

# outbursts

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spotlight on arts in communities

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## Artistic expression paving the way for social change

By Hannah Samlall

Picture this: art, music, and theater providing hope for change in communities plagued with violence and inequality. That's the subject of a new book by Virginia Tech researchers Max Stephenson Jr. and Scott Tate.

Tate, senior economic development specialist with the Office of Economic Development, says: "The arts are not an answer; the arts are not the solution. But I think the arts can help illuminate problems and concerns." He adds, "Arts-based stories provide different ways for people to address concerns, and sometimes that different perspective is incredibly valuable, particularly with populations that may need their story to be told."

The book, *Arts and Community Change: Exploring Cultural Development Policies, Practices and Dilemmas*, provides insight into arts endeavors as close as the New River Valley and as far away as the Middle

East. Stephenson and Tate believe the arts may be a source of hope in these communities.

"We're really exploring the different ways the communities employ arts and culture and what kinds of purposes the arts are geared towards and used for – both how that can benefit people and communities and advance social change, but also how it can be complex and complicated," Tate says. "There are dilemmas that are created sometimes that must be watched out for."

### SETTING THE STAGE

Incidents of violence involving law enforcement officers or hate crimes appear to be on the rise. Can creating a stage for citizens to air their concerns influence a community's capacity to address and perhaps even to avoid such incidents? Stephenson, a professor of public and international affairs who directs the Institute for Policy and Governance in the College of Architecture and Urban Studies, believes that theater, in particular, serves a

purpose when it comes to conversations about social issues.

*Urban Bush Women (dance company) performing in one of their latest shows, "Walking with Trane, Chapter 2," Choreographed by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Samantha Speis.*

*Photo by Rick McCollough*



*Photo courtesy of The DustyRebel.com*

"Theater has the capacity to unleash imagination," he says. "You don't get change in individuals unless those individuals themselves come to the realization of what they first believe, which in many cases is subconscious and broadly shared in a community. Everybody thinks the same thing."

Theater groups that travel around the world face the challenge of relating to a variety of communities. Bond Street Theatre, for example, has several projects in Afghanistan. One of its most recent programs, Theatre for Social Development, trains theater companies to deliver information to people in rural areas in that nation, where illiteracy is high. The project has focused mainly on women and has required that the theater troupe adapt to strict customs of the countries they visit. "If they were expected themselves to be heavily veiled, they honored the custom in that village, wherever they were performing," Stephenson says. "That's a necessity in order to galvanize a measure of trust in the community."

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Urban Bush Women perform "Hep Hep Sweet Sweet." Concept, stage and choreographic direction by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, created by the company (from left): Amanda Castro, Tendayi Kuumba, Samantha Speis, Courtney Cook, Chanon Judson, Stephanie Mas, and Maria Bauman. Photo by Rick McCollough

## ART AND TECHNOLOGY

When people think of art, many think of theater productions, paintings, dance, and sculptures, but there are other ways to tell a story. In March 2014, the Institute for Policy and Governance at Virginia Tech received grant support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to enable several New River Valley high school students to produce digital narratives. Through the narratives, the students shared with their communities how health issues have touched and shaped their lives.

The students, known as the Healthy NRV Ambassadors, worked alongside the Conversation NRV Conveners to create stories to share with community leaders in hopes of promoting conversation about health issues.

"It happened to be in the instance of health care and focused a lot on substance abuse, which was very valuable for the region they were focused on," Tate says. "But it can be applied just as readily in a number of different locations."

The result of the project was a yearlong process that identified the region's most relevant problems. Once the youth leaders and the broader community identified their central concerns, they developed four areas on which to focus to encourage a healthier quality of life in the New River Valley.

While some of these examples may seem to suggest that implementing arts-based programs is simple, that is not the case, according to Tate. Collaboration and teamwork are required to bring communities together. "I think

that the more the arts organizations can engage with the public sector, and with the community as a whole to include neighborhood residents, in addition to artists, you're able to advance those goals more easily," he says.



Centre-fuge Public Art Project, container art, New York City



Roadie the clown of "The Simpletons" clown troupe dances with a stranger in a New York City park.



The "Secret Walls Battle," an arts project in New York City. Photos courtesy of The DustyRebel.com

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*Arts and Community Change: Exploring Cultural Development Policies, Practices and Dilemmas* explores how arts-based initiatives impact communities and advance social change. Throughout the 10 chapters, community leaders, university researchers and artistic professionals share their stories, scholarship and challenges.

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