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Perspectives on surviving and thriving in black theatre : what works?

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**PERSPECTIVES ON SURVIVING AND THRIVING
IN BLACK THEATRE: WHAT WORKS?**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Television, Radio, Film, Theater

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Viera Whye

May 2004

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Ethel Pitts Walker", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Ethel Pitts Walker

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "David Kahn", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. David Kahn

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Buddy Butler", written over a horizontal line.

Professor Buddy Butler

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Pamela C Starker", written over a horizontal line.

ABSTRACT

PERSPECTIVES ON SURVIVING AND THRIVING IN BLACK THEATRE: WHAT WORKS?

by Viera Whye

What are the elements required for a Black Theatre Company to survive and thrive in the United States? This thesis seeks to understand what qualities and criteria are utilized to sustain a Black Theatre Company and/or to grow it to a level of commercial and artistic prominence. Specific focus is given to two Black Theatre companies, one having survived for fifty years (the Arena Players in Baltimore), and the other -- one of the premier Black Theatre companies in the United States (St. Louis Black Repertory); additional focus is given to the award winning Crossroads Theatre in New Jersey which closed its doors in 2002. The stories of these companies provide insight into what is necessary for a Black Theatre Company to operate. A brief historical review of African American Theater is offered. A model/matix for survival is presented and used to examine the operations of the selected companies.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father Annon and siblings: Beatrice, Leon and Timmy, my niece Myrt, and nephews, Martin and Darnell. "We miss you."

I also dedicate this to my mother, Gladys, and my other siblings: Gladys, Audrey, Leroy, Myrtice, Roland, Menaris, Odessa, Cynthia, and especially my brother, Martel -- who inspired me to read profusely in the search for knowledge and truth, and to the rest of the Whye clan. "I love you all."

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"Live and Learn."

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Chapter One: Introduction

Significance/Necessity of Black Theatre

What is Black Theatre? Is it any play with a black author, black actors, and produced by a Black Theatre company? This term is truly open to interpretation. For the purpose of this paper, Black Theatre will be defined as any theatrical venue/genre produced, written, and/or performed by those of African descent that identify racially, culturally, and/or ethnically as black, and has the intent or purpose to expose, explore, understand, identify, celebrate, and/or embrace black culture and/or experience. It also includes writings of non-blacks with blacks as subjects, i.e., Athol Fugard. How effectively are the Black Theatre companies meeting the needs/desires of their communities and their artists? What are the elements necessary to meet the demands of the business and its patrons? Can Black Theatres continue to thrive, remaining true to their “blackness,” while reaching a larger non-black audience? Is financial status of the company the key factor in drawing and retaining quality talent and in audience development? What elements are utilized by “thriving” Black Theatre companies that enable them to have strong audience development, strong financial backing, and high artistic quality?

This thesis presents a limited historical review on influential Black Theatres from the early African Grove Institute for the Arts to those of the Black Arts Movement of the nineteen seventies. It outlines in detail the history, goals, missions, and operation of select accomplished/noteworthy Black Theatre organizations and creates a model for survival and success in which to assess these theatres. It summarizes the general

requirements needed to operate a successful theatre and gives a personal perspective on what the research indicates. It offers opinions on the African American audience, theatre management and recommendations from various Black Theatre organizations and theatre practitioners on the state of Black Theatre, its maintenance and growth.

It is widely accepted by many Black (and Non-Black) theater practitioners (among them Amiri Baraka, Paul Carter Harrison, Woodie King, Robert Hooks, Harry Elam, and August Wilson) that black artists, performers, technicians, and craftsman should be given opportunities to participate in the theatre to present their unique artistic talents, tell their stories, and express the depth of their human existence. In an interview with Gwen Ifill April 6, 2001, *American Shakespeare* Wilson expresses his thoughts on being referred to as a Black playwright:

AUGUST WILSON: Well, you know, I think, I think it's important that you have a black director .... I think when you have a work of art that deals with a culture that's so seminal through black American culture, that you just simply have black sensibility behind the artistic development of that project. ... I'm a black American playwright. You know, I couldn't deny it. I couldn't be anything else. I make my art out of black American culture, all cut out of the same cloth, if you will, you know. That's who I am, that's who I write about. You know, in the same manner that Chekhov wrote about the Russians, I write about blacks. So there's no reason why you can't say "August Wilson, playwright" -- even though all of my work, every single play, is about black Americans, about black American culture, about the black experience in America, you know? "August Wilson, playwright." I write about the black experience of men, or I write about black folks. That's who I am. I couldn't do anything else. I wouldn't do anything else. (4, 5)

Theatre can be a vehicle to promote understanding and awareness among diverse cultures. As Wilson and others believe, the need for Black Theatres in the community and on a professional level is important to the enrichment and fullness of our society.

Diem Jones, Director of Grants Programs, Arts Council Silicon Valley, offers this opinion, "Black Theatre is theatre that is artistically controlled by those of African descent, the themes are relevant and of interest to African Americans. Once you become mainstream do you still have that cultural identity? Probably not" (Jones Interview).

These men believe that blacks want to see themselves on stage in their image, and claim the celebration and complexity of their heritage; theatre companies that make it possible for blacks to be seen and to work are important vehicles in accomplishing this.

Two theatre companies that produce Black Theatre are reviewed in this examination. Due to limited time to give meaningful focus to those selected, other Black Theatre companies that are surviving and thriving are not part of this research. These two companies were selected because of familiarity, accessibility, availability of personnel associated with these theatres, they are clear examples of a surviving theatre (for fifty years), and a thriving one (now and its twenty-seventh year). Crossroads is included in this examination because it was initially selected as the premier theatre to be reviewed, but during the course of this project shut down its operation.

The first is The Arena Players in Baltimore, Maryland. It was founded in 1953 in a small building on McCulloh Street and still operates there today. It has had marginal success and struggles each year to mount its season and promote its events. However, it has remained a vital part of the community and history of the city, and continues to survive (produces at least four productions/events per season and has been in existence/operational for at least fifteen years). They have faced adversity over the years and managed to overcome them. The Arena Players have an interesting history and an

important story to tell. The second theatre is St. Louis Black Repertory, founded in 1976; it is one of a few "thriving" Black Theatres (operating in the black, financially healthy, and stable, has a budget over a million dollars, receives national acclaim and attention, and high praise and honors for its artistic quality, produces a full season of plays, offers workshops and other community activities, and is well funded by earned and contributed income). The qualities and operation of these companies are important in understanding the requirements to thrive and/or survive. Crossroads Theatre in New Brunswick, New Jersey was initially selected as the premier theater for this examination but has since shut down operation. Crossroads was considered by many as the pre-eminent professional Black Theatre Company in the US. They were the only African-American Theatre Company that was a member of the League of Resident Theatres, had a new state of the art facility, received large private and government funding, and was home to many renowned black artists. Brief analysis will be given in this study to their rise and fall. This paper seeks to reveal why some theatre companies struggle to survive and others thrive.

My own perspectives are shaped by my involvement with Tabia African American Theatre Ensemble for the past 25 years, and as the Producing Artistic Director for the past 17 years. The company has produced over thirty mainstage productions and a continuous touring show during my leadership. Trained as a business manager, and as a director, and actor, the artistic, fiscal, people, and time management skills needed to understand how to keep this theatre surviving are clear to me. This research seeks to

further define what it takes to survive and more so to thrive in the "Black Theatre" business.

Literature Review

Limited historical, social, and political discussion on the importance and necessity of Black Theatre follows; models and beliefs for the survival of Black Theatre offered by a few theatre practitioners and administrators are presented. In general the key points they offer are: a strong argument for having Black Theatre based on black culture and aesthetics rather than European concepts; that Black Theatre should be about blacks, written by blacks, and supported by the black community; that it is representative of society, has social value and can institute social change; and it must seek to get funding to do theatre on its own terms and be black controlled.

There is considerable historical data from W.E.B. DuBois, Harvard Ph.D. and former Professor of Economics and History at Atlanta University, regarding the necessity for Black Theatre and how it should operate. DuBois' notable quote from *The Crisis*, July, 1926 of a Negro Theatre: "About us, By us, For us, and Near us," echoes through the years (Hill 4). It was DuBois' opinion that theatre must be in the black community and operated by those of the black community to give authenticity to what was being written and performed. He sought to have Black Theatre be a vehicle of the people and a reflection of society. DuBois joined the NAACP in 1910, and founded and edited their *Crisis* magazine for twenty-four years; he used it as a platform to speak-out against racial discrimination. DuBois was also on the NAACP's Drama committee, which sponsored a series of propaganda plays that spoke about current social problems. He saw theatre as a

means to teach blacks the meanings of their history. Hay writes in his *African American Theatre*, “The DuBois school of theatre, therefore, was strictly political. ...His ‘new theatre’ consisted of characters and situations that depicted the struggle of African Americans against racism, which he called ‘Outer Life’” (3). In 1926, DuBois formed the Harlem group of Krigwa Players. The Krigwa Players operated in the basement of the 135th Street Harlem Library until 1930. All of the plays presented were by black writers and were addressed to black audiences, but welcomed artists of all races and those sympathetic to their cause. DuBois supported the development of black playwrights and produced black plays for black audiences.

Alain Locke, former Professor of Philosophy at Howard University, was another theorist and spokesman of Black Theatre. Errol Hill says in his introduction to *Theatre of Black Americans* that Locke called for, “Negro dramatic art to be liberated from the handicaps of both external disparagement and self-imposed limitations. He saw the need for experimentation in form and urged Black Theatre artists to have the courage to be original, to break with established dramatic convention of all sorts and develop their own idiom” (5). John Selby gives a similar account in *Beyond Civil Rights*: “Locke felt the Negro theatre must be race representative, and race supported, and that it was the Negro’s best possible avenue of self-expression, it being an ‘art where we have a peculiar natural endowment’” (59). Locke felt that black playwrights should not concern themselves so much with protest and the propaganda plays that DuBois presented but with folk drama; he wanted to see characters that came off the streets, who expressed honest and real sentiments without regard to politics. Hay said, “Locke wanted believable characters and

situations that sprang from the real life of the people, from what DuBois called 'Inner Life'" (3). Unlike DuBois, Locke directed his efforts almost entirely toward blacks.

The two men argued out their opposing schools of thought in DuBois' *Crisis* magazine. Hay says, "Despite their differences, the tenets of the two schools still inform African American drama. Within the particular contexts of their origins and development, neither school appears more obviously right or wrong, modern or outdated, than the other" (5). Although their approach was different both of these men wanted Black Theatre based on black culture and aesthetics.

Amiri Baraka, playwright, director, actor, and administrator believed strongly in the concept of Black Theatre for social change. In *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, Baraka was asked, "What is Black Theatre?" His answer:

Black Theatre actually deals with the lives of Black people. It is a theatre that actually functions to liberate Black people. It is a theatre that will commit Black people to their own liberation and instruct them about what they should do and what they should be doing...Because you can show the lives of "Negroes" doesn't have anything to do with my definition of Black Theatre. Black Theatre has to be making a dynamic statement and be of itself an act of liberation. (84)

Baraka's concept was to develop theatre as a vehicle to instigate social and political change, by the use of customs and ceremony familiar to the black experience.

In 1997, there was considerable discourse on the state of Black Theatre centering on the positions taken by notable African-American playwright August Wilson. August Wilson, in his speech "The Ground on Which I Stand," *American Theatre Magazine* calls for a Black Theatre about, by, and for black people where the unique culture of black people can grow and develop:

The time has come for black playwrights to confer with one another, to come together to meet each other face to face, to address questions of aesthetics and ways to defend ourselves from the nay-sayers who would trumpet our talents as insufficient to warrant the same manner of investigation and exploration as the majority. We need to develop guidelines for the protection of our cultural property, our contributions and the influence they accrue. It is time we took responsibility for our talents in our own hands. We cannot depend on others. (Wilson 73)

Wilson goes on to express the cultural specifics of the eating habits, religious beliefs, attitudes toward sex, and beauty that are traced back to African and Southern plantation roots. He maintains that Blacks have their own values, style, linguistics, religion, and aesthetics that are worthy of examination and celebration needing no validation from the white cultural hegemony. He calls for blacks to be their own “cultural custodians” to give expression to the art, cultural and spiritual contributions of blacks in this country, so that our history does not become distorted and devalued.

The works of August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Seven Guitars*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Two Trains Runnin'*, *Piano Lessons*, *Jitney*, *King Hedley II*, and most recently *Gem of the Ocean*, portray the life of Black Americans in this country throughout the 1900's. His plays have been produced on Broadway and at regional theatres throughout the country. As documented in Henry Louis Gates' "Chitlin Circuit" article, Wilson explains his use of “White Theatres” for his productions, -- his comments are in reference to the decline of the Negro Ensemble Company in the eighties, “It was not doing work of the quality that we deserve, and there's no theatre that's since stepped into the breach...I do good work” (Gates 48). Gates, Harvard professor and writer, interprets Wilson's point to be that there were no Black Theatre Companies putting out the quality needed for his plays; his plays deserved the best of conditions and

there were no Black Theatres worthy at that time of producing them. However, in the past few years Wilson has profoundly claimed the need for black professional theatre companies to be funded in order to perform Black Theatre.

Professor Harry Elam echoes Wilson comments:

There is a need for Black Theatre, as there is for Asian, Latino, Yiddish, or Feminist theatre. Black Theatre serves the specific needs of a particular community, and allows a sense of freedom that may not exist in a mainstream setting. The need is there to develop material that may have a wider appeal but may not be able to be developed elsewhere. The specifics of the focus allow it a freedom that may not be allowed outside of that. It should be a place where artists, directors, and technicians can develop. (Elam Interview)

The debate of ethnic specific funded theater in 1997, between August Wilson and Robert Brustein, Artistic Director of the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass. and Theatre Critic, sparked considerable response from theater practitioners and scholars. Some theatre practitioners view Black Theatre as separatist, substandard, and therefore unworthy of public funding; others feel it is necessary in maintaining authenticity, that it has true value, and is a celebration of culture. Is Black Theatre a negative entity in a society claiming equity in cultural, social, and economic arenas? Is it perpetuating the segregationist ideals and actions of the past? Is it true that the necessity for such theater is a thing of the past that may have been needed at one time, but not any longer? Have the American people ascended beyond race, so it is now an area no longer in need of specific focus? When there has been increased funds given to the mainstream theaters to promote black plays and increase black audiences what is the gripe of many black performers, artists, and scholars? Isn't the intention to have the works produced and the opportunity for artists to work? Aren't these objectives being accomplished

through these endeavors? Wilson responds to some of the above questions in Craig Marine's article "Funding Black Theatre...":

Colorblind casting, Wilson said in 1996, is an aberrant idea that has never had any validity other than as a tool of cultural imperialists... To mount an all black production of a ...play conceived for white actors...is to deny our own humanity, our own history, and the need to make our own investigations from the cultural ground on which we stand as black Americans. We do not need colorblind casting; we need those misguided financial resources to be put to better use. (Marine C-1)

Elam comments on non-traditional and colorblind casting:

Actors need to keep working, it is difficult for any actor to get work, and is worse for black actors, especially black women. "Non-traditional" casting gives Blacks more opportunities to work, Shakespeare is a regular option for this. I would like to distinguish "colorblind" from non-traditional casting. "Colorblind casting is what Wilson has a problem with, because it says that it is a colorblind world and 'race doesn't matter,' but what it does, implicitly is presume a white 'Norm.' Normative gets read as "white," so therefore you have black people playing white people which is what Wilson takes issue with, because it is outside of their cultural experience." The colorblind casting model is problematic, but non-traditional casting says "race does matter." It takes someone from a different race or gender and puts them into a non-traditional position. It takes into consideration race or gender to bring different meaning to a script, and seeing a traditional script in a different way. It can be a good thing for actors who get these opportunities. (Elam Interview)

The concept of "non-traditional" casting is important to this discussion because it offers opportunities for black actors to work. It does not force them to imitate "whites" and values their ethnic identity; a "white" play done with black sensibilities then becomes "Black Theatre." Non-traditional casting allows focus on the principle of black culture and black aesthetics.

Wilson and his supporters say that they are not looking for a separatist theater, but one of inclusiveness; their desire is simply to have art produced by those closest to the

community. Wilson, in his speech, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” pointed out that because there was only one black LORT theater [Crossroads, at the time] you may falsely assume that there aren’t sufficient numbers of blacks working in the American theater but he says “If you do not know, I will tell you that black theatre in America is alive...it is vibrant...it is vital...it just isn’t funded” (Wilson 16).

For Wilson a key issue is that the vast amount of funds and resources go to venues that reflect the history, culture, and experience of European Americans; and unquestionably, Black Theatre doesn’t enjoy the visibility and prosperity of its white counterparts. Wilson's belief is that Black Theatres are still recovering and dealing with years of institutionalized racism, and the gap that exists between races has less to do with the drive to create theater than it does the need for communication and understanding of America’s race relations. A pro Black Theatre does not necessarily mean an anti-white one. In an interview with Sharon Fitzgerald, *American Visions*, August 2000, Wilson shares what he considers the purpose of Black Theatre: "For me, the primary focus should be the celebration and illumination of the culture, he says. The culture has not always been valued; it certainly has not been valued by white America. In terms of the value and worth of the humanity of black folks, it has been sometimes very urgently and profoundly denied" (2).

Brustein, in his article “Subsidized Separatism,” in *American Theatre*, October 1996, expressed his opposition to Wilson’s position as being separatist. He said that he was not at all certain what constitutes a “Black” or “White” theatre. His comments were

that most American theatres today, like most American cities are racially mixed, like many Americans. Brustein wrote:

Wilson's rambling jeremiad is essentially an effort to accentuate the achievements of black theatre, which he claims to be supreme today though "often accomplished amid adverse and hostile conditions." ... Wilson manages to express his disdain for black "crossover artists" who, "like house slaves entertaining the white master and his guests," manage to "slant their material for white consumption." He rebukes white foundations for failing to create and subsidize black theatre companies....If you hear echoes in this of 1960s radicalism, particularly the language of Black Nationalism, your ears are not deceiving you....This tribalist approach, as Diane Ravitch has written, "confuses race with culture, as though everyone with the same skin color had the same culture and history." ... Although Wilson would deny it, such sentiments represent a reverse form of the old politics of division, an appeal for socially approved and foundation-funded separatism. I don't think Martin Luther King ever imagined an America where playwrights such as August Wilson would be demanding, under the pretense of calling for healing and unity, an entirely separate stage for black theatre artists. (1, 2, & 5)

Wilson responds in this same article to Brustein's comments:

It is true, as Robert Brustein asserts, that theatres are the indigenous outgrowths of dedicated artists and supporting communities. No one knows that better than the people involved in black theatre. Most of the time all they have to make theatre with is their passionate dedication and loving, supporting communities...Before Brustein gets so carried away in invoking the name of King in service of the status quo, let us remember that it is Brustein's failure to imagine a theatre broad enough and secure enough in its traditions to absorb and make use of all manners and cultures of American life that contributes to the failure of the American spirit that permits King's challenge to go unmet. We issue the challenge again. (6-8)

August Wilson teamed with Victor Leo Walker, II, writer, educator, and president of African Grove Institute of the Arts, and Dr. William Cook, Professor of English at Dartmouth University, to discuss the state of Black Theatre and to put together plans to grow the professional Black Theatre. The National Black Theater Summit, a weeklong conference on African-American Theater, held at Dartmouth in March 1998,

gave birth to the African Grove Institute of the Arts (AGIA) which was designed to serve as a vehicle for social change. The plan was to partner Black Theatre managers with the Dartmouth business school so that these managers could gain the business knowledge needed to ensure the economical survival of a theater. The work of AGIA is continuing, but has lost some of its momentum and has been slow in establishing the financial and administrative support it sought to offer (AGIA will be discussed later in more detail).

George C. Wolfe, playwright, director, and producer of the New Shakespeare Festival, has a more inclusive view than August Wilson and disagrees with the need for specific "Black Theatre." Wolfe says that we need not have White or Black Theatre but an American theatre that reflects everyone, "I think we need an American theatre that is of, for, and by us—all of us" (Gates 55). He says, "There is no purity in America. We're all mutts and we're all informed by each other. I'm a composite of a number of things--African, Indian, White..."(Morales 17). Wolfe goes on to express that Black American culture is very fragmented and that blacks must join with other cultures in the theatre; blacks are to be true to cultural differences yet recognize the similarities.

On the other hand, Woodie King Jr., founder and producer of the New Federal Theatre in New York, and considered one of the founding fathers of the Black Theatre Movement in the 1960's has expressed in many publications and interviews the need for Black Theatres to develop writers, and performers on their own terms, without the need to explain to white people or conform to a European concept. In 1981, King authored *Black Theatre: The Present Condition*, -- in this text, he discusses many of the factors facing those who were participating or desiring to participate in Black Theatre in the

1960's and 1970's, and the Black Arts Movement. He speaks of Black Theatres owned and operated by blacks, not dependent on government grants for their existence. He offered this advice:

The Negro actor's situation can be bettered by (1) joining with Negro writers and (2) building an audience within the Negro community. I think this has been done with great results in Detroit at the Concept-East Theater and in Harlem with LeRoi Jones' Black Arts Theater....And if we do not know yet that a play about Negroes must appeal to Negroes, we should leave the theatre. I do not mean they must love or hate it. But they must identify with it. (King 5)

Woodie King is quoted in Pamela Renner's article "Black Theaters in a Fight for Survival," in *Variety* July 2000, saying similar things that he said in 1981, "The people who give the grants judge the artistic quality of our work on European and White standards. Black theater doesn't have donors, contributors and wealthy boards" (3).

In his 1981 text he also wrote about Black Theatre as a reflection of society:

Theatre for social welfare has replaced theatre's old image – an image of pastime activity. ... There should be an involvement of the Black communities in this new awareness of the power of the theatres, because the social condition of this country is directly related to conditions in the Black communities. To say that *Barefoot in the Park* and *Hello Dolly!* represent theatre is, in a sense, like saying Black communities do not exist. (7)

Interestingly, at the National Black Theater Festival in 2003, a production of *Barefoot in the Park* was produced, which many of the Black Theatre participants found an odd choice for play selection; this play by Jewish playwright Neil Simon became very "black" based on the language, codes, symbols, and physiology of the all black cast. There was no attempt to hide that these were black characters, not blacks actors portraying white characters. This production of *Barefoot in the Park* took on a whole

different “feel” and context than those previously seen. To illustrate this point further, following the intermission, there were some late comers returning to their seats, Kim Fields (who played the lead character and was one of the Executive Producers) had begun her dialogue and stopped in the middle of her sentence to bring attention to the latecomers, saying, “I’m sorry ya’ll, I ain’t never seen white folks late for a play. Oh it’s the NBTF, it’s OK—they’ll be late.” The mostly all black audience exploded in an uproar of laughter. I was somewhat dumbfounded that she did this, (it totally broke the concentration of her fellow actor) and thought this could only happen at a black production and be understood and appreciated. It was a “black thing” and the blacks in the audience “got it.”

