

BLACK MASKS

Fall 2022

Spotlight on Black Theatre

\$5.00

**REMEMBERING
BILL GUNN
AND
KATHY COLLINS
PART ONE**

**THE NBTF
DOES IT AGAIN!**

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ADAM WADE

NICKY PITTS

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FORTY YEARS A PLAYWRIGHT



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Black Masks Publication (ISSN 0887-7580), featuring information about the Black performing, literary, and visual arts, is published quarterly. The four-issue subscription rates: US, \$28; Canada, \$33; elsewhere, \$38. Electronic subscriptions, \$20.

Submissions: *Black Masks* accepts articles on performing, literary, or visual arts and artists of African descent throughout the US and abroad. A query email or text is suggested prior to submission. The manuscript length may vary from 500–2,000 words depending on the topic. Transmission via email is required.

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BLACK MASKS

Fall 2022

Vol. 28, No. 1



Photo by
Cressandra Thibodeaux

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Editor's Notes

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Beth Turner

Beware the Cannon Fodder

Around this time last year, I was marvelling at the number of Black productions that were being readied for Broadway in response to the advocacy of the “We See You White America” and other BIPOC theatre groups. I expressed some reservations that the first shows were being mounted at a time when Covid-19 still threatened to suppress theatre attendance and I worried that the Black shows were being sent out to take the hit—to be cannon fodder, so to speak,—in the war against the pandemic.

Indeed, three plays did attribute their

early closings to Covid outbreaks among their casts: *Chicken & Biscuits* closed November 8, 2021 almost two months shy of its projected run; *Thoughts of a Colored Man*, scheduled to run until March 13, 2022, closed on December 22, after cast members became sick with Covid-19; likewise *The Waitress* also closed early.

Other shows like *Caroline, or Change*, *Trouble in Mind*, *Slave Play*, *Clyde's*, and *The Skin of our Teeth* had pre-set limited runs. They managed to open and complete their projected runs as planned. However, *for colored girls...*, which opened on April 20, 2022 and expected to run until August 14, initially announced it would close on May 22, as it was able to fill only about 51% of its seats. Its run was extended until June 5, buoyed by the Tony nominations the production received. *Passover* failed also to find an audience amidst the rich competition of Black theatre offerings and closed after about two months.

Some open-run Broadway shows, such as *Lackawanna Blues*, *Skeleton Crew* and *Paradise Square* also closed after truncated two- and three-month runs. However, *MJ, the Musical*, opened on February 1, 2022, and *A Strange Loop*, opened on April 26,

are both thriving. Three more plays are hitting Broadway this fall. *The Piano Lesson* and *Topdog/Underdog* are already previewing and *Ohio State Murders* will open in December. The all-Black cast *Death of a Salesman* will also open for a limited run until January. Time will tell how these plays will fare, but they have the chance.

Were the early Black plays cannon fodder? Maybe so. With Covid still active they were not able to run the eight to twelve sold-out weeks usually needed to recoupe the costs of a drama, nevermind the four to eight months needed for a musical. But beyond the economics, these Black plays proved their artistic worth, if measured by America's most recognized award for theatre excellence—The Tony Award. At the last Tony Awards in 2020, three Black artists won awards, out of twenty-three nominees. However, in 2022, out of the forty-four Black artists nominated, there were six winners: Michael R. Jackson for his musical *A Strange Loop*, Phylicia Rashad, Joaquina Kalukango and Myles Frost for their performances in *Skeleton Crew*; *Paradise Square*; and *MJ, the Musical*, respectively, and Montana Levi Blanco for his costumes for *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Some fodder!*

In Memoriam

Mary Alice, née Smith, was an acclaimed actress, especially known for her 1987 Tony-winning depiction of Rose in the original Broadway production of August Wil-



son's *Fences*. She also had lead Broadway roles in Charles Gordone's Pulitzer Prize-winning *No Place to Be Somebody* and in Emily Mann's adaptation, *Having Our Say: The Delaney Sisters' First 100 Years*. Off-Broadway, she appeared in Charles Fuller's *Zooman and the Sign* as well as Ntozake Shange's *Spell # 7*, among many others. She also appeared in films, such as *Malcolm X*, *The Inkwell* and *The Matrix* and had a recurring role in the soap opera *All My Children* in the 1980s. She won an Emmy Award for her performance in the TV series *I'll Fly Away* in 1993. Born in Indianola, Mississippi on December 3, 1936, she grew up in Chicago from the age of two. She relocated to New York

City in the 1960s to work with the Negro Ensemble Company and never left. She passed away on July 27, 2022 in her Manhattan apartment. She was 85 years old.

Nehemiah (Nicky)

Pitts, born on April 14, 1938, in Detroit, Michigan, was one of ten siblings. A social worker by profession, he was also an ardent lover of Black theatre. In the 1980s, he moved to New York City and founded a Black theatre, The Ladies Fort, on Bond Street in Lower Manhattan. He had planned an all-women's season, including a new play by Adrienne Kennedy, but his plans were derailed by a fire ordinance edict, which he could not overcome financially. Returning to Detroit, he remained a strong supporter of Concept East Theatre, The Saturday Irregulars and an avid promoter of *Black Masks*. He passed away in Detroit on June 23, 2022.



Adam Wade achieved recognition originally as a singer with three top ten hits and then as the first Black network game show host (*Musical Chairs*) in 1975. He performed on the big screen in several films including *Shaft*, *Across 110th Street* and *Claudine*, and in primetime TV hits, such as *Good Times* and *Sanford and Sons*. He also appeared in the soap operas *Guiding Light* and *Search for Tomorrow*. He and his wife, Jeree Palmer Wade, created and performed in productions together, including *Shades of Harlem* that played Off Broadway, and at the Village Gate, as well as on tour. Born March 17, 1935 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Wade was 87 years old when he passed away in Montclair, New Jersey on July 7, 2022.*



CELESTE BEDFORD WALKER

FEMINIST AND HISTORICAL DRAMATIST

by Sandra M. Mayo

With authentic dialogue, and captivating storytelling filled with humor and pathos, Celeste Bedford Walker's dazzling plays bring to life the rich history and experiences of African Americans. Walker's extensive canon includes over forty plays (twenty-five already produced). Her honors include the National Black Theatre's August Wilson Playwriting Award for significant contributions to Black and American Theatre, the Beverly Hills / Hollywood NAACP Theatre Awards for Best Playwright and Best Play, and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Texas Institute of Letters (TIL), the highest literary honor in Texas. When accepting the TIL award, Walker reminisced: "My mother always told me to aim for the moon and you might land among the stars."

A veteran of the Houston, Texas theatre scene, Walker was born and raised in Houston, and attended Jack Yates Senior High and Texas Southern University, both historically Black institutions. She credits many of her English teachers for helping her find her way. "Mrs. Gloria King was the one who really got me to thinking about writing," she recalls. "She entered me in a writing contest. They chose three people from Jack Yates, and I was one of the three. I had never even thought about myself like that. So when she suggested me, it really was a turning point for me to see myself in a different light."

Sandra M. Mayo, Ph.D. is a retired administrator and professor emeritus from the Department of Theatre and Dance, Texas State University—San Marcos. Her publications include Black History Plays, 1823–2020s: An Annotated Bibliography; Stages of Struggle and Celebration: A Production History of Black Theatre in Texas; and Frederick Douglass: Reflections on a Struggle for Freedom.

