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Black Theatre's Unprecedented Times

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IN ASSOCIATION WITH

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Photographs by JOSEPH MEHLING

With a Special Introduction by **AUGUST WILSON**

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Photo by manicho

Editor's message

By Us, For Us, About Us, Near Our Hearts

Hely Manuel Pérez

It has been a great privilege to serve as editor of **Black Theatre's Unprecedented Times**. The idea for this publication first started to materialize in my mind in November of 1997 during a conversation with Victor Leo Walker about the Summit events that were to follow in 1998. The more I listened to Victor talk about what we needed to do to assure a bright(er) future for Black Theatre, the more the words of DuBois' "call for race plays" resonated in my head—By Us, For Us, About Us, Near Us. When Victor spoke about the plans for a 1998 Black Theatre Summit in Ashland, New Hampshire, I was reminded of another summit convened by DuBois in 1905 in Niagara Falls, Canada, that eventually resulted in the formation of the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The parallels between the events of 1905 and 1998 were evident from the conceptualization of the summits to their geographical locations--near the US-Canadian border. I knew then these were going to be unprecedented times in Black Theatre and that there would be a role for **BTNews** to play. Whatever was about to happen, it was About Us, For Us and By Us; therefore, it was only logical that it should be Us who would tell the story. From the beginning, **BTNews**' role within the "movement" and its place in history had already been decided; we just needed to "allow" the turn of events to take place.

When Victor approached me in May of 1998 with the idea of a special publication to inform the public about the Summits I was not surprised; I was expecting it. The first Summit had already generated an ambitious agenda and I was eager to tell everyone. I knew this project would create a tremendous stress on **BTNews**' technical capabilities, but stress in the presence of limited technical resources is nothing new in Black Theatre. Struggle with technical limitations has claimed a spot in the process of "creating Black Theatre;" but, by its own nature, struggle has also added to our humanity and has fortified our work. This is something I learned many years ago by watching Maggie Porter create magic at Harmonie Park Playhouse in Detroit; a theatre not larger than a medium size living room. Anybody who experienced her "in-your-face" production of Ntozake Shange's **Spell # 7**, or Don Evans' **One Monkey Don't Stop No Show**, or Samm-Art Williams' **Home** will attest to the high value and excellence that can be produced out of focused struggle. Through the years I have also admired the tireless drive of Gary Anderson in his effort to bring Plowshares Theatre to its rightful cultural place in Detroit. More recently, I have learned of the work of Ron Himes at St. Louis Black Repertory Company, and others all over the country who have not allowed technical limitations to keep them from telling our stories our way--by building on our strengths rather than our weaknesses. Black people are spiritual people; the strength comes from higher sources. So, armed with these thoughts we undertook the venture of bringing **Black Theatre's Unprecedented Times** to realization.

The road we have walked since DuBois' summit in 1905 has brought us to this unprecedented moment. Black people in general are now better educated and have greater economic power than at any other time in American history. We have the benefits of lessons learned from times past—some still flash fresh in our minds. Today, we have positive stories of success in Black theatre administration and stories of unprec-

edented personal accomplishments to share. All this at a time when technological advances in communication allow for almost instant transfer of information. These are also unprecedented times, because America's premier playwright is African American. And, as he has taken upon himself to tell our history, he has helped all people to overcome the evils of ignorance by exposing our African American Humanity. In the houses of Broadway, in theaters everywhere, and in classrooms across the country, America has received and continues to receive an effective lesson in HUMANITY from August Wilson. This has helped place African Americans in a position where they are more likely to be heard. With his words and through his plays Wilson illuminates and illustrates the beauty and complexity of the "Souls of Black Folk." On the "literary canvas" of his plays, he has painted the lives of African Americans in different decades of the 20th Century, and now, he is "walking" the way with others and fighting for better decades ahead. His light shines bright and, as DuBois in 1905, he helps to illuminate the way in 1999.

This publication is dedicated to Us by Us. The main purpose is to tell our stories our way; not to follow linguistic technical constructs rooted in an Eurocentric education. I cherish my times at the University of Michigan because there I received a bounty of knowledge, but most importantly I learned to think critically and freely. That means, I believe we should follow Eurocentric constructs to help us focus and embellish our work; but, we should never allow an over emphasis on those constructs to circumscribe, and eventually kidnap, our thoughts and steal our joy away. Sometimes it is necessary to liberate ourselves from stringent rules that may not be of absolute relevance to the moment; that is the case in this publication. bell hooks and Cornel West demonstrate, by the use of an unconventional "conversational style" in their book **Breaking Bread**, that we do not always have to follow Eurocentric rules/styles of written communication to be scholarly respected. In **Unrecovered Losses**, Ntozake Shange explains why sometimes it is necessary to break away from traditional usage of punctuation and spelling. She writes: "...in order to think n communicate the thoughts n feelings i want to think n communicate/i haveta fix my tool to my needs..." We followed Ntozake's method here. And although our use of language is not as "radical", the spirit is the same; and we did indeed fix our "tools" to meet a new Millennium perspective. Anyone who wants to get the most from this publication should not look at it through an European cultural hegemonic eyeglass; by doing so, the reader might be distracted and eventually taken away from the intent of the publication.

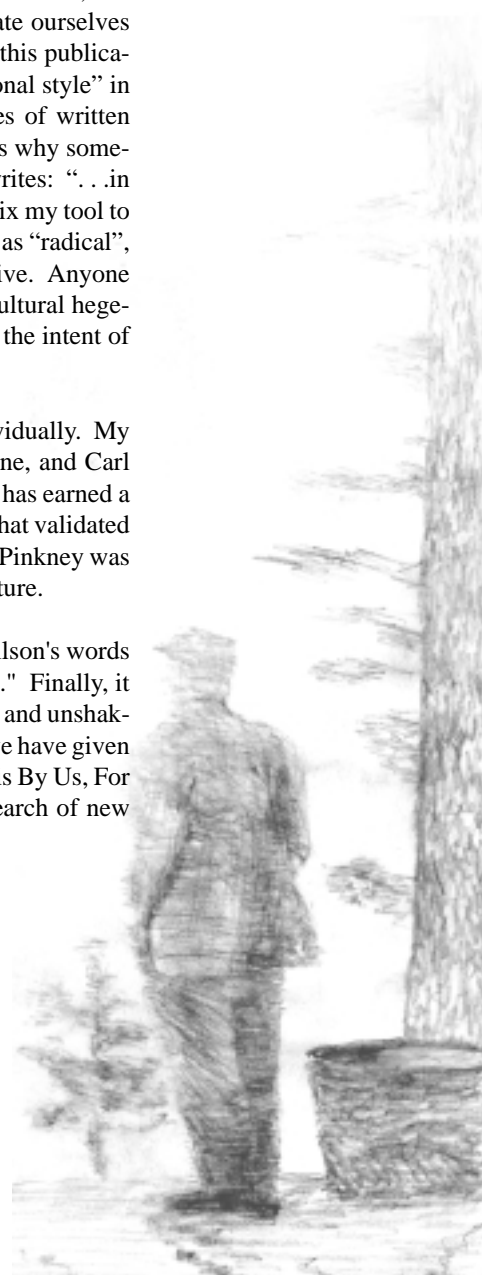
We gathered a truly unprecedented group of contributors, too many to be acknowledged individually. My gratitude goes to each one of them. I would like to acknowledge Ed Bullins, Sydné Mahone, and Carl Jennings for inspiring conversations that came "just at the right time." Dr. Beverly Robinson has earned a very special place in my heart and in this publication. She was the voice of scholarly wisdom that validated my work's personal worth and provided tremendous energy when it was most needed. Mikell Pinkney was the rod that kept us on the "right track" and the "rock" that strengthened my faith in this venture.

The pages of BTNews and its publications will forever feel blessed by the presence of Mr. Wilson's words in this publication. My heart is full of respectful gratitude and admiration for "the main man." Finally, it was a tremendous honor to be associated with Dr. Victor Leo Walker, II. His relentless efforts and unshakable conviction toward making "all this happen" have been a lesson for life. I only hope that we have given justice to his inspiring efforts on behalf of Black Theatre by bringing to you a publication that is By Us, For US, About Us, and Near Our Hearts. As we move forward into the next Millennium in search of new possibilities may we use Langston Hughes' words for inspiration:

We have to-morrow
Bright before us
Like a flame

Yesterday, a night-gone thing
A sun-down name

And dawn to-day
Broad arch above the road we came,
We march





*The struggle continues
Against taken*

INTRODUCTION

IN OUR HANDS

The arts are a vital part of human life and contribute to our sense of well being as Americans and mirror all the many places we shine with virtue. Art is made up out of the spiritual resources of the people who create it. Out of their experiences, the sacred and the profane, is made a record of their traverse and the many points of epiphany and redemption. It empowers and provokes sense of self that speeds development and progress in all areas of life and endeavor.

Nationwide as African American artists we are stifled in our expression because we do not have institutional support and respect for the value of our experience and our aesthetic values which are often at odds with those of the dominate society. We do not have access to funding sources that would enable and provoke our art allowing us meaningful avenues to grow and develop our talents and make the contributions to the body of world art of which we are capable. Yet our art generates untold millions of dollars and provides America with a valuable spiritual resource that contributes to the comfort and well-being of the society providing it with an emotional reference to the conditions of human life and enlarging its prospects.

Unfair guidelines that make it difficult for most black institutions to apply for grants, and sociological criteria that favors European American institutions suggest an intent that is echoed by private foundations and corporate America, further stifling any financial recourse necessary for the development of black artists. We are robbed of the climate of friendship and camaraderie that would strengthen American art and help to define our national will and purpose.

In the American theater we have 66 LORT theaters scattered from Maine to Alaska that investigate and explore the experiences of European Americans. These theaters have enormous support systems and working relationships with public agencies, corporate and private foundations as well as communities that value, volunteer, probe, push and provoke their vitality as institutions all Americans can be proud of. The theaters the artists work in are well-equipped and are seamless in their embrace of the aesthetics, attitudes and sensibilities of their European heritage. They produce a unique and vibrant theater that encourages the new as well as celebrates age-old accomplishments which provide a history and platform for the playwright to stand and shout or whisper as they choose. The playwrights work with a confidence born of their struggle to champion their artistic enterprise while vigilantly patrolling the field of theater history and finding their mark at every turn.

European American arts institutions receive, and will continue to receive, the lion's share of financial and other support for their efforts at preserving and promoting the thoughts and values of their ancestors. Our struggle is to remove the sociological criteria of their ethnicity in the rewarding of grants and other financial support and to fiercely resist efforts to fold African American art into European American institutions which are guided by practices and aesthetics that do not serve the interest of Black American artists and are harmful to their development and propagation. We have rejected and continue to reject a single value system that excludes the hard-won values of our ancestors by denying them equal validity. A single value system must include the valued experience of all Americans whatever their ethnic constitution.

The funding of art in such vast disproportion as the NEA's 1995 funding of European classical music in Ohio at \$1,192,000 compared to \$7,000 for jazz *must be challenged at every turn*. Our political capital harnessed and given will, must insure a more fair and equitable distribution of public resources, scarce or otherwise. What is at stake is nothing less than our spiritual survival and the survival of our own myths and rituals as valid assessments of human life. Our collected endeavor to prosper, to contribute to the investigation of human conduct and its high ideals of life *as lived by us* cannot be beholden to anyone other than ourselves. It is not open to negotiation. We have labored in the vineyards for 390 years. The barrels can no longer be carted away to the cellar and reserved as the privilege of race for the furtherance of European American hegemony.

The idea of diversity that seeks to further empower European American institutions by making them the repository and custodians of our art, that seeks to maintain economic and political power of control by instituting the values of European Americans as the normative values to which all others must acquiesce must be rejected out of hand for the harmful and destructive practice that it is.

We have begun the struggle anew. The moment is already in our hands. It is pregnant with possibilities that ennoble. Our collective muscle is no longer in danger of atrophy. It strengthens in its application of will. In the vast sea of culture it proclaims a society indebted to its own origins, its own willful constructs of duty and faith. It is we who decide whether our efforts bear fruit. It is in our hands. The baptismal spray that defines and anoints us. It is we who decide. We know all too well the consequences of the failure of our vigilance. We have ample proof of the dire circumstance that accompanies the failure of faith. It is we who are at the cross-roads. The defining moment that parallels our future. This is the history that we are making. Each and every day. There are millions of children born and unborn who will travel roads we have hacked out of the underbrush of America's paranoia. It is we who decide whether their tools for a productive life will be meager or sufficient to the prodigious task ahead of them.

August Wilson

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August Wilson by Squam Lake (On Golden Pond)

The Black Theatre Network-AGIA Connection



Mikell Pinkney discusses issues concerning diversity within the Black Arts Community at the Minary Center during Summit I. Pinkney is former Artistic Director of Brooklyn's Billie Holiday Theatre and Detroit's Harmonie Park Playhouse. He is currently Assistant Professor of Theatre and Coordinator of Diversity Issues and Minority Affairs at the University of Florida, and BTN Immediate Past President.

BTN Leadership in this Publication

Four BTN Presidents and the current BTN Vice President contribute to this publication:

- **BTN 3rd President, Addell Austin Anderson:** "Emerging Black Theatres: Priorities for Future Growth"
- **BTN 5th President, Lundeana Thomas:** "Money: Where is it? And how we can get it"
- **BTN 6th President, Mikell Pinkney:** "The Black Theatre Network-AGIA Connection: An Unprecedented Publication for Unprecedented Times"
- **BTN 7th President (current), Lorna Littleway:** "Expectations for the Future of an Alliance between BTN and AGIA"
- **BTN Vice President (current), Eileen Morris:** "Theatre's Duality: Art and Industry"

An Unprecedented Publication for Unprecedented Times

by Mikell Pinkney
University of Florida
BTN Immediate Past President

This publication of **BLACK THEATRE'S UNPRECEDENTED TIMES** is a special Black Theatre Network (BTN) fundraising endeavor in collaboration with the African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA). I am happy that AGIA recognized the pragmatic wisdom of utilizing the means of the moment to substantiate and encourage the ideology of concerted unified action among Black Theatre institutions. BTN is in the business of serving the field of Black Theatre history, literature, theory and criticism, production and performance. By utilizing the resources of BTNews, the official newsletter and communications journal of BTN, AGIA now brings to the masses information and philosophical constructs resulting from three major national conferences focused on the future of Black Theatre. This collaborative effort is symbolic of a need to (re)focus on the intrinsic nurturing and development of the institution of Black Theatre; encouraging and empowering it to stand as an equally recognizable force for what American Theatre will become in the twenty-first Century.

Uncompromising Advocacy

Since its establishment in 1986 the Black Theatre Network has developed and thrived as an independent organization devoted to cultural restoration and cultural innovation. For the past thirteen years funding for operational needs and program development has come primarily from membership dues, annual conference fees and the sales of informational source materials produced and published by the organization. More recently, extra income has been generated by the sale of advertising space in *BTNews* and the licensing of the organization's data base mailing labels. Because it has never received funding from any corporation or government agency to support its endeavors, BTN remains uncompromising in its advocacy of chosen goals and support for allied organizations and institutions.

The Black Theatre Network is a self sustaining constituency of individuals and institutions, in support of the past, present and future potential of Black Theatre as an entertaining, educational and spiritually inspirational source of sapience for all humankind. Everyone who works for BTN does so with love and concern for art, beauty and the people who create and produce it.

BTN/AGIA: a Long-Time Relationship

BTN's self sustaining uncompromising nature was arguably what prompted August Wilson, Victor Walker III, William Cook and the Executive Board of the National Black Theatre Summit "On Golden Pond" to acknowledge the importance of the organization by extending invitations to key members of its Executive Board for participation in Summit I at Dartmouth College. Furthermore, from the on-set BTN had implicitly claimed a spot in the evolving movement by the simple fact that several of its current and past members were serving on the Summit Executive Planning Board--including Wilson and Walker. At any rate, it was clear why I was invited; I was President of BTN at the time. More significantly, it was clearly insightful for the organizers to also invite the President-Elect of BTN as a means of ensuring a long term relationship between our established organization and any potential outcomes of the Summit.

Signs of recognition and respect for the accomplishments and the resource potentials of BTN were evident long before any invitations to the Summit were extended. Soon after August Wilson's groundbreaking speech at the TCG conference in 1996, BTN decided to offer it's 1998 conference in Houston, Texas as a forum in response to Mr. Wilson's statement that Black Theatre artists should "confer in a city in our ancestral homeland in the Southern part of the United States in 1998, so that we may enter the millennium united and prepared for a long future of prosperity." But, as fate would have it, it was Dr. Victor Walker, Prof. William Cook and the resources of

Dartmouth College that would make the first Summit in March of 1998 a stunning reality. The planning and execution of the Summit "On Golden Pond" set in motion a sequence of events that brings us directly to the unprecedented publication at hand.

Following the now famous TCG speech, August Wilson and conservative theatre critic and director Robert Brustein vied in a series of written and oral debates during late 1996 and early 1997. At the urging of Detroit theatre producer and BTN member Maggie Porter, *BTNews* took a special interest in the topic. In the Fall of 1996, we published accounts and viewpoints on the issues associated with the oppositional stands of the two major figures in this debate (*BTNews*, vol. 7, no. 1, Fall 1996). The discussion continued in the Spring '97 issue where Eugene Nesmith reported on the two personalities' debate at the New York City Town Hall. In the meantime, the BTN Board adopted plans to present its own Town Hall Meeting at the 11th Annual Conference in Winston-Salem, North Carolina,

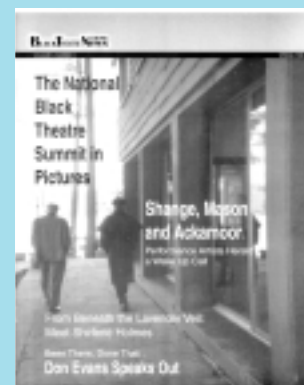
BTNews and AGIA



the National Black Theatre Summit "On Golden Pond" and the African American Theatre: The Next Stage One Day Conference were announced in the Fall 1997.

BTNews

was awarded exclusive rights to publish the first official photographs in a pictorial edition entitled "Postcards from On Golden Pond," including a centerfold photo of the individuals invited to the landmark retreat (see *BTNews*, vol. 8, no. 3, Spring 1998).



Walker addresses the 12th Annual BTN Conference in Houston



[l-r] Lorna Littleway, BTN President; Victor Leo Walker, II, AGIA President and CEO; Mikell Pinkney, BTN Immediate Past President. Photo by Kathy Perkins.

during the summer of 1997, as a forum for the membership to discuss the issues raised by Wilson. To assist the discussion, BTNews published in its special conference issue excerpts of student papers on the topic from a Black Theatre class I taught during the Spring of that year (see BTNews, vol. 7, no. 4, Summer 1997).

Prior to the '97 Conference in North Carolina, BTNews Editor, Hely Perez contacted BTN member Walker to discuss a possible article for the conference program. In their conversation Walker disclosed the plans for a Summit event that would take place in early March of 1998 at Dartmouth. Soon, Walker and Perez were discussing how to use the pages of BTNews as a spring board for the event. Walker later revealed that he had been contacted by TCG's American Theatre Magazine for information on the coming event. But Walker and the Summit organizing team decided to award exclusive news rights to BTN. Thus, in the Fall 1997 issue of BTNews the National Black Theatre Summit "On Golden Pond" and the African American Theatre: The Next Stage One Day Conference were announced in a detailed article that outlined the purposes and expected outcomes of the event. The article became the cover story and remains a valuable informational reference source detailing the "Six Primary Issues and Sub-Issues" that the Summit was to address (see BTNews, vol. 8, no. 1, Fall 1997). In the Winter BTNews issue that followed, the Dartmouth Summit was advertised in a colorful announcement on the back cover of the publication. Copies of this issue (vol. 8, no. 2, Winter 1998) were made available to Summit participants and conference goers, establishing a visible connection for BTN with these important events. In addition, I was there to toot BTN's horn of achievements, resources and potentials at every needed opportunity. It was a constant reminder that the wheels of development need not be totally reinvented at every turn.

Following the New Hampshire events, BTNews was awarded exclusive rights to publish the first official photographs in a pictorial edition entitled "Postcards from On Golden Pond," including a centerfold photo of the individuals invited to the landmark retreat (see BTNews, vol. 8, no. 3, Spring 1998). Appearing in this same issue were articles in reaction to the Summit and the one day Conference, and an announcement and schedule of events of the National Black Theatre Summit II, to be held in Atlanta, Georgia, in July 1998 --a joint effort of AGIA and the 10th Anniversary National Black Arts Festival. It was in this issue that many were introduced to the name of the newly formed African Grove Institute for the Arts.

At the Atlanta Summit AGIA's structure was revealed, panels presented results from the Dartmouth events, and open mediated discussions allowed wider range of public participation. BTN Consultant and Past President, Kathryn Ervin joined me in Atlanta to discuss with AGIA CEO, Victor Walker, the potential development of the AGIA-BTN association. About two weeks later Walker met the BTN Board and membership at our 12th Annual Conference in Houston. It was there that the plan for "**Black Theatre's Unprecedented Times**" was proposed and adopted.

These Unprecedented Times

There are two primary purposes for this publication. One purpose is to raise funds for the ongoing support of the work of BTN -the first national fund-raising endeavor undertaken by the organization. The second primary purpose is to bring the general public up to date with the results of the unprecedented Summit events of 1998, for it has indeed been an outstanding year in the historical development of Black Theatre in the United States. The publication's ultimate goal is to illustrate this unprecedented reality.



Victor Walker and August Wilson examine the Spring 98 issue of BTNews which depicted photographs from the Summit I.

Not since the 1905 meeting of Black leaders at Niagara Falls, Canada, which subsequently became the growing bed for the 1909 creation of the NAACP, has there been such a concerted effort to gather African American thinkers to ponder new directions of such magnitude as the future of African American Theatre. One of the organizers and leaders of the 1905 meeting was W. E. B. DuBois, who in his book, **The Souls of Black Folk**, set forth the premise of the dual nature of African-Americans. DuBois reminds us that it is this dual nature that makes it possible to view the complexities of the world, and especially the United States, through unique eyes. Through this dual vision, the curse of historical degradation is overshadowed by a clairvoyant gift for "second-sight" or intuition. The physical and psychological oppressiveness of an American hegemony is eclipsed by the African's "dogged strength" and will to survive. The Americanization of the African motivates a new spirit that aspires not merely to survive, but to live freely in the pursuit of enlightened happiness. According to DuBois, living within the dual consciousness or reality of an African-American/ (Black)-ground does not totally reject all other ideas. On the contrary, it allows for the enrichment of those ideas with the insightful spirit of subconscious understanding. The challenge that DuBois' statements present is to expose that potential which dwells within the dual spirit of the African as an American by freeing the expressive "otherness" or "difference" inherent in such a unique persona. This denotes an aspect of "unprecedentedness" in the very being of African-Americanism.

The term "unprecedented" is defined as, showing marked departure from previous practice; new, original, fresh, novel, unfamiliar, inventive, innovative and newfangled." While some would argue that "there is nothing new under the sun," it can also not be denied that the present moment in history offers potentials of a higher sort for the development of Black Theatre not present at any other previous time. What are some of the elements that make this an unprecedented time? For all the problems that still remain to be addressed there is equally exciting new awareness and opportunities: new technology, better training opportunities, the existence of an evolved theoretical and critical history of Black Theatre, more economic options, the existence of a substantial number of regional Black theatres, the success of theatre artists such as August Wil-

son, Lloyd Richards, George C. Wolfe, Oprah Winfrey, Whoopie Goldberg, and institutions such as BTN, NCAAT, NADSA, AUDELCO, the National Black Theatre Festival and the National Black Arts Festival. Now the potentials of AGIA are added to this list. More importantly, in the midst of all these elements that make these unprecedented times, there is an urgent call for proactiveness. The challenge is clear: to effectively utilize the energies of the moment to propel us into a burgeoning new age.

Uncompromising Philosophical Stand

In acknowledgment of the unprecedented nature of African American Theatre and the present platform of time on which we stand, BTN maintains an African philosophical perspective. We will innovate American Theatre and American culture by being confident and original in our forms of presentation both on the stage and on the page. BTNews will hold its own standards in highest regard in much the same way as did the revolutionary Black Theatre theoreticians whose paths we follow. It is imperative that BTN cater only to the institution of Black Theatre and that it maintain independence without debt to previously powerful hegemonic institutions. In these special times, there must be a space allowed for Black artists

Outside the Binary Center



[l-r] BTN members Idris Ackamoor, Mikell Pinkney and August Wilson engage in informal discussion outside the Binary Center, during the First National Black Theatre Summit On Golden Pond.

and scholars to breathe freely as cultural creators and leaders. While AGIA's historical mark is yet to be made, BTN will continue to serve the community and field of Black Theatre as it has for thirteen years and as it does in this very publication.

BTN continues to be an organization of volunteers in service to the causes of Black Theatre. We hope you are served by this publication and that you will consider joining us as we move beyond our present realities and limitations into a new millennium of possibilities. All those who contributed to this publication in any way should be acknowledged as heroic figures. This work is demonstration of unified volunteerism; people working to inform and enlighten all human-kind to the power and potential of self agency, of being the subjects and not the objects of spiritual power. What we seek to present here are ideas expressed with originality and insight by artists and scholars free to be themselves rather than what "others" expect of them. It is my hope that Black Theatre, Black theatre artists, and this publication of the Black Theatre Network illustrate the potentials of what it means to use the "otherness" of blackness as a positive spiritual force for future good. In 1966 Ed Bullins, who contributes to this publication, proclaimed a Black Dialectic of *change* and *experience*, in which he associated *change* with protest and revolutionary writing and *experience* with "being" and expressing the realities of an African American "self". There are clear realities about the Black American experience that give African American Theatre a "difference." African American Theatre is revolutionary at the very core of its being, by its very existence. Hopefully, these pages will illustrate "an-Other" perspective, a relatively different approach to theatre artistry and cultural thinking.

I hope this publication will inspire people throughout time, when and wherever it shall be read, to be moved forward knowing that at an unprecedented time at the end of the Twentieth Century Black people did something to continue the struggle toward the recognition and appreciation of a rich theatrical heritage. This collection of articles, photographs and symbols of patronage will live in history as reference to Black Theatre's unprecedented endeavors of 1998 and beyond. ❖



Rear: Eileen Morris, Beverly Robinson and Elmo Terry-Morgan;
Front: Lorna Littleway, Mikell Pinkney. Dining out during the Summit "On Golden Pond." (Photo from Pinkney's personal file)

BTN Presence at the Summit "On Golden Pond"

(Past and current BTN members among the 45 invited to the First National Black Theatre Summit)



Idris Ackamoor



Lou Bellamy
(Penumbra Theatre)



Abena J. Brown



Walter Dallas
(Freedom Theatre)



Clinton T. Davis



Don Evans



Sam Hay



Woodie King, Jr.



Lorna Littleway



Eileen Morris



Mikell Pinkney



Beverly Robinson



Ntozake Shange



Tonea Stewart



Elmo Terry-Morgan



Victor Walker



August Wilson



Lorna Littleway is Assistant Professor of Theatre at the University of Louisville, a Free-Lance Director and President of the Black Theatre Network.

Expectations for the Future of an Alliance between BTN and AGIA

Lorna Littleway, BTN President

When I think about organizational alliance among Black theatres, I am not aware of any existing models. So it seems that I am venturing into uncharted waters as I ponder the possibilities, likelihood and ramifications of an alliance between the Black Theatre Network and the African Grove Institute for the Arts. There are models of informal or quasi alliances among the heads of Black Theatres to share information about funders, good scripts, talent, etc., and to share or to loan out resources. But I view these types of relationships, despite their longevity, as models of successful networking rather than examples of alliance building. What are the differences?

Networking relationships tend to satisfy short term needs. One party is “resource rich” while the other is bereft, and the time invested to resolve the need is minimal. So a key difference in building an alliance is the scope of the mutually agreed upon agenda, the time commitment willing to be invested, and the assets and liabilities of the aligning entities. Another significant difference is that networking relationships are on-going; but alliances are not made to be held in perpetuity, because they are borne out of crisis and become dormant or dissolve once the crisis passes.

Some criteria for productive alliances are commonality of membership, a list of goals to achieve with a timetable for their fruition, and an *equalization of benefits* to be derived. Alliance building requires and consumes too much focus, human and capital resources and angst to be fueled by anything less.

An alliance is necessary because the crisis of “Black Theatre in America” is formidable and multifaceted. Black Theaters are undercapitalized; Black Theatre in practice and theory is virtually non-existent at institutions of learning; the art of Black

Theatre is stagnant and the concept of Black Theatre as culture has dissipated. BTN, as an organization working solo, cannot move with sufficient alacrity to redress these issues. Therefore, an alliance is in order; and AGIA has posited itself as an organization that recognizes the complexity of these issues.

The commonality of membership is apparent. Most of the AGIA major players either are or have been *active* BTN members. Like BTN, AGIA consists of working professional theatre artists and academics. Unlike BTN, AGIA also consists of business people, who directly are neither practitioners nor teachers of theatre; and unlike BTN, AGIA is not viably accessible to the student community. The vitality, through an information exchange, that each missing component could bring to BTN and AGIA respectively, is strong reason alone, to pursue an alliance; and it also speaks to the criterium: *equalization of benefits derived*.

Who in BTN has not found the money tree to be parsimonious, whether its trunk be called arts council, dean, department chair, provost or subscriber? Who among us in BTN has not bemoaned our lack of access to entrepreneurial dollars or has not experienced a visionary shortsightedness from the sources that we must implore to feed and sustain our creative juices? Lastly, if AGIA cannot elicit the interest of a student community and the general theater-goer, then these endeavors will become a footnote in the annals of African American Theatre History. The Black Arts Movement was fueled by ideals derived from intellectual reflection and contemplation that were translatable into populist terminology: Black is Beautiful!, Think Black, Buy Black, Be Black! et al. Its art making was fueled, maintained and sustained by its audience and its artists. Our diversion from the simplicity of the Black Arts Movement has left us with a constituency void.

The diversity of BTN's membership is a definite asset. BTN truly is multi-representational, demographically, vocationally and geographically, in both its decision-making and the populace whose concerns it seeks to elucidate, promote and address. BTN, truly, is identifiable as an organization of "the people" and, most importantly, "the people" are unswerving in their devotion to Black Theatre and are not distracted by the fashionable derivatives that are masquerading as its equivalent. BTNers are believers, not skeptics; we are principled in terms of our art.

The promise of AGIA is access to the cultural standard-setters, who hold this distinction by virtue of their ability to distribute and/or influence the distribution of public and private monies. The promise of AGIA is setting, unequivocally, before these cultural standard-setters a multiple fiscal agenda intended to: 1) elevate and sustain the financial health of our existing Black Theatres operating within the competitive market of the recognized regional theatre network known as LORT; 2) encourage the growth and expansion of existing Black Theatres wanting and needing to be competitive with the theatres in the regional network; 3) encourage the founding of new theatre groups and the transformation of existing theatres that need to better service an existing or new constituency, and 4) assist in the development of investment strategies for Black Theatres and Black Theatre service organizations so that these institutions can advance toward greater economic self-sufficiency and viability.

These cultural standard-setters must be cognizant of the role, influence, and value of Black Theatre research in the areas of criticism, theory, history, literature and *performance* and the correlation of that research to assuring the longevity and posterity of Black Theatre. These cultural standard-setters must

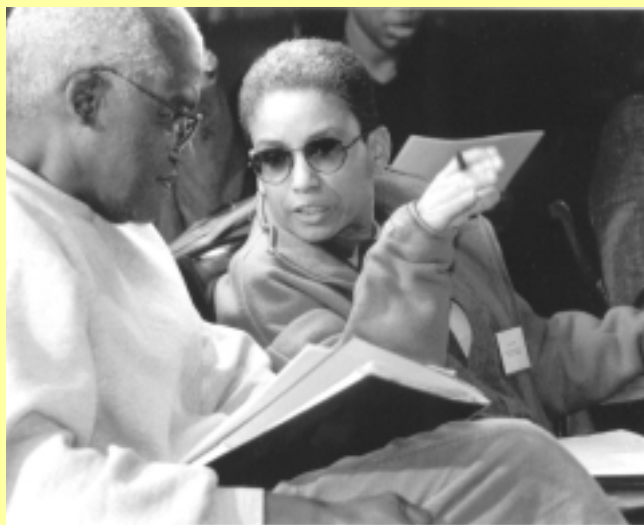
go back to their institutions of learning and impress upon the current leadership, the destructiveness of their policies of conformity toward the nurturing and creativity of researchers, teachers, and students of Black Theatre.

Our obligations as Black Theatre institutions are: 1) to liberate ourselves from the slavish emulation of western theatre traditions, organizational structure and theatrical fare, and open our doors wider to emerging Black Theatre artists exploring genres other than American realism; 2) to reconstruct our institutions into full service entities for our communities, both artistic and lay; 3) to assume a greater responsibility, at our own facilities for the education and training of students of Black Theatre as critics, theorists, historians, playwrights, performers, directors, designers, administrators, trustees and visionaries; 4) to reconnect with the *boldness* of our legacy of theatre as social protest and political activism. We must trust and believe in the *power* of the theatre of relevance to sell tickets and turn out an audience as much as we believe in the efficacy of *star power* to sell tickets and fill theatre seats.

Both BTN and AGIA must be effective advocates for the sanctity and protection of academic freedom for teachers of Black Theatre in pursuit of promotion and tenure at their institutions. BTN and AGIA must become viable sanctioning bodies, with the equivalent recognition of ATHE, in the areas of professional activity, research and service.

A BTN/AGIA alliance portends a tremendous future for Black Theatre to ascend to its rightful position in both the popular and intellectual culturescape of America without having to deny its source of origination, dilute the magnitude of its artistry or abdicate its mission of educating, training, and mentoring our posterity. ❖

Woodie King, Jr., Lorna Littleway, Robbie McCauley and Don Evans discuss "Developing Black Playwrights"



Littleway with Paul Carter Harrison at the Minary Center.

