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Five African-American playwrights on Broadway, 1923-1929

Scott, Freda L., Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1990

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**FIVE AFRICAN-AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS ON BROADWAY,
1923-1929**

by

FREDA L. SCOTT

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in
Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of
New York.**

1990

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

FIVE AFRICAN-AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS ON BROADWAY,
1923-1929

by

Freda L. Scott

Adviser: Professor Charles Gattnig

This historical study documents the first five non-musical African-American authored plays to be presented in Broadway theatres: The Chip Woman's Fortune by Willis Richardson, a one-act comedy produced as part of the repertory of the Ethiopian Art Theatre in 1923; Appearances by Garland Anderson, a full-length melodrama produced in 1925; Fool's Errand, a one-act comedy by Eulalie Spence, performed by the Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre in 1928 at the Fifth International Little Theatre Tournament; Meek Mose, a comedy-melodrama by Frank Wilson, the first of this group to have an African-American producer, presented in 1928; and Harlem, a melodrama produced in 1929, co-authored by Wallace Thurman, an African-American writer, and white writer William Jourdan Rapp. Commentaries by contemporary African-American and white critics of the period are included.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for assistance in the preparation of this dissertation. The librarians of City College of New York have continually proved most helpful and cooperative, as have the librarians of the Schomburg Collection, the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, and several other divisions of the New York City Public Library. Ruth Kerns, head librarian of the Special Collection and Archives, George Mason University, and M. E. Mahanand, curator of the Channing Pollock Theatre Collection at Howard University, were most gracious in responding to additional telephone and mail inquiries when I had overlooked some avenue of research. The librarians of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University must also be thanked for their valuable assistance during my visits there. The Hatch-Billops Collection generously opened its doors to me.

Professor Margaret Knapp assisted me greatly in the initial phase of preparation. Professors James V. Hatch and Vera Mowry Roberts, who served on my dissertation committee, have given guidance and encouragement. I am grateful to them, and especially to Professor Charles Gattnig, chairman

of the committee, for his unflagging energy, continual concern, and vital assistance.

Appreciation must be expressed to the Pamela Galiber Fellowship for financial aid. Lee Roy Giles, Marian Ivry, and other friends have freely given time and typing assistance with the draft of this study. Yvette Dobbs is to be thanked for her skillful and professional work in typing the final version.

I will be eternally grateful to all the friends and family who have sustained me in countless ways through these years of study, but my most deeply felt thanks go to my parents, George W. Scott and Grace T. Scott, to whom this dissertation is lovingly dedicated.

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INTRODUCTION

. . . the Aframerican author faces a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about--the problem of the double audience. It is more than a double audience; it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view. His audience is always both white America and black America. The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter he is immediately called upon to solve, consciously or unconsciously, this problem of the double audience. To whom shall he address himself, to his own black group or to white America? Many a Negro writer has fallen down, as it were, between these two stools.¹

The first non-musical play by an African-American playwright to make the transition from black Little Theatre groups or variety houses to the most coveted mainstream commercial stage, Broadway, was Willis Richardson's The Chip Woman's Fortune, a one-act comedy presented on a bill of three plays performed by the Ethiopian Art Players in 1923. During the Harlem Renaissance, or Negro Renaissance decade of the 1920s, five African-American playwrights were afforded the opportunity to display their talents in this venue. In 1925 Garland Anderson's Appearances, a full-length drama, was produced. Two years later, Fool's Errand, a one-act comedy by Eulalie Spence, was presented by the Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre as part of a national Little Theatre Tournament. Meek Mose, a comedy-drama by

Frank Wilson, was presented in 1928. In 1929, Harlem, a collaborative effort by black writer Wallace Thurman and white writer William Jourdan Rapp, was the first of this group to achieve box office success.

The primary purpose of this historical study will be to document the histories of these Broadway productions, and to assess the extent of the contributions of these plays toward solving a specific problem: the quest for commercial success versus the quest for a theatre of black identity. During the Negro Renaissance period, the question concerning whether the goal of commercial success could be reconciled with the purpose of service to the black community came under close scrutiny, and was the subject of intense debate, as it still is today. If there was to be a black drama stemming from a black aesthetic, how should it be presented? By whom? For whom? The white playwright was relatively unfettered in the choice of setting, character, and subject matter. Should there, could there be the same freedom for the black playwright? Most interested parties agreed that a body of black drama must be built, but the black playwright was faced with having to choose between pleasing the overwhelmingly white audience of the commercial theatre or writing for a black audience, which wished to see its image with less distortion but could not provide commensurate material rewards. This study may provide some additional insight into a problem which still persists, as well as

providing detailed information on the nature and execution of these pioneer productions.

Published critical histories of the period, such as Nathan Huggin's Harlem Renaissance² and The Harlem Renaissance Remembered, edited by Arna Bontemps,³ offer limited information on play productions outside of opening dates, names of theatres, and varying amounts of historical, critical, and biographical data on the playwrights. Huggins does briefly discuss the plays, while Bontemps supplies extensive information on novelist-playwright Wallace Thurman and one major African-American critic, Theophilus Lewis. The landmark historic overview of black life and art in New York, Black Manhattan by James Weldon Johnson,⁴ completed in 1929, is an excellent general survey. However, I have found no specific text which provides a comprehensive examination of the five plays upon which this study is focused.

Doris Abramson's published dissertation, Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre, 1925-1959,⁵ contains one chapter on the 1920s which surveys two of the plays, Appearances and Harlem. Meek Mose is discussed in the context of the production of its revised version, Brother Mose, which appeared in 1934. Edith J. R. Isaacs, in The Negro in the American Theatre,⁶ mentions Willis Richardson once, and mentions Wallace Thurman in one paragraph. Lofton Mitchell's chapter on the Harlem Renaissance in Black Drama: the Story of the American Negro in the Theatre,⁷ despite

space limitations necessitated by a work of such broad scope, makes good use of brief commentaries on each playwright. As in all the works cited, however, Eulalie Spence, the sole woman in this group, but perhaps the most prolific black playwright of the era after Willis Richardson and Randolph Edmonds, is relegated the least space.

In the most recently published general history of African-American theatre, Black Theater in America by James Haskins,⁸ the plays and playwrights receive brief mention; this work, as the others cited, covers extensive ground. Haskins's book is specifically intended to provide an introductory survey for young audiences new to the topic.

Some dissertations provide background information on the productions, some biographical information on the playwrights, and some comments by critics. These works also have a large scope. Fannin Belcher, in his benchmark study, "The Place of the Negro in the Evolution of the American Theatre"⁹ minimizes the distinction between dramas of black life by black playwrights and those by white playwrights, as well as between commentary by black and white critics. A very extensive history, "Dramas by Black American Playwrights Produced on the New York Professional Stage, From 'The Chip Woman's Fortune' to 'Five on the Black Hand Side'" by Jeanne-Marie A. Miller¹⁰ provides valuable coverage of The Chip Woman's Fortune, Appearances, and Harlem, comparing them to each other in content and theme,

reporting on the criticism, and offering insightful analysis. With so much ground to cover between 1923 and the late 1960s, Miller's discussions, of necessity, are limited, and not heavily detailed in the production history portions. In reporting on the criticism of the plays, Miller relies primarily on major mainstream sources such as the New York Times. Further discussion of the responses of the black critics is warranted. Miller does not discuss the exposure gained by Spence through the Little Theatre contest, which was held in a Broadway theatre and attended by major figures in the professional theatre community as well as the general public; since the script of Meek Mose is no longer extant in its original form, discussion of this work was truncated.

A significant reference work, "A Record of the Black Theatre in New York City: 1920-29" by John Gilbert Monroe¹¹ provides important guidance as to where to seek further information, but it gives no play or other subject more than two or three pages of discussion. By narrowing the focus and viewing one aspect of the total theatre picture of African-American drama and theatre of the 1920s in detail, new insights into the contributions of Richardson, Anderson, Spence, Wilson, and Thurman can be gained, just as the study of one organ can give new insight into the workings of the entire body.

Among other dissertations I have located, there are similar views of these playwrights and their plays as

threads in a greater tapestry. There are studies specifically devoted to Wallace Thurman, including "Stepchild in Harlem: the Literary Career of Wallace Thurman" by Dorothy Jean McIver¹² and "A Study of the Fiction of Wallace Thurman" by Shirley Haynes Wright,¹³ but these studies concentrate primarily on Thurman's literary contributions outside of play writing. I have found no specific studies solely dedicated to Willis Richardson, Garland Anderson, Eulalie Spence, or Frank Wilson.

This study seeks to provide biographical information on the playwrights; gather historical and critical information on their works which reached Broadway; provide production histories of these plays; collect and compare the critical response by the black and white press to these plays; attempt to gain information on audience composition and response to these plays; and attempt to assess The Chip Woman's Fortune, Appearances, Fool's Errand, Meek Mose, and Harlem within the context of the popular culture of the era in which they were written and initially produced, and within the context of the conflict over the nature and purpose of a black aesthetic. I intend to investigate whether these plays influenced subsequent playwrights and/or productions and to ascertain the playwrights' own views of their works and their works' significance.

There are several sources of inspiration for this study. The "jazz age" of the 1920s and the period of

social, political, psychological, and artistic ferment for the African American which was labeled the Harlem, or Negro, Renaissance which occurred within this complex, turbulent era, have been a source of continual fascination for me. Another source was my reading of The Souls of Black Folk by W. E. B. DuBois, a work as resonant now as when it was written near the turn of the twentieth century. In this book, DuBois delineated the duality, the "double consciousness," of the African American:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, or measuring one's soul by the type of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.¹⁴

This duality made all aspects of life in the United States more than difficult, but it had to have profoundly compounded the dilemma of the black artist seeking expression (as it still does). E. Quita Craig applied this principle to drama by black playwrights in her book, Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era,¹⁵ when she stated that the black dramatist actually writes two plays: the one that the white audience sees, and the one that the black audience sees. As one who has felt the "peculiar sensation" caused by this double consciousness, I wanted to investigate its effect on the first African-American playwrights to set their works on the foremost commercial stage in the United

States without, or somewhat without the comfort of a song or dance to fall back on. What did they want the audience to see? What did the white audience see? What did the black audience see?

Finally, there was my reading of The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual by Harold Cruse,¹⁶ as well as of the debate between Langston Hughes¹⁷ and George Schuyler¹⁸ which appeared in the pages of the journal The Nation in 1926. Cruse has judged Harlem Renaissance art a failure because it did not define itself and reconcile cultural nationalism, an art of black identity reflecting the needs, goals, and aspirations of the black community, with integrationism, the desire for mainstream recognition and success. Again, the search for wholeness, for an undivided soul, is evident. And the search continues. Schuyler believed that cultural nationalism was an illusion, that the African-American is no more than a "lamp-blackened Anglo-Saxon," so all this struggle is unnecessary. Hughes believed in the unique beauty of the African-American idiom, a beauty which should be unafraid to display itself no matter who misunderstands: there is a black American aesthetic within this Eurocentric context. Hughes and Schuyler were speaking in the 1920s. Cruse was speaking from the 1960s. I wanted to learn more about how this Renaissance viewed and judged itself and its art and search for some conclusions of my own.

This study is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter provides general historical background and context, describes some aspects of the popular culture of the time, and discusses the nature of the conflict over the idea of a black aesthetic during the Harlem Renaissance period.

The next five chapters are arranged in chronological order according to the appearance of each playwright's play on Broadway: The Chip Woman's Fortune by Willis Richardson, Appearances by Garland Anderson, Fool's Errand by Eulalie Spence, Meek Mose by Frank Wilson, and Harlem by Wallace Thurman and William Jourdan Rapp.

The seventh, concluding chapter, provides a summation and commentary. Richardson, Anderson, Spence, Wilson and Thurman may have found their aesthetic "stools" to sit on, or they may have fallen between the stools.

CHAPTER 1

BLACK DRAMA AND THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

But above all, in two fields, the Negro has made his great contribution to American Culture, and that is in art and in labor. . . . We can therefore, well think of the Negro element in America as an integral part of American life and as having made a permanent contribution to American civilisation.¹

Many historians mark the beginning of a North American theatre establishment with the arrival of the Hallam troupe from England in 1752. The beginning was tenuous, since "The Anglo-Saxon founders of American life were a stern minded folk to whom the theatre was nothing less than 'the antechamber of the devil' and actors were 'catepillars [sic] of the commonwealth.'"² There had been some theatrical activity before the Hallams, but their extensive touring through colonial America left an indelible imprint, and helped develop a professional theatre in the United States. With a North American theatre a new drama slowly developed, a North American theatre and drama which did its best to minimize the presence of black people on the new continent. According to historian Richard Moody,

Except in the minstrel show the Negro never became a figure of major importance in American drama. He had some high days in the ante-bellum abolitionists' plays such as Uncle Tom's Cabin and Dred, but his success was short-lived. In the half century before this peak and in the half century after, his stage career was limited

to performing the menial tasks of the trusted and faithful family servant and, in his execution of these tasks, to interjecting a bit of comic relief into the play. Occasionally, he was involved in the manipulation of the plot, but never as a principal character.³

Moody goes on to state that the obvious reason for the exclusion of blacks from drama was racism, and that the black characters depicted at the time bore little resemblance to blacks in real life. With the exception of the popular Oroonoko, a dramatic adaptation of a novel by Mrs. Aphra Behn, written in 1696 by Englishman Thomas Southerne, whose main character was a tragic "noble savage," an enslaved African prince torn between love and honor, depictions of blacks tailored to fit popular stereotypical mythology were the norm. Even Oroonoko never set foot in North America; the setting of the play was the West Indies. The play was adapted for the American stage with the interpolation of slaves performing musical numbers.⁴

The exclusion of blacks from prominence in the drama was coupled with the total exclusion of blacks from the stage. There is controversy over when and where the appearance of the first native American black character on the North American stage took place, but one major candidate appears to be from The Padlock, an English comic opera written by Isaac Bickerstaffe in 1766. The prominent black character was Mungo, a comic servant. Lewis Hallam appeared as Mungo in 1769.⁵

Yet the black presence in North America has been a strong one since 1619, when twenty African slaves were set ashore from a ship at Jamestown, Virginia, a year before the Mayflower crossed the sea. Since that moment, the African-American experience has been one of struggle for political, economic, social, and aesthetic parity with the majority of citizens of this land.

It would take more than two hundred years before black people could establish their own theatre in the United States. The first efforts toward aesthetic parity in the theatre were probably made at the African Grove Playhouse, which was organized in New York City, in 1820, seven years before manumission in that state. In the words of James Haskins,

Although most whites saw nothing wrong with white actors playing the roles of black characters, the black people . . . were beginning to feel differently. . . . It must have also upset them to see blacks portrayed only as slaves or servants when in fact well-to-do and educated blacks were active in many areas of American life. . . . By the early 1800's there were enough freemen . . . to . . . create the first recorded black theater. . . . With the founding of the African Grove Theatre in New York City in the 1820's, these conditions were finally met.⁶

The founder and manager of the African Grove was a man known only as Mr. Brown, a former ship's steward, who, with his principal actor, James Hewlett, led the company to three years of relative success. There is a paucity of information on Mr. Brown. He is, however, credited with the authorship of a play, King Shotaway, dated circa 1823, the

first known Amercian play by a black American author.⁷ The play itself has been lost, but from a description on an extant playbill, the plot has been ascertained to have been based on Mr. Brown's eyewitness experience of a slave revolt in the West Indies.⁸ It is highly unlikely that such a story from such a point of view could have been told on any other stage at the time.

The African Grove has also been identified as the site of the earliest professional efforts of Ira Aldridge, the first African-American actor to achieve international stardom. The knowledge of the obstacles Hewlett had to face may have been a factor in Aldridge's decision to seek a career in Europe, where he was eventually given the opportunity to prove his talent.

The African Grove endured harassment from the authorities and vicious ridicule from the white press, which mercilessly lampooned the company's physical features, elocution, and mannerisms.⁹ The white community could not tolerate the African Grove. The theatre was finally trashed by a gang of white ruffians who may have been hired by a white theatre manager jealous of the African Grove's success.¹⁰

Their building may have been poorly appointed, the sets and costumes shabby, and the offerings marred by untutored performers and unappreciative audiences, but the efforts of the African Grove troupe fulfilled a need for blacks to

provide an image of themselves closer to their realities as human beings rather than as the stereotypes being projected all around them. The experience of the first African-American theatre company of record resonates throughout the experiences of African Americans in the American theatre. They sought to serve a constituency and to blend their own culture and experience with the one to which they had been adapted. Racism interfered with the natural development of events.

There would be no more African Groves for years to come. Instead there would be minstrels. There are a number of theories concerning the advent of the minstrel show. One theory suggests that Thomas "Daddy" Rice, with his ragged costume and "Jump Jim Crow" song and dance, a sensation in 1832, was the impetus for the development of the minstrel show.¹¹ Others suggest that whites simply appropriated and adapted their impressions of slaves entertaining themselves or their plantation masters. Ironically, it is possible that minstrelsy began at the African Grove Playhouse. An English performer, Charles Matthews, during a visit to New York in 1822, attended a performance by the African Theater Company. When he returned to England, he lampooned what he saw in his satirical skit, "A Trip to America," to great acclaim.¹² There is evidence that James Hewlett was devastated when he learned of Matthews's treatment of him on the stage.¹³

Individual acts featuring white performers blackened with burnt cork such as Rice's and Matthews's led to acts banding together, culminating in minstrel companies and a formalized minstrel show format. Black companies, even before the Civil War, were formed as well, performing complete with the application of burnt cork and greasepaint.¹⁴ Through minstrelsy white America could channel its fascination, fear, and hostility toward the African and resolve its uncertainties as to the African's place in American society. Mr. Interlocutor, Tambo, Bones and their brethren became reality through fantasy. Stephen Foster's minstrel songs, romanticizing of the relationship between slave and master, were to become standard tunes in the United States. Through the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, America's perceptions of African Americans would be shaped by the minstrel tradition, and "like the Cheshire Cat in the topsy-turvy world through the looking glass where appearances offered few clues to reality, the minstrel show, long after it had disappeared, left its central image--the grinning black mask--lingering on, deeply embedded in American consciousness."¹⁵

As the minstrel show dominated American musical variety entertainment, becoming known as the first indigenous American theatrical form, melodrama dominated the nineteenth-century legitimate theatre in the United States. The most popular melodrama of that century, and perhaps of

all time, was the dramatization of Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin.¹⁶ Among the first adaptations, George L. Aiken's version was probably the best; it proved a popular sensation in 1852. The sensation lasted through numerous companies and versions well into the twentieth century. Eventually, the strength and nobility of Uncle Tom was debased into self-deprecating servility, leaving in its wake the negative stereotype associated with Uncle Tom today. Topsy became reduced from a tragicomic character to simple darky comic relief. By the end of the nineteenth century, five hundred Tom shows were touring the United States simultaneously.¹⁷ There could hardly have been a corner of the world where some version of the play was not known. Uncle Tom's Cabin remained a frequently performed play throughout the early Depression era. A brand new version was produced for cable television in 1988.

William Wells Brown, a black abolitionist activist nearly as prominent in his own time as Frederick Douglass, answered what he saw as the soft-pedaling of the true horror of slavery in Uncle Tom's Cabin with his own hard-hitting melodrama, The Escape, in 1856. Though read with great success at anti-slavery rallies, the play was never produced. The nation at large preferred the sentimentalized, softer-edged Uncle Tom's Cabin.

By the late nineteenth century, those who wished to bring the image of the African American closer to reality

began to achieve some commercial success. In 1898, Bob Cole wrote, directed, and produced A Trip to Coontown. Although the title suggests that there was still a long way to go, A Trip to Coontown was a musical with a plot and did break away from the minstrel format. J. Rosamond Johnson, brother of James Weldon Johnson; Paul Laurence Dunbar; Will Marion Cook; and Ernest Hogan also wrote successful, less minstrel-like material for blacks on the musical stage. Further success was achieved by the comedy team of Bert Williams and George Walker in their productions of In Dahomey, Abysinnia, and Bandanna Land between 1903 and 1910. Though coon humor was still very much in evidence, contrasts were provided. In Dahomey, for example, featured a dignified African king. A more intense period of agitation for change was looming on the horizon.

When the literary and artistic aspects of that seminal period in black American history usually demarcated by the advent of World War I on one end and the advent of the Depression on the other, and popularly known as the Harlem Renaissance, is examined in retrospect, the black dramas of the period are usually conspicuous in their absence. The major black dramatists of the time are little remembered save by interested historians, or are remembered for other contributions. Their dramas are almost never revived. The same appears true for dramas written around black characters by white playwrights. Perhaps the plays of this era are

thought to be hopelessly dated, although Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones is staged fairly often, and his still highly controversial All God's Chillun Got Wings has been revived within recent memory. Occasionally a period black musical is dusted off and taken from the shelf. Because of George Gershwin's music, the operatic treatment of DuBose Heyward's play, Porgy, has played nearly continuously in the world since its recreation as Porgy and Bess.

But what of the black dramatists and their creations for a black theatre? Larry Neal, a highly respected theorist, writer, and critic from the Black Arts Movement begun in the 1960s, surmised:

The Black Arts Movement represents the flowering of a cultural nationalism that has been suppressed since the 1920's. I mean the "Harlem Renaissance"--which was essentially a failure. It did not address itself to the mythology and the life styles of the Black community. It failed to take roots, to link itself concretely to the struggles of that community, to become its voice and spirit.¹⁸

It is true that the achievements of the black playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance period are not remembered in the same way as those of the poets and novelists. It is true that when that period is recalled, no names like Baraka or Bullins spring forth. But did the playwrights fail to express the voice and spirit of the black community of their time, or did they simply fail to overcome the circumstances affecting their art? Before the words success or failure can be applied, before an

assessment can be undertaken, an examination of the problems these playwrights faced in ascertaining what a black drama should accomplish and how it should be made should be undertaken.

The period just before and just after World War I engulfed the entire United States in a wrenching, profound conflict which wrought complex, disturbing changes.

Historian Geoffrey Perrett notes:

I discovered a duality I'd never expected. I had assumed the Twenties were the first decade of the twentieth century, with the Great War serving as the death agony of the nineteenth. And so they were. What I'd not expected to find were large areas of American life still in the grip of the Victorian/Puritan/Frontier past.

. . . All across American life there was a deep break in continuity, with the sense of release that liberation brings, along with all the anxiety occasioned by the unknown.¹⁹

The country was at the crossroads of being pulled in either a more conservative or more liberal direction. The eighteenth amendment to the Constitution (1919) took away the right to freely imbibe alcoholic drinks. The nineteenth amendment (1920) gave women the right to vote. The Ku Klux Klan, anti-black, anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic, rose to the summit of its national prominence, broadcasting its message through its own radio programs and its network of travelling lecturers. Al Smith, a Catholic, ran for President. Women's hair and hemlines were suddenly cut very short. There were many shocking events, such as the Teapot Dome scandal, the violence of Sacco and Vanzetti, the strikes of

the Wobblies, and the Scopes Monkey Trial. Federal legislation was being sought to control the rising tide of heroin, cocaine, and opium addiction.

Among the great social changes was a dramatic shift of large segments of the population toward urban industrial centers. This migratory trend had a tremendous impact on the black community as well as on the nation at large. According to James Weldon Johnson, author of Black Manhattan, a history of black people in New York City, the severe labor shortage in the industrial North, aggravated by the nearly total suppression of immigration, caused recruiters from industry to lure blacks northward and westward by the thousands with a free one-way railroad ticket and the promise of a better life, a life less marred by oppression and fear. The 1920 census showed that 235,000 blacks had migrated to cities. It also showed that black deaths were exceeding births numerically and projected that the percentage of black population in the United States would be reduced from ten percent to five percent by the end of this century.²⁰ Dire predictions were made that the Negro's desperate economic condition, coupled with his inability to adapt to urban life, would lead to the extinction of the African American.²¹

Some of these dire predictions may have had to do with the economic impact of the Great Migration upon the South. Such newspaper headlines as "Exodus of Negroes Affects

Alabama; Klan Partly 'Blamed;' Shortage of Labor in Mines, Mills, Agriculture;"²² and "Negro Exodus Hits North Carolina"²³ proliferated. By 1930 the black population in the North had increased sixty percent, as compared with a five percent increase in the South, subsequently creating large black communities in such cities as New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland.²⁴ The issue of race pushed to the forefront of national concern.

On one hand, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant member of the majority feared for his survival. According to George B. Cutten, president of Colgate University,

The melting pot is destructive to our race. What this thought of "democracy," "equality" and "the melting pot" has accomplished is to permit persons of different races and intellectuality to marry into and deteriorate our stock at an alarming rate. Not only philanthropy but modern medicine is deteriorating the stock, for by this means is inferior stock kept alive.²⁵

Cutten was by no means alone. In 1924 the National Origins Act (also known as the Immigration Restriction Act) was passed, excluding Asian Immigration and limiting European immigration by nationality to two percent of each country's immigrant population in the United States as of 1890.²⁶ Eastern and southern Europeans were considered part of the "inferior" group.

On the other hand, the African American was already here, and inextricably bound into the economic fabric of the United States. White America sentimentalized him as a servant and despised him as a human being.

In 1923, the Daughters of the Confederacy petitioned Congress for permission to erect a statue dedicated to the memory of the black mammy, as an eternal memorial to this beloved symbol of the southern aristocracy. The black community was incensed. The previous year, fifty-one blacks had been lynched.²⁷ The Dyer anti-lynching bill, proposed in 1921, had not and would not be passed.²⁸ In fact most reference indexes of the day contained only one cross reference for the subject-heading "Negro": "see lynching." Before Congress was a marriage and divorce bill which would prohibit marriage between insane persons, paupers, epileptics, "feeble minded" persons, and those afflicted with venereal disease as well as interracial marriage between Caucasians and blacks or Asians, rendering any existing unions null and void without benefit of legal proceedings.²⁹ African-Americans needed no bronze reminders of the "good old days" and the place white America wished for them.

The atmosphere was charged with the threat of violence. The Great Migration of blacks from the South brought with it a people's culture centered in its oral tradition and most appreciated for its music. It was met with violence. The South reacted violently against the decimation of its labor pool, forcing blacks to flee as in the Underground Railroad days. The urban areas to which blacks moved responded with riots against them, the worst of

which flared in twenty-five cities at once during the period James Weldon Johnson dubbed the Red Summer of 1919.

Blacks, however, were beginning to reach new levels of effectiveness in fighting back, leading the New York Times to lament,

The majority of Negroes . . . before the great war, were well behaved. . . . most of them admitted the superiority of the white race and troubles between the two races were unheard of.³⁰

A black man, Grover Cleveland Redding, had led an armed insurrection in Chicago in 1920, in which many blacks and whites died, and was hanged. Marcus Garvey began building a black nationalist, back-to-Africa movement, and was eventually imprisoned and deported in 1927. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), begun in 1910, had matured into a dynamic civil rights organization, fighting through the courts and legislative bodies for the franchise, anti-lynching legislation, and equal protection under the law. The Urban League was formed to aid blacks in finding employment and social services in the cities. Though there had always been pockets of blacks in urban areas, neighborhoods were now growing into communities.

The concerns of society were becoming the concerns of the theatre. Movements begun in Europe finally made significant inroads into American theatre, naturalism and expressionism among them. The Art Theatre and Little

Theatre movements spread, and broadened possibilities for the commercial stage. Playwrights, while moving slowly away from melodrama, became increasingly interested in American folkways and culture as sources of material for a distinctly American drama. This was the period in which Eugene O'Neill became the United States' first world-class playwright.

The American commercial stage, however, never forgot that it was a business enterprise. The business of Broadway during the 1920s, free of the oversight by the Securities Exchange Commission which was to come, was dominated by the theatre owners. The most powerful of these landlords were the Shuberts, A. L. Erlanger, John Golden, Florenz Ziegfeld, and the Hammersteins. The post World War I economic boom, which peaked in 1925, encouraged the building of more theatres. In 1910 there were thirty-five legitimate theatres in New York. The number grew to forty-six by 1920 and to seventy-five by 1929.³¹ This enormous growth helped to place "Broadway" in the forefront of the world's commercial theatre centers.

The major landlords were also producers, but a usual practice was to lease a theatre to an independent producer, also known as a manager. If the landlord chose, he could demand a weekly guarantee of several thousand dollars from the manager in addition to up to thirty or forty percent of the show's earnings. During lean times, the landlord could be persuaded to settle for a percentage. The landlord would

pass on as much of the house overhead (which included taxes, insurance, and maintenance) as possible to the manager. Including stagehands, ushers, and other employees, this "nut," or overhead could run anywhere from \$1,500 to \$6,000 per week.³² In turn, an impresario, a freelance producer, could submit attractions to theatre lease-holding producers for a share of the risk and the profit. The credo became "No play is a good play unless the box office says so."³³

Attractions were chosen not only for their Broadway box office potential, but for their potential appeal to audiences at stops the show would make on tour. Profits on the road could make up for losses on Broadway, and the road was a major business consideration. The Shuberts were still the titans of the tour circuit, owning a tightly controlled network of houses throughout the nation. The primary source of stage material was still Broadway.

Playwrights would submit their plays to producers' readers. The reader would pass on likely prospects to the producers. The producer would option a play for a specified time, offering a royalty, or percentage on earnings if the play gained production. The size of the royalty was dependent upon the track record of the playwright. This royalty might be split between the playwright and a "play doctor," a specialist in adding commercial appeal to the play, who was hired by the producer.

Ticket speculators would often invest in shows, gaining control of large blocks of tickets. The trouble these speculators caused was akin to the trouble caused by greedy stock market speculators. If the show became a hit, price gouging became the rule. The potential audience member in search of the "hot ticket" of the moment might be found in the avaricious grasp of this scalper.

The producer would secure a General Stage Director to take care of the technical demands of the production and a director to secure the actors and direct the play. Typecasting was the rule. Actors' salaries would run from \$100 per week for a bit player to \$600 per week for a proven leading man or woman.³⁴

Beside the cost of sets, properties, and costumes, the expense of transportation, printing, the advance man, advertising, and other incidentals had to be considered. Up to two hundred press tickets would be set aside for critics and newspaper writers. Unless a hit seemed assured, blocks of seats would be placed with ticket agencies and discount tickets would be made available at the Public Service Ticket Office. If need be, the house could be papered through complimentary tickets distributed through hotels, department stores, YM and YWCAs, and other organizations and clubs; even the Bowery Mission provided an audience for the producer in need.³⁵

The situation could get desperate. During a good year, 1924, for example, the ratio of hits to flops was about one to two. In the beginning of lean times, 1928-29, the ratio was slightly over one to five.³⁶ Besides fluctuations in the economy, producers were concerned with the burgeoning popularity of radio and motion pictures, as well as the spectre of censorship.

The idea of institutionalized censorship gained great popularity in the 1920s. In 1922, The God of Vengeance, a drama about the unsuccessful efforts of a brothel owner to keep his daughter out of the family business, was closed by the police, and the producer and principal actors convicted and fined for presenting an immoral drama.³⁷ A "play jury" was sporadically convened in New York to encourage or discourage legal action against controversial plays, including those by major playwrights, such as Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms. Pressure for legislated censorship mounted, culminating in the Wales Padlock Law, passed by the New York State Legislature in 1927. The producer successfully prosecuted under this law for presenting a play deemed either fully or partially morally objectionable could find his theatre "padlocked," completely closed for one year. If producer and owner were separate entities, both would share in the disaster. This law remained on the books until 1967.³⁸

Thus, the professional theatre itself was part of the tug of war between more conservative and more liberal elements. Theatre professionals overwhelmingly rejected any form of censorship; that does not mean that they forgot that the business of Broadway was seat-filling entertainment: art for art's sake for money's sake. The attitude of the establishment theatre critics, represented by this statement by Barrett H. Clark, concurred with the status quo:

I dislike plays that set forth to reform, convince, persuade, or improve me or anyone else.

I dislike, in most of its forms, "good theatre." by this I mean plays deliberately written to make an effect. Good plays aren't made that way.

I dislike and do my utmost to combat every effort to curb the dramatist in his choice of subject or treatment. Censorship, in whatever guise, is a stupid and mischievous thing.

On the other hand.

I welcome every new play (no matter how poor it may otherwise be) that treats a "forbidden" or delicate subject or employs words and phrases that have not yet found their way into the theatre.

I am at present more interested in American plays than in the plays of any other country, because (a) there are more of them worth seeing than ever before, and (b) because many of them are not yet given a fair chance of success, and (c) because I am an American, attracted not only by what is familiar to me, but because I confess I see in our country more potential material for drama than is to be found anywhere else.

Hence.

I make it my business to seek out among the new plays of each season every indication of talent, of a desire to discover and interpret any phase of our national existence, in the belief that it is better to encourage a young dramatist with something to say than to patronize the dramatists of the past at the expense of the newcomers.³⁹

Despite efforts to avoid controversy, the concerns of society were more apparently becoming the concerns of the

theatre. The capital of the commercial theatre and the capital of black America, both situated in New York, increased in awareness of each other.

Harlem, the then new community of blacks in New York, became the center of the Renaissance because black humanity flowed in from all corners of the nation and the world, unlike cities such as Chicago, where blacks usually migrated in blocks from a few southern areas. By the 1920s the black literati made the breakthrough popularly known as the Harlem Renaissance. The dawn of the New Negro, rising to break the fetters of his stereotypical image in American society, was bursting. America turned in wonder toward the poets, men of letters, and novelists, exemplified by James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. DuBois, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes. All of these major figures shared a vital interest in black drama for the legitimate theatre, though not all wrote for the stage, and the great impact of Hughes in the area of drama would not be fully felt in the twenties. The artists who worked in the theatre worked between two poles. One pole is represented by Alain Locke, one of the founders of both the Theatre Department at Howard University and the Howard Players, a Little Theatre company which worked under the university's auspices.

Locke viewed the new expression of interest in the African American as a subject for American drama as a

potential purveyor of the truth of African American life to the stage, as a force for destroying destructive stereotypes. But Locke rigorously opposed any attempt to place specific socio-political messages on the stage, because "Propaganda, pro-Negro as well as anti-Negro, has scotched the dramatic potentialities of the subject."⁴⁰ In Locke's view, the black in drama should be treated as any other topic of local color or regional interest. Locke saw no difference in the ability of the white dramatist to accurately portray black life from that of the black dramatist. His view was "art for art's sake":

The creative impulse is for the moment caught in this dilemma of choice between the drama of social analysis and the drama of expression and artistic interpretation. But despite the present lure of the problem play, it ought to be apparent that the real future of Negro drama lies with the development of the folk play.⁴¹

At the other pole stood W. E. B. DuBois. While recognizing that art based in the African-American experience could carry universal themes, DuBois felt that art should directly confront and attack the issue central to the existence of the black in America, racism:

Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used for propaganda, for gaining the rights of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.

In New York we have two plays: "White Cargo" and "Congo." In "White Cargo," there is a fallen woman. She is Black. In "White Cargo," the Black woman goes down further and further and in "Congo" the white man

begins with degradation but in the end is one of the angels of the Lord.

In such cases, it is not positive propaganda of people who believe white blood divine, infallible, and holy to which I object. It is the denial of a similar right of propaganda to those who believe Black blood human, lovable, inspired with new ideals for the world. White artists themselves suffer from this narrowing of their field. They cry for freedom in dealing with Negroes because they have so little freedom dealing with whites. DuBose Keyward writes "Porgy" and writes beautifully of the black Charleston underworld. But why does he do this? Because he cannot do a similar thing for white people of Charleston, or they would drum him out of town. The only chance he had to tell the truth of pitiful human degradation was to tell it of colored people.⁴²

For DuBois, the black character on the stage must overtly rebel against his role as scapegoat for all that is repressed in the American psyche. Locke likewise recognized the need for new images, but wished a more subtle, though powerful, infiltration of the national psyche, akin to the pervasive influence of black music.

The Stage Negro of the popular theatre of the 1920s reflected the status of the black person in America: a native American alien. He was the comic minstrel, a grotesque parody of himself whether in blackface or out; he was Rastus or Zip Coon or Jim Dandy. He was the faithful, often pathetic servant, epitomized by Uncle Tom. He was the tragic mulatto cursed by black blood as seen in The Octoroon or The Nigger. He was the bad buck, like Porgy's Crown. He was exotic, sensual, loosely constrained by conventions of morality or society:

One feels that a Negro's expression is not quite free from the matrix of the earth from which he is

extricating himself. His to-be subconscious self is not yet out of sight. You listen as he speaks and are conscious of a strange cast of voice. You watch him and are fascinated by his weirder shadow on the wall.⁴³

The minstrel image of the singing, dancing, carefree darky had dominated the stage for so many years that it had become imbedded in the American consciousness. White performers in blackface, such as Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, James Barton, Eddie Leonard, and Frank Tinney, were still among the best loved and most highly paid. Through the years, Bob Cole, Will Marion Cook, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Bert Williams, and George Walker, among others, had tried to expand the parameters of the minstrel image with some success, but real change was slow in coming. Legitimate plays in which black characters appeared usually conformed to stereotyping and employed white actors to do the roles in make-up. Black stock companies which played to black audiences adapted commercially successful plays by white playwrights, sometimes with the actors in whiteface. White theatres either barred blacks from the audience or provided segregated balconies. Plays by black playwrights were few and far between.

The Renaissance period witnessed a concerted assault on the minstrel and coon stereotypes, primarily moving toward an appreciation of the folk roots of black American culture. One play often noted as a precursor of this period is Rachel, written by a black poet, Angelina Grimke, in 1916

and first produced in Washington, D.C., by the Drama Committee of the NAACP as an attempt to "use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of ten millions of Colored citizens in this free republic."⁴⁴ The title character, a young black woman who deeply loves children, denies herself the opportunity for marriage and family, since she feels the future for black children in America is too bleak and painful. The stark realism of the situation and political nature of the play startled many. Their opposing views on the use of drama as propaganda caused two members of the committee, Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory, to break away to form the Howard Players.⁴⁵

However, the production of Three Plays for a Negro Theatre by white playwright Ridgely Torrence in New York at the Old Garden (formerly Wallack's) Theatre in Madison Square Garden in April, 1917, marked a larger change. The plays, Granny Maumee, The Rider of Dreams, and Simon the Cyrenian, were acted by the Coloured Players, produced by Mrs. Emily Hapgood, and directed by Robert Edmond Jones, who designed the sets and costumes as well. In their quest for authentically American material, several white playwrights began to explore American culture through their perceptions of black life, becoming more interested in the rural peasant and urban underclass. The black middle class was considered too homogenized, i.e., uninteresting.

Granny Maumee concerns an aged woman of royal African blood who lives in the rural South and hates the whites who made a bonfire of her son for a crime he did not commit. Granny Maumee was blinded when she tried to reach her son through the flames. Tragically, one of the white perpetrators of the lynching fathered a child by one of her granddaughters. At first, Granny Maumee seeks retaliation on father and child through voodoo, but her Christian precepts have overcome her, so she forgives, and dies. The Rider of Dreams centers on a working rural woman with a daydreaming husband. The action revolves around her efforts to realize her own dream of owning a home. Simon the Cyrenian is a pageant-like drama about the black man who carried Christ's cross to Calvary. The plays were critically acclaimed for their realism, their use of black actors, their avoidance of stereotypes, and the integration of blacks in the audience. Critic George Jean Nathan placed two of the cast, Opal Cooper and Inez Clough, on his list of the ten best actresses of 1917.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the show opened the day before the United States entered World War I; its potential run was stunted.

In 1918 the Provincetown Players produced O'Neill's The Moon of the Caribbees, which included black characters, with an all-white cast. In 1919, however, black actors performed in their production of his The Dreamy Kid, the story of a black gangster's last visit with his dying

mother. Then came The Emperor Jones starring Charles Gilpin in 1920. A century later, Gilpin had become the link between James Hewlett, Ira Aldridge, and those, including the monumental Robeson, who would follow. The Emperor Jones, an expressionistic foray into the mental state of a black pullman porter turned outlaw who meets his destiny on a Caribbean island, was often praised and condemned in the same breath. Lofton Mitchell's comment that, "For all its dramaturgical excellence, The Emperor Jones remains ludicrous,"⁴⁷ may serve as a summation of the response from the black community.

Though The Emperor Jones was found innovative and exciting, many in the black community were outraged that Brutus Jones, "a crap shooter and escaped convict,"⁴⁸ should be permitted onstage. There was fear that the budding interest in the portrayal of "authentic" black life in the Art Theatre and on the commercial stage would blossom into a new flowering of old, undesirable images. An alarm was sounded, interestingly enough by white director Raymond O'Neil, in The Crisis:

As the Russians guarded their arts as much they could from Westernization, so will the Negro have to guard his from one hundred percent Americanization. Particularly must he be on his guard against the white friends of his art who will urge its development in the direction of their prejudiced imagination. A very great advantage which Negro art has enjoyed has been white contempt or indifference towards it, qualities which are rapidly changing now to interest and to eventual commercial and intellectual exploitation.⁴⁹

Paul Robeson, in response to criticism of his appearances in O'Neill's Emperor Jones and All God's Chillun Got Wings, had a different view:

We are too self-conscious, too afraid of showing all phases of our life--especially those phases which are of greatest dramatic value.⁵⁰

Could Brutus Jones be seen as an artistic creation with universal meaning, although from a unique ethnic background, or would he become just another "bad buck"? Was this simply more exploitation? How should the black community respond? As interest grew, so did controversy.

Shuffle Along, a musical written, produced, and performed by blacks in 1921, struck a major blow against stereotyping. The book was written by Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles, a famous comedy team, with music and lyrics by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle, who had been foremost among musical performers who refused to appear in blackface. Blacks played straight romantic love scenes and sang love songs, which, until that time was unheard of on Broadway. Some of the tunes, particularly "I'm Just Wild About Harry," became perennial hits. The success of this show at the Sixty-Third Street Theatre began a vogue in black musicals. The Theatrical Syndicate, the theatre owners/producers monopoly which preceded and was broken by the Shubert organization, had all but removed blacks from commercial theatres for several years.⁵¹ Shuffle Along marked a major comeback and breakthrough for the black musical performer

and made musical theatre history.⁵² Interest in black life and culture was fast becoming a fad, making Harlem a tourist attraction and playground for whites seeking adventure.

No major breakthrough for a black playwright on the Broadway level occurred until 1923, when Willis Richardson's one-act play, The Chip Woman's Fortune, was produced.

In 1924, a one-act version of Paul Green's In Abraham's Bosom was published in American Mercury. But with the production of Eugene O'Neill's All God's Chillun Got Wings, which had also been published earlier in American Mercury, the limitation on the extent to which a playwright could explore racial questions was revealed. According to James Weldon Johnson, a Hearst publication editorial stated:

Gentlemen who are engaged in producing plays should not make it any harder for their friends to protect them from censorship. . . . They should not dramatize dynamite because while helping the box office, it may blow up the business.

We refer to the play in which a white woman marries a black man and at the end of the play, after going crazy, stoops and kisses the Negro's hand.

It is hard to imagine a more nauseating and inflammable situation, and in many communities the failure of the audience to scrap the play and mutilate the players would be regarded as a token of public anemia.⁵³

Fear of the wrath of the audience, not to mention the district attorney, forced some minor changes in the play.

All God's Chillun Got Wings opened without incident.

Johnson commented that

All God's Chillun Got Wings did not prove to be another Emperor Jones. . . . It may be as the play began to grow, Mr. O'Neill became afraid of it. At any rate, he side stepped the local question and let his heroine

go crazy; thus shifting the question from that of a coloured man with a white wife to that of a man living with a crazy woman. The play, as a play, did not please white people, and, on the other hand, it failed to please coloured people. . . . However, the play ran for several weeks, and Paul Robeson increased his reputation by the restraint, sincerity and dignity with which he acted a difficult role.⁵⁴

Responses to plays on black life were often variant among black and white audiences and black and white critics. The new treatment of this subject matter may have been of interest to the commercial theatre, but pleasing the predominantly white Broadway audiences meant not straying too far into taboo areas--areas which make that audience uncomfortable.

The next play by a black playwright to reach Broadway was fairly well received critically, but still could not attract enough theatregoers to gain financial success. This play was Garland Anderson's Appearances (1925). The circumstances under which this play arrived on Broadway may be described as miraculous, and will be more fully discussed later, but the play triggered a strongly positive response from producer/playwright David Belasco:

The theatre of tommorrow must reckon with a new force, the race of Ham. The Negro from today onward will compel recognition through the sheer power of his intrinsic mine of talent. No race can surpass the Negro for his instinctive stage ability. He is a natural actor with a sufficient background of tragedy to make him fertile ground.⁵⁵

It is significant that Belasco made reference to the biblical tale of Noah and the son he cursed, which popular

legend identified as the curse of a black skin (though there exists no biblical evidence to support this assertion), and that Belasco believed like so many others that all black people could sing and dance. Black people were mysterious and exotic subjects. Belasco exploited as many exotic, primitive elements as he could in his production of Lulu Belle.

Belasco presented Lulu Belle at the Belasco Theatre in April, 1926. Written by Edward Sheldon (author of The Nigger) and Charles MacArthur, this melodrama boasted an integrated cast of fifty-eight. Some of the white actors, including the title character, played black characters. Lulu Belle was portrayed by the white actor Lenore Ulric, while a major black actor, Evelyn Preer, played her best friend, Ruby Lee. Lulu Belle was a jazz-age Harlem vamp who rejected her faithful black lover for the glamor of life in Paris as the mistress of a French nobleman. Her jilted lover, after many misadventures, follows her there, only to be rejected again. In a fit of passion, the beleaguered lover strangles Lulu Belle, despairing over her body as the curtain falls. Carmen had come to Harlem. The play was an unqualified hit. Although a consensus of black critics found Lulu Belle disturbing due to its emphasis on the lurid, sensational aspects of Harlem and its "yellow journalism" type of realism, Opportunity, the Urban League's journal, stated optimistically that Belasco "makes it easier

for the next step--an all Negro cast in a serious presentation of some other and more significant slice of Negro life."⁵⁶ By now Harlem was the epitome of the Roaring Twenties in the white imagination, where any hitherto repressed desire could be fulfilled. Harlem was where the swells of Irving Berlin's "Puttin' on the Ritz" went, and the place the heroine of Cole Porter's "The Lady is a Tramp" eschewed. Lulu Belle may have been partially to blame. The people of Harlem, who could entertain in the proliferating establishments like the Cotton Club, which opened to satisfy the new hordes of thrill-seeking "slummers," but could not enter these night spots as patrons, looked on in consternation.

Debate intensified over this artistic problem: the quest for commercial success versus the quest for a theatre of black identity. W. E. B. DuBois surmised that a black drama must be built, from scratch, by blacks for a black theatre. DuBois edited The Crisis, the monthly journal of the NAACP which he had been instrumental in founding. DuBois had been calling for a black theatre for years, and had written and produced a pageant, The Star of Ethiopia, himself. Through The Crisis he founded Krigwa (Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists). Krigwa sponsored a literary contest which included a play writing competition and fostered a Little Theatre company, the Krigwa Players. In a

1926 Crisis article on the Harlem branch of the Krigwa

Players, DuBois included a now frequently quoted manifesto:

. . . The plays of a Negro theatre must be: 1. About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. By us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continued association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. For us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. Near us. The Theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.⁵⁷

The first Krigwa literary contest took place in 1925. The plays submitted were judged by Eugene O'Neill, Charles Burroughs, and Lester A. Walton. Willis Richardson won first prize (\$75.00) for The Broken Banjo. The central character of The Broken Banjo, a folk drama of the rural South, is a black man who has become estranged from his wife and her family, whose sole friend and source of solace is his banjo, which he plays poorly. The protagonist finds himself forced to fight a white man who attempts to break his banjo; he accidentally kills the white man. The banjo ends up at his home. While he is out of the house, his wife's brother, a parasite in the family, breaks the banjo and betrays the main character to the police. The man's wife vows to do all she can to aid him. The need for family cooperation and unity is stressed, with the banjo possibly serving as a symbol of a nearly lost African heritage, a heritage which valued the extended family. As in most of the folk plays, dialect is used.

The Church Fight, a satire in which Parson Procrastinator defeats the efforts of a disgruntled committee, led by Sister Instigator and Brother Judas, to remove him from the church, won second prize (\$40.00) for Ruth Ada Gaines-Shelton. Third prize went to For Unborn Children, a propaganda play against interracial marriage by Myrtle Athleen Smith. In contrast to All God's Chillun Got Wings, the protagonist in For Unborn Children, a black lawyer, is finally persuaded that an interracial marriage would be a dereliction of duty to his race, and explains this belief to his fiancée. Following his realization, he must face a lynch mob which has learned of the relationship.⁵⁸ All three plays were concerned thematically with issues pertinent to the black community and two of its primary institutions, the family and the church. For Unborn Children also explored tensions within the black middle class.

