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Student play gives youth greater appreciation of culture

by Greg Holzheimer | Staff Writer



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Music teacher Onelnora Pearson listened intently as students performed a dress rehearsal of "From Harlem to Hip-Hop" on July 23 at Bishop McNamara High School in Forestville.

Pearson, a former sixth-grade history teacher who gives lessons at the Lake Arbor Community Center in Mitchellville, said she remembers her frustration when she tried to introduce the Harlem Renaissance to students who had never heard of it before.

"One boy said, 'What's that — some kind of restaurant?'" she recalled.

The performances, held July 23 through Saturday, were the culminating events of the four-week Players' Academy, an acting camp for Prince George's County students held at Bishop McNamara High. The camp was organized by The Arts Reaching Out Through Education. Tarsha Proctor Standridge, TAROTE's founder and artistic director, co-wrote the play.

"I think that once a lot of students discover that there's always been greatness in their culture, then they can truly keep their head up," said Proctor Standridge, a graduate of Suitland High School in Forestville who now lives in Burbank, Calif.

Proctor Standridge said the play is about the connections between the Harlem Renaissance and modern hip-hop. She said she hopes the play gets students interested in the Harlem Renaissance, something she said many teachers fail to do.

"Sometimes it just goes over their heads because it's not presented in a fun way," she said.

The play focuses on a summer school class taught by "Ms. Green," played by Upper Marlboro resident Lindsey Better, who tries to inspire her class to learn more about African-American art in the 1920s. Her students are initially not interested.

"The Harlem What?" one student asks when she introduces the topic. Another student says he has been to Harlem, where he says Sean Combs lives. That comment sparks a long debate about whether he still lives in Harlem or has moved to Manhattan.



Brenda Ahearn/The Gazette
Christopher Blagmon (right), 15, of Fort Washington and Jaida Brooks, 12, of Mitchellville perform July 23 at the culminating event of The Players Academy in Forestville.

But the classroom lessons are interspersed with students reenacting the singing of Duke Ellington, the poetry of Langston Hughes and other performances from the 1920s. In the first half of the play, actors perform 1920s-style dances and Billie Holiday sings "God Bless the Child."

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" says one of the students. "Jazz, big band... Ooh, child, we had swagger back in the day!"

During intermission, Reshae Green, 13, said he joined the camp because he wanted to work on his dancing skills. But he said the program has also taught him that African-Americans have come a long way since the 1920s.

"Back in the day blacks weren't allowed to do a lot of things," said Reshae, of Upper Marlboro. "It's important to know your history, and where you come from."

By the play's second half, students are drawing comparisons between Langston Hughes and rapper Tupac Shakur, both of whom they say were "inspirational" and "believed we should keep our head up." Towards the end of the play, Ms. Green starts talking about the similarities between rapper Nas' "poetic rhymes" and Hughes' "profound use of diction."

Andra Howard, 15, of Forestville said she did not know much about the Harlem Renaissance before joining the program, but has since developed an interest in the time period.

"I didn't know anything about it at first, and I wasn't taught about it at school," she said. "As I study more and more, it starts to really interest me. [When] you start to really know your background, it gives you a new perspective on life."