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THE ARENA PLAYERS, INC.:  
THE OLDEST CONTINUOUSLY OPERATING AFRICAN  
AMERICAN COMMUNITY THEATRE IN THE UNITED STATES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Theatre

by  
Alexis Michelle Skinner  
B.A., Temple University, 2002  
M.A., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2005\  
May 2021

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Alexis Michelle Skinner

these pages are for my parents.

Laura Anne Gibbs Skinner

(12/13/1946-6/21/2020)

&

Michael William Skinner

(11/4/1941-11/7/2013),

&

our ancestors that came before and beside us,

known and unknown.

Asé!

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## **Nomenclature**

AETA - American Educational Theatre Association  
AME – African Methodist Episcopal  
ANT- American Negro Theatre  
API- Arena Players, Inc.  
ASALH- Association for the Study of African American Life  
BCT- Black Community Theatre  
BNHP – Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project  
BROS- Baltimore Rock Opera Society  
BTC- Black Theatre Catalyst  
CSO/I- Culturally Specific Organization/Institution  
DEI- Diversity, Equity, Inclusion  
ETC- Experimental Theatre Company  
FTP- Federal Theatre Project  
HBCU- Historically Black Colleges and Universities  
KRIGWA- Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists  
LORT- League of Residential Theatres  
LT- Little Theatre  
MSAC- Maryland State Arts Council  
NA- Narcotics Anonymous  
NAACP- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People  
NADSA- National Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts  
NEA- National Endowment for the Arts  
NLT- Negro Little Theatre  
NIDA- Negro Intercollegiate Dramatic Association  
PWI- Primarily White Institution  
RFP- Request for Proposal



SADSA- Southern Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts

STEM- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

US- United States

VA- Department of Veterans Affairs

WPA- Works Progress Administration

WW II- World War Two

## **Abstract**

Hay (1994) gave the Arena Players the moniker, “the oldest continuously operating African American community theatre company” in the U.S. But, if Black Theatre is increasingly found in mainstream venues in regional theatre and Broadway while Black Drama is relegated to syllabi, where is the living practice of African American, or black, community theatre? And what guarantees its survival? Craig (1980) and Fraden (1994) give voice to black critics, like Locke (1925), in co-creating objectives for black theatre during the FTP which took stage as the Negro Little Theatre continued. Hill & Hatch (2003) solidify the geographical and ideological connections between the black community theatre movement and Educational theatre with its professors at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Essays in Young (2013) widen the scope of black theatre history. But it is Du Bois’ (1926) Krigwa manifesto that declared black theatre must be about, by, for, and near African American audiences. Black community theatre expanded ideas of African American performative practice valuing the psychosocial well-being of black audiences while training novice practitioners. BCT fights against the U.S. mainstream practices that, sustained by a white folk culture, shut black people out from human and civil rights. In this Critical autoethnography, I establish a historical context for the self-determinative practices of black community theatre supplemented by oral histories from members of the Arena Players in Baltimore City, Maryland, founded in 1953. My Baltimore City roots provide me insider-outsider access to comment on the innerworkings of a company beset by loss and obsessed with survival. Refocusing on the culturally-specific practice of black community theatre also reassesses the U.S. theatre’s concentration on creating a hierarchy of theatre genres. Notably, for black theatre practitioners, this would mean claiming self-determination and community connectivity as their condition for creativity.

## Introduction

Theatre, being one of the earliest forms of media, is oft considered the realm of the elite, and theatre companies led by white people are the mainstream, traditional, and historical face of American theatre. Dorothy Chansky (2004) writes that mainstream theatre “implies ‘legitimate’ theatre...[which] is accepted as universally American both in cultural histories and ‘in the ambient culture generally’” (Chasky 2004, 14). That which is mainstream, according to Chansky (2004), stems from the ideas, images, and values of the professional white middle class. Ignoring ideations of legitimacy in white markets, black theatre created its own acceptance, beyond the white gaze that cataloged African American theatre ventures and performances of blackness as “lesser.” This negative Othering derives from the indelible legacies of America’s racial project that created a binary hierarchy of representation based on skin color valuing European origins over the cosmologies, traditions, and humanity of descendants from the African diaspora (Omi & Winant 2015). While white criticism of black theatre often extends to critiques of audience behavior it encroaches upon African American generated theatre convention by presuming the white gaze is wanted or valid. This superficial evaluative perspective inflicts African American patrons with paternalistic assumptions of intellect and assigns mainstream values to black performance and production. Notwithstanding that, the black middle-class values of education and freedom are deeply embedded in black theatre. As a genre of performance that reflects identity and the values of its African American community, black theatre is not mainstream because it values black life at its core in its output and reception.

Recognizing the agency of the black audience underscores the inherently radical nature of black social engagement through black theatre. Presenting black theatre in black spaces makes safe spaces for black audiences to assess the value of that which is meant for them. Because of

their feedback about black controlled images of black subjectivity, black theatre remains an expression of African American self-determination, one that stems from a black freedom drive built on African American humanity, experience, and community. What mainstream critics neglect to appreciate, or don't understand, about black community (audience) performance is found in the latest iteration of Du Bois' black theatre principles taken from Solange's "F.U.B.U." on her 2016 album *A Seat at the Table*: "For us, this shit is for us/ Don't try to come for us." In catering to the black gaze of black audiences, black community theatre is reliant on and responsible to its relationship with local African American communities.

## **Argument**

This ethnographic study explores the history of the Arena Players, a black community theatre in Baltimore City, Maryland, which bills itself as the "longest continuously operating African American theatre company in the United States." In it, I am arguing that Black Community Theatre is comingled with Black Theatre in a universal push for a social and political community-driven theatre practice and is an affirmation of local black life and culture which operates outside of the purview of non-black arts leaders. In this goal, I am supported by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s declaration that we "are all heirs to critical theory, but we black critics are heir to the black vernacular critical tradition" (Gates, Jr. 1987, 44). My application of critical theory in this document utilizes my positionality as an African American who draws from the well of double consciousness and intersectionality in critique of Eurocentric histories of black theatre practices. In doing so, I insert the black vernacular tradition of African American oral history into the textual archive of theatre history as a Black Baltimore born and raised creative. I use critical ethnography to engage documented black theatre history, Baltimore history, and U.S.

cultural trends in a dialogue with the African American institutional memory of the Arena Players.

Like the prescience of Beneatha's big chop and unveiling of an Afro hairstyle on Broadway in 1954's *A Raisin in the Sun*, the work of black community theatre in the U.S. is a radical move to discharge the power of whiteness over black expression, representation, and theatre production. In Baltimore City, Maryland, the Arena Players formed a black-led community theatre founded by, near, for, and about African Americans during segregation. The Arena Players claimed space where there was none in the city's extant arts community. In Moten's (2003) *In the Break*, or site of radical improvisatory supplementation, he finds an "anoriginality" (Moten 2003, 535-6) in reference to the empowerment of the idea before its utterance. The self-determination of African American life is a part of this phenomenon. And it is manifested in the *ensemble* of players who co-create as a modernist radical challenge to universalized traditions of representation. And it is the metaphor of the ensemble that I extend to the Arena Players' production of black theatre in the Du Boisian context<sup>1</sup> as a black theatre praxis by a collective of African Americans free from white directives particularly notable as a black-led company that began before the end of segregation. Their actions were provoked by the omission of black creative voices in Baltimore and operated, at its start, in direct conflict with white supremacist practices of exclusion.

With the black leadership of a highly visible Artistic Director, Sam Wilson, at its helm for forty years, the Arena Players have had to overcome setbacks linked to founderism, which

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 1 plots the course of Du Bois' 1911 pageant, its effects on educational theatre, his critical debates with Alain Locke, and the wellspring of black theatre after his 1926 Krigwa article.

were exacerbated by Wilson's death. Yet, in Baltimore's active theatre ecosystem, the Arena Players, Inc. have survived as the only black-led production house due to their ensemble of dedicated volunteer-professionals. Many of the creative leaders and educators who contribute are professionals, usually in theatre *and* other industries, and bring that wealth of knowledge and experience with them as unpaid laborers in black community theatre. I put forth the term volunteer-professional to negotiate the accumulated skills of black community theatre practitioners. Scores of volunteer-professionals work towards the goal of uplifting the black community through theatre production and training. It is part of an active pedagogical process that scouts laypersons interested in working with a black community theatre.

In the United States, that which is mainstream has often siphoned elements from black life and culture uncited. There is a current trend in mainstream theatre where white-founded and, usually, operated, regional and semi-professional companies are "innovating" through audience development, minority hires, and community programs, like theatre education. I call into question those outreach programs that supposedly develop black and other minority writers, performers, directors, designers and technicians as being practices already endemic to black community theatre. I also argue that the Arena Players' continuum of pedagogy makes this particular black community theatre company a repository of theatre skill sharing in the ways that it has housed and produced African American artists who continually move into mainstream non-profit and commercial theatre, film, and television, as well into other fields. Not only does this case study of the Arena Players, Inc. add to the general discourse of black theatre history, it further explores narratives of noncommercial black theatre's survival as one that has always already been addressing so-called diversity issues in a funding environment geared toward mainstream popular and regional theatre Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

## Scholarship

I lean heavily on black theorists historians and other non-white scholars as much as possible for their insights into the black experience as practitioners and/or members of communities of color. To be entirely essentialist, for a moment, their conclusions allow me to draw from a well of authenticity that overtly and directly challenges the Eurocentric worldviews that have guided and sullied expectations about black life and culture. Additionally, I place their work into the conversation with non-black generated scholarship to see where the conversation goes. But, to aid in this discussion, I turn to performance theorist Fred Moten's 2003 *In the Break* which reinforces the notion of the "freedom drive that animates black performance" (Moten 2003, 12). He finds this freedom drive clarified in the aurality of the jazz ensemble and extends it to the intent and demonstrable elements of black radical theatre performance. I apply the freedom drive to the self-deterministic practices of African Americans which are the building blocks for black life, culture, and art. And I extend Moten's actionable power in the utterance into metaphor of aurality for the ways that black personal narratives can function as a jazz ensemble. Through this lens, the dual physical and vocal performatives of being while expressing black are already radical acts.

When applying a race-conscious lens to critique the practical and aesthetic properties of black community theatre as well as the social conditions that contributed to its formation, I am employing philosopher bell hooks' (1992) use of an *oppositional gaze* and Moten's (2003) *oppositional encounter*. hooks' is a critical stance, or mode of viewing work, from the perspective a black woman which refutes and chastises the white male gaze that territorializes and objectifies all in its path. At the same time, I remain open to the revelations of my interview collaborators as the voices qualified to represent the Arena Players. For the reader this will likely

create an appositional encounter, or in Moten's words "a nondetermining invitation to the new and continually unprecedented performative, historical, philosophical, democratic, communist arrangements that are the only authentic ones" (Moten 2003, 22).

I further apply Moten's (2003) metaphor of the "break" to acknowledge the space in the archive that the creative practices of black community theatre fills. In doing so, I amplify the voices of my interview collaborators which, as an *ensemble*, offend the historical assumptions of theatre as an individualistic white mode of expression. Moten's (2003) metaphor works in tandem with Indian critical theorist Homi Bhabha (1990) who urges writers to disrupt the grand narrative of nation by inserting alternative voices that efface a universalized narrative. My research aims to fill in spaces that the archive leaves open as an act of *dissemination* (Bhabha 1990). If black community theatre can be the "supplemental space for the articulation of knowledges that are adjacent and adjunct but not necessarily accumulative, teleological, or dialectical" (Bhabha 1990, 313), this dissertation does two things. First, it contrasts the black theatre movements which were created in defiance of white American folk culture, highlighting the ways that white theatre practitioners did not consider the concerns of black audiences. Second, it isolates the motives and functions of a black community theatre, taking the spotlight off mainstream commercial theatre as the only theatre practice to study.

In documenting over sixty years of Arena Players' history across many different time periods important to theatre historians, I use the term black community theatre as a "secular interpretation" (Bhabha 1990, 293) of theatre that transgresses the sacrosanctity of movements and genres, especially that of the Little Theatre movement. Today, while U.S. confusion over



whether #blacklivesmatter<sup>2</sup> continues to be demonstrated by brutal police-related deaths and debated in mass media forums, black community theatre continues to proclaim great value in black life, which informs every element of performance, production, and administration. This black contradiction of U.S. theatre experience opposes the historical, and the many present depictions, criticisms, and omittance of blackness by whites on professional stages and in other media.

Fred Moten's (2003) nontraditional interpretation of the outcomes of black aurality finds a radical quality in black performance, including theatre, which contains a "surplus lyricism [known to be] what that which is called the Avant-Garde desires" (Moten 2003, 26). Moten (2003) sees a shortcoming in the shifts of mindset that the European and Eurocentric U. S. Avant-Garde claimed to provide. Likely because it did not reform ideas of African American quality en masse. Therefore, Moten points to black art forms as the source of true radical breaks in ideology, particularly through the African American performance traditions. For example, Moten cites Jazz music, which underscores the Harlem Renaissance literary movement as a radical black performative mode. But Tillman (2009) goes farther, calling the Harlem Renaissance artists out as social activists building black consciousness across the arts, including Oscar Micheaux in film. Regularly excluded in theatre history is the influence the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age had on the white U.S. Avant-Garde. The Harlem Renaissance's twinning of black jazz music with black literary and dramatic arts is overlooked as *the* truly

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<sup>2</sup> The #BlackLivesMatter Movement banner specifically protests the deaths of black men, women, and, most critically, children, by the hands of (or in the custody of) police officers and private citizens.

minoritarian alternative to mainstream and racist theatre practices of the time. And it is in that era we find the Negro Little Theatre's widest outreach.

The Negro Little Theatre as generated by the sociopolitical work of W.E.B. Du Bois<sup>3</sup>, in conversation with his contemporaries, can be traced from the post-Reconstruction era into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (1923, 1926, 1929). Even though scholars like Alain Locke (1922, 1925) disagreed with Du Bois' early protest and propagandist intentions for black theatre, their practice was invigorated by the power of the rally cry of black theatre about, by, for, and near African Americans everywhere. This defining statement of African American (black) theatre values the artistic and social relevance of African American life despite historical (i.e., traditional) economic manipulation and staged representations by white Americans. Du Bois' impassioned call to action provided the impetus for much of twentieth century black theatre's development and, within the tomes of critical conversation and debate with other critics, generated a rich and diverse body of work that is still growing.<sup>4</sup> As a maxim for black theatre, "about, by, for, and near" is so fundamental to black theatre practitioners' training that it is oft quoted among African American theatre theorists and researchers such as Harvey Young (2013), Annemarie Bean (1999), Mance Williams (1985), Harry Elam (2000), Larry Neal (1974), Margaret Wilkerson (1979), and countless others.

Du Bois (1926) also disfigures an academic assumption of the universality of whiteness in theatre. Predating conversations about differences between community, community-based, and culturally specific theatre, Du Bois' intervention calls attention to the existing differences between [white] theatre and *Negro*, or black, theatre. Whenever the ethnic or racial marker—

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<sup>3</sup> Pron. "*Due Boyss*" (Lewis 1993, 16).

<sup>4</sup> I mean, we're here, aren't we?

*Negro, black, Afro*, etc. is used as a qualifier, it signifies the inherent social distinctions in the black experience of democracy in the United States of America. This is where Michael Omi and Howard Winant center their research in *Racial Formation in the United States* (2015).

Conversely, European and continental American *white* imagery is the unmarked, unnamed, unqualified assumption of natural, traditional, and mainstream humanity and, therefore, universality. Faedra Carpenter (2014) in *Coloring Whiteness* says that the trope of whiteness is “set as the paradigmatic standard...a standardization that grants whiteness an obscuring ubiquity—an inevitable power” (Carpenter 2014, 83). I would extend this phrasing to say that whiteness therefore has been guaranteed life. And this is because whiteness has governed U.S. media channels, including theatre, by maintaining the white image as commercially and critically viable and the necessary image to respect and repeat. Because white society and culture in the United States of America was founded on devaluing blackness, white theatre’s challenge in mainstreaming black theatre has always been how to humanize members of the African diaspora and “accept” the universality of the black image.

## **Literature review**

In this dissertation, I am signifying that the United States’ history of racial segregation created the conditions for black community theatre which is at the heart of a wider history of black theatre in practice. This work specifically recognizes the growth and challenges the black artists and theatre producers of the Arena Players have faced with the process of continuity within a minefield of professionalization, commercial ventures, funding, and other media. Having outlived many of the companies that defined the Black Arts Movement, the Arena Players proved their sustainability through a blend of independent and non-profit administrative practices that opened a permanent venue in 1961 and, since 1962, included a board overseeing

finances; community partnerships; impartial civic engagements and event hosting (Hay 1994, 185). My focus on black community theatre history marks my place as a scholar in an ever-growing field of minority research still underrepresented in traditionally European and United States theatre archives. In this document I present a small cross-section of scholarly research that is enriched by practitioner's concepts of black theatre. While the practitioners of the Arena Players define their work as black, or African American, community theatre, it is necessary to consider the extant record of black theatre, community theatre, and black community theatre put forth by other theatre scholars.

### **Black theatre**

Though many African American scholars have definitions for black theatre it does not simplify its meaning. This complexity proves that even in academic circles that require archival definitions, black theatre is a nebulous topic to approach without considerations of the layperson's definition and application. The problem with black theatre is that it has been oft marked as one discrete genre of performative practice. Its long and varied history in the United States of America has been consigned to a simple narrative that has been told historically in terms of artistic output, or playwrighting, and black representation, or the performers on the stage. The multitude of movements in black theatre have been distilled to the United States with the stark distinctions of the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement, and "Contemporary" or "Minority" Theatre. Often, texts from African diaspora movements, not based in the United States, such as Césaire's *Negritude*,<sup>5</sup> Caribbean, or African Drama from across the globe are taught as a part of Black Drama courses to undergraduates if they are lucky. But the black theatre

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<sup>5</sup> I have included *Negritude* in Black Drama syllabi as an Instructor in a BA Theatre program at an historically black university. See also Egar 2009 and Miller 2011, 150-1.

movements have also been variously defined across the different eras of output as: a venue; the appearance of African American performers; and the intended experience of the audience. Rarely is black theatre defined as an administrative practice. Additionally, while the work of many European theatre and, now, Arts Administration scholars examine management practices at Shakespeare's Globe or even through the Samuel Pepys diaries,<sup>6</sup> there is no specialized theatre history genre dedicated to the projects of black artistic entrepreneurship of black-led companies and venues, as they are outliers in black theatre history.

In Margaret B Wilkerson's 1979 *Redefining Black Theatre* she exposes the major problem of defining black theatre by addressing it as one of association:

Caught in the practices and traditions of mainstream American theatre, black theatre succumbs to the conventional, limited modes of assessing and discussing the theatre experience. The spotlight experience. The spotlight shines on the stage, literally and figuratively; the dialogue and gestures of the performers, the director's concept, the handling of aural and visual elements are carefully reviewed for their aesthetic effect, but the audience, for whom the show is mounted, is largely ignored. The interaction between performer and spectator is lost. Both are treated as objects, forever separated and bearing little relationship to each other (Wilkerson 1979, 32-33).

Wilkerson's critique is that a narrow mainstream theatre rubric has been misapplied to the black theatre experience. She finds fault in the use of the spotlight that values the work of the black creative artist in a way that objectifies them as a commodity and isolates them from the audience. In concentrating on a star culture, Wilkerson sees black theatre negating the agency of both the artist and the audience. With a Du Boisian understanding of black theatre, the focus should be on black audience members as the recipients of black-informed thematic concepts and the de facto core of word-of-mouth critics. Their importance in the ecosystem of black theatre is valued in

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<sup>6</sup> Pepys *Diaries* 1659-1669.

black community theatre, where there are few, if any, barriers between them and the artists, who share membership in their local African American community.

There are some, now historic, reports that examine operational methods from the home front of black community theatre from the 1960s and 70s like those coming from New Orleans' Free Southern Theatre (Moses et al. 1965). Larry Neal's (1968) "The Black Arts Movement" in the Summer 1968 edition of *The Drama Review* thrilled researchers and artists for its insight into the revolutionary theatre of the Black Arts Movement. At the time, it was a dangerous act for black people in the United States to so boldly identify as an artist with a revolutionary mindset (Joseph 2006). Significantly, the Summer of 1968 was the Summer of mourning that cut black America into pieces (Elfenbein et al. 2011) as it was the summer following the assassination of the pacifist Negro Civil Rights Leader, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>7</sup> Neal re-introduces the concept of "Afro-American" identity and reiterates Du Bois (1926) call to action, even highlighting Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) pageant *Slave Ship* (Neal 1968, 36). For some, this volume was all of the black theatre they knew existed.<sup>8</sup> What it did for black theatre was reinforce the concerns of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century social scholars and Harlem Renaissance era black artists who did not see themselves represented accurately by the standards of popular, commercial, and mainstream white theatre. The "old standby" texts most black theatre scholars can turn to for starting their research are the in the tomes of scripts, companies, and movements from Annemarie Bean (1999), Errol Hill (1980, 1987, 2003), James Hatch (2003), and Samuel

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. (Asé!) studied at Crozier Theological Seminary with Pastor Marcus Garvey Wood (Asé!) of Providence Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland (providencebaptistchurchinc.com, Rasmussen 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Things would change with Broadway musical *The Wiz* (1975). Baltimorean André De Shields originated the role of the Wiz, but during his first Tony award winner speech at 73 for *Hadestown* (Gans 2019) DeSheilds speaks of his uphill climb working in the theatre.

Hay (1994). African American cultural historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1997) brought the efficacy of the independent black theatre, the Chitlin' Circuit, to the table in 1997 while so many black theatre artists and scholars were too highbrow to even consider the artistry of the most patronized popular black theatrical form.

Samuel Hay's 1994 *African American Theatre* bases the criteria for African American theatre on the written texts. He characterizes the play texts written between 1898 and 1992 as "revealed" through W.E.B. Du Bois's wide use of instructional or thought-provoking propaganda or "lusty" as influenced by the work of Alain Locke who advocated for folk-drama that allowed the playwright artistic freedom of expression. For black theatre it is the entanglement of the two positions that has encouraged the creation of a dramatic canon and black theatre companies. Additionally, Hay's (1994) intervention into black theatre governance structures breaks new ground in exploring the constitution of black theatre companies. In my research on the Arena Players, the plays they performed met Hay's criteria and also disobeyed them, especially during their first full decade when they performed plays by white playwrights (Appendix E. List of Productions). In *A Sourcebook of African-American Performance: Plays, People, Movements* edited by Annemarie Bean (1999), the essays explore the historic and ideological interventions that African Americans have contributed to theatre in the United States. Collectively, they champion the idea that black theatre consists of the artistic efforts undertaken by black people whose particular culture developed outside of the mainstream white American experience.

In *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era* E. Quita Craig (1980) argues that black theatre as a practice could not have manifested without the African cultural influence which traveled with the American descendants of enslaved and free Africans in the U.S. Craig also contends that the African connection, however tenuous to black theatre practice during the

Federal Era, worked on a political level which created works that both affirmed and denied African identity or Africaness as a value. Craig presents evidence of a theatre practice by black Americans that defied white supremacist social strictures on the African American narrative and practice of selfhood. This prime intent is in the fabric of every black-led theatre venture.

Glenda Dicker/sun (2008) includes a timeline of African American theatre practice and other significant events from (1847-2008) in *African American Theater: A Cultural Companion*. Events seen through an African American practitioner's lens offer validity to black theater as a flight, or digression, from the social construct of traditional theatre with a narrative based on the white gaze's "creation" of African American practice. By reclaiming black representational practice as a socio-historical narrative of African American identity from within a mainstream white culture, Dicker/sun (2008) relies on an ontological black identity heuristic to define black theatre. Theatre history scholars can add these interpretations of black American theatre practices to our understanding as those defined by the political needs of African American practitioners.

Macelle Mahala (2013) defines black theatre as a sociopolitical term that "uses the material of African American culture in ways that contribute to a sociological dialogue about the meaning and cultural implications of African American identity" (Mahala 2013, xv). Her date book, *Penumbra: The Premier Stage for African American Drama*, offers revelations of the historic and artistic development of Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota from its 1976 inception addressing their survival on the other side of an extreme financial crisis. She focuses on the administrative workings of Penumbra as an arts organization with a specific mission to serve African American regional theatre in the Midwest. Mahala's text supports my exploration of the operational structures of the Arena Players as one fulfilling the sociopolitical needs of its African American community.



Harvey Young's body of research on black theatre has laid a foundation for the declaration that he makes with collaborator, Queen Meccasia Zabriskie (2013) in their oral history of Chicago's black theatre and dance community. Their conclusive definition that black theatre is black life may be as clear as anyone can get on defining a praxis that salutes black labor as one built on collective intentions. In 2013's *Black Theater Is Black Life: An Oral History of Chicago Theater and Dance, 1970-2010*, Young and Zabriskie present the narratives of African American and diaspora artists who offer a myriad of perspectives on their and other's work in Chicago's black theatre and dance community. As a local ethnographic study, it presumes that black narratives are the authority on black theatre experience which is the stance I take in this document. It also builds a case for the ways that black theatre is a multi-faceted artform that happens amongst<sup>9</sup> a collective of artists from the within the African American community.

Even now, in this era of "post-black" theatre terminology we still haven't completed the black theatre project. My discussion of the Arena Players as a company of volunteer professionals whose lives are intertwined in the daily operations of the theatre is clearly part of the larger project to preserve the voices of black theatre practitioners. What is exciting about black theatre since 1999 is the way that African American black theatre scholars like Young & Zabriskie (2013), D. Soyini Madison (2005) and Macelle Mahala (2013) have embodied research, some using the critical theory approach, and have built their definitions for black theatre by engaging directly with its participants through oral histories. They have quite literally been researching "about, by, for, and near" black theatre. Other scholars like Marvin McAllister (2003), who writes a narrative of the African Grove Theatre, and Thomas Bauman (2014), who

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<sup>9</sup> As in the colloquialism "Talk amongst yourselves."

details the Pekin in Chicago, have expanded our interpretation of black theatre by investigating venues of import to African American theatre history. Through these texts we gain access to historical practices of black-led theatre ventures that directly serve African American communities while defying the social history of black disenfranchisement in the United States. Research into black theatre's administrative operations provides more insight into the inner workings and financial struggles that commercial and community black theatre companies have contended with and are still working through. The number of theatre scholars specializing in African American and/or black theatre is still growing. Collectively their research makes it plain that their interests in the value of these unmarked cultural spaces are important to all of theatre history.

### **Community theatre**

Bradley Boney (1994) finds that theatre's efficacy is "hinged on immediate community" (Boney 1994, 100). But in community theatre the audience cum community is cultivated from within the local geographic areas where the companies and their performers center their lives. From the start of the Little Theatre Movement, community was focused on the artistic and social needs of white performers in the United States of America. In her 1917 introduction of *The Community Theatre* Louise Burleigh (1917) is optimistic that the "New Theatre" of pageants and the Little Theatre movement will bring audiences closer to performers, free performers to create, allow the spoken drama to flourish when the novelty of the era was silent films, and allow the actor to "awaken his group to consciousness of self" (Burleigh, 1917, xxvii). This last claim is similar to those of many of the European Avant-Garde artists. Dorothy Chanksy's (2005) *Composing Ourselves* is a comprehensive history of the Little Theatre Movement. But Burleigh's early text eventually comes to define community theatre as "a house of play in which

events offer to every member of a body politic active participation in a common interest” (Burleigh, 1917, xxxii).

Burleigh’s (1917) discussion of the pageant of the Oberammergau is her prime example of community theatre in the way it draws from the talents of local citizens who are cast by committee and how the ritual reenactment serves a communal need. Burleigh’s major point about pageants is how they fulfill a sociological need. This is also true within the African American subculture. Building community in the Negro Little Theatre was fundamental to its political and social purposes. W.E.B. Du Bois’ pageants (1911-1915), which I outline in Chapter 1, predated Burleigh’s text and were not only meant to soothe the socio-political pains that African Americans were working through on the hard-won road to Civil Rights. Du Bois’ pageants (1911-1915) also generated employment and volunteer opportunities, engaged individuals from the black community in several cities, and provoked a racial pride in African American attendees by showcasing black historical figures. This last psychological concentration generated positive feelings or prideful sentiments in black audiences who saw self-affirming images on stages. Du Bois’ work also instigated black pageants across the nation in churches, social organizations, and schools which continue to this day in African American churches, educational communities, and in established historically black colleges and universities. Additionally, I later argue in Chapter 3 that the pageant holds a pedagogical place in African American community theatre.

From her monograph on Cornerstone Theater’s performance practice in rural, urban, and regional theatres, and the development of community-based theatre, Sonja Kuftinec uses anthropologist Victor Turner’s notion of *communitas* to describe the temporary “social and aesthetic exchanges...that create and enable community” (Kuftinec 2004, 7). Within the traditional structures of black communities, the temporary is what is being challenged by the

longevity of black community theatres. By claiming the space as the alternative to professional and commercial performance organizations, black theatres are building towards permanent community.

Jan Cohen-Cruz (2005) delineates the work of community-based theatre as a co-created and responsive practice in *Local Acts*. Cohen-Cruz (2005) stresses that community-based performance and community theatre are distinctly different. She argues that while both utilize the amateur performers, community-based theatre generates performance material from the local setting whereas community theatre “is enacted by people who neither generate the material, shape it, work with professional guidance, nor apply it beyond an entertainment frame” (Cohen-Cruz 7). This conception of community theatre does not extend it to the conditions of black community theatre. In black community theatre often professional black theatre artists work with novices who are not only learning performance or production technique, but also social context for the thematic conditions of a play as they work on productions. This is especially true with the young people growing up in the youth arts programs. Of particular interest to my research is her recognition of community-based theatre as a joining of local social needs with the aesthetic process. Cohen-Cruz (2005) notes the importance of the relationship between the Civil Rights era Free Southern Theatre and their intended audiences (Cohen-Cruz, 9). Cohen-Cruz (2005) goes on to detail the symbolic and literal 1985 funeral of the company held by its founders (Cohen-Cruz 2005, 60-1) as a worthwhile commemoration of the end of an artistic and Civil Rights era.

### **Black community theatre**

There are no specialized texts detailing the history of black community theatre, but there are many articles about the history of companies like New Orleans’ Free Southern Theatre (Hill

& Hatch 2003, 477-8) and Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia (Klein 2000). The entirety of Bean (1999) Part II features five articles from 1965-1998 mostly written by or in conversation with the Free Southern Theatre's black theatre practitioners. The *African American Theatre Directory, 1816-1960* includes an entry for the Amateur Colored Dramatic Company in New York City which presented two plays in 1870 (Peterson & Gore 1997, 13). Though short-lived, it is a testament to the desire of black community members to bring theatre to their fellow community members. Today, as mainstream theatres push for audience development [getting minorities in seats, training young people of color], they are mimicking the foundations of black community theatre. I throw my lot in with Nadine George-Graves (2013) in "African American Performance and Community Engagement" who states that:

The ebbs and flows of the personal relationships between any given artist or group of artists devoted to work by, for, about, or near people of African descent, and the inspiration and commitment to those people, comprise the fodder and tradition of African American performance (George-Graves 2013, 196).

George-Graves echoes Du Bois (1926) in clarifying that black theatre is inherently connected to African American communities. This inextricable relationship between the African American performance practice and the African American audience is an active exchange. Audiences are catered to in black community theatre to foster deep and lasting relationships with the company or venue through season offerings, training programs, and community events. Because black theatres originated with the intent to serve black audiences during segregation, the audience operated as a de facto community when gathered with the intention to be entertained by black performers. The black community theatre continues to engage with audiences where they are, while pushing them to envision themselves as part of a shared history, present, and future.

In developing this critical ethnographic study some patterns of behavior endemic to black community theatre begin to emerge that challenge universal history and American theatre practice. Because “[w]hite middle class communities [are] the standard by which all others are judged” (Yosso 2005, 82) in research, pedagogy, and policy, negative criticism of black performance has historically been documented from a Eurocentric perspective. Early white criticism of black theatre ranges from the paternalistic to the outraged. Yet, in the critique of African American theatre by African Americans, there exists a wider range of values used in making judgements of appreciation or denigration (Hay 1994, 201). And further still this document is an invitation to discern the parameters of black community theatre from a practitioner’s view.

## **Methodology**

Due to my birth, acculturation in, and longstanding association with the African American community in Baltimore, MD, this dissertation has a distinctly critical race theory influenced autoethnographic approach. As Anderson (2006) says, “Autoethnographers should illustrate analytic insights through recounting their own experiences and...be involved in the construction of meaning and values in the social worlds they investigate” (Anderson 2006, 384). Therefore, throughout this text, I attempt to invert ideas of the Other by turning the spotlight on white theatre phenomenon as tangential in its relationship to the black community theatre experience. For myself, whose history and future is linked, inescapably now, with the Arena Players, my voice is referring to topics in tandem with my collaborators or in dissonance to offer a new insight. I monitored my interview comportment and writing for the scrutiny that does not belie favoritism.

It is no secret that growing up in black community theatre, at the Arena Playhouse, surrounded by black artists, designers, administrators, and educators laid the foundations for my theatre skillset, vocabulary, and practices. This life experience shaped the way I interpreted all other modes of theatre production and pedagogy and my interactions with the world beyond Black Baltimore. So, my choice to write a dissertation that explores the Arena Players' history came at a time when the city of Baltimore was literally burning, during the 2015 Uprising after the death of Freddie Gray from police brutality. My panic only grew in seeing the familiar streets and landmarks of my city being described by outsiders, with no connection to the location or affection for the African American youth or communities they investigated and interrogated. And, thousands of miles away, I felt quite helpless in my ivory tower of academic privilege. One of the few of my family members that lived outside of Baltimore, I could only watch the montage of images while I projected myself into each city scene. I was on the phone with various members of my family trying to insert their voices into the fear driven narrative of what was unfolding while also trying to reassure myself in the voices of my elders. While I hoped that the history of the Black Baltimore that raised me would not go up in smoke, I knew that its new challenges were just beginning.

In this text, I am applying my dramaturgical lens to investigating the terms of value, community, and professionalism in documenting the origins, survival strategies of leadership, and pedagogical work of Baltimore, Maryland's Arena Players from its inception in 1953 through to the present day. Sixty-seven years of history, as recounted through my research and interviews provided by past and present members of the company, inform my interpretations of the extant historical record of black theatre in the U.S. And it is this history that I share by laying out the historical data and splicing it in order to create a break. Into that I supply the black

history that reveals modes of creating with and for the ensemble. Subsequently, the participants' definitions of their work with the Arena Players contribute to a practitioner-led definition of black community theatre and the Arena Players, Inc. specifically. This noting of the aspect that names races highlights how the U.S. universal narrative, which has been unmarked by excluding whiteness as a term, must be made plain. In some cases, I lay the break directly on top of unmarked data to feel the tension or discomfort that double consciousness creates. It is my hope that as these pages slide into and out of the digital archive the appellation of black community theatre will result in the genesis of a new interpretation of black theatre as a sentient and growing discipline.

James Stewart (2014) recognizes a Jazz model in Black/African Studies as inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois which champions the qualitative inquiry of the participant observer and the collective generation of new knowledge (Stewart 2014, 111). In a way, I am navigating double consciousness by connecting the jazz aesthetic with hip hop and alternative rock to represent a my way of preparing a reader for the bridge, which is their opportunity to riff on the themes presented. Into some of these schisms I retype a name followed by "Asé!," guiding the reader to recognize and empower the memory of those that have passed. Black death is its own kind of break. Cole (2019) declares:

The condition of blackness requires that black death not only be remembered but also relived in succession. From the Middle Passage and the residues of slavery to Jim Crow and the highly visible incidences of police brutality and state violence in the post-civil-rights era, black death is both in our memory and our contemporary lives (Cole 2019, 215).

Memory of death's interruptions in black life operates like an unexpected refrain. But the phenomenon of black life operating within the confines of a U.S. social structure built on white supremacy and manifest destiny is a space of constant innovation in response to stimuli. This is



also visible in the layout of this document as a response to growing and working in black community theatre while also contending with the act of performing scholarship in mourning. Cultivating an academic perspective for this work meant knowing the history, committing to my discipline, following directions, and performing the academic on cue. But that did not erase or destroy what black community theatre created, rather, it solidified my through line of continuity and the document's evolution.

Following the interview practices of oral historians, especially the critical approach of D. Soyini Madison's (2005) *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* I collected interviews, reviewed primary and secondary documents, as well as performance histories from past and present participants of the Arena Players, Inc. Madison's (2005) text is a particularly useful resource that focuses on the place of theatre when it is used to create or sustain an African American community. Her methodology development for critical ethnography is particularly useful for me as a black theatre artist conducting research while negotiating the double consciousness of my African American social experience and cultural norms in tandem with my attempts to prove my status in academia. Noting Barbara Myerhoff's (1978) reflexivity in *Number Our Days*, I acquired my first insight into what would become an autoethnographic practice. I draw it from my reflexive insider-outsider style of collaborating with interview participants who have shared their experiences of learning and teaching the collaborative craft of black community theatre. Returning to the Arena Players, Inc., to study the site of one of my theatrical homebases, I also utilized recommendations from Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) in *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. In my notetaking during the interview process with collaborators, some of whom, were my mentors and teachers since my early adolescence and

while attending performances and other events at the theatre, noticed not just the details, but the aspects of our conversation and themes that would be concepts to return to.

Within the history of black theatrical tradition, it is ““our unspoken or unacknowledged contributions to discourse [that] infuse our mental lives with conceptual subtlety. We become deep, perceptive, alert, and resourceful”” (Moten 2003, 241). Discourse is the body of knowledge that circulates about any given subject and, in historical research, is often found through consultation with the archive, the collected written documents. In sharing the oral history of my collaborators, I introduce the discourse found within the personal narrative which reveals lived experience as a counterpoint to U.S. history. Margaret B. Wilkerson (1979) states “the drama groups must be allowed to articulate their own reference points so that the researcher can have an appropriate framework for judging and reporting their work” (Wilkerson 1979, 34). Instead of applying a closed definition of black community theatre based solely on W.E.B. Du Bois (1926) or another critic’s key points, I utilize the personal narratives of members of the extended Arena Players family. In these oral histories they articulate their own practices which are of individual and collective importance to the Arena Players themselves. Furthermore, these narratives may echo other black community theatre experiences. Their contributions reveal their working definition of black community theatre as a practice far beyond that of a leisure activity.

I turn to Jane Hill’s (2005) essay on the narrative form, “Finding Culture in Narrative.” In it, Hill (2005) suggests that “discourse...is the most important place where culture is enacted and produced in the moment of interaction” (Hill 2005, 159). Not only do my collaborators reveal the culture of the theatre company, they also provide insight into the changing social, geographical, and political landscape of Baltimore’s African American community since 1953. They provide, as well, testimonial evidence of the Arena Players’ influence in wider artistic circles and black

community theatre's preexistent practices that have been taken up by mainstream companies. These assembled voices of the [O]ther "provide a necessary antidote to the abstract generalities of a given Enlightenment" (Moten 2003, 134-5), particularly that of mainstream theatre. In claiming that my collaborators and I voice the other, African American identity, this move has the goal of challenging the master narrative of American theatre history which presupposes commercial professionalism and white-led governance structures as the criteria for creating community [mass] influence.

For interpreting the explicit and implied content of my collaborators' discourse about the Arena Players as black community theatre I needed to "move constantly between noting what is being said and done and trying to make sense of these sayings and doings, in terms of both the immediate and the broader sociocultural context" (McCauley 2008, 286). While there were moments of codeswitching among my collaborators, these "black people theorize[d] about their art and their lives in the black vernacular" (Gates, Jr. 1987, 37) in our conversations. In my interactions with my collaborators in the past and during the interview process we did exactly that. Gates, Jr. clarifies the black vernacular as "the language we speak when no white people are around" (Gates, Jr. 1987, 37). But because of the academic purpose of our conversations for this dissertation, and with my collaborators' consent (Appendix C. Release Form for Academic Work), I have been allowed to share these included excerpts of the interviews I completed between 2015-2017. Additionally, verbal consent was sought for the inclusion of the personal narrative of choreographer Martique Johnson<sup>10</sup> (in Orange 2015) and Sandra Meekins (in Owens 2015). As I conduct a critical discourse analysis on the shared narratives that contribute to the oral history of the Arena Players theatre company, I am exploring the "language use in discourse

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<sup>10</sup> Martique Johnson, Asé!

[that] creates, recreates, and modifies culture” (Scherzer 1987, 300). From these interviews, labels such as *professional* and *successful* are reconsidered within black community theatre’s framework.

After working on the community-based Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project (BNHP) in the late 1970s/ early 1980s, oral historian Linda Shopes (2015) came to question her original disappointment in the conversational style found in her trained local oral historian volunteers from low-income communities. But Shopes (2015) recognized that the:

professional approach to oral history, honed in the academy and replete with forms, deadlines and certain lines of inquiry, was simply out of synch with local people’s sense of history as something deeply personal communicated in everyday reminiscing with friends” (Shopes 2015, 100-1).

In my own interviewing style, I believe that our shared identification as African Americans and my insider-outsider reflexivity led to interviews with my collaborators that broke with the formality of interviewing and became conversations that had moments of overlap, preaching to the choir, and call and response; hence my use of *collaborator*. This is apparent in a few passages where I include moments I am directly addressed. This is my attempt to allow the reader a chance to jump in the break with their own moments of self-conscious recall. On occasion my experiences provide more context for the ways that I saw the Arena Players as efficacious in its ability to educate me and accept me as a novice and an alumnus. I use the first-person plural pronoun *we* which stems from my life as a black woman born and educated in Baltimore City, Maryland. It reflects my decades-long artistic association with the Arena Players, the black church, HBCU culture, and other organizations within Baltimore’s African American community which were a part of that upbringing. When used by my collaborators, *we* points to the collective ethos of working in black community theatre at the Playhouse and/or

their place in the wider African American Community. I also step away from the personal *we* to use *they* when identifying the Arena Players as a living body instead of *it* because the theatre company is made of people.

While I primarily use the term *alumni* in describing the people who have studied in the youth arts programs at the Arena Players, I do so with the intent to maintain its connection to black community theatre's concentration on education. I use terms like *family* and *network* to highlight the real and metaphorical genealogical and associative comradeship of my ensemble of interview collaborators that take ownership of their shared and tangential experiences as Arena Players, especially since moving into the Playhouse. Furthermore, another sense of ownership, that of property, reinforces the familial camaraderie of the Arena Players, who have lasting memories that revolve around the venue itself. Guillermo Caliendo posits that:

Once memory (positive and/or negative) is said to reside in an object, such as a King street, statue, or memorabilia, collective memory can seize the object (capturing the past) and discursively add a particular meaning to that memory trace, deeming the object valuable and historically relevant or worthless and historically irrelevant for present and future generations (Caliendo 2011, 1154).

In naming their performance venue the Playhouse, since 1962 every Arena Player who has worked and learned there values the building on the south-eastern corner of McCulloh Street and Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard (Appendix D. Map 1) to varying degrees. Audience members who share in a sense of ownership by association and time spent watching the work in the building have ideas of how the building should be preserved or remodeled. With renovations and the company's drive to maintain the property, the value of the location is considered by my collaborators in terms of real estate, historical/cultural, and personal value. I spent many hours at the Playhouse from the age of 4 or 5 until the age of 17. I continued to attend performances

alone, with family, and interact with other Arena Players as we share an artistic heritage and home.

