Oasis: Atlanta University Summer Theatre

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The iconic Fox Theatre in Atlanta, which opened in 1929, stands at the corner of Peachtree Street NE and Ponce de Leon Avenue. The exterior staircase on the Ponce de Leon side serves as a reminder of the nature of segregation as practiced in southern theatre. There is the ghost of a Negro box office, then the exterior staircase, an eight-story climb to the Negro section set at the highest rear area of the balcony: a mere 188 seats in the 4,665-seat house. During the Jim Crow era, if Black patrons were admitted to White theatres at all, they had to traverse back-alley entrances, often making their way around the garbage cans. The situation remained the same until 1962, when the theatres slowly integrated. Theatre historian James V. Hatch describes the Atlanta of that era as a "white desert of self-segregation."[1] Crosses were still being burned on Stone Mountain, and racially motivated violence against non-Whites was still a fact of life. This was a city and a state that African Americans had fled in such numbers during the first Great Migration that began just prior to World War I that by 1930, Georgia had lost at least one congressional seat.[2]

Oasis in that desert were few. As the grip of the icy fingers of the Depression grew stronger, all forms of theatrical activity contracted. The one bright spot in this bleak picture may have been the annual production of *Heaven Bound* produced by the Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church beginning in 1930, a phenomenal success from its first performance. Written by Lula B. Jones, Nellie L. Davis, Sunday school teachers and choir members at Big Bethel, this combination of *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Everyman,* and *The Green Pastures* with spirituals but minus the stage Negro dialect and celestial fish fries, was singled out by *Theatre Guild* magazine in 1931 as "the first great American folk drama."[3] The church, the one autonomous African American institution, again provided a center for artistic expression as long as this expression fit within doctrinal boundaries. The city's White aristocracy, for whom many in the cast labored as domestics, enthusiastically supported the production and further swelled its burgeoning audiences. However, as long-time participant, Gregory D. Coleman reports:

[1] James V. Hatch, *Sorrow is the Only Faithful One: The Life of Owen Dodson* (University of Illinois Press, 1975), 65.

[2] Ridgeley Torrence, *The Story of John Hope* (MacMillan, 1948), 320.

[3] Gregory D. Coleman, *We're Heaven Bound* (University of Georgia Press, 1994), 3.

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> For the favors they extended, the whites generally expected the blacks to 'stay in their places.' . . . In those days, even at performances given at Big Bethel, the whites seated themselves in the forward section of the sanctuary. Law, custom and habit . . . had led whites to expect not only separate seating but the best seats in the house.[4]

When the Federal Theatre Project, established in 1935, finally arrived in Atlanta in 1937, it mounted a production of *Heaven Bound*. No Negro unit was established, and this was the only African American production mounted in Atlanta. It ran successfully at the Atlanta Theatre on Exchange Place in 1937 and again in 1938. *Heaven Bound* has been performed by the church nearly continuously since 1930. Meanwhile, in 1930, John Hope, the first African American President of Atlanta University (established in 1869) and President of both Atlanta University and Morehouse College at the time, phased in a plan that would reconfigure Atlanta University as the first HBCU graduate school in the United States. Undergraduate students were being transferred to Morehouse, the all-male institution and Spelman College, the all-female institution. Sister colleges Clark and Morris Brown, plus the Atlanta School of Social Work and Gammon Theological Seminary were included in this consortium.

In 1933, all seven institutions banded together to establish a six-week summer school in June and July under the leadership of Atlanta University. Designed primarily for educators and open to students from all parts of the South, the summer school would offer the latest innovations in progressive education, from the one-room school to the urban environment. Emphasis would be placed on the practical application of educational theories. Training seminars for ministers and social workers were also offered. Despite hard economic times, the Atlanta University complex grew in quality, scope, and recognition. Faculty member Anne Cooke (Reid) would convince President Hope and his counterpart at Spelman College, Florence M. Read, that a theatre program should be a component of the summer school. A native of Gary, Indiana, who graduated from Oberlin College with a degree in English, Cooke joined the Spelman College faculty in 1928. Her theatre experience was gained through post-graduation studies at the Chicago Art Theatre. In 1930, a Rosenwald fellowship allowed her to travel to Europe and spend the academic year at the American Academy of Dramatic Art in New York. During that time, she returned to Spelman to write, produce, and direct a pageant in celebration of the college's fiftieth anniversary. In 1942, she earned her doctorate in theatre at Yale University.

