



## THE OPERA "TEA" PROVIDES A CHANCE TO IMBIBE THE ARTS!

Outside, it was the aftermath of a February blizzard. Piles of shoveled snow created a cold, bleak backdrop. But inside the Adams building on Presidential Boulevard, the stage was set for warmth and music.

Chanta Harris, teaching artist from Art-Reach, had come to the NOVA II community to prepare the residents for their afternoon at the opera. With the help of their activities director, Jenaya Parker, a group of about ten adults with psychiatric, cognitive, and physical disabilities had gathered to learn about *Tea*, the opera, and the Academy of Music where they were all invited by Art-Reach to share in an exciting cultural experience.

The NOVA residents were ready, and Chanta was prepared! Alternating information with interactive projects, she skillfully engaged the group. The history and categories of tea led to a sampling of tea, and Chanta's "students" assessed both taste and fragrance. Her condensed biography of Chinese composer Tan Dun morphed into individual creations of unique and organic musical instruments that modeled his. Goya beans, rubber bands, cups, paper, and stones blended into a strangely pleasant cacophony, ending in a rousing finale! Finally, Chanta's summary of the opera's storyline culminated in a dramatic reading, enhanced by spontaneous singing, by two of the residents, of the entire libretto. Meanwhile, another group member provided her version of the action, complete with pantomimed embracing, weeping, and stabbing, along with sound effects using water to suggest the background's natural setting. Chanta had indeed generated excitement for the upcoming trip to the opera!

Curriculum for Tan Dun's opera *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* is provided by the Opera Company of Philadelphia's Sounds of Learning Program. Opera Company of Philadelphia is an Arts Partner of Art-Reach, and just as planned, on yet another cold February day, The Opera Company of Philadelphia warmed the theatre with its final dress rehearsal of Tan Dun's opera *Tea: A Mirror of Soul*. The Academy of Music was packed with Philadelphia school children, but among them sat four groups of adults representing Art-Reach members. Two are long-term residential communities: Little Sisters of the Poor, from Newark, DE, and Evangelical Manor of Wesley Enhanced Living, from Philadelphia. Two other members serve people with disabilities: Silver Springs and People's Choice Center, also from Philadelphia, and, of course, NOVA II. For the next few hours, youthful and elderly, able-bodied and physically-impaired, white, black, Hispanic and Asian---invited guests equally shared the experience of opera with all its sensory appeal and artistic beauty.

Preparation was the key to understanding and appreciating this sophisticated genre. Referencing her teaching artist from Art-Reach, a resident from "Little Sisters" Community said "Michael [Borton] explained it so well. We knew just what to expect!" When questioned about what they remembered from their earlier prep session, some

folks noted “pretty colors, especially red”, “the water dripping into the bowls”, “that high-pitched voice”, “beautiful costumes and headdresses”, and “that big Chinese symbol!” Indeed, it was clear, as one woman reported, that traveling even from Delaware was “worthwhile, just to be able to see a performance like this!”

The program ended inside the historic Academy of Music, and the audience slowly leaked out into the cold February afternoon. “We’ve had so many good experiences through Art-Reach”, one client concluded. Hopefully others agreed and felt the same spiritual warmth and restorative value from their time at the opera that tea drinkers experienced at their ceremonies long ago.

-By Barbara Speece

*Barbara is a Special Projects Ambassador with the Art-Reach Ambassador Program*