The contest grew and continued through the end of the decade. Willis Richardson won so often that he was made a judge. Krigwa literary societies were started in several areas of the country to encourage black artists of all types and the Krigwa Players gained sister companies in Washington, D.C., and several other cities. Other frequent contest winners in the drama area included Eulalie Spence and Randolph Edmonds. DuBois, among the leadership of the intellectual community he called the Talented Tenth, which

he felt should determine the direction of the black community, was concerned with establishing political and social perspective for his people through the role models provided in the new black drama. Despite his concerns, contestants were admonished to

Write about things as you know them. . . . In the Crisis, at least, you do not have to confine your writings to the portrayal of beggars, scoundrels and prostitutes; you can write about ordinary decent colored people if you want. On the other hand do not fear the Truth. Plumb the depths. If you want to paint crime and Destitution and Evil paint it. Do not try to be simply respectable, smug, conventional. Use propaganda if you want. Discard it and laugh if you will. But be true, be sincere, be thorough, and do a beautiful job.⁵⁹

Visual artists and authors of books usually found outlets for their works; broadbased support need not have been as vital to them as to the dramatist, and the financial investment carried less risk. Mass audiences, black or white, still tended to choose entertainment over uplift, and entertainment usually meant clinging to images fixed in the past. Out of concern for this problem, The Crisis sent questionnaires to major artists, producers, and publishers on the obligations or lack thereof of both black and white artists toward the portrayal of blacks; replies were printed in several issues. Respondents included H. L. Mencken, DuBose Heyward, Mary W. Ovington, Langston Hughes, Alfred A. Knopf, Vachel Lindsey, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Jessie Fauset, Countee Cullen, Julia Peterkin, and others. Even Carl Van Vechten, author of the cheaply sensational

Nigger Heaven, which DuBois found "a blow in the face . . . an affront to the hospitality of black folk and the intelligence of white,"⁶⁰ was asked to contribute. The series was called "The Negro in Art/How Shall He Be Portrayed/A Symposium."

Responses fell into three general points of view: art should be commercially exploited while it was hot; black art should serve to correct stereotypes and uplift the race; black art should seek no obligation from the artists other than truthfulness. Van Vechten stood four square for exploitation: "The question is: Are Negro writers going to write about this exotic material while it is still fresh or will they continue to make a free gift of it to white authors who will exploit it until not a drop of vitality remains?"⁶¹ Jessie Fauset, novelist and Crisis staff member opted for uplift: ". . . people are keenly interested in learning about the better class of colored people. They are quite willing to be shown."⁶² The artistic freedom viewpoint was best advocated by Langston Hughes: ". . . the true literary artist is going to write about what he chooses anyway regardless of outside opinions. . . . It's the way people look at things, not what they look at, that needs to be changed."⁶³

This type of debate was not parochial. There was national interest. Now that the Negro had been rediscovered the question of how to present this discovery in light of

the needs and aspirations of this oppressed people became a popular topic of intellectual debate. A central issue of this public debate was the question of whether the black American has a distinctly separate aesthetic or has become too assimilated into the mainstream culture to stand aesthetically alone. Black conservative critic George S. Schuyler argued against the existence of a black aesthetic in a debate with Langston Hughes published in The Nation:

. . . the Aframerican is merely a lampblackened Anglo-Saxon. If the European immigrant after two or three generations of exposure to our schools, politics, advertising, moral crusades, and restaurants becomes indisquishable from the mass of Americans of older stock . . . how much truer must it be of the sons of Ham who have been subjected to what the uplifters call Americanism for the last three hundred years. . . .

In the homes of the black and white Americans of the same cultural and economic level one finds similar furniture, literature, and conversation. How, then, can the black American be expected to produce art and literature dissimilar to that of the white American? . . . This nonsense is probably the last stand of the old myth palmed off by the Negrophobists for all these many years . . . that there are "fundamental, eternal and inescapable differences" between white and black Americans.⁶⁴

Hughes began his response by dissecting the desire of black Americans to be as much like white Americans as possible:

. . . One sees immediately how difficult it would be for an artist born in such a home to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns. . . . A very high mountain indeed for the racial artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people.⁶⁵

Hughes saw the material derived from spirituals, blues, jazz, modes of religious worship, and everyday life in the black communities of the North and South as distinct enough to be considered a black aesthetic; from these raw materials the black artist could draw best, and should be free to draw in whatever way he saw best:

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing Water Boy and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty. We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If not, if doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.⁶⁶

Charles S. Johnson, social scientist and editor of Opportunity responded that

The opposing discussions of George S. Schuyler and Langston Hughes in The Nation on the question of Negro art offer evidences of a sort of mental fermentation which is . . . more significant than the conclusions of either. Mr. Schuyler denies that there is such a thing as Negro art and regards the "Aframerican" as "merely a lamp-black Anglo-Saxon." Mr. Hughes contends that there is a Negro art and laments that Negro art expressions are being choked by . . . "the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization. . . ." neither does Mr. Schuyler mean that there is no beauty in Negro life, nor Mr. Hughes that Negroes are . . . creatures with amusing peculiarities. . . .

We must expect a deal [sic] of misunderstanding here. The question is still open as to whether or not

there is or can be such a thing as distinctive Negro art . . . if there could be, it would not remain distinctive for long. It is more important now that we develop artists and let the question of a distinctive art settle itself.⁶⁷

In order to assist in developing artists, Opportunity also instituted literary contests in 1925. The play judges included Montgomery Gregory, Alexander Woollicott, Robert Benchley, and Edith Isaacs. The first winning play was Frances by J. D. Lipscomb. Frances told the story of a young woman in rural Mississippi who was promised to a white landowner as a concubine by her uncle, in return for ownership of a plot of land. A series of events leads the uncle to learn that he cannot pursue his dreams at the price of integrity. Frances is saved, but the uncle and the landowner (who never legalized the deed to the land) kill each other. Several significant social and political aspects of the black struggle are combined with an exciting story, a story told in a way the commercial stage would not accept.

Humble Instrument by Warren A. MacDonald and Color Struck by Zora Neale Hurston tied for second place; The Bog Guide by May Miller took third. Willis Richardson, Eloise Bibb Thompson, and Zora Neale Hurston (for Spears) received honorable mentions.⁶⁸ As in the Crisis (Krigwa) contests, the plays were of black authorship and short enough to be published in the journals; many were. Subsequent judges included Ridgely Torrence, Paul Green, and Lula Vollmer, and

Eulalie Spence was among later winners. The judging panels of all the various divisions of the contests were integrated, and the ability of white judges to appraise black art did not appear to be an issue. The Opportunity contests also ceased with the onset of the Depression.

A look at the aesthetic debates and the literary contests may pinpoint the failure of which Larry Neal spoke in Cruse's The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual. A successful movement must have a clear-cut direction, while allowing plenty of space for diversity and variety. Artistically, the Harlem Renaissance opened the door for increased diversity and variety, but was unclear in direction. The two major forces, the integrationist (mainstream recognition and success as the primary goal) and the cultural nationalist (theatre of black identity primarily by, for, and about blacks) could not reconcile themselves. Criteria for the evaluation of black art other than standards based on Euro-American models were not clearly established.

Part of the reluctance of the black leadership to take aesthetic matters fully into its own hands lies in a longstanding, still unresolved problem of duality. It is the duality of which DuBois spoke in The Souls of Black Folk, which describes the identity problem faced when the black person must see himself both as he knows himself and as the predominant white society sees him. The two

disparate images cause pain, confusion, and self-doubt. Survival often depended upon the agonizing choice of which image to select for which occasion. The choice of response to a given situation could be a matter of life and death.

Another aspect of the problem was financial/institutional. White patronage supported individual black artists financially; white controlled outlets, such as publishing firms, were the means of broad-based exposure. White artists such as Van Vechten influenced such organizations to expose black works. The general economic/political/social autonomy upon which artistic autonomy could be based was missing.

These problems were no less severe for the aspiring black playwright seeking a commercial venue. In the society in which blacks lived, some Art theatres and Little Theatres, like Krigwa in Washington, D.C.; New York; and Philadelphia; and the Shadows in Chicago were springing up. But they paid in art rather than capital. The commercial houses like those on the Theatre Owners' Booking Association circuit, both black- and white-operated, were primarily interested in vaudeville and skits for vaudeville. During the 1920s the two primary professional stock companies, the Lafayette Players and the Lincoln Players, both based in Harlem and both named for their respective theatres, were primarily interested in producing black-acted performances

of popular nonracial Broadway fare. Loften Mitchell described the Lafayette Players (1917-32) as

. . . basically a "me-too" organization--one devoted to showing white folks that I, too, can play roles that you think are yours alone, that I, too, am human. It was, in short, a defensive organization, unsure of what it would have unleashed had it said: "I am black, so what?"⁶⁹

Plays by black playwrights, particularly Frank Wilson, were produced by the very limited number of extant black stock companies, but the opportunities for growth and on-the-job training were mainly the province of the black actor rather than the black playwright.

At the same time, there was still a wide gap between the perceptions of the black and white professional critics; this disagreement contributed to the problems faced by black playwrights interested in entering the commercial theatre arena. In Abraham's Bosom is a case in point.

Near the end of 1926, Paul Green's In Abraham's Bosom, "the biography of a Negro" in seven scenes, opened at the Provincetown Playhouse. Green, one of the Carolina Playmakers, a circle of scholars and playwrights interested in folk material, often wrote plays about blacks. This one starred Julius Bledsoe, Rose McClendon, and Abbie Mitchell. The headline of Brooks Atkinson's review read, "The range runs all the way from the boisterous and infectious gaiety of the race to the religious ecstasy and the madness of the

hunted and baffled creature of mixed blood who is the central tragic figure."⁷⁰

That tragic mulatto creature is Abraham McCranie, who dreams of becoming a leader and educator of his people, but who, driven to destitution, despair, and insanity, kills his white half-brother. There are echoes of The Emperor Jones in the use of ghost tableaux and a terrified run through the forest by a black man punished for reaching beyond himself. Atkinson stated in a later article that the crux of the tragedy was to be found in a line spoken by one of Abraham's co-workers in Carolina turpentine country: "Give a nigger a book and you might as well shoot him."⁷¹ The play moved to the Garrick Theatre and won the Pulitzer Prize.

Many black critics praised In Abraham's Bosom, feeling that the treatment of the subject matter, the tragic mulatto, was sympathetic. DuBois differed. Though he felt that Green, the playwright, was sympathetic, DuBois thought the drama

. . . ill balanced. . . the same defeatist genre of Negro art which is so common and at present inescapable. It arises from the fact that the more honestly and sincerely a white artist looks at the situation of the Negro in America the less he is able to consider it in any way bearable and therefore his stories and plays must end in lynching, suicide or degeneracy.⁷²

The white critical establishment considered Green to be the most qualified playwright to write about black life. Barrett Clark, in an article for Theatre Arts Monthly, stated that Green's writings in black dialect "are a more

genuine contribution to American poetry than the highly finished work of many of our distinguished Negro writers. He will soon perceive that it is the artist's function to paint, to state, to exhibit and not to argue, to prove, or philosophize."⁷³ Paul Green is quoted in the same article as stating, "The American professional stage . . . is an industry and not an art as I had thought. . . . it is a business run to the pattern of supply and demand."⁷⁴ Too far a departure from the acceptable fantasies about blacks would be bad for business. Any playwright who would seek commercial acceptance would be obligated to bear this in mind, with potentially more painful consequences for the black playwright.

The Theatre Guild produced Porgy by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward in 1927, the same year that the musical Showboat opened on Broadway. Also that year, the Krigwa Players performed Fool's Errand by Eulalie Spence in the Fifth Annual International Little Theatre Tournament, another first for blacks on Broadway, since the finalists competed in a Broadway theatre.

The next play by a black playwright to reach Broadway was Meek Mose by Frank Wilson, who had been a member of the original cast of In Abraham's Bosom. Meek Mose opened at the Princess Theatre in 1928. The final play of black authorship to play The Great White Way in the 1920s was

Harlem, a collaboration between white playwright William Jourdan Rapp and black author Wallace Thurman in 1929.

Willis Richardson, Garland Anderson, Eulalie Spence, Frank Wilson, and Wallace Thurman became pioneers in the process of the meeting of parallel worlds before and behind the footlights:

Our writers may have two quite different audiences in mind:

A. White Americans used to theatre going

B. Colored folk.

While we set no limitations we are mainly interested in the second audience; we want colored folks to add the new diversion of the drama to their lives; it will bring inspiration, ambition, satisfaction.⁷⁵

There were times when these two different worlds met. There were times when these meetings resulted in a collision with a resonant crash.

CHAPTER 2

THE CHIP WOMAN'S FORTUNE

Willis Richardson . . . was not the first Afro-American to write a play, but he was the first significantly productive Afro-American playwright.¹

When Willis Richardson was nine years old, his family decided to leave Wilmington, North Carolina, where he had been born on November 5, 1889, to move to Washington, D.C., where he would reside until his death in 1977. The impetus for the move was an outbreak of severe racial violence against blacks in Wilmington, precipitated by an attempt by a group of black men to vote in a local election. In an interview taped three years prior to his death, Richardson is lyrical in his description of the beauty of night in Wilmington and how several days of terror were played out before an awesome natural backdrop.² This gift for observation and recollection combined to make him the most prolific and popular dramatist for black Little Theatre groups in the 1920s.

As a youth in Washington, Richardson would often pay fifteen cents for a seat in the gallery of the Academy of Music to view the latest melodramas, but until he saw the

play Rachel, the only representation of black characters he had ever seen onstage were the characters of Uncle Tom's Cabin.³ Richardson was inspired to become a dramatist after viewing a performance of Angelina Grimke's Rachel presented by the Drama Committee of the Washington branch of the NAACP. This propaganda play was successful in stimulating strong reactions by those who viewed it. Rachel tells the story of a bright, attractive young woman who faces a future limited by racism. Rachel is sensitive to her own plight and to that of her loving mother, brother, and a neighbor's child, whom she befriends. Living with them in their pain, and finally learning that her father's death was due to lynching, cause Rachel to reject her suitor's earnest marriage proposal and opt for a lonely, childless life rather than risk bringing a child into the world to which Rachel has been consigned.⁴

Grimke, a poet, taught English at Richardson's high school, and had favorably reviewed some of Richardson's poetry before he turned to play writing. Richardson was also encouraged by Mary Burrill, another playwright and teacher at his school, Dunbar High School.⁵

Though Rachel had a hard-hitting plot, the language was Victorian and florid, and Richardson, though he liked the play, thought he could do better. He enrolled in a correspondence course in playwriting, and arranged with a

friend to collaborate on a play. Those plans fell through, but Richardson ploughed on.⁶

By the age of twenty, Richardson had taught himself to type and had procured a position as a messenger in the Division of Maps and Charts in the Library of Congress.⁷ He later moved to the U. S. Bureau of Engraving and Printing from which he retired after forty-four years of service. Married in 1914, Richardson and his wife, Mary Ellen, became the parents of two daughters, Jean and Shirley, and a son, Noel.⁸ Richardson knew early on that it would be practically impossible for him to support his family solely through writing: "I don't know any black playwright who 'makes it' writing plays . . . he has to work someplace else to make a living."⁹

Richardson began submitting his work to W. E. B. DuBois at The Crisis. DuBois published a Richardson essay, "The Hope of a Negro Drama," in the November 1919 issue. In this article, Richardson delineated his view of what black drama should be and do:

When I say Negro plays, I do not mean merely plays with Negro characters. Dramatization of Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and Gustave Flaubert's "Salamambo" did not make them Negro plays, although they had important Negro characters. Miss Grimke's "Rachel" is nearer the idea; still even this, with its Negro characters, is not exactly the thing I mean. It is called a propaganda play, and a great portion of it shows the manner in which Negroes are treated by white people in the United States. That such a work is of service will be acknowledged by anyone who will examine many of the plays of Shaw, Galsworthy and Brieux. Still there is another kind of play; the play that shows the soul of a people; and the soul of this people is truly

worth showing. Mr. Ridgley Torrence . . . has accomplished it. "Granny Maumee," "The Rider of Dreams," and "Simon the Cyrenian" are Negro plays; and we can never thank Mr. Torrence enough for such an excellent beginning of a movement we hope to continue.¹⁰

Richardson goes on to advocate Ireland's Abbey Theatre as a model, to describe the African American's poetic and linguistic gifts, and to chide George Jean Nathan. The famous critic had written a book, Mr. George Jean Nathan Presents, in which he undercut complimentary comments on black actors (including a recommendation that Othello should always be portrayed by a black actor) by joking about the status of blacks as porters, waiters, and cooks, and referring to blacks as "coons." Despite his trepidation about the ability of even friendly white critics to evaluate black art, Richardson ends the article on a hopeful note:

I am very sure that all those broadminded people who are intelligently interested in the welfare and development of the Negro race in America will be delighted when we shall be able to send a company of Negro plays across our own continent; and those intelligent people who have never been interested in us will surely give us a second thought.¹¹

Richardson probably could not have known at that time that he would soon become part of such an effort. His philosophical viewpoint on the nature of black drama appears to be a combination of the ideas of both DuBois and Locke, leaning more toward Locke's point of view.

DuBois recruited Richardson to write children's plays for publication in The Brownies' Book, a magazine for children edited by DuBois. Four were published.

Richardson's first produced play was The Deacon's Awakening, presented by The Players, a St. Paul, Minnesota Little Theatre group, in 1921.¹² This comedy tells the story of a church deacon who wants to bring the church's women's club up on charges for demanding voting rights until he finds out that his own wife and daughter are leaders in the group. The play had been published in The Crisis in 1920.¹³

Through DuBois, Richardson was introduced to Raymond O'Neil in 1922. O'Neil, after a stint as a director at the Cleveland Playhouse, "an amateur producing theatre,"¹⁴ had gone to Europe for further study and returned claiming to have trained at the Moscow Art Theatre and with Max Reinhardt in Berlin¹⁵ as well as with Jacques Copeau in Paris.¹⁶ Upon his return, O'Neil moved to Chicago to start a Little Theatre in the white community. However, he "gradually came to the opinion that he could get more vigor and expressiveness out of the ill-trained actors of the colored race than out of ill-trained white amateurs and professionals liberally supplied with inhibitions."¹⁷ With the assistance of prominent white arts patrons "and colored people who felt that the theatre by both white and colored people in this country had much to gain from the Negro and by some who were interested for sociological rather than artistic reasons,"¹⁸ O'Neil instituted a producing organization, the All-American Theatre Association. O'Neil spent a year gathering and training the actors. A

previously closed house, the Avenue Theatre on Indiana Avenue at Thirty-first Street, would be re-opened January 29, 1923, for the new black repertory company. The twenty-five actors selected included "such well known and qualified performers as Evelyn Preer, Arthur T. Ray, Lionel Monagas, Charles Moore, Sidney Kirkpatrick, Laura Bowman, Solomon Bruce and others of merit":¹⁹

The company numbers twenty-five. O'Neil gathered it by ranging far and wide through Chicago. He frequented colored cafes and restaurants, sat long in cabarets and places of entertainment and explored widely before deciding on the company. The greater part of the company are professionals--either regularly or in an itinerant way. Work in the theatre for Negroes being scarce, some have alternated their work on the stage with other occupations. One is a post office employee, another is a pullman porter; two of them lived abroad for fourteen years, speak French and German fluently, and are familiar with the Continental theatre and literature.²⁰

Preer, Kirkpatrick, and Bowman were widely known as veteran Lafayette Players. The new company was identified in the press as either the Colored Folk Theatre or the Negro Folk Theatre--most often as the Colored Folk Theatre.

Richardson had sent two plays to O'Neil, The Chip Woman's Fortune and The Broken Banjo; both were placed in repertory. One other "race play," as black plays were often called, A Train North by Frank Wilson, was accepted. All three are one act in length. The bulk of the repertory consisted of "more universal" full-length plays: Salome by Oscar Wilde; The Follies of Scapin by Moliere; George, a German expressionist tragedy by Georg Buchner; two "a la

jazz" adaptations of Shakespeare's The Comedy of Errors and The Taming of the Shrew; and Everyman set in a cabaret. The Amsterdam News reported O'Neill's rationale for the Colored Folk Theatre and its repertory:

It is O'Neill's idea that a Negro theatre should look forward to the creation of a folk drama, but since no genuine Negro drama exists as yet, he feels it had better subsist on the classics than on the synthetic Negro drama written by white people about colored folk. The great plays of the world have a broad and simple appeal, anyway, he says, and belong to everyone. Any play not based on an exclusively white psychology can be done without incongruity by Negroes, he says, and the classics are based on a universal psychology. Nevertheless, they will be invested with a native idiom, just as inevitably happens to Shakespeare when played by Germans, Russians or Scandinavians--and this is a gain to the plays rather than a loss.²¹

Salome, considered a sensational rendering of the biblical tale of the princess's unrequited passion for John the Baptist, was chosen as the inaugural production. The Chip Woman's Fortune would serve as the curtain raiser. This ingenuous comedy would also serve as a sharp contrast to Salome and reveal the range of the company.

Aunt Nancy is the title character of The Chip Woman's Fortune. She scratches out a living scavenging the streets of an unnamed town for wood and coal chips or salvaged items from other people's trash. Aunt Nancy has boarded all winter with the Green family--Silas, Liza, and their eighteen-year-old daughter Emma--and earns her place with them by caring for Liza, who is "just up from a spell of sickness," with her own concoctions of herbal medicines and

home remedies. As the play opens, Aunt Nancy and Liza are discussing Liza's progress in the Greens' modest parlor, as Liza notices that Aunt Nancy's wrinkled visage is glowing. Aunt Nancy has a secret joy which she is not yet ready to reveal:

Aunt Nancy: Ah got somethin' to think about.

Liza: What?

Aunt Nancy: Ah can't tell you everything. It ain't good to tell everything you think about, you know. 'Spose everybody told all their thoughts?

Liza: That wouldn't never do.

Aunt Nancy: 'Deed it wouldn't never do. Everything ud be upside down with other people knowin' what you was thinkin' about.²²

As Aunt Nancy leaves to rest on the back steps, Emma enters. Liza examines Emma suspiciously, and is scandalized to learn that Emma has re-combed her hair and powdered her face:

Liza: What you doin' plasterin' your face up and combin' your hair if somethin' funny ain't goin' on? You know you ain't never combed your hair twice the same day in your life if it wasn't Sunday.

Emma quickly changes the subject, and prepares to leave for the market, stopping to turn on the Victrola, the family's single luxury. The Victrola soon becomes the object of anxiety, as Silas, a porter, returns home early from work. He has fallen behind in his installment payments

on the record player, and must face being laid off from his job as well as the Victrola's repossession.

Silas: The manager o' that music place is a friend o' ma boss; and this mornin' while ah was sweepin' off the pavement he passed by me goin' in the store. When he seen me he stopped and looked at me hard, then he went in. Ah thought trouble was comin' when ah seen him look at me so hard. After he came out the boss called me in and told me they was goin' to send after that Victrola; and then he says, "Go home and stay a few days and maybe you'll learn how to pay your debts." So here ah am.

The family becomes distraught. Silas suggests that Aunt Nancy pay room and board to help out, but Liza reminds him that Aunt Nancy, who has no money anyway, contributes to the household by helping Liza recover her health, and by keeping the family supplied with wood and coal chips. Silas insists that Aunt Nancy has hidden assets. He has seen passersby on the street giving Aunt Nancy money, which he believes she has hidden in the back yard. Silas has already been digging around, to no avail.

When Emma returns and is told of the problem, she reveals that if Aunt Nancy has anything, she is saving it for her son, who is soon to be released from prison and may arrive that very day. Her parents are flabbergasted, but Silas is not deterred from his determination to ask Aunt Nancy to pay rent, or at least give him a loan:

Silas: If ah can get her to do us this favor before the men come after the Victrola, everything'll be all right. . . . And even if she will agree to help us, ah'm tired o'

this kind o' life. Ah'm sick o' livin' from hand to mouth.

Liza: Ah reckon we ought to be thankful to be livin' any kind o' way with the trouble we had. Some people get along better'n we do, but a whole lot o' others don't get along as good. Ah only got one consolation besides believin' in the Lord.

Silas: What's that?

Liza: That things ain't always been like this, and they might not always be like this.

When Aunt Nancy returns, Silas puts his cards on the table, and Aunt Nancy reveals that she has been saving every penny she's accumulated for her son, so that he can reestablish himself after his release. When Silas chides her for supporting a son who should be supporting her, and who has disgraced her by becoming a "jailbird," Aunt Nancy staunchly defends her own:

Aunt Nancy: Goin to the pen ain't nothin'. Some o' the best men in the world's been to the pen. It ain't the goin' to the pen that counts, it's what you go there for. Once it used to be a big disgrace to be locked up. No, seh, it ain't the bein' locked up, it's what you locked up for. If the Lord had a got locked up for stealin' somethin' or killin' somebody do you think people would be praisin' him like they do?

Aunt Nancy's son had become entangled with the wrong kind of woman, who caused him to beat up a more prominent member of the community in a fistfight (as well as the woman). The beaten man used his influence to have her son, Jim, imprisoned. Aunt Nancy will not release any of Jim's

money, but directs Silas to ask Jim when he comes. But Jim may come too late. Two men have arrived to repossess the beloved Victrola.

Just as the Victrola is all but lost, Jim, a tall, strapping, handsome young man, enters, embraces his mother, and, after being informed of the situation, ends up filling the doorway to prevent the men from removing the Victrola until Aunt Nancy returns from the back yard. Jim, in gratitude for the Greens' kindness to his mother, has given all he had, fifteen dollars, to Silas. Thirty-five more dollars are needed. Aunt Nancy returns with a dirt-covered box and pours its contents onto a table. There is more than enough. Jim gives Silas enough to pay off the Victrola in full, promises to take care of his mother, and prepares to leave with her to find their own living quarters. There is not enough room at the Greens', even though Silas offers to let them both stay, and though Emma appears to be very interested in getting to know Jim. Aunt Nancy promises to continue to look in on Liza. The Greens rejoice and Silas prepares to return to his job. As the curtain falls, everyone shimmies to music from the Victrola.²³

In The Chip Woman's Fortune, Richardson has created a human comedy based on a realistic situation. The family solves its own problem through friendship, family loyalty, faith, and love. The characters may have been familiar to the time, but were not stereotypical, and the audience was

encouraged to feel empathy for them rather than ridicule them. There was the suggestion that racism contributed to their problem, since the bosses and the legal system showed a pronounced lack of compassion, but the play's focus was on the relationships of the characters in averting a minor disaster.

Dialect is used, but it is not exaggerated.

Richardson was making a conscious effort to give his characters dignity, noting that "most of the [black] plays and players seemed to be put on the stage just to be laughed at."²⁴ My play was about ordinary black people."²⁵ But, as Richardson feared, the commercial theatre wanted plays "with characters--prostitutes, dope handlers, thieves, and criminals."²⁶ Struggling against stereotyping, Richardson decided to be sparing with dialect: "Of course I write in dialect when it's absolutely necessary. In a book that's used for the school room I wouldn't write in dialect."²⁹ Much of Richardson's work is drawn from the drama and comedy of daily life, from what he may have seen, experienced, or remembered. He was concerned that the slices of life he created be served up with minimal distortion.

The Chip Woman's Fortune and Salome were played before an invitation-only Chicago audience on Monday, January 29, 1923. Subsequent audiences would pay box office prices ranging from twenty-five cents to one dollar. The opening was well advertised, with several advertisements including a

photo of Evelyn Preer, prominently mentioning that as Salome she would perform the Dance of the Seven Veils.²⁸

The opening was eminently successful, and labeled "a sensation."²⁹ Though Salome gained most of the attention, The Chip Woman's Fortune garnered its share of favorable reviews as "a curtain raiser of 20 minutes' duration . . . a domestic story of the comedy-drama type with a solid punch at the finish."³⁰ The Colored Folk Theatre

. . . with sensational results, has been held over for the second week. The daily papers were a unit in praising the production and a well-known critic on one of them declared that the presentation was the artistic event of the season. The racial playlet, "The Chip Woman's Fortune," which is done preceding the Wilde offering, is also coming in for a great deal of praise, and together with the first mentioned, it makes a perfect evening's entertainment.³¹

According to Kenneth Macgowan,

The Chip Woman's Fortune . . . had some of the naive and pungent folk quality of Lady Gregory's Irish plays. Excellently acted by Evelyn Preer, Sidney Kirkpatrick and the rest of the cast, it was as wholly delightful as the plays by Ridgely Torrence which Robert Edmond Jones and his colored players produced at the Garden Theatre some seven or eight years ago.³²

On February 11, the repertory would continue with The Follies of Scapin "and another racial comedy."³³ The Chicago opening attracted the attention of the New York papers, partially because "It meant the blending of white and black in an audience of huge proportions":

An impressive number of the city's social, artistic and financial leaders were on hand to lend their influence. They shared boxes with men and women of a darker hue and sat with them in orchestra seats. . . .

The movement for an art theatre wherein the actors should all be Negroes and where plays built upon racial characteristics should be presented has been brought to materialization.³⁴

The thirty-six piece Coleridge Taylor Orchestra, one of, if not the leading black orchestra of the day, provided music for the opening night. Among the list of distinguished guests were Edgar Lee Masters and Mrs. Sherwood [Eleanor C.] Anderson, a primary financial backer of the venture.³⁵

The Follies of Scapin, preceded by Frank Wilson's A Train North were well received and likewise held over a second week. The reviewer at the Chicago Defender (a black newspaper with national circulation), Tony Langston, wrote a follow-up column to his reviews, noting the way all of the plays brought out the entire versatility of the players.³⁶ The next offering, George, did not fare as well with the public, and the comment below indicates that box office revenues did not keep pace with critical success:

The players deserve much better support than they have been getting. Considering the fine merit of the offerings and the manner of presentation it is hard to believe that their efforts can be ignored in the manner noted during this engagement.³⁷

Since the black community was not supportive enough, the Colored Folk Theatre went in search of a white audience which might enjoy the plays but lacked the desire to venture into a black neighborhood:

It started its work in a racial theater in the South Side of Chicago, but made such a tremendous impression that a group of white people brought the company into

Erlanger's Olympic Theater in the heart of the theater district and to the Art Museum, the Fine Arts Club and the Chicago University for a series of performances.³⁸

Despite the problem with audience support, the engagement and critical response were judged strong enough to auger a successful tour. Producer Robert Levy now moved publicly to the head of the venture. Levy, former manager of the Lafayette Theatre and the Lafayette Players, may have been involved from the beginning. According to Laura Bowman, it was Levy who called together the Lafayette Players involved and who opened the Avenue Theatre to house them.³⁹ There appears to have been a fairly large commercial plan behind the Colored Folk Theatre. For a year Levy had been working toward organizing a theatrical circuit catering to black playgoers. In March of 1923 Levy's organization, with \$100,000 capitalization, was granted a charter in New York as the Syndicate Attractions Circuit, Inc. Their territory would include much of the eastern seaboard. Robert Levy would be headquartered in New York as president of the corporation. The circuit would embrace twenty houses affording forty weeks of playing time. Theatre companies would play the route twice each season. Levy already controlled the Attucks Theatre in Norfolk, Virginia, the Douglass Theatre in Baltimore, the Howard Theatre in Washington, the Howard Theatre in Richmond, and the Lincoln Theatre in Newport News, Virginia. He was negotiating for New York's Lafayette, Chicago's Avenue,

Detroit's Koppin, Philadelphia's Dunbar, and Cleveland's Globe as well as theatres in Kansas City, Boston, St. Louis and possibly other Southern cities.⁴⁰

The exact scope of the type of presentations the syndicate would produce was not certain, but shows would be booked into houses on a percentage sharing basis. I. H. Herk of the Affiliated Booking Corporation, which handled the routing of the Shuberts' units, was scheduled to become general manager.⁴¹ Herk, however, did not join the venture.⁴²

The Syndicate Attractions Circuit would be "the first and only exclusive organization ever perfected in the United States to play only colored musical shows in the largest metropolitan cities."⁴³ The new syndicate could mean a continuous flow of work for performers and a more uniform flow of profits for theatre owners and managers.

The company now known as The Colored Folk Theater of Chicago opened in the Howard Theatre in Washington on April 1, 1923. The run would include "A professional matinee, at which the leading white actors in Washington will be the guests of the company."⁴⁴ Salome and The Chip Woman's Fortune were again selected as the lead productions, and reviews were again favorable. The Chip Woman's Fortune was described as "a quaint and homely little comedy . . . well worth seeing. It is well played and quite enjoyable."⁴⁵

The white theatre community again invited the Colored Folk Theatre to its neighborhood, this time to the Playhouse on N Street.⁴⁶

The success of The Chip Woman's Fortune in Washington provided a breakthrough for Richardson. Richardson had submitted plays to Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory, the founders and directors of the Howard Players, Howard University's Little Theatre, which was enjoying a burgeoning reputation. Locke and Gregory were interested, and Richardson and Locke became friends. Richardson credits Locke with providing encouragement, and Locke was well known for his ability to get works by black authors published.⁴⁷ But the president of Howard University and head of the English Department were white, and their permission was required before any play could be produced by the Howard Players. They withheld that permission until after The Chip Woman's Fortune became a critical success. Since the Howard Players and the Howard Theatre were just about the only game in town for black playwrights, the opening of another avenue for Richardson's plays was very significant.⁴⁸

The next stop for the Colored Folk Theater was the Lafayette Theatre at Seventh Avenue and 132nd Street in Harlem for a one-week engagement commencing April 23, 1923. The advertisements heralding the engagement in the black press contained some classic showbusiness hype:

See: The Most Marvelous "Salome" in Existence
The World's Greatest Colored Attraction

The Dance of the Seven Veils as Never Done Before
 The Most Beautiful Colored Woman in the World
 The Sensational Group of Colored Actors
 Who Have Been Honored Throughout the World
 The Most Striking and Novel Electrical Effects

With a Cast of the Greatest Performers that Ever
 Trod a Stage--White or Colored

The wonderful awe-inspiring performances given by the company have been declared to be one of the greatest factors on the uplift and recognition in the abilities of our people. It puts the race on a par with others and has already written pages in the history of our people--pages of facts inspired by the ideals and teachings of our late noble leader--BOOKER T. WASHINGTON. Were he alive today, he would be willing to pass on after seeing this group of performers, for he would know and feel that his ideals, his thoughts, his struggle for recognition, his inspirations, had not been fostered in vain.⁴⁹

The company was renamed the Ethiopian Art Theater, and they were rumored to be headed for Broadway. Evelyn Preer and Sidney Kirkpatrick, husband of Laura Bowman, were considered its stars. The group was scheduled to play Boston on April 30, following the Lafayette engagement.⁵⁰ Harlem audiences, however, were not impressed, and were chided by both the New York Age and Amsterdam News for their behavior:

Though handicapped by unappreciative audiences, the Colored Folk Theatre of Chicago, Raymond O'Neil, director, is presenting at the Lafayette this week several of the race's foremost actors and actresses in Oscar Wilde's Salome [sic]. . .

Apparently some did not realize that the play was not a comedy. . . . but despite this handicap, the entire cast was almost perfect.⁵¹

. . . few expected them to reach the heights they did . . . in the face of an unappreciative gallery which during the entire performance kept those who know to what debts [sic] these vultures can descend nervous for fear that they would break out at any moment and spoil a splendid performance . . .⁵²

Salome may not have been able to overcome the gallery, but The Chip Woman's Fortune fared much better:

Many expected that this would be just an insignificant little something to kill the time before the presentation of "Salome" but the merit of this little piece and the acting proved a distinct shock of satisfaction if there is such a thing and one well known writer immediately saw in this little offering something that could be stretched out and played with great advantage for two hours.⁵³

When recounting his memories of the Ethiopian Art Theatre, Richardson recollected that the company returned to Washington because a Broadway theatre could not be secured.⁵⁴ Broadway critic Alexander Woolcott reported differently in 1923; in an article about the Ethiopian Art Theater, he states that Salome was deemed too risqué for Boston and was banned by the mayor's office.⁵⁵

The Chicago Defender reported that Salome was a hit in its second visit to Washington, but that the performers were guilty of overacting in The Chip Woman's Fortune.⁵⁶ A few days later the same paper reported that H. H. Frazee, manager of the Frazee Theatre, a Broadway house located on Forty-Second Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, had invited the company to play his theatre.⁵⁷ The Frazee, owned by Oscar Hammerstein, was erected in 1904 (and razed in 1940). Known as the Frazee from 1920 through 1924,⁵⁸ the house has been described as comparable in size to that of the Belasco Theatre, which is still standing.⁵⁹

There are conflicting reports as to whether Frazee first saw the Ethiopian Art Theatre in Chicago or New York; according to the Defender, Frazee first viewed the play in Chicago. Several other papers report that he first saw the play in Harlem. By the time the announcement of Frazee's invitation was reported in the Defender, the troupe had already returned to New York. Subsequent advertisements for the Ethiopian Art Theatre state that their tour was now fully managed and directed by the Syndicate Attractions Circuit.⁶⁰

The Ethiopian Art Theatre opened The Chip Woman's Fortune and Salome at the Frazee Theatre on Monday, May 7, 1923. The Amsterdam News urged "the better class" of the black community to attend and lend support:

On Monday night at the Frazee Theatre Broadway had a chance to pass on the work of the colored artists presenting Oscar Wilde's "Salome" and the verdict will be received with a great sense of satisfaction by colored America as we have at last been accepted in the serious drama.

Conspicuous indeed was the opening of this Ethiopian Art Theatre on Broadway and when it becomes generally known that Mr. Robert Levy, whose splendid work did so much to bring to the fore the Lafayette Players, is at the head of the syndicate presenting these shows in first class houses, the better class of colored people will show their appreciation by going to the Frazee like they went to his uptown home in the days when he controlled the Lafayette.⁶¹

While the uptown press viewed the Broadway appearance of the Ethiopian Art Theatre as an opportunity to integrate black art and audiences into the mainstream, the downtown press noted with anticipation that "Rumors of the remarkable

quality of these players, their unique spontaneity, their beauty of voice and their emotional power, have reached New York all the [sic] season.⁶² Newspaper advertising indicated that this would be the start of not only a national, but an international tour as well.⁶³ There were great expectations all around.

But Broadway was where things began to fall apart. In his review for The Nation (which was reprinted in the Chicago Defender) Ludwig Lewisohn reports that he only saw one other white critic at the opening.⁶⁴ This would reflect a paltry showing, since there were over a dozen daily newspapers in Manhattan alone, as well as the potential for several more reviews in magazines and outer borough newspapers. But Lewisohn's report appears to have been inaccurate. On May 8, reviews appeared in several New York papers: the Times, the Globe and Commercial Advertiser, the Evening Telegram, and the Tribune, as well as the Bronx Home News and Brooklyn Daily Eagle. This amount of coverage is not at all bad, considering that there were five other plays opening the same night: The Mountebank by W. J. Locke and Ernest Denny; a revival of Sheridan's The Rivals; For Value Received by Ethel Clifton; The Apache by Josephine Turck Baker; and The Second Mrs. Tanqueray by Sir Arthur Wing Pinero.⁶⁵ The opening of a play by a highly successful playwright like Pinero and The Rivals performed by the Actors Equity Players garnered much of the attention of the

major critics. Yet some did attend the opening night of the Ethiopian Art Theatre and others attended a night or two later. On May 9, Heywood Broun's review appeared in the World and Alexander Woollcott's in the Herald. A critic known only as "The Playgoer," Burns Mantle, and an uncredited scribe printed reviews in the Sun, the Daily News and Variety, respectively, on May 10. On May 11, Anita Block of the Call and Alan Dale of the American gave their reviews. In fact, reviews appeared during nearly the entire Broadway run of the Ethiopian Art Players due to the busy schedules of the critics and the fact that many returned to provide another review when the company changed its program during its second week. The competition for an audience was severe. On the night of the May 7 opening, the potential audience could choose from thirty-seven legitimate plays and fifteen musicals in the Broadway district alone.⁶⁶

The reviews were mixed, but generally very favorable for The Chip Woman's Fortune and very unfavorable for Salome. The reasons for this response from the mainstream newspapers went deeper than normal criticism. The reviewers all exhibited some awareness of the significance of this attempt by the Ethiopian Art Theatre, and race played a part. In many cases the entrance of racism into the reviewing process ranged from mild or unconscious to disturbing.

Lewisohn, though he wished the company had chosen a different name, saw the Ethiopian Art Theatre as a breakthrough:

There is, as few people know, a flourishing "colored show business." Four or five musical comedies and revues are touring the country; there are minstrels and vaudeville "acts" without number; there are fifty Negro "acts" in burlesque. Much of this activity, granting talent and energy, is of slight interest; much of it always strikes me as an actual imitation of the white "black-faced" comedian--an imitation, from the Negro's point of view, a caricature of himself. All these things then have little or no value as art, as an expression of either the Negro individual or the Negro race. It was the performance of Mr. Charles Gilpin in "The Emperor Jones" that first attained such value. Mr. Raymond O'Neil's group of Negro players attains it, I believe, in an even higher degree.⁶⁷

Lewisohn describes the performance as "tentative," but reserves final judgment on the quality of the company for the future. He praises the performers for their "resonant, well-modulated" voices, clear diction, and emotional range:

It left no room for doubt that the Negro speaks an English which is his own, which he has made in his spiritual image, which is unique beyond such external things as accent or pronunciation. This English has a strange softness, a minor note, an echo of wailing . . .⁶⁸

Evelyn Preer garnered Lewisohn's approval, moreso for her Liza than her Salome: "And for all the concrete realism in her acting in the folk play there was a touch of humble poetry in it too [sic] which saved it--as indeed the whole play was saved--from any tinge of the sordid."⁶⁹

The Home News was dissatisfied with Evelyn Preer's dancing: "Little Marion Taylor, shimmying to a phonograph

in the introductory playlet, did far better."⁷⁰ The total review was more favorable than unfavorable:

The weirdly beautiful "Salome" of Oscar Wilde was prefaced by an attractive little sketch of Negro Home Life [sic] "The Chip Woman's Fortune." The latter was excellently done, but made very slight demands on the players.⁷¹

It is difficult to ascertain whether the reviewer thought the demands of the play "slight" because of the structure of the piece or because the actors should have an easier time with a black folk play. The Evening Mail carried stronger, but somewhat left-handed praise for Richardson's play, stating that "The curtain raiser alone was worth the price of admission. Willis Richardson's sketchy little affair called 'The Chip Woman's Fortune' calls a spade by its first name, and its intimate view of Harlem life is delightful."⁷² Harlem was not mentioned in the play or its stage directions.

"Even those scientific persons who are fussy about keeping the Nordic, Mediterranean and the Alpine races distinct could not have failed to be interested in what took place at the Frazee Theatre last night," proclaimed the Evening Telegram,

The opening programme began with a little curtain raiser, "The Chip Woman's Fortune" by Willis Richardson. Although it proved to have no plot to speak of this play gave the performers an opportunity to show what they could do with six very distinct negro types. When the curtain went down the very intelligent looking audience behaved as if it had been very favorably impressed.

There could have been no greater contrast between this sketch with its transparent sincerity and directness and what was to follow.⁷³

The Telegram went on to describe the weaknesses in Wilde's script, and in the actors' performances. Percy Hammond of the Tribune was not impressed by Salome either, except for Evelyn Preer's beauty, her portrayal, and the fairness of her skin. As several other reviewers did, he compared Preer's performance to that of Mary Garden, foremost interpreter of the operatic version of Salome of her time. Hammond recommended that the Ethiopian Art Theatre stick to folk plays: "'Salome,' of course, was little but an odd stunt last night, but the negro 'Chip Woman's Fortune' was an honest, well-played little comedy. There is where the Ethiopian Art Theatre seems to belong, except when it chooses to be antic."⁷⁴

John Corbin, the Times critic, was more acerbic. Heading his review, "Art Theatre Gives a Performance Not Entirely Art,"⁷⁵ Corbin describes the Ethiopian Art Theatre as "Heralded as the dark horse among the many attempts to lift the drama on stepping stones of art theatres to higher things."⁷⁶ The evening was not Ethiopian enough for him, and the acting too amateurish. As for Richardson's play, "The piece is trifling and at times amusing."⁷⁷

The reviewer for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle penned a similar review, stating that "If the Ethiopian Art Theater had burlesqued Oscar Wilde's 'Salome' last night instead of trying hard to play it seriously the result would have been

delightful entertainment."⁷⁸ The Ethiopian Art Players were encouraged to stay in their place:

Last night's friendly audience . . . well enjoyed the slight curtain raiser comedy of negro life very much more than Wilde. A program of short plays akin to "The Chip Woman's Fortune" would have provided a delightful evening of entertainment in which negro folk play the foibles and peculiar qualities of their own kind. Mr. O'Neil himself, after working with the players for a year, says: "It [sic] the folk play and the play with a universal appeal that the colored actor is qualified to perform." . . . Evelyn Preer showed her comedy talent, and every other member of the cast played in a natural, easy strain that was most appealing. Just to hear negroes talk naturally is a delight to white folks."⁷⁹

Alexander Woolcott, among the most formidable of the critics, was not enchanted by Salome. In characteristically highly connotative language, he touched on several levels of what may have been occurring in the minds of the audience, and of the difficulty in viewing the Ethiopian Art Theatre from an objective vantage point. He begins by describing the company as a "troupe of mulatto players" who are weighted down by a "gauche and unfortunate"⁸⁰ name. He predicted a brief engagement, partially because the company faced a host of "obscuring predispositions and preconceptions."⁸¹ To downtown audiences, the real world in which black people lived was a world apart: "Recently they played a week's engagement at the Lafayette Theater up in Harlem, but so watertight are the little compartments into which New York is divided that it will be gravely recorded and believed in most journals that they came to town only

Monday night."⁸² Woollcott exemplified typical audience members as: the man who came for a "darky" musical show and is dismayed to learn he is viewing a serious play; the earnest youth who comes to support the Ethiopian Art Players as a sociological experiment; the wealthy matron who welcomes the chance to appear liberal; and the prude who seeks to point an angry, probably envious finger at the lascivious Salome. Only a tiny handful have come simply to see a play. If anyone did drop in to see a play, not already informed that the Ethiopian Art Theatre was a Negro group, according to Woollcott, that theatregoer would not have been able to tell whether the company was black or white.⁸³

Woollcott dismissed Salome as a dull play with long speeches in need of trimming, but described The Chip Woman's Fortune as

delightful . . . a sketchy morsel of darky life which the company was able to present most engagingly. If all the rejoicing must be confined to this curtain raiser it is because it is the stuff of which a true negro [sic] theater will one day take form to the permanent enrichment of the American stage. Those who groan at the mulatto "Salome" do so because there are so many players who can play "Salome" and so few who can give such plays as "The Chip Woman's Fortune."⁸⁴

Woollcott concludes his review by predicting that one day a black company comparable to the Irish Players (Abbey Theatre) would arise with "something to say . . . that everyone will want to hear that no one else can say."⁸⁵ He

cautioned that such a group would not waste its time and resources on plays like Salome.

Heywood Broun basically agreed. His review for the World contained similar references to the Abbey Theatre, similar criticism of the Ethiopian Art Theatre's selection of repertoire, and similar advice to the company to stick to folk plays. Broun devoted half his column to The Chip Woman's Fortune, deeming it "excellent." After an extensive description of the plot, Broun spoke admiringly of the play's simplicity:

It seemed to us absolutely convincing and to have in addition to truthfulness a not infrequent beauty arising from the shrewd collection and combination of the commonplace.⁸⁶

Burns Mantle titled his review, "Ethiopian Actors Splendid Comedians; Not So Good as Interpreters of 'Salome.'⁸⁷ Mantle took O'Neil to task for giving the company an "ugly study of a degenerate wanton"⁸⁸ to play. Mantle, too, wished the company would confine themselves to folk dramas: "In 'The Chip Woman's Fortune,' for instance, a . . . comedy by a Negro author, Willis Robertson [sic], they reveal as many flashes of a true histrionic art as their white contemporaries."⁸⁹ The actors are complimented for their portrayals in both plays, especially Evelyn Preer for moments of "barbaric charm," with a note that "A company of Columbia College Japanese could be taught to play 'Julius Caesar' . . . But it never would be 'Julius Caesar.'⁹⁰

Despite his displeasure with Salome, Mantle urged the Drama League to rush to the aid of the company through immediate financial assistance to enable them to show more of their repertoire. This is a clear indication that the company was doing poorly at the box office from the very beginning of the engagement.

Salome was not universally disliked by the critics. The Sun critic considered Salome "superior to any white production we have seen."⁹¹ This critic also praised Evelyn Preer for her Liza/Salome and Sidney Kirkpatrick for his Silas/Herod (Laura Bowman's Aunt Nancy, Marion Taylor's Emma and Solomon Bruce's Jim received scant, if any notice) as well as the entire ensemble acting effort, the direction, and the technical elements; but even in this review, The Chip Woman's Fortune, "a very human and realistic playlet that depends more on its character-drawing than on any great complexity of plot,"⁹² garnered more column space and more enthusiastic praise than Salome.

The Globe and Commerical Advertiser critic took an opposing view of Salome, disliking nearly everything about the production except Sidney Kirkpatrick's acting, and including the fact that the actors were of a wide range of color tones and speech patterns. On the other hand, The Chip Woman's Fortune passed muster as "a lively comedy of Negro life."⁹³ This critic, like Woolcott, acknowledged that an objective viewpoint would be difficult to achieve:

Passing judgement on "Ethiopian art," however, is a difficult matter. This week's Freeman begs the New York public to forget that his company is Ethiopian and to "judge these players by the quality of their acting." If this were done, one fears it would come out rather badly. Allowances must and will be made, the Freeman to the contrary, for the fact that drama customarily performed and spoken by white people is being attempted by Negroes. Nor will the Ethiopians have occasion to complain of this concession. The best dressed persons went away last evening rapturous in their praise.⁹⁴

Comments like these point up how novel the idea of black performers essaying not only legitimate roles, but roles outside of their specific ethnicity, as well as outside their own communities, really was in the eyes of the critical establishment. There is irony in the fact that white performers had never been constricted from impersonating any race, and that for years had been "blackening up" to the delight of theatregoers.

