

## AfroSolo Arts Festival: Thinking Beyond the Arts by Jean Schiffman



Afrosolo artistic director  
Thomas Simpson

"My idea is that in some ways art is a means of dealing with social and political issues," says Thomas Robert Simpson, founder/artistic director of San Francisco's 17-year-old AfroSolo Arts Festival, a multipronged, citywide event. When the lights go down, Simpson believes, minds open up.

Hence this year's umbrella theme, "United in Peace." Last fall, when Simpson and colleagues--a loyal group of supporters that comprise an advisory board--started thinking about a theme for this year's festival,

President Obama had been elected but was faced with legions of naysayers, including members of the Tea Party. "The commentary [about him] was very negative and to me very racial," says Simpson. He thought about that, as well as black-on-black crime, soldiers returning from Iraq and the troubled Middle East in general. "We were going into a new year, and a new decade. So what can we say through AfroSolo that would have some impact?" he wondered. "What can we do around peace, around bringing people together?"

He realized he'd have to go beyond AfroSolo's mission "to nurture, promote, and present African-American and African Diasporan art and culture through solo performances and the visual and literary arts." The festival would need to be multicultural, a gathering of many races.

For Simpson, the word *peace* is inclusive. On the AfroSolo website, he posed these questions: What does peace mean to me? What parts of myself do I need to make peace with? Who do I need to make peace with? Who needs to make peace with me? What can I do to create peace in myself, my home, and my community? Thus, the way the festival's participants conceptualize the idea of peace is wide-ranging.

First up is a panel discussion at the Commonwealth Club in which representatives from the various performing arts--theatre (Theatre Bay Area executive director Brad Erickson), music (Oakland East Bay Symphony conductor Michael Morgan) and dance (dancer/choreographer Arisika Razak)--discuss the roles the arts have played historically in peace movements. Writer Jewelle Gomez moderates.

The official kickoff is always the free outdoor concert at Yerba Buena Gardens. This year, the "Concert for Peace" features the multicultural Junius Courtney Big Band, a 19-piece band that plays the music of Duke Ellington and Count Basie as well as Latin jazz. "This was one of the first integrated big bands in this area, and it remains so," says Simpson. "There are whites, blacks, Latinos, Asians, a lesbian sister. If these people can come together and make beautiful music, I think of that as a metaphor for the world."

Also on the bill is local vocalist Denise Perrier.

At the core of the festival are the solo performances, this year called "Performance for Peace," in which actors, dancers, musicians, and poets present short solo pieces. Simpson worried that he'd get a whole lot of "Kumbaya" from everybody, but it hasn't turned out that way. For example, among the performers is Afro-Brazilian dancer Paco Gomez with

"Is Peace Possible?" "His conclusion is theoretically it's possible *if we want it*," says Simpson. Spoken word artist Raymond Nat Turner's monologue is about coming to peace with his estranged father. Dancer Colette Eloi, whose parents' native land is Haiti, conjures an ancestral spirit from the Haitian Revolution to help her find peace in her personal life. At press time, Simpson was hoping to also have two dancers, an Israeli and a Palestinian, in a duet, and was considering a hula performance. "Visual Artists for Peace," a free multimedia group show, also features works based on the peace theme. "When you throw an idea [like peace] out to artists, you never know what's going to happen," says Simpson, laughing. "One artist [April Martin Chartrand] is using cigar boxes, working on the idea of what tobacco has done to our community. Who'd have thought!" "United in Health," a participatory event for artists, healthcare workers and the community, is as always free.

AfroSolo was originally created by Simpson as a birthday present to himself, a sort of theatrical salon in which he and his actor friends could present their own solo pieces to a like-minded audience. Early on he was encouraged by former Oakland Ensemble Theatre artistic director Benny Sato Ambush to look beyond theatre to stories told through different artistic media. At that time, there were fewer outlets for black artists in the community, Simpson observes. So the festival morphed from theatre to include dance, music, spoken word and visual arts.

But even at those first festivals, Simpson was thinking beyond the arts. He invited social, political and health organizations to set up information tables. "I see art as a healer, so why not bring some of the other healing elements around that?" he explains. At last year's festival, 39 different health and social service agencies participated, from dental to HIV testing to psychiatry to health insurance programs. The public could be screened for asthma, blood pressure, diabetes and more. Now, AfroSolo takes mini-health fairs directly into the housing projects. Just as at the festival itself, performers and visual artists provide entertainment.