Woodie King was also heavily committed to the principle that Black Theatre be in and about the black community. The Black Theatre Alliance was a project King was involved in during the 1970’s that assisted and offered services to Black Theatre companies. In an interview with Barbara Lewis in the *Black Theatre Alliance Newsletter*, November 1977, she notes King’s definition of the Black Theatre Alliance as “one of the most important organizations to come to the aid of Black Theatre, providing services that would take us individually a long time to be able to muster” (King 81). King, in reference to Black Theatre said: “The foundation of this theatre must be the community around it. The classic function of the theatre is to project and illuminate the feelings and concerns of the community which sustains it. Thus the theatre, like the church is a community ritual. And black theatre cannot emerge until it is free of the European concept...” (29). He goes on to say “it exists to make way for Black thought and Black

artistic expression. Ideally it should be in a black community” (32). He suggested that there be concentrated efforts to get the black community to support and subscribe to Black Theatre, that there be audience development campaigns appealing to whites and blacks, ideally blacks. He asks the question, what is presented to blacks to make them pack a church, buy their favorite records, attend bars, and go to all kinds of commercial theatre? In answering these questions we solve the problem. He quotes Ed Bullins as saying, “If the Black community were organized to support its Black artists, they would not have to feel fortunate and beholden to rich white people to get their theatre going. There is enough money in Black America to support all of the Black arts...if every Black Cadillac driver missed one payment and sent it to a black theatre in his community, or near him, this would be achieved” (33). These comments are out-dated in regard to the type of car, but the concept and meaning are the same today; they suggest that with the support, financial contributions, donations, and patronage of the black community, Black Theatre would continue to exist and persist. They infer that the black community has to value Black Theatre as they do other cultural and entertainment aspects of their lives.

Paul Carter Harrison, educator and playwright in the preface to *Black Theatre*, *Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, comments on the belief that Black Theatre must reflect black aesthetics:

Though emerging from a context of oppression, the ideal expressive products of Black Theatre throughout the Diaspora should reflect an alternative style of work or practice that is culturally specific and not limited to Western dramaturgical conventions...Consequently, it should be evident that the mere presence of black actors on a stage, including the novelty of a nontraditional all-black cast performing European classics such as *The Cherry Orchard*, does not constitute Black Theatre.... Most importantly, whatever value it might have as entertainment, the inventive

process of Black Theatre must illuminate the collective ethos of the black experience in a manner that binds, cleanses, and heals...Black Theatre is not merely the social inscription of victimization arrested in the lens of social realism. Rather, it is the rhythmic spectacle of language, movement, and sound rooted deeply in the social negotiations of church, Carnival, and the call-and-response practices of collective experience. (Harrison 4, 5)

Harrison tells us that this volume of work was shaped in response to August Wilson's speech "The Ground on Which I Stand" which resulted in the National Black Theatre Summit on Golden Pond. Harrison was on the committee for Aesthetics, Standards, and Practice with the late Dr. Beverly Robinson, writer, director, educator, and Professor at UCLA, and Dr. William Cook, Professor at Dartmouth; they arrived at the following objectives for Black Theatre practice again emphasizing the principle that Black Theatre be about black culture and experiences:

Black Theatre is performative, not didactic, yet seeks collective self-definition. In both ensemble and solo work, the performance objectives rise above self-aggrandizement, recognizing the tension between I/we that subjects the individual self to collective responsibility... Black Theatre is joy, passion, and beauty, which leads to positive illumination. (9)

The views expressed here establish the importance and need for Black Theatre to function and operate as artistic expression of the black experience. Understanding the significance of culturally specific theatre motivates many artists to make the commitment and sacrifice to run Black Theatre companies and to do Black Theatre. The criteria and qualities for how to successfully do this are further explored in this thesis.

Further discussion on the development of Black Theatre follows to highlight the core themes demonstrated by a select group of Black Theatre companies and

organizations; it is a brief examination of their influence, and provides insight to the success and failures of current Black Theatre companies.

Historical Perspective

The African aesthetic and ritual are the roots of the Black Theatre in America. The strong oral traditions of Africa were brought to America with the slaves. The slaves performed African rituals which were comprised of song, dance, storytelling, and drumming; it is these modes that continue to characterize contemporary Black Theatre. The beginnings of Black Theatre in America are in the minstrel shows and musicals of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, which had significant influence on the Black Theatre. The entertainment provided by the slaves is what led to the minstrel show, creating images of blacks that would remain in the years to come. W. T. Lhamon Jr. in *Raising Cain*, rhetorically asks:

Given that the minstrel show has seeped well beyond its masked variants into vaudeville, thence into sitcoms; into jazz and rhythm 'n' blues quartets, thence into rock 'n' roll and hip hop dance; into the musical and the novel, thence into radio and film; into the Grand Ole Opry, thence into every roadhouse and the cab of every longhaul truck beyond the Appalachians – why, then, is the minstrel show said to be over?" (56)

Alexander Saxton in his essay "Blackface Minstrelsy" from *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, informs us that three men, Thomas Rice, Dan Emmett, and E. P. Christy, are generally recognized as founders of blackface minstrelsy. "In 1931, imitating a shuffle he had seen performed by a black man on the Cincinnati levee, Rice for the first time 'jumped Jim Crow' – and Jim Crow made Rice's fortune" (Bean, et al. 69). These men had direct contact with slaves and imitated the dancing and music of the slaves in performances; they performed in blackface to gain their success in the theatre. These

early minstrels failed to recognize African aspects of the music they were imitating; they viewed it as being close to nature. The “Virginia Serenaders” were the first regular minstrel company, organized in 1841 by Dan Bryant, and the “Christy Minstrels” were organized in Buffalo in 1842 by E.P. Christy. One of the first black minstrel troupes was the “Georgia Slave Troupe Minstrels,” originally from Macon, Georgia. They were organized in 1865 by a white man, W. H. Lee and were later managed by Sam Hague. However, Charles B. Hicks would form another group referred to as Hick’s party of the Famous Original Georgia Minstrels, also established in 1865, that would gain notoriety. Eileen Southern, in her essay “The Georgia Minstrels: The Early Years,” denotes that “One of the most celebrated of all the Georgia Minstrels was Sam Lucas (1840-1916). He was a comedian, ballad singer, guitarist, and songwriter; he was advertised as the ‘King of All Colored Comedians’” (Bean 170). Another touring black musical group at the time was “The Hyers Sisters Combination,” which according to Southern, played an essential role in establishing the groundwork for a black musical theater. It was in this early minstrelsy that black performers had their first break into professional theater. The Georgia Minstrels and Hyers Sisters Combination established themselves as national institutions and developed loyal followings among both blacks and whites (171).

The African Grove Company/Theater is regarded as the first Black Theatre in the United States. It was established in 1816 by William Brown in a tea garden setting and ended its performances in a theater constructed in an old hospital building in 1823. James Hewlett, a West Indian, spearheaded the company, Hewlett was the first of the “Negro tragedians.” The African Grove produced Shakespearean plays (*Richard III* was

a company favorite) and introduced the renowned actor Ira Aldridge (the second of the Negro tragedians) to the stage. Aldridge left America for England in 1824. He performed throughout Europe, and was recognized for his Othello, Macbeth, Lear and Shylock portrayals. He was acclaimed by European royalty. African Grove was the first, but the link between theater, community, and social/political issues would lead to the establishment of many Black Theatres over time.

The Lafayette Theater was built in 1912 at the corner of 132nd and Seventh Avenue in Harlem. The theatre presented musicals and other shows, J. Leubrie Hill's *Darktown Follies* opened there in 1913, and became the theatre's first "hit." Loftin Mitchell in *Black Drama* states, "The Lafayette Players were probably the outstanding Negro theatre group of their time. They did dance-dramas, remade variations of popular plays and original plays...Theirs was basically a 'me-too' organization ---one devoted to showing white folks that I, too, can play roles that you think are yours alone, that I, too am human" (70). Although they were in the black community they produced many "white" plays, and the audience filled the theatre.

In the latter part of the 1920s W. E. B. DuBois organized the Krigwa players. Mitchell says, "Dr. DuBois feared for the death of the Negro folk play, and he advocated a drama written by Negroes, produced by Negroes and supported by Negroes. ...Such works as Willis Richardson's *Compromise*, Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Broken Banjo and Blue Blood* and Eulalie Spence's *Brothers and Sisters of the Church Council* were in Krigwa's repertoire" (88). Both Krigwa and Lafayette were controlled by blacks; their productions were "for, near, and about blacks."

Core themes from the above and the following historical organizations are considered as we discuss the theatre companies in this section. The noted themes that have influenced modern Black Theatre fall into these categories: producing black art, instilling black pride, elevating black consciousness, connecting with the black audience and community, art and social consciousness, style, location, fostering black artists, and acquiring business skills to establish, maintain and grow a theatre company. These general principles of operation and the issues (theory and ideals versus reality and actions, lack of funding and dissension) that were experienced by these organizations are reflective and comparable to those discussed later in this text.

The Federal Theater Project (FTP), 1935-1939 with its Negro Units had important historical influence on the nature of Black Theatre, particularly in elevating black consciousness. James V. Hatch in the introduction of E. Quita Craig's *Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era: Beyond the Formal Horizons* states that the black artists of the FTP though they worked among segregation and racism, found means to communicate in their dramas "dual messages" one for whites the other for blacks. The black writers used European concepts to talk to the white audience but at the same time presented an African aesthetic and philosophy to blacks. It was a government sponsored and funded program, based in New York that had a specific mission, targeted audiences and was run by "white" producers, Orson Welles and John Houseman. It had clear objectives and guidelines that were abided by, in order to maintain its existence. The FTP provided opportunities for many black artists and black audiences that hadn't been offered to them prior to that time. Craig informs us that "the nominal prices charged by the Theatre for

tickets made it possible for members of those communities to attend performances, and the increased degree of artistic freedom practiced by the Theater made it possible for black playwrights to project a new and recognizable image for those audiences” (9). One of the main ordeals of the black unit of the FTP was racism. The negative stereotypes of the black brute, black mammy, negro minstrel, and tragic mulatto, was a large problem for the artists. Craig explains: “Hand in hand with the expectations of the white public, that conformity to these stereotypes would be maintained, went the expectation that white aesthetic and ethical standards would also be reflected on the stage. To white audiences of the thirties, black was not beautiful, and black ethics were not even believed to exist” (11). It was these images that FTP’s black artists fought to eliminate. However, Ronald Ross, in his essay “The role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre, 1935-1939” in *Theatre of Black Americans* informs us that from the outset project officials of FTP initiated a close relationship with blacks:

Aside from being favored with their own production units because the project’s national leadership was determined to contribute to the development of blacks, blacks also shared fully in other project activities. . . . this government theatre had an opportunity to accomplish something that it never should have had to attempt in the first place—to dramatize to white America the essential humanity of its black citizenry. . . . it was effective enough so that it had less actual discrimination than any other Roosevelt program. . . . The theatre project’s sensitivity to minorities also extended into the area of play selection. (Hill 234, 236, 237)

Productions presented by the Negro unit included Frank Wilson’s *Walk Together Children*, George McEntee’s *The Case of Philip Lawrence*, Rudolph Fisher’s *The Conjure Man Dies* and DuBois’ *Haiti*. The most highly acclaimed production, Orson Welles’ and John Houseman’s *Macbeth*, featuring Canada Lee, opened on April 14,

1936. In addition to the two New York Negro units of the FTP there were projects held in Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and several other cities nation wide.

The artists of this time laid the groundwork for the Black Revolutionary Theater of the 1960s and 1970s. Their work raised the consciousness of the black community; they attacked and rejected the white aesthetics and ethics in much of their work in an effort to gain black autonomy. The ideas invoked by FTP for the potential of black community theater were: black consciousness, a new African influenced theater, the presence of a black audience, black music for ideal development and the focus on black to black communication, these are aspects directly or indirectly developed in modern Black Theatre companies.

In 1939 Abram Hill and Frederick O'Neal established the American Negro Theatre (A.N.T.). Renowned actors Ruby Dee and Alice Childress were members of A.N.T. In Errol Hill's *The Theater of Black Americans*, Ethel PittsWalker in her essay "The American Negro Theatre" states:

...(A.N.T.) was the fulfillment of a dream by Black Theatre artists in search of a home to practice their art. Unable to find a place on the Broadway stage, these artists turned to the Harlem community. They created in Harlem an active, dynamic theatre, one that introduced new playwrights, trained actors and technicians, produced a number of significant dramas, and built Black audiences for the live theatre. (Hill 247)

The objectives formed by A.N.T. were: To Develop an Art; To Develop a Vital Theatre; and To Develop Pride and Honor (Hill 252). These objectives are echoed in August Wilson's current call for blacks to be their own cultural custodians, that Black Theatre is vital and vibrant, and to honor and celebrate black history. A.N.T.'s first focus

was on setting up an acting company that had its own style derived from the unique performance codes of blacks; the second was to have a theatre in the Harlem community with a school and workshops that were associated with other Black Theatre groups; and the third was to have a theater that was well respected, and instilled pride. These objectives presented by A.N.T.: to be in the black community, to do theatre about blacks, and in the style of blacks, and to do vital theatre that they are proud of, are valid and applicable to the operation of contemporary African American Theater companies, such as The Arena Players in Baltimore, Karamu House in Cleveland, Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia, and ETA Creative Arts Foundation in Chicago.

The early efforts of A.N.T. set the framework for many other theater organizations to model after; and the problems it faced towards the end of its existence are the same problems that many modern community and professional groups struggle with in contemporary theater. The problems were dissension within the group, growth, competition, financial constraints, and lack of focus on original objectives, (some of these issues were the same problems faced by Crossroads Theatre, noted later in this text). The ability to keep a group focused on the same objectives, style, and approach of an operation is a huge task; it is seldom easy to create or maintain. Walker conveys that A.N.T.'s decline was generally due to the success of the production of *Anna Lucasta*. She quotes Fred O'Neal, "Anna was the company's greatest failure...it took the main company to Broadway and they never came back" (Hill 258). The company members began to set their sights on being professional and getting to Broadway, rather than on the community theater ideals put into work by A.N.T. The history of A.N.T. exemplifies

how the original concepts and mission of organizations can be altered by several factors, including its success, its members, its administration, its funds, its publicity and its audience. As demonstrated by A.N.T. commercial success can bring with it attention and criticism that can be overwhelming, disrupting the balance of an organization. This example indicates that it is probably wise before taking steps to reach a higher level of professionalism and development, that careful thought and planning is given to the ramifications and consequences. It infers that additional coordination, communication, marketing demands, financial needs, and creative expectations associated with expansion, and professionalism be given significant attention.

The ability to write proposals and effectively manage a business are critical skills in running a theatre company. Mastering the creative and administrative elements of running a theater business is essential to its survival. As an arts administrator and funder Diem Jones of the San Jose Arts Council offers this advice:

Theatre Companies should not position themselves based on what the funders say; they should stay true to their mission and principles and not simply chase dollars. It is important that they develop relationships as well as “grantsmanship.” The state of Black Theatre is that it's underfunded, challenged, and fighting for dollars when the playing field has shifted. The standards have risen in grant proposals, there are more people competing for fewer dollars, so excellence plays a role and resources must be properly documented. (Jones Interview)

A major dilemma of many of the historical Black Theatres was how to effectively turn theory and ideals into practice, to balance the artistic vision with the business practices.

Several of the Black Theatres had similar goals and objectives based on common perspectives of the social and political needs of the black community. Tom Dent in his essay “Black Theater in the South: Report and Reflections” from *The Theater of Black*

Americans outlines the objectives of The Free Southern Theater, (formed in 1964 in Jackson, Mississippi), that mirror those of A.N.T.'s:

...to stimulate creative and reflective thought among Negroes in Mississippi and other southern states by the establishment of a legitimate theater...within the Southern situation a theatrical form and style can be developed that is unique to the Negro people...a combination of art and social awareness can evolve into plays written for a Negro audience, which relate to the problems within the Negro himself and within the Negro community. (Hill 262)

The Free Southern Theater (FST) was noted as a model project because of its geographic location, its ideology, political, and community involvement. The founders of the theater, Doris Derby, Gilbert Moses, and John O'Neal, declared its function was to train actors, playwrights, and technicians, and to build an audience. Richard Schechner and Thomas Dent were also key contributors to the organization. Dent remarks in *The Free Southern Theater by the Free Southern Theater*, in response to the need for FST, "It relates to the need to articulate an experience. There is something in the human spirit that is reflective, that asks for someone to 'tell it like it is.' The FST came into being to tell it like it is. We have not always succeeded. But that goal is the essence of our dream" (xiii). FST's focus was on the core themes of instilling black pride, doing "black" theatre in the black community, and social consciousness. The audience they were seeking to target was traditionally unfamiliar with the theater so they sought to take the theater to the people, to existing institutions: the church, sporting events, dances, and other public programs. The black church was the most meaningful and successful in achieving this goal, because it was easy to incorporate drama into its programs due to its ritualistic and improvisational characteristics. FST relocated to New Orleans in 1965. The eventual

problems that FST faced were: the contradiction between their goals and actual practices, difficulty in recruiting actors, inadequate rehearsal time, and the racism they had to deal with, which made traveling on the road unsafe due to violent acts against the performers. The group had to change directions and focus because of financial problems; they struggled to maintain their autonomy, and balance political action and theater during a time of cultural and revolutionary movement; the FST was able to survive until 1982 (Williams 66).

Another company which had difficulty in translating theory into action, and managing its business aspects was The Black Arts Repertory Theatre (BART) created and run by Amiri Baraka in 1965. It was an intriguing project; Baraka, voicing strong “anti-establishment” political statements, initially managed to receive public funds to support his theater. The controversy over his political agenda caused his theater to have a short seven-month life; the government would not continue to fund a program that accepted its money but gave it no control. But Baraka’s “Revolutionary Theater,” “the theater of hatred,” had profound impact on the Black Nationalist and Art Movements. The violent language and actions levied towards whites and the “establishment” in his plays, *The Dutchman*, *The Slave* and *The Toilet*, would serve to feed the growing unrest with things non-black or not supportive of blacks. This was a dynamic time in the history of Black Theatres. Woodie King says of Baraka’s work at the time, “That paper, and that feeling in Harlem helped, indirectly, a great many Blacks across the country to get over. The establishment was so afraid of Baraka they would do anything. They would just give money away. Anybody who said they didn’t like Baraka got a grant” (King 83). Several

theaters (New Lafayette Theatre for example) were able to organize and capitalize on the political unrest and protest of the black movement.

Clear understanding and knowledge of the political and social environment of their community by theater administrators, was a key component to their survival during the Black Arts Movement. Baraka's attention was on raising black and social consciousness, gathering the black audience and community, being located in the community, and nurturing and growing black artists; he possessed many of the noted principles except the business acumen, that was his missing element. Diem Jones comments on the theatre movement of that time, "The Black Arts Movement for social consciousness had purpose and drive but when that died -- when the passion behind the purpose died -- it died. They were artists and performers, not business people or managers" (Jones Interview).

Ideals versus actions was also a problem that beset the New Lafayette Theater (NLT) founded in Harlem in 1966, under direction of Robert Macbeth. The NLT proposed to serve as a "national community theater." Among NLT's funders were the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and the New York Foundation. The NLT had relative success with Ed Bullins serving as artist-in-residence. Several of Bullins plays were produced including *In the Wine Time*, and *Electronic Nigger*; along with the works of Richard Wesley, Sonia Sanchez, and others. However, critic, Mance William, from his essay "Black Theatre Companies during the Movement," reports that NLT came under criticism for not living up to its promise to draw talent and material from the community, becoming exclusive and factional. The plays produced were alleged not to

appeal to the black masses. The artistic quality gradually declined over time because the best talent was not employed and over expenditures was an ongoing issue (56). In 1972, the group closed its doors, ending the chapter of another Black Theatre Company.

One of the most notable Black Theatre companies ever established was the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC) of New York, founded in 1967 by Robert Hooks, Douglas Turner Ward, and Gerald Krone. NEC, in its initial year, received a grant from the Ford Foundation for \$434,000 to establish a theater that would produce black oriented plays and train black artists, and craftsmen in a highly professional manner. The primary targeted audience was black, but whites were not excluded. The plays produced were not the “hate whitey” revolutionary plays but those reflecting the black cultural experience done in a naturalist form. Mance Williams, comments that, “Ward must have felt that the style best able to depict the Black experience in all its complexity was naturalism ... According to Ward, these were plays Black audiences wanted to see because they could identify with the aspirations of the characters” (67). NEC used a style that would enable them to connect with the community, (even though they were not directly located in the black community), they developed and nurtured some of the most notable actors of the time, and produced quality theatre for which the black community could be proud.

However, NEC received early criticism because of its integrated staff, the location of its theater in Greenwich Village, its grant from the Ford Foundation and the fact that it produced plays not written by black writers. The group would continue to be faced with negative criticism throughout its existence. Williams reports:

Much of NEC’s success, however, was clouded by adverse criticism....
These critics maintained that an all-Black Theatre company did as much

as segregated White ones to impede the integration movement.

...Ironically, rebuttals sometimes managed to castigate White critics while simultaneously criticizing NEC. A good example is Clayton Riley's *New York Times* article "We Shall Not Be a New Form of White Art in Black Face." ...He does not feel NEC seriously and honestly depicts Black life. ...Riley scoffs, "NEC's most significant gesture would come in the presentation of one proud work offered on its feet, rather than a hundred plays produced in a kneeling position before its dubious benefactors and critics." ...So, too, Peter Bailey's short article in *Negro Digest* (Black World) of April 1968 takes a long hard look at NEC and raises a pertinent question in the title "Is the Negro Ensemble Company Really Black Theatre?" Bailey cites several factors that he feels disqualify NEC as pure Black Theatre. Supporting the argument is Harold Cruse's definition of Black Theatre as an institution completely controlled by Blacks, financially, technically and administratively. The fact that the Ford Foundation, seen by many to epitomize the capitalist establishment, financed the operation of NEC, meant the company could not lay claim to financial independence. (69, 70)

Ward was criticized by some as not providing a "black" enough vision for the organization; the identity and purpose of the organization was under constant scrutiny. In 1978, NEC restructured to ensure its survival: new programs were instituted, production activity was increased and enhanced, staff personnel changes were made, the Board expanded, consultants were hired to ensure stability and solicit outside support, the playwrights' unit was expanded, and other improvements and changes were made artistically and administratively, including moving to a larger facility in 1980. NEC experienced great success with the productions of *The River Niger*, *The First Breeze of Summer* and *Home*. Many of NEC's alumni are award winners and a virtual "who's who" of Black Theatre: Roscoe Lee Browne, Al Freeman, Jr., Robert Hooks, Samuel L. Jackson, Phylicia Rashad, Richard Roundtree, Denzel Washington, the late Rosalind Cash, and Esther Rolls, among them. The company sought to be self-sufficient, although

it continued to receive large funding from Foundations. It went through financial hard times in the late 1970s but was able to bounce back with the success of *A Soldier's Play*.

