

An Interview with Elaine Jackson

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The Journal of American Drama and Theatre
Volume 33, Number 2 (Spring 2021)
ISSN 2376-4236
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Elaine Jackson, born in Detroit (1938), began her career in the theatre as an actress. In the early 1970s, she established her career as a playwright with her first produced play, *Toe Jam* (1971). She went forward to write some of the most provocative dramas of the 1970s and 1980s, always offering a celebratory vision of women and their advancements. Her most well-known plays are *Cockfight* (1976), *Paper Dolls* (1979), *Birth Rites* (1987), and *Puberty Rites* (2011). She has received several notable awards and honors, including the Rockefeller Award for Playwriting for 1978–1979; the Langston Hughes Playwriting Award (1979); and the National Endowment for the Arts Award for playwriting (1983). In addition to serving as Playwright in Residence at Lake Forest College (1990) and at Wayne State University (1991), where she earned her undergraduate degree, Ms. Jackson is an educator who has taught at various institutions.

I had an opportunity to sit down with Ms. Jackson to discuss her career and her continued efforts in the theatre. The initial interview took place during the spring of 2019, and we continued our conversation via telephone through the summer of 2020.

Nathaniel G. Nesmith: I read that you have been involved in theatre since you were ten. Could you contextualize your early theatre involvement?

Elaine Jackson: At the age of ten, I was in elementary school and that was my first adventure on the stage. I played the South Wind and from there it was through high school, etcetera, that I had sporadic introductions with the theatre, nothing extraordinary. But after high school, shortly after that, Woodie King began the Concept East Theatre in Detroit.[\[1\]](#)

I began to play many of the roles that he produced through the theatre, as well as eventually going to Wayne State University. The theatre department there was absolutely the best. That is where my essential training came. I took many classes in the theatre, acting as well as drama. And I was very fortunate, in that I got to perform extensively in the black box theatre; my most noteworthy claim to fame was in a production of the Bonstelle Theatre, which is the major theatre at Wayne State. They had a production of *Caesar and Cleopatra*, the Shaw version, and I played Cleopatra. That was my biggest event at that time. At the Bonstelle, they performed my play *Paper Dolls*, while I was in residence there, much later.

NGN: You started to write your play *Toe Jam* while studying at Wayne State University. You take on the themes of pregnancy, abortion, and the experience of an unmarried black woman in that drama. What inspired you to write that play while in college?

EJ: It was a time when pregnancy was not something that was acceptable among unmarried and single women of any kind. So, the idea that some of the women that I knew had to go through excruciating choices of getting rid of the pregnancy was what prompted that. It was endemic at that time, especially

with the college group because they were preparing for a different life that often the pregnancy interrupted. So, that was kind of the seeds of that.

I thought I was fashioning that play after one of my favorite playwrights at the time, Lorraine Hansberry. I was copying her famous play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. I didn't do a very good job of copying that play, but I really did find that that was the impetus for the style that I was writing in at that time. I did my best to copy what I thought was one of the finer plays that had been written at that time.[\[2\]](#)

NGN: Let's go back. Why playwriting rather than fiction? What inspired you to become a playwright?

EJ: I had the most extensive ability on the stage. I was very, very fortunate. I got to act in plays by one of my favorite playwrights of all times, Tennessee Williams. I think I performed the lead in practically all of the well-known plays of his at that time at both Wayne State and Woodie King's Concept East.

I began to look forward, because I think of him as one of the great playwrights of all time. I began to look forward to more and more opportunities to perform those kinds of plays. I didn't feel that they existed.

Performance faded because I couldn't find the kinds of roles that I thought were capable of being performed by good actors. In fact, it was Woodie King, when I asked him, "What can I do?" He was the person who actually encouraged me to write the play that I thought I would like to perform in. And that lead to *Toe Jam*. He produced it here in New York and I performed the lead role in that play. It was really a kind of a round-robin because of what he had said.[\[3\]](#)

NGN: You have done a variety of roles as an actress. You played a geisha in Buriel Clay's *Liberty Call* at the Negro Ensemble Company; you also played Abbie in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* at New York Theatre Ensemble. You were opposite Phillip Hayes Dean in Calua Dundy's *Running Fast through Paradise* at La MaMa. You acted in all these roles and at the same time, you are furthering your career and developing to become a playwright...[\[4\]](#) Are there other notable roles you played as an actress that you would like to discuss?

