

**Have You Ever Heard of NAM-MYOHO-RENGE-KYO?  
Telling a stranger about Buddhism opens up an opportunity for Audrey  
McLure's acting debut in a new play about AIDS.**

**By WENDY DeORE  
Texas Bureau Chief**

Sharing her Buddhist practice with a stranger at a bus stop led to the opportunity of a lifetime for Dallas member Audrey McClure. In spite of the blazing late-summer heat in Dallas and no reliable transportation, Audrey had been determined to attend the afternoon chanting sessions at the Dallas Culture Center.

On the way, she shared her faith with an affable stranger who turned out to be the director and writer for a professional theater group in Dallas called Soul Rep Theater Company.

The stranger's name was Stuart Litchfield. He was writing a play about AIDS in the African American community. He was already thinking of creating a character who becomes a Buddhist. Stuart had been living with AIDS since 1990.

Stuart went with Audrey to the culture center that day to learn to chant and continued to go nearly every day after that. He and Audrey became good friends. As a director, writer and actor himself, Stuart recognized the untapped talent that was waiting to be discovered in Audrey. He wanted Audrey to audition for a role in his play.

The play, *SLiM*, co-written and directed by Stuart and Anyika McMillan, explores the impact of AIDS on black men and women. The title comes from the slang term for AIDS in Africa, where it was once thought that the only people who carried the virus were slim. The play is a powerful drama that also is intended to educate audiences about the reality of this disease and the people who live with it.

Since the death of her only son just a few years earlier, Audrey had struggled with her practice and her life. Still, through that tragedy, she never gave up. She continued to chant and attend activities and began to discover her love of storytelling. Audrey received invitations to tell stories at local schools and community centers, and she enjoyed bringing smiles and a taste of her cultural heritage to the children who would gather around to hear her. She wove African folk tales about "how the sky became so high" or "what happened to the greedy brother."

But Audrey had never acted before. What's more, the Soul Rep Theater Company is the resident company at the African American Museum in Dallas, and all the performers in the company are seasoned professionals. Despite her anxieties, Audrey auditioned for the play and was cast in several roles.

"I was petrified to perform in this play," Audrey says. "The beginning rehearsals were just terrible. Two or three times I wanted to give up — but I knew that I couldn't do that. My practice was the only thing that kept me going. A few times at rehearsals, I just wanted to slap Stuart, but he made me reach down into myself and pull out what was there. I chanted so much. I had to succeed. I wanted to be the best in the play so I could show actual proof. After all, I was the only one who had the Gohonzon." With the encouragement of her SGI friends and her husband, David, Audrey definitely hung in there.

The play presents a series of vignettes in the lives of Africans and African Americans who contract the disease. One character is a recovering addict named Coco, who is inspired to get off the streets by the music and the life of Tina Turner. She is encouraged to explore her spiritual life by a social worker, played by Stuart, who helps her get off the streets and cope with her disease. A friendship develops between this gay white man and a black

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woman in recovery, both of whom are facing AIDS.

Later, with her hands pressed together in prayer, Coco sits alone on stage and chants Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, explaining to the audience that "If it worked for Tina, why not for me, too?" Coco becomes strong and self-reliant, eventually landing a job as a counselor for other women trapped in a life of addiction and prostitution.

Audrey plays several characters: the grandmother to a little girl dying of AIDS; the mother of a Ugandan woman who contracts the disease from her husband; a crazy street person who inhabits Coco's nightmare world of addiction; and the grandmother of a gay rights activist.

She is superb, an inspiration. She invited the company to perform the play at the Dallas Culture Center on Dec. 6, 1997. SGI-USA members, their guests and others from the community came together to watch this outstanding drama. The audience was moved, educated and ultimately uplifted.

The play was performed to rave reviews at the Dallas Public Library last fall, and the company is seeking funding to take the play on tour in the schools locally, statewide and nationally.

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