Celebrating TCG’s ARTS ADVOCACY
BLACK STAGE REPORT
BACKWARD AND FORWARD
PLUS:
NATIONAL BLACK THEATRE FESTIVAL
Produced by the North Carolina Black Repertory Company
DAVID HENRY HWANG

TCG GALA
FEBRUARY 3, 2020 THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

OUR STORIES 2020

GALA 2020
“It’s the stories that make my heart beat faster — those are the ones to write about.”

– David Henry Hwang

To tonight’s esteemed honorees, thank you for making our hearts beat faster.

With love,

JOHN

and your friends at

JOHN GORE ORGANIZATION
DAVID HENRY HWANG BACKWARD AND FORWARD
America’s leading Asian American playwright revisited his most famous play and wrote a new musical
By Diep Tran

DAVID HENRY HWANG BACKWARD AND FORWARD
North Carolina Black Repertory Company is preparing another can’t-miss biennial week of new work, networking, and mentorship opportunities. By Rosalind Early

BLACK STAGE REPORT
African American theatres embrace their own internal diversity and move beyond a monolithic narrative
By Kelundra Smith

EVENT ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
TCG would like to thank our Host Committee for their help in making this event a success!
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T IS FITTING THAT THE HONOREES FOR THE 2020 TCG Gala—the first of our new decade—should themselves have made such auspicious beginnings. For David Henry Hwang, it was in 1980, when he brought his very first play, FOB, from his dorm room to the Public Theater. For the National Black Theatre Festival (NBTF), it was 1989, when Larry Leon Hamlin welcomed Dr. Maya Angelou to deliver a manifesto and serve as chair of the inaugural festival. Clearly, our honorees know how to make an entrance!

Yet it’s their staying power that we celebrate most tonight. Hamlin launched NBTF with the goal of ensuring Black theatre’s longevity. Over 30 years later, the Festival now hosts upwards of 120 performances, attracts more than 65,000 visitors to Winston-Salem, and has contributed over $230 million to the Winston-Salem economy since its inception. And 40 years after FOB, David Henry Hwang returned to the Public this year with his latest play, Soft Power, winning a Tony Award and countless other accolades along the way.

TCG published FOB all those years ago, and we’re thrilled to be publishing Soft Power as we have so many of Hwang’s plays. For TCG’s own staying power is inextricably linked to the vitality of the theatres and artists we serve. Founded in 1961 by a handful of groundbreaking theatres, TCG’s community has grown to include thousands of theatres, theatre leaders, individual artists, students, educators, and trustees with our grantmaking, research, convenings, publications, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion initiatives, and more rippling out through an increasingly interconnected theatre movement. Together, we work toward our vision of a better world for theatre, and a better world because of theatre.

Another core element of that vision is our commitment to activism and arts advocacy. TCG advocates at the federal level on a host of critical issues facing the theatre sector, working in coalition with many national partners and theatre leaders. Some recent successes include the largest increase in NEA funding in a decade and improved visa processing for artists from abroad. By joining us tonight, you’re supporting those efforts and all of TCG’s work, as well as the network of theatres and artists we serve.

As TCG approaches our 60th anniversary, we’re taking one more piece of inspiration from our honorees tonight. For though NBTF and David Henry Hwang could very well rest on their considerable laurels, they’re always most excited about what’s coming next. As Hwang noted at our 2011 Fall Forum, “we have this model that was born 50 years ago but it can be reborn at any moment.”

So tonight, let’s raise our glasses to our honorees, to their legacies of artistry and impact, and to the possibilities of rebirth that a new decade presents us all. Thank you for joining us!

Teresa Eyring
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Adrian Budhu
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HONORING
National Black Theatre Festival
produced by the North Carolina Black Repertory Company

David Henry Hwang

CELEBRATING
TCG’s Arts Advocacy for the Field

February 3, 2020
Edison Ballroom—New York City

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Justin Rothberg, Guitar

FEATURING PERFORMANCES BY
Billy Bustamante
Nambi E. Kelley
James Jackson Jr.
Alyse Alan Louis

TCG would like to offer our gratitude to all of tonight’s sponsors, including Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Kenan Institute for the Arts/Creative Catalyst, for their support of this important event. Special thanks also to Broadway Across America and Rick Miramontez for generously providing tonight’s auction items.
Thank you to our wonderful performers who have given so generously of their time and talent.

Billy Bustamante is a NYC based Performer, Director and Photographer. Broadway credits: Miss Saigon (Engineer u/s), The King And I (Lun Tha u/s). NYC/ Regional credits: Soft Power and Here Lies Love at the Public Theatre, Ahmanson Theatre, Arena Stage, Old Globe, Paper Mill Playhouse, Sacramento Music Circus, Walnut Street Theatre, San Jose Rep, North Shore M.T., Pan Asian Rep, Prospect Theatre Company and The Arden Theatre Company. Billy recently directed the Off-Broadway revivals of The Adding Machine and LaChiusa's The Wild Party. Other directing/choreography credits include Arden Theatre, Virginia Stage Company, Goodspeed, Lincoln Center, NAAP, TUTS, Merry Go Round and CFRT. He is co-founder of Broadway Barkada and on teaching faculty at Jen Waldman Studio. Billy is passionately committed to the development of new works and new artists. www.BillyBustamante.com


Alyse Alan Louis: Recently, Zoe and Hillary in David Henry Hwang and Jeanine Tesori’s Soft Power (The Public Theater/Dir: Leigh Silverman). Broadway: Amélie, Disaster, Mamma Mia. Off Broadway: TEETH (NAMT); A New Brain (Encores Off Center); The Civilians’ Pretty Filthy (Abrons). Regional: Soft Power (CTG and Curran); Fall Springs (Barrington Stage Company); Amélie (Berkeley Rep and CTG); The Rocky Horror Show (Bucks County Playhouse). Pop! Who Shot Andy Warhol? (City Theatre, PA). Original Cast Recordings: Soft Power (upcoming), Amélie, A New Brain, Pretty Filthy.

David Schweizer has been developing and directing new theater, opera and performance work nationally and internationally for more than forty years now and has no plan to stop any time soon. Career highlights in the New York area include Rinde Eckert’s And God Created Great Whales (Obie Award) and Richard Rodney Bennett’s opera The Mines of Sulphur at New York City Opera at Lincoln Center. His notable productions have been seen at the Public Theater, Second Stage, Playwright’s Horizons, Lincoln Center/Mitzi Newhouse, The Vineyard, New York Theater Workshop, and so many other TCG Theaters from coast to coast and in between.

