

[CENTER STAGE]

untitled @ large

History of Black Activism In Theatre

The African Grove Theatre was founded by William Henry (or Alexander) Brown, who is considered to be the first Black playwright in the US. However, the theatre was shut down when they did a production of *Richard III* next door to a white production of the same play. In 1826, the theatre was burned down for unknown reasons.

William Wells Brown was a writer who created the first play written by a formerly enslaved person who escaped, entitled *The Escape, or Leap to Freedom*. Now available to the public, at the time it was not produced, only spoken aloud during abolitionist society meetings.

Alabama's Tuskegee Institute introduces classical actor Charles Winter Wood as a professor of drama and elocution, as Black higher institutions start to support students' involvement in play production.

Many African American female playwrights contributed to theatre at this time: Angelina Weld Grimké, Georgia Douglass Johnson, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Mary Burrill, Myrtle Smith Livingston, Ruth Gaines-Shelton, Eulalie Spence, Marita Odette Bonner, and May Mille.

In 1909, The Crescent Theatre, the first Black theatre in Harlem, was constructed. The theatre launched the careers of many performers of the Harlem Renaissance. However, due to competition from other theatres, The Crescent closed in 1915.

Bert Williams and George Walker found financial and artistic success in their Globe Theater (Boston) production of *In Dahomey*. It was considered the most successful Black musical of that period. Other contributors to this piece were Will Marion Cook (music) and Paul Laurence Dunbar (lyrics).

Juanita Hall became the first African-American person to win a Tony Award (Best Supporting Actress) for her role as Bloody Mary in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*. She would go on to reprise her role in the 1958 movie adaptation.

A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry premiered on Broadway. Based on some of her own experiences, this play deals with family dynamics, the idea of American success, and anti-Black sentiment as it relates to home ownership in 1950s Chicago. This story has received numerous revivals and adaptations.

In 1968, the National Black Theatre (NBT) was founded. It is now one of the longest theatres owned and operated by a woman of color. The NBT offers residency programs for Black artists in playwriting and other areas of theatre.

Michael R. Jackson's *A Strange Loop* received the Pulitzer Prize in Drama. It premiered May 24, 2019 at The Playwrights Horizon Theater (Off Broadway) in New York City. It tells the story of Usher who is "a black, queer writer, working a day job he hates while writing his original musical: a piece about a black, queer writer, working a day job he hates while writing his original musical."

Thoughts of a Colored Man by Keenan Scott II had its world premier at Syracuse Stage. Scott wanted to "tell a story that humanized black men, showed our complexities, and valued our feelings."

The pivotal production of August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* premiered. This marked Wilson's Broadway debut, and the piece delved into the frustrations African American artists face when entering into the white-dominated music and arts industry.

Ntozake Shange's "choreopoem," *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, premiered. It's form is unique and ground-breaking, combining dance, color symbolism, and poetry. The show earned several honors, including 3 Obies, the Outer Critics Circle Award, an Emmy, and a Grammy.

SPOTLIGHTS

Barbara Ann Teer: Art Activist

Harlem World Magazine

WHEN: late 20th century
WHERE: Harlem, NYC
WHAT: founded National Black Theatre in Harlem in 1968 (@natblacktheatre)



Dr. Barbara Ann Teer was a pioneer during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s, when Black artists of all mediums combined their creativity with their passion for justice to demand equality of the races. Teer was multi-talented, with experience in dance, theatre, television, and film. In 1968 she founded the National Black Theatre (NBT), a theatre company located in Harlem, New York City that showcases Black performers telling Black stories and celebrates traditional African aesthetics. In Dr. Teer's own words, the NBT's mission is to "leverage our existing creative assets and human resources,

in order to achieve parity in the 21st Century." Although Dr. Teer passed away in 2008, her daughter Sade Lythcott (@sade1111) took over as NBT's CEO to continue fighting for her mother's vision of equality in the arts.

