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## Karamu Finds a Way Forward

by David C. Barnett

A legendary Northeast Ohio theater is facing some tough choices as it enters its second century. Karamu House was in the midst of a 100<sup>th</sup> birthday season, last week, when news came of severe budget cuts, slashing both staff and programming. A study from this past Fall indicates that minority-led arts groups across the country are having similar problems balancing the books.

Director Terrence Spivey has been busy, this week, preparing a special performance of a new play called *The Bloodless Jungle*. There's going to be a "staged reading" of the political drama, this weekend — no sets, no special lighting, just actors sitting on the stage reading scripts at Karamu House Theater.

This test production comes in the wake of an announcement that Spivey will lose his job as Karamu's artistic director, at the end of the season. He was one of 15 employees laid off at the storied Cleveland institution, last week. Executive director Tony Sias says the cuts were difficult, but necessary

"We looked at the entire organization," he says. "Every department was impacted."

Sias says that includes a longstanding daycare operation, once an important part of the organization's public service mission, but which more recently got poor quality ratings from the state. He hopes to re-tool a suspended arts education program and bring it back, this fall. Only nine employees now remain at America's oldest black theater company.

"Karamu is one of the most important in the country," says Michael Kaiser.

He's chairman of the *DeVos Institute of Arts Management* — a Washington-based agency that helps arts groups remaining viable in a time of aging audiences and increased competition for the entertainment dollar. This past September, a DeVos report examined issues facing arts organizations of color.



Tony Sias (PHOTO: DCB)



Terrence Spivey (PHOTO: Twitter)



Peter Lawson Jones (PHOTO: DCB)



Michael Kaiser (PHOTO: Ilan Mizrahi)



"...and what we found was that this sector was not growing at all, in terms of revenue. And yet, we've had inflation, and other arts organizations are growing, so that what happens is, if you are not growing, you're falling behind."

One key reason is donor bases. For example, Kaiser says the typical mainstream organization might raise 60% of its funding from individual donors, while the average minority-led arts group raises less than 10% of its support from individuals.

"And this is critical," Kaiser says, "because, in place of individual donors, organizations of color are relying on foundations and government agencies — and those organizations are either capped or reducing how much they fund, so that arts organizations of color have a hard time growing with the economy."

Karamu felt that pain in 2014 with a one-two punch of funding cuts from agencies it had long relied on for support. In June of that year, the *United Way of Greater Cleveland* cut back on the number of programs it funded, which amounted to a nearly \$115,000 loss for Karamu. The second blow came that fall, when *Cuyahoga Arts and Culture* denied the organization's two-year operating funds request. CAC's Karen Gahl-Mills says that was in the neighborhood of \$145,000.

"They didn't make their best case in their application about where they were going with the forward direction," she says. "They didn't put their best foot forward."

Gahl-Mills notes that Karamu was going through a leadership transition, at the time, which may have led to a sub-par presentation. She adds that CAC has awarded the organization a couple of special grants to help as they reorganize. Former Karamu board member Peter Lawson Jones says Karamu's management issues are longstanding.

"I've got to be honest," he says. "I think the executive leadership at Karamu, over the last several decades, has been — diplomatically put — less than inspiring."

But, Jones says he's enthused by the promise of Tony Sias, who was appointed executive director, this past fall. Jones says Sias has both the theater chops — as an actor and director — and the management skills, coming off of a celebrated tenure running the Cleveland Municipal School District's arts education program. For his part, Sias won't get into specifics about the budget problems that led to last week's budget cuts. But, he's not looking back.

"It was important for us to come up with a lean team to take Karamu and our work to 2.0."

Sias says "2.0" includes adding newer and younger faces to the audience, perhaps through concerts and poetry readings. A new strategic plan for this tenacious Northeast Ohio institution is due to go to Karamu's board of directors, next month.