Simpson is also programming multicultural youth involvement in the festival, working with various youth organizations to solicit dance, spoken word and music that incorporates messages of peace.

At press time, Simpson had several peripheral plans in motion for AfroSolo weekend: to have local politicians proclaim it as a citywide weekend of peace; to get 1,000 volunteers to commit to a personal act of peace; and to convince religious leaders to dedicate a sermon, or perhaps a candle-lighting ceremony, to peace. "The idea is for peace to rumble throughout the whole community, like symbolic smoke signals not of war but of peace," he says.

To keep tabs on the social needs of the community at any given time, Simpson needs to look no further than the work brought in by the festival's performers. "A lot of the performances are issue-oriented, whether it's about something personal, whether it's about sexuality, family, racism. A lot of the work is infused with social activism in general, so it's just kind of there," he says.

It's perhaps not surprising that Simpson's vision extends beyond theatre and the arts. An undergraduate psychology major in his hometown of Nashville, he went on to become a social worker. But along the way, he was also an aspiring, if practical-minded, actor. The fourth-youngest in a family of 11 siblings, he got his start as a kid, appearing in a church Christmas play, and performed in high school and college.

Now 57, he hasn't given up hope that he'll eventually return to the stage; he has several ideas in mind for original pieces. "I feel like I've got all these sticks with spinning plates

on them and I'm trying to keep them all from falling," he says. "Sometimes I think, 'Thomas, why don't you just go back to focusing on theatre? There's enough there.' Yes, I'd love to do that. But music is nice. And what about the visual? That's nice. Dance is nice..." He laughs and shrugs.

AfroSolo, after all these years, is still somewhat a solo effort, as local playwright/director Brian Freeman puts it--the accomplishment of "one very dedicated person." It is Simpson who comes up with the ideas, and it takes a little village to rein him in. Freeman, a longtime friend, offers advice, sometimes helps with the staging, and has recommended participating artists. "Thomas has persistence of vision," says Freeman. "In some ways the festival is still an artist's salon. It's never been a highly technical event, it's always been accessible. It's never been the grandest of festivals, but in a way that's part of its charm."

"AfroSolo is so important because it really supports artists doing their own work," comments Sherri Young, founder of the African-American Shakespeare Company.

"Performers are often supporting someone else's vision...but these are programs and performances that are coming in performers' own words, from their own experiences, their own craft. In AfroSolo, people can really express who they actually are."

Young's office is on the same floor as Simpson's--and as Cultural Odyssey's--in the African American Art and Culture Complex in the Western Addition, and she says she and Simpson often cry on each other's shoulders as well as tell each other the truth. "We sort of need that in this industry, to have a safe place to bounce things off people and have them let us know we're not crazy, or maybe tell us we are crazy!" she says.

But, she adds, she keeps asking Simpson, "Who's going to take over when you're gone? That's where we all seem to falter. There's no succession plan!"

For his part, since AfroSolo is now breaking with tradition by having a multicultural theme, Simpson wonders about its role in the future. "Do we then go back to where we were?" he muses. "Do we have an [ongoing] peace component?" There are more local performing arts festivals than when AfroSolo first started, and more local opportunities for black performers through groups like Youth Speaks and the leadership of hip-hop theatre artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph. "Is there still a place [in the African American community] for traditional theatre or for blending theatre with spoken word?" says Simpson. And he wonders too about the unstable fiscal situation for theatre in general. "What I need to make AfroSolo work," he concludes, "is people, funding and technology. In that order."

*"The Arts: A Medium for Peace," panel discussion at Commonwealth Club, Jul. 29, 5:30 p.m., 595 Market St., \$15-20. "A Concert for Peace" at Yerba Buena Gardens, Aug. 7, 1-4 p.m., free. "Performance for Peace," African American Art and Culture Complex, 762 Fulton St., Aug. 8, 3-5:30 p.m., \$50-75. "Visual Artists for Peace," Main San Francisco Public Library, 100 Larkin St., Aug. 15-Oct. 15 (artists' reception Aug. 15, 3-5 p.m.). "United in Health," Ella Hill Hutch Community Center, 1050 McAllister St., Aug. 14, 10 a.m.-2 p.m., free. (415) 771-AFRO. Visit [afrosolo.org](http://afrosolo.org).*

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