NEC focused on many of the core principles: they produced Black Theatre based on black culture, instilled a sense of pride amongst blacks across the country (they were considered a national treasure), they had a style that appealed to the African-American audience, and they developed some of today's most acclaimed black artists; but once again as with Baraka's company their limitations were in the business and administrative functions and funding. NEC made heroic attempts to maintain their vision and stay abreast of the requirements of running a Black Theatre, but like so many others it is no longer in operation. From Pamela Renner's article:

In the mid-'90's, New York's leading black institution, the Negro Ensemble Co., lost its shirt. ...After years of bucking against federally mandated caps on the Ford Foundation's support, Ward was forced to give up his fight: "In the '90s, everything came to a head. The tax people put us in a bind. We couldn't continue. I made my final appeal to the public. I don't think at the time people realized the implication of losing that kind of an institution," Ward says. (2)

NEC shut down its operations in 1992, in her article "Black Arts Suffer in the Name of Diversity," Mary Jo Palumbo quotes Victor Walker, "...the Negro Ensemble Company, a legendary 30-year-old theater troupe in New York City, shut down. The NEC, which employed New York's finest black actors and inspired Black Theatre groups nationwide, closed because it couldn't raise \$750,000 to keep its doors open." (1, 2). The problems NEC faced were some of the same ones that A.N.T. and others had faced -- financial constraints, lack of clear direction and focus, and inability to adequately balance

the artistic expression with the fundamentals of business. Professor Elam comments on the Negro Ensemble Company:

NEC received a million dollars from Ford Foundation. There were serious disagreements on how to use it. They did a number of great things, productions, series of workshops and developed actors. Basically what happened to them as with many theatres is they encounter financial problems, and don't know how to move the theatre forward. The problem comes in managing a dual structure. How to handle the artistic vs. managing director. (Elam Interview)

However, NEC was the birthplace of incredible talent, Ward created a resident theater that would foster theater artists as well as managerial and technical personnel.

In a personal interview I conducted with Robert Hooks, in May 2000, he stated:

I am personally concerned about Black Theater because the costs have gotten so great that the community can't afford it. We have intellectualized theater and alienated it to some extent. Elitist groups sit around and talk about theater at roundtables and retreats that don't have anything to do with connecting to the community. We must build an audience. I'm from the grass roots era, and wanted to give back to the community; we must bring creative people together, and work to do theatre together that the community wants to see. The most difficult thing to do in this business is to run a theater company....Black Theatre is being involved in the culture, black culture. (Hooks Interview)

Robert Hooks also ran the D.C. Black Repertory from 1969 –1977. He comments on its demise:

Washington D. C. is an elitist town; if you don't get the backing of the black middle class you are dead. I did not locate this theatre downtown but rather in the community, and the people "with money" did not come, they would not support it. (Hooks Interview)

In spite of the fact that he built his theatre in the community, using DuBois concept of "near the people" it did not work because the people that could fund it, the theatre-going audience, did not come.

An exception to the list of Black Theatres that have had to close their doors is the Karamu House located in Cleveland, Ohio. Mance Williams states, “Founded in 1916, Karamu’s continued existence attests to the longevity and continued survival of Black Theatre in America” (Williams 74). The Karamu House was originally organized by Russell and Rowena Jelliffe as a children’s theater program. The word Karamu is Swahili meaning “a place of feasting and enjoyment in the center of the community.” The name of this theater is indicative of its survival. The Jelliffes developed an interracial theater within the heart of the black community that has evolved into a multi-facet complex with three programming areas: the performing arts, visual arts, and early childhood education. Langston Hughes wrote several of his plays for the Gilpin Players at Karamu, *Little Ham* in 1936, *Joy to My Soul* in 1937, *Front Porch* in 1938 and *Simply Heavenly* in 1957. With a unique vantage point in Cleveland’s inner city, black community, Karamu reaches out to serve people of all ages, races, and origins. It is a gathering place for all to share in its programs, it offers a day care program and an activity center for seniors. It is the broad scope of their mission that embraces all people, the extent of their programming, and many years of experience in running a theater that keeps them in business. Professional Alumni of Karamu House include Richard Brooks, Charlie Brown, Buddy Butler, Bill Cobbs, Ron O’Neal, Robert Guillaume, and Beverly Todd. Karamu has focused on most of the elements presented for influencing contemporary theatres: producing black art, instilling black pride, elevating black consciousness, connecting with the black audience and community, being located in the

black community, growing and developing black artists, and effectively managing the business. They provide a model for modern Black Theatres to follow.

Many of the Black Theatres previously noted grew out of the limitations faced by black artists because of social/political and economic conditions, as well as discrimination and racism. The writers, performers, producers, and audience came together to form their own theaters. These black artists felt that if they wanted to define their role in theater and have opportunities to engage in the craft, if their voices were to be heard they would have to take initiative and be innovative in establishing theaters that were run by them and for them.

Based on this historical review we recognize that Black Theatre organized and operated in churches, YMCAs, and community centers throughout its development. Some of the problems experienced by many of the early theater companies were that they grew too quickly, wanted to be commercially successful too fast, lacked quality in their productions, uneven choice of scripts, lack of funding, and “in-fighting” among company members. Overcoming and dealing with the aforementioned obstacles is how Black Theatre companies would manage to stay in business. The intense necessity to have a voice and stance in the community is what drove many black artists to use unconventional means in establishing a cultural art form. The use of ritualized/ceremonial (call and response) aspects familiar to the black audience, were huge contributors to the survival of many Black Theatres, and are still key components to contemporary theatre performances and productions.

A limited discussion of the genres, shared concepts, principles, (previously mentioned) processes and guidelines for stability and success offered by various black arts organizations and theatre practitioners follows.

Chapter Two: Black Theatre Operation/Criteria for Survival and Growth

The African American Audience, Storytelling and Oral Tradition

Discovering which genre is most appealing in attracting a targeted black audience and yet has value to other cultural groups aids in audience development and the survival of Black Theatre. Historically, musicals have been the genre most likely to attract black audiences. Folk and oral tradition is also a positive choice for inspiring and illuminating hopes and visions of black people. Storytelling combined with music, song, and dance is generally captivating theater to black audiences. From Errol Hill's *The Theatre of Black Americans*, Tom Dent in 1974, in his essay "Black Theater in the South: Report and Reflections":

...the play form, the so-called "well made play," is not endemic to black culture. The traditional play form is the product of Western European art and culture... It is my conviction that as Black theater begins to reconceive itself, it must do so in terms of the oldest and most proven values of Black culture – our music, in all its forms—rhythm, dance, the oral tradition in its pre-American and post-American forms, call and response, spirituality, suggestiveness and subtlety of speech. It will not then be theater as we have known it in Western Europe or America. (Hill 265 & 269)

This offers the option for Black Theatre to rely on the values of the black community, its music, oral traditions, church, rhythms, and language for survival and prosperity. This is demonstrated by the popularity of the "Urban Circuit" plays, (a popular form of "Black" gospel touring shows) that have been incredibly successful in building an audience and strong market share.

Audience development, capturing, maintaining, and growing a targeted black audience is one of the most complex components in the operation of a Black Theatre

company. Who is the African-American audience? What is their relationship to theatre on a traditional basis? The African-American audience is defined here as those of African descent choosing to identify themselves with the cultural aspects: music, song, literature, eating habits, language, gestures, religious beliefs, rituals, and semiotics born out of and adapted from the slave legacy and history of blacks in this country. Many African-American audiences have typically been noted as demonstrating unconventional behavior in attending theatre productions. It has been said that they seem to laugh at the wrong times and at the wrong things, it is difficult to know what they will laugh at. Thomas Pawley in his article "The Black Theatre Audience," *The Theatre of Black Americans*, outlines that:

Student behavior patterns may be placed into two categories the non-verbal and verbal: Non-Verbal responses may be further divided into vocal and physical reactions. To the former belong shouting, jeering, hooting, laughter, and an infinite number of non-linguistic vocal reactions indicative of approval or disapproval, enjoyment or dissatisfaction. Physical responses include beating on the seats, stamping on the floor, nudging or kicking companions, clapping or slapping hands ("give me some skin"), rocking back and forth, and in extreme instances, spontaneously leaping to one's feet in the manner of a sports crowd. ... Verbal responses involve talking aloud sometimes to the actor, sometimes to the audience, sometimes to one's self, and sometimes to nobody in particular. (Hill 309)

Pawley goes on to narrate what most would conclude or have witnessed, that this behavior is at times upsetting to the performers, makes listening to the performance difficult, whites and other ethnic groups are perplexed and amused, and blacks are embarrassed or annoyed. He offers as explanation for these causative factors: the language of the play (swearing or sexual references), love scenes, costuming, recognition of the actor, music, and strange or eccentric behavior. Anything that may go noticeably

wrong during the production (missed cues, forgotten lines, and problems with the set) will undoubtedly draw laughter. The traditional behavior associated with the black church has served to stimulate the behavior of blacks in the theatre. They have grown accustomed to an environment that encouraged verbal and physical response. Pawley cites that the patterns of behavior at nightclubs and sports events also carry over to the theatre.

Knowledge of traditional theatre behavior is lacking in many cases simply because many blacks have not had "live theatre" experiences. The verbal and non-verbal actions/reactions of the audiences are generally positive. Their responses mean they are engaged in the performance and usually are enjoying it. Margaret B. Wilkerson in her article "Critics, Standards and Black Theatre," says that the nature of the theatrical event for Black people:

Is at once communal, functional, and participatory. Productions which feature Black casts in plays relating to their lives have an instant community - not spectators, but a spiritual community.... Perhaps for that reason Black audiences are as likely to applaud or cheer a statement with which they agree as to acknowledge a performer's craft. The emphasis on the former is not a lack of taste, but a recognition of theatre as metaphor and dramatic action as a functional extension of their lives. For them the theatrical event is not an objet d'art but exists as effective tool of personal and social development. (Hill 320)

Wilkerson's comments harken back to Locke's account of theatre as folk drama.

I offer a personal observation as an example of the differences in having or not having a black audience for "black" plays (written by, for, and about blacks). I attended a production of August Wilson's *Jitney* at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in March 2000, with an audience that was 90% white; I later attended the same production, with the same cast a month later in April at the Second Stage Theatre in New York with a 90%

black audience. My impression was the production was quite different based on the racial make-up of the audience. The actors seemed to connect with the Black audience and there was an "electricity" that was not even remotely present at the Mark Taper. There was so much laughter, talking back and vocal response to what was occurring on stage that the audience became a part of the performance. The actors' performances were enlivened in reaction to the audience's responses. The cultural connection between actor and audience was substantiated, the audience was totally engaged in the show, and the entire theatre seemed to be "caught up in the spirit" of a black church service. This was not the case with the show at the Mark Taper, it had been a polished and professional production, but did not convey the power, drama, and meaning of the play that was portrayed in the New York production. Immediately following the New York show I talked with Barry "Shabaka" Henley, one of the actors, who told me that he felt he gave the same performance regardless of the demographics of the audience, but he admitted that performing the play in front of a black audience instead of a white one had a different energy and gave stimulus to the actor that was not there with a Caucasian audience.

Discussion of the African American audience warrants examination of the "Urban Circuit plays." The contemporary debate in the community in regard to the Urban Circuit is ongoing. These plays have historically been widely commercial and produced without high artistic merit. However, some have begun to develop on a more professional level. This style of theatre seems to thrive in the black community. Why do they continue to play to packed houses when other forms of Black Theatre struggle to get an audience? In his *Chitlin' Circuit* article Gates says, "these are the plays of, by, and for

black folk... It may not be what August Wilson has in mind when he proposes his ideal for black American theatre, but it is what audiences want to see" (Gates 48, 52). In her 1999, article "Ticket to Heaven" in *American Theatre Magazine*, Dr. Beverly J.

Robinson, explored the development of the Urban Circuit drama, stating that "It is a phenomenon that has become so financially successful and attracted such enormous audiences in major cities across the United States that it cannot be ignored" (22).

Robinson disagreed with Gates' reference to these shows as "chitlin' circuit plays," as historically incorrect; she states that the chitlin' circuit was reflective of a tradition of black entertainment from the early 1900's through 1940. David Talbert, producer of many of the shows including *He Say, She Say But What Does God Say*, *Lord Have Mercy*, and *Mr. Right Now*, says, "In some ways our shows are merely an extension of the church, wrapped around colorful dialogue and identifiable characters" (Robinson 22). For many blacks attending the theatre is similar to being at church; there exist a close and "free" relationship between performer and audience. Dr. Robinson reported:

Kevin Fontana, owner of the Los Angeles-based entertainment company Classic Artists and producer of *Whatever Happened to Black Love* and other productions, notes that urban circuit audiences are invited to talk back to the stage---they do not "feel bogged down by European-imposed theatre etiquette," as he put it. When they are in disagreement with a character, they let them know by responding aloud without shame. When they are spiritually touched, it is understood, and they are encouraged to raise a testifying hand, openly let the tears flow, or "run up and down the aisle." (25)

Robinson notes that producers of the Urban Circuit plays say they are fulfilling DuBois' call for the four fundamental components of theatre for the black community,

“by us, for us, about us, and near us;” and that the audience attendance and participation validates the existence and desire for this type of theatre (Robinson 25).

In September of 2003, I attended *If These Hips Could Talk* in Baltimore, the production values of this production were of fairly high quality -- the actors were very polished, the set quite elaborate, and functional. *If These Hips Could Talk* was written and produced by Angela Barrow-Dunlap, originally directed by award winning playwright and director, Ron Milner. What I found to be most interesting was the audience. There was a sold-out house of approximately 4,000 seats, and 95% of the patrons were black; the excitement and electricity in anticipation of the performance abounded. People were eager for the show to begin! They were slapping each other “five” and ecstatic about being at the theatre. I witnessed first-hand what Fontana mentioned about the responses that the audience demonstrates. It definitely had the “vibe” of a black church service, and people felt free to participate, expressing their disapproval and approval openly -- verbally and physically – talking loud, commenting, and standing and shouting when “so moved.”

Tyler Perry is the newest and hottest success in the Urban Circuit theater scene. Perry is a writer, actor, producer, director, and set designer. His touring plays, *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, *Madea’s Family Reunion*, and *Madea’s Class Reunion* sell out each performance everywhere throughout the country. His character portrayal of Mabel Simmons known as Madea has become famous in the African American community. Margena A. Christian comments in her article “Tyler Perry: Meet the Man Behind the Urban Theater Character Madea,” in *Jet* magazine

December 2003, “Still, even with his accomplishments, many don’t acknowledge the Black traveling stage plays as real theater” (64). Perry’s response, “I’m seeing Black families at my plays. I don’t know of any other place other than church where Black families are coming together. I’ve been able to reach people” (64).

The Urban Circuit genre is a good study for understanding what the majority of blacks want to see in the theatre and for the marketing techniques that will get them there. A few of the revered playwrights and directors of the Black Theatre community have expressed interest in getting involved in this theatre genre and improving the professionalism as a means for ensuring the existence and vitality of Black Theatre in the future. This appears to have occurred with Ron Milner’s initial involvement and direction of *If These Hips Could Talk*; this particular show was rather tastefully done.

Substitutions for the comedy, song, dance, and urban circuit style plays that appeal to African-American audiences are the use of “storytelling,” black folklore, oral tradition and the contemporary spoken word performances. The oral tradition that is present in Shay Youngblood’s play *Shakin’ the Mess Outta Misery* exemplifies storytelling as powerful dramatic structure and performance, appealing to black audiences. Shay’s stories are rooted in the oral and folk traditions that she became acquainted with in childhood. She is quoted in an article from D. Monroe, “Theater: Hearing Voices,” *Creative Loafing*, 1995:

My work for the theater fuses the African-American tradition of storytelling with movement, ritual, visual art, music, and poetry to give voice to a language specific to my community – the one I experience while growing up in the South in the 1960’s. Music is important in my work. My language is rhythmic and lyrical with a certain poetic style influenced by jazz, soul, gospel, and blues. I write the way my people talk

and am very conscious of wanting to give voice to a community not often heard in mainstream media. Verbal rituals like rapping are contemporary forms of the oral tradition that are being kept alive by the youth. (2)

Shay's comments characterize the "spoken word" performances that are currently popular among youth. This ritual and style offers a means for the survival of Black Theatre. Understanding this type of performance art and its attractiveness to black audiences is an aspect worthy of exploration for the longevity of Black Theatre.

"Live Theater" as entertainment is still in the developmental stages for many blacks. In Hooks' opinion theatre has become chic, too expensive for the community, and the black community gets priced out. He said:

There have been occasions where Blacks in leadership have built the theatre, received corporate sponsorships, produced the theatre, but many black folk were intimidated and didn't come. The majority in the black community is unsophisticated when it comes to theatre and the people running theatre companies need to understand what the black audience wants to see. To build an audience you have to produce the kinds of plays and have the activities that blacks are interested in. (Hooks Interview)

Pawley suggests that there is a lack of traditional theatre-going blacks. Black children that are not introduced to the theater early and grow up attending the theater on a regular basis are not likely to continue to be theatergoers as adults.

When asked what the key factors are in running a theatre company Robert Hooks again focuses on the community and building a black audience:

Stay connected with the community, do town meetings, have open forums, involve the community and get their input. Choose a season that has a mixture of play types -- that uses some of the urban circuit genre to draw the audience in and then spring on them something that is more serious. Nurture the silly shows, (actors will do any thing to be on stage), do some of these shows, bring in your audience educate them on theatre and then wean them away from the soap operas. (Hooks Interview)

The opinions of those offered above indicate that if Black Theatre companies know what their audiences will respond to and how, it can assist them in planning and audience development which are core elements for sustainability.

In *Black Drama*, Lofton Mitchell states, "The one hope is that those groups in the ghetto areas ...will create drama as it was intended, as a living instrument that educates, communicates and entertains..." (235). He remarked that the existence of Black Theatre was inevitable; he suggests the sharing of drama and the stage is a means to better understanding the nature of people in a shrinking world, "If we see each other, really see each other on the world's stages and share common human problems, we may achieve a better world" (236).

Stephen Langley - The Six W's

Stephen Langley, in *Theatre Management in America*, declares that people are motivated to do theatre, for profit, social, educative, and/or humanist reasons. He states that the theatre producer must have clarity of statement and publication of the purpose for the theatre or production. A theatre must first form a vision and mission and then seek funding for the idea. Profit and non-profit ventures must form a workable and feasible plan: "The hopeful producer or several managers of a project will do well to reexamine the idea behind it ... Are answers easily forthcoming to the six W's: why, what, where, when, who, wherewith?" (Langley 17). Clear, concise answers to these six questions are the basic factors leading to the formation and stability of a theatre company. He defines the six W's as Why? Being the idea; What? Being the artistic form it will take; Where? The place where it will be expressed; When? The time when it will be expressed; Who?

The people who will express and manage it and Wherewith? As the cost. If there are not plans in place for the direction and goals of the theatre, if there is not strong leadership, if there are no funds or facility, it is obvious that a theatre or any other business will not exist for any extended period of time.

The most important factor in establishing and maintaining an organization is the “Who?” Who will be the people managing the theatre? Good strong leadership is required to manage a theatre company; it demands an administration that is knowledgeable of many facets of management and is capable of projecting and realizing its goals, objectives and vision. Langley sites the Rockefeller Panel Report, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospect of 1965* to define a good arts manager:

A person who is knowledgeable in the art with which he is concerned, an impresario, labor negotiator, diplomat, educator, publicity and public relations expert, politician, skilled businessman, a social sophisticate, a servant of the community, a tireless leader-becoming humble before authority-a teacher, a tyrant, and a continuing student of the arts. (Langley 20)

The summation of this assessment is that an incredible and extraordinary person is required for an extraordinary business. Good theatre managers must have administrative, financial, communication, and people skills. They must be able to influence and motivate others, be flexible, and adaptable, yet firm in their decision making. The theatre manager’s responsibilities include setting goals and objectives, selecting plays, raising the capital, staffing and casting, supervising, and controlling; they embody and embrace the theatre concept. The more elaborate and complex the production the more formalized and sophisticated the management requirement is. Langley presents four basic elements that must be considered by theatre managers in presenting a theatrical performance: the

creative raw material; a person to refine the material; a place to present the material; and an audience to witness the presentation (24).

The aspects and components required in operating a theater outlined by Langley are true for culturally specific groups as well. However, there are historical, social, cultural, and psychological conditions specific to “Black Theater” organizations that cause them to have qualities and issues different than other groups. Evidence of the importance of "Who" is illustrated in Robert Hooks comments:

The key component of Black Theatre is the leadership, that's what we had in the sixties and seventies that is missing today. The leaders are not in place, and they are needed to create opportunities and outlets for African American communities to get out of the doldrums. This would give young people opportunities and bring black people together as me and Barbara Ann Teer did with the Group Theater Workshop in New York (Chelsea, Harlem, Jamaica, and Bedford-Styvensant); out of this group came renown actors Antonio Fargas, Hattie Winston and Daphne Maxwell-Reed. Strong leadership existed in the Negro Ensemble Company, I was the Executive Director, Gerald Krone was the Administrative Director and Douglas Turner Ward was the dramaturg. Ward, was a great, brilliant man, who understood character, structure and the community. (Hooks Interview)

The answer to Langley's questions of “Why” and “What” are key aspects for consideration of the survival and/or thriving of Black Theatre. The need of many black artists to express their culture and values without regard to European convention is what drives and supports the endurance of Black Theatre. The style, language, ritual, symbols and codes associated with “blackness” not reflected in traditional theater forms warrant an outlet by those most closely associated with it. The "Wherewith," the costs and means by which to run a theatre company and produce shows is an essential element. Solving

this question will determine survivability. Lack of funding and capital has caused many theaters to fold, and is the main obstacle for many Black Theatre companies.