Rona Siddiqui is a composer/lyricist based in NYC. She recently won the prestigious Billie Burke Ziegfeld award. Her show Salaam Medina: Tales of a Halfghan, an autobiographical comedy about growing up bi-ethnic in America, had a reading at Playwrights Horizons Nov. 2019 (dir. by Raja Feather Kelly). Other musicals include One Good Day, The Tin, and Treasure in NYC. She is the recipient of the ASCAP Foundation Mary Rodgers/Lorenz Hart Award, and the ASCAP Foundation/Max Dreyfus Scholarship. She has written pieces for Wicked’s 16th anniversary commemoration “Flying Free,” 24 Hour Musicals, Prospect Theater Company, The Civilians, the NYC Gay Men’s Chorus, and 52nd St Project, and has performed concerts of her work at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and 54 Below. Original scores she has written include The Vagina Monologues, Middletown and The Good Person of Szechuan. Rona music directed the Off-Broadway productions A Strange Loop (Playwrights Horizons), Bella: An American Tall Tale (Playwrights Horizons), and Who’s Your Baghdaddy: Or How I Started the Iraq War (St. Lukes Theatre). She has orchestrated for Broadway Backwards, NAMT and Hole in the Wall Gang Camp Galas, and the upcoming show Untitled by Matt Schatz at Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera. www.ronasiddiqui.com

Nambi E. Kelley Award-winning playwright and actress, Kelley has performed on stages across the world and on television. Nambi most recently served in residence at New Victory Theatre and as a Dramatists Guild Foundation Fellow. She has penned plays for Steppenwolf, Goodman Theatre, Lincoln Center (Director’s Fest), and internationally. Former playwright in residence at the National Black Theatre (I Am A Man Residency 2017) and Goodman Theatre (Playwrights Unit 2012). Awards include: The Prince Prize 2019 ($25,000), Writers Alliance Grant 2018-19 (Dramatists Guild Foundation, $5000), the Francesca Primus Award 2015, 2018 (finalist), and The Kevin Spacey Foundation Award (finalist). Currently working on an adaptation of Toni Morrison’s Jazz, a play based on the life of Stokely Carmichael (Prince Prize), and a rolling world premiere of a play based on the life of Dr. Maya Angelou. Nambi is a staff writer on Showtime’s The Chi, is working on several commissions for the stage, and is in development with projects for television/film. www.nambikelle.com

Thank you to our wonderful performers who have given so generously of their time and talent.
The Actors Fund, for everyone in entertainment.

The Actors Fund salutes TCG and tonight's honorees!

CONGRATULATIONS TO David Henry Hwang and the National Black Theatre Festival

Thank you for sharing OUR STORIES with the world.

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For information on joining the National Council, please contact Adrian Budhu, Deputy Director and COO: abudhu@tcg.org.

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David Henry Hwang
and
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National Black Theatre Festival

THE NATIONAL BLACK THEATRE FESTIVAL® (NBTF) IS A PROGRAM OF THE NORTH CAROLINA BLACK Repertory Company (NC Black Rep). Presented every odd numbered year, the festival hosts upwards of 120 performances, attracts upwards of 65,000 visitors to Winston-Salem, and has contributed over $230 million to the Winston-Salem economy since its inception in 1989. Founded in 1979 by Larry Leon Hamlin, NC Black Rep was the first professional Black theatre company in North Carolina. NC Black Rep’s mission is to engage, enrich, and entertain with innovative programming that resonates across the community and challenges social perceptions. The Company is universally recognized for its artistic and administrative achievements and its international outreach program, the NBTF.
WE CELEBRATE THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP FOR ITS DEDICATED SERVICE TO AMERICAN THEATRE

AND SEND OUR CONGRATULATIONS TO THIS YEAR’S HONOREES

NATIONAL BLACK THEATRE FESTIVAL AND DAVID HENRY HWANG

YOUR FRIENDS AT AMBASSADOR THEATRE GROUP
DAVID HENRY HWANG’S STAGE WORKS INCLUDE THE PLAYS M. BUTTERFLY, CHINGLISH, YELLOW FACE, Kung Fu, Golden Child, The Dance and the Railroad, and FOB, as well as the Broadway musicals Elton John & Tim Rice’s Aida (co-author), Flower Drum Song (2002 revival) and Disney’s Tarzan. Hwang is a Tony Award winner and three-time nominee, a three-time OBIE Award winner, and a two-time Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. He is also the most-produced living American opera librettist, whose works have been honored with two Grammy Awards. He co-wrote the Gold Record Solo with the late pop icon Prince, and worked for four seasons as a Writer/Consulting Producer for the Golden Globe-winning television series The Affair. Hwang serves on the Board of the Lark Play Development Center, as Head of Playwriting at Columbia University School of the Arts, and as Chair of the American Theatre Wing. M. Butterfly recently returned to Broadway in a revival directed by Julie Taymor, which marked his eighth Broadway production. East West Players has named its mainstage the David Henry Hwang Theatre and recent honors include his 2018 induction into the Theatre Hall of Fame. Hwang was a Residency One playwright from 2012-14 at New York’s Signature Theatre. His newest work, Soft Power, a collaboration with composer Jeanine Tesori, premiered in May 2018 at Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles where it won 6 Ovation Awards, including Best New Production, and enjoyed a successful run in Fall 2019 at the Public Theater.
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DAVID HENRY HWANG AND THE
NATIONAL BLACK THEATRE FESTIVAL
OF NORTH CAROLINA

CONGRATULATIONS TO

David Henry Hwang

brilliant writer, educator, and colleague on this important recognition.

We are so proud to have you on our faculty.
Jackie Alexander
(Accepting for National Black Theatre Festival) is an award winning actor, writer, producer, director, former Artistic Director of the Billie Holiday Theatre in New York, and current Artistic Director of the North Carolina Black Repertory Theatre, producers of the National Black Theatre Festival. His debut novel, Our Daily Bread was published by Turner Publishing in the fall of 2012. His debut feature film Joy was awarded Best Feature Film by the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame, and also earned Best Actor and Best Screenplay honors for Jackie on the festival circuit. The author of six plays, his work has been produced off-Broadway and regionally throughout the country. Jackie has been featured on two recordings Spoken Melodies and 1999’s critically and socially acclaimed Price of Freedom-The Amadou Project, both produced by the late jazz great Weldon Irvine. The OBIE and AUDELCO award-winning Billie Holiday Theatre in New York devoted its entire 2010-2011 season to Jackie’s work; commissioning him to write three new plays and making him the only playwright in the storied history of the theatre to receive that honor. In 2018, The Black Theatre Network (BTN) honored Jackie with the Presidential Pathfinder Award at its yearly conference in Memphis, Tennessee. The award is presented to an artist or an institution that illuminates a path to innovations and new concepts in Black Theatre. www.jackiealexanderproductions.com.

Stephen C. Byrd
(Co-Chair) is the President and Founder of Front Row Productions, Inc., whose primary purpose is to shine the spotlight on diversity, inclusion and non-traditional casting on Broadway and London’s West End. Multi Tony Award-nominated, and Olivier Award-winning producers Byrd, and his producing partner Alia Jones-Harvey, are the only full time African American producers, both on Broadway and London’s West End, and they have been partners for the past 14 years. Their producing credits to date include: Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (both on Broadway and London’s West End where they won the Olivier Award for Best Revival of a Play), A Streetcar Named Desire, The Trip to Bountiful, Romeo and Juliet, Eclipse, Paramour (with Cirque de Soleil), The Iceman Cometh, Smokey Joe Café, American Son and the current Broadway smash hit Ain’t Too Proud: The Life and Times of The Temptations. They are also developing the iconic Oscar and Palme D’Or winning Brazilian film Black Orpheus into a Broadway musical, with an A-list creative team that includes George Wolfe, Director; Lynn Nottage, Book; Susan Birkenhead, Lyrics; Daryl Waters, Arranger & Composer; and Camille Brown, Choreographer. Additionally, they are part of the lead producing team for MARLEY, The Bob Marley musical, opening on London’s West End in the Fall of 2020. Byrd serves on the Board of Governors of the Broadway League, is a member of the Society of London Theatre, and is on the Board of Directors of New York City Colleges Performing Arts Department. Stephen is the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including the recent Global Producer of the Year Award.