AGIA: A BRIEF CHRONICLE

by William W. Cook

The history of the organization known as the African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA) is bound to the history of the National Black Theatre Summit “On Golden Pond.” The National Black Theatre Summit was held partly in response to a call issued by August Wilson in a speech delivered on June 26, 1996 to the eleventh biennial Theatre Communications Group Conference at Princeton University. In that speech, Wilson, after commenting on the state of Black theatre, pointed to the need for just such a meeting.

The time has come for Black playwrights, Black theatre intellectuals, and Black theatre artists to confer with one another. . . to come together to meet each other face to face, and address questions of aesthetics and ways to defend ourselves from nay-sayers who would trumpet our talents as insufficient to warrant the same manners of investigation and exploration as the majority. We need to develop guidelines for the protection of our cultural property, our contribution, and the influence they accrue. . . **We should confer in a city. . . the United states in 1998, so that we may enter the millennium united and prepared for a long future of prosperity.** . . artists, playwrights, actors, (intellectuals), we can be the spearhead of a new movement to reignite and reunite our people’s positive energy for a political and social change that is reflective of our spiritual truths.

August Wilson, “The Ground On Which I Stand”

In response to this speech, a series of conversations which included Don Evans, Woodie King Jr., Paul Carter Harrison and Victor Leo Walker II (among others) began to consider the most effective manner of responding to Wilson’s call. With August Wilson as convener, Victor Walker as Executive Director and William W. Cook as chair, plans for a national meeting began to take shape. An executive committee for the National Black Summit was created in order to increase the number of views represented in those plans. Members of this initial executive committee with Cook, Walker and Wilson were the following: Keryl McCord of Crossroads Theatre, Amina Dickinson of Kraft Foods, Ifa Bayeza of the Duncan YMCA Community Center, Lou Bellamy of Penumbra Theatre Company, Claude Purdy of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Paul Carter Harrison of Columbia College, Woodie King, Jr. of New Federal Theatre, Don Evans, playwright, Beverly Robinson of UCLA, Robbie McCauley, performance artist; Pearl Cleage, playwright. Early in its deliberations the Executive Committee decided that participation had to be limited if the work of the Summit was to be completed in a timely fashion. It also came to a firm conclusion that participants should represent not only the arts world but also academia, the corporate sector, foundations, government institutions and other friends of the theatre. The combination of these interests and approaches

with that of those in the theatre and arts profession was felt to be a sure augury of the success of the Summit. Finally, the Committee insisted that geographical and institutional representation be as varied as possible; that younger voices be a vital part of this unique exchange. It goes without saying that the final selection necessitated a great many compilations of lists of names, professional activities, location and every pos-

William W. Cook is a Professor of English, Dartmouth College. He served as Chair of the National Black Theatre Summit and is currently the Vice President and Chair of the Board of Governors of AGIA.





Victor Leo Walker, II, AGIA President and CEO, August Wilson, AGIA Chairman of the Board, and William W. Cook, AGIA Vice President and Chair of the Board of Governors outside the Minary Center during The First National Black Theatre Summit.

sible permutation of these characteristics. After lengthy deliberation, a list of possible participants was decided on. The Committee then turned its attention to funding, locale and agenda. The presence of August on the campus of Dartmouth College as a Montgomery Fellow, the membership of both Cook and Walker in the faculty of that institution and the willingness of Dartmouth to assist in funding the Summit made this next challenge less daunting. The Summit would be held at Dartmouth College's Minary Conference Center on Squam Lake (the Golden Pond of the Hollywood film) and a last stop on the fugitive slave journey to Canada.

The problem of the schedule and agenda for the Summit was solved by a repeated winnowing down of a list of topics to six which the Committee felt were most encompassing and urgent. The Committee agreed to direct the attention of the Summit to the following issues: 1) Legal and Social Initiatives; 2) Developing Black Playwrights; 3) Audience and Community Development (Institutional Development); 4) Diversity Within the Black Arts Community; 5) Economics (Institutional Development); and 6) Aesthetics, Standards and Practices. Individual participants were asked before hand to prepare position papers on one of the above topics or to be prepared to respond to the position papers of others. After a full vetting of each paper before the entire group (presentation of position paper, response to the paper and full-group discussion), smaller working groups began to refine and further examine each of the topics. When these working groups returned to the full session, they had moved in very substantial and productive directions away from the early examinations. Because all of the plenary sessions and the small group sessions were audio and/or video taped, a permanent record of the proceedings was made possible. The Summit then turned to the issue of the One-Day Conference planned to climax the Summit. This Conference held on the main campus at the College was yet another attempt to broaden

the conversation begun by the Summit. Summit participants closed their activities on Golden Pond by planning for presentations and discussions with the still larger audience of the One-Day Conference.

Attendance at the One-Day Conference exceeded our expectations as did the range and intensity of the discussion. The topics which formed the basis of the Summit were greatly enhanced by the contribution of dedicated arts professionals, activists and others concerned with the future and health of Black theatre. The presentation of a new piece by Ntozake Shange, speeches by organizers of the Conference and officials of Dartmouth College and the Tuck School of Business Administration and a rousing opening and closing by African drummers and dancers sent everyone out of Moore Theater charged with energy and excitement.

The spate of activities following the National Black Theatre Summit and the One-Day Conference continued to reflect the two-fold purpose of the organizers of those events. These activities were aimed at including more and more individuals and groups in the response to August Wilson's call and to setting in place programs and other initiatives that will realize the goals of that call. A series of town meetings have been held at sites ranging from San Francisco, Philadelphia, New Jersey, Houston, Saint Paul, Chicago, New York and Los Angeles. The African Grove Institute For the Arts was incorporated with a newly constituted group of officers, a Board of Directors and a Board of Governors. Wilson, Walker and Cook spent a week at the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities. From that initial contact a series of partnerships have developed or are in the planning stages. Getty will host Getty Fellows recommended by AGIA on its campus in Los Angeles beginning in January, 1999, and will host organizational and fundraising meetings for the organization. Other partnerships await final fine tuning. With Georgia Public Broadcasting, AGIA is completing a documentary of the Summit for public television and higher education. With John Hughes and Michael Werner, we will be partners in the production of film projects on Black arts for the same audiences. With the Rockefeller Center we have initiated a series of lectures by prominent individuals titled "Public Policy and the Arts." The Amos Tuck School of Business Administration at Dartmouth College, a school regularly ranked among the top ten graduate schools of business administration, has become another AGIA partner in the effort to address needs raised at the Summit. Three projects are exemplary of this new partnership. Heads of Black theatre and arts organizations will attend, on scholarship, The Tuck School Minority Business Executive Program (MBEP). These same individuals or others with the requisite training will be eligible to attend the advanced program (AMBEP). The first groups have completed training in those business skills which many informants listed as an immediate need. Saint Martin's Press has issued a contract for a book on the Summit

to be edited by Wilson, Cook and Walker; this book will include the work not only of the three editors, but also chapters by many participants in the Summit.

One other project should be mentioned in this partial list of activities since the Wilson speech and the activities and organization which it encouraged. In partnership with the National Black Arts Festival held in Atlanta in July of 1998, we convened National Black Theatre Summit II. Given ground work already laid, we were able to involve still larger numbers in our deliberations. One of the more interesting program elements of this gathering was a kind of Summit-within-a-Summit which brought together scores of theater and arts organization heads in an attempt to clarify important issues in Black theatre from the point of view of those experienced individuals. Again, as was the case with the One-Day Conference, attendance exceeded our expectations. All activities at Summit II, with the exception of gatherings like the initial meetings of the theatre and arts organization heads, were free and open to the public.

Funding for The National Black Theatre Summit on Golden Pond and Summit II in Atlanta was provided by The Ford Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, The Rockefeller Foundation, The Nathan Cummings Foundation, Dartmouth College and the Montgomery Foundation.

I have omitted one central aspect of Summit I, Summit II and the One-Day Conference: great food and celebration. Both are so obviously a part of our gathering together that they can be taken for granted. Our meetings were difficult and assiduous work but they were part of a larger whole that included celebration of our culture and ourselves.

We stand now at a major crossroads in the brief history of AGIA. Our goal is to secure funding on such a basis as to permit those initiatives already begun to continue to develop in useful di-

rections, and to permit us to turn our attention to a number of new initiatives presented to us in our many public gatherings. Wilson made clear in his call not only the importance of the coming together that this record documents, but also of the urgency of that coming together, our insistence that we define for ourselves and our communities the very nature of our cultural products. We must do so individually, collectively and in partnership with other individuals and organizations.

I close this brief chronicle with the words of another great parent-artist, Langston Hughes. Hughes' words opened our early meetings and they offer a fitting close to this review of later events.

NOTES OF COMMERCIAL THEATRE

You've taken my blues and gone
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

You also took my spirituals and gone.
You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones
And all kinds of Swing Mikados
And in everything but what's about me —
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me ñ
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.

A NOTEWORTHY FOOTNOTE ON OUR NAME

The African Grove Theater, the first in the United States managed by Blacks, came into being in New York City and under the leadership of theater manager Mr. Brown offered its first performances in the 1821-22 season. The African Grove was shut down by city authorities in 1822 but Brown appealed to the general public for patronage and support. Under his leadership the theater developed plays (**The Lost King Shotaway**), playwrights and actors (James Hewlett and Ira Aldridge were among them). The name The African Grove Institute for the Arts signals our continuity with and admiration for this daring, pioneer venture in Black Theatre in the United States.

AGIA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

August Wilson, Chairman of the Board
Victor Leo Walker, II, President and CEO
William W. Cook, Vice President and Chair of the Board of Governors
Slivy Edmonds Cotton, Treasurer and Vice President
Keryl McCord, Secretary and Vice President

BOARD OF GOVERNORS

Mariea R. Cromer, Amina Dickerson, Ifa Bayeza, Lou Bellamy, Paul Carter Harrison, Don Evans, Beverly Robinson, Walter Dallas, Esmeralda Simmons, Zola Mashariki

A Work in Progress: THE AFRICAN GROVE INSTITUTE FOR THE ARTS INTERACTS WITH THE GETTY TRUST

by Karen L. Stokes
with Michael S. Roth



Karen L. Stokes, Local and Comparative Research, Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and Humanities, & Manager L.A. as Subject Project, addresses the Summit II in Atlanta

In Spring 1998 I was invited to attend the ground-breaking National Black Theater Summit, On Golden Pond, convened by distinguished playwright August Wilson and sponsored by Dartmouth College at its Minary Conference Center in Ashland, New Hampshire. The Summit was organized by Dartmouth Professors William W. Cook, Chair of the English Department, and Victor Leo Walker, II, Assistant Professor of drama. Although my schedule made it impossible for me to participate, I was intrigued by the objectives of the National Black Theater Summit (NBTS), objectives bearing on the topic “Cultural Recovery” which I was then exploring with some of my colleagues at the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities (Getty Research Institute).

It is an understatement to say that I was disappointed at not being able to attend the NBTS. I was looking forward to examining with other Summit participants critical issues concerning African American and Black Diaspora Theater as related to conservation and preservation of cultural heritage and the process of cultural recovery. I was also interested in exploring possible intersections between the Getty Research Institute’s initiatives and the work of the NBTS in the areas of research, scholarship, and institutional relationship building. Of particular interest to me was the structure of NBTS as an organized body of artists and scholars with (1) the institutional leverage, via Dartmouth College as the sponsoring entity and August Wilson as an icon of Black Theater in the Americas, and (2) the artistic and intellectual capacity to expand access to new primary and secondary sources that could be used to further inform our interpretations and representations of Black American cultural life, past and present. I shared my enthusiasm about the Summit agenda with Michael Roth, Associate Director of the Research Institute, and requested authority to invite the conveners of the NBTS to the Getty for a week of conversation. My request was approved, and in April 1998 the conveners of the National Black Theater Summit accepted our invitation to engage in a series of meetings at the Getty Center.

During that week of discussions Wilson, Cook, and Walker

met with the leadership of the Getty program-areas including the Museum, research, education, conservation, technology and grants, ending in a meeting with Barry Munitz, President of the J. Paul Getty Trust. The meetings regarding future collaborative program possibilities were both productive and encouraging. The African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA), managing organization of the NBTS, and Munitz agreed to state that the Getty and AGIA are developing a relationship. Significantly, AGIA was offered an invitation to consider the Getty Center one of its West Coast activity sites--and while focusing on other theater, ethnic, and cultural groups closer to their mission, they could view the Center as one staging-ground and leverage point to initiate and/or introduce new programs, convene relevant groups, and to engage public events. It was emphasized repeatedly that whatever AGIA initiatives develop with Getty involvement must be based upon partnerships within the local arts community. These initial meetings represented a critical milestone for what should be a continuing conversation regarding potential partnership initiatives between cultural institutions in Southern California, the Getty Center and the African Grove Institute for the Arts.

The first series of meetings at the Getty Center was followed by Summit II in Atlanta, where Michael Roth and I publicly described the working-relationship being formed between



"Organizations like AGIA are going to play an important role in reshaping how we think about the intersection of the arts, community and a diverse democratic culture."

Michael S. Roth, The Getty Center.

the Getty Center, AGIA and Los Angeles arts groups. The announcement included these components for the next year: (1) envision the Getty Center as one possible staging ground for connecting AGIA to local cultural organizations and foundations; (2) use Getty facilities as one place for hosting programs and events that can assist in enhancing the AGIA agenda; (3) invite AGIA's board of directors to the Getty Center in Spring 1999 for a series of discussions and meetings with the Los Angeles arts community; (4) explore potential topic-based "mini-think-tanks" co-sponsored by AGIA and the Research Institute around issues of mutual interest; (5) discuss a process for involving AGIA affiliated scholars in the Research Institute's residential scholar program; and (6) continue to examine other possible points of program collaboration.

This announcement was of great interest to some and to others a significant--if not unsettling--surprise. Local and national responses ranged from bewilderment about how an organization dedicated to the visual arts could possibly find common ground with an organization committed to the performing arts through theater--particularly Black Theater--to skepticism regarding the ability of AGIA to retain its vision and not be diverted or co-opted by the vision of an internationally noted, significantly endowed institution such as the Getty. The AGIA response to these concerns is stated best by a quote from Wilson, Cook, and Walker: *"The Summit WILL NOT be a forum for complaints, redress of past or present grievances, oversimplification of very complicated issues, the creation of a 'Separatist' theater arts agenda, or any issue that is reductive rather than constructive, or reactive rather than proactive."*¹ When the question is asked, "Why include the Getty?" the Getty response is, "Why should we not be one of the West-Coast organizations supporting various interlinking forms of creative arts," particularly if the emphasis of collaboration is on equity and mutual benefit. This is consistent with the Getty's recently released Annual Report 97-98: *"Since we have the intellectual and philanthropic capacity to manage and leverage our resources, and to embrace the power of learning throughout our orga-*

*nization, Getty programs and partners accept and respond to innovations and risks beyond most others' capacity. We are therefore able to engage a diverse public."*²

The Getty, in fact, has a history of engaging in various types of balancing partnerships with local, national, and global universities, cultural institutions, organizations, and other centers of research. In these partnerships it is expected that every component will contribute both to leveraging resources and to the conceptual development of collaborative programs and initiatives. Unfortunately, when diverse entities such as AGIA and Getty come together, they are often perceived and codified stereotypically: one as the financial resource, or resource broker, and the other as the provider of cultural content for the other to use or commodify at will. While this has proven true in traditional models of culture-based partnerships, this unfortunate--if not uncommon--perception diminishes the potential for new models of productive program-based partnerships to form and forecloses the possibility of equity in a collaborative effort. Indeed, the Getty president repeatedly insisted that the Getty would neither be a major source of financial support or the lone Los Angeles partner--AGIA had to be the leader in gathering resources and identifying more central collaborators.

These and other issues continue to be discussed and examined by AGIA and the Getty representatives. It has been beneficial to the conversation and to the process that the leadership vision within each organization begins on common ground. Wilson, using theater as his entry point, has stated that there are *"many unexplored realities"* and that *"we must widen the view"* and begin to see the arts as a *"catalyst for social change and cultural enrichment."*³ Munitz, using visual arts as entry point, states that the Getty Center *"...weaves together the presentation, enjoyment, study, support, and preservation of the visual arts, and thereby helps strengthen aesthetic and humanistic values... injecting throughout our programs the role of the visual arts in creating a more civil global society."*⁴ These are not polarized thoughts or visions. Together both visions bind the power of the arts to change, to transform, and to renew our cultural sense of place, representation, and meaning. It is this multi-textured integration of text, performance, and the visual arts that makes the Getty/AGIA initiative possible and of critical importance to informing the future of arts and culture in our changing society.

The conversation between AGIA and the Getty continues to progress and evolve. Last week I attended a seminar for scholars in residence at the Research Institute.⁵ As Michael Roth, who also heads the Research Institute's Scholars and Seminars Program, introduced the presenter for that semi-

1 Black Theatre Network News, *African American: The Next Stage*, Wilson, Walker, II, Cook, Volume 8, Number 1, Fall 1997, p. 10.

2 The Report of The J. Paul Getty Trust 97-98, President's Message, p. 2

3 Black Theatre Network News, *African American Theatre: The Next Stage*, Wilson, Volume 8, Number 1, Fall 1997, p. 9; and Tuck at Dartmouth, Tuck Today, *From Center Stage to the Bottom Line: Managers of Black Theaters Enter Minority Executive Program*, Reid, Volume XXVIII, Number 1, Winter 1999, p. 11.

4 The Report of The J. Paul Getty Trust 97-98, President's Message, p. 2,4

5 The intent of the Getty Research Institute's scholar appointments is to provide scholars with time and resources needed to support their work and to create a community of scholars with shared interest in a given theme. The current theme is "Representing the Passions." The seminar meets weekly around work of a particular scholar.

nar (a scholar recommended to the program by AGIA), I thought about the conversation last April with Victor Walker, Bill Cook, and August Wilson regarding the mutual interests of our affiliate institutions. The speaker in this seminar, Professor Errol Gaston Hill, John D. Willard Professor of Drama and Oratory, Emeritus, Department of Drama, Dartmouth College, began by giving the historical background of Blacks in New York City at the turn of the 18th Century, then read an excerpt from the manuscript that he is completing while in residence at the Getty Research Institute tentatively titled The 19th Century: Part 1— The African Theatre to Uncle Tom's Cabin: "*From the ranks of this intrepid group of seamen in the port city, came the founder of the first known Black theatre company in North America. His name was William Alexander Brown. During the hot summer months, it was customary in the city to open pleasure gardens (known also as "tea gardens") where residents could spend their leisure time out-of-doors and be entertained by musicians, dancers. . .and various other performers while refreshing their appetites with beer, mead, ice cream, cake, tea, and other delicacies. Although there were several of these venues, such as Vauxhall, Chatham, and Castle Gardens, Black folk were denied admission to them. To redress this inequity and provide comparable entertainment for Blacks, William Brown created a facility that he called the African Grove.*"⁶

Professor Hill's presentation was well received by his colleagues and it provoked an hour of stimulating discussion. How was the early Black Theater connected to other forms of artistic expression? What were its literary and visual sources of inspiration? The conversation addressed some fundamental issues concerning the nature of ethnicity, race and the arts. "What makes Black Theater Black?" How does an art form retain the traces of the identity of its maker? The seminar discussion began to explore our collective sense of the power of the arts--the interface of visual, literary and performing--to affect how we engage, as Wilson has put it, "culturally, socially, intellectually, and politically" as a civil society.

We are now exploring how in Spring 2000 the potential AGIA/Getty "mini-think tanks" might examine the above questions and other topics including: 1) how the visual arts have intersected with the production and reception of Black American Theater, (2) how to create new points of academic and public access to the material, visual culture of Black American Theater, (3) examination of associated access issues regarding ownership and the preservation of cultural property rights, and (4) strategies and methods for examining Black American Theater in relation to the

development of other art forms. Additionally, there could be a co-hosted lecture series at the Getty Center, Winter or Spring 2000 based upon a comparative examination of the historical and contemporary interaction between text, performance, and the visual arts in theater, and through this examination contribute to the development of a framework for understanding the cultural contexts of art as a multi-textured practice in ethnic American and Diaspora cultures.

In a relatively short time frame the Getty staff, other local professionals, and AGIA have made significant progress towards an active, engaged and productive partnership. The Getty Research Institute has established a process to receive recommendations from AGIA of affiliated scholars and artists for consideration in the scholars and seminars program. As a result, in addition to Professor Hill, who is currently in residence at the Getty, author and playwright Sydne Mahone will be joining the scholars program in April 1999 and will remain in residence through June 1999. The AGIA Board of Directors will visit the Getty Center in June 1999 to explore the next appropriate steps and to determine whether the earlier conditions set for meaningful partnership are being fulfilled.

As this conversation continues, it is important that natural intersections between our program interests and those of other arts organizations in Southern California have been identified. It is most critical that we have begun to design a different model of partnership and that we continue to develop creative ways to pursue common points of interest, with an active identification of strong partners, and with respect for the mutual contributions and expertise of each institution. It is essential that Getty staff receive as much from AGIA in intellectual and resource exchange as AGIA expects to gain from the Getty and its other Los Angeles collaborators. It is through this type of exchange that institutional partnerships of the new millennium will take root and be given an opportunity to flourish.

Karen L. Stokes, Local and Comparative Research, Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, & Manager L.A. as Subject Project.

Michael S. Roth, Associate Director, Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, & Head of Scholars and Seminars Program.

⁶ Hill, Errol Gaston, *The 19th Century: Part I The African Theatre to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Manuscript, 1999

Call and Response:

The Making of the African Grove Institute for the Arts

by Elmo Terry-Morgan

Photo by Marsha C. West



Elmo Terry-Morgan is Associate Professor of Theatre Arts and Afro-American Studies, and Artistic Director of Rites and Reason Theatre at Brown University. He is also recipient of multiple AUDELCO Awards for directing, playwriting and musical creation; and is Managing Editor of Black Theatre Network News.

On Monday, November 2, 1998, at Rites and Reason Theatre, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, I engaged in a conversation with Dr. Victor Leo Walker, II, Professor of Theatre Arts, and Prof. William Cook, Chair of the English Department, both of Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire. Walker is Executive Director/CEO, and Cook is Vice President, Board of Governors, of the African Grove Institute for the Arts, Inc., (AGIA). Also present were Karen Allen Baxter, Managing Director of Rites and Reason Theatre, and Dr. Demetrice Wurley, Visiting Professor of English at Dartmouth College. Much of the information and quotes in this article come from that conversation.

SOMETHING WAS CONJURING

“WE ARE INVISIBLE”, I thought, as I sat in the front row, audience right, at Town Hall, New York City, on Monday, January 27, 1997, at the debate, that almost-was, entitled “On Cultural Power: The August Wilson/Robert Brustein Discussion”. If not for the presence of August Wilson the fact that African-American theatres already exist, and still do, would have been totally ignored. Debate moderator, Anna Deveare Smith, acknowledged Crossroads Theatre of New Brunswick, New Jersey; at the time, the only Black theatre to be a LORT member (League of Regional Theatres); and gave a nod to pre-eminent theatre producer, Woodie King, Jr., who was in atten-

PREAMBLE

Town Hall, New York City, January 27, 1997

"On Cultural Power: The August Wilson/Robert Brustein Discussion"

dance, as examples, I suppose, of Black theatres. But what about the rest of us?

What about The National Black Theatre, the H.A.D.L.E.Y. Players, Black Spectrum, NuYorican Poets Cafe, Rites and Reason Theatre, Freedom Theatre, Kuntu Theatre, North Carolina Black Repertory, Jomandi, St. Louis Black Repertory, Plowshares, The Ensemble Theatre, ETACreative Arts Foundation, Penumbra, The Lorraine Hansberry, The Hittite Empire, Cultural Odyssey and so many others? What about the National Black Theatre Festival, the National Black Arts Festival, AUDELCO, the Black Theatre Network?

At this historic gathering, organized and sponsored by the Theatre Communications Group (TCG), half-way through the event, I felt that being there was a waste of my time, energy, and money. Was this some staged event to give even more exposure and credibility to August Wilson, Robert Brustein and Anna DeVeare Smith? In their respective rights they had each achieved prestige in the American Theatre, but what did they have to do with Black me, with my theatre - Rites and Reason, and with African-American Theatre overall? I had a feeling that these people were not speaking to me, because they did not even know that I existed. I said to myself, "This is an academic exercise for the White folks, and those handful of Black folks who have *made it* in the White Theatre."

Black Theatre had been in a downward, financial, spiral since the mid-1980s.

Most, if not all of the Black theatres, had been suffering, barely holding on, for a number of years. I wondered if this public discussion would, somehow, educate and illuminate our situation; if this debate would initiate a movement to acknowledge the, history, importance, and uniqueness of African-American Theatre; and, ultimately, create a consensus and advocacy to give The Black Theatre access to financial resources - to which it had been blocked - which would ensure its perpetual, institutional stability and viability. At the end of the debate, I was not hopeful that any of that would happen. However, what I did not know, at the time, was that conversations had already been happening between August Wilson and other Black Theatre professionals regarding his "Call" for Black Theatre folks to gather on "Common Ground" to discuss the current condition of Black Theatre and its future into the next millennium.

After reading the transcript of August Wilson's keynote address delivered at the TCG conference in Princeton, NJ on June 26, 1996, in American Theatre magazine, my initial reaction was "How bodacious!". Here was August Wilson, the most successful Black playwright in American history, pulling the covers off of White Theatre's dirty little secret, racism.

In a Washington Post article, August 11, 1996, by David Richards, entitled "A Playwright's Demand for Black Theater (Angry Speech Embroils August Wilson in Controversy)", director and scholar Clinton Turner Davis was quoted as saying,

"The American theater suffers from an ostrich syndrome...The moment you mention race in this country, particularly as it's connected to the arts, people turn a deaf ear and walk out of the room: 'Oh my God, are they still talking about that?' But the point is, the only way we'll get anywhere is when we are all totally comfortable talking about differences. Until that happens and we can look one another in the eye, curse each other out, if necessary, and still come out of it talking, we're not going to make any progress."

Wilson's words definitely struck a chord, and folks were talking about theatre, money and race at Princeton. In the same September, 1996 issue of American Theatre a companion article, "Inside the Tent, Issues of race, money and the vitality of art fuel four days of discussion at TCG's 11th National Conference" by Douglas Langworthy, reported on the ad hoc meeting and discussion that followed the speech, moderated by Benny Sato Ambush. But, even then, I read the article with a curious detachment. I did not feel that the doings at Princeton had anything to do with me, at the time, or would have any impact on my ongoing struggle to maintain a Black Theatre institution on an Ivy-League campus or on my work with the National Black Theatre, AUDELCO, and the Black Theatre Network. Like so many other artistic and managing directors, and dedicated workers in Black Theatre, I already felt isolated, overwhelmed, frustrated, unappre-

...What I did not know was that conversations had already been happening between August Wilson and other Black Theatre professionals regarding his "Call" for Black Theatre folks to gather on "Common Ground"...

... half-way through the event [the Wilson/Brustein debate], I felt that being there was a waste of my time, energy, and money ...

Elmo Terry-Morgan and Ntozake Shange at the Minary Center, Summit I



ciated, and weary. I thought, “This will all blow over, and it will be back to business as usual.” But something was conjuring.

Robert Brustein, Artistic Director of the American Repertory Theatre, had responded to Wilson’s speech in his article in The New Republic, August 19 & 26, 1996, entitled, “Subsidized Separatism: Robert Brustein on Theatre”. The Los Angeles Times article “The Wilson Manifesto, Part 2”, September 15, 1996, by Don Shirley, reported on this “national discussion”. And, TCG continued its coverage of the “controversy” in its December, 1996 issue of American Theatre, “Plowing August Wilson’s ‘Ground’, Four commentaries on the cultural diversity debate”. With all of this eloquent verbiage in print, the conversation was on a level that ignored the fact that viable Black Theatre institutions already existed. So, to me, this was still an intellectual exercise that had and would have no tangible affect on Black Theatre. So why the hell did I buy a ticket for a debate, of all things!, and drive 180 miles from Providence, RI to New York City to be in attendance? Why did I encourage Karen Allen Baxter, Rites and Reason’s Managing Director, and Marsha Z. West, director/actor, to join me at the debate? Why did we take the subway from Harlem to Mid-Town? When we emerged from the subway, it was sleeting, and snowing. It was cold! We ran right into Mary B. Davis, AUDELCO grande dame and Board member. That’s when I knew a historic event was about to happen. Something was conjuring.

As we approached Town Hall I thought I was seeing a winter mirage. In the bright New York City lights, fractured with sleet and snow, the sidewalk was packed with people. Cars and taxis were crowded in the street. The throng was animated and talkative. There was a buzz! A few entrepreneurs were scalping tickets TO A DEBATE! Folks were buying! And White-looking folks were everywhere. I wondered, “Where are the Black folks?” After all, this discussion was really about our theatre institutions! Wasn’t it?

Then, the landscape began to look more familiar. I saw Benny Sato Ambush and Ricardo Khan. Of course they would be there; they were TCG officers. But then I saw Woodie King, Jr., Paul Carter Harrison, Richard Wesley, Lorna Littleway, Robbie McCauley, Victor Leo Walker, Glenn Turman, Roger Guenveur Smith and so many more. We were there!

Something special was about to happen, but, for me, and many others, it did not happen on the stage that night.

Eugene Nesmith, Professor of Theatre at CCNY, gives an insightful overview of the evening in his article, “The Brustein/Wilson Debate at Town Hall: What Happened and Why it Matters”, in the 1997 spring issue of Black Theatre Network News (BTNews). Nesmith writes,

“The stage was thus set for a lively debate but the big debate never got off the ground. In short, it was a royal disappointment.”

I agree. Although I give credit to TCG for organizing the event, and appreciate its efforts in managing its intricate logistics, the debate or discussion fell way short of addressing the concerns of Black Theatre. Many thoughts were coursing through my mind, but not all of them specific to Black Theatre.

As a professor of Theatre Arts and Afro-American Studies, my mind had been on the one hundred year parallels. 1996 was the centennial anniversary of the Plessy vs. Ferguson Supreme Court Decision which legitimized the legal practice of “separate and unequal”. Both Ebony and Emerge magazines had reported on this historic phenomenon in 1996. Although progress had been made for Black folks in America, the exponential growth of racism in its overt and covert forms still had negative affects on the lives of Black folks, and would continue to do so for generations to come. As W.E.B. DuBois had predicted, we were still challenged by the issue of race.

The discussion was over. Photo ops were happening on stage. Karen, Marsha and I departed Town Hall. I felt hopeless. At that time, I felt, and still believe, that the Black/White race war in America will not end peacefully until a critical mass of White folks acknowledge that racism is intricately woven into their cultural inheritance; own racism as a problem that they must solve; and, actively work to eradicate it. What a predicament! Overall, the American White hegemony does not give comparable value to its own artistic legacy and institutions as compared to its support of its

... Something special was about to happen, but, for me, and many others, it did not happen on the stage that night ... [at the debate]

Don Evans [left] and August Wilson outside the Minary Center, Summit I. Evans was among the first to answer Wilson’s “Call.”



**We entered the West Bank Cafe, . . .
A “Who’s Who in Black Theatre” was
in attendance - including August Wil-
son.**

Paul Carter Harrison [left]
and Victor Leo Walker [right]
in the Minary Center, Summit
I. Harrison served as a liaison
between the “organizers”
and Wilson.



financial, technological, and scientific cultural arms, [Reference the struggles of the National Endowment for the Arts]. So why should Black Theatre folks expect them to give any significant recognition and monetary support to Black Theatre? It is no secret that attendance at The Theatre pales next to the numbers that support film and sporting events. So, how important is it? Does this thing called Theatre have a particular importance for Black folks? And, why are Black Theatre warriors so insistent on maintaining it? I believe the answer is heritage.

In the late 1800s, post-Civil War, the Black Aristocrats, The Talented Tenth - if you will, those few who had anomalistic advantages for Negroes, that precious elite who had tried so hard to assimilate, to prove to Whites that they were human and shared their European-American cultural values and aesthetics were traumatized by rejection. That model of White “civilization” to which they so desperately aspired spurned them and relegated them to the status of “The Untalented Ninety”; in effect, the same as the “wretched” masses of Black folks, “niggers” with pedigrees, but “niggers” all the same. Those thoughts kept echoing through my mind as we walked westward, across town, headed towards B. Smith’s restaurant - because we heard some “folks” from the debate would be there; perhaps, a gathering of the 1997 Artistic Intelligentsia, a chance to try to make some sense out of what had happened at Town Hall.

The sleet and snow had stopped. The air

was damp and cold. The streets were wet. We ran into Ann Duquesnay, Tony Award winner for Noise/Funk, coming out of a deli. We had recently worked with Ann, back in December, on the 24th Annual AUDELCO Awards ceremony, a tribute to its co-founder, Ancestor Vivian Robinson. [Ann co-hosted with actor Jerome Preston Bates.] We gave her our impressions of the debate - not glowing - said “so long”, and kept trekking. I thought about those Victorian Era ancestors. When Plessy vs. Ferguson backfired on the Colored assimilationists (Reference Aristocracy of Color, the Black Elite, 1880-1920 by Williard B. Gatewood), **what did they do?**

They embraced a two-pronged strategy: They continued to fight vigorously for integration and equal citizenship **while** they developed, **out of necessity**, their own Negro/Colored/Black/Afro-American-only organizations and institutions. Political manifestations of Double Consciousness, coined by DuBois, is not new to African-Americans. Rather, that way of feeling, thinking and behaving has been a staple of their traditional, cultural paradigm - the Black Moral Culture (BMC). Something was conjuring, but where?

We made it to B. Smith’s. It was crowded, lively. We stood, and looked. We saw Malik Yoba and party exiting. The stars were out! But where were the “debate” folks? We heard (from whom I cannot remember) that “they” were at the West Bank Cafe (on 42nd Street at 9th Avenue across from Theatre Row). We left and headed a few blocks southwest.

We entered the West Bank Cafe, one of my favorite mid-town New York City spots (Kalinda is a great bartender!). It was warm and familiar. A “Who’s Who in Black Theatre” was in attendance - including August Wilson.

