

A Documentary Milestone: Revisiting Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement

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The 1978 documentary *Black Theater: The Making of a Movement* opens with a striking performance by the legendary artist-activist-duo Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee that reveals the stakes of the project and the revolutionary Black artistic movements it archives.^[1] Viewers first encounter Dee's radiant face and honey-toned voice. With her eyes fixed squarely on the camera, the esteemed actress launches into a poem whose opening line offers a powerful rebuke of the notion that Black art is in any way imitative or derivative. "Black poetry is not what Shakespeare begot," Dee recites percussively.^[2] Davis quickly responds to her initiating call, adding "Nor, is it one with Tennyson."^[3] For a minute or so thereafter, the pair trade lines that remind viewers that Black art "sets up its own condition" and, indeed, "defies tradition."^[4] The performance culminates with Davis and Dee inviting viewers to join them in celebrating all that is distinct and compelling about Black art. The scene offers an evocative overture to a film that, by casting a resplendent spotlight on some of the key figures and movements that collectively revolutionized Black art in the twentieth century, distinguishes itself as a major milestone in African American theatre and performance history.

Produced and directed by Woodie King, Jr., the founder of the New Federal Theatre, *Black Theater: The Making of a Movement* has been screened countless times since its late-70s premiere, and the academic database and video publisher Alexander Street has made it available to stream through its website.^[5] For those who study and teach African American dramatic literature and theatre history, the film remains an indispensable resource for the sheer number of Black theatrical luminaries it brings together to meditate on the vital importance of Black art in the ongoing struggle for Black liberation. As the promotional description that accompanies it asserts, the film "is a veritable video encyclopedia of the leading figures, institutions, and events of a movement that transformed the American stage."^[6] In addition to Davis and Dee, the documentary features, among other theatrical innovators, Amiri Baraka, Roscoe Lee Browne, Ed Bullins, Vinnette Carroll, Robert Hooks, James Earl Jones, Lloyd Richards, Ntozake Shange, Barbara Ann Teer, Glynn Turman, and Douglas Turner Ward commenting on the rich contributions of enterprises and initiatives such as the Black Theatre Alliance, the Group Theatre Workshop, the New Lafayette Theatre, the Negro Ensemble Company, and the Urban Arts School. The film offers viewers much more than an abundance of star power or a standard accounting of the organizations and institutions that helped shape the new theatre movements that the Civil Rights activism of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s engendered. It overflows with insights about the tremendous significance and influence of the arts—theatre, especially—in Black social, cultural, and political life.

Revisiting the film in the wake of the growing calls to fundamentally upend and overhaul the systems and structures reinforcing racism, antiblackness, and white supremacy in the arts reveals just how deeply relevant and resonant many of the conversations it catalogs remain. Its subjects convey with profound clarity their visions for a Black theatre that is at once revolutionary, heterogenous, and deeply attuned to

the experiences of Black people. In drawing attention to a few of its more potent threads and themes in what follows, I hope to situate the current demands for change within a longer history of struggle to rework the American theatre. I also aim to explore how heeding some of the vital lessons the documentary provides might further enrich and embolden efforts to imagine, plot, and build artistic practices, strategies, principles, and conditions that are both transformative and sustainable.

The documentary launches with well-known figures including Dee, Davis, playwright Owen Dodson, and director Lloyd Richards paying homage to some of the artists who they credit with making their work in the theatre possible. They give particular praise to change agents like Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson for breaking barriers and expanding possibilities for the Black theatrical imagination. Two key points emerge from these backward glances. The first is the idea that Black theatre has always been deeply connected to and rooted in community. Davis explains how Black artists in New York City responded to the bigotry and discrimination of commercial and mainstream theatres by bringing together people from their own mostly segregated neighborhoods to mount performances. In doing so, they extended a tradition that dates back to the early national period, as theatre historian Marvin McAllister outlines in his study on the “entertainments” of impresario William Brown.^[7] However, as Richards observes, the little headway that Black artists did begin to make on and off Broadway in the 1940s and '50s was quickly undermined by the racist and repressive forces of McCarthyism.

