The Harlem Renaissance: Crash Course Theater #41

Crash Course: Theater
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

(PBS Digital Studios Intro)

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course: Theater and today, we're exploring the Harlem Renaissance. This 1920s movement, centered in an uptown Manhattan neighborhood, encouraged a dynamic re-awakening and re-imagining of art, music, and literature. It was a very necessary corrective to all of those decades of melodramas, minstrelcy, and blackface, and unlike the other Renaissance, there was no bubonic plague.

We'll take a look at the Harlem Renaissance more broadly, and then explore playwrights and theater companies it birthed. Lights up!

(Crash Course Theater Intro)

The Harlem Renaissance roughly spanned the 1920s, spreading out from Harlem and across America's northeast. Writer James Weldon Johnson wrote about the Harlem of that era, "Not merely a colony or a community or a settlement, but a black city, located in the heart of white Manhattan and containing more negros to the square mile than any other spot on Earth. It strikes the uninformed observer as a phenomenon, a miracle." First characterized by the writer Alain Locke as the new negro movement, the Harlem Renaissance was by and for people who had arrived from the south during the great migration and others who had arrived in the United States via the Caribbean diaspora.

The movement invited African American artists to practice forms of art that would shatter stereotypes, increase visiblity, and uplift black Americans. Much of the work was celebratory, but artists didn't shy away from difficult themes: alienation, discrimination, and the discomfort of performing black identity in a white world were all explored. This is an example of the phenomenon that theorist and activist W.E.B. Du Bois described as "double consciousness", the feeling of being black and American at the same time, of seeing yourself as simultaneously part of and not part of society.

In terms of form and genre, some artists of the period looked back to distinctly African and African-American folk forms like fables and spirituals, while others lookked to newer forms, like the fractured modernism of Gene (?~2:11) "Cane" or the jazz-echoing rhythms of poems by Langston Hughes and Geraldine Brookes.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

The Harlem Renaissance was pretty much *the* moment when the white world and also a lot of the black world began to celebrate black artists. This doesn't mean that black artists were new to America, far from it, but many of them hadn't been known or honored outside of their communities. In the 1920s, theaters in New York were still largely segregated. Blacks and whites typically sat in different sections and I'm sad to report that blackface was still a thing. In 1903, there had been a Broadway musical comedy "In Dahomey", written by and starring African Americans, as well as several others Broadway-adjacent musicals by black composers, though likely "In Dahomey", these relied pretty heavily on stereotype.

In terms of serious, non-musical plays, the white playwright Ridgely Torrence created a sensation with "Three Plays for a Negro Theater", crafting realistic portrayals of black life. These players were originally performed by white actors, but in 1917, an all-black cast, directed by Robert Edmond Jones, led the Broadway production. This was a Broadway first, Three Negro Plays Played By Negros was the headline in the New York Times. The critic said that the interesting and sympathetic plays were inadequately acted.

In the same year, one of Manhattan's little theaters, the Neighborhood Playhouse hosted "Rachel", a play written by a black playwright, Angelina Grimke, and staged with an all-black cast. "Rachel" is the story of a young African-American woman so shaken by the racism she discovers all around her that she vows to never have children.

The early 20th century saw an enormous upsurge in black theater companies. The first important African American theater company of this era was Anita Bush's Bush Players, later called the Lafayette Players founded in 1916.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

Most of the Bush players' plays were written by white playwrights, but they were performed for mostly black audiences. Other early companies included the Ida Anderson Players, the Acme Players, which later became the National Ethiopian Art Theater, and the Negro Players, the company that had first performed three plays for a negro theater.

In the midst of the Harlem Renaissance, DuBois, then editor of the NAACP's monthly magazine "The Crisis" founded Krigwa, which is almost an acronym for the Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists. Krigwa sponsored a playwriting contest and encouraged entrants to "write about things as you know them. You do not have to confine your writings to the portrayal of beggars, scoundrels, and prostitutes. You can write about ordinary, decent, colored people if you want. On the other hand, do not fear the truth. Plumb the depths. If you want to paint crime and destitution and evil, paint it, but be true. Be sincere. Be thorough and do a beautiful job."

Opportunity, an African-American literary journal, also sponsored a playwriting contest, awarding prizes to Zora Neale Hurston and (?~5:07) Spence. In 1925, DuBois and Regina Anderson founded the Krigwa players, headquartered in the basement of a public library on 135th Street. While it only lasted for three seasons before splitting into a number of offshoots, it was probably the most influential African-American theater troupe, owing to its insistence that works be performed, written, and directed by black artists.

