

Interviews and Afterviews on "Milestones in Black Theatre"

by Heather S. Nathans
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During the fall of 2020 I had the privilege of interviewing a group of groundbreaking scholars in Black Theatre: **Harry Elam, Jr., E. Patrick Johnson, David Krasner, Bernth Lindfors, Sandra Richards, Sandra Shannon,** and **Harvey Young.** Asking each of these distinguished colleagues the same four questions, I invited them to share their insights into the current state of the field, describe important milestones they have marked, and suggest those that have yet to be documented.

What a gift it was to spend time with these generous colleagues and to hear their perspectives on the state of Black Theatre and Performance. The essay below represents a synthesis of roughly eight hours of live interviews as well as written responses to my questions. Additionally, in some instances, the interviewees mentioned works by rising generations of scholars and I reached out to those colleagues for *their* thoughts. I have included the comments of those who were able to respond in a concluding section entitled "Afterviews," featuring **Julius Fleming, La Donna Forsgren, Donatella Galella, Douglas A. Jones, Jr.,** and **Adrienne C. Macki.**

Certain themes echo throughout the comments below: The need to embrace Black Theatre as a site of both joy and resistance; the need to explore and document uncharted histories that lie outside traditional definitions or sites of "theatre," and the opportunities to create more intersectional narratives of Black theatremakers. I offer my thanks to everyone involved for making the time to share their insights and for laying out a number of pathways and challenges for students and scholars studying Black Theatre's past, present, and future.

1. What critical junctures in the field of Black Theatre have yet to be marked?

David Krasner began with a call to expand and complicate the Black Theatre canon by delving back into the archives for long-forgotten or lost works: "Scholars need to consider what they do with the scripts that never received production—for example, the Black radical left works of the 1930s that often got buried or went unperformed due to political pressure." Krasner cited earlier manuscript versions of Theodore Ward's *The Big White Fog* or of Langston Hughes's *Mulatto* that reveal the extent to which authors had to compromise their original visions. He asks, "What might an exploration of these texts reveal about the ongoing political discourses of this formative era in Black theatre and performance? Artists of the 1960s often critiqued what they imagined as the timidity of earlier generations, without grasping the levels of censorship those earlier playwrights faced on a daily basis." He also pointed researchers towards Bert Williams and George Walker's unproduced play, *Just Like White Folks*, which they could never get produced.

Krasner describes Black artists walking, "a razor's edge of how far you can push things – what you can say and what you can't." He invites scholars to explore, "what did artists *want* to say and how did they get their messages across *despite* the restrictions they faced?" As he notes, "Errol Hill and Jim Hatch

really set the trend of exploring what performers had to do to get audiences and how they worked the system.”

Bernth Lindfors emphasized the new directions that the field of Black Theatre Studies has taken since he first began his research into nineteenth-century Black star Ira Aldridge many years ago. Lindfors honors Errol Hill’s emphasis on the experience of Black actors *beyond* the US. He hails it as “essential in imagining the impact of Black performance outside the minstrel traditions and legal restrictions that hampered its growth in the US throughout the nineteenth century. Yet Aldridge continues to dominate the scholarly imagination, and in many ways, valorizes the narrative of exceptionalism so often attached to Black performers.” Just as Krasner urges research into less-familiar texts, Lindfors encourages scholars to explore the stories of lesser-known Black artists (as he has done in his most recent study, *The Theatrical Career of Samuel Morgan Smith*), declaring, “Populating the history of Black theatre with their stories not only reveals the *number* of Black artists who managed to establish successful careers in a white-dominated industry. It can reveal patterns of collaboration and legacies of interracial performance traditions as well.”

E. Patrick Johnson laughingly notes that he gives the “answer people would expect” about the critical junctures still to be marked in the field: the influence of LGBTQIA+ artists in Black theatre, as well as the impact of Black women and feminist interventions in Black theatre history. And, he adds, “Black queer theatre history has yet to be told in its fullness,” underscoring the importance of recognizing artists who either self-identified as queer or who likely were (such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston). Johnson pays tribute to the “plethora of Black queer artists producing work during the 1980s that we lost to AIDS, including Marlon Riggs, or the artists whose work explicitly explored the Black queer experience of that time, including the Pomo Afro Homos theatre troupe (1990-1995).” He also notes that Lorraine Hansberry’s queer identity had only been “celebrated very recently.”

