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Abatan, Adetola, "Black Arts/West: A Theater Without a Home" (2021). *Black Arts/West*. 1.
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Black Arts/West: A Theater Without a Home

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Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities

March 19, 2021

Abstract

In the 1960s, the civil rights struggle gripped much of the nation as Black people and African nations sought greater sovereignty at the personal and state level. The Black Arts/West theater company (BAW) was born into this atmosphere with an express purpose to “Educate, Enlighten and Entertain” (Barnett, 2001b). Over an 11-year span, BAW produced and performed over 100 plays in Seattle, while also teaching dance and acting as part of the Central Area Motivation Program (CAMP). Unfortunately, the theater struggled to establish a home and sustainable funding. How does a fledgling theater group of Black artists and activists match their artistic vision to a rapidly growing organization combatting historic racial discrimination, and the early stages of neighborhood gentrification? This case study establishes a timeline for significant BAW events, provides historical context, and investigates various reasons that led to its official closure in 1980.

Black Arts/West: A Theater Without a Home

In a 2012 report for the Urban Institute, author Maria Rosario Jackson defines artistic spaces as a "pulse point" for the community. When functioning at their best,

> they are places in which people gather; curiosity is piqued; world views are challenged or affirmed; preservation and innovation are fostered; creativity and imagination are stoked; intellect, critical thinking, and compassion are expanded; and people find inspiration that leads to a more generative society. (Jackson, 2012, p. 2)

This is the ideal, when the arts facilities and the organizations that manage them can be a home and refuge for the artists and ensembles that have a creative vision to bring to the world. And yet, this happy alignment is often unrealized.

In the 1960s, the civil rights struggle gripped much of the nation as Black people and African nations sought greater sovereignty at the personal and state level. Writers like James Baldwin and Maya Angelou, playwrights like August Wilson, musicians like Nina Simone and actors like Harry Belafonte were active in the movement, creating work that roused the general population from apathy to care about the marginalization of people of African descent. Black Arts/West (BAW) was born into this atmosphere with an express purpose to "Educate, Enlighten and Entertain" (Barnett, 2001b).

Black Arts/West began as the New Group Theater, founded in 1961 by Douglas Barnett. Born and raised in Seattle, Barnett became involved in local theater after his first performance in a production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1961 at the Cirque Playhouse, a popular theater location in the 1960s and 70s. He enjoyed performing so much so that he eventually resigned from an 18-year career at the United States Post Office to pursue acting and directing full time (Cipalla, 2020).

The first play produced by the New Group was a free performance at the Douglass-Truth Library in 1961, just before the Seattle Repertory Theatre came into existence in 1962. According to Barnett (2002), the ensemble "secured free usage of an abandoned firehouse at 18th and Cherry to rehearse in, but the city provided no amenities like heat and water" (para. 16). The New Group Theater rehearsed without utilities, but their performances of "one-act plays around the city" took place at churches and other community organizations for $300 to $400 per performance (Barnett, 2002, para. 18). This seems to follow a tradition of artists squatting in abandoned buildings in Seattle to rehearse and experiment with new material (Mahmoud, 2019).

CAMP and Fire House No. 23

In 1964, the Central Area Motivation Program (CAMP) was initiated under the Economic Opportunity Act, to "[help] people move from poverty to self-sufficiency and [build] the political strength and economic wealth of the Black community in Seattle" (Byrd Barr Place, 2021, para. 1). By 1965, CAMP was looking for a director for its performing arts program, which seemed to align with the work the New Group was already doing and offered the theater company an opportunity to expand as well. Barnett came on board to helm the program, bringing the New Group Theater under the CAMP umbrella.

Initially housed on 17th Avenue in a building leased from Seattle University, a fire forced the organization to move to Fire Station 23, the same firehouse that the New Group Theater had previously used for rehearsals (Henry, 2009). By the time CAMP took up residence in 1968, the building had undergone extensive renovations including the construction of offices and a dance studio. The historic building became CAMP headquarters and is known as Byrd Barr Place today (see Figure 3). The new location accommodated CAMP's rapid growth to 300 employees

supporting over twenty initiatives on to promote employment and community empowerment and alleviate poverty.

