

# Up from the delta

*A powerful tale of one woman's rise from poverty in the Jim Crow South*

By Eric Secoy

TAB Correspondent

**D**r. Endesha Ida Mae Holland has an unlikely background for a PhD.

Born African-American and poor in the Mississippi Delta, the poorest area in the poorest state in the Jim Crow South, Holland was stealing and turning tricks on the streets of Greenwood while still in her teens. Then the civil rights movement came to town and she realized she had alternatives.

## THEATER

The story of Holland's passage from the delta to a University of Minnesota doctorate is retold in her play *From the Mississippi Delta*,

which opens the Huntington Theatre's fall season this week.

"Another person would have reveled in the sordidness of the background," says Ebony Jo-Ann, one of the three actors featured in *Mississippi Delta*. "[Holland] kind of skips through it, without making light of the subject.

"Now, I mean you get the impact, but she doesn't wallow in it. It's not oppressive. She's very kind to herself" and to everyone involved," Jo-Ann adds.

The three actors play several characters, of different ages, genders and races. "I have no idea how many characters I play," Jo-Ann says. "I'm Aint Baby [Holland's mom] a lot of the time. I'm Phelia, the daughter, sometimes. I'm several different men. I'm a white man, a black man. I'm a white woman named Miss Lawrence.

"This type of play *makes* you work. It requires lots of character study. [It] requires that your stamina be where it needs to be and it requires that you dig deep" inside yourself and expose yourself to the audience, Jo-Ann says.

The approach is similar to improvisational theater, according to Jo-Ann, because she must rely on her own voice and body, rather than the props or the set or the music, to create the characters. "All the characters — everything — must be built from the inside out."

Kenny Leon, artistic director of Atlanta's Alliance Theatre Company, is directing the production. His approach to the play strips away many of the external props and crutches the actors might use to avoid the character work involved.



The Huntington Theater's production of *From the Mississippi Delta*, a tale of a woman's struggles and triumphs in the deep South, features Ebony Jo-Ann, Mona Wyatt and Melody Garrett.

"Many actors aren't capable or willing to do that because they have the idea that the director will tell them exactly what to do," says Jo-Ann. "I love the rehearsal process because that's where the creating is done."

Another feature of the play is the blues, which, like Holland, grew up in the Delta before moving north. The show's *a cappella* songs for the actors and incidental music are just some of Holland's tools for keeping the play's sometimes horrifying events from overwhelming her narrative. Another is that she plays tribute to all these different people she's met in the civil rights struggle.

"Endesha has an incredible gift for telling a story," Jo-Ann says. "It's a tool for teaching and enlightenment without preaching, with loads of compassion and humor. I am sure that writing this piece served as a healing balm for her because it certainly serves as a healing balm for me."

*From the Mississippi Delta runs through Oct. 10 at the Huntington Theatre Company. Tickets are \$18-\$38. Call: 266-0800. □*