



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

American Negro Theatre records

1940-1981 [bulk 1940-1950]

Sc MG 70

Processed by Steven Fullwood.

Summary

Creator: American Negro Theatre

Title: American Negro Theatre records

Date: 1940-1981 [bulk 1940-1950]

Source: Gift of Frederick O'Neal SCM82-13, SCM86-59

Abstract: The records contain ANT's constitution and by-laws; correspondence by Frederick O'Neal, Abram Hill, Maxwell Glanville, Hilda Sims, Alice Childress, and Harry Wagstaff Gribble; assorted programs; minutes of the board of directors; financial records; articles; ANT's School of Drama; Planning, Administrative, Reorganization, Playreading and Audience Building Committees minutes and notes; and Theatre Renovations information.

Preferred citation: American Negro Theatre records, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

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Related Materials:

American Negro Theatre Scrapbook, MG 363

American Negro Theatre Alumni Collection, MG 535

Hilda Haynes Papers, MG 626

The Frederick O'Neal Papers, MG 427

Hilda Simms Papers, MG 539

Creator History

The American Negro Theatre (ANT) co-founded by Frederick O'Neal and Abram Hill, was established to provide black actors, playwrights, directors and other theatre-related professionals with opportunities to work in productions that illustrated the diversity of black life. On June 5, 1940, O'Neal and Hill, and twenty-eight other individuals met in Harlem to discuss the formation of a permanent acting company produced by blacks. In the wake of the demise of the WPA Federal Theatre Project (Negro Unit) in 1939, and the Rose McCleendon Players in 1941, ANT's purpose was formulated at their second meeting in the basement of the 135th Street Branch Library. Many members of the Rose McCleendon Players, O'Neal, Ruby Dee and Helen Martin, among them, helped to establish ANT.

O'Neal and Hill both brought a wealth of knowledge and experience in the theatre to the ANT. O'Neal graduated from the New Theatre School and the American Theatre Wing. He studied with such notables as Komisarjevsky, Lem Ward, John Bond and Doris Sorrell. In 1927, O'Neal had organized the Ira Aldridge Players in St. Louis, Missouri, and at the suggestion of Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston, had moved to New York in 1936. Hill had graduated from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and did further study at Columbia University and the New School for Social Research where he studied playwriting and play analysis.

As ANT took shape, O'Neal's and Hill's goal of creating a truly diverse theatre was reflected in the construction of ANT's governing documents; the constitution, by-laws and aims and objectives. These documents provided for rules and regulations in all sectors of maintaining a functioning and progressive theatre. Special consideration was given to fund raising and audience building. ANT's program was essentially divided into three categories: stage productions, a training program and radio programs.

Considering the dilemma many black playwrights and actors faced in the 1940s, such as the lack of professional experience, skillful preparation, and few outlets for their works, ANT's mission was to break this cycle by providing opportunities to develop the skills of fledgling talents. Their sense of professionalism was also exhibited in their decision to offer classes in acting, voice and speech, body movement, stage craft, choral singing, radio voice training and playwriting. O'Neal believed that hard discipline was one of ANT's main contributions to black theatre. Indeed, ANT members were fined if they were late for a rehearsal or performance, which helped to consolidate their reputation as a serious theatre company.

For the first five years (1940-1945) ANT was housed in the basement of the 135th Street Branch Library of the New York Public Library, known as the "Harlem Library Little Theatre." According to historian Ethel Pitts, this space was especially renovated for the group with "new lights, new seats, a larger foyer, storage room, work space and dressing rooms." In 1945, ANT was forced to move to the Elks Lodge at 15 West 126th Street, which was renamed as the American Negro Theatre Playhouse.

From 1940-1949, nineteen plays, twelve of them original, were produced by ANT. "On Striver's Row," "Walk Hard--Talk Loud," (both written by Hill), and "Rain" were well-received plays. However, commercial success struck with Philip Yordan's "Anna Lucasta," adapted for a black cast. Starring Hilda Simms as the wayward protagonist, the play had a successful run in Harlem, and went on to Broadway, Chicago and London. Hill and numerous black playwrights such as Countee Cullen ("One Way To Heaven"), Theodore Browne ("Go Down Moses" and "Natural Man"), Owen Dodson ("Garden of Time"), and Curtis Cooksey ("Starlight") were able to see full-fledged productions of their plays. ANT also exhibited the talents of several now well-known actors and actresses, some for the first time, including Ruby Dee, Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Alvin and Alice Childress, Hilda Simms, Earl Hyman, Isabel Sanford, Vinie Burroughs, Helen Martin, Roger Furman, Maxwell Glanville, Clarice Taylor, Gordon Heath and Hilda Hayes. Although primarily focused on the development of black talent, ANT had white

members and produced works by white playwrights such as Yordan ("Anna Lucasta"), Henry and Phoebe Ephron ("Three's a Family", and Henry Wagstaff Gribble ("Almost Faithful").

