

BLACK THEATRE IN THE 1920s – 1940s



Black theatre flourished during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s. Experimental groups and black theatre companies emerged in Chicago, New York City, and Washington, D.C. Among these was the Ethiopian Art Theatre, which established Paul Robeson as America's foremost black actor. Garland Anderson's play *APPEARANCES* (1925) was the first play of Black authorship to be produced on Broadway, but Black theatre did not create a Broadway hit until Langston Hughes's *MULATTO* (1935) won wide acclaim.

The **Harlem Renaissance** was a phase of the larger "New Negro" movement that had emerged in the early 20th century and in some ways ushered in the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The social foundations of this movement included the Great Migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North. This led to the dramatic rise in levels of literacy, the creation of national organizations dedicated to pressing African



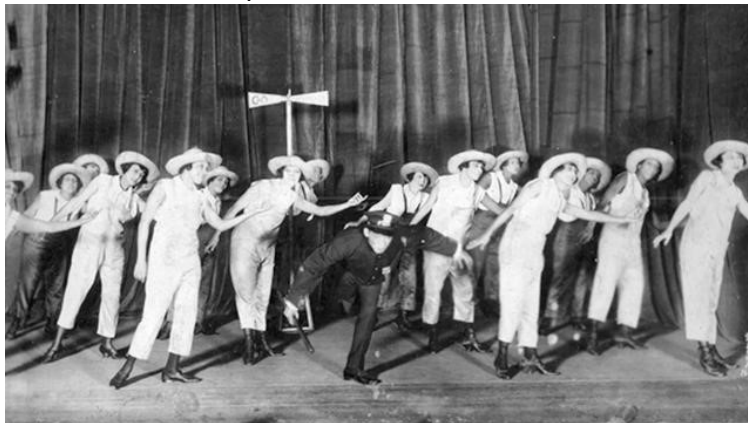
American civil rights, "uplifting" the race, and opening socioeconomic opportunities. There was also a great development in race pride, including pan-African sensibilities and programs. European dramatists praised the body language of black dance and stage humor which had descended from the black-face minstrel show (the most popular and original form of American theatrical comedy of the time).

Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle's musical revue *SHUFFLE ALONG* opened on Broadway in 1921 and established a model that would shape black musicals for the next half-century. Florence Mills and her dance company achieved immense fame across the United States and Europe. Josephine Baker became an international star when *LA REVUE NÈGRE* opened in 1925 in Paris, where she achieved celebrity status by playing a variety of "exotic" roles. Popular

revues and vaudeville acts drew all-black audiences throughout the United States in cities on the TOBA circuit. The Harlem Renaissance was driven by the success of black-produced shows coming to Broadway and white-produced shows that had begun to feature black casts in the 1920s.

SHUFFLE ALONG, a musical comedy which featured an all-black cast, was the most significant achievement in black theatre of its time. *Shuffle Along* opened at the Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C., in late March, 1921 for two weeks. It was later performed at the 63rd Street Theatre in New York City in May, 1921.

Promoters and theatre managers were skeptical at first as to whether white audiences would accept a "colored" musical because no black show had been successful on Broadway in over 12 years. The musical *mélange* became an instant hit because of the energetic, vivacious, torso-twisting dancers that gave birth to the shows that were to characterize black productions thereafter. It proved that white audiences would pay to see black musical comedies on Broadway and ran for more than 200 performances.



Among the cast of "*SHUFFLE ALONG*" were Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle, Paul Floyd, Lottie Gee, Gertrude Saunders, Roger Matthews, Mattie Wilkes, Lawrence Deas, and Adelaide Hall. The plot centers on the characters Sam and Steve who run for mayor in Jimtown, USA. If either one wins, he will appoint the other his chief of police. Sam wins with the help of a crooked campaign manager. Sam keeps his promise to appoint Steve as chief of police, but they begin to disagree on petty matters. They resolve their differences in a rousing, humorous 20-minute fight scene. As they fight, their opponent for the mayoral position, Harry Walton, vows to end their corrupt regime, underscored in the song "I'm Just Wild about Harry." Harry wins the next election as well as the girl and runs Sam and Steve out of town.

