



**MAMIE'S MAN:** the director's inspiration for the play's main character comes from his grandmother.

# Delta don

## Theatrically speaking, Kenny Leon is a ladies' man

by Carolyn Clay

**D**irector Kenny Leon may not be from the Mississippi Delta, site of Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland's remarkable chronicle of her escape from cracker-country prostitution to civil-rights activism and PhD-dom. But he knows the neighborhood. Leon, who is artistic head of Atlanta's Alliance Theatre Company, grew up in rural poverty, where there was no running water but the "colorful characters" ran like faucets. That's one reason he was attracted to Holland's play *From the Mississippi Delta*, which kicks off the Huntington Theatre Company season, September 10 through October 10. There was also the matter of divine intervention.

The laid-back, soft-Southern-spoken Leon recalls: "Originally I said no when I got the offer. With my schedule, I maybe had 15 offers to go out this season, and I can only go out once or twice. And this is our 25th-anniversary season at the Alliance. Then my grandmother passed, who I was very close to. Until I was 11 or 12, it was just me and her on a little farm-type situation in Tallahassee, Florida . . . all these people in *From the Mississippi Delta*, I know those people. I re-read the play and I was really considering doing it just because of her. God said, 'You're supposed to do this play, and you're supposed to do it now.' Then I got really excited about the beauty of the play, the power of the language, what we can do musically to move the play in a universal way."

So it is that Leon is in Boston, staging *From the Mississippi Delta* with an other-

wise female team of set designer Marjorie Kellogg, costume designer Susan Mickey, lighting designer Ann Wrightson, and actresses Ebony Jo-Ann, Mona Wyatt, and Melody Garrett, who play everyone in the play, from the mystical midwife and mother-figure Aint Baby (based on Holland's own mother, who was killed in a suspected KKK firebombing in 1965), to fairground entertainer Miss Candy Quick, whose below-the-waist way with a cigarette has the ability "to create frenzy in the menfolkes."

Playing on a women's team is no problem for Leon, who is particularly committed to distaff drama. "I think theater is the richest art-form there is," he explains. "It's the only art-form that really reveals life itself. And if we don't have all the voices participating, then we're not painting an accurate picture. For so many years we

haven't heard the voices of women on our stages, we haven't heard their stories. And I find women to be more sensitive in terms of how we relate to other human beings, to have a better ear and a better eye about what's happening in the world."

Among the women in *his* life, Leon likes best to reminisce about the Aint Baby stand-in, his Grandma Mamie, who held sway over 15 children, 51 grandchildren, and 121 great grandchildren. Elements of his grandmother's "beautiful" funeral, and of the rich black-church tradition of his youth, will find their way into *From the Mississippi Delta*, particularly in the music. "Dwight Andrews, who does all of the music for August Wilson, is working with the ladies on the arrangements for these songs. And the women in the play can really sing. That was crucial to me. So the universal language sort of takes us through the piece. Dwight is an expert on the origins of African-American music as well as classical music. So he comes in and brings back that 1700, 1800 feel. You can't write some of it on paper. You're just dealing with those notes, and bending the notes, in a way that's unique to rural African-Americans and goes back to some of their African origins."

Leon has come a long way from Grandma Mamie's north-Florida farm. After college and a brief stint at law school, he spent nine years as an actor with Atlanta's outreach-oriented Academy Theatre. He then collaborated with playwright Barbara Lebow on the PBS film *The People of the Brick*, in which the homeless were recruited to put on a play about their own experiences. A 1987 NEA directing fellowship brought him into the League of Regional Theatres loop, but Leon remains somewhat evangelical about the uses of theater. And working in racially troubled Boston, though he tip-toes around the subject, is part of that mission.

"I think a lot of times it's only what's in your head. This is my first time to visit Boston; it's like some people never get to the South but they have impressions. And there are many things you hear about Boston in terms of the race issue here. This is a story that needs to be told in Boston just because of that reality or perception. It's one of those plays that's culturally specific but can really empower and inspire all of us as human beings. That's what theater really is — taking a specific cultural experience and letting other people peek into that hole, where they don't feel guilty or intimidated. Theater is a safe haven for all of us to grow and feel good about life. Every night we have the opportunity to get 800 people in a theater and have them laugh and think and cry and change and be moved to action." □