

The Theater: *A Corps for Urban Arts*

New York

One of the more baffling aspects of the rewarding theatrical experience is that the spectator can never be quite sure where he's going to find it. It can elude him completely in a high-priced seat before some multi-thousand-dollar musical, but then it can pleasantly sneak up on him at an amateur production in some small countryside playhouse. This reviewer came across something of the latter phenomenon recently, not in the country but in a small, overheated room at the Clark Center for the Performing Arts, housed in a YW-YMCA on 8th Avenue and 51st Street.

The occasion was a final run-through performance of the initial offering of the Urban Arts Corps. The director of the program is Vinnette Carroll, an educator, clinical psychologist and a stage director with extensive experience in the theater and television. Appointed by executive director John B. Hightower as a consultant for the New York State Council on the Arts' Ghetto Arts Program, Miss Carroll made an extensive study on performing arts in the slums and was quickly promoted to her present job. First results solidly justify the move.

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Her group consists of about 25 fledgling actors, primarily Negro and Puerto Rican and ranging in age from 16 to 25. The young men and women are being paid \$85 a week by New York State for spending their mornings working at various day centers and much of the rest of their time training with the Urban Arts Corps. Previous experience in the performing arts was no criterion in their being selected for the program, but the ability for leadership, to communicate effectively, was—and it's impressively apparent.

The immediate impression cannonballed from the group's program of two one-acters—Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" and Joseph White's "Old Judge Mose Is Dead"—is that, while these may not be the most polished of actors, they are delightfully aware of the talents they do and do not possess and are able to project what they have with a high-spirited verve that's both infectious and disarming. This makes for a number of mo-

ments that connect with maximum force, as, for instance, when Miss Jackson's familiar tale takes on the aura of a religious revival meeting.

Melvin Johnson, a robust young man playing the role of Joe Summers, the lottery organizer, announces that he's "gonna declare a lottery" and then claps, stomps and shouts his way into a rousing "Come by Here, My Lord," enlisting accompaniment from the other actors and the audience as well. Miss Carroll's sharp direction tends to stylize movement, effectively heightening the story's macabre view of small-town superstition and prejudice and its shuddering progression to human sacrifice only because "that's the way things are and have always been."

"Old Judge Mose" is little more than a vignette, but a good one and a very funny one despite its being set in a morgue. As the corpse of the judge rests on one of the tables, one of the black floorwashers attempts to impress his co-worker with his total disdain for the man who once sentenced him unjustly. The worm keeps turning and the whole comes up with some incisive, basically gentle, insights into black-white relations.

Several names on the available list of actors were traceable to some of the more outstanding performances: Bernard Johnson, Mary Barnette, Linda Patterson, La Vern Bernard and Denise Pigott, among them. The attractiveness of the entire company, however, is uncommon, and the group will be appearing in some uncommon theaters throughout the state for the next month—state parks, juvenile courts and prisons.

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Believing that art is more than a luxury for middle-class whites and that "it is possible for a black or Puerto Rican artist to be part of the American dream," Miss Carroll is determined to demolish some comfortable myths about the performing arts in the "outsider" world—and in the commercial theater. In Los Angeles not too long ago she received the Merit Award as "Outstanding Negro Woman of the Year." Her efforts so far for the New York State Council on the Arts make it easy to see why.

—JOHN J. O'CONNOR