

Performing Arts For Everyone:
A Portrait of The Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage

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Introduction

Three minutes...Click. Boom.... In spite of knowing the outcome, there was still a collective shudder that permeated the house. It had been fifty years, yet the audience still remembered and wept. September 15, 1963 was a bleak day in the history of this country. Racial hatred stole the lives of four little girls and shook the nation at its core. Exactly five decades later, the story of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama played out on the Family Theatre Stage at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Readings of the commemorative piece were also simultaneously executed in dozens of cities throughout the United States.

The mounting of *Four Little Girls*, written by Christina Ham and directed by Phylicia Rashad, was a collaborative effort. (*Four Little Girls*, 2013) Project Voice and Howard University in cooperation with Duke Ellington School of the Arts and the African Continuum Theatre Company joined together to provide a forum for themselves and others to reflect on a tumultuous period in American history, preserve the memory of four young ladies whose lives were prematurely and violently taken, and to give voice to those no longer capable of speaking for themselves. (*Four Little Girls*, 2013)

Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins and Cynthia Wesley were innocent victims of the times. Their deaths marked a pivotal moment in the struggle for racial equality in the South. By 1963, the Civil Rights Movement had become a powerful instrument for social change. Nonviolent demonstrations and legal achievements shed light on the injustices and discrimination African Americans faced on a daily basis. Public sentiment was rapidly shifting to the side of the freedom fighters, and the segregationists were digging in their heels. It was a volatile combination. The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church served as a refuge for protesters and a target for extremists determined to block integration at every turn, even if it meant snuffing out the lives of precious children.

Spectators at the September 15, 2013 performance were moved through time. They vicariously experienced what it was like to reside in the Jim Crow South if they were black, brown or biracial. Separate and unequal was the law. Resistance was met with force by those in positions of power and the Ku Klux Klan, a secret society of bullies, whose job it was to make certain that people of color stayed in their place.

Most importantly, however, the onlookers learned that Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins and Cynthia Wesley were not just *Four Little Girls*. They were our future with hopes and dreams never realized. Denise McNair wanted to be a doctor. She was eleven on that fateful day. Carole Robertson was fourteen. She was a Girl Scout and a straight A student. Addie Mae Collins was also fourteen. She played softball. She left six siblings behind. And Cynthia Wesley was fourteen. She was the offspring of two educators. She enjoyed reading, arithmetic and band. (*Four Little Girls*, 2013)

Learning the names of the victims and peering peripherally into their lives was at the center of this performance. A quote from Carole Robertson's childhood friend, Angela Davis, which was recited at the beginning and end of the staged reading, drove this message home. Angela said: "What bothers me the most is that their names have been virtually erased: They are inevitably referred to as 'the four Black girls' killed in the Birmingham church bombing." (*Four Little Girls*, 2013) This production may have contributed, in a small way, to protecting and honoring the memory of the young women.

The play also introduced members of the audience to Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware. Two names omitted from history texts. The teenagers were murdered in racially motivated incidents on the same day in the same city as the *Four Little Girls*. Johnny was slain by a police officer, and Virgil was shot, while he rode on the handlebars of his brother's bicycle. (*Four Little Girls*, 2013)

The heinous crimes, perpetrated by white supremacists, eventually subsided when America could no longer ignore the shameful scenes of fire hoses, attack dogs and bombings displayed on the nightly news. The tide of public opinion had shifted and Birmingham had to end its practice of institutionalized apartheid against her citizens of African descent. The actors reminded us that times have changed, but the pain from that stormy era remains and the wounds still fester. Neighborhood nicknames like "Dynamite Hill," and "Bombingham" are permanently etched in the minds of those old enough to recall. (*Four Little Girls*, 2013)

A post-performance discussion moderated by Dr. Carolyn Shuttlesworth, the youngest daughter of civil rights icon Fred Shuttlesworth, followed the staged reading. The panel also included: award-winning journalist, Jerry Mitchell, Dr. Greg Carr, associate professor in the Department of Afro-American Studies at Howard University, and Carolyn McKinstry, a Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing survivor.

This special evening was free and opened to the public. It was made possible by The Kennedy Center's signature initiative, the Millennium Stage, which provides quality arts programming, free of charge, 365 days per year. The Millennium Stage is an extraordinary, one of a kind, community project, which invites everyone to explore culture in an accessible way. Arts organizations in this country and abroad can learn a great deal from this one of a kind pilot program.

