SDC MEMBERS CREATE NEW BLACK ARTS INSTITUTE

BY MARY B. ROBINSON

“I wanted to make sure that the young folks didn’t get so far removed from their culture that they lost their heart and souls—their blackness, unapologetically, the pride and integrity of their ancestors,” says director, actor, and writer Ruben Santiago-Hudson about the need for the Black Arts Institute.

“In all the places I’ve taught, there has not been one place where students of color have not had a complaint about not having that part of them invited into the room, and having people who look like them teach them sometime,” says director, actor, and teacher Michele Shay. “So a schism gets created, splitting them, and to reach their full potential, that needs to be healed.”

“These three SDC Members, along with Member Phylicia Rashad—all veteran, award-winning theatre artists who have had major acting and directing careers—founded a program that is already having a profound impact on the lives of the young African American theatre artists who have participated in it. For five weeks in the summer of 2018, 30 actors took an immersion course that delved not only into African American theatre but also into black music, dance, history, politics, literature, and culture. This program’s goal was to enable these theatre artists to become, in Santiago-Hudson’s words, “more aware of the glory of who they are.”

“I have a commitment to wanting to help the next generation,” says Shay, echoing all the founders, “so that we’re offering the industry profound, capable, and spiritually conscious artists who can eventually lead.”

The Black Arts Institute originated out of many conversations that were happening between artists and institutions about the need to ensure that the
next generation of theatre artists was provided a deep immersion in their culture, rooted in the African American canon and the Black Arts Movement. Henderson, Santiago-Hudson, Shay, and Rashad, as well as the “fifth founder,” poet Sonia Sanchez, all had relationships with both the Billie Holiday Theatre in Brooklyn and the Stella Adler Studio of Acting. Henderson connected the leaders of these two institutions, Dr. Indira Ettaroo, Artistic Director of the Billie Holiday, and Tom Oppenheim, Executive Director of Adler; and when Ettaroo and Oppenheim first met one-on-one, they knew this was an idea whose time had come.

The program took its name from the Black Arts Movement, which emerged from the Black Power Movement and burst onto the scene in the mid 1960s in the form of artists’ circles, writers’ workshops, theatre groups, dance troupes, new publishing ventures, bookstores, and cultural centers. It had a presence in practically every community and college campus in the country with an appreciable African American population, and its goals were to affirm the autonomy of African American artists and urge them to create art that would awaken consciousness in the black community. Sanchez, one of the key members of the Black Arts Movement, taught a course in African American literature at San Francisco State in 1966 (the first of its kind in the country at a predominantly white university), and is the co-editor of SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader. “She’s at an extraordinary moment in her life,” says Oppenheim about the 84-year-old poet. “She feels like she’s ignited with a prophetic fire.”

“So August always said that he was fired in the kiln of the Black Arts Movement,” says Henderson about playwright August Wilson, whose work inspired early conversations about the need for this program for young actors. “You’ve got to start with what inspired August.”

The choice was made to house the program at the Billie Holiday Theatre in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn because it is a historically black theatre in an African American community. Artistic Director Ettaroo had previously worked with Santiago-Hudson and Henderson when they served as Co-Artistic Directors for August Wilson’s American Century Cycle, which Ettaroo produced at the Greene Space at WNYC in Lower Manhattan in 2013. Shay and Rashad also participated in this series—in fact, the four of them directed seven of the 10 live-recorded readings.

“Central Brooklyn is the largest community of African descent in the country,” says Ettaroo about the area where the Billie Holiday is located. “I lived in Africa for a couple of years and this feels the closest to that of any place I’ve ever lived. The way people are with each other, the way they greet each other, the layers of noise—it’s not like Midtown noise. There’s this incredible polyrhythm of sound that is so akin to Africa.”

A weeklong pilot to test the curriculum was held at the Billie Holiday in January 2018, during which Rashad, Henderson, Santiago-Hudson, and Shay led a combination of master classes, lectures, and monologue work from plays by African American writers. Jason Gray, who works at the Adler Studio and became the program’s administrator, describes the week as “euphoric—more than any of us expected, to have that energy every day in the room.” A riveting lecture by Sanchez had not only the students but also the program’s founders “on the edge of their seats, like young kids,” he says.

“It was so clear in that trial run how much they wanted it,” says Henderson about the students. “They were hungry for it and they weren’t getting it.” Rashad, who coached them in monologues from Wilson’s plays, says that it was “exciting to see them move to a deeper level of understanding of what it means to portray a human being whose full humanity is investigated beyond what is seen on the page.”

