattiloo’s audience and his youth and outreach programs are a large part of that. The theatre runs 8-12 different com-



munity programs at any given time. By breaking down certain barriers, Bandle has widened the reach of theatregoers. In addition to kids-only theatre camps, they hold free, family-friendly plays at local libraries. They've also partnered with an organization called Deaf Connect which provides signers on stage. Another project, Special Shows for Special People, was inspired by Bandle's youngest daughter who has special needs. Each performance keeps sensory stimulation in mind by adjusting house lighting, sound, and ensuring ample space for wheelchairs.

Another avenue Bandle is passionate about is inviting out-of-town artists to work and learn at the Hattiloo. The theatre's residential space, a triplex called the HattiHouse, is used for guest artists and fellows. After attending training at the DeVos Institute of Art Management in Washington DC, Bandle decided to start a Black Managers Fellowship. It was an experience that completely changed how he managed Hattiloo and he wanted to share that with other individuals who were currently working in Black theatres across the United States. Each of his fellows get paid a stipend and the opportunity to spend eight weeks immersed in case studies, workshops, guest speakers, and assigned readings.

"I had to look through a cultural lens to make my learning more relevant to what I was doing. So, I've taken those experiences and that knowledge, and we impart it to four Black theatre managers every three years," says Bandle. "This whole program is funded by the Black Seed Fund. Hopefully, the results will be such that foundations may look at it and say this is actually strengthening the Black theatre landscape nationally and we want to help continue that."

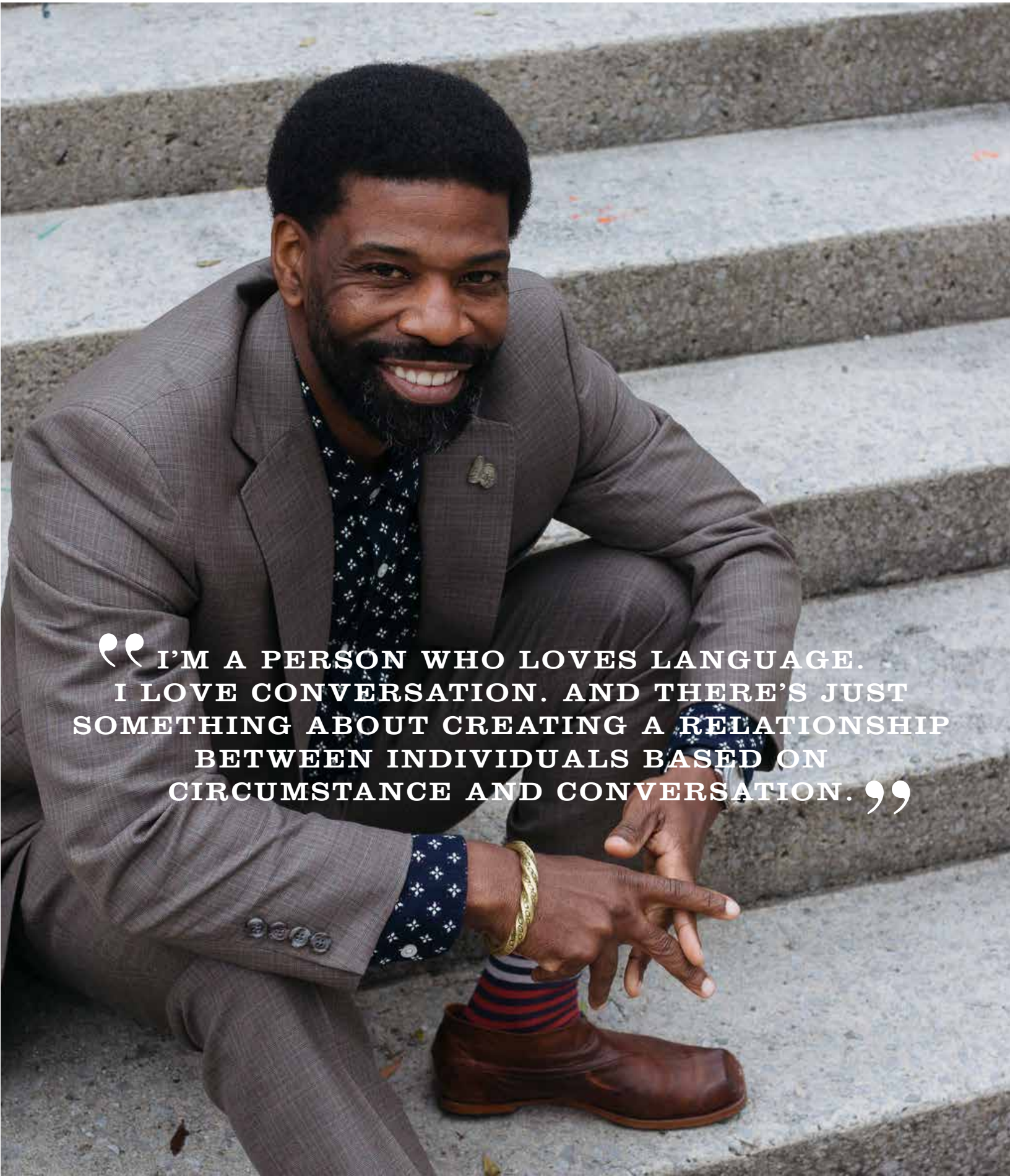
The Hattiloo Theatre's presence also stretches beyond Memphis. Before international travel restrictions, Bandle went to Milan twice a year to produce plays under the auspices of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He's even taught a Theatre Management class in Khartoum, Sudan. But, while bringing the Hattiloo and Southern culture across borders is exciting, Bandle's sights remain fixed on what's most important closest to home. He's dedicated to training more Black actors, playwrights, and stage managers. The future of Black theatre relies on solid infrastructures, well-paid and well-trained management and artists having the platforms to speak their truths. For Bandle, his theatre strives to be a space where all of that can happen. Just as he came to the stories written and shared by people long gone, the Hattiloo offers up the chance for the next generation to find their voice and create their own.

"We all end up stories. While we tell stories on stage, they come from somewhere, they represent someone. Even if we think it's completely made up that story has some form of life or background." says Bandle.

[hattiloo.org](http://hattiloo.org)

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**Above:** Ruined is a play by Lynn Nottage. The play won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and centers around the plight of women in the civil war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo. **Center:** The cast of the popular musical The Wiz. **Bottom:** Blueprints to Freedom: An Ode to Bayard Rustin, one of the most prominent leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. **Opposite:** Ekundayo Bandle opened the doors to the Hattiloo Theatre in the Edge District of Memphis in 2006.



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