Introduction

IF it were simply a question of the survival of African American theatre, there would be no need for yet another historical and critical analysis of African American plays, theatre people, and theatrical organizations. Up to today, this theatre has wheezed through more than one hundred seventy years, thanks to generous patching and propping. Given the circumstances, such a long existence is no small achievement. This prompts the question, What can be done to improve prospects for the further long-term health of this repository of African American life and history? To find answers requires a thorough examination of African American drama and theatre. Getting a fix on the plays demands, for example, a complete understanding of the general principles governing the works' methods, aims, functions, and characteristics.[1] In this checkup, therefore, the first two chapters separate into schools,

periods, and classes most of the plays written by African Americans between 1898 and 1992. The criteria are based on theories espoused by the philosopher Alain Locke (1886–1954) and the sociologist William E. B. DuBois (1868–1963) during the 1920s and the 1930s. The purpose of classification is to set terms and impose limits. Chapter 3 studies African American theatre people. Their condition today looks better than it actually is – thanks to the well-known few actors trained in community theatres during the thirties and the forties. These theatres now are on their deathbeds, however, because there are too few young people willing to brave the uncertainty of the theatre profession and the racial prejudice in the preparation. The third chapter, then, is a pep talk to the young and the tired. They must be made aware that historically the major contributions to African American theatre have come from people whose backs have been spiked to the wall. Their stories might be just the medicine needed to improve even the management of theatre organizations. This is the purpose of the fourth chapter, which analyzes historical examples of management schemes, pointing out their advantages and disadvantages. The benefits of these strategies are reviewed in Chapter 5, which rummages through history to find abundant and fresh remedies.

Getting this health examination under way requires looking at the tenets of developments in, and nineteenth-century sources for DuBois's and Locke's respective schools of theatre. DuBois wandered into the theatrical arena in 1911 in order to teach "the colored people" the meanings of their history and of their rich emotional life. Most importantly, he wanted to use theatre to reveal the Negro to the white world as "a human, feeling thing."[2] These were also the objectives of his *Suppression of the African Slave Trade* (1896) and precedent-setting *Philadelphia Negro* (1899). He realized, however, that to change the race situation in the United States required capturing the mass imagination. Theatre was the most accessible medium for this purpose. DuBois tried his hand at writing, submitting to the American Pageant Association in 1911 his stiff *The Star of Ethiopia.* The association ignored him, although

not totally for racial reasons. DuBois was happy to appear before a special committee of the U.S. Senate on February 2, 1912. The committee was holding hearings on a planned exposition to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. DuBois proposed a permanent – and "distinctly educational" – exhibit, whose "main scheme should try to show the condition of the colored people throughout the United States."[3] He said, for obvious reasons, that a historical pageant might be just what was needed. By 1913 DuBois was staging his *Star of Ethiopia* in New York; it opened in Washington in 1915, in Philadelphia in 1916, and in Los Angeles in 1924. During these same years, DuBois, an almost tireless man, organized three Pan-African congresses (1919, 1921, and 1923), founded and edited four national periodicals, and developed two theatre companies – all to give first-class citizenship to African peoples. The DuBois school of theatre, therefore, was strictly political. DuBois attacked the popular Broadway musical comedies of the time, calling them "decadent" stories about "clowning people." His "new theatre" consisted of characters and situations that depicted the struggle of African Americans against racism, which he called "Outer Life." This struggle, DuBois believed, required that the drama show people not only as they actually were but also as they wished to be.