SEEDS OF THE CONJURING

It wasn’t until almost a year later that I learned how the conjuring came to be; how the Wilson TCG speech led to the Wilson/Brustein Debate; how that led to the First National Black Theatre Summit (On Golden Pond), and One Day National Black Theatre Conference; how that led to the formation of the African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA); how that led to the Second National Black Theatre Summit at the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta; and how the conjuring took root and created a movement.

On Monday, November 2, 1998, Victor Leo Walker, II (VLW), and William Cook (WC), came to Brown University for a dinner meeting at the President’s House, hosted by President E. Gordon Gee and his wife, Professor Constance Bumgarner Gee. The meeting’s agenda was to discuss the status of Rites and Reason Theatre, University support for it, and a guest artist/scholar collaboration between Rites and Reason/Brown and AGIA/Dartmouth. The night before, we had met in Boston at the Huntington Theatre where August Wilson’s play, Jitney, was in production. I was guest lecturer for the post-performance Humanities Forum.

**VLW . . . Don [Evans, the playwright] called me
up . . . and he said, ‘Y’know August gave this
speech and I just got the text.’ . . .**

Don Evans reads
his position paper
to the First Summit.



It wasn't until almost a year later that I learned how the conjuring came to be . . . TCG speech . . . Debate . . . Summit . . . Conference . . . African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA) . . . Summit . . .

Before we left for the President's House that Monday evening, I turned on the tape recorder and, for the most part, listened to Walker and Cook explain how this movement all came to be. Also in attendance were Karen Allen Baxter and Professor Demetrice Wurley. August Wilson was scheduled to attend, but due to the illness of his baby daughter, Azula, he and his wife, Constanza Romero, had to fly back to Seattle.

This was an informal conversation with lots of crosstalk, but I was able to produce a detailed transcript. I had been privy to some of the behind the scenes logistics and politics, had attended both Summits, engaged in a couple of substantive conversations with August Wilson, and was, basically, in the mix. However, I was missing some important details which would explain how events evolved from a speech to a movement. So, I jump-started the conversation by saying, in a less than eloquent manner, "...Like August [Wilson] gave his speech at the TCG conference in 1996 and made his call...It was like it just kinda happened all of a sudden."

The creation of AGIA did happen with lightening speed. How did that happen?

VLW: "[The] TCG Address was June of 1996 at Princeton. Don [Evans, the playwright] called me up...and he said, 'Y'know August gave this speech and I just got the text.' Don wasn't at the TCG Conference but he read the text of the speech and everyone had been

buzzing...So he called me in August of '96 and said, 'Man we gotta respond to this speech.'..."

"...a week after that, Paul Carter Harrison called me and said, '...I heard about August's speech...And I've talked to August, and August gave me a copy of the speech.'"

"So I said, 'Send me a copy of the speech.' ...Paul Carter Harrison sent a copy of the speech. Couple of months went past and, then, Don and I talked again."

By this time it was October, 1996. Walker and Dartmouth College were becoming a focal point. Don Evans had the idea to respond to Wilson's Call for a meeting which, according to the text of the speech, "The Ground on Which I Stand", was initially directed to Black playwrights, but, as history has proven, expanded to encompass all domains:

"The time has come for black playwrights to confer with one another, to come together to meet each other face to face to address questions of aesthetics and ways to defend ourselves from the nay-sayers who would trumpet our talents as insufficient to warrant the same manner of investigation and exploration as the majority. We need to develop guidelines for the protection of our cultural property, our contributions and the influence they accrue. It is time we took responsibility for our talents in our own hands. We cannot depend on others. We cannot

depend on the directors, the managers or the actors to do the work we should be doing for ourselves. It is our lives and the pursuit of our fulfillment that are being encumbered by false ideas and perceptions."

"It is time to embrace the political dictates of our history and answer the challenge to our duties. *I further think we should confer in a city in our ancestral homeland in the southern part of the United States in 1998*, so that we may enter the millennium united and prepared for a long future of prosperity."

(Source: American Theatre, September, 1996, page 73; italics mine)

In the entirety of the speech, the, above, two paragraphs are the ones that speak directly to the core of the AGIA Movement. This was the Wilson Call. But who heard it? And, of those who heard it, who had the resources to make a conference happen in the South or anywhere else?

I asked Walker and Cook about this. I read the article a few times, but I only heard a great idea, one which had been bandied about at Black Theatre conferences, festivals and awards ceremonies. I did not hear the call, which is probably why the gathering did not happen at Brown University. First, I believe if I had approached Brown's administration with the idea to convene a Black Theatre summit and conference with its sanction and institutional support, I would have

... Walker and Dartmouth College were becoming a focal point. Don Evans had the idea to respond to Wilson's Call for a meeting which, according to the text of the speech . . . was initially directed to Black playwrights . . .

The Minary Center.



... Paul [Carter Harrison] said, ‘... read the speech...the cat is calling, man ...’ And Don [Evans] said the same thing, ‘August ... called for us to have a meeting.’...

... in October, 1996, Don Evans offered to hold a meeting at Trenton State ...

been dropped kicked out of University Hall. Second, I did not feel that I had enough clout to approach the multiple Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award winning August Wilson. But Don Evans, Victor Leo Walker, II, and Paul Carter Harrison heard the Call and responded.

I openly, and, perhaps, naively said, “...When I read the TCG [article]...I didn’t feel like, oh, he’s [August Wilson] waiting for people to call him.”

In his sage and resonant fashion, William Cook responded, “I think it was not so much that he expected somebody to call him as he expected someone to act on that call.”

VLW added, “He would make himself available.”

WC: “...he figured somebody is gonna act on this, is gonna pick this up and start something, and...[he’d] be happy to be a part of it.”

VLW: Paul [Carter Harrison] said, ‘...read the speech...the cat is calling, man...’ And Don [Evans] said the same thing, ‘August...called for us to have a meeting.’...”

WC: “That’s how I read it.”

I assumed Evans, Walker, Harrison and Cook were all close friends of Wilson, and that’s how they had ready access to him.

WC: “It wasn’t so much that Vic-

tor, Don and Paul were that close to him.”

VLW: “That’s right...”

WC: “We all knew him, but close to him - no.”

Still in October, 1996, Don Evans offered to hold a meeting at Trenton State, now the College of New Jersey, where he is on faculty. This was not to be a massive summit or conference. Evans did not have the funds or resources for a meeting on that scale. Rather, a small meeting would be convened that would include persons like Woodie King, Jr., Ntozake Shange, and, of course, August Wilson, to discuss Wilson’s vision. Paul Carter Harrison made the next move.

VLW: “So Paul said, ‘Well, let me call August’...Because we hadn’t even talked to August yet...So, this is now November of ‘96...”

Harrison became the liaison between Walker and Evans, and Wilson. He called August Wilson. He was interested in and supported the Trenton State meeting. But in December, 1996, Wilson received a call from Anna DeVeare Smith about the debate with Brustein at Town Hall in New York City. According to Walker, Wilson accepted the invitation because he thought something good would come of it, that DeVeare Smith’s idea to continue an ongoing dialogue about the state of the American Theatre was important, especially in New York City where, more than likely, a large number of people would convene. For the moment, the Trenton State meeting was put on hold.

THE CONJURING TOOK ROOT IN THE MOJO

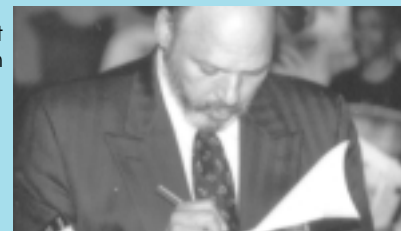
The Mojo is the vortex, the center, where the Crossroads meet at the Intersection of the North/South-East/West Axis, the Magic Spot from which the *Bokongo Circle of Life emanates. (*A people of West/Central Africa. Thank you Marta Moreno Vega.) In The Mojo exists all of the Stuff of Life: The Divine and Profane, Joy and Agony, Positive and Negative; it is where humans barter with God and make deals with the devil; where choices are made.

As Marsha and I sat at the bar in the West Bank Cafe, schmoozing with Benny Sato Ambush, Victor Leo Walker, actor Charles Turner, and a few others, I did not know that we were in the middle of The Mojo. I should have known. Karen Baxter was in animated conversation with Woodie King, Jr., Pat White, Glenn Turman; Paul Carter Harrison was holding court; Roger Guenveur Smith (having just completed a successful residency at Dartmouth) was in attendance; and, August Wilson’s energy was everywhere. It was there that I first learned from Walker about his idea to bring August Wilson to Dartmouth for a residency.

According to Walker, Wilson had arranged this gathering at the West Bank Cafe, and was expecting Anna DeVeare Smith to be there. She was not. At this point, the conjuring in The Mojo began to intensify. Wilson suggested to Walker

... Wilson suggested ... that they go ahead with Don Evans’ idea to meet at Trenton State. And, Walker proposed to Wilson that he come to Dartmouth for a residency. Wilson agreed that night ...

August Wilson at the Summit II in Atlanta



... But in December, 1996, Wilson received a call from Anna Deveare Smith about the debate ... he thought something good would come of it ...

Bill Cook [left] and Ifa Bayeza [right] at the Minary Center, Summit I. Both Cook and Bayeza serve on AGIA's Board.



and Harrison that they go ahead with Don Evans' idea to meet at Trenton State. And, Walker proposed to Wilson that he come to Dartmouth for a residency. Wilson agreed that night. He further suggested that they, Walker, Harrison and Don Evans, meet him at Crossroads Theatre in the Spring when Jitney would be in rehearsal.

It was significant that Wilson's new play Jitney (which he had started and workshopped almost 10 years earlier in Pittsburgh under the direction of Marion McClinton) was being developed at Crossroads, a Black theatre. The Pulitzer/Tony Award winning August Wilson's plays had been developed at Yale University and White regional theatres. How could he criticize White Theatre, when it had validated his work? This seeming inconsistency provides insights into the complex mind of Wilson. To understand, one has to look at political strategies that Black folks have historically employed to realize success in their chosen fields of endeavor, and to make contributions to the overall liberation of their people. Using the institutional arms of White America while criticizing it for perpetuating racial and cultural inequity is not new or unusual. Look at the Congressional Black Caucus! Also, talks between Wilson and Crossroads had begun long before the Town Hall Debate and Dartmouth Summit had even been conceived. Wilson was expanding his capacities. His criticism of White America was already well-known. At Princeton, he put it all on the line. He used his celebrity and clout to ignite a movement.

After the West Bank Cafe gathering, Walker returned to Dartmouth and sought the counsel of William Cook. Since Trenton State would only be able to support a meeting of fifteen or twenty people, Walker came up with an expanded idea.

VW: "So I said, [speaking to Cook]. 'I got this idea. Rather than do that [the smaller Trenton State meeting], why don't we hold a national Black Theatre summit where we can have people come for a week?'"

Cook agreed that it was a good idea, but it would require resources, consideration of where they were (Dartmouth), and when to have it.

In April, 1997, I met Victor at The Public Theatre in New York City to attend a Saturday matinee performance of A Huey P. Newton Story. After the show, Paul Carter Harrison picked us up in his car and drove to Crossroads Theatre in New Brunswick, New Jersey where we were to meet with August Wilson.

When we got to the theatre, the cast was on a break. I got to chat with Jerome Preston Bates, who was playing Booster in Jitney, while Sydné Mahone (who I had just met for the first time) took a classic picture of August Wilson with Paul Carter Harrison and Walter Dallas, Artistic Director of Freedom Theatre and director of the play. The genius that was in that lounge actually made my legs unsteady. The conjuring was stirring at the Crossroads.

We went to a nearby restaurant. Talk about a surreal moment for me! Don Evans was supposed to be at the meeting, but he was ill and could not attend. I ended up there, I suppose, by being Victor's friend. Since January, we had remained in touch by phone, so I knew something about his idea. But, there I was sitting in this upscale restaurant at a corner table with Victor to my right, Paul Carter Harrison to my left, and August Wilson sitting opposite me. As Victor and Paul started to unveil the plan, I knew that I was witnessing history in the making. Wilson responded favorably to the summit idea, and was clear and firm in his position that for him to participate, it would have to be a first-class enterprise. Also at that meeting, Wilson confirmed his commitment to come to Dartmouth although the exact time had not yet been determined.

A brief re-cap:

1996: June 26: August Wilson delivers speech at TCG Conference. August: Playwright Don Evans and Paul Carter Harrison call Victor Leo Walker to discuss response to Wilson's Call. October: Don Evans makes Trenton State meeting offer. November: Paul Carter Harrison contacts August Wilson. December: Wilson accepts Anna Deveare Smith's invitation for Town Hall discussion with Robert Brustein.

1997: January 27: Wilson/Brustein Debate and West Bank Cafe gathering. Wilson encourages Walker and Harrison to pursue the Evans' Trenton State meet

VLW: "So I said ... why don't we hold a national Black Theatre summit where we can have people come for a week?" ..."

PLANNING THE SUMMITS

... Walker and Cook began working on ... (1) Securing a residency for August ... (2) Raising funds for the Summit ...

ing. Wilson commits to Dartmouth residency. April: Wilson meets with Walker, Harrison and Terry-Morgan at Crossroads Theatre, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

In May, 1997, Walker and Cook began working on two projects that would define Summit I and, ultimately, converge into a keystone for the AGIA Movement: (1) Securing a residency for August Wilson at Dartmouth, and (2) Raising funds for the Summit and Conference. Due to Cook's clout at the College, he had access to the highest levels of the administration. He would negotiate the residency, preferably The Montgomery Fellowship, Dartmouth's most prestigious residency. Then, the conjuring in the Mojo started up again.

VLW: "...usually Montgomerys are planned two years in advance. So, we got very lucky. I mean we got extremely lucky! Because... - ironically - the week before we called the Montgomery people, a major poet from Latin America had canceled. They had a slot open during the Winter of 1998 term. When Bill and I went to talk to the Montgomery people they said, 'This is great! Make it happen!' I said, 'He already said he would come.' And they said, 'Good. Great.' And within two weeks, we had a contract in the mail. Everything was signed and everything was done. It was almost as if the Orisha said, 'Boom! This is suppose to happen'..."

The Wilson residency was secured. But, Dartmouth did not commit to sponsor-

ing - paying for - a conference. It was up to Walker and Cook to raise the money. Wilson was the flame that would attract the faithful and curious, so the summit and conference were planned to coincide with his residency at Dartmouth. Although Walker and Cook rigorously pursued funding, one important variable was still at play. Wilson still wanted the meeting to be in the South. As such, he was waiting for the brothers and sisters in the Southland to respond to his Call.

According to Walker, Wilson was absolutely clear that if he got a call from the South before they put the Dartmouth Conference together he would "do the Southern thing".

Walker and Cook forged ahead. In June, 1997, in Chicago, they met with Ifa Bayeza, Lou Bellamy, Amina Dickerson, Paul Carter Harrison, Keryl McCord, Claude Purdy, and August Wilson. Together they formed the embryo of the Summit's Executive Committee. It would grow to include Pearl Cleage, Don Evans, Robbie McCauley, and Beverly Robinson. I was initially invited to this meeting, but I couldn't make it. Attendance at Executive Committee meetings was compulsory so my name dropped off of the list. But, I stayed in contact with Victor. Their job was to define the mission of the Summit and design its working structure. They also had another charge which would take six months to complete, and would put the budding movement under attack. They had to decide who would be invited to the Summit.

According to Cook, The Executive Committee developed a list of 200 to 300 names in various classifications: Artistic directors, playwrights, choreographers, corporate and foundation executives, government agency officers, attorneys; and, an under-thirty years old category. They went through a series of rounds and eliminations.

WC: "It seems that every time we eliminated one name somebody thought of someone we had forgotten."

Eventually a list of about 125 names was compiled, and distributed to approximately 25 Black Theatre professionals in the nation. The request was to select 25 names from the list who one thought must be invited to the Summit. This was an agonizing process. I received the list and request, and the best I could do was narrow it down to 30, all of whom worked in the theatre. It was almost impossible for me to choose prominent person 1 over prominent person A. Since I had no basis of knowledge from which to evaluate the non-theatre folks, I didn't try.

The tallying of names was not the sole criteria. Once received, the Executive Committee examined the returns and ranked folks based upon how many times their names showed up on the individual lists. The other criteria was category distribution and geographic representation. Then, the final criterium was the commitment assessment. The Executive Committee's challenge was to determine who they believed would commit to work

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with the new organization, in this Black Theatre millennium movement, for, at least, 10 years.

VLW: "Okay, who, really, on this list, is gonna stick with us for ten years?"

"And when people started to soul searching, to think about it, people said, 'Well...'...And everybody got honest..."

Forty-five would be the magic number! Forty-five people would be invited to attend the five day, sequestered summit, followed immediately by a one day conference. Why 45? According to the organizers, that was the number that the budget could accommodate.

In November, 1997, letters of invitation went out under the signatures of August Wilson, Convener, Victor Leo Walker, II, Executive Director, and William W. Cook, Chair, of the National Black Theatre Summit, On Golden Pond. And that's when the Mulebone hit the fan! Even *my* phone was ringing off the hook!

Some very prominent people did not receive invitations, and folks wanted explanations. Then, the questions and accusations began:

Who do they think they are?"

"How can you hold a Black Theatre summit and not invite (you fill in the name)?"

"Who is this Victor Leo Walker, II, anyway?"

"This is a separatist movement!"

I even tried to lobby Victor and advocate for two people who I thought should be on the list. But, he held fast to the decisions of the Executive Committee. By this time, they had already expended an incredible amount of energy organizing and fundraising, and they were determined to stay on point.

"And why way up there at Dartmouth!"

"Because Dartmouth was willing."
(August Wilson, Boston Globe, March 6, 1998)

Although the Summit site, the Minary Conference Center on Squam Lake, was in the area of one of the last rest stops on the Underground Railroad, and, therefore, had symbolic meaning; and its nearness to Canada evoked a sense of kinship to the Niagara Movement of almost a century earlier; the fact that Dartmouth was willing was very important. A venture of this magnitude and significance required deep institutional resources. Remember, Wilson wanted to convene in the South, but the response was not forthcoming--yet.

Back in August, 1997, the Black Theatre Network Conference convened in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the host city of the National Black Theatre Festival. There was a lot of talk about Wilson's Call. A plenary session was held

at the BTN Conference to discuss it. The Crossroads Theatre production of Wilson's Jitney, directed by Walter Dallas, was poised as the jewel of the NBTF. And Wilson was still waiting for the Southern Response to his Call. According to Walker, Wilson decided not to approach anyone about holding the meeting in the South, but, rather, would wait to see who approached him. The Southern Response did not come.

Wilson, Walker, Cook and the Executive Committee vigorously went about the task of fundraising.

In the course of submitting grant applications, The J. Paul Getty Trust connection was made. Walker found a card in his rolodex from Karen Stokes, Project Associate of Public Programming at the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities. He couldn't remember when or how he got her card, but felt that he had met her. When Stokes received the proposal, she called Walker. She, too, felt that she knew him, but neither of them could place the occasion.

However, as an aside, it turned out that Stokes' brother had been one of William Cook's students at Dartmouth, and Cook was his favorite professor.

Stokes thought the Summit /Conference was a good idea, but explained that The Getty didn't fund those types of projects. But she was interested. Walker invited her to attend the Summit. She was one of the original 45, and is included in the Summit's booklet of participants. She accepted, but had to cancel due to a trip

**... Forty-five would be the magic number!
Forty-five people would be invited to attend
... that was the number that the budget
could accommodate ...**

The participants
in the First
National Black
Theatre Summit



SUMMIT I

... The organizers had chosen a site where we could work without distraction. We worked from early in the morning into early into the next morning ...



Walter Dallas



Leon Denmark, Woodie King, Jr.

to London. She requested that someone else have her slot. Then, she invited Walker, Cook and Wilson to come to The Getty in May, 1997, for a residency to discuss their initiative.

The seed money for the Summit/Conference came from the Rockefeller Foundation through the efforts of Mikki Shepard, Director for Arts and Humanities. Although Walker had missed the grant deadline, Shepard spoke with the Foundation's President, and delivered \$60,000. The grant deadline for the National Endowment for the Arts had passed, also, so Walker was not going to apply. But Clinton Turner Davis advised him to call GiGi Bolt at the N.E.A. to request an extraordinary action grant. A grant in the amount of \$15,000 came through. In six months time, \$250,000 was raised. Dartmouth provided 15% of the total funding as well as institutional, in-kind, staffing, services, meeting space, office space and equipment, and materials.

As the time for the Summit neared, newspaper coverage increased. This Summit was going to happen. And, the controversy over who had been invited and who had not escalated. The Summit organizers were accused of being sexist, homophobic and separatist. As I heard and read those angry words from various critics, I wondered what the real motivations were. It was no secret that the Black theatres were struggling like hell just to keep their doors open. Anyone could have made the Call. It was an idea! Anyone could have responded to Wilson's Call. But any and everyone did not. Of those

who found fault with the idea and its conceivers, who was willing to get in the leaky row boat, with one oar, and paddle out into the ocean and save Black Theatre? And as for being sexist and homophobic, the outraged adversaries must not have known who was among the Golden Pond 45. Perhaps the organizers could have done a more thorough job of explaining their intentions and selection process to the public - especially the Black Theatre community - but they were working with a very small staff of mostly students, under deadline pressure, and creating the Summit's infrastructure as they were planning, i.e., Building the bike as they were riding it. And, then, I honestly believe if they had done all of that, and more, they would have been criticized all the same.

The issue of separatism is intriguing. The accusation smacks of Plantation culture. It echoes of the Black Codes when it was illegal, in many American communities, for more than two Black folks to gather in public without a White person being present to oversee their language and actions. I kept asking myself, "Separate from what!?" You have to be a part of something before you can separate yourself from it. The people who met and worked at the Summit were about the business of preserving and perpetuating Black Theatre so that its unique identity and heritage would not be absorbed and marginalized under the artistic colonization of White Theatre, or become extinct. Like our counterparts in other national Black professional organizations, e.g, medicine, law, military, police enforcement, academic, social work, business,

etc., we were not willing to rely upon the kindness of ole massa to give us permission to pick a few more bales of cotton and worship his glorious image. There was no historical basis for trust. When has White Theatre ever invited more than one or two Black playwrights, at a time, to share in its resources? Its acceptance and validation of a few individual Black Theatre artists does little, if anything, to secure the perpetual, good health of Black Theatre as an institution.

Everyone at the Summit was aware of the negative energy that was directed at us. The venom was coming at us through the newspapers even while we were at the Summit. But the group chose to stay focused on the positive, and to complete its task.

The organizers had chosen a site where we could work without distraction. We worked from early in the morning into early into the next morning. Even if you had the energy, there wasn't much you could do up in all that nature, especially when it got dark. I had never seen so much night in my life!

We were also afforded first-class treatment while at the Summit: Accommodations, food, transportation, office services, staff; and special accolades to Laura and Drew Hinman, Minary Center caretakers and our hosts. The Executive Committee had assured that the meeting would represent the quality of effort and comfort that Wilson had outlined in his speech.

VLW: "We're asking these people

... We were also afforded first-class treatment ... food, transportation, office services, staff ...





Ifa Bayeza , August Wilson



Keith Antar Mason , Elmo Terry-Morgan



Gary Love, Idris Ackamoor, Eileen Morris



Tonea Stewart, Ifa Bayeza

to be sequestered, first of all, for a week, away from their families, away from their jobs and so on...It's extremely important to me that they focus on work and nothing else...And waited on hand and foot...

WC: "And accommodations have to be first-class. I don't know why we feel that we always have to walk around with a peanut butter sandwich..."

VLW: "I said, 'It's time!...It's time for us to re-orient our thinking'..."

There was also something inspiring about the setting. The symbolism was not lost on us. I sat next to Ntozake Shange on the bus that Tuesday as we rode from Dartmouth College in Hanover to the Minary Center in Ashland. It was a slow ride on mostly narrow, winding roads that took about one hour and fifteen minutes. As we got further up the mountains and into the woods, I looked out the window and said, "Is we free yet?" I couldn't help but think about those runaway slaves who had walked, and ridden in horse-drawn wagons, who had made their way from Georgia and North Carolina all the way up here, and they still were **not** in Canada! I thought about those Victorian Era Black Aristocrats who had adopted the two-pronged survival strategy of fighting for integration while developing and strengthening their own institutions. Were they separatists? No. They had been separated! The situations were analogous. The difference being, whereas the Jim Crow I era White racists said 'good riddance' to the separated

Colored folks, some contemporary theatre folks, of diverse descriptions, castigated the Summitters for being divisive separatists. Perhaps some envy and fear were at play: "Why didn't I think of that?" "Maybe they'll get some money and I won't!"

When we rode back to Hanover on Friday night, March 6, 1998, the bus was quiet, partly because we were tired, but also because we didn't know what to expect next. The One Day National Black Theatre Conference was the next day, and it would be our opening night. This time, I was sitting next to Eileen Morris, then the Artistic Director of The Ensemble Theatre in Houston. I said to her, "Eileen, I wonder if they are expecting us to have found the Negro Magic Wand up in those woods?" I thought the critics would be waiting for us with tomatoes and eggs in hand having already decided that they would pan our performance, and even if they enjoyed it would not admit it.

The silence rode with us into Hanover.

VLW: "...that's when the marquee was up and that's when everybody got real quiet, when we drove into the town. They had the Hocking Center lit up. And they had SHANGE, WILSON up top. And it hit everybody at that moment that we got a whole lot of folk [coming] - hopefully...Bill and I didn't know how many people were actually gonna show up."

WC: "No idea."

VLW: "Because we only had fifty registered..."

WC: "Only thing I know, we thought it would be tiny."

The marquee at the Hocking Center, where the Conference and the closing ceremony of the Summit would be held, signified that something big was about to happen, or, at least, was supposed to happen. I felt the gaps in our ranks. Rick Khan had to leave. Lou Bellamy had to leave as did Lorna Littleway and Leon Denmark. I missed them. I felt like our ranks had been diminished, and we would need our full cast to put on a show that would satisfy those hearty and determined souls who braved their way all the way up to Hanover, New Hampshire to find out what this think tank had conjured.

JOY COMETH IN THE MORNING

Saturday, March, 7, 1997, was an overcast, damp and cold day in Hanover. The One Day National Black Theatre Conference began with a breakfast. It was not a tiny gathering.

VW: "...We went to the breakfast that morning...the tables were set up for 340...all those tables were filled ... it was just ... overwhelming..."

... that's when the marquee was up and that's when everybody got real quiet, when we drove into the town. They had the Hocking Center lit up. And they had SHANGE, WILSON up top. And it hit everybody at that moment that we got a whole lot of folk [coming] ...



THE CONFERENCE

Showtime! The audience understood what we were doing. We called and they responded . . .



The Committee on

People came from all over the country: Celebrities, Black Theatre directors and executives, practitioners, academicians, students, the press and the curious. Familiar, supportive faces helped greatly to ease the concerns that we carried with us back to Dartmouth. As I looked around the dining hall, I sought out my Summit companions. We were enlarging ourselves, trying to fill the space, toning up for our presentations. This was not going to be an easy audience. They were intelligent, well-informed on the issues, and passionately concerned about Black Theatre.

After the keynote address by Amina L. Dickerson, Director of Corporate Contributions for Kraft Foods, Inc., my panel gathered in the hall for a last minute briefing. Ntozake Shange was not there yet. She was in her hotel room working on her epic poem which she would deliver that evening at the closing ceremony. So, Marta Morena Vega, Mikell Pinkney, Keith Antar Mason, and I walked over to her room. Beverly Robinson, of the Summit's Executive Committee, was there. We re-capped our presentation. It included an opening ritual. Marta was almost a wreck. The thought of performing intimidated her. Mikell was about to vibrate into the cosmos. Ntozake was nervous about her poem. Keith was too calm and cool. We set the time to gather and walk back over to the dining hall. Beverly Robinson stayed with Ntozake to help her get ready. Marta and Mikell went to his room to

center and summon the ancestors. I don't know where Keith went. I went to my room and had a cigarette and a shot of bourbon.

Showtime! The audience understood what we were doing. We called and they responded. But how much could be accomplished in one day? Certainly, we could not solve all of Black Theatre's problems in one day. But, what we did was contribute to the making of a movement. Even behind the background, the conjuring was still happening.

That night at the closing ceremony, Dartmouth's Provost, James Wright (now its President), and Dean of the Amos Tuck School of Business Administration, Paul Danos, announced its new initiative to provide two scholarships for Black Theatre artistic and managing directors to attend its Minority Business Executive Program beginning in July of that year. This was a critical partnership, one that would begin to address AGIA's developing mission which already included training and acquiring better skills of business management. That expertise is key to making money and maintaining it so that the theatres can transform into self-perpetuating institutions with healthy fiscal systems in place.

Another key development, in the background, was the presence of Dwight Andrews at the Summit. Andrews was the Artistic Director of the upcoming National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta,

and musical director on many of Wilson's productions. However, only a few knew that he was on a special mission. Wilson wanted to keep the momentum going by holding a second summit at the NBAF in July.

VLW: "...Dwight is probably one of the most gracious people. I said, 'Look Dwight...August wants to do a second summit...Our staff is already burned out...and we don't have the resources to keep this ball rolling, to go into a second summit five months later...We already did one summit...we, like, raised a quarter of a million dollars. Who's gonna give us more money for a second summit?'"

Andrews told Walker to put together a budget and give it to him. That April, Andrews called Walker and told him that the NBAF could cover 75% of the budget for a second summit. That left the new organization, The African Grove Institute for the Arts, with a relatively small amount to raise. Generous support came from The Nathan Cummings Foundation, with additional support from The Rockefeller Foundation, The Ford Foundation, The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities and Dartmouth College. The National Black Theatre Summit II was planned for July 12-15, 1998. Wilson's vision of a meeting in the ancestral homeland of the South would be realized.

Beverly Robinson



Beverly Robinson, Paul Danos



Victor Leo Walker, II



August Wilson





Diversity within the Black Arts Community" at the One-Day Conference

"Ring Shout"



August Wilson, Ishmael Reed, Beverly Robinson, Constanza Romero, Azula Wilson.



Roger Guenveur Smith, Eileen Morris



Ed Smith, Karen Baxter, Ed Bullins



Aina Dickerson, Director for Corporate Contributions for Kraft Foods, Inc., addresses the opening session of the conference.

... Another key development, in the background, was the presence of Dwight Andrews ...



[l-r] Dwight Andrews, Dominic Taylor and August Wilson, Summit I.

SUMMIT II

... Deep, passionate, and lengthy conversations were going on. Issues were being debated. . .



Barbara Ann Teer, Victor Walker

THE SUMMIT GOES DOWN HOME

Summit II had two purposes: (1) To disseminate information about the findings of the panels at Summit I, and (2) To convene a closed-door session of Black Theatre artistic directors to identify common issues and concerns and to identify existing resources that could be used for the common good. Many of the Summit I participants were invited to serve on public panels. Others, primarily artistic directors, were assigned to the closed-door session. Our charge was to share information from Summit I with those who had not attended it; to help facilitate the procedure; and, importantly, not to posture as if we were the experts and shepherds of the flock. What we had begun at Dartmouth was unfinished and incomplete. The inclusion and respect for new voices was critical to maintaining the dialogue among the Black Theatre family. Marsha Jackson Randolph (Jomandi Theatre) and Walter Dallas (Freedom Theatre) facilitated the historic closed-door gathering of over 30 Black Theatre artistic directors.

There were some moments, as was expected, when concerns about who had not been invited to Summit I had to be aired and discussed. From appearances and the professional and familial manner in which folks interacted and worked together, we were able to move forward. Rational voices reminded the group that in order to conduct business the numbers must be limited. And, it was acknowledged that just as the Summit I partici-

pants were accused of being an exclusive group, the same accusation might very well be levied at those invited to Summit II.

The bonding that occurred, under sequester, at Summit I manifested itself differently at Summit II. Although nestled within the busy activity of the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta, during the day, when in session, the Summiters remained focused on their job. The time spent was intense. We only had two and a half days to accomplish our mission.

In the evenings and nights in the lobby lounge of the Renaissance Hotel, NBAF Headquarters: Deep, passionate, and lengthy conversations were going on. Issues were being debated. Solutions were being refined. Partnerships were being made. Acquaintances were becoming friends, and friends were becoming family. Many of us already knew each other but Summits I and II gave new meaning and purpose to those relationships.

Considerable efforts were made to determine how to pronounce "AGIA". But whether long "A" or short "A", or emphasis on "A" or "G", the name had entered into our language and imaginations and had become part of our history. We were the history, and the organizers, now bearing impressive titles, seemed tireless in their efforts with the announcement of each new initiative.

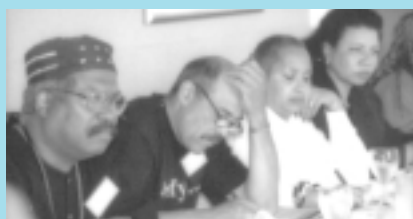
The Advance Minority Business Executive Program at Dartmouth's Tuck School was in simultaneous session with Sum-

mit II. Rites and Reason Theatre's Managing Director, Karen Allen Baxter, was accepted into the advanced program, and was the first person in the program ever to represent a not-for-profit organization. The following week, Keryl McCord (Crossroads), Lou Bellamy (Penumbra), and Eileen Morris (The Ensemble) would be attending the Tuck MBEP. The promise of two scholarships had increased to four. In just a few months time, AGIA had delivered.

The next stone in its foundation would be laid at the Town Meeting: Closing Plenary Session on Wednesday, July 15, 1998, at the First Congregational Church of Atlanta. Karen Stokes and Michael Roth of The Getty Institute announced the Getty-AGIA initiative to sponsor a series of Black Theatre residencies, think tanks, and lectures at its facility in Los Angeles. The partnership is open-ended as the on-going mission is mutual to both AGIA and The Getty.

