Performing (Non)Profit, Race, and American Identity in the Nation's Capital: Arena Stage, 1950-2010

Donatella Galella

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PERFORMING (NON)PROFIT, RACE, AND AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE NATION’S CAPITAL: ARENA STAGE, 1950-2010

by

DONATELLA GALELLA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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ABSTRACT

PERFORMING (NON)PROFIT, RACE, AND AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE NATION’S CAPITAL: ARENA STAGE, 1950-2010

by

DONATELLA GALELLA

Adviser: Professor Judith Milhous

Theatre socially reproduces and contests economic, racial, and national hierarchies. There is a dearth of scholarship on U.S. regional theatre because of middlebrow anxiety and yet, for that very reason, regional theatre demands attention as a fitting example of the site of struggle over different forms of capital. Located in Washington, D.C., Arena Stage is the ideal case study for both the invention of viable non-profit theatre and the negotiation of race and national identity in the United States. Arguably the closest institution the U.S. has to a national theatre, the company was the first regional theatre to send a profitable new play to Broadway and now brands itself as the largest theatre devoted to “American Voices.” By capitalizing upon its location in the nation’s capital; staging racially liberal dramas; and developing institutional practices that help the institution to accumulate economic, cultural, and symbolic capital, the theatre has thrived for more than sixty years.

My dissertation is a critical history of Arena Stage from 1950 to 2010 and consists of three thematic sections that focus on how the company produced non-profit practices, African/Caribbean/American drama, and U.S. identity. While the history chapters provide context and theoretical underpinnings from Pierre Bourdieu’s *Field of Cultural Production* to Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States*, the case study chapters perform close readings of Arena Stage’s most successful productions that mark turning
points: *The Great White Hope* (1968) inspired a trend toward Broadway transfers with attendant economic and symbolic capital; *Raisin* (1973), the musical adaptation of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, staged a liberal yet safe black theatre; and the multiracial production of *Oklahoma!* (2010) opened the company’s new theatre center and symbolized a diverse, neoliberal nation. I draw from performance and American studies; sociology and critical race theory; archival materials; and interviews with artists and administrators. I argue that Arena’s viability has been largely due to the theatre’s progressive politics yet ultimate maintenance of hegemonic structures, namely of class, race, and nation.
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My conference presentations, teaching institutions, and research archives provided laboratories and materials for this dissertation. I presented parts of my dissertation at the conferences of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, American Society for Theatre Research, Futures of American Studies Institute, and Harvard-Princeton Musical Theatre Forum. When I taught Theatre of Color at Baruch College and Social Themes in the American Musical at Eugene Lang College-The New School, I was able to articulate my thoughts on intersectional
hierarchies seen in popular cultural productions, and my students taught me in turn. The librarians, administrators, archivists, and assistants at the Special Collections and Archives at George Mason University were tremendously helpful in locating and photocopying materials for me.

I would not have written this dissertation were it not for Janine Sobeck, former literary manager of Arena Stage, who hired me as the dramaturgy intern in 2009. My summer working with the inspiring, intelligent members of the Artistic Development (ArtDev) team led by David Dower led me to study this particular regional theatre, ask big questions, and become engrossed by stories about people of color. Speaking with the artistic directors of Arena, Zelda Fichandler, Doug Wager, and Molly Smith, was an honor and an illuminating experience. I must also thank the many artists and administrators whose formal conversations with me informed my understanding of the theatre company and their roles therein: Kelly Renee Armstrong, Guy Bergquist, Faedra Chatard Carpenter, Edgar Dobie, Kyle Donnelly, David Dower, Jamie Gahlon, Alison Irvin, Cathy Madison, Laurence Maslon, Anita Maynard-Losh, Marvin McAllister, Mustapha Matura, Dan Pruksarnukul, Amrita Ramanan, Stephen Richard, Stacey Stewart, and Cheryl West.

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the Washington metro area. Ross listened to my arguments, interpretations, and historical accounts, and he pushed me toward greater clarity and complexity. He consistently reminds me of the meanings of being alive, even as we contest the meanings of Company.
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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

An under-explored field, U.S. regional theatre attracts considerable audiences and illustrates negotiations over economies of theatre and identities. Its institutions circulate theatrical productions and cultural, racial, and national formations in ways that contest, confirm, and socially reproduce hierarchies. Arena Stage helped to pioneer U.S. regional theatre. Its history and dynamic institutional life today, as well as its location in Washington, D.C., position Arena as the ideal site for studying both the invention of viable non-profit theatre and the negotiation of racial and national identity in the United States. Founded in 1950, the company originated as a for-profit corporation but reincorporated as a non-profit theatre ten years later. Since then, Arena has gained fame for its many firsts—the first regional theatre to send a profitable new play to Broadway, the first to present the U.S. canon behind the Iron Curtain, and the first to win the Regional Theatre Tony Award.

Arena Stage deftly accumulated cultural, symbolic, and economic capital, developing what would turn into the standard artistic and economic practices of non-profit theatres in the United States. The company’s relationship to race, particularly to black artists and audiences, is key to its identity as well as to its critical and commercial success from the late 1960s to the present day. Positioned as a global theatre, especially in producing Russian and Eastern European work, Arena expanded its “western,” implicitly white repertory to include more black theatre when its artistic leadership decided to address the black majority population of Washington, D.C. In the 1990s, the theatre committed to the value of U.S. racial diversity and turned its full attention toward “American Voices.” The theatre’s programming and institutional practices constitute and have been constituted by who counts as “American” and who has
“Voices” on the symbolic stage of the nation’s capital. By navigating the waters of capitalism and white American hegemony, and never straying too far into radical, uncharted areas, Arena Stage has maintained a practicable course for more than sixty years.

My dissertation is a critical history of Arena Stage from its amateur for-profit beginnings in 1950 to its opening of the multi-stage $135 million Mead Center for American Theater in 2010. In covering these six decades, I attend to how Arena changed institutionally, artistically, and economically to maintain its viability and how the theatre company refracted socio-politics in this process. The dissertation is divided into three thematic sections on how the company produced non-profit theatre, black drama, and U.S. identity, focusing on 1950-1970, 1970-1990, and 1990-2010, respectively, though there is some overlap in the timelines. Each section includes one history-centric chapter and one case study-based chapter. The former is not a season-by-season list of productions and programs. A timeline of productions can be found in the appendix. Instead, these historical chapters document significant shifts in the theatre company and theorize them sociologically. In order to contextualize the case studies, these chapters serve as histories of Arena’s moves toward non-profit status, African/Caribbean/American drama, and exclusive dedication to U.S. theatre. The case study chapters highlight the major productions that mark turning points in and are representative of Arena’s aesthetics, politics, and practices: *The Great White Hope* (1967), *Raisin* (1973), and *Oklahoma!* (2010). *The Great White Hope* inspired a national trend toward transfers from regional theatres to Broadway with attendant economic and symbolic capital; the musical adaptation of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* continued this trend and sparked a new one in staging a safe, liberal black theatre; and the multiracial production of *Oklahoma!* opened the Mead Center, solidified the commitment to multiracial U.S. musical productions, and symbolized a neoliberal multicultural vision of diversity in the United
States. I argue that these productions were among the most important in Arena Stage’s history because they were economically and/or symbolically the most profitable productions of their respective times. I realize that there is a large gap between *Raisin* and *Oklahoma!*, but the pertinent historical chapters detail how Arena Stage transitioned from global theatre to multicultural U.S. theatre. For instance, I address that while *Raisin* premiered in 1973, similar African American musicals became regular mainstage productions in the late 1990s. Finally, I imagine the three case studies as representative parts of a typical season of plays, one of which would likely transfer to Broadway: a world premiere American play that deals with racial politics, an uplifting black musical, and a multiracial production of a classic American musical.

To some extent, my study of Arena draws on the history of Washington, D.C. theatre, regional theatre, and U.S. theatre at large by illustrating how different plays, playwrights, and practices circulate and create distinction in these decades as related to their cultural contexts. Nevertheless, my focus remains on what makes this company exceptional: its location in Washington, D.C. The racial demographics of the nation’s capital have shaped the theatre’s repertory and patronage. During the racial upheavals of the 1960s, white flight from the city proper led to the dominance of the black population across different classes. At this time, founding artistic director Zelda Fichandler began to stage classics and new plays with, by, and about people of African and Caribbean descent. When Doug Wager received the leadership in 1991, he committed to a U.S. multiculturalist repertory, ensemble, and audience. In 1998, Molly Smith, as the third artistic director, increased this commitment to principally American work. By this point, the Washington, D.C. area had again become increasingly gentrified—white, wealthy, and educated—and able to support approximately seventy professional theatres.\(^1\) In addition, in

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the early 1980s, the number of playing weeks for professional touring productions in the nation’s capital was higher than that of any other city outside of New York; by the end of the decade, Washington, D.C. was second only to Los Angeles.\(^2\) The Washington Post recently reported that more than two million local theatre tickets are sold each year and, since 2000, hundreds of millions of dollars have been invested in new theatre complexes.\(^3\) This proliferation of theatres led Arena to articulate its own niche, focusing on new and classic U.S. drama, particularly with stories focused on people of color. Located in the seat of federal governance, Arena Stage touts its “American” brand and attendance by current Supreme Court justices to position itself as a major stage for U.S. political discourse.\(^4\) In the 2000s, the community engagement department hosted annual fundraising galas in which politicians such as Jesse Jackson, Jr. and Joe Lieberman performed in original, campy, political plays. Arena profits from resonances and resources of the nation’s capital, and it is arguably the closest institution the U.S. has to a national theatre. In “National Theatres Then and Now,” Marvin Carlson concentrates on Europe and defines a national theatre as “a monumental edifice located in a national capital, authorized, privileged and supported by the government, and devoted wholly or largely to productions of the work of national dramatists.”\(^5\) Now that the Mead Center is open, Arena fits much of this definition as the national “American” theatre, especially under the current leadership of Molly Smith.

**Performing “American”**


Arena Stage brands itself as the largest theatre in the United States dedicated to “American” voices, a compelling reason to unpack this particular regional theatre and how it distinguishes itself and defines “American.” Its website currently proclaims its vision as “To unleash the transformative power of the theater to understand who we are as Americans.” This forceful diction privileges theatre as “transformative” in its affect and production of knowledge. The presumptive “we” locates Arena’s artists, administrators, and audiences as Americans. Through this vision, Arena Stage invents a national community; the performative utterance of “American” and performances of, by, and for Americans make Americans. This articulation unites people around a national identity and idea, an act that potentially erases other identifications, material differences, and inequalities. In addition, Arena’s usage of “American” denotes “of the United States of America,” obscuring the rest of North America and all of Central and South America. Arena’s repertory has rarely ventured to produce Latina/o playwrights. I am sensitive to the possibility that using “American” in this dissertation replicates national hierarchies, so I am invested in critically unpacking Arena Stage’s mobilization of this term. I also believe that a simple substitution in terminology might do another kind of symbolic violence by ignoring the United States’ historical and continuing imperialist projects, whereas “America” and “American” remind us of empire and technologies of power.

Arena’s mission statement continues to assert performing American identity through various institutional practices. The company’s website announces:

Arena Stage is alive as a center for American theater in our nation’s capital with productions, diverse and innovative works from around the country and the nurturing of new plays. Our focus is on American artists. We produce and present all that is passionate, exuberant, profound, deep and dangerous in the American spirit. We explore issues from the past, present and future that reflect America’s diversity and challenges. These are voiced through the productions we create, the work we develop, the presentations that move beyond our stages and community and education programs that engage artists, students and audiences.\(^{10}\)

From the start, the statement positions Arena as a “center” of American national identity because of its American repertory and location in the nation’s capital. The theatre emphasizes “diversity” in both the “works” and “issues” on stage. By not specifically naming race, class, gender, or sexuality, “diversity” becomes a nebulous catchall value of desirable liberal humanism that includes others and does not alienate those with power, much as the national identity term “American” labors to create harmony. The statement also works to make Arena sound exciting, using active adjectives such as “exuberant” and “dangerous” that resonate with characteristically American qualities and histories of pioneering, exploring, and dominating. Invoking the “past, present and future,” the mission statement grounds the foundation of American identity in an apparently concrete national history as represented by classic American dramas; in the contemporary moment influenced by history as mediated by new American plays; and in the imagined future that presumes a continuing, collective American history, people, and nation.

Finally, the theatre names its development, production, presentation, and education practices that

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form the pillars to support the institution and its performances and interrogations of American identity. The apparatus of this regional theatre thus provides an apt location for studying “America.” My history concludes in 2010 when Arena Stage clearly articulated itself as a kind of national theatre with the opening of the Mead Center for American Theater. At the same time, the presidency of Barack Obama symbolized both huge strides in black American representation and stagnation if not increasing material inequality and violence against people of color. Arena similarly staged a neoliberal multiculturalist vision of the United States that capitalized upon multiracial American artists and audiences in ways that avoided radical politics in order to sustain the theatre institution.

