

# **Preserving the History of Black Theatre in Texas**

## **An Overview of Research Project**

**Dr. Elvin Holt**  
**Professor of English**

**Dr. Sandra Mayo**  
**Director, Multicultural and Gender Studies**  
**Associate Professor of Theatre**

**Updated August 27, 2010**

### **Purpose**

Although African Americans in Texas have made and continue to make significant contributions to the arts, most of the scholarship focuses on musicians/entertainers such as Scott Joplin, Huddie Ledbetter, Arnette Cobb, and San Marcos native, Eddie Durham. Almost nothing has been written about the long tradition of Black theatre in Texas. We plan to research the early history of Black theatre in the Lone Star State and conduct an indepth study of contemporary Black theatre in five urban areas: Austin, Dallas, Forth Worth, Houston, and San Antonio. The Black Academy of Arts and Letters (TBAAL) based in Dallas and Houston's Ensemble Theatre celebrated their 30th anniversary in 2006. The Ensemble Theatre, a cultural landmark in Houston, is also recognized as the largest African American professional theatre company in the United States that produces in its own facility. Harold J. Haynes, playwright and founding director of the Encore Theatre in Houston, has been producing Black Theatre in Houston for over 25 years. Despite their more than three decades of productions, few people outside of Dallas/Fort Worth and Houston have heard of these groups. The same situation is true of Hornsby Theatre Company, the Renaissance Guild Company in San Antonio, and Austin's Pro-Arts Collective, the latter group led for 15 years by the late African American actor and director, Boyd Vance.

The purpose of this project is to locate and preserve materials that document the unique contributions that Black Theatre has made to the arts in Texas. We want to examine records that reveal how these theatres were organized, how they fund their productions, how they recruit actors, directors, and other theatre personnel. Additionally, we plan to identify playwrights whose works the companies have staged and compile an anthology of representative plays to make them available to a world-wide audience in print and via the Web.

### **Methodology**

Since we have already received enthusiastic responses from all of the theatre groups targeted in our study, we are confident that we can complete our project successfully. Funding for this project will allow us to accomplish several significant goals. Our study covers four phases.

1. **Research:** We will collect, organize, and review primary documents during visits to the theatres. The volume of materials to be reviewed is approximately 12-15 linear feet per group, with the exception of The Black Academy of Arts and Letters in Dallas that has approximately 35-50 linear feet. Additional primary resources we will analyze include audio/video taped interviews with artistic directors, actors, and other persons associated with the theatres.
2. **Archiving:** Archiving institutions in the five key cities have committed to receiving, processing, and preserving the research documents with minimal cost to the donating organizations.
3. **Book Development:** Our research will yield two books, a touring exhibit, and a web-based library of archived materials. The first book will be a historical narrative that documents the origins and development of Black Theatre in Texas, with an emphasis on the contemporary theatre companies and playwrights. The second book will be an anthology of original plays produced by the theatre companies targeted in the historical narrative.

**4. Exhibit Design and Tour:** Drs. Holt and Mayo will design an exhibit in consultation with curators and select representative documents (playbills, correspondence, posters, newspaper articles, photographs, promptbooks, etc.) and artifacts for an exhibit that will be mounted in 6 Texas cities--San Marcos, our home base at Texas State University, as well as Austin, Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Antonio. Drs. Holt and Mayo will work with curators, a tour manager, and other exhibit assistants.

### **Description and Importance of Project**

Over the past 250 years, African Americans have developed and sustained a rich tradition in amateur and professional theatre, producing plays in schools, women's clubs, men's lodges, churches, and public theatres. Black Theatre, though rarely acknowledged in the mainstream press, has served as a training ground for several generations of aspiring playwrights, actors, directors, and other theatre personnel. For example, Ted Shine, former professor of theatre at Prairie View A & M University, is a superb playwright and director whose work is virtually unknown. The late Sterling Houston, playwright and artistic director for the Jump-Start Theatre in San Antonio, left a significant body of work that deserves sustained scholarly and critical attention. Eugene Lee, a native of Smithville, Texas and Texas State artist in residence, is a nationally known actor and playwright, but his plays have not been collected or examined by scholars and critics. We want to bring to light these and other talented but lesser known Black playwrights and then ensure that they live on for future generations by carefully archiving them.

Our study also focuses on the previously named theatres in five key urban areas: (Dallas) The Black Academy of Arts and Letters, (Fort Worth) Jubilee Theatre, (Houston) Ensemble Theatre and Encore Theatre, (San Antonio) Hornsby Theatre Company and the Renaissance Guild, and (Austin) Pro-Arts Collective. These institutions continue to promote Black Theatre under very

challenging circumstances. Because records are being lost due to lack of space and funds for proper storage, we want to conduct our research before more documents are lost.