To close out Summit II, The Honorable Andrew Young was scheduled to address the Town Meeting, but, according to Walker, canceled at the last minute. Then the spirits started conjuring again. Wole Soyinka said he would speak at the Town Meeting. He had been traveling in Africa, and had just returned to Atlanta that Tuesday. He wanted to make a contribution, and insisted upon participating without compensation.

Photographs of the Town Meeting attendees were taken on the steps of the church. Summit II - Atlanta was officially adjourned. That night, the gathering in the



[l-r] Clinton Turner
Davis, Lou Bellamy,
Keryl McCord,
Marlea R. Cromer

... when in session, the Summiters remained focused on their job. The time spent was intense. We only had two and a half days to accomplish our mission . . .



Lou Bellamy, Mary B. Davis



Silvy Cotton, Michael Roth, Lou Bellamy



Phyllis Yvonne Stickney, Beverly Robinson



Barbara Ann Teer, Larry Leon Hamlin

hotel lounge was especially festive. Folks stayed until closing. There were hugs and kisses and even some tears.

THE MOJO: STILL CONJURING

Two Summits later, the Tuck School initiative in place, and a partnership with The Getty Institute on-going, I asked Walker and Cook what else does AGIA want to create. The vision is simple; implementing it is not. They envision a national organization with regional associations united in mutual support of Black Theatre. The functions are inter-related, and directly connected to revitalizing African-American communities. The troubles of Black theatres and the communities they serve, primarily Black, are well known. Those things which they had developed that work, their models of success, are not so well known. That is why it was important for Summit II to identify not only common issues and concerns, but existing resources that can be netweaved, made better, and implemented for the common good. When we look at such examples as The National Black Theatre, Cross-roads Theatre,

The Ensemble Theatre, and ETA Creative Arts Foundation we see how Black Theatres, committed to the revitalization of their home communities, can have a positive impact on their physical environment, economics, and spirit.

VW: "...When we met with Barry Munitz, [President and CEO of the Getty Trust], me and August and Bill Cook, we made it absolutely clear to him, he made it clear to us, that our missions were very similar and the same, that we want to change the cultural landscape of the country and make the arts a viable part of economic development, cultural development, intellectual development, education in this country..."

A series of AGIA residencies began at The Getty in January, 1999 with the distinguished professor and scholar, Errol Hill. Following him in April will be dramaturg Sydné Mahone. In the fall of 1999, a series of residencies and accom-

panying lectures on text performance in the visual arts is scheduled.

The AGIA story is still in progress. Whether it is here for a season, a lifetime or forever will be determined by the level at which the Black Theatre community embraces its efforts. It is one idea out of a landscape of many ideas and philosophies. Folks are free to choose which fits their personal cultures best. In the 1960s, Black folks aligned themselves with ideas and strategies from Dr. King's SCLC to the NAACP to the Urban League to SNCC to the Nation of Islam to the Black Panthers. Some did it a la carte. Regardless of the labels integrationist, separatist, accomodationist, assimilationist, radical or revolutionary, they all shared three things: Someone had an idea, someone made a Call, someone Responded. And, a movement was born. August Wilson had an idea. He made a Call. It echoed into the wilderness. Who heard it and who responded? ♦



Summit II meets in closed session

First National Black Theatre Summit "On Golden Pond" March 2-6, 1998

PARTICIPANTS

- IDRIS ACKAMOOR. Co-Director, Cultural Odyssey
- DWIGHT ANDREWS. Artistic/Executive Director, The National Black Arts Festival
- IFA BAYEZA. Artistic Director, Duncan YMCA Chernin's Center for the Arts. AGIA Board of Governors.
- LOU BELLAMY. Artistic Director, Penumbra Theatre
- ABENA JOAN BROWN. President, ETA Creative Arts Foundation, Inc.
- ED BULLINS. Playwright, Northeastern University
- WILLIAM COOK. Dartmouth College/AGIA Vice President
- SLIVY EDMONDS COTTON. President, Walnut Capital Corporation/ AGIA Treasurer and Vice President for Development
- MARIEA R. CROMER. Moorehouse School of Medicine, Chief legal Council to the Board of Directors of AGIA
- WALTER DALLAS. Artistic Director, Freedom Theatre. AGIA Board of Governors
- CLINTON TURNER DAVIS. Director, Colorado College
- LEON DENMARK. Brentmar Associates, Inc.
- DON EVANS. Playwright, College of New Jersey
- PAUL CARTER HARRISON. Playwright/Scholar, Columbia College
- SAMUEL HAY. North Carolina A&T State University
- CARL JENNINGS. President, Jennings & Jennings
- RICARDO KHAN. Artistic Director, Crossroads Theatre
- WOODIE KING, JR. Executive Director, New Federal Theatre
- LORNA LITTLEWAY. University of Louisville/BTN President
- GARY LOVE. Investment Banker
- SYDNÉ MAHONE. Writer/Dramaturg
- ZOLA MASHARIKI. Attorney, Filmmaker/AGIA Board of Governors.
- KEITH ANTAR MASON. Playwright, Poet, Performing Artist, Artistic Director Hittite Empire
- KERYL Mc CORD. Managing Director, Crossroads Theatre
- ROBBIE McCAULEY. Performance Artist, Playwright and Director
- MARTA MORENO VEGA. Caribbean Cultural Center/Baruch College
- EILEEN MORRIS. Actor, Director, BTN Vice President
- MIKELL PINKNEY. University of Florida, BTN Immediate Past President
- CLAUDE PURDY. Director
- BEVERLY ROBINSON. UCLA, AGIA Board of Governors
- NTOZAKE SHANGE. Poet/Playwright, Prairie View A&M University
- SANDRA G. SHANNON. Howard University
- MIKKI SHEPARD. Director for Arts and Humanities, Rockefeller Foundation
- ESMERALDA SIMMONS. Medgar Evers College Center for Law and Social Justice
- TONEA STEWART. Actor/Professor, Alabama State University
- DONALD SUGGS. Entrepreneur
- DOMINIC TAYLOR. Playwright
- ELMO TERRY-MORGAN. Artistic Director Rites & Reason Theatre/Brown University
- VICTOR LEO WALKER, II. President and CEO, AGIA/Dartmouth College
- AUGUST WILSON. Playwright. AGIA Chairman of the Board
- ELOISE WILLIAMS

Second National Black Theatre Summit

July 12-15, 1998

PARTICIPANTS

- SUANDI. Performance Artist/Poet/Playwright, Black Ark Alliance, England
- IDRIS ACKAMOOR. Co-Director, Cultural Odyssey (cs)
- MIGUEL ALGARIN. Artistic Director, Nuyorican Poets Cafe (cs)
- ADDELL ANDERSON. Executive Director, Plowshares Theatre (cs)
- DWIGHT ANDREWS. Artistic/Executive Director, The National Black Arts Festival
- IFA BAYEZA. Artistic Director, Duncan YMCA Chernin's Center for the Arts. AGIA Board of Governors (cs)
- LOU BELLAMY. Artistic Director, Penumbra Theatre (cs)
- ABENA JOAN BROWN. President, ETA Creative Arts Foundation, Inc. (cs)
- DONALD D.H. BROWN. Managing Director, Freedom Theatre
- ED BULLINS. Playwright. Northeastern University (cs)
- RUDOLPH BYRD. Emory University
- SLIVY EDMONDS COTTON. President, Walnut Capital Corporation/ AGIA Treasurer and Vice President for Development
- MARIEA R. CROMER. Chief legal Council to the Board of Directors, AGIA, Moorehouse School of Medicine
- WALTER DALLAS. Artistic Director, Freedom Theatre. AGIA Board of Governors
- TYRONE DARGINS. Artistic Director, Renaissance Theater (cs)
- CLINTON TURNER DAVIS. Director, Colorado College
- LEON DENMARK. Brentmar Associates, Inc.
- AMINA DICKERSON. Director of Corporate Contributions, Kraft Foods Foundation
- GLENDA DICKERSON. University of Michigan
- ERNEST DILLIHAY. Executive Director, Los Angeles Theatre Center (cs)
- DON EVANS. Playwright, College of New Jersey
- SHIRLEY JO FINNEY. Director/Actor
- KEVIN FONTANA. Independent Producer (cs)
- ANDREA FREY. Actor/Director
- LARRY LEON HAMLIN. Artistic Director, National Black Theatre Festival (cs)
- PAUL CARTER HARRISON. Playwright/Scholar, Columbia College (cs)
- SAMUEL HAY. North Carolina A&T State University
- RON HIMES. Artistic/Executive Director, St. Louis Black Repertory Company (cs)
- PATRICIA SCOTT HOBBS. Director Performing Arts Training Program, Freedom Theatre
- JOHN HUGHES. General Manager, WACU-TV Georgia Public Broadcasting
- PAMELA FAITH JACKSON. Dramaturg/Arts Education Specialist
- CALEEN JENNINGS. Playwright, American University
- CARL JENNINGS. President, Jennings & Jennings (cs)
- PHILIP MALLORY JONES. Media Artist/Archivist
- TOM JONES. Artistic Director, Jomandi Theatre (cs)
- RICARDO KHAN. Artistic Director, Crossroads Theatre (cs)
- WOODIE KING, JR. Executive Director, New Federal Theatre (cs)
- CAROL MITCHELL LEON. Actor/Director. Clark Atlanta University
- KENNY LEON. Artistic Director, Alliance Theatre (cs)
- GAIL LESLIE. Managing Director, Freedom Theatre
- J.W. LEWIS. Director/Producer. Clark Atlanta University
- VERNELL LILLIE. Artistic Director, Kuntu Rep Theatre/University of Pittsburgh (cs)
- SYDNÉ MAHONE. Writer/Dramaturg
- ZOLA MASHARIKI. Attorney, Filmmaker/AGIA Board of Governors.
- KEITH ANTAR MASON. Playwright, Poet, Performing Artist, Artistic Director Hittite Empire (cs)
- KERYL MC CORD. Managing Director, Crossroads Theatre
- SHAUNDA E. MILES. Student, Dartmouth College
- EILEEN MORRIS. Actor, Director, BTN Vice President (cs)
- ROME NEAL. Artistic Director, Nuyorican Poets Cafe (cs)
- ROHAN PRESTON. Theatre Critic, Star Tribune
- MARSHA RANDOLPH. Artistic Director, Jomandi Theatre
- ISHMAEL REED. Author
- BEVERLY ROBINSON. UCLA, AGIA Borad of Governors
- MICHAEL ROTH. Public Programming Associate Director, The Getty Research Institute for History and Humanities
- TUNDE SAMUEL, National Black Theatre
- HARRIET SANFORD. Director Fulton Arts Council
- NTOZAKE SHANGE. Poet/Playwright, Prairie View A&M University
- SANDRA G. SHANNON. Howard University
- ESMERALDA SIMMONS. Medgar Evers College Center for Law and Social Justice
- ROGER G. SMITH. Actor/Director/Playwright
- WOLE SOYINKA. Nobel Laureate. Emory University
- TONEA STEWART. Actor/Professor, Alabama State University
- KAREN STOKES. Public Programming Project Associate, The Getty Research Institute for History and Humanities
- DAVID E. TALBERT. Independent Producer (cs)
- BARBARA ANN TEER. President, National Black Theatre, Inc. (cs)
- ELMO TERRY-MORGAN. Artistic Director Rites & Reasons Theatre/Brwon University (cs)
- LUNDEANA THOMAS. University of Louisville
- VICTOR LEO WALKER, II. President and CEO, AGIA/Dartmouth College
- JANINE WATKINS. Director of Special Programs, Watts Labor Community Action Committee
- TERRY WATKINS. Executive Director, Watts Labor Community Action Committee (cs)
- TIMOTHY WATKINS. Watts Labor Community Action Committee (cs)
- STANLEY WILLIAMS. Artistic Director, Lorraine Hansberry Theater (cs)
- AUGUST WILSON. Playwright. AGIA Chairman of the Board

Note: (cs) Denotes participants in Summit closed sessions

First National Summit participants



SUMMIT REPORTS



Summit I. The Committee on Audience and Community Development meets at the Minary Center. [l-r] Tonea Stewart, Carl Jennings [foreground], Walter Dallas, Lou Bellamy and

Audience and Institutional Development

Notes from a “Consensus” Document

by Abena Joan P. Brown

“On Golden Pond”, the National Black Theatre Summit, held at Dartmouth March 2-7, 1998 was an idea whose time had come. Believing that everything has a time, a season--if you will--the coming together of a diverse group of theatre theorists and practitioners was a more than significant historical event.

August Wilson’s call, “The Ground On Which I Stand” came as a landmark on the continuum of a movement which began in 1820. From our beginnings with the African Grove Theatre, Black people in the theatre have moved from protest plays (for the most part) to plays which did not offend White people (for the most part) to the Black power movement of the sixties which was propelled by self-affirmation and self determination to the current milieu of seeking ways to be self sustaining and, ultimately, prosperous. We are growing up! !



Abena Joan P. Brown is the President, Producer and Co-Founder of ETA Creative Arts Foundation, Inc. of Chicago, Illinois.

The convened group of people were quite remarkable. We all agreed to leave our rhetoric, personal axes, and slights of past inequities at the door. As this was achieved, it freed the best of our minds and experience to focus solely on the ultimate question of what we as Black people need to do to secure a bright future for our theatre. This was probably the first National meeting, ever, which was about us--Black people taking control and responsibility for our own cultural longevity using the financial resources available to us, collectively. As the week wore on, the deliberations were heightened by the spiritual connections which permeated the group.

Process was also very important in that the group was able to reach a general consensus about direction of the work that needed to be done to increase the viability, growth and development of the Black Theatre movement over the next millennium and beyond.

The Audience and Community Development presentation consisted of documents by myself and Dr. Samuel Hay of North Carolina A & T State University in Greensboro with a response from Walter Dallas, Artistic Director of Freedom Theater in Philadelphia. After discussion in the plenary group, these documents were further distilled in a break-out group who returned to the larger group with recommendations. Later, in the public meeting, there was further discussion of the overall outcomes.

Summit II during the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta gave still others the opportunity to respond to the original presentations as delineated in the “consensus” documents.

Through meetings held in the participants’ respective cities and with this BTN special issue, “Black Theatre’s Unprecedented Times,” the dialogue can and should continue. In the final analysis, this process and the resultant relationships established among the participants may be the most important outcome of the Summit meetings.

The presentations stressed several fundamental cultural paradigms and principles, illustrated by case examples, which must be put into place if the goal of sustainability is to be realized. We were reminded that our theater of today exists in a historical context; that we are part of rich and deep traditions and that there are theaters with long histories from which we all can learn.

Central to the discussion at the outset was W. E. B. DuBois 1920s statement citing the prerequisites for a viable arts movement which would resonate in the hearts and minds of people. That is: *The Negro arts movement should be about us, by us, for us and near us.*

Recommendations

Development of an Infrastructure

In this time of increasing economic consciousness, it seems extremely important that our theaters must be near the Black population. While recognizing that there are many artists who don’t want to institutionalize their efforts, it was granted that the acquisition of land and the development of an infrastructure provides the greatest potential for the transmission

of our stories and values to present and future generations.

Clear Mission Statement

It was also determined that the mission statement which must be clear, explicit and succinct is crucial to ongoing success. The mission not only states the kind of organization, but it ought to put forth values while highlighting the entity's special ability and competence. Moreover, the mission ultimately insures the integrity of the work by providing a framework for overall planning, development and evaluation by all levels of the organization—Board, Staff, Volunteers, Contributors and Patrons.

Enlargement of Institutional Visions

Along with the mission statement, it was posited that theaters in an approach to the enlargement of its institutional vision, should determine what business they are in as it relates to the needs, aspirations and vision of its real and potential constituency. That is, the arts organization cannot position itself as an insulated entity doing “art for arts sake.” It must link its services to a particular role and function and advance the collective interest of the community.

Balance Artistic/Management Components

The relationship within the organizational leadership was also discussed in depth. We concluded that there must be a balance between the artists component and management; the most successful model would be one which implemented team based performance and goal setting. The break-out group summarized that “teams develop shared visions designed to support and achieve the artistic mission by focusing on goals, building commitment, sharing accountability, and implementing action steps for shared success.”

Clear Role for Boards of Directors

A consistent bane for many theater companies is the management of “creative tension” between Boards of Directors and staff, both artistic and administrative. However, it is increasingly clear that an ongoing process must be put into place to insure that Boards of Directors are clear about role and function. If a theater is to flourish, to live into the future, it must have a Board of Directors that buys into the mission of the organization. One that appreciates and supports the artistic vision, and organizes itself for maximum effectiveness to secure the resources, both human and financial, to carry the work forward.

Networking

Revisiting that which is known, we said that radio ads, “networking” with diverse community organizations in and beyond the artists’ community, collaborations, premiums from

prizes to discounts, comp tickets to special groupings as part of community service, discounted tickets for fund raising theater parties are all important marketing strategies, with “word of mouth” being the most effective. In short, the drum and/or the grapevine can be used to great advantage by theater companies. All of this subsumes, of course, that the artistic product is one, which mirrors the experience of the patrons we seek. If it doesn't do that, the people will not continue to come. More than a drum will be needed!

A Collaborative Process

It has become quite in vogue to talk about audience development in most places where cultural workers get together. Generally, the people who come to our theaters are viewed as “a group of listeners or spectators” as defined by the word audience. However, when we think about the development aspect of the construct, our focus should not be on just expanding the group. It must make that group active by promoting their growth through the theater experience. This suggests a re-definition of the role of the seer (see-er). The people in the seats, particularly in the Black theater, interact with the production; they talk back as a seer: one who predicts events or developments. Our theater should illuminate our experience; it should offer possible solutions to life situations; it should celebrate our continued presence on the planet called earth; it should be entertaining and it should be heroic. In the theater as a collaborative process, the work of the writer, director, technical personnel and administrative workers only becomes validated when the people come and respond. The people are the ultimate critics who let us know by their continued involvement if the work has relevance to their lives.

Take Risks with New Writers

Related to the issue of audience and its expansion is the question of production choices. As much as we all love the standards, the “tried and true,” particular attention must be paid by theaters to take a presumed risk with the work of new writers. After all, the playwright is the griot--the story teller. And if the writer is not nurtured, developed and produced, our theaters will have no new stories to tell and the people will be hungry. In this regard, we also talked about the urban circuit play to which great numbers of our people are responding and to which some refer as “chitlin circuit.” We can learn from the experiences of these profitable productions.

While we did talk about the business of theater during the summit, all of the ramifications were not discussed in as great detail as they might have been in relationship to audience and community development. There was discussion of the changed landscape in the economic development break-out group in which I also participated and since all the sessions were interrelated, questions for on-going consideration were lifted.

Our consensus was that all cultural arts groups must become extremely entrepreneurial if the cycle of dependency is to be broken. We said, that “we got to sell something” and opportunities to increase earned income must be consciously developed. Tourism is a major economic engine in most Metropolitan cities. Our companies need to position themselves to be a tourist attraction and develop gift spaces which reflect the mission of the work for sales.

It was noted that people visit cities for shopping, number one and to experience the cultural offerings, a very close second. The internet is fast becoming the top vehicle for communication and sales, so theaters need to develop related product for consumers who use this medium. The underlying premise of this discussion was that theaters must find the wherewithal for full computer capacity to maximize efficiency and earnings.

The work that cultural arts organizations do has broad implications for the social and economic development of the communities of which they are a part. A recent study in Illinois indicated that the arts industry generates over \$880 million annually for the state economy. The study by the Illinois Arts Alliance further notes that the not-for profit-arts industry impacts the State economy beyond increased spending, jobs and tax revenues. Non-quantifiable impacts include providing cost-efficient education-entertainment, supporting the hospitality

infrastructure (restaurants, shops, bars and hotels), and creating and/or maintaining an image of a “growing and progressive cultural center.” In the case of ETA Creative Arts Foundation of Chicago, Illinois, this means that 80% of its annual one million plus budget goes directly back into the community by way of staff salaries, artists fees, and the purchase of ancillary services. This is not inconsequential; as we grow, the contribution to the economic life of our community will grow. So, it is important that we circulate our monies within our own communities. Theater people must learn to interpret our work in economic as well as artistic terms to demonstrate our commitment to the community’s goals and objectives.

Finally, I would make note that cultural workers, as visionaries in the Black world, must strive to overcome our double consciousness our two-ed-ness—as described by W. E. B. DuBois in “Souls of Black Folk” (1920). We must make a choice to work toward the larger vision of using the arts for the liberation and prosperity of our people. To quote August Wilson: “we cannot allow others to have authority over our cultural and spiritual products. We reject, without reservation, any attempts by anyone to rewrite our history so as to deny us the rewards of our spiritual labors, and to become the cultural custodians of our art, our literature, our lives.” Let the dialogue continue in the spirit, forever, Amen and Amen! ♦

... Our consensus was that all cultural arts groups must become extremely entrepreneurial ...



Abena Joan Brown and Walter Dallas discuss “what has worked at ETA and Freedom Theatre” and how it can be applied at other theaters.

Summit I: Audience and Community Development

Those who participated in the Audience and Community Development discussions at the Summit On Golden Pond were asked to “survey publicity and marketing strategies which will enable theaters to communicate more effectively with those communities [they serve].” The discussion was to be concerned “not only with developing an audience for productions, but also with developing that audience’s response to, comprehension and enjoyment of the variety that is African American theatre.”

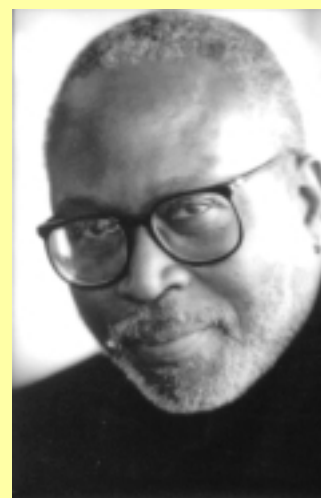
Walter Dallas, Artistic Director of Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia, was among the participants in these deliberations. During his leadership Freedom Theatre has reached high accomplishments artistically and financially. Mr. Dallas presents here his experience at the front of the theatre to illustrate the points at hand.

Freedom Theatre: A Case Study

By Walter Dallas

Each year Freedom Theatre offers a season of four professionally mounted productions. It works under Equity’s Small Professional Theatre designation in smaller houses and under LORT for shows in larger venues. The theatre’s Performing Arts Training Program mounts a student season and a major dance concert, both supported by the Rep’s Production Team. Freedom’s Traveling Black History Show tours the Eastern Corridor (TYA contract) year round. FreedomFest, an annual festival of new play readings and developmental workshops, provides an opportunity for our audience to take ownership in the development of new work.

Freedom’s operating budget has grown from 1.2 mil in FY’92 (when Dallas joined the theatre) to 2.5 mil in FY’96 to 3.3 mil in FY’97. The projected budget for FY 98 is 4.2m. FY’99 will approximately be 5 mil. The contributed to earned income ratio is 49% versus 51%.



Walter Dallas is Artistic
Director of Freedom Theatre
in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

A Brief History

Freedom Theatre was established in 1966 in the heart of North Central Philadelphia. Founded by the late John E. Allen, Jr. as part of the Black Peoples Unity Movement of the 1960s, it was to be a place where black people could see plays about themselves, portrayed in realistic or, if by their choice, non-realistic ways. In 1972 Robert Leslie, a friend of John’s who started as a volunteer and became General Manager, established the Performing Arts Training Program. Now nationally acclaimed, this program offers high quality, theatrical arts instruction and education programs to over 1200 students annually. Ninety-eight percent of these students complete high school, while an impressive 85 percent continue their education in post-secondary institutions.

In 1992, Freedom Theatre’s founder, John Allen Jr. died. Soon after, I accepted Freedom’s Board of Directors invitation to become the new Artistic Director. I was met “at the door” with a challenge to immediately address: Freedom had just embarked on an unprecedented \$10 million Gifts of Freedom Capital Campaign to renovate and expand its facilities. The theatre was housed in the historically certified Edwin Forrest mansion that was to be turned into a major multi-purpose theatrical production and training facility. The project also included the construction of a 299 seat theatre, a scene shop, new office and studio spaces, and ten condominiums for guest artists and rental income. I accepted the campaign challenge but remained focused on the season of productions while trying to discover why we were not able to fill most of the seats in our tiny, 120 seat theatre on a regular basis.

Mission/Artistic Vision

My first immediate challenge was to articulate and gain institutional support for an artistic vision that would prepare Freedom Theatre for the next stage of its development by delineating clear programmatic goals for the institution, and encouraging the development of strategies for success.

Freedom's Mission states: "... dedicated to achieving artistic excellence in professional theatre and expanding artistic and personal development, especially in young people, through our performing arts training program ... for the enrichment of our community locally, nationally and internationally."

My artistic vision is one that sees Freedom Theatre recognized and respected as a world class theatre. By "world class," I mean being able to attract the best possible talent, having the ability technologies and resources to efficiently and effectively solve each problem as it arises.

Six main components are required to realize this vision: 1.- A first class repertory company; 2.- A first class performing arts training program; 3.- An excellently trained staff; 4.- A state of the art theatre facility; 5.- Successful hypercompetitive strategies to secure financial resources; and 6.- A clearly articulated relationship with the community. All these components are intrinsically interconnected; we will concentrate here on how they apply to community relationship matters. The focus is to provide an insight on strategies implemented at Freedom to address the topic at hand: Audience and Community Development.

Production, Marketing and Audience Development

When I became Artistic Director, I thought I knew Freedom and its audiences well because I had guest directed through the years, attended performances and served on its Board of Directors. I thought the plays I had selected at the beginning of my tenure would be as interesting to the public as they were to me. I was wrong. I realized that in order to reach our goals as Freedom grew into our shared vision, I would have to fill key positions on our staff with experts.

Freedom had received a \$500,000 grant over a five years period from the Lila Wallace-Readers Fund to support audience development initiatives which allowed us to hire a Director of Marketing to help develop strategies. With the help of the newly hired Director of Marketing, we soon discovered that the theatre's play selection did not complement our audience's interests. Freedom's core audience was African American women over age 35, college educated, relatively affluent and conservative. They wanted to be entertained and challenged with



Mr. Dallas presents his paper to the Summit at the Minary Center.

thought-provoking theatre. On the basis of the Director of Marketing analysis and recommendations we programmed a season for 1995-96.

We catered to our audience and they started to be excited to be part of our growth. They got the traditional fare they wanted but also enjoyed our experimental works with scripts in evolution by authors such as Keith Antar Mason's, Ntozake Shange, Don Evans, Sonia Sanchez and Clarice Taylor. More importantly, they have always applauded Freedom's commitment to our local community, a rather depressed area where most live next to or below the poverty line. Today, we demonstrate our commitment by offering full scholarships to classes, paid internships, free tickets to performances, hiring pros from the neighborhood, or allowing free meeting space for community organizations. We realize that we can do a lot for the community, but we can't be all things for everybody. We also found that people want to contribute something to the theatre rather than just get a free handout.

Currently, approximately 13% of Freedom's expense budget is devoted to marketing. Although this amounts to about \$524,000, it is still not enough. Aggressive strategies offer high returns from radio — \$150 to \$300 for a thirty second spot—through give-aways, contests, on-air interviews, on-site broadcasts, etc. The advertising, however, is not just designed to sell tickets. It aims to raise awareness about the theatre in general. In spite of all money spent on advertising, most people hear about and see a production due to word of mouth.

I like to think that 100% of Freedom Theatre's budget is devoted to marketing. Everything we do, everything we spend money on, every staff member, every phone message affects our audiences positively or negatively. The theatre itself is the greatest strategic marketing and audience development tool we have.

In order to address the need to improve production values I began upgrading the production team soon after my arrival at Freedom. In 1992, my staff consisted of a production manager who also served as dramaturg, prop mistress, costume designer, technical director, company manager, literary manager, AEA liaison (we were under a Guest Artist contract) resident playwright, and anything else she needed to be. Everyone else was jobbed in on a per show basis. Today that person serves as Staff Producer and oversees a Production Team consisting of a full time Technical Staff, a resident Costume Designer and his full time staff of five, resident Associates in Production, Stage Management and Casting. Most recently we've added an Associate Artistic Director whose strengths lie in theatre management and presentation. Discussions are underway with nationally recognized playwrights and directors who might join the Freedom family as Associate Artists and work with the Rep as teachers and directors with the Training Program.

Productions have been enhanced through collaborations with other theatres: New York's Lincoln Center, Billie Holiday, and American Place, New Brunswick's Crossroads Theatre, Princeton's McCarter Theatre, Chicago's Goodman Theatre and others. This fall will see the beginning of a collaboration between Freedom and St. Louis' Black Repertory Company. Discussions are underway with other regional theatres, as well.

I also work with an Artistic Advisory Team which includes August Wilson, Lloyd Richards, Ntozake Shange, Paul Carter Harrison, Anne Cattaneo, Earle Gister, Johnnie Hobbs, Jr., Woodie King, Jr., Sonia Sanchez, Leslie Lee, Ricardo Khan, Emily Mann, Ves Weaver, Leslie Lee, and Samm Art Williams.

Group Sales versus Subscriptions

In 1994, I scrapped our fledgling subscription efforts and significantly expanded our group sales team. These folk [audience] did not want to commit to tickets in advance as single ticket buyers, but have no problem reserving as part of a group. We seem to be onto something with our shift to group sales. The audience for the 95-96 season grew 29 percent to 13,400 from the previous season. Ticket sales increased 56 percent, with paid capacity growing from 62 to 75 percent. Income from group sales more than doubled, reaching 60 percent of all ticket sales. Our group sales and distribution efforts increased our audience from 6,700 in Fiscal year 93 to 37,000 in fiscal year 97. As part of the strategy, our Director of Sales developed relationships with feeder organizations that lead groups to Freedom. These include distribution networks such as Afri-

can American travel agencies, the Convention and Visitors Bureau and other distributors who basically create packages that will send theatre goers from Virginia, Baltimore, New York, etc. to Philadelphia for shopping, dinner, a Freedom production, and a night of dancing or jazz and dessert. We tapped into the fact that Philadelphia is fast becoming one of the most popular destinations among African American tourists, most of who fall into our "target" audience profile.

The emphasis on serving the audience has helped Freedom's infrastructure grow in leaps and bounds. Due in large measure to our new Development and Managing Directors, who came on in 1994, we have clearly defined areas of management, marketing, sales and development. As those areas have become specialized. So too have systems of operation.

Research, Planning, Implementation and Review

Freedom Theatre is now a research-based institution. When we consider taking on projects, we have decision-making and evaluation models for measuring their benefit to Freedom. Theatres are often asked to do performances, benefits, festivals, special projects, etc. During the start up phase of a theatre, when you are just happy to be there and doing it, you tend to say "yes" to every opportunity to perform and be seen. During the growth phase, when you realize you can't be everything to everybody, you have to have a way of determining which opportunities you can afford and those you can't. Freedom Theatre, while developing a strategic business plan as part of its involvement with the Working Capital Fund of the Ford Foundation, has created a decision making model which enables us to evaluate each opportunity and its potential impact on the Theatre. This model includes:

- **Research**

Constituent market research is a critical guide for development of the curriculum, play selection and advertising strategies. We do quantitative research by conducting surveys regularly during the performances. In addition, every few years we conduct a longer, more detailed attitude and usage survey that gives us a wide range of information on our current and future potential target audiences.

- **Planning**

The Freedom planning model includes research and evaluation of audience demographics and future needs; competitive benchmarking, resource needs (human/capital), funding sources and future trends.

During the planning phase for each project we conceptualize strategies for new project development and establish mechanisms for decision making. Theatres must

develop business and strategic plans that include revenue and profit projections, timetables, and budgets. True costs of operations is crucial information needed for effective planning and decision-making.

Strategic plans must be developed and implemented by all staff. These plans include critical issues, strategies to address each issue, and tactics to execute each strategy. Strategic plans should be dynamic and revised periodically.

Implementation/Team-based Action

The balance of art and management is part of the dilemma that plagues most well managed theatres. The successful management of a theatre with a strong artistic vision must see the management style move from directional management through team based performance; and from goal setting through delegation of responsibilities to staff leading to empowerment. Teams develop shared visions designed to support and achieve the artistic vision, focus on goals, build commitment, share accountability, and implement action steps for shared success.

At Freedom, the Artistic, School and Managing Directors are the lead team. The Associate Artistic Director, Staff Producer, and Directors of Operations, New Projects, Marketing, Development, Sales, Facilities and Finance serve as team leaders or Department Heads who supervise a team of Managers who in turn supervise their staffs. There are 50 full-time employees at Freedom Theatre.

Review

We evaluate every major production, class event and project to determine whether or not its goals were achieved. The lessons are learned based on staff self-assessments implemented immediately and continually —we conduct these evaluations during wrap-up meetings, which occur two to four weeks after an event. The active, regular use of evaluation as research is an example of how dynamic Freedom Theatre's planning process is, which enables the Theatre to be able to react to changes in customer needs and marketplace demands quickly.

Financials and Cash Cows

In order to support the artistic mission, a theatre must have a strong Development Team that creates multi-year budget plans and aggressive strategic financial goals to build cash reserves and endowments, have earned revenue to support most of the operating budget, develop lines of credit at banks, etc.

The Development Team at Freedom is responsible for generating contributed income for programs, general operations, and capital from several sources including government grants and fee-for-service contracts, national and regional foundations, corporate sector, membership including United Way, Board contributions, major gifts, general membership, alumni, staff, parents, marketing sponsorships, and in-kind contributions.

Board of Directors

If a theatre is to flourish, to live into the future, it must have a board of Directors that buys into the artistic vision, takes a leadership role in fundraising and community relations activities, maintains the organization within guidelines, organizes itself for maximum effectiveness, ensures that the theatre is fulfilling its mission.

Freedom's twenty-six member Board works in teams with staff in the areas of administration, finance, marketing, development, etc.

Preparing for the Next Stage: A Checklist for Theatre Growth and Position of Strength

As artists and community activists in the 1970s, we were driven by a vision. We needed a safe place to commit our art. We needed our communities to be in touch with each other. We needed funds to be able to feed and educate our young. We needed to share our resources and form teams to strategize for success. Today, at the turn of the century and in the beginning of a new millennium, we still do. So, I leave you with the following checklist in the hope that it can be used to help you get there.

