

TD&T

THEATRE DESIGN & TECHNOLOGY



S U M M E R 1 9 9 5

THEIR PLACE

African Americans Behind the Scenes in the American Theatre

IN HISTORY

by Kathy A. Perkins

PHOTO: COURTESY OF FTP COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



DESIGNERS BYRON WEBB AND PERRY WATKINS OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT'S NEW YORK NEGRO UNIT.

On my first day of graduate school at the University of Michigan in 1976, I asked a young white male for directions to the MFA designer's orientation. Replying as if he could not comprehend my question, he immediately pointed to the actors' orientation. When I emphasized that I was a design major, he said he was not aware of any black designers.

Having graduated from a predominantly black institution (Howard University) in Washington, DC, at the height of the black theatre movement of the 1970s, I informed him that there were many of us working behind the scenes and that we had *always* been there. As the young man directed me to the correct room, he remarked, "You would never know by looking in any of the theatre history books that blacks existed."

Later that evening, I went to the library and examined every theatre history book available. The young man was correct—African Americans behind the scenes were indeed absent. Sitting in the library that night, I felt an overwhelming sense of combined anger and embarrassment at this invisibility. Somehow I was *not* convinced that African Americans contributed to the development of the American theatre only as entertainers, which history books have led us to believe.

Not only did that young man direct me to my meeting that day, but he also directed me to a relatively unresearched area of theatre history—the contributions of African Americans behind the scenes. Fueled by this brief encounter, I set out on a mission to help alter history. Although not formally trained as a historian, I realized I had an obligation to help fill a major lacuna in our country's theatre history.

Major studies on Euro-American designers such as Jo Mielziner, Robert Edmond Jones, and Robert Wilson have resulted in books, articles, and exhibitions. In contrast, the African American designer has been absent from the annals of American theatre history, despite the intimacy we share with whites in the economical and cultural formation of the American theatre. I began my principal research in 1979, with the main objective to end the anonymity of these artists and to encourage public awareness and appreciation of their achievements.

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META VAUX WARRICK FULLER
CIRCA 1913

PHOTO: COURTESY OF SOLOMON FULLER, JR.

