



Be Russell, Kristen Natalia and Marlette Buchanan in *Crowns* at Taproot Theatre.

A Family Affair

by TODD MATTHEWS

Local theatre audiences are in for a treat this fall as Faith Bennett Russell and her daughters, Be and Sarah, will share the stage for the first time in a full production when Taproot Theatre Company presents *A Night with the Russells: The Legacy of Us* (Sep 21–Oct 22, 2022). Faith, Be, and Sarah recently sat down together to talk about this 90-minute cabaret that promises to send audience members leaving with a song in their hearts. »



Faith Bennett Russell



Be Russell



Sarah Russell

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity and brevity.



Be Russell, Bethanie Willis and Tracy Michelle Hughes in *Crowns* at Taproot Theatre.

TODD MATTHEWS: What will audiences experience during the show?

BE RUSSELL: We'll share songs that have very personal meanings to all three of us. Songs that either highlight, amplify, or mirror our journeys as artists. I don't want to give too much away because I want it to be a surprise for our theatergoers. But audiences can expect musical theatre, pop culture, and faith-based songs—songs from all different canons that inspired our individual and collective journeys and represent who we are.

FAITH BENNETT RUSSELL: We will ask our audience to be involved. Get up and dance. In the time we're in, there needs to be invitations to dance and sing. Not only are we celebrating our work and our journey, but we're also celebrating community. Also, it's a call for transparency and exposure, which I feel are necessary. It's time to take the masks off—I don't mean the masks necessary to keep us healthy, but the figurative masks—and just walk in our authentic selves. There's been so much loss. There's so much happening in the world. I'm hoping it gives the audience permission to

be, like, "Let's all be real together and confess it has been hard. Yes, I can relate to that story."

Is this really the first time the three of you have been on stage together in a show?

BR: As far as a full production, yes. Sarah and I have been in many shows this season together, which has been such a joy. We did *9 to 5: The Musical*. We did *Mamma Mia!* at Village Theatre. Faith and Sarah have been on stage together, as well. Sarah and I had a cabaret in 2019, in which our surprise guest was Faith. Also, Taproot Theatre had a benefit event in 2012, and we sang "Stand by Me" together. The audience had an amazing response to the three of us singing in harmony and being on stage at the same time. That

"We will ask our audience to be involved. Get up and dance."



(left) Sarah Russell in *Big Fish* at Taproot Theatre. (right) Be Russell in *Godspell* at Taproot Theatre.

kind of gave us the bug: *What if we tried to do something together?*

How does this show compare to your experiences working on large-scale musicals?

SARAH RUSSELL: This is so much more personal. We're telling *our* story. It's scary to put yourself out there in a very vulnerable way—*This is me. Take it or leave it.* It's exciting and scary, but that's the motivation to do it. It makes you stronger.

What is the Russell family legacy?

FBR: We're Jamaican-African American, and our people are storytellers. On my dad's side, my great-grandfather passed stories down. Our family would gather around and tell colorful, fun stories. My father continued that legacy of

storytelling. After dinner, he would get his guitar out, teach us old Jamaican songs, and tell us stories attached to those songs. Also, I'm a pastor's kid. Both my parents are preachers. Preachers know how to tell a story. That started my passion for wanting to act and tell stories through songs, dance, and dialogue.

BR: It's also the legacy of what Taproot is in our lives as artists. Sarah and I grew up at Taproot. Faith was pursuing theatre as a profession, and we were home-schooled and came to the theatre with her during rehearsals and performances at seven and four years old. So, there's a real special legacy as far as what being on the Taproot main stage means for us. The word "legacy" in the show's title is not accidental.

Be and Sarah, as kids, did you appreciate what was going on at the time with your mom and Taproot?

SR: I didn't realize that wasn't normal. I had a great time. Don't all kids go to the theatre with their mom and watch the plays, know all the choreography, and sing all the songs?

BR: It wasn't just at Taproot. Faith invested in so much of our education and experience—going to the ballet, plays, and museums. Faith introduced us to so many things to give us the opportunities to find out what we loved. We watched so many movie musicals—*Cats*, *Grease*, *West Side Story*, *The Sound of Music*. We grew up being taught the canon and experiencing it on stage. As a child, it felt like this is what we do. It wasn't until later



(top), Sarah Russell in *A Charlie Brown Christmas* at Taproot Theatre. (left) Faith Bennett Russell in *Le Club Noel* at Taproot Theatre.

in life that I realized how grateful I was for that education and the fullness of what it means to engage in the richness of life.

FBR: I just want to say my son's name, Peter Russell Jr., because he also was at Taproot Theatre growing up. If he was typically abled, I believe he'd be an actor, too. He enjoyed the music and being around the storytelling. He keeps me grounded and real and authentic. He's definitely present with me in the work that I do.

What will it be like on opening night with the three of you taking the stage together for this show?

FBR: It's giddiness! It's a joy I can't describe. My heart bursts with so much joy.

SR: I know I'll be nervous. I'm usually nervous before shows. Once I step foot on stage, I'm fine. But I will be on stage with the people I laugh with the most—the people who know the goofiest side of me. It's going to be so much fun. I can't wait.

BR: I might be a little biased, but I admire Sarah and Faith as artists. It's a real privilege to share the stage with them. Also, I feel like there's a special kind of groundedness and energy that only family can bring out of you.

A Night with the Russells: The Legacy of Us will play at Taproot Theatre Company September 21–October 22. Tickets are available at taproottheatre.org.

Todd Matthews is a Seattle-based writer, editor, and journalist whose work has appeared in 425, Capitol Hill Seattle Blog, City Arts, HistoryLink, Real Change, Seattle, South Sound, and other publications in print and online over the past 25 years. A graduate of the University of Washington and the author of three non-fiction books, he has earned four awards from the Society of Professional Journalists.