After taking classes at Texas Southern University, Walker worked as a data processor. Admiration of Toni Morrison led her to consider writing novels until she discovered more interest in the dialogue. The thoughtful examination of the Black experience in Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958) and the romantic comedies of Neil Simon (e.g., *Barefoot in the Park*, 1963) sparked and shaped her theatrical style. Her love of literature and the arts soon led her to seek creative activity in her community at the Black Arts Center in Houston's Fifth Ward. At the Center, she immersed herself in the Black pride and assertiveness of the Black Arts Movement of the sixties and seventies. She notes, "We wanted to write stories about Black self-determination and our own culture. We were realizing that as Blacks, we had our own unique culture, separate and apart from the mainstream. She remembers, "We wanted our stories to talk about the beauty and the strength of Blackness. So that is how I evolved and found encouragement to consider stories, that I wanted to tell, important."

Walker also helped organize the Writers Clinic, Inc. with a group of artists who helped launch her first play, *Sister Sister* in 1978 (renamed *Once in a Wifetime*). Thus began a lifelong passion for developing and sharing African American cultural stories for the stage, often juxtaposing the serious with the comic and returning frequently to African American women's issues. By creating an authentic voice for Black women, she spotlights their emotional life and debunks negative images. While many writers, e.g., Pearl Cleage, have explored the Black female struggling underclass in relation to race, sex, and gender, Walker has consistently expressed the challenges and triumphs of privileged Black women—educated, spirited, empowered middle-class women—



Steve Davis

Celeste Bedford Walker receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Texas Institute of Letters in El Paso, Texas on April 23, 2022.

bonding as they set the table of their lives. This trope of women bonding in Walker's canon mirrors a pattern in literary works by African American women.

Her feminist journey began with *Once in a Wifetime* (1978), produced by Sage Edwards with Operation Breadbasket, and directed by Alma Y. Carrière. It continued with the musical *Over Forty* (1989) and reached national recognition with the frequently produced *Sassy Mamas* (2007). Recognitions honoring *Sassy Mamas* include NAACP Image Award, Sparkling City Entertainment (2016); Broadway World Houston, Best Play, The Ensemble Theatre (2017); and an AUDELCO Award for Outstanding Ensemble, Black Spectrum Theatre, (2020).

In *Sassy Mamas*, Walker showcases audacious mature Black women who decide to reverse the paradigm of older men with younger women by opening them-

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Walker..

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selves up to companionship with younger men. Set in a triad of beauty (luxury D.C. apartments, elegant clothing, and attractive physical form), these sassy, sophisticated women exemplify self-confidence, verve, financial security, career success, and agency. Laughs abound in this romantic drama filled with witty banter and comic business, though not without serious self-reflection and growth. With much pride and joy, Walker touts that “all the ‘sassy mamas’ who have performed in the play have been special from the very first production at The Billie Holiday Theatre, directed by Marjorie Moon.”

On the other hand, Walker’s celebrated historical works recover and remember significant moments in African American history, presenting the stories in a creative medium that makes the history more accessible. Her plays contribute to the African American canon of over 200 historical dramas written since the early 1800s. Her most recent historical drama, *Greenwood: An American Dream Destroyed* (2021), produced in Tulsa, Oklahoma by Theatre North, was part of the 100th anniversary commemoration of the notorious riot/massacre. Shortly thereafter (also in 2021), the play premiered at Karamu Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio as a streaming theatre production. Prior to its premiere, Walker workshoped the play with The Essence of Acting Inc. in New York City and The Black and Latino Playwrights Celebration at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas.

Greenwood reimagines the destruction of over thirty-five blocks of a prominent oil-rich African American community and the massacre of over 300 citizens in 1921 when a Black youth is accused of attacking a White woman. From historical records, and with skillful development of the fictional Boley family and friends—a representative composite of the people caught up in the disaster—Walker brings the tragedy to light in its compelling emotional intensity.

Walker’s historical pageant, *Distant Voices* (1998), a finalist for the international Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for outstanding work by a female playwright in the English-speaking theatre, was com-



David Brown

(l. to r.) Michele Harrell, Detria Ward and Alice M. Gatling in The Ensemble Theatre’s 2017 production of Celeste Bedford Walker’s comedy *Sassy Mamas* in Houston.

missioned by The Ensemble Theatre of Houston. She remembers that “Director Peter Webster had been driving through Fourth Ward and something drew him to this wooded area of town. He had to turn around and go back. He didn’t know why, and he just walked through the woods, and he discovered a cemetery in the wooded overgrown weeded lot. He said, ‘Oh, this is a story. Somebody has to write this.’ He went to The Ensemble and Eileen Morris, bless her heart, said, ‘Oh, only Celeste can write that.’ And she pulled me in on it, and I am so grateful. The whole community was a part of it.”

With *Distant Voices*, Walker chronicles the history of the Houston metro area, one of the largest Black populations in Texas. She lifts the skeleton of stories from the archival records but also grave-stones, news clippings, funeral programs, and oral history to bring them to the fore, fleshing them out in authentic creative dialogue. She fondly reminisces, “I was at a performance, sitting in the dark watching the play unfold and somebody next to me grabbed my hand and said, ‘That’s my mother’s story. Thank you for writing it. Now I have an ending; I have closure.’”

Walker began her journey reimagining Black history for the stage with her play, *Camp Logan* in 1987. She originally received a grant from San Antonio’s Carver Cultural Community Center through the efforts of Mike Kaliski of San Antonio,

who later became the co-producer of the touring company. Produced first in 1987 by Kuumba Theatre in Chicago and directed by Lini Yeni, *Camp Logan* went on to win the NAACP Image Award.

Growing up in Houston, Walker heard references to the Camp Logan riot and had the opportunity to interview Houstonians who had relatives caught up in the event. Though she studied the archives in the Texas Southern University library, and the Black history section of the downtown Houston library, and read *Night of Violence: The Houston Riot of 1917* by Robert Haynes, she found oral history a particularly rich source for the emotional and personal story of the soldiers. “I would hear elders in the community sitting around talking about it, especially when there was some kind of a racial event that happened in the city. They would talk, whisper, and say, ‘We don’t want another Camp Logan.’ And I would listen, and ask questions, and they would talk to me.”

Camp Logan, a two-act tragedy, is a faithful recounting of the 1917 Houston, Texas military riot, including the events leading up to the riot, the carnage, and the sentences meted out to the Black soldiers. The action revolves around six Black soldiers who are a composite of the group immersed in the tumultuous event, along with their White captain. Walker frames

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Reminiscences

BILL GUNN AND KATHLEEN COLLINS

A Two-Part Series

by John E. Williams

The articles in this two-part series are excerpts from a Zoom interview of John E. Williams conducted by Classix director Awoye Timpo, Classix actor Brittany Bradford and Classix dramaturg Arminda Thomas on February 19, 2022. Classix is a New York City-based Black theatre collective that showcases plays by Black playwrights in the US, and the African diaspora.

This interview is dedicated to Pearl Bowser, Ishmael Reed, Bill Gunn and Kathy Collins.

As legend has it, famed playwright and screenwriter Bill Gunn was born while on route to Philadelphia from Cincinnati, Ohio in 1929. (His birth year has been given as 1934, but some believe it to be more likely 1929). Raised in Philadelphia, West Philadelphia to be exact, during the Jim Crow era, in a middle-class African American household, he was the only son of Louise Alexander Gunn (an aspiring actress and co-founder of uplift organizations) and Bill Gunn, Sr. (an itinerant blues musician, poet and songwriter). Bill Gunn died in 1989, at the age of fifty-nine after a prolonged battle with encephalitis related to HIV/AIDS meningitis—on the eve of the premiere of his play, *The Forbidden City*, at the Public Theater. He was in his prime. We can only imagine what he would have been able to accomplish had he survived his final illness.