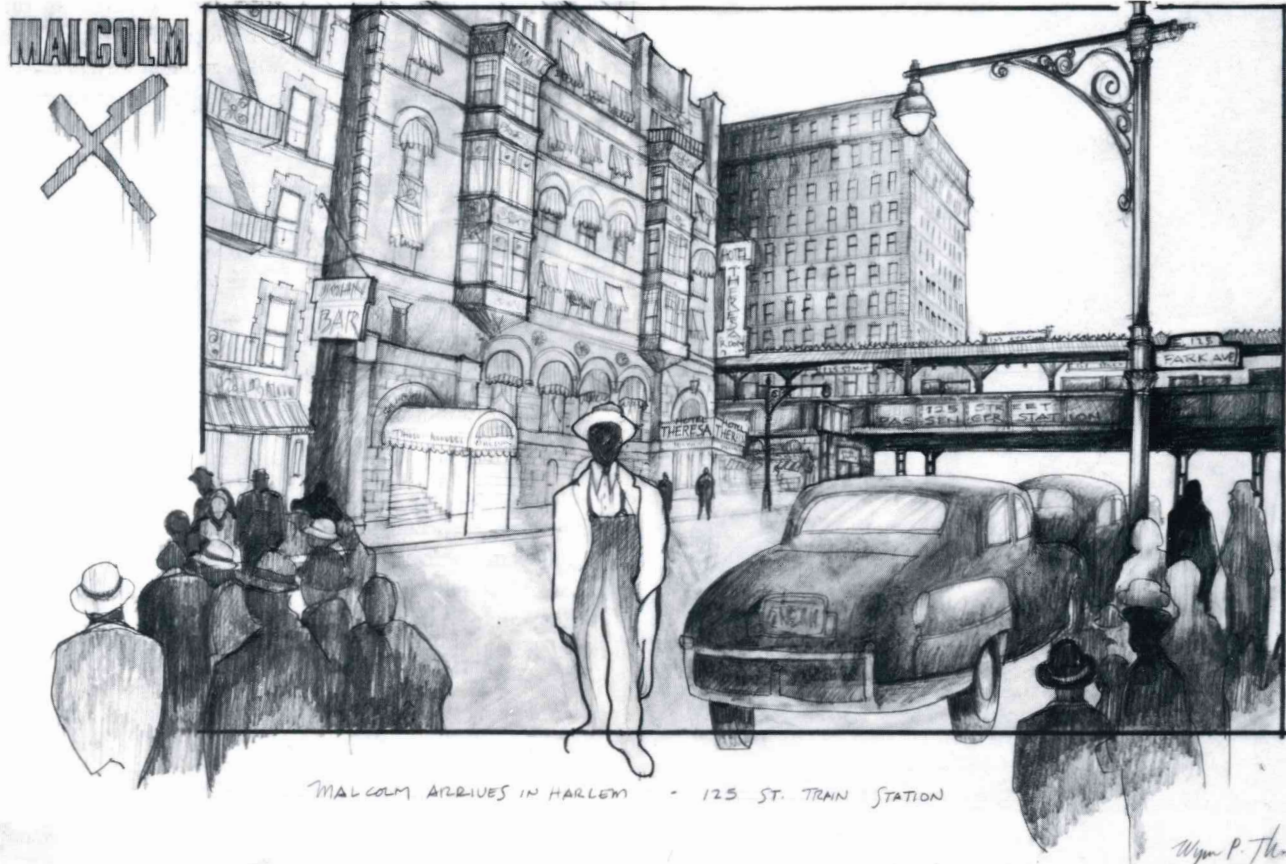


NEW YORK LOCAL 1-A MEMBERS SEATED WITH IATSE PRESIDENT (IN WHITE JACKET)
DURING EARLY 1940S.

When I first began this project, my initial research revealed a paucity of serious literature and documentation on African Americans behind the scenes. With the aid of numerous grants, including one from the USITT/Edward F. Kook Endowment Fund, I have conducted extensive research in this area and have accrued a sizeable collection consisting of more than 400 interviews (nearly half on audio and video tape), 1,500 slides/photographs, more than 1,500 playbills and articles, and numerous posters. Costumes, props, and masks by one of the earliest African American

designers are also included in this collection.

My first major project honoring the contributions of African American designers is *ONSTAGE: A Century of African American Stage Design*, an exhibition co-curated with Barbara Stratyner, displayed for four months earlier this year at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center in New York City. (Stratyner is Curator of Exhibitions at the library). My goal is for the exhibition to tour as well as result in a catalog/book. The designers displayed in *ONSTAGE* represent a fascinating diversity of backgrounds and approaches to design. Their work includes designs for Broadway, Off-Broadway, regional theatre, performance art, dance, opera, film, and television. Like that of their white counterparts, the work by the artists in the exhibition



A STORYBOARD BY PRODUCTION DESIGNER WYNN THOMAS FOR THE 1992 FILM *MALCOLM X*. FROM *ONSTAGE: A CENTURY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STAGE DESIGN*, AN EXHIBITION SEEN IN THE AMSTERDAM GALLERY OF THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS (40 LINCOLN CENTER PLAZA) FROM 24 JANUARY THROUGH 20 MAY 1995.

is innovative and exciting. Viewers witness creative use of fabric for costume and scenery, a wide range in color palette, and elaborate designs as well as simple creations that illuminate the heart and soul of a given work. Each designer's work is accompanied by a caption in his or her own voice commenting on their work. The quotes are taken primarily from interviews I've conducted with the artists over the past 13 years.

THE PIONEERS

Although *ONSTAGE* includes a number of very important works that have not been seen by a large public, the exhibition is hardly complete. Unfortunately, works by many of these artists, particularly those from the first half of this century, have vanished and much of the existing material lacks documentation. Even today, very few institutions maintain appreciable collections on African American artists other than performers. Names of pre-twentieth century and many turn-of-the-century designers were often omitted from playbills. While the omission of designers was often true as well for many white designers, the struggle for recognition by African American artists was much greater and continued well into the twentieth century.