EJ: The last performance I did was at the Public Theater. It was a production under the title *Man-Wo-Man (Passion Without Reason)* by Neil Harris. Joe Papp was there. That was my last performance. I also performed in San Francisco, in a play called *The Ofay Watcher*. I lived at that time in Palo Alto.[\[5\]](#)

NGN: You starred in the production of *Toe Jam* at the New Federal Theatre in 1975. How did you make this happen?[\[6\]](#)

EJ: Well, I had recently moved to New York from Detroit. Woodie King had already been here and established his presence at the Henry Street Settlement. Since I had the connection, he was doing Detroit writers. That was his thing, whether it was me or Ron Milner or anyone.[\[7\]](#)

He helped all of us who were from Detroit. Without him, I don't know if I would have had a production of any play. That is how that came about.

NGN: I just mentioned that you acted opposite Phillip Hayes Dean. Most people know Phillip as a playwright. Since he was a playwright, what was that experience like working with him?[\[8\]](#)

EJ: For me it was interesting, for the playwright I think there was a different experience. He was quite a Method actor. He did Stanislavski to the nth degree. When we would perform each night, we did not know what he was going to do. But I found his interpretations to be interesting. The playwright was not very pleased with Dean. I thought of him as really a very deep thinker about the role that he played.

NGN: You just stated that you could not find acting roles and Woodie King had encouraged you to become a playwright—

EJ: Well, there was also another major event: the birth of my son. In fact, when I was performing at the Public Theater, I was pregnant with my son at the time. I had to give notice of that and Mary Alice took over the role from there.[\[9\]](#)

NGN: How did being an actress help your playwriting?

EJ: In fact, I can hardly believe that there are playwrights who are not actors. I think like an actor for every line that I write, for every movement that I see. I see the stage; I look from the stage, and I recognize the characters. In fact, that is what I do. I write characters. I start with characters, and I build them. My acting was just instrumental on a massive scale for the writing.

NGN: In the original production of *Cockfight* (1977), which premiered Off-Broadway at the American Place Theatre, you had an exceptional cast with Mary Alice, Morgan Freeman, and Charles Brown. Woodie King directed this bittersweet love story. In retrospect, what did it mean to have that cast and that director?[\[10\]](#)

EJ: I can tell you Mary Alice and Charlie Brown were outstanding. I did not experience Morgan Freeman too much because he left shortly after the first performance to do a movie. He opened the show, but he left. He was succeeded by his understudy, George Lee Miles.

The play opened at the American Place Theatre and I must add that Wynn Handman (one of the founders of the American Place Theatre), who was most instrumental in the development of my playwriting skills—requiring the discipline of re-writing seven versions of *Cockfight* before the onset of the use of the computer—was great.[\[11\]](#)

NGN: Was this your first time working with Woodie as a director?

EJ: Yes; actually, except for at the Concept East, he directed many of the smaller productions there.

NGN: Did you have any sense at the time, that Mary Alice, Morgan Freeman, and Charles Brown would go on to achieve the stardom that they did?

EJ: They were already powerful actors. There was no question, they were already top of the line. I was very proud and happy to have them as the cast.

NGN: *Cockfight* was a battle of the sexes, between a black man and a black woman. Reba, the wife, was considered to be demanding; Jesse, the husband, who was an artist (he was an author, musician, and a jeweler), did not live up to his wife's expectations. The couple is dealing with the fact that this might be

the dissolution of their marriage.

The play was often compared to Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*.^[12] How do you feel about this comparison?

EJ: I don't know how that comparison came about. I don't understand that comparison.

NGN: It could just be a time thing.

EJ: It is very much so. Maybe that's it. And I think Woodie King was the first person in New York to do Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls*. It could have very well been that connection.

In terms of *Cockfight*, what I was doing was contrasting the various stages of the male. That is to say, there were the young thirtyish males; then there was the male who was closer to his fifties; then there was another male that in time was removed, but that I feel is essential, to show that he was an even older male. And their expectations of their interactions with women was the difference that I wanted to explore in terms of their different ages and how that had evolved in the ways they dealt with females. That was the crux of some of it.

The current play that I am writing, *Ground Cover*, is very possibly—it is also a love story. It was inspired by my thoughts about the connection between some of the revolutionary men of the '60s and '70s and the women who were connected to them through that ideology. I thought mostly of Mandela and his wife. I find it just amazing that when Mandela was finally released, the woman who had stood by him through all of those times, however much she had maybe some kinds of problematic areas showing up, that he, from my point of view, abandoned her. The play is not about Mandela, but that whole idea about the revolutionary individual. And this kind of reverberates from *Cockfight* a little bit as well.

