Howard U. theatre group produces child actors

By Judith S. Andrews

Eddie Robinson is a 10-year-old who has been dancing since kindergarten. What he wants most in life is to make it on the stage, and, by most accounts, he is well on his way.

He has recently been called back to audition for a television series and has an upcoming role in a play about Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the late Harlem legislator.

Like Eddie, 12-year-old Kellie Williams has been performing for most of her young life. She appeared in August Wilson's celebrated play, "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," and was recently in Philadelphia filming a television drama entitled "Lost and Found."

Another 12-year-old, Eric Coles, is looking forward to his first television role in ABC's new series "A Man Called Hawk."

All three of these children polish their performing skills as members of the Kelsey E. Collie Playmakers Repertory Company, which is recognized in the nation's capital as the premier training ground for talented black youngsters with theatrical ambitions.

Founded in 1976, the repertory company is an outgrowth of the Howard University Children's Theater Workshop, an annual summer program that attracts youngerster ages 7 to 17 from around the nation.

The Playmakers meet each Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. in Howard's College of Fine Arts, which has produced the likes of former "Fame" television star Debbie Allen and Phylicia Rashad of "The Cosby Show."

While the summer theater has open admissions, an audition is required for admission to the select Playmakers group, primarily composed of 34 talented youngsters from a variety of urban and suburban homes in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

With kids like Robinson, Williams and Coles, who get called regularly for both in- and out-of-town auditions, this company of performers has gained a reputation that keeps Kelsey E. Collie, a Howard drama professor, in touch with Hollywood and New York producers when they are looking to cast black kids.

Preparing children for film, stage and television, the Kelsey E. Collie Playmakers Repertory Company is a training ground for talented black youngsters in Washington, D.C.

"Recently, Lyn Stalmaster, a Hollywood casting director, was looking for two little boys for a movie and he called us," says Collie, with a look of obvious delight on his face.

"Right now, here in Washington, D.C., we have the greatest number of black kids who are trained and ready to audition," he stresses.

Collie believes his kids are successful more often than not in auditions because of his comprehensive approach to theatrical training. "We teach everything, not just acting. We have courses in voice, dance, and most importantly we train them how to audition," he emphasizes.

Take dancer Eddie Robinson for example. He never considered himself much of a singer but is now taking voice lessons from one of several instructors who work each week with the kids. In a profession where performers are always looking for that all-important edge, he believes singing will give him an added dimension when he is called to audition.

Ervin Williams, who has had his daughter Kellie before the bright lights since she was 4 years old, says that she approached a recent screen test with confidence because of her work with Collie and the Playmakers.

"It's possible a Disney movie could come out of this for her," says the proud father. "We can't break away from this group even though Kellie has been earning pretty good money for several years."

While all of these kids in the repertory group may not go on to stardom or have the chance to earn large sums of money, what they do receive is a strong sense of themselves as doers and capable individuals. They also get the opportunity to travel.

Last year, they made appearances in Miami and the Bahamas. They plan to perform this year in Toronto.

In the words of one mother, Gwen Bethea, whose daughter Lezlee is a recent recruit to the theatrical group, "More than anything, this group has given her a sense of drama and expression that she uses in school and other places. It's even made her outgoing."

Collie had watched the 8-year-old this past summer in his annual summer workshop, and says that he never imagined "how she would blossom."

"When she came in to audition, she blew us away," he recalls. And, in spite of the fact that Lezlee had had little formal training in acting, dance or music, she received the highest score of the new inductees.

Collie believes that these same techniques he teaches his Playmakers can improve the learning ability of all children "because children gain far more from what they see than what they hear."

He is presently working with local Washington public school teachers to show them how to incorporate drama into the entire school curriculum. Says the professor, "Drama is a tool that can enhance the quality of life."

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Cable channel airs specials this month

"My whole life has been a mathematical proof of what a black man can do," says Benjamin Banneker, the first black man of science, in the film of his life, "Benjamin Banneker: The Man Who Loved the Stars."

