



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

Guide to the

Bill Gunn playscripts

1986 - 2003

Sc MG 971

Processed by Barrye Brown, 2019.

Summary

Creator: Gunn, Bill, 1934-1989

Title: Bill Gunn playscripts

Date: 1986 - 2003

Size: 0.21 linear feet (1 box)

Source: Gift of Anne Cattaneo, 2019.

Abstract: The Bill Gunn playscripts are comprised of 5 varying copies of Bill Gunn's playscript titled, *The Forbidden City*.

Preferred citation: [Item], Bill Gunn playscripts, Sc MG 971, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Barrye Brown, 2019.

Creator History

William (Bill) Harrison Gunn was an African American playwright, novelist, screenwriter, filmmaker, and actor who was active from the mid-1950s until his death in 1989. He was born on July 15, 1934 and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, by his parents, William Harrison, Sr., a songwriter and poet, and Louise Alexander Gunn, an actress who directed a local theater company. After dropping out of high school to join the Navy, Gunn returned to Philadelphia in 1952 and found work as a scene painter at Neighborhood Playhouse, where he was cast as an extra in *Street Scene*.

Gunn moved to New York City's East Village to further pursue his acting career. In 1954, He made his Broadway debut in *The Immoralist*, and also appeared in the off-Broadway production of *Take a Giant Step*, and the television drama *Carmen in Harlem*, opposite Billie Allen. His later theater credits include *The Member of the Wedding* (1955) with Ethel Waters, *Sign of Winter* (1958), *Moon on the Rainbow Shawl* (1962), and the New York Shakespeare Festival productions of *Antony and Cleopatra* and *A Winter's Tale* (1963).

In 1959, the Theater Guild in New York produced Gunn's first play, *Marcus in the High Grass*, which was followed by the *Celebration* in 1965 at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Gunn's third play, the one-act *Johnnas*, premiered at the Chelsea Theatre in 1968 and was produced as a television special in 1972, earning Gunn an Emmy for Best Television Play. While Gunn expanded his career into television and film screenwriting throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, he returned to theater in 1975 with *Black Picture Show*, an AUDELCO Award-winning musical co-written with musician, Sam Wayman. Gunn continued to work as a playwright throughout the 1980s, producing *Rhinestone*, a musical based on his 1981 semi-autobiographical novel, *Rhinestone Sharecropping*, as well as *Family Employment* in 1985 and *The Forbidden City*, his final work in 1989.

Gunn was a pioneer of black independent filmmaking. In 1970, he became the second black filmmaker to direct a film for a major studio with his directorial debut, *Stop*, which was shelved by Warner Bros due to its controversial premise and X rating. In 1973, Gunn wrote, directed and acted in *Ganja and Hess*, a horror film about vampires starring Duane Jones and Marlene Clark. While the film was marketed as a blaxploitation film and received a limited release in the United States, it was critically acclaimed, and selected for Critic's Week at the Cannes Film Festival in 1973, and later recognized as one of the ten best American films of the decade by Cannes. Gunn later directed *Personal Problems* in 1980, an avant-garde soap opera extensively featuring black directors, writers and actors such as Vertamae Grosvenor, Walter Cotton, Michele Wallace, and Jim Wright.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Gunn also directed and produced a number of television programs, including *The Alberta Hunter Story*, a five-part series about legendary jazz singer Alberta Hunter for the BBC, *The Life of Sojourner Truth* for CBS, *The American Parade*, and a television special for Lena Horne produced by Bill Cosby. In addition to his extensive credits as a playwright, screenwriter and filmmaker, Gunn published two novels, *All the Rest Have Died* (1964) and *Rhinestone Sharecropping* (1981).

Scope and Content Note

The Bill Gunn playscripts are comprised of 5 varying copies of Bill Gunn's playscript titled, *The Forbidden City*. Each playscript is 81 pages in total and all are missing page 21 but it appears to be a misnumbering error, as the script continues cohesively and uninterrupted from page 20 to 22. Some versions of the playscript include handwritten notes related to edits, cuts, production notes, and timing.

Arrangement: The Bill Gunn playscripts are arranged chronologically.

Key Terms

Subjects

African American actors
African American dramatists
African American screenwriters
African American theater
African Americans in the performing arts
Black author
Independent filmmakers

Names

Gunn, Bill, 1934-1989

Container List

- b. 1 f. 1 The Forbidden City, Version A 1986 November 5
- b. 1 f. 2 The Forbidden City, Public Theater Script 1989 March 17
- b. 1 f. 3 The Forbidden City (Master Copy) 2003 October
- b. 1 f. 4 The Forbidden City
- b. 1 f. 5 The Forbidden City