



Portraying the Soul of a People:

African Americans Confront Wilson's
Legacy From the Washington Stage

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Still there is another kind of play: the play that shows the soul of a people; and the soul of this people is truly worth showing.

—Willis Richardson, 1919¹

Portraying the Soul of a People:

African Americans Confront Wilson's Legacy From the Washington Stage

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In 1903, a twenty-year-old journalist who would go on to a distinguished career in journalism, diplomacy, and politics—future US minister to Liberia, Lester Aglar Walton—excitedly told the readers of *The Colored American Magazine* of African American successes on stage.² “The outlook for the Negro on the stage is particularly bright and encouraging,” Walton began. “At no time have colored stage folk been accorded such consideration and loyal support from show managers, the press and the general public... Heretofore, colored shows have only found their way to New York theatres of minor importance; and the crowded houses invariable in evidence where ‘coon’ shows have played have been occasioned more by reason of the meritorious work of the performers than by the popularity of the playhouses.”

To Walton's mind, “catchy music, mirth-provoking dialogue and mannerisms void of serious lines” had ensured the success of recently produced “coon” shows. “The stage,” he continued,

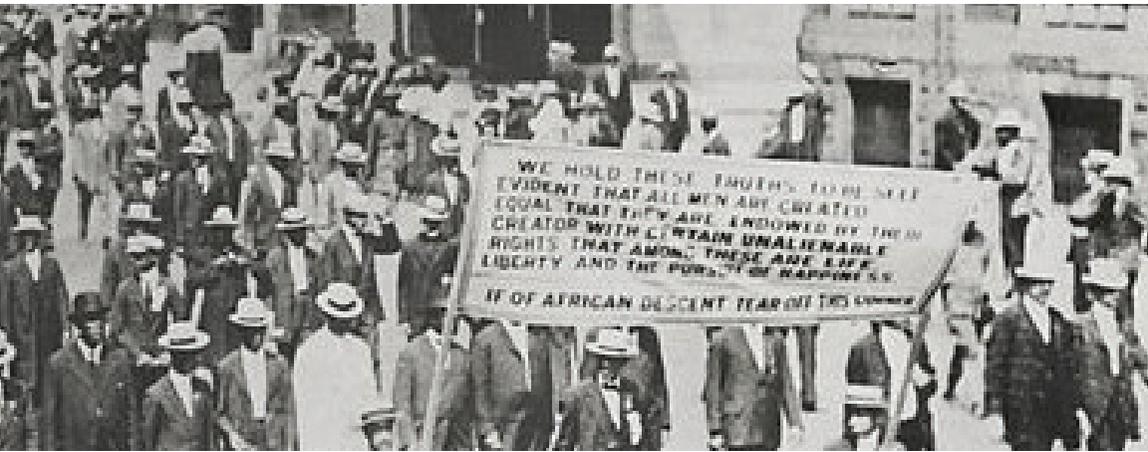
will be one of the principal factors in ultimately placing the Negro before the public in his true and proper light. Instead of being ridiculed before the foot-lights as has been done for years, a sentiment will be crystallized which will be of an instructive and beneficial nature. It is unfortunate that the members of the white race, generally speaking, do not know the colored man as he is, but merely from impressions formed of him from the observation of a certain element obnoxious—yet usually most conspicuous.



For Walton, “the time for the debut of the colored actor in serious stage work is not far distant.”

Walton was correct when recording that the African American musical—often closer to the popular “coon” minstrel show than to the operetta—had been enjoying success for several years. His assessment of the openness of white audiences to serious stage work, however, would prove optimistic; as would his assessment of race relations generally. Nearly a decade later, the country would elect a new president – Woodrow Wilson – who brought many of the beliefs and folkways of his native South with him to the White House.

The first Southern-born President since the Civil War, Wilson launched a devastating attack on African Americans generally with policies which had a disproportionate impact on the African American community in Washington. His administration segregated the Federal Civil Service, effectively denying all but the most menial Federal employment to African Americans. This action lay waste to a community in which the stability of a government job could mean the difference between respectability and penury.³ Over half of



In New York City during World War I the NAACP led a march protesting brutality against African Americans. One of the many banners read: "Mr. President, why not make America safe for democracy?"

all twentieth century regulations restricting the rights of African Americans in the District of Columbia were put into place during the Wilson Presidency. These actions earned Wilson deep enmity among Black Washingtonians for policies *The Washington Bee* maintained promised the "everlasting damnation to the colored Americans in this country."⁴

Many among Wilson's white supporters and compatriots shared the President's harshly racist attitudes. Racial tensions heightened as the United States entered World War One, with an atmosphere of white violence against African Americans growing following the war. Howard University historian Rayford W. Logan tellingly identified the period as the nadir of American – and Washington – race relations.⁵ In 1915, President hosted a screening of D. W. Griffith's freshly released epic apologia for the Ku Klux Klan, *The Birth of a Nation*; an action which embodied Wilson's stance on race. The viewing – the first time a film had been shown at the White House – was taken by many as an endorsement of a rewriting of post-Civil War history.⁶

From Mask to Mirror

In 1916, writer Edward Christopher Williams and his wife, Carrie Clifford, organized a “drama committee” within the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).⁷ The committee’s membership included



Edward Christopher Williams

photo courtesy of: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Christopher_Williams

Williams and Clifford, Anna Julia Cooper, Alain Leroy Locke, Ernest E. Just, and T. Montgomery Gregory (half of whom are now on US Postage Stamps).⁸ Beyond promoting theater, the committee set about countering the impact of D. W. Griffith’s scurrilous glorification of the Ku Klux Klan in *The Birth of a Nation*.⁹ In doing so they wanted to transform theater from the mask of burnt-cork Blackface to a mirror reflecting the realities of African American community life.

Several prominent Washingtonians participated in the founding of the NAACP in 1909 and, by 1913, established a semiautonomous District of Columbia chapter.¹⁰

Intense struggles over control of the Washington-based division broke out almost immediately.¹¹ With easy access to the federal government and to the city’s prosperous African American community, the Washington NAACP chapter represented a potential alternative power base to the national NAACP headquarters in New York. Struggles over control of the DC chapter would continue until a bitter 1942 court battle definitively resolved the chapter’s status as subordinate to the national organization.

This conflict for control of the NAACP in Washington was more than just a struggle over internal funds, rights, and privileges. The organization was caught up in skirmishes touched off by a rising professional class within the city’s African American community as it sought to seize community leadership away from well-entrenched pastor-politicians. Ambassador Archibald Grimké took control of the DC NAACP chapter and built it into the largest and strongest of all the organization’s local affiliates. Williams’s proposed drama committee was but one component of these larger struggles.

Archibald Grimké, former US consul in Santo Domingo, and his brother, the Reverend Francis Grimké of the prestigious Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, had long been intellectual and moral leaders of the Washington African American community. Born slaves in Charleston—and nephews of the famed abolitionists and suffragettes Sara and Angelina Grimké—Archibald and Francis fled slavery to fight with the Union Army. After the Civil War, they attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania before, respectively, entering Harvard Law School and Princeton Theological Seminary.

Archibald's daughter, Angelina Weld Grimké, attended DC schools and taught English at Armstrong Technical High School and Dunbar High School. Her essays, short stories, and poems would be included in such anthologies of the New Negro (Harlem) Renaissance as *The New Negro*, *Caroling Dusk*, and *Negro Poets and Their Poems*. Working closely with the DC NAACP chapter's Drama Committee, the young English teacher penned *Rachel*, which has come to be considered the first "propaganda" play to counter the pernicious impact of Griffith's and other's racist films and plays.¹²

Rachel premiered under the Drama Committee's auspices at the Myrtilla Miner Normal School on March 3–6, 1916. It was directed by Nathaniel Guy, and its playbill noted that this "race play in three acts" represented "the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of tens of millions of colored citizens in this Free Republic."¹³

Angelina's antilynching play presented the life of an African American family in the North during the early twentieth century. Each role centered on the title character, and these roles thus expressed different responses to the racial discrimination against Blacks at the time. Rachel changed her perceptions based on her expanding awareness of the terrible truths in the world around her, which was torn apart by a lynching.



Angelina Weld Grimké

Photo courtesy of: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Angelina_Weld_Grimk%C3%A9.jpg

Grimké's play responded to the heightened racism of the Wilson era, and to the Southern white barbarism underlying an accelerating rate of lynching. Her characters proclaim African American personhood and citizenship by focusing on African American domesticity and the damage inflicted on it by mob violence to assert cultural self-affirmation.¹⁴ The creators of antilynching plays endeavored to bring a fundamental humanity to the portrayal of African Americans on stage.

The Washington Antilynching Plays

As Koritha Mitchell notes, Grimké and the other prominent authors of these plays were Black women living in Washington (including Grimké, Mary Burrill, and Georgia Douglas Johnson), near Washington (Alice Dunbar-Nelson), or spent time in Washington (Myrtle Smith Livingston). "As the capital," Mitchell contends, "Washington, D.C., stood for the nation's commitment to protecting American life and liberty, but in the 1920s it was where antilynching bills went to die... the genre's characters become representatives for a national Black population whose concerns are not necessarily shared by their representatives in the Congress and Senate." DC, she continues, "held in perfect tension all of the promises that were presumably inherent in the North and the perils that were supposedly more characteristic of the South."¹⁵

Theater historians have tended to minimize the artistic achievement of *Rachel* and other antilynching plays. Rather than seek commercial production, their playwrights penned superficially modest one-act works suited for reading and amateur performance in the intimate spaces of family gatherings, school auditoriums, and church halls. They reached their audience by publishing their plays in periodicals with large African American and white activist readerships such as W.E.B. DuBois's *The Crisis*, and Max Eastman's *The Liberator*.¹⁶ Focusing on sympathetic, well-mannered, dignified characters (such as loyal soldiers, committed lawyers, and caring mothers), the plays, according to Mitchell, "did not just need those who would work

to gain whites' empathy; they also needed individuals who could provide tools for surviving."¹⁷

Georgia Douglas Johnson, among the most prolific writers of the genre, disguised creative ambition behind the supposedly simplistic format of such "propaganda" plays. As Mitchell records, Johnson "wrote two versions of a script that dramatizes the moment when white authorities willfully disregard African American voices. One version of Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* uses hymns from a Black church as background to the action; the other features a white church, but both show that police officers abruptly reject Black testimony."¹⁸

The Washington antilynching plays reveal how a number of the writers and playwrights gathered in the city would contribute to the emergence of African American theater during the years and decades ahead. These efforts, however, were not without controversy. Divisions over staging *Rachel* brought focus to what had been often inchoate differences in sensibility. Two distinct schools of thought emerged driven by the writings of Du Bois and Locke throughout the 1920s. Over time they became reduced to differences between "propaganda" as advocated by DuBois; and "art," as promoted by Locke's approach to aesthetics.¹⁹ Du Bois and Locke agreed in the end to disagree. As Miller observes, "In both men's cases, the depth of their education and intellect alerted them to the fact that Negro culture could produce art that was beyond the precepts of the white middle class."²⁰

Their proponents and admirers continued the argument over what constituted Black theater – and who was in and who was out. Did one accept Du Bois's four principles of African American drama and theatre as being "about us, by us, for us, and near us;" or not?²¹ This disagreement animated African American – and Washington – theater for the remainder of the twentieth century.²²

Locke and Gregory eventually supported the Drama Committee's production of Angelina Ward Grimké's *Rachel* with the

expectation that the committee subsequently would support the folk dramas they favored. Locke resigned when the committee failed to back such productions.²³ Through these battles, Locke and Gregory discovered a common belief in the power of realistic portraiture of lower-class life, together with a style of storytelling, stage direction, and set and costume design that was coming to define modernist drama.²⁴ This shared preference drove Gregory's attempts to raise Howard University's drama club to the more ambitious Howard Players. In doing so, he would draw on the advances noted by Walton a few years before.

A Child of Howard University Returns



Thomas Montgomery Gregory

Photo Courtesy of: <https://aaregistry.org/story/thomas-montgomery-gregory-broke-ground-for-black-theater/>

Thomas Montgomery Gregory's appointment in 1910 to Howard University's English Department as an instructor was a homecoming. Gregory—who had just graduated from Harvard as a member of the illustrious Class of 1910, where he studied alongside T. S. Elliot, Walter Lippmann, John Reed, Hsi Yun Feng, and Hamilton Fish Jr.—had grown up on the Howard campus. His father transferred to the university from Oberlin College in 1868, becoming the first student to enroll in the collegiate department. He also was valedictorian of the university's three-member initial graduating class.

