Newarkers from around the world

By Reginald Roberts
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Ping Chong doesn't know exactly how to categorize his "Undesirable Elements," which is a theatrical performance, but not a play. He best describes it as "a work in progress."

The latest progression took the piece to the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, where it was presented Saturday in the rehearsal room for a test run for future performances.

There were no lights, no set elements, just five people sitting in chairs "weaving a multicultural tapestry" from their oral histories. Four of the five actors live in Newark. Their stories tell of their native lands and their ties to the city.

Chong, born in Toronto and raised in New York's Chinatown, created the "oral history project," as he calls it, in 1992.

"I was interested in making a theater piece using different languages," said the theater director, who founded the Ping Chong and Company, in 1975. While most of the work is in English, the actors recite poems in their native languages.

The piece has already been presented in 10 cities, including New York, Cleveland and Long Beach, Calif. The next stop after Newark is Chicago.

The Newark version features immigrants from Portugal, Ghana, Uganda and Chile. Each has a connection to Newark.

Although each city brings a different group of immigrants with different histories, they all share common problems in their new homes, said Chong. "When you leave your own place of birth, what do you keep and what do you give up? What does home mean? What does identity mean?"

For Newark, the "Undesirable Elements" were the 1967 riots. "I felt that the Newark riots were the essential part of this project in that it has haunted Newark since it happened and made real damage to the city," said Chong. "It has taken time for it to revive itself."

For more than a month, the five members of "Undesirable Elements" met several times a week, with the script changing at each rehearsal.

Esmerelda Trinket Monass Walker, a native of the Philippines and a member of the original 1992 cast, is the only non-Newarker in the latest version. Working in theater, dance and music, she now lives in New York.

"This is such a rich community with a rich culture," she said, explaining the insights she has gained by working with the Newark group.

Of the four other actors, Linda Rodrigues is the only native Newarker. She was born in the Ironbound, the daughter of Portuguese immigrants. A member of the Newark Public Library Board of Trustees, she is experiencing her first acting job.

Rodrigues tells the story of her father, Daniel Rodrigues, who left his home in Portugal in 1912 at age 12, never to return.

"lt (Newark) is a place where | felt committed, a place where | felt I could make a difference."

- LINDA RODRIGUES, a native Newarker

Writer/director Ping Chong oversees "weaving a multicultural tapestry" with telling her own personal story, Rodrigues said she has remained in Newark "because I did not want to live in anonymity."

"It's a place where I felt committed, a place where I felt I could make a difference."

Kabu Okai-Davies also feels comfort and commitment to the city. A native of Ghana, he came to New Jersey almost 11 years ago from London. He lived in various suburbs before settling in Newark. In 1992 he founded the African Globe Theatre.

"It's given me a place to express my creativity," he said of the city, describing it as a place of "detached sense of friendliness" where an outsider can feel at home.

In "Undesirable Elements," Okai-Davies focuses on his homeland. The year is 1979 and he is 19 years old. "I never forgot what happened. Something huge happened. We witnessed this live."

On June 4, Ghana, the former British Gold Coast colony, went through a revolution. The dismantling of the government gave the countrymen a sense of freedom, Okai-Davies said, adding that they were given the responsibility of defining their own destinies.

The revolution not only changed Ghana, but Okai-Davies as well. He began a self-evaluation through the arts.

Of the actors, Patrick Ssenjovu was born in Toronto and raised in New York's Chinatown.
Rehearsal of "Undesirable Elements" at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. He describes his play as
no lights, no set elements, just oral history.

Esmerelda Trinkel Monsod Walker is one of five performers in Chong's work.

has spent the shortest stay in the city. In 1994, he was doing his own entertainment news television show in
his native Uganda. For the past year, he has pursued his acting career liv-
not a revolution, but a relative.

Sserijju shares the life of his Uncle Willie through the storytelling tradition of his homeland.

His Uncle Willie was a musician after suffering a long illness,

Uncle Willie finally gave up on life.

"He died in his sleep. But he lived life to the fullest."

Oscar Marchant, who immigrated