HARVEY YOUNG

Introduction

In June, 1996, playwright August Wilson delivered a keynote address at the biennial gathering of the Theatre Communications Group (TCG), a professional organization of theatre artists and scholars. Arriving at the podium, the two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, who was widely considered to be the most influential voice active in the American theatre, surveyed the assembled audience. He saw the leaders of prominent regional theatres in the country, emerging young artists eager to take their places, and critics whose pens had the power to attract (or drive away) corporate and governmental funding. There were several hundred attendees. The vast majority of them were white. Wilson was not surprised by the composition of his audience. Having developed his seven history plays on the African American experience, which were part of a planned ten-play cycle, at regional theatres across the country en route to Broadway, the accomplished playwright was well aware of the complexion of American theatre. His success, his standing at the podium on that day and, more generally, as one of the world's greatest living playwrights, was aided by many of the people who sat before him. Now, they were awaiting his remarks.

Wilson's "provocative" and "passionate" address,[1] which would later be published under the title "The Ground on which I Stand,"[2] triggered a national conversation, within the arts, about race, multiculturalism, and cultural separatism. It catalyzed a series of debates, including a couple featuring August Wilson and his primary antagonist, theatre critic Robert Brustein. It inspired scholars to interrogate the relevance of the "color line" at the end of the twentieth century and within the theatre. Standing at the podium, Wilson asserted that more opportunities needed to be made available to non-white artists to create and engage in work that reflects their unique cultural experiences and history. He criticized colorblind casting practices for not acknowledging cultural difference. He called for the creation of ethnic theatres whose missions would be to champion the work of and create opportunities for artists of color.

What made Wilson's remarks so controversial was that the playwright's own career ascendance seemed to suggest that American theatre had achieved not only racial diversity but also racial syncretism. The TCG address was a celebratory occasion. It was a chance for August Wilson and his collaborators and supporters (his TCG audience) to reflect upon how much the theatre industry had progressed. One hundred years earlier, theatre audiences were segregated by race, and blackface minstrelsy remained popular on vaudeville stages. A century later, the most critically acclaimed and commercially viable dramatist in the country was a mixed-race playwright who identified as African American.

Wilson was not in a celebratory mood. He maintained that the contemporary theatre industry had done little to support, encourage, appreciate, and preserve the distinct voices, expressions, and experiences of artists of color. Offering evidence, he pointed to the League of Resident Theatres (LORT), the largest professional association of non-profit and not-for-profit theatres in the United States. Although not every major regional theatre is a LORT member, the seventy-five-member organization is often considered to be synonymous with American theatre. In 1996, only one of the then sixty-seven LORT theatres could be identified as "African American," meaning that its mission was to cultivate and produce the work of (or relating to) African Americans. The lack of producing venues and sponsoring institutions with a sustained commitment to the development of Black theatre suggested to Wilson that the future of African American theatre was at risk and that the value of black experiences expressed on stage remained underappreciated.

This book opens with August Wilson's address in 1996 to demonstrate that the work of building African American theatre remains both incomplete and controversial. These themes – an ongoing desire *to build* and *create* spaces to stage African American experiences, and the *challenges* that attended these efforts – recur throughout the following pages. It was the lack of opportunities for African American artists and the absence of stages for their work that prompted William Alexander Brown to found the African Theatre in New York City in 1821. The venue where Ira Aldridge, the often-celebrated interpreter of Shakespeare's plays, made his theatrical debut, the African Theatre attracted the ire of white theatre impresarios who actively campaigned for its closure. The theatre would succumb to these outside pressures and permanently shut its doors after only three years of operation. The fact that Wilson would lament the paucity of theatres 175 years after the opening of Brown's theatre hints at the challenges, difficulties, and obstacles that have accompanied efforts to build and maintain African American theatre.

