

Making Art, Making Detroit, Making a Difference

By Eddie B. Allen Jr.



Art in the Justice System

Graceful movements and elongated limbs tell the story of a brown-skinned figure dressed in white. Symbolically, she's a little girl, then a young woman, who morphs into a hardened, incarcerated veteran of drug-rotted streets.

She recoils, stretches, then recoils again to instrumental rhythms, dropping to the floor as if crushed beneath the weight of sexual abuse and exploitation. The curse visits her repeatedly, even in the person of a jailer who impregnates her in one final, definitive step toward continuing the generational cycle.

"Imani" is her name.

She dances the blues.

Her presence is as main character in a production titled "[Cell/Ships,](#)" presented by the Detroit-based drama troupe, [4TheatrSake,](#) as a critique of the prison system. It's a fitting piece for the Network of



Cell/Ships, a performance by 4TheatrSake at Urban Word

Ensemble Theaters' MicroFest: USA session, Art Impact on an Issue: The Justice System. As a Detroiter, I'm encouraged, personally, to see NET's interest in the happenings at one tiny bright spot in this crumbling block that includes a liquor store, which opens way too early in the day, and not much else that beckons artists and progressive thinkers to this part of the community.

Inside the Urban Network bookstore and cyber café, all eyes remain on Imani. She's an actress, of course, but her dramatized testimony—sexual victimization at age 10, captive to a drug habit and soon locked up because of it—isn't even the worst that I've ever heard. With 4TheatrSake's performances, which include two other segments, as a backdrop, MicroFest participants soon delve into a discussion of what produces Imani's condition,

and what, if any, artistic solutions exist for provoking wider and broader dialogue about her plight.

4TheatrSake troupe member Sean Rodriguez says he was inspired to produce *Cell/Ships* following his own encounter in a jail cell when he was briefly arrested for outstanding traffic tickets and forced to observe, firsthand, the disproportionate number of men of color being held. The stage seemed a fitting platform to provoke thought about incarceration and even so-called “precautions” that resemble incarceration, taken daily on behalf of thousands of Detroiters, Rodriguez adds.

“It’s so interesting to me,” he says, “to see how something simple, like walking through a metal detector at school, psychologically changes you.”

Creative expression, however, can counter adverse psychological change, experts agree.

“Art is the healing and the coping mechanism,” says panelist [Hasan Davis](#), an artist, writer, and the juvenile justice commissioner for the State of Kentucky. As a proponent of creative expression, Davis makes clear his support for access by prisoners to outlets that will help nurture their humanity in what are often the less humane circumstances of confinement. It’s through art that Imani’s character, though clearly resigned to her prison fate, is able to express “forgiveness” for “everyone who’s ever hurt” her, as a voice-over proclaims during her choreography solo.

Ex-gang-banger and author [Yusef “Bunchy” Shakur](#) relates to art’s transformative power, as evidenced by his direction of Urban Network, which offers literature, paintings, and live entertainment space, including a wooden palette in the corner of the small storefront that serves as 4TheatrSake’s stage. Shakur tells NET and his co-panelists that it was largely a sense of obligation to his beloved neighborhood, “Zone 8,” along with the importance of books as he served a prison term, which led him to open the café. But it’s not always easy, he explains, as an ex-offender, trying to do the right thing in the community where he grew up, among people who’ve not reinvented themselves, like Shakur, the “thug” once known as “JoJo,” reinvented himself. Incidentally, I’ve been a Shakur fan since I caught him on another panel two years ago discussing youth violence and telling the audience how Detroit Mayor Dave Bing rejected a copy of his self-published autobiography—while Detroit Mayor Dave Bing sat three chairs away on the same panel. The problem, Shakur’s message seemed to be, is indifference from the very folks charged with solving it.



Urban Network

“Hurt people hurt people,” he reminds the seminar, citing the old saying. He later explains that he still carries the “weight” of men with whom he was imprisoned for nine years, and the pressure to succeed on their behalf “every day of my life.” Part of this sense of obligation led Shakur to chair the grassroots organization, Help Our Prisoners Elevate (HOPE).

