

# The East Bay Center for the Performing Arts

## A Model for Community-Based Multicultural Arts Education

**Eric Engdahl**

### Introduction

James Catterall's 1998 monograph *Involvement in the Arts and Success in Secondary School* established a link between arts-rich educational environments and academic success in middle and high school for predominately multicultural, low socio-economic status (SES) students:

The overall performance levels of the entire economically disadvantaged group are lower than performance levels for all students, as we would expect. But the positive relationships between arts engagement and academic performance remain robust and systematic. (Catterall, 1998, p. 7)

Catterall presents data that show that low SES students in art-rich environments have higher English grades, higher standardized test scores, lower dropout rates, less boredom in school, higher self-concept, and stronger attitudes towards volunteerism and community service (Catterall, 1998). In his follow-up 2009 book, *Doing Well and Doing Good by Doing Art*, he finds that the advantages of participating in an arts-rich environment for low SES students continue on into their early adulthood. He also notes that the non-White students make up the majority of the low SES group in his study (Catterall, 2009).

Contained within his texts is the not surprising fact that low SES students have far less access to educational systems that are art-rich, that supply the in-depth arts experiences which could be transformational for these students. This raises a question of how to provide deep arts education experiences to students whose school systems lack the necessary resources to provide them. Even when these resources exist within districts, they usually go to schools with more affluent parents.

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This article highlights the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts in Richmond, California, which is one successful model of a community-based arts education organization whose central mission is to provide these deep art-rich experiences for students from low SES communities, who in this instance are predominately African Americans and Hispanics. How the East Bay Center has survived and grown from a modest start in 1968 to a \$15.4 million capital campaign and building renovation is a model of how multicultural community-based organizations can serve their constituents and grow and mature in cities that are not economically vibrant. Looking at the lessons learned, but more especially how the Center has managed to retain institutional integrity and quality of services, can assist other organizations to likewise thrive.

The mission and goals of the East Bay Center are relatively unique. It is an art training center for young people from the area as well as a service organization providing professional performing ensembles to the community. It also serves these ensembles as their professional artistic home. It offers six days of afternoon and evening classes at its site. It works closely with local school districts to provide after school and in school enrichment programs and runs an arts based preschool program.

But it is not, per se, a conservatory with the goal of making its students the next generation of performing artists. Its students are generally 7th through 10th graders and it serves some of them as a pre-conservatory. While it provides performances through its resident companies, it is not primarily a producing company.

Rather, it exists to provide underserved children and youth with deep arts experiences in a community where they otherwise would not find them. Over its 40 year history the Center has reached some 50,000 students (East Bay Center for the Performing Arts, 2009).

### Background and History

Although Richmond has commanding views of San Francisco Bay and Marin County, it does not share in the affluence generally associated with the Bay Area. It is an industrial city with a large oil refinery and railroad yard. The population is poor, with well over 60% of the children in its school system eligible for free and reduced lunch. The population is changing as well. Formerly dominated by African Americans, the city is now home to an increasing population of new immigrants. The cost of living in Richmond is low in comparison to surrounding cities. Over 60 different languages are present in its schools. In addition, Richmond is regularly listed as one of the top ten cities for murder and crime, nationwide.

Richmond is in many ways still recovering from World War II. It was home to the Kaiser Shipyards (and Rosie the Riveter) which produced 747 Victory Ships during the war—some in as short a time as four days. Kaiser recruited over 98,000 workers to work in the plants (National Park Service, 2000). The newcomers arrived from all over the nation, creating a vibrant multicultural city. Their musical traditions were brought to the Bay Area and mingled with each other on Macdonald Avenue in downtown Richmond. But with the end of the war, the shipyards closed as suddenly as they opened and most of the workers disbursed, leaving those who stayed behind little chance of finding meaningful employment.

In 1968, in the wake of the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., a group of community leaders met and founded the East Bay Music Center. It was intended to provide an alternative to violence for the youth of Richmond and to address the disparities of social justice and educational opportunity. Five teachers gathered together 45 students for music lessons in a rented church hall. They had a vision of providing young people, particularly the

disadvantaged, with skills in the arts. They believed that the arts could be a “powerful tool for awakening individuals to their greatest potential and can serve as a vehicle for social reconciliation and a practical model for meaningful collaboration” (Smith & Simmons. n.d.).