**Trajectory of Scholarship**

As the dramaturgy intern of Arena Stage in 2009, I have insight into Arena’s two-year transition period marketed as “Arena Re-Staged” when the Mead Center was being built, productions took place in separate theatres in Crystal City and the U Street Corridor, and the company was rebranding itself as “American.” For instance, I participated in conversations about which U.S. musical should open the Mead Center and how to shape the American Voices New Play Institute. Through these experiences, I learned about behind-the-scenes institutional processes. Although my work at Arena uniquely positions me to write about the theatre company, I also realize that I need to be aware of my own habitus. By practicing a self-reflexive sociology, I labor to maintain a critical eye while not exempting myself from structures. I recognize that this very endeavor of writing about this theatre comes from my personal experience and position-taking that prompts me to argue for the company’s significance. Still, studying Arena Stage, the flagship regional theatre of the United States, contributes to the
underexplored field of regional theatre and provides a new lens for understanding U.S. non-profit theatre institutional practices as socially reproducing and contesting racial hierarchies and nation formation.

There is a dearth of recent scholarship on U.S. regional theatre, and what little exists is rarely critical. Although the central text of the field, Joseph Zeigler’s *Regional Theatre: The Revolutionary Stage*, is an invaluable survey that spotlights Arena Stage, it lacks sociological theorization, and it is more than forty years old. More recent and sustained histories such as Andrew Davis’s *America’s Longest Run: A History of the Walnut Street Theatre* serve more as chronicles of productions, celebrities, and technological changes for fans of particular regional theatres. Indeed, many companies publish their own illustrated histories, including Arena Stage, whose literary manager Laurence Maslon assembled *The Arena Adventure: The First 40 Years*. This text is nonetheless useful for understanding how Arena’s leaders wished to portray and remember themselves after four decades.

One of the main reasons U.S. regional theatre is understudied is because of middlebrow anxiety. According to David Savran,

Middlebrow cultural producers, consumers, and critics alike are always looking over their shoulders; always fearful of encroachments from above or below; always uneasy about their own class positionality and their own tastes; always trying to negotiate between creativity and the exigencies of the marketplace, between politics and aesthetics, between an art that requires studied investment and the desire for untrammeled pleasures.14

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With its questionable legitimacy, U.S. literary theatre has occupied a fraught position between highbrow forms like opera and lowbrow forms like minstrelsy since the nineteenth century. As Savran notes, regional theatres in the 1960s and 1970s moved toward the upper-middlebrow end of the spectrum because of their non-profit status and productions of “serious drama.” Today, however, their position is more tenuous, since they frequently collaborate with commercial theatre producers. Because regional theatres are too close to commerce instead of art, as if these are mutually exclusive, they often arouse critical sneers and appear to some to be unworthy of study in the academy. On the other end of the spectrum, there is a plethora of research on 1960s theatre collectives, which are often seen as aesthetically and politically radical, in part because they disavow financial profit. Such scholarship often valorizes so-called lively theatre in New York and looks down upon what is often referred to as museum theatre outside the city. In *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, for example, Stephen J. Bottoms asserts the importance of Off-Off Broadway by contrasting it with 60s regional theatre that “tended to offer much the same kind of ‘library’ repertory as off-Broadway, and did little to pioneer new directions.” This value judgment goes under-examined, while designated avant-garde and legitimate cultural productions receive more scholarly attention because these theatrical texts and forms have greater cultural and symbolic capital. It is for this very reason—the middlebrow nature of regional theatre—that regional theatre demands

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attention as a fitting example of the site of struggle over different forms of capital and the dynamics of U.S. theatre, culture, and politics.

The middlebrow anxiety that regional theatre arouses also relates to the institution’s very institutionalism, an entrenchment in not only commercial support and the popular, but also whiteness and apparently apolitical politics. Savran reminds us that regional theatre is not activist theatre in that consuming non-profit theatrical productions is neither equivalent to igniting revolution or nor even to voting.19 Some scholars who study minoritanian performance prize what David Román calls “indigenous theatre,” by which he means ethnically-specific or community theatre because “The indigenous is presumed to have remained uncontaminated by commercialism, commodity culture, or mainstream tastes.”20 For example, in El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez provides a much-needed feminist, Chicana/o-centered, anti-capitalist history of El Teatro Campesino, but she frames the company as “alternative” pre-Broadway and “mainstream” thereafter without troubling these terms and notions of unmediated authenticity.21 Similarly, in Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theater, Sonja Kuftinec critically engages with Cornerstone Theatre by asking, “Who defines appropriate representational politics in collaborative productions: the community, Cornerstone artists, or some temporary critic/participant-observer?”22 However, she opens her book by acknowledging, “I approach most productions with a dull sense of dread and a faint whiff of hope. The dread arises from years of attending overproduced deadly professional and academic theatre. The hope mainly emanates from

19 David Savran, A Queer Sort of Materialism, 100.
22 Sonja Kuftinec, Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theater (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 129.
experimental student and community-based productions, grounded in locality, place, or identity.”

Broyles-Gonzales and Kuftinec thus privilege “indigenous” theatre, and to varying extents, they remain critically self-aware of their objects of study and themselves.

In his introduction to *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts*, Román also assesses the precarious position of U.S. theatre scholars. He points out that American Studies academics often use theatre and especially performance as a metaphor but rarely analyze actual theatre and dance performances and rarely read Theatre and Performance Studies scholarship. In part as a result of experiencing middlebrow anxiety and of being ignored by an overlapping field, U.S. theatre theorists and historians frequently feel that they must defend their project. Román observes, “There is a near industry in theatre studies of work on American theatre and performance that bemoans drama’s irrelevance and marginality to the academy and the larger national culture. Nearly every study of American drama begins as an advocacy project, one where the case for the project itself needs to be justified.”

By quoting this in my dissertation on U.S. theatre, I seek to recognize my own complicity in cultural hierarchy. Answering the question, “So what?” and justifying my research explicitly engages with middlebrow anxiety as important and meriting study, rather than advocating a recuperative project that uncritically reifies hierarchy. In other words, my history of Arena Stage is not built upon an argument that Arena is legitimate, avant-garde, ethnically-specific, or community-based and therefore deserves investigation on those bases; rather, I question these categories and their attendant values, and I illustrate how this particular regional theatre negotiates different forms of capital and racial and American identities.

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23 Ibid., 1.
Methodology

My methodology for writing a critical history of Arena Stage involves using scholarship from Theatre, Performance, and American Studies; applying socio-cultural theory and critical race theory; analyzing archival material; and interviewing artists and administrators. This multidisciplinary approach is crucial to not only the contextualization such a history demands but also to performance in general, and musical theatre in particular, a major thread in the history of Arena. While many books on U.S. regional theatre focus solely on a company’s history of performances and artists, this dissertation in addition examines the structures that funded, developed, critiqued, and institutionalized Arena Stage.

In order to understand the position of this company, I loosely map out the field of regional theatre production in Washington, D.C. and the United States and repeatedly use a few major theatres as touchstones. The shape of this field depends upon the relations between the positions of various theatre companies and the historical circumstances by which those positions came to be. To draft this map, I use scholarship on the history of the nation’s capital and U.S. regional theatres as well as pertinent newspaper articles and interviews.

My approach to studying the U.S. regional theatre field of cultural production is indebted to Pierre Bourdieu. His work shapes the theory and language I have been using about the relative positions of theatres, the middlebrow, and the disavowal of economic capital in order to accumulate cultural and symbolic capital. According to Bourdieu, “The theatre, which directly experiences the immediate sanction of the bourgeois public, with its values and conformisms, can earn the institutionalized consecration of academies and official honours, as well as money.”25 It is this history of Arena’s institutionalization and negotiation that interests me. I argue that “non-profit theatre” necessarily includes economic, cultural, and symbolic capital, and

that “earned income” includes donations and grants. The model of the “Economic World Reversed” is very compelling, but I believe that it is more unpredictable than Bourdieu claims, so that social art, bourgeois art, and art for art’s sake are not always clearly distinct, particularly in the 1960s. Still, one of his other major theses concerning the ways artistic distinction socially reproduces hierarchies is pertinent to Arena’s administrators, artists, audiences, and repertory. Drawing from Bourdieu, Loren Kruger astutely observes of the institutionalization of theatre, “Just as the concrete apparatus of theatre production and the social and economic regulation of its audiences bear traces of the norms governing or contesting legitimate performances and texts, so the texts themselves bear the imprint of the apparatus.” At least since the 1960s when Arena began to study its audiences, its patrons have been mostly upper-middle-class, highly educated, and white.

Social class hegemony through theatre intersects with the structures of white supremacy, and this is particularly acute in Arena’s aesthetic and managerial organization. I draw from key texts in critical race theory from sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s formulation of racial formation to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s arguments of colorblindness as the new racism after the Civil Rights era. Following Jodi Melamed, I critique multiculturalism for advocating cultural pluralism without addressing and redressing power.

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27 According to a study conducted in 1964, more than half of Arena Stage patrons had some graduate school education and their average family income was $15,000, approximately twice that of the Washington, D.C. average. Susan Powers, Press Release, January 20, 1964, Arena Stage Records, Special Collections & Archives, George Mason University Libraries. For the rest of this dissertation, the Special Collections & Archives at George Mason University Libraries will be referred to as GMUL.
a burgeoning of critical black performance studies scholarship that informs my dissertation, especially in parsing what “black” in “black theatre” signifies.\textsuperscript{31} I rely especially upon Harvey Young and his conception of “black habitus”\textsuperscript{32} as well as E. Patrick Johnson and his interrogation of authenticity and blackness.\textsuperscript{33}

To gain a greater understanding of Arena’s institutional practices and production processes, I have made extensive use of the Special Collections & Archives at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. The university houses 675 boxes of Arena Stage’s records from 1950 to 2007, including meeting minutes, correspondence, audience responses, in-house studies, financial documents, production files, advertisements, photographs, and videos. There are more than 200 boxes of additional materials from Zelda Fichandler, whose speeches, letters, and essays have been tremendously helpful in reconstructing her vision for Arena Stage. The George Mason archives also house the papers of Thomas Fichandler and J. Burke Knapp, whose roles as economists navigating the company’s finances deserve more attention. The former was not only Zelda’s husband but also executive director for decades, and the latter was the president of the board of trustees throughout the 1960s. The collection at George Mason University also includes many materials from Doug Wager’s tenure as artistic director, 1991-1998, but few materials from Molly Smith’s current leadership.

I have also used promotional materials, reviews, and interviews. Because I am interested in how Arena has branded itself over time, I have studied various marketing materials from subscriber pamphlets and playbills to YouTube videos that suggest how the theatre company framed its audiences, productions, and artistic missions from the earlier eclectic “western”

repertory to the more recent “American” one. In part to assess the impact of such marketing, I examined reviews that were helpfully clipped and filed in the archived Arena Stage production folders. Critics, particularly the chief writers of the *Washington Post* such as Richard Coe in the 1960s to Peter Marks today, provide insight into how Arena’s productions were received by critical gatekeepers. While local papers have been helpful to situate Arena in the Washington, D.C. theatrical ecosystem, the increasing number of reviews from critics of the *New York Times* since the 60s suggests the relative importance of Arena Stage in the national theatre system.

Finally, I conducted interviews in person, on the phone, and over e-mail with twenty-one associates of Arena Stage. These interviews have proven crucial in providing accounts of production processes and institutional decisions because there is little scholarship on this regional theatre, and administrators’ viewpoints, as opposed to artists, rarely receive attention. My conversations with the theatre’s artistic directors, Zelda Fichandler, Doug Wager, and Molly Smith, shed light on their visions for the company and interpretations of Arena’s history, artists, repertory, audience, and position in the larger fields of U.S. theatre and culture. Speaking with long-time employees such as former production manager Guy Bergquist, who served under all three artistic directors, imparted additional perspectives on how and why the institution has changed over time especially during leadership transitions. Interviews with casting director Dan Pruksarnukul and literary manager Amrita Ramanan, who worked with Smith, provided behind-the-scenes accounts of the casting and reception of the multiracial production of *Oklahoma!* Because much of my research investigates black theatre largely directed by white administrators, it was not only essential but also ethically imperative to include the voices of black artists. I thus interviewed playwrights Mustapha Matura and Cheryl West, two frequently produced artists by Arena Stage from the late 1980s to the present. In addition to speaking with artists, I reached out
to people who have worked on the business and community engagement sides of the theatre in order to understand the institution’s multi-faceted mission and diversified accumulation of economic, symbolic, and cultural capital.

Structure of Study

My dissertation consists of institutional histories and production case studies divided into three sections on the negotiation of non-profit, black, and American identities. The three historical chapters cover approximately twenty years each from 1950 to 2010 and unpack how Arena produced non-profit theatre, black drama, and U.S. identity in liberal yet normative ways. Then, three case study chapters on *The Great White Hope*, *Raisin*, and *Oklahoma!* alternate with the histories. These are the most important productions in Arena Stage history, I argue, because they were the most profitable, and they mark significant turning points in Arena’s artistic direction toward potentially Broadway-bound plays, black works, and multiracial productions of “Golden Age” musicals. The case study chapters each include production histories, close readings, and critical responses.

Although I have three historical-thematic threads with corresponding case studies, I also demonstrate how these threads intertwine. The productions of *The Great White Hope*, *Raisin*, and *Oklahoma!* invested in economic, symbolic, and cultural capital; racial hierarchy; and U.S. identity at large. Chapter Five on Arena’s turn to U.S. national identity, for example, focuses on Molly Smith’s rebranding of the theatre as American from 1998 onward but also addresses Zelda Fichandler’s interest in U.S. drama since the 1950s as well as Doug Wager’s commitment to U.S. multiculturalism through new play development, production, and audience diversification.