NGN: This is what you said back in 1977: "I don't think America can solve any of its problems until it solves the problems between men and women."^[13] Forty years after you made that statement, do you think the problems between men and women that you were referring to have been addressed, or solved?

EJ: Absolutely not. I see that the women are searching, but the stories of the failure to be able to associate together is just an abysmal kind of thing. I have been privy to many of them, exact kinds of stories of couples trying to come together.

I think of many of the women particularly, and I am going to speak of black women right now, who grew up without a male figure in their household. They grew up in all-female households. And as such, they have idealistic ideas about the males. And when they meet up with men who don't have these idealistic tendencies, they are very disappointed and unable to connect. That is one thought I have about that. I think we have a long way to go to connect with one another again.

When I write a play, the male/female balance or imbalance drives the character connections. This is not based on the physical representation of a male or female. Rather, it is the sexual energy rhythm that is represented by the yin/yang (female/male) force that I believe animates all humanity. Whether it is an all-female or an all-male cast, the sexual energy dictates the personal connections.

NGN: Your comedy-drama *Birth Rites* (1987),[\[14\]](#) which premiered at American Folk Theatre, takes on the issue of mothers who must undergo Cesarean deliveries in overburdened urban hospitals; these mothers are awaiting the birth of their babies. Your play provides a diverse, multicultural overview, in the sense that the mothers speak different languages. Why did you bring maternity to the forefront and why is it important to present this multicultural perspective?

EJ: I started writing it shortly after the birth of my son. What I discovered was that I was in a ward where I was probably the only patient who spoke English. What I discovered also is that we all shared one thing in common and that was giving birth, but at that point everybody had been subjected to a Cesarean and I thought it had to do with the language barrier.

The comedy of how they tried to connect through that was what it was about. The language barrier included the medical staff--the doctors, nurses, and interns who also spoke a different language. So, the only common language was the universal language of birth.

NGN: After the mid-1970s, black women playwrights ascended as never before. You had Endesha Ida Mae Holland,[\[15\]](#) Aishah Rahman,[\[16\]](#) Micki Grant,[\[17\]](#) J. e. Franklin,[\[18\]](#) and Ntozake Shange,[\[19\]](#) among others, and, of course, you. Why do you think black women playwrights were being produced more frequently at that time?

EJ: Well, I have a pretty radical thought on that. Up until that time, it was mostly black male playwrights. And they had so injured the female characters through their plays that I think just a couple of the voices of the black female playwrights trying to balance that out came through at that point.

There were plays by some of the most noteworthy male playwrights about women as dogs with leashes around their necks. Women were being subjected to all kinds of atrocities on stage, and I think the women were trying to find their voices and that is why that happened.

NGN: The best article that I have come across about how difficult and competitive it is for a playwright to get a grant or fellowship was by Mel Gussow. This was around the same time that you received a Rockefeller grant. Your name was mentioned in the behind-the-scenes process that Gussow wrote about.[\[20\]](#) What did the grant do for your career?

EJ: It was the most rewarding kind of impetus for the continuance of my being in that craft. I wish that all playwrights could have been given such an agreement that their work was good enough for that. It wasn't an enormous amount of money, but it was the idea that I was being recognized.

Currently, from my point of view, there are only two types of playwrights being produced: what I call the emerging playwrights, which is a synonym for young playwrights who have never written plays before, and established playwrights, playwrights who have gained a name over time. And whatever they write is produced, because they are who they are, not necessarily because their new plays are as dynamic as the plays they are known for. So, the people in the middle, of which I am one, we don't get quite the same attention of having our plays produced.

NGN: Your name was also mentioned in another important article that Mel Gussow wrote,[\[21\]](#) dealing with the emergence of women playwrights and also the new strength coming forth from women

playwrights. Did you feel the late 1970s or early 1980s was a special time for women playwrights, that they had more opportunities and were less constrained than they had been? How would you compare that feeling to what is occurring today with women playwrights?