PODCASTS TO FOLLOW

Daughters of Lorraine

Episode 6: Dramaturgy, Black Refusal, and Possibility with Otis

Cortez Ramsey-Zoë

Howl Round

Daughters of Lorraine is a Black feminist theatre podcast hosted by Jordan Ealey and Leticia Ridley, both of whom are PhD students at the University of Maryland. In this episode, they interview Otis Cortez Ramsey-Zoë, another PhD candidate at their university. The three talk about his personal theatre history, his work as a director and dramaturg, and the importance of centering Black stories on the stage. Otis also



celebrates many Black artists, including those he has collaborated with and those who are his influences.

Andy Jean: Production & Tech Artist

instagram.com

INTERVIEW W JEAN

WHO: @qween_jean
WHERE: New York City
WHAT: costume designer, stylist, storyteller, & Black Trans Lives Matter activist

Andy Jean currently works Off-Broadway, and she has designed for films, operas, and shows, including the WP's *Our Dear Drug Lord* and Trinity Rep's *Othello*. Within the Breath Entertainment Podcast (@breatheentproductions) episode, Andy Jean discusses how she became a costume designer, her experience as a black trans woman, growing up within her Haitian culture, and her activism within this moment. This is a great podcast to put on when you take a walk around campus or need a break from work. If you enjoy the podcast make sure to read her interview

JEAN'S PODCAST



in the Philadelphia Sun and check out the video she created on Youtube, "Qween Jean's Dream," which is a moving piece discussing the silence of Black trans lives in our culture and media.

Topdog/Underdog: Suzan Lori-Parks

The show won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2002, making Suzan-Lori Parks the first African American female playwright to do so. The play follows the lives of two adult brothers, Lincoln and Booth, living in an apartment together. Lincoln is an Abraham Lincoln impersonator for a living ever since he gave up card hustling. Booth, his younger brother, desperately wants

Playwright: Suzan-Lori Parks (@suzanloriparks365)
Premiere: July 26, 2001
Off-Broadway at the Public Theater

Lincoln to teach him how to play, but Lincoln has sworn off the cards. The play reveals the struggles between the brothers as they deal with conflicting values, their upbringing, and the impact of their external world. If you are interested in reading this play, please reach out to Untitled for a copy!

Off Book: The Black Theatre Podcast

Episode: Black Student/White School

Presented by Broadway Black (@broadwayblack), *Off Book* is a theatre podcast with hosts Donja R. Love (@donjarlove), Amber Iman (@amberiman_), and Drew Shade (@drewshade). This episode features director Christopher Betts (First-Year at Yale) and actor Chris Holland (Third-Year at NYU). They discuss their experiences as Black students at PWIs, particularly within their theatre programs. They also celebrate Black theatre artists and their achievements both on- and off-Broadway.

ANTI-RACISM IN THEATRE

Today Tix:

Why Equity in Theater Education Is Important

Zhailon Levingston (@zhalion) is a Louisiana born director and writer who is currently the resident director at *Tina-The Tina Turner Musical* on Broadway. Within this article, he highlights that "the primary miseducation given to Black students at predominantly white institutions is that their work must be crafted to the palate of the 'white gaze.'" The focus of his article then shifts to center all the Black educators who provided him with invaluable experience and meaningful care and counsel growing up. Through personal anecdotes, he honors them and describes the impact they had on him, particularly as he navigates white theatre spaces.

Howl Round:

How Liberal Arts Colleges Are Failing Their Students of Color

"As a young, Black, queer director and newcomer, there were already so many ways I was in the hot seat." Miranda Haymon (@miranda_haymon) writes about the myriad ways that liberal arts colleges do not provide space for their students of color, which then often puts undue pressure on faculty members of color, of which there are usually few. Haymon provides four ways for colleges to begin correcting the past: expanding what is "canon," including students of color in programming decisions, hiring and more heavily involving guest artists of color, and again, hiring guests of color (for work that isn't related solely to their ethnic and racial identities).

