

BLACK THEATRE FROM THE 1950s – 1970s



Black theatre began to bloom over the three decades that followed WWII in America, reflecting the social changes brought on by the emergence of violent and non-violent activism, integration of public schools and other components of the Civil Rights Movement.

Advances made within African American theatre in the beginning of the 20th century were stunted by the Great Depression. The 1930s did, however, see a few plays by black playwrights produced on Broadway (Langston Hughes' *MULATTO*, for example).

Louis Peterson's *TAKE A GIANT STEP* (premiered in 1953) told the story of growing up in an integrated neighborhood. William Branch's *IN SPLENDID ERROR* (premiered in 1954) recounted the conflict between John Brown and Frederick Douglass. Lofton Mitchell's *LAND BEYOND THE RIVER* (premiered in 1957) was about a black minister and his efforts to end school segregation. Alice Childress' *TROUBLE IN MIND* was produced by the Greenwich Mews Theater, an off-Broadway theatre which was casting plays without regard to race, and Childress' play was the first play by an African American woman to receive a professional staging. This started a trend that, in 1959, led to the first play by a black woman on Broadway: Lorraine Hansberry's *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*.

The **1950s** pushed black theatre forward: first with Alice Childress becoming the first female black playwright to have a play professionally produced, then with Lorraine Hansberry becoming the first to have a play on Broadway. Lorraine Hansberry was also the youngest American playwright (and the 5th woman) at the time to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play of the Year. Hansberry's *A RAISIN IN THE SUN* (with its title taken from a Langston Hughes poem) also has the distinction of bringing Broadway its first black director- Lloyd Richards.





TROUBLE IN MIND was Alice Childress' first full-length play; it was optioned for Broadway, but after two years of rewriters, Childress refused to tone down her message for mainstream audiences. The play opened off-Broadway at Greenwich Mews Theatre.

A scathing indictment of racism in American commercial theatre, *TROUBLE IN MIND* tells the story of Wiletta Mayer, an African-American actress cast in a supposedly "progressive" play about racism by a white male author—it turns out to be anything

but progressive, both in terms of its script and rehearsal environment.

Childress was an actress, novelist, and playwright. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, she moved to Harlem at age five, where she was raised by her grandmother. Alice's grandmother encouraged her love of writing, and Alice found inspiration in her family's stories as well as the lives of the people around her. In particular, the stories she heard at weekly church events inspired her to focus on the lives of urban African-Americans.

Alice developed a passion for theatre and attended the American Negro School of Drama and Stagecraft. In 1944, she made her Broadway acting debut in *ANNA LUCASTA*—but she constantly battled racism in casting, being denied leading roles because she was black while also being told she was "too light" for traditional "black" roles. Frustrated and disgusted, Alice began writing plays. She was particularly interested in creating central roles for African-American women, observing that "the Negro woman has almost been omitted as important subject matter in the general popular American drama, television, motion pictures, and radio." She also emphasized the importance of representing ordinary people on stage; her goal was "to write about those who come in second, or not at all...My writing attempts to interpret the ordinary, because they are not ordinary."

In all, Childress wrote over a dozen plays and several novels, including the groundbreaking young adult book *"A Hero Ain't Nothin' But A Sandwich"* (1973) about a thirteen-year-old recovering heroin addict. *Hero* was nominated for the National Book Award; her 1979 novel *"A Short Walk"*, about an ordinary woman's eventful 'short walk' through life was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

Writer and playwright **James Baldwin** was one of the 20th century's greatest writers, breaking new literary ground with the exploration of racial and social issues in his many works. He was especially known for his essays on the black experience in America.

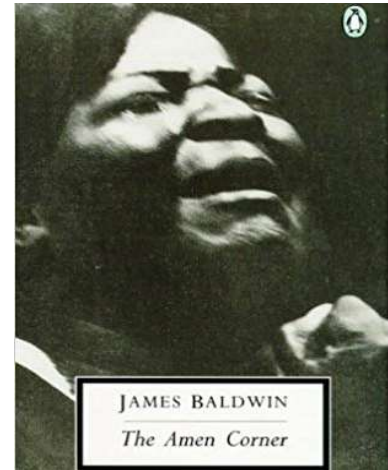
THE AMEN CORNER is a three-act play by James Baldwin published in 1954. It was Baldwin's first attempt at theater following *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN*- a 1953 semi-autobiographical novel telling the story of an intelligent teenager in 1930s Harlem, and his relationship to his family and his church.

THE AMEN CORNER addresses themes of the role of a church in an African-American family and the effect of a poverty born of racial prejudice on an African-American community. It takes

place in two settings: a “corner” church in Harlem and the apartment dwelling of the church pastor, and of her son and sister.

Baldwin's novels and plays fictionalize fundamental personal questions and dilemmas amid complex social and psychological pressures thwarting the equitable integration of not only African Americans, but also gay and bisexual men, while depicting some internalized obstacles to such individuals' quests for acceptance well before the gay liberation movement.

BLUES FOR MISTER CHARLIE is James Baldwin's second play, a social commentary drama in three acts. It was first produced and published in 1964. The play is dedicated to the memory of Medgar Evers, his widow and children, and to the memory of the dead children of Birmingham. It is loosely based on the Emmett Till murder that occurred in Money, Mississippi, before the Civil Rights Movement began. "Mister Charlie" is a phrase used by African Americans that refers to the white man.



Lloyd Richards was born in Toronto, Canada in 1919, though his family moved to Detroit, Michigan not long afterward. At the age of 13, Richards went to work to help support his family.

Richards entered Wayne University in Detroit but his studies were interrupted when he volunteered for the U.S Army Air Corps during World War II and was in training with the Tuskegee Airmen when the war ended in 1945.

On returning to Wayne University, Richards pursued his interest in drama, learning all aspects of theater, as well as radio production. After graduation he started a theater group in Detroit with a handful of friends and classmates. This was a time when American theater was centered entirely in New York City, so Richards moved there in 1947 to pursue an acting career. Roles for African-American actors were hard to come by, but

Richards managed to find work on Broadway and on radio throughout the 1950s. He also taught acting while directing off-Broadway.

In 1958, Richards stimulated The Great White Way with his production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*. This production, as mentioned before, began a new era in the representation of African-Americans on the American stage.

In the 1960s, Richards directed the Broadway productions *THE LONG DREAM* by Ketti Frings (adapted from the novel by Richard Wright), which only had five performances; *THE MOON BESIEGED* by Seyril Schocken, which played for one night only; *I HAD A BALL* with book by Jerome Chodorov, music by Jack Lawrence & Stan Freeman and lyrics by Jack Lawrence & Stan Freeman, which had 199 performances; and *THE YEARLING* with book by Herbert Martin & Lore

Noto, music by Michael Leonard, lyrics by Herbert Martin (based on the novel by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings), which ran for three performances.

In 1966, Lloyd Richards became head of the actor training program at New York University's School of the Arts. He was Professor of Theater and Cinema at Hunter College in New York City before he was tapped to become dean of the prestigious Yale University School of Drama in 1979. At the same time, he became Artistic Director of the highly influential Yale Repertory theater.

Lloyd Richards' productions for television included segments of Roots: The Next Generation, Bill Moyer's Journal and Robeson, a presentation on the life of the African-American actor and activist Paul Robeson, who was an early inspiration for the young Lloyd Richards. Richards also dealt with Robeson's life and legacy in the 1977 theatrical production of Phillip Hayes Dean's *PAUL ROBESON*- for 77 performances.

Lloyd Richards was the recipient of the Pioneer Award of AUDELCO, the Frederick Douglass Award and, in 1993, was awarded the National Medal of the Arts. He also served as President of the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers.

In 1991, Lloyd Richards retired from his posts as Dean of the Yale University School of Drama and as Artistic Director of Yale Rep. He continued to serve as Artistic Director of the Playwrights Conference at the O'Neill Center until 1999. He died in 2006, on his 87th birthday.



Lorraine Vivian Hansberry was an American playwright and writer.

She was the first black woman to write a play performed on Broadway. Her best-known work, the play *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*, was considered to be the turning point for African-Americans in American theatre. The play highlights the lives of Black Americans living under racial segregation in Chicago. The playwright James Baldwin noted "never before in the entire history of the American theatre has so much of the truth of black people's lives been seen on the stage." The title of the play was taken from the poem "Harlem" by Langston Hughes: "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?" Hansberry's own upper-middle-class family had struggled against segregation in Chicago, challenging a restrictive covenant and eventually provoking the Supreme Court case *Hansberry v. Lee*.

Hansberry studied at the Chicago Art Institute, originally wanting to be a painter. She went on to study at the University of Wisconsin. There, she saw a production of the Irish playwright Sean O'Casey's *JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK*. She found inspiration in O'Casey's ability to universalize a culture on stage. That inspired her to become a playwright.

After she moved to New York City in 1952, Hansberry worked at the Pan-Africanist, Harlem based newspaper *Freedom*, where she dealt with intellectuals such as Paul Robeson (founder of the newspaper) and W.E.B. DuBois. Much of her work during this time concerned the black American struggle for liberation and their impact on the world. In fact, in the realm of theatre, she found the body of materials about negroes to have nothing more than cardboard characters. So, she set out to create a social drama about negroes that will be good art. She created *A Raisin in the Sun*. The play opened on Broadway on March 11, 1959, making her the youngest American playwright, the first black playwright and only the fifth female to have a play on 'the Great White Way'. She was also the first black female to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play of the Year.

In 1964, she opened her second play, *THE SIGN IN SIDNEY BRUSTEIN'S WINDOW*. The play, about 'the western intellectual poised in hesitation before the flames of involvement', ran for 101 performances before it closed on January 22 the following year, the day of her death.

Hansberry had her third production posthumously in the 1968/69 off-Broadway season: *TO BE YOUNG, GIFTED AND BLACK*- a theatrical collage based on her writings. It was the longest running drama of that season. The production correlates to the song of the same name by Nina Simone, who was inspired by Hansberry.

Hansberry had another play produced posthumously on Broadway- *LES BLANCS*, which had a short run in 1970.

As more militant black playwrights emerged through the 1970s, Lorraine Hansberry's body of work became overshadowed, though her first play continues to thrive within the great African-American canon.



A RAISIN IN THE SUN portrays a few weeks in the life of the Youngers, an African-American family living on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s. When the play opens, the Youngers are about to receive an insurance check for \$10,000. This money comes from the deceased Mr. Younger's life insurance policy. Each of the adult members of the family has an idea as to what he or she would like to do with this money. The matriarch of the family, Mama, wants to buy a house to fulfill a dream she shared with her husband.

