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978-0-521-62472-5 - A History of African American Theatre
Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch
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A History of African American Theatre

This is the first definitive history of African American theatre. The text embraces a wide geography investigating companies from coast to coast as well as the anglo-phone Caribbean and African American companies touring Europe, Australia, and Africa. This history represents a catholicity of styles – from African ritual born out of slavery to European forms, from amateur to professional. It covers nearly two and a half centuries of black performance and production with issues of gender, class, and race ever in attendance. The volume encompasses aspects of performance such as minstrel, vaudeville, cabaret acts, musicals, and opera. Shows by white playwrights that used black casts, particularly in music and dance, are included, as are productions of western classics and a host of Shakespeare plays. The breadth and vitality of black theatre history, from the individual performance to large-scale company productions, from political nationalism to integration, are conveyed in this volume.

ERROL G. HILL was Professor Emeritus at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire before his death in September 2003. He taught at the University of the West Indies and Ibadan University, Nigeria, before taking up a post at Dartmouth in 1968. His publications include *The Trinidad Carnival* (1972), *The Theatre of Black Americans* (1980), *Shakespeare in Sable* (1984), *The Jamaican Stage, 1655–1900* (1992), and *The Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre* (with Martin Banham and George Woodyard, 1994); and he was contributing editor of several collections of Caribbean plays. He was awarded the Gold Medal for Drama from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, the Barnard Hewitt Award for Outstanding Research in Theatre History, the Robert Lewis Medal for Lifetime Achievement in Theatre Research, the Presidential Medal for Outstanding Leadership and Achievement from Dartmouth College, and an Honorary Doctor of Letters from the University of the West Indies.

JAMES V. HATCH is Professor Emeritus in the Graduate Theatre Program at the City University of New York. He is author of several books on African American theatre, including *Black Theater USA* (coedited with Ted Shine, 1996) and the prize-winning biography *Sorrow is the Only Faithful One: The Life of Owen Dodson* (1993). With his wife, Camille Billops, he founded the Hatch-Billops Collection, an archive of black cultural materials that has published twenty-one annual volumes of *Artist and Influence*. His recognitions include the Skowhegan Award (with Camille Billops) for contributors to the arts, the Winona Fletcher Award for Outstanding Achievement in Black Theatre, the Life Achievement Award from the American Theatre in Higher Education, and two Obie Awards for contributors to off-Broadway Theatre.

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The American theatre and its literature are attracting, after long neglect, the crucial attention of historians, theoreticians, and critics of the arts. Long a field for isolated research yet too frequently marginalized in the academy, the American theatre has always been a sensitive gauge of social pressures and public issues. Investigations into its myriad shapes and manifestations are relevant to students of drama, theatre, literature, cultural experience, and political development.

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*A History of African American
Theatre*

ERROL G. HILL

Dartmouth College

and

JAMES V. HATCH

City University of New York



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Foreword

Lloyd G. Richards

History is made in four ways. First, by those who participate in the event. Second, by those who observe the event and will pass their version on by word of mouth, embellishing, forgetting, or adjusting as the circumstances demand. Third, by the professional observer who writes and whose accounts end up in a chronicle in the library. And fourth, by those who do not write. Much of history is lost because it was not written about either accidentally or purposefully. Much of the history of Blacks in America simply was not written about, certainly from a black point of view. That applies to the history of Blacks in American theatre.

I came to the United States from Canada at the age of 4. All my education through university has been in America. The theatre was not discussed around our dinner table, for we didn't go. Why should we? The stories were not about us, nor did we have an opportunity to speak our mind. I went to the movies a lot. I saw events of history and of human existence. I never saw two black people kiss. The films also taught me that black people did not walk down the streets in New York, or anywhere else for that matter. I never saw a cotton field without a black person in it or a red cap without a black face under it. I was being educated. This was reality. This was history. Were it not for the strength of character of my family, my education would have been left to Epaminondas and Little Black Sambo.