What eventually became known as the “international” circle of Bill Gunn aficionados and admirers that materialized after his death was initially comprised of a tiny coterie of people including Ishmael Reed, Pearl Bowser, Sam Waymon and

John E. Williams is the recipient of an Edward Albee Foundation Fellowship, a Eugene O’Neill National Theatre Critics fellowship and a TCG Affiliated Writers Fellowship. His first article for Black Masks appeared in the Aug./Sep. 1997 issue. Titled “Nilo Cruz: A Bright New Bi-Cultural Voice,” it was about Afro-Cuban poet-playwright Nilo Cruz. Williams is currently based in Eugene, Oregon.

myself, who were among the earliest to champion his work. Later, the circle expanded to include others, such as the programmer/distributor Jake Perlin (who with Hilton Als, curated the landmark film retrospective, exhibition and multimedia series, “Till They Listen: Bill Gunn Directs America” at Artists Space from June 5th to August 15th 2021); Nicholas Forster (a young, dynamic scholar from Yale, who, with the film scholar Michele Prettyman, compiled a special close-up section for the Spring 2019 edition of *Black Camera: An International Film Journal*); and most recently, Yale scholar Carlos Valladares. After Bill Gunn died in 1989, we early admirers were doing everything that we possibly could to keep his legacy alive by organizing film-video conferences, curating film lecture series events and showcasing his works at venues such as Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Cinématek, Lincoln Center and the Whitney Museum.

I am so grateful to Pearl Bowser, who is now an amazing ninety-one years old, particularly for all that she did to keep Bill Gunn’s legacy alive. Thanks to her and the work of many others, we can now see how he was the “bridge” or link between the blaxploitation cinema era of the ‘70s and the new generation of New Jack Hollywood homeboy Black filmmakers, who appeared on the scene in the ‘90s in the wake of the release of Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989). For many years Bowser was the only one distributing Gunn’s 1973 blaxploitation-era, independent feature film *Ganja and Hess*, and Kathy Collins’s 1982 independent feature film, *Los-*



Tyes Johnson III

Bill Gunn and Kathleen Collins working together on the set of *Losing Ground* in Rockland County.

ing Ground, through African Diaspora Images, Bowser’s own Brooklyn-based film distribution company.

Although known by many as the renowned author of experimental novels such as *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Flight to Canada*, and the publisher of Gunn’s cinema/novel *Rhinestone Sharecropping* (I. Reed Books, 1981), my long-time friend and colleague Ishmael Reed founded a multicultural film organization called “There City Cinema” in the San Francisco Bay area in the 1980s. I initially started work-

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Reminiscences...

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ing for him as a part-time administrative assistant, secretary and liaison between his organization and many other community based nonprofit film organizations that existed in the Bay Area at the time, such as the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame (BFHFI), the Northern California Women in Film and TV, Cine Acción, and the Nosotros Hispanic Filmmakers Hall of Fame. During that time I was also coordinating workshops for Black independent filmmakers under the aegis of the BFHFI, as well as film-video conferences in association with Ishmael Reed (I-Reed) under the umbrella of his film organization. I coordinated a film-video conference with him called “Hollywood’s War Against Ethnic America” (1986), during which we screened Bill Gunn’s feature-length *Ganja and Hess*. This was one of the earliest film-video conferences dedicated to Gunn’s work.

I-Reed was also the author and executive producer of the experimental video/soap opera that Bill Gunn directed, titled *Personal Problems* (1980). I became very familiar with many of the members of the cast and crew, such as Sam Waymon, who worked with Ishmael Reed on this project. Waymon was Bill Gunn’s musical collaborator and was responsible for composing the musical scores for most of his films, including *Ganja and Hess*, and his plays, such as *Black Picture Show*.

I was also talking to Bill Gunn long-distance everyday at his home in Rockland County, New York while working on the film-video conference, and we became very good friends. You would have never known that Gunn and Kathy Collins were residing in those tiny, suburban bedroom communities out in Rockland. Gunn was actually based in Tappan-on-the-Hudson, while Kathy Collins was based in Piermont-on-the-Hudson. Yale scholar Nicholas Forster and film scholar and screenwriter Michele Prettyman’s co-edited section, “Close Up: The New York Scene” in *Black Camera* in 2019 was dedicated to the works of Gunn and Collins and the “Nyack” or “Hudson” school of Black independent filmmaking as they came to be known.¹ The “Close Up” section documents many of the works that they collab-



Chuck Stewart

Bill Gunn, filmmaker and playwright, shooting his 1973 classic film, *Ganja and Hess*.

orated on during their lifetime as well as many of the locations in Rockland County where they shot Collins’s independent feature film, *Losing Ground*. Although both Gunn and Collins were fiercely independent and iconoclastic with notably different ideas about the politics and aesthetics of Black filmmaking—they were like brother and sister, in many respects, when they collaborated together.

When I first saw *Ganja and Hess*, I was just completely blown away! I just couldn’t believe that someone had made a film like this that explored the ways in which a Black man goes about overcoming various addictions, using the 19th century trope of vampirism as a metaphor. Watching it was like watching my entire life unfold before me! *Ganja and Hess*, featuring Marlene Clark as Ganja, Duane Jones as Hess, and Bill Gunn in the role of George Meda, is a tour de force! This film goes all of the way back to the blaxploitation era of the 1970s—or what has become known as the era of the Black male “penetration” of Hollywood cinema—when Gordon Parks, Sr. directed *Shaft* (1971), featuring Issac Hayes’s musical soundtrack; Melvin Van Peebles burst on the scene with his iconic film, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baddass Song* (1971), which he wrote, produced, directed and starred in; and Ossie Davis directed the genre-breaking Black action film *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1972), based upon the Chester Himes novel. In any case although on the surface *Ganja and Hess* has all of the conventions of blood, gore and gratuitous violence associated with a typical blaxploitation film and—for all intents and purposes—looks like a vampire flick,

what it actually does in a very subtle and sophisticated way is draw upon the conventions of both the genres of blaxploitation and horror to tell a much more complex story about the plight of the Black male artist in US society trying to stay true to his art without being coopted by commercial Hollywood interests. (This theme reemerges again in Bill Gunn’s cinema / novel *Rhinestone Sharecropping*, written many years later in 1981.) *Ganja and Hess* captures Gunn at the peak of his powers as a scenarist, director and filmmaker and I’m convinced that it will take its place as one of the greatest works of world cinema to ever be produced as more is learned about it! Even Spike Lee has acclaimed it as a masterpiece!

However, those who have studied the history of this film are also aware of the way in which it was panned by hostile White critics in the US only to be later acclaimed by Josephine Baker when it was screened at the Cannes International Film Festival in France in 1973, and named one of the ten best American films. This turn of events has been very well documented by cultural critics, scholars and film historians, such as Greg Tate, James Monaco, Michael Gillespie and Ashley Clark. After watching *Ganja and Hess*, I came to understand why Tate championed the film as the *Invisible Man* [Ralph Ellison’s groundbreaking 1952 novel] of Black independent cinema.

