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## Introduction to “Sustaining Black Theatre,” by Harvey Young

Ann M. Shanahan

Loyola University Chicago, [ashanah@luc.edu](mailto:ashanah@luc.edu)

Ann Fliotsos

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## SUSTAINING BLACK THEATER

BY HARVEY YOUNG, NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

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.

INTRODUCED - EDITED BY ANNE FLIOTSOS + ANN M. SHANAHAN

The 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 declines 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.

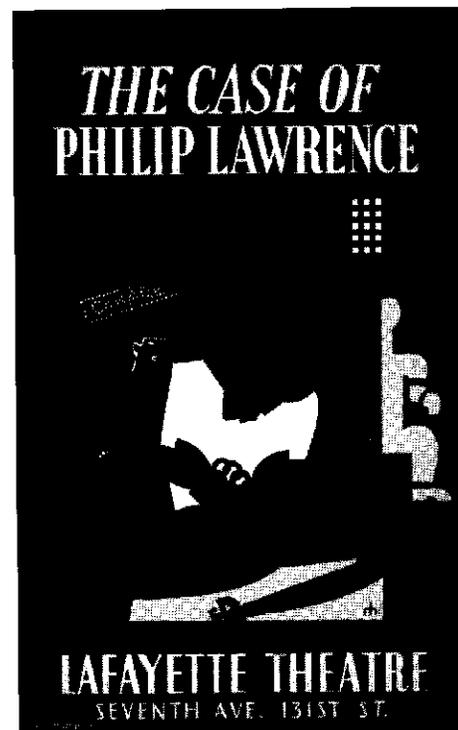
### BLACK LIFE ON STAGE

Blackface minstrelsy is widely considered to be one of the most significant American contributions to western theatrical practice. Conventional wisdom is that Greece contributed 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 reveled 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



FIG. 1  
Bert Williams  
Library of Congress  
Prints + Photographs Division

FIG. 2  
WPA Federal Theatre Presents  
*The Case of Philip Lawrence, 1936/1937*  
Poster (silkscreen)  
Library of Congress  
Prints + Photographs Division



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 169). 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: “Hullo! Jim Crow!” Harry, as slave, must perform. The danger of his situation is made legible in the entrance of his mother, Eliza, who “grasps the child eagerly in her arms, and cast[s] another glance of apprehension” in the direction of the men 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 themed 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: “When life seems full of clouds and rain, And I am full of nothin’ and pain, Who soothes my thumpin’, bumpin’ brain? Nobody.” The fact that lynchings 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 those 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 Koritha 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 laced 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 Krigwa 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" (50).

African American theatre companies spurred the development of black artistry by issuing calls for new work and establishing a network that aided its circulation. For example, Krigwa "discovered" and widely disseminated the writings of playwrights Willis Richardson and Eulalie Spence. The "negro units" of the Federal Theatre Project existed in dozens of US cities, spanning the east and west coasts. Art begets art. The campaign for black art, in the 1920s and 1930s, introduced and widely shared the work of artists whose aesthetics revised stereotypical minstrel representations. Although scholars have rightly noted that black intellectuals debated the merits of "high art" and "folk art," a general agreement existed on the fact that black artistry allows diverse audiences an opportunity to bear witness to African American experiences.

Writing a generation later for *The Drama Review*, Larry Neale, cofounder of Black Arts Repertory Theatre, outlined how the Black Arts Movement was a folk arts campaign intended to engage neighborhoods, reflect their residents' voices, and effect political change. He opens with the following declaration: "The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community" (29). Further noting that the "[p]olitical values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American [artists]," he asserts that black life is inseparable from black artistry. This is evident in Amiri Baraka's 1964 play *Dutchman*, arguably the most famous drama of the period. In it, Clay confronts societal racism, vents about the misperceptions of black life that are rampant within society, and, ultimately, loses his life. He is murdered. The play, which Baraka initially staged in the Lower East Side before moving it to the streets of Harlem, invites audience members to bear witness to the articulation of black experience. As theatre, it presents these experiences in a communal setting and invites spectators to reflect with one another. Certainly, the message of the play was not lost on Howard Taubman, in his *New York Times* review. Taubman observed, "If this is the way even one Negro feels, there is ample cause for guilt as well as alarm, and for a hastening of change."

