

MEMORABILIA

From page 1

speech. Many people are still alive for whom these antiques were once commonplace. For those too young to remember this time, they are a doorway into a dark social pattern that now leaves a subtler imprint.

The items come from the black memorabilia collection of Doris Stack, 67, a resident of North Fort Myers. They consist of banks, figurines, clocks, pictures, prints, dolls, games and "one of a kinds."

Stack, who is African-American, refused to have her picture taken.

"I'm a private person," she said.

She's lived in North Fort Myers since she became a widow six years ago. When she showed her collection of black memorabilia items, which once numbered around 5,600 pieces, the first things she wanted to talk about were the slave shackles.

"I got them from Africa...when I went to Senegal," Stack said. "Senegal was where they bought the slaves."

The shackles date back into the 18th century but many of the items are a lot younger. One that immediately captured my notice was a game box titled "Snake Eyes." It was a board and card game which displayed the stereotypically giant white eyes of the culturally acceptable exaggerated black features of days gone by. You

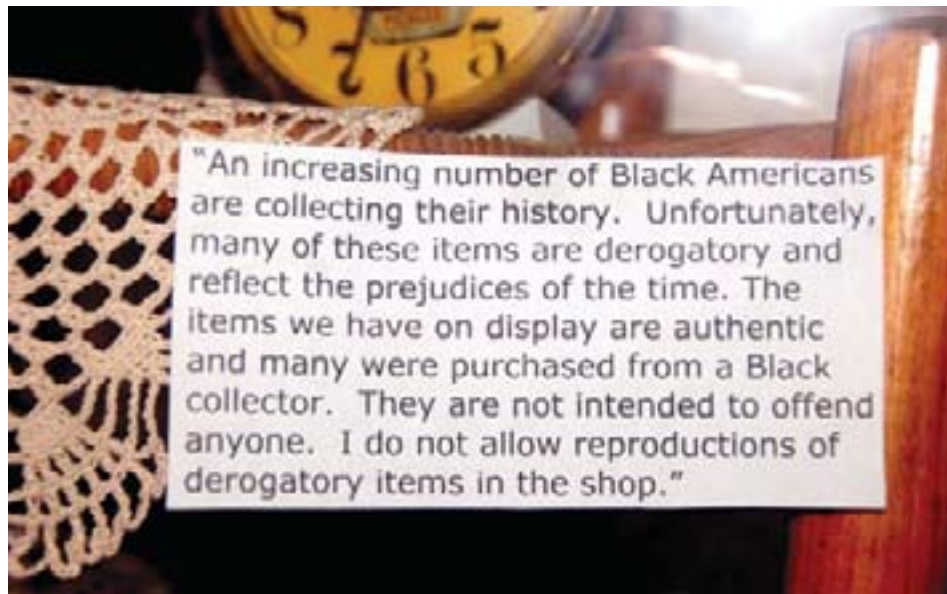


PHOTO CARL-JOHN X VERAJA

This sign in Noel's consignment shop in downtown Fort Myers tells customers about the black memorabilia.

might not expect it but the game was made in Canada.

Stack made note of this in a letter about her collection.

"It is history neither to enrage blacks nor humiliate whites," she wrote. "...some of my pieces are made of glass, plaster, plastic, cast iron, tin, ceramic, from Germany, Spain, England, China, Africa."

How did Doris Stack get started collecting black memorabilia?

Her lifelong passion started with a favor.

Her neighbor asked her to get a "black man pepper shaker." She

remembers that it was one of nine pieces and when she found it for her neighbor they were very pleased.

The collecting added a dimension of interest to another passion: travel. Wherever Stack and her husband would go, they would seek out and often find black memorabilia or other related memorabilia.

"At one time we...stopped collecting," she recounted. "But we missed going out looking. So, we started collecting again. It is in our blood."

Stack, now retired, once worked on automobiles for General Motors in Delaware and also on aircraft and

helicopters for Boeing. At the age of 50, she went to college to study interior decorating and began selling black memorabilia from home.

She now has some 2,000 pieces left to sell and explained some of her deeper motives.

"I do hope that one day blacks will buy back some memorabilia just like the Japanese did with their 'Made in Japan' articles," said Stack. "It's a great chance to inform the public. It's a learning process for everyone."

Stack also had an item that was of a different historical significance. A phonograph made by the Victor Talking Machine Company or a Victrola. Upon request, she turned the crank and dropped the needle. While playing "Roll Out the Barrel," she asked if anyone wanted the volume turned down and then tittered.

"You can't turn it down," she said.

"Roll Out the Barrel" was played in a room full of figurines of black jazz musicians with enlarged, bright red lips, seemingly charging sounds and perceptions of the past with an eerie life.

"These figurines remind me of yesterday's world," Stack said. "When I pass them in my home they speak of triumph and overcoming. Even something beautiful—preserves of history we have overthrown."

She asked me to move the Victrola and be careful not to pull out the plug then laughed.

