

ENTERTAINMENT

Church members cast in Oberlin play

By KAREN SCHAEFER

Even in rehearsal, their energy is infectious. Their music seems to reverberate from the massive stone columns and angled steps — equally suggestive of an ancient temple or a shabby old church. The two choruses, dancers and singers, echo the other in a kind of choreographed call and response, one in movement, the other in song.

The play's music director Cathy Elliott, stage manager Julianne Keenan and assistant director Brenda Grier Williams snap their fingers, tap their toes — and smile.

This weekend, Oberlin College associate professor of African-American Studies Caroline Jackson Smith will direct guest artist Tony Sias of Cleveland as Preacher Oedipus and an all-

Oberlin cast in three performances of Lee Breuer's "The Gospel at Colonus."

Set in a Pentecostal church, Breuer's adaptation is of the original Greek play by Sophocles, "Oedipus at Colonus." It tells the final chapter of Oedipus' tragic story, ending his exile within the cathartic, redemptive fervor of a gospel service. A live music ensemble accompanies Bob Telson's gospel score.

Besides the marriage of gospel and Greek tragedy, there is a different kind of union — a wedding of town and gown. For when director Jackson Smith chose "Gospel" for its Afrocentric appeal, she also sought community members to be cast with students as actors, singers, dancers and production assistants.

"One of my interests is what happens when different cultures

meet," said Smith. "In 'Gospel,' I envisioned looking through the service to the time 2000 years ago. An ancient story about a displaced man sung by African-Americans has strong reverberations in the present."

Assistant director Grier Miller, who serves as special student academic services adviser at Oberlin College, is an Oberlin resident and a longtime member of the Pentecostal Church. Her daughter Imani, 15, a member of the movement chorus, is a sophomore at Oberlin High School.

"At the heart of Caroline's productions is the belief that theater is really a whole community event," said Grier Miller. "Many of the cast — including both students and townspeople — have never been in a main stage production before, but this coming together has gotten everyone excited."

Oberlin resident Louis Pollard, who plays the part of the Coragus, had never sung outside his Christ Temple Apostolic Church.

"I belong to a Pentecostal church," said Pollard, 40, a social worker at the Berea Children's Home. "I teach Sunday school there — Imani's in my class. I thought, if Imani's brave enough to come, I could, too. I didn't take part in the Million Man March on Washington, but I do believe we adult black men need to be more involved as role models and teachers."

Jackson Smith chose her all-black cast primarily for their voices. Among her finds is Oberlin College freshman Alexander Elisa, whose deep, rich bass and soaring falsetto bring power to his role as Singer Oedipus. Senior Keisha Smith and sophomore Brian Salter sing the parts of Evangelist Antigone and Pastor Theseus.

Schaefer is a free-lance writer in Oberlin.

✓ For your information

The Oberlin College Theater and Dance Program will present "The Gospel at Colonus" tonight and tomorrow at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. in Hall Auditorium, 67 N. Main St (Ohio 58). Tickets are \$8, \$6 for seniors. For information, call 775-8169.