Sandra Shannon suggests that scholars of Black theatre are *beginning* to see the fruits of decades of labor and documentation, but that, “the inflection point we see at the moment – with the combination of the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, the murder of so many Black Americans, will inevitably transform our future scholarship on Black theatre in ways we can’t even begin to imagine.” She adds that, “the moment we’re in has put race relations front and center and has dispelled any illusions about what Obama’s election accomplished.” She stresses the need to see the “big picture” on confronting systemic racism through Black theatre. Shannon wryly acknowledges the irony that, “Black artists have always used moments like this to create revolutions,” suggesting that “We may even see the creation of a new cycle series,” (referencing August Wilson’s 10-play history of Black America).

Sandra Richards invites scholars of Black Theatre in the Americas to rethink their chronologies, asking, “Where do we start? With Yoruba traditions? With the Middle Passage, to put it on the slave ship as various African aesthetics merged into new genres, all marked by trauma?” Richards asks, “where do we learn what *Black* is?” She looks to colleagues like Kathy Perkins who have helped to make visible the histories of production at HBCUs, or institutions like the University of Iowa, that contributed to the training of Black theatre artists (particularly designers, who are so often overlooked in chronicles of Black theatre history). Richards reminds contemporary Black artists and scholars that they, “may be following in someone’s footsteps and not realize it,” simply because that history remains undocumented. For her, that lack of historical context robs contemporary scholars and artists of a crucial sense of heritage—of a “family tree” that confers an important sense of *belonging*.

Harry Elam, Jr.'s comments echo Richards's call to remember the "family tree," as he observes, "Are we in a critical juncture *now*? There is a tendency to focus on the contemporary in Black Theatre, rather than looking *back*. We have to mark our history." Elam points to the rise of "neo-slave plays," including those by Suzan-Lori Parks, Brandon Jacobs Jenkins, and Jeremy O. Harris, and the ways in which they, "look back at history as a way to reckon with it." He ponders what scholars might take away from this irreverent approach to playing with history. Like Shannon, Elam also questions how the pandemic crisis will impact opportunities for new Black playwrights to make their mark, asking, "How will rising authors get seen" when theatre makers often privilege the more familiar and established Black writers?

Harvey Young argues, "More attention could and should be paid to intersectionality, specifically Blackness and *latinidad* as well as Blackness and transgender identity. Although there have been important early studies in performance studies and communication studies—such as E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón Rivera-Servera's terrific edited collection *Blacktino Queer Performance* and C. Riley Snorton's stellar monograph *Black on Both Sides*, there needs to be more scholarship in those disciplines and also an equivalent set of smart, sophisticated writings that specifically center theatre. Furthermore, gender and sexuality, when indexed by race, should not be assumed (as topics) to exist primarily in the disciplines of performance studies or American Studies."

Young notes that, "It is difficult to conceive of *latinidad* without Blackness or African diasporic presence. This is increasingly apparent in the writings of mainstream authors (such as Junot Diaz). We need to more fully interrogate how and why scholarship on *latinidad* sometimes seems to deliberately erase or render invisible Blackness even as it offers nuanced, sophisticated ways of considering performances of whiteness and/or indigeneity. Certainly, the similarities of Blackness and Brownness is hinted at in Jose Esteban Munoz's posthumously published *Sense of Brown*—in which Munoz (thanks to the keen editorial work of Joshua Chambers Letson and Tavia Nyong'o) links the affective resonance of being and feeling Black and Brown. Blackness and Brownness influence and build upon one another. It might be helpful to think of Blackness and Brownness as twins, perhaps fraternal, which influence and inspire one another with shared roots (and occasionally overlapping diasporic routes). Of course, there are myriad examples in which Blackness is Brownness, co-existing and overlapping within the same body."

2. How might we document the ways that Black theatre scholars and artists are remapping the field? How have *you* experienced shifts in the profession?

Krasner highlights efforts to shift scholarly attention away from, "familiar urban centers towards less familiar regions such as St. Louis or Seattle that provided homes to active Black theatre artists and companies. By focusing on the performers, designers, dancers, and crew who made those regional theatres possible, contemporary researchers can illuminate rich histories that lie beyond the familiar Broadway-oriented narratives." As he observes, "There are pockets of local Black theatre history that reveal wonderful acts of resistance and wonderful work."

Lindfors echoes Krasner's suggestion to look beyond the familiar US circuits, but he directs attention, "beyond the borders of North America to a focus on *Black mobility* as a productive line of inquiry." He points to recent studies such as Bill Egan's *African American Entertainers in Australia and New Zealand* and Kathleen Chater's *Henry Box Brown: From Slavery to Show Business* that looks at the experience of a Black American entertainer in Victorian England.

In addition to telling the histories of Black artists in cities beyond familiar urban theatre centers, **Johnson** argues that, “there is so much Black theatre happening in informal spaces, not on formal stages,” and he highlights the recent scholarship of Koritha Mitchell and Julius Fleming that invites readers to frame alternate spaces for Black theatre.

