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978-1-107-01712-2 - The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre

Edited by Harvey Young

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

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.

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EDITED BY
HARVEY YOUNG
Northwestern University



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For my parents,
Harvey Young, Sr.
and
Regina Huff Young

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SANDRA G. SHANNON is Professor of Dramatic Literature and Criticism in the Department of English at Howard University. Her prolific publication record includes two book-length studies: *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* and *August Wilson's Fences: A Reference Guide*, an edited collection: *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics*, and a significant number of additional publications in notable refereed journals.

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HARVEY YOUNG is Associate Professor of Theatre at Northwestern University. He is the author of *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*, and coeditor of *Performance in the Borderlands: A Critical Anthology* and *Reimagining A Raisin in the Sun: Four New Plays*.

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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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 1868 Birth of W. E. B. Du Bois.
- 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.

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- 1916 Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* opens. Birth of Alice Childress. Harlem Renaissance begins.
- 1918 The Great War ends.
- 1920 Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* opens on Broadway, starring Charles Gilpin.
- 1921 Birth of Errol Gaston Hill.
- 1922 Death of Egbert "Bert" Williams. Ethiopian Art Theatre of Chicago opens.
- 1923 Willis Richardson's one-act *The Chip Woman's Fortune* opens: the first drama by an African American playwright on Broadway.
- 1925 Garland Anderson's *Appearances* opens: the first full-length drama by an African American on Broadway. Georgia Douglas Johnson founds the S Street Salon.
- 1926 W. E. B. Du Bois founds the Krigwa Players.
- 1929 US stock market crash, indicating the start of the Great Depression. The Negro Experimental Players founded. The Harlem Experimental Theatre founded.
- 1930 Birth of Lorraine Hansberry. Death of Charles Gilpin.
- 1931 Nine black teenage boys ("The Scottsboro Boys") accused of and tried for rape in Alabama. The Harlem Players founded.
- 1932 Birth of Adrienne Kennedy.
- 1934 Birth of LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka).
- 1935 Birth of Ed Bullins. Langston Hughes's *Mulatto* premieres on Broadway. The Federal Theatre Project created by the New Deal Works Progress Administration: includes "Negro Units."
- 1938 Langston Hughes and Louise Thompson form The Harlem Suitcase Theatre.
- 1939 World War II begins.
- 1940 Frederick O'Neal and Abram Hill found the American Negro Theatre in Harlem.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1945 World War II ends. Birth of August Wilson.
- 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.
- 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* Supreme Court ruling, declares segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Birth of George C. Wolfe.
- 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).
- 1963 March on Washington; Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech. Birth of Suzan-Lori Parks. Death of W. E. B. Du Bois.
- 1964 President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Birth of Lynn Nottage.
- 1965 Congress passes the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Black Arts Movement begins. Amiri Baraka opens the Black Arts Repertory and School. Assassination of Malcolm X. Death of Lorraine Hansberry.
- 1966 Black Panther Party forms.
- 1967 Robert Macbeth opens the New Lafayette Theatre. Douglas Turner Ward founds the Negro Ensemble Company. Death of Langston Hughes.
- 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.

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- 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. Death of Eulalie Spence.
- 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 *Nine 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*.
- 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.

CHRONOLOGY

- 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*.
- 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 Death of August Wilson. Hurricane Katrina strikes New Orleans, killing approximately 1,800 people.
- 2008 Barack Obama elected president of the United States. Death of Barbara Ann Teer.
- 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*.
- 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. Death of Ellen Stewart.
- 2012 Audra McDonald wins Tony Award for Best Actress in Parks's adaptation of *Porgy and Bess*.