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34 I put “Golden Age” into scare quotes because I question the value judgment implicit in this categorization; instead, I use this term to signify musical comedies and integrated musicals of the 1930s through the 1960s.
Accordingly, the twenty-year demarcations for the chapters serve more as permeable frames that illustrate continuities rather than as arbitrary breaks. This structure of alternating histories with case studies allows the chapters to complement one another—the former providing sociological context and the latter performing close, critical readings of key texts with attendant theories from cultural and performance studies. For instance, Chapter Three documents African/Caribbean/American theatre and audiences from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, while the complementary case study in Chapter Four theorizes the mobilization of “blackness” and unpacks how an almost all-white production team tamed *A Raisin in the Sun* into a popular, feel-good black musical entitled *Raisin* in 1973.

The first two chapters focus on the production of non-profit identity and practices. Chapter One, “Negotiating (Non)Profit Theatre,” traces the invention of a viable non-profit U.S. regional theatre model via Arena Stage from 1950-1970. This chapter takes inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu but underscores the flexibility of the “Economic World Reversed” particularly in 1960s U.S. regional theatre. Arena began as a for-profit corporation, and its eclectic repertory, elite subscriber base, and relationship with commercial New York theatre formed the bases of non-profit theatre. In 1959, Arena Stage reorganized as a non-profit, allowing for a permanent home, resident ensemble, new play development and production, and experiments with multiracial casting. In the mid-sixties, the theatre struggled for the first time with a budget shortfall. To rationalize the value of non-profit theatre and its perpetual economic debt, which was part of the argument of fulfilling artistic standards and producing overtly political and seemingly risky plays, Zelda Fichandler played upon the art-commerce binary and called for grants from foundations, corporations, government, and individuals. She was greatly assisted by her economist husband Thomas Fichandler and W. McNeil Lowry of the Ford Foundation.
Throughout the chapter, I trouble the notion that money and art are mutually exclusive. Political works such as *Oh! What a Lovely War* and *Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance* were often economic and artistic hits with audiences in the sixties, although Zelda Fichandler shrewdly claimed that the unpopularity of these anti-war plays created the theatre’s first deficit. I argue that non-profit is to a large extent for-profit in her sophisticated negotiation and accumulation of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital to institutionalize Arena Stage.

Chapter Two, “The Great White Hope and the Great White Way,” builds upon the previous chapter by focusing on the position of *The Great White Hope* and the blurry, constructed line between for-profit and not-for-profit. Although Arena had produced many world premiere plays, and some of them had transferred to New York for commercial runs, *The Great White Hope* marked a major turning point. By earning awards, critical acclaim, national attention, and significant money upon moving to Broadway, the production located non-profit regional theatre as the new site for originating highly profitable American plays. In the mid-sixties, Zelda Fichandler secured funding from the Ford Foundation for Howard Sackler to write this new play based on the life of black boxing champion Jack Johnson. While the play launched the careers of Sackler and star James Earl Jones, Arena lost $50,000 on the production, and it lost half of its resident acting company to the Great White Way. As a consequence, Zelda and Thomas Fichandler learned that they needed to stake out a percentage of potential profit from future productions when negotiating contracts. Since 1970, Arena Stage has developed, produced, and/or presented twenty productions that subsequently moved to Broadway. In addition to historicizing the significance of *The Great White Hope* in inaugurating what is today the common practice of non-profit theatres transferring productions to Broadway, I attend to the liberal racial politics of this play that facilitated its critical success. I argue that Sackler’s
portrayal of a black boxing champion, miscegenation, and racial performance tackles white supremacy and resonates with Mohammed Ali, Loving v. Virginia, and the Civil Rights Movement. At the same time, the play centers on whiteness and black downfall, and Sackler and Jones publicly disavowed the salience of race and racism. The Great White Hope thus represents struggles over capital and race, and its ambivalent politics created an appealing liberal narrative that appeared at once critical and universalist.

Beginning the second section on performing black identity, Chapter Three, “Global Stages: From Russia and Eastern Europe to African Diaspora Dramas, Artists, and Audiences,” historicizes how Arena Stage cultivated African/Caribbean/American theatre and audiences toward the end of the Cold War. Since 1950, Fichandler selected an eclectic repertory, and she long had an interest in producing new and classic Russian and Eastern European work. In 1973, Arena was chosen by the State Department to represent the United States by touring Our Town and Inherit the Wind in Russia. Positioned as a world-renowned theatre and a global theatre, Arena increasingly presented and produced theatrical works from Africa and the Caribbean in the 1970s and 1980s. Fichandler and Wager were interested in the plays of Athol Fugard, Derek Walcott, and Mustapha Matura. In advocating liberal apartheid politics (A Lesson from Aloes) or adapting canonical western plays (Playboy of the West Indies), these playwrights were accessible and appealing to Arena’s existing audience, and Matura in particular attracted new black patrons. During this period, the population of Washington, D.C. was approximately 70% black, consisting of a mix of the black bourgeoisie that had come to the nation’s capital during the Great Migration and more recent immigrants and refugees from Africa and the Caribbean. The whiteness of Arena in contrast with its community moved Fichandler to change the repertory and staff. By the late 1980s, the company began regularly producing African American playwrights
such as August Wilson and hiring African American artist-administrators such as Tazewell Thompson. Taking institutional steps toward greater diversity on stage, back stage, and in the audience, Arena Stage received a record $1 million grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to implement and maintain cultural diversity programs. These initiatives helped to establish the theatre as a leader among regional theatres in institutionalizing multiculturalism.

In Chapter Four, “Cultivating Raisin and the Popular Black Musical,” I analyze Arena’s investment in black musicals. The musical adaptation of A Raisin in the Sun was written by a mostly white production team: whites Robert Nemiroff (Lorraine Hansberry’s ex-husband and estate manager) and Charlotte Zaltzberg penned the book, Judd Woldin the music, and Robert Brittan the lyrics, while African American Donald McKayle directed and choreographed. The most successful production in the company’s history up to that point, Raisin premiered in 1973, transferred to Broadway, and went on an extensive national tour. In this chapter, I map out different positions and definitions of “black musical” in discourses about Raisin to illustrate contestations over blackness, authenticity, specificity, and universality. Revisiting Raisin, a neglected yet important musical, provides a productive site for processing changing cultural hierarchies of plays versus musicals and the politics of African American representation. I argue that the musicalization of A Raisin in the Sun tames the play’s feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist politics and provided the liberal politics and pleasurable affect that many audiences desired in the wake of war, recession, and racial upheaval. This production laid the groundwork for future works by African Americans that contain liberal but not violent or radical critique, music, literariness, and appeal for white and black audiences, a recipe for successful black productions at Arena. Since Molly Smith’s tenure began in 1998, producing black musicals has
become an annual endeavor. These productions have paid off by generating record-high ticket sales, inspiring joyful affect, and diversifying audiences.

For the final section on performing American identity, Chapter Five, “Articulating American Voices,” examines Arena Stage’s rebranding as “Where American Theater Lives” under the artistic leadership of Molly Smith. But first, I trace the theatre’s American identity to Fichandler’s and Wager’s tenures. From her earliest days at Arena, Fichandler invested in U.S. drama by producing Washington, D.C. premieres such as *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller and by developing new plays by emerging U.S. playwrights. Her innovation with a racially integrated acting ensemble in the late 1960s was due in part to a recognition that her stage and her audience did not mirror the diverse population of the United States and especially the nation’s capital. When Wager became the artistic director in 1991, he implemented New Voices for a New America, a program to institutionalize U.S. multiculturalism. Artists such as Cheryl West and Anna Deavere Smith in addition to African American patrons found a home at Arena, while many older white subscribers resented the commitment to racial diversity. In 1998, Smith became the artistic director, and she gradually transformed Fichandler’s and Wager’s globally eclectic repertory to a decidedly American one, by which she meant a focus on U.S.-based artists and stories that often dealt with racial politics. This American identity distinguished Arena, which competed with seventy local professional companies in the late 1990s. Her vision included producing not only canonical white American playwrights and African American playwrights, but also other artists of color such as the comic-political Latino group Culture Clash. In 2009, the American Voices New Play Institute launched to develop and study the field of new American plays, and the following year, a new building dubbed the Mead Center for American Theater opened and concretized Arena’s American branding.

Chapter Six, “Redefining America, Arena Stage, and Territory Folks in a Multiracial Oklahoma!,” details the strategy and American identity that Smith enunciated through the production that inaugurated the Mead Center in 2010: Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein’s Oklahoma! Winning awards and critical acclaim, the musical became the highest-grossing initial-run production in the company’s history. By mobilizing a popular musical of U.S. nation formation populated by multiracial territory folks on the frontier and in the nation’s capital, Smith’s directorial approach attracted audiences, rearticulated Arena and America, and reverberated with Barack Obama’s presidency. I contend that this production embodied what Jill Dolan calls a “utopian performative” by staging a harmonious community of multiracial Americans; at the same time, this harmony obscured Native Americans in the histories of the original play and the state of Oklahoma as well as continuing racial material differences.36 This point is crucial when people of color appear to have significant representation be it on stage at Arena or in the White House, and many white Americans deny the contemporary salience of race and racism, thereby sustaining inequities. Drawing upon Angela Pao’s foundational work on race, ethnicity, and nationality in U.S. casting practices, I theorize productions and interpretations of the multiracial actors as playing multiracial characters, white characters, and/or post-racial characters.37 I consider interviews, marketing materials, and critical reviews to demonstrate these varying perspectives and their attendant politics. Given Arena’s historical and continuing commitment to staging multiracial productions of classics as well as its position in the nation’s capital, this particular regional theatre opens up productive opportunities

to interrogate the intersection of racial and national identities on stage and their subsequent affects and effects beyond the stage.

My critical history of Arena Stage analyzes the theatre company’s stagings of and struggles over non-profit status, black theatre, and American identity from 1950 to 2010. In charting institutional, artistic, and economic practices, I contextualize Arena within the changing map of U.S. regional theatre and of sociopolitical dynamics. By producing racially liberal dramas; capitalizing upon Washington, D.C.; adapting and distinguishing its mission; and developing institutional practices that have helped it to accumulate economic, symbolic, and cultural capital, this flagship company has stayed afloat for more than sixty years. Located in the capital of the United States, Arena Stage performs capital, race, and nation in the round and demands critical attention to intersections of power on the regional stage.
CHAPTER ONE:
NEGOTIATING (NON)PROFIT THEATRE

Introduction

In 1967, critic Martin Gottfried argued in *A Theater Divided: The Postwar American Stage* that U.S. theatre was separated into two camps. The right camp produced new comedies and musicals from Broadway to summer stock, staged legitimate theatre such as Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* in a professional manner, and subscribed to *Variety*. It encompassed “any theater that is accepted by the public, the government, the powers that be”—in short, for-profit theatre.38 Meanwhile, the left camp produced classical and experimental work in a more amateurish fashion, renounced popularity, and subscribed to *TDR*—in short, non-profit theatre. According to Gottfried,

The left wing includes most of the newer resident theaters that have developed in the United States. These theaters are concerned with producing theater art— the classical literature in particular. They are not nearly so adventurous as they think and their work is concentrated in war-horse classics (Chekhov, Shaw, O’Neill and Shakespeare), but their object is serious, and their directors are usually bright and talented young men [sic] who became disenchanted with Broadway (to a degree because they couldn’t get any work there) and left for art’s sake.39

Although Gottfried presents the right and left as distinct, opposing forces, he also contradictorily demonstrates how they overlap. He chastises the self-importance of regional theatre artistic directors whose tastes and resumes are at once rooted in Broadway and disavowing of Broadway. Both right and left wings produce “classical literature” such as Chekhov as well as

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39 Ibid., 6.
new avant-garde plays such as *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* (also known as *Marat/Sade*). Both are “accepted by the public, the government, the powers that be” if in different ways through ticket sales, donations, grants, and newspaper and academic reviews. Both seek kinds of profit. Their artistic and economic practices are not as different as Gottfried initially portrays them. Indeed, he names regional theatre, specifically Arena Stage, as the intersection between right and left, money and art, profit and non-profit, because in his view Arena had become “established” and “institutional” by the 1960s.40

Many theatres had not set out to reject Broadway altogether but to develop institutions for professional theatre outside of New York City. Critics such as Martin Gottfried and Richard Schechner had initially welcomed Arena Stage among other regional theatres as alternatives to Broadway in the early sixties. But a mere few years later, they accused artistic directors of selling out by, for instance, selecting the repertory based on what might thrive on Broadway or might receive foundation and government grants.41 In terms developed by Pierre Bourdieu, they viewed economic and symbolic capital as antithetical.42 Their very writings contributed to the articulation of the supposed division between The Establishment and everyone else. More recently, in “The Mythologizing of American Regional Theatre,” Vincent Landro critiques the critics for romanticizing the origins of regional theatre and reifying the idea that a theatre can have either artistic or commercial success, “a simplistic bipolar model of theatre history typical

40 Ibid., 7.
of the polarized thinking in the 1960s.”

Institutionalizing, professionalizing, and maintaining a balanced budget did not necessarily mean reducing artistic standards and experiments.

