

HARLEM THEATER, ANTECEDENTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Barbara Lewis, Ph.D.



Staging themselves into representative belonging began early for the American denominator group on citizenship's bottom rung.

In the beginning was the Grove, located in Greenwich Village, New York's first version of Harlem. Specializing in Shakespeare, the Grove lived about a decade and then died in the 1820s.

Founder William Alexander Brown, a retired seaman, opened the Grove as a summer pleasure garden for his friends and as a creative outlet. Brown wrote a play about a late 18th century revolt in the Caribbean, a critique against a discrepant status quo.

Theaters then were segregated, with blacks sent to separate sections. The Grove had a roped off area for unruly whites. The idea of a black theater displeased politicians and police; the latter raided the stage, arresting actors in costume still spouting lines.





By the end of the 19th century, blacks were living on the west and east sides, close to Grand Central Station and Lincoln Square. The Tenderloin cops made so much money from graft they could eat steak every day, hence the name.

In August 1900, a Tenderloin cop arrested a black woman, accusing her of street prostitution. Her husband, who was nearby, came to her defense, and a huge quarrel ensued.

Mobs of white men gathered and grabbed bottles, stones, and sticks, whatever was at hand. Their first targets were blacks who seemed to have spending money. With their fine clothes, they were most visible. So the mob chased and accosted any black they saw, yelling "Get the nigger!"

As we see in the image on the left from the 1900 Tenderloin riot, well-dressed women were targets of mob fury. After the riot, blacks called the movers, and went north to Harlem.

James Hewlett as Richard III



Paul Lawrence Dunbar



Representational inclusion was impossible for 19th century blacks, who were portrayed by whites with sooty faces. As the 20th century approached, blacks tried to elude the foreign otherness; finally, they inverted the politics of the mask, advertising themselves as the real thing, not merely counterfeit. Still, they were held tight by past norms and made to play the buffoon even if their talents were not only genuine but Shakespearean as well. James Hewlett from the Grove, Williams & Walker, Cole & Johnson, Ernest Hogan, and poet and lyricist Paul Laurence Dunbar as well as European trained composers tried to get free of the mask and music of limitation, but few managed to escape. Dunbar's novel, *The Sport of the Gods* (1902), is set against the theater world of the Tenderloin, and its title suggests that blacks were regularly seen as trifles to pummel and kick.