Upon completing his degree, the elder Gregory joined the faculty and the household moved onto the Howard campus.²⁵ The family eventually relocated to New Jersey, where Gregory headed the Bordentown Industrial and Manual Training School. Thomas Montgomery's mother, Fannie Emma Hagan, a Howard student of Madagascan descent, was a force of nature in her own right. She mentored students, supported young African American women, and enjoyed recognition as an independent and important partner in various family endeavors at Howard and Bordentown.²⁶

The younger Gregory established himself at Howard and in Washington, starting a family and moving through the university ranks. When World War I broke out, Gregory unreservedly

lobbied for the Army to accept African Americans into officer training programs. His efforts—which joined with those Joel E. Springarn, Du Bois, and other prominent leaders—prompted the Army to establish the 17th Provisional Training Regiment for Black officer candidates at Fort Des Moines. After completion of officer training, the Army commissioned Gregory as a lieutenant. He served as an intelligence officer without leaving the country, and he continued to remain active in veterans' groups throughout his life.²⁷

Gregory became head of the English Department upon returning to Howard in 1919. His publications and professional interests increasingly focused on the role of the arts in promoting social change. Drawn especially to the theater, Gregory used his position to establish the Howard Players in 1919 and, two years later, became the first director of the newly established Dramatic Art and Public Speaking Division.

Gregory, as Marvin McAllister has argued, remained troubled that elite African Americans had sought “to un-race” themselves by avoiding any association with their own cultural heritage. Arriving at Howard, he became concerned that a fascination with European classical education remained deeply entrenched. Gregory considered this devotion to European models to be an obstacle for the development of African American drama in particular.²⁸

Having been joined, by this time, by Locke, another Harvard man, Gregory set his sights high. He declared that he sought nothing less than the establishment of National Negro Theater at Howard. As he wrote at the time, “Washington, the national capital, is the center of what is becoming to be regarded as one of the most interesting as well as significant experiments in the development of native American Drama. . . . Now Howard University has undertaken to build upon the slight foundations thus laid a permanent and determined movement for the establishment of a National Negro Theatre similar in general outline to the Irish Theatre at Dublin.”²⁹

Confronting Racist Stage Traditions

As Walton had noted nearly two decades before, African American musical theater was well on its way towards establishing its presence. Indeed, the achievement of African American composers, musicians, and performers in moving the American musical from the racist clichés of the minstrel stage to noteworthy artistry provided a model for those – like Walton, Gregory, and Locke – who wanted to provoke Black dramatic theater to greater originality and invention. Moving forward, they faced entrenched traditions which constantly challenged their vision.

The 1752 arrival of the Covent Garden impresario Lewis Hallam and his company on American shores proved to be a foundational event for American theater.³⁰ Formerly the head of London's Company of Comedians, Hallem, his wife, their children, and a troupe of ten adults landed in the American colonies. Their appearance in Williamsburg, Virginia, marked the beginning of professional theater in what would become the United States.

Hallam's company established several customary aspects of American theater that would last into the nineteenth century: managers/producers/directors controlled companies; theatrical performances featured stock companies that offered well-known repertoires of dramatic and comedic works; and financial success depended as much or more on touring as on remaining in one town on a single stage. Additionally, in 1769, Hallam's son, Lewis Jr., became the first white actor known to have performed an African American-styled song in Blackface when he sang "Dear Heart! What a Terrible Life I Am Led" at New York's John Street Theatre.³¹ Blacks have been mocked on American stages ever since.

Lewis Jr. appeared in *The Disappointment or The Force of Credulity*, presenting the first Black character drawn from American colonial experience with the racially charged name "Raccoon."³² Lewis Jr.'s performance was followed by British and American productions such as *Robinson Crusoe and Harlequin*

Friday (1786), *The Yorker's Strategem, or Banana's Wedding* (1792), *The Triumph of Love* (1795), and *The Politicians* (1797), mocking African American dialect and speech while Black characters shuffled along for comic effect.³³ At least ten plays written by English and American playwrights before 1800 included Black dialect, to the humorous delight of white audiences.³⁴ Such sarcastic formulas morphed into the nineteenth century's most popular and lucrative entertainment: the minstrel show.

Minstrelsy was a purely American invention, having nothing to do with the minstrel bards who had wandered across Europe from the time of the Middle Ages. European storytelling crossed the Atlantic with French, British, and Dutch colonizers, blending, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, into what would become American folk music. The minstrel show was something else altogether. American minstrelsy—which remained the country's most popular theatrical form throughout the nineteenth century—assumed extraordinarily pernicious meaning as it became inexorably intertwined with American racism.

By the 1840s, a Cincinnati bookkeeper named Stephen Foster began writing songs for monetary profit. Foster's songs—such as "Oh! Susanna," "Camptown Races," "Old Folks at Home," "My Old Kentucky Home," and "Old Black Joe"—entered into the American musical canon and continue to be sung today.³⁵ They proved to be well suited for the "Blackface minstrel" variety shows that dominated the American stage. Foster soon found an easy alliance with the circus promoter and celebrity clown Dan Rice, who gained fame and fortune by singing "Negro songs" in Blackface as the character Jim Crow. Other popular Blackface characters sported a host of offensive names.³⁶

By midcentury, the mask of Blackface cork, shoe polish, and greasepaint—and the accompanying happy-go-lucky darkies who filled the stage—defined the place of African Americans on stage; and beyond. For the dramatic form's white originators, minstrelsy offered a platform for ridiculing African Americans. For African Americans, as Eleanor Traylor has argued, the genre's cakewalks,

hoedowns, tap dances, “signify” language, and color-drenched costumes provided the equivalent of the masking-miming rituals of the slave quarters, in which the last laugh was on master.³⁷

The parameters for the African American on the American stage (and later film and television) were set remarkably early in the history of the American theater. As Sterling A. Brown recorded in his influential 1933 article “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors,” African Americans appearing in American letters were pigeonholed into seven stereotypical character types: the contented slave, the wretched freeman, the comic Negro, the brute Negro, the tragic mulatto, the local color Negro, and the exotic primitive.³⁸ Brown, widely known as one of the poets of the New Negro (Harlem) Renaissance, was already teaching at Howard University when he wrote this article.

Singing Our Song



Will Marion Cook
photo courtesy of:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_Marion_Cook

The battle to remove the Blackface mask and reinvent the American stage as a mirror of African American life thus began before Gregory, Locke, and Brown arrived at Howard. Black performers appearing in Black shows began to enjoy large-scale success for the first time. The African American comedian Bert Williams became arguably the most popular performer in the country at the time. Violinist and composer Will Marion Cook emerged as a critical figure in this story.³⁹

Cook was a native Washingtonian, and the son of the dean of Howard University Law School. He began studying the violin and composition at Oberlin Conservatory, before members of Washington’s First Congressional Church, led by Frederick Douglass, raised the money for him to continue his studies at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin, where he became a student of Joseph Joachim. Cook returned to the United States and studied with the Czech-born composer and conductor Antonin Dvořák at the short-lived National Conservatory in New York.⁴⁰

Dvořák, much to the condemnation of American arbiters of high musical taste, was convinced that African American music would be the source of a distinctive American musical tradition. At his prodding, as many as 150 of the National Conservatory's 600 students were African American, including such noteworthy prodigies as Cook, Maurice Arnold Strathotte, and Henry T. Burleigh.

At the urging of Bert Williams and George Walker, the popular vaudeville comedy team then approaching the apex of the American entertainment industry, Cook and poet Paul Laurence Dunbar collaborated on a new musical comedy. The duo wrote *Clorindy; or the Origin in the Cakewalk*, during an alcohol-fueled all-nighter in Cook's brother John's basement in Washington, just off the Howard campus on Sixth Street NW. Set in the Louisiana of the 1880s, the show purported to tell the story of the beginnings of the faddishly popular cakewalk dance.

Williams and Walker bowed out of the production due to scheduling conflicts, but another famous African American actor, Ernest Hogan, signed on. When the show opened in New York at the Casino Theatre's Roof Garden on July 4, 1898, *Clorindy* became the first Broadway musical with an all-Black cast. The show marked the acting debut of a young Abbie Mitchell, who would marry Cook. Mitchell would gather numerous stage credits, including singing "Summertime" in her fabled final musical role as "Clara" in the original 1935 cast of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.⁴¹

An instant hit, *Clorindy* demonstrated that African Americans could carry a Broadway show on their own. However, the production conformed to the stereotypes of African Americans that had dominated the American stage from the very beginning. Cook reported that when his mother first heard what would become the show's hit—"Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd?"—she broke down in tears of shame.⁴²



Abbie Mitchell
photo courtesy of: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abbie_Mitchell#/media/File:Maud_Cuney_Hare-223-Abbie_Mitchell.jpg

Cook continued to collaborate with Williams and Walker and, together with Dunbar, wrote several more shows, including *Senegambian Carnival* (1898) and *A Lucky Coon* (1898). Other all-Black shows were making their ways to the Great White Way during these years, including Williams and Walker's *Sons of Ham* (1899) and *Bandana Land* (1908), as well as Bob Cole and Billy Johnson's *A Trip to Coontown* (1898).⁴³ Williams and Walker performed in Blackface (after Walker's death, Williams continued to put on the paint after he joined the Ziegfeld Follies). As these plays' titles indicate, self-mockery reinforced white audiences' stereotypes of African Americans.⁴⁴

Cook and Dunbar collaborated on one more triumph before Dunbar's premature death at the age of thirty-three in 1906: the smash hit *In Dahomey*.⁴⁵ That work had been inspired by the the "Dahomey Village" exhibit at the 1892 Chicago World's Fair that assigned people from West Africa (present-day Benin) via Paris to a campground, where they displayed their "primitive" way of life to "superior" white visitors.⁴⁶ Cook and Dunbar were joined in this enterprise by Jesse A. Shipp, who wrote the book, with Cook writing the score, and Dunbar the lyrics. Bert Williams, George Walker, and Aida Overton Walker played the lead roles.

A full-scale operetta, *In Dahomey* is considered "the first full-length musical written and played by Blacks to be performed at a major Broadway house."⁴⁷ The play enjoyed two New York runs, in 1903 and 1904, before extensive tours in the United States over the next four years. Its original production moved to the Shaftsbury Theatre in London in 1903, after an extensive provincial tour around England. The production's immense popularity was capped by a command performance at Buckingham Palace to celebrate the Prince of Wales's (and future King Edward VIII's) ninth birthday.⁴⁸ This triumph undoubtedly spurred Walton to write the above mentioned article.

After these successes, Cook continued to play a prominent role in nurturing African American music. He famously joined Washington-raised James Reese Europe Europe at the

celebrated Clef Club concerts, which brought African American music to the concert stage; and he mentored yet another young Washingtonian who sought musical success in New York, Edward “Duke” Ellington. Cook and Mitchell remained close to Washington even as they entered New York’s musical world. Their son, Will Mercer Cook, joined the Howard faculty and later became John F. Kennedy’s ambassador to Niger.⁴⁹

Other works followed, such as the 1921 smash hit *Shuffle Along*, with Eubie Blake’s music, Noble Sissle’s lyrics, and Fournoy Miller’s and Aubrey Lyles’s book. The show’s creators wrote the play after an encounter at the annual convention of the NAACP in Philadelphia in 1920, where they joined forces to create “high-class” entertainment.⁵⁰ Blake, Sissle and Miller portrayed a serious love affair between two African Americans on the American stage for first time; brought jazz to Broadway; launched the stage careers of Josephine Baker, Adelaide Hall, Florence Mills, Fredi Washington, and Paul Robeson; and featured what would become Harry Truman’s campaign song, “I’m Just Wild about Harry.”

As Lester Aglar Walton had hoped, the wave of African American musicals appearing on major American and British stages during the quarter century after the Chicago World’s Fair transformed the “coon” musical show into operetta.⁵¹ But unlike his hopeful prediction in 1903, such success did not extend to the dramatic stage. Plays written by African Americans about African Americans and performed by African Americans remained extraordinarily rare. Thomas Montgomery Gregory made this second artistic revolution – which seemed ever more pressing in the wake of Wilson’s racist policies and stances – his personal mission as he moved into the chair of Howard University’s Department of English.

From Drama Club to Theater Company

Like many universities of the era, students and faculty at Howard had organized a Drama Club in 1907.⁵² Any liberal arts

student enrolled in a four-year degree path could join the club for a membership fee of 50 cents.⁵³ Formed under the direction of Ernest Everett Just, Benjamin Brawley, and Marie Moore-Forrest, the club attracted members from across the university community interested in presenting the works of Shakespeare.⁵⁴ Under their guidance, student and community actors offered several Shakespearean plays at the commercial Howard Theatre just off campus over the next several years.⁵⁵



Ernest E. Just
photo courtesy of:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Everett_Just

Just arrived at Howard after graduating from Dartmouth College with highest honors.⁵⁶ Finding his career options limited by his race, he joined Howard's English Department in 1907. Howard students already had participated in dramatic ventures for some time, because required training in oratory led to their involvement in competitions and other theatrical events as far back as the 1870s and 1880s.⁵⁷

Howard rhetoric professor Coralie Franklin-Cook, who moved to Washington in 1899 from the National School of Oratory in Philadelphia, transformed public-speaking elocution into mandated courses for graduation. The rigor of these requirements prepared students to take the next step onto the stage as Just began to promote drama and theater activities.⁵⁸

Just's first love, however, was zoology. After collaborating during the summers with Frank R. Lillie—head of the Department of Zoology at the University of Chicago and director of the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, Massachusetts—Just earned his PhD from the University of Chicago and, beginning in 1912, served as chair of the new Department of Zoology at Howard.

