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Introduction to “Sustaining Black Theatre,” by Harvey Young

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A after the forum on "The Relationship between the Academy and the Profession," inaugurating our first issue of the SDC Journal Peer-Reviewed Section (PRS) in the summer of 2015, the peer-review editorial board invited leading scholars of theatre to provide our initial set of essays on topics relating to directing and choreography at universities and on professional stages across the country. In this issue, we are very pleased to publish the following piece by Harvey Young, Chair and Professor of Theatre at Northwestern University, President-elect of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), and a prominent scholar writing on theatre and race and black theatre in America. This inaugural essay serves as an example of scholarship focusing on important contemporary issues and historical trends in the fields. We hope these first invited essays inspire authors working in and thinking about our professions to submit pieces for peer-reviewed publication in future. For detailed submission guidelines, please see the website or contact the co-editors directly.

T he frustration and, indeed, anger of the Black Lives Matter movement centers on the alarming number of unarmed men, women, and children who have been gunned down by law enforcement officials. Protestors actively critique a justice system that often dictates to hold the individuals who pulled the trigger criminally responsible and, ultimately, allows black folks to be killed with alarming frequency. The movement inspired people with varying complexions to bring the conversation on the importance of black life to their local communities by posting placards on front lawns and holding vigils to remember lives lost senselessly. In the theatre, it led to the commissioning of artists to create new works that capture the emotion and energy of the moment. Hands Up: Six Playwrights, Six Testaments, produced by New York City-based New Black Fest is one of many recent examples.

Black life has long been a significant—and, arguably, a central—concern of mainstream American theatre. Abolitionists employed the stage to present portraits of the devastating day-to-day experiences of American chattel slavery. As bodies hanged from trees across the United States, New Negro proponents called for the creation of a wide array of performances to record the emotional toll and the devastating loss of lives. The experience of living in segregated and, later, slowly desegregating America was captured in the dramas and musicals of the Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights era. With regularity, artists have gathered over the past fifty years to assess the development of black theatre and call for the creation of new works that tell the stories of black life and preserve the richness of black culture.

This article offers an overview of the imbricated nature of black theatre and black life. In the following pages, I chronicle how the stage offered an opportunity to raise awareness and bring attention to experiences of racial violence and abuse. I look at how arts professionals and civil rights proponents repeatedly, for more than a century, advocated for the development of creative works about, by, for, and near African Americans. I draw attention to the frequency of such calls to sustain black theatre in order to reveal how black theatre, like black life, is simultaneously vibrant and under threat.

BLACK LIFE ON STAGE

Blackface minstrelsy is widely considered to be one of the most significant American contributions to Western theatrical practice. Conventional wisdom is that Greece contributed the tragic form, Italy opera, England a recognizable narrative structure, and Japan a gestural vocabulary that inspired generations of avant-garde and experimental artists. The US contribution was the actor "blacking up" and impersonating someone with brown skin. Thanks to the circuits travelled by troupes of artists, blackface reached not only Great Britain but also the expanses of the British Empire. Audiences flocked to see the minstrel show. They revel in the opportunity to spend time with a "Black" person and to be entertained by a set of acts imagined as being essentially or authentically black. Their preference for this style has been
well documented, from Mark Twain publicly declaring his adoration of the "nigger show" to the manner with which the blackface form was eagerly adopted by nascent film producers in such Hollywood cinematic fare as The Jazz Singer.

As legend has it, actor T.D. Rice first delighted audiences in the 1820s by costuming himself like a nearby African American porter or "stable hand" (Thompson 160). This performance, which would blossom into his widely popular "Jump Jim Crow" song and dance routine, would be staged in sold out venues across the United States and, by Rice and his imitators, around the globe. Through his racial impersonation, Rice rendered black bodies dramatically interesting for a worldwide audience. He also framed expectations for the performing black body as being marked by excess in regards to dialect, costume, and movement. Whereas Rice toured the United States and the United Kingdom, the artists whom he influenced traveled increasingly broader international circuits. In so doing, they introduced black lives—albeit in stereotypical fashion—to a diverse, worldwide set of attendees.

