

A Hidden Figure: Beth Turner and *Black Masks* at the Crossroads of Art, Pedagogy, and Innovation

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For some time now, I have been deeply invested in recovering the hidden figures of Black Theatre history whose contributions to Black Theatre and performance have stood at the crossroads of artistry, pedagogy, and innovation. More specifically, I've been interested in Black Theatre artists/pedagogues whose works—be it through playwriting, directing, designing, teaching, critical writings, and documentation—have shaped Black Theatre in some form or fashion yet have been severely under-discussed and, in some cases, completely neglected. I include playwright, pedagogue, and founder and editor of *Black Masks* magazine, Beth Turner, PhD, among those hidden figures.

Beth has a lengthy history in Black Theatre as an academic and a practitioner. She has taught at several institutions, including NYU and Florida A&M University, published several scholarly essays with a keen focus on playwrights Pearl Cleage and Dael Orlandersmith, directed Black plays at various institutions, and written several plays that have received full productions. Her plays include *Ode to Mariah*, *Come Liberty*, and *Sing on, Ms. Gri*. Turner's play, *Sweet Mama Stringbean*, a story about performer Ethel Waters, was first produced in 2008 at Woodie King Jr.'s New Federal Theatre and in 2021 at Florida A&M University, directed by Evelyn D. Tyler. However, of all her accomplishments, Beth declares that her most outstanding contribution to Black Theatre is *Black Masks* magazine.

While Beth Turner's name has been synonymous with *Black Masks* magazine since 1984, her commitment to Black Theatre has not received the critical attention it so rightly deserves. What follows is an interview I conducted with Beth Turner where she discusses her introduction to theatre, her work as a playwright, and her founding of *Black Masks* magazine.

Khalid:

As I understand it, you were not always interested in theatre. Where did your interest in theatre come from?

Beth:

All my undergrad work was in French. I was a French major. French language and literature and that kind of thing. I didn't have a serious interest in theatre and really didn't have that much contact with theatre. I think I did go out for one campus show, which I remember as

being a horrific audition. Then after that, I think I just volunteered for their costume department or something, so I helped set up costumes for that show. No, the real interest came when I met my husband, Charles Turner, who was aspiring to be an actor. That is what got me immersed in the Black Theatre world. Just meeting with the people – the other actors and playwrights and directors that he was working with and just sitting around and hearing these wonderful conversations on subjects that ordinary people just don't talk about. That's where I got my first touch of it. I kind of jumped in from the writing side, and that came about when Charles got a job in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* by Derek Walcott. It was a Negro Ensemble Company production that they were taking out to California. I think it was to Mark Taper Forum. He was cast in that. We thought that would make a great summer vacation. We had two miniature poodles, and our nine-month-old daughter, Shairi. We packed up and tried to drive there. We were working with a map that was ahead of its time and had certain highways finished that weren't really finished. We found ourselves up in the Poconos in Pennsylvania, in the mountains, and the road ran out. It was the middle of the night, and the road ran out, and so we got lost in the mountains for that whole night. We drove all night and ended up finally in Harrisburg in the morning. Anyhow, we lost a lot of time and a lot of energy and a lot of sleep. We had to cut short the trip because Mark Taper told him that he had to be there the next day or they were gonna give his part away. He flew out from Indianapolis, and I drove the rest of the way. When we got out there, he was rehearsing and then performing. Because we were staying in a resident hotel, it was the first time I didn't have to deal with housecleaning. I just had to deal with my baby and that was it. When I put her to bed at night, and he's rehearsing or performing, I decided to do some writing. I started writing a script for *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, which was a television series. Back then, it was one of the few that I had kept up with and I really liked. I knew the characters. I wrote this script, and he handed it in to his agent that also had a literary branch. They submitted it to MGM, and MGM was interested in it. This was such a validation, right? This was like through the roof. Unfortunately, it ended up being the last season of the show, so the season ended before my script could be done or entertained. But it gave me the feeling, the confidence that I could write something that could be accepted and get past the professional eyes, both of the agent and then also of the people that were producing. That's when I started writing. When we came back to New York, I started submitting my plays to the Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop. Anyhow, I ended up getting a grant to do a children's show that took us to Africa. I came into theatre through playwriting.

Khalid:

You mentioned being around some of the folks who were doing Black Theatre at that time. Who were some of those people?