After its original release, *Ganja and Hess* was picked up by another film distribution company and was re-edited and re-released under the title, *Blood Couple*, which bore very little resemblance to the original film. Gunn was, of course, mortified when he saw what they had done to it. But thank goodness that Pearl Bowser had the foresight to secure permission from the Museum of Modern Art to have the unabridged uncut 35 mm director’s cut of the film be permanently stored in a vault before it was reedited. It remains there to this day under lock and key, and is screened every ten years as a tribute to Bill Gunn’s genius. All who wish to really know what he originally had in mind when directing this film can actually view it in its unexpurgated form at MoMA.

Since Jake Perlin and Bret Wood at Kino Lorber Films were responsible for

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NBTF'S TRIUMPHANT RETURN

by EVELYN D. TYLER

All over the world, despite the disruption of Covid-19 and the devastating loss of loved ones, people continuously choose to move forward in support of one another for survival. This can be easily said about the posture of the creative minds behind the National Black Theatre Festival (NBTF) in Winston-Salem this summer, and of its supporters across the nation and around the globe. Collectively, they maintained the continued legacy of the NBTF, as it survives and thrives.

Beyond a doubt, the NBTF is a legacy worth preserving. The late founder Larry Leon Hamlin, and his recently deceased wife, Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin, were intentional in the establishment and maintenance of the festival, which continues to pave the way for Black artists, new and seasoned, to come together to render their best works in all things theatre related. In 2021, the scheduled festival was deferred due to the Covid pandemic, but in 2022 plans were set forth and executed to continue the biennial offering of the highly anticipated event. With a new executive producer, Jackie Alexander, at the forefront, and with co-chairs Lisa Arrindell and Petri Hawkins Byrd and the entire NBTF administrative team, members and volunteers, the 17th biennial festival was set to be a success, despite having only a few months to do so, following executive producer Sprinkle-Hamlin's death.

From my view, festival programming was well orchestrated and ran smoothly

Evelyn D. Tyler is an associate professor of theatre at Florida A&M University, where she also serves as a theatre generalist. Tyler is the creative mind and artist behind The Arts Collection by E. Tyler. For more information visit her website: www.theartscollectionbyetyler.com.

without any disruptions. Helping to support the Festival through ticket sales, the gala and the following stage productions successfully sold out one or even multiple shows: *The House of the Negro Insane* by Terrence Anthony, directed by Cheryl Lynn Bruce; *The Dance on Widow's Row* by Samm-Art Williams, directed by Terra Hodge; *Pretty Fire* by Charlayne Woodard, directed by Gregory Horton; *Freedom Summer* by Cynthia Grace Robinson, directed by Jackie Alexander; *Zora Neale Hurston: A Theatrical Biography* by Laurence Holder, directed by Woodie King Jr.; *I Wanna Be Evil: The Eartha Kitt Story*, written and performed by Jenelle Lynn Randall and directed by Yvans Jourdain; *Natural Woman: An Aretha Story*, written and directed by Thandiwe Desha-zor; and *The Eve of Jackie, The Last Time*, a reprise of Chester Gregory's earlier NBTF performances as Jackie Wilson. I proudly confess, I saw the *Eve of Jackie* three times during this festival. It truly was that good.

Other shows I went to see and thoroughly enjoyed include: *Cowboy* by Layon Gray; *Pooled: A Gospel Musical Drama* by Moses T. Alexander Greene; and *Let My People Go! A Dance Adaptation of the Prince of Egypt*. Also, I caught several short films worth mentioning: *Substance* by Jamaal Bradley, *The Blouse* by Jaleighna B. Jones, and *Plus One* by Lorenzo Wells.

In the past, the listing of productions, various events and workshops were rendered via a brochure. This year, the festival came prepared with both the brochure and an app! Festivalgoers had easily accessible information through the NBTF app, which highlighted everything! Anyone who downloaded the app had updated information on the daily schedule of productions, workshops, tickets, venues, and



Chester Gregory's crowd-pleasing performance as Jackie Wilson in the 2022 NBTF production of *The Eve of Jackie, The Last Time*.

social media. And for the first time, the programs for each event were available only via the app!

Unfortunately, the only major aspect the app didn't list was where to eat. Although there were good restaurants found throughout Winston-Salem, one spot that I visited morning, noon and night, was Butcher and Bull Steakhouse, a Marriott restaurant with great food and kind, attentive servers. As everything was fresh and made to order, select menu items were tastefully dyed the color purple to help pay homage to the festival. The potatoes, cheesecake and Belgian waffles all came in purple versions, which made us smile. Some of the alcoholic beverages even had festival names like "Marvtastic Long Island Iced Tea." There were other places throughout Winston-Salem that showed the festival love and support as well.

In addition to plays, readings, workshops, films, and symposia, other special offerings for the NBTF included The Mil-

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EVENTS

Arizona

Barbecue by Robert O’Hara. Directed by Ron May. During a family barbecue, the arrival of a drug-addicted sister sets off a wild, unplanned drug-fueled intervention in this raucous comedy. **Oct. 21–Nov. 6** (\$50). **Black Nativity** by Langston Hughes. A joyous company of singers, actors, dancers and musicians delivers a powerful message of joy, hope, victory, and liberation. **Dec. 2–18** (\$46). Black Theatre Troupe, 1333 E. Washington St., Phoenix (602.258.8128; blacktheatretroupe.org).

California

Man’s Favor Devil’s Plan by Kwik Jones. Directed by C. Julian White. In 1938, the owner of a Los Angeles hotel is a victim of his own diabolical abuse. **Oct. 20–Nov. 20**. Robey Theatre Company, 514 So. Spring St., 3rd fl. (213.489.7402 therobeytheatrecompany.org).

Florida

Guys and Dolls. Music and lyrics by Frank Loesser. Book by Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows. Directed by Jim Weaver. This Tony Award winner tells the story of a New York City gambler who dreams of setting up a big dice game while avoiding the authorities—and marriage to his longtime fiancée. **Oct. 5–Nov. 20**. **Langston Hughes’s Black Nativity**. (See description above under *Arizona*). **Nov. 30–Dec. 23** (\$50; \$20, students & active duty military). Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe, 1012 N. Orange Ave., Sarasota (941.366.1505; westcoastblacktheatre.org).

Illinois

American Son by Christopher Demos-Brown. An estranged interracial couple must confront their feelings about race and bias after their son is detained by the local police following a traffic

stop incident. **Oct. 29–Nov. 13** (\$30). Fleetwood-Jourdain Theatre, 927 Noyes St., Evanston (847.866.5914; fjtheatre@cityofevanston.org).

Blue Heaven, written and directed by Daryl Brooks. In what looks like a performance venue, four great blues legends reminisce about their careers while waiting for the next “new guy” to show up. When B.B. King arrives, what ensues is a blues concert that is “heaven” sent! **Oct. 22–Nov. 27** (\$46.50–\$55).

Black Ensemble Theater, 4450 N. Clark St., Chicago (773.769.4451; https://blackensembletheater.org).

The Island by Athol Fugard, with John Kani and Winston Ntshona. Directed by Gabrielle Randle-Bent. Featuring Ronald L. Conner and Kai Ealy. This sobering glimpse into the social, physical, and psychological wounds of apartheid, epitomized by South Africa’s infamous Robben Island prison, is a lesson in the complex work of

liberation and a testament to the transformative power of theatre. **Nov. 11–Dec. 4** (\$23.50–\$85.50). Court Theatre, 5535 S. Ellis Ave., Chicago (773.753.4472; courttheatre.org).

What to Send Up When It Goes Down by Aleshea Harris. Directed by Ericka Ratcliff and Daniel Bryant. A powerful interactive play-pageant-healing ritual, designed to help Black communities heal from American racialized violence. **Sep. 23–Oct. 9** (\$40). A Congo Square



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and Lookingglass Theatre Company presentation, Water Tower Water Works, 821 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago (773.296.1108; congosquaretheatre.org).

