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Performance artists win Charlotte Street awards

By CHUCK FURLONG
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A local composer and an assistant theater professor last week won the 2010 Charlotte Street Foundation Generative Performing Artist Awards.

Brad Cox, leader of the People's Liberation Big Band, and Stephanie Roberts, founder of Boom! An International Lost and Found Family Marching Band, each received \$6,500 for their work.

David Hughes, director of the Charlotte Street Foundation, gathered with the winners and other supporters to present the awards Wednesday at Helix Architecture & Design. The awards were designed to distinguish Kansas City as a place that values a variety of artists.

The local foundation has given awards to visual artists for 13 years. In 2008, it started honoring performing artists, such as Cox and Roberts, who create original works.

"The idea is to validate, support and recognize them," Hughes said.

Roberts said she might use the prize to buy equipment such as lapel microphones for Boom! Or she might use it to pay for production costs for the one-woman mask show she hopes to take on tour or for a collaborative piece she's working on.

Roberts' performances use a variety of musical genres. Her theatrical band Boom! plays styles ranging from rap to rhythm and blues to klezmer.

"It's an eclectic group," Roberts said. "We're all different nationalities, we all have different accents."

Her other works include last winter's "Slammed! KC Speaks Out on the Recession," an inventive piece of documentary theater where Roberts, who teaches at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and 15 students pursuing master of fine arts degrees collected about 50 interviews from people in the Kansas City area and used that material as the basis of the show.

As for Cox, he said his ensembles cover wide stylistic ground. His compositions are written for the musicians he works with, he said.

Cox's work draws on a deep well of modern jazz influences, chamber music, global invention and pop, in search of sounds other people don't usually hear. He often works with the Owen/Cox Dance Group, which he directs with his wife, Jennifer Owen, and the ensemble of musicians he leads called the People's Liberation Big Band.

"The big band is intended as a community of like-minded musicians," Cox said.

He doesn't know what he'll do with the money yet, but he has a few recording projects to finish.

"It was a little bit of a surprise," he said. "I wasn't counting on it."