Beth:

Well, most notably, of course, was Lloyd Richards because he was the director of *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. And Roscoe Lee Brown. Derek Walcott was there. These were

heavy hitters, and you can imagine what their conversations were like. I was soaking it all up and just fascinated with it. That's how the bug bit me. It was not an acting bug, but a writing bug instead.

Khalid:

A few years ago, I discovered a published interview with you, James V. Hatch, Glenda Dickerson, and Shauneille Perry. The title of the interview was "Three women in theatre." It was the content of that interview coupled with your founding of *Black Masks Magazine* in which I contend established you as a pioneer of Black Theatre. Do you consider yourself a pioneer of Black Theatre?

Beth:

I consider myself a pioneer in terms of *Black Masks*, my documentation of Black Theatre. I think that's my major contribution. I also have a life as a playwright. I've written six plays. I had all my plays produced in New York. I had one that just closed last week, here in Tallahassee at Florida A&M University – *Sweet Mama String Bean*; it's the life story of Ethel Waters.

Khalid:

You are an accomplished playwright. You're also an accomplished teacher, scholar. In the context of being a documentarian, would you consider *Black Masks* to be your greatest legacy thus far?

Beth:

Yes, I think I would. It's the most unique thing that I do. It's the most unique accomplishment in that there really isn't another publication for this time period. There isn't another documentation that's been going on other than *Black Masks* in terms of the theatre, the month to month across 37 years now. That's really the unique thing. I sent Lloyd Richards a version of one of my plays. He was trying to be kind, but he said, "*Black Masks*, now that's something." I really feel that *Black Masks* is the most unique thing that I've done because there are plenty of playwrights who are much better than I am. I'm a good teacher, but there's a lot of excellent teachers out there, too.

Khalid:

Tell me the story of how *Black Masks* came to be.

Beth:

It was at the time when I was an aspiring playwright, and I started going to the Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop. I got to meet all these wonderful Black artists who were doing so many things and had devoted their lives to theatre, either as playwrights or actors or directors. At that point, they got no coverage. In the mainstream newspapers there was always one or two

African American artists who would be featured. If you weren't Denzel Washington or Morgan Freeman or on that level, few folks got coverage. But as for the rest of these people, I would say, "Well, you've been in theatre. You've been performing for 20 years, and you've never had a feature article on you ever?" People like Frances Foster from the Negro Ensemble Company. Then the other thing was that our work didn't get covered, even notices of our work didn't get carried in the mainstream publications either. The *New York Times*, at that point, had a whole section of little ads and notices about all the plays, Broadway and off-Broadway. We didn't get into any of those. The only way we had of advertising our work was word of mouth and then flyers. Anybody who was doing the show would come maybe to Frank Silvera and pass out the flyers for their show that was coming up that week or whatever. That was good, but I figured there were a lot of folks like me. I'd grab the flyers. I'd bring them home. When I finally had both the time and the money to go, I couldn't find the flyer anywhere. I said, well, you know, maybe I could do a publication that would give some coverage to some of these wonderful artists, and then also carry the listings of what's going on so people can have it all in one place." At first, *Black Masks* was coming out every month. Every month, I would have the listings for that month. The first issue, I timed to come out with the opening of the Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop in September 1984. Six pages. It was harder than what I do now in terms of the learning curve because you had to lay out by hand then. So, I had those borders and all of that. The rulers and the T-squares and all of that to line up the lines. Just painstakingly hard. The six pages, and I brought it to Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop, and I featured Woodie King on the cover. In the beginning, it was set up as a newsletter, so it wasn't a full-page cover. It was just like a newsletter. He had a little headshot. In fact, he didn't have a headshot, and so I had to cut his picture out of a book that he had just published. I said, "this is ridiculous." But anyhow, it was the right size, and I cut it out and put it in. That was the first one. It was so well received at the Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop. They were just sweethearts. "I want mine! Where's mine?" They were sweethearts. Enough for me to be encouraged to do the next month and the next month. There was great support from the community. I started building up my database, my subscriber list. It just developed from there, step by step, adding, doing a little bit more, depending on how the money was coming in. The theatre community's enthusiasm kind of just keeps me going because every time I said, "Oh, you know, it's enough. This is like too much." Then I'd think of one or two or three more people, I'd want to highlight. "Oh, but gee, I didn't do so and so. I planned to do a cover on so and so. They need to have that coverage. So, I'll do at least one more issue." That's the way it's been going for over thirty years.