Oskar Eustis
(Co-Chair) has served as the artistic director of The Public Theater since 2005, after serving as the artistic director at Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, RI from 1994 to 2005. From 1989-1994, he was associate artistic director of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, and from 1980–89 he was dramaturg and then artistic director of the Eureka Theatre Company in San Francisco. He is currently a professor at New York University and has held professorships at UCLA, Middlebury College and Brown University.

Alia Jones-Harvey
(Co-Chair) is the only woman of color currently who is a lead producer on Broadway. Her company Front Row Productions began with the revival of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof in 2008, won an Olivier Award with Cat on a Hot Tin Roof on the West End, continued with A Streetcar Named Desire,
The Arts Council of Winston-Salem and Forsyth County proudly celebrates The North Carolina Black Repertory Company and the National Black Theatre Festival

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David Henry Hwang

National Black Theatre Festival
Produced by North Carolina Black Repertory

FROM JULES FISHER, JOSHUA DACHS & THE FISHER DACHS TEAM

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Rick Miramontez (Co-Chair) began his career, direct from college, as the press director of the Center Theatre Group/Ahmanson Theatre where he organized the campaigns for more than 25 major productions. He was the press director for the 1987 and 1990 Los Angeles Festival (the latter under the direction of Peter Sellars), seminal events in the American cultural world, where he introduced Cirque du Soleil to the U.S. media, as well as Peter Brook’s epic The Mahabharata. From 1988-1996, Miramontez headed his own firm, Rick Miramontez Company, which represented many of the major arts events on the West Coast. His office, located in the art deco headquarters of La Opinion, was a hub partly responsible for the renaissance of the new Downtown L.A. In New York as President and Founder of O&M Co. he has represented many of Broadway’s Tony Award-winning hits, including Dear Evan Hansen; Hello, Dolly!; Fun Home; Kinky Boots, Beautiful; The Humans; Clybourne Park; Hair; School of Rock; Hello, Dolly!; Cats; and Spider-Man: Turn Off The Dark, to name a few, as well as the Curran theater in San Francisco.

Jonathan Moscone (Presenter) currently serves as Chief Producer of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) in San Francisco. Over the past 5 years, Jonathan has shepherded the civic engagement efforts at YBCA, focusing on creative placemaking, food justice, youth empowerment, and most recently, leading the successful ballot measure to restore arts funding for artists and organizations throughout San Francisco. He currently chairs the Advisory Committee of San Francisco’s Grants for the Arts and serves on the boards of Homeless Prenatal Program and Alice Waters’ Edible Schoolyard Project, and previously of Theater Communications Group. Prior to YBCA, Jonathan served for 15 years as Artistic Director of the California Shakespeare Theater and is the first recipient of the Zelda Fichandler Award, given by the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation for “transforming the American theater through his unique and creative work.” Born and raised in San Francisco, Jonathan received his MFA from the Yale School of Drama and BA from Williams College, and he continues to pursue directing throughout the country.

Leigh Silverman (Presenter) Theatre Director. Productions with David Henry Hwang: Soft Power by Jeannine Tesori/David Henry Hwang (Public Theater; Ahmanson Theatre/Curran Theatre); Chinglish (Goodman Theater; Broadway); Kung Fu (Signature Theatre); Golden Child (Signature Theatre); Yellow Face (CTG/Public Theater). Other Broadway: Grand Horizons (2ST); The Lifespan of a Fact (Studio 54); Violet (Roundabout; Tony nomination); Well. Recent: Hurricane Diane (New York Theatre Workshop/Two River); Harry Clarke (Vineyard Theatre/Audible, Minetta Lane; Lortel nom); Wild Goose Dreams (Public Theater); Sweet Charity (New Group); Encores: Violet, The Wild Party, Really Rosie. 2011 Obie and 2019 Obie for Sustained Excellence.
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ONIGHT, TCG IS PROUD TO BE CELEBRATING its long-standing commitment to arts advocacy. By advancing the value and importance of theatres in communities across this country, TCG ensures the future and vitality of the nonprofit American theatre.

Theatre has the power to shape and challenge ideas, inspire civic engagement, and ultimately change the world. Activism in communities across the nation led to the successful building of a national theatre field, and it is the same sense of activism that allows TCG to fight for effective cultural and economic policies.

TCG’s activism is exhibited, in part, through our focus on federal level advocacy. TCG is the primary advocate for the not-for-profit professional theatre in the United States. TCG represents the theatre field both in Washington, DC, and nationally, to provide timely information for theatres and theatre artists on federal legislation, regulations and other significant government opportunities and issues. TCG focuses our advocacy in five major areas:

1) Increased funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. The NEA’s mission is to strengthen the creative capacity of our communities by providing all Americans with diverse opportunities for arts participation. The NEA supports artistically excellent projects that celebrate America’s creativity and cultural heritage, invite a dialogue that fosters a mutual respect for the diverse beliefs and values of all persons and groups, and enrich our humanity by broadening our understanding of ourselves as individuals and as a society. The NEA is America’s chief public supporter of the arts and celebrates the arts as a national priority.

2) Increased funding for arts education within the U.S. Department of Education, which directs grants through the Assistance for Arts Education program to strengthen the arts as part of a well-rounded education. Student learning is strengthened through arts education and integration of arts instruction into other subject areas supported by Arts Education Model Development and Dissemina-
tion grants. Innovative models to improve instruction for teachers are supported by Professional Development for Arts Educators grants. National, high-quality arts education projects and programs for children, with emphasis on serving students from low-income families and students with disabilities, are supported by a National Program Competition.

3) Favorable tax treatment of nonprofit arts organizations and encouraging charitable giving. Nonprofit arts organizations are an essential part of the broader community of 501(c)(3) organizations in the U.S. In recognition of their benefit to the public good, contributions made to nonprofits have been tax-deductible since 1917. Ticket sales alone do not come close to subsidizing the artistic presentations, educational offerings, and community-based programming of theatres. Approximately 40 percent of financial support for nonprofit theatres is derived from charitable giving. Tax policy changes directly impact nonprofit services. Congress is being urged to support increased charitable giving by enacting a Universal Charitable Deduction, available to all taxpayers.

4) Improved cultural exchange by improving visa processing for artists from abroad. Foreign guest artists engaged by U.S. arts organizations are required to obtain a visa to work in the U.S. Artists and U.S. arts organizations have confronted uncertainty in gaining approval for visa petitions due to lengthy and inconsistent processing times, inconsistent interpretation of statute and implementation of policies, expense, and unwarranted requests for further evidence. Advocates are working with Members of Congress to enact the Arts Require Timely Service (ARTS) provision, which will require U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to reduce the total processing time for petitions filed by arts organizations.

5) White Space – protecting wireless microphones from interference. The FCC is being urged to provide licenses and interference protection to preserve nonprofit performing arts technical operations. For 40 years, wireless microphones have allowed unrestricted on-stage movement and helped to create sophisticated sound. Wireless systems are also integral to backstage communications used by stagehands to execute complex technical activity. Interference to these backstage communications could compromise the safety of performers, technicians, and audiences. Additionally, many theatres use wireless microphones to feed high-quality audio into assistive listening devices mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

TCG Member Theatres receive “Action Alerts” providing immediate notification via email when prompt action is necessary for pending legislation. TCG also writes testimony, provides witnesses for hearings and works closely with other groups dedicated to government support of the arts. To learn more please visit: http://www.tcg.org/Advocacy.

Laurie Baskin is TCG’s director of Research, Policy & Collective Action.
CONGRATULATIONS DAVID!

Thank you for your lifelong dedication to theatre!

