THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

This new edition provides an expanded, comprehensive history of African American theatre, from the early nineteenth century to the present day. 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, the Companion also features fresh chapters on significant contemporary developments, such as the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement, the mainstream successes of Black Queer Drama, and the evolution of African American Dance Theatre. Leading scholars spotlight the producers, directors, playwrights, and actors who have fashioned a more accurate appearance of Black life on stage, revealing the impact of African American theatre both within the United States and around the world. Addressing recent theatre productions in the context of political and cultural change, it invites readers to reflect on where African American theatre is heading in the twenty-first century.

Harvey Young is Dean of the College of Fine Arts and Professor of Theatre at Boston University. He is the author or editor of ten books, including Embodying Black Experience, Theatre & Race, and most recently Theatre after Empire.
The Cambridge Companions to Theatre and Performance collection publishes specially commissioned volumes of new essays designed for students at universities and drama schools, and their teachers. Each volume focuses on a key topic, practitioner or form and offers a balanced and wide-ranging overview of its subject. Content includes historical and political contexts, case studies, critical and theoretical approaches, afterlives and guidance on further reading.

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

EDITED BY
HARVEY YOUNG

Boston University
For my parents,
Harvey Young, Sr.
and
Regina Huff Young
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When the first edition of this book was published in 2013, my son, Zeke, was an energetic three-year-old. A decade later, he’s a voracious reader and a kind, caring teenager with an emerging interest in theatre. His performance of Dennis/Sir Galahad in a middle-school production of Spamalot remains a wonderful memory. My daughter Cora, who is eight, is
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a storyteller, dancer, and aspiring artisan who has brightened and improved my life in ways that I could have never imagined when I began working on the original Companion.
**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”
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
1827  The first African-American-owned and operated newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, published
1830  Thomas Dartmouth Rice (a White blackface performer) makes the Jim Crow character his signature act
1831  Nat Turner leads a slave rebellion in Virginia; known as Nat Turner’s Rebellion or the Southampton Insurrection
1833  Ira Aldridge performs at Covent Garden in London
1852  Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* published
1861  Civil War begins
1863  Abraham Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation
1865  Civil War ends
1876  First Jim Crow laws enacted
1896  *The Gold Bug* opens; George Walker and Bert Williams become the first African Americans on Broadway
1902  *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
The Lafayette Theatre becomes the first New York City theatre to desegregate

The Great War (World War I) begins

Anita Bush founds the Anita Bush Stock Company (later renamed the Lafayette Players), becoming the first major professional Black dramatic company in the United States. The NAACP forms a Drama Committee. The Playhouse Settlement (later the Karamu Theatre of Cleveland) founded

Angelina Weld Grimké’s Rachel opens. Harlem Renaissance begins

The Great War ends

Eugene O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones opens on Broadway, starring Charles Gilpin

Ethiopian Art Theatre of Chicago opens

Willis Richardson’s one-act The Chip Woman’s Fortune opens: the first drama by an African American playwright on Broadway

Garland Anderson’s Appearances opens: the first full-length drama by an African American on Broadway. Georgia Douglas Johnson founds the S Street Salon

W. E. B. Du Bois founds the Krigwa Players

US stock market crash, indicating the start of the Great Depression. The Negro Experimental Players founded. The Harlem Experimental Theatre founded

The Harlem Players founded

Langston Hughes’s Mulatto premiers on Broadway. The Federal Theatre Project created by the New Deal Works Progress Administration: includes “Negro Units”

Langston Hughes and Louise Thompson form The Harlem Suitcase Theatre

World War II begins

Frederick O’Neal and Abram Hill found the American Negro Theatre in Harlem

World War II ends

President Harry Truman signs Executive Order 9981, declaring equal treatment for all in the armed services

Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man published

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas Supreme Court ruling, declares segregation in public schools unconstitutional

Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun debuts on Broadway: the first play staged on Broadway by an African American woman
Chronology

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)

1963 March on Washington; Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his “I Have a Dream” speech

1964 President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964


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*

1970 Woody King, Jr. starts the New Federal Theatre

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*

1981 *Dreamgirls* opens on Broadway

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

1984 Jawole Willa Jo Zollar founds Urban Bush Women

1986 Black Theatre Network founded. Margaret Wilkerson publishes *9 Plays by Black Women*

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*

1991 Pomo Afro Homos premiere *Fierce Love: Stories from Black Gay Life*
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Chronology

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  Hip hop Theatre Junction formed in Washington, DC
2002  Suzan-Lori Parks receives the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Topdog/Underdog*. Kenny Leon and Jane Bishop founded True Colors Theatre Company
2003  Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch publish *A History of African American Theatre*
2004  Phylicia Rashād wins Tony Award for Best Actress for revival of *A Raisin in the Sun*
2005  Hurricane Katrina strikes New Orleans, killing approximately 1,800 people
2008  Barack Obama elected president of the United States
2009  Lynn Nottage wins Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Rain*
2010  Denzel Washington and Viola Davis win Tony Awards for Best Actor and Best Actress for Broadway revival of *Fences*
2011  Plays by three African American women appear on Broadway: Katori Hall’s *The Mountaintop*, Lydia Diamond’s *Stick Fly*, and *The Gershwins’ Porgy and Bess*, a musical revival adapted by Suzan-Lori Parks
2016  Renée Elise Goldsberry, Daveed Diggs, and Leslie Odom, Jr. win Tony Awards for their performances in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*
2019  Nataki Garrett named sixth Artistic Director of Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview* wins Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the first of four consecutive plays by Black playwrights awarded the Pulitzer
2020  Broadway closes for seventeen months because of COVID-19 global health pandemic. Alliance of artists of color launch ‘We See You White American Theatre’ movement to address racism and bias in the theatre industry; Jeremy O. Harris’s *Slave Play* receives record-setting twelve Tony nominations
2021  Broadway reopens with seven Black plays: Antoinette Chinonye Nwandu’s *Pass Over*, Ruben Santiago-Hudson’s *Lackawanna Blues*, Douglas Lyons’s *Chicken & Biscuits*, Keenan Scott II’s
Thoughts of a Colored Man, Alice Childress’s Trouble in Mind, Lynn Nottage’s Clyde’s, and Dominique Morisseau’s Skeleton Crew

2022
Michael R. Jackson’s A Strange Loop wins Tony Award for Best Musical. James Ijames’s Fat Ham wins Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Two Broadway theatres renamed in honor of James Earl Jones and Lena Horne