Recording companies marketed all of the 18 songs from the show including "Love Will Find a Way" and "I'm Just Wild about Harry" (which became President Harry S. Truman's campaign slogan in 1948) "Gypsy Blues," "I'm Cravin' for That Kind of Love," and "Shuffle Along." The landmark production renewed the public's interest in black theatricals and marked a decided turning point in the history of black entertainment in the United States. It introduced to the Broadway stage a black chorus of partially garbed "girls" in the style of the white "Follies." Because of the show's popularity, the entertainment profession witnessed the return of black musical comedies to Broadway on a regular basis.

Theatre practitioners were debating the function of drama, as well as its subject matter and presentation of the "Negro experience." Plays written by whites about black life gained great critical and box-office success from the late 1910s through the mid-1930s while inspiring the rise of black dramatists. Those white playwrights whose works provided opportunities for black performers were Ridgely Torrence's *PLAYS FOR A NEGRO THEATER* (1917), Eugene O'Neill's *THE EMPEROR JONES* (1921) and Marc Connelly's *THE GREEN PASTURES* (1929). These plays also caused black playwrights to present more authentic examples of what were called "Negro plays." New all-black theatre groups were formed across the United States.

Black playwrights that grew out of the Harlem Renaissance era included Alice Dunbar Nelson, Angelina Weld Grimké, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Mary P. Burrill, Marita Bonner, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Willis Richardson, Eulalie Spence, Frank Wilson and Randolph Edmonds.

W. E. B. Du Bois, founder and editor of "The Crisis", the monthly journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), surmised that Black Drama must be built from scratch, by Blacks for a Black theatre. Through The Crisis, he founded Krigwa, originally Crigwa. Krigwa sponsored a yearly literary contest which included a playwrighting competition and fostered a theatre company, the Krigwa Players which rehearsed and performed at the 135th St. branch of the New York Public Library. Frequent contest winners in the drama area included **Eulalie Spence**. In 1927, *FOOL'S ERRAND* competed



in the 5th Annual International Little Theatre Tournament, a first for Blacks since the finalists competed in a Broadway theatre. The Krigwa Players won one of four \$200.00 prizes and the play was published by Samuel French. However, Spence and Du Bois didn't see eye to eye, artistically or politically. Du Bois took the \$200.00 prize money and used it to reimburse production expenses and paid neither the actors nor Spence. The Krigwa Players disbanded as a result. Politically, Du Bois felt that theatre should be used as a vehicle for propaganda to advance the cause of the American Negro. Spence, on the other hand, always very aware of the fact that she was not African American but rather from the West Indies, had a different outlook regarding theatre. Spence felt that theatre was a place for people to be entertained and not antagonized by the problems of society. The plays of Eulalie Spence helped to make a name for the Krigwa Players amongst both Black and white critics. Eulalie's *HER* opened Krigwa Player's second season. Eulalie's sister, Olga Spence was an actress with the Krigwa Players. Although Eulalie Spence's work has been overshadowed by the male counterparts of her day such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Richard Wright, in recent years scholars have been resurrecting Spence's work along with other lesser known African American female writers. Other African American female playwrights whose works are being rediscovered are May Miller and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins.



Zora Neale Hurston was employed as a maid by the lead singer of the Gilbert & Sullivan theatrical company in 1916. In 1925, she submits a play, *COLOR STRUCK*, to Opportunity's literary contest, winning the second-place award. "Opportunity", in full "Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life", was a magazine associated with the Harlem Renaissance. In 1930, Hurston worked on the play *MULE BONE* with Langston Hughes before breaking with Langston over authorship.

In 1929 **Wallace Thurman's** play *HARLEM*, written with William Rapp, opened to mixed reviews, although its bawdy treatment of Harlem life made it a popular success.

