

Creating and Preserving Culture: The Evolution of African American Theater

an exhibit curated by Dartmouth students
in Dr. Monica Ndounou's
Theater 10/African & African American Studies 32 class
Spring 2024

Context for the Exhibit:

During the Spring term of 2024, Dr. Monica Ndounou, Associate Professor of Theater, taught the second iteration of her highly successful course, "Curating Black Theater" (THEA 10/AAAS 32). This class provided its students an opportunity to learn about Black theater history, scholarship and practice in the U.S. and abroad. In the process, students helped develop ideas and curated exhibits that represented a range of formats and platforms. As social media and academe become interdependent in the 21st-century digital era, the course enabled participants to imagine and implement exhibits for the museum as a digital and onsite space where national and international contributions to developing black theater can be shared with the larger public. This current exhibit, "Experiencing Black Theater in America," is one facet of the experiential learning component of the class, which also included a visit to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., interactive engagement with the African American Museum of Performing Arts in Chicago, and a conversation with Sharon Washington, Tony-nominated playwright, actor, and member of Dartmouth's Class of 1981. Sponsors of the course included: Rauner Special Collections Library; the Department of Theater, The African and African American Studies Program, the Dartmouth Center for Social Impact; the Division of Institutional Diversity & Equity; the Institute for Black Intellectual and Cultural Life, Dartmouth Libraries, and the Hopkins Center for the Arts.

Introduction to the Exhibit:

"Creating and Preserving Culture: The Evolution of African American Theater" is an immersive exploration into the vibrant world of African American theater. This exhibit captures the dynamic essence of Black theatrical expression, showcasing how African American artists have continuously created, evolved, and preserved their cultural identity through art. This array of rare artifacts, photographs, scripts, and memorabilia tells a story of resilience and innovation - a story that we, the students of this year's Curating Black Theater class, are honored to share as you journey through the exhibit.

The pieces on display constitute a tapestry that interweaves past, present, and future eras of African American history and theater through common themes of resistance, self-expression, and cultural pride. Each harkens back to those before it and foreshadows those to come, all the while maintaining an unwavering commitment to addressing the social and cultural exigencies unique to its time, embodying the self-referential continuum that is the African-American theater.

Throughout, you will find a unique curation of materials interspersed that reflect the long-standing relationship between African American theater and institutions such as our own - Doubly acknowledging the fraught history from which that tradition emerged and celebrating the fruits of mutualism that we now enjoy. From original playbills and scripts of performances held on campus to photographs and memorabilia from influential Black artists associated with Dartmouth, these items underscore the indelible impact of African American theater and culture on all facets of society.

Recognize the origins of Black theater in America are an outgrowth of African cultures and performance traditions as we delve into the Plantation and Minstrel eras and discover rare artifacts revelatory of the roots of African American performance as a form of resistance; Situate yourself at the heart of the creative explosion and unabashed expression that defined the Harlem Renaissance; admire the deft skill with which Black playwrights centered cultural nuance and critical issues of race and identity in their works for a largely white audience; celebrate today as we stand atop the shoulders of the Afrocentric Revolutionary giants who catapulted us into the contemporary era; And finally, look forward to the future, having reflected on the powers of resilience, ingenuity and creative fervor as exemplified by the exhibits before you.

This exhibit was curated by the members of Associate Professor Monica Ndounou's "Curating Black Theater" class (THEA 10/AAAS 32) during the Spring 2024 term: Aidan Adams '24, Ivie Aiwuyo '26, Tamonie Brown '24, Julia Cappio '27, Makayla Charles '27, Godwin Kangor '27, Noah Martinez '27, Kambrian Winston '26, and Justine Zakayo '25. It will be on display from July 8th, 2024, through September 28, 2024. You may download a pdf of the exhibition handlist and a printable version of the exhibition poster designed by Sam Milnes.

Content warning: This exhibit contains images of performers in black face, stereotypical representations of Black people, and the use of racial slurs.

The Plantation Era

As the first era of Black Theater, the plantation era combines African art forms with the somber reality of slavery. Through song, dance, and performance, enslaved Africans were able to express themselves despite many external attempts at suppression. These materials from the collections explain how Black people were able to process their thoughts and feelings both internally and externally.

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Brown, William Wells. Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave. Boston: The Anti-slavery office, 1847.

