

## Introduction to “Milestones in Black Theatre”

This special issue of the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* was initially envisioned as a celebration of the inimitable Errol Hill’s contributions to Black Theatre in American history. Hill’s centennial asks us to reflect on the long history of American performance and the impact of Black lives on the American theater. Errol Hill did not revise American theater history by making it more “inclusive.” He challenged the systemic racism of American theater by providing evidence of a thriving Black arts practice that helped to shape the foundations of American theatrical traditions from musical theater to dance.

However, when colleagues from the American Theatre and Drama Society, the Black Theatre Association, and the Black Theatre Network began developing this issue, we were all reeling from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We did not have the theater to help us process this international trauma and loss. Theaters around the world were shuttered indefinitely due to pandemic lockdowns and quarantines. ATHE’s 2020 conference was supposed to take place in Detroit, Michigan, one of the country’s most densely populated Black cities. Instead that summer found us mourning and grappling with death and darkness via Zoom. Facing our limitations, fragilities, anger, and discontents, we attempted to make sense of what we were experiencing as a collective of theater-makers while paying close attention to the racially specific atrocities the pandemic and perpetual climate of anti-blackness did to our Black and Brown colleagues and friends.

While we formulated this issue, we watched the ongoing international public protests in response to the murder of George Floyd. The daily theatrical loop of trauma and death streaming onto our phones, tablets, televisions, and Zoom screens felt unbearable. By August of 2020, an unconscionable number of Americans had lost their lives to COVID-19 with those numbers disproportionately representing deaths in Black and Brown communities. At the same time, international audiences witnessed the unrelenting barrage of anti-Black deaths including Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Elijah McClain.

As every day seemed to bring a deluge of fresh pain or disaster, colleagues from across ATDS, BTA, and BTN came together to support a group of scholars whose work documents Black Theatre’s histories of resistance, pride, courage, and triumph. Working on this special issue of the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* celebrating "Milestones in Black Theatre" has opened up opportunities to reimagine the parameters of the field. It has also highlighted the inadequacy of one journal issue to represent all of the extraordinary accomplishments and developments in Black Theatre Studies.

Rather than curating a more traditional journal format with four or five articles, we deliberately broke open the structure to encourage short thought pieces, manifestos, explorations of new work, interviews, roundtable discussions, and reimaginings of familiar material. We also sought to represent a broad swath of scholars in Black Theatre -- both well-established voices and those newer to the conversation. Additionally, we developed a Spotify playlist to accompany the issue (available at: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6GVG9zV2bK1JC9Xn1kzhS6?si=9ea0067b0eb1409d>). This playlist invites readers into a sonic landscape as an alternate methodology and archive. It asks how we can think through milestones and approaches in new and unfamiliar ways? We hope that it will inspire you to add songs or to curate your own lists around *your* research.

We launch the issue with a series of interviews from award-winning scholars and leaders, including Harry Elam, David Krasner, E. Patrick Johnson, Bernth Lindfors, Sandra Richards, Sandra Shannon, and Harvey Young. Their numerous contributions to Black Theatre Studies adorn many of our bookshelves and grace our syllabi. Each of these scholars in turn hailed a host of new voices—marking the rise of successive generations in the field and those are included in a section entitled “Afterviews.”

A cluster of articles from Elizabeth Cizmar, Baron Kelly, Khalid Long, and Nathaniel Nesmith offers new insights into histories of Black artists, including Glenda Dickerson, Earle Hyman, Elaine Jackson, Ernie McLintock, Frederick O’Neal. A pair of short essays by Michelle Cowin Gibbs and Eric Glover presents contrasting interpretations of Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes’s *The Mule Bone*. Two manifesto-style pieces from Omiyemi Green and Lisa Thompson confront assumptions about career trajectories in Black Theatre and the academy, Black Theatre pedagogy, and the particular challenges Black women have faced in the field. Another cluster of essays by Bernth Lindfors, Olga Sanchez Saltveit, and Isaiah Wooden prompts readers to expand their theoretical and methodological lenses, including rethinking familiar documentary sources, boundaries between Black and Latinx theater, and how scholars can mine the archive for previously undiscovered treasures.

We close the articles section with a roundtable discussion that reflects on the role of the artist-scholar in the current moment. It looks back on the legacy of earlier artist-scholars, including Errol Hill, and it also asks how contemporary artist-scholars imagine their legacies. We invite readers to envision new possibilities that will not be measured only against what we have now.

The issue closes with a special selection of book reviews focusing on new directions in Black Theatre, compiled by *JADT* Book Review Editor Maya Roth, as well as a list of the Errol Hill Award-winning books and articles over the past twenty-three years. The Errol Hill Award, launched in 1997, recognizes, “outstanding scholarship in African American theater, drama, and/or performance studies, as demonstrated in the form of a published book-length project (monograph or essay collection) or scholarly article” ([astr.org](http://astr.org)).

We hope that this special issue will prompt debate and will also invite those just beginning their work in Black Theatre into the field. We also hope that it will serve as a useful benchmark for the historical moment in which we find ourselves.

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