

# The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance

Edited by **Kathy A. Perkins, Sandra L. Richards, Renée Alexander Craft, and Thomas F. DeFrantz**

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## Chapter 20

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### **Being Black on Stage and Screen**

**Black actor training before Black Power and the rise of Stanislavski's system**

Monica White Ndounou

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## 20

# BEING BLACK ON STAGE AND SCREEN

## Black actor training before Black Power and the rise of Stanislavski's system

*Monica White Ndounou*

Mainstream actor training programs in the United States rarely include the contributions of Black Americans. Instead, they primarily focus on Russian actor, director, and theorist Constantin Stanislavski, whose system of acting encourages strategies for consistently engaging in more realistic performances (Moore 9). Originating in 1906, variations of the system have continued to dominate US actor training programs since the 1930s and 1940s (Carnicke 3–6). As a result, matters of race, gender, and sexuality in training received little attention until the 1970s and 1980s (Bernhard 472–473).

Even without a “national” school of actor training, Stanislavski-based curricula eclipses the various culturally distinct contributions to the development acting theories and practices throughout the 1,800 US college and university theatre departments offering Bachelor degrees in theatre arts (Bernhard 472–473). This selective focus reinforces the erroneous impression that the development of actor training in the United States is a distinctly white enterprise when that is hardly the case. Various Black theatre studies and biographies reveal a rich history of Black actor training grounded in careful study of craft, cultural expression, artistry, history, and lived experiences. Black Americans have historically participated in actor training and have influenced acting technique in the United States. This chapter introduces several of the programs that existed in the nineteenth century and through the 1940s.

The first US actor training institutions emerged in 1871. After studying with François Delsarte in France, white American actor, director, playwright, designer, and inventor Steele MacKaye established the St. James Theatre School in New York, the first known professional theatre academy in the United States. When the school dissolved after six months, at least four others emerged in New York along with three more in New England (Watson 62–63). Early Black performers like Adrienne McNeil Herndon, Alice M. Franklin, and Henrietta Vinton Davis studied at these predominantly white institutions (Peterson, “Profiles” 116; E. Hill 51–52, 65). Before the end of the century, though, around 1896–1898 and possibly earlier, Black institutions began to appear. Bob Cole, an early Black American actor, entertainer, playwright, songwriter, director, and producer of vaudeville and the musical stage, founded the All-Star Stock Company in New York City (Peterson, “Directory” 12–13). Established in residence at

Worth's Museum, the All-Star Stock Company was the first professional Black stock company and training school for African American performers (Peterson, "Profiles" 70–71).

Cole's institution challenged popular perceptions of Black performers as "natural actors" lacking intellect and artistry (Ross 239). Notable performers in the company demonstrated expertise in stage management, producing, directing, playwriting, songwriting, and musical composition. They did so while immersed in the study of voice and vocal music (i.e. opera); movement through dance (i.e. the cakewalk); comedy, including stand-up and ensemble work in specialty acts (i.e. minstrelsy), and character acting. Examples of the performance styles explored at the All-Star Stock Company include *The Creole Show* (1890–1897), the Octoroons Company (1895–1900), the Black Patti Troubadours (1896–1915), the Williams and Walker Company (1898–1909), and the Pekin Stock Company (1906–1911), which performed Black musicals and popular comedies (Peterson, "Directory" 13). Some of the Pekin's players were also involved in film, like William Foster, who is generally credited as the first Black filmmaker (*The Railroad Porter*, 1912) (Robinson 168–169). The rich tradition of institutional Black actor training ushered in by the All-Star Stock Company continued in various forms, including apprenticeship/mentorships, on-the-job-training in professional jobs, theatre programs at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and the Negro Units of the Federal Theatre Project (1935–1939).

Before the All-Star Stock Company, Black American actors routinely developed voice, movement, and emotional flexibility through a variety of individual and collective processes. The all-Black African Company of the African Grove Theater, founded by William Brown, exemplifies those early processes. In 1816–1817, Brown hosted "entertainments" in his backyard tea garden on Thomas Street in New York City, an enterprise that eventually grew into his legendary company (1821–1824). The African Company is best known for its staging of William Shakespeare's plays as well as Brown's original work, including the first Black authored play in the United States, *King Shotaway*, a story of the Carib uprising against the British on the island of St. Vincent (Hill 11–16).

The African Company's star performers were James Hewlett and Ira Aldridge. According to the *New York Star*, Hewlett's initial "histrionic education took place under those celebrated masters [George Frederick] Cooke and [ ... Thomas Abthorpe] Cooper, whom he followed as a servant boy, and stole their action and attitudes in moments of recreation or recitation" (qtd. in Lindfors, "Early Years" 54). Aldridge attended the Free School in New York, where he learned reading, writing, and recitation, and then apprenticed under Hewlett (A. Hill and Barnett 11). After performing with the African Company, Aldridge made his London debut in 1825 at the age of 17, honing his skills by "performing in small venues while touring the English provinces, where he was acclaimed both as a tragedian and as a comedian" (Lindfors, "Early Years" 4). By the end of his eight-year apprenticeship, "he could perform as many as sixteen different roles in a week and a half—a range broader than that of some of his more famous [white] contemporaries" (4). In his performances, Aldridge drew upon "anti-slavery sentiments by playing long-suffering slaves in abolitionist melodramas set in the New World" (Lindfors, "Mislike Me" 181). Grounding his performances in Black culture and an awareness of the plight of Black people, Aldridge paved the way for the more natural performance style that has become the crux of US actor training (Hill 19).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, vaudeville performers George Walker and Bert Williams formed a theatre company that incubated Black talent while developing acting processes and characters in an attempt to disrupt existing Black stereotypes (Ndounou 65). Born in the Bahamas, Williams carefully studied the "darker" stereotype in American entertainment and adapted it into a sad clown with an insightful philosophy of life. In addition to

studying mime in Europe with Pietro, the great pantomimist, Williams fused observations of African cultures with his lived experiences to cultivate his vocal technique in speech and song as well as in movement and improvisation. His signature sad, comic character, known as the Jonah Man, revolutionized a popular trope and provided a model for his contemporaries and successors.