### **Arena Players Collaborators**

In writing this history of the Arena Players I am drawing heavily on the perspectives coming from my ensemble of collaborators at this African American community theatre. My interviews were with 12 individuals (Appendix A. Arena Players Collaborators) who identify as part of the African American community in Baltimore, Maryland. Each has worked with the Arena Players for varying amounts of time--some for over forty years. Many of my collaborators have been instrumental in developing the performances and programs that have sustained the company over the past years into today. Some of the participants in my case study of the Arena Players have worked with other theatre companies or arts organizations throughout the city of Baltimore, within Maryland and beyond. Most of my collaborators were born in Baltimore while the others have been Baltimore-based for much of their artistic lives. All of them have considered the Arena Players a home for African American theatre and feel a strong kinship to those they have worked with at the theatre. In this dissertation, I hope to reflect their sentiments accurately through my transcription (Appendix B. Notes on Transcription) practice as I discuss their journeys in the arts and lives in Baltimore's African American community.

I am relying on these narratives drawn from the lived experience of black theatre practitioners to contribute to the concurrent dialogues about black theatre and black community theatre. While I asked many different questions specific of each collaborator in the moment, the topics that guided my June 2015-February 2017 interviews are listed below:

- Earliest memories of the Arena Players
- Involvement with the theatre company

- Lessons learned working/performing at the Playhouse
- Your life outside of the Arena Players
- What do you hope for the future of Arena Players?

None of the collaborators knew the questions in advance so their answers reflected a blend of reaction and remembrance. My collaborators' retelling from memory was affected by their real-time relationship *with* those memories and their reactions *to* those memories which were both provided extemporaneously. This sometimes caused my collaborators to circle back to offer more information about memories they had begun at earlier points or stress points that were made earlier.

## **Chapters**

Within the following chapters I lay out an argument for a black community theater praxis that is fed by the self-determination of African American artists and their choices to work collaboratively to provide theatre and theatre training for the African American community in Baltimore. Each chapter contributes to a broader understanding of the operations of the Arena Players, Inc. and their role in contributing to black Baltimore's artistic landscape by valuing black life in the broader body politic of the United States of America. The included narratives from individual Arena Players can open new insight into the cultural capital, or "use value" (Mahala 2013 xii), of one black community theatre and its effects on the African American community surrounding it. Within the following chapters the practitioners share how their African American self-determination to work in theatre as a volunteer professional has led to strategies of survival that brought the Arena Players beyond its founding, the artistic rush of the Black Arts Movement, and the economic turns that closed other black theatre companies. Not

only are these individual narratives of my African American collaborators useful in expanding the existent historical record of Baltimore and the Arena Players, Inc., but together they work as an ensemble to supplement the existent archive of black community theatre history.

## **Chapter 1     Black Theatre in Black Communities**

Chapter one offers an overview of black theatre development as a politico-aesthetic characterized by black control of the black image from the 1820s-1950s. I present Black theatre's radical co-creation as one that prioritized the psychosocial needs of African Americans in response to the mainstream tropes of black face minstrelsy, Little Theatre, and U.S. popular culture. This chapter highlights the impact that the Negro Little Theatre movement had in meeting the sociopolitical needs of black audiences especially through its proliferation in historically black institutions of higher education. It also reveals the ways that the independent theatre and NLT catered to the diverse tastes of the black audience creating a black popular culture. As a community-developed practice, black theatre engaged black writers, philosophers, sociologists, students, performers, critics, producers, and audiences in a constant communication of ideas and experimentation in black spaces that valued the accumulation of economic wealth and personal value-creation. In the many acts leading to black theatre as a singular performance practice, Black Americans developed their own sub genres of theatrical performance and challenged the extant record on who could interpret plays written by white authors.

This chapter also recognizes the outcomes of the critical interventions of Locke (1925), Du Bois (1926), and the Negro Intercollegiate Dramatic Association (1930), Although commercial black independent theatre and amateur black community theatre ventures predate the formalized concept and conventions set out by W.E.B. Du Bois (1926), his work was invaluable in clarifying black theatre's mission. Du Bois' call-to-arms instigated Krigwa, a black Little



Theatre movement built on the premise of black theatre being about, by, for, and near black communities. Additionally, Chapter one traces the influences of Du Bois' pageant play, *The Star of Ethiopia* (1913), in the development of black theatre pedagogy within African American collegiate communities. This work would not have been possible without other practitioner-critics such as Alaine Locke of Howard, S. Randolph Edmonds of Morgan College and several historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and Anne Cooke<sup>11</sup> of Spelman College and other HBCUs. These black educators introduced methods for black theatre during the era best known as the Harlem Renaissance. Black theatre operated outside of the oversight of white theatre practices while interacting with Little Theatre Movement and the Federal Theatre Project. Black theatre survived its many movements by prioritizing the psychosocial needs of African Americans. In relying on other black-led institutions, African American theatre practitioners, built networks of survival which cocreated a politico aesthetic of blackness. Founded just a few years after the end of World War II, the Arena Players is an inheritor of the Negro Little Theatre manifesto that sparked Krigwa, the HBCU collegiate organizations, and the independent black theatres that came before it.

## **Chapter 2     Baltimore's Black Community Theatre**

Exploring the African American experience in Baltimore requires an understanding of its development through their priorities of freedom, self-determination and civic engagement contributing to black social capital, an intangible, but powerful accumulation of social value that African Americans have built up in the U.S. It is social capital that African Americans have been accumulating since before Emancipation. And as it grows in black-led institutions especially,

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<sup>11</sup> Yale Drama Ph.D. (1944) (Hill & Hatch 2003, 258).

African Americans have been able to rely on it represented by a personal and community-derived value. Chapter two relates a history of the social networks, the investments into community cultural wealth, and the geographic movements that built Baltimore's African American community. It also concerns itself with the outcomes of Jim Crow segregation in Baltimore's theatres and broader society which fostered both rupture and cohesion in the black community. By historicizing African American place outside of, and with ideologies differing from, Baltimore's white communities, I justify African American choices to seek and build their own spaces in the city as built on an a priori self-determination to exercise their human freedoms. Additionally, chapter two makes a case for the application of African American social capital in black institutions which provided fuel for the naissance of the Arena Players. Chapter three closes with observations about subsequent Baltimore theatre ventures begun after Arena Players' 1953 founding.

### **Chapter 3     Educating the Black Community**

Chapter three emphasizes the continuum of pedagogy that sustains the Arena Players. The theatre educators who created the company believed that as a community theatre, they could encourage other African Americans to move from amateur to some level of proficiency in theatre performance and production. While dramaturgy is geared at enlightening audiences who attend performances it is often built into the rehearsal process for performers and designers. Arena Players' training programs for adults in Studio 801 and young people in the Little Theatre, Intermediate Theatre, and Youtheatre programs, provide foundational theatre training. In Chapter three, accounts from interviews of past and present Arena Players, Youtheatre administrators, teaching artists, and artists-in-training create an overview of the Arena Players' educational programming and its impact. From their perspectives, the importance of self-determination is as

valuable as it is applicable to skill-learning and to developing an understanding of black history and culture at the Playhouse. The Du Bois intervention of the pageant play along with devised works stand out as ways director Troy Burton taught black youth to explore their African and American histories during the 1990s and 2000s. With the support of choreographer Yvette Shipley and other teaching-artists, the faculty of the Youtheatre encouraged the self-expression of developing artists through self-scripted monologues, choreography, and technical production by the young participants. Since 1965, Arena Players' investment in its youth performers has led other opportunities in the arts and other professions with a foundation in the African American theatrical, literary, oratorical, dance, and musical canons that scaffold African American culture.

#### **Chapter 4     Black Leadership at the Playhouse**

In the Post World War II years of the late 1940s, the African American body politic was clarifying its wishes for integration and civil rights. But with this came questions from black artists about their needs for self-sufficiency and wanting a kind of expression that validated the black experience. The founders of the Arena Players recognized a critical choice had to be made because:

melding black Americans into the white American mainstream would have meant the obliteration of Locke's folk-inspired art-theatre, and an end to the cultural, often African related distinctions that both Du Bois and Locke had championed in Negro Art" (Miller 2011, 141-2).

The founders chose to build a black theatre company to train artists and serve African American audiences. But this could not happen without maintaining the integrity of black creative leadership which, in the face of loss, brought new challenges due to founderism. Chapter four recognizes the foundational work of the Arena Players' first Artistic Director, Samuel Wilson, Jr. and his work in building black arts leaders through mentorship before his 1995 passing. This

chapter navigates the continued survival of the company including the instrumental work of Executive Director, Rodney Orange, Jr.,<sup>12</sup> who passed in 2018. His independent theatre techniques survived the changing of guard at the Playhouse despite Baltimore's political and economic shifts. Chapter four places loss at the center of the urge to create and prove black life matters while the United States has yet to prove its commitment to that fact.

Additionally, through my conversations with past and current leaders of the company, Chapter four reveals that black theatre organizations undergo many trials just to maintain. But it also informs several values of leadership. One key value, from Ackneil Muldrow, II's<sup>13</sup> offerings is that leadership requires both improvisation and staying on script, occasionally, to adhere to the organization's mission. This includes relying on a Board of Directors styled on the black church. Another value through the lens of Catherine Orange, Youtheatre Director, is that leadership has no gender, and her work is part of a tradition of African American educators at the Playhouse. The last value is that there should always be room at the table for each other, guests, and newcomers. Not only do my collaborators echo this sentiment explicitly, but this is also evident in the apprenticeship of leadership that Artistic Director has extended to Associate Artistic Director, David D. Mitchell. This is a refrain of director Troy Burton's testament to Sam Wilson and other Arena Players' critical intervention in his life as arts mentors. These and other strategies employed in maintaining a legacy of black leadership rest in navigating the fiscal and social challenges which can be attributed to a singularity of focus and a familial obligation to continue building on the company's mission of training black amateurs and engaging black audiences.

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<sup>12</sup> Rodney Orange, Jr., Asé!

<sup>13</sup> Ackneil Muldrow, II, Asé!

## **Chapter 5     Survival Networks**

As with any organization that prides itself on longevity, the concerns for the future of the Arena Players vary across a wide swath of issues. Most significant is loss of black life, through natural means and as an after effect of state-sponsored violence or the global pandemic of SARS-COV-2. My collaborators have weighed in on topics such as capacity building, reorganization, leadership, creative output, financial stability, community involvement, and audience development. Because of this Chapter five expresses the numerous frustrations of the Arena Players about the ways that the theatre has been overlooked by African Americans and the city leadership. But it also explores what the Arena Players foresee in the future through the different means my collaborators envision will support the longevity of the company as a black-founded, black-led, and black audience-focused company located in an historically black neighborhood in Baltimore City, Maryland. The chapter also includes my reflections on my work there as a volunteer professional as part of a surge of alumni activity. Chapter five reflects on the various ways that the Arena Players, Inc. draws from its own cache of community cultural wealth to uphold a black legacy by connecting with and strengthening the connectivity of their networks of survival.

## Chapter 1. Black Theatre in Black Communities

Down here with us because he looks like us, because he looks like her, they tell us how to look like them, so we can reach through us to what we share.

--Fred Moten  
“a prefatory note”  
*A-Line Journal*

The blackness of a theatre is only made clear in its differentiation from the assumed whiteness of all theatre. Mainstream theatre relies on interpretations of Eurocentric ideologies of “culture” and value. As an art form, the black theatre, which superficially consists of public performances by African Americans, includes the dramatic literature, performance locations, and production methods cultivated through a mash-up of countless sources of black creativity, scholarship, and debate throughout the African Diaspora. *Black* theatre sprang from African American culture as an artform whose social and political functions are based in African American value systems. Overwhelmingly, the production of black theatre is meant to conquer the negative stereotypes of black life and humanity circulated in tropes popularized by *white* theatre. It makes the gesture of educating white audiences while placing at its forefront the entertainment value for and/or education of black audiences. In black theatre, black presence *is* authentic African American representation driven by black contributors and consumers and it is their voice of resistance that resonates from spaces the white gaze occludes.

In Kwanzaa<sup>14</sup> terms, the mentality of self-determination, relies on the faculties of self-definition, self-appellation, self-generation, and self-voice. In this chapter, I present the larger project of black theatre history as one grounded in the African American community’s self-deterministic practices by an oft-dissenting, co-creating, collective of black practitioners who,

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<sup>14</sup> See Molette & Molette (2013), 267 86n.

through their individual contributions and conversations, form a wide cross section of the African American artistic body. Within that artistic body is also the black audience, whose uses of black theatre fulfill a range of African American psycho-social needs. The in-group conversations about representation and message illuminate black theatre as a distinct product created by and for the African American community using the resources attributed to it. While black theatre makes the radical step to demand recognition of its firmament in blackness from non-black audiences, it does so as a reflection of the obvious humanity of black people. In this way, black theatre refers to ideas of African copresence in the U.S. and is an affirmation of black freedom ideologies. Black theatre achieves these primary objectives without regard to the established or historical use of genre titles or recognition by popular white culture and academia. Even as a commodity, black theatre is a system of representation that requires black creativity and relies on African American networks of survival.

Although white audiences and critics have come to view black theatre as an educational outlet for their own study of African American culture, black theatre did not develop with them as the target audience. Since black theatre is black life, as Young and Zabriskie confirm, and I can attest, my further point is that black life is and has always been built on the principles of a broadly expressed freedom unrestricted by white oversight.<sup>15</sup> The testimonials of formerly enslaved Marylanders detail their experience of white oversight. From those Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews it is clear how white oversight overreaches for control of the mental and spiritual in addition to the physical behaviors of black people:

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<sup>15</sup> White oversight (n.) -1. *relating to the visual, verbal, and corporeal control of black bodies by white people, particularly the master's surrogate, the overseer, under America's slave-based economy.* 2. (v.) *the incessant noticing and disciplining of black movements.*

1. From Mrs. M. S. Fayman, "The overseers were the overlords of the manor[.]" (11)
  2. From Rev. Silas Jackson, "On Sunday the slaves who wanted to worship would gather at one of the large cabins with one of the overseers present and have their church. After which the overseer would talk." (32)
  3. From Mary Moriah Anne Susanna James, "The overseer lived on the farm...He would whip men and women and children if he thought they were not working fast." ( 39)
  4. From Mr. Dennis Simms, "When we behaved we were not whipped, but the overseer kept a pretty close eye on us." ( 61)
- (The Federal Writers' Project 1936-38)

Here, white oversight leans on African American understandings of being under the punitive lash of white purview and not the ability to escape the white gaze. Black theatre's distinction as a black-led art form means that its creation is unique to the black experience and had to rely on itself for its own genesis. The history presented in this chapter reveals that black theatre venues are, therefore, meant to be safe spaces, like hush harbors, to protect black audiences and creatives. This contrasts with the United States' white economic and artistic interests which have acted to stifle the freedom mindset of black Americans or recreate blackness for itself. And that is why the very act of black theatre claiming space punctures the hegemony of whiten-ness and its associated privileges.

While linear time is more accessible to a Western interpretation of significance, this chapter uses it in reference to the topical history of black theatre using the conventional terminologies already in common usage. It also reorients the reader to the chronological overlap of the black personnel, plays, and purposes of black theatre as a social project in relationship to the reader's interpretation of the United States' mainstream white theatre activities. In light of the overlapping and intertwining of people, places, and their shared objectives, black theatre, commercial or nonprofit, stands as a product of its local African American community. The black rationale behind this willful ignorance of traditional white oversight illuminates the



interconnectivity within African American community institutions that supported the spread of black theatre and black culture.

Moten (2003) highlights a freedom drive or “the emergence from political, economic, and sexual objection of the radical materiality and syntax that animates black performances” (2003, 7). As an American artform from its genesis, black theatre engages in an ongoing struggle to release itself from the trope of blackface minstrelsy and its unrealistic and debasing stereotypes. In effect, black theatre’s radical action makes the foundational statement that black lives matter. In revisiting black theatre throughout American history (1820-1953), I am presenting an interwoven patchwork of black theatre’s traditional praxis as one that fomented a pedagogy built on black literature and production values that uplifted black-led creativity by destabilizing white theatre’s historically exclusionary conventions in the United States. Aligning black theatre through Moten’s (2003) theory has it operating outside of the [de]generative gaze of white U.S. in order to vivify the black body and its iterations. Black-led production of identity on stage is still a radical shift from the universals of white mainstream performance modes. In reclaiming the black body, mind, and life for black audiences, applied black theatre fundamentally breaks from white ideologies of blackness.

Within the social project of black theatre (BT) is black community theatre (BCT), which is not separate or apart from the history of black theatre but has contributed to its goals, content, and practice well before white theatres became attentive to the forces of African Americans producing black plays. Black community theatre offers a local self-defined alternative to mainstream, white, representations of black life, culture, and community. In every era black-led

theatre companies have aligned their work with social activism and political change,<sup>16</sup> many by virtue of having opened their doors. Black community theatre was an already established branch of black theatre before federal delineations of non-profit status divided black theatre's aims between commercial and community endeavors. In actuality, it is the cultural specificity of black community theatre with its focus on meeting black audiences where they are that predates the mainstream acknowledgement of black theatre as a publicly recognized genre in mainstream theatre.

### **150+ years of black theatre in the United States**

It is no surprise that African American performers and producers started black-led entertainment outlets for black audiences, because black people were not accepted in white social circles or most U.S. public theatres. Without degrading caveats to gird up white representation as greater than the black image, white theatre was merely a function of U.S. racism. When we look at theatre history, the establishment of African American theatre companies destabilized “the invisibility of whiteness while maintaining whiteness as a hegemonic ‘center’” (Pascale 2008, 174). Black theatre companies signify<sup>17</sup> to whiteness’ control over creative impulses and black representation and offers its antithesis as black art for black people.

It could be said that all black-founded theatres are *independent* ventures relying on black producers who challenge white expectations for black bodies and their output. Beginning in 1820, when playwright and entrepreneur William Brown opened the African Grove Theatre well before the start of the Civil War. He used his own funding in addition to revenue from his attached beer garden to produce entertainment for New York’s free black population as well as

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<sup>16</sup> Young 2013; Bean 1999; Hill 1987

<sup>17</sup> Gates, Jr. 1988.

whites of all classes. He presented the works of Shakespeare performed by a predominantly black troupe of actors, at one time including Ira Aldridge<sup>18</sup>. His season included other modern performances of monologues, songs, skits, and plays like the Brown-penned *The Drama of King Shotaway*.<sup>19</sup> McAllister's (2003) history of the theatre's brief tenure highlights the racial tensions behind its closing in 1823. After damning reviews by white critics and the vicious theatre market competition from white-produced and performed minstrel shows, Brown fought back. His notorious entrance placard, "White People do not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed For Ladies & Gentlemen of Colour," denounced rabbleroising white patrons (some planted by white competitors) accustomed to blackface minstrelsy and those who did not appreciate seeing serious black performers whether they were interpreting the Bard or not.

By the 1830s, the working-class white immigrants who invented blackface minstrelsy rode its success into the white middle class and commercial theatre professionalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. United States cultural historian Eric Lott (2013) concedes that the "leitmotif running throughout blackface minstrelsy was antebellum white America's profound ambivalence about blackness, which both fascinated and disgusted them" (2013, 165). The buffoonish characterizations of black servitude under white rules created a false idea of U. S. slavery culture, and subsequently, America's African diasporic subculture. The toms, coons, dandies, mammies, and bucks of blackface minstrelsy parlayed into many characters that became strictly for-profit commercial stereotypes in a vibrant Broadway pop culture and still plague every area of media, advertising, education, and governance. The coded black imagery extended into white expectations of African Americans in their daily social interactions with them. The

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<sup>18</sup> McAllister 2003, Williams 1985.

<sup>19</sup> Hill & Hatch 2004, 34.

coded messages of costume, gesture, and verse as entertainment was built on stereotypes by and for working class white United States' Northerners to consume in *their* popular culture. Lott (2013) emphasizes the sociopolitical impact of:

blackface minstrelsy's century-long commercial regulation of black cultural practices [which] stalled the development of African-American public arts and generated an enduring narrative of racist ideology, a historical process by which an entire people has been made the bearer of another people's "folk" culture. (2003, 17)

White "folk" culture circulated as an interpretation of and manipulation of black people and their images. Even Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1850 abolitionist bestseller *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was not safe from theatrical adaptations in the style of blackface minstrelsy that altered the plot and character of Uncle Tom by presenting him as a turncoat that shunned other black people, cowed from black rebellion, and informed "Master" of their every freedom-seeking move. It is this adaptation of the Uncle Tom character that represents both the Uncle Tom of blackface minstrelsy and the "Sellout" who claims no African American racial allegiance.<sup>20</sup> Lott (2013) credits the commercial prominence of minstrelsy with its "social violence of cultural caricature" as a force for acculturating white performance and therefore the United States and its territories with blackness (2013: 105). The grandest irony is the impression that authentic black artistry had on white audiences. Black actors eventually embodied blackface thus challenging its original interpretation while still widely circulating the imagery. These African American performers had to navigate the tug of black images, language, music, bodies, and culture—though caricatured

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<sup>20</sup> Randall Kennedy (2008) explores the modes and means of selling out in African American culture in *Sellout*.

and counterfeited—as they made their way into the business of representing blackness onstage for themselves.

Predating Little Theatre, in the 1870s San Francisco's Colored Amateur Company produced plays such as Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Equal rights activist and newspaper editor, Philip Alexander Bell, is known to have performed in *Ion* and *Pizarro* as well as writing criticism for other performances (Appiah & Gates 2005, 424). Though the texts noted here are not by black playwrights, the Colored Amateur Company made investments into black community theatre by utilizing the amateur talents of a politically engaged African American network. But black playwrights were forthcoming. The next oldest documented black penned play is 1874's *The Doctor* by Ira Aldridge,<sup>21</sup> who finally gained fame for his Shakespearean performance as an expatriate. It may be due to Aldridge's European success that the play has been preserved, but its reappearance during the Black Arts Movement is vital to the historical record in demonstrating a black theatre canon of works written by black playwrights for black performers in defiance of white representation.

## **1900s**

The next century's independent black theatres come well after the United States' Reconstruction Era (1865-1877). As American black political leaders, W.E.B. Du Bois' infamous post Reconstruction social debate with Booker T. Washington highlighted their individual ways forward for African Americans. Du Bois saw education and political coordination as group advancement while Washington saw education as economic development through labor or entrepreneurship as self-advancement. Though the stakes are more nuanced,

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<sup>21</sup> See Hatch & Shine 1974.

their differences have been remembered as a rift between the laborer and the educated. Of the difference, Du Bois said, “Never make the mistake of thinking that the object of being a man is to make a carpenter...the object of being a carpenter is to be a man” (Lewis 1993, 111). In his experience at Harvard, Du Bois, was a member of the black glee club handling performance bookings and travel accommodations (Lewis 1993, 87). Du Bois also had the prescience to use his arts experience to forward his philosophical premises. In his 1903 text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois theorized that as the descendants of former slaves, African Americans suffered from the sociological duress of negotiating life while living in two different worlds—the black body politic and white American society, constantly at odds with one another. This “split self” problem he labeled “double consciousness.” Under the auspices of white Christian American morality, blackness was a negative, but double consciousness gave black identity credence.

In order to lighten that burden and release centuries of trauma Black producers across the country saw the value of entertainment in African American communities. When the Pekin Theatre in Chicago opened in 1904, it contributed to the black theatre phenomenon of community engagement and uplift by staging plays and vaudeville productions written by black people for black audiences.<sup>22</sup> The Pekin also staged some of the first black musicals that appeared on the commercial Broadway stage like *Shuffle Along*<sup>23</sup> by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, a Baltimore, Maryland native. Across the nation black-operated independent theatres sparked the careers of many black theatre professionals. Collectively they operated as a network

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<sup>22</sup> Bauman 2014; Fraden 1994; Hill & Hatch 2003.

<sup>23</sup> The black producers F. E. Miller, Aubrey Lyles, Eubie Blake, and Noble Sissle toured the Chitlin’ Circuit with the musical revue before getting to Broadway (Williams 1985, 98.)

called the Chitlin' Circuit, a metaphor derived from an infamous dish of pig intestines. Like much of African American soul food, it refers to a survival cuisine and mindset—where one is given the worst and makes the best of the situation. Across the U.S., the venues that black minstrel, then vaudeville, troupes performed in and the supporting businesses that housed and fed them, laid the foundation for the tour routes that independent black producers followed. Yet, everything has its heyday and the Circuit grew while black control of venues declined:

The same forces that that caused white theatre to suffer also hurt independent black theatre: higher transportation costs, low cost movies and the added burden of racism, the lack of financial sponsorship for black shows, second-class bookings due to racism of owners and managers combined with the death of many of the first-class black performers caused independent black theatres to suffer more. (Fraden 1994, 58)

Because black companies will always have to contend with the loss of their artists and administrators, their legacies remain as a testament to their place in the ecosystem of black theatre. Though black producers have found other modes of operation to deal with racism in the United States, issues of funding and audience attention remain a concern in black-led theatre.

Black professional performers and playwrights who earned their living in the independent black theatres often turned their sights to Broadway and the new media of radio and film as the next professional milestone. Meanwhile, black scholars and audiences were having critical discussions about those transitioning into mainstream theatre that focused on the authenticity of black performance. That which was deemed authentic often denied the popular black genres of theatre such as revues, farces, musicals, and melodrama for many divergent rationales. Black audiences wanted both straight drama and lighter fare as entertainment. Some black critics felt that the loosely held together plots or broad comedy of a vaudeville style revue supported black stereotyping and were uncomfortable with the proximity to minstrelsy. Others saw all-girl chorus

line shows as promoting lascivious ideas of black woman which was too close to the historical white interest in the black female body. The commercial success of these popular black theatre forms had some appeal on Broadway, but black audiences and critics did not share a homogenous set of moral or aesthetic values.

Serious dramas and “art” theatre were also performed across the independent theatres but did not have the same commercial success as the forms more closely aligned with white popular theatre. This was due largely to the overwhelming inclination of following white U.S. theatre trends. To break that mold in 1906 Chicago, actor Charles Gilpin participated in play readings with other professional actors performing “serious dramatic roles...[which created] an early black community theater...born from the need to see (and inhabit) a range of representations not available elsewhere” (Young and Zabriskie 2013, 7). In the complicated in-group conversations about black respectability politics and representation in performance, the highly lucrative black musicals and most black folk arts, like jazz and the blues were deemed by the Du Boisian Talented Tenth<sup>24</sup> set as being unsubstantial and morally reprehensible. That is, they were not educational enough to be considered *appropriate* forms of black representation. Although they remained popular, garnering immense support from black audiences, Du Bois was working on a tool of racial uplift and civic pride, the pageant.

## **1910s**

W. E. B. Du Bois also saw an opportunity in performance as a therapeutic way to negotiate double consciousness. Using the lens of Pan Africanism, he meant to attune black Americans to their African past. In “Black Reconstruction in America” Du Bois (1935) vaunts

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<sup>24</sup> See Chapter 3.



the theatrical note in the African American experience as the “most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history[–]the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West” (in Roediger 1994, 72). To recreate and pay homage to that drama, Du Bois wrote didactic pageant scripts as early as 1911 that drew from the well of medieval theatre pageantry and U.S. civic theatre to convert the unenlightened with a shock of black nationalistic imagery and thematic representations of race pride. While white subcultures were announcing their Americanness in pageants like the ones celebrating Christopher Columbus Day across the nation, there was limited space for black performers in these communities and performances. Pageants have been used to “celebrate race progress” (Bean 153) for black cultural education programs in settings like black universities, schools, churches, and civic groups based on the Du Boisian aesthetic. Still in use today, the pageant play, for W.E.B. Du Bois’ purposes, is a stylized account of the development of the African diaspora with an episodic retelling of the black experience that covers the span of time from *before* the first Africans came to America through to the achievements of current popular cultural figures. They often end with a charge for the target audience (black people) to start nurturing African, African Diaspora and black U.S. cultural awareness in their own communities. It emphasized the production of labor at the cost of African American liberty which manifested in a dearth of social justice/ equity for black people across the globe. The staying power of the pageant in the black community is shown in its recurrence in HBCU culture and led to the pageant play of the later black Avant-Garde.

Du Bois attempted to counter the trite stereotypical representations of African Americans for a civic stage. He penned *The Star of Ethiopia* in 1911 which was first “presented in the 12<sup>th</sup> Regiment armory as part of New York’s commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the

Emancipation Proclamation” (Lewis 1993, 465). He later produced the pageant in 1912 and 1913 in Washington, D.C., trimming down the 1000 person cast that included members from across the local black communities, especially black college students and Boy Scouts, for African American audiences. *The Star of Ethiopia* was a pointedly Pan African pageant play which included meditations on the pre-slavery largess of Africa including the deities and monarchs across African nations (Du Bois 1916). In *Star* Du Bois focuses on the “gifts of the Negro to the world” (Du Bois “*Star*” 1914): Iron; the Nile (cradle of civilization); Faith (citing Islam); Humiliation [sic] (humble endurance); Struggle toward Freedom; and Freedom for the workers. Music and dance, an important feature of African American culture, also took on several forms during the pageant including drumming, the Negro spiritual, and the compositions of classicists like Samuel Coleridge Taylor to score the trials of Africans in America (Du Bois “*Star*” 1914).

Though Ethiopia is the name used to generalize the African experience, *The Star of Ethiopia* pageant play presented great heroes from throughout the African diaspora while positioning them as symbols of freedom such as Toussaint L’Overture (Haiti), Frederick Douglass (Baltimore, MD) and Sojourner Truth (New York). It ended with meditations on the future of the educated Negro, now African American. These performances of *Star* spread the use of pageant plays throughout black communities across the U.S. Du Bois’ purpose was to develop a visual representation of black people influenced by their predisposition for freedom utilizing black self-determination. This imagery that contradicts minstrelsy and defies U.S. social constructs. By tapping into the medium of theatre through pageant plays Du Bois also connected performance to education. Intentionally the positive propaganda of W. E. B. Du Bois was used with many intents. For U.S. acculturated black audiences his prime objectives were to: 1) encourage a black self-awareness for those who had not previously considered their Africaness

as a positive; 2) initiate black ingroup bonding; and 3) revel in black life and freedom.

Secondarily, for white audiences, *Star* affirmed black humanity and educated them of pre-existing cultural histories of African civilizations before the Transatlantic Slave Trade, signifyin' that their own cultural traditions are founded on black life.

The black university was to become the laboratory to test the pageant and other forms of black socio-political expression even before the Negro Little Theatre spread widely. Pageants became so popular a form that the:

Negro college emulated Du Bois...and throughout the 1920s presented dozens of pageants...written by civic leaders or faculty to celebrate race progress, women's contributions to art and learning, or the history of a college...The spectacles enhanced the status of dramatics in black schools and colleges (Hill & Hatch 2003, 261).

The pageants ultimately worked to educate young African Americans about a black history that was not sanctioned in public school curriculums. They provided opportunities for black students to gain cultural insight into a shared African heritage. Most importantly, black students could embody high moral ideals and bring to life black figures of historical and social consequence for the education of others. Additionally, pageants and performance groups allowed black students studying elocution to practice their newfound modes of expression, often affecting high-toned, clipped, sharp "standard American English" dialects to "free" (Hatch "Survey" 1998, 155-6) their tongues from the dialects of the poor and southern states from which they came. These codeswitching accents were meant to allow them greater caché moving through the racially mixed world after black college life, especially with the goal of eliciting better interactions with whites. The Tuskegee Institute in Tennessee, Atlanta University in Georgia and Howard

University in Washington, DC would start the earliest HBCU dramatic troupes (Hatch “Survey” 1998, 151).

There are no new accounting of forms of black theatre without considering the roots of W.E.B. DuBois’ pageants. In re-aculturating black Americans to their African origins, Du Bois draws on double consciousness to clarify that African values are on par with the Eurocentric value systems African Americans were brought up in. Du Bois’ work forwarding black identity, black community, and black theatre is well documented in the many volumes of *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Du Bois would hold the position of editor from its first volume in 1910 until 1934 (NAACP 2020). There numerous black critics and layperson subscribers gave feedback and posted their own work about black performances and theories. This was a supplement to the social travails and political needs of black communities across the country. *The Crisis* journal would prove useful as an open forum for black theatre’s needs which moved along the lines of the black social progress the journal documented. Its subscription model allowed it to serve as a source of news detailing integration’s progress to readers across the United States.

In 2004’s *Composing Ourselves*, Dorothy Chansky determines that American Progressivism, rooted in protestant white middle-class values in the 1910s and 1920s, led to the rise of the segregated Little Theatre movement (Chansky 2004, 3). With these values, an audience class was cultivated through peer groups of white Americans. If we were to look for an outcome of the Little Theatre Movement that transcended race, it would be the creation of the professional-managerial and audience classes. Chansky (2004) describes the professional-managerial class as comfortably employed, thus the target market for leisure activities and sending their children to college to study “‘privileged work,’ such as writing, law, teaching,

medicine, upper-level administration or publishing” (Chansky 2004, 35). In studying Avant-Garde art theatre models such as the Théâtre Libre in Paris, The Free Moscow Theatre, and other European models, the early influences of the U. S. Little Theatre movement provided outlets for the newly minted white U.S. middle class to show off their cultural independence. Their cultural independence was however built on the economic benefits of incentivizing whiteness for the white poor, working class, and immigrant ethnic groups who aspired to it. By the time D. W. Griffiths Ku Klux Klan inspired *Birth of a Nation* debuted in 1915, white supremacy was reinforced as a popular social construct (See also Roediger 1994, 156-7) along with fallacies of black humanity, much to the chagrin of Black activists whose outrage was renewed. And as U.S. identity became an exclusively white terrain it solidified concepts of white U.S. community as one in opposition to the Negro.

But blackness and black American performing arts remained deep in the consciousness of white America. In fact, nothing influenced both the European and American avant gardes as much as jazz, America’s first popular music form. Featuring black artists and musical stylings from the Caribbean and Southern U.S. early on, jazz music is a form born of African creativity with its improvisational, collaborative, and callback nature.<sup>25</sup> Black Christian orthodoxy was anti-jazz for its unsanctioned use of classical instruments and salty lyrics, but jazz music signaled the dawn of a commercial sonic aesthetic opening up white American consciousness to the, once invisible, aurally accessible Other. In David Roediger’s 1994 collection of essays, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, he explores the cultural creation of whiteness in the United States and the

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<sup>25</sup> As a youth, I studied flute with the intentions of becoming a jazz flautist. John Storm Roberts (1979) details the artists and musical styles that influenced early jazz. Additionally, Errol Hill (1987) includes an excerpt from “An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance” Robert Farris Thompson’s (1966) discussion of call-and-response as a feature of West African music and dance that influenced theatre (in Hill 1987, 99-111).

role of whiteness in U.S. history and social movements. Of the white immigrant musicians who brought jazz to white audiences, Roediger (1994) notes that they “fled the homogeneity of suburban culture and assimilationism and preserved much of the best of immigrant resistance to routinization via and identification with African American culture” (Roediger 1994, 189). Similarly, Chansky (2004) characterizes the Little Theatre participants of the 1910s as antibourgeois and modernist. Though the jazz-addled white bohemians honed their skills as writers and designers in Little Theatre, they still had economic goals to “[s]tay solvent and in operation, not necessarily turn a profit...[like] ‘Broadway’” (Chansky 2004, 7). However, the professional-managerial class that sprang from [white] Little Theatre was not easily attained in the Negro Little Theatre.

The 1917 founding of the Lafayette Players is the earliest Negro Little Theatre in New York. Jonathan Shandell (2013) finds that the Negro Little Theatre was a humble venture that concentrated on the black bodies and texts it utilized. They:

fashioned themselves after [the] European and American little theatres. Their spaces were intimate, makeshift, and modestly equipped. Their budgets were limited. Most importantly, their sense of rebellion against a commercial status quo and their disregard for traditional artistic formulae were palpable. (Shandell 2013, 105)

The Negro Little Theatre movement decisively acted to defy white commercial representation though their challenges were greater. African Americans had not made the same en masse traction in American politics, economics, or civic equality as the white middle class.

## **1920s**

Across the spectrum from noncommercial Negro Little Theatre, the independent black theatre producers experienced a measurable economic and social impact in the popularity of black-run venues of the time. In the 1920s, *independent theatre* often pointed to the black

production companies that put on shows sometimes with elements of white investment, whether it be building ownership, or through tribute made to organized crime. The black acts, however, could perform in venues friendly to African American audiences without race restricted seating. The performance troupes were often managed by African Americans and free of white creative license. This is a key requirement in black theatre as it places African Americans in the positions of leadership that had been traditionally denied them due to the legacy of U.S. racism. This freedom from white producers also gave priority to the black artistic vision and freedom of expression to black artists who did not have to censor or degrade themselves for white audiences. They also were free from the need to educate white audiences and concentrated instead on entertaining black patrons.

The emphasis on race as a cultural specificity in the definition of black community theatre works to engender a “cultural action” (Fraden 1994, 204-5) in the ways that it draws on social circumstances to create new ones for black artists and audiences. While [white] Little Theatre was concentrating on itself and its white audiences the Negro Little Theatre movement manifested in part because Black artists still were not satisfied with the mainstream influence on black commercial performance. Yet, they needed no permission to build a theatre that was an:

independent, non-commercial African American theatre producing dramatic works...[addressing] vital needs of African American communities: authentic self-expression, political protest, intellectual and artistic development, and communal celebration and solidarity” (Shandell 2013, 104).

According to Shandell (2013), the Negro Little Theatre, though independent, differs from popular independent theatre in two ways. First, it was not seeking mass commercial success. Second, NLT’s intervention meant taking on the mantle of black representation as an act of political solidarity with the wider African American community. This cultural action would

mean that the Negro Little Theatre had to lean heavily on education to build its ranks and expand its mission. In 1921 Cleveland, a pair of white social workers, Rowena and Russell Jelliffe, supported the development of the Dumas Dramatic Club which was later renamed for Charles Gilpin after his \$50 donation to the amateur performance group (Shandell 2013, 113). Karamu House also claims the title “oldest” African American community theatre which will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

On the road to community theatre, the development of the American Little Theatre movement coexists with the rise of the college Theatre (Drama) major and development of the professional arts manager. Collegiate and Little Theatre overlap “personnel, [distribution of] scripts, and widely circulated ideas about production and scenery” (Chansky 2004, 3). This is also true of Negro Little Theatre’s connection to black theatre. Likewise, it is difficult to parse out the strands of experience that many African American professional performers, writers, directors, and technicians have from their origins and early associations with historically black universities and community theatre companies. This intertwined history encouraged Black educational centers to create their own theatre programs such as “Morgan College [in Baltimore, which] had the distinction of being the first black college to install a complete dramatic laboratory...where all the work in connection with the drama was advantageously pursued” (Hill & Hatch 2003, 262). In many cases the professors and instructors were already in place and actively experimenting with theatre forms that could best serve black dramatic literature while generating the practitioners to continue to bring it new life.

Teaching at Howard in Washington, D.C., a historically black institution of higher learning with a long tradition of theatre training, noted Harlem Renaissance scholar Alain Locke encouraged an active reclamation of African culture into African American performance. As the



head of the Howard Players, Locke challenged his young artists to draw from ““ancestral sources of African life and tradition...in some adaptation of its folklore, art-idioms and symbols, [as a way to] influence the art of drama”” (Hatch 1980, 16). He saw the ways that European and white American Avant-Garde writers, performers, and artists were drawing on black American creativity, especially jazz music, and African and other pre-colonial cultures’ iconography as “primitive” catalysts for their deconstruction of traditional European theatre. By encouraging black writers to *value* their diasporic African lineage Locke made a giant philosophical step in rejecting the principles of universal history, an exclusionary system of thought based on “Hegel’s denigration of the ‘Negro’ and Africa...[an] element of the history and foundation of Western moral philosophy” (Madison 2005, 92). Locke’s charge for black artists built on his consideration of the “New Negro,” a concept he created for a generation removed from Reconstruction and raised during Jim Crow. The New Negro was ideologically focused on “collaborat[ing] and participat[ing] in American civilization” (Hay 1994, 4) by entertaining African Americans with representations authentically derived from Africa and American black folk experience.

Alain Locke believed that a noncommercial black theatre was the way forward for the “New Negro.” In a 1922 *The Crisis* article “Steps Toward the Negro Theatre,” Alain Locke outlined his Howard University drama curriculum that drew on the classics and suggested the development of an experimental “art drama”:

We believe a university foundation will assure a greater continuity of effort and insure accordingly a greater permanence of result. We believe further that the development of the newer forms of drama has proved most successful where laboratory and experimental conditions have obtained and that the development of race drama is by those very circumstances the opportunity and responsibility of our educational centers. Indeed, to maintain this relation to dramatic interests is now an indispensable item in the program of the progressive American college...By threefold sponsorship, then race drama becomes peculiarly the ward

of our college, as new drama, as art-drama, and as folk-drama. (Locke 1922, 66-67)

For Alain Locke, it was not a political imperative, but an artistic one to develop and protect a dramatic form that would focus on the artistic impulses of the jazz-influenced African American youth culture. According to Locke (1922), the noncommercial black university (HBCU) was the needed “endowed artistic center where all the phases vital to the art of the theatre are cultivated and taught—acting, playwrighting, scenic design and construction, scenic production and staging” (Locke 1922, 66). As a place where college curriculums included speech and forensics classes, the pedagogy of personal representation and public performance expanded to include drama. While all HBCUs did not always have the funding specifically for degree programs with a specialized theatre curriculum, they supported young artists in other ways. Many had created performance clubs named after the school, important professors, or actors of the previous era, such as Prairie View Agricultural, Mechanical & Normal’s Charles Gilpin Players. Howard University’s theatre program built on Locke’s artist-driven protocol and produced black folk plays and making space for black playwrights to craft (Fraden 1994, 86). These clubs made production and performance a priority holding regular seasons with work that reflected a wide range of playwrights and themes. The professors, who often worked at several different colleges (now universities), were particularly resourceful and devoted their entire academic careers to black theatre and black communities, providing opportunities for the playwrights of the Negro Little Theatre & Harlem Renaissance, some from among their student body and HBCU faculty colleagues.

Although it did overlap with the black Harlem Renaissance, the white Little Theatre reform movement did little to “challenge entrenched hegemonic assumptions about white social

superiority” (Chansky 2004, 17). In fact, with the rise of the popular global study of Eugenics, another pseudoscience backed by white supremacy, the white Little Theatre did more to categorically dismiss black humanity as a genetic flaw or an unsolvable dramatic problem. It was largely a segregated movement except for some of the experimental drama by playwrights like Eugene O’Neill who wrote a few plays featuring black characters for black actors to portray. As a white writer he faced the ire of white critics and mixed reviews in black circles for his use of black actors. The firestorm of criticism received for an interracial kissing scene in his 1924 play *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, which featured Paul Robeson in an interracial marriage, proved that white America, voiced by white critics, could not fathom the idea of races mixing. *New York Times* drama critic John Corbin supports his discomfort with citations from biologists Darwin and Spencer complaining of, “both mental and moral respects to where the ‘average negro [sic] is inferior to the average white, and the army tests have strongly confirmed it” (Gill 2000, 40). These blatant ideas of white superiority were not actually based on physical, but psychological threats to the white way of life through theatre as a media and mode of representation.

It is no surprise that many black-led Negro Little Theatre groups were birthed across United States in black communities. From the seeds of the critical interventions of Alain Locke, Du Bois, and many others, the aesthetics of black theatre straddled many Western and some African conventions. This cultural action birthed an African American “politico-aesthetic” (Moten 2003, 35) in support of a theatre agenda that supported black identity and black community. Recognizing black theatre as a politico-aesthetic entity meant constant innovations in theatrical forms of resistance namely education. As reported by Theophilus Lewis, a drama critic writing for the black journal, *The Messenger*, the 1924 plans of the National Ethiopian Art Theatre in New York was an educational venture. As quoted in Fraden (1994) Theophilis Lewis

analyzes the Negro Little Theatre's company constitution with its aims to build a school in Harlem as one that clearly requires local support. Lewis (1924) sides with Du Bois that black artists can:

foster colored community theatres [specifying that] these theatres should be in the districts where the colored people live...partly if not wholly supported by a subscription audience. It would have to be a *little* theatre, however for the kind of plays the National Ethiopian Art Theatre is likely to present will not have a very wide appeal (Lewis in Fraden 1994, 74) .