Richards sees Black Theatre becoming, “more inclusive as queer studies and explorations of trans and non-binary identities” intersect with current scholarship. She points to the work of E. Patrick Johnson and a generation of rising scholars who have expanded the parameters of Black theatre studies. She also stresses the expansion of research around Afro-Latinx intersections, Diasporic Studies, and Gender Studies, and their exciting potential to shape future research in the field of Black Theatre. Musing on the terminology that will emerge to define the new directions in the field, she queries, “*Is diaspora the correct term for a new generation?*”

Shannon points to the work of scholars like Harvey Young, Tavia Nyong’o, Jonathan Shandell, Donatella Galella, Douglas A. Jones, Jr., Koritha Mitchell, La Donna Forsgren, Nicole Hodges Persley, Sandra Mayo, Soyica Diggs Colbert, Adrienne Macki, and Brandi Catanese as part of a critical reimagining of Black theatre history, illuminating the milieu and context of Black dramas. Shannon sees these scholars delving into the histories of the communities that inspire Black theatre and how theatre in turn serves and supports these communities, “these scholars are taking the primacy off the stage and focusing on theatre as an ecosystem.” Like Krasner and Johnson, Shannon also points to the need to document theatre work being done at *all* levels in the Black community. With the passion that marks her Wilson scholarship, she exclaims, “I want to understand it all!”

Like Shannon, **Elam** salutes Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones Jr., Harvey Young, and other Black Theatre scholars, “who are changing what we look at.” He also praised editors such as LeAnn Fields of the University of Michigan Press for making books on Black Theatre Studies visible across the profession, and credits Fields, along with Colbert, Young, and others with expanding definitions of Black Theatre *beyond* the stage to encompass broader definitions of performance.

Elam notes particularly the need to look at *failures* as well as successes in telling the histories of Black Theatre: “Think about things that *didn’t* work. What reverberations did they create? When we don’t look at failures, we erase histories and we erase legacies of repetition and cycles of learning. Don’t imagine these things never happened. Tell their stories.” As Elam argues, scholars can look at histories of failed attempts to understand *how* Black Theatre emerged in its present forms.

Young points to the opportunities offered by new technologies to document Black Theatre histories: “What is needed is a digital mapping project to better identify and chart the nodal networks of influence and inspiration to reveal how structures (archives, institutes, centers, funding initiatives) have been created to preserve the history and bolster the future possibilities of Black performance.”

He adds that achieving a *critical mass* will prove as important as any new technologies: “A small number of people in the academy research and work specifically in Black theatre. This paucity means that single individuals build entire branches, whole genres, of study. While it is a testament to their rigor that a handful of names have become synonymous with the objects of their study (Sandra G. Shannon’s work on August Wilson’s dramaturgy is a clear example), it is important for collectives to form to engage future researchers in an effort to further these explorations (the August Wilson Society, co-founded by

Professor Shannon is a prime example). *Each one, Bring one*. The work that Monica White Ndounou has done with her Craft Institute, in partnership with Dartmouth College, has helped to bring artists and scholars into conversation with the aim of impacting professional theatre and the academy. It is meaningful that Brandi Wilkins Catanese and thereafter La Donna Forsgren, as editors of *Theatre Survey*, will frame the conversations on theatre studies through the year 2024.”

3. What and whose legacies have we begun to recognize and where does vital work remain to be done?

Like Johnson, **Krasner** emphasizes the opportunity for researchers to explore and elevate “community” theatre histories in reclaiming legacies of Black theatre and performance. Asking how scholars can uncover the “invisible traditions people come from,” he described not only the community-based performance histories, “but early traveling circuits, Black gay cabarets, and the lives of those artists who *had* to stay invisible in order to stay safe.” As he argues, “You have to piece the stories together and use your imagination to think about what they went through.” He adds that historians need to, “think about where they see *themselves* in the story.”

Johnson asks, “How do we document informal spaces where Black performance happens?” For Johnson, oral histories, rudimentary recordings, playbills, photos can *start* to fill in histories, but for pieces created in “non-traditional” spaces, documentation remains a significant issue. Johnson salutes contemporary social media for, “supporting documentation and distribution,” yet he expressed a significant concern about the urgent need to create an archive (and he is part of a Mellon-Sawyer Seminar Grant to develop a Black Arts Archives). For Johnson, “If the works are not documented, how do we provide evidence they occurred?”

Lindfors invites scholars to “trace the histories of artists such as Dusé Mohamed Ali, editor of *The African Times and Orient Review* and *The Comet*, as well as an actor, playwright, activist, and theatre critic (who once interviewed Oscar Wilde). While much has been written about Ali in the context of literary and political histories, few have focused on his contributions to African theatre. What might a study of Ali’s theatre career reveal about the development of British Black Theatre history and historiography?”

