

ARMSTEAD-JOHNSON FOUNDATION  
FOR THEATER RESEARCH RECORDS

The New York Public Library  
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture  
515 Malcolm X Boulevard  
New York, New York 10037

NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

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515 Malcolm X Boulevard  
New York, New York 10037-1801

HELEN ARMSTEAD-JOHNSON THEATER COLLECTION  
Armstead-Johnson Foundation for Theater Research, 1977-1994

Sc MG 599

Bulk Dates: 1974-1994  
Extent: Shelving Unit: 3 record cartons, 1 print box  
Linear feet: 3.2  
Source and Date: Helen Armstead-Johnson, December 1996.  
Processor's Name: Janice Quinter  
Date Finding Aid Completed: September 2000  
Processed: Processed as part of the *Blacks on Stage: African-American Theater Arts Collection Project*. Funding was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the City and State of New York.  
Abstract: The Armstead-Johnson Foundation for Theater Research was established in 1974 to collect, preserve, document and exhibit the history of African-American contributions to the American stage.  
Provenance: Helen Armstead-Johnson  
Organization note: Collection is organized into four series: Administrations, Correspondence, Exhibitions and Collection  
Access: Unrestricted access  
Reproductions: All requests subject to limitations noted in divisional policies on reproduction.  
Copyright: Information on copyright (literary rights) available from repository.  
Other Source of Description: RLIN #: NYPW00-A191  
Armstead-Johnson Foundation for Theater Research Records  
Citation: [Item], Helen Armstead-Johnson Theater Collection, Sc MG 599, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library  
Index Terms  
Names: Elliot Carpenter, Eubie Blake, Bill Boyd, Everett Francis Briggs, Langston Hughes, Ada May, Flournoy Miller, Basil Travnikoff, Dooley Wilson  
Subject: Afro-American composers, Afro-American musicians, Afro-American entertainers, Afro-American in the performing arts, Afro-American Songs and music, Musical scores, Scripts, Scrapbooks, Lyrics

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## **Preface**

This inventory was prepared as part of an archival preservation project to arrange, describe and catalog resources essential for the study of the African-American Theater History. The necessary staff and supplies for the *Blacks on Stage: African-American Theater Arts Collections Project* were made available through a combination of funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the City and State of New York.

**Armstead-Johnson Foundation for Theater Research Records,  
1974-1994.**

**2.8 lin. ft.**

**Organizational History**

The Armstead-Johnson Foundation for Theater Research was established in February 1974 by theater historian Helen Armstead-Johnson for the purpose of collecting, preserving, documenting and exhibiting the history of African-American contributions to the American stage. The governing body of the Armstead-Johnson Foundation, the Board of Sponsors, included as its members John Bubbles, Carmen DeLavallade, Owen Dodson, Geoffrey Holder, Joe Franklin, John Houseman, Walter Kerr and Ulysses S. Thompson. The committees included Executive, Finance, Acquisitions, Production Benefits, and Volunteers.

Johnson, the Foundation's director began conducting research into African-American theater following a chance meeting in 1966 with the Noble Sissle (1889-1975), musician, band conductor and show business partner of composer Eubie Blake. An English professor at York College in Queens, New York at the time, Johnson turned to theatrical research, adapting to it the discipline and research techniques of her previous specialty, eighteenth century English literature. Her research and other activities for the Foundation took her across the United States, most of Europe, to Africa including Egypt, South America and Australia. Throughout this time, she continued to combine full-time teaching with her research and other duties for the Foundation.