#WeSeeYou

BIPOC Demands for White American Theater

BIPOC Demands for White American Theatre is a 29 page living manifesto outlining the many ways in which the institution of theatre must change to protect, support, and uplift BIPOC theatre communities. The demands, written after an initial statement signed by over 300 BIPOC theatremakers, are in no way exhaustive and serve to address the sometimes contradictory concerns of a large community. The main demands fit under the following categories: cultural competency, working conditions and hiring practices, artistic and curatorial practices, transparency, compensation, accountability, and boards, funding and resource demands for BIPOC theatre organizations, commercial theatre and Broadway, unions, press, and academic and professional training programs. This includes actions like the decentralization of whiteness/Western aesthetic, elimination of the 6-day rehearsal week, and proper training/consultation of Black hair and makeup when working with Black actors.

Baltimore Center Stage, a regional theatre, appears to be the first theatre to respond directly to We See You WAT. On July 29, they issued a statement outlining their first, but not last, steps in committing to anti-racism. This includes training under a new permanent "antiracism" budget line item, weekly salaries for playwrights' time in rehearsal, 5-day rehearsal weeks, and eliminating the artist pay gap between their two performance spaces. "I'm hopeful change is afoot, but I am

Medium:

What I Think About When I Hear That Broadway Is Racist

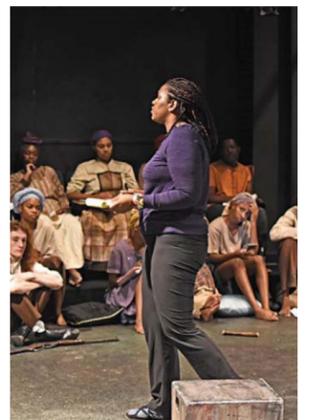
In Heathcliff Saunders's (@feelthehealth) article *What I Think about When I Hear that Broadway is Racist*, Saunders speaks of issues within Broadway and America's greater theatre community concerning race, prejudice, and misrepresentation of Black people. As an experienced actor and writer himself, he adds his own personal experiences into the article, while spotting key differences in the world of Black musical theater between being cast in an "imagined world" or a "real one." Regardless of which world and which archetype Black people are cast in, Saunders says that it is important for writers to "stop writing what we know, and start writing what we don't," and maybe, just maybe the musical theater community and Broadway specifically can tell the difference between using Black bodies for the sake of using Black bodies and using Black actors because Black actors matter.

Variety:

How To Make Anti-Racist Theatre

RDU On Stage

Nicole Brewer is an activist and anti-racist actor, theatremaker, and educator who has focused for years on anti-racist theatre training. Her work is based on her experiences as a Black woman in theatre, as well as her involvement in social justice movements. In her interview, Brewer mentions three guiding principles for anti-racist theatre: harm prevention, harm reduction, and relationship repair. Her main focus is on the creation of an anti-racist theatre ethos, which asks an



individual, "how am I showing up? What am I doing to center BIPOC voices in the theatre industry?"

also waiting, along with my BIPOC colleagues," Stephanie Ybarra, artistic director of Baltimore Center Stage, said. She goes on to acknowledge her own accountability in her current position, but notes that as a Latinx woman, she has experienced trauma at the hands of the institution, and in that regard, she too is waiting. Across the country, many white artistic directors are stepping down and creating space for others. In places like Serenbe Playhouse, where the entire staff was laid off due to accusations of racism, this transition is forced. Despite some of these changes, most companies are still closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so it's unclear what theatre will look like when it finally opens again.

CELEBRATE BLACK THEATRE

The Cody Renard Richard Scholarship Program for BIPOC Theatre Students



Announcing! Broadway stage manager Cody Renard Richard (@Codyrenard), in partnership with the Broadway Advocacy Coalition (@bwayadvocacycoalition), has recently created a new scholarship for BIPOC student theatre creatives who are focusing on playwriting, directing, stage management, technical theatre, or design. Recipients will receive \$1,500 and mentorship opportunities with professional theatre artists.