Richards, reflecting on the widespread efforts to terrorize Black artists during the period, offers the second key point I want to underscore. Black theatre, he insists, is fundamentally a theatre of protest. “The theatre has been for Black people a way of protesting the circumstances within which we attempt to exist in this country,” Richards remarks.^[8] An abundance of evidence in the corpus of African American dramatic literature bears out this declaration. As Daphne Brooks points out in her evocative reading of William Wells Brown’s *The Escape, or a Leap for Freedom*, the first play published by a Black person in the United States, African Americans have long mobilized the power of theatre and performance to forge both discursive and embodied insurgency.^[9]

Throughout the remainder of the documentary, King grants some of the Black arts leaders who helped heighten the fervor for a radical Black consciousness, aesthetic, and politic that intensified during the catalytic Black Power era an opportunity to elaborate on their motivations for pursuing new theatrical paradigms. The deep commitment so many of these artists had to centering experimentation in their work resounds across these conversations. Vinnette Carroll, who was both the first Black woman to stage a show on Broadway and to garner a Tony Award nomination for her direction, notes that she founded the Urban Arts Corps in 1967, in part, to create a space for Black artists to train and develop new material that might not otherwise receive nurturing or support. “It’s also a place where some writers and musicians can come and try out things and not be afraid to fail,” Carroll explains.^[10] Barbara Ann Teer, who, along with actor-activist Robert Hooks co-founded the Group Theatre Workshop in 1962 and, in 1968, established the National Black Theatre in Harlem, expresses a similar sentiment. Teer recalls how she and her early collaborators at the National Black Theatre spent nearly two years collectively devising artistic processes and practices that at once “fitted the sensibilities of Black people” and demonstrated “the richness and greatness and power inherent in the form and feeling of Black life/style.”^[11] To that end, they experimented with drums, rhythms, chants, and energy, all in an effort to create a theatre that was unequivocally and unapologetically Black.^[12]

Not every Black artist of the era committed to renouncing any and all things associated with the theatrical

traditions of Europe. For example, the Group Theatre Workshop, which mounted an off-Broadway staging of Douglas Turner Ward's *Happy Ending* in 1965, paved the way for the founding of the Negro Ensemble Company in 1967. While the Negro Ensemble Company would quickly fortify its reputation as a launching ground for Black artistry and talent (including a production of Errol Hill's *Man Better Man* in the 1968-69 season), it did not shy away from engaging with white interlocutors and collaborators. The first work the company produced was *Song of the Lusitanian Bogey* by German playwright Peter Weiss, in fact. "When the decision about *Song of the Lusitanian Bogey* was announced I knew I would get flack," Turner Ward recalls.^[13] "But no matter. The fact, in this instance, was that authorship had no significance. The play was 'authored' by the real historical situation itself. Peter was merely a conduit. More significantly, the material was going to be authored by an all-Black creative team, giving it life," he goes on to say.^[14] The production proved an auspicious springboard for the company, establishing it as a formidable presence on the New York arts scene and a model that others might adopt and follow.

Certainly, as James Earl Jones recalls in the documentary, many Black artists maintained profound ambivalence about what their social and artistic responsibility should be to the various movements brewing around them. Jones recalls that during the successful off-Broadway run of Jean Genet's *The Blacks*, a fierce debate erupted amongst his fellow company members about what actions they should take to advance the struggle for rights, freedom, and justice. "Half of us thought it was our responsibility, our social and artistic responsibility, to go up to picket... [The] other half preferred to, as Roscoe Lee Browne would say, stick to our vocational guidance, stick to our work."^[15] While Jones notes that he sided with Browne, he also confesses that he found great value in the dissension, as it not only served to build a greater sense of ensemble amongst the company, but it also empowered each performer to clarify for themselves what form they wanted their activism to take.

