



# How a former *HOME* turned *THEATER* is Transforming the Black Arts Scene in Camden



Jenise Rolle, South Jersey, Information Equity Project

One woman is on a mission to help break the cycle of poverty in the City of Camden, New Jersey, and she is doing it through performing arts and creative playwriting.

Desi P. Shelton, a Camden, New Jersey native, is the founder and artistic director of the Camden Repertory Theater, which sits in the heart of Camden's Downtown neighborhood. Shelton, who received her Masters of Fine Arts in Acting (MFA) from Sarah Lawrence College, launched Camden Rep in 2006 after seeing a void for urban female voices within live theater. She then transformed her former home into a live performing arts theater for the public.

Camden Rep is a community-focused theater company that educates, inspires, and provides local artists with a space to create and produce new work that speaks to the real-life experiences of those living within the inner city. For Shelton, the driving force behind the theater company is her desire to create a safe space where Black women can have real conversations. "When you come to Camden Rep, you should feel like you're going to your girlfriend's house to hang out," says Shelton, "as women, we need spaces to laugh, cry, and simply know that somebody gets us and understands what we're going through."



Photo courtesy of Camden Rep Theater

Many of the actors, designers, and playwrights in the theater's various productions are students or alumni of Camden Rep's Preparing Artists for College Entrance (P.A.C.E.) program. P.A.C.E., a yearlong high school program, uses the arts as a stepping stone to increase high school graduation rates and provide students with the educational, financial, and emotional support they need to transition into college. Shelton, a self-proclaimed stickler for education, says, "Poverty doesn't just happen, it's intentional, and I'm passionate about helping students get into college; so they can experience a different side of life throughout those four years." She believes that obtaining a quality education is one of the cornerstones for strengthening Black women's economics and breaking the generational cycle of poverty.

For much of this year's Black History Month and Women's History Month, Camden Rep hosted a live production of Aishah Rahman's underground classic play *Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage* alongside a live jazz band

and a host of local talent. J'lynn Henry, a junior at Camden High School, enjoyed playing Mattie in the most recent stage play and feels that Camden Rep is providing her an outlet to positively showcase her extroverted side. Prior to joining P.A.C.E. a year ago, Henry never participated in theater but now views the arts as something larger than an extracurricular activity. According to Henry, "Theater isn't just about art, it's about the lessons it teaches us, and I'm gaining more knowledge on something that I love to do."

In addition to learning about live acting and performing, P.A.C.E. is also teaching students the technical aspects of creating a quality stage production. "I was able to try directing!" says Janiyah-Rae Houston excitedly. Houston, a high school junior, enjoys the behind-the-scenes work that goes into producing a stage play, "Since I've joined, I've started reading on producing too! We are learning about light and costume design as well." For Alani Burke, a high school senior and one of the actors in *Unfinished Women*, Camden Rep is helping her to learn more about her college options upon graduation. "I didn't really know about HBCUs before P.A.C.E, but now, in my third year, being a part of this has helped me become more educated about my college options and find schools that match my interest areas," says Burke.

Shelton, who is also a high school theater teacher in Camden, is currently finalizing her newest production, *Child Support*, which will open to the public this Fall. The play is a sequel to her first stage play and chronicles the difficulties of navigating life without a present father.

For more information on Camden Rep Theater or to stay updated on upcoming shows, visit their website at [www.camdenrep.com](http://www.camdenrep.com).

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## We'll be the Judge

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steps they would take.

We probably have a clue in another bill, the Supreme Court Ethics Act, that was introduced earlier this year to close what Durbin called "the inexcusable Supreme Court loophole" in federal judicial ethics rules.

"The highest court in the land shouldn't have the lowest ethical standards," Durbin said.

He makes a good point. In fact, a federal statute already governs gifts to judges. But, perhaps because it was produced by arguing lawyers, its wording is open to interpretation, and the justices have questioned whether it can be constitutionally applied to them.

To end that confusion and clarify the value of ethical conduct, the proposed Supreme Court Ethics Act calls for a code of conduct for the Supreme Court and a mechanism for the public to report potentially unethical conduct by justices.

Judges below the Supreme Court are instructed to

avoid even the appearance of impropriety. That's an excellent standard that should be fundamental to all of the Supreme Court's business.

None of the justices should feel insulted or inconvenienced by the need to protect their own integrity — on which; rests the rule of law itself.

Despite his reputation for abundant silence on the bench, Justice Thomas has spoken wisely and at length in other forums about the importance of honesty, integrity, and the danger of victimhood mentalities and entitlement attitudes.

Whether his failure to file all of his disclosure statements resulted from bad legal advice or not, he is hardly the only person who needs to have a code of ethics to help end that confusion.

The public needs it too. The demands of self-government call on all citizens to appreciate sound standards of ethical conduct — and then do our best to live by them.

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## Vote that Jawn

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large council candidates will meet with hundreds of voters in a reverse job fair-style event that allows voters to directly interact with council candidates.

Then, on April 16, C70 will host The Voter Hub at FDR Park, where citizens can register to vote, apply for a mail-in ballot, have their questions answered, and discover free, nonpartisan resources in several languages. Vote That Jawn will cover the event and use it to launch their content for the rest of the election cycle.

Together, C70 and Vote That Jawn will continue to provide education and information that allows people to empower themselves and their communities; hold their officials accountable to the promises they make during campaigns; and demand more from their government.

"In 2018, after the Parkland, FL, shooting, and after my Creative Writing students wrote about their generation's experience of gun violence on the one hand and activism on the other, they challenged me: create a course that would let student writers convince Philadelphia youth, high school, and college, to vote," said Vote that Jawn founder, Lorene Cary.

"It was homework with urgency. Vote That Jawn grew

to encompass partners from PA Youth Vote to Fresh Artists to Youth Poet Laureates to the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society. We focus on digital forms with a fresh youth voice to share over social media. So maybe it doesn't make voting cool. But connected to other youth. So, cooler. Now, Vote That Jawn needs a whole new level of good-government expertise. In Philly, that means C70," Cary said.

### ABOUT Committee of Seventy

The Committee of Seventy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that has promoted, supported, and facilitated government ethics and election integrity for more than a century. We believe that elections should be more free, more fair, more safe, and more secure. We want every eligible voter to vote, to be informed when they vote, and to vote with confidence. For more information, visit [seventy.org](http://seventy.org)

### ABOUT Vote That Jawn

Using the power of youth voice and connection, #VoteThatJawn aims to bring 18-year-olds and other first-time voters to the polls—beginning a process toward full civic engagement—not just for a charismatic candidate, but to advocate for youth safety, agency, and inclusion. For more information, visit [votethatjawn.com](http://votethatjawn.com)

## Affordable youth housing

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Therefore, we welcome this opportunity to work together to help these young adults find a place to call home and to eliminate barriers that hinder their pursuit of college and career opportunities as they transition to adulthood and independent life. With this joint effort, these vulnerable young people can focus on their goals and dreams without worrying about where they are going to lay their heads at night.

### OHS Director Liz Hersh

We never want a young adult to age out of foster care into homelessness. These vouchers and our continued collaboration with PHA and DHS will help improve the lives of Philly youth who are at risk of homelessness.

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