The discussion of prison and its implications, political and otherwise, on artistic depiction and interpretation isn’t complete without an examination of the institution’s peculiar relationship to space and place. “Buzz” Alexander, founder of the 23-year-old Ann Arbor, Mich.-based [Prison Creative Arts Project \(PCAP\)](#) has insight.

“We celebrate the power and the resistance of the people in prison,” Alexander tells the audience. Along with producing live dramatic performances in what “are very challenging spaces,” like rec rooms and common areas where movement is monitored and restricted, PCAP sponsors visual art exhibitions on behalf of inmates involved with their program. The inmates are often given opportunities to sell their work to the public.

“We don’t come in with lesson plans. We don’t say, ‘This is what you need to do.’ We show them what we do and they catch on very quickly.”

While a logical presumption might be that the facility’s influence on an inmate will result in art that conveys anger or depression, the space of prison itself has occasionally birthed freedom from emotional and spiritual burdens. There was the time, Alexander recounts, when a woman who’d killed her husband helped PCAP explore the theme of forgiveness in what Alexander says eventually became “the best play I ever participated in.”

PCAP’s Sari Adelson, sitting quietly on the panel for the majority of the roughly 40-minute discussion, speaks true volumes in discussing the power of art to transcend the inhibitions of place, once she breaks her silence.

“Hearing people laugh and smile inside of a prison” is one of art’s direct forms of impact on the space in which it’s created, Adelson says.

“Being called by their first name, and not their last name or a number,” she adds, are simple gestures that PCAP provides to help inmates retreat, at

least, temporarily, from constant reminders of the “worst decision” of their lives.

In his unique position as both an arts advocate and “The Man,” representing a justice system that places little value on art, Davis says creative agencies must think in dollars when proposing programs and talking about outcomes. Presenting arts resources and arts-driven skills with an eye toward capitalizing on prisons’ fundamental concerns, such as re-entry programming and transferable skills development, is what will be heard, not art’s power to enable emotional expression or retreat. Speaking the language of elected officials and facility administrators, says Davis, creates commonality. Even though “data is clear about the transformative value of the art, they don’t want to hear it” unless it affects budgets.

These two views on what difference art makes aren’t mutually exclusive. It’s a matter of what to frame and measure depending on who is the stakeholder. I can particularly appreciate Adelson’s view, since I have a cousin, who’s more like a brother, serving time in a Michigan prison. He, like the man he was convicted of killing, represents the growing numbers of Detroiters in their teens, twenties and even thirties, who can most potentially benefit from art’s intervention before they’re swept into the unforgiving and recidivistic American penal system. A MicroFest plenary session the night before at Art Effect Gallery hints at possible strategies for making creative expression more ground-accessible to Detroit’s talented youth and adults who might lack public school outlets or the funds to attend places like College for Creative Studies.



Making Detroit Better: By and For Whom?

“When we have the conversation about making Detroit more attractive, let’s talk about for whom,” says Oya Amakisi, founder of the [Detroit Women of Color International Film Festival](#). In the first of what would become several MicroFest conversations about art’s and artists’ role in gentrification, Amakisi tells the audience gathered at Eastern Market’s Art Effect Gallery that Detroiters “love” transplants to the city. These transplants, however, shouldn’t receive greater advantages, she says, than “people who’ve lived here all their lives” and who are “creating art every day.”

Eastern Market, which is about 10 minutes from my home, has been a Detroit landmark for more than 100 years. On weekends, in particular, it bustles with residents from all over the metro area, who descend upon the open-air vendors to buy fresh fruits, vegetables and flowers, or have lunch at one of the restaurants that surround the Market district. On this night, in this particular place, however, our corner of the district is the hot-spot for an age-old debate about outsiders and their relationships to native inhabitants.

One hometown “native” in the audience at Art Effect’s session identified as [“Marsha Music,”](#) daughter of a former Detroit record store owner, even takes MicroFest to task. She wonders why the coordinators scheduled an arts event during the same weekend as Detroit’s annual [African World Festival](#).