Shannon’s role as President of the August Wilson Society offers her unique insights into the curation of Black theatre histories. She hopes to continue to document the impact of the “Wilsonian Warriors” – the artists, directors, designers, and other theatre-makers whose collaborations with Wilson continue to ripple across the field and to inspire rising generations.

Richards recalls her own start in the field of Black Theatre when she had to seek out colleagues like Margaret Wilkerson *after* graduate school because neither her undergraduate nor her graduate program offered courses in Black or African American theatre and there was “no one else” to offer her guidance. She marks the shift in the profession that has brought Black Theatre into a sharper focus alongside Performance Studies in ways that have, “created more breathing space and more intellectual opportunities.” She also hails, “the push towards Black Theatre of the *Americas*,” that she sees emerging across the field. She named colleagues including Douglas A. Jones Jr., La Donna Forsgren, and Koritha Mitchell among those doing exciting work to push the field into new conversations.

Young points to developing areas in Black Theatre scholarship, “There has been a considerable effort over the past two decades to spotlight and recognize the work of Black women theatre makers. We are all indebted to the editorial work (as well as to the professional practice) of Kathy Perkins, whose anthologies have made it easier to access the writings of Black women dramatists. Koritha Mitchell’s spotlighting of women writers will inspire a new generation of researchers to consider Black women’s theatrical and performance literature. In addition, recent explorations into the life and theatre of Lorraine Hansberry, by Soyica Diggs Colbert and Imani Perry, are cementing Hansberry’s place within the canon of internationally significant playwrights.”

However, he adds, “there is much to be done with regard to exploring Blackness within national theatre cultures. Significant research needs to be done on Black Canadian theatre. The critical study of performance by underrepresented groups (with the possible exception of First Nations theatre) in Canada remains at a nascent stage. Maureen Moynagh’s important edited collection, *African-Canadian Theatre*, helpfully charts the landscape. There is an emerging body of critical scholarship on contemporary Black British theatre but the volume of work does not compare with that centering African American theatre. However, Lynette Goddard has been an enviably effective champion of this necessary work and alongside other scholars, such as Deidre Osbourne and Mary F. Brewer, has created an impressively substantial critical core. In addition to continued exploration of the Caribbean influence inherent in the works of Lloyd Richards, Trey Anthony, and Winsome Pinnock among others, it is helpful to spotlight the ongoing theatre in the Caribbean, including but not limited to Jamaica.”

4. **Have you uncovered a milestone from the past whose impact scholars have yet to realize?**

In thinking about milestones, legacies, and the call to think about where he sees himself in the stories he explores, **Krasner** acknowledges his privilege in being a “Jewish boy from Brooklyn,” who feels the responsibility to bear witness to the racism he saw growing up and that he sees around him still. He argues that “scholars can connect to those who can no longer speak for themselves,” and they can honor the artists, “who refused to run away” from overwhelming racism and discrimination. Citing Ada Overton Walker, Krasner hails her bravery: “How good, how brave, how savvy, and how determined she must have been to succeed.” As he contends, “Performance can find the cracks in the walls. You can burn a manuscript, but performance finds a way.”

Lindfors describes the moments that Errol Hill reached out to him with encouragement to keep going in his quest to document Ira Aldridge’s career. He mentioned one moment in particular when Errol was terribly ill, yet took the time to reach out and inspire him. He asks, “How can we offer the same generosity, support, and validation to the scholars of today? And can we bear in mind how meaningful it is to have our scholarly ‘heroes’ recognize our work?”

Elam echoes Lindfors’s gratitude to the researchers and artists who paved the way for contemporary scholars, including Errol Hill (whom he described as an inspirational “model of rigor”). Hill was renowned as both a scholar and an artist, enjoying a career as a playwright, performer, and director, and Elam recognizes the importance of “*making* theatre as well as studying it.” He asks, “Are we creating opportunities for these rising scholars to do work in labs that will help them understand their subjects in new ways?” He stresses the vital relationship of theory to practice as critical in thinking *about* and *with* Black Theatre. Elam also envisions a field which honors its past and nurtures its future – underscoring the importance of making those support networks visible so that new generations of scholars

never feel isolated.

Johnson salutes another group of “heroes,” shifting his lens towards the “unsung heroes in the curation of Black performance who were critical to making sure that the history of Black Theatre *happens*.” He also looks ahead to the “next frontier” in Black theatre – exploring the impact of sexuality gender and mapping the “whole genealogy of Black theatre made possible by artists like George C. Wolfe, Robert O’Hara, and Michael R. Jackson.” As Johnson notes, “We’re now seeing lots of Black queer artists creating – so many people whose work grew out of the art created in backyards, community centers, churches, and other spaces where Black artists found space and voice.”