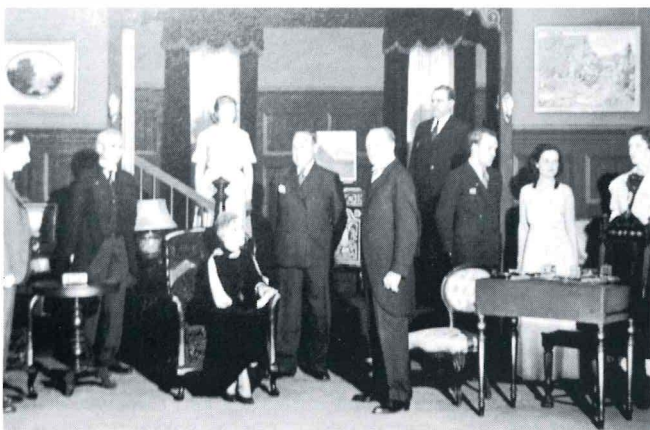
My research concluded that many of these early pioneer designers were dressmakers, carpenters, and various other craftspeople. The skills of many of these individuals date back to slavery. To increase their market value, slaves were taught fabric weaving, textile decoration, carpentry, and painting, with many such skills also coming from Africa. (To date, most of my research from the nineteenth century focuses on costumes, since the names and places of those individuals have been more accessible than those who worked in scene design.) Plantations often had slave seamstresses who did nothing but embroider the white family's wardrobe; and for those whose owners allowed them to buy their freedom, dressmaking was a sometimes viable way to make money.¹

One example of an early dressmaker is Elizabeth Keckley (1824-1907). Born a slave, Keckley (who later purchased her freedom for \$1,200), became the personal dressmaker and fashion designer for President Abraham Lincoln's wife, Mary Todd Lincoln. Keckley's most famous design was the First Lady's inaugural ball gown, currently housed in the Smithsonian Institution. According to historian Marie Garret, Keckley's clientele also included such prominent Washington ladies as Mrs. Jefferson Davis and Mrs. Stephen A. Douglas. Other black dressmakers were equally creative, such as Fanny Criss (circa 1866-1942), who designed for the white elite in Richmond, Virginia. The Valentine Museum in Richmond has one of Criss' wedding reception dresses from 1896 in its collection.

Since many black women in urban cities during the later 19th century were dressmakers and fashion designers, they undoubtedly had an impact on the fashion industry in America. Many of these former slaves would set up successful dressmaking shops that served both black and white communities. Many of the dressmakers were skilled at adapting illustrations from magazines of the time, such as *Vogue* and *Harpers Bazaar*, creating a new look. It is not known whether Keckley or Criss created any theatre designs. However, by the turn of the century, many African American dressmakers were designing for the stage. In a 1981 interview with the late Leonard DePaur of the Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre Project, he comments on the designer for turn-of-the-century pioneer African American actress Aida Overton Walker:



(TOP AND MIDDLE PHOTOS) 1960 LINCOLN UNIVERSITY (MISSOURI) SUMMER THEATRE PRODUCTION OF *NUDE WITH VIOLIN*. SETS & LIGHTS BY WHITNEY LE BLANC AND COSTUMES BY WINONA FLETCHER.



THE FRAMINGHAM CIVIC LEAGUE PLAYERS 1935 PRODUCTION OF *SKIDDING* WITH SETS AND MAKE-UP BY FULLER.

Before the Federal Theatre, black designers had tended to be dressmakers.... But anyway, what I'm getting at is she [Walker] was one of the most fashionably dressed women of the day. Same person who designed her clothes for the street designed her clothes for the stage. You know, and in that fashion they were costume designers...they would be a little more flamboyant for the stage than they might for the street.²

Later in the century would appear other prominent dressmakers who would take their talents to the stage, such as Zelda Wynn, who designed one of the first sequined stage gowns for actress Mae West.