### **Roles of the Investigators/Authors/Coordinators**

Drs. Holt and Mayo will visit theatres to review relevant documents and artifacts. Dr. Holt will take primary responsibility for collecting and editing plays. Dr. Mayo will take primary responsibility for researching and drafting the historical narrative, and she will maintain ongoing communication with representatives of the theatre organizations. Dr. Mayo will also hire and supervise support staff. Drs. Holt and Mayo will collaborate on all phases of the research and writing. Dr. Holt will be the primary editor for the project.

### **Student Participation**

Graduate and undergraduate students will be recruited to organize and catalogue records, conduct oral history interviews, and write explanatory notes for the exhibit. In order to involve as many students as possible in this research project, we will submit a proposal to the University Honors Program to offer a course entitled Black Theatre in Texas. Students will see productions in Austin and/or San Antonio and write critical reviews of the performances. Additionally, students will hone their writing and critical thinking skills by preparing a detailed case study of a play, focusing on all aspects of the piece (language, style, structure, timing, theme, coherence, etc.) from text to performance. This research project offers students an opportunity to engage in the "nuts and bolts" of researching, archiving, exhibiting, and publishing a study of Black Theatre in Texas

## **Dissimination of Research**

The results of our research will be disseminated via two books, a historical narrative and an anthology of plays written by Black Texas playwrights produced by the theatre groups in the study. We have a fully executed contract for publication of the books with the prestigious University of Texas Press. In addition, dissemination of the results will be through journal articles, papers presented at state and national conferences, archives in five Texas cities, news releases and a web-based catalog. Also, a six city exhibit tour in Texas (San Marcos, Austin, Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Antonio) will showcase representative documents and artifacts. Finally, the Southwest Writers Series Collection of Texas State University-San Marcos in collaboration with the University of Texas Press will include the anthology in its collection. Texas State student involvement will be encouraged through not only course work but also presentation of papers based on their research at local and national conferences.

Disciplines the topic addresses include cultural studies, ethnic studies, African American studies, and Southwestern studies. The market, thus service area, for the books is university theatre and English departments, theatre companies, university and public libraries, and general readers. The audience for the exhibit will be Texas community members and groups, school groups, as well as university faculty, staff, and students.



*The rising STAR of Texas™*

**Dr. Elvin Holt**  
**Professor of English**

## CURRICULUM VITA

### I. Academic and Professional Background

Ph.D. 1983. University of Kentucky. American Literature. "Zora Neale Hurston and the Politics of Race." Robert E. Hemenway, Director

M.A. 1973. Southwest Texas State University. British and American Literature.

B.A. 1968. Prairie View A & M College. English. *Magna Cum Laude*

#### University Experience

Professor. Texas State. 2000

Associate Professor. Texas State. 1991-1999

Assistant Professor. Texas State. 1983-1990

### II. Courses Taught (Selected)

Two Honors Seminars, African American Literature, Introduction to African Literature, The Plays of August Wilson (graduate seminar), The Novels of Toni Morrison (graduate seminar), The American Novel, The Short Story

### III. Memberships in Professional Societies

Texas Folklore Society, National Council of Teachers of English, Zora Neale Hurston Society, College Language Society, Toni Morrison Society

### IV. Selected Publications and Conference Presentations

"J. Mason Brewer: A Biographical Essay." *The African American National Biography*. 8 vols. Eds. Henry Louis Gates and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. New York: Oxford University Press. (Forthcoming 2008)

"J. Mason Brewer." *Encyclopedia of African American Folklore*. Ed. Anand Prahlad. Vol. 1. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006. 167-168.

"Dog Ghosts." *Encyclopedia of African American Folklore*. Ed. Anand Prahlad. Vol. 1. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006. 334-336.

"Zilpha Elaw." *Writing African American Women: An Encyclopedia of Literature by and about Women of Color*. 2 Vols. Ed. Elizabeth A. Beaulieu. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006. 299-301.

"The Men of Brewster Place." *Writing African American Women: An Encyclopedia of Literature by and about Women of Color*. 2 Vols. Ed. Elizabeth A. Beaulieu. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006. 619-621.

"Julia A. J. Foote." *Writing African American Women: An Encyclopedia of Literature by and about Women of Color*. 2 Vols. Ed. Elizabeth A. Beaulieu. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006. 341-342.

"Preacher Tales." *Encyclopedia of African American Folklore*. Ed. Anand Prahlad. Vol. 2. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006. 1016-1018.

"Reconstructing Black Manhood: Message and Meaning in Spike Lee's *Get on the Bus*." *CLA Journal* 47.4 (June 2004), 409-26. (With William Jackson).

