

# **The Story of NADSA**

(The National Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts, Inc.)

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**(ABSTRACT)**

As the 25<sup>th</sup> president of the National Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts, Inc. (NADSA), it was my goal to develop a plan of action for NADSA in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Not only is my responsibility to continue the legacy established by others, but also it was my desire to develop ideas based on a thorough and exhaustive historical analysis of the organization, which laid the foundation for a self-study of this sort to happen. The purpose of this study is to thoroughly investigate the history of the NADSA for two reasons: 1) to determine what is the driving force behind this organizational structure that has caused it to be the oldest surviving national educational theatre organization in the country; and 2) to evaluate why this association has not taken the rank of being the “premier” theatre association among theatre practitioners.

It has been sixty-four years of struggling and surviving for the oldest Black educational theatre organization in America, and that is a magnitude of history of which to be proud. Founded upon the principle that Blacks needed to be educated in both speech and theatre, NADSA has provided a vehicle for almost sixty-five years. This organization established competitions, publications, symposiums, meetings, and opportunities for minorities who had interests in speech and/or theatre on a national level. It also provided opportunities for professional development and networking when Blacks were still thought of largely as “coons”. NADSA acknowledged an art form for Blacks when many thought that pursuing theatre arts was simply a waste of time. What I found is simply that this great organization was built on a strong organizational structure and has a phenomenal legacy. The downfall of the organization, as with any organization I suppose, has been with the people who make momentous decisions, based oftentimes not on thinking in terms of what is best for the organization, but possibly, on what is best for their own political agendas.

This research has revealed that the organization has survived because there was a need then and there is a need now for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) Speech and Theatre programs to meet and compete in the areas of speech and theatre. It is these largely because of these meetings that HBCU programs receive validity, very similar to that of athletics, which is the model that Edmonds’, NADSA’s founder, used to develop the structure for NADSA. Also, the research determined that NADSA has not taken the rank of being the “premier” theatre association in the country primarily because that status was never NADSA’s goal. NADSA serves a clientele that supports under-funded Speech and Theatre programs primarily at HBCUs. And because it has stayed true to its mission, NADSA has survived the tests of time and maintained its history, mission, and legacy as the oldest surviving educational theatre association in America — May Its Soul Go Marching On!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study in a real sense has been the product of many people, including some whose help cannot be acknowledged individually. These latter should accept this statement in the spirit of deep gratitude with which it is given.

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I would like to thank my family, especially my mother, Inez Myles, who always offered motivation and monetary support, and my sister Karen, who was always willing to discuss and listen to me complain about my progress. I want to thank my cousin, Willie L. Todd, Jr., for his untiring support and assistance when I needed someone to view what I had written and provide editing and constructive criticism.

At last this dissertation is in tribute to the memory of my great grandmother Reverend Ella Yarborough. And as I prepare to make my journey into academia, I want to thank all of the persons who contributed to my education. It has truly been a journey to this finish line, but I could not have gotten here if it was not in the Master plan, or if the people were not in place to support my endeavors. Thank you so very much.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Preface..... i-vi

Chapter One ..... 1-8

Chapter Two..... 9-23

Southern Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts: It's Birth and History

National Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts: It's Birth and History

Chapter Three..... 24-55

The Crucible--Working towards excellence in Black Educational Theatre

1960s-- I am Black and I am Proud

1970s--Looking in the Mirror of NADSA

1980s--Rebuilding Bigger, Better and Stronger: Redefining NADSA

1990s--A Person Reflection

Chapter Four

A Past to Cherish: A Future to Fulfill..... 56-63

Work Cited..... 64-67

Appendix A

NADSA Conference Programs 1941-1999..... 68-321

Appendix B

NADSA Publications ..... 322- 395

NADSA Encore Magazine

NADSA Update

NADSA News

NADSA Competition Handbook

NADSA Brochure

NADSA Incorporation

Appendix C ..... 396 - 409

NADSA Institute of Dramatic Arts

NADSA Conference Pictures

Vita

## **Preface**

As the 25<sup>th</sup> president of the National Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts, Inc. (NADSA), my goal has been to develop a plan of action for NADSA as it moves into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Not only is it my responsibility to continue the legacy established by others, but also it is my hope to develop ideas based on a thorough and exhaustive historical analysis of the organization, which will lay the foundation for a self-study of this sort to happen. The purpose of this study is to investigate the history of NADSA for two reasons: 1) to determine what is the driving force behind this organization's structure that has caused it to be the oldest surviving national educational theatre organization in the country and 2) to evaluate why this association has not taken the rank of being the "premier" theatre association among theatre practitioners.

As I prepared for my last year as president of this prestigious organization, I wholeheartedly became a servant who worked with body, mind and soul, holding on to that slender thread of hope established by past generations, which provided the thread for me to weave a net for the present and future generations of Black educational theatre (Fletcher 7). I feel much like Winona Fletcher when she said, "The older I get, the more it seems that nearly everything I want to say has already been said by somebody wiser than I for some other occasion. The test of my wisdom comes frequently in how well I listen to the words of others and how effective I implement what their combined wisdom dictates" (Fletcher 7). Therefore, it is my desire to establish through this dissertation an archive of information for people of all generations to read about how NADSA survived the "test of time." So, that is why I want to be the first to tell the story of the greatest

theatre organization founded for Blacks in this country, from its founding in 1936 to the present.