Theatre production and the study of theatre as literature were long-standing disciplines at Atlanta University and Spelman College. The first elocution teacher at Atlanta University, Adrienne McNeil Herndon, founded the Department of Elocution, which became the Department of Elocution and Dramatics, in 1894. Under her directorship, the Atlanta University Players

[4] Coleman, *We're Heaven Bound,* 134.

specialized in performances of Shakespeare and the classics.[5] The department and Players continued until Cooke reorganized the group as the University Players at Spelman College in 1931. Students from Spelman, Morehouse, and Atlanta University participated in the productions, which were held in the auditorium of Howe Memorial Hall on the Spelman campus and thrown open to the community as well as the colleges. Realizing the need for further training opportunities for potential professional theatre practitioners, schoolteachers, and committed amateurs, Cooke started the Atlanta University Summer Theatre (AUST) in 1934:

> For training in dramatic art for talented young Negroes; for the building up of confidence through repeated performances; for education in dramatic art through a wide diversity of plays; for bringing together the community and the college students through the enjoyment of their productions. A part of the plan was to seek out Negro artists, Negro play-writers [sic], and plays about Negroes.[6]

Until the onset of World War II, which necessitated alteration of the production plan, the summer program remained the same: over the course of the six-week session, five programs would be presented; each program would be given three performances. The first production of the inaugural 1934 season would be *Sun-Up* by Lula Vollmer, who once lived in Atlanta. Next came the comedy *Mr. Pim Passes By* by A.A. Milne, followed by an evening featuring three one-act plays highlighting Negro life: *Mimi La Croix*, an original drama about a Louisiana Creole family by Atlanta University graduate Ernestine Coles; *The Broken Banjo* by Willis Richardson, one of the most frequently produced African American playwrights in Little Theatres and the author of the first non-musical play by a Black author to appear on Broadway, *The Chip Woman's Fortune* (1923); and *The Seer*, a comedy about superstition by J.W. Butcher, who would regularly work with the summer theatre and eventually become head of the Theatre Department at Howard University. Next George Bernard Shaw's *Candida*. The season would close with Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*. John M. Ross, a faculty member trained at Yale, who had assisted Cooke in the summer theatre for several years, would share directing responsibilities with her.

Atlanta's African American newspaper, the *Atlanta Daily World*, the first, and at that time, the sole daily Black newspaper in the United States, enthusiastically reported the news of the summer theatre in its society pages. Its theatre pages were reserved for national theatre, film, and radio news. Local theatre, usually in the form of church pageants and school productions, was reported among fraternal organization events, society soirees, and noteworthy weddings. Little was done by way of reviewing productions; it appears that from time to time, someone

[5] Richard A. Long, "Theatre at Atlanta University," *The Atlanta University Bulletin* 4, no. 2 (September 1974): 18, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library. https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12322/auc.002.bulletin:1974.09_1.

[6] Florence Read, *The Story of Spelman College* (United Negro College Fund, 1961), 265—266.

would volunteer to do so. Even the White press, to which the Black community that comprised about a third of Atlanta's population was all but invisible, took some notice. Suffice it to say, the Atlanta University Summer Theatre program received widespread attention which brought in audiences near and far. For example, when the first play, *Sun-Up* was presented, a group of actors from the Auburn-Opelika Players drove 116 miles from Alabama to see it.[7] Mabelle S. Wall, the arts columnist at the *Atlanta Journal*, noted that this venue would be the only summer theatre she knew of in the city; however, when listing the plays to be offered, she studiously avoided using the word Negro when referring to the *Three Plays of Negro Life*, simply noting them as *Three Plays*.[8]

Sterling Brown, a member of the Spelman English Department, wrote an article on the first season of the Atlanta University Summer Theatre published in the October 1934 issue of *Opportunity*, the Urban League's monthly journal. A sophisticated theatgoer, he had been skeptical at first about the ability of a group of earnest students and instructors to pull off such an ambitious project, rehearsing and building sets and costumes day and night when not performing in the heat of Atlanta's summer. However, he purchased a season ticket and enjoyed the experience so much that he attended every performance. Much to his delight, he was even drafted into a walk-on part as a butler in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. But despite his admiration for the company and Cooke's efforts, Brown felt that American drama and dramas of African American life were underrepresented. He acknowledged that "the difficulty of finding Negro plays for college theatre facilities and for a college audience has long been apparent."[9] Brown noted that there had been two other dramatic ventures on campus that summer. The Workers' School, headquartered at Atlanta University, presented three one-act plays written, directed, and acted by students, which, with minimal props and technical support, contrasted with the more professionally produced summer theatre offerings. These plays "dealt with the inequities of our present social order, presenting the growing resentment of the maid of all work and little play, the strike in a 'pender' factory, and the dire results of attempting to organize sharecroppers... At the School of Adult Education, a one-act play *Sharecroppers* was given."[10] Brown praised these efforts despite the awkward writing and unpolished productions. Implicit in this praise was a criticism often leveled at the Atlanta University Summer Theatre: maybe there should be less focus on Eurocentric canonical plays like Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* and more on the Scottsboro Boys and other significant issues.

