

African American Theatre: A White Man's Journey

James V. Hatch

[James V. Hatch's Roger L. Stevens Memorial Address was delivered in the atrium of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C., on April 18, 2004..]

I will begin with a brief tribute to Errol G. Hill, who passed away last autumn. We all knew him as a Fellow and a colleague. I also knew him as a co-author. I have brought a videotape of an interview I did with Errol at the Hatch-Billops Collection 16 years ago in 1988. I have selected a five-minute excerpt that begins with Errol's recollection of his attending the Old Vic Theatre School in London when he was a young man.

{The videotape was viewed. The tape is held both at the Hatch- Billops Collection in New York, and in the College of Fellows of the American Theatre Archives at the University of Texas, Austin.]

I have brought the transcript with me. For anyone who would like to see or read the entire interview, I'm donating it and the video to the Fellows' Video Living History Archives.

Throughout the 90s, Errol and I labored to research and write a definitive history of black theatre. When Cambridge University Press finally delivered *A History of African American Theatre* last year, Errol called me on the phone to say that he was holding the volume in his hands and that he was very pleased with it. A month and some later, he died.

With fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, we had made the journey together - he, traveling to New York City - me, to Dartmouth - and sometimes both of us around the nation. Initially, Errol wished us to write the history as if we were one author, and the story would be an unbroken tale of tragedy and triumph. However, midway, we found that the materials were twice what we had anticipated, and we decided to divide up the chapters and take responsibility for our own words. Errol preferred to write in longhand and only grudgingly did he adjust to a laptop, a creature he deemed less meticulous and precise than his own eagle eye. Once, when I wrote that a white producer had blackmailed a black actor, Errol asked me to change it to "whitemailed," and I did.

During the course of our partnership, we celebrated my wife Camille's sixty-fifth birthday. I had put together a series of small entertainments - a puppet show, a song or two from *My Fair Lady*, a Chinese demonstration of the tai chi fan - all audience pleasers, but it was Errol who captured the prize by his recitation to Camille of Shakespeare's sonnet - "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day." That occasion reminded me that many years before when I directed a scene from *Pygmalion*, I had cast a student as Professor Higgins. As Errol watched the performance, I could see that he was displeased with the actor's diction. Like Professor Higgins, Errol had a profound love of language and its proper articulation.

Once, at the end of a long session with our book, I suggested we have a cocktail. He shook his head. "I've never drunk alcohol or smoked tobacco." Then he smiled his full-mouth grin, "Do you think I've missed anything?"

No, Errol, you did not miss anything. You had a lovely wife, handsome and successful children. You were a produced playwright, a stage director, a devoted theatre professor at Dartmouth, and an author of several important theatre histories. Every time I pick up our book, I shall recall that you were my friend.

Dean Oscar Brockett has asked me to describe the Hatch-Billops Collection, an Archives of African American Cultural Arts and how it came to be. How did a white boy from a small town in Iowa end up writing a black theatre history with Errol G. Hill from Trinidad? Bear with me then, my personal reminiscences, while we job through the seven ages of Jim Hatch on his sojourn to African American theatre history.

All the world's a stage. First the infant. Born the son of a country school teacher and a railroad boilermaker on the Great Western Railroad, I began my mewling and puking in October, 1928, just in time to welcome the Great Depression. The town - Oelwein. "O-e-l-w-e-i-n." That's the way you spell it. Here the way you yell it, "Oelwein!" Gredna Doty, our once and future Dean, attended the same school as I - a kind of Grover's Corners of the Midwest, a town where I delivered milk from a horse-drawn wagon.

As a whining school boy with shining morning face, I walked two miles to Crowfoot District #5, a one-room schoolhouse where 18 farm children stood beside their desks each morning to salute the flag, pledging liberty and justice for all. Because the words "under God" had not been inserted yet, we bowed our heads to recite the Lord's Prayer (we didn't know it was illegal). And on many blizzard days the window frames leaked snow into the schoolroom. There it was that we sat rapt to hear Miss Iola Sperry read chapters from *Tom Sawyer*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Uncle Tom and Nigger Jim were the first Negroes I ever met.