Bert Williams and George Walker



Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson



Ernest Hogan





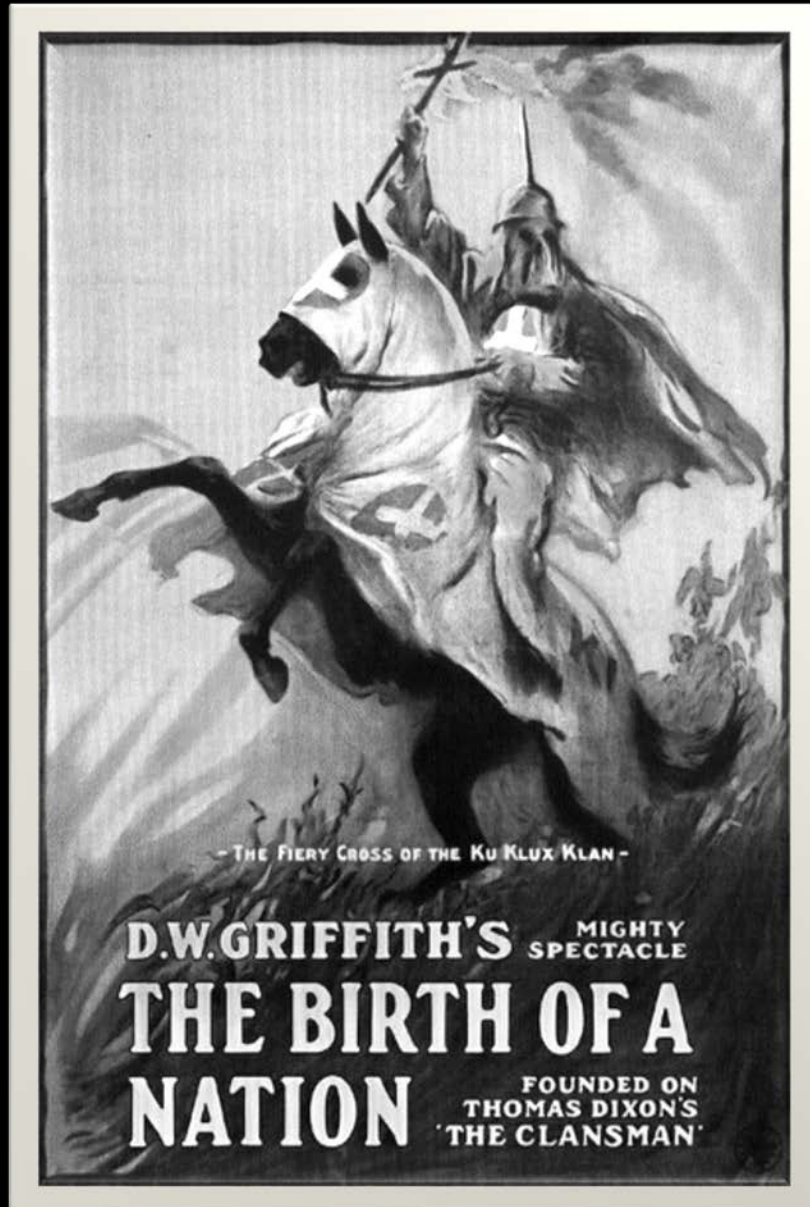
Bert Williams

At the turn of the century, the dancing, singing, writing teams of Williams & Walker and Cole & Johnson create and headline first-class companies that make inroads on Broadway, and initiate a craze for black performers. *In Dahomey* (1903) is their first Broadway hit, which toured the U.S., England, and Scotland. Six years later, catastrophe hit. George Walker is felled by disease, and Bob Cole soon follows. Without Walker, Williams is invited to headline with the Ziegfeld Follies. Again, he is consigned to blackface and feathers, depicted as not fully human. At the Follies, he achieves a name as a comic of unparalleled timing, but he is isolated and sad beyond measure. His signature song is *Nobody*.



Anita Bush

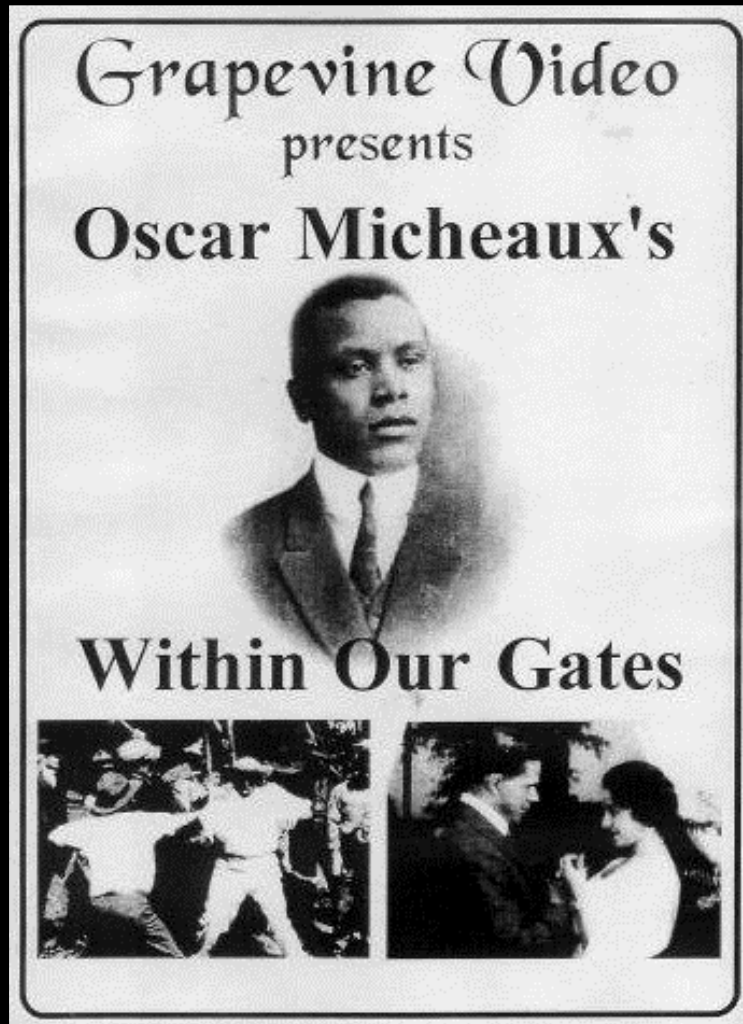
Williams & Walker gave Anita Bush a spot in the chorus of several of their shows. A talented dancer with a brain for business, in 1915, Bush started a company at the Lincoln on 135th Street in Harlem. Now Metropolitan Baptist, the theater is still across the street from Harlem Hospital. Bush's company included Charles Gilpin, the original Brutus Jones, Dooley Wilson, Sam of Play it Again, Sam fame, and Evelyn Preer, a popular silent film actress. After the Lincoln, Bush moved a few blocks south to the Lafayette, where she also initiated a touring company that performed in Harlem, Chicago, in the east and south. Bush wanted to do more than perform, and she quickly identified a new market, believing that blacks deserved first-class entertainment, second to none.



