



## [Theater Records](#)

### **Copyright Notice:**

This material may be protected by copyright law (U.S. Code, Title 17). Researchers are liable for any infringement. For more information, visit [www.mnhs.org/copyright](http://www.mnhs.org/copyright).

For two decades, Lou Bellamy's  
Penumbra Theatre has been the  
white-hot center of black drama.

# Soul Survivor

by Russell Smith

LAST APRIL, LOU BELLAMY, the artistic director of St. Paul's Penumbra Theatre Company, flew to New York to audition actors for an upcoming show. The trip was a bust. "Those people out of Juilliard *ahhh entiahhly* too English," he says, affecting a British thespian's accent. "I

need someone who's black and knows it, Jack!"

Bellamy is an artist who knows who he is, where he is from and why he's here. His 19-year-old theater is considered one of the best—perhaps *the* best—of a handful of American stages dedicated to works about black people.

"You don't know anything...not the pure heart, the pumping black heart."

—Imamu Amiri Baraka

The Penumbra's home is in the historically African-American section of St. Paul: the Rondo community, which in 1962 was split by the construction of I-94. Bellamy's theater is housed in the Hallie Q. Brown-Martin Luther King Center—a nondescript brick community center near Selby and Dale avenues. It's a blandly functional building in an actively troubled neighborhood—a haven to a job service, a literacy program, a preschool and the Penumbra. The crooked little 260-seat theater is smaller than many high-school auditoriums. Bellamy, who grew up four blocks away from the King Center, would like better facilities, but he'll never move the Penumbra out of its neighborhood. What the interstate cut in two, Bellamy and the Penumbra have striven to put back together.

"For African-American performers, it's a whole different vibe," says Penumbra company member Marvette Knight. The theater attracts a powerful mix of black artists: Hannibal Peterson, the Grammy-nominated jazz trumpet player from Houston; Obie-winning performance artist Laurie Carlos, a Penumbra regular nationally known as a



## **Partially Scanned Material**

The remainder of this page/item has not been digitized due to copyright considerations. The original can be viewed at the Minnesota Historical Society's Gale Family Library in Saint Paul, Minnesota. For more information, visit [www.mnhs.org/library/](http://www.mnhs.org/library/).