Shannon declares, “Black theatre has the potential to heal – how can we use Black theatre to show the way forward in this moment?” She invites colleagues to take advantage of this, “call to arms moment,” arguing that “subversive acts are necessary to deal with hegemonic structures.” She cites the current moment as, “particularly ripe for Black women who have become heroines and who are establishing their legacies.” Like Richards, she also reminds contemporary scholars to pay attention to the power of HBCUs, and to “reach up to claim and tout the value of these institutions.”

Richards points to the COVID-19 crisis and the many other challenges shaping the professoriate as the *next* milestone to mark in the field of Black Theatre. She asks, “Where are we going after the pandemic when professional opportunities will have shrunk, but the *need* to do and to document Black Theatre will not?”

Afterviews

Each of the scholars I interviewed mentioned a number of newer voices that have begun to shape discourses on Black Theatre. The “**Afterviews**” below showcase some of their responses to the question: “Where do *you* think the field of Black Theatre is headed in the future?”

Julius Fleming: “What will Blackness be?”

“What will blackness be?” As I reflect upon the futures of Black Theatre and Performance Studies, this prescient question from literary and performance theorist Fred Moten looms. An aesthetic and political tradition, black theatre and performance has allowed us to probe what blackness is and what blackness might be. Because the construction of the modern world relies on the extraction and abstraction of black bodies, the critical attention that Black Theatre and Performance Studies pays to the body will be vital to understanding, critiquing, and reconfiguring the known world and its futures—and to discovering new worlds and otherwise possibilities. From expanding uses of digital technologies within live theatre to staging plays that spotlight the State’s uneven, race-based practices of State care in the wake of natural disaster, black theatre and performance consistently engages the most innovative tools and pressing social concerns that animate the “now.” And the concerns of the “now,” we know, are the animate legacies of various pasts and the building blocks of times that are yet-to-come. In this sense, what excites me most about the future of Black Theatre and Performance Studies is that it will become an even more radical and robust enterprise, one that expands what we know and how we know it. Mirroring the nature of its object of study (i.e., performance), the field will remain unruly and innovative—on the run as it were. And yet, it will continue to negotiate the structural threat of disappearance and ephemerality ignited by the harrowing rise of increasingly anti-intellectual societies. But whatever the nature of those times that are yet-to-come,

Black Theatre and Performance will be a site to which we can continue to turn to understand what blackness is and might be, which is also to say what the world is and might be.

Douglas A. Jones, Jr. “Hurston’s Call”

Two recent publications explore theatrical practices that emerged from the sociality of everyday black persons that pay little to no regard for how such practices comported with mainstream tastes or courted sanction from black elites and other bourgeois gatekeepers. These books—Chinua Thelwell’s *Exporting Jim Crow: Blackface Minstrelsy in South Africa and Beyond* (UMass) and Rashida Shaw McMahon’s *The Black Circuit: Race, Performance, and Spectatorship* (Routledge)—offer exemplary historiographies of how Black performance cultures are often at their most inventive and nourishing when they refuse to organize themselves around the white gaze. Thelwell’s examination of Black minstrels forging Black diasporic networks of care across continents and Shaw McMahon’s of thriving African American theatre makers outside and against majoritarian institutions reveal the importance of studying Black performance that traffics in (sociocultural) politics that easily offends prevailing critical opinion.

In “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), Zora Neale Hurston called on critics to carry out these very sorts of investigations—our sensibilities be damned! For a host of intellectual and institutional reasons, Black Theatre and Performance Studies has generally pursued tacks more in line with W.E.B. Du Bois’s cultural theories. But Thelwell’s and Shaw McMahon’s fantastic new books show the importance of decentering Du Boisean frameworks for those thinkers like Hurston formulated. Such an approach recovers undertheorized Black performance genealogies and, accordingly, helps redress several of the class, political, and regional biases that continue to organize our field. Heeding Hurston’s call is both urgent and necessary: my hope is that it will shape methodologies and archival priorities in Black Theatre and Performance Studies for decades to come.