Among the materials which Johnson collected are scripts, programs and playbills, books and pamphlets, posters, broadsides, clothing worn by performers and costume designs, musical instruments, memorabilia, photographs, phonograph records, taped interviews with well-known entertainers, magazine and newspaper clippings, trophies and plaques. Johnson attempted to document black people's role in theatrical history from slavery through 1980's. Most of the items in the Foundation's collections were acquired through donations, such as the bequest of the Elliot Carpenter Papers and the gift of the A. Lincoln Harris Scrapbook. Materials were purchased, for example the Bill Robinson Collection of artifacts. She also gathered contemporary articles to supplement older material and to document modern day performers. The Foundation was housed

adjacent to Johnson's apartment in the Hotel Chelsea in Manhattan where she put together a small museum in 1975 for the display of some of the objects she had collected.

Initially, the space was open to the public by appointment, however after several years, security and space considerations forced her to close the museum. Because the Foundation was unable to open to the public on a regular basis, major grants of public funds were unavailable to it. Instead, the Foundation sought and received a number of small grants from foundations and corporations such as the New York Foundation for the Arts, IBM, the CBS Foundation, Exxon, and modest private donations to help support acquisitions, cataloging of the collections and mounting exhibitions. The bulk of the expenses, however, to support the Foundation was borne by Johnson through a combination of her university salary, lecture and exhibition fees. Additionally, in November 1980 the Foundation initiated its Spotlight Awards "for the pursuit of excellence on stage" which also served as a fund raiser. The first two recipients were ninety-two year old U.S. "Fleet of Feet" Thompson, a retired international entertainer, and the artistic director of the Negro Ensemble Company, Douglas Turner Ward. This performance benefit also included entertainment and a silent auction of mementos.

Following the closing of the museum, the Foundation's public service was rendered primarily through exhibitions based solely on its collections for which rental fees were charged to the host institution. (See Appendix for a list of exhibitions researched and organized by Johnson.) The collections were also utilized in the making of a film, a filmstrip and for publications. On irregular occasions Johnson granted access to the artifactual and archival collections.

The Foundation was honored by being the recipient of several awards: the AUDELCO Board of Directors's award for "superior contributions toward preserving black cultural heritage", a 1981 Proclamation for the Junior Black Academy of Arts and Letters in Dallas, Texas, for "endeavors to expose and preserve the "Black Cultural Heritage nationally and internationally," and a Proclamation from the mayor of New York City in 1982.

The Foundation continued to function through 1994, primarily through the exhibits planned by Johnson, and some collection

development. In 1996, due to Johnson's ill health, the Foundation ceased functioning and that same year Johnson donated the entire Armstead-Johnson collection to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

### Scope and Content

The Armstead-Johnson Foundation for Theater Research Records document the activities of the Foundation including the administration, collection development, exhibition planning, and research requests. The Records are divided into four series. The titles, dates and box numbers are as follows:

<b>Title</b>	<b>Dates</b>	<b>Box Numbers</b>
Administration	1974-1989	1
Correspondence	1974-1993	1
Exhibitions	1974-1994	2-3
Collections	1974-1990	4

The **ADMINISTRATION** series, **1974-1989 (1 lin. ft.)** consists of a trust document establishing the Foundation, membership list for the board of sponsors, minutes of board meetings, and correspondence with the board members. There are also press packets, a fact sheet, a list of exhibitions sponsored by the Foundation, biographical information about Dr. Johnson, complimentary letters, news clippings, invitations and other printed material. Additionally, these files contain financial records including budgets, fund raising correspondence with the few foundations and private organizations which donated monies to the Foundation; the balance consists of letters of declination from corporations responding to the Foundation's solicitations for financial support. A benefit performance which included a Spotlight Award event and silent auction are also documented. There is information outlining a proposed affiliation between the Foundation and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, n.d., and correspondence and legal documents discussing the proposed donation of the Foundation's collections to the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center and to the Schomburg Center.

The many topics discussed in the **CORRESPONDENCE** series, **1974-1993 (.2 lin. ft.)** include Dr. Johnson's television and radio appearances (1975-1983), requests for assistance from

researchers in African-American theater history, complimentary letters, speaking engagements, the donation of sheet music to the Library of the Performing Arts of the New York Public Library, requests to lend travelling exhibits to universities and public places, requests for loans of items to be displayed at exhibitions sponsored by other institutions, and finally, correspondence with theatrical people who donated collections to the Foundation, such as Elliot Carpenter.

