

The Bennett Banner

Friday, May 3, 1991

BENNETT COLLEGE, GREENSBORO, N. C.

Vol. XLII, No. 3



With conviction: Choir Director John McLean has poise born of defeating adversity. His confidence has reached his singers, who include Lydia Oliver (left) and Dennice Rippy. Photo by Otis Hairston, Jr.

McLean has direction

by Rehan Overton

A little black boy in Johnston Co., North Carolina didn't understand a question a white child asked him: "Where's your tail? My mother said all niggers have tails."

This was nothing out of the ordinary for John McLean as he was growing up in the small town of Smithfield, in the midst of "KKK country." McLean faced many instances of humiliation and anger. One instance he remembers is being spat upon by white schoolchildren.

However, McLean, Bennett College choir director, has taken those negative childhood experiences and tuned them into stepping-stones towards success.

If you ask the thirtysomething McLean about his admirable music career, you will hear the quiet sophistication of a well-educated and accomplished music virtuoso. Although his concentration in music is on classical works, McLean's first passion was the jazz trumpet. McLean stresses the necessity for all people to be exposed to all types of music.

"It is absolutely essential to be aware of one's culture, but it is arrogant to believe your culture is the only one that offers meaningful, beneficial music. I am committed to good music," he says.

Committed he is. McLean is the son of musicians and an honors graduate in voice and trumpet performance from Simpson College in Iowa. In his first year as director, he considers the job of instructing and directing at a historically black college for women as a return to his roots.

"My experience at Bennett has caused me to reflect on the black experience. I'm thrilled and inspired and more

than anything, impressed with Bennett women — their potential, diversity and dreams. Bennett women possess the ability to be great leaders of the community at large," McLean says.

The walls of McLean's office in Steele Hall bear no plaques. McLean's rewards have come through his commitment to leadership and service to those who wouldn't normally have a chance to experience a variety of music.

"I have been able to see my gift as a musician affect people's lives. I like to think of myself as a messenger of music, a vehicle by which people may gain an appreciation of the importance of music," he says.

McLean, after attaining masters of music degrees in conducting and voice from the University of Texas in Austin, moved to California where he directed the Oakland Youth Chorus. He has served as director of the Young Musician's Program at the University of California at Berkeley and as conductor of the Berkeley Youth Orchestra. He is listed in "Who's Who Among Southern Personalities," "Who's Who Among Black Americans," and "The International Directory of Distinguished Leadership." He recently received the outstanding merit award from the National Association of Negro Musicians.

Although he believes music is "the international language of humankind," he admits that the assimilation of certain types of music allows people to become exposed to the lives of others.

"Jazz is our music; it is a part of the black experience, our culture... They (whites) have taken our music and have interpreted it their way. Just like classical music is European. There is an assimilation of music... I'm a

classical musician due to training and exposure. I'm black and will never be European. Music is the reflection on one's culture. It is the expression of the human experience. It's called exposure. I developed an appreciation for country and western music while in Texas. I love to expose young people to different types of music, something else to touch (them) just as intimately as the music (they) normally listen to," he says.

McLean doubts that he will ever return to the stage as a performer, preferring, for now, the role as an educator on the college level.

"It takes a lot of ego to get in front of an audience," he jokes.

"There are still things I'm contemplating. One of my goals is to have a professional ensemble specializing in classical music of African-American composers."

For those aspiring to the heights that McLean has reached, he stresses the importance of devotion to the art.

"If one has an interest in music, learn about the (performance) structure of music from the standpoint of the piano. Learning to play the piano and reading music is the beginning. If you can conquer the keyboard, you can go anywhere. The earlier, the better. Vocal music is cultivated in the church. It takes commitment, devotion, self-discipline to become a professional," he advises.

If a student is still interested in joining the choir, it's never too late.

"I'm very open to anyone who's interested in singing. Being a part of the choir provides experience that will benefit you. That's a part of the education experience. Keep an open mind and keep growing," he urges.