I certainly never read a chapter in a theatre history book on the black theatre in America. Nor did it appear on any of the required or suggested reading lists that I encountered. Purposefully or carelessly we were being educated toward the fact that we did not count. It is a wonder that I survived my education to spend my life in the theatre.

Wondrously, in the last decade more volumes have begun to appear to augment those pitiful few on the library shelves. And now Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch have brought tireless research and writing skill to address

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FOREWORD

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this question. One of their most important discoveries is that they have just begun to tap the vein. There is much more to be discovered.

Every black person who aspires to a life in the theatre should be fortified with a knowledge of his/her past as his or her rite of passage. And every white child should have knowledge of the vigor and diversity of the theatre in America as we join in creating a true American theatre.

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Preface

James V. Hatch

Black Manhattan (1930) may have been the first attempt to chronicle the history of African American theatre; its author, James Weldon Johnson, focused on the theatre he knew best, the New York commercial stage. Fifteen years later Fannin Saffore Belcher Jr. wrote a more comprehensive history entitled *The Place of the Negro in the Evolution of the American Theatre, 1767 to 1940*, his 1945 dissertation at Yale University. It was never published. Another decade passed before Tom Fletcher published his memoirs, *One Hundred Years of the Negro in Show Business* (1954). Fletcher performed professionally until his death in 1954 while his book was still in press. Lofton Mitchell, a professional New York playwright, published *Black Drama* in 1967, again an important volume because Mitchell had known and worked with many of the artists he wrote about; however, the major focus of his book was Harlem and New York City theatre. In the three decades since Mitchell's history, African American theatre's styles and locales have changed radically, emerging as a widely recognized world theatre.

This *History of African American Theatre* makes a concerted effort to embrace a wide geography, investigating companies from coast to coast as well as their travels abroad. The book presents a catholicity of styles from African ritual to European forms, from amateur to professional, and from political nationalism to integration. It chronicles nearly two-and-a-half centuries of black performance and production, with issues of gender, class, and race ever in attendance.

In order to define the boundaries of African American theatre the authors asked: what is Black theatre? The easy answer appeared to be that it is an art created by black people, but that definition raised more questions. Should the immigrants and migrants born in the Caribbean, in Africa, or in South America be included? Or should only those born in the United States be included? For the purposes of this book we have attempted to

limit the geography to continental North America, while recognizing migrant playwrights and actors from the Anglophone Caribbean, as well as African American companies touring Europe, Australia, and Africa. This global aspect has stretched the book's boundaries to include such diversity as minstrelsy, Ira Aldridge, the Negro Ensemble Company, and many others who often took their talents abroad.

What, then, are the criteria for selection? We have chosen to write about companies, productions, actors, managers, and technicians who achieved national reputations, who exhibited pioneering courage and endurance, who represented a larger number of like theatre artists or companies, who exemplified movements or fashions, or who changed the form or essence of African American theatre. The authors knowingly have omitted names of many theatre practitioners, a painful excision compelled by space limitations.

Whether boastfully virulent or shamefully camouflaged, America's changing racial climates and policies over the years are noted. The cultural exchanges between Blacks and Whites, although never constant, have been continuous throughout both segregation and integration. In this vein, the authors have set down instances when the races "borrowed" performance and culture from each other in order to create a distinctive branch of American theatre.

In recent years definitions of theatre have expanded beyond performances on the traditional stage. Half-time displays at football games, marching bands at funerals, even public executions have been added to performance ritual. One has only to think of the jitterbug contests at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem or the step dance contests in historically black colleges and universities to be reminded that African Americans have often celebrated themselves on nontraditional stages – streets, lodges, schools, nightclubs, cabarets, and churches. To embrace the full diversity of black performance would be to write a second volume; nonetheless, we have selectively included some minstrel, vaudeville, and cabaret acts pertinent to the development of American theatre, particularly music and dance.

