

Brown Sugar bubblin' at Central

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Assistant Editor

"Before I went on stage, I was very nervous—I just had to be alone in a little room somewhere," recalls Donna Buie, a 21-year-old drama major at North Carolina Central University.

"I gave my audition to the empty chairs in the room, which was close to what I did in the theatre, but not quite." Her hands dance in front of her as she speaks, signs of her bubbly personality.

"Once I returned to the waiting room, I tried to let off some of that excess energy by talking and laughing with the other auditionees... Then, just they called the person before me, I got terrified. It was like...AAAHHH!"

This is the audition—the actor's doorway to the stage.

NCCU's drama department will open its theatre season in a few weeks with the animated musical review, "Bubbling Brown Sugar," the Broadway success which was a 1976 Tony Award nominee for best musical.

For two days in late August, production staff members Dr. Benjamin Keaton, Kaye Sullivan and Karen Dacons-Brock sat through young actor's auditions looking for the face and feel that could lend the show its spark and sparkle.

"What happens is that we herd people on stage and let them put themselves on display," says Dr. Linda Kerr Norflett, Chairman of the University's Drama Department. "Most of these people are motivated... They have a craving to perform."

"As we watch the students, we ask:

"Does the person... command attention?"

"Does she have a strong voice suitable for the stage?"

"Is he stiff or relaxed... can we

get out of him what we need in terms of movement?"

"Does he physically look like the character?"

"Does she fit the style of the show?"

The answers to the questions are quite subjective, Dr. Norflett notes. "The director reads the play over and over again until she can smell it... she has a sense of how everything should be by totally submerging herself in the script."

But once the auditions are over, the casting is not necessarily finished; any number of things can happen between the auditions and the actual production in October.

"You never know what personalities may surface. Some people show extremely well in auditions, yet do very little during the actual rehearsal. Others don't show too well at the auditions, but they grow during the rehearsals."

Down the hall in the Green Room—a lounge for drama majors—sits Kevin Allen, a junior from Durham who aspires to be an actor. Dressed in t-shirt and jeans, he leans back in a straight backed wooden chair.

The ominous black theatre across the hall awaits his arrival.

"I don't know what song I'm going to sing until I get on stage," says Allen. "For the first few minutes, I'll stretch then look into the audience." He speaks in a soft, smooth tenor voice.

"Of course the whole time I'm up there, I'll attempt to feel confident... and I'll try to remember the basics. You know, to enunciate... enunciate..."

"Enunciate, man," Kevin Dennis says from one side of the room. Dennis listens to Allen as he waits for his audition.

Allen says he is not really nervous.

"I've sung before... I've even been with a traveling gospel choir, so the singing really doesn't worry me." On the other hand, this musical requires that the students dance also.

Allen says he doesn't dance.

"You can find people who can sing," Dennis says, "and you can find people who can act; but you can't find people can dance."

Production stage manager, Linda Harris, a visiting instructor in the department, agrees: "There was this one person who could sing, but just couldn't move — finally the person gave up."

"They're ready for you Kelvin," she adds.

"In doing a musical, you have more people to collaborate with instead of just one director as in a regular dramatic piece," says director Karen Dacons-Brock, assistant professor in the department. "You've got me, the musical director, Ben, and the choreographer, Kaye."

"It's a lot of work."

But the play is not really unique in any other respect, she says. It is a review, so the songs carry the show — a showcase for the 15 singers, actors and dancers who will be on the final cast list.

"What we're looking for now are the older people — 60 plus," she says, "And we'd like to do it with students which can be very difficult because it demands that students project mature characters."

"So far we've seen some good movement in the earlier session and some good singers; most of the group was versatile and they all read well."

"When I'm on stage, what I'm mostly concentrating on is how to show them — the director, choreographer and musical director — that I can do everything," says Ms. Buie.

"Even during the singing audi-

tion, I tried to show them I could move — a little heel-toe this and a little side-to-side that.

"And my facial expressions, I hope, made them say, 'Maybe she can do some acting too.'"

However, she says that during the dance audition, one has to concentrate on just keeping up with the choreographer. Kaye Sullivan, a visiting artist at the University, tests the students dance abilities by teaching students a simple routine then watching them repeat it with speed.

Ms. Buie recalls the routine:

"Four jazz steps to the front of the stage. A quick turn to the right. Hop left, touch the floor. Roll on your back, legs in the air. To your feet — hop left, hop right. Four point jazz walk. Attitude."

"Easy," she says laughing, "if you've got good coordination. I think I even stumbled some ... but I still have good coordination."

The final part of the audition is a cold reading. Three weary actors, Kelvin Allen, Kevin Dennis and Ruby Prescott, are given scripts of the musical and told to flip to page 1-4-8.

Allen is assigned to read the part of the Sage; Ms. Prescott, that of Irene as Dennis watches.

"Come on honey!" Allen booms across the stage. "I got to tend to business. I promised to show Charlie and Judy this old town. And I got to keep an eye on Checkers so he don't mess with my half of the money."

"John, forget the money. Come back with me."

"Forget the money! Are you crazy?"

"I guess I was crazy to think that anything could bring us back together."

"Irene, I'm coming back to you. I'm coming just as soon as this tour is over."

"How long is that?"

"About 30 years."

"30 years — knowing you, it'll take you that long to get warmed up ..."

After the audition, Allen says he is somewhat discontented with his dance performance, but relieved that the auditions are over. "I wish I had danced better. All I need is time — maybe the five or six weeks we'll have to rehearse."

"But," he adds, "they may not give me time."

EDITOR'S NOTE: UNC-CH students can see Kelvin Allen and Donna Buie in NCCU's production of "Bubbling Brown Sugar" Oct. 10-14 in the University Theatre. Shows begin at 8:15 p.m. and student prices may be obtained by calling the drama department. □



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