The story of the idealistic and accomplished Banneker (1731 - 1806) will air for the first time on The CNB Family Channel at 8 p.m. Feb. 11 and 8 p.m. Feb. 20 as part of the network's salute to Black History Month. It was filmed as a docudrama, its history painstakingly researched by a team of historians from Morgan State University, its content based on the book, "The Life of Benjamin Banneker," by Silvio A. Bedini.

Benjamin Banneker, born a free man in 1731 in Maryland, was a mathematician, astronomer and abolitionist, the first black to receive a presidential appointment when he was named to the Capital Commission. He prepared and published almanacs for Maryland and surrounding states and assisted in the survey of Washington, D.C.

Ossie Davis stars as Benjamin Banneker, the first black man of science, in "Benjamin Banneker: The Man Who Love the Stars."

Ossie Davis portrays Banneker in the film. "The film itself is exceptional . . . Banneker was a remarkable, unique man in our history and this fine film is a fitting tribute to him," wrote Lou Robinson of PBS Critics' Place.

Also airing on CBN will be the music extravaganza, "Family Reunion: A Gospel Music Celebration," at 8 p.m. eastern Feb. 10. It stars Andrae Crouch, Jennifer Holiday, the Commodores, Janie Fricke, the Rev. James Cleveland, Richie Havens and many more in a two-hour special tracing the roots of gospel music and its influence on subsequent music styles.

An hour-long drama honoring Martin Luther King, Jr., which won the Peabody Award, will air twice during February.

"The Boy King," the story of the civil rights leader as a child and a youth, will air at 9 p.m., Feb. 11 and 20.

This show stars Howard Rollins, Jr. as "Daddy King," Martin Luther King, Sr. Rollins' credits include the movies "A Soldier's Story" and "Ragtime," the current television show "In the Heat of the Night" and numerous other films, TV shows and theater.

"The Boy King," was produced as a made-for-TV drama by WSB-TV of Atlanta and first was syndicated in 1986, the first year that a special day honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. was celebrated.

Walter Franks (left) and Howard Rollins, Jr. star in "The Boy King," airing on the CBN Family Channel this month.

Jeffrey Osborne, Della Reese and Billy Preston are just some of the stars on "Family Reunion—A Gospel Music Celebration" air on CBN Family channel.

—'Tap'

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Nicholas Brothers, Bunny Briggs and Sandman Sims.

"Sammy Davis, Jr. was our Michael Jackson, said Hines. "He would come on the stage without background singers, or a light show and smoke machines, etc., and just entertain by himself. He can do everything. While I was in owe of that, honed in on his ability to tap because that was what I did."

In many ways, this film brings Davis back to his earliest roots in show business. "When we discussed the project. Hines said, Sammy wanted this part so badly he said, "I don't have to have my jewelry." In fact, his character Lil' Mo, looks a little dingy. In addition to not wearing gold in the film, Davis pulled his hair back and tied a scarf around his head.

According to Hines, the new age of tap is already here.

"I think for so long we've had tap numbers in shows choreographed by choreographers who are not tap dancers, but know a little basic tap. And what they would do is hire dancers who could do a little bit of tap. Nowadays, people are more open to hiring tap Choreographed by choreographers who are not tap people who can really tap dance. So if we can develop a generation of dancers who can do jazz, who can do ballet, and can tap really well, I think we'll see some tremendous choreography on stage."

And if films starring Black actors come out with a positive message like "Tap" has, we will all be grateful. This is a film you shouldn't miss.

Lil' Mo and Sandman Sims engage in a heavy conversation in "Tap" opening Friday.

—Marsalis

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he received a citation for his accomplishments: the Harvey Shapiro Award for Oustanding Brass Player.

At eighteen he began attending Julliard and was soon recognized as the school's most impressive young trumpeter. He performed as a pit musician in Broadway's "Sweeney Todd" and played with the Brooklyn Philharmonia. That summer he joined Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers.

"Have you heard this kid from New Orleans?" the other players would ask. "He can already play all of Clifford Brown's stuff, and if you don't believe it then wait until Blakey comes back to town," Wynton inspired quite a bit of jazz talk and was soon signed to Columbia Records.

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