While our history focuses on black theatre, it was not possible to exclude white. For example, we have included *Porgy and Bess* (1935), a show written, produced and directed by Whites. A white-conceived musical such as *Carmen Jones* (1943), with its all-black cast, is pertinent. Even shows that opened with white casts and which were later recast black, such as *Hello Dolly* (1967), deserve to be recognized because their stars should not be ignored. Jean Genet's *The Blacks* (1960) and a host of Shakespearian

productions, as well as other classics by white authors – but acted by Blacks – were germane because they were steps on the ladder of black achievement.

Although Donald Bogle, Phyllis Klotman, Edward Mapp, and others have already written the histories of black television shows and films, on occasion when a stage play like *A Raisin in the Sun* was developed into a film, we noted it, especially if the actors were known for their theatre tenure. Token black actors in white theatre companies, along with performers in mixed media such as dance, poetry, and music, have necessarily been omitted.

Some problems in assembling this history are pertinent: first, the scarcity of certain written, oral, and photographic records. Africans came in chains, their cultures, rituals, and languages having no validity in a hostile environment. As they settled into the routine of southern plantation life, or became northern freemen, accounts of their music and dance begin to appear in newspapers and journals, albeit always filtered through a white racial gaze. Even when African Americans in the nineteenth century began to set down their own histories, the biographers unabashedly selected individuals from their own class, preserving those aspects of black life that they thought Whites might approve of. For this reason, one may pore over many bio-dictionaries of black “achievement” and find few women and no theatre folk unless that artist had already won the approbation of white audiences, as Bert Williams had.

Theatre history has always depended upon subjective memory, biography, and reviews. Compared to the mountainous theatre archives of Whites, early African American records are often scarce and sometimes contradictory. Nonetheless, with persistence and hard digging one may uncover treasures such as those in the National Archives, where the United States Food Administration in World War One set down the names of 104 theatres, cinemas, and cabarets in Chicago that catered to Blacks. This is to say that until recent times theatre archives, be they libraries, newspapers, or books, have not served African Americans well, except, perhaps, when they noted Blacks appearing before white audiences.

In matters of documentation, we have placed our asides and references in endnotes. Our bibliography lists those books and periodicals referred to in these notes. In matters of style, we have chosen to use the terms *Black* and *African American* interchangeably. We have capitalized Black and White when they appear as nouns, but not as adjectives. African, Colored, Negro, Afro-American, Afri-American, and People of Color appear when quoted or when appropriate to the period under discussion. Ironically at the

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PREFACE

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beginning of the twentieth century during the “melting pot movement” the children of immigrants chose to be “hyphenated” as a means of asserting “We, too, sing America,” an idea that triumphed in the working-class Festival of Nations movement of the 1920s and 1930s. However, by the 1980s hyphenation meant someone other than a “genuine” American. For this reason, we have omitted the hyphen between *African* and *American*.

Both authors of this book, although long familiar with black theatre history, were amazed at the breadth and variety of materials that they uncovered. We were not able to set it all down in this text. But other African American theatre histories will follow, uncovering fresh treasures, reinterpreting a difficult terrain, and, yes, improving on our inadequacies. We welcome them. We have done our best.

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We wish to express our gratitude for the generous assistance received from the institutions and individuals listed below. It enabled us not only to undertake travel, research, and consultation needed in preparing the text, but also offered substantial help and encouragement in establishing the factual record, both historical and contemporary. The following are among the various means of support.

To Errol G. Hill: a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and a winter term 1999 residency at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California (nominated by the African Grove Institute for the Arts). Professor Hill writes: research visits were made to several collections, namely, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas; the Countee Cullen/Harold Jackman Memorial Collection, 1881–1995, at the Robert W. Woodruff Library of Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, Georgia; in New Orleans, Louisiana, (i) the Amistad Research Center, (ii) the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library at Tulane University, (iii) the Historic New Orleans Collection at Williams Research Center, and (iv) the Huntington Library in San Marino, California.

