

# Arts in the Ghetto

SALLY HAMMOND



VINNETTE CARROLL

Appointed by John Hightower this spring to head the council's Ghetto Arts Program, it's hard to imagine a more exciting and talented person for the job of nurturing "a positive self image" in black communities.

"It's presumptuous to impose on black children nothing but Shakespeare, Beethoven and Picasso," says Miss Carroll with gusto, "without telling them about Jacob Lawrence and Leontyne Price, or that Talley Beatty is as important to them as Nureyev."

Aside from helping ghetto people "be aware of their artists, their history, their writers" her job is to encourage workshops and community centers "to involve the community in the art of the community."

At the same time she adds, "We make them aware of the council, and that we're their friends, here to serve the entire population of the state, not just the white community."

A favorite project this summer, she said, is her Urban Arts Corps, a group of 25 youngsters between 17 and 25, both high school graduates or in college, with "a commitment to the arts."

"It's primarily a leadership program," she explained, "not therapy. As serious students, they'll spend their mornings in day camps for Puerto Rican and black children feeding some of their knowledge back into the community."

"The Corps is a way of life, we tell them. If you're very talented and bright you have an obligation to the community. Art is not just narcissism—look at me—it's look at us."

The carefully selected Corps members then spend their afternoons at Clark Center, the Y at 840 Eighth Av., where they "work on materials

by black playwrights, composers, have a dance class every day with a specialist." They talk over their problems and "we replenish them," she said.

"The first day we sat around and talked. I could barely get through it emotionally. I felt, if the future is in the hands of people like this then we're in good shape."

An actress and director of distinction, holder of an Obie for an off-Broadway performance ("Moon on a Rainbow Shawl") and an Emmy for a CBS-TV production ("Beyond the Blues"), Miss Carroll spent six months this winter with the Inner City Repertory Company in Watts.

"It was to be a multiracial theater, but when I got there I saw all white people, white actors, staff, stage manager, it was ridiculous! I decided I was brought there for window-dressing. And the level of the white actors was appallingly bad."

Eventually she was given a chance to direct "Slow Dance on the Killing Ground" and brought in a top-quality integrated cast. The ghetto folk "just flipped over it," she said, laughingly.

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Born in Harlem, Vinnette Carroll spent her childhood in Jamaica with grand parents while her father went through Howard University Dental School. She grew up in Washington Heights and attended integrated Wadleigh HS.

But she cherishes most her mother's passion for her cultural nourishment and her insistence that her children were "queens" who "came from a majestic background."

"To protect us from the American society, she organized a class in Negro history for a group of teenagers and we'd all meet Sunday afternoons at a Y in Harlem," she remembered. "We knew about Crispus Attucks, the first Negro to die to in the Revolution, and Sojourner Truth, the underground railroad abolitionist, and all the heroes of our people. Talk about cultural overkill! We had to take violin lessons, cello lessons and we saw everything that came to the Lewisohn Stadium."

Unmarried, she lives on 17th St. with a huge Great Dane called Lummumba and goes bicycling every morning in the park with her 9-year-old godson, Brian MacShane, son of an actress.