Mama's son, Walter Lee, would rather use the money to invest in a liquor store with his friends. He believes that the investment will solve the family's financial problems forever. Walter's wife, Ruth, agrees with Mama, however, and hopes that she and Walter can provide more space and opportunity for their son, Travis. Finally, Beneatha, Walter's sister and Mama's daughter, wants to use the money for her medical school

tuition. She also wishes that her family members were not so interested in joining the white world. Beneatha instead tries to find her identity by looking back to the past and to Africa. As the play progresses, the Youngers clash over their competing dreams. Ruth discovers that she is pregnant but fears that if she has the child, she will put more financial pressure on her family members. When Walter says nothing to Ruth's admission that she is considering abortion, Mama puts a down payment on a house for the whole family. She believes that a bigger, brighter dwelling will help them all. This house is in Clybourne Park, an entirely white neighborhood. When the Youngers' future neighbors find out that the Youngers are moving in, they send Mr. Lindner, from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, to offer the Youngers money in return for staying away. The Youngers refuse the deal, even after Walter loses the rest of the money (\$6,500) to his friend Willy Harris, who persuades Walter to invest in the liquor store and then runs off with his cash.

In the meantime, Beneatha rejects her suitor, George Murchison, whom she believes to be shallow and blind to the problems of race. Subsequently, she receives a marriage proposal from her Nigerian boyfriend, Joseph Asagai, who wants Beneatha to get a medical degree and move to Africa with him (Beneatha does not make her choice before the end of the play). The Youngers eventually move out of the apartment, fulfilling the family's long-held dream. Their future seems uncertain and slightly dangerous, but they are optimistic and determined to live a better life. They believe that they can succeed if they stick together as a family and resolve to defer their dreams no longer.



Arena Players has provided continuous performances of live and exciting community theater in Baltimore since 1953 when the founders—Jimmie Bell, Bernard Byrd, Doris Dilver, Aurthur Thurogood, Irvin Turner, Joe Wilson, Julius Wilson, and Sam Wilson—took their final bow for “Hello Out There,” William Soroyan’s one act drama. Arena Players is now one of the oldest theater groups in the country and boasts an unbroken string of periodic performances, which grows annually. Arena Players began as an outgrowth of “The Negro Little Theater.” Nomadic for the first ten years, this group performed in a variety of Baltimore locations, including Coppin State University, the Druid Hill Avenue

Branch of the YMCA, the Great Hall Theater of St. Mary’s Church in the Walbrook neighborhood, and the Carl J. Murphy Auditorium at Morgan State University. In 1962 the group moved into its present location at 801 McCulloh Street and established the Arena Playhouse. In 1969 the group purchased the building by using box office receipts and contributions from the founding members.

This volunteer organization has grown significantly over the years. Participants in Arena Players programming come from all walks of life and a variety of vocations.

In 1965 Arena Players initiated its annual banquet for the presentation of awards to persons responsible for excellence in the perpetuation of the performing arts. These awards have gone to members as well as non-members of local and national vintage. Recipients of awards and

honors have included Langston Hughes, Cab Calloway, Ed Bullins, Richard Long, Ellen Stewart, Edward J. Golden, Lola Miller, Harvey Denmark, Elbert Wilson, Joseph Wilson, Mary Carter Smith, Irv Turner, Damon Evans, Catherine Adams, and Donald Evans.

In the **1960s**, black theatre aimed at improving rights and opportunities of minorities. By the middle of the decade, black playwrights had found a strong and pronounced voice in theatre. This was greatly exhibited by Adrienne Kennedy's *FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO*, Lonne Elder III's *CEREMONIES IN DARK OLD MEN*, Charles Gordone's *NO PLACE TO BE SOMEBODY* and Douglas Turner Ward's *DAY OF ABSENCE*. One of the most controversial black playwrights also came to prominence in this period: Amiri Baraka (born Everett LeRoi Jones), whose plays dealt with a range of subjects and theatrical techniques.



The **1960s** saw a wave of new black theatre following the new precedent set by Hansberry's landmark play. Amiri Baraka, however, took black theatre in America in a bold new direction after his play *DUTCHMAN* brought him into the forefront of American theatre and introducing a new aesthetic for black theatre that carries on to the present. The 60s also established a large number of African American producing organizations.



Amiri Baraka (born Everett LeRoi Jones) was among the most prolific and provocative dramatists in modern American theatre. As many agree that Eugene O'Neill brought American theatre to maturity, so too did Baraka bring black theatre into a revolutionary new age. Black protest drama, which had been very realistic, was now injected with poetic allegory and lyricism under Baraka's inspiring new style of writing.

The poet laureate of New Jersey was born in Newark, New Jersey and attended first Rutgers University, then Howard University. Baraka migrated to New York and became a beat poet after serving in the U.S. Air Force and earned his M.A. in German literature from the New School of Social Research. Baraka wrote his first play- *A GOOD GIRL IS HARD TO FIND* in 1958, followed by *DANTE* in 1961. However, it was with his politically and psychologically metaphorical *DUTCHMAN* that brought him to the forefront of American theatre in 1964, earning Baraka a Guggenheim Fellowship and an Obie Award for Best American Play. *DUTCHMAN* may very well have created a new aesthetic that affected black theatre through the 1960s and 70s. Baraka followed up

with the one-acts *THE SLAVE* and *THE TOILET* in 1965, foreshadowing the racial violence that erupted across America in that era.

Baraka followed his success by forming his own performing company- The Black Arts Repertory Theater and School in Harlem. Later, he returned to Newark and founded the Spirit House Movers and Players.

Meanwhile, after the assassination of Malcolm X, Baraka (still LeRoi Jones at this point) broke away from the pacifist Civil Rights Movement, writing the controversial poem "Black Art", which expressed Baraka's feelings toward the the violence necessary to creating a Black World. "*Black Art*" became a poetic philosophy for the Black Arts Literary Movement.

It was in 1967, after adopting the philosophies of Kawaida that he changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka. *Imamu* derived from the Arabic 'Imam', *Amiri* (originally *Amear*) meaning 'prince', and *Baraka* meaning 'blessing'.

Amiri Baraka was not only a poet and dramatist, but also a novelist, musicologist, essayist, critic, educator, lecturer and editor. He has earned the Langston Hughes Award from the City College of New York, the Before Columbus Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award, the Rockefeller Foundation Award for Drama and is a National Endowment of the Arts Fellow.

DUTCHMAN may be described as a political allegory depicting black and white relations during the time Baraka wrote it.

The action focuses almost exclusively on Lula, a white woman, and Clay, a black man, who both ride the subway in New York City. Clay's name is symbolic of the malleability of black identity and black manhood. It is also symbolic of integrationist and assimilationist ideologies within the contemporary Civil Rights Movement. Lula boards the train eating an apple, an allusion to the Biblical



Eve. The characters engage in a long, flirtatious conversation throughout the train ride.

Lula sits down next to Clay. She accuses him of staring at her buttocks. She ignores his denials and uses stereotypes to correctly guess where he lives, where he is going, what Clay's friend, Warren, looks and talks like. Lula guesses that Clay tried to get his own sister to have sex with him when he was 10. Clay is shocked by her apparent knowledge of his past and says that she must be a friend of Warren.

Lula is glad that Clay is so easy to manipulate and puts her hand on his leg. She feeds him apples. She tells Clay to invite her out to the party he is going to. At this point, it is unclear whether Clay is really going to a party, but he tells her he really is. Lula vaguely alludes to having sex with Clay at her "apartment" after the "party". We don't know if these are real or conveniently made-up by Lula.

Clay is gladdened by Lula's apparent liking for him and maintains a hopeful attitude to having sex together. However, he does not push his hope onto her and waits for Lula to make the offer first.

Lula is angered by Clay's not falling for her manipulative tactics. She switches strategies and mocks Clay's Anglo-American speech, his college education and his three-button suit. She derides his being black and passive. She dances mockingly in an R&B style and tells Clay to join her and "do the nasty. Rub bellies".

Clay, who does not respond initially, eventually grabs her and throws her down. Clay accuses Lula of knowing nothing but "luxury". He slaps her twice and tells her to leave him alone. Clay launches into a monologue. Clay suggests that whites let black people dance "black" dances and make "black" music. He explains that these segregatory actions assuage black Americans' anger towards whites and distracts them from accessing the "white man's intellectual legacy". Clay states that if black people stopped trying to heal their pain through dance, music, civic participation, religion, or focusing on moving upwards in American society, and became coldly rational like white people, black people would just kill all the whites and be done with racism in America. Clay says that if he were to take Lula's words to heart, he should just kill all the white people he meets.

Although Clay says all this, he deeply rejects this plan of action. He states that he does not want to kill and that he prefers to be ignorant of the problem. He says he would rather choose to pretend to be ignorant of racism, not try to get rid of it by fighting with whites.

Once Clay makes his confession, Lula changes strategies again. Clay makes as if to leave, but Lula coolly, rationally, stabs him twice to the heart. She directs all the other passengers, blacks and whites, in the train car to throw his body out and get out at the next stop.

The play ends with Lula looking towards another young black man who has just boarded the now mostly empty train car. The elderly black train conductor steps into the compartment and tips Lula his hat.

The play's title evokes images of Dutch ships that carried slaves across the Atlantic. The subway car itself, endlessly traveling the same course, is symbolic of "The Course of History." Another layer of the title's symbolism is the myth of the Flying Dutchman, a ghost ship which, much like the subway car Clay rides on, endlessly sails on with a crew that is unable to escape the confines of the vessel.



Founded in 1963 by John O'Neal, Doris Derby, and Gilbert Moses at Tougaloo College in Mississippi, the **Free Southern Theater** was designed as a cultural and educational extension for the civil rights movement in the South. Closely aligned with the Black Arts Movement - and more specifically the Black Theatre Movement - several members of the Free Southern Theater were figures of national prominence. The leaders aimed to introduce theater to the Deep South - free of charge - to communities which had no theater in their communities and little in the way of cultural production. With both political as well as aesthetic objectives, the group aspired to validate positive

aspects of African American culture and to act as a voice for social protest. The legacy of Free

Southern Theater serves as a model for other community theater groups across the nation. Since 1963, John O'Neal has been a leading advocate of the view that politics and art are complementary not opposing terms. His work as a writer, performer and director has been acclaimed by audiences in the US and worldwide. He is founder and artistic director of Junebug Productions, the organizational successor to the Free Southern Theater, of which O'Neal was also a co-founder and director. He was a field secretary of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and worked as National Field Program Director with the Committee for Racial Justice.



Ellen Stewart had no background in theatre, yet became a key figure in the beginnings of the Off-Off-Broadway movement. In 1961, Stewart founded **Café La MaMa** with Paul Foster and others. Her foster brother, Frederick Lights, wanted to be a playwright. One of the major reasons she began the theatre was because he was having difficulty getting his work produced. Café La MaMa eventually became La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club. The theatre was named La MaMa after Stewart, who many referred to as "Mama". La MaMa was created as a space for playwrights to experiment with their new work without the interference of critics or commercial interests. These young playwrights included Sam Shepard, Lanford Wilson, Robert Patrick, and Harvey Fierstein as well as actors like Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, and Bette Midler. In the early days of La MaMa, Stewart continued designing clothing to support the theatre. She had an incredible work ethic and dedication, and her influence on experimental theatre was enormous. Stewart was known to come out before a performance to "ring a cowbell and announce La MaMa's dedication to the playwright and all aspects of the theatre." She also contributed to many of the early productions as a designer, including Tom Eyen's *MISS NEFERTITI REGRETS* (1965) and Andrei Serban's production of Brecht's *THE GOOD WOMAN OF SETZUAN* (1978).