In calling for a more forceful articulation of identity and advocating for the development of (black) community-based theatres, BAM artists underscored the importance of collective organization to the advancement of black arts and politics. In a nation struggling with segregation, debating the necessity of civil rights, and beginning to witness an increasing disparity in how darker complexioned folks were treated by the justice system, a movement emerged that succeeded in championing the independent production of art that engages the personal and the political.

#### HOLDING GROUND

In June 1996, playwright August Wilson stood before the full membership of the Theatre Communications Group at an annual meeting at Princeton University. The keynote speaker occupied the highest rung of the American theatre. He had won the Pulitzer Prize twice and collected numerous major theatre awards, including the Tony Award. His presence at the lectern was a sign of how far the American Theatre had come, from the antics of T.O. Rice and the minstrelsy of Aiken to this moment and this man. What could have been a celebratory occasion at the arrival of perhaps the "black hope" of late twentieth century theatre ended up serving as the staging ground for a forceful, impassioned, and searing critique of the racial divide within the theatre industry.

Although mostly remembered for his comments on colorblind casting, which spurred a series of debates with a prominent critic and detractor, Wilson's address advocated for the expansion of opportunities for black artists by calling for the development and support of black theatre companies. Despite the fact that his comments often are framed as a lamentation on the decline of black theatre, the playwright was optimistic about the state of black artistry but, admittedly, pessimistic about its sustainability. He declared, "If you don't know, I will tell you that black theatre in America is alive...it is vibrant...it is vital...it just isn't funded" (495). The address, titled "The Ground on Which I Stand," served as the first salvo in a campaign to restructure American theatre in a manner that would render black theatre companies financially stable. The urgency of his address anchored itself in his belief that it is only through black artistic collectives that the experiences of African Americans can be translated to the stage. This was a lesson that he learned as a young adult during the Black Arts Movement, a period that he memorably identified as "the kiln in which I was fired" (494). It was also something that he sought to teach within his own plays, which offer ample opportunities for actors and audiences alike to immerse themselves within majority black communities. Theatre historian Harry J. Elam expresses it best, in *The*

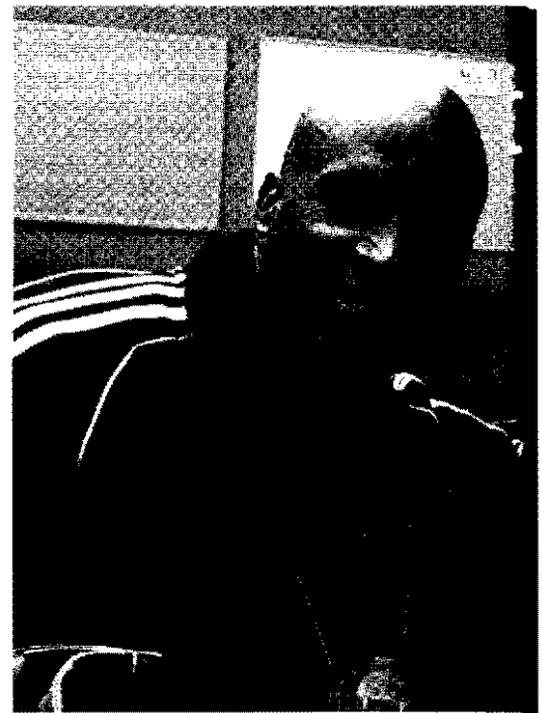
*Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, when he succinctly notes that within Wilson's dramaturgy, "the truth of race lies in the intersections of lived experience and the social, cultural, historical constructions of blackness" (221).

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" to his legacy is evidenced in the fact that a 2015 PBS documentary, which premiered on the 10<sup>th</sup>-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 (qtd in Young and Zabriskie). Sanders cofounded 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 cohosted, 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 Ntoshake Shange, Ifa Bayeza, and Thulani 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" (621). 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



FIG 3  
Chicago Black Theatre  
Ron O'Parson,  
Kenny Leon,  
Eileen Morris  
PHOTOS Harvey Young



its growth. It is estimated that three hundred people attended the public portion of the Dartmouth summit (Kendt, "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 4 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 theater" ("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 Hay, 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