PHOTO: WINONA FLETCHER/SUMTHEATRE

PHOTO: WINONA FLETCHER/SUM THEATRE

PHOTO: FRAMINGHAM CIVIC LEAGUE PLAYERS

At 88 years of age, Wynn continues to design, primarily for the Dance Theatre of Harlem. The late Hilda Farnum, who designed costumes in Harlem and the Washington, DC, area for various theatre groups during the 1920s and 1930s, later joined the New York Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre as head of the wardrobe department. Unfortunately, no known photos of Farnum's work exist. Very few people are familiar with milliner Mildred Blount (1907-74), who made a career designing hats for such feature films and stars as *Gone with the Wind*, *Easter Parade*, Ginger Rogers, Marlene Dietrich, Margaret Sullivan, and Linda Darnell—to name a few.

In the area on scenery and lighting, a significant number of African Americans, primarily males, were concentrated along the East Coast in such cities as Washington, DC, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Richmond, and New York. Many of these men

benefits. Thomas, who would later migrate to Harlem and work for decades at the famous Apollo Theatre as an electrician/lighting designer, spent many hours sharing his knowledge on the number of talented African American electricians/lighting designers at the Apollo, Lafayette, and other black houses in Harlem, including Byron Webb, who would later become a lighting designer with the Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre Project. After local 224A was established, other A locals throughout the country in major cities were created, but Washington's local was to remain the largest as well as the last that would finally merge with the parent local in 1981. (While a student at Howard University, I was privileged to train with many of the members of local 224A).

The segregation of the IATSE locals prevented African Americans from working in various mainstream theatres, and in the case of New York City, very few blacks worked outside of Harlem or below 110th Street. One of the few exceptions was Richard Brown, an engineering graduate from Howard University with a strong carpentry background, who, starting in the 1930s, worked for years at the Henry Street Settlement in New York City. Although Henry Street was not under IATSE jurisdiction, Brown worked as a carpenter and electrician, and he also designed sets and lighting without receiving the formal credits. Brown came to Henry Street during the period when Alwin Nikolai was experimenting with lighting effects and had also designed early sets for choreographer/dancer Martha Graham.

When names began to appear on playbills, primarily during the 1930s, it also revealed that numerous designers were also visual artists—painters and sculptors. One of the most exciting discoveries in my research was that of sculptor Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (1877-1968), an important precursor of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. As early as 1915, she was known throughout the Boston area for her innovative set designs, her exciting use of fabrics for costumes, lighting effects, and her work as a master make-up artist. Fuller's parents owned and operated a hairdressing parlor and a barber shop that catered to the wealthy in Philadelphia. Fuller learned the hairdressing trade from her relatives and attended art school in the same city. At the turn of the century, Fuller studied sculpture in Paris under the great artist Auguste Rodin. Shortly after returning to the States, she married and settled in Framingham, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston, where she was in great demand for her artistic talents in the theatre community.

Sculpting dominated only part of Fuller's life. One of the earliest African American stage productions she designed in Boston was the pageant *The Answer*, performed at Boston's Symphony Hall in 1921. According to the playbill, *The Answer* was "a symbolic pageant showing the contribution to America's growth and greatness made by Negroes." For this production, Fuller designed the costumes.

During the early 1920s, Fuller was active with the Framingham Civic League Dramatic Association, which became the Civic League Players during the late 1920s, a semiprofessional theatre group. As the only African American member of the group, Fuller reportedly worked on more than 30 productions with the Players, where she participated in every design capacity but served primarily as a costume and make-up designer. The author interviewed one of the former directors of the Players in 1988, Dorothy Larnard, who was in her early 90s at the time. Larnard recalls:

Mrs. Fuller did many big props for us, you know. Her imagination was working over time all the time.... She was very meticulous with any little line—she knew what the lights would do to that line. She, from experience, was really educated in lighting. Lighting was one of her passions.³

PHOTO: JOAN MARCUS



COSTUME DESIGN BY TONI-LESLIE JAMES FOR THE BROADWAY PRODUCTION OF *ANGELS IN AMERICA*.

received their technical training in lighting and carpentry at the segregated Armstrong Technical High School in Washington, DC, during the first half of the century, while many others received on-the-job training in the numerous African American theatres that flourished during the same time period, such as the Howard Theatre in Washington, DC, and the Apollo in Harlem.

