

CULTURAL ODYSSEY

BY IDRIS ACKAMOR

[Cultural Odyssey](#) is one of the oldest African American performing arts organizations in the State of California. Founded in 1979 by musician Idris Ackamoor, and joined in 1983 by performance artist Rhodessa Jones, Cultural Odyssey's mission is to support the artistic work and vision of Rhodessa Jones and Idris Ackamoor, as well as an ancillary group of emerging, community, and established performing artists.

NORTH BEACH BEGINNINGS

On a chilly, brisk 1979 night in San Francisco's North Beach, the Savoy Tivoli Club was the site of an exciting performance art double-bill. *The Beginning of the Second Earth* was the very first production of Cultural Odyssey, featuring founder Idris Ackamoor in a solo performance utilizing jazz, costumes, slides, and pre-recorded tapes. The other half of the bill featured a wild performance by Rhodessa Jones and musician Harry Mann. This was the first time Rhodessa and Idris met - in the theater!

AFRICAN INSPIRATION

At that time in 1979, Rhodessa's house was a gathering place for artists. Idris Ackamoor began showing up and participating in artistic soirees and conversations. Rhodessa was fascinated and impressed by the artistic concept Idris had for Cultural Odyssey. Idris talked about his senior year in college where he



traveled and lived in Africa for a year studying the music and performing arts of the continent. He loved how the African artists he came in contact with were mostly interdisciplinary, combining music, dance and theater. In addition, he was impressed by the

commitment these artists had to serving their community.

He returned to America fired up with passion, energy, and creativity to form a non-profit performing arts organization that was artists-centered and reflected the precepts of interdisciplinary performance and community involvement. In 1983 Rhodessa joined the company. Jones & Ackamoor began a professional and personal relationship. Idris advised Rhodessa to "quit her day job!" Soon after, the couple departed for the first of many European sojourns where they refined their unique performance duet combining music, dance and theater. Returning to America, their reputation grew and the ground was laid for the organizational development of the company they now ran together, Cultural Odyssey.



CIRCLING THE GLOBE

Thirty years later Cultural Odyssey continues to circle the globe refining and defining the concepts of an artist run and centered organization. Although no longer a couple, Jones and Ackamoor continue to honor those early years of commitment with longstanding trust, reliability, personal friendship and partnership.

This year marked Cultural Odyssey's 30th Anniversary and the activities leading up to this milestone has been quite extraordinary. In celebration of Black History Month and National Women's Month Cultural Odyssey presented a *30th Anniversary Celebration of New Works* February 4 – March 14, 2010. All performances were at the Buriel Clay Theater at the African American Art &

Culture Complex located at 762 Fulton Street, San Francisco. The Celebration opened with the San Francisco premiere of *The Love Project* in February. Part house party, part TV talk show, and part cabaret, *The Love Project* is an interactive experience that testifies to the network of human relations that define our times.



Cultural Odyssey's world premiere production of *The Breach* featured dancer/choreographer/aerialist Joanna Haigood, actress/singer Rhodessa Jones, and actor/musician/composer Idris Ackamoor. *The Breach* utilizes theater, dance, music, and video to explore through the artists'

eyes reparations for African Americans.

COLLABORATION WITH THE MEDEA PROJECT

Cultural Odyssey's world premiere production of *Dancing with the Clown of Love* ran March 4 – 14, 2010. The production is a collaboration between Rhodessa Jones & the Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women and the **Women's HIV Program at UCSF Medical Center (WHP)**, supported by the CAC's **Creating Public Value Program**. Ms. Jones, in collaboration with WHP, explored the reasons that lie behind the AIDS epidemic in the lives of African American women - with HIV positive women telling their own stories onstage! Eight participants who are HIV positive performed in the show as well as ex-inmates and community actresses and youth. After each show, there was an audience talkback, where questions regarding HIV were addressed by the audience members and the performers. The women were incredibly forthcoming with their stories, bringing laughter, cries, joy, and inspiration to those who attended the show. Several amazing moments included audience members confessing their HIV status during the talkback! This was unforeseen and incredibly moving.

ARTISTIC BEING

Immediately following the Anniversary productions, Idris received a **California Arts Council/ Department of Justice Music Presenting Grant** to tour California with his musical group, *Artistic Being*. Idris performed in duet format with his musical collaborator, pianist/drummer Frederick Harris. There were also several engagements when other musical guests joined the duet. Renting a cargo van, Ackamoor and Harris hit the road to perform at a variety of rural venues and arts councils including the Lassen County Arts Council in Susanville, Sierra County Arts Council (performing in Sierraville at a school auditorium and in Downieville at the Yuba Theatre), El Dorado Arts Council in Placerville, Healdsburg Jazz Festival, Mammoth Lakes Arts Council (performing at Rafters Club & Restaurant and the Mammoth Elementary School), Miners Foundry Cultural Center in Nevada City, and for the Antioch Music Foundation (performing at the Delta Performing Arts Academy in Antioch). This three-week tour to rural and underserved communities was



incredibly moving and inspirational. Audience members came from around the county to see the show. All performances were wonderfully successful, with many receiving standing ovations and an abundance of positive recognition. To kick off the tour, *Artistic Being* also performed in San Francisco at the DeYoung Museum and the African American Art & Culture Complex.

Despite the financial crisis that seized America during 2009, Cultural Odyssey's artistic programming was spectacular due partly to a strategy that increased touring, providing valuable income. In October 2009 they returned to South Africa to continue working with incarcerated women



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sponsored by **Urban Voices Festival** and **South African Correction Services**. Another first in the history of Cultural Odyssey was the **U.S. State Department Speakers Tour** of Russia during September 2009, where Co-Artistic Directors Rhodessa Jones and Idris Ackamoor conducted workshops, lectures, and performances in Russia.

Photo credits: Idris Ackamoor and Rhodessa Jones in the *Love Project*, by Hubert Williams; Joanna Haigood and Idris Ackamoor in *The Breach*, by William H. Jones, Jr.; Performance of *Artistic Being*, featuring Idris Ackamoor and - Fredrick Harris at Mammoth Lakes Elementary School, by Gaye Mueller.

Cultural Odyssey is a recipient of the California Arts Council's Creating Public Value Program (CPV). Lucero Arellano manages the CPV Program, which supports arts organizations in rural and underserved communities through projects making a positive contribution to the individual and collective lives of all Californians. Cultural Odyssey is also a recipient of a California Arts Council/Department of Justice Music Presenting Grant managed by John Seto.