EJ: I will give you one of the most amazing things that happened during *Cockfight*. We would have talk-backs at the end of many of the shows and people in the audience would get to ask questions or make comments. And every single night of the talk-back, the one question came every single night, and that question was: why are these characters black? The expectation that there was a type of character that should be black versus some other kind of thing was running through the audience. Their thing was that there is such a thing as a black play and without that connection of whatever was in their stereotypical expectation, that play did not register as a black play. To your question about why was there a resurgence, I think because people were exploring a variety of experiences for the black characters that they were doing.

NGN: Early in your career, you spoke about the stereotypes and demeaning roles women in theatre were offered. How did you go about helping to change the perception of and bring about opportunities for women, more specifically, for black women?

EJ: I don't know that I personally brought about any personal opportunities, or whatever, but I will use one of my plays as my exploration of that. My play *Paper Dolls* was not produced in New York, but it was produced while I was Artist-in-Residence at both Lake Forest College in Illinois (1990) and at Wayne State University in Michigan (1991).

Paper Dolls has not been produced in New York, and one of the reasons is that it is a very detailed extensive play, and it requires an amazing amount of work from the two lead actors. But it begins with two elderly women who were the first black beauty queens in Boley, Oklahoma, and who are now being asked fifty years later to judge a beauty contest in Canada, to be the judges this time. And the play explores stereotypes through the vision of beauty in this case.

NGN: The Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement opened doors for women in big ways. Several black women founded theatres and became producers: Vinnette Carroll, Marla Gibbs, Barbara Ann Teer, Rosetta LeNoire—they all started out as actresses. What did the success of these women mean to you at that time, and how did it relate to the Civil Rights Movement?[\[22\]](#)

EJ: That is a question that is very difficult for me to talk about because for the most part the women that you mentioned were New York women. I personally was not familiar with the New York women in the theatre as well because, for example, Barbara Ann Teer I had only met briefly after I came from Detroit. I never met most of these women. And so I don't have a good sense of that.

NGN: You stated earlier that Woodie King was a major influence in your being involved with theatre. Would you expand on this?

EJ: Shortly after I graduated from high school, he created this small little enclave of the Concept East, and I think there were a couple of other small theatres that I had begun to explore, but they were just exercises. He discovered that I wanted to be in the theatre. I remember one of the early plays that he did was *Hello Out There*, which was not a black play, but I got to play the lead role in it and that was the

beginning of a series of plays that he began to produce. I understand Ron Milner was a part of it, but I don't remember his influence as much, but also he was connected in some way. It began to grow.

When I finally began to write a play, I really didn't like it when the performers have to keep asking me: well, what did you mean by this; what happened that led to this, because it is their turn now to interpret. I really like it when I have written a play that they can interpret.

I asked Woodie King how do I solve this? He said you write it in the play. And there it is. It was the most amazing insight into playwriting for me at that time. He made it very simple. He was always an advocate for the playwright, especially if you were from Detroit. He was essential for many of us.

NGN: Since you just mentioned Detroit, did you work with Lloyd Richards?[23]

EJ: No. Well, let me explain one thing. Lloyd Richards was going to do a play on Broadway. It was one of the first plays he ever did. I was about sixteen, and I was asked to play the young girl, who was a very light-skinned girl. I was driven all the way to New York to audition for this role for Lloyd Richards. I had never met him before that time. I hadn't studied enough at that point, so I didn't have a voice, I didn't know how to project my voice in a way that could handle that stage. That was the end of my almost Broadway performance. That was the only time I met him. And I traveled all the way from Detroit, in a car.

NGN: Your play *Puberty Rites* (2011) was directed at the Castillo Theatre by Dean Irby. It is a coming-of-age drama of two teenage girls, one black (Keesha) and one white (Vesna). It explores the racial tension between these aggressive young girls who are from different neighborhoods. What did you want your audience to take away from these teenagers and their racial conflict?[24]

EJ: Well, I have been an educator all my life. I have had an amazing educational background in that I have taught almost every grade level in the public school system, as well as at several private schools, and what I came to that play with was how the class system had sort of not allowed minority students to gain access to the educational experience that would give them the success that they should have gotten.

Yet, at the time I was teaching in California as well, they had what they called the magnet school, which was to entice the white students who generally had fallen out of the regular school system to come to this all-black high school. Once they came, money was poured into the school, all kinds of exotic things. They went on trips to Switzerland and all kinds of things like that.

What I wanted to show was that these girls were equals. They both had difficult family lives, but they were equal in educational powers, and yet nobody would acknowledge that. I had the black female play like she was not capable, but at the same time she was way ahead of what she professed and showed. She knew all of these things in detail; she knew things that nobody was going to recognize. She played off of that a lot. And then she ended up being subject to her environment and falling back into line with that.