At grade seven I left Crowfoot District #5 for junior high school in town, and there Cupid pierced my heart with his poisoned arrow. First love left me sighing like a furnace with a woeful ballad (never written) to a girl in a gingham dress - Elverna Gerstenberger - a seventh grader with a Wagnerian bosom. I rarely had the courage to

speak to her. And Uncle Tom and Nigger Jim remained my only Negro friends.

In high school a dapper man in an immaculate suit would stand before us and recite Chaucer's "Prologue to the Canterbury Tales."

Whan that Prille with his shoures sote
The droghte of March hath perced to the rote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;

And we repeated his lines in unison without a clue as to what they meant. Horace Hoover directed the high school plays, taught us debate, oratory, dramatic interpretation, and how to be well-spoken. He gave Gresdna and me access to the world of letters that we might "walk safely in any season's tantrum." We loved him, and because he loved us, we felt ourselves to be special.

The military draft ended with World War II, so I didn't have to seek the bubble reputation in the cannon's mouth. Instead, I enrolled at Iowa State Teachers College as an English major. There Stephen Vincent Benet in his epic poem, *John Brown's Body*, introduced me to several new Negroes, but they left little impression; however, in my campus dorm there lived a real one. We would pass each other occasionally in the hallway. "Hello." "Hello."

At graduation I married Evelyn, the daughter of Danish immigrants, and she and I scurried off to Monticello, Iowa, to teach English, direct the senior plays, and raise two blond children who saved me from the draft in the Korean War. Summers I served in productions at the University of Iowa, where I met two "realleo-trulleo" Negroes, Ted Shine, a playwright, who became my first co-author, and J. P. Cochran, an actor, who played Othello and Emperor Jones. In those pre-cross-racial-casting days, there were few roles for JP. Ted Shine's first play, *An Epitaph for a Blue Bird*, remedied that. Directed by Oscar Brockett, he and Ted scoured the university campus to find ten Blacks for Ted's play.

As I neared graduation, President Eisenhower sent troops into Little Rock, Arkansas to integrate the high school. Folding my new Ph.D. into my suitcase, I flew to the West Coast in time to feel the stirrings of the urban Civil Rights Movement. At UCLA I met Bernard "Jack" Jackson who composed music for the dance department. Together we wrote a musical - *Fly Blackbird* - inspired by the student "sit-ins" in Greensboro, North Carolina. Over the next two years, we produced *Blackbird* ourselves first in the Shoebox Theatre and then at the Metro Theatre in Los Angeles. My present partner and wife, Camille Billops, sang in the chorus. In 1962 *Fly Blackbird* flew to off-Broadway and won an Obie for best musical, but over that time, Jack had taught me to see our world from a black point of view. "Affirmative action," he would say, "white males have always had Affirmative Action." Once I had crossed that threshold of perception, I could not ever quite return to being a white liberal. I did have black friends who would say, "Hatch, you're different from other white people. I didn't feel that way. Was it meant to be a compliment? In any case, I had fallen in love with Camille. So I fled to Egypt, on a Fulbright to teach at the High Cinema Institute. My wife divorced me. I invited Camille to follow me to Cairo, where we lived in sin.

The early 1960s were heady days for Pan Africanism. Gamal Abdul Nasser, President of Egypt, awarded stipends to American Blacks to study Islam in Cairo. One African nation after another threw off colonial rule, and Cairo for a decade became a kind of "Paris" for black American ex-patriots. Camille met W. E. B. Du Bois senior in Accra. We met the son of Elijah Mohammed, attending Al Ashar University. Around the corner from our apartment, lived our friend, Maya Make, who later reclaimed her old name, Maya Angelou. At that time she was "married" to Vusumzi Make, a plump man who had no money but assured everyone that he certainly would become the next prime minister of South Africa. In Cairo we danced the "High Life" with Ghanaians, Nigerians, Ethiopians. There I met a black American poet named Ibrahim Ibu Ismail from Newark, New Jersey. We wrote and published a book together - *Poems for Niggers and Craockers*. Camille drew the illustrations. The book was the beginning of my partnership in the arts with her. In 1983, after 25 years, we decided our partnership was going to last and we got married.