With love,

AMERICAN THEATRE WING

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David Henry Hwang

and the

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T’S 11 O CLOCK AT NIGHT. YOU’VE BEEN UP SINCE
6 a.m. catching films, attending workshops, watching shows, and
meeting luminaries of the American theatre. You need sleep, but
there’s a meet-and-greet to get to, a midnight poetry reading, and
at 1 a.m. Obba Babatundé is doing a staged reading. Maybe at 3
a.m. you can finally get some shut-eye?

Such are the sweet dilemmas of the National Black Theatre
Festival (NBTF), the largest Black theatre festival in the world,
held biennially in Winston-Salem, N.C. The next one will be held
July 29-Aug. 3, and programming will include a film festival, a teen
showcase, workshops, seminars, an international colloquium, sev-
eral dozen mainstage productions, and a fringe festival.

“Everybody has FOMO [fear of missing out] that week,” says
Jackie Alexander, artistic director for North Carolina Black Rep-
ertory Company, which produces the festival. This will be Alexan-
der’s second time helming it. When he started with NC Black Rep
in 2016, organizing for the 2017 festival was already underway, but
Alexander managed to add a health fair, and NC Black Rep produced
two mainstage productions.

“I bit off quite a bit,” he says. “Maybe more than I should have.”

NORTH CAROLINA BLACK REPERTORY COMPANY IS PREPARING
ANOTHER CAN’T-MISS BIENNIAL WEEK OF NEW WORK, NETWORKING, AND
MENTORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES.

BY ROSALIND EARLY

The Road to
2019’s
National Black
Theatre Festival

NBTF Gala-Comedian Michael Coylar and Stilt Walker
This year NC Black Rep will present *Jelly’s Last Jam* as part of the festival, featuring several members of the original Broadway cast. They’ll also be producing a staged reading of a new work by Nambi E. Kelley about the life of Maya Angelou. Alexander says he plans to reduce the festival’s overall number of mainstage productions to focus on quality over quantity. In 2017 there were 35 mainstage shows; this year the number will be 25.

“We want to make sure that all of the historical Black theatres around the country that have been making an impact are represented,” Alexander says. “We’re going to really focus down on the best plays that get submitted.”

Submissions were due at the end of January, and Alexander says that for mainstage productions alone NC Black Rep received more than 100, including several from international presenters. Submissions for staged readings, of which there will be more than 40, have just closed, and other deadlines—the fringe festival for collegiate theatres, the youth talent showcase, the film festival, etc.—are sprinkled throughout the spring.

Despite the decrease in mainstage offerings, Alexander says that this could be the biggest NBTF yet, due to the addition of other new programming. For starters, NC Black Rep will partner with the North Carolina School of the Arts and the Arts Council of Winston-Salem to stage a free Shakespeare play at an outdoor amphitheatre daily from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., precisely between the matinee and evening performances of the festival’s mainstage shows. “It’s going to be a great way to introduce the community to the festival,” Alexander says.

Other new programming, as well as the full mainstage production lineup, will be announced June 4. Despite not knowing what the full lineup will be, many festivalgoers have obviously already booked their rooms: The hotels in downtown Winston-Salem that week are sold out.

“The people are coming,” Alexander says. “A lot of people make it their family reunion. They see old friends. The weekend before the festival, the National Black Theatre Network always holds their conference in Winston-Salem. So we’ve got academics talking about the history of Black theatre; we’ve got professionals who are working in Black theatre talking about it. It’s a way of keeping it alive, and that’s really what the goal of the festival is.”

Mentoring is another important part of keeping Black theatre alive. So for the 2017 festival, Alexander introduced a special meet-and-greet bringing together playwrights with directors, and artistic directors with commercial producers, including from Broadway. This year he plans to announce a new playwriting competition to keep fostering these connections.

“Discovering new voices, connecting people—I really want to focus on making sure people connect,” Alexander says. His focus on mentorship is inspired by his own career, which has been guided by mentors who helped him do things he’d never thought possible. Jazz musician Weldon Irvine helped Alexander produce his first film, *Joy,* in 2002. Marjorie Moon, executive director of the Billie Holiday Theatre in Brooklyn, N.Y., encouraged Alexander to write his first play, *The Desire,* and produced it. Woodie King, founder of New Federal Theatre, gave Alexander some of his first theatre directing jobs.

“These people weren’t making money off of me,” he says. “They had no reason to help, really, other than what they wanted to. I feel this is my way of paying it forward.”

In addition to paying it forward, Alexander is interested in looking back at the history of North Carolina Black Repertory Company and the festival. Not all of the community members know that the company is the driving force behind the festival.

“People say, ‘Oh, we have to keep the festival alive,’” Alexander says. “If you want to keep the festival alive, you have to keep the company alive, because the festival can’t live without the company.”

Alexander hopes to make that connection clear. Especially because, in the spring of 2018, the NC Black Rep lost its space. After being in temporary spaces for a few months, the company has found a new location in downtown Winston-Salem. The space race curtailed NC Black Rep’s season last year, but the new location is right where the festival has always been held (various downtown locations). Alexander hopes this will give the NC Black Rep more visibility.

“The history of both the company and the festival are milestones in American theatre. Larry Leon Hamlin founded the NC Black Rep in 1979 as the state’s first Black theatre. The festival came 10 years later, with Maya Angelou serving as the first chairwoman. August Wilson and Oprah Winfrey both attended and were honored at the opening night awards ceremony. Since then stars, including Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, Lou Gossett Jr., and Denzel Washington, have attended, performed, or been honored.

“It’s never been documented, the history of it,” Alexander says. “We’ve got footage from years and years from Dr. Angelou to Harry Belafonte, all these people who have been through.”

Alexander and a production team will be working on a documentary, due out in 2021, about the festival and North Carolina Black Repertory Company.

The celebrities, the attention, and the sheer breadth of the festival has firmly established it as one of the nation’s most important arts events. And this year the festival turns 30. (Since it’s a biennial, that means this is the 16th festival.) Alexander wants to continue that legacy, and hopes to produce another groundbreaking festival that will bring together both the storied luminaries of Black theatre and the up-and-comers.

“It’s exhilarating,” he says, envisioning the festival week to come. Then he laughs, and adds: “And exhausting.”

Rosalind Early is the associate editor of the alumni magazine for Washington University in St. Louis and a freelance theatre critic for *St. Louis Magazine.*

Publishing
David Henry Hwang’s Work
Since 1980

By the author of M. Butterfly and Yellow Face

YELLOW FACE

David Henry Hwang

TRYING TO FIND CHINATOWN: THE SELECTED PLAYS

DAVID HENRY HWANG

By the author of M. Butterfly and Yellow Face

Ch’ing-lish

DAVID HENRY HWANG

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ASK ANY ASIAN AMERICAN WHAT THEIR FAVORITE problematic musical is and they are likely to name one of these three: The King and I, Miss Saigon, or Flower Drum Song. For me—and I feel some shame admitting it—it’s The King and I. I swooned when I saw the recent revival at Lincoln Center, directed by Bartlett Sher, featuring Kelli O’Hara’s soaring soprano and Ken Watanabe’s sexiness. As soon as the boat carrying Anna Leonowens sailed onstage (literally), I was hooked despite myself.

So was playwright and diversity advocate David Henry Hwang. “That boat is fantastic!” he exclaimed over dinner one evening at Hakkasan in Hell’s Kitchen. “I always loved King and I, and then seeing Bart’s production—and realizing how terrible the show is—still by the end, I’m like, ‘Oh, he’s dying, and she loves him!’ It’s a very complicated feeling that you get when you see things that you know are offensive but they’re so well-done.”