Louisiana

Trans Scripts, Part 1: The Women by Paul Lucas. Directed by Tommye Myrick. An original play was developed from over 75 interviews conducted with people from around the world who identify as transgender. **Nov. 17–25** (\$25–\$75). Voices in the Dark Repertory at the Allways Lounge and Cabaret, 2240 St. Claude Ave., New Orleans (504.333.6748; voicesinthedarkrepertory.com).

Maryland

Ain't No Mo' by Jordan E. Cooper. Directed by Lili-Anne Brown. This comedy is a surreal trip across Black America as Peaches, narrator and flight attendant, invites Black Americans to board African American Airlines' one-way Flight 1619 back to Africa for a mass exodus. **Oct. 17–Nov. 20**. A Woolly Mammoth Theatre and Baltimore Center Stage production at 700 North Calvert St., Baltimore (410.332.0033; centerstage.org).

It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues, based on a concept by Ron Taylor. Musical direction by Donald Owens. This musical is a stirring retrospective of blues classics that summon the true soul of African American music—from African chants and Delta spirituals to the urban electricity of a Chicago nightclub, to the twang of a country juke joint. **Sep. 16–Oct. 9** (\$39; \$35, seniors; \$20, students). Arena Players, 801 McCulloh St., Baltimore (401.728.6500; arenaplayersinc.com).

Massachusetts

Chicken & Biscuits by Douglas Lyons. Directed by Lyndsay Allyn Cox. The Jenkins family reunites to bury their father—hopefully without kill-

ing each other in the process. But then a family secret shows up at the funeral. **Dec. 9, 2022–Jan. 8, 2023**. A Front Porch Arts Collective production in partnership with Suffolk University at The Modern Theatre, 525 Washington St., Boston (617.557.6537; frontporcharts.org).

Michigan

44: Portraits of a President. This collective sculptural exhibit includes 44 artists' interpretations of Barack Obama, our 44th President, on identical life-size busts upon which they can give free rein to their interpretation of the man, his presidency and our history. **May 27–Dec. 31, 2022** (\$25, general; \$19, seniors & youth). The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, 315 East Warren Ave., Detroit (313.494.5800; thewright.org).

Minnesota

Weathering by Harrison David Rivers. Directed by Colette Robert. What happens when a circle of women surrounds a couple experiencing excruciating loss? Can the wound ever close? Rivers' first Penumbra commission reflects the pain of generations of Black women in this story of deliverance from grief. **Oct. 11–Nov. 6**. **Black Nativity** by Langston Hughes. Directed by Lou Bellamy. This is Penumbra's homegrown Christmas show of stirring vocals and breathtaking choreography. **Nov. 29–Dec. 24** (\$45; \$40, seniors; \$20, students). Penumbra Theatre, 270 North Kent St., Saint Paul (651.224.3180; penumbraattheatre.org).

Missouri

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller. This Black-cast production of the Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning classic, about traveling salesman Willy Loman and his family, explores disillusionment with the American Dream and the toll it takes on a middle-class family strug-

gling to survive in a crumbling world. **Jan. 11–29, 2023** (\$50; \$45, seniors & military; \$20, students; \$15, student rush). St. Louis Black Repertory Company at Edison Theatre, Washington University in St. Louis, 6465 Forsyth Ave., St. Louis (314.534.3810; theblackrep.org).

New Jersey

Chicken & Biscuits by Douglas Lyons. Directed by Lynda Gravatt. (See description above under *Massachusetts*.) **Dec. 21–Dec. 31** (\$20–\$135; \$150 for special New Year's Eve show). Crossroads Theatre Company, 7 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick (732.545.8100; crossroadstheatrecompany.org).

Blues in My Soul: The Legend and Legacy of Lonnie Johnson by David Robson. Directed by Ozzie Jones. Based on a true story, the musical is a celebration of an unsung, cast-aside American legend whose music inspired the likes of B.B. King, Elvis Presley and Eric Clapton. **Oct. 13–30** (\$30; \$25, senior; \$13, student). Passage Theatre, Mill Hill Playhouse, 205 E. Front St, Trenton (609.392.0766; passagetheatre.org).

New York

Drama

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller. Directed by Miranda Cromwell. Featuring Wendell Pierce, Sharon D. Clarke, André De Shields, Khris Davis and McKinley Belcher III. (See description above under *Missouri*.) **Sep. 19, 2022–Jan. 15, 2023** (\$67–\$371). Hudson Theatre, 141 W. 44th St., Manhattan (855.801.5876; thehudsonbroadway.com).

The Gospel Woman by TyLie Shider. Directed by Adrienne D. Williams. This workshop production depicts the story of an award-winning soul singer who is supposed to record her live gospel album in the church, only to be confronted with a

boycott, threats of foreclosure and a sororal feud over just whose voice is on the demo that launched her career. **Nov. 9–13**. A co-production of the National Black Theatre with The Chelsea Factory, 547 W. 26th St., Manhattan (212.722.3800; nationalblacktheatre.org).

Ohio State Murders by Adrienne Kennedy. Directed by Kenny Leon. Featuring Audra McDonald. Noted writer Suzanne Alexander's return to her alma mater as a guest speaker to discuss the violence in her works sets in motion the unraveling of a dark mystery. **Previews, Nov. 11. Opens Dec. 8** (\$50–\$304). James Earl Jones Theatre, 138 W. 48th St., Manhattan (212.239.6200; <https://www.broadway.com/shows/ohio-state-murders>).

The Piano Lesson by August Wilson. Directed by LaTanya Richardson Jackson, Featuring Danielle Brooks, John David Washington, Samuel L. Jackson, Michael Potts, Ray Fisher, April Matthis and Trai Byers. In Pittsburgh's Hill District in 1936, a sister and her brother are locked in a war over the fate of their family heirloom: a piano carved with the faces of their ancestors. **Previews began Sep. 19. Opens Oct. 13**. (\$50–\$363). Ethel Barrymore Theatre, 243 W. 47th St., Manhattan (212.239.6200; pianolessonplay.com).

Pick Up the Pieces by Jeanette Hill. Directed by Fulton C. Hodges. Featuring Kenya Wilson, Ria Alexander, Douglas Wade, Colby Christina, Aaron Watkins, Gil Tucker, and Mel' Lahnee Blackwell. In this journey of love, three women, three generations, three hearts are re-born! **Oct. 20–Nov. 6** (\$30). Black Spectrum Theatre, 177 St. & Baisley Blvd., Jamaica (718.723.1800; blackpectrum.com).

Topdog/Underdog by Suzan-Lori Parks. Directed by Kenny

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Arts Hotline

(continued from page 11)

Leon. Featuring Corey Hawkins and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II. This darkly comedic fable of brotherly love and family identity, tells the story of two brothers, Lincoln and Booth, who are haunted by the past and their obsession with the street con game, three-card monte. **Previews Sep. 27. Opens Oct. 20** (\$81–\$371) John Golden Theatre, 252 W. 45th St., Manhattan (212.239.6200; topdogunderdog.com).

The White Blacks by Melanie Maria Goodreaux. Complicated racial distinctions agonize a New Orleans family that has a branch of lighter-skinned members who “pass for White” to reap social benefits. But at what cost? **Nov. 10–27.** Theatre for the New City, 155 First Ave. (bet. 9th & 10th Sts.), Manhattan (212.254.1109; https://theaterforthenewcity.net).