What follows is a portrait of the Millennium Stage. Portraiture methodology is a qualitative approach pioneered by Harvard scholar Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. It "combines systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigor" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). It's a form of narrative inquiry, referred to by Social Historian, Joseph Featherstone (1989) as a "people's scholarship" because it is transparent, and written for the masses, usually in the first person narrative. It is also very descriptive utilizing an appreciable amount of adjectives.

Portraiture methodology was chosen for this article because it captures the rightness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural non-text, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences. The Millennium Stage portrait is shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one participating in the drawing of the image. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3) This way, readers will be introduced to this multifaceted community endeavor from an arts administrative perspective by the people who were directly involved with the initiative. Through personal accounts and interviews, subscribers of the American Journal of Arts Management will get an inside view of one of the most important civic engagement experiments in this country. It is the first time that the Millennium Stage's inaugural corps was consulted and has provided oral histories of their experiences from that time. Those comments have been approved and thoughtfully woven into the fabric of this article.

Readers are also introduced to various aspects of *Four Little Girls* throughout the piece. By concentrating on one designated performance, the portraitist is able to provide intricate behind the scenes details and a glimpse into the multifarious nature of running the *Performing Arts for Everyone* initiative on a daily basis.

More On The Millennium Stage & Portraiture Methodology

For readers not familiar with portraiture methodology, a brief explanation of why this uncommon form of narrative inquiry was selected for the "Performing Arts for Everyone" article is provided. First, portraiture is a research design, that helps to document and illuminate "the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it, trusting that the readers will feel identified" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 13). Arts administrators will easily be able to single out, analyze, and empathize with the highs and lows of starting a new project, especially a venture of this magnitude. The biases and challenges described are readily available, allowing readers to dream big and knock down notions that programs of this nature are impossible and out of reach. With a little wherewithal, they can become reality.

Secondly, the language utilized in Portraiture methodology is accessible, just like the *Performing Arts for Everyone* initiative. If members of academic communities want to broaden the audience for their work, then they must "begin to speak in a language that is understandable, not exclusive and esoteric . . . a language that encourages identification, provokes debate, and invites reflection and action" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 9). Through portraiture, readers will become familiar with the context and spirit in which the Millennium Stage was developed; hear the voices of the originators of the project and the on the ground troops; become acquainted with the formidable relationships that help anchor the complicated enterprise, and reflect upon the whole through the sum of its parts. All of this is done in prose that is straightforward and understandable for a practitioner as well as a scholar.

Lastly, portraiture methodology was utilized for the *Performing Arts for Everyone* composition, because it is an approachable way to convey and arrange a series of events for readers. The layout in this study provides an extraordinary opportunity for arts administrators to vicariously involve themselves in Millennium Stage activity. This creates a platform for them to critically examine all aspects of the project. They are no longer passive bystanders. Instead, they can become directly engaged with the material, possibly resulting in new ideas and action for their own organizations.

Pulitzer Prize winning author Eudora Welty (1995), whose impact on Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot was immense, believed:

Writing a story or a novel is one way of discovering *sequence* in experience, of stumbling upon cause and effect in the happenings of a writer's own life. Connections slowly emerge. Like distant landmarks you are approaching, cause and effect begin to align themselves, draw closer together. Experiences too indefinite of outline in themselves to be recognized for themselves connect and are identified as a larger shape. And suddenly a light is thrown back, as when your train makes a curve, showing that there has been a mountain of meaning rising behind you on the way you've come, is rising there still, proven now through retrospect. (p. 90)

Birth of the Millennium Stage

It's no surprise that *Four Little Girls* graced the Family Theatre stage on September 15, 2013. James A. Johnson, the former Chair of the Kennedy Center, who conceptualized and underwrote the "Performing Arts for Everyone" project, along with Maxine Isaacs, is a long-time proponent of civil rights. His commitment to the African American struggle for equality dates back to 1965. During that year, he traveled to Alabama to partake in the Selma to Montgomery jubilee. (Johnson, 2013) The celebration, that occurred the night before the weary marchers finished their long trek to the State Capitol, featured notables like Harry Belafonte, Sammy Davis, Jr., Dick Gregory, and Peter, Paul and Mary. (Crosby and Bender, 2000) More than 10,000 people assembled on that March 24th evening "in a muddy church playground for a concert designed to cheer them on for the last leg of their journey. A makeshift stage had been built from pine coffins stacked on top of one another, with a sheet of plywood laid over them." (Crosby and Bender, 2000, p. 20) The experience inspired Jim. (Johnson, 2013) So it is fitting that the commemorative piece, which paid tribute to the victims of the Birmingham Church bombing, made its debut in a space conceptualized by a man who participated in one of the great historic moments five decades before.