Although it was novel as well for a black legitimate playwright's work to appear on Broadway, Richardson being the very first one, the critics did not appear fazed. Not one mentioned Richardson's pioneer status.

. Most of the critics found fault with Salome as a play, noting Wilde's bombast and disregard for the Victorian decorum still prevalent in acceptable Broadway fare. Any good production might be beset by problems due to this problematical script, but even though the play is set in biblical Judea on the African continent, the race of the performers was an overriding factor in the criticism. The Chip Woman's Fortune offered more familiar, thus more

acceptable reference points, which may have so favorably predisposed the critics that the true extent of their enthusiasm for the play as a piece of dramaturgy would be difficult to ascertain. Richardson himself stated, "The critics seemed to like my play better than Wilde's because-- one critic, Heywood Broun, said it was excellent. I didn't think it was excellent, but he said so, and he's supposed to know more about it than I do."⁹⁵

The Chip Woman's Fortune, meant as a curtain raiser, an appetizer for the audience, should have been the main course for the Ethiopian Art Theater in the eyes of the New York critics. Titling his review "Ethiopians Do One-Act Play with Much Charm and Merit," Alan Dale stated

It was in good sooth an obstreperous "Salome" with many ragged ends but filled with a rough and not inartistic fervor.

Whereas, on the other hand, there was genuine merit and an abiding charm in the little one-act play called "The Chip Woman's Fortune." This, which was quite plotless, and merely a black leaf from a human document, was delightfully acted. Ethiopia, as seen in this trifle, might almost be compared to Moscow. After seeing the tiny play we felt that we had lived for a few moments with these actors. They were so eminently human, so simple, direct and interesting. . . . If the sponsors of Ethiopia have any other delicatessen of this ilk, let them be trotted forth.⁹⁶

References to the Moscow Art Theatre and Abbey Theatre appear in many of the critical assessments of the Ethiopian Art Theater, by both black and white critics. These theatres were viewed as national theatres, theatres, though not confined to folk dramas, which represented to the world

the artistic souls and aspirations of the Russian and Irish peoples. Many expected the Ethiopian Art Theatre to do the same for African Americans. Here again was the dilemma of what defined a black theatre and where the artistic/ideological boundaries should be placed. One white critic, Anita Block, turned her review into an essay on this subject:

. . . a Negro theatre, (and let us, pray, have the direct, honest title, instead of such highfalutin vagueness as an "Ethiopian Art Theatre"), which so many of the true friends and admirers of the colored people would so heartily welcome, will never be realized as long as Negroes think there is any art in looking like white people, and acting the parts of white people in white people's plays about white people. To say that there is no race or color in art is true only when we interpret that truth is its larger spiritual aspects. But when we interpret it as a denial of the facts of race and color, it becomes merely ridiculous. Our colored friends have just as much right to make themselves look white and act the parts of white people as we have to brown or blacken white actors and make them act the parts of colored people. Only let us make it clear at the outset that that is not what we mean by the founding and development of a Negro theatre, a theatre to be devoted to the creation, cultivation and interpretation of genuine Negro folk-art, if we may use the term.

Fortunately the present bill of the Ethiopian Art Theatre is a perfect example of what the Negro theatre should and should not do. The first offering of its program is a little one-act play of Negro life written by a Negro, called "The Chip Woman's Fortune." It shows us a typical proletarian colored family, in its pitiful economic insecurity, heartbroken because the adored victrola is about to be taken away. . . . But oh, what a gem it is with its rich portrayal of Negro personality and psychology! What a picture we get of ambition and shiftlessness, kindness and pugnaciousness, ignorance and keen intelligence, and of the unquenchable racial love of music and the dance, all in those few short moments! Here, in very truth, is the stuff out of which a national Negro theatre must be made, and its material, with all the negro's struggles and strivings and manifold problems, is endless. . . . It does not

interest us to see what a so-called Negro troupe can do with drama in which they have to play at being white . . . Undeniably, Sidney Kirkpatrick . . . is an unusually able actor, and Evelyn Preer, with her marvelous white body made a physically glorious Salome. But it was her acting as the sick wife, in a dirty calico wrapper, in the little Negro play that revealed her real acting ability.

The Ethiopian Art Theatre is unfortunately an attempt away from, rather than toward, the establishment of a real Negro theatre.⁹⁷

Variety did not report the Ethiopian Art Theatre's first week's receipts (though it reported that the top ticket price was \$2.50), but did print a review and an article. The unbylined reviewer devoted two-thirds of his review to The Chip Woman's Fortune, and, like most of the others, greatly preferred it over Salome. Opening with a reference to the Moscow Art Theatre, Jewish Art Theatre, and Irish National Theatre, the reviewer discussed the fact that the opening night audience was filled with high society, theatre cognoscenti, noted intellectuals, and "colored folks of quality."⁹⁸ This review is the only one which provides a description of The Chip Woman's Fortune's set:

. . . played in "one" before three rather soiled drapes, that gave the suggestion of an interior of a slovenly colored home. There was a picture of Booker T. Washington, or possibly Marcus Garvey, pinned to one side and a religious picture on the other. There were three chairs, a table with an onyx clock and a Victrola utilized as the props.⁹⁹

A set designer is not credited in the review nor noted in existing programs examined. In describing the plot, the reviewer observes, "Behind his tale is the thought that the whites stick together and punish the blacks for their

shortcomings in meeting their obligations."¹⁰⁰ Silas is referred to as "the colored boy" and Liza as "a slovenly wench in soiled wrapper, of a high yaller [sic] complexion:" "This was all pure negro and as such highly enjoyed by the audience."¹⁰¹ Perhaps the most significant observation in this review concerned the effect of the curtain raiser on the audience's attitude toward Salome. "Without it there would have been a tendency to look upon the 'Salome' effort with a tolerance that they would have bestowed on children striving to mimic their elders," states the reviewer, "but 'The Chip Woman's Fortune,' typical of the negro as it was, placed the audience in a mood to receive 'Salome' in the light of a real effort on the part of the players."¹⁰²

An article in the same issue of Variety brought into sharp relief an issue that would have a significant impact on any effort to bring a production of possible interest to a black audience to Broadway, the issue of audience seating. Though segregated seating was illegal in New York at the time, an unwritten rule existed that non-white theatre patrons would be seated in the balcony. Non-white patrons who insisted on orchestra seats would be placed as close to the side walls as possible, and openly refused access to the center orchestra section. The management of the Ethiopian Art Theatre had tried to negotiate a relaxation of this policy at the Frazee, but were dissuaded from pressing the issue by Frank Hopkins, the house manager. Hopkins argued

successfully that the repertory would not draw sufficient black audiences downtown to support it financially, and that the company would have to rely on white audience support. White audiences would not countenance fully integrated seating. After opening night, white patrons were given sole access to the lower floor, with blacks confined to either the balcony or the gallery.¹⁰³

The black press responded angrily, but somewhat resignedly to the situation. W. E. Clark reported in the New York Age that the black press who arrived for the opening flatly refused to sit in the balcony, and that several black potential audience members, upon learning of this policy, left to seek out other entertainment. Robert Lelvy made a lame attempt to placate the press, telling Clark that "no conscious attempt was made to segregate the colored at the opening performance, and pointed out that the seats for the Negro press were on the front row of the balcony. He could not explain why the other press representatives were given seats downstairs."¹⁰⁴

This incident suggests that black audiences would be hard-pressed to make an effort to return to Jim Crow when they could sit anywhere they liked in a Harlem theatre. Very few whites would travel uptown to see legitimate theatre in Harlem. Catering to white Broadway audiences could make it extremely difficult to present material not tailored to that audience's prejudices, preconceptions, and

tastes. Their preferences were often unacceptable to blacks. Broadway was where the money and national fame could be found, but for the producer of a black show, Broadway was "catch twenty-two" and Hobson's choice rolled into one.

Criticism in the white press went far beyond the usual Aristotelian considerations. Words such as "boy," "slattern," "slovenly," and "mammy" were frequently used in describing the characters. A large amount of print space was devoted to discussions of the relative darkness and lightness of the performers' skins, as if this were a criterion for judging their work. The Ethiopian Art Theatre's worth as a national theatre representing all of black America was debated, though the company did not actually seek to wear this mantle. The black press responded from a defensive position.

The Age and Amsterdam News were weeklies; therefore, their reports and reviews appeared later than those of the daily papers. The Chicago Defender was also a weekly paper. Major journals such as The Messenger, The Crisis, and Opportunity were published monthly, an even further time lapse away from the event. The strength of an immediate reaction could not be felt.

Abram L. Harris reviewed the Ethiopian Art Players for The Messenger. Harris attended opening night. In his review, he felt compelled to take up most of his space in

response to the reviews by the white critical establishment. Noting that like the white critics, he liked The Chip Woman's Fortune better than Salome, Harris stated that, "We like 'Salome' less because it was uninteresting and dull, and 'The Chip Woman's Fortune' more because it contained a Negro motif."¹⁰⁵ According to Harris, the white critical establishment, no matter how liberal some of the critics, was incapable of separating the artistic merit of the company from the sociological implications of the company's appearance on Broadway. Many critics spent more time arguing whether the company should appear on Broadway, and what type of material it should be performing than discussing the plays they actually saw. Harris went on to quote several reviews which exhibited fascination with the lightness and darkness of the performers' complexions. Even if it were granted that white art belonged to white folks and black art to black folks,

. . . the mere possession of Negro blood or the fact that one who was born in a Negro environment does not inhibit one's effective and accurate delineation of a character. . . Our ability to witness a dramatic performance by Negroes without reference to the societary meaning of color is no fault of the artist.¹⁰⁶

Harris noted that segregating drama by the race of the performer would be similar to relegating Negro singers to singing only Negro songs. He also pointed out that in the real world of professional theatre, significant dramatic roles like Othello were not consigned to black actors; at

the time of Harris's writing, no non-white actor had ever played Othello in a white theatre:

Every day in every way Othello is getting whiter and whiter. Eventually he'll become Mr. Othello, the Nordic blonde instead of the bronze Moor. The criticism which will be made of us is that we are desirous of being white or wanting to ape white folk. Granting that this is our desire, are we more reprehensible for aping the white man than he is for imitating every other people with whom he has come into contact? Culture, the anthropologist will inform us, is not the invention of any one people. . . . The great works of Shakespeare, Moliere and others are not the indisputable heritage of the white man which constitute his forbidden territory of drama upon which none but Caucasians should trespass. . . . bear in mind that making a contribution to American culture as a racial group is different from not imitating white people.¹⁰⁷

The Ethiopian Art Theatre's faltering performance at the box office and the critical response from the white press may have been partially responsible for an editorial which appeared in the May 12 Defender. The editorial essayed a topic very much a priority of the art community at the time, the building of a national American theatre. The Drama League was particularly concerned with building a body of drama distinctly American in character rather than derivative and imitative of European models. The Defender pointed out that a national theatre could not be achieved without overcoming the problems of commercialism and racism:

The average American playwright and those who have enjoyed success have been the producers of commodities like any other business men, ever ready to subserve to public taste and faddism, and have seldom troubled themselves about searching out the deeper and universal truths of life. . . . We have much to give American art life. Our peculiar gifts for the theatre are a heritage of America. No one questions this. . . .

In America no theater enjoys a governmental subsidy, such as is the case in many European countries. Thus the people's amusement has been left to the commercial speculators, who in their choice of production are never actuated by the artistic merits of a work, but by its ability to swell the box office receipts, and always it has been that which appealed most readily to the lower human emotions. . . . We have had an immeasurable influence on American musical compositions, stage comedy, and it might be said that almost all distinctly American dances have had their origin with us. And a national theatre if true to its avowed aim would thereby be the one institution in America that would thus frankly and unequivocally give a full recognition to our fine attributes of character, through and only through which any race is best remembered in history.¹⁰⁸

At nearly the same time as the Defender editorial, announcements were placed in the New York press that the Ethiopian Art Theatre would continue its repertory with The Comedy of Errors "a la jazz" preceded by another Richardson play, the drama The Broken Banjo, set to open Monday, May 14.

In addition to reviews, the press had been following the Ethiopian Art Theatre as a human interest story, and some of the critics wrote follow-up articles for the Sunday, May 13 issues of their papers. In the Sunday New York Herald, Alexander Woollcott wrote an article at once both complimentary to and satirical of Mrs. Sherwood Anderson for her efforts in securing an engagement for the Moscow Art Theatre in Chicago and her financial and moral support of the Ethiopian Art Theatre. Woollcott noted that this group of "moderately talented mulatto players"¹⁰⁹ had been heavily criticized for not bringing a repertory solely consisting of

folk material like the "altogether engaging"¹¹⁰ The Chip Woman's Fortune, but asserted that this criticism was unfounded, since there was not yet a body of dramatic literature on black life large enough to draw a solid repertory from: ". . . to rebuke the Ethiopian Art Theatre for not bringing along a repertoire made up of a lot of plays of the 'Emperor Jones' calibre is like turning querelously on the Theatre Guild and demanding that it develop an American Shakespeare by August 12 at 2:15 P. M."¹¹¹

The same issue of the Herald carried an article about Max Reinhardt, who was on the verge of completing a highly publicized first American visit, and his interest in African-American performers and performing arts. Reinhardt, the famous German director, had often stated an interest in observing African Americans, whom he considered the only race to resist total absorption of European culture, retaining much of its "primitive passion."¹¹² While in the United States, he visited black vaudeville and cabaret shows, and attended the Ethiopian Art Theatre's opening night. This may lend credence to O'Neil's claim of a relationship with Reinhardt, and may partially explain where O'Neil gained some of his views on black theatre. Reinhardt also met with leaders in the black arts community, such as Alain Locke, during his visit. Reinhardt did not find the

"savagery and flamboyance"¹¹³ he admittedly was looking for in the Ethiopian Art Theatre.

Percy Hammond wrote an article for the Sunday, May 13 New York Tribune on the Ethiopian Art Theatre which primarily focused on the exceptional acting talent of Evelyn Preer (whom Hammond thought of as more white than black) as Salome. Hammond complimented all the actors in their work in The Chip Woman's Fortune, "a deft little comedy."¹¹⁴ He describes Liza, Preer's character as a "slattern negress . . . a qualid [*sic*], slipshod New York mulatto,"¹¹⁵ though Richardson's script indicates nothing beyond the fact that Liza is recovering from a period of illness. In Hammond's opinion,

Little is said or done in the sketch that is unfaithful to illusion. It represents a troubled afternoon in the black belt humorously and with sentiment, though it ends somewhat artily with all the characters doing the shimmy to jazz music by the retrieved victrola. Their sophisticated Broadway touch, we presume, was added by the white instructors of the negro pupils.¹¹⁶

It is true that Richardson's script makes no mention of dancing to the phonograph at the end of the play. It is also of interest to note that the company, described as primarily seasoned professionals in the black press and Chicago's white press, were looked at as little more than above average amateurs in New York. The New York World's Sunday, May 13 issue printed an article on the players' survival jobs and previous occupations, "Negro as Dramatic Artist Finds Opportunity at Last; Ethiopian Players' Little

Theatre Movement Brings Pullman Porters, Minstrel Men and Stock Players Into First Organization of Its Kind."¹¹⁷ Preer was described as a former beautician.

For the second week of the run, O'Neil did substitute The Comedy of Errors for Salome, but retained The Chip Woman's Fortune. Most of the major critics returned to the Frazee, and most of them were still more complimentary to The Chip Woman's Fortune. Setting Shakespeare's adaptation of Plautus's comedy of mistaken identity in a circus tent with a ringmaster, jazz band, and costumes à la Pierrot and Harlequin may have been current with elements of theatre craft in fashion at the time, but could not, in the words of Kenneth Macgowan, save this "daring and unsuccessful attempt to resuscitate, as well as revive, a dull old farce."¹¹⁸

Heywood Broun concurred, reminding his readers that The Chip Woman's Fortune was repeated "and confirmed us in our opinion that it is a striking and amusing folk comedy."¹¹⁹ John Corbin thought the bill of Salome and The Chip Woman's Fortune showed more "smoothness and precision."¹²⁰ Corbin again wrote an additional article on the Ethiopian Art Theatre for the Sunday Times, praising the "sociological phase"¹²¹ of the company but doubting the artistic value of the enterprise. First of all the actors were not black enough. Stating that "the mental testers have found that negro intelligence increases with the admittance of white blood,"¹²² Corbin complains that the

"barbaric splendor of 'a rich jewel in an Ethiopie's ear'" is missing. Second, though the actors acquitted themselves well, especially when bringing forth their "negroid undertone,"¹²³ the choice of plays was poor, with the exception of The Chip Woman's Fortune

. . . an unaffected and wholly convincing transcript of everyday character. No one is glorified or otherwise tricked out to please, no one is blackened to serve as a "dramatic" contrast. I am referring, of course, to points of essential character, not to that matter of walnut stain. . . . Willis Richardson has limned half a dozen characters candidly, sympathetically, truly.¹²⁴

Alexander Woollcott observed that the audience at the Frazee was "small and diminishing."¹²⁵ The failure of The Comedy of Errors was not the fault of the "industrious darky troupe from Chicago;" the play was simply an "unspeakably dreary" farce.¹²⁶ Woollcott advised the company to return to Chicago and wait until it had a repertory of black plays before returning to New York.

Burns Mantle was similarly unimpressed, stating that The Chip Woman's Fortune "is again the gem of the bill."¹²⁷ The Comedy of Errors bored Alan Dale "to distraction:" "As on the 'Salome' occasion, the main bill was preceded by that admirable trifle, 'The Chip Woman's Fortune,' and again I beseech the purveyor of this attraction to keep his artists to portrayals of their own race."¹²⁸

The New York Evening Mail's James Craig found "too little jazz and too much Shakespeare, or else too little

Shakespeare and too much jazz."¹²⁹ Anita Block found that

The Comedy of Errors

merely strengthened the opinion we expressed in this column last week. . . . "The Chip Woman's Fortune," such a rich and human bit of characteristic Negro life, so perfectly acted by persons obviously Negro, that we listened to it again with as keen pleasure as the first time. Surely there must be at least a dozen such plays, which, together with plantation songs and spirituals and real jazz and darky dancing, would make the excellent beginnings of a genuine Negro theatre.¹³⁰

The critic for the Evening Telegram was kinder to The Comedy of Errors as an example of "the new stage art,"¹³¹ giving kudos to the actors for their speaking skill, "and their intelligence and loveliness,"¹³² and again finding The Chip Woman's Fortune "an excellent little Negro folk play, acted with delightful realism by these interesting performers."¹³³

Percy Hammond of the Tribune described the production of The Comedy of Errors as "foolish, but not irreverent,"¹³⁴ and paused to reflect on the future of the performers:

One of the young members of the cast, Miss Edna Morton, acting the sister to Adriana, was a subject for reflection. She was prettier, better mannered, more intelligent and defter in her ways than the average Broadway ingenue, and as white. She had more than the tricky, routine charm of her stage type, and she knew how to employ it. So we could not help wondering what it all avails her under the circumstances. She seemed indeed to be a small but tragic race problem. Perhaps the Ethiopian Art Theater, if it lives, is a way out of the blind alley in which she and others find themselves perplexed. Preceding "The Comedy of Errors" is "The Chip Woman's Fortune," a good, sentimental negro [sic] sketch, completely acted.¹³⁵

Variety printed a disappointing record of receipts. During its first week at the Frazee the Ethiopian Art Theatre took in barely \$2,000. The hit drama Rain, "Sweetest money getter of all the dramas this season,"¹³⁶ was taking in over \$15,000 per week in its twenty-eighth week. Even the failing The Adding Machine, limping into its final week, surviving on the new "two for one" tickets, pulled in \$5,000. Though consideration of house sizes and overheads should be made, the Ethiopian Art Theatre was making a poor showing at the box office. Variety announced that the company was closing its run.¹³⁷

The Defender reported that the total run took in \$3,500 with \$1,800 of that the first week, and surmised, "The Ethiopian Art attempt to attract white patronage was never intended at inception. All of the Colored attractions which have ventured away from the Colored show shops have been under white management, but the Frazee experiment appears to have been the result of overcalculation or egotism."¹³⁸

The Ethiopian Art Theatre closed its Broadway run on May 20, 1923 after eight performances of Salome, seven of The Comedy of Errors, and fifteen of The Chip Woman's Fortune. The Amsterdam News reprinted excerpts from reviews of the Salome/The Chip Woman's Fortune bill, quoting Heywood Broun, James Craig, and Burns Mantle.¹³⁹ The same edition of the paper announced the opening of The Comedy of Errors with

The Broken Banjo on May 14, but no subsequent reviews were printed. Both articles were printed on May 16. The Defender reprinted the New York Sun's review of the opening bill under the headline "Players Score on Broadway."¹⁴⁰ After the closing the Amsterdam News commented:

The manner in which "The Chip Woman's Fortune" by Willis Richardson was received clinched the writer's opinion that these little dramatic playlets by our own people would be well received if the managers, who think they reflect in their refusal to submit them to the people the attitude of the playgoers, would "get wise to themselves" and give originality its long-looked-for opportunity.¹⁴¹

In the view of this uncredited writer, without The Chip Woman's Fortune, Salome would have failed to receive the attention it did, and the failure of the Broadway experiment indicated that O'Neil had miscalculated in underestimating the importance of black folk plays to the repertory.

The Ethiopian Art Theatre returned to Harlem's Lafayette Theatre for a repeat engagement of Salome and The Chip Woman's Fortune commencing June 4. The run included a Friday night midnight performance and daily matinees. Soon circumstances would intervene to bring about the complete demise of the Ethiopian Art Theatre.

Richardson placed the blame for the ultimate failure of the Ethiopian Art Theatre squarely on the shoulders of O'Neil, asserting that the bill ran well on Broadway the first week, and that changing it was a mistake. Audience members who arrived the second week anticipating the original

bill were vocal in their displeasure at the change.

According to Richardson, O'Neil, in response to criticism of his decision, "left in a huff, stranding the cast in New York."¹⁴²

On Saturday, June 9, 1923, Robert Levy, former head of the Quality Amusement Corporation, which had once run the Lafayette Theatre and managed the Lafayette Players, and current president of the Syndicate Attractions Circuit, had Raymond O'Neil arrested on a charge of grand larceny. Levy alleged that O'Neil had misappropriated \$3,500 in funds.¹⁴³ The producing coalition fell apart, never to be rebuilt.

In an article for Theatre Magazine, W. E. B. DuBois attributed the theatre company's failure to critics who were incapable of dispassionate judgment: "If this new thing had come out of France with a European imprint I cannot but think that New York would have gone wild in praise at its daring originality."¹⁴⁴ DuBois considered the effort worthwhile in striking a blow for getting the African American playwright and actor into the mainstream of American theatre.

It would appear that unanimous and enthusiastic approval from the New York professional critics early in his career would have stimulated some interest in Willis Richardson by the commercial producing establishment. Though Richardson did benefit from the success of The Chip Woman's Fortune in other ways, another Broadway opportunity

was not one of them. Try as he might, Richardson could not obtain so much as an agent.¹⁴⁵ Many years after The Chip Woman's Fortune, Leigh Whipper, a black performer, director and producer, attempted to raise funds for a Broadway production of one of Richardson's full-length plays, The Amateur Prostitute, but could not; Whipper was assisted in this effort by Richardson's good friend and correspondent, Frank Wilson.¹⁴⁶

Richardson completed ten full-length plays which were neither produced or published: The Amateur Prostitute, Family Discord, Hope of the Lowly, The Bootblack Lover, Joy Rider, The Wine Seller, The Visiting Lady, The Flight of the Natives, The Broken Banjo, and The Chip Woman's Fortune. The latter three are full-length versions built from one-act plays.¹⁴⁷

However, Richardson's one-act plays, of which he left a body of forty,¹⁴⁸ proved extremely popular with black Little Theatre companies, stock companies, colleges and amateur groups. Nineteen of his one-act plays were published.¹⁴⁹ Richardson became arguably the most popular, most produced black playwright in these venues during the twenties. When asked, even Richardson could not gauge the locations and numbers of productions of his plays, since it was quite often the case that he was not contacted by the groups performing them.¹⁵⁰

In fact, this casual attitude toward the playwright's work was the cause of a permanent rift between Richardson and Alain Locke. Locke gave the Howard Players permission to perform Compromise, which Locke had included in his highly significant literary anthology, The New Negro, and failed to notify Richardson of the production though both were in the same city. When he discovered that his play was in performance, Richardson sent Locke a letter requesting a five-dollar royalty. Locke's response was never to speak to Richardson again. Richardson attributes his failure to have his work included in another important anthology, The Negro Caravan, to which he had been asked to contribute, to this incident.¹⁵¹ The chief editor of The Negro Caravan was Sterling A. Brown, then a professor at Howard University. The misunderstanding which broke off the friendly relationship between Locke and Richardson may appear humorous in retrospect, but it is possible that the lack of Locke's influence may have been detrimental to Richardson's quest for publishing opportunities.

Richardson's most prolific playwriting period occurred from the 1920s through the 1930s. Though his playwriting productivity tapered off sharply after this period and he turned his attention toward the short story form, Richardson kept writing and revising his plays until the time of his death.

The most popular of Richardson's plays was probably The Broken Banjo. This play, winner of the Krigwa contest of 1925, gained for Richardson the opportunity to meet DuBois in person for the first time when he travelled to New York to be awarded his prize.¹⁵² Contest judge Eugene O'Neill had commented, "I am glad to hear the judges all agreed on The Broken Banjo and that the play was so successfully staged. Willis Richardson should certainly continue working in his field."¹⁵³ Though rejected by the Federal Theatre Project during the 1930s, The Broken Banjo may have been the most frequently produced of his plays.

In 1926 Richardson gained honorable mention in the Opportunity contest for Fall of the Conjurer. The Bootblack Lover took first place in the 1926 Crisis contest. Richardson wrote for a short biography printed in the Crisis,

About 1918 I began to write plays and have been fortunate to have some of them produced. . . . I have been asked many times which of my plays I like best and have always been uncertain which one to name, but now that I have just finished writing it, I think I prefer the three act version of "The Chip Woman's Fortune."¹⁵⁴

In 1927 DuBois amended the rules of the Krigwa contest, eliminating any persons who won either first or second place twice in the same category from competition and relegating them to the newly formed Krigwa Academy as judges. Richardson and Countee Cullen were the first to be given that distinction.

Richardson was an integral part of the Krigwa movement in Washington; several of his plays were produced by both the New York and Washington companies of the Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre. Krigwa was active in Washington from 1927 through 1935. He was also one of the Saturday Nighters, an appellation applied to the group of writers who gathered weekly at poet Georgia Douglas Johnson's home to read and discuss each other's work into the wee hours of Sunday mornings. When DuBois or Langston Hughes were in town, they often dropped in.¹⁵⁵

In April 1928 Carolina Magazine printed two Richardson plays, The Idle Head and Flight of the Natives, in a special number on black drama. Richardson edited his first anthology, Plays and Pageants From the Life of the Negro, for publication in 1930. Three of his own works, The King's Dilemma, The House of Sham and The Black Horseman are included in this volume of eight plays and four pageants. In the preface, Richardson states that these dramatic works are intended for use in schools. He discusses the difficulties of choosing plays for young audiences, including appropriateness of subject matter, characters, and use of dialect.¹⁵⁶

Richardson appears to have had a special concern about dialect and its proper use. This is not surprising, given the use of distorted dialect on the stage. Richardson contributed an article to the October 1924 issue of

Opportunity on roles for the black actor and the use of dialect, asserting that authentic dialect is pleasing to the ear and would be suitable for use in reciting Shakespearian verse.¹⁵⁷

Another Richardson concern was improvement of black performer, material, and audience:

The company of Lafayette Players is a case in point. These players whose acting in most instances is naturally bad on account of careless training, or no training at all, do as well as many white companies which have been similarly trained. I have often wondered if the excellent support which Negro audiences give these players and the bad plays they offer (Broadway cast-offs) is the reason for the lack of training and the careless choice of plays. I also wonder if, when the Negro audiences obtain some better standard of criticism, their natural demand for better things in their theaters will be met with better dramas and more trained acting. The indiscriminate praise and support of bad acting and worthless plays surely cannot last forever.¹⁵⁸

Over a year away from his Broadway experience, an air of frustration seemed to hang over Richardson's remarks. This frustration did not appear to abate, but may have intensified with the passage of time, as evidenced by a 1925 article concerning gaining more diverse and truthful delineations of black characters onstage:

Any discussion of this question will make these people who are particularly interested in the Negro race wonder if Negroes would willingly accept serious plays in those theatres they support. All of us know they accept the blackface comedian with his painted lips and cruel jokes; accept him with wild applause, and go to see him perform the same insanity time after time, whether he be bootlegger, thief, crapshooter, or criminal of whatever kind. So long as he grins and cracks a laughable joke he may be their hero forever. But for one moment wash the burnt cork and paint from his face and let him be a bootlegger planning seriously

to become wealthy by this illegal practice and he is at once taboo. . . . Has it narrowed down to the fact that as a fool a Negro character may do anything he wills and gain applause while one error on the part of a Negro character as a man will make the whole race throw up its hands in horror?¹⁵⁹

The stakes for material and psychological survival in this country were so high that realism in art was a fearful prospect for the African American. One answer might be to paint only a positive "credit to the race" portrait of blacks. Richardson could not approach his work this way for two reasons: first, it was illogical; second, it would prove uninteresting:

We hear that the desire is for Negro characters of refinement and culture . . .

No, it is not necessary for your leading character to be a criminal, but it is very necessary for him to be interesting and distinctly a Negro type. In order for him to be interesting he must either do something or have something done to him; and in order for him to be a distinct Negro type he must be distinctly different from the white man. . . . the cultured Negro is so much like the cultured white man that he is seldom interestingly different enough to be typical of the whole Negro race. . . . and unless it should be a propaganda play the average audience would hardly call it racial.¹⁶⁰

Playwrights who have depicted unpleasant Negro characters have gotten very little encouragement from the Negro group. [As examples, Richardson mentions O'Neill's The Emperor Jones, The Dreamy Kid and All God's Chillun Got Wings and Torrence's Granny Maumee] . . . I venture to say that this was because the characters . . . did not taste the joys of life . . . And the Negro playwrights themselves will be in for a very rough time of it, unless they agree to forget all logic, and depict fortunate characters who attain great wealth or become kings and queens, and live happily ever after.

And the Negro writer, if he wishes his work to attain any permanance, must not be discouraged. . . . He must make his audience hear the truth, or nothing. He must not allow himself to be howled down . . .¹⁶¹

In a number of respects, the problems of white and black dramatists were similar. Their individual constituencies, in such proximity and yet so very far apart, would have difficulty accepting drama that was other than the traditional escape from reality, the familiar, comfortable conventions of comedy and melodrama.

Richardson refused to confine the range of his characters. He wrote folk plays of the black underclass and middle class, created kings, queens and fantasy characters, and recreated historical figures. He tried his hand at verse drama and pageants. The propaganda content of his plays varied from negligible to primary.

Historian Carter G. Woodson, who had played a major role in the preparation and editing of Plays and Pageants in the Life of the Negro,¹⁶² requested that Richardson compile a second anthology, this time of plays with black historical themes. Negro History in Thirteen Plays was published in 1935. Poet-dramatist May Miller is listed as co-editor. Richardson contributed five plays to the anthology: Antonio Maceo, about the betrayal of a Cuban patriot; Attucks the Martyr, set just before the death of the American Revolutionary War hero; The Elder Dumas, a rather unflattering portrait of Alexandre Dumas pere; Near Calvary, a treatment of the story of Simon the Cyrenian which was broadcast on the radio program "Voice of America" on July 7, 1936;¹⁶³ and In Menelik's Court, a love story set amid the

intrigue of an 1898 Italian plot against the Ethiopian throne.

After the publication of Negro History in Thirteen Plays Richardson's output of new plays dropped sharply. In 1941, Miss or Mrs. was produced by the Bureau of Engraving Dramatic Club in Washington¹⁶⁴ and little was heard from Richardson until the publication of his third and final anthology, The King's Dilemma and Other Plays for Children, in 1956. The King's Dilemma, Near Calvary and The Dragon's Tooth had been previously published elsewhere; the other plays in this collection, The Gypsy's Finger Ring, Man of Magic and The New Santa Claus, were new.

Richardson appears to have turned most of his attention to writing short stories based on his recollection of real-life events. Many of these stories were meant to be part of his autobiography; there is no evidence that this work was ever completed. Two of the stories, "Growing Up in Washington" and "He holds His Head Too High," were published in The Crisis. As late as 1974, Richardson was reworking The Amateur Prostitute as well as some of his other old plays.¹⁶⁵

Willis Richardson lived long enough to see another resurgence of attention to African-American art in the 1960s and early 1970s. It is unfortunate that his response to the drama of this period is not recorded. However, Richardson was asked prior to his death in 1977 which writers were

influenced by him, a question at which he modestly chuckled before responding, "I don't know."¹⁶⁶

CHAPTER 3

APPEARANCES

The story of the writer of the play was actually better than the play.¹

Born in 1886 in Wichita, Kansas, where his father, a former slave, had settled after his emancipation, Garland Anderson moved to San Francisco at the age of six with his parents and older brothers.² Anderson entered school at age seven. His mother, who had some education and imbued him with her advocacy for women's suffrage and prohibition,³ died when he was eleven. By the age of twelve, despite his father's wish that he remain in school, Anderson forsook a formal education, found a job as a newsboy, and left home to "tramp around the country."⁴

As a young adult, Anderson, who never smoked or drank alcohol studied the precepts of Christian Science; eventually finding these precepts too rigid, he turned to more general studies of psychology and metaphysics.⁵ Much of his young adult working life, from about age twenty-one to thirty-eight, was spent as a switchboard operator, a bellhop, and a railroad pullman porter.⁶ At the time he wrote Appearances, Anderson was employed at the Braeburn Hotel in San Francisco.

The impulse to write a play was generated by Anderson's desire to spread his spiritual beliefs:

My first thought of writing a play came as the result of the many guests in the hotel in which I was employed, repeatedly telling me that "my views of life were wonderful, what a beautiful way I had of always trying to show people the bright side of life and what a shame it was that I could not reach more people with my message." I too had a desire to reach more people with my message, but the question was, how am I going to do it? About that time, I saw Channing Pollock's wonderful play, "The Fool." Then the thought, if I could only write a play I could reach thousands of people, but how could I ever hope to write a three-act drama. In spite of this realization the desire still remained. . . .⁷

Anderson was inspired by a touring production of The Fool, which had opened on Broadway in 1922. The central character of this four-act melodrama is Daniel Gilchrist, a young man who has turned his back on a life of wealth and privilege in order to follow as closely as possible the teachings of Jesus Christ. He is misunderstood by former friends of his own social class and frequently mistrusted by the downtrodden people he attempts to help. His former guardian threatens to commit him to a mental institution, and he is rejected by the elders of his church. Daniel is drained by the efforts of his former fiancée, who could not reconcile herself to a life of poverty, to tempt him from his chosen path. He opens a homeless shelter called Overcoat Hall. The climax occurs when Daniel is threatened by a gang of men who misunderstood his efforts to counsel their leader's wife. During the ensuing melee, a miracle occurs. A homeless, crippled waif, Mary Margaret, who has

been praying for Daniel, drops her crutches and walks. The mob, at the point of beating Daniel senseless, is now awestruck by the miracle. The play closes as it opens, on a Christmas Eve, as Daniel and Mary Margaret gaze contentedly at the stars.⁸ Anderson was moved by the strong religious message of the play. He may not have been aware of it, but some circumstances surrounding the production of Pollock's play foreshadowed similar events during the production of Appearances:

. . . The attitude of many reviewers, and apparently of many who saw the play, was not altogether favorable, and for three weeks the fate of "The Fool" . . . hung uncertainly in the balance. The fact that it was frankly a sermon drama seemed to mitigate against it. About that time, however, thanks largely to the persistent efforts of Mr. Pollock to interest the public he knew would like the play . . . the tide turned. Within another fortnight the theatre was packed at every performance. . . .⁹

Like Pollock, Anderson would have to fight for his play's life; yet he would achieve a different kind of victory. Anderson thought out the plot for his play, originally entitled Judge Not According to Appearances, for three months. Then for three weeks, as he worked his shift at the switchboard, he committed his play to paper. By now it was autumn 1924, the beginning of a year-long odyssey which would alter the remainder of his life.¹⁰

Appearances' protagonist is Carl Saunderson, a black bellhop at the Hotel Mount Shasta in San Francisco. The first act is set in the hotel's lobby. In a brief prologue,

two hotel residents, Judge Robinson and Judge Thornton, discuss the contents of an unusual dream which Carl has described to Judge Thornton:

- Judge Robinson: The bellboy. Oh, yes, he is the one who thinks a man can do anything he believes he can. What is he delving in, some kind of creed or religion?
- Judge Thornton: Oh, he says it is just simple faith and no particular creed or religion.
- Judge Robinson: If he believes a man can do anything, then why don't [*sic*] he make something of himself? Why is he working as a bellhop?
- Judge Thornton: That is just what I was going to tell you, he believes that his dream is coming true, for he intends to work it out himself and in doing it he will prove that any man can do what he believes he can, if his purpose is right.
- Judge Robinson: How will this prove his point?
- Judge Thornton: He reasons this way. That if he; with color, lack of education, lack of money and all against him; can work his dream out in real life, it will prove that other people with greater advantages can naturally do greater things.¹¹

Carl enters and his dream unfolds before the audience. The exposition in Act 1 introduces a number of characters and reveals their problems. Mr. Thompson, the owner/manager and his wife are near separation due to his clandestine relationship with a woman named Elsie. Judge Thornton's daughter, Louise, has doubts about her engagement to Wilson,

a city prosecuting attorney. Wilson verbally abuses Carl because he is jealous of Louise's trust in the bellboy and his ideas. Wilson is also involved in a risky financial venture which involves wresting control of a selenium mine from the honest westerner, Kellard, who is representing his partners. Two other black characters, Ella and Rufus, are also introduced. Ella Buford, a maid who is studying law at night school, is Carl's fiancée. Rufus wanders in from the street and gains a job as a porter:

Rufus: I know some Bufords. It wouldn't be that you is relations to the Bufords of Gadsden, Alabama, ma home town?

Ella: No, sir, my family came from Ohio.

Rufus: Oh, which reminds me of a story, if I may exude. Well, one darkey meets another darkey and says, "Ain't you the darkey I met in Chicago last spring?" And the other darkey says, "I ain't never been in Chicago my whole life." Then the first darkey says, "I ain't never been in Chicago my own self," so it must have been two other darkeys.

Wilson unsuccessfully attempts to bribe Carl into helping him pressure Louise into marriage. Carl is subjected to veiled threats and more verbal abuse. Carl heads home at the end of his shift, while Rufus is sent to buy ice cream for a hotel resident. Suddenly, screams from outside are heard in the lobby. Rufus, distraught, rushes in, fearing a lynching. Soon Elsie is brought in, then Carl is dragged in by policemen. Elsie accuses Carl of attacking her.

The setting for the second act is a courtroom. Judge Robinson is presiding over Carl's case, while Wilson serves as prosecutor:

Judge Robinson
(to Carl): Where is your attorney?

Carl: Your Honor, I have no attorney. I do not feel that one is necessary.

Judge Robinson: Young man, you are here charged with a very serious offense. If you are convicted it means a long term of imprisonment.

Carl: Your Honor, I am innocent of this charge. I shall tell nothing but the truth, and the truth needs no defense.

Judge Thornton stands by to advise and assist, as Elsie and two other witnesses testify against Carl. Carl takes the stand to testify that it was he who was accosted by Elsie, who attempted to extort money from him, then started screaming. Though Kellard tries to support Carl's story, he cannot corroborate it. Finally, Rufus George Washington Jones is called to the stand. He is asked to explain his whereabouts at the time of the incident:

Rufus: Yes, sir. Judge. I knows these places around here don't sell ice cream to no colored folks, so I goes way down South, take ten minutes on the car and go to Carlin's drug store; (to Judge Robinson) That's the colored drug store, Your Honor.

On the way back with the ice cream, Rufus sees Carl and Elsie struggling, Carl calls out for him, and Rufus approaches them. At this moment an angry crowd begins to form. Terrified, Rufus runs and hides. He has heard the

mention of calling in dogs. His testimony is interrupted, as Judge Robinson questions the relevancy of pursuing the discussion of dogs any further. Judge Thornton explains the significance of Rufus relating a past experience to the court to explain the motivation for his behavior:

Judge Thornton: . . . it shows the blind hatred that seems to inflame certain types of white minds where a Negro is concerned, and will explain to the jury why some of this testimony may have been influenced by this hatred.

Rufus is permitted to tell his story:

Rufus: Well, I was workin' for a lady back home and she 'cused me of stealin' a ring, so they takes me and locks me in the smoke house till the Constable can come. So I digs myself out and gets away an' into a swamp and hides myself. In the middle of the night the baying of the dogs wakes me up and I knows they got the scent by the way they bays, and I starts travelin', but 'tain't no use, so I climbs a big old stump and soon the dogs is all around me, then the white folks come and they want to string me up, but the Constable wouldn't let them, and they drags me back to the house, when we gets there the lady she finds her ring where she lost it, and tell the folks I didn't steal it at all.

Judge Robinson: Did they arrest her?

Rufus: No sir. She gave me two dollars and give me my job back again.

Judge Robinson: And you took them?

Rufus: Yes, sir. First time I ever had a whole two dollars in my whole life.

Wilson attempts to punch holes in Rufus' testimony, and perhaps later implicate him in the incident. He asks Rufus why he had to travel so far to get ice cream:

- Wilson: You say that no store in the neighborhood or near the place of the assault will serve a colored man with ice cream:
- Rufus: No sir, I didn't say that.
- Wilson: Don't you know it's against the law to refuse to serve a colored person?
- Rufus: I never said they refused to serve you, sir.
- Wilson: Oh, then, you could have bought the ice cream around here.
- Rufus: Yes, sir.
- Wilson: Then why didn't you?
- Rufus: Well, they will serve you sir, but they put some flavor in that ice cream that just spoils it for eatin' sir.
- Wilson: That's preposterous.
- Rufus: Is that so, sir? I never hears with what they calls it before. It sure tastes worse than it sounds-- . . .
- Wilson: I said, if you are innocent, why did you run?
- Rufus: Because you're innocent ain't goin' to do yer no good if you're hangin' from a telegram pole.

Rufus goes on to testify that Carl was trying to break away from Elsie. Louise takes the stand to provide corroborative evidence of Rufus' ice cream story. Rufus is cleared of any connection with the incident. Wilson then offers his summation to the jury:

Wilson: . . . The law says that there must be one law for white and the same law for black, and I subscribe to the law, but there is something that the law cannot control and that is the honor of a white woman when attacked by a black man. . . .

Wilson paints a portrait of Carl as a pseudo-religious hypocrite and potential rapist. Carl, who has remained mute throughout the proceedings, offers his own summation:

Carl: . . . Your Honor, and Members of the Jury, I have made no defense because I need none. I have done no wrong and that's why I believe harm cannot come to me. Even if you find me guilty and send me to prison I will still believe that good will still be good and truth more powerful than prison bars. I feel nothing but good to this lady who has so falsely accused me and in my heart there is a great sorrow for her, for as good will come from good, so evil comes from evil, it is as one thinks in his heart. I have told the truth--there is nothing more to say.

Judge Robinson charges the jury, but before it can leave to deliberate, Judge Thornton introduces a surprise witness, Mrs. Thompson. She had wished to remain silent, but realizing the potential consequences for Carl, "some irresistible force" compelled her to come forward. Her husband's interest in Elsie caused her to hire a private detective. An investigation into her background uncovered the fact that Elsie is not a widow, as she purported, but a wife who deserted her husband and child. Six months earlier she had unsuccessfully tried the same stunt she pulled on Carl on another man. This man fought back by having her charged with blackmail. Not only is Elsie a fugitive from

justice, she is also a "Negress" passing for white. The detective with the supporting documentation is ready to testify. The courtroom is stunned, and Wilson is nonplussed. Elsie, cornered, screams out that the plot against Carl was conceived and executed by Wilson. Carl is exonerated and Wilson, disgraced, will face action by the Bar Association.

Act 3 returns us to the hotel lobby. Carl now spends his free time writing. His inspiration, he explains to Rufus, "comes from the source of infinite supply." He must share the proof of his faith with others. Judge Thornton and Louise now suspect Wilson of attempting to defraud Kellard. Elsie appears on the scene. Mrs. Thompson has helped her seek a reconciliation with her husband. It was Wilson who broke up their home in the first place. Wilson has seen Elsie surreptitiously pass a secret letter from Mrs. Thompson to Carl. Wilson snatches the letter and reads excerpts to Thompson. Infuriated at the thought that Carl may have some secret relationship with his estranged wife, Thompson attacks Carl. Elsie steps in to reveal that she and Carl had been sworn to secrecy to surprise Mr. Thompson. His wife has returned to him and awaits him upstairs. The letter was a thank you note to Carl for his spiritual guidance. Mr. Thompson rushes upstairs. Ella runs to assist a roughed-up Carl, and they discuss their future:

Ella: Oh, I'm so proud of you. You're going up and up--and will take your place along with Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington.

Carl: We are going up together, dear. For any success I might attain will be due to the inspiration I receive from you. For I firmly believe that any man who ever succeeded must have been inspired by some good woman.

Judge Thornton, Louise, and Kellard unravel Wilson's fraudulent mine scheme; he is arrested. Kellard and Louise are now fully free to become engaged. As the lights fade, Carl returns from his dream:

Carl: . . . for all my thoughts and all they said were filled with a big message If a black bellboy with not much schooling could imagine himself a playwright, that by believing and working he could write a play that was interesting and entertaining enough to hold an audience, it would prove to the world beyond the shadow of a doubt that any man can do what he desires to do, can become anything he desires to be.

The play then takes a slightly surreal turn, as Carl reveals to the ensemble before him that they were all characters he dreamt, but are now real. Carl's dream has come true.

Anderson took his manuscript to George Warren, dramatic critic at the San Francisco Chronicle, who advised him to expand his plot and rewrite. Anderson took this advice, then sought out a prominent actor, Richard Bennett, for his opinion. Bennett was supportive.¹²

Accounts differ as to how the play reached the hands of the superstar entertainer Al Jolson. In one of several

pamphlets later published by Anderson, he describes the next steps he took:

A friend suggested that I get in touch with Al Jolson, so I wrote Mr. Jolson (who was in New York) and he requested me to send him the manuscript, which I did, and later decided to follow in person, with the result that Mr. Jolson gave me a wonderful letter regarding the merits of the play, and money to cover my round trip fare from San Francisco.¹³

Some accounts attribute contact with Jolson to a cousin of the entertainer.¹⁴ Jolson may not have expected a neophyte black playwright to appear at his door one November day in 1924,¹⁵ but he provided invaluable assistance. He did not produce the play himself but he gave Anderson the chance to find a producer. Perhaps his greatest contribution was lending Anderson his press agent:

Through the press agent for Al Jolson the Metropolitan newspapers have given considerable space to the fact that Anderson had the nerve to give up his job temporarily and come to New York to get his play produced.¹⁶

Jolson's letter of recommendation and the publicity surrounding "the bellhop playwright" enabled Anderson to meet a number of prominent social and theatrical figures, including Channing Pollock, whose name soon became linked with the project. Human interest stories began to pop up in the New York daily papers telling a new Horatio Alger story:

Anderson has confidence in his play. So have others. Al Jolson, the star of "Big Boy," read it and liked it so well that he paid Anderson's expenses across the continent. Richard Bennett, the star of "They Knew What They Wanted," has the script now and has told Anderson that he believes he can place it. Marjorie Rambeau, the actress, Channing Pollock and Ernest

Culberson, author of "Goat Alley," are others who have read it. They all call it an unusual play.

Anderson hopes that a producer will accept it soon. His job at the Braeburn Apartments is being kept open for him. His 8-year-old boy, his brother's widow and his brother's four children are waiting in San Francisco. They are dependent on Anderson.

If he can place his first play he intends to write others. But in the meantime he will go back to the switchboard to provide for those dependent on him. Whether the play is produced or not he knows that he has demonstrated the truth of the play; he was an unlettered negro [sic] and he made himself a playwright.¹⁷

Anderson worked hard to raise financial backing for the play, but after nearly five months in New York, made negligible progress. Anderson sought out Pollock's advice on his idea of presenting a public reading of the play. Pollock warned Anderson that it would be difficult to attract an audience, especially an audience which might contribute financial support. He advised Anderson to try his reading in a small hall in order to minimize risking his very limited financial resources. Anderson, acting on his faith and instinct, rented the Grand Ballroom at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel.¹⁸

Anderson did not have the \$150.00 necessary to secure the ballroom. He decided to go to the National Bank on Broadway and speak with the vice president. After hearing his story, the vice president introduced Anderson to the bank's president. Anderson told the president he had no job, no definite producer for the play, and no collateral, only his word that he would repay the loan. The loan was granted.¹⁹

In an effort to attract important people to his cause, Anderson decided to contact the most prominent man in the state of New York. Governor Al Smith, in New York for a brief visit, was staying at the Biltmore Hotel. Anderson called the hotel and then presented himself to the governor's clerk. Though told the governor would be too busy to see him, Anderson took his place at the end of a long line of hopeful visitors and waited. Undaunted by the efforts of the governor's bodyguard to send him away, his patience was rewarded when the bodyguard finally took one of Anderson's press clippings to the governor. Governor Smith met with Anderson and consented to be his guest at the reading, which was to take place two weeks later.²⁰ Governor Smith's name on the invitation assured the attendance of socially prominent New Yorkers.