Mary P. Burrill inspired Willis Richardson and other students to write plays. Burrill herself wrote plays about the Black Experience, their literary and cultural activities, and the Black Elite. She featured the kind of central figures as were prominent in the black society of Washington D.C., and others who contributed to black women's education in early twentieth century. The one-act play *THEY SIT IN DARKNESS* focuses on the difficulties of a young mother in having numerous children. Melinda, a 38-year old woman, works full-time and also takes care of her 10 children. She dies of physical and mental exhaustion, forcing her 17-year-old daughter to take care of the family rather than go to college as she planned, a result that continues the cycle of poverty for her and her siblings. Through Melinda's story, the play explores how legal restrictions that limited women's access to reproductive rights affected their welfare and that of their families. It was part of a campaign to legalize birth control, but this did not become legal until March 22 1972. Burrill's work was controversial because it advocated birth control as a means to escape poverty long before women were given reproductive rights in the U.S. The play *AFTERMATH* (1919) is set in rural South Carolina and features John, an African-American soldier who discovers after returning home from World War I that his father has been lynched. The play was produced by New York City's Krigwa Players in 1928. *AFTERMATH* was considered political because Burrill's portrayed John as a black male who selflessly and fearlessly confronted racial oppression.

Willis Richardson was the first black playwright to have a serious play produced on Broadway when *THE CHIP WOMAN'S FORTUNE* opened at the Frazee Theatre on 15 May 1923. Earlier this play had opened in Chicago as a production of the Ethiopian Art Players (29 Jan. 1923), in Washington, D.C., and on 7 May at the Lafayette Theater in Harlem. In the early 20s, black drama groups were searching for plays by black writers, and Richardson was the first to fulfill this need with his black history plays and plays that emphasized the physical strength, the nobility, and the



courage of his heroes. The Gilpin Players of Cleveland produced Richardson's *Compromise* at the Karamu Theater on 25 Feb. 1925, their first play by a black playwright. Among the other early black theater groups producing Richardson's plays were the Howard Players in Washington, D.C., and the Krigwa Players in New York. Recognized by Darwin Turner, critic of black theater, as the first significantly productive Afro-American playwright, Richardson wrote more than forty plays and edited two anthologies of plays by black writers, "*Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro*" (1930) and, with May Miller, "*Negro History in Thirteen Plays*" (1935).



Angelina Weld Grimké was one of the first American women of color to have a play publicly performed. Grimké wrote *RACHEL* – originally titled *BLESSED ARE THE BARREN* – one of the first plays to protest lynching and racial violence. The three-act drama was written for the NAACP, which called for new works to rally public opinion against the recently released film, *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* (1915), which glorified the Ku Klux Klan and portrayed a racist view of blacks and of their role in the American Civil War and Reconstruction in the South. Produced in 1916 in Washington, D.C., and subsequently in New York City, *RACHEL* was performed by an all-black cast. The action of the play is incited by a lynching. *RACHEL* centers on the family of the title character, portraying the life of an African-American family in the North in the early 20th century, where hundreds of thousands of

blacks had migrated from the rural South in the Great Migration. Grimké also explores themes of motherhood and the innocence of children. Rachel develops as she changes her perceptions of what the role of a mother might be, based on her sense of the importance of a naivete towards the terrible truths of the world around her.



Marita Bonner's writing dealt with issues of race, gender, and class, as her characters struggled to develop more fully in the face of social limitations, highlighting especially the vulnerability of black women. She wrote three plays: *THE POT MAKER* (1927), *THE PURPLE FLOWER - A PLAY* (1928) and *EXIT, AN ILLUSION* (1929), the most famous being *THE PURPLE FLOWER* which portrays black liberation. Many of Bonner's later works, such as *LIGHT IN DARK PLACES*, dealt with poverty, poor housing, and color discrimination in the black communities, and shows the influence that the urban environment has on black communities. Bonner is one of the many frequently unrecognized black female writers of the Harlem Renaissance who resisted the universalizing, essentialist tendencies by focusing on atypical women rather

than on an archetypal man, such as the New Negro," which can be seen in her earliest works.

