Chapter 1

The Evolution of Black Educational Theatre in America

"Everything in the universe is subject to change and everything is on schedule" (Fletcher 5). A society's values are measured more by its actions than its words. As a nation, Blacks have made significant gains in articulating a philosophical position that guarantees every racial or ethnic group full participation in mainstream America. But is that true in American Theatre?

And so I begin my tale of how Black folks got into the business of establishing organizations that could serve the need of Black theatre (Fletcher 5). The developmental trends of Blacks in American theatre extend from the early appearance of stage representations of Black characters to the present. "Along with the American Indian, the American Blacks became one of the indigenous themes in literature, having become a part of the native scene in the novels of the eighteenth century" (Archer 8). During the Colonial period, Blacks were introduced on the American stage as the noble savage type, for example in the play Oroonoko by Thomas Southern, a British playwright (Flowers 2). From the Colonial period to the 1850s, there were no Blacks on the New York scene or even in the audiences where white companies performed (Archer 9). According to Edith Issac's study, The Negro in the American Theatre, there was a tradition that barred the Negro almost as effectively as the laws. Black roles, therefore, were played by white actors in "Black face," a practice that extended until the 1920s. This form of entertainment supported the position that Black life was not serious enough to gain the attention of the American playwrights of this period (Issac 3, 44).

Because of the racism present in American society, Black actors entered the commercial theatre through the side door of minstrelsy, with the hope that the *Great White Way* would see their potential and allow Black theatre to evolve. According to Edith Issac, "these performers took over the entire format and conventions of the minstrel stage, even to the use of burnt cork and thickened lips in their performance" (25). Having gained acceptance on the stage in Black face minstrelsy, these early Black performers began to enlighten and individualize their presentations with song and dance, and later, added colored show girls to the minstrel cast. As a result, "Negro minstrelsy offered the first opportunities for Black musicians and producers to express themselves in the

American theatre through their own native folk rhythm and through other differing native qualities" (Archer 9). Even though these performers were criticized by Blacks for performing in Black face, Bob Cole became the greatest singer among Black performers of this period. He, in fact, was the first Black performer to appear in a Broadway play (Mitchell 41-47). Sissieretta Jones, at the same time, became the most popular of the show girls; and as a singer, she toured the country in a modified minstrel show titled Blacks Pattis Troubadors (Johnson 90). These Black face presentations began to depart from the tradition when dramatic sketches were added to the format by the middle of the 19th century. Blacks became more involved with their total social and intellectual being, and it was during the latter part of the 19th century that education was moved to the forefront.

During the 1880s Black schools became the mainstay of the Black race. Many schools including Howard University, Fisk University, Atlanta University, Hampton and Tuskeegee Institutes were prime training centers for educating Blacks. "Shall we teach them trades, or train them in liberal arts?" W. E. B. Dubois asked in 1903. "Neither and both...," he answered. "The final product of our training must be neither a psychologist nor a brick mason's son, but a man" (Blight 84).

Under the direction of Steel McKaye, who was considered to be one of the most renown men of theatre in the United States, the evolution of educational theatre began around 1871 at the St. James theatre in New York (Langley, 161-187). During the same time that theatre began to flourish in the dominant culture, similar headway was being made at the Black universities. Langley stated, "around 1870, many schools had begun to offer classes in acting" (161). The St. James School of Theatre was founded to train students to be competent in a professional theatre environment. Curriculums at the St. James theatre in New York offered courses in body movement, mime, vocal expression, diction, stage effect, make-up, elementary dance, ballet, and fencing (Langley 161-187). Langley stated, "As theatre activity began to make significant headway, people in America became dissatisfied with professional theatre, which opened the door for educational theatre to present itself" (Langely 164).

As a result, a movement to establish an educational wing for Blacks in theatre evolved. In 1870, Howard University began to develop oratorical contests (Dyson 145-

146). Many do not understand that most theatrical activity in the Black institution began with speech contests or what was then called elocution. It was not until 1899 that elocution was taught in the English department as an elective. Thus elocution was the first course that incorporated a form of drama taught at Howard University, and it became a compulsory course in the University's core curriculum on February 8, 1911 (Dyson 146). With the increase of students taking the core speech class, Howard University hired in 1909 Ernest Just as an Instructor of English to plant the seed for the first drama group to be organized at a Black institution of higher learning. Also, Professor Samuel Hay at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (NC A & T) stated that dramatic activity began at that institution in 1907 with a course taught by Mrs. Susan B. Dudley entitled Expression and the Dramatic Arts. This course was very similar to the style of elocution, but she also wrote and produced several plays at NC A & T. Later she was able to convince her husband (Dr. James B. Dudley, President of NC A & T) to hire the celebrated actor Richard B. Harrison in 1923. Mr. Harrison taught the dramatic course and directed plays each summer until 1930 when he went to Broadway to star in Marc Connelly's The Green Pastures (Hay 28).