The programming dates suggest a disconnect with the very community that MicroFest hopes to reach, considering that hundreds of artists perform in or attend African World each year, Ms. Music suggests. I’m among the local writers who occasionally cover “AWF,” which I’ve not missed since I was a teenager, and have plans on visiting in between MicroFest sessions. For the local arts community, and particularly black artists, AWF is a big deal, so I appreciate Ms. Music’s observation. I’m gratified to hear NET’s Ashley Sparks (who already strikes me as very cool) calmly and respectfully explain that Detroit’s event was originally scheduled for the following weekend, but that lodging accommodation became an issue; she also tells the audience that the African World Festival will be a site visit for MicroFest the following evening. Her response, in my view, has just the right tone—one that’s not defensive, in the least—for a person seeking to earn collaboration, rather than conflict with NET’s target group of local participants.

“Earning collaboration” isn’t just a turn of phrase. As with the dynamics of any relationship, the trust between artists and the organizations purporting to represent them has to be earned, as Amakisi notes in her comments about public resources: “As we talk about this (topic) of gentrification, let’s talk about who gets funded and who doesn’t get funded,” she says, adding that “art is not separate from the people” creating it, or from their demography and culture.

Gary Anderson, who directs the popular Detroit-based [Plowshares Theatre Co.](#), seems to agree with Ms. Music’s and Amakisi’s viewpoints, but he notes a conflict in the idea of artistic self-determination and demanding fairness from public funding sources.

“We can’t fight and beg the same man,” he says. “You cannot expect somebody who doesn’t understand your vision, your passion, to pay for your dream.”

On the coin’s flip side, the Eastern Market session shows some independently driven efforts to help level the terrain for Detroit-born and -bred artists, including the Hamilton Anderson Associates (HAA) architectural firm’s [rogueHAA](#), a design, architecture, and urban advocacy collaborative which, as its name suggests, stimulates ideas and new design solutions for Detroit through local design initiatives, installations, research and planning, and public presentation and dialogue.

“What if art and other forces in Detroit could overcome what appears to be a pre-determined path?” asks Rogue’s Dan Kinkead in his introduction.

“Rather than just talking about how great the talent in this room really is, let’s talk about how we can keep this thing going down the line and create a Detroit that’s sustainable,” he adds.

Toward the goal of creating a sustainable Detroit, Philip Lauri, of [DETROIT LIVES!](#), which represents clients in film, public art and fashion, and Jela Ellefson, of the [Eastern Market Corporation](#), join [Street Culture Mash](#)’s Mike Han and Amakisi in the discussion. All of them present views and thoughts, practical and passionate, about how creativity and its means of expression are vital to life in their city. Even from a vantage point that remains business and revenue-focused, Ellefson explains Eastern Market’s welcoming posture toward gallery and club tenants: “We understand art as something that adds value, and through value, creates opportunities.”

The dialogue has been both spirited and stimulating, not to mention punctuated with notable performances by my old college friend, now internationally known poet and performer, [jessica Care moore](#), and the rapper [Invincible](#), whose Detroit-centric rhymes I hear for the first time. I note, in both pieces—jessica’s poem chanted energetically over a “house” music track, and Invincible’s thoughtful lyrics delivered in synch with a slide photo presentation of city scenery—the place-impacting-art and art-impacting-place dynamics. jessica’s poem, she says, originated from her experience with Detroit nostalgia as she was performing and living in New York, among other artists, years ago. I suspect that few in the audience know it, but even the techno-heavy beats over which she performs have their roots in a Detroit musical innovation that has made artists like Juan Atkins and Derrick May into superstars overseas. No coincidence is this, obviously, as jessica muses in her distinctive rasp, “Even though Motown left, we never let the music stop, never let the music stop, never let the music, never let the

music, never let the music stop..." Motown-meets-techno (which has also come to be known as "electronic music") in lyrical union; it's almost like a code language among Detroiters, reminiscent of the spirituals sung aloud during slavery, which doubled as instructions for mobilizing toward freedom.