Birth of a Nation, 1915

The same year that Bush created her company at the Lincoln, *Birth of a Nation* (1915) opened on screens across the country. America had not yet entered World War I, but a war was going on in the country nevertheless, and its undertones and overtones were racial. The Civil War was 50 years in the past but far from forgotten. The country was marking the 50th anniversary of the end of the Civil War, when the D.W. Griffith Hollywood film, based on a series of novels and a play by Thomas Dixon, portrayed the Ku Klux Klan as crusading knights crushing the head of the black enemy snake in America's Eden. *Birth* was a record-smashing hit and the black characters were played by whites in blackface.





Early in the Harlem Renaissance, blacks, then called Negroes, had a new neighborhood and a new lease on life. Tired of the ugly, old images, they were eager to be creatively reborn, and film offered a fresh opportunity to influence hearts and minds. Oscar Micheaux, independent black filmmaker, barreled his way through to success. A novelist, who started out in the west, his energy seemed unstoppable. He was a one-man show, writing novels, selling them door to door, and then using the earnings to bankroll his films. Over the course of his career, he made 22 silent and 15 talking films. *Within our Gates* (1919), starring Evelyn Preer, an alumna of the Lincoln and the Lafayette, was his rejoinder to *Birth of a Nation*.



Shuffle Along , 1921

Shuffle Along, featuring the talents of Sissle & Blake and Miller & Lyles, musical & writing teams, opened in 1921, signaling the arrival of the Harlem Renaissance, it had gorgeous stars, such as Florence Mills, who became an international sensation, a long line of delightful chorus girls, including Josephine Baker, comic cut-up. Paul Robeson had a role in the show, and Langston Hughes was new in town. Over and over he got a ticket to take in all the marvelous energy of a people singing and dancing their way to the top, determined not to be stopped by anything.





K. P. L. N. T.

KRIGWA PLAYERS

LITTLE NEGRO THEATRE

AN attempt to establish in High Harlem, New York City, a Little Theatre which shall be primarily a center where Negro actors before Negro audiences interpret Negro life as depicted by Negro artists; but which shall also always have a welcome for all artists of all races and for all sympathetic comers and for all beautiful ideas.

Second Annual Season

FIRST PROGRAM

"Pandora's Box" "Mandy"
"Foreign Mail" "Her"



Performances: Monday, January 17; Wednesday, January 19; and Monday, January 24, 1927, at 8.30 P. M.

Playhouse: Basement 135th Street Branch, New York Public Library.

TICKETS 50 CENTS

For Sale at

*The Library, 135th Street The "Brown Bunny", 2354 Seventh Ave., at 138th St.
The Wright Library, 2296 Seventh Avenue, at 135th Street.*

W.E.B. DuBois, the 20th century's leading black intellectual, opens a theater in what he calls High Harlem, probably because Harlem marks a high point. Never before have blacks been able to call such wide avenues and beautiful buildings home. Theater, he believes, matters to a people denied the vote and forever fighting an image war. On their own aesthetic steam, they can campaign for greater inclusion, sharing their story and their unique cultural riches. A long procession of other energetic, dedicated, small theaters emerge, eager to make a positive difference. Most of them, however, including the Suitcase Players, which Langston Hughes starts in 1938, are short-lived.