Khalid:

Did you ever imagine *Black Masks* being a staple of Black Theatre today?

Beth:

No. No, not at all. I don't want to say I never made a business plan, but I never projected way out like that. I just always said I will do what I can afford to do and then garner as much

information as I can. The writers have been the mainstay of the magazine because people have wanted to write about their friends or people that they know in the business, that they admire. That's what's kept it going. Initially, I had to do a lot of the writing. That was a double whammy because you've got the deadline. You've got all that business: the interview, the writing, and then laying it out, and then the editing. It just became mind boggling. I didn't want it to be a vanity publication where it's just me writing about things. As time went on, more and more writers came through, and I was very glad to have those additional voices and to content myself with laying it out and distributing it. So that's what I've pretty much done all these years.

Khalid:

By adding more writers, you've created space for people to have a place to write that goes through a rigorous editorial process but is very different than the process taken by most conventional scholarly journals. That is part of the richness of *Black Masks*. I think, for instance, about scholars such as Freda Scott Giles. She is someone who has published her critical essays in several scholarly journals and edited collections, but her essays that are published in *Black Masks* are written for a broader audience. The same can be said about Judith Stephens-Lorenz who is a regular contributor to *Black Masks*. In doing so, they are showing that they're speaking the language of the academy as well as the language of non-academics who benefit from *Black Masks*.

Beth:

Right, right. Yes, and that's really what I'm very happy about because I set out to really make it a publication that could be read and understood and appreciated by everybody in Black Theatre. When I started it, I was not in academia myself either. I definitely wanted it to be something that could be read generally, broadly, by everybody that was at the Frank Silvera Writers. That was the core audience, which covered a lot of folks. I wanted it to be accessible. When I was at NYU, and I was going up for tenure, that was one of the things that came up. Would you ever consider making *Black Masks* a journal? I thought about it, and I was like, there is no way that I'm gonna be able to carry this as a journal, plus carry this teaching load, and still have any sanity left at all. I told them, "No. That wasn't the audience specifically or the process because the thing that I knew I could not handle would be sending work out to five external academic readers." I said, "I don't begin to have the time for that, and I just can't. I can't do that. Just can't do that. That will be the thing that will upend it." So, I just molded it to something that I could handle. I never made a living at it. I never could give up teaching or anything else that I was doing to make a living. It was always a side thing, and it had to be manageable.

Khalid:

If you did take that opportunity and evolve *Black Masks* into a more conventional scholarly journal, I imagine you would have run the risk of losing some of your readers.

Beth:

I would have. I would have definitely lost a lot of my actors, especially young actors starting out. I would've lost a lot of those folks. Yeah, so it's always trying to find that good middle point.

Khalid:

Black Masks has its own legacy in terms of Black Theatre history. More specifically, has shone light on many of our unsung heroes, theatre practitioners such as lighting designer Shirley Prendergast, director Ron OJ Parson, playwright ntozake shange, and actress Margaret Avery. Throughout the years, *Black Masks* has also spotlighted Black Theatre scholars who've shaped theatre studies in the academy. I am thinking of Paul Bryant-Jackson, Sandra Richards, and Sandra Shannon. That has been really one of the most important facets of *Black Masks*. That is, having Black Theatre culture history documented for over 30 years. *Black Masks*, in many ways, is an institution in and of itself, I would argue.

Beth:

Okay. [Laughter] I'll let you argue that. [Laughter] I think a decision I made early on was that I was not going for the celebrities because those few who were, at that point, who were celebrities didn't need *Black Masks*. And even today, folks who can get that real serious, serious media attention, what's *Black Masks* to them? I've been trying to always get to that next layer of folks that are doing serious, good work – those who are ready to break through or who are just at that plane below celebrity. For instance, in a recent obituary that I carried on Cortez Nance, Jr., his fellow actors described him as a journeyman actor. He was in so many works. But he was never really highlighted. He was never usually the lead. But he did solid, solid work over an entire career. Those are the folks. And I missed covering Cortez. I mean, I miss a lot of them. One of my biggest disappointments was Chadwick Boseman because Chadwick came to me at some event, with his headshot and that smile. He said, "you need to do an article on me because I'm gonna make it big." I believed him. I believed him because he had that way about him although he hadn't done hardly a thing outside of what he done at Howard at that point. I took his headshot and his resume, his little resume, and put it in my folder. I said, "I've gotta find somebody who would be interested in writing about him." I usually always go by the writers, what they want to write about. I kept that resume and headshot in my folder, I don't know for how long. Too long! Because next thing, of course, he had blown up, and I was like, "oh, okay. Missed that one." [Laughter] Big time miss on that one. When he passed away, then it was just like, no, no, no. No! No! This is just too horrible. We're going to do an article on Chadwick to make up for what I should've done way back when. Otherwise, usually, I'm not covering somebody at his level...somebody who's broken into film and all of that in a big way.