The legacy of Rice and his followers is evident in Uncle Tom's Cabin, George Aiken's 1852 theatrical adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's popular novel. Early in the play, a young black slave child named Harry performs for the amusement of two white men. Aiken's directions reveal that Harry "sings and dances around the stage." The link to minstrelsy is made certain when one of the men greets the boy: "Hulloa! Jim Crow!" Harry, as slave, must perform. The danger of this situation is made explicit in the entrance of his mother, Eliza, who "grasps the child eagerly in her arms, and casts a glance of apprehension" in the direction of the man before she and her son exit.

Numerous scholars have written about the excesses contained within the myriad stagings of Uncle Tom's Cabin across the nineteenth century. The academic focus on the presence of live animals or technological wonders—for example, a treadmill on which horses allegedly galloped in pursuit of Eliza—as well as the many Tom-themed souvenirs and collectibles can obscure a simple truth: the success of the play and the novel depended upon its spotlighting of black life and experiences. Uncle Tom's Cabin, as penned by Beecher Stowe, was intended to be an abolitionist text. The play offers a fictionalized version of everyday black existence and reveals the savagery of a system of enforced servitude. Even as audiences may have rejoiced at the minstrel-inspired singing and dancing of Harry, they were forced to witness and, perhaps, empathize with the title character being subjected to the lash of Simon Legree. The whipping of Tom proved to be one of the more memorable aspects of the narrative. Indeed, the visual spectacle of poorly treated and physically abused black bodies informed the popular iconography of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Among the more extreme material objects produced by the Tom trade were miniature cardboard character cutouts which were inserted into regional newspapers and allowed the user, presumably children and their guardians, to reenact the play, including the abuse of Tom within their homes. These cardboard cutouts were akin to present day toys found in children's cereal boxes. They were intended to amuse. The invitation to role play may have allowed children to find pleasure in the abuse of the black body—similar to the way in which performance historian Robin Bernstein astutely describes the treatment of Tom-themed black dolls in her book Racial Innocence (210). Regardless, the novel, theatrical adaptation, and termed collectibles staged the precarity of black life.

As the nineteenth century concluded and the subsequent century began, black artists managed to achieve greater authority in the scripting of black culture through performance. Aida Overton Walker's choreography shone a spotlight on the social dances of black folk. It revealed how African Americans actively contributed to American performance culture by remixing a range of elements inspired by African diasporic ritual and the witnessing—from the margins of servitude—of white genteel dance. Black life could be expressed through gesture and movement. A similar articulation occurred within the theatre, as the work of George Walker, Overton's husband, Bert Williams, and their collaborators demonstrate. Williams's performance of the 1905 song "Nobody," with lyrics penned by Alex Rogers, offers a refreshingly candid insight into the experience of living a marginalized existence. Despite being a comic song sung in an invented black dialect by the Bahamian actor, the lyrics reveal the harsh conditions of black life: "Where life seems full of clouds and rain, And I am full of nothing and pain, Who soothes my thumpin', thumpin' brain? Nobody." The fact thatynchings of black men, women, and children continued to occur in an unchecked manner across the United States as Williams sang "Nobody" may have allowed the song to resonate with the contemporary experiences of listeners.

The rise of naturalism, despite being tainted by the residues of the previous century's sentimental, melodramatic, and blackface styles, offered an opportunity to better reflect the experiences of black folk. The most famous definition of black theatre was penned by W.E.B. Du Bois who called for the creation of art that was "about us, by us, for us, and near us" (134). Reflecting on recent nineteenth-century stagings of black characters as caricatures, Du Bois understood that representations of African Americans often were staged by white Negro delineators and performed before primarily white audiences. Although putatively "about" African Americans, these works imagined an unrealistic, stereotypical picture of black life that was not consonant with the lived realities and daily experiences of actual black people. If black artists created theatre about black folk and shared them with black audiences in their own communities, then these performances could be understood as political acts that worked to revise the social standing of African Americans in public life.