Over six hundred people heard Judge Not According to Appearances read at the Waldorf on Palm Sunday, April 5, 1925. The sole reader was Richard B. Harrison, who would later earn lasting fame for his portrayal of De Lawd in the original stage production of The Green Pastures by Marc Connelly. According to Anderson, the Appearances reading was Harrison's first exposure to a white audience.²¹ As Harrison read, Anderson "sat nearby in his bellhop uniform."²² Although the applause was warm and enthusiastic, the evening netted Anderson only one hundred and forty dollars.²³

Anderson held fast to his dream, and found another way to keep the play alive. He wrote a letter to the President of the United States, Calvin Coolidge, offering to present him with a copy of the play. Though the response was a polite refusal, Anderson journeyed to Washington and presented himself at the White House. He spoke with official after official, moving up through the hierarchy until he reached the President's secretary. The secretary could not grant Anderson a private audience, but did take the manuscript into the President's office, and permitted Anderson to follow a scheduled group in to shake Coolidge's hand.²⁴

Another reading, this one open to the general public and free of charge, was given on April 21 at the Manhattan Opera House (34th Street at 8th Avenue).²⁵ J. A. Rogers, an historian who wrote a regular column for The Messenger, gave Anderson, his play and his supporters a scathing review:

Readers of this column have in all probability heard of Garland Anderson, protege of Al Jolson, and author of the play, "Judge Not According to Appearances," who, coming fresh from his bellhopping in San Francisco, has wormed his way into the personal notice of thousands of leading Easterners, including President Coolidge, and who has received more publicity than Shaw, Galsworthy, Gordon, Dunsany, Sholom Asch, or any living playwright with the possible exception of Eugene O'Neill, of "All God's Chillun."

Anderson in his stride across public notice is one of those phenomena made possible by color prejudice in America. Before I enlarge on that let me say a word about his creed. . . . To quote from Anderson: "The desire to accomplish is proof that you can accomplish." Good. I have always had a burning desire to be the world's champion runner. From now on Nurmi had better look out. . . .

With all respect to Heywood Broun, Al Jolson, Richard Bennett, Marjorie Rambeau and some nine other endorsers of it, Anderson's alleged play is the most long-winded monotonous sprawl of words that have ever tormented my ear. . . .

Consider the cumbersome title Why not: "Judge Not" or "Appearances?" Besides, if one is not to judge by appearances, by what one sees, what then? Judge by what one believes, that is, his prejudice? . . .

For the life of me I could not give a coherent synopsis of it Almost the entire script is one long monotony of Christian Science hokum and moralizing . . . relieved here and there by jokes so stale that they are new again like the waistcoat of Sir Roger de Coverley that had been in and out of style.²⁶

Rogers goes on to debunk the merits of Anderson's plot and his bellhop hero. As examples of improbabilities, Rogers describes some events not included in the published version of the play. In one, the hotel owner, who is named Carlson, not Thompson, is saved from bankruptcy by Carl. Carl opens a cafe, makes enough money in one year to buy the hotel, then sells it back to his former employer for a hundred dollars. In another, the owner's wife is immobilized by a badly swollen sprained ankle. Carl persuades her that her swollen ankle is a state of mind and she attends a dance that night. Rogers counted four black characters in the piece rather than the three that appeared in the produced version. The courtroom scene, with its disregard for realistic procedure, was sheer "asininity" in Rogers' view.²⁷

Rogers estimated the value of the publicity Anderson received at half a million dollars:

One would fancy that after all this producers would be hounding him to death. On the contrary, they are steering as clear of him as the plague. Is this because any of the four colored characters are of the new Negro type? Far otherwise. All are of that happy-go-lucky, trusting innocuous kind, that delights the Southern Ku-Klux heart.

. . . Still Anderson is a go-getter and one must admire him for that. He has that initiative which, if it could suddenly be shot into every Negro, would put the "race" fifty years ahead in a week.

Anderson says that he is going to raise the \$30,000 necessary to produce the play himself. I, for one, most heartily hope he does . . . particularly as Negroes are not being called upon to foot the bill.

At the reading there was nothing but space in the great opera house. Afterwards I questioned more than a dozen Negroes of intelligence and all agreed that it was the worst mess they had ever heard.

I hope I have said enough by this time to make it clear that my quarrel is not with Anderson but with certain friends of the Negro. . . . Tens of thousands of white writers produce annually just such inferior work and these gentlemen would, in their case, have unhesitatingly chucked it in the wastepaper basket. A member of a "downtrodden race" does it . . . and they boost it into pseudo-fame through indiscriminate sympathy. . . .

The publicity given Anderson is at bottom the same as that given John Daniel, the gorilla eating with a knife and fork and smoking a cigarette. How almost human!

. . . when will our good white friends cease regarding us as objects of pity and judge us by the standards of men? . . .

Judging by appearances Anderson has a winning personality. But while sincerity is one thing, to be able to deliver the goods is quite another. . . .²⁸

Anderson persevered, doggedly making his rounds and speaking wherever he was given the opportunity. Finally, a producer stepped in. On June 19, Lester W. Sagar, manager of the Central Theatre, optioned Appearances.²⁹ Sagar had formerly worked in the Shubert offices; this play would mark his first solo producing effort.³⁰ A number of newspapers

reported this event, and a congratulatory, encouraging editorial appeared in the New York Graphic.³¹

At Anderson's behest, a clause was written into his contract with Sagar, stipulating that Anderson could purchase a half interest in the play for \$15,000:

The request was made because I had heard of so many different playwrights whose plays were accepted for production but were never produced, and realizing that fifteen thousand dollars was sufficient to produce the play, I knew that upon raising that amount I would be assured of an immediate production.³²

The target month for a Broadway production was October, and Anderson gave himself six weeks to accomplish this new fund raising task; the contract gave him until September 15.³³ Anderson's strategy was to return to the West; he was back in San Francisco by June 26.³⁴

On July 9 a reading of Appearances rendered by Anderson's seventeen-year-old niece, Tabytha Anderson, was given at the Native Sons' Hall on Mason Street; a \$1.10 admission fee was charged.³⁵ A highly favorable article in the San Francisco Chronicle declared that Appearances was

The first full length play ever written [emphasis added] by an American negro. . . .

"My play doesn't touch upon the race question at all," says Anderson. "There is a Negro bellboy who is the central character, but he is always polite and courteous, remembers his position, and speaks only when he is spoken to."

Mayor Rolph was present at the reading and gave his encouragement to the plan [to take the show to Broadway]. . . .³⁶

The successful stage reading led to a broadcast reading on radio station KFRC by the City of Paris Players,

with Anderson himself reading Carl.³⁷ There was talk that the first full staging of the play might take place in San Francisco, since Anderson retained the right to mount a stock production on the West Coast.³⁸ California producer Henry Duffy expressed interest in doing so, because "That boy's a sensation in the East."³⁹ There were also reports that Anderson was in the process of writing two other plays.⁴⁰

The interest in the form of publicity shown Anderson and Appearances had not escaped the notice of other producers. New York entertainer Willie Howard and his brother Eugene had announced that they would produce a play written by Leonard Taylor, an African-American graduate of Tufts College and doorman at the Winter Garden Theatre.⁴¹ Soon after, renowned produceer Florenz Ziegfeld optioned a play by J. Eddie Edwards, elevator operator at the New Amsterdam Theatre-likewise an African-American.⁴²

Anderson sold his half interest in Appearances for \$15,000 to two brothers, Harold and Fergus Wilkinson; the brothers had once lived at the Braeburn Hotel Apartments, where Anderson had worked as a bellhop. They would return to New York with him.⁴³ Of course there would be attendant publicity. The party of Anderson, Mr. and Mrs. Harold Wilkinson, and Fergus Wilkinson set out from the steps of San Francisco's City Hall in a two-car caravan on August 7, 1925. Each car sported a banner reading

San Francisco to New York for New York Production
 "Appearances" by Garland Anderson The Black San
 Francisco Bellhop Playwright⁴⁴

Mayor Rolph was out of town, but J. Emmet Hayden, the acting mayor of the city, presented Anderson with a letter of endorsement to the Mayor of New York, John F. Hylan. The Amsterdam News reported the event and reprinted the letter in its entirety.⁴⁵ This paper also reported that producer Sagar would insure that New York would not be outdone by San Francisco by arranging a comparable New York reception.⁴⁶ The caravan planned to stop along the way, "holding receptions" in various cities.⁴⁷ When it reached New York, Anderson was photographed delivering his letter to Mayor Hylan.⁴⁸

Though some members of the black community, such as J. A. Rogers, voiced skepticism about the true merits of Appearances and the aura of hype which appeared to surround it, others simply wished Anderson well:

We note with extreme pleasure that the production of Garland Anderson's play, "Appearances" . . . will at last come to light on Broadway. . . . Garland Anderson will achieve the distinction of attaining nationwide publicity through his attempt to give the public something that is a great venture and accomplishment. Good material is something which knows neither creed nor color. Those standing behind this work . . . are not there because they like Anderson . . . but . . . purely and simply because it has the possibilities of earning them money. If it takes, it will go on the road, if it flops--well, it will go on the road also, but in a different direction. The moral is simply this: if you have brains, use them in getting something that is different and something that looks good to the fellow in the game with the money.⁴⁹

Sagar had hired John Hayden to direct the play. Hayden was an experienced director, who would later direct The Night of January 16 by Ayn Rand and Abide With Me by Claire Boothe Brokaw (Luce) for Broadway, and become a contract director for the Shuberts.⁵⁰

Casting the roles proved problematical. Sagar decided to cast black actors for the three black roles. A racially mixed cast was far from the norm, and the 1924 firestorm over All God's Chillun Got Wings, in which Paul Robeson was cast in an interracial marriage, had not been forgotten:

Contrary to custom, Mr. Sagar did not put white actors into the three Negro parts, but filled them instead from the principals of the Lafayette Stock Company of New York--the most famous Negro theatrical organization in the world.⁵¹

The role of Carl would be essayed by Lionel Monagas, a Lafayette Player who had also been a member of the Ethiopian Art Theatre. His distinguished career, cut short by his death in 1945 at age forty-two, would include work in the Federal Theatre Project, Hollywood films, the American Negro Theatre, the Negro Playwrights Company, and a long list of other stage credits.⁵² The other black actors chosen, Evelyn Mason, selected for the role of Ella and Doe Doe Green, who would gain considerable notice for his portrayal of Rufus, were drawn from other sources.

According to Anderson, Evelyn Mason had not been a professional actress until she met him. He met Mason, whose spiritual views were akin to his own, in the early portion

of his first trip to New York. He allowed her to read his manuscript, and she confided to him that though she had never been on the stage, she had always wanted to be an actress. Anderson, through his philosophy, imbued her with the confidence she needed, and Mason, on her first try, landed a leading role in a professional production at the Lafayette Theatre. Appearances was her first Broadway show.⁵³ Mason also contributed several columns concerning Appearances to The Amsterdam News.

Doe Doe Green was a vaudevillian; Appearances was his first major break in legitimate theatre. Later roles would include a long stint as Gabriel in The Green Pastures and the Federal Theatre.⁵⁴

Before the entire principal cast of eleven white and three black actors could be assembled for the first rehearsal in September, Nedda Harrigan, hired to portray Mrs. Thompson, quit the production upon learning that the cast would be mixed:

Miss Harrigan emphasized the fact that her decision must not be construed as indicative of race prejudice, but said that the production of a play called for so close an association with the other players that she felt that she could not be happy under the circumstances.⁵⁵

Myrtle Tannehill, who would have played Elsie, soon followed suit.⁵⁶ Concern was expressed as to whether "one of the cleanest plays ever to come to Broadway"⁵⁷ would go on.

A few months before her death in 1989, Nedda Harrigan Logan was asked for comment on this incident. Unfortunately, she claimed no recollection of it.⁵⁸ Sagar and Hayden secured replacements the day after the walk out. Mildred Wall stepped into the role of Elsie, while Daisy Atherton took over the role of Mrs. Thompson. The September 15 New York Telegraph reported that Anderson

. . . was a trifle hurt over the action of the two actresses. . . . Surely, he said, they have come in contact with colored persons during their lives, and the colored persons in "Appearances" all play the parts of servants. But Anderson was so happy about other things--that rehearsals at the Union Church on West Forty-eighth Street were going on, that the first performance would be given in Scranton on September 28, and that Broadway would have the play two weeks later--that he did not discuss the matter for long. A true member of his race, he was happy.⁵⁹

The initial performance of Appearances actually took place on September 25, 1925 at the Orpheum Theatre in Easton, Pennsylvania. Local reviewers in Easton reported that the play was well received by a large audience:

Apparently the play's chief bid for fame or otherwise is the fact that it was conceived and written by a young negro whose schooling took him only as far as the fourth grade, according to his statement after the performance last night.

Not that the play is without merit in many places, but it lacks sufficient dramatic interest to forecast its success and the plot is meagre and in spots decidedly amateurish. . . .

Carl, the bellboy, was interpreted by Lionel Monagas, a Negro with considerable histrionic talent. The part of Rufus, the colored porter, was taken by Doe Doe Green, another Negro, who brought reality to the part together with typical African comedy that was irresistible. The rest of the cast was adequate.⁶⁰

Though the emphasis had been placed on Anderson's Cinderella story and the play's positive thinking message, the socially relevant aspects in the piece could not be ignored, although the implication that Anderson could be capable of authoring the piece was viewed as an accident:

The author . . . is unique. . . . Without any training whatever, for him to be able to construct such a play, places him somewhat analogous to "Blind Tom," of many years ago, who will be remembered as a musical genius. He also was a Negro.

"Appearances" deals with many subjects, the predominant one being faith in accomplishment and seeing good in everything. It throws a strong light on the injustice of mob rule and racial prejudice. It is a strong plea for the education of the colored race and for the equality of the sexes.⁶¹

The next stop was Elmira, New York, followed by Utica, where notices were fairly good. The company then returned to Pennsylvania, playing Scranton and Williamsport.⁶² Ticket prices ranged from fifty cents to two dollars.⁶³ All in all the out of town tryout went well.

The Broadway opening of Appearances took place at the Frolic Theatre, which was situated on the roof of the New Amsterdam Theatre at 214 West Forty-second Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, on October 13, 1925. The theatre was owned by Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger,⁶⁴ two of the founders of the Theatrical Syndicate.

All the major newspapers sent reviewers, but due to a heavy schedule of openings, first-string major critics were noticeably absent. This was a season in which 220 new plays opened.⁶⁵ Three plays opened the same night as Appearances:

The Grand Duchess and the Waiter by Alfred Savoir; A Man's Place by Patrick Kearney, and Weak Sisters by Lynn Starling.⁶⁶

The first wave of reviews was primarily favorable, though the emphasis often appeared to be on Anderson's amazing story rather than the merits of the play; the lead paragraph of nearly every review provided a brief chronicle of how Appearances came to be produced. But reactions to Anderson and his play ranged from wholehearted support to cynical amusement. One paper reported:

A dream that came true before their eyes drew one of the season's most spontaneous and thrilling ovations last night from the audience which stayed after the third act . . . to insist that its author come before the curtain. . . .⁶⁷

Another asserted:

Last evening when the play had been done, a timid voice peeped "Author," and another said it a little louder. Finally the mixed audience stopped departing and stood up in the aisles, in their seats and at the door. . . .⁶⁸

There was something about Anderson, however, that moved even the jaded theatregoer:

The bellboy walked on to the stage with clenched and fidgeting fists of intense earnestness. He thanked his audience with so genuine and sincere a speech that one almost felt the theatre had some soul wandering about it, a film of honest regard for this well meaning fellow who was saying an old, old thing with all the enthusiasm of new discovery.⁶⁹

The mainstream press fostered very little, if any doubt of Anderson's sincerity, but thought the structure of the play weak except for its courtroom scene:

It would be pleasant to report . . . that "Appearances" . . . is what is called an unqualified success, but such a report would be only partially true. . . . For the new play . . . is a strange potpourri of not ineffective melodrama and Pollyannaish preaching that is made worthy of respect, if not wholehearted admiration by the transparent sincerity of the author.

But it is when "Appearances" is being melodramatic, rather than sincere, that the author is most successful. The trial scene . . . is overlong, but it is brightened up by some really exciting drama. . . .

The naivete of the drama does have certain virtues, however, for it keeps from being annoying the long speeches by the bellboy protagonist on the power of truth and right thinking. Written by any white playwright, these addresses to the audience would have been unbearable, but in the hands of Negro actor and writer they breathe a profound and disarming spirit of belief.⁷⁰ You may regret them, but you cannot laugh at them.

Most reviewers admitted that they did not take Appearances seriously as a dramatic work. Many sought to avoid the racial issues in the play although Anderson's race was taken into consideration, even by the most favorable reviewers. The play was considered naive, sincere, crude, and primitive . . . like black people:

If the circumstances surrounding the play had been less romantic . . . the above remarks might have been a good deal sharper.⁷¹

This particular reviewer failed to derive any mental or spiritual stimulation . . . but he recommends it to the more pure in heart. It is a primitive play for primitive people.⁷²

But there were some who thought Appearances a good play. John Forbes, reviewing for the Telegraph, pronounced it, "not bad," though "the kind of a play you would expect a Negro bellhop to write--if you did expect a Negro bellhop to

write one." Yet, it "had a certain sense of values" and "did move, and it happened to get somewhere".⁷³ The New York Star deemed Appearances "a good play" which "tells a story that undoubtedly occurs every so often in various parts of the country. It depicts hotel life as no other stage play of the present day has done, due undoubtedly to the author's experience as a hotel bellboy."⁷⁴ According to the Brooklyn Standard Union, Appearances was "a rattling good play."⁷⁵

The Citizen chose not to gloss over the racial issues in the play, declaring, "The Association for the Advancement of the Negro Race will place its stamp of approval on the three-act drama, because it is frankly negro [sic] propaganda."⁷⁶ The New York Globe and Commercial Advertiser went further, calling Appearances a protest against lynch law and

a stirring plea for justice for his race . . . written with a burning zeal . . . for all its faults, it is vivid and forceful and rings true. . . . He voices an impassioned protest against lynch law . . . Its theme, and the obvious sincerity of its telling, lifts "Appearances" to a high place."⁷⁷

A similar analysis appeared in the New York Times:

A finely conceived, crudely wrought protest against lynch law is this drama, "Appearances," which has in it moments of power and a great many moments of ponderousness and stiffness. The fact that it was written by a Negro bellboy, and that it breathes a passionate sincerity, makes it impressive and absorbing.

In the background of this play, and without doubt lurking somewhere in the author's memory, is a lynching--with the cries of the savage mob, the baying of hounds. . . . Out of a passionate protest in his own

heart the playwright has fashioned an eloquent appeal for reason and justice. . . .

The reality of the play and the poetry in it, too, is in the part of the bellboy Carl Sanderson, a part which we are told Mr. Anderson wrote for himself.⁷⁸

Fairly enough, the critics identified autobiographical elements in the character of Carl and Carl's voice as the voice of the playwright. Lionel Monagas was generally praised for his performance as Carl. But "the laurels of the evening went to one Doe Doe Green."⁷⁹ Green was universally and heartily praised by the critics, while Evelyn Mason's performance received an occasional mention as "satisfactory."⁸⁰ The critics differed on the relative merits of the rest of the cast. Louis Frohoff as Judge Robinson appears to have made a consistently favorable impression.

Though probably the harshest comment about Appearances was that it was "a particularly bad play, but . . . nevertheless amusing,"⁸¹ the fairly favorable reception did not sell the play to the Broadway audience. In the second week of the show's run, Variety noted that despite "fairly good notices, business was very light, hardly \$2,000 in seven performances."⁸²

The most enthusiastic supporter of Appearances in the black press corps may have been Bill Potter of the Chicago Defender, who appeared satisfied with the response to the play: "This, no doubt, will be the incentive for writers to get busy and show a different style in offering characters

of the Race [sic] to the public."⁸³ Potter also noted that the play had made a significant contribution by having previewed in cities which had never witnessed a play with an integrated cast.⁸⁴

The Pittsburgh Courier reprinted the New York World's review⁸⁵ while the Amsterdam News printed a column by Alan Dale, who had attended a matinee of the show after it had opened. Dale's commentary was singular in that it alluded to the Broadway run of the Ethiopian Art Theatre in 1923, recalling the "splendid work" of the actors and testifying that "I have always believed in the dramatic tendencies of the race."

Though Dale praised Lionel Monagas and Doe Doe Green, he was hardly impressed by the play:

It would be absurd to waste much time in analysis of this play, at which a small but select matinee audience applauded as though it touched a responsive chord. . . . I admit that this little play is better than some of the offerings that have made Broadway wretched this season.⁸⁶

The show limped into its second week, and Variety reported that a last-minute decision was made to keep Appearances open for a third week, though advertisements had already been pulled from the daily papers.⁸⁷ At the eleventh hour, believers in Anderson stepped in to stop the closing:

H. W. McQuinn and Jack Hodgson, both members of the white race in Dallas, Texas, advanced \$2,500 to keep it on the stage, and as Mr. Anderson comments, "thus proving that the play contains nothing which would shock the sensibilities of the most extreme Southerner."⁸⁸

Despite this development, the prognosis for a run was poor. Still, that week, the Amsterdam News reported optimistically that the play had been well received by the white press, that Doe Doe Green had proven a decided success with audiences and critics alike, and that a continued run would bode well for the future of Green, Monagas, and Mason.⁸⁹

Hopes were dashed in the third week when the box office tallied less than \$1,800.⁹⁰ Closing came after twenty-three performances. Variety attributed the demise of the show partially to the lack of endorsement by major reviewers, caused by a crush of openings.⁹¹ Another article in the same edition reported that since the first week of the run, Anderson had been out gathering support for his play, primarily among Christian Science congregations.⁹² The same determination which had gotten the show produced was now channeled into first, keeping it open, then, raising the funds to reopen.

Anderson again made the rounds of the newspaper offices and contacted his supporters. He reminded his lecture audiences that the hugely successful Able's Irish Rose had faltered badly its first three weeks, and let it be known that among the first to contribute to the Appearances fund was David Belasco, who bought a \$1,000 subscription.⁹³

A promotional brochure was composed, in which several of the most favorable reviews were reprinted. A column by

Heywood Broun which had appeared after Appearances closed was included, in which Broun described his favorable impression of the play and the enthusiasm of the audience. He also told how the two Texans stepped in to save the show for another week, ending with an endorsement for Appearances. Like many others, Broun had forgotten Willis Richardson's brief moment as first black serious dramatic playwright on Broadway two years before:

The play has a strong appeal not because its author is a Negro, not because it is the first drama by a Negro which has appeared on Broadway,⁹⁴ not because Anderson was a bellboy but because it contains eternal truths handled with great emotional power.⁹⁵

Broun's name was published on a list of over a hundred contributors to the fund to save Appearances, as were the names of David Belasco, Al Jolson, Channing Pollock, Henry Miller, Arthur Hopkins, Richard Bennett, Morris Gest, Noel Coward, Houdini, George Jessel, Otto Kruger, Ethel Barrymore, Walter Hampden, Marjorie Rambeau, Pauline Lord, Fay Bainter, Ina Claire, the Marx Brothers, Marilyn Miller, Ernest Culbertson, Lenore Ulric, Sessue Hayakawa, the Federal Council of Churches, Congresswoman F. Kahn and other prominent members of the theatrical community and the community at large.⁹⁶

Support came from significant figures in the African-American community and civil rights movement as well. On the subscription list were prominent performers Florence Mills, Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes and Inez Clough,

A'Lelia Walker, heiress to the beauty products fortune amassed by the first African-American millionaire, Madame Walker, and civil rights activists James Weldon Johnson, Walter White and I. F. Springarn.⁹⁷

Anderson continued his campaign, canvassing church congregations of varied denominations and civic and cultural organizations, as support grew. The Amsterdam News (also forgetting Richardson's achievement) joined in the effort, printing an article which included a letter of appeal circulated by Anderson to every New York newspaper theatre editor and the address to which contributions could be sent:

Mr. Anderson, who is on record as the first Negro to have a play produced on Broadway, is now engaged in the effort to raise an endowment fund for the purpose of again presenting it in a theatre in Manhattan. . . . An endowment fund of \$30,000 will carry the play along for six weeks, at least . . . and by that time, it is the hope . . . the play will have gained enough momentum to carry itself into a pronounced financial and artistic success.⁹⁸

Anderson extended himself further by offering to sign promissory notes to those who wished to lend, rather than contribute funds. Now, more than ever, Appearances was a cause, a ministry:

I am not seeking to be recognized as a wonderful playwright: rather am I seeking to serve humanity through the medium of my play. . . . If I (just a black bellhop, with only four years' schooling) can manage to write a play sufficiently interesting and entertaining to hold an audience for two hours, the very production of this play would automatically prove . . . to my audience that each and every one of them can do much bigger things in life. I ask, can you conceive of any father or mother who would not want their child to see a play in which a black, uneducated bellhop without training, just faith in God and himself, succeeded in

having produced [sic] in order to inspire the child to realize that he, with much greater opportunities, can do much greater things? Can you imagine anyone going away after seeing such a play without being encouraged and refreshed for accomplishment?"⁹⁹

The black community remained divided on the merits of Anderson and his endeavors. To the writers for The Messenger, Anderson was still no more than an opportunist making a name for himself by telling people, especially white people, what they wanted to hear. The Messenger derided him on its editorial page:

Every so often we come in contact with a Negro, a piano player, an actor, who has been praised by parlor parties and applauded by superficial persons until his head has been turned. Quite confident of his ability, which to him must be talent personified, he will tell you in [sic] an air of gusto, "I never had a lesson in my life," or as in a recent case a "playwright" told us he had never been to school but four months in his life. In short, these people are telling you that they are self-made men and women.

A word of advice: if you are dealing in any line of art, literature, painting, drawing, singing, acting, and have never had a lesson or very little training, there is no need of announcing that you are self-made. To anybody who knows anything about the subject, it is self-evident. In fact it has become true in almost every line unless someone has helped to make you, besides yourself, it is obvious that not very much has been made. All of which means that people are either poking fun at you when they praise, or else their opinion doesn't amount to anything.¹⁰⁰

Evelyn Mason retorted angrily on Anderson's behalf through a letter to the Amsterdam News. She characterized The Messenger's remarks as non-constructive and the editorial staff of this journal, at that time led by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, as self-styled "Leading Colored American Thinkers" who failed to represent

mainstream thought in the black intellectual community: "I am sorry those who slander him [Anderson] and who are his superiors educationally (if all education is acquired in the schoolroom) will not themselves write and get a play produced on Broadway, and then cast the first stone."¹⁰¹

In her letter, Mason numbers the total cast as thirty. This number would include the supernumeraries and the jury which was on stage. All became members of Actors Equity through association with this production. She concludes by stating that James Weldon Johnson, after seeing Appearances, believed that this play would foster a better understanding between the races, and that those who would denounce such an effort should be ashamed, but forgiven for their ignorance. She closed her letter with the words of Jesus: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."¹⁰²

The more radical factions notwithstanding, Anderson gained approval from the black leadership establishment, including, finally, W. E. B. DuBois and The Crisis:

The case of Garland Anderson is remarkable. His play "Appearances" is an excellent play. It fascinated both white people and colored people, Northerners and Southerners. Everybody who saw it was enthusiastic about it. It was only those who did not see it and those who assumed that a play by a colored man on Broadway must be negligible that contributed to its financial failure. It is said two white men from Texas enabled it to run as long as it did and now friends, headed by Belasco himself, are raising a subscription to enable the play to open again. If it does appear in New York or elsewhere, the colored people and all their friends ought to fill the houses; and this will not be Charity, it will be Opportunity.¹⁰³

The Amsterdam News offered its address as a collection point for members of New York's black community who wished to contribute to the play it called "a forward step to every Negro in this country."¹⁰⁴ Reporting that the fund was progressing extremely well, the paper announced that a prominent business firm which wished to remain anonymous had pledged a contribution of \$20,000 if Anderson could raise \$10,000.¹⁰⁵ A spirit of optimism prevailed. But the better part of three years would pass before Appearances would return to Broadway.

The time which passed was far from uneventful. By 1927 Anderson's efforts culminated in a new tour of Appearances through the western United States, which began in April in Los Angeles. On tour, Anderson performed an added prologue which prepared the audience for Carl's dream.¹⁰⁶ The response from critics and audiences was favorable, and Appearances remained in Los Angeles for five weeks, followed by over twelve weeks in San Francisco and one week in Seattle.¹⁰⁷

Doe Doe Green was the only member of the original cast retained, as well as the sole black cast member. The role of Carl was portrayed by a new young actor, Dario Shindell, who was frequently pressed to explain that he was not a mulatto.¹⁰⁸ The entire cast now numbered seventeen, since the staging had been adjusted to enable the audience to replace the jury.¹⁰⁹

Wherever Appearances played, Anderson supplemented participation in the performances with speaking engagements before religious and civic organizations. Invitations to speak were numerous, as the predominantly white audiences found Anderson and his message appealing. One Houston columnist who attended one of Anderson's lectures in Los Angeles, fearing that Anderson would be a "spoiled, New York-petted Negro," expressed pleasant surprise at his humility, noting that after he concluded his talk he donned an apron and helped serve refreshments.¹¹⁰

By December 1928, Appearances reached Chicago, having been warmly received in such cities as Oakland, California; Vancouver, British Columbia; Missoula, Great Falls, and Lewiston, Montana; and Duluth, Minnesota.¹¹¹ Porgy and In Abraham's Bosom were enjoying successful Chicago runs at the time Appearances opened at the Shuberts' Princess Theatre on December 23, 1928. A new backer, R. L. Rutter, a millionaire from Spokane, Washington, had entered the picture. He infused a \$20,000 investment into the show and stood ready to provide more cash if necessary; his daughter was a member of the cast.¹¹²

Three weeks after the opening, Robert S. Abbott of the Chicago Defender exhorted the African American community to support Appearances, dismayed by the paltry number of black faces in the audience.¹¹³ Jack L. Cooper, columnist for another black paper, The Chicago Bee, concurred: "I have

seen "Appearances" . . . I regret very much there were not more race people present--not altogether to be amused or entertained, but instead to feel the impact of the blow this play deals social antipathy."¹¹⁴

Although Appearances was now being promoted as a comedy-drama, rather than a melodrama, partially due to the popularity of Doe Doe Green's Rufus, the black press did not shift emphasis from the racial issues. While the Vancouver Sun endorsed the play by stating, "To enjoy the comedy of 'Appearances' is just like going to the bank and drawing money in the form of inspiration and courage",¹¹⁵ the black press emphasized what the mainstream press tended to soft peddle. A column by William Pickens of the Associated Negro Press, which appeared in the Chicago Bee and other black newspapers, noted innovations among the seemingly stock characterizations:

The play does not have the usual buffoonery and tomfoolery that is always called for by the producers of Negro plays. The humor of the ignorant hotel porter is used as a vehicle for getting across the most solid philosophy of interracial relations. When the crooked lawyers charge the porter with having shown his guilt by running away from a pursuing mob, the porter confounds the lawyer by simply remarking that his "innocence" would have done him no good after he was hung to [sic] a telegraph pole.

I have seen a lot of Negro-white plays, but Garland Anderson is the first playwright I have seen "get over" a scene on the white American stage in which a proud white man is made to "take low" before a Negro man, even though this Negro man is the porter who had already demonstrated his moral superiority to the white man, who at this juncture of the play had been thoroughly exposed as an educated crook.

This is also a play in which the Negro character is the genuine hero and "triumphs." Other playwrights

have had to "apologize" . . . for showing Negro virtues to the audience, by finally sacrificing the Negro; as if they dared not make him a hero and then permit him to live--in the sight of white Americans, if the Negro is going to be a hero, he must finally be a dead one--homage paid by tribute to prejudice. That is exactly what "All God's Chillun," "Emperor Jones", "Abraham's Bosom," and all other such plays by white men have done. . . . We do not mean that every heroic Negro soul, in real life, must triumph, but neither [must] they all fail.¹¹⁶

In the every-day life of the African American, the most significant subject matter of Appearances was not metaphysics, but the reality of black life in the United States:

The court trial in the play clearly demonstrates the injustice daily faced by the Negro in certain sections of the United States. The general public, until a few years ago, actually believed that all Negroes who were lynched had committed a crime against some white woman. Not until the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had made an exhaustive investigation of the lynching record and presented the facts to the reading public to prove the contrary, was there an effort to stop lynching by any agency in America. . . . The case of Ben Bess, that will come before the . . . Superior Court of South Carolina (1928) is one instance of this kind. Ben Bess is a Negro who has served thirteen years in prison on testimony of a white woman who recently signed a statement in which she said, "she had falsely accused the negro [sic] of assault." He was given his freedom. After friends of the woman called her attention of [sic] the possibility of her being prosecuted she then gave out a statement that she did not mean what she had signed, that "she only meant to forgive the Negro." He was then returned to the penitentiary for the remainder of his life.¹¹⁷

Whether viewed as a universal statement of faith or socio-political propaganda, Appearances made a strong enough showing on its tour to enable it to reopen on Broadway at the Hudson Theatre on Forty-fourth Street on April 1, 1929.

This time it was produced by C. Mischel Picard and directed by Lee Miller, with scenery designed and executed by Edward Sunquist and Theodore Kahn, and draperies by Variety Scenic Studios. Doe Doe Green retained his role as Rufus, but Dario Shindell had been replaced by James LaCurto in the role of Carl. LaCurto likewise replaced Anderson in delivering the prologue and epilogue about the mission and message of Appearances. The director, Lee Miller, played Fred Kellard, the honest westerner. Sally Rutter, daughter of the show's financial backer, retained her role as Ella.¹¹⁸ By the time of its revival on Broadway, Variety estimated that the Appearances tour had run at a deficit of \$40,000.¹¹⁹

Several papers reported that the opening night house was comfortably full. The critical response to this return engagement was less warm. A representative sample of downtown critical opinion could be found in Wilfred J. Riley's review for Billboard:

. . . its outlook as a metropolitan production is hopeless.

No one will deny the high motives that prompted its writing and it is equally evident that the reasons behind this renewed bid for favor are commendable. Withal, however, Appearances is a naive and amateurish play. . . . It is too sugary to be digestible, too preachy to be credible.

. . . This play is such a hopeless conglomeration of comedy, drama, farce, and downright burlesque that it would defy the talents of the most capable cast. . . . Doe Doe Green . . . is seen again in his part of the hotel porter. His overplaying is so persistent that it becomes irritating. . . .

The direction and the settings are on a par with the other departments of the production.¹²⁰

The years between the two Broadway productions of Appearances had seen audience taste grow a bit tougher, a bit more sophisticated. Melodrama was still popular, but the new hit plays, Street Scene and The Front Page, included some harder-edged realism: "If Appearances proved too lukewarm in 1925, it still is but parboiled in its 1929 Easter dressing."¹²¹ An attempt had been made to update, rewrite, and revamp the play, but "the ancient lines from meller-drama days, vaudeville stunts . . . which became passe before the World War, and jokes that were funny when Floradora meant a sextette never yet made a 1929 success."¹²² To the Broadway theatregoer, Appearances was "weak, trite and tedious."¹²³

There was some dissent. Carl Helm of the New York Sun thought Appearances "proved to be a good entertainment. It has quite a likely chance of becoming popular . . . all in all it is an evening of light entertainment for those who want just that and sermonizing for those who might want that too."¹²⁴ Helm also alerted readers that Anderson, according to circulars distributed on opening night, would deliver midday free lectures in the theatre on "Success, and Why It Is Available to All."¹²⁵

Doe Doe Green was the primary beneficiary of Appearances' return. By now he had achieved star billing. One review was even entitled "Doe Doe Green Gives Rare Portrait in "Appearances."¹²⁶ The majority of critics

showered him and his near-minstrel turn of a performance with praise.

Again Appearances, "One of [the] Season's Most Interesting Freaks,"¹²⁷ could garner only temporary audience support. It closed after twenty-four performances.¹²⁸

Throughout the rest of his life, Anderson claimed sole authorship of Appearances as a testimony to his belief that perfect faith could make all things possible. Yet an incident briefly came to light which sheds doubt on Anderson's claim. In Anderson's scrapbook, repositied in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library, a small, unidentified newspaper clipping is posted:

Garland Anderson, Negro bellhop, professedly the author of "Appearances," current here, and John Locke, author, who claims to have rewritten the play and introduced considerable original material, have agreed to submit their differences to arbitration by the Authors' League of America.

Locke is asking two percent of the gross receipts, the same amount he said he received when the play was originally presented here five years ago. Roger Mahon, attorney for Locke, this week declared that his client was disposed to permit Anderson to be known as the sole author of the play providing he received compensation.¹²⁹

Though the use of "play doctors" hired to improve the commercial prospects of Broadway shows was common practice, though producers routinely kept these ghost writers on retainer, and though such writers often shared in the royalties received by the playwright, it would seem in this case that a question of ethics might be raised concerning the manner in which Anderson sold himself and his play to

the public. Anderson's assiduous labor and amazingly powerful communication skills, his hyperbolic promotion by others as a prodigy, his promotion of himself as a simple servant of humanity, may be tainted by the possibility that he used a ghost writer. His claim to divine inspiration and the spiritual leadership he wished to provide might not have been so appealing to the press and his supporters had they known he was not entirely truthful in his presentation of himself. Though the use of a ghost writer is not an unusual circumstance, in this case it casts a shadow over Anderson's achievement and over those who sought to promote and exploit him and Appearances for "freak" publicity and box office value. An aftertaste of cynicism about the ethics behind the whole Appearances saga is left behind.

Still, the fact that Anderson had brought himself a long way, "from bellhop to playwright," could not be denied. During the Appearances tour, Anderson announced that he was preparing a new, seven-character play entitled Extortion. Set in the context of the modern business world, the plot would reveal "the working out of a great good against many and seemingly insurmountable obstacles" and would not be a "race play."¹³⁰ Anderson also had a third play in mind, in which the same principles would be proved on a black prison farm.¹³¹

The late fall of 1929 brought news that Extortion had been sold to David Belasco. One newspaper article on this

subject reveals the extent of the influence of Appearances on Belasco and on interest in depicting black characters in the commercial theatre:

Producers who read the play Appearances decided it was good, but that it couldn't be produced because it had a mixed cast. It had never been done, nor had any Race playwright ever crashed Broadway. . . .

The day after the play producers were amazed to find that not a single newspaper reviewer had criticized the fact that there was a mixed cast. And that set a precedent on the American stage. Belasco immediately put Lulu Belle [sic] into rehearsal. From then on race plays became popular.¹³²

Despite the inaccuracies in the article concerning mixed casts and Anderson being first to reach Broadway, the idea remains that Appearances allayed the fears producers felt about using mixed casts and erased the memory of the censorship threat engendered by the All God's Chillun Got Wings controversy. Producers began to explore new casting possibilities. However, Appearances is the only play by Garland Anderson ever produced.

Film producers were also pondering new possibilities. Cecil B. DeMille considered making a film of Appearances but ultimately rejected the idea, fearing the reaction of the South. There was also the possibility that he might make a film from the novel version of Porgy by Dubose Heyward. Other producers were waiting to see what he would do. The African-American was a subject which might be too hot for commercial films to handle, as this comment concerning the possibility of filming Appearances may indicate:

Carey Wilson, noted scenario writer, points to the protest that arose in many quarters against "The Birth of a Nation" . . . declares "If the public will not accept a picture dealing only in facts, it is not likely to receive cordially one of imaginative origin."¹³³

It is interesting that the film community was surprised that a film depicting the "heroic" rise of the Ku Klux Klan engendered controversy, and that the thought of controversy surrounding more sympathetic portrayals of African-Americans engendered prohibitive fear. There was a good deal of publicity about the likelihood of making a filmed version of Appearances, but no producers materialized. Anderson announced his intent to find private capital and produce the film himself,¹³⁴ but that task proved too great.

Yet Appearances did not die. In November 1929, Anderson sailed to London. The man who, "With a confidence born of the ideal he has set for himself . . . has been able to induce more money to flow to him in trying to impress the world with his idealistic show than any other Negro during the past quarter century has been able, single handed, to get in producing a show,"¹³⁵ would insure its production there.

The play enjoyed a satisfactory run at London's Royalty Theatre from mid-March "through the end of May, 1930, under the producership of Bernard Nedell. Doe Doe Green again repeated his role, and Dario Shindell, who had done the western United States tour, returned to the role of

Carl."¹³⁶ Like a number of other African Americans, Anderson achieved the type of success in Europe which had eluded him in the United States. Appearances, after closing at the Royalty, played some "outlying houses" for a few weeks, then returned to the main theatre district in London's West End.¹³⁷ One of Anderson's obituaries states that the play was also performed in Brussels and Paris,¹³⁸ but no other source corroborates this statement. While abroad, Anderson was treated as an honored guest, a distinguished lecturer and playwright rather than an anomaly, though some people were so astonished by his abilities that they theorized that Anderson must have been a reincarnated white soul.¹³⁹ In 1931, while giving a series of lectures in London, Anderson met Doris Sequira, daughter of a physician, who soon after became his second wife. Their interracial marriage apparently did not arouse in the British the hostile responses they often encountered in the United States. Doris Anderson recounts the story of their first tour of the northern United States in her book, Nigger Lover, published in 1938.¹⁴⁰

Anderson traveled extensively throughout England, the United States, and Canada as a metaphysical lecturer and teacher for the Unity organization. Many prominent members of English society and the theatre community were attracted to his message, and for a time he moderated a popular radio program on England's Radio Normandy entitled "The Voice of

Uncommon Sense," titled after a book he had written detailing his philosophy, Uncommon Sense. Anderson also claimed to have been under consideration for the role of De Lawd in the film version of The Green Pastures.¹⁴¹ He became the first black person to be admitted into the prestigious literary organization, P. E. N.¹⁴²

A wealthy investor enabled Anderson to establish a successful business in London, Andy's Nu-Snack, in 1934. Andy's Nu-Snack was the first milk bar in England and specialized in serving malted milk.¹⁴³

In May, 1939, Anderson suffered a heart attack while lecturing in England. Against his doctor's advice, he sailed for New York the same month. He was expected to attempt to get a new play produced based on Uncommon Sense¹⁴⁴ and his wife was awaiting his return at the Theresa Hotel in Harlem.¹⁴⁵ Upon his arrival on May 23, he was carried from the ship Champlain on a stretcher; on May 31 he succumbed to heart disease at Harlem Hospital.¹⁴⁶

It has often been noted, and his wife attributed a substantial portion of a chapter of her book to the observation that Anderson was painfully aware of the lack of interest in his ministry by African Americans. Mrs. Anderson adopted a rather bitter, critical tone toward the black community for its lack of support, but perhaps it was comments like these made by her husband which alienated Anderson from the African-American community:

The white race is the superior race of this age. In making this statement I do not feel that it is any reflection on my own race. The white race has centuries of civilization behind it, while the Negro race has less than a hundred years since its slavery in America in which it can lay claim to any civilized status. With such a history there is every reason why the white race should be superior.

As a member, then, of an inferior race, I am outlining . . . how Uncommon Sense caused me to be aware of the principle of success which I set out to attain. I have not done this for the purpose of exploiting myself, but with the sole purpose of showing that any member of the superior race who is so willing can use the same principle to attain success to a far greater degree.

As I am an admitted member of a less enlightened race, am not claiming any unusual abilities or qualities. . .¹⁴⁷

Perhaps the African-American community felt excluded from the message this tall, distinguished, slender, mild-mannered, complex man was attempting to impart. Yet it cannot be denied that he made a unique imprint on the history of African America during the Renaissance years. He was living testimony to his beliefs:

We all have this kingdom within, seek and ye shall find there ideas, which when fully expressed, will bring you true success and happiness.¹⁴⁸

CHAPTER 4

FOOL'S ERRAND

Others may anatomize and dissect, we must paint and create.¹

Alexander Hamilton's birthplace, Nevis, British West Indies, was the birthplace of Eulalie Spence. She was born June 11, 1894. In 1902, when she was eight years old, she emigrated to the United States with her father, mother, and six sisters. They booked passage in the steerage of a ship, passed through Ellis Island, and finally settled in Brooklyn,² which would remain her home until her death in 1981.³

Economically, life for this closely knit family was a struggle. Spence's mother found work sewing uniforms for private schools, while her father worked two jobs, to which Spence attributed his premature death. Though the family never thought of itself as poor or disadvantaged, the economic stress, coupled with anti West Indian bias on the part of African Americans as well as whites, caused Spence to recollect her childhood as "a difficult time."⁴ Her happiest memories were of the tales of romance and adventure told by her mother, a woman who had an education and encouraged her daughters' educational pursuits.⁵

Spence graduated from Wadleigh High School and entered the New York Training School for Teachers. Upon finishing the normal course there, Spence took special courses in English at the College of the City of New York and at Columbia University. At Columbia she took a playwriting course with Hatcher Hughes (who would become the winner of the 1928 Pulitzer Prize for his melodrama, Hell Bent fer Heaven), and was encouraged in the study of Elocution.⁶ She also joined Columbia's Laboratory Players under the direction of Prof. Estelle Davis Koit for which Spence wrote skits as well as acted: "I was so thin I was cast for male parts or old ladies."⁷ When she secured a position as a teacher of Elocution at the Eastern District High School in Brooklyn, she became its first, and for many years, sole black faculty member, and remained there until her retirement.⁸

In 1924, Spence participated in the programs of the National Ethiopian Art Theatre, often identified as N.E.A.T., a Harlem-based organization begun at nearly the same time, but not affiliated with the Ethiopian Art Theatre led by Raymond O'Neil. N.E.A.T. was founded by Anne Wolter, who had been a staff member at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. The Academy had instituted dramatic training classes composed of black students. Wolter eventually headed this program which led to a Little Theatre group, the Acme Players, which became the N.E.A.T.⁹

A primary feature of N.E.A.T. was its emphasis on dramatic training both for future performers and teachers of dramatic arts, through its institution of a theatre school. Several instructors from the American Academy participated. Another feature was its Little Theatre company. Spence was active in both as student, actor, and writer. N.E.A.T. inaugurated recitals and theatre programs in June 1924.¹⁰

On October 15 of that year, N.E.A.T. presented a program of one-act plays as a midnight show at the Lafayette Theatre: Cooped Up by Eloise Bibb Thompson, Bills by John M. Francis, and Being Forty by Eulalie Spence. Eric D. Walrond, a prominent black writer, awarded the laurels for the evening to Eloise Bibb Thompson in a critique for Opportunity:

. . . It isn't hyperbole to state that "Bills" and "Being Forty" existed for the most part as a sort of raison d'etre for the Thompson play. And this, by all means, is not a reflection on the merit (such as there was) in either Miss Spence's or Mr. Francis' effort. It was simply a matter of sandwiching a first class piece of drama between two maudlin attempts at melodrama.

George S. Schuyler basically concurred with Walrond in his review for The Messenger, but devoted more space to a critique of Being Forty and gave mention to Spence's performance in her play:

The first play, "Being Forty" dealt with the revolt of a spinster of two score years against the restrictions of a pious and rascally elder brother and the devitalizing atmosphere of a small town. . . .

It seemed to me this play could have been rewritten with much profit. . . . Eulalie Spence . . . should certainly be able to do better next time, especially if she will endeavor to make her characters truer to Negro

life. By that I do not mean the Hugh Wiley type of characters, but people who will impress the audience that they actually exist. . . .

Eulalie Spence, as the older sister [of the main character] was far from satisfactory. . . .¹²

The National Ethiopian Art Theatre produced its final program in May, 1925.¹³ Spence, along with two of her sisters, Doralyne and Olga, then joined W. E. B. DuBois' newly formed Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre. On August 14, 1925, the company produced The Broken Banjo by Willis Richardson at the Renaissance Casino under the direction of Charles Burroughs.¹⁴ During its first season, the Krigwa Players found a permanent home in the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library and completed its first season with a program consisting of The Broken Banjo, Compromise, another Richardson play, and The Church Fight by Ruth Ada Gaines-Shelton on May 3, 10 and 17, 1926.¹⁵ Theophilus Lewis penned encouraging words for the company and for Spence: "The Krigwa program, so far as acting goes, would have been 100 per cent more interesting if all the players had followed the example set by Eulalie Spence, as Jane in Compromise [sic]"¹⁶

Spence took second place in the 1926 Crisis (Krigwa) playwriting contest for a one-act comedy, Foreign Mail. The Krigwa Players performed this play, along with Mandy, a play by W. J. Jefferson, at the awards ceremony for the Crisis Prizes in Literature and Art at International House in New

York on October 25, 1926. Both Spence and Richardson attended.¹⁷

The Krigwa Players' second season commenced at the 135th Street Library on January 17, 19 and 24, 1927. The program consisted of three one-acts, Mandy by W. J. Jefferson with Foreign Mail and Her, both by Spence, plus an interpretive dance and dialog, Pandora's Box by J. Gordon Amend.¹⁸ The company garnered more favorable notices, particularly company members in the Spence family:

"Foreign Mail," a light comedy, was the hit of the evening, with clever lines that caused considerable laughter. The acting, on the whole, was good . . . That of Marian King and Olga Spence left little to be desired. . . .

