



Resources

In the Shadow of the Great White Way: Images from the Black Theater

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As a junior faculty at LaGuardia Community College/CUNY in Long Island City, New York, I began using the Humanities Department's conference room for meetings. On the wall was a collection of photographs that caught my attention. They were black and white images containing a who's who of African American actors from the 60s, 70s and 80s. When I asked my boss, Bruce Brooks (then Program Director of LaGuardia's Photo Program), about the work, he told me that they were prints made from copy negatives of the original photographs; the original negatives were destroyed in a fire. (B. Brooks, personal communication, circa 2011) Having lost my work to flooding, I empathized with the devastation of that tragedy and caring for this collection became one of my desires.

When my department moved to another building on campus, I made it my business to shepherd the work to its new location and hang it on a wall close to my office. In time, I explored the possibility of creating signage for the work and opened the frames and mats to try to find out information about the photos. It was then that I found the name of the photographer, Bert Andrews, and I began to research. My search led to a publication entitled "In the Shadow of the Great White Way: Images from the Black Theater. (Harrison & Andrews, 1993) The text details Andrews's struggles to track down his work from the archives and customers he had over the years, re-photographing the works, and then publishing them with text. The book also contains interviews with Andrews and an essay by the late Cicely Tyson. I scanned the entire book for future projects.

In response to the release of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" and the call for papers for *Dialogues for Social Justice*, I explored writing this article to point out the importance of, the need to celebrate, and to educate the next generation about black theatre history. The photos in this special DSJ issue of the *Black Experience in the United States* capture not only black actors' journey in white theatre but the black struggle that art so amply articulates. To find images that could be shared, I searched for archives that had print quality scans. This led me to the Schomburg Library which had images but did not have the publication rights. The search for the rights led me to Marcia Hudson, Andrews's cousin, and the executor of his estate. After some discussion it became clear that Ms. Hudson and the estate could use the support of an archivist. As I waited for the pandemic

to subside, I looked for a paid student intern to help begin. I am also trying to open channels with the college's LaGuardia/Wagner Archives which would have the support structure to take care of the work without demanding the rights.

My research led to some other discoveries. The first being that the work currently on display at the college was part of an exhibition that coincided with Andrews's death. The work was never picked up and as a result has been in the possession of the college ever since. My colleague's wife, Susan Gardner, made the show possible as she had a long-term personal relationship with Andrews. It turned out that her mother, the late Dorothy Ross, who was in the theater, hired Andrews to document plays. She leveraged that relationship to get Andrews to attend parties and document the events gratis (a marketing technique that is not unique to African American photographers).

"Bert was a family friend," said Gardener, "so when Bruce decided to have an event for his photo students, we asked him to do a show and talk about his work." "He was the first of many guest lecturers," said Brooks, "But he died, and we just ended up keeping the work." "The pictures of the Black Theater were Bert's special project," said Gardner, "he made sure he photographed every production. It's his great work." (B. Brooks & S. Gardner, personal communication circa 2021). While the book is available by secondhand book sellers, its price keeps going up. As we celebrate the film productions of classic Black Theater plays, we should also celebrate the actors and productions that originally brought them to life in the shadow of the white way.

Illustrating the gems from Andrew's oeuvre, I chose five pictures containing royalty of the Black Theater who went on to become major figures of the American entertainment industry. In addition, these pictures showcase productions that are reminders of the journey that theatrical works have taken to capture the nation's attention. The first image is the towering presence of the young James Earl Jones in the Norman Rosten play adapted from the Joyce Cary novel *Mr. Johnson* (Rosten, 2022). Dressed in a simulated loincloth on an empty stage and shot from a low angle, Jones looks the giant of the Broadway stage that he will soon become.

Next is the late Cicely Tyson, center (with I believe Barbara Baxley on the left and Janet League on the right), in *To Be Young Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words*, a play compiled from her writings by Hansberry's ex-husband, the poet Robert Nemiroff shortly after her death in 1965 (Gussow, 1995). Hansberry's 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun*, was the first play on Broadway written by an African American woman. In Tyson's face we see some aspect of the torture Ms. Hansberry may have experienced as the price for being a trailblazer (Shepard, 1969). The play was a hit of the 1968-69 Broadway season. The title of the play comes from a Nina Simone song written about Hansberry (Saad, 2019).