Conversely, Invincible's music is codeless and explicit, representing Detroit's finest traditions in trend-setting. Her art seeks no one's approval. In fact, it runs the risk of alienation when she raps lyrics rejecting homophobia and bigotry, which have run rampant in the hyper-masculine hip hop genre since its emergence more than 30 years ago. As if to further make her city's presence felt in the force of her song "Detroit Summer," she brings the weekend's most infectious call-and-response to the excited crowd, sprinkled with out-of-towners who compliantly yell, "I love – Detroit city!" She has converted the entirety of Art Effect's energetic space with the power of her art.



Invincible

I see Invincible a second time near the close of MicroFest, at her presentation inside my alma mater Wayne State University's Hilberry Theatre, located, according to the venue's web site, in "Midtown." During the course of the weekend, she has spoken, quite accurately, of a re-branding effort by some of the city's non-profit cultural and tourism agencies; it's a marketing strategy that some of us find offensive. I spent my Wayne State days as a resident of Midtown, the neighborhood also known as "New Center," located not quite a mile north of Hilberry. Back then, it was a liberal mix of students like me, working-class blacks, and established but upwardly mobile professionals, though framed on one side by a stretch of Woodward Avenue known for crack and prostitution. Apparently, however, re-branders have determined that the area extending to Hilberry Theatre and beyond—which true Detroiters know as Cass Corridor—would benefit from a moniker makeover, since the Corridor was largely associated with crime and poverty.

Invincible is one in a handful of MicroFest participants who call attention to the questionable motives of certain community entities, which appear more intent on attracting new residents than empowering the present ones. It's no secret that artists, who frequently find affordable housing in low-income



[Matrix Theater Company](#) performing in TAP (The Alley Project) Gallery

Saturday tour of The Alley Project, including a performance by youth involved in Matrix Theatre Company, for impressed MicroFest participants.

“They love the city,” she tells me. “They’re like, ‘We’re gonna come back!’”

Mosaic Youth Theatre: Making its Case

It may not be the smartest thing to admit—in writing, no less—to an obsession with teenagers, but I confess: I’ve stalked them.

And it’s not just me. My over-40 friends have repeatedly sought out a particular group of kids for years now. We’ve even exchanged recordings of their sweet voices that we later played for our private pleasures, over and over again.

What other choice has one who ever enjoyed the amazing vocal talents of Detroit’s nationally recognized and critically acclaimed [Mosaic Youth Theatre](#)? (The video that opens Mosaic’s web site says it all!)

Fortunately for my friends and me, who are among Mosaic’s countless fans, a documented 95 percent

districts like Cass Corridor, are among the most vulnerable to displacement when rebranders and name-changers, often suburbanites who only work in the city, choose what’s “best” for the collective.

After hearing discussions like these, I’m both reflective and guardedly optimistic. Encouraging, at least, are reports from people like Southwest Detroit photographer and NET fellow Lisa Luevanos, who guided a



Mosaic Singers. Photo from the report: “Excellence on Stage and in Life: The Mosaic Model for Youth Development Through the Arts.”

of Mosaic youth graduate high school and attend college, so their faces change – lest our preoccupation with following them from one public performance to the next expose us and possibly incur the spurn apparent in such teen phrases as, “Get a life.”

So impressed have I been by the group’s discipline and stellar talents that I make it a point to ask every young person I meet, who shows raw talent and passion for performing, “Do you know about Mosaic?” Not fully understanding the mechanics of online fundraising, Mosaic’s is one of few Web capital campaigns that I’ve ever supported.

“We didn’t start with a model,” founder Rick Sperling told the MicroFest audience gathered at Mosaic’s rehearsal space. “We just did stuff. We saw that there was a need. Arts programs were being eliminated.” Even now, he says, site-based theater programs exist in only about 5 percent of the schools in Michigan’s largest educational district.

In the 20 years since Mosaic’s 1992 formation, the organization has performed at the White House, and toured Africa, Europe, and Asia. Artistically, Sperling said, the bar of excellence for these high school-aged singers and actors is set “very, very high.” “Sometimes ridiculously high,” he added. “When you put the bar just above what’s possible, that’s when you experience the most growth.”



