

Anne Cooke Reid and Owen Dodson:

Standard Bearers of Excellence

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Howard University has earned a reputation for training leaders of the American stage and screen, including Chadwick Boseman, Phylicia Rashad, Debbie Allen, Richard Wesley, Roxie Roker, Charles Brown, and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), among others. In the mid-1940s, Howard University was establishing a new drama department, with two remarkably talented individuals appointed to launch the initiative—Dr. Anne Cooke (Reid) and Owen Dodson. This article showcases two significant artistic contributions from the legacies of Anne Cooke Reid (1907—1997) and Owen Dodson (1914—1983), who stand as shining examples of excellence during a time when their accomplishments went unrecognized or were insufficiently acknowledged. When Cooke and Dodson joined the Howard faculty, they were Black drama professors committed to presenting a blend of African American subjects alongside works from the classical humanist tradition to enhance the dramatic craft of their students.

Dodson and Cooke shared graduate school experiences at the Yale Drama School (Dodson earned an MFA in 1939, and Cooke a PhD in 1944). Of note is that Cooke the first African American to earn a doctoral degree in theatre from Yale. Both collaborated on various projects in Atlanta while Cooke was teaching at Atlanta University's Spelman College. During this time, the Howard Players turned to productions of significant new American drama—including Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1947) and Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1948)—as well as modern European classics, such as their production of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, which caught the attention of Norwegian diplomats and led the Howard Players on a famous three-month acting tour of Scandinavia and Germany in 1949.

The Howard University drama department was one of the first Black colleges, as opposed to theatre departments, which were a division of the English departments. Some students who came to Howard were drawn for many reasons, not necessarily to be in theatre. The students who wanted to be in the arts were away from home, and they met the discipline there. Most importantly, the students wanted to be at a Black institution to feel comfortable before their peers. Anne Cooke said:

I never advertised for students or did anything consciously to get people to register. We had a small department, but there we were, and people came and auditioned. Sometimes, there were five, and sometimes, there were twenty-five. I don't think we ever had a class with fifty in the theatre department... The drama department at Howard had three directors, and each of us directed a play during the summer. Then we got together to see what kind of bill it would make. I had decided to do a play by Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*. Whenever Howard University had a production, we'd run a little notice in the newspaper, hoping that two people would come and buy tickets.¹

Anne Cooke Reid

Dr. Cooke's journey to teach and direct at Howard began when she joined Atlanta University's English Department at the end of the 1930s. She launched that school's six-week summer theatre festival. Cooke worked closely with W. E. B. Du Bois and others to promote large-scale pageants about African and African American history. She frequently produced purposefully difficult theatre classics to elevate her students' dramatic craft. Her efforts caught the attention of John D. Rockefeller's General Education Board, which had been established to improve the qualifications of the faculties of southern Black universities by offering scholarships to leading northern schools. She went off to Yale University and, having completed her doctoral studies, joined the faculty of the Hampton Institute before moving to Howard University in 1944, where she would remain until her retirement in 1958. Equipped with strong organizational skills and a vision, Cooke organized and chaired Howard University's first drama department, making it the premiere Black institution for drama.

The Wild Duck Grows Wings

In November 1948, Fredrik Haslund, then chief of the Norwegian Government Welfare Office for the Merchant Marines, came to the United States as Norway's delegate to the United Nations. That Mr. Haslund was an individual of daring imagination was established during the war when he managed to smuggle Norway's gold reserves out of that Nazi-occupied country. Haslund's daring was soon displayed differently. While in New York, Mr. Haslund heard that the Howard University Players were presenting Ibsen's *Vilanden (The Wild Duck)*. When he came to Washington a few days later, he mentioned to some Norwegian Embassy people his desire to see this Negro production of the Norwegian classic. Because Washington's only commercial house, the National Theatre, had been closed because of a strike by Actors Equity in protest of the National Theatre's one-hundred-twelve-year-old policy of excluding African American

¹ Anne Cooke Reid, interview by Shauneille Perry, 1993.