Bonner regularly discussed poverty, familial relations, urban living, colorism, feminism, and racism in her works. She also often wrote about multi-ethnic communities, such as in "Nothing New". Bonner was wholly opposed to generalizations of black experience, and wrote about several differing black experiences in her short stories and plays. She is thus remembered as an advocate for intersectionality and a documentarian of multicultural urban life.



Georgia Douglas Johnson wrote numerous plays, including *BLUE BLOOD* (1926) and *PLUMES* (1927 under the pen name John Temple). Johnson was a well-known figure in the national black theatre movement and was an important "cultural sponsor" in the early twentieth century, assembling and inspiring the intellectuals and artists who generated the next group of black theatre and rising education. The 28 plays that she wrote were divided into four groups: "Primitive Life Plays", "Plays of Average Negro Life", "Lynching Plays" and "Radio Plays". Several of her plays are lost. In 1926, Johnson's play *BLUE BLOOD* won honorable mention in the Opportunity drama contest. Her play *PLUMES* also won in the same competition in 1927. *BLUE-EYED BLACK BOY* is a 1930 lynching genre play written to convince Congress to pass anti-lynching laws.



Frank Wilson started out in black vaudeville and minstrelsy, and also performed in big time vaudeville backing Eddie Leonard. He also sang with a group called the Carolina Comedy Four. Wilson had aspirations to be a serious actor, however. In Harlem he acted at the Lafayette Theatre and the Lincoln Theatre. He also organized a group called the Folk Song Singers, which sang spirituals. In 1917 he began a course of study at the American Academy of Dramatic Art. Here he became associated with the actress Rose McClendon, with whom he was to appear in many plays, including *JUSTICE* (1919). In 1923 two of his own short plays, *THE HEARTBREAKER* and *A TRAIN NORTH*, were produced by Harlem's Acme Players.

From here he went to Broadway, where he was to work steadily for three decades. He was in the original productions of Eugene O'Neill's *ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT WINGS* (1924) and *THE EMPEROR JONES* (1925), Paul Green's *IN ABRAHAM'S BOSOM* (1927), and Dorothy and Dubose Heyward's *PORGY* (1927), in which he played the title character. In 1926 he organized an all-black chorus for John Alden Carpenter's ballet *SKYSCRAPERS*, at the Metropolitan Opera. In 1928 his own play *MEEK MOSE* was produced on Broadway. 19 other Broadway shows followed, notably the original productions of Marc Connelly's *THE GREEN PASTURES* (1935), Lillian Hellman's *WATCH ON THE RHINE* (1941), Rodgers and Hammerstein's *SOUTH PACIFIC* (1943), and Clifford Odets' *THE BIG KNIFE* (1949).

Following *THE GREEN PASTURES*, he wrote and directed *WALK TOGETHER CHILLUN* (1936) which was produced by the Negro Theatre Unit of the Federal Theatre Project.



James Mercer Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri. He was raised by his grandmother until he was thirteen, when he moved to Lincoln, Illinois where Hughes began writing poetry. After graduating from high school, he spent a year in Mexico followed by a year at Columbia University in New York City. During this time, he held odd jobs such as assistant cook, launderer, and busboy. He also travelled to Africa and Europe working as a seaman. In November 1924, he moved to Washington, D. C. Hughes, who claimed Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Carl Sandburg, and Walt Whitman as his primary influences, is particularly known for his insightful, colorful portrayals of black life in America from the twenties through

the sixties. He wrote novels, short stories and plays, as well as poetry, and is also known for his engagement with the world of jazz and the influence it had on his writing. His life and work were enormously important in shaping the artistic contributions of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Unlike other notable black poets of the period—Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, and Countee Cullen—Hughes refused to differentiate between his personal experience and the common experience of black America. He wanted to tell the stories of his people in ways that reflected their actual culture, including both their suffering and their love of music, laughter, and language itself.