“We teach a different way,” says Santiago-Hudson about the founding faculty’s contrasting styles, which he feels gave the students “different elements to add onto your craft. Michele is loving and coddling, I’m harder and poppin’, Stephen is very cerebral, and Phyllicia has her way that she brings in ‘your heart is the seat of God’ kind of teaching.”

It was easy to see, says Santiago-Hudson, “how important it was—not only to them, but to us, as people that are now carrying on the legacy. We talk about Frances Foster, Gloria Foster, Moses Gunn, Lonnie Elder, Douglas Turner Ward, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier—those people who carried the torch for us for so long. Now it’s us.”

For the five-week summer intensive, emerging theatre artists from all over the country sent in videos or auditioned in person, wrote essays, and had phone interviews with Gray, who had the job of winnowing the applicants down to the 30 who would participate. “I was looking for people who weren’t interested necessarily in being seen for casting by someone like Phyllicia or Ruben—you can weed out that energy pretty quickly,” he says. Instead, he wanted to assemble a group of “folks who in their essays seemed—those people who...”

Accepted students found creative ways to raise the necessary money for their tuition fees. Besides running GoFundMe campaigns, “There’s one brother that sold fish and chicken dinners,” says Santiago-Hudson. “Didn’t know where he was going to stay when he got here.” The 30 students who attended were from BFA and MFA programs around the country, as well as early career actors, and they expressed a range of reasons for wanting to be part of the intensive, from wanting to expand their knowledge of African American history to dissecting great works with master teachers to learning and
growing with other black theatre artists. "Black work is what keeps my drums beating and reminds me of where I come from," says one student.

A typical day during the five weeks started in a way familiar to anyone who’s participated in a theatre training program: half of the group attended a voice and speech class, and the other half attended movement, followed by music and dance classes. But this was a training program with a difference: every teacher and every student was of African descent, and the approach to every class reflected that. Chantal Jean-Pierre, a voice and dialect expert, taught a class on mastering the Liberian dialect. Musician Bill Sims Jr. led the students in an exploration of blues lyrics. Choreographer Ronald K. Alexander taught his ballet-based/African-inspired approach to dance. Percussionist Ron McBee shared the history of each of his percussive instruments, then passed them out and led a jam session. Dancer and choreographer Camille A. Brown taught a class on African American social dance. And Carol Lynn Maillard and Louise Robinson, from the group Sweet Honey in the Rock, held a master class in singing.

"It’s different from a regular voice class—it’s speaking and singing from a place that just awakens a tone in the body that feels like home," says Shay about the students’ experience of working with artists from Sweet Honey in the Rock. "It’s very ancient, very old, but when that happens, the fight for security and approval that every young artist feels—that disappears. There’s a true, organic sense of a right to express and be creative, which is what we spend hours and hours in acting class trying to get people to just sit in. But that, within the rituals of our culture, happens automatically.

"I feel like there is an innate body wisdom, like an integrated wisdom between the head, heart, and body, that is a part of our culture. It is definitely part of the African culture, which, with Western thinking per se, the mind and the heart gets separated. So what we’re trying to do is put it all back together so it’s one unit for them."

Other speakers included Bill Forchion, a clown and mask expert who talked about his 30-year career in the circus industry; Cynthia Henderson, an Ithaca College professor who lectured on “Theater for Social Change”; Jonathan McCrory, who spoke of his experiences as Artistic Director of the National Black Theatre; Hollis King, an artist whose career has included heading a major advertising firm and creating album art for many prominent artists; and Larry Powell, who screened his new film and spoke about the importance of investigating new forms of storytelling. Actor Tonya Pinkins gave a master class in singing; director Seret Scott spoke about her early involvement in the Free Southern Theatre; actors Brandon Dirden and Carra Patterson spoke about their experience acting in August Wilson plays and navigating the theatre and film industries; and playwright Donja Love taught a playwriting workshop focused on an experiential understanding of different identities. The intensive extended beyond the arts to include politics and history as well. Public intellectual and professor Michael Eric Dyson spoke about the role of artists to reflect the times and hold humanity accountable. Professor Frank Leon Roberts, who created the first Black Lives Matter course at NYU, spoke about the movement’s history and tenets. Billie Holiday Director Etwaroo gave a two-hour talk on African American history, covering more than 50 years, from Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance—a lecture that left many students overwhelmed by the connections they felt between the horrors of 100 years ago and our country’s current moment. When one student asked, “What can we do?” Etwaroo told them to draw strength from each other and quoted Amiri Baraka: "To be optimistic at a time like this is to be revolutionary."