I am grateful to the following scholars from whom I have quoted relevant extracts from an earlier work that I published under the title *The Theatre of Black Americans*. The writers quoted are Shelby Steele, Eleanor Traylor, Eileen Southern, Robert Farris Thompson, and my coauthor, James V. Hatch. Others in academia from whose research and insights I have profited include John Graziano, Samuel Hay, Tisch Jones, Bernth Lindfors, Thomas Pawley, Eric Ledell Smith, George A. Thompson Jr., and Sylvia Wynter. Dr. Jewel Plummer Cobb, a relative of the multitalented Bob Cole, generously allowed me to inspect family owned papers about him.

Caribbean-inspired theatre in America has a history dating back to the early twentieth century but it was only in the mid-1970s that an attempt was made to form a resident Caribbean American Repertory Theatre (CART) in New York. That endeavor still exists along with a West Coast branch known as CART/West. Data on the work of these companies have been provided chiefly by leading participants Austin Stoker, Olivier Stephenson, and Rudolf Shaw, to whom I extend thanks. More recent playwrights and theatre workers from the Caribbean, as well as collectors abroad who have contributed to the present study, include Lennox Brown, Ray Funk, William Norris, and Mizan Nunes. In addition, bare-boned professional theatre troupes based mainly in Jamaica have begun traveling to America to present their productions. Information on these and other Caribbean-related theatre activities has been furnished by Jean Small of the Philip Sherlock Centre for the Creative Arts at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, and by David Edgecombe, director of the Reichhold Center of the Arts on St. Thomas, Virgin Islands.

At Dartmouth College, librarians Patricia Carter and Bonnie Wallin were most helpful in tracking down information sources; Susan Bibeau and Otmar Foelsche of humanities resources repeatedly rescued me from computer woes; the theatre department provided a quiet office at a crucial time when, due to reconstruction, faculty offices in the Baker Library were unavailable, and theatre staff gave unstinted assistance at all times. Special thanks are due to emeritus professor Caldwell Titcomb of Brandeis University for faithfully supplying copies of his theatre reviews published in the *Bay State Banner* and elsewhere. Richard and Jennifer Joseph graciously opened their home to my wife and myself when lodgings in Atlanta proved inhospitable.

I acknowledge with appreciation the help of my sister Jean Sue-Wing in Trinidad, for her ready response to many inquiries. To my coauthor, James V. Hatch, I am immensely indebted for his willingness to assume responsibility for a much larger portion of the history than was initially assigned, when at a critical point in the writing I experienced serious health problems that required surgery and prolonged treatment. Finally, I acknowledge with gratitude the material assistance of my wife, Grace, and our grown children, whose care and concern for the completion of this project have been truly humbling.

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the editor of the *Cambridge Studies in American Theatre and Drama*, Don B. Wilmeth of Brown University, for encouragement in writing this history. Professor Hatch writes: the following librarians were most helpful – Nancy Burkett of the Antiquarian Society; Randall K. Burkett, Woodruff Library, Emory University; Rosemary Cullen, Brown University; Andrew Davis, Museum of the City of New York; Richard H. Engleman, Sayre-Carkeek Collection, special collection and preservation division, University of Washington; Annette Fern and Michael Dumas, Harvard Theatre Collection; Liz Fugate, Theatre Arts, University of Washington; Kathy Harvey, Theatre and Performance Sayre-Carkeek Collection, Seattle Public Library; Diana Lachatanere, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City; Robert N. Matuoizzi, Butler Collection, Holland Library, State University Pullman; Melissa Minette Miller, Theatre Arts Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas; Bernard L. Peterson Jr., Bibliographer, Elizabeth, North Carolina; Theatre Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia; George Thompson Jr., Research, Bobbs Library, New York University; and Beth Turner, Editor, *Black Masks*, New York University.