The **EXHIBITIONS** series, **1974-1994 (1 lin. ft.)** documents the numerous exhibitions the Foundation sponsored along the eastern seaboard and in Vienna beginning with a 1975 group show in Washington, D.C. and continuing to November 1993 with an exhibition held at the Queens Borough Public Library. Among the types of documents to be found in this series are correspondence and memoranda planning the exhibitions, budgets, grant proposals and fund raising letters, letters requesting loans and agreements, layout for exhibitions, design production information, lists of material exhibited and in isolated instances, insurance papers, research information and notes. Other items include label text, invitations, press releases, press previews, guest books, news clippings, manuscripts for catalogs and the published catalogs. Additionally, there is correspondence regarding requests and negotiations for the exhibition to travel to European cities other than Vienna as well as to American institutions, posters advertising the exhibitions, and lists of materials displayed in the Foundation museum at the Hotel Chelsea.

The **COLLECTIONS** series, **1974-1990 (.2 lin. ft.)** documents the manner in which Dr. Johnson acquired collections for the Foundation, either by soliciting donations or by negotiating the purchase of items. There are also lists of materials including photographs owned by the Foundation in 1975.

Provenance

Gift of Helen Armstead-Johnson, December 1996  
SCM96-38

Processed by Janice Quinter  
May 2000



Appendix

Exhibitions

<u>Opening Date</u>	<u>Title and Location</u>
April 1975	The Hecht Company exhibition for the re-opening of the Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C. (Group Show)
January 1976	"America on Stage: 200 Years of the Performing Arts." John F. Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C.
October 1976	"Dixie to Broadway: An Exhibition of Black Americans on Stage, 1800 to 1939." Jamaica Arts Center (N.Y.)
February 1977	"Dixie to Broadway." The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Community Gallery
February 1977	"Traveling Through History with Black Performers." Port Authority, World Trade Center II (Theater segment of Black History Month exhibition)
April 1977	"Circa 1910." The Whitney Museum Downtown (Group Show)
October 1978	"Black America on Stage." The Graduate Center Mall of the City University of New York
May 1979	"Black America on Stage." [Redesigned and greatly enlarged] New York State Museum, Cultural Education Center, Albany, N.Y.
June 1982	"Black America on Stage." The Austrian Theater Museum, Vienna
January 1993	"Black America on Stage." Newark Public Library N.J.
November 1993	"Black America on Stage." Queens Borough Public Library

**Container List**

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	
1		ADMINISTRATION
	1	Incorporation Papers, 1974
	2	Tax Exempt Status, 1974-1976
		Board of Sponsors
	3	Board Members, 1975-1978
	4	Minutes, 1975-1979
		Correspondence
	5	1975-1976
	6	1979
	7	Notes, n.d.
8-11		Background Information
		Financial Records
	12	Budget, 1975-1980
		Fundraising
	13	Contributors - Individuals, 1975-1977
	14	Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, 1976
	15	Eli M. Black Foundation, 1974
	16	New York Foundation for the Arts, 1974-1976
	17	New York State Council on the Arts, 1974-1977
	18	Foundation Grants, 1984
		Solicitations
	19	1974-1975
	20	1976
	21	1977-1979
	22	1981-1985
	23	Benefit Performance - Planning, 1979
	24	Spotlight Award and Silent Auction, 1980
	25	Collaboration of Helen Armstead-Johnson Foundation for Theater Research - Center for Advanced Studies in Theatre Arts - Graduate School and University Center, City University of New York, 1978
		Donation of Helen Armstead-Johnson Foundation for Theater Research
26		Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, 1974-1984