By 1972 the Center expanded programming to include dance, filmmaking, and theater. It also recognized the importance of including culturally distinctive art forms in the repertoire. This arose out of the desire by many local residents to connect with their cultural heritage and the wealth of master artists in the greater East Bay, an area that includes West Contra Costa County, Berkeley, and Oakland, with easy access to San Francisco). This was an important change in the Center’s mission. It became an integral part of the city’s social, cultural, and artistic life through teaching art forms that reflected the diverse range and richness of the population.

In 1978 the Center renamed itself the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts and moved into a teaching/performance facility on 11th Street and Macdonald Avenue in the Iron Triangle neighborhood of Richmond (named for the three rail lines that demarcate its boundaries). The Iron Triangle also is the most dangerous neighborhood in the city. During this same time period, the Center expanded programming to include after school outreach programs in low income communities in Berkeley and throughout West Contra Costa County, as well as beginning a long-term relationship with the Richmond Unified School District (renamed the West Contra Costa Unified School District [WCCUSD] after emerging from a 1991 bankruptcy).

The Center’s basic repertory was set in the late 1970s and 1980s. It includes the first (and for many years only) public ceremonial Mien/Khmu/Hmong (Laotian) music and dance curriculum in the United States, classical music, jazz, urban hip hop, regional Mexican music and dance forms, West African (Anlo-Ewe) music and dance, media/digital arts, theater, chorus, and Trinidadian steel pans. Graduated group classes are offered in these areas along with private instrumental and vocal lessons. In addition to teaching these art forms, it also houses ensembles, which include adult and professional performers that perform in the community.

### **Growth 2000-to-2010**

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the Center was relatively stable, although it

went through several lean years based on economic cycles, as did many arts organizations. Around 2000, the Center leadership began to realize that the organization needed to evolve in order to mature. This maturation process became based on two initiatives—one focusing on increasing the quality of the training programs and the other on much needed upgrading of building facilities.

### **The Diploma Program**

The first initiative began in 2005 when the Center phased in the Diploma Program, a four-year training sequence broken into two-year components. Most students begin the Diploma Program around the age of 12 (entering 7th grade). The rationale for this is that middle schools in the area are not strong providers of arts education opportunities, that middle school is when high school drop-out prevention is most efficacious, and that it is the best time to get students excited about learning (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1988).

Students with deep arts experiences are also more likely to be successful in later high school years (Catterall, 2009). At the end of the first two years, or Advancement Program, students can continue their studies at a more concentrated level in the Leadership Program. The studies consist of year-round individual lessons and group classes, community engagement, student mentoring projects, recitals, and public performances.

At the end of four years a student will have had as much as 2,000 hours of class and lesson time. Many of the Diploma graduates will continue to work at the Center during their last two years of high school as teacher assistants or ensemble members. As members of the ensembles they are paid for performances. During that time the Center supports them with college admissions advice.

The Diploma Program is offered free of charge and without auditions. Students and parents are interviewed and parents must commit to volunteer a requisite number of hours. Classes are selected by the staff to meet the needs of each student. Some students enter the program with specific artistic skills while others may enter with a generalized interest. Students do specialize during the program but not to the exclusion of experiencing other art forms. In 2010 the Diploma program began to offer the full four years of training. Eventually 60 students total will be enrolled.

The Diploma Program has not supplanted other Center classes and program-

ming. The pre-school, after school, in-school enrichment, and regular on-site class offerings are on-going. The Diploma program in many ways evolved out of these ongoing activities, since as students took classes a certain portion of them wanted to focus and deepen their learning in the arts. In order to assure the quality of all of these programs, the faculty is selected carefully for both their discipline expertise and their teaching ability. Some of the senior faculty has been at the Center for over 25 years.

Using Catterall’s definition, the Center certainly is an art-rich environment. It has a focus on the arts, it has practicing professional artists as teachers, students are engaged in the practice of art on average three days a week, and students practice a range of arts disciplines both individually and in groups. Beyond the obvious, it also possesses a broader vision of what arts education can do for these students. It is an artistic community that possesses, in Catterall’s words, a “... shared ethos, community of caring, shared ways of knowing, value for creativity in all its forms and outreach and integration with parents” (Catterall, 2009, p. 116).

