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Singer and Actress Karen Clark-Greene brings new life to local performing arts

Feb 24, 2023



The Newnan Times-Herald

By Tamara Newell

Metro Atlanta is becoming a booming area for entertainment and performing arts. Film crews and television fan tours can be seen in Coweta county itself.

The 2022 fiscal year set a new industry record with the film and television industry spending \$4.4 billion in Georgia. With growing opportunities, talented performers are making Georgia their home.

One such woman is Karen Clark-Green of Grantville.

Clark-Green settled in the city in 2019 after marrying a childhood neighbor, Johnny Cooks, who'd previously moved to the area. As the entire world went through collective change in 2020, she underwent many changes herself.

"My career started in 1959. At my age, I'm grateful to be relevant and still be able to sing," Clark-Green said. "Moving here, I almost feel like I'm going to start all over. Performing is just what I do. I've only done the arts my whole life. And I'm not going to stop now."

A career defined by her Yes

Clark-Green stepped into her first dance class as a 4-year-old. But in the '50s, Black dancers faced rejection often. At 9, her teacher moved several hours away, prompting Karen to seek out another studio.

"I remember my mother had taken me to three or four studios, and no one would teach me. My mom tried to get me into any studio, but they would not take me. So we took the train from Youngstown to Cleveland to the YWCA," she recalled.

The nearly hour trip proved fruitless.

"I literally sat there waiting for them to come to get me and bring me into the studio. And no one ever came," Clark-Green said. "To them, our physiques were wrong, our feet were wrong."

She had every reason to be discouraged. To be angry or back away from the gift and calling of being who she was made to be, a performer.

"All of us have creation in us. If we cut that part out, then we've cut a part of us out of us", she said.

Even facing rejection early on, Karen said yes to herself. She developed an inner resilience paired with grace that allowed creativity to flow through her at every stage of life.

"Things fall in place; they happen," she said "Everything is a lesson. The point is to just keep moving."

A full life of creative pursuit

An early yes came when Karen was 9 years old. Being a young, Black performer in 1959, not everyone was welcoming. She was cast in her first professional show alongside a well-known actress, Betty White. Not everyone in the production was welcoming to Clark-Green, but Betty was.

"She took me under her wing," Clark-Green said. "She called me her china doll."

Karen continued performing throughout her youth and later graduated from Youngstown State University. Once again as a Black performer she faced opposition and challenges. Racial challenges, academic challenges and performance challenges. The racial challenges led to making a formal complaint with the dean, who then helped turn a negative situation into another yes moving forward.

“They had a program called individualized curriculum program, meaning you could actually design your own program,” Clark-Green said. “My background was music, dance and theater, and at that time, the school did not offer a BFA. It was only like a Bachelor of Music or Bachelor of Education. I created my own program, formed my own board and graduated with a BFA. I wrote my own degree.”

Over the years, her “yes” spirit brought her to Italy to study opera at the famed La Scala Opera House, author five books, graduate with a master’s degree, perform around the world and raise four children, all of whom are artists in their own right.

“In my house we had musicians rehearsing in our basement,” she said. “My late husband was a percussionist. I’d be singing opera upstairs, and the kids just picked it up. Everywhere I went, they went. If I was doing a production and needed an extra body, I grabbed them and they were doing it. So from that, they all developed their own niche. I’m a very proud mom.”

Creating opportunities for local performing arts

Public art shapes the unique identity of a place. New Orleans is synonymous with jazz. New York City has Broadway. Country music fans flock to Nashville. And today, the greater Atlanta area is a growing hub for artists and entertainers. Art pulls tourism, commerce and diversity into an area.

“I see that change happening here,” Clark-Green said. “I see a craft shop or boutiques or things that people have created. Those are the kinds of things that draw people in and help the city grow.”

In Newnan, Karen partners with Southern Arc Dance, performing and teaching at various events. During Black History month, Karen sang at the opening of the Wharton family exhibit at the De Sousa Slay Gallery.

“I feel like we’re in a kind of renaissance era right now,” she said. “I told my kids this is the perfect time to create. There’s so much going on in the world, you don’t have to dig far. The inspiration is right in your pocket. I’m very excited about what is going to happen.”

As a committee member of the Hogansville Regional Art Association, Karen is working alongside fellow members in restoring the Historic Regional Theater. Phase one renovations will be completed this spring alongside developing a series of events, plays and musicals.

With both Southern Arc and HRAA, Karen seeks to attract, inspire and provide opportunities for performing artists to bring their talents to the community.

“I’ve always felt I’ve been called to the generations after me.” she said.

Hogansville Regional Arts Association is hosting the cabaret fundraiser June 3, and will be holding auditions in April. Check the Facebook page (Hogansville Regional Arts Association) or email at HogansvilleRRA@gmail.com for updates or more information.



Photo by Marquette Jones

Clarke-Green plays the role of Nana in the film “Round on Both Sides.”

Photo by Youngstown Symphony Orchestra

Clark-Green performed in the Youngstown Symphony Orchestra’s production of South Pacific.

Photo by Southern Arc Dance

Clark-Green collaborated with dancer Oliva White for a performance at Southern Arc Dance in Newnan.





Photo by The Cleveland Opera

Clark-Green performed the lead role of Bess in Gerwin's "Porgy and Bess" with the Cleveland Opera.



Photo by The Cleveland Opera

Clark-Green sang on stage at Gershwin in Concert at the Ohio Theater with the Cleveland Orchestra.