

# **African American Deaf Women in Performing Arts: Theater and Film**

**Michelle Banks and Ann Marie Bryan**

Onyx Theatre Company  
New York, N.Y.

## **Mission Statement**

Onyx Theatre Company, Inc. has been established as a recognition of the visible gap that remains in the Deaf theater community for African Americans. While there is existing Deaf theater, and while it remains dedicated to expressing the experiences of the Deaf community, it neglects to explore the experiences of its many minority subcultures.

Committed to our artistic community, we exist to provide professional African American Deaf performers with more opportunities to explore the various cultural aspects of their lives. As we grow and expand, we would like to include in our productions Deaf/hard of hearing performers, as well as hearing performers, representing all minority groups.

The articulation of the goals of such artistic cross-cultural work that Onyx Theatre Company presents is often best implemented with panel and workshop discussions so as to allow greater understanding between varied cultures; to achieve a greater freedom in writing, adapting, and performing particular work.

We are very responsive to bringing about yet another important cultural exchange between Deaf and hearing audiences with the aid of sign language and voice interpreters. We will always seek out untapped potential talents to create and give new meaning to our vision of understanding. Above all, we seek to explore whatever possibilities visual cultural theater can provide us, and to share our experiences with all interested in learning more, regardless of their hearing loss.

## **Statement of Activities**

Onyx Theater Company, Inc., was founded on August 31, 1989 by three young deaf minority artists (Michelle Banks, an African American actress; Monique Holt, a Korean actress; and Christopher Smith, an African American dancer/actor) to recognize the visible gap that exists in the Deaf theater community for African Americans and other minorities. Onyx was officially incorporated in 1990 in New York City and operates as a nonprofit organization.

After Onyx was originally established in 1989, the first small production, "There's Butter But No Bread," was performed in July of 1990 as Onyx's debut presentation at New York University Studio. It was adapted from the

original play, "Waiting for Godot," by the late Samuel Beckett. The play was adapted, produced, and directed by Michelle Banks. Monique Holt served as assistant director of this production. The play was based on deaf minority actors' experiences, cultures, and perspectives of life. The cast of "There's Butter But No Bread" consisted of five actors: two African American deaf men, one Chinese deaf woman, one white American hearing man, and one Hungarian deaf woman. This production, Onyx's first, drew an audience of 181 people.

Onyx presented its second production, "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf," by Ntozake Shange from April 11-21, 1991 at Henry Street Settlement Playhouse in Manhattan. It was also performed in Washington, D.C., on May 17 and 18, 1991 at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf. Directed by Jaye Austin-Williams, an African American Deaf woman, this performance was presented in both sign language and spoken English by four Black Deaf actresses and three hearing actresses. The play tells the stories of women of color and addresses the oppression, by society and their men, they have faced in their experiences.

The purpose of performing this play was to demonstrate minority women's experiences in life as they are relevant to the issues of culture, racism, oppression, sexuality, abortion, and womanhood; it was also our objective to make the play available to a cross-cultural audience, and to explore different communication mediums/styles, as it was performed in spoken English and American Sign Language. A panel discussion following the performance brought about an exchange of cultural experiences between two very distinct audiences, the deaf/hard of hearing and the hearing. The play was additionally performed at a dinner theater in Brooklyn in February of 1992.

In August 1992, Onyx produced a collection of works edited by Onyx Ensemble, "Black Women's Stories: One Deaf Experience," directed by Ann Marie Bryan at the La Guardia Community College's Little Theater in Long Island City, N.Y. The play was also performed at the Seventh Place Theater in St. Paul, Minn., by invitation from Northern Sign Theater Co. In March 1993, at Manhattan's Open Eye Theater, Onyx produced this play again to celebrate Women's Month. This play was created by collecting and editing works from eight African American female writers: Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Gayle Jones, Ntozake Shange, Ann Marie Bryan, Lisa Weems, and Michelle Banks. This was a collection of African American women's stories that not only reflect ideas, but also life, breathing both color and pain into the moments of childhood and young adulthood. It also made visual the trials of women today: grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters have told these stories. Collecting these works was the best way to communicate the unique experience of being a young African American Deaf woman.

Onyx usually publicizes its programs and productions by contacting Deaf organizations and other special interest groups as well as by sending press releases to newspapers, magazines, and public broadcast services. This year

our audience attendance grew to approximately 1,110, representing Onyx's successful growth within a two-year period.

In January 1991, Onyx hosted a fundraising event to raise money for the "For Colored Girls..." project. Two small performances of African Folklore Tales and a skit entitled "Black and White Hope" were presented. At a separate fundraising event in Washington, D.C., a Caribbean buffet was made available for sale. In December 1991, Onyx hosted its first annual celebration. Currently, we are in the planning stages of a major fundraising initiative, aiming to earn over \$50,000. Included in this effort, we are providing workshops focusing on acting techniques and cultural issues in visual theater, and establishing a committee of minority Deaf writers to create original works for future projects.

Onyx Theater Company's first priority remains the community and to serve the people of color who are deaf and hard of hearing. In addition, we would like to introduce multicultural audiences to the experience of cultural, visual theater.