All the students read selections from SOS—Calling All Black People in preparation for the course, and the book’s co-editor Sanchez traveled up from her home in Philadelphia weekly to teach and lecture; on one occasion, she led students on a field trip to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem and showed them how to use its library. "They hadn’t gone!" says Santiago-Hudson. "These are black students, and no one has ever told them that’s important. They didn’t even know that the Schomburg is a resource for them."

"The reality is, we can’t get mad at them," Henderson says about some of the students’ gaps in knowledge of African American arts and literature. "They can’t just spontaneously know, and they’re not being told at the schools they go to. That’s the very reason that we have to do this. We can’t blame them for not knowing it. We have to provide."

Speaking to the students about her own first experience of the Schomburg’s resources, Sanchez said, “My life changed forever, and I’m just hoping that your life will change forever also. You cannot act a fool any more, when you have this information. This is our business, our history, our herstory, our life. That’s why you’re so important—that’s why I love you all so much—because you will continue this great tradition."

The cornerstone of the program was scene study classes, which focused on works from the Wilson canon, as well as Suzan-Lori Parks’ Topdog/Underdog (with women playing the roles instead of men), Skeleton Crew
Immersion in plays by dramatists of African descent was an essential aspect of the program for these young theatre artists. "They’re reading Lynn Nottage, and then they go back and they find out about these other writers that inspired Lynn Nottage. It’s thrilling, it really is," says Henderson. "To see them relish and celebrate the culture, it’s amazing to see. It is amazing to witness them rejoice in themselves.

"Shakespeare may be arguably the greatest playwright in the English language, but he ain’t the only one got a tongue," Henderson says, quoting from The African Company Presents Richard III. He recalled seeing the play at Rutgers University, with Wilson in the audience. "He was in the ‘amen corner’, shouting," he says about the playwright’s reaction to that line. "He really did say, ‘Woo! Woo! Woo!’ Amiri would say, ‘You study to be a writer, you don’t study one writer, you study all the writers. You read everything, but what your voice is going to be, what you’re going to write about, now that’s you.’ Because everybody writes from their own cultural base.”

"One of the things that I really try to make them aware of is what the writer is trying to tell them," says Shay, in answer to a question about how being a director affects her work as a teacher. "How to understand what the story is and how to build character based on that and how to go beyond that. That’s because I’m a Lloyd Richards baby. He trained us to serve the playwright, to serve the story first, to create an ensemble.”

As Santiago-Hudson points out, all the founding faculty are, in fact, "Lloyd Richards babies." If August Wilson was forged in the kiln of the Black Arts Movement, the actor/directors who created this program were forged in Wilson’s plays, under the guidance of Richards, whose influence on the lives of so many theatre artists is incalculable. Dean of the Yale School of Drama and Head of the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center, Richards was the director of six of the original productions of Wilson’s plays. He was the first African American director to work on Broadway—in 1959, he directed Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun, for which he was nominated for a Tony Award, the first of many. He went on to win the Tony for Best Director for Fences in 1987.

"I got a chance to spend some precious hours, after I’d been around for about 50 years, with Lloyd Richards," says Henderson. "Lloyd crystallized and synthesized every road I had been down, all the things that got poured in. And then August came along, and he was a poet-playwright. You have to have the knowledge of all that music and history and politics and socioeconomics and culture—it all pours into being able to appreciate that big family album of those 10 plays and those characters we’re all related to.”

"I know that, for me, doing August Wilson, working with Lloyd—that changed my life," says Shay. "It changed how I did things. What I’ve seen, directing August around the country in different colleges and places, is that once people experience that sense of self that’s offered from doing this canon, it doesn’t leave them. It gives them something that’s very stick-to-your-ribs.”

"August always used to talk about finding your song," says Santiago-Hudson, “and when your song is accepted in the world, you’ve truly arrived. And I’m trying to help them find their
song. I’m trying to help them find their voice. The song is your voice: you’re comfortable inside your skin and you’re being who you are.”