- Have a strong artistic vision
- Have staff, board, and community buy-in of the vision
- Place your audience at center stage
- Clarify and activate a strong infrastructure
- Clearly define the long term vision and strategic plans for the future
- Develop a model for selecting new projects to pursue
- Collaborate with theatres with similar visions and goals
- Determine and execute action steps to acquire the resources needed for current and new projects
- Only proceed further with new projects which have first been assessed for their impact on current or future resources
- Eliminate projects that require you to be everything to everybody



A Round Table

By: Carl L. Jennings

This article details the discussions of the Management and Institutional Development Round Table at the National Black Theatre Summit II. The discussions took place on Monday July 13, in the Renaissance Atlanta Hotel. The session expanded on discussions initiated earlier during the first Summit “On Golden Pond.”

Design and Purpose

The primary distinction between this conference and the National Black Theatre Summit “On Golden Pond” was the difference in design and purpose.

SUMMIT I: The activities for the Summit “On Golden Pond” were focused on conducting an internal assessment of the current state of Black theatre nationally. To address the issues, the Summit organizers brought together leading theatre artists, academicians, lawyers and members of the business community from around the country. Members of this group of experts were asked to present a paper that focused directly on a specific aspect of Black theatre. Those invitees representing disciplines and professions other than Black theatre or academia, were asked to make presentations about why their areas of expertise were important and how they could support Black theatre now and through the next millennium. The round table opened with the panel chair’s presentation, followed by a response from a multi-disciplinary panel, then responses from the rest of the Summit. At the one-day conference the larger body of participants joined the discussion as well.

SUMMIT II: The purpose of Summit II was to expand the dialogue begun on “Golden Pond” and to structure a varied series of presentations that would share the work accomplished thus far with a larger audience. It also sought to get feedback and input from supporters of Black theatre at the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta. An opening plenary session, special presentations, round tables and a closing plenary were the primary vehicles chosen to accomplish the goals.

Carl Jennings is Managing Director of Jennings & Jennings and Consultant to the AGIA Board of Directors



Summit II: The Management and Institutional Development Round Table

The presenters for the Summer II round table included: Mariea Cromer, Director, Managed Care Institute, Morehouse School of Medicine and Chief Legal Counsel to the AGIA Board of Directors; Donald Brown, Managing Director, Freedom Theatre; Caleen Jennings, Professor/Playwright, American University; Carl Jennings, Managing Director Jennings & Jennings and Consultant to the AGIA Board of Directors.

The Management and Institutional Development round table began with a presentation by Attorney Mariea Cromer. This presentation focused on the legal parameters associated with the various aspects of developing and running theatre companies. Ms. Cromer also discussed the function of not for profit organizational structures (501c3s), the concept of enlightened self interest and how trusts can be established for theatres through charitable giving. To help theatre directors understand how the law can help them in their efforts to secure their theatres, Ms. Cromer recommended that they develop relationships with lawyers or legal organizations within their theatre community.

The next presentation was by Donald Brown, Managing Director of Freedom Theater. Mr. Brown focussed on his experiences as managing director of one of the most successful Black theatres in the country, and shared those parts he thought were especially enlightening to the topic at hand. In his presentation he emphasized the importance of boards, understanding and managing the dynamic interplay between marketing and finance, and maintaining an affiliation with organizations that control resources needed to support theatrical organizations.

Caleen Jennings reinforced the importance of establishing strategic alliances. She highlighted the advantages that result when theatre groups enter into relationships with institutions of higher

education. She stressed that theaters should look for relationships not only with theatre programs but with the law and business schools as well. Some of the advantages she identified are:

- Instruction and technical assistance from colleges and universities in exchange for co-ops and internships in their organizations;
- Opportunity to link performance seasons to college syllabi that result in building and strengthening college and university audiences;
- Establishing linkages with alumni/faculty and staff groups for additional support;

In the final presentation, Carl Jennings focused on understanding the importance of well executed principles of organization and management development in the sustaining of Black theatre organizations. This involves the critical importance of theatre managers understanding that their primary responsibility is to ensure the flow of resources to those parts of the organization where these resources are needed. This necessitates management's commitment to enlist the involvement of organizational members to craft a strategic plan capable of guiding the fulfillment of its mission by organizing its resources in relationship to the tasks that must be fulfilled to ensure success. Additional considerations for ensuring success were detailed in the report on the Management and Institutional Development round table during the closing plenary session.

If Black theatrical institutions are going to survive, the realities of the present day global environment demand that they be well organized and managed. In keeping with this demand, the panelists identified the following concerns as priorities:

- The development of a well-crafted strategic plan to include input from all the involved stakeholders;
- The need for boards, management and staff to support theatrical organizations with tried and true human systems development practices, financial planning and control measures, and the needed information technology critical to operations, production and development;

- The establishment of a well planned marketing effort that focuses on distribution of information;
- An understanding of finance that goes beyond record keeping and encompasses the acquisition of credit and competently managing the investments of funders;
- Overcoming difficulties with boards in order to mobilize them to gain support from politicians, the corporations and foundations;
- Viewing theatres as critical community assets is important because, at present, community assets receive important funding;
- Making the case that theatres have social and economic impact on the community, maximizes possibilities for funding;
- The provision of practical training for people interested in careers in theatre, is an important obligation for black theatres. This can be achieved through partnering with academic institutions;
- The development of alternate approaches to ensure Black theatre's survival, given the scarcity of managerial and economic resources. Achieving this includes, but is not limited to, establishing strategic alliances, partnerships, mergers and networks.

By addressing the concerns above, Black theatre can be assured of a long, resilient and meaningful life. In this way, it can continue to make its needed contributions to the African-American and world communities. ❖



The panelist: [l-r] Donald Brown, Freedom Theatre; Caleen Jennings, American University; Mariea Cromer, Morehouse School of Medicine and Chief Legal Counsel to the AGIA Board of Directors; and Carl Jennings, Jennings & Jennings and Consultant to the AGIA Board of Directors.

Emerging Black Theatres: Priorities for Future Growth

by Addell Austin Anderson with Gary Anderson

INTRODUCTION

I became the Managing Director of Plowshares Theatre Company in 1993, three years after the company began producing Black Theatre in Detroit. I also happen to be married to its Producing Artistic Director—Gary Anderson—who founded the theatre in 1989 with a former Wayne State University classmate. The two founders originally shared the title of artistic director and had formed the company to provide challenging opportunities to local artists. They believed that by producing quality dramas that both entertained and enlightened, Plowshares could make theater more relevant to its audience. The name of the theatre company was chosen to be synonymous with its mission: Plowshares would “break new ground” by nurturing emerging talent and presenting newer works.

We could not be happier with the artistic achievements of the company over the last nine years. Plowshares has consistently received good reviews, nominations and awards from the major local newspapers. However, in comparison to such established companies as Crossroads Theatre, Freedom Theatre and Penumbra, I still consider Plowshares as an emerging institution for several reasons. The first reason is the size of its operating budget: although we have been able to significantly increase earned and unearned revenues by more than 100% for the last three seasons, we still have an annual budget that is less than \$500,000. Most of that is expended on the 4-show production season, educational initiatives and a play development program. The limited budget has curtailed our ability to expand the company’s full-time staff to enhance our capability to provide new services to our patrons, and thereby, improve revenue and customer relations. Secondly, we do not own our own facilities; we rent office, rehearsal and performance spaces in three different locations. In the case of the performance and rehearsal spaces, we share those venues with other non-profit organizations. This fact limits our ability to provide internships and training workshops for local African American actors, playwrights, directors and designers; and it forces us to do much of our training through the rehearsal process. Third, although the growth of our donated funds and support from corporations

and foundations has increased annually, we are still not at a desired level of support. Less than 10% of our revenues come from charitable donations. This is the case in spite of the fact that Detroit’s population is almost 80% African American and the surrounding suburbs consist of 10 to 25% African Americans. These factors indicate that Plowshares still has room to grow.

THE SUMMIT II DISCUSSION

We recognize Plowshares is at a pivotal moment in its journey toward becoming a major cultural institution with regional and national impact on the future of African American Theatre. Two of the three growth areas facing us are financial. The other area, spatial needs/artist training, should not be considered a subordinate concern. In the following section, I would like to share some ideas that surfaced during the Summit II discussion on “Black Arts Institutions: What are the Pressing Issues” that are significant to the topic and could help emerging theatres to address similar concerns.

1. “LIVING BUSINESS PLAN.”

To visualize and plan for sustained growth, the administrative staffs and governing boards of emerging theatres need to set aside time to devise a strategic business plan with reasonable

Addell Austin Anderson is the Managing Director of Detroit's Plowshares Theatre Company. She served as the third Black Theatre Network President.





Addell Anderson of Plowshares Theatre Company [center] engages in discussions on the major issues facing Black Arts Institutions with Vernell Lillie of Kuntu Repertory Theatre [left] and Eileen Morris of The Ensemble Theatre [right] during the Summit II closed session.

short and long-term goals. Such a business plan should begin with a full commitment to the organization's mission. From that, goals will be devised that focus the organization's energies in attaining its mission, followed by a vision statement, objectives, strategies and a plan of action. On an annual basis, the plan should be monitored and evaluated to assess the need for change.

2. REGIONAL SUPPORT GROUPS.

Regional chapters of Black theatre organizations—such as the Black Theatre Network and AGIA—should be encouraged and established immediately. Such a series of geographic support offices would be more adept at facilitating networking on a regular basis (i.e., monthly or quarterly), meeting specific regional needs, encouraging resource sharing, and assisting in raising the profile of Black theatre, overall. These chapters could help to expand the national presence of a Black Theatre organization in the same way regional offices of the NAACP have assisted in building that organization.

3. MANAGEMENT MENTORING PROGRAM.

- A. Established African-American Theatre institutions should consider adopting an emerging Black theatre. The “mentor” company could be compensated for making their personnel available to conduct workshops and participate in board retreats to answer questions or concerns of the “mentee” group. Moreover, the “mentor” may also provide assistantships for the personnel of emerging theatres to learn directly by working at the established company.

- B. National Black Theatre conferences and festivals should commit more of their workshops to addressing the practical, vital issues confronting the very institutions they wish to serve. Seminars and roundtables—like the ones conducted by AGIA within the last year—could be used as a model. Such forums would help to continue the dialogue and expand the variety of voices to be heard. Furthermore, a company's best practices, such as volunteer recruitment and marketing strategies, could be shared. This information, also, could be made available by publication via a national journal/magazine and posting on a web site.

4. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NEEDS.

- A. Emerging theatres need to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, then seek out advice from experts for building strategies and adopting new business practices.
- B. Regional seminars/workshops, at affordable rates, could be initiated to address the following concerns:
 - Board Recruitment and Skill Enhancement.
 - Accounting practices.
 - Fundraising techniques – annual, capital, planned giving and endowment campaigns.
 - Enhancement of organizational infrastructure and staff development.
 - Development of volunteer/service organizations.
 - Black Theatres and their affiliation with professional unions.
 - Private and public partnerships.

5. ARTISTIC GROWTH.

- A. To facilitate changes necessary to make the transition from an emerging to established institution, grants should be made available to allow critical company personnel to take time away from producing to provide more time for artistic development and the opportunity to set new managerial strategies.
- B. Seminars/workshops should be initiated to allow artistic staff to further develop their talents and share practices.

6. FUNDING PRIORITIES.

During most of this decade, funding priorities of most public and private sources have discontinued to provide operational support grants. Most of the funds have been reassigned to project grants. In spite of this, emerging Black theatres must resist this obvious trap of being project oriented, instead of directing efforts with the goal of building an institution which serves the needs of the community. We must look beyond the financing of programming in order to identify the crucial needs of the organization. If the organization is not sustained how can the programs be effectively implemented?

- A. Staff Development. Short-term grants are needed to

help critical staff positions make the transition from volunteers and part-time staffers to full-time employees with adequate wages and benefits.

- B. Technical Capabilities. Funding and expertise are needed to acquire computers, software, and related components to perform daily accounting, record keeping, graphic design and word-processing functions. Also, a company web-site should be created with links to other Black Theatres throughout the world.

7. DIRECTORIES.

The following directories should be available in both print and electronic formats:

- A. A national database of Black theatre scripts - similar to the one once supported by the Black Theatre Network, entitled Black Voices.
- B. A national database of artist profiles - e.g., directors, actors, designers, and playwrights - to be accessed as resource for possible hires.

8. ADVOCACY.

All African American theatres and their supporters should work toward devising better strategies to make the case for supporting Black theatre. The primary targets of these strategies should be individual African Americans and businesses, as well as foundations, and corporations. African Americans, in particular, are now affluent enough to support such institutions. However, it appears that this generation of Black people does not display a similar commitment to sustaining such institutions, as did their less prosperous predecessors. Ironically, the Black Theatre--the very cultural institution that played a significant role in the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements--has not directly benefited from the economic changes the Black community has gone through these past thirty-four years.

The issues facing emerging Black Theatres are reflective of their current, yet, ever changing level of development. The priorities suggested in this essay contain some strategies that can greatly enhance these institutions' ability to fulfill their missions and objectives without significant additional funding requirements. The responsibility for addressing these strategies lies with the administrative staff and governing board of the theatre company. It must be the institution that takes the initiative to meet the challenges which would allow it to better serve its constituents and enhance the cultural life of the community. ❖



... Unfair guidelines that make it difficult for most black institutions to apply for grants, and sociological criteria that favors European American institutions suggest an intent that is echoed by private foundations and corporate America, further stifling any financial recourse necessary for the development of black artists. We are robbed of the climate of friendship and camaraderie that would strengthen American art and help to define our national will and purpose . . .

August Wilson
"in Our Hands", page 32



Top: August Wilson at the Second Summit in Atlanta, during the National Black Arts Festival.
Bottom: August Wilson outside the Minary Center during the First Summit, "On Golden Pond."



The Urban Circuit Play Panel addresses the audience at the Summit II/National Black Arts Festival. [l-r] Kevin Fontana, Dr. Beverly J. Robinson, David Talbert and Slivy Edmonds Cotton.

THE URBAN CIRCUIT PLAY

. . . The urban circuit play comes out of the experiences shared by masses of Americans in today's life who understand the language, movement, music, tragedy and the spiritual power of how hope can be realized. . .

THE URBAN CIRCUIT PLAY

aka CHITLIN CIRCUIT

By Beverly J. Robinson

The issues that led to developing a panel on the Urban Circuit play were largely based on a schism between what is theater and can the financially successful “circuit” productions reaching large audiences throughout major cities in the United States be ignored. For many theater professionals these productions have not relied on relative, collaborative strategies common to theater (e.g., actor, designer, director, lighting technician). On one hand, they represent poorly constructed efforts, while on the other an itching hand has been making profitable bank deposits. These artistic factors along with the lack of communication between what appeared to be *the theater professionals* and the *producers of phenomena*, and a concern regarding cultural custodians of other people’s disciplines were instrumental in bringing the panel together. Invited panelists included Slivy Edmonds Cotton, President and CEO of the Edmonds Group based in Tucson, Arizona, Board of Directors’ member of African Grove Institute for the Arts and an independent producer of plays ranging from those of August Wilson to new musicals; Kevin Fontana, an accountant and owner of the Los Angeles based Entertainment Company Classic Artists, and whose productions have included two Off-Broadway shows **Willie and Esther** and **Ritual, Roommates, and Whatever Happened to Black Love** that is currently touring nationally; and David Talbert, a business-based entrepreneur residing in Las Vegas who wrote and produced **He Say, She Say but What Does God Say, Lord Have Mercy**, and his current national production **Mr. Right Now**.

To begin, a working definition of the genre of theater which brought our panel together was necessary. The term “Chitlin Circuit” reflects an earlier era of Black entertainment history. African Americans devoted to their artistry (primarily music) performed despite (or in spite of) racism, poor working conditions, inadequate accommodations on the road, and meager wages. Committed to their art, these early performers toured on a circuit that generally guaranteed their work whether it was by the way of the Keith Circuit, Theater Owner’s Booking Association (TOBA) dubbed “Tough on Black Artists” or “The Chitlin Circuit.” This tradition actually began during the early 1900s and continued through the 1940s; for some, until the

early 1950s. The contemporary urban plays are rooted out of different experiences.

The cultural custodians from other disciplines who find it necessary to use nomenclature of oppression by calling these modern productions “chitlin circuit plays,” are historically incorrect. Furthermore, this unwarranted outside intervention is intellectually demeaning considering that theater is comprised of enough articulate voices to provide names for the genres within its field.² If anything, *Urban Circuit Play* better reflects and complements the type of theater in question which based on the panel participants, has a marketable strategy. As one panelist noted, the Urban Circuit Play’s success lies in the subject matter being identifiable, relatable, and important to the everyday lives of African Americans. There is “a common thread that weaves through the lives of common people and we have become the tailors. Our shows present characters, subject matter, and situations that most, if not all, audience members have found themselves in. And it is centered around spiritual themes such as redemption, repentance, or that path or solution to any problem—the everyday struggle between good and evil—must at some point go through God. In some ways our shows are merely an extension of the church, wrapped around colorful dialogue and identifiable characters. Because of its appeal, we market our product right where our audience live; in church, on urban and Gospel radio, on street poles, and in nightclubs.”



Dr. Beverly J. Robinson, Panel Chairperson and Moderator. Professor of Theater, School of Theater, Film and Television. University of California, Los Angeles

¹ Tough on Black artists was the commonly used term among performers. However, more “risqué” performers such as Red Foxx referred to TOBA as “Tough on Black Asses.”

² For example, see the February 3, 1997 *The New Yorker* article, “The Chitlin Circuit” by Henry Luis Gates, Jr.

The marketing strategy seeks a particular kind of audience and dismisses mainstream print. In short, the urban circuit play audience is not motivated by print advertisement to purchase tickets. Where Broadway may sell aesthetics common to a selective audience taste, the strength of the urban circuit play promoters is emotions and good feelings common to the everyday person. Audiences are invited to talk back to the stage because it is part of their etiquette and they do not “feel bogged down by European imposed theatre etiquette.” When they are in disagreement with a character, they let them know by responding aloud without shame. When they are spiritually touched, it is understood and they are encouraged to raise a testifying hand, openly let the tears flow, or “run up and down the aisle.” There is no embarrassment. “If danger is ensuing, we’ll try to let the other characters on stage know. We become affected by the characters struggles, because *their* struggles are *our* struggles.”

When a play is initially conceived to the last period of that last paragraph, the urban circuit playwright “is thinking of how this play can be commercially marketed.” The title itself must pull in large audiences: *Beauty Shop*, *The Diary of a Black Man*, *What Goes Around Comes Around*, *If Beds Could Talk*, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, *Momma Don’t*, etc. These titles along with the contents of the play provide a unique marketing tool and the audiences come in large numbers. The plays are marketed as if they were concerts; beginning with flyers and posters in the streets, then radio advertising which also serves as a review of what will be heard and seen at the production, and finally the television spots that include visual comedy or singing. As one panelist noted: Flyers = comprehension; Radio = awareness; Television = Draw to purchase.

The fundamental marketing pyramid is awareness, comprehension, desire to purchase, and action to purchase. Repetition is used so that the play can become a part of the buyer (*awareness*). Repetition tends to breed a familiarity with the production before it is even seen (*comprehension*). The audience becomes comfortable with the lines, music and talent by it constantly “being in their faces” (*desire to purchase*). Opening night is highlighted with offering ticket discounts as an incentive (*action to purchase*). Talbert and Fontana reiterated Shelley Garrett’s success by using some of this basic formula for his multi-million dollar success in two years with *Beauty Shop*, and affirmed their personal successes with productions when these key steps were properly executed with a show that has a storytelling format with which an audience can relate. Talbert, for example, “manufacture moments that will create a frenzy in the audience. And that frenzy is created when I deal what’s dear to my audience: drug dealers turning their lives around, a mother wanting her son to straighten his life up, a wife wanting her husband to treat her right, grandmothers praying to God to deliver their families, and . . .” The urban circuit play comes out of the experiences shared by masses of Americans in today’s life who understand the language, movement, music, tragedy and the spiritual power of how hope can be realized.

Marketing Pyramid



The producers were eloquent in defining what and how they accomplish their form of theater. They spoke before an audience that listened, occasionally reprimanded, but mostly one that questioned and shared. When Talbert reiterated W.E.B. DuBois’ four fundamental components that create theater: It must be by us, for us, about us, and near us, the potential gulf of separation between “professional” and “phenomena” was quietly closing because the components were familiar to us all. “It must deal with the Black experience as it is today,” he continued, “and the audience must validate it by their patronage of it.” With the establishment of new audiences is the goal to improve the quality of the plays; that includes hiring professional actors and musicians—particularly ones that are familiar to an audience via television and film (Antonio “Huggie Bear” Fargas, Ernest Thomas and Bern Nadette Stanis [*Good Times* and *What’s Happening*] or the gospel singing star Kirk Franklin); better scripts that often incorporate the use of audience participation (e.g., *Whatever Happened to Black Love*); a stronger message from Gospel to Black History; and better production values that require an understanding of the strategies common to theater. More corporate sponsorship and creating subscription buyers for yearly series and better ways for the wealth to be spread among the actors involved are also part of the producers’ vision. The urban circuit play is a real phenomenon; and, like in the larger struggle for the survival of Black arts, it is mandatory that there is a unification of, as Kevin

Fontana so aptly stated, “all theater people together so that we can all continue to grow.” There is a lot to be gained by both sides—those involved with the urban circuit plays and those who are involved with other forms of theater.

Clearly, the modern success of the urban circuit play developed out of a marketing strategy where the artistic merit was often overridden by audience “strategizing.” Consequently, there is a recognizable market which is apparently growing to the point that producers can now afford to incorporate the mandates of artistic merit common to professional theater: set designs, lighting, state of the art sound, top venues, dramaturgs who can assist with educational packets and outreach. For the theater practitioners who have been struggling to gain or keep audiences and stay financially strong, there is something to be achieved from the experiences of the urban circuit producers. It appears that both sides stand to profit; proving that within the definition of theater (or theatre) is another example of how our art form (as a reflector of our culture) is not static but dynamic. ❖



Dr. Robinson leads the discussion on the Urban Circuit Play, Summit II/National Black Arts Festival. [l-r] Kevin Fontana, Beverly J. Robinson, David Talbert and Slivv Edmonds Cotton.

The Black Preacher

by Beverly Robinson

One of the celebrated voices in American history has been that of the Black preacher. As early as the 1770s, men like George Liele and Andrew Bryan of Georgia were preaching to Whites and Blacks. These early Black preachers were often the ones who drew the audiences for their White counterparts. A man known as Black Harry, for example, was a major orator who had the ability to stir crowds to listen and “preached from the same platform with other founders of the Methodist Church.” The preacher often became the living voice of African culture in America by preserving the rhythmic forms and musical idioms in his speeches. He was a troubadour, storyteller, and griot (official village historian) that displayed the richness of an oral tradition.

By the late nineteenth century pageant plays, dramatic rituals, or productions primarily geared toward children—like the nativity productions, *Easter Rock rituals* or *Womanless Weddings*—were apparent in Black churches. Music was an inseparable part of these early folk dramas relying on spirituals, gospels, the art of the human voice. Most importantly, the productions (whether a mockery on weddings or an enactment of Biblical stories) were rooted in oral tradition, much like the urban circuit play of today.

When professional writers began to create their productions based on the folk tradition stemming from churches, a new and larger audience was formed. These audiences were pri-

marily in urban cities—New York, Chicago, Houston, Atlanta, Baltimore, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Oakland and other major areas where Black audiences could recognize the rhythms, the language, the music that would advertise on their favorite stations about an upcoming production. Today, these areas are where many shows are “workshopped” in small venues before reaching major theater houses and multi-cultural audiences. The tradition of the urban circuit play is not new, but indeed, parts of a continuum.

The urban circuit play is rooted in oral tradition and relies on the art of the spoken word, particularly the ministerial appeal, songs and an elocutionary style of the traditional Black preacher. These are recognizable cultural and dramatic devices known to the folk from whom they originate and which they support. Within theater, the urban circuit play was epitomized in the early documentary and successful works of Zora Neale Hurston (*The First One* and *The Sanctified Church*), Langston Hughes’ *Tambourines to Glory*, James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones*, Vinette Carroll’s *Your Arms Too Short to Box with God*, and *Trumpets of the Lord*, and Vy Higginson’s *Mama, I Want to Sing*. Later productions of *Thomas Dorsey* and *The Untold Story of Gospel Music*, *He Say She Say But What Does God Say*, *Calling All Saints* and other urban circuit plays are ones which link the continuing artistry of those contributors from an earlier time in American history to today’s economic successes.



Esmeralda Simmons (standing) discusses economics and fundraising with the Summit. [l-r] Carl Jennings, Claude Purdy, William Cook, Keith Antar Mason.

Fundraising and Economic Development

...The greatest need for organizations that produce theatre is always money for general operating support. Yet, most donors are not interested in funding operational needs ...

The Challenges We Face

by Ron Himes
St. Louis Black Repertory Company

African American professional theatre companies are faced with the monumental challenge of producing and presenting high quality professional work while having to balance earned and unearned revenues in an environment of inequitable funding where competition for funds and audience interests and patterns are constantly changing. But this is nothing new. I would dare say that from the time of the first Africans in America we have been involved in economic development in a hostile environment that cared little about our well being, and even less about our culture. Nonetheless, African American theatre organizations have flourished in this country and have a collective proud history of accomplishments.

From the likes of the African Grove Theatre, The Lafayette Players, the American Negro Theatre, the Negro Ensemble Company, the New Federal Theatre, ETA Creative Arts Foundation, and the National Black Theatre have evolved the St. Louis Black Repertory Company, Crossroads Theatre, Penumbra Theatre Company, Jomandi Theatre, Lorriane Hansberry Theatre, The Ensemble Theatre, and The National Black Theatre Festival. But how far have we really come? How much have we developed and what does the future hold for us? These are some of the issues we attempted to discuss in Atlanta within the context of Fundraising and Economic Development. To put it in plain English, “here we are and now what we gonna do?” While professional theatre companies are not the only source of theatre available to audiences interested in an African American perspective, this paper is written from the perspective of such companies.

BLACK THEATRES ARE ALIVE AND WELL, THEY JUST ARE NOT FUNDED

-August Wilson

Economic development is a broad and complex topic. To simplify, it can be visualized as bricks and mortar; where entrepreneurial enterprising, job creation, unrelated (taxable) income, and community development are but a few of the parts that need to be cemented together to form the foundation for eco-

nomic stability and growth.

For the purpose of the discussion at the Atlanta Summit, this concept can be applied to an organization that offers theatre among other services to its constituencies. Because the primary mission of the organization in question is not the production of professional theatre but other social programs, such an organization should have broader opportunities for funding. But even within this more favorable scenario fundraising is still, and will always be, a great challenge for African American organizations that produce theatre.

The greatest need for organizations that produce theatre is always money for general operating support. Yet, most donors are not interested in funding operational needs—although some public funding agencies are still providing this type of support. Foundation moneys are more likely to support production programs. Even more, in some cases they support foundation created initiatives that cause organizations to cater to the foundation’s vision. The reality is that foundation driven visions have had a tremendous impact on the field and this impact has not always been positive.

Corporate solicitation is also challenging. Some companies offer financial support for reasons of social investment or civic responsibility. Therefore, an institution’s ability to secure this type of funding is greatly impacted by the parameters used to define “social investment or civic responsibility.” In addition, corporate philanthropy depends on how the corporate donor sees its return on the investment (or lack of it) or whether it bears any responsibility or interest in assuring a diverse cultural landscape. As a result, African American theatre organizations in urban communities have to fight an uneven competition for funding with well established “mainstream major cultural institutions.” This diminishes our ability to attain, sustain, or increase corporate contributions.



Ron Himes is Producing Director and Founder of the St. Louis Black Repertory Company. He was a member of the Fundraising and Economic Development panel at the Summit II in Atlanta.

Recently, some corporations seeking name recognition and marketing opportunities are offering funding in the form of sponsorships (i.e. SFX & Houston Alley Theatre, Disney and the Alliance Theatre). The potential here could range from enhancement dollars to full investment in a corporate driven project. In addition some of our institutions exist in communities that combine arts fundraising campaigns (united arts funds) that serve as the conduit of corporate dollars. This presents a completely different set of variables and may create new obstacles to our ability to access the corporate donor. Historically these campaigns are established to support “mainstream major cultural institutions” and we are often just not included.

Soliciting funds from individuals is quite different from foundation or corporate solicitation. In many of our institutions this remains one of our greatest untapped resources. Even though cultivation of individual gifts usually includes relatively small checks as opposed to donors in the five and six figures, it is essential that we have this investment base at the community level—that we have this commitment from an audience base that realizes the importance of contributions beyond the price of the ticket. So often due to administrative challenges we choose the public grants, the foundation or corporate proposals at the expense of the individual donor. We go for the big “hit” and neglect the cornerstones of our institutions.

Fundraising and Economic Development

MONEY: Where is it? And how we can get it?

by Lundeana Thomas

Lack of economic stability, without a doubt, has been the greater cause of fatality for African American businesses and theatres. Even today, we face monumental economic challenges and the competition field is uneven, as Ron Himes so eloquently expresses in the previous section: “The Challenges We Face.” Victor Walker states in AGIA’s campaign for successful Black Theatre in the future that, “We address these [economic] concerns with a mind in our history and our eye toward the next millennium.” Under these premises we met in Atlanta to continue and expand the dialogue that started at the first Summit in Dartmouth on the topic of Fund Raising and Economic Development. This time the discussion concentrated on the recent successes of theatres such as Crossroads Theatre, St. Louis Black Repertory Company and Jomandi Theatre.

I had the honor to chair the panel that discussed the topic. The participants were all eminent successful corporate or theatrical successors including:

- Ron Himes, founder and Artistic Director of the St. Louis Black Rep. Mr. Himes presides over an African American professional theatre with financial solvency.
- Tom Jones II, co-founder and artistic director of Jomandi Productions, a professional Black Theatre in operation over ten years.
- Esmeralda Simmons, attorney and Director of the Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Egar Evers College in Brooklyn, New York. Ms. Simmons has

Dr. Lundeana Thomas is an Assistant Professor of Theatre, Theatre Arts Department, University of Louisville. She served as the 5th President of the Black Theatre Network.

Photo: K. Perkins



been urging cultural institutions to assert their cultural rights and pursue their equitable share of public and philanthropic funds.

Teryl Watkins, President and Director of Development, of the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC). Ms. Watkins presides over an annual operating budget of 17 million dollars, 460 employees, 34 human service programs and 6 housing units and 13 commercial sites.

Janine Watkins, of the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC). She presides over WLCAC self-initiated programs of advocacy, cultural historic foundations, and cultural tourism—which generates its own funding and profit.

We met on Tuesday July 14, 1998 at 10:00 am; it was a well attended meeting. Our minds were on those who had tried and those who were succeeding. We put aside the excuses for our lack of audience development campaigns, our lack of grants, our lack of plays and original creative works, and our inability to pay competitive salaries for actors. Our eyes were on the next millennium and we wanted solutions. Nothing can be taken for granted. The Negro Ensemble Company serves as a profound example that no matter how high your ground is today, tomorrow it can come tumbling down and succumb under economic pressures.

My responsibility was to encourage the participants to expound on the national and regional initiatives that spurred their economic development within the Black Arts community. In the process they would relate the events that helped them achieve positive economic relationships with corporate foundations and private donors. The dialogue was intriguing and provided engaging results. Recommendations of all sorts came forth; including from the most basic business practices to the most recent ingenious funding initiatives of today. What follows is only a selected summary of the most relevant recommendations compiled from the few notes I was able to take during the discussions. Among those recommendations in the basic business practice category are:

1) Establishing a vision and setting a “Plan of Action” that demands the development of a worthwhile product. It is important that you provide good directors, passionate actors and adequate personnel to obtain the best production possible and one that caters to your audience.

2) Build on your plan by putting something away for a “rainy day.” It’s called amortize —prepare for tomorrow today. Establish endowments, set up investment plans and/or procure the services of a financial planner.

3) Focus on your plan by utilizing your resources, take risks — even demand (you will have not if you ask not). Also nurture good leadership and guide the power of that leadership so it works for you and not against you.

Three innovative and enlightening points came out of the panel:

1) Moneys have become available through local and state government for organizations that provide cultural educational programs. Janine Watkins in Los Angeles Watts provided her own experience as an example. She asserted that because her theatre organization provided culture to her area it qualified for funds offered under cultural tourism and historical foundations. She contacted the Chamber of Commerce and the wheels were set in motion. Because her organization was placed in the official route of Los Angeles visitors, she was also able to establish a gift shop in her theatre that caters to tourists. There, they could purchase gifts as well as learn about the theatre and current production and at the same time provide extra income to support the theatre. This is an alternative to be considered seriously since minority theatres by their own nature serve the purpose of cultural education (Barbara and Carlton Mollette’s **Black Theatre: Premise and Presentation**, 2nd ed. Bristol, IN: Wyndhan Hall Press, 1992).

Funding might also be available through Empowerment Zone Programs. These federal funds are dispersed from the Congress to your Congress person and could help theatres in their efforts to become self reliant. The Empowerment Zone allows you to set up your theatre as a cultural institution. This has

already been quite successfully done by theatre organizations in New York and California. Contact your Congress representative’s office to obtain more information and find if it is available in your area and how you can apply.

2) For years we have been under the impression that the 501(c)(3) was the best and only way to run theatre companies. That does not seem to be the case anymore. Your “not for profit” theatre may establish a related “for profit business” to subsidize your operations and programs. These businesses may include, but are not limited to, restaurants, laundry mats, fast food parlors, printing and reproduction companies, or flower shops. Total “not for profit” may no longer be the way to prosper or even exist; at least not entirely. For examples, look to the National Black Theatre in Harlem and the Inner City Cultural Center in L.A., these theatres are flourishing because they have acquired profitable businesses that generate funds to sustain the Theatres.