Until 1930, when Sheppard Randolph Edmonds (see Appendix A—113) founded the first Black educational theatre organization in the United States, the Negro Intercollegiate Drama Association (NIDA), such a body of Black theatre people was not perceived by Blacks or whites as significant enough to warrant their attention (Williams 266). In the thirty-nine years between 1930-1969, the only two Black theatre organizations were the Negro Intercollegiate Association (NIDA), founded in 1930, and the Southern Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts (SADSA), founded in 1936. SADSA changed its name to NADSA in 1950 (Sandle 172). Edmonds founded both of these associations at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). However, as integration set in, other Black theatre organization began to evolve, for example the Afro-Asian Theatre Project, that became the Black Theatre Program (BTP), founded in 1970 as a subsidiary entity of the American Theatre Association (ATA). BTP later became the Black Theatre Network (BTN), which was restructured after the demise of ATA in 1986, resulting in the founding of BTN in 1986. The Black Studies Association, later known as the National Conference of African American Theatre, Inc., was founded in 1983 (Walker). All of these associations were established to meet the needs of Black educational theatre, but the irony is that all were soliciting support from a small group of people working in Black theatre.

Since the publication of Floyd Sandle's scholarly work titled A History of the Development of the Educational Theatre in Negro Colleges and Universities from 1911 to 1959, there have appeared numerous articles, essays, theses, and dissertations on

African American theatre affiliations that all alluded to NADSA. Much that these authors have said, Sandle said better, and most of their research seemingly has been confined to merely turning the pages of his book. Whatever allusions he made, they made, perpetuated, and pronounced without a lot of effort to authenticate the first or to question the second.

As I searched for scholarly answers to questions about NADSA, a serious limitation was imposed on the investigation by the generally inadequately labeled archives and records discovered about the organization, a fact well recognized by scholars in the field of theatre and higher education. Through this investigation, I am able to state that no comprehensive study has been done on NADSA from 1960 to the present, which truly proves the necessity of this work.

This examination will evaluate the purpose, structure, management, and development of this organization, as well as to determine whether or not NADSA has served its purpose. It will also explore the social and political environments that shaped the birth and development of this great institution. This research will analyze the major internal and external influences and factors at work in NADSA and the interrelationships that exist between NADSA and other theatre organizations. Many similarities and differences will also be noted as the organization has moved toward greater complexity in its attempt to become more global and professional in its scope.

This study will be organized in the following manner: The preface provides the methodology and the purpose for doing such a study. Chapter I sets the stage for the evolution of Black educational theatre in America. Chapter II focuses on the founding of NADSA and the formative years up until integration. Basically, it establishes the need

and significance of such a study and provides sufficient overview and background information about the evolution of the Black educational theatre movement in the 1930's to the beginning of integration in the United States, which should set the stage for the in-depth examination to follow. The intent of Chapter III is two fold. In it I explore the status of NADSA during the period wherein many Blacks felt the need to disband Black organizations for the total integration of mainstream associations and examine the influences that political or social events had on NADSA. This chapter also investigates whether or not NADSA has served its purpose. In Chapter IV, I reveal discoveries and findings and draw conclusions from the findings, make projections and speculations for the future, and discuss a possible plan for the organization as it moves into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through this investigation, I endeavored to present an accurate, objective, and significant history of NADSA.

The selection of data for this study was made from such sources as NADSA constitutions, reports of surveys, and studies made by the organization and other reliable authorities. Earlier brochures, minutes from meetings, and various correspondence is not available; the files and archives of this organization were destroyed in a fire at Kentucky State University in 1968. The only surviving organizational archives are housed on the campus of Grambling State University and as of April 1999, Dr. Allen Williams, chair of the Speech and Theatre program, does not know where they are. A serious limitation is consequently imposed by the paucity of primary material. This fact was recognized by H. D. Flowers, II, past president of NADSA and professor of theatre at Livingstone College, in his monumental 1974 survey of "Educational Theatre at Forty Predominately Black Colleges and Universities in the United States." These original sources were

supplemented by biographical materials, items from contemporary newspapers and magazines, histories written and told by persons intimately acquainted with the subject treated, and other such data as seemed necessary to establish the historical reliability and significance.

Certain phases in the history of NADSA had to be reconstructed through reports and interviews with persons who could provide an account of the organization. The absence of adequate records in the organization made this procedure necessary. The appendices include copies of NADSA organizational constitutions and by-laws throughout the years, lists of current and past officers, past leaders of the organization, conference programs, Encore Magazines, NADSA newsletters, minutes from meetings, and other publications and documents that reveal significant contributions and efforts including awards recipients.

My aims for this study are as follow: 1) to present an accurate and fairly exhaustive account of the history and development of the oldest surviving educational theatre organization in the United States; 2) to reveal some of the basic problems NADSA has encountered and conquered over years; 3) to assemble, as far as existing records permits, all of the programs and minutes of the Association's conferences and meetings; and 4) to provide an overview of its progress and make projections for its continued growth and contributions to theatre. It is not my intention to suggest that this study is the final analysis on this subject because there is, no doubt, much room for further investigations. Keeping this in mind, I do intend for the study to create a foundation for future researchers. It is important that this story of NADSA be told so that

people all over the world will know that Blacks are contributing to theatre in significant and ongoing ways.