Fire Station 23 (see Figure 3) was built by the city of Seattle in 1909 in the era of fire battalions with horse-drawn carriages. It was retired from active service in 1922 after motorized vehicles had taken over the roadways (Seattle Landmarks, 2014, para. 2). On December 13, 1976, the historic building was designated a landmark by the Seattle City Council, "because of its significance to the heritage of the community, its distinctive architectural style, and its familiarity as a visual feature in the neighborhood" (Seattle Landmarks, 2014, para. 4).

In *Developing Artist-Driven Spaces in Marginalized Communities*, Maria Rosario Jackson (2012) notes that

> the spaces are not created solely for the formal presentation of professional art; they are also places in which artists and other community stakeholders engage actively in artistic and creative processes and share their work. In some instances, artists as well as other people live in the spaces; likewise, these spaces are sometimes used for purposes other than art. (p. 3)

Fire House No. 23 is a prime example of such a space, as CAMP initiatives for economic and community empowerment and after-school programming ran congruently with the New Group Theater's dance and drama classes for adults and children. The arrangement enabled multiple organizations to join forces and share funding under a common community umbrella.

That said, multi-use spaces (especially renovated historic spaces) are not necessarily suited to the requirements of movement and performance. Barnett notes that "the excitement and fervor of that first year with [CAMP] was tempered by the frustration of not having adequate rehearsal space for the drama component..., a concrete floor not good for the legs of dancers…,

[and] evening rehearsals hampered because of meetings being held upstairs" (Barnett, 2001a, paras. 1-3). The New Group Theater began to look for its own space in the Central District in order to have greater autonomy.

New Home, New Problems

Nearby on Capitol Hill, the Cirque Playhouse had enjoyed great popularity in the old Broadway Hall since the early 1940s and was "the oldest and longest running professional theater in Seattle" (Stein, 1999, para. 3). Though the Cirque focused on beloved, non-controversial musicals and comedies, it did have a reputation for presenting famous actors from across the country alongside local talent, and audiences supported their productions (Blecha, 2011).

By 1968 however, changing neighborhood demographics, increasing racial tensions, neighborhood crime, persistent lack of parking and competition from new theater groups in the city led to a decline in the Cirque's largely white audience, and founder Gene Keene decided to move the company to downtown Seattle. This created an opportunity for Douglas Barnett who petitioned the CAMP leadership, promoting the benefits of the New Group having their own venue while remaining under the CAMP umbrella. CAMP agreed and provided the first and last month's rent, and Barnett quickly negotiated a lease agreement with the city of Seattle. On April 1, 1969, the New Group Theater took occupancy of the old Broadway Hall at 3406 East Union Street and officially became Black Arts/West (BAW).

With a new home, Black Arts/West focused on elevating the quality of its productions with professional actors and directors, while continuing to serve CAMP's missions to empower the community empowerment and reduce poverty. Employing local dance instructors and professors from Seattle area universities who specialized in African or Diasporic dance, "more

than 400 students were enrolled in the program, [ranging] in age from six to seventeen" over the course of BAW's existence in the city (Barnett, 2002, para. 35).

In 1971-72, BAW produced a series of performances for prisoners at McNeil Island federal penitentiary and Monroe State Reformatory. Barnett took great pride in these performances, describing them as "joyous, heartfelt celebrations of the human spirit, reuniting with many from our community" (Barnett, 2001b, para. 31). It is compelling that Barnett describes these performances as 'reunions', given current discussions about the unequal treatment of black men and women in the United States' justice system. He recalls one of the inmates at McNeil Island being so taken with the BAW performances that "he studied acting in prison, exchanged correspondence with us, and upon release, joined Black Arts/West in our training program. He eventually performed in several productions" (Barnett, 2001b, para. 31). This speaks to the value and power of an arts outreach program, since "Blacks must be encouraged to accept Black theater as a place where they might see plays that speak to them and their experiences" (Butler, 1977).

These community outreach successes were mirrored in house, including a highly acclaimed production of Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* directed by Jason Bernard (Barnett, 2001). The show ran at 85 percent capacity and was well received in the press, empowering the BAW ensemble to experiment and grow bolder with its theater productions, and highlight the struggles of African Americans with racism and economic depression in their communities.