If interested, applications are open now through October 25! Please share if you know of anyone who might be interested in this opportunity! Additionally, if you wish to support this program, please donate.



APPLY HERE

Penumbra Theatre Creates Center for Racial Healing



A nationally-renowned African American regional theatre in Saint Paul, Minnesota, Penumbra Theatre has been committed for 44 years to “create professional productions that are artistically excellent, thought provoking, and relevant and illuminate the human condition through the prism of the African American experience.” The founder’s daughter and current Artistic Director of Penumbra, Sarah Bellamy, is honoring the deep need for healing and creating a space which fully nurtures Black artists and community members.

In the company’s own words, “The Penumbra Center for Racial Healing will continue the legacy of Penumbra by centering black people and the black experience. Penumbra’s center for racial healing will also learn from and support people of color who are not black and welcome and support white individuals interested in building resiliency and competency for racial equity work. We are already developing specialized curricular tracks designed to promote healing from the embodied racial trauma embedded in our shared national history. The Penumbra Center for Racial Healing will also actively stand in solidarity with and sup-

Broadway Black Produces Inaugural Antonyo Awards



On June 19, 2020 (Juneteenth), Broadway Black (@broadwayblack) produced the first ever Antonyo Awards! This awards celebration highlights the work and achievement of current Black Off-Broadway and Broadway artists, including those who work off-stage. Enjoy celebrating nominees/winners of the night, watching stunning performances, and listening to some of the black theatre history which transformed American Theatre.

Drew Shade (@drewshade), founder of Broadway Black and producer for the Antonyo Awards, mentions in an interview with NPR, “I think that it’s definitely something that I’m really hoping will spark more change, will spark more black creatives to enter the industry and know that there is a place for them and they are welcomed, that they are valued.”

NPR INTERVIEW

TODAYTIX INTERVIEW

EXPLORE CENTER FOR RACIAL HEALING HERE

port indigenous communities upon whose land our space is located.” The center will focus on three areas in order to accomplish their goals: The Arts, Racial Equity, and Wellness.

TAKE ACTION: SUPPORT, DONATE

Black Art Futures Fund



“Black Art Futures Fund (BAFF) is a collective of emerging philanthropists promoting the elevation and preservation of Black arts & culture. Through grant making, board-matching, and organization-to-donor cultivation, we seek to amplify and strengthen the future of Black art. We provide grants to small (\$750K or less) non-profit organizations working to enhance the future of Black arts & culture. DéLana R.A. Dameron founded Black Art Futures as a philanthropic initiative of Red Olive Creative Consulting in 2017. BAFF operates as a donor advised fund with the Brooklyn Community Foundation.”



DONATE TO BAFF

Black Lives Matter



If you haven’t already, sign these petitions! This list not only includes George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, but as well as many other victims of police brutality from recent dates who are not “trending”. This is an example of not only the widespread police brutality, but the suppression of the news as well.



SUPPORT BLM

Black Trans Femmes in the Arts



“We are a collective of Black trans femmes dedicated to creating space for ourselves in the arts and beyond.”

DONATE TO BTFA



CENTER STAGE

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Center Stage is a publication by *Untitled @ Large* created to amplify BI-POC perspectives and work in theatrical arts.

Questions? Suggestions? Topic ideas? Want to contribute? Email us: untitled@hamilton.edu

Black Voters Matter Fund

“Black Voters Matter’s goal is to increase power in marginalized, predominantly Black communities. Effective voting allows a community to determine its own destiny.” Ensure that you and those around you are registered to vote. Utilise the links provided on BlackVotersMatterFund’s website to do so. After having done so, consider volunteering with Black Voters Matter Fund, or donating to their cause.

EXPLORE BVM