Khalid:

There were some big hitters that were highlighted in *Black Masks*, right?

Beth:

Now, I did hit a lot of folks going through the August Wilson phenomenon when he was just making his breakthrough. So, with that, we got Lloyd Richards and James Earl Jones. I would not have gone after James Earl Jones, independently.

Khalid:

Speaking of August Wilson, Judith Stephens-Lorenz's wrote an article on Dr. Sandra Shannon, a pioneering Wilson scholar, noting how *Black Masks* played a part in her early research on Wilson. She wrote: "She also recalls drawing on information in *Black Masks*, especially those issues featuring Lloyd Richards and August Wilson."

Beth:

That's wonderful. I would love to take credit for that. If she said that, that's wonderful because her work was so important to me as I was putting together my courses at NYU as I was teaching August Wilson

Khalid:

I have one last question. For this question, I'm going to return to a final question you posed in that 1989 interview I mentioned earlier: What are the goals, the dreams deferred? What are the things undone that you really are aspiring still to do in your many years of career left?

Beth:

[Laughter] Okay. Got me. I'm working on one of those dreams deferred. Because, of course, I mean, with all of the work I do and the people I've been around, of course, I aspire to write a book. And I just got the National Endowment in Humanities grant.

Khalid:

Congratulations.

Beth:

To do the research for my book, I'm not teaching this year. I cannot even begin to understand how this time has gone by so quickly. Yes, I do very much want to write this book. This is a book that is based, of course, on Black Theatre, but Black Theatre history – the period that *Black Masks* covers. I decided to try to recreate a sense of the landscape for each of the decades that we've been publishing, that it's been coming out. To give a sense of what was happening for theatre artists in each discipline. Looking at the producers, the theatre companies, the playwrights, the directors, the technical team, and designers and what was happening, what were the issues for them in each of those decades and how it evolved, taking us up to today. I'm

working on the first chapter. It's very exciting to put together whatever topic you're working on, and you start doing that research, and the connections start coming alive, right?

Like many periodicals, *Black Masks*, too, is a documentary magazine, thus capturing the people, plays, and moments that have shaped Black Theatre and performance within the African Diaspora. *Black Masks* has traced the evolution of Black Theatre for over 35 years, making it the oldest continuous periodical devoted to Black Theatre and performance. More explicitly, *Black Masks* has spotlighted pioneering and innovative theatre artists and practitioners, theater founders and administrators, and trailblazing teachers and scholars who have received limited or no attention in other periodicals as well as in more traditional scholarly journals and collections.

Although several historians have written extensively on Black Theatre, thus filling the gaps of history, the discipline remains relatively underexplored compared to Western European theatre. As such, periodicals such as *Black Masks* magazine allow readers to celebrate the advances of Black Theatre, particularly during the pre-social media era. A significant aspect of *Black Masks* is the chronicling of figures who have transitioned to take their place among the ancestors. In her usual fashion, Beth invites writers to submit memorializing tributes that convey a fuller view of their work in the theatre. For instance, the first time I was invited to write for *Black Masks* was after the passing of Dr. Paul Bryant-Jackson, a professor of theatre and a scholar whose edited collection (along with Lois More Overbeck), *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy*, paved the way for future studies of playwright Adrienne Kennedy.¹

In sum, *Black Masks* provides a critical perspective, periodical highlights, and historical information on Black Theatre for broad audiences. Interestingly, many of the regular contributors to *Black Masks*, including Freda Scott Giles and Judith Stephens-Lorenz, are scholars who have published studies on under-examined figures in Black Theatre. To this end, *Black Masks* writers such as Giles and Stephens-Lorenz fulfill the mission of *Black Masks*, which is to bring hidden figures to the forefront for a more general audience of readers.

¹ See Author "A Pedagogy of Inclusion: Dr. Paul Jackson," *Black Masks*, Fall 2018: 9, 14-16.