In 1926, DuBois published an influential manifesto in the Crisis, establishing what African-American theater should be: "1: About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal negro life as it is. 2: By us. That is, they must be written by negro authors who understand from brith and continued association just what it means to be a negro today. 3: For us. That is, the theater must cater primarily to negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

4: Near us. The theater must be in a negro neighborhood, near the mass of ordinary negro people." While a lot of the innovation was happening in the little theaters, African-American works were making it to Broadway, too. In 1921, the team of Noble (?~6:20) and (?~6:20) Blake introduced "Shuffle Along", a wildly successful jazz musical that featured Josephine Baker and Paul Robeson in small roles. Langston Hughes called it: "A honey of a show, swift, bright, funny, rollicking, and gay, with a dozen dance-able singable tunes. Everybody was in the audiene, including me." "Shuffle Along" set off a minor craze for African-American shows and nine more made it to Broadway in the next three years.

In 1923, Willis Richardson, who had won the Krigwa playwriting contest several times, had a one-act slice of life play, "The Chip Woman's Fortune", which was produced on Broadway and earned pretty good reviews. In 1925, Garland Anderson's "Appearances", a melodrama about a black bellhop falsely accused of rape,

became the first full-length straight play by an African-American author to open on Broadway, but most Broadway plays about black life were still the work of white playwrights who sometimes even won Pulitzer Prizes for them.

Let's look at two key figures of the Harlem Renaissance: Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston, a folklorist and novelist, was an early winner of the Opportunity playwriting contest. "Color Struck", an Opportunity winner, is about colorism among a group of black Floridians. The play makes use of Southern black speech, which Hurston, a trained anthropologist, carefully studied. Hurston later channeled an interest in African and African-American folktales into several reviews, "The Great Day", "From Sun to Sun", and "Singing Steel".

Better known as a poet, Hughes had a Broadway hit in 1935 with "Mulatto", a poetic play about a mixed-race child and his desire to be acknowledged as his father's heir. Hughes subtitled the play a tragedy, but when it was produced on Broadway, changes were made that brought it closer to melodrama, making it more palatable to a white audience.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

Hughes was not thrilled. He once told James Baldwin, "If you want to die, be maladjusted, neurotic, and psychotic, disappointed and disjointed, just write plays, go ahead." Still, he established three theater companies, The Suitcase Theater in Harlem, The Negro Art Theater in Los Angeles, and The Skyloft Players in Chicago, and continued to write plays and lyrics throughout his life, including "Little Ham", a folk-comedy celebrating Harlem in the 20s.

Together, Hurston and Hughes collaborated on the 1930 play "Mulebone". Based on a Florida folktale, it's a comedy about two men who come to blows over a woman, but Hurston and Hughes' working relationship soured and the play was never finished.

For a closer look at the theater of the Harlem Renaissance, let's explore "Don't You Want to Be Free?", a play Hughes wrote in 1937 for The Suitcase Theater. When the play begins, the stage is bare except for a lynching rope and an auction block. A young man steps out and explains the set: "We haven't got any scenery or painted curtains, because we haven't got any money to buy them, but we've got something you can't buy with money anyway. We've got faith in ourselves and in you. So we're going to put on a show." The show, he says, is about what it means to be black in America. Help us out, Thought Bubble.

Cymbals crash and (?~9:24) thump as a young woman begins to dance an African dance while reciting some of Hughes' poetry. She's joined by a young man who describes the capture of slaves and their arrival at Jamestown in 1619. Several characters are sold as slaves, but one young man resists. While he's being whipped, other characters begin to sing his protest song, "Go Down Moses". The Civil War arrives. Then, sharecropping and Jim Crow. Then, the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Depression, the first stirrings of the civil rights movement. In every scene, characters chant poems and the chorus sings hymns and spirituals.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

Toward the end of the pageant, the residents of Harlem begin to resist the landlords and small business owners who discriminate against them. This move culminates in the 1935 Harlem Riots. The play then directly asks the audience to organize, join unions and tenants leagues, and get together with members of the white working class. As one character says, "When black and white really get together, what power in the world can stop us from getting what we want?" The show ends with the entire cast linking hands with the audience and singing, "Oh, who wants to come and join hands with me? Who wants to make one great unity? Who wants to say no more black or white? Then let's get together, folks, and fight, fight, fight." Fight, fight, fight. Wow. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

This pageant is modern, fragmentary, almost (?~10:59), we're gonna get to that adjective soon. It uses theater to make some clear political points, but in its reliance on poetry, music, and dance, "Don't You Want to be Free?" also argues that African-American performance is inextricable from African-American history and that it will accompany people of color as they push for greater equality.

Thanks for watching. We'll see you next time when we move from little theaters to a really, really, really big one: the WPA's Federal Theater Project and hang on to your seagulls, everybody, because Stanislavsky and realistic acting are coming to America, courtesy of the group theater. Group hug, Yorick? No? Well, group curtain, then.

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===== (12:00) to (12:11) =====

Thanks for watching.