Approximately four months prior to the launch of the dramatic reading, I sat down with Jim Johnson to discuss the birth of his hallmark achievement. I was one of the first head ushers for the Millennium Stage, so our paths crossed on numerous occasions throughout the years. It wasn't until May 31, 2013, however, that I had an opportunity to truly engage him in conversation. Our chat took place at Jim's former Washington, DC office on Pennsylvania Avenue, located blocks away from the Kennedy Center.

Our visit was friendly and informal. We covered a lot of territory, but the primary focus of our get-together was the Millennium Stage. Jim was eager to address the topic. It was an opportunity to reflect on his special creation, unparalleled in the world of community centered arts education projects.

Jim kicked off the conversation, reflecting on his early days as Chair of the Kennedy Center. His tenure at the Center began on May 1, 1996. At that time, the institution had an image problem. It was considered a predominantly, White, elitist establishment in a Black town. Tickets were unaffordable, and the shows were targeted to a wealthy demographic. Jim's goal was to turn the situation around. He was set on truly fulfilling the Kennedy Center's mission to local residents and the nation by making the performing arts accessible to everyone. Jim's idea for the Millennium Stage literally took shape during a short walk through the Grand Foyer:

I noticed all of these risers assembled in a haphazard configuration in the Grand Foyer. One of the local schools was participating in an educational program sponsored by the Kennedy Center. The overall event wasn't organized in any particular fashion. It was just there in the middle of the long red carpet. That was the moment I became cognizant that the Kennedy Center needed to do a better job reaching out to the community at large. I immediately enlisted David Jeffers, my right hand man from Fannie Mae. David was my public relations strategist. We put our heads together and placed the Kennedy Center's administrative staff on notice that something new was coming down the pike on the fast track. I felt a sense of urgency to implement a cutting edge initiative that would welcome the public on a daily basis to the nation's living memorial for President John F. Kennedy. Whatever was designed needed to be a stand-alone venture, a destination. It couldn't be an appendage of an already existing series. There couldn't be any barriers, which meant no tickets, no reservations and no assigned seats. High caliber, diverse, quality performances would be vital to ensure the success of the project, and it was necessary to alert patrons that this endeavor was not a one shot deal. It would be an integral, on-going, sustainable platform that would invite our local, national and international friends to partake and enjoy the arts 365 days per year. Our global friends, who are unable to physically make it to the daily performances, could stream it live. Furthermore, all of the shows would be recorded and archived so anyone could visit the Kennedy Center website and watch. I enlisted Fannie Mae's Chief of Technology to help conceptualize the Internet, catalogue and archive component of this project. (Johnson, 2013)

I eagerly listened and wrote furiously trying to capture every word. I wanted to know all of the particulars. Having been associated with the Millennium Stage since its launch on March 1, 1997, it was fascinating to learn the nitty-gritty details. I asked Jim if there were similar projects in the United States: "Not in the U.S. The National Theatre in London tried something on a much smaller scale, but it wasn't as comprehensive or involved as the Kennedy Center's *Performing Arts for Everyone* initiative." (Johnson, 2013)

In conclusion, I inquired about the generous \$1,000,000 contribution that Jim and Maxine Isaacs earmarked for the Millennium Stage project:

I am from Minnesota. My parents had a deep-seated ethos of philanthropy. It was instilled in me. I wanted to put my money where my mouth was. The Kennedy Center's *Performing Arts for Everyone* initiative was an undertaking I believed in. It was important to provide the startup funding to ensure its success. (Johnson, 2013)

The interview lasted approximately one hour. I thanked Jim for his time. We shook hands and I assured him that I would schedule a meeting with David Jeffers, his confidant and strategist for the Millennium Stage venture. Jim thought it was important to get David's perspective since he was an integral part of the developmental process. I didn't waste any time. That afternoon, I tracked David down on the LinkedIn site, sent him a note and waited for his response. David contacted me within a few days and booked our get-together for June 17, 2013. Our meeting took place in David's office in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood. After traditional greetings and chitchat, David got down to business. He started the conversation by providing a bit of background information about himself and his connection to Jim Johnson:

I was Jim's public relations strategist at Fannie Mae. I started working with him in 1987. Beginning in January 1991, I spent almost every waking hour with him for approximately six years creating communications blueprints. Jim referred to me as his idea man. We were very compatible because we were both raised in the populist tradition and believed in the democratizing of housing opportunities. So when it came to the Kennedy Center, Jim wanted to throw the doors wide open. At the time Jim took the reins, the institution was a performing arts bureaucracy. It was insular – essentially a rental hall. It wasn't a creative place and it wasn't friendly. It revolved around a board of trustees' politics and they needed to be kept happy. Jim was a change agent and the Kennedy Center's image and practices needed transformed. So we put our heads together and trudged ahead. (Jeffers, 2013)