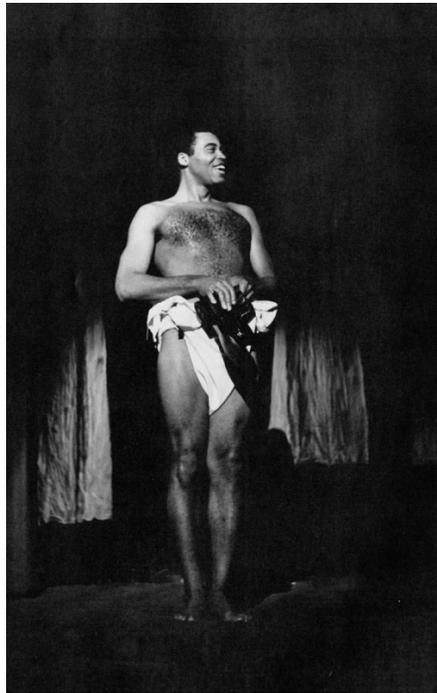
The third photo is of Gloria Foster as Volumnia and Morgan Freeman in the title role of the Public Theater's production of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. We see scars on Freeman's face, denoting his warrior character and the "...spectacular display... (of) force," in the words of The New York Times review by Richard Eder, in Ms. Foster's performance. Freeman was the standout in the Joe Papp African-American/Latinx cast production. Papp was one of the pioneers of color-blind casting in Shakespeare plays and this one made the case for the policy's success (Eder, 1979).

The next photo is from *When the Chickens Come Home to Roost* and the beginnings of Denzel Washington's role as the slain civil rights leader Malcolm X that informed his Academy Award

nominated performance in the Spike Lee film. Here he plays opposite Kirk Kirksey as Elijah Muhammad in the Laurence Holder play. We catch Malcolm X pleading with the leader of the Nation of Islam who is unwilling to respond to his concerns. Washington may have been delivering the line, “I love you like a father,” but it would not save the two characters from their real-life eventual schism (Rich, 1981).

Finally, we have a play which eventually made it to the screen, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, one of August Wilson's cycle of ten plays on African American history. It stars Theresa Merritt who was nominated for a Tony. Directed by Lloyd Richards and premiering at the Yale Rep it moved to the Cort Theater on Broadway where this photo may have been taken (Playbill, 2022). It shows cast members that included Joe Seneca. The still image encapsulates the power dynamics of collaboration, gender, and race.

LaGuardia Community College does not offer programming in restoration and preservation of photos, but students engaged in internships can explore this project as adult and continuing education students. I continue to look for the right students and funding to do this work and support the Bert Andrew's Foundation. This is important work, an act of assuring that black theatre history is understood and celebrated especially considering the current “We See You, White American Theater” movement (We see you, 2021) and the many anti-racism campaigns in the theater community. There is urgency to preserve this history, tell this history, as another aspect of counterstory (Martinez, 2020) and visual storytelling – another legacy of the Black Experience in America.



Andrews, B. (1963). Mr. Johnson [Photography].



Andrews, B. (1969). To Be Young, Gifted and Black [Photography].



Andrews, B. (1979). Coriolanus [Photography].



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Andrews, B. (1984). Ma Rainey's Black Bottom [Photography].

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Born in Miami Florida in 1962, Hugo Fernandez was raised in Dade County and the Northeast. Studying photography at Miami Dade Community College, he received an Associates in Communication in 1985. He traveled to the western United States then returned to Miami and went on to earn a BFA in Fine Art Photography at Florida International University in 1989. After traveling to Chile, Bolivia, and Peru, he entered graduate school at the Yale School of Art, earning an MFA in Fine Art Photography in 1993.

He moved to New York City after graduate school and began working at LaGuardia Community College in 1994. He teaches courses in photography and art appreciation.

In 2013 he returned to Chile for the first time in over 20 years. In 2015 he traveled to his families in Cuba, returning in 2016. He exhibited the Hemingway House panoramas in New York City, and in South Florida at the Florida International University North Campus Library, in February of 2019.

*Graduate and undergraduate students, adult and continuing education students interested in internship possibilities of working with the restoration and preservation of these photos should contact: Professor Hugo Fernandez, hfernandez@lagcc.cuny.edu

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