

IN PERFORMANCE 'BLKS' ★★★½

Joy, anguish of modern-day life

Play impresses with portrait of 4 black women

BY CHRIS JONES
 Chicago Tribune

Aziza Barnes' "BLKS" begins with the sudden appearance of a genital mole. But this poignant blast of a comedy at the Steppenwolf Theatre is really all about that time in your life when what happens in the moment starts to not mean enough.

All kinds of things happen contemporaneously to Barnes' hugely likable quartet of pals, variously energized, assailed and overwhelmed, merely by living in modern-day-drunk New York City while simultaneously being African-American, female and under 25 years old.

Aside from the aforementioned, mortality-imbuing invader, the women — Octavia (Nora

Carroll), June (Lea Ayers), Imani (Celeste Cooper) and Ry (Danielle Davis) — have to navigate the possibilities and inconsistencies of friends, lovers and each other, gay, straight and superseding such creaking definition. Then there's the obstacle course of mostly disappointing black men and white women, in their arms, on the streets, around the dance floor. In Barnes' intentionally reductive telling, the men mostly are attached to their Cro-Magnon male ways, despite, you know, *everything*. And while the white women have potential, they're so reduced to mumbling guilt by the changed rules of interracial communication that even casual sex with them is fraught.

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MICHAEL BROSILOW PHOTO

Nora Carroll as Octavia, from left, Lea Ayers as June and Celeste Cooper as Imani in Aziza Barnes' "BLKS" at Steppenwolf Upstairs Theatre. The play, directed by Natakai Garrett, follows a group of friends in New York.



BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Cellist Yo-Yo Ma greets students and Civic Orchestra of Chicago members as they play together last month at Chopin Elementary.

CPS SHORING UP THE ARTS

5-year report card shows strides in establishing core educational component



JOHN VON RHEIN
Heard & Scene

There's a special kind of vibe coming from the classrooms at Dawes Elementary School. It's the excitement of kids immersed in not just music or visual art, but a broad spectrum of the arts. Indeed, for this progressive community school on Chicago's predominantly Hispanic Southwest Side, the arts are as integral to the curriculum as math and science and reading and gym.

During a visit to Dawes on a recent afternoon, the school's principal, Mary Dixon, gave me a walking tour of the many kinds of arts learning experiences available to students, from second- to eighth-graders.

In one classroom, seventh- and eighth-graders were strumming guitars to pre-recorded pop. In another, students were making and painting paper-mache masks. In another, an instructor was guiding younger special-needs kids through yoga exercises. In a dance class, a dozen boys and girls swirled and bounced to a Latin beat.

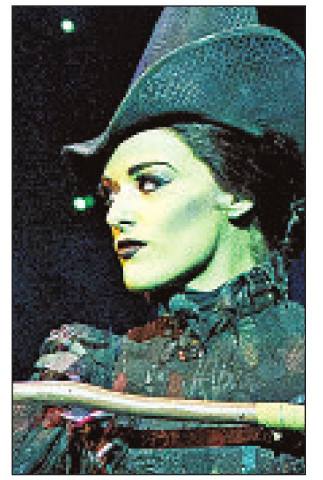


Chopin viola players and their older musicians-in-training snap a photo at the school.

It has been her experience, Dixon said, that having young kids participate in arts activity, both during the school day and after school, improves attendance and sharpens learning ability in general. She cited the example of a shy seventh-grader who had been habitually late for classes but now is always on time since he took up the guitar at Dawes.

"You can see that when kids are engaged in the arts, they are happy," she said. "We want to prioritize happiness and learning. The arts enhance all of our other subject areas in the curriculum. We are not a rich school, but we have an amazing staff that's invested in the kids and com-

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JOAN MARCUS PHOTO

New Year's Eve "Wicked" tickets could be yours.