Following President Kennedy's assassination, we returned to the U.S. A. where a dear friend, Leo Hamalian, took us in and found me a job teaching English and Theatre at the City College of New York, a mostly all-white, tuition-free school, located in Harlem. Camille enrolled there to earn an M.A. in art, and they soon hired her to teach ceramics. The it happened. The Black and Puerto Rican students closed the college to force open enrollment for all students, regardless of race or grades. Suddenly my theatre history classes were filled with Harlem faces, but I had no African American plays or black theatre history to teach them. So I spent the summer of 1969 in the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue reading every play written by Blacks, and even white plays that had a black character. Armed then with Jackson's black point of view, I began to see how African American theatre history had developed - its similarities to and differences from white theatre history, and how the two had often

borrowed from one another. I began to see that I might organize an anthology by modeling it on Richard Moody's splendid collection, *Dramas from the American Theatre*. Five years later, Ted Shine and I published *Black Theater USA, 45 Plays by Black Americans 1847-1974*, the first historical anthology of black playwriting. I tell you this to emphasize that to write comprehensively about American Theatre, one should know both black and white histories. Our book found an eager audience, and our revised edition is still in print 30 years later. (I have a couple of anecdotes about racism in publishing in those days, and I will tell them to anyone willing to buy me a drink.)

In 1972, when I began to develop a fair round belly with good capon lined, Camille and I founded the Hatch-Billops Collection, and in 1975 we incorporated our library under the N.Y. State Board of Regents with a triple mission:

1. To collect and preserve primary and secondary resource material in the black cultural arts;
2. To provide access to these materials to artists, scholars, and the general public;
3. To develop programs in the arts that would use the materials in our collection.

When I began interviewing actors, directors, playwrights for the oral histories, nearly every person told me tales of white exploitation. Historian Loftin Mitchell suspected that I was exploiting black artists by publishing their plays and histories, and he said so. I sometimes suspected myself of exploitation. On the other hand, playwright Ted Ward was so delighted to have his own history in the Federal Theater recorded that he asked me to become his agent.

It is often difficult to work across races because, as Jackson had told me, when the dominant white group denies access to a minority, it forces the minority to protect the little access it has left. For example, if the only job in theatre available to an African American is teaching and directing black theatre, he/she dare not welcome a white scholar to fill such a position. At the same time, African Americans may be reluctant to write dissertations on Greek drama or Arthur Miller because they will be accused of turning their backs on their own culture, and a white dissertation topic won't help them find a job. I have even had white students ask me if they should research a black subject for their dissertation. Would they be able to get a job? I don't know. I have been unusually fortunate. I received kindness and encouragement for my research from Winona Fletcher, Thomas Pawley, Margaret Wilkerson and Owen Dodson, to name only four from dozens.

In 1975 Camille hailed Richard Schechner on the street corner and asked him if he knew of a loft for sale in New York city. "Yes," he said, "Richard Forman is co-oping a building at Broadway and Broome. Tell him if you want a floor." I called Forman, who told me, "Okay, bring me \$11,000." I cashed my insurance policy and found Forman, in his scene shop. He took my check, slipped it into his pocket, and said, "Thanks." I said, "May I have a receipt?" Forman Shrugged, grabbed a brown paper bag off the floor and tore the side out and wrote: "Received \$11,000 dollars from ... what's your name?" We bought the loft sight unseen. Camille and I moved into the 3,900 square foot loft, which looked south to the World Trade Center. That was 30 years ago. Now, the loft, on the floor below us was sold last month for ... are you ready? ... sold for one million seven hundred thousand dollars. It's unreal, isn't it? So, are we going to sell our loft and retire to Oelwein, Iowa with the library? Our Collection has 4,000 books, 1,500 oral histories on reel to reel, 10,000 slides of black art and artists, 1,200 theatre programs with black actors and/or directors, playwrights, and designers, 6,000 black and white photographs, 300 motion picture stills and lobby cards, 2,200 exhibition catalogs of black artists, as well as reels and reels of film. No. When I leave our loft, it will be feet first, or in a butterfly net.