Diem Jones of the Arts Council comments on the "Wherewith":

We know how to make a lot with a little. And also know when it is time for us to get a lot, it is our turn, and must stand up to the plate, and ask. We have been programmed to look at our feet instead of up, and must learn not to be afraid to ask without "batting an eye." Theatre companies must make sure every prospective funder gets an invite to their shows. They must have quality marketing materials, have consistent fundraising events and programs, do print, radio, and television interviews and ads, so that they become a household name. The work and expression of the art should be fulfilling the mission and vision of the organization and artists/administrators. If it is not then it should not continue. "The Arts should enrich our lives not shorten them." (Jones Interview)

The "Where" and "When" is generally determined by the answers to the other four questions, to have a time and place to perform without the other resources does not lend itself to survival and endurance. Langley suggests having consistent, effective answers to these six questions will ensure stability and instigate growth for theatre companies.

African Grove Institute of the Arts (AGIA)

Gloria Goodale reports in *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 15, 1998, "August Wilson told his audience, 'It's our fault that we don't have the theaters we need.' He added that the goal of the newly formed African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA) is to build new relationships with the major funding institutions in the country" (1).

The answer to Langley's question of "Who" is The African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA), a 501c3 national service and advocacy organization established in 1998 to provide policy development, programs and services, and technical assistance for African American theatre, performing arts, and other cultural institutions. AGIA is a direct

outgrowth of the National Black Theatre Summits, I and II, held in March and July, 1998 respectively. The National Black Theatre Summits were held largely in response to the call issued by August Wilson in his speech “The Ground on Which I Stand” in 1996 at the Theatre Communications Group Conference at Princeton University. AGIA was established by influential educators and theatre practitioners in Black Theatre. The executive committee consisted of August Wilson, Victor Leo Walker II, William W. Cook, Keryl McCord, then of Crossroads Theater, Amina Dickinson of Kraft Foods, Ifa Beyeza of the Duncan YMCA Community Center, Claude Purdy of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Lou Bellamy of Penumbra Theatre Company, Paul Carter Harrison of Columbia College, Woodie King Jr., Don Evans and Pearl Cleage, playwrights, Dr. Beverly Robinson, and Robbie McCauley performance artist, who volunteered to organize these events; upon completion of the Summits, this committee was dissolved. Dr. William Cook informs us in his essay “AGIA: A Brief Chronicle,” from *Black Theatre’s Unprecedented Times*, that the executive committee set the following six issues as their focus: 1) Legal and Social Initiatives; 2) Developing Black Playwrights; 3) Audience and Community Development; 4) Diversity Within the Black Arts Community; 5) Economics (Institutional Development); and 6) Aesthetics, Standards, and Practices (Perez 42-43). AGIA was formally incorporated in April 1998 and received its 501(c)3 in March 1999.

The answer to “Why” is addressed by Dr. Victor Leo Walker, II in his essay “AGIA and its Vision for the New Millennium” from the aforementioned publication he expresses the ideas of AGIA:

As an organization, AGIA is working toward cultural equity to address the inequities that are often ignored in social/artistic experiments designed to achieve cultural diversity...Hence, until there is economic, social and cultural equity among the races in America, as a nation, we face an uncertain future....AGIA's board is clear that a component of the organization's mission will be to develop initiatives to create awareness around issues concerning the advancement of cultural equity as a social movement. You cannot achieve so-called cultural diversity until you fully address the question of cultural equity....In addition to its focus on cultural equity, AGIA also plans to address the political, social and intellectually apathy that seems to have immobilized the vast majority of Black people. We must begin to look inward if we are to revitalize our communities, to address those issues that warrant our time, commitment, and dedication...As we move into the new millennium the Black arts community must be proactive and ready to forge initiatives and strategic partnerships --both within and outside the Black community --- that will cultivate growth, longevity and stability for artists and arts institutions dedicated to serving both the Black community and society at large. (123, 124)

AGIA's mission responds to the question of "What," it describes the form and objectives that AGIA will implement: AGIA is dedicated to creating an environment to support artistic excellence and to promote the advancement and preservation of Black Theatre as a cultural agent for social change, economic development and intellectual property. An organization of artists and arts advocates, AGIA, provides leadership, technical assistance, and resources for research, acquisition of capital, policy initiatives, and advocacy to insure the integrity of Black Theatre practice, and protection of intellectual property. Through strategic collaboration and partnership with other organizations and institutions, AGIA fosters a nurturing environment for artists and supports the artists' role in the revitalization and empowerment of their communities (*Black Theatre Unprecedented Times* 124).

AGIA's answer to "Where" it will operate is that it is a national organization, organized through a Regional Council structure. It is located in six regions of the United States: Western Region, Southwest Region, Midwest Region, Southern Region, New England Region, and Mid Atlantic Region. The purpose of establishing Regional Councils is to create an ongoing structure that provides a continuous link between the national organization and its membership. The State chapters play an important role in the structure of the organization, some of their objectives are to foster: new leadership, strong ties to the black community and the artists, loyalty and trust among its membership, entrepreneurial ventures, change in the way theatre is narrowly defined, strong relationships with businesses, corporations, faith based organizations, and community leaders in each region (AGIA-Texas website). AGIA seeks to operate in the community using the core themes of instilling black pride, using black aesthetics, fostering black artists, and gives particular emphasis to business management. They also concentrate on developing strong relationships with stakeholders as another key component to the survival of Black Theatre.

Some of the early initiatives of AGIA provide the "Wherewith" for its existence: development of the AGIA/Tuck Business/Performing Arts Partnership Initiative to provide fellowships, training, and hands-on assistance in institutional development, finance, strategic planning, marketing, and communications for Black Theatre executives and artists; the initiation of the Public Policy and the Arts Lecture Series (a collaboration of the Rockefeller Center, AGIA, The Getty and Dartmouth College Hopkins Center), to explore the changing relationship among government institutions, society, artists, and arts

organizations; and establishment of the AGIA/Getty Initiative for the Advancement and Preservation of Black Theatrical and Associated Arts as an Agent for Social and Economic change. This training was extremely valuable for the theatre administrators that attended. It offered new approaches and insight into managing a business that they could personalize and implement in their operations.

Another aspect of the "Wherewith" is AGIA's strong relationship with the Black Arts community in Los Angeles. AGIA held a benefit in L. A. on August 2, 2003 in honor of August Wilson and the opening of his play *Gem of the Ocean*. In attendance and offering support to the organization were Phylicia Rashad and Danny Glover; AGIA has also received previous support from Laurence Fishburne, Angela Bassett, and Delroy Lindo. This celebrity support was a way for AGIA to gain visibility and credibility to aid in obtaining funding and other assistance for the organization.

One of the Roundtable discussions at Summit I focused on developing black playwrights (this provides another answer to Langley's "What," this is an art form that AGIA wants to maintain, AGIA members believe that black plays written by black playwrights are essential in sustaining the "cultural connections" that are representative of Black Theatre). Four activities were identified as priorities: developing craft and collaborative skills; increasing opportunities through partnerships with educators; heightening the value of Black Theatre in society; and documentation.

At Summit II in Atlanta, July 15, 1998 Dr. Lundeanna Thomas (Assistant Professor of Theatre, University of Louisville) chaired a panel on "Money, Where is it? And how do we get it?" that addressed the "Wherewith." Where does the money come

from to cover the cost of operations? The panel made the following recommendations to achieve positive economic relationships with corporate foundations and funders: 1) Establish a vision and set a plan of action that demands the development of a worthwhile product. It is important that you provide good directors, passionate actors, and adequate personnel to obtain the best production possible and one that caters to your audience. 2) Build on your plan by putting something away for a “rainy day.” It’s called –amortize--- prepare for tomorrow today. Establish endowments, set up investment plans and/or procure the services of a financial planner. 3) Focus on your plan by utilizing your resources, take risks – even demand (you will have not if you ask not). Also nurture good leadership and guide the power of that leadership so it works for you and not against you (Perez 91). These recommendations adhere strongly to Langley’s outline for successful and strong theatre management, focusing on leadership, planning, who your audience is, and what they want.

Idris Akamoor, founder and co-artistic director of San Francisco’s Cultural Odyssey, was among the artists and directors, executives, playwrights, and business leaders who attended Summit I. Craig Maine in an article in the *San Francisco Examiner* in April 1998 notes some of Akamoor’s comments on the Summit:

The future of black theater may depend on increased marketing skills and the creation of a national foundation dedicated solely to funding...the intention is to approach existing financial organizations for funding, as well as reaching out to wealthy blacks who want to give back to the community. To succeed, black theater must combine the financial independence of the churches with the social responsibility of the community centers. You watch black people in church and they are more than willing to give their money. I think that black people of even modest incomes would be willing to help fund our work if they were only asked.

We haven't figured out how to reach them, to make them see the positive impact we can have on their lives. (Maine 1)

Akamoor suggests extensive merchandising may be a way to increase profits. His final comments were that "we have to think in terms of profit" (2).

In the Management and Institutional Development round table, Summit II, Carl Jennings, Managing Director of Jennings & Jennings and Consultant to the AGIA Board of Directors, focused on the importance of well executed principles of organization and management development in sustaining Black Theatre organizations. His comments give detailed recommendations to answer Langley's questions of "Who," "What," and "Wherewith," which provide guidelines toward survivability, Jennings noted:

If black theatrical institutions are going to survive, the realities of the present day global environment demand that they be well organized and managed. In keeping with this demand, the panelists identified the following concerns as priorities:

- The development of a well crafted strategic plan
- The need for boards, management and staff to support theatrical organizations with tried and true human systems development practices, financial planning and control measures, and the needed information technology
- The establishment of a well planned marketing effort that focuses on distribution of information
- An understanding of finances that goes beyond record keeping and encompasses the acquisition of credit and competently managing the investments of funders
- Overcoming difficulties with boards in order to mobilize them to gain support from politicians, corporations and foundations
- Viewing theatre as critical community assets is important because at present community assets receive important funding
- Making the case that theatres have social and economic impact on the community, maximizes possibilities for funding
- The provision of practical training for people interested in careers in theatre, is important for black theatres. Can be done through partnering with academic institutions.

- The development of alternate approaches to ensure black theatre's survival, given the scarcity of managerial and economic resources. Achieving this includes, but is not limited to establishing strategic alliances, partnerships, mergers and networks.

By addressing the concerns above, black theatre can be assured of a long, resilient and meaningful life. In this way, it can continue to make its needed contributions to the African American and world communities.”
(Perez 80)

The core themes of connecting with the audience and community, art as social consciousness, and business acumen are covered in Jennings comments. This is a thorough list of the administrative elements needed for the development, operation, and sustainability of a theatre company.

AGIA plans to continue assisting in the development of Black Theatres in their communities; they are committed to solidifying and growing Black Theatres by offering quality support and programs as envisioned by August Wilson and as noted above.

AGIA's work in support of Black Theatre focuses on these core themes: planning, strong leadership, community, youth, management development, forming alliances and partnerships, valuing the black aesthetic, and celebrating black culture. It also incorporates a technical and digital aspect to the "new-world" of theatre, encouraging new ideas -- "to think out of the box" in search for the right ingredients to make Black Theatre, a business -- succeed.

National Black Theatre Festival – Larry Leon Hamlin

Larry Leon Hamlin, Executive and Artistic Director of the North Carolina Black Repertory Company, started the National Black Theatre Festival in 1989 as a national gathering that would bring together producers, actors, directors, and patrons in a collective effort to preserve the heritage of the Black Theatre. His vision for the festival

answers the question of "Why," his dream was that this event would honor legends of the Black Theatre and bring together some of the best Black Theatre companies in the country. It would be a "Celebration and Reunion of Spirit." Hamlin also believed that this festival would help establish an audience for generations to come. The festival has become a clearinghouse and showcase for legitimate Black Theatre. Stars from near and far, and thousands of theater artists and practitioners attend this festival. Small and large Black Theatres have an opportunity to gain exposure during this weeklong festival held every other year in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The entire town becomes a stage. This festival has taken on international stature. Hamlin realized that young theater companies had to be nurtured and tested; he created this festival to ensure the survival of Black Theatre. In Bill Morrison's article "Power Plays," Hamlin says:

Prior to 1989, our theater was in a very dangerous situation. We were losing so many black theaters at such an alarming rate...if the trend continued by the year 2000 there wouldn't be any black theater. Something had to be done. I only thought there were 65 to 70 black theaters in America at that time, but after doing my research I found there were over 250....We didn't know each other, but I found out that many of us had the same problems. By coming together we were able to create an agenda that would ensure the continuity of black theater for generations to come. (7)

The answer to "Who" in Langley's question is Larry Leon Hamlin serving as the leader and motivating force behind NBTF. It is also made possible by hundreds of volunteers, and celebrity attendance and support. The National Black Theatre Festival (NBTF) has been the host to legends of screen and stage artists including: Oprah Winfrey, Louis Gossett Jr., Miki Grant, Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, Avery Brooks, the late Esther Rolle, Leslie Uggams, Bill Cobbs, Debbie Allen, Robert Hooks, and countless

others. In this week long festival "What" (the art form) is an incredible amount of theater, over 50 staged productions, produced by theater companies throughout the country, including the classics, avant garde, and performance art. The Reader's Theatre, coordinated by Garland Lee Thompson of the Frank Silvera Writer's Workshop, is a showcase of original works written and read by renowned and aspiring playwrights; along with numerous other plays that are read morning, noon, and night throughout the festival. Workshops and seminars conducted by theatre professionals, scholars, and celebrities are also held throughout the week. An International vendors market offers an array of goods and services featuring Afro-centric products that adds a level of excitement and allure to the festivities, and a connection to black art and culture.

In 1989, Hamlin said, "If black theater is to survive and exist in America in the next 10 years, we must act now to strengthen and ensure its cherished dreams of longevity" (*NBTF 1999 News Magazine* 5). This article entitled "NBTF reaches out to youth with Celebrity Project," reports, "Motivated by Hamlin's announcement Cynthia Mack introduced the Youth Celebrity Project in 1993. Its purpose...preserve the future of Black Theatre by involving young people in its history and future" (5). This project was designed to expose youth to various cultural aspects, the arts, and theater. The celebrity performers in town for the festival share their experiences, offer workshops, and entertain the young people. Some of the celebrities that have participated in the youth project are Angela Bassett, John Amos, Melba Moore, Barbara Montgomery, and Bill Cobbs. Since its inception thousands of youth have participated in this program. NBTF gives attention

to the development and training of youth because they realize that the youth are the resource for the future of Black Theatre.

NBTF has 1500 volunteers and a \$1.5 million budget, it generates \$9 million worth of business in Winston- Salem (Morrison 7). The "Wherewith" for this festival is major funding from R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, City of Winston- Salem, U. S. Airways, Nabisco, Wachovia Corporation, Bank of America, American Express, GMAC Insurance Company and numerous others (*The National Black Theatre Festival 12th Anniversary 2001* 9).

In his article "Power Plays," Morrison recounts a story Hamlin shared with him about the early development of his theatre company:

I was promoting the company, and you have to take the theater to the people, right? So I went to what is known as a juke joint – a liquor house – and we did a scene from a play in this liquor house, trying to get people to come and see the show... Years later at the opening of the festival in 1989, amid the swirl of celebrities, Hamlin noticed a man who had been at the bar years before. “He was sitting up in that theater with his family, and all because we went into that liquor house. And you know, that really took my breath away. The lesson, is to embrace the total community and not just a portion of it.” (Morrison 3)

The NBTF has provided a service in promoting Black Theatre, it brings recognition to artists and producers of theatre. It involves a whole community of volunteers from near and far to be a part of the action. People in the community are excited about theatre and anxious to be involved; they have complete "buy-in" and are stakeholders in the event. It has created the dynamic and interest that generates a sense of value and need to maintain Black Theatre. NBTF is a popular venue, bringing together Black Theatre artists to share ideas, talent, information, conversation, energy,

and spirit. The wisdom of the elders (i.e., Ossie Davis, Woodie King, Art Evans) mixed with the creativity of the young (i.e., Malcolm Jamaal Warner and helena d. lewis) fashions an electrifying environment. Hamlin, refers to the festival and the events surrounding it as being on "holy ground." In my observation there is a definite spirit and synergy about the festival that can't be denied. It brings needed support and attention to Black Theatre companies throughout the country, giving them an opportunity to showcase their talents to thousands. The Who (black artists, technicians, administrators), What (Black Theatre, art and culture in performances, workshops, readings, and networking), Where (Winston-Salem, North Carolina), When (One week, every other year), Why (sharing, exploration, acknowledgment and preservation of culture), and How (government and corporate funding, community support, and artists commitment) are all evident at this festival. NBTF is a celebration of black culture; instilling pride, developing artists, building audiences and connecting with the black community.

Rhodesa Jones, writer, performer and co-artistic director of Cultural Odyssey in San Francisco, writes of her experience at the festival in 2001 in her article "The Mother of All Reunions: The 12th Biennial National Black Theatre Festival Celebrates Stories of Living on the Outside. (Critic's Notebook)":

I am now standing at the gate of the mother of all family reunions, the real Stone Soul Picnic, the 12th biennial National Black Theatre Festival. ... The NBTF, for so many of us African-American artists working in theatre, film and television, has become a traditional rest stop and meeting ground. ... When they aren't networking or attending the program of 100-plus productions from more than 30 far-flung production companies, participants are attending panels and seminars on issues ranging from marketing new plays to finding inroads into Hollywood. Every night 'round midnight crowds swell for a new-play reading series curated by Garland Lee Thompson. There and throughout the festival stars interact

with soon-to-be stars: Anyone can bump into and chat with Ella Joyce, Ntozake Shange, Bill Cobbs or Kamilah Forbes. ... The festival's theme, if one can be distilled, is about places in the heart--celebrating the human spirit, the human family. (1-3)

My personal observations having attended the NBTF three times, the first being in 1999, echo Jones' sentiments. Being a part of this festival was one of the most intriguing aspects of my involvement in theatre for the past thirty years. I was able to talk with and obtain information on the operation of Black Theatre companies from legendary actors, directors and playwrights: Woodie King, Jr., Robert Hooks, Art Evans, Ed Bullins, Bill Cobbs, Richard Roundtree, Ossie Davis, the late Paul Winfield, Claudia McNeal, Cicely Tyson, Dick Anthony Williams, and Samm Art Willliams. NBTF is a Black Theatre "giant" that carries the legacy of Black Theatre on its shoulders. This is a networking mechanism for actors, technicians, and playwrights to share talent and creative expression that is essential to the awareness, vitality, and unity of Black Theatre in this country.

Samuel Hay's Recommendations – The National Endowment for African American Theatre

The funniest thing about the fussing that goes on in theatre boardrooms is that it is not funny at all. The feuding is such a given within some 'governing' bodies that many talented people simply refuse to serve on the boards of African American theatre organizations. These people say that it is a waste of time, because the Lord God Himself must have spent the whole Second Week trying to organize an African American theatre. The questions that arise are Is theatre governance really as bad as all of that? How accurate – and fair – is the charge that African American theatre open and close like morning glories? And If the average theatre life span is shorter than a pet canary's, what can be done about it? (Hay 177)

Samuel Hay, author, theatre historian, critic, and director, in his essay "The Governance of Theatre Organizations," informs us that there are three developmental

phases of theatre, but that most don't survive past the first or second period. Hay says, "The first stage begins when a highly motivated individual decides to devote the thought, time, energy, money, and emotion needed 'to put on some plays.' Because of this huge personal investment, the organization becomes 'My Theatre'" (172). Hay identifies early first-stage organizations to include Rose McClendon Players (1938-42), and the American Negro Theatre (1940-50). Both these organizations offered affordable entertainment and training for actors. They gave starts and sent to Broadway prominent actors, including Ossie Davis, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, Isabel Sanford, Earle Hyman, and Maxwell Glanville. The importance of these first-stage organizations was the high quality productions they provided and the strong support from the community. The American Negro Theatre had thousands of patrons over a nine-year period, and Broadway producers came to see the shows to find talent to cast in their productions because of founders Abram Hill and Fred O'Neal. "Thus," says Hay, "the American Negro Theatre – first stage or not- was critical to the very notion of African American theatre, whereas Ed Bullins' Black Theatre Workshop (1968-71) is an example of the importance of the later theatre organizations"(173). However, Hays says that ninety percent of the first stage theatres failed for various reasons. He notes:

The first stage organizations functioned like social clubs. They were basically run by their founders, along with boards consisting of casts, relatives, and close friends who would generally confirm a founder's decisions. The boards had distinct advantages and drawbacks. Their principal benefit was that members were highly motivated, hard working, and trustworthy. ... Such devotion carried with it the major weakness of this board, however: Not much got done during the founder's absence. (174)

Hay believes that theatre organizations reach the second phase of development when they add community leaders and professionals to their boards. These boards function like societies or associations. The founder – artistic director is still the decision-maker, but the boards can give some input and direction. The founders enlist people who have recognizable names and status who basically rubber-stamp their decisions. The disadvantage of these boards is that some influential board members can pressure other members to take on policies that are not in their interest or part of their mission. Hay cites several theatres that were in second stage development, New Lafayette Theatre, Negro Ensemble Company, and New Federal Theatre among them, that had to "fold," lose their facility, or decrease production because the support and funding achieved was mainly for the founder and not the organization.

Hay asserts:

Second stage organizations enter the third phase only by empowering their boards. This means that the founder-artistic director gives to the board complete control over determining the organization's mission, establishing fiscal policy, providing adequate resources, hiring the artistic directors, developing and maintaining community resources, and executing the by-laws. Statistics show that boards with these powers help organizations survive longer. (177, 178)

When he wrote this essay, Hay noted that of the five most influential and board-controlled organizations founded during the seventies and the early eighties only one had floundered. And doing quite well were -- Jomandi Productions in Atlanta (1976), the Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul (1978), Crossroads Theatre Company in New Brunswick, New Jersey (1978), Lorraine Hansberry Theatre in San Francisco (1980), and Oakland Ensemble Theatre (1976). Of the five only Oakland Ensemble Theatre (OET)

had done fewer than four plays, and that even OET under the direction of Sharon Walton was recovering. Hay declared, "The evidence overwhelmingly supports the need for founders and puissant artistic directors to surrender their power to boards that are in no way obligated to the founders. ...The founder, additionally, will be delighted to find out just how smoothly an empowered board operates" (178). (Since the time this essay was published in 1994, three of the five companies, Jomandi Productions, Crossroads Theatre, and Oakland Ensemble Theatre have shut down operation). Lorraine Hansberry, Penumbra, Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia, and St. Louis Black Rep are third-stage organizations continuing to do very well. "The encouraging news is that all African American theatre organizations do not die after only a few years. Only those with un-empowered boards do," said Hay (189). Hay's observations highlight the importance of the "Who" in running a theatre company. He asserts that strong, professional, and empowered boards working with competent, skilled artistic directors is one of the ingredients for a smooth running operation.