Adrienne C. Macki: “Clarion Call”

Certainly, the Black Lives Matter movement has prompted important global conversations. Black Theatre and Performance will continue to build upon that momentum as it remains at the forefront of this clarion call to promote a more inclusive space advancing diverse, underrepresented, and often disenfranchised perspectives. Of course, this is a divisive time, but I am interested in choosing to embrace radical optimism and recognize Black Theatre and Performance’s labor to mobilize audiences. I have long been interested in activist community-based theatres that employ theatre as a transformative space to promote conversation, healing, equity, and action. Simultaneously, white institutions, white leadership, and white audiences must listen and be vigilant while working towards understanding as well as acknowledging their privilege. Such steps are necessary to topple white supremacy. It sounds simplistic, but I am taking seriously the need for radical change and I am thinking about what concrete actions would look like on a practical level. Towards that end, the recent institutional practice of circulating statements that “we stand in solidarity...” is insufficient; it pays lip service to issues of equity that have plagued the field for far too long. It is high time for theatre organizations and allies to implement real change. Action is imperative to dismantle anti-black racism. Silence is complicit. Accordingly, in this context, Black Theatre and Performance has the potential to cultivate tangible opportunities for communities to rebuild, reconnect, and reimagine equity and inclusion. Likewise, the field may assume an explicit and central role in guiding academic, community, and professional theatres.

Donatella Galella: “Read, Cite, and Commit”

Black scholars are doing brilliant work in the field of Black Theatre and Performance, and all of us should engage with it.

A lot of current scholarship carefully considers affect to understand Black spectatorship and survival. La Donna S. Forsgren’s award-winning essay on *The Wiz* reveals the pleasures of queer Black feminist viewing practices. Ashon Crawley reminds us of the importance of Black joy in a context that spectacularizes trauma. To identify and navigate “know-your-place aggression,” Koritha Mitchell encourages us to center on Black success and frame white violence as a reaction. At the same time, anger can be useful, as Nikki Yeboah cites Audre Lorde and offers her play *The M(O)thers*, which encourages audiences to link personal stories of Black mothers to larger patterns of police anti-Blackness and to propel anti-racist action.

Black creativity as research also emerges in new scholarship that challenges the normative academic book structure of analyzing one case study per chapter with allegedly objective distance. In *Ezili’s Mirrors*, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley follows the lwa to sing multi-voiced Black girl ways of knowing. E. Patrick Johnson similarly follows Miss B., playing with meanings of honeypot and presenting oral histories of same-gender-loving Black women in the U.S. South.

This is but a fraction of the exciting work that will shape the future of the field. I am eager to learn more, and I hope that more scholars will read, cite, and commit to radical Black politics from reparations to prison abolition.

La Donna Forsgren: “Agitate for Change”

While the need to produce life-sustaining art may seem especially urgent during the Black Lives Matter movement of today, the reality is that creating and disseminating Black art has always been vital to our survival as a people. As such, I am cautiously optimistic about the future of black theatre and performance. I envision the rising generation of Black theatre artists creating new works and manifestos that speak to the needs of our community. Manifestos such as “We See You, White American Theatre”—incited by the ongoing Black Lives Matter protests—have created space for critical thought and action to obliterate systemic racism from our professional and university stages. I envision rising scholars also attending to the material realities of what it means to be Black in America and amplifying works produced at historically black theatres, many of which will not survive years of scarce funding compounded further by the financial devastation of a global pandemic.

Despite my optimistic vision, I also understand that systemic racism intrenches every aspect of our society. To revolutionize our field, we must agitate for change beyond the appearance of inclusivity. History has shown that granting a select few Black artists and scholars “a seat at the table” does not change the nature of the table. If we do not take action now, this newfound interest in Black art and scholarship will slip through the cracks of history as a passing “trend,” going gently into that good night. I want scholars to reconsider what constitutes the “archive” and reclaim heretofore marginalized works of Black women and LGBTQ+ members of our community. I want historically Black theatres to sustain the next generation of artists and thrive. I want Black artists and their allies to use this moment to dismantle all oppressive behaviors and practices of the past and envision a new, truly equitable future. If we can do

this; I envision another great era of Black cultural flowering.

BIOS:

Harry J. Elam, Jr., currently the President of Occidental College, is the author and co-editor of seven books, including the award-winning *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (University of Michigan Press, 2006), and dozens of journal articles and book chapters. He was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences as well as the College of Fellows of the American Theatre. The Association for Theatre in Higher Education awarded him its highest recognition, the Distinguished Scholar Award, and he is the recipient of the Career Achievement Award from the American Society for Theatre Research. Elam has also directed professionally for more than 25 years, including *Tod, the Boy*, for the Oakland Ensemble Company, and *Blues for an Alabama Sky* for Theaterworks in Palo Alto, winner of Drama-Logue Awards for Best Production, Best Design, Best Ensemble Cast and Best Direction. He also has directed several of August Wilson's plays, including *Radio Golf*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Two Trains Running*, and *Fences*.

