

HBCU Theatre Programs

Carlton Molette
University of Connecticut

I try to bolster my opinions with facts, but much of what follows is still opinion. Therefore, I feel obliged to disclose some prior experiences that have shaped my views. Most of my pre-college education took place in Kansas City, Missouri, when state law mandated racial segregation. I was reminded of this fact every morning as I viewed Central High School from my front porch while departing for Lincoln High School several miles away. The summer after the Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional, I completed the 10th grade, celebrated my 16th birthday, received a Ford Foundation Early Admission Scholarship to Morehouse College, and witnessed the murder of Emmett Till. Millions of Americans saw the horrendous photo of Emmett Till in JET magazine. Nearly every adult my parents knew thought going to Georgia was a very bad idea. My grandfather, a Harvard graduate, became Head of Morehouse's English Department in 1907. My mother said, "Papa loved Morehouse. He did not love Harvard." So, despite the dire predictions from her friends, I went to Morehouse.

Although I was still in elementary school when my Grandpa passed away, I'm certain he influenced my thinking about what constitutes "best" when it comes to colleges. America's dominant opinion-shaping force for ascertaining the "best" colleges is the "rankings" that media organizations create. Apparently, they believe the only reason people go to college is to make lots of money. They seem to think a college education is a good investment, only if graduation results in monetary gain, and the logical way to create a hierarchical list of the "best" colleges is by average income of graduates five years after graduation.

On average, graduates who major in engineering, business, and the sciences earn more money in the first five years after graduation, than those who major in the humanities or the arts. So, these criteria will inevitably conclude that the "best" colleges are those where most students major in the sciences, engineering, and business, while those where most students major in the arts or humanities are not as good. The rankings include other criteria, but they mostly measure the wealth to have impressive buildings and equipment, and the fame to attract so many applicants that they can refuse to admit most of them. On the other hand, some students want a college that prepares them to do something they love to do, and also benefits society.

Morehouse is all-male, Spelman is all-female, and a co-ed theatre program located on Spelman's campus serves both institutions. Although I graduated from Morehouse, all my theatre

courses and production experiences were at Spelman. When I was a student, Dr. Benjamin E. Mays was President of Morehouse. He encouraged us to discover and embrace what we were "called" to do. When I was a freshman, I had no idea what I was "called" to do, and I wasn't trying to find out. But a good friend of mine was cast in a play that needed two guys to carry this thing off the stage. He said, "All you have to do is pick up the other end of the thing, and we carry it off." That was my first HBCU theatre experience. I had ZERO lines, so I had lots of time to observe the process of creating a play, and I was impressed by the director's passionate pursuit of excellence.

I didn't BEGIN to think theatre might be my "calling" until the following year. I enrolled in a drama class. The second semester, everyone in the class was required to direct a short play to be presented in class. After my play was performed, the professor said he wanted to include it in the upcoming public performances of three one-acts, directed by three seniors. I realized I was working hard at this theatre thing because I loved it. My junior year, I had several acting and crew assignments, and I directed another one-act. I had discovered my calling, and I embraced it. My senior year, I directed a one-act in the Fall, and August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* in the spring.

Graduate school was my first experience at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), and it created a "baseline" for comparison with my HBCU experience. Differences between the two experiences can be summarized by the variance in what the word "universal" means. Long before the current attack on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), the word "universal" permitted individuals who profess expertise in various art forms to conclude that William Shakespeare's or Leonardo da Vinci's, or Ludwig van Beethoven's work is universal, but Hale Woodruff's or August Wilson's, or Duke Ellington's is not. Some people of every culture are intelligent and learn enough to appreciate the art of other cultures, while others believe their culture is superior to all others, and that their art and artifacts are "universal." Thus, everybody else's cultures are "primitive" in comparison. Black people cannot flourish in a place where White people of the latter persuasion are in control, even if the various media outlets "rank" it as one of the "best."

