

# SoutheastStylings

## DC Connection to Hollywood



Eisa Davis (Courtesy Photo)

BY KHADIJAH ALI-COLEMAN

### Q & A with Actress Eisa Davis

Acclaimed actress and singer Eisa Davis is someone who may not be well-known but is destined for legacy status soon. This multi-talented woman has many irons in the fire. Davis has appeared on the cable TV dramas "Soul Food" and "The Wire" and most recently seen on NBC's "Law and Order SVU." She has, in the past, brought her stage plays "Hip Hop Anansi" and "Bulrusher" to us through the Imagination Stage in Bethesda and the theater group Musefire. An accomplished songwriter and singer, her CD, "Tincture," is currently in record stores nationwide.

Davis talks to East of the River about her up-and-coming projects and her views on celebrity, arts education in the DC area and her father, Sam Jordan, executive director of Health Care Now and former Ward 7 councilmember candidate.

#### **EOR: Are you a native of DC?**

ED: My father is a longtime resident of DC, but I have never lived there. I was born in Berkeley, California, and raised in the Bay Area. I live in Brooklyn, New York.

#### **EOR: What was your inspiration to enter the field of the arts?**

ED: I can't locate one single inspiration. I can't remember when I wasn't immersed in music and drama and film.

My grandmother and mother were always taking me to dance classes or piano lessons, reciting poetry, encouraging me to write stories...The arts have always been a way of life for me. And this early appreciation has enriched every experience I've ever had.

#### **EOR: Has DC had an impact on your current success as an artist? How?**

ED: Last year, I created a play at Imagination Stage with deaf choreographer and performer Fred Beam, director Patrick Crowley, and an amazing half-deaf, half-hearing cast. Janet Stanford, the artistic director of Imagination Stage, brought us all together. The piece, "Hip Hop Anansi," was my very first professional production as a playwright, so I can thank DC for that.

#### **EOR: What productions have you been a part of in the DC area?**

ED: Besides "Hip Hop Anansi," my play "Bulrusher," a Pulitzer Prize finalist this year, was given a reading by the theater company Musefire.

#### **EOR: What is your biggest aspiration as an artist?**

ED: To create more compassion and freedom and joy in all of our lives.

#### **EOR: Your father seems to be your biggest cheerleader ... what has his role been in your success?**

ED: He and I recently became friends. It's a wonderful moment when parents

and children can move beyond the constricting aspects of these familial roles and begin to understand and accept each other as people. This shift in my relationship with him altered my work and gave me the emotional freedom to create what is now my best known play.

#### **EOR: What are your views on his run for public office in DC?**

ED: I'm biased, but I know that he would be a great leader.

#### **EOR: What are upcoming projects you are working on or will be working on?**

ED: I am currently performing in the Public Theater's production of *Passing Strange* in New York City. I also just released an album of my original music. And my play "Bulrusher" is going to be produced in my hometown of Berkeley this September.

#### **EOR: What have been your most enjoyable collaborations?**

ED: In my work, I am always trying to reach the caliber of the many gifted teachers and collaborators I've had the opportunity to work with. And some of those people will never be celebrities nor do they want to be. We spend too much public and private time in our culture focusing on celebrity, and it hurts us in ways we don't even realize. Some of the most important people to my growth as an artist are the playwrights Anna Deaver Smith and Adrienne Kennedy and

the black poets' organization Cave Canem. Their innovation and trailblazing has made a lasting impact on my work.

#### **EOR: If you could advise your father on ways to improve arts education in DC, what would be some suggestions?**

ED: Arts education is absolutely essential to creating the human in human beings. Arts aren't just fun things to do when you're done with science and math, they're serious tools that allow you to understand yourself and the world. How else can we foster a citizenry that can thrive in a global society without studying the arts that form our many cultures?

Visit Davis' site at [www.myspace.com/eisadavis](http://www.myspace.com/eisadavis)

### Annual Poetry Slam at Ballou High School

Words flew and audience members applauded as Ballou student and staff poets battled it out on May 15 during the school day. The annual poetry slam had judges and prizes for the lyricists who garnered the highest points during this event sponsored by the DC Creative Writing Workshop. Judges included Mary Brown, the executive director of the youth art group *Life-pieces to Masterpieces*, Veronica Nolan, executive director of the college prep program *Urban Alliance*, Juanita Wade, a DC Grants Initiative officer and yours truly.

Poetry slam Rambo Everett and judge Juanita Wade



The event was enjoyable. I was impressed by the intensity of many of the poems while the enthusiasm and charisma of the Ballou staff poets was energizing. The audience was allowed to boo the judges when we gave our scores, so we faced a lot of boo-ing and criticism when we gave low scores to those who were clearly crowd favorites. First place winner student Rambo Everett made an impact on the audience as his poem dealt with loneliness and depression.

James Saunders, a Larry Neal Award winner and a 2006 Parkmont Poetry Contest winner kicked off the event with one of his poems from "Voice of the Knight," Ballou's literary magazine.