One of the first pillars of regional theatre, Arena Stage was crucial to the invention of U.S. non-profit theatre through its acts of distinction, negotiation, and contradiction. Founded originally as a for-profit corporation in 1950, the company became the first professional resident theatre in the nation’s capital. Producing director and co-founder Zelda Fichandler had high ambitions. She envisioned a large, in-the-round, public theatre that staged entertaining comedies; challenging, contemporary works; and classics that spoke to present issues. She wanted to emulate European theatres that boasted resident acting companies and rotating repertories. Most importantly, she needed a permanent home. To raise funds for these projects, Arena Stage reorganized as a non-profit, a relatively new idea for a theatre in 1959 that has now become the dominant model for regional theatres. Non-profit status allowed for more innovation and expansion: larger, stable homes; resident acting ensembles; and new programming. It did not, however, fix all fiscal problems and permit total artistic license.

In the mid-sixties, Arena Stage and other rising non-profit theatres struggled for the first time with rising deficits. To justify the value of non-profit theatre and its perpetual economic debt, which was part of the argument of fulfilling artistic standards, the company invoked the 1965 Rockefeller Fund report *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects* and William Baumol and William Bowen’s 1966 landmark study *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*. With non-profit status and studies, Fichandler was able to push the company’s physical, aesthetic, and financial boundaries further than before, yet she had to consider how far she could go when leveraging the deficit. At times, she risked and even disavowed monetary gains in order

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to obtain prestige and to experiment, yet a level of financial sustainability provided a foundation for the company. The implementation and maintenance of Arena’s adventurous endeavors including the rotating repertory, integrated ensemble, and world premieres, though funded by grants and seemingly free from market forces, were ultimately contingent upon the kinds and amounts of capital they produced. Arena’s success largely flowed from Fichandler’s accumulation and negotiation of different kinds of capital, particularly with the help of her economist husband and company executive director Thomas Fichandler as well as W. McNeil Lowry, the head of the Humanities and the Arts division of the Ford Foundation.

Money and art are not mutually exclusive. This chapter charts the history of Arena Stage from 1950 to 1970 focusing on the intersections of commerce and aesthetics that shaped the extent to which Zelda Fichandler’s ideas materialized. I am particularly invested in unpacking the term “non-profit theatre,” challenging the implicit idea that cultural and symbolic capitals are not kinds of profit, and that donations and grants are not kinds of earned income. In addition, the company’s programming cannot be simplified and categorized into classic money-makers and avant-garde prestige plays. Political works such as those by or inspired by Bertolt Brecht were often economic and artistic hits with audiences in the sixties, although Fichandler shrewdly claimed that these plays created the theatre’s first deficit, capitalizing upon the ideology of the art-commerce binary. *The Great White Hope*, the focus of Chapter Two, also blurred the lines between for- and not-for-profit as the first highly successful transfer of a production from a regional theatre to Broadway.

This first chapter, “Negotiating (Non)Profit Theatre,” begins with a discussion of Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of different capitals, the Economic World Reversed, and relations of agents in *The Field of Cultural Production*. Next, an overview of scholarship that often invokes
Bourdieu when historicizing the development, preservation, and contestation of cultural hierarchy in the United States will help to situate Arena Stage’s history and negotiation of (non)profit. The bulk of this chapter historicizes the theatre during its first two decades as a for-profit and not-for-profit institution, arguing that the company invented the viable non-profit model by investing in what were considered more risky, artistic endeavors yet remaining well within the bounds of popular acceptance and for-profit capital accumulation.

**Background**

Pierre Bourdieu has strongly influenced my approach to studying Arena Stage in the field of cultural production. He conceives this field as comprising of the relations between different agents (individuals and institutions), their habitus, their positions, how those positions historically came to be possible, and how this field sits in the larger field of power. Habitus emerges from agents’ social class among other dispositions as well as relations to other agents that influence subsequent perceptions and actions to the extent of seeming second nature. Agents compete over resources categorized as different kinds of capital. Capital is unevenly distributed and can sometimes be exchanged for other kinds of capital.

Economic capital, symbolic capital, and cultural capital interest me here. Economic capital is the formal money earned in, for instance, wages or capital gains. Symbolic capital is the prestige, celebrity, and honors from consecrating institutions such as awards committees and the academy. Cultural capital comes from cultural competences often through education although that assumes cultural knowledge of highbrow art necessarily has more value than that of lowbrow art. I prefer citing symbolic capital instead of cultural capital because the former has a clearer relationship to institutions that legitimize agents and to economic capital. Symbolic
capital rests upon a production of belief in which agents engage in “struggles for the monopoly of power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated.” Its value derives from a practiced disinterestedness, a disavowal of the desire to accumulate economic capital.

This brings me to the “Economic World Reversed” of the field of cultural production in which a “winner-loses” logic rules. Agents can accumulate lots of economic capital at the expense of symbolic capital, or they can accumulate lots of symbolic capital at the expense of economic capital. For example, in the 1960s, Broadway producer David Merrick earned money by producing *Hello, Dolly!*, while Joseph Papp earned accolades by producing Shakespeare on a flatbed truck in underserved communities. Yet theatre, in its middlebrow position, complicates this binary and “must represent a kind of highest social denominator.” According to Bourdieu, “The theatre, which directly experiences the immediate sanction of the bourgeois public, with its values and conformisms, can earn the institutionalized consecration of academies and official honours, as well as money.” Indeed, David Merrick also brought the prestige plays *Marat/Sade* and *Oh! What a Lovely War* to Broadway, just as Joseph Papp did with the musical *Hair*, suggesting that art and commerce do not always have an inverse relationship. At the center of these intersections, Arena Stage produced or at least seriously considered producing all three of these plays.

Another aspect of Bourdieu’s theory that I do not believe is so clear cut is his distinctions between social art, bourgeois art, and art for art’s sake. He separates them based on the kinds of capital these artistic productions accumulate. In addition, he maps the arts onto different habitus inclinations and different scales of production. On one end, there is mass, working class art, and

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44 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 78.
45 Ibid., 126.
46 Ibid., 51.
on the other, there is art by socially elite but not economically elite producers for fellow producers. Although I largely agree with the model of the “Economic World Reversed,” I believe that it is less predictable than Bourdieu claims, so that the divisions between types of cultural productions and producers are not always clearly distinct. His theory describes the art industry of the late nineteenth century, but it does not wholly account for the 1960s when movements like camp complicated delineations between high and low art.

Nevertheless, I concur with one of Bourdieu’s other major theses concerning the ways artistic distinction reproduces social class hierarchies. The bourgeoisie and elite for instance use their cultural competencies to select some art over others, perceive more than the object being represented, and believe their more cultivated taste justifies their rule over the working class. To Bourdieu, it is essential for a sociologist of culture to recognize power: “to ignore the fact of legitimacy is either to condemn oneself to a class-based ethnocentrism which leads the defenders of restricted culture to ignore the material foundations of the symbolic domination of one culture by another, or implicitly to commit oneself to a populism which betrayed a shameful recognition of the legitimacy of the dominant culture in an effort to rehabilitate middle-brow culture.”

Agents employ art and culture to legitimize their dominance, and when scholars render this relationship invisible, they ultimately reify cultural and social hierarchies.

While Bourdieu traces the development of art for art’s sake through artists such as Flaubert and Manet, theatre scholars use parallel theatrical examples. In *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine surveys how social pressures from immigration, industrialization, and division of public and private space shaped a new cultural hierarchy in the United States. This structure exalted arts such as European operas and Shakespeare’s plays, which had been popular in the nineteenth century. According to

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Ibid., 129.
Levine, the elite justified domination through distinction: “Culture thus could be used as a force with which to proselytize among the people (masses) or as an oasis of refuge from and a barrier against them.”⁴⁸ Focusing on the early 1920s, David Savran provides a closer examination of brow level in theatre in *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theatre, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class*. He argues that producers, consumers, and critics mobilized jazz to distinguish between theatrical genres, venues, classes, and races. For instance, critic George Jean Nathan’s heavenly praises of Eugene O’Neill contributed to the development of a legitimate literary theatre that disavowed jazz and cultivated a bourgeois audience.⁴⁹

Progenitors of or at least precedents to U.S. regional theatres, the little theatres and the Federal Theatre Project (1935–1939) also developed audiences and attendant non-profit models; moreover, they helped to de-center professional theatre. Little theatres emerged in the 1910s and lasted through the 1920s, the most famous perhaps being the Boston Toy Theatre, Chicago Little Theatre, and Provincetown Players. According to Dorothy Chansky in *Composing Ourselves: The Little Theatre Movement and the American Audience*, publications such as *Theatre Arts*, George Pierce Baker’s playwriting workshops, and new high school and university drama courses helped to form a national bourgeois theatergoing audience at a time when the rise of radio and film began to compete with theatre.⁵⁰ Such programs distinguished between—and often derided—lowbrow mass entertainment and highbrow inaccessible art, thereby teaching audiences to replicate aesthetic taste and social class. Paul DiMaggio makes a similar argument in “Cultural Boundaries and Structural Change: The Extension of the High Culture Model to

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He illustrates how little theatres produced a particular artistic repertoire and turned non-profit in order to follow museums and symphonies and attain attendant symbolic and cultural capital. However, I qualify the direct descent of regional theatres from little theatres because so few survived into the second half of the twentieth century, namely the Cleveland Play House and the Pasadena Playhouse. The early histories of these two companies are more closely aligned with amateur theatre and university theatre, respectively. In addition, regional theatre leaders such as Zelda Fichandler more often cite European national theatres such as the Comédie-Française, Berliner Ensemble, and Moscow Art Theatre as influences than they do U.S. little theatres. Still, these early twentieth century companies modeled an “art” theatre and cultivated audiences outside the theatrical center of New York City. During the Great Depression, although most of the Federal Theatre Project dollars from the New Deal went to New York, regional-specific initiatives brought professional theatre to working class audiences, often for the first time. Again, these initiatives did not lead to long-lasting institutions, but like the little theatres they suggested non-profit-run professional theatre could find support beyond New York City. They also provided training for artists such as Margo Jones, who along with Fichandler would come to be known as one of the matriarchs of regional theatre.

For-Profit in the 1950s

In 1950, director and George Washington University theatre professor Edward Mangum and his graduate student Zelda Fichandler co-founded Arena Enterprises, Inc. At the time, there

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was no professional theatre in Washington, D.C. From 1948 to 1952, the National Theatre, a touring house, was legally ordered to close because the management refused to admit a racially integrated cast and audience. Locals could see amateur performance at colleges such as Catholic University and Howard University or at community theatres such as the Mount Vernon Players from which founding members Vera Roberts and Edward Mangum would go on to create Arena Stage. Mangum had come from Dallas, saw what Margo Jones had done with her in-the-round Theatre ’47, and proposed that he and Fichandler follow her model. But unlike Jones, Mangum insisted upon starting as a for-profit venture. He remarked, “I knew of no one who wanted to contribute his [sic] hard-earned cash to a non-profit enterprise as shaky as a legitimate theatre can be. I did know some friends who were willing to gamble on my making a success of a new kind of theatre.”

Despite the history of little theatres, U.S. theatre was still cast in commercial terms, and according to Mangum, a non-profit theatre seemed riskier than a for-profit one.

In her influential tract Theatre-in-the-Round, Jones asserted that a theatre set up as a for-profit company could work as long as the investors did not compromise artistic standards for big dividends. Such a belief suggests that art and money are the extreme ends of a spectrum, and investors and administrations should lean toward the side of art. Jones had previously worked in commercial theatre. She co-directed the original Broadway production of The Glass Menagerie, and it was through her connection to Broadway that she gained legitimacy for her work in Dallas. Meanwhile, she famously opened her theatre as a non-profit institution at a time when theatre in general had not yet joined the solidly non-profit ranks of the symphony and opera house. Jones nevertheless insisted, “Unlike many nonprofit organizations, a theatre should and

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can make enough money to pay for itself, provided an initial sum is raised to start it.” She thus made a distinction between theatre and other arts; theatres, she believed, should raise money principally through capital campaigns, not on an ongoing basis, and then continue to support themselves through the box office, a common credo for early regional theatres. Despite advocating for non-profit status and art above money, she perpetuated the underlying conviction that theatre should be able to support itself financially. This somewhat contradictory logic suggests that regional theatres heavily rely on the accumulation of economic, symbolic, and cultural capital. As conceived by Jones, for-profit theatre and non-profit theatre were not so different from each other, and Arena Stage illustrates this point from its earliest years.

Mangum and Fichandler raised $15,000 from forty stockholders whose occupations ranged from ambassador to carpenter, a point that Arena Stage’s own narratives often emphasize to underscore the company’s populist beginnings. The company initially bought a boat, the SS Potomac, on which they imagined that they would perform plays, but they were unable to find a suitable place to dock the boat. The members subsequently located an old movie theatre, the Hippodrome, and transformed it into a 247-seat theatre-in-the-round. Because theatres were required to have a fire curtain, and Arena could not have one due to its in-the-round playing space, the institution could not have the word “theatre” in its name, hence Arena Stage. The company produced a repertory largely of classics, perhaps mediating the conservative streak of the 1950s as well as the educated, middle class milieu of the company’s founders and patrons. The first season boasted seventeen productions, including She Stoops to Conquer, The Importance of Being Earnest, and Twelfth Night, which were so popular that they were brought back the next season. Arena gained Equity status after its first year, meaning that all the actors

were professionals. Mangum soon left for other ventures in Hawaii. After four more years with Zelda Fichandler at the helm, the company’s corporate worth nearly doubled.\textsuperscript{55}

To get a sense of Fichandler’s habitus, I will need to describe her background. Fichandler was born in 1924 in Boston, Massachusetts to a middle class immigrant family. Both her parents had emigrated from Russia when they were children, and both were Orthodox Jews. They met when they were studying at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. When Fichandler’s father Harry Diamond took a job at the National Bureau of Standards, the family moved to Washington, D.C. He went on to become an important engineer who invented a radio and proximity fuze useful in wartime. When seventeen or so, Fichandler defied her parents, who had wanted her to remain in Washington and marry like “a regular girl.”\textsuperscript{56} She attended Cornell University to partake in an upper-level program on contemporary Soviet culture. In an interview, she recalled, “I worked myself through this program on my own.”\textsuperscript{57} She penned Russian translations, wrote her thesis on Shakespeare and the Soviet Union, and read Chekhov in the original language, remarking in our interview upon how one specific translator was superior to another. She also worked for the U.S. government in translating Russian missives. This background gestures toward her repertory, which prominently featured Shakespeare and Chekhov, and other proclivities.