Comedy

Ain’t No Mo, written and performed by Jordan E. Cooper. Directed by Stevie Walker-Webb. (See description above under *Maryland*.) **Previews, Nov. 3. Opens, Dec. 1** (\$48–\$394). Belasco Theatre, 111 W.

44th St., Manhattan (212.239.6200; aintnomobway.com).

Musicals

Hadestown. Book, music and lyrics by Anaïs Mitchell. Directed by Rachel Chavkin. Featuring Jewelle Blackman, Eva Noblezada, Patrick Page, T. Oliver Reid, Reeve Carney and Lillias White. The mythical tale of young dreamers Orpheus and Eurydice intertwines with the myth of King Hades and Persephone into a hell-raising journey to the underworld and back. Opened Apr. 2019. **Open run.** (\$62–\$268). Walter Kerr Theatre, 219 W. 48th St., Manhattan (877.250.2929; hadestown.com).

Hamilton. Book, music, and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda. Directed by Thomas Kail. Featuring Miguel Cervantes, Nik Walker, Tamar Greene, Aubin Wise, Krystal Joy Brown, Fergie L. Philippe, Mandy Gonzalez, Kyle Scatliffe, Daniel Yearwood and Euan Morton. This Tony Award-winning musical portrays the life and death of America’s founding father, immigrant Alexander Hamilton. Opened Aug. 6, 2015. **Open run** (\$175–\$351). Richard Rodgers Theatre, 226 W. 46th St., Manhattan (877.250.2929; hamiltonbroadway.com).

MJ, the Musical, with book by Lynn Nottage. Directed and choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon. Led by Myles Frost, with Quentin Earl Darrington, Antoine L. Smith, Tavon Olds-Sample, John Edwards, Ayana George, Lamont Walker II, and Zelig Williams. Going beyond the singular moves and signature sound of the star, this musical offers a rare look at the creative mind and collaborative spirit that catapulted Jackson into legendary status. Opened Feb. 1, 2022. **Open run** (\$69–\$420). Neil Simon Theatre, 250 W. 52nd St., Manhattan (212.757.8646; mjthemusical.com).

Six by Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss. Directed by Lucy Moss and Jamie Armitage. Featuring Brittney Mack, Brennyn Lark, Andrea Macasaet, Keri René Fuller, Bre Jackson and Samantha Pauly. From Tudor queens to pop princesses, the six wives of Henry VIII musically remix some five hundred years of historical heartbreak into an exuberant celebration of 21st century girl power. Opened Oct. 3, 2021. **Open run** (\$94–\$336). Brooks Atkinson Theatre, 256 W. 47th St., Manhattan (212.719.4099; sixonbroadway.com).

A Strange Loop. Book, lyrics and music by Michael R. Jackson. Directed by Stephen Brackett. Featuring Antwayn Hopper, Jaquel Spivey, James Jackson Jr., John-Michael Lyles, Jason Veasey, L. Morgan Lee, and John-Andrew Morrison. A Pulitzer Prize-, Tony Award-winning musical portraying the strange loop created by a Black queer writer writing a musical, etc. Opened Apr. 26, 2022. **Open run** (\$60–\$371). Lyceum Theatre, 149 W. 45th St., Manhattan (212.239.6200; strangeloopmusical.com).

Dance

Camille A. Brown & Dancers: The Trilogy. The first two of Brown’s trio of essential works redefine Black identity

within our changing cultural landscape. **Oct. 25–Oct. 31** (\$26–\$71). The Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., Manhattan (212.242.0800; joyce.org). The third work examines the culture of Black life that is often appropriated, re-written or silenced. **Nov. 4 & 5** (\$39.35–82.70). The Apollo Theatre, 253 W. 125th St, Harlem (212.531.5300; apollotheater.org).

Ayodele Casel: Chasing Magic. Directed by Torya Beard. Welcoming old and new musical collaborators into the mix, the dance program explores the magic of both tap dance and daily life. **Nov. 2–13** (\$26–\$71).

Garth Fagan Dance. On its 52nd anniversary, this internationally acclaimed dance company will open with a program that marries the gravity of modern dance, the vitality of Afro-Caribbean movement, with the speed and precision of ballet and the risk-taking experimentation of postmodernism. **Nov. 15–20** (\$26–\$81). **Complexions Contemporary Ballet.** Artistic directors Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson curate an eclectic program featuring a world premiere, *Endgame*; the critically acclaimed *Snatched Back from the Edges*; and the company premiere of a pas de deux from *Slingerland*. **Nov. 22–Dec. 4** (\$26–\$81). Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., Manhattan (212.242.0800; joyce.org).

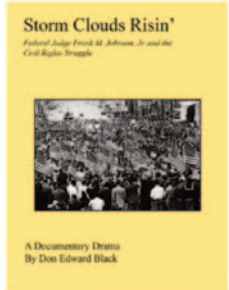
Embarqued: Stories of Soil by Stefanie Batten Bland. This new dance-theatre work invites reflection of our shared history and interrogates our relationships with memorialization, revealing post-colonial foundations and mythologies. **Nov. 1–5** (\$35). Fishman Space at BAM Fisher, 321 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn (718.636.4100; bam.org).

Exhibits

Hear Me Now: The Black Pottery of Old Edgefield, South

(continued on back page)

Storm Clouds Risin’
Federal Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr.
and the Civil Rights Struggle
by Don Edward Black



Storm Clouds Risin’ is a “documentary drama” and is well suited for stage or the high school classroom. It is the story of Federal Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr., who ordered the Selma march in 1965. The first portion of the play brings to life the character, Judge Johnson, followed by Selma, including testimony by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and future Congressman John Lewis, plus others. Together they tell the story of Selma from a “first person account.”

\$6.00, Paperback

Testimony from official records, National Archives, Georgia

WWW.STORMCLOUDSRISIN.COM

Walker...

(continued from page 6)

and imbues the work with the facts of the event, but creatively reimagines the dialogue of the soldiers while in the barracks—stories of home, women, brushes with discrimination, and hatred. She brings the soldiers' humanity to life through their camaraderie in their barracks. In saluting courage under fire, Walker's *Camp Logan* evokes memories of celebrated movies such as *A Soldier's Story* (1984), *Glory* (1989), and *Tuskegee Airmen* (1995).

In 1990, Walker founded and became CEO of Mountaintop Productions. With managing producer Sage Edwards, she began a ten-year tour with *Camp Logan*. The company not only performed at military installations, but also at major theatre venues across the country, including the Kennedy Center in 1991.

Variety abounds in Walker's canon. With *Reunion in Bartersville* (1983), featured at the National Black Theatre Festival in 2019, Walker contributes an entertaining and compelling work that expands the African American literary canon in the murder mystery genre. Walker notes, "I love the murder mystery. That's what I cut my teeth on—Sherlock Holmes. I would skip class to go to the library and read Sherlock Holmes mysteries, never thinking that I would write one. But actually what really inspired me was my dad talking about some kind of event that happened in a little small town in Texas called Bordersville where somebody got killed."

Reunion in Bartersville has all the popular techniques of the "Who done it?" drama—fear, menace, suspense, and surprise. Intertwined in the details of this murder mystery are thought-provoking themes regarding the face and the mask, the pull of relationships, as well as the age-old need to go home.

