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BLACK THEATRE
HISTORY PLAYS
Remembering, recovering, re-envisioning

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The first known Black theatre troupe in America can be traced to William Alexander Brown’s African Company (1821–1823) at the African Grove Theatre in New York City. Brown, founder and manager of the African Company, also wrote and produced the earliest known Black play, *The Drama of King Shotaway* (1823), a historical rendering of the Black Carib War in St. Vincent in 1796 (Hill and Hatch 27). In 1858, self-educated former slave William Wells Brown wrote *The Escape; or, a Leap for Freedom*, a historical account of the evils of slavery based on his own experiences. William Easton contributed to the genre with two plays on Haitian emperors, *Dessalines* (1893) and *Henri Christophe* (1912), produced in Chicago and New York City, respectively. Thus, historical recovery and reimagining through drama traversed the first half of the twentieth century in African American theatre. This creative impulse persists in contemporary playwriting with celebrated examples, including Jeff Stetson’s *The Meeting* (1990), Carlyle Brown’s *The African Company Presents Richard III* (1993), Philip Hayes Dean’s *Paul Robeson* (1997), Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight Los Angeles* (1992), and Katori Hall’s *The Mountaintop* (2009). Black historical theatre celebrates and preserves Black culture in the tradition of the African griot (storyteller/oral historian)—remembering, recovering, and re-envisioning historical narratives on the stage. After defining the history play genre, this chapter analyzes the genre in terms of its purpose, theatricality, and themes in the pioneering period from the early 1800s to the 1960s.

Defining the genre

As a genre, the history play’s earliest form harkens back to Aeschylus’ *The Persians* written in 472 BCE, an extant work that celebrates a famous Athenian naval victory (Gainor 90). During the Medieval period (c.600s CE to mid-1600s), the history genre took the form of re-enactments celebrating the lives of saints and biblical stories. Codification of the genre began to emerge during the Renaissance with the historical renderings of Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1594) and William Shakespeare’s chronicles of monarchs such as *Richard III* (1597) and *Henry V* (1599) (Ribner, “Marlowe’s”; English History Play). The *First Folio* (1623) publication of Shakespeare’s plays cataloged them as tragedies, comedies, and histories, though the history classification was limited to the lives of monarchs. Historical drama up to that point was mainly a combination of fact and fiction based on historical narratives.
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Scholar Gary Dawson notes the emergence of documentary drama with Georg Buchner’s *Danton’s Death* in 1835 (166). Most of *Danton’s Death* features verbatim documentation from primary sources. The word “documentary” enters the lexicon in February 1926 in a review of a British film by John Grierson who defined the documentary as “creative treatment of actuality” (Dawson 224–225). The term, used by Brecht in 1926, came to be associated with German director Erwin Piscator’s epic and documentary plays. Dawson notes a principal shift with documentary theatre from the Aristotelian paradigm—exposition, complication, recognition, reversal, complication, and resolution—to a non-Aristotelian one of montage, juxtaposition, historical documentation, distanciation, direct address, audience participation, and total theatre (279).

Although definitions of plays that retell history are fluid and varying among artists and scholars, historical theatre showcasing factual material falls under the generic term *history play*. Three genres come under this term. One coinage for the most prevalent subgenre is *historical drama*, fictionalized drama based primarily on actual events gathered mainly from *secondary* sources. Docudrama, one of its major descriptors, is also used to identify documentary drama, causing some confusion because of the overlap. Historical drama takes the form of prose or verse, straight or musical, myth or realism or combination of these elements. *Documentary drama*, created with facts derived mainly from *primary* sources, is the second key subgenre of *history play*. Its main descriptors include verbatim theatre and theatre-of-fact (Hammond and Steward). The *historical pageant* is the third key form of the history play. “Too pictorial to be a parade, but not dramatic enough to be a play, pageants—with their music, costume, dance, narration and tableaux—reenacted historical events” (Shine and Hatch 86). For clarity, this chapter uses history play as a general umbrella term and differentiates between the subgenres using the terms historical drama, documentary drama, or historical pageant (except in direct quotes).

