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'Thought-Provoking' Theater

African-American company takes the Epic stage

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Members of the Face Off theater company include, clockwise from left: Tanisha Pyron, Kendra Flourney, Janai Travis, Bianca Washington, Mickey Moses and Marissa Harrington.

The new Face Off Theatre Company aspires to be more than a performance group. It sees itself as a bridge connecting the area's African-American community with theater.

The company, which staged its first production in July, is composed entirely of African Americans.

"We're not just telling stories that are relevant to us, but we are telling human stories," says Marissa Harrington, one of the founders of Face Off.

Harrington founded the group along with Mickey Moses, Tanisha Pyron, Janai Travis, Bianca Washington and Kendra Flournoy. It operates under the auspices of the Black Arts and Cultural Center, which supports African-American culture in Kalamazoo.

The BACC had a theater company, the Ali Players, until 2013 and was looking to expand its live stage performances from the one or two held since then, according to BACC Executive Director Yolonda Lavender. Harrington had directed two productions at the BACC and had been trying to form her own theater company for several years. It was kismet.

"We'd be doing (theater) anyway," Harrington says. "With the Black Arts and Cultural Center, we're working under an established nonprofit."

For its first season, Face Off is planning four shows, "consistent enough that (audiences) know we do

regular theater," Harrington says. The first, *Been Lovin' You — An Exploration of Black Love*, was staged at the Epic Theatre, on the Kalamazoo Mall. A compilation of poetry, music and scenes from the plays of African-American playwright August Wilson, the one-night show drew about 150 attendees, according to Harrington.

"People were really impressed by the quality of the show," she says. "One of our goals was to showcase our training in acting, singing, even dancing."

The company's second show, *Chain*, ran Oct. 22—25, also at the Epic, and its third, *The Mountaintop*, is scheduled for January, although no specific dates have been set yet. The company is still deciding on a show for April. Harrington says it may be a family-friendly performance with less serious subject matter than that of the company's first three productions.

"In theater, spring is where the lighthearted show goes," she says. "Some would consider our plays 'heavy.' We would use the word 'thought-provoking.'"

All of the plays staged by Face Off Theatre Company are written by acclaimed playwrights, helping to give legitimacy to the productions, Harrington says. The immediacy of the theater, where actors are moving and speaking just a few feet from the audience, makes people confront subjects they might not otherwise, she says.

Face Off will also be conducting "talk-backs," at which the cast and crew of a show sit with the audience after a show to talk about the production and its themes. Dealing with serious topics, like drug abuse and the civil rights movement, is part of what Face Off Theatre Company is for, Harrington says, and is even an inspiration for the company's name.

"You have to take off your face to become a character (in a play)," she says. "We want to confront these issues head-on."

Lavender supports this mission. "Activism has been intentional (for the BACC) since the beginning," Lavender says. "We want to make sure there's a message going out to the audience."

Harrington says Face Off also aims to bring theater and art to Kalamazoo's black community. There are many African-American writers, actors and musicians in the area, but people outside the theater may not be aware of that, she says. And while there are plenty of ways for people to entertain themselves, good art offers something more than entertainment, Harrington says.

"We want to provide an environment to talk about issues," she says. "Life now is so impersonal — you can't see each other or hear each other. Theater makes you connect as human beings."

Learn more about Face Off Theatre at blackartskalamazoo.org or visit their Facebook page at facebook.com/FaceOffTheatre.

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