The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre centers the struggle to create a uniquely African American theatre. It offers an introduction to significant moments, topics, and themes that influenced the development of Black theatre over the past two centuries. The book begins in the nineteenth century, when slavery was legal and when African Americans who were "free" lacked basic citizenship rights, such as the right to vote. It ends approximately two centuries later, after August Wilson's premature death and during the presidency of Barack Obama, the first African American President of the United States. With each passing decade, African American actors, playwrights, directors, and producers actively employed the theatre not only to comment upon the events and concerns of their present but also to record and preserve their experiences and everyday realities for future consideration.

The complexion of America

It is difficult to discuss American cultural production, particularly within the area of the expressive arts, without acknowledging the significant influence of African Americans. Unlike most other racial and ethnic groups in the United States, the majority of African Americans arrived not by choice but by force. African captives were shipped as cargo across the Atlantic Ocean and sold as property throughout the Americas. Once on the continents (North and South America), families were repeatedly broken and fragmented as parents, children, and close relatives were sold to different buyers. The brutality of slavery, which lasted over many generations (approximately 300 years), severed most ties to the languages, cultures, and customs of the captives' ancestral homelands. As the influence of African practices faded with the passage of time, a new culture and set of customs were developed to replace them. They were premised upon experiences within the Americas. This new, distinctly American culture was unlike anything seen or heard elsewhere in the world.

African American music was one of the first widely recognized and uniquely American cultural forms. In 1892 – before black spirituals evolved into the blues, jazz, and, later, inspired the creation of rock 'n' roll music – famed Czech composer Antonín Dvořák predicted "that the future music of [the United States] must be founded on what are called Negro melodies … They are the folk songs of America and your composers must turn to them."[3] These melodies, which had been performed across Europe as well as other parts of the world thanks to the travels of African American "jubilee" singers, contained, in song, the experiences of black folk. They detailed the harsh reality of slavery and occasionally expressed an African American optimism

that a better life, perhaps even in death, awaited those who toiled and struggled. African American innovations in the area of music would continue: blues in the 1920s, jazz in the 1930s and 1940s, rhythm and blues in the 1950s and 1960s, and, more recently, rap and hip-hop music in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. Black musical expression became a metonym for American culture.

African American autobiographies, as a literary form, similarly formed the core of a distinctive and uniquely American culture. Although such creations were limited during the years when slavery was legal as a result of concerted efforts to prevent African Americans from becoming literate, the few existing narratives were widely circulated by abolitionists for their ability to offer an intimate, first-person glimpse into the hardships of slavery and an individual's ability to overcome extreme adversity. While it could be argued that the dominant strain of American autobiography is the depiction of the United States as the "last best hope,"[4] where immigrants can arrive penniless and fashion a more prosperous future for their families than they could in their homelands, the African American narratives are distinct in their depictions of the unparalleled hardships that the protagonist survived. For example, Frederick Douglass in his best-selling autobiography recalls the "shrieks and piteous cries"[5] of his aunt who was whipped for attempting to date a fellow captive. The struggles and sufferings of African Americans, as remembered and recounted in literature, contributed toward the fashioning of the belief that America was the place where a person's fortune could be radically reversed.

The widespread popularity of black music as well as the orations of prominent African American abolitionists in the early-to-mid nineteenth century fueled a desire to see African Americans represented on theatrical stages. Charles Mathews, the famed white English solo performer, developed a crowd-pleasing performance with his one-man show *A Trip to America* (1823), which consisted of his impersonations of the various American character types that he encountered during a visit to the country. Among those impersonated, caricatured, and, arguably, stereotyped by Mathews were African Americans who labored as porters and, in one instance, as an actor, presumably at Brown's African Theatre. Mathews's depiction of the porters and the unnamed actor as seemingly dim-witted would set (white) audience expectations for the appearance and the behavior of the African American character. When Ira Aldridge performed at Covent Garden in London in 1833, his performances of Shakespeare's plays were consistently panned by critics possibly as a consequence of their having been primed by Mathews. Around the same time, T. D. Rice, who is widely rumored to be the individual who started the phenomenon of blackface minstrelsy, achieved international

fame for his seeming ability to channel blackness in his performances of the Jim Crow character, a blackface figure dressed in tattered rags who spoke in broken English and sang and danced before audiences. Rice's performances, which toured throughout the United States and Europe, particularly the United Kingdom, inspired a number of imitators who, like Rice, proceeded to introduce minstrelsy to international audiences throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, and transformed blackface performance into, arguably, the most significant theatrical form to emerge from the Americas. Novelist and satirist Mark Twain enthusiastically identified blackface minstrelsy as "the show which to me had no peer and whose peer has not yet arrived, in my experience."[6]