His research on the role of the cell surface in the development of organisms proved pathbreaking. Because he was prevented by race from securing a position at a major American university, he worked in European research centers as much as his Howard

duties would allow (he briefly was a prisoner of war at the outbreak of World War II, after being swept up by the German invasion of France in 1940). Although his increasing involvement in biological and zoological research precluded his continued association with Howard's burgeoning dramaturgical scene, he retained a lifelong interest in the dramatic arts and connection with theater at Howard.

Enthusiastically launched, Just's club expanded its repertoire in 1909 with Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, followed between 1910 and 1919 by Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals*, R. M. Baker's *For One Night Only*, Stephen Phillips's *Herod*, and Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Merchant of Venice*, among numerous productions.⁵⁹ The university's publication of record at the time—the *Howard University Journal*—proclaimed the premier performance of *She Stoops to Conquer* at the Andrew Rankin Chapel as “the greatest success ever attained on the hill [the community's moniker for the school—BR]. It drew the fullest house of anything that has ever been given and reaped the greatest financial rewards.”⁶⁰ A year later, the *Journal* eagerly anticipated the club's production of *The Rivals*, noting that the majority of seats had been sold “to people not connected with the university.”⁶¹

Success on campus led the actors to move off campus into the surrounding community with performances at schools and, eventually, at the new Howard Theatre down the hill at 7th and T streets NW.⁶² Inaugurated in 1910, the Howard Theatre became the premier commercial theater in the country catering to African American audiences.⁶³ With eclectic programming appealing to multiple tastes, the Howard's management booked a production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* soon after the theater's opening.⁶⁴ Other dramatic productions followed. The newly arrived Gregory, for example, played Lysander in a Washington Dramatic Club production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Anna Julia Cooper at the Howard Theatre in May



Coralie Franklin-Cook
photo courtesy of: photo courtesy of: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abbie_Mitchell#/media/File:Maud_Cuney_Hare-223/Abbie_Mitchell.jpg

1912; and he played Lorenzo in the club's *Merchant of Venice* a year later.⁶⁵ These successes transpired just as Wilson was about to be elected President.

A Theater Born at Howard

Throughout these years, Gregory kept thinking about how he could build off the successes of Washington African Americans on the musical stage and of the Howard Drama Club to extend the reach of serious African American theater. Just's departure from the English Department to establish a Zoology program and the appointment of Locke to the English Department combined with Gregory's appointment as Department Chair to open new possibilities. His goal became the establishment of a National Negro Theater at Howard modeled after the Irish National Theatre in Dublin.⁶⁶



Howard Theater, 2015
photo courtesy of: Blair Ruble

In early 1922, the white theater critic Leonard Hall received the message and told readers of the new local tabloid the *Washington Daily News* that “no more significant or satisfying dramatic endeavor has been visible in Washington this Spring,” than the efforts of the Howard Department of Dramatic Arts “to build a structure of native Negro drama, to be interpreted by people of that race.”⁶⁷ Hall had just attended a campus performance of two one-act plays—one by a student, and one by an alumna of the university—and had become a convert to Gregory's cause.

The authors and performers Hall praised were part of Gregory's new effort at Howard. Gregory hoped to train actors and producers who would be able to organize groups of African American players in larger cities around the country; companies that would achieve a high level of artistry sufficient to attract fair-minded members of the white community. He planned to do so by blending elements from four models: the Irish National Theater, founded by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, George Moore, and Edward Martyn in Dublin; George Pierce Baker's “Workshop

47" Program at Harvard; George Cram "Jig" Cools' and Susan Glaspell's Provincetown Players; and Frederick Koch and Paul Green's Carolina Playmakers at the University of North Carolina.⁶⁸ Hall's review suggested that the enterprise was off to a fortuitous start.

Gregory, by this time, had secured an energetic partner for this initiative in Howard faculty member and fellow Harvard alumnus Locke. Locke was born into High Victorian African American Philadelphia, and he set off to Harvard after graduating from that city's Central High School. Upon graduation from Harvard in 1907, he was chosen as the first African American Rhodes Scholar (the selecting officials possibly did not realize that he was Black).

After spending research time in Oxford and Berlin, where he studied literature and philosophy, Locke joined the Howard English Department in 1912. Four years later, he returned to Harvard, where he completed his doctoral degree in philosophy. He then took up the position of chair of Howard's Philosophy Department in 1918.⁶⁹

Locke and Gregory had hit it off well during Locke's initial stint at Howard. Both shared the experience of having been among the very few African Americans at Harvard. Together, they founded Howard's student literary Stylus Society and its magazine, *The Stylus*, which would come to play an important role in the New Negro (Harlem) Renaissance, launching, among many, the writing career of the Howard student Zora Neale Hurston.⁷⁰

Locke was already familiar with the work of the Harvard dramatist George Pierce Baker. As Baker's former student, Gregory wanted to emulate the work of his former professor.⁷¹ After establishing the Harvard Dramatic Club in 1908, as they both knew, Baker had founded Workshop 47. The workshop's purpose was to provide a cohesive forum for the performance of plays developed within his English 47 class—an arrangement well suited to the plans of Locke and Gregory.⁷²



Irish National Theatre, Dublin
photo courtesy of: Eason, <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Collection/vtls000033799>

Locke welcomed the endorsement of Department of Dramatic Arts Dean Kelly Miller for Gregory's plans to create a drama program at Howard modeled after Baker's Workshop 47 Program for training playwrights, directors, and performers.⁷³ With Gregory working on productions at Howard, Locke would oversee student playwriting in his English seminars.⁷⁴ Women penned the majority of these plays, as female students seized this unusual opportunity for the era to express themselves publicly.⁷⁵

During his initial stint at Howard, Locke had found himself embroiled together with Gregory in the above-mentioned conflict within the Drama Committee of the Washington branch of the NAACP over the sorts of plays the group should produce. Locke, Gregory, and Howard Players cofounder Just believed the path beyond the caricatures of African Americans that had long dominated the American stage was through enhanced artistic achievement. Anna Cooper and a majority of the committee favored W. E. B. Du Bois's stance that theater was propaganda and should be pursued as such. As noted

above, the debate surrounding the production of Grimké's *Rachel* in the Drama Committee consolidated a growing discomfort within the African American drama community over a perceived tension between "propaganda" and "art."

Henry D. Miller argues in *Theorizing Black Theatre*, that this strain began to form much earlier in the already noted turn-of-the-century efforts to establish an African-American musical theater (as evident in the very first full-length African American written musical comedies – Bob Cole's *A Trip to Coontown* [1898] and Will Marion Cook's *Jes' Lak White Fo'ks* [1899]). The contrast between Cole and Cook rested, for Miller, in the opposition of a focus on the "Outer Life" (represented by Cole's interest in society) and the "Inner Life" (exemplified by Cook's focus on performance). Those distinctions, he continued, trace their origins back to African performance philosophies as well as to divisions within European tradition and evolved over time into a distinction between "propaganda" and "art" evident



Alain LeRoy Locke
photo courtesy of:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alain_LeRoy_Locke

in the controversy over Angelina Grimké's *Rachel*.⁷⁶ Together with the backing of Dean Miller, Gregory and Locke set out to elevate the university's drama club to the more ambitious Howard Players.

A University-based Strategy for a New Theater

Gregory established a clear strategy for building his program in the director's reports he filed with the Howard administration in 1921 and 1922. In 1921, he noted that African Americans had lacked the institutional foundations for permanent and determined progress developing their own theatrical voice. He argued that the establishment of the National Negro Theatre at Howard could provide the catalyzing effect on African American drama that the establishment of the Irish National Theatre in Dublin had achieved for the Irish people.

This argument expanded on Gregory's earlier writing about the relationship between race and art. In 1915, Gregory published a lengthy and considered reflection on "race attitude" in the Boston-based journal *The Citizen*. "By race attitude," Gregory wrote, "I mean the attitude of the individual members of the Negro race to the race itself. For instead of cultivating a race pride, a race self-respect, a race consciousness, we have sought to un-race ourselves, to avoid whatever might definitely associate us with the Negro race." If art is self-expression, he noted, "it is necessarily race expression." This expression demanded a presentation of African Americans outside any sense of inferiority, without any tendency "to mimic the tone and texture of Euro-Americanism."⁷⁷

For these reasons, he argued, the establishment of the Howard Players represented a significant development for African Americans throughout the country. Noting that support of original dramatic works by African Americans about African Americans would "considerably influence the development of a real native American drama," he explicitly turned to the

experience of the Irish National Theatre in advancing a distinctive Irish drama.⁷⁸

The next year, Gregory stated that the Players were larger than Howard. “The Players,” he began, “are not simply a college dramatic club or local institution. They are now recognized as a significant movement in American Drama, and great things are expected and demanded of them.”⁷⁹ To underscore the national reach of his enterprise, Gregory convened a blue ribbon advisory council to support his efforts, which included Harvard’s George Pierce Baker; the playwright and poet Percy Mackaye; the drama critics and actors Robert Benchley and Haywood Broun; the American novelist Winston Churchill (who, at the time, was better known than the British politician of the same name); Smith College’s Samuel L. Eliot Jr.; the designer Robert L. Jones; Carolina Players’ Frederick H. Koch; *Theater Art Magazine*’s Kenneth Macgowan; the NAACP’s Joel Spingarn; and the *New Republic*’s Stark Young—as well as the playwrights Ridgeley Torrence and Eugene O’Neill.⁸⁰

This advisory council’s impressive membership crossed racial and geographic barriers and demonstrated widespread support among many leaders of the American theater community for Gregory’s mission of bringing African Americans to the dramatic stage. Letters of support streamed in from such luminaries as W. E. B. Du Bois; Grace Hegger Lewis, on behalf of herself and her husband Sinclair; and Eugene O’Neill.⁸¹ O’Neill’s missive was particularly unambiguous. “I am thoroughly in sympathy with your undertaking,” he wrote, “and I believe as strongly as you do that the gifts the Negro can—and will—bring to our native drama are invaluable ones. The possibilities are limitless and, to a dramatist they open up new and intriguing opportunities.”⁸²

Universities over Commerce

Locke shared Gregory’s commitment to the enterprise, similarly emphasizing the importance of a university base for the future development of African American theater. His article “Steps

Toward a Negro Theatre," appearing in *Crisis* in 1922, echoed several of Gregory's themes.⁸³

Locke began his commentary by observing that "culturally, we are abloom in a new field, but it is yet undecidedly a question as to what we shall reap—a few flowers or a harvest. That depends upon how we cultivate this area of the drama in the next few years." Noting that "the Negro actor without the Negro drama is a sporadic phenomenon," Locke made the case for a comprehensive approach to cultivating a new drama. Successful actors alone were insufficient, he argued. New actors needed to be cultivated, new plays needed to be written, and new theaters needed to be managed.

Although many were concerned that African American theater favor "professional auspices and a greater metropolitan center like New York or Chicago for the Negro theatre," Locke added, those at Howard "believe a university foundation will assure a greater continuity of effort and insure accordingly a greater permanence of result." This perspective stood in opposition to those who favored connections to commercial theaters in New York or Chicago. Despite such diversity of opinion, Locke counseled that the movement to produce African American dramatic theater must receive "the unanimous sanction of our hearts."

Gregory's and Locke's approach reflected the success of two related organizational strategies in American theater that had developed over the previous decade. Beginning in about 1912, a movement had begun to support innovation outside the restrictions of large-scale commercial theaters. First emerging in Chicago, Boston, Seattle, and California, the "Little Theatre Movement," as it became known, encouraged intimate, non-profit-centered and reform-minded theater.⁸⁴

Over the next two decades, some 470 African American little theater groups (including the Scribblers of Baltimore, the Dixwell Players of New Haven, the Gilpins of Cleveland, the Quill Club of Boston, the Shadows of Chicago, and other important

companies in Dallas, Philadelphia, and Indianapolis) would come into being and pass out of existence in every major Black community across the country.⁸⁵ The movement's experimental character, support of playwrights, reform—often radical—politics, and community orientation appealed to Gregory, as he developed strong ties with the Provincetown Players.

The Provincetown Players had moved from Cape Cod to New York in 1917 and would continue to feature the work of new playwrights until the company vanished during the mid-1920s.⁸⁶ At the time that Gregory and Locke were launching the Howard Players, the Provincetown Players—and the many artists then associated with it (including Theodore Dreiser, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Eugene O'Neill, John Reed, and Wallace Stevens)—were among the most influential theatrical innovators of their era.

The Carolina Playmakers at the University of North Carolina provided an even more appropriate model for what Gregory and Locke wanted to achieve.⁸⁷ Established in 1918 by Professor Frederick Koch as an outreach effort for the production of original student plays, the Playmakers, like Baker's Workshop 47, sought to create a cadre of theater artists trained in all aspects of their craft. Its first production featured the playwriting debut of the Carolina undergraduate Thomas Wolfe.