David had my undivided attention. As the hours passed by, the story of the Millennium Stage unfolded. I attempted to capture the essence of the narrative as I quickly jotted notes. I didn't want to miss a single nuance. Following his introductory remarks, David discussed the master plan and rollout of the project:

First, I needed to informally access what visitors did when they came to the institution. I stood at the John F. Kennedy bust in the center of the grand foyer for hours observing the ebb and flow of foot traffic. Groups and individuals would stare at the bust, look up and down the corridor, oftentimes stop in the gift shop, and then leave. On occasion there was a Grand Foyer Series, irregularly scheduled at the request of a member of congress, with a marching band or chorus. The quality of the performance was usually poor. Risers would be assembled for the event and quickly removed at the conclusion of the program.

Frankly, it was a form of tokenism for the representative to appease his/her constituents.

Following the evaluation, I drafted a twenty-page proposal with approximately six to ten different ideas. The Millennium Stage was one of the major components outlined in the document. Jim liked the concept and decided to start there. After showing the proposal to Larry Wilker, the former Kennedy Center President, and Ann Stock, the former Director of Development, we were good to go. I conceived of a name - Millennium Stage. Jim approved. It was 1996, close to the turn of the century. We both thought it was appropriate. It was time to push ahead. Next we had to turn our vision into a viable operation. Jim handed out marching orders and let people know that I spoke for him.

I began to think about ways we could rebrand the Grand Foyer Series as well as weigh our space options. We needed to know how much room was actually available and how many patrons we could accommodate. I originally focused on the South End of the Grand Foyer, which housed the Concert Hall. It seemed like the perfect place to build a permanent stage – large windows, easy exits, a majestic, but welcoming aura. After some deliberation, we settled on a raised portable stage for the South end. The North End platform would be built in front of the Eisenhower Theater approximately one year later. I had already left the scene, but think it was a great plan. This way we could shift from side to side depending on the Kennedy Center’s performing arts schedule. Interference with other productions would be less of a problem.

Jim was pleased. He said: “Let’s announce this.” I put together a press release. It was widely circulated so all stakeholders were on the same page. Next Larry Wilker, called a press conference around the third week of January. That is when Jim announced that the Kennedy Center would no longer be closed on Christmas Day. The Millennium Stage would make the arts accessible to everyone 365 days per year. It was a done deal. The Washington Post ran a story the next morning.

I thought my work was finished, but Jim gave me the title, Executive Producer of the Millennium Stage and said he wanted the project up and running by March 1st – approximately five weeks after the press conference. For the next month I dug in. I had to figure out all of the particulars prior to the official launch. One of the tasks included physically building the stages. Mickey Berra, the Vice President of Production was enlisted to conceptualize and oversee the effort. He was a pro. He saw to it that everything would be seamlessly constructed. And he was fun and down to earth. Mickey made my job easier. Garth Ross was also a major player during the conceptualization phase. He was enthusiastic, creative and a real go-getter. Both guys were my heroes.

Other assignments involved the creation of a logo; transporting patrons to and from the space; and aggressively marketing the initiative. It was the Grand Foyer Series on steroids. (Jeffers, June 17, 2013)

David looked at his watch and realized he was running late for a conference call. We had been totally engaged in conversation for two and a half hours. We lost track of time because we were both so absorbed in the subject. Before we concluded, David had a few final thoughts:

The creation of the Millennium Stage was Jim's proudest, single achievement. It was his signature initiative while he was Chair of the Kennedy Center. It was permanent and it made a huge impact. It transformed the institution. (Jeffers, 2013)

I thanked David for generously sharing his story. We shook hands and went about our business. As I walked home, I zoned out the hustle bustle of the hot summer afternoon and replayed the interview in my head. I had a spring in my step and a gleam in my eye. It was an honor to be affiliated with this extraordinary initiative. Months later when I attended the premier of *Four Little Girls* I would be reminded again how important the Millennium Stage is to the community at large.

Programming

Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963 was comprised of a meticulously woven series of vignettes, vivid images, historic abridgements, and songs. The dramatic reading comfortably transported the audience between people, places and time. It zeroed in on the personal narratives of the young women and methodically situated them in the context of the period. It was a powerful reminder of how the arts can bridge intergenerational and cultural divides, penetrate barriers, and provide a mechanism to heal the walking wounded.

