This Companion provides a comprehensive overview of African American theatre, from the early nineteenth century to the present day. Along the way, it chronicles the evolution of African American theatre and its engagement with the wider community, including discussions of slave rebellions on the national stage, African Americans on Broadway, the Harlem Renaissance, African American women dramatists, and the “New Negro” and “Black Arts” movements. Leading scholars spotlight the producers, directors, playwrights, and actors whose efforts helped to fashion a more accurate appearance of black life on stage, and reveal the impact of African American theatre both within the United States and further afield. Chapters also address recent theatre productions in the context of political and cultural change and ask where African American theatre is heading in the twenty-first century.

Harvey Young is an associate professor at Northwestern University, where he holds appointments in African-American Studies, Performance Studies, and Theatre.

A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book.
THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

EDITED BY
HARVEY YOUNG
Northwestern University

Cambridge University Press
For my parents,
Harvey Young, Sr.
and
Regina Huff Young
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An edited collection brings together an array of voices and talents for a common purpose. In addition to those whose names appear in the table of contents, the editor would like to acknowledge the following individuals whose presence and efforts were instrumental to the completion of this book. Vicki Cooper, Fleur Jones, and Rebecca Taylor at Cambridge University Press saw the potential in this project and served as the book’s earliest advocates. Project manager Emma Wildsmith at Out of House Publishing Solutions arranged for copy-editing, typesetting, and proofreading. Robert Whitelock copy-edited this manuscript. Christine Simonian Bean at Northwestern University and Katie Zien at McGill University provided general (but vital) editorial assistance, including reformatting chapters and reading chapter drafts. Zeke Young, an always smiling and often singing three-year-old, provided the soundtrack as his father edited this book.
CHRONOLOGY

1529  First enslaved Africans arrive in North America.

1741  Enslaved Africans allegedly attempt to kill the white men of Manhattan, known as “The Great Negro Plot.”

1807  Birth of Ira Aldridge.

1818  Birth of Frederick Douglass.

1821  William Alexander Brown opens the African Theatre (also known as the Minor Theatre, African Grove, or the African Company), the first African American theatre in New York City.

1823  Brown’s *The Drama of King Shotaway* produced; thought to be the first African-American-authored play produced in the United States. Charles Mathews performs *A Trip to America* in London.


1830  Thomas Dartmouth Rice (a white blackface performer) makes the Jim Crow character his signature act.

1833  Ira Aldridge performs at Covent Garden in London.

1831  Nat Turner leads a slave rebellion in Virginia; known as Nat Turner’s Rebellion or the Southampton Insurrection.

1839  Enslaved African revolt on the *Amistad*.

1850  Congress passes the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act.

1852  Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* published.