Now That I Can Dance, a production of Mosaic Youth Theatre

youth. During a three-year period, Mosaic participants were given pre- and post-program assessments, including questions about their personal life

Years after Mosaic’s founding, Sperling recognized that the program was not only filling an extracurricular need, but developing a blueprint for teen success. As he writes in a letter published at Mosaic’s web site, “...over the years, I began to see that the Youth Ensemble program was having an impact on its young artists that went far beyond artistic pursuits.”

Eventually, a [three-year study](#) was conducted by the University of Michigan with support from The Wallace Foundation, which enabled in-depth research on Mosaic’s methods and its outcomes in the lives of primarily lower-income, urban-reared

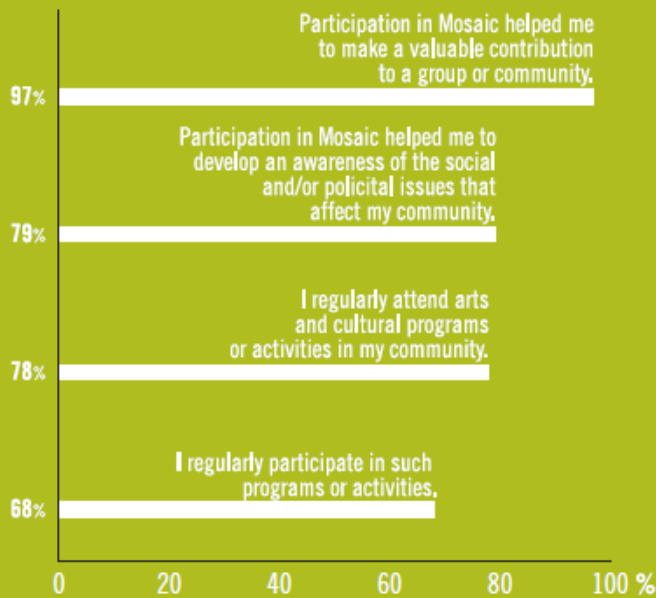
influences and challenges, ranging from the sources of stress in their lives to their parents' marital status. Mid-year assessments were individually conducted among youth whose parents consented to their participation in the study. Meanwhile, Mosaic alumni feedback was solicited via e-mail surveys, with iTunes or Amazon.com gift cards provided as their incentive for responding, which generated nearly 200 additional data sources.

U-M's study, "Excellence on Stage and in Life: The Mosaic Model for Youth Development Through the Arts," was specifically commissioned, said Sperling, to help him and the staff assess what helped and what didn't help in producing both artistically talented and personally well-developed students. Among findings related to Mosaic's impact on youth development:

- Mosaic alumni cite the program's influence in helping them manage time and conduct themselves professionally.
- Eighty-one percent of alumni cite their involvement in Mosaic as more helpful toward their personal growth than any other activity experienced during their teen years.
- Ninety-two percent cited their Mosaic involvement as the source of their confidence in believing they could achieve other goals.
- Mosaic alumni named the program as a strong influence on their positive self-images and positive decision-making.

"We also decided to create this document because we wanted to share our model with educators, youth workers, arts organizations, and policymakers," writes Sperling. "While we could tell people—anecdotally—about the incredible success stories we were witnessing, it was hard to sway many people who were set in their belief that the arts were an "extra" and could not significantly impact youth development."

CHART 10:
Community participation



The U-M study reported: Over Mosaic’s 15-year history, Mosaic has seen that many alumni have become more involved in community efforts due, at least in part, to their participation in Mosaic. While Mosaic’s Ensemble program does not have an explicit focus on community service, many alumni have reported becoming more community active because of Mosaic. Graph from the report, “Excellence on Stage and in Life: The Mosaic Model for Youth Development through the Arts.”

Additional outcomes examined in the study address the positive impact involving Mosaic’s “theory of change,” which focuses on the core elements of creating high expectations, a supportive environment and a sense of artistic empowerment for youth; the research suggests that Mosaic’s approach is particularly beneficial in nurturing and developing lower-income, urban teenagers, who often face the challenges of overcoming low expectations, such as those of their teachers and in some of their homes, non-supportive environments, such as those created by negative peer pressure, and a sense of helplessness due to circumstances like crime and violence.