In 1969, La MaMa moved to 74A East Fourth Street, which was built into a 99-seat theatre with the financial support of W. MacNeil Lowry and the Ford Foundation. In 1974, Stewart converted a former television studio at 66 East Fourth Street into a 295-seat theatre called the Annex. The Annex was renamed the Ellen Stewart Theatre in 2009. La MaMa also has an art gallery and a

six-story rehearsal space in the East Village. Altogether, La MaMa puts up approximately 70 productions a year.



In 1963, Rufus DeWitt and his friend, Dr. Robert Matthews, founded the **Southeast Community Theatre** (SECT), with the assistance of several other committed and civic-minded individuals, including charter members Peggy Anzer, Gloria Knight, Milton Knight, James & Bernice Reed, John Johnson, Dr. Jack Kimbrough, Laura Smith, and Luther Goodwin. The Theatre began to produce plays and was chartered as a non-profit arts and cultural organization in 1964. It filled the need to develop the artistic talents of young African Americans and soon became San

Diego's premier African American theatre, with many productions directed by Gloria Knight. In 1971, DeWitt & Dr. Matthews heard of Dr. Floyd Gaffney, a new professor at UCSD and co-founder of the Department of Drama and Dance at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). They approached the chancellor of UCSD and requested his assistance in getting Dr. Gaffney involved in the direction and the development of the Southeastern Community Theatre. Dr. Gaffney enthusiastically accepted the invitation and thus began his 36-year tenure as an associate and eventually as artistic director of Southeastern Community Theatre, which he renamed Common Ground Theatre in 2003.



Prior to the 1960s, there were virtually no outlets for the wealth of black theatrical talent in America. Playwrights writing realistically about the black experience could not get their work produced, and even the most successful performers, such as Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen, were confined to playing roles as servants. It was disenfranchised artists such as

these who set out to create a theater concentrating primarily on themes of black life. In 1965, Playwright Douglas Turner Ward, producer/actor Robert Hooks, and theater manager Gerald Krone came together to make these dreams a reality with the **Negro Ensemble Company (NEC)**. The main catalyst for this project was the 1959 production of *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*. Written by Lorraine Hansberry, *A RAISIN IN THE SUN* was a gritty, realistic view of black family life. The long-running play gave many black theater people the opportunity to meet and work together. Robert Hooks and Douglas Turner Ward were castmates in the road company. Together they dreamed of starting a theater company run by and for black people. While acting in Leroi (later Amiri Baraka) Jones' play *DUTCHMAN*, Hooks began spending nights teaching local black youth. In a public performance primarily for parents and neighbors, the kids put on a one-act play by Ward. A newspaper critic who had attended the performance recommended that Ward's plays be produced commercially. While Hooks raised money, Ward wrote plays. The pair recruited a theater manager, Gerald Krone, and the three men produced an evening of black-oriented, satiric one act plays. One of these short plays, *DAY OF ABSENCE*, was a reverse minstrel show, with black actors in whiteface performing the roles of whites in a small Southern town on a day when all the blacks have mysteriously disappeared. The plays, performed at the St. Marks Play House in Greenwich Village, were a major success. They ran for 504 performances and won Ward an Obie Award for acting and a Drama Desk Award for writing. Impressed with his work, the New York Times invited Ward to write an article on the condition of black artists in American theater. Ward's piece in the Times became a manifesto for the establishment of a resident black theater company. With money from the Ford Foundation and a home at the St. Marks Playhouse, the Negro Ensemble Company formed officially in 1967. Though the new company succeeded in attracting audiences from all walks of life, they ran into a number of political and economic difficulties. In London, a performance of the NEC's first production- *SONG OF THE LUCITANIAN BOGEY* (1967) was heckled by-right wing protesters who resented its anti-colonial message. Back home in America, the group had to deal with criticism from members of the black community over their continued association with white administrators, playwrights, and funders.

Among the many plays produced by the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC) were such greats as Peter Weiss' *SONG OF THE LUCITANIAN BOGEY*, Lonnie Elder's *CEREMONIES IN DARK OLD MEN* (1969) and Charles Fuller's *ZOOMAN AND THE SIGN* (1980). These plays dealt with complex and often ignored aspects of the black experience. Creating emotionally resonant characters with depth and variety, the NEC paved the way for black



Americans to present a voice that had been aggressively stifled for three hundred years. This

revolution in production and writing also meant an equally important advance for black actors. With the NEC, many black actors found their first opportunity to play characters with depth and meaning.

Though critically acclaimed and presenting some of the most important theatrical work of its time, the NEC ran into a number of economic troubles. With production costs rising and an original grant from the Ford Foundation gone, the group no longer had enough money for many of its projects. Even sellout audiences in the St. Marks Theater could not generate enough revenue to meet the budget. In the 1972-73 season the resident company was disbanded, staff was cut back, training programs canceled, and salaries deferred. The decision was made to produce only one new play a year.

Fortunately, the first play chosen was *THE RIVER NIGER*, by Joe Walker. *THE RIVER NIGER* was a moving play about the struggles of a black family from Harlem in the '70s. It was the first NEC production to move to Broadway, where it stayed for nine months. It won the Tony Award for Best Play, and embarked on an extensive national tour. The success of *The River Niger* helped to insure the continued work of the NEC and of its many members over the next ten years. In 1981, the NEC had what was probably its most successful production with *A SOLDIER'S PLAY*, by Charles Fuller. *A SOLDIER'S PLAY* is a gripping story of the murder of a black soldier on a Southern Army base, and the subsequent investigation by a black army captain. It was a tremendously popular play and won both the Critics Circle Best Play Award and the Pulitzer Prize. It was later made into a movie, "A Soldier's Story", which was nominated for three Academy Awards. Since its founding in 1967, the NEC has produced more than 200 new plays and provided a theatrical home for more than 4000 cast and crew members. Among its ranks have been some of the best black actors in television and film, including Louis Gossett Jr., Sherman Hemsley, and Phylicia Rashad. The NEC is respected worldwide for its commitment to excellence, and has won dozens of honors and awards. While these accolades point to the larger success of the NEC, it has created something far greater. It has been a constant source and sustenance for black actors, directors, and writers as they have worked to break down walls of racial prejudice.



Douglas Turner Ward, playwright, actor, director, producer, dramaturg and visionary, was born in Burnside, Louisiana in 1930 under the name of Roosevelt Ward Jr. He spent his early years on a Sugar Cane/Rice Plantation where both his mother and father worked as field hands. At age sixteen he went to Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio hoping to obtain a football scholarship to a prestigious college. But Wilberforce didn't have any kind of football program and although he was a journalism major, he found time for theatre. Later on, due to the way he saw African Americans being treated in the US he became interested in Marxist

ideology and in time became a youth leader in New York's Left-Wing Political Movement. During that time, he met Lorraine Hansberry and Lonne Elder who became lifelong friends. Both credits Ward as inspiration for their playwriting careers. In 1967 after the success of his plays *HAPPY ENDING* and *DAY OF ABSENCE*. Ward wrote an article for the New York Times

entitled “American Theatre for Whites Only” in which he proposed the creation of a professional all black theatre company dedicated to training black theatre practitioners and artists along with producing black plays. Ward and his colleagues Robert Hooks and Gerry Krone were approached by the Ford Foundation to make real such a dream and the Negro Ensemble Company was founded with Doug Ward as its artistic director.



Lonne Elder III, American playwright whose critically acclaimed masterwork, *CEREMONIES IN DARK OLD MEN* (1965, revised 1969), depicted the dreams, frustrations, and ultimate endurance of a black family living in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City in the 1950s.

Orphaned as a boy, Elder was raised in New Jersey by an aunt and an uncle who ran a numbers game (i.e., an illegal lottery) out of their home. As a young man, he moved to New York City, where he worked a number of odd jobs while learning the acting trade and writing poems, short stories, and, finally, plays. From 1959 to 1962 he played the role of Bobo in the classic drama *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*, at the personal

invitation of its author, Lorraine Hansberry.

CEREMONIES IN DARK OLD MEN was presented as a dramatic reading in 1965 and then produced for the stage by the Negro Ensemble Company in 1969. The drama centers on the fractured Parker family, whose aging patriarch dreams of lost youth while his daughter toils at a dead-end office job, his two hustling sons sell bootleg liquor and engage in petty thievery, and a smooth-talking con artist runs numbers out of their decrepit barber shop. The play enjoyed instantaneous success, bringing Elder many prizes and being produced for television in 1975. By that time Elder had moved to Los Angeles, where he wrote scripts for television shows, for the motion picture *SOUNDER* (1972; Academy Award nominee for best screenplay), and for *A WOMAN CALLED MOSES* (1978), a television miniseries based on the life of abolitionist Harriet Tubman. Elders’s only other play to be staged, *CHARADES ON EAST FOURTH STREET* (1967), was produced for a New York social service agency.

CEREMONIES IN DARK OLD MEN was the runner-up for the 1969 Pulitzer Prize in drama and was adapted for a television movie in 1975.

A floundering Harlem barbershop is the setting and the cauldron of action that leads to tragic consequences. Russell B Parker, a former vaudeville hoofer, is a man of big dreams but small ambitions. He hardly works at all in fact, often spending the time incessantly playing checkers with his friend, William Jenkins. Parker lives with Theopolis and Bobby, his two unemployed sons, and Adele, his hard-working daughter. The ghost of his



dead wife, a woman who drove herself into an early grave working to support the family, nags at his conscience.

Adele deeply resents that she is carrying the entire family financially. She announces that she's done supporting her father's failing shop and freeloading brothers. If they do not find paying jobs immediately, she'll shutter the barbershop and kick them out on the street. Theo proposes they go into business selling "black lightning," his homemade corn whiskey, and convinces his father to meet Harlem crime boss Blue Haven. Blue gets them started and receives a cut of the profits in exchange for protection from police raids or rival criminals.

When the operation proves successful, Theo becomes the household's new breadwinner, but the family becomes divided. Adele blinds herself to their criminal activities through a romantic distraction. Bobby conspicuously spends time away from the shop and is rumored to be involved in a rash of city burglaries. And Parker often steals money from the operation's till, so he may entertain a Young Girl that has become the object of his affection.

While the family disintegrates and the retribution of Parker's choices threatens everything, he retreats into atmospheric tales of his life in vaudeville. In the final stages of the play, he even attempts to summon dance steps of his youth to little avail. Parker and his family's dreams of a better life cannot shake the spectre of a racist society, bringing their story to a tragic conclusion.