Julius B. Fleming, Jr. is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he specializes in African American literary and cultural production and black performance studies. Fleming is currently completing his first book manuscript, entitled "Black Patience: Performance, Civil Rights, and the Refusal to Wait for Freedom," under contract with New York University Press. He is also beginning work on a second book project that explores the new geographies of colonial expansion and their impact on Afro-diasporic literary and cultural production. Having served as Associate Editor of *Callaloo* and *Black Perspectives*, the award-winning blog of the African American Intellectual History Society, his work appears and is forthcoming in *American Literature*, *American Literary History*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Callaloo*, *The James Baldwin Review*, and *The Southern Quarterly*.

La Donna L. Forsgren is an Associate Professor in the Department of Film, Television, and Theatre; concurrent faculty in the Gender Studies Program; and affiliate faculty in the Department of Africana Studies. She currently serves as Vice President/Conference Planner for the Mid-America Theatre Conference. Her first book, *In Search of Our Warrior Mothers: Women Dramatists of the Black Arts Movement*, investigates the works and careers of Martie Evans-Charles, J.E. Franklin, Sonia Sanchez, and Barbara Ann Teer (Northwestern University Press 2018). Her second book, *Sistuh's in the Struggle: An Oral History of the Black Arts Movement Theatre and Performance* (Northwestern University Press 2020) explores the art and activism of pioneering black women intellectuals of the 1960-1970s. She has contributed articles to journals such as *Theatre Survey*, *Theatre Topics*, *Continuum*, and *Callaloo*, as well as book chapters in *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance* (Routledge, 2019), *Teaching Critical Performance Theory in Today's Theatre Classroom, Studio, and Communities* (Routledge, 2020), *The Great North American Stage Directors* (Bloomsbury Methuen, forthcoming), and *Women's Theatre Theory and Dramatic Criticism* (Routledge, forthcoming). Her current book project explores queer black feminist spectatorship in contemporary musical theatre.

Donatella Galella is an associate professor at the University of California, Riverside. She researches how systemic racism shapes contemporary American theatre from the ways white institutions capitalize on blackness to the persistence of yellowface in musicals. Her book *America in the Round: Capital, Race, and Nation at Washington DC's Arena Stage* was an Honorable Mention for the 2020 Barnard Hewitt Award from the American Society for Theatre Research and a Finalist for the 2020 Outstanding Book

Award from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.

Patrick Johnson is is Dean of the School of Communication and Annenberg University Professor at Northwestern University. A member of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, Johnson's work has greatly impacted African American Studies, Performance Studies, and Gender, and Sexuality Studies. He is the author of several books, including *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003); *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South—An Oral History* (2008); *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.—An Oral History* (2018); *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women* (2019), in addition to a number of edited and co-edited collections, essays, and plays.

Douglas A. Jones, Jr. is an Associate Professor at Rutgers University, where he is also Assistant Dean of Humanities. He is the author of *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* (Michigan 2014); co-editor of the essay collection *Race and Performance after Repetition* (Duke 2020); editor of the special issue of *Modern Drama* 62.4 "Slavery's Reinventions" (Winter 2019). He is currently writing a book on black minstrelsy and its role in the production of African American literary modernism; an essay from that project appears in *Theatre Journal* 73.2 (2021).

David Krasner has taught acting, directing, and theatre history for 40 years. He is currently Chair of Theatre at Five Towns College in Long Island, New York, where he oversees the BFA Program in Musical Theatre, Acting, and Design/Tech. He is the author and editor of eleven books, three dozen articles, and over sixty book and performance reviews, ranging from theatre history, dramatic literature, a two-volume history of modern drama, acting, theatre and philosophy, theatre in theory, and a two-volume history of African American Theatre. He has twice received the Errol Hill Award from the American Society for Theatre Research for the best work on African American Theatre, and in 2008 he received the Betty Jean Jones Award for the best teacher of American theatre and drama. He has served, and continues to serve, on a dozen editorial advisory boards, including *Stanislavsky Studies*, *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Survey*, *African American Review*, and *Theatre Annual*. He has been the co-editor of the University of Michigan Press's series *Theater: Theory / Text / Performance* since 2006.

Bernth Lindfors, Professor Emeritus of English and African Literatures at the University of Texas at Austin, wrote biographies of Ira Aldridge and Samuel Morgan Smith after retiring from teaching in 2003. His earlier theatrical research focused on works by African playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Hubert Ogunde and Mbongeni Ngema, most of whom wrote their plays in English. He also published two books that dealt with African entertainers who performed in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business* (Indiana University Press, 1999) and *Early African Entertainments Abroad: From the Hottentot Venus to Africa's First Olympians* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).

