

ARTS PRODUCER

Baraka Sele

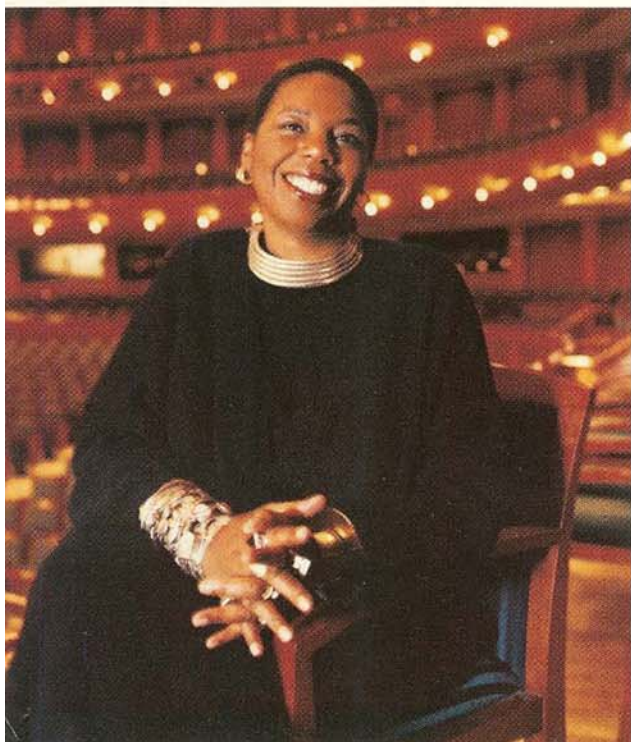
SALARY RANGE: \$50,000–\$100,000

As a performance poet, I never imagined I could turn a passion for the arts into a career and get paid for it. While living in Houston, Texas, I was booked by SumArts, Inc., a multidiscipline arts organization, to read poems as the opening performance for saxophonist Pharoah Sanders. One of my accompanying musicians subsequently referred me to Lanny Steele, the artistic director of SumArts, Inc., who offered me a position as general manager, producing international performing-arts festivals. And for 14 years I produced contemporary arts and jazz festivals.

"In 1996 I joined the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC) as a consultant. When its \$180 million facility opened in 1997, I came aboard part-time to develop an international performing-arts festival. The next year I joined NJPAC full-time, producing the World Festival. And recently I was promoted to assistant vice-president of programming. As a producer, I'm responsible for creating year-round performances, workshops, panel discussions and residencies with artists from New Jersey and around the world. I also assist in raising funds from foundations, private donors, the State of New Jersey and corporate sponsors.

"I'm one of four producers on a staff of more than 150, and we have an annual operating budget of \$23 million. I'm proud to offer resources, access and exposure to artists and people who wouldn't ordinarily receive it. In 1999 I introduced international hip-hop artists to NJPAC through a three-day Sacred Circle and Spoken Word conference and festival, and in 2002 I produced a four-day Planet Hip Hop conference and festival.

"My work has taken me to countries throughout Africa, as well as Brazil, Great Britain, Israel, Mexico and many others. I was honored with the prestigious 2004 William Dawson Award for Programming Excellence by the Association of Performing Arts Presenters. Most artists only dream of being onstage, but working behind the scenes as a producer is a viable and lucrative career option and also an ideal way to empower our community." —SHERRI A. MCGEE



SO YOU WANT TO PRODUCE ARTS EVENTS?

7 WAYS TO GET STARTED

MAKE IT A MAJOR Consider attending a college or university that offers business-administration courses in arts marketing and management. For example, New York University (NYU) and University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), offer these courses.

WORK IT Consider a part-time job at an art gallery, arts festival or a place that offers an internship program, like the New Jersey Performing Arts Center.

VOLUNTEER Most nonprofit arts organizations always want reliable volunteers. Donating time is one of the best ways to figure out exactly what you want to do and to meet important people in the process.

MAKE THE SCENE Get to know directors of arts festivals. Check out the performing-arts center in your area. Hang out at creative venues like poetry slams and coffeehouses.

SEEK A MENTOR Identify someone doing what you want to do and send her a letter asking for advice and information on how she got into the business.

READ UP Baraka Sele suggests reading publications about the arts, entertainment and literature.

NETWORK The National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta (nba.org), the Houston International Festival (ifest.org) and The New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival (nojazzfest.com) are all excellent places to network with artists from around the world. —S.A.M.

If you're compelled to leave a job and the company offers you a severance package, make sure you understand exactly what's included, advises Susan Wilson Solovic in her book *Reinvent Your Career: Attain the Success You Desire & Deserve* (Career Press). You don't have to take the first offer. Like salaries, severance packages can often be negotiated. □