This thrust in drama established a clear movement in educational theatre, which sparked a desire to provide some type of creative and revolutionary theatre outlets outside of the academic perimeter. However, Dyson stated "that drama activities did not reach their zenith both financially and technically until 1919"(147). That was the year of the great Northern migration of Southerners during a time when Blacks were being lynched across the country.

Despite the turmoil in the African American community, Howard University developed a speech program and appointed Montgomery Gregory in 1919 as the chairman (Dyson 147-148). This was the first speech department created at a Black institution that offered academic credits in dramatic arts. Shortly afterwards, many other Black institutions began to follow suit, such as Morgan College, Virginia State College, Hampton Institute, and Virginia Union University. Even though many other institutions did not offer classes, they instead created dramatic clubs in their English programs. It was those drama clubs that led to the establishment of Black educational organizations for the movement of theatre for Blacks, by Blacks, and about Blacks (Blight 84).

The realistic movement in the dramatization of Black life in America brought the problem of race into sharper focus upon the stage. On the other side of comedy, the audience saw the tragic element of Black life, the struggle, frustration, and futility resulting from the conditions of race and color, and the problems and clashes between racial groups resulting from social, political, and economic pressures (Flowers 21). So, the tale continued during the years of the Great Depression when Blacks desired equality in every form of life. The struggle with the laws created for whites and Blacks did not provide equality; laws of Jim Crow, laws of hatred, laws of discrimination and laws of rejection denied Blacks the opportunities that they had fought so hard to obtain. This rejection inspired Blacks to organized their own businesses and associations (Trotter 118-120). Frustration with the inequalities of life somewhat spurred the rise of the Negro Intercollegiate Drama Association (NIDA), specifically designed to aid in developing the theatre techniques that would enhance a collaboration of knowledge and education in the Black theatre component. An organization was established by Shepp Randolph Edmonds at Morgan College in Baltimore, Maryland, to address the needs of theatre at Black colleges and universities (Williams 265-268). Meanwhile, society was about to experience the biggest economic decline in history. The year was 1929 when the headlines hit the newspaper that the stock market had crashed (Trotter 128-129). Times were hard for everyone; Loften Mitchell described the early depression years in his book Black Drama:

> Joblessness reigned in the nineteen-thirties. Once proud men stood on 125th street with signs on their coat lapels, reading "Unemployed. Please buy apples." But few people had money to buy even an apple. Families who could not pay their rent saw their furnishings put out on sidewalks. Poverty forced many families to move eighteen times within nine years. Homes for these families became dark, shifting rows of tenements, totally lacking in permanency and security. Homeless men wandered across the nation, eating from garbage cans, if they found any filled. Once proud workers lived in Hoovervilles--the name given to the collection of shacks they erected in vacant lots along river fronts. And Black women "shaped up" on the Bronx slave market--which means they stood around, waiting,

> for white women to approach them and offer them a day's domestic work at twenty-five cents per hour. Meanwhile, in Washington, President Herbert Hoover declared prosperity was just around the corner, that soon there'd be a chicken in every pot. (93)

Around 1930, the Great Depression was a stark reality in the United States, causing the federal government to begin programs of economic relief and recovery. The trends that had guided the causes of development for the advancement of Blacks in the theatre continued under financial stresses (Trotter 128-130). The format of the musical comedy had worn thin, but minstrel performers, dressed in Black face, poking fun about the Black experience, became prevalent in the south by road companies such as Butterbeans and Susie, The Rabbit Foot Minstrels, and Silas Green of New Orleans.

> Professional theatre began to decline and theatre began to evolve in smaller communities and educational institutions. It is recorded that, in these colleges, theatre began slowly. But after World War I, two developments outside the educational picture furnished impetus to the school theatre: 1) Negro little theatre groups in larger cities gained recognition, and 2) Prominent dramatists turned out widely acclaimed and commercially successful plays which presented Negro life and problems sympathetically. (Edmonds18) Sheppard Randolph Edmonds wanted to create an organization similar to that of sports conferences that would include several colleges and universities, with a mission to establish theatre as a discipline and not an extracurricular activity. Edmonds stated, "The hope of the genuine Negro theatre is to be found in an organizational approach of these Negro colleges" (Sandle 31). It was Edmonds' dream to design an association in higher education to encourage the study of drama and especially to use the college drama organizations as laboratories for productions of plays and the study of Negro folk material (Sandle 32). Thus, this organization was developed as the Negro Intercollegiate Drama Association (NIDA), the first Black theatre organization in the country to be founded by Blacks (Fletcher 34-37). According to Halstead and Behringer, NIDA was faculty inspired, but as it developed, students