Walker's other full-length plays include: *Praise the Lord and Raise the Roof*, a foot-stomping gospel musical; *Hip Hop-pin' the Dream*, a drama about teens in the midst of Hip Hop culture, who come to a greater appreciation of the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.; *Brothers and Sisters*, *Husbands and Wives*, a provocative soap opera about a zany dysfunctional family; and *Harlem After Hours*, a swinging musical about night life during the Harlem Renaissance. Her one-act plays include histories, fantasies, and comedies as exemplified by *Noble Lofton*, *Buffalo Soldier*; *Adam and Eve: Revisited*; *Spirits*; *Smokes Bayou*; *The Boule*; *Jack Yates*, *Blacks in the Methodist Church*; *Reparations Day*; and *The History of Wheeler Baptist Church*. Performed before thousands of students over the years, Walker's youth theatre includes: *Freedom Train*; *The African Talking Drum*; *Where My Girls At?*; *Giants in the Land*; *Fabulous African Fables*; *Black Diamonds*; and *I, Barbara Jordan*.

A living legend in Houston, Celeste Bedford Walker, has had a working relationship spanning three to four decades with The Ensemble Theatre. The Ensemble's audiences were introduced to a di-



Steve Davis

Celeste Bedford Walker at the Texas Institute of Letters, next to a poster from Los Angeles's Robey Theatre's production of Walker's award-winning historical drama, *Camp Logan*.

verse selection of her work, among them *Over Forty*, *More Than Christmas*, and, of course, *Camp Logan*, *Distance Voices*, and *Sassy Mamas*; several were commissioned by the theatre. In 2021, echoing the words of The Ensemble Theatre's founder George Hawkins, current award-winning artistic director Eileen Morris said, "There will always be a place for Celeste Bedford Walker at The Ensemble Theatre."

With diverse genres, bold subject choices, meticulous research, and authentic language and character, Celeste Bedford Walker has enriched American theatre while preserving and ennobling in art African American history and culture. "What really drives and inspires my writing," says Walker, "is a passion to present the American Black in a holistic light, [to] present this individual as a joyful, courageous, loving human being with dignity and unconquerable will to not only survive, but to thrive."

Note: *Acting Up and Getting Down: Plays by African American Texans*, edited by Sandra Mayo and Elvin Holt, features *Camp Logan*. Forthcoming from Texas A&M University Press in 2023 is *Sassy Mamas and Other Plays by Celeste Bedford Walker*, published in collaboration with Texas State University's Wittliff Collections Literary Series, where Celeste Bedford Walker's papers are archived. ✨



The 2021 production of *Greenwood* at Karamu House in Cleveland, Ohio.

Reminiscences...

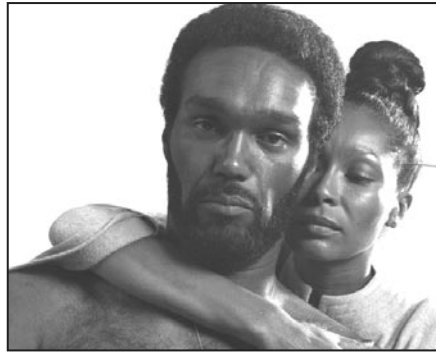
(continued from page 8)

the digital restoration and re-release of *Ganja and Hess*, this film may also be accessed through them. Chiz Schultz, who is a very talented filmmaker and documentarian in his own right, also produced a DVD titled, *Ganja and Hess: The Complete Edition 2006*, which contains three minutes of missing footage from the original film; audio commentary by deceased cinematographer James Hinton; and various essays by scholars of the horror genre. It's also a must see!

Personal Problems (1980) was initially a radio play that Ishmael Reed had conceived in association with poet Steve Cannon that morphed into an episodic made-for-TV series, titled *Personal Problems, Vol. 1 and Vol. 2*. Directed by Gunn, the series features Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor in the role of the Black female protagonist, Johnnie-Mae Brown; Charles Brown as Walter Cotton; Jim Wright as Father Brown; and Sam Waymon as Raymon, with cameo appearances by Ishmael Reed as Doggie Diner Manager, and Michele Wallace as Sharon. It featured the music of composer Carman Moore,² and the cinematography of Robert Polidori.

The series not only captures many of the documentary techniques that were prominent in the '70s and '80s—it also chronicles the interior lives of a Black working class poor family without all the glitz and illusory glamour usually associated with commercial Hollywood cinema. In my estimation, it's a good example of what Cuban filmmaker and film theorist Julio Garcia Espinosa meant to imply by the term "imperfect cinema," when he used it to describe the counter-hegemonic, anti-Hollywood stance that Cuban cinema took with regard to the imperializing gaze of the Hollywood filmmaking apparatus.

Personal Problems was later digitally restored and released in 2018, many years after Gunn died. The release was made possible by I-Reed and Cannon in association with Jake Perlin and Bret Wood, (who were responsible for transferring it from its original ¾ U-matic camera format into its new digital format), and then distributed by Kino Lorber Films. Among other features, the DVD release of *Personal Problems* contains the previously unseen preliminary version of the series



Duane Jones (Hess) and Marlene Clarke (Ganga), lead characters in Bill Gunn's film, *Ganja and Hess*.

directed by Bill Gunn in 1979 as well as the original six-part radio play written by I-Reed and Cannon in 1977; interviews with I-Reed, Cannon and Waymon; footage from the Q & A; a session from the premiere of the digital restoration of the film; and a theatrical trailer. This project was a forty-year labor of love that Ishmael Reed had been carrying around with him since the 1970s—something that he had spent his entire life working on. He actually wrote a wonderful companion essay titled "Bill Gunn: the Black Artist Hollywood Couldn't Buy" (2020) for Criterion Films about the odyssey of making this series and what it was like for him to collaborate with artists such as Bill Gunn, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, actor Walter Cotton, and composer Carman Moore.

Since many of those who participated in the original production of *Personal Problems* are now deceased, the series holds a hallowed place in the annals of Black cinema history as one of the few works to be initially rejected by critics, only to later achieve critical acclaim as a "classic," after it was thought to have been lost. Rediscovered and re-released forty years after it was conceived, the series was in many respects comparable to what almost occurred to many of the turn-of-the-century silent race movies by pioneer Black independent filmmaker Oscar Micheaux. Also presumed to be lost, his films were later re-discovered in a dustbin in a museum in Spain.

In addition to his filmmaking, Gunn wrote several stage plays, including the above-mentioned *Forbidden City*, produced at the Public Theater in 1989, and *Black Picture Show*, which was originally produced at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre at Lincoln Center in 1975. In June 2021

Classix director Awoye Timpo presented a staged reading of the play at the Artists Space gallery and later filmed the performance. It was the first time that the play had been produced since Joseph Papp did it back in 1975! The lead role, Alexander, was originally portrayed by Dick Anthony Williams, who received a Tony Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor for his performance. It should be noted that Ron O'Neal (*Super Fly*) was originally slated to portray this role, but made the decision to bow out in the early stages of the production. After watching Andre Holland portray Alexander in the recent reading, I became convinced that Gunn really had an actor like him more in mind for this role than either Williams or O'Neal. But, unfortunately, because this play was produced during an era when the ways in which Black manhood and masculinity could be embodied on the stage were limited by the rigid constructions of gender performativity, compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity that existed at the time, it didn't escape those constraints. In any case, previously performed as a cisgender African American heterosexual male, Awoye Timpo's staged reading of *Black Picture Show* marked the first time that an openly Black gay male had ever portrayed that role.

