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Theodore G. Cooper

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# GROWING UP WITH THE THEATRE

By Theodore G. Cooper

Like adults, children too enjoy a good play. Through the theatre, children can be entertained as well as educated. With this in mind, Howard Players two years ago unveiled an exciting program for children called the Howard Players Children's Theatre, H.P.C.T.

In the summer of 1973, when Ihunanya's African tale "Koyo and the Leopard" was produced, it ushered in another significant episode in the long history of Howard Players. For this production, sponsored under a faculty research grant, represented the first presentation exclusively mounted for children.

After 26 performances in the Ira Aldridge Experimental Theatre for more than 5,000 youngsters from the Washington metropolitan community, a regular program of three courses in children's theatre and creative dramatics was initiated, and two touring productions were mounted during the 1973-1974 academic year. A tour of the H.P.C.T. became a reality, with the presentation of "Celebration!" by Kelsey Collie. The Children's Theatre Workshop class developed study guides to be used by teachers in classrooms before and after each presentation; the purpose being, to educate youngsters through quality theatrical experiences. It had been demonstrated during the inaugural summer that for the most part many Black children in the District of Columbia had few, if any, theatre experiences that portrayed Black life or even displayed Black characters in favorably realistic roles. There can be no question about the impact the legitimate theatre and motion pictures have on their audiences. The "Superfly" fashion fad is a prime example. Recognizing this affect on young viewers, the H.P.C.T. attempts to present Black life in a positive manner.

One of the major concerns of the program is to experiment with all forms of theatre for, and, with children. Original scripts are sought, since there are few plays available which speak to the needs of the children for whom the productions are primarily aimed.

In keeping with this purpose, a pot pourri of poems, dramatic readings, pantomimes, Published by Digital Howard @ Howard University, 1975



Kelsey E. Collie, coordinator of the children's theatre project.

dances and improvisations based on the seven principles of Blackness were developed in a presentation entitled "Sketches in Black." The somewhat free-form production found responsive audiences in the inner city as well as suburban schools. (The seven principles are *Umoja*, unity; *Kujichagulia*, self-determination;



Scenes from "Goodnight, Mary Beck," by T. G. Cooper, a 1973-74 production of Howard Players. [Photography by Phil Portlock]

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*Ujima*, collective work and responsibility; *Ujamaa*, cooperative economics; *Nia*, purpose; *Kuumba*, creativity; *Imani*, faith.)

Two other productions, "Magical Faces," a fantasy where laughter was forbidden, by Brian Ways, and Collie's "Black Images/Black Reflections," which chronicled the Afro-American's history and contributions from enslavement to the present, became the 1974-75 touring show offerings.

After only one year, the H.P.C.T. was cited last year for its quality productions and community-based program. The Children's Theatre Association, gave to H.P.C.T. the Zeta Phi Eta Winifred Ward prize, a honor that established Howard University as the educational center of Black children's theatre.

As a national leader, the H.P.C.T. has been invited to appear at the Peekskill Drama Workshop and at West Chester State College in Pennsylvania, and to perform at the Region II Children's Theatre Association Convention in Freehold, N.J., in April, 1975.

The H.P.C.T. program includes workshops for children and teenagers also. The first creative dramatics and improvisational workshops were held for six weeks during the summer of 1974. In what was the largest cast ever assembled to appear in a single production on the Ira Aldridge stage, 110 youngsters appeared in "Randy's Dandy Circus," a production which was later telecast by the local affiliate of NBC-TV.

Children's theatre courses have become popular with Howard students during the past year. Where a year ago only 5 students registered for Children's Theatre workshop, the number has now grown to 15.

### The Beginning

Howard Players, a theatrical organization with a long history, is responsible for the development of the children's theatre program.

Walter Dyson, in his book, *Howard University: The Cradles of Negro Education*





outlines the early beginnings of Howard Players. Ernest Everette Just and a number of students in 1900 organized the College Dramatic Club. Plays were performed in Rankin Memorial Chapel, outdoors on the campus grounds and in the now historical site, the old Howard Theatre, located at 7th and T Streets, northwest. The Club operated until 1919 under the name of the College Dramatic Club.

In 1919 drama courses were offered at the University for credit under the Department of Speech, headed by T. Montgomery Gregory, who merged the Dramatic Club with the Speech Department. The new group was given a new name, Howard Players. Unlike the club, Howard Players specialized in the production of plays of Black life, written by students and others.

Ironically, the Harlem Renaissance began a year later. And Howard Players was among the forerunners of this movement, which opened the doors of the American Theatre to a succession of race plays and has given permanent recognition to the Black actor and actress.

Howard Players began its legendary accomplishments almost immediately. It was the first Black drama troupe on a predominantly Black university campus. The purpose, according to its first director, Gregory, was to be the base for "the establishment of a National Negro Theatre where the Negro playwright, musician, actor, dancer and artist in concert shall fashion a drama that shall merit the respect and win the admiration of the world." Gregory and Alain Locke spent several years planning for such an organization. To establish the National Negro Theatre, Gregory formed a board of advisors. Its members included historically known persons such as: Ridgley Torrence, who authored some of the early plays of Black folk life; Robert Edmond Jones, one of the great scene designers in theatre history; Richard Harrison, who created the role of de' Lord in Connely's play "Green Pastures;" Charles Gilpin, who created the role of Emperor Jones in Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones."

Howard Players, in association with the board of advisors, launched the National Negro Theatre Movement on March 28, 1921 with the opening of "The Emperor Jones" at the Belasco Theatre in Washington, D.C. The Belasco Theatre was located on Jackson Place, northwest, across from Lafayette Park. The production was successful, and brought fame and wide recognition to Howard Players.

Playwrights, Black and white, began writing specifically for Howard Players. The repertory of original productions during this period included Jean Toomer's, "Balo;" Ridgley Torrence's "Danse Calenda;" Thelma Duncan's "The Death Dance;" Helen Webb's, "Genifrede," and Willis Richardson's, "Mortgaged."

#### Famous Howard Players

Although some people would say the National Negro Theatre did not develop into a lasting institution, Howard Players was and is a viable theatre group that has given to the world many great and talented Black artists. For example, giants such as Sterling Brown, one of the early directors of Howard Players is a living legend in the area of Black literature; Owen Dodson, renowned educator, poet and director, Ossie Davis, playwright-actor-director, and Joseph Walker, who won the Tony Award for the best play ["The River Niger"] on Broadway during the 1973-74 season.

#### Recent Productions

Howard Players continues to offer quality productions in a wide variety of plays, which extend from experimental to main-stage theatre; from plays of the ghetto to plays of the middle-class Black; from adult to children's theatre, and from drama to musicals. Perhaps the most significant contribution to Black theatre and the nation-wide community is the start of the Howard Players Children's Theatre program. □

*Theodore Cooper is acting chairman of the Department of Drama.*