In 1955, Fichandler persuaded the stockholders to move Arena Stage to a larger space, arguing that more seats would generate more income. But she did not intend for the profits to go to the stockholders; rather, the money would go back into the theatre because it “has entailed too many hardships, including that of low salaries, the pressures of constant bargain hunting in all

\textsuperscript{55} Zelda Fichandler, “Report to the Stockholders of Arena Stage, Inc.,” June 8, 1955, p. 1, box 1, fol. 32, Arena Stage Historical Documents 1950-1998, GMUL.
\textsuperscript{56} Zelda Fichandler, in discussion with the author, December 2012.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
departments, and the necessity to make too many artistic judgments on the basis of the dollar sign alone.”58 This was not a typical corporation calculating every decision to increase the economic value of its holdings and distribute those dividends to investors regularly. This was also not a romantic valorization of the starving artist. Instead, Fichandler asserted that the theatre thrives upon well-paid employees, less anxiety over finances, and decisions not beholden to the box office and production costs, such as selecting plays with small casts and few costume changes. She conceived of economic capital being in service to her artistic choices. But at this time, even sold-out runs, such as the Washington premiere of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, lost money, indicating that Fichandler was willing to keep ticket prices low and to produce work for artistic and political reasons at an immediate financial loss. In our interview, she revealed that she and her husband were investigated by the FBI for producing *The Crucible*, one of her favorite plays, suggesting that perhaps Arena was not so conservative but indeed liberal in this McCarthyite era and area.59 In her five-year report to the stockholders, she also imagined Arena Stage at age ten with a permanent acting ensemble, a playwright in residence, and educational initiatives, programs that later became the purview of non-profit theatres.

In 1956, Arena Stage moved to a larger space, the Old Vat Brewery, fitted with 500 seats. But because that building was soon slated for destruction to make way for a new bridge across the Potomac River, the company had to move again. This time, the company sought permanence and non-profit status. During a meeting with the board of directors in 1958, Fichandler “pointed out that we were at present in an anomalous position, being set up as a private-profit making venture, and yet by our aims and policy not seriously expecting to make any sizeable private profits, but rather attempting primarily to furnish the Washington area with high caliber theatre

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59 Zelda Fichandler, in discussion with the author, December 2012.
fare.” Here, Fichandler again pits “private profits” against “high caliber theatre fare,” as if they are mutually exclusive. Part of gaining non-profit status entailed Arena’s assertion that it was already not in the business of making substantial economic profits but of profiting the community with professional theatre.

At the same time, however, Arena did have a relationship with commercial theatre. It gained a reputation for bringing to life plays that had flopped on Broadway, such as the acclaimed Australian drama *The Summer of the 17th Doll* by Ray Lawler. Its production, directed by Alan Schneider, was so successful that commercial producer Sidney Bernstein proposed that he transfer and co-produce the show with Arena Stage Off-Broadway. After considering the potential high prestige and low financial risk, the board of directors voted unanimously to cover half of the capitalization. The fact that the play had not done well at the Broadway box office and was moving to the less explicitly commercial clime of Off-Broadway likely helped to justify this decision. Just a couple of years later in “A Permanent Classical Repertory Theatre in the Nation’s Capital,” part of the application for Arena to obtain non-profit status, Fichandler indicted Broadway and articulated the art versus commerce binary: “Broadway’s objective is not culture at all. Its objective is commodity.” In her speeches to board members, she repeatedly linked New York, specifically Broadway, to a money-making machine—and a broken one at that, pointing out the high rate of flops in the late 50s. She contrasted this image with regional theatre as the new site for art. Regional theatre and Off-Broadway, though they occasionally

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60 Minutes of a Meeting of the Board of Directors of Arena Enterprises, May 8, 1958, p. 1, box 30, fol. 1, Thomas C. Fichandler Papers 1950-1997, GMUL.
62 Zelda Fichandler, “A Permanent Classical Repertory Theatre in the Nation’s Capital,” p. 27, box 2, fol. 11, J. Burke Knapp Papers 1960s, GMUL.
produced the same plays that had premiered on Broadway, were considered distinct from Broadway.

During this period, Washington, D.C. was considered a cultural backwater by many critics. In 1959, Howard Taubman of the *New York Times* asked, “In Culture, Is Washington a Hick Town?” and implicitly answered, “Yes.” But he praised Arena Stage in passing. In the 1950s, reviews by Brooks Atkinson and articles in *Theatre Arts* had helped to legitimize the company and position it as an exceptional regional theatre. Critiquing the shallowness of Taubman’s article, Fichandler remarked, “he shows a lack of specific knowledge about the dynamics of the situation when he calls Washington’s record in theatre ‘poor’ and at the same time fails to note that between 1950 to 1960 Arena Stage went from $67,000 to almost a quarter-of-a-million dollars at the box office and […] went from 30,000 to over 100,000 in attendance.” She then pointed out that Washington, D.C. had (and has) more theatre playing weeks than comparable cities such as Dallas and Detroit and a professional audience eager for professional theatre. She understood the power of critics from New York as well as local ones such as Richard Coe of the *Washington Post* in consecrating her institution and city.

At the same time, Fichandler critiqued her bourgeois audience and their reliance upon critical approval. The critics’ power was not natural or immutable but granted “by a by-and-large immature, commodity-oriented public who, for both psychological and economic reasons, are loathe to make independent choices as to how to spend their time and money. ‘Daddy’ must tell them whether or not this production of *Hamlet* is worth the price of two tickets as against a new gadget for the barbecue pit and worth three or four hours time as against weeding out the

Fichandler’s conception is almost Bourdieuian in her understanding of the field of cultural production and habitus. Still, she exaggerates agents’ deliberate calculation of capital accumulation using her sarcastic wit and betraying her own ambivalence about the audience. This ambivalence—wanting a public theatre but rebuking the public—appeared repeatedly during Fichandler’s tenure and negotiation of non- and for-profit.

Raising a subscription audience was another tool to present Arena as less commercial. Beginning in 1957, the theatre could count on subscribers to pay for and fill seats, whether or not the individual production was well-liked, paralleling the audience model of other performing arts non-profits. When speaking of subscriptions, Fichandler was fond of quoting French theatre artist Jean Louis Barrault: “a theatre’s duty was ‘to strive unbendingly to attract the devoted adherent as opposed to the transient public interested only in the hits.’” She attributed the theatre’s success in the 1959-60 season to subscribers and community-oriented programs, such as “preview performances for government workers” and “the teen ticket plan for high school students and teachers.”

During these transitional years, she acknowledged the continued importance of ticket sales and called for “unpretentious entertainment.” Speaking like a producer, she stated, “success is the first law of the theatre, profit or non-profit.” According to Fichandler, “The reason we moved from 247 to 800 [seats] was because we weren’t taking enough in to do what we wanted to do, and we were selling out. It was success that turned us into non-profit.” The sentiment of “success” here appears to be defined as economic success in order to provide a

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66 Zelda Fichandler, remarks at the meeting of the Washington Drama Society, June 7, 1961, p. 4, box 108, fol. 1, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
68 Zelda Fichandler, remarks at the meeting of the Washington Drama Society, June 7, 1961, p. 10.
69 Ibid.
70 Zelda Fichandler, in discussion with the author, December 2012.
sustainable stage for the production of other work and other capitals, which can be done more easily under the banner of non-profit, even though non-profit also signifies a kind of for-profit. The late fifties were financially the best years yet, though they did not grant structural stability. Reincorporation as a non-profit was primarily about constructing and securing a home.

It was important for Arena to establish itself as a durable institution, and for Washington, D.C. to showcase its sole resident professional theatre. The company’s application for landmark status boasts of foreign visitors and newspaper coverage from Italy to Hong Kong in the early 1950s. During the Cold War, the U.S. government wanted to match the symbolic and cultural capital of the Soviet Union in its own capital. The visible impoverishment of the city embarrassed U.S. politicians. Because of its unique geopolitical position, Washington, D.C. lacked an industry aside from government, a strong tax base, and sovereignty, contributing to huge disparities in wealth that mapped onto racial and spatial gaps. In Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C., Howard Gillette, Jr. frames infrastructure policy in the nation’s capital as motivated by either social justice for the advancement of material equality or aesthetic beauty for the advancement of state power. Arguments of the latter often outweighed the former, and such was the case for Southwest D.C. where Arena Stage would be built.

Since the Great Migration of the early twentieth century, Southwest developed a significant concentration of poor African Americans. Meant to address substandard housing by razing such housing, “the New Deal ‘urban-renewal’ effort only aggravated overcrowding in other parts of southeast and southwest Washington, as would urban renewal ‘reforms’ that would

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take place in southwest Washington in the 1950s.”\textsuperscript{73} These so-called reforms led to the establishment of the Redevelopment Land Agency “to assemble land parcels for resale to developers [which] fell under the control of its chair, department store owner Mark Lansburgh, who conceived the agency’s role as attracting higher-income buyers back to the downtown area,” because many had moved to the suburbs in Virginia and Maryland.\textsuperscript{74} The agency authorized the demolition of 99\% of buildings in Southwest D.C. and then the construction of 5,900 housing units; this resulted in the displacement of low-income residents, three-quarters of whom were black, and the new units were intended for almost entirely high-income white residents.\textsuperscript{75}

After clearing the area of low-income people of color, much like what would happen with Lincoln Center, the Redevelopment Land Agency promised to sell land at a reduced cost to Arena if it were a non-profit. Such status would also allow the company to receive grants; donations; and new tax breaks on income, property, and tickets, helping to cover the tremendous cost. Zelda Fichandler’s husband Thomas Fichandler undoubtedly played a huge part in researching these options and financial planning, though it is sometimes difficult to determine which Fichandler was responsible for which fiscal policy. He was an economist who worked for the Twentieth Century Fund and served as the vice president of Arena’s board as well as executive director at this time. In 1959, they persuaded the stockholders to dissolve the corporation and transfer assets to the new non-profit Washington Drama Society. This change was a bold experiment. The Fichandlers and the new board knew they had to raise nearly $1 million for a permanent home, and they believed Washington, D.C. was a challenging city for fundraising due to the transience of its professional class. Moreover, because the nation’s capital


\textsuperscript{74} Howard Gillette, Jr., \textit{Between Justice and Beauty}, 155.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 161-165.
then had little to no autonomy, newer, less legitimate institutions could not count upon governmental funding, unlike for instance New York-based arts and their attendant arts councils. Still, Arena Stage’s leaders forged ahead and hoped their past success would guide their future.

Non-Profit Stability

In 1961, the Arena Stage Theatre became the first theatre built in Washington, D.C. since 1895, the first arena-style theatre specifically built for a U.S. company, and with its more than 800 seats the largest theatre for a resident U.S. professional company. The project was designed by Harry Weese, who went on to design the Washington Metro. When theatre representatives first inquired into support from national and local foundations and corporations, they mostly failed to get contributions to what seemed a shaky venture. Theatres were still not on the same level as symphonies, not to mention hospitals and schools. Once the Fichandlers developed more concrete plans and obtained non-profit status, one foundation after another (the Rockefeller Foundation, the Old Dominion Foundation, and the Meyer Foundation) contributed to the capital campaign. Arena also raised funds by soliciting donations principally from loyal patrons, former stockholders, and members of the new board of trustees. In addition, administrators sold bonds to the public, thereby making the theatre more of a community-driven initiative and financial investment. Although the company was left with a mortgage and many hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt, the press celebrated the financial security that the permanent home promised. Reporters hardly discussed potential artistic changes that the new building and non-profit status would make possible, reinforcing the notion that Arena had been behaving like a not-for-profit company that would continue business as usual.

The Ford Foundation provided substantial economic security in 1962 when it gave Arena Stage $863,000. W. McNeil “Mac” Lowry, the head of the Humanities and the Arts division of the Ford Foundation from 1957 to 1965 and later a vice president, had previously given grants to Zelda Fichandler as a director. In 1962, Zelda and Thomas Fichandler told the board of trustees that Lowry consulted them on the state of regional theatre and funding their own institution as part of a new project.\textsuperscript{77} The resulting grant showed Lowry’s faith in Arena’s artistic and financial track record. It covered the mortgage, bonds, and site acquisition for the new theatre and left more than $150,000 in reserve. Between 1962 and 1971, the Foundation gave $2,659,450 to Arena, out of a total $16 million distributed among seventeen regional theatres.\textsuperscript{78} The only regional theatre that received more money was the Alley Theatre in Houston. The impact of this financial support cannot be overstated in giving Arena a permanent space and what Zelda Fichandler famously called the freedom to fail, a prerogative of the non-profit. For the Ford Foundation, the funding initiative was an opportunity to make a significant impact on the performing arts field. The funding also raises the issue that capitalism enabled the success of Ford and its subsequent philanthropy, which could then help the Ford brand, further complicating the relationship between for- and not-for-profit. Moreover, the Ford Foundation was intimately involved with cultural diplomacy initiatives during the Cold War.