audiences, Haslund was indirectly encouraged to attend the performance at Howard University. In this case, the adverse effects of history worked in favor of theatre history. Immediately after the performance, Haslund discussed with the director, Dr. Anne Cook, the possibility of taking the show to Norway. Clark stated, "The novelty of a Negro Ibsen intrigued him. He phoned for six tickets, and, fortunately for theatre history, the Norwegians were admitted at curtain time. After the performance, Haslund casually approached me and inquired if I would like to bring my Duck to Norway the following September."²

Haslund inquired if she could provide him with some films, recordings, and texts from Howard's performance of *The Wild Duck* and other plays in their repertoire, which he handed over to Hans Jacob Nilsen, one of Norway's leading producers. Nilsen, too, was impressed by the films and recordings. At the time, Cooke thought the question a pleasant gesture and was surprised when she realized the offer was serious. Cooke stated:

These guys asked me, 'Would you bring this production to Norway?' I said, 'Of course, when?' (I thought some people coming from downtown were trying to make an A-S-S out of me!) So, I played their game as well as they did. 'Sure, when would you like us to come?' 'Well, we'll have to talk to Oslo.' I said to myself, 'Who's Oslo?' Then it came to me: that's the capital of Norway! The next day, I had a telephone call, and an appointment was set up with Ambassador Morgenthau, the Secretary-General of the United Nations.³

Thus, in March 1949, the Norwegian Government officially invited the Howard Players to make a ten-week tour of Norway with Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* and Dubose Heyward's *Mamba's Daughters*. Twenty-four students and three staff members went to Norway, and it turned out to be a Scandinavian tour, which included Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and the American zone in Germany. But the Norwegians got the idea and footed the hefty bill.

Haslund and Nilsen persuaded the Norwegian Parliament to commit \$4,500 to bring twenty-four people to Scandinavia. Local citizens would provide room and board for the Americans, keeping the cost down. Only the problem of transportation money remained—an additional \$4,500. Howard University had no available funds, nor could the State Department finance the students under the Fulbright Act, which was reserved for individual scholars. The Norwegians turned to the U.S. Department of State for help. The State Department's Exchange of Persons division had no American money to offer. Still, they contacted Blevins Davis, the man who underwrote and produced the American guest performance of *Hamlet* at Elsinore in

² James Hatch, *Sorrow is the Only Faithful One* (University of Illinois Press, 1993), 151.

³ Reid, *Interview*.

Denmark that summer. As reported in the newspapers, Mr. Davis's generosity and interest in international theatre again came to the fore. As a result, he footed the cost of transportation.

At the time of the appearance of the Howard Players in 1949, many young Norwegians were reading Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* to gain an understanding of racism in the United States. Dr. Gunnar Myrdal was a professor at the University of Stockholm, an economic adviser to the Swedish Government, and a member of the Swedish Senate. He was a scholar who had already established an international reputation as a social economist. In 1937, Dr. Myrdal was invited by the Trustees of the Carnegie Corporation of New York to become the director of a comprehensive study of the Negro in the United States to be undertaken in a wholly objective and dispassionate way as a social phenomenon. In 1944, Myrdal declared in his book: "If America, in actual practice, could show the world a progressive trend by which the Negro became finally integrated into modern democracy, all mankind would be given faith again—it would have reason to believe that peace, progress, and order are feasible."⁴

With increasing incidents of racism in the United States getting coverage in the world press, the United States government decided it could not afford negative press. Suppose the United States did not practice its ideals of democracy at home. How could foreign countries put their trust in a hypocritical United States? An investigation of U.S. State Department records reveals a degree of racial bias operating behind embassy walls. Although the Howard Players were invited at the behest of the Norwegian Embassy, the U.S. State Department wanted the tour to serve as a representative antidote for Paul Robeson's denunciation of American racism. In 1949, Robeson spoke at the World Peace Congress in Paris hosted by the World Peace Council. In a speech denouncing the U.S. Government, Robeson said, "It is unthinkable ... that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations ... against a country [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to the full human dignity of mankind."⁵ Robeson's remarks made headlines all over America. He was widely attacked, and his comments, taken out of context, were misinterpreted as "treason." Robeson was labeled an "avowed or active propagandist for un-American ideologies."⁶ It may be worth noting that the first published suggestion that the tour was arranged as an answer to Robeson came in a dispatch in the Norwegian newspaper, *Aftenposten*, from its New York office, quoting an article by Nona Brown in the Sunday edition of *The New York Times*.⁷

⁴ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (Harper & Row, 1962), 1021—1021.