With limited production venues, Du Bois and his contemporaries, especially Alain Locke, encouraged the publication of plays and poetry within periodicals such as Theatre Arts Monthly and Crisis. They invited readers to share these printed artistic works with family members and, perhaps, neighbors. Plays were read aloud. In some households, roles were distributed among family members in order to facilitate the staging of the play. The drama of black life entered the homes of African Americans and non-black allies of the New Negro movement. Through the telling, listening, and re-performance of stories about the everyday experiences of black folk, the bonds of community were forged. Sitting within his or her parlor, a person could be transported to another place and encounter a range of black folk whose daily realities were shockingly familiar. They could commiserate with friends, family, and neighbors who shared a point of view on the experience of being black in the early twentieth century. The drama of the New Negro era was essential to articulating the black experience. As theatre historian Korrhia Mitchell has observed, New Negro artists "wanted African Americans to recognize themselves in the scripts and to take pride in what they saw, even if it was faced with sorrow" (41).

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, communities of artists gathered to revise the depiction of black life with an aim to create art that reflected the complexity as well as the beauty of African American culture. Scholars, including David Krasner and Jonathan Shandell, have written authoritatively about the development of such communities across the United States, from Georgia Douglas Johnson's famed S Street Salon at the heart of the Baltimore-Washington corridor, Beale Street in Memphis, and along "the Stroll" in Chicago to name just a few places. These homes and clubs nurtured the creation of black artistry that could rally community and effectively articulate socio-political critiques. In Harlem's Theaters,
Adrienne Macki Braconi offers a series of rigorously researched case studies that demonstrate the political charge that results from the intermixing and political organizing of activists and artists. Writing about Harlem's Kigwa Players, Macki Braconi notes: "Du Bois and the theater's founders saw themselves as progressive social revolutionaries entrusting the local stage as a laboratory for their social experiments, as active practitioners who sought to teach community members about dramatics, "the truth of race lies in the intersections of lived experience and the social, cultural, historical constructions of blackness."

To this day, Wilson's TCG speech continues to exist as a widely circulating manifesto, available in its entirety in a variety of online and print outlets. It is considered to be the best reflection of his voice and politics. The significance of "The Ground On Which I Stand" is evidenced in the fact that a 2015 PBS documentary, which premiered on the 100th anniversary of his death, bears the same title. The importance and easy availability of his remarks inspired a new generation of black artists, such as director Derrick Sanders, who recalled the impact of reading Wilson's words in college (and in Young and Zabriskie). Sanders co-founded Chicago's Congo Square Theatre Company, to which Wilson's widow would later request that mourners of her husband's passing send financial donations in lieu of flowers. At the very least, the speech initiated a national conversation on the future of the American theatre. It prompted a consideration of what role black arts might play in the new millennium, especially as the "century of the color line," as W.E.B. Du Bois famously called the twentieth century, neared its end.

Wilson, again, placed a spotlight on the necessity of sustaining black theatre in 1998 when he co-hosted, with theatre critic Victor Leo Walker II and literary scholar William Cook, a national conversation at Dartmouth College. "On Golden Pond," the name of the gathering, was enabled through the fortuitous timing of several interrelated events: the playwright's residency at Dartmouth as well as the presence of multiple Dartmouth faculty members with a commitment to aiding the development of black artistry. Wilson's celebrity, coupled with the lingering controversies from his TCG address, attracted "leading black theater artists, scholars and community organizers, entrepreneurs and corporate executives," including Ntsokho Shange, Ifa Bayeza, and Irutani Davis among others ("Playwright"). "On Golden Pond" offered a compelling reminder of the power of collective advocacy. It recalled the combined efforts of past arts leaders who understood the political potential of black artistry. Walker, in an article announcing the impending summit, asserted that the event "reflects the spirit of Langston Hughes. W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson and so many others who struggled to attain social and cultural equity for black people in America." This first contemporary gathering, a five-day, closed door discussion followed by a single day public conference, existed as a space and site of collective possibility. The mission was to devise strategies to sustain black theatre and foster
its growth. It is estimated that three hundred people attended the public portion of the Dartmouth summit (Kerdt, “August”).

From a contemporary perspective, few theatre artists can identify concrete outcomes of that gathering. What were the lasting reforms inspired by Wilson, Walker, and Cook’s National Black Theatre Summit? In a February 1998 Dartmouth news release, the planned structure and closed-door discussion themes were revealed: “Participants will break into small groups to consider such topics as how to encourage black playwrights, build audiences, and address the legal, social, financial and aesthetic issues related to developing African American theatre” (“Playwright”). Journalist Ronald Roach, in a recap of the summit that merged the language of the Dartmouth release with excerpts from a post-event interview with a participant, noted that one attendee, theatre scholar Samuel Hey, hoped that the conversation would spark the development of a National Endowment for African-American Theatre with a $25 million endowment.