### **Upgrading the Physical Plant**

The second initiative towards the Center’s maturation involved the upgrading of its physical plant. Its home, the 1924 Winters Building, needed seismic and ADA compliant upgrades to make it safe and accessible for the community. Although many options were discussed, such as minor restorations, tear down, moving to a new facility, etc., it was decided to restore and renovate the Winters Building.

In the world of redevelopment and philanthropy, this most expensive option proved to be the daunting but ultimately least challenging way to raise capital. The City of Richmond sold the building to the Center for \$1 and made its restoration part of a larger “Main Street District” renovation project. A series of private/public partnerships were formed and work began in 2009. Even during the economic downturn the Center has raised almost all of the necessary \$15.4 million and the building was fully reopened in the fall of 2011.

The Center, however, is not interested in becoming its building, but using it to forward its mission. Simmons says, “We were never about the building. But we realized we were the last civic space left downtown. This will be a gathering place for the neighborhood and will carry the Center through the next 50 years of students” (Hewlett Foundation, 2008).

Congressman George Miller echoes these sentiments:

The East Bay Center is one of the best kept secrets in Richmond. Year after year, it has provided young people and the community with so many opportunities and shown what is possible – even with relatively modest resources – when a cultural center grows organically from the community. This renovation might well be a linchpin for a broader revival in a neighborhood that has had a shortage of good news. (Hewlett Foundation, 2008)

### Leadership

Strong and committed leadership has been key to the Center's survival. In *The Qualities of Quality* Steve Seidel states "...the drive for quality is personal, passionate, and persistent" (Seidel, 2007, p. III). The Artistic Director of the Center, Jordan Simmons, has been in that post for over 25 years. Brought up in Richmond, he began his association with the Center as a student, then as a teacher, and then as Artistic Director in 1985. Simmons possesses strong ideas regarding the importance of what the arts can do for a community such as Richmond.

It is Simmon's vision that drives the work of the Center. He is articulate in communicating his vision with the community and funders, collaborative in working with staff, and able to manage multiple challenges. He is also an artist who understands personally what involvement in the arts can do on an individual and group level. Simmons came of age in the 1970s and received an art-rich education at Kennedy High School in Richmond. While this experience and his subsequent education at Reed College helped to supply him with the personal artistic experience and passion for the arts and his community, it is his persistence that is the key element in his leadership. The tenacious quality of "sticking to it" and his ability to seek out staff who shares an understanding of the importance of the work of the Center are responsible for the organization's survival and success.

### "The Qualities of Quality"

Project Zero at Harvard's Graduate School of Education published *The Qualities of Quality* in 2007. This publication, led by Steve Seidel, interviewed leading arts educators and examined exemplary programs (including the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts) in order to determine what made quality arts education.

The researchers defined seven goals that represent the broad purposes of arts education. Using these goals as lenses clarifies what has made the East Bay Center successful and can serve others as gauges to examine their own work.

#### **1. Arts Education should foster broad dispositions and skills, especially the capacity to think creatively and to make connections.**

The curriculum at the Center is broad and very few students take classes in a single artistic discipline. Students are encouraged to explore and many projects arising out of classes are collaborative and cross-disciplinary. Faculty make overt connections between art forms. During the thrice annual performances and recitals students see their peers in diverse art forms. Indeed, the majority of performing art forms taught in the curriculum are multidisciplinary. For example, West-African music and dance cannot be separated, as they are symbiotic; digital video requires skills in acting, camera work, writing, and underscoring. This natural fusion which is inherent in the performing arts and which is further explored as faculty artists expand their own boundaries creates an environment in which making connections is the norm.

This is exemplified by an original workshop performance produced at the Center and featuring Diploma program students in the summer of 2009 entitled "Orpheus in Richmond." Based on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the tale was updated to Richmond and the journey of the musician (Orpheus) included West African music and dance, Mexican son, and hip hop. Students participated in the collaboration and witnessed senior faculty working together to create a coherent whole.

Students find a range of artistic problems to solve at the Center both individually and collaboratively. Within this environment complex artistic challenges are raised and different sets of skills may be drawn upon in responding to them; critique, reflection and revision are ongoing. This teaches important skills used in the creative process, "persistence and discipline, tolerance for ambiguity, reflection, and metaphorical thinking" (Seidel, 2007, p. 19). Because there are different art forms in which students can express themselves, these skills are taught across a range and they learn how to apply the skills of creativity broadly.