⁵ Dorothy Gilliam, *Paul Robeson: All-American* (The New Republic Book Company, 1976), 137.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷ National Archives, Files of the Howard University Players, RG 59, American Embassy file 857.4061, Box 6061.

The Norwegian Embassy saw the trip as an experimental but natural extension of Norway's widespread post-war interest in amateur dramatics and students' international exchange. Cooke had been always fascinated by Ibsen's writing. She stated:

I got on to Ibsen because I liked plays that had ideas and didn't sound like that kind of formalized Shakespearian theatre. The more I read of Ibsen, the more I became intrigued with his ideas. When I was reading Ibsen, I didn't see a big audience for it, and there still isn't. Women don't want to go and hear about the fate of women. They were good plays with not a lot of extraneous material. Right to the point and tight.⁸

Ironically, what had begun as a cultural handshake across the seas now emerged as an East/West propaganda tool. Originally a tour of goodwill initiated by the Norwegian Embassy, the U.S. State Department positioned this tour of young African Americans as anti-Communist propaganda to counteract Paul Robeson's condemnation of the United States' treatment of African Americans. Although it was later discovered that Robeson had been misquoted, the damage had been almost instantly done.

The Howard troupe's presence in Europe and the quality of their dramatic work provided a telling rebuttal to Russian propaganda representing African Americans in the United States as brutally oppressed and denied any share in cultural life. Drew Pearson headlined his Washington Post syndicated column with the "Negro Actors to Trail Robeson" and wrote that "the appearance of these American Negro student players in Scandinavia will be a testimony to the fact that it is not only in Russia (as Robeson alleges) that the Negro artist can breathe easily and freely."⁹ While it is preposterous to suggest that Communist agents were somehow responsible for postwar racial tensions, President Truman sought to persuade Americans that the United States was under a massive, ideologically—based assault on both its international aims and its internal security. By the late 1940s, many Americans equated support for racial equality with Communism, and many White Americans viewed Paul Robeson as a traitor.

Director Anne Cooke did not plan the tour as a representative of the "Free World" for Negroes. Nonetheless, she intended to showcase the best productions possible. State Department communications reveal that, behind closed doors, the American Embassy was aware of private comments suggesting that the ambitious endeavor of an all-Negro cast interpreting Ibsen in his

⁸ Reid, *Interview*.

⁹ Drew Pearson, "Washington Merry-Go-Round," *Washington Post*, August 7, 1949, in the Owen Vincent Dodson clipping file, Howard University Moorland Spingarn Research Archives in Washington, D.C.

own country was a fundamental mistake. As noted in a 1943 U.S. Department of State communication:

The theatrical concepts of the Negro, not to speak of his mood and temperament, are so different from the Scandinavian that a local audience could scarcely be expected to appreciate even the best-intentioned effort to bridge the fundamental gap. I suspect that in their hearts, many Norwegians resented what must have appeared to them an unwarranted tampering with something particularly sacred to Norway.¹⁰

Whether racism, subtle or unconscious, played any part in this revealing aside is a question that must be raised. The Norwegians did not seem to resent the Players' being African Americans and applauded the students' efforts in their production. Journalist Ove Bang Overdale in *Norges Handels og Sjøfartstidende* (*Journal of Shipping and Commerce*) summed the mixed reviews up for the critics, writing, "forestillingen har nadd sin hensikt, a spenne en bro av felles menneskelighet og samstemt morskap og medlidenhet fra nasjon til nasjon og individ til individ."¹¹ ("The performance achieves its purpose of building a bridge of common humanity, of ordinary joy and sympathy, from nation to nation and from individual to individual.")