There were several limited term accomplishments of the Dartmouth summit. In response to the gathering, the university created scholarships for underrepresented minority graduate students in theatre management. Although such a designated program no longer exists, Tuck Business School continues to incentivize nonprofit work by offering graduates working in such areas access to a loan forgiveness program. The most significant outcome of the National Black Theatre summit was the creation of the African Grove Institute for the Arts. Theatre historian Annamane Bean notes that it “was formed with August Wilson as the Chairman of the Board and Victor Lea Walker II as the CEO and President” (123). The African Grove, borrowing its name from William Wells Brown’s theatre company from the 1820s, was established with a mission to support and revitalize black performing arts institutions. Active for nearly a decade, AGIA succeeded in organizing two additional summits in Los Angeles and, more generally, existed as a service agency in support of black artistry, especially in secondary schools. Ultimately, AGIA fell short of Wilson’s goals. As Talvin Wilks notes in a 2013 Howlround article, “after a few convenings and an unwieldy bureaucracy, it resulted in very little, leading Wilson to lament in an interview, ‘I’m willing to bet that if you go back and look at after the speech there was less money given to black theaters then before.’”

Since “On Golden Pond,” there have been several gatherings of theatre professionals with the explicit aim of revisiting Wilson’s call to assess and sustain black theatre. The first one held at the Los Angeles Theatre Center (LATC) in May 1998 continued the conversation begun at the New Hampshire conference and provided a progress report. In addition to the announcement of the business school scholarships, organizers—Wilson, Walker, Cook, Bayes, and UCLA professor Beverly Robinson—expressed a desire to “publish a quarterly journal and/or a popular monthly about black performing arts” (Kerdt, “August”). Three years later, Walker and Cook organized a second AGIA-sponsored summit at the LATC. Reports of that gathering suggest optimism at AGIA’s likely ability to achieve its aims. Rob Kerdt, writing for Rockstage, notes, “Convening more than 100 theatre professionals, the African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA) unveiled to the West Coast its initial plans to become the ‘NAACP for the arts’ at a three-day private retreat and a two-day public forum last week” (“Meeting”). In addition to tooting the success of the Tuck scholarships, organizers expressed a desire to create “a national capital campaign to help dispense grants, loans, and lines of credit to artists and arts organizations and a full-length documentary on black theatre...” (124). The introduction, the Praise/Words, to that 2002 collection, Harrison succinctly defines the goals of black theatre: “whatever value it might have as entertainment, the inventive process of Black Theater must illuminate the collective ethos of the black experience in a manner that binds, cleanses, and heals” (5).

National black theatre summits have experienced a resurgence in recent years. In August 2014, Dr. Barbara Ann Teer’s National Black Theatre in New York City hosted a four-day symposium, “Moving the Black Theatre Legacy Forward” attended by representatives of twenty theatre companies. The culminating event of the gathering was a public conversation moderated by Dafina McMillan, director of TCG’s Diversity & Inclusion Initiative and also its director of communications, and featuring Ruben Santiago-Hudson.
Ali Jones-Harvey, Sade Lythcott, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Carmen Morgan, and Bridgit Antoinette Evans. It was webcast live by Howlround, the online "knowledge commons." In the wide-ranging discussion, Morgan noted how the current financial struggles of black theatres could be caused, in part, by a new challenge: the "intentionality on the part of white theatres" to engage "diversity and inclusion" that results in programming "competing" for audiences traditionally served by black theatre companies. Other panelists noted the necessity of improving the management structure of black theatre companies, beginning with developing capacity building initiatives and creating arts leadership internships for artists of color. Kwei-Armah, artistic director of Baltimore Centerstage, stressed the importance of expanding the audience base and squarely placed the onus on everyone for bringing folks to the theatre. He imagines a straightforward recruitment conversation: "Have you been to the theatre lately? Come along with me." The 2014 convening was mostly diagnostic. It provided an opportunity to spotlight contemporary challenges and cleared space for a collective brainstorming of how to maintain the vibrancy of black artistry across the 21st century.