## **Presentation**

The tape of Onyx's most recent production, "Black Women's Stories: One Deaf Experience," will be shown. It is an empathetic portrayal of the lives of two African American deaf women who have struggled and accomplished much in an ignorant society. Being a Black deaf woman is a triple obstacle in society because we, as women, have to work much harder to achieve and succeed in society. We need to have patience and persistence to educate and advance ourselves, and eventually our road to success may be worthwhile. However, to some degree, some women have given up and accept the way society looks at them. We need to voice our happiness and sadness regarding our life stories. What is a woman? It's a question all women have been asking themselves. We need to analyze who we are and realize how womanhood can affect our lives. Two African American deaf women, Ann Marie Bryan and Michelle Banks, have written poems and monologues about womanhood. Michelle will convey them at the conference. The videotapes of some of Onyx's previous productions can be shown if time permits.

## **Anticipated Questions From Participants**

1. In what ways can Onyx affect people's lives?
2. How can anyone who is interested in Onyx get involved?
3. Are there any or enough minority women, especially Deaf, achieving in the arts? If not, how can Onyx gain the recognition of these women in the arts?
4. Is being a Black Deaf woman in performing arts difficult and how do you cope?
5. Do you consider yourself as racially challenged to the arts?
6. What do you hope for Onyx to achieve in 5 years?

7. What do you expect from us who are not interested or interested in performing arts?
8. Where can anyone get acting training?
9. What kind of theater is Onyx engaged in?
10. Is it possible to participate in theater artistically and professionally regardless of competition and financial instability?

## **Deafvision Filmworks, Inc.**

### **Mission Statement**

Deafvision Filmworks, Inc., was formed in 1991 by an inspiring filmmaker, Ann Marie Bryan. This is a company about to become a not-for-profit center for the advancement of emerging and established media artists of diverse backgrounds. Our goal is to help produce new, imaginative, daring, and diverse visions exploring cross-cultural identities among deaf and minority people on film, video, and television.

### **Statement of Activities**

Bryan has produced and directed movies and other works: "The Feeling of Silence," 1990; "Married or Coming Out," 1990; "Deafie, Hearie," which was her first film in 1989; "Cutting The Edge of a Free Bird," 1991; and "Listen to the Hands of Our People," 1992. She has worked as production assistant with the Hudlin Brothers in the movie, "Boomerang," which featured Eddie Murphy, Robin Givens, and Halle Berry. Deafvision Filmworks had two fundraisers at Crazy Nanny in Manhattan last year and on February 16, 1993 to help raise money for her works. They were successful and drew an attendance of about 150 people at her screenings.

### **Presentation**

The showing of Ann Marie's two filmworks, "Listen to the Hands of Our People" and "Cutting The Edge of a Free Bird," will be presented. "Listen to the Hands of Our People," a 20 minute, 3/4 inch video documentary, features interviews of deaf people with AIDS, during their visit to the National AIDS Quilt in Washington, D.C., where there were deaf volunteers, the deaf panels of the quilt, an AIDS vigil, and much more.

The documentary focuses on a variety of struggles that deaf people faced while coping with the AIDS virus. The documentary shows the diversity of some deaf people's backgrounds and the experiences they faced in terms of the lack of interpreters, misunderstandings in the hospital with their doctors and nurses, their fear of the disease, their family problems, poor medical care due to the lack of communication, and the impact on their social lives and jobs.

The documentary was produced at New York University for a senior thesis, which was a school project by our newly founded company, Deafvision Filmworks, Inc. We collaborated with other outside organizations such as

Deaf AIDS Project (DAP) of New York, Deaf Mosaic of Washington, D.C., Gay Men Health Crisis of New York, Deaf AIDS Center of Los Angeles, and other companies that we were dealing with rights to use their materials.

The second screening, "Cutting The Edge of a Free Bird" (16mm color, 12 minutes), deals with an African American deaf family that has struggled in making the decision between a college for the deaf or regular college for their daughter. The relationship between the mother and daughter is tense. The mother wants her daughter to follow in her footsteps by attending a college for the deaf centered around the deaf community. However, her daughter doesn't find it worthwhile because she has been attending a school for the deaf since she was a little girl. She wants to do something different in her life by attending a regular school to study film. The daughter fears she will upset her mother, so she puts off revealing her wish against going to a school for the deaf. The film is about discovering the daughter's own identity in a hearing world that is separated from her deaf culture. The point in the film is that both deaf women, in their own pace of struggles in the hearing world, try to understand and respect each other's wishes regardless of their different choices in colleges. The mother fears for her daughter being in a hearing world, and she feels that her daughter would not benefit from a regular school that has no knowledge of deafness or special support for disabled. The daughter faces her own struggles in breaking barriers through self-discovery.

### **Anticipated Questions From Participants**

1. Are you planning to get this video on television?
2. How often do you show your work?
3. How much is the budget?
4. Where do you get the money to make your movies? and How?
5. Does your school provide some type of special allotment for your production?
6. What do you do for a living?
7. Where did you go to school to learn film?
8. Do they have other deaf people in the program?
9. Is it difficult to be a deaf person in a mainstream college?
10. How do you edit your film/sound?
11. What type of film do you make?
12. What's your next move to make another film?
13. How many people are involved in the company?
14. What are the goals of the company?
15. I understand there are differences between the textures in subtitling a dialogue on film/video; which one is more expensive, subtitle or closed captions?
16. Where do you expect to see yourself in the next few years as your company comes along?
17. How many board members are involved?