The Playmakers primarily produced "folk plays" reflecting the experiences of marginalized communities around North Carolina and the American South. They toured statewide, often to the most dispossessed communities, and gave voice to the concerns of poor rural communities, Appalachian whites, African Americans, and Native Americans. In 1925, the Playmakers began publishing *Carolina Folk Plays*, providing a model for achieving the goals articulated by Gregory and Locke for the Howard Players. In addition to Koch, the Carolina student writer—and future Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright—Paul Green developed strong connections to the Howard Players.

Each of the archetypes for the Howard Players—the Irish National Theater, Baker's Workshop 47, the Provincetown

Players, and the Carolina Playmakers—embodied several shared characteristics. With the exception of Workshop 47, each theater company sought to give voice to marginalized communities. With the exception of the Irish National Theater and the Provincetown Players, they were connected to universities. They all, in different ways, tried to extend the boundaries of theatrical arts beyond large-scale commercial enterprises. They valued innovation and holistic approaches to the training of theatrical professionals. And they valued the realism, unfettered storytelling, and simplicity of the modernist movement in drama.

Playing before the World

On November 3, 1921, *Life Magazine* published an article by its drama critic, Robert C. Benchley, praising Howard University's efforts to establish a national Negro theater where "the Negro playwright, musician, actor, dancer, and artist in concert shall fashion a drama that shall merit the respect and win the admiration of the world."⁸⁸ Benchley's article appeared just as Gregory was putting the final touches on a germinal production that extended beyond the bounds of Howard, the city, and even the United States. A month later, the Howard Players performed for the delegates to the World Disarmament Conference (also known as the Washington Naval Conference).

During his first year in office, Republican president Warren G. Harding invited nine nations under the auspices of the League of Nations to resolve disputes and implement an international regulatory regime for naval fleets.⁸⁹ This event—the first international conference ever convened in the United States—provided an opportunity for Harding and his imposing secretary of state, Charles Evans Hughes, to establish their diplomatic bona fides while diverging from their predecessors in the Democratic Woodrow Wilson administration. The conference organizers faced the additional challenge of needing to figure out how to keep the delegates contented in what they considered a provincial backwater.

Today, Harding regularly appears at the bottom of lists ranking American presidents. The fact that he died of a heart attack halfway through his first term limited his legislative accomplishments. And his presidency was further undermined by ever-unfolding scandals and a pattern of womanizing that tarnished his personal stature. Generally, a go-along-get-along politician, Harding was not known for his strong moral stances. However, though long forgotten, Harding initially sought to moderate Wilson's harsh race policies, both nationally and in the nation's capital.

At a planning session with his staff, Harding evidently suggested that the delegates might enjoy an evening of performance by the newly formed Howard Players.⁹⁰ This mention was all Gregory needed to swing into action. Despite the absence of support from other administration officials—and only a tepid endorsement by Howard officers—Gregory succeeded in organizing an immensely well-received evening of theater and music on December 12, 1921.

The silence of senior State Department bureaucrats conformed to the generally patrician disdain many diplomats displayed at the time toward their compatriots—amplified, no doubt, by an unhealthy measure of racism. Senior members of the US delegation skipped the event, with only a relatively low-ranking State Department official—Charles Lee Cook—and delegation advisory committee member—George W. Wilson of Harvard—showing up for the host country.

Gregory's Howard superiors played a distasteful bureaucratic game of claiming success as their own while casting blame for failure on others. Howard president J. Stanley Durkee and his staff undoubtedly were distracted by preparations for the bestowing of an honorary doctor of science degree on the French World War I hero Marshal Ferdinand Foch a month previously. In the end, Durkee dispatched the university's secretary treasurer, Emmett J. Scott, in his stead.

Such behind-the-scenes bureaucratic scuffles passed unnoticed to those who attended Gregory's evening of entertainment.⁹¹ Gregory viewed the show as an opportunity to be "of tremendous importance to the reputation and staging of the Negro race," given that the delegates "knew nothing of the cultural life of the Negro in this country." Everyone present that evening seem to have agreed.

A larger-than-capacity audience crowded into the university's Rankin Chapel to see a two-part program featuring a performance of Ridgely Torrence's new drama *Simon, the Cyrenian*, followed by a musical program performed by the University Glee Club under the direction of Roy W. Tibbs. Torrence's play told the tale of Simon, whom the Romans compelled to carry the cross of Jesus to Calvary. The Players would perform this play on numerous occasions, using sets and costumes designed by the Provincetown Players' Cleon Throckmorton, who had recently begun teaching in Gregory's new Dramatic Arts program. The cast included the future Michigan politician Harold Bledsoe, the future New Negro (Harlem) Renaissance playwright Ottie Graham, and the future actor Alston Burleigh.



Howard Players, 1922
photo courtesy of: howardtheater.org

After an intermission, the University Glee Club performed a program designed to show the evolution of Negro music. The musical selections moved from such folk songs as "Roll, Jordon, Roll" and "Steal Away" to compositions of later composers such as Henry T. Burleigh, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and the British composer and opera singer Montague Ring.⁹²

The evening's audience was as much a part of the show as the works performed. Diplomats from France, China, Japan, and the Netherlands were joined by delegates from around the countries of the British Empire, including Britain, Canada, Australia, and

India. The English author H. G. Wells and the journalist Henry Nevinson joined the French writer Pierre Combret de Lanux and many of the most distinguished members of Washington's African American elite.

Gregory used every opportunity to promote his work, together with that of his colleagues Marie Moore-Forrest and Alain Locke, to create the National Negro Theatre modeled after the Irish National Theatre in Dublin. Moore-Forrest was an instrumental figure in this effort, as she served as acting coach. She also was a leading activist in the National Women's Party organized in support of women's suffrage.⁹³ She was a key figure in bringing together the former Dramatic Club with the Department of Dramatic Art. Outside the university, Gregory took every measure to emphasize the growing relationship between the Howard Players and Provincetown Players; as he announced future performances of plays written by Howard students and Washington high school students.⁹⁴ Black Washington was challenging Wilson's characterizations from the stage.

The Emperor Jones

Gregory was an inveterate collector of playbills. He saved the programs from every production he saw, carefully noting those among onstage and offstage artists who were Black. Others noted this passion. His friends and colleagues—including Langston Hughes and Richard B. Harrison (the Da Lawd in Marc Connelly's hit *Green Pastures*)—dutifully sent their programs along, appropriately identifying any people of color associated with a production. Over his lifetime, Gregory amassed scores of programs from productions in Washington, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and beyond, including such gems as autographed playbills from the original productions of *Show Boat* (1927) and *Porgy and Bess* (1935).⁹⁵ One such program proved to be of great significance for the development of the Howard Players.

In November 1920, Gregory held on to the opening reviews of an

ambitious, rising playwright's successful new play: *The Emperor Jones* by Eugene O'Neill. O'Neill, the son of an Irish immigrant actor and his first-generation Irish American wife, was literally born to Broadway at the Barrett House hotel in Times Square. Frequently on tour and suffering from substance abuse, his parents dispatched Eugene to a Catholic boarding school in the Riverdale section of the Bronx.

O'Neill eventually made his way to Princeton, where he dropped out due to various conduct violations. Fighting alcoholism and depression, he associated with radical unionists and their political agendas. By the 1910s, he had landed with the Provincetown Players and begun to write for the theater. O'Neill—who would win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1936 and four Pulitzer Prizes—ranks at the top of any short list of great American playwrights. Together with Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekov, O'Neill is considered one of the founding luminaries of the sort of modernist realism so attractive to Gregory and Locke.⁹⁶

The Emperor Jones became O'Neill's first genuine "hit."⁹⁷

The play consists of flashbacks telling the story of an African American Pullman porter—the escaped criminal Brutus Jones—who finds refuge on a Caribbean Island. Jones starts swindling his way to the pinnacle of local power. The play heaves toward Jones's inevitable death by silver bullet to the steady beat of drums played by rebellious islanders.

The play won every possible prize of its era, and it has been reprised dozens of times over the past century on stage and screen alike. Its success transpired despite controversies over its racialized representations of Jones and the rebels. Demanding an intimidating range of emotions, from euphoria to terror and insanity, the role of Brutus Jones challenged theatergoers raised on Blackface minstrel show stars to accept the lead character as a human being of Shakespearean dimensions. The role's originator, Charles S. Gilpin, achieved the stature of one of the great American dramatic actors of the day.



Charles S. Gilpin, 1921
photo courtesy of
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/
File:Charles-Gilpin-The-Emperor-Jones-1920-2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles-Gilpin-The-Emperor-Jones-1920-2.jpg)

Gregory saved reviews from the show's opening in November 1920 (well marked, they remain in his archived papers).⁹⁸ The *New York Globe's* Kenneth Macgowan found *The Emperor Jones* to be "perhaps the most interesting play and production to be seen in New York." Alexander Woollcott of the *New York Times* declared the play to be "an extraordinarily striking and dramatic study of panic fear." Heywood Brown wrote in the *New York Tribune* that "*The Emperor Jones* is so unusual in its technique that it might wait in vain for a production anywhere except in so adventurous a playhouse as the Provincetown Players... . If *The Emperor Jones* were taken elsewhere, we have little doubt that the manager would engage a white man

with a piece of burnt cork to play Brutus Jones. They have done better in Macdougall Street. The Emperor is played by a Negro actor named Charles S. Gilpin, who gives the most thrilling performance we have seen anyplace this season."⁹⁹

For Gregory, searching for ways to advance his vision of an African American theater worthy of admiration, Gilpin had arrived at just the right moment. A carefully marked playbill from December 6–18, 1920, indicates that Gregory traveled to New York to see the production, was as overwhelmed as the critics, and planned to call or visit the Provincetown Players the next day.¹⁰⁰ The resulting collaboration was well in evidence at the Washington Disarmament Conference gala less than a year later, as O'Neill had joined Gregory's advisory board, while the master designer Cleon Throckmorton had signed on to teach at Howard and to work on the Howard Players' productions. Both companies joined together to bring Gilpin to Washington to perform his iconic role of Brutus Jones.

Gregory arranged for the Howard Players to perform *The Emperor Jones* in Washington with an initial afternoon performance featuring Gilpin at the Belasco Theatre near the White House on March 28, 1921. Performances on the evenings of April 1 and 2 at the Myrtilla Miner Normal School followed,

with the Howard student thespian George D. Williams in the lead role.¹⁰¹ The Howard Players added additional performances with the student cast later in the month.¹⁰²

Given the play's – and Gilpin's – rousing success in New York, the initial performance was something of an event in white Washington as well as within African American society. *The Evening Star* noted that “the audience, white and colored, packed the Belasco.”¹⁰³ The venture became a fund-raising and reputation-building success.

The *Washington Herald* columnist Earle Dorsey, meanwhile, thanked his African American barber for tipping him off about Gilpin's appearance. Noting that “the Negro, a born mimic, and naturally endowed with Thespian accomplishments of an unusual order, might easily evolve a series of native dramatic groups of no mean order,” Dorsey complained that “the arrangement of the affair, in presenting Gilpin, is presenting almost for the exclusive delectation of their own race.” He concluded that he hoped Gilpin would return for “the delectation of local white theater-goers.”¹⁰⁴

Others among the city's white press were less generous with praise for the student production. The *Evening Star* critic found the play “a weird and awe-inspiring dramatic treatise on the progress of fear and its accompanying hallucinations.”¹⁰⁵ The *Washington Herald's* counterpart noted that Williams is “a student whose stage experience in amateur theatricals has been limited.” More generously, the *Herald* continued, “the acting of Williams reflects a wealth of credit upon the university instructors and as much as for his own talents.”¹⁰⁶

African Americans were more forthcoming in their praise. Despite concern among both New York and Washington African Americans that O'Neill portrayed Black characters as criminals and roustabouts, Black audiences generally took pride in the power of Gilpin's performance and in the quality of the student actors. W. E. B. Du Bois found the play to have been “exceedingly well done and most promising for the future.”¹⁰⁷

Gregory could not have had a better launch for the Howard Players. Gilpin's appearance, followed by the Washington Disarmament Conference's success, validated Gregory's vision of the players as "not simply a college dramatic club or local institution" but also "recognized as a significant movement in American Drama, and great things are expected and demanded of them."¹⁰⁸ The Players embarked on regular productions of new works by established playwrights—such as Lord Dunsany, Booth Tarkington, and Ridgeley Torrence—both on campus and at commercial houses around town and in Baltimore. They similarly performed works by Locke's students and winning submissions in competitions in the city's African American schools.¹⁰⁹

But storm clouds were beginning to gather. The plays produced by Locke's students were proving disappointing. Underneath collegial goodwill, academic jealousies and competing claims for esteem began to creep into Gregory's and Locke's relationships with one another.¹¹⁰ Sustaining donor interest remained a constant challenge. Southern congressmen were concerned that Howard might become a hotbed of sedition. The university's increasingly venomous atmosphere, fueled by a menacing president and meddlesome trustees, proved even more malignant.

