

Medgar Evers College Celebrates Answer to Racism and Ossie Davis Play

With a Salute to Congressman Major Owens: from Tennessee to Brooklyn

(Crown Heights)—An enthusiastic audience filled Founders Auditorium at Medgar Evers College, CUNY (MEC) in Brooklyn recently, for “The People of Clarendon County”—A Play by Ossie Davis, & the Answer to Racism! The event featured a performance of the civil rights play by the late actor/activist, Ossie Davis, and diverse speakers—black, white, Latino, Jewish, and Christian—who told what they learned is the cause and answer to racism from their study of Aesthetic Realism, founded in 1941 by the great American philosopher Eli Siegel.

The afternoon celebrated education, the arts, and unsung heroes of civil rights, notably the 12-term US Congressman, Major Owens, who represented Brooklyn’s 11th district until retiring in 2007, and who is now a Distinguished Professor at MEC’s DuBois Bunche Center for Public Policy.

Professor Carolyn Jones and the nonprofit Alliance of Ethics & Art collaborated on bringing this event to MEC, based on the book edited by journalist and Aesthetic Realism Associate Alice Bernstein (Third World Press). “The People of Clarendon County,” written by Ossie Davis in 1955, dramatizes the lives of black parents in segregated South Carolina, who risked death to achieve a decent education for their children. Their lawsuit for an “equal” school bus set the stage for Brown v. Board of Education, the historic 1954 US Supreme Court ruling which outlawed segregation in public schools. Ossie Davis called Bernstein’s “unearthing” of his play, 50 years after its only performance, “remarkable.” He and actor Ruby Dee, his wife, supported her vision of presenting the play in relation to Aesthetic Realism, believing this combination would be powerful in fighting racial injustice. And it is!

Why are education and equality things the people of the world want most and also fear? And why would people not only have to, but want to risk their lives for a school bus? The an-

swers are in what Aesthetic Realism explains is the cause of racism and all injustice, contempt: “the addition to self through the lessening of something else”; and the solution: criticizing contempt, including in oneself, and seeing that another person’s feelings are as deep and as real as one’s own.

How much this explanation resonates with audiences, can be seen in the responses of people in the three years the event has travelled nationwide to schools, museums, universities, libraries, churches, community organizations, and the Congressional Auditorium in Washington, DC. People of all ages say that they are learning from what they hear, and seeing others with more respect. The clear educational impact has resulted in grants, including from Verizon Foundation, to continue these events free to the public.

At MEC, Dr. Divine Pryor, Executive Director of the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions joined Bernstein in telling the story of Clarendon County and her friendship with Ossie Davis. Speaking on the answer to racism were Allan Michael, Dr. Arnold Perey, Dr. Jaime R. Torres, and educator, Monique Michael (born in Haiti), whose interactive first grade science lesson on diversity in birds and people, based on the Aesthetic Realism Teaching Method, made clear why this method succeeds in having children learn and become kinder—including in the most economically hard-hit neighborhoods.

Borough President Marty Markowitz’s citation to Alice Bernstein, “for her commitment to eradicating racism” was presented at this event.

The Fight for Education and Equality—from Memphis to Brooklyn

Congressman Major Owens’ work in behalf of education and equality in America was saluted by Alice Bernstein and State Senator Eric Adams of Brooklyn’s 20th Senatorial District, who presented a proclamation in his honor. They told of his being born into extreme poverty in Collierville, Tennessee (near Memphis), in 1936, during the Jim Crow era when his father

feared that registering to vote would cost his life. Inspired by his parents’ belief in his abilities, and strengthened by his own passion for knowledge, he went on to earn graduate degrees, and began his career as a librarian in Brooklyn. There, in the 1960s, he was a civil rights activist and later a NY State Senator, working for housing, employment, and anti-poverty programs. As a Congressman in the US House of Representatives, he was largely responsible for the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act. His uncompromising advocacy of educational opportunity for all, led to his being called the Education Congressman. Legislation he worked on provided money for the first time to historic and predominantly black colleges, and his amendment to Title I legislation brought in millions of education dollars to his district, for parent involvement in schools with students living in poverty and at risk of failure.

Accepting the proclamation, Major Owens warmly acknowledged people in history—black and white—including the Clarendon County parents and the abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens of Philadelphia, who inspired him to work for justice against the odds. He stated firmly that there is a direction the country should be going now, and that is NO COMPROMISE!

He thanked all the people who sent him to Congress and kept him there, among whom was Ossie Davis himself, who participated in his first fundraisers and teach-ins; as well as “the people who put today’s magnificent program together.”

As the event concluded, many eagerly submitted written comments, including: “Aesthetic Realism was thought provoking, informative, and illuminating.” “Please keep teaching what you are teaching.” “Enriched me in so many ways. Will use these ideas in my work with youth as a teacher and librarian.” “A concerted effort to end racism by forward thinking people.” “Our samenesses and differences were shown vividly. There is hope for all!”

To learn more, contact: ClarendonEvent@gmail.com, or call toll-free 888-262-5310.



“The People of Clarendon County” performed by (l to r) J. Loren Russell, Mugga, and Charles Eccles, Photo credit: David M. Bernstein



Salute to Congressman Major Owens (l to r) with Maria Owens, State Senator Eric Adams, and Alice Bernstein, Photo credit: Nathaniel Blue



above: Monique Michael presents the Aesthetic Realism Teaching Method, Photo credit: David M. Bernstein



above: Professor Carolyn Jones, Photo credit: David M. Bernstein

above left: Alice Bernstein, Aesthetic Realism Associate
left: Ossie Davis, actor/activist and playwright