Adversity inspires diversity

Arts groups pin hopes for survival on drawing a wider audience

By Rebecca J. Reitze

When an arts organization calls the N.C. Arts Council to say it hopes to attract a more ethnically diverse crowd, the first thing deputy director Nancy Trevillion says is: "That's great, but please make this a serious commitment, not a one-time event, and think long and hard about it.

"We get them to really access who their audience is, and who they want their audience to be," Trevillion said.

"Think about the content that you have. Does it make sense to market this to a more diverse audience? If so, you have to build on whatever relationships you have. It takes effort to make connections in the community."

Many North Carolina groups now "do this without thinking," she said. Others are just now making the effort.

"They're not just doing it because it's the right thing to do, or to qualify for state funding. "They are doing this because they have to, in order to survive," Trevillion said.

This fall, a curator look at the Triangl e arts agenda reveals a serious effort to present high-caliber artists of color across all disciplines. Two organizations—Trevillation considered trailblazers—PlayMakers Repertory Company and Duke University's Nasher Art Museum—are continuing their commitments to diverse programming by presenting a world premiere play about the Freedom Riders and a major photography exhibit from the African Diaspora.

Even in the rarified halls of classical music, there's a remarkable twist this fall. The annual Prelude Festival, when one classical ensemble tours the Triangle, will feature the Harlem Quartet, and for the first time, the festival will include a concert at N.C. Central University.

Trevillion said he made reaching diverse audiences a priority when he arrived at Duke five years ago.

As the Nasher Museum's first contemporary art curator, he's pushed to acquire works by artists of color, organized a Barry Hendricks retrospective, and was host to a talk with D.J. Passe's Drive of The Bootis.

"It's been a really important effort for us here," Schoomaker said. "Durham is 40 percent to 50 percent African American, and we'd be foolish not to serve our community. That's our mission, and we really can really have an impact."

The Nasher's fall photography exhibit, "Becoming: Photographs from the Wedge Collection," features pictures from the African Diaspora from

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an unusual source: A Jamaican-Canadian dentist with a very serious hobby. Through Jan. 8, the museum will exhibit 110 images from Dr. Kenneth Montgomery's collection.

"Black identity is a definite theme," Schomaker said, but viewers of all ethnic backgrounds should find the images accessible. "There's a kid in a Cub Scout uniform and girls playing with Barbie dolls. These are photographs people can relate to."

Trovillion praised the Nasher not only for its bold programming, but for taking intermediary steps to get people through the door. For example, there's a free open house celebrating "Becoming" on Nov. 10, plus a film screening and curator talk. But Trovillion also points out that, "more often than not, arts organizations have to be willing to go beyond their own venues to get people in."

A model organization in that regard, she said, is PlayMakers, the professional theater based in Chapel Hill. Every mainstage show is complemented by a series of events at local libraries and bookstores.

To promote "The Pach- man Hour," a world premiere musical about civil rights activists jailed in Mississippi, the theater plans an especially ambitious schedule of free events, including a historical discussion at Durham's Hartig Heritage Center and a reading at Chapel Hill's Hargraves Community Center.

"The Pachman Hour" actually debuted at UNC last December as a student production, Pittsboro-based playwright Mike Willey, known locally for his one-act shows and school assemblies, said he was "absolutely ecstatic" when PlayMakers decided to stage the professional premiere. Now he hopes the PlayMakers staging will draw a wider audience for African-American theatrical works.

In recent years, regional theaters like PlayMakers have produced more and more works by black playwrights. A few examples include Pulitzer Prize finalists Duett Ondundomuzi, MacArthur "genius" grant winner Lynn Nottage, and the late August Wilson, whose "Fences" was staged at PlayMakers last year. But there's a counter trend that concerns Wiley: the rise of touring plays by Tyler Perry, the entertainment mogul behind the "Madea" franchise, and some, his impersonators.

"There are a lot of corporate Perry plays around," Wiley said. "And in the end everything is worked out through prayer. There's a place for that. But I would imagine that people who go to see certain types of African-American theater may not even know that a person like Lynn Nottage exists."

"PlayMakers has no quota for producing works by and featuring artists of color, but some other arts organizations have found setting thresholds is the best way to reach out," Nancy Lambert, executive director of the Raleigh Chamber Music Guild, has a policy of bringing in at least one minority group each year, and making sure those artists make community appearances.

But this is the first year that a minority ensemble will be featured at the Pachman Festival, an annual series of concerts jointly presented by the guild and area colleges.

The Harlem Quartet musicians, who are of African and Hispanic descent, will perform four concerts Sept. 8-11. The hitch is that all of their programs are classical; the second features jazz compositions by the likes of Chick Corea and Wynton Marsalis. During the days, the musicians will offer master classes and visit Raleigh's Ligon Magnet Middle School. Linmar Gavilan, a Cuban-born violinist, said the quartet members take school visits seriously, and that musicians of color face additional pressure to perform well.

"We have to always be on top of our game," he said. "We have to prove to disbelievers that we are the real deal."

"Classical music doesn't have it easy when it comes to diversity, either onstage or in the audience," agreed Emi Kang, executive director of Carolina Performing Arts. "Neither does opera, nor ballet. It's just a matter of historical fact."

These are art forms rooted in Central European traditions. When he came to UNC from the Detroit Symphony, one change Kang endeavored was booking performers from across ethnic and artistic spectrums.

"We really believe that the arts can be a window on the world," Kang said. "UNC's full dance offerings are crowding "Taiwan's Cloud and Dance Theatre returns in October, an Indian dance troupe visits in November, and dance season opens Sept. 23 with Philadanco. That performance will include a new work by Durham native and Alvin Ailey dancer Hope Boykin commissioned by UNC, and the company's visit will coincide with a symposium on black choreographers.

Will Philadanco attract more people of color than say, the Sept. 7 season-opener concert by Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie? Most likely. But Kang sees that as a false dichotomy when it comes to diversity.

"It's true: You can probably guess on which nights you're going to see people of color," Kang said. "But our goal is not to get young, African-American men to come see the Mur- tinsky Orchestra. We present a broad offering, and let everyone find a place on our ro- sorate. We are fortunate that we can do that, and we take that responsibility very seri- ously."

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