



The Ordway Center for the Performing Arts is a public institution.

That means the beautiful building housing a 1,900-seat orchestra hall, ornate lobby and rehearsal spaces located at 345 Washington Street in Saint Paul is funded in part by public contributions – as well as a host of private donations. Each year nearly 400,000 people are greeted by ticket takers to experience a variety of performances at the Ordway. But of that number, few are of African descent or people of color. That didn't sit well with the powers that be at the Ordway. It also didn't sit well with Robin Hickman.

"My mother would say things like, 'My tax dollars pay for these institutions, so we have a right to be here,'" said Hickman, CEO and executive producer of SoulTouch Productions, and director of the Ordway's Taking Our Place Centerstage: The African Diaspora in Harmony (TOPC).

It wasn't the rights of people being denied at the Ordway that kept people of color from attending the many offerings at the hall; it was the programming. With TOPC, the Ordway is producing events geared towards a more inclusive audience. The most recent installment of that series includes a host of performances throughout February and continuing through the first of June. Programming includes Maria de Barros, Wednesday, Feb. 19, a discussion with Ronald K. Brown, choreographer of The Gershwins' *Porgy and Bess* Feb. 25, the play, *The Gershwins' Porgy & Bess* March 25 – March 30 and *Step Afrika!*

, May 31, and June 1. As part of its Black History Month Celebration, the Ordway will host a reception before Maria de Barros' Feb. 19 performance honoring Naomi Tutu, an international speaker on race and gender justice and daughter of South African Bishop Desmond Tutu. Naomi Tutu will also give a special introduction for de Barros.

Hickman said the efforts of the performance venue reach beyond the venue itself. In addition to performances, many of the performers will be available for discussions and workshops at various locations throughout the Twin Cities.

"This goes beyond the Ordway. The Ordway is walking with the community in presenting these

Robin Hickman guides Ordway celebration of African and African American culture

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.

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experiences and performances. We are working together to create an exciting array of events that can open up minds and hearts," said Hickman. "We're in partnership with Youthprise (a learning beyond the classroom initiative), we had young men who had correctional issues come to the Ordway, we had busses from south Minneapolis come with our seniors, 200 strong. I had the opportunity to meet a man who was playing piano outside of the Ordway and come to find out he was homeless. I said brother, one day you'll play inside of here and six months later he did."

The Ordway's TOPC program began in October 2010 in partnership with communities of African and African-American ancestry. The initiative, led by Hickman and program manager, Leah Nelson, is committed to artistic, educational and economic engagement.

"We have such a creative and energetic team behind this program," said Patricia Mitchell, president and CEO of the Ordway. "Throughout this season, we are all on a journey that inspires, uplifts, and entertains – a journey made possible through artistic and education programming designed and executed in partnership with community leaders and artists."

The African Diaspora refers to the communities throughout the world that are descended from the historic movement of peoples from Africa, predominantly to the Americas, Europe and the Middle East, among other areas around the globe.