



BRINGING WOMEN'S HISTORY TO LIFE

Soundoff!

April 3, 2008

Volume 60 NO. 14

Lisa R. Rhodes, Staff Writer

ACTRESS PORTRAYS THREE LEADING AMERICAN WOMEN

1st Sgt. Zachary Hansarik, Headquarters US Army Garrison, knew very little about the life and accomplishments of famed opera singer Marian Anderson.

But then he attended the installations' annual Women's History Month observation on March 26 and saw the highlights of Anderson's life portrayed through an original musical-drama entitled, "Women: Back to the Future" starring actress Kate Campbell Stevenson.

The performance reflected the 2008 Women's History Month Theme "Women's Art: Women's Vision." The production was sponsored by Ft. Meade's Equal Opportunity Office.

"Her artistic work is a good portrayal of women's history and goes with this year's theme," said Sgt. Stephen Schafer, Installation Equal Opportunity Advisor.

In her portrayal of the black contralto, Stevenson told the audience at McGill Training Center how Anderson performed in 1939 before an integrated crowd of over 75,000 people at the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday. Anderson performed there after the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to permit her to sing for an integrated audience at Constitution Hall because of her race.

"It was interesting how {Anderson} reached people through song rather than making a political statement," Hansarick said. "All she wanted to do was let her voice be heard"

Using music, monologue, poetry and humor, Stevenson also portrayed suffragist Lucy Stone (a lesser known contemporary of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton) and former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt in a one hour, one-woman show. Between portrayals Stevenson changed her makeup and costumes onstage behind a counter draped with Navy fabric.

“Stevenson’s performance was outstanding,” said Gloria Van Dyke, a Ft. Meade Equal Opportunity Office Specialist. “It was so great. I’ve never seen a performer like her before... The way she transformed before your eyes.”

Dressed in a black fur coat and fur hat and wearing brown makeup to darken her skin, Stevenson reminisced about the opera singer’s historic performance at the Lincoln Memorial. “It was an experience I shall never forget,” she said, portraying Anderson. Stevenson then sang, “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” one of Anderson’s signature songs.

The one-woman show began with Stevenson’s portray of Lucy Stone. Wearing a grey wig, eyeglasses and a ruffle around her neck, Stevenson portrayed Stone in 1883 at age 65 as she prepared to make a commencement speech at Oberlin College, her alma mater.

“All my life I’ve been fighting for the right to be heard,” Stone said in character, explaining how her father did not believe in education for young women. Stevenson told the audience how she picked berries and made shoes to buy books and supplies for school.

Later in life, Stone traveled across the country, speaking out against slavery and for women’s rights. “Hold fast to your dreams! Put one foot in front of the other,” Stevenson said in her portrayal.

Stevenson then portrayed Roosevelt at age 36 in Hyde Park, New York, in 1922. She wore fake teeth, a wig and a simple lace dress. She told the audience that Roosevelt was a shy awkward child, who longed for her mother’s affection, yet yearned to live a life of purpose.

The audience watched a Roosevelt struggled to become an effective speaker on behalf of her husband, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was stricken with a debilitating disease. The malady left him paralyzed below the waist before his election to the Presidency in 1932.

Stevenson showed how Roosevelt’s courage and competency grew over the years as she spoke at Democratic fundraisers. She later spoke out in support of a constitutional amendment against the abused of child labor and in support of the League of Nations.

“I had fun. It was thrilling and rewarding.” Stevenson said as Roosevelt. “I’m finding my own place I the sun.”

Eventually Stevenson said the Roosevelts formed a grand alliance in the White House. Stevenson explained that Eleanor Roosevelt “went on to find her own voice” as first lady. Speaking up and working for society’s powerless.

In an interview after her performance, Stevenson, who has more than 25 years of experience in musical theater, said she developed the show 12 year ago to bolster her young daughter’s self esteem. The musical drama took 18 months to research and develop.

Stevenson’s repertoire includes other historic women such as Bessie Coleman, the first black woman to become an airplane pilot; Abigail Adams, wife of President John Adams; Rachel Carson, noted environmentalist; Louise A. Boyd, a little known wealthy business woman who led seven expeditions to the Arctic during the 1920’s and 1930’s; Alice Paul, another lesser known suffragist; and Sacagawea, the Native American guide who accompanied Lewis and Clark on their exploration of the western United States.

Over the years, Stevenson has brought her show, "Women: Back to the Future," to the White House, Pentagon, the National Theatre of Washington, DC as well as to colleges, schools, county fairs and civic organizations.

Staff Sgt. Rocio Jimenez, Headquarters US Army Garrison, praised Stevenson for her creativity and called her performance "inspirational." Jimenez said she was surprised to learn during the show that Eleanor Roosevelt supported the participation of women in the armed forces.

After the program, Bert Rice, the installations' executive officer, thanked Stevenson for "the message in poetry and song" and presented the actress, writer and director with the Commander's Award for Excellence on behalf of Installation Commander Col. Kenneth O. McCreedy.

Stevenson's performance was a living example of women's art and history and their contributions to our country," Shafer said.