Professor Harry Elam of Stanford University also says that one of the key factors in the success of a theatre is to have a good board of directors, and their main job is fundraising:

You need a board who cares about fiscal as well as artistic management, and can raise corporate as well as individual contributions. Raising money is a constant. Theoretically you can hire better directors and actors if you have money. When you're operating on a shoestring budget you have to find creative ways to survive and remain solvent. (Elam Interview)

He cites Lorraine Hansberry Theatre in San Francisco as an example:

They position themselves as "the" Black Theatre in San Francisco, and they play politics, give away tickets to theatre, and have special nights at

the theatre. They have developed strong relationships and partnerships with American Conservatory Theater and Berkeley Repertory, where they share marketing postings and discount tickets to each others shows. As a theatre manager, you need to play both the city and national angle. You can't just do quality work, you must do a show that is different in someway or establish what about your company stands out, "find a niche." You must find what can you do in terms of the work to develop a strong company that addresses a certain need. Play selection and how you do it is critical. (Elam Interview)

Hay's observations noted in this section highlight the importance of the "Who" in running a theatre company. He infers that Black Theatres must move beyond the "first stage" of operation to obtain survivability. He suggests that having a strong board of directors will lead to the development of business processes and management skills necessary for stabilization and growth. Hay asserts that strong, professional, and empowered boards working with competent, skilled artistic directors is one of the essential components for a smooth running operation and longevity.

The Theatre Communications Group - Meeting For Theatres of Color, September 11-14, 2003

The Theatre Communications Group (TCG) held a meeting September 11-14, 2003 for twenty artists and management leaders of theatres of color at Gilman Foundation's White Oak Plantation in Yulee, Florida, to discuss the future of theatres of color. From the November 2003, report prepared by Suzanne M. Sato the themes of the deliberations were: funding, artistic process and the work, audience composition, organization development of leaders, staff and artists, education and training programs, and media and criticism (*More Than Mere Survival*, Sato 2). Her report begins with a request from Ron Himes, Founder and Producing Director of the St. Louis Black Repertory Company, to Ben Cameron, Executive Director of Theatre Communications

Group, two years ago asking how TCG could and would help the survival and future of American theatres of color and particularly African American Theatres. “The time had come, he said, to take stock and move these organizations forward as a community” (Sato 2). The Theatre Communications Group, the national organization for the American theatre, responded to Himes' request with this meeting, funded by the Howard Gilman Foundation and the Nathan Cummings Foundation. Ben Cameron says in his letter dated December 17, 2003 to TCG colleagues, “Clearly, there has been much conversation about the vulnerability of theatres of color and multicultural theatres. The intent of this gathering was to advance that conversation a step further --- to come together to quantify the organizational realities facing these theatres and to identify some priority issues that would warrant the investment of time, energy, and money” (Cameron 1). Nineteen theatres of color comprised the participants, included were participants from New Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia, National Asian-American Theatre Company in Brooklyn, GALA Hispanic Theatre in Washington D. C., Ma-Yi Theater Company in New York, and Teatro Vision in San Jose.

Findings reported from the retreat were based on budget size (above or below \$500K) and ethnicity -- African-American, Asian, or Latino. Zannie Voss (Associate Professor, Duke University) surveyed and analyzed data from the nineteen theatre companies; she characterized the data she gathered as “telling your story with numbers” (Sato 10). Findings were gathered in the areas of: Productivity, Earned Income, Expenses, and Contributed Income. Voss led a discussion about working capital during the meeting and said that working capital is “a fundamental building block essential for

organizational growth and the ability to take risks and to meet financial commitments in a timely fashion....it is quite simply what resources you have readily available to pay for operations” (Sato 16). She said that a healthy organization should have at least three months of working capital, and provided a formula for calculation:

Working Capital is measured by taking “total unrestricted net assets” from the theatre’s audited balance sheet, and subtracting “building, equipment, depreciation” (calculated by adding building, equipment less depreciation) and further subtracting unrestricted endowment. Divide the working capital by total expenses to arrive at a working capital ratio. If the theatre’s working capital is negative, the institution is undoubtedly experiencing cash flow stress or financial crisis. If working capital is positive, health is determined by the number of months the organization could exist on working capital alone. (Sato 16)

Breakout groups were held to discuss the challenges that the theatres shared in achieving financial health. They were summarized into five areas:

- Move beyond a hand-to-mouth existence; build a working capital reserve and improve the working capital ratio;
- Increase individual giving both from the board and other individuals, while developing a culturally sensitive approach to donor development;
- Improve single tickets sales while identifying other models for earned revenue that reflect the theatre’s mission and capitalize on its strengths;
- Define a healthy relationship between earned and contributed income; clarify the relationship between marketing and development to maximize their effectiveness;
- Understand and evaluate the organization’s potential for growth (Sato 17)

“Many of the theatres felt that an “off the shelf” model of fundraising or financial health, seems culturally inappropriate and financially unrealistic” (Sato 18). They concluded that the ultimate goal is more than a balanced budget:

How do theatres move beyond equating survival with success, to achieve genuine financial health and stability? A key part of that success might be turning the artists, audience, community and even donors, into shareholders or stakeholders, so that they become invested in the

organization as ticket buyers, donors, in-kind service providers and overall kindred spirits...The idea of building shareholders ---or stakeholders--- goes beyond fundraising to encouraging investment in the organization at every level: investment of time, energy, passion, commitment, and yes, money, to ensure its sustainability as a community resource. (Sato 18)

Other areas for consideration for sustaining theatres of color identified at the TCG retreat were: 1) Collaborations have also come to be a means of survival for many theatre companies. Sato says that “There have been many productive collaborations, but more often theatres of color have felt that they are left holding the short end of the stick, either because of financial, artistic, or perceptual imbalances of power” (21). Many of the theatres of color feel they are used as a feeder system or talent database for the “mainstream” theatres, and are marginalized by the process. Sato recommends that mutual respect, inclusion, and shared authority be part of the upfront discussions; 2) Education and Training – Theatres of color are almost all engaged in some form of education or training program. Funding for these programs, making it part of the theatre’s mission rather than just chasing funds, is among the many factors that must be dealt with in establishing ongoing educational programs; 3) Succession Planning “Who is going to do this work when we’re gone?”; 4) Audience Development; 5) Media and Criticism – Marketing and Reviews/Critics. Sato stated, “So many of the issues raised in this convening are not new; they have been identified, defined, and addressed over the years in local, regional and national programs. Not only must theatres of color move to the next level ---in size, in expertise, in maturity---but they must recognize their progress” (33). From Sato’s report:

This idea of institutional investment must extend to audience members and students as well...People who feel invested in an organization, who are

stakeholders in its health and success, who believe that they are better for the theatre's existence, are people who will attend our events, volunteer time and expertise, and contribute....One conferee noted that Historically Black Colleges and Universities have not only survived, but thrived, because they continue to provide a unique and vital service, not only to African Americans, but to the community as a whole. ... Passion, priority, commitment ---these are the qualities that have ensured survival. Knowledge, artistry, planning, and more commitment---these are the skills we need to move forward, so that theatres of color are able to realize the principles on which they initially relied, i.e. an institution of, by and surrounded by its people. One participant concluded, 'It may be unfair that theatres of color must have a social agenda, but it is a social reality that like it or not, falls in our lap. We must be as aware of the conversations we have with each other, as well as the external ones; to talk only about external validation is to have missed the point.' Another responded, '...I would like to be an instrument for change, or part of the mechanism for change. And the way I can effect that change is to be true to myself, and do what I know. I am a theatre artist, and an artist of color, and I must act from who I am.' Survival in these challenging economic times may be admirable, but it is not sufficient. (34, 35)

In answer to the questions -- Why are theatres of color important?, Why must they continue to justify their distinctiveness, as well as their importance?, What is their relationship to the larger theatre world? "The bottom line is that there are multiple perspectives and we need to see them all. If we don't tell our stories through unfiltered voices, then there is a distorted perspective of the contributions we have made. We must be allowed to tell our stories, to write our stories, to interpret from our own cultural perspective" (34).

Key points from this conference in answer to Langley's questions are community support and contributions, cultural identity, skillful planning and the vitality of ethnic specific theatre. It examined social consciousness, audience and business development, location, ethnic pride, and community connections as means to establish stability.

Sydné Mahone

Sydné Mahone, freelance dramaturg, editor, and former director of play development at the Crossroads Theatre Company in her introduction to *Moon Marked and Touched by Sun* notes that, because of limited funds and the over dependence on corporate, foundation, and government funding, blacks need to diversify their funding strategies. They lack a strong donor group, and most have no endowments or other assets. Her solution:

In order to move from survival mode toward growth, we must examine our relationship to our own community, in all its diversity. As more black people move into the middle and upper classes, the theatre will have to rely on them to assert consumer power on behalf of our cultural institutions. Black-owned corporations and elite entertainers and athletes who tend to contribute to organizations that address more pressing social problems -- poverty, hunger, housing, and drug rehabilitation--must be courted the way we court all other corporations. Our representatives in Washington, D.C. need to be called upon to advocate for the arts. We must challenge the unspoken perception in the black community that theatre--and perhaps art in general--is a frill. (Harrison, et. al 263)

Mahone goes on to say that African American playwrights must return to and reinvent African-engendered elements: such as "signifyin'," ancestral invocation, incorporation of music and movement, magic and storytelling. She suggests that blacks use these cultural charms to voice universal concerns that would advance the recovery of purpose in Black Theatre; she specifically says that when black women playwrights, along with others, focus on these elements the African American community will acknowledge the theatre, and the arts, as a spiritual necessity (Harrison, et al 263). Mahone's concentration is on the core themes of black art based on black aesthetics, and connecting with the black community.

Walter Dallas

Walter Dallas, Artistic Director of Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia, in his essay, "Freedom Theatre: A Case Study" from *Black Theatre's Unprecedented Times*, offers a checklist for Theatre Growth and Position of Strength:

- Have a strong artistic vision
- Have staff, board and community buy-in of the vision
- Place your audience at center stage
- Clarify and activate a strong infrastructure
- Clearly define the long term vision and strategic plans for the future
- Develop a model for selecting new projects to pursue
- Collaborate with theatres with similar visions and goals
- Determine and execute action steps to acquire the resources needed for current and new projects
- Only proceed further with new projects which have first been assessed for their impact on current or future resources
- Eliminate projects that require you to be everything to everybody (Perez, et al 78)

Walter offers this list because he says that, "In the nineteen seventies, artists and community activists were driven by a vision, needed a safe place to commit to their art, to be in touch with their communities, needed funds, and needed to share resources and form teams to strategize for success; we still do!" (78) Dallas outlines the answers to all of the six "W's." He recommends that attention be given to the core principles of audience building, business planning, community focus, funding, and establishing partnerships.

"Whye's" Model (Criteria Established for Survival/Thriving Theatres)

My model for evaluating the selected Black Theatre companies is a combination of the listings of "how to" previously reviewed in this paper. It is clear that there isn't an absolute criteria that will work "across the board." There are different circumstances,

visions and missions that drive the need to establish criteria and standards that do not fit all situations. However, there are some common threads that present themselves throughout this research that appear evident in sustaining and growing a Black Theatre company. The established criteria are noted below and will be used for evaluating the operation of the selected theatre companies in the following chapters. In review: DuBois wrote that Black Theatre should be About us, By Us, For Us, and Near us, and theatre should be a vehicle of the people and a reflection of society. King wrote that Black Theatre must build an audience within the community. The foundation of the Black Theatre must be the community, and the challenge is to understand what it will take to get and keep them there. AGIA's main points are to have a diverse stream of income, leadership, relationships, nurture artists, community, strategic planning, skilled and strong board and management, and collaborations. TCG's focus is on establishing the community as stakeholders, getting them to invest time, commitment, and money in sustaining theatre. Dallas' recommendations also center on community, combined with planning, vision, and a strong infrastructure for growth. Are answers easily forthcoming to the six W's: why, what, where, when, who, wherewith, identified by Langley? Is the idea, the artistic form, the place, the time, the people, and the cost to create and maintain the theatre or theatre project well established and implemented? In my view there are eight areas that must have focus, direction, development and be monitored for stability and growth: commitment to high **artistic quality**, strong and skilled **leadership** (a clear mission, vision and strategic planning) and **management** (a knowledgeable and involved board of directors), **audience development** and **community building**,

relationships/collaborations, money, (secure funding and capital), and marketing.

Henceforth this matrix will be referred to as **ALARMM** for: art, leadership, audience, relationships, money and marketing. I also summarize these into seven principles for usage (**The 7-UPs**): **passion, purpose, production, professionalism, planning, people, and profit.** Drive and commitment to the art are the impetus for the formation of many theatres, but it also takes flexibility, adaptability, creativity, integrity, and treating the art as a business to be embraced by the community, funders, and stakeholders for them to continue to survive and/or thrive.

Chapter Three: Arena Players – A Surviving Black Theatre Company

The nation's oldest Black Theatre company, Karamu House in Cleveland, was founded by whites in 1915. The Arena Players, Inc. is the nation's oldest continuously operating African-American Community Theatre founded by African-Americans. It is located at 801 McCulloh Street in Baltimore, Maryland, in the heart of the city. The Arena Players has operated since 1953. A small group of middle class Baltimoreans met to create what they termed "a little theater" group. The group consisted mainly of teachers who were educated in the literature of the theatre and wanted to indulge their interest in performance while entertaining their peers in the city. These individuals gave liberally of their time and resources to bring their dreams to reality. The founding members were: Samuel H. Wilson, Joseph Wilson, Jacques Wilson, Julius Wilson, Irvin Turner, Jimmy Bell Clay, Doris Dilver, Harvey Denmark, and Mary Carter Smith.

The Arena Players celebrated their 50th year in 2003 and have sustained themselves through years of numerous challenges, difficulties and changing times. In the words of Rodney Orange, Managing Director:

I am so proud to see Arena Players, Inc. reach this 50 year achievement. It speaks volumes about the commitment of a people, the strength of a community, and the spirit of strong founders. There have been challenging times—financial, social, artistic, legal, moral—and I know, there will be more, but once you pass 50 years, there is a calm, a confidence that motivates and insures that whatever is to come next, we as an organization, a united group of friends and people with one common interest, will get through....Our active members range in age from 4 – 84 and I am most proud that through the years, "active membership" has been the call of the day. Everyone participates at Arena Players. Everyone is on stage. Everyone is on committees. Everyone has a voice. Together, we have kept Arena Players here in this historic place, forging a role in Baltimore City that cannot be denied. ("Hello Out There! Fifty Years of Excellence..." 5)

The Arena Players, as Orange indicates, truly operates as a community theater. It is through the continued support of the community in all aspects of their operation that they continue to function.

In its early years the Arena Players was a nomadic group. Their first production, *Hello Out There*, was performed on the campus of Coppin State College in Baltimore (at that time a Black Teacher's College). The Druid Hill YMCA served as their home for the sixth and seventh season, and in 1960 they performed at the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin for their eighth season. The following year they moved to 406 Orchard Street, which would eventually become their permanent home. In 1969 they purchased this property, which became part of the city's renovation plans, and this would be their prime location with the new address of 801 McCulloh Street. The property has undergone several renovation projects that have made it more accommodating and conducive for doing theater. In 1976, the new Arena Playhouse opened. Renovations and improvements also continued through the 1980s and 90s. The structure houses a three hundred seat auditorium and facilities, classrooms, rehearsal space, an office suite, and art gallery.

The current staff/administration consists of Edward Smith, Jr. - President, Board of Directors, Rodney Orange – Managing Director, Ed Terry – Artistic Director, Donald Owens - Director Studio 801, and Catherine Orange – Director of "Youtheatre." They offer programs in Adult Theatre classes (Studio 801), an extensive youth theatre program, Reader's Theatre, and a season of full staged productions. They also offer a playwright competition in partnership with Baltimore's WMAR TV2 . A Women's Committee

organized in 1964 serves as volunteers for greeting theatre-goers, preparing receptions, soliciting sponsors, developing the annual awards banquet, and working in the box office. The Players Group (consisting of dues paying community residents who participate as actors, directors, sound and light technicians, musicians, and choreographers) assists in the operation of the theatre company, providing support to the administrative arm of the organization. They help with fundraising activities, give artistic input, and assist in planning of special events (“Hello Out There! Fifty Years of Excellence...” 28).

In Samuel A. Hay’s study *African-American Theatre, A Historical and Critical Analysis*, he cites the Arena Players’ ability to establish and utilize a strong Board as being key to their success in developing and maintaining their operation. This meant being willing to give the Board complete control over determining the organization’s mission, establishing fiscal policy, providing adequate resources, and hiring artistic directors. “Switching to a powerful board was one of Wilson’s smartest moves: Not only was the Players in 1992 the oldest continuously operating African American community theatre, but it also played to houses filled to 80 percent of capacity in its \$2 million refurbished complex” (Hay 179).

Hay goes on to state that the Arena Players' empowered Board consists of a suitable composition of people (satisfying specific needs of the community), having gone through an interview process with in-depth questions, and an orientation on the history of the organization and their individual responsibilities, ensuring a smooth running operation. This process enables the Arena Players' Board to effectively choose its

members, regulate monetary matters, and limit its participation in the day-to-day operation of the theatre (Hay 179, 180).

The Arena Players have produced a variety of plays in their forty-nine years; among them are *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *Purlie*, *Carmen Jones*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Death of A Salesmen*, *Bubblin' Brown Sugar*, *God's Trombone*, *Wine in the Wilderness*, *Checkmates*, *Flyin' West*, *The Talented Tenth*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *Having Our Say*. They do an average of five shows per season. Their 2003-2004 season includes: *If My Heart Could Sing: A Night with Billie Holiday*, by P. L. Neal and R. Smith; *Come Back, Little Sheba*, by William Inge; *No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs*, by John Henry Redwood; *Who Shot Uncle Benny*, by Mildred Dumas; and *Bits of Broadway, A Century of Black Musical Theatre*. They also offer a youth theatre Christmas production, a class production, Reader's Theatre, a Jazz series and a Comedy series. Arena's ticket prices are a minimal, \$15.00 so that the community will not be "priced out" of attending the theatre. The facilities are also rented out to the community and organizations for functions and events, this is an important segment of income for them. The partnering with community organizations to sponsor productions is also something that has greatly assisted in sustaining their efforts over the years (Catherine Orange Interview).

Many nationally known actors including Miki Grant, Damon Evans, and the late Howard Rollins received their early training with the Arena Players. Other well-known artists who have supported the theatre are Charles Dutton, Trazana Beverly and Al Freeman. Arena Players has always and continues to use volunteer actors and technical

support for all of their productions. They have served and given artistic opportunities to thousands of people over the years. The Youtheatre trains over 150 young people per year. The shared ticket sales plan brings churches, clubs, and other community organizations to the theatre, and proves to be beneficial to the theatre group as well as these organizations.

The Arena Players play a significant role in the Baltimore Arts community and nationally. They are a member of the Baltimore Theatre Alliance and Greater Baltimore Playwrights Festival and Artscape. They are represented on numerous government and community committees, and try to stay involved in city activities, so that the city will be interested in their work. They receive their main funding and ongoing support from the Baltimore Community Foundation, The Family League of Baltimore, WMAR TV, Radio One, Ideal Savings and Loan, Allfirst Bank, Maryland State Arts Council, Mayor's Advisory Council on Art and Culture, and Mano Schwartz ("Hello Out There! Fifty Years of Excellence..." 25).

In 2000, I visited Arena Players and spoke with, Managing Director, Rodney Orange and part-time Receptionist Mr. Calvin Talbert. Mr. Talbert was an absolutely delightful, elderly man, who had been with the Arena Players for over thirty years. He told me several stories of the development of the theater over the years, and how he had been a professional dancer performing worldwide. He informed me of the difficulties the company and personnel faced over the years, in growing and adapting to change. In talking with Mr. Orange, who joined the Arena Players 17 years ago, I got a real sense for the amount of work and challenges the theater faces. He informed me of the difficulties

in getting funding, paying the bills, and continuing their operation. In an article, “Arena Players Ready For Next Act” in *SunSpot* by C. T. Goodman, Ed Terry expressed at their 50th anniversary, “It’s all good that we have been around for 50 years,...but there’s a constant struggle to maintain ourselves. By hook or crook, we’ve managed to hang in there” (1). Orange also expresses in this article, that “A lot has changed for us in 50 years. Community theater doesn’t mean the same thing. These changes didn’t happen overnight. We’ve had to change how we do business, because that’s really what it is—a business” (2).

In 1996 the Arena Players almost shut their doors due to the sluggish economy, the death of the founder, Sam Wilson, and a \$175,000 debt. They owed \$60,00 to Baltimore Gas & Electric (and almost had their electricity turned off). They were having a hard time getting people in the seats; they turned to the community for help. Orange instituted ways to get them back on track; he limited productions that required expensive costumes and sets, enhanced their internationally renowned children’s program, rented out the theatre to community groups, and started a jazz and comedy series in an effort to raise funds, which proved to be successful. They are now debt free (4). Orange informed me of his plans to get involved in local politics and the importance of networking in getting needed support for the theatre.

The Arena Players get competition from mainstream theatres such as the Lyric Theatre and Center Stage (which have begun to produce African-American works) and from the Urban Circuit plays, (which appeal to large African American audiences). Dr. William Cook, member of AGIA, is quoted in the *SunSpot* article in regard to this

problem, “These challenges are not insurmountable. This does not mean death or tragedy. (sic) You need to adapt your program to these special circumstances” (5). The article states that this is where the institute, (referring to AGIA) steps in with education and support. Cook goes on to say, “There’s the assumption in the African-American community that business skills are something you get from osmosis. We, as a people who have been locked out of business participation for a long time, have not been exposed to other kinds of thinking” (5).

I visited the theatre again on August 15, 2003 and spoke with Catherine Orange (Rodney's mother) to get her views on the current status of the Arena Players. Upon entering the theatre I noticed the art-work that was displayed throughout the facility, and there seemed to be a real atmosphere of community. There were many plaques and awards that were also displayed throughout the theatre lobby. The Youth Theater group was actively rehearsing in the main theater auditorium. In Mrs. Orange’s office there were at least one hundred headshots of performers (the famous and the not-so-famous) that had trained and performed with the Arena Players lining the walls. Although she was busy and anxious to get to her rehearsal with the kids, she was gracious enough to spend some time with me. She was very appreciative of the support they have received over the years from the community organizations and businesses (noted earlier). Mrs. Orange is very committed to the growth of Arena Players and artistic quality of their productions; and of course her main focus is the youth theatre. She is proud and excited about the work they do, and the benefits it has for the kids, the theatre, and the community. She showed me the award the Arena Players had recently received from the

National Black Theater Festival for “Longevity” in producing Black Theater. Producer and director of the Festival, Larry Leon Hamlin said, “To be able to stay in continuous production for 50 years is a prestigious accomplishment. I look at Arena Players and say OK maybe we can create an institution. It takes a really great sense of financial management, long term financial planning, because so many companies have fallen by the wayside” (Goodman 3).