It is notable that these early representations of the African American character on stage were imagined and devised by non-African American artists. They were not designed with the aim of accurately reflecting the black experience. Instead, they placed a spotlight on white privilege relative to assumptions of blackness. Mathews's performances were less about the porters and the African Theatre actor and more about the movements of an English thespian in the particular environment of the early-nineteenth-century United States. His performances sought to relay to his audiences the feeling of being an outsider or tourist in the strange but exciting new nation that had developed since the American colonies had won their independence forty years earlier. Rice was less interested in representing African American song and dance and more interested in developing an appealing but extreme character type. The rumor that he developed his Jim Crow character by exaggerating the street performance of an African American street musician with a physical disability supports this contention. In each of these instances, the staging of a caricatured or stereotypical version of the African American character was employed to push an agenda and, frequently, a racial politics that were unconcerned with the actual, lived experiences of African Americans. Such stereotypes and caricatures are part of the larger history of African American theatre. This book engages with their legacy but elects to spotlight critically the work of black artists who succeeded in overcoming arguably racist assumptions of blackness rather than those who created and popularized them.

The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre centers dramatic and musical works that explicitly aim to offer an honest and recognizably real portrayal of African American cultural and historical experiences. It explores the long history of American theatrical production and spotlights the activities of those individuals whose efforts helped to fashion a more accurate appearance of black life on stage. Along the way, this book chronicles the evolution of African American theatre, from the days of legalized

African captivity, to the "New Negro" and "Black Arts" movements, to contemporary "post-race" and "post-black" campaigns. In addressing such a large period of time, this book champions an elastic conception of African American theatre that accounts for the changing conceptions of blackness as a result of the radical social and political events that occurred over the past two centuries. Although their definitions of African American theatre vary, the theatre artists featured in this book – from producer William Alexander Brown to playwright Lynn Nottage – share the belief that the everyday concerns and experiences of African Americans are important and worthy of being expressed on the stage.

Defining African American theatre

In this book, thirteen prominent historians and critics of African American theatre offer engaged and engaging close readings of specific theatrical movements, genres, and plays that were instrumental to the development of Black theatre. Within their individual chapters, the authors attend to the issues that were particular to a historical moment. The subtle shifts in the evolution of Black theatre appear in their discussions of the differing perspectives of contemporaries, such as the contrasting viewpoints on the utility of theatre held by Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois, or the unique ways in which Barbara Ann Teer and Ntozake Shange embraced an Africanist presence within their plays. The chapters inform one another and, together, offer a full and detailed chronological mapping of African American theatre from the 1800s to today.

The expansive period covered within this book can be divided into four temporal periods: antebellum and Reconstruction, the New Negro, the Black Arts Movement, and the post-black. Although each is formally addressed in individual chapters, it is worthwhile briefly to consider them in order to appreciate better the historical development of African American theatre. In the antebellum and, later, Reconstruction periods, the years preceding and immediately following the Civil War (1861–1865), African Americans were legally denied citizenship (and, in the earlier period, personhood) rights. Theatrical advocates, like Brown, succeeded – albeit briefly – in creating theatre companies and leisure gardens for the entertainment of black customers. The creation of venues, like the African Theatre, and the presence of audiences, particularly black audiences, who were eager to see performances occasionally penned by black playwrights and performed by black artists, launched the first wave of African American theatrical production. By the end of the Reconstruction era and the dawn of the twentieth century, African American theatre troupes toured across the country and began to appear on

Broadway. Bob Cole, J. Rosamond Johnson, Bert Williams, George Walker, and Aida Overton Walker were among the innovators who, through their performances, slowly revised and refashioned the popular representations of blackness as designed by Rice and his imitators into something that was more recognizable to African American audiences.