University Drama

Howard University president James Stanley Durkee was the latest in a line of white presidents who generally looked down on the school's African American students and faculty. Durkee was a Baptist and Congregationalist minister who grew up in Nova Scotia before immigrating to the United States. He completed his higher divinity training in Boston, where he served as pastor of the First Free Baptist Church and the South Congregational Church before coming to Howard in 1918. He later would serve as associate pastor of the famous Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn.¹¹¹

Durkee was contemptuous of the Howard community and paranoid about somehow having the school's congressional support undermined by radical activity at the time of the post-World War I Red Scare. His concerns only grew as Howard came under attack from Congress for promoting "Bolshevik" ideas after the outbreak of intense racial violence during the summer of 1919, when the communities around Howard armed themselves to fend off attacks by marauding whites.¹¹²

Durkee summoned a newly appointed history professor, Carter G. Woodson, into his office and accused him of disloyalty. The President produced a letter from Secret Service agents accusing Woodson of communist tendencies. He then tried to recruit Woodson to spy on his fellow faculty members. Instead, Woodson quit, moving to West Virginia Collegiate Institute (now West Virginia State College). Woodson later returned to Washington to edit the *Journal of Negro History* and tend to the affairs of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History that he established with Jesse E. Moorland in 1915.¹¹³



Carter G. Woodson
photo courtesy of: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carter_G._Woodson

The Woodson saga was emblematic of Durkee's relationship with his faculty, and with the Howard Players. In late 1922, Durkee interfered with Gregory's plans to produce a work by the Washington playwright Willis Richardson.¹¹⁴ Richardson, who would become the first African American playwright to have a drama produced on Broadway, was achieving recognition with his dramas examining African American life. Well connected to the Washington community of African American intellectuals, he was a natural partner in Gregory's and Locke's crusade to bring plays by Blacks about Blacks to Black theater audiences. Durkee eventually relented, and the Players performed Richardson's family drama *Mortgaged* in 1924.¹¹⁵

The master designer Cleon Throckmorton resigned precipitously in June 1922, forcing Gregory to scramble to find faculty to teach courses on set and stage design. His departure eroded the

connection between Howard and the Provincetown Players. The precise circumstances of Throckmorton's departure are murky. He continued to work with the Provincetown Players, enjoyed a highly successful career on Broadway, and eventually became artistic designer for the Columbia Broadcasting System. Perhaps he simply had mounting opportunities outside Washington.

Locally, however, Throckmorton was as well known for his notorious speakeasy, the Krazy Kat Klub, at 3 Green Court off Thomas Circle, as he was for his work at Howard. His illicit sideline would not have pleased Durkee in the least. Throckmorton's blunt and brief June 7, 1922, scrawled resignation letter suggests an unexpected departure. Addressed to Gregory, he wrote: "Kindly accept my resignation from 'the Department of Dramatic Arts,' which you head. I would also like to signify that I do not care to join the Department again in the fall. Very respectfully."¹¹⁶

Gregory himself would soon follow. In August 1924, he accepted a position as supervisor of Negro schools, and later principal, in Atlantic City, New Jersey, citing a very considerable salary increase. The story may not have been so straightforward. In 1912, he had resigned after an anonymous letter was sent to the university's president accusing him of a drunken display at a Washington bar. Reinstated after a letter-writing campaign by Booker T. Washington, William A. Sinclair, and others, Gregory might well have put the story behind him.¹¹⁷

Those close to him—as well as the record found in his papers at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center—hint at ongoing conflicts with Howard administrators. Whatever its limitations, Howard offered a more visible base of operations than the Atlantic City schools for pursuing his passionate goal of establishing the National Negro Theater.

Gregory did not give up on his dream. In a seminal review of Jean Toomer's freshly published novel *Cane* appearing in the December 1923 issue of the National Urban League's monthly

journal *Opportunity*, Gregory set forth why he believed it so important for Blacks to tell their own stories.¹¹⁸

“It has been conceded that the varied life of the Negro in America, especially his folk-life, offers almost unparalleled opportunities for the brush of the artist and the pen of the poet,” he noted. Unfortunately, he continued, there has been “unqualified opposition” in the Negro community “to the utilization of his mass life in fiction, in music, or in drama. What has this meant? It has robbed the race of its birthright for a mess of pottage. It has damned the possibilities of true artistic expression at its very source. It has enabled the white artist to exploit the Negro race for personal recognition or commercial gain.” After praising Toomer for telling the story of Black life with extraordinary power, Gregory goes on to repeat his appeal for a Negro theater that is capable of producing works such as *Cane*. Beyond the “alien exploitation” of Black life, Gregory argued that the vast richness and complexity of the African American community required authors from within—such as Toomer—to write plays. In this spirit, he noted that “Art is *self-expression*” (emphasis in the original).

Shortly after arriving in New Jersey, Gregory lectured at Trenton’s Lincoln School Lyceum, arguing that the time had arrived to leave behind “the white actor made up as Blackfaced comedian, particularly in the theatre life of New York City.”¹¹⁹ In 1927, he penned the *Encyclopedia Britannica*’s entry “The Negro in Drama.”¹²⁰ Two years later, he toured community drama programs throughout the South.¹²¹

His friendship and collaboration with Locke continued. Locke tried to lure Gregory back to Howard on at least two occasions.¹²² In 1930, the two former colleagues joined forces to compile *Plays of Negro Life: A Source-Book of Native American Drama*.¹²³

Despite strong family connections to Washington, Gregory’s life had moved north, where he threw himself into his work in

Atlantic City with the same enthusiasm and energy as he had when starting out at Howard. He sustained his interest in theater throughout his life, participated in conferences and on scholarly panels, reviewed works by aspiring writers, and continued to build his extensive collection of playbills.¹²⁴

In addition to Locke, Gregory remained a lifelong close friend of Sterling Brown, and he maintained close ties to the Washington intellectual community and to those around Howard. His daughter, Sheila, was a member of the Howard Players while a student at Howard, and she went on to teach in the DC Public Schools, and also produced an award-winning children's television show, *The Magic Door*.¹²⁵ Gregory's great-granddaughter, Aisha Tyler, has continued the family connection with theater as a successful actor, comedian, director, and television talk show host.¹²⁶ After his retirement in New Jersey, in 1960 the elder Gregory returned to Washington, where he lived until his death in November 1971.¹²⁷

A little under a year after Gregory's departure from the Howard campus, on June 16, 1925, the university's Board of Trustees informed Locke that they would not renew his contract for the 1925–26 academic year. The letter—signed by the board's secretary treasurer, Emmett Scott—informed Locke that “after very full discussion of the matter, in all its phases, your place, among others, it was decided, could be vacated and the work of the University not unduly suffer.”¹²⁸

The New Negro

Alain LeRoy Locke was uncommon at Howard and among Washington's middle-class African Americans. He grew up in Philadelphia, spent considerable time abroad (Weimar Berlin was his preferred haunt), and traveled at every opportunity around Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. He was an aesthete, a Bahá'í, a homosexual, and a humanities scholar in a conservative university designed to produce teachers, clergy, lawyers, and doctors. He lived with, cared for, and toured accompanied by his

mother until her death in 1922, when he was already well into adulthood. He mastered the as-yet-recent academic game of cobbling together prestigious grants so as to spend as little time on campus as possible. He sought a universal and humanistic appreciation of African American achievement within a global community, while many Blacks simply wanted to remove white people from their lives. Finally, to the dismay of those who become jealous over the achievements of others, he was already on his way to becoming one of the most important American intellectuals of his generation.

Locke could be dismissively arrogant toward his Howard colleagues. In 1923, he wrote to Langston Hughes that Howard was “a cultural backwater, even though at the nation’s capital.” He wanted to stand at the center of a “literary and art coterie” that could not be found in his current position. “And yet,” he continued, “I have always been attracted to Howard and in spite of much disillusionment am still intrigued with its possibilities.”¹²⁹

Unsurprisingly, far too many of his associates were not always charmed by his presence. However, today, Alain Locke—who retired in 1953, moved to New York, and died a year later—is revered at Howard, with his personal library carefully preserved in a special room at the university’s Founders Library. Locke, it turned out, has been easier to celebrate in his absence than when he was present every day. In 1925, he was surrounded at Howard by numerous colleagues who privately supported the trustees’ decision not to renew his contract.

Disappointed though he may have been with Howard, he had few options open to him. No “mainstream” (i.e., white) American university was going to appoint an African American philosopher to their faculty, no matter how stellar his achievements had been. Neither his growing attentiveness to African art and aesthetics—an interest that was becoming a signature for his work—nor his enthusiasm for interdisciplinary perspectives fit into the institutional structures and constraints of American academic life.¹³⁰

Initially feeling liberated after his Howard contract was not renewed, Locke escaped to Harlem. Over time, however, anxiety began to replace feelings of emancipation. Ironically, Locke's dismissal came as he was enjoying unprecedented success. After spending most of the summer of 1923 in Europe, he continued on to Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean, including a visit to the Bahá'í holy places in Haifa.

Locke arrived back in the United States full of enthusiasm for training a cadre of students at Howard who could engage with Africa on multiple levels. He stopped off in New York on his way back to Washington to meet the National Urban League's Charles S. Johnson. Locke and Johnson discussed an ambitious publishing plan in conjunction with *Opportunity* magazine before heading on to Washington for the start of Howard's winter term. He returned to campus with a consolidated vision for an African foundation for African American education and myriad new and solidified personal contacts to support his efforts.¹³¹

Later in the year, Locke connected (and clashed) with Albert Barnes, who was then compiling his impressive collection of African and European art, as well as with Paul Guillaume and Guillaume Apollinaire, who were bringing new European perspectives to West African art.¹³² Together with Johnson, Locke convened a dinner of leading African American intellectuals and writers in March to discuss a literary awakening in Black America—the arrival of “New Negro” authors.¹³³ As these achievements suggest, Locke was at the apex of his success.

After his usual European sojourn, Locke worked with Johnson to capture the artistic and intellectual explosion recasting Harlem.¹³⁴ These efforts eventuated in a landmark issue of *Survey Graphic* dedicated to the dynamism sweeping across New York's premier African American neighborhood—a “Harlem Renaissance.” Locke was now at the epicenter of one of America's most formative cultural explosions. The problem was that Howard University was not.

The New Negro Renaissance was moving from Washington's

U Street to New York's 125th Street. James A. Miller correctly notes that sixteen of the thirty-five contributors to Locke's famous compendium *The New Negro: An Interpretation* had been born, raised, educated, or worked in Washington; but that many of them, like Locke, were increasingly spending time on Manhattan.¹³⁵

Board Intrigues

Back at Howard, Locke had been assigned the unenviable task of serving as secretary to the faculty committee on salaries. This position brought him into direct conflict with members of the Board of Trustees, who resented Locke's demands for improved faculty compensation, even though he was merely reporting the views of the committee.¹³⁶

Locke's biographer, Jeffrey C. Stewart, captures the moment when he tried to explain how the premier Negro institution of higher education could fire its most-educated faculty member just as that professor was at the center of a major intellectual and cultural explosion. "The answer," Stewart writes,

while complex, came down to this: the New Negro was not a welcome attitude in all quarters of Negro America, especially among administrators of institutional Negro America who viewed the New Negro and its criticality of racial hegemony as a nuisance to be dismissed or, if that did not suffice, to be crushed. Locke's problem was simple. He was not only the principal chronicler of the New Negro—he was a New Negro himself, an upstart rebel against the kind of paternalistic control that had become the staple of Negro higher education.¹³⁷

The truth was that Locke's success became a target for condemnation rather than approbation.

President Durkee appeared to be the most likely initiator of the move against Locke; Locke certainly thought so. But Durkee was soon heading for the exit himself. Caught up in his own scandals,

he resigned in March 1926. As Stewart uncovered while trolling Howard's archives, little was what it had seemed at the time.¹³⁸ Durkee, in fact, had not been particularly hostile toward Locke and had supported him in his various requests for absences and research travel. Instead, Locke had earned the lasting abhorrence of Howard trustee Jesse E. Moorland.

Meanwhile, a furious Locke headed to New York, where he spent the autumn putting the final touches on what would become one of the most important compendiums of essays published during the twentieth century: *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Locke hit the lecture circuit following the anthology's publication in December 1925. As he toured around, the struggle back at Howard moved to a new phase.

The Board of Trustees eventually landed on the Baptist minister Mortdecai Johnson as the university's new president. Johnson proved to be an inspired choice, despite being an imperious micromanager. As the university's first Black president, Johnson was on a mission to make his university the equal of any school in the country. During his thirty-four years at the helm, he greatly expanded the school's financial base, increasing its congressional appropriation from \$216,000 to \$12 million, together with an additional \$42 million for buildings and other capital expenditures.¹³⁹ In addition, he brought numerous top African American scholars to campus—including the legal scholars Charles Hamilton Houston and William Hastie, the chemist Percy Julian, the poet Sterling Brown, the economist Abram Harris, the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, the political scientist Ralph Bunche, the medical researcher Charles R. Drew, and the historians Rayford Logan and John Hope Franklin—producing such distinguished graduates as Thurgood Marshall, Zora Neale Hurston, David Dinkins, and Toni Morrison.¹⁴⁰ Locke pursued Johnson across Europe during the summer 1926. Meanwhile, he secured a one-year appointment at Fisk University for the 1927–28 academic year.