**Container List**

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	
1	27	Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 1987-1990
	28	Legal Services, 1974-1989
	29	Personnel, 1974-1978
	30	Mailing Lists
	31	Notes, n.d.
		CORRESPONDENCE
	32	Television and Radio Appearances, 1975-1983
	33	Reference Inquiries, 1975-1989
		General
	34-35	1974-1975
	36	1976
	37-38	1977-1979
	39	1980-1993
	40	1980-1996, n.d.
2		EXHIBITIONS
	1	Howard Theatre, 1975
	2	"America on Stage: 200 Years of the Performing Arts," John F. Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C., 1975-1976
		"Dixie to Broadway: An Exhibition of Black Americans on Stage: 1800 to 1939"
		Jamaica Arts Center
	3	1974-1976
	4	1975-1977
		Metropolitan Museum of Art
	5	1976
	6	1976-1978, 1982
	7	Insurance and Layout
	8	Notes, 1976
9	Catalog - Manuscript	
10	"Traveling through History with Black Performers," Port Authority, World Trade Center, 1977-1979	
	"Black America on Stage"	
	Graduate Center, CUNY	
11	1978	
12	Label Text, 1978	

**Container List**

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>		
2	13	Grant - New York Council for the Humanities, 1978-1979	
	14	Catalog, 1978 New York State Museum, Albany, New York	
	15	1979	
	16	1978-1979	
	17	1979	
	18	Workbook	
	19	Exhibited Items - List	
	20	Case Labels Vienna	
	21	Austrian Theater Museum, 1981-1984	
	22	Panel Labels	
	23-24	Exhibition Layout	
	25	Catalog Notes	
	26	Notes	
	27	Fund Raising, 1981	
	28	Other European Cities - Negotiations, 1980-1982	
	29	Catalog, 1982	
	30	"From Harlem to Hollywood: American Race Movies, 1912-1948," American Museum of the Moving Image, Loan of Material, 1990-1992 "Black America on Stage" Newark Public Library	
	31	Loan List, 1992	
	32	1992-1993	
	33	Queens Borough Public Library, 1993-1994	
	34	Contents in Cases	
	35	Exhibitions List	
	36	Exhibition Materials	
	3	1-2	Text for Labels
		3	Panels - Numerical Count
		4	Posters - List
		5	Slide Presentation - Slide Codes
		6	Museum - Chelsea Hotel
		7	Guest Lists
		8	Research Information - Notes

**Container List**

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	
3	9	Inquiries to Travel to Other Institutions, 1975-1976
	10-11	Notes Newsclippings
	12	1972-1976
	13	1977-1984, n.d.
	14	Press Previews, 1974-1976.
	*	Posters and Certificate, 1976-1994*
		COLLECTIONS
		Acquisition
	15	Amy Lee Scrapbooks - Correspondence, 1979-1992
	16	Bubbles, John, 1974-1977
	17	Thompson, Ulysses S., 1970-1983
	18	Postcard Collection, 1974
	19	Correspondence, 1974-1992
	20	Lists of Items
		Reference Use
	21	William Greaves Productions, 1974-1990
	22	J. K. Lesser, "Black Theater in America," 1975
	23	Library of Congress - Exhibit Loan, 1976-1980
	24	1975-1989
	25	Music
	26	Photographs

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\* Filed in Oversize Box 4

**SEPARATION RECORD**

The following items were removed from:

**Name of Collection/Papers** Armstead-Johnson Foundation for  
Theater Research

**Accession Number** SCM 96-38

**Donor:** Helen Armstead-Johnson

**Date received:** December 1996

**Date transferred:** May 2000

The item(s) listed below have been sent to the division indicated, either to be retained or disposed of there. Any items that should receive special disposition are clearly marked.

**Schomburg Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division:**

4 audiotapes of Board of Sponsors meetings, October-  
November 1979

**Schomburg Photographs and Print Division:**

1 folder of photographs depicting exhibits in Chelsea  
Hotel, traveling exhibits and vintage photograph.