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## Yesterday's Drama—and Today's: Students Update and Perform a 2,500-Year-Old Greek Tragedy

by Clarence Williams

Sorting out a 2,500-year-old Greek tragedy is no easy business. But a group of students did just that for the past several months, meeting after school to go over the work -- and then rewriting it to depict modern life on their Southeast Washington streets.

Aeschylus wrote "The Persians" as a morality play about war. The students, ages 9 to 14, wrote "The Persians 2K6: Tragedy in the Hood," about war, too, along with their fears of modern urban life, global disaster and timeless human frailties such as pride and arrogance.

A line or two was forgotten when they put on the show last week at Charles Hart Middle School, and spare beige tunics and colorful headdresses couldn't quite conceal the T-shirts and bluejeans worn by the cast. But the powerful writing and enthusiastic acting amazed the crowd and carried the production.

Mournfully, the chorus addressed the queen, who stood with an attitude mid-stage. The chorus members spoke words of doom -- with a lilt of street slang in their voices.

"We watched the pride of Southeast, our young men, march away," they declared. "We went strong, we died strong. That's it. The enemies were also strong in their hands, their guns and those fists they use."

After the applause and the curtain calls, 13-year-old Renita Williams said she saw parallels between the original play and the guns and rivalries that take so many lives on D.C. streets. "That play was just like it is out here," she said. "It's like Barry Farm and Condon Terrace. They were killing each other for nothing."

The original drama is considered the oldest existing Greek tragedy, depicting the Persians' attack on Greece and the devastation wrought upon their homeland after their defeat. King Xerxes, who instigated the carnage, leads his people to death and despair. The play unfolds in a dialogue between the main characters and a chorus of Persian elders.

The play was studied and rewritten by about 30 adolescents who live in the Congress Heights community. They signed up for the D.C. Creative Writing Workshop, a collaborative of professional writers who work with students from Hart Middle School, Simon Elementary School and Ballou Senior High School; the Hart students performed the play. Over the past six years, the program has turned out 18 issues of a literary magazine, several poetry contest award winners and an annual play from one of the Greek classics.

Nancy Schwalb, a leader of the Hart-based workshop, said the playwriting teaches teamwork, the value of hard work and the importance of peaceful conflict resolution through the lessons of the ancients.

"They're from a community where kids are always fighting and things are resolved by fighting," Schwalb said. "They look at the moral issues of these plays."

The Hart school's version of the play describes how Xerxes led his forces of "OGs" (Original Gangstas) and "street soldiers" with their fists, Cadillacs and Humvees. Some set off for Maryland, and others take the Frederick Douglass Bridge en route to Northwest Washington.

"He went through every neighborhood for miles around and burned their churches and robbed their carry-outs and wrote 'Xerxes was here' on every building. . . . He even disrespected their grandmothers," according to the script.

But the invading army came to a deadly demise at the hands of an enemy bankrolled by "loads of jewelry" and "a lot of drugs to sell." The enemy fought "dirty" with brass knuckles, rocks, bricks and unleashed pit bulls, killing most of the "youngens" and leaving the populace to "cry like punks."

During the performance Thursday night, the students pantomimed fistfights between the street soldiers from Southeast and their enemies.

The violent conflict draws on what the students have seen and heard on the street.

Family tragedy struck leading man Steven Brown, a last-minute stand-in as Xerxes, in 2002 when his stepfather, Kennard Coleman, was fatally shot on Eighth Street SE, said Steven's mother, Armenta Coleman.

Coleman has enrolled Steven in the workshop for the past three years as an outlet to express some of the difficulties of life in a sometimes dangerous neighborhood.

"They're used to seeing so much," Coleman said. "It shows that our black youth are smarter than people give them credit for."

Lead actress Monae Smith said her 16-year-old neighbor from Wahler Place was shot to death this month in District Heights while being robbed of a bike. Monae said the students even heard gunfire one day in writing class and dived to the floor.

Her contributions to the play also were motivated by global events as she penned lines expressing the devastation of the play's Southeast population in terms of international disaster.

"It's like a hurricane, a tsunami and 9-11 all over again," she wrote, describing the Persians' loss.

Scott Sedar, a professional actor, directed his second tragedy for the workshop after being recruited by Schwalb last year. He said his young amateurs "get it" and understand the emotional and human story that "The Persians" tells. Sedar is amazed by their ability to take on a difficult translation of a foreign text, across many centuries -- a tough task for many adults.

"They're not stuck by the language. They're moved by the emotion," Sedar said.

Some people take the stage, and others are more comfortable working behind the scenes. Everyone gets a chance to contribute. As a seventh-grader last year, James Tindle balked about acting for one simple reason: image.

"I didn't want people to think I was soft," he said.

But this year he played a charismatic member of the chorus and earned cheers from the 75 people in the audience for knowing most of his lines and wailing the sorrow of the defeated Persians. Readapting the ancient piece seemed simple for his classmates, said James, 13.

"People die every day. It's hoods beefing with hoods," James said. "That's why everybody was so experienced in writing this."

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