"You can't pull out the plug," she said. ■

FLA REP

From page 1

the show throughout New York City's parks during the summer.

Last year, the troupe performed "King Lear" at the Folger Theatre in Washington, D.C., Cacioppo says, adding that their modern-day version of "Romeo and Juliet" sets the young lovers in Harlem in 2007.

Cacioppo plans to present a classic play each year, whether Shakespeare, a Greek classic such as "Medea" or "Lysistrata," or even Shaw's "Pygmalion" or Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire."

As part of the Florida Rep's World Classic Initiative program, "Romeo and Juliet" will be performed for all 5,000 Lee County high school students for free, with a dozen special performances, one for each high school.

"For some, it'll be the first professional play they've ever seen, and for some, the only professional play they'll see in their lives," Cacioppo says. "We see ourselves as a service in the community and an asset."

After "Romeo and Juliet" comes "Stones in His Pockets" (Oct. 26 – Nov. 18), an Irish play that ran in London in 2001, where it received a Lawrence Olivier Award for Best Comedy. The two-man play with actors portraying a variety of characters opened on Broadway in 2003.

"A Hollywood movie company invades a little town in Ireland to make a big, big film," Cacioppo says, explaining the premise. "They're quirky characters. It's extraordinarily hard to do. It's not campy like 'Greater Tuna' even though the men play women too."

Next is "Noises Off," (Nov. 30 – Dec. 23), a farce that looks at theater from backstage, with overly nervous actors, actors who can't remember their lines, deceit and romance. The show contains a play-within-a-play, or, if you will, a farce-within-a-farce.

"Noises Off" was Florida Rep's very first show of their first season, so presenting it during their 10th season brings it around full circle. Expect lots of slamming doors and barely controlled pandemonium.

In the new year, from Jan. 11 through Feb. 3, the troupe presents a hit Broadway

And over the past 10 years, Cacioppo has seen his audience grow more willing to stretch. For example, "Rabbit Hole," a drama about how a child's death affects a family, exceeded their expectations at the box office. Cacioppo believes they paved the way by previously offering plays such as "Side Man," "Art" and "Wit."

play. Due to contractual obligations, Florida Rep can't announce the name until the end of May. But it won numerous Tonys and Cacioppo says it's in the tradition of other plays they've previously presented, such as "Rabbit Hole," "Proof" and "Wit."

"A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" runs from Feb. 15 through March 16. Cacioppo calls it "a real celebration of the roots of theater." It was the show with which he originally wanted to open their first season, but was unable to obtain the rights because it was touring nationally. (That production, starring Rip Taylor, played at the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall.)

Cacioppo recently viewed a film of the Broadway show at the Lincoln Center library's archives in New York City.

"It was so funny," he says. "Larry Gelbart, who also wrote 'M*A*S*H,' says it's the closest he's come to perfection."

The madcap, zany musical is almost like vaudeville set in ancient Rome and the music features Stephen Sondheim's clever wordplay.

"It's made for actors who can sing," Cacioppo says. "It's really an actor's piece."

Next, Florida Rep offers its "one romance for the season": "Almost, Maine" (March 28 – April 27). The show played Off-Broadway in New York City in 2006 and was a critical success for Theatre Conspiracy in Fort Myers this season.

Cacioppo says the play was recommended to him. When he read the script, he knew he wanted to do it.

"I think it should get broader notice," he says.

The play is set in a town called Almost, in Maine.

"It's about how, on this one night, a Saturday night at 9 o'clock, under the northern lights, all these people in the town start falling in love. Not every story ends happily," he warns. "It's the one pure romance we have."

The season closes with "Visiting Mr. Green," a two-man play (May 9 – 25). Eli Wallach played Mr. Green in the Off-Broadway production.

The show's two characters are as unlike as you can get: an elderly Orthodox Jew who's a widower and estranged from his daughter, and a 28-year-old executive with his entire life ahead of him.

"It's a story about two very different people and how they get over their differences, the bond they form," Cacioppo says. David Howard, who portrayed Morrie in "Tuesdays With Morrie" last season, will play Mr. Green.

In addition to "Visiting Mr. Green," Cacioppo says, "we have two dramas – 'Romeo and Juliet' and the yet-unnamed Broadway play, two comedic dramas – 'Stones in His Pocket' and 'Almost, Maine,' and two of the greatest farces -- 'Noises Off' and 'Forum.' A nice balance."

As for celebrating 10 years, "we feel great, we feel lucky," he says. "We never expected the audience we have...Now we can start thinking about more than just survival in the next 10 years."

In a town that's known for its love of light, frothy musicals, the Florida Repertory Theatre has introduced award-winning dramatic fare and raised the bar in both the quality and type of theater it offers.

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"As an organization we've become a more substantial theater, and the community has become more responsive to it," he says. "It's OK just to laugh, but we also do plays

that are complex and will make you think. Our audiences want to come on a journey with us, and that's really exciting." ■

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