The National Ethiopian Art Theatre planned to cultivate black artists and cater to black audiences by relying on the subscription model of the European avant garde companies like Théâtre Libre. They were not alone. By 1925 it was estimated that more than three thousand black amateur groups existed (Hill & Hatch 2003, 262). *The Crisis* journal was already running play contests (Williams 1985, 109) to build a black-authored dramatic cannon to produce. With the essentialist intention to showcase authentic black art, Alain Locke continued to open up new lines of inquiry into black performance as editor of the 1925 anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike the early writers of the Harlem Renaissance period, W.E.B Du Bois was not relying on concerned white benefactors to fund his vision. Du Bois officially organized an experimental Little Theatre company in Harlem in 1925, the Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists, which took on an Africanized acronym, KRIGWA. Krigwa would go on to have sister branches in black communities served by the NAACP across the nation. "The group encouraged writing and provided training and production opportunities for original drama by, for, and about black people" (Diggs Colbert 2013, 88). Performing plays by African American playwrights in

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<sup>26</sup> The collection includes fiction, poetry, plays, and sociocultural analysis with attention to the African diaspora. Locke 1925.

borrowed spaces in black neighborhoods, Krigwa Little Negro Theatre came to represent the early black community theatre movement.

While some Krigwa companies performed plays by white authors to give the black actor an opportunity to take his place as a universal hero, other companies nurtured black playwrights who authentically represented race relations, internal racial conflicts, and black women's issues. Others chose to experiment with form and staging to move beyond the strictures of realism, made passé by white art theatres like the Provincetown Players. The Negro Little Theatre movement as a whole was needed in 1925 to contradict misguided attempts of white companies at representing black life. The Dallas Little Theatre's 1925 production of *The No 'Count Boy* was a play with African American characters written by Paul Green, a white playwright, and performed by white actors in blackface. Dorothy Chanksy (2004) describes the reactions of critics in the audience. This serious drama left one white critic satisfied that the Dallas Little Theatre's representation of black life was more authentic than the real black people living in Harlem. Another critic agreed, noting how the actors "'discarded their natural good looks [and] blacked their faces'" (Chansky 2004, 212) in a nod to the superiority of whites in all things, especially beauty. This affront was clearly the kind of performance and criticism that black theatre aimed to be rid of.

By 1926, in the form of a manifesto, W.E.B. Du Bois demanded that black audiences become more critical in the ways that they consumed black arts and culture. His critique of the commercial independent theatre was in its inability to be propagandist in stirring black nationalist pride and for not correcting false assumptions about black life. His purpose was to rid African American artists and audiences of the same kind of sleepy complacency that the white avant garde claimed enslaved the bourgeoisie to "traditional" cultural values. Only, as an African

American philosopher, sociologist, arts critic, and producer, Du Bois did not have the luxury of excluding any of the black social classes in his theatrical revolution. In order to maintain an aesthetic that clearly served the political needs of an empowered black America, Du Bois built a platform for the KRIGWA Negro Little Theatre movement:

The plays of a real Negro theatre must be: 1. *About us*. That is, they must have plays which reveal Negro life as it is.

2. *By us*. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from *birth and continued association* just what it means to be a Negro today.

3. *For us*. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval.

4. *Near us*. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro peoples (Du Bois 1926 in *The Crisis* vol. 32, 134).

Du Bois' call to create a community-oriented theatre accessible to all African Americans was in response to the institutionally racist practices in American society that willfully ignored, defamed, or killed black people. Not limited to the pageant form he also wrote plays dramatizing the black experience. Du Bois, sought to reeducate the Negro to see themselves as Africans in America by "affirming the worth of black life and black culture" (Diggs Colbert 2013, 100) outside of the context of slavery.

The Harlem company of the Krigwa Players under WEB Du Bois' management entered and integrated the 1927 Little Theatre Tournament with Fool's Errand, a comedy by Eulalie Spence (Shandell 2013, 109; Gill 2000, 12).<sup>27</sup> They won the Samuel French Award for Best Original Script (Chansky 2004, 215) and showed what authenticity could do for black performance. The Little Theatre had few integrated theatre companies for black creatives and

integrated audiences during segregation. The professional-managerial class of white Little Theatre was not emulated in the Negro Little Theatre, where the managers led on passion and in tandem with other paying opportunities. Nonetheless, the volunteer-professional manager in black-led theatre often juggled personal priorities with those of their company. For the Harlem Krigwa company, the Little Theatre Tournament win created the conditions for disagreement due to financial reinvestment into the company in lieu of paying the playwright, Spence, for her labor. Even after stepping away from Krigwa, Regina Anderson Andrews, an African American Librarian and theatre rabble-rouser at the New York Public Libraries, built a following of theatre groups who wanted to use the library space in the 135<sup>th</sup> Street Branch. Ultimately, Andrews dissolved her artistic relationship with W.E.B. Du Bois because she felt the performance fees should be shared with the actors, technicians, and playwrights (Whitmire 2015, 62). but the wanted more economic freedom and often had other forms of employment primarily outside of theatre multiple theatre jobs.

For the Negro Little Theatre Movement, community was the focus. It entailed building a community of practitioners and audiences. Educating their performers and entertaining audiences meant that their “most important struggles and accomplishments...[revolved around the] pursuit of survival, continuity, and stability” (Shandell 2013, 113). A lack of finances was at the heart of the many closings of Negro Little Theatres which served exclusively black audiences. Leisure expenses were hard won for a black population who, regardless of employment industry, had financial priorities in other places. Consequentially, black audiences were bombarded with variety of new media like the radio and film—both cheaper entertainments from the consumer perspective. In the absences of a non-profit sector, Negro Little Theatres were funded on a subscription basis and staffed by black community members who worked for the theatre on

passion not paychecks (Fraden 1994, 68). Black students, especially those studying speech and music, were able to pick up the slack where fulltime arts workers could not. Samuel Hay documents the theatre expertise of Morgan College professor S. Randolph Edmonds in creating the Baltimore Krigwa Group (1929-1933) managed by Gough D. McDaniels (Hay 1994, 175). assistance Yet, preceding the economic downturn of 1929, black theatre as media came to be a significant threat to white theatre's commercial and popular control of the black image with the rise of the Harlem Renaissance literati as leading American arts figures.

### 1930s

Segregation on stage was still the American norm, but black stars were also visible in film, largely in musicals, and as performers or servants. Unfortunately, these pioneering black actors were not playing characters that challenged the contemporary mindset. This limited view of black performativity defined by popular culture continued to fuel the creativity of new dramatic literature and musicals of the Harlem Renaissance. The Pan African revision of the Western value system for the arts used by Locke, Du Bois, and critic, Lewis et al. aimed to do away with the *stereotype* of black people as uncivilized. In doing so each challenged the black and bougie<sup>28</sup> and black laborers to re-envision themselves as the inheritors of African civilizations from whom the West learned civility. The subsequent theories and works of black theatre were circulated and cultivated by the black theatre educators and professionals who continued the work across the nation in black-led settings.

Two early educational organizations, in particular, cultivated a sense of dramatic competition among schools while also generating black performance theory. The first of them,

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<sup>28</sup> Borrowed from the French *bourgeoisie*, *bougie* is an African American colloquialism for black wealth and respectability real or feigned by black people.



Negro Intercollegiate Dramatic Association (NIDA), was founded in 1932 to “promote the study of drama and performance at black colleges” (Sanders 1989, 39). Originally made up of the membership of Howard University, Hampton Institute, Virginia State College, and Virginia Union the organization grew to include Morgan College in Baltimore, Maryland. The second, the Southern Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts (SADSA), would come later in 1936. Hay (1994) highlights Professor S. Randolph Edmonds’ work in the Baltimore Krigwa Group which would come to a halt when more politically connected board members advised the company to integrate. This key conflict between integration and black identity that Hay brings up focusses on the operation of the theatre board models. Edmonds would also go on to support the short-lived work of the Monumental Theatre Group until its close in 1935. But the integrated group took on the name Negro Little Theatre and continued to operate through 1946 although the onset of WWII greatly limited the productions (Hay 1994, 175-6).

It is impossible to think that the global theatre scene was overlooked by African American professors of speech and drama, as the label remains in some historically black higher education theatre programs today. Championing the educational capacities of theatre, instructors at historically black colleges and universities—many of which were missionary seminaries or founded as Teacher’s Colleges<sup>29</sup>—continued to play a large part in training African Americans in theatre as well as exploring ideas of an early black avant garde through exploring writing technique, theme, and performance practices across the U.S. and abroad. It is not until 1933 that Artaud writes in “Theatre and Cruelty” that theatre “must abandon individual psychology, espouse collective passions, mass opinion, [and] tune into the collective wave-lengths” (Artaud 1938, 88). Notice of his work would not have missed Anne Cooke, Director of Dramatics at

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<sup>29</sup> See also Hatch “Survey” 1998, 150.

Spelman College, a women's only HBCU in Atlanta. She returned from the Third Moscow Theatre Festival in 1935 determined that a Negro theatre "should first and foremost right the wrongs of past theatrical views of the Negro and replace old stereotypes with new types" (Fraden 1994, 61). She was emboldened by the styles of Russian theatre and the display of women's equality, there, which was particularly useful in her position at the all-female black university. Cooke later went on to head Theatre at Howard (Hatch "Survey" 1998, 156). Praise is due to the collegiate theatres where black female playwrights such as May Miller, a Howard graduate contributed to a wealth of plays that spoke to the more intimate concerns of African American women instead of the desperate backwards image of African American women in servitude or distress (Hatch "Survey" 1998, 156) in the mainstream white American culture. In 1935 Miller published *Negro History in Thirteen Plays* with another Harlem Renaissance playwright Willis Richardson (Hill & Hatch 2003, 261).

In 1935, President Roosevelt's New Deal Federal Theatre Project (FTP) contributed to pre-World War II black community theatre for four years by providing steady theatre work for all-black casts, directors, and playwrights in certain regional units, and holding performances in black neighborhoods like Harlem in New York City. Integration under the Federal Theatre Project meant that some black-led units were able to chose works that suited their local audiences. Others paired experimental white creatives with black creatives to produce works that upset the norms of theatre convention. This was the case with the 1936 *Voodoo Macbeth* directed by Orson Welles under the Federal Theatre Project which was subjected to intense scrutiny by white drama critics. But it also maintained some of the racial fallacies of blackness in performance. As Marguerite Rippey (2014) further notes, Welles missed an opportunity for the production to truly reflect the realities of Haitian culture by not engaging the talents of FTP

Negro Unit artists Zora Neale Hurston or Katherine Dunham, “both of whom had extensive knowledge of Haiti and ethnography” (Rippy 2014, 690). The Boston unit, directed by African American Ralf Coleman, was particularly successful in entertaining mixed (black and white) audiences. However, Coleman’s tenure was critiqued by Boston’s black press for his choice of “folk plays,” written by black people that seemed too close to minstrelsy by including music and dialect without “educating white audiences” (Fraden 1994, 163), another intention of black theatre. Many critical discussions taking place in black newspapers, magazines, and journals were about the rise of art theatre over agit prop; arguments for black respectability in characterization of melodrama, vaudeville, and other popular types; the use of dialect in folk drama; and which classes and geographic demographic of black experiences were worthy of staging. These supplements to creative practice in FTP Negro units and Negro Little Theatre did not completely override the preferences of black audiences who expected a wide range of performances to attend. With the voices of the black media, black scholars, and the artists of the Harlem Renaissance themselves combined, these discussions about black theatre led to black dramatists that “conscientiously wrote for the black community where their plays were produced in black-owned and black-operated community theaters, churches, schools, social club halls, and homes” (Dicker/sun 2008, 47).

There are several reasons the short-lived Federal Theatre Project (FTP) informed but was not black community theatre. Beyond the end of funding, the most pertinent concern is that the FTP concealed an institutional racism built into the conventions of theatre. The expectations of white universality were assumed, whereas popular critical perceptions of blackness were codified by the social architecture of Jim Crow racism and colored by the many centuries of debasing the humanity of African Americans. Dennis Tyler goes further, saying that Jim Crow logic projected

disability onto blackness in addition to often inflicting physical damage (Tyler, Jr. 2017). In *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor*, Geneviève Fabre asserts that the FTPs radical social project was overshadowed by Broadway which forced “black characters and actors into new stereotypes [making] them too vulnerable to communist influences and to the charge of engaging in ‘un-American activities’” (Fabre 1983, 10). All too often Black Americans working together towards social equality, with or without white allies, were branded “communist” for their goals and actions repudiating the US racial status quo. In white performance critiques, which were especially snide or paternalistic regarding black actors’ efforts in the classics or modern adaptations of European Avant-Garde plays, white resistance to the agency of black performers is apparent.

An obvious reason for black community theatre’s spread is the mass of white criticism of black performance which also extended into a de facto white critique of the black audience and by extension the entire black community under the white gaze. In many cases, critics noted the exuberance of black audiences who, for many reasons, identified with the black characters and were excited to see African Americans laboring on stage, a relatively new field compared to the hundreds of years enslaved by the American economic system. Published criticisms of black performers, by white critics, present images of audiences too *uncouth* and *untrained* in conventional [white] theatre audience behavior. The critiques did not consider the culturally conserved practices of *African* American decorum as a necessary or noble fact of the black theatergoing experience. They also never considered how the white writers’ portrayals of black life could be considered ridiculous to black audiences. White critics used terms such as “audience spirit” to suggest a *primitive* expression of feedback or an outright lack of *discipline* in the face of white theatre’s expectations of decorum. Other FTP audience critiques favored the

urbane aura of New York over the “naïve, dull, stupid audience” in other geographic locations (Fraden 1994, 143). It was the early categorization of African American performers and audiences as unfit for theatre that barely contained disdain for the voice and figure of African Americans attending FTP productions.

Rena Fraden (1994) discusses the conflicting perceptions of appropriate audience behavior noting the theatre as “a place of acculturation, [where] proper manners are taught, and uncontrollable ‘ejaculations’ squelched” (Fraden 1994, 148). She offers the example of Eugene O’Neill’s *Emperor Jones* to describe black audiences that either found the use of *primitive* imagery as absurd, or who did not appreciate the white playwright’s appropriation of the black voice and image. In short, O’Neill’s whiteness made him the wrong playwright to define blackness in theatre, no matter the play’s subsequent popularity. In highlighting this production Fraden (1994) brings out the struggles between the integration of black-led art forms into the mainstream and black audience reception. Because the FTP provided federal financial oversight, production choices were censored based on assumptions of how white audiences would receive those plays “that had white antagonists that incited violence against blacks” (Fraden 1994, 157). Fraden’s note about censorship due to racial conflict within a play text highlights the inability of the FTP to provide free license to black artists in representing African American reality. This protection of white society from the possibility of staged black rage made certain plays with topics censuring white characters potentially inflammatory and likely considered not worth the hassle of receiving a full production.

But the work of black higher education theatre would build a wider repertoire for black artists, audiences, and black critics to grow with. This work tempered the white critical disrespect of the authenticity of black theatre by shoring up productions in black educational

spaces. With S. Randolph Edmonds' move from Morgan in Baltimore City to Dillard University in New Orleans, another collegiate organization was formed in 1936, the Southern Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts (SADSA). SADSA expanded the membership of the Negro Intercollegiate Dramatic Association, which included HBCUs from the Eastern shore board, spreading across the South to add member schools in additional regions like Texas, and beyond. The concern for the value of black life and its fragility in the U.S. was clear on the pages of *The Crisis* which regularly dedicated space to the accounts of lynching. And black theatre spaces would find the 1939 recording of Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit" an echo of earlier protest plays<sup>30</sup> and a haunting reminder of work still to be done.

## 1940s

While performance and competition were always contentious topics at the annual SADSA gatherings, the professors who coordinated them, taught HBCU students critical discernment of popular theatre practice, instilled in students the self-esteem necessary to perform blackness with agency, and advocated for new forms of black dramatic texts to share among their students. The HBCU theatre conference organizers even brought better stage make up to a wider practice after a 1941 presentation on "Makeup in Sepia" by white costume designer and speech instructor, Professor Lillian Voorhees.<sup>31</sup> Her workshop taught students how to get beyond the Max Factor colored performer shades of "minstrel black, Chinese yellow, Indian red, and Mexican brown" (Hill & Hatch 2003, 256) to create a variety of more naturalistic makeup

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<sup>30</sup> Angelina Grimke's (1916) *Rachel* (in Hatch & Shine 1974) is one of the plays meant to heighten awareness of African American lynching in the United States..

<sup>31</sup> 1941 NADSA Convention at Tuskegee (Hatch "Survey" 1998, 156-8; Hill & Hatch 2003, 265-7).

shades. Voorhees joined the ensemble of SADSAs Professors who built on NIDA's original mission:

1. To increase the interest in intercollegiate dramatics
2. To use dramatic clubs as laboratories for teaching and studying drama
3. To develop Negro folk materials
4. To develop aesthetic and artistic appreciation for the dramatic art
5. To train persons for cultural service in the community
6. To establish a bond of good will and friendship between the colleges (Hatch 1998, 154).

But for SADSAs, adding new playwriting objectives like experimentation with form, representations of the black middle class, and "white life as [playwrights] see it" (Hatch 1998, 155) spoke to the need for variety in black theatre production.

The black collegiate theatre organization allowed professional training to become an extracurricular experience for African American students and professors who gathered in the name of theatre (and forensic speech) and experimented with dramatic themes, topics, and forms. SADSAs's incorporation of professional values in student performance also introduced new techniques to students who would go on to use them immediately upon return to school, but also later in their professional lives if they pursued the arts or education. SADSAs professors returned to their schools invigorated by their convening and campaigned to build curricula for Speech and Theatre academic departments. In 1947 Grambling State University was able to do so though many would stay linked to English departments. These same professors, like S. Randolph Edmonds, were also writing their own plays as a contribution to the Black Theatrical Canon (Hatch "Survey" 1998). In 1948 SADSAs debuted its research publication, the *Encore* journal, which further communicated black theatre criticism and play texts across the HBCUs (Hill &

Hatch 2003, 267). Through intercollegiate organizations, new plays were exposed to audiences from many different regions transmitting the spread of ideas about and for black theatre across the educational-minded HBCU theatre and community-oriented Negro Little Theatre. Their co-existence and overlapping dialogues cross cultivated one another animating black theatre practice.

In the Negro Little Theatre, many black artists learned theatre skills as they participated on productions that garnered successes in the black community and grew in popularity. Some Broadway productions of black plays eventually toured outside of New York and faced local discriminations meant to belittle local black audiences. The Baltimore, Maryland, leg of the Richard Wright and Paul Green play *Native Son* was met with hardline racial segregation in 1942. Glenda Gill (2000) cites Max Johnson's (1942) *Baltimore Afro American* newspaper article that mentions the management not only ignoring the pleas of white patrons to lessen racial seating restrictions, but also reprimanding them for the very thought of it. Gill (2000) notes that even the Baltimore City police chief joined in the fight against integrated theatre by removing all pictures of the integrated cast from public view (in Gill 2000, 117-8). These last-ditch attempts at keeping Black audiences in a separate and lower social category than white audiences by white people in positions of power, belied the attachment to white supremacy as the old and official norms of political and cultural values in the United States.

Black performers on stage challenged white US theatre's commercial and popular control in the way that Communism post World War II was said to threaten the moral fiber of American Democracy. The advent of McCarthyism enhanced this connection, and its literal repercussions undid the work of several black artists such as Paul Robeson. Yet the power of its figurative



application maintained a code suggesting black equality was un-American.<sup>32</sup> Thus, integration in the arts was socially bold but did not effect lasting change in the Black communities across the U.S. Racial segregation proved that black artists could build confidence in themselves and their audiences by concentrating on the work that reflected their interests. With entertainment, education, and activism as aims of black community theatre the assignment of black-generated aesthetic values confounded the American social engineering that benefitted white artistic communities.

Positive reviews by white critics of black performance on Broadway were becoming more normalized in the 1940s. As commercial black theatre was poised to grow independently, the motion picture industry called many black community theatre artists to the film studio contracts in California. Although film was a more lucrative industry, black theatre was still able to grow in areas with strong community economic growth. Though Ossie Davis, Former Howard University student, championed the creation of a community theatre “in all the ‘Harlems’” (in Cruse 1967, 528) he too, became a performer of stage and screen. But by then black theatre began to be mainstreamed and respected as an outgrowth of the popularity of Harlem Renaissance artists. As the center of American theatre, New York also became iconic of black theatre and more black playwrights were gaining headway in Broadway production. But education in black theatre was still vital. By 1945, Anne M. Cooke draws on her experiences teaching at Spelman, Hampton, and Howard and calls attention to pedagogy and survival strategies for black community theatre as educational programming in black colleges and Negro Little Theatre companies in her article “The Little Theatre Movement as an Adult Education

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<sup>32</sup> Integration and its real and coded connection to Communism, including Robeson’s plight is explored in essays in Mitchell (1967) & Mitchell (1975).

Program Among Negroes” (Cooke 1945). The Negro Little Theatre companies took education to heart, teaching their members, acting, voice, movement, playwrighting, and technical elements as part of their mission to represent blackness appropriately. Abram Hill says that the American Negro Theatre felt like catering to the black churches, schools, and black groups allowed them to produce theatre that was “meaningful and significant to the people who would in turn support us because we were giving them a lift and projecting the Negro as a real human being” (in Mitchell 1975, 147). This sentiment was unconditionally what black theatre was built on and represented on stages. By the close of the decade, now at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical, Edmonds summarizes the aims of the black collegiate theatre organizations thus:

To encourage the study of drama in the member institutions by introducing courses, departments and workshops; to exchange plays and productions; to encourage the writing of plays based on Negro life and experience; to introduce world drama to the students through classroom study and productions; to hold professional meetings; to present festivals and tournaments; and to contribute towards building a National Negro Theatre as a significant aspect of American and world drama” (Edmonds 1949, 93).

These goals were ultimately met proving the use value of HBCU theatre in seeding the United States with black theatre practitioners who fearlessly interpreted classical, contemporary, and global play texts. As integration spread to formerly white-only theatre groups like the American Educational Theatre Association (AETA) SADSA became the National Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts (NADSA) to show its national outreach in 1949 (Hill & Hatch 2003, 268).

## **1950s**

Black Community Theatre inherited the work of the Negro Little Theatre Movement in the transition to a less antiquated appellation for the work of artists who were continuing the work of empowering blackness onstage. The development of black theatre also had to contend

with making profits (Bean 1999; Fraden 1994, 68; Hill & Hatch 2003, 223) while maintaining its aims on the development of a politico-socio aesthetic, mission, and adherence to community development mandates. The non-profit model had not yet become every black theatre's mode of operating and, already, black community theatre was just beginning another round of hope and dejection. Each step towards cultivating black audiences reinforced the black community's autonomy from archaic white theatrical interpretations of black Americanness, but was tied to the finances available in the black community. The fervor and excitement that black community theatre companies were founded on were in tandem with the growth of black economic power post World War II. Though it was exacerbated by each economic wave in the U.S., black artists found they could bond together to support the expansion of the black aesthetic and the black audience. Margaret Wilkerson (1974) concurs citing:

Black theatre since the Negro Little Theatre movement has worked to create community among black artists, but especially in its cultivation of a black audience class. The motive to connect is a driving force behind black community theatres. The fact that they operate inside a building or a place set aside for such performances or because they may follow a written script, or because the audience usually pays to attend or because the event is advertised ahead of time or any of the "because" of theatre practice - does not sever this connection nor blunt the drive to achieve it. What occurs in black community theatre is simply a more ritualized, more prepared and controlled presentation... (Wilkerson 1979, 32).

The black audience members joined one another challenging Jim Crow by sharing in the pride of observing black stage figures that resembled their true social and spiritual life and goals. This was part of a renewed Civil Rights drive, though not always explicitly connected to it. These new black images aligned the pride of U.S. citizens who fought and died for the United States in two World Wars, but who were girding themselves for a renewed battle against the racial and economic hypocrisy of American society.

By finally granting a black audience class visions of their collective universality on stage, black community theatre evolved to represent the plight of a cohesive African American community which could share in degrees of self-recognition in performance and in its support of a black canon of dramatic literature. At the close of the American Negro Theatre (ANT) in 1951, even in New York, the precarity of black community theatre did not lie in the quality of productions or personnel, but on sustainability in the face of a white-run commercial theatre industry. Abram Hill, director, writer, and de facto managing director of the ANT saw its eventual closing as linked to the imbalance in a desire for popular crossover and racial inequality, which kept government and private funding from supporting black theatres at equal levels as white companies. In order for black theatre to grow, Hill surmised that ““we, as an ethnic group, will have to rely more and more upon ourselves and not anybody else”” (Hill & Hatch 2003, 356). This statement signifies to the dissolution of ANT after the Broadway production of *Anna Lucasta* that revealed white producers who did not fully support the mission of the company.

When the Arena Players put on their first production in 1953 at the black Coppin College in Baltimore, Maryland, they were on the cusp of a new American social promise of integration. Yet, in choosing to build a company about, by, for, and near African Americans, but also ready to go to the spaces they were in. This was a calculated move to win the next round of the Civil Rights movement for equality in the arts. While they were not the first to show the white segregated Baltimore theatre community how African Americans valued themselves as theatre goers, like all black-led theatre companies, the Arena Players took black representation into their own hands outside of the white gaze. They built a black-led theatre company with artists capable of providing a training ground for black amateurs. Additionally, the Arena Players, as a black

community theatre, meets most of the prerequisite sociopolitical, artistic, and entertainment goals of being about, by, for, and near Baltimore's African American community. Although their early selection of plays reflected the popular Broadway shows, the Arena Players catered to black audiences. In the communal move towards reciprocity, they drew strength from the local black schools, churches, political, and social groups that initially supported them.

Other companies with Civil Rights Movement era origins, such as the integrated Free Southern Theatre of New Orleans, had to make major shifts in operations in order to make black identity a primary ideology of their practice at the onset of the Black Arts Movement. But the Arena Players' African American community approach already challenged the "existing sociopolitical and stage practices in its drama" (Craig 1980, 194) at its inception by virtue of being a black-led company casting black actors in Baltimore and performing for black audiences around Baltimore. It was later influenced by the wave of black revolutionary theatre aesthetics during the Black Arts Movement in more subtle ways. Plays by black playwrights, like Ed Bullins and Douglas Turner Ward<sup>33</sup> were staged along with works from the Harlem Renaissance and works by white writers. Primarily, the Arena Players founding Artistic Director, Sam Wilson doubled down on developing young black artists by actively recruiting them from wherever he was and mentoring them so that they could also mentor others. Though I will give a more detailed account of the Arena Players' origins and operations in the following chapters, the included oral history accounts show further evidence of the company as a black community theatre created through, and surviving because of, African American self-determination.

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<sup>33</sup> Douglas Turner Ward (Asé!) performed in the original 1959 Broadway cast of Hansberry's (1954) *A Raisin in the Sun* and is one of the founders of the Negro Ensemble Company (1967) (Collins-Hughes 2021).

## Black community theatre

Black theatre historians use many methods to reach the same or similar conclusions about black theatre without engaging in the specifics of black *community* theatre's existence. That is a semantic oversight that I seek to correct by defining it further before the close of this chapter with reference to my site of research, the Arena Players, Inc. of Baltimore, MD. Although black theatre's origins are most often highlighted within the geographically specific Harlem Renaissance era, this kind of labelling confines ideas of black theatre to a distinct period and place. In practice, the production of U.S. black theatre has nationwide reserves stemming from investment in the performing arts by black people, members of the African Diaspora, in the U.S. as a platform for social change starting in their black communities since the Nineteenth Century. In this way black theatre is naturally a community art. In tracing a genealogy of black theatre, I use the term black community theatre because it twines the two threads of *community engagement* and *enlightenment/ education* in the subsequent chapters about the Arena Players, Inc. My use of the term black community theatre is meant to delineate the reality of black-led theatre ventures as they are supported by African American community institutions that provide a social challenge to whiteness coded as tradition and white supremacy coded as American civic praxis.

Black community theatre's existence fills in the void of realistic or authentic representations of black people missing from popular commercial entertainment in the U.S. In many ways, it utilizes the tools of Western theatre to generate an African American hybrid product meant for the consumption of African American audiences. However, black community theatre's survival has depended on its ability to remain black-led, which sustains a black centered creative practice without the creative oversight of white theatre practitioners. By putting

production choices in the hands of black professionals, hobbyists, and novices cultivating their artistry, black community theatre has been instrumental in altering African American self-perception.

## **Chapter 2. Baltimore's Black Community Theatre**

America's promised equality was unmet by 1953, providing the conditions for the Arena Players to organize around a shared black identity in a city with a long theatre history for and by white Baltimoreans and a vibrant Black entertainment industry. In this chapter I will build a case for the legacy of self-determination inherited by the company's founders that built an artistic practice about, by, for, and near African Americans by examining black Baltimore history. African American self-determination is in response to white Baltimore's history of anti-black and segregationist protocols left space for the Arena Players to grow by relying on the early support of black educational and religious institutions. By focusing in this chapter on the concerns of and choices made by African Americans from before the Civil War through the Jim Crow era, I propose that black Baltimoreans used their personally designated freedoms to create opportunities for themselves economically, socially, and artistically. Though Baltimore's pro-slavery and anti-black sentiments guided social and political practices, African American self-determination in Baltimore initiated, sustained, and developed bonds of community based on their shared identity in direct contradiction to the devaluation of blackness by white supremacy. Black Baltimore made black life a priority well in advance of municipal, state, and federal legislation like the Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, and the subsequent Civil Rights laws that enforced them. Although the ways and means of expressing their self-possession varied among African Americans, when they collaborated on shared goals as the African American community, they applied a powerful system of social credit, or capital. This allowed Black Baltimore the ability to efface the ideology of white supremacy and provoke political, economic, social, and artistic gains.



Additionally, in this chapter, I will also outline segregation's unintended outcome of girding an African American community by creating Black neighborhoods that can be traced along the geographical movements of Americans of African descent throughout Baltimore's history. These shifts have affected the Arena Players' African American audiences and artists whose application of African American social capital contribute to a political black identity that deems black life to be equally as valuable as white life.<sup>34</sup> After reviewing the foundations and early operations of the Arena Players as they sought a permanent facility in black Baltimore, this chapter will discuss the effects of integration in commercial and community theatre venues in Baltimore.

### **Black Baltimore history**

Black creativity is not unique to Baltimore, but Baltimore has a unique relationship to black creativity. Freeborn astronomer, abolitionist, and black Baltimore County native, Benjamin Banneker, would go on to plot key locations in the spatial design for the U.S. capital city of Washington, DC. He would also go on to publish a farmer's almanac that educated others about agricultural and astronomical concerns. The earliest-mentioned black Baltimore City visual artist is Joshua Johns[t]on, a self-taught portrait painter whose white father purchased his freedom in the mid-1700s. Listed in the Baltimore city directory from 1796-1824 as a "Free Negro householder" (Beirne 1951, 279), Johns[t]on made his living as an artist painting middle class white families including. These families may have attended Baltimore theatre performances such as the Maryland Company's 1793 *benefit* performance for the 1,500 French Haitian planters who fled Saint Domingue with their remaining slaves (Ritchey 1971, 43) after the 1791 Haitian

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<sup>34</sup> This is the expectation of the American-ness promised by the United States, but not yet fulfilled and often alluded to by African American leaders.

Revolution which liberated black people from slavery and freed the island of European colonial control.

Baltimore has always been a city of contradictions, where the poor and rich were both black and white. In the city, freeborn, formerly enslaved, and enslaved black people often worked together to ensure further freedoms for the following generations. A Baltimore history is laid out in the 400 page *The Amiable Baltimoreans* by Francis F. Beirne (1951) who highlights his version of “all” of Baltimore’s notable persons and their achievements without mention of the Native American Piscataway and Susquehannock Tribes who inhabited the land before Baltimore’s 1633 colonization by Great Britain and 1729 incorporation. Although Beirne, born in 1890, came to age as a white historian whose knowledge of persons represent the mainstream authority I am disrupting with African American oral history, his history provides insight into African American life from the 1700s to 1951, sometimes by exclusion. Beirne’s (1951) inclusion of the living conditions of Negro Baltimoreans and their place in the workforce makes Negro “Progress” visible though the institutions created to serve African Americans during segregation such as (in order of mention) the Baltimore Urban League (1924), Provident Hospital (1894-1986), and the Afro-American Newspaper (1892), while completely ignoring the NAACP, founded in 1909 with a strong Baltimore City chapter.

For my purposes, Beirne’s text supports my historiographic research through comparison to other sources from the archive. His inclusion of a few amiable *Negro* [my italics] Baltimoreans, in chapter nineteen of twenty-eight, includes a small number of black men Beirne (1951) became aware of as a client patronizing the whites-only side of the segregated entertainment and service industry. He makes mention of people like black catering entrepreneurs, musicians in the entertainment industry and even religious leader Father Divine’s

early career as a gardener, born George Baker (Beirne 1951, 181). While Francis F. Beirne's (1951) commentary on racial segregation or "the Negro Problem" suggests white Baltimoreans "yielded with surprising calm to the demands for change" (Beirne 1951, 275) the actual experiences are noted in other sources. However, Beirne (1951) presents a history that shows an African American arts economy that was already in place well before the Arena Players' establishment.

For more on the community life of political African Americans, I turn to Leroy Graham's (1982) *Baltimore: The Nineteenth Century Black Capital*, which is a thorough history of four notable Baltimoreans, three of African descent, William Watkins, George A. Hackett, and Isaac Meyers. Meyers would mean a great deal to unionization as I discuss later. These black men work built a community network activated for black social justice. Graham presents the Quaker influences in the abolition of African Americans which, paired with the growth of African American wealth and civic pride as Baltimoreans, showcase a history of black communal leadership and service. The early black leaders set a precedent for the intersectionality of black Baltimoreans, free and enslaved, who worked together to build a civic framework for self-determination that led to Baltimore's African American community and the possibility of the Arena Players, Inc.

The disciplining of black bodies has been at the behest of white American interests; thus the African American community as an institution has made the case for nurturing and sustaining black life by preserving black interests in a sociopolitical move to dispel the powers of white oversight. While black freedom has been legislatively and historically linked to specific localities, it is played out in the self-determination of African Americans who enact a criminal

insanity<sup>35</sup> that is the ongoing resistance to slavery.<sup>36</sup> After centuries of generating wealth for white Americans, the manumission of the formerly enslaved left those freed with absolutely nothing to call their own except their bodies, wits, and will. According to political scientist Marion Orr (1999) white abolitionism in Maryland began with Baltimore's first antislavery society founded in 1788 (Orr 1999, 23), black people who longed for freedom often took it into their own hands—or died trying. In fact, the shape of the state of Maryland is defined by its northern border, the Mason-Dixon line (Shopes 2015, 98), which divided the Southern Confederate slave holding states from the Northern Union until the end of the Civil War when the enslavement of African Americans was outlawed across the United States. Well before 1865, Baltimore was a city defined by its industries, which included the human trafficking of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, trade of goods, manufacturing, transport, and shipbuilding related to its large harbor. Despite its slave-holding status, Baltimore was a city of promise for free black people and a city that offered some economic advancement for those who were enslaved but had specialized skills, especially in the shipbuilding industry (Towers 2000).

Though Baltimore had stopped directly importing Africans in 1807, the clipper ships being built in Fells Point (Appendix D, Map 3), at the westernmost edge of south east Baltimore were built with the labor of both free and enslaved black people. In 1835, abolitionist Frederick Douglass was enslaved in Baltimore City though much of the city's black population consisted of free born African Americans (Fee et al. 1991, 128). Frederick Douglass arrived in pre-bellum East Baltimore at age 11. He played and worked with white immigrant children, although his

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<sup>35</sup> Black freedom has been linked at various times to ignorance, disability, criminality. Also, see Willoughby 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Moten 2003, 166. His conclusion that blackness is avant garde links here to black rejection of white American standards in favor of black freedom which is “displaying outward presence—as visual-gestural-aural-locomotive-pathology.”

trade was controlled by an urban enslaver that hired Douglass out as a ship caulker. According to an historical survey of Baltimore leading up to the 1968 riots by Elizabeth Fee, Linda Shopes and Linda Zeidman (1991), Douglass was often subject to harassment and beatings by white shipyard workers. Though a skilled tradesman earning a wage for his labor at 18, Douglass was still enslaved, and had to turn his earnings over to his white captor Hugh Auld who “rented” his labor out to the shipyards. African Americans were valued for their bodies by those who enslaved them, but enslaved individuals also received lower wages than free black workers. Additionally, there were still jobs in Baltimore that black people could not have:

Trades that were legally inaccessible to African Americans—because whites either coveted the jobs or believed that they threatened slavery—included interracial business partnerships, clerking, peddling, selling alcohol, and owning or commanding a ship (Towers 2000, 238).

But these conditions only sparked a sense of racial solidarity in what Towers (2000) calls “autonomous urban communities” (Towers 2000, 238) of African Americans.

In a show of solidarity, enslaved and free, black caulkers unionized in 1838 Baltimore to secure better wages and working conditions. This act of community development through political engagement formed a group of African Americans organizing to raise their economic status—a key requirement to making freedom a viable lifestyle. Black caulkers were able to add to their resources, as some of them were working towards loftier goals. Many wanted to establish homes and businesses that could help them afford the freedom of enslaved loved ones they may have left behind. That same year Douglass also freed himself from the bonds of slavery, just one year before Baltimore’s ports were exposed as complicit in illegal human trafficking. According to a 2002 *Baltimore Chronicle* article, in 1839 a schooner ship *Ann* was confiscated before it could make its maiden voyage to transport Africans (Clayton 2002) into human chattel bondage.

For African Americans, banding together was a necessity because, in Baltimore City, the urban black population was smaller than in other parts of Maryland, like the rural Prince George's County, where primarily enslaved black people outnumbered white people by 13,677; Baltimore City was home to only 1000 free African Americans. Baltimore City's 1860 Census counted 2,218 enslaved African Americans, but nearly 26,000 emancipated black people who lived and worked alongside 184,520 white people (U.S. Census Bureau 1860). Particularly after 1865, the black caulkers union enforced employers to make direct payments of wages to the black laborers free or otherwise. Thanks to the social outcomes of unionization, black Baltimorean Issac Meyers and his business partners were able to establish their own shipping company nearly thirty years before the start of the twentieth century (Fee et al. 1991, 125). Although, the Chesapeake Marine Railway and Dry Dock Company was spearheaded by a \$10,000 investment by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church and would close in 1884 (Towers 2000, 247), the financial outcomes of black solidarity and industry unionization granted African Americans access to a higher level of social, or cultural, capital. This ultimately afforded black people the opportunity to build individual wealth which then was used to seed the tangible structures of Black Baltimore community.

### **African American social capital**

Value is vital in the discussion of African American personhood. White Americans built their economic systems deciding the market value for black bodies and their various labors based on the same monetary trade system that guaranteed a barrel of rum was worth a certain amount of gold or silver. Black people themselves had different values attached to their marked [as Other] bodies which, to this day, is troubled by white cultural norms that do not value black life. Throughout the centuries of African enslavement in America, thousands of documents note the

value that white individuals and industries placed on black heads, shoulders, hips, and legs. Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade ship manifests listed as cargo and insured the Africans they abducted from nations as diverse as Nigeria, Ghana, Congo, or Sierra Leone. Auction houses specializing in trading Africans and Americans of African descent listed prices for those people, who may have been given “Christian” names like Sally or Jim, or ironic pet names like Caesar or Brutus. They were described as wench, buck, “mulatto,” “octoroon,” or pickaninny based on age, gender, skills, skin color (racial makeup), and strength in the hopes of earning more than list prices. “Fugitive slaves” were black people who escaped from the unethical and immoral system of slavery. Freedom seekers were criminalized for wanting and acting on the natural human impulse of freedom because they “stole” [themselves as] property. Additionally, they were classified as psychologically deficient for their habitual *drapetomania*.<sup>37</sup> The pursuit of free black people was rewarded by rural white planters and urban enslavers with cash rewards, and was supported by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which compelled Northern states and free territories to return escapees to their enslavers and, subsequently, allowed for the abduction and enslavement of free born black people. The forerunners of municipal police and National Guards, these patrollers, were bands of armed white men (usually lower class) whose only task was to pursue, subjugate, and re-enslave free black people. They would either do so for hire or in reference to published classified ads in newspapers and posted flyers alerting the general public to capture the escaped runaways. At one time, Maryland freewoman, Harriet Tubman was infamously wanted dead or alive for a \$40,000 reward.

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<sup>37</sup> Drapetomania is a racially-specific pseudo-scientific “disease” created by early psychologist Samuel A. Cartwright to pathologize the black freedom drive. See also Willoughby (2018).

In Baltimore, the African American community has always elected to act for itself and developed organically as the city's labor needs changed. First as black people escaped or were freed from bondage, then during the Great Migration as they left the rural deep South. African Americans, like my forebears, arrived in droves from agricultural centers like Maryland's Eastern Shore, Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas—places with strong Confederate sentiments. Arriving to the economic opportunities of an urban city's industrialized trade and service jobs, African Americans earned wages for their labor instead of drowning in the endless exploitation of sharecropping debt. African Americans built businesses that supported their own needs during segregation. They also struggled to make themselves appear respectable to white America. For African Americans, our racialized social experience as Americans is based on our relationship to white *norms*. Particularly post-Abolition, those white norms have been consistently maintained or shored up by a hegemonic system that prevents full equality mainly through the coded language of legislation. In such an imbalanced system, white everything is the only right anything. American history shows that black self-determination alone and in community collaboration, led to civic, and by extension, economic freedom despite the American socioeconomic system that created and enforced the enslavement of human beings of African descent. It was the:

cultures of resistance based on music, religion, African traditions, and family ties, among other political technologies...[that led to] the development of a 'free' black identity, a sense of 'peoplehood,' and a collective dedication to emancipation (Omi & Winant 2015, 142).

African Americans have been able to make leeway in gaining social, or cultural, capital outside of white norms through collective actions that target economic or social problems. Marion Orr (1999) turns Robert Putnam's (1994) lens of "social capital" to African American school reform



in Baltimore. He finds that the black social capital in Baltimore has helped to protect African American community interests and expand black opportunities. Black social capital is built within black organizations and the ways that their members contribute to social change through tangible and intangible means. Orr (1999) observes that black social capital is represented by:

the benevolent societies, fraternities, voluntary associations, church congregations, and tightly knit neighborhoods formed in the late nineteenth century and by the black newspapers, historically African-American colleges, and civil rights organizations established in the early decades of the twentieth century—[and] must be understood against a political culture and history of white domination and black exclusion (Orr 1999, 9).

Orr (1999) includes here groups that have always been founded on the principle that black people could use their unpaid leisure time to work together for shared goals, namely more secure lives. The people within these networks attained a personal capital, or something of value, which could be traded for goods and services and social expectations. While black social capital can be valued as simply as accumulated self-determination, Orr's (1999) black social capital has a correlation to the colloquialism "street cred" as something earned through life experience. Black social capital is earned this way and applied through cultural actions usually within or as a representative of black-led community organizations. Most critically, Orr (1999) clarifies that black institutions battled the mainstream ideological force of white supremacy to protect the inherent value of black humanity, humanity that white planter capital as embodied by enslaved African descendants before 1865 attempted to sublimate. Black bodies, until then, had mainstream value in a cruelly economic sense. It is no wonder that black value in black lives escaped white understanding for so many centuries in the U.S. Mainstream U.S. values led to notions of white privilege<sup>38</sup> over black desires in ways that still jeopardize black bodies in U. S.