My first HBCU faculty experience was at Tuskegee University, where I was a temporary replacement while the Director of Theatre was on leave working on a PhD. After the first faculty meeting where new faculty are introduced, the renowned composer William Levi Dawson, walked up, introduced himself, and said, "I saw your grandfather play Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*." Before that moment, I had no idea that my Grandpa had ever been involved in theatre! I knew that before he became President of Lincoln University, he had been Head of Tuskegee's English Department for over a decade, and he taught elocution. Years later, I learned that the legendary actor Charles Winter Wood was English Department faculty and Director of Theatre at the time. So, Charles Winter Wood undoubtedly directed the production. That moment definitely strengthened my conviction that theatre was what I was "called" to do.

Tuskegee happened to be the right place and the right time for Barbara and me. In 1960, we were newlyweds. A Black newlywed couple planning careers in theatre had to be inspired by Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. One day, sitting at my desk in the English Department, the phone rang:

ME: Hello.

VOICE: Is this Carlton Molette?

ME: Yes.

VOICE: I'm Ossie Davis. My wife and I are going to be in town visiting my sister for a few days. When my sister is at work, Ruby and I are available to come over and talk to your students ... if you think that would be ...

ME: This is a joke, right?

VOICE: No. My sister is a nurse at the V.A. hospital. Ruby just finished shooting the film version of *A Raisin in the Sun* in Los Angeles, and we decided to drive back to New York, and visit relatives along the way.¹

Ossie and Ruby spent more than the class time talking to my students. Our paths crossed several times over the years. They always took time to encourage my students. But they were always relentless in telling them, as they told Barbara and me early on, "You have to put in the work."²

Later that school year, another unusual circumstance caused Lloyd Richards to see a production of *Simply Heavenly* by Langston Hughes that I directed. When he got back to New York, he wrote a letter that included the admonition,

At all costs, retain your 'ego.' A very necessary item. It is akin to 'artistic courage,' a thing necessary to all of us in this endeavor. However, temper it with honest reality and bolster it with knowledge and experience.³

Everybody doesn't get to meet one of their heroes early in life. But if you treat everybody like you want to be treated, some of the "nobodies" you meet early in life might become a "somebody" later on. The list of "somebodies" I met before they became rich, famous, or both is far too long to list here.

¹ Ossie Davis, Personal communication with the author, 1960.

² Ibid.

³ Langston Hughes, Personal communication with the author, 1961.

After more graduate study, and a stint as the "first Negro" full-time staff at a major community theatre, my second HBCU faculty experience was at Howard University. As I recall, my faculty status did not automatically make me a member of the Howard Players, but Robert West directed a production of *Purlie Victorious* with James Butcher as "Ol' Cap 'n Cotchipee" and me as the Sheriff. After that, I was an undisputed member of the Howard Players.

As a novice professor, I wanted to provide that "something" I experienced as an undergraduate that was absent from my first PWI experience. But what is it? And how do I impart it to others? Providing information about Black theatre in Africa and throughout the diaspora proclaims the value of Black theatre, but that's not enough. Imparting that "something" to others is larger and more complex than simply presenting facts. Still trying to understand what that "something" was, and how I might impart it to others, I recalled my undergraduate directing experiences. Could I have gained that experience, and the self-confidence it inspired at a PWI? More significant than the fact that I directed four plays as an undergraduate is the fact that my professors BELIEVED I could and would do the work. What any school's theatre does for its students largely depends on the effort each student puts into it. But for me, going to Morehouse College is arguably the best choice I ever made. When I think about the most important things in my life: I didn't get to pick my parents, and I might never have met the woman I married if hadn't decided to attend Morehouse College. So, I have no doubt that the past sixty-five years would have been far less pleasant if I had not decided to participate in theatre at an HBCU.

After marriage, graduate study, being hired as the "first Negro" at a major community theatre, the Army (they drafted young men back then), temporary faculty at Tuskegee University and Howard University, five years at Florida A&M University (FAMU), a Ph.D., and another "first Negro" gig at Asolo Repertory Theatre, I joined Spelman's faculty in 1969. Very few PWIs had a Black theatre professor back then, so I was an occasional guest at a PWI. Invariably, Black students would ask, "Where (or with whom) did you study Black theatre?" Most were surprised to learn I never took a Black Theatre course. I would explain that, although several English departments included plays in a Black literature course, to the best of my knowledge, there was no graduate course in Black theatre anywhere when I was in grad school; that the first such course was the one I offered at Atlanta University beginning in 1970; and that, even at the undergraduate level, such courses were rare, and mostly at HBCUs.