Backstage in America, particularly the Broadway theatres and other major houses, was extremely segregated. Even the International Association for Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) was segregated at its inception during the late 1800s. In a 1982 interview with Doll Thomas, one of the first blacks to join IATSE in Washington, DC, in 1918, he says "The constitution and by-laws of the IA, up until the Twenties, stated in a nice way instead of blatant language—no Negroes. This organization is for white males only." The IA local in DC was 224-A, the first black local organized in this country. IATSE established auxiliary or "A" locals to prevent blacks and whites from working together and receiving the same

In 1928, Fuller enrolled in a summer lighting course at Wellesley College and another course on designing for religious pageants. She was indeed an anomaly for her period, not only because she was an African American woman designing for the stage, but also because she was a designer in all areas of the theatre, which was rare for any American during her period.

Another pioneer was the painter Lois Mailou Jones, who was both a friend of and inspired by Fuller. Born and raised in Boston, Jones attended the High School of Practical Arts, and while still a student was employed by the Grace Ripley Studio from 1919 to 1923, where she learned to create costume and mask designs for a branch of the Bragiotti School and for the Ted Shawn School of Dance. During her studies at Columbia University during the 1930s, she became acquainted with the African choreographer Asadata Dafora and designed masks and costumes for his production of *Kykunkor* in New York City. In a 1990 interview in her Washington, DC, home, Jones recalls how her mask work with Grace Ripley continues to influence her work as a painter. The 89-year-old Jones has worked exclusively as a visual artist since the 1940s.

During the 1920s, the renowned Harlem Renaissance painter Aaron Douglas lent his talent designing posters and backdrops for several Harlem theatres. Painter Charles Sebree, who began his career as a dancer and painter, designed costumes and scenery, starting in the 1930s for dancer/choreographer Katherine Dunham. He also designed with the American Negro Theatre and theatre groups in the Washington, DC, area.

THE TRAILBLAZERS

The 1930s and early 1940s witnessed African Americans *slowly* breaking down barriers with theatrical unions and educational institutions. In 1931, John Ross became the first African American to enter the Yale School of Drama, where he studied with legendary lighting professor Stanley McCandless. Although Ross was engaged a great deal in the technical area, he completed his MFA in playwriting in 1935. Ross was indeed an exception during this period.

In 1939, graphic artist Perry Watkins, who had studied during the late 1920s at the Rhode Island School of Design, made history by becoming the first African American to design on Broadway (with *Mamba's Daughters*) and to receive membership into United Scenic Artists union (USA) in all categories of design. Watkins later designed other Broadway productions and ventured into film and television later in his career. This opportunity for Watkins to gain a foothold in the professional arena became possible as a result of his association with the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) from 1935 to 1939. Through the FTP, many African Americans received professional training by some of the most prominent stage designers of that period, such as lighting designer Abe Feder.

Louise Evans, the first African American woman to be admitted into USA union for costume design in 1953, began her theatre training at Northwestern in 1940 before transferring to The Art Institute of Chicago to study design, where she designed in all areas for the theatre. In our 1982 interview, Evans commented:

I loved costuming because my dad had been a tailor and my mother was a seamstress and I had learned it from a child. It was this part of growing up, I learned the craft of tailoring and seamstress and materials... I was taught by Jan Scott while at the Goodman [Art Institute of Chicago] and she pushed me to go to New York and join the union. My goal was to join the union.⁴

Evans was able to take her talents in all areas of design to several Off-Broadway houses, although she states that during the 1940s and 1950s they were not considered Off-Broadway. She also designed in all categories for summer stock theatre, the American Negro Theatre, and the American Negro Ballet Company. (In 1962, Evans ended her theatre career to become a nun with the Third Order of Carmelites.)