NGN: You were supposed to collaborate with composer/lyricist Martin Weich on the musical version of your play *Birth Rites*. [25] What happened with that musical?

EJ: He passed away recently. His music was astounding. As he pointed out, I think the musicals have

their roots in the Jewish experience. He had that kind of Jewish musical experience and his music was just phenomenal.

He was a doctor and I was a teacher, and the only time we could collaborate was on the telephone. We weren't able to have the luxury of spending time collaborating as others do, so it was a piecemeal kind of thing. And unfortunately, as I said, he passed away and I still have his music. I somehow hope to maybe find a way to jell it but I have not done it yet. A showcase production of the musical was presented at Henry Street Settlement, produced by Woodie King.

NGN: How do you feel about not being produced at the same level that you were back in the 1970s and 1980s?

EJ: The economy is such that I can no longer just be the person who writes twenty-four/seven. So, it has taken me quite some time to try to get through a play that I normally would have gotten through more quickly.

I think that one of the things that happened, and I will use Broadway as an example, I think the experience has changed. They don't like drama as much for Broadway because they don't make as much money as those great, massive musicals.

When I was younger in Detroit, they used to have what they called the Ice Capades, and there were those exotic shows with great costumes and all kinds of things like that. That seems to be where Broadway is, these exotic Ice Capades as I call them. It is rare that they produce dramas, because it is risky in terms of their making money on them.

NGN: What can you share about your Detroit colleague, playwright Ron Milner?

EJ: I knew him and he was from Detroit. I thought his work was very fine. In fact, he got one of his plays on Broadway through Woodie (*Checkmates*).[\[26\]](#)

NGN: You mentioned that you were an educator for a long time. What has it been like teaching theatre in high schools?

EJ: I taught English, and I did occasionally teach theatre. For example, I taught at Friends Seminary, down on 16th Street, I taught drama there, and I put on a couple of shows. I also taught at Hunter College High School.[\[27\]](#) It has probably the finest drama department; it can be equal to professional shows. It is where Lin-Manuel Miranda went to school. It does an amazing job. I wish that theatre of that nature was done in regular schools. And I worked in Hunter's theatre department.

NGN: How many years have you been an educator, if I may ask?

EJ: (She lets out a loud laugh). Oh, God, way past twenty-five, maybe thirty-five.

NGN: You were connected to the cultural climate of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the Women's Movement. How did that influence your work?

EJ: My first husband was integral to the Civil Rights Movement of the time, and we were both students at Wayne State then. I wrote for some of the papers, and he as well. We were, I would say, we were the intellectual wing of the Civil Rights type, we were not the people who marched in the street as much. It was the impetus for our journey to California at the height of that time.

NGN: You have been involved with theatre for a long time, but you have also been away from theatre. How does it feel to be away from theatre?

EJ: It feels horrible. By that I mean I feel it is something that is just waiting for me and I need to find it. As I mentioned, I am writing this play, I am going to try to finish it as soon as possible because it does take a while for a production if it is going to be produced. But I am very excited about it. I think it's connected to *Cockfight*. The characters' names are different, but in a sense I feel like they are connected.

NGN: When do you think you will have that out?

EJ: I am expecting to have it out soon.

NGN: What would you like for people to always remember about playwright Elaine Jackson?

EJ: That she looked for the characters among the people that she knew, and that she tried to portray those characters in their honest ways on the stage.

Nathaniel G. Nesmith, who is a 20th- and 21st-century drama specialist, earned a B.A. and M.A. in criminal justice from John Jay College of Criminal Justice; he also has a B.F.A. in theatre from Temple University and an M.F.A. in playwriting from Columbia University. He received his Ph.D. in theatre from Columbia. He has taught at several institutions, including Columbia University and Middlebury College, where he was a Creating Connections Consortium Postdoctoral Fellow. His John Jay thesis, *Contextualizing Issues of Crime and Justice in Pulitzer Prize-winning Plays by African American Dramatists*, explores criminality in the works of Charles Gordone, Charles Fuller, August Wilson, and Suzan-Lori Parks. His Columbia dissertation, *Freedom and Equality Now! Contextualizing the Nexus between the Civil Rights Movement and Drama*, examines how central issues of the American Civil Rights Movement were dramatized on stage. He has published articles in *American Theatre*, *The Dramatist*, *The Drama Review*, *The Black Scholar*, *American Music*, *The New York Times*, *The Yale Review*, *African American Review*, *New England Review*, and other publications.

