

Experiencing Black Theater in America: A Handlist

This past spring, Associate Professor of Theater Monica Ndounou taught a class made possible through an experiential learning seed grant from the Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning. Titled, “The Making of 21st Century Exhibits: Curating a National Black Theater Museum/Institution,” the course was cross-listed with the Theater Department and African and African-American Studies Program. This class provided seventeen 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 African American History and Culture Museum in Washington, D.C., the opportunity to work with the local community’s regional black theatre, JAG Productions, and a chance to attend events featuring choreographer Camille A. Brown during her spring 2019 Dartmouth residency.

The majority of the documents in this exhibit come from the papers of Theater Professor Errol Hill, the first African-American educator to receive tenure at Dartmouth College. A Trinidadian native, Hill joined the faculty of Dartmouth’s Drama Department in 1968 and worked tirelessly here for thirty-five years before retiring in 1989. Hill was a wellspring of productivity, whether as a scholar, a playwright, or a director: over the span of his career, he wrote eleven plays, authored or edited fifteen major books and periodicals, and wrote twenty-five major articles on drama and theater history. While at Dartmouth, he taught a portfolio of thirteen different courses on acting, directing, playwriting, and theater history, directed thirty-three full-length productions, and wrote numerous influential works including *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (1986) and, with Professor James Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (2003).

The exhibit was curated by Stella Asa ‘22, Asanni Brown ‘21, Laura Calderon ‘19, Stephanie Everett ‘19, Arielle Isedenu ‘22, Rena King ‘20, Will Maresco ‘19, Devon Mattie ‘20, Jelinda Metelus ‘22, Eleanor Mitchell ‘20, Millenah Nascimento ‘21, Owen O’Leary ‘19, Daniella Omeruo ‘21, Kerrigan Quenemoen ‘20, Chelsea Rafferty ‘21, Lexi Warden ‘21, and Sam West ‘20. It is on display in the Class of 1965 Galleries at Rauner Library in Webster Hall from June 7th through September 6th, 2019.

Case One: Early African American Performance, Minstrelsy, and the New Negro Renaissance

It is a common misconception that African American theater began with minstrelsy. On plantations across the Americas, African American theater was taking place in song, dance and storytelling, all based in African tradition. African American performance developed on the plantation as a means of survival and maintaining a sense of autonomy and culture. The history of Black performers on primarily white stages should also be noted, like that of Ira Aldridge, whose life was heavily documented by Errol Hill. All of these performance practices have had a significant impact not only on African American theatre, but on the greater American cultural landscape.

Blackface Minstrelsy is commonly known to be America's first original form of popular entertainment. However, every element was stolen from Black performers. White performers in blackface mocked and dehumanized Black people but they would never replicate or best the talent of Black performers. Minstrel troupes began hiring Black performers and Black performers began creating companies of their own. While some of these performers still performed in blackface, the inclusion of Black men and Women in theater allowed Black performers to take back their identity and narrative. After the civil war, Minstrelsy transformed into Vaudeville which used burlesque and spectacle to transform into musical comedy.

A broader cultural New Negro movement began after Black Americans saw no progress toward their own freedom after WWI. The goal was to counteract stereotypical depictions seen in minstrel shows and other popular culture. Black artists were able to produce valuable and significant content that fueled the culture on a mainstream level. The visibility and intensity of the period symbolized a major shift in the degree to which Black people could and did claim the authority to speak about and represent themselves and their experience.

Early African American Performance Era

1. William Paine. *Mr. Ira Aldridge as Aaron*. Islington: London Printing and Publishing Company, 1852. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

Ira Aldridge (1807-1867) was an American Shakespearean actor, known for being the first Black actor to play the character of Othello. He is subject of much research by Errol Hill, which was featured in his book *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors*.

2. Monica Ndounou. "Plantation Performance Elements." THEA 10.55/AAAS 32.15 class lecture: "Curating Black Theater." Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, 9 April 2019.

Many elements of African American theatre and performance can be traced back to slavery. The following themes and motifs were developed by enslaved Africans as a means to maintain autonomy and protect their culture. Look for these elements throughout the exhibit!

- Slave music
- Mime
- Dance
- Pidgin language and dialect
- Masked Acts and Coded Meanings
- Double Consciousness (as referenced by W.E.B. DuBois and Anna Julia Cooper, among others)
- Concept of the Mask
- Call and Response
- Divination (as in interacting with the larger spirit consciousness)
- "The Shout"
- Spirit Possession
- Religious Rituals, Rites and Ceremonies
- The Trickster (as in folklore, like Ananzi and Briar Rabbit)
- Double-Voiced Meaning



Check out our digital companion for more information!

3. Camille A. Brown. "History of African American Social Dance." TED Ed, 2016, ed.ted.com/lessons/the-history-of-african-american-social-dance-camille-a-brown.

In this video renowned choreographer and dancer, Camille A. Brown, discusses the history of African American social dance and its impact on American

performance art. Brown is known for her work on *Choir Boy*, *Once on this Island*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar Live in Concert*, as well as directing her own dance company.



