

The Berkshire Eagle

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Culture at Colonial



The Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa performs last night at The Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield.

■ A performance by a West African ensemble highlights a celebration for the Berkshire Immigrant Center.

By Jack Dew
Berkshire Eagle Staff

PITTSFIELD - In a quasi coming-out party for a growing immigrant group in the Berkshires, the Colonial Theatre became a West African center for a night. With the Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa slated to perform, the Colonial and a host of community groups organized an evening of cultural exchange, shining the theater's spotlight on the burgeoning population of people from West Africa in Pittsfield and the Berkshires.

"It is the newest, growing segment of the county," said Brooke Meade of the Berkshire Immigrant Center, particularly immigrants from

Ghana and the Ivory Coast. She estimated her organization is working with 50 to 60 West African immigrants, a small but significant slice of the agency's overall client list.

For Phillippe Boua, the event was a chance to blend business and pleasure. With his wife, Boua is co-owner of Pittsfield's Cultural Market on Elm Street, a store that specializes in West African goods like the djembe, a hand drum that he had on display in the Colonial's lobby last night.

"I think it's a very good opportunity for us to introduce these things, show the people and the public what we have," Boua said.

Outside, members of the Youth Alive! dance team performed on Pittsfield's moveable stage, installed for the evening on South Street. They were a tune-up for the Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa, a critically acclaimed troupe of singers, dancers and percussionists from Mali.

David Fleming, the Colonial's executive director, said the theater's mission is to bring the music and art of other cultures to the Berkshires. It has been working with a consortium of groups to

ensure that the theater's cultural offerings have a chance to spread into the community.

"We wanted to combine this performance with some significant activity to benefit the peoples of Africa," Fleming said.

To that end, it collaborated with the BARKA Foundation, which is working to bring potable water to the impoverished African nation Burkina Faso. BARKA kicked off its "\$1 a Day" campaign yesterday, asking for contributions of a single dollar or a dollar every day of the year. The money will help cover the cost of drilling wells in the world's third-poorest nation.

"Everybody can give a dollar," said Ina Anahatu, who runs the foundation from Housatonic. "We are really here to join hands with everybody in order to really participate.

Everybody talks about being a global village. ...By doing this locally and getting people to have a better understanding of what is going on around the globe, we all have the opportunity to participate in the global village."

Working with the Colonial and others "seemed like a natural thing to figure out how to make this a community event," said Esu Anahatu, co-founder of BARKA.

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Last night's celebration hosted a number of community groups, shining a light on the growing West African population in the Berkshires.