

# The New York Times

June 18, 2000

## ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

### Beating Drums and Toting Videos, Artists Apply to Help in Classrooms

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IT was not the usual silent, stony-faced, anonymous arts panel face, the kind that offers only a dismissive "thank you" after the artists put their work, and themselves, on the line.

These panelists ate bagels, smiled, offered praise and even danced.

But while their approach may not have been rigid, it was rigorous -- perhaps because they were choosing artists to appear before some of the most demanding audiences of all: classrooms of schoolchildren.

Specifically, the seven-member group, representing a range of artistic disciplines, convened recently at the Westchester Arts Council here to add names to the roster of 85 people available to teachers in the county who want to invite a choreographer, poet, painter or musician to share their classrooms for a day or several months.

The applicants fielded a variety of questions: what in their past experience equipped them to teach? How would they approach a recalcitrant child? How could they interlace their particular art with the school curriculum?

And, of course, how good was their artwork? That question was answered by the panelists themselves, who pored through portfolios and applications before each interview.

The applicants arrived beating drums, carrying paint buckets and toting videos. Some were nervous and others lighthearted. "So it's dog-and-pony time?" asked a muralist, who impressed the panel with her textural designs.

Another artist said as she sat down: "This has been a great day. All of us are networking in the waiting room."

Perhaps the most unusual entrance was made by Kazi Oliver. He walked in beating his jimbe drum, keeping up the rhythm long enough to make Nefretete Rasheed, manager of the 26-year-old arts-in-education program, jump to her feet. Her long purple dress billowing, her braids flying, she launched into a spirited African dance. Mr. Oliver did not speak a word until the impromptu performance was over.

"Did you study in Africa?" was the first question asked by Aduke Aremu, a panelist. When Mr. Oliver said no, Ms. Aremu suggested: "You need to go over. Once you go over, it's going to change your life."

Then the talk turned to teaching. "How do you get students to participate?" Ms. Aremu, a playwright, asked. Mr. Oliver said: "I allow them to know there's no fear to worry about. This is a fun thing."

Mr. Oliver was full of ideas about what he would

teach, and how. He would introduce the drum, he said, and ask children to guess where its skin cover came from. That would allow him to discuss cultural practices like killing an animal for food and economically using all its parts. He would show students how to make drums out of oatmeal boxes. He would bring a bunch of sticks to class, so all the children could beat on his drums.

Ms. Aremu advised: "Begin to connect all the school subjects with your programming. That puts you totally in demand." Then she added, striking a networking note: "If you can connect drumming with theater, I can connect you with someone immediately."

Artists selected for the roster do not automatically get work in the schools. First they must be selected by teachers, who read their biographies and qualifications in the council's "Arts Make Us Happy" catalog. The schools pay the artists \$225 for each full day of teaching and \$125 for a half-day. Word of mouth makes some artists, like Cleaster Cotton, popular in the schools as well as at community sites where the council also conducts programs.

Ms. Cotton, a writer and poet, has worked this year in the third grade at Public School 17 in Yonkers. She was recruited by Barbara Marciani, a career magnet teacher who had secured a grant for a project on community occupations. "We interviewed three or four artists," Ms. Marciani said, "and told them what we wanted to do" -- to give children a comprehensive look at what goes on in the working lives of people they see every day. The topic dovetailed with the third grade social studies curriculum.

Ms. Cotton suggested making posters that illustrated various professions. The project spanned writing, collage and theater, as Ms. Cotton drew on her acting experience to help children visualize the lives of a judge, a photographer or a veterinarian, for example. She began one recent class by asking the students to listen to their heartbeats -- a technique to get them focused, she said. Then she went from desk to desk, as the children worked on their posters.

Ms. Marciani said Ms. Cotton had added to the collaboration between herself and the third grade classroom teacher, Paula Arietta. "It takes a community of people to get the best from children," she said. "We all bring our personalities and individualism. They see you as a person, not just as a teacher. More teachers should do it."

Artists in the classroom do not just provide color and a whiff of worldliness, however. They have a serious mandate to animate the curriculum in ways a textbook never could. The council's panel, therefore, held back their highest scores if an applicant seemed unsure how to merge creatively with math, social

studies or reading. In many cases, artists were advised to take one of the council's development workshops, and sometimes are recommended for community programs. Occasionally, artists are not judged ready for either program.

Applicants are scored in a number of areas including their creative work, professional activity, past teaching experience and ability to collaborate with teachers.

"What would you do if a boy didn't want to take part in dance, or thought it was just for girls?" a panelist asked Nancy Kane, a choreographer whose only previous teaching experience was with college students.

Ms. Kane thought about it. "I'd start with their athletic experience and do some movement analysis," she said. "We'd do street moves and hip hop. There are guys who wouldn't say they're dancers, but they blow me away. I would hope to learn from them."

Terry Zappala, a retired elementary school art teacher on the panel, nodded. "You would be very valuable in the schools," she said. "You'd be great with kids."

Frank Ingrasciotta provided another moment of unexpected entertainment. A poet, playwright and actor whose one-man show, "Blood Type Ragù," was just ending a limited off-Broadway run, Mr. Ingrasciotta began his interview by speaking of educational subjects like Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. He also discussed the improvisations he wanted to use in science and math classes.

Before long, however, the panelists, who also included Leslie Lee, a former television writer; Hilda Demsky, a painter; Susan Henley Christenson, a dancer; and Ron Mineo, a sculptor, were talking about going to see his play about the Italian-American experience. "Can you do something from it for us?" asked Janet T. Langsam, executive director of the arts council, who had just stopped by.

Mr. Ingrasciotta looked surprised, then cleared his throat and began performing. When he was finished, the room was abuzz. Not only did the panelists want to see his show, but they also wanted to make an evening of it. Could he recommend a restaurant?

Ms. Aremu took his card and said she would help him place his play in another theater. The panelists all agreed. Mr. Frank Ingrasciotta was a find.