Amid their successes, ANT's financial problems were ever present. Throughout its ten-year history, there were concerted efforts to build and establish audience support and membership in the theater as vehicles to finance salaries, production and administrative costs. In 1944, ANT received a John D. Rockefeller Foundation grant for \$21,500. According to O'Neal, it was the only grant ANT ever received. Despite the company's consideration of undertaking a major fund raising campaign in 1948, O'Neal observed that there was never a full canvassing of the community for support.

In 1949, ANT's Reorganization Committee worked to find new ways to address the company's administrative and financial problems. Although ANT continued to produce plays, many members, including founders Hill and O'Neal subsequently resigned. In 1950, ANT made its final move to a loft on West 125th Street, and according to O'Neal, officially went out of business a year later.

Pitts, Ethel Louise. "The American Negro Theatre, 1940-1949." Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri/Columbia, 1975.

Scope and Content Note

The American Negro Theatre records span the years 1940-1981 (bulk dates 1940-1949) and illustrate various aspects of ANT's mission.

ANT's constitution and by-laws, 1940, and its aims and objectives, n.d., map out a strategy to establish a permanent acting company in Harlem. The constitution describes the function of the governing body, the production staff, legal advisors, membership and trustees. Also included is an organizational chart.

A large amount of the Correspondence, 1940-1981, was generated by or to Frederick O'Neal. Authors of the letters include Abram Hill, Austin Briggs-Hall, Hattie King-Revis, Alice Childress, Bill Downer, Harry Wagstaff Gribble and Hilda Hayes. Subject of the letters include constitutional revision disputes; broken contracts; internal feuding; resignation letters from O'Neal, Donner and others; performance reviews; the discontinuation of the use of the 135th Street Branch Library building in 1945; and the subsequent demise of ANT.

Included in the Programs, 1940-1942, 1944-1946, n.d., file are flyers and programs for productions such as the critically acclaimed "On Striver's Row," "Sojourner Truth," "Tin Top Valley," "The Washington Years," "Henri Christophe," "Natural Man," and the popular "Anna Lucasta." A more complete file of programs can be found in the Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, in the Programs and Playbills collection filed under the production's name.

The Board of Directors, 1944, 1946-1947, 1949, file contains reports, minutes, and information about the Planning Committee, 1947. ANT's Financial Records, 1945-1949, 1951, n.d., contains operating plans, production costs, membership and pledge information, invoices, a proposal for the construction of a permanent site for ANT, a list of loans made to ANT members, fiscal year reports, and other documents concerning miscellaneous administrative production expenses.

Articles, 1945-1948, 1978, n.d, features pieces and clippings about ANT's history and contain reviews of productions from the newspapers and magazines *Big Red*, *Smith College Spectator*, *The New York Sun*, *New York World Telegram*, *Variety* and *Rhythm Magazine*.

Within the Fund Raising Campaign, 1947, file is a proposal and unsigned contract with Carter-Johnson and Associates for a fund raising campaign with notes via radio and print media.

The School of Drama, 1947-1948, n.d., file contains the school's aims and purposes. This document features courses on acting, voice and speech, body movement, directing, stage craft. Also included are notes from class.

Minutes contained within the Administrative Committee, 1949, file reveal efforts by O'Neal and other staff members to both revive and reconstruct the company. Many of those efforts were also chronicled in the minutes, notes and by-laws found in the Reorganization Committee file, 1949. The content of this file includes information about the Harlem community's lack of support, inaccurate financial records and ANT's inability to maintain organized activities.

In tandem with the Reorganization Committee, the Audience Building Committee, 1949, focused on redirecting efforts to increase sponsorship and attendance of ANT's productions as noted in minutes, letters and other materials.

The Theatre Renovations, c. 1940s, n.d., file has proposals concerning operating expenses, personnel, productions and facilities for the 135th Street Branch Library at Lenox Avenue.

The Playreading Committee, n.d., file includes reports for analysis of plays, recommended plays and evaluations of "Freedom Road," by Dan James; "Providence and a Girl," by Eugene Coleman; "Canaries Sometimes Sing," by Frederick Longsdale.

Key Terms

Subjects

Acting -- Study and teaching -- New York (State) -- New York
African American actors
African American theater
African Americans in the performing arts

Geographic Names

Harlem (New York, N.Y.)

Titles

Schomburg NEH Blacks on Stage: African-American Theater Arts Collections Project

Names

American Negro Theatre
Childress, Alice
Glanville, Maxwell
Gribble, Harry Wagstaff, b. 1896
Hill, Abram, 1910-1986
O'Neal, Frederick, 1905-1992
Simms, Hilda, 1920-

Container List

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