Minstrelsy Era

1. George W. Walker. "The Real "Coon" on the American Stage." *The Theater Magazine Advertiser* August 1906. Photocopy. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

This article, written by the famous black minstrel actor George Walker, gives insight into life as a performer during an age where the most common performance was blackface minstrelsy. Walker discusses how his partner, Bert Williams, and he revolutionized their performance style in order to break away from the negative stereotypes portrayed in blackface.

2. "Richard & Pringle, Rusco & Holland's Big Minstrel Festival" and "The Big 4 Comedians." *Freeman* 24 December 1898. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

This newspaper advertisement for two different minstrel shows is one example of the hundreds of minstrel advertisements that appeared in newspapers across America. The top advertisement is for a white minstrel group while the bottom advertisement displays a Black minstrel group.

3. Emma Forbes Waite. "Light on the Blackface Minstrel." *The Magazine Antiques* April 1943. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

"Jim Crow" was a stock character that was extremely popular in blackface minstrel shows. This character became so prominent that it not only became a derogatory term for black people but also the colloquialism for the laws passed during Reconstruction to limit the freedom of Black people.

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4. Black and White Slide of Billy Kersands. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

Billy Kersands was a prominent star in Black minstrel troupes in the 1860s. Kersands amazing performances had a large impact on the success for the Georgia Minstrels. By 1882 he was making \$80 a week, about the same as a white minstrel. In 1885 he founded his own minstrel troupe, named Kersand's Minstrels, which toured across the East Coast.

5. Black and White Slide of Bert Williams and George Walker. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

George Williams and Bert Williams were two important Black actors of the minstrel era. In the early 1900s they toured around Europe and America, showing Vaudeville plays such as *In Dahomey*, *Sons of Ham*, *Abyssinia*, and *Bandana Man*. Together they attempted to reclaim blackface by creating a blackface character who suffered from misfortune.

6. “Dixie to Broadway.” 1-27 February, 1977. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

The Met’s “Dixie to Broadway” exhibit provides a good explanation of the negative stereotypes that blackface minstrelsy created. The small exhibit catalog highlights the credentials that Black minstrels had and the difficulties that they faced.

The New Negro Renaissance

1. Alain Locke, ed. *The new Negro: An Interpretation*. New York: A. and C. Boni, 1925. Rare E185.82 .L75.

The New Negro was an anthology compiled by Howard University philosophy professor and first black American Rhodes Scholar Alain Locke. The book brought together much of the theory and art that characterized the movement and the concept of the confident, proud, and artistically engaged new Negro. In *The New Negro*, Locke highlighted the work and ideas of the “younger generation” but also featured some of the older leaders—including a chapter by W.E.B. Dubois. The book’s beautiful portraits and illustrations were done by the White German immigrant artist Winold Reiss and Locke’s Black student Aaron Douglas—who also designed Locke’s bookplate featured in this, Locke’s own copy.

2. Marcus Garvey, ed. *The Negro World*. New York, NY: Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League, 1920-1933. Rare E185.5 .N3998.

Negro World was a NYC newspaper that was founded in 1918 by Marcus Garvey and Amy Ashwood. The purpose of the paper was to provide a voice to the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League, a national fraternity that was also founded by Garvey. It gave space to Black writers and artists to write about issues that permeated the black community. It also advertised Black theatre productions that took place in Harlem.

Case 2: Revolution and Reclamation

The 1970s and beyond in Black Theatre history are marked by revolution, Afrocentrism, and assertion. The first era presented in this case is titled The Revolutionary Afrocentric Era (1960s-mid 1980s) as defined by Mikell Pinkney: “[the era that] retains revolutionary ideology while it is marked by a return to African consciousness in the form of ritual based aesthetics” (Pinkney 27). Following the Black Arts/Black Power Era, the ideology of Black Nationalism gave rise to Afrocentrism: the cultural and psychological return to Africa and African influence.

In the decades that followed and into the early 21st century, black theatre evolved again, giving rise to a more fully realized and unapologetic black intellectualism and artistry. Denoted as the New Age Post-Revolutionary Era by Pinkney, this period contains the most recent events of this installation. Pinkney describes the era as being marked by "protest, revolt, and assertion in the form of new intellectualism and the mind-expanding desire and capability to go beyond the physiological and sociological

limitations of the past." Always at the forefront of exploration of form and theme, black artists, drawing from their revolutionary ancestors and Afro-centric roots, exploded onto the American stage, asserting their place in the present and future of American theatre.

1. Janice D. Hamlet. *Afrocentric Visions: Studies in Culture and Communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998.

A combination of essays, Afrocentric Visions combines the advancements of Afrocentrism collected by the diaspora in the last 10 years. Beginning with Afrocentric ideologies and methods, authors move on to cover Afrocentric group and communication dynamics, Afrocentric involvement in academia and media, and "where do we go from here?"

2. Ntozake Shange. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide, When the Rainbow Is Enuf: A Choreopoem*. New York: Scribner Poetry, 1997.

A combination of poetic monologues, dance, and music, Shange's work birthed a new genre of theatrical performance, called the choreopoem. The piece is a series of 20 separate monologues that interconnect the stories of love, empowerment, struggle and loss of seven nameless women of color.