George Corrin attended Carnegie Mellon in the 1940s and in 1951 received his MFA in set design from Yale—the first known African American to receive such a degree in this country. Corrin would make his career primarily in television production as an innovative designer. His most notable innovation was his design for the 1966 ABC presidential election show. According to Corrin:



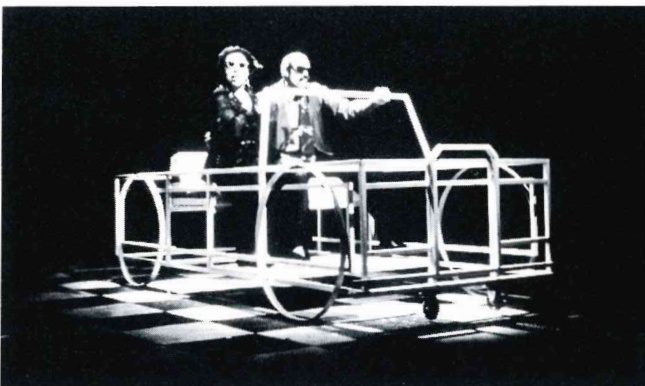
THE HARTFORD STAGE COMPANY'S PRODUCTION OF *SPUNK* (1995) WITH COSTUMES BY KAREN PERRY AND SET BY EDWARD BURBRIDGE.

This was the presidential election show when Johnson beat Goldwater. This was the first election show that ABC did in color. So the engineers said the background should be blue because white flesh tones looked better against blue...I said you can use any color, it's a question of how you use it. I said I don't think you want a blue set. CBS will be blue, NBC will be blue and if ABC is going to be blue, who will even tell the difference?... It was quite an intriguing production.⁵

Corrin continues to work in New York for corporate video.

Another trailblazer was Edward Burbridge, who trained at Pratt Institute in painting, and along with Corrin, gained union affiliation in all categories during the 1950s. Since the 1950s, Burbridge has

PHOTO: JENNIFER W. LESTER, COURTESY OF HARTFORD STAGE CO.

BERNARD JOHNSON'S COSTUME DESIGNS FOR THE BROADWAY HIT *EUBIE* (1978).PENUMBRA THEATRE'S PRODUCTION OF *TALKING BONES* (1994) DISPLAYING CAR DESIGN BY SEITU KEN JONES.

SOMEHOW I WAS NOT CONVINCED THAT AFRICAN AMERICANS CONTRIBUTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AMERICAN THEATRE ONLY AS ENTERTAINERS, WHICH HISTORY BOOKS WOULD HAVE US BELIEVE.

FELIX COCHREN'S SET DESIGN FOR THE HILBERRY REPERTORY THEATRE PRODUCTION OF *LES LIASONS DANGEREUSES*.

designed in all facets of the theatre including Broadway, opera, television, and film. Both Corrin and Burbridge have a career spanning more than 40 years in the theatre.

During the 1970s, multi-talented Geoffrey Holder took Broadway by storm with his bold and electrifying colors and magical use of fabric in his costume designs for *The Wiz* and *Timbuktu*. Holder's creativity undoubtedly influenced other designers' work in terms of color and fabric usage. Holder went on to become the first African American to win the Tony Award (1976) in design. Costume designer Bernard Johnson, who also has a career spanning more than 40 years, is known for his glamorous designs for such smash hits as *Eubie* (1978) and *Bubbling Brown Sugar* (1975). These artists helped open the doors for future African American designers.

The road for the African American designer has not been without difficulties. Due to racial and sexual discrimination during the first half of the twentieth century by major white institutions and theatrical unions—continuing even today—African Americans were denied entrance or strongly dissuaded from studying design. When George Corrin applied to the Carnegie Institute in 1942, he was advised to attend a black college because “as a Negro his needs would not be satisfied.” (Corrin eventually was admitted.) According to the historian James V. Hatch, when Lorraine Hansberry, author of *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), attended the University of Wisconsin to study scene design in 1948, she was told by her white professor that she was wasting her time because there were no jobs for black designers.

One of the few exceptional white institutions, before the 1970s, was the University of Iowa, which trained the largest number of African Americans in design. Iowa would train many—comparatively speaking—African Americans who would later carry their talents to several historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) and to summer theatres. The summer theatres at Atlanta University and Lincoln University in Missouri—headed by Anne Cooke and Thomas Pawley respectively and dating from the 1930s to the 1960s—were major training grounds designed primarily for blacks. Out of the group from Iowa came such talents as Winona Fletcher, Whitney LeBlanc, Joan Lewis, and Carlton Molette.