[7] "Fifteen Years of Summer Theatre at Atlanta University," *The Atlanta University Bulletin* 3, no. 64 (December 1948): 14, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library. https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12322/auc.002.bulletin:1948.12_1

[8] Mabelle S. Wall, "Music, Drama and Art," *Atlanta Journal*, June 17, 1934, 11.

[9] Sterling A. Brown, "The Atlanta University Summer Theatre: an Educational Venture," *Opportunity* 12 (October 1934): 308—309.

[10] Ibid.

The Negro Renaissance of the 1920s precipitated an ongoing debate over what the purpose and nature of African American drama should be. W.E.B. Du Bois advocated a theatre of social protest that would attack the racism that sought to inhibit Black aspiration and progress. He saw all art as propaganda, a weapon in the human rights arsenal. Alain Locke, another intellectual leader of the period, advocated for the promotion of Black cultural expression over political content. He saw African American drama as an opportunity to valorize Black cultures; recognition of the beauty of cultural expression would lead indirectly to an appreciation for Black humanity.

During the 1935 season, AUST presented *Bad Man* by Randolph Edmonds, who was a pioneer in the field of educational theatre at HBCUs. They also presented *Round Trip* by Carl Allensworth and *The Rider of Dreams* by Ridgely Torrence, a White playwright who had opened doors Black actors on Broadway when his *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre* were presented in 1917 as its *Three Plays of Negro Life*, prompting Joseph Addison to write for the *Atlanta Daily World*:

> The fare served by the Summer Theatre this week is a warmed-over dish, however it is quite a tasty dish. I would not hail these *Three Plays of Negro Life* as works of literary art, nor would I sanction them as being representative of the Race. For three reasons the production of this type of plays failed to meet my approval: first, they are constructed on an unwholesome racial psychology; second, they defeat our own purpose by presenting Negro life in the lower strata; lastly, the theses are trite and worn . . . In the rich treasure vaults of our African background there are priceless claims to a new poetic drama. One can imagine a stalwart dark prince pouring forth his soul to a sunburned maiden, two African warriors fighting for the supremacy of a tribe or a dashing Haitian soldier who is admired by all the villagers. There should be a Pan-African spirit in Negro drama, something that is pure and untouched by the leprous hand of Caucasian civilization.[11]

Others continued to wonder why the theatre placed most of its emphasis on Eurocentric plays:

> It was during the season of 1936 that a critic came out with the statement that ‘since the Atlanta University Summer Theatre was the summer theatre of Atlanta, the people of Atlanta have a right to question its policy. Should a minority group,’ queried the writer, ‘be contented with mere entertainment when some of its members are facing the electric chair in Alabama, when Negro sharecroppers are enslaved in Mississippi and Arkansas,

[11] Joseph Addision, “Society Slants,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 8, 1935, 3.

> or when Negro Atlanta is trying to bring certain chain stores to reason with racial economy? As a minority group, the Negro has something to say.'[12]

This question of balancing the need to provide insight into theatre that most in the audience would not get an opportunity to see otherwise, to give opportunities to practice the many theatre arts, including acting, that would not be available in most other venues, to reveal African American life through dramatic storytelling in a more truthful manner, and to valorize African American culture appears to have remained open. In addition, censorship may have played a significant factor in what AUST could produce. A letter in the Atlanta University archives signed by Rufus E. Clement, the President who succeeded John Hope, indicates that the theatre offerings were subject to administrative control:

> *Dear Miss Cooke:*
> *Miss Read and I have approved the following plays from your list for the 1938 Summer Theatre:*
> *Outward Bound*
> *Journey's End*
> *Three Faces East*
> *The Silver Cord*
> *Mary of Scotland, and*
> *A Play of Negro Life.*
> *You may feel free to choose any five of these which you would like to give.*[13]

This administrative oversight might have been partly due to the necessity of considering royalties and production costs, as it seems that both Clement and Read wrote numerous letters to Samuel French, Dramatists Play Service, and the Theatre Guild seeking discounts on royalties. More importantly, since White patronage remained crucial to the university's financial survival, everyone involved in AUST must have been keenly aware of the severe consequences that could arise from pushing the artistic envelope too far.