Sheila McNerney Anderson argues that “Lowry shaped arts policy and institutional development in the performing arts community in the United States more than any other single individual.”\textsuperscript{79} Lowry was particularly interested in the development of European-inspired acting

\textsuperscript{77} Minutes of a Meeting of the Board of Trustees, Washington Drama Society, Inc., June 24, 1962, p. 1, box 30, fol. 3, Thomas C. Fichandler Papers.

\textsuperscript{78} Joseph Wesley Zeigler, \textit{Regional Theatre: The Revolutionary Stage} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1973), 185.

companies, “non-commercial theatre,” “classics,” and the “creation of a new body of American classics.” These interests translated into funding permanent acting ensembles, playwrights in residence, and new play productions at handpicked regional theatres. The former was key to Arena retaining and training talented actors and cultivating ongoing relationships between artists and audiences. The latter funded playwrights-in-residence including Herbert Boland and Civil War novelist and historian Shelby Foote.

With financial and symbolic support from foundations, Fichandler chose more challenging plays. In 1961, she opened the new space with what was billed as the U.S. premiere of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. This was actually the premiere of John Holmstrom’s translation and probably the first professional U.S. production. Directed by Alan Schneider, the play signified the kind of work Fichandler wanted to promote on her new stage. Fichandler uses the play and its subsequent revivals as a framing device for her introduction to the theatre’s self-produced commemorative book *The Arena Adventure: The First 40 Years*. Reflecting on the 1961 production, she notes “there was some consternation about picking this particular then-avant-garde play by this particular East German writer for so spotlighted an event,” especially considering that the Berlin Wall had been erected a couple of months earlier. In the week leading up to the launch of the new theatre and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the *Washington Post* printed several articles about Arena Stage, its new building, and Brecht, as well as a positive review by Richard Coe. In the *New York Times*, Howard Taubman delivered a glowing review comparing Washington, D.C. favorably to New York for producing Brecht and having such a stellar resident acting ensemble. The production was a hit, but writing to Lowry,

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80 Ibid., 180-183.
Fichandler claimed that audiences were coming to see the new theatre, not necessarily the play. This was probably true to an extent, yet it was likely a tactic to continue asking the Ford Foundation for targeted artistic grants.

In its first seasons at the new home, Arena earned more income from the box office than ever before. The company continued to produce eight-show seasons but now for more weeks and seats. Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle* and Marc Blitzstein’s adaptation of Brecht and Weill’s *Threepenny Opera* had the highest ticket sales in the 1961-62 and 1962-63 seasons. Thomas Fichandler had interestingly recommended raising ticket prices for *Threepenny* because of the particularly high cost of hiring an orchestra. The board of trustees argued about the theatre’s duty as a non-profit and ultimately defeated the motion. According to Zelda Fichandler, maintaining low ticket prices was one of her greatest achievements because “everybody can come,” opening up the possibility for dialogue and transformation. But “everybody” is an overstatement. In 1962, single tickets to Arena Stage’s productions cost $2-$3.95, several times the cost of movie tickets. According to a study conducted in 1964, more than half the company’s patrons had some graduate school education and their average family income was $15,000, approximately twice the Washington, D.C. average. Producing *The Threepenny Opera* and providing access at least to the educated, white middle class helped Arena articulate what it meant to be a non-profit regional theatre.

Brecht and Brecht-inspired plays were well-liked by middlebrow audiences in the 1960s, likely because of their politics, cultural and symbolic capital, and music. In 1967, a decade after

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82 Zelda Fichandler to Mac Lowry, March 30, 1962, box 154, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
83 Box Office Receipts, 1961-62 and Subsequent Seasons, p. 1, box 82, fol. 2, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
85 Zelda Fichandler, in discussion with the author, December 2012.
86 “Case History of the Economic Workings of Arena Stage,” p. 6, box 12, fol. 3, Arena Stage Financial Documents, GMUL.
87 Susan Powers, Press Release, January 20, 1964, Arena Stage Records, GMUL.
Brecht’s death, Martin Esslin commented on Brecht’s growing popularity in U.S. academic publications, himself participating in such production via his biography of Brecht and this very article published in *TDR*, a kind of Brecht forum at the time. He posed the question, “Has the significance of Brecht engendered the Brecht industry, or has the Brecht industry made Brecht seem so significant?” These are coextensive. Scholars writing on sixties theatre collectives stress Brecht’s formative impact on radical U.S. theatres such as the Living Theatre, while others historicize Brecht’s stays in the United States. His place on regional stages is, on the other hand, less well known, although *Threepenny* was one of the most frequently produced works at regional theatres in the late 60s.89

Thinking of Brecht as an “industry” and possibly “American” almost seems sacrilegious, yet his circulation between Washington, D.C., New York, and other U.S. cities suggests his strong presence in U.S. theatre, and Arena Stage took part in his institutionalization. Fichandler may have produced *The Threepenny Opera* because of the popular production in New York where it ran for nearly 3,000 performances Off-Broadway at the Theater de Lys from 1954 to 1961. After Arena opened with *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, that play was produced soon afterward at the Actor’s Workshop in San Francisco, the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, and Lincoln Center in New York, among other regional theatres. Perhaps the trendiness of Brecht partially accounts for why *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Galileo* were some of the only well-received productions during Herbert Blau and Jules Irving’s tenure at Lincoln Center. This pattern underscores the impact a single well-publicized and acclaimed production can have, and, in this case, how Blau and Irving could disseminate their tastes from San Francisco to New York.

89 Tomoko Aono, *The Foundations of American Regional Theatre* (PhD diss., CUNY Graduate Center, 2010), 27. Aono compiled this data using *The Best Plays*, local newspapers, and theatres’ commemorative publications and internal records.
City. Fichandler, though, prided herself on producing *Galileo* (Charles Laughton’s version) “before it did the resident theatre circuit.” ⁹⁰ Such negotiations draw attention to competing claims to cultural productions as well as a more circular system of programming beyond Broadway. Moreover, play selection was not a simple matter of choosing between high art and high box office receipts. Politically progressive yet popular, in several senses of the term, these plays linked Arena’s artistic mission and commercial needs.

In the mid-sixties, Fichandler moved the repertory further in this direction. This included contemporary European plays in the vein of *The Hostage* by Brendan Behan, *Oh! What a Lovely War* by Joan Littlewood, and *Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance* by John Arden. The former were two of the most produced plays across the country in the mid-sixties. ⁹¹ The 1965-66 season subscription mailer advertised John Arden’s play by citing *The Hostage*, which Arena had produced three seasons prior, and emphasizing the high literary quality. The description of *Oh! What a Lovely War* relied on knowledge of Joan Littlewood and emphasized entertainment: “The English musical review [sic] from Miss Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop…a brightly inventive, caustic entertainment blending dramatic and humorous skits with songs of the First World War.” ⁹²

Whereas the early marketing downplayed the anti-war messages of these works, the productions themselves seem to have been provocative, or they are remembered as such. Covering the 1965-66 season, *The Arena Adventure* spotlighted only these two plays and declared “Arena kept pace with the country’s growing skepticism about armed conflict in

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Indochina by offering two distinctly different anti-war plays.” The productions were particularly topical in the context of the nation’s capital. According to staff meeting minutes, during the run of Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance, Arena planned to put photographs of the Vietnam War and other wars in the lobby. Washington Post critic Geoffrey A. Wolff observed that Arden’s play “obviously speaks to our moral dilemmas in Vietnam.” Meanwhile, Richard Coe bemoaned the missing irony he appreciated so much in the original Theatre Workshop production of Oh! What a Lovely War, a “brilliant, black, bitter revue.” Programming these plays capitalized on the audience’s mostly liberal politics, which were not limited to Off- and Off-Off-Broadway but very present in sixties regional theatre.

Fichandler also took an interest in absurdist theatre. In 1962, she wrote an article for the National Educational Association Journal articulating the aesthetics and politics of these “anti-plays.” She cited critics who were hostile to these plays as well as Esslin’s Theatre of the Absurd, arguing on the one hand that these plays mediate “the tortured, fragmented, centrifugal world in which we live” but also “It is doubtful that the Theatre of the Absurd will contribute a body of plays to rank with Aeschylus or Shakespeare.” And yet, Fichandler took part in the institutionalization of this aesthetic. Just prior to the opening of the permanent home in 1961, she produced Krapp’s Last Tape, directed by Alan Schneider. According to Natka Bianchini, “Schneider would direct every play Beckett wrote, including all the American premieres of his

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93 Laurence Maslon, The Arena Adventure, 36
98 Ibid., 14-16.
major plays (12 in total), and, even more significantly, five world premieres.” Schneider was also a major director at Arena, directing more than thirty productions and serving briefly as co-artistic director once in the 1950s and once in the 1970s. During the 70s, he directed Beckett’s Not I, Waiting for Godot, and a trio of short plays Play, Footfalls, and That Time. The latter two were particularly important as the first time Beckett’s works had a U.S. premiere outside of New York City. Bianchini observes that, at this time, commercial Broadway and Off-Broadway became too financially risky, drawing Beckett to the non-profit world; in addition, “Academic symposia devoted to his work were becoming more frequent, as were Schneider’s invitations to be part of them.” These phenomena suggest the apparent inverse relationship between economic and symbolic capital and the shift of contemporary playwriting to U.S. non-profit regional theatres.

Dealing with the Deficit

After the 1965-66 season, Arena Stage experienced its first deficit, which was approximately $50,000, and then its first decrease in subscriptions. In 1963, Thomas Fichandler explained that the company regularly lost half of its subscribers each season: one quarter because of the transient nature of political Washington, D.C., and the other quarter for no known reason. But in an oft-repeated speech, Zelda Fichandler claimed that Arena lost half its subscribers because conservative audiences disliked the season’s experimental and politically-charged repertory, which included short works by Ionesco (The Lesson) and Pinter (The

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100 Ibid.

Collection) in addition to Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance and Oh! What a Lovely War. According to The Arena Adventure, including these anti-war plays in “this banquet gave some subscribers indigestion and they left the table. More traditional fare was added.” The food diction interestingly elevates this repertory as a “banquet” while stating that art is meant to be consumed. As noted earlier, this same commemorative book describes these anti-war plays as reflections of popular U.S. sentiment. But here, these plays are positioned as unpopular in a strictly commercial sense.

The claims about losing money and losing subscribers are exaggerated if not plain false, betraying the common ideology of the Economic World Reversed that a production can have either economic or symbolic capital, that it can be either social art, bourgeois art, or art for art’s sake. In total, Arena Stage had only 400 fewer subscribers than the year before, coming to the still sizable total of 16,000 in the 1966-67 season. Throughout the mid-sixties, the audience typically filled 90% of the house, suggesting the popularity of the experimental and left-leaning repertory among subscribers and individual ticket buyers. Pinter’s plays The Birthday Party and The Homecoming were among the most frequently staged at regional theatres in the mid-1960s. Oh! What a Lovely War was actually the biggest box office draw of Arena’s 1965-66 season, bringing in more than $90,000, an amount second only to The Threepenny Opera years earlier. Admittedly because of the hired band and projections, Oh! What a Lovely War was probably more expensive to produce. It also had fewer available seats because one section of seating was removed, the first and only time the theatre has done this, to create a thrust stage and

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106 Box Office Receipts, 1961-62 and Subsequent Seasons, box 82, fol. 2, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
area for projections. Still, *Oh! What a Lovely War* was the single production whose image graced the brochure for subscribers to renew for the next season, perhaps the reason why some subscribers “left the table.” Despite the financial success and entertainment value of *Oh! What a Lovely War*, the widely held belief that challenging, higher art cannot also be commercial permitted Fichandler and others to blame the deficit on the supposed audience rejection of the artistically and politically challenging repertory. Following the deficit year, the 1966-67 season was somewhat more conservative, featuring several classics including *Macbeth*, *The Crucible* (a new production), and *The Inspector General* and fewer plays in total.

In 1967, Fichandler delivered a speech to the American Educational Theatre Association, an audience likely receptive to praises of avant-garde and anti-war plays and to critiques of popular audiences, a speech that critics have quoted unquestioningly for decades.  

She disclosed that Richard Schechner admired most of her company’s productions such as *Oh! What a Lovely War* but derided what he called the “Marshmallow Theatre” movement and absence of working-class audiences. Fichandler countered by underlining the absence of wealthy donors to support a populist theatre and claiming that she received complaints from her audience about the repertory becoming too “specialized” and not enough “fun.” She asserted that to survive, “what we had to do was to acknowledge that the audience was our Master (oh oh oh six o’clock and the master’s not home yet, pray God nothing’s happened to him crossing the Potomac River. If anything happened to him we’d all be inconsolable and have to move to a less desireable [sic] residence district!)

Although Fichandler acknowledged loyal subscribers as the backbone of her theatre, she also resented their influence and critiqued their frankly white, middlebrow tastes.