Revolutionary in its connections to Afrocentricity, *For Colored Girls* places African values and ideals at the center as it paints stories of African American experiences. Afrocentric elements seen throughout Shange's piece magnify her intentions as her characters strive to reclaim the past, present, and future of their narratives within the oppressions present in society.

3. *Second World Congress on Communication and Development in Africa and the African Diaspora, Bridgetown, Barbados July 24-28, 1983: Official Program*. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

A conference held in 1983 that brought together academics to discuss Afrocentrism. This program highlights the broad scope and influence of the return to African ideals and values in academia.

4. Judy Salsbury. Letter to Errol Hill from Shakespeare & Co. regarding "interracial casting," August 1983. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

Non-Traditional, Color-Blind, Race-Conscious, or "interracial casting", as referred to above, has been a controversial issue for years. In this letter to

Professor Errol Hill from Judy Salsbury, the Public Relations Director of Shakespeare & Co. at The Mount, it is clear that the Company wants to be recognized for more than just their casting. Salsbury's desire to share reviews that go beyond discussing the casting choices shows the company's desire to be seen for the quality of their work first and foremost. Salsbury also mentions that the Company struggles with a biased press, another issue that many modern companies still struggle with.

5. Carlyle Brown. *The African Company Presents Richard III*. Venture Theatre, 19 October -6 November 1993. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

In 1820 The African Company was formed in Manhattan by William Brown, owner of the African Grove. James Hewlett led their first production, *Richard III* which opened in 1821. Carlyle Brown's piece *The African Company Presents Richard III* follows the story of this group and their production of the play and its reception by New York audiences. While not the most pivotal play of the era, the work is an interesting intersection of history and art, as well as classical European and the beginnings of a newer, more modern form.

6. Playbills from several of August Wilson's Plays: *Jitney* (1982), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), *Fences* (1987), *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), *Seven Guitars* (1995), *King Hedley II* (1999). From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

With *Jitney*, August Wilson launched the beginnings of the Century Cycle, a series of 10 plays that would address African American life in each decade of the 20th century. Each play illuminated another aspect of black experience and as well as the depth of Wilson's skill in playwriting. One of his plays featured here, *Fences*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama along with another in 1990 for *The Piano Lesson*.

7. August Wilson. "The Ground on Which I Stand." Theatre Communications Group Conference keynote address. 1996. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

Wilson delivered this monumental speech, bringing the needs of the black theatre and black artists to the forefront of discussion amidst the theatrical community. With regard towards theatre's community of undervalued and underestimated black artists, here he takes an unapologetic and assertive stance on theatre of the day, emphasizing the importance of the work of black theatre-makers. In this essay, he calls for the support of black theatres and reaffirms the role black people play in telling the story of universal humanity as both Africans and Americans.

8. *African American Theatre: The Next Stage*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, 1998.
From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003.

Following his landmark speech to TCG entitled The Ground on Which I Stand, August Wilson convened The National Black Theater Summit "On Golden Pond", a 5-day closed-door summit at Dartmouth College. As can be seen in the programs above, notable African American theater makers and scholars from around the country attended the summit. Following the Summit, a one-day public conference was held on Dartmouth's campus, as advertised in this flyer.

Case 3: The Revolution Continues

1. Miles M. Jefferson. "The Negro on Broadway 1951-1952—Another Transparent Season." *Phylon* 1952. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 74, Folder 3.
2. Errol Hill. "The Revolutionary Tradition in Black Drama." From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 76, Folder 43.
3. Paul Carter Harrison. "Black Theater and the African Continuum." *Black World* August 1972. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 76, Folder 34.
4. Larry Neal. "The Black Arts Movement." *The Drama Review* Summer 1968. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 76, Folder 43.
5. Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones). "Slaveship: The Chelsea Theater Center Production." From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 76, Folder 43.
6. John Mason Brown. "Countee Cullen: St. Louis Woman." *Saturday Review* 27 April 1946. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 74, Folder 1.
7. Program for 1959 Integration Showcase at the Majestic Theatre. Playbill, 20 April 1959. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 74, Folder 2.

8. George Goodman. "Black Theater: Must It Appeal to Whites?" *New York Times* 10 January 1982. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 76, Folder 33.
9. Advertisement for *Adrienne Kennedy's Funnyhouse of A Negro* at the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre. 24 June-17 July 1983. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 76, Folder 3.
10. Program for *Amiri Baraka's Slave Ship* at the Morgan Theatre. Playbill, 28 April-1 May, 1983. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 74, Folder 26.
11. Miles Jefferson. "Empty Season on Broadway, 1950-1951." *Phylon* 1951. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 74, Folder 3.
12. "Rules of the Black Panther Party." *The Black Panther* 29 August 1970. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 74, Folder 26.
13. Mel Gussow. "Baraka Discusses Politics as an Art." *The New York Times* 13 March 1973. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 74, Folder 26.
14. Photograph photocopy. From the Errol G. Hill Papers, 1800-2003. ML-77, Box 78, Folder 20.

This is an image from *Macbeth* performed at The Hampton Institute. This production was performed by an all-black cast at the Hampton Drama Festival.