Only two of the reviews touched directly on the racial issue. However, Hans Heiberg, President of the Norwegian Authors Association, began his critique in *Verdens Gang* (*World News*) thus:

Det har i fullt alvor vært hevdet i New York—pressen at når Howard-studentene kom over Atlanterhavet for å spille Ibsen hos oss, var det et bevis for at det ikke fins raseundertrykkelse i USA. Noe slikt bevis gir besøket naturligvis ikke, og kan av gode grunner ikke gi. Derimot gir det et fullgodt bevis for at det fargede Howard-universitetet eier et litterært, teatermessig og allmenkulturelt studentmiljø på et plan som ethvert europeisk eller annet universitet kan misunne det. (Disse studentene er amatørskuespillere, og deres rent kunstneriske innsats må bedømmes etter det. Vi kan ikke sammenlikne Charles White med Stein Grieg Halvorsens geniale tolkning av Hjalmar på Nationaltheatret i vår, eller Robert Brown med Olaf Havrevolds hensynsløse blottlegging av Gregers. Men ut fra amatørens forutsetninger ytte Howard-studentene en imponerende innsats. Forestillingen var godt tilrettelagt og velgjørende gjennomarbeidet, og hver enkelt skikkelse var bygd omhyggelig og gjennomtenkt opp.) Og de omfattende studiene som må ligge bak, har ført til at Ibsens skuespill ble framstilt så naturlig, riktig

¹⁰ National Archives, Files of the Howard University Players, R.G. 59, American Embassy file 811.42782/6-345. Box 4810.

¹¹ Ove Bang Overdale, "The Howard Players," *Norges Handels og Sjøfartstidende*, September 14, 1949, 7.

og verdig at resultatene i meget stor grad stemmer med de oppfatningene Ibsens eget hjemland er kommet til. Denne framføringen var meget mer i Ibsens ånd enn for eksempel den stort oppstyltede og sterkt roste forestillingen den franske nasjonalscenen, Odéon-teatret i Paris, ga til beste i årene før krigen.¹²

(It has been asserted in all seriousness in the New York press that when the Howard students crossed the Atlantic to play Ibsen for us, it was proof that there was no racial discrimination in the USA. Naturally, the visit does not provide such evidence; for good reasons, it cannot. However, it proves that the 'colored' Howard University has a literary, dramatic, and general cultural student environment that any European or other university might envy. These students are amateur actors, and their purely artistic accomplishments must be judged accordingly. We cannot compare Charles White with Stein Grieg Halvorsen's inspired interpretation of *Hjalmar* at the National Theatre this spring or Robert Brown with Olaf Havrevold's unscrupulous unveiling of *Gregers*. However, from an amateur point of view, Howard students make an impressive contribution. The performance was well organized and pleasantly prepared, and each character was carefully built up and thoroughly thought out. The extensive studies that must lay behind the performance have meant that Ibsen's play was performed naturally and correctly and that the results correspond closely to Ibsen's understanding. This performance was much more in the spirit of Ibsen than, for instance, the largely stilted and much-praised performance at the French National Theatre, the Odeon Theater in Paris, which obliged us within the years before the war.)

The Communist newspaper, *Friheten*, struggled to find the right tone in its review of the performance; at least it included only a brief note the morning after the opening, stating that its review would appear the following day. When it was published, on schedule, it conveyed much the same messages as its peers but aligned with the party line in the last paragraph:

Negerstudentenes besøk i Norge var å motvirke det bildet Paul Robeson gir av negrenes stilling i USA. Bare det trekk ved initiativtakernes side å stille en gruppe amatører opp mot en av de aller største personlighetene i vår tid, taler tydelig nok for seg selv.¹³

(The Negro students' visit was intended to counteract the picture Paul Robeson gives us of the condition of the Negro in the USA. The fact that the promoters have put up a group

¹² Hans Heiberg, "Negerstudentene med Vildanden," *Verdens Gang*, September 14, 1949, The Howard Players clipping file at the Ibsen Center Oslo, Norway.

¹³ "Negerstudentene spiller Vildanden," *Friheten*, September 14, 1949, The Howard Players clipping file at the Ibsen Center Oslo, Norway, 4.

of amateurs against one of the most significant personages of our time says enough in itself.)