When I asked Mrs. Orange what she considered the ideal circumstances and goals for the theater are, she replied, “of course financial stability, high quality artistic productions, a full and busy class schedule, and an expansion and upgrade of their facility.” She went on to tell me that they have an annual budget of approximately \$150,000. She mentioned that her biggest concerns were keeping the bills paid and audience development. There were times, she said, when the \$25 membership fee has directly contributed to paying bills. They have not, nor plan to do a special fundraiser for this year. The per night rental fee for the theatre is \$1,500.00; this generates additional income for them. From a box office standpoint she said that audience development is an ongoing challenge and that musicals sell better. We had a short conversation about the urban circuit plays, and her dislike of them because of the lack of character development and depth of the material. But, she said “If it means keeping the doors open and the lights on, I may have to break down and do one since they sell out down the street!” She acknowledged that the urban circuit plays sell extremely well to Black audiences, and when one comes to town to the Lyric Theatre its 4,000 seat house is filled to capacity!

Mrs. Orange said that collaborations and partnerships have been vital to their continued existence. Over the years they have formed an extensive partnership with Coppin State College and collaborated with several community and civic groups. They do not pay any of their performers or technical staff; they are all volunteers (I expressed my surprise that artists and technicians are still willing to work for no monetary gain). This demonstrates the influence and importance of this theater company to the community; however, it may in turn have a negative effect on the artistic and professional quality of their performances. The Artistic Committee selects the plays that are produced. Each production runs for about a month, consisting of 12 to 16 performances. The Youth Theatre program is conducted in five-week sessions, culminating in a performance. The sessions are split into different class groupings by age and level -- 5-7 years, 8 years, 9 & 10 years, and preteens/teens to advanced. There is an approximate budget of \$9,000 for the Youtheatre, and these Instructors are paid --\$30 an hour. The Youtheatre gives instruction covering several disciplines: Drama, Dance, Music, and Theatre Tech. The sessions are at a cost of \$475.00 to the participants, although many scholarships are offered. The Youth Theatre does performance presentations in February, at Christmas, and in the Spring each year; Mrs. Orange is kept very busy conducting and coordinating this very successful program.

Arena Players operates with a ten member Board; at one-time it had twenty-two members, but they found that such a large Board was unworkable. The Board meets four times a year. Mrs. Orange mentioned that they have good relations with the local Baltimore papers, *The Baltimore Sun* and *The Baltimore Times*. They receive coverage

and reviews on a regular basis. Nationally known performers have come back to the theater in support of their programs, which brings well needed publicity and audience attendance. Andre De Shields, celebrated actor and Baltimore native, was honored at their 50th Anniversary event.

At the close of our conversation, it was evident to me that The Arena Players had similar challenges of fundraising, audience development, sustaining programming, and budgeting that most small culturally specific (and nonculturally specific) theaters have, and that their ongoing survival is based on their commitment to the community and the community's involvement in all aspects of the activities that occur at the theater. In her *SunSpot* article, Dianne Hood, Theater and Dance Program Officer at the Maryland State Arts Council said, "Arena Players sees what the community needs and then serves that need. The Arena Players has for many years, and continues to be, a valued component in this vibrant arts community" (6). Rodney Orange also states "We're still a community theater, in spite of it all...We have a five-year plan and development efforts under way to achieve it. Luckily we realized, before it was too late, that we are now running our community theater in a new reality" (6).

Summary - Model Assessment

The flexibility and adaptability of the leadership and management at Arena Players is one of the key factors in their survival. They have been creative in making the necessary adjustments to keep their operation running. In regard to the six W's: They definitely know **why** – to preserve cultural history; they know **what** they are producing -- ongoing seasons of Black Theatre and educational and training workshops; they know

where they are performing because they have their own facility in the black community (in a city that is 64% black); they know **when** -- they have a scheduled season of productions and activities; they know **who** -- the staff and community volunteer actors and technicians; the **wherewith** has been a problem that has surfaced many times over the years, but they keep finding ways to overcome those hurdles. The leadership of The Arena Players is committed to the community and the community remains committed to the theater. Increased support, resources, and financing are desperately needed to grow the organization, but for now they are doing the essential things to continue to exist and be a central part of the community.

The future of the Arena Players remains tenuous and challenging. **On their art:** The Arena has been successful in producing a full season of plays and activities for fifty years. They have produced a variety of plays, by blacks and non-blacks that have received relative support. The Arena's productions are performed and staged by volunteers from the community, sometimes this is evident in the production quality; because these are unpaid, non-professionals there is a limitation on the talent available to the theatre company. **On their leadership/management:** There have been times over the years when the leadership has waned and been in transition. This flux has had a negative effect on the artistic production level and administrative operations. Strategic planning and the implementation thereof does not appear to be as focused as needed. It has remained somewhat a family operation and is run by a small group of people that have been involved in the company for a number of years. **On their audience/community development:** The Arena has sustained support from the

community. Operating about, for, of, and near the community. They have been flexible in working with the community organizations and as a resource for the youth.

Maintaining consistency in their ticket sales and support of their productions is an ongoing problem. Their partnerships with civic organizations are essential to their operation. **On their relationships/collaborations:** They have been effective in forming relationships with the community, city government, and media. They are viewed as a vital and historical component of the city. However, they could probably benefit from forming alliances with other professional theatre companies. **On their money/finances:** Establishing capital funds and financial stability is an ongoing struggle for The Arena. Increasing their annual budget and obtaining the needed funds for upkeep and maintenance is a chronic concern. Reaching a level of relative financial comfort is necessary to grow The Arena to a thriving organization. **On their marketing:** The restricted finances of the theatre company limits their marketing exposure. They use community ads to support their production programs, and have Gala fundraisers to support their educational activities. They receive a substantial amount of their funding from government and corporate grants. In summary of the elements of **ALARMM** -- the art, leadership, marketing and money are continuing problems for the Arena Players.

Of the 7-UPs, **passion, purpose, and people** are evident in The Arena's operation. The principles of **production, planning, professionalism, and profit** need more direction, attention and focus. These missing principles are indicative of why The Arena Players is surviving and not thriving.

In the next chapter we will review a thriving theatre company, St. Louis Black Repertory. They are receiving national acclaim and attention; what is the basis of their current success?

Chapter Four: St. Louis Black Repertory – A Thriving Black Theatre

Ron Himes founded St. Louis Black Repertory (Black Rep) in 1976 while a student at Washington University in St. Louis. Many of his friends in the Theatre Department were not receiving the practical experience in campus productions due to the lack of roles for African Americans, so Himes and others began producing their own plays on campus. The company began touring on college campuses and eventually found a home in Greeley Presbyterian Church's former sanctuary in 1981, which the company converted into a theatre space and renamed The 23rd Street Theatre. In 1992, the company moved into the newly renovated Grandel Square Theatre in the heart of Grand Center, St. Louis' arts and entertainment district (Stlouisblackrep.com). The Black Rep has continued to experience record growth in production values, subscriptions, attendance, and contributed support. As a result of Himes' leadership, The Black Rep has become highly respected, both locally and nationally, for its quality productions, education, and community programs. In 1978 Himes received a B.S. in business administration from Washington University. C. B. Adams in his article "The Performance of a Lifetime" says of Himes, "Twenty-five years later, Himes has become all the things he aspired to be, yet none of them specifically. He is part artist and part businessman. He is part actor and part activist. He is founder and producing director of the ... (Black Rep), one of the most influential theater companies both nationally and locally..." (Adams 2).

The Black Rep's mission is to provide platforms for theatre, dance and other creative expressions from the African-American perspective that heighten the social and

cultural awareness of its audiences. They had an annual attendance of 175,00 last year. Black Rep remains the pre-eminent African-American performing arts organization in Missouri and is one of the five largest African-American performing arts companies in the US. (St. Louis Black Rep Fact Sheet). However, Himes reports that he recently attended the Arts and Education Council's 13th Annual Arts Awards, it was a festive evening celebrating arts, patrons, and educators contributing to the arts in the region. For three hours, he says speaker after speaker praised arts organizations in the community, at no point in the entire evening was there any mention of the largest African American theatre company in America, which just happened to be located in Saint Louis. Himes says, "Something's wrong here. Something don't fit right. ...Was this some gross oversight? Isn't the Black Rep considered to be one of the 'major' arts organizations in our community?" ("The Black Rep 2003/4 Season" 2). The fact that Black Rep could be overlooked in this setting is a discouraging indicator for those smaller Black Theatres that are barely surviving; how will they ever gain the recognition and credibility they seek if Black Rep, a thriving Black Theatre can't get it?

The Black Rep's award-winning Touring Company performs more than 170 shows each year for schools, community groups, corporations, churches and other organizations in St. Louis and throughout the Midwest region (Stlouisblackrep.com). They reach over 60,000 students (St. Louis Black Rep Fact Sheet). The Black Rep's Professional Guest Artist Program provides young actors with training and performing opportunities through the Touring Company.

Black Rep has performed at the National Black Theatre Festival, The Kennedy Center, and presented more than a dozen world premieres. Black Rep produces five plays each season, including works by established as well as emerging black playwrights. It's scheduled 2004 season includes: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* by August Wilson, *The River Niger* by Joseph Walker, *Home the Musical* by Samm-Art Williams and Grenoldo Frazier, *Pretty Fire* by Charlene Woodard, *Raisin* by Robert Nemiroff and Charlotte Zaltberg, and the 11th Annual Woodie Awards.

Pam Droog in her article in *St. Louis Commerce Magazine*, March 2001:

In January, the Black Rep began its 24th season \$50,000 in the black. "We sold 1,900 subscriptions compared to 1,500 last year. Single-ticket and group sales are up, too," says Black Rep board chairman Debra Denham, vice president of community affairs at BJC HealthCare. "People were so anxious to get back after such an exciting season last year, the phones just rang off the hook once tickets went on sale." (1)

Ron Himes developed the Woodie Awards to honor the outstanding actors, directors, and designers, from the Black Rep's mainstage season and to recognize corporate contributions to the arts. The Awards are named for one of the pioneers of the Black Theatre Movement, Woodie King, Jr., whose thirty-year career has made him one of the most prolific and prestigious African American theatre producers in the country; he has produced more than 120 plays over the past 20 years. Funds raised from this star-studded event support the Black Rep's education and community programs such as the new Teen Tech program (this program allows each teenager to gain experience in stage management) touring shows and student matinees, workshops for children and adults, summer theatre camp and the Professional Guest Artist Program. Last year's gala raised a record \$150,000 (Droog 2).

The Black Rep also offers an eight week Summer Conservatory that is designed to provide young people with an opportunity to expand their creative talents and imagination. Children receive instruction in theatre, dance, voice, writing, and hip-hop. Campers also prepare for and perform in a special production for their families at the end of the session.

Other events include a Noon day Series, lively and informative discussions with directors, designers, and cast members of the Rep's productions and followed by lunch, and Black Rep also sponsors an annual cruise -- this theatre has a real presence in the community.

The St. Louis Black Repertory Guild, started in 1981 by Ron Himes is a member based organization of volunteers. Guild members are charged to promote the Black Rep by helping to increase philanthropic support, by spearheading fundraising events, telemarketing campaigns, ushering, and selling promotional materials and concessions. The Guild functions as an independent entity of the Black Rep and works with the Board of Directors and staff by continuing to provide needed support to the company.

Black Rep's funders include American Airlines, Anheuser Busch, AT&T Foundation, BJC Health System, The Black Rep Guild, The Boeing Company, Emerson, Enterprise Rent-A-Car, Famous Barr, Fleming Communications, The Ford Foundation, Fox Associates, Grand Center, Inc., GenAmerica, Graybar Foundation, Interface Construction company, KMOV-TV, KSDK-TV, Kwame Building Group, Michelob, Missouri Lottery, Monsanto Fund, O. J. Photo & Supply, Rodgers Townsend, Seagram Americas, Shubert Foundation, Southwestern Bell Foundation, The Whitaker Foundation,

and Working Capital Fund. They also receive funding from: the St. Louis Regional Arts Commission, Missouri Arts Council, and National Endowment for the Arts. The Black Rep is also a funded member of The Arts & Education Council of Greater St. Louis, and is a constituent member of Grand Center, and a member of the Theater Communications Group. They also have an individual annual giving program. Funds raised through this program are used to support the St. Louis Black Repertory Company's community and education programs as well as its mainstage productions. Their established levels of giving are from \$1 to \$1,000 (Stlouisblackrep.com). Approximately 55% of the Company's revenue is from earned income; the balance from donations made from individuals, corporations, foundations and government agencies ("Facts At A Glance," St. Louis Black Rep Brochure).

The St. Louis Black Rep is in its 27th season, and has experienced many high and low points. In the 1997 article, "The Father of Black Theatre in Saint Louis, An Interview with Ron Himes of 'The Saint Louis Black Repertory Company'" by Michael O'Brian and Jill Barrett, Himes highlights some of the difficulties and focuses on the elements required to have success in Black Theatre. In 1981, they opened their first season and the first show was a black musical revue, which sold out the 200-seat space at the Presbyterian Church. They expanded their efforts to include a dance company and a season of five shows. Himes expressed that, "Everybody did everything: directing, acting, lighting. Over the next few years, that core worked on every production. We weren't paying much, if anything. We built a strong reputation doing musical theatre...they became the 'black cultural clearing house.' We were filling a cultural void"

(O'Brian 2). These sentiments are representative of many community theaters; there is a necessity for everyone to participate in doing whatever it takes to get things done.

Without sufficient funding, things are accomplished through sheer dedication and commitment rather than financial rewards. In these situations when the non-monetary satisfaction associated with involvement in the theater is no longer enough to compensate for the time and labor contributed, then there is evidence of a decline in productivity.

Himes goes on to say that they had problems because they didn't have a five-year plan in place; they were not strategically prepared for their move to a larger, more technical and expensive facility. The Corporate support they enjoyed in one year of success was not there the following year, which caused great financial burden. Another problem he identified was the lack of theater reviews they received, "the lack of black reviewers has caused a lack of cultural perspective that is sorely needed...on occasion, we don't even get reviews in the black newspapers"(3). The inconsistency of funds, lack of reviews, poor planning, changes in location are all factors that can lead to the downfall of a theater organization. The ability to withstand these conditions is the challenge and test of theater management and personnel. Renner in her article "Black Theaters in a Fight for Survival," says that a handful of institutions thrive, such as the St. Louis Black Repertory Company, while many others fight to stay afloat. What makes the difference according to Ron Himes, is that it helps to have a responsive local funding agency and the long-term partnership of a major corporation, "When we moved into our new space we had growth in our corporate sponsors and audiences, but we also had to absorb tremendous expenses and overhead. Our annual budget is \$1.3 million and growing. The Ford

Foundation gave us a three-year grant through their 'working capital' program. Of late, funding agencies and foundations have begun to commit resources to stabilizing institutions. We want to be here to train the next generation" (2). Currently their annual budget is 1.8 million and they have operated with a surplus for the past three years. Black Rep does not own their facility but are a resident company from January to June each year. Expenses for the six-month period are approx. \$60,000-\$75,000 ("Facts At A Glance," St. Louis Black Rep Brochure).

Black Rep has found ways to overcome obstacles and is flourishing in their development and production at this time. They have found a formula that is currently working. Buddy Butler, (professor at San Jose State University, writer, and director), has directed several plays at Black Rep, *Bourbon at the Border*, *Conversations on a Dirt Road* and *River Niger* among them. In Black Rep's February 2004 brochure, Butler says of Black Rep, "I was impressed with the shows they had done, their level of professionalism as well as the reputation of the writers that had been doing work here – like Samm-Art Williams – an old friend of mine from my days with the Negro Ensemble Company" ("The Black Rep 2003/4 Season" 2). In a telephone conversation with notable playwright, director, and producer Samm Art Williams on December 23, 2003, he voices similar comments about St. Louis Black Rep:

Ron has a good thing going there. It is one of the few theater companies that you call where you can get adequate responses from anyone you talk to. Everyone is aware of what is going on and informed of what decisions have been made and what their role is. It is a thorough running machine, and there is no 'one' person that is making it happen. It is a good company run by good people. (Williams Interview)

St. Louis Black Rep collaborated with Mr. Williams to produce a premiere musical version of his award winning play *Home* in March of 2004.

St. Louis Black Rep is thriving because it has a strong artistic and business leader, and sound leadership. They have an astute board, which is one of the key components of its current success. Some of the board members are Debra Denham (board president), Cheryl Sharpe (managing director), Susan Hagen (business manager), Richard Greene, Traci Blackmon, Audrey Jones, Emmanuel Kintu, Dr. George Murphy, Larry Richardson, Gloria Ross, Peter Sargent, and Dr. Moisy Shopper. Droogan notes Himes' comments on his board:

"...when you generate only 50 to 60 percent of the \$1.5 million operating budget you need at the box office, you still have to raise 40 to 50 percent of overhead. That's where an active and committed board comes in." The Black Rep's 26-member board is "perhaps the strongest we've had in the history of the organization, Himes says. Members represent community groups, educational institutions, law, banking, professional sports, media, medicine and more. Most board members serve three-year terms on a rotating basis. "This gives us continuity, and helps us maintain a leadership trail to develop officers," Himes says. The full board meets bi-monthly, and the executive, nominating, finance, marketing, development and facilities committees meet monthly. New candidates are nominated by individual board members. "In areas where we targeted a specific need, we identified a couple of people we were interested in and went after them," Himes says. "We've never had anyone we have sought not accept a position on the board. That speaks well for the work the board does and how it's perceived in the community." (1)

Black Rep has made the right connections, formed the right partnerships and nurtured the right relationships. They have an ongoing partnership with Washington University; Karen Lucas, Assistant Director of the Department of Humanities talks about their relationship in support of Black Rep:

The Centers objective is to increase awareness about their programs. "The night is not only a fundraiser it is a friend raiser." ... We thought there were a lot of people that don't know what a treasure the Black Rep is. Some people may think the Black Rep is not for them or feel they will not understand it, but if they get there I know they will love it. (Elkins 1, 2)

They have an incredible amount of community and corporate support. All the essentials are present to effectively operate a quality theatre; they have capital funds and are investing in the future:

The board also recently kicked off a major African-American giving initiative, the Cornerstone Project, which will help build cash reserves and establish an endowment. "We hope to raise \$150,000 to \$200,000 the first year, then \$50,000 or more annually," Himes says. "It's ambitious but to support our expanding artistic programming, we've got to be ambitious." The Black Rep board's most recent achievement has been receiving an equity investment of \$128,000 from the Working Capital Fund, a collaborative effort of the Ford Foundation and the Nathan Cummings Foundation. The Working Capital Fund is a four-year program designed to strengthen nationally-recognized arts groups of color that have reached a critical juncture in their development. An additional source of satisfaction for the Black Rep board is that all five mainstage plays have been underwritten by corporate sponsors. "This is exciting for us, because it allows us to focus more on the art," Denham says. (Droog 1)

The community is committed to Black Rep's mission and wants to be a part of the organization. Himes notes:

No other group has made the commitment to develop artists of color, and to build the kind of diversity this community really needs, Himes says. I think we've been very successful at that, and you can see it on any night at the theatre, where we undoubtedly have the most diverse audience of any performing arts organization in the region. (1)

They have an audience demographic of 70% African American and other minorities and 30% Caucasian ("Facts At A Glance," St. Louis Black Rep Brochure).

Himes continues to make good decisions and ask the right questions at the

right times. He has created a strong infrastructure, has clear artistic and strategic vision, and has acquired the funds to finance it. Although, he says, "For us, the biggest challenge is to be considered a major cultural institution but not to be supported at the same level as the other major cultural institutions by the philanthropic and corporate communities and the community at large" (Adams 4). C. B. Adams reports that "He [Himes] dreams of the time when the company owns its own theater, facilities, and artistic community center. The company's performance space at Grandel Theatre is leased; its administrative offices are across the street, and the sets have to be built at another distant facility" (5).

St. Louis Black Repertory is a model project at this time. The educational programs, productions, marketing, board and audience development have all gelled together in the right place and time through good leadership and management efforts. St. Louis demonstrates and incorporates all of Langley's and many of AGIA's and Walter Dallas' criteria for success. Himes says:

Time after time I am asked why is there a need for a company like The Black Rep. My response usually has something to do with...where would you see a production like *The River Niger* if we were not here? How many plays by an African American playwright are included in the list of American classics. Who would celebrate the rich canon of African-American literature? ... So thank you for subscribing to the Black Rep and thank you for recognizing why we need to be. And most of all thank you for supporting the next "national treasure." ("The Black Rep 2003/4 Season" 3)

Summary - Model Assessment

St. Louis Black Rep has successfully answered all the questions to the **six W's**. They know **why** – to provide platforms for creative expression from a black perspective

that heighten social and cultural awareness; they know **what** -- excellent Black Theatre, training and workshops; they know **where** they are performing because they have their own facility; they know **when** --continuous full and quality season productions; they know **who** -- a skillful and knowledgeable leader, and professional actors, directors and technicians; they have found the means to be secure in the **wherewith** for the past few years, with a dedicated board, committed audience, and a skilled, smart leader; and they are financially stable.

On their art: The consensus in the Black Theatre community is that St. Louis Black Rep “has it going on.” They are producing classic and contemporary works, on a high artistic level. They hire professional directors, actors, and technicians for their productions. They offer a superb touring show and education programs. **On their leadership/management:** Ron Himes has been the founder and executive producer of the theatre since its inception. He has used his business savvy in operating the company, and has remained true and focused to his mission. This consistency and focus is probably a key factor in the growth of the company. The company has taken time to plan and effectively implement those plans. The strong and diverse board enables the organization to have an extended presence and access to multiple resources. **On their audience/community development:** The Black Rep’s audience has grown consistently over the last few years. Their volunteer base is committed and supportive of the organization. Although their productions are ethnic specific, they have a diverse audience that appreciates and values the theatre company.