Cooke, who would marry sociologist Ira D. Reid, left Spelman College to head the theatre program at Hampton Institute in Virginia in 1942 but continued returning to the AUST through 1948. Her final program celebrated her fifteen-year tenure with a production program cover designed by artist Hale Woodruff. That year, AUST produced *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, *R.U.R*. by Karel Capek, *Camille* [sic] by Alexandre Dumas fils, and *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. In examining the seasons, it appears that there had been no play of African American authorship since *Elijah's Ravens* by Shirley Graham, mounted during the

[12] "Fifteen Years of Summer Theatre," 14.

[13] Robert E. Clemet, "1938: Letter to Miss Cooke," *Rufus E. Clement Records Collection*, Box 199—563, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, https://findingaids.auctr.edu/repositories/3/resources/60.

summer of 1941. By the time she left Atlanta University, Cooke had established the template that guided AUST productions throughout the rest of its existence: On a typical day, there would be a rehearsal period of about eight hours, including the learning of lines and building of sets and costumes either before or after. Every day from 1:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., a new play was in rehearsal. Lines for the current play were rehearsed from 5:00 to 6:30 and could run into show time at 8:00 p.m. Each show received a minimum of fifty-six rehearsal hours on the stage.[14]

Beginning in 1937, Cooke instituted a program that offered class credit in acting, directing, speech, movement and "the allied arts of the theatre."[15] The course of study was planned to accommodate two types of students: the schoolteacher; the social worker whose jobs required some technical training in theatre arts; and the student with a professional interest or talent for some branch of theatre activity.[16]

In 1942, Cooke brought Broadway star Abbie Mitchell (the original Clara in George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, among other distinguished roles) to the summer faculty. In 1948, several prominent figures led weeklong workshops, including highly respected stage designer Lee Simonson, playwright Elmer Rice (who had been a collaborator with Langston Hughes and Kurt Weill on the Broadway musical *Street Scene*), and *Time Magazine* theatre critic Louis Kronenberger. Throughout her tenure at Atlanta University, Cooke advanced the careers of her successor, Baldwin Burroughs, (who formally was the director of drama at Tillotson College), Owen Dodson (associate professor of English at Howard University), James W. Butcher, (theatre professor at Howard University), Thomas D. Pawley (theatre professor at Lincoln University), and many others. As stated in a 1974 tribute to AUST published by Atlanta University,

"The distinguished history and the phenomenal success of the Atlanta University Summer Theatre can justly be attributed to the enthusiasm and brilliance of Anne Cooke Reid whose idea it was to initiate a Summer Theatre project and whose personality represented the dynamic force that brought the idea to fruition and gave direction, for so many years, to its implementation."[17]

AUST, without fanfare, also provided Atlanta with at least a partially integrated theatre audience. In an interview with historian James V. Hatch, Dr. Lucy N. Clement Grigsby recalled:

> White people came. Several front rows were always reserved for white people. White faculty in the AU Center sat anywhere they liked, but community Whites supported the

[14] Barbara and Carlton Molette, "Atlanta University Summer Theatre, History, 1934—1987," *Carlton W. and Barbara J. Molette Papers*, Box 13, Folder 1, Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University.

[15] Ibid.

[16] "Fifteen Years of Summer Theatre," 14.

[17] Hallie Beachem Brooks, Theater at Atlanta University," *The Atlanta University Bulletin*, 1974, 24..