Langston Hughes' play *MULATTO: A TRAGEDY OF THE DEEP SOUTH* was produced on Broadway in 1935 by Martin Jones, where it ran for 11 months and 373 performances. It is one of the earliest Broadway plays to combine father-son conflict with race issues. Historian Joseph McLaren notes that the play was popular with audiences because they were intrigued by the tragic mulatto theme. Critics, however, were more negative, perhaps in part because director/producer Martin Jones altered much of the plot, moving the play away from tragedy and into melodrama. Melinda D. Wilson notes that Jones's addition of a rape scene may have

helped sell tickets, but also may have reinforced stereotypes of violent and promiscuous blacks—the kinds of stereotypes that black writers of the time were trying to stamp out. Literary scholar Germain J. Bienvenu argues that the play also examines the ways black people of the time held prejudices against other blacks. An American tale set two generations beyond abolition on a plantation in Georgia. Colonel Thomas Norwood is an old man who never remarried after the death of his young wife. His servant, Cora Lewis, a black woman now in her forties lives in the house with him and she manages the house and cares for his every need. Cora and the Colonel have had five children together, four of whom survived to adulthood. These mixed race children (called then “mulattoes”) have been educated and employed on the plantation, but are not acknowledged as family or heirs. Robert Lewis, the youngest at eighteen, worshipped his father until age eight when he was severely beaten for calling Colonel Thomas Norwood “Papa.” Since then he has been on a mission to get the Colonel to recognize him as a son.

Robert will not use the back door, he drives the car without permission, and he refuses to wait for a white customer to be served when he has been waiting longer. His actions inflame the local community who threaten to lynch him.

The action of the play culminates in a confrontation between the Colonel and Robert where the two men fight and Robert kills his father. The townsfolk come to lynch Robert, who runs, but circles back to the house with a gun. Cora tells her son that he is to hide upstairs and she’ll distract the mob. Robert uses the last bullet in his gun to shoot himself before the mob can hang him.

MULATTO: A TRAGEDY OF THE DEEP SOUTH was performed in 1934 on Broadway. The fact that a man of color had any show produced on Broadway at that time was strikingly significant. The play, however, was heavily edited to sensationalize it with even more conflict than the original script contained. Langston Hughes was so angry about these unsanctioned changes that he boycotted the opening of the show.

The title includes the word “tragedy” and the original script was already rife with horrifying and violent events; the illegal changes only added more. Yet the real tragedy Langston Hughes wanted to communicate was the grim reality of generations of race mixing without recognition by white landowners. These children who lived in “limbo” between two races should be recognized and respected and that is one of the tragedies of the Deep South.



Paul Robeson was a famous African-American athlete, singer, actor, and advocate for the civil rights of people around the world. He rose to prominence in a time when segregation was legal in the United States, and Black people were being lynched by racist mobs, especially in the South. His talents made him a revered man of his time, yet his radical political beliefs all but erased him from popular history. Today, more than one hundred years after his birth, Robeson is just beginning to receive the credit he is due.

Robeson attended Rutgers University on an academic scholarship before moving on to Columbia University and earning a law degree in 1923.

Robeson was performing in an amateur production when he caught the attention of the playwright Eugene O'Neill, who then offered him the lead role of Brutus Jones in his play *THE EMPEROR JONES*. Robeson accepted the role in 1924, and also appeared in the film version in 1933. His onstage appearance in the play launched his career as a concert performer. His program of spirituals and work songs at Town Hall in NYC was the first program of all-black music ever sung on the New York stage by a solo artist.

Paul Robeson lived in England between 1927 and 1939 where he appeared in productions such as "*THE HAIRY APE*" (also by Eugene O'Neill), "*STEVEDORE*" and "*SHOW BOAT*" (where he earned his trademark singing "Ol' Man River"). His greatest achievement as an actor was perhaps playing the role of Othello, first in England and then again in 1945 on Broadway. The Broadway production ran for a record 296 performances- the most performances of any Shakespeare play on Broadway.