Although the concept of the "New Negro" was popularized and given new cultural relevance by Alain Locke, and is most closely associated with the locale of Harlem, the authors in this collection who address this period emphasize the influence of the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois and the space of Washington, DC on theatre. Du Bois championed the creation of African American theatre in the 1920s as a bold and powerful act of self-determination. Using the theatre as a tool to engage black communities, he asserted that playwrights among other artists could articulate the experience of blackness. Audiences could gather to see themselves, their stories, their culture, and their lives represented on the stage. This mirroring function rested at the very heart of his conception of African American theatre. Indeed, Du Bois insisted that theatre artists had an obligation to present, in a recognizable manner, the concerns of black folk.

> The plays of a real Negro theatre must be: 1. About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal real Negro life as it is. 2. By us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. For us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. Near us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.[7]

It is not surprising that Du Bois, who famously identified "the color-line" as the central "problem" of the twentieth century,[8] would craft a definition of Black theatre that would be informed by its presence. Writing during the segregationist period when neighborhood associations vigorously, forcibly, and *legally* worked to maintain the whiteness of their communities, he understood the necessity of creating a distinctive and unique art form that could exist within black neighborhoods.

For Du Bois, African American theatre reflects the embodied experience of being black. The author of *The Souls of Black Folk* asserted the value of a phenomenal, a body-based, "understand[ing] from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today." The theatre for which he advocates reveals the experience of black folk living at a moment when not only racial segregation was legal but also the murders of African Americans by white lynch mobs usually went unprosecuted. It reflects the efforts of artists who challenged widely popular Jim Crow stereotypes and caricatures by

creating characters who more accurately resembled – in look, mannerism, and everyday concerns – the folks who resided in black neighborhoods. Most importantly, it, according to Du Bois, unifies black audiences by creating and emboldening a sense of community. The frequent "us" refrain in his definition reveals this.

When playwright Amiri Baraka offered a definition of "Black theatre," he extended Du Bois's about/by/for/near formulation and added a fifth feature: it must be "liberating."

> It is a theater that actually functions to liberate Black people. It is a theater that will commit Black people to their own liberation and instruct them about what they should do and what they should be doing, will involve them emotionally. It will also, hopefully, involve them programmatically in their liberation and should not only be utilizing the so-called Black lifestyle or the lifestyle of African people in America but it should also be an act of liberation.[9]

For Baraka, African American theatre needed to be more than a reflection of "us." Active in the decades *following* the end of legal segregation in 1954, the celebrated production of Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway in 1959, and the most active years of the Civil Rights Movement (1955–1965), the playwright yearned for the creation of theatre that would re-energize and reactivate the social and political consciousness of black folk. Theatre could (and should) encourage audiences not to be complacent with the successes of the Civil Rights Movement. It should motivate and mobilize audiences toward continuing the Movement to bring about social change.

Arguably short-lived, the Black Arts Movement inspired artists to think critically about the political potential of African American theatre. Beginning in the mid 1960s and ending a decade later, the Movement spurred the creation of hundreds of theatre companies that sought to revise stereotypes of blackness, emphasize the beauty of black culture, and engage the social and political concerns of African American communities. Despite the fact that the majority of these companies would fold within a decade, the legacy of the Black Arts Movement lived on thanks to the ongoing influence of surviving companies, such as Penumbra Theatre in Minneapolis, and artists, such as August Wilson, whose voices were nurtured within them. Wilson, in his TCG address, refers to the Black Arts Movement as the "kiln in which [he] was fired."[10]