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<sup>38</sup> A tangible vestige of America's white supremacist cultural practices and norms.

civil society. African American social capital speaks to black notions of quality of life based on the “self-evident” truths of our undeniable humanity, freedom, and cultural experience.

Post-Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans self-possessed their individual social capital and collectively applied ideological and legislative pressure on a white normative mainstream society in order to gain civic freedoms and economic parity with whites, or at the very least, the goods and services guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. Mullins (1999) presents the notion that black respectability is a social performance, cum currency, that black men and women applied to performative acts of social justice. He notes the work of Baltimore and Annapolis black elite who were spearheading resistance to segregated rail car laws (Mullins 1999, 27). Social organizations, schools, and centers of worship brought African Americans together in the pursuit of freedom in creating community. African Americans have worked together to challenge white norms that did not sanction—rather undermined—their incorporation as a community.

First, the construct of community provides a template for describing actual power relations as people live them and conceptualize them. The idea of community as well as lived experiences within actual communities are central to how people understand and organize the social inequalities of everyday life. Because people exercise power in their everyday lives as individuals in multiple and crosscutting communities, it stands to reason that ordinary people will use the construct of community to think and do politics (Collins 2012, 445-6).

African American social capital continually bolsters the African American community which has relied on itself when the hegemonic American racial system ignores or denies black equity.

Orr’s (1999) list of institutions that act as sites of African American social capital serve black political and social needs is strengthened by critical race theorist Tara Yosso’s (2005) definition of community cultural wealth. Through critical race theory Tara Yosso (2005)

challenges Bourdieuean (1977) cultural capital as a term that excludes the knowledge of people of color based on eugenic principles. Cultural capital is supported by her definition of culture as “behaviors and values that are learned, shared, and exhibited by a group of people [and] evidenced in material and nonmaterial productions of a people” (Yosso 2005, 75). By valuing the personal knowledge, approaches, and methodologies for theorizing space that people of color possess, Yosso’s “community cultural wealth,” which is accumulated within the appellate African American community, is on par with Orr’s (1999) “black social capital” which is most apparent when applied outside of the African American community. Both point to the legitimacy of the term African American community, which is literally and figuratively made up of the black networks that challenge white supremacist hegemonic structures by their very existence. The African American community originates in the objectives, impulses, and interactions among African Americans. The impact of the African American community when it applies economic, political, or even artistic force only adds to its *value* within the hegemony of America.

### **African American networks**

Building an African American community with black social capital required black people thinking for themselves, communicating freely with one another, choosing their destiny, and challenging the status quo through focused political actions. In the Works Progress Administration’s 1937 interview of the formerly enslaved Dennis Simms, he speaks of the treatment of runaways from the Contee Plantation in Maryland. Simms recalls “Sometimes Negro slave runaways who were apprehended by the patrollers,<sup>39</sup> who kept a constant watch for escaped slaves, besides being flogged, would be branded with a hot iron on the cheek with the

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<sup>39</sup> A Baltimore variation I heard growing up was “pattyrollers.”

letter ‘R’” (*Federal Writer’s Project* 1936). These acts of self-possession and determination were criminalized and pathologized during the centuries of enslavement endured by African descendants. One of many strategies for restricting outright rebellion by enslaved African Americans was through censorship and the white oversight of black communications. This was particularly true for religious gatherings where only certain references were allowed, such as those compiled in the abbreviated 232 chapter “Slave Bible” (Martin 2019). Christianity’s role in the development of the African American community is double-sided as a faith used to justify the enslavement of Africans. It is a wonder that the African American church would eventually become instrumental in undermining slavery and pushing for more freedoms for black citizens in Baltimore.

Throughout the United States in many African American communities, the black church has been the seat of a liberation theology since before the Civil War. Many black-led churches participated in the abolition movement in stealth or in plain sight through the end of the Civil War. The Methodists met in Baltimore in 1784 to form the Methodist Episcopal Church and ordered all members to free their slaves (Graham 1983, 73 ). When black parishioners sought to leave the restrictions of white leadership and segregation by white clergy and members, they formed Bethel African Methodist Episcopal in 1816 (Bethel AME ). Reverend Dr. Harvey Johnson, the fifth pastor of Union Baptist Church, founded the Colored Baptist Convention of Maryland in 1892 in protest over African American experiences of discrimination by the Maryland Baptist Union Association (Union Baptist Church). The proximity of John Brown’s 1859 Harper’s Ferry raid was close enough to Baltimore to scare white residents into thinking that black people were coming for their heads (Floyd 1909). Thus, by 1860, a reactionary state [early Jim Crow] law that prohibited the assembly of blacks and barred blacks from owning

property was voted down in part due to the mobilization of black churches and businessmen in applying their social capital (Orr 1999, 27). While Jim Crow laws were developed in a coordinated effort to uphold American white supremacist structures, the African American church was a community hub financed by the collective efforts of black Americans coordinating black people in economic and civic participation.

African American community creation, and therefore cultural capital, has always been troubled by the extent to which individual African Americans accept other African Americans within their smaller networks. Civil Rights lawyer Harold McDougall (1993) navigates the history and participation of African American Baltimoreans living in the Sandtown-Winchester, Sugar Hill, Upton neighborhoods and their inhabitants in *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*. From this site he defines a vernacular black culture rooted in locale and the practice of community members. Through the lenses of Booker T. Washington's (entrepreneurial) and W.E.B. Du Bois' (educational) differing ideologies of African American self-determination, McDougall (1993) finds that a synthesis of the two led to the rise of the black church. There, liberation theology engendered relationship-building as a civic responsibility for the creation of base communities. McDougall notes the human networks of "church, fraternal association, and small business" (McDougall 1993, 20) which allowed for African American cultural capital to affect political change in Baltimore by providing a free space. He also contends that black vernacular culture began to decline as the Talented Tenth left the city.

Educated and wealthy networks of African Americans justified their social elitism, by claiming membership in W.E.B. Du Bois' "Talented Tenth," a theory which sprang from what Shantella Y. Sherman (2012) calls a New Negro Eugenics. Though meant as an alternative to white interpretations of "negro character" (Sherman 2012, 39) the classifications for the Talented

Tenth were rooted in a patriarchal system of moral, intellectual, and occupational habits as the litmus for black success after slavery. Based on Du Bois' 1899 sociological study of black families in Philadelphia, Du Bois actually generated four categories or *grades* of black people. His Grade 1 was the Talented Tenth populated by men who were not laborers and whose wives remained at home as a reproducer and caretaker. Grade 2 included "respectable" women who worked outside the home which was marked by the home's appearance along with her tidiness. The impoverished workers of Grade 3 were deemed to lack energy, thrift, and self-determination. The "submerged tenth" of Grade 4 were those who willfully committed vice (Du Bois 1899 in Sherman 2012, 5-6). Baltimore's Talented Tenth settled largely in the West Baltimore neighborhoods south of Druid Hill Park. The Du Boisian Talented Tenth practiced an inter-community eugenics, or social engineering, that relied on concepts of black respectability that was upheld by an amalgam of education, class, and economic opportunity. The wealthy black networks that hosted events such as cotillions and Jack & Jill clubs for their children to socialize, have over time become less about color and more about wealth and class (Martin 2010, 243).

Disrupting notions of African American community unity early on were the class and color divisions among black people. Because there was no universal adoption of African-ness as a point of pride, some African Americans chose to self-segregate from poorer and darker-skinned black people early on. These factions within black community members are a part of an ongoing African American sociological problem that stems from African American applications of pseudoscientific eugenic theory. Originally coined by Frances Galton in 1883, eugenics was a pop sociology craze that equated civility and individual success with bloodlines.<sup>40</sup> Poor and immigrant whites in the U.S. were considered lower *quality* white people than the wealthy. Like

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<sup>40</sup> Power (2016) discusses the application of eugenic theory in the creation of Jim Crow law.

the “one drop” rule that consigned black people to enslavement through matrilineage, eugenics made intellectual and character aspersions against the descendants of Africans based on their existing socioeconomic conditions and physical appearance. Black scholars joined the fad, with some black eugenicists aiming to *prove* Eurocentric eugenic “truths.” However, according to Sherman (2012), other scholars like Allison Davis claimed the opposite. In her words, his take on blackness made “striving for white social acceptance...a sign of neurosis or racial degeneracy” (Sherman 2012, 10). Eugenics did not create, but it did exacerbate African American colorism,<sup>41</sup> the intergroup problem that stifled early black nationalism within the African American community. Although colorism has had a lasting effect on black self-esteem and cooperative action, it has contributed to black wealth by building and sustaining elite black networks.

Regardless of the avenues that brought them about, members of the African American elite of all shades could be as dismissive as the white elite in creating distance from their lower classes, using whatever means they felt individually made them superior—individualism being part of U.S. acculturation. Some truly expected the poorest African Americans to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” Informally, ideas of black wealth and economic advancement

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<sup>41</sup> Colorism is a practice of intergroup discrimination based on the lightness or darkness of black American skin tones and has been used to alienate both light and dark-skinned African Americans from one another. Stemming from an internalized racism, this problem created black micro communities. In gaining favor as American citizens, some African Americans have socially engineered marriages amongst themselves in the hopes of eradicating dark skin and African phenotypical features such as tightly coiled hair and broad noses. This is similar to the social systems that were created by the gens de couleur of Louisiana, who through the system of *plaçage*, strategically paired free women of color with elite white men to provide better economic opportunities and social ranking for their lighter skinned descendants. These acts of social/genetic engineering, taken to their extreme, made it possible for some black people to make the very risky decision to pass for white, a costly socioeconomic advantage. It forced them to give up membership in the African American community altogether, abandoning family and friends who could expose them. Kennedy (2008) details several individuals of note who were passing as white in white social spheres as well as literary characters in Chapter 5 of *Sellout*.

have been associated with terms like “brown paper bag test,” “marrying up,” and “bougie” in the black vernacular. But the black elite who wanted to integrate into white society realized they were legally confined by their race, and were more likely to use politics to fight for their rights as citizens, which ultimately benefitted all African Americans in the wider community. Many took a black nationalist stance fueled by race pride.

There was no one way to build African American community and it is important to note that not all elite African Americans were guided by colorism or New Negro Eugenics. “Race” men and women worked diligently to further the political agenda of African Americans, thereby proving that the value of the entire African American community lies in its ability to work collectively. As the highly educated, skilled workers, or entrepreneurs, Race men and women (Dicker/son 2008, 9) had more opportunities to build wealth and were some of the first to collect funds and organize campaigns for African American suffrage. They were in effect linking the networks within the African American community to actively challenge ideologies backed by white supremacy. Omi and Winant (2015) observe that the alternative national frameworks that challenged the legitimacy of the white nation [of the United States] become an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983 in Omi & Winant 2015, 81) in rebellion. For African Americans, supporting that alternative framework included strategizing for the equality of citizenship they were expecting since the abolition of slavery.

One of the cornerstones of United States civic life is the leisure time to build ideologically in schools, guilds, and religious orders. In these African American institutions, social circumstances are structured by the African extended family that relied on interactions with a community network beyond the nuclear family. Here black Baltimoreans and transplants shared news and messages from home, made family alliances, entertained and worshiped, and



discussed employment prospects among themselves. The expanded economic opportunity in Baltimore was already drawing more black people to settle in the city. Paul Gilroy (1993) states:

It is possible to argue that the acquisition of roots became an urgent issue only when diaspora blacks sought to construct a political agenda in which the ideal of rootedness was identified as a prerequisite for the forms of cultural integrity that could guarantee the nationhood and statehood to which they aspired (Gilroy 1993, 112).

The kind of nation-building brought the African American community from an imagined one into a concrete community in its creation of black spaces that amassed community cultural wealth. Through the application of social capital from those centers for black life and culture, Baltimore's burgeoning African American community made even greater economic and political impact, even while faced with white racism by law and by custom. Cole (2019) recognizes that "social networks serve as significant and important components of black community-support systems and ultimate survival" (Cole 2019, 214) with collective love at the root of these relationships. With the support of other African Americans within their community networks, black Baltimoreans were able to build stable lives and plan for equitable futures.

### **Baltimore geography in black and white**

The enactment of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment's goal of "Negro Suffrage" was immediately restricted by the legislation of black bodies. While there were already laws on the books that restricted free black populations, many more laws were passed in Southern municipalities, including Baltimore, as soon as slavery ended. Some laws kept African Americans out of certain towns and neighborhoods after sundown, made it easier to send them to prison, and limited employment opportunities for the newly freed workforce. Omi and Winant (2015) cite the 1896 *Plessy v Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of "separate but equal" as a key factor in Jim Crow

laws' institutionalization as state racial policy, "severely curtailing black labor's competitive threat to whites" (Omi and Winant 2015, 57). The morbidly authoritarian Jim Crow laws that followed, whites reasoned, were the way to deal with the "Negro problem" of freedom because "the White problem" after black freedom was economic competition. African American freedom also triggered irrational fears, rooted in bias, of white annihilation (stemming either from black retaliation or impregnation of white women). Jim Crow laws were formalized to protect white privilege and the networks of collusion that the elite whites had already established, as the landed gentry, including Senators, Governors, Mayors, and City Council members along with industry captains and law enforcement.

The most commonly widespread Jim Crow laws segregated public facilities into "whites only," often without providing access for blacks. This is especially true of social services like education. Though Baltimore's public schools opened in 1829, black Baltimore did not receive government funded education until 1867 (Orr 1999, 24-5). Jim Crow also reached the private sector and categorized many jobs as "white" or "black" so that even educated and skilled black craftspeople were coerced to work in the lowest paying jobs. At the state government level, Confederate sympathizing Baltimore Democratic leaders wanted to maintain control and subverted the black vote through the use of "African-American agents whose function it was to steer blacks away from the Republican party, keep black voter turnout down, or solicit what little black Democratic support could be obtained" (Orr 1999, 46). Because Jim Crow laws were created by white Americans to protect and strengthen social practices of white supremacy challenged by the integrated Reconstruction government's aims, they were based wholly on the white imaginary of blackness, based on theatrical representations.

“Jim Crow” is a phrase derived from a blackface minstrel character portrayed by a white man, Thomas “Daddy” Rice. This fact and the aftermath of this 1827 moment in black performance studies is mentioned in many black theatre sources including: Dicker/sun 2008, 21; Hill & Hatch 2003, 97; Miller 2011, 23; and Young 2013, 4-5. The origins of the Jim Crow mythos is described in detail in Eric Lott’s (2013) *Love & Theft* which examines the history of blackface minstrelsy as a performance practice as well as the social impulses that contributed to its popularity for white audiences. The white performers projected a palatable [to them] image of blackness in stereotyping black figures as comically and tragically inept and uncouth. These stereotyped characters, and by extension African Americans, were not respected as equal, nor were they seen as problem figures due to their buffoonish nature. It was African American self-determination that created the so-called Negro Problem, which guided the mindsets of those passing and upholding laws and social habits that quelled equality for African Americans in academic, social, government, and economic movements in the United States after Emancipation.

Baltimore’s segregation history is directly linked to the long-lasting separatist sentiments of its white elite class. The established wealthy white Baltimore population lived in the center of the city in the townhomes from Howard Street eastward to Cathedral Street around the Mt. Vernon area. Their country estates were around the suburban woodland and lake areas such as Druid Hill Park, Herring Run, and Lake Montebello. Beirne (1951) details the violent white mobs throughout Baltimore’s history. Malka (2017), Towers (2000), and Lieb (2019), corroborate incidents ranging from the 1835 Bank Riots, the 1858 and 1859 caulker riots,<sup>42</sup> to the

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<sup>42</sup> In early June 1858 at gunpoint William Skinner and Sons shipbuilding company defended their black workers from gang violence at the hands of Know Nothing affiliates, the Tigers, but later

intimidation of black homeowners in the 1913, respectively. During the 1850's the national anti-immigrant Know-Nothing Party consisted of many smaller clubs of established white Baltimoreans with gang-like names that frequently terrorized communities of immigrants who settled along the edges of Baltimore's industrial harbor. They did so without censure and with the cooperation of the Baltimore police force, especially during elections, inciting riots by beating voters with shoemaker's awls leaving hundreds maimed and others killed (Beirne 1951, 150). During the 1860 census, Baltimore's foreign-born white immigrant population represented most of Europe including French Acadians and numbered more than 52,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 1860). This immigrant-targeted violence only added fuel to Baltimore's century long nickname as "Mobtown."<sup>43</sup> Characteristic of white Baltimorean territorialism and aggression, in 1861, they were the first Americans to riot before the start of the Civil War, heckling and attacking with knives, guns, and rocks the squads of Union Army soldiers en route to Washington, D.C. Though Baltimore's Mayor tried to protect the troops, several were killed before the troops retaliated against the rioters. These white Baltimorean rioters cried out for secession from the Union while destroying large segments of rail tracks to prevent more Northern troops from entering the city (Beirne 1951, 151; Williams 2011). This riot stands as a prime example of the anti-Other sentiment of white Baltimore that lasted generations. It was reinforced by the Post Civil War influx of displaced white Southern gentry (Power 2016, 6) joining the newly freed black migrants and European immigrants coming into the city and competing for economic resources.

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hired twelve white caulkers at lower wages than their black workforce (Towers 2000, 225-6) bowing to their job busting pressures.

<sup>43</sup> Beirne (1951) Chapter 10 lays out the numerous instances of Baltimorean mob mentality in an effort to change or rid the city of people whose mindsets that did not mesh with theirs from the American Revolutionary War through to 1945.

African American businessman, Isaac Meyers wrote, “If citizenship means anything at all, it means the freedom of labor, as broad and as universal as the freedom of the ballot” (Fee et al. 1991, 128). To that, I add freedoms of education and housing, all three being embedded in the civil rights drive behind the figurative and literal demographics of African American communities in Baltimore. In fact, two black neighborhoods still exist in the North East surrounding Morgan College [Morgan State University]<sup>44</sup>, which was founded in 1867 to train Christian ministers. Another is around Coppin Teacher’s College [Coppin State University], founded in 1900. These neighborhoods around historically black colleges were safe spaces for Baltimore’s African American higher education workforce, at one time counting W.E.B. Du Bois among them.<sup>45</sup> Black Baltimorean neighborhoods developed first, ad hoc, then, in tandem with the movement of sympathetic white immigrant communities, before succumbing to the pressures of social engineering to protect white vistas (McDougall 1993; Power 1996, 2016). Conversely, in 1905, Baltimore’s newest white immigrant population of Italians, were not willing to work across racial lines under the Republican banner, instead turning to the white inclusion promised by the Democratic party which actively sought to disenfranchise black voters (Shufelt 2000, 54-5).

By the start of the Twentieth Century, Baltimore’s extant black community was attractive to the thousands of African Americans who left the limited economic opportunities and civic disenfranchisement in the postbellum South (Omi & Winant 2015, 30). Between 1910 and 1940,

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<sup>44</sup> Morgan State University is where my parents would meet and, shortly after graduation, they married.

<sup>45</sup> Lewis (1993) discusses Du Bois’ first teaching job after his Harvard B.A. at the first HBCU in the United States, Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio. Du Bois began his college career at Fisk in Nashville, TN. It isn’t until 1939 that Du Bois makes the neighborhood surrounding Morgan State University his home.

during the height of the Great Migration, Baltimore's black population had swelled by 27.1% (U.S. Census Bureau 1910, 1940) within the city confines. But the new arrivals faced "urban development" in Baltimore, which has often been code for removal of African Americans since the 1860s. a "substantial African-American neighborhood which included a colored school, several black churches, and 'shabby' 1820's townhouses" (Power 2016, 10) was razed for 1919's Preston Gardens, just north of the city center. In order to build a commercial downtown area which supported the white civic structures and business establishments that benefitted from Baltimore's industrial past, urban planners worked with researchers from Johns Hopkins University to "clear out the slums." Some residents were moved from around the harbor, formerly called the Basin (Towers 2000, 225) into the early public housing while others had to fend for themselves, settling in black neighborhoods in East and West Baltimore (McDougall 1993; Power 1983). This meant displacing African Americans from congested neighborhoods that were functional centers of cultural community wealth, although they lacked municipal services.

Lieb (2019) writes of the "city-sponsored racism" like the Baltimore City ordinances that were created as early as 1910 to enforce racial restrictions on housing, making it difficult for black people to live and work in their own neighborhoods. Garrett Power (1983) highlights the Progressives spearheading a segregation that historian George Fredrickson (1971) in "The Black Image in the White Mind" links to a racial quarantine due to white people's view of blackness as a source of literal and social contamination (Power 1983, 301). From then on, Baltimore's black population was mainly confined to the districts cordoned off by city officials during the widely used practice of redlining, a Jim Crow practice of systematically confining, or refusing, African American access to certain areas due to laws and banking and housing association regulations

regulating African American habitation (McDougall 1993, 103). They stem from Sundown towns (marshall

Franklin 2012, 4-5), mentioned above, where black travelers were threatened, harassed or killed by racist whites who did not want them present after dark. Lieb (2019) cites a 1913 Baltimore Sun article about West Baltimore's white citizen mobs who used garbage, dismantled porches, and committed violent acts of terrorism on and in black homes to scare their black neighbors away (Lieb 2019, 112). With no government protection from incidents like these of course the black community was spread out across Baltimore City in pockets of safe spaces. Redlining preserved a white quality of life in neighborhoods around Baltimore like Roland Park and Hampden, with whites-only covenants (McDougall 1993, 101-2; Gadsby 2011, 23).

While redlining in the 1930s had successfully marked the boundaries of African American residential neighborhoods in Baltimore, it also created a local civic community of African Americans who used their social capital to organize around shared goals. "The segregated neighborhoods of West Baltimore helped build bonds and trust among African Americans" (Orr 1999, 31). Further evidence that black economic credit was undermined by policies like the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) 1945 VA-guaranteed mortgage loan, adopted from the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which included racial demographic checklists to prevent African American Veterans from attempting to apply for loans for homes in neighborhoods with racially restricted housing covenants (Lee, II 2013, 405) while earmarking loans for white Veterans (Lee, II 2013, 394). Although, redlining's greatest achievement was in shifting Baltimore's black population through political means to live separately from whites, the practice also controlled financial resources available to African Americans. Still, there were

certain gains that African Americans acquired during segregation that supported their growth into a community:

Segregated black neighborhoods and historically black [universities]...became important sources of group cohesion, intergroup identity, and black social capital. Black social capital was wrought and refined in the crucible of collective black experiences” (Orr 1999, 41).

Black residents and visitors to Baltimore wanted black entertainments where they could be safe and respected as patrons and Baltimore’s black neighborhoods were willing to serve them.

According to the 1940 Baltimore listing in *The Negro Motorist Green-Book*, originally compiled by a black postman, West Baltimore was home to nearly all of the hotels, restaurants, beauty shops, and clubs that advertised for African American patrons (Green 1940, 16). The Upton Neighborhood, known as “The Bottom,” was a home for upwardly mobile and highly educated blacks since the 1920s. Thurgood Marshall’s family house is there at 1964 Division Street (William 1998, The Historical Marker Database). Living there was a concentration of the black middle class made up of educators, ministers, doctors, social workers, and post office workers like my paternal grandfather who raised a family in the McCulloh Homes, adjacent to Upton<sup>46</sup>, after World War II. But my paternal grandmother would make her way to Harlem, New York.

Many black neighborhoods were thriving as African Americans gained access to better-paying jobs and higher wages (McDougall 1993, 56). Even as some jobs for African Americans were ruled out due to race or social conventions, Black Baltimoreans actively campaigned for reforms. White-owned businesses on Pennsylvania Avenue reluctantly hired young educated black workers after 1933s “Buy Where You Can Work” boycott (Skotnes 1994). By 1946 social

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<sup>46</sup> See Appendix D. Map 1. The McCulloh Homes Housing Project is just above Dr. Martin Luther King. Blvd.



worker, Samuel Joseph Rice, observed that the Western Boundary of Old Baltimore became that of Black Baltimore along Fulton Avenue where at least 50 homes were owned by black people and the rest were up for sale (Rice in Lieb 2019, 115-6). Baltimore experienced a post WWII industrial boom that employed black and white labor and supported Black homeownership in the city for the laboring class (Wilson 2005). Due to the Great Migration and the major industries situated in Baltimore, African Americans were attracted to jobs at places like Bethlehem Steel, particularly during and after World War II. Neighborhoods, like Cherry Hill, developed near Bethlehem Steel to house the black soldiers returning from the frontlines. My maternal grandfather, graduate of Paul Lawrence Dunbar High School, was one of those returning WWII veterans who found work at Bethlehem Steel, but lived with my maternal grandmother and their growing family in East Baltimore on Rutland Avenue, not too far from their own mothers. As it turned out, they lived quite close to my paternal great grandmother and great grandfather on Wolfe Street. Quite near Johns Hopkins hospital.

As integration in housing covenants, education, and civil service jobs opened up opportunities for African Americans to live, learn, and work alongside white Baltimoreans, Baltimore was investing in white communities (Power 1996). Housing loans and opportunities for education were granted to white veterans, supporting the creation of suburban enclaves where they could continue to protect their quality of life. Second and third generation immigrant neighborhoods housed Baltimore's ethnic Europeans made up of Greeks, Ukrainians, and Italians in the city's Southeast around the Fell's Point side of the harbor. As they rose into the middle-class, they, too, fled to the suburbs leaving homes in the city available for black homeownership. Baltimore's Jewish immigrant community at one time occupied the city's northeastern edge before moving its epicenter to just west of Druid Hill Park along Park Heights

and Liberty Heights, famously dramatized in the eponymous 1999 Barry Levinson film (Bartley 2007). Still operating on the edge of Druid Hill Park in a predominantly black, now gentrifying, neighborhood is an Orthodox Jewish temple.

In the push for respectability, black Baltimore has continually targeted housing as a concern. Beirne (1951) notes that 92.6% of black Baltimore lived in blighted areas in comparison to only 27.3% by 1951 (Beirne 1951, 272). Like with redlining, Baltimore City led the way, in delaying African American economic advancement. This time, black homeowners were driven into debt by coercing them to take on loans for property repair as portrayed in documentary, *The Baltimore Plan*. The 1953 Baltimore Plan was an urban planning program touted as a campaign against blight. In addition to the plan itself, I want to mention a few production values featured in the integrated Baltimore production of the narrative-driven documentary, *The Baltimore Plan*. Produced by Encyclopedia Britannica films in collaboration with Clark S. Hobbs, Chairman of the Baltimore Redevelopment Commission, according to the opening title reel. *The Baltimore Plan* is a twenty-minute overview of the Baltimore urban initiative that became a standard in cities across the US. The Baltimore Plan itself, was based on the research of a white female social work student, Frances Morton (Leclair-Paquet 2017), enforced by white-run municipal government, and backed by white-owned private business. Social Work was an industry that offered consistent employment for white women during segregation (Chambers 1986). The film features a white heroine, an older social worker challenged with finding a black face to act as community representative for the “clean up the slums” social program. Except for the judge, all actors mime their roles, and narration via voiceover is prerecorded or dubbed throughout with white male and female voices. What is particularly curious is the number of black citizen/actors involved in the film and what their silent representation says about black Baltimore at the time.

Essentially, the film sanitizes white Baltimore's attitudes about its African American community. And, reading between the lines, the plan's aims were clearly the blueprint for uprooting the city's black community networks and destabilizing African American social capital, thus setting the stage for today's gentrification of historically black neighborhoods.

The centralized collective power of African American Baltimoreans became scattered when low-income African Americans living in the unrepaired slums were evacuated to other sites. The Baltimore Plan worked in tandem with the construction of the 1953 high-rise public housing structures that have come to represent African American urban life. The "projects, such as Murphy Homes and Lafayette Courts...became sources of crime and social alienation," (McDougall 54). Civic works like this are credited for disrupting the economic power of African Americans in Baltimore and were used as a political means to fracture the organization of the African American community. As integration became more normative, many African Americans carried their nuclear networks with them and, beyond returning for religious service, did not continue investing their black social capital in the neighborhoods they left behind. It was Baltimore's upwardly mobile white immigrant and Jewish communities that offered homes for rent and sale as some were shifting their communities to other areas (McDougall 1993). The more urbane and upwardly mobile African Americans settled in the Northwest, away from the black housing sectors, into neighborhoods like Ashburton, or Randallstown by the 1970s, diminishing the geographical cohesion of established African American neighborhoods. This was particularly true for African Americans who no longer wanted to associate poverty with race in lower-income black neighborhoods (Rich 2009, 844). These aftereffects were very clear to me traversing the roads to school, church, or when visiting African American family, friends, and acquaintances who lived in various parts of Baltimore City and County (Elfenbein et al. 2011 &

Martin 2010). The remaining black neighborhoods within Baltimore City limits, sanctioned by redlining, form a pattern Lawrence Brown (2017) calls the Black Butterfly (Appendix D., Map 2.) “to define the pattern of spatial demographics in the city by race” (Brown 2017, 169). In designating the shape that Baltimore’s urban black population takes, Brown draws attention to the borders created by historical segregation in the city. Wilson (2005) answers the questions of “Where are the African Americans that used to live in the urban centers?” and “Where have they gone?” in delineating the urban exodus of African Americans, who seek suburban lives in metropolitan area communities that may have commercial centers of their own, recently built housing developments, neighborhoods with racial turnover or all-black suburbs (Wilson 2005, 24). He goes on to correlate these locations as housing workers employed in the more modern industries such as technology, finance, business, government, and the military industrial complex (Wilson 2005, 25). But Wilson (2005) sees this trend progressing as one spurred on by the progressive integration model which make class difference a marker of the post-civil right policies meant to ease the economic problems caused by state-sanctioned white supremacy.

### **Early Baltimore theatre**

The Arena Players’ home venue, the Playhouse, lies within the Black Butterfly, two blocks away from Pennsylvania Avenue at 801 McCulloh Street (Appendix D., Map 1). It is the only business sitting on a traffic island, south of the newly reinvigorated North Avenue arts and entertainment district, but within the Bromo Seltzer district. The Playhouse is surrounded by four very different complexes: the State Center for state office buildings; the University of Maryland, Baltimore’s Midtown campus (designated as a separate neighborhood); the McCulloh Homes public housing projects; and a Baltimore Gas & Electric service lot. All of this lies within the historic Seton Hill neighborhood, which along with Upton and Harlem Park, was home to “fully

half the city's black population by 1904" (Elfenbein et al. 2011, 188). However, there are ways that Baltimoreans, black, white, and other racial groups, have turned a blind eye to the Arena Players. If any of those constantly crisscrossing Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard by car, were to pull off the main road just to explore the surroundings, it would place them in a terrible jam of one-way streets that veer off in different directions. They would be surrounded by low-income housing projects, dilapidated rowhomes, and black youth walking the streets, which may make them later than usual to arrive to their suburban enclaves that are bursting with food and retail shopping options. Perhaps the traffic that drives West on Madison and veers North on McCulloh going past 801 McCulloh every day from working downtown, willfully tuning it out as an overfamiliar landmark that is not the Wendy's across the street where they can pick up a quick bite from the drive-through. But that's only if they aren't buying into stereotypes of black residents living in McCulloh homes and ruled by the biases and irrational fears of black people fueled by media reports of inner-city violence. Suffice it to say, being a black-led arts organization in a black neighborhood has not led to receiving more attention, but, like the black neighborhood itself, the Playhouse has been left to its own devices and people are, still too often, amazed that they are still open or even exist at all.

Regarding Baltimore City's performance tradition, Francis Beirne (1951) cites the start of Baltimore's theatre industry as having occurred in 1751, with the first theatre being built in 1781 (Beirne 1951, 175). The most well-known Baltimore theatre, the Old Drury, was built in 1794, and in the pre-Civil War years became famous for two men. The first is President Abraham Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth, who debuted in Baltimore favorite, William Shakespeare's *Richard III*. The second, John T. Ford, purchased the Old Drury theatre before his 1862 purchase of the Washington, D.C. Ford's Theater where the president was assassinated in

1865. Ford then built the Baltimore Ford's Grand Opera House, which primarily staged theatre productions until its close in 1964. All of Ford's performance venues targeted white audiences and featured offerings that included blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville that featured blackface performance up until its decline.

### **Community theatre in Baltimore**

Beirne (1951) begins his discussion of amateur theatre in Baltimore City with A. Baldwin Sloane's 1894 founding of the Paint and Powder Club, a high-society amateur group of white men performing all of the parts in original comic operas, in the style of the single-sex elite private college troupes and early Elizabethan theatre. *The Vagabonds: America's Oldest Little Theater* by Linda Lee Koenig (1983), presents a history of the mixed-gender Little Theater movement that began in Baltimore in 1916. The Vagabonds experimental theatre company, also claimed to be the oldest continuing little theatre though, other research suggests that the Little Theatre movement in the US began with the 1912 Toy Theatre in Boston (Chansky 2004). Beirne's (1951) Baltimore history supports Koenig's (1983) claim of Vagabonds history, citing Helen Penniman's revival of the Civil War era amateur performance group, the "Old Wednesday Club," as Vagabonds' troupe inspiration. Beirne's sources say it was the "New Wednesday Club," that ultimately birthed Vagabonds who performed works of noted avant garde playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill and Luigi Pirandello (Beirne 1951, 188). Opening just one year after Baltimore's symphony orchestra, the Vagabonds began with Constance D'Arcy Mackay, Adele Gutman Nathan, and Carol Sax sponsoring a pageant celebrating William Shakespeare in the storefront of the St. James Hotel. News of the theatre grew through word of mouth in Baltimore arts circles, who had been accustomed to seeing performances usually brought in from New York at the Ford's, the Academy, and the Auditorium theatres. Vagabonds'

first production featured a one-act play by infamous *Baltimore Sun* journalist H.L. Mencken (Koenig 1983, 20-2). Their first program announced that the Vagabonds were dedicated to ““freedom and free expression [as] a group of artists, actors and authors interested in stimulating and developing new methods of producing, acting and writing for the American stage”” (Koenig 1983, 22). Koenig makes no mention of the integration of Vagabonds, clarifying its narrow focus on a segment of the population consisting of numerous “blue bloods” (Koenig 1983, 122-3). The continuity of Vagabonds relied on white volunteer-professionals as artists, technicians, and audiences which upheld segregation in Baltimore’s community theatres.

African American artists in Baltimore were already working in segregated facilities that catered to them and their black audiences in the Chitlin’ Circuit, mentioned above. Since the 1920’s Baltimore’s African American entertainment corridor ran the length of Pennsylvania Avenue from North Avenue to what is now Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard (Appendix D, Map 3). The premiere entertainment hub for black musical and variety show performances was the Royal Theater on the corner of Pennsylvania and Lafayette Avenues. Other venues included the New Albert Auditorium and the Strand Ballroom (McDougall 1993, 42). In these theatres and clubs, black independent producers toured their black-led and staffed productions to places where their safety and humanity were guaranteed. Chitlin’ Circuit producers entertained audiences of African Americans who had unfettered access to the venue seating and no vitriol from any white patrons who may have attended.

It is not until 1934 that Vagabonds’ historian, Koenig (1983), recognizes the beginnings of a Negro Little Theatre in Baltimore. In a brief mention, she cites the amateur black actors who “got together at St. James’ Episcopal Church” and lasted until the beginning of World War II performing works by black and white playwrights (Koenig 1983, 61). Mentioned above, Hay

(1994) confirms that the Negro Little Theatre, which operated from 1933-46, followed the earlier Baltimore Krigwa Group which began productions in 1929 (Hay 1994, 175). The Arena Players celebrate Sheldon B. Haskins as a 1930s NLT proponent and dance and theatre youth educator who became the ballet master in Broadway's *Carmen Jones*. Haskins also directed the Baltimore Negro Little Theatre's production of *Blind Alley* in 1948 (Arena Players Program Booklet, 1977). During this time local Little Theatre community staged more performances and several professional houses brought in touring companies, but they were still for white artists and audiences. Baltimore's theatre community after the conclusion of WWII was revitalized by the return of the troops. By 1952 the Directory of Nonprofessional Community Theatres list fifteen Baltimore City amateur companies (Duthie 1952, 144-5). Like in most parts of the country, the racial segregation of theatre venues required black Baltimoreans be relegated to the balcony areas—if they were allowed to enter the premises as patrons at all. For venues to meet the federal codes of separate but equal, which predated full integration in Baltimore, venue seating also required separate entrances and restroom facilities. African Americans were fed up with these codes of conduct that restricted their access to entertainment and the arts.

The hostile white climate for African American audiences was taken to task and Black Baltimore applied their social capital wherever it was needed. Before many substantial integration reforms were made through legislation in Baltimore, it took the concentrated campaigning efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to amplify the voice of African Americans. The NAACP pooled their political resources locally to apply pressure on white arts venues, forcing them to recognize the economic power of African American theatre goers.



During the 1940s African Americans used voter registration and bloc voting to gain a measure of black power in Baltimore City...in 1952, Ford's Theater agreed to admit African Americans after seven years of NAACP picketing...The Lyric [Opera House] booked Marian Anderson, its first African American performer in 1953 (Fee, Shopes, & Zeidman 1991, 73).

Although Baltimore's Ford's Theatre made substantive changes to allow black audiences in as patrons, it did so primarily to drive up box office sales. To desegregate one white theatre, it took nearly a decade of applied African American legal social pressure for the Ford's Theatre to engage in United States civil practice. It is no wonder, that in such a climate, the founders of the Arena Players saw the gap that they could fill for black Baltimore and were compelled to take action, unapologetically. Not only were they a source of entertainment free of discrimination against black dollars and artists, but their work was also meant to inspire and offer a sense of pride for black Baltimore.

### **Arena Players, Inc.'s beginnings**

The Arena Players' vision foreshadowed the later development of many black-led theatre companies that sprung up in the fervor of the Black Arts Movement by ten years or more. Baltimore City's segregation problem alienated many black citizens from the white political, social, economic, and artistic spheres. As a localized arts-based response to segregation, the Arena Players were established during the early Civil Rights Era by directors, dancers, and actors, many of whom were also educators. Together Jimmie Bell, Bernard Byrd, Doris Dilver,<sup>47</sup> Aurthur Thurogood, Irvin Turner,<sup>48</sup> Joe Wilson,<sup>49</sup> Julius Wilson,<sup>50</sup> and Sam Wilson formed the

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<sup>47</sup> Doris Dilver, *Asé!*

<sup>48</sup> Irvin Turner, *Asé!*

<sup>49</sup> Joe Wilson, *Asé!*

<sup>50</sup> Julius Wilson, *Asé!*

Arena Players when they took their final bow for Armenian-American William Soroyan's one act drama "Hello Out There." From the company's website, we learn that:

Arena Players began as an outgrowth of "The Negro Little Theater." Nomadic for the first ten years, this group performed in a variety of Baltimore locations, including Coppin State University, the Druid Hill Avenue Branch of the YMCA, the Great Hall Theater of St. Mary's Church in the Walbrook neighborhood, and the Carl J. Murphy Auditorium at Morgan State University ([arenaplayersinc.com](http://arenaplayersinc.com)).

In the tradition of group advancement that African Americans have utilized to create organizations that benefit the community, the seven founders of the Arena Players pooled their resources together in 1953 to produce their first production and build Baltimore's only black theatre company. Strategically, this practice of pooling together resources has been used among African Americans to lower the financial risk of any one individual in a business venture, including churches. From a 1987 interview of Samuel Wilson[, Jr.], founding Artistic Director of the Arena Players, Samuel Hay (1994) cites the collaborative governance and production process of early performances that required the company members "did everything: made and sold the tickets, built the costumes, did the lighting, built and painted the sets, everything. When it came time to act, we were so tired that we could hardly see'" (Wilson 1987 in Hay 1994, 178). It would be this artistic work ethic of the founding members that has sustained the Arena Players to the present day.

### **Oral History of the Arena Players**

In our 2017 conversation in her kitchen, writer Eugenia Collier<sup>51</sup> considers the bold thinking and action of Sam Wilson and his collaborators in founding the Arena Players as a black theatre for black artists and black audiences. As an affirmation of black self-determination, they

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<sup>51</sup> Collier is also cited as a drama critic (Hay 1994, 29).

did so without the direction or oversight of white Baltimore, utilizing African American community networks that recognized the community cultural wealth that was to come from such a venture.

### **Eugenia Collier**

My introduction to the Arena Players was with Mari Evans' play *Eyes*. Sam Wilson was one of my colleagues. I knew Mari Evans and I wanted to be involved and they let me sit in. And I got to meet Donald Owens then. [Pauses.] Sam was everywhere! And I think it was Sam—See, me, I think of things, but I don't act on them. It takes you or somebody else to say “Well now, why don't we get together with so forth and so on. Let's do it next Saturday over at my place.”--It takes something like that. But it started in the heart and mind of Sam Wilson and a bunch of African Americans who had been segregated, or kept out, or couldn't get a job with So-on-and-so-forth. But that's just what it took. The time when somebody coalesces. When one person said something to somebody else. And one person said something to somebody else and said, “Well why don't we then.” And I think it just started that small and it certainly didn't start with somebody else's [indicating white people] help. Sam got started at Coppin and said, “Well you can do such-and-such [gesturing to indicate a task]. We'll need a space. It's up to you. Go ahead see what you can do.” And [Sam] stayed with the Arena Players until the day he died. And there's nothing dramatic that I can tell you about it (Collier 2017).

In recalling her experience with Arena Players, Collier validates the value of word of mouth among African Americans in Baltimore who used it as a basis for collective action. Collier's signifies with a sly regret that telling the story of a black theatre's creation is not particularly exciting in a dramatic way. Her use of the colloquial phrase “So-and-so” [indicating a name] in her commentary exposes the places where memory does not (or the individual chooses not to) recall details for the expediency of storytelling.

After nine seasons of productions that placed primarily all-black casts in popular British and United States one-acts, plays, and musicals, the Arena Players' 1962 season (Appendix E. Productions) was the first to feature plays by black playwrights including Lorraine Hansberry,

Langston Hughes, and Louis Peterson. It is also when the group moved into its present location at 801 McCulloh Street, establishing the Arena Playhouse as a black theatre venue. It had been a coffin warehouse for the local mortuary company, that sold the building to the theatre company. In our conversation, I managed to get the Youtheatre Director Catherine Orange away from the office phone where, ever vigilant for business calls, she is usually stationed. Ever focused on the future of the company, Orange is usually at the office desk selling tickets, arranging for and/or printing brochures, programs and tickets, managing group sales, handling enrollment and discipline issues or paying the bills, sometimes, quite literally, out of her house money. She joined me in the better sound quality space, one I grew up calling the “Carpet Room,” as it was the only room with carpeting in the second-floor classroom or third floor storage spaces.

### **Catherine Orange**

There used to be a Funeral Home on Madison that was called Charles Laws Funeral Home and they used to store caskets in here. It was some kind of warehouse. The caskets were not around in the early days. That was before [the Arena Players] acquired the building. And, you know, all out front on McCulloh Street there were houses. Because the actual theatre was where the theatre is, now, and all of the lobby area was the street. People lived in the 800 block of McCulloh Street. We could do a show and look outside the window and look on top of rooftops of people's houses. But when they did “The Possible Dream” [capital campaign] they started to board up those houses and we got the property. When Donald Shafer was the Governor, he did a lot for us (Orange 215).

Since that big capital campaign that brought the playing area to the ground level and closed the Orchard Street main entrance, there have been few infrastructural changes at the Playhouse. The brick façade of the current main entrance has the orange and purple Arena Players marquee facing the traffic on McCulloh Street.

