

A day to honor black power

Du Bois center to praise Ed Bullins, Bernard Drew

By Laura S. Marshall, Special to The Eagle

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GREAT BARRINGTON - Every region has its history, its stories that tie it together, connect it to the rest of the world, give each generation a place in time. Honoring that history and telling those stories are important for cultural development and preservation because, as filmmaker Theodore "Regge" Life says, "the past becomes the present soon enough."

"We must keep a connection to the past and have knowledge of those who came before us," Life added. "The richness and unique nature of the Berkshires is a result of the shared history of many groups of people."

And Berkshire residents can connect with history this weekend as a host of luminaries descends on the area to help the W.E.B. Du Bois Center celebrate its fourth anniversary on Saturday: Life, theater producer Woodie King Jr., maestro Maurice Peress, trombonist Craig S. Harris, Simon's Rock professor and author Wesley Brown, playwright Ed Bullins and historian Bernard A. Drew.

The festivities, which will begin at 3 p.m. at Searles Castle, will include a ceremony for the center's annual Pioneer Awards, a film screening, a panel discussion and a musical tribute. A reception will follow at the center itself.

The "come as you are" event is intended "to celebrate us being open for four years, operating on a shoestring budget," said Randy F. Weinstein, the Du Bois Center director. "In this climate of nonprofits not doing too well, that's a miraculous kind of occurrence."

W.E.B. Du Bois was a Berkshire-born African-American civil rights activist, historian, author and editor who fought against racism from the late 1800s until his death in 1963, and the center works to preserve his legacy and "to provide our community with educational programs that honestly examine our multi-ethnic history and culture," Weinstein said.

Notable personalities

For Berkshire residents, the celebration also represents a rare opportunity to attend an all-star event with important arts figures. It's significant that all these people are coming to the Berkshires this weekend in honor of Du Bois, Black History Month and their shared stories, said Weinstein.

"It overwhelms me," he said.

Woodie King Jr.'s New Federal Theatre (NFT), founded in New York in 1970, began as a neighborhood-based professional theater specializing in minority drama. From the start, NFT has encouraged emerging minority playwrights, actors, designers and directors, sponsoring theater groups and events as well as vocational training workshops. Alumni include playwrights Amiri Baraka and Ron Milner and actors Morgan Freeman and Denzel Washington.

King, who has won Obies for many of the more than 160 off-Broadway plays he has directed, will join in the panel discussion on Bullins' life and legacy, following the film screening of a performance of his play "Clara's Ole Man" from the late 1960s.

Pioneer Awards

The annual Du Bois Center Pioneer Awards will be presented as part of Saturday's event. The awards are given annually as a pair to a local figure and a national or international figure, people "who open the way for others to follow," drawing on the definition of "pioneer" in the Oxford English Dictionary.

This year, the honorees are theater legend Ed Bullins, distinguished artist-in-residence at Northeastern University in Boston, and local historian and writer Bernard A. Drew.

The winners for 2010 were selected for their vision, said Weinstein.

"The vision of Du Bois is the vision of Drew, the vision of Bullins: to be a pathfinder," he said. For Bullins, being a pathfinder has meant blazing new trails in the world of the theater. An alumnus of NFT's program for playwrights, he joined the Black House, a political theater group started by playwright Amiri Baraka; after a split in the group's politics, he left and joined the New Lafayette Players in Harlem.

He later was named minister of culture to the Black Panther Party and worked with the American Palace Theater and the New York Shakespeare Festival, among others. Bullins's work has earned him Obies, New York Drama Critics Circle awards, Guggenheim Fellowships and other grants.

For Drew, pathfinding has meant retracing the steps of historical figures. He writes a column for The Berkshire Eagle and has published numerous books on a variety of topics; his specialty is local history, including Du Bois himself. In one of his books, "Dr. Du Bois Rebuilds His Dream House," published in 2006, Drew studied Du Bois in the context of his hometown, Great Barrington.

"In this case, Du Bois was already the subject of a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography," he said. "But the man's life was so involved, there were more than enough new Great Barrington stories to be brought out."

'A community resource'

The Du Bois Center in Great Barrington works to keep those stories alive.

"The center is a community resource," said Weinstein. "It contains a reference library, bookstore, lecture hall, classroom, performing arts area and civil rights museum."

On its fourth anniversary, the center is looking back - celebrating the accomplishments of African Americans in the Berkshires, the state, the country and the world - and looking forward, too, to next year and its fifth anniversary, and all the anniversaries and accomplishments that will come as its history unfolds.