

Rising through ashes, preserving our stories

*Bushfire Theater's efforts
impacting African-American art world*

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It may have even seemed a little foolish then, back in 1980, trying to buy a building that once was stunning, but since had crumbled, much like its surrounding neighborhood at 52nd and Locust streets.

Yet it was in that corner marble, stone and brick edifice that the founder of the then-fledgling Bushfire Theater saw how he could infuse drama into a largely Black West Philadelphia neighborhood.

What was a nominal investment of \$100,000 has since grown to be more worth easily more than 10 times that much in what is now a five-building complex devoted to classes and performances.

Harder to enumerate is the value the Bushfire Theater of Performing Arts has lent not just to the immediate 52nd Street area, but to the cause of community-based arts for African-Americans of every age. As its 25th season draws to a close, it is clear that the theater company has helped impact Philadelphia's drama scene by serving as a venue for stories of a people to be learned and told.

"Every community needs a collage of cultural places to make statements about their experiences," said Al Simpkins, the company's artistic director since its inception in 1977.

"When we looked at it, it was a beautiful building no one wanted, which is a statement as to why it's so important to develop where you're at, even in light of all the problems we have."

The ornate fleur-de-lis and lily designs on the facade of the theater are reminiscent to its 1911 Beaux Arts beginnings, and that glamour is heightened with an African-American Walk of Fame that spotlights significant players of stage, film and

television. Markers denote the lives and contributions of those who have passed, while handprints signify those still creating. Every May, new names are added.

Neighborhood theaters provide opportunities for the artist and layperson alike to taste what it takes to create good drama, a strong point for Bushfire.

"You shouldn't have to leave your neighborhood to have access to the arts," said Debora Kodish, director of the Philadelphia Folklore Project. "And you shouldn't have to pay an arm and a leg to have access to the arts. Kids have to work so hard to have access to art now."

For the past four years, Bushfire has supplemented its work with a literary club for youngsters and this spring will open its annexes — Sassy's Salt Peanuts Café and the Artists' Hut — to the public, showcasing music as well as plays in development. A puppet theater also set for a spring debut is also meant to help cultivate the next viewing generation.

While Bushfire provides a good physical setting for work to be performed, the issue of cultivating and sustaining credible playwrighting extends beyond having a place for the work to be performed, said Joseph P. Blake. His latest work, "Ushers," was produced last fall.

Mass-market plays, some of which focus on histrionics as opposed to depth, not only eat into audience share, but also limit audience expectations for what a night of theater could or should be, Blake said.

"You expose them to serious theater, serious drama, great dialogue, and they fall asleep on you," he said. "It's hard to make that kind of switch and change."

That's why Bushfire contin-

ues to introduce and re-introduce new and classic pieces, Simpkins said.

The origins of the name — Bushfire — comes from a time when West African griots in the country, or bush, told stories around fires. Those tales, of valor and values, educated generations.

The West Philadelphia theater, Simpkins said, is a continuation of that effort.

Lorraine Hansberry's landmark "A Raisin in the Sun" just closed, and "Urban Transitions: Loose Blossoms," by Ron Milner, will close out this anniversary season.

A hallmark of the arts group is investing in emerging playwrights through the 52nd Street Writers' Workshop and now a collaborative effort with Lincoln University to cultivate even more young playwrights.

"We're blessed in Philadelphia to have Bushfire and Freedom Theater, but you need many more," Simpkins said. "It's important that the community find ways that these cultural organizations live, that they become institutionalized, that we don't let them disappear from lack of funding. The major support of any arts comes from one's own. If they don't, it will disappear. It's only a matter of time."