In 1950, the U.S. State Department revoked his passport due to his strong affection for the Soviet Union and his activism around the racial situation of the time in the U.S. This led to his being blacklisted, and he was denied use of recording studios and concert halls.

After an eight-year campaign by his world-wide supporters, he regained his passport and celebrated with a concert at Carnegie Hall before leaving the country. He re-primed his role of Othello at Stratford-on-Avon and went to the Soviet Union to receive the Stalin Peace Prize.



Langston Hughes and Louise Thompson Patterson formed the **Harlem Suitcase Theatre**, an experimental theatre-in-the-round that premiered Hughes' didactic play *DON'T YOU WANT TO BE FREE?* during its first season in 1938. The goal of the Harlem Suitcase Theatre was to organize "a group of proficient actors" who would present productions for labor organizations. Paul Peters,

Whittaker Chambers, Langston Hughes, and Jacob Burck would serve as directors.

The Executive Committee of the theatre consisted of Louise Thompson, Robert Earl Jones, Mary Savage, Grace Johnson, Ernest Goldstein, Muriel Unis, Hilary Phillips, Dorothy Peterson, and Hughes. Membership in the theatre was open to "all who conform to the cultural and artistic standards of the group" and applications would be approved by the Executive Committee. The theatre relied heavily on membership as one of the "important foundation stones." Two of the crucial concerns were "financial" and "technical matters." Of the fifty or so members of the Suitcase Theatre, many served on committees. The House Committee, the Promotion Committee, and the Technical Department were among the various working groups. Black

writers such as Waring Cuney and Gwendolyn Bennett as well as the artists Richmond Barthé and Romare Bearden were included as committee members; Ralph Ellison's name appears on one-member list.



The **Federal Theatre Project** was the largest and most ambitious effort mounted by the Federal Government to organize and produce theater events- the closest that the US came to establishing a national theatre. It was an effort of the administration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to provide work for unemployed professionals in the theater during the Great Depression. The Federal

Theatre Project was one of five arts-related projects called Federal Project Number One, established under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during Roosevelt's first term, created through Executive Order on May 6, 1935. The FTP was administered from Washington, D. C. under the direction of Hallie Flanagan, but its many companies stretched the full breadth of the Nation. It functioned from 1935 to 1939 when its funding was terminated. In those four years, it was responsible for some of the most innovative staging of its time.

Various kinds of units produced under FTP including African-American, Yiddish, Italian, Spanish, French and German units.

The **Negro Theatre Project** (NTP) was part of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) and had units that were set up in cities throughout the United States. The units were located in four different geographical regions of the country. In the West, units were located including Seattle, Los Angeles, New York City, Boston, Hartford, Philadelphia, Newark, Raleigh, Durham, Birmingham, Chicago and Cleveland. The project provided employment and



apprenticeships to black playwrights, directors, actors, and technicians. The project offered a much-needed source of assistance for African American theatre during its existence.

The New York Negro Unit was highly active and perhaps the most well-known. It was located at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem (previously occupied by Anita Bush's Lafayette Players), and staged some 30 plays. The most popular production came to be called *THE VOODOO MACBETH* (1936), director Orson Welles' adaptation of Shakespeare's play that was set in the Haitian court of King Henri Christophe. Other plays included Frank Wilson's folk drama *WALK TOGETHER, CHILDREN* (1936), which described the deportation of 100 African American children from the South to the North to work for low wages. Arna Bontemps and Countee

Cullen's *THE CONJUR MAN DIES* (1936), was a farcical mystery dramatizing Rudolph Fisher's mystery-melodrama. Also, in 1936, J. Augustus Smith and Peter Morrell co-authored *TURPENTINE*, a social drama focusing on the injustice of Southern labor camps. George MacEntee's *THE CASE OF PHILIP LAWRENCE* (1937) was a courtroom melodrama, and *HAITI* (1938) by William DuBois was a historical drama about overthrowing the Haitian government. The New York Negro Unit was what evolved into the illustrious American Negro Theatre the year following the FTP's suspension.