This special 50th anniversary commemorative Millennium Stage program was not atypical. On August 28, 2013, The Heritage Signature Chorale helped mark the momentous 1963 March on Washington. And the "Let Freedom Ring" annual celebration, which honors the work and legacy of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., is always presented on the national holiday named for the Civil Rights Movement luminary.

Others, who have graced the stage, include acclaimed American artists such as folk icon Pete Seeger; vocalist and composer Bobby McFerrin; rock musician Patti Smith; opera singer Jessye Norman; and dancers from the Joffrey Ballet Company. (Kennedy Center, n.d., p. about the Millennium Stage)

On the international front, headliners like the Royal Shakespeare Company; Brazilian pianist Sergio Mendes; French African hip-hop/R&B duo Les Nubians; Japanese jazz pianist Hiromi; and Nigerian vocalist and guitarist King Sunny Ade have also appeared. (Kennedy Center, n.d., p. about the Millennium Stage)

Since the commencement of the first show, more than seventeen years ago, millions of people have enjoyed the broad spectrum of featured Millennium Stage performances. The nightly programs have become part of the fabric of the Washington, DC community.

I wanted to understand more about the booking process, so on June 12, 2013, I sat down with Garth Ross, the Vice President of Civic Engagement, and Diana Ezerins, the Program Manager for the *Performing Arts for Everyone* initiative, to learn the particulars. Garth has been connected with the Millennium Stage from the beginning. He served in an administration capacity prior to the launch of the first concert on March 1, 1997, working in tandem with David Jeffers. Diana is in her tenth year. Both parties have a wealth of institutional knowledge. I asked Garth and Diana to reflect on their experiences during their overall tenure at the Millennium Stage:

The Millennium Stage opened with the Charlie Byrd Trio and the Billy Taylor Trio on March 1, 1997. The launch was a success. Now the Kennedy Center had to build upon its victory and become a tour de force. We started to establish more community partners. With 365 productions a year, it was easier to pay attention to salient components like equality, diversity and outreach. The regularity of the shows also allowed us to welcome more artists from different genres and walks of life. There wasn't the pressure of ticket sales and there was more freedom and opportunities for performers and patrons alike. The Millennium Stage became a constant and a destination.

It wasn't all smooth sailing in the beginning, however. There were kinks that needed ironed out. For instance, the Kennedy Center still had an image problem. Changing hearts and minds overnight was not an effortless task. Additionally, the series was an unknown quantity and there was a psychological bias against free performances. A common viewpoint is complimentary equals poor quality. Patrons had to be convinced that the Millennium Stage was a special space. It was not a stepchild for an underserved demographic who couldn't afford high-priced tickets in the other theaters.

The shift came after we partnered with Alicia Adams, the Vice President of International Programming and Dance. Alicia was curator for a four-year initiative on Africa and the African Odyssey. It was an eye opener. There was a populist nature to that particular performing arts expo, which was rooted in domestic and world popular culture. It was a game changer. From that point forward, we started forging strong relationships with other Kennedy Center programming staff members, embassies, various local, national and global organizations, and a diverse array of artists. There were no more auditions. The Millennium Stage had become too big and too popular to go back to the mom and pop way of doing things. In fact, currently, approximately 50% of our season comes from partnering with the rest of the institution. Quite often, the presentations have a central theme, which provides a more cohesive feeling throughout the Center. The other 50% of our programming comes from due diligence. Diana works with tons of venues, attends lots of festivals, reads and listens to a great deal of music. (Ross and Ezerins, 2013)

After covering various programmatic topics, I asked Garth and Diana how they deal with the issue of censorship. Their response was thoughtful:

The Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage is a cultural common space. The presented work is meant to be positive. It is also a chance to bring people together. We work with community collaborators whom we trust. If the artist is controversial or questionable, then we try to make him/her aware of the nature of the platform. We believe in free speech, so we never tell artists not to do what they do. We try to be as open as possible and never put the institution's views before the creativity of the performers. If we believe that the content may be offensive to some patrons, then we do our best to warn them in advance with signage, program notes and advertisements. (Ross and Ezerins, 2013)

I noticed that the clock was ticking on that sweltering June morning and I was monopolizing a good deal of Garth and Diana's precious time. In spite of the tasks that awaited them, they continued to be charitable and attentive. I had a few additional questions regarding fees, funding and the elimination of the anniversary shows. They happily responded:

Artists are paid approximately \$100 per person. It can go as high as \$1,000 depending on the entertainer and the circumstances. We don't pay for transportation. In fact we try to share the performers with other venues in the area. This provides additional exposure to the artists and helps keep costs down. (Ross and Ezerins, 2013)

Artists aren't always financially compensated for Millennium Stage productions. In many instances they benefit in other ways. In the case of *Four Little Girls*, the Kennedy Center provided the venue, production support, which included labor, and technical equipment, the theater, a four-camera-shoot webcast, advertising and press. No one received monetary rewards on this particular evening. (Ross, 2013)

As for the big anniversary shows, Diana and Garth said they stopped a few years ago. They were expensive and they gobbled up a lot of valuable resources. There were diminishing returns. They told me that it makes more sense to hold the birthday celebrations every five years. We all agreed that they were fun and important. Some of the ceremonial crowd pleasers of the past included the Commodores, Kool & The Gang, and Mya. (Ross and Ezerins, 2013)

Last, but certainly not least, we briefly reviewed the funding structure for the *Performing Arts for Everyone* Initiative. Garth and Diana articulated that some contributions, like Jim Johnson and Maxine Isaac's original donation, are earmarked specifically for the Millennium Stage. It is restricted money. There are some foundation and corporate grants. More importantly, however, there is a pure institutional commitment for the series, so the Millennium Stage is part of the overall budget. (Ross and Ezerins, 2013)

Patrons interested in the specific financing of Millennium Stage programming can see some of the fiscal backers listed in the bill, which is distributed nightly before the show. Among them are the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, Capital One Bank, The Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education,

and the Millennium Stage Endowment Fund. There are also anonymous gifts that help secure the future of the enterprise. (*Four Little Girls*, 2013)

Frontline Warriors

On September 15, 2013, I arrived at the Kennedy Center around 4:30. The line for the distribution of free tickets for *Four Little Girls* was already around the building for a 6:00 show. Prospective audience members had been standing there for hours in hopes of obtaining admission to the main event. Required passes for Millennium Stage productions is an unusual practice, but nothing was commonplace about this 50th anniversary commemorative staged reading.

First off, the presentation was in the Family Theater opposed to the regular venues located on the North and South side of the Grand Foyer. Due to limited seating, however, viewing screens were erected for the massive overflow crowd at the customary sites. Thanks to the advanced technological apparatus installed at the Center, the dramatization of the Birmingham Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, and the panel discussion that followed, was seen by hundreds of patrons, whom came out to support the show. Other theatergoers, not lucky enough to score a seat, for a variety of reasons, could experience the event in the comfort of their homes. Millennium Stage happenings are streamed in real time, so anyone in the world can tune in. Webcasting for the nightly shows started in 1999. Spectators can also watch all Millennium Stage performances by downloading preferred programs through the archives. All of this is made possible through the dedication of a well-equipped camera crew, whom are part of the Millennium Stage family.

The on-line option didn't appear to be the people's choice for this noteworthy presentation. Besides the orderly congregated group outside, eagerly waiting for the dissemination of a small number of tickets, inside there was a sea of humanity hoping to be awarded a chair for the screening of the dedicatory program at one of the Millennium Stage's regular locals. I was happy to have received admission for one of the precious spots in the Family Theater. The *Performing Arts for Everyone* production team kindly set aside a ticket, so I could experience the dramatic reading first hand for this composition. Once I retrieved the pass at will-call, I quickly hid it in my purse. Losing it or having it plucked out of my hand would have been tragic. Once it was safely tucked away, I took a walk to observe the action elsewhere. The atmosphere was festive and a bit chaotic. All hands were on deck. It's the dedicated behind the scene employees that successfully execute the programming on a routine basis. September 15, 2013 was no exception. In fact, the front line warriors on this night had a more labor-intensive operation than usual due to the immense crowd. The event appeared to be understaffed.

The ushers, in particular, had an arduous task. Ordinarily, their primary responsibilities include personalized customer service, meeting and greeting the public, the stuffing and distribution of programs, accommodating patrons with special needs, seating, and crowd control. Due to the oversized assemblage of spectators, however, their role was more difficult than usual. They were on overdrive. Nevertheless, they rose to the occasion. The two head ushers on board that evening, Renee McKinney and

Hollace Enoch, remained cool, calm and collected, in spite of some of the abrasive comments being hurled in their direction. There just weren't enough seats to accommodate everyone so the ushers got the brunt of unhappy bystanders.