Unfortunately, these successes were tempered by the realities of operating a historic facility, particularly one that had not been renovated for over 20 years under the previous tenant. In Barnett's words:

> while we celebrated the advent of our own space…the burden of meeting the rent, utility payments, and other incidentals was a crushing burden. Heretofore, we were exempted from that in working out of the CAMP firehouse, now we were expected to pay our own way…The joy of having one's own theatre was muted by the responsibilities attendant to maintaining the facility. (Barnett, 2001b, paras. 6-8)

Funding mechanisms were also changing rapidly. In 1971, "the federal government designates the Model City Program and Concentrated Employment Program (CEP) as the primary vehicles for combating inner-city poverty" (Byrd Barr Place, n.d., para. 14). As a result, BAW received a budget of $65,000 from the Model Cities program (which was now the funding source for CAMP) in its first year. That amount increased to $110,000 in 1973 and 1974 (Barnett, 1976), most of which went towards the outreach programs, guest directors, instructors, and the BAW performing ensemble. Unfortunately, those funds shrank significantly in later years. By 1975 the budget had been reduced to $50,000, an amount that barely covered the annual cost of productions, much less the facility rental and maintenance (Barnett, 1976).

BAW sought additional funding outside of CAMP and created traveling theater groups as a means of generating revenue. However, there was internal disagreement over the priority of the performing arts programs, and applications for external grants were met with quiet resistance within CAMP. In 1973, Barnett resigned as Black Arts/West director and CAMP hired Buddy Butler as his replacement, followed by Tee Dennard and Doug Johnson (Barnett, 2007). In 1980, Black Arts/West officially closed its doors and its members moved on to other theatrical projects.

Racial Covenants History

Arts organizations continually struggle to articulate the monetary value of arts programs. That seems to have been true for Black Arts/West. However, this should also be placed in a historical context. Funding for the arts is difficult, but funding for Black arts organizations in an era when racial discrimination was institutionalized was nigh impossible. While Seattle and the Pacific Northwest are not usually associated with the overt violence of the Deep South, racism was alive and well in the region, enforced through restrictive real estate covenants and redlining practices. The University of Washington's "Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project" documents the use of racially restrictive deeds and covenants by land developers, even after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down segregation ordinances in 1917.

These covenants significantly shaped the city's demographics, and it is jarring to see just how explicit their language was. For example, the 1927-1928 historical deeds for the Capitol Hill Community Club include clauses that

> the parties hereto signing and executing this instrument and the several like instruments relating to their several properties in said district, hereby mutually covenant, promise and agree each with the others, and for their respective heirs and assigns, that no part of said lands owned by them as described following their signatures to this instrument, shall never be used, occupied by or sold, conveyed, leased, rented, or given to Negroes, or any person or persons of the Negro blood. (Silva, 2009)

The red dots in Figure 5 represent areas in the city that had specific language prohibiting occupancy by certain racial groups, while the size of the bubbles illustrate just how many properties were affected. The yellow dots represent contracts that were not as explicit but clearly achieved the same purpose of restricting access to certain neighborhoods. It is worth noting that

racial restrictions in this era extended to other ‘non-white’ groups, including people of Jewish/Hebrew, Ethiopian/African and Filipino/Malay as well as those of Japanese or Chinese descent particularly after WWII.

Decades of these practices corralled people of color into specific neighborhoods including the Central District, where the same groups that were being marginalized were also forced to “pay excessively high rents [and] compete for living space” (Pettus, 1948, para. 8). The U.S. Congress finally passed the Housing Rights Act in 1968, which outlawed “discrimination based on race or ethnicity in the sale or rental of housing. Since then, it has been illegal to act on the race restrictions that are embedded in so many deeds in Seattle and other King County communities” (Silva, 2009).

This was the difficult climate in which Black Arts/West was trying to maintain a theater. While their shows were well attended showing that support for the entertainment was there, the monetary backing was not. Indeed, “no matter how highly we may value them, art and culture are produced by individuals and institutions working within the general economy, and therefore cannot escape the constraints of that material world” (Heilbrun & Gray, 2001, p.3).

