

# The New York Times

## For This Theater Leader, a Mission That Goes Beyond the Stage

Sarasota's Westcoast Black Theater Troupe is getting back to live shows and community outreach after multiple shutdowns.



“We celebrate tenacity and resilience,” Nate Jacobs, founder of the Westcoast Black Theater Troupe, said of the Florida theater’s new season. Octavio Jones for The New York Times

**By Bob Morris**

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SARASOTA, Fla. — Last month, an audience of about 100 sat around the thrust stage of the Westcoast Black Theater Troupe’s 205-seat theater. It wasn’t a bad turnout for a weekday, especially since many of this city’s culture-loving snowbirds had yet to make the seasonal migration south and worries about the coronavirus persisted.

From the stage, Nate Jacobs, 62, the theater's founder and artistic director, introduced the evening's entertainment, "Eubie!," with preacher-like bravado. "The theme of this season is 'Rise,'" he said, a reference to a Maya Angelou poem of perseverance. "And tonight, we celebrate tenacity and resilience."

He had reason to be cheerful: Until October, his theater had been shuttered because of the pandemic. It closed in March 2020, shortly after opening its newly renovated complex near this city's historic Black Newtown neighborhood.

The musical "Caroline, or Change" christened the new facility with a five-week run that February. But its second show, "Your Arms Too Short to Box With God," was forced to close early. The company, with an annual budget of \$3.3 million and a typical yearly audience of 33,600, ended up tabulating a loss of a million dollars in ticket sales with the closure of its two stages.

On this particular fall night, that was a fading crisis. "Eubie!," the musical revue, features nearly a dozen century-old songs composed by Eubie Blake, who helped produce Broadway's first all-Black musical, "Shuffle Along." With its period costumes, amiable staging and rousing rendition of "I'm Just Wild About Harry," the show had a flirtatious and carefree tone.



The theater returned to the stage in October with the musical revue "Eubie!" From left, Brian L. Boyd, Ty-Gabriel Jones, Jai Shanae, Idella Johnson and Delores McKenzie. Sorcha Augustine for WBTT

After it ended (and received a standing ovation), Jacobs greeted Thiam Botchi, one of the many young men he mentors as part of the theater's mission to engage talented community members. "You said you'd come to the show and you did!" he sang out with avuncular warmth.

As the crowd filed into the lobby, Jacobs fielded compliments and questions. One audience member asked if the show would tour, another wondered about a woman who had been calling out words of encouragement from her front-row seat, gospel-service style. Yet another inquired if the cast was vaccinated.

"Oh, yes," Jacobs said. "We're safe, safe, safe!"

In fact, the theater, one of the only major Black companies in a smaller American city (most of them reside in big metropolitan areas), seems to be in a good place these days.

In addition to a full season of plays and musicals, the Westcoast Black Theater Troupe hosts a free summer camp for local youth (many of the past attendees have pursued entertainment careers); new playwright workshops; and public school programs. Jacobs also informally mentors young people who are less theatrically inclined.

Sarasota has about 60,000 residents and several professional theater companies, along with a professional opera, ballet, symphony and first-class art museums. Jacobs's theater, known as WBTT, joined the cultural landscape 22 years ago, but he said he has had to fight to present works by Black and other historically underrepresented writers and composers to a diverse audience.

"Sometimes a smile will right every wrong," the "Eubie!" cast sang in the title number from "Shuffle Along." If Jacobs embodies that sentiment, it would be in spite of the harsh realities he has faced to build his theater.

The son of a domestic worker and a traveling gospel singer who owned a lawn and tree service, Jacobs and his 10 siblings grew up in Tampa and Daytona Beach. After graduating in 1981 from Florida A&M University, a historically Black college in Tallahassee, he began writing and directing plays at a K-12 private school here while occasionally acting with the Asolo Repertory Theater, the largest professional nonprofit theater company in Florida.

In the early 1990s, the prominent community theater the Players invited him to direct a play in an effort to help it diversify its audience. He chose James Baldwin's "Amen Corner," and added gospel songs to the church scenes.



The cast of the theater's holiday show, "Joyful! Joyful!" Sorcha Augustine for WBTT

By networking with locals, he assembled a mix of 23 professional and nonprofessional actors. But even as a director hired to diversify the theater's programming, he said he faced several incidences of in-house racism while getting his first show up and running.

"It was what it was, and I knew the narrative as a Black man in the South," he said, reflecting on the experience.

It was the day after the "Eubie!" performance, and he was sitting in his airy office at the performing arts complex. We could hear upbeat singing from a rehearsal of a holiday show. On a window sill, he had placed several African figurines and a gold star ornament. Awards and citations lined his walls. A photo of his original company led him to boast about the careers he had fostered.

One actor, Teresa Stanley, joined the company of "The Color Purple" on Broadway and has toured nationally with "Rock of Ages." Another, Apphia Campbell, took her solo play "Black Is the Color of My Voice" to Shanghai and Edinburgh, as well as New York.

"We've been in this together for a long time," Jacobs said.

But back to the hard lived past. After his first community theater production, which, he said, sold out its 500 seats for several nights to racially diverse audiences, he directed three more shows for the Players. Then he said he was told that the diversity funding the company had been receiving had ended. So, the company said goodbye.

He recalled wondering, “What am I going to do with all these actors I brought into the theater?”