This work has benefited from the generosity of many scholars who shared their research. I thank Addell and Gary Anderson, Wayne State University, Detroit; Annemarie Bean, Theatre, Williams College, Massachusetts; Oscar Brockett, University of Texas; Professor Beth Cleary, Macalester College, St. Paul; Winona Fletcher, Indiana University, Bloomington; Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Temple University, Philadelphia; John Graziano, Music Department, City University of New York; Leo Hamalian, English, City College of New York City; Tisch Jones, State University of Iowa; Woodie King Jr., New Federal Theatre, New York City; Brooks McNamara, Performance Studies, New York University; Thomas D. Pawley Jr., Lincoln University, Jefferson City, Missouri; Kathy Perkins, University of Illinois; William R. Reardon, University of California, Santa Barbara; Peter Rachleff, Macalester College, St. Paul; Leslie Catherine Sanders, York University, North York, Canada; Ted Shine, Theatre Department, Prairie View, Texas; Judith L. Stevens, Penn State University, Orwigsburg; Dana R. Sutton, City University of New York; Vanita Vactor, Illinois State University; Margaret Wilkerson, Ford Foundation; Bob West, National Conference of African American Theatre, Washington, DC.

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Abbreviations

AEA	Actors' Equity Association
AETA	American Educational Theatre Association
AGIA	African Grove Institute for the Arts
AME	African Methodist Episcopal
ANT	American Negro Theater
ANTA	American National Theatre and Academy
AUDELCO	Audience Development Committee
BARTS	Black Arts Repertory Theatre School
BBR	Berkeley Black Repertory
BTA	Black Theatre Alliance
BTN	Black Theatre Network
CAFE	Caribbean Arts Festival Ensemble
CAMP	Central Area Motivation Program
CART	Caribbean American Repertory Theatre
CAU	Colored Actors Union
CCC	Civilian Conservation Corps
CET	Concept East Theatre
CETA	Comprehensive Employment Training Act
CHT	Council on Harlem Theatres
CNA	Committee for the Negro in the Arts
CNAT	Chicago Negro Art Theatre
CUNY	City University of New York
ELT	Equity Library Theatre
ETC	Experimental Theatre Club
FST	Free Southern Theatre
FSWW	Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop
FTP	Federal Theatre Project

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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HADLEY	Harlem Artistic Developmental League Especially for You
HARYOU	Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited
HBC	Hatch-Billops Collection
HBCUs	Historical Black Colleges and Universities
HCTC	Harlem Children's Theatre Company
HET	Harlem Experimental Theatre
ICCC	Inner City Cultural Center
KRIGWA	Crisis Guild of Writers and Actors
LORT	League of Resident Theatres
MTV	Music Television
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NADSA	National Association of Dramatics and Speech Arts
NAG	Negro Actors Guild
NBAF	National Black Arts Festival
NBPC	National Black Political Convention
NBT	National Black Theatre
NBTC	National Black Touring Circuit
NBTF	National Black Theatre Festival
NCBRC	North Carolina Black Repertory Company
NCCC	Network of Cultural Centers of Color
NEA	National Endowment for the Arts
NEC	Negro Ensemble Company
NEH	National Endowment for the Humanities
NFT	New Federal Theatre
NIDA	Negro Intercollegiate Dramatic Association
NLT	New Lafayette Theatre
NNT	New Negro Theatre
NPC	Negro Playwrights Company
NRC	Negro Repertory Company
NTCP	Non-Traditional Casting Project
NVA	National Vaudeville Artists
NYSF	New York Shakespeare Festival
PAH	Postmodern Afro-American Homosexuals
PASLA	Performing Arts Society of Los Angeles
PEN	International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, and Novelists
PMA	Producing Managers Association

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

RACCA	Richard Allen Center for Culture and Art
RAM	Revolutionary African Movement
RPC	Repertory Playhouse Company
SADSA	Southern Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SSCPA	South Side Community Performing Arts
TOBA	Theatre Owners' Booking Association
TTW	Trinidad Theatre Workshop
UBW	Urban Bush Women
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
USAA	United Scenic Artists Association
USO	United Service Organization
UVI	University of the Virgin Islands
UWI	University of the West Indies
WCF	Working Capital Fund
WCT	Wild Crazy Things
WPA	Works Progress Administration
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
YMHA	Young Men's Hebrew Association