In the last play, "Her", Olga Spence scored another hit.¹⁹

Doralyne Spence was listed among the other members of the company. The Spence sisters had by now thoroughly charmed Theophilus Lewis, who entitled his review of Krigwa's opening night, "The Spence Family Passes in Review." While noting several technical problems and awkward moments which detracted from the evening's overall effect, Lewis spoke words of tolerance and encouragement for a company he hoped would fulfill the promise of quality theatrical entertainment for the Harlem community, closing off his commentary with a note of approbation for the Spences:

Aside from individual honors, the trophy for the highest number of points scored goes to the Clan Spence. They contributed two plays and two actresses to the evening's entertainment, a decided plurality of the

program. Master Galton used to say genius runs in families.²⁰

William E. Clark of the New York Age gave a similar impression of Spence and her sisters and suggested that the company was ready for bigger and better things:

The Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre has outgrown its home in the basement of the 135th Street Branch Public Library. . . .

Two of the plays served to increase considerably the reputation of Miss Eulalie Spence as a playwright. "Her" . . . was by far the best of the bill. It was a ghost story and was written with such skill that it rose to the heights of a three act tragedy that might have been written by a Eugene O'Neill.²¹

Doralyne Spence received kudos for her acting in Her as did Olga Spence in Foreign Mail. Overall the acting was judged as professional in caliber. Yet the nature of Spence's plays raised questions in Clark's mind:

The one criticism that might be made of both "Her" and "Foreign Mail" is that they were more Latin-American in theme and treatment than Negro. And this criticism brings the question, whether it is wise or not for the Little Negro Theatre to stick to Negro plays exclusively?²²

Clark goes on to describe Jefferson's play, Mandy, a drama about lynching, as the one "real" Negro play. Spence would often be criticized for writing plays "whose characters were undeniably black, but whose problem within the play was not ethnic."²³ Spence was a pioneer in creating what might be called a more universal view of the black experience.

1927 was a banner year for Eulalie Spence in terms of awards. In the third Opportunity contest, she won second prize in the play division for The Hunch and shared third

prize with William Jackson, author of Four Eleven, for a one-act comedy, The Starter.²⁴ A brief biography was printed in the July Opportunity in which Spence sketched her background, education and teaching experience as well as her abiding love for the theatre: "The theatre will always possess a great attracting for me. Acting, play production, writing of plays--it is indeed hard to say which holds the greater lure."²⁵ All of her skills were put to the test by the Krigwa Players. As well as winning the third place award in the third Crisis contest for two plays, Hot Stuff, a comedy, and Undertow, a melodrama,²⁶ Spence was largely responsible for the honors the Krigwa Players received in the Fifth Annual International Little Theatre Tournament held in May, 1927.

The Krigwa Players had presented Spence's Fool's Errand as part of its second program of its second season on April 20, 25 and 27, 1927. Her was again on the program along with Willis Richardson's Compromise and The Broken Banjo and Blue Blood by Georgia Douglas Johnson. Doralyne Spence appeared in Her and Fool's Errand, and Eulalie Spence reprised her role in Compromise as well as fulfilling her duties as head of the costume department. Again, the entire program was directed by Charles Burroughs, with DuBois listed as Chairman of the Cabinet, which consisted of director Burroughs and members in charge of scenery,

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costumes, publicity and the treasury. By now, the ranks of the Krigwa Players had swelled to fifty-five members.²⁷

Though Spence appears to have been a major contributor to the Krigwa Players, her relationship with DuBois was strained. A major factor in the stress between them was a fundamental divergence in ideological viewpoints:

I don't think he liked West Indians. He didn't like anyone who disagreed with him. . . . A very dominating and aggressive man. He liked to overpower people . . . I wasn't used to that . . . He had hoped that this group would continue and go on to provide what you might call the nucleus . . . of what you might call the angry explosive things we've seen in the last ten years [1960s-70s] . . . I couldn't write to order . . . A play should never be for propaganda. Give a speech, give any form of presentation, but a play . . . cannot depend on propaganda for its success.²⁸

Ideologically, Spence was closer to Alain Locke's theatrical vision than DuBois'. This raises the question as to why DuBois, whose voice was by far the strongest in the matter of play selection, would select Fool's Errand as the play with which to enter the company's first group competition and first exposure to the theatre community downtown. DuBois had told Spence quite frankly that he did not like the play and would have preferred a propaganda piece.²⁹ This is a question which only DuBois could answer, but in Spence's view, this was the play which best fit the criteria for the portion of the contest sponsored by Samuel French, the play publishing house,³⁰ and DuBois may have put the idea of possibly winning a prize or prizes and proving

the group before the general public in this manner ahead of ideology for the moment.

The Little Theatre Tournament had been originated by Walter Hartwig, its general manager, in 1923, under the auspices of the New York Drama League. The top prizes were the David Belasco Trophy which would go to the winning troupe, and cash awards which were bestowed upon the top two original plays, and top two previously published plays. Hartwig, as did many in his time, viewed the burgeoning Little Theatre movement as the foundation of a national theatre, a theatre of the people built with amateur, semi-professional, and professional hands working in concert, a theatre which "should be recognized and encouraged."³¹

For an entrance fee of \$165.00, each competing group would be given ninety-five orchestra seats for the night it played in competition with two or three other groups. Groups moved into the finals, in which they would repeat their performances, through garnering the highest point count with the judges, a combined group of critics, theatre professionals, and prominent members of the Little Theatre community, based on the following criteria: fifty percent for presentation, meaning, interpretation or "how well the idea of the play is gotten over;" twenty-five percent for acting; fifteen percent for setting, and ten percent for play selection.³² The contest was at first confined to one

act plays, but was expanded to include full-length plays in later years.³³ The 1927 tournament was held at the Frolic Theatre from Monday, May 2 through Saturday, May 7.

The Krigwa Players' entry, Fool's Errand, is usually described as a comedy, but this folk play contains many elements of domestic melodrama, and serio-comedic satire. Though she had never visited the South,³⁴ Spence set the action of the play in the tattered, tacky living room of a cabin in an "unprogressive Negro settlement"³⁵ somewhere in the rural South on a summer evening in the 1920s. The cabin is occupied by Doug, Mom, and their teenaged daughter, Maza. At rise, Doug is asleep in the bedroom, Maza is out, and Mom is away working a two-week-long job as a domestic servant. The cabin is being tended by Maza's Aunt Cassie during Mom's absence. Cassie, "a shriveled, ugly little woman," admits Sister Williams, the parson's wife, into the cabin, having summoned her to discuss a domestic crisis. Cassie, having snooped through the family's personal effects, is convinced that Maza is concealing an illegitimate pregnancy, and tries to prod the parson's wife into confronting Maza's father with this problem. Sister Williams is reluctant to involve herself, but is easily persuaded to have the church's Council for Suppression of Vice and Correction of Sinners meet that very day in the cabin. Maza is to be brought before them, forced to reveal the father's name, and made subject to the Council's guidance. The church, of which

Aunt Cassie is among the most conservative members, is concerned that the community's youth is getting "out of hand:"

Cassie (spitefully): It's mah 'pinion dey's bin outer han' a mighty long time. What wid de way dey cuts off de little hair Gawd gives 'em an den spends all dey's got tuh straighten it out--flyin' in de face uh Gawd, Ah calls it!

The Council is presently engrossed in the scandal of two young women caught smoking cigarettes at the Sunday School picnic:

Sister Williams: Ef sech doins keeps on, reckon our young people'll be jes' as brazen's white folks.

Freddie and Jud, Maza's two suitors, are to be tricked into attending the Council meeting. Doug, whose sleep was induced by drinking, withholds permission to allow Cassie to bring any "psalm-singin' fools" into his house when he emerges from the bedroom and gets wind of the proceedings. But Cassie convinces him that Maza is pregnant by showing him where she had been hiding the baby clothes she has been making. Doug flies into a rage. He is a potentially violent, dangerous man, as the stage directions indicate: "with a snarl like that of some wild beast, Doug makes a spring for the little garment and with one motion of his claw-like hands, shreds it in two." Cassie subdues Doug with her sharp tongue and browbeats him into allowing Parson Williams and the Council into the house, promising that the parson will force a marriage.

Maza enters; she has been out with Jud. They are sent on a trumped-up errand to secure kerosene. Soon the Council files in, headed by Parson Williams, having gathered first at the Williams' home.

Parson Williams is "a veritable giant of a man, amply provided by Nature with the physical and vocal ability to cast out devils--spiritual and otherwise." The church brothers are uncomfortably dressed in their Sunday best, while the sisters are uniformed in "ill-fitting white frocks and ugly black hats." Their faces are tight; their eyes gleam coldly. Since Doug is seated with his head in his hands on the couch and no one is certain of his condition, there is some agitation concerning seating arrangements. Freddie is soon to arrive with camp chairs; this task is the ruse which will insure his presence at the meeting.

Maza and Jud enter, surprised to see the meeting. It is evident that Jud loves Maza. Confronted with the baby clothes, Maza denies any knowledge of them. Doug is visibly torn; he dotes on his daughter, but cannot fathom how she could lie in the face of concrete evidence. Freddie enters with the chairs. Cassie formally accuses Maza before the Council. Maza vehemently proclaims her innocence, as Jud and Freddie glare at each other. The Council applies the force of the Bible, hymn singing, prayer, and supplication. Parson Williams launches into a rousing sermon accentuated by the response of the half dozen brothers and sisters.

Freddie, able to stand no more, attempts to leave, and is physically attacked by Doug, who delivers a knock-out punch. Maza fans Freddie when he is downed, which is interpreted as conclusive proof of fatherhood by the Council. Jud rushes out in despair as Maza implores him not to believe the accusation against her.

Doug orders the parson to wed Maza and Freddie on the spot. Freddie tells Maza he has no objections, but feels that Maza loves Jud. Maza is angry, confused, and hurt that Jud would not believe her, and does not answer immediately when Freddie asks, "Is it Jud yuh cares 'bout, Maza?"

Maza (Sadly): What'd yuh speak out fer, Freddie. Dey mistook what yuh said.

Freddie (Ruefully): Dunno. Reckon dey got on mah nerves.

Just as the parson prepares to perform the marriage ceremony, Maza's mother enters the scene. Once Mom is informed of the situation, she utters contempt for Cassie's meddling and reveals that it is she, not Maza, who is pregnant. Doug is, as are all, flabbergasted. Parson Williams, realizing that Cassie has brought the Council on a "fool's errand," is fit to be tied.

Mom (Addressing the Council. With biting sarcasm): Sorry tuh spile yuh pleasure! Reckon yuh's had a pretty good time, ain't yuh? Oh, yuh needn't trubble 'splainin'! Yuh's done yuh dooty as yuh seen it, Gawd help yuh!

The Council, led by Cassie and Sister Williams, file out shamefacedly, bearing their camp chairs. Parson

Williams renders a sincere apology, which Mom accepts. Maza tells Mom how Freddie stood by her, and indicates that Freddie will probably win her hand some day. Doug, deeply ashamed, accuses himself:

Doug (Bitterly): Ah knows Ah's a fool, Mary! An ole fool!

Mom (With a little laugh that loses its way in her throat): Well, what 'bout me, Doug?

Doug does not answer, but moves to the cabin doorway with Mom. In the final moment of the play, they listen to the Council singing far down the road:

Ah met mah sister de odder night,
She call me by mah name.
An' jes' as soon's mah back waz turned
She scandalize mah name.

Yuh call dat a sister?
No! No! (Chant the Council)
Yuh call dat a sister?
No! No!
Yuh call dat a sister?
No! No!
Who'd scandalize mah name!

Preparation for the tournament was left primarily in Spence's hands. For an undisclosed reason, Charles Burroughs did not participate, and Spence stepped into the director's position.³⁶ Spence, with the aid of Ira Reid, who played Parson Williams, and Ardelle Dabney, portrayer of Mom, brought together the cast, most of whom had played or alternated in their roles for the recent Krigwa performances. Resources were limited, and Spence faced the problem of putting together a set suitable for the

competition. One of her sisters, a secretary at Townsend Harris High School, heard about a discarded stage set available in Greenwich Village. DuBois was reluctant to release funds to ship the set uptown, but was finally persuaded. The entire cast worked together to restore and dress the set.³⁷

The Krigwa Players would compete against sixteen other groups from several areas of the nation and from England. Critic Barrett H. Clark was chairman of the panel of judges which included Dororthy Stockbridge, staff member of Ainslee's Magazine, Ernest K. Lindley of the New York World, Elita Miller Lenz, Little Theatre columnist for Billboard, and Abel Green of Variety. The Krigwa Players would compete on the first night of the competition against the Union Players of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn and the Y.M.H.A. (Young Men's Hebrew Association) Players' Stock Company of Manhattan.³⁸ A second black company, not posted on the original list of contestants, was added to the Thursday night line-up, the Mansfield Players of Manhattan. There appears to be little or no record of this group outside of the Little Theatre Tournaments of 1927 and 1928. In both they performed plays by a white playwright, Amy L. Weber. Their 1927 entry was a three character one-act piece concerning a love triangle situation set in the fictional Cotton Wood Club, entitled Off Col'uh.³⁹ Spence remained the sole black playwright. In the words of the New York Evening World, "The colored

race is represented in this year's authorship lists by Eulalie Spence . . . "40

Fool's Errand generally fared well critically. The New York Times judged the play a close second to Confession by Kenyon Nicholson, performed by the Y.M.H.A. Players. The Union Players' production of The Drums of Oude by Austin Strong was thought to be a distant third. The presentation by the Krigwa Players was "very effective, except in the denouement,"41 according to the Times.

The Sun bestowed its approval in the form of a left-handed compliment, calling Fool's Errand

. . . the hit of the evening with a cast of fourteen, varying from ace of spades black to straight haired near whites. They acted as white folks think negroes ought to act, providing amusement with prayer, song and a comedy of sex that did not violate any section of Harlem's or City Hall's penal codes.42

For some critics, the ethnicity of the play and its performers was still the primary, perhaps the sole, reference point. Thomas Van Dyke of the Telegraph, also saw the ethnicity of the play as its major virtue:

It is a rather flimsy affair. . . . If the play was nothing, it did contain one very amusing scene, about which and for which the play was written. There is a religious revival and spiritual meeting at which everybody prays and the parson beseeches the Lord to give them a sign to determine the guilty party. This was highly entertaining and almost proved a real raison d'etre. Ira Reid as the heavy battling and long winded praying parson was excellent and gave the best performance of the evening. Ethel Bennet as Cassie, the long-tongued, gave a rather good performance.43

The Herald Tribune had a higher opinion of the play, though it, too, singled out the prayer and hymn singing portion of Fool's Errand as its most salient feature:

With one exception the opening night of the tournament gave evidence of sharing a characteristic of those past years in that the plays were below the par of the acting. The exception was the presentation by the Krigwa Players, "The Fool's Errand" by Eulalie Spence. . . . Both acting and play were superbly typical.⁴⁴

Again, Ira Reid was singled out for his portrayal of the pastor, in addition to Doralyne Spence as Maza, Malcolm Dodson as Jud, and William Holly as Freddie. Most of the Herald Tribune's review was reprinted in the New York Age. The Telegram concurred, making Fool's Errand the focal point of its brief review:

The Krigwa Players' Little Negro Theatre wisely selected "The Fool's Errand", written by one of its own members, Eulalie Spence, for its entry. . . . Dealing with materials essentially their own, which Miss Spence had arranged with understanding of dramatic technique and effectiveness, the colored cast was uniform in excellence.⁴⁶

The Bronx Home News' reviewer was also impressed by Spence's directing talent:

[The Little Theatre Tournament] opened last night with two worthwhile and finely acted plays out of three productions.

One of the two was . . . Eulalie Spence's quiet, yet searching and human comedy. . . .

The author, who is a teacher of elocution in the Eastern District High School in Brooklyn, proved herself a master in directing the large cast of colored amateur actors.⁴⁷

Though he was a judge in the contest, Abel Green wrote a review for Variety which included a disclaimer that the

opinions expressed should not be viewed as having a bearing on any subsequent awards. It is interesting to note that Green, though favorable to the play, was confused about the ethnicity of the playwright:

Eulalie Spence, the authoress of the "The Fool's Errand," may be a negress, perhaps related to Doralyne Spence of the cast. It is an original playlet, the first time produced, and is in competition for one of the Samuel French awards for hitherto unproduced sketches.

It probably qualifies as a fairly accurate cross-section of contemporary negro[sic] life on the half-shell. The syncopated gospel singing, the fatalistic belief in the Good Book and the mundane characteristics of a genuine race are the keynotes of the production. . . .

Coupled with this simple enough theme is some shrewd local color on a self-sufficient colored community that regards its church and council as the court of final decree.

Casting exceeds the production investiture in impressiveness, although the interpretations do much to offset the physical shortcomings.⁴⁸

M. E. Kehoe of Theatre Magazine favored the acting of William Jackson as Doug, but praised the Krigwa Players on the familiar grounds that black actors simply did what came naturally, stating, " . . . the enthusiasm with which the negro throws himself into his character is always refreshing."⁴⁹

Five groups were selected to repeat their performances as finalists for the David Belasco Trophy:⁵⁰ Confession, by Kenyon Nicholson, would be presented by the Association Players of the Ninety-Second Street Y.M.H.A.; The Delta Wife, by Walter McClellan, performed by the Memphis Little Theatre; Mr. Sampson by Charles Lee, staged by the Theatre

Society of Welwyn Garden City, England; The Immortal Beloved by Martin Leonard played by the Brookside Open Air Theatre of Mount Kisco; and Fool's Errand by Eulalie Spence acted by the Krigwa Players.⁵¹

On Friday, May 6, Fool's Errand was awarded \$200 as one of the best unpublished plays, as was The Immortal Beloved. Spence's play had proved itself against plays by much better known playwrights of the time, including Paul Green, who had recently been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for In Abraham's Bosom, which was in the midst of its Broadway success.⁵² The Krigwa Players performed matinee and evening shows on Saturday, but the Belasco Cup went to the Welwyn Garden City troupe.⁵³ On the same night as the tournament finals, Opportunity held its awards dinner, where Spence's second prize and shared third prize in the play division were formally announced.⁵⁴

Ironically, the fine showing in the tournament by Spence and the Krigwa Players, rather than strengthening the company, caused its demise. Spence laid the blame for the disintegration of the Krigwa Players squarely at the feet of DuBois. When he accepted the cash award, not only did he refuse to share any portion of it with the actors; he also refused to give any to Spence. He told the company that the money had been used to defray the expenses incurred in moving the set and mounting the production. The players,

angered, left the company. Spence felt that the actors blamed her for this turn of events.⁵⁵

DuBois defended himself through an article printed in the Amsterdam News several months after the incident. As part of an explanation for the disbanding of the Krigwa Players, he published a meticulously balanced budget:

Income	
First season	245.21
Second season	
1st program	205.45
2nd program and Frolic theatre tickets	256.38
Prize check	<u>200.00</u>
	907.04
Expense	
First season	165.64
Second season	
1st program	210.09
2nd program and Tournament	366.31
Tournament fee	<u>165.00</u>
	907.04 ⁵⁶

In DuBois' view, the mission of the Krigwa Players was service to the community, not profit. No member of the company, in any capacity, was paid. Though there were over fifty persons on the membership rolls, only half participated in the work necessary to run the company and mount productions. DuBois defined and explained four problems detrimental to the company's survival:

1. Getting over our ideas to the actors and to the public
2. Opposing the "ante room to Broadway" idea
3. Discipline
4. Voluntary help
- . . .

A . . . difficulty was the number of young people who came to us with the idea that we were training actors for Broadway. . . . Acting is a fine career . . . but the object of a Little Theatre is art--not money--it is to do a beautiful, complete thing for the sake of the thing itself, not for the utility. It was difficult for many of the young folk to see this. . . . For the most part the spirit and team work were excellent, but there was some open contempt for authority, bickering, jealousy and backbiting. Indeed, our tournament play was nearly ruined by this . . . but the prevailing loyalty came to the rescue manfully and made the malcontents play the game. They capitulated with good grace and, although the bickering made our play less smooth and finished than it should have been, it proved a work of art, as well as proof of self-government.⁵⁷

Spence's objectives as a theatre practitioner were not at all incompatible with DuBois' as far as financial gain was concerned, but neither did she view the Krigwa Players as missionaries for black art or ideology:

I wrote for fun. I just never believed that you could induce people out to see a play about lynching or something that was painful for the writer. And it wasn't my background and experience anyway. To be poor, to work hard, to have fun and to enjoy. . . ⁵⁸

DuBois, feeling that the company he founded did not share his vision, withdrew, taking the Krigwa name, which he had copyrighted, with him, while wishing those who remained well: "I hand on the idea, the experience, the hope to others stronger, abler and more willing."⁵⁹ Despite this graceful departure, Spence recalled DuBois' response to the Krigwa Players' break-up as one of bitter disappointment.⁶⁰

By this time, a sister Krigwa Players company had formed in Washington, D.C., which continued operations after the New York company disbanded. Doralyne Spence continued

acting, at one point serving as understudy for the premier black actress of that time, Rose McClendon. A company of players entered the 1928 Little Theatre Tournament as the Krigwa Players, under the direction of Charles Burroughs. They performed Aftermath by Mary Burill. This group, however, was organized under the auspices of the Workers Drama League and was not a continuation of the original Krigwa Players.⁶¹

After Willis Richardson, Spence was the most prolific and most produced playwright among African-American Little Theatre groups.⁶² Yet, as the decade of the 1920s drew to a close, her writing appears to have tapered off. The Crisis and Opportunity did not publish any of her plays as they did some of the other contest winners, but in 1928, Opportunity offered Fool's Errand, which had been published by Samuel French, as a bonus gift to each person who purchased a one-year subscription.⁶³ Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory published The Starter, a one-act comedy, in their 1927 anthology, Plays of Negro Life. In 1928, Carolina Magazine included the play Spence considered her only serious drama,⁶⁴ Undertow, a melodrama built around a love triangle, in a special issue anthologizing plays of black life. In a review of this issue for Opportunity, Randolph Edmonds noted approvingly that Spence's play gave an old plot new vitality, and contained more dramatic action than any of the other plays in that issue.⁶⁵ That same year another of her

plays, Help Wanted, appeared in a Boston journal, Saturday Evening Quill.⁶⁶

Spence never represented herself as a theorist or critic, though she briefly ventured into these areas. In the December 1928 issue of Opportunity, she criticized a performance by the Negro Art Players, an amateur group turned professional. Earlier that year, in the June issue of the same journal, she published an essay, "A Criticism of the Negro Drama," which clearly expressed her ideas on the state of black drama and the course of development it should follow:

The drama, more particularly the American drama, is from twenty to thirty years behind the novel and short story in point of subject matter. There is almost no subject today that cannot be discussed with the most revolting detail between the covers of a book. If there are any who doubt this, let them read Home to Harlem by Claude McKay. Not so with our drama. Here we have elected to be squeamish, and perhaps advisedly so. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the theatre has not made enormous strides ahead. The drama has developed a new technique, new ways and means, a new genius of mechanism, and a new direction.

Unfortunately, almost everyone thinks that he can write a play. . . .

Here it is then that our Negro dramatists have failed to reach a larger and more discriminating public. They have labored like the architect who has no knowledge of geometry and the painter who must struggle to evolve the principles of perspective.

May I advise these earnest few--those seekers after light--white lights--to avoid the drama of propaganda if they would not meet with certain disaster? Many a serious aspirant for dramatic honors has fallen by the wayside because he would insist on his lynchings or his rape. The white man is cold and unresponsive to this subject and the Negro, himself, is hurt and humiliated by it. We go to the theatre for entertainment, not to have old fires and hates rekindled.

Of course, if we have a Shaw or Galsworthy among us, let him wander at will in the more devious by-paths of

race dissection. Let him wander wheresoever he will-provided he has no eye for the box office. . . .

What, then, is left to the Negro dramatist? Let him portray the life of his people, their foibles, if he will, and their sorrows and ambition and defeats. Oh, yes, let us have all of these, told with tenderness and skill and a knowledge of the theatre and the technique of the times. But as long as we expect our public, white or colored, to support our drama, it were wise to steer far away from the old subjects.

A little more laughter, if you please, and fewer spirituals!⁶⁷

After 1929, Spence appears to have followed a path further away from performing, directing, and even writing for the theatre, outside of her capacity as a teacher. There are published references to her having directed for the Dunbar Garden Players at St. Mark's Church in 1929, but she denied a connection with this Little Theatre company.⁶⁸

In the early 1930s, she read a novel by Roy Flannigan, The Whipping, and saw dramatic possibilities in it. She contacted the publisher, received permission to adapt the book, and developed a full-length play. When the play was completed, she searched the telephone book for a literary agency, and subsequently gained the representation of agent Audrey Wood, who would later become prominent in her field. Through Wood's representation, The Whipping was sold to Paramount Pictures in 1933 for the sum of \$5,000.00. Paramount did not produce a film version. A stage production went into rehearsal in Bridgeport, Connecticut, but it, too, was never realized. The money received from

The Whipping was "the only money I ever made writing plays."⁶⁹

The Federal Theatre Project, instituted in 1935, accepted The Starter as a vaudeville sketch, but there is no evidence that this Spence piece was ever produced by any of the project's units.⁷⁰ There is no apparent evidence of new literary output by Spence after the 1930s.

Spence earned a B.A. from Teachers College in 1937 and an M.A. in Speech from Columbia University in 1939.⁷¹ There is no indication that she married or had children.

As a dedicated teacher of speech and theatre courses, she exerted a profound influence on a man who is probably her most famous pupil, Joseph Papp, one of the most influential theatrical producers in the United States. His producing organizations, the New York Shakespeare Festival and the Public Theatre, are recognized worldwide. Many Broadway productions were begun in these venues, including Ntosake Shange's play, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf and A Chorus Line, Broadway's longest running musical production. Spence recollected Papp, a student of hers in the 1930s, as an energetic and resourceful youth with a talent for finding whatever props or materials were necessary to mount the productions she directed at Eastern District High School.⁷²

In a brief interview, Papp expressed recollections equally as affectionate. He remembers Spence for her

beautiful teeth, regal carriage, and precise diction, and credits her with inspiring him to choose the theatre as a career. When she died, he attended her funeral. However, when told of her prominence as a black playwright of the Harlem Renaissance period, Papp expressed surprise. She never told her students about her career outside of teaching. At present, Papp is preparing an oral history of his theatre for publication. A portion of it is devoted to Eulalie Spence.⁷³

Through her life and her work, Spence was a teacher:

I like to teach generosity, understanding, the importance of understanding differences--you know, not one over the other.⁷⁴

CHAPTER 5

MEEK MOSE

A conscientious actor--proud of his profession and his ability--he has won his prestige, not through a sensational success but rather because he has never failed to give "the inspiring performance everyone who knows him expected."¹

The term "Renaissance man," in its most complimentary and resonant sense, could be applied to Frank Wilson, whose talents encompassed all aspects of theatre craft. Had he emerged as a performing artist at a different time, his achievements might not have been overshadowed by those of his distinguished contemporaries, Charles Gilpin, Rose McClendon, and Paul Robeson.

The first hurdle Wilson overcame was the sadness of an orphaned childhood. He was born in Manhattan on May 4, 1886, and both of his parents had died by the time he was eight years old. Wilson spent his remaining childhood in a waif's home, which he remembered as a place where he was taught love, compassion, and the true meaning of friendship.² He earned his living by taking odd jobs, running errands, and working as a hotel doorboy. When he was fifteen, he completed his formal education by putting himself through night school. Then he discovered the

theatre:

The first deep impression made upon me in reference to the Negro in the theatre was in 1903, when Williams and Walker appeared at the New York Theatre in In Dahomey. . . . In those days I never heard of the Negro doing anything in the drama in the theatre. He danced and he sang. If you went to a manager and told him you were an actor, he'd immediately take you into a back room, point to the floor and tell you "Go ahead. Act." That was your cue to dance.³

Despite the dim prospects for a career as a legitimate actor, Wilson entered the theatre. He gained his first recognition by organizing a vaudeville act, the Carolina Comedy Four, in 1908.⁴ The act did fairly well, but by 1911 Wilson had married Effie King, herself an actress, with a daughter and son from a previous marriage, and he had fathered a son, Emmet Barrymore Wilson.⁵ Though his son's middle name was an homage to a theatre dynasty, Wilson took a practical approach to his career, supplementing his income by taking a civil service examination and entering the postal service.⁶

Wilson's observations and experiences as a Harlem postman provided him with a wealth of dramatic material, which he turned into a series of playlets that he wrote, directed, and performed in at the Lincoln Theatre from 1914 through 1917. Every four to six weeks, he produced a new dramatic or comedic sketch; e.g., Confidence, Race Pride, Colored Americans, The Good Sister Jones, The Frisco Kid, Back Home Again, and Happy Southern Folks.⁷

Wilson made his professional debut as a legitimate actor with the Lafayette Players in a play entitled Deep Purple in 1917. From 1917 through 1920, he studied in the segregated theatre course for black actors at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. Like Eulalie Spence, Wilson worked under the direction of Anne Wolter with the Acme Players and the National Ethiopian Art Theatre. In 1922 the Acme Players performed Confidence as a part of a midnight benefit show for the New York Urban League at the Lafayette Theatre. In 1923, the Acme Players included Wilson's A Train North in its program.⁸ This was the same play accepted by Raymond O'Neill's Ethiopian Art Theatre. Another Wilson play, The Heartbreaker, was part of the Acme program as well.

At nearly the same time, Wilson belonged to another Little Theatre company, the Players' Guild. This company had performed Confidence in the auditorium of the Harlem Y.M.C.A. in January 1920, with Wilson in the cast.⁹ Wilson appeared in the Players' Guild production of Simon the Cyrenian, one of Ridgely Torrence's Three Plays for a Negro Theatre, which starred fledgling actor Paul Robeson. Charles Burroughs, who would later direct the Krigwa Players, was also a cast member. This performance was particularly significant for Robeson, since Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmond Jones, prominent members of the Provincetown Players, were in the audience.¹⁰ The careers

of both Robeson and Wilson would benefit from their later associations with the Provincetown Players.

Confidence, with Lionel Monagas in the cast, was produced at the Lafayette Theatre on November 22, 1920. On January 10, 1921, the Lafayette produced The Heartbreaker.¹¹ The Lafayette Players also enhanced Wilson's reputation as a playwright by performing his one-act plays on their tours.¹²

The Acme Players returned to the Harlem Y.M.C.A. with The Heartbreaker, A Train North, and a play by E. P. Baird, The Mirage, in May 1923. By now, Frank Wilson and Willis Richardson were viewed as the pioneers who would create a much-needed black drama:

The manner in which "The Chip Woman's Fortune" by Willis Richardson was received clinched the writer's opinion that these little dramatic playlets by our own people would be well received if the managers, who think they reflect in their refusal to submit them to the public the attitude of the playgoers, would "get wise to themselves" and give originality its long-looked-for opportunity. . . .

Frank Wilson, in his writings, is simply putting into words and action things true to life, as they concern our people in America and the conditions under which they live.

Many will maintain that white people will not accept these plays because, at most times, they show the whites at their worst, but even admitting that they do place the white man on trial, we firmly believe they would be accepted . . .¹³

Wilson began to see his full-length plays produced. His comedy, Pa Williams' Gal, met with success at the Lafayette Theatre in September 1923. Theophilus Lewis devoted major portions of two of his columns for The Messenger to this play, which featured Richard B. Harrison

and Rose McClendon in the cast. Although he called Pa Williams' Gal "a rather dull comedy by F. H. Wilson and John J. Co-incidence,"¹⁴ with good dialog its only saving grace, Lewis saw this play as a meaningful development for black theatre:

If I were a committee of one, authorized to award a prize for the year's most valuable contribution to the Negro Theatre, I would reach over "Runnin' Wild" and the venture of the Ethiopian Art Theatre and pin the blue ribbon on F. H. Wilson's "Pa Williams' Gal." I say this without any desire to change my opinion of the play. . . . "Pa Williams' Gal" misses the poignancy of life and for that reason is not first-rate work, perhaps not even second-rate work; but it does capture a mite of the romance, reverence and humor of life and it entraps a great deal of the striving upward, snobbery and absurd posturing we see going on around us every day. That is enough to make it a respectable contribution to the nascent Negro drama.

While "Pa Williams' Gal" contributes drama to the Negro Theatre, "Runnin' Wild" and the Ethiopian Art Theatre . . . give only acting. Now the Negro Theatre is a national theatre, just beginning a struggle for independence. Without an indigenous drama it can never achieve autonomy but must remain simply the sepia province of the American Theatre. Drama, to employ a theatrical metaphor, is the very bones and nerves of a national theatre; acting is only the grease paint on its cheeks.¹⁵

The plot of Pa Williams' Gal revolves around a conflict between daughter and father over the choice of a husband, but the Harlem critics were less concerned with the slender plot of this domestic comedy-melodrama than with its implications for African-American theatre. The Amsterdam News devoted two different columns to this play in its September 5, 1923 issue. In his regular column, "About Things Theatrical," drama editor Romeo L. Doherty viewed the

play as exemplary of why only an African-American playwright could delineate the African-American experience:

He has a better foundation for bringing forth the great drama than the plodding white writer, for he, like most intelligent colored men, knows the white man better than the white man knows the race and with our wealth of material along [with] the sufferings endured by our ancestors from the days when they were torn from their African home to the present generation, he has but to stick to the truth and when the spotlight is thrown upon what he has to offer it will be something to stir the emotions of all peoples.¹⁶

The other article, a news item about the show, allowed Wilson to speak his mind on his choice of audience for his plays. Both Doherty and Wilson foreshadowed the "By us, for us, about us, near us" manifesto which would later come from W. E. B. DuBois:

Speaking of his work the other day Mr. Wilson said: "I have been questioned time and again for the reason actuating me in confining my writings to Negro plays and playlets only when I could be financially benefitted if I would write my plays and playlets with both races in mind--plays that could be used for either race.

I thank my friends for their kindly solicitations and kindly advice and interest in me. I shall write for one race, and that race my own [sic]. I sincerely feel that when the great American play is written it will come from the heart of my own people, who are a gold mine of comedy or serious drama to any one who will take the time to look into it. It has always been my ambition to write something big, yet with a dignity and simplicity that would reach the great masses of the people. I feel that I have it in this play, "Pa Williams' Gal."¹⁷

Wilson's next major engagement as an actor took him to the Provincetown Playhouse to play a supporting role opposite Paul Robeson in Eugene O'Neill's controversial All God's Chillun Got Wings. The play opened in May 1924 and

Wilson continued with the production when it moved to Broadway. A few months after this engagement, Wilson became director of the Aldridge Players of Corona, Queens, a Little Theatre organized in 1921. Their first program under his direction consisted of two plays by Wilson, Away With It and The Good Sister Jones, plus The Mirage by M. P. Baird.¹⁸

Wilson took the role of Lem in the revival of O'Neill's The Emperor Jones in 1925 at the Fifty-Second Street Theatre, supporting both Gilpin and Robeson. He played the lead in this production's curtain raiser, The Dreamy Kid.

Wilson's career took major leaps forward in 1926 and 1927. In February 1926, Wilson was engaged to appear, along with eleven other black actors, in Skyscrapers by John Alden Carpenter, a new American ballet which would premiere at the Metropolitan Opera. The sets were designed by Robert Edmond Jones, and the dances staged by Sammy Lee.¹⁹

The following May, Wilson won first prize in the Opportunity playwriting contest for Sugar Cain, a one-act folk melodrama which revolved around the revenge slaying of the white rapist of a black woman. Opportunity noted in its June 1926 issue that Wilson had written sixteen one-act and four three-act plays prior to Sugar Cain; eleven one-acts and one full-length play had been produced.²⁰

With the spelling of its title revised to Sugar Cane, the play was published in Plays of Negro Life edited by

Alain Locke in 1927. A salient feature of this play is a debate between an older black man and a progressive black youth over the way African Americans should respond to racism.

Wilson and the Aldridge Players produced three of his plays, Sugar Cain, Flies, and Color Worship at the 135th Street Library under an arrangement with the Krigwa Players on July 12, 1926. About the performance, Theophilus Lewis commented

The program was decidedly superior to the recent program of one-act plays presented by the Krigwa Players themselves, both in dramatic and histrionic interest, mainly the latter. I purposely eschew judging the plays according to conventional standards of drama because at this point in the development of the Negro little theatre movement the dramatic quality of a play is less important than its theatricality. . . . The best performance of all was Mr. Wilson's portrayal of the handkerchief head nigger in "Sugar Cain," and the scene in which Mr. Wilson and Mr. Taylor, as father and son, engaged in the duologue in which the progressive spirit of youth respectfully challenges the conservatism of age--that scene was as serenely beautiful as a Barbizon landscape.²¹

Wilson was cast in a supporting role as Bud Gaskins in the off-Broadway production of In Abraham's Bosom, which would win Paul Green a Pulitzer Prize, in late fall. The play opened in December 1926, and soon moved to the Garrick Theatre on Broadway. Julius Bledsoe had earned critical acclaim as the main character, Abraham McCranie, and when the play moved from the Provincetown Playhouse, he demanded star billing. It was the Provincetown's policy as an art theatre not to single out any actor above the others. In

this case the distinguished company included Abbie Mitchell and Rose McClendon, who were given equal billing. On the second night of the show's Broadway run in February 1927, Bledsoe refused to appear. After holding the curtain for a half hour, the management asked Wilson, Bledsoe's understudy, to step into the leading role.²² J. Brooks Atkinson was among the major critics in the audience that night:

Mr. Wilson . . . walked on as Abraham McCranie, and gave a performance not only almost letter perfect, but also swift, direct and extraordinarily moving. . . . Mr. Wilson has been given the leading role permanently. His talents richly deserve that mark of confidence.²³

As a result of his outstanding performance as Abraham, the Theatre Guild selected Wilson for the title role in DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's drama, Porgy. Porgy, which opened in October 1927, was a phenomenal success, and Wilson stayed with the show for its United States and European tours as well as its 1929 Broadway revival. Before he was finished, he had played Porgy 850 times.²⁴ His supervisor at the Post Office demanded that Wilson choose between the Postal Service and the theatre. Wilson chose the theatre, finally giving up his day job.²⁵

At nearly the same time that Wilson joined the cast of In Abraham's Bosom, Broadway producer Jack Goldberg optioned one of Wilson's full-length plays, The Wall Between.²⁶ Approximately two years later, the July 27, 1929 edition of the New York Age reported that this play was being readied

for a Broadway production, but there is no evidence that the play ever opened.²⁷ Instead, Meek Mose would inaugurate Wilson's Broadway debut as a playwright.

The impetus behind the production was provided by Lester Walton, who had earned high regard in several fields, including the theatre. Walton, a native of St. Louis, Missouri, started out as a freelance newspaper reporter for the St. Louis Globe-Democrat. By the time the City Editor learned that Walton was black, he had proven himself so competent that he was assigned to cover the courthouse beat. He worked himself up through several departments, then moved on to the Star and then to the Post-Dispatch. While at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, he met Herbert Bayard Swopes, who would later become editor of the New York World. Part of Walton's experience with the St. Louis newspapers included working as a drama critic, and in 1907 Ernest Hogan, a well-known musical entertainer, persuaded Walton to work for him and to move to New York.²⁸ Walton succeeded as a lyricist for entertainers such as Hogan and the comedy team of Miller and Lyles.²⁹ He picked up the trade of personal representative and business manager by going on the road with one of Hogan's shows, Rufus Rastus.³⁰

In 1908, Walton was hired as dramatic editor of the New York Age, where he soon was promoted to managing editor. At the close of World War I, he toured France and wrote a series of significant articles. In 1920, he took over the

management of the Lafayette Theatre.³¹ In fact, it is said that it was Walton who persuaded Meyer Jarmulowsky, a lower East Side banker, to build the Lafayette Theatre in 1912.³² Walton remained at the Lafayette until he joined the staff on the New York World in 1922.³³ While there, he successfully lobbied for the capitalization of the word Negro by the New York press.³⁴

Walton served as a civil service commissioner under the administration of Mayor James J. Walker. Though his newspaper and political careers remained vital and flourishing, Walton never strayed far from the theatre. He remained an active member of the organization he helped found, The Colored Vaudeville Benevolent Association.³⁵ as well as the prestigious black theatrical fraternity, The Frogs, in which he served a term as president.³⁶

Walton concurred with the prevailing thought of the African-American community that a breakthrough in the commercial theatre, a breakthrough into the United States' imagination, could effect a fundamental change in prevailing attitudes toward the African American. A shift in the focus of black theatre by, for, and about blacks would precipitate this change:

The race has a goodly supply of actors, both actual and potential but it is distressingly short of authors, and vehicles in which the actors can express themselves. This is the opinion of Lester A. Walton. . . .

The Negro must now look at the field of the drama with certain objectives in mind, thinks Mr. Walton. First, we must think of developing our own culture, just as other races have developed their own culture. Having

settled that point, which means we must center attention on plays pertaining to Negro life, of a constructive and inspirational nature, we must support our actors in this field. This does not mean that the Negro cannot act in any play, but it does mean that the Negro himself must center his interest on his own themes first, and let other things flow from this source.

This [sic] new objectives will naturally open the field for Negro writers, as it is Mr. Walton's opinion that Negro writers can best write for Negroes. And why not a broad field for Negro themes, he asks. Negroes love, hate, laugh, cry, have their ups and downs just as any other human beings, all of which is full of dramatic possibilities. The white producer is inclined, because of tradition, to produce a certain "type" of Negro, and for that reason Negroes must produce their own normal, well-balanced plays. . . .

And, finally, urging that the Negro rely more on himself for the development of his drama, as he should and is doing in other fields, does not mean he should refuse cooperation with members of the white race. Mr. Walton points out that in his career as producer he had the cooperation of whites whose help was invaluable. But while the cooperation of white should be solicited and gladly accepted, the direction of affairs should remain with Negroes, as it will be up to the Negro, ultimately, to develop the important phase of his cultural life.³⁷

This line of thought, which appears compatible with Wilson's may have inspired Walton to attempt to form an African-American repertory company on Broadway, with Meek Mose as its first offering. Though Meek Mose turned out be the company's only offering, the production enabled Walton to become the first African-American producer of legitimate theatre on Broadway, and gave Wilson a Broadway credit as a playwright at the same time that he achieved a new level of Broadway stardom as Porgy. The fact that Wilson had achieved solid credentials in both the African-American professional theatre and the mainstream commercial theatre

may have also influenced Walton to choose Meek Mose as his projected Negro Theatre Company's inaugural production. The choice proved to be an unfortunate one.

Wilson sought to paint a portrait of black life in Texas oilfield country, and set Meek Mose in Mexia, an actual eastern Texas town. The plot revolves around the family of Mose Johnston, spiritual leader of a large faction of Mexia's black community. The primary action of the first act concerns a meeting in Mose's modest cabin which turns into a prolonged debate. The community must decide whether to cooperate in a relocation scheme put before them by the white business community, which seeks to build a cotton gin on the presently occupied land. Mose and his neighbors have been offered land in an area known as "de Gut," a miasmic marsh adjacent to the town dump, along with a small sum of money. Those under the leadership of Enos Green, a black entrepreneur, advocate active resistance to the move. Mose, a firm believer in the Beatitude, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," and in the benevolence of his employer, Mr. Harmon, who advises him to move, maintains his resolve to relocate and does so.

During the first act, a subplot develops. Two strangers arrive from Mississippi: Nathan Davis, a youth in his early twenties, and his younger sister Claribel. Mose and his family take them in, and over the course of the play, romantic relationships develop between Nathan and

Penolia, Mose's seventeen-year-old daughter, and between Claribel and Ezra, Mose's son who is approximately the same age as Nathan. Nathan has come in search of Enos Green, who has reneged on paying back money borrowed from Nathan.

By the second act, a month following Mose's move (the time is not mentioned, but is probably the 1920s), the ill-effects of life in the Gut are taking a toll. There is pestilence and sickness, and the community which follows Mose blames him. Enos and his faction appear to have been right, and Enos encourages attacks against Mose. Some have lost their loved ones to disease, and even the strength of Josephine, Mose's stalwart, sensible, practical wife, appears broken. The only relief appears to be the spirituals sung at intervals throughout the play, and the blossoming romance of the young lovers.

The script of Meek Mose is no longer extant, but Wilson extensively revised the play, which was produced as Brother Mose in 1934. The following dialog excerpt from the second act of Brother Mose, may serve as a sample from Meek Mose, since it is from a scene mentioned in reviews as among the best moments in Meek Mose:

Nathan (smiling happily): Gal, yo's aces, I swear.
 (Draws Penolia closer to him.
 Penolia turns her head toward
 him with her lips puckered up.
 Nathan, in surprise, kisses
 her. Ezra enters back yard
 and sees them kissing. Nathan
 and Penolia do not see him.)

Ezra (coming closer): Wot's dis?

Penolia (a bit frightened): Oh, yo scared me, Ezra.

Ezra: Oh, is dat so, yo must hab been doin sumphin
you had no business doin, yo scared.

Nathan (seriously): No, she wuz all right.

Ezra (angrily): Din I see yo two kissin?

Nathan: We wasn't doing nothin else.

Ezra: Penolia, yo ought to be ashamed of yoself.

Penolia: Shame of what?

Ezra: Kissin dis man.

Penolia: I wasn't kissin him, he kissed me.

Ezra (to Nathan angrily): Wot are you doin takin
advantage of my sister?

Nathan: Wot are you gettin all steamed up about,
brother?

Ezra: Yo know yo ain't doin right.

Nathan: How come I ain't?

Ezra: Doan try to play innocent. I saw yo kissin
Penolia.

Nathan (rising): Well, ain't I got jes much right
ter kiss Penolia as you has ter
kiss Claribel?

Ezra: Wot?

Nathan: Yo heard me, yo heard me. Doan git deaf now.

Ezra: Er, rum . . . you know . . . well . . . yes,
I heard you.

Nathan: I know yo did, now say dat you din kiss
Claribel las night out in the kitchen wen yo
all supposed ter be washin dishes.

Ezra: Aw, well, now . . .

Nathan: Aw, well, now, mah rusty hide! Did yo kiss
de woman or din yo?

Ezra (gulping): Yes, I kissed her.

Nathan: Well, den I kissed yo sister. How you like dat? (Penolia sits smiling at Ezra.)

Ezra (offering his hand to Nathan): Well, it's all right with me.

Nathan (shaking Ezra's hand): All right den, make me know it.³⁸

Before the resolution in the third act, Josephine's illness worsens substantially, and the Johnson family is further beset by angered neighbors. Mose's abiding faith is rewarded at the end, as, due to Mr. Harmon's investigation, oil is discovered in the Gut. Some anxiety occurs when the deed to the land is temporarily misplaced, but the play ends with the promise of great wealth, Josephine's recovery, marriages in the offing, and the singing of spirituals.

Walton turned to Otto Kahn for capitalization of his project. Kahn was an exceedingly wealthy international banker-capitalist who was revered as one of the theatre's most beneficent "angels." His investments proved invaluable to the Theatre Guild, Eva LeGallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre, and the Metropolitan Opera, among others. He was largely responsible for enabling the Moscow Art Theatre and the Abbey Theatre to visit the United States.³⁹

A self-made man who rose from poverty to billionaire status, Kahn also considered himself a friend of the black artist:

I have a great interest in the Negro on the stage as well as in music. I believe that he is capable of

making original and creative contributions to American art. His emotional powers are largely unexpressed and unspent as yet, resembling in this respect some of the Slavic races. Denied for many generations freedom and opportunity, his emotional and artistic powers have remained stored up and accumulated within him. . . .

Their artistic expressions, when unadulterated, whether of pathos or of joy, have a quality which eloquently speaks and faithfully portrays the soul of a race. . . . All the more do I regret the tendency of Negro art to permit itself to be "Broadwayized." In far too many things in which he has presented himself to the public, especially of late, the Negro artist has become simply an imitation of second-rate white standards. The injunction, "To thine own self be true," holds good as much in art as in life. If the rich artistic talent of your race is to become fruitful to itself and to American art, it must above all things, remain itself, it must respect itself, be conscious of itself, uphold its dignity and guard its characteristics.⁴⁰

Kahn backed the Negro Theatre with \$12,500.⁴¹ This sum should have been adequate to produce Meek Mose because, during the 1927-28 Broadway season, the average cost of a production was \$10,000.⁴²

An announcement concerning the new theatre company appeared in the December 24, 1927 New York Age:

Possibly animated by the success that the Theatre Guild's production of Porgy [sic] has had on Broadway, a group of Negro writers and players have got together under the leadership of Lester A. Walton and intend to try out the experiment of giving Broadway a repertory of Negro plays, acted and directed by Negroes. . . . Richard B. Harrison has been selected to play the title role in Meek Mose [sic], and Sidney Kirkpatrick, Laura Bowman, Susie Sutton, Lawrence Criner and Charles Moore are to have leading roles. As yet no theatre on Broadway has been obtained, but Mr. Walton will take his company on a tryout tour starting in Washington the middle of next month.⁴³

Walton had turned to the ranks of the Lafayette Players for the cast of Meek Mose. For an unknown reason,

Richard Harrison did not play Mose, and Charles Moore, venerable elder statesman of vaudeville, minstrelsy, musical comedy and stock, stepped into the lead. George MacEntee, a stock company actor who would portray Mr. Harmon, was credited as director in the original program. However, this credit was later shared with Jasper Deeter, who was reported to have signed on as director ten days prior to the show's Broadway opening.⁴⁴

Deeter, who had played Smithers, the white character in The Emperor Jones, opposite both Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson, was a Provincetown Player and friend of Eugene O'Neill. It was Deeter's idea that a black actor play Brutus Jones, rather than a white actor in black face, and it was he who convinced O'Neill to adopt this idea.⁴⁵ Deeter was probably best known as director of the Hegerow Playhouse in Moylan, Pennsylvania, which he founded in 1923, and which became a laboratory for the United States' foremost playwrights as well as a force for innovation in staging and lighting.⁴⁶

Albert Bliss, a neophyte designer fresh from school, was hired to design the set. All three acts were set in Mose's cabin. Meek Mose tried out in Philadelphia, rather than Washington, at the Gibson Theatre. The first response after the play's January 30, 1928 opening, appears to reveal quite a divergence between the black and white press. W. Rollo Wilson, who wrote a review for the Pittsburgh Courier,

was incensed by what he considered a conspiracy to teach blacks to be submissive:

Splendidly acted but my Northern stomach just could not keep it down. Meek Mose [sic] they call it, and he is meek. He is so meek that one wonders what was the thought behind the show, who is paying for it, and why? Is it what Mr. Otto Kahn ordered?

