

A New Performing Arts Center Sets Up Shop

Written by Anne Tschida, BT Arts Editor
February 2018

Liberty City gets a gorgeous cultural venue



or those who have yet not visited the Sandrell Rivers Theater at 6101 NW 7th Ave., in the heart of Liberty City -- or maybe more likely, those who don't even know yet that it exists -- you're in for a real treat. It's a stunningly beautiful performance and exhibition space, opened in 2016, that is now home to both the youth-focused Fantasy Theatre Factory, formed in 1982, and Florida's oldest African-American theater company, M Ensemble.

It's an overused cliché, but Sandrell Rivers is truly is state of the art: the optics are lovely, the spaces are decked out in clean variations of subdued black, white, and gray furnishings. The lighting and sound for the theater are as good, if not better, than most of Miami's performance centers. Sandrell includes a black box theater, a dance and rehearsal studio, and a multipurpose space that can incorporate artworks, seminars, receptions, and so on. (The theater's namesake was a tireless advocate for the arts in Miami. She died of cancer seven years ago at age 62.)

The theater is part of a larger project, the Audrey M. Edmonson Transit Village, which has two affordable-housing complexes, the Sandrell Theater, and a transit hub. It is a Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs-funded building, and Fantasy Theatre Factory (FTF) serves as the managing operator and main programmer of the theater, according to Fantasy Theatre manager Evelyn Gigiras Sullivan.

For FTF and M Ensemble, both of which are longtime nomadic troupes, Sandrell is a longed-for

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landing space. But it is also a performance center accessible to those not connected to the more upscale life along the Biscayne Corridor, for instance, or Miami Beach.



Looking back, the handsomely outfitted Sandrell is a far cry from the storefront theater space that M Ensemble used back in the early 2000s, on W. Dixie Highway in North Miami. One of its productions was a memorable play about blues musician Robert Johnson, who'd supposedly made a Faustian deal with the Devil; the intimate setting did feel a little like a juke joint, but the acoustics and lighting were difficult.

Fast forward to today, and plays like *Flyin' West*, a true but not well-known story of African Americans who established a town in Kansas during the Reconstruction era, and *Sassy Mamas*, the current light comedy about older women chasing some younger men, have lighting and a setting that do justice to the performers and performances.

Founded in 1971, M Ensemble always had a mission to promote African-American culture and plays, and to produce it in Miami's predominantly black communities. It's been a participant in the prestigious National Black Theater Festival in Winston-Salem and other festivals, representing the Southeastern United States. But it never found a permanent home, until now.

The same is true for Fantasy Theatre Factory, the other resident company, which has been touring in South Florida communities and around the state, as well as internationally, for 35-plus

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years.

“As a theater for young audiences, a touring company, we’ve never before had a permanent home venue,” says Gigiras Sullivan. “Sandrell Rivers Theater provides Fantasy Theatre Factory a beautiful facility in which to perform its original plays, and to present its new programs such as a film series, music series, and play-reading series, New Year New Works [which promotes unproduced/unpublished plays] as well as an exhibit space to showcase local and national artists.”



The core mission of FTF, she says, is “dedicated to expanding access to theater to more people of all cultures and backgrounds, especially those who are underserved -- economically, through disability, limited geographic mobility. We place a special emphasis on serving children and families with educational theatrical productions.”

FTF produces fieldtrip opportunities for thousands of Miami-Dade and Broward students each year at the Sandrell Rivers Theater and at other theaters around South Florida, she says. The plays mix up mimes, juggling, and magic, and “the programs reach more than 125,000 people each season with more than 350 events and shows produced annually. FTF tours its programs and produces in-house programming simultaneously.

For its Sandrell next production, FTF is in rehearsals for the world première of *Lorali*, a new play from the creator of Nickelodeon’s *Blue’s Clues*, Todd Kessler, who first started with *Sesame Street*

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and moved on to edgier kids programming. That will run in March.

This month the lobby space will be dedicated to a portrait-filled art exhibit called “Martin Luther King Jr. Legacy,” which is part of Black History Month. The cougar-inspired *Sassy Mamas* from resident M Ensemble continues just until February 4.



There will also be several series called “Family Programming,” one with the Greater Miami Youth Symphony Jazz Concert on February 3 (free). Another is a production of Fantasy Theatre Factory called *Bananas, Books & Pancakes*, which has an aim to get kids to enjoy reading, and features two children who find out their teacher is a gorilla (who maybe likes bananas over pancakes?), on February 24.

The JDivas Dance troupe will hold its winter recital also on February 24, and a free screening of the movie starring Liberty City natives, *Moonlight*, will be shown on March 2.

Back in the darkened black box theater, the actors portraying sassy mamas and founders of a town on the edge of the West are finally getting the stage they deserve for a wide variety of plays from black playwrights and performers. There’s also room for art and dance and film and kids’ play. So far, it’s a good start for this performing arts center serving a neighborhood that has for too long been neglected.

FTC will continue to diversify its programming, says Gigiras Sullivan, and to offer a broad range of cultural activities for everyone in our South Florida community.

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