The play concerns the ceremonies acted out by African American men. Parker is kept afloat by the fact that his daughter Adele works, which gives the family enough of an income to survive. Jenkins, the other "Dark Old Man" of the title, finds a sanctuary in Parker's barbershop, where he trades insults with Parker and plays checkers. This part exemplifies the "ceremonies" of the title, the game. The barbershop provides a place where the two dark old men can be insulated from a society in which they have failed under the norms of the capitalist, racist society of the 1960s. According to the *Oxford Companion to African American Literature*:



The play is a dramatization of rituals—of survival, of friendship, of deception and manipulation, of self-deception, of black male friendship, of shifting intrafamilial allegiances, and of black manhood. As Elder presents the ineffectual lives of a Harlem family entrapped by rituals of economic and spiritual dependence, he urges African Americans and African American communities to become aware of and to break free of “ceremonies” that assuredly lead to personal loss and tragedy. Echoing Douglas Turner Ward's warning to black Americans whose “happiness” and survival are predicated upon white America's relationship to black America in *Happy Ending* (1966), *Ceremonies* challenges the myth that the social, political, and economic plight of black America rests in white people's hands. Through layers of ritual, Elder demonstrates the futility, corruption, and internal disruptions that result from efforts to undermine a capitalist system that seeks to determine and define African Americans' worth and selfhood.



Charles Gordone was born Charles Edward Fleming in Cleveland, Ohio of African-American, Native American, and European heritage. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Gordone continued acting and began directing. At one point, he sang and played guitar in a calypso band. He co-founded both the Committee for the Employment of Negro Performers and the Vantage Theater in Queens. His acting credits included Brother Jerro in *THE TRIALS OF BROTHER JERRO BOHEM*, Hickey in *OF MICE AND MEN*, and The Valet in Jean Genet's *THE BLACKS* (1961–66) alongside James Earl Jones, Maya Angelou, Cicely Tyson, and many other Black

actors who went on to change Hollywood. He also assisted with the casting of the '60s feature film *NOTHING BUT A MAN*, starring Ivan Dixon, Abbey Lincoln, and Julius Harris.

Mr. Gordone's first play, *A LITTLE MORE LIGHT AROUND THE PLACE*, was co-written with Sidney Easton in 1964. It was an adaptation of Mr. Easton's book of the same title.

It was during his employment as a waiter in a Greenwich Village bar that Gordone found inspiration for his first major work as a playwright, *NO PLACE TO BE SOMEBODY* (Alexander Street Press), for which he won the 1970 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Written over the course of seven years, the play underwent one major change in the course of its production: the omitting (by Gordone himself) of an imaginary character named Machine Dog. This character can still be found in the actual play versions (i.e. the rare, out-of-print Bobbs-Merrill and Samuel French editions, as well as the currently available Alexander Street Press version). Not only was Charles the first playwright of African-American descent to receive the Pulitzer, but *NO PLACE TO BE SOMEBODY* was the first OFF-Broadway play (Joseph Papp's The Public Theater) to receive the award.

NO PLACE TO BE SOMEBODY is the story of Black bar owner (Johnny Romero) trying to carve out his piece of the American Dream in a New York City neighborhood where most venues are run by the Mafia. Johnny's best friend (Gabe Gabriel) is a light-skinned black actor/writer who is too white-looking to land black roles and too ethnic-looking to get any white roles, and this causes him great angst. Romero is brimming with arrogance, and a "get-over" mentality, while Gabriel appears intent on holding high morals, and the two of them are always at odds. It was often said that both Johnny and Gabe represent Gordone's alter egos.



Described as a "Black-black comedy", *NO PLACE TO BE SOMEBODY* soon hit Broadway running, under the production of Gordone's wife Jeanne Warner-Gordone and partner Ashton Springer (Broadway producer of *BUBBLING BROWN SUGAR*). Subsequently, with Gordone as director, *No Place* played to packed houses featuring audience members of many racial diversities. From 1970 to 1977, the play toured nationally, with Gordone as author/director for all three separate companies. Jeanne coordinated, booked, and managed the touring companies, as little Leah-Carla traveled with her often-on-the-road mother. A theatrical legacy was being forged.



Adrienne Kennedy is an American playwright. She is best known for *FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO*, which premiered in 1964 and won an Obie Award.

Since the early 1960s, Kennedy has been contributing to American theater, influencing generations of playwrights with her haunting, fragmentary lyrical dramas. Exploring the violence racism brings to people's lives, Kennedy's plays express poetic alienation, transcending the particulars of character and plot through ritualistic repetition and radical structural experimentation. Much of her work explores issues of race, kinship, and violence in American society, and many of her plays are "autobiographically inspired."

Kennedy is noted for the use of surrealism in her plays, which are often plotless and symbolic, drawing on mythical, historical, and imaginary figures to depict and explore the African-American experience.

Her first play to be produced was *FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO*, a one-act play she wrote in 1960, the year she visited Ghana for a few months with her husband on his grant from the African Research Foundation. The play draws on Kennedy's African and European heritage as she explores a "black woman's psyche, riven by personal and inherited psychosis, at the root of which is the ambiguously double failure of both rapacious white society and its burdened yet also distorted victims."

A RAT'S MASS was produced at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club in Manhattan's East Village twice in 1969 and once in 1971. In 1976, La MaMa's Annex performed the show with music by Cecil Taylor. *SUN: A POEM FOR MALCOLM X INSPIRED BY HIS DEATH* and *A BEAST STORY* were both produced at La MaMa in 1974.

Kennedy was a founding member of the Women's Theatre Council in 1971, a member of the board of directors of PEN in 1976–77, and an International Theatre Institute representative in Budapest in 1978.

She might be 86 years-old, but Adrienne Kennedy still has things to say, as proven with the recent New York premiere of a play (her first in a decade), *HE BROUGHT HER HEART BACK IN A BOX*. Kennedy's first major work, *FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO*, premiered in 1964 and won her first Obie. Kennedy is also renowned for developing short works featuring the same character, Suzanne Alexander. The four one-acts that feature her were later re-released in a single volume as the *ALEXANDER PLAYS*. In her golden years now, Kennedy lives with her son Adam in Virginia, where they produce work together.

Although the success of sit-ins and public demonstrations of the Black student movement in the 1960s may have "inspired black intellectuals, artists, and political activists to form politicized cultural groups," many Black Arts activists rejected the non-militant integrational ideologies of the Civil Rights Movement and instead favored those of the Black Liberation Struggle, which emphasized "self-determination through self-reliance and Black control of significant businesses, organization, agencies, and institutions."

FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO chronicles the last hours in the life of Sarah, a young black woman troubled by race and identity. Kennedy's depiction of Sarah's hallucinatory subconscious—struggling with self-hatred, race hatred, and alienation from the larger culture—was regarded as powerful by some critics of the era. Other critics were confused by the staging and subject matter of the work. Many scholars contend that *FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO* was revolutionary in a number of ways, especially Kennedy's unique portrayal of what it was like to be black and a woman in the United States in the 1960s.

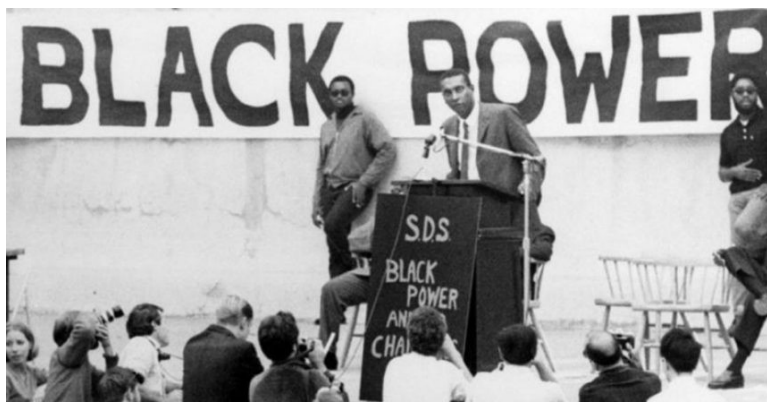


At the core of *FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO* is Sarah's internal struggle to understand and accept her identity as an African American woman in the United States. Each of Sarah's four "selves"—her subconscious.

Because *FUNNYHOUSE OF A NEGRO* is a surreal play that takes place primarily inside Sarah's mind, only a few aspects of the setting are "real."

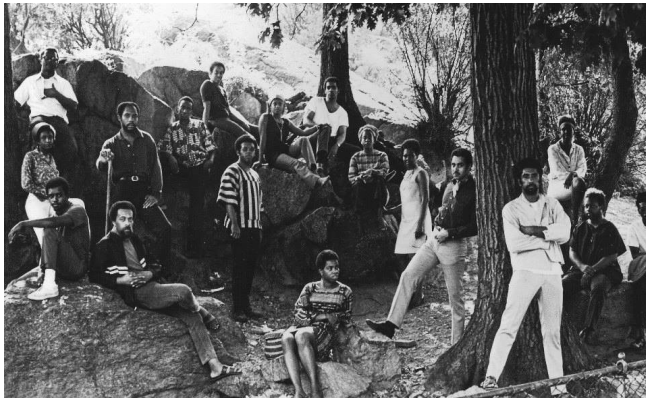
Set in the early 1960s, the play takes place in Sarah's room in a New York City brownstone. Her room features a large statue of Queen Victoria, other pictures of British monarchs, books, a bed, and a writing table. Some of the "realistic" action takes place on the landing and inside Raymond's room.

The play has several settings specific to Sarah's four selves. For example, the Queen has her own chamber with a tomb-like mahogany bed, a chandelier, and walls the color of wine. The Duchess has her own space: a ballroom with a chandelier, marbled floor, fake snow, and benches. In the final scenes, a jungle replaces these rooms, altering their symbolic meaning.



The beginnings of the **Black Arts Movement** may be traced to 1965, when Amiri Baraka, at that time still known as Leroi Jones, moved uptown to establish the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS) following the assassination of Malcolm X. Rooted in the Nation of Islam, the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Arts Movement grew out of a changing political and cultural climate in which Black artists attempted to create politically engaged work that explored the African American cultural and historical experience. Black artists and intellectuals such as Baraka made it their project to reject older political, cultural, and artistic traditions.

The Black Arts Movement—also known as BAM—is a subset of the Black Power Movement. Larry Neal described the Black Arts Movement as a "radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic." Key concepts of BAM were focused on a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, & iconology as well as the African American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. BAM consisted of actors, actresses, choreographers, musicians, novelists, poets, photographers and artists. Though male artists such as Amiri Baraka heavily dominated the Black Arts Movement, some notable women writers of the movement were Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Rosa Guy, Lorraine Hansberry, Lucille Clifton, Ntozake Shange and Sonia Sanchez, among others.



From 1966 to 1972 one of the most innovative, productive, and influential groups was of Harlem. By 1970, there were approximately 125 black theatres within the United States. The **New Lafayette Theatre's** performances served as an inspiration to a number of artists and organizations while operating its own literary and talent agency, developing actors, writers, directors, designers, and others at The Black Theatre Workshop.

Founded by Robert Macbeth, the NLT was a resurrection of Anita Bush's earlier Lafayette Players- but with new concepts. Macbeth believed that the purpose of the NLT was to "show black people who they were, where they are and what condition they are in". They presented concerts, symposiums, created a film company, published the nationally renowned "Black Theatre Magazine" and introduced the playwright Ed Bullins.