The *Performing Arts for Everyone* production crew was also out in force on September 15, 2013. Normally, the personnel serve as liaisons to make certain that there aren't any squeaky wheels. It's important that every show comes off without a hitch. To ensure the success of all of the nightly programs, they coordinate the various components, which include the sound engineers, the camera crew, the ushers, and attend to the wishes of the artists.

Additionally, the stagehands played a major part on this special 50th anniversary remembrance for the victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, just like they do the other 364 days per year. They are the glue that holds all Millennium Stage shows together. The dedicated engineers ensure that the quality of each performance is of the highest caliber and that all productions run smoothly.

On January 3, 2014, I met with Mickey Berra, the Kennedy Center's Vice President of Production to discuss the role of the *Performing Arts for Everyone* technicians and his personal connection to the Millennium Stage. Mickey's been a Kennedy Center employee for forty-three years. He was one of the original stagehands for the institution and was enlisted by Larry Wilker, in 1997 to develop a blueprint for the initiative and build the Grand Foyer Theaters. Mickey joyfully recounted his years with the program he considers to be the "heartbeat of the living memorial" (Berra, 2014):

The Kennedy Center is the marble palace and the Millennium Stage is the heartbeat of the institution. I am proud to be affiliated with such a wonderful program. I was there from the beginning. In 1997, Larry Wilker drafted me to quarterback for the initiative. I put a construction team together and got to work. It was an in house strategy and design. That was the best route. By assembling the stages ourselves, we saved the Kennedy Center time, money and aggravation. But it wasn't easy. It was a challenging undertaking. Not only did we have to understand the logistical aspects of the project, we had to take into account the complexity of the institution's programming. We also had to deal with the various building restrictions.

In order to satisfy all of the stakeholders, including the United States Commission of Fine Arts, which had to approve any alterations taking place within the landmark architecture, we created a rudimentary portable platform that could go up and down in a moment's notice. Kind of like a rock and roll stage. The chandeliers had to be dismantled and raised about four feet to make space for the structure, a framework for lighting and sound needed to be installed and we needed buy-in from our other colleagues. As the years passed, the Millennium Stage became part of the overall fabric of the Kennedy Center, due to its popularity, so we continued to make improvements. In fact, today, we rarely disassemble the stage, not even for the Honors. It has been an evolutionary process. It helped that Larry Wilker changed my job description from stagehand

to Director of Production back in 1996. From that moment forward, the Millennium Stage has become a major component of the Kennedy Center. We are really one big happy family, opposed an institution with a lot of independent parts. (Berra, 2014)

Challenges

In spite of the systematized fail-safe mechanisms, which have been incorporated since the launch of the Millennium Stage's first show on March 1, 1997, there will always be irregularities that will require adjustments. It's the nature of the beast. For instance, some shows, like *Four Little Girls*, are understaffed. Since there aren't advanced ticket sales, it's difficult to project audience participation beforehand. On this particular occasion, the *Performing Arts for Everyone* programming team miscalculated popular sentiment for the subject matter. As a result, a mass of people flocked to the Kennedy Center unable to obtain a seat.

The underestimation of a Millennium Stage crowd also occurs, such as in the case of The Heritage Signature Chorale. The group sang on August 28, 2013 to mark the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington. Since approximately 100,000 enthusiasts converged on the District of Columbia to engage in the weeklong plethora of activities associated with the observance of the significant milestone, there was an elevated expectation that onlookers would cap off the day with some beautiful music. Even though there was a respectably sized audience, the demonstrators never made it over to the Kennedy Center. The consequence for a smaller number of theatergoers had little impact, with the exception of more staff on hand to oversee the event.

Further challenges involve the first come first serve policy. Frequently, patrons line up well in advance for a show. The Millennium Stage can comfortably accommodate about 300 people on any given night. Once the ushers open the house, everyone rushes in to grab available seats. Quite often they place their belongings across a row of chairs, saving them for friends and family members, who aren't even on the premises. This practice creates problems for the ushers, who try to welcome as many spectators as possible. It also forces later arrivals to stand and watch the performance on the raised screen outside of the makeshift theater.

There is also a delicate balance between ensuring a quality experience for those in attendance and security. Great customer service is key. All personnel work as a unit to guarantee a memorable overall outing for all Millennium Stage visitors. Safety, however, is also a consideration. Sometimes the two elements collide. The diverse makeup of the crowd is compelling, but also requires vigilance. It is incumbent upon the ushers to be the eyes and ears of the operation. Kennedy Center security is also on tap if necessary. Cooperation between the various entities is essential and allows for a smooth process.