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This did not mean Fichandler produced more canonical fare necessarily against her own wishes. There was no conservative board of trustees constantly imposing its will, an accusation used against non-profit theatres since the sixties.\textsuperscript{109} According to regional theatre scholar Joseph Zeigler, who interned at Arena Stage in 1962 and wrote on it in his invaluable study \textit{Regional Theatre: The Revolutionary Stage}, the “board may technically employ Zelda and fix her salary, [but] she controls the board. Arena Stage is a ladylike autocracy.”\textsuperscript{110} The theatre’s own narrative, as seen in \textit{The Arena Adventure}, emphasizes its hard-hitting 1960s social dramas that “paralleled the turbulent decade in which they took place,” but classics and comedies never left the repertoire.\textsuperscript{111} The theatre continued to produce Renaissance comedies such as \textit{Volpone} and \textit{The Taming of the Shrew} into the 60s. Before and after the move to the new building, some of Arena’s most commercially successful shows were comedies, especially those of George Bernard Shaw, and Washington premieres of contemporary plays, such as \textit{The Wall} by Millard Lampell. In her essay “Theatres or Institutions?” among other speeches and publications, Fichandler actively advocated for classics that spoke to contemporary audiences, and she defended 1930s farces for their aesthetics as well as their box office appeal.\textsuperscript{112} From the opening of the new building in 1961 to 1970, Arena produced four plays by Shakespeare and three each by Shaw and Chekhov. This period also included multiple productions of plays by Brecht, Feydeau, Pirandello, O’Neill, Sackler, Anouilh, and Kaufman and Hart. The more traditional season of 1966-67 attracted some audiences—the number of subscribers did increase that year—while remaining well within the bounds of Fichandler’s artistic preferences. Throughout the

\textsuperscript{109} See, among others, “What Future for Lincoln Center Repertory?,” \textit{New York Times}, December 10, 1967, http://search.proquest.com/docview/118133144?accountid=7287, in which critic Michael Smith writes, “From the start the Repertory Theater has been burdened with too much advice. Mr. Irving is responsible to a board of directors concerned more with financing culture than creating theater.”

\textsuperscript{110} Joseph Wesley Zeigler, \textit{Regional Theatre: The Revolutionary Stage}, 35.

\textsuperscript{111} Laurence Maslon, \textit{The Arena Adventure}, 24.

\textsuperscript{112} Zelda Fichandler, “Theatres or Institutions?,” \textit{Theatre} 3 (September 1970): 105-116.
sixties, Fichandler produced an eclectic repertory of classics and new plays that proved to be financially viable.

The theatre still had to focus on selling tickets because the fundraising safety net was relatively weak. Arena Stage’s contributed income accounted for 11% of total income in the 1961-62 season and increased to 32% by the end of the decade. In *The Subsidized Muse*, Dick Netzer notes of the 1973-74 season that the company’s continued heavy reliance on the box office was rather unusual in contrast to theatres such as Trinity Repertory Theatre in Providence, Rhode Island. Correlating income trends with fundraising initiatives, Tomoko Aono observes that Arena’s grant applications and appeals to donors in the early 1960s called for one-time capital funds, insisting the theatre would support itself through ticket sales thereafter. Artistic and foundation leaders, such as Lowry, frequently pointed to Arena’s early financial stability as evidence of a theatre not needing to raise constant unearned income. “Unearned” denotes money from grants and donations, while “earned” income is from ticket sales, rentals, and the like, though of course both forms of capital are earned in involving labor and time to generate them.

Many theatres used individual, foundation, and government contributions to construct permanent homes, and as with Arena’s new model, they established themselves as non-profits in the sixties. According to the 1965 Rockefeller Fund study *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*, “More than half the professional theatre projects outside New York—and almost all the major ones—have been created as nonprofit undertakings.” The Guthrie Theater is a frequently cited example. Founded by Sir Tyrone Guthrie, Oliver Rea, and Peter Zeisler, the

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company sought out foundation and civic funding from the very beginning to determine where the theatre should be located, ultimately selecting Minneapolis. On a panel about “The Community and Festival Theaters” in 1963, Fichandler distinguished the opening of the Guthrie “that is, full-blown from the head of Zeus” from the emergence of her own theatre “slowly, painfully, organically,” arguing that her experience of navigating profit and institutionalization was the more common.\(^{117}\) But both theatres were rather uncommon in their success. According to the Rockefeller report, only three regional theatres ran surpluses in 1963: Arena Stage, the Guthrie Theater, and UCLA Theatre Group.\(^{118}\) Reversing earlier ideas about theatre sustainability, the report concluded in bold italics: “this panel believes that as a general principle the nonprofit performing arts organizations should not be expected to pay their way at the box office. Indeed, they cannot do so and still fulfill their true cultural mission.”\(^{119}\) The “should not” to “cannot” move underscores the value seen in the “true cultural mission” viewed as at odds with hits at the box office.

The Rockefeller Panel’s beliefs and recommendations were supported by the publication of William Baumol and William Bowen’s 1966 landmark study *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*. The Princeton economists dispelled the 1960s cultural boom myth: Americans were not spending more on cultural activities with respect to percentage of income, and the percentage of people attending performing arts events did not increase. The difference between an institution’s expenditures and earned income became known as the “income gap,” and Baumol and Bowen argued that the non-profit theatre’s income gap would worsen over time. They reasoned that technology would not meaningfully improve productivity in theatre, so production costs would continue to increase. Ticket prices could not keep up with inflation, production

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 54.
costs, and salaries while remaining low enough to attract diverse audiences. An analysis of the income gap in the 1966-67 season illustrates that the Guthrie ended with a $224,700 gap, and ultimately a $22,500 season deficit, because of unearned income from foundation grants totaling $200,900. Meanwhile, Arena had an income gap of $43,300 with almost no unearned income leading to a $41,800 deficit. According to Zeigler, on average, the income gap for eighteen regional theatres from 1966-1970 was $165,000, and the average “Fund Raising” was $138,000, leaving a net deficit of $27,000. Arena Stage and other non-profit regional theatres subsequently cited Baumol and Bowen and changed the language of their grant requests to accept deficits as the natural condition of non-profit theatres. As a result, they created fundraising initiatives to maintain the operations of the theatres rather than asking for donations only for capital campaigns.

Many theatres also started or expanded public service projects. According to Zeigler, “The concept of public service is partly an insurance policy for the regional theatre institution. By serving, it hopes to provide for itself and its public an alternative to the ‘hit-or-miss’ psychology of the commercial theatre,” and “Service had all the respectability that mere production of plays did not have.” Part of being a non-profit theatre is doing such service, often in the field of education. In the 1960s, Arena added educational programs including internships and the Living Stage, a company that performed for and with public school students. These educational initiatives did not directly make money, though they arguably helped to cultivate new audiences and symbolic capital. In addition, the theatre regularly requested and

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122 Ibid.
received grant money from the Ford Foundation and later the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), founded in 1965, to subsidize actor training. Such programs and applications for targeted grants to support those programs helped Arena to extend its community and artistic outreach and therefore gain greater legitimacy as a public-serving institution.

Zeigler further contends that Fichandler purposefully sought a deficit to secure more funding from foundations and install ambitious programs.\textsuperscript{126} Aono echoes this claim when she charts the increasing expenditures of Arena Stage in the late 1960s.\textsuperscript{127} Indeed, according to Fichandler, “Every time the box office caught up with our intentions, our intentions grew.”\textsuperscript{128} Because having a deficit became acceptable by the mid-1960s, she could implement the artistic plans that she had envisioned years earlier without needing to end the season in the black. Like education, art could be positioned as having a higher calling than commerce. Nevertheless, funding concerns continued to dictate the maintenance of programs and the installation of new ones, namely rotating repertory, an integrated resident ensemble, and world premieres of U.S. plays.

**Embracing the Deficit**

Modeling Arena Stage on European theatres, Zelda Fichandler argued throughout the sixties that a company of the highest achievement needed a resident acting ensemble and rotating repertory. Even in 2012 she asserted, “the hardest dimension of the theatre and the most central is the acting company.”\textsuperscript{129} In a letter to subscribers, she explained that the actors would build relationships with each other and the audience, while taking on different roles each night would

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\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 35.  
\textsuperscript{128} Zelda Fichandler, in discussion with the author, December 2012.  
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
keep performances fresh with new insights. The rotating schedule would allow visitors to
Washington, D.C. to see several shows and allow flexibility in scheduling. If one production
proved more popular than others, then that play could have more performances.\footnote{Letter from Zelda Fichandler to Arena Stage subscribers, “Repertory… What is it? Why do it?,” n.d. but likely 1967, Arena Stage Printed Materials 1950-2000, GMUL.} In the late
sixties, Arena did experiment with rotating plays, producing for instance \textit{The Tenth Man}, \textit{Room
Service}, and \textit{The Iceman Cometh} in repertory. But the costs of frequently changing the sets
proved too high. Arena returned to straight runs after 1969, though Fichandler produced a few
two- and three-play rotating repertories in the 1970s, showing her commitment to this notion.

In 1968, she obtained a large grant from the Ford Foundation to hire and train African
American actors for the resident ensemble. She observed a “profound aesthetic dislocation”
between the whites on stage and in the audience of Arena versus the majority black population of
Washington, D.C.\footnote{Zelda Fichandler, “Arena to Create a New Inter-Racial Stage Force,” \textit{Washington Star}, June 30, 1968, D-1.} At this point, the black population comprised 70\% of the residents in the
D.C. metro area due in part to white flight. Stories of sixties racial anxieties were not being told
at Arena Stage, yet they were staged in marches on the National Mall in 1963 and in race riots
following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. In “Toward a Deepening
Aesthetic,” a lengthy essay in her funding application, Fichandler frames the multiracial
ensemble in humanistic, aesthetic, and even political terms rather than economic ones—i.e.
giving employment to African American actors.\footnote{Zelda Fichandler, “Toward a Deepening Aesthetic,” box 108, fol. 27, Zelda Fichandler Papers.} At times, she championed “race-blind”
casting, while at others she promoted deliberate multiracial casting to underscore thematic points
regarding contemporary racial politics.

Reactions to the multiracial casting were mixed. Richard Coe acknowledged the
integrated ensemble near the end of his reviews of \textit{The Threepenny Opera}—a new production—
and Six Characters in Search of an Author, which ran in rotating repertory, but claimed the integration had zero effect on the productions. In his review of King Lear later that season, he did not mention race, perhaps as a way to perform how he liberally sees past race, which was unusual at this time. On the other hand, some audience letters in the Arena Stage archives reveal discomfort and/or anger about the casting, particularly when family members in the plays were of differing races. Patron Peter Weidenbruch Jr. wrote, “we find your policy of enforced integration to be artificial and distracting. Certainly a policy of non-discrimination is highly desirable, but your discriminatory policy (in reverse) interferes substantially with one’s concentration upon the theatrical aspects of the production. I should think you could implement your social theories in other ways than by forcing them down our throats.” Other letters accused the black actors of being less talented, or at least less trained, criticizing their diction. In No Safe Spaces, Angela Pao observes these phenomena across her case studies of multiracial casting in U.S. theatre; the reactions to Fichandler’s productions were not unique, though Arena was one of the first U.S. companies to attempt a sustained commitment to such casting.

The integrated ensemble folded at the end of the season. In a letter to the Ford Foundation, Fichandler called the program a temporary failure and reported that she did not think black artists and audiences were interested “in our kind of repertory” but in the Black Arts

Movement. She did not implicate white audiences or invoke Arena’s actual proximity to race riots and the largely impoverished location of the theatre but situated the failure as one of not attracting a sizeable black audience. Meanwhile, at a board of trustees meeting in 1968, Thomas Fichandler explained the deficits and decreases in subscriptions by highlighting “the April disturbances and the consequent reluctance of many people to come into the inner city in the evenings.” His diction glosses the riots as “disturbances” and “people” as suburban, wealthy whites. At the annual membership meeting in 1969, Zelda Fichandler added that finding and keeping qualified black actors was difficult, and that the integrated company was “several years ahead of its time,” but she and the Ford Foundation “felt it was a worthwhile attempt and did not regret trying it.” Reflecting upon the integrated ensemble in 2012, Fichandler remarked, “I’m still not sure how to solve this question, but I think the experiment has made itself known throughout the country, and we see for example that Jimmy Earl Jones and that wonderful white actress [Vanessa Redgrave] playing lovers in Much Ado About Nothing in their 60s, or 70s.” She added, “It was always called an experiment. It’s the only thing that rescued me when it fell apart.” Despite the discontinuation of the program, Arena’s experiment with an integrated acting ensemble was historically significant, especially considering the racial climate of D.C., and it was contingent upon performance at the box office and possible only with foundation support.

Grants also sponsored world premieres of plays, which were risky projects. As a for-profit in the 1950s, Arena had produced a handful of premieres, including Robert Anderson’s All
Summer Long, which subsequently moved to Broadway. As a non-profit with targeted grants for new work, the company produced one or two world premiere plays each season to varying success. In the mid-sixties, Fichandler secured funding for Howard Sackler to write a new play based on the life of African American boxing champion Jack Johnson. Arena had previously produced another play by Sackler, and Fichandler admired this ambitious new play that offered commentary on contemporary race relations. The Great White Hope, famous for starring James Earl Jones, transferring to Broadway, and winning the Pulitzer Prize, was only the third-highest grossing play for Arena in the 1967-68 season. In fact, Arena lost $50,000 on the production, and it lost half its resident acting company to the Great White Way. The play’s success in the commercial world led to a public tussle in Variety over financial and artistic compensation for the regional theatre. This case study will be explored further in Chapter Two.