Ed Bullins was not only a playwright, but also the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party. As a playwright, he was one of the pioneers of the Black Theatre Movement and had a style of writing that he described as "natural"- not to be mistaken for naturalistic. Along with co-managing the New Lafayette Theatre as associate director alongside artistic director Robert Macbeth, Bullins also took on the ambitious project of writing the "Twentieth Century Cycle"- not to

be confused with August Wilson's 'Pittsburgh Cycle'. Bullins cycle (which does indeed chronicle the black experience, but within 20 plays as opposed to Wilson's ten) includes the plays IN THE WINE TIME (1968), IN NEW ENGLAND WINTER (1971), THE DUPLEX (1970), THE FABULOUS MISS MARIE (1971), HOME BOY (1976) and GOIN' A BUFFALO- the play that brought him to the attention of Robert Macbeth. Like Wilson, Bullins was also influenced by music in the writing of his plays and was inspired by Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones). Ed Bullins was born and raised in North Philadelphia before joining the Navy and moving first to Los Angeles, then to San Francisco before ending up in New York.

National Black Theatre [NBT] was founded in 1968 in the heart of Harlem by Dr. Barbara Ann Teer, an award winning, visionary artist and entrepreneur. With a distinguished history of innovative work in its community, NBT is among the oldest Black Theaters in the country, and amongst the longest owned and operated by a woman of color. NBT is also a pioneer as the first to establish revenue generating Black art complex located at 2031 5th Avenue in Harlem, NY. NBT's achievements reflect Dr. Teer's lifelong commitment to community service through the arts. She believed whole-heartedly in the power of Black Theatre to uplift, strengthen, and heal Black communities on a local & national level.



The Carpetbag Theatre, Inc. was founded in 1969 and chartered in 1970. A Knoxville-based professional, multi-generational ensemble company dedicated to the production of new works. Carpetbag works in partnership with community artists, activists, cultural workers, storytellers, and leaders to create original, theatrical works. The mission of The Carpetbag Theatre is to give artistic voice to the issues and dreams of people who have been silenced by racism, classism, sexism, ageism, homophobia and other forms of oppression.

In March of 1969, a “**Black Academy of Arts and Letters (BAAL)**” was founded, chartered and incorporated as a non-profit, tax-exempt organization by the State of New York on June 12, 1969. C. Eric Lincoln was president; John O. Killens, vice president; Doris Saunders, secretary; Alvin F. Poussaint, treasurer; and Julia Prettyman, executive director. Charles V. Hamilton, Vincent Harding, Robert Hooks, Charles White and John A. Williams were other Board Members. Additional members and fellows of the



Academy from 1969-1972 included Alvin Ailey, James Baldwin, Imanu Baraka, Harry Belafonte, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee Davis, Lonne Elder III, Duke Ellington, Alex Haley, Lena Horne, Frederick O'Neal, Sidney Poitier, Lloyd Richards, Paul LeRoy Roberson and Nina Simone.

Focusing on similar organizational objectives that were developed by the American Negro Academy, some of the major programs created by BAAL included the Incentive Awards to Promising Artists and Scholars, Revolving Chairs of Black Arts and Letters at Black Colleges, Touring Exhibits of Black Art, support of Black Arts at the Community Level, Black Academy Hall of Fame, A Directory of Cultural Activities in the Black Community and a Biennial Conference of Black Artists and Scholars. Other activities included annual competitions and festivals for Black filmmakers, annual retreats for Black writers, establishment of cultural archives covering all major artists and scholars, both living and deceased, a Manual for the Guidance of Black Writers in preparing material for publication, an oral history of the Black experience, a photographic record of Black achievements in architecture and the crafts and sponsorship of cultural festivals and forums on Black Theater, Music, Art and Dance.

By the early part of 1973, BAAL had undergone some administrative changes and it became defunct approximately one year later in 1974. Both academies ANA and BAAL, however, had lived up to their respective objective. They gave reality to speculation and solidity to dreams. Eighty years (1897-1977) after the inception of ANA and eight years (1969-1977) after the development of BAAL, a third Academy generation was formed with the concepts, goals, dreams, purposes and objectives of the previous academies. In 1977, the Junior Black Academy of Arts and Letters, Inc. (JBAAL), was conceptualized. After Curtis King had conversed with C. Eric Lincoln, John O. Killens, Margaret Walker Alexander, Frederick O'Neal, Jean Hutson, Romare Bearden and Doris Saunders concerning the formation of an Academy that would directly involve young and aspiring artists and scholars, JBAAL was founded and officially formed by Curtis King in Dallas, Texas on July 17, 1977 with \$250 of his personal money.



By 1970, there were around 125 black theatres producing across America. Few, however, survived into the 80s; fewer still have struggled through and into the present. The New Lafayette Theater was founded in 1966 and lasted six years, closing in 1972. Before doing so, it published Black Theatre, a journal on the subjects, techniques and effects of black theatre. It

also introduced the playwright Ed Bullins. The Negro Ensemble Company, however, has survived into the present, but struggled through the 1990s. It still has the distinction of being the oldest professional black theatre in America.

The 1970s continued to see the birth of black theatres across the country (like The Black Rep in St. Lois, Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Black Spectrum Theatre Company in New York, Crossroads Theatre Company in New Brunswick, NJ and the North Carolina Black Repertory Company), as well as the creation of additional significant plays making it to Broadway (such as *THE RIVER NIGER* by Joseph Walker and *THE FIRST BREEZE OF SUMMER* by Leslie Lee).



Joseph Alexander Walker is best known for writing *THE RIVER NIGER*, a three-act play that was originally produced Off-Broadway in 1972 by the Negro Ensemble Company, before being transferred to Broadway in 1973 and then adapted into a 1976 film of the same name starring James Earl Jones and Cicely Tyson. In 1974, Walker became the first African-American writer to win a Tony Award, receiving the Tony Award for Best Play for *THE RIVER NIGER*. The playwright previously won an Obie Award during that play's 1972 to 1973 Off-Broadway run. Walker was one of the first African Americans, along with Lorraine Hansberry, to be nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play, which he won for *THE RIVER NIGER*. His efforts and

talents drew him critical acclaim at the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC), with Douglas Turner Ward as the artistic director. *THE RIVER NIGER*'s run was one of the NEC's longest consecutive runs. Other works include the drama *DISTRICT LINE*, *YIN-YANG*, *THE HARANGUES* (*Tribal Harangue 1, 2, and 3*), *THE LION IS A SOUL BROTHER*, *OUT OF THE ASHES*, *ABSOLUTION OF WILLIE MAE*, *KOULABA D. HAITI*, and the musical *KING BUDDY BOLDEN*.

Walker met his first wife, Barbara Ann, in philosophy class; they were married in September 1957. That same year Walker entered the Air Force. In 1958–60, while stationed at Loring Air Force Base, Walker became founder and artistic director of Pine Tree Theatre Guild. In 1962, Walker was discharged and decided to pursue an MFA in Theatre with a minor in Elizabethan Drama at Catholic University.

Walker's time in the Air Force is significant because the main character from *THE RIVER NIGER*, Jeff Williams, was also discharged from the Air Force. In addition, the Williams character makes references to symbolically asking everyone at the Air Force base to "let go of my toe". Barbara Walker has stated that *THE RIVER NIGER* may be semi-autobiographical.

He taught at Spingarn High School in Washington, D.C., from 1963 to 1965 as an English/drama teacher.

Walker then began the pursuit of an acting career in 1966. He began studying voice and vocal reproduction from Brook Alexander and at the end of that year joined Voices, Inc. He remained narrator, lead singer, and artistic director of this organization until *THE BELIEVERS* was produced in 1968. *THE BELIEVERS* was co-authored by Walker and Josephine Jackson.

From 1969 to 1975, he taught at CCNY's Leonard Davis Center of Performing Arts as an associate professor in the speech and theatre department. Also in 1969, he met Moses Gunn,

who introduced him to Douglas Turner Ward, the artistic director of The Negro Ensemble Company (NEC), which led to the production of *THE HARANGUES*, opening the 1969–70 season. *ODODO*, which Walker wrote, directed, and co-choreographed, opened with mixed reviews in the 1970–71 season at NEC. The music for *ODODO* was composed and directed by his second wife Dorothy Ann Dinroe-Walker, also a Howard University graduate.

Wanting to create his own theatre company, Walker became the artistic director of the Demi-Gods. The Demi-Gods was co-founded with his wife Dinroe-Walker between 1970 and 1974. In 1971–72, Walker and Dinroe-Walker co-produced *YIN-YANG* at the African American Studio. In 1972–73, Douglas Turner Ward went into production for *THE RIVER NIGER*. The response to *THE RIVER NIGER* was so overwhelming that the play was moved to the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Broadway in 1973, where it won the Tony Award in 1974.

Walker received 400 hours towards a Motion Picture Production Certificate received at the Germaine School of Photography, New York City, in 1973. He also completed 28 credits towards his Ph.D. in cinema studies at New York University and was honored as playwright-in-residence at Yale School of Drama.



Leslie Lee grew up in West Conshohocken, Pennsylvania. He earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a master's degree from Villanova University. Lee's early theatre experience was at Ellen Stewart's La Mama Experimental Theatre Club in the East Village, Manhattan. His play *ELEGY FOR A DOWN QUEEN* was produced at La MaMa in 1970 and in 1972 by John Vaccaro's Playhouse of the Ridiculous. *COPS AND ROBBERS* was produced at La MaMa in 1971 by La MaMa GPA Nucleus Company.

His play *LOVE IN THE EYES OF HOPE DIES LAST* was produced at La MaMa in 1997, and he directed Sophia Murashkovsky's *COYOTE TAKE ME THERE* at La MaMa in 1999.

Lee also worked with the Negro Ensemble Company.

His significant work includes his history play *COLORED PEOPLE'S TIME*, a production of which featured Angela Bassett and Samuel L. Jackson, and Hannah Davis. He received a 1975 Obie Award for Best Play, a 1976 Tony Award nomination for Best Play, and an Outer Circle Critics Award for his play *FIRST BREEZE OF SUMMER*. The story of a middle-class Black family in a small Northeastern city is told on two levels: events that transpire on one hot June weekend and flashbacks to the memories of the visiting grandmother as a young woman. She recalls the three men, two black and one white, who are the fathers of her three children. A resourceful woman, she feels some regrets, no shame and feels she has had a useful life. Lou, an oversensitive boy who is about to graduate from high school, worships the grandmother. The resolution of his problems and his acceptance of his sexuality and blackness form the backbone of the play.

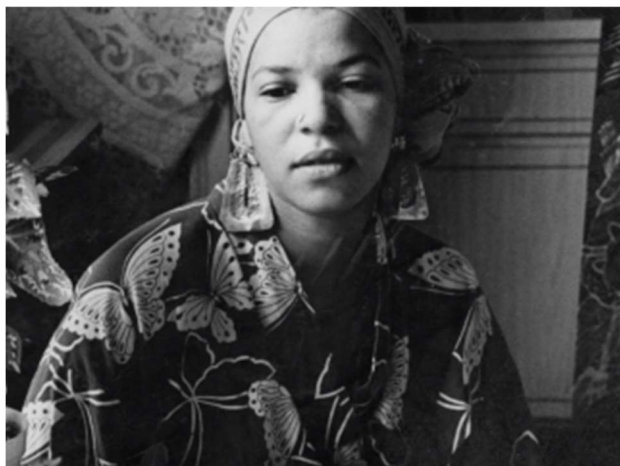
Carl Clay—a playwright, director, and filmmaker—founded **Black Spectrum Theatre Company** as a traveling theatrical troupe in 1970. He is now its executive producer. Since that time, Black

Spectrum has grown into a multifaceted performing arts and media company that has produced and presented over 150 plays, 30 films, and numerous works of music, dance, and performance art.

