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JEFFERSON AWARD: Presented to Thomas Robert Simpson
Arts to educate, inspire, provoke

- Shelah Moody, Chronicle Staff Writer
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"When the lights in the theater go down, our minds open," said Thomas Robert Simpson, artistic director of the AfroSolo Theatre Company and Arts Festival in San Francisco. Simpson, a former psychologist and longtime arts advocate, founded the AfroSolo Arts Festival, a showcase for local and internationally renowned artists in the black community, 13 years ago.

"I feel like the arts are a way to educate, to inspire, to provoke and to raise consciousness," said Simpson, from his office at the African American Art & Culture Complex on Fulton Street in San Francisco.

"The arts are critical to all of us," said Simpson. "The democracy of the voices has been really critical for me, to present individuals and give voice to the diversity of the black experience in this country. The AfroSolo Arts Festival has expanded to include people of the African diaspora. The disabled have performed for us. We've dealt with politics, civil and individual rights, health issues and colonialism."

Since its inception, the AfroSolo Arts Festival has attracted celebrities such as actress Ruby Dee, comedian-activist Dick Gregory, gospel singer Mavis Staples, actor John O'Neal, psychologist Brenda Wade and the late blues musician Charles Brown. Simpson said his main focus is to provide a forum for talented Bay Area artists such as Robert Henry Johnson (choreographer, dancer and playwright), Alan Kimara Dixon (photographer), Stephanie Johnson (visual arts) and Jacqueline B. Hairston (composer/arranger).

"Thomas is open to an array of ideas, aesthetics and forms," said Robert Henry Johnson, who has presented his works "Brown Crayon," "Letters to Jesus" and "The Othello Papers" through AfroSolo. "My experience at AfroSolo provided an audience for me to try this new, eclectic form -- a form I have always been interested in. It gave me the courage to continue to push the form of performance.

"AfroSolo has provided our community with a place to workshop our not-so-finished solo work. Without a workshop, many pieces just never get done or get to a point where it is in shape enough to share with the world."

Simpson, 54, was born and raised in a predominantly black community in Nashville. He was introduced to the stage as a child in church.

"I remember being in a church pageant that we had every year," said Simpson. "I even remember my line, something like, 'Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill to all men.' That's kind of where some of the seeds were planted for the theater."

Simpson grew up during the civil rights movement, which has influenced much of his work. He attended Lipscomb University in Nashville, where he earned a degree in psychology.

"I worked as a psychologist for a while, but theater and the arts kind of hovered over me," said Simpson.

"In 1979, I went to an acting school and spoke with the teacher. She was very encouraging for me to explore acting, theater and the arts."

Inspired by the thriving Bay Area arts scene, Simpson moved to San Francisco in 1984. He later took a theater workshop on solo performance from Cultural Odyssey, founded by Rhodessa Jones and Idris Ackamoor. On Oct. 23, 1991, Simpson launched the AfroSolo Arts Festival as a celebration of his 39th birthday.

"I decided to do it by inviting some friends to perform," said Simpson. "We rented the space, we had some food and we sold tickets and had performances of music, dance and spoken word. At that time, it was only going to be a one-time event, but it went so well that the next year, people encouraged me to have it again, so I had another party."

Simpson spoke to members of the arts community about making AfroSolo an annual event; he set up an advisory board and acquired physical sponsors. The first AfroSolo Arts Festival was held over three nights at City College of San Francisco's Diego Rivera Theatre in 1994. In 1996, AfroSolo began workshops on developing solo shows and marketing. The AfroSolo Theatre company received a Bay Area Critics Circle Award in 1998. It moved into the African American Art & Culture Complex in the Western Addition in 2001. AfroSolo has a seven-member advisory board and more than 30 volunteers from the community.

Simpson is also currently on the board of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco.

AfroSolo has acquired a number of sponsors over the years, including the San Francisco Arts Commission, Grants for the Arts, California Pacific Medical Center, Cultural Odyssey and Z Space Studio in San Francisco. It also works closely with grassroots organizations, such as the Donald Lacy's LoveLife Foundation, which was established to raise awareness of youth and violence.

The 2006 AfroSolo Arts Festival, which took place over six weeks and just ended, focused on health issues that affect the black community, such as breast cancer, prostate cancer, diabetes and HIV/AIDS. Simpson believes in using the arts to explore issues that are difficult to talk about.

"HIV/AIDS has been prevalent in our community," said Simpson. "In the '90s, we had an event that we called 'Black Artists Responding to AIDS' that was part of our festival. We had Willie Brown, who was the mayor at the time, come to speak about AIDS locally. Rep. Nancy Pelosi came and spoke about AIDS on a global level. After the performances, we had panel discussions. My goal was to provide a safe place for people to discuss these issues when they were not in a crisis, with the hope that if and when a crisis did occur, people would be more informed as to go about handling it."

"The Truth in Knowing: A Conversation Across the African Diaspora" is the theme of 14th annual AfroSolo Arts Festival, planned for May through June. AfroSolo, in collaboration with the San Francisco International Arts Festival, will bring together artists from the Bay Area and across the country as well as Africa and Europe.

"What I've found is that our stories are universal and that our audiences are pretty mixed," said Simpson. "I've found that no matter the culture one comes from, there's something about our stories that people can connect with. I frequently get comments from African Americans like, 'Wow -- I didn't know we were that diverse!'"

AfroSolo will host a fundraiser for its 2007 Arts Festival on Saturday at Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, 2041 Larkin St., San Francisco. For information, call (415) 771-2376 or go to afrosolo.org.

Each week, The Chronicle features a Bay Area resident who has won a Jefferson Award for making a difference in his or her community. The awards are administered by the American

Institute for Public Service, a national foundation that honors community service. Bay Area residents profiled in The Chronicle are also featured on CBS 5-TV and KCBS-AM, which are Jefferson Award

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