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National Museum of African American History and Culture

Playbill for A Raisin in the Sun with insert essay 'Sweet Lorraine'

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couple of productions that I talked to people about. Then this came back around. I thought, 'this is probably it.'" Franco then spoke to Shapiro. ("I'm pretty sure he was interviewing me," jokes the director.) O'Dowd climbed aboard next. "I got a call September or October, and was asked if I'd be interested," he recalls. "Then I didn't hear anything about it for months. I figured something came up and it had been fallen through. Then I heard it was happening and I signed up that day." Franco is glad that Shapiro is involved for reasons that go beyond her proven talent. "It was so clear after the first table read that it's such a man-heavy play," he says. "Really, there's only one female part. It's nice to have her very strong female energy conducting everything, giving it something new." Franco's instincts were sound, for, just as he was excited about what Shapiro's less testosterone-oriented viewpoint might bring to the play, Shapiro is pointedly interesting in exploring "the maleness of the story." She explains, "I'm fascinated by how the promise of the American Dream plays itself out in, and on, the men in my life... And I'm particularly occupied by their obsession with this idea of usefulness and worthiness-how this idea of usefulness and worthiness-how they determine their own value and by what measure-because I think there is a kind of cruelty they perpetrate on themselves in this conversation that is heartbreaking to me. Hopefully I'll bring an outsider's compassion, but other than that, I'm not sure it really matters that I'm a woman, per se. I think it mostly matters that I'm fascinated." Though this is the first Broadway staging of the play in four decades, Shapiro doesn't plan to reinvent the script via some grand directorial concept. "In my work with Tracy and [playwright] Bruce [Norris], the inhabitants of those worlds use language—and a lot of it—to manage their situations," she says. "This is not that kind of world—this is practical, pragmatic, and, in some ways, more natural environment and so the rules are different." Despite his reputation as an artistic risktaker, Franco is just fine with that straight-ahead approach. "One thing very clearly leads into the other in a way that everything feels inevitable. As an actor, that's great. I can let the material work on me rather than try [to] manufacture something to make the material work. "I'm not one who subscribes to the idea of, 'just say the words and it will all happen,'" he says before laughing and adding, "but in some ways it kind of feels like that!"

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