Several of Arena’s productions had moved to New York years before, but the success of The Great White Hope crystallized the idea that a regional theatre could gain national attention and substantial profits from a Broadway transfer. Arena soon afterward produced the U.S. premiere of Indians by Arthur Kopit and transferred the play to Broadway. From 1969 to 1970, Zeigler notes “15 percent of all plays on the main stages of theatres were new plays—tripled the percentage in the two seasons before The Great White Hope,” and more regional theatre productions transferred to Broadway or Off-Broadway. These increases provoked some critics such as Martin Gottfried to accuse regional theatre artistic directors of producing plays for their commercial rather than artistic potential. Yet the overwhelming majority of these transfers did not turn an economic profit. Instead they offered regional theatres prestige. New York, specifically Broadway, was—and is—still at the top of the theatrical hierarchy, in spite of

142 Joseph Wesley Zeigler, Regional Theatre: The Revolutionary Stage, 196.
attempts by the regional theatres to legitimize themselves through their non-profit status, riskier plays, and attendant community service.

Much like in the early sixties, Arena Stage in the late sixties produced edgy, contemporary plays alongside classics and comedies. Critic Julius Novick wrote in 1968, “More and more, the Arena is expanding beyond its old preoccupation with familiar plays for its contented middle-class audience.”144 Marat/Sade provoked hostile mail because of its explicit scenes, as did No Place to Be Somebody because of what some patrons viewed as its racist portrayal of whites. According to Thomas Fichandler, “We have lost some subscribers as expected. There was some resentment to the integration of the cast and some negative reactions to MARAT/SADE.”145 No Place to Be Somebody was the first play by a black playwright, Charles Gordone, to win the Pulitzer Prize, and Gordone was the first black playwright produced at Arena Stage. No Place, The Great White Hope, and the integrated ensemble signaled Arena’s growing interest in cultivating an African American aesthetic and audience, which will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

On the apparently more commercial side, Fichandler looked to musicals, perhaps the best artistic example of middlebrow anxiety over the relationship between economic and symbolic capital.146 Because the first production of The Threepenny Opera was so successful, Arena produced the Brecht-Weill piece again in 1968. That season, Fichandler also proposed hosting the tour of Hair: “Hair will take some explaining, but we can point to it and say, ‘Look! We can’t make it in the big theatre so we are using it commercially to subsidize our operation.’”147

Her phrasing here is interesting because *Hair* is obviously tied to the non-profit Public Theater and is essentially about liberal politics, yet she had to justify presenting the musical because of its financial success and presence on Broadway. But, adhering to the non-profit mission, the board reeled at the idea of dramatically increasing the ticket prices two or three fold, which would have been demanded by *Hair*’s producers, and did not host the tour. Instead, the company presented the touring production of the revue *Jacque Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*.

By the late sixties, there was more competition over grants and audiences. The number of regional theatres had dramatically increased from a few in 1950 to a few dozen in 1970. In addition, there were more professional theatres in Washington, D.C. The National Theatre reopened in 1952, and Ford’s Theatre reopened in 1968. In his study of U.S. theatre economics from 1968, Thomas Gale Moore did not perceive any decrease in ticket sales at the National Theatre upon its reopening, implying that there was little competition between road shows and Arena’s Stage repertory. This likely changed, however, when Arena Stage began to produce musicals more frequently. A new local professional theatre called the Washington Theatre Club was founded in 1960 and filled a niche for smaller plays as Arena transitioned to its larger, permanent home. The company’s mission was to produce new U.S. plays, and the theatre won the Margo Jones Award years before Zelda Fichandler did. Finally, after years of promising to build a cultural center in the nation’s capital but refusing to fund it, Congress moved forward with the Kennedy Center after the assassination of President Kennedy. The Center opened in 1971 to showcase music, dance, and theatre by local and touring companies, and to memorialize Kennedy, who had long been tied to cultural aspirations.

From 1965 to 1969, Arena Stage had a deficit, yet instead of scaling back artistic programs, it expanded its horizons. In 1970, the company literally expanded by opening the

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Kreeger Theater, a second stage with a flexible proscenium/thrust stage meant for more experimental work and named for a major donor, David Lloyd Kreeger. The program given to attendees of the theatre’s opening used *Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance* as the primary example of the kind of play one could expect in the Kreeger, again suggesting the importance of that play and production, despite disavowals of its popularity. Meeting minutes reveal that Fichandler had been planning this new theatre since the mid-sixties, precisely when her theatre first moved toward a deficit model. She insisted, “We need to test the resources of the community vis-à-vis the major foundations’ attitudes towards grants.”149 Such statements demonstrate her use of the accepted deficit to execute her larger vision. In 1969, Thomas Fichandler wrote to Mac Lowry for more funding and ultimately received a combined $900,000 from the Ford Foundation and NEA to help cover the $1.5 million cost of the new building. Ford came to the rescue again, but these organizations demanded a stipulation that Arena could not ask for more money for several years. This was a problem when Baumol and Bowen had shown that performing arts non-profits would need increasing financial support beyond the box office. Foundations and the federal government had also learned this lesson, and they were trying to shift the source of unearned income to local communities.

In “Theatres or Institutions?,” published in 1970, Fichandler articulated the fundamental need for funding: “There are other signs that money will not right, but which cannot be righted without money since money is the exchange commodity of our life.”150 Repeating “money” three times because it is the “exchange commodity of our life” in theatre, her wording in its awkwardness signifies the utter necessity of economic capital and its complex relationship to symbolic capital. Ultimately, she called for more federal funding of the arts. Concerned about

150 Zelda Fichandler, “Theatres or Institutions?,” 110.
“the hand that rocks the cradle,” she felt uncomfortable about the audience donating to the theatre and therefore dictating the repertory.\textsuperscript{151} In time, however, individual donors would mostly fill the financial gap created by foundation retreat. As seen with Hair, Fichandler was willing to make what she considered more ostensibly commercially-driven decisions, so long as they did not jeopardize her artistic integrity. She also endorsed classics and comedies as vital to the repertory, the human spirit, the public, and the subsidizing of new work and other programs. She confessed, “I cling to European institutional models—the subsidized, well-staffed, anything-that-money-can-buy theatre,” but she also recognized, “we have had to teach ourselves to be independent of European models … [to] be conceived more fluidly,” adhering to the demands of capitalism.\textsuperscript{152}

\textbf{Conclusion}

In 1970, Arena Stage’s income met its expenditures for the first time in years, not counting the new building-related costs. That year, the theatre also lost subscribers, increased ticket prices, and still lacked a formal fundraising department. Arena had for the time being figured out the limits to its costly, adventurous artistic programs and new spaces. While the integrated ensemble did not last into the 1970s, other educational and creative programs, particularly the support of new work, persevered. All the while, Fichandler steered the repertory and leveraged the deficit to conduct artistic experiments and fortify her theatre institution within the demands of show business. Negotiating the meaning and model of the viable non-profit regional theatre, she, along with her husband Thomas Fichandler and patron Mac Lowry, sustained Arena Stage with money and art. The dozens of non-profit regional theatres that

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 108, 111.
followed in Arena’s wake in the 1960s typically emulated its course. They frequently developed equivalent artistic programs and produced the same plays. Other regional theatres likewise dealt with deficits and built institutions on economic and symbolic capital.

Fifty years later, non-profit regional theatre institutions still wrestle with similar issues. Indeed, the Guthrie Theater, which has hewed to classics but has also presented new Broadway musicals, recently announced that it had to furlough most of its full-time employees for one week in January of 2014. Many have blamed the exorbitant cost of its new building. Today, some critics lament the state of the art as having gone commercial, while they romanticize the purer motives and ideals of theatre companies and leaders of the past. Such was the common complaint during a convening of theatre professionals in 2011 hosted by HowlRound, once part of Arena Stage and now based at Emerson College. It is true that there are new and more tangled relations between non-profit and for-profit theatre now. For example, commercial producers increasingly use enhancement money; they cover a significant percentage of production costs for non-profit theatres to test new products with subscription audiences before transferring the productions to commercial runs. This is the new (non)profit tryout model. In 2012, Zelda Fichandler remarked on the current economies of U.S. theatre:

It’s total irony, or maybe the word is travesty, that the non-profit theatre was established in reaction to and away, away from the Broadway theatre, now needs it for money. In order to do what? In order to do less and less of what it was intending to do and more and more of what they need [to do] to get the money, which is mostly musicals. And the Broadway theatre is telling [them], at the same time that it’s using them, to see, to judge

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whether this is a viable commercial fare, is telling the non-profit theatre, “You know what, you are not living up to your original morality. You have to examine your morals.”

Here, Fichandler, like Gottfried nearly fifty years prior, positions the origin of regional theatre as the polar opposite of Broadway to provide a distinct contrast with the present when non-profit and for-profit are intertwined. She astutely points out the contradictions and mutual reliance of these institutions because they both need to accumulate sufficient economic and symbolic capital.

It is crucial to remember though that Arena Stage did not start out as a totally avant-garde, anti-Broadway, non-profit art house, and that such classifications obscure the relations of capital in cultural production. Instead, the company began as a for-profit corporation that behaved much like what would become the norm of a non-profit theatre with its eclectic repertory of classics, comedies, and new work; resident acting ensemble; and other innovative artistic and politically progressive programs alongside ties to commercial theatre in New York. Its productions of experimental political theatre were very profitable, and to think they were otherwise perpetuates oversimplified assumptions about the cultural values of art. Historicizing the apparently simplistic terms of profit is necessary for a more complex and complete understanding of theatrical economy. Too often, art and commerce are pitted against one another. Regional theatres, especially Arena Stage in the sixties, provide productive points of entry to destabilize this false dichotomy.

155 Zelda Fichandler, in discussion with the author, December 2012.
CHAPTER TWO:
THE GREAT WHITE HOPE AND THE GREAT WHITE WAY

Introduction

Often considered the first new U.S. play to transfer from non-profit regional theatre to for-profit Broadway, The Great White Hope is a heavyweight in the histories of U.S. theatre and Arena Stage. In On Broadway: Art and Commerce on the Great White Way, Steven Adler asserts, “Beginning with the Broadway transfer of Howard Sackler’s The Great White Hope from the not-for-profit Arena Stage in Washington DC in 1968, a long line of plays and musicals had made its way from theatres around the nation to Broadway.”\(^\text{156}\) Arena marked its fiftieth anniversary with a new production of the play in 2000. In the program, artistic associate Steve Samuels penned a paean to the company’s many firsts; he proclaimed, “In sending plays to New York, Arena has pioneered the relationship between commercial and not-for-profit entities” and asked “How much shock and exultation were caused by the cross-color kiss shared by James Earl Jones and Jane Alexander when Howard Sackler’s The Great White Hope premiered December 7, 1967, and when the production moved to Broadway, establishing Arena and the suddenly burgeoning resident theater network as the primary source of new American plays?”\(^\text{157}\)

Accompanied by interviews with playwright Sackler and revival director and current artistic director Molly Smith, the program celebrated Arena as a pioneer in the realms of cultural production and racial progress.

Arena’s revival of the play indicates the theatre’s investment in its own legacy. At Molly’s Salon, an audience enrichment event, costume designer Rosemary Pardee listed

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astonishing numbers for the new production: twenty-eight actors took on two hundred and forty roles, one hundred and eight-seven costumes, twenty wigs, seventy-five pairs of shoes, and one hundred and forty hats.\footnote{Kelly C. McAndrews, Rosemary Pardee, and Molly Smith, “Molly’s Salon,” August 28, 2000, VHS, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library.} The actor’s packet, which provides dramaturgical research to help the actor with her process and understanding of the play’s context, contained extensive information and theory. The \textit{Great White Hope} packet contained not only a timeline of Jack Johnson’s life and a glossary of terms used in the play but also essays on the Negro Baseball League and images of characters from \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}.\footnote{Actors Packet for \textit{The Great White Hope}, box 49, fol. 1, Arena Stage Dramaturgical Files 1950-2000, GMUL.} The dramaturg’s file held dozens of articles from the black newspaper the \textit{New York Age} from the early twentieth century and excerpts from Eric Lott’s \textit{Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class}, suggesting the extent of scholarly research completed and compiled to revive this historic play.\footnote{Dramaturgy research, box 86, fol. 1-5, Arena Stage Dramaturgical Files.} In the interview published in the program, Smith employed larger-than-life diction to underscore the play’s importance: \textit{The Great White Hope} was a “wonderful, passionate epic play,” a “legend” thanks to the “audacious achievements of Zelda and Tom Fichandler.”\footnote{Maggie Boland, “Q&A with Artistic Director Molly Smith,” \textit{The Great White Hope Program Book}, fall 2000, 16, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library.}

As the previous chapter demonstrates, however, \textit{The Great White Hope} was far from the first play to premiere at Arena Stage and subsequently move to New York. Moreover, Arena was not the only non-profit regional theatre involved with Broadway. Just six months before the play opened on the Great White Way in 1968, the \textit{Don Quixote}-inspired musical \textit{Man of La Mancha} transferred to Broadway from the ANTA (American National Theatre and Academy) Washington Square Theatre; the musical had originally come from the Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut. A “legitimate” play, \textit{The Great White Hope} is significant for its historicization as
what Joseph Zeigler deems the “fourth major turning point of the regional theatre because it proved the national power of new plays.” The work and its transfer to Broadway