As the film shifts focus to the future of Black theatre in its final section, a more subtle line of conversation begins to emerge about the perils and politics of arts funding. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the drastic economic changes that occurred throughout the 1970s, the interviewees voice a palpable unease about money and resources. It surfaces in the appeal that Carroll makes for wealthy Black people to consider financially supporting the arts: "I'd like to see more Black producers doing all sorts of things in the theatre, and that Black people would invest in us because we certainly have a group of Black people now with the money to invest in the theatre," she asserts.^[16] In the wake of Nixon's election to the U.S. presidency, many of the grant-giving institutions that had been instrumental in launching ventures like the Urban Arts Corps, the Negro Ensemble Company, and the New Lafayette Theatre (the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, among them) decided that it was too risky to continue to support Black cultural institutions and withdrew their financial backing. This left many of these organizations without the resources they needed to stay afloat. Bullins, who after a brief stint as the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party became the playwright-in-residence at the New Lafayette Theatre, explains:

When Nixon came in the late 60s...he so frightened the philanthropic community that they cut back on just about all Black arts activities...So, all that money just about disappeared. And, we were working with a company of fifteen actors and all the support personnel with quite a yearly budget. And so, we couldn't operate on the level that we had been operating on.^[17]

The documentary's various discussions about funding underline just how potentially detrimental an overreliance on the goodwill and philanthropy of foundations and corporations can be to building a truly

sustainable theatre. This is an important caution to take note of, especially amid calls to celebrate the commitments that institutions like the Ford and Mellon Foundations have made in recent months to granting millions of dollars to Black arts and cultural organizations.^[18] These foundations have proven time and again that they are undependable. And, although they might provide some relief in the short term, the inconsistency of their funding often produces deleterious effects for Black art that are much longer-lasting.

While the film's chronological structure might suggest a progressive, teleological narrative, *Black Theater: The Making of a Movement* closes by exploring many of the questions and ideas that remain unaddressed or unresolved for Black theatremakers. The conclusion of the film sends an urgent call to Black artists to continue to find ways to bring the artform to Black communities and to harness its power to embolden radical change. Each of the figures featured in the documentary played a significant role in expanding possibilities for what the American theatre could be. Revisiting the film reaffirms just how solid the foundations they laid remain. It also provides an occasion for contemporary scholars and students of Black theatre to contemplate further how to capitalize on some of the "new stirrings" that have emerged in efforts to reimagine and remake the theatre—and the world—*anew*.^[19]

Isaiah Matthew Wooden is a director-dramaturg, critic, and assistant professor of Theater Arts at Brandeis University. A scholar of African American art, drama, and performance, he has contributed articles and essays to *The Black Scholar*, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *Modern Drama*, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Theatre Topics*, among other scholarly and popular publications. Wooden is the co-editor of *Tarell Alvin McCraney: Theater, Performance, and Collaboration* (Northwestern UP 2020) and is currently at work on a monograph that explores the interplay of race and time in post-civil rights Black expressive culture.

^[1] *Black Theater: The Making of a Movement*, directed by Woodie King, Jr. (1978; San Francisco: California Newsreel), <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/black-theater-the-making-of-a-movement?source=suggestion>. All subsequent references are to this version of the film.

^[2] *Black Theater*.

^[3] *Black Theater*.

^[4] *Black Theater*.

^[5] The New Federal Theatre notably celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2020.

^[6] See *Black Theater*.

^[7] See Marvin McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of Colour: William Brown's African and American Theater* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[8] *Black Theater*.

[9] See Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

[10] *Black Theater*.

[11] *Black Theater*.

[12] La Donna L. Forsgren's *In Search of Our Warrior Mothers* provides a wealth of evidence of some of the other ways this commitment to experimentation manifested for Teer and her Black Arts Movement contemporaries. See La Donna L. Forsgren, *In Search of Our Warrior Mothers* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018).

[13] Douglas Turner Ward, "Foreword," in *Classic Plays from the Negro Ensemble Company*, ed. Paul Carter Harrison and Gus Edwards (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press, 1995), xiii.

[14] Ward, "Foreword."

[15] *Black Theater*.

[16] *Black Theater*.

[17] *Black Theater*.

[18] See, for example, the announcements about the Ford Foundation's "American Cultural Treasures" initiative and the Mellon Foundation's sponsorship of "The Black Seed."

[19] See W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

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