Carl's organization began in a church in 1970. From there Black Spectrum used the basements and homes of members and their parents. As Black Spectrum grew in sophistication, they performed along the eastern seaboard in colleges, churches (including Cornell & Albany State), countless festivals, and event venues (including Lincoln Center in NY).

Carl Clay has been a significant force in the theater and independent film movement in the U.S. for almost two decades, and his creative use of theater, film, video, and music has resulted in numerous awards. As founder and executive producer of Black Spectrum Theatre, he has produced over 300 theatrical productions that have been performed in New York City and throughout the U.S. His motion pictures and videos have been screened at various national and international TV and film festivals.

As the founder and CEO of Black Spectrum Theatre, Mr. Clay has trained over 1,000 actors. His feature-length film is available on video. He's produced over 30 jazz concerts with such artists as Roy Ayers, Carl Thomas and Roberta Flack.



Ntozake Shange (born Paulette Linda Williams in Trenton, New Jersey), was an author of plays, poetry, and fiction noted for their feminist themes and racial and sexual anger. Shange attended Barnard College and the University of Southern California. From 1972 to 1975 she taught humanities, women's studies, and Afro-American studies at California colleges. During this period, she also made public appearances as a dancer and reciter of poetry. Her 1975 theatre piece *FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED*

SUICIDE/WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF quickly brought her fame. The show ran for seven months Off-Broadway in New York City before beginning a two-year run on Broadway, becoming the second play by a black woman to reach Broadway. It was subsequently produced throughout the United States, broadcast on television, and in 2010 adapted into a feature film titled *"For Colored Girls"*.

Shange created a number of other theatre works that employed poetry, dance, and music (known as "choreopoems") while abandoning conventions of plot and character development. One of the most popular of these was her 1980 adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*, featuring a black family in the time of the American Civil War. Some of Shange's other works for the stage are *WHERE THE MISSISSIPPI MEETS THE AMAZON* (1977), *THREE VIEWS OF MT. FUJI* (1987), and *THE LOVE SPACE DEMANDS: A CONTINUING SAGA* (1992).

Although Shange is described as a "post-Black artist," her work was decidedly feminist, whereas BAM has been criticized as misogynistic and sexism had been widely & hotly debated within movement publications and organizations. Though Shange's work did have a radical reordering of western cultural aesthetic with its spelling, structure, and style, Baraka—one of the leading

male figures of the movement denied her as a post-Black artist. In regards to Shange as a part of the black aesthetic and as a post-Black artist, he claimed that several women writers, among them Michelle Wallace and Ntozake Shange, like Ishmael Reed, had an aesthetic of capitulation and garbage. Shange set her writing apart from the Black arts movement by creating a "special aesthetic" for black women to an extent. She claimed, "the same rhetoric that is used to establish the Black Aesthetic, we must use to establish a women's aesthetic, which is to say that those parts of reality that are ours, those things about our bodies, the cycles of our lives that have been ignored for centuries in all castes and classes of our people, are to be dealt with now."

Although the Black Arts Movement was a time filled with black success and artistic progress, the movement also faced social and racial ridicule. The leaders and artists involved called for Black Art to define itself and speak for itself from the security of its own institutions. For many of the contemporaries the idea that somehow black people could express themselves through institutions of their own creation and with ideas whose validity was confirmed by their own interests and measures was absurd.



As a choreopoem, ***FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE/WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF*** is a series of 20 separate poems choreographed to music that weaves interconnected stories of love, empowerment, struggle and loss into a complex representation of sisterhood. The cast consists of seven nameless African-American women only identified by the colors they are assigned. They are the lady in red, lady in orange, lady in yellow, lady in green, lady in blue,

lady in brown, and lady in purple. Subjects from rape, abandonment, abortion and domestic violence are tackled. Shange originally wrote the monologues as separate poems in 1974. Her writing style is idiosyncratic and she often uses vernacular language, unique structure, and unorthodox punctuation to emphasize syncopation. Shange wanted to write for colored girls... in a way that mimicked how real women speak so she could draw her readers' focus to the experience of reading and listening.

FOR COLORED GIRLS is a piece of work inspired by events of Shange's own life. Shange admitted publicly to having attempted suicide on four different occasions. In a phone interview conducted with CNN, she explained how she came to the title of her choreopoem: "I was driving the No. 1 Highway in northern California and I was overcome by the appearance of two parallel rainbows. I had a feeling of near death or near catastrophe. Then I drove through the rainbow and I went away. Then I put that together to form the title." The colors of the rainbow then became the essence of the women in the choreopoem.

Shange also explains that she chose to use the word "colored" in the title of her choreopoem so that her grandmother would be able to understand it.



Woodie King is a renowned African-American director and producer of stage and screen, as well as the founding director of the New Federal Theatre in New York.

As a young black Alabama-born aspiring actor living in Detroit, Woodie King, Jr. came upon "*The Defiant Ones*"- a film starring Sidney Poitier, two days after graduating from high school. He then wrote to the American Negro Theater in Harlem where he'd read that Poitier (as well as actress Ruby Dee) had gone. This set-in motion the sequence of events that would fortuitously lead to the foundation of the intercultural New Federal Theatre (NFT), which set forth in 1970 - with a production of *SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER* by Tennessee Williams directed in a Lower East Side

church basement - St. Augustine's - by King himself. Tennessee Williams attended the production.

Woodie King, Jr. got to New York City, despite the response received by his letter to Mr. Poitier, saying he was better off remaining in Detroit. And the many generations of playwrights, directors and actors who've followed him there over the years owe much of their success to his tenacity. King believed that if Poitier could make the move from Nassau to NYC at 16 without knowing how to read, then he himself could certainly do the same.

The 18-year-old King could read, and he spent two years in a Detroit public library reading up as much as he could about the many facets of theatre. As he explored catalogues and school ads, he found the Will-O-Way Apprentice Theater in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. There, he was taken in by Will-O-Way founder Theresa Way Merrill and her daughter Celia (who ran the school).

They gave him a scholarship.

King had another encourager in Reverend Malcolm Boyd- an author, poet, playwright and gay crusader. They toured across Michigan with Boyd's *STUDY IN COLOR*. Boyd would then be the one who sent King off to New York in 1964. One year later, King would become an understudy for the satirical all-black Douglas Turner Ward double-bill of *DAY OF ABSENCE* and *HAPPY ENDING* that would flower into the influential Negro Ensemble Company. The production played above a movie house on Second Avenue, in parallel with what King himself was soon to start at the Henry Street Settlement.

He'd got there by way of Mobilization for Youth, an East 2nd Street drama and dance training ground run by Bertram Beck and Val Coleman. When Beck went off to Grand Street, Woodie King Jr. followed. In later years, the NFT would do two plays by Coleman and one or more by Coleman's wife.



The **New Federal Theatre** got its name from the 'old' Federal Theater Project that Woodie King, Jr. had read about in books, newspapers when he was in Detroit. He also learned of it from teachers who were actually there in the 1930s. Teachers like the Group Theater's Harold Clurman. The Works Progress Administration's Federal Theater Project had kept so many actors, directors, playwrights and other theatre professionals employed during the Depression. That is until Congress brought the venture to an end in 1939.

The New Federal Theatre, however, celebrated many successes for many years, such as J.E. Franklin's *BLACK GIRL*, a play directed by Shauneille Perry which headlined NFT's second (1971-1972) season with a smash-hit eight-month run. Another great success was Ntozake Shange's choreo-poem *FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF*. New Federal actually enjoyed more than 200 essential productions that have been wide-ranging: from black baseball's Josh Gibson and Satchel Page to the one drama that paved the way for such a legacy- Lorraine Hansberry's *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*.



eta Creative Arts Foundation was founded in 1971 to provide training and performance opportunities for youth and adults. In the past 47 years, eta has evolved to become a recognized cultural treasure not only in the city of Chicago, but nationally and internationally. The organization has a commitment to the production of new works that “tell our story” in the first voice and to the development of individual artists.

eta Creative Arts Foundation provides professional opportunities by way of training and performance for the development of both youth & adults as artists & technicians; in order to be a major cultural

resource institution for the preservation, perpetuation and promulgation of the African American aesthetic in the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois and the Nation.

Florida’s oldest surviving Black Theatre group was founded in 1971 on campus at the University of Miami by T.G. Cooper. Theodore G. Cooper was a producer, director, educator, writer & actor of **The M Ensemble Company**. “T.G.”, as he preferred to be called, later became a professor of Drama at Howard University for twenty years before becoming chair of the University drama department.

M Ensemble's mission was to promote African-American culture and experiences throughout the performing arts. A year later, leadership was assumed by Williams and Richardson taking the company to a new level.

Patricia E. Williams, Co-founder, associate producer, general manager, and occasional stage manager of M Ensemble, is an active member of the Screen Actors Guild and Actor's Equity. She is also the director of the after-school program at The YWCA of Greater Miami, where she supervises 18 schools and more than 100 staff members. Williams has performed on stage, television, and film. She studied theatre in New York and New Jersey where she worked with off-Broadway and regional theaters. She earned a bachelor's in theater and journalism from Northwestern University.

Shirley Richardson, a native of Miami, has also directed and performed in many of the company's productions. Additionally, she is the Program Director at the Concept Health Systems Outpatient Treatment Center. Richardson attended Florida A&M University and studied theater. She graduated from the University of Miami with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in theater. She also has a Master's Degree in Mental Health Counseling from Nova Southeastern University.

In 1972 M Ensemble was selected to represent the southern region of the United States at the World Festival for Black Arts in Lagos, Nigeria., West Africa; co-founded the Southern Black Cultural Alliance comprised of 30 African-American theatre and other cultural organizations; pioneered the country's first known drama workshop for the blind and visually disabled children in 1977; and implemented the country's first known drama program for youths in juvenile detention centers.



In 1967, 33-year-old lawyer, Franklin A. Thomas was appointed the first president of the newly created Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation. Thomas established **The Billie Holiday Theatre** in 1972 "to expose the second largest black community in America to the arts while providing an outlet for local talent." Herbert Scott Gibson, was the founding Executive and Artistic Director of The Billie Holiday Theatre. Marjorie Moon worked with Mr. Gibson for a few years and

was later appointed Artistic and Executive Director of the Theatre. Under Moon's leadership that spanned over 4 decades, "the theatre built a community audience by placing Bedford Stuyvesant citizens on the theatre's board." Moon is responsible for establishing the Billie Holiday Theatre as a dynamic destination in the heart of Brooklyn. During her tenure, Ms. Moon produced more than 120 productions there including *INACENT BLACK AND THE FIVE BROTHERS* by A.Marcus Hemphill, starring Melba Moore, which went on to be the first Broadway production to derive more than 50% of its financing from the Black community. Her long-standing tenure was followed by several seasons under the helm of Artistic Director Jackie Alexander who also served the theater as a playwright and director.