That’s the feeling that inspired Hwang’s newest show Soft Power, co-created with composer Jeanine Tesori, and playing May 3–June 10, 2018 at Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles (in association with East West Players). “It’s a play that becomes a musical,” explained Hwang. It takes place now and in the future, and is partly about China using musical theatre to promote its dominance on the world’s political stage. And borrowing a trope from his 2007 play Yellow Face, “There’s a DHH character who is trying to get his script approved by a Chinese film executive to shoot in China.” Hillary Clinton is also a character, though when we spoke, Hwang admitted he was still trying to figure out how to break the news to the former presidential candidate.

Director Leigh Silverman, who has collaborated with Hwang on six projects, compares Soft Power’s relationship to genre to that of the film Get Out, in the sense that “it’s a horror movie but it’s also
making fun of horror movies, and it also has this searing political commentary at the center of it.” Likewise *Soft Power* is “both skewering and honoring” musical theatre and its historical role, along with most of American entertainment, in promoting white supremacy.

Though he’s 60 now, it’s clear that Hwang has lost none of his bite. And he continues to keep himself busy: He’s chair of the board of the American Theatre Wing and he’s working on a number of operas (including *An American Soldier*, playing at Opera Theatre of St. Louis in June). Last fall he did a major rewrite of his touchstone play *M. Butterfly* for a splashy but unevenly received Broadway revival, all the while preparing *Soft Power*, a work so big and ambitious “it’s terrifying,” as Silverman put it.

So it’s been a season of looking to the past and to the future for Hwang. While I’ve spoken to Hwang over the years as a source for many stories, I’d never spoken to him at length about his life and his career. And as someone who, like many Asian Americans of the generations that came after him, held up Hwang as an example when my parents asked me why I wanted to be a writer, I decided it was time for a real conversation.

We spoke days after the announcement that the revival of *M. Butterfly*—the one that catapulted him into theatre history as the first ever (and so far the only) Asian American playwright to win a Tony Award—would close early. Hwang took the news with grace, as if he knew he had already proven himself and didn’t need further validation.

“Sure, it would have been nice if [New York Times theatre critic Ben] Brantley had liked *M. Butterfly*, and it would be nice if we didn’t have to close early,” he remarked with a shrug. “But ultimately I’m not dependent on that to continue working.” Indeed, he said, “I think it’s kind of cool I can go for 21 years without a good review in The New York Times and I can still have a career.” We spoke about that career, about his new play, and about whether or not revising *M. Butterfly* was a good idea.

How can you survive as a playwright without any rave reviews from the Times?

I don’t know. I guess the way that I see it is, you can’t game this thing. You can’t make something and try to do it so it’ll get good reviews or be commercially successful. If there is a way to do it, I don’t know how to do it.

What that means is I have to make sure that I have other outlets that allow me to survive. So I write a lot of things other than plays, so that protects me when I do the plays, because I’m not concerned.

Does it also help to have institutional connections like Center Theatre Group?

But those can go away too. There are a lot of people who—they may have had connections at various institutions and they can still call up those people, but they don’t get produced.

I also feel like I’m lucky that I picked a subject and had a point of view on the world or on America or our political situation, and the culture sort of moved toward the position that I took—except for the presidential election. But by and large, in the cultural community, it has continued to move toward issues of inclusion and all those things that I believed in early in my career when they were less widely accepted. And who could have guessed, when I started talking about China 40 years ago, that China was going to be so important that we were all going to have to think about China? So I feel like I lucked out in some ways.

You were christened very early on as the preeminent Asian American playwright. Have you ever felt like you had to conform to certain expectations because you were that writer? Yeah, I feel like when I first started wanting to write plays, I was like most Asian Americans of my generation—I didn’t think much about being Asian. I knew I was Chinese but I really didn’t identify with it. So I didn’t think that I was going to end up writing about some of this stuff.

I was home for the summer between my junior and senior year in college, and I saw an ad about studying playwriting with Sam Shepard. And it was the first year of what was going to become a prominent theatrical event in Southern California [the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival in California], but this was the first year they decided to do it, and only two people applied. I was one of them, so I got in. At Padua, Sam and [María] Irene Fornés taught us to write more from our subconscious—not to be rational, not to be self-censorious, just to see what happens.

And I found that I was writing about stuff like immigration and assimilation in the U.S. So clearly some part of me was incredibly interested in these issues, but my conscious mind hadn’t figured it out yet. I feel like that changed my life. I often say that the artist creates the work, but the work recreates the artist, and there’s a reciprocal relationship where I created the thing, which then changed me. Over the last 30-40 years, there’s been times where I’m like, I don’t know if I want to be the Asian playwright. But most of the times when I go back to my original work, the most personal stuff, I’m still mostly interested in the same set of issues. Which is not unusual for playwrights. So I think it’s pretty artistically organic. For better or worse, it’s not something that I ever imposed on myself.

So about *Soft Power*—did you, like the character DHH, really try to get a TV show shot in China?

There’s some truth to that. The first scene [in *Soft Power*] is a discussion about content restrictions and what the Chinese are trying to do. Then DHH goes with the Chinese film executive to the community, it has continued to move toward issues of inclusion and all those things that I believed in early in my career when they were less widely accepted. And who could have guessed, when I started talking about China 40 years ago, that China was going to be so important that we were all going to have to think about China? So I feel like I lucked out in some ways.
2016 Hillary Clinton fundraiser. And the executive makes this deep bond with her, and she says that when she becomes president, he’s going to be able to visit her in the White House.

Then it goes 50 years into the future, and this incident has become the basis of a beloved East-West musical in China. So we’re watching a Chinese musical about a good-hearted film executive who helps China step in and rescue the world when America collapses after 2016 (which is sort of happening).

When I first started writing it, I kind of assumed that Hillary was going to win, and it was going to be a little more like The King and I, where he was going to teach her how to solve the problem of gun violence in America. Then after the election, it was so much better—not for the country, but for my show. So now it’s about a Chinese musical that celebrates the rise of China over America, and what a bad idea democracy is—it’s an anti-democratic musical. You can see the Chinese wanting to make something like that.

So if we do it well, it should have that same complicated emotional feeling at the end where you’re watching something that’s basically propaganda. But so much is propaganda; it’s just that when we do it well, it’s art. So the show becomes, in part, about how empires use culture to reinforce their dominance.

Do you read Viet Thanh Nguyen’s work? He talks a lot about how Hollywood is the propaganda arm of America, especially in relation to how movies like Apocalypse Now and Platoon reinforce America’s version of the Vietnam War. Right, and we think, “Apocalypse Now is so subversive and anti-American.” But we don’t understand the kind of underlying assumptions of the work, which actually—even though it is critical of that American policy in a micro-sense—is really reinforcing the sense of American dominance and white supremacy and, you know, white people in the center of the narratives of all that stuff.

China is doing the same thing now, starting to partner with Hollywood, as with The Great Wall. So they’re seeing the value of cultural capital.

I think soft power has been the goal of China for a good 20 years now. It’s the reason why I’ve ended up going over as often as I have in recent years, because there’s a big desire that they would create a show that would get on our Broadway. And I happen to be the only even nominally Chinese person who’s done a Broadway show. So I’m the only person who they can ask, “Here, look at this musical that we have. If you tweak it a little, it could be a big hit on Broadway.” They’re just starting to get musicals, so in terms of their understanding of the form it’s Cirque du Soleil and maybe The Lion King.

