

MEMO

TO: Amilcar Shabazz, Afro-Am Dept., Chair

Gina Kaufman, Theater Dept., Chair

Gil McCauley, Theater

FROM: Judyie Al-Bilali, Theater and CHC

RE: Progress Report and Renovations Proposal for Laboratory Theater at New Africa House

DATE: 22 May 2017

History and Impact

Located in the basement of New Africa House, the recently reinvigorated and renamed Laboratory Theater, is an historic space. Since the Afro-Am department's founding in the 1970s and up until the past several years that area of the basement has been a site for performing and visual arts; alternately as a theater and dance rehearsal studio, a classroom, a sculpture studio and more. Dance, music, theater, poetry, clothing and hair fashion, etc. are the means by which we transmit and preserve knowledge in the African Diaspora. This tradition of combining arts and culture with intellectual discourse and rigorous scholarly research is crucial to the effectiveness of any Black Studies program.

As I have shared previously, I have academic and artistic roots in New Africa House. As a BDIC (Theater and Afro-Am) student I trained with Prof Diana Ramos' Dance Theatre Ensemble and studied Afro-American music history with Prof Archie Shepp. As a graduate student I performed and directed theater pieces in the Augusta Savage Gallery. Now, as a professor I am committed to reviving activity in this building in the spirit of creative expression and research. Given the urgency of our current political and social landscape alongside the catastrophic condition of the global natural environment the time is now to support young people's leadership and innovation. The Laboratory Theater is specifically dedicated to encourage the intersection of creativity and citizenship on our campus through the lens of Black Studies.

Current and Proposed Programming

Following planning conversations with Prof Shabazz (subsequent to conversations with previous chair Prof Brace) and Prof McCauley last November, my applied theater class Brown Paper Studio, took on the challenge of cleaning the basement to prepare for use as a theater. The students cleaned debris and trash, consolidated boxes and archival materials, moved furniture, created a stage space and found chairs for an audience. With the generous assistance of the Theater department's loaned platforms, theater faculty donations of rugs and a sound system from the Afro-Am department we successfully opened to a full house on a snowy December 17 night. We remounted graduate student Jen Onopa's original devised theater project, *I Am Ulysses* coupled with a staged reading by Brown Paper Studio of the prose poem *that's what he told us* by Hattie Gossett. The sense of enthusiasm, cooperation, agency and commitment from students was evident from the start. With minimal publicity, no budget and volunteer energies the Lab Theater has produced an inaugural season of nine events:

Dec – Grand Opening; *I Am Ulysses & thats what he told us*

Jan - Kwaanza Celebration organized by Prof Shabazz

Feb – Theater in Motion; Black theater touring company from New York produced by Josh Odom

Mar – Tuzko; a night of music produced by Miguel Paredes

April –*HerStory*; women of color touring production from New York produced by David Ke with support from the Yuri Kochiama Cultural Center, The Latin American Cultural Center and CMASS

Dysfunctioning Just Fine; original production by Meredith Wells

Impromptu Drag Show; produced by Jordan Reed & Co.

Feya Kaku Quintet; South African trumpeter's quintet produced in cooperation with Jazz Shares

May- *Working On It: A Story of Struggle, Love & Donuts*; original production by UMass alumni Nick Baker and current theater undergrads

On-going - Drum Circle organized by Roy Hernan Watson-Badell on Friday evenings

Students worked collaboratively as actors, directors, house managers, stage managers, musicians, designers, tech crew and publicists. They submitted performance reports for almost every event; audience attendance ranged from 25 – 83 with an average attendance of 51.

For the upcoming 2017-18 academic year Prof McCauley and I have classes scheduled for spring and fall respectively, both will be cross-listed between Theater and Afro Am. My class, Performance + Research (298P), is a practicum course focusing on studio training plus the day-to-day management of a creative performance space. In the spring Prof McCauley will teach his Black Theater Workshop course.

In addition to these courses, two student groups have already proposed productions for the Lab Theater's 2017 fall season. We also plan to establish the Lab Theater as an internship site for students enrolled in the Multicultural Theater Practice Certificate. There is more than sufficient programming, curricular needs and community events to maintain a full schedule consistent with the goals and objectives of the Theater department and the Afro Am studies department cooperatively.

Short Term Renovations

Following is the list of necessary upgrades identified at our May 18 meeting:

Sprung wood floor

Stackable chairs with trolley storage

Lighting instruments, equipment and light stands

Sound equipment

Storage locker

Ceiling painted

Doors secured with coded locks

These basic renovations will allow us to use the space as a classroom more comfortably and securely. Next year we plan to consult with Theater dept.'s design faculty and with campus facilities to explore more extensive renovations to the Lab Theater.

Theater Management

Similar to Commonwealth Honors College's management of the Events Hall, the Laboratory Theater is managed by Afro-Am studies in cooperation with the Theater department. Given the success of this first experimental spring season, together we will determine how the facility will be programmed. Situated in the Afro-Am Studies Dept. the Theater's offerings would naturally foreground African Diasporic arts, culture and scholarship. This in no way implies exclusivity and our first experimental season presented a rich variety of artistic voices in addition to Black arts and artists. Our programming addresses an on-going need for cultural and intellectual self-determination for African American people.

To date I have been in charge of scheduling for the space and with the cooperation of Prof Shabazz and Prof McCauley will continue as an advisor and administrator. The first task of my fall practicum class is to discuss and with the use of performing arts techniques explore systems for self-governance within the Lab Theater. This past semester I observed how for the students this space became truly a laboratory for new society. In addition to discovering beautiful art it is also cultivating the art of mutual cooperation - our most critical curriculum across all disciplines.

I'll conclude with an excerpt from my 'Art, Legacy & Community' narrative. As I reviewed my original proposal I confirmed how the creation of the Laboratory Theater at New Africa House is consistent with my on-going creative research:

*"Our area of Western Massachusetts boasts an unusually rich heritage of African American scholarship, arts and culture that over the last fifty years has attracted some of the most influential figures in the Pan-Africanist canon along with legends of the Black Arts Movement. Since the 1960s when student activism gave rise to the WEB DuBois Dept. of Afro American Studies, an exceptional community evolved and UMass Amherst became a vibrant crossroads for Black culture and consciousness. UMass and the Five College Consortium has hosted an impressive roster of luminaries; James Baldwin, Chinua Achebe, Nelson Stevens, Pearl Primus, Johnnetta Cole, Max Roach, Archie Shepp, Joe Sann, Aishah Rahman, Dorrance Hill, Samuel R. Delaney, Diana Ramos, Paul Carter Harrison and the list literally goes on. **'Art, Legacy & Community' celebrates these many great contributors with the intention of paving the way for the current and upcoming generation of change agents.** The project equally honors the profound impact of grassroots organizing and activism. The concept of Sankofa, as expressed in a proverb of the Akan language states "se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki", literally translated means "it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot". Sankofa teaches us that we must go back to our roots in order to move forward. Through the craft of theater, 'Art, Legacy & Community' embodies the principle of Sankofa and seeks to illuminate our remarkably influential history and in doing so, to foster a dynamic future vision for the all the people of this region."*