Rare Book E44.B88

William W. Brown was enslaved for the first 20 years of his life, during which he was tasked with maintaining a cheerful image of slavery. Later, Brown had the opportunity to write down his experiences in his autobiography. How might this change the perception of the performing arts?

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Clutsam, George H. "Ma Curly-Headed Babby: Plantation Song." Melbourne: Chappell & Co., 1926.

Williams/Watson Sheet Music 1290

This aching lullaby was part of a larger movement of plantation songs. A recording of this song from 1916 is available through the Library of Congress, which can be found here:



Minstrelsy and Vaudeville

The Minstrel Era saw the emergence of minstrel shows, staged performances by white or Black cast members pretending to act as foolish, dangerous Black people. Minstrel shows often featured characters with similar tropes, including the ignorant, free Zip Coon and the happy, enslaved Jim Crow, the Mammy and the Mulatto, etc. Since then, these tropes have persisted in everyday media.

When Black performers reappropriate minstrelsy, they imitate the white performers who believe they are imitating Black people who are, in fact, imitating/mocking whites. Black performers distinguished between Blackness of their lived experience and the blackness invented by these white performers with the minstrel mask; bill themselves as the “real” thing to profit from the practice previously dominated by white performers.

A strange competition between white and Black minstrels leads to the emergence of vaudeville. Whites, unable to compete with “authentic Black minstrels” increase the size of their troupes to become large full-scale shows with choruses of white performers in Blackface and glittering costumes with spectacular scenery. White companies then add chorus lines of female dancers with exposed legs—using sex to compete with racial constructs—which ultimately leads to the emergence of vaudeville shows.

The archival documents displayed here represent general resources available for minstrel show performers, local Dartmouth productions of minstrel and vaudeville shows, and a minstrel show performed during the British National Antarctic Expedition in 1902, underscoring the ubiquity of these performances in Western culture.

Leading Footlight Favorites. New Minstrel and Black Face Joke Book. Baltimore: Ottenheimer, 1907.

Joseph Rainone Early Comic Collection, Box 11

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Dartmouth College Opera Company. [Minstrel Performance Program]. March 2, 1886.

Vertical File - "Minstrels"

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[Photograph of the Dartmouth Players cast from their 1906 production of Vaudeville]. From the Dartmouth Players records.

DO-60, Box 6522, Folder 24

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Royal Terror Theatre. Dishcover Minstrel Troupe Programme. 6 August 1902. Ross Island, Antarctica: [Dishcover Minstrel Troupe], 1902.

Stefansson PN6120.N4 R693 1902

The Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was an essential time in the historical and theoretical development of Black theater in the United States. Not only were countless poems, novels, and other writings produced and regularly published; visual art, sculpture, dance, and music thrived thereby paving the way for a broader range and depth of Black cultural production across platforms, including theater and film. Cultural producers in Black theater wrote and developed plays about Black experiences for Black audiences, theorists provided frameworks for defining and producing Black theater, performers developed techniques for performing and training performers, and educators trained the next generation of Black theater artists in performance, design, directing, and producing.

Many of these creatives would go on to influence and participate in the later movements elaborated upon in this exhibit, like the Black Arts/Black Power era, thereby informing current trends in Black theater and performance that center Black people and culture in creative works. This cultural shift was observed through the institutions where artists of the area performed and New Yorkers convened. The pieces chosen for this section of the exhibit are part of an article called "Harlem's First Shining" and a document titled "Some Harlem Clubs, Dance Halls, and Bar/Restaurants, 1900-1975". These two publications demonstrate the importance of these spaces on the creation of culture, showing how they contributed to the emerging lifestyle of African Americans in Harlem.

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Lewis, David Levering. "Harlem's First Shining." *Modern Maturity* 32:1 (Feb.-Mar. 1989). From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

ML-77, Box 73, Folder 24

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"Some Harlem Clubs, Dance Halls, and Bar/Restaurants, 1900-1975." From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

ML-77, Box 73, Folder 24

The Assimilationist Era

The Assimilationist Era, spanning from 1935 to the 1950s, marks a monumental period in Black Theater history, during which many Black artists navigated the definition of a "Negro Theatre." This era was characterized by a tendency of Black playwrights to create works that subtly conveyed themes of racism to white audiences. This section of the exhibit features works that reflect the prominent plays, organizations, and theatrical discourses of the time, highlighting the identity crisis and cultural development that shaped the early half of the 20th century.

