

Chapter 4

A Past to Cherish: Future to Fulfill

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, thou who has brought us thus far on the way; thou who has by thy might led us into the light, keep us forever in the path, we pray. Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee; Lest, our hearts drink with the wine of the world, we forget thee; shadowed beneath thy hand, may we forever stand. True to our God, true to our native land.
(James Weldon Johnson)

The Legacy of NADSA

Johnson's words truly were the sentiment at the final general session of the 63rd annual conference (1999) of NADSA in Los Angeles, California. After everyone had argued about the issues they thought were important, after each member had taken the opportunity to vote for which candidate(s) it thought could either lead the organization into the 21st century or simply the candidate that they liked the most, after all official conference business was over, and my term as president had ended, I released a deep overwhelming sigh of relief because I had been able to successfully carry and pass the torch of the oldest surviving theatre organization in America to leaders who would be charged with carrying this organization into the new millennium. It was hard for me to believe that it had been seven years ago from that date that I had become an Executive Board Officer. However, at that last meeting, I was filled with so many mixed emotions that it was almost next to impossible to talk about where the organization was six years before and what it had overcome during that seven-year period. As I reflected over those turbulent but productive years, a quote by Maya Angelou came to mind, "I have been creative, constantly taking chances-racehorse chances-to negotiate my path. I have used a number of ploys to erect my own bridges over boiling waters, laughing when I wasn't tickled and scratching when I didn't itch. And I am here " still here, despite the odds" (2). That quote stuck out in my mind because it was a reflection of my legacy with NADSA, as the youngest and immediate past president, the last president to serve a full-term during this century. I wanted to share Dr. Angelou's quote as part of what some might have called my presidential address. However, I was so overcome with

emotion that I could not even remember the quote at the meeting, and consequently, was not prepared to present a non-emotional presidential address. Later, I thought back to why I didn't give any final remarks. Maybe I felt that it would not matter much to those in attendance. Similarly, Winona Fletcher had once commented: "For all of the good that I strove to do with NADSA, throughout history, the one who makes the changes, adding waves to the water, is oftentimes not seen as the most popular person. It is unfortunately not until death, that the good that we do is often appreciated" (25).

As the NADSA tale continues, this chapter will provide a self study of the association primarily focusing on the following: the organizational structure, the goals and objectives, the national annual conference, the NADSA publications, and lastly, recommendations for the organization to strive to fulfill so that its past may be preserved and its future fulfilled for years to come.

The National Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts, Inc. has gone full circle from that day in 1936 when Sheppard Randolph Edmonds founded the first educational Black theatre organization in the United States. This study, which includes 68 years of Black theatre history, has many positive and negative revelations, revelations that marshaled NADSA through the years of integration, revelations that caused membership to rise to astounding numbers, and revelations that saw a drastic dwindling of membership. Wherever this great organization stands now, whether it be seen as strong or feeble, it exists; and its legacy provides a history that is important for documentation for those who have an appreciation of the contributions of educational organizations, specifically Black educational organizations.

It has been 64 years of struggling and surviving for the oldest Black educational theatre organization in America, and that is a lot of history of which to be proud. Founded upon the principle that Blacks needed to be educated in both speech and theatre, NADSA has provided a vehicle for those 64 years. This organization established competitions, publications, symposiums, meetings, and opportunities for minorities who had interests in speech and/or theatre on a national level. It provided opportunities for professional development and networking when Blacks were still thought of largely as "coons." NADSA acknowledged an art form for Blacks when many thought that pursuing theatre arts was simply a waste of time. What I have found is simply that this great organization was built on a strong organizational structure and has a phenomenal

legacy. The downfall of the organization, as with many organizations I suppose, has been with the people who make monumental decisions, based oftentimes not on thinking in terms of what is best for the organization but possibly on what is best for their political agendas. As I stated earlier, the findings are simple.

NADSA has suffered and survived during difficult times: segregation, world wars, racial integration, assimilation, assassinations, and even at times, possibly inadequate management and leadership. However, throughout the years, it has been able to overcome those adversities and maintain its existence, primarily based on the idea that today might not look fulfilling, but tomorrow will bring sunshine again. That sunshine is still a major quest today, but the determination will always exist because of the principle inscribed in NADSA's founding. This organization, this institution, this Black educational theatre organization is important despite those who used it for mere gratification and professional development. This perspective serves as the basis for what is to follow, that is whether NADSA is implementing its stated or implied mission.