The students who attended the first Black Arts Summer Intensive talk about wanting to write, direct, and self-produce as well as act. “This program wasn’t just acting,” says actor and writer Steve Gray about his experience in the five-week program. “It was getting to the essence of who we are, it’s remembering our culture. It’s identifying with our past in order to create these characters or write these characters or perform these characters.”

Deep bonds have formed among the participating students, many of whom talk about finding “my tribe” or “a long-lost family.” “This is a unique thing, to be among a whole collective of other black people who are theatre artists,” says Alicia Stith. “We wanted to find a way to stick together, because we haven’t had that up until this point. And so we’re trying to figure out what we want to do next.”

Stith organizes weekly group meetings at which unproduced plays from the Schomburg Center are read and discussed. The Schomburg has offered space for the group to do public readings, and several students are also talking about writing their own theatre piece based on material they’ve discovered at the Center. And every week, they swap the books they’ve been reading on their own since the intensive ended. “I have a book of names—I swear, there’s like six or seven pages—of people I need to know and read,” says Gabriela Urquia. “When you’re done with the intensive, you have to follow up, keep up—you can’t learn it all in the intensive; it’s not possible. But they gave us great resources, and we made great connections with each other. And I’ve been reading nonstop since.”

Jak Watson, a classically trained actor who loves Shakespeare, confirms that. “This experience woke something deep inside of me that I realize has slowly been subdued,” he says. “I was unlocking parts of myself that I hadn’t had contact with in a long time. After living with the ‘double consciousness’ for so long, in training program after training program and institution after institution, you start to lose track of who you really are because you’ve gone so far deep into what you’re trying to become.”

“Walking into a room full of people at a predominantly white institution, you feel that you have to present a section of yourself and keep the rest at bay,” says Urquia. “It’s not that anyone is telling you to do that—for me, it’s something that I automatically did. Being in a room full of black people, there’s this ease and this weight off my shoulders that I didn’t realize was there until I was in a position to not carry it.”

“It’s super freeing,” says Stith, who talks about the need she now feels to do work that matters and “that is for us, written by us, about us.” She quotes Santiago-Hudson, channeling the legendary Richards: “If you have the chance to hold somebody’s attention for a few hours, you can’t waste their time. Especially when there’s so much to be said.”

Planning has begun for the second week-long winter and five-week summer intensives, which will once again be a partnership between the Stella Adler Studio and the Billie Holiday Theatre. The collaboration between the two institutions “feels like something really new under the sun, and the answer to so much, both artistically and socially,” says Adler Executive Director Oppenheim.

One of the Black Arts Institute’s biggest needs is funding to help cover tuition fees, which several accepted applicants weren’t able to put together this past year. “We really need scholarship money,” says Shay. “I feel very strongly about that. I want to change the thinking that just because you don’t have the money, it doesn’t mean that your dream can’t come true. We are having the opportunity, in a truly profound way, to see the difference that it makes when people are learning in a cauldron or an environment or a container that includes their culture and their history as well. Especially because the people
that are teaching, we’re part of the living history of that.”

Santiago-Hudson speaks of the sense of belonging that the students feel at the Billie Holiday Theatre, “an institution being run by African American people. The young folks, that doesn’t go over their head. Indira Etwaroo, she talks to them, and these young sisters, they kind of perk up: ‘Wow, there’s a sister running this.’

“They realize what inheritors they are, these young people,” says Henderson. “They are inheriting this huge legacy, and it’s personal and it’s cultural. It’s the group and the individual—the group feeds the individual, and the individual contributes to the group. One hopes that they go back not only fortified by what we give them but really secure in their ability to do any kind of play.”

“I’m trying to make sure that they have the confidence when they leave here to inject that well-being into the arenas that they enter,” says Santiago-Hudson. “Into the ensembles that they become a part of. To be supportive, to be inside the family and not outside the family.”

Henderson agrees that the students’ work together this past summer “builds an ensemble—the strength of an ensemble. That builds that selflessness, that giving of oneself to the work. Because the business as it exists, you can feel very alone in it. My hope is that an ensemble, or an ensemble spirit, is something that they’ll have when they come together with any cast.”

“It awakens in them whatever they have the affinity for,” Henderson says, about where this unique theatre training—and this immersion in African American culture—might take its participants in the future. “Their ancestors are speaking to them—that’s the thing. It depends on what house they come from, as to what house they’ll build. However they’re going to make their contribution, we can’t predict. We give them everything we have and everything that we were given, but we’ve got to let it go into them, and let them take it and go where they’re going to go with it.”