

1B ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Afro-American Children's Theatre hits 15

By Winfred B. Cross
THE CHARLOTTE POST

It's not hard to figure why the Afro-American Children's Theatre chose to do a production of the Tony Award-winning musical "The Wiz" to celebrate its 15th anniversary.

The play's main character Dorothy goes from humble beginnings in a small-time town to a magical land of make-believe and wonder, learning valuable lessons in life on the way.

AACT been on an odyssey of sorts, too. Its humble beginnings were in a small donated space at Johnson C. Smith University. Fifteen years later, with hundreds of performances under its belt, the troupe has digs in Charlotte's Spirit Square Center for the Arts and Education.

Production of "The Wiz" shows the theatre's growth. It's the first time its attempted a production that wasn't written by anyone associated with the group.

"I think they were looking for a show for the main stage," said Corlis A. Hayes, director of "The Wiz." "They wanted to appeal to a broader audience to really put the name out there."

According to AACT board chairman James Ferguson III, 26 - better known as Jay - that was one of two reasons.

"This is a show that provides a greater range of visibility in the community," Ferguson said. "This is a show that people recognize and enjoy. I've been to a lot of the rehearsals and it's going to be a very, very



PHOTO/CALVIN FERGUSON

The cast of "The Wiz"

good show.

"Also, many of our longtime dedicated participants were looking for something more challenging," Ferguson said. "Brandon Crawford's a member of AACT. He's been in the Larry Johnson shoe commercials and 'Once Upon A Time When We Were Colored.' What do you do for someone like that? You offer more challenging roles."

Ferguson knows first hand about challenging roles. He is an original member of AACT. His mother, Barbara Ferguson, started the organization when Jay was turned down for an audition.

"You know how mothers are," Jay said, then laughed. "She thought I was the best and

should have gotten the part.

"AACT has been a true family affair for us," he said. "My father (attorney James Ferguson II) has always been supportive. Even my sister Kali (19, a sophomore at UNC Greensboro) and brother Taj (21, a senior at North Carolina Central University) have been members."

Lori McElrath, 26, producer of WPEG's Breakfast Brothas Morning Show, is also an original member of AACT and a board member. She credits the organization with helping shape her life.

"It's a great organization," McElrath said. "It was in AACT that I learned how to speak and develop my love for theatre. It made me aware of

certain traits and characteristics that I have that I wasn't aware of."

McElrath worked as a drama teacher at Ransom Junior High School before being hired at WPEG. A self-proclaimed "drama junkie," she wants to get her 3-year-old daughter Jada involved with AACT.

"That's important because it makes the individual well-rounded," McElrath said. "I'm trying to help her discover the arts now. It's a great outlet. We all have to feel a sense of power and accomplishment. The arts give children that feeling. Unfortunately, the negatives in society are more easily accessible than the

positives."

Positive is how Jay describes the organization's contributions to the community.

"This organization is about empowering our community's young people. That's why the shows 97 percent of the time are made up of all-youth casts," he said. "Participants also learn about the technical side of theatre as well as performance. We know consider ourselves a leading development organization. We promote that at all levels."

Most of AACT's 100-150 members attend the summer sessions, usually three weeks long, twice a summer. This summer's session was used a workshop for "The Wiz."

"We worked on the dramatic, the basics," Hayes said. "When we came into rehearsal, we were very much familiar with each other. We didn't burn them out with it. We never had a full rehearsal. We ended the camp with a showcase of bits

and pieces of the show."

Hayes has no doubt that the troupe will be ready for Friday's debut.

"After (Tuesday night's) rehearsal, I'm sure they are, especially after they hit the stage and got comfortable. It was a long day. We practiced at JCSU from noon to 4 p.m. Then we hopped in a van and headed for Spirit Square and practiced from 6-9 p.m."

Surviving is still more of a struggle for the organization than getting kids to say the right lines. Money has always been tight. Is there an arts organization that has lots of money? Money from the Arts & Science Council, private donations and proceeds from productions are the group's sources of income. AACT can't afford an executive director, although it does have a program director, Art Randolph III.

Still, Jay remains upbeat

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Lee's 'Bus' ranks with his best movies



By Winfred B. Cross

Get On The Bus
Directed by Spike Lee
Written by Reginald Bythewood
Starring: Charles S. Dutton, Andre Braugher, Bernie Mac,

Richard Belzer,
Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Spike Lee works best with topics that touch him and others deeply. The Million Man March, an



Thomas Jefferson Byrd, left, and DeAndre Bonds



Cast of "Get On The Bus"

historic peaceful gathering of African American men, must have done so, for it's the basis for his latest triumph, "Get On The Bus."

The film, a sympathetic look at the march through the eyes of a bus load of would-be participants, is one of Lee's best. He goes back to the guerrilla filmmaking style which brought him acclaim early in his career. It's a style that suits this passionate piece well. Jumpy camera movements, unusual lighting, even the use of video footage turn this into a tale that's intimate and engaging.

Most of the supposedly controversial aspects of the march are softened. Minister Louis Farrakhan is mentioned, but isn't the focal point of the movie. Some might feel he's glossed over, but he's dealt with - evenhandedly I'd say.

Reginald "Rock" Bythewood, known mostly for his work on Fox TV's "New York Undercover," has given Lee a jewel of a script to direct. His story is frank and full of meaty characters. Speeches are kept in check. They only get preachy when absolutely nec-

essary, offering insights into the character and adding significant merit to the overall movie.

Bythewood tackles a lot of subjects - homosexuality, child-rearing, self-respect, racism, black-on-black crime - all of which were relevant to the march and the movie. Bythewood must be given huge props for his frank and honest discussion of homosexuality. He avoids the "In Living Color" approach and presents characters that are believable and even likable. These are men who happen to be gay, not flamboyant cross-dressers.

Lee's direction is at its finest, keeping the action moving at an easy, but steady pace. It never gets slow. There's always something going on to hold your interest. He doesn't hammer points in. He makes and lets the viewer gently soak it in.

This is also one of the few times Lee hasn't been in his own movie. His presence is felt in the character X (Hill Harper), an aspiring University of California at Los Angeles film student. A good

portion of the film is told through X's video camera lens.

Yes, Lee deserves credit, but it's the actors that make this piece work. Although it is an ensemble cast, Charles S. Dutton and Ossie Davis are the linchpins that make this film work, delivering stunning performances. As George, the gung ho bus driver, Dutton delivers his best movie role to date. He fleshes out the character with a wide range of emotions. He's compassionate, caring, intelligent and fiery when necessary. By the time he reaches his climax - a flawlessly delivered tribute to a fallen brother - Dutton has you hooked, drawn into his character. You sit there emotionally wrung.

Davis, plays Jeremiah Washington, a man struggling to redefine his dignity. Davis -

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Andre Braugher (L) • Richard Belzer