



## FOUNDING PHILOSOPHY

On May 7, 1982 the Memphis Black Arts Alliance and LeMoyné-Owen College co-sponsored an inaugural event to publicly launch MBAA. The reception which honored nationally noted actors Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee was attended by more than 300 Memphians. Prior to the Davis' remarks, Bennie Nelson West, organizer of the Alliance, made the following statement about the need for the organization--setting the tone for the Alliance's philosophy, goals, anticipated program and services. Excerpts of those remarks follow: There are **five basic reasons** the Memphis Black Arts Alliance is needed.

**First, the role, work and contributions of the arts is not generally understood or appreciated in our community.** And that's at all socio-economic levels. Many of us do not realize:

- The arts have the power to inform, educate, inspire and influence action.
- The arts are an interpretation of our history and aspirations as a people.
- They are not something seen on a stage or in a museum, they are in our home and in the way we say and do everything from dress to preach, from talk to walk to how we see the world.
- The arts provide our youngsters a primary outlet for expression, achievement, recognition and the habit of success.
- The arts enrich the quality of life in the black community and the city as a whole. The Chamber of Commerce, Memphis Jobs Conference, the County Mayor and others have recognized that cultural amenities are essential to increasing Memphis' job growth and the economic progress of our city.
- As important, the value of the arts is they help us communicate, understand and develop mutual respect for our differences and our strengths.

**Second, public and private funding for the arts in our community has not been sufficient.** Tax supported art institutions and organizations like the Pink Palace, Memphis Arts Council, TN Arts Commission, et al. exist for all of us.

They have made some gestures to include us, but they need to be more aggressive in reaching out and meeting the arts needs in the black community. At the same time, we need to know more about them and how they work. Meanwhile, decisions are made which result in the black community and black arts organizations and individual artists not receiving their fair share of public dollars.

On a private level, individuals in the arts want to make a living at their art. But, most must leave Memphis for recognition, professional and financial success. In order to gain support, I believe arts organizations and individual artists have an obligation to make their art affordable and accessible to the community it's intended to serve. At the same time, the black community must come to support the arts with their presence and their dollars. Instead of "department store art" buy an original piece of art, sculpture or painting. Artists have credit plans, too. Don't stay glued to the 'boob tube.' Take your family to the theater, go out for an evening of jazz, buy and read a book or magazines written by blacks about African-American life and culture.

- We must learn to value the arts practitioner as a community resource and not someone who "should get a job!" His or her job *is* the arts and we, the public, have a responsibility to that they are paid for their work.

**Third, we need a network to share information and resources** affecting arts across various discipline lines and to reach out to develop wider audiences within the black and white community.

- We need to know the latest information on: Who we are? How we can help one another? What and where the national and local resources are? What are we doing and when? Who is our audience? How can we expand it?

*Celebrating & Nurturing the Arts & Black Heritage Since 1982*

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**A fourth concern** is the need among our arts organizations and individual artists for additional training and technical assistance to:

- Increase our management and economic self-sufficiency skills; we must learn sound business and financial practices;
- We also need help to develop professionally within our disciplines, learning the latest in aesthetic and technical developments.

Stability is a serious problem among our arts organizations and among those individuals who want to earn a living at their arts. And, stability is often related to economic survival skills. High quality arts offerings do not guarantee economic success or longevity for an arts organization or an individual artist. Many good arts organizations have folded and many individual artists have given up and forsaken their art. The result is that the arts in Memphis suffer and Memphis suffers. It takes business skills to stay in business. And make no mistake...the arts (profit or non-profit) is a business and an industry. We must be prepared to be competitive in marketing and managing our arts activities and resources.

**Fifth and finally**, as African-Americans, there is a need to recognize, celebrate and preserve our dual cultural heritage which adds richness and diversity to our city, the nation and the world.

The arts have always been a spiritual force in our life-style and culture---as much so as religion. In fact, among our forebears, they were often intertwined.

- Because the arts can educate and inform we must make certain our children know our history, so they are not condemned to repeat our mistakes. All forms of the arts are critical to this process.
- The schools, for many reasons, have not provided us a mechanism to educate all of our youth about our culture and the role of the arts.
- Too often, many in the black, as well as, the white community reject art activities and art organizations that do not fit traditional, western European cultural expressions. In other instances, we leave the preservation and interpretation of our arts and history to others.

The challenge to those of us committed to the arts is to find ways to use both spiritual and material power of our arts in such a way that it becomes a vehicle for understanding and enriching our human existence.

So, with these ideas, and with the will and commitment of the Memphis community and the members of the Memphis Black Arts Alliance, we hope to provide better service to ourselves and to our city.

*Bennetta "Bennie" Nelson West, 5/10/82*



**SANKOFA** is an Akan West African concept which teaches we should reach back and gather the best of what our past has to teach us, so that we can achieve our full potential as we move forward. The bird symbol is moving forward, yet reaches back for an egg (the future) to carry it on.

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