3) A word of caution arose among the recommendations: “not all money is good money.” Many of the new grants and proposals or even large private donors that offer monetary gain could compromise the integrity of your organization. Some grants ask for conditions theatres cannot or should not render. Therefore, make sure you fully understand the wherewithal concerning these moneys, their sources, what they provide, and why. This could save embarrassment and solvency in the end.

In conclusion, we must think of our theatres as a business and treat them as such. Thinking of your theatre as a business means spending money to make money; hiring investment and business advisors to locate profitable business ventures and financial advisors to assure your money makes money; and acquire the services of lawyers who can provide inside information on government subsidy. On a personal note: above all don’t be afraid of a little prayer—MANY TIMES A LITTLE GOES A LONG WAY. ❖



[l-r] Janine Watkins, Esmeralda Simmons, Terri Watkins, Ron Himes, Tom Jones.



[l-r] Prof. William Cook, Dartmouth College and AGIA Vice President and Chair of the Board of Governors; Joseph J. Murphy, Sourcing Government Support Programs & Compliance, GE Aircraft Engines; Keryl McCord, Managing Director of Crossroads Theatre; Lou Bellamy, Artistic Director of Penumbra Theatre; Eileen Morris Artistic Director of the Ensemble Theatre; Victor Leo Walker, AGIA President and CEO; and Diana Mercer-Pryor, Executive Special Supplier Relations and Operational Purchasing, Chrysler Corporation, outside the Tuck building. McCord, Bellamy and Morris are among the first theatre professionals to participate in the Business/Performing Arts Partnership Initiative established as a result of collaborations between the Tuck School of Business and the African Grove Institute for the Arts. Photo by Jon Gilbert Fox.

The AGIA/Tuck School of Business Partnership

Tuck's Minority Business Executive Program (MBEP), founded in 1980, is the oldest program of its kind in the country. It developed out of a joint effort by Tuck and the U.S. Small Business Administration to provide minority business executives with the same access to executive education that was (and is) readily available to Fortune 500 employees.

With Tuck providing the majority of the funding and Walker and Cook identifying the candidates, the Business/Performing Arts Partnership Initiative (BPAPI) was born--with emphasis on the word "partnership."

For the theater artists, there was the obvious attraction of cutting-edge business training and the chance to network with peers in the for-profit sector. For Tuck, there was the opportunity to expose its minority executives to new ways of thinking.

SOURCE: Tuck Today Winter 1999.

Theatre's Duality: Art and Industry

By Eileen J. Morris

"Theatre is both an art and an industry; an expression of culture and a source of livelihood for artists and craftsmen; a medium of instruction and a purveyor of entertainment."

Errol Hill , Theatre of Black Americans

The need to fully comprehend this theatre duality, as both art and industry, was perhaps the underlying conviction that brought leaders of the African American community to convene at *"On Golden Pond"* for the first National Black Theatre Summit. For one week in March of 1998, a group of 45 leading artists, business executives, producers and writers, directors and actors met to affirm a belief in ourselves, our art, our people and our culture. The ultimate purpose of the gathering was to develop strategies that would build on our abilities to help us fulfill our worth within American theatre. I had the honor of being among those chosen to participate in these deliberations.

Subsequently, during one week in July of 1998, I had the opportunity to participate in the Tuck Minority Business Executive Program offered by the Dartmouth College School of Business Administration (TUCK MBEP Program). I was among a group of four representatives from Black Theatre Companies across the nation chosen to participate in this program; established as a result of the AGIA/Tuck Business School partnership. This first pilot program included Karen Baxter--who attended the advanced program-- of Rites and Reasons in Providence, Rhode Island, Keryl Mc Cord of Crossroads Theatre in New Brunswick, New Jersey, Lou Bellamy of Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul-Minneapolis, Minnesota, and I from The Ensemble Theatre in Houston, Texas. During this c Cord, Bellamy and me had the opportunity to interact with a group of dynamic, assertive and personable minority business leaders. As a theatre administrator, I found myself constantly trying to as-

sess the net-worth of every executive with whom I came into contact. This was a survival practice I had developed in my earlier years when I worked with The Ensemble Theatre founder George Hawkins and later with the Theatre's Board President Audrey Lawson. I had learned that each personal encounter with an audience member or visitor to the theatre represented an opportunity to identify a possible board member, a financial/space resource person, or a "drum major" to champion the causes of The Ensemble Theatre. What I received from these executives at Dartmouth went a step beyond in my survival kit for non-profit theatres. For the entire week, we networked, shared our business experiences and discovered that with proper guidance there is no reason why African American Theatres cannot become stable fiscal entities on the cultural world map. For the first time in twenty years, I was forced to equally embrace the aesthetic and the fiscal dimensions of the arts.

During the week spent at *On Golden Pond* we discussed a variety of issues as they related to seven general areas. I discovered that these same areas also encompassed the experience at the TUCK MBEP program: legal and social initiatives; institutional development; developing Black playwrights; audience and community development; fundraising and economic development; diversity within the Black arts community; and aesthetics, standards, and practices.

In the TUCK MBEP program, legal and social initiatives fell under the "managing strategy bridge through competitive strategy and managing transitions." A case study was examined to



Eileen J. Morris former Artistic Director of The Ensemble Theatre in Houston, TX. She serves as the Black Theatre Network Vice President.

help illustrate the point: “Celestino Beltran at Comprehensive Technologies International.” Lead by Mr. Beltran himself, this case study was designed to help us investigate how to develop core competencies that could allow us to compete in the commercial arena, i.e. contract writing with playwrights for commissions and royalties, and relationships with governmental and non governmental support organizations. We were able to understand the importance of managing new business development projects that build out of an organization’s set of competencies; and to understand the top team dynamics present when a top manager is an innovative visionary, and others have a different vision of the organization’s mission and goals. One point must remain clear, project development involves working with board, staff and audience relationships; all part of the social initiatives.

Our discussions in regards to institutional development illustrated ways in which working capital management, as an incremental profit, can play a significant role in credit granting decisions. We examined how working capital management can be used to develop a better system for managing receivables. In conclusion, institutional development requires a comprehensive understanding of the five C’s of credit: capital (ownership), collateral, character, capacity and conditions.

Developing Black playwrights was a topic that we creatively experienced at the TUCK MBEP Program. Each case study that was examined during the day was read and presented as a “play” that night. We broke the case study down into characters, intent, emotion, drive, use of language, antagonists, peaks and valleys and subject as they related to the case. So, we faced the same general challenges presented to playwrights: “How does this fit into our world?” How can I make this all work for me? The significant conclusion reached in this part of the program was that developing black playwrights is an opportunity for theatres to enter new markets and expand their product and their style of plays. This can be accomplished by commissioning new more diverse works that meet a broader range of customer needs.

Audience and community development (institutional development) is vital in small arts organizations with limited resources such as corporate support and endowment funds—a common denominator among non-profit theatre companies. It becomes more important in cases that include extreme socio-economically diverse audiences. Several case studies were used to assist in the comparison. The key point to community development is creating segments that are identifiable, sizable, reachable and separable and evaluating the “net” benefit that a product provides to each one of these segments.

A good marketing strategy must include three general points: a) a solid knowledge of the product/company, b) development and implementation of a plan of action c) and demarcation of the expected results. Two general observations must also be

kept in mind: Identifying people/audiences who will have a direct benefit by being a supportive patron of the institution embraces institutional building; and creating new ways or using ideas that for profit companies utilize encourages and enhances patronage development.

The Southwest Airlines example Used at TUCK particularly related to audience and community development and was probably one of the most interesting case study in the program. Two main points were a) managing the expectations of your customers and b) managing the delivery of your service. To work on these points, we need to manage audiences by a) understanding change of marketing styles, b) identify, get and keep the right people on board, c) prioritize and keep people on track and d) see the shared vision.

Understanding our markets requires that we first understand ourselves which leads us into the next topic: diversity within the Black arts community. People of all ages and educational backgrounds, “colors” and nationalities gathered at the TUCK program to share knowledge and information, to gain new, innovative, creative and implementable ideas. Each of us became a case study in itself and our personal trials and tribulations of making our business work became teaching tools.

The use of a strategic approach to communications can help organizations work more effectively with their constituents. Therefore, establishing a set of aesthetics, standards, and practices is necessary before communications strategies are set forth. Corporate image and identity must be understood as it relates to corporate advertising and advocacy, marketing communications, media relations, financial communications with investors, relations with employees, artist, board or patrons, corporate philanthropy, lobbying and community relations. A proactive approach to media relations is better than a reactive approach and planning for crisis helps organizations deal with problems more effectively. Warp of effectively setting standards can be summarized through strategy, structure, staffing, shared values, skills and style or better known as the 6 S’s. Gaining insight into the key strategic and organizational issues that arise when a firm diversifies into a new business area and creating wealth through technology transfer are resourceful areas to look into.

To summarize my experience, the TUCK MBEP program gave me, an artist, the opportunity to be in an environment filled with non-artists that were very supportive, positive, creative and inspiring. To know that those wonderful people of color were worth over a billion dollars and remain personable, friendly and encouraging was worth everything. Relating the TUCK MBEP program to the seven general topics of Dartmouth’s “*On Golden Pond*” helped me to tie together two varying experiences that dealt with one common goal—to look at business or theatre from a more linear perspective and to be privy to enhanced working new ideas. ❖

A Week in the Life of a Tuck MBEP Student

By Keryl E. McCord
Crossroads Theatre

It seemed like a good idea at the time when I was asked if I were willing to be one of the pioneers—more like guinea pigs—for the Business/Performing Arts Partnership Initiative (B/PAPI); the result of a new partnership between the African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA) and the Amos Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College. I eagerly leapt at the chance; as visions of great debates in the classroom danced in my head. But even though in the abstract a lot of ideas sound good, it is in the implementation that one discovers the pitfalls and pratfalls of life.

As the date drew near for me to go to New Hampshire to attend the Tuck Minority Business Executive Program, I seriously began to question my sanity. When I thought about the mounds of paper that seemingly copulated on my desk producing offsprings with the speed of light, I was sorely tempted to cancel. But I was intrigued, interested, and hungry for knowledge.

Subtext and Context

It takes practically all day to get to Hanover, New Hampshire from New Jersey. I must first fly into to Boston and wait one hour for the Dartmouth Shuttle that will finally get me into Hanover—about 2 1/2 hours later. So in the era of instant everything, I left home at 6:30 a.m. for an 8:00 a.m. flight from Newark to Boston and arrived in New Hampshire at 1:15 p.m.

As I check into the Hampshire Inn for the evening I realize this will be the last night for a week that I will live like a fully-grown adult. Tonight we have access to room service, maid service, cable television in our room, and two restaurants in the hotel, fluffy robes courtesy of the hotel, and an iron to knock the wrinkles out of our clothes. Oh, and chocolates on our pillows when the bed is turned down at night.

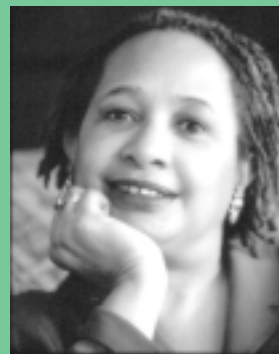
Tomorrow those of us who are the first class of theatre managers to attend this program will check into a dorm on campus and live very much like students. But tonight my theatre cohorts and I attend a lovely dinner with the MBEP staff of Tuck, Dean Paul Danos of the Business School, Victor Walker, and Karen Baxter, Managing Director of Rites and Reasons Theatre who was just completing the advanced program.

I was especially anxious to talk with Karen about her experience. How prepared were her classmates? Was the program

helpful to her work at Rites and Reasons? Did she discover similarity of management issues that crossed profit and not-for-profit structure? How did her classmates receive her? What was the faculty like, were they good, open to new ideas, prepared for us?

As Lou Bellamy (Penumbra Theatre), Eileen Morris (The Ensemble Theater)—the other two participants—and I peppered Karen with our questions the great differences between the advanced program and the experience we were about to have became clear. However, Karen felt the experience was valuable and worthwhile and that was the bottom line.

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Karen Baxter was a true pioneer in that she was the first and only theater manager in her class. She spoke to the fact that she wished she had been able to share the experience with someone else from her field. Little did I know at that moment my theater partner, Walter Dallas, Freedom Theater's Artistic Director, was unable to attend the program leaving me as the lone ranger in my class of 60 students—grouped as the Magnates. Lou Bellamy and Eileen Morris would be together in their group—the Tycoons, also comprised of 60 students.

Curtains Up

My journal entry from the first day reads like someone greatly relieved. The core of the MBEP program is the case study method and the study group. We are each assigned to a study group who will meet each morning and together review that day's cases. It is expected and hoped that the participant in the study group will support each other's learning; aiding in the assimilation of the vast amounts of information heaped upon us.

The curriculum covered everything from Team Building, and Financial Statements, to Basic Borrowing; from New Initiatives in Supply Chain Management (my favorite), to Internet Marketing for Small Business; from Developing a Marketing Plan for a New Product or Service to Developing and Implementing a Market Focused Strategy.

In the isolation of my room reading through the material, I understood the many points of similarity between the issues and challenges faced by the commercial sector and the not-for-profits. The similarities often had to be inferred or interpreted since the businesses used in the case studies were so dissimilar in form, structure, and purpose from our not-for-profit arts organizations.

For example, in our field, there is no reason to have in-depth discussions about corporate structure in terms of how the assets of a company will be distributed after the death of a owner [founder]. In our "world" there are no profits, tangible assets, stock, or dividends to be distributed amongst shareholders. Yet the issue of succession planning is critical for us.

It was intriguing to hear that 70% of all small businesses fail due to a lack of succession planning. After years of hearing how we need to be more like traditional businesses, I then discovered that indeed we are. Succession is a problem that afflicts for profit and not-for-profit business alike. Actually I felt a sense of relief stemmed from the fact that it is apparent to me that we [commercial and not-for-profits] share many similarities and we are all just trying to do the best we can with what we have.

Scene Shift

Often it appeared that to implement many of the ideas suggested in our cases would require far more resources than were available to us; access to personnel, expertise, and money that we often do not have. But the study group allowed us to examine the challenges from a multiplicity of viewpoints, to think not just outside the box but to, in some instances, recreate the box altogether. Thinking outside the box was a great way to exercise one's imagination and reach creative solutions to problem solving.

There is a world of difference between small and midsize businesses and Coors or Southwest Airlines. And these case studies proved interesting to us for focused learning opportunities. More importantly, there were many case studies taken from companies that fit our size profile; their inclusion was helpful and informative. But as the time passed, I still longed for case studies on our field to see the myriad problems we tackle in our individual companies so neatly laid out and categorized: finance, personnel, marketing, management, development, and audiences/customers.

The most relevant lesson was perhaps to realize, once again, that it matters not whether a company is a not-for-profit or for-profit entity, good business practices transcend corporate structure. And contrary to popular belief they have a prominent place in the support of the artistic mission of a theater company.

The Players

The faculty were prepared, interesting, engaging, funny, charming, and obviously well informed and knowledgeable about their areas of expertise; but I needed help with translating the acquired knowledge to our specific industry and part of the world. It became clear that many members of the faculty were not familiar with the nuances and unique challenges of the not-for-profit sector. The same was true for many of our classmates. So, as the week went on, I longed for structured space for discussions with Eileen Morris and Lou Bellamy.

Ultimately I think the issues that made the experience more challenging at times came down to the following points:

- Commercial businesses have a mission first to be profitable. It was not just a question of paying dividends to stockholders but, instead, of survival. Our mission is first to provide a service to our communities, our stakeholders; it too is an issue of survival.
- In a classroom filled with people who manufacture tangible goods and material, or provide more traditional services, or information technology, I often felt like a fish out of water. There is such a disconnect between the commercial and civic sector, a chasm of ignorance of the other

and the value each brings, that communication requires beginning with the basics, the alphabet.

My feelings of cognitive dissonance were most acute in the class discussion on New Initiatives in Supply Chain Management. In order to actively engage in the discussion, I found myself trying to explain a business that produces something that is non-tangible, extremely costly to produce, is very labor intensive, often has contract compliance stipulations with labor unions, and has a limited “shelf life”. Unlike my colleagues in the classroom, theatre administrators work on a business that is very self contained. And if the promise of supply chain management was that it would allow business to maximize profitability, well we were not on the same planet. In theatre, we are not in business solely to make a profit. Furthermore, we have to deal with severe limitations on things such as the number of seats available and production budgets in ratio to the cost of doing business that made discussion of profitability unrealistic.

After a few attempts to turn the discussion to how the production of not-for-profit theater intersects with supply chain management, I decided to let it go. It was apparent that the professor wished to spend time talking with those whose businesses more closely fit the norm the class was designed for. I would wait until our nightly reception when I would see Lou and Eileen and determine if they got more from this class than I did.. Yet, the sheer command of the material by the professor carried me along. I relaxed and allowed myself to enjoy the discussion.

If there is any one thing that was really outstanding, consistently remarked upon by all, it was the quality of our professors. They breathed life into what could have been an extremely boring and stultifying experience. So much so that by the end of the week I was astonished that the class on the internet made sense, I understood it and felt great that something that had eluded me was now clear. I am not a technophile, nor a gadget person. I had a working grasp of the internet, spend lots of time surfing the web and am an email maven. But the technology behind the web, the nuts and bolts of how information is coded and transmitted across the phone lines, well, I did not have a clue.

A most remarkable experience occurred when our marketing professor received a standing ovation at the end of the class. His case study centered on a controversial company, Coors, and demonstrated how a well managed, well orchestrated publicity campaign, can turn the fortunes of a company around and change public opinion. It was a masterful demonstration of a man who took great delight in his work.

Curtains Down

By the end of the week I was ready to go home. I was itching and raring to share with our staff the fruits of our la-

bor. I would have to dispel one myth though, about dorm living. Everyone kind of laughed, or smiled/smirked, when I told them I would be living in a dorm for a week, eating in the cafeteria, walking across campus to class. In reality, we were fed like royalty at Dartmouth--three sumptuous meals a day, two snacks that were minimeals, and wine and beer with dinner, and an evening reception before dinner.

Graduation was scheduled for Friday and we were filled to the brim, mind, body, and spirit. But before Friday comes Thursday, and our graduation banquet in the main dining room of the best restaurant of the Hanover Inn. It was a feast of memorable food, wine, beer, champagne, and lots of laughter.

The MBEP graduates did Dartmouth proud that evening and pledged over \$100,000 to the program to fund scholarships. Of course it goes without saying that Lou, Eileen, and I looked on with amazement when our classmates fell all over each other trying to give money to this very wealthy school; we could not help but wish it were our theatres who were the beneficiaries of such largesse.

That evening we got to see a very different side of our classmates at the after party in the dorm basement. And what a party it was, a real throw down, break a sweat and get funky kind of party. We were sure that Dartmouth would be feeling the reverberations of our celebration for some time to come.

As Friday morning dawned, I began to feel a little of the let down that comes after an intense experience. The pace of the past week had been so tight: breakfast at 6:30 A.M., study groups from 8:00 A.M. until 8:55 A.M., and classes at 9:00.

On Friday, we had classes until noon, then lunch and graduation. That afternoon after almost everyone else was gone, Lou, Eileen and I, along with Victor Walker and Bill Cook, met with Dean Danos and the MBEP staff to talk about the experience. We had come to the point where it was time to evaluate if the program worked, should it be continued? Were we interested in attending the advanced class next summer?

We made many observations and recommendations to improve the program, such as exploring the idea of creating a not-for-profit management institute, or carving out space in the curriculum to address the highly unique daily challenges and conditions in our field. We spoke about increasing the number of theatre managers in attendance, and the absolute need for at least two theatre folk in each group. We commended the staff for their clockwork precision and incredible organization. Hopefully future attendees will benefit from our week in the woods.

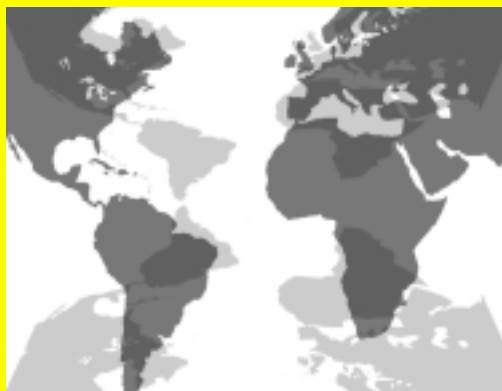
Overall the experience was terrific and I am grateful for the opportunity, and very much looking forward to attending the advanced program next summer. ♦



The Cultural Diversity within the Black Arts Community Committee meets at the Minary Center (Summit I). [l-r] Marta Moreno Vega, Keith Antar Mason, Mikell Pinkney, Elmo Terry-Morgan and Ntozake Shange.

Cultural Diversity within the Black Arts Community

A cross-cultural global African vision



... To move forward from an isolationist perspective our discussions defined America, or the Americas, to include the Caribbean, South America, and Central America—home to more than 250 million people of African descent. . .

Cultures Rooted within African and New World Diaspora Theatres

As masters of cultural negotiation, we sometimes drown in the mighty hyphen that connects African to American. We become so involved in physical survival that we forget that we are part of an ancient, African, continuum that has provided all the answers for becoming fully expressive spirits in mortal vessels. In the Diversity panel, Marta Moreno Vega guided us to that remembrance. As a model for brainstorming this vast and vague issue, she drew the Circle of Life diagram on a piece of paper. The Bokongo People had given us the blueprint: Spirit is connected to the earth in an endless circle. Marta and Ntozake took us on a journey through the Middle Passage and into the Diaspora of the Americas. Ntozake's position paper came to life as we, as did all other panels, re-remember that we are on a journey to recollect the pieces of our fractured spirit which is dispersed about the New World. And once re-remembered, the forgotten, complete, tongue will be resurrected so that we can communicate with one another without the restrictions of the oppressor's language. This was a key epiphany: Language. The word diversity was tainted with public and private funding newspeak which has promoted and sanctioned the artistic colonization of our historical experiences and cultural expressions. What the hell does diversity mean without equity'? Thus, we renamed our panel "Cultures Rooted within African and New World Diaspora Theatres". Shifting from the linear to the cyclical gave us the insight into understanding and handling diversity. It is quite simple: In a linear listing someone is always on top and someone is always on the bottom. In a cyclical design, there is no top or bottom, but a circle of equal entities that are inextricably united. This cultural perspective is automatically inclusive. As such, we in Black Theatre have the capacity to acknowledge, respect, and champion diverse expressions without assigning greater or lesser value to them. From this point, our panel exploded with energy. Our stacks of papers, which sat in front of us in neat box formations, marking off our respective territories, began to flow into each other, commingle. We began to draw pictures. We got up out of our chairs, and walked around the room. We even did a Holy Dance ! Mikell spoke in Tongues! We broke through the oppressive wall of language, and tapped into an energy source that connected us as Africans, as Africans of the Diaspora. We had found our purpose.

(From: **Remembering the Fractured Spirit** by Elmo Terry-Morgan , *BTNews* Vol 8, No 3, Spring 1998)



[l-r] Elmo Terry-Morgan, Ntozake Shange, Mikell Pinkney, Marta Moreno Vega and Keith Antar Mason (in the "Circle")

The Americas

By Marta Moreno Vega, Ph.D.

Shared traditions brought to different regions of the Americas by Africans over four hundred years of enslavement have forged a diversity of creative expressions that have a similar historical cultural legacy. Forged in isolation from each other, our communities in the Caribbean, South America, North America and Central America created an aesthetic cultural vocabulary and expressions that incorporate diverse Native and European influences into a New World African context. To comprehend the complex issues of identity, aesthetics and cultural transformations of Africans in the Diaspora the panel found it necessary to acknowledge and attempt to weave together the threads of these varied African-rooted traditions to better understand the multiple levels of transformation that the African experience in the Americas encompasses.

We [the panel] soon understood in our deliberations—and in our presentation to the broader group in the Minary Center—the ethnocentric nationalistic cultural barriers and unconscious discriminatory view in the United States of “other” African cultural traditions not grounded in the North American reality. In our attempt to pursue the panel’s charge, we realized: First the necessity of deconstructing the notion that America is the United States. Second, the notion that artistic productions of the United States are somehow inherently superior. To move forward from an isolationist perspective our discussions defined America, or the Americas, to include the Caribbean, South America, and Central America, —home to more than 250 million people of African descent.

The ensuing discussion led to broadening our dialogue to include how to weave together the aesthetic vision of Africans in the Diaspora while understanding and respecting the cultural differences developed in a diversity of geographic locations. Shedding the imposed internalized notion of the superiority of an aesthetic forged within the United States was a central point of discussion. As a group we acknowledged that limited exposure to other African cultural traditions had provided most of us with a myopic vision of the global African aesthetic experience. We committed ourselves to learn and experience more of the diversity we understood intellectually.

When we presented our cross-cultural global African vision to the rest of the Summit, the reaction was mixed. The audience, primarily nurtured in an African American United States aesthetic, was still grappling with what it meant to be African American in

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the United States and had some difficulty in placing itself in a global perspective. I heard comments similar to the following statement, “Before we can deal with the global experience we need to define the African American experience first.”

It is my opinion that the African United States experience can better be understood within the context of the global African aesthetic. The continuous flow of Africans from the Caribbean and Latin America to the United States has created a long history of cross-cultural collaborations that have joined our varied traditions in a seamless mosaic artistic tapestry. Could Dizzy Gillespie have developed Cubop without the traditional Cuban drummer Chano Pozo? Would the Pan-African aesthetic forged by Katherine Dunham be possible without the inclusion of Africans from Brazil, Cuba, Haiti and the United States? If Arturo Alphonso Schomburg viewed his African heritage as being limited to Puerto Rico would there be a Schomburg Library for Research in Black Culture or a Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute? What if Ntozake Shange had not seen the African global rainbow; would she have called on the orisha Oya, the female Yoruba warrior divinity, who traveled in the bodies of enslaved Africans to Cuba, Trinidad, Puerto Rico, Brazil and the United States in the Summit closing ceremony insisting that an aesthetic divine vision be forged?

The National Black Theatre Summit I provided a necessary avenue for a conversation that must be continued. We must define how we wish to see ourselves in the time clock of history and into the next Millennium. Certainly our definition must be inclusive of the global diversity we represent

It is important the summit organizers view the topic “Diversity within the Black Arts Community” as central to the structure of the organization. It is through developing opportunities for representatives of our diverse communities to meet, to work together and to collaborate that the barriers of ethnocentrism and nationalism will be destroyed. The Summit provided an empowering glimpse into the future of what an international Black Arts Community could achieve. In step with other African Diaspora projects, the Summit can be a major contributor to the building of a united aesthetic cultural Black Arts movement. ❖

Summit II: Cultural Diversity within the Black Arts Community

They Do Things Different in the UK.

By SuAndi, OBE
Black Ark Alliance

Throughout my years, I have been called a few unpleasant names but I have never been a nigger. I embraced one term - Half Caste - for some years until I wised up and knew that Black was my true identity. Now the word Black is a troublesome adjective in England. That's England as in my homeland--the same England that trespassed upon and violated our ancestors - ripping them out of the heart of Africa to transpose them into the bloody guts of America and the Caribbean.

Why England is unable to say Black (outside Police statements) is a subject that merits a more in-depth evaluation than space will allow here. But, take it from me, the politically uniting, self-identifying word Black causes tremors to run through the government. It is said in hush tones, often with another word, e.g. "Asian", being appended. In the United Kingdom "Asian" represents people of Indian and Pakistani heritage and thus the concept of divide and rule comes into play. Regardless of how many Asians do not wish to come under the "Black" umbrella it suits the great and the good to maintain the division.

I was put into many boxes along the road to establishing myself as a Blackwoman artist. I began my profession as an Ethnic Minority. The original meaning of this term is derived from 'pagans and heathens; those not of the Jewish or Christian belief'. Whilst my ancestors may not have been Christians, they were certainly not heathens in the sense that they did not believe in the superiority of one religion over another. Therefore, I knew this term did not accurately reflect me.

Later I became a Minority Artist, seen as an inferior being in the world of mainstream art forms and its producers. Multiculturalism witnessed my only brief period of exoticism as it portrayed Black artists as something foreign and colourful. Colour was finally the 'in' thing! The Multicultural "trend" was eager to establish our art forms as non-British and reinforce the idea that we were still immigrant. (Although the first Africans arrived in Britain in 4AD alongside Roman Legionnaires).

In between all these periods of confused identity we all struggled to place the word 'Black' high on the agenda, spelling it always with a capital B. We removed it from a description of skin colour and elevated it into a cultural identity.

Following Jessie Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, the term Cultural Diversity landed like bird droppings, splat onto the table. It has always been my understanding that 'Cultural Diversity' covers all of us: not just everyone but them, but everyone. I am at a loss to comprehend why this term suddenly represents Black artists, with



The Cultural Diversity panel address the audience at the National Black Arts Festival. [l-r] Ishmael Reed, J. W. Lewis, Zola Mashariki, SuAndi.

some elements of sexuality and a whisper of disability thrown in for good measure.

What America does today, Britain will doubtless do tomorrow. So I had no hesitation in accepting the invitation to AGIA, in Atlanta 1998. I welcomed the opportunity of being in the company of people who thought like me. If Cultural Diversity was to be seen in its truest sense, as I understood it, then surely the discussions would look at ways Black theatre could embrace contributions from "New World Africans": Haitians, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, Trinidadians etc. and not forgetting Black British. The summit would surely extend its discussions to include the involvement of Hispanic, Asian and other Diaspora plays, playwrights and audiences in African-American Theatre. That's what I thought and I truly believe that was what was intended. The reality was slightly different.

The African-American held the floor allowing on occasion the dialogue to quickly sink to personal gripes. The young and emerging accusing the older and thereby consider established, of failure. (I go with Keith Antar Mason's belief that when you are Black you are always emerging). The elders exposed a lack of tolerance for the young. The norm was considered to be straight hip and obviously Black when out on the floor the delegation in all its shades of people of colour included the Gay, the Lesbian, also hip, also Black. And no one addressed the issue and obvious absence of our colleagues with disabilities.

Yet my fellow panel members represented the very diversity that we were there to discuss and it was eyes of the silent members of the delegation that flashed both understanding and acceptance. Everyone is trying to make it through the best way they know how without whoring and pimping themselves, their beliefs or their ancestry.

I would never dispute that funding is a slow drip feed and the hand that checks the outflow is tainted, heavily tainted, by racism. But I am not the property of the white racist. My history lives with everyday that we all come through but I refuse to have my future stifled by the shackles of slavery. It seems that there is a competitiveness of histories which, without doubt is

the result of the Jewish Holocaust holding first place in the sympathy stakes. I understand that fully. It is the reason why we need to have a future mentality. We all have the talent, the personality; we're articulate, businesslike and streetwise. We have a marketable creative flow and that is what makes it worthwhile to share. Share. If anyone is handing out the failure shackles you will not find me on line.

Do you remember me saying that there was a time in my life when I considered myself to be Half Caste. I did not one day disown my white, Liverpoolian Mother, nor indeed, my Nigerian Father when I put on the mantle of Blackwoman. Instead, I brought those blood ties to the forefront of my artistic expression and fought hard to place my story on line with so many others. Those of my love-linked Jamaican Sistahs and those umbilically linked to India, Trinidad and all those places where the intruders have trodden. In doing so I began to hear stories different from my own and some with similar threads. I have heard tales of feminine oppression that make my struggles seem so minor. Stories of lesbian triumph that have almost unconsciously brought my hands together in applause.

My life partner is an American and we head-butt on many occasions. Like me, his heritage is African, but our lives are so different that we collide, crash and smash into each other and then we unite in our blackness, our evolved mutual understanding. If we can do it why can't we all? We need to get off the wheel of exclusion forever. As surely as we are different heights and weights we are people made up of different sexual preferences, languages and skin tones. We were put here not to duplicate the white man but to stand independently, uniquely, diversely as ourselves.

I hear that statistically people of mixed heritage are fast becoming the largest racial group in the UK. Let's hope that by 2000 the 'Designer African' (those who wear the robes but do not walk the talk) has dropped out of sight to allow simple Black folk to get on with their lives alongside other people of colour. Squabbling amongst ourselves is exactly what some white people desire. "You aint as Black as me," or "You're not really Black," are devise statements that make me see red and holler. And I can holler. Who gives a damn? If you do you'd better stop, give up the theatre and tune into the daily TV schedule for there you will find homogeneous diversity representation where all Latin people are wearing frilly dresses and dancing and all Black people are small minded comedians. There is no celebration of life and all of its achievements against and because of the odds. And Cultural Diversity will simply become a contemporary title hung around our necks to replace the slave yokes of yesterday. ❖

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Black Arts in Britain

Excerpts from **Black Arts in Britain; 1940s to the 1990s**. By Naseem Kahn. BTNews Vol 7, No 3, Spring 1997

Black arts in Britain are the result of multiple journeys. They are the markers set down by people who have been travelers--or whose parents have been--and who have taken the monumental step, either voluntarily or forcibly, of leaving their homes, culture and roots.

1940s

... The end of the 1940s saw a small non-white population in a country emerging from six years of war. A few non-western art forms of expression could be found. Foreign students far from their homelands got together to stage events for their college societies. . .

1950s

... talented writers and performers came to Britain to study from the Caribbean, Africa and Indian sub-continent. . .
 ... People from impoverished villages and cities of the old Empire encouraged to come to Britain by a booming job market. Immigration was largely male. . .
 ... The 'colour bar' was active and oppressive. This was not the time for music, poetry, celebration and dance. . .

1960s

... Families were coming over to join fathers and husbands and people began to build for the future. . .
 ... Nationhood and identity were live and burning issues as the independence movement spread in Africa and the Caribbean, and as Black Power spread in the United States and (adapted) in Britain itself. . .
 ... Communities of exiles and immigrants were in the process of changing their self-definitions, and beginning to declare themselves as black British. . .
 ... politics, numbers and spaces [magazines, venues, publishing houses]. . . created the conditions for the growing strength of what was later to become known as, 'ethnic minorities arts', 'minority arts', 'ethnic arts' and then 'black and Asian arts' successively. . .