The Arena Players’ first annual fundraising banquet was held in 1965, with a program that consisted of a meal, the presentation of awards, speeches, and entertainment. This event

supported the company's operations and eventually provided scholarships for youth performers. Ultimately, it offered black Baltimore a venue for gathering to recognize the artistic and community work of others who have shown "excellence in the perpetuation of the performing arts" (arenaplayersinc.com). Quite a few honorees have been widely known for their success in the arts & entertainment industry, while others have led careers in education, business, or politics. Honorees included local and national figures such as Cab Calloway, Ed Bullins, and Mary Carter Smith.<sup>52</sup> In 1969 the Arena Players fortified their roots in the black community and purchased the building at 801 McCulloh Street by using box office receipts and contributions from the founding members. Audiences once used to enter the Playhouse on the 406 Orchard Street side. Not much has changed in the building since 1977's "Possible Dream: Phase III" capital campaign. The brick façade of the main entrance still has the trademarked orange and purple Arena Players, Inc. marquee facing the traffic on McCulloh Street. While the theatre itself is on the first floor with seats for 250. The second floor offers rehearsal spaces, classrooms and a dance studio. The Third floor houses a small costume and prop shop on the third floors. Additionally, there is again an art gallery in the lobby where black visual artists take the position of honor.

### **Baltimore ties, Baltimore foundations, other Baltimore venues**

As a company, the Arena Players has been an artistic home to more than few professional performers, at one point including Charles S. Dutton and Oprah Winfrey.<sup>53</sup> Yes, *the* Oprah.

Trazana Beverley won a 1977 Theatre World Award and 1977 Tony Award for Best Featured

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<sup>52</sup> Also listed: Catherine Adams, Langston Hughes, Richard Long, Ellen Stewart, Edward J. Golden, Lola Miller, Harvey Denmark, Elbert Wilson, Joseph Wilson, Irv Turner, Damon Evans, Catherine Adams, Damon Evans, and Donald Evans (arenaplayersinc.com).

<sup>53</sup> This is a tale that remains in the oral archive of some Arena Players. Marion (2011) notes Winfrey auditioned for a Center Stage production.

Actress in a Play for her performance in Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. Awardee Damon Evans played Lionel in the African American pop culture TV spin-off *The Jeffersons*. Several of my peers from the Youtheatre program have gone on to experience various levels of commercial success as actors: Joy Hall was a special guest on *Amen* in 1989 as the official representative of the Easter Seals campaign and Tracie Thoms is best known in Broadway circles for *Rent*, but has moved to film and television fame in Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof* and the procedural drama *Cold Case*. In Chapter 3 my collaborators offer other examples of Arena Players' alum who made careers outside of the Baltimore community theatre that offered some of them their first glimpse into performance and entertainment as an industry.

Morgan State University alumnus Troy Burton has expanded his world considerably as the manager for vocal performing artist, Maysa, but even before he did that, Burton was a young artist and Youtheatre programs director at the Playhouse. In fact, he was one of the many educators I studied under who became a collaborator, in sharing their oral history with me. In his, then position as Artistic Director of the Eubie Blake Cultural Center, Burton sat with me in the lobby, near Eubie's piano to share about other Baltimore firsts that connect Baltimore to the wider world of, not just theatre, but also, television media.

### **Troy Burton**

June Thorne was one of the founding members who, before there was Oprah, there was June Thorne. She was one of the first African American woman to have her own women's talk show. Before you leave there's a picture right over there on the wall with Eubie Blake on the June Thorne show. It was called the "Woman's Journal" on WMAR. When you talk to Miss Orange, get her to tell you the story about Oprah and Oprah being at the Arena Players because Oprah performed there on stage (Burton 2015).

In charting the diverse courses of Arena Players alumni career paths, I began to notice a theme. Black Baltimore artists among my collaborators seemed to beam with pride when they mentioned other Baltimore artists who have made leeway<sup>54</sup> in commercial theatre and other media. Though not all black Baltimore artists come through the Arena Players, for those who have, sharing an artistic home makes one think of others who have passed through those same doors as kindred.

In many ways, black community theatre is a levelling agent at the root, making up for class and educational differences through time served in place, and shared mentors. Speaking with Youtheatre programs director Catherine Orange, who knows everyone who has come through the Youtheatre program since the 1970s, offered insight into how few degrees any Arena Players alum are from any other black Baltimorean, no matter how seemingly far removed their immediate social circles are.

### **Catherine Orange**

And I think about it, and I know Stephanie Rawlings<sup>55</sup> has a lot on her hands with the city, but she was a member of this Youtheatre for at least 2 or 3 years. Recently her brother Wendell—he was in the Youtheatre, too—but recently Wendell, stopped by and said she would come down one day. I said, “Well the doors are open. She can come down every day that she likes.” I mean, we do have an open-door policy (Orange 2015).

The importance of an Arena Players’ open-door policy highlights the investment the company makes in being accessible to all members of the African American community. Even the former Mayor was once a young girl learning theatre, and dance, and “Friends, friends, 1-2-3” from

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<sup>54</sup> To make leeway (v.) is a common Baltimore colloquialism meaning to find or create opportunity and progress. The phrase derives from sailing terminology.

<sup>55</sup> Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, Baltimore’s Mayor from 2010-2016.

John “The Kinderman” Taylor<sup>56</sup> well before she ever dreamed she’d be in such a position of power and prestige (Although she is from a Black Baltimore political dynasty). As for me, Ms. Orange taught with my mother, another lifetime educator, before I was born. She taught my brother English at Baltimore City College High School. And a decade later, Ms. Orange was my Drama teacher at the same school and one of my high school theatre directors for Shakespeare and a musical. Additionally, dancer and choreographer, John Taylor, besides being everyone’s favorite Maryland Public Television figure, occasionally worked with my maternal grandmother, a Head Start teacher. It was under his tutelage that I remember my first Artscape as a performer in a chorus of children singing and dancing the hits, including “Fanga Alafia.”

Self-identifying African American theatre practitioners and critics *are* the proof in the pudding of black theatre’ sociopolitical embodiment. While I can’t trace their precise genealogies and archaeologies of black theatre research or training, they have “earned” their stripes in the enculturation process of black community theatre. My key collaborator, Artistic Director, D. Russell “Donald” Owens, freely shared his experiences with me whenever we were together. His openness allowed me to better appreciate the passage of knowledge across generations. Before this project even began, I asked Owens if he would be open to such a project. In our first official conversation he shared his insights on everything with gusto. His take on the craft of theatre at the Arena Players is a nuanced comparison of community theatre and commercial companies.

### **Donald Owens**

The word professional— [pause] I was in this interview and I really described it as when we’re reviewed, we’re reviewed on the same level. I say we are professionals, but not commercial. There are commercial actors. Professional is a

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<sup>56</sup> John Taylor, Asé!



level. It's not whether you get paid or not. And last year [2014], *Amen Corner* was number five out the ten best productions in the region (Owens 2015).

Owens describes the company as having professional standards in performance that have been often recognized in local theatre criticism. Distinguishing between commercial and professional allows Owens to highlight the difference between governance and quality of performance or direction. In chapter four, I will further discuss how independent theatre operations, which are more commercial, have contributed to the survival of the Arena Players.

Due to the closed networks of Baltimore's racial groups, desegregation in the city took place in waves, some of which happened before the laws took effect. Now Baltimore has a small commercial and regional theatre, but a large community theatre network. The Arena Players company pushed the envelope by not seeking to integrate Baltimore theatre, but instead seeking to serve their culturally specific community where they could feel comfortable being their authentic selves. While the Arena Players is no longer the only African American community theatre company in Baltimore with its own venue, there are more than a handful of nomadic black-led community theatre groups featuring black theatre artists, some paying stipends to their performers. In addition to formal theatre companies, there are numerous African Americans writing plays or adapting books into plays. They are privately producing works and renting spaces across the city, including the Playhouse, for their productions.

ArtsCentric is Baltimore's newest black-led community theatre company to plant roots in a venue. It was founded in 2003 as a collective of writers, directors, and musicians that produce musicals and concerts. Baltimore's culturally specific theatre community now includes the 2018-founded Baltimore Asian Pasifika Arts Collective who "address the deep need for Asian American and Pacific Indigenous representation and advocacy in the arts communities of

Baltimore” (Baltimoreapac.org ). Their growth will be particularly compelling in a city that often forgets there are other minorities present that are not African American.

Theatre in Baltimore’s African American churches has also become widely popular. Many Arena Players alumni are actively engaged in their art, both at the Playhouse and “in the Lord’s House.” Nearly every denomination and size of Baltimore’s black Christian congregations present regular oratorical performances and full-scale productions of written dramatic works, many drawing from the Medieval pageant traditions for the purposes of praise, evangelizing, and fellowship, a black church term for socializing. These performances happen during Christian holidays, Black History Month, or as part of regular worship services. But it is the Du Boisian style Black History Month historical pageant that gained wide acclaim in the black church. Some of Baltimore’s black churches and megachurches have dedicated Drama Ministries that work in tandem with their Music and/or Liturgical Dance Ministries. They operate as strategies for keeping members of church congregations active throughout the week beyond Sunday service. Gathering throughout the week to participate in these programs provides adults with creative outlets for expressing their spirituality and keeps young people engaged in faith-based activities. In a way, the religious arts of African American churches reinforce the importance of the black church in maintaining the ties of black community membership. Simultaneously, worship through drama in Baltimore’s houses of faith does not deter African Americans from attending performances at the Playhouse. African American church groups are among the most reliable audiences in arranging for group sales at Arena Players, often for fundraising purposes.

I was around three, when I was called to the theatre at church. My mother was in a production of *Tambourines to Glory*, a 1952 Langston Hughes musical, at the church I grew up

in, Providence Baptist Church, on the corner of Pennsylvania and Lafayette. Its pastor, Reverend Marcus G. Wood was a member of the Arena Players in good standing from 1997-1984 (Arena Players Program Booklet 1977 & 1984). Across Pennsylvania Avenue is the Billie Holiday<sup>57</sup> statue (Smith 2009) and across Lafayette is the memorial marquee for on the site where the Royal Theatre once stood (Penn 1999). Attending practice with my mother on weeknights and some Saturdays, I would sit in the Fellowship Hall, where the performance would be. I recall watching the young director, Gail Parker [Murray]<sup>58</sup> closely as she put the adults—deacons, trustees, ushers, and choir members—through their paces. My mother played Laura, the money-making minister with a bad habit for a bad man. I remember one night in particular, during the rehearsal process. The cast was coming back from a break and I called out, “ACTION!” when I thought it was time for the actors to begin performing. I remember being appointed Assistant Director from then on as the adults humored this little person taking charge. There are still a few people who remember this moment and remind me on occasion.

The bigger question of where the Arena Players fit in Baltimore City’s theatre community returns our attention to the Vagabonds, who are still an active community theatre company. Although its claim of being the oldest Little Theatre in the U.S. has been disproved, it is still Baltimore’s oldest Little Theatre. Vagabonds was joined by other white community theatre companies that first served white patrons during segregation, such as Baltimore Actor’s Theatre (1959). However, it is after the Arena Players purchased their space that Baltimore City seemed to spring to life with new theatre ventures, some of which were integrated. Spotlighters (1962), Fells Point and Corner Theatre ETC [Experimental Theatre Company] (1968) followed

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<sup>57</sup> Holiday was born in Baltimore Elenora Fagan.

<sup>58</sup> A local Griot.

forging new pathways into integrated theatre in Baltimore. Because these companies are no longer segregated, with every season they produce one or two productions that are aimed at including actors and directors of color. As community companies that don't pay their performers living wages, there are still unresolved tensions from some of the older Arena Players alum that seek to understand why these traditionally white companies wish to do black art. Of course, they are accessing the interests of black audience members, but primarily they require black creatives to help them achieve their goals of inclusivity. Baltimore's African American actor pool is not small, but whenever there is a casting call for black actors and directors from Baltimore's mainstream companies, they always send their calls through the Arena Players' networks. This is corroborated through the narratives of my collaborators.

Maryland's state theatre, Baltimore Center Stage was created from the embers of a defunct for-profit theatre venture in 1963. Center Stage is a 501(c)(3) League of Resident Theatres (LORT) Equity house, primarily auditioning actors from New York, but also offering non-union roles on occasion. Since the 1990s, Center Stage has been actively engaged in growing their minority, particularly African American, theatre audiences, through education and community outreach programming. It was a successful strategy. Their first non-white Artistic Director was the Afro-Caribbean British playwright Kwame Kwei Armah (2012-2018). This appointment was innovative, in the choice of drafting the artistic expertise of an international black theatre artist. It was also strategically political, in providing an image of black theatre leadership for Baltimore Center Stage in the "chocolate city"<sup>59</sup> where the majority of their audiences came from a dedicated middle-aged and elderly white theatre-going public. However, the choice proved divisive by implying that there were no qualified African descendant

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<sup>59</sup> A colloquial term for cities with a large population of African Americans (Perry 2017).

*Americans* for the role of director from among the hundreds of black theatre artists living in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., or nationally. Armah oversaw Center Stage's \$32 million renovations (Smith 2015, Gunts 2017). Now, with Latinx Artistic Director Stephanie Ybarra at the helm, Baltimore Center Stage is also partnering with other regional theatres like Philadelphia's Wilma to co-produce plays.

Taking over from the Ford Opera House legacy, the Morris A. Mechanic was Baltimore's Broadway touring house from 1967 until the 2004 opening of the larger, newly renovated, Hippodrome Theatre in the France-Merrick Performing Arts Center. The Mechanic building stood vacant for a decade and ultimately was demolished in 2014 (Bednar 2014). The Hippodrome was a movie and vaudeville house from 1914 and the \$63 million public-private partnership is now Baltimore's Broadway touring house (Wren 2004). Additionally, there are now a [number of] other independent spaces such as Everyman Theatre which opened in the early 1990s as a repertory company on Charles Street, and moved its facilities in 2012 in an \$18.5 million capital campaign to a historic building (Gunts 2016) around the corner from the Hippodrome in the Bromo Seltzer Arts and Entertainment District. More recently, the classics-focused school touring and summer stock company founded in 2002, the Chesapeake Shakespeare Company, moved from Howard County to Baltimore City in 2014 into a renovated 19th-century bank building on Calvert Street downtown in a \$6 million capital campaign (Pash 2013). These aforementioned venues and companies have all thrived due to the city's investment in mainstream companies and redeveloping rundown properties in areas that have been converted into entertainment districts, mainly in downtown Baltimore City. Just over a decade old, Single Carrot Theater grew rapidly from a small alternative community company. It has recently vacated its building in the increasingly gentrified Remington area just south of Johns Hopkins

University's Homewood campus for a space in a primarily black neighborhood in the St. John's Church in The Village at Greenmount and Old York Road (singlecarrot.com). The space they once occupied will be taken up by ArtsCentric which is currently fundraising for their plans to turn the space into a "cultural arts center" (Gunts 2019).

Other new mainstream, alternative, and multiracial non-profit theatre companies have started up and begun to thrive. There are companies in flux like Iron Crow, a queer-focused theatre that has recently experienced scandal (Kaltenbach 2018) as part of the #MeToo movement's aim to expose alleged abusers. Other theatre companies like Rapid Lemon, an independent repertory company that produces new plays and a short play festival and the Baltimore Rock Opera Society (BROS), which creates original rock operas, have had creative partnerships with the Arena Players co-producing shows. Primarily these newer companies rent their rehearsal spaces and book other venues, like the Theatre Project,<sup>60</sup> which is now a rental based performance venue; the Motor House in the North Avenue entertainment district corridor, which was sparked by investments from the Maryland Institute College of Art,<sup>61</sup> and non-traditional theatre spaces like the newly-renovated Peale Center for Baltimore History and Architecture. Cohesion Theatre Company, which opened in 2014 and has, according to their website, been "dedicated to the production and development of thoughtful and audacious live theatre that is culturally and socially resonant, while striving for the highest levels of artistic excellence and intersectional awareness" (cohesiontheatre.org). However, they have announced a hiatus after their Executive Director Brad Norris stepped down due to health issues. Even within companies led by white creatives, the problems of longevity and continuity still loom large in

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<sup>60</sup> Founded as Philip Arnoult's Sixth Theatre in 1971. (Carney, III 1985, 19-22)

<sup>61</sup> My father began his college career here as a painting student before finances led him into U.S. military service.

Baltimore's community theatre companies. And it is clear the Arena Players' origins have provided fertile ground for black and other minority artists to work in an integrated and robust Baltimore theatre scene.

### **Chapter 3. Educating the Black Community**

The culmination of the Negro Little Theatre and its continued development in the historically black educational institutions placed black community theatre squarely into its function as a pedagogical practice that supports the psychosocial wellbeing of black people in the U.S. The value of black community theatres is in their ability to provide experiential education opportunities to a population that wants to express themselves in a safe place. In Baltimore, the Arena Players' value as an arts space where community cultural wealth has accumulated in its audiences and alumni. The true litmus test for the efficacy of youth arts training at the Arena Players should be who has been touched by learning the craft of theatre. Without a formal study, the answer is not quantifiable in discreet numbers. But what becomes clear in 2020 is that studying theatre at the Arena Players has prepared African American youth and adults to move from practicing a hobby to building a career that does prepare them for the mainstream. The adaptability to change and use improvisational skills to pivot on a dime are part and parcel of the layered teachings that the students receive when they are learning theatre through and about the black theatre texts and with contextualized histories. In fact, I venture that growing and learning theatre in a black environment supports a strong self-esteem that allows young African American performers to feel comfortable that their artistry is on par with others' training. However, the preceding narratives offer only a few examples of how the Arena Players' alumni, but especially its youth theatre participants, still represent Baltimore's African American community theatre in educational, non-profit, and commercial theatre, as well as in the film and television industries.

Hill and Hatch (2003) describe the current home of the Arena Players, Inc., 801 McCulloh Street which contains a "314 seat [thrust stage] theatre [with] classrooms, rehearsal



spaces, a Youtheatre (ages 13-18), a children's theatre, and an art gallery" (409). Currently, the seating in the performance space can accommodate 250 patrons in gently raked seating around its half angled oval thrust stage. At the Playhouse, novices are given the training in the arts and an education in African American history and culture that is focused on supporting the whole individual. Moreover, after time the formal roles of teacher and student soften to reveal a more familial or peer relationship structure among participants in Arena Players' educational activities. For artists like Ruby Dee who began in theatre as an amateur, the communal aspect of black theatre is also a pedagogical one, essential to their personal growth as black artists. Dee recounts her experience at the American Negro Theatre as "'a theatrical family [for her] first training and schooling'" (Gill 2000, 156). This sentiment holds true among the many who have learned black theatre at the Arena Players. In this chapter, I will briefly explore the several arms of education at the Arena Players for audience members and adult performers, through Studio 801, before spotlighting the youth arts programs, particularly the Youtheatre. In addition to my collaborator's words, I lean on my insider-outsider experience growing up in the Youtheatre.

According to the Arena Players, their purpose, as listed on their website, highlights the function of the novice to grow skills that benefit the greater African American community

Arena Players is a community theatre founded and dependent upon the interactions of people who combine their knowledge, interest, and pursuit of effort to perpetuate the organization. Herein is an opportunity for the development and display of the talents, technical skills, and crafts of all who would pursue the theater arts as a career, a vocation, or audience member.

Involvement in Arena Players has a reciprocal value and experiences are self rewarding (arenaplayersinc.com).

When we spoke in 2015 Light Board Operator and all-around arts administrator, Charlene Williamson (2015) began her tenure at the Playhouse as a mother of a precocious young child

[Tiffani Barbour] in the Youtheatre program. A Home Economics teacher, she learned stage management, did costuming for shows, taught Arts and Crafts class, and has been a light board operator ever since learning how to be one from Dana Orange.<sup>62</sup> Though she would describe herself as shy, some days Williamson presents the pre-show announcements to the audience. To develop that diverse skill set, it took various members of the Arena Players to teach Williamson the components she needed to approach each new skill with ease.

## **Dramaturgy**

G. E. Lessing's (1729-1781) seventeenth century dramaturgy was a practice centered on developing textual and performance criticism in alignment with Aristotelean values. Today, the aim in dramaturgical practice is to bring the audience into the world of the play. While the work of the dramaturg defies simple definition, it often consists of observation, research, conversation, and deep textual analysis. Working with a director, a dramaturg can find a synergy that helps scaffold the director's vision and interpretation of a dramatic text or in the development of a devised work. Dramaturgs seek to provide context and insight to a playwright's text and a director's approach for actors and audiences alike.

As an audience-focused educational intervention, dramaturgy is a hidden hallmark of black theatre, though it wasn't always labeled as such. Many black theatre publications can be categorized as dramaturgical in their critical assessment of text characters, plot points, and intentions of the playwright. Ultimately, the dramaturgy of black theatre relies on and draws from notions of the collective African American experience as the primary source material. This is especially true for productions that are specifically Afrocentric.<sup>63</sup> The educational packet,

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<sup>62</sup>Dana Orange, Asé!

<sup>63</sup> Molette & Molette (2013) explicate Afrocentric Theatre.

regularly produced by regional theatres, are tools for K-12 teachers, and a variant of the dramaturgy that mainstream professional theatre has come to rely upon.

Dramaturgy at the Arena Players began with the collaboration of two Coppin State University educators with Eugenia Collier in English and Amini Courts<sup>64</sup> in the Theatre departments. In practice, Arena Players Dramaturg Emeritus Collier found that her role was much more expansive. Part stage manager and part assistant director, some of her time was spent reminding actors to stay true to the words the playwright sanctioned. She found that some directors appreciated her help during the rehearsal process while others were satisfied with the additional “program notes.” In one of my rare interviews outside of the Playhouse, I visited with Collier at her residence in 2017. She took a break from the book she was working on to speak to me. Her excitement was infectious. She was especially delighted to share some of her experience as a dramaturg, an area she thought was underrepresented in black theatre.

### **Eugenia Collier**

And I was just hooked. I went to all the rehearsals that I could and it was just a grand experience! I didn't want to let go and from then on they gave me a title. Amini Courts at Coppin gave me a title for working with the play. I think of that, too. I worked with her and they didn't know what role--not role--but what I should be called. So Amini told me I could be the *dramaturg*. I had no idea what a dramaturg was or how to spell it or what the plural of it is, but I helped write the program notes. Because I was a writer then. But that's really what a dramaturg does and that was my role to the Arena Players. That was the start of it. And then I think the next thing was working with *Eyes* at the Arena Players. I don't think most of the people even read most of the notes. Some did. But I took them all very seriously. And you will see that I will send you copies...

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<sup>64</sup> I knew who Amini Courts was from observing the Main Stage production process from a distance as a child. However, when I first began teaching as an adjunct theatre Professor at Coppin State University in 2007, Professor Courts was there. As the Executive Board Secretary at NADSA, she patiently taught me, the Assistant Executive Board Secretary, the organization's governance structure. Additionally, Professor Courts trained me for the responsibilities of her position including record-keeping for a national theatre organization.

I wasn't involved in all of the plays. Some of the directors just didn't want a dramaturg. Some did. And I have a number of titles blowing around in my mind. You know it's not easy to write program notes. Because you have to condense all the things that you have to say in just a couple of paragraphs. If I had to do it again, I would have gotten my master's degree, not in English, which is what I did, but in Dramaturgy. I really would like to have combined all of that, but that wasn't the case when I came along. You got your degree in English and you taught English, if you were lucky. But there is so much to just say about theatre and especially about black theatre (Collier 2017).

It is unclear when in time Collier began to think of Dramaturgy as an educational area in theatre that she would have preferred over her English studies, yet, as a dramaturg, Collier was conscientious of the ways that her contributions were valued by her directors and enjoyed the collaborative work with Courts. In the attention to reliably and authentically represent the black experience, black playwrights, directors, actors, and designers have all contributed to the dramaturgical practice, often by default. In the same way, Collier's various hats worn during the production period illuminates the fact that black community theatre doesn't always have a single person to fulfill every title, yet each production goes on.

## **Studio 801**

I was sitting with Artistic Director Donald Owens one afternoon while he was waiting for a visual artist that was interested in performing in plays. Owens was glad to introduce the artist to the history of black theatre, and introduce him to the Arena Players, but the excitement that he radiated as he talked about the actor training that Studio 801 had on offer was palpable. I was reminded of how vital cross conversations among black artists are in the ways that we can feed off each other and riff on shared pulse points across genres. I saw then how the origin story of Studio 801 was just that—a riff on a theme. It was a return to the Arena Players origins, but with a clear directive, to take the Arena Players out of the Playhouse and deploy them throughout the

community, so that the community can join in. In our 2015 conversation, Owens recounted his involvement in the conception of the adult actor training program and a wild story from the early days of Studio 801. Studio 801 was established in the 1980s in order to provide the Arena Players with a repertory style ensemble. At one time, Studio 801 provided additional income streams through grant-supported performances that did several things: community development/outreach; intensive actor training; and it showcased the work of a core acting ensemble who could be paid stipends for performances.

### **Donald Owens**

I had the experience of doing a lot of things when I was young, but then I got over it. But I never lost the love for theatre. And I still teach adults. I teach acting and directing. I just love it. That's my passion. And I love to direct plays. You know, when I began Studio 801, I really wanted it to be a repertory company for Arena. And for a time, it was. Studio 801 is the adult training center and I went to Sam Wilson with this proposal. And Sam said, "Okay, you get it to go...Go!" So, I wrote a grant for the Maryland State Arts Council and they funded the birth of it. Now we are not a separate entity, we are Arena Players, but it is separate—like you have the Youtheatre—they have their program. Studio 801 and then Mainstage. And we have—We've done things where we've gone—Eugenia Collier used to call us the "Penal Players." I think we've done every penal institution in the state of Maryland [laughter]. But we do things like that by contract because everyone gets stipends and so it's a little separate from the community theatre.

We had a captivated audience! That's one time we never had to worry about not having a full house. [Laughter.] That's sad to say, but it's so true. When Studio 801 did *A Soldier's Play* we were touring with it and sometimes I played different roles. I was directing, you know. And I was playing Peterson one day. And Daniel said at first, "I knew too many people over there." I said, "Well man, you need to stay on this side of the theatre." Manuel Ringo has never been back to another theatre since--and that was his debut in the theatre. We were in the middle of this scene and it just went. I thought "What in the hell are we doing here?" I looked at him and said, "I must go," and left the stage. There was some commotion happening in the audience. The guards were moving fast. Daniel had been around long enough to figure out what to do. Daniel said, "Shut up fool! We gotta ball outta here!" But theatre is live. Because it's live so much can

happen, y'know. [Laughing.] And he kept running. [Laughing.] (Owens 2015).

One of the audiences important to Owens was imprisoned populations. Studio 801 did not produce theatre with the collaboration of inmates in the prison facilities, as many programs do today due to a reevaluation of rehabilitation methods. The Arena Players have, however, worked with actors who were formerly imprisoned. The Studio 801 program included bringing to prisons fully rehearsed, simply staged theatre productions that were relevant to the black experience in America. Although the story Owens shares is one of “shit hitting the fan” during an inmate dispute, there is something to be said for the value of black theatre performance for United States prison populations as a cathartic experience. Though that is outside the scope of this study, this narrative also speaks to Owens’ skills of observation and decision-making. He had to assess a situation and make an immediate decision to end the performance, and guide his cast in the right direction, counter to most theatre practitioners’ instincts that the show must go on.

### **Youth theatre**

At the Arena Players, Summer means Youtheatre. In my memory, young people packed the Playhouse going room by room from the ground floor up to the third floor. The big kids’/little kids’ space and time split proved that we could all use every inch of space in the building amicably. We always passed each other on the second-floor staircase or moving from the dance room across to the arts and crafts room. The different groups took up rehearsal space in the double classroom or had breakout rehearsals in the small carpet room. We took turns owning the stage for our performances. Over winter session we, the big kids, had pretty much the run of the building on Saturdays when we met from 9 am – 3 pm. Spread out around the lobby were our familiar workspaces for school assignments and studying before rehearsals began on weekday

evenings. We operated as any other production would with auditions, rehearsal, tech week, and dress rehearsals before the performances. Our rehearsal schedules would overlap with the adult performances as each production was booked into the theatre season and we would peek in to see how different genres and styles of theatre brought adults from all walks of life to work and build together.

Baltimore's black population still lived largely segregated from Baltimore's white populations when Arena Players Founding Artistic Director, Sam Wilson, initiated a youth arts program in 1965. The early days of the Play Shop program in 1971 to teach black youth theatre performance and production. The program was co-ed and students spent their summer on the campus of Coppin State University. Hay (1994) notes that at one time, Youtheatre offered paid internships (Hay 1994, 203). The participants of the Summer and, later, Winter youth-focused programming were black Baltimoreans as well as their counterparts from some Baltimore county suburbs. When it was fashionable for philanthropic organizations to "save" black teens, the youth theatre program received subsidies to provide arts education, meals, and artists to instruct students.

There were a variety of other factors that jeopardized the stability of the Arena Players youth-focused theatre training. I want to highlight a rupture, but first, let me warn you reader, that it has never been en vogue in African American culture to speak about internal conflicts within the black community in predominantly white forums. As I do this undone thing, I am willfully breaking the conventions of black respectability which indicate that one never shows the seams and, above all, never fights in front of company. This ethic has not helped move black art forward. But as this dissertation concentrates on the modes of survival that black theatre, specifically the Arena Players, Inc., has had to call on to ensure its continued practice and

relevance, I turn to the narrative Ackneil Muldrow, II, former Board of Directors treasurer and chairman. According to him a calamity revolved around paid workers who threatened the theatre company with a strike because they wanted to receive living wages. In Chapter 4 Catherine Orange's version of stepping into this dispute clarifies her commitment to the theatre as a sustaining leader.

### **Ackneil Muldrow, II**

Then we got into the Youtheatre. When it started—it was somewhat before Catherine. I forget the lady, but she was there, and we were getting funding from Westinghouse. And that barely covered expenses but she decided, “We needed to get paid more money.” “We're giving you a little stipend what else do you want?” Oh no! They called a strike. So, Miss Sherrard didn't know what to do and I was at the point at that time, you know, “Come on. This is silly. Now you're going to sacrifice the program?” The summer had started for the young people, but I just—I didn't know what to do. I have to ask her one question. “Who could lead the theater?” She said, “Yeah, Catherine Orange could do it. So just tell the people who struck ‘Thank you. We'll let you come in to see a play next season.’”

Well, lo and behold, that shocked everybody because they knew we were just going to fold without them. No, we are not going to fold. Catherine stepped in, did a beautiful job, and has been there every since. Catherine came on. Fifty-eight of them [students] went on successfully and nobody knew any interruptions had went on at all. Some of the Players' instructors said, “You know, I didn't really want to do that. I want to know if I can come back?” And we said, “No, you can't come back.” “Well they really feel bad.” I don't care if they really feel bad. They were going to pull something on us that we really couldn't afford and that was not in the interest of the theatre. So why would we reward them by letting them come back? So, we just said, “No,” and some people got angry. But they came back for the next season and performed [Here Muldrow is signifyin' to stereotypes of artists being “dramatic”] and they did the same thing on the play on the next season and that's a whole ‘nother story (Muldrow 2015).

I highlight this narrative while being conscious of black and white U.S. value systems around the term *strike*. Going on strike is a loaded action meant to protect the needs of the workers over the wealth-building desires of a capitalist overlord. Turning to historical labor conflicts before labor



unions became commonplace, if a strike was called for where the masses of workers were white, the strikebreakers were treated as *persona non grata* and denigrated with ugly names such as *scab*. It was common practice to call in black workers as their replacements for lower wages. This capitalistic practice of production only incited much more racial vitriol by using black bodies as scapegoats. However, in an African American community theatre setting, a worker's strike could have been the end of the entire company. Exposed in this supplemental Youtheatre narrative are: 1, the needs of individual arts workers; 2, the constraints of black community theatre budgets; 3, the network of black volunteer-professionals; and 4, the learning curve for the volunteer-professional.

Knowing that volunteer-professionalism is not for everybody, the conflict between the instructor and the board was not a personal grievance being ignored. When boiled down to its essence, the conflict is revealed as one between black artist(s) maintaining a lifestyle in Baltimore City and a black arts organization maintaining its mission in Baltimore City, both approaching their goals by any means necessary, to borrow a phrase from Malcolm X. To the artist(s), the board represented capitalism and money-making. To the Arena Players' board, the artist(s) demands represented off-mission expenses. Here the board took the decision to concentrate on the mission of the organization, as expected, while maintaining a pre-approved budget. What the conflict reveals about those individuals on strike is that they had expectations of a community arts organization that did not match their knowledge of the organization's administrative practices. There were other black artists available and committed to teach in the Play Shop without a living wage. It also speaks to an alignment with the mission of the organization among Baltimore's black artists. Prioritizing individual economic circumstances

over the operations of the community organization did not mesh with Arena Players' youth-focused educational priorities.

The conditions of strike-breaking at Arena Players was not a prioritizing of capitalism over the needs of the worker. In toto, the collective needs of the African American community took precedence over the needs of the individual. And this is more than a discussion of survival, it is about the maintenance of the collective, and investing in community cultural wealth. In this case, the young people in the youth arts programs, the black artists of the future, were more valuable to the organization than the individuals who threatened the stability of the programming. Stepping in to protect the future of the black arts in Baltimore must have been a daunting task, although, it is clear that it was an easy choice to make. Volunteer-professionalism is the core operating principle supporting black community theatre. And, I suspect, in community theatre across the U.S., working without pay or with only a small stipend has its own value when one is in alignment with the mission of the organization, and that is the essence of any volunteer initiative across the globe.

### **Financing youth arts**

Arts funding across the country has dropped significantly in the current climate that has redirected social concerns toward STEM. Most effected have been the culturally-specific arts communities. Playwright Ed Bullins (1990) clarifies that, in his experience, black theatre groups are less likely to find funding without having an advocate lobbying for them (Bullins 1990). When and where funding was steady, mainstream funding was never proportional for cultural institutions that served people of color. In fiscal year 1991, the Maryland State Arts Council's (MSAC) theatre grants reflected this trend in significant ways. The institutions designated by

MSAC as *State-Wide* were prioritized, and received funding in numbers much larger than the institutions listed as Citywide.

The Maryland State Arts Council's State-Wide theatre funding granted \$126,865 to the Olney Theatre, in a DC suburb. The largest theatre grant of \$288,083 was received by Center Stage. The world-famous Alvin Ailey American Dance Foundation of Maryland, however, received only \$98,670. Grants for the Baltimore City organizations were as follows: Baltimore Theater Project \$42,500; Baltimore Actors' Theatre \$15,000; Impossible Industrial Action \$8000 [then resident company of the Theatre Project]. That year the Arena Players received \$9500, but their funding was cut by \$500 in 1992. For "children's events" MSAC granted: Pumpkin Theatre \$7500, and Great Blacks in Wax Museum \$2000. When it comes to community theatre, the numbers do not necessarily reflect a cultural bias. Arena Players were allocated more than Vagabond Players, who received \$5524 in 1991 and \$3200 in 1992, perhaps because there was an established youth arts program that the Arena Players provided. Vagabonds received \$4123, a cut of \$1401 over the course of twenty-seven years. The funding I highlight in 1991 is during the first wave of audience development programs meant to plug more racially diverse bodies into mainstream audiences and well before the inclusionary practices meant to welcome minorities into leadership roles in the arts. This data points more to the predominantly white organizations using MSAC funding to combat shifts in their traditional funding networks, such as loss of legacy supporters and the white flight that contributed to Baltimore's majority black population. The Arena Players are not listed on the 2019 MSAC fiscal year of grantees at all.

Youtheatre Director Catherine Orange recounts some funding streams that the Arena Players could rely on in the 1990s until the funders' Request for Proposals (RFPs) reflected programming that was outside of the company's mission and programming. What Orange plainly

discloses is that the close of an outside funding cycle led to the Arena Players' institution of a tuition fee for their youth arts programs.

### **Catherine Orange**

The Youtheatre, for eleven years we actually got \$10,000 from NEA, the National Endowment for the Arts. We got \$10,000 or \$12,000. We got it for about eleven years. And of course, you know how grants dry up. One of the things they ask us to do was to change what we did for Youtheatre. We've added some things, but they wanted a new hook, so we said, "We can't do this." You know, why change it if it's working? So that's when we started with charging the tuition. But still the tuition, compared to what some of the other groups get for Arts camps [Pauses] Because we had never charged.

I think we've been at \$575 or \$675 forever. And I've looked at other camps where they go four weeks and they pay over \$1,000. They don't necessarily do a show at the end. They just do the activities and people don't come and look at them. There was one program I saw, I don't remember what program it was, and it was \$1400! But anyway, it was \$1400 for four weeks and that was it. And after it was over, it was over. And we try to keep it low because we want our kids, you know. We get people who say, "I can't pay it. We got to pay in installments. Can I pay half?" And you gotta let them in if they have talent and even if they don't because, you know, of course you want the kids to see, because you see them grow (Orange 2015).

As of 2019, the rates for the six-week Summer session of Little People's (ages 4-8) and Intermediate (ages 9-12) Theatre Programs were \$575 while the longer Youtheatre (ages 13-18) was \$700. Orange completes a value assessment that makes the Arena Players youth program offerings less expensive than other programs in the Baltimore area. More importantly for Orange, the students learn to participate in a production process from read through to final curtain. This more comprehensive training in theatre underscores her understanding of the value of Arena Players youth arts offerings. Students enrolled at the Playhouse are exposed to black directors, choreographers, musicians, and designers who provide their training in the arts. These built-in role models bring the tableau vivant of black theatre practice to life which, for young

people who've only studied theatre at the Playhouse, makes them inclined to see theatre as a *black* thing.

In conversation with collaborator David Mitchell, he shares that, even with its competitive pricing, the Arena Players' youth arts programs are still a major boost to the theatre's bottom line. But his insight into the function of black-led theatre training for black youth offers reasons why it remains a viable program for psychosocial reasons. The Arena Players has been consistently applying a very simple formula to their program that has made them successful at not only bringing the arts to students in Baltimore City and surrounding counties, but it has helped to shape life-long creatives. That major element at the Playhouse is a love and concern for the overall well-being and development of each young person as an African American artist. One Summer afternoon after most of the young people have left for the day's theatre lessons, the theme of education rang prominent in conversation with David Mitchell, then, Associate Artistic Director. Mitchell's take on Arena's youth arts training aligns the Playhouse with similar HBCU concerns for protecting African American cultural identity, psychology, and life of black students:

### **David Mitchell**

Continuously we're introducing new generations to be a part of the history of this place. But also, to the possibilities or potential. Every year we get a new crop of students to the Youtheatre and it's an opportunity to help them think about their future using theatre or using dance as a vehicle to do so. That's appealing to a large percentage of our community that still believes in for black, by black, about blacks, you know what I mean. This environment, despite its deficiencies, still feels safer than sending them to say, Everyman's youth programming or Chesapeake Shakespeare's youth programming, or any other PWI's [primarily white institutions] programming. You know what I mean? Because the kind of nurturing that they would get at home is likely to happen here more so than it would in a PWI. Which makes this place very relevant and it continues to get support through that (Mitchell 2015).

Echoing W.E.B. Du Bois, Mitchell addresses African American safety concerns for black youth, post-integration, post-2000s, post Trayvon Martin (Asé!) and Tamir Rice (Asé!). He also brings up notions of the sanctity of black children's lives in the care of strangers. Mitchell suggests that Baltimore's PWI theatres have managed to build diversity by enrolling black youth in arts programs, but they are not invested in building black community cultural wealth, which is literally the forthcoming generations of black youth. The Arena Players offer black youth a chance to build theatre skills and personal maturity without the mainstream gaze or "traditional" stereotypes pre-defining them. This is especially necessary, especially regarding black representation. At the Playhouse, everyone learns that they are held to the same standards and each young person is valuable to the group, no matter their age or ability upon entry. And most especially, black youth learn that they are safe to express themselves creatively with the support of established black artists.

### **Programs**

To understand the importance of W.E.B. Du Bois' pageant play, and its impact on the Arena Players and the Youtheatre, we must first consider the importance of Black History Month. Though it is a United States observance, it may pass unmarked by many, like National Mentoring Month (January) or Academic Writing Month (November). Although Black History Month created conditions for African American theatre to be present in white spaces, Black History Month (February 1-28/29) may be the only time period observed *en masse* by African Americans in black spaces. Begun in 1926 by the Association for the Study of Negro Life & History (est. 1915), now the Association for the Study of African American Life & History (ASALH) under the leadership of Dr.

Carter G. Woodson,<sup>65</sup> President, Lyndon B. Johnson, designated the second week of February to celebrate the contributions and achievements of black people in 1926. Woodson wanted Negro History Week to pay tribute to the birthdays of two men known for working towards the emancipation of enslaved members of the African diaspora (asah.org): Abraham Lincoln (born February 12), celebrated through the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century by African Americans since his assassination in 1865, and Frederick Douglass (born February 14), icon of black self-determination.

By the 1930s Black History Week grew to a month after being widely adopted in African American schools (asah.org) and, by the 1960s, reveling in our skills and successes and our contributions to the foundations of United States life and culture included memorials of the *Maafa*, the monumental suffering of Africans who were transported along the Transatlantic Trade routes and their enslaved progeny under colonial rule (Donahue 2010, 200-1). Pageant plays are frequently produced during Black History Month<sup>66</sup> wherever there is predominant representation by African Americans. Theatre companies throughout the city produce plays by and featuring black artists.

Several of my collaborators make a point of sharing some element of their Black History Month experiences. Through their contributions it is clear that the Youtheatre offers experiential insight into the modes and means of freedom and black survival for young black theatre artists. At the Playhouse, Black History Month in the 1990s meant the Youtheatre would perform a pageant play as an educational tool for a school-aged audience that often-included peers from their schools. During that production process the

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<sup>65</sup> Ph. D. from Harvard c/o 1912.

<sup>66</sup> Pageants are also regularly produced for HBCU Homecoming coronations and memorial events.

teaching artists were very instructive about the history, personnel, and products of African American culture as well as teaching theatre performance and production. Youtheatre Director, Catherine Orange solidifies a reason for the importance of the Black History Month (BHM) Youtheatre production as one that highlights the continued struggles for black youth who don't have context for the Civil Rights Movement of the past and the preceding generations who fought for equality.

### **Catherine Orange**

So, the Black History show—that came after the old program. You did Christmas and went home. Then sometime, it had to be early 80s, I decided that we could do Black History. And, if you remember, when we did Black History we did it the whole month of February. And we used to get a grant from Baltimore City Public Schools. It was a \$4,999 grant because it was something about it couldn't be \$5,000. And what we did was use that check to bus kids in. You remember doing that don't you? And in the day when we did that the kids only paid, like, two or three dollars to come and the bus was free. And after we met our quota we couldn't do it anymore. But you know we used to do three shows a day. And I know you remember being in one of those shows or couple of them. And we did get a few County Schools but most of them were [Baltimore] City schools. And if you remember the shows were about an hour long. We would finish one, have one group out one door, and have another group coming in the other door. But I think they really did appreciate it because we used to give them a little program with stuff that they could go back and talk about at those schools. You know we tried to make it educational, give them something they could do when they went back.

I think when you compare the kind of work that we were doing in the theatre then [it's] the kind of thing that people are looking for now. It was ahead of the curve. And I guess [it's] because we taught school and I knew that this is what kids need. And even today they need to know about themselves. And I think that the Black History show did that for the kids. We just don't do enough. We used to do a lot of that but now we don't do it as much. And I think it's because people think it's not needed. You know, they say in history that if you don't know where you've been or where you come from you can't move forward. And I think a lot of the young people now—because they don't have, or they didn't have, segregation and all of that—they think, “Well, it's okay. We're just like everybody else.” But it's not like that. Unfortunately, they just aren't. When you look at the news at the crazy stuff that's happening [shakes head] I ask myself, “Why? Why is



that happening?" I went through the sit-ins and all that stuff (Orange 2015).