The Center is also concerned with cultural connections as well as artistic con-

nections. West-African music and dance, Mexican *son jarocho*, and jazz are distinct art forms with different sensibilities, technical skills, and performances. The skills of learning one of these disciplines are applicable in learning another. But they are culturally linked as well. They share common roots. Students come to understand this, while listening and performing better with a deeper artistic and cultural grasp of the distinct art forms.

This can be transformative for students. In 2006, a 5th grade student participating in a United States Department of Education Arts Education Model Development and Dissemination grant awarded to the East Bay Center took classes in *son jarocho*. As he learned this fusion music originating from African slaves, indigenous Mexicans, and Europeans in the state of Veracruz he had the courage to admit to his peers that his mother was Mexican, that he was bi-lingual, and that his African-American "role" did not encompass all of him (Lee, 2006).

These skills are also useful to students as they move into the world of work. Daniel Pink in *A Whole New Mind* argues that they are key to the economic success of the nation as we enter "the conceptual age" (Pink, 2005).



JULIA MENDOZA AS EURYDICE  
IN "ORPHEUS IN RICHMOND"

**2. Arts education should teach artistic skills and techniques without making these primary.**

While there exists debate in the arts education community about exactly what role technique plays and how it is woven into arts education, the Center’s mission states that “East Bay Center for the Performing Arts engages youth and young adults in imagining and creating new worlds for themselves and new visions for their communities through the inspiration and discipline of rigorous training in world performance traditions” (East Bay Center, 2009). Imagination and creation is the end product through discipline.

While the distinctive world performance traditions that make up the Center’s repertory possess strong technical bases, aesthetics, and philosophic underpinnings, technique is not the end product for students at the East Bay Center. Students are taught sequential skills development in art forms but rather than creating technically proficient performers the Center strives to enable students to become meaning-makers and creators.

It is important that students become empowered to say what they have to say, rather than being able to repeat and recreate an artistic tradition. This idea is especially important for communities such as Richmond, where the performing arts “...give voice to the silent, to unite peoples of diverse backgrounds, and to help realize the fullest potential of communities and the individuals who live in them” (East Bay Center, 2009). Or put another way, the first responsibility of an arts educator is to demand for students the right to speak and then to provide them with the tools to speak eloquently and even beautifully.

**3. Arts education should develop aesthetic awareness.**

Being able to see the world through an aesthetic awareness is a key purpose of arts education as stated by many arts education theorists (Eisner, 2004). Aesthetic sensibility is also considered to be a key competency for 21st Century work (Pink, 2005). Being able to traverse the world with senses alert and an awareness of sights, feelings, sensation, beauty, and nuance certainly enhance one’s experience of the world. But how is aesthetic awareness cultivated?

At the East Bay Center this often presents a challenge. There is a poverty of arts exposure for students in the community. Despite proximity to Berkeley and

San Francisco, most students arriving at the Center have usually had only limited exposure to the arts. Most have never seen professional performances. Their parents lack the economic resources to attend or sometimes to even have awareness of arts productions. A small percentage of students come to the Center because they have been at one of the few remaining schools with a music teacher, have experience with an ethnic arts group, or have parents who understand the importance of the arts.

However, according to student enrollment data at the Center, 78% come because they have seen a performance in the community by a Center ensemble, taken an after school class at a local school offered by the Center, know someone who has taken classes at the Center and “liked it,” or have been recruited by a family member or friend taking classes at the Center. Therefore, most students come to the Center without knowing what excellence in the arts means.

Certainly aesthetic sensibility is taught through the classes offered and performances given. The Center’s resident ensembles serve the community often by being one of the few opportunities for them to experience live performance. They are often part of larger community events and are free. The resident companies serve to recruit students, provide arts experiences to the community at large, and provide performing opportunities for artists.

The sequential learning (i.e., beginning guitar leads to intermediate guitar

and then often to the jazz collective) helps students to have the experience of improvement with the reflective practice to help them understand why and how. Faculty work hard to help students understand excellence, in their own work, in the work of their peers, and in the artistic work of the faculty.