> theatre; they sat in these reserved seats. Miss Read would always come in with ten or fifteen White folks and they sat up front.[18]

As James Butcher remarked in his interview with Hatch, "Even that, in those days, was something."[19]

Baldwin Burroughs would head AUST for the next twenty-one seasons (1949—1970). His priorities appear to be a bit different from the goals stated at AUST's inception: the search for African American playwrights and plays about African American life seems to have receded, at least until 1964. His three-show inaugural season included three plays by White playwrights: *Dear Ruth* by Norman Krasna, *Noah* by André Obey, and *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe. The following presentation by an African American playwright, *Simply Heavenly* by Langston Hughes, was included in the 1960 season, the only play of African American life at AUST between 1949 and 1964. Those seasons were marked by popular Broadway fare, such as *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial* by Herman Wouk, and *Light Up the Sky* by Kaufman and Hart. These plays were interspersed among classics playwrights such as Shakespeare, Moliere, Chekhov, Ibsen, Sophocles, and others fundamental to the Western canon. In 1963, AUST produced *The Emperor Jones* by Eugene O'Neill directed by Burroughs. As in the Negro Renaissance days, plays about Black people by White playwrights were accepted as "plays of Negro life." The selection of plays for a season could be a site of struggle for the faculty at an HBCU. As was the case at Spelman College, season selection was subject to approval by the upper-level administration, which was often White. Concern for financial support for the institution, also often in White hands, had to be considered. The need for a body of African American-authored drama was recognized, but prevailing thought among the academic community often determined that there were not enough such plays of high enough caliber. There was also the fact that the predominantly Black audience should be given the opportunity to experience the classics of the Western canon as well as to enjoy popular plays that segregation prevented them from seeing. Despite the efforts of Randolph Edmonds and other educators to promote and develop African American drama, the pressure to present a season that would not alienate White patronage remained.

1964 was a year of marked change not only for AUST, but for theatre programs in the Atlanta University consortium as well. The John D. Rockefeller Fine Arts Building opened on the Spelman campus that year. For the first time, the art, theatre, and music departments would be housed together. The main theatre eventually was named for Baldwin Burroughs, who directed the Atlanta-Morehouse-Spelman Players as well as AUST. At this writing, due to the

[18] Lucy N. Clement Grigsby, interview by James V. Hatch, 1985, *Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives*, Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University.

[19] James Butcher, interview by James V. Hatch on April 15, 1972. *Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives*, Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University.

generous donation and fundraising efforts of alumni Samuel L. Jackson and LaTanya Richardson, the LaTanya Richardson Jackson and Samuel L. Jackson Performing Arts Center was established in the John D. Rockefeller Fine Arts Building.

During the 1964 AUST season, Burroughs directed *The Trials of Brother Jero* by Wole Soyinka. According to Carlton Molette, this production marked the first performance of a Soyinka play in the U.S., the first play by an African author staged at AUST, and the start of a shift towards a more Afrocentric focus. Although there is no direct evidence, this change may have been influenced by the rising fervor of the Civil Rights Movement and the turbulent events in the U. S. that began in the mid-1950s. While Burroughs appeared to be primarily focused on African plays, he was likely responding to calls for more direct Afrocentric representation. However, in 1965, AUST produced *The Ugly Duckling* (a children's play adapted from the story by Hans Christian Andersen), *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, *The Unexpected Stranger* by Agatha Christie, and *The Fantasticks*, a musical by Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt. In 1966, Burroughs directed *Boy with a Cart* by Christopher Fry, Ibsen's *Ghosts,* and *In White America* by Martin Duberman (a play about African American protest by a White author). During the 1967 season, there was one play by an African American author, *In Splendid Error* by William Branch. Again, there was no play by a Black author during the 1968 season, which included *The Magic Apple* by Glen Hughes, *Enemies* by Arkady Leokum, and *Four Strange Plays* by Crane Johnson. In 1969, the season was entirely dedicated to African plays: an adaptation of *Everyman* by Ulli Beier (who wrote under the pseudonym, "Obotunde Ijimre"), *The Masquerader* by J.P. Clarke, and an encore of *The Trials of Brother Jero* by Wole Soyinka. This season coincided with a conference on African and African American Studies taking place on campus. By this time, AUST seemed to have become more closely aligned with African American Studies.

In 1970, Burroughs's final season at AUST, the Atlanta University Center Afro-American Studies Program (under a grant from the U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education and Welfare), sponsored a Summer Institute for participants primarily from HBCUs working in the areas of social science, humanities, arts, and education. The season of plays would complement the summer program, and Burroughs decided that the focus would be on the Caribbean. He directed *Dance Bongo* by Erroll Hill, *Terminus* by Dennis Scott and *Malcochon* by Derek Walcott. Another connecting tissue with Afro-American Studies that summer was Dr. Carlton Molette. He had worked at AUST during his undergraduate years at Morehouse College starting in 1959. By 1970 he had earned his M.A. at the University of Iowa, his PhD at Florida State University, and had become an associate professor of theatre at Spelman College. Molette served on the faculty of the Afro-American Studies Summer Institute program as the instructor in the field of aesthetics. A specialist in design and technical theatre, as well as a stage director and playwright, Molette would take over the seminar/workshop in technical theatre problems, designed for high school teachers, that had been instituted in 1969. In 1971, he became the third and final Director of AUST.