M. Butterfly is about Westerners trying to dominate the East. So for the recent revival of the play, did that political message seem dated to you?

I thought about that. I believed that, despite the rise of China, A: There’s still an impulse to dominate China in the West. And B: International relations between the West and China are still gendered in the sense that, particularly in America, our masculinity is so performative. I still believe that the East is considered feminized. So if the East is powerful, it’s a different feminine model—I think it’s a dragon-lady model more than the lotus-blossom model. But when Trump or whoever says China is cheating, they can only be “Crooked Hillary” or “Cheating China”—women only get ahead when they are devious.

Jin Ha played Song Liling in the recent production. Can you imagine a version of M. Butterfly in which that role is played by someone who is gender-nonconforming?

We auditioned some gender-nonconforming people, because that would have been an interesting choice, but we obviously didn’t end up casting any of them. I did try to learn more and study more, because the term transgender didn’t exist 30 years ago. P. Carl at HowlRound was super-helpful; he really helped me understand that Song is not a transgender character, and that took a big load off my shoulders.

Also, after 30 years, Carl helped me understand a big part of my emotional connection to the play. He said that the reason Song isn’t transgender is that when he wants Gallimard to see his true self, he wants to show Gallimard his dick; if he were a transgender woman, he would not identify with that. So we concluded that what Song wants is to be desired as a man. And I was like, Oh my God, that’s how I relate to the play! Because as an Asian male, I want to be desired as a male. Maybe I should have figured that out 20 years ago.

Even though it closed early, do you think this revision of M. Butterfly was successful artistically?

I don’t know if it’s possible to know that for another three or four years at least. It wasn’t successful in that it didn’t run. But I think I’m on the right side of history.

I don’t know. For me that’s what it means to be an artist. You make the best thing you can, you invest in your thing, you investigate what you need to investigate, and you put it out there and then you don’t have any control over it. And that’s how I feel about my plays.

Do you prefer the old or the new version?

[pause] I prefer the new version, actually. But we’ll see. Assuming that people continue to produce the play, we’ll see what version they pick. It’s kind of like Flower Drum Song—you can do my version or you can do the old version (I think my version does get done more).

We’ll just see how this continues to play out over the next years and decades, or however long.

Diep Tran is a former senior editor of American Theatre.

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Thank you, David, for your outstanding artistry and commitment to mentoring the next generation of playwrights.

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Congratulations!
FIRST, A DISCLAIMER: THIS IS NOT A STORY about how Black theatres grapple with issues of inequity, though that certainly is a part of their history and their founding, which I’ll try to contextualize here. This is a story about how art is made against the odds, how new voices enter the field despite covered ears, and how hearts are opened through the power of live theatre.

The American theatre has largely been conceived as a white American art form designed to tell the stories of white Americans to each other, invoking nostalgia and escape every time the curtain rises. This has been the norm for much of this country’s history, but the kettle has been whistling loudly for the last 40 years with the message that it’s long past time for American stages to reflect and present more of the range of American life. Indeed it is no coincidence that the regional theatre movement, which began in the early 1960s, and the Civil Rights movement were celestially aligned. The full realization of human rights includes, though it is not limited to, the sharing and appreciation of culturally specific stories, customs, and art. That is why in 1966, when Stokely Carmichael pronounced in his Black Power speech that “a broad nose, a thick lip, and nappy hair is us, and we are going to call that beautiful whether they like it or not,” it incited an artistic revolution. African American artists took that as a charge to move their narratives from vaudeville and the folklore tradition to the theatre with an “-re.”

The steeping of the Black Arts Movement within the Black Power Movement also presented an opportunity for African American artists to imagine themselves in roles they were often prevented from playing. There could be a Black Ophelia or Julius Caesar, a bronze Willy Loman or Blanche DuBois. In fact, many Black actors went to theatre school and studied the Greek tragedies and Shakespearean classics, but had been relegated to playing servant and clown roles, if they were given parts at all. Most of the country’s African American theatres embrace their own internal diversity and move beyond a monolithic narrative.
American theatres were founded to give Black actors an opportunity to play diverse roles and to offer Black playwrights the chance to tell honest, original stories about their communities.

As August Wilson said in his famous “The Ground on Which I Stand” speech at the 1996 TCG conference, the Black Power movement of the '60s was “the kiln in which I was fired, and has much to do with the person I am today and the ideas and attitudes that I carry as part of my consciousness.” The same movement that bore Wilson also birthed most of the nation’s Black theatres, and many of them persist today, training artists of color, providing opportunities for marginalized artists to see their work onstage for the first time, filling in the gaps of arts education for their communities, and, most importantly, entertaining and enlightening audiences with powerful stories.

When Barbara Ann Teer founded National Black Theatre in Harlem in 1968, the neighborhood was reeling from the riots that were wreaking havoc across many Black communities after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Her mission was to create a space to celebrate Black liberation through art. Teer was a classically trained dancer and actress who had toured with mostly white companies, but she knew that the best way to use the breadth of her talent was to create something of her own. That is why she decided to anchor herself at 125th and 5th Avenue, which she called the “most recognizable street in the world.” Her theatre still stands there today. Fifty years later, her daughter Sade Lythcott, the theatre’s CEO, carries the torch of creating space for Black people to get free.

“For so long Black people have been in flight,” says Lythcott. “Ever since we set foot on this continent, we have never been able to make a real sense of home, so we make it mostly through our art. Our vision is to be a home away from home for Black artists who want to lay down the burden of this experience.”
Lythcott continues to build upon her mother's rich legacy, which included world premieres by Amiri Baraka and Ntozake Shange. Along with artistic director Jonathan McCrory, Lythcott continues to put brave, revolutionary work in the limelight by staging works by performers and playwrights including Rain Pryor and Dominique Morisseau. The theatre houses “I AM SOUL” residencies for African American playwrights, directors, and producers to help them develop new work or refine existing work. They are also crossing oceanic borders, creating National Black Theatre of Sweden and developing a musical in South Africa, all while raising capital to redevelop the Harlem space.

The same need that motivated the founding of theatres in the '60s and '70s persists today. According to the Actors’ Equity 2017 Diversity Study, African Americans received just 8.63 percent of all principal contracts in plays, and 2.3 percent of stage management contracts. This may be one reason most African American theatres are not Equity houses, but instead operate under special agreements when the need arises.

This is how African-American Shakespeare Company in San Francisco has operated since 1994, giving local talent the opportunity to tackle starring roles in The Tempest, Much Ado About Nothing, and The Winter’s Tale. Sherri Young started the theatre just two years after graduating from the MFA program at American Conservatory Theater, with the goal of creating a pipeline of classically trained Black actors who could work at any theatre in the world.

“In the ’90s theatre companies across the country were doing colorblind casting, because they were trying to bring diversity, but the work was still very Eurocentric,” Young recalls. “My community was not interested in seeing a show just because there was a Black person or a Latino on the stage. I thought to myself, ‘These big theatres don’t understand how to speak to communities that aren’t their own.’ I thought that [my friends and family] needed to see the work onstage in their own community to get the relevance. That’s how I thought of African-American Shakespeare.”

In recent years, Young and artistic director L. Peter Callender have expanded their education programs, teaching literacy through theatre at local schools and Boys & Girls Clubs, hosting acting workshops, and inviting teachers to preview shows whose texts they are teaching in their classrooms. Alongside work by Shakespeare the theatre has also started producing African American classics: The Colored Museum, Jitney, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf. Callender is also working on a script of his own about a family living in South Africa immediately after the end of apartheid. The pointed question he’s mulling: “How could 44 million Black people forgive 7 million white people with-out there being a bloodbath?”

