

Theater focuses on social justice

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By Todd Cohen

RALEIGH, N.C. — In December 2011, believing minorities were underserved by local holiday theater productions, The Justice Theater Project in Raleigh staged *Black Nativity*, a retelling by Langston Hughes of the classic Nativity story with a mainly black cast.

That inaugural production was sold out for all four performances, which were presented at Pittman Auditorium at St. Mary's School near downtown, with the matinee selling out three months in advance.

And at one of the December 2012 performances of the production, which the nonprofit troupe will present annually, a table set up in the lobby by the Family Resource Center of Raleigh signed up two families to serve as foster parents for children referred by Wake County Human Services.

Stimulating awareness, discussion and action by audiences on social justice issues is the focus of the nonprofit, say Melissa Zeph, the organization's managing director.

Founded in 2004, the group operates with an annual budget of just over \$200,000 and a staff of two people working full-time and one working part-time, plus about 300 contractual employees for its three main-stage productions each year and *Black Nativity*, as well as three summer theater camps it runs for kids.

In the fiscal year ended June 30, 2012, the four productions attracted a total of 4,700 patrons.

Each year, the Theater Project selects a theme for its productions, such as the death penalty and immigration, with each production running for a total of nine performances over three weekends.

For this year's theme, political responsibility, the group has presented Frost-Nixon and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and in June will present *Ragtime*, a musical based on the book by E.L. Doctorow.

Each main-stage production, all of which are presented in donated space at The Catholic Community of St. Francis of Assisi on Leesville Road, includes discussions with the audience before and after the performances featuring experts on the social issue addressed in the performance.

And to help raise awareness about political responsibility, David Henderson, director of the production of *Julius Caesar*, visited Enloe High School in Raleigh and spoke to all 1,000 sophomores at the school who are studying the play.

The theater camps the Theater Project runs serve a total of 300 kids each summer.

They include a two-week camp, sponsored through a \$10,000 grant from Triangle Community Foundation and offered in partnership with Passage Home at the Raleigh Safety and Community Club, that serves 70 to 80 kids ranging from age 5 to high school students who serve as counselors.

The other two camps, offered for three weeks at St. Francis of Assisi in Raleigh and for two weeks at the Emily K Center in Durham, feature fully-mounted musical theater productions that also include discussions about social justice issues.

The Theater Project also has increased its annual membership revenue to \$14,000 from \$500 two-and-a-half years ago, thanks to a new development committee created and headed by Richard Derrenbacher, a board member and retired vice president of sales and marketing at Channel Master, Zeph says.

And it hopes to expand its revenue with a theater trip to England in 2014, an online auction, adult classes, and camps for year-round students who cannot attend traditional summer camps.

"We don't have a light bill," Zeph says. "We don't have an office. We all work out of our homes. We're not building a building. We're building a community."

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