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Bradstreet, Howard. "A Negro Miracle Play". Opportunity (May 1930): 150-151. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003

ML-77, Box 73, Folder 26

The Green Pastures by Marc Connelly is a notable theatrical production that holds a significant place in African American cultural representation. This review by Howard Bradstreet praises the play as it is "based on the mind of the Negro and is given by a Negro cast yet it transcends the color line."

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Photocopy of accession sheet for the records of the Negro Actor's Guild of America, Inc. (1937-1981). Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

ML-77, Box 73, Folder 27

The Negro Actors Guild (NAG) was founded in 1937 in New York City. It emerged during a period when African American actors faced widespread racial segregation and limited opportunities in the entertainment industry and was an important organization in the history of American theater and entertainment. The NAG was dedicated to supporting African American actors and promoting their professional opportunities during a time of significant racial discrimination.

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Du Bois, W.E.B. "Beside the Still Waters". The Crisis (May 1931): 168-169. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

ML-77, Box 73, Folder 26

In the article, Du Bois emphasizes the transformative power of theater for the African American community. He critiques the contemporary state of Negro theater, identifying both its shortcomings and its unrealized potential. Du Bois advocates for a theater that not only entertains but also educates and inspires, serving as a platform for social commentary and cultural affirmation.

Black Arts/Black Power and Revolutionary Afrocentric Eras

The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s was a political and performative movement in which Black influentials across many different art forms used their art as a political spearhead for civil justice and protest. These playbills and examples of Black art showcase the authenticity of Black-centered art of the 1960s. Recognizing the prior influence of other periods, we can see this peak-level exposure of Black art and recognize how it transpired into future artists, works, and movements.

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Photographs of the “Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre”. Giesen Management, Inc. From the Programs for On-Campus Events records, circa 1940-1970.

DA-836, Box 13429, Folder “Ailey, Alvin - Dance”

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[The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater program]. Dartmouth College White Series. Spaulding Auditorium, Hanover, February 3, 1969. From the Programs for On-Campus Events records, circa 1940-1970.

DA-836, Box 13429, Folder “Ailey, Alvin - Dance”

This program is from a performance that The Alvin Ailey Dance Theater was supposed to give on campus at Spaulding Auditorium. The performance was ultimately canceled due to tour bus issues, but the impact of Alvin Ailey still continues. Alvin’s innovation created a space for Black dancers that revolutionized artistic expression for Black people at home, on stages, and in entertainment. Choreographers like Alvin Ailey helped the shift from the assimilation era to the Black arts era where choreographers made an effort to include African traditions in their choreographies and use it to send a message.

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Bullins, Ed. 1968. The Electronic N***: A Tragicomedy in One Act. New York: American Place Theater, Inc. From the Arthur W. Bloom Papers, 1930-1998.**

ML-84, Box 5, Folder 72

Ed Bullins was a playwright and important contributor to the Black Arts Movement (BAM), which grew from the roots of the Harlem Renaissance. For a time during the Civil Rights Era, Bullins and fellow playwright Amiri Baraka were both in residence at Black House, BAM's cultural center. Although Bullins served as the Black Panthers' minister of culture in the 1960s, he and Baraka saw art as a form of cultural nationalism and not a weapon for revolution. This play was one of many written by Bullins during this era, along with *In the Wine Time* and *Goin' A Buffalo*.

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[for the colored girls production planning notes, Spring 1993]. Black Underground Theater Association. From the African-American (Afro-American) Society Records, 1967-2008.

DO-47, Box 3600, Folder 11

This mixed media piece was created by students from the African American Society at Dartmouth in collaboration with the Black Underground Theater Association (BUTA). It promoted the staging of Ntozake Shange's groundbreaking 1976 choreopoem for the colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf. Shange's work gave a poetic voice to the multi-layered experiences of Black women in America. Through its blend of poetry, dance, music, and brutally honest narratives, it sheds light on issues like racism, domestic violence, healing, love, and sisterhood. This exhibit piece reflects the vibrant creative spirit of the play itself. Bold colors, dynamic movement, and expressive forms evoke the African diasporic performance traditions like blues, jazz, and African dance woven throughout Shange's poetry. By bringing this acclaimed choreopoem to life, the Dartmouth students embraced their role as cultural torchbearers. for the colored girls emerged as an artistic revolution, unapologetically asserting Black female subjectivity. This piece reminds us of the vital importance of platforms that amplify the authentic stories, artistry, and experiences.