In 2015, the theatre broke ground and began a complete renovation under the leadership of Dr. Indira Etwaroo, who was tapped as The Billie Holiday Theatre's Executive Director. On May 9, 2017, The Billie Holiday Theatre completed a \$4.1 million-dollar renovation and re-opened its doors. The first event was the reading of Zora Neale Hurston's *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*, directed by Tony Award-winner Ruben Santiago Hudson, adapted by Arthur Yorinks. Many of today's successful actors, writers, designers, and musicians developed their craft at The Billie Holiday Theatre. Samuel L. Jackson, Debbie Allen, Tichina Arnold, Bill Cobbs, Jerome Preston Bates, Michele Shay, Phyllis Yvonne Stickney, Carol Woods, Elaine Graham and Ebony JoAnn to name but a few.

The **Black Theatre Troupe** (BTT) was born out of a need to serve the community during racial tensions in the 1970s. In an effort to give voice to people of color and avert impending racial unrest, Helen Katherine Mason, a city of Phoenix Parks and Recreation Deputy Manager, started a series of open-door community forums at Eastlake Park, where opinions and frustrations could be expressed in poetry and improvisations.

From those proud but humble beginnings, the Black Theatre Troupe was formed as an important part of the cultural fabric of Phoenix. During its fledgling years the company performed in several city facilities before getting its first home in 1976. One of the most important facilities that the City of Phoenix provided during those times was a meeting room at Eastlake Park in downtown Phoenix. Eastlake Park has served the inhabitants of Phoenix since the late 1880s. Originally known as Patton's Park, it was developed by the Phoenix Railway Company to serve as a recreational area for the white patrons of the city's trolley system. The park eventually became a place where people of all races could meet to relax and celebrate special events without violating separatist laws which existed in the nation and state during the first half of the 20th century.

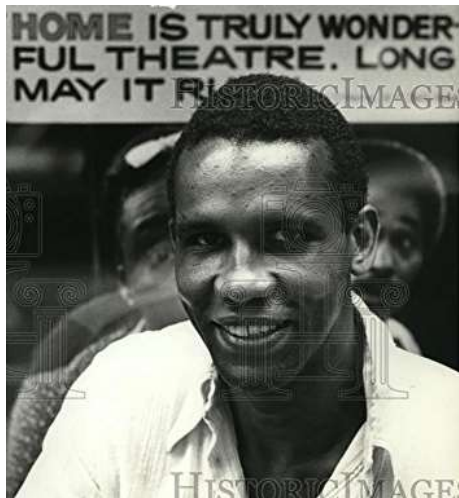


Charles Fuller began his writing career in Philadelphia during the 1960s, writing mostly poetry, short stories, and essays in his spare time while working various jobs throughout Philadelphia. In 1965, Fuller decided to continue his education and enrolled in La Salle College (now La Salle University) which he attended until 1968. During his time at La Salle, Fuller began writing short plays for a theatre group in Philadelphia that became the Afro-American Theatre of Philadelphia. He helped found this theatre, and served as co-director until he moved to New York in 1970. Fuller's first critical acclaim as a playwright came with the production of his

play, *THE VILLAGE: A PARTY IN 1968*. *THE VILLAGE* was first produced by Princeton's McCarter

Theatre, and later it ran off-Broadway in New York where it was re-titled *THE PERFECT PARTY*. During the 1970s, Fuller wrote many plays that were produced off-Broadway. In 1976, Fuller penned the first of his three most famous plays, *THE BROWNSVILLE RAID*, a play based on true events which occurred near an Army base in Texas in 1906. The second of his most successful plays, *ZOOMAN AND THE SIGN* was first produced in 1980, winning two Obie Awards (an award given for off-Broadway productions).

In 1981, Fuller suffered a great loss when his childhood friend, Larry Neal, who also became a playwright, died of a heart attack. Fuller decided to honor his friend by writing what became his most celebrated work, *A SOLDIER'S PLAY*. This play ran off-Broadway for more than a year and earned the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Charles Fuller became the second African American to win the Pulitzer (the first being Charles Gordone in 1970). *A SOLDIER'S PLAY* also won the 1982 New York Drama Critic's Award for Best American Play, as well as the Edgar Allen Poe Award for Best Mystery. Fuller was also rewarded for his effort with a movie contract from Columbia Pictures. He wrote the screenplay himself, and changed the name to "A Soldier's Story". The film was released in 1984 and received two Academy Award nominations in 1985.



Samm-Art Williams was born in 1946 in Burgaw, North Carolina, the son of Samuel and Valdosa Williams. His mother was a school teacher, and Williams attended segregated public schools through high school.

As Samm Williams, he entered New York City theater as an actor in 1973, performing in the play *BLACK JESUS*. With New York's Negro Ensemble Company (NEC), Williams appeared in such plays as *NOWHERE TO RUN*, *NOWHERE TO HIDE* (St. Mark's Playhouse, 1974) and *LIBERTY CALLAND* (St. Mark's Playhouse, 1975), before taking on the name Samm-Art Williams for *ARGUS & KLANSMAN* and *WAITING FOR MONGO* (St. Mark's Playhouse, 1975).

Other early New York acting experience includes understudy work in Leslie Lee's Tony Award-nominated Broadway play *THE FIRST BREEZE OF SUMMER* (Palace Theatre, June 7 - July 19, 1975); *EDEN* (St. Mark's Playhouse, 1976), *THE BROWNSVILLE RAID* (Theatre de Lys, 1976–77), *NIGHT SHIFT* (Playhouse Theatre, 1977), and *BLACK BODY BLUES* (St. Mark's Playhouse, 1978). His early work in regional theater includes *NEVIS MOUNTAIN DEW* at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. (1979).

As Samm Williams, he wrote the play *WELCOME TO BLACK RIVER*, produced by the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC) at St. Mark's Playhouse in 1975; and as Samm-Art Williams, *THE COMING* and *DO UNTO OTHERS*, both at the Billie Holiday Theatre in Brooklyn in 1976; *A LOVE PLAY* produced by the NEC that same year; *THE LAST CARAVAN* (1977); and *BRASS BIRDS DON'T SING*, at New York City's Stage 73 in 1978.

Williams participated in the NEC Playwrights Workshop, under the guidance of playwright-in-residence Steve Carter, who strongly influenced his work. About Carter, Williams has said "that no single individual has influenced my writing to the degree that Steve Carter has."

Williams' comedy *HOME* was mounted by the Negro Ensemble Company at St. Mark's Playhouse from 1979–80, moving to Broadway's Cort Theatre from May 7, 1980 to January 4, 1981. The play earned nominations for both the Tony Award and the Drama Desk Award.



Founded in 1976 by Producing Director Ron Himes, **The Black Rep** is one of the largest, professional African-American theatre company in the nation and the largest African-American performing arts organization in Missouri.

After its inception, Himes began to take the company on the road, performing for people everywhere by touring college campuses, community centers and various art / theatre festivals. The Black Rep started to draw such huge crowds when they performed and in 1980, the company took residence in the former Greeley Presbyterian Church's sanctuary on the corner of St. Louis Avenue and 23rd Street, renovating the interior into a theatre space. During the 1980's, the company began to hire guest actors, directors, designers and choreographers locally and nationally. In addition, The Black Rep began presenting regional dance companies and a musical film series. By 1986, the company became the only African-American theatre in the Midwest to operate under a contract with the Actor's Equity Association, guaranteeing union wages to its actors and stage managers. Later in the eighties, The Black Rep decided to narrow its focus to only producing African-American live theatre.



Founded in 1976 by Lou Bellamy, **Penumbra Theatre** created a forum for African-American voices within the Twin Cities. Penumbra quickly garnered praise and a loyal following through a commitment to provide realistic, inspirational works.

For nearly 40 years, Penumbra Theatre Company lived up to its mission of presenting valuable experiences from an African American perspective. It has achieved national recognition for its quality productions and leadership role in

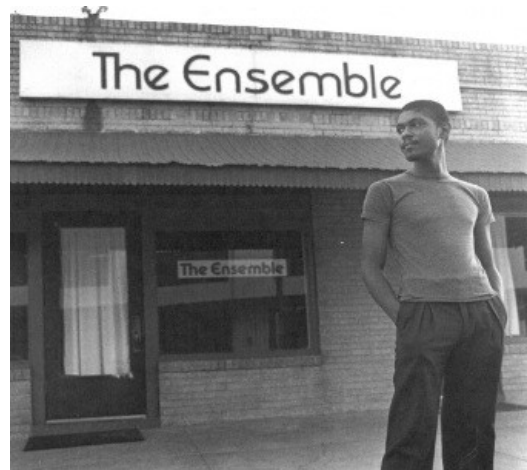
launching the career of many respected playwrights, including two-time Pulitzer Prize winner August Wilson.

Penumbra has grown, performing before 40,000 people of all backgrounds every year, as well as developing educational and outreach activities that impact more than 5,000 students each year within the Selby/Dale neighborhood and surrounding community. Penumbra employs more actors, choreographers, dancers, directors, and administrators of color than all other theatres in Minnesota combined.

Penumbra was recognized in January of 2000, when Danny Glover presented the theatre with the Jujamcyn Award in New York City- a national award for the development of artistic talent. Penumbra has also been named "Best Theatre for Drama" by City Pages and "One of Ten Companies that Make a Difference" by Stage Directions Magazine.

Today, Penumbra Theatre Company is Minnesota's only professional African American theatre, and is one of only three professional African American theaters in the nation to offer a full season of performances. Under Bellamy's quarter century of continuous leadership, Penumbra has stayed on the cutting edge of the national theatre scene and continues to present groundbreaking productions.

The Ensemble Theatre was founded in 1976 by the George Hawkins to preserve African American artistic expression and enlighten, entertain and enrich a diverse community. Forty years later, the theatre has evolved from a touring company operating from the trunk of Mr. Hawkins' car to being one of Houston's finest historical cultural institutions. The Ensemble is one of the only professional theatres in the region dedicated to the production of works portraying the African American experience, the oldest and largest professional African American theatre in the Southwest, and holds the distinction of being one of the nation's largest African American theatres owning and operating its facility and producing in-house. The Ensemble Theatre has fulfilled and surpassed the vision of its founder, and continues to expand and create innovative programs to bring African American theatre to a myriad of audiences.



The **Denver Black Arts Company (DBAC)** represented a vital part of the evolution of Black Theatre in Denver. Through the 1960s, several theatre companies had emerged from Northeast Denver, providing work for community actors and plays highlighting minority culture and experiences.

The DBAC itself emerged from Nudijah Productions, a company formed by

actress/poetress/writer Khadijah Farabi and actor Noomis Jones. Under Farabi's direction, Nudijah inspired many blacks to think collectively in developing clout for black artists by producing original scripts and workshop classes to provide artistic training.