The **American Negro Theatre** (ANT); formed by Abram Hill, Frederick O'Neal, and other actors in Harlem, New York in 1940, was born out of the illustrious Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre Project in Harlem. From 1940 and into the mid-1950s, ANT was governed by four goals: to develop a permanent acting company trained in the arts and crafts of the theatre that also reflected the special gifts, talents, and attributes of African Americans; to produce plays that honestly and with integrity interpreted, illuminated, and criticized contemporary black life and the concerns of the black people (and particularly the Harlem community); to maintain an affiliation with, and provide leadership for, other black theatre groups throughout the nation; and to utilize its resources to develop racial pride in the theatre, rather than racial apathy. In addition to producing plays, ANT focused on creating training workshops for actors, playwrights and technicians, as well as a radio program.

Hill and O'Neal started the ANT by assembling several of their own theatre friends: Howard Augusta, James Jackson, Virgil Richardson, Claire Leyba, Jefferson D. Davis, Vivian Hall, Austin Briggs-Hall, Stanley Green, Fanny McConnell, and Kenneth Manigault. Hill approached librarians at the public library on 135th Street in Harlem, the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library, to start producing his plays. The librarians granted Hill and the ANT permission to use their basement stage. The basement theatre held 150 seats and Hill charged 49 cents a seat.



Stage productions included:

HITS, BITS, AND SKITS (July 1940); *ON STRIVER'S ROW* by Abram Hill (September 1940); *NATURAL MAN* by Theodore Browne (May 1941); *ON STRIVER'S ROW*, the musical version (March 1941); *THREE IS A*

FAMILY by Phoebe and Henry Ephron (November 1943); *THREE IS A FAMILY* transferred to Broadway (April 1944); *ANNA LUCASTA* by Philip Yourdan, adapted by Abram Hill (June 1944); *GARDEN OF TIME* by Owen Dodson (March 1945); *HENRI CHRISTOPHE* by Dan Hammersmith (June 1945); *HOME IS THE HUNTER* by Samuel Kootz (January 1946); *ON STRIVER'S ROW* (revived in February 1946); *ANGEL STREET* by Patrick Hamilton (July 1946); *JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK* by Sean O'Casey (July 1946); *YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU* by Moss Hart and George Kaufman (August 1946); *THE PEACEMAKER* by Kurt Unkelbach (November 1946); *TIN TOP VALLEY* by Walter Carroll (March 1947); *THE LATER CHRISTOPHER BEAN* by Sidney Howard (July 1947); *ROPE* by Eugene O'Neill (July 1947); *THE SHOW OFF* by George Kelly (August 1947); *RAIN* by John Colton and Clemence Randolph (December 1947); *THE WASHINGTON YEARS* by Nat Sherman (March 1948); *SOJOURNER TRUTH* by Katherine G. Chaplin (April 1949); *ALMOST FAITHFUL* by Harry Wagstaff Gribble (June 1948); *RIDERS TO THE SEA* by John Millington Synge; *FREIGHT* by Kenneth White (February 1949)

The play that ANT is most recognition for was *ANNA LUCASTA*. It opened at The Harlem Library Theatre, but Broadway producers were anxious to move it downtown because of its commercial appeal. The show ran on Broadway for 957 performances (3 years- the longest running Broadway venture for black theatre at the time) before it toured throughout the country and later abroad in London, England. Unfortunately, the success of *ANNA LUCASTA* on Broadway had a two-fold effect on the company. ANT fell apart afterwards due to the fact that a commercially oriented production was a major departure from the company's community roots. This led to the resignation of founder Abram Hill, who was opposed to the shift in goals and ideology.