1970s

... The earlier 'boom' years had led to a greatly increased birth-rate that now started to go through the universities and polytechnics, forming a much expanded student population. . .
 ... The arrival of well educated East African Asians . . . precipitated a rapid cultural development. . .
 ... The arts map began to change. Theatrical rules were regularly broken as a point of principle; the very style, nature, function and justification of theatre came under scrutiny. . .
 ... The establishment of MAAS (Minorities Arts Advisory Service) created an active national watchdog that remained on duty for many years. . .

1980s

... The struggle for cultural equity received a powerful boost in the early 80s when the Labour Party took control of the Greater London Council (GCL). . .
 ... Radical and energetic years, they recognized the heterogeneity of society and the rainbow coalition of different races, physical abilities, sexual orientation, gender and class. . .

1990s

... The Arts Council's next deliberation on policy, 'Towards Cultural Diversity' put the provision of performance and exhibition space at the very head of its black arts agenda. . .
 ... There is still little recognition that multiculturalism implies something different from passive cultural co-existence. . .
 ... In recent years, all British culture suffered, but because of their smaller numerical base, Black arts have suffered disproportionately. . .
 ... The gradual retreat of economic depression has left Black arts battered. However, the arrival of National Lottery funding is a bright light. . .

New Directions

Sandra G. Shannon, Ph.D.

Never before has there been such a dire need for arts education in the black community. The media continues to assault our senses with a parade of morbid images; statistics of unspeakable crimes mount; and incidents of aberrant behavior proliferate. So we find ourselves scrambling to find ways to reverse these trends in order to save an entire generation of youth as well as to inspire the children who will eventually inherit this world. These are indeed unprecedented times.

If the panelists who assembled in Atlanta, Georgia, in July 1998 as part of the National Black Theatre Summit II are an indication of the intense movement afoot to reverse such trends, then the black community is well positioned for the millennium. Armed with a plethora of traditional as well as cutting edge resources and unified in a belief that arts education can make a significant, lasting, and positive impact upon all age groups, these representatives take their work quite seriously. Although from various parts of the United States from New England to Arizona—each is about the mutual business of challenging this prevailing sense of doom. Thus, arts education, as we formerly knew it, has accordingly expanded its definition and broadened its parameters. In large part, the results of this re-defining process have been shaped by careful attention to how arts education functions, who should provide it, and how best to provide it.

Take for example Freedom Theater's Performing Arts Training Program, which operates on the premise that "art gives a clear view of self, community and history reinforcing customs and rituals in our communities." This program, under the direction of Patricia Scott Hobbs demonstrates how arts education functions on a number of levels. Primarily, she puts its mission into practice by coordinating a series of successful programs designed to teach self esteem, culture, self discipline, intellectual and spiritual achievement to preschoolers, teens, and adults. Toward this end, the Performing Arts Training Program operates Theatre School Programs targeted at each level. Further advancing its mission of cultural, spiritual and educational enrichment, the Performing Arts Training Program boasts a Teacher's Training Program, a Parent's Group, and Community outreach Workshops. The solid grounding of the Performing Arts Training Program within the black community mirrors the guiding principle adopted by Freedom Theater, which

prides itself in being "rooted in the African American tradition, dedicated to achieving artistic excellence in professional theater and expanding artistic and personal development especially in young people." While these proven programs can exist on their own merit, Hobbs insists that it matters tremendously who provides arts education to the African American community—again echoing core values of Freedom Theater: "If our art is supposed to be by us, for us and near us, African Americans need to become leaders and stakeholders in the development of its arts programs in our communities and extend our art to non-African American communities so that understanding can cross cultural lines."

Consider also the efforts of the Fulton County Arts Council's Art-at-Work Program. Developed in 1998, the six-week summer arts education and job training program for teenagers combines the academic, creative production and business aspects of the arts. Art-at-work allows teens to express their creativity while exposing them to job opportunities in the arts and giving them an opportunity to earn their own income. Visiting artists and field trips are incorporated into the program to help the apprentice artists understand how the classroom experiences translate into the world of work and real life experiences.

The question how does arts education function also drew a passionate response from a young African American female panelist currently studying at a predominantly white New England college. For undergraduate students such as she, who suffer symptoms associated with being cut off from their cultural base, arts institutions steeped in the rituals and traditions of the black community offer welcome sustenance. At issue, therefore, it seems, is accountability. When mainstream institutions recruit and enroll some of the best and brightest African American students, how far do their responsibilities go in



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terms of creating and sustaining a nurturing environment where these same students can find supportive cultural communities? Can students rightfully expect to find such cultural sustenance in theater departments, in course offerings, or in campus organizations? The issue, then (which reared its head during a very animated Q & A session during the Winter 1998 one-day conference “Black Theatre: Next Stage”) is one that bears further study and recommendations for change.

A very enlightening audio-visual presentation by Arizona State University artist-in-residence and digital archivist Phillip Mallory Jones addressed the twin concerns: Who should provide arts education and how do we provide it? In an intriguing demonstration of a process he has designed to virtually immortalize historical and cultural artifacts, he convincingly argued that “we, the people of the global African community, are at the intersection of new technological capabilities.” His entire presentation was focused upon making the audience aware “that the knowledge systems practices, and histories of people of the African Diaspora are at risk of disappearing from the global consciousness.” His solution to avert such demise of cultural property was exemplified in the work he had done with the help of numerous grants to uncover, for example, scattered and poorly maintained records of the Negro Ensemble Company and transform them to a more time-friendly medium: the digital archive. He further demonstrated how film versions of play performances can be packaged for educational use. Arts education for Jones, then, comes in the form of instructing African Americans and others of the Diaspora the means to preserve aspects of their culture for posterity.

In addition to the fascinating potential of technology and the numerous successful programs that stem from major theatre

institutions, the black church is still regarded as one of the most effective sites for providing arts education to the black community. By virtue of its usual proximity to its congregation, these places of worship and nuclei of neighborhood activity, have become natural homes for arts education programs. As dramaturg and arts education specialist Pamela Faith Jackson notes, many churches have accepted this traditional role and have expanded their roles in the community to include—along with the regular Sunday School lessons, sermons and church socials—arts education offerings. Concern was expressed, however, that churches need to become more involved and more diversified in this endeavor.

When I think back on the intense energy and obvious commitment displayed by this Arts Education panel, the image of Romare Bearden’s collage entitled “The Piano Lesson” seems a fitting tribute to the work that they do—the one in which a teacher hovers over a student deliberately negotiating the piano keys. So too emerges the reflection of one of August Wilson’s characters in **Two Trains Running** who labors to teach another to enunciate “Black is beautiful.” And still other scenes come into focus depicting a group of characters from **Joe Turner’s Come And Gone**, who clear the floor to dance the Juba and of a contemplative **Ma Rainey** talking about the blues to a band member and of a brother and sister bonding while they piece together lyrics previously learned from their deceased father. What is the connection? Clearly, we carry within ourselves the very lessons we need to impart to a generation hungry for cultural sustenance. As each of the three panelists concluded and as I concur, let us continue to seek new ways of transmitting and safeguarding our cultural values through arts education in a careful and deliberate manner that will carry it forth with us in tact into the 21st century. ❖



Serious Discussions continued during lunch at the First National Black Theatre Summit: On Golden Pond



The Acting and Directing Panel addresses an open session during Summit II in conjunction with The National Black Arts Festival.

Acting and Directing

PARTICIPANTS

Summi II

Roger G. Smith, Actor/Director/Playwright
Tonea Stewart, Actor/Professor, Alabama State University
Glenda Dickerson, Porfessor, University of Michigan and Curator,
Theatre/Drama, National Black Arts Festival
Andrea Frye, Actor/Director
Shirley Jo Finney, Director/Actor

Summit II: Acting and Directing

. . . The historic theater summits convened by Mr. Wilson and executed by Victor Walker . . . reopen a dialogue too long silenced. More importantly they framed the question [of prosperity and growth] in a way that it had not been framed in far too long . . .

Thoughts on Black Actors and Directors 1959 to the Summit

Glenda Dickerson
University of Michigan

Let a new earth arise. Let another world be born.
Let a people loving freedom come to growth.
Margaret Walker

In the Black revolutionary times, Huey P. Newton pictured in his peacock chair, was a flawed, charismatic sign, symbol, trope of our coming liberation. With his violent death in 1989, the revolution was officially over. Early in my sojourn in Atlanta, Georgia, a politically active friend called me from Washington, D.C. urgently seeking my vote against Newt Gingrich. Needless to say, Newt won despite my vote and went on to become Speaker of the House. These two events can serve as a framework for my thoughts about acting and directing as Black theater moves towards the Millennium.

The contemporary time of Black theater can be said to be measured from Lorraine Hansberry's **Raisin in the Sun**. Lorraine Hansberry stood on the shoulders of the race giants like Paul Robeson and James Hewlett as well as members of the American Negro Theatre. She sang the praises of Toussaint and Lumumba. Even though she was surrounded and supported by Jewish and white intellectuals, Ms. Hansberry nonetheless was a clarion voice for the Negro theater. Integration was the order of the day. Writing against this backdrop of integration, Ms. Hansberry made the case for accepting the Negro neighbor next door, while simultaneously drawing a portrait of a nuclear family crafted meticulously from living social material (Amiri Baraka). When Lloyd Richards brought his [**Raisin in the Sun**] cast which included Sidney Poitier, Claudia McNeil, Diana Sands and Ruby Dee to Broadway, history was made and a standard set. Before this genre of contemporary Black play, balancing a complex of issues and characters in a well-made structure, could emerge as a model to be emulated and developed, the black power movement burst on the scene rejecting the kitchen sink drama as handkerchief head mama

on the couch utterances which did not speak to the "masses" of people of African descent. Rather than bow to Mama's superior wisdom and knowledge and honor father's ancestral memory, Jimmy Garrett's ("We Own the Night") Mama had to be killed by the revolutionary soldier because she stood in the way of the new day. I cite this extreme example only to make the point that change was afoot in a radical way.

This change in the way we made plays rode in on the wings of the Black Power movement. This Movement ushered in a new way of thinking about ourselves, about our history, and about our art. Kujichagalia—self-determination—became the watchword of the day. We rejected integration and embraced a latter-day back to Africa movement in our dress and hair and in the names of our children. We rejected linear drama and embraced instead a ritual form of playing that was intended to incite the people to radical change and reclamation. This was a rich and productive time and the energy of the Movement released, burst onto our stages in bright colors and colorful language.

As a director, I learned to make plays in the cauldron of the Black theater movement fueled by black power. I stand as witness to a hectic, eclectic, rowdy, invigorating, inspiring, inventive, liberating theatrical day the likes of which has not been seen since. The black theater movement arose as the aesthetic arm of the black power struggle. As Stokely Carmichael coined the phrase Black Power, LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal codified the language that led us to a new understanding of what theater by, of and for the people should look like. So many people all over this country hearkened to their call. I

was one. In Washington, D.C., I worked at Paul Allen's Black American Theater, Peggy Cooper's Workshops for Careers in the Arts, Robert Hooks' Black Repertory Theater. In New York, I worked at Douglas Turner Ward's Negro Ensemble Company, Woodie King's New Federal Theater, Hazel Bryant's Richard Allen Cultural Center, Roger Furman's New Heritage, Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theater, Ernie McClintock's Afro American Studio, Robert MacBeth's New Lafayette Theater. Handing out kudos for all this prosperity of plays was Vivian Robinson's AUDELCO. The Black Arts Alliance was a national voice and network, tying together a frenzy of activity in Chicago, Detroit, New Orleans, San Francisco, Los Angeles; everywhere the people were talking to each other in loud proud voices. As Larry Neal was the intellectual fire, James Baldwin, Don L. Lee, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni were the poetic fervor. The playwrights, Lonnie Elder III, Charles Gordone, Ed Bullins, Ntozake Shange, Clay Goss, Alexis DeVeaux, Charles Fuller, Salimu, Ron Milner, Don Evans; the directors, Michael Schultz, Israel Hicks, Joseph Walker, Shauneille Perry, Vinette Carroll, Dean Irby; the designers Ron Walker, Marshall Williams, Sandy Ross, Shirley Prendergast; the countless actors including Rosalind Cash, Esther Rolle, Adolph Caesar, Graham Brown, Frances Foster, Minnie Gentry, Estelle Evans, Duane Jones all contributed to a time of innovation, daring, rediscovery, celebration, and potential. Actors and directors were able to practice their craft and cut their teeth in a variety of forums and on a broad breadth of material. Directors, women and men, went from "gig" to "gig", growing and expanding and adding a new voice to the American stage. The potential seemed limitless. And then suddenly it was all gone, snuffed out seemingly overnight by forces outside our control. Black theater went the way of black power. One day it was no longer fashionable. The proud self-determined voice that wove itself through all our spirits and came out in all manner of cultural expression was silenced.

For a decade or more, that voice lay dormant. Assimilation became the order of the day. The Non-traditional Casting Project gave Black actors less work instead of the more it was founded to insure. The money went not to the Black theaters, but to white companies for multiculturalism and community outreach. Colleges and universities no longer hired the obligatory black instructor to answer the vocal demands of students to have their experience validated. Rather a new breed of teacher emerged who could cross over, who could fit in. While it was incumbent on those of us who taught and worked in the 70s to be versed in the canon of Western European theater, we were valued for our particular voice and specialty. From the mid-eighties forward, that balance shifted, so that the new breed of instructor is Black only by coincidence. Skin color is all that is required. The value of these young people lies in their ability to be indistinguishable from their white colleagues; they proudly specialize in rock and roll rather than rhythm and blues.

In one way of thinking, the searing plays of August Wilson could be said to be the zenith of this trend. Developed in the prestigious Yale Drama School rather than the NEC, tried out in consortium arrangements with top regional theaters before arriving triumphant to Broadway where Lorraine Hansberry set the stage in 1959. The cycle of assimilation, of cooptation seemed to be complete. But August Wilson, surprising us all, was bold and quick—like Gabriel blowing his horn—to say that we must return to the self-determined voice of the sixties in charting our own theatrical course. Amid mounting criticism, Mr. Wilson stood firm, raising his heroic voice and then taking heroic action, putting his money where his mouth is. The historic theater summits convened by Mr. Wilson and executed by Victor Walker at Dartmouth this spring and in Atlanta this summer reopen a dialogue too long silenced. More importantly they framed the question in a way that it had not been framed in far too long.

Black actors and directors who came of age during the Black Power movement have lived through tumultuous times--The deaths of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Barbara Jordan, the demise of the Civil Rights movement, affirmative action and welfare. We have stayed as true to our covenant as we could in changing times. We have tried to remain visible as we were systematically erased. The National Black Theater Festival remains a meeting ground for old soldiers to gather and reminisce.

In 1996 at the National Black Arts Festival, Huey rose out of the ashes of his demise in the person of Roger Guenvere Smith. When Roger first took to the stage in 1996, there was no national dialogue about the future or past of Black Theater in this country. Now as a result of these historic summits, we again think of taking responsibility for our own voice, we identify once again with our own people, we take the reins again into our own hands. When Newt Gingrich came into office, I feared we were returned to a world that Lorraine Hansberry railed against. Now the pendulum swings back. The talking begins again. All over America we see little theaters rising up doing Black Theater. The Black Theatre Network rose out of the ashes of snuffed out revolutionary fervor and lives to publish this volume. As we approach the Millennium, Gingrich slinks back to Georgia, his rhetoric wrapped in cardboard boxes and Roger Smith exhorts Huey's revolutionary fervor on stages all over America. Now let the self-determined Voice speak again. Let the Power resurge. Let a people loving freedom come to growth. ♦

Glenda Dickerson is a director, writer, folklorist, educator and actor. She is Associate Dean for the Arts at The Racham School of Graduate Studies at The University of Michigan.



The Developing Black Playwrights Committee. [l-r] Ed Bullins, Woodie King Jr., Lorna Littleway, Robbie McCauley, Don Evans and Sydné Mahone at the Minary Center. (First National Black Theatre Summit: On Golden Pond)

Developing Black Playwrights

The Committee on Developing Black Playwrights was charged with addressing development issues specifically related to playwrights and their relationship to theatrical institutions. Among those issues were means to assure long-term playwright-theater association, workshop opportunities, bench readings and extended performance necessary to script development.

The Crisis of the Black Playwright

Ed Bullins



Currently, if a new writer of African American background is prone to write a play for the stage, other images rather than the confines of a theater are likely to first fill her or his mind. There are the movies that this playwright viewed early on, perhaps from the security of the crib, through the medium of television, though television is different than movies. These technological factors alone might motivate a cultural and media arbiter to state, "There is presently a crisis among today's black playwrights. It is a phenomena created by factors unknown to prior generations of any kind of dramatist." Yes, and this expert would be correct, at least partially. But post-modern media and digitized robotics are not alone in perpetrating this crisis in today's black dramatist's soul; for there is a progressive malady of the spirit which affects these potential theatrical creators.

If the subject of writing plays for the theater arises in the presence of many black new generation writers, their first response may be "How much money will I get?" And can they be blamed? Huge figures of movie grosses, photo spreads of rap star's mansions (even those lost), not-yet-canceled television series (even black soap operas) and baseball rookie moguls' salaries appear in the daily and black weekly press. Not too long ago, one of the black American dreams was to buy mom a little house upon getting that first big contract; now the dream seems to have segued to an individual fantasy of the most fly guy castle with a garage to accommodate the Rolls, BMW, Lexus, Mercedes and Harley Davies. And hopes of coming off the road and having some spare time to give old mom a spin around the grounds.

With such dreams of the new writers, lavishing their talents on smaller venues, even Broadway theaters, is a losing proposition. It seems a waste of time. A frivolous conceit. Besides, one would have to take the time to learn to do all that stuff—write drama. Like write serious stuff. Acting for the stage is different from acting for movies and television, right? A stage actor wastes all that time learning how to analyze a scene, studying the traditions and history of the theater, of dramaturgy, and the craft of acting, while the movie and television actor cuts to the chase and finds out "how to hit the mark." Right? What could be simpler? And who's gonna be lookin' fly in they Cadillac on Sunset Boulevard, mah n_____? Thaaats the bomb!

Like Delroy Lindo's character believes in the movie "Get

Shorty," writing movies is easy. Ain't nothing to it. And this character explains his lame method in detail. To paraphrase him, "Hire someone to fill in the commas and stuff, and some of the scripts ain't even got that many commas . . . Then you cut to the end. Fade out. You're done." And sadly, more young, black moviegoers probably believed him than not. And aren't plays just wanna be movies?

So there is a crisis facing the development of new black playwrights. There is a lack of provocative engagement, activity or movement to inspire young minds to this field. And, sadly, there is a current myth of the non-relevancy of Black Theatre among segments of the population, not all of them being youthful. The revolution is over, many say. Forget about it being televised. Slavery is gone. We sit at the back of the bus by choice. School and learning are bunk. And there is little left but "safe sex" and money, money, money. So what is there to do?

One hundred seventy-five years ago, in 1823, an African-Caribbean immigrant from the island of St. Vincent, a Mr. Brown, wrote and produced a play in New York that has become legendary "as being as revolutionary as any play produced during the 1930s, 1960s or since," to paraphrase a secondary source; who is, a knowledgeable academic. **The Drama of King Shotaway** was this play. It was produced in New York City and marked the appearance of playwriting in America of persons of African descent. Though the native of the Caribbean Island of Saint Vincent, Mr. Brown, had to take on and fight the New York City Tammany Hall political establishment until he "disappeared."

In 1859, thirty-six years after the first performance of Mr. Brown's premiere, another blackman with a surname of Brown—William Wells Brown—an escaped slave turned abolitionist, wrote **The Escape; or, A Leap to Freedom**, a play supporting emancipation through escape. William Wells Brown read his play upon Abolitionist stages for years, though his play was not staged for decades until after his death.

Outside of a few other halting efforts during the 19th century, little effort and impact was made on black dramatic writing until the 20th century. Like the slave Phillis Wheatley sequestered in her Boston servant's room during the 1700s, the gaining of

literacy by Mr. Brown and William Wells Brown are amazing, not popularly known and auspicious stories. When the learning of reading and writing were crimes for blacks, how did these few become among a handful to achieve creations in poetry, narrative and drama?

There is much less confusion about the training of playwrights in the 20th century. W. E. B. DuBois, a black Fisk University, Harvard and University of Berlin educated intellectual, conceived and produced a pageant, **Star of Ethiopia**, which appeared in New York City (1913), Washington, DC (1915), Philadelphia (1916), and Los Angeles (1925). DuBois, editor of the NAACP Crisis magazine gave a call for "race" plays to address and confront the major issues for black women of voting, birth control, miscegenation, lynching, child rearing and patriotism.

The group which responded to DuBois' appeal for dramatic materials were in the main Howard University and black college female graduates. Angelina Weld Grimke (**Rachel** 1916), Alice Dunbar-Nelson (**Mine Eyes Have Seen** 1918), Mary P. Burell (**Aftermath** 1919) Georgia Douglas Johnson (**A Sunday Morning in the South** 1925), Zora Neale Hurston (**Color Struck** 1925), Eulalie Spence (**Undertow** 1929) and some others.

In the 1930s, the U. S. government sponsored the WPA Theatre Project which appeared due to the Great Depression. Numerous black women and men were trained in playwriting, acting and theater arts. This period played a greater part in forming the foundation of the modern Black Theatre than even the Harlem Renaissance.

Lorraine Hansberry's **A Raisin in the Sun** (1959) was introduced in the middle of the Civil Rights era, and nothing has been the same in black theater since. **Raisin** led to **Dutchman**, by Amiri Baraka, and the Black Arts Movement which led an explosive revolution in African American theater and arts which has not completely quieted down to this day.

How do you develop Black playwrights? Give them something to aspire to which pumps spirit and pride into their hearts for making a positive contribution for the positive survival of their people and themselves. Never mind the payoff. The aesthetic lies in the messianic labor of raising the spirit of the people to overcome enemies, tyrants, oppressors, drugs, defeatism, ignorance, laziness, disease and other vampires sucking on the Black nation's lifeblood. These core motives have inflamed and inspired the imaginations of black dramatists since the times of the Pharaohs. And it can happen again and again as black consciousness is called into play for the sake of survival, family and black love. Get the values straight. Teach that Black Theatre is part of the spoken word movement, that last vestige of direct, pure communication between black arts/communicators, and black/Pan African/universal world audience. Black Wordsmiths are as traditional as African tribal Griots reciting the endless epic poems of nation-building, or the warrior Maroon's cries as they pushed back the charges of an ocean of invaders. So let the stages speak throughout the land.

Searching for a needle in a haystack

Excerpts from

Notes from the Master: A Conversation with Lloyd Richards.

BTNews Vol 7, No 3. Spring 1997.

. . . Many Blacks are writing today, and we're seeing a better level of plays coming to us than 10 to 20 years ago. There are usually a few at the top of the pile and several are below par, but it is that medium or middle group of plays that are much better. Of course, genius is always difficult to find. . . So it is like searching for a needle in a haystack. And of course, there is no guarantee that that "one" will make it all the way to success. But the trend is developing in the middle portion, where the quality is getting better. . . we are always looking for that 1 in 1000, that needle in a haystack. And you have to be content with knowing that you have to go through that process of looking; working at looking for that one needle in that haystack. The work goes on, and you have to be willing to spend the time. . .

. . . What I see now is that more young people are inclined toward film. . . This interest begins at a young age for so many young people. So it becomes an integrated process, this interest in films and making films. Then there are those who can go to the [live] theatre at a young age, and they have been awe struck by what happens in the theatre. There should be some way to make this happen more, to get young people into the theatre, and then this becomes an integrated process into their lives. . .



Meeting Notes

Sydné Mahone, Dramaturg

SUMMIT I: "On Golden Pond"

The Minary Center, Dartmouth College, March 2-6, 1998.

Participants: Ed Bullins, playwright; Woodie King, Jr., producer, New Federal Theatre; Sydné Mahone, dramaturg; Robbie McCauley playwright and performance artist; Lorna Littleway, director; Don Evans, playwright.

In our search for strategies that would dynamically energize efforts to develop Black playwrights, the Roundtable discussion identified four spheres of activity as priorities: developing craft and collaborative skills; increasing opportunities through partnerships with educators; heightening the value of Black Theatre in society; and documentation. We proposed the following initiatives:

- Revive playwright workshops
- Provide reality-based training to transmit the values of respect for collaboration, commitment, discipline, and introspection
- Embrace alternative forms of playwriting and encourage playwrights to sustain the griot tradition by accessing stories in our communities
- Create an atmosphere of success for Black theatre to encourage young people to write for the theatre
- Form partnerships between playwrights and colleges/universities to present workshop productions in preparation for transfers to professional Black theatre
- Advocate for production of Black-authored plays in theatre seasons at colleges and universities, particularly at historically Black institutions
- Elevate Black Theatre in theatre arts education
- Create a publishing company for plays and dramatic criticism
- Create a national/international theatre archive with Internet access

I proposed three levels of workshops supported by short and long-term playwrights' residencies: 1) distinguished writers

gather in retreat to read and critique each other's work; 2) theatres host one distinguished writer to conduct a master workshop with local emerging writers; and 3) emerging writers conduct workshops for young playwrights.

Ed Bullins recalled the weekly Saturday workshops that he led at his New Lafayette Theatre during the 1960s, and at the New York Shakespeare Festival in the 1970s. He cited the workshop as a place where a writer learns that writing plays is hard work; where they can develop discipline, and get a chance to test, see, hear and discuss the work with the audience. "The work ethic I talk about," Bullins said, "I learned from musicians. It's something they call woodshedding—working, rehearsing, practicing." Over time, he added, the writer learns the difference between arrogance and ambition, between luck and persistence; they move beyond "centeredness," and "get coordinated" with the collaborative nature of play production.

Don Evans said, "Most venues where [Ed] used to work don't exist any more. Those places also stimulated the writing. They transmitted the values of discipline and hard work. We have to maintain source areas—places where plays are created."

"Name any writer you consider to be successful." Woodie King interjected "and they will tell you, it doesn't happen overnight. It came from a long line of deep introspection."

Robbie McCauley identified the need to develop concrete strategies to implement these values. "The old model is competition and only a few benefit," she said. "We need to think more broadly and include more people. Rather than find ways to weed out, find ways to include." In addition to studying classic texts and pedagogy, she pointed to the processes of performance artists and auteur-directors as alternative models. "Performers can be a source for playwrights. Or explore the development of a play as a communal activity," she encouraged.

"We need not commit to only one form of playwriting," Evans said. "Training playwrights ought to include an understanding of the various ways of accessing our stories, for instance through narrative, rituals, and collage. It's also a mentoring process. We're not just teaching playwriting, we are developing people. We are teaching people to know themselves through writing."

Returning to the topic of collaboration, Woodie King specified, “the role of producers and artistic directors is to help the writer understand that the playwright/director relationship is one of equals. New writers have to learn that the director is as important as all the other artists involved—all of whom are protected by their unions,” King said. As mentor he said, “the producer’s job is to provide an atmosphere for reality-based training.”

King aptly articulated the goal of all play development. In the process of finding the play, the writer must answer this question: What is the internal mechanism that moves this piece? When the playwright is successful, that internal mechanism activates or taps into the internal forces that move the people in the audience.

Two noteworthy comments came from the open forum at the Summit. Playwright Dominic Taylor observed that most white theatres have funds to commission writers. This channels money directly to the writer as well as to the production; while most black theatres get moneys only for production. Beyond the economic relief to the artist, the commission validates the writer and enables the theatre to take an active role in shaping the future of Black Theatre.

Playwright August Wilson advocated for the establishment of an independent retreat space devoted wholly to play development, yet set apart from the pressures of the marketplace—such as The O’Neill Playwrights Center. “We could develop ten new writers each year,” he envisioned.

The discussion then turned to the untapped resources that are available at colleges and universities. Director Lorna Littleway urged professionals in the academy to facilitate the development of Black theatre curricula, for instance by incorporating Black-authored plays for scene study, for Black theatre history, and for dramatic literature. She fired off a burst of ideas “Convert the classroom into a mini-theatre; associate with the Pan-African Studies Department; expose students to the me-

dium of hearing plays; engage them in group writing of scenes; invite established writers to on campus festivals and other special events. Professionals have to come and validate the work. Find a way to teach teachers of high school theatre arts.”

As artists move into the academy, and in effect, become producers, Littleway warned, “Don’t let them change the way you do things.”

The first step is to create a dialogue between educators and theatre professionals. Evans said, “We need to talk about the script from idea and concept to production, and utilize the [student] acting pool.” The larger challenge is to effect positive change in the institution. To that end, he continued, “We need to alert the traditional black colleges to the possibility that they could be enhanced if they produced black playwrights, and that it’s as important to do Bullins and Wesley as it is to do Shaw.”

Littleway asked “How can we create a black theatre of permanence in the university?”

McCauley responded, “Permanence is an active thing. We can establish archives or host summer retreats on campus to upgrade knowledge and skills.” Whatever the chosen strategies for partnership, McCauley recognized the potential benefits of prioritizing playwrights. “Elevate the value of the playwright,” she said, “and the rest of the artists come along.”

SUMMIT II: THE ATLANTA MEETING at the National Black Arts Festival

The Renaissance Hotel, July 15, 1998

Ed Bullins and I [from Summit I] joined director Shirley Jo Finney, Ricardo Khan, artistic director of Crossroads Theatre Company, and performer/ professor Carol Mitchell Leon to form the panel on Developing Black Playwrights.

After panelists’ remarks, the session designed by Khan and Finney truly became an open forum. Khan invited playwrights to introduce themselves, to speak briefly about their work, and to ask questions.

The issues and concerns included an impassioned plea for artistic directors’ responses to plays submitted for production consideration, and a desire for improved communication, information sharing and networking. BTN’s newsletter and Black Masks were cited as publications that could serve such a function. A website featuring current events, news, resources, and



The committee discusses issues with Summit I participants at the Minary Center, Dartmouth College. [l-r] Sydné Mahone, Woodie King, Jr., Don Evans, Ed Bullins, Zola Mashariki.

history was also in demand. In one form or another, many playwrights voiced the perennial question: How can I get my play produced? There were no easy answers, but there was a genuine desire to engage in honest dialogue.

Playwright Marian X asked, “why can’t black producers form a consortium and establish a tour circuit so that a new play can enjoy more than one production?” Lou Bellamy, artistic director of Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul-Minneapolis, cited new play funding criteria as one major obstacle. If company X is applying for a grant to produce “the world premiere” then companies Y and Z—the potential partners—are forced to compete rather than find ways to cooperate, he explained.

The forum affirmed the presence of a vibrant corps of playwrights at work, and underscored the urgency of developing ways to take better care of our artists. The ritual of testimony offered writers an opportunity to share experiences, which effectively validated each writer. Khan ended the session by asking them [members of the audience] to name the principles that should govern and guide the efforts to develop playwrights as we approach the millennium. Among the Word offerings, the playwrights called for excellence, integrity, courage, respect, power, and truth.

Beyond the scope of these discussions, I hold these visions for the development of black playwrights, visions offered as stimulus for further thought and exploration:

PLAYWRIGHT AWARD. Honor excellence with an annual

prize of \$50,000 for an emerging playwright. A career-altering grant would recognize contributions to the field, and could position Black Theatre as an arbiter of public opinion.

MULTIMEDIA COLLABORATIONS: Collaborate with film companies to commission playwrights to write for stage and film; Explore filming stage productions; Form collaborations with the music industry, using celebrity and emerging musicians, to commission jazz, gospel, and hip hop musicals with recording opportunities; Collaborate with television producers to create a documentary series of interviews with artists that educates and inspires the public and aspiring artists; Use playwriting and play reading techniques to support literacy programs.

TRADITION & INNOVATION: Commission adaptations of new and classic novels. Producers can honor the legacy by selecting one living playwright and producing one play from that body of work (e.g. the Leslie Lee season). Revive summer series of plays-in-the-park; Support the formation of new theatres to accommodate the aesthetic diversity of the avant-garde, women’s theatre, the gay and lesbian experience, theatre of the Diaspora, and children’s theatre.

Sharpen focus on **DRAMATURGY:** Establish or fortify literary departments; include dramaturgs in all of the above mentioned initiatives.

Re-examine the season schedule to achieve balanced attention to process and productions. ❖



Carol Mitchell Leon, Shirley Jo Finney, Ricardo Khan, Sydné Mahone and Ed Bullins discuss issues related to developing Black Playwrights at the Summit II/National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta, Georgia.



Members of the Aesthetics, Standards and Practices Committee meet at the Minary Center during the National Black Theatre Summit "On Golden Pond." [l-r] Ifa Bayeza, Dominic Taylor, August Wilson, Sandra Shannon, Paul Carter Harrison, Bill Cook and Beverly Robinson.

Aesthetics, Standards and Practices

. . .Our dialogue both challenges and redefines
aesthetic to meet the basic need of
one that will express and guide an African based
sensibility of American theater. . .



Dr. Samuel A. Hay at the Minary Center, "On Golden Pond"

At The National Black Theatre Summit "On Golden Pond" at Dartmouth, Keith Antar Mason, co-founder and artistic director of The Hittite Empire, touched people when he complained that his group was being shut out of Black theatres in the U. S. His company (a hard-hitting, in-your-face performance-artists collective based in Santa Monica, California) has performed at several festivals and residencies in London and Mexico City, as well as in many U.S. cities. However, until March 2-6, 1998, not any major Black theaters had invited him. Among the probable causes are what Stephen Holden of The New York Times calls the group's "incendiary riffs on racial oppression" and its "scalding asides aimed at white liberals." Mason says that his collective is "not about white-bashing. It causes a lot more turmoil and upheaval in the African American community because of the types of characters that come and because of the subject matter that they talk about, . . . which is the hardcore issues of our survival." Although this might scare off some Black artistic directors, Mason's appeal for inclusion at the Summit was so heartfelt that many participants said that they would correct the oversight.