From Howard's perspective, an ensemble of American artists who had never been outside the States experienced a world and a theatre they had yet to discover. Everywhere they went, people were curious about them and what it meant to be a Negro in the United States. Published testimony from tour members attests to how the Norwegians treated them with friendliness and politeness. Various troupe members were asked to discuss race discrimination in the United States privately. Other curious questions arose about the actors' "chances as Negroes of being professional actors and whether they would be able to be in plays with white people."¹⁴ There were, however, moments of tension. Zaida Coles, an actress on tour with the company, related one such experience:

It was at a tea and cocktail party in Oslo, Norway, where an international group was present. You could feel a certain strangeness in the air when we walked in. We knew what was on their minds. Finally, a Britisher asked Shauneille [Perry] what she thought of Robeson. 'Do you mean as a politician or musician?' she asked him. Her diplomacy stunned the group. We found our diplomacy improved constantly because of such questions.¹⁵

Shauneille Perry, a Howard University drama department alum, remarked:

The United States Government jumped on the bandwagon at the last minute to avoid embarrassment because of the attention bestowed on the Howard Players. The Norwegians were fascinated by the idea of seeing young Black people do *The Wild Duck*. They weren't caught up in what was professional and what wasn't. They were absolutely fascinated by the idea of young black people doing one of their plays.¹⁶

The Howard Players were welcomed wholeheartedly. Of course, for the troupe members, there were everyday experiences of innocent curiosity. The only reference points Norwegians had about African Americans were the derogatory roles portrayed in American movies.

The 1949 visit to Norway of the Howard University Players in their production of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* was hailed as a milestone in international and intercultural relations. African American actors, albeit amateurs, had set a precedent for the first time in Norwegian theatre

¹⁴ "21 Howard Players End Tour, Tell of Role as 'Ambassadors.'" *Washington Evening Star*, November 28, 1949, in the Owen Vincent Dodson clipping file at Howard University Moorland Spingarn Research Archives Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Shauneille Perry, Interview by Baron Kelly, December 6, 2014.

history and attempted to break existing stereotypes. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the United States Information Service (USIS) actively dispensed propaganda about America's civil rights problems. The positive achievements of African Americans were prominent features of the overseas radio broadcast "The Voice of America." The tour did achieve cross-cultural results. The Howard tour inspired the U.S. State Department to request legislation enabling the United States Information Service (USIS) to bring American dance, film, art, music, and theatre to the world.

Owen Dodson: Howard's Dark Prince

Owen Dodson began his studies at Bates College and then earned a master's in fine arts from Yale University in 1939. Born to a large and struggling family in Brooklyn on the eve of World War I, Dodson retained a deep connection with New York City throughout his life (dying after he retired from Howard of a heart attack at the age of sixty-eight while living on Manhattan's Upper West Side).¹⁷ After his time at Bates, Dodson landed a job substituting for Cooke at Spelman College while she was on leave. Shocked by southern segregation, he spent his time in Atlanta among the African American intellectuals who had formed a community surrounding W. E. B. Du Bois. Dodson moved to Virginia's Hampton Institute at the end of his appointment in Atlanta, and from there, he joined the Howard University faculty in 1940. Throughout his tenure as professor of drama at Howard until 1970, Dodson was a nurturer of young drama students in his position.

Dodson was the product of two powerful forces—the Black experience in America with its folk and urban roots and a classical humanistic education. On one hand, his classical humanistic education was most distinguishable within his pedagogy. Glenda Dickerson (1945—2012), a Howard University theatre alum, remarks that Dodson gave her and her classmates “an extraordinarily personal affinity for the classics. Mr. Dodson beat it into our heads in a most poetic way so that Clytemnestra, Orestes, Medea, Hamlet, all of them, Hecuba, Andromache, are like family to us.”¹⁸ On the other hand, Dodson's engagement with classical theatre was interpreted through an Africanist lens, thus allowing his students and audiences to connect culturally to theatre. For example, when students of the theatre program at Howard University were urging their instructors to teach and develop a curriculum that reflected the revolutionary turn of the 1960s, Dodson remained steadfast in his approach to classical theatre training. As Denise J. Hart and Kathy Perkins note, Howard's theatre students “came to appreciate Dodson's treatment of the Greek plays due to their visual and emotional impact on audiences and their connection to African culture.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Hatch, *Sorrow is the Only Faithful One*, 197.

¹⁸ Glenda Dickerson, interview by Kathy Perkins, January 14, 1983.

