

Meeting the Moment:

HBCU Theatre as Protest, Performance, and Pedagogy

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Theatre at Historically Black Colleges and Universities has always been more than just an art form—it's a space for radical storytelling, cultural memory, and protest. In March of 2025, I had the opportunity to see two productions at Atlanta's HBCUs—Clark Atlanta University's *Antigone* and Spelman College's *An American Anthem*. At first glance, the two seem worlds apart: one is a reimaging of a Greek tragedy, while the other is a contemporary theatrical album. However, what struck me most was how both pieces centered on protest, sacrifice, and the urgency of standing for a cause. Watching these productions, I was reminded that HBCU theatre is about bearing witness, calling for change, and embracing Blackness in all its complexity.

Clark Atlanta's *Antigone*: A Hip Hop Tragedy

Joseph C. Phillips' adaptation of *Antigone* felt like home—Black joy, rhythm, playfulness, and resistance wrapped into one. This hip hop-infused take on Sophocles' tragedy had the audience audibly responding—"amen"-ing, gasping, laughing, and vibing with every crisp movement on stage. The show used rhythm and blues, dance, and hip hop not as embellishments but as the lifeblood of the storytelling. The choice to have the Chorus—a symbol of the Theban community—both rap their commentary and use hip hop dance as a form of storytelling kept the story fresh and propelled it forward. I was privileged to attend a performance that had a talk back with the audience afterwards. It gave me deeper insight into the process, the vision of the director, and the experiences had by the students. Phillips's inspiration for the reimaging of the chorus came from thinking about the age gap between Creon, Antigone, and Haemon. He used the Chorus



Figure 1. "*Antigone*" by Sophocles. Clark Atlanta University. Syndey Lee Photography.

as a symbol of the youth speaking to the older generation through a series of raps and dance breaks. Particularly drawn to movement and dance as a form of storytelling, I was captivated by the dance breaks (choreographed by Clark Atlanta students) and how they felt like mini music videos.



Figure 2. “*Antigone*” by Sophocles.
Clark Atlanta University. Syndey
Lee Photography.

A standout moment in the production was when Queen Eurydice learned of her son’s death. This moment was movement as storytelling personified. Two women-identified messengers, through a series of fluid, liturgical dance-like movements, brought to life the poetic retelling of both the Queen’s son and Antigone’s death. There was an underlying gravitational push and pull of Eurydice’s grief through the movements, which was underscored by a pulsing cinematic beat. At times, their bodies (both the two messengers and Queen Eurydice) wove together in a tight triangular prism creating a striking visual representation of tension and devastation. The lighting design choice of a deep shade of blue heightened the moment, reinforcing the weight of Eurydice’s loss.

Beyond its inventive staging, *Antigone* was a testament to the power of resilience and resourcefulness. Clark Atlanta’s theatre program may not have the largest budget, but what it lacks in resources, it more than makes up for in ingenuity. Students took on roles in set and sound design, choreography, and music direction. As Phillips acknowledged during the post-show discussion, “This was truly a student-run production” and that is the spirit of HBCU theatre—creating something transformative.

Another intriguing creative decision by Phillips was his vision for Tiresias, the traditional blind prophet led by a child. Audiences witnessed “a Ray Charles” inspired figure, complete with two backup “Raelettes.” Moreover, Phillips encouraged the actor playing Tiresias to compose an original song for the scene. This choice reinforced the musicality already embedded in the production’s hip hop and R&B influences, and shifted Tiresias from being a mere harbinger of fate to an active, musical storyteller, mirroring the sounds and feels of Stevie Wonder’s album, *Songs in the Key of Life* (1976).

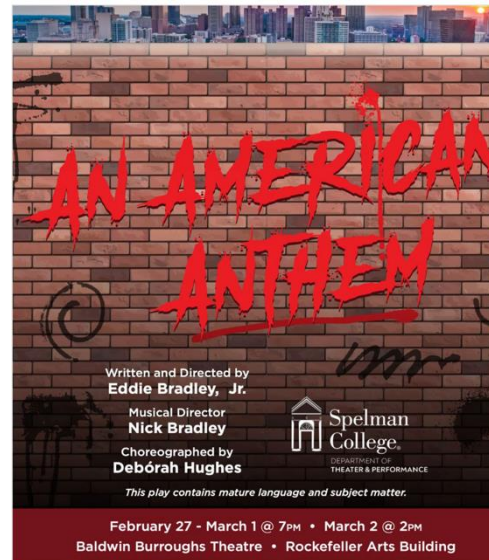


Figure 3. “*Antigone*” by Sophocles. Clark
Atlanta University. Syndey Lee
Photography.