With a small staff comprising vocal and acting coaches, Sperling auditions youth aspiring to join the group. Mosaic members rehearse almost daily after school. Trained to professional-level performance capabilities, the youth are known for their a cappella renderings of everything from Negro spirituals to contemporary songs. At a December 2011 program, the group put its own stellar spin on the theme song, “Mr. Grinch,” from Dr. Seuss’ classic holiday animated cartoon, “How the Grinch Stole Christmas.”

Mosaic’s drama component attracts youth who may not sing, but who have acting talent, or who aspire to perform in stage musicals. A third division of the organization trains youth in the artistic and technical knowledge of theatrical production

THE MOSAIC MODEL

Providing Opportunities for Positive Youth Development through Performing Arts Training



From the report, “Excellence on Stage and in Life: The Mosaic Model for Youth Development through the Arts”

The Mosaic model, detailed in the study, consciously creates conditions and frames specific goals that support youth development. The preparation-to-performance process is embodied in what Sperling described as the “3 E’s”: *expectations, environment* and *empowerment*—or setting standards for the youth, creating a space in which they feel accepted, and giving them ownership of the troupe. Also governing the program’s direction are the “3 S’s” that pertain to members’ personal growth: *skills, self* and *society*—which embody honing the craft, accepting responsibilities, and having a relationship with the community.

For its MicroFest audience, Mosaic’s “Next Stage” troupe of advanced, mostly 17-year-old performers show why they’re all the rage. Moments after spectators get settled, the urban Detroit youth erupt into a jumping and chanting, ethnic-clan-style ritual of call-and-response sounds, which is entertaining to watch, even by folks who don’t know exactly what’s going on. Shortly after, they cheer, then transition into a series of movement warm-ups before forming a 15-person circle, and doing jumping-jack-like spasms as they yell to one another what sounds like “Diddy!” and “Da!” It’s strange, but looks like lots of fun.

The best part? As the most talented members chosen specifically for presentations and workshops, “Next Stage” is paid through Mosaic for such appearances, respecting teens’ serious commitment to work in theater and


music and the reality that such opportunities can also take them away from jobs that many hold.

It feels fitting that the presentation takes place during MicroFest, where young people recur as a living case study for how NET and its members can structure successful programs, originating from the absence of traditional artistic models. Whether through university partnerships or procuring grant funds to sponsor research in training methods and outcomes, arts practitioners who are want to understand better the impacts of their work can follow Mosaic's lead in taking the initiative of internal research.

The additional effort may help toward what Sperling calls the prerequisite for joining one of the finest youth performance groups in America: "It starts with, you're here," said Sperling, "because you want to be great."

My city isn't one that many people visit to find inspiration; it's one that people who've already found inspiration tend to use and re-channel. A few questions that I note from the final plenary session—"What makes a Detroiter a Detroiter?"; "What specific questions do you have about art and how to engage with the community?"; "What makes place, apart from location/geography?"—strike me as more academic than organic. I simply wonder how well they'll translate into substantive action. I have seen, and continue seeing, the way that art, particularly Detroit-centric art, which resembles the city's people, places and events, instills pride among us, even while suburban critics and national audiences distance themselves. What truly "makes a Detroiter a Detroiter" has much less to do with birthplace than with adaptation to the community and all its challenges, good and bad. Art has a central role in creating the means of adaptation, especially when art is informed by uniquely Detroit perspectives.

Oya Amakisi posits in the opening session of MicroFest that if one can survive in Detroit, one can survive anywhere. I don't know if this is necessarily true, but I know that, especially with the sincere, elevating efforts of artists and arts organizations like NET, Detroit is the only place that I'll continue to pick as my environment for survival.



EDDIE B. ALLEN JR. is a published author, award-winning reporter and freelance journalist, who has covered such national figures as Bill Clinton and Rosa Parks. A graduate of Wayne State University who majored in journalism and Africana Studies, his newspaper contributions include the *New York Times*, *Associated Press*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Detroit News*, *Orlando Weekly*, *Toledo Blade* and the *Philadelphia New Observer*. He lives in Detroit, where he is currently adapting his first book *Low Road: The Life and Legacy of Donald Goines* into a feature film.

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