

## American Theatre History: A Segregated and Untruthful Affair

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Spotting an elephant in your midst is all a matter of perspective. Imagine, if you will, being an elephant or, for that matter, a 400 pound gorilla seated in the middle of a roomful of zebras enrolled in a course in American Theater History. The teacher—trained at one of the nation’s premiere institutions, draws her lessons from a curriculum that informs her philosophy, shapes her syllabus, and influences the production season. The zebras—educated thus far in similar institutions—are, for the most part, encouraged by the course’s familiar content and expect to do well. Many cut their teeth on fundamentals of a flawed American Theatre History during previous AP coursework. The lone elephant, however, offers up a sigh, for although she, too, is comforted in the familiar, she does not see reflected in the course content the rich theatrical legacy of her pachyderm ancestors. But her classmates are progressive and, over time, join her in voicing a collective concern that the narrative of American Theatre History, according to their teacher’s agenda, is missing several episodes.

I have situated my elephant at the center of this discussion to trumpet a disgraceful absence of theatre scholars who are well versed in *both* black and white theatre history and practice and, worse, who are the least bit inclined to study the field. Interestingly, as one may also infer from this awkward setting, today’s students themselves are more prone to take up the cause of this neglect and, in many cases, take measures that hold both teachers and institutions accountable. It has been my experience

over my many years in the classroom that students are grateful to learn about the intersections between African American and American Theatre History. They are motivated by an intellectual curiosity for the whole story and register discontent when lack of a qualified instructor or conscious omission are the reasons they are denied.

Throughout his long and distinguished career, critic, theatre historian, and prolific scholar James V. Hatch has done much to expose this elephant. Yet I am sure that he is disheartened to know that, in 2008, circumstances remain just as dire as they were nearly twenty years ago upon the release of his *own* manifesto entitled , “Here Comes Everybody: Scholarship and Black Theatre History.” With “spot-on” accuracy, he described the status of Theatre Studies in late 1980s America, bemoaning the fact that “many theatre students believe that Afro-American theatre began with Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and that whatever preceded amounted to little more than the stereotypes of minstrelsy . . . .” “So American theatre history remains a segregated and untruthful affair,” Hatch concluded. “It is here that the practitioners and the mentors must initiate changes. Students must be required to study ethnic theatre histories. Both white and black students preparing to teach should be able to teach all American theatre history, without being ghettoized into their own race . . . historians must not assume that African culture did not survive the Middle Passage. When Afro-American culture is denied African roots, it is left to attach itself to European traditions which have afforded it little respect.”

My elephant is also an ominous reminder of what lies ahead for the field of American Theatre History should current trends persist. I share Hatch's foreboding diagnosis: "This cultural segregation has resulted today in a segregated theatre history, not always from overt racism, but from promulgating a narrow definition of theatre, which has excluded Afro-American theatrical traditions. With the continued de-emphasis of African American Theatre History in the classroom, fewer would-be scholars are likely to join a publishing community that has worked to keep the discipline vibrant, relevant, and in the forefront of Theatre Studies and research. Indeed, a gloomy picture emerges if we were to imagine the state of the discipline as it appears to be headed if current trends persist. As I contemplate my one-year anniversary as Editor of *Theatre Topics*, I am disturbed at scant submissions on African American theatre that come across my desk. Out of nearly 60 essays that were submitted for publication between 2007 and 2008, only two focused upon topics related to African American performance; neither made it to publication.

The continuing practice of shutting out instruction of African American Theatre History in many college curricula is a travesty that has been, for years, neither sufficiently acknowledged nor confronted head on. Collectively the inattention on the part of teachers, coupled with phony excuses given out by administrators for the lack of qualified faculty, and implicit cultural devaluation have created and sustained a gargantuan elephant in the room. A student who sees the adjective "American" in the title of a theatre text, for example, should rightfully expect the course to offer more than European ethnics. Many African American students in graduate schools may attest to the fact that they are usually on their own and struggle for guidance in this regard. Let me

conclude by again lifting up again James Hatch's fervent appeal: "This continuing apartheid in an era when our scholars show increasing sophistication in national and multiethnic theatre history is UNFAIR TO STUDENTS.—and dishonest."