But in some disciplines, such as theater, it is a challenge because students simply lack experience of the theater; they have not seen a theatrical performance. In this discipline, therefore, faculty return to “broad purpose #1,” the ability to make connections, in order for students to begin to bridge the gap between an art form they know to one they don’t. It is challenging, but because the faculty understands that these “qualities of quality” are interwoven, it can be overcome.

**4. Arts practices should provide ways of pursuing understanding of the world.**

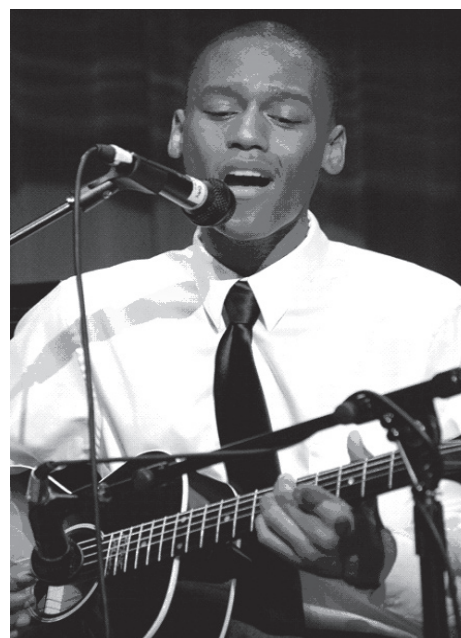
“Art expresses meanings while the sciences and social sciences state them, and we are simply in a different relation to meanings when we are experiencing something rather than heeding a guidebook or a signpost or a manual” (Greene, 2001, p. 88). Recalling the story of the 5th grader who admitted his full racial identity after learning an art demonstrates the power of the arts to broaden understanding.

The Center feels strongly that it is through the artistic experience that understanding comes. In order to reach this understanding the Center’s repertoire deliberately has wide range and diversity to it. The arts represented have cultural range as well as artistic range. However, at the Center the concept of understanding is based foremost in community. Artistic Director Simmons says:

We want youth to learn about themselves, be strong enough to go out of themselves to learn about other people and cultures—then return to themselves. Then they will be able to go into new situations without fear. We don’t say, “Love other people.” We say, “Learn about these other cultures, and you decide what your community is about.” (Hewlett Foundation, 2008)

**5. Arts education should provide a way for students to engage with community, civic, and social issues.**

For some arts education organizations this is tangential, but it is central to the Center’s mission. Arising out of the social turmoil of 1968, the Center uses the arts as tools to examine and challenge unjust social dynamics. This is done through annual



GABRIEL LAMBRITH

“Youth Summits” hosted by the Center during its summer intensives. Youth from all over California work together to work on building an agenda for social change based on their community needs.

The Center also runs additional programs that have included an arts program for the families of men recently released from prison, serving as a convening for the “Healthy Richmond” initiative, and working with the National Park Service on the Homefront History Festival. The free pre-school arts program is aimed at low SES families and contains distinct parent education and kindergarten readiness tracks. It is always offered in locations convenient to families.

Artistically the Center has consistently addressed social issues. The “Orpheus in Richmond” referenced earlier also contained a theme of homelessness. Faculty and students at the Center have produced over 42 original theater and film works (several bilingual) on such topics as date rape, gang violence, race relations, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, and teen pregnancy.

#### **6. Arts education should provide a venue for students to express themselves.**

A student at the Center sums up his experience there,

There is a place where people can go. You have people that will help you and not just with your music but with life in general—plans for college, plans for your future—keeping you on the right track, keeping you stable in your head. (Hewlett Foundation, 2010)

Constructing a safe environment, helping students to stay “stable in the head,” are part of the Center’s strategies to give students’ voice. Especially in a neighborhood where youth must be guarded, where violence is an everyday occurrence, where gangs and drugs abound, students must be made to feel safe in order to create. The faculty and staff at the Center understand that this is part of the job. It is not just instructing students in the arts, it is listening to students and honoring what they say.

