

Choir sings for cause

Concert will raise money for burying ground project

BY DEBORAH MCDERMOTT
dmcdermott@seacoastonline.com

PORTSMOUTH — The shores of Africa will tug at the shores of Portsmouth next Monday, when the Soweto Gospel Choir from South Africa performs in a concert that will end with a candlelight ceremony at the site of the historic African Burying Ground on Chestnut Street.

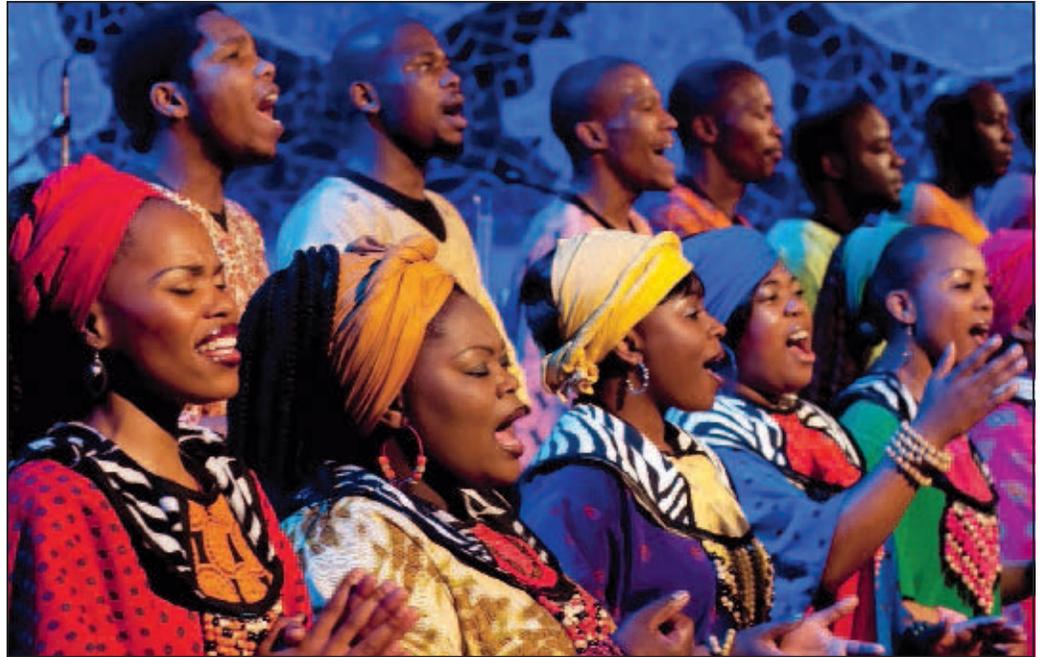
In honor of Black History Month and the Africans interred at the mass gravesite, the African Burying Ground Committee has teamed up with The Music Hall to provide an evening of entertainment and inspiration.

Plans call for a candlelight procession from The Music Hall, where the choir will perform Feb. 13, to the burying ground site, where there will be more songs and a brief program.

Adding their talents and prayers to the evening will be West African and world musician Randy Armstrong, the female choral group Voices from the Heart, and a number of Portsmouth clergy led by the Rev. Arthur Hilson of the New Hope Baptist Church.

"I think it's going to be quite wonderful," said City Councilor Chris Dwyer, a member of the African Burying Ground Committee. "It has really taken on a life of its own."

Dwyer said the committee had been looking for an event that would meet three criteria: it would be educational, would involve a wide swath of the community and could be a



COURTESY PHOTO/LORENZO DI NOZZI

The Soweto Gospel Choir, along with several other artists, will perform at The Music Hall before a candlelight procession to the African Burying Ground on Chestnut Street.

fund-raising vehicle as well.

The committee is looking to raise \$1.2 million for a memorial park at the site.

At the same time, the Music Hall staff was looking for a way to affiliate with the committee for an event. Dwyer said it was Executive Director Patricia Lynch who suggested the collaboration.

"Here's a choir that came out of Apartheid and has a global reputation for singing about spirituality, liberation and triumph over oppression," said Lynch. "Here was an opportunity to capture the imagination of people in a larger way about the importance of the burying ground."

A group was formed to discuss ideas for the evening, and from that came the idea for the candlelight walk as well as the involvement of Armstrong and Voices.

As envisioned, Voices will welcome the Soweto Gospel Choir at the beginning of the concert, with members sitting

Those attending will be given candles and will be invited to join in a processional to the burying ground.

in the balcony.

Voices director Joanne Connolly said they will sing a Zulu song, "Ipharadisi," which she said includes the words, "In paradise where all the dead are living, may we one day join them in paradise." Interspersed with that piece, members will also sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

At the concert's conclusion, the candle lanterns used at Strawberry Banke will line the path from Chestnut Street on the Music Hall side, across State Street to the south section of Chestnut Street.

At that site in 2003, the remains of 13 Africans were

discovered during routine utility work. They are believed to be among 200 Africans, mostly slaves, interred in a burial ground that continues past Court Street.

Those attending the concert will be given candles on their way out and will be invited to join in a processional to the burying ground, led by Armstrong and the drumming group Drumamama.

There will be more singing at the site, along with a reading of "In Honor of Those Forgotten," a poem that will be on the memorial. Expected to read are Hilson, the Rev. Lauren Smith of South Church and Rabbi Barry Krieger of Temple Israel.

"People tell us the world is going to hell in handbasket, yet look at this — here we are reaching back through time and reaching into 21st century to have a moment of healing," Lynch said. "If we can open our heart to idea, I think it's going to be terrific."