The history of Black theatre is replete with this exclusion business—from the Howard University president's refusal to let the Howard Players put on Willis Richardson's "propaganda" plays during the twenties, to similar situations in the sixties involving Ed Bullins and the San Francisco Bay Area Black theatres, and Amiri Baraka and the New Lafayette Theatre. The significance of this self-centeredness is that it goes to the heart of the question of what, really, is so ugly and distasteful that it should be excised from Black theatres. Or, what are the Black theatre philosophies of taste and beauty, its overwhelming of the senses and mind with imposing grandeur and humbling effect?

Casting A Cold Eye on Things

By Samuel A. Hay

The Igbo culture lays a great deal of emphasis on differences, on dualities, on otherness. This is why we do not find it difficult to accept that other people somewhere else might be doing something differently from ourselves. It's as if Igbo culture is constantly anxious to remind you of the complexity of the world. And so you are ready for it. Now, if you're brought up in a culture that is fanatically singleminded in its own self-centeredness, then you've got a job to do to correct it. It is a liability, and no one but yourself can correct it.

Chinua Achebe

Is the theatre's sublime that quality of represented Black life that makes one finally understand and accept the philosopher Alain Locke's tenet of beauty as one's own unadulterated sorrow and ecstasy? Or is it the theory that beauty is the balance of the moral and intellectual sensibilities needed to build a rational and healthy social and economic system that connects people and rights?

The more popular of these philosophies is—and has always been—the former, what might be termed Black Experience Theatre. In fact, the crowds have not let up since Mr. William Alexander Brown packed his African Grove Theatre in New York City during 1821-23 by originating this example of the beautiful. People plugged into Mr. Brown's recognizable adaptations of Shakespeare's **Richard III** and **Othello**, along with his versions of operas and ballets. Forty-two years later, Black folks still flocked to the direct descendant of the African Company's fun pieces, the 1865 minstrel shows by Charles Hicks, proprietor of the first black-owned minstrel company. This Black Experience tradition continued, from **St. Louis Woman** (1946) by Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen to **A Raisin in the Sun** (1959) by Lorraine Hansberry, to Ed Bullins's three one-acts (**A Son, Come Home; Clara's Ole Man, and The Electronic Nigger**) in 1965, to **Mama I Want to Sing** (1983) by Vy Higgins, to August Wilson's **Ma Rainey's Black Bottom** (1984), to George C. Wolfe's **The Colored Museum** (1986), and to **Tellin' It Like Tiz** (1990) by David E. Talbert.

The tastes, styles, and manners of this philosophy of theatre are as comforting as its antithesis, the Black Arts Theatre, can be anxiety-ridden. Audiences have historically thought the characters disfigured and issues unpleasant in Black Arts theatre, which contains plays that hammer home the differences between what is and what should be. One need but examine

the disappearance of the fun-seeking throngs that once crowded into Mr. Brown's African Grove to see **Richard III**. After Mr. Brown got into trouble with the law, the crowds thinned considerably, leaving Mr. Brown and his company to go to jail for refusing to shut down the theatre. There are no records of any public protests to support Mr. Brown. When he retaliated with his **The Drama of King Shotaway** (1823), in which he probably urged Blacks to take up arms to win full citizenship, the crowds appeared to have evaporated.

This probably did not surprise Mr. Brown because he went to jail not for the support of Blacks but for their public good. Undoubtedly, he himself probably would have preferred the beauty of his ballets, operas, and comedies. But he knew he had to do something to oppose vigorously the denial of voting rights to anybody who, in 1822, did not own a home and was not free of all debts. Therefore, he and his company, then, like Keith Antar Mason and The Hittite Empire, now, might have felt compelled to map out who they were and where they were going to be tomorrow. That has been the historical mission of Black Arts Theatre, carried on by such representative—and sometimes lonely dramatists as William Wells Brown, W. E. B. Du Bois, William Branch, Amiri Baraka, Ntozake Shange, and Keith Antar Mason.

William Wells Brown's **Escape; or a Leap for Freedom** (1858) so upset even those already fully committed to the abolition of slavery that they asked the agent for the antislavery society to remove Wells Brown because he disturbed the gentle audiences. Wells Brown refused to withdraw and dared the agent to find a better fundraiser. He continued demanding that Black people not be considered property. W. E. B. DuBois's **Star of Ethiopia** (1914), the spectacular pageant on Black civilizations, so angered the officials of the American Pageantry Association that it refused either to sponsor or endorse **Star**. And so did DuBois's own executive board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. DuBois put up his own money for the first production.

William Branch's **A Medal for Willie** (1951) was hideous to middle-income people who were preparing themselves to fight North Korea. Never had they seen a Black mother tell off community leaders for what she considered to be racial hypocrisy concerning her late soldier-son. Branch's **Medal** introduced the Golden Age of Black Protest Drama, which included Alice Childress's **Trouble in Mind** (1955), Loftin Mitchell's **A Land Beyond the River** (1957), and James Baldwin's **Blues for Mr. Charlie** (1964). From these dramas rose Amiri Baraka's **Slave Ship** (1967), with its notion that slavery is not only genocide but patricide, Ntozake Shange's **for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf** (1975), which changed the structure and scope of beauty; and Keith Antar Mason. He acknowledges his obligation to Shange, whose influence is apparent in such major works of his as **The Anatomy of Deep Blue** (1998), **Man in the Belly of a Slaveship** (1997), **The Harsh Reality of Toys, Field Hollers and Other Screams from the Night** (1995), and **Black History Month in Apartment Two Thirteen** (1994).

The argument can be made that the distinctions between the Black Experience and the Black Arts theories of beauty are artificial, especially since the plays often address identical issues. For example, August Wilson and Keith Antar Mason continually raise the issues of Black economic development. However, the Black Arts plays are but issues walking through very slight plots and characters. The Black Experience plays, however, have well-developed (i.e., all-sided) plots, characters, and themes, which are entertainingly represented.

It is no great surprise, therefore, that the seasons for most African American theatre companies consist of 98% Black Experience plays. Audiences want them. Just as Mr. William Alexander Brown's audiences wanted **Richard III** instead of **The Drama of King Shotaway**. Nevertheless, Mr. Brown decided against playing it safe—against securing his own financial future at the expense of his people's not being confronted with calls for actions to save themselves.

Finally, what does Mr. Brown's example say to us about our continually feeding patrons and subscribers with joyful pieces that de-emphasize differences and dualities? If we do not follow Mr. Brown's lead, what will history think of the resulting one-sided and ugly aesthetics? On the other hand, what will history think if more of us followed the examples of Lou Bellamy's Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Lorna Littleway's African American Theatre Program at the University of Louisville by answering Keith Antar Mason's plea to be included? ♦

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Samuel A. Hay and Beverly Robinson at the Atlanta Summit

Aesthetics, Standards and Practices

The Committee on Aesthetics, Standards and Practices was charged with “conceptualizing a consensus as to aesthetic values and practices for African American theaters and methods for sharing information about exemplary practices.” The Aesthetic Declaration is the result of the committee’s deliberations during the *First National Black Theatre Summit*. The document is a collaborative work of the following committee members: Ifa Bayeza (Summit Committee Chairperson), Paul Carter Harrison (Public Presentation Chairperson), William Cook, Robbie McCauley, Beverly J. Robinson, Sandra G. Shannon, Dominic Taylor and August Wilson. The declaration printed here was edited by Dr. Robinson who presented it on behalf of the committee at the *African American Theatre: The Next Stage Conference* in Dartmouth College that followed immediately after the Summit.

(Note: The Aesthetics Declaration is a work in progress. A final version will be released in future publications.)



Aesthetics

A DECLARATION

aesthetic: Having or showing an appreciation of the beautiful or pleasing; tasteful, of refined taste. *Of things:* In accordance with the principles of good taste (or what is conventionally regarded as such). [Oxford English Dictionary]

The [previous] definition is a rather broad one and the conventionality of the term is derived from Western European culture. Our dialogue both challenges and redefines aesthetic to meet the basic need of one that will express and guide an African based sensibility of American theater as it has evolved and continues to gain recognition beyond the shores of the United States.

- **PERFORMATIVE, NOT DIDACTIC**

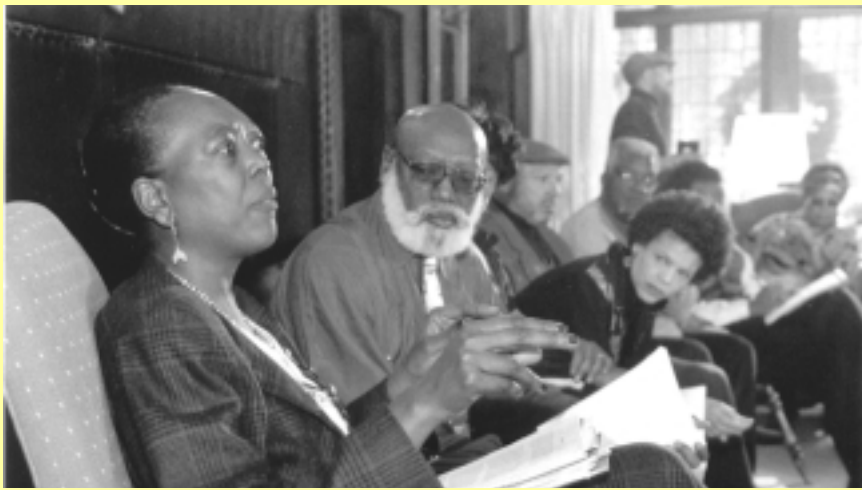
Drawing on Abena Joan Brown’s adage, yes indeed you want to affirm the tradition; and, yet transform the condition. The African American aesthetic is performative and not didactic. These are our stories, being told by our voices and in our way. This dialogue on aesthetics is an on-going process although we will continue to explore, refine, define and evolve our expressive strategies. This is a distillation of our recent dialogue during the 1998 Black Theatre Summit.

- **COLLECTIVE SELF-DEFINITION**

The aesthetic must reinforce our collective self-definition and identity. An African American aesthetic is not simply an alternative to Euro-American models. It is an articulated system. Resistance is central to the aesthetic. Hence, the work of African American artists is based upon resistance. This aesthetic subverts the hegemonic character of the European tradition. In the process, it amplifies our self-definition. It is the intention of the African American aesthetic to preserve, promote and perpetuate a representative world view as it appears to us outside of the continental African experience. Implicit in this view, as Elmo Terry-Morgan has reminded us, is a Black Moral Code centered on the unity of spirit and corporal life. Despite the challenge of resistance and the struggle of self-definition, as carriers of the culture we are obligated to assume the responsibility for its survival. If we look at the works themselves we will see a common thread.

- **A PRESERVATIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE DRAMATIC RITUAL**

When you enter a Black theatrical experience the aesthetic must be edifying in a manner that allows you to come out with a reappraisal of your reality of experience; a sense of being transformed, awakened, uplifted. There is an opportunity to create both a preservative and transformative dramatic ritual. Derek Walcott’s **Dream on Monkey Mountain**, Miguel Piñero’s **Short Eyes**, August Wilson’s **Joe Turner’s Come and Gone**, Pepper Carrill’s **Shango de Ima**, Adrienne Kennedy’s **Funny House of a Negro** are but a few examples of the reappraisal.



Presenting to the Summit

Dr. Beverly Robinson leads the Aesthetics Committee presentation to the Summit "On Golden Pond." Minary Center.

- **SPACE AS THE GROUND FOR RITUAL**

There is transformation of the space that we act upon. We alter that space/universe by the aesthetic choice we make (be it the playing field, boxing ring, church, theater or the hotel lobby) and that space remains permanently altered. Although the proscenium arch may limit ritual space, we claim any space as the ground for ritual; i.e. we can create, make and invoke ritual space. Our space defies fixity. Our time is endless.

- **CENTRALITY OF SPIRIT**

The centrality of spirit should be recognizable. It is always an invocatory process and it connects to ancestral spirit. The artist is and must be a vessel for divine and ancestral forces. The spirit force is always there if no more than in its ministerial appeal. Thus when you have a movement like the "electric slide" known in an earlier incarnation as "bus stop", the synchronous repetitive pattern of the movement invokes a particularized disposition as if driven by a personal deity claimed from the invisible world.

- **DYNAMIC**

This aesthetic is dynamic thus has the potential to reformulate itself over time and circumstances. Most often the edifying aesthetic, like traditional African divination systems, provides a set of riddles that must be interpreted and applied to life. The aestheticians must have the critical acumen to tease out and call to our consciousness what we are seeing, and giving it its proper name; e.g. an *urban circuit play* as opposed to the modern day "chitlin circuit."

- **RECOGNIZABLE AND UNDERSTOOD RHYTHMS**

The principle of transformation also applies to the attitude toward language, both verbal and non-verbal. We continually revivify language/speech that resonates within the spaces that we occupy in the world. It is a ply-vocal chorus/movement charted with recognizable and understood rhythms. Ensemble playing best approximates our art. Text is seen as a score, something we play off of. Improvisation, repetition, call and response are the strategies of this collective construction.

- **ENSEMBLE/SOLO/ENSEMBLE**

Ensemble work also speaks to the solo performer. There must be an objective (beyond one's aggrandizement) that is empowered by the community. The result is a linkage of the solo artist to the specific humanity of the community thereby allowing illumination of the larger humanity. Examples of this can be found in the works of Robbie McCauley, Roger Guenveur Smith, Tonea Stewart, Idris Ackamoor, Anna Deavere Smith and Keith Antar Mason.

- **DEEP STRUCTURE OF EXPRESSION**

The African American aesthetics centers itself on the fractures of many migrations (the middle passage, the underground railroad trek, the great migration to urban centers and the industrial north—not to forget bussing). Songs and other rituals referred to as "safe shelters" have been adapted in each kind of fracturing, dismemberment for survival. Although our experiences have been marked by severance, we have retained a deep structure of expression, a *re-remembering* that has made cultural cohesion possible.

- **INFINITE POSSIBILITIES**

Symbolic action is implicit to African American aesthetics. For example, the trickster is identified with symbolic action. Trickster, shape changer, the embodiment of chaos, but also of infinite possibilities is a part of this aesthetic. Trickster is linked to our redefinition of the game. Trickster is the elaboration of "spezzatura"—the quality of exaggeration that exceeds expectation finding new ways to amplify and elaborate . . . invocatory gesture. Ananse does this, as well as the *Signifying Monkey*, *Shine*, *Cunni Rabbit* or even *Esu* as it is often said, is "in the house all the time." Given the potentiality

of the trickster mode, we as African American performative artists should aspire to the highest possible level of achievement.

- **JOY**
Another element of the aesthetic is joy which may also shift in form from humor to song or movement.
- **POSITIVE ILLUMINATION**
History is a human construct. From the varied events of the past, we select those that will contribute to a narrative of our own sense of self, reifying those icons who represent for us the highest aspirations. The artist working within the African American aesthetic selects and constructs those narratives that result in a positive illumination of our experience. When one lacks the collective sense central to this aesthetic, the artist may select and construct narratives that feed individual ideation of otherwise personal perversion. Those icons that ennoble our experience, however, are not available for cavalier deconstruction.
- **PASSION**
Passion is a quality of our aesthetic. Passion is fueled by our sense of urgency.
- **BEAUTY**
Where beauty is concerned, coolness and balance are signifiers of potency as opposed to the traditional Western notions of “prettiness”. Beauty is how the whole comes together in the fulfillment of the ritual. People can look good but the service or performance is beautiful. It’s the rhythm in the mix (seeing and feeling yourself into that rhythm).
- **TENSION BETWEEN I/WE**
The I/We Thang has always been important. As an African people we have a tolerance and appreciation for the tension between I/We and it has a special dramatic interplay in the work that we do. The language of the individual self is still subject to accountability and responsibility. It is not that improvisation is unlimited, but if you are on the podium and not playing the riff, there is no amen. Ntozake Shange has (**for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf**) and continues to understand this principle in her work. There remains a series of standards and expectations.
- **CONTINUITY OF SPIRIT**
The testimonial is important with the call and response. It is a bearing witness to our collective experience. We reach backward to pay homage to the ancestral spirit and call it forward to manifest itself in our lives whether we are conscious of it or not. The aesthetic writes to, speaks for and represents the generations: from the unborn to the elders. The continuity of spirit exists throughout our daily lives. Even the coded language and the expressive strategies of our discourse have the power of making the familiar family; e.g. the renderings of the Star Spangled Banner by Jimi Hendricks and Marvin Gaye which created new ritual space and gave fresh social appraisal to the familiar. The dramatic work of Paul Carter Harrison’s **The Great MacDaddy** exemplifies this transformation as well as the ships in Amiri Baraka’s **Slave Ship**. The process recalls traditional cultural values, reasserts cultural identity, and invents new and innovative ways of looking at the world.

During the Summit meeting we were reminded there is a divining principal in the work that we do. It was Ntozake Shange who demonstrated the possession of our divine power in the ritual use of a broom. The broom became a divining rod that could move—sweep out—the unwanted. We must not equivocate or compromise our African sensibility because to do so is to lose self. ❖

At Work

Aesthetics Standards and Practices Committee members Ifa Bayeza, Dominic Taylor, Paul Carter Harrison and Robbie McCauley discuss a draft of the Aesthetics Declaration.



AGIA and its Vision for the New Millennium



Victor Leo Walker, II, Dartmouth College
President and CEO, African Grove Institute
for the Arts

In my reading of history the modern civil rights movement of the 20th Century was forged by two very important events. The first was Plessy vs. Ferguson which upheld the doctrine of “separate but equal” which reinstated another form of slavery for Black People in America through government sanctioned apartheid. To this day Black people in the United States are continually confronted in their day-to-day existence with the vestiges of this government sanctioned apartheid. The newly reconstituted apartheid has been couched in such language as “The Contract With America,” “Reverse Discrimination,” “New World Order,” “California’s notorious 209-anti-Affirmative Action Law—authored and spearheaded by a Black right wing zealot named Ward Connerly, a member of the Board of Regents of the University of California, and Proposition 187, California’s anti-Immigration Law; i.e., IN THE IMMORTAL WORDS OF EMMA LAZARUS: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore” but not if they are Haitian, Dominican, African, Mexican, Nicaraguan, El Salvadorian, Puerto Rican, Vietnamese, etc.

The second event which helped to forge the modern civil rights movement in the 20th century was a meeting in 1905 that became known simply as the Niagara Summit. In 1905, the eminent sociologist and activist, Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, called for “a private and confidential” meeting of selected individuals to inaugurate “a permanent national forward movement.” In July of that year 29 business and professional men, led by DuBois and William Monroe Trotter, met secretly at Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada, and organized the Niagara movement. In short, the movement demanded the abolition of ALL discriminatory practices by local and state governments, the Federal government, and the private sector. What would emerge out of the Niagara Summit, three years after the meeting would be the formation of the NAACP, the ONLY agency, private or otherwise, that, for nearly a century, Black people in the United States could turn to for assistance in fighting government sanctioned apartheid.

The meeting was held in Canada because hotels “in the vicinity of Buffalo, New York” would not rent rooms or meeting space to DuBois, Trotter and the 29 Summit participants.¹ Hence, Plessy vs. Ferguson was enforced to the letter of the law and like his former ancestors who fled to Canada for freedom, DuBois and his Niagara participants were forced to flee to Canada to address strategies for the abolition of apartheid in the United States.

¹ Lerone Bennett, Jr., Before the Mayflower (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 330-333 and 512

Hence, the National Black Theatre Summit was called to address those vestiges of Plessy vs. Ferguson that are woven into the fabric of the American arts community, and the lingering elements of Cultural Apartheid and European Cultural hegemony that Artists of color are so often confronted with in the arts community in the United States.

In the spirit of the 1905 Niagara Summit the Executive Committee for the National Black Theatre Summit “On Golden Pond” chose Ashland, New Hampshire—just over one hundred miles to the Canadian border—because the area was one of the final stops on the road to freedom for escaped slaves en route to Canada. The symbolism implicit in the location for the Summit represents the continuum of Black people in America—like David Walker, W. E. B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Dorothy Height—who sought freedom from injustice, tyranny, racism, by refusing to participate and cooperate in their own oppression. Therefore, when August Wilson made the call to convene The National Black Theatre Summit, his call was an outcry for Black artists to desist in participating and cooperating in their own oppression.

“. . .black...not only denotes race, it denotes condition. . .”

August Wilson

In Wilson’s speech to the 11th biennial Theatre Communications Group Conference he stated: “the term black or African American not only denotes race, it denotes condition, and carries with it the vestige of slavery and the social segregation and abuse of opportunity so vivid in our memory. That this abuse of opportunity and truncation of possibility is continuing and is so pervasive in our society in 1996 says much about who we are [as a Nation] and much about the work that is necessary to alter our perceptions of each other and to effect meaningful prosperity for all.”² Not just for a few but FOR ALL, I pose the following question to the Black performing arts community and the arts community at-large in the United States: What price are you willing to pay to create proactive change in the arts and society at-large? It is apparent when we look at the 1960s and 1990s that much has changed in the arts and in society. A sad new development is the growing apathy and lack of political will that has infected a large segment of the Black community, especially the Black Arts community, in addressing the vestiges of European American cultural hegemony and “Jim Crow aesthetics.” I will illustrate my point.

With the development of new funding categories in the 1980s

such as “New Audience Development,” “Expansion Arts Grants,” “Special Project Grants,” etc., large European American theatre companies reaped substantial financial benefits by embracing multiculturalism as another way of doing business. But, during the 1960s The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), along with a number of corporate foundations like Ford and Rockefeller, already supported the development and growth of arts organizations and artists ethnically and racially specific in their cultural/artistic focus. But that support slowly dissipated after the Sixties, to the point that dozens of companies disbanded or went out of business during the 1970s and 1980s.

The proliferation of grants to Euroamerican arts organizations to support the production of works by artists of color in the 1980s and 1990s reduced further the small pool of grant money available to arts organizations committed to serving artists, patrons and communities of color. Now, in an attempt to expand their funding base, these latter organizations are competing for the same dollars with the large Euroamerican arts organizations under a mandate to incorporate within their institutions some limited form of “cultural diversity”. At the heart of the issue is the fact that none of these institutions, particularly theater institutions like the Mark Taper Forum, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Guthrie, Arena Stage et. al., have a real commitment to the development of works by artists of color. Just look at their play selection over the past thirty years and you’ll get a clear picture of their so-called commitment to “cultural diversity.” They’re committed to the short-term goal of raising much-needed capital during tough economic times.

I fully support genuine efforts toward making diversity an integral part of the way in which institutions do business beyond having actors of color on stage during Black History month, Hispanic Heritage month, or whatever other ethnic flavor is being celebrated during a given month. Hence, diversity must be incorporated from the box office staff to the Board of Directors, from the janitorial personnel to the artistic personnel, from the executive staff to the community volunteers—diversity must be incorporated at all levels of the organization. Diversity, both within and outside the arts community, should be the process of building mutual acceptance and respect, rather than artistic subjugation and domination, it should mean that artists of color are welcomed by Euroamerican arts institutions as members of that institution’s artistic family rather than servants who are there to be exploited for the purpose of serving the economic goals of the institution. Cultural diversity in the American Theater can only be achieved through veneration and cooperation, not by encouraging mainstream arts organizations to lie, deceive and wave the flag of “cultural diversity” to position the institution to receive a six or seven figure grant.

In addition, American funding resources attempt to enfranchise,

² August Wilson, “The Ground On Which I Stand,” speech delivered on June 26, 1996 to the 11th biennial Theatre Communications Group Conference at Princeton University.

educate, and empower the so-called minority appeal to a self-reflective model of progress which states—flat-out—that our job is done and we need to move on to the next item on the agenda: international multiculturalism. This institutional notion of “progress” underscores the popular and mainstream understanding of American cultural history. For in the eyes of the mainstream, America’s war on racism only began with the Civil Rights Movement and ended with Colin Powell’s autobiography, **My American Journey**.

We mustn’t lose sight of the fact that there will always be a need for institutions that are Ethno-Specific in conception, design and mission. That does not mean that those institutions are “separatist” or “antagonistic” toward the so-called “mainstream,” on the contrary, they are very much a part of the complex interweaving of the American mosaic of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual preference, politics, commerce, class, etc. If you live in one of the many urban centers around the country take a cultural survey of your city and you will find hundreds of institutions that serve a broad, diverse population and are Ethno-Specific in design and mission, e.g. China Town in San Francisco, Greek Town in Chicago, Little Havana in Miami, the African Market Place in Los Angeles, German Town in St. Louis, Nuyorican Poets Cafe and the Caribbean Cultural Center both in New York City, Saint Patrick’s Day in Boston, and on and on.

If Crossroads Theater, Def Jam Records, 40 Acres & A Mule Film Works, Black Enterprise, Essence, Emerge and Ebony magazines, Motown, Johnson Hair Products, Rhythm and Hues Studios, and hundreds of other Black owned businesses and cultural institutions did not integrate a larger world view beyond the Black community, they would be out of business! I say all of this to make a point: just because your product or your institution is specific to your racial, ethnic, national or religious background does not mean that people from different backgrounds won’t find areas of interest and commonality with that experience, i.e. often times it is out of the singular human experience that we find the universal connection to the race to which we all belong—the one less often referred to as HUMAN. Therefore, for those who denunciate the African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA) as an organization promoting a “separatist Black agenda” because we advocate the need to further develop and strengthen the practice, study, vocation, aesthetics, economic viability and the commercial potential of Black Theatre, I reiterate my earlier point: often times it is out of the singular human experience that we find the universal connection to the race to which we all belong—the one less often referred to as HUMAN.

The “separatist Black agenda” argument crumbles under the weight of the partnerships AGIA has developed with the Getty Research Institute, The Walt Disney Corporation, the city of Los Angeles’ Cultural Affairs Department, the Georgia Public Broadcasting Service/WCAUTV, and the Amos Tuck School

of Business Administration at Dartmouth College. Let me highlight just a few of the programs that AGIA has already launched in cooperation with two of our partners:

I. AGIA/TUCK Business/Performing Arts Partnership (B/PAPI)

Two year pilot project Summer 1998 - Summer 2000 (B/PAPI’s strength lies in its break from the charitable 501(c)(3) model typical of most arts support and its creation, instead, of business partnerships and initiatives based on the long term financial needs for institutional development and educational/artistic programming):

AGIA/TUCK P/PAPI pilot project provided the leaders of four black theater companies with scholarships to the TUCK Minority/Advanced Minority Business Executive Program (MBEP/AMBEP), a one-week program that exposes minority business owners and senior executives to cutting-edge management concepts and techniques in strategic planning, finance, marketing, fund raising, and communications. Tuck, with expertise in developing programs specific to a particular industry and a history of creating innovative training programs for minority executives, is ideally suited for this type of project. If the pilot project proves successful, starting Summer 2001 B/PAPI efforts will include a two-week training program for theatre executives and artists, one week of MBEP/AMBEP and the second week devoted to theater management. AGIA will award Fellowships to most of the theatre artists/executives who attend the program.

Additional B/PAPI pilot projects in the works are:

- Tuck, in conjunction with AGIA, plans to mount a series of round tables for minority theater artists and business people in several cities, including New York and Boston, to explore ways of working together for mutual advantage. These round tables will start late Winter 1999 and will continue through May 1999.
- October-December 1998, a group of Tuck MBA students, most with several years of business experience behind them, devoted their required field service project to providing consulting services to two Black Theater companies: Crossroads in New Brunswick, NJ, and Rites and Reason Theatre at Brown University, Providence, RI.

II The AGIA/Getty Initiative for the Advancement and Preservation of Black Theatrical & Associated Arts as an Agent for Social and Economic Change:

The Getty Research Institute and AGIA have merged their collective interest in a partnership, the first of its kind in

this century, to develop a think tank for the advancement of cultural equity and the preservation, stabilization and cultural recovery of Black performing/cultural arts in the Americas. The Getty/AGIA partnership is a major research initiative to create new pedagogical paradigms, research methodologies, and participation of artists in developing creative approaches to preservation and recovery of Black cultural arts. In addition, the molding of Black performing arts and community development as a catalyst for addressing some of the social, cultural, economic, and creative needs of the Black community will be an integral component of the think tank. AGIA/Getty Partnership has established the following mission:

- a. To develop public policy initiatives for the arts at the local, state and national levels. To initiate the process AGIA has partnered with the Rockefeller Center and the Hopkins Center at Dartmouth College to organize a lecture series on Public Policy and the Arts. The lecture series will explore the changing relationship between government institutions, society, artists and arts organizations. This collaboration between The Getty, the Hopkins Center, the Rockefeller Center and AGIA is part of an ongoing effort to promote a better understanding of the arts and to inform a national audience about major political and cultural issues facing the nation.
- b. Award Fellowships to artists and scholars: AGIA and Getty have initiated a pilot project that will bring four Black Theater scholars, practitioners and artists to the Getty for residencies of four months from January 1999 through December 2000. This initial pilot program will provide valuable data that will help in shaping the AGIA/Getty artist/scholar program, which will be officially launched in 2001 in partnership with the Getty Research Institute. The Fellowship program will include artists/scholars not only in theatre but in related fields such as folklore, alternative media, animation, film, dance, and humanities.
- c. Publish a quarterly journal to help spawn growth and development of scholarship, research and critical evaluation of Black artists and their works, historical studies of Black arts institutions, etc. Over the next two years AGIA will be working with scholars and practitioners to launch by the Fall of the year 2001, *CALL & RESPONSE*, the first critical/scholarly journal that examines Black Theatre/Performing/Visual Arts from points of view from both within and outside the Black community.

We must view the world as a stage where everyone has a part to play and we mustn't depend on the benevolence of others to determine what roles we will play. We can neither pretend nor ignore the fact that as the eminent sociologist W. E. B. DuBois so eloquently stated at the dawn of the 20th century: ". . . the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line."³ And that "problem" can not be trivialized as the brilliant philosopher/scholar Cornel West has proclaimed because "Race Matters."⁴ And nowhere in the cultural kaleidoscope we call the United States is the inclusion and delusion of race more skewed than in popular entertainment. Through proactive initiatives AGIA will address difficult questions and complex issues that surround culture, race, aesthetics, art, diversity, etc. As an organization we have done our homework and we are examining the lessons of history in preparation for our work in the present and the future. Let me illustrate my point.

As an organization, AGIA is working toward cultural equity to address the inequities that are often ignored in social/artistic experiments designed to achieve cultural diversity. In the Foreword to the book **Voices From The Battle Front**, Professor Molefi Asante asserts: "The chief problem facing the United States in the twenty-first century will be cultural equity. In the twentieth century, race, just as W. E. B. DuBois predicted, has been the main one. . . Since DuBois's insight, the United States, in its population, has come to reflect the world. No longer is that population seen in Black and White, but in the technicolor of scores of cultures that have come to these shores—resulting in the richness of the American experience. . . The U. S. keeps the vision of a multicultural, multiethnic nation alive in the world. Such a vision is a predicament of the American Creed Of Course . . . The Creed and the Deed have often been completely at odds."⁵ Hence, until there is economic, social and cultural equity among the races in America, as a nation, we face an uncertain future.

Is cultural diversity as a "social experiment" merely "cultural diversion?"; the real issue we must address is cultural equity. According to a 1966 report issued by the census bureau, people of color will be the numerical majority in the United States by 2025, but people of color will continue to remain—as the numerical majority and as a percentage of population—the most "ill housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished, and uneducated" in our nation. AGIA's board is clear that a component of the organization's mission will be to develop initiatives to create awareness around issues concerning the advancement of cultural equity as a social movement. You can not achieve so-called cultural diversity until you fully address the question of cultural equity. Currently, it is my opinion, that the vast majority of so-called "cultural diversity initiatives" are nothing more than missionary efforts to create token minority partici

³ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls Of Black Folk* (New York: Sigmet Books, 1982) xi

⁴ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Random House, 1994) 156



Members of the First National Black Theatre Summit Executive Board outside the Minary Center. [l-r] William Cook, Mariea R. Cromer, Robbie McCauley, Victor Walker, Ifa Bayeza, August Wilson, Woodie King, Keryl McCord, Paul Carter Harrison, Beverly Robinson, Lou Bellamy, Claude Purdy and Don Evans.

pation in select sectors of our nation. Cultural equity is much less about adding up the numbers to achieve a balance, it is truly about taking the difficult steps to create a level playing field for all, i.e., political, economic, social and cultural parity. To borrow a line from James Brown: “I don’t want nobody to give me nothin’, just open up the door, and I’ll get it myself...”

In addition to its focus on cultural equity, AGIA also plans to address the political, social and intellectual apathy that seems to have immobilized the vast majority of Black people. We must begin to look inward if we are to revitalize our communities, to address those issues that warrant our time, commitment, and dedication. Where is the thunder of the Black Arts community during these very difficult times? As we move into the new millennium the Black arts community must be proactive and ready to forge initiatives and strategic partnerships—both within and outside the Black community—that will cultivate growth, longevity and stability for artists and arts institutions dedicated to serving both the Black community and society at-large. As AUGUST WILSON articulated in his speech “The Ground On Which I Stand”: “Artists, playwrights, actors, [intellectuals], we can be the spearhead of a new movement to reignite and reunite our people’s positive energy for a political and social change that is reflective of our spiritual truths.”⁶ AGIA’s mission and vision for the 21st century takes into account August Wilson’s statement:

MISSION

African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA) is dedicated to creating an environment to support artistic excellence and to promote the advancement and preservation of Black Theatre as a cultural agent for social change, economic development and intellectual inquiry.

An organization of artists and arts advocates, **AGIA** provides leadership, technical assistance, and resources for research, acquisition of capital, policy initiatives and advocacy to insure the integrity of Black Theatre practice and protection of intellectual property.

Through strategic collaboration and partnership with other organizations and institutions, **AGIA** fosters a nurturing environment for artists and supports the artists’ roles in the revitalization and empowerment of their communities.

VISION

By drawing upon the intellectual and cultural richness of African people and their descendants, the **African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA)** will shape the worlds of culture and commerce on a global scale and will be the center of innovative and transformative leadership in the arts.

⁵ Marta Moreno Vega & Cheryl Y. Green, ed., *Voices From The Battle* (Trenton: Africa World Press) xi

⁶ August Wilson, “The Ground On Which I Stand,” speech delivered on June 26, 1996 to the 11th biennial Theatre Communications Group Conference at Princeton University.



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