Locke found DuBois's school of Protest theatre indigestible, particularly his going on at length about African Americans who were "ignoring or discrediting their cultural contributions and spiritual resources."[4] The most interesting thing about Locke's complaint was that he did not go public with it for twelve years. Instead, he tried to change the DuBois school from within, to shift it from protest to art-theatre. He began soon after DuBois performed his *Star of Ethiopia* in Washington. Locke was not among the many who believed that the pageant was the best thing since cornbread, fatback, and millet syrup. Locke wanted believable characters and situations that sprang from the real life of the people, from what DuBois called "Inner Life." Instead of loudly publicizing his feelings, Locke quietly pushed dramatists away from

protest writing. Nevertheless, the DuBois school flourished until, in 1922, Locke published his "Steps Toward the Negro Theatre" – in DuBois's own *Crisis* magazine no less. Locke obliquely criticized DuBois for not recognizing that "sowing the future" of African American cultural arts depended on

> distinguishing between the movement toward race drama and the quite distinguishable movement toward the Negro Theatre. In the idea of its sponsors, the latter includes the former, but goes further and means more; it contemplates an endowed artistic center where all phases vital to the art of the theatre are cultivated and taught.[5]

Warming to the task, Locke unloaded a double-barrel with his "Enter the New Negro" and "Youth Speaks" in the March 1, 1925, issue of *The Survey:* "The Sociologist, the Philanthropist, and The Race-leader" must understand that the "New Negro" was not "swathed in their formulae." This younger generation, which was "younger" not because of its age, but because of its new aesthetic and philosophy of life, did not see itself through the distorted perspective of a social problem. These young had shed the old chrysalis of the Negro problem and had been spiritually emancipated. Locke recommended that artists lay aside the status of beneficiary and ward, that they become collaborators and participants in American civilization, and that they tap the gifts of the folk-temperament – its humor, sentiment, imagination, and tropic nonchalance.[6]

In October 1926, eleven months after the publication of Locke's *The New Negro* (1925), the manifesto of the Art-Theatre School, DuBois answered Locke in "Criteria of Negro Art." He said in this treatise of the Protest School that by agreeing to focus on Inner Life themes and people, Locke's New Negro artists were being hoodwinked into stopping agitation on the African American question. These young artists, who were but "accidents of education and opportunity," had to search first for Truth and Beauty. If that search caused the artists' work to be labeled propaganda, people should dismiss the charge:

All Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right 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.[7]

Locke shot back that Truth and Beauty in art demanded a balanced, interesting, and detached depiction of things as they were. Instead of DuBois's plots, which "revealed" African Americans, Locke demanded plots that were full of these people's "lusty" lives, myths, legends, and histories. Locke wanted characters who were off the streets, who came out of joints and dives – people who, while "cuttin the fool," expressed honest and personal emotions, irrespective of politics. DuBois wished for characters who came from the same mold as model human beings and historical figures, characters who pined because of frustrated hope. Locke directed his themes almost exclusively toward African Americans. Without sentimentalizing issues, he sometimes indicted whites. DuBois's themes pricked the consciences of white people. The language in Locke's Art-Theatre was that of ordinary folk – dressed up with poetry, music, and dance. DuBois spoke up for "literate and thought-provoking" language. Despite their differences, the tenets of the two schools still inform African American drama. Within the particular contexts of their origins and development, neither school appears more obviously right or wrong, modern or outdated, than the other.

Although Locke and DuBois drew up the ground plans for modern African American drama, their schools really originated with the African Company productions of Shakespeare's *Richard III* in 1821 and William Brown's *The Drama of King Shotaway* in 1823.[8] The stories about the productions of Mr. Brown and his African Grove Theatre of New York City are well-known. Few know, however, about the productions' political and economic contexts, which lend significance not only to the stories but also to the modern schools. Brown, a retired seaman of means (he had served as a

chief steward), built his successful theatre organization in three phases. During its initial stage, 1816 to 1821, he molded such Inner Life "exhibitions" as singing, dancing, and reciting into shows designed solely for audience escapism. The acts presented by Brown were the fountainhead of Locke's Art-Theatre (later, the Black Experience School). The birthplace of Brown's theatre was the backyard of his Thomas Street home in Greenwich Village. The 1816 birth year, significantly, coincided with the transformation of ten thousand free Africans in New York City into a political force. These Africans, voting overwhelmingly with the Federalist party, often swung close elections: In 1813, for example, three hundred Africans decided the city's Assembly elections in favor of the Federalists, changing the political character of the state.[9] Africans had no African-based entertainment, however, until Brown opened his rough-hewn tea garden. The Africans flooded Brown's Sunday-afternoon affairs, so much so that within five years the police had forced Brown to move. In 1821 he built the African Grove Tea-Garden at 56 Mercer Street, an elaborate place with little boxes, each seating four, as well as space for the garden band. There was even a second-story apartment.