The 1960s and 1970s were periods of ferment, tumult, and change. The murder of Dr. King introduced a new level of fragmentation to the Civil Rights Movement. College campuses became battlegrounds against the established power structure, and HBCUs were not immune. The Black Arts Movement rejected dependence on White institutions and sought autonomy under an Afrocentric aesthetic umbrella. As one of the major intellectual voices, Larry Neal stated:

> When we speak of a 'Black aesthetic' several things are meant. First, we assume that there is already in existence the basis for such an aesthetic. Essentially, it consists of an African-American cultural tradition. But this aesthetic is finally, by implication, broader than that tradition. It encompasses most of the usable elements of the Third World culture. The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world.[20]

Molette and his wife and writing partner, Barbara Molette, were firm proponents of Black aesthetics, and they eventually published *Black Theatre: Premise and Presentation* (1992), a book that defines and analyzes this aesthetic in theatre and performance. When Carlton Molette took the helm of AUST, now linked with the Department of African American Studies, the productions fully reflected this significant and resonant historical period.

The three productions during the summer of 1971 included Ted Shine's *Contribution, Boojie Woojie* by Carlton and Barbara Molette, and *A Black Mass* by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka). Ted Shine's dark comedy tells the story of a militant young man who discovers that his aunt, a cook for the White sheriff, has her own way of securing reparations. *Boojie Woojie* looks at a young man's quest for meaning in his life while addressing the issue of drug addiction. *A Black Mass* is based on the doctrine of the Prophet Yacub, which is the belief held by the Nation of Islam that the White man was created by a mad scientist. The first two productions were directed by Molette, while the third was directed by Georgia Allen, who was a member of the repertory company at AUST for around thirty years. Actors Samuel L. Jackson (alum of Morehouse College) and LaTanya Richardson (alum of Spelman College), participated in the company, taking on both performance roles and crew responsibilities— including set building, costumes, box office, and publicity.

In 1972, the Molettes mounted another original play, *Dr. B.S. Black*, a musical satire on race and contemporary politics; followed by *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* by Lonne Elder III, the story of a Harlem family that wants the right things, but pursues them in a way that ends in tragedy. The third production, *Perry's Mission* by Clarence Young III, was set in a bar where a

[20] Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1968): 29. https://doi.org/10.2307/1144377

young Black militant challenges the Black identities of other patrons with explosive results. Carlton Molette directed *Dr. B.S. Black* and *Perry's Mission*, while Joan W. Lewis directed *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*. Lewis enjoyed a long career as an educator, stage manager, and director.

From 1972 through 1975, the theatre workshop program was reestablished and expanded due to grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. The summer of 1973 marked AUST's fortieth season. Andrea Frye served as guest director for *Black Terror* by Richard Wesley. Set in "[t]he very near future, given the nature of American society,"[21] the play exposes the often contradictory array of ideas underpinning the actions of a group of young revolutionaries. Carlton Molette directed *Idabel's Fortune* by Ted Shine and *Wine in the Wilderness* by Alice Childress. Childress's comedy/drama upends class structure as a middle-class visual artist is taught a lesson by a working-class woman.

In 1974, AUST hosted a preseason show by the People's Art Ensemble, entitled *Problems in the Ghetto*, featuring poetry readings, song, dance, and monologues. The ensemble hoped to "help minds to see and motivate Black masses to change the system that thwarts us."[22] The season schedule included *Tell Pharaoh* by Loften Mitchell, Abram Hill's *On Striver's Row,* and an evening of one-acts: *The Leader* by Joseph White, *Mojo* by Alice Childress, and *Strictly Matrimony* by Erroll Hill. Ken Chambers, Carlton Molette, and Joseph Stevens all shared directing responsibilities. This ambitious season was followed by a reduced season in 1975. Only two plays were produced: *One Last Look* by Steve Carter and *Noah's Ark* by Carlton and Barbara Molette. Carter's play was a family drama set at a funeral, while the Molette's production was described as "an Orwellian glance at the American condition, circa 1984."[23]