On their relationships/collaborations: They have a solid relationship with Washington University, with Ron Himes lecturing on campus, and the University supporting his productions. Himes received an honorary doctor of arts degree in 1998 from Washington University and in 2003 he was appointed as the Henry E. Hampton, Jr. Artist-in-Residence. Himes has been on panels and councils for a number of arts organizations, including the National Endowment for the Arts and the Arts and Humanities Commission. St. Louis Black Rep produced *The Meeting* at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. They are members of the Arts & Education Council of Greater St. Louis and a member of Theatre Communications Group. **On their money/finances:** Black Rep is operating in the “black” today, they have established capital funds and look to continue to grow their assets. They receive large grants and funding from public and private organizations. **On their marketing:** Black Rep receives lots of national attention and is held in high regard. The community embraces them and they continue to expand their circle of potential audience members. Black Rep has used its marketing budget wisely in selling/promoting itself and gaining stakeholders. They put together major fundraisers and receive celebrity support in promoting the company and enlisting interest in their activities. In summary of the elements of **ALARMM** – all of them: the art, leadership, audience, relationships, marketing and money are all working together and balanced at this time.

The **7-Ups** are apparent in Black Rep’s operations: **passion** by Black Rep's strong commitment to the artistic quality of their productions; **purpose** through their mission to provide platforms for theatre, dance, and other creative expressions from the African

American perspective; **production** by the high artistic quality in their programming and variety of events and activities that are well received in the community; **professionalism** by Black Rep's integrity, administrative processes and procedures and in dealing with the general public, their website and promotional materials are of high quality, using high-tech graphic techniques, on high quality paper, and give complete information; **planning** due to their solid infrastructure and management team that have worked together to make effective decisions and grow the organization; **people** by the skilled board, efficient staff, supportive audience, and strong partner organizations that keep Black Rep functioning and progressing; and **profit** by the fact that they are currently operating in the black, and have over a million dollar budget. The manifestation of these principles is seen in the quality of St. Louis Black Rep's performances, programs, administration, and overall operations. If their audience continues to grow, and board remains in tact, and the artistic quality remains high Black Rep will continue to thrive and flourish in the years to come. There is excitement in and about the company, they are definitely one of the country's premier Black Theatre companies, if not "the" premier Black Theatre company.

In the following chapter Crossroads Theater Company in New Jersey will be explored which just a few years ago was considered the pre-eminent Black Theatre company in the nation. Why is it that this theatre company which had tremendous artistic success, substantial funding and support is no longer in operation?

Chapter Five: Crossroads Theater -No Longer A Thriving Black Theatre

A 1999 Tony Award recipient for Outstanding Regional Theatre, Crossroads Theatre Company was founded in 1978 by Ricardo Khan and L. Kenneth Richardson and became the “nation’s premier African-American theatre.” In its somewhat tumultuous history, the company presented world premieres of *The Colored Museum*, *Spunk*, *The Love Space Demands*, *Black Eagles* and *Sheila’s Day*. Its first Broadway production was the Tony nominated musical revue *It Ain’t Nothin’ But the Blues*.

In October 1991 Crossroads moved into a new 264-seat state-of-the art facility complete with rehearsal space, administrative offices, market space, and costume shop. Through its mainstage productions and community and education programs Crossroads reached a diverse audience. Crossroads received support from several esteemed public figures and leaders such as: Bill Cosby, President George Bush, General Colin Powell, Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King, Nick Ashford, Valerie Simpson and Phylicia Rashad. Crossroads also, received the National Governors’ Association Award for Distinguished Service in the Arts and was designated a Major Impact Arts Institution by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Department of State.

Crossroads’ mission was: To be recognized as a national, world-class theatre for the exploration of the African-American experience as well as its interconnection with other cultures; To create a nurturing environment and working laboratory for writers and artistic collaborators in the theatre, supporting the commissioning, development, presentation, and documentation of new works for the World stage; To build a multicultural audience and work force that embraces and supports the Crossroads

experience as a truthful celebration of the culture, history, spirit and voices of the African Diaspora; and through this, to build bridges of better understanding between people of all backgrounds in this society and the world; and To preserve and uphold the highest values, and standards of artistic and creative excellence in all that we do (Crossroads Website 2000).

From Crossroads Theatre Company Fact Sheet in 1999: Crossroads had an annual operating budget of \$2.7 million; 43% was earned income, 57% contributed. Their goal was to increase the earned income. They had a plan to launch a National Stabilization Campaign to raise \$10 million, which would be used to eliminate the theatre's \$1.3 million debt, purchase the building they were residing in, and develop an operational endowment and arts/education endowment. The total audience attendance was 41,5000, representing 54% of seats sold. Khan said, " In the beginning, most of our subscribers were white. At that time, the African-American community didn't have a habit of subscribing to a theatre. Most of the black people who came to Crossroads came in groups. Eventually we ended up with an audience that was half-and-half for most of our history" (38). The success and artistic quality of *Crossroads Theater* was recognized nationally. Crossroads was regarded not simply as a showplace, but as Rev. Buster Soaries, pastor of First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens said "it is a gathering place for the reclamation of genuine community" (1). Ricardo Khan in *American Theatre* interview in July 2001, said:

Crossroads was really about creating an environment for us to do our work well. It was not a political statement or the fallout of a social phenomenon. What Lee Richardson and I wanted to do in 1978 was simply to create a space for us as actors and directors to do our work--and

that's what we did. We wanted people to understand that even though we were a professional theatre, it didn't mean that we were different from or outside the community, the community there being primarily black and Latino. Also it didn't mean that there was no role to play (in the audience, at the board table, on staff or on stage) for people who were traditional theatergoers, who were predominantly white in the area. So that's where we get our name, Crossroads. It's the coming together of people from many backgrounds to try, I suppose, to create a whole new world... All the same, Crossroads was intrinsically black in perspective, because that's who we were. Whenever we did works that brought in another culture--whether that other culture was South African, or West Indian, or European American, or Jewish--it was always to help us redefine our relationship as African-American people with that other culture. Our agenda was not about being "multicultural"--we already were that. It was about trying as African-American people to be honest on stage with our desire to redefine who we are for ourselves and for our audience-and to explore in depth our relationship with other people. It was black because we're black. (1, 2)

Crossroads produced over 100 productions in their twenty plus year history. They offered a four-play mainstage season by leading African American artists. In addition to their mainstage season there was an annual Genesis Festival of new plays – a two-week series of staged readings and workshops. It was the artistic home to writers, composers, directors, and actors through its Associate Artists program, which included: Avery Brooks, Olu Dara, Ruby Dee, Micki Grant, Leslie Lee, Emily Mann, Oyamo, Ntozake Shange, Anne Devere Smith, and George C. Wolfe.

Crossroads 1999-2000 season consisted of *Homework*, by Kim Coles and Charles Randolph-Wright, *Play On*, conceived by Sheldon Epps, book by Cheryl West, *Yellow Eyes*, by Migdalia Cruz, *Venice* by Kathleen McGhee-Anderson. Their 1998-1999 season included: *Blues For An Alabama Sky*, *It Ain't Nuthin But the Blues*, *Ali* and *Lost Creek Township*. In 1996 they co-produced *Nomathemba* (a South African musical) with the Kennedy Center, which received rave reviews from *The Washington Times* and *The*

New York Times. George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* was developed and staged at Crossroads in 1986, and was a tremendous success. Their ticket prices ranged from twenty-four dollars to forty dollars. Their giving contribution programs ranged from twenty-five dollars to one thousand dollars (Crossroads Website 2000).

Bill Cosby is quoted on Crossroads' website, "The plays you're going to see here will be wonderful. They'll be plays that are going to make Manhattan jealous. Sooner or later you will realize that Crossroads is a very hip place." Khan on his commitment to the community in the *American Theatre* interview:

When you're marketing a black play, the best thing is word of mouth. If you're going to pay for advertisements, then pay for the radio first, as opposed to print, because radio is about personal connections. ... It was always important to make that one-on-one connection with people in the community. People knew that when you came to Crossroads you were still in the community. I never called any of our programs "outreach" programs. Why are we going to reach out to something that's already here? (38)

Crossroads received funding from the state of New Jersey throughout its existence. It was also supported by the Minneapolis Foundation's Working Capital Fund Program for Minority Cultural Institutions through a grant from the Ford Foundation. It was the recipient of grants from the national Endowment for the Arts, The Rockefeller Foundation, The Ford Foundation, The Nathan Cummings Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The Blanche and Irving Laurie Foundation, The Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays, The Shubert Foundation and The Edler Hawkins Foundation. Corporate funding was received from Johnson & Johnson, AT&T, Seagrams, The Prudential Foundation, The Merck Company Foundation, PNC Bank,

Bristo-Myers Squibb, The CIT Group, The Bell Atlantic Foundation, Colgate-Palmolive and Deloitte Consulting.

Crossroads' Board of Trustees in 1999-2000 were: Dale Caldwell, President (National Director of MBA Recruiting, Deloitte Consulting), James Norfleet, Vice President (Colgate Palmolive Technology Center), Dee Henoach, Secretary (Psychotherapist), Melanie A. Nicolson, CPA, Treasurer (Senior Financial Analyst, Colgate Palmolive Company), Gregory Brewer (Vice President, Human Resource The CIT Group), Larry Daniels (General Manager, Hyatt Regency New Brunswick), Vernon Hammond (Senior Vice President, The Management Ark), Ricardo Khan (Co-Founder and Artistic Director), Sandra Rhue (Director, Access Services, Telecordia Technologies), Linwood Tindall (Retired Director, Equal Opportunity Affairs, Bristol-Myers Squibb Company) and Jean A. Williams (President, Crossroads Theatre Guild, and Educator, Plainfield School District) (Crossroads Website 2000).

The success of Crossroads was generated through its commitment to artistic excellence but apparently not its administration and management. It evolved and flourished but did not effectively manage the six W's: the why, what, where, when, who, and wherewith of the theater business. What went wrong?

Renner comments in her article "Black Theaters in a Fight for Survival" on Crossroads Theater Company:

While artistry and enthusiasm in the field run high, the wolf is never far from the door. Andre Robinson Jr., executive producer of Newark, N. J.'s Tony Award-winning Crossroads Theater Co., can testify to the continual challenge of keeping his company afloat. During the '90s, due in large part to a recession in New Jersey, the 22-year-old Crossroads lost 50% of its state sponsorship and saw its corporate grants cut in half. Crossroads

slashed its outreach and education programs, but still found itself engulfed in financial chaos. "Our deficit grew to \$1.6 million by 1994-95. For an institution whose annual budget is under \$3 million that's a big anvil to carry around our necks. When we brought in our new board, they knew they were being invited into a war. Our team of players is ready to turn things around." (3)

Later in 2000, Crossroads was forced to cancel the first two shows of its 23rd season as reported by Peggy McGlone in her article "Theater Debts Scuttle 2 Shows,":

...both have been canceled because of the theater's increasing debt, which has grown from \$1 million to \$1.7 million, and because Crossroads messy financial records have delayed a badly needed infusion of funds. ... Some \$835,000 in state funding has been approved for the theater, but none has yet been awarded. The grants will be awarded once financial statements and a debt-reduction plan submitted to the New Jersey State Council on the arts are approved. "They want to know, no matter how ugly it is, what happened last year," Caldwell said. (19)

The theater's financial problems were made known just six months after it received the 1999 *Tony Award*. McGlone cites several problems that the theatre was having in September of 2000. The 1999-2000 season ended without a marketing campaign, which meant there were no subscriptions sold. They had received a \$500,000 state backed loan but were behind in the payments. They had funding pending from Federal grants but until they received it the theater was dormant. The staff had decreased from twenty to four. Ricardo Khan had taken a sabbatical and decided not to return in a management position. The interim artistic director Harold Scott resigned. The board of trustees lost members including its vice president and treasurer (McGlone 2).

Ricardo Khan took a sabbatical from the theatre beginning January of 2000. At that time he was planning to assist in the fund-raising for the company. He's quoted at the time as saying "We're [Crossroads] in a good place now." I wouldn't be taking a

break now if we weren't" (Jordan 1). It's noted by Chris Jordan in the *Courier News* that Crossroads debt began when they moved to the Livingston Avenue facility and the operating costs increased by \$300,000, and the funding was decreased the next year by \$300,000. From an editorial in the *Star Ledger* December 8, 1999, "The artistic, social and economic consequences of losing Crossroads are unthinkable, and that justifies an extraordinary response and rescue from the state" (22). This editorial states that Khan wanted a showcase for plays focusing on black lives and black actors, and that Khan's bold risk taking is what made Crossroads the national treasure that it was and one factor that left it dangling on the financial edge:

It is not unusual for a program to rise on the vision of one genius, without whom the creation would be impossible. But as time goes on, the dominant genius who cannot match his artistic vision with equivalent fiscal and management skills may suppress his creation's growth. Frequent high-level staff turnovers at Crossroads are one symptom of this syndrome. A board that never grew into its financial role is another. (22)

Peggy McGlone in her article "Crossroads in crisis: Act II" says that Ricardo Khan's vision that shaped the artistic success was tempered by his lack of business acumen:

The early acclaim for Crossroads' artistic triumphs -- which attracted the attention of big funders — turned out to be a two edged sword. "They never had to build themselves up in a traditional way, said David Hawkanson, managing director of Crossroads in 1994-95, and now managing director of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. "With the kind of outside money they had, the board did not have a critical role in the growth or sustainment of the company. It never had to stabilize itself until that period of largesse was over." When Crossroads moved into its Livingston Avenue space in 1991, the financial crunch hit home. "They were caught in the edifice complex, a standard problem," said Eric Krebs, the producer who took "It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues" to Broadway"...Crossroads never recovered from having a new home." (37)

Andre Robinson who became the Executive Director in 2000, said that the company was serious about change, "Crossroads is learning to maintain its standards and do more with less. There needs to be a commitment from Crossroads to behave better, to operate better and to be smarter, and we know that" (37). Dale Caldwell, was named the president and CEO of Crossroads in December 1999, at the time he stated, "Our cash-flow problems are resolved this year, there's no chance of Crossroads closing down this year or really, next year. This consolidation has allowed us to focus on a long-term strategy"(Carroll A2). He also is noted to say that the theater would have to learn to operate without Ricardo Khan and had a unique opportunity to demonstrate how to institutionalize a theater. Unfortunately, Caldwell's outlook would prove to be faulty and Crossroads would have to close their doors.

Professor Elam suggests that Crossroads' production of Wilson's *Jitney* may have started them on their final downward spiral. The production costs may have been far more than they could afford or manage. Elam says, "Wilson wants Black Theatre to operate at the highest level, but it can be contradictory, because the highest level, can be incredibly expensive. So how do you meet the needs at the highest level, when the determination and money that establishes what is good is controlled by the 'white' establishment?" (Elam Interview)

I visited Crossroads Theatre Company in September of 2000 and found the facility to be quite inviting although with the skeletal staff employed it was quite a "ghost town." One of the members of the staff shared some information and articles with me. The article regarding the cancellation of the first two shows of their 23rd season had

appeared in the *Star Ledger* that day so she was visibly upset and cautious with me.

Understandably, Andre Robinson was busy with this news and could not meet with me.

All of the publicity about Crossroads being a theatre in crisis was definitely proving to be a crisis for them on that day, and their fears and concerns would soon come to realization.

In Carroll's article "Steps Announced to Aid Trouble Theater," Robert Osborne of Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia, said, "There needs to be a ...connection between the vision behind the theater and the business of the theater, I'm not suggesting (business) should take priority. But it doesn't make any sense to come out blasting and have a great performance and then the theater goes dark because you can't pay the lighting bill" (37). Osborne's comments pinpoint the situation at Crossroads, although they had been doing incredible award winning works they were not filling the seats or effectively managing the fiscal responsibilities.

Andre Gans reports on the status of Crossroads in his June 2003 article, "Kennedy Center Forms Alliance With Struggling Crossroads Theatre in N. J.":

The financially struggling Crossroads Theatre in New Brunswick, New Jersey, has announced an alliance with the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The Washington Post reports that the famed Center will help the New Jersey theatre company — which closed its doors in 2000 because of massive debts — to "rebuild and solve its financial crisis." The Kennedy Center is helping the New Jersey theatre through its Capacity Rebuilding Program, which aids minority organizations. Currently, the Center has 17 participants in the program, which is funded through a grant from SBC Communications. When the Crossroads Theatre Company reopened its doors two years ago, it offered a season of just four plays and was able to reduce its debt by \$1 million. Company Executive Director Roberta J. Coleman told the Washington Post, "Our goal was to reopen the doors and get the subscribers back into the theatre, without adding to the debt." Kennedy Center President Michael M. Kaiser added, "[The Crossroads Theatre Company] consistently did some of the best theatre in

America. However, they didn't have the management wherewithal to sustain themselves in a different economic environment. (1)

Summary - Model Assessment

Crossroads appeared to have all the questions to the six W's answered. They knew **what** -- they were producing quality Black Theatre; they knew **where** -- they had their own facility; they knew **when** -- they offered continuous full and quality season productions; For a while they knew **who** -- they had a strong artistic leader and renown professional artists; and they knew **why** -- to explore the African American experience and its interconnection with other cultures and to celebrate the culture, history, and voices of the African Diaspora; the **wherewith** -- was at times in question, but for an extended period seemed to be under control. They had a dedicated board, celebrity and political support, and national recognition, but the artistic demands grew beyond their means.

On their art: Crossroads received national acclaim and awards, and had an award winning Broadway production. Over a twenty-year period Crossroads produced over 100 works, 38 of which were world premiere productions by leading African and African American artists. They hired professional directors, actors, and technicians for their productions. They had a four-play mainstage season and presented a two-week festival of new works for the stage. **On their leadership/management:** Ricardo Khan and L. Kenneth Richardson were the founders of Crossroads. Khan and Richardson were solely actors unlike Himes at St. Louis Black Rep, who in addition to being an actor, had been a business major. Khan received an honorary doctorate from Rutgers University in 1997. Crossroads had a board of directors with accomplished and professional resumes; however, they did not play a substantial enough role in the decisions made by the artistic

team or use their business acumen to stabilize and sustain the company even though the company appeared to have access to extensive resources. **On their**

audience/community development: They had a Theatre Guild with an Usher and Volunteer committee, and an internship program. They had a diverse audience and board support, and were well rooted in the community. **On their**

relationships/collaborations: They had a strong alliance with the Kennedy Center, producing two plays with them – *Flyin' West* and *Nomathemba*. They had established firm relationships with their funders and dependable partnerships with some of the top artists and writers in the community (Associate Artists included: Micki Grant, Leslie Lee, Emily Mann, Ruby Dee, Denise Nicholas, Oyamo, Ntozake Shange, Anne Devereaux Smith, and George C. Wolfe). They gained the respect and allegiance of many theatre practitioners. **On their money/finances:** Crossroads was supported by a working capital fund program, and many other foundations but continued to struggle financially. The production of August Wilson's *Jitney* may have put them in their final tailspin. Even though they received large grants and funding from a wide selection of public and private organizations, the esteemed artistic quality they had become accustomed to became too costly for them to remain solvent. **On their marketing:** Crossroads received numerous accolades and tremendous national attention. The media attention gave them a huge marketing boost. The *Tony Award* they received in 1999 for Outstanding Regional Theatre was a great promotional aid. They operated with artistic excellence in their operations and their deliverables were of professional caliber. Their high artistic quality attracted top funders, critical acclaim, and celebrity and community support. In summary

of the elements of **ALARMM** -- the art, leadership, audience, relationships, marketing and money were seemingly in place, but the actual operation was obviously not on stable ground.

Most of the **7-Ups** were evident in Crossroad's operations: **passion** by their sincere commitment to the artistic quality of their work; **purpose** by their mission to promote African American theatre for its artistic and social value; **production** by their consistent, superb artistic performances, tours to Africa, and wide critical acclaim; **professionalism** by the excellence in their projects and programs, but as mentioned their administrative functions needed some adjustments; **planning** by the artistic vision and planning being stable and consistent, but the fiscal management was lacking in this area; **people** by the supportive audience, celebrity support and strong partnerships, but they needed a more skilled and involved board; and **profit** was the principle that eluded them, the financial problems -- big budget productions and operational overhead were too much to overcome.

Failure to fully achieve some of these principles identifies the probable causes leading to Crossroads demise. Crossroads' management failed to comprehend that the artistic demands and costs must be balanced against the available funds, and the artistic drive must be gauged against the business requirements.

As noted above there were many aspects that went awry at Crossroads. Maybe too much emphasis on the "art" and not on the business, a leader who needed more support and involvement from his board. Fundraising, marketing, audience development, good management, and accounting skills appear to have been lacking. It was in a tough

market, between New York and Philadelphia and their audience base was spread between seven different newspaper circulations. Attention was given to the issues and plans for corrections made but apparently it was too late for them to overcome their tremendous debt and management changes to re-group and survive. They went from what appeared to be thriving to not being able to survive because of financial limitations and administrative/management problems.

Chapter Six: Reflections: Summary/Conclusion

There are approximately 150 Black Theatres currently operating in the United States, (see appendix for partial listing) some more prestigious and professional than others. Some have no permanent performance facility and operate on very small budgets; a few have large elaborate facilities and operate on million dollar budgets. Lorraine Hansberry Theatre in San Francisco is among those that produce professional quality productions. In the Bay Area Lorraine Hansberry is probably the most widely known professional Black Theatre company, and Berkeley Black Repertory Group (Berkeley Black Rep) is probably the best known community Black Theatre; on a smaller scale (referencing budget and attendance) these two theatres parallel the thriving St. Louis Black Rep and surviving Arena Players respectively.

In a telephone interview on May 4, 1999 with Stanley Williams, the Artistic Director of the Lorraine Hansberry Theater in San Francisco, he stated that the main factors in the continuation of his theater are the management of personnel, artists, and funding. "You have to ensure that you are on the minds and lips of the political powers of the city so that when they discuss funding you are at the forefront of their minds." He was secure in his funding and place in the community because of their strong political ties and connections with Corporations and City leaders. The Lorraine Hansberry is one of the few professional companies devoted exclusively to producing African American Theater. In 1988 the theater moved into its own 300-seat theater space in the Union Square area of San Francisco. It draws on the support of famed actors such as Danny Glover and Ruby Dee, and presents the works of August Wilson and Ishmael Reed

among others. It has been able to attain a winning formula for success, combining the appropriate artistic, managerial, and business aspects equaling stability and endurance.