> became an integral part of the organization. This was bound to happen anyway; it was part of the master plan as the title of the association indicates. "Intercollegiate" suggested that Edmonds saw an opportunity to pattern this great organization after intercollegiate athletics with students competing in various forensic and dramatic competitions. Therefore, the seed was planted for the business of establishing Black associations to deal with the need of Blacks in theatre. Edmonds felt there could be an educational theatre organization in higher education designed "to encourage the study of drama and especially to use the college organizations as laboratories for the production of plays and the study of Negro folk material" (Sandle 32). Edmonds was on the cutting edge with theatre at a "HBCUs'." He was able to transcend the boundaries of theatre and produce shows like Bad Man outside of NIDA and present it for the National Broadcast Company. However, this production did not establish the beginning, because Edmonds and the Morgan Players presented The Man Who Died at Twelve O'Clock by Paul Green, a white playwright, on Broadway on May 10, 1929 (Williams 85).

On March 7, 1930, when NIDA was organized, several institutions were invited to partake of this great event with representatives from Howard University, Washington, DC; Hampton Institute, Hampton, VA; Morgan College, Baltimore, MD; Virginia Union, Richmond, VA; and Virginia State College, Petersburg, VA (Williams 266). These institutions were considered the chartering members of NIDA (Sandle 79).

With Edmonds' vision, the different representatives were established at its first meeting and the aim was " to increase the interest in intercollegiate dramatics; to develop aesthetic and arts appreciation for the dramatic arts; to use dramatic clubs as laboratories for teaching and studying drama; to develop Negro Folk material; to train persons for cultural service in the community; and to establish a bond of good will and friendship between colleges" (NIDA 2) The members of NIDA felt that organizing was a great idea, and they elected Edmonds president of the association where he remained for the next five years.

During Edmonds' administration, members pledged to enhance dramatics at all historically Black institutions by developing a network that would allow them to produce productions between member colleges and sponsor intercollegiate drama tournaments, along with workshops in different areas of the communicative arts each year at one of the colleges in the spring (Edmonds 222). "Each year there was a tournament of One-Act plays with one of the five institutions acting as the host. Hampton Institute has the distinction of producing the first tournament's winning production, which was Paul Green"s The No Count Boy. The next three tournaments were won by Morgan College with Bad Man, Nat Turner, and Breeders, written and directed by S. Randolph Edmonds (Sandle 79). As it occurs with many sports programs in American higher education, drama at the NIDA institutions began to focus only on winning the tournaments. They neglected the collaboration that was necessary because of limited resources and opportunities that were available. Consequently, the members decided to change their tournament to a festival, discontinuing the competitive idea (Williams 268). With this NIDA at the helm of Black theatre in America, many more Black plays were written and produced during this era. However, membership was slow; many institutions were not able to exchange plays because of the distance and expenses. After seven years, only ten schools had applied for membership (Sandle, Williams 79)." With membership recruitment being low, Edmonds, during that same year surveyed the membership to identify dramatic activity. "The results then showed that a total of 204 productions had been given which included a variety of plays. Twenty intercollegiate play exchanges had been made. Twenty-five productions by member colleges had been Negro plays divided as follows: thirteen written by white playwrights, four by colored/Negro directors, and eight by students" (Williams 222).

. As the Depression continued to take its toll on society, financial strains began to plague the universities, and the issue of whether to become a state supported institution or private school would be the ultimate question for most. Meanwhile many problems occurred as revealed in the article entitled *The Exodus Starts at Morgan:* Mr. Edmonds is just one of Morgan's excellent instructors who took the bull by the horns against constant salary cuts and promises in place of payment. When the budget runs short the faculty gets it in the neck. No appreciable donations or endowments have come Morgan's way

for several years, and Dr. John O. Spencer, now 75, is too old to be the go-getter as a money raiser he once was. The poor pastors of the Methodist Episcopal Church are too busy trying to raise enough cash to keep the wolf from their own doors to worry about raising money for education. And besides, the demands of Morgan have outgrown their puny efforts. While all this is happening, a few old sentimentalists on the trustee board are steadfastly denouncing the efforts to have the institution become a state school. The attitude is obviously unfair to the teachers, who must suffer because of the stubbornness, not to mention the students who cannot do their best work for instructors who are hampered by economic worries. (Williams 92)

With all of the confusion and unfair treatment of faculty, Edmonds, the president of NIDA, was invited to begin a drama program at Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana. So, in 1935 he resigned from Morgan State College to teach at Dillard University, where he organized the first theatre department at a HBCUs' (Williams 93). Even though the founder had moved to New Orleans, NIDA continued to meet. "During the 1935 conference meeting, Edmonds emphasized that NIDA was important, and challenged the membership to continue their efforts in sustaining and building the organization" (Sandle 78). However, because of the racial tensions prevalent in America, it was difficult for Blacks to travel from state to state.