This means that not every teaching artist is a fit for the Center. It can at times be a challenge to find teaching artists with the requisite discipline skills and the sensibility to be a teacher in this community. But when the match is made, faculty stay committed. It becomes about more than the art. C. K. Ladzekpo, a senior faculty member (as well as professor of African music at

the University of California, Berkeley and former Director of the National Music and Dance Ensemble of Ghana) notes, “There’s a spirit of volunteerism here that animates the place. It’s a desire to be part of the life cycle of the community” (Hewlett Foundation, 2008). Staff and administrators need these sensibilities as well. In one recent example, the Center hired an administrator who is also a professional salsa pianist and a licensed social worker.

#### **7. Arts education should help students develop as individuals.**

Most arts educators passionately believe that the arts have the power to transform students. They believe they help students and youth to see that they have something to offer the world and that the arts can build intrinsic motivation. Ladzekpo says, “I want them to develop a culture of excellence as a habit. I just don’t want them to be excellent in dancing, or when they’re in front of me, and when they go to another teacher they’re not doing that. There is a habit of doing that” (Seidel, 2007, p. 26).

This passion keeps faculty engaged in the work. Catterall’s work supports their beliefs. He found that students with low SES in art-rich environments increased their likelihood of college attendance 15% over their SES peers in art-poor environments; that these same students in their 20s watched 12% less television were 15% more likely to act as community volunteers, and to become registered

voters than their peers from art-poor environments. (Catterall, 2009, p. 111) The indicators of how the students behave in their 20s suggests a strong sense of self, along with other indicators he notes such as library use, attendance at performances, and direct involvement in the arts.

Economic stability also contributes to an individual’s development. From this perspective as well the work of the Center has a dramatic impact on the students who attend. Many students who come to the Center in 6th or 7th grade have no idea of college. The student quoted earlier fell into this category, yet by his graduation from the program he was determined to attend. Statistically, he will likely earn \$30,000 more a year than a peer with only a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

It is the self-respect that student artists develop, though, that gives them their true sense of being an individual. In the act of creation, there is an act of self-efficacy.

The drama teacher ... expressed in an interesting way her view of the relationship between the arts and a student’s growing sense of self-esteem. She said, “I don’t think the arts teach self-esteem and confidence; I think the arts demand self-esteem and confidence.” (Deasy, 2005, p. 33)

#### **Conclusion**

The East Bay Center for the Performing Arts serves as a model for a community based arts education organization in a low SES multicultural neighborhood. Its survival and success are based on leadership with a commitment to its mission that is personal, passionate and persistent as well as community involvement and partnerships. It also recognizes that arts education serves more than one purpose at a time.

At the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts ... they told us that they strive to teach rigorous and sequential arts technique, to promote youth development and leadership, and to help students examine social issues through the arts and thereby effect change. (Seidel, 2007, p. 27)

The mission of the Center is complex and multi-layered—it develops artists and individuals, it fosters social activism and positive change in the community, it provides professional artists with a home. Within its programming these goals are woven together making it a stronger organization.

During its history the Center has also allowed decisions to be openly made, with input from many constituents. This can be potentially detrimental to an organization



LINDA SAECHAO IN “MIEN LEGENDS”

### Seven Goals for Arts Education

1. Arts Education should foster broad dispositions and skills, especially the capacity to think creatively and to make connections.
2. Arts education should teach artistic skills and techniques without making these primary.
3. Arts education should develop aesthetic awareness.
4. Arts practices should provide ways of pursuing understanding of the world.
5. Arts education should provide a way for students to engage with community, civic, and social issues.
6. Arts education should provide a venue for students to express themselves.
7. Arts education should help students develop as individuals.

but with the Center's strong mission and values at the core this open process has strengthened it. The process goes hand in hand with a culture of reflection and dialogue. While reflection is inherent in the arts, it is not always so in arts organizations. The Center is in a state of permanent reflection because the community in which it is situated is dynamic. It must cope with changes in the population it serves so that both can thrive.

The Center faces many challenges, as do all art education organizations—finances, changing demographics, retaining faculty, student recruitment along with the challenges of working in a community filled with violence and poverty. But it remains concerned with quality. It respects its work and traditions, its students, its faculty and staff, and perhaps most of all its community. It therefore strives to put quality in all it does. It is not always successful artistically, but because reflection is simply part of the process, its failures are turned into valuable learning experiences. It is this attribute which has allowed it to grow and mature organizationally and continue to serve its community.

### Credit

All photographs appearing with this article were taken by Michelle Flynn, East Bay Center for the Performing Arts.

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