The components that result in the success of Black Theatre are evidenced in a multi-faceted approach to survival. Many of the organizations that have endured the test of time operate on a multi-functional basis within the community. Their funding is solidified based on their programs for children, the elderly, and at risk youth, rather than just on theater production. One theater that truly exemplifies this theme is the Black Repertory Group in Berkeley, California. Sean Vaughn, is the current Artistic Director at Black Rep; his mother, the late Nora Vaughn was the founder and head of the organization for many years. The productions of this group are often lacking in artistic quality, yet the 32-year-old group continues to thrive in their own comfortable and intimate facility. The Berkeley Black Rep refers to itself as the “Keeper of the Culture,” and much of its emphasis is on the outreach programs it offers to the community. Their education programs, on-site drama programs that teach health and literacy skills to at-risk kids, as well as providing a place to act—“onstage rather than on the streets,” fulfill a need supported by local politicians and foundations. Its accessibility to the community and response to its needs are the key elements in the duration of this company. It is the pure desire and allegiance to the community by those in leadership that keeps their doors open. The components of excellence in management, artistic quality, and audience development are not readily evident here, and the characteristics associated with success and survival are challenged in this circumstance, but Berkeley Black Rep serves to prove that differences in community, mission, objectives, and definition determine success in a

variety of ways. Their operation is similar to that previously mentioned about the Arena Players. Although there appears to be vast differences in the number and quality of the productions that Berkeley Black Rep produces, it is another community theatre with their own facility that has operated for many years offering classes, workshops, readings, and performances. There is strong participation from the community in keeping the organization functioning, and it offers opportunities to the community that are essential to the development of new and ongoing talent and skills in the arts. Although Berkeley Black Rep tends to struggle substantially more with the artistic quality of its productions than the Arena Players, it too serves as a vehicle for many young people to be involved in a positive experience, giving them hope, enlightenment, and a sense of purpose.

The attention to and implementation of programs for youth are a measurement of success that is credible and valuable to the community regardless of whether any mainstage productions are presented or profit is made. Educating and involving young people in the theatre provides an opportunity for them to express themselves, and gain critical communication and literary skills. It engages them in community programs and serves as a positive outlet and activity for them; it aids in overall community development by instilling in these youth a sense of self-esteem, confidence, and accomplishment that is transferable to other aspects of their lives.

Brian Freeman, playwright and performer, writes in his article "African-American Theatre in the 21st Century," (in reference to an AGIA conference held in March 2000 in Los Angeles) that there was "a generational disconnect between those who came of age during the black arts movement of the '70's (think Amiri Baraka, Aretha Franklin, Ed

Bullins, Ntozake Shange) and the twenty-thirty somethings working in today's pervasive hip-hop culture" (3). Freeman's observation was that there were too few young artists present:

...and even though Dr. Cook stated that "We want to embrace all forms of Black Theatre. We want to embrace performance artist Keith Antar Mason and the kind of stuff he does," the dialogue was dominated by the traditional, naturalistic "uplift of the race" school of family drama. The future of African-American theatrical expression is going to be built by artists now in their 20s and 30s. If AGIA can welcome them to the table—tattoos, skateboards, piercings and all—this discussion will get real and might actually get interesting. But if AGIA can't, the next generation of African-American theatre artists will make their own way, regardless. (4)

Barry "Shabaka" Henley, actor and writer, in *American Theatre* article "Forging new myths for new realities. (Panel Discussion)" conveys similar sentiments to Freeman's, that young people are the key to the future of theatre:

....my efforts are always concerned with the social political, and spiritual condition that we find ourselves in.... a lot of theatre that's getting done does not reflect the lives of the general population of African Americans, which is as diverse as you could imagine. I think our theatre of tomorrow really depends on reaching deep into our communities and pulling out those young people to take on the leadership positions of theatres. (4)

Nu Black Arts West in Seattle, Washington, is a theatre company that also believes in giving special focus to working with community groups and youth. In a conversation I had at the NBTF in August 2003, with Kibibi Monié the Executive Director, she said the key components of their twenty-three year survival are: using membership programs rather than season subscriptions; developing partnerships with schools, Parks & Recreation, The Girls and Boys Club, Senior Centers, along with other community centers; conducting ongoing theatre workshops; and obtaining business

sponsors. She stated that for Black Theatre to continue, “We have to get back to the children and educate them about going to the theatre, to get audiences interested again, we must grow them up in the theatre” (Monié, Interview). One of the Nu Black Arts West most successful genres has been productions about actual people in history, such as Alberta Hunter and Billie Holiday.

Another group that has continued in operation for twenty-six years and serves to re-define what constitutes community success and what it takes to achieve it, is the African American Drama Company, founded in 1977, by Phillip Walker and Ethel Pitts Walker. They have survived by producing only touring shows and have remained extremely valuable to the community. Stephanie Robinson in her article on the African American Drama Company informs us that “it is a self sustaining entity, which operates without grants, on its own capital. In an industry in which stability is rare and integrity rarer, still this touring company is a tribute to both” (Community Connections 2). The commitment to their mission, which is to educate people through entertainment of African American culture and history, has fueled their continued efforts and survival.

My focus with Tabia African-American Theatre Ensemble (I have been the Artistic Director since 1987), is to produce quality Black Theatre by, about, of, and for black people that appeals to all ethnic groups. Tabia’s mission is to celebrate and promote African American culture and theatre, enriching and contributing to the artistic awareness and diversity of the community. Tabia consists of a dedicated group of individuals who have been involved in the theatre community for the past twenty years. Tabia developed out of the San Jose Black Theatre Workshop (BTW), a group that was

established and began performing on the campus of San Jose State University in 1972. For several years it functioned in direct association with the University and therefore claims its historical place in the legacy of Black Theatre as the only Black Theatre in the country with University roots. Currently, Tabia is one of the performing arts groups under San Jose Multicultural Artists Guild, a non-profit organization established in 1987. Our purpose then and now is to present plays written by and about African-Americans and the African influence and culture throughout the world. We bring the unique creativity of African-Americans to the stage, that have universal themes, enlighten, educate, and entertain our audiences with powerful messages and spirit. Tabia is the only group in the South Bay that provides consistent opportunity for African-Americans to gain visibility and experience on the stage. Our goal is to produce high quality, thought provoking, professional theatre that enriches the lives of our audiences; and fosters positive relationships and understanding among people of varied backgrounds.

I endeavor to run a professional Black Theatre company with black artists, technicians, and staff that can be valued, appreciated, and attended by all ethnicities without compromising black culture, heritage, customs, ritual, and “style.” Tim Bond, Artistic Director of Seattle’s Group Theatre, in “Forging New Myths for New Realities,” sums up many of my thoughts about running my own theatre company:

I’m also interested in the whole question of an Afrocentric perspective, and whether that may be separated from the practice of “black theatre,” by which I mean directing and running a theatre company. In fact, everything that I choose and everything that I work on as an artist – a Shakespeare play, a play by a Native American playwright, whatever – comes from an Afrocentric point of view. I can’t change that. I don’t want to change that. So my question is about the universality of the work we’re creating: Can it address the ethnic specificity of our culture and at the same time

encompass the human stories that make it important to everyone who comes to see it? (2)

Tabia produces two full stage productions each year; and also performs as a traveling troupe, taking its touring show to schools, festivals, corporations, churches, and conferences throughout California. The touring show is a dramatic presentation that features drumming, and dance based on West African culture; and poetry and storytelling rooted in the traditions of the African-American experience. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, by August Wilson, *Flyin' West*, by Pearle Cleage, *Steal Away*, by Ramona King, *Long Time Since Yesterday*, by P. J. Gibson, *Home*, by Samm Art Williams, *Sisters*, by Marsha Jackson, *Waiting to be Invited*, by Sherry Shepherd-Massat, *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*, by Shay Youngblood, and *Spunk*, by George C. Wolfe are part of their repertoire. Buddy Butler, Professor of Theatre at San Jose State, director and playwright, has directed several of Tabia's and St. Louis Black Rep's productions.

Tabia has survived because we knew what we were doing, and why we were doing it, with strong leadership and clear focus on the business as well as the artistic aspects. Ann Johnson who is one of the co-founders of the organization and President of our board of directors, has a B.A. in business; she maintains strict focus on the fiscal management of our organization. This allows me to have more time to focus on the artistic and producing aspects of the company. Of the 7-UPs: Tabia has continued to survive largely due to passion and purpose, however, professionalism, high production value, and strategic planning has also been given its due attention. Profit has continued to elude us (although, from year to year we have operated in the "black," it is always a

concern where the funding will come from for the next show). People, is also another principle that is constantly in question and under examination, our audience attendance varies from production to production, averaging 60%. Most times we have dependable support from the community but on occasion they disappear. To fill the gaps, Tabia needs a full-time staff and a larger, more involved, fundraising board. However, we recognize that running a theatre is a business and that we must manage people, time, and money as in any business. We have been limited in our focus of what to do, when, and who we were doing it for, and must be pointed in our efforts to give the needed attention to these matters. To reach the level of thriving (producing four quality plays a season, be financially stable with working capital, and have full time staff) we seek to obtain, we have to increase our funding, diversify our income, have widespread marketing and branding, have an increased and influential board, and have consistent community involvement, buy-in, and patronage.

As I explored research for this thesis I kept coming back to the concept that the black church may be the true model for Black Theatre. Samuel Hay's theory speaks to the continuance of Black Theatre. Hays' actual proposed business model for theatre to be orchestrated as an actual church service and church operation seems a little "far-fetched," but it offers a really interesting and viable concept in which to base the operation of a Black Theatre company. As I sit in church service after church service I can not help but connect the rituals that occur as the basis for Black Theatre. The very orchestrated high and lows, the music, the chanting, the call and response, how every nuance seems to occur at just the right time and disappear on cue. I absorb the emotional expression, the

affected speech, and the cultural connection it offers. Hill quotes DuBois saying in 1916, "pageantry and dramatic recital are closely mingled with religious rites and in America the 'Shout' of the Church revival is in its essential pure drama" (4). Although Whites and other ethnic groups may be present, there is an unapologetic commitment to black customs, heritage, and community. The codes and symbols of blackness (the walk and talk), say here I am in all my glory, like it or not you are in my world. I realize my first acting lessons and training were in the black church: singing on the choir; learning to stand in front of the congregation and read scripture, or MC a program, all gave me experience in handling an audience, projecting my voice and behaving appropriately. Like many others I learned to play different roles with proficiency and confidence. These early experiences were my early training for the theatre, and continue to be for people in the black church. Many of the performers that we pay top dollars to see in musicals on Broadway and regional theatre do not surpass the dynamic, incredible, spine-chilling voices of those heard on Sunday mornings. Nor is there much theatre that can generate the excitement, energy, and emotion that captivates you, when the choir and church are caught up in the "spirit." If Black Theatre on a professional, mainstream level were to cease to exist, it will continue to be alive and well in the black church. As church productions (black Christian drama) become more sophisticated and polished, and with a built in audience, they may provide an option for the survival of Black Theatre. The close ties that the "urban circuit" plays have to gospel dramas also indicate that it will be one of the ongoing genres that will continue to represent Black Theatre for many years to come. Dr. Robinson in her article, "Ticket to Heaven," quotes Kevin Fontana:

This audience participation is a crucial holdover from the traditions of gospel music and the black church, and an element that dramatically distinguishes the urban circuit play from more conventional theatre. The strength of the genre, finally, is in emotions and good feelings common to the everyday person. The form is a conduit for the experiences shared by masses of Americans in today's world, who understand the language, movement, music, tragedy and the spiritual power of how hope can be realized. (25)

The continued growth and existence of Black Theatres in the years to come will be based on their ability to be self-sufficient. They must find ways to be more entrepreneurial assuring their financial viability and stability. Investment income and contributions, along with planning, and artistic quality will continue to be necessary for longevity. Audience development, new plays that speak to contemporary issues and inform of a rich history will be welcomed. The future will depend on increased marketing skills, increased funding, skillful management, and excellence in leadership. Economic, racial, and aesthetic concerns must continually be examined and addressed. Black Theatres must consistently find ways to work within the black community to solicit support and finances; partnerships must be established with colleges and universities to groom students to become the new theatre leaders, and consortiums must be formed with other community organizations that will contribute to the survival of each other. Technology must be utilized to enhance the theatrical experience, administrative, and marketing aspects and to relate to the younger generation. Black Theatre must unify with the community to thrive and exist; new paradigms have to be set and heavy reliance on government funding alleviated. As mentioned earlier, the focus and attention has to be on community, planning, relationships, partnerships, finances, and cultural identification and celebration for Black Theatre to continue to survive.

It is my hope that the following words of August Wilson will come to fruition for Black Theatre and that it will enjoy growth and stability in the future, “We have taken new steps on the road of a self-determining theater. We accept that responsibility. We don’t harbor ill feelings. We begin from this day with a march toward progress. We are capable of much more than we have imagined” (Palumbo 1). The powerful spirit and energy of a black audience and black performers engaged in a theatrical performance is truly an invigorating experience. It is vitally important to draw blacks to the theater as well as non-blacks to view black oriented plays; the enlightenment, inspiration, education, and entertainment of the rich African-American culture and aesthetic is too valuable to be dismissed. Black Theatres must continue to make it their mission to reach out to all age groups, presenting plays that are of interest and value to life and society. A sense of freedom, expression, and understanding can be achieved through the involvement of theater. There are far too few traditional mainstream theatres that present works about blacks on a regular basis to adequately represent the African-American’s history, legacy, contributions, dynamics, and spirit in this country.

On a national scale of course we need theatres that represent all cultural and ethnic groups, colorblind casting has its place; culture specific casting has its place. Black Theatre must be compelled to continue to operate, create, function, and flourish, providing a venue for African-American artists to learn, explore, and gain exposure to the theatre arena in a safer and more relaxed environment. It removes the fear of embarrassment of “the way we talk, and the way we walk” that may not fit into the standard classical theatre training environment and expectations. It removes the element

of being judged solely on the basis of the western cultural hegemony and allows identification with a culture that may have more in common with the values of African-American performers encouraging them to grow and develop. Are Black Theatre companies interested in maintaining a theatre of separatism? I don't think so, but we are interested in maintaining a theatre about, for, and by blacks that gives African-American artists and audiences a representation of themselves that offers value and celebration of their culture, identity, and history.

Focus has been given in this paper to The Arena Players in Baltimore, a surviving theatre company, St. Louis Black Repertory, a thriving theatre company, and Crossroads Theatre in New Jersey, a theatre company once thriving and now struggling to reinvent itself. The model I used **ALARMM**: for arts, leadership, audience, relationships, marketing, and money, and the **7-UPS**: passion, purpose, production, professionalism, planning, people, and profit can be used to analyze and evaluate the condition of most theatre companies in determining their propensity for success and survivability. Further in depth research is needed into Black Theatre companies not mentioned and those mentioned but not fully explored in this paper. The urban circuit plays, performance art, and use of digital technology should be explored as means for survival and growth of Black Theatre. A question presented to me by Diem Jones and "Shabaka" is also worthy of examination, "Even when the writers, actors, and content/stories are "black," is it still Black Theatre, when it is being produced, supported, and funded by large "white" commercial theatre companies, foundations, corporations, and mostly white audiences?

(i.e., August Wilson's plays)." Has St. Louis Black Rep become "mainstream? Is it still a Black Theatre?

Black Theatre must seek to do theater meaningful to blacks and all other ethnic groups - the goal being to do theatre about blacks, by blacks, near blacks, and for blacks but also for the entire community and do it well! In closing I offer August Wilson's words, "Black Theatre" uttered August Wilson, "These words have a feeling to them. When you see them, you feel good. It's as simple as that. It don't need no explainin'" (Ards 1).

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Appendix - US Professional Black Theatre Companies

ARIZONA

Black Theatre Troupe, Inc. (Phoenix)

CALIFORNIA

African American Drama Company (San Francisco)
 African-American Shakespeare Company (San Francisco)
 Afro Solo Theatre Performing Arts Company (San Francisco)
 Arts on the Move (Pasadena)
 BAMN BAMN Youth Ensemble (Los Angeles)
 Bayview Repertory Theatre Company (San Francisco)
 Black Artists Contemporary Cultural Exchange (San Francisco)
 Blackstreet USA Puppet Theatre (Los Angeles)
 The By Any Means Necessary Ensemble (Los Angeles)
 Christian Elite Ensemble (Los Angeles)
 Crossroads National Education Art Center (Los Angeles)
 Cultural Odyssey (San Francisco)
 Hittite Empire (Santa Monica)
 Hollywood Thespian Company (Studio City)
 Inner City Cultural Center (Los Angeles)
 Longtime Coming Productions (Los Angeles)
 Lorraine Hansberry Theatre (San Francisco)
 New Ivar Theatre (Los Angeles)
 Oakland Public Theatre (Oakland)
 Robey Theatre Company (Burbank)
 San Diego Black Ensemble Theatre (San Diego)
 Tabia African American Theatre Ensemble (San Jose)
 Southeast Community Theatre (San Diego)
 Towne Street Theatre (Los Angeles)
 Unity Players Ensemble (Inglewood)
 Watts Repertory Company (Los Angeles)

COLORADO

Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Theatre (Denver)
 Eden Theatrical Workshop, Inc. (Denver)
 Eulipions, Inc. (Denver)
 Shadow Theater Company, (Denver)

WASHINGTON, D.C.

African Continuum Theatre Company
 Encore Theatre Company
 The Essential Theatre

Hip Hop Theatre Junction
Pin Points Theatre

FLORIDA

The M-Ensemble (Miami)
People's Theatre, Inc. (Orlando)

GEORGIA

Just Us Theatre Company (Atlanta)
Promised Land Theater Productions (Atlanta)

ILLINOIS

Alarinjo: Theatre (Maywood)
Black Ensemble Theater (Chicago)
Chicago Theatre Company (Chicago)
Congo Square Theatre Company (Chicago)
ETA Creative Arts Foundation (Chicago)
MPAACT (Ma'at Production Association of Afrikan Centered Theatre)
(Chicago)
Muntu Dance Theatre of Chicago (Chicago)
Najwa Dance Corps (Chicago)
Oui Be Negroes (Chicago)
Overflow Ensemble Theatre (Chicago)

INDIANA

Actors Ink Theatre Production Company (Indianapolis, IN)
The Indianapolis African American Repertory Theatre Group (Indy AART Group)
(Indianapolis, IN)

KENTUCKY

Juneteenth Legacy Theatre (Louisville)

LOUISIANA

Adella Adella the Storyteller and Legacy (New Orleans)
Arts for Life (New Orleans)
Chakula Chua Jua Theatre Company (New Orleans)
Creative Artists Striving Together (CAST) (New Orleans)
Curtain Call Theatre Company (New Orleans)
Dashiki Theatre (New Orleans)
Ethiopian Theatre (New Orleans)
Junebug Productions, Inc. (New Orleans)
Winfield Production (New Orleans)

MARYLAND

Arena Players (Baltimore)
 The Asili Repertory Theatre (Baltimore)
 The Kuumba Ensemble (Baltimore)
 Soul in Motion Players (Rockville)

MASSACHUSETTS

African Repertory Troupe, the Other ART (Boston)
 New African Company (Boston)

MICHIGAN

Plowshares Theatre (Detroit)

MINNESOTA

Penumbra Theatre Company (St. Paul, MN)

MISSOURI

Pamoja Theatre Workshop (St. Louis)
 Saint Louis Black Repertory Company (Saint Louis)
 Unity Theatre Ensemble (East St. Louis)

NEBRASKA

Center Stage (Omaha)

NEW JERSEY

African Globe TheatreWorks (AGT) (Newark)
 Afro-One Dance, Drama and Drum Theatre (Willinboro)
 Dunbar Repertory Company (Freehold)
 Performers Theatre Workshop (Livingston)
 South Jersey Black Theatre Ensemble (Millville)

NEW YORK

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (New York)
 AMAS Musical Theatre, Inc. (New York)
 The Apollo Theatre (New York)
 B.G. Enterprise (New York)
 Billie Holiday Theatre (Brooklyn)
 The Black Enterprise Ensemble, Inc. (Albany)
 Black Experimental Theatre (New York)
 Black Spectrum Theatre Company (Queens)
 BluesEnBop Theatre (New York)
 Caribbean American Repertory Theatre, Inc. (Rego Park)
 Castillo Cultural Center Theater (New York)
 Charles Moore Dance Theatre (Brooklyn)

Classical Theatre of Harlem (New York)
 Crucial Arts Productions, Inc. (New York)
 Everlasting Life Company (Bronx)
 Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop Foundation, Inc. (New York)
 Growing Theatre, Inc. (New York)
 H.A.D.L.E.Y. Players (New York)
 Harlem Ensemble Company (New York)
 Harlem Theatre Company (New York)
 INNERACT Productions (New York)
 Joan Miller's Dance Players (New York)
 Live Theatre Gang (New York)
 National Black Theatre (New York)
 New Day Repertory Company, Inc. (Poughkeepsie)
 New Federal Theatre, Inc. (New York)
 Opera Ebony (New York)
 Our Theatre: The Forgotten, Inc. (New York)
 Paul Robeson Performing Arts Company (Syracuse)
 Roger Furman Theatre (New York)
 Salt & Pepper Mime/New Ensemble Actors Theatre (New York)
 Stormy Weather Productions (New York)
 TupuKweli Theatre Company (New York)
 Ujima Company, Inc. (Buffalo)
 Urban Bush Women (New York)

NORTH CAROLINA

Afro-American Children's Theatre Inc. (Charlotte)
 National Ensemble Theatre (Raleigh)
 National Black Theatre Festival (Winston-Salem)
 North Carolina Black Repertory Company (Winston-Salem)

OHIO

Cincinnati Black Theatre Company (Cincinnati)
 Dayton Contemporary Dance Company (Dayton)
 Karamu House (Cleveland)

OKLAHOMA

Black Liberated Arts Center, Inc. (BLAC) (Oklahoma City)
 Theatre North (Tulsa)

OREGON

Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center (Portland)

PENNSYLVANIA

Evelyn Graves Drama Productions (Philadelphia)

First World Theatre Ensemble (Philadelphia)
 Freedom Theatre (Philadelphia)
 Kuntu Repertory Theatre (Pittsburgh)
 New Horizon Theater (Pittsburgh)
 Philadelphia Dance Company (PHILADANCO) (Philadelphia)
 Venture Theatre (Philadelphia)

RHODE ISLAND

The Providence Black Repertory Company (Providence)
 Rites & Reason Theater (Providence)

SOUTH CAROLINA

Progressive Center for Creativity (Lady's Island)

TENNESSEE

Blues City Cultural Center (Memphis)
 Carpetbag Theatre, Inc. (Knoxville)
 Memphis Black Repertory Theatre (Memphis)
 Mockingbird Productions (Memphis)
 Nubian Theatre Company (Memphis)
 Ripe and Ready Players (Chattanooga)

TEXAS

Blacken Blues Theater (Dallas)
 Disciples in Action (Houston)
 Ensemble Theatre (Houston)
 Griot Productions (Dallas)
 Jubilee Theatre (Fort Worth)
 Jump Start Performance Company (San Antonio)
 Kuumba House Dance Theater (Houston)
 ROOT WY'MN (Austin)
 Soul Rep Theatre (Dallas)
 TeCo Theatrical Productions, Inc. (Dallas)

WASHINGTON

Nu Black Arts West Theatre (Seattle)