African American playwrights up to and through the 1960s and beyond embraced the history play most often in the form of the historical drama (combination of fact and fiction). In the 1930s, Langston Hughes pioneered Black documentary drama (mainly factual) as agitation propaganda with his political plays (Hughes and Duffy). In 1913, W. E. B. Du Bois pioneered the African American historical pageant (panoramic collage).

**Purpose**

Theatre historian Udo Hebel notes that, “Historical plays were to serve as sites of memory … display[ing] agency, achievement, and endurance even under the most repressive, dehumanizing circumstances” (54). Former enslaved playwright William Wells Brown used his personal memories of slavery in *The Escape; Or a Leap for Freedom* (1858) to educate Northern sympathizers about the realities of slavery. In 1925, Arthur Schomburg asserted that Black history plays offer “a future oriented, revisionary recognition of the American Negro as an active collaborator, and often a pioneer, in the struggle for his own freedom and advancement” (qtd. in Hebel 54). Carter G. Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life (1915) and other significant history initiatives, promoted Black history in dramatic form for educational purposes. His sponsorship led to the publication of *Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro* (1930) and *Negro History in Thirteen Plays* (1935). Woodson’s ideas challenged monocultural versions of American history regarding the dramatization of a new America, the symbolic enactment of examples of the New Negro as a maker of civilization in Africa, a contributor to progress in Europe, and a factor in the development of greater America (Hebel 54; Richardson and Miller iv–v).
Social scientist, co-founder of the NAACP, and founding editor of the NAACP’s *The Crisis* magazine, W.E.B. Du Bois promoted the theatre as a tool for agitation/propaganda. With his historical pageant, *The Star of Ethiopia* (1913), and other initiatives, including the founding of the Krigwa Players (1929), he significantly shaped the mission of the history genre into self-affirmation and advocacy for equal rights. Charting a different path from Du Bois in the 1920s, Howard University professors Montgomery Gregory and Alain Locke called for an emphasis on the folk drama stories of rural Blacks that document their joys and sorrows. They mentored many Howard University student/playwrights who blended their own goals with those of Du Bois, Gregory, and Locke in writing historical dramas and pageants. In the promotion of the history genre, May Miller and Willis Richardson were Gregory and Locke’s best-known disciples.

**Theatricality**

The theatrical style of Black history plays varied with each author. Of the 60 history plays documented by this research from the early 1800s to the mid-1960s, the dominant subgenre was the historical drama: fact with fiction embellishment. A few examples include William Easton’s *Christophe* (1911), Randolph Sheppard Edmonds’ *Denmark Vesey* (1929), Owen Dodson’s *Amistad* (1939), and Theodore Ward’s *Our Lan’* (1947). Historical dramas, paying homage to Black heroes, often fit the pattern of melodrama with good and evil characters clearly delineated and good triumphing, as in May Miller’s *Harriet Tubman*. The hero treatises were also historical tragedies with the hero defeated and killed, though not before demonstrating an undaunted will to fight for freedom and dignity, for example, Randolph Sheppard Edmond’s *Nat Turner*. In *Black Heroes* (1989), Errol Hill documents the criteria for the Black hero protagonist:

- He or she should pursue a goal that leads to betterment of mankind.
- The goal should become a passion.
- The hero should not expect to receive material gain.
- [The] hero should be willing to risk life, if need be, in carrying out this self-imposed mission.
- [The] hero is driven by a superior force that sustains him [or her] in the quest and allows him [or her] to endure whatever hardships are experienced in striving toward the goal.

Black historical dramas were often one-acts. Teacher/playwrights found the shorter form best for their young audiences, plays like May Miller’s *Christophe’s Daughters* and Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *Frederick Douglass*. However, representative longer works such as Brown’s *Escape*, in five acts, and William Branch’s *In Splendid Error*, in three acts, demonstrate the diversity in range.

