

Howard

EXTRA

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PHOTO BY MICHAEL TROMBER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

In the intimate Theatre Outback, the audience awaits the last show performed there, a production of "Our Town" by Student-Alumni Arts at Howard Community College. Director Sue Kramer, right, leads an exercise with the cast.

The Final Curtain For Theatre Outback

Cafeteria-Turned-Theater Gives Up Limelight
To a Modern Space for HCC Students

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Theatre Outback's Latest Act Closes

Black Box Space Will Stage Comeback as TV Studio When HCC Completes \$22 Million Arts Center

By [Joshua Zumbrun](#)

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A crowd just shy of 100 huddles around the stage at Howard Community College's Theatre Outback, as the third and final act of "Our Town" begins. Much of the cast sits in several rows of wicker chairs, as a thick fog billows across the room.

Michael Coleman, the narrator, explains that 12 years have passed since the play began. Many of the characters the audience has just spent two acts getting to know have died. The wicker chairs represent gravestones in a cemetery.

Coleman delivers the play's famous soliloquy, "We all know that something is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the stars."

Tears roll down his cheeks, and in the intimate black box Theatre Outback, where no seat is more than a dozen feet from the stage, the audience can see every tear in an actor's eye; they can see every furrowed brow, every blink of an eye, every grin and every frown. And it's infectious.

"Everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal," Coleman continues, "and that something has to do with human beings." Throughout Act 3, the theatergoers wipe away tears and sniffle softly. When the play ends, they erupt in applause. As the actors exchange flowers and hug their families, Sue Kramer, the play's director, slips out of the theater onto a small concrete patio behind HCC's administration building, off the main quadrangle, and two floors below the building's main level (hence the name) and lights a cigarette.

She's a little misty-eyed after this ninth and final performance of "Our Town" in the play's three-week run, which followed months of rehearsal. It's the 28th show that Student-Alumni Arts at Howard Community College has staged. By her reckoning, Kramer has witnessed nearly 5,000 rehearsals, meetings, set-builds, open-mike sessions and auditions in the Outback.

Sunday's performance of "Our Town" was the theater's last show.

Over the summer, the college will complete the \$22 million Horowitz Visual and Performing Arts Center, which will include a state-of-the-art, 200-seat black box theater. The Theatre Outback will be converted into a TV studio.

"I'm gonna miss it a lot. A lot," Kramer said.

The growth of the arts at Howard is a little hard for Kramer to believe. Twenty years ago, the arts program had one acting class and no performances. When the fledgling arts program wanted a new building, the school said it could have the cafeteria.

Good enough.

Program participants painted the cafeteria black, blocked out the windows, put up some lights and, within months, Kramer starred as one of two characters in Theatre Outback's inaugural play, "Talley's Folly."

Signs that the theater was once a cafeteria never really went away. The ceiling is too low, and above the back row of seats hangs a sign: "Please Watch Your Head! Low Clearance Be Careful!" The area immediately backstage doubles as a dance studio. The dressing room is barely seven feet wide, and the walls and floors resemble the hallway of an old hospital.

The prop room, roughly 10 feet by 25 feet, is overflowing with old costumes from past shows, a collection of dirty elf shoes, countless dinner place sets, salt shakers, an old jukebox, an old turn-dial television, nutcrackers from 1 to 5 feet tall, a collection of hardbound journals, old tennis rackets and a library card catalogue. Here, props aren't thrown away: They might come in handy later.

The new arts center will be a quantum leap forward -- a facility to fit a program that is bursting at its seams. According to Valerie Lash, chairman of HCC's arts and humanities department, the college has nearly 500 arts majors, double the number of five years ago. Lash said she expects the number to double in five years.

"We feel our students deserve the best," she said. "There are more students in Maryland enrolled in two-year programs than four-year. Why shouldn't they have the facilities they need?"

Additional to a new theater are practice rooms, a recital hall, art gallery, spacious lobby, suite of dressing rooms, a green room where actors will be able to relax, a costume room and sound-proof offices -- everything an arts program could ask for. Almost.

"There's an ownership with this space," Kramer said, gesturing toward the entrance to the Outback, "that we just won't have immediately. The students love it more."

After changing out of their costumes, cast members trickled out to join Kramer on the patio, where they shared their favorite memories.

The actors are as eclectic as the items in the prop room: first-year students; longtime alumni; members of the HCC faculty and staff; and members of the community.

Coleman, the narrator, and Michael Avolio (Doc Gibbs in "Our Town") first performed in Theatre Outback in "The Elephant Man" in 2001. They also performed in "Romeo and Juliet," in which all the sword fights had to be specially choreographed without any overhead swings, to avoid hitting the ceiling.

Marsha Jenkins remembered her first show, "The Crucible" in 1996. She remembered asking Kramer whether the audience had to buy tickets and Kramer replied, "No, we're just glad if they come."

Sisters and HCC students Ashanti and Candace Cooper -- Ashanti played Mrs. Gibbs in "Our Town" and Candace was the production's stage manager -- talked about their experience writing music for "Letters to S.A.N.T.A.," an original play written and scored from scratch by Student-Alumni Arts. The production nearly sold out all nine shows at \$15 a ticket.

It began to drizzle lightly, but no one was tired of sharing stories.

"It's going to be very difficult to break in some new space," Kramer said to the cast, "but we will make it our own."

"I think I speak for everybody," Coleman told her, "it's because of you we're still here and we always will be here."

After all, it's not about houses or names, right? It's something in human beings.



Narrator Michael Coleman introduces "Our Town," the last play performed at Howard Community College's Theatre Outback.



Michael Avolio, who played Doc Gibbs, hugs Lindsey Nixon backstage before the final show. Avolio first performed in Theatre Outback in 2001.

"It's going to be very difficult to break in some new space, but we will make it our own."

— DIRECTOR SUE KRAMER

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The cast prepares to go onstage at Theatre Outback, which will become a TV studio. MCC is leading the \$22 million Horowitz Visual and Performing Arts Center, with a state-of-the-art, 200-seat theater.