Special education teacher Ms. Chen was one of the highlights of the event, performing a well-received poem called "My People." The poem spoke to the stereotypes people have about Asian people – dispelling the image of the Korean vendor who asks do you want salt, pepper and ketchup on your French fries or who doesn't speak English.

Stage presence was highly judged, and staff members wowed the crowds with their stage charisma. Sage Morgan-Hubbard -- National Slam Poet and writer-in-residence for DCCWW – performed her ode to poetry as she raised the bar to new levels. Her lyrical flow reverberated through the room as an a cappella hip hop melody.

Nancy Schwalb, founder and artistic director of DCCWW, participated and was proud of the students who participated this year. "This is something we look forward to each year," she said. Student winners were: Rambo Everett, Micquel Smith – second place winner, Alexis Monroe – third place winner and Neferteria Crawley, who came in fourth.

To learn more about the DC Creative Writing Workshop, call 202-297-1957, or visit [www.dccww.org](http://www.dccww.org).

### Youth Artwork Contest Seeking Entries (ages 13-19)

National Women's Law Center celebrates its 35th anniversary with an art contest for youth ages 13-19. "Expanding the Possibilities for Women and Girls" is the theme of this national art contest which invites young artists to submit their original photography, paintings, drawings, flash animation and Web-based media.

Artwork should creatively address something relevant to theme, incorporating at least one of the following angles: the different roles women play, advances women have made, and/or the challenges women have faced historically and continue to face.

A panel of judges will select a winner by Sept. 30 based on the artwork's originality, presentation style and relevance to the contest's theme. The winner receives \$500.

Submissions must be received by June 30. For further info and to download an entry form, visit [www.nwlc.org/contest/](http://www.nwlc.org/contest/) ■

## Meet Ward 7 Artists: James Stephen Terrell and Tracy-Lynne Toles

by Deidre R. Gantt, Ward 7 Arts Collaborative Inc.

Anyone who has lived in Ward 7 knows that talent runs deep within our community, although

it is seldom reflected in the media or among the wider Washington arts scene. For three years, the Ward 7 Arts Collaborative has partnered with city administrators and private developers

to ensure that the arts have a prominent place in projects like the Great Streets Initiative, the Benning Library reconstruction and the Eastgate/Hope VI redevelopment.

The Collaborative has also helped emerging and established artists to secure teaching, presentation and funding opportunities around the city. This summer's exhibit at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum, "A Creative Profile: Artists of the East Bank," is the largest exhibit the Arts Collaborative has been affiliated with to date. More than two-thirds of the 21 featured artists live in Ward 7. Two of these artists, James Stephen Terrell and Tracy-Lynne Toles, exemplify the diverse range of artists the Collaborative has engaged.

Terrell is a professionally trained painter and guitarist. Born and raised in Anacostia, he has received fine arts degrees from Howard University and Parsons School of Design (New York), and a Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary (New York) with a focus on theology and the arts. After returning to DC, Terrell became an ordained minister and began exhibiting locally at Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, the Graham Collection Gallery, the Sumner School Museum and several other locations. He has also played at venues such as the Lincoln Theatre, Bar Nun and the Martini Lounge on H Street.

Toles, a Michigan native who currently serves as the Collaborative's office manager, has self-published three books of Christian

poetry, with a fourth volume due out in September. Also a self-taught visual artist, Toles had been creating mosaic bead artwork for friends and family for two decades but only began producing professionally two years ago. "A Creative Profile" is her first exhibit. She credits the Collaborative's interim executive director, Wanda Aikens, with encouraging her to apply. Toles recalls, "When I actually got the letter, I was like, 'Oh my God, they actually picked it.' It's still really exciting...especially to go to the museum and see something with your name on it."

Both Terrell and Toles believe deeply in the power of the arts to transform lives, particularly young lives. Since 1999, Toles has run GIRLTALK, a mentoring program for young women ages 11-18, now based in the Riverside Center in Marvin Gaye Park. Terrell spent a year teaching art in DC Public Schools. He is currently designing the art and music curriculum for the Colin L. Powell Public Charter School, which will open in 2008. "Art gives our youth an outlet which helps [them] stay out of the streets and out of the prison system," says Terrell. "It brings a person into a meditative state where one is forced to sit in contemplation. If more of our youth sat in contemplation, we would not see so much violence, early incarceration, early teen pregnancy, early addiction to drugs and alcohol."

The Arts Collaborative has a growing slate of programs for both emerging and established artists as it works to create Washington's next arts district right here in Ward 7. Terrell, who also attended a Collaborative-sponsored framing workshop in January with painter Henry Ferrand, says, "They do a great job in keeping me informed on the art-involved activities in DC."

Meet Terrell, Toles and other East of the River artists at a free public reception on June 10, 4 p.m., at the Anacostia Community Museum. Also see "A Creative Profile: Artists of the East Bank," on display through Aug. 12 at the Museum, 1901 Fort St., SE. For more information, contact the museum at 202-633-4820 or the Ward 7 Arts Collaborative at 202-396-1201 x107.



LEFT: Painting by A Creative Profile artist James Stephen Terrell

RIGHT: Mosaic bead artwork by A Creative Profile artist Tracy-Lynne Toles

Photos by Bruce McNeill

