tBTR
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Introduction:

The Role of Theatre at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Special Guest Editors

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Long overlooked in academic discourse on theatre and performance studies, theatre programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have served as foundational spaces for cultivating Black theatrical expression, innovation, and leadership. These programs play a critical yet often underexamined role in shaping both Black performance traditions and the broader trajectory of American theatre. Volume 3, Issue 2 of *the Black Theatre Review* focuses on this vital cultural and institutional landscape, offering a timely exploration of the historical, artistic, and educational significance of HBCU theatre programs.

Historically, HBCUs have served as centers of radical cultural production, preservation, and innovation. As such, theatre programs are rooted in this legacy, utilizing performance not merely as entertainment, but as a means of resistance, remembrance, and renewal. Black cultural expression, as theorized by bell hooks, is deeply connected to the necessity of survival and self-definition. As she writes in *Art on My Mind*, "For Black folks, the function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it's to imagine what is possible."[1] This imaginative function—this capacity to create from memory and aspiration—is embedded in the work of HBCU theatre, where the stage becomes a space for enacting both ancestral knowledge and radical futures.

This legacy is not merely abstract for us—it is deeply embodied and personal. As graduates of Albany State University (Williams) and Cheyney University of Pennsylvania (Long), America's oldest historically Black institution for higher education, we are direct products of HBCU theatre traditions, shaped by institutions that have long viewed performance not just as an art form, but as a vessel for cultural memory, political urgency, and visionary

[1] bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (The New Press, 1995), 6.

possibility. Williams is the mentee of Dr. Wendy R. Coleman, a former theatre director at Albany State and now the Dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Alabama State University, who was herself mentored by Dr. Tommie "Tonea" Stewart, a transformative leader in Black theatre at both Jackson State and Alabama State University. Long counts among his mentors Cheyney University theatre arts professors Jan Ellis-Scruggs and Edythe Scott Bagley (1924-2011). Scott Bagley was the sister of Coretta Scott King and founder of Cheyney University's Theatre Arts program. We are shaped by Dr. Paul Bryant-Jackson (1951-2018), a former professor and chair of the Department of Theatre and Drama at Spelman College.

Our scholarly, artistic, and pedagogical commitments are grounded in the formative experiences we had on those stages, where we learned that theatre is never neutral. It is, instead, a spiritual and activist space—a place where Black stories are celebrated, interrogated, and transformed. In these environments, performance functioned not only as a mode of storytelling but also as a practice of survival, a method of honoring ancestry, and a space for imagining radical futures. We were taught that theatre could hold the complexities of Black life—its triumphs and traumas, its joys and injustices—and present them with care, honesty, and purpose. Our training at these institutions went far beyond technique; it cultivated our sense of identity, responsibility, and mission as Black theatre artists and scholars. We were mentored within traditions of excellence that emphasized collaboration, rigor, and critical engagement with the world around us. This experience shaped not only our craft but also our sense of purpose, reaffirming the necessity of theatre that speaks to, for, and with Black communities. Today, as we continue our work as scholars, directors, dramaturgs, and educators, we remain deeply connected to that tradition, not as passive recipients of its history, but as active participants in its ongoing legacy. Our careers are living proof of the transformative power of HBCU theatre programs to develop artist-scholars who blur the lines between scholarship and activism, who recognize the stage as both archive and altar, and who are committed to protecting and promoting the voices of Black artists and thinkers. Through our teaching, writing, directing, and creative practice, we carry forward the vision of HBCU theatre—not merely as an object of study or nostalgia, but as a vital, evolving, and future-facing cultural force.

This project has taken several forms (too many to recount here). However, it is essential to note that the early iterations of our effort to document critical perspectives on HBCU theatre programs began when we were graduate students navigating predominantly white spaces (i.e., theatre conferences) that had no connection to HBCUs in general. This prompted us to embark on a lengthy journey that included conference sessions, workshops, and public events supported by various organizations, most prominently The Black Theatre Network. This special edition of *tBTR* represents the culmination of that journey.