In this excerpt, Orange uses *we* indicating her alignment with the Arena Players as a company of educators, but also refers to her connection to her generation and the collective black consciousness. Orange also acknowledges the intergenerational gaps that the Black History Month performances can bridge particularly regarding her experience of segregation and how that history is still important to teach young people. She positions the Youtheatre's public school performances as having a high use value in its ability to educate young audiences about the black experience. Orange even recognizes the educational packets as ahead of its time as a resource students and teachers could use after the BHM performance ended. It is one production that outside funding supplemented until that pool went dry. Yet, the Arena Players did not let funding dictate their extant programming because they were confident in its efficacy.

### **Working with young people**

Studying programs centered on cultural identity and wellness of black youth, Loyd and Williams (2017) recognize that programs like this include creative activities like dance, music, and skits and promote the ethnic racial identity of African American youth. Their conclusions suggest these programs:

chose facilitators intentionally based on the premise that staff should understand African American youth's backgrounds and cultural values, have extensive experience working in African American communities, or present themselves as positive role models for African American youth Loyd & Williams 2017, 7-8).

With the Arena Players' youth arts programs, this is true, with many, in more recent years, having graduated from the Youtheatre program. And as the arts instructors, their goals are to educate the next generation in theatre as well as in black history. For them, the same issues that

teachers face in K-12 schools occur in the youth arts programming at the Arena Players. When working with young people, you must also work with parents and guardians. At Arena Players, then, there is a communal nurturing function that is enacted in the multi-tiered levels of communication between the instructors, children, and the adults in their lives.

Together Ms. Orange and the teaching artists in Little People's, Intermediate, and Youtheatre take on the responsibility of bridging the intergenerational gaps that can distract from training young people in the art of theatre production. For those who have grown up with cell phones and tablets as their primary means of entertainment and communication there have been challenges with developing interpersonal skills, with unencumbered physical activity, and with shorter attention spans. Catherine Orange says that, for this generation, an education in live theatre helps them "learn to talk to each other face-to-face" (Orange 2015). In training young artists, some of whom seek constant approval and/or attention because of the way that social media entrains us to live for "likes," it is necessary to be very clear about expectations.

Each teaching artist focuses on instructing youth in the many modes of theatre production from building vocabulary to playwrighting as contributors to their creative process. The instructors have been supported by Catherine Orange's ability to work with parents and guardians who are given one-on-one guidance in order for students to grow into their artistry. Orange says, "it's a learning experience for the kids and the parents and even for the teachers" (Orange 2015). Her work includes reminding parents how to go through a script before rehearsals, so they know what their children are being asked to do. This is especially helpful for parents, most of whom have no theatre experience.

Choreographer Yvette Shipley has been with the company since the 1980s. Aptly, we convened in the dance rehearsal space, the place I first remember meeting her as she put us

through our beginner's ballet paces. Here, she speaks of the kind of discipline and repetition that students learn for themselves when they are given opportunities to be creative and devise work that reflects their lives. She also mentions that the work goes smoothly with the support of her co-teachers. What is clear, is that the kind of training that a young person receives from a community of artists reinforces and builds on the lessons of each individual voice.

### **Yvette Shipley**

I think if you're a teacher—because kids are so honest—if you are honest, they respond honestly—I mean look at you. We let them write a Christmas play. It was wonderful. I always had to fight for the kids—not against anything—but *for* them and their interests. We did a Black History Month show and we tied the historical to the present. And it hadn't changed. We opened, I had them running for their lives. Things haven't changed. And ended with "Hands up! Don't shoot!" We gotta stop running. It's time to stop running. We first did it [the performance] before the unrest [Baltimore Uprising]. And we were asked to do it again around Memorial Day. I understand them having a feeling of success. That should make them hungry looking for what's next.

Tag team. How can I say this about George [Holmes, another long-time Youtheatre artist-instructor and full-time educator] and I? Cause we're basically the same age. We have to guide some with the student directors. We really work well together to get them so they have a successful show. We created a show for an Early Childhood Development program up at CCB [Community College of Baltimore City]. Two of the kids from Youtheatre who wrote the Christmas Show wrote a lot of the scenes. Nursery rhymes. We did *Henny Penny* and the *Ugly Duckling*. They had to trust themselves. That's all performers have to do.

I was watching *So You Think You Can Dance*. All the young people could dance, but are they artists? And that's what the goal is. All of it. Singing. Dancing. Acting. It's the art of it. You have to be honest. You cannot pretend. There's times that I stop them and say "Stop dancing and just *do* this." And they look at me. [Demonstrates.] "Listen to what I'm saying. Don't dance *at* it. Don't pretend. If you gotta be sad, be sad." That's when you can really get into the art. And I haven't been able to get there with them yet. And I think it's maturity. And I think as we [African Americans/ black people] progress we take responsibility away from the child. They don't have chores. They don't have to work for nothing. Cause when you work for something it means a whole lot more.

I like for all the kids to get the whole experience. But I think I haven't gotten what I want from them yet. They're sweating. I get, "It's hot." And my favorite, "One more time." [Whining like her students.] "But we've done it ten times already." "But it's not right yet so do it again." You know we'll get it. But it's on them. Those who want that will be those who continue. And that's the crux of it. I don't know how many of them want this. Not everybody is a dancer, but everybody can dance. My sister bought me this t-shirt from South Africa. It said, "If you can talk you can sing. If you can walk you can dance." I love that t-shirt. But that's it. We had this one young lady who came. She didn't want to dance. I told her this is a musical theatre program. And she stuck it out. She found out she could do it. No one ever says I hope not to ever sing (Shipley 2015).

Here Shipley's take on the term *progress* is underscored by her intergenerational observations on child-rearing, something educators are always attuned to. To combat rehearsal fatigue from kicking in too early, Yvette Shipley pushes students to develop personal discipline as they grow in expertise and maturity. This way, whatever growth students achieve happens because of their own self-determination. As members of the same African American community, the youth arts instructors recognize the creative, social, and personal challenges their students are dealing with. This may be why they have no fear in leading young people to an understanding of African history, the Maafa, black United States culture, and the legacy of racism we've inherited. Socially, the students learn an artistic context for their black experience in the United States.

### **Being a member of Youtheatre**

At his home surrounded by African statuary, I spoke with one early 1970's member of the Play Shop, Jerome Banks-Bey. A current public school theatre teacher, he cites among his mentors, the teaching artists from his early theatre training at the Arena Players Play Shop. In our conversation, Banks-Bey spoke of the special connection he felt with mentor Irv Turner, one of the Arena Players founders, who ran the summer program at Coppin then and led workshops in acting. In a scene from *West Side Story*, Banks-Bey was rightfully [by his own admission]

accused of being a ham, or an attention seeking, scene stealing over-actor. His other mentor, then youth instructor, Donald Owens, “cut into him” as did the other students.

### **Jerome Banks-Bey**

I was loud and brash in school. A perpetual bundle of energy. Bullshit was the engine. But I was shy with girls in the summer arts program. We took classes on Coppin’s campus in drama, music, dance, voice, choir. And dance with John “The Kinderman” Taylor. It was the perfect model for any performing arts school. Some young men were nervous about the social stigma of men in dance as gay. We were assigned scenes. Irv cancelled the scene ‘cause I was absent from rehearsal. And I blew it. Irv really put you through your paces. I learned the lesson “You gotta show up.” I express it to students now. Another valuable professional lesson was to be where you should be and not add to a scene when not required to be present (Banks-Bey 2017).

When Banks-Bey returned to community theatre after graduate school he began working with Donald Owens at the Arena Players as an adult actor. Banks-Bey was in a production that traveled to a white community theatre in Baltimore, in his words, “exporting [black theatre] to the hub of white culture” (Banks-Bey 2017). Later he performed under the direction of Amini Courts and recalls “literally sitting at Miss Eugenia [Collier]’s knee” (Banks-Bey 2017) in a production of *Pill Hill* (Rousuck 2007). Banks-Bey also credits the youth arts program for playing a pivotal role in his career as a theatre educator. Though he studied Acting and Directing at the Predominantly White Institution (PWI) Catholic University, he realized while there that, “Black theatre needs its [own training] because black performers get mishandled. Arena Players cultivates you” (Banks-Bey 2017).

Among my collaborators who were former members of the Youtheatre, the major recurring theme is maturing as individuals in a black community theatre. Those collaborators gained soft skills including: accepting criticism, learning from missteps, gaining black history knowledge, taking pride in their blackness, and finding their artistic voices. These concepts

overlap as contrary to the ubiquitous media representations of African Americans that have vilified our community as detriments to U.S. society. Larry Mercer, wrestling ring-side announcer, attests to the ways that the Youtheatre program broadened his knowledge of African American culture and theatre skill sets. In our 2016 conversation at in my mother's home seated at my paternal great grandmother's dining room table Mercer spoke at length about his involvement in the Youtheatre in the 1990s. In his earnest to share with me the many things that he learned in the Youtheatre, I observed Mercer's experiences flood his memories. I saw the spark burning bright as Mercer shared a very personal epiphany about finding his calling as a performer.

### **Larry Mercer**

I learned [quotes Paul Laurence Dunbar] "We wear the mask that grins and lies." [Lists on his finger.] I learned what a griot was. African Americans have white palms and white soles of their feet. I learned a lot about myself. I learned a lot about puberty. I learned a little about...girls. [Laughs.] And I learned about, you know, your extended family. Probably more than school. Because this was not—this was like almost like voluntary school. I think, if I remember correctly, I think it was like pay for school. Like, there was a tuition you had to pay. So, this wasn't, like, you know, school you have to go because of the law. This was like the school that I wanted—*wanted* to go to. I learned [about white palms] through storytelling which is what a griot does. And it had to have been during Black History. The February show that we did which was also—and I didn't know this [at the time]—but that's also the show we invited schools--you know, our peers [with great emphasis]--to come in and watch our production. But, you know, Troy Burton who worked extensively with a lot of the Youtheatre, challenged us to find poems that were Afrocentric.

I think there was a time during the summer during—there was like a day where we got to tour the booth. And we got to see what Miss Charlene [Williamson] did while the production was going on. But it just seemed so boring to me that I kind of was, like, "Well, okay that day is over. Let's get back to the singing with Mr. Perkins or dancing with Miss Shipley because that's the [AMS overlapping] *active* thing." [Shared laughter]. I also learned [dance and music]. The rhythm of dance. So, there's, uh, [pounds out beat with hands]. There's, like, a metronome to everything. And that's inside of us, too. It's in our heart. So, everyone can dance. Everyone can't dance *well*, but everyone can dance. Well, my time with Miss Shipley [pauses] I was not a very good dancer at all. I was never highlighted for any of the dance numbers. I was always with a group where

I could be kind of hidden. You know, doing the wrong steps. But, one thing that I learned from her and Mr. Perkins was that [gesticulates rhythmically with his hands] that rhythm. Whether it was the metronome or, aah [winces]. Yeah. They both would kind of, like, yell at us to get this.

And there were times that Mr. Perkins would strip the music down. And it would just be him going [Sings and snaps along rhythmically.] da-Da da-Da da-Da. And once we would get it and you would slowly start to bring the chords in. And then he would start to layer it. And before you know it, he was playing the whole song. But he would start with that foundation. And Miss Shipley would do that as well. I just couldn't get it with Miss Shipley oftentimes. You know, Eric [Anthony], or somebody, who could probably do the whatever. But that movement, that metronome, that Rhythm of Life—it's all connected (Mercer 2016).

I want to cosign Mercer's memory of Anthony Perkins, a musician who was also important to the ensemble of instructors that supported our artistic growth during the 1990s. As an instructor he was a stickler for getting the music right. I would describe him as devoted to cracking the code to get pre-teens and teenagers to focus their attention on their vocal parts. I imagine it was quite difficult to work on harmonies with boys whose voices were changing almost daily amid a sea of teenage hormones. But Perkins pushed through young attention spans that lapsed the second you weren't giving direct instruction to sopranos, altos, tenors, and bass voices. He drilled us with attention to meter and cadence in order to let the melodies shine. I especially recall his ability to pull beautiful harmonies out of us in spite of the variety of vocal control within the group. His work was assisted with additional voice lessons from Delores Jones,<sup>67</sup> opera singer and co-founder of the Municipal Opera Company of Baltimore. Other voice and dialect coaching came from Robert Chew,<sup>68</sup> actor, famous for his role as Prop Joe in *The Wire* (Zurawik 2013).

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<sup>67</sup> Delores Jones, Asé!

<sup>68</sup> Robert Chew, Asé!

Of course, my take on “Booth Day” differs from Mercer’s because I didn’t just love performing, I also relished learning the ins and outs of stage management under James Brown, NAACP ACT-SO Coordinator. And I was desperately noseey about other theatre production skills. I would ask Sam Wilson questions about theatre performance, but I also hold fond memories of following Robert Russell<sup>69</sup> around and learning how to trace letters in construction paper for the corkboard that held the current production “poster” at the entrance of the theatre, or marvel as he would get the key to install the signage on the outside marquee.

In my autoethnography that laid the foundation for my black theatre knowledge base, I recall one 1997 Black History Month pageant play in particular: *The Drum*. For me, it was a performance that tested my maturity as a young artist and stretched my theatre skill sets. Conceived and directed by Troy Burton, *The Drum* interwove the poetry and prose of African American artists through a historical narrative that included song and dance. Like the Pageant play of W.E.B. Du Bois, it covered the movement of African people during the Transatlantic Slave Trade through to the contemporary era (Rousuck 1999). In *The Drum* black artists, performers, and prominent African American community figures are featured as icons of African American culture. This particular production of *The Drum* also challenged me as a dancer through Ms. Shipley’s nuanced choreography that boldly stylized the harrowing conditions and abuses enslaved Africans underwent on clipper ships. Drawing on traditional African and Modern Dance techniques, her staging presented a peaceful African communal tableau disrupted by capturing invaders in white masks. Utilizing Shipley’s delicate direction allowed me to instigate the embodiment of moving from a state of freedom to one of nonconsensual entrainment. A completely alien idea to me, but a true challenge of interpretation. For this

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<sup>69</sup> Robert Russell, Asé!



production, geared towards school-aged students, we were tasked with writing our own monologues based on the lives of figures from black performance history. I vividly recall a compromise that Yvette Shipley and Troy Burton *helped* me reach regarding my Zora Neale Hurston monologue. The first draft was factually influenced by Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Hurston 1942), but thematically conveyed the details of her Voodoo conversion taken from her auto-anthropology *Tell my Horse* (Hurston 1938). I was tasked with writing another more "kid friendly" monologue that encouraged young people to "jump at de sun" like Hurston's mother told her to for the school performances. But, to my delight, I was allowed to present my first draft for public performances. With *The Drum*, I learned how to take editorial and performative notes from my choreographer and director and turn them into an empowered performance.

### **Youtheatre abroad**

Troy Burton's tenure as director of the Youtheatre productions in the 1990s has affected not only me, but the lives of many of the young artists who have come through the program in large and small ways, particularly when he directed the Youtheatre in their first international performance in Rotterdam. This artistic exchange was a part of the Baltimore Rotterdam Sister City arts programming ([baltimorerotterdam.org](http://baltimorerotterdam.org)). Their original schedule was changed due to the terrible, paradigm-changing incidents of September 11, 2001. Burton's cast was ready to perform the musical *Gospel at Colonus* by Lee Breuer of Mabou Mines which brings Sophocles' classical tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus* to the black church. With the engagement postponed, the students embarked on creating a choreopoem<sup>70</sup> drawing from their life experiences post 9-11.

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<sup>70</sup> The choreopoem is a black theatre genre developed by Ntozake Shange (Asé) with *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is too much* (1976). Most black women

Here Burton speaks of the Youtheatre's production experience and sharing their choreopoem with a non-African American, non-English speaking children's audience.

### **Troy Burton**

My greatest experience was taking the Youtheatre to Europe. And I decided that for the exchange the choreopoem would be great, which is something that they're not familiar with at all. It's something we could offer them. Something that they don't produce over there using the music, the poetry. We developed our own piece called *The Face of Reality*. And within the show *The Face of Reality* Joshua [Dixon] wrote a piece about his mother. It was a wonderful show because we opened it with a movement. Mary J. Blige "My Life My Life". And that's why we call it *The Face of Reality*.

All of the kids that were in it. They brought pieces and we used, as a theme, one of my favorite poets, Jaki Terry [Arena Players alum]. She has a piece called "I write poems because they are free." It's impressive. [Recites] "With a pain in my hand and a poem in my heart, together the Lord and I can work this thing out." It's amazing I still remember it. And I used that as a theme for the piece. And each kid performed that piece and they got into their own story. So that is one of my moments. Literally taking kids that I work with at Arena and into a whole 'nother culture.

No one told us that at the children's show the children didn't speak English. And we got there—we were staging it for the space—and we got there and they said, "Oh by the way the kids don't speak English." And I was, like, "Whoa!" So, I went to the kids from Arena and said, "Look, you're going to have to do the best damn acting y'all have ever done so these kids can understand. And y'all are just going to have to really engage them and think about it on stage. You don't speak their language, but they *will* understand through your actions. Everything you have to put it in your body. So, all my old technique from Sam Wilson about "seeing the doorknob."

The Arena Players had never done anything outside of the country like that and so it was an honor for me to be the first director to represent them internationally. Miss Orange was wonderful about [getting passports]. She made sure of most of the arrangements for me. She said, "Burton you just go in there and get the show and I'll handle the arrangements." I just remember Sandra Meekins saying, "If we going to Europe, we got to get a limousine to get these children to ride to the airport." You know, just being proud. Just being proud of something like that. To see how what we presented was well-received because—It's a theatre form. The choreopoem. But we just didn't know if the Europeans would receive it. And for them to receive it so well I was, like, "Wow!" [Beams] (Burton 2015).

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who studied acting in a black theatre since the 1980s have their *colored girls* monologue in their arsenal. Mine is The Lady in Red "Sorry." See also George-Graves (2013) pp. 207-8.

Burton took a devised work performed by black youth from Baltimore, Maryland, to the Netherlands in a journey that may have altered the meaning of black theatre for the students of the Youtheatre and their European audiences providing them more context for the life of youth in Baltimore City. The black theatre they had learned to that point operated within a relatively closed system. In its application in the Youtheatre program, writing provides young people with an opportunity to express their voices and prepares them for a future of expecting to be taken seriously as black artists. The choreopoem the Youtheatre performed was a new take on an established black theatre genre making them shareholders in the legacy of theatre education. They, in turn, taught their assembled audience what it means to be alive from the perspective of African American youth.

### **Arena Players' alumni in the arts world**

The artistic and personal growth of each student is monitored as they progress through their age-based theatre training groups: Little People's, Intermediate, and Youtheatre. And student growth can be better assessed for those that return summer after summer. At the Playhouse, the artists who lead classes in acting, dancing, singing, and stagecraft become the students' formal and informal mentors. As students learn the value of self-discipline through practicing skills repeatedly, rehearsals become more about sharpening one's individual craft. Creatively, the teaching-artists challenge students to do more than just show up and follow directions, leaving space for students to experiment. Students are expected to hone an arsenal of talents and showcase those skills, not just at Arena Players in full-length productions, but in other public venues. In our conversation, I asked, Director of Youtheatre, Catherine Orange if she had ever considered the impact of the Youtheatre programs.

## Catherine Orange

I have. Yes, even now I look at TV and say, “Whoa! She used to be in Youtheatre.” And then there's a commercial on right now that has Ryan Hollis in it. And you know we've had kids on Broadway. We have a little boy—his name is Judah—but he was in *Lion King* for a while. His family moved to New York because he was getting work. He was in *Matilda* on Broadway and I've seen him in commercials too. And he was in a movie called *Home* and I think I have that still downstairs.

But I think we've had a big impact on people's lives and what they do. And those who really love this business--which it's hard. It's hard, you know, because you have to get out there and work at it and audition. And Tiffani Barbour she was in that thing last season—that weird show called [searches for name. I say: *The Leftovers*.] That was weird! I never figured it out, but I know she was with those people who smoked cigarettes. And I watched it because of Tiffani. Sometimes you don't know, because you're dealing with kids. But I think with all the Youtheatre members who go to college and study this stuff because they love it. So, that means we did something. We did something right. And you don't ever really know what it is (Orange 2015).

I also posed the same question about Youtheatre's impact to choreographer Yvette Shipley who finds her connection to efficacy in working with her former students and seeing others take on new opportunities.

## Yvette Shipley

Look at how long we've all been here. And there were times I've wanted more money, but my reward doesn't have an amount on it. When I see that connect. Like they come up, “Ms. Shipley!” Lori [Goodman]'s daughter taught them two summers. And Dana [Orange] taught them. And he's bringing something new. What I enjoy now is working with Martique [Smith] and Dana [Orange] as my directors. Cause you reverse that role [of teacher] and now it's their turn. But we've had two Youtheatre alum who are now coaches placing in the [dance] competitions and I'm elated. Eric [Anthony], Jonathan Browning, Damien Patterson. He's beautiful. Some of the girls. Rakiya [Orange], Charmaine [Surname unknown]. Not as many girls have continued. Tracey [Thoms]. I saw a short of hers. She was a mother with a daughter. She was excellent! (Shipley 2015).

These Youtheatre alumni mentioned, and others, experienced a multi-layered training in theatre, dance, and music at the Arena Players. Yet, many of them still left the city because Baltimore is

not a commercial black theatre hub. Some who remained are part of the gigging economy because there are so few full-time theatre performance jobs. For this reason, the arts world is not the only place that the young people who have come through the programs make their careers. However, the preceding narratives offer only a few testimonies of how the Arena Players' alumni, but especially its youth theatre participants, still represent Baltimore's African American community theatre in educational, non-profit, and commercial theatre, as well as in the film and television industries.

## **Chapter 4. Black Leadership at the Playhouse**

It is the iteration of Aunt Hester's scream that Fred Moten (2003) returns to as the source of an a priori claim to black subjecthood, overlooked, or perhaps evoked, by a United States economic system that has privileged a vitality in white life at the cost of black life. Moten (2003) places emphasis on the awakening to selfhood that Frederick Douglass experienced in the moment of his Aunt Hester's brutal beating. Moten (2003) contends that Douglass experienced an original thought that, though unutterable, was a response to the aurality of the Aunt Hester of Douglass' memory. There, she makes an utterance of protest, of trespass that, once decoded in Douglass' memoirs, becomes a monument to his realization that his life was not entirely his own. Hester's protest perhaps marks the call to self-determination that propelled Douglass out of slavery in Baltimore. I contend that her outrage is a painful reminder that black voices carry the weight of U.S. black history and culture with the directive to choose your own path to freedom. Without these raised voices, black narratives, like black lives, would be submerged, dismantled, and forgotten. And that is why Aunt Hester's scream is an introduction to civility and humanity, which her brute enslaver could not fathom. Just as she could not envision a world where she was silent about her abuse and outrage, Douglass could no longer envision a world where he did not determine his own fate. Nor could the scores of black theatre practitioners who dedicated their lives to the art and theatre education. But the pain of violation remains. And that is why black survival guides this research on a black community theatre's experience.

Although built with a grand vision for the freedom of black artists, one only has to look at the short-lived August Wilson Center for African American Culture (2009-2014) in Pittsburgh to see that longevity is not always a given experience among black theatre companies and venues. This uncertainty is much bigger than the buildings we gather in to presume to build community

cultural wealth but parallels black life all the same. The phenomenon of black survival is not given the same amount of airtime as black death. Yet even when it is prepared for, the loss of black life, or black creativity, trespasses against black notions of continuity for its cultural institutions. It is not always the case that the company ends when the founders leave, but something happens to the audience. Black institutions attempt to assuage the grief, and raise morale, but the rupture eventually surfaces. As this document concerns itself with the African American self-determination that has propelled us forward since 1619, there are some things to be said about loss and what it does to the black community and its sense of self-determination. With public loss, there is first a destabilization of circumstances. Loss unhinges momentum, but it encourages reflection and revision. It is the black audience (qua community) that utters the cry of protest or acts out against a system that cannot offer stability.

The stakes are high when you consider the aftereffects many other “chocolate cities,” have undergone since the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>71</sup> Black Baltimore went into a state of civil unrest after the 1968 protests sparked by his loss. And still African Americans across the nation have continued to protest the many ways the community has experienced loss while seeking equality. The 2015 Baltimore Uprising, after the death of Freddie Gray,<sup>72</sup> again, set off African American Baltimorean’s concerns that our lives are still not valued despite our contributions to the arts, history, and culture of the United States. In 2015, the outrage over the precarity of black life in Baltimore’s Black Butterfly was created in part by the social and economic issues that deflated African American community cultural wealth. Not to conflate the events of 1968 and 2015, but some of 2015’s socio-economic realities are, in

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<sup>71</sup> Elfenbein et al. (2011) *Baltimore '68* provides a detailed study and oral history of those moments.

<sup>72</sup> Freddie Gray Asé!

actuality, holdovers from 1968. Additionally, there are markers of a hierarchical continuity in suppressing black dissent with both the National Guard and a militarized police force deployed to “keep the peace” in predominantly black neighborhoods by enforcing curfews. This kind of government regulation of African American movement harkens back to slavery and the origins of municipal police forces. Keeping black people under such surveillance reinforces the need for black spaces where the black voice is free to express itself and the black body is unrestricted.

This chapter navigates the founding and the changes of guard in the Arena Players over the course of their nearly seventy-year history and features the voices of the people who stepped up to the plate of leadership. By paying particular attention to the tenacity and resilience of the Arena Players in the face of loss, this chapter specifically recognizes the difficulties leaders have faced that have both challenged the organization’s capacity and allowed it to expand. Additionally, through the narratives of the company’s leaders, this chapter reveals the paths forward these African American artists, producers, and board members have taken. Because of their tenacity, the Arena Players “is now one of the oldest theatre groups in the country and boasts an unbroken string of periodic performances” ([arenaplayersinc.com](http://arenaplayersinc.com)). It has been a beacon of black community theatre in Baltimore City since 1953. The company’s survival is symptomatic of African American self-determination. As a black-founded, black-led, and black audience focused company located in an historically black neighborhood in Baltimore, this continuity is attributed to a singularity of action-oriented theatre praxis and a familial obligation to continue building on the mission of educating and entertaining the African American community. The Arena Players’ investment in continuity is backed by a core of leaders who have been actively learning how to better fulfill the needs of the intersectional demographics represented within black Baltimore audiences.



## **Arena Players, Inc. operations**

Black theatre in America has, since 1820, been developing itself as a system of engaged political and creative practice, but no companies could maintain production seasons without applying equal attention to their governance and the economic requirements that their administrators attended to. Volunteer-professional labor and fiscal discipline forged the Arena Players' creative use of resources on stage and off, to remain a self-sustaining operational model of theatre practice. Arena Players, Inc. maintained their capacity to be an independent black theatre company that catered to community audiences by utilizing a strategy from the black church to stay afloat: the board. The board and the black church go hand in hand. Usually, the founders of a church become the first board of trustees<sup>73</sup> to help the church acquire and maintain a space, pay a fulltime preacher a regular salary. Outside of religious holy days, a black church's finest day is the "Mortgage Burning" ceremony. This signals the congregation's financial independence gained through faithful tithing and special monetary offerings which allow them to claim ownership over their building. Even local dignitaries are invited to celebrate the community accomplishment (Jacobs 2013). In the founding liberation theology of the black church, financial freedom, not prosperity gospel, is built on securing an ideological gathering space for ones' community. In the same fashion, the Arena Players' Board of Directors did not dictate artistic programming but planted itself in the community to enrich human, financial, and cultural capital through word-of-mouth campaigns, fundraising, and financial planning efforts.

Samuel Hay (1994) documents a brief history of the Arena Players, Inc. which he received, in part, through the 1987 oral histories of Artistic Director, Sam Wilson, and Board of

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<sup>73</sup> The nomenclature conveys a certainty that the board members responsible for fiscal solvency must be trustworthy.

Directors' member, Camilla Sherrard,<sup>74</sup> and from studying "the books" (Hay 1994, 259, 9-12n). In a chapter titled "Governance of Theatre Organizations" (Hay 1994, 171) from Hay's (1994) text *African American Theatre* he highlights the company's incorporation which required a board. Hay proffers that the board membership served "from among the former members of the Krigwa Group/ Negro Little Theatre and the Monumental Theatre" (Hay 1994, 178). The board transitioned from a social club board made of friends and family only, to a business-minded board with complete control over the finances and functions of the organization. Hay (1994) does detail a creative conflict between artistic director Sam Wilson and board member Clifton Sherrard. But Hay (1994) goes on to say that the Arena Players' "empowered board" (Hay 1994, 185) which, already familiar with the theatre and its needs, facilitated the Arena Players' \$200,000 Playhouse refurbishment project in a multi stage capital campaign called "The Possible Dream."

Just a few days before Independence Day, I sat with Ackneil "Neil" Muldrow, former board Treasurer and, later, Chairman. We were on the back porch of his and Ms. Ruth's home up the block and around the corner from the house I grew up in. There he showed me some of the old gala programs, including one, where he was an honoree, and spoke with me at length about the figures involved in the twists and turns of bringing the "Possible Dream" to life:

**Ackneil Muldrow, II**

Leroy Bennett would have been the treasurer--this was in the 70s. He died--and someone, I'm not sure whom, recommended me to be Treasurer of the Arena Players' Board. And they had just gotten the new building. Just occupied the new building and I think the city gave them \$300,000 or \$200,000 to renovate the building because it was on Orchard Street (Muldrow 2015).

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<sup>74</sup> Camilla Sherrard, Ase!

While the Arena Players were not always acting unanimously, they collectively found that engaging civic, business, and philanthropic leaders from the Baltimore community provided the much-needed resources to continue their mission. And it was obvious that everyone would have to play a role in helping the company grow. The Arena Players Board of Directors' membership has been made up of a broad cross section of Baltimore's African American, and now Caribbean, community at any given time. They were not the only people who took up the responsibility of ensuring the theatre was visible in the black community and in white circles as well. English and Drama teacher, Mary West Miller<sup>75</sup> is remembered as a diva with charisma, compelling performances, and impeccable standards in the use of the English language. She was also an outspoken asset to the company, often accompanying Sam Wilson to fundraising events where she, "brought a certain pizzazz and drama...with her theatrical manner, her sharp wit and her articulate expression" (Loeschke 2001, 17).

To contrast the Arena Players' operation with other black-led theatres, it is necessary to view the concerns of black theatre leadership during the Black Arts Movement. During the 1960s and 1970s a host of new black playwrights, directors, performers, and companies committed to social action via performance in black metropolitan neighborhoods across America. However, many of them were unfamiliar with the methods of operating a theatre company at the time. For many, their production knowledge base grew with their intent to self-produce and their ability to source funds and local support from black audiences. And the shift of many of these companies towards nonprofit business structures created a paradoxical situation. How could these black revolutionary theatres rely on grants from white philanthropists as they developed programs to bolster black national identity? Jon Rossini and Patricia Ybarra (2012) identify this as

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<sup>75</sup> Mary West Miller, *Asé!*

neoliberalism beginning in the mid-1960s; a practice characterized in the US by free-market capitalism, the movement from public to private good, and freedom for individuals as well as corporations as individuals. Though they focus on the minoritarian art of Latino theatre as it became mainstreamed through a process of professionalization that, to some practitioners, represented a continuum of “compromise” through receipt of government funding. The risk of compromise, for black community theatres, meant jeopardizing black freedom of expression.

It is the term “progress” that concerns Rossini and Ybarra (2012) in the way it conflates professionalization, a symptom of neoliberalism, to mean so-called progress in a minority art form that did not require mainstream validation. For some black community theatres, professionalization represented an ideological failure and, therefore, not any sort of progress. Seeking grants was akin to compromising black self-determination or nation-building priorities to gain white acceptance. It led to cries of “selling out,” or abandoning the Black Arts Movement agenda (or being coopted all together by Eurocentric values). For others, grants were a needed financial boost to address production costs or raise capital for establishing venues. The Arena Players were not conflicted about accepting funding from as wide a range of sources as possible because, although radically prescient in creating their own black representational space, they did not claim to be a revolutionary company. Having opened their doors well before the Black Arts Movement battle cry was uttered, the Arena Players maintained their focus on serving black audiences with black theatre where Baltimore’s black community had access to them. For the Arena Players, that was progress.

The Arena Players has survived in part through grant funding and working with a Board of Directors according to a professional nonprofit structure for decades. As an incorporated company, the founders were able to lighten their personal load by establishing a board with other

black Baltimoreans who shared in the concern of producing black theatre. Although, a board which rules and regulates the use of resources is a convention borrowed from the black church, the Board of Directors of Arena Players, Inc., supported its mission and artistic ideals making use of their extended networks and building relationships with others who would support the growth of the theatre. In this way, the Board members who did not come from the creative pool of the Arena Players were enculturated into the wider Arena Players family. Hay (1994) details the selection process which required the theatre company to educate potential board members about the company and their expected roles before interviews to determine if they were a good fit (Hay 1994, 184-5). The Board of Directors allowed the artistic leadership and programming to take center stage while they were negotiating across the fine lines that kept the company solvent. After deliberation, and sometimes debate, the Arena Players Board sought financial support from people of all races and mainstream institutions like Baltimore City, the State of Maryland, and national philanthropic organizations. Their unique caveat was that the Arena Players would approach only organizations that did not expect them to alter their mission or programming.

Through his energetic informal speech, Muldrow shares that he came from a career in the financial industry at the beginning of his tenure with the Arena Players Board of Directors in the early 1980s. In the following excerpt, he details how he sharpened his expertise and experientially built his knowledge base of Board membership through building and protecting the theatre company's assets. He also explains how one of the most famous and wealthy black men in Baltimore City, Henry G. Parks, Jr.<sup>76</sup> came to join the Arena Players family (Donovan

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<sup>76</sup> Henry G. Parks, Jr., *Asé! Parks was the founder and owner of Parks Sausage Company* (Wright, 1972).

2013). Additionally, Muldrow details several critical fundraising moments that taught him how arts funding happens when black organizations plug into larger networks of wealth.

### **Ackneil Muldrow, II**

I did what I thought I was supposed to do as Treasurer. You know, keep good records and all of that. But a lady named Catherine Adams felt that we should have Henry Parks [of Park's Sausages] on the board, but Henry had turned her down. Several times. So, he came and joined the board and somebody said, "Mr. Parks, you've turned us down each time we've asked you. What changed your mind?" "Well, Miss Adams showed me some financial statements and the numbers were accurate." [She said,] "Well Mr. Muldrow did them." And I did. I got to know him from that. Got to know him from that. But he felt confident in the numbers and some of the things I proposed that protected us, like getting Officer's and Director's insurance. And with things of that nature, we became fast and hardworking partners in the organization.

So, we put together a plan to renovate the second and third floor to have a dance theatre or hall up there. And then storage on the third floor and an elevator because no one will walk up all that distance. And then the plan came out to be \$730,000. But, well, Parks and them people—I'm just giving you a general story of how we got the building—so Parks said, "I'm going to reach out to my contacts, but I don't think we're going to make it." So, we started out on that and really got a lot of people together, Alexis, because that was the vision; businesspeople over here. The one thing that kept the Negroes off my butt was that they were afraid of Parks because he were mean. And we were able to raise—between the challenge grant from the state and fundraising—we raised over \$500,000.

But, I learned a lot. People give to people they know. Because we were sitting there one day we were talking about raising some money and he called up the head of USF&G Insurance Company, Jack Mosley, and said, "Jack, I'm trying to raise money for this project and whatever you can do... Whatever you can do to help us out." And he sent him a check. It had only been about a half an hour and he sent him a check for \$10,000 just like that [snaps]! I learned a lot in fundraising through Parks and Arena Players. Using my skills what I learned there, I helped raise money for Walters Art Museum when I was on their board. But going back, I saw good a dedicated group of people as performers and a dedicated support group in the board members. And I wanted to bring some people in that I knew. And I brought a white gentleman by the name of Ed Wilson who was very wealthy, and I had been on the Lottery Commission with him, but I had not realized the dynamics of black people. "Why you bringing that white man in?" "Well he knows construction and he shared some things with me that can help us."

And then we contract with Alan Quayle who is the parking magnate. He's black. He had all these parking lots around the city. We contracted with him and he put up a box and we had agreed that he would donate, I think, 40% of the

collections to us. And he would keep the lot clean and keep up with it. Anyway, so we had that in place. Well later on when I left the board, they fired Quayle. Said, “We don't need him. We'll handle the lot.” But you see, people put money in the box. So, he took it so them Negroes wouldn't have no way to collect the money. And they didn't know what to do, ‘cause they thought he was making all of the money. He was not making all of the money. He provided a convenience. He provided some revenue, but they didn't see it that way (Muldrow 2015).

Muldrow's partnership with Henry Parks proved advantageous to the Arena Players because Parks could use his reserve of individual black social capital in white America for large-scale fundraising efforts. However, those donors did not engage with the company directly, and the Arena Players did not remain on their radar after Parks left the board. Another challenge Muldrow shares is the working relationship the company built with a black-owned subcontractor that was later nullified in a decision to cut costs and turn a larger profit. That decision was made after Muldrow's tenure on the board though he was still a member of the Arena Players family and he warned the company against it. One can only speculate on the effect this kind of decision has had on the company in terms of building relationships with other black-owned business subcontractors, but the long-term effect of the decision is visible in the physical plant which still has the same lot. It is a free lot, now and in desperate need of releveling.

Additionally, Muldrow highlights how a history of segregation in Baltimore led to two kinds of social disconnects in Baltimore. First, segregation kept the Arena Players from building alliances with wealthy white people without brokering that relationship through others. And to a larger degree, the introduction of a new white Board Member, exacerbated the distrust that African Americans have had, historically, in allowing new people into the inner workings of an African American arts organization. Muldrow dealt with this when he was a newcomer to the Arena Players board. And again, as an established and proven member of the board, he met a backlash following his invitation of a white businessman to join the board. This was at a time

before the language of allies existed and it revealed the sensitivities black community members felt post-integration about working so closely with a member of Baltimore's white community. Some were, understandably concerned about group dynamics and whether or not the white Board Member would identify with the mission of the Arena Players.

The Arena Players' survival after the gains of the Civil Rights movement and their continued self-determination through the Black Power Movement was on the merit of a local African American economy and their broader appeals to government and private granting bodies. Muldrow learned firsthand that being prepared was not always enough in garnering support from government and private donors. His narrative of fundraising by the board membership is critical in understanding how the Baltimore African American community consists of a wide spectrum of economic classes, including an upper class with the capital and network to support the largescale fundraising plans of the Arena Players, Inc. Lastly, Muldrow's experience exhibits the frustration that forward-thinking black financiers can have in working with black arts organizations when there is a clash of strategy. But that is not the only frustration that the black community theatre has had to contend with.

### **Losing leaders**

John O'Neal (1979) of the Free Southern Theatre wrote, "The purpose of a testament is to identify that which is most important and to say what should be done with it in the event of your death" (O'Neal 1979, 11). Founding Artistic Director, Sam Wilson left a few testimonies and an excerpt of one is now YouTube accessible, though not famous (or viral yet), with 325 views.<sup>77</sup> There is a recorded presentation from 1992 (Lee 2018) that has been digitized and is available on a technology that didn't yet exist when Wilson stood before an interracial group (number

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<sup>77</sup> The views are counted as of February 2021.



indeterminable) in a classroom, likely on Coppin State University's campus. The recording is approximately 44 minutes, and in it, Wilson shares the good news about the beginnings of the Arena Players, Inc. Detailing his journey from earning an M.A. in Education from Boston University to challenging the segregation in Baltimore theatre, Wilson characterizes the peripatetic early years of the Arena Players as ones that brought popularity to their adopted venues. Before purchasing the venue at 406 Orchard St. Wilson recounts the decision to invest in the property after a nudge to move on from his home church, "Let's move from the church hall, we'll have to go find our own location." His pragmatism about Baltimore's racial conditions, priorities at the church, and setting down roots for the company was supported by an ensemble who financed the \$10,000 building themselves; some, like Wilson, mortgaged their homes. Wilson also recalls the first financial aid received from Baltimore City after inviting then mayor to the theatre to see a production.

As the first point of contact for scores of Arena Players, Wilson introduced many to the inner workings of theatre from the production level. This means some of the current leaders began as amateur theatre practitioners; actors, directors, technicians, and designers. My collaborators from the Sam Wilson generation provide insight into his influence on them as theatre practitioners. His leadership is revealed as nurturing, risk-taking, and visionary. While Wilson took chances on young untested artists, he encouraged them to try their hand at building new skills. But in the wake of his passing, the organization has dealt with the backlash of founderism in a black community organization. Founderism, in the black colloquial tradition, is a condition of attachment to founders and a strong aversion to new leadership. It occurs quite often in black churches due to the deep emotional and spiritual bonds parishioners experience in direct congregation with their worship leaders. In the black arts, the connections also go beyond the

founders' identity as a public figure for the organization. Black arts organization founders are also de facto African American community canvassers and organizers. In this way they become figureheads of African American respectability and representatives, or ambassadors, of the black community for non-black arts practitioners in municipal and state settings, and, eventually, globally. The tenure of a black arts organization founder speaks to the ways that their personality becomes intrinsically linked to what outsiders, patrons, and their colleagues think of the organization. And when they pass on, the disconnected masses assume that the organization goes to the grave with them. The Arena Players have been battling this misperception since the mid-1990s.

Samuel Hay (1994) briefly mentions the phenomenon of theatre organizations dissipating after the founder moves on in an observation of Langston Hughes' various theatre companies (Hay 1994, 175) in New York and Chicago. But here, I contend that death can create an even greater disruption in artistic and administrative continuity. Sam Wilson, Jr's passing affected the theatre so much that ticket sales plummeted leaving the theatre in debt and *Baltimore Sun* Theatre columnist issued a premature obituary for the Arena Players, Inc (Kane 30 Mar. 1996). Navigating a theatre company after the death of a founder requires strong leadership from those stepping into the limelight to reassure the public that the company still stands. The changes of guard at the Playhouse have had to overcome the mourning African American audience again and again. Although accustomed to losing our leaders, African Americans are still quite sensitive to it.

Here it is necessary to share a bit about the work of Rodney A. Orange, Jr., Executive Director of the Arena Players and one of Catherine Orange's sons. Growing up at the Playhouse with his children, I have many memories of him as a tireless worker. But like Sam Wilson, John

Taylor (Kelly 19 Jul. 2018), Ackneil Muldrow, II (Kelly 5 Nov. 2018), and Ed Terry<sup>78</sup> (Reimer 2013), Rodney Orange, Jr. has made his final curtain call. His 2019 transition to the realm of the ancestors places the remaining leadership of the Arena Players in a position to examine their capacity-building strategies as they move the theatre into its next phase. While the company's leaders are redistributing the workload to maintain their focus on their mission, they also are under observation by the African American community due to local newspaper articles in memoriam of Rodney's life and work. Rodney's path to leadership began at a time in Baltimore history when the African American community was just beginning to recover from the effects of the 1980s crack epidemic. He stayed so busy during my initial interview period that I could not pin him down to sit for a conversation. But I want to underscore the prescience of Rodney's vision as part of the leadership of the Playhouse after Wilson's death. Rodney's work was particularly oriented toward continuity. He set out to maintain the organization's community relevance since the 1990's, securing grant funding and diversifying programming.

