

Tony Winner Uses the Arts to Disciple Youth

Ben Harney, founder of the By All Means Save Some theater group, promotes biblical principles through performance arts.



[] A Tony Award-winning actor is using theater to teach life skills and biblical principles to youth in New York City. Through the By All Means Save Some (BAMSS) Theatre Works, which he founded with his wife, Olive, Ben Harney helps youth develop discipline and social skills by participating in wholesome theatrical productions such as *Annie*, *The Wiz* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. The productions are funded through partnerships with local organizations, public schools and the Harneys' church, Christian Cultural Center (CCC) in Brooklyn.

"Our focus is on process because it is in process that relationships are built, that lives are really transformed," Harney said. "So we are building community, but we are also helping people to develop a biblical worldview."

Cast as Curtis Taylor Jr. in the original *Dreamgirls* cast—a role for which he won a Tony Award in 1982—Harney never expected his profession to merge with a ministry calling. He accepted Christ in 1979 after a season of searching various belief systems. Soon afterward, he began a Bible study

with industry insiders that grew from a few meeting in a theater hallway to more than 100 gathered in a local church.

Still pursuing a career on Broadway and in Hollywood, Harney said in 1988 he began to sense that the seasons in his life and career were changing. "The Lord was saying that's a closed chapter, and I was officially saying that's it for the performance aspect of my life," Harney recalled.

Despite "nonstop" offers for roles, Harney stood by his decision, thinking he would move into full-time ministry. "And it didn't happen," Harney said. "I realized over the years that the way in which the Lord would use me was not traditional."

BAMSS began as a way to use biblical principles to teach acting, and before long it mushroomed into a ministry of sorts. Now it includes a youth theater ensemble, adult repertory company and summer musical theater camps.

A.R. Bernard, pastor of 27,000-member CCC, where Harney directs the adult theater department and special youth projects, said Harney is "passionate about God and young people." He said Christians need to be involved in redeeming the arts. "We live in a sight and sound generation, and the arts are able to grasp both," he said. "It allows youth an outlet for creative expression that is

wholesome. It can be a platform that is relevant to reach young people.”

Rebekah DeAndre Gordon joined BAMSS at age 16 and credits the conflict-resolution program with helping her develop leadership skills and confidence in public speaking. “The community has benefited from the strong and positive people involved [in BAMSS],” said Gordon, who is attending New York University on a full scholarship.

John Colon, who joined BAMSS eight years ago, said the organization has had a “tremendous” impact on his life. “Ben Harney is a man of such wisdom and has poured so much into me,” he said. “The BAMSS organization itself has given me unbelievable relationships and outlets of expression that saved me.”

Harney believes BAMSS is in “a new bursting season” as he searches for a permanent home base and continues to bring the ministry of arts to youth. “We are part of the planting and watering of the Lord in the lives of others,”

Harney said.—**Lavenia J. Lavelle in New York**