Recommendations for Future Actions

The National Association of Schools of Theatre's (NAST) 1999-2000 handbook defines mission or mission statements as:

statements that articulate the broad connections between the institution's efforts in theatre and the world of art and intellect; goals are broad statements of aim, the specific needs toward which efforts are directed; and objectives are the specific steps for reaching goals. Goals usually imply something less remote and more definitive than mission, while objectives are components measurable in time, numbers, dollars, or specific activities. (52)

Based on the national constitution for NADSA, last amended at the 1997 Conference during the 2nd General Session (business meeting) held at Grambling State University in Grambling, Louisiana, the purpose (mission) of the association shall be:

- To foster a closer relationship among students, educators, practitioners, and renowned individuals in the area of theatre, speech, radio, and television.
- To serve as a foundation for students planning to enter the professional field of theatre, speech, radio, or television.
- To encourage the creation of definite standards and objectives in order that theatre,

speech, radio, and television may assume their proper place in the curriculum of educational programs.

- To stimulate an interest in the writing, reading, and producing of quality scripts.
- To encourage and assist students and educators towards excellence in the area of the communicative arts. (1997 NADSA constitution)

As it stands, NADSA has followed its mission during its years of existence. It might prove beneficial to the organization to again review its mission and possibly set timelines of five years to ensure that goals and objectives are being documented and that they can be measured and evaluated to determine their effectiveness. It is also extremely important to work with the written constitution and not rely upon implied (not written) constitutional guidelines to achieve its goals. To date, if one were to ask to see the “NADSA Constitution,” a person might be given one of any three or four different constitutions. Either due to confusion because of the lack of accurate recorded minutes at some meetings or simply because of a disagreement with items in a once “amended” constitution, the organization as of this date does not have a constitution that can be agreed upon by all members as being the one most recently amended. Therefore, rules and regulations are often distorted due to individuals giving their interpretations of rules where a lack of written document exists. The American Heritage College dictionary defines constitution as “the system of fundamental laws and principles that prescribes the nature, functions, and limits of a government or another institution” (298). The 1997 proposed constitution of NADSA has been somewhat neglected over the years, amendments have not been maintained, and there have been many instances that decisions were made and the constitution was simply overlooked. I recommend that NADSA take the last constitution amended, following published guidelines and procedures in 1997, and begin to work from that constitution to develop whatever is needed to maintain the organizational structure. If in fact there are problems with that constitution, the amendment process simply needs to be followed. However, it is imperative that there be one constitution by which the organization abides.

NADSA was founded upon the principle that Negro colleges and universities needed to meet and compete in the areas of speech and theatre. Such an organization would be the only way for these institutions to develop the support to increase their curricula and funding. So, in 1936, NADSA set out to have conferences that would be similar to that for athletics and have done so

ever since. NADSA's largest accomplishment has been that it has been able to maintain meetings for 64 years. With that achievement in mind, more emphasis should be placed in developing a conference that would attract people in speech and theatre from around the country. The major problem with current conference procedures is they focus primarily on the competitions, but in today's educational system people want to receive much more than simply a trophy or an award.

I recommend that NADSA develop a system where the forensic competitions are scheduled simultaneously and more emphasis is placed on the play festival. In fact, this recommendation also includes NADSA's moving from just one-act plays to presenting full length plays as well. The primary goal should be to have the organization raise its standards to ensure that the schools participating are working more diligently to add more sophisticated sets and other technical aspects to their presentations. It would not be difficult to incorporate this modification into the schedule of activities if the forensic activities were scheduled simultaneously.

Also, it is important to make sure the conference presents exciting training situations whether those are in workshops or other interactive experiences. Detailed planning for the conference is needed, and it takes creative and dedicated persons to make it a success.

However, such conference events cannot happen without NADSA making the investment to support the goals and objectives of the organization through creative funding. I recommend that NADSA find innovative ways to increase funding for the association through advertisements in their national publications, membership drives, and by charging for the forensic and play festival competitions. With such funding, NADSA would be able to provide: support for guest artists to attend the conference, more exciting events during the conference, and perhaps more tangible items that schools could take back and use in their programs.

Also, the leadership needs to look at its membership dues from student to organizational institutional memberships and determine whether NADSA's dues structure is consistent with other similar organizations. Of course, NADSA must in return offer a good product. The question over the years has been, when I pay my dues what should I receive in return?

Currently, NADSA provides a quarterly newspaper that comes out when schools submit their information, and it provides a NADSA journal that is only given to conference attendees. Even then, there is no guarantee that enough will be printed for the entire membership in attendance. Fortunate members may receive a membership card and a notice about the next conference; other may not. I recommend that NADSA solicit theatre supply or magazine companies or theatre organizations to offer some forms of discounts or subscriptions to the members of NADSA. It is important that NADSA become more business-like and focus on providing a quality product and some type of incentive for membership other than attending the conference.