The theme of the play--submission to the mature judgment of the white Southern--is obnoxious. . . .

The show is propaganda, simple and unadorned, for white supremacy. If you can forget that and want to see some wonderful acting, by all means look in on "Meek Mose."⁴⁷

The Philadelphia Bulletin, a white paper, presented a much gentler opinion:

If Frank Wilson has accomplished nothing else, in the writing of "Meek Mose," he has been able to transfer a cross-section of negro [sic] life to the stage which is true in every detail, perfectly plausible, and interesting in its sheer simplicity. . . . Despite considerable repetition, and a rather tedious finale, it is, in all, a homely story, simply and interestingly told.⁴⁸

The Evening Public Ledger was similar in its approval:

Frank Wilson . . . has done another creditable piece of work in the writing of "Meek Mose." . . .

Billed as a comedy, the predominant vein . . . is of a more serious nature. It is like a parable. . . . But there is enough comedy in "Meek Mose" too.⁴⁹

Hope remained high for the production as it moved to New York for its opening on February 6 at the tiny Princess Theatre. This intimate house of fewer than 300 seats, built in 1913 by its owner, F. Ray Comstock, was located near the south west corner of Sixth Avenue (the Avenue of the Americas) at 104 West Thirty-ninth Street. At first known for its successful experiments with small-scale musicals,

the Princess alternated as a stage and motion picture house until it was razed in 1955.⁵⁰

Variety listed the Princess under its "Outside Times Square--Little--Special" heading in its weekly reports on the New York Theatres, and did not report the grosses of these "under regulation" size houses. There may have been hope that if Meek Mose did well enough, it could be moved to a larger venue, or, it is possible that the Princess was selected as a suitable home for a venture of perhaps limited commercial possibilities.

The Broadway opening promised to be a glittering affair. On February 4, the New York Times reported that Mayor Walker would attend, along with Rouben Mamoulian, the director of Porgy, and members of the Theatre Guild.⁵¹ Nearly all the reviews made note of the high-gloss audience, which also boasted Ferdinand Q. Morton, another black Civil Service Commissioner, Max Reinhart, sculptor Jo Davidson, newsman Morris Gest, Dr. Robert R. Moton, the principal of Tuskegee Institute, and a number of notables from the arts, education, journalism, and politics. Harry Burleigh, a famous musician, was in attendance to see his son Alston as cast member and director of the spirituals. According to one critic, the audience "more than made up in distinction what it lacked in numbers."⁵² Poor weather may have contributed to a disappointing turnout.

Mayor Walker was invited to speak between the second and third acts. The Age reprinted his speech in an editorial laudatory of the mayor's show of good will. Mayor Walker said:

This is a city in which men are measured by their merit and by no other standard. Our Negro citizens have given splendid accounts of themselves in industry and commerce, and now they enter the most vital of the arts, the theatre.

This play is as convincing and as entertaining and as real as anything I have ever seen in the theatre. Its production means much to New York; it vindicates the underlying principles of our government. I hope that before the week is out this theatre will not hold half the crowds that come to see the play.⁵³

It is not known whether Editor Fred R. Moore, Managing Editor Lucien M. White, or City Editor William E. Clark wrote the Age editorial which called Mayor Walker's speech "a graceful, as well as significant" gesture, but the editorial included an astute observation on the dilemma of writing for a racially mixed audience in the United States:

Plays dealing with Negro life have a peculiarly difficult gauntlet to run, as they must not only conform to the white man's idea of negro psychology, but also to the real knowledge of the Negro actors and audience as to how they really would react to certain impulses. In trying to meet these two opposite requirements, the whole action of the play may be completely spoiled.⁵⁴

Perhaps Meek Mose had tried too hard to accommodate both segments of its audience, truly reaching neither. In his review for the Age, Clark endorsed the play, but not necessarily on the basis of dramatic merit. Meek Mose offered an alternative to what many African Americans found offensive about Porgy, In Abraham's Bosom, The Emperor

Jones, and other plays of black life which pleased white audiences:

The new show was presented by Lester A. Walton, who for many years has sought to present the less vicious elements of the Negro life to the theatre going public. Mr. Wilson's play is a step forward in this direction, in that it has no crap shooting, no scenes of debauchery and no Negro killing someone or being lynched.⁵⁵

Right next to Clark's review is a news article concerning the banning of Josephine Baker from performing in Vienna, Austria, and the efforts of Viennese student protestors to keep all black performers out of Vienna. Positive statements about black people were sorely needed to counteract the new intensity of race-based hostility fermenting in Europe and the United States, which in a few years would culminate in Europe in mass murder of a scale heretofore unimagined. A homely melodrama about a good Christian black family overcoming adversity might be one little candle against the great darkness that the darker races could feel encroaching.

But Meek Mose was not that candle. Like Lucien H. White, the Age's music critic, those who wrote about the play saw its strengths as being overwhelmed by its weaknesses. White felt compelled to write his own review, since the music sung frequently throughout Meek Mose lent the play its most effective moments. After describing and assessing the performance of the spirituals sung in the play, White commended the actors:

However, in fairness to the players themselves, it might be said with emphasis that they were much better than the play they were giving. Laura Bowman as "Josephine," Charles H. Moore, a veteran of the stage, as "Meek Mose," and Sidney Kirkpatrick as "Enos Green," the villain, are well known in the theatrical world, and their experienced interpretations did much to add some measure of enjoyment to the play. Moore is the dean of negro actors, probably longer on the stage than any of them and never did better work than in this play.

One of the surprises of the evening was the work of Ruth Ellis, heretofore known only in the recital stage as a dramatic reader of considerable parts, who portrayed the part of "Penolia," the daughter . . . making her first appearance on the stage in a dramatic production.⁵⁶

Harry T. Burleigh received honorable mention as the musical director as well as for his acting in the role of "Cole Turner," another of Mose's antagonists. Bowman and Kirkpatrick should be remembered not only as Lafayette Players, but also as leading characters in The Chip Woman's Fortune produced on Broadway five years earlier; Arthur Ray, a walk-on in that production, now played "Ezra" in Meek Mose. Other Lafayette Players in the cast included J. Lawrence Criner and Susie Sutton. A few years after Meek Mose, Sutton, Charles Moore, and Frank Wilson would work together as Noah's wife, Mr. Deshee, and Moses, respectively, in Marc Connely's highly successful play, The Green Pastures.

Romeo L. Dougherty of the Amsterdam News was as enthusiastic about the performances in Meek Mose as the Age reviewers, and like William Clark, Dougherty kept his fingers crossed for the production's success:

The story . . . lacks sufficient depth, we think, to bring us to the theatre for the second time. We hope that it will have a liberal run, but we doubt it. It is, however, a very important step in the right direction.⁵⁷

The Crisis, Opportunity, and The Messenger did not publish columns on Meek Mose. Theophilus Lewis had stopped writing for The Messenger, which was floundering financially and would cease publication in mid-1928. The Crisis and Opportunity do not appear to have maintained truly regular theatre criticism or a regular theatre critic, but given the circumstances and persons involved in the production of Meek Mose, the omission of criticism in these journals seems unusual.

The Pittsburgh Courier published another article on Meek Mose in its March 3, 1928 edition. Floyd J. Calvin offered his opinion of the show along with some gross historical inaccuracies:

. . . first, it is the occasion of the first time a Negro producer has invaded Broadway in the legitimate dramatic field, second, it the first play to be produced on Broadway that was written by a Negro. And . . . is the first Negro play to be produced on Broadway with a happy ending. . . .

I read the criticisms, then on Thursday night of the second week I went to see the play. After a few minutes . . . my first remark to the wife was, "I don't see why critics don't like this play. It's as good as 'Porgy,' except it doesn't have the volume." . . . Even the backers of the project admit that it isn't the best play in the world, but it is at least a good start toward what at least the white critics are agreed on--that a Negro theatre on Broadway for the presentation of Negro plays by Negro actors is inevitable. Now whatever little contribution that can be made toward that end, no matter what sacrifice, it will go down in theatrical history as worthwhile. . . . Let the mockers of "Meek Mose" think again. There is so much good this play has

accomplished, just by its mere appearance, that it is worthy of much praise. . . . And speaking of the theme of the play--"meekness"--had it not been for a "Mr. Harmon" even this would not have seen the light of day.

If "Meek Mose" fails, the Walton Producing Company has already decided to produce another play at a later date that will take a step nearer the goal of a Negro theatre on Broadway.⁵⁸

The Courier's editors failed to correct Calvin's statements that Meek Mose was the first black-authored drama to reach Broadway, as well as the first with a happy ending. Again, mention of the achievements of Willis Richardson and Garland Anderson had been omitted. Not only did they precede Wilson by five and three years respectively, but both their plays had happy endings. The choice of the word "invaded" to describe the introduction of a black legitimate theatrical producer to Broadway may indicate the degree of difficulty involved in achieving such a goal. The idea that some of the African-American press had soon forgotten the achievements of Willis Richardson and Garland Anderson is disturbing. The admission of the backers of "Meek Mose" that they were asking audiences to support a weak play in hope of building better productions in the future implies that some of the realities of Broadway audiences and the Broadway bottom line were being overlooked. The majority of black and white critics alike appear to have thought that the establishment of an African-American theatre company at the heart of the commercial theatre was important. However, it seems patently unfair to have attempted to place the

weight of the fate of African American Theatre on Broadway upon the slender shoulders of Meek Mose.

Alexander Woollcott was among a small cadre of white critics in the audience for the opening of Meek Mose. He contributed a review of the show as well as a large portion of his Sunday column, in which he compiled his cumulative thoughts on the previous week in the theatre. In his first column, "The Stage," Woollcott pithily described the opening night:

The portents of a dozen seasons past have foreshadowed that inevitable and welcome day when this city will have a theatre for plays of Negro life written by Negro playwrights for Negro players.

A feeble and faltering step in that direction was taken last night at the Princess Theatre when a scant audience attended the first performance of a play called "Meek Mose," written by the same Frank Wilson who put aside his Harlem mail bag to play the leading roles in "In Abraham's Bosom" and "Porgy." It is an open secret that it was the ringing triumph of "Porgy" at the Guild which made the backing for this less auspicious venture so easy to find.

The first audience for "Meek Mose" was small enough to make the little Princess seem a cavernous and drafty temple of the drama. But it was mighty choice. . . . There were present all the elements of a great occasion except a good play and a good performance. . . . If "Meek Mose" could have profited from the same brilliant and resourceful direction which brought "Porgy" to such glowing life . . . this morning's report . . . might have been a different story.⁵⁹

Woollcott's weekly column, "Second Thoughts on First Nights," further expressed disappointment and hope:

A similar indecision made last Monday night painful. Up at the Cosmopolitan in Columbus Circle they were reviving "Mrs. Dane's Defense" . . .

Torn with indecision between these proffered entertainments, most of the reviewers turned their footsteps toward Columbus Circle, and only Percy Hammond of the Herald Tribune [sic], Charles Brackett of the New

Yorker and your correspondent showed up in the sparse audience which assembled to welcome "Meek Mose." . . . For the day is surely coming when New York will have a stage just for the production of plays of Negro life, written and acted by and for the colored brethren. There is no earthly or heavenly reason why that theatre should not be as vivid, as vital, as individual and as inviting to dramatists as, for instance, the Abbey Theatre in Dublin . . . But it will need far better showmanship than the brand which could assemble little more than a hundred people to watch the faltering first performance of "Meek Mose." . . .

Yet feeble as it is, "Meek Mose" can be saluted as just another step away from the days when up in Harlem, instead of seeing such an honest attempt at an interpretation of Negro life, you would more likely have found the old Lafayette stock company giving "Mrs. Dane's Defense," with its most ululant actress writhing through the cross-examination scene in a coat of the best white powder.⁶⁰

Percy Hammond's impression of the opening night was similar to Woolcott's, and he provided the additional information that Meek Mose ended with a wedding scene which was not contained in the revised Brother Mose. He thought that the singing of spirituals in Meek Mose was the best feature of the play, which he described as a "mess of oversweet theatrical marmalade."⁶¹

Unlike many of the other critics, he was unimpressed by the acting, which he viewed as generally "feckless. They seemed to be Negro players imitating white players in Negro impersonations."⁶²

Brooks Atkinson was among the major critics who chose to attend Mrs. Dane's Defense, but an unsigned review appeared in the New York Times which denigrated Meek Mose as

. . . a childishly naive endeavor . . . depicting life only in slightly shop-worn terms of the theatre.

It may or may not be axiomatic to say that the negro, in writing about himself, sees himself not as he is, or even approximately as he is, but in the vivid reds, blues and greens of the comic strip. He becomes, in brief, a caricature, and such a caricature as even few whites make him out to be. In "Meek Mose" the majority of the characters do not seem to be real people, not as real as those in "Porgy" or "Goat Alley," but exaggerations of real people. . . . On the other hand, the point may well be brought up that "Meek Mose" is not supposed to be a realistic portrayal of negroes or contemporary negro problems, but simply a theatrical entertainment. In this case, the opinion that such a theatre should locate in Harlem, where it would be of most service, might be in order.⁶³

The Daily News printed more of a plot synopsis than a review of the play, withholding critical analysis and remarking that the opening night audience was a "sparse one, considering a wintry night when people prefer to stay home by the radio."⁶⁴

Since Richard Lockridge's review appeared in the New York Sun the day following opening night, it is likely that he was among the first nighters as well, contrary to the observation of Woollcott. Lockridge was thoroughly disappointed:

There was something about the title, "Meek Mose," which promised well. An honest, perhaps a poignant play, might have such a title as that when it was to be about negro life--and not about the strained sophisticates of that happy, troubled race, but about the colored brothers and sisters who live in such places as Mexia, Tex. [sic], and hide everything they feel from white men. There was nothing in such a title to indicate that the whole was to be merely a tawdry melodrama, overlaid ineptly with a cracking varnish of the minstrel show.⁶⁵

The Evening World, the Telegraph, and the Post also printed reviews the day after the opening. The Post focused on flaws in the structure of the play:

Mr. Wilson's play has too many characters in it. They file through Mose's living room, orating no end, repetitiously and to no apparent purpose other than for reasons of characterization. Some of them are magazine story characters, others seem snatched by the seats of their baggy trousers directly from minstrel shows. But at least four important ones stand out as clear-cut and valuable creations. Charles H. Moore, in the role of Mose, played a sentimental part with an affecting simplicity, shared by Laura Bowman as a pertinaciously practical wife and by J. Lawrence Criner and Arthur Ray. But Mr. Wilson has depended not a little for his effect on the group singing of "Go Down, Moses," "Nobody Knows," "Calvary," and once even by dialogue whose emotion is intensified into a group spiritual with an engaging and natural sense of proportion. That the third act unblushingly discovers an oil well in the back yard, bringing in a handy if also comic relief to all concerned, really matters very little. Except, perhaps, to prove that the meek shall inherit not only the earth but the five hundred barrels a day that chance happily through it in the immediate vicinity.⁶⁶

Harold M'Gillicuddy of the Telegraph agreed that Meek Mose was a "A feeble, amazingly naive, yet sincere comedy-drama of negro [sic] life."⁶⁷ However, he was more inclined to identify the direction as the show's major problem: "The direction, which was split between George MacEntee and Jasper Deeter, seemed rather weak, being carried on along the general lines of a snail's pace."⁶⁸

The reviewer for the Evening World gave kudos to the acting ensemble of seventeen with speaking roles plus supernumeraries. Though he agreed that the play itself was

weak, he was one of the few to see some social commentary in the piece:

But the comedy-drama itself . . . after propounding a full-sized problem of the rights of the Negro in the face of Caucasian greed, weakens fearfully by answering it with the threadbare, melodramatic and happy-endish device of buried treasure.⁶⁹

The Brooklyn Daily News thoroughly panned Meek Mose, calling Wilson "no playwright at all."⁷⁰ The play was, in the reviewer's opinion,

. . . about as faithful a description of negro [sic] life as "Uncle Tom's Cabin." "Porgy," by two white Americans [DuBose and Dorothy Heyward] and staged by a Russo-Armenian who has lived in this country for less than two years [Rouben Mamoulian], is not only a true revelation but also an authentic photo of life below the Mason-Dixon line. . . . It is highly doubtful whether the end of the week will still see "Meek Mose" in the race.⁷¹

Meek Mose did survive from February 6 through March 3, 1928.⁷² Audiences interested in a play about African-Americans were flocking to Porgy. It was inevitable that Meek Mose would be compared to Porgy, and Meek Mose suffered in the process. In its February 8, 1928 issue, Variety pronounced the show all but dead:

The new all-colored cast play (save a minor character) is of the arty kind, high brow in its own circles, a commendable effort though one that hardly stands a chance as a box office draw. . . . His Honor was presented Monday night when the error of not having the little house filled was made. . . . The weird, colored, religious melodies are about the most alluring things about "Meek Mose." . . .

"Meek Mose" as a colored play by colored players is questionable for necessary support. Looks like it has its best chance in the little Princess, with no chance of moving to a regulation sized house. For \$3.30 top the average playgoer demands more.⁷³

With the same top ticket price of \$3.30, Porgy was pulling in a hefty \$13,000 per week⁷⁴ while Meek Mose did not seem to be able to paper its house full. Gordon Leland of Billboard was kind to the play and to the efforts of its supporters, but inferred that Meek Mose lacked appeal for the typical Broadway theatregoer:

One of the most interesting evenings in a long while for a white Broadwayite was spent at the opening of Meek Mose . . . an impressive moment in the lobby was the sight of the Irish mayor, the negro [sic] commissioner and the Jewish financier, Otto Kahn, conversing intimately with their arms thrown over each other's shoulders. In the lobby, too, the colored producer, Lester A. Walton, made a most favorable impression of high intelligence and culture. . . .

For the most part it goes in for caricature and the appropriate order of things is entirely disregarded. For this very reason Meek Mose, tho [sic] it is not good playwrighting, avoids the pitfalls of bad playwrighting. One fears that it will slip into 10-20-30 melodrama, for example, when Ezra waxes indignantly, "What you mean by kissing my sister?" But Nathan merely says, "What are you getting all steamed up about, Big Boy?" and the incident ends in a laugh. . . . Behind the minstrel aspect there flashes the distinctive qualities of race. . . . George MacEntee and Jasper Deeter are credited with the direction, the merit of which can only be commented upon by one more familiar with such strange entertainment.⁷⁵

After Meek Mose closed at the Princess, the show travelled uptown to the Lafayette Theatre for a one-week engagement commencing March 12, 1928. The Lafayette retained its regular variety bill, scheduling the play to go up each night at 10:45 P.M.; the audience was assured that playing time would be under two hours. Ticket prices ranged from \$.50 to \$1.65.⁷⁶

The Age (which had repeated the erroneous statement that Wilson's play was the first of black authorship to reach Broadway) reported that Meek Mose received an enthusiastic reception at the Lafayette, and that a midnight performance would be given on Sunday, March 18. The report also noted that Charles Gilpin was among the audience which welcomed Walton and veteran Lafayette players to their old home; it was also hinted that Walton was in negotiation with film companies concerning film rights to Meek Mose, though no names were mentioned.⁷⁷

The possibility of success for Meek Mose appeared slim in any medium. Mose was not the Moses preferred by the New Negro. In the words of Randolph Edmonds:

The bowing and scraping of the meek old man failed to excite a large number of Harlemites, and did not contain enough force or melodrama to satisfy the satiated Broadway theatre-goers.⁷⁸

One side effect of the failure of Meek Mose appears to be the demise of the idea of the Negro Theatre repertory company. Walton did not progress further with his plans for a black theatre company on Broadway. As for Wilson, critical response to Meek Mose may have slowed his progress as a playwright, but his career as an actor continued to flourish until his retirement in the 1950s. Broadway roles in Sweet Chariot in 1930, Singin' the Blues in 1931, Bloodstream in 1932, We the People in 1933, They Shall Not Die in 1934, and Roll Sweet Chariot, also in 1934, followed.

Though the Federal Theatre had yet to be officially formed, performers were already at work through the Works Progress Administration, the first federal agency organized to offset the debilitating economic effects of the Depression. Among the first of the successful plays presented by the WPA was Brother Mose.

Though revised, Brother Mose retained the essential character of Meek Mose. The Johnson family was now the Jenkins family, and most of the characters were basically the same. One notable change was the disappearance of Mr. Harmon from the stage, though he retained a strong offstage presence and was referred to often. The location of the second act was divided between Miss Minnie's Cook Shop in the old black settlement and Mose's cabin in the Gut. The scene in Miss Minnie's place provided an opportunity for a new set of characters, who happened to be musical entertainers, to perform some popular songs and dances while discussing differences in points of view between the adherents of Mose and those of Enos Green. The title page of the play identifies it as "a comedy of Negro life with music and spirituals."⁷⁹ There were now twenty characters plus supernumeraries in the cast.

Although subtly woven into the script, social commentary was present in the script along with ideas which Wilson would articulate more clearly in his next play produced by the Federal Theatre, Walk Together, Chillun.

One recurring theme which Wilson followed through more than one play concerns the difference between the attitude of the "old" Negro and the "new" Negro. When Mose's son Ezra first meets Nathan and befriends him, he warns Nathan to maintain a low profile:

Ezra: Well, son, yo's in Texas now, and wen a colored man starts runnin down hyer', dey all run, doctors, lawyers and ebery ting else, safer to run first, den ask questions after.⁸⁰

Nathan cannot reconcile himself to the docility of the black community in the face of the order to move:

Ezra: Dey offered us a small sum fer our homes, and offer ter build us homes free of charge in de Gut.

Nathan: Well, I know you all ain't goin' ter accept anything lak dat, is yo?

Josephine: If we don move, dey mought move us anyway.

Nathan: Doan let em move yo.

Nathan's ideas are viewed with suspicion by Josephine. He is seen as a troublemaker. Later, word is brought back that Nathan talked back to a white man, causing the whites to force the family to move sooner than anticipated. The situation might remind the modern reader of the way the living conditions of blacks are manipulated in South Africa. In the face of adversity, Mose turns to the Bible:

Josephine: But Mose, whar kin you show dem in real life outside ob de Bible whar de meek has inherited de earth.

Mose (quickly): De Jews. . . . dat's whar . . . Who's any mo meek and humble den de Jews; dey

never fight, and ain't de got ebery thing?

Josephine: Yes, but de Jews ain't no relation ter us. Dey havin money don't hep us any . . . Wese meek and humble too. . . . but wot has we got?

Mose: We got ebery thing but patience.

Josephine stands by Mose, but later she knows that her attitude is more earthly and practical:

Josephine: Well, doan yo understan, if de white man sees dat we'se stickin together he might give us some sideration, but wen one's pullin dat way, and he's pullin t'other, he's got us divided, doan yo understand? Dis is de time we got ter get tergether, I told yo.

Through Josephine, Wilson interweaves another theme, strength through unity. Wilson, in his description of his cast of characters at the beginning of the play, had created a community of every physical type and description of African American: light and dark, tall and short, educated and uneducated. Mexia's black community is a microcosm of the black community at large. At the end of the first act, humor is culled from color-consciousness when Stanley, Mr. Harmon's valet, arrives at Mose's cabin, where the community meeting is taking place, to deliver a message:

Enos: Now Captain, I'm goin to put it up to you, you look like a clean throughbred white gentleman.

Stanley: No sir, I'm not white. I'm young Mr. Harmon's valet, and a Negro, just like the rest of you.

Dave: What!

All: What!

Minnie: And he ain't white?

Cole: Look a here!

Enos: What you mean coming in here, makin us
 believe you is white?

By the beginning of the third act, a series of disasters have occurred: there has been sickness and death, and Ezra has been sentenced to six months on the chain gang for defending his mother from angry neighbors who blame their calamities on Mose. In addition, the blacks who tried to keep their homes have been forcibly removed from them and thrown into the Gut. It is disunity which has caused more trouble than the white man, poverty, and pestilence. All seems lost until Stanley arrives with word that Mr. Harmon's son has discovered oil on Mose's property. Mr. Harmon has also arranged to have Ezra returned from prison. One last obstacle remains; the deed has been misplaced. Inadvertantly left behind at Mose's old home, it was purloined by Miss Minnie and held for ransom. It is Nathan who outsmarts both Miss Minnie and Enos and saves the new found wealth of the Jenkins family. Mose will use his money to benefit the community, as Nathan urges him to broaden his horizons:

Mose: Children, you know the first thing I'm gwine to do is clean up this Gut and make it a decent place for decent people to live, and the next thing ahm going ter build one of de finest churches in Texas, . . .

Nathan: Mr. Mose, course I ain't tryin to tell you how to spend yo money, but don't yo think it would be a good idea to build some business places here so me and my children would have some place to work? . . .

Mose: That's all right, son. I'll tend to the business and I got plenty of money to do it with.

The play ends as family and friends file out to visit Josephine, who is recuperating in the hospital, talking happily and singing, "Good News." Though the structure of the play is seriously flawed by the triteness of melodramatic coincidence and fantasy, Meek Mose/Brother Mose carries a message of the need for community unity. Yet the character of Mose, who is true to the precepts of Christianity, always turning the other cheek when struck, raises such ambivalent feelings that it may be difficult to get to the messages underneath. What if there had been no oil well (from which, incidently, Mose will receive the profits from one of every eight barrels, even though he owns the property)? In melodrama, good must triumph over evil, but in real life race relations, there are too few happy coincidences.

Theatre Number Four, one of the portable WPA stages which circulated around New York City, carried Brother Mose, written and directed by Frank Wilson. On August 6, 1934, Brother Mose played to an audience of ten thousand on the Central Park Mall. Laura Bowman reprised her role as Josephine, and a new young talent discovered by Wilson,

Canada Lee, who was destined to gain a lasting place in theatre history, took his first professional role as Nathan. Gus Smith replaced Charles Moore as Mose.⁸¹ The play was staged over 250 times⁸² by units in New York and twenty additional cities.⁸³

Wilson remained with the Federal Theatre Project as an actor and director. He directed his highly successful Walk Together Chillun for the Negro Theatre Unit at the Lafayette Theatre. The play, which opened on February 4, 1936, happened to be the first legitimate production by the New York branch of the Federal Theatre.⁸⁴ A drama in two acts, Walk Together Chillun shows how a black community in an unnamed Northern city overcomes factionalism in the face of adversity. In his primarily favorable review of the play, Brooks Atkinson commented that it "is simple, direct and sincere. It is also frankly addressed to Negro audiences. . . . Mr. Wilson is talking to his comrades. He is not appealing for Times Square applause."⁸⁵ Through Walk Together Chillun, Wilson kept his promise to write "for one race, and that race my own."

In 1935, Wilson joined the cast of The Green Pastures as Moses. His other major stage credits include: Sailor, Beware! (1935); numerous revivals of The Emperor Jones; Journeyman (1938); All the Living (1938); Kiss the Boys Goodbye (1938); Watch on the Rhine (1941); South Pacific (not to be confused with the musical, 1943); Memphis Bound

(1945); Anna Lucasta (1946-47); Set My People Free (1948); The Big Knife (1949); How Long Till Summer (1949); Moby Dick (1955). He last appeared on Broadway as Frank the bartender in Take a Giant Step by Louis Petersen, a play which featured a new young star, Louis Gosset, Jr., in 1953.

Wilson sojourned to Hollywood, primarily during the 1930s. His film credits include: Melody Makers (1932); The Emperor Jones (1933); The Green Pastures (1936); The Devil is Driving, All American Sweetheart, A Dangerous Adventure, Life Begins with Love (1937); Extortion (1938); Watch on the Rhine (1943); Beware (1946). There was no lack of potential work for Wilson, but he eventually turned his back on Hollywood. When asked why, he explained that parts offered him were usually stereotyped menial roles, and not worth the trip to California.⁸⁶

Wilson did accept an offer to write and act in films made for African-American audiences by producers Jack and Dave Goldberg. He wrote the screenplay for and appeared in Paradise in Harlem, the story of a great black comedian who realizes his dream of playing Othello (although not stated as such, possibly an homage to Bert Williams, with whom both Wilson and his wife had worked), in 1939. He wrote Murder on Lenox Avenue and Sunday Sinners for the Goldbergs in 1941, as well as appearing in several of their other films. In addition, Wilson served as a featured player in a number of films by black filmmaker Oscar Micheux.

A member of several performing arts unions as well as the Negro Actors Guild, Wilson's career also encompassed radio and television, including "Circus Days," "Studio One," and "Ethel and Albert."

On February 5, 1956, Wilson suffered a paralytic stroke. He died February 16 in Queens General Hospital, not far from his home in Corona, New York.

Wilson never achieved the level of artistry as a writer that he attained as an actor and director. However, his plays, though dramaturgically weak, were indicative of a search for a new consciousness of expression in African-American drama. Wilson believed that a true black drama must unselfconsciously retain its integrity as a black experience. If valid as a black experience, it would be appreciated, though probably in different ways according to different frames of reference, no matter what the constitution of the audience. "Negro theatre must get back to what Williams and Walker [the comedy team of Bert Williams and George Walker] stood for," Wilson once said. "They took advantage of being Negroes--something we keep apologizing for."⁸⁷

CHAPTER 6

HARLEM

Wallace Thurman laughed a long bitter laugh. He was a strange kind of fellow, who liked to drink gin, but didn't like to drink gin; who liked being a Negro, but felt it a great handicap; who adored bohemianism, but thought it wrong to be a bohemian. He liked to waste time, but he felt guilty wasting time. He loathed crowds, yet hated to be alone. He almost always felt bad, yet he didn't write poetry.¹

Of the writers discussed in this study, Wallace Thurman was closest to the epicenter of the Negro Renaissance circle of literati. His hegira to Harlem, notoriety, and an early death was marked by peripety, illness, and a struggle against self-destructive impulses.

Thurman was born on August 16, 1902 in Salt Lake City, Utah. He described his parents and grandparents as "pioneer westerners."² The marriage between his father, Oscar, and his mother, Beulah, disintegrated while Thurman was very young. He followed his mother through a progression of cities and marriages. Thurman entered school in Boise, Idaho, at age six, was taken ill two months later, and became an invalid for the next two years. He was moved back to Salt Lake City for a brief stay, then to Chicago from 1910 through 1914. A move to Omaha, Nebraska, followed, where he finished grammar school and his first year of high

school. He then returned to Salt Lake City, where he suffered what he termed "persistent heart attacks."³ Thinking a lower altitude would help, Thurman went to Pasadena, California, where he was overtaken by the flu epidemic of 1918. He managed to finish high school, then matriculated at the University of Utah in Salt Lake. After two years there as a pre-med student, he suffered a nervous breakdown. Thurman left school, spent a summer in Omaha, returned to Salt Lake, then moved to Los Angeles, where he enrolled in the University of Southern California. While Thurman completed the two remaining years of his undergraduate studies, he worked as a postal clerk. After graduation he remained at the post office for an additional year.⁴

Thurman called his decision to become a writer a "sudden inspiration."⁵ He began by contributing a column, "Inklings," to a local black newspaper, and, inspired by what he had learned of the New Negro movement centered in New York, started his own magazine, The Outlet, to encourage this movement on the West Coast. The magazine lasted only six months.⁶ Meantime, Thurman befriended a co-worker at the post office who was also a struggling young writer, Arna Bontemps. They encouraged each other and discussed their submissions. Bontemps, as soon as he had his first poem published in The Crisis, packed up and moved to New York.

Shortly thereafter, Thurman likewise decided to migrate from Los Angeles to Harlem. The year was 1925.⁷

Among Thurman's first friends in New York was Theophilus Lewis, who steered him to an editorial position on a short-lived leftist newspaper, The Looking Glass. Lewis then helped Thurman gain a position as acting managing editor of The Messenger while the man who held that post, George Schuyler, took a sabbatical. When Schuyler returned in the fall of 1926, Thurman moved on to become circulation manager for a white liberal publication, The World Tomorrow.⁸

Thurman had once told Lewis that his ambition was to be an editor of a financially secure magazine.⁹ His next attempt to realize that dream was Fire, published in November 1926. By now Thurman was familiar with most of the writers of his generation in Harlem, and his apartment, popularly known by the appellation he had given it, "niggeratti manor,"¹⁰ was the scene of frequent raucous gatherings of uptown black and downtown white bohemians.

Thurman invited some of the most gifted of the younger generation of black writers to contribute essays, short stories, and poetry, and included art work by Aaron Douglas. Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett, Richard Bruce Nugent, Aaron Douglas, and John Davis were listed not only as contributors, but as associate editors as well. Countee Cullen, Edward Silvera, Lewis Alexander,

Helene Johnson, Waring Cuney, and Arthur Huff Fauset rounded out the roster of writers for the first and only issue. The beautifully produced magazine, priced at a dollar per copy, proved an impossibly hard sell. Fire also ignited the wrath of powerful critics, such as W. E. B. DuBois; critical denunciations, particularly from the black literary establishment, flew hot and heavy. The failure of Fire severely wounded Thurman emotionally and financially. He was forced to spend the next several years paying off Fire's printing and start-up costs.

Thurman was seeking to liberate black writers from the oppressive weight of two schools of thought on black writing: the DuBois school and the Locke school. Those in the DuBois camp viewed propaganda and social commentary as a duty of African-American art, while those of the Locke group believed African-American art should primarily explore African and folk roots toward the creation of a distinctive artistic idiom. Thurman, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and several other young artists, felt that it was time the old guard give way to a new freedom in artistic expression. There should be no limits, spoken or unspoken, and no taboos. As Thurman said of Fire,

It was not interested in sociological problems or propaganda. It was purely artistic in intent and conception. Its contributors went to the proletariat rather than to the bourgeoisie for characters and material. They were interested in people who still retained some individual race qualities and who were not totally white American in every aspect save color of skin.¹¹

Thurman's primary writing contribution to Fire had been a short story, "Cordelia the Crude." In first-person narrative form, the story chronicled a young writer's two encounters with a young woman transplanted to Harlem from South Carolina against her will. Cordelia's anger toward her parents took the form of refusal to attend school or to find a job. She whiled away her time picking up young men at the neighborhood movie theatre. One evening she picked up the narrator. Curious, he escorted her home, only to suddenly reject her overt, yet unspoken, invitation to a sexual encounter. Instead, he hurriedly pressed two dollar bills into her hand as he left her standing bewildered at her door. Six months later, he recognized Cordelia as she indulged in a drunken, frenzied Charleston at a rent party. After brushing past him to join her friends, she acknowledged him as the man who gave her her first two dollars. Ironically, the young man's gesture had inspired Cordelia to become a prostitute.

Thurman turned the short story into a play scenario, also entitled "Cordelia the Crude"; sketching out a three-act melodrama, he created a family for Cordelia, the Masons, emigres from North Carolina. Cordelia was to be "an emerging Harlem 'Chippie' . . . 17, teakwood tan, sturdy, slicked down bobbed hair. . . ." ¹² Her siblings included Arabella, fourteen, and "saucy and impudent" ¹³

seven-year-old Maizie and eight-year-old George. Her beleaguered, overworked parents, Mr. and Mrs. Uriah Mason, have opened their railroad flat to boarders in order to make ends meet. These are Basil Venerable, an earnest West Indian, and a common-law couple, Anna Craig and Jesse Stone, described as "two pagan animals . . . bits of color who refuse to be dimmed by a drab environment." Anna is "high yaller" and Jesse is "stovepipe blonde."¹⁴ The principal characters are rounded out by Kid Vamp, a bisexual male prostitute and gambler, "reddish brownskin with long wavy slicked hair"; Roy Kane, weaker counterpart to Kid Vamp, a "keen featured Mulatto, curly headed . . . a 'sweetback,'" whose fiscal prosperity is based on his sexual prowess with women.¹⁵

Thurman's scenario would become the play's first act, in which the major conflicts are introduced: the disintegrating relationships among the Mason family; Basil's consuming passion and jealousy where Cordelia is concerned; a rent party where Harlem's worst elements openly mingle and cause explosive tensions to erupt. In order to shape these ideas into dramatic action and dialogue, Thurman turned to William Jourdan Rapp, a friendly acquaintance since 1925, when Thurman, new to the New York scene, had sought out Rapp for advice on how to gain employment as a writer.¹⁶

Rapp, who was of Irish-German extraction, was born in New York in 1895. After earning a degree in bacteriology at

Cornell University and spending an additional year of graduate study in Paris, he became a public health consultant, subsequently travelling throughout Europe and the Near East in that capacity. Rapp then turned to writing, becoming a feature writer at the New York Times in 1925 and an editor at True Story Magazine in 1926. He participated in writing radio scripts for both the Columbia and National broadcasting networks, as well as working as an independent media consultant. He produced two novels, but only one play under his sole authorship, Osman Pasha, a drama of the Turkish Revolution, which was produced in 1925. He collaborated with other authors on several plays before and after his association with Thurman; among these are Whirlpool, Hilda Cassidy, Substitute for Murder, and The Holmeses of Baker Street. At the time of his death in 1942, Rapp had recently left True Story for an editorial post at the Cook Publishing Company, a major producer of religious books. He appears to have enjoyed a stable personal life with his wife, Virginia, and their two children.¹⁷

Rapp assisted Thurman with the scenario for "Cordelia the Crude," which took a year to write and another year to produce. Eventually, this play was retitled Harlem.¹⁸ Together, Thurman and Rapp wrote several drafts under various titles, including Cordelia the Crude, City of Refuge, a title that had been used for a short story about Harlem by Rudolph Fisher, and Black Mecca. The title of the

script submitted to potential producers was Black Belt, which was completed in 1927.¹⁹

Cordelia's family name had been changed to Williams. There were siblings Arabella, now fifteen, George, age twelve, and Maizie, ten. Pa Williams had become less noble in character, described as a man who "likes to beget children, does not particularly care about them after they begin to create new responsibilities. . . . lost without Ma . . . helpless. . . . his blustering exterior conceals a profound sense of inadequacy in his new environment." Ma has become "a typical southern woman ready to moan and pray at the slightest provocation."²⁰ Cordelia, on the cusp of age eighteen, is still "selfish, lazy, sullen," but is counter-balanced a bit by the addition of an older brother, Jasper, twenty-eight, a mature, responsible man who had been the major influence in the family's decision to move to New York. Jasper's wife and children are referred to, but not shown.

Basil Venerable, now identified as a native of Barbados, was still boarding with the Williams's and still obsessed with "Delia." Basil has been given a roommate, Jenks, a slow-moving southerner. The unmarried rooming couple were now named Effie and Jimmie. Cordelia was provided with a confidante, a fellow "chippie" named Mary Lou. The rent party musicians, Ippy Jones, a piano player, and Jake, a trap drummer, would also figure in the play's

action. Roy Kane was now Roy Crowe; he and Kid Vamp were now described as harlem "sheiks" and bosses of an underworld gambling ring.

Other speaking characters included Briggs, Kid's henchman; Detective Sergeant Donohue, a white policeman and the only white character in the cast; Patrolmen Kelly and Johnson; a janitress and her daughter; the Hot Man, renamed the Hot Stuff Man in later drafts; Dr. Voodeo [sic]; Reverend Johnson; Sister Saunders and Sister Brown. A large ensemble of party goers was also required.

The first act was set on a Saturday night in late November in the parlor of the Williams's five-room railroad flat, as final preparations are under way for the rent party, a gathering at which admission is charged and refreshments, which usually included bootleg liquor as well as food, are sold, and music is provided for dancing. The family's tensions are quickly introduced in an expository dialog between Arabella and Maizie:

Maizie: I wish we was back home.

Arabella: Oh, Harlem's all right if it wasn't so cold and dirty. Betta times here than home.

Maizie: Whadu you mean, betta times? Nobody here but Delia has betta times, Ma and Pa both workin' all de time! We nevah gets out to play! All de beds in de house rented out! And den dese Saturday night parties! Pa gets drunk; ma cries all day Sunday; Basil and Delia fights; an' we has to go to brother Jasper's an' sleep in the bed wid dose wettin' kids o' his.²¹

One by one the rest of the family returns to the fourth floor tenement walk-up: first Ma, who takes in washing and does domestic work, then Cordelia, then Pa. Cordelia taunts Arabella with the knowledge that her younger sister is in love with Basil, whom Cordelia and others often refer to with the derogatory term for West Indians, "monkey chaser."

Basil arrives, having skipped his night school classes in order to keep an eye on Cordelia at the rent party. His ambition is to become a lawyer. He has proposed marriage to Cordelia numerous times and been rudely rejected. He takes the fact they have had a sexual relationship seriously, while she does not.

Jasper comes in to take Ma and the younger children to his nearby flat for the night. Ma releases her frustration on him:

City of Refuge! Dat's whad you wrote in' told us.
Harlem is de city of refuge. Is yo' shure you don' mean
City of Refuse? Dat's all dere is heah. De people!
Dese dark houses made out of de devil's brick, piled up
high an' crowdin' one another an' smellin' worse dan our
pig pen did back home in summer! City of Refuge! You--
I--God have mercy on our souls.

Pa's frustration is equally great. As he readies the pistol he keeps in case the party gets out of hand, he berates his son for convincing him that Harlem was the way to a better life. Pa was happy in the South, and wants to return there. He blames the West Indians for his inability to find work at a decent wage; they take the jobs by taking

lower pay. Ma asserts that there is nothing to return to; the family has no money and the old homestead is gone. Jasper reminds them both that life was no bed of roses in the South. The debate then shifts to the pros and cons of playing the numbers. Jasper is unsuccessful in dissuading his father from illegally gambling a substantial portion of the family's meagre financial resources. Then all eyes turn to Cordelia as she suddenly enters in a skimpy party dress. Admonished by her mother, Cordelia fearlessly responds:

Cordelia: . . . I got all I needs but freedom. Jes' cause I don' wanna tend to babies, slave, cook an' wash for pa or some white women don' mean I don't know what's best for me. I ain't cut out for dat. I'm cut out for something big, something more excitin' and beautiful dan bein' a washwoman or a ladies' maid.
. . . All black women don' have to be sudsbusters and kitchen mechanics. An' don't tell me to be no school teacher! I've had enuff of kids right here!

Mother: But whatcha gonna do chile? Whatcha gonna do?

Cordelia: I'm goin' on de stage.

As soon as Jasper, Ma, and the younger children exit, Ippy, who happens to be Roy's cousin, comes in to set up for the party. It also happens that Ippy, having once dated Cordelia, still has a crush on her. Roy soon arrives; the mutual attraction between Roy and Cordelia is evident. Basil soon leaves his post at the front door, where he is collecting quarters from the guests as they are admitted, to verbally confront Roy. More guests pour in, and for a while

wild dancing and the consumption of pig feet, coleslaw, and corn liquor prevail. Tom, one of Kid's number runners, enters to report to Roy that he has been robbed of his policy receipts by members of a white mob which is muscling in, the Rafferty Gang. Told by Roy that he must make up his losses or face the wrath of the Kid, Tom furiously hawks the numbers at the party.

The party climaxes with a fight between Roy and Basil, whose jealousy was further inflamed by the sight of Cordelia and Roy locked in the embrace of a sexually suggestive dance. Roy blackjacks Basil; Pa rushes from the kitchen to throw Roy out. Cordelia objects, and is told by Pa that she can leave too. As she exists with Roy, she taunts Basil, who swears vengeance on Roy.

Act two opens an hour later in Roy's kitchenette apartment. Cordelia is wearing Roy's bathrobe. He brags about his underworld connections, revealing that he is doublecrossing Kid Vamp and working for Rafferty. Suddenly the doorbell rings; it turns out to be Kid Vamp. Roy hides Cordelia in the bathroom, but soon brings her out for the Kid to admire. Cordelia is now dressed. After warning Kid to stay away from her, Roy sends Cordelia out for cigarettes so that he and Kid can discuss business. When she leaves, Roy reveals that he plans to make himself Cordelia's pimp.

Kid has discovered Roy's doublecrossing, and a fight ensues in which Kid fatally shoots Roy. Cordelia is at the

door before Kid can escape, so he places Roy's body on the bed and pulls closed the curtain around it. He admits Cordelia, tells her Roy has left, and proceeds to convince her that she should leave with him. Before they can leave, Jasper and Ma appear demanding that Cordelia return home. Cordelia refuses and is backed by Kid until he learns that she is underage. He then tells her to return home, where he will meet her later. Kid remains; Cordelia, Ma, and Jasper leave. Then Basil arrives, demanding knowledge of Cordelia's whereabouts. Refusing to believe she is not there, he pulls Pa's revolver on the Kid and searches the apartment, subsequently pulling back the curtain and discovering Roy's body. Kid knocks Basil out, switches guns, and proceeds to call the police. He will use this opportunity to pin the murder on Basil. A humorous dialog ensues as Kid repeatedly reaches the local precinct and is told to hold. When his call is finally completed, he exits and Basil comes to.

As the police break down the door, Basil escapes through a window. The police investigate the scene, question the janitress and her daughter, and find out that Cordelia, Jasper, and Ma had been there. Soon Briggs, one of Kid's henchmen appears. Under questioning he breaks down and reveals that Kid had been there. The hunt for Kid is on.

The location returns to the Williams's apartment for the third act. It is still Sunday morning. Ippy has returned to retrieve his sheet music, and converses with Arabella about Cordelia; he believes Cordelia has talent and could make it in show business if given a chance. Ippy has plans to go to Paris, where blacks are treated better. Their conversation is interrupted by the entrance of the Hot Man, who sells clothing procured through nefarious means. Effie and Jimmie have left money for him. As he leaves, Jasper, Ma, and Delia enter. Pa slaps Cordelia and vows to force her to marry Basil.

The scene is again interrupted as Dr. Voodeo enters. He sells charms and magic powders; Cordelia is a regular customer for his love powders. Ma regards him coldly, considering him a heathen, but Pa purchases a charm to help with his number playing. Effie, Jimmie, George, and Maizie return home, having attended church, and the discussion turns to the contrasting attitudes of wealthy and poor churches toward the common folk of Harlem. For Ma, religion is the only hope:

Mother: De Bible says dat de meek will inherit de earth, dat de first shall be last, an' de last shall be first, an' dat some day Ethiopia will stretch forth her wings. I jes' lives an' prays fo' de time when I will be called home. The Lawd knows what he's doin'.

Basil bursts in, breathless. Arabella brings him water and sees that he is hurt. She takes him to the

kitchen to tend to his wounds, though he is frantic to speak to Cordelia, who is in her room. Another set of visitors, Reverend Johnson and the church sisters, arrives. Mrs. Williams has been missed at church; the reverend leads them in prayer.

As Kid Vamp enters, to the embarrassment of the family, Reverend Johnson and the sisters hurriedly exit. The Kid has come for Cordelia, and he assures the family that he will marry her as soon as his divorce is finalized. Cordelia defiantly prepares to leave, as Kid pulls his gun to keep the family at bay. The police, however, are closing in. They arrive before Kid can escape, and Roy's murder is revealed. Kid claims that Basil did it. Cordelia helps point the finger by repeating Basil's threats from the previous night. Basil, weakened by his wounds and by Cordelia's betrayal, faints. Arabella rushes out to summon a doctor. Just as it seems that Kid and Cordelia will get away, Basil is revived and tells his version of the events at Roy's apartment. There is general consternation as to which story is true, but Briggs has incriminated the Kid by identifying his gun. The gun switch is discovered. Kid attempts to escape through a window, holding off the police at gunpoint; however, he slips and falls to his death.

The police consider taking Cordelia, but submit to her mother's pleas. Yet Cordelia is still defiant and picks up her suitcase to leave:

Yes, try an' stop me. I'm goin', see! An when you hears from me again, I'm gonna be livin' high, standin' in de lights above deir heads, makin' de whole world look up at me. Come on Ippy. Take me out of here!

Ippy, who has witnessed the entire scene, shamefacedly follows Cordelia out. Pa bids good riddance to bad rubbish. Arabella returns, having been unsuccessful in her search for a doctor. She goes out to continue her search as Maizie runs in. She and George had been sent downstairs much earlier in the act. Maizie informs her mother that George has gotten into a fight and that the other boy's mother is on her way up, hopping mad. Ma Williams, as she treads wearily toward the door, speaks the last line of the play: "An' dey calls dis de City of Refuge!"