Krigwa Players

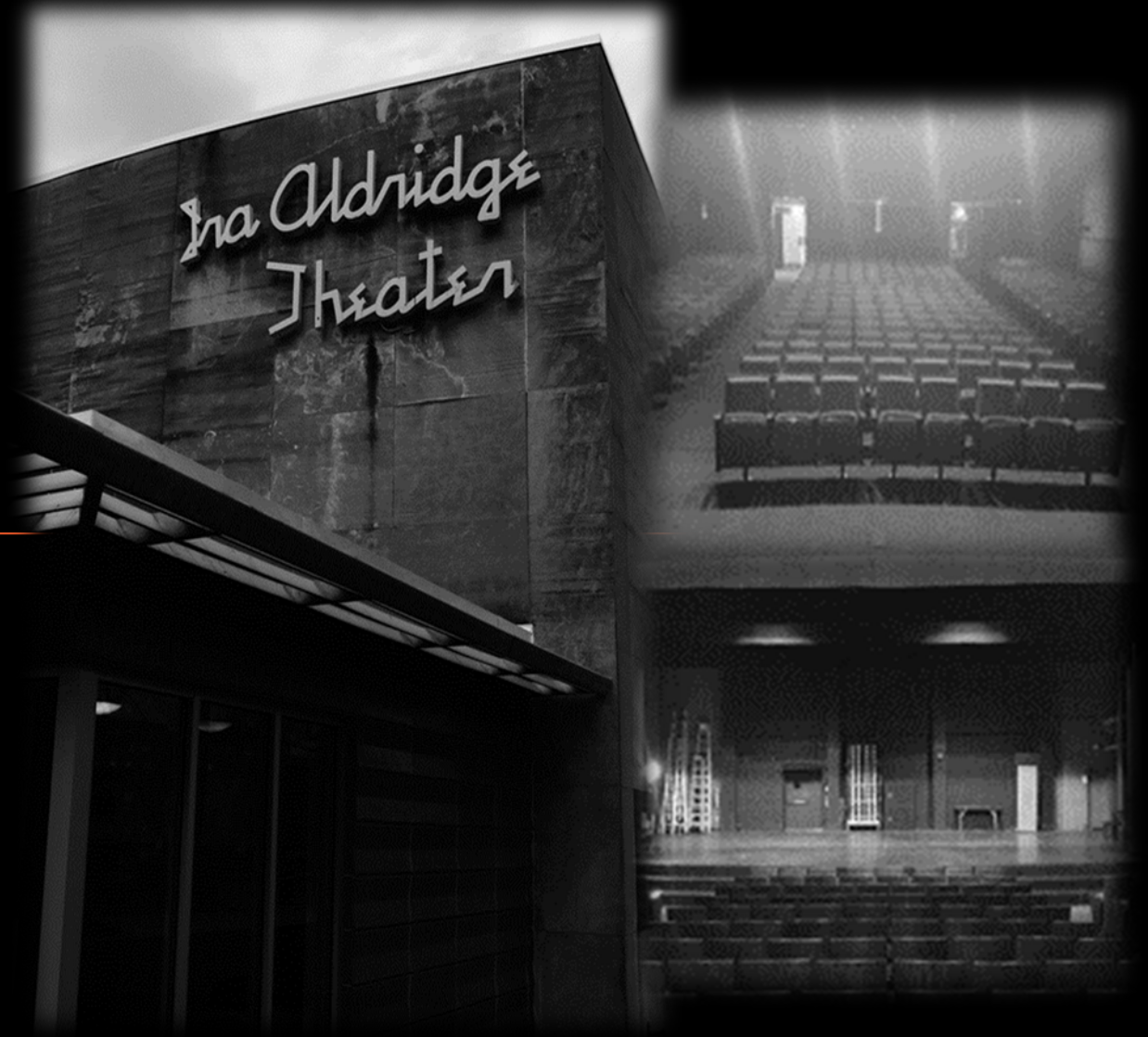


The Federal Theater production of *Voodoo Macbeth*,
The Lafayette Theatre
132nd Street and 7th Avenue in Harlem, New York.

In the Depression, the Federal Theater opens at the Lafayette. Orson Welles and John Houseman are at the helm. When the Federal Theater Project is shuttered in 1939, some of the actors come together to form the American Negro Theater. Frederick O'Neal, who has organizational talent and playwright Abram Hill are the chief architects of ANT, which starts with 40 members, and is built on a cooperative model. Alice Childress, actress and playwright, learns everything she can about the theater, working behind the scenes and on-stage. In 1949, as ANT is coming to an end, Childress writes her first play, *Florence*. Set in a southern train station, the train to better times is delayed, which emblemizes the status of the racial other in America still in the 21st century. The much-awaited equality train is late. Still, the artistic team of ANT pulled together and created an institution that got closer to the dream of positive portrayal in America.




After the African Grove closed in New York, a young Aldridge went to Europe, where he performed Shakespearean roles in world capitals, expanding his theatrical legacy. During the Harlem Renaissance, black theater reached a high point of excellence, which ANT then carried forward and celebrated on Broadway. Invested in training the next generation, the Aldridge Theater at Howard is still building for a future dream.



Ira Aldridge Theater , 1961
Howard University
2455 6th St NW Washington, DC





Ruby Dee




Alice Childress



Hilda Simms



Harry Belafonte



Sidney Poitier



Ossie Davis

For a time, Harlem meant home, where an untrammelled self could stretch and strut more than an hour on the stage.

It was a culminating time of rebirth and glory, when African American talents of various types and scopes, pulled together and made themselves a place of belonging.

The names are legendary. Alice and Alvin Childress, Hilda Simms, who graced magazine covers, Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, the golden, eternal couple, Harry Belafonte, activist par excellence, Sidney Poitier, Academy Award winner, Abram Hill, playwright and author of *On Striver's Row*, ANT architect along with Frederick O'Neal, who later became president of Actor's Equity. The name they chose for their collective tells the story. In their eyes, they were due home and citizenship in a country that often prefers to withhold it.