Locke's interest in African American theater hardly waned,

despite the turmoil in his professional life. In 1927, he continued to engage in discussions over the African American contribution to the American stage. "One would do well to imagine," he pondered, "what might happen if the art of the Negro actor should really become artistically lifted and liberated. Transpose the possible resources of Negro song and dance and pantomime to the serious stage, envisage an American drama under the galvanizing stimulus of a rich transfusion of essential folk-arts and you may anticipate what I mean."¹⁴¹

Locke continued to balance this interest in elevating African American sensibilities within American culture with a need to be precise about what Black writers could bring to cultural developments. Writing in the University of North Carolina's *Carolina Magazine*, he warned African American poets to consider what their experiences meant. "But what is Negro poetry, admitting all this—after all? Is it a matter of theme and subject matter or a question of spirit and attitude—a distinctive angle on life, or a certain idiom of feeling and emotion? We miss the vital point primarily, I think, because we wish to crowd whatever the Negro elements are into a rigid formula."¹⁴² This warning applied equally to Locke's view about African American drama.

Although Johnson would become an ally, the problem's solution would lie elsewhere. The university's trustees, rather than its president, would need to change their minds in order for Locke to be reappointed to the Howard faculty. As Stewart uncovered in the archives, unbeknownst to Locke, his rival and foremost antagonist W. E. B. Du Bois overcame whatever personal misgivings he had about Locke (which evidently were many).¹⁴³ He reached out to Jesse Moorland and urged that Locke be reinstated, writing that "we must have cultured and well-trained men in our institutions."¹⁴⁴ By the autumn of 1928, Locke was back on campus.

There is no evidence that Locke ever knew of Du Bois's intervention on his behalf. Both men could be wearisome; and they remained difficult rivals for one another. In this instance,

however, the larger goal of advancing the place of African Americans in society eclipsed personal animus. As Locke's journeys indicate, New York's Harlem was becoming the center of gravity for African American cultural and intellectual life. This creative concentration was as unmistakably manifest in theater, as in other artistic fields.

Just a few years earlier, Locke had warned against the vicissitudes of depending on commercial theaters in major metropolitan centers to sustain a nascent African American theater.¹⁴⁵ He argued instead that universities could provide greater continuity and permanence for the Negro theater. The sagas surrounding the Howard Players and the company's leaders had proven him wrong. University administrators could be no less obtrusive than private funders and commercial producers.

Harlem's ascendancy came late to the African American stage.¹⁴⁶ Unquestionably the center of American theater, competition in New York was intense. Although the city's African American theaters had flourished during the 1910s, they were hardly alone among Black stages across the United States.¹⁴⁷ Alternative African American commercial and nonprofit companies could be found around the country, to say nothing of the Washington scene. Among the most active centers were Chicago's Pekin Theatre and Ethiopian Art Players; Cleveland's Gilpin Players of the Karamu Theatre; the Krigwa Players' Little Negro Theatres, promoted by W. E. B. Du Bois and the NAACP, with satellite companies to the primary New York stage in Cleveland, Baltimore, and Philadelphia; and various touring companies in California. Harlem's Lafayette Players were more analogous to these smaller companies than to the commercial houses downtown on Broadway.¹⁴⁸ Collectively, they created a thriving setting for aspiring African American playwrights, directors, and actors.¹⁴⁹

By the late 1920s, the advantages of consolidation in New York became ever more apparent, especially as the economic collapse of the Great Depression eviscerated the economic well-being of African American communities everywhere. With

fewer resources to spend on leisure and entertainment—and with the ever-growing reality of truly inexpensive entertainment on radios, phonograph players, and in Hollywood film—community theaters could not compete. Though true for white theater, these trends proved especially malign for generally disadvantaged African American theaters. African American theater professionals, audiences, and venues—like their white counterparts—concentrated in Manhattan.¹⁵⁰

Campus and Community

Shortly after Locke returned to the Howard University campus, Sterling Allen Brown joined the Howard faculty. The son of a former slave who rose to be a professor of divinity at Howard, Brown graduated from Williams College before earning a master's at Harvard University.¹⁵¹ He had taught at several colleges and had established himself as an important poet and literary critic by the time he joined Locke at Howard.

Brown shared Locke's interest in theater, and together they sponsored the Howard Players for several years. Brown remained at Howard until his retirement, becoming an ethical and intellectual compass for the school beyond his retirement until his death in January 1989 at the age of eighty-eight. Known for poetry that reflected the cadences of African American music, Brown was a major figure both nationally and locally. He became the District of Columbia's first poet laureate, and he was honored in 1979 when the city set aside a day named in his honor to celebrate his achievements.

Under Locke's and Brown's guidance, the Howard Players remained one of the country's top university college groups, even though Gregory's ambition to establish the National Negro Theatre no longer seemed possible. The future National Medal of Arts laureate and Kennedy Center Honors recipient Ossie Davis was but one of the impressive future theater professionals passing through the Howard Players during these years, where

he became one of Locke's most prominent protégés.¹⁵²

The Howard Players were not alone in making Washington a center of African American theater during the 1920s and 1930s. Howard University was embedded in a dynamic and creative community that participated in the development of African American—and American—artistic reinvention in music, dance, the social sciences, and law, to name just a few areas of accomplishment. Activities in each of these areas rested on lively interaction among African Americans across socioeconomic barriers imposed by racial segregation and the legacies of Wilson's segregationist policies. These creative tensions extended to the stage. Two particularly notable figures—Willis Richardson and Georgia Douglas Johnson—personified the inspiration that was to be found beyond the Howard campus.

Willis Richardson was a seminal figure in the history of African American dramatic theater.¹⁵³ Though he is now largely forgotten,

he was a path breaking playwright embedded in the blue-collar workaday of most Washingtonians. Later, he attracted the attention of a biographer, Christine Rauchfuss Gray, who boldly promoted his work.¹⁵⁴



Willis Richardson
photo courtesy of:

<http://todayinafricanamericanhistory.com/november-7th-in-african-american-history-willis-richardson/>

In 1899, when Richardson was nine, leaders of North Carolina's white Democratic Party conspired to overthrow the legitimately elected Black-and-white city government in his hometown of Wilmington. This revolt became the only successful armed coup d'état against an elected government in US history. Drawing on white anger over the city's growing diversity, local and state leaders vilified local officials, and unleashed "Red Shirts" to terrorize local African Americans and their "sympathizers." On the morning of November 10, white gangs rampaged through the city, burning Black businesses and homes, lynching community leaders, and running duly elected local officials out of town. Many African Americans hid out in the swamps north of the city for days. In the end, up to 300 Blacks were killed and 2,000 Blacks left town for good.¹⁵⁵ After taking

some time to consider options, Richardson's family followed.¹⁵⁶

The Richardsons landed in Washington, where young Willis attended public schools, eventually graduating from the elite M Street (Dunbar) High School (studying English with Angeline Grimké).¹⁵⁷ An excellent student, Richardson won a partial scholarship from Howard University. Requiring additional income to survive, Willis declined this scholarship, instead taking a job with the US Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Richardson seems to have thrived. He remained at the bureau until he retired forty-three years later, marrying and supporting a family household that included his wife and their three children.¹⁵⁸ He died in 1977, after having spent the final two decades of his life trying unsuccessfully to attract attention to his plays.¹⁵⁹

Theater remained Richardson's passion, and he looked for every opportunity to be involved with the life surrounding the stage. He continued to be particularly concerned over the absence of serious dramatic works by African American authors. "Is it true," he wrote in 1919 in a questioning that remained central to his suspicions, "that there is coming into existence in America a Negro Drama which at some future day may equal in excellence the American Negro Music? If the signs of the times do not point to such a thing, we must change their direction and make them point the way; we must have a Negro drama."¹⁶⁰

Richardson became a focal point for productions by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing's drama club. Of greater lasting significance, he wrote prolifically, penning forty-nine plays (largely during the 1920s).¹⁶¹ When Raymond O'Neill's Ethiopian Art Players brought his *The Chip Woman's Fortune* (1923) to New York, Richardson became the first African American playwright to have a dramatic work performed on Broadway.¹⁶²

Richardson advocated the development of a theatrical repertoire written by African Americans about African Americans and performed by African Americans, so as to portray "the soul of a people, and the soul of this people is

truly worth showing.”¹⁶³ Like Gregory and many others of the era, Richardson saw the Irish National Theater as a model, because it empowered Irish playwrights to tell the story of their people unfiltered through the pens of non-Irish playwrights. He believed that African Americans, like the Irish, had developed their own way of speaking English, which reflected their own spirit. This distinctive elocution could bring new life to the classics written by others.

“Sweetness of the Negro tones,” he suggested, “is so well suited to the poetry of Shakespeare.” These tenets animated Richardson’s plays throughout his career. He prepared the way for later landmark works in Black American drama, such as August Wilson’s commanding *Pittsburgh Cycle* (1982–2005) of ten plays tracking the life of African Americans in the Steel City’s Hill District.

As his biographer Gray observed, Richardson’s plays were different from what was being written at the time by other African American playwrights. For Gray,

protest plays, such as those written by Richardson’s colleagues, validated the structures of oppression. In Richardson’s plays, the tension springs from the family and displays the effect on the Black community when Blacks themselves do not work together. . . . In focusing on Black-on-Black relations, Richardson put at the core of his plays characters entangled in conflicts with members of their community or family. Parents, aunts, cousins, visiting relatives, aging neighbors, grandparents, adopted children, boarders and lovers fill his stage.¹⁶⁴

Richardson, over the course of his career, published poems, essays, and plays in both leading white (*Carolina Magazine*) and Black (*Crisis*, *Opportunity*) literary journals. In 1931, his play *Compromise* appeared in Hungary. His plays have been included in major anthologies of early African American plays.¹⁶⁵ His first produced play—*The Deacon’s Awakening*, in 1921—was reprised in the 2010s in New York and elsewhere.

Richardson struggled to sustain his writing career while holding down full-time jobs at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. He remained perhaps closer to the daily life of many African Americans than his contemporaries at Howard and in Harlem.

The U Street NW Washington community of which Howard is a part is noteworthy for the social propinquity of varied social classes forced to live on top of one another by segregation. The neighborhood's substantial influences on African American and American music, literature, jurisprudence, and political protest often rest on chance encounters among Black residents, whose lives otherwise had little in common. From leading constitutional law authorities encountering angry barbers to conservatory-trained composers hearing the sounds emanating from pool halls, U Street became a vital setting for some of the most far-reaching changes in American life, precisely because it remained a mixing bowl of otherwise disparate inspirations.¹⁶⁶

Richardson was writing for an African American audience, and his plays generally fall into two categories. Many of his works are seemingly modest educational accounts of meaningful moments in African American history that are crafted to be accessible to community, school, and church theater groups in performances for student audiences. Such plays often appeared in Carter G. Woodson's *The Journal of Negro History*, or were published by Woodson's Association Publishers in concert with the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Richardson also published a number of children's plays in W. E. B. Du Bois's youth magazine *The Brownies' Book*. These scripts are more complex than they may at first appear. Richardson purposefully wrote plays about pivotal historical events calibrated for classroom and drama club use.

In 1930, Woodson published Richardson's best-known work—the collection *Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro*—with an explicit educational purpose in mind. This landmark anthology contained Richardson's introductory essay setting forth his goal of compiling a collection of works written primarily for use in

schools. These remarks were followed by the scripts for a dozen plays and pageants, including works by Thelma Myrtle Duncan, Maud Cuney-Hare, John Matheus, May Miller, Inzes M. Burke, Dorothy C. Guinn, Frances Gunner, and Edward J. McCoo, as well as four of his own works. The handsomely produced volume included striking block prints by the Howard University faculty member and master printmaker James Lesesne Wells accompanied by passages from the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson.¹⁶⁷ In 1935, Richardson joined May Miller in editing a second anthology of history plays, *Negro History in Thirteen Plays*.¹⁶⁸

Plays of Domestic Life

Richardson's plays examining African American life achieved recognition at the time. He won playwriting awards and prizes, including the *Crisis* journal's Drama Award and the Edith Schwab Cup. His plays were included in Locke's *The New Negro*, and they were performed around the country. Four of his more successful plays—*The Chip Woman's Fortune* (1923), *Mortgaged* (1924), *The Broken Banjo* (1925), and *Compromise* (1925)—demonstrate how he sought to bring the lives of ordinary African Americans to theater audiences.¹⁶⁹

The Chip Woman's Fortune focuses on the everyday challenges facing urban African Americans at the outset of the twentieth century.¹⁷⁰ Aunt Nancy has taken a room in the home of Silas and Liza and their daughter Emma. When Silas loses his job, he and Liza face the prospect of defaulting on a Victrola that they purchased on time payments. The Victrola is their one small pleasure, as it brings music into their world. Suspecting that Nancy—who collects chips of coal off the street so that the family can have heat—is hoarding money, Silas confronts the old woman. Nancy, it turns out, has been saving money as best she can so that her son Jim would have a start on a new life once he is released from prison. Nancy and Jim come up with the funds to pay off Silas and Liza's debt just as the store comes to repossess the Victrola. The play ends with everyone dancing to

jazz recordings being played by the saved Victrola.