Thurman's notes indicate that his collaboration with Rapp was a harmonious one:

I have often wished for a movie camera during our play writing sessions. Posterity should not be deprived of the picture of Bill Rapp, excited over the possibilities or difficulties of a scene, leaping from his chair, pacing the floor, frantically gesturing the while he shouts Negro dialect with decided east side overtones.²²

Rapp was equally enthusiastic about working with Wally, as Thurman was known to his friends. According to Rapp, the two worked so closely together that there were only two instances in which lines could be directly attributed. Thurman gave Pa the line, "You know what's wrong wid Harlem--Dey's too many niggers." Rapp supplied a joke in which the detective asks, "Are you the janitress?"

and the janitress responds, "No, I s'se de assistant superintendent." In Rapp's view, "the first is white humor while the second is negroid humor--so you figure it out."²³

Most of the writing was accomplished in Rapp's Manhattan home. The atmosphere of collaboration in process changed radically when the two attempted to eat meals together in restaurants. The only restaurant in the midtown Manhattan area which would serve them was a Chinese chop-suey shop. One evening, when they ventured into Sardi's, they were ushered to a remote area, served, and asked to take their leave through a rear entrance.²⁴

Literary agent Frieda Fishbein distributed Black Belt to several production offices, and the play was looked at with interest, though no producer appeared to desire the play in the form in which Thurman and Rapp had written it. One interested producer even wanted to rescript the play into a vehicle for entertainer George Jessel.²⁵ Finally, on January 9, 1928, a contract, the standard minimum agreement of the Dramatists Guild, was signed by Rapp, Thurman, and Crosby Gaige. Gaige optioned the play, under the title Black Mecca, for five hundred dollars.²⁶ Another producer, Al Lewis, was also interested in the play and agreed to join forces with Gaige in its production. Within a month the play had been cast and was in rehearsal under the title, Black Belt. Lewis left on a monthlong trip abroad. When he returned, the cast was dismissed. The producers told

Thurman and Rapp that there was no "wow" in the third act, and the play could not be produced until there was one. The playwrights went into rewrites.²⁷

Several more drafts of the third act were produced. In one, Basil is arrested for Roy's murder and taken away by the police as Arabella weeps. There is, however, justice for Kid Vamp. As he and Cordelia prepare to leave, two white gunmen, members of Rafferty's gang, burst into the Williams's apartment to take Kid "for a ride." They end up shooting him to death in the hallway as he tries to escape. Cordelia immediately takes her suitcase and storms out, followed by Ippy, after telling her family she hates them and blames them for everything. Presumably she did not have to step over Kid's body on the way out. The dialog then went straight to Ma's last line.²⁸

The playwrights even considered a suggestion from Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, authors of The Front Page, that the third act should end in Paris, where Cordelia meets a sordid end. Thurman and Rapp quickly rejected this idea; MacArthur had used it for Lulu Belle and they saw no need for repetition.²⁹

No matter what they tried, Thurman and Rapp could not create the "wow" that would satisfy Al Lewis. He allowed their option to expire in September 1928. The duo submitted Black Belt to Jed Harris, the Theatre Guild, Lee Shubert, Horace Liveright, Herman Shumlin, Brock Pemberton, and

several others, without success. Finally, there was a stroke of luck:

A young actor, play reader, stage manager, vaudeville sketch writer, and occasional director by the name of Chester Erskin got hold of one of the original copyrighted copies of the play. (There were more than fifty copies of the various versions of the play which had been typed at the expense of nearly \$200. Most of the different versions were the result of trying to "wow" that third act to Mr. Lewis's satisfaction.) Erskin liked the play and decided he wanted to do it. He interested a theatrical publicity man by the name of C. A. Leonard. Both of them interested young Edward A. Blatt, who wanted to become a producer and bought the option sight unseen. We settled back to await its expiration. Imagine our surprise when these young men actually produced the play under the title "Harlem."³⁰

Chester Erskin³¹ was only twenty-five years old when he directed Harlem, his first Broadway directing credit. The success of Harlem led to other major directing assignments, including the stage version of The Last Mile, which made Spencer Tracy a stage star and helped Clark Gable gain Hollywood's attention. Erskin himself enjoyed a lucrative Hollywood career as a producer, writer, and director. Erskin also claimed to have "re-directed and rewritten" Langston Hughes's first Broadway play, Mulatto, produced in 1935.³²

Harlem was the first play produced by Edward A. Blatt, also a young man of twenty-five. Blatt had started out ten years earlier as a messenger for a press agent firm, Selwyn and Company, and worked his way up to general manager for producer Herman Shumlin. He had once worked as an assistant to publicist Crosby Gaige, and had also co-managed the

production of the play Broadway for producer/manager Jed Harris. His apprenticeship also included a year in the office of producer Martin Beck.³³

While Blatt searched for financing, Erskin, Thurman, and Rapp set out on a search for a cast. Thurman noted:

A most educational and amusing experience is to be had when one essays to cast a Negro play. There are no casting agencies to visit. There is no Negro theatrical blue book to consult. There are no Negro dramatic houses, amateur or professional, to visit for purposes of scouting.³⁴

Believing that Porgy had tied up the most viable acting talent, the trio scoured Harlem cabarets, shows, and any place where they thought talent might be found.³⁵

Erskin found Cordelia in the chorus at the Alhambra Theatre in Harlem. She was Isabell Washington. Washington had been a stenographer for the Black Swan record company, but had decided to go on the stage as her sister Fredi, who had already appeared onstage with Paul Robeson, and would later play major roles in films had. Isabell Washington did develop a stage career, and became the first wife of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., famed Harlem minister and politician.³⁶

Richard Landers, hired to play Basil, was actually from Trinidad, the son of a politician. Veteran actors Inez Clough and Lew Payton were selected to portray Ma and Pa Williams.³⁷ After the show opened a story was circulated that Erskin discovered the other Williams children in an uptown Chinese restaurant.³⁸

Ardelle Dabney, former member of the Krigwa Players, was a school teacher and chiropodist by profession. She and her daughter were hired to play the janitress and her daughter.³⁹ Dabney was also listed in the program as governess for the show's children.

A tap dancer, Collingswood Hayes, was chosen to play Jenks. Included as cast members were a dentist, a cigarette girl, and two professional lady boxers.⁴⁰

Jasper Williams was played by Emory S. Richardson, Effie and Jimmie by Lillian Fairly and Hemsley Winfield, who also served as stage manager, Roy Crowe by Billy Andrews, and Kid Vamp by Ernest R. Whitman. Arthur Hughes was cast as Detective Sergeant Palmer. The entire cast numbered sixty, two thirds of which were employed solely for the rent party sequences.

The title of the play was changed from Black Belt to Harlem just before it played a brief tryout engagement at the Boulevard Theatre in Jackson Heights (Queens, New York) for the week commencing February 11, 1929. Instrumental in the last minute nature of this change may have been the fact that a musical called Deep Harlem had opened on Broadway in January. This show closed quickly; therefore, it was not expected that there would be any confusion among the ticket buyers concerning the title.

Robert Garland of the New York Telegram reported from Queens that Harlem: A Thrilling Play of the Black Belt "is

providing the suburbanites with something to talk about for days and days,"⁴¹ although as drama it was "content to rehash the same old thing"⁴² and the actors, for all intents and purposes "might be white actors made up in blackface."⁴³

The reviews indicate that the action of the third act remained basically the same as the 1927 script, with the exception that the rent party was still in full swing. One reviewer reported that the cast, now advertised as numbering seventy-five, "dance in a manner hardly to be tolerated outside of police supervision."⁴⁴ Aside from this, Harlem was "a stirring melodrama, highly keyed and raucous":

A few in the audience may have had thoughts based on reading "Nigger Heaven" or "Home to Harlem." But except for a few moments in the first act wherein it is explained that a large negro [sic] family up from the Carolinas are unable to acclimate themselves to the torrid atmosphere of a Harlem railroad flat, nothing that might be called an analysis of the spirit of "the black belt" is put forth.⁴⁵

There was a superficial attempt to create the "spirit of the black belt" in that a glossary of Harlem slang was included in the show's program. Such terms as "sheik," "monkey hip eater," "chippie," "sweetback," and many others were explained. There was even an explanation of how to play the numbers. Carl Van Vechten had placed such a glossary in his novel, Nigger Heaven (which Thurman had favorably reviewed in The Messenger and defended in Fire), several years before. To some, this novelty was synonymous with authenticity:

Broadway has seen a number of Negro plays, but never one like this. It is 99 percent Negro and it unquestionably sets a new mark in the presentation of Negro life on the stage. It is vividly realistic and merely as a novelty is sure to attract attention when it reaches Broadway.⁴⁶

It is possible that an air of positive expectancy hung over the production of Harlem, as it may have over Thurman's life at that moment. Nearly simultaneously with Harlem's opening came the publication of Thurman's first novel, The Blacker the Berry. This chronicle of a woman's odyssey through soul-searing humiliations at the hands of her family, lovers, and society due to the darkness of her skin, through which she finally overcame her own self-hatred, garnered respectable notices. Through Emma Lou, the protagonist of the novel, Thurman may have been attempting to come to terms with his own dark complexion, about which he was eminently self-conscious.

Despite several illnesses, the years 1928 and 1929 proved highly productive. In addition to the novel, Thurman was contributing under pseudonyms to True Story Magazine, and had secured an editorial position with McFadden Publications. Following the publication of The Blacker the Berry, he was hired as an editor by the novel's publisher, Macaulay. He was the first African-American to hold such a position.⁴⁷ Thurman had even gotten an inside view of performing on Broadway, having served a brief stint as a supernumerary in Porgy. He may have also gained some

insights helpful to the revision of Harlem from this experience.

Yet there were some painful failures. In 1928, Thurman made another attempt at publishing, Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life. Despite contributions by Langston Hughes, Theophilus Lewis, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alain Locke, George S. Schuyler, and several other exceptional writers, and a cover price of twenty-five cents, the journal only survived six months. That same year, following a brief courtship, Thurman married Louise Thompson, an educator and political activist. Their stormy marriage turned into a tempestuous separation within half a year. Still, Thurman appears to have retained his sense of humor when late in 1928 he wrote,

Three years in Harlem have seen me become a New Negro (for no reason at all and without my consent), a poet (having had two poems published by generous editors), an editor (with a penchant for financially unsound publications), a critic (see articles on Negro life and literature in The Bookman, New Republic, Independent, World Tomorrow, etc.), an actor (I was a denizen of catfish row in Porgy) [sic], a husband (having been married all of six months), a novelist (viz: The Blacker the Berry [sic]: Macauley's, February 1, 1929: \$2.50), a playwright (being co-author of Black Belt) [sic]. Now--what more could one do?⁴⁸

Harlem, now subtitled, An Episode of Life in New York's Black Belt, opened at the Apollo Theatre on Forty-second Street, west of Broadway, on February 20, 1929. The initial response of the downtown critical establishment was quite favorable. J. Brooks Atkinson called Harlem

. . . perhaps the most informalist melodrama in months with its high jinks, sizzling dancing, kicks on the shins and family jars, and its facility for tossing the facts around liberally. Not for some time have the natural processes become so firmly entangled in the warp and woof of the dramatic art. It is rag-bag drama and high-pressure blow-out all in one. . . .

What gives "Harlem" dramatic color, apart from its people, is its native instinct for direct action. No time is wasted on the amenities.⁴⁹

Atkinson also noted in his review that police department censors were on hand to scrutinize the dancing in the rent party scenes. Despite the threat of censorship, the company, particularly Isabell Washington, "performed with an abandon seldom seen before."⁵⁰

Arthur Ruhl of the Herald Tribune approved of Harlem even though it spoke more of "regulation" melodrama than of African America:

. . . while there was no question that it pleased the audience, looked at strictly from the standpoint of Negro drama it represented promise rather than fulfillment.

It was composed of two different strains, and of these what might be described as the white or Broadway element overlaid the black. It was the many bits of authentic Negro life and Harlem color that made it humanly novel and interesting, but comparatively routine racketeering melodrama--good of its kind--which made it move as a play.⁵¹

Richard Lockridge, writing for the Sun, embraced the popular view that the African-American had yet to internalize the notion of civilization:

The play is, in a sense, a motion picture thrown upon the background of negroes dancing. They dance lustily, swayingly, shamelessly and reveal the simplicity and deep earthiness of their race's hold on life. . . . Men and women who dance like that have the strength for violence. . . . Opportunity is given in it for the drawing of sharp contrasts between the new

negro, who has revived the jungle, and the old, who has merely borrowed morals and a religion. . . .

Now and then the play drags unfortunately. Now and then, too, it slips into that distressing artificiality which always comes when negro actors become obsessed by the feeling that they must act like negroes. . . .

It is free from moralizing and from theories. It has no message. It is merely good melodrama about life in Harlem and it contains both drama and life. Even its defects are somehow interesting.⁵²

Thomas R. Dash raised a dissenting voice concerning the veracity of Harlem in Women's Wear Daily:

If "Harlem" is the epic of New York's black belt, we prefer "Porgy," the epic of Catfish Row, Charleston. . . . We see here the black man shorn of romance and beauty . . . by collision with a harsher and colder environment that does not develop any of that voluptuous folklore beauty by which the Southern negro is enveloped. . . .

"Harlem" as a melodrama of the black zone's seamy and rancid ghettos may attract many customers, for it has the ingredients of commercial success, but we hope that some day the odyssey of the black man will be written. We feel certain that there must be some phases of life in this belt that are richer, nobler, and more exalted than those too vividly portrayed in "Harlem."⁵³

Several critics brushed thoughtful consideration of the play aside in favor of celebration of the fabled exoticism of what had become the caucasian New Yorker's afterdark playground. In the words of John Anderson of the Journal American, Harlem offered "a lively and colorful picture of New York's eclipse district."⁵⁴ The dance scenes were "dusky orgies. . . . since most of the principal actors are negroes, it is stimulated at once by the natural born instinct of that festive race for cutting up monkeyshines. . . . I can recommend it to those who might be going to Harlem for a frolic, and would thereby save taxi fare."⁵⁵

Two days after his review, Anderson devoted most of his column to sharing the Harlem glossary with his readers.

Bide Dudley reported in the Evening World that Harlem was received "with enthusiasm," but advised producer Blatt to have the dancing toned down voluntarily before the authorities did it for him.⁵⁶ Whitney Bolton concurred in the Morning Telegraph: "There are but two major errors in 'Harlem,' and curiously they are both matters of perfect reporting. One is the manner of dancing in the first and third acts and the other is the switching of Isabell Washington, who plays . . . a high-yaller baby wit ha [sic] roving eye and rippling skin." Titling his review, "'Harlem'--38 and 2; An Approach to Perfection," (a take-off on the term "40," Harlem slang for "perfect"), Bolton complimented Erskin's direction: "staging of the piece was superb and he made of a difficult business a silken result. His crows spoke and moved as though in their own Harlem homes. . . ." ⁵⁷

Blatt, Erskin, and the press revelled in the mythology that an African-American's acting ability could not exceed his capacity to be himself on the stage. During the second week of Harlem's run, the New York Times printed a human interest article on the show, chronicling Erskin's search for a cast. The article ended with Erskin's highly suspect account of his directing technique:

When rehearsals got under way Erskin's chief problem was instructing his rough-and-ready cast in the

rudiments of their new trade. His first move in that direction was to make his players repeat the lines after him, word for word, until they could recite them from memory. Then he permitted a few gestures, and later he taught them the art of entrances and exits and how to ignore the audience. When they proved a bit slow in grasping things, their great lament was: "You know, Misto' Erskin, we'se colored peole. We can't think as fast as white folks." When the play actually opened and they were praised for their individual performances they replied: "Misto' Erskin done it."

They at first insisted that he sit in the front row and watch them during every performance and often he still does. Whenever they are applauded they look in his direction for a nod of approval.⁵⁸

There was no mention that Inez Clough, who received uniformly excellent notices for her portrayal as Ma Williams, had been on the stage since the days of Bob Cole, and that she had been singled out for her portrayals in Three Plays for a Negro Theatre in 1917. Nor was there mention that the cast included theatre professionals and experienced amateurs as well as lady boxers, though it was noted that Erskin found a few of his "personalities rather than actors" in some of the "better class negro homes."⁵⁹

According to Alison Smith of the New York World, the acting compensated for the weakness of the script "due to a Negro cast which has, for the most part, the vivid actuality which belongs to their unique racial talents for make-believe."⁶⁰ In his view the direction could not stand up to the rhythmic excitement created by Ruben Mamouljian in Porgy.

Robert Benchley gave a similar assessment of the acting in his favorable commentary on Harlem: "There is an

ease and a sense of timing which even the worst actors among them have that many a white star should pay money to acquire."⁶¹ Walter Winchell concurred, calling the play "an accurate portrait of the lower class Lenox Avenuers" in his review titled, "A Chippie Off the Old Block", in which he found Harlem comparable to Lulu Belle.⁶² In recommending the play, he commended the set designer, Paul R. Meltzer, listed as "art director" in the program, though Winchell did not mention his name.

Calling Harlem "Good Rough-Stuff," columnist Donald Mulhern noted that the opening night was fraught with excitement all around:

It rather seems that the first-night emotion, which was so great that the cast was shaking hands spectacularly with one another during the many curtain calls, swept the dancers at the rent party into acrobatics that may be missing from less hysterical evenings.⁶³

Billboard and Variety both augured financial success for the show. Variety, noting that Blatt "begged friends to take a piece of the show only last week," enthused:

Man, buddy, out of the blue came a colored comedy-drama, "Harlem," that was so true in many ways that the billing "an episode of life in new York's black belt" seemed authentic. It is as good a comedy as "Porgy" is a drama. It has its vulgarities, which isn't strange to Broadway, and if they don't back up the "Harlem" [sic], it will get in the money.⁶⁴

The review ended with highlights from the program's glossary. Though Billboard agreed that Harlem should make money, it took a less ebullient view of the play's merits:

If Harlem takes its place among the Broadway commercial hits, which seems not at all unlikely, it will be due to the novel aspects of the production rather than any unusual merit the play, the players, or the direction may hold. Here is a loud, crude and often vulgar drama of life among the Harlem negroes, played by a large cast of colored actors. There is nothing to get excited about in the play itself, either as an example of dramatic writing or as a faithful picture of life in the negro capital.⁶⁵

A play that opened the same night as Harlem, The Broken Chain by Williams J. Perlman, was reviewed in the same issue of Billboard. Interestingly, it was a drama of Hasidic Jewish life, and was thought, though meritorious, doomed to a short run due to its limited appeal.

There were a few who found some social comment beneath Harlem's surface showiness:

Among the conditions pointed out by William Jourdan Rapp and Wallace Thurman in their play, "Harlem," are the changing relationships of men and women in the Black Belt north of 125th Street.

The play claims colored women of the lower middle class find it easy to secure work at good salaries as maids, cooks, seamstresses and nurse girls, and that colored men of the same class find it difficult to obtain work even at low salaries as porters and elevator boys, has resulted more and more in men being supported by women [sic].

In short, the economic situation in Harlem, plus the large preponderance of women over men, is, according to the authors, speedily bringing about a relationship of the sexes akin to that among the old Indian tribes. The men dress up, strut, talk, loaf, smoke, gamble and fight, while the women do all the work.

Any notion, they say, that the women in general resent this order of things would be entirely erroneous. . . . Thus the "sweetback," or professional lover, has become one of Harlem's most prominent inhabitants. . . .⁶⁶

Rapp was, incidently, invariably given first writing credit in all publicity and reviews.

A more excoriating social view was expressed by another reviewer, known only by the initials T. M.:

Here we have the denizens of New York's most expansive negro quarter under the scrutiny of the sociologist. Awed by a white civilization, the poor black man finds himself setting at naught every lusty, joyful sin-memory of yesterday. His naive, playboy heart gives up an unwilling ghost and he becomes civilized.

But comes Saturday night! Weird, passionate music, emanating, not from the jungle tom-tom, but from a queer black box, studded with the white ivory of brother elephant! And white man's gin! Poor black moth! In bewildered fashion he flutters from one blinding light to another.

"Harlem" is a melodrama, it being essential that shooting, shouting, and intrigue be present, in order that white folks may be cajoled into paying their good money to look at the poor negro; in order that white folks who really know how to live, may come to be horrified at his depravity, to laugh at his stupidity, and to pity him for his lack of self-esteem.

It is adequately cast.⁶⁷

Robert Garland, who had given favorable advance notice of the show when it played in Queens, now stood back a bit, possibly sensing controversy. Though finally admitting he enjoyed Harlem, he wrote,

When a play treads on dangerous ground the critic who is cautious refers to it as provocative. . . . "Harlem," which has come to the Apollo Theatre, is provocative.⁶⁸

Burns Mantle was more direct in sounding a warning in his review for the Daily News:

Protests against the transplanting of this sector of cheaper Harlem in the Times sq. [sic] district are likely to come from two directions.

First, the better citizen elements among the colored people are quite sure to protest against having the play, "Harlem," represent their district and their race in the Broadway theatre.

Second, Mr. Hoyt, the watchful acting police commissioner, will doubtless send a minion or two to

warn Mr. Blatt, the producer, that unless he cuts out the orgiastic exhibit revealed as a Saturday evening dance in Harlem, the wagons will be backed up to the Apollo theatre and he and his actors landed in several jails.

These two matters cleaned up, it is possible the drama may run on for a considerable period.

It has undeniable vitality and some humor. It has its exciting moments and is fascinating in its simplicity. It is racially authentic and one or two characterizations by the colored actors are vividly arresting. . . . So much of a message as they had to deliver, which appears to be a plea that the southern black should be urged to stay where his soul is comparatively safe rather than brought north, where he finds the jobs scarce, the gin terrible and immorality at least rampant--this message is so completely buried under the surface showiness of the play that it emerges as a mere whisper.⁶⁹

Mantle had excluded one category of possible objectors, members of his own critical establishment. Dana Skinner soundly denounced Harlem in The Commonweal:

The exploitation of the Negro, both as an actor and as a subject for sensational dramatic writing, is progressing apace. It is a matter which should be of deep concern to those who feel the inner poignancy of the Negro's handicap in the American environment, and who would rather see him contribute, within the boundaries of his true genius, to the scope of our life than be held up as a cheap vaudeville curiosity. . . .

Anyone given to prejudice or haphazard judgments would come away from this play with the impression that Harlem is a den of black filth where animal passions run riot and where the few Negroes with higher ideas are hopelessly snowed under by black flakes from a sodden sky.

To be quite accurate, the story and incidents of the play are less maliciously gross than many of the "sophisticated" comedies of white life which have glutted Broadway this year. . . . But just as producers seem to relish a Chinese or other exotic setting as a means of putting across material which would not be tolerated in domestic drama, so, in Harlem, the life of the lower classes of Negroes is treated as something exotic and therefore specially licensed.

. . . The offense to the Negro, as I see it, is not lessened by the fact that the entire cast, with the

exception of one white detective, is Negro. It only doubles the irony of the exploitation.⁷⁰

Harlem appeared to be as carnal as Appearances was spiritual, and this carnality appealed to a formidable sector of the Broadway audience. According to Francis R. Bellamy, critic for Outlook:

One of the most interesting things about "Harlem" . . . is its audience. For it is a prize-fight audience, a spectacle audience, and is fairly representative . . . of the element of American society among which the negro in real life has to make his way. It is an audience, probably, that wants to be thrilled; that looks for "raw meat" in its artistic menu; and represents an opposite extreme from those nightly crowds which stream into the Theatre Guild productions and go to see the Ethel Barrymores and the Walter Hampdens. In other words, it is fairly representative of one of the groups of society which the negro must please in order to make himself first felt as an artist. . . . Unquestionably many people will go to see it merely for the "kick," the unashamed presentation of primitive humanity it affords.⁷¹

Perhaps the concern expressed about the play's impact on real-life African-Americans caused J. Brooks Atkinson to qualify and further explain his approval of Harlem in the Sunday, March 3, 1929 edition of the New York Times:

At last we begin to see modern, urban negro life through the eyes of a negro, and in what must approximate its true colors--from black to brown to high "yaller." . . . As drama this black-bedizened festival is no great shakes . . . But as an exhibition of negro acting in the frank terms of impersonation, as a medley of local customs and traits, it is deep-rooted, elemental playmaking. All the animalism springs so naturally from race that it loses, artistically, the offensiveness it would have in artificial circumstances. But it is animalism nevertheless, crude, dark and coarse, with none of the poetic exorcism of "In Abraham's Bosom" and "Porgy," and, for that matter, none of the bizarre pornography of "Lulu Belle." . . .

As negro melodrama, "Harlem" has a ring of authenticity that comes from the negro influence in its authorship. . . .

Representing one aspect of Harlem is not representing the entire negro microcosm. . . . Negro themes have been coming into the theatre more and more during the past few years. . . . In due course he will be the subject not merely of workday playmaking on a familiar last but of earnest, thoughtful drama.⁷²

Richard De Rochemont defended Harlem in the Sun, "on the face of things, to be an honest and an essentially simple play. . . . a fragment of a mirror is nevertheless a mirror."⁷³ Interest in the play extended throughout the mainstream press, including mixed, but overall affirmative reviews in Theatre Magazine, The Drama, and Theatre Arts Monthly. Despite the controversial nature of the play's content, it could not be denied that there was an appealing vitality in Harlem. Even Literary Digest published a review in its March 16, 1929 issue, replete with an extensive photographic display. George Jean Nathan wrote approvingly of Harlem for the May 1929 issue of American Mercury, asserting that melodrama was the form most suited to the temperament of the African-American. He made a more telling comment in a different publication that "with all its holes, it gets under the skin of the characters and their lives and it has all the actuality of an untouched-up photograph . . . a dozen and one vivid hints of niggerdom at its realest."⁷⁴

The mainstream critical concensus may be summed up by the commentary which appeared in The New Yorker:

With such material "Harlem" isn't as good as it should be. . . . Of the two major categories in which

plays fall, however, it belongs to the desirable. It is not a bore.⁷⁵

Generally, the black community viewed Harlem with a mixture of consternation, contempt, anger, embarrassment, and admiration. Shortly after opening night, Variety reported

All of the colored actors in "Harlem" . . . are wondering what the real Harlem is thinking of the play.

The actors who scampered off the stage between the acts with shrieks of laughter became immediately serious when confronted with this problem. "Yes, we hear that uptown they are all upset by this play. They think we are showing up Harlem," several said.

It was the general opinion of the actors, all from Harlem, that the show is just one phase of Harlem life, not exaggerated and with no good ground for objection.⁷⁶

The article went on in a somewhat lighthearted tone to describe negative encounters by cast members with middle-class blacks, West Indians, and even "hot stuff" men, ending with the statement that the show would prove a boon to Harlem night clubs.

The African-American press found fault with Harlem on both the production and artistic fronts. A major problem appeared to be the attitude of the producers, as reported by the New York Age:

"Harlem," the new play . . . is not for Negro theatre-goers, said the press representative, C. A. Leonard, to a representative of The Age. No advance publicity was sent any of the Negro papers, nor were any sent tickets for the opening, The Age [sic] has been informed.

When inquiry over the telephone as to the reason for apparent slight of the colored press was made, Mr. Leonard replied that the show was primarily for "white consumption" and that perhaps later on some advertising would be carried in the colored papers. He did not seem

particularly enthusiastic to have the colored press review the play.

The attitude is one of marked contrast to that adopted by Lew Leslie, producer of "Blackbirds," and David Belasco, when he produced "Lulu-Belle," another successful play in which a large number of colored people appeared. A large part of the success of these two shows may be directly tracable [sic] to the support given them by colored patrons.⁷⁷

This behavior may indicate the the producers anticipated a negative response by the black community, but this blatant Jim Crow treatment of the black press must have caused the producers some embarrassment; shortly after The Age report appeared, its dramatic editor, William E. Clark, was invited to review Harlem. In the March 23 edition of the paper, he gave the play a conservatively favorable review, calling it an "entertaining melodrama of one phase of Negro life in New York City":

. . . The cast has been carefully chosen and the acting is far above average. . . . Instead of holding the New York Negro up to ridicule, . . . I think it will give other races a more sympathetic understanding of conditions as faced by the Negro in this city.⁷⁸

After the review appeared, advertisements for Harlem were placed in The Age.

Chappy Gardner reported for the Pittsburgh Courier,

Never before has the opening of a show caused such a sensation as "Harlem," . . . For the first time in the history of New York the Black Belt is aroused to anger. . . . It is showing white folks how some Negroes manage to pay their high rent . . . Some say the authors could have shown a better character to the people who already hold us body and soul. . . . --a fine plot carried out through the entire show--and last, but by no means least--59 colored and one white actor comprising a cast . . . perfect in performance . . . These are the features that makes [sic] Broadway pay \$4.50 for a seat

every night. And the house is sold out nightly in advance.⁷⁹

It should be noted that Gardner later became a member of the touring company of Harlem; his enthusiasm for the show may have been related to his desire for employment.

The Chicago Defender reprinted Robert Garland's review from the New York Telegram in its March 9, 1929 issue, but later, in the April 13 issue, an elder statesman of black theatre, Salem Tutt Whitney, felt compelled to comment on Harlem in his column, "Timely Topics":

. . . There is no denying the fact that "Harlem" possesses dramatic value. It moves swiftly. Events take place in rapid succession that sometimes thrill and always entertain. But it is impossible for us to like the story. It is the Race situation that furnishes the ground for my objection. Most of the white people who see "Harlem" say, and are anxious to say, that it is a true portrayal of Race life. They do not say one phase of our Race life. To me it is not realism, it is exaggeration. And thereby we are condemned as a race.

All the characters, if we except the mother . . . and the sister . . . represent a low, mean vulgar and sometimes vicious phase of life. At no time does right have its say or virtue get its legitimate hearing. It begins low down and ends low down.

The majority of women of the opposite race say that our women are notoriously immoral. It is the only way they can save their face and account for the large number of mulattoes who confront them. They want to forget the iniquitous system that made such a thing possible. They would rather hold our women to shame. Cordelia Williams of the play subscribes to their propaganda. . . . Mr. Thurman has written a hit. A feat that others of us have tried and may never accomplish. He is only a boy, which makes the feat the more remarkable and praiseworthy. We do not hold Mr. Thurman to blame. Who can say how much that was fine and creditable to the Race was deleted from the first version of "Harlem." Playwrights must give them what they want, and just now "Porgy" and "Harlem" are the types of Race dramas they want and are willing to pay for. Others of us have tried to force our ideas upon

them and as a result we can use our manuscripts for vest protectors while our overcoats are in pawn.⁸⁰

While Whitney sought to excuse Thurman for the damage he felt Harlem was causing the image of the urban African-American, Theophilus Lewis staunchly defended the play as "an innovation in the treatment of the Negro character on the American stage":

"Harlem," because it emphasizes the "I will" character instead of the gypsy type of Negro, is a wholesome swing toward dramatic normalcy. Its characters are not abnormal people presented in an appealing light but everyday people exaggerated and pointed up for the purposes of melodrama. This is a sound orthodox theatrical practice, and if "Harlem" proves to be as profitable as it is entertaining other playwrights will be encouraged to adopt its methods with the result that Negro drama will be changed from an aberrant to a normal form.⁸¹

Lewis illustrated his point through a comparison of Cordelia with Abraham McCranie, the main character of In Abraham's Bosom, and Bess, leading female character of Porgy.

Cordelia acted, while the others were primarily acted upon. She would not permit herself to be victimized, while Abraham and Bess ended up as rather pathetic victims. The only real fault Lewis found with Harlem was that "The authors had to strain a bit to make the second act long enough. . . ."⁸²

Some months following the appearance of Lewis's review, Randolph Edmonds would concur somewhat with Lewis's assessment of the meaning of the vitality of the characters in Harlem, stating that "One of the most important things it did was to lift Negro characterization from a spineless

creature of frustration to one having a backbone."⁸³

However, there were those who were less concerned with the vitality of the characters than the effect of Harlem on the image of the African-American. Among them was Paul Bebee Grymes, a theatre goer who wrote a letter to the editor of The Age:

After attending the colored show called "Harlem," I consider it is the most degrading show ever produced by colored artists. Instead of it being something to help raise the race's name in the theatrical world, it is putting the black man down where the white man wants him. The profane language, filthy dancing, in fact the most common and lowest type of every thing used in that filthy drama, is helping to lower our race's standard which the black man has striven so hard to raise since slavery.⁸⁴

This view might serve as a telling contrast to an opinion printed in the New York Times:

. . . The novels and plays about Harlem . . . reveal and revel in a primitive folk. It is a civilization still happy in the joyous rhythms and rich colors and free forms that have been vanishing, alas, out of our less primitive white civilization; and particularly that branch of white civilization which has been exposed to the Puritan miasma. What greater praise can there be for Harlem than to emphasize the delightful contrast it provides our white cognoscenti to the inhibitions of Main Street? Suppose 135th Street, as currently portrayed, does look like a very short step away from the Congo? Think of the kick our own rarer, truly civilized spirits get therefrom! Esthetically envisaged, Harlem is being glorified, not libeled.⁸⁵

Thurman and Rapp felt compelled to respond to the criticism levelled at their play. Burns Mantle reported that they sent letters to drama critics.⁸⁶ The duo also wrote an article, "'Harlem' as Educational Drama," which was printed in at least one publication under the title, "The

Negro Made Human." Thurman and Rapp defended Harlem on the grounds that

. . . the dramatist who portrays the Negro as reacting to life in the same manner as whites, except where his reactions are conditioned by his color, risks being accused of writing a white drama and having it played in black-face. The fact that the black number racketeers in "Harlem" acted much like white bootleg racketeers led many critics to question the authenticity of this part of the play.

And because most of the characters are not "white folks' niggers" others critics ascribed the stark realness of the play entirely to the natural acting of the players, seemingly not realizing that those players could only have acted thus naturally because the lines they spoke and the situations they found themselves in were perfectly familiar, most of them having spoken such lines and found themselves in such situations in real life.

So perhaps "Harlem" does qualify for the educational theater in spite of its being, as two critics stated, "rangbang drama and as exciting as a fire." At least the authors will be pleased if it helps to banish the illusion that all Negroes are "white folks niggers."⁸⁷

Both separately and as a team, Thurman and Rapp produced several articles on the real-life Harlem as well as the production of their play. Meanwhile, the play had garnered audience support to the extent that a second company was formed for the purpose of touring. Harlem had gained the status of other successful shows of the time with a large contingent of African-Americans in the cast, Porgy and the musicals Blackbirds and Showboat.

Having rehearsed in New York and played one full performance on Broadway, the second company of Harlem opened in Detroit on April 7, 1929 at Shubert's Lafayette Theatre. The company would play a limited engagement there, then head

for Chicago for an open-ended run. Chappy Gardner reported in the Pittsburgh Courier that Harlem opened to a full and enthusiastic house and that Thurman had journeyed from New York for the opening "to encourage the players."⁸⁸ Harlem had now been playing in New York for eight weeks. The Chicago Defender informed its readers that the show was "having the most phenomenal success that any producer might wish."⁸⁹ There was a rumor that other cities wished to sample Harlem before it opened in Chicago, and that there was the possibility of a European tour in the offing.

A new young actress, Vivian Babar, portrayed Cordelia for the road company. The cast included Alston Burleigh as Roy Crowe, Andrew Bishop as Kid Vamp, and Elizabeth Williams as Ma. The Border City Star of Windsor, Ontario, deemed Harlem

. . . more red meat for the theatre goer. . . . all woven into the life of Cordelia Williams, the Lulu Belle of West 134th Street. It is good entertainment of the torrid order.⁹⁰

There was, however, one problem. The Welfare Commissioner of Detroit ordered that for Harlem to remain open, some of the "vulgar" dancing and language had to be eliminated. Modifications were made and the show completed its engagement without further incident.⁹¹

Harlem's Chicago run commenced on April 28, 1929 at another Shubert house, the Majestic Theatre. C. J. Bulliet of the Chicago Evening Post felt that "It is in its

sensuous, Ethiopian savagery . . . that 'Harlem' is distinguished, and not in its plot."⁹² Virginia Dale of the Chicago Journal agreed that "'Harlem' is not a pretty picture, but it is a dramatic one . . ."⁹³ Frequent allusions were made by several critics to Lulu Belle, Nigger Heaven, and even Diamond Lil, a play by Mae West. Margaret Mann Crolius of the Chicago News thought that

Prosperous, self-respecting Negroes might justly resent this aspersion on their race. The Negroes have laughed with "white folks" over the amusing fellows depicted by such actors of their own race as Bert Williams and Miller and Lyles, and have good-naturedly tolerated the blackface comedians who imitated the Negro, but in "Harlem" they are asked to view themselves in a different light--as hi-jackers, wantons, gangsters, murderers and users of vile language. The too realistic scenes of the party are offensive even to those who have no call to be offended through race loyalty.⁹⁴

For the Chicago Herald and Examiner, Ashton Stevens reported that Harlem

. . . had a late and loud start last night. It was nearing 9 o'clock when the curtain rose and the gifted colored troupers sounded as though they had just had a final rehearsal in fortissimo . . . turned out to be a fast and fairly workmanlike melodrama . . . never becomes a burnt cork show.⁹⁵

Steven's review also revealed that part of the ending included a promise from Pa Williams that he would take the family back to the South with the proceeds from the next rent party. This promise was not included in the original script.

Frederick Donaghey of the Chicago Tribune hated Harlem, calling it

. . . a frame-up. . . . at its best, everyday crook-drama . . . at its worst . . . "Lulu Belle." If the authors honestly designed it as a play dealing with the sociological fortunes of the Negro in a large Northern city, then their design has been frustrated by the direction and promotion. My direct reaction to the first act, and especially the dancing therein, was unmistakable nausea.⁹⁶

Negative reviews and objections from the black community did not deter the New York and Chicago audiences, which were overwhelmingly white. Harlem was now an acknowledged hit in two major cities.

Thurman had continued west, and was now dividing his time between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles. Deeply in debt, in the throes of a bitter divorce, exhausted and depressed, he thought the trip would not only improve his health and distance him from his troubles, but that it might gain him film studio employment and afford him an opportunity to sell Harlem to the movies.

While in the West, Thurman corresponded frequently with Rapp. These letters indicate that Thurman turned to Rapp not only for professional counsel, but also for advice and assistance in personal matters. In a letter dated May 7, 1929, Thurman revealed to Rapp that he had an employment interview with Metro Goldwyn Mayer Studios and had been turned down:

I was even told that I was too intellectual.
Speaking of producers. I hope you are keeping a close watch on friend Blatt. Either he is cheating on us or observers are easily fooled. I had many reports from Detroit, one from a boy whose brother worked as porter in the Shubert Lafayette. His report of the full houses certainly belied the reported grosses. I know of

course how easily a layman can be fooled or exaggerate. But it pays to keep one's eyes open.

Hope Harlem in New York can last thru May. And that number two lasts forever. What about the road chances of number one in the east? What are plans if it closes for the summer?⁹⁷

In the same letter, Thurman reported that interest in a west coast production of Harlem had been expressed by Robert Levy, manager of the Lafayette Players, who were in the West at that time. Levy had the play in mind as a vehicle for two of his principal actors, Evelyn Preer and Laura Bowman.

Thurman's distrust of producers extended to the Shuberts, on whom he frequently rained down curses for their sloth in forwarding his royalties. Thurman was open with Rapp in revealing his need for funds and his desire to hide his earnings from his estranged wife. Eventually, Rapp helped Thurman send her to Reno for a divorce; however, her mother's illness caused Louise Thurman to leave Reno before the residency requirement could be fulfilled. Thurman was very concerned about the public accusations his wife might make concerning his sexuality. He protested vigorously to Rapp that he was heterosexual, despite an arrest for a homosexual encounter in his past.⁹⁸

Thurman had borrowed money from his grandmother to the extent that he could no longer feel comfortable doing so. His grandmother was so concerned about him that she had some of her church members come to her home to "pray over him"

that he might turn his talents "into the path of righteousness." His mother, embroiled in her own problems with her sixth husband, was of no help. He was estranged from his father, and he expressed the desire never to see or speak to him again.⁹⁹ Harlem appeared to be the brightest spot on his horizon, and the future beyond appeared more uncertain than ever.

Thurman continued working despite his problems. He was co-authoring a novelization of Harlem with Virginia Venable, Rapp's wife, as well as working on another play, Harlem Cinderella. He kept making the rounds of the film studios. Though he never sold Harlem, screen rights were eventually sold, according to Blatt, to Universal Studios.¹⁰⁰

As he ricocheted between illness and good health, fighting off respiratory infections and minor ailments, Thurman's mental attitude appears to have sunk into bitterness and cynicism. At one point he wrote to Rapp concerning an idea of turning the story of Nora Holt Ray, a notable Harlem "chippie" of her day, into a screenplay,

The morons would eat it up especially in movies, if given a deal of darky dancing, nigger comedy, and coon shouting.¹⁰¹

A portion of his disillusionment may be attributed to his treatment by the producers of Harlem, who whitewashed their own racism as well as pandering to that of their preferred audience. In an article for Theatre Magazine, C. A. Leonard wrote:

Whenever Wallace Thurman, the young Negro co-author of Harlem, goes to the Apollo Theatre to look his show over, he voluntarily buys a seat in the balcony. . . . he is most retiring. His chief concern when going to the theatre is that some white spectator might object to his sitting in the orchestra. He wants to spare such a spectator the possible embarrassment of discovering that he is the co-author, and for that reason, if not another, has a perfect right to sit wherever he darn well pleases.¹⁰²

This published account differs markedly from the private statement Thurman made to Rapp:

Five different times I have bought seats for myself to see Harlem--including opening night--and tho I asked for center aisle seats (as much as a week in advance) not yet have I succeeded in not being put on the side in a little section where any other Negro who happened to buy an orchestra seat was also placed.

I appreciate of course the customs and phobias which make such things advisable. And it is only because I have been overwrought recently that the thing has stuck in my mind. . . .

New York is heaven compared to the rest of the country despite certain unpleasant experiences one has. At least people don't stare at you or jump away as if you were a leper. Coming west three people left the observation car in protest to my being there.¹⁰³

The New York company of Harlem played its last week at George White's Apollo Theatre commencing the week of April 15. Previous contractual commitments at the Apollo were responsible for the move; on April 29, the day after the second company had opened in Chicago, Harlem reopened at the Times Square Theatre, two doors away from the Apollo. This theatre was under the management of Jed Harris. It was here that the relationship between the producers and the cast would reach the breaking point.

In late March, while the second company was in rehearsal in New York, the first company pulled a wildcat strike; the performers in the party scene refused to go on at the end of the first act. Erskin, who was next door with the new Harlem cast, hurriedly herded them to the Apollo to fill in. Hemsley Winfield, stage manager and cast member of the first company, gave his account to the Amsterdam News:

. . . During rehearsals the director . . . informed me that "any time he was kind and nice to any of the cast it was just for what he wanted to get out of them." From then on I knew my place. . . . When we opened, Miss Washington, our star, was very ill, and the consideration for her conveniences at Jackson Heights was deplorable. Miss Clough was entirely ignored.

We opened in Jackson Heights with very low salaries, the ensemble at \$18, with a promise of a raise if the play proved to be successful. The principals . . . were also promised a raise. . . . We came to Broadway a "perfect hit." . . . Several weeks passed and no mention of a raise was made. Two months were gone and still no mention. . . . Things were getting pretty tight. A letter was written to Mr. Blatt, stating a fair proposition. This was ignored and the following night the ensemble did not appear . . . for the first-act party scene. Every principal was in favor . . . except a few. They were told the letter had not reached Mr. Blatt, as he was 1,600 miles away, and Mr. Erskine [sic] was ill in bed, with four doctors around him from the shock of the strike. While this was being announced in walked Mr. Blatt and Mr. Erskine.

After a "hot" argument an agreement was formed that the company become Equity, and a seven dollar raise for the ensemble. Salaries of the principals were cut for the new contracts and you could "take the job or not."

Of course, I immediately lost my position as stage manager because of the stand I took with the ensemble. . . . Is Broadway Broadway to the Negro? I hope you will understand. I do.¹⁰⁴

Billboard reported that after disaster in the first act was averted, negotiations took place during the second act, and the original cast was restored by the third act.¹⁰⁵

By the first week in April, Blatt had posted a salary bond with Actors Equity and signed the entire cast under union contracts. This move protected both cast and producer, since now, notice was required before any cast member could withdraw from the show.¹⁰⁶

Romeo Doherty called for the formation of a black performers' union to defend the rights of African-American performers in the pages of the Amsterdam News. However, not everyone was sympathetic to the plight of the Harlem cast. A published letter to Doherty asserted that eighteen dollars per week was a more than equitable salary, since most supernumeraries earned one dollar per performance, or eight dollars per week. A raise to twenty-five dollars per week should have made the extras happy.¹⁰⁷

The Age gave extensive coverage to Harlem's problems. One problem with the raise for the supernumeraries was that it was taken out of the salaries of the principals, whose earnings were relatively small. Isabell Washington earned seventy-five dollars per week prior to the strike.¹⁰⁸ A lead performer in Porgy could earn up to two hundred dollars per week.¹⁰⁹ After the strike each principal lost ten to fifteen dollars per week. The principals paid for the raise in salaries for the ensemble, leaving the budgetary outlay for cast salaries untouched.¹¹⁰

Another major difficulty arose from further callous treatment by management. An example was the fact that

Arthur Hughes, the sole white member of the company and holder of a secondary role, was assigned to the star dressing room. In addition, the other cast members felt that Hughes was being inordinately played up in the show's publicity.¹¹¹ The new Equity contracts did not ease the tension.

On Monday, May 6, Erskin called the company together and, following "a tirade of profane abuse,"¹¹² notified them that Harlem would close on Saturday, May 11. Calling them a "bunch of crafty niggers,"¹¹³ Erskin bid the cast "go back to Harlem . . . and starve."¹¹⁴

The Age provided a full report in its May 11, 1929 issue. When word reached Thurman of The Age coverage, he immediately sided with Erskin and Blatt, firing off a telegram to The Age. Paradoxically, Thurman defended men he distrusted:

1929 May 15 AM 5:53

. . . Advise you to check up on story in issue of May eleventh. Also advise you to retract. Will willingly cooperate on any court action against you. Your newspaper ethics are only level of a scandal-mongering moron. Personally know your story is untrue. Hope you get your just deserts. WALLACE THURMAN.¹¹⁵

Thurman wired Rapp the same day, advising legal action in the form of a libel suit. The controversy seemed to energize Thurman, who signed off this telegram with the statement, "Anger has revived creative urge."¹¹⁶ Erskin telephoned The Age, vehemently denying that he had verbally

abused the cast, and demanding a retraction. The Age's request for an interview was denied, and rather than a retraction, the paper reinforced the veracity of its story with reprints of similar reportage from the New York Daily News. Erskin also denied The Age's allegation that the show was on solid financial footing when it closed, asserting that Harlem had been losing money for several weeks, and intimating that financial losses were the true reason for the closing of Harlem, rather than dissension between management and labor. The Age's report on Thurman's telegram and Erskin's phone call ended with a quote from Irving Salkow, producer Blatt's business manager, to the Daily News:

They thought they had a whip hand and could make all kinds of demands because the show was a sell-out. But when they thought they were indispensable, and dared us to close the show, Mr. Blatt obliged.¹¹⁷

. . . Now they can all go back to Harlem and stage their own rent parties and see how much they make. They couldn't appreciate what we were doing for them. They all got swellheaded.¹¹⁸

The financial reports by Variety indicate that Harlem should have been in the black as it neared its hundredth performance. Its first week, the show grossed \$12,000 at three dollars for a top ticket in the 1,168 seat Apollo Theatre, supporting Variety's view that it was "off to an excellent start."¹¹⁹ Another drama, Congai, at the 1,051 seat Harris theatre, which also had a three dollar top, grossed \$11,000 that same week, and business was described

as "fairly good." The Front Page, at the 1,057 seat Times Square Theatre, Harlem's future home, in its thirteenth week at three dollars and eighty-five cents top, earned its lowest gross that week, \$10,000, and was still described as doing "o.k." During its first nine playing weeks, Harlem grossed between eleven and thirteen thousand dollars per week.¹²⁰

Revenues began to dip in the tenth week, when Harlem grossed \$10,000. Still Variety gaged the show for "good profit." During the eleventh week, the show was still "okay" at \$9,000 gross, and a run through the month of May appeared probable. Due to a further dip to \$8,000 the twelfth week, a further run past May was predicted as looking doubtful. Then, in its May 15, 1929 issue, Variety printed Harlem's Broadway obituary: "Closed suddenly Saturday; played 12 weeks; started promisingly and made some money; slipped lately."¹²¹

There was no doubt that the Broadway run had peaked, and that Blatt bailed out while he was ahead, but there was no cause to place the blame on the cast, as Erskin did when he called them "no good . . . the worst show on earth."¹²² Meanwhile, the Detroit run had fared well and the second company was still in place in Chicago. Blatt and Erskin were already engrossed in forming a new company of Harlem for a fall tour which was reported to have secured twenty-six weeks worth of bookings.¹²³ A feature article on

Blatt printed in the Detroit Free Press on May 12, 1929 reported that Harlem was earning him \$2,000 per week in profits.¹²⁴ By all accounts, including Blatt's own on his resume, Harlem was a "money show."¹²⁵ It appears quite possible that the Broadway run could have reached the magic number of one hundred performances when it was stopped at ninety-three.

