

Committee on Black Performing Arts



From 1992 through 1996 the CBPA in collaboration with Academic Software Development and the Department of Drama, worked with the government and citizens of East Palo Alto to create two one-act plays, a video documentary and an archive of the history of East Palo Alto. The plays, by Charles Oyamo Gordon and Cherrie Moraga, were co-produced with the Drama Dept. in East Palo

Alto in November 1995.



COMMITTEE ON BLACK PERFORMING ARTS
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The video, "Dreams of a City: Creating East Palo Alto" was completed and debuted October 26, 1996. A curriculum guide will be distributed to Ravenswood City School District classrooms in 1998. The archive, consisting of audio and video taped oral histories, newspaper articles, academic papers and videotapes of the plays is open to the public by appointment.

"DREAMS OF A CITY: The East Palo Alto Project"

"Dreams of a City: The East Palo Alto Project" (Also known as EPAP) was originated by the Committee on Black Performing Arts at Stanford University, in collaboration with the citizens of East Palo Alto, in 1991. It was to unite the CBPA's mission and expertise regarding the presentation of the performing arts from the perspective of African American culture with the community's goal of presenting its history from the perspective of its residents. EPAP was modeled after a project created in the early 1970's by drama professors George Houston Bass and Rhett Jones at Brown University entitled "Rites and Reasons". This program works in a process of research-to-performance; an issue is first researched, then that material is turned into a theatrical piece. EPAP's scope enhanced this model through encompassing the following five components:

1. Conducting research into the history and evolution of East Palo Alto, that was performed by Stanford faculty, students and staff in consort with residents of East Palo Alto;
2. commissioning and producing two one-act plays about East Palo Alto's history, that were presented to sold-out houses in the community and on campus;
3. holding community forums to address issues raised in the plays;
4. assisting in the production of a one-hour video documentary based on oral histories of current and past residents, focusing on the economic, political and sociological development of the town from the 1920's to the present, for use by schools and community groups, television broadcast and distribution outside the area; and
5. creating an archive of audiotaped and videotaped oral histories, newspaper articles, academic papers and other documentary materials, to be housed in East Palo Alto and with the CBPA.

As this project began, East Palo Alto was battling severe revenue shortages, drug dealing (mostly to people from outside the area) and the pervasive negative press that often stereotypes non-white communities with these socio-economic

problems. However, few people, inside as well as outside of the town, were aware of how surrounding communities, governmental agencies and other entities contributed to these conditions. For instance, the creation of Stanford University had a direct impact on the economic growth of certain areas and the economic stagnation of others, such as Whiskey Gulch in East Palo Alto. People also had little or no knowledge of the activism that was part of East Palo Alto's history, that provided a model for working class and ethnic communities nationwide.

When the concept for this project was presented to East Palo Alto residents and members of the CBPA's Steering Committee, four project goals emerged:

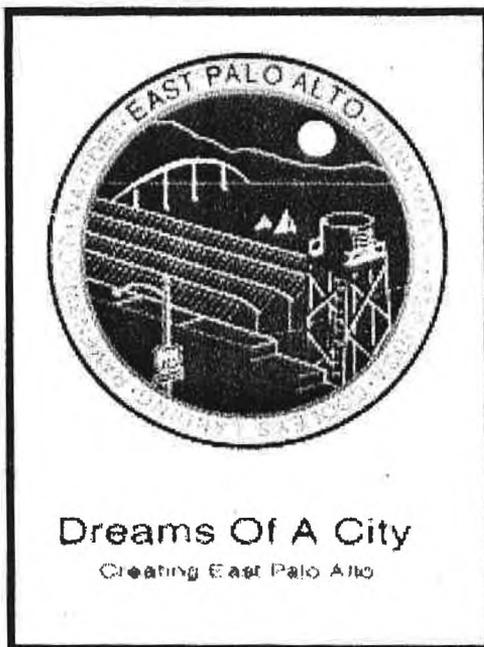
1. to provide an accessible, comprehensive history of this racially and culturally diverse area, told from the community's perspective;
2. to provide tools for combating external and internal stereotyping of the city and its diverse communities;
3. to promote dialogue and enhance understanding between East Palo Alto's various cultural groups;
4. to open new avenues for dialogue between the university population and members of the East Palo Alto community.

Through this project, a more rounded picture of the community has emerged; one that does not ignore problems such as factionalism and racial tension, but that is balanced with cultural pride, political activism and entrepreneurship, qualities that have persisted and enabled growth and positive change to occur. Presenting this picture to people who have experienced only a portion of the story has been an exercise in community education and communication, for East Palo Alto citizens and residents of Stanford.

Community collaboration was at the core of EPAP. Community members active in social, cultural and political development, as well as Stanford faculty, students and staff were asked to serve on an EPAP Task Force. This group provided overall project guidance, access to information and feedback on individual components as they were developed.

Initially, the CBPA planned to hire only one African American playwright. However, the increasing influence of the Latino population in East Palo Alto indicated, begged someone who could speak from that cultural perspective. Two playwrights were chosen: Charles Oyamo Gordon and Cherríe Moraga. Gordon was an internationally produced playwright on faculty at the University of Michigan, and Bay Area playwright Moraga had utilized a "research-to-performance" method for her award-winning play "Heroes & Saints".

The EPAP plays were cast from the community and Stanford students. Moraga's play, "Circle in the Dirt", excelled in depicting the lifestyles and attitudes of Mexican immigrants and Chicanos, and their relations to other ethnic groups - blacks, Asian Americans and Southeast Asian Americans in particular. She also gave a strong depiction of the vitality of the Black Liberation movement activities at Ravenswood High School in the 1960's and 70's, and the upcoming development that would displace people and change the nature of the community. Gordons non-linear play "Dancing on the Brink" provided brief, highly charged scenes personalizing the struggles of different ethnic groups in their migrations to northern California, thereby giving a picture of the development of the state over the last 300 years. The plays received sold-out houses in East Palo Alto and on campus.



Simultaneous to the development of the plays, was the research, development and production of the video. This piece, produced in collaboration with Academic Software Development on campus, was produced and directed by Michael Levin. The documentary focused on the evolution of the area during this century, from its agrarian beginning in the 1920's to current attempts to encourage large economic development projects. There was a significant focus on the history and activism of the African American community. Numerous individuals and organizations contributed to the resulting wealth of documentation that was produced through during this phase. Over 80 hours of videotaped oral histories exist in the EPAP archives, the fruits of this extensive labor.

The documentary premiered in East Palo Alto in October 1996 to a very enthusiastic audience. It was also shown on KTEH, the San Jose public television station. Community fund raising enabled the production of broadcast quality videotapes of both plays. All videos exist in the EPAP archives and are being made available within the East Palo Alto community. Copies will be made available to the general public for \$25.00.

The success of this project has strengthened the ties between the CBPA and the community, and has led to the CBPA including East Palo Alto in the development of any future programming.