Sharazad shows surprising subtlety

by Jacqueline Davis

The infamous Sharazad Ali awed and shunned the audience at North Carolina A&T University on April 15.

Ali is the author of the controversial book "The Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Blackwoman." In 1985, she published another book, "How Not To Eat Pork: Life Without The Pig."

She opened her speech by stating, "I am sure that most of you have heard something about my book, or you have seen something on television or heard something on the radio, read something in the newspaper. Ah, I don't think that we have had a book that has gotten so many people involved in discussing it or reacting to it since 'Roots.'" The audience snickered.

"I have been going around the country trying to do this lecture tour to provide our people with some relief. It seems as just as you experience in your classroom if you get attached to the study, and you don't have an instructor, then sometimes it can cause confusion. Between the television, newspaper and radio, that is what we have, confusion," said Ali.

The audience was in agreement with what Ms. Ali said. Her presentation was more of a black and white issue rather than her book's issue. It did not coincide with her book at all because she took a more subtle approach. She boosted African-American men's egos; however, she chastised African-American women. She did not dwell on the negative aspects of her book, and she did not appear the way that she has been portrayed on The Phil Donahue Show or The Sally Jessie Raphael Show.

She talked about male and female relationships. "Share

the responsibility fifty percent. Women cannot be whole without men, and men cannot be whole without women. The black woman represents the heaven the black man knows because we have a lot of power," said Ali.

Ali stated, "I have not said that all black women are in this book, but it shows what slavery has done to the black woman. It is a painful study; however, eighty percent of people that are in disagreement with my book have not read the book!"

She said, "The black man not only provides finance, but he also provides direction, guidance, fulfillment, gratification and protection. God made man and woman to mate, reproduce and be happy. The black man is not becoming extinct because if the black man dies, then we all die, and I don't want to die."

The audience was not hostile toward Ali until she mentioned an alarming statistic.

"There are five women to one man so this means that he will have children by more than one woman." She also emphasized the fact that so many of our black men are incarcerated. "Fifty percent of our black men are in prison not in college. Seventy-three percent were raised by their mothers only. A woman cannot raise a male."

She told the African-American women that we are queens, and this is why she wears a crown.

There was a question and answer session. However, she only addressed ten questions from five women and five men. She did not answer some of the questions thoroughly. Some of the questions were repetitious and this annoyed Ali.

She closed by saying, "In 25 black colleges, this book is required reading."

Frosh get savvy

by Moneca Surida

Freshmen aren't going to be "fresh" much longer. They have become well-rounded in the ways of collegiate life. They have experienced and they have survived.

This year's freshmen are anxious to leave their "freshmen days" behind. Though most of these young women have many fond memories, they have been disillusioned enough to never wish to re-live any of their "freshmen firsts."

As a whole, the majority of freshmen were disappointed with Bennett College. Eighty-five percent of freshmen interviewed indicated Bennett fell short of their expectations while 15 percent seemed generally pleased with their choice of college. Some of their greatest concerns were with the lack of well-planned activities, dilapidated dorm rooms and poor food service. Freshman Kim Nelson comments that "Bennett is everything I didn't expect, but even with all of its shortcomings it is the kind of place you learn to love."

Many freshmen came here expecting to find a haven of serenity, when in fact they got a dated dormitory room and a hallway full of havoc.

Washing clothes, paying bills and managing money were new to more than a few of these newcomers. Seventy percent of those freshmen interviewed were taking full responsibility for themselves. Many had to deal with things that their parents normally took care of.

"Being away from home with no one to remind you about this or that forces you to become more responsible," says freshman Althea Gibbons.

In between trips across the railroad tracks to the infamous A&T, meeting deadlines and cancelling dates, this year's freshmen class has made it to the next level. They are happily anticipating being higher on the totem pole as sophomores. They feel that their relationship with upperclassmen will improve with living and sharing activities with them.

(see page 4)