W. E. B. Du Bois arranged for Raymond O'Neill and Mrs. Sherwood Anderson to produce *The Chip Woman's Fortune* in cooperation with the Ethiopian Art Players.¹⁷¹ The work moved from Chicago for a two-week run at the Howard Theatre and on to Harlem's Lafayette Theatre.¹⁷² Drawing ever larger audiences, the production transferred to the Frazee Theater on New York's 42nd Street for a two-week run, together with Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* and Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*.¹⁷³ Percy Hammond, reviewing the production for the *New York Tribune*, found Richardson's work to be "a deft little comedy, engaging real persons in an honest and sentimental situation."¹⁷⁴ John Corbin similarly praised the work for the *New York Times*.¹⁷⁵ The play may well have enjoyed an extended run had O'Neill not left town, leaving the actors stranded and angry audience members demanding their money back.¹⁷⁶

As already noted, this Broadway success enabled Gregory to convince Howard University president J. Stanley Durkee to permit the Howard Players to mount a production of Richardson's *Mortgaged*. His 1924 student production became the first play by an African American author to be staged at Howard.¹⁷⁷ Locke included this play in his landmark 1925 anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*.

In this work—which was presented by various professional and nonprofessional groups around the country—Richardson juxtaposed two contrasting brothers representing conflicting aspirations among educated African Americans. John Fields, a widower chemist who is struggling financially to cover his son's tuition at Harvard, is contrasted with his brother Tom, who maintains an inflated life style with lucrative real estate deals. In the end, one of John's discoveries is purchased by a major corporation, thus saving him from penury, while Tom is humiliated as a slum lord. Though contrived, the story exposed tensions within the African American middle class between devotion to racial uplift and greed.¹⁷⁸

The Broken Banjo and *Compromise* became staples of W. E. B. Du Bois's Krigwa Players as they performed in New York and elsewhere around the country.¹⁷⁹ *The Banjo Player* earned Richardson prestigious prizes and became one of his best-known works. The play tells the story of family betrayal as two impoverished newlyweds, Matt and Emma, fight over Matt's preoccupation with playing his banjo.¹⁸⁰ Tensions arise when Emma's brother Sam and cousin Adam show up. A family fight breaks out when Matt discovers that Sam and Adam had broken his beloved banjo while horsing around with it. Sam announces during the brawl that he knows Matt had murdered old man Shelton years before. Emma retrieves her life savings from underneath the mattress and convinces her husband to escape before the police arrive. Sam shows up with the sheriff before Matt can make his run for it, leaving Emma crying alone as the curtain falls.¹⁸¹

Compromise represented one of the few times Richardson brings white characters onstage. In this instance, a Black family's malevolent white neighbors eventually bring about four tragedies, for which they are never penalized. The action explores the various ways in which Blacks must compromise with whites as they make their way through the world.¹⁸² Richardson, always protective of the rights to his works, became upset when Locke produced the play without his permission. The resulting falling out may have undercut Richardson's future ability to see his works staged and republished.¹⁸³ *Compromise* was published and performed in Hungary in 1931.¹⁸⁴

Life's obligations and failing health overtook Richardson's playwriting ambitions by the end of the 1930s. He and his work faded from view.¹⁸⁵ He devoted his retirement years to trying to republish and restage various plays, only to be disappointed by an uninterested theater public that found his once pace-setting works now dated. As the years passed, he increasingly became a footnote—the first African American to have a dramatic play staged on Broadway—until his biographer, Gray, set out to

systematically recover his work and bring new recognition to his life and achievements.¹⁸⁶

Saturday Night Salons

Richardson was a regular member of another Washington institution, albeit informal, that would exert lasting influence over the shape of African American and American culture in the years ahead: Georgia Douglas Johnson's "Saturday Nighters." For a decade or so beginning in 1926 (or perhaps as early as 1922), the playwright, poet, and composer Georgia Douglas Johnson regularly hosted the country's leading African American literati for dinner and discussion at her home at 1461 S Street NW.¹⁸⁷

Johnson was born in Atlanta in 1880, and spent her childhood in Rome, Georgia. After graduating from Atlanta University's Normal School, she attended the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. In 1903, she married the Atlanta lawyer and local Republican notable Henry Lincoln Johnson. The couple moved to Washington when President William Howard Taft appointed Henry as DC's recorder of deeds in 1910. The couple had two sons, and Henry preferred that Georgia devote her attention to homemaking rather than pursuing her song, short story, play, and poetry writing.

Despite her husband's misgivings, Georgia taught music, became an organist at a local Congregational church, and began to submit her writing to various newspapers and literary magazines. Beginning in 1916, she published four volumes of poetry, including the well-received *The Heart of a Woman*. When Robert died in 1925, Georgia took a job at the Department of Labor to support herself and her two teenage sons. After losing that position in 1934, she worked as a temporary clerk at various offices around town.

Georgia's wide-ranging interests and passionate activism could not be contained. By the 1930s, she had become an outspoken



Georgia Douglas Johnson
photo courtesy of: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgia_Douglas_Johnson

advocate for the antilynching movement. She regularly published her poetry, plays, and activist essays, and, for several years, she wrote a syndicated weekly newspaper column "Homely Philosophy" for some two dozen African American newspapers around the country. She died in 1966.¹⁸⁸

Shortly after her husband's death, Johnson began inviting local African American intellectuals over for dinner on Saturday nights. These gatherings became a much-sought-after invitation for anyone who wanted to matter in the world swirling around the New Negro (Harlem) Renaissance. After dinner, the crowd would discuss the latest political and artistic challenges of the previous week. Regulars at this gathering over the next decade included W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Mary Church Terrell, Carter Woodson, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, and Willis Richardson.¹⁸⁹

Some evenings, the diners would divide up into smaller groups to focus on specific themes. From time to time, several playwrights went off to a room to discuss how to advance African American theater. Many in the group had been involved in the previous discussions over how to respond to Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* and Wilson's segregationist policies. Regular participants included Johnson herself, Richardson, Marita Bonner, Eulalie Spence, May Miller, Randolph Edmonds, Carrie Clifford, and Edward Christopher Williams. All were involved to some extent in Du Bois's little theater initiative, the Krigwa Players.¹⁹⁰ Others—such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes—might join in if they happened to attend that night. Hughes, in particular, was already setting his sights on Broadway (the first of Hughes's several New York Plays—*Mulatto* (1935)—appeared at the time, setting all records for a drama written by an African American).¹⁹¹ Issues raised during the 1910s continued to animate the African American theater community.

One of this country's most significant literary salons, Johnson's Saturday Nighters shaped her own writing as well as that of Richardson and the other participants. These gatherings kept

Washington at the center of the New Negro Renaissance even as that movement's center of gravity shifted to Harlem. Their influence spread throughout Washington's African American community and, in various ways, shaped the future of the Howard Players.

Changing of the Guard

The poet, folklorist, and critic Sterling A. Brown arrived at Howard in 1929 after teaching appointments at Lincoln and Fisk universities. He would remain on campus for the next four decades—with visiting appointments at some of the country's leading universities along the way.¹⁹²

Brown had strong ties to Washington, having grown up in suburban Maryland and graduated from Dunbar High School before heading off to Williams College for his undergraduate years. He grew to have a powerful influence over Howard's development and mentored some of its most illustrious graduates. His essays on the white reception of Black Americans—such as his 1933 essay “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors,” cited above—made influential contributions to the redefinition of race in American letters.

Brown teamed up with Locke in working with the Howard Players. His deep philosophical engagement with the African American experience was readily evident in his own poetry and essays. Like Locke, Brown saw African Americans as essential to defining the American experience, and he promoted the writing—and staging—of works that told their story. He saw the role of the Players as preparing Howard students for careers on and around the stage.

James W. Butcher—another Dunbar graduate, Howard student, and holder of degrees from the universities of Illinois and Iowa—joined Locke and Brown in their work with the Howard Players.¹⁹³



Sterling A. Brown
photo courtesy of: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sterling_Allen_Brown

Arriving on campus in 1934 (and remaining until 1976), Butcher came to Howard after having led the Spelman College drama department in Atlanta. He served as director of Howard's Office of Theatrical Productions until 1984 and held a number of other positions at the university, including a term as the associate dean of the College of Fine Arts. Deeply committed to the development of African American and American theater, Butcher was founder and director of the Negro Repertory Players of Washington and cofounder of the Washington Repertory Players. He is credited with directing more than a hundred plays of various genres during his time at Howard.

Under Locke, Brown, and Butcher, the Howard Players performed between two and four plays each year throughout the 1930s, including works by African Americans about African Americans—such as Willis Richardson's *Compromise* (1932), Eulalie Spence's *Undertow* (1932), Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Blueblood* (1933), and James Butcher's *Milk and Honey* (1934)—and plays by white authors about African Americans—such as Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom* (1929, 1933) and Ridgeley Torrence's *Rider of the Dream* (1935)—as well as a selection of popular works and classics unrelated to American race relations—such as Lord Dunsany's *The Lost Silk Hat* (1933), Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1933, 1934), Anton Chekov's *The Proposal* (1936), and Emyln Williams's *A Murder Has Been Arranged* (1938).¹⁹⁴

The trend toward presenting a mix of African American subjects and works from the classical humanist tradition continued after Owen Dodson joined the faculty in 1940, and he was followed by Anne Cooke (Reed) in 1944. Dodson and Cooke shared graduate school experiences at the Yale Drama School (Dodson earned an MFA in 1939, and Cooke a PhD in 1944). Both had worked together on various projects in Atlanta while Cooke was teaching at Atlanta University's Spelman College.¹⁹⁵

Cooke joined Atlanta University's English Department at the end of the 1930s, and she launched that school's six-week summer

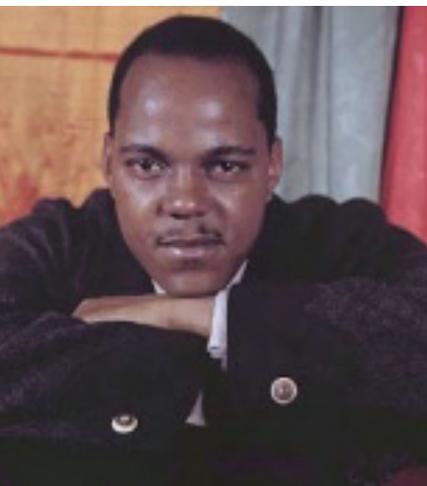
theater festival. She worked closely with W. E. B. Du Bois and others to promote large-scale pageants about African and African American history and, with her students, she staged several African American plays (including works by Richardson). She frequently chose to produce purposefully difficult theater classics to elevate her students' dramatic craft.

Her efforts caught the attention of John D. Rockefeller's General Education Board, which had been established to improve the qualifications of the faculties of southern Black universities by offering scholarships to leading northern schools. She went off to Yale and, having completed her doctoral studies, joined the faculty of the Hampton Institute before moving to Howard in 1944, where she would remain until her retirement in 1958.

Dodson may be best remembered as a poet, having won wide recognition for his verse (including invitations to the White House, several honorary doctorates of letters, and any number of prestigious grants for his literary achievements). He was a considerable playwright as well, eventually penning thirty-seven plays and operas, of which twenty-seven were produced, including two at the Kennedy Center.¹⁹⁶

Born to a large and struggling family in Brooklyn on the eve of World War I, Dodson retained a deep connection with New York City throughout his life (dying after his retirement from Howard of a heart attack at the age of sixty-eight while living on Manhattan's Upper West Side).¹⁹⁷ After time at Bates College, Dodson earned his master's in fine arts from Yale in 1939, and in 1940 he joined the Howard faculty, where he would become chair of the Drama Department.¹⁹⁸

In 1939, Dodson landed a job substituting for Cooke at Spelman while she was on leave. Shocked by southern segregation, he spent his time in Atlanta among the African American intellectuals who had formed a community surrounding W. E. B. Du Bois. Dodson moved to Virginia's Hampton Institute at the end of his appointment in Atlanta, and from there, he went to Howard.¹⁹⁹



Owen Dodson
photo courtesy of:
<https://www.loc.gov/item/n85137047/owen-dodson/>

Simultaneously, he began directing in New York, primarily with the American Negro Theatre, commencing a pattern of working in New York and elsewhere while based in Washington at Howard.²⁰⁰

Dodson steadily established himself in Washington. He rented an apartment from the playwright May Miller that happened to abut Georgia Douglas Johnson's house across a back alley.²⁰¹ He started to write theater reviews of shows around Washington and directed for off-campus theater companies.²⁰²

The proud—perhaps arrogant—Dodson had an at times tetchy relationship with some longtime Howard notables.