The most recent convening was held in April 2015 in Chicago at the Goodman Theatre. Organized by director Chuck Smith, Ron OJ Parson, Wills Taylor and myself, the summit was one of the closing events of a two-month-long, city-wide celebration of August Wilson's life and career curated by the aforementioned organizers with Costanza Romero, Wilson's widow. Whereas the previous summit functioned as an opportunity to address the state of black theatre, the Chicago gathering sought to offer practical lessons and advice on how to sustain black theatre by focusing on the financial pressures faced by theatre companies. Attended by artistic directors of prominent black theatre companies, including Kenny Leon, True Colors Theatre Company, Eileen Morris, Ensemble Theatre, Woodie King Jr., New Federal Theatre, and Ekundayo Bandele, Hatillo Theatre, as well as theatre scholars, the two-day closed-door gathering offered the opportunity to reflect on the financial realities of black theatre companies. Discussion centered on board development and the topic of leadership succession. One of the most compelling insights of the gathering was an acknowledgement that the effort to sustain black theatre demands the active recruitment of both African American and non-African American allies as donors (and board members) and audience members.

Black theatre in the 21st century can only thrive with an ethnically diverse alliance working collectively to create new work as well as stage classic plays that still adhere to a commonly held principle: black theatre needs to offer an honest reflection of black experiences.

The need to sustain black performing arts was made palpable by two events coinciding with the Chicago summit. The first was a series of protests organized by or aligning with the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Participants spoke about the recent murder of Walter Scott, a fifty-year-old unarmed black man, whose death was recorded on a cell phone camera. Scott was shot in the back as he fled a police officer. The second was the Goodman's production of August Wilson's play Two Trains Running. In that play, which is set in 1969, the precarity of black life is openly discussed. Memphis, the protagonist, makes a comment that seems to be ripped from the headlines. He declares: "They had that boy Begaboo. The police walked up and shot him in the head and (protestors) went down to see the mayor. Raised all kind of hell. Trying to get the cop charged with murder. They raised hell for three weeks. After that, it was business as usual." (84). The name Begaboo could have been replaced with Tamir Rice or Scott among many others. It was compelling to hear the truth of present represented in a play that not only was twenty-five years old—it premiered in 1990—but also was set almost a half-century ago. Not much seemed to have change.

The movement to champion and sustain black performing arts institutions is ongoing. Indeed, it has been a continuous campaign since the founding of Welf Brown's African Grove. Despite the continued call to devise strategies to preserve black artistry, it would be a mistake to assume that progress has not occurred. Financial sustainability is a concern of every theatre company, regardless of the racial or ethnic make-up of the company and staff. What the summits have allowed is an opportunity for artists to talk specifically about their reality while underscoring the continued necessity of working about, by, for, and near black folks. An ancillary benefit is that summits, conferences, and gatherings forge professional networks and encourage the passing of history and knowledge across generations. Black theatre is black life.

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SHAKESPEARE FOR AMERICAN ACTORS AND DIRECTORS

EXCERPTS FROM THE SCRIPT

SCENE 1

HORSE (off stage)

GENTLEMAN

What news do you bring from the East?

HORSE

Nothing but what is reported by the sea captains, who say the East bears much gold and spices. We hope to send a fleet next year, as we have done for many years past.

GENTLEMAN

Good news indeed. How is the kingdom of India?

HORSE

It is flourishing under the wise rule of our king. The people are content and the crops are plentiful.

GENTLEMAN

What of the queen?

HORSE

She is well, save for a slight indisposition, which she attributes to the heat of the season. She is preparing for the coronation of the heir apparent, who will ascend the throne upon the death of the king.

GENTLEMAN

I shall inform the king of your message. May the king and his people prosper.

HORSE

So say I. May the winds of fortune blow kindly upon you and your family. Godspeed.

GENTLEMAN

Thank you, horse. A safe journey, I pray.

HORSE

A safe journey indeed. Godspeed, sir.

GENTLEMAN

Goodbye, horse. May your path be always blessed.