Other members of the Williams and Walker Company also recognized the importance of training. Actor and choreographer Aida Overton Walker, George Walker's wife, trained with the All-Star Stock Company (Peterson, "Directory" 12). In 1905, the majority of training and experience obtained by Black performers was in musicals and comedies. Aida Walker suggested that "one of the greatest needs of the times [was] a good school in which colored actors and actresses may be properly trained for good acting" (Walker 571–575). By 1911, her dramatic productions provided Black actors access to a broader range of roles thereby expanding practical training opportunities in dramatic acting (Perkins 308). Anita Bush, a chorus member of the Williams and Walker Company, also provided training through her own theatrical group, the Lafayette Players (1915–1932). They performed serious dramas, most of which had been written by whites due to the limited number of full-length plays by Black playwrights. Clarence Muse and other members of the company sometimes performed in whiteface, thereby exploring the performing of racial and cultural identity in serious dramas through costuming, makeup, and accents (McAllister 113–114).

The Little Negro Theatre movement from the mid 1910s to late 1930s offered additional training opportunities in local community theatres, institutions of higher education, and other venues. In 1945, while advocating for the potential of this movement to promote adult education, Dr. Anne Cooke, founder of theatre programs at several Black colleges and universities, conducted a survey of some of those institutions (Cooke 418–424). Out of 36 colleges, 21 responded. Of these, 2 had no theatre programs, 6 programs were solely extracurricular, but 13 had community programs and/or played to audiences beyond their campuses.

HBCU theatre programs like those at Howard University, Tuskegee Institute, Hampton, North Carolina A&T, and several other colleges developed noteworthy curricula for the training of Black theatre professionals. In addition to developing acting theory and practice by performing in plays by white authors, Black performers also trained in "native dramas" by Black authors, including "race" or propaganda plays and folk plays. Randolph Sheppard Edmonds, known as the Dean of Black Academic Theatre, helped to organize Black theatre training programs, develop more intentional curricula, and raise production standards when he founded the Negro Intercollegiate Drama Association (NIDA) (1930–1952). He also founded the Southern Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts (SADSA) (1936–1951), later known as NADSA when it became a national association. Through these organizations, HBCUs developed theatre seasons and curricula with the central focus of training Black theatre professionals, especially in acting and playwriting.

These programs reveal the importance of accessibility of training and performance opportunities on and off college campuses. For example, in collaboration with the local rural, Black community, the student writers at Tuskegee's Bucket Theatre supplied community-inspired material for the locals to perform in off-campus shows. In this instance, actors received on-the-job training performing local stories in the community. To make the theatre truly by and about the community it served, Dr. Cooke suggested that the program employ a technique in children's theatre that would enable community members to write their own scripts or, if they were illiterate, to dictate their plays to Tuskegee student playwrights. Such acting techniques grounded in improvisation and storytelling informed the development of playwriting and vice versa.

Wiley College's Cabin Theatre demonstrated a model for sustainable training by collaborating with the community. Wiley's program sought playwrights who were encouraged to "write from the inside experiences of their various communities" and child and adult actors to perform the work (Cooke 419). A local church paid for its own director to train at the college and implemented a year-long program at the church that explored secular and spiritual approaches to acting. Atlanta University's Summer Theatre Lab, founded by Dr. Cooke, involved the study of all types of professional theatre training. The majority of the plays it produced were by white authors, many containing non-Black characters. One show per season was dedicated to a Black-authored play. This program's predominantly Black lab setting demonstrated the potential for merging mainstream, popularized techniques with culturally nuanced experimentation. Dillard University's program deviated from the little theatre model represented by the other programs by simultaneously educating the performers and the audiences through an array of community programs.

Black actor training continued during the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) (1935–1939). As part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, the FTP employed out-of-work actors, directors, playwrights, designers, and stage managers. The initial 16 Negro Units expanded to 23 units; out of those, only 3—in New York, Boston, and Chicago—were directed by African Americans. These three units characterized the institutional development of Black actor training at the time. The New York Unit, headed by famous actor and director Rose McClendon and later by white director John Houseman, had a classical drama unit staging African American adaptations of white dramas. The Boston Unit, headed by actor and director Ralf Coleman, produced folk plays and productions from other Negro Units. Trained musician Shirley Graham brought national recognition to the Chicago Unit with a range of successful, serious dramas and musicals. The repertoires of these units represented a variety of distinct acting styles achieved through a range of techniques. The FTP's theatre apprentice program documented various performances, like the veteran musical-comedy entertainers in the Vaudeville Unit in New York, providing rich material for studying acting in this period (Ross 231–246). After the FTP ended, Abram Hill, a HBCU alum, founded the American Negro Theatre, one of the most tangible outgrowths of the Federal Theatre Project and best-known example of Black theatre training at the time.

A variety of approaches to individual and institutional actor training by Black artists and educators emerged from the nineteenth century through the 1940s. Incorporating these contributions into today's formal training programs can correct the misperception of US actor training as an exclusively white enterprise.

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