Of the HBCU's, Howard University was one of the few equipped to offer any form of professional training in the technical theatre and design from as far back as 1921. The early design faculty members, who were white, included Broadway scene designer Cleon Throckmorton. In later years, African American designer and Iowa graduate James Butcher would head the design area. Other faculty and staff members at Howard have included William T. Brown, St. Clair Christmas, Ralph T. Dines, and Quay and Ron Truitt. Tennessee State boasted W. Drury Cox, a scenic, lighting, and make-up designer, for close to 40 years. John M. Ross, the first African American to receive an MFA from Yale, taught design at a variety of HBCUs as well as both summer theatres in Atlanta and Missouri.

The Civil Rights Movement spurred the Black Theatre Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which provided greater design opportunities for African Americans in the professional arena. Such companies as Inner City Theatre, DC Black Repertory Company, The Negro Ensemble Company, The Richard Allen Center, The National Black Theatre, and the New Federal Theatre were established. From this era emerged such talented designers as William H. Grant III, Llewellyn Harrison, Myrna Colley-Lee, Karen Perry, Sandra Ross, Virgil Woodfork, and Edna Watson. This era also witnessed African Americans receiving professional training on a greater scale than in the past, although still in very small numbers compared to their white counterparts.



COSTUME SKETCHES BY LOUISE EVANS
FOR THE NEW YORK NEGRO BALLET'S 1955
PRODUCTION OF *CINDERELLA*.





MYRNA COLLEY-LEE'S SKETCH OF BAROKA FROM *THE LION & THE JEWEL*, PRODUCED BY RICHARD ALLEN CULTURA CENTER AT LINCOLN CENTER, 1980.



SUZANNE JACKSON'S COSTUME SKETCH FOR THE CALIFORNIA SHAKESPEARE'S PRODUCTION OF *MACBETH* (1992).

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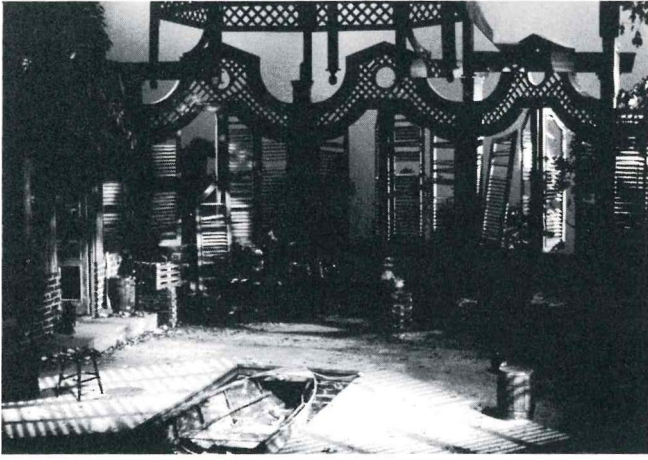
One of my goals is to help increase the number of minorities in the technical theatre field, hopefully with the aid of USITT and other organizations such as the Black Theatre Network. There is a wealth of talent in the African American community that needs tapping. The reasons for the paucity of African Americans in design are numerous and varied, ranging from a sense of no job opportunities once the degree is obtained to the lack of mentors (this is not to say that mentors can't be white), to a feeling of isolation and not really belonging once admitted into MFA programs. From my own experience and particularly from those of other African American women in lighting and/or scene design that I interviewed, exposure to these fields is the issue. Many of us weren't aware that careers in design existed until we entered college. To those of us who grew up in the segregated South, where theatres we were allowed to attend were limited, knowledge of blacks in these professions didn't exist. So in my case, I couldn't aspire to be something that I didn't know existed. Exposure is the key solution to the problem, as well as convincing young African Americans that these are viable and meaningful professions.

It has only been within the past few years that African Americans artists—such as costume designers Toni-Leslie James and Judy Dearing; lighting designers Allen Lee Hughes, Shirley Prendergast, and Roma Flowers; and scenic designers Felix Cochren, Wynn Thomas, and Charles McClennahan—have received any significant recognition. The 1990s have also witnessed a new generation of exciting designers that includes Paul Tazwell, Dorian Sylvain, and Seitu Ken Jones. Many of these artists have branched out into film and television.