Save the Seats is coming Dec. 27

BY DOUG GEORGE
 Chicago Tribune

What are you doing for New Year's Eve? Save the Seats is our annual feature with loads of Dec. 31 ticket reservations for the big night, and they're all for Tribune readers when the time comes. Save the Seats will run in the A&E section on Wednesday, Dec. 27, and online at chicagotribune.com/savetheseats beginning at 6 a.m. that day. (Tickets go on sale as each venue's box office opens.) In the meantime, here's a first show to start things out — there are more than two dozen more where this came from:

'Wicked'

Blond girl, green girl, longtime popular. Which witch are you, and when did you first see "Wicked"? The original Chicago production of this Stephen Schwartz musical opened in 2005 and ran for years, closing soon after the new year in 2009. The national tour is back at the Oriental Theatre for a long holiday run, still stocked with stellar talent, says Chris Jones in his Tribune review. *Claim your seats: Two tickets (at \$362 per, sold in pairs) for the 2 p.m. Dec. 31 performance at the Oriental Theatre, 24 W. Randolph St. Call the Broadway in Chicago box office at 312-977-1702 when it opens 9 a.m. Dec. 27.*

Also check out Phil Vettel's annual Save the Tables for New Year's Eve restaurants, online at chicagotribune.com/savethetables beginning at 6 a.m. Wednesday, Dec. 27, and in Food & Dining.

CPS makes strides in arts education

Von Rhein, from Page 1

munity, and we try to bring everything we can to our kids. Students who would never sit together at a lunch table are creating something together. With the arts, anyone can fit in."

The multidisciplinary arts program at Dawes is, in many respects, a microcosm of the expanded focus of arts education in the nation's third-largest public school system over the past five years.

A few years ago, it was rare for any Chicago public school to offer instruction in more than one art form. Today, the majority of the 653 Chicago public schools provide access to a greater variety of arts, to a greater number of students, than ever before.

That is among the central findings of a five-year, in-depth analysis of arts education in CPS contained in the newly issued 2016-17 State of the Arts in Chicago Public Schools report prepared by Ingenuity, the Chicago-based arts advocacy organization that works with the city, CPS and other cultural institutions and arts organizations to help get arts education for CPS students. It is essential reading for anyone who cares about arts instruction in the public schools — and how it can be further improved.

The 117-page report by the independent watchdog group reflects the input of a host of people — district and school administrators, staff, local arts institutions and arts leaders, the office of Mayor Rahm Emanuel, the philanthropic community, an advisory panel and others that partner with Ingenuity.

"Our focus is to make sure that every student has access to the arts from the day they start kindergarten to the day they graduate from high school," said Paul Szniewajs, executive director of Ingenuity. "We do that by tracking data, pushing for better policies and by providing support to the 1,100 city arts and cultural entities that work with CPS, 550 of them actively each year."

Ingenuity was created in 2011, roughly a year before the Board of Education approved CPS' first Arts Education Plan, which declared the arts a core area of the curriculum while identifying elements that constitute a quality arts education.

In 2013, the Creative Schools Initiative was launched to help implement the plan. Ingenuity monitored systemwide efforts and published findings in its initial report. Its latest report provides a snapshot of the CPS arts education landscape for the 2016-17 school year and analyzes the progress made over the past five years to realize the objectives set forth in the 2012 plan.

Over the past five years,



BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Annija Kern, top right, of the Civic Orchestra chats with other musicians at Chopin Elementary, where dozens of low-income pupils take music lessons.

according to the report, CPS students have been offered greater access to better arts education. Remarkably, these gains have taken place despite cuts, some of them severe, in district and school budgets.

What's more, 66 percent of CPS schools are meeting the criteria designated by Ingenuity and its advisory board as strong or excelling in the arts, an increase of 128 percent from five years ago.

Szniewajs (pronounced "Shneeveise") said he sees this as a clear sign that school principals are making "arts-positive decisions, using their discretionary dollars to spend on arts education, placing a value proposition on the arts we haven't seen previously." What's more, from the educational, cultural, political and philanthropic sectors "there has been a convergence of resources and energy and manpower around the issue of arts education in the CPS we haven't seen in other places in the U.S."