[1] Woodie King and playwright Ron Milner founded Concept East Theatre in Detroit in 1960.

[2] In 1959, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* debuted on Broadway; the play became a critical hit and The New York Drama Critics' Circle voted it the best play of 1959. Langston Hughes gave Hansberry the rights to use the title, *A Raisin in the Sun*, which was from his poem *Harlem* (also known as *A Dream Deferred*). With her play, Hansberry became the first black woman to have a full-length drama produced on Broadway. In addition, with *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lloyd Richards became the first

black to direct a play on Broadway. See Lloyd Richards's obituary: Campbell Robertson, "Lloyd Richards, Theater Director and Cultivator of Playwrights, is Dead at 87," *New York Times*, 1 July 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/01/theater/01richards.html>.

[3] *Toe Jam* was written by Ms. Jackson in 1971 and produced at Woodie King Jr.'s Henry Street Settlement's New Federal Theatre in 1975. Ms. Jackson played the role of Xenith, the character who dreamed of a creative life (poet, actress, playwright) while her mother wanted her to get married and find financial security.

[4] The Negro Ensemble Company was founded in 1967 by Douglas Turner Ward, Robert Hooks, and Gerald S. Krone. Many legendary black actors have worked there, from Angela Bassett to Richard Roundtree. See Douglas Turner Ward Obituary: Nathaniel G. Nesmith, "Douglass Turner Ward, Pioneer in Black Theater, Dies at 90," *New York Times*, 22 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/22/theater/douglas-turner-ward-dead.html>;

La MaMa was founded in 1961 by Ellen Stewart. It was located in the East Village in Manhattan. It was known for being an experimental theatre. See: Mel Gussow and Bruce Webber, "Ellen Stewart, Off Off Broadway Pioneer, Dies at 91," *New York Times*, 13 January 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/14/theater/14stewart.html>.

[5] The story is about Rufus and Bruce. Rufus is a black man. Bruce is a young, white biochemist who is conducting a series of experiments. He comes up with a substance to turn black people white.

[6] Henry Street Settlement's New Federal Theatre was founded by Woodie King Jr. in 1970. It is mainly known as the New Federal Theatre, which is a theatre company named after the black branch of the Federal Theatre Project, created during the 1930s.

[7] Ron Milner's play *Checkmates* (1987) was on Broadway, starring Denzel Washington. He was a close friend of Woodie King's and they worked together for over four decades. See Ron Milner's obituary: Kathryn Shattuck, "Ron Milner, 66; Wrote Plays of the Ghetto," *New York Times*, 17 July 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/17/arts/ron-milner-66-wrote-plays-of-the-ghetto.html>.

[8] Phillip Hayes Dean was a stage actor who became a playwright. One of his plays, *Paul Robeson*, was on Broadway in 1978; it starred James Earl Jones. See Phillip Hayes Dean's obituary: Bruce Weber, "Phillip Hayes Dean, the Playwright of Divisive 'Paul Robeson,' Dies at 83," *New York Times*, 22 April 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/23/arts/phillip-hayes-dean-playwright-of-paul-robesson-dies-at-83.html>.

[9] Mary Alice (now known as Mary Alice Smith) is an American film, television, and stage actress. She is known in the theatre world for playing the role of Rose, for which she earned a Tony Award for Best Featured Actress, in August Wilson's *Fences* on Broadway (1987).

[10] The American Place Theatre was founded in 1963 by Wynn Handman, Sidney Lanier, and Michael Tolan in New York City. The theatre was responsible for producing and developing first plays by several major American writers, from Joyce Carol Oates to Robert Penn Warren. In addition, the American Place Theatre was responsible for producing first plays by several black playwrights in the 1960s and 1970s,

including Phillip Hayes Dean and Lonne Elder III. See Wynn Handman's obituary: Neil Genzlinger, "Wynn Handman, Influential Director and Teacher, Dies at 97," *New York Times*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/theater/wynn-handman-dead-coronavirus.html>.