Abram Hill was an African-American playwright, author of *ON STRIVERS ROW*, *WALK HARD*, *TALK LOUD* and several other plays; and a principal figure in the development of black theatre from Atlanta, Georgia.

Hill was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 20, 1910, and spent half of his childhood there. At the age of seven he appeared in a Morehouse College Theatre production. In 1925, the family moved to Harlem, New York, and at 13 years of age Hill attended De Witt Clinton High School. After

completing high school, he enrolled at City College of New York for two years and subsequently graduated with a B.A. from Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, in 1937; before graduating he secured a job in drama with the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps), where he directed productions with male youths. He majored in Theater Arts at Lincoln, and after graduating was hired as an assistant in the university's drama department.

Frederick O'Neal was an American actor, theater producer and television director. He founded the American Negro Theater and was the first African-American president of the Actors' Equity Association. He was also known for his work behind the scenes as a revolutionary trade unionist.

Born in Brooksville, Mississippi, O'Neal made his New York debut in 1936 with the Civic Repertory Theatre. In 1944, he won the Clarence Derwent award for his Broadway performance as the greedy brother-in-law in *ANNA LUCASTA*. He also earned acclaim for his stage portrayal of Lem Scott in *TAKE A GIANT STEP* in 1953. He reprised both roles on film.

On television O'Neal also portrayed Officer Wallace on "*Car 54, Where Are You?*" from 1961 to 1963. In 1964 he played Matty Howard in a boxing-centered episode of the ABC drama "*Breaking Point*" titled "Never Trouble Trouble till Trouble Troubles You" that boasted a primarily black cast, including Terry Carter, Diana Sands, Rex Ingram, and Mark Dymally. Among theater companies which he helped organize were Harlem's American Negro Theatre in 1940, which started the careers of Harry Belafonte, Ruby Dee, Sidney Poitier, among others. O'Neal also co-founded the British Negro Theatre.

In 1964 he became president of the Actors' Equity Association and Associated Actors and Artistes of America. He was the first African-American president of Equity (1964–73).

He narrated, along with Hilda Simms, the educational record "Great Negro Americans" which was written and produced by Alan Sands.



ANNA LUCASTA is a 1944 American play by Philip Yordan. Inspired by Eugene O'Neill's *ANNA CHRISTIE*, the play was originally written about a Polish American family. The American Negro Theatre director Abram Hill and director Harry Wagstaff Gribble acquired the rights and adapted the script for an all African American cast, and presented the first performance on June 16, 1944. The play moved from Harlem to Broadway's Mansfield Theatre, running August 30, 1944 – November 30, 1946. The Broadway cast included Hilda Simms, Canada Lee and Alice Childress, who earned a Tony Award nomination for

Best Supporting Actress. Childress was inspired to write the Obie Award-winning drama, *TROUBLE IN MIND* (1955), based on her experiences in the production.

A girl making her way through life as a prostitute seeks forgiveness from her family. The Lucastas, working-class people in a coal mining town, are selfish people whose daughter, Anna, has left home to lead what they consider a "life of shame" in the city. Rudolf, the son of a friend, comes to visit them on the suggestion of his father. He has several hundred dollars in his pocket and is eager to marry. The family decides that the youth is a hick, but there is a chance to marry off Anna "respectably". However, Rudolf turns out to be rather attractive and graduated from an agriculture college. When Anna returns home, she is fascinated by him and the two fall in love, though she is still in love with her sailor boyfriend Danny. Anna gradually awakens to find out what it means to be treated by a kind young man. For Anna is not a degenerate, but a high-spirited girl driven from home by her father's puritanical cruelty. Without telling Rudolf about her past, she agrees to marry him. But on her wedding day, Danny

shows up. Anna, believing that a life with Rudolf is impossible, returns to her old haunts in the city. Rudolf realizes he loves Anna more deeply, and sets out to find her. He makes her realize his love for her and they go off together.