After forty-two consecutive seasons that were mounted in the face of the Second World War and the turbulence of the modern Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and roiling campus unrest throughout the nation, Carlton Molette states, "After 1975, Atlanta University, under the leadership of Dr. Thomas Jarrett, ceased funding the summer theatre program."[24] Molette further stated that whether the decision was solely the President's or the Board of Directors, he attributes this action to the result of a national movement toward a business model for the administration of higher education. AUST was not an especially costly enterprise, as ticket sales, tuition, and grants partially supported the seasons. President Jarrett not only ended AUST, but also AU's national contest and exhibition of visual arts by African Americans. Both had become sources of national recognition. Molette indicates that funding from external sources such as the Title III program and the Ford Foundation may have pressured the institution to place

[21] Richard Wesley, *Black Terror* (Dramatist Play Service, 1974), 10.

[22] Ibid.

[23] "Noah's Ark Theatre Program," in *Play Noah's Ark 1975*, Box 21, Folder 12, *Carlton W. and Barbara J. Molette Papers*, Stuart A. Rose Library. Emory University.

[24] Barbara and Carlton Molette, "Atlanta University Summer Theatre, History."

less emphasis on arts and culture and more on courses that would generate increased credit hours. Carlton and Barbara Molette left Spelman College for other institutions in 1975. Carlton Molette connects four subsequent summer seasons on the Spelman campus to AUST. The National Endowment for the Arts funded a 1976 summer drama workshop that mounted only one production, *Day of Absence* by Douglas Turner Ward. Bill T. Nunn, a Morehouse College and AUST alumnus, conducted a children's theatre workshop during the summer of 1978. In 1979, funding from the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) supported a company of professional actors who presented Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and a company-developed revue, *Blackbird Droppings of '79*. Though Molette counts forty-six seasons, there were only forty-two under the direct auspices of AUST. Still, AUST is arguably and historically the longest-running summer theatre, as well as the first African American summer theatre in the United States.

As an institution, AUST proved invaluable to the development of educational theatre among HBCUs and professional theatre by, for, and about African Americans. The first director, Anne Cooke Reid (1907—1997) helped develop educational theatre programs at Spelman and Morehouse colleges, Hampton Institute, and Howard University. She helped launch the careers of several theatre luminaries. She taught Toni Morrison, Roxie Roker, Zaida Coles, Shauneille Perry, and Graham Brown—to name a few. After her retirement from Howard University, she served as an administrator at the University of California Santa Cruz, and then as a senior professor of theatre at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. During her tenure as founder and director of AUST, she sought not only to present plays from the American and European canon but also to develop and promote the growth of African American authored and performed drama. African American actors were given the opportunity to build roles that they might never get to play in the commercial theatre as well as to represent more truthful depictions of African American life. Writers, technicians, and designers were trained and return to their communities to serve Little Negro Theatres and community theatrical efforts.

Baldwin Burroughs, the second and longest-serving director, steered AUST further toward the shows that played in the still segregated commercial theatres. As historian James V. Hatch explains:

> English and American plays dominated college stages during the 1940s and 1950s. Very few new and suitable black plays had been written and would not be until late in the 1960s. In addition, black faculty increasingly obtained advanced degrees from northern and midwestern universities, they traveled abroad and saw theatre, and their familiarity with world drama encouraged them to mount European plays. Professor Anne Cooke of

> Howard stated frankly that she was preparing her students professionally to play all roles, even though in the late 1940s few parts except maids and butlers were offered to blacks.[25]

Burroughs appears to have followed a trend that ended with the turbulent 1960s. The latter years of Burroughs' directorship appear to reflect a somewhat transitional period. Carlton Molette's leadership reflects a complete change of course toward the theatrical aims of the Black Arts Movement. It may be possible that President Jarrett was considering the political underpinnings of the Black Arts Movement as he considered fundraising for the Atlanta University consortium. Whatever the reason, the end of AUST was not the end. Those decades of productions, workshops, stagecraft, and teaching of amateur and professional theatre practitioners and teachers live on. Those who began their careers in AUST went on to teach at Lincoln University, Howard University, Hampton University, and other HBCUs. Talented performers tasted the possibilities of pursuing theatre as a profession and some rose to prominence. AUST began as an oasis; a place for relief from Jim Crow society. It was also an institution at the root of the educational theatre movement among HBCUs. Its influence still resonates through its alumni and those they teach and train.

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