He gives something of an oblique answer of his own. “I am burned out with the slave narrative,” he says. “I would like to see more power-based, youth-based, and female-based [work]. I want to chronicle what’s happening with #MeToo, Hands Up Don’t Shoot, and what’s happening at the Southern border. August Wilson wrote 10 history plays, and I want us to pick up where he left off, similar to what Dominique Morisseau is doing.”

THE NEED FOR DIVERSE, SOUL-LIFTING narratives is what Nate Jacobs had in mind in 1999 when he founded Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe in Sarasota, Fla. At the time, the Florida A&M University graduate found that he and his friends were only getting cast in servant roles at Asolo Rep, as they rarely placed Black actors in principal roles in the classical plays that composed much of their programming. Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe thus became an outlet for African American artists to showcase their talents. For the first few years, the theatre was largely run from the trunk of his car, staging performances of Black classics, such as James Baldwin’s The Amen Corner, wherever they could find space. Now they have a brick-and-mortar location, and their most recent musical, Marvin Gaye: Prince of Soul, was produced through special arrangement with the late singer’s family. It has been a runaway hit for the theatre.

Jacobs has focused on creating original musicals and cabaret performances as a way to start important conversations while also making sure that everyone feels included. He believes that a lot of Black theatres get stuck producing shows that throw into white audiences’ faces the way their ancestors treated Black people. He prefers to finesse the way that material is presented.

“A certain type of patron is not going to come to your theatre and pay money to be slapped in the face,” Jacobs reasons. “It’s not that I cater, or play down our history, but I’m very strategic. My stuff has always existed for a diverse audience of all intellects, races, and colors. Everybody can relate.”
When Jacobs thinks about what keeps him going, he reflects on a conversation he had with his mentor, Larry Leon Hamlin, who founded the National Black Theatre Festival at North Carolina Black Repertory Company. Hamlin told him that when white theatres stage Black-focused shows like *Ain’t Misbehavin*, they have no real investment in the work beyond making money. Jacobs believes that part of the reason his theatre has been so successful is that diverse communities in Sarasota can see their culture reflected onstage, and they take pride in being able to support the work.

“There is no other part of society, no other culture, that is responsible for telling our stories,” Jacobs says. “It is our responsibility, and I feel very passionately that many of our white patrons also feel that.”

The origin story and the programming at Karamu House in Cleveland are a bit different. Founded as a settlement house for European immigrants in 1915, the theatre became a safe haven for African American artists when Blacks moved into the neighborhood for industrial jobs in the 1940s. The theatre’s name means “joyful gathering place” in Swahili, and in the past century it has produced everything from Langston Hughes to Vanessa Bell Calloway’s one-woman show *Letters from Zora*, as well as an original play, *Believe in Cleveland*, about the nation’s first Black mayor, Carl Stokes.

Karamu has seen its peaks and valleys, and when artistic director Tony Sias took the helm in 2015 the place was in need of a turnaround. Since arriving, Sias has patched relationships with funders and patrons, increased the theatre’s budget, spent more on marketing, and emphasized an investment in the quality of the art onstage.

“Quite often when organizations are in the midst of a turnaround, they cut back on production costs, but we invested more,” Sias says. “We are in a theatre-rich community, so we had to be competitive, and we have seen the return. We were at 73 percent capacity for our shows last season.”

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African American theatre since its establishment. It is not enough to put a Black Richard III or Mary Tyrone onstage; writing and producing original work and sharing that work with the community is an essential practice as well. This is part of what earned Crossroads Theatre Company in New Brunswick, N.J., the 1999 Regional Theatre Tony Award (which they have since donated to the National Museum of African American History & Culture). The theatre has presented almost 50 world premieres by African American playwrights in 40 years, including *The Colored Museum* and *Spunk* by George C. Wolfe and *The Darker Face of the Earth* by Rita Dove. Artistic director Marshall Jones III blissfully recalls looking down from the balcony and seeing real-life Tuskegee Airmen donning their red jackets during the 1992 premiere of *Black Eagles*, Leslie Lee’s play about their experience.

Now that the theatre is preparing to move into a new space in the fall and to announce the recipient of their first annual Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee Award, Jones is hoping they can revamp the associate artist program so that they are developing closer relationships with Black playwrights and Black designers.

“When artists of color work at predominantly white theatres, everybody walks on eggshells,” Jones says. “The white people walk on eggshells because they don’t want to say the wrong thing, and the artists walk on eggshells because they don’t want to offend the theatre. When you’re working at Crossroads you don’t have to walk on eggshells. It’s always about the work.”

Eileen J. Morris, the executive director of the Ensemble Theatre in Houston, started an initiative called “Celebrating the Creative Journey” to offer working artists a space, light technical support, and a small stipend to develop new plays. She is also invested in developing the next generation of performers through the theatre’s Young Performers Program, through which they offer theatre camps to students of all ages during the summer, spring, and winter break. In addition Morris is a recipient of a grant through the BOLD Theatre Women’s Leadership Circle, which the theatre has used to hire an associate artistic director and more female designers thus far. Morris will also be using part of the grant to work with a female playwright to develop a new holiday musical, because she says it’s hard to find shows that depict African Americans celebrating.

In fact the search for a multicultural holiday show is what connected Morris’s theatre to Young’s African American Shakespeare Company, where Young had created an African American version of *Cinderella*. Morris heard about the show and asked Young if she could produce it at her theatre too. It proved to be a runaway hit in both cities. Getting in on the ground floor with new work is a boon for most theatre companies because of potential royalties (and bragging rights), but for African American theatres, it is an essential way to have their communities represented onstage.

“I could name 50 Black theatre companies right now, and it’s important that all of us exist,” Morris states. “A few years ago we

Teacake, in front, with Rovenia Thompson, Rachel Hemphill Dickson, and Troi Aryana Bingham in the Ensemble Theatre Houston’s 2012 production of *Cinderella*. 
had a little girl come to see Cinderella, and on the program cover we had a picture of a Black Cinderella and she looked at her mommy and she said, ‘Mommy, she looks like me.’ That’s why we do it—so the young performers, teens, and adults can see folks that look like them.”

African-American Shakespeare Company continues to run the show and occasionally updates the script, but in 2017 a dispute with their landlord at the African American Cultural Complex almost scotched the season. Determined to make it happen, Young called her connections at the ballet and the symphony, who agreed to let them stage their shows there. She sees this as a blessing in disguise, because going to venues with that kind of cachet allowed them to reach more audiences, and an advertising sponsorship from the Bay Area Rapid Transit meant that existing audiences always knew where to find them.

Few theatres own their buildings, and for African American theatres the numbers are even smaller (though three of the six theatres profiled in this article own their building outright). The insecurity of being subject to a landlord’s whims and fancies can make it difficult to plan ahead, commission new work, and make upgrades that will attract new audiences.

“One of my goals before I retire, and I don’t know when that will be, is for African-American Shakespeare Company to have their own building,” Young says. “There’s no consistency about where we’ll be, and we have such a great following—300 subscribers and 10,000 single-ticket buyers during an average season. I have seen other theatre companies falter because somebody bought the space they’ve been performing in for 20 or 30 years and now they’ve been priced out of the market.”