John McCallum was an actor for Nudijah, later becoming the musical director. McCallum wrote *DAFT*, the first full-length musical performed by the company. With Nudijah Productions and Jump Street (the band McCallum was part of at the time), *DAFT* touched Colorado campuses and widened the audience for the Black Arts.

In 1976, Farabi and Jones moved to California. John McCallum and Jo Keel formed the Denver Black Arts Company and the Movement Free Dance Company, which worked in consort since their founding.

DBAC was a unique and culturally exciting organization. They were formed in January of 1977 by John McCallum to give primarily black and minority actors an outlet to study, rehearse and perform plays, musicals, dramas, concerts, variety shows, dances, mimes and any other cultural form that relate to Black Art or involves Blacks. The Black Arts Company was divided into two companies: The Novice Company (for beginners and hobbyists) and the Semi-Pro Troupe (for those persons preparing for the professional stage). The Semi-Pro Troupe's immediate goal was to become a self-sustained performing company of professional caliber which offered quality theatre to anyone with an interest in the arts.

DBAC was affiliated with the CSU Family Action Center and was a non-profit making organization.

The formation of DBAC propelled Denver's Black Theatre arts to a new level. The company became recognized for its innovative, original musical productions written, adapted and/or directed by John McCallum. Productions like *THE HOBBIT*, and *AVATAR*. Other productions involving the DBAC included *THE WIZ* and *TAMBOURINES TO GLORY*, which were produced by The Bonfils Theatre. DBAC established itself as an artistic force within the community. The local press described the DBAC as the "talent pool" of the region.

Many of today's prolific artists in Denver's black theatre came out of that pool. Jo Bunton Keel- founder of Eulipions, Hugo Jon Sayles, Janice Guy-Sayles, Jeffrey Nickelson- founder of Shadow Theatre Company, Jimmy Walker, Donnie L. Betts, Sheryl McCallum, Vincent Hardy, Carlton Bacon, Debbie Johnson Lee, Vincent C Robinson, Shahadah James & Kenneth Grimes are just a few such artists.

In 1979, John McCallum moved to New York, passing the responsibility of the company to Kenneth Grimes.

John Edward McCallum, Jr. was the founder & artistic director of Denver Black Arts Company. While John was attending East High School, he was torn between pursuing a career in theatre and music, or becoming a forest ranger. Fortunately for Denver's theatre goers, he chose the former. A writer, director, producer, singer, composer and actor, he was no stranger to Denver theatre. John was nominated for a prestigious Audulco Award for musical direction,



attended the University of Northern Colorado as a Music major, earned a B.A. in Musical Theatre (composition) from Antioch University and a M.A. in Theatre (writing & directing) from Long Island University C.W. Post Center. He also received honors for producing the best student show there. He won the Paul Robeson Cultural Arts Award (1978), La Anna Cultural Arts Award and the Barney Ford Achievement Honor.

His professional career began in 1972 when he produced his first jazz/rock musical *DAFT*. He also wrote and directed *THE HOBBIT*, *AVATAR*, *DON'T LOSE*, *ARE THERE REALLY ANGELS IN THE SUN?*, *IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS*, *RHAPSODY IN BLACK*, *FOOTSTEPS*, *THE MIDNIGHT VISIT* and *A WISH FOR AVATAR*. Being a musical theatre specialist and pianist, Mr. McCallum's music encompasses several popular styles. His credits include composing scores for *THE WRITING ON THE WALL*, *GODS BEFORE OLYMPUS* and *THESMORPORIASOUSAE*; and he has also performed in *HOW DO YOU DO?*, *TIME CAPS* and *YEAH, UH-HUH*.

He was a diversified pianist and singer who played keyboards and sang vocals for James Cleveland, Bloodstone, Roy Ayers and his band - Jump Street. He was a musician with Free Spirit and danced with Movement Free Dance Company. Mr. McCallum toured throughout the U.S., Europe and South America and served as musical director for several productions such as *HOW TO SUCCEED IN BUSINESS WITHOUT REALLY TRYING*, *FORTY-FIVE MINUTES FROM BROADWAY*, *THE WIZ*, *TAMBOURINES TO GLORY*, *SLOW DANCE ON THE KILLING GROUND* and *IN THE HOUSE OF BLUES*, working in theatres that included the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, La Mama's, Little Theatre of the Rockies, Post Theatre Company, MacMillian Theatre and Nudijah Productions. John had about reached his goals when a fatal heart attack ended his life on January 23, 1989.

In 1990, the John McCallum Music and Arts Scholarship was established in memory of John Edward McCallum, Jr. The McCallum family established a \$500 scholarship fund which would be awarded to any eligible High School or College student.

He will be remembered for being instrumental in getting many of Colorado's black actors started in the theatre.



Since its founding in 1978, **Crossroads Theatre Company** has produced over 100 works, many of which were premiere productions by the world's leading African and African American artists.

Crossroads has filled an otherwise empty space on the cultural canvas of the country and the world, with a collective body of work that remains unparalleled by any other theater in the nation. Crossroads forged its vision into reality through the development, production and touring of new works from throughout the African Diaspora, and positive imaging of African American life, history and culture. These honest theatrical portrayals helped move the consciousness of the nation forward

and into the twenty-first century by building bridges of understanding and veracity between people of all backgrounds in this society and the world.

Crossroads continues to lead the nation with its commitment to literary works that examine the African American experience so that it may be understood and appreciated by all people.

When co-founders Ricardo Khan and L. Kenneth Richardson envisioned a space where, as actors, the two young men could work on substantive, non-stereotypical roles, little did they realize that their vision would grow into the major institution that it is today.



Founded in 1979 by Larry Leon Hamlin, the **North Carolina Black Repertory Company (NCBRC)** is the first professional Black theatre company in North Carolina. NCBRC is committed to exposing diverse audiences to Black classics, the development and production of new works, improving artistic quality, and sustaining Black theatre internationally. This continues to be the benchmark by which all projects are measured. Further, NCBRC was founded as a vehicle from which theatre professionals can earn a living through their craft.

The Company is universally recognized for its artistic and administrative achievements and its international outreach program, the National Black Theatre Festival® (NBTF).

NCBRC produces Black Theatre classics, up and coming African American writers, and at least one world premiere each season. The annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday Celebration and the holiday presentation of Langston Hughes' *BLACK NATIVITY* have become two of the Company's staples. The NCBRC Teen Theatre Ensemble illustrates NCBRC's mission to develop, train and showcase the theatrical talent of local teens. In addition to its productions, the NCBRC is involved in a broad range of community outreach programs and partnerships.

In the 1970s, several shows created and performed by blacks were mainstream successes.

Ntozake Shange's *FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE / WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF* (1976), a series of poetic dance monologues in support of black women, set the standard for much feminist theatre. *THE WIZ* (1975), *AIN'T MISBEHAVIN'* (1978) and *EUBIE!* (1978) rekindled interest in all-black musicals.



The idea for the musical ***THE WIZ*** originated with producer Ken Harper. He replaced the original director, Gilbert Moses, with Geoffrey Holder in Detroit during out-of-town auditions. The original Baltimore cast included Renee Harris as Dorothy, Charles Valentino as the Scarecrow, Ben Harney as the Tin Man, Ken Prymus as the Cowardly Lion, and Butterfly McQueen as the Queen of the Field Mice. Only

Harney would remain in the Broadway cast, but in a much smaller role. Harris stayed on as understudy for the role of Dorothy, as did McQueen for the role of Addaperle.

The show had a pre-Broadway tryout at the Forrest Theatre in Philadelphia from December 11, 1974, through December 21, 1974. After drawing mixed critical reviews, producer Ken Harper

considered closing the musical after its Broadway opening night. One source attributes its turnaround success to a publicity campaign that included a TV commercial featuring the cast singing "Ease On Down the Road," a song that proved so popular that it was released as a single recorded by the disco group Consumer Rapport. The Broadway production moved to The Broadway Theatre on May 25, 1977, and closed on January 28, 1979, after four years and 1,672 performances.

Along with other musicals including *PURLIE* (1971) and *RAISIN* (1974), *THE WIZ* was a breakthrough for Broadway, a large-scale big-budget musical featuring an all-black cast. It laid the foundation for later African-American hits such as *BUBBLING BROWN SUGAR*, *DREAMGIRLS* and *DUKE ELLINGTON'S SOPHISTICATED LADIES*.

Assembled under the expert eye of director/lyricist, Richard Maltby, Jr., with a book by Murray Horwitz and music by various composers and lyricists as arranged and orchestrated by Luther Henderson, ***AIN'T MISBEHAVIN'*** is one of the most popular, well-crafted revues of all time and winner of the 1978 Tony Award for Best Musical. It is named after the song by Fats Waller (with Harry Brooks and Andy Razaf), "Ain't Misbehavin'".

The musical is a tribute to the black musicians of the 1920s and 1930s who were part of the Harlem Renaissance, an era of growing creativity, cultural awareness, and ethnic pride, and takes its title from the 1929 Waller song "Ain't Misbehavin'". It was a time when Manhattan nightclubs like the Cotton Club and the Savoy Ballroom were the playgrounds of high society and Lenox Avenue dives were filled with piano players banging out the new beat known as swing. Five performers present an evening of rowdy, raunchy, and humorous songs that encapsulate the various moods of the era and reflect Waller's view of life as a journey meant for pleasure and play.



EUBIE! Is a revue featuring the music of jazz/swing composer Eubie Blake, with lyrics by Noble Sissle, Andy Razaf, Johnny Brandon, F. E. Miller, and Jim Europe. As with most revues, the show features no book, but instead showcases 23 of Eubie Blake's best songs. The idea of the show was conceived by Julianne Boyd. It opened in 1978 receiving positive reviews from Time, Newsweek, Variety, Backstage, and The Today Show. After seven previews, the Broadway production, opened on September 20, 1978 at the Ambassador Theatre, where it ran for

439 performances. The show was conceived and directed by Julianne Boyd, choreographed by Billy Wilson and Henry LeTang, and costumed by Bernard Johnston. Vicki Carter was the musical director, pianist, and conductor. Lou Gonzalez was the sound designer. Eubie Blake was nearly 100 years of age when the show opened. An original cast recording was produced by Warner Brothers and released on vinyl 1979, and was later released on CD.

The theater setting was designed to be reminiscent of the 1920s, with "curlicued settings, dancers diving down a staircase in a pie-shaped wedge, a girl in a mantilla with a Spanish rose in her teeth". Many of the songs were from the Blake-Sissle 1921 show *SHUFFLE ALONG*, which follows the story of two friends who are both running for mayor. Among the songs were "Charleston Rag", "Daddy", "My Handyman Ain't Handy No More", "Gee, I Wish I Had Someone to Rock Me in the Cradle of Love", and "There's a Million Little Cupids in the Sky" (from the 1924 Blake-Sissle show *THE CHOCOLATE DANDIES*).

A few months after the show's opening on Broadway, the tour of *EUBIE!* opened on February 7, 1979 in Baltimore.