Well before Tyler Perry toured with his Madea stage plays, the Arena Players' biggest competitors for African American theatre in the early 1990s were the popular Chitlin' Circuit plays. Usually musicals, they played at the Lyric Opera House, situated within a mile of the Playhouse. Competing for the same Baltimore City and County African American audience, Rodney's choices as a producer leveled the field for black entertainment offered at the Playhouse. He made the Playhouse a venue accessible to Baltimore's up-and-coming and established African American comedians, such as Monique and Larry Lancaster, and their black audiences. Stand-up comedy worked as an outreach project that engaged black Baltimoreans who did not claim or aspire to be a part of Du Bois' Talented Tenth. The black working-class,

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<sup>78</sup> Ed Terry, *Asé!* See also Appendix A. Troy Burton entry.

which is ignored in Du Bois' submerged 80%, is a demographic of the black audience that contemporary black theatre still struggles to entice away from film and television. The stand-up comedy performances were part of a larger series of local events and community rentals that Rodney booked in the Playhouse such as hair shows, fashion shows, music acts, and church events. These revenue building events made Rodney the face of the common denominator for black Baltimore, but he worked against the tide of what certain factions of the black Baltimore community thought the theatre should be.

Rodney's leadership skills are reflective of the black independent theatre in keeping the broadest audience development targets present in his programming choices. Zielenbach (2008) explores West Baltimore's community development struggles citing as fodder the 1990s drop in real property tax that led to a loss of population which operated in a cyclical relationship with Baltimore City's reputation of violent crime (Zielenbach 2008, 316). The economic situation of the black community also was affected by the city's shifting conditions. To navigate this very immediate community concern, Rodney's astute business acumen was needed to maximize profits for the theatre as a venue thus allowing for more artistic leeway in mainstage theatre productions (which relied heavily on ticket sales). Rodney was also instrumental in bringing more targeted community groups into the building, whose work was relevant to the African American community. In 2015 his mother, Catherine Orange, spoke of one group in particular:

Rodney also works with NA (Narcotics Anonymous). They have something called "In A Jam" or "NA Talk" where they come in for a day and people share their stories and share their experiences. That's another way of helping that segment of the community to keep them straight--anytime you help one person you're probably helping another (Orange 2015).

In advocating for a social experience<sup>79</sup> that bridges class divisions among black Baltimoreans, Rodney's programming made the building more valuable to African Americans experiencing *their* intersectionality in *their* community's theatre, right in the heart "of the 'hood."<sup>80</sup>

Youtheatre Director Catherine Orange, sees the underlying value in welcoming Baltimoreans from *all* walks of life to the Playhouse. Though Narcotics Anonymous (NA) is a multi-racial organization, their use of the Playhouse is in alignment with the company's mission to provide a physical facility for participation in the performance arts. The NA Jam is a regularly held event that offers a safe space for those in various stages of recovery to entertain and be entertained, where their psychosocial wellbeing is respected without the pressure of drink minimums or open bars. As a venue where black audiences and artists can be free to be themselves, the Playhouse also offers room for other visitors in need of a communal space who are exposing their vulnerabilities through self-expression.

Of course, removing the black middle-class mystique of hyper-respectability from the theatre caused friction between those who thought the building should be used for fine art performance only. However, the bigger picture of black inclusivity was far more important. This contribution to African American nation-building required Rodney's accumulated event management skills, which brought a wider cross section of the African American community in as vendors, performers, and audience members. In directly connecting with Baltimore's non-theatre acculturated population, Rodney was able to introduce theatre to patrons whose needs had not been yet been met by the Arena Players. Some of these patrons would go on to become

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<sup>79</sup> A black hair event, for instance, defies class.

<sup>80</sup> I use *hood* ironically here, because it both attracts and comforts some while repelling other members of Baltimore's African American community due to their feelings about urban areas with majority-black populations. See also Wilson 2005 and Martin 2010 for more on where African Americans claimed as their home.

subscribers of Arena Players' mainstage theatre performances, performers in those productions, and/or send their children to the summer educational programs.

## **Perseverance**

The hidden side of theatre production at the Playhouse includes the day-to-day costs of maintaining a venue. In survival mode, the Arena Players, Inc. has always been working towards developing and maintaining the kinds of fiscal support to strengthen the edifice and operate artistic and educational programming. The Arena Players have had to be their own biggest advocate in municipal and state government circles, avoiding the interparty squabbles, while remaining true to the African American community they were founded to serve. That is why several non-black politicians have played supporting roles in advocating for funds the black-led company, often by virtue of their methods for maintaining relevance in the black community. Because Baltimore's past Democratic leadership saw only white males in the top office through the end of Mayor William Donald Schafer's term in 1987, the shift to African American leadership of the city coincided with splitting the black vote based on individual priorities and political alliances. Baltimore's first black Mayor, Clarence "Du" Burns, lost the seat to another black politician, Kurt Schmoke. Instead of embroiling itself in the particulars of black Democratic politics, the Arena Players choose political neutrality. This has allowed them to focus on the opportunities available for black arts organizations while maintaining programming that serves all elements of the African American community.

Current Artistic Director Donald Owens speaks to the realities of running a black arts organization in a time that is marked by mainstream theatre companies seeking to bring in more audiences of color. Across the mainstream board, this means marketing plays and doing community outreach geared at African Americans and the other communities of color including

new immigrant communities and existing Latinx, Asian American, Middle Eastern, Native American, Caribbean, and African communities and often through productions that target those racial demographics. But Voss et al. (2016) pose the question for culturally-specific organization doing the work as usual to the mainstream's commitment to diversity. Their research controls for the size and operating budgets of Asian American, African American, and Hispanic [Latinx] serving theatres asking if "there is a consequence for those organizations that have always been dedicated to connecting with the cultures of specific ethnic communities?" Voss et al. 2016, 10). The Arena Players' strengths lie in engaging African Americans regularly and applying audience development strategies primarily through marketing to the general public which reaches white patrons as well as those from other ethnic identities. Although the word *diversity* is troublesome for him, under Artistic Director Donald Owens' stewardship, there has been a recent uptick in attendees of Asian and African ethnicity, which speaks to a cross-minority investment in community outreach. In utilizing the word *diversity* as one meant for mainstream organizations to recognize their whiteness, Owens sees it as misapplied in black community theatre. Instead, he makes *diversity* representative of the kinds of programming on offer at the theatre, instead of using it to refer to the presence of African American people at the theatre. This is a critical distinction that indicts the mainstream use of terms like *diversity* and *tolerance* with the connotation of bringing difference or Otherness to white majority spaces. It is a vestige of a Hegelian *universal* mindset that has no place in black community theatre, where black people are the majority and they are comfortable with being part of that number. For the Arena Players, for whom only a small number of their audience members and donors are not African American, there has been no strategy for inclusion or audience outreach that proves quantitatively they have

reached targeted audiences in the U.S. ethnic minority categories, because that is the work they have always done, well before it was on the mainstream arts agenda.

Artistic Director Donald Owens spoke of a survival strategy of inclusivity that has allowed the Arena Players to remain in people's consciousness. He expresses pride in how the culturally-specific theatre company became a place of cross cultural fellowship during the turbulence of the March 2015 Baltimore Uprising.

### **Donald Owens**

Do we bring [new audiences] in? I think that it has to be done and I think that we are working hard on this. Doing it through the diversity of programs. I hate that word *diversity*. There are some who come for comedy shows there are some who come for jazz shows. There are some who come for plays. There are community organizations who have something to do but don't have a place to do it, so we do rentals. There are three fully mounted productions—at least three productions—annually. Other productions and public special events are held through a space rental scheme. The Playhouse as a venue also hosts community events. In June 2015 there was a “Community Sing” in response to the upheaval of the April Baltimore Uprising. The black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, runs a young women's program during the school year in the classrooms on the second floor.

Part of the survival of a place like Arena Players is that they are going to have to stay conscious of prevailing [mainstream] society, you know. And you've got to find some ways of reaching out. You can not solve all of the problems. Like I was telling people when we did the program around Freddie Gray, I was a little upset with Kwame [Kwei Armah] and Molly [Smith<sup>81</sup>]. Because they went up there and that was a PR stunt. What was that solving? What was that helping with? Nothing. It has nothing to do with calming the situation or anything. Or being engaged with it. Yeah. Yeah. They did it. They left. [silence] So, my thing is we take things of the community. There must be something where we can leave something there. Not just take something and leave. We just did a thing, the “Community Sing” that [Leah] Gilmore headed up, but it was a healing process. That was one of the responses to what has happened recently. And it was interesting because the audience was a really well mixed audience. Whites and blacks. Of course, they had no idea who was coming and they just came in the door. You know. Word went out. This was June 16th [2015].

There also is a problematic issue. It's survival. Because quite often we are the germ of something to give birth. But once that germ dies, how do you

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<sup>81</sup> Artistic Director of Arena Stage (1998-Present), a Washington, DC, LORT theatre.



continue? See? And the Arena Players has managed this. Most black owned businesses have died after the first generation. Because if the people don't want to continue it, or they go on and they got their own careers. You know, the Arena Players has survived.

We do several things. One we definitely stay in touch with our political representatives. It's amazing how many of them have never heard of you. I go down to City Hall just to say hello. We have a new representative who was not elected. He replaced the previous one in the city council. So, I went down there and I was letting him know who I was and about the Arena Players. He said, "Well what's that?" I said, "Well we're in your district." I continued to express to him who we were. And the next thing you know, he's getting emails from us. He gets our newsletters and I make sure his assistant gets our newsletters, too, so he can't say it didn't arrive. And the other day we saw rodents in the field<sup>82</sup> so we sent an email off to him to take care of this. And we got a response from his assistant. He got the email. She lets us know. And so, you play those games (Owens 2015).

Owens' critique of the way that Center Stage, Baltimore's regional theatre<sup>83</sup>, attempted to connect with the African American community after the death of Freddie Gray is centered on authenticity. Center Stage's former Artistic Director (2012-2018), Kwame Kwei Armah, is an Afro-Caribbean British man who, some felt, was not authentically connected to Baltimore's black community and its wants and needs. As the black leader of a mainstream arts organization, his company's response to the Baltimore Uprising in 2015 was not regarded by Owens as one that carried weight. This is in comparison to the Arena Players' approach to the widely reported civil disobedience and unrest in the city. As a black organization with deep and lasting ties to black Baltimore and a geographical location within a mile of the fires and protests, the Arena Players' venue was a natural fit for local activists and other citizens to gather in the aftermath of the Uprising. As the Artistic Director of an unabashedly black organization, Owens believes

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<sup>82</sup> Owens is referencing a two-part grassy lot crisscrossed by two alleys at the rear of the Arena Players building that meet at the parking lot.

<sup>83</sup> Listed as a founding theatre in the League of Residential Theatre's organization since 1966 according to The Oscar G. Brockett Center for Theatre History and Criticism (2016).

that using the space to bring Baltimoreans together in a time of turmoil was the appropriate arts-based response to the 2015 community crisis.

Being an unapologetically black arts organization in Twenty-First Century Baltimore may also be a reason that the political leadership of the city and state have been reluctant to fully embrace the Arena Players in recent history. Although the leadership of the city largely reflects its 64% African American population, in this modern era of inclusion over integration, the non-black ethnic subgroups are also struggling to be heard at City Hall and in Annapolis, the seat of Maryland's state government. The behavior of the elected official Owens speaks of is consistent with the other Baltimoreans outside of the Arena Players' networks overlooking the Playhouse as a public gathering space. One would think that a *newly* elected government representative would already be familiar with the cornerstones of their constituency's history. Perhaps their minds were focused on the newcomers to the neighborhood or developers. In any case, it was Donald Owens who had to reach out to their office to first introduce himself and the company and to file a city complaint on behalf of the Playhouse in the same way that he would for his home as a private citizen. This may be indicative of the expectations from both outsiders and insiders that the African American community's primary engagement is in religious activities and not black-led cultural organizations (beyond the Reginald F. Lewis Museum).

### **Black women working**

As Sojourner Truth<sup>84</sup> faced the white suffragettes gathered at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851, she spoke to them about her value as equal to a man's and added cheekily, that the [white] man was "in a tight place" ([sojournertruthproject.com](http://sojournertruthproject.com)) having to deal with both

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<sup>84</sup> Sojourner Truth, Asé!

the abolition of slavery and women's rights. Her words linked black women to modes of work outside of the home that privileged white women had never considered. In Baltimore, the bold Civil Rights interventions of women like Juanita Jackson Mitchell<sup>85</sup> and Enolia McMillan<sup>86</sup> set the tone for black female leadership in the city since the 1930s. Black women are central to the daily operations of the Arena Players and have been from the beginning.

African American women often go uncredited for their contributions to community cultural wealth. Cole (2019) makes certain to mention “the role and centrality of black women in community caretaking” across social networks of survival (Cole 2019, 218). Even with a succession of black men holding the role of Artistic Director, the balance of leadership at Playhouse requires the labor of black women also. This parity of responsibility fosters an environment of gender equality that respects the contributions of all parties. But this also indicates that the Arena Players are reliant on the kind of black female productivity that is most associated with the early Baltimore Civil Rights Movement.<sup>87</sup> Since the 1970s one woman in particular has worked tirelessly to support the youth arts programs at the Arena Players: Catherine Orange. In our conversation, she speaks about the Playhouse's past and other leaders who have encouraged her. She especially emphasizes the role of other women, Gloria Barnes<sup>88</sup> and Camilla Sherrard, who have helped to shape the Arena Players, Inc. and its youth arts programs. Orange's path to leadership within the company began with her clerical work for the Play Shop, before becoming the Youtheatre Director. When she stepped into that role, she found ways to expand and develop the youth arts programming.

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<sup>85</sup> Juanita Jackson Mitchell, *Asé!*

<sup>86</sup> Enolia McMillan, *Asé!*

<sup>87</sup> Skotnes (1994) speaks of an “implicit feminism” at play within the Baltimore Black freedom movement of the 1930s and 40s.

<sup>88</sup> Gloria Barnes, *Asé!*

Though she characterizes herself as an amateur at the start of her tenure with the Arena Players, Orange took on each role with pleasure and poise, taking the time to learn her duties in stage management. While undertaking her bachelor's degree in English, Orange brought her pre-existing skills in fashion, hair, and makeup to the company. Catherine Orange has been an active and dutiful member of the Arena Players ever since she accepted the invitation of Sam Wilson, then her English Professor, eventually serving on the Board of Directors for a time. As a parent, Orange has also guided several generations of black theatre practitioners. As an educator she has done a great deal to guide other African American theatre practitioners as well.

### **Catherine Orange**

And during that time they started the Youtheatre, but during that time it was called the Play Shop, the first couple of years I didn't work with the Youtheatre or anything. And one summer Sam said to me "Well, you want to help us out with the youth theatre? With the Play Shop?" And I said "Yeah." There was a lady named Gloria Barnes who was the director. [Sam] said, "Well maybe I just want you to do all of the clerical work." I could type a little bit and, again, I was organized. And after the first or the second summer she came to me and said, "Catherine, I want you to be my assistant." So, I said, "Okay fine I'll do it." And I became hard to send away. We worked together for about four or five years and we moved back into this building. But anyway, [Gloria Barnes] left and Camilla Sherrard who was the main director at that time said, "Well Catherine I'll help you, but will you direct the program and I'll just help you direct."

Graduated from Coppin and all the time I'm working down here. Still doing makeup. Still working shows. I become a member of the Board of Directors. I never stop doing this. I just wish [pause] that for all the things we do [pause] they should recognize the quality. That's another thing when you look at black theatre. They just think for some reason that it's not great theatre. And we let other people's groups come in and do their plays. Although what I find with that—and you'll put it all together somehow. What I find they say is "I have a group and I want to put together a play." And someone says, "Oh, call Arena Players. And they'll call and say "Oh, well I wrote this play. And I want to put it on your stage." But they think we can do it for nothing. And we can't. We can't because we still have to pay. Your play is on stage. We still have to have our tech [staff] because you can't come in off the street and run our tech. We still need our house person. Because we have to protect our building. They need to get things like their own insurance. So, I think a lot of people sometimes are discouraged from using us because they have to pay. But I know that if they go someplace else

that they have to pay. And know that we can do it if time and space is available because there's so many things we do (Orange 2015).

The *they* Orange refers to is those who are not active Arena Players. She is often approached by African Americans who want the Arena Players to produce their work. In explaining that the theatre is not just a building but also a producing theatre company that has to prioritize their own season of performances, often outside people are resistant. Some presume that a black community space must have the time, funding, and personnel to mount every production by virtue of it being a play written by an African American in the city. This initial misunderstanding provides an opportunity for the Arena Players to educate about theatre production and venue maintenance. Catherine Orange and other Arena Players have had to take on that task. Though it may grow tiring to tell people something they don't want to hear, it does prove worthwhile instruction, even when some groups eventually don't book the space.

### **Passing the torch**

The work of Troy Burton has influenced many youth artists from the 1990s to 2000s. Of his early time at the Playhouse, Burton says, "I always came back. I love the atmosphere because the Arena during that [time]—There were endless opportunities!" In his role as collaborator, Burton shares sage advice from Sam Wilson about stepping up to fulfill his artistic potential, offers insight into areas in need of support, and shares a more personal lesson based on a conversation with Charles S. Dutton about knowing when to move on.

### **Troy Burton**

That was the first year I was Assistant Director of *The Colored Cyclone*,<sup>89</sup> and the others on the committee didn't want me to become the Assistant Director. And Sam said, "Nope that's the future of the Arena Players." And, "Boy, I had to

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<sup>89</sup> An ABC Baltimore affiliate Black History Month Drama, play filmed for television. See also Hay (1994).

fight to get you in there because you are the future of the Arena Players. I had to fight for you to get you in there like with the Youtheatre.” It was amazing that he stepped down [as the director of Youtheatre productions]. Sam was the person to tell me and make sure that I knew that I could be a director. Because he stepped down—and you [referring to me] were in the Youtheatre at that time—so I can follow him because he kept talking about the future, you know. And that's something that's missing from the Arena Players. Now that's one of its pitfalls that they're not setting up young directors for the future. They're not going in to mentor them.

Sam told me to follow through. No matter what you say follow through with it. And that was something he said to me many times with school, because I was a student at school. And as a young man that helps really build character. Arena Players, they had a lot of great men come through there in terms of developing young African Americans. Artists being father figures. And then ladies of class. They were very keen in identifying people who have multiple talents. And, actually, they saw a little bit of something. And they just pushed me and said, “Now you can direct. Now you can perform. Now you can teach.” All that stuff. A lot of mentors.

I had a unique experience with Charles Dutton there. Charles Dutton was working on a production. It was a fundraiser for Arena. An evening of Shakespeare where he did all of his favorite Shakespearean scenes and he utilized actors from Arena Players. I was the set designer for the production of *The Old Settler*. And I thought I was in the theatre by myself. And he came in and quietly sat down at the back and watched me work. I was just working building a set and it was a wonderful set. And that was the first time I've ever built a set. And I think for 10 or 15 minutes he just sat there quietly. And I was totally unaware that he was sitting there. Finally, he said, “Hello and I understand you're going to be my audio person for the show.” So, we had brief introductions and I thought “Wow, Charles Dutton, how cool is that?” And he said, “Let me tell you something” after our conversation about finding out how I do lights and I do sound and all of that.

[Paraphrasing Dutton] “The great thing that this theatre has is people who are able to do multiple things. However, the hard part is that the theatre is going to have to release people like you because they have to. It's that they have great people working hard like you.” And he told me, “Don't stay here forever because you know sometimes people connect with the community theatre and they don't want to move on. But you got to be willing to go out from here and do other things and occasionally come back. But don't get stuck here.” I was like, “Wow!” That was something he had to do to last. Being passionate about something and being in a space where you have room to be passionate about something but not getting stuck in it. That was great advice for me because if [he] hadn't told me that, there are a lot of things that I would not have gone on to do. And it's easy to know when to come back (Burton 2015).

Many of the Arena Players can attest to Sam Wilson's role as a mentor. In our conversation, Troy Burton also testifies that he's been mentored by other black men and women at the Playhouse including Ed Terry, Benjamin Prestbury, John Taylor, and Catherine Orange. While still a young adult, Burton was able to work alongside his elders as equals while growing in his artistry. This evidence of mentorship in action reveals it to be an educational practice that replaces formal training. It also shows mentorship as supporting the individual and feeding into a network of African American support in black community theatre. Burton, too, has taken on mentorship as an active process of encouragement and theatre skill building. In preventing personal "burnt out," Burton made space to create a vision for other African American cultural endeavors while further honing his black community arts administrative skill set. Subsequently, when Burton took a step back from the Arena Players, following Dutton's advice, his absence reset the continuum of theatre leadership and pedagogy, making way for other young artists to train the next generation.

### **New blood**

Coming from a mixed community theatre troupe, Mitchell's path to the Arena Players is linked to his intentions to find an artistic home outside of academia. This indicates that, though he found opportunity there and in mainstream community theatre in Baltimore, he did not feel entirely at home. The last time Mitchell and I met to talk theatre, he was the Operating Manager of Run of the Mill Theater, an alternative community theatre company. Years later in the Playhouse lobby at the close of a Youtheatre day, we spoke about his role at the Arena Players after he had been named the Associate Artistic Director.

## David D. Mitchell

Working at Arena has given me a deeper appreciation for my own culture and the value that we bring to society. The work is also illuminating. My roles have been about stabilization and the more stable the organization or the building—the actual physical plant—is the more opportunity we have to look at programming and adjust it and to let other people in with ideas. But, if you're in a place of instability, then it's impossible to be welcoming of new things because of the risk involved with that invitation. It's no easy task building bridges between communities because everybody wants to make sure they are understood. Everyone is not always in a place of receiving. In a city that is 60% African American yet it always feels like that part of the ecosystem is always labeled the underdog. There's a huge inequity that we—Yet we still thrive.

The love and support for this institution—that has sustained it in a significant way. The biggest blessing in this place is that we aren't in the red and that we haven't really ever been in the red. And that's to be commended. When you look from one institution to the next across the city there's nobody that has a financial narrative like ours. Now, we're not rolling in the dough either, but, you know, that's big! It's a little bit offensive when people fly off the cuff [giving directives] about the operations. Every organization throughout this city has its warts. You know, we are actually sitting on a highly valued piece of land. And everybody knows that. And we *own* our property which is a real stickler for most folks who wish to develop this property. We can't be moved though we've been offered so many different kinds of deals for movement. We are an art space.

There's just bigger issues you know, I would say on a grassroots level, that we'd have to deal with in order to survive. I would say that a great majority of CSOs [culturally-specific organizations] are understaffed and it's probably an issue for everyone. Yet and still, you have to make a way. The [Baltimore 2015] Uprising is not our major concern because we are one of those many organizations here in Baltimore that has already been doing the work, you know. With the community and with the young people that feel disrespected or undervalued, you know what I mean. So, it wasn't about us springing into action saying "Oh, what do we do? What do we do?" No, "We keep doing what we're doing. I'm glad you guys are now aware" (Mitchell 2015).

While he makes the case for black presence in settings and conversations revolving around funding opportunities, Mitchell brings to light that the limits of individual human capacity don't always make it possible. In making stability a priority in his work at the Playhouse, David Mitchell has become a representative of the theatre in addition to Artistic Director Donald Owens. This doubling of the voice of the theatre in public venues grants the Arena Players more



than one way to connect with the African American and other communities. Mitchell's passion for the survival of black theatre is valuable for the Arena Players at this time when mainstream theatre companies still garner the bulk of regional funding for programming, capital campaigns, and, particularly, for their outreach and inclusion initiatives that mine personnel and audiences from within communities of color.

Perhaps because of that, Mitchell is aiming to maintain the qualities of kinship among the Arena Players. Locally, Mitchell regularly seeks creative partnerships, grant funding, and programming to support the company's mission. In his other capacity, presenting about inclusivity in the U.S. theatre with the Black Theatre Commons, he travels to conferences across the nation to engage in conversations about the survival of culturally-specific institutions. Mitchell garnered the BTC's support in producing a series of archival dinners at the Playhouse during the 2017-2018 season with a rotating guest list of former and present Arena Players. It was a potluck affair in the style of a post-show cast party. With this monthly gathering, the Arena Players found a way to strengthen the familial connections that have kept the company together throughout the preceding six decades by archiving their oral history. Cole (2019) proclaims the tradition of the post-funeral meal, the repass, as a black gathering for (re)memory and rededication to black life. To Cole (2019) the repass is a radical act of community preservation "which, in turn, is also 'political warfare'" (Cole 2019, 2017-8) though it is a series of actions dictated by the showering of love and affection, acts of nurturing, and sharing oral history. Here we talk amongst ourselves, allowing space for those in mourning to hear the oral histories of their loved ones or, while in mourning, we relish our skin, grateful to see another day in a space where there is love and life.

## Working in the wings

The self-determination of volunteer professionals to work as a collective is applied social capital in black theatre. At the Arena Players, Inc. the leaders contribute to black representation with interest as each one defines their respective roles and work with one another to support their shared mission. From these diverse narratives of some of the leaders at the Playhouse, we are enlightened about one black community theatre's pool of volunteer professionals. These volunteer professionals are individual artists that freely give of their time and energy. They also strengthen preexisting skill sets while growing new ones in other content areas. What that reveals about the leadership styles of these collaborators from the Arena Players, Inc. is that they are "thinking actors," learning how to perform their roles and responding to the stimulus provided. In times of emergency, we can trust the show will go on.

And perhaps this is what the mission-driven early novice black people, provoked by "Oh, Say Can You See?" turned to theatre in a time of "America, the Beautiful" wanted in their hard times of fighting for human rights and social justice. The idea of the volunteer-professional cons the idea of the slave. Something *one* never chose. Yet *one* found themselves without a home, without a family, and without permission to exert the full *force* of their will to shape the world around them. Living in a nation that has been colored *for* you, forces *you* to consider the obvious. "Well, what are *you* doing then?" *Some* of us have used this marking of self to make time to create our hearts' desires. The leaders of the Arena Players prove that while *their* personal priorities require them to work a day job or several gigs that fulfill their economic needs, at the end of the day, they still have some energy and a lot of love to left to invest in African American Community cultural wealth. With this certainty it is necessary to remain open with regard to any unexpected changes. The improvisational nature of operating a black community theatre has

grown from its *many* challenges facing the uncertainty of death. In the face of loss and mourning, the Arena Players' investments into conscious mentoring and professional development has prepared their leaders to move through the inevitable. By assessing the needs of the company and each individual's capacities to fulfill those needs, the Arena Players are in a position to defiantly look up and say, "Yes. And?" to the future.

## Chapter 5. Survival Networks

More than just “somewhere for black folks to go” (Owens 2015) the Arena Players on Sam Wilson Way [the stretch of McCulloh St. with the main entrance] has evolved over the years to mean more than the original performer-producers who first presented a play under the moniker. The Arena Players is also more than the venue and trademark orange and purple décor. Writing about the future of a now 66-year-old theatre organization requires a reorientation to where the Arena Players are today. The passing of many longtime Arena Players has, no doubt, left space in the Arena Players family for newcomers. However, it has not disrupted the continuity of creativity and production or stalled the educational programs. The dedicated volunteer professionals who have seen the company through many decades are doing what they have always done. They are still operating as many as seven mainstage productions and one-person shows yearly and training adults and young people in theatre. Under the direction of Catherine Orange, and with the support of Charlene Williamson, the Youtheatre program runs both through the Summer and during the school year. The Studio 801 adult acting classes are still led by its founder, Artistic Director, Donald Owens. And rentals of the space, which support programming, community events and meetings, and corporate social responsibility programs like the Redbull Amiphiko project contribute to growing survival networks for the Arena Players.

This continuity of artistry and service has led to the sustainability of the organization for over sixty years. This longevity is a fact that the Arena Players celebrate heartily with whomever they come in contact. I asked Youtheatre Director Orange if Baltimore was the only possible home for the Arena Players to have originated:

## Catherine Orange

I think the people are important because there's been other cities that have started these theaters and I think in other cities some of the problems are that they started too large or they didn't grow. And I don't think Arena Players is unique to Baltimore. [Pauses.] But, then again it may be. Because in other places where they started, they didn't survive. Did you look at some other places? There's this lady that calls us all the time and says you are not the first black community theater. And I say we are the first black community theater that never ever closed. Cause she's talking about Karamu Theatre in Cleveland. And we have this debate with her all the time. We are the first theater to never have closed since we have started. That's the operative word *never* closed.

And, I don't know, maybe it is unique that it's in Baltimore. And how it started. Cause, like I said, it started when everything was segregated. So, I think it may be unique in the sense of how it started. And how we just kept growing and then it was the Youtheatre and the Little People's Theatre, then the Reader's Theatre. So, it's—maybe you think it may be unique in Baltimore because we've lasted. I don't think it's unique in the sense of starting, but it's the people and the mission that makes it unique. Could it be done someplace else? I'm sure it could. If you had the right time, the right people [trails off] (Orange 2015).

Orange considers the term unique from every angle, both agreeing and disagreeing with its application to the Arena Players' history. Her sense of pride in the Baltimore origin and survival of the Arena Players does not negate space for other black community theatres. However, Orange and the other Arena Players do not invite "competition" among other black community theatres for the title of "oldest continuously operating." Though Karamu is a longstanding black company, Silver (1961) notes that their educational programs and history is one that began in a Yiddish settlement house with Jewish leaders before becoming a black-led arts venture. Karamu is, however, still a black community theatre of note with a long history of youth-centered and multicultural work in Cleveland, Ohio.

While there are white actors and other minorities that are connected to the theatre company, it is predominantly still members of Baltimore's geographically spread-out African American community that create, administer, and attend events and productions at the

Playhouse. David Mitchell assesses the Arena Players' environment and draw as nurturing and relevant for hobbyists from all walks of life. His belief is that they view their contributions onstage or behind the scenes as fulfilling a dream and they participate "for the love of *this* place" (Mitchell 2015).

Today, the Arena Players have a sitting board of seventeen members. Some of these board members use their community networks to highlight the work of the theatre, like Radio One host, Senator Larry Young. There is also an outside group of supporters called the Friends of Arena Players. They plan fundraising events, buy batches of group tickets for performances, and have even made gifts of objects d'art that honor Arena Players founders. While I have not been able to interview a representative of the Friends group who could give me a solid date on their incorporation, I know they began meeting as early as the 1990s. I have been told that they are both cheerleaders and critics of the Arena Players' operational style. The Friends of Arena Players are a group made up now of primarily senior citizens, many of whom were performers and patrons in their earlier days. They wish for more visibility, more government funding, upgrades to the Playhouse, and more plays that suit their collective tastes. At their 2018 gala they championed the Youtheatre by inviting former members to perform and host. I happened to be one and performed a monologue from Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West*. The Friends of Arena players also unveiled two bas reliefs of Sam Wilson and Irv Turner, two of the most revered founders. Their surviving family members were present to celebrate, including Sam Wilson's grandson, who flew in from Helsinki, Finland, in order to learn more about the Arena Players.

But the Board and the Friends weren't the only organizations that apply their black social capital for the Arena Players. Black networks of survival rely on these investments from within the African American community for anything from word-of-mouth performance notices to

invitations for fundraising. For the Arena Players to continue making space for black novices, they have established creative partnerships with other black institutions in their network of survival. In the summer of 2017, I attended Jam for the Arts, a joint fundraiser for the Arena Players, Inc. and the Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute and Cultural Center. Held at the Eubie Blake Center, a multipurpose performance venue, art gallery, and jazz historical and cultural center named in honor of the Baltimore jazz musician and early black musical theatre contributor, the affair was packed out and felt like three events rolled into one. On every floor, current Arena Players, alumni, and members of Baltimore's African American community were interacting in many styles of attire, from the sparkly club look to dressed down jeans and t-shirts. The attendees of the event represented a very diverse showing of Baltimore City and County African Americans from many different social strata. Even high-profile Baltimoreans such as Baltimore District Attorney Marilyn Mosby, were there. As the night closed, the Artistic Director of the Eubie Blake Center, Troy Burton, and the Executive Managing Director of the Arena Players, Rodney Orange, began to work together to stack chairs and clean up. Though I wasn't dressed to work, I saw several things from an event planning perspective. First, the success of the evening which generated financial support for the theatre and cultural center also delivered a good night out to all. And also, how two leaders committed to work as an ensemble. But lastly, I noted the ways I crossed over from audience to participant throughout the night.

### **Current concerns**

Now, as the Arena Players, Inc. family and community network mourn the loss of the stalwart Executive Director, Rodney A. Orange, Jr. (Kelly 15 May 2019), the company is focused more than ever on continuing the legacy of its founders, to be a stable home for the growth of the black arts in Baltimore, and to continue educating others in black theatre. In tuning

into some of the key issues that jeopardize the sanctity of the company we see that budgetary constraints and the limits of individual capacity take their tolls. Additionally, we can see how a scarcity of financial investment in the institution can stifle creative projects and lead to uncomfortable conditions for performers and audiences. But there are also theater etiquette concerns that stem from the modern age and affect audience attention spans. In our 2015 conversation Lighting Board Operator, Charlene Williamson brings up the practical issue of cell phone use in theatre audiences a huge distraction to the actors and other audience members. But the black audience is critical to the future of the Arena Players as the source of their potential earned income. Other black theatres also lean heavily on ticket sales as part of their operating budget (Anderson, 2018, 11). Williamson is also attentive to this and expresses frustration about the costs of printing tickets for productions that aren't popular with audiences. Of this phenomenon, she says, "We still mess up. We still lose money printing tickets when we don't get people" (Williamson 2015).

My collaborator, director and Baltimore City theatre teacher, Eric Jones has an idea where some members of the black audience are instead of the theatre. We both were students in the Intermediate and Youtheatre groups around the same time. And his spirited frustration put me in mind of his father, Cornel Jones, who was my high school philosophy teacher and my then 3-year-old nephew's favorite Macbeth. From Jones' perspective at the time of our 2015 conversation, economic reasons prevented equitable access to theatre for Baltimore's black audiences. His emphasis on "just maintaining," or making ends meet, is one that urges a new action plan from the networks of survival that have upheld the Arena Players. But it is Jones' critical view of the theatre that links Baltimore City's infrastructure and inconsistent governance with the fate of the Playhouse earmarking it as a place that needs vital change.



## Eric Jones

I think the two [Baltimore City & Arena Players, Inc.] can't exist without the other. If art is a reflection of life, then this place is definitely a reflection of this city. This city has no current identity and neither does this theatre. The [2015] riots are a direct reflection of that. And in some ways this place is like that. It's become a relic of this city's past. This place should *not* be a relic [throws hands up ardently]. This place should be leading the way to what the rest of the city is. Dammit. The city is always talking about a cultural center. So, guess what? This place should be a part of the cultural center as anything else. I think the city gets caught up with all the newer theatres that have sprung up around North Avenue—the oldest established African American theatre is still here—and guess what? It's the forerunner. And while we have the Spotlighters theatre—While we have the Vagabonds Theatre—This is the one theatre that's ours. African American.

This is a byproduct of this not being run the way it should have been run. We distance ourselves from things that aren't run the way they ought to be run. The Christmas show we had giant heaters on in the wings just trying to maintain. That's serious. We *maintaining*. If this place reflects the city, then guess what? [exasperated] *Baltimore* is just maintaining. This theatre is just maintaining. There is no growth in this city and that's why its young people feel like they *can not* progress. And *that's* how the city works. *That's* how its wired [disappointed].

Now we're starting to get into a cultural divide. Those who are just maintaining don't have time to seek the arts. Therefore, the arts get thrown away. The arts are *already* thrown away by the government. Yet, it's been documented that people who take up the arts make more money and are better educated, are better students, make better workers. When Arena Players is brought up, [repeating] "That place is *still open*?" (Jones 2015).

Anywhere else, these frustrations would likely drive a person to retire from volunteer-professionalism all together. This is not universally the case at the Arena Players, where those the most active feel free to use their voice in disagreement with the status quo. Usually, this counter punto is in order to provoke a conversation that leads to some solution or plan for the future. In Jones' narrative, he is alluding to a frustration that the black community theatre company is not on a trajectory for progress without a windfall of funds. But as a company they must define progress for themselves. The bigger issue of identity that Jones brings up is one that

is visible in the city's inattention to the black arts in Baltimore. Mallach (2012), who lays out ways towards urban rejuvenation, notes that deindustrialization in Baltimore in the 1970s (Mallach, 2012, 8) was significant to the evacuation of the city center by businesses and private citizens. The attention the Playhouse doesn't garner in the mainstream arts corridors may point to its position as an outlier, but greater visibility will come from concentrated conversations between the City and the Arena Players about their role in a historical black-serving arts institution.

When my collaborator Shirley Watson sat with me in my mother's home, she reminded me that she was one of my first music teachers at the Playhouse. I remember her most as a guest pianist at different churches I had visited in Baltimore City. In our 2016 conversation Watson links advertising choices with audience attendance concerns. She believes that the African American community is trying to connect with the Playhouse, but are either unable to get through, due to the limitations of its open hours as a community theatre, or they are not adequately reached where they are:

### **Shirley Watson**

They could be, I think, doing a lot better. Catherine told me on the other day they didn't have a good audience.<sup>90</sup> And I wanted to say why don't you all publicize? So, I just decided that I would go down when I always go down to the shows. And invite other people to come too. Because it's a real fun thing to do. And they have some good actors there too (Watson 2016).

It is very difficult for theatre companies to reach wider audiences without seeking advertising sources that target and woo patrons from different demographics. Officially, the Playhouse is open Monday-Friday 3 PM – 10 PM, 10 AM - 10 PM Saturdays, and 10 AM -7 PM Sundays.

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<sup>90</sup> Here, Watson indicates a full house.

Unofficially, the work there goes on around the clock. The mode of advertising that has worked for the company is through phone calls and social media, as word-of-mouth. As it stands, the Arena Players' financial resources are heavily geared toward production costs and building maintenance—not traditional advertising means. For mass appeal, the advertising budget and all marketing material costs prioritize the season brochure and on-site production posters. Watson's personal strategy, though, is based on pre-social media theatre etiquette of reaching out individual to individual. This kind of interpersonal outreach creates more meaningful connections between the newcomer and the institution and demonstrates black community theatre's reliance on authentic relationships.

## **Continuity**

Gary Anderson (2018) Producing Artistic Director of Plowshares Theatre Company (founded 1989) feels that the black theatre, as a whole, will require a combination of self-determinative strategies to end conversations about uncertain survival (Anderson 2018, 19). As the company continues its work, I wanted to know how my collaborators felt the Arena Players should move forward. I brought every interview to a close with a question about the future of the Arena Players. Some collaborators were entirely optimistic. A few expressed concerns about the future citing the lessening support of the theatre by African Americans in Baltimore. All of my collaborators felt an urgent need for help of some sort was necessary. Most felt that the only option is for the Arena Players to remain a community theatre because they couldn't imagine a Baltimore without the Playhouse. Its influence has reverberated throughout the city and the wider arts world. Even with the advent of streaming and binge-watching, from time to time, an Arena Players Alum is on someone's television, tablet, or stage. And more volunteer-professionals are needed to build capacity and provide the programming needs. Even while bursting with pride at

the past, the principal concern for many of my collaborators was rooted in continuity. They didn't ask who would commit to the onerous task of leading the Arena Players into the future, but they had many ideas about what the Playhouse would offer in the future.

Wrestling announcer, Larry Mercer remembers his time at the Playhouse fondly and wants "the Arena Players to never go away" (Mercer 2016). He also wants a return of the Black History Month pageant plays where the Youtheatre performs for public school students. Choreographer, Yvette Shipley believes that "black community theatre is to Baltimore as Baltimore is to black community theatre" (Shipley 2015). She sees a future that relies more on audience development and more community crossover events. Dramaturg Emeritus, Eugenia Collier, answered the question from a community value stance. She sees wider outreach as a valuable investment the Arena Players can make in their own future.

### **Eugenia Collier**

I've seen them grow from Coppin. I've seen them attract scholars from different places. They need more leadership in that direction from what they've had. History is written by the victors It's not written by me and you. The black story is really the basis of our civilization[...]I would like to see the Arena Players tap into that in terms of the black experience reaching out as far as is possible[...]I would like to see the Arena Players reach out more into the international community. They don't have to be just right here on McCulloh Street. There is so much talent right here in Baltimore to be the nucleus of it, but that's only the nucleus. It needs to go so far from here in terms of just reaching out (Collier 2017).

Collier takes the position that the theatre's leadership should reinforce connections with higher education in order to express the vitality of black history. She is in favor of historical programming and positioning the company as one that operates within a global network. Though it is unclear which international communities she is referring to, Collier does characterize the

Arena Players as a cultural arts hub that has the potential to be of interest to other cultural groups.

My collaborators see a future for the company in its dogged ability to continue to produce African American theatre and train amateurs from interest to artist since 1953. And they all hope for the kind of funding to assist that survival. And so, it is fitting that my collaborators contextualize their wishes for the future by noting their outrage in the attention the theatre does not get from the African American community and municipal government which all point to levels of funding.

### **Troy Burton**

Historically [the Arena Players] needs to continue to exist to set an example of people's struggle and how--as a teaching vehicle--how to develop and get through. How to continue your education. Arena plays an important role even with all of the other Regional Theaters and dinner theaters in the area. They are doing pieces by August Wilson and other African American playwrights. I think it still really says something when you *have* an African American theater in the city and that's what it offers Baltimore. That this is a company of historical significance that is still around instilling pride in people of Baltimore. Arena needs money from Baltimore. Financial means are also [necessary]. Baltimore needs to understand that Arena provides the spirit of longevity and that's what Arena has given to Baltimore. And quality, you know. There have been some ups and downs and some bad plays, but at some point, Arena has always prevailed in terms of coming around (Burton 2015).

In asking about the future, I also brought up ideas of the past. The two are not separate in an African worldview. My collaborators see the value of Arena Players' longevity as a surviving black arts institution and emphasize the value of its historical presence in Baltimore. And perhaps that is a way to lead the conversation at the table with government officials as the Arena Players lobby for themselves, but with a wider network.

In 2015 Associate Artistic Director, David Mitchell spoke of the ways that Baltimore City has not assessed the value of the Arena Players, leading to the city's newcomers overlooking the historic theatre company. Mitchell sees that their attention, and therefore, dollars are primed for mainstream arts organizations like "the Walters [Art Museum], Centerstage, [and] the Meyerhoff [Symphony Hall]"<sup>91</sup> (Mitchell 2015) without being inclusive of the culturally specific organizations and venues like the Playhouse. Even though many strangers I've approached either don't know of the Arena Players or have expressed surprise that they are still open, the Arena Players has never left the minds and hearts of former Youtheatre members like myself. Demonstrating its open-door policy, many Youtheatre members are investing in the black community theatre where they received their early theatre training. Josh Dixon, a Baltimore City Public Schools educator and up-and-coming comedian, performs at the Playhouse regularly, and recently directed for the Youtheatre program. Devron T. Young is an actor, singer, and director whose 2017 production of *Ain't Misbehavin'* was very popular at the Playhouse. Once again utilizing African American networks, black community theatre and HBCUs are expanding black theatre's reach. Another former Youtheatre member, photographer Ciera Adams, has successfully initiated a conversation with Morgan State University about partnering to archive documents and images from the past six decades. Some of this material was donated by Arena Players Emeritus, retired, but still active patrons, like Nancy and George Barrick,<sup>92</sup> who passed in 2018 (Kelly 27 Apr. 2018), and the family of Sam Wilson. This creative partnership could be the first digital archive of an African American *community* theatre to be established at an historically black university. Taking the steps to preserve and distribute

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<sup>91</sup> It is within walking distance heading East on MLK, Jr. Blvd.

<sup>92</sup> George Barrick, Asé!

information prioritizes enlightening others about and expanding awareness of culturally specific institutions like the Arena Players, Inc. In another archival step to preserve the work of black theatre the Black Theatre Commons is working with the Smithsonian National African American Museum of Culture and History to build a black theatre digital archive where a portion of these archival materials will be available. The future of these initiatives will reflect how the highly digitally connected African American community in Baltimore and beyond responds to black community theatre.