When I joined Spelman's faculty in 1969, Baldwin Burroughs (Department Head, and my undergraduate mentor) had already established a course focusing on post-colonial Africa. By 1972, our "History of the Theatre" course was renamed "History of EUROPEAN Theatre." Often, theatre history courses at PWIs either omit important contributions made by Black people, or assiduously ignore the fact that the person who made the contribution was Black. Courses that correct these defects are definitely needed, but my course focused on attributes of the work itself that differentiate African American theatre from theatre that's distinctively European, Asian, etc.

In addition to providing Black theatre for Black audiences, HBCUs give students the skills and self-confidence required for success in "mainstream" theatre, film, and television. But the "something" HBCUs provide does not come from the theatre program alone. I had extraordinary professors in other courses who added skills and self-confidence that my career path required. Steven Kassel taught me to see like a visual artist in a freshman Humanities course. Without that ability, I would not have become a scenic designer. I never experienced the fear of "writer's block," mostly because Robert Brisbane required four essay exams in every Political Science course I took. When I decided to write a play, I just did it. I didn't expect it to be easy, but, thanks to Robert Brisbane, I knew I could do it. When Baldwin Burroughs handed me a script and said, "Direct this play, I didn't expect it to be easy, but I knew I could do it. By the way, Brisbane had a Harvard Ph.D. and Burroughs had a Yale M.F.A. and a Ph.D. from Western Reserve College. Steve Kassel is a Jewish guy from Brooklyn with an M.F.A. from New York University (NYU). His favorite professor at NYU was Hale Woodruff, who recommended him for the job at Morehouse.

When I was a young professor, I knew my HBCU experience had provided me and my fellow students with something of value—not just the theatre majors, and not just my HBCU. As a professor, my job was to provide my students with that "something" I received when I was a student. But what is the "something" I'm supposed to provide? I was fortunate to work with experienced professors: Owen Dodson and James Butcher at Howard, and S. Randolph Edmonds at FAMU. Thanks to their examples and my undergraduate experiences, I began to figure it out.

Decades after I graduated, I found a quote that expresses an idea that I heard Benjamin Mays express in various ways during my student years. It identifies the key factor in the "something" that HBCUs nurture that's difficult (but not impossible) for other environments to replicate, "It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not a disaster to be unable to capture your ideal, but it is a disaster to have no ideal to capture. Not failure, but low aim is sin."⁴

High aim requires self-confidence. Black people who exude self-confidence are labeled "arrogant" and punished for exhibiting it. Black performing artists and athletes are "supposed to" exude humility. They are praised for being humble and condemned when they seem arrogant.

My undergraduate professors did not tolerate low aim. I have seen several professors at PWIs encourage it. They say it's to prepare their Black students for the discrimination they will surely face. Most of my professors and my colleagues at HBCUs thought the best preparation for discrimination is to work harder. Be better. Be confident in your ability to do better than anybody else. I have been a faculty member at eight Historically Black Colleges and Universities. I have seen rehearsals and performances at many additional HBCUs. I'm aware that many HBCU

⁴ Benjamin Elijah Mays, n.d.

professors (including me) say (and sometimes scream) not-so-nice words. But, in every instance I have observed, the underlying message was, "You can do better than that, but you have to put in the work." So, why do I think theatre students are more likely to get that "something" at an HBCU than they are to get it at a PWI? Theatre is a collaborative art form. You can't do theatre well unless you collaborate with people who want to collaborate with you.

Carlton Molette (B.A. Morehouse College; M.A. University of Iowa; Ph.D. Florida State University). Career achievement awards from Black Theatre Network; National Black Theatre Festival; Atlanta Black Theatre Festival; Southeastern Theatre Conference. Emeritus Professor, University of Connecticut; professor at Atlanta, Florida A.&M., Howard University, Spelman College, Texas Southern University; Fine Arts Division Chair, Spelman; Dean at Texas Southern and Lincoln University (MO); Academic Affairs Vice President, Coppin State (MD). Playwright's work produced by Abibigromma [Ghana's National Theatre], New York's Negro Ensemble Company, Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop, New Federal Theatre, Turtle Shell, and many regional and university theatres. Former students are among the most respected professionals in the theatre and media industries.