Other key findings in the report are that 90 percent of schools reported having dedicated arts budgets; more than 500 community arts partners actively served 97 percent of the schools; 14 Chicago-based foundations and corporations donated more than \$9 million to support arts education; and a grant from Ingenuity raised the total community investment in arts education for 2016-17 to more than \$10.5 million.

Also, more CPS schools are allocating money to hire

arts instructors, and, as a result, more schools are meeting the district's recommended 1:350 instructor-to-student ratio.

While elementary schools continue to perform higher than high schools on what Ingenuity calls its Creative Schools Certification, the gap is narrowing, according to the report. Also lagging in high schools, the study found, are arts-specific professional development programs.

The movement to broaden and deepen arts education in the schools has a powerful ally in Emanuel, a self-described cultural booster who studied ballet at the Evanston School of Ballet decades before he was elected mayor of Chicago.

"I am encouraged that we are making progress to make sure that quality arts education is universal and integrated into the fabric of our children's education," Emanuel said.

Whatever hits the city and school district budgets may take in the near future won't pose a threat to growing the arts presence in CPS, he added.

"Out of the city's budget (there will be) a lot more money toward arts education," the mayor said. Two million dollars of (income from) the amusement tax will go toward arts education for kids, and an additional \$2 million from the Chicago cultural affairs department.

One reason for this is that after the CPS arts education plan was created,

a group of Chicago civic leaders stepped forward, including Exelon, the Crown Family Philanthropies, and Richard P. and Susan Kiphart to raise \$16 million dollars through the Be Creative Campaign. That money now fuels the Creative Schools Fund, which lives at Ingenuity and grants money directly to CPS schools for expansion of arts programs.

To gain another perspective on how school principals and staff are embracing the arts as an essential component of the learning experience, I paid a visit to Chopin Elementary School in Humboldt Park.

There, at a school assembly attended by second-graders, musicians from the Civic Orchestra of Chicago (the CSO's pre-professional training ensemble) sat side by side with students of the Chopin School's string orchestra to play a Bach "Brandenburg" Concerto. This was part of the Bach Marathon spearheaded each year by cellist Yo-Yo Ma, the CSO's creative consultant, who took part in the performance at a seat at the back of the cello section.

Some 80 low-income students in the seventh and eighth grades take music lessons at Chopin Elementary and Chicago's Merit School of Music, explained Frederick Williams, the school's principal; 40 of those students are selected by Arturs Weible, who directs the string orchestra program, to receive private lessons at the Merit school,

which also provides the players with free instruments. The orchestra is among the very few at that level of CPS.

Even with his school footing most of the bill, Weible has to stump for outside money (including help from Ingenuity) to keep up the music program. For him, helping kids escape the urban reality around them, through music, and perhaps lead richer lives once they're out of school, is worth the effort.

"The orchestra is a nice way to keep them off the streets," he told me. "Every year I have a waiting list of 30 students who want to join. That keeps the interest level high, and it's also a good way for us to reach out to the community to enable every child to have the opportunity to play an instrument."

His advanced string students receive periodic visits from their somewhat older peers of the Civic Orchestra as part of ongoing partnerships between the CSO's Negaunee Music Institute with various CPS schools. But it's not just the participants who benefit: During the assembly the kids seated out front sounded just as enthused as the kids on stage.

Cellist Nicholas Swett, now in his second year as a Civic scholarship fellow, told the students they should think of Bach's music as evoking "the feeling you get when you arrive home." The kids listened intently and whooped with

pleasure when the music had finished. During the subsequent Q&A, one Civic violinist was asked what made her take up her instrument. "To make people smile," she replied.