1859  John Brown launches attack on Harpers Ferry.
Chronology

1861  Civil War begins.
1863  Abraham Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation.
1865  Civil War ends. Ku Klux Klan forms.
1867  Death of Ira Aldridge.
1873  Birth of George W. Walker.
1874  Birth of Egbert “Bert” Williams.
1876  First Jim Crow laws enacted.
1878  Birth of Charles Gilpin.
1894  Birth of Eulalie Spence.
1895  Death of Frederick Douglass.
1896  *The Gold Bug* opens; George Walker and Bert Williams become the first African Americans on Broadway.
1902  Birth of Langston Hughes. *In Dahomey* opens as the first full-length musical written and performed by African Americans on Broadway.
1903  W. E. B. Du Bois publishes *The Souls of Black Folk*.
1909  Formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Bert Williams stars in the Ziegfeld Follies, becoming the first African American to receive top billing.
1911  Death of George W. Walker.
1912  The Lafayette Theatre becomes the first New York City theatre to desegregate.
1914  The Great War (World War I) begins.
1915  Anita Bush founds the Anita Bush Stock Company (later renamed the Lafayette Players), becoming the first major professional black dramatic company in the USA. The NAACP forms a Drama Committee. The Playhouse Settlement (later the Karamu Theatre of Cleveland) founded.
## Chronology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>The Great War ends.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Eugene O’Neill’s <em>The Emperor Jones</em> opens on Broadway, starring Charles Gilpin.</td>
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<td>1921</td>
<td>Birth of Errol Gaston Hill.</td>
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<td>1922</td>
<td>Death of Egbert “Bert” Williams. Ethiopian Art Theatre of Chicago opens.</td>
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<td>1923</td>
<td>Willis Richardson’s one-act <em>The Chip Woman’s Fortune</em> opens: the first drama by an African American playwright on Broadway.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Garland Anderson’s <em>Appearances</em> opens: the first full-length drama by an African American on Broadway. Georgia Douglas Johnson founds the S Street Salon.</td>
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<td>1926</td>
<td>W. E. B. Du Bois founds the Krigwa Players.</td>
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<td>1930</td>
<td>Birth of Lorraine Hansberry. Death of Charles Gilpin.</td>
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<td>1931</td>
<td>Nine black teenage boys (“The Scottsboro Boys”) accused of and tried for rape in Alabama. The Harlem Players founded.</td>
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<td>1932</td>
<td>Birth of Adrienne Kennedy.</td>
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<td>1934</td>
<td>Birth of LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Birth of Ed Bullins. Langston Hughes’s <em>Mulatto</em> premieres on Broadway. The Federal Theatre Project created by the New Deal Works Progress Administration: includes “Negro Units.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Langston Hughes and Louise Thompson form The Harlem Suitcase Theatre.</td>
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<td>1939</td>
<td>World War II begins.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Frederick O’Neal and Abram Hill found the American Negro Theatre in Harlem.</td>
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1948  President Harry Truman signs Executive Order 9981, declaring equal treatment for all in the armed services. Birth of Ntozake Shange.
1952  Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* published.
1959  Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* debuts on Broadway: the first play staged on Broadway by an African American woman playwright. Lloyd Richards, the director of *A Raisin in the Sun*, becomes the first African American director of a Broadway play.
1961  Ellen Stewart founds Café La Mama (later La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club).
1966  Black Panther Party forms.
1968  Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Barbara Ann Teer founds the National Black Theatre.
1969  James Earl Jones wins Tony Award for Best Actor for *The Great White Hope*.
Chronology

1971  Melvin Van Peebles’s Ain’t Supposed to Die a Natural Death opens on Broadway.

1974  Joseph Walker wins Tony Award for Best Play for The River Niger.

1975  Charlie Small’s The Wiz opens on Broadway and wins Tony Award for Best Musical.

1976  Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf opens on Broadway. James V. Hatch and Ted Shine publish Black Theatre USA.


1982  Charles Fuller receives Pulitzer Prize for Drama for A Soldier’s Play.


1987  August Wilson receives Pulitzer Prize for Drama for Fences. James Earl Jones receives Tony Award for Best Actor for Fences.

1989  Larry Leon Hamlin founds the National Black Theatre Festival.

1990  August Wilson receives Pulitzer Prize for Drama for The Piano Lesson.


1992  Los Angeles Uprising (also known as Los Angeles Riots).

1994  Anna Deveare Smith’s Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 opens on Broadway.

1996  Suzan-Lori Parks’s Venus premieres at the Yale Repertory Theatre.

1997  Djanet Sears’s Harlem Duet premieres in Toronto.

1999  Hiphop Theatre Junction formed in Washington, DC.
2002 Suzan-Lori Parks receives the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Topdog/Underdog*. Kenny Leon and Jane Bishop found True Colors Theatre Company. Paul Carter Harrison publishes *Black Theatre*.


2004 Phylicia Rashâd wins Tony Award for Best Actress for revival of *A Raisin in the Sun*.

2005 Death of August Wilson. Hurricane Katrina strikes New Orleans, killing approximately 1,800 people.


2009 Lynn Nottage wins Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Ruined*.

2010 Denzel Washington and Viola Davis win Tony Awards for Best Actor and Best Actress for Broadway revival of *Fences*.


2012 Audra McDonald wins Tony Award for Best Actress in Parks’s adaptation of *Porgy and Bess*. 