That threat is what prompted Jacobs to purchase a building for Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe in 2013. Many African American theatres struggle because they don’t have connections to people in the inner circle of wealthy communities or benefactors who include them in their wills. They also face a gap in donor education, as many African Americans are accustomed to supporting church, politics, and education, not the arts. Jacobs recognizes that the Black community in his region is very small, which requires extra outreach.

“My theatre has been called ‘the miracle theatre,’ because it’s a miracle that white patrons are writing checks to support us,” Jacobs says. “In the beginning I was told that I would never get a $1 million gift, and six years later I got a check from a woman who gave the first seven-figure gift to our capital campaign. I was blown away when the white community eventually began to embrace us, because when we started they asked us why we even existed.”

Westcoast’s first executive director, Christine Jennings, is a retired banker who helped Jacobs find a building. While the Great Recession a decade ago was a challenge for many, it proved to be the theatre’s golden opportunity, as their landlord could no longer afford the former warehouse and sold it to them for $450,000. After Jennings’s retirement, Julie Leach took the helm and launched the theatre’s capital campaign to complete three phases of renovations on the space, which sits on 3.5 acres. They have raised $6.8 million so far, have already completed the education and outreach building, and plan to begin working on the theatre space at the end of this season.

“Black theatre in general needs more funding and recognition in the theatre world,” says Leach. She served on the theatre’s board before joining the staff, and has found that the theatre’s mission aligns with work she did as a social justice worker in her youth. During her tenure Westcoast’s budget has gone from $800,000 to $2.2 million, and the theatre currently has 5,958 season subscribers.

“African Americans must tell their own stories their way,” says Leach. “Diverse programming at other theatres often looks like diverse casting for a white story. But it’s not the same as a story written, performed, and directed by African Americans.”

COMPLICATING ALL THEATRES’ FORTUNES IS GENTRIFICATION, and Black theatres are no exception. In Harlem, Houston, and the Bay Area, sky-high rents and property taxes are displacing longtime members of the communities many of these theatres create art for. National Black Theatre nearly faced foreclosure a few years ago but turned things around through a partnership with a major developer and an unrelenting commitment to serving the people of Harlem.

“When I inherited NBT, I inherited a resilient organization whose best practices had never evolved,” says Lythcott. “The Black theatre narrative is that we’re underserved, underprivileged, we don’t get the funding everyone gets, everyone’s racist. That’s not untrue, but it’s not bringing more resources to the table. Founders
can sometimes get so stuck in the dogma of their struggle that they can’t see the opportunities outside of their struggle because they’ve beat the drum for so long.”

McCrory and Lythcott realized that there was a need to change the narrative to achieve fiscal health for the organization. Theirs is a story that many theatre leaders can relate to: Put simply, they went from a mentality of scarcity to one of abundance.

“We changed our narrative to say that Black theatre deserves to be funded because no one is doing anything as brave and revolutionary as this,” says Lythcott. “We spoke to the turn-on of Black theatre and the unique experience you get walking through our doors. Doesn’t everyone want to come sit at this table?”

And not all change is bad. For the Ensemble Theatre, the construction of a multi-million-dollar mixed-use complex and the expansion of public transit led to an Ensemble/Houston Community College light rail stop being built right in front of their building. Janette Cosley, ETH’s executive director, says that they get more convention groups and millennials walking through their doors because of the stop. She adds that as the neighborhood changes, the theatre is ready to embrace anyone and everyone interested in seeing African American stories onstage.

“The whole point of integration is not for us to disappear, but for us to have quality and equality wherever we are,” says Cosley. “Our theatre is for everyone—the ‘e’ in ensemble is for everyone.”

Securing funding is an issue for most nonprofit arts organizations, but for Black theatres the issue is much more complicated. Later in Wilson’s historic speech, he said that Black theatre is “alive” and “vibrant,” it just isn’t funded. That is still true today. In that same speech he posited that funders who support diversity initiatives, such as colorblind casting, at white theatres “have signaled not only their unwillingness to support Black theatre but their willingness to fund dangerous and divisive assaults against it.” African American theatres still face stereotypes about Black people mismanaging money and questions about the legitimacy of their programming. And as diversity trends upward, more funders are offering white theatres money for doing the same kinds of plays and education initiatives that African American theatres have been doing, usually without such largesse, for decades.

“A lot of major foundations invested in audience diversity at majority institutions, and a lot of those with means were welcomed at majority institutions, and as a result, minority institutions suffered,” says Sias. “It caused an exodus. That was a national trend, and minority institutions suffered, not unlike what happened to Black businesses during integration—everybody ran downtown and forgot about uptown.”

White theatres capitalizing on the potency of Black (and brown, Asian, Indigenous, et al.) stories is the elephant in the room of the American theatre. These major theatres get the funding to pay Black playwrights more to produce plays so they can prove to funders that they are investing in diversity. It’s a dysfunctional cycle that reflects the pervasiveness of white supremacy.

“White organizations are getting funding for doing what Black organizations have been doing the whole time,” says Young. “Foundations believe they are supporting the entire community with larger organizations, but they are doing a disservice to the smaller organizations that have been doing the work.”

Jones says that the drag-and-drop nature of just funding diversity when it comes from a majority white organization only heightens existing disparities. Value must be placed on the unique cultural perspective that can only be relayed to an audience when a work emerges from the community it is about.

“There’s a difference between Black theatre and a theatre with Black people in it,” Jones says. “Institutionally we bring a unique aesthetic. It’s great that Off-Broadway theatres are doing all of this diverse work, but don’t forget about us. I hope that audiences can tell that there’s a difference when they go to National Black Theatre versus Playwrights Horizons.”

Indeed a unique aesthetic is what has sustained all of these theatres over the years. Above all else the work on stage must be good, and there’s no better testament than the fact that audiences keep coming back season after season. These theatres have launched the careers of some of today’s hottest playwrights and most celebrated performers. The resiliency of Black folks and the flavor that permeates African American stories, conceived and performed by Black artists, are the draw.

“We must have a platform for the artists and for the diverse people of the world to have something to hold onto,” says Morris. “The stories are universal. I’ve seen Fences more times than I’ve seen any other play. I saw it in Germany and it touched their hearts.”

The African American theatre is as fertile and nuanced as the culture from which it is born. There is no separating art from issues of social justice, because to create or support art is to make choices about what’s important (and what is not). Aesthetics vary, resources are coveted, and different cities and communities bring different challenges, but it is imperative to have myriad narratives so that people of different backgrounds can learn about each other. There are never too many opportunities to hear a good story, and the one thing expressed by all the artistic leaders I spoke to is the desire to become the premier destination in their region to experience African American theatre.

“The state of Black theatre is something that can’t be positioned or serviced in a mammoth statement,” says McCrory. “It has to be uniquely analyzed and appreciated from the community in which it is housed in and navigating. In many ways it is the wealthiest space on this planet and in other ways it has a huge deficit. The real question is, how do we serve its uniqueness? How do we create systemic bandages that allow every institution to be served properly? It’s helping to hone the unique historical resource that our institutions provide and no one else can do.”

Kelundra Smith, an arts journalist in Atlanta, is a frequent contributor to American Theatre.

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Community and Connection

TCG connects theatre people to the partners, resources, and knowledge they need. From webinars and peer teleconferences to professional development workshops, from the online community TCG Circle to one of the largest in-person theatre conferences in the U.S., TCG strives to be that “catalytic center of a network of people” from our vision statement. In our role as the U.S. Center of the International Theatre Institute, we also connect our members to the global theatre community through our shared leadership with the Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics at Georgetown University. We believe that TCG thrives by bringing the ordinary people of our theatre field together...so won’t you come, too?

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