

Black Repertory Theater to Open on Marshall

Performances will cover everything from traditional subjects to avant-garde

ANDREW ASHBY | The Daily News

A neighborhood on the edge of Downtown is seeing some growth, the newest of which is a black repertory theater.

The 70-seat, 3,200-square-foot Hattiloo Theater is scheduled to open Sept. 22 at 656 Marshall Ave. and will focus on black theater and art. The building belongs to Pinkney Herbert, the owner of the Marshall Arts gallery at 639 Marshall.

The nonprofit theater is named after executive director Ekundayo Bandele's daughters Hatshetsut (whom he calls "Hatti") and Oluremi (called "Loo").

"I like the name because it sounds black, it sounds Southern and it sounds feminine," Bandele said. "Art often has a feminine connotation to it."

Making the circuit

Bandele said the theater mostly will have classic plays from black playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry, Earl Lovelace and Derek Walcott. Hattiloo will have seven performances a year, with one being an American classic.

In the first season, the theater will put on Neil Simon's "The Odd Couple" with an all-black cast. The messy Oscar character will have dreadlocks while clean-cut Felix will be a Republican with a shaved head, Bandele said.

The lobby of Hattiloo will be called Zora's Lounge after author Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote, among other famous pieces, "Their Eyes Were Watching God." The lobby will host musical performances, jam sessions, open microphone performances and comedy. There also will be listening parties in which people may listen to the collected recordings of black artists such as dancer, singer and actress Josephine Baker.

"Everyone's heard of her, but nobody's really heard her performances," Bandele said. "Everybody's heard of (jazz saxophonist) Charlie Parker, but not everybody's heard everything he's done."

Bandele said he enjoys bringing diversity to Memphis and can see how a black repertory theater might seem counter to that.

Ekundayo Bandele is soliciting donations to meet Hattiloo Theater's opening goal of \$98,000. The 3,200-square-foot black repertory theater will seat 70 people.

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"However, there are (several) white theaters (in Memphis), so you need a black theater to kind of bring people together," Bandele said. "I think that by exposing young blacks to theater at Hattiloo, they'll feel more comfortable going to Theater Memphis, Playhouse on the Square or the Circuit Playhouse."

Unfurling the welcome mat

Hattiloo also might have white directors or playwrights if plays center on black themes. Bandele said the theater might do some Spanish-speaking plays because of the large Hispanic population in Memphis, which some estimates place at 300,000 people. Memphis' total population is a little more than 900,000, according to the most recent U.S. Census data.

Also, some of Bandele's favorite plays are in Spanish.

"It's kind of like an opera," Bandele said. "You have the story in the playbook, so you read that and can follow the action."

Bandele said that in the theater's second year, he would like to see actors perform at schools in Memphis to interest young people in live theater.

"If you get someone black up there, then they might think, 'Hey, I can become like that. One day I could maybe be a writer or a screen director,'" he said. "We want to put it in their head that it's not all about being a baller or a rapper, you can be playwright, a set designer or an actor."

Another purpose of Hattiloo is to shift Memphis' focus to high art. Bandele said he enjoys hip-hop culture, but thinks Memphis needs a balance, with plays written by Pulitzer Prize, Nobel Prize and Tony award winners.

"You have a black arts community in Memphis but it's very fragmented," Bandele said. "I want to open the doors to Hattiloo and let everyone know they're welcome."

Neighborhood with an edge

Hattiloo is being built in The Edge neighborhood, which is bordered by Danny Thomas Boulevard to the west, Jefferson Avenue to the north, Union Avenue to the south and Manassas Street to the east.

Mike Todd, president of The Edge Community Association, said the neighborhood got its name because it's on the edge of Downtown. Todd said he thinks it has a good location because of the general momentum of Downtown growth, which is why he started buying property in the area 10 years ago.

"I think it's sort of like the next South Main," Todd said. "South Main took 15 years to develop. I don't know if we're 15 years away or closer, but I feel like we're closer."

Sam Bond, a principal broker with Crye-Leike Property Management Inc., sells property in the area. He points to the neighborhood's proximity to Downtown and the low property costs as advantages.

"I think it's just now being discovered," he said. "I think you're going to see a lot going on in the next few years."

Much of the residential properties in the neighborhood are mixed-use with living spaces above commercial, Todd said. His general contracting business, Premiere Contractors Inc., shares a building with an event space called Premiere Palace Ballroom and two artists' living and working spaces. The event space features a retro 1930s ballroom and is available for private parties and events.

Todd did some design work for Quetzal Internet Cafe, a new restaurant in the neighborhood. With it and the Hattiloo Theater, Todd said he hopes the new developments will add to the neighborhood.

The neighborhood has one successful draw already, Sun Studio, which sits at the corner of Marshall and Union avenues a few doors down from Quetzal.

"It never ceases to amaze me that there are people there at all times of day and night," Todd said.