[11] Wynn Handman was not only one of the co-founders of The American Place Theatre, he was also its artistic director. He was well known for seeking out, training, and encouraging emerging theatre artists. He also directed many important plays, such as Eric Bogosian's *Drinking in America*. He taught many well-known actors and taught for over 50 years. See: Jeremy Gerard, *Wynn Place Show: A Biased History of the Rollicking Life & Extreme Times of Wynn Handman and the American Place Theatre* (Hanover: Smith and Kraus Publishers, Inc., 2013).

[12] For more information about Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, see Mel Gussow's review, where he acknowledges that it was at Henry Street Settlement before it moved uptown: Mel Gussow, "Stage: 'For Colored Girls' Evolves," *New York Times*, 16 September 1976.

[13] Barbara Lewis, "About the Playwright," *New York Amsterdam News*, 29 October 1977.

[14] See review of the play: Stephen Holden, "Stage: Elaine Jackson's 'Birth Rites'," *New York Times*, 7 May 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/07/theater/stage-elaine-jackson-s-birth-rites.html>.

[15] Endesha Ida Mae Holland was a playwright and a civil rights activist. Her most famous play is *From the Mississippi Delta*. She also wrote a memoir of the same name, published in 1997. See Endesha Ida Mae Holland's obituary: Margalit Fox, "Endesha Ida Mae Holland, 61, Dies; 'Mississippi Delta' Writer," *New York Times*, 1 February 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/01/books/endesha-ida-mae-holland-61-dies-mississippi-delta-writer.html>.

[16] Aishah Rahman was a playwright and author known for her participation and contribution to the Black Arts Movement. One of her best-known plays is *The Mojo and the Sayso*. See Aishah Rahman's obituary: "Aishah Rahman," *Legacy*, <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/nytimes/obituary.aspx?n=aishah-rahman&pid=173849555> (accessed 18 April 2021).

[17] Micki Grant is a dancer, actress, lyricist, librettist, composer, poet, playwright, director, and writer. She is best known for her 1972 musical revue *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope*, which earned her the distinction of being the first woman to win a Grammy Award for the score of a Broadway musical.

[18] J. e. Franklin is a playwright; she is best known for her 1969 play, *Black Girl*, which was later made into a 1972 feature film directed by Ossie Davis.

[19] Ntozake Shange was a poet and playwright; she is best known for her play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. See Ntozake Shange's obituary: Laura Collins-Hughes, "Ntozake Shange, Who Wrote 'For Colored Girls,' is Dead at 70," *New York Times*, 28 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/28/obituaries/ntozake-shange-is-dead-at-70.html>.

[20] Mel Gussow, "Grants to Playwrights—Look Backward," *New York Times*, 1 January 1978, <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/01/01/theater/grants-to-playwrights-look-backward.html>.

www.nytimes.com/1978/01/01/archives/grants-to-playwrights-a-look-backstage-grants-to-playwrightsa-look.html.

[21] Mel Gussow, "Women Playwrights Show New Strength," *New York Times*, 15 February 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/02/15/theater/women-playwrights-show-new-strength.html>.

[22] For more about black women during the Civil Rights Movement, see: La Donna Forsgren, *Sistuh in the Struggle: An Oral History of Black Arts Movement Theater and Performance* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020).

[23] Lloyd Richards was not only the first black person to direct a play on Broadway; he was also an actor. He was Dean of the Yale School of Drama from 1979 to 1991. In addition, he was in charge of the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center for many years and the Artistic Director of Yale Repertory Theatre. He was the major director of plays by August Wilson.

[24] See review of *Puberty Rites*: Richard Carter, "Woodie King's 'Puberty Rites' is a Big Hit at the Castillo Theatre," *New York Amsterdam News*, 10 November 2011, <http://amsterdamnews.com/news/2011/nov/10/woodie-kings-puberty-rites-is-a-big-hit-at-the/>.

[25] Stephen Holden, "Elaine Jackson's 'Birth Rites'," *New York Times*, 7 May 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/07/theater/stage-elaine-jackson-s-birth-rites.html>.

[26] Ron Milner's play *Checkmates* was on Broadway in 1988, at 46th Street Theater. It was directed by Woodie King Jr. and starred Denzel Washington, Paul Winfield, Ruby Dee, and Marsha Jackson. Frank Rich, "Milner's 'Checkmates, Story of 2 Households,'" *New York Times*, 5 August 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/05/theater/review-theater-milner-s-checkmates-story-of-2-households.html>.

[27] Friends Seminary and Hunter College High School are located in Manhattan.

ISSN 2376-4236

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