Acclaimed theatre scholar Paul Carter Harrison, co-author with renowned theatre photographer Bert Andrews, of *In the Shadow of the Great White Way: Images from the Black Theatre*, indicated that Bill Gunn's *Black Picture Show* was one of the most significant plays to be written by a Black playwright in the '70s, along with Lonne Elder III's *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*; Charles Gordone's *No Place to Be Somebody*; Phillip Hayes Dean's *Sty of the Blind Pig*; and Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*. I was so pleased to be able to witness a staged reading of this play fifty years after it was originally produced. Now, everyone wants to know who this Bill Gunn is.

When Gunn became ill in 1989, I began corresponding with his mother, Louise Alexander Gunn who is now deceased. We were corresponding back and forth regularly and she was sending me letters describing his rapidly deteriorating state of health. As soon as I became aware that he was on the verge of succumbing, I con-



(l.to.r) Sam Waymon, Duane Jones, Niamani Mutima, John Wells, Ron, Bill Gunn and Tres Johnson III (seated) in Nyack, New York.

tacted Toni Morrison, who was then residing in Grandview-on-the-Hudson. As soon as she found out that Bill Gunn was dying, she called the hospital where he was located to let him know that he was loved. He passed shortly thereafter. Chiz Schultz became the executor of his estate. The films that Gunn wrote and directed during his lifetime can also be accessed through Schultz.

The year following Bill Gunn's death in 1989, Ishmael Reed did a gallery talk about him at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in association with John Hanhardt, who was then the curator of the New American Film and Video Series. This was the first major film retrospective dedicated to the works of Bill Gunn. All of his films were screened at the event: including *Ganja and Hess* (Kelly-Jordan Enterprises, 1973), *Personal Problems vol. 1 & 2*, and a video of his suppressed, unreleased film *Stop!* (1970), which he shot in Puerto Rico. Ishmael Reed's talk at the Whitney Museum back in 1990 really "got the ball rolling" so to speak, in generating renewed interest in Bill Gunn and his works. And here we are in 2022 and we're still talking about all that he did back in the '70s and '80s!! Isn't that amazing?!

Endnotes:

1. Nicholas Forster and Michele Prettyman, eds. Close-up: The New York Scene, a special section in *Black Camera: An International Film Journal*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 52–158. (Particularly see: Forster and Prettyman, "Introduction: A Scene of New Worlds," pp. 52–68.)
2. Composer Carman Moore's original music for *Personal Problems* was released as a stand-alone motion picture soundtrack in 2019 with liner notes by Moore and I-Reed—and is available in both LP and digital formats.*

The NBTF...

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ton Rhodes gallery that featured an exhibit titled "Black Theatre Royalty: Portraits from the Hattiloo Theatre Collection." It showcased paintings of Black theatre artists like August Wilson, Lorraine Hansberry, and James Baldwin to name a few. Another touching sight was the new façade of The Central Library downtown, renamed in honor of the late Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin, who had long served as its director.

The National Black Theatre Festival is a treasured gem we will continue to preserve as it keeps growing and getting better and better. Where else can you see over 100 presentations in one week featuring Black artists from all over the country? The answer is nowhere. Months before the festival, I was having lunch with a dear friend who stated she would attend this year. I lit up with excitement and said "I wanna go!" Prior to that moment, my mind was far from the festival. But as soon as she mentioned it, I was triggered and awakened to all of the great experiences I encountered from past National Black Theatre Festivals. I knew

Winston-Salem was where I wanted to be at the end of my summer. Later that same day, I began to prepare my engagement and travel to Black Theatre Holy Ground, including developing a workshop, titled, "Building Relics," that would allow participants to learn the process of recreating a relic/stage property by measuring with their eyes and then building with their hands. My workshop was accepted and I presented it in two different sessions.

When I arrived at the Marriott, I was met by purple and black festival paraphernalia, and a smile from celebrity co-chair, Lisa Arrindell, who greeted me as I got on the elevator. Later I would see her with her celebrity co-chair, Petri Hawkins Byrd, who, as gracious hosts, were always present, approachable and friendly. I believe their good vibes and energy aided in setting the sweet inviting tone the festival had and maintained throughout its run.

NBTF is a place where Black theatre magic happens and where those who may just want a sample will always receive a full portion—there is just so much offered at the National Black Theatre Festival, on the Black Theatre Holy Ground, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina!*

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Arts Hotline

(continued from page 12)

Carolina. Focusing on the work of African American potters in the 19th-century American South, the exhibition presents approximately 50 ceramic objects from the Old Edgefield District, in South Carolina, a center of stoneware production in the decades before the Civil War. **Sep. 9, 2022–Feb. 5, 2023** (\$30; \$22, seniors; \$17, students). Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Ave., Manhattan (212.535.7710; metmuseum.org).

North Carolina

Conserving a Legacy: Works by HBCU Professors. **Sep. 9–Dec. 30.** Delta Arts Center, 2611 New Walkertown Rd., Winston-Salem, (336.722.2625; deltaartscenter.org).

Nativity According to the Gospels, written, directed and choreographed by Mabel Robinson. An

electrifying rendition of the Christmas story told through gospel music, dance, and spoken word. **Dec. 9–18** (\$30; \$23, students & seniors; \$18, children). North Carolina Black Repertory Company, HanesBrands Theatre, 209 N. Spruce Street, Winston-Salem (336.723.2266; https://ncblackrep.org).

Ohio

Black Nativity by poet Langston Hughes. Directed by Tony F. Sias. (See description above, *Arizona*). **Dec. 2–23.** Karamu House, 2355 E. 89th St., Cleveland (216.795.7070; karamuhouse.org).

Pennsylvania

A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry. A tight-knit family, living in a small tenement apartment in 1950s Chicago, receive a large life insurance payment that sets into play each family member's aspirations and dreams. **Oct. 12–30** (\$32–\$80). Pittsburgh Public Theater, O'Reilly Theater, 621

Penn Ave., Pittsburgh (412.316.1600; ppt.org).

Texas

Love & Southern Discomfort. Books and lyrics by Monica L. Patton. Music and lyrics by Bobby Daye. Directed by Eileen J. Morris. This musical is a rich and timeless story about how love and southern discomfort fuel dissension when the family matriarch's death creates crises for her heirs. **Sep 17–Oct 16** (\$44–\$60). **A Motown Christmas.** This musical is a perfect blend of the traditional Christmas carols paired with soulful sounds from Motown celebrities such as Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, The Jackson Five and the Supremes. **Nov. 12–Dec. 24** (\$44–\$60). The Ensemble Theatre, 3535 Main St., Houston (713.520.0055; ensemblehouston.com).

Plenty of Time by John Shévin Foster. Directed by Calvin J. Walker. Since 1968, Corey, a Black Panther and Christina, a member of an upper class family, have met

in Oak Bluffs in Martha's Vineyard annually on the same day. Each time they return to the small private beach house, they bring their personal growth and the effects of ongoing social and political changes they face as African Americans. **Sep. 30–Oct. 30** (\$32–\$44). **Take the Soul Train to Christmas** by Ekundayo Bandele. Directed by D. Wambui Richardson. **Nov. 25–Dec. 23.** Jubilee Theatre, 506 Main St., Fort Worth (817.338.4411; jubileetheatre.org).

Washington, DC

My Body My Choice. Directed by Molly Smith. Eight of America's most exciting female playwrights, including Dael Orlander-smith and Fatima Dyfan, share what choice means to them, following the overturning of Roe v. Wade. **Oct. 20–Nov. 6** (\$18). Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater, 1101 Sixth St., SW, Washington, DC (202.554.9066; arenastage.org). *

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