That several African American artists worked outside their community since the nineteenth century dispels the myth that African Americans can only design for black theatre. This myth still prevails, however, in many mainstream theatre communities. These designers, particularly those who trained at major institutions, engaged in the same courses as their white counterparts, which enables them to conduct the same research for a production as any other designer. While most African American designers enjoy designing for black theatre, there is a strong desire to expand into other areas and reject being "pigeon holed" as a black designer who can *only* design for the black stage. The intent of the exhibit *ONSTAGE* is not to perpetuate this myth, but to define these artist simply as African Americans who are stage designers.

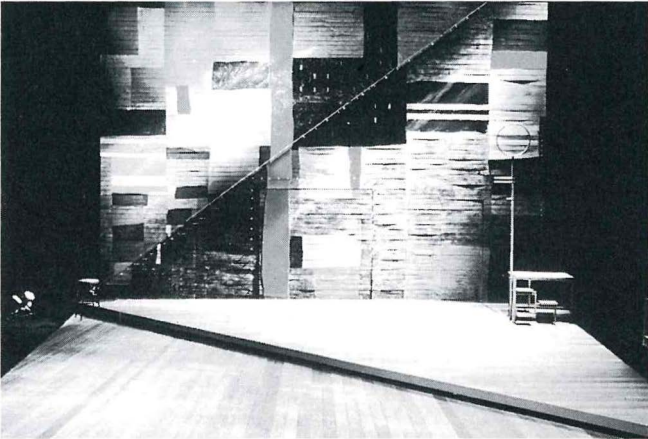
ONSTAGE represents only a *small percentage* of the close to 200 known African American designers throughout the twentieth century. Narrowing the exhibition down to the group displayed was indeed a difficult task. It is my hope that, after viewing *ONSTAGE*, one will leave with the knowledge that as African American designers, we have always been present in the American theatre. **TD&T**

KATHY A. PERKINS is a member of USAA and the design faculty at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This project was funded in part by the USITT Edward F. Kook Endowment Fund.

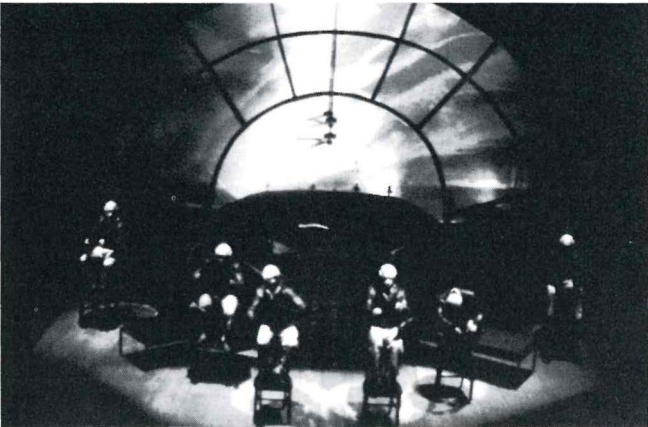


TALLEY'S FOLLY (1983) AT CHICAGO'S COURT THEATRE. LIGHTING BY ROMA FLOWERS

PHOTO: JENNIFER W. LESTER, COURTESY OF HARTFORD STAGE CO.



THE HARTFORD STAGE COMPANY'S PRODUCTION OF *SPUNK* (1995) WITH COSTUMES BY KAREN PERRY AND SET BY EDWARD BURBRIDGE.



BLACK EAGLES PRODUCED BY THE ST. LOUIS BLACK REPERTORY (1993) WITH SETS BY CHARLES MCCLENNAHAN AND LIGHTING BY KATHY A. PERKINS.

Endnotes

- N.H. Goodall, "Fashion" in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*. Editor, Darline Clark Hine (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1993) 405-410.
- 2 Interview with Leonard DePaur, musical director with the New York Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre Project, 3 November 1981, New York City.
- 3 Interview with Dorothy Larnard, 28 October 1988, Winchester, Massachusetts.
- 4 Interview with Louise Evans (Briggs-Hall), 27 August 1982, New York City.
- 5 Interview with George Corrin, 18 November 1993, New York City.