Meanwhile, there was further trouble in Chicago, which culminated with an investigation of Harlem by the police commissioner. There had been numerous complaints concerning the suggestive dancing and vivid language in the show. Modifications were made, but following a conference among representatives of the police department and the Shubert organization, the decision was made to shut down the show on June 22, 1929. Further motivation for the closing was provided by the fact that business had fallen off.¹²⁶ Burns Mantle's Best Plays of 1928-29 surmised that Harlem had "caused a mild sensation because of its "orgiastic" dances and that in Chicago

Harlem [sic] arrived in late spring and magnetized immediate attention. The negro denizens denounced it through their own two newspapers and but for a small trickle, refused to buy seats. After eight weeks our alert police awoke--or was [sic] prodded--into taking action against it and Harlem was saved for an increase of patronage by the deletion of a few scenes.¹²⁷

The producers had not given up on the idea that further mileage remained in Harlem. On October 21, 1929, a third company opened at the Eltinge Theatre, a Shubert house

on Forty-second Street west of Broadway under the ownership and management of A. H. Woods. Now subtitled An Extraordinary Study of Negro Life, the show retained only five players from the original cast: Edna Wise Barr as Arabella, Clarence Taylor as George, Emory S. Richardson as Jasper, and Ernest R. Whitman as Kid Vamp. A few members of the second company were included, primarily Elizabeth Williams as Ma Williams and Alston Burleigh as Roy Crowe. Most of the remaining cast was new. Apparently, the show generated none of the excitement it had stirred in its initial run and closed at the end of its second week.¹²⁸

Irving Salkow then took this production to a one-week engagement at the Windsor Theatre, located on East Fordham Road in the Bronx, commencing the week of November 18, 1929. This engagement was followed by another one-week booking at Werba's Flatbush Theatre at Church and Flatbush Avenues in Brooklyn, commencing on December 2, 1929.¹²⁹

Hopes for the continuation of Harlem fizzled, along with the hopes of the rest of the commercial theatre industry, near the end of 1929 and the commencement of the Depression. Unlike The Chip Woman's Fortune and the Ethiopian Art Theatre and Meek Mose, Harlem was not invited into the community which was its namesake. There is no evidence of further bookings for the third company.

Robert Levy did eventually produce Harlem on the west coast, at the Music Box Theatre in Los Angeles. This

production, which opened on October 7, 1932, garnered reviews which were lukewarm at best, and limped through a two-week engagement.¹³⁰

1932 was the same year in which Thurman's second novel, a bitingly satirical overview of the Harlem Renaissance scene, Infants of the Spring, was published. Thurman had completed a second playwriting collaboration with Rapp, Jeremiah the Magnificent, in 1930. The material for this play was drawn from the saga of Marcus Garvey and the back-to-Africa movement he founded. This three-act drama was never produced.

In the fall of 1932, the Crisis reported that Thurman and Rapp had set to work on a dramatization of Thurman's third novel, The Interne [sic], which had followed close on the heels of Infants of the Spring in its publication that year.¹³¹ This novel, which was itself a collaborative effort between Thurman and another writer, A. L. Furman, exposed medical abuses and corruption in a large urban hospital. No evidence of a dramatization of the novel is apparently extant.

By this time, Thurman had risen to the position of editor-in-chief at Macaulay's. Finally, Hollywood called. Thurman signed a contract with Foy Productions Ltd. in 1934, and returned to California to produce the screenplays for two films, "High School Girl" and "Tomorrow's Children," the topic of which, sterilization, caused its censorship in New

York. "High School Girl," released in 1935, explored the moral dilemmas faced by adolescent girls.¹³²

Life in Hollywood proved detrimental to Thurman, whose physical and emotional problems were exacerbated by his increased consumption of alcohol. He travelled to Florida and Jamaica in an attempt to regain his health, but returned to New York gravely ill and deeply depressed.¹³³

Upon his return to New York in May of 1934, he collapsed and was taken to City Hospital on Welfare Island, which was, ironically, the institution upon which he had based The Interne. Louise Thompson, who had gained a Mexican divorce, returned to his side to nurse and comfort him. No amount of compassion or concern on anyone's part could lift him from the despair which gripped him, and after six months in the ward for the incurable, Thurman succumbed to tuberculosis on December 22, 1934.¹³⁴

Thurman's funeral rites were held on Christmas Eve and he was interred in Silver Mount Cemetary on Staten Island. Many among the leading figures in African-American literature and theatre were there. Theophilus Lewis, in a eulogistic column published in the Amsterdam News, called Thurman ". . . a serious artist and one of the most important figures in Aframerican literature. He was too big a man for his death to be played down in a human interest story."¹³⁵

Both Lewis and Langston Hughes, in their assessments of Thurman, noted that he was never satisfied with his work; in his own eyes the greatness which he sought as a writer had eluded him. Of Harlem, Hughes said, "His play . . . considerably distorted for box office purposes, was, nevertheless, a compelling study--and the only one in the theater--of the impact of Harlem on a Negro family fresh from the South."¹³⁶

Much has been written about the literary gifts of Wallace Thurman and the personal demons which beset him. He struggled with his desire to break new literary ground, his thirst for fame and its rewards, and his ambivalent feelings concerning his view of himself and his race, as well as his race's view of him. Harlem had made him both famous and infamous and he could be comfortable being neither. In a letter to Rapp, Thurman had written, "I am fighting hard to refrain from regarding myself as a martyr and an outcast."¹³⁷

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Now what is the best way of helping young colored authors to write the drama of their race?¹

At the turn of any decade, it is natural to assess the progress which has occurred in the unit of time that has passed and speculate on the implications of pivotal events for the impending future. In the October 1930 issue of Opportunity, Randolph Edmonds looked back on the 1920s, finding that

The conclusion is almost inescapable that the so-called "Negro Renaissance" has been almost a total failure in so far as the development of the drama is concerned.²

Edmonds felt that although significant strides forward had been taken by the African-American actor in maturation of performing skill and achievement of a new level of respect from the audience, the African-American playwright, so essential to the development of the hoped for new black theatre, which would speak as poignantly and truthfully of African Americans as the Moscow Art Theatre, Abbey Theatre, and Yiddish theatre did for their native consitituencies, had been retarded in development. Edmonds attributed the lack of maturation of the African-American playwright to two primary causes: the lack of opportunity for development

from a long-standing cultural tradition, and the need to appeal to a heterogeneous audience which included such a broad range of opinions and prejudices that no playwright could profess a truly personal and free point of view without placing himself or herself at great risk. For Edmonds, the African-American playwright was as much a pioneer in the twentieth century as Ibsen had been in the nineteenth, and equally vulnerable to violent reaction.³

The first of Edmonds' causes might appear at the outset to be a similar problem to that of the white playwright of the time. White playwrights in the United States were seeking a break from European models just as African-American playwrights were seeking a break from stereotypical stage conventions molded from centuries of racial prejudice. New territories were being explored, and polished results could not be expected right away. In addition, the formal study of theatre was a relatively new concept for both the white and black playwright. However, though theatre did not become a recognized academic discipline at the university level until 1900, with the installation of Brander Matthews as the first professor of dramatic literature in the United States at Columbia University,⁴ the white playwright could apprentice through practical experience by working in some capacity in the theatre or could study in a training institution such as the American Academy of Dramatic Art. The first playwright from

the United States to achieve world-class stature was Eugene O'Neill, whose first full-length play, Beyond the Horizon, was produced in 1920.⁵

The African-American playwright could not expect to be given the same opportunities for training as the white playwright. A paucity of opportunities to gain experience in legitimate theatre existed in the black community, and the necessary skills for writing excellent plays could scarcely be achieved from watching European-modeled or racially distorted delineations from the balcony of a white commercial theatre. Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory did not create the first African-American forum for the formal study of theatre, the theatre department at Howard University, until 1920.⁶ Willis Richardson had been instructed by a correspondence school. Garland Anderson learned dramatic structure by watching a melodrama, while Frank Wilson, with some guidance from instructors from the American Academy of Dramatic Art, learned his craft primarily through on-the-job experience. Eulalie Spence was trained at the university level, while Wallace Thurman, also a college-educated writer, relied on the experience and guidance of his collaborator in shaping plot and dialog into a play. None of these playwrights was privy to the networking associations which ease the way to the interpersonal connections and associations so often integral to gaining production in the mainstream commercial theatre.

Theophilus Lewis stated the problem of developing playwrights to meet the need for material suitable to the new images, plots, and characterizations required for the cultural growth of black theatre succinctly: "As acting is a comparatively easy art to master while drama is among the hardest, the actor develops much faster than the playwright."⁷ Everyone concerned with the growth of black drama seemed impatient for the black dramatist to catch up in development. Eugene O'Neill, when asked his opinion on the prospects for an African-American theatre during the 1920s, responded:

But where are your playwrights? I have read a good number of plays written by Negroes and they were always bad plays--badly written, conceived, constructed--without the slightest trace of true feeling for drama--unoriginal--and what revolted me most, bad imitations in method and thought of conventional white plays! . . . Be yourselves! Don't reach for our stuff which we call good! Make your stuff and your good! . . . There ought to be a Negro play written by a Negro that no white could ever have conceived or executed. By this I don't mean greater--because all art is equally great--but yours, your own, an expression of what is deep in you, is you, by you!! . . . I appreciate the Negro too well ever to want him to be white--in the arts which have no "line" of here or there--and I do urge him to dig within and not without!⁸

O'Neill's remarks are reminiscent of those of W. E. B. DuBois when he stated that a black theatre must be "by us, for us, about us, near us," as well as similar to Edmonds's diagnosis of the first prong in the two pronged problem of creating black playwrights of quality:

Negro drama, as written by Negroes, is too stilted, too restrained, directly imitative of white authors, and as a rule inferior in craftsmanship with long literary

speeches and almost no theatric values. There has been no riddle of the world given a solution in black terms
 . . .⁹

Yet how could the first part of the problem be solved without solving the second, the audience? How could innovations be achieved and new levels of proficiency be reached when the audience was so critically underprepared to respond, even if the response was simply to attempt to look and listen with some semblance of objectivity?

The second cause for lack of development by black playwrights noted by Edmonds may also appear at first to be a universal one. Any playwright who challenges established conventions, who offers the audience unaccustomed images or situations, is likely to be viewed as controversial, or as unqualified for the popular stage. For the African-American playwright, this problem of gaining a fair hearing from the audience is compounded and inextricably complicated by the convoluted nature of the relationship of racism to the American psyche. James Weldon Johnson labeled this problem the problem of the double audience. The black artist is forced to

. . . intentionally or unintentionally choose a black audience or a white audience or a combination of the two; and each of them presents peculiar difficulties.

If the Negro author selects white America as his audience he is bound to run up against . . . a whole row of hard-set stereotypes which are not easily broken up. . . . Even revolutionary literature, if it is to have any convincing power, must start from a basis of conventions, regardless of how unconventional its objective may be. . . . American Negroes as heroes form no part of white America's concept of the race. . . . In

plain words, white America does not welcome seeing the Negro competing with the white man on what it considers the white man's own ground. . . . The years have not been many since Negro players have dared to interpolate a love duet in a musical show to be witnessed by white people. The representation of romantic love-making by Negroes struck the white audience as somewhat ridiculous; Negroes were supposed to mate in a more primeval manner. . . .¹⁰

If the African-American artist turned exclusively toward his own race for an audience, he or she soon learned that:

He has no more absolute freedom to speak as he pleases addressing black America than he has in addressing white America. . . . The colored people of the United States are anomalously situated. They are a segregated and antagonized minority in a very large nation, a minority unremittingly on the defensive. . . . Consequently, they have a strong feeling against exhibiting to the world anything but their best points. . . . A curious illustration is found in the Negro theatres. . . . all of the Negro weaknesses, real or reputed, are burlesqued and ridiculed . . . and are laughed at and heartily enjoyed. But the presence of a couple of dozen white people would completely change the psychology of the audience . . . If some of the performances so much enjoyed by strictly Negro audiences were put on, say, in a Broadway theatre, a wave of indignation would sweep Aframerica from the avenues of Harlem to the canebreaks of Louisiana. These taboos of black America are as real and binding as the conventions of white America. . . . This division of audience takes the solid ground from under the feet of the Negro writer and leaves him usspended. Either choice carries hampering or discouraging conditions. . . .

The dilemma is not made less puzzling by the fact that . . . it is an extremely difficult thing for the Negro author in the United States to address himself solely to either of these two audiences. . . . But it is impossible for a sane American Negro to write with total disregard for nine-tenths of the people of the United States. Situated as his own race is amongst them, their influence is irresistable. . . . Of course, the Negro author can try the experiment of putting black America in the orchestra chairs, so to speak, and keeping white America in the gallery, but he is likely at any moment to find his audience shifting places on him, and sometimes without notice.¹¹

Both Johnson and Edmonds expressed hope for an eventual rapprochement of the perceptions of the black and white audiences, making at least a partial solution to this dilemma possible, but both acknowledged that it had not happened, and that fruition of such a hope was a long way off, if at all. No matter what the African-American playwright wrote, or how he or she wrote it, race would act as a barrier between the artist's creation and the audience. It is in light of the problems articulated by Johnson and Edmonds that the histories of The Chip Woman's Fortune, Appearances, Fool's Errand, Meek Mose, and Harlem should be recorded and analyzed.

It does not appear that Willis Richardson wrote The Chip Woman's Fortune with a Broadway audience in mind, but the play reached Broadway in tandem with Salome by Oscar Wilde, as part of the repertory of the Ethiopian Art Theatre. The primary goal of this company was to prove that the black actor could handle the same material that a white actor could. Following acceptance of the company by racially mixed audiences in Chicago, the Ethiopian Art Theatre appeared viable as a commercial venture, and made its way to New York, playing first in black, then, by invitation, in white theatres enroute. Had the company succeeded in New York, it would have provided the nucleus of a commercial black legitimate theatrical circuit operated by Robert Levy, manager of the Lafayette Players, several of

whom were participants in the Ethiopian Art Theatre experiment.

It would appear that success on Broadway would not be critical to the building of a black theatre circuit, but the Ethiopian Art Theatre was expected not only to please black audiences, but white audiences as well. The reason for this may lie in a statement by black poet Claude McKay:

"Thoughtless Negroes, like all good Americans, think that the commercially successful standard is the only standard by which Negro artistic achievement may be judged."¹²

The black audience was accustomed to viewing black actors in "white" roles; the Ethiopian Art Players would introduce this condition to the white audience, to whom this concept was foreign. The plays by African-American playwrights were selected for the repertory by Raymond O'Neil, and relegated to serve as curtain raisers, ethnic appetizers which would prepare the audience for the main course. O'Neil, Levy, and the primary financial backer, Mrs. Sherwood Anderson, were white, and controlled all aspects of the management of the Ethiopian Art Players. Mrs. Anderson's goal seemed to be to attack anti-black prejudices. Levy's goal seemed to be to promote a commercially successful venture in the black community, where he had worked successfully in the commercial theatre for years. O'Neil, in his first major professional theatrical venture, may have been attempting to establish

himself in the commercial theatre. The Ethiopian Art Theatre appeared to be attempting to be all things to all interested parties. The only point in which all aspirations seemed to meet was in the response by both black and white audiences to The Chip Woman's Fortune.

The Broadway critics, who for the most part reflected the attitudes, beliefs, and values of their time, generally failed to accept the black actors in traditionally white roles. The actors' skintones, vocal inflections, and speech patterns were pointed out as reasons for invalidating their performances; their acting abilities were viewed as natural attributes which failed them when they portrayed other than black characters. Since The Chip Woman's Fortune was a folk play written in dialect, and the audience preferred the "real black experience to the "arty" aspirations of the Ethiopian Art Theatre, this play was more successful among the white critics.

It was also more successful with the black critics, but for different reasons. The Chip Woman's Fortune painted a portrait of a black family solving a problem by themselves with a spirit of mutual concern, cooperation, and a little luck. There was comedy without caricature, laughter without ridicule. Aunt Nancy, the chip woman, and Liza, the mother of a young adult daughter, were not stereotyped as mammies. Silas, though he may have been called "boy" when he worked as a porter, was head of a household and a beloved husband

and father. Emma, the daughter, was a charming ingenue, who could not be considered anything but a good girl. Jim, Aunt Nancy's son, though a newly released convict, was just a man who had made a mistake, and as far from the image of the sociopathological "bad buck" as could be. The characters were authentic as African Americans as well as conventional characters in a domestic comedy. The Chip Woman's Fortune was seen as a step in the right direction toward a truly representative yet universally enjoyable play about African America.

Though the white critics agreed that The Chip Woman's Fortune was a step in a positive direction, some of them could not see past stereotypical conventions, labelling Liza a "slattern" even though the script indicated that she was recovering from an illness, and viewing Aunt Nancy as a mammy and Silas as a Step'n Fetchitt type.

The approval of the black audience might have meant more box office support on Broadway for the Ethiopian Art Theatre had there been no practice of segregated seating in Broadway theatres. The black press was incensed by this policy, and the black audiences, who could choose any seat in their own theatres, were probably loathe to travel to midtown Manhattan to receive Jim Crow treatment. When the Ethiopian Art Theatre appeared at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, it was well received, though the reception was not so strong that the company was held over.

Though his play garnered nearly universal critical praise, Broadway exposure did not further Richardson's career as a commercial playwright. No agent or producer from the commercial theatre took an interest in his work. Though his plays became staples of the budding black Little Theatre movement, Richardson never at any time gained financial support from writing plays. The black commercial theatre was still geared primarily to variety entertainment, while the white commercial theatre, if aware that Richardson was black, viewed African-American drama as a fascinating novelty and could probably envision no significant niche for an African-American playwright. Since at that time, it was not thought essential, even by influential critics in the black community such as Alain Locke and W. E. B. DuBois, that valid African-American drama should only be written by a black playwright (though only a black playwright could approach complete authenticity), it is not unusual that the mainstream commercial theatre would overlook black playwrights in favor of white.

Two years after The Chip Woman's Fortune, Richardson's achievement was all but forgotten, even in the black press. In fact, for Frank Wilson and Wallace Thurman as well as for Willis Richardson and Garland Anderson, whose Appearances was produced in 1925, newspaper articles from the black and white press can be found proclaiming each the first

African-American playwright to have a play produced on Broadway.

Appearances was an example of the stilted, imitative, poorly crafted, pseudoliterary drama criticized by Edmonds. The play reached Broadway through the herculean efforts of Anderson and its appeal as a novelty created by the "bell-hop playwright." Broadway could scarcely believe that a black man could write a play. Anderson, who had no other goal than to reach Broadway, crafted his play for a primarily white audience, softpedalling what may have been extremely controversial elements in the play so as not to offend. For example, Elsie Benton, the woman who wrongfully accused the hero, Carl, of attempted rape, and who was an acknowledged liar and adultress, turned out to be a black woman passing for white. Rufus, the porter, was drawn in the broad strokes of the minstrel buffoon, slow of wit and broad of dialect. When Appearances toured, Rufus was the only black character portrayed by a black actor. The other two black characters, Carl and Ella, were played by white actors in black make-up. Because of its structure, subject matter, theme, and preponderance of white characters, Randolph Edmonds did not consider Appearances a black play.¹³

Appearances, however, was an influential play in terms of the development of black drama in the commercial theatre. Though two white cast members resigned during rehearsals,

the integrated cast was readily accepted by the audience and the critics, alleviating fears by other producers that they would be subject to the same negative publicity which surrounded the production of All God's Chillun Got Wings. Such encouragement was directly connected to David Belasco's decision to produce Lulu Belle, which, while exploiting sexual stereotypes of the black woman, and utilizing a white actress as the leading black character, marked a new dynamism in the portrayal of black characters, and utilized an integrated cast. Appearances was a step forward toward the establishment of the idea of a black hero, an idea that James Weldon Johnson had identified as missing in the consciousness of the white audience.

When Appearances toured, it played in communities which may never have viewed a black person, much less a black hero, and left favorable impressions even though the tour failed financially.

It is interesting to note that Appearances was originally produced and directed by Lester W. Sagar and John Hayden as their first Broadway play. This was similar to the case of Raymond O'Neil in regard to the Ethiopian Art Theatre, as well as to Edward A. Blatt and Chester Erskin with Harlem. New producers and directors were afforded the opportunity to advance their careers through these independent productions, through taking risks that the big producers, such as the Shuberts and Belasco, hesitated to

take. In addition, Meek Mose made Lester Walton the first black producer on Broadway. All of these shows were financed by white backers, and none of them used a black director. Though black actors were making gains, there was very little progress outside the area of performing. There is no evidence that black technicians or designers were sought.

Historian Doris Abramson aptly describes white critical response to Appearances:

Reviewers of Appearances were generably favorable if fatuous, more serious in their response to the play's message of "cheerful uplift" and the author's autobiography than truly critical of the production. It was easier to praise the man than to criticize the artist.¹⁴

Black critics were divided on the merits of Appearances. Some viewed the play as a cynical exercise in exploitation on the part of Anderson. Others viewed it as a breakthrough, in that the central character was allowed a happy ending. Despite the lack of emphasis on racial issues, some significant statements about racism pushed through, particularly in an examination of the peril in which Carl was placed as a black man accused of menacing a white woman, and through Rufus's testimony on the past experiences which rendered him unable to come to Carl's aid. There was also the aspect of a white man, Wilson, the prosecutor, being punished for his wrongful persecution of Carl as well as for his other nefarious activities.

Though approving, the white audience did not support Appearances. Despite the novelty of a play on the power of positive thinking by a black bellhop, and a widely acclaimed comic performance by Doe Doe Green as Rufus, the play lacked theatrical excitement, and its dramaturgical shortcomings could not be overlooked. Though Anderson did seek support for Appearances from the black press and prominent figures in the black community, he did not pursue the black audience as aggressively as he did the white, and eventually Anderson and the black audience became almost completely estranged. The fact that Anderson planned to build his next play exclusively around white characters may indicate that Anderson wished to reach "universality" through the avoidance of what could be perceived as racial issues.

Fool's Errand, though not a commercial venture, was significant in the encouragement of the black Little Theatre movement. Eulalie Spence, through her writing and direction, proved the capability and viability of the Little Theatre as a potential incubator for the types of plays of African-American life that the intellectual leadership of the Negro Renaissance was pressing for. It is unfortunate that the Krigwa Players could not overcome the dissension between W. E. B. DuBois and the rank and file of the company he founded. Had the Krigwa Players company survived, it might have become a major source of new plays and

playwrights. Spence appears to have been the most developed of the playwrights associated with the Krigwa Players.

However, Spence preferred to follow the ideas of Locke on the development of black drama rather than those of DuBois. The friction which existed between Spence and DuBois probably would have precipitated a break between them at some time. The fact that DuBois appears to have had little to do with the preparation of Fool's Errand for the Little Theatre Tournament, after selecting it for the competition, and then autocratically determined what would be done with the prize money, certainly did not further the cause of keeping the company together. When he saw that he could not control the dissent in the Krigwa Players, he withdrew, taking the company's name with him, and all but insuring its demise.

Spence, like Richardson, focused on a black family, then extended that family into its immediate community, represented by the church council. The use of spirituals and of the preaching style of the black church were from the black experience, but the plot was a universal one concerning the detrimental effects of gossip and innuendo in a small town. The characterizations could not be extensively drawn in the space of one act, but the play did individualize the main characters in the manner of melodrama: a wizened old busybody; an innocent young girl;

an understanding mother; a troubled, but loving father; a strong, upstanding pastor.

Also in the manner of Richardson, Spence wrote in dialect, seeking to duplicate the sound of black southern speech. Both playwrights were versatile enough to produce other plays in which dialect was not necessary to the structure of the play. Richardson said of dialect,

. . . fifty years nor a thousand years from slavery is sufficiently long to enable a man to forget his mother tongue. We know nothing of the language our African ancestors spoke: we have learned the English language, but the dialect of the slave days is still the mother tongue of the American Negro.¹⁵

Richardson and Spence both sought to exhibit black dialect as natural speech among African Americans rather than as the symbol of ignorance it had been used for in the minstrel days. Since the success of the use of dialect depends on the skill of the actor, it would be difficult to determine whether white audiences could tell the difference between the authentic use of dialect and the fractured stage dialect conventionally used when black characters were depicted. In Appearances, Anderson used the latter type of dialect, replete with malapropisms, for the delineation of Rufus, but did not use dialect for the hero, Carl, or Carl's fiancée, the more educated Ella. Frank Wilson seems to have used dialect for both authentic speech and comic effect in Meek Mose. Wallace Thurman not only wrote southern black dialect, but gave the audience the flavors of the urban

black dialect of Harlem, including its slang, and of a West Indian accent. The use of urban black slang was such a new and exotic feature for the white audience that a glossary, which was discussed and reproduced in several newspaper articles, was provided. It cannot be readily determined whether the use of black dialect by black playwrights had an effect on making the use of dialect by black characters on the stage more realistic, but it is significant that black English was used for the purpose of duplicating authentic speech rather than for purposes of exaggeration.

With the exception of Anderson, all of the playwrights featured either black spirituals, black popular music, or black popular dances in their plays. Richardson used dance music in The Chip Woman's Fortune, Spence used folk music in Fool's Errand, Wilson used several types of music and dance in Meek Mose, and Thurman featured hard driving black urban rhythms and dance in Harlem. The importance of music to the black experience, and the impact of black music and dance on American culture, cannot be denied. However, Wilson depended so strongly on music that it was viewed by some as the strongest feature of his play. In the case of Thurman, the music and dance were so pungent that they were considered lewd by the white audience, and an unfair exaggeration by the black audience.

The fact that Spence's play gained publication, while the other plays did not, should also be noted. White Little

Theatre companies were known to perform black plays in blackface; The Rider of Dreams by Ridgely Torrence and The No 'Count Boy by Paul Green are two examples that readily come to mind. It is possible that the accessibility of Fool's Errand to white companies caused it to be produced in white Little Theatres. This possibility might be worthy of investigation. Since Opportunity offered Fool's Errand as a gift with subscriptions, African-American school and amateur groups might have been more inclined to produce the play, thus increasing Spence's popularity. However, like Richardson, Spence never made a living as a playwright. Both writers wrote full-length plays which failed to gain production. The production of more full-length plays by Little Theatre companies, which preferred the easier to handle one-act form, might have contributed further to the development of the black playwright.

Frank Wilson was committed to the "by us, for us, about us, near us" philosophy of DuBois, but the racial content of Meek Mose was watered down to the extent that neither the black nor the white audience could extract any further meaning than "the meek shall inherit the earth." This message did not ring true with either side, and the incredibly contrived coincidences which brought the play to a happy ending did not help. To blacks, Mose was too close to the prevailing conception of an Uncle Tom, and he and his followers were a bit too meek. One black critic even

suggested that the play was a conspiracy against black militancy. The reliance on a beneficent white father figure by Mose also grated on some black critics. However, some viewed the play as a step toward more positive images of black characters. Mose and his family were morally impeccable. The play, however, creaked with outmoded melodramatic conventions and leaned too heavily on tried and true spirituals and dances to please the crowd.

Wilson was magnanimous in his view of the white critics who called his play, in the words of J. Brooks Atkinson, "foolishly naive." In a letter to historian Fannin Belcher, Wilson wrote

Of course their attitude toward Negro plays depends a great deal on the play. There have been so few good Negro plays written, that many times the critics have to stretch a point in order not to throw vitriol on a Negro play. I have the feeling that the critics have their type all set, and are just eagerly waiting to say something nice about any half-way decently written Negro play that arrives. I believe that the critics feel the public is becoming Negro minded in regards to plays. New York critics have been more than fair and un-prejudiced in their judgement. . . . Critics I feel are interested in Negro plays more as entertainment than anything else.¹⁶

Wilson wrote this letter ten years after the production of Meek Mose, in 1938.¹⁷ There are those who would differ on the point of fairness from the white critics, particularly in light of some of the commentary recorded on previous pages of this work. In the early 1970s, African-American theatre historian Margaret B. Wilkerson wrote,

. . . so a fair evaluation of Black productions requires an understanding of Afro-American history and culture and an acknowledgement of Black theatrical expectations. The ever-present oppression which separates Blacks from whites and the highly charged emotional atmosphere which informs that condition make it particularly difficult for a white critic to share a Black artist's perspective.¹⁸

Wilkerson goes on to extend this difficulty in sharing perspectives to the differences in responses by a predominantly black and a predominantly white audience. Black audiences tend to be more interactive with the event being witnessed and to be more vocally responsive, a difference which Wilkerson attributes to West African tradition and to the tradition of the black church. Even good will cannot assure that the perception and response gap can be bridged.¹⁹

Lester Walton saw the production of Meek Mose as an opportunity to bring black and white audience perceptions closer together. Mose and his family were hardworking, God-fearing people who brought their community together in the end. To the moral gestalt of melodrama was brought characteristics of black folk drama, including the music and dance of the black experience in which whites were taking a new interest. The play was written by the star of Porgy, which was critically acclaimed and supported by the Broadway audience. Had Meek Mose proved successful, Walton would have continued to build a black repertory theatre on Broadway, bringing downtown and uptown audiences together.

Walton's idea would not reach fruition until the inception of the Negro Ensemble Company in 1967.

The white audience preferred the romance and exoticism of Porgy's Cat Fish Row to Mose's more mundane Mexia, Texas. The white audience still preferred shows which fed its fondest fantasies of the African-American. They found one such show in Harlem. Thurman and Rapp had constructed a sensational, hard-boiled action melodrama on the order of The Front Page and Broadway, two successful plays of the era. To this they added the myth of Harlem as a place where the veneer of civilization thinly veiled explosive animal passions. They revealed fascinating aspects of the black subculture, such as the numbers rackets and rent parties. to this they added an anti-heroine fraught with sexual prowess, a sensual female predator who clawed her way out of the sepia asphalt jungle. Cordelia's story unfolded against a backdrop of hot jazz and frenetic dances. The African-American community, sensitive to the danger inherent in white fantasies about it, felt betrayed.

Yet Thurman did show, along with the sensational aspects, the dilemmas and aspirations of Harlem. Basil, the spurned lover, was trying to better his lot and serve his people; Cordelia's family was caught in a web of joblessness and lack of legitimate opportunity, such frustrations exacerbating friction between the native born and immigrant blacks locked in competition for the few menial jobs

available. The numbers game was a way out; show business was a way out. Cordelia did not want to become like her mother, so she lashed out, raged against the constricted life around her. She was an existentialist in that she acted without blinking at the consequences for her or those around her. It is for this that Theophilus Lewis defended her, that she was dynamic, acting instead of waiting to be acted upon.

Thurman was attempting to push the envelope of possibilities for the black writer, freeing him to expose what others felt should be hidden, no matter who misunderstood. Harlem foreshadowed the black exploitation films of the early 1970s, in which a hero was anyone who fought back, whether pimp (Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song), cocaine dealer (Superfly), or superwoman (Cleopatra Jones).

The producers of Harlem exploited the aspects which would titillate the white audience as fully as they could, at one point openly admitting that they did not care whether the black audience supported the play or not. They abused the cast and insulted Thurman by tacitly supporting the segregated seating policy of the theatre. They made a profit and ended up in Hollywood.

Thurman remained loyal to the producer, Blatt, and the director, Erskin, despite documented testimony as to their disregard for him and for Harlem's cast, exacerbating the rift which already existed between himself and the more

moderate and conservative black artistic community, and the black citizens who were outraged by the images he projected through Harlem. In this case, Thurman's need for recognition overbalanced all other considerations. A passage written by music historian Charles Edward Smith describes the internal battle which Thurman lost:

From the simplest beginning of folk art, it would seem, artists in whatever field have taken pride in craftsmanship and found a simple joy in the aesthetic end result of art, with its serene and commonplace identity with all things that breathe and have life. This directness and direction of art is modified by ego demands for money and prestige--no artist is altogether free from both--and might also be influenced . . . by the everyday hungers, for love and food and a roof overhead. Stress and conflict in lesser and greater security needs cast impinging shadows and these, in grotesque distortion, become the demon.²⁰

Among the white critics in their reviews of Harlem, a resurgence of derogatory terminology occurred. Cast members were referred to as "darkies," "crows," even as denizens of "coondom" and "niggerdom." New life was breathed into the belief that black performers were naturally endowed with the ability to sing and dance, but incapable of the intellectual ability to act a role beyond the projection of their own personalities. Rather than viewing Harlem as a typically exaggerated melodrama, they generally extolled the play as an authentic slice of life, a view diametrically opposed by the majority of the African-American press, though the social issues raised were acknowledged as valid, and the vitality and dynamism of the characters and

characterizations were recognized. It was the treatment of the issues which angered the black community.

In January 1930, Jennie M. Waugh published an assessment, "The Last Decade on Broadway," in The Drama. Among her observations was that

An interesting trend in subject matter has been the use of negro life and problems. The negro has always had a place in the lower type of plays and musical revues. During the last decade the negro has been accepted by outstanding native dramatists as material for the higher type of legitimate drama. The continued popularity of Emperor Jones through the decade, the recognition of In Abraham's Bosom, by critics by choosing it for the Pulitzer Award, and the genuine interest of the public in the Theatre Guild's performance of Porgy lead us to believe that the trend in negro subject matter is significant in opening a field which offers a new phase of interesting native material for our American drama.

The growing popularity of native life in its various settings as subject matter is significant in that it brings us closer to the "great American play."²¹

It is significant that Waugh omitted the possibility of a role for the black playwright in this sought-for creation. The theatre was changing, but the conditions which determined the authority with which the African American could define for himself his role in this change had not been significantly altered.

Waugh also provided valuable statistical information in her article. The average run of successful plays was lengthening, but that percentage of plays meeting the criteria of one hundred performances was decreasing. In the 1919-1920 season, thirty percent of the plays produced were successful, while by the 1928-1929 season, this percentage

was reduced to seventeen. The average number of per-season productions for the decade was 161; the average length of a run was sixty-three performances. A major concern at the close of the decade was the defection of major theatrical talent to Hollywood and the increasing influence of the motion picture on the entertainment industry, particularly in light of the advent of the talking picture and the fact that though the United States contained seven percent of the world's population, it produced ninety percent of the world's films.²² These developments would certainly influence the future of the theatre.

At this pivotal time, Lester Walton had managed to become the first black producer of legitimate theatre on Broadway. Walton did not turn to the black community for financial backing. The fact that no other black producer followed Walton's attempt, and that Walton could not secure funds from his own community, may be attributable to the economic condition of African Americans at that time. At an average cost of \$10,000 per production, the cost of opening a Broadway show could support ten black families for a year. The earliest available median income figures for black families were estimated in 1935, but the condition that the black family earned about half the income that a white family earned existed over the course of several decades. A black family, consisting of a husband and wife, with or without children, earned \$980 per year. A native-born white

family of the same construct earned \$1,930. This came to approximately \$20 per week for a black family and \$40 per week for a white family. Though these figures came from the Depression era, they show that the theatre itself was an enterprise in which the median family of either race could scarcely afford to participate vigorously.²³ From 1920-1930 the estimated percentage of black persons in the United States remained stable at 9.9%; this figure represented 10.5 million people in 1920, and 11.9 million in 1930.²⁴

Still, African Americans had a right to expect more input into the manner in which they were presented to the majority population. One of the biggest theatrical hits of the 1929-30 season was The Green Pastures by white author Marc Connelly. Though African Americans participated only in the performance aspects of the production, this play seemed to satisfy both black and white audiences. Perhaps such an event was made possible by the events of the 1920s. Randolph Edmonds wrote:

. . . Negroes who have never seen the play criticize it sharply. They cannot see how a fish fry could represent heaven . . . God being black is something they have never heard . . . the spirituals are just those old slave songs sung for the benefit of white people. In short, they conclude that it is just another show making fun of the race. Very rarely are these comments heard after they have seen the spectacle . . . Somehow the spiritual message forces its way through the comedy, music setting and the violent contrasts of its episodes. There comes a feeling . . . that here is something beautiful and powerful acted by Negroes and told in Negro dialect, and of which they need not be ashamed. The whole seems a tremendous refutation of James Weldon Johnson's statement that dialect is an instrument with only two stops, comedy and pathos.²⁵

But The Green Pastures was not written by a black playwright, nor produced or directed by blacks. Though some social and psychological doors had been pried ajar, there was further pushing open to be done, and more closed doors remaining to be pressed against, on both sides of the double audience.

There are few today who would view The Green Pastures as enlightening black theatre.²⁶ On the contrary--most would say that it represents further undesirable residue from the minstrel tradition. In the intervening decades between the 1920s and the 1980s, much has occurred. But there is still a significant need for more African-American representation among the producers of theatre of the black experience to truly complete the growth of black drama. And there is still confusion about a definite answer as to what the role of the African American in commercial theatre in the United States is.

In the 1960s, the Black Arts Movement asserted that the only viable role for black theatre was service exclusively to the black community. The quest for mainstream acceptance by the theatre creators of the 1920s was viewed as a contributing factor to the failure of this theatre to provide this service. However, the observation by James Weldon Johnson that there was no way for the African-American artist to address only one audience has held true across the decades. Confusion as to the nature of

black theatre and its relationship to audiences and critics existed throughout the 1960s, as evidenced by this comment by scholar and critic Eric Bentley following his attendance of a performance of Slave Ship by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) in 1969:

What is the white theatregoer to do? Stay away from Jones' plays? Play at being Black? That surely is an identification with the victim which soon becomes ludicrous. Enjoy being put down . . .? That surely is an exercise in white masochism that only black sadists can contemplate with satisfaction. . . . I just didn't identify myself with the Whites in it. How could one? They were monsters.²⁷

Is there any way to get at the truth of the African-American experience before the double audience? This question is still under consideration. Today there are several black playwrights, Charles Fuller and August Wilson foremost among these, who have apparently accomplished this goal. The quality of their writing meets the standards set by the Western theatre. But still the double audience doesn't always match. For example, August Wilson's Fences broke the double audience barrier, while Joe Turner's Come and Gone, which relied more heavily on knowledge of African-American folkways, did not.

Richardson, Anderson, Spence, Wilson, and Thurman were part of the process of building a substantial body of black-authored black drama. They were among the first to test what they had written against the double audience, and through their experiences, much can be ascertained about how

far both the theatre and the audiences have come. Though Richardson has left behind a substantial body of work, the true extent of his contributions has yet to be explored through any full-length study, such as a book or dissertation. Such a work is warranted.

In the case of Garland Anderson, though his was a significant achievement in getting Appearances produced, some clarification may be needed on how much of the play he actually wrote, in order to get a more accurate picture of what actually happened. The only extensive accounts of his life were written by himself and his second wife. Though a study of Anderson as a playwright would not be warranted, a study of him as an historical figure might uncover additional insight into the time in which he lived.

Eulalie Spence is certainly worthy of further academic investigation. She has been underrepresented as a figure in African-American theatre history, and this oversight should be corrected. A full accounting of her contributions should be given. The same holds true for Frank Wilson, whose career spanned at least four decades.

The events surrounding the production of Harlem illustrate the differences between the perceptions of the African-American and white critics. The play may have been of some help to Thurman in his literary career, but he paid a heavy price for his independence from the black critical community. The role of black theatre critics and their

influence should be explored more fully. Theophilus Lewis has been acknowledged as a major recorder of and commentator on the African-American theatre of his era, but Romeo Doherty, William E. Clark, and others bear further study. Much more information could be culled from the African-American press, and the observations of black critics are vital to the development of a balanced picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the offerings placed before the black and white public. Generally, the field of African-American drama and theatre prior to the second major prolific period of African-American literary output, the 1960s through early 1970s, is still an area rich in opportunities for research.

Several white producers, directors, performers, designers, and other theatre artists were involved in not only the commercial presentation of African-American theatre, but in the literary community of the Negro Renaissance, and in the black academic institutions in which the black theatre movement of the 1920s grew. The effect of their involvement with black theatre on their careers could be further explored.

The connection between predominantly white funding sources and African-American literary production has been frequently discussed. What has changed in this area and what remains the same should be further examined. It is

difficult to imagine that aesthetic independence could be achieved without significant change in this situation.

The decade of the 1920s provided new possibilities for the African-American actor and the promise of new possibilities for the African-American playwright. Though harmful stereotypes persisted, there was some movement on the part of white as well as black playwrights to get to the truths beyond those omnipresent images. Theophilus Lewis predicted

As the class cleavage between whites and whites becomes more pronounced the consequent friction is bound to either overshadow the race problem or absorb it. . . . The race problem, of course, cannot be solved; it can only be ameliorated. In which respect it is just like every other human problem.²⁸

No manner of art has been able to solve this human problem. Willis Richardson, Garland Anderson, Eulalie Spence, Frank Wilson, and Wallace Thurman--they all confronted and tested this predicament; a quandry all artists must face. Those who follow these artists may not be aware of their contributions to theatre, but they are indebted to the pioneering achievements of these African-American dramatists.

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**Appendix A
Broadway Casts**

**The Chip Woman's Fortune
by Willis Richardson**

Producer: The Ethiopian Art Theatre

Director: Raymond O'Neil

Cast:

Liza.....	Evelyn Preer
Silas.....	Sidney Kirkpatrick
Emma.....	Marion Taylor
Aunt Nancy.....	Laura Bowman
Jim.....	Solomon Bruce
A Man.....	Arthur Ray

Opened at the Frazee Theatre, 7 May 1923.

Closed 19 May 1923, sixteen performances.

Appearances
by Garland Anderson

Producer: Lester W. Sager

Director: John Hayden

Cast:

Frank Thompson.....	Edward Keane
Carl.....	Lionel Monagas
Mrs. Thompson.....	Daisy Atherton
Fred Kellard.....	Robert Toms
Elsie Benton.....	Mildred Wall
Louise Thornton.....	Hazele Burgess
Judge Thornton.....	Frank Hatch
Rufus.....	Doe Doe Greene
Ella.....	Evelyn Mason
Jack Wilson.....	Joseph Sweeney
Police Officer.....	Clifton Self
Judge Robinson.....	Louis Frohoff
Court Clerk.....	William Davidge
Court Stenographer.....	Leatta Miller
Gerald Saunders.....	Edwin Hodge
Hiram Matthews.....	James Cherry
A. A. Andrews.....	William Lackley, Jr.

Opened at the Frolic Theatre, 13 October 1925.

Closed 31 October 1925; twenty-three performances.

Appearances (return engagement)

Producer: C. Mischell Picard

Director: Lee Miller

Cast:

Frank Wilson.....	Norvell Thompson
Carl.....	James LaCurto
Mrs. Thompson.....	Donna Padeloup
Fred Kellard.....	Lee Miller
Elsie Benton.....	Verna A. Felton
Louise Thornton.....	Martina Martin
Judge Thornton.....	Thaddeus Gray
Rufus.....	Doe Doe Greene
Ella Buford.....	Sally Rutter
Jack Wilson.....	Rupert LaBelle
Police Officer.....	Delmar Nightingale
Judge Robinson.....	Robert W. Smiley
Court Clerk.....	Jerome Wise
Court Stenographer.....	Hazel Gray
Gerald Saunders.....	Stanley Ruhland
Hiram Mathews.....	Harry Davis
Bailiff.....	Willie Meehan
A. A. Andrews.....	Harry Bond

Opened at the Hudson Theatre 1 April 1929.

Closed 20 April 1929; twenty-four performances.

Fool's Errand
by Eulalie Spence

Producer: The Krigwa Players

Director: Eulalie Spence

Cast:

Cassie.....	Ethel Bennett
Sister Williams.....	Marian King
Doug.....	William Jackson
Parson Williams.....	Ira Reid
Maza.....	Doralyne Spence
Jud.....	Malcolm Dodson
Freddie.....	William Holly
Mom.....	Ardelle Dabney
Brothers and Sisters of the	
Church Council.....	Minnie Brown
	Inez Bennett
	Louise Robinson
	George Lee
	Samuel Carthan
	Levi Alexander

Competed in the Little Theatre Tournament at the Frolic
Theatre, 2 May 1927. Two additional performances 7 May.

Meek Mose
by Frank Wilson

Producer: Lester A. Walton
Directors: George MacEntee, Jasper Deeter

Cast:

Ezra.....	Arthur Ray
Nathan.....	J. Lawrence Criner
Josephine.....	Laura Bowman
Enolia.....	Ruth Ellis
Mose.....	Charles H. Moore
Claribel.....	Ruth Carl
Enos Green.....	Sidney Kirkpatrick
Madam Jones.....	Olyve P. Hopkins
Miss Minnie.....	Susie Sutton
Dave Roberts.....	Richard Gregg
Cole Turner.....	Alston Burleigh
Dr. Slaughter.....	Thomas Moseley
Prof. A. P.....	J. (Onion) Jeffrey
Stanley Brown.....	Joe Chapman
Policeman.....	William Edwards
Dr. Strickland.....	Oliver Sanderson
Mr. Harmon.....	George MacEntee

Opened 6 February 1928 at the Princess Theatre.

Closed 25 February 1928; twenty-three performances.

Harlem
by Wallace Thurman and William Jowdan Rapp

Producer: Edward A. Blatt

Director: Chester Erskin

Cast:

George Williams.....	Clarence Taylor
Mazie Williams.....	Elise Thomas
Arabella Williams.....	Edna Wise Barr
Ma Williams.....	Inez Clough
Pa Williams.....	Lew Payton
Cordelia Williams.....	Isabell Washington
Basil Venerable.....	Richard Landers
Jasper Williams.....	Emory S. Richardson
Effie.....	Lillian Fairley
Jimmie.....	Hemsley Winfield
Thaddeus Jenkins.....	Collington Hayes
Ippy Jones.....	Hillis Walters
Mary Lou.....	Carmen Marshall
Roy Crowe.....	Billy Andrews
Briggs.....	Frank Badham
Will.....	A. B. Walker
Jaintress.....	Ardelle Dabney
Janitress' daughter.....	Malvina Dabney
Tom.....	Robert Bramlett
Hot Stuff Man.....	Bud Allen
Kid Vamp.....	Ernest R. Whitman
Dr. Voodeo.....	F. Barclay Trigg
Det. Sgt. Palmer.....	Arthur Hughes
Officer Sam.....	Nat Cash
Ensemble.....	Joseph Slocum,
	Mary Jane Watkins,
	Mae Morrison,
	George Thomas,
	Rita Weldon,
	Albert W. Patrick,
	Cora Parkes,
	William McFarland,
	Jennie Roe,
	Daisy Pilgram,
	Robert Corbin,
	Irene Temple,
	Ernest D. Sharpe,
	Lillian Maxwell,
	Lorenze E. Graham,
	George Grissom,
	Aline Lewis,
	Grace Burke,
	Emory Bonner,
	Stanley Wolcott,
	Roy De Coverly,

Ensemble (continued)

.....Gertie Chambers,
Thula Ortiz,
Rex Gorleigh,
Emma Maitland,
Larri Lorear,
A. Wheedlin,
Suzanne Cartier,
Mary Daniels,
Alec Archer,
Phoebe Roe,
Ray Coleman,
Harry Long,
Robert Bramlett,
Rosett Brown,
Alberta Foster,
Jimmy Young,
Bud Allen,
Ernest R. Whitman,
F. Barclay Trigg,
Arthur Hughes

Opened 20 February 1929 at the Apollo Theatre.
 Closed 11 May 1929 at the Times Square Theatre;
 ninety-three performances.

Harlem (return engagement)

Producer: Edward A. Blatt

Director: Chester Erskin

Cast:

George Williams.....	Clarence Taylor
Mazie Williams.....	Ivy Neely
Arabella Williams.....	Edna Wise Barr
Ma Williams.....	Elizabeth Williams
Cordelia Williams.....	Alma Smithe
Pa Williams.....	Alonzo Fenderson
Basil Venerable.....	William McFarland
Jasper Williams.....	Emory S. Richardson
Effie.....	Marie Richardson
Jimmie.....	Ossie Lyles
Thaddeus Jenkins.....	Sam Davis
Ippy Jones.....	Hillis Walters
Mary Lou.....	Leonore Winkler
Roy Crowe.....	Alston Burleigh
Briggs.....	Herbert Ellis
Loving Joe.....	Joe Reedick, Jr.
Tim.....	Gertrude Mae Hill
Honey.....	Ruth David
Sleepy.....	C. Thorton
Babes.....	Allen B. Walker, Jr.
Lou.....	Louise Renault
Fats.....	Stanley Wolcott
Pinky.....	Alonzo Balue
Row.....	Rae Blanks
Jack.....	Jackie Barry
Tom.....	Wallace Edenboro
Bee.....	Blanche Jones
Reggie.....	Reggie Fenderson, Jr.
Flo.....	Florence Miller
Mars.....	Margie Foster
Ironsides.....	Milton Greene
Hip.....	Alonzo Freide
Ruth.....	Ruth Carl
Maybe.....	Mary L. Payne
Tim.....	T. Gordon Van Nieff
Slim.....	Robert Bonner
Rex.....	Rex Goreleigh
Hotstuff Man.....	Milton J. Williams
Kid Vamp.....	Ernest R. Whitman

Dr. Vodeo.....F. Barclay Trigg
Detective Sergeant Palmer.....Corneilus Roddy
Officer Sam.....Nat Cash
Janitress.....Helen Nelson
Janitress' Daughter.....Nonie Simmons

Opened 21 October 1929 at the Eltinge Theatre.
Closed 2 November 1929; sixteen performances.

Appendix B Known Plays and Sources

Garland Anderson

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