"Word on the Brazos." *Encyclopedia of African American Folklore*. Ed. Anand Prahlad. Vol. 3. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006. 1389-1391.

Rev. of *Dancing on Main Street: Poems by Lorenzo Thomas*. Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2004. In *Texas Books in Review* 21.1 (2004-2005): 22-23.

Rev. of *The Black Bard of North Carolina: George Moses Horton and His Poetry*. By Joan R. Sherman, ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. In *ANQ Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews*. (Formerly *American Notes and Queries*). 13 (2000): 46-49.

"Zora Neale Hurston's Essays on Jim Crow and Democracy." *Zora Neale Hurston Forum*. 2.2 (1988): 16-21.

"Zora Neale Hurston." In *Fifty Southern Writers After 1900*. Eds. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bains. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987. 259-269.

### **Conference Papers (Selected)**

"From Boys to Men: Meditations on Black Manhood in Selected Works by Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, and August Wilson." Conference of College Teachers of English. University of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, TX. February 27, 2003.

"Performing the Word: The Black Preacher as Trickster in Selected Folk Tales Collected by J. Mason Brewer and Zora Neale Hurston." Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society. Albuquerque, New Mexico. October 8-12, 2003.

"Zora Neale Hurston and the Ruby McCollum Trial." Conference of the College Language Association. Morgan State University, Baltimore, Maryland. April 6-8, 2000.

"Imagining Africa: Images of Africa in Selected Poetry by Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen." International Conference on Africa Sponsored by the Society for Research on African Cultures. Montclair State University, New Jersey. October 22-24, 1998.



**Dr. Sandra Mayo**  
**Director, Center for Multicultural and Gender Studies**  
**Associate Professor of Theatre**

## **CURRICULUM VITA**

### **I. ACADEMIC/PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND**

#### **EDUCATION**

**Ph.D. and M.Ph.**, 1986, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, Humanities (modern and contemporary theatre literature and history with focus on Black Theatre) Dissertation topic: "The Cultural Roots of the Drama of Ed Bullins"  
Columbia University, NY, NY, Ph.D. student in Theatre, (earned 39 credits)  
State University of New York at Buffalo (19 credits in theatre beyond M.A. degree)  
**M.A.** in Humanities, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1972, emphasis—African American literature, history, and theatre; Thesis: "Children's Black Identity Theatre"  
**B.S.** in English Education, Minor in Public Speaking and Theatre, 1969, State University College at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY

#### **UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE (Most Recent)**

**Director of Center for Multicultural and Gender Studies, Associate Professor of Theatre**, Texas State University, Sept. 2001-present.

**Dean of Arts and Sciences**, St. Philip's College, Jan. 1998-2001; Interim Dean, Aug. 1996-Jan. 1998.

**Director of Theatre and Fine Arts**, St. Philip's College, Jan. 1993-Jan. 1998

**Associate Professor**, University of the Incarnate Word, 1992-3; Assistant Professor, Speech and Theatre, 1989-92; Coordinator of Fine Arts core classes, 1989-93; Special Assistant to the President, Sept. 1989-May 1990.

**Assistant Professor**, University of Houston-Downtown, Arts and Humanities Department, Sept. 1988-May 1989.

### **II. TEACHING (Representative List of Courses Taught)**

#### **Graduate**

Contemporary World Theatre and Backgrounds of Modern Drama

#### **Undergraduate**

Introduction to Ethnic Studies, Ethnic Theatre Workshop, Ethnic Drama and Film,  
Introduction to Fine Arts, Introduction to Theatre, History of the Theatre: Beginnings to 1850  
History of the Theatre: 1850 to Present, Black Drama in America, Black Theatre Workshop

### **III. SCHOLARLY/CREATIVE (Representative List)**

#### **Edited Textbook**

Introduction to Fine Arts: Dance, Music, Theatre, and Visual Art. 2nd ed. Managing Editor, with Buddy Trevino, Peter Carey, and Eloise Stoker. Needham Hts., MA: Ginn Press, division of Simon and Schuster, 1991 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1990). (chapter contributor)

## **Edited Book**

Myth, Magic, and Farce: Four Plays by Sterling Houston. Texas: University of North Texas Press, 2005. (edited book and wrote refereed introduction)

## **Refereed Journal Articles**

- “Ed Bullins: Toward an Understanding of the Twentieth Century Cycle. *Blackstream*, Association for Theatre in Higher Education, 1997.
- “‘Sassy Assertiveness’ and ‘Somebodiness’: the Poetry of Black Women in the 1960s. MAWA Review (Middle Atlantic Writer’s Association), Baltimore, MD, June 1991.
- “Ed Bullins: New York’s Resident Black Dramatist.” *Afro-Americans in N.Y. Life and History*, Buffalo, NY, July 1981.
- “Toward an Understanding of Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf*.” *Afro-Americans in N.Y. Life and History*, Buffalo, NY, July 1978.