When we were invited to propose a special topic for *tBTR,* focusing on *The Role of Theatre at Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, we knew we wanted to recognize HBCU theatre programs as more than mere technical training institutes focusing on acting,

directing, or design. For us, HBCU theatre programs have a long history of nurturing what Robin D.G. Kelley calls "freedom dreams." In his book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Kelley writes, "Without new visions we don't know what to build, only what to knock down."[2] HBCU theatre programs created space for students to imagine and build those new visions. As such, these programs were not just about preparing students for careers in theatre; they were about helping students see themselves as artists, cultural workers, and future leaders who used performance to reflect, challenge, and shape the world around them. This edition includes articles from Baron Kelly, Freda Scott Giles, Charlotte Canning, Sakinah Davis, and a note from the field by Carlton Molette. Collectively, the essays in this special edition chronicle the work of several HBCU theatre programs, providing historical overviews and case studies that spotlight groundbreaking pioneers and innovative productions, and acknowledging how HBCUs have cultivated relationships with surrounding communities. Additionally, this special edition showcases photographs from past productions at HBCUs, namely Cheyney University of Pennsylvania under the direction of Jan Ellis-Scruggs, Albany State University under the direction of DeRon S. Williams, Clark Atlanta University under the direction of Joseph C. Phillips, and Howard University under the direction of Raquis Petree. We hope this special edition of *the Black Theatre Review* will inspire a new focus in theatre studies that highlights theatre programs at HBCUs, underscoring their significant role in the broader history of American theatre.

Today, HBCU theatre programs continue to offer a space for exploring identity, community, and the legacy of Black storytelling. Students learn to write, direct, and perform stories that speak to their experiences, their histories, and their hopes. They engage with plays that center Black voices and perspectives, and they are encouraged to create new work that fills in the gaps left by dominant narratives. These theatre spaces are places where both joy and pain are welcomed—where grief and celebration are given equal weight, and where the complexity of Black life can be explored with honesty and depth. This ethos resonates deeply with the vision of August Wilson, who championed the power of Black stories told by Black voices on Black terms. Wilson insisted that Black art must be rooted in the specific cultural, historical, and linguistic experiences of African Americans. He argued, "We must develop within ourselves the power to articulate our own needs, our own histories, our own culture, our own values and to place them within the context of the larger society."[3] In the spirit of Wilson's call, HBCU theatre becomes a critical site of self-definition and cultural sovereignty. These productions are more than performances; they are educational, cultural, and political acts. They teach by doing, by embodying history, memory, and resistance. Students often draw on Black folklore, literature, oral traditions, and lived experiences, creating performances that connect the past to the present in powerful and meaningful ways. These programs preserve cultural memory not through textbooks or lectures alone, but through the energy of live performance—the stories, movements, and voices that bring history to life. What happens on the stage becomes a kind of living archive, a way of holding onto traditions while also imagining new futures. The theatre becomes a space

[2] Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Beacon Press, 2002), 9.
[3] August Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand* (Theatre Communications Group, 2001), 37.

where stories are not only remembered but reimagined, not only performed but lived. In this way, HBCU theatre plays a vital role in sustaining and advancing Black cultural expression. It is a place where students can honor their roots while also dreaming about their future, and where performance becomes both a tool for learning and a path toward liberation.

Although Historically Black Colleges and Universities continue to navigate ongoing challenges—including resource inequity, limited public visibility, and varying levels of institutional support—theatre programs remain vital to the cultural and intellectual life of these institutions. Far more than mere extracurricular activities, as the essays in this special issue of *the Black Theatre Review* demonstrate, HBCU theatre programs serve as essential bridges between student experiences and public discourse, connecting academic rigor with community uplift, and personal identity with collective responsibility. They cultivate professional pipelines into the arts, positioning themselves as spaces of both disciplined training and visionary launchpads for careers in performance, academia, design, and arts leadership. The contributions in this special issue reflect the multidimensional practices and enduring relevance of HBCU theatre. Some essays trace the legacies of pioneering figures whose influence has shaped the field and guided generations of artists and scholars, while others explore curricular and pedagogical innovations that center Black cultural thought, emphasizing the intersections of education, performance, and political engagement. Together, these writings affirm what has long been true: HBCU theatre is not peripheral to American theatre—it is foundational. It is where Black performance thrives in full voice, where stories are not simply remembered but reimagined, and where students learn to move through the world as artists, thinkers, and leaders. As Toni Morrison reminds us, "The function of freedom is to free someone else."[4] HBCU theatre programs and programming embody that ethic, empowering students to imagine, create, and liberate through performance. This special edition honors that ongoing work and amplifies the transformative power of Black theatre education to preserve cultural memory, elevate artistic practice, and shape the future of performance in America.

[4] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 103.