

of the 1860 Homestead Act giving U.S. citizens the right to free or inexpensive acreage in the fertile Midwest.

FLYIN' WEST focuses on a fictional family of women led by the feisty Sophie Washington, who typified many of the women who settled the Midwest in the late 19th century. While many settlers lived in traditional family groups, by 1890, a quarter of a million unmarried or widowed women were running their own farms and ranches.

Sophie, her sister, Fannie and the matriarchal former slave Miss Leah share a home on a wheat farm outside Nicodemus, that, like other attractive property owned by blacks, becomes the target of white speculators. Beset with the threat to their land, the women also confront evidence of abuse of Sophie's and Fannie's younger sister, Minnie by her husband Frank. The action is interspersed with Miss Leah's haunting recollections of life under slavery.

The period set, designed by Daniel Proett, will bring a touch of Kansas to New Brunswick, incorporating prairie grass and flowers imported from that state along with various Midwest antiques.

Pearl Cleage, who is known as a performance artist and feminist, has written a naturalistic, linear work in FLYIN' WEST that broaches contemporary issues from a historic perspective.

Ms. Cleage was inspired to write the play by the work of the crusading black journalist Ida B. Wells, whose Memphis newspaper columns of the 1890s exhorted African Americans to leave that city to escape riots and lynchings by white racists.

"Seven thousand left Memphis in one month," Ms. Cleage said. "I was so in awe that a black woman could say that and people would listen."

She began writing about Memphis but when her research led her to the Homestead Act and the black women pioneers, FLYIN' WEST was born.

"It was clear to me that the things they had to struggle against were the same as in the contemporary world such as racism and domestic violence," Cleage said.

FLYIN' WEST premiered to critical acclaim last season in Atlanta. Noted one critic: "There is a trove of theatrical alchemy in FLYIN' WEST..."

A prolific writer, Ms. Cleage currently is playwright-in-residence at Spelman College, her alma mater. She is the founding editor of the literary magazine Catalyst, a columnist for the Atlanta Tribune and a regular contributor to Essence magazine. She is artistic director of the Just Us Theater Company in Atlanta. Her plays include LATE BUS TO MECCA and CHAIN, co-produced last year by The Women's Project & Productions and the New Federal Theater in New York; and HOSPICE, winner of Audelco Awards for best play and playwright.