With a nudge from several of his early supporters, he decided to incorporate. A lawyer did the paperwork pro bono. But without a permanent home (an old white van served as a storage unit, a dressing room and more) and even with positive reviews for his shows (performed at churches and community centers), the pressure was overbearing, as was the debt.

That’s when more supporters stepped up.

“I told him he needed an executive director or he’d have to close down and would never open again,” said Howard Millman, who joined WBTT’s board in 2006 after stepping down as Asolo’s producing artistic director.

His mentoring of Jacobs began right away, as did the fund-raising and search for an executive to run things. Soon the company owned a warehouse (purchased in foreclosure). Then Christine Jennings, a former banker, came in as chief executive and got the company on its feet. With the help of the board's chairwoman, Doris Johnson, she spearheaded a campaign that raised \$8.3 million for a three-year renovation that turned the warehouse into a state-of-the-art small Equity theater.

The advisory board currently includes Dennis Archer, a former Detroit mayor who is among the high-powered African Americans who have migrated here in recent years. Charlayne Hunter-Gault, the journalist and civil rights leader (who calls Sarasota “Martha’s Vineyard South,” a reference to the elite African American community of Oak Bluffs, Mass.), is a subscriber who moderated a playwriting panel last spring.

Fredd Atkins, who was this city’s first Black mayor, subscribes too. “It’s been an amazing experience watching the theater grow,” he said. “The theater is a tremendous asset for our community and especially our young people.”

The most recent believer in Jacobs is Thiam, the 22-year-old Senegalese immigrant and college student who was at the performance of “Eubie!”

Thiam had recently attended an informal mentoring session, part of Jacobs’s crusade to use his position to be a big brother in the community. He’d been struggling after a car accident and had not dealt with medical bills, let alone calls he needed to make to help start a small business.

The day after meeting with Jacobs, he said he made every necessary call.

“He reminded me it all begins with me,” Thiam said.



Jacobs at the WBTT complex. “Nate saw something in me, he wants us to let our light shine,” Michael Mendez, one of the theater’s performers, said of Jacobs. Octavio Jones for The New York Times

Though he is known for his musical revues, Jacobs doesn’t shy away from more politically challenging material. While in his office, he had a FaceTime call with his older brother Michael, a legal consultant in Washington. They are writing “Ruby,” a musical scheduled to premiere in January, about Ruby McCollum, a wealthy Black Floridian involved in the 1952 shooting of a sexually abusive white doctor.

The script and lyrics are based on Zora Neale Hurston’s coverage of the trial for The Pittsburgh Courier. Both brothers believe the story has relevance beyond its obvious #MeToo aspect.

“There’s a song in the show about how Black people can only go as far as white people will allow them,” Jacobs said.

After the meeting with his brother, he popped into the rehearsal for “Joyful! Joyful!,” the theater’s holiday show with original soul-, R&B- and gospel-inflected music. Under the eye of the choreographer Donald Frison, a couple dozen performers strutted, stomped, glided and sang out in bright warm harmonies.

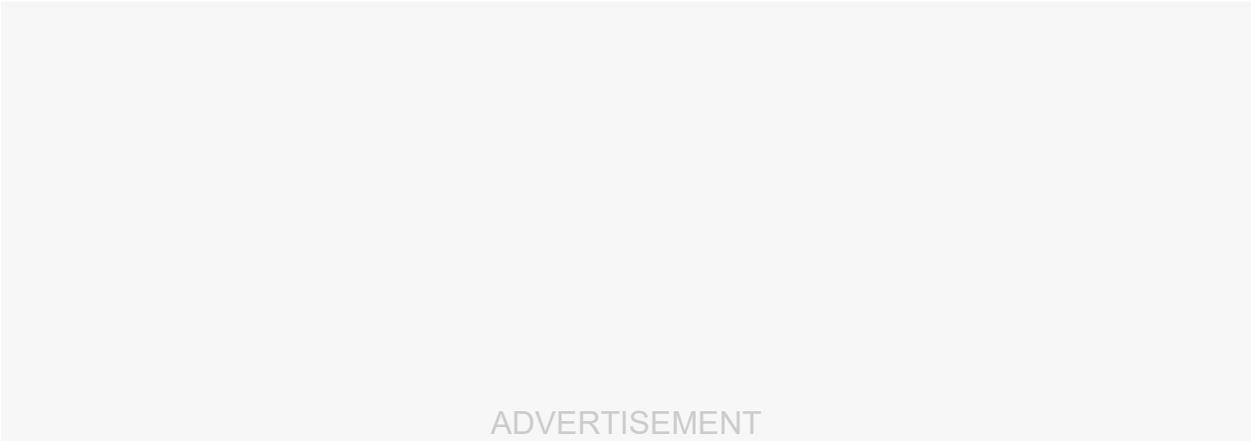
One performer, Michael Mendez, used to visit Jacobs at the theater as a teenager, and Jacobs kept asking him to sing. Later he was invited to perform with the company and work as Jacobs’s paid personal assistant.

“I come from a Dominican family that doesn’t know about theater,” Mendez, 30, said during a rehearsal break. “But Nate saw something in me, he wants us to let our light shine.”

Delores McKenzie, 33, trained with Jacobs and now lives in New York. She recently returned to perform in “Eubie!” and the holiday show.

“This theater changed my life,” she said during a break from rehearsing a “Little Drummer Boy” with a contemporary beat. “Nate is planting seeds all the time.”

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