## **Book Chapters**

- “Ed Bullins.” *A Dictionary on Black Theatre*. ed. Allen Woll. NY, Greenwood Press, 1983.
- “Designers and Technicians.” *Introduction to Fine Arts: Dance, Music, Theatre, and Visual Art*. 2nd ed. Managing Editor, with Buddy Trevino, Peter Carey, and Eloise Stoker. Needham Hts., MA: Ginn Press, division of Simon and Schuster, 1991 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1990)

## **Papers Presented at Professional Meetings**

- “Reconciling Sterling Houston’s *Isis in Nubia* with Ancient Nubian Myth and History.” International Federation for Theatre Research Conference (IFTR), Stellenbosch, South Africa, July 13, 2007. (also invited lecture at Tshwane U in South Africa)
- “Infusing Multiculturalism into the Theatre Curriculum.” Texas Educational Theatre Association Conference, January 20, 2007.
- “Strategies for Teaching Ethnic Theatre. Texas Educational Theatre Association Conference,” Austin, TX, 2003.
- “The Twentieth Century Cycle: Meditations on Black Manhood.” Second Annual Symposium on African American Theatre, North Carolina A&T, Greensboro, NC, 1995.
- “Ed Bullins’ Twentieth Century Cycle: A Critical Overview.” Association for Theatre in Higher Education Conference, Philadelphia, PA, 1993.
- “The Folk Roots of Ed Bullins’ *Goin’ a Buffalo*.” Third Annual Black Theatre Conference. Morgan State University, Baltimore, MD, 1986.

## **Invited Talks, Lectures, Presentations**

- “Black Theatre in America: Historical Survey, Aesthetics, and Intellectual Thought.” Tshwane University, Pretoria, South Africa, School of the Arts, July 18, 2007. (also presented at Texas State, St. Philip’s College, Our Lady of the Lake University, and for several other venues including community organizations over the last 20 years)
- “African American Women Playwrights from 1850s to 1970s.” guest lecturer. Images of Reality class. Texas State, 2003, 2004, 2005; also San Antonio Inter-American Book Fair and Literary Festival, 1991, and St. Philip’s College Women’s History Month Celebration, 2000.

## **Theatre Productions**

- “Frederick Douglass: Reflections on a Struggle for Freedom,” Texas State, Studio Theatre, 2005. (writer and director)

*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*  
by Ntozake Shange, Texas State, Studio Theatre, April 2004. (director)

*The Wiz*, St. Philip’s College, Feb. 1998. (producer)

*Fences* by August Wilson, Mar. 1995. (directing consultant and producer)

*Wine in the Wilderness* by Alice Childress, Incarnate Word College, 1993. (director)

**Black Theatre in Texas**  
**Sandra Mayo and Elvin Holt**  
**Book Prospectus (Historical Narrative)**

Approximately 350-page manuscript (including illustrations)  
60 illustrations (photos) in a variety of sizes throughout (possibly ten in color inset)

**Table of Contents**

*Introduction*

Black Texans: Overview of Cultural Highlights and Milestones

Historical Development of Black Theatre in Texas

- Relation to national scene
- Work in churches, public schools, historical Black colleges, community groups and centers

*Thirty-One Years Engaging the Community*

The Black Academy of Arts and Letters

Dallas, TX

*Twenty-Seven Years and Counting*

Jubilee Theatre

Fort Worth, TX

*In a Home of Their Own on Main Street*

The Ensemble Theatre

Houston, TX

Encore Theatre

Houston, Texas

*A Burgeoning New Voice*

The Renaissance Guild

San Antonio, TX

*Christian Players Take the Stage*

Hornsby Theatre Company

San Antonio, Texas

*Collaboration in the State Capitol*

Pro-Arts Collective

Austin, Texas

**Black Theatre in Texas II**  
**Book Prospectus**  
**Anthology**

**Table of Contents**

300 to 350-page manuscript (including photos)  
Collection of 8 to ten representative plays written by African American Texans  
8-10 illustrations (photos)

*Introduction*

- Critical overview

*Playwrights and Plays*

*Information for each playwright to include:*

- Short biography (paragraph)
- Brief notes on dramaturgy
- Photo of scene from play
- Play

Sterling Houston, *Driving Wheel*

Elizabeth Brown Guillory, *When the Ancestors Call* and *Break of Day*

Eugene Lee, *Killingsworth*

George Hawkins, *Brer Rabbit*

Sandra Mayo, *Frederick Douglass*

Thomas Meloncon, *Johnny B. Goode*

Ted Shine, *Night of Baker's End*

Celeste Bedford Walker, *Camp Logan*