Conclusions and Legacy

Black Arts/West was a beacon in the community for the eleven years of its existence, despite its struggles to meet its artistic mission while retaining autonomy and achieving financial independence. Long-term planning and fiscal discipline seemed to be missing from their strategy for facility management once they were in the Cirque Playhouse. In the 2011 Nonprofit Finance Fund report *Case for Change Capital*, the authors caution that “many arts organizations operate with only enough unrestricted revenue to cover program and operating expenses. This is considered acceptable, when in fact many organizations have annual expenditures that exceed

operations alone" (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 6). Barnett and his group worked extremely hard but constantly had to justify their needs relative to the other initiatives under CAMP's umbrella and to potential outside funding sources.

The genesis of Black Arts/West was organic and, after years of making do in any available space, CAMP seemed a useful umbrella organization that would free them from facilities issues an allow them to 'focus on the art'. In a case study on Blue Barn Theatre in Omaha, Nebraska, director Susan Clement cautions that "the need to grow should stem from artistic drive as well as line up with economic realities" (Bent, 2015, para. 13). In moving to a theater space that was better suited to the needs of performers, BAW took on a significant financial burden that they seemed ill-equipped to manage. Their revenue met programming expenses, but not facility or operating costs.

That said, some of the resistance BAW faced is likely due to the covert racism that was still at work in the 1970s. Much of the history about this organization is written by Douglas Barnett, and there is a palpable frustration in his words on the page. How do arts leaders ensure they 'drink their water' to remain nourished and supported as they create programs that pour into others? The disagreements with CAMP leadership and the ongoing financial struggles of managing a theater space made for more than a full-time job, and it often clashed with the very real creative work he and the group were producing. This fatigue is common among artistic directors, but especially so with minority leaders who are not just contending with public valuation of art, but also societal validation of self.

The mantle for Black theater in Seattle was picked up once more in 1993 by Kibibi Monié, who founded the Nu Black Arts West Theatre in 1993 as a nod to her time as a "staff member, actress and instructor for Black Arts/West Theatre for six years" (Isomedia, n.d., para.

1). The organization still collaborates with local artists to create relevant content, including a 2021 video performance by Ms. Monié titled "*Take a Knee Revisited"* (Benson, 2021) that is a poetic commentary on Colin Kaepernick's silent protest of police brutality.

After resigning as the director of Black/Arts West, Douglas Barnett served as manager of the acclaimed Negro Ensemble company, presiding over the national tour of "The River Niger," a play by Joseph A. Walker that went on to debut on Broadway and win the 1974 Tony award for Best Play (Cipalla, 2020). Eventually, he returned to the post office, retiring in 1997 and passing away in 2019 (Alexander, 2019). In November 2020, the city of Seattle marked the previous home of Black Arts/West and its founding director by renaming the corner of East Union Street and 34th Avenue in his honor (Cipalla, 2020).

Method Note:

This case study was developed by Adetola Abatan, MFA 2022 for Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership course Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities taught by faculty Katie Oman. Primary research was conducted during Spring Quarter, 2021. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing. Citations and references may not conform to APA standards.

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Black Arts/West Image Gallery

Figure 1: Fire Station No. 23 as Byrd Barr Place, circa 2020. Courtesy of SKHS Architects.

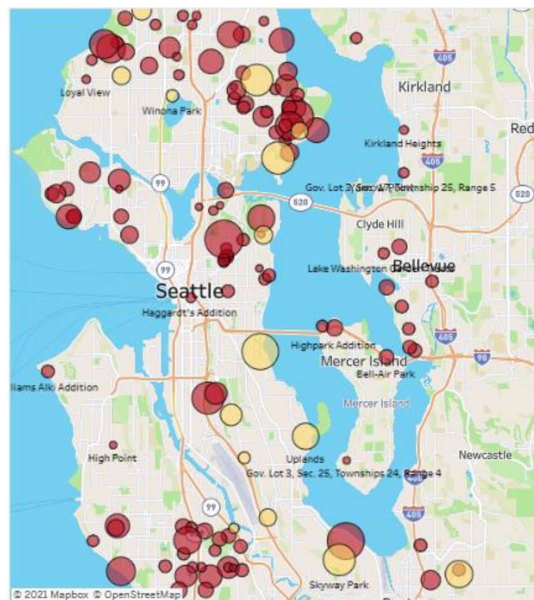

Figure 2: Racially restrictive covenants map, Seattle/King County (Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project)