Now that the latest Ingenuity report has appeared, a lot of people are smiling. Szniewajs would be the first to admit that hard data by themselves are no barometer of the impact the arts exert on young minds. CPS arts programs will forever live in the shadow of potentially devastating budget cuts and staff layoffs and school closings. The impact of Chicago's 2019 mayoral election is another wild card.

Outweighing everything else, to Szniewajs, is that making sure superior arts instruction is available to every CPS student will require renewed dedication, creativity and support from everyone wishing to build on the gains already made.

"We have seen tremendous growth, from 29 percent of the schools rated strong or excelling in the arts five years ago to 66 percent today; our goal over the next three to five years is to chip away at the remaining third of the schools and get them where they need to be," he said. "As Mayor Emanuel recognizes, we must not spike the ball too soon. We have more work to do."

John von Rhein is a Tribune critic.

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'Major Crimes' celebrates 100 shows, 13-year franchise

BY DANIELLE TURCHIANO
Variety

When viewers first met Sharon Raydor (Mary McDonnell), she was an antagonist, not the leading lady. Tasked with investigating officers and even auditing the Major Crimes Division on "The Closer," the Warner Bros. crime drama for TNT starring Kyra Sedgwick, the intense law enforcement professional spent the better part of four years in that role.

But something interesting happened in 2011 when Warner Bros. struck a deal with TNT to produce a spinoff titled "Major Crimes," with McDonnell starring as the new head of the division.

When the show premiered in August 2012, suddenly audiences got to see things from Sharon's point of view, and they embraced the character for six seasons and now 100 episodes.

"The fact of the matter is

that I don't look at 'Major Crimes' as celebrating its 100th episode. I look at a franchise that's been on the air for 13 years," says Peter Roth, Warner Bros. Television Group president. "It all began with 'The Closer' ... I actually look at these shows first and foremost as character-based. That they took a character in Sharon who was difficult, demanding, hierarchical — she was really tough! — and turned her into the sympathetic character that she has become was a major accomplishment and example of really great writing."

For McDonnell, getting to play a character whose sense of morality and ethics became so "alive" for her was key. "She took care of business, and I really admired her for that," McDonnell says.

James Duff, who created both series and served as executive producer alongside Michael M. Robin, feels one of the key elements that has helped the show stay on top and reso-

nate with its audience is the fact that the episode cases are not "torn from the newspapers" but rather "torn from the heart." The stories and moments that have meant the most to him through the years are the ones in which the characters' personal lives intersect with the cases. But he can't deny there is something to "anticipating what is going to happen" in the real world that has helped the show feel fresh throughout the years, as well.

Back in the second season of the show, the program tackled the murder of a transgender teen in an episode titled "Boys Will Be Boys" and just last year, it did a multipart arc about the rise of neo-Nazis, "long before they were marching in Charlottesville," Duff points out. The 100th episode of the show, which falls during this final season, is part of a multi-episode arc about men who abuse their power.

"We broke this story in May and finished it then,"



FRANK MASI/TNT

Mary McDonnell plays Sharon Raydor on "Major Crimes," which is ending next month after six seasons on TNT.

Duff says. "We were trying to tell a good story, and as it turned out, we told a story that was about to emerge in the news. Suddenly these episodes were shockingly relevant. I like being able to establish a pattern of facts, and when you have an emotional issue like that, where people have a multitude of opinions, and then you put the facts together, that's pretty amazing." Being able to tell power-

ful stories is only part of the legacy the team behind "Major Crimes" hopes the show will leave, though.

"Major Crimes" honored what is the very best in law enforcement — what is ethical, what is humane, what is family-oriented — because (it) is true that law enforcement relies on each other as any family would," McDonnell says. "I think it kept what is good about law enforcement alive for peo-

ple at a time when that which is wrong with law enforcement, that (which) has to be dealt with, is so apparent, finally, in our culture. So I do think it was a bit of a balancing point for representation of law enforcement on television, and I hope that that is what it's remembered for."

The series finale airs next month.

Maureen Ryan contributed.