Other trials and tribulations were discussed during my June meeting with Garth Ross and Diana Ezerins:

There aren't enough days in a year to book all of the artists, whom are interested in performing on the Millennium Stage due to its growing popularity. This scenario tends to be problematic. We are forced to schedule our season way in advance, leaving little wiggle room for players who happen to be blowing through town and are searching for an additional gig.

The procurement process also limits our ability to successfully build relationships and engage with various constituencies. We welcome the communities' input and strive to partner with as many of our friends and neighbors as possible. We've achieved some of our goals, but we have a ways to go. Time is always a factor. (Ross and Ezerins, 2013)

The inability to connect to all of the district's citizens was certainly apparent on the night of September 15, 2013. One very important group was conspicuously missing from the gathering: Civil Rights Movement veterans. The few, who attended the staged reading, didn't have a reserved ticket so they had to stand in line with the rest of the hopeful theatergoers.

I happened to bump into Dorie Ladner, a long-time activist in the battle for equal opportunity. She was born and raised in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and was instrumental in many of the major campaigns in the Jim Crow South. She was waiting in the Grand Foyer with M.J. O'Brien, whose book, *We Shall Not Be Moved: The Jackson Woolworth's Sit-In and the Movement It Inspired*, was recently released. Dorie's legs don't function as well as they used to, so it was painful for her to be on her feet for such a lengthy period of time. Luckily, Hollace Enoch, one of the head ushers, accommodated her in a section reserved for seniors and individuals with disabilities. This arrangement was satisfying to Dorie.

Unlike other venues around the city, however, where Movement activists are afforded exclusive invitations to special programs centered on the struggle for equal rights, the Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage has not taken stock of this tradition. Customary protocol is to notify prospective guests that a particular program is on the books. The Smithsonian and Newsuem are among the better-known institutions that engage in this practice. On the day of the function, seats are cordoned off for the veterans, and some time during the affair they are asked to stand to receive special recognition for their service to this country. These extraordinary movers and shakers courageously put their lives on the line during the tumultuous 1960's and beyond, so it is only right to honor them in this modest fashion.

The insufficient dissemination of information and outreach to Civil Rights Movement veterans was a topic of conversation during my next shift at the Millennium Stage. I cornered Matt Kattenburg, the *Performing Arts for Everyone's* Production Manager, to discuss formal courtesies for future performances of this kind. He agreed that more had to be done. (Kattenburg, 2013) Negligence or disregard for this unique demographic was not the issue. The problem was generational. The younger staff members didn't have an entry into the tightly entwined network of abolitionists known as the band of brothers and sisters. As a result no measure was taken to provide appropriate

concessions for the commemorative show. Matt is optimistic about rectifying this situation down the road. (Kattenburg, 2013)

Conclusion

Lift every voice and sing, till earth and Heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won. (Kennedy Center, n.d., p. archives)

On September 15, 2013, as I stood to sing the final composition, known to many as the African American anthem, my thoughts drifted to another time. In 1999, during my tenure as head usher of the Millennium Stage, I traveled to Alabama for a book tour, celebrating authors from the Black Belt. I'm not from the red clay country, but I had just spent eight years of my life documenting the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. It was my first trip to that part of the Jim Crow South and it was an eye opener. I visited many of the prominent historic sites, among them, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, where Robert Graetz, the author of *A White Preacher's Memoir: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, and I had a speaking engagement. In 1955, Bob was the pastor of the American Lutheran Church in Montgomery when Rosa Parks refused to relinquish her seat to a white passenger. (Graetz, 1998) He served an all-black congregation and would soon find himself in the middle of the struggle. His house was bombed three times during that battle to integrate the city's public transportation system. It was a privilege to be by his side.

Prior to our talk, we visited Kelly Ingram Park, a gathering spot for Civil Rights Movement demonstrators back in the day. The park is situated across from the 16th Street Baptist Church, where the massive explosion claimed the lives of Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins and Cynthia Wesley, on that dark September morning in 1963. It was a memorable journey, one that I frequently return to in my mind on occasions like the commemoration hosted by the Kennedy Center's Millennium Stage.

At the conclusion of the hymn, the rousing standing ovation brought me back to the present. It was one of those rare moments where it seemed like my life had come full-circle. That is the power of art. It has the ability to transport people through time and touch the deepest part of their souls. The arts can also have a transformative impact, leading to change in the hearts and minds of spectators.

In the years to come, there will be lots of celebratory events, which will recognize the various human rights campaigns waged, the victories won, and the human costs. I'm certain that some of these programs will take place on the Millennium Stage. It's a perfect venue for these types of projects and is truly one of our nation's special jewels.

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