In the Black historical drama, language indicates the character’s education, the verbal creativity of the playwright (poetic dramas), and the political perspectives of writers, editors, and producers. As early as 1858, Brown demonstrated flexibility with dramatic dialogue in *The Escape; or, a Leap for Freedom*. He starts with the dialect of the Black comic character Cato: “I allers knowed I was a doctor, an’ now de old boss has put me at it” (Hill and Hatch 39). Then, he switches to the elevated language of Glen, the slave suitor of mulatto slave Melinda: “How slowly the time passes away. I’ve been waiting here two hours, and Melinda has yet to come. What keeps her I cannot tell” (40). Melinda speaks even more eloquently than Glen: “It is often said that the darkest hour of the night precedes the dawn. It is ever thus with vicissitudes of human suffering” (41). Brown adds a poetic language song in Glen’s tribute to the North Star:
Star of the North! Though night winds drift
The fleecy drapery of the sky
Between thy lamp and me, I lift,
Yea, lift with home my sleepless eye,
To the blue heights wherein thou dwellest,
And of a land of freedom tellest.

(Shine and Hatch 55)

Langston Hughes is among the Black playwrights who developed historical plays in verse such as *Don’t You Want to Be Free* (1938). This play includes many of his well-known poems. Owen Dodson’s *Ballad of Dorie Miller* (1943) is a poetic tribute to the Black hero of World War II.

Dialect or standard English: that was the question. In Richardson’s *Plays and Pageants* (1930), he announced that the plays “must for the most part not be written in dialect,” noting the difficulty because “most plays by Negro authors are written in dialect” (xlv). Indeed, many plays written by Black females before the 1960s employed dialect to represent authentic folk culture. In 1934, Randolph Sheppard Edmonds, a graduate of Oberlin College and Columbia University, prolific playwright, director, and professor defended the use of dialect, stressing its authenticity (Hill and Hatch 264). Edmonds’ *Nat Turner* and Miller’s *Harriet Tubman* were among the plays written in dialect or a combination of dialect and standard English depending on the character. However, plays by Black authors chronicling the Haitian revolution were dialect free; even the most uneducated ex-slave, Dessalines, who rose to power as a great military leader and emperor, spoke standard English in Langston Hughes’ *Emperor of Haiti* (1936). The re-imagining of the Haitian revolution in English was complicated by the fact that the Black Haitians’ native language was Kreyòl, with French the forced second. Thus, playwrights avoided the challenge of creating authentic vernacular speech by using standard English dialogue.

Black historical dramas like Hughes’ *Troubled Island* (1936) and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins’ *Peculiar Sam, Slaves Escape; or, the Underground Railroad* (1880) often included songs—Black spirituals and gospels. Hughes’ *De Organizer: A Blues Opera* (1939), written during the height of the depression, musically charts the labor challenges of the time. Black historical pageants traditionally combined verse, prose, and music, as in Hughes’ *Don’t You Want to Be?* (1938). African American music enhanced Du Bois’ pageant, *Star of Ethiopia*. In its 1915 performance in Washington, DC, the pageant featured 1,200 performers, including 200 singers with J. Rosamond Johnson as the musical director.

**Thematic overview**

Though a few historical works explored biblical and military history, the dominant themes have been slavery, Black heroes, and contributions of the race to civilization. Black playwrights returned frequently to the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), during which self-liberated slaves successfully ousted their colonizers and re-took their freedom and country—Easton’s *Dessalines* (1893) and *Christophe* (1911), Hughes’ *Emperor of Haiti* (1936), and Miller’s *Christophe’s Daughters* (1936). Many of the plays chronicling Black heroes celebrated those who courageously fought against slavery—Branch’s *In Splendid Error* (1954), Edmonds’ *Nat Turner* (1935), and Miller’s *Harriet Tubman*. Another popular theme was the fight for equity and justice, as seen in Hughes’ *Mulatto* (1935) and his documentary labor plays such as *Scottsboro Limited* (1932). The pageants’ themes, like those of Du Bois’ *Star of Ethiopia* (1913) and Frances Gunner’s *The Light of Women* (1930), often focused on a survey of Black
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contributions to civilization and Black freedom and integrity. In 1913, *Star of Ethiopia* had the highest participation and attendance rate of any Black historical production up to the 1960s—more than 14,000 spectators and 350 performers; the 1915 restaging included 1,200 performers (Hill and Hatch 201).

Remembering, recovering, re-envisioning for the sake of education, entertainment, and glorification of Black participation on the world stage—these were the goals and achievements of Black playwrights who transformed historical narratives into history plays from the 1800s through the mid-1960s.

**Works cited**