Annamarie Bean notes that it "was formed with August Wilson as the Chairman of the Board and Victor Leo 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 **Tahvin 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 that after the speech there was less money given to black theaters than 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, Bayeza, and UCLA professor Beverly Robinson—expressed a desire to "publish a quarterly journal and/or a popular monthly about black performing arts" (Kendt, "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 Kendt, writing for *Backstage*, 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 touting 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 aimed to air on PBS." Until 2008, AGIA actively served as an advocate and, at times, a sponsor of black artistry. Its most significant publication is arguably *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, coedited by Walker, Gus Edwards, and Paul Carter Harrison. In the introduction, the "Praise/Word," 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**,

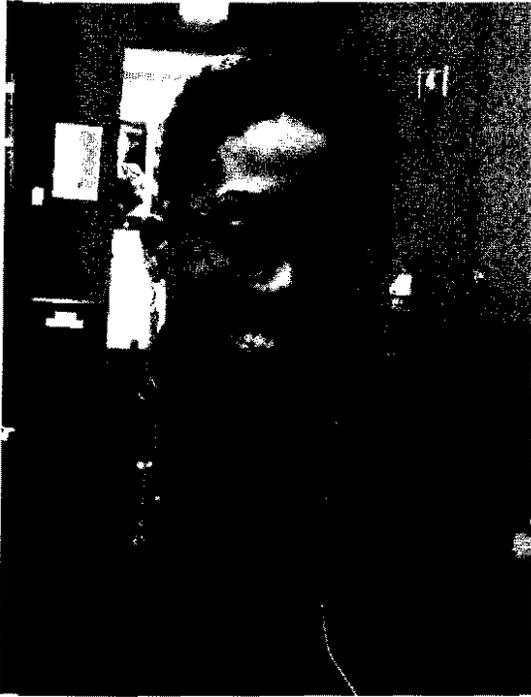


FIG. 5  
**Woodie King, Jr.**,  
 Tsehaye Geralyn  
 Hébert +  
**Chuck Smith**

Alia 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 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The most recent convening was held in April 2015 in Chicago at the Goodman Theatre. Organized by director **Chuck Smith**, **Ron OJ Parson**, Willa 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 Bandle, Hattilo 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 21<sup>st</sup> century can only thrive with an ethnically diverse alliance working collectively to create new work as well as stage classic plays that still adheres 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 Wells 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 developing work 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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HARVEY YOUNG is Chair and Professor of Theatre at Northwestern University, and President-elect of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. His books include *Theatre and Race*,

*Embodying Black Experience*, *Black Theater Is Black Life*, and *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre*. ✉

SDCJ-PRS BOOK REVIEW

SHAKESPEARE FOR AMERICAN ACTORS AND DIRECTORS

BY AARON FRANKEL

REVIEW BY

CRISTINA GUTIERREZ-DENNEHY  
Northern Arizona University

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Aaron Frankel's *Shakespeare for American Actors and Directors* aims to provide new ways to access and interpret Shakespeare's texts and characters. Breaking away from the models set by other Shakespearean acting manuals, such as Peter Hall's *Shakespeare's Advice to the Players* (2003) and John Barton's *Playing Shakespeare* (published in 2011, based on a 1982 television miniseries), Frankel's focus is on action rather than on verse. *Shakespeare for American Actors and Directors* begins with four brief chapters that introduce Frankel's approach to close reading, character relationships, and key words. The rest of the book is devoted to readings of sixteen scenes, drawn from a wide variety of Shakespeare's texts, which Frankel uses to suggest ways in which practitioners might apply his concepts.

Frankel's work, aimed primarily at actors, and secondarily at "the director's work with the actor" (ix), operates from the premise that work with Shakespeare should be considered "basic" rather than advanced training (ix). Although Frankel's treatment of verse (or lack thereof) may be off-putting to directors who have experience working with Shakespearean texts, his work with actions and relationships provides useful insights for directors working with actors who are new to Shakespeare.

In a brief section in the first chapter titled "How to Read a Play," Frankel uses the opening scene of *Hamlet* to demonstrate the value of close reading. Bernardo's simple "Who's there," Frankel argues, provides a wealth of information about the uncertainty and fear present in the scene. In addition to his emphasis on the importance of close reading, the strongest argument Frankel makes in the introductory chapters is that an understanding of action should be central to an actor's work with Shakespeare's texts. He suggests that actors work to uncover what Shakespeare's characters want by identifying both the source of conflict in a given scene and what a character does to address this conflict—which Frankel terms "action" (18). Although Frankel does not discuss directing explicitly, his succinct discussions of conflict and action