Spelman College's *An American Anthem*: A Theatrical Call to Action

If *Antigone* was a reimagining of the past, *An American Anthem* was a searing snapshot of the present. This original work, written by Dr. Eddie Bradley, Jr., an associate professor of theatre, was structured as a theatrical album—a fusion of storytelling, music, and movement designed to hit hard and stay with you. And it did.

The show tackled America's racial reckoning during the COVID-19 pandemic, centering on injustice, protest, and the collective grief of a community in crisis. Dr. Bradley structured each scene as a track, reinforcing the “album” concept, complete with labels and thematic significance. Just as a musical album is curated with intentional sequencing and transitions, the play's vignettes were presented as distinct yet interconnected tracks. From one of the opening numbers, the production declared itself as an act of defiance with a rousing step routine from protesters chanting “I’m Tired of this Shit” (choreographed by Spelman alum, Debórah Hughes).



One of the most striking creative choices was the use of an alternate reality to depict Donald Trump and his base. In Track 6, the song, *Trumpeteer*, we're transported into a world where Trump's followers are puppets—literal swamp creatures who hang onto his every word. Every Trump scene is underscored by eerie, childlike nursery rhyme music (ala *Barney* meets *Sesame Street*), providing an unsettling juxtaposition to the raw pain depicted in the “real world” sections of the show. The visual contrast—bright, exaggerated colors in the puppet world versus the stark, dimly lit reality of protest and loss—highlights the absurdity of media spectacle in contrast to the gravity of Black suffering.

In Track 9, *Run, N-word, Run*. This number, led by an actress portraying an older Black woman sitting in a rocking chair, felt like an auntie or “Big Ma” passing down a painful but necessary history lesson. Her voice, full of both sorrow and strength, guided us through a Jim Crow-era story of racial violence, while the ensemble moves frantically in the background; their silhouettes flickering under shifting dawn-to-dusk lighting. It was a haunting, rhythmic reminder that this country's racial history is cyclical, and we are still running.

More than merely a performance, *An American Anthem* was a communal act of testimony. It represented history, activism, and theatre colliding in real time. The fact that it was entirely developed by Spelman College faculty and performed by students enhanced its impact. It served

as a reminder that HBCU theatre is not just about retelling stories but about creating new ones that demand to be heard.

Protest, Performance, and the Vitality of HBCU Theatre



Figure 4. “*Antigone*” by Sophocles. Clark Atlanta University. Syndey Lee Photography.

Despite their different styles, both productions embodied the spirit of protest theatre. Antigone’s defiance of Creon’s law mirrors the fight against systemic oppression in movements like Black Lives Matter. Her willingness to sacrifice herself for justice echoes the risks that activists take every day. Likewise, *An American Anthem* made the case that protest is not just about action but also about remembering, storytelling, and honoring those who have been lost.

HBCU theatre is a space where art meets activism. At HBCUs, theatre serves as an act of survival, resistance, and affirmation. As such, it offers opportunities for reclaiming narratives, challenging oppressive structures, and centering Black voices unapologetically. Often working with tight budgets, HBCU theatre departments compensate for this with their brilliance and flexibility.

Pedagogically, both productions were nearly entirely student-driven, providing young artists with hands-on experience in every aspect of theatre-making. Both productions also showcased the importance of faculty mentorship in creating spaces for students to engage with theatre as both art and activism. The commitment of these programs to producing high caliber and socially relevant work, despite financial constraints, is truly remarkable.

Watching *Antigone* and *An American Anthem* back-to-back was a reminder that HBCU theatre is not just important—it’s necessary. These productions were not only about entertainment; they addressed truth-telling, remembrance, and revolution. They embodied what HBCU theatre has always done: meet the moment, speak the truth, and move audiences in ways that linger long after the curtain falls. As HBCU theatre programs continue to push boundaries, they deserve more recognition and support. These artists are shaping the future of Black storytelling, proving that theatre is not just a reflection of life but a force that can change it. And in this capacity, it remains as vital as ever.