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[Program for N.R. Davidson Jr.'s El Haji Malik]. Collis Common Ground, Hanover, May 15-17, 1992. From the African-American (Afro-American) Society Records, 1967-2008.

DO-47, Box 3600, Folder 11

This promotional poster transports us back to May 1992 at Dartmouth College. The African-American Society marked its 25th anniversary with a powerful theatrical event: the staging of El Haji Malik by N.R. Davidson Jr. at the Collis Common Ground. Held from May 15th-17th at 8pm each night, this production paid tribute to one of the most influential and controversial figures of the 20th century civil rights movement: El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, better known as Malcolm X. The play innovatively wove together quotes from Malcolm X's landmark autobiography as told to Alex Haley. Audience members experienced the man's own words and journey from street hustler to criminal to transformative leader and activist. By bringing Malcolm X's potent words and radical ideas to life on stage, El Haji Malik erected a platform to ensure his legacy endured for future generations. This powerful staging was a collaborative effort between the African-American Society, director Dee Jonson, actor Michael Van Dyke, the Paddock Music Library, and Dartmouth's Hopkins Center, and Theater department. Together, they resurrected Malcolm X's legacy and philosophies for a new generation.

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Account ledger. Black Underground Theater Association. 1984-1987. From the African-American (Afro-American) Society Records, 1967-2008.

DO-47, Box 3600, Folder 11

This account book contains the monetary records and transactions of the Black Underground Theater Association (BUTA). Founded in 1969 by students committed to elevating Black voices and experiences, BUTA became a haven for pioneering playwrights, poets, actors and directors of the Black Arts Movement. This cashbook's entries capture the grassroots funding, ticket sales, and expenses. From Amiri Baraka's controversial racial satire Dutchman to Ntozake Shange's trailblazing choreopoem for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf, the payments outlined in these pages made such culturally impactful theater possible. The cashbook's simplicity belies the profound artistic productions it helped facilitate. While the incomplete entries are a sign of BUTA's ultimate dissolution, this artifact endures as a

testament to the bold, unified student voice that emerged at a pivotal time for Black activism and art on campus and beyond.

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"KUUMBA: Principles For Creativity and Liberation". Informational flyer. No date. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

ML-77, Box 79, Folder 14

The document, titled "KUUMBA: Principles For Creativity and Liberation," outlines the cultural and political philosophies of the Black Arts Movement during the 1960s and 1970s. It emphasizes the importance of creating art that reflects African American experiences and advocates for the use of art as a tool for social change and empowerment as well as preserving black culture. This piece captures the revolutionary spirit and the collective drive for self-determination and cultural pride that defined the era.

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[Concept East Theatre brochure]. Detroit, Michigan. No date. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

ML-77, Box 79, Folder 9

This brochure explores the role of the Concept East Theatre, a dedicated group of Black actors committed to developing conscious self-awareness and creative expression within the Black community. Amid the revolutionary fervor of the 1960s and the Black Arts Movement, they provided a vital platform for Black artists to share their voices and talents. Their performances were not only a source of entertainment but also a channel for information and cultural enlightenment, making them essential contributors to the era's call for self-awareness and empowerment.

New Age Post-Revolutionary Era

The New Age Post-Revolutionary Era merges the lessons of the Black Arts/Power Movement and ideas of the Afrocentric period of the previous decade. Illuminating on

the uniqueness of the hyphenated African-American position, the 1980s began an exploration of Black expression in the United States, using the material of the past for inspiration. Like W.E.B. Du Bois' decree of 1926 and Amiri Baraka's 1964 declaration, August Wilson delivered his inspiring "The Ground On Which I Stand" speech in 1996, providing the periodic encouragement African-American performing artists need to continue. These selected documents deal with establishing spaces and programs to develop, study, and utilize Black theater during the latter half of the 20th century.

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Errol Hill to Roger Stevens, Hanover, NH, October 1, 1971. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

ML-77, Box 18, Folder 1

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Korf, Jean. "Goals and objectives for 1980 - The First Five Years". American Theatre Association. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

ML-77, Box 18, Folder 9

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August Wilson et al. Program for African American Theatre: The Next Stage conference, Dartmouth College, March 7, 1998. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

ML-77, Box 26, Folder 15