In the last couple of years, the NADSA quarterly news has been revamped by NADSA Publicity Director, Willie L. Todd, Jr. With its new design and current information, truly it has been the only correspondence a member would receive possibly for the entire year. The only exception might be a few flyers all in one package, often giving unedited and incorrect information about the conference. However, even with passionate pleas for information and a quality newsletter, schools will not send information to the publicity director, which in turn delays the news.

Because of funding, the NADSA journal/magazine is not a publication given to the entire membership, and its focus recently is not in line with what was established as the purpose of this publication. Just as the constitution is overlooked, this document has seemingly been used to support individual persons' and their colleagues careers. Oftentimes they are not even affiliated with NADSA. The journal may even be serving to fulfill publishing quotas provided by individual members' colleges or universities rather than to preserve and inform its membership about theatre.

I recommend that the NADSA News and NADSA Journal be combined into one publication that comes out quarterly. That publication should focus on Black theatre and some speech activities at its member institutions. The publication should pattern itself after similar publications with advertisements, new plays, and scholarly articles that would be of interest to the members of NADSA. These publications must be competitive, appealing, and on the cutting edge. When I look at other organizations, I am amazed by the amount of dedication and volunteerism that they receive which contribute to the overall success of the organization. However, only a few NADSA members

volunteer for NADSA during the year, as a result, NADSA's projects are often not at the level of proficiency that they could be. I recommend that NADSA develop strategies and training environments to nurture volunteers and support members' efforts as they work for the organization.

NADSA should equally develop strategies that will increase its visibility and promote its mission. Despite the current need for NADSA to act strategically to become the premier Black theatre organization, I know firsthand the challenges that may result in that action. Regardless of how many novel ideas are brought to the table, change takes time. And with any change there are those who are willing to change, and there are those who would like NADSA to stay the way it is. However, a call for change should be well grounded in the knowledge of the history of the organization and an analysis of past activities. I recommend that the history of NADSA be incorporated in the curriculums where feasible and taught throughout the year at every institution affiliated to ensure that all membership will possess the knowledge to make decisions that could push the organization forward.

Although these recommendations are easily made, change takes time. Many leaders from Edmonds to Williams to Fletcher to Flowers to Lewis to Rivers have all tried. However, as stated before, oftentimes the person who promotes change may be viewed as one who does not truly have the organization at heart.

NADSA has survived the tests of time and maintained its history and mission as a legacy. This organization has contributed to Black educational theatre for 64 years, and it truly has been the golden gate of opportunity for those who saw it for what it was. With all of the issues that cannot be denied, there is still something magical about NADSA that needs to be preserved and promoted. Many times I found myself pondering why I remain so committed to such a troubled organization. After doing this research, I was reminded that all organizations have their problems and NADSA is no different. It could be argued that if an organization like NADSA did not exist for HBCUs, we would surely have to create one.

However, the fact still remains that its initial purpose of founding was honorable and most needed. In addition, NADSA has touched more lives of African American and non-American performers than might ever be recorded. Somewhere down the line, if a

student was taught by an African American professor, that professor may have been touched by someone who was touched by someone who was nurtured by NADSA. Preservation is important historically because history teaches us to live for future generations. Fletcher states it best in the foreword to the 1990 NADSA monograph series:

Black educational theatre began as an extra-curricular activity, moved into a legitimate academic place, reached out to high schools, community and professional theatres and to Black and White audiences, established interracial understanding and awareness, developed Black writers, teachers and leaders, expanded student exposure in preparation for life after college. All of this might well be a description of NADSA's track record since 1936. NADSA's undying spirit has depended inordinately on **strong central figures** in leadership positions; as the only non-honorary, student-centered organization in educational theatre, it has dedicated itself to building a network of inspired student leaders who can move up to the **strong central figure** positions after graduation. If it is to continue to survive and prosper--if its "**soul is to go marching on**" -- it must not neglect this commitment. It must develop an effective year-round national program and make its regional structure function. It must not forget the purposes as set by its founder as its struggles with the modifications of its "spirit" made necessary by the changing times. Shep Randolph Edmonds states in a tribute made in 1976, to NADSA leaders who had passed on to greener pastures, "Life-time performances..." May all you have done and all we can continue to do while here be merely a prologue to the greater glory of the great educational drama of the future. May NADSA's enviable history of preserving our heritage serve as a model for other organizations and--MAY ITS SOUL GO MARCHING ON! (3)