Gregory, for one, believed that his younger successor had snubbed him unforgivably. The task of mending bridges in such circumstances often fell to Sterling Brown.²⁰³ In 1961, Dodson oversaw the opening of a new campus theater named after the legendary African American actor who wowed Europe during the nineteenth century, Ira Aldridge.²⁰⁴ The Kennedy Center celebrated his career in 1975 with a production of *Owen's Song* based on his poetry.²⁰⁵

The Howard Players' production of Dodson's *Bayou Legend* (1948) and Miller's *All My Sons* (1948) caught the attention of Washington's leading white critics (Richard Coe of the *Washington Post*, and Jay Carmody of the *Evening Star*), firmly reestablishing the Players as a major theatrical company for the city.²⁰⁶ A handful of white graduate students from nearby Catholic University began making their way to Howard around this time to study with both Dodson and Cooke.

Under Cooke and Dodson's tutelage, well into the late twentieth century, Howard University trained leaders of the American stage, such as Debbie Allen, Richard Wesley, Roxie Roker, Charles Brown, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), and Earle Hyman.²⁰⁷ An effort begun in response to the racism of Wilsonian Washington had grown into a more permanent achievement.

The Howard Players of the era turned to productions of important new Americana drama—including Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* (1947) and Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons* (1948)—as well as modern European classics, such as the production of Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck* that caught the attention of Norwegian diplomats in 1948.²⁰⁸

A Scandinavian Prince of Another Hue

The 1950s were a time of change for Howard University, the neighborhood, the city, and African American theater. Desegregation enabled African American high school students to move into mainstream universities; African American Washingtonians to move from around U Street NW; Howard faculty to move to major research universities; and African American entertainers to move to formerly segregated clubs downtown.²⁰⁹ Cultural tastes changed. The Howard Theatre booked rhythm & blues and rock & roll and stand-up comics rather than putting on diverse programming that would include a dramatic play from time to time. Cinema and television shattered the audience for live theater.²¹⁰ African American theater was on the brink of a revolutionary radicalization—to be unleashed a few years later by Amiri Baraka’s *The Dutchman*.²¹¹

The Howard Players were never marginal to the era’s African American theatrical development. Baraka studied theater history and philosophy at Howard in the early 1950s. Robert Hooks, a native Washingtonian with strong ties to the Howard Players, gave a standout lead performance in *The Dutchman*’s premier at New York’s Cherry Lane Theater in 1964. In 1955, Dodson produced the first performance of James Baldwin’s play *The Amen Corner*.²¹² And the future playwright Joseph A. Walker—who became the first African American writer to win a Tony Award for *The River Niger* (others, including Lorraine Hansberry, had been nominated)—played the role of Luke in Baldwin’s play.²¹³

Dodson later directed one of the early performances of Baldwin’s controversial *Blues for Mr. Charlie*.²¹⁴ *The Washington*

Post reviewer, Geoffrey A. Wolff, found that the “agit-prop mannerisms” of Baldwin’s play and Dodson’s direction “shout and stamp its untruth.”²¹⁵ Even Wolff, however, acknowledged that the predominantly African American audience reacted far more enthusiastically than he had, at a time—November 1965—when Washington audiences were becoming ever more polarized by race.

Major figures in late-twentieth-century American theater—such as Walker, Ossie Davis, Debbie Allen, and Phylicia Rashad—made their way through the Howard drama program during these years. The story had not ended; nor will it, as evidenced by such contemporary stage and screen stars who learned their craft at Howard as Anthony Anderson, Marlon Wynans, and Chadwick Boseman.

Thomas Montgomery Gregory’s dream of founding the National Negro Theatre at Howard University never came to fruition. Yet the legacy that he, Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, Owen Dodson, Anne Cooke, Marie Moore-Forrest built has had a deep, lasting, and profound impact on American theater. Their achievement is one of a community that lies outside the standard accounts of the American stage. Washington viewed from the perspective of African American theater turns out to be a considerable theater town indeed.

One summer evening’s entertainment in July 1951 captures Dodson’s loftier achievements at Howard in an event that should have passed into Washington—and American—theater lore (and certainly would have, if the major protagonists had been white). Dodson had admired the work of Earle Hyman, a teenage actor with New York’s American Negro Theater. He seized on the opportunity presented by a scheduled Summer School production to invite Hyman to take a turn with the Howard Players in a production of *Hamlet*. Many white critics questioned the ability of African American performers to master the range of emotions required to stage Shakespeare. Dodson and Hyman set out to prove them wrong.²¹⁶

Dodson pulled out all the stops for the production. He hired David Amram, then a student at George Washington University, to write an ground-breaking musical score for the performance. Amram, who would become one of the leading American composers of the late twentieth century, was performing with top-flight jazz musicians around town even as he was holding down a chair playing the French horn with the National Symphony. The Czech conductor and musical educator George Schick (who would later join the conducting staff of the Metropolitan Opera) served as the production's percussionist. Frederick Wilkerson, the noted voice coach, played the King. American Negro Theater actors Austin Briggs-Hall and Claire Leyba played Polonius and Gertrude, while Carolyn Hill Stewart, who already had Broadway credits to her name, was Ophelia.²¹⁷

Dodson and Hyman reached out to Sir John Gielgud when the British actor was on tour in Washington with a production of Christopher Frye's *The Lady's Not for Burning*. When Gielgud discovered that Washington's Jim Crow segregation prevented him from having lunch at his hotel with Dodson and Hyman, he joined them at the Greyhound Bus Station instead. Gielgud spent a day working with the Howard Players, and he coached Hyman as best he could from a distance throughout the young actor's preparations for the role of the Danish Prince.

Operating with a miniscule budget, Owen spread the word as best he could. Avoiding expensive printing, he made sure that the production was the talk of the African American community. He later complained that, during a number of radio interviews, he was constantly asked whether such a play was too ambitious for African American actors. Owen bitterly complained that "no goddamed body here thinks Negroes can do anything but n***** parts."²¹⁸

Students made the costumes as best they could and, even at that, still ran out of money. The found a solution by having the men perform almost barechested. When a professor from Carnegie Tech complained that the men were "wandering

around with their tits hanging out," Dodson responded that "we designed the costumes to make them feel free."²¹⁹

Hyman had perfected the ability to fall straight on his face, or tumble backward without hurting himself. The audience gasped when, after the famous Ghost had left the stage, he simply collapsed. Actors entered anyway they could, given the limitations of the stage, walking in from the back, the sides, and even proclaiming from the top levels of the audience. Hyman changed his costume from black to pink, which reportedly send a shiver through the audience.

In one memorable moment, Wilkinson tried to flee the stage as Hyman launched into a sword attack with more enthusiasm than caution. Owen pushed him back onstage, where he was able to complete his death scene. The play closed as the extras carrying torches lifted Hamlet's body offstage to the reverberations of Schick's drums. And this was all for a run that lasted only from July 18 until July 21.

The *Washington Post* drama critic Richard L. Coe, writing for the *New York Times*, spotted Gielgud's influence on Hyman and noted that the "nunnery scene" was beautifully played. "While all the voices have that variety of accent common to American classical readings," Coe lamented, "Mr. Hyman's has impressive power and command which stood him well in the long role. Considering the very few opportunities a Negro actor has at this role, he shows surprising mastery of its facets and his ability to put his intellectual concept into action is impressive."²²⁰

The *Evening Star's* Jay Carmody was more honest about his own prejudices.²²¹ "On the surface," he began, "it is lamentably mismatching play and players when any save the most gifted performers take on 'Hamlet.' It is tradition that in any such case, both the greatest dramas and the most reckless cast shall lose with the audience a third loser. Well, tradition is being pleasurably interrupted at Howard University this week where 'Hamlet' is

being played by a company of professional performers under the perceptive and artful direction of Owen Dodson.”

After noting the influence of Gielgud on the production, Carmody praised Hyman. “Hyman’s Prince is a neurotic with a voice that makes a ranging music of Hamlet’s agonized indecision. The Negro actor is a lithe, youthful and dynamic figure who never loses awareness that his distraught prince has a singularly sensitive mind. He moves through the role with an arresting sureness of touch that is the play’s best feature.” After admiring Steward’s Ophelia, he praised the costumes and lighting. Wrapping up, Carmody noted that “the Howard U. ‘Hamlet’ will close with tonight’s performance but it will be remembered by those fortunate enough to see it as the best production in the school’s history.”

The production had surpassed any expectation. Sold-out crowds streamed into Spaulding Hall each night, with perhaps as many as five hundred people turned away at the door the last evening. The *Washington Afro-American’s* Lois Taylor speculated that the production might even make its way to Broadway.²²² But this was not to be.

Dodson had many years left at Howard when the curtain came down on his *Hamlet*; and, Hyman had decades of superior performances on stage, film, and television. Best remembered for his role of Cliff Huxtable’s father Russell in television’s *Bill Cosby Show*, Hyman would have plentiful opportunities over an illustrious career to demonstrate the power that African American actors bring to the emotional range contained within Shakespeare’s most magnificent characters.

Dodson’s *Hamlet* reveals how much Montgomery Gregory—and all his partners along the way—created a national Negro presence on the dramatic stage, even if their national Negro theater never materialized. The Howard Players have left an indelible mark on the American stage.

Curtain Call

Acrimony was guaranteed when Edward Christopher Williams, Carrie Clifford, Anna Julia Cooper, Alain LeRoy Locke, Thomas Montgomery Gregory, and Ernest Just gathered in 1916 as the NAACP Drama Committee to discuss whether or not to present Angelina Weld Grimké's new play *Rachel*. Each of the participants embraced differing calculations of the appropriate balance among education, aesthetics, and commerce for constituting the value of theater. The ensuing rancor became so intense that Locke and Gregory resigned from the committee and took their own visions of theater back with them to the Howard campus.

The cleavages so visible within the group may have been sparked by Wilson's policies; they continued to define the contours of African American theater more generally throughout the century. To draw on W.E.B. DuBois's stark formulation, should Black drama be propaganda or art? The challenge of mediating among such seemingly divergent values continued throughout the twentieth century. Lost within the resulting tensions stands a deeper reality that much of the impulse towards an African American theater has been driven by distress over the condition of African American community.

The egos of many committee members trembled before no one. Their highly successful subsequent careers reveal a firm belief in oneself held by all. Nonetheless, the act of producing *Rachel* – or not doing so – was predicated on a shared belief that theater could express the soul of a people. In doing so, theater would confront the American denial of full citizenship on the basis of skin color.

As the story unfolds, African American theater generally – and especially in Washington – looked to bolster community well-being. Theater remained an effort to sustain the soul of a people and their community.

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Dr. Ruble's latest work, *The Muse of Urban Delirium*, examines how new forms of performing arts emerge at moments of uncertain social identity in cities undergoing rapid transformation. His earlier book-length volumes include: *Washington's U Street: A Biography*, *Creating Diversity Capital*, and a trilogy examining the fate of Russian provincial cities during the twentieth century: *Leningrad. Shaping a Soviet City*, *Money Sings!*; and, *Second Metropolis*. Several of these books have appeared in translation. Dr. Ruble's more than twenty edited works with several partners include: *Jazz in Washington*, *Urban Diversity*, and *Preparing for the Urban Future*.

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The creation of beauty in the face of malice is a radical act.

Over the course of too many summers to count, Baltimore theater doyen Philip Arnoult and I have sat on muggy evenings in the stands of Camden Yards watching our beloved Orioles. As is typical of life's most enduring experiences, various patterns developed. Early on, when hope ran high, Philip would verbally joust with the legendary vendor Fancy Clancy Haskett, from whom Philip has bought beer for some four decades. By the middle innings, Baltimore's maladroitness relief pitchers began to make their appearances (the Orioles consistently have maintained among the worst bullpen records in major league baseball). Faith would slip away. As their pitch counts grew, we redirected our conversations toward theater in Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Yekaterinburg, and Washington. These leisurely chats—punctuated by the confident crack of an opponent's bat—prompted me to understand that Washington has a venerable and intriguing theater history full of stories worthy of attention. One such story appears here.

Research is a solitary endeavor, in that scholars must gather materials, formulate the story, and write more or less on their own. Such notions of writerly seclusion are greatly exaggerated. Multitudes of folks help along the way. I am especially aware of how dependent writers are on others from working at an institution that regularly supports researchers on their individual journeys to convert piles of notes and flashes of intellectual insight into products that someone else will want to read. I owe this work—and so much more—to the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, which has provided a supportive institutional and intellectual home for much of my career.

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Blair A. Ruble
Distinguished Fellow

NOTES

Abbreviations used in this chapter's notes:

HUFLVT	Howard University Founders' Library, Library Division, Vertical Files.
MAP	Maryrose Allen Papers (Collection 160), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington.
OVDP	Owen Vincent Dodson Papers (Collection 27), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington.
TMGP	T. Montgomery Gregory Papers, (Collection 37), Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington.
UA	University Archive, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington.

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