¹⁹ Denise J. Hart and Kathy A. Perkins, “The Howard University Players: From Respectability Politics to

In the summer of 1951, Dodson cast the twenty-four-year-old unknown Earle Hyman (1926—2017) in the title role of *Hamlet* at Howard University. Dodson admired the seventeen-year-old Hyman in a 1944 production of *Anna Lucasta*, first staged in Harlem by the American Negro Theatre and later moving to Broadway that same year. Through a mutual friend, Hyman had established a relationship with Dodson that led to his being cast in the role of Hamlet. James V. Hatch writes: "After Hyman had studied with Sybil Thorndike and recorded scenes from *Hamlet*, Hyman invited Dodson for dinner. [He] played recordings of Sir John Gielgud and Maurice Evans, and slipped his own in. Dodson exclaimed, 'Wow! Who is that actor? He's the best one of all.'"²⁰ Previously directing *Hamlet* at Hampton Institute with African American actor Gordon Heath in 1945, Dodson was well-equipped to handle a remounting of the play. The production at Howard opened in the summer of 1951.

Richard Coe of the Washington Post wrote of Dodson's *Hamlet*:

Hyman, who played Rudolph in *Anna Lucasta* on Broadway and the West End stage, is the Hamlet. His reading shows a strong Gielgud influence, and his characterization emphasizes the neurotic prince. His 'nunnery' scene with Carolyn Hill Stewart, the Ophelia, matches the director's concept admirably, a beautifully played, exceptionally moving scene. While all the voices have that variety of accents common to American classical readings, Mr. Hyman's impressive power and command stood him well in the long role. Considering the very few opportunities a Negro actor has in this role, he shows surprising mastery of its facets, and his ability to put his intellectual concept into action is impressive.²¹

Jay Carmody's review in *The Evening Star* reflected the paternalism of many Whites who came to mock and stayed to praise. He stated:

On the surface, it is lamentably mismatching play and players when any save the most gifted performers take on *Hamlet*. It is a tradition that in any such case, both the greatest of dramas and the most reckless of casts shall lose. Well, tradition is being pleasantly interrupted at Howard this week when *Hamlet* is being played by a company of professionals and student performers under the perceptive and artful direction of Owen Dodson. This is not merely the most ambitious venture in the university's drama history

Black Representation," in *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance*, eds. Kathy A. Perkins, Sandra L. Richards, Renée Alexander Craft, and Thomas F. DeFrantz (Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance, 2020), 144.

²⁰ Ibid., 168.

²¹ Richard Coe, "Negro Players Present 'Hamlet'," *New York Times*, July 20, 1951, 3.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1951/07/20/archives/negro-players-present-hamlet.html>.

but also the most interesting. Neither Spaulding Hall's miniature stage nor the limited experience of even the ablest members of the company is permitted the implication that this is a mid-summer folly. Frankly, that is what this reviewer anticipated, and he had never been more definitely wrong.²²

Dodson found that producer T. Edward Hambleton was interested in helping him bring his production of *Hamlet* to Scandinavia. Hambleton, however, needed help finding investors for the project. Dodson felt, "Artistically it would be an exciting experience for a European public to see Negroes playing Hamlet, and good for Negro players to get this opportunity to visit Europe, and good for how the Negro problem is judged in Denmark to see what high standard the Negroes can rise to in America."²³ Through the next few years, Dodson held fast until the break came for his *Hamlet*, but it never did. After being forced into early retirement from Howard in 1967, and plagued by health issues, Dodson continued to stay busy writing, lecturing, and picking up the occasional directing assignment.

Anne Cooke Reid and Owen Dodson did not confine themselves or their students to the smallness of categories. Cooke and Dodson's contributions to the theatre, especially in their work with students, revolutionized the consciousness of its audiences at home and abroad. At Howard University, they brought their pedagogy of self-expression to a generation of great artists, including Earle Hyman, Toni Morrison, and Amiri Baraka, among others.

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²² "Howard U. 'Hamlet' Best of its Drama Offerings," *Washington Evening Star*, July 21, 1951, 14.

²³ Hatch, *Sorrow is the Only Faithful One*, 174.

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