Nonetheless, recently I have heard from behind me an ominous rush of wings, when I look into my rear-view mirror, I see a soon-to-be lean and slippered pantaloone with spectacles on nose. I hear my voice turning again to childish treble that pipes and whistles in its sound. Surely it is true: Camille and I are being summoned to that Great Archives in the Sky. What will happen to Hatch-Billops Collection when we are sans teeth, sans eyes, sans everything? Emory University in Atlanta will take the Collection as our gift. We have not sold it because we still wish to control when the various parts of the collection leave the loft. Presently, we are sending Emory duplicates of the oral histories, as well as journals and books. We have recently mailed 137 posters to Emory's Special Collections.

To distinguish Hatch-Billops in New York from Emory's collection in Atlanta, we changed the name down there to the Camille Billops and James Hatch Archives. But in the meantime, before this strange eventful history ends in second childishness and mere oblivion, we are still in business at 491 Broadway, still writing, producing plays, still making films. We have made six documentaries. We rent them to earn money for the library. Hatch-Billops has published 23 volumes of *Artist and Influence*, a journal that has now recorded the lives of over 300 minority artists. For more than 20 years, we have been funded by the New York State Council for the arts and by the National Endowment of the Arts. The collection is open by appointment, but we do not encourage browsers because

the Collection is our home. To use the library, you must know what you're looking for since we may not have it. We're a Mom and Pop operation and neither of us has ever taken a salary, but we will help you with your research at five dollars an hour, and photocopies are ten cents a page.

Camille Billops is president of the Collection. She writes all the grants, designs all the invitations, indexes the articles and catalogs, sells her art to raise money for our films and for the library. The Hatch-Billops Collection continues largely because of her vigilant attention. Working in our archives has been educational and we have met wonderful scholars from Germany, France, Turkey, Australia, Indonesia .. Black theatre history has become an international theatre research subject.

Research in the black theatre arts has its own peculiarities. First, there's a scarcity of written , oral, or photographic records. Africans came in chains, their cultures, rituals, and languages had no value in the hostile environment. As they settled into a routine of Southern plantation life, or that of Northern freemen, accounts of their music, dance, and verbal virtuosity began to appear in newspapers and journals, albeit always filtered through the white racial gaze. Even when African Americans in the later 19th century set down their own histories, the biographers unabashedly selected individuals from their own class, preserving those aspects of black life that they thought Whites might approve. For this reason, one may pore over many early bio-dictionaries of black "achievement" and find few women and no theatre folk unless the artist had already won the approbation of white audiences, as Bert Williams had.

Theatre history has always depended upon subjective memory, biography, and reviews. Compared to mountainous theatre archives of Whites, early African American records are scarce and sometimes contradictory. Nonetheless, with persistence and hard digging, one may uncover treasures such as those in the national Archives, where the United States Food Administration in World War I set down the names of 104 theatres, cinemas, and cabarets in Chicago that catered to Blacks. This is to say that until recent times, theatre archives, be they libraries, newspapers, or books, have not served African Americans well, except perhaps, when they noted Blacks appearing before white audiences.

Dr. Samuel Johnson said that a lexicographer is a harmless drudge. So, too, the bibliographer and the librarian. I suspect that my graduate school mentor, Oscar Brockett, was surprised to see Jim Hatch in the role of Bibliographer, for when I was enrolled in Brock's class at Iowa I proclaimed myself to be a playwright who would never, ever, have any use for bibliography or footnotes.

"One never knows, do one?"

And so we've come to the final scene that ends this strange eventful history. Our play is ended.

Thank you all.