Adrienne C. Macki is an Associate Professor in Dramatic Arts, Faculty in the Institute for Africana Studies, and American Studies Program at the University of Connecticut. She teaches courses in gender and performance, Black theatre, African American women playwrights, sports and performance, and introduction to theatre. She enjoys developing new work for young audiences and has authored numerous articles and essays. Her book, *Harlem's Theaters: A Staging Ground for Community, Class, and Contradiction, 1923-1939* (Northwestern UP, 2015) received the 2016 Errol Hill Award, Honorable Mention, for Outstanding Scholarship on African American Performance from the American Society for

Theatre Research (ASTR). She has served on the boards of the American Theatre and Drama Society, the Black Theatre Network, and on the Executive Committee of the American Society for Theatre Research. Adrienne received her B.A. in Theatre from Middlebury College, Masters in Theatre Education from Emerson College, and Ph.D. in Drama from Tufts University.

Sandra Richards is Professor Emerita at Northwestern University. Her research specialties include African American, African, African Diaspora, and American theatre and drama, she has authored *Ancient Songs Set Ablaze: The Theatre of Femi Osofisan* and numerous articles on a range of black dramatists. Richards is co-editor (with Sandra Shannon) of the *MLA Handbook of Approaches to Teaching the Plays of August Wilson*. She was also part of the editorial term of Kathy A. Perkins, Renee Alexander Craft, and Thomas F. DeFrantz that produced *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance* (2018). From 2001-2004, she held the Leon Forrest Professorship of African American Studies that supported research and publication on issues of cultural tourism to slave sites throughout the Black Atlantic. In 2007 ATHE recognized her as an Outstanding Teacher of Theatre in Higher Education, while ASTR honored her with its Outstanding Scholar award in 2017.

Sandra G. Shannon is Professor Emerita of African American Literature in the Department of English at Howard University, is widely considered *the* leading authority on playwright August Wilson and a major scholar in the field of African American drama. She is the author of two book-length studies, numerous essays, and chapters on African American literature, in general, and, more specifically, on August Wilson and his American Century Cycle plays. She has also served as Editor and Co-editor of four essay collections. Dr. Shannon is a Founder member of the August Wilson Society, and, since 2006, has served as its President.

She is a Fellow of the College of Fellows of the American Theatre--so honored in 2018 for being a "distinguished achiever in professional and educational theatre." She was elected by this body to serve as its next Dean (beginning in 2022). In 2018, Dr. Shannon was awarded the prestigious Winona Fletcher Award from the Black Theatre Network for her "academic excellence in theatre scholarship." Dr. Shannon is currently Artist-in-Residence at Pittsburgh, PA's August Wilson African American Cultural Center where she serves as a chief consultant for the Center's forthcoming state-of-the-art interactive exhibit, August Wilson: A Writer's Landscape. (For a complete list of her publications see: <https://works.bepress.com/sandra-shannon/>.)

Harvey Young is Dean of the College of Fine Arts at Boston University. His research on the performance and experience of race has been widely published in academic journals, profiled in the *New Yorker*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. As a commentator on popular culture, he has appeared on CNN, 20/20, and Good Morning America as well as within the pages of the *New York Times*, *Vanity Fair* and *People*. He has published seven books, including *Embodying Black Experience*, winner of "Book of the Year" awards from the National Communication Association and the American Society for Theatre Research. His forthcoming edited collection (with Megan Geigner) *Theatre After Empire* will be published in 2021. He is Immediate Past President of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education and has served as Trustee/Board Member of the African American Arts Alliance of Chicago, American Society for Theatre Research, Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra and Yale Club of Chicago.

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Table of Contents:

- “Subversive Inclusion: Ernie McClintock’s 127th Street Repertory Ensemble” by Elizabeth M. Cizmar
- “Earle Hyman and Frederick O’Neal: Ideals for the Embodiment of Artistic Truth” by Baron Kelly
- “A Return to 1987: Glenda Dickerson’s Black Feminist Intervention” by Khalid Y. Long
- “An Interview with Elaine Jackson” by Nathaniel G. Nesmith
- "Playing the Dozens: Towards a Black Feminist Dramaturgy in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston" by Michelle Cowin Gibbs

- "1991: Original Broadway Production of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's Antimusical *The Mule-Bone* Is Presented" by Eric M. Glover
- "Ògún Yè Mo Yè! Pathways for institutionalizing Black Theater pedagogy and production at historically white universities" by Omiyemi (Artisia) Green
- "Dancing on the Slash: Choreographing a Life as a Black Feminist Artist/Scholar" by Lisa B. Thompson
- "Newly Discovered Biographical Sources on Ira Aldridge" by Bernth Lindfors
- "Guadalís Del Carmen: Strategies for Hemispheric Liberation" by Olga Sanchez Saltveit
- "A Documentary Milestone: Revisiting Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement" by Isaiah Matthew Wooden

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