Toward the close of the twentieth century and into the dawn of the twenty-first century, artists and scholars increasingly began to trouble the received, historical definitions of blackness and to deny the "color line" a place in the new century. For example, in a 2005 essay, playwright Suzan-Lori Parks

responded to the "What is a Black play?" question in the following manner: "A black play is blacker than black. A black play is written by a black person. A black play has black actors. A black play is written by a white person and has white actors. A black play doesnt have anything to do with black people. Im saying *The Glass Menagerie* is a black play. SAY WHAT? EXCUSE ME?!?!"[11] This excerpt, which is part of a more extensive list of the many possibilities of a black play, signals a generational shift in thinking about and conceptualizing blackness. Parks's perspective connects with a post-black and post-race perspective that does not seek to erase race but rather looks to other experiences *in addition* to race that define a person's sense of self. Admittedly, the "post" can feel like a misnomer in that the goal is not to bound blackness – to develop an end point that can then be moved beyond – but rather to expand understandings of blackness. Post-black is additive, blackness plus. In her definition, Parks denies African American theatre its exclusivity by reading it not as something to be possessed by a particular group of people within a given community. She rejects the "us" and, by extension, "them" binary in favor of a universalism that sees the influence of blackness everywhere. African American theatre is indivisible from American theatre. They are one and the same.

An orientation map

The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre centers the efforts of mostly African American artists who worked to revise the stereotypes and negative images of blackness and to bring a more accurate and recognizable representation of African American experiences to the stage. These men and women understood that expressive art has the capacity to enable self-determination, to record and preserve historical experiences, and to fashion community. Producers established venues that bolstered a sense of African American community by providing audiences with opportunities to see themselves and their stories enacted on stage. Playwrights literally took pen in hand to write characters and plot lines that offered insight into the everyday reality of being African American within the United States. Actors infused their roles with a sensibility that revised historical stereotypes and caricatures of black folk and gave the African American character a new face. This book centers the work, the labor, and effort of artists to script and share African American experiences on stage from the nineteenth century to the present day.

Douglas A. Jones, Jr. looks at performance in the antebellum period and casts a critical spotlight on the ambivalent nature of African American theatre. He looks at both the coerced performances of black captives – such as

their singing and dancing during the transatlantic crossing of slave ships and preceding their still stands on auction blocks – and those voluntarily created acts, such as the "wild songs" on plantations and, later, the productions at Brown's African Theatre, to interrogate the multiple purposes to which black performance could be employed. He demonstrates that Black theatre in itself is not inherently liberating. It has been used to reinforce the condition of oppression. However, it has also been infused with the potential to create an "oppositional culture" capable of challenging the status quo.

Heather Nathans centers the representation of slave rebellions and rebellious black characters on the theatrical stage "from the colonial era through the beginning of the twentieth century." She reveals how dramatic representations of captive uprisings were influenced by actual events. For example, the revolution in Haiti (formerly Saint Domingue), which was led by Toussaint L'Ouverture in 1791, inspired the scripting of numerous plays about unrest and revolution in "Hayti," among other places. Nathans reveals that plays, penned by both white and black playwrights, frequently depicted the unjust conditions to which black men and women were subjected. They framed rebellion and revolt as justifiable acts.

Monica White Ndounou focuses on Bert Williams, George Walker, and Langston Hughes. Through a close reading of their seminal productions, she reveals how the artists attempted to challenge existing theatrical stereotypes and caricatures of blackness. Ndounou reads these figures as trailblazers, paving the path for future artists who were able to present more accurate depictions of African American life on the Broadway stage. The author covers more than fifty years of theatre history, from the emergence of Williams and Walker in the late nineteenth century to the premiere of Hughes's *The Barrier* on the Great White Way in 1950.

Jonathan Shandell offers an overview of the Negro Little Theatre Movement, the twenty-year period between the 1910s and 1930s that witnessed the flourishing of small, independent theatres across the country. As Shandell notes, these theatres "took root in library auditoriums, churches, community centers, universities, and anywhere else a platform could be built and artists and audiences might gather." This chapter spotlights a handful of these theatres – the Anita Bush Stock Company, the Ethiopian Art Theatre, the Krigwa Players, the Harlem Suitcase Company, and the Karamu Theatre of Cleveland – and discusses both their evolution and lasting impact. Along the way, Shandell chronicles the efforts of several individuals, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Charles Gilpin, who were instrumental to their creation. The chapter ends with a brief account of the Federal Theatre Project's "Negro units" and their aesthetic similarity to African American little theatres.