Irregardless (Coates 2009) of this document, I would be remiss in excluding that I, too, have been tapped as part of this cohort's collaborators. I am deeply honored to have been recruited to perform several functions at the theatre during the 2016-17 Season. In the course of my fieldwork and as a product of the Arena Players' ensemble of educators, I've also worn several hats at once: Public Relations, Curator, Resident Dramaturg, and sometime director and performer. My return to Baltimore coincided with a reactivation of the visual arts at the Playhouse. In his search for an individual who believes in the mission of the theatre, Mitchell offered me the opportunity to be the theatre's liaison with Baltimore's visual art community. I have acted as a Curator for the Arena Players Gallery and Exhibition Space to help activate the lobby area as was once done by another soul gone home. Additionally, I've been continuing to grow as a theatre artist there as well. In the 64th Season, while dramaturg for Katori Hall's *Hoodoo Love*, I was present at rehearsals which led to the Arena Players tradition of being called on as other production needs arose. Not only did I dramaturg the show, I was also the intimacy coach for Hall's lyric take on self-determination after trauma. I contributed to the set and props, working late into the night/early into the wee hours of morning to bring the director's vision to life, along with other volunteer-professionals. I also became the costume designer and a running

crew member for performances. But, in my experience, this is still proof that there is a desperate need for more hands on deck.

In the 65th Season, my work as a dramaturg overlapped with my work as a curator for Arena Players' production of *A Raisin in the Sun*. I undertook this with the understanding that black theatre audiences were well familiar with the text, due to its popularity in schools and mainstream theatres. As the Black History Month production, it served to swell the numbers of African Americans at mainstream theatres for audience development. Because of the fatigue that many black theatre goers experience due to the oversaturation of a highly valuable black play such as *Raisin* and other oft-performed classics from the August Wilson canon, I wanted to highlight the 60th anniversary of Lorraine Hansberry's classic in a much more radical way than through traditional program notes. I wanted to present it in a way that reflected a holistic dramaturgical practice, so that it would be highly accessible across the generations and subcultures that make up the audiences at the Playhouse.

The vision I had was simple; to take the dramaturgy off the page and let it live on the walls of the Gallery. Instead of a brief commentary about the themes of the text, I opted for something more active, from which the audience members could not escape. Because the gallery is also the lobby where audience members visit and talk before the house opens, pass through during restroom breaks, and during intermission for concession sales, I had a captive audience for the production dramaturgy. My rationale was uncomplicated. In today's increasingly digitized world full of scrolling images on social media, I wanted to prime the audience for the live performance they came to see on stage, but I did not want to tell them how to feel about the art works that filled the walls.



Although I was multi-tasking in my role as curator and part of the set<sup>93</sup> and props team, as a dramaturg, I specifically wanted to create a more engaging way for black audiences, in particular, to draw their own contemporary meanings from the production directed by David Mitchell. I also wanted to emphasize the power of black theatre produced in a black space by black people sixty years after the play dramatized the process leading up to one family's integration of white Chicago. Keeping in mind the maxim "a picture is worth a thousand words," the exhibition theme for "Visions of *A Raisin in the Sun*" called for artwork inspired by the play, directly reflecting the themes and characters, or making observations of/providing commentary on the current state of African Americans since the Civil Rights Movement.

Selected artists from across the African Diaspora submitted work that drew on their experiences and vision as black artists. They are: Ram Brisueno, April Byrd, Dew the Artist (Douggy Charmant), Monique Dove, Cheryl Edwards, Claudia Gibson-Hunter, Liz Miller, S. Rasheem, Erin Savage, and Akan Udoh. Their works covered a range of concepts such as urban blight, gentrification, black pride, and home. Curation, I found, is also an educational practice at the Playhouse. In encouraging artists from the African Diaspora to exhibit their work, *I* had to learn how to hang artwork properly, so that I could teach some of the artists who have never hung their own artwork before, how to hang their work professionally. Learning this process of curation was accessible to me at the Arena Players as a novice even as I am bringing my formal education to a close. Professionally, these are just more experiences to add to my C.V. which chronicles, in

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<sup>93</sup> I installed a running water faucet in a sink using plumbing fixtures, hoses, and a pressurized spray bottle.

part, a lifetime of black theatre, a few years across the pond, some teaching and mentoring, some curriculum development, some publications, and some artistic praxis under my belt. Ultimately, though, my return to my hometown is only a small step up in the world of academic theatre. As a volunteer-professional, it brings my involvement in black theatre full circle, back to my community though.

It is from Samuel Hay's (1994) assertion that the company gets its moniker as "the oldest continuously operating African American community theatre company" (Hay 1994, 179) since 1992. A designation the Arena Players have worn with pride. However, in the midst of celebrating their 67<sup>th</sup> consecutive season of productions, the Arena Players added a new skill for everyone to learn—Facebook Live streaming technology. Having just concluded phase one of theatre renovations, which targeted rebuilding the stage itself in 2018, the current plan to refurbish and add office space on the second floor of the building will benefit from a recent grant. At the close of 2019 the Maryland Board of Public Works approved a \$300,000 grant for infrastructure improvements to the Playhouse (Yeager 2019) which would, in addition to the ongoing fundraising drive to install new audience seating in the performance space, would get people curious. But the Arena Players are also focused on expanding their legacy and they are relying on the leadership, support, and commitment of the of the next generation of African American theatre artists and practitioners.

History had other plans for Arena Player's 67<sup>th</sup> Season. Not only did the year 2020 bring the onset of a global pandemic from the coronavirus SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) that has shaken what it means to live, work, and play to the core. The year also brought the loss of more black lives. While all industries have had their struggles, the "butts in the seats" policies of the performance arts had to pivot in order to find ways to engage audiences and artists in online

arenas. Staying safe during quarantine has forced theatres everywhere to find new ways to connect with patrons via peer-to-peer virtual meeting services. Due to Maryland's statewide quarantine in effect March 13, 2020, the Arena Players had to restructure its modes of outreach and production style in order to protect its most valuable audience base and vulnerable population of senior citizens. While the ides of March had already jolted live theatre production from its mooring, the Summer of 2020 was a painful reminder of Baltimore 2015. It manifested again and again when Breonna Taylor and George Floyd lost their lives at the hands of police officers. These stark reminders of state sanctioned violence were painful echoes of the "strange fruit" African Americans mourned in the first two thirds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Again, Mayor Jack Young instituted curfews to keep the bitter protest from spilling over into the City infrastructure. In sounding out feelings of loss via protest, the African American community reclaims, or reiterates, black voice and black presence. But, this time, the network of citizens in the U.S. swelled to reach across the world. And the voices that hollered out and cried out that #blacklivesmatter were from a global ensemble. With each time zone, they began the refrain anew. Some of us while learning how to stop working from home as their mother lay dying.

But the daily routine of the Playhouse has not been completely broken by the global pandemic, rather, the Arena Players looked to shelter and encourage the growth of black youth as always. The Little People's, Intermediate, and Youtheatre Summer programs did meet in 2020, albeit with smaller numbers and additional sanitation practices in place. But these protections are a given. Especially through these uncertain times, when the life, liberty, and justice for all has once again been brought into question by the overwhelmingly white majority in the mob that stormed Capitol Hill on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 with the intention to intercept and arrest the peaceful transition of power between presidents (Anderson 2021). At least it didn't happen here—this

time. And now as Baltimore City's newest and youngest Mayor, Brandon Scott (Condon 2021), is easing quarantine restrictions while COVID-19 vaccines are making their rounds, the break may soon be over. As ever, the Arena Players are poised, at the ready to open to the public at any given time. Someone will return an email addressed to [arenaplayersinc@gmail.com](mailto:arenaplayersinc@gmail.com) and one can still find Ms. Orange at the Playhouse taking calls at 410-728-6500. But, before you enter the office, #pullyamaskup, and pause a moment to read the names of those who have passed (Asé!). Those Players are listed there on the board to your right.

## **Appendix A. Arena Players Collaborators**

### **1. Jerome Banks-Bey (interviewed 2 February 2017)**

From East Baltimore, Banks-Bey describes his younger self as both outspoken and shy at times. He credits his time at the Play Shop in the 1970s with providing him a firm foundation in theatre skills and maturity. There, he found strong mentors in Donald Owens and Irv Turner. Banks-Bey studied Acting and Directing at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. As an actor he has performed across the U.S. He has also been a Theatre teacher in the Baltimore County and Prince George's public school systems.

### **2. Troy Burton (interviewed 24 June 2015)**

Originally trained as a vocalist at Morgan State University, Burton recalls his introduction to the Arena Players when Hugh Carey brought him and his two friends, Laura Sligh and Leah Gilmore, to the theatre after finishing an internship at Center Stage. Ed Terry directed Burton in his first production eventually teaching him how to tap dance. His creative force was not only applied at the Arena Players, but also at the Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute and Cultural Center, just around the way from the Playhouse on Howard St., which he led for a decade before becoming their Artistic Director. Burton is also the tour manager of performing artist Maysa, a founding member of the popular 1990s group Incognito.

### **3. Eugenia Collier (interviewed 17 January 2017)**

Collier has loved theatre and performed as a child in school productions. She has attended various theatre conferences and performances. An avid audience member of the Arena Players since their first production at Coppin College, Collier recalls the art exhibition by a black

artist that preceded the opening performance. Although a writer best known for her prize-winning 1969 short story, *Marigolds*, Collier was introduced to the production side of the Arena Players when she worked as Dramaturg with Director Amini Courts. She credits her education “as a literary person” for allowing her to interpret play texts and John O. Killens for teaching her how to reconstruct a character.

#### **4. Eric Jones (interviewed 24 June 2015)**

Jones grew up in a family of educators and his father, Cornell Jones, was a longtime Arena player before his recent passing in 2018. Jones is a Youtheatre alum and a Baltimore City public school drama teacher. He holds a B.S. in Mass Communication from Towson University and a Master’s of Theater Education from Catholic University in Washington, D.C. As a teaching-artist he has been the Director of the Intermediate Youth theatre productions for the last nine years in Summer and Fall sessions.

#### **5. David D. Mitchell (interviewed 19 June 2015)**

Mitchell has been a Theatre Lecturer at HBCU, Morgan State University, and Managing Director for Baltimore community theatre, Run of the Mill, until 2011. I worked with him there from 2006-2008. Among other arts appointments Mitchell is a founder of the Urban Arts Leadership Program which began with the goal of bringing African Americans and other minorities into mainstream networks of arts production and nonprofit arts management in Baltimore’s existing organizations. He is a noted Baltimore director and he is currently working with the Black Theatre Commons, a group that sprang from the National Black Theatre’s 2014 Catalyst conference. Mitchell says part of him knew that “whatever career trajectory [he] took, art would be a part of it.”

**6. Larry Mercer****(interviewed 14 November 2016)**

Mercer's exposure to theatre began with school pageants before his mother enrolled him in the Arena Players in the early 1990s. He studied Theatre at George Washington Carver Vocational-Technical High School before becoming a gigging actor in New York. He is now professional wrestling announcer and sees his involvement at the Arena Players as foundational in his current performance work. By the end of two summers, Mercer began to see theatre as something he would do "for a long time."

**7. Ackneil Muldrow, II****(interviewed 29 June 2015)**

From Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Muldrow grew up around the black academics of the Winston-Salem State College HBCU community. The beginning of his tenure with the Arena Players Board of Directors in the early 1980s began after he had been working in the financial industry. Muldrow has also been a board member for the Walters Art Gallery. Of his time serving on the Arena Players Board, Muldrow, "saw good a dedicated group of people as performers and a dedicated support group in the board members." Muldrow and his wife Ruth, a Trustee at my home church, Providence Baptist Church, also lived in the Baltimore City neighborhood I grew up in, Mt. Washington. Muldrow passed in 2018.

**8. Catherine Orange****(interviewed 29 June 2015)**

In the 1960s Orange remembers attending performances at the Playhouse with her grandmother and her best friend's mother. Though she characterizes herself as an amateur at the start of her tenure with the Arena Players, she was undertaking her bachelor's degree after making a career in cosmetology and fashion. In the 1970s when Orange accepted the invitation of Sam Wilson, her English Professor at Coppin College, she did not foresee herself eventually

serving on the Board of Directors. As a parent, Orange has guided several generations of black theatre practitioners. She is a retired Baltimore City Public School system teacher who was also my eleventh grade Theatre teacher at Baltimore City College High School. I first recall meeting Ms. Orange in her official capacity as Youtheatre Director at the Playhouse when I was six or seven. Her memory of me, however, stretches back before my birth to when my mother and she taught at the integrated Lemuel Junior High School together in the 1970s.

#### **9. D. Russell “Donald” Owens (interviewed 23 June 2015)**

My key collaborator, Artistic Director D. Russell [Donald] Owens, was born in Virginia, just outside of Washington, D.C., but was educated in the Catholic school system in DC. The son of a performer, he grew up exposed to working Black artists. Though he has retired from the financial industry, Owens’ journey in theatre included performing as a high school student, college training in theatre Ohio, and working as a performer in commercial theatre in New York as well as some film work. Additionally, he has worked in Alexandria, Virginia, at the segregated Little Theatre of Alexandria (community theatre) in an offstage only capacity. He was recruited to join the Arena Players family by Sam Wilson and considers his mentor to be Irv Turner. Reflecting on his personal experience, Owens says theatre “wasn’t something to learn. It was something was through osmosis. It was just natural.”

#### **10. Yvette Shipley (interviewed 1 July 2015)**

After training as a dancer at Peabody Institute, Shipley studied with Maria Broom and the teachers at the Dunbar Cultural Center, including Arena Player John Taylor. Shipley danced with Eva Anderson in the Baltimore Dance Theater company for over twenty-five years. Though she attended performances at the Playhouse in the 1970s, Shipley became a dance teacher and choreographer at Arena Players in 1988 when she heard they need a teacher for the summer.



Shipley says that dance has “always been in” her. And it still is. We worked together on a production written and directed by Laura Sligh titled, *Who Am I?* (2020) as the COVID-19 precautions turned into quarantines. It premiered on Zoom via Single Carrot Theater.

**11. Shirley Watson (interviewed 30 January 2016)**

As an audience member Watson enjoyed attending performances at the Playhouse and other theatres including those on Broadway, before she became an Arena Player. A pianist and a retired educator, she had not worked in theatre until she began performing as a pit musician with the Arena Players. In addition to performing at churches around Baltimore, Watson was a teaching artist for the youth arts programs for many years. She was one of my music teachers when I first began attending the Little People’s theatre in 1986.

**12. Charlene Williamson (interviewed 29 June 2015)**

Williamson began as a parent volunteer of a student in the Little People’s Theatre program in the 1980s. Since that time, she has been working at the Arena Players to coordinate performance needs and facilitate the Youtheatre, Intermediate, and Little People’s Theatre summer and school-year performance programs. As a Home Economics teacher for many years, Williamson has also contributed to the Arts Administration side of things including the tedious work of collecting information from casts for their productions to put together programs and handling the clerical work of brochures and printing tickets for use each performance for decades now. At the Playhouse, Williamson went from novice to training others in stage management, lighting, and sound. And, thirty years later, operates the light board for nearly all of the mainstage productions.

## Appendix B. Notes on Transcription

The transcript is limited when compared to the live experience, and the audio or video recording, which preserves a nearly complete experience of an event. I offer the reader the memories and present [at the time of interview] thoughts of my collaborators which feature heavily in this document. Moments from my transcribed interviews support or diverge from the historical research within this dissertation. In bringing the voices of practitioners into the archive of African American community theatre, I am seeking to correct an academic oversight that has long discounted the value of African American laypeople's' contributions to the discourse. With my guiding questions (in Chapter 1) I wanted to create room for my individual collaborators to speak according to their own narrative structures. Because each was asked the same questions, I did not include myself in the transcripts except in a few instances. However, during the process there were many instances where conversational markers of guttural affirmation and shared reactions resembled the call and response of "preaching to the choir" due to the memories, history, and African American cultural lexicon that I share with my collaborators.

As historians and ethnographers we carry on the documentarian traditions from those early field recordings of black music and accounts of formerly enslaved African Americans, so it is important to my practice to preserve the narrative without imposing a superficial dialect, or accent, to the spoken words of my collaborators. For this project it would be akin to bastardizing their voices. However, I do provide certain notations, familiar to play texts, that look like stage directions, which allow the reader insight into some nonverbal cues that affect the speaker's meaning: physical gestures, tonal shifts, groans, and laughter. Furthermore, I maintain some speakers' use of discourse markers such as *like*, *you know*, or *and so*, which mark the particular

cadence of the individual. None of these recorded interviews would have made it into transcript form if it were not for the generous suggestion of West Baltimore community leader, Ianthia Darden, to use the “Voice” function in Google Docs. Onto each excerpt of the transcribed narrative utilized in the document, I impose a thread of analysis to draw the reader’s attention to the collaborator’s message as part of a shared experience. But most importantly the excerpts chosen are meant to reveal the ways that my collaborators, like a jazz ensemble, diverge, clash, signify to, cosign, and callback to one another’s individual experience, without prompting.

## Appendix C. Release Form for Academic Work

### RELEASE FORM FOR ACADEMIC WORK

AM SKINNER DISSERTATION

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (print name of the undersigned Interviewee), understand that Alexis M. Skinner (the Author) is conducting research for, preparing, writing, and may publish a dissertation (the Work) on the subject of minority theatre administration.

In order to assist the Author in the preparation of the Work, I have agreed to be interviewed and to provide information and other materials to be used in connection with the Work, including my personal experiences, remarks, and recollections as well as any photographs and documents that I may choose to give to the Author (the Interview Materials). I understand that the Author will extend extensive and valuable time and effort in preparing a manuscript based on her interviews with me and has relied on my consent to use this interview material.

I hereby grant and assign to the Author and his/her licensees, successors, and assigns the following rights in connection with the Interview Materials for use as part of the Work or any advertising, packaging, or promotional materials for the Work, in any and all editions, versions, and media, in perpetuity and throughout the world:

1. The right to quote or paraphrase all or any portion of the Interview Materials, and to generally use and publish the Interview Materials, including my experiences, recollections, incidents, remarks, dialogue, actions, and information, as well as any photographs and documents that I may give to the Author.
2. The right to use my name, image, and biographical data.
3. The right to develop, produce, distribute, advertise, promote, or otherwise exploit the Work as a dissertation or any other Work in any manner that the Author or his/her assigns deems appropriate. I understand and acknowledge that the Author or his/her assigns will be the sole owner of all copyright and other rights in and to the Work.

In order to enable the Author to develop the Work in any manner that the Author may deem best, I hereby release and discharge the Author and his/her licensees, successors, and assigns, from any and all claims, demands, or causes of action that I may have against them by reason of anything contained in the Work, or any of the above uses, including any claims based on the right of privacy, the right of publicity, copyright, libel, defamation, or any other right.

☐ I choose for my name, image, and participation in this study to be withheld from any publication. My contributions can be used anonymously.

I acknowledge and agree that I am not entitled to receive any other form of payment from the Author and/or his/her licensees, successors, and assigns.

Agreed and confirmed:

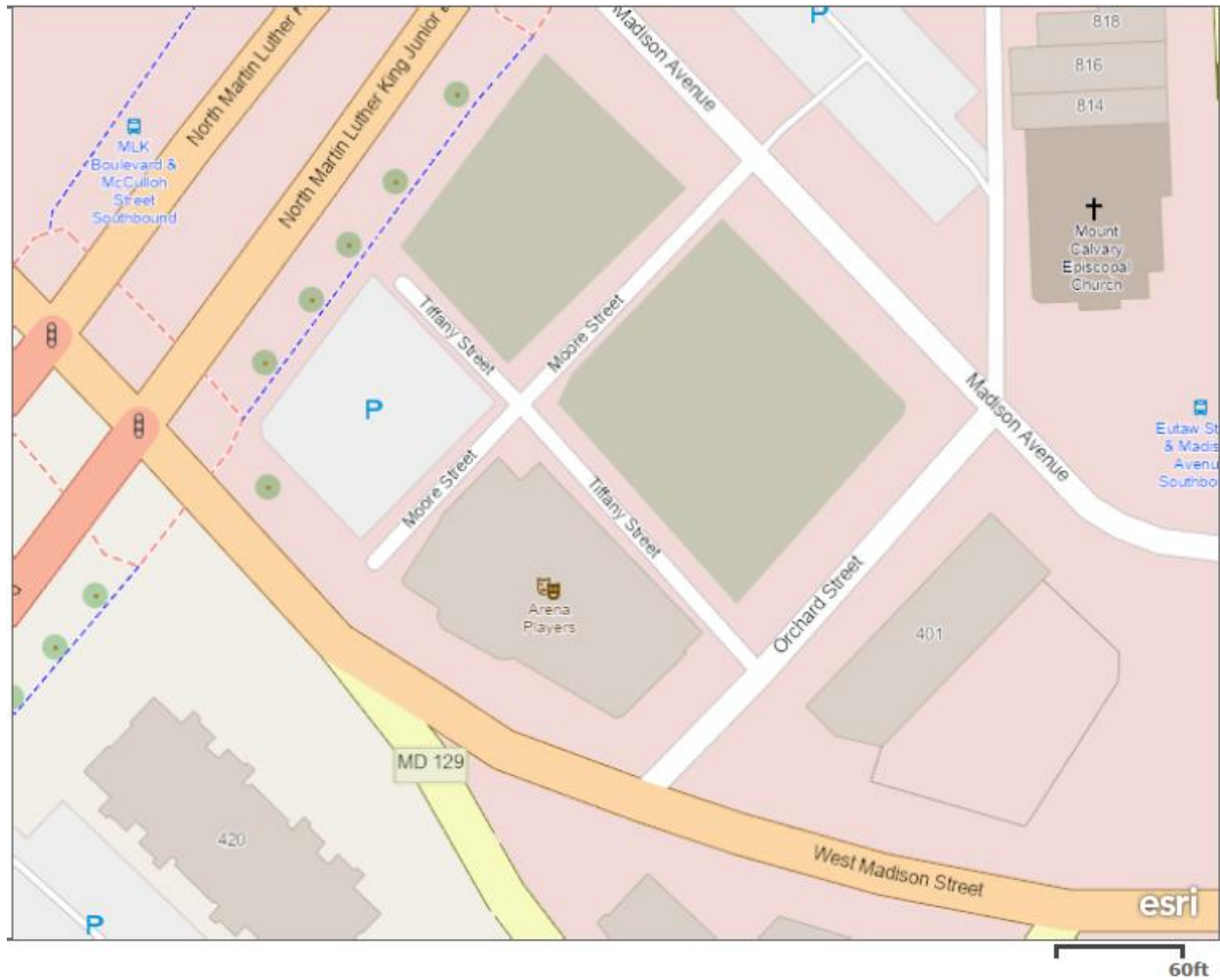
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Date

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Name (print)

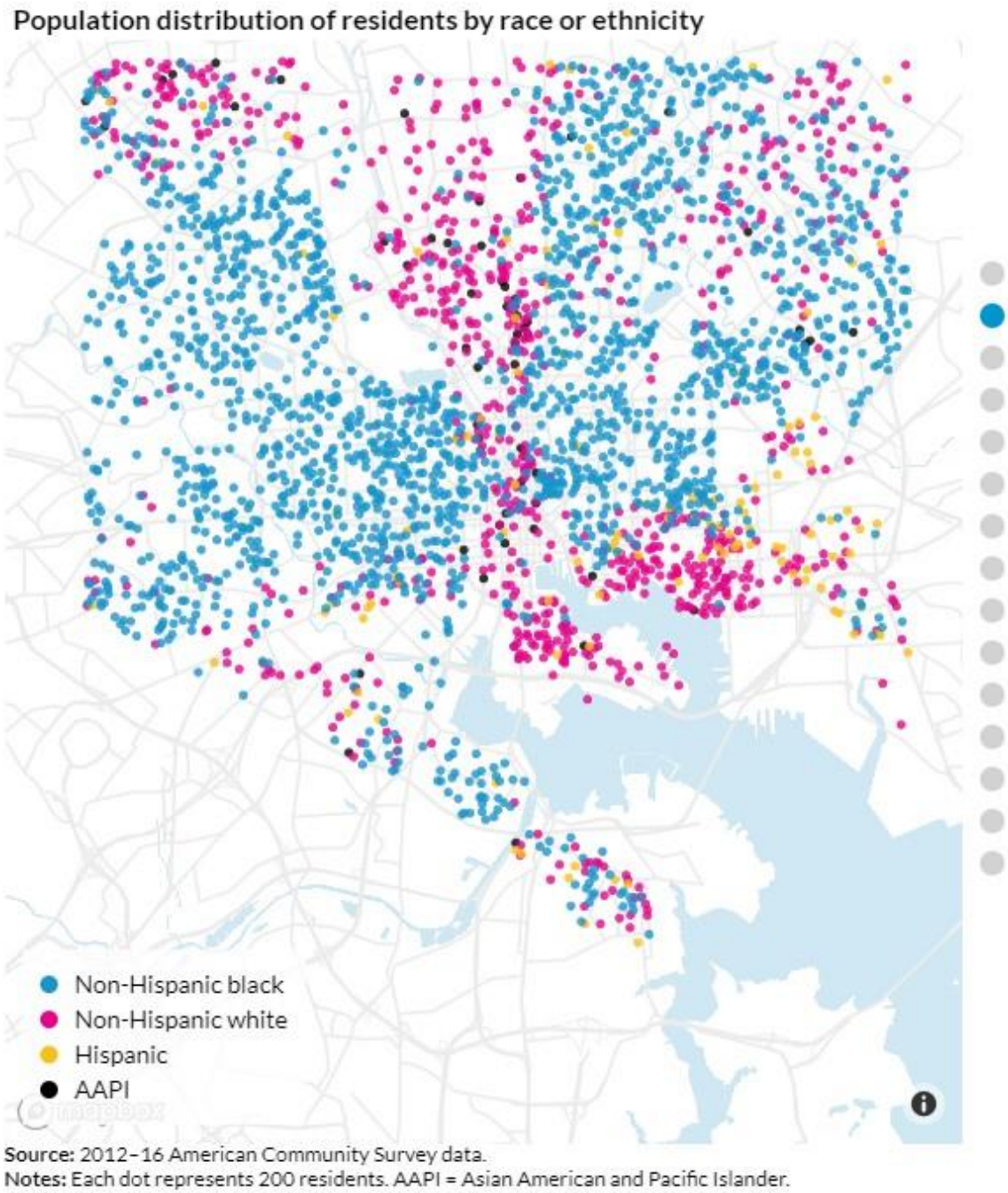
## Appendix D. Maps

**Map 1.** Arena Players, Inc. 801 McCulloh Street, Baltimore, Maryland, 21201 (Baltimore Open Data “Open Street Map” 2020).



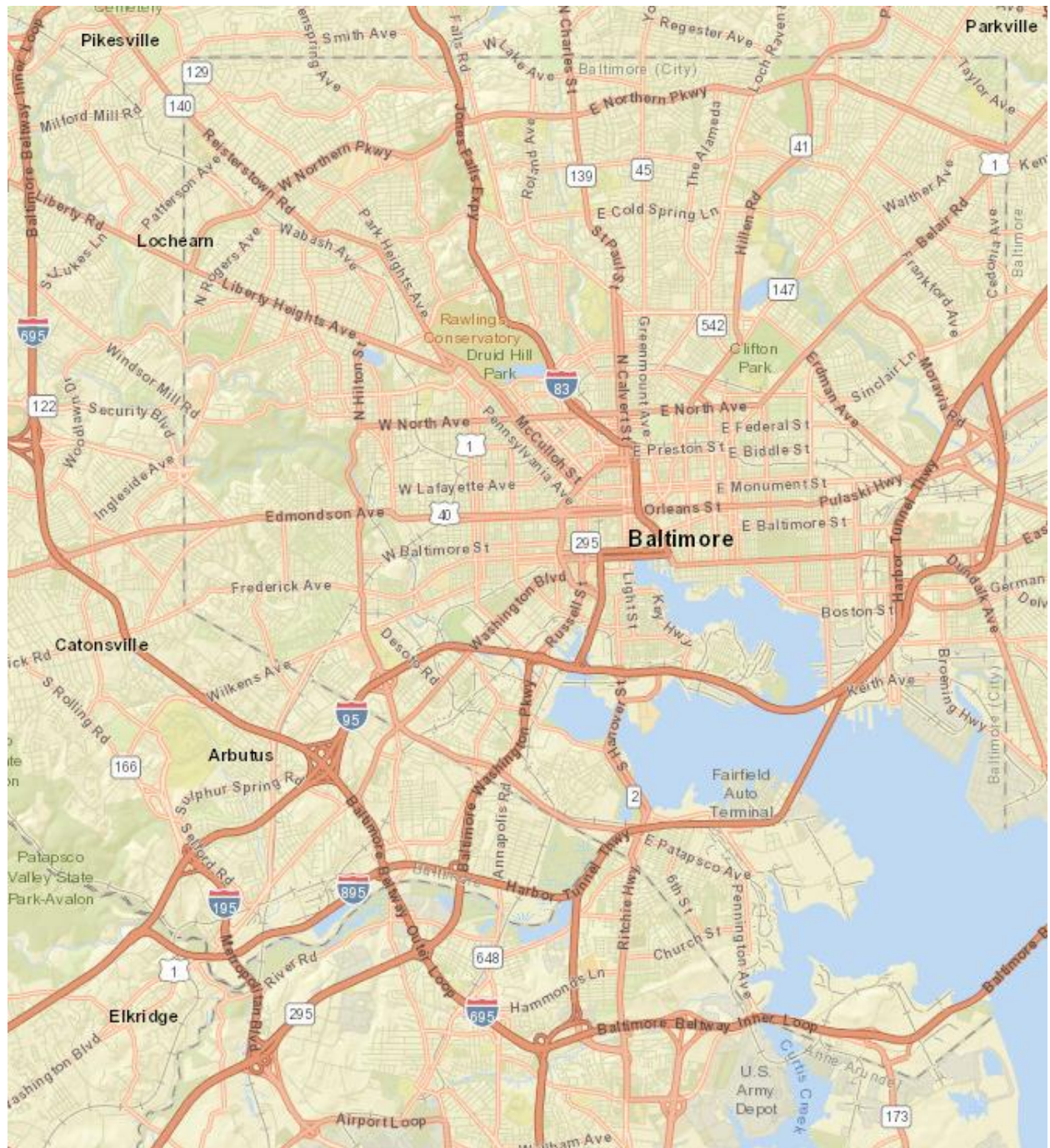
Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors, Map layer by Esri

**Map 2.** Baltimore's "Black Butterfly" in Population distribution of residents by race or ethnicity (Urban Institute 2019).





**Map 3.** Baltimore City (streets view) (Baltimore Open Data “Streets View” 2021).



## Appendix E. Productions

### 1953<sup>94</sup>

*Hello Out There* by William Saroyan

*The Happy Journey* by Thornton Wilder

*The Bronze Lady* (unknown)

*Twenty-Seven Wagons* by Tennessee Williams

*This Property is Condemned* by Tennessee Williams

### 1954

*The Madwoman of Chaillot* by Jean Giraudoux

*The Cradle Song* by Gregorio Martinez Sierra'

*All My Sons* by Arthur Miller.

*Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw

*The Long Goodbye* by Tennessee Williams

*Portrait of a Madonna* by Tennessee Williams

### 1955

*Picnic* by William Inge

*My Three Angels* by Bella Spewack and Sam Spewack

*Our Town* by Thornton Wilder

*Angel in the Pawnshop* by A. B. Sheffrin

*Summer and Smoke* by Tennessee Williams

### 1957

*Champagne Complex* by Leslie Stevens

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<sup>94</sup> Productions from the years 1953-1984 listed chronologically in the Thirty First Anniversary Program Booklet for the Arena Players, Inc. (31<sup>st</sup> Anniversary Booklet, 22-26) except for the 1983 productions (8). I have included playwrights in most instances.



*The Prisoner* by Bridget Boland  
*The Little Hut* by Andre Roussin  
*The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams  
*A Hatful of Rain* by Michael V. Gazzo

## **1958**

*Dark of the Moon* by Howard Richardson and William Berney  
*Fallen Angels* by Noël Coward  
*The Immoralist* by Augustus Goetz and Ruth Goetz  
*The Waltz of the Toreadors* by Jean Anouilh  
*The Rainmaker* by N. Richard Nash

## **1959**

*Cues, Characters, Coffee* (unknown)  
*Blithe Spirit* by Noël Coward  
*Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne  
*The Heiress* by Ruth and Augustus Goetz  
*Come Back Little Sheba* by Tennessee Williams

## **1960**

*Affairs of State* by Louis Verneuil  
*Aria de Capo* by Edna St. Vincent Millay  
*Hello Out There* by William Saroyan  
*Fumed Oak* by Noël Coward  
*The Showoff* by George Kelly  
*Night Must Fall* by Emlyn Williams  
*On Borrowed Time* by Paul Osborn

## **1961**

*Road Show* (unknown)

*Here We Are* by Dorothy Parker

*The Traveler* by Marc Connelly

*Glory in the Flower* by William Inge

*Silent Night Lonely Night* by Robert Anderson

*Hands Across the Sea* by Noël Coward

*Still Life* by Noël Coward

*The Flattering Word* by George Kelly

*The Night is My Enemy* by Fred Carmichael

*The Still Alarm* by George S Kaufman

*The Ugly Duckling* by A.A. Milne

*The Sandbox* by Edward Albee

*The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee

## **1962**

*Candida* by George Bernard Shaw

*Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry

*Soul Gone Home* by Langston Hughes

*Pilgrims Pride* (unknown)

*Celestial Cymbals* (unknown)

*Simply Heavenly* by Langston Hughes, music by David Martin

*Take a Giant Step* by Louis S. Peterson

## **1963**

*The Beautiful People* by William Saroyan

*Fools Paradise* (unknown)

*Separate Tables* by Terence Rattigan

*A Murder Has Been Arranged* by Emlyn Williams

*The Boyfriend* by Sandy Wilson

## **1964**

*Anna Lucasta* by Philip Yordan

*The Moon is Blue* by F. Hugh Herbert

*Twelve Angry Men* by Reginald Rose

## **1965**

*A Story for a Sunday Evening* by Paul Crabtree

*Mary, Mary* by Jean Kerr

*Purlie Victorious* by Ossie Davis

*The Heiress* by Ruth and Augustus Goetz

*Tambourines to Glory* by Langston Hughes, music by Jobe Huntley

*Dial M for Murder* by Agatha Christie

## **1966**

*Bus Stop* by William Inge

*Ready When You Are C.B.* by Susan Slade

*Tambourines to Glory* by Langston Hughes, music by Jobe Huntley

*The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams

*Happy Ending* by Douglas Turner Ward

## **1967**

*Take Care of Business* by Marvin X

*Clara's Old Man* by Ed Bullins

*How Do You Do* by Ed Bullins

*A Thousand Clowns* by Herb Gardner

*The Best Man* by Gore Vidal

*Tambourines to Glory* by Langston Hughes, music by Jobe Huntley

*The Amen Corner* by James Baldwin

## **1968**

*In the Wine Time* by Ed Bullins

*The Fantastic[k]s* by Harvey Schmidt and lyrics by Tom Jones

*Wait Until Dark* by Frederick Knott

*The Amen Corner* by James Baldwin

## **1969**

*Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller

*Ceremonies [in] Dark Old Men* by Lonne Elder III

*Little Ham* by Langston Hughes

*The Connection* by Jack Gelber

*The Owl and the Pussy Cat* (adaptation unknown)

## **1970**

*The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman

*The Mouse Trap* by Agatha Christie

*In New England Winter* by Ed Bullins

*Tambourines to Glory* by Langston Hughes, music by Jobe Huntley

*The Reckoning* by Percival Wilde

*The Gentleman Caller* by Philip Dawkins

*Black Mass* by Amiri Baraka

## **1971**

*Simply Heavenly* by Langston Hughes, music by David Martin

*The Deadly Game* by James Yaffe

*To Be Young Gifted and Black* by Lorraine Hansberry & Robert B. Nemiroff

*Sty of the Blind Pig* by Phillip Hayes Dean

*Five on the Black Hand Side* by Charlie L. Russell

## **1972**

*Simply Heavenly* by Langston Hughes, music by David Martin

*The Deadly Game* by James Yaffe

*To Be Young Gifted and Black* by Lorraine Hansberry & Robert B. Nemiroff

*Sty of the Blind Pig* by Phillip Hayes Dean

*Five on the Black Hand Side* by Charlie L. Russell

## **1973**

*The Curious Savage* by John Patrick

*Tambourines to Glory* by Langston Hughes, music by Jobe Huntley

*Sugarmouth Sam Don't Dance No More* by Don Evans

*Dark of the Moon* by Howard Richardson and William Berney

*Day of Absence* by Douglas Turner Ward

*Thunder in the Index* by Phillip Hayes Dean

*To Be Young Gifted and Black* by Lorraine Hansberry & Robert B. Nemiroff

*The Minstrel Boy* (adaptation unknown)

*Nightwatch* by Lucille Fletcher

*The Clinic* (unknown)

*The Everlasting Arm* (unknown)

## **1974**

*Purlie* book by Ossie Davis, Philip Rose, and Peter Udell, lyrics by Udell and music by Gary Geld

*Freeman* (unknown)

*Butterflies Are Free* by Leonard Gershe

*Amahl and the Night Visitors* by Gian Carlo Menotti

*Living Room* by Graham Greene

*Veronica's Room* by Ira Levin

*Contribution* by Ted Shine

## **1975**

*Wedding Band* by Alice Childress

*And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little* by Paul Zindel

*Purlie* book by Ossie Davis, Philip Rose, and Peter Udell, lyrics by Udell and music by Gary Geld

*Butterflies Are Free* by Leonard Gershe

*When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?* by Mark Medoff

## **1976**

*None to Call Him Father*

*It's Showdown Time*

*Soul Gone Home* by Langston Hughes

*Shoes* by Ted Shine

*Mother and Child* by Langston Hughes

*On Being Hit* by Clayton E. Goss

*The First Breeze of Summer* by Leslie Lee

## **1978**

*The Boyfriend* by Sandy Wilson

*Child's Play* by Robert Marasco

*It's Simply Love* (unknown)

*Gingerbread Lady* by Neil Simon

*Detective Story* by Sidney Kingsley

*The Philosopher Limer* (unknown)

*Cleaning the Temple* (unknown)

## **1979**

*Don't Bother Me I Can't Cope* book, music and lyrics by Micki Grant

*Eden* by Steve Carter

*Tom Sawyer* (adaptation unknown)

227 by Christine Houston

*Dr. Cook's Garden* by Ira Levin

*The Amorous Flea* book by Jerry Devine, music and lyrics by Bruce Montgomery.

## **1980**

*Tambourines to Glory* by Langston Hughes, music by Jobe Huntley by Langston Hughes, music by Jobe Huntley

*The Night is My Enemy* by Fred Carmichael

*Babes in Toyland* composed by Victor Herbert, libretto by Glen MacDonough

*The Mighty Gents* by Richard Wesley

*Wine in the Wilderness* by Alice Childress

*Happy Ending* by Douglas Turner Ward

*Fair Play for Love* (unknown)

*A Wind Between the Houses* by Maurice J. Hill

## **1981**

*It's So Nice to be Civilized* book, music and lyrics by Micki Grant

*Porch Patio* by Jack Heifner

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* by Edward Albee

227 by Christine Houston

*Eubie* music by Eubie Blake, lyrics by Andy Razaf & Noble Sissle, conceived by Julianne Boyd

*See How They Run* by Philip King

*The Magical Pied Piper* adapted by Pauline Kelvin and Richard Kelvin

## **1982**

*Purlie* book by Ossie Davis, Philip Rose, and Peter Udell, lyrics by Udell and music by Gary Geld

*Hands Across the Sea* by Noël Coward

*Fumed Oak* by Noël Coward

*Poor Aubrey* by George Kelly

*Treemonisha* by Scott Joplin

*Anna Lucasta* by Philip Yordan

*It's Showdown Time* by Don Evans

*Vanities* book by Jack Heifner, music and lyrics by David Kirshenbaum

*Billy No Name* music and lyrics by Johnny Brandon, book by William Wellington Mackey

## **1983**

*A Breeze from the Gulf* by Mart Crowley, dir. Don Owens

*Scrooge* (adaptation unknown), dir. Cheryl Pasteur

*The Living Room* by Graham Greene, dir. Ben Prestbury

*The Second Time Around* by Henry Denker, dir. Robert Russell

*Old Phantoms* (unknown), dir. Sam Wilson

*So Little Memories So Little Time* (unknown), dir. Sam Wilson

## **1984**

*The Little Dreamer: A Night in the Life of Bessie Smith* by Ed Stockton

*3* by Tennessee Williams by Tennessee Williams

Youtheatre Production

*How the Other Half Loves* by Alan Ayckbourn

*Nevis Mountain Dew* by Steve Carter

*Never Too Late* by Sumner Arthur Long



Musical Comedy (TBA)

...

**2017-18<sup>95</sup>**

Teddy, written & dir. Randolph Smith

*Yellowman* Dael Orlandersmith, dir. Rosiland Cauthen

*The Hallelujah Girls* by Jessie Jones, Nicholas Hope, & Jamie Wooten, dir. Carolyn White

Youtheatre Holiday Production

*Praise the Lord and Raise the Roof* by Celeste Bedford Walker, dir. D. Russell Owens

*Hoodoo Love* by Katori Hall, dir. David D. Mitchell

*White Gloves*, written by Robert Russell & dir. Aaron Androh

*Ain't Misbehavin'* book by Richard Maltby, Jr. & Murray Horwitz, music by Thomas "Fats" Waller, dir. Devron Young

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<sup>95</sup> Production information for 2017-2018 are taken from the Arena Players, Inc. 64<sup>th</sup> Season Brochures.

## Appendix F. IRB Letter


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### Office of Research & Economic Development

Date: March 4, 2019

To: Malcolm Richardson  
Interim Dean, Graduate School

Through: Stephen Beck   
Associate Vice President, ORED

Re: Unapproved project

The IRB office received a post-hoc application on February 28, 2019 from Alexis Skinner, the PI, and Shannon Walsh (Theatre) as the faculty advisor. The work was for the PI's dissertation entitled "Arena Players, Inc. The oldest continuously operation African American community theatre in the U.S." This project involved interviewing individuals involved with the organization. The work apparently began in 2015 and has since been completed.

If the PI had submitted a proper exempt application it likely would have been deemed minimal risk and approved. However, as you know, IRBs cannot give retroactive approval, so this work with human subjects was done without a proper IRB review.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "D. Landin".

Dennis Landin  
Professor Emeritus, Kinesiology  
Chair, Institutional Review Board  
dlandin@lsu.edu

cc: Elizabeth Cadarette  
Shannon Walsh  
Alexis Skinner

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## Vita

Baltimore native Alexis M Skinner is an artist-scholar guided by the spirit of *nommo*, a Dogon concept that imbues each individual with the power to create with intention. She grew up learning the craft of theatre and the history of black theatre at the Arena Players, Inc. As an undergraduate, Alexis studied psychology and earned her B.A. in Theater from Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. While earning her M. A. in Arts Administration and Cultural Policy from Goldsmiths, University of London, in the U. K. she interned at Theatre Royal Stratford East in several departments. Alexis went on to write about the structures of institutional racism in black theatre in her M. A. Dissertation, a study titled “Staging Black Britain.” Before returning to the states, Alexis studied theatre archival at the Victoria & Albert Theatre Museum.

Alexis entered academia teaching Theatre at the historically black Coppin State University in Baltimore, MD, and at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff in Arkansas. As an instructor there she joined the National Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts while helping undergrads develop their skills in theatre performance, dramaturgy, and arts administration. As a scholar, Skinner’s work builds on African American and African diaspora performance. As an artist, Alexis is a performer, dramaturg, and writer.