

Entertainer

Kuntu Continues Its Celebration Of Women With 'Over 40'

By LISA McCLENDON
Courier Staff Writer

The scene is a women's retreat. In attendance are Gwen, Belle, Patricia and Annie. With song and dance, they relive their childhood experiences and sort out their middle-aged problems. These women are very different, except for the fact that they are all "Over Forty."

For the 1996-97 season, Kuntu Repertory Theater has a celebration of women with several plays including "The Trial of One Short-Sighted Black Woman Versus Mammy Louise and Safreeta Mae." Continuing the celebration, Kuntu presents the musical revue "Over Forty," directed by Vernell A. Lillie, chair of University of Pittsburgh's African Studies Department. Karla Washington, Debbie Starling-Simms, Linda Hunt and Nyjah Moore bring their musical stylings and acting ease to the stage.

Written by Celeste Bedford Walker in 1987, "Over Forty" should not be compared to "Waiting to Exhale." The play was originally performed at the Billy Holiday Theater in New York in 1988.

According to Lillie, Walker was "interested in what we women were thinking about."

The production takes four women who are over 40-years-old to a retreat where they reminisce and sing about childhood, men, children, careers and dreams. Since they're over 40, they bring us up from Howdy Doody through the civil rights era and down to their present date, Lillie said.

"It was not written as a feminist play," Lillie said. "It was just written in terms of African American sensibilities. The



OVER FORTY—Kuntu Repertory Theater presents the musical revue "Over Forty," Starring left to right: Linda Hunt, Karla Washington, Nyjah Moore, front, and Deborah Starling-Simms.

things they thought about and how they dealt with issues. Each woman brings something to the retreat.

Annie, played by Deborah Starling-Simms, is a 49-year-old housewife. She has been married for 30 years and has five children. She is holding the retreat. As a devout Christian, Annie has a strong belief that a woman's place is in the home. While at the retreat, her

beliefs are challenged and questioned by the other three working-class women.

Starling-Simms, who has been working since the age of 17, had a challenge capturing the housewife attitude of Annie. She has been a sales representative for Matthews International for 18 years," she said.

On the other hand, Gwen,

played by Nyjah Moore, is a 40-year-old social activist, who has grown apart from her husband, Carlos, so she disagrees strongly with Annie. Gwen is making the point that she's got to be able to take care of herself, because you can't always depend on that.

Gwen is "very educated, very articulate. She's really outspoken," said Moore about her character. "You never have to worry about where she's com-

ing from."

At 26, Moore takes on the huge job of playing Gwen. Moore has her master's degree in social work. She works for PSI, a foster care agency, where she works as a social worker.

Unlike Gwen and Annie, Belle, played by Linda Hunt, has never been married. She is a 45-year-old lawyer, who still lives at home and has been dating the same man for 21

years.

"My character has a problem obviously with being over 40 and with all the things that comes with that," Hunt said. "A lot of people think that when you get older that means you're closer to death, and that's when the fear comes getting older. It's not a big deal to me being 48."

Hunt is a family counselor at Holy Family Institute, which is contracted by children and youth services to work in homes where children are at risk. In her sixth season with Kuntu, she handles the task of portraying Belle with great ease.

At 26, Karla Washington is a veteran of singing, dancing and theater. She's a short-term disability benefit analyst at Cigna Group Insurance. With all her love for theater and singing, she is excited about playing the role of Patricia.

Patricia is a 41-year-old investment broker. And what she desires more than anything is to have a baby.

"She's worked very hard to climb the corporate ladder, until here she is 41-years-old and her biological clock is tick, tick, ticking away," Washington said.

With every scene, "Over Forty" touches many avenues of an African-American woman's life and experiences.

Opening night for the revue will be Saturday, Jan. 25. The show will run through Feb. 8 at the Stephen Foster Memorial Auditorium. Performances will be Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 4 p.m.

"So each one brings something that they need to explore," Lillie said. "And we cover them."

PHOTO BY VENETIA PALM