For the August 1, 1821, opening, Brown invited not only his own considerable following but also the press. One person to accept the invitation was Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785–1851), the sheriff of New York City. Noah was also a judge, consul, politician, playwright, and critic, and the editor of the powerful *National Advocate* newspaper. When he invited Noah, Brown probably did not know that he was a proslavery official in the city's Tammany Hall political organization. In fact, at the 1821 New York State constitutional convention Noah was responsible for whipping up support to change considerably the qualifications an African American had to meet in order to vote (a freed African man was eligible to vote, as was a white man, if he paid taxes, or owned a freehold valued at twenty pounds, or rented a tenement for at least forty shillings).[10] Noah's reasons for seeking to raise the qualifications were as much political and economic as they were racial. His Tammany Hall

Democrats, many of whom were mechanics, believed that universal suffrage drew African Americans to New York, where, as they "changed butler's coat for cap and jeans, or salver for a saw," they took good-paying jobs away from whites.[11] The political ramifications of this increased African American vote were the loss of Assembly seats and political appointments by the Democrats. Tammany Hall nearly panicked, therefore, when it realized that the tide at the 1821 convention was running in favor of maintaining the less-stringent voting requirements. As the September 19 first vote approached, Noah desperately needed ammunition with which to stop approval.

The invitation to the opening of the tea garden was just what Noah needed. As soon as Mr. Brown read Noah's article on the opening in the August 3 *Advocate*, Brown knew his enterprise was in trouble. Instead of a review, Noah wrote a political notice that also questioned African American intelligence: "People of colour generally are very imitative, quick in their conceptions and rapid in execution; but it is in the lighter pursuits requiring no intensity of thought or depth of reflection. It may be questioned whether they could succeed in the abstruse sciences."[12] This was also the theme of the Democrats at the convention as was keynoted by a Mr. Ross: "[African Americans] are a peculiar people, incapable, in my judgment, of exercising that privilege [of voting] with any sort of discretion, prudence, or independence."[13] Noah's article personalized this theme: He made fun of African Americans, describing the men's "shining faces, protuberant eyes, and widening mouths."[14] He debased the women, paraphrasing Shakespeare ("Black beauties 'making night hideous' "). He reported overhearing a conversation that he used to prove that Brown's friends could do nothing but "ape their Federalist masters and mistresses in every thing." Here again Noah echoed Ross's opening address: "A petition in behalf of Negro votes now on your table, in all probability, had been instigated by gentlemen of a different colour who expect to control their votes." Noah ended his notice on the opening of the tea garden with fodder for the conventioneers: "They fear no

Missouri plot, care for no political rights; they are happy in being permitted to dress fashionable, walk the streets, visit the African Grove, and talk scandal."

The fallout from Noah's article, which led to the second phase, 1821 to 1822, of Brown's theatre organization, initially created a financial bonanza for Brown. So many people – including whites – crowded into the tea garden that the neighbors allegedly complained to the police. In response, Sheriff Noah closed the establishment, which left Brown with a useless piece of property. Brown, however, seized upon a notion that came to him when he saw, in the *Advocate,* that the Park, the city's leading theatre, which was being rebuilt, had booked the English actor Junius Brutus Booth (1796–1852) to star in *Richard III* for its October 21, 1821, reopening. Sheriff Noah's order had forbade the reopening of the tea garden; the order had said nothing about a theatre. Thus Brown staged his own version of *Richard III* in his upstairs apartment, which was now the African Grove Theatre. Noah attended the opening on September 20, the day after proslavery Democrats at the convention had lost on the voting question by sixty-three to fifty-nine. Infuriated by the loss, Noah avenged it with a scurrilous review of *Richard III.* He hoped this tactic would win him the five votes he needed to reverse the decision on the second reading. Noah stated in the review that African Americans, whom he called "imitative inmates of the kitchen and pantries," were already too assertive because of "the great charter that declares 'all men are equal.' "[15] Noah did not let up: Before and after the convention, he published only five articles about African Americans – all were negative. During the convention, however, he published ten articles detailing crimes committed by African Americans, in addition to three reviews of the African Company. He even attached the following editorial to Brown's announcement of an opera that opened on September 24:

> The following is a copy of a printed play bill of gentlemen of *colour.* They now assemble in groups; and since they have crept in favour in the convention, they are determined to have balls and quadrille parties, establish

a forum, solicit a seat in the assembly, or in the common council, which, if refused, let them look to the elections. They can outvote the whites, as they say.[16]

Noah had every reason to feel desperate: The debate in the convention still favored giving all men the right to vote – thanks to the expert leadership of Peter A. Jay, whose father, Governor John Jay, had founded in 1785 the Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves. In the meantime, all of Noah's publicity about the African Grove Theatre drew people to it – especially white people, who, according to the actor Ira Aldridge, came to ridicule but stayed to admire. These crowds meant lower ticket sales at the Park Theatre. This, too, very much concerned Noah, whose friend, Stephen Price (1783–1840), owned the Park. In fact, Price and his assistant manager, Edmund Shaw Simpson (1784–1848), produced Noah's plays:

I became in a manner domiciliated in the greenroom. My friends, Price and Simpson, who had always been exceedingly kind and liberal, allowed me to stray about the premises like one of the family, and always anxious for their success, I ventured upon another attempt for a holyday occasion, and produced *Marion, or the Hero of Lake George.* It was played on the 25th of November – Evacuation day, and I bustled about among my military friends, to raise a party in support of a military play, and what with generals, staff-officers, rank and file, the Park theatre was so crammed that not a word of the play was heard, which was a very fortunate affair for the author. The managers presented me with a pair of handsome silver pitchers, which I still retain as a memento to their good will and friendly consideration.[17]

Significantly, this close friendship motivated Noah, as sheriff, to close the African Grove Theatre. The reason-of-record was that the theatre caused riots. But according to Aldridge, the disturbances were sparked by Price:

Price, a manager of some repute, became actually *jealous* of the success of the "real Ethiopian," and emissaries were employed to put them down. They [the African Company] attracted considerable notice; and people

who went to ridicule remained to admire, albeit there must have been ample scope for the suggestion of the ridiculous. Riots ensued, and destruction fell upon the little theatre.[18]

The real reason Price wanted the African Grove closed was that Brown was hurting the Park Theatre financially.[19] The political reason for closing the African Grove was that it made good copy for poisoning conventioneers' minds against African Americans. Noah even turned into a political act Brown's practice of seating troublesome whites behind a partition – done in a desperate effort to stop his theatre from being closed.[20]

Following the closing, Brown developed the first guerilla theatre: Throughout 1822 he moved his actors to different rented spaces, including a hotel next door to the Park Theatre. Noah pursued, closing performance after performance, making some arrests right off the stage. The arrests became so commonplace that the actors continued performing, even in the jail cells. These arrests – duly reported by Noah in the *Advocate* as well as by the other dailies – also had the effect of isolating Mr. Brown from the city's African American preachers and other community leaders. The tragedy was that these leaders had worked tirelessly to retain the liberal voting criteria, and Brown was undermining their efforts. In the end, the constitutional convention limited voting to those men who "shall have been in New York for three years, and for one year next preceding any election, shall be seized and possessed of a freehold estate of the value of two hundred fifty dollars over and above all debts."[21] African American leaders probably felt little sympathy for Brown, either for his having been harassed in 1822 or for his decision to retaliate in 1823 and begin his organization's final developmental phase. It was during this stage that Brown used theatre, as DuBois would later advocate it be used, to protest racism. Brown even defied Noah's ban: Not only did Brown return to the closed African Grove Theatre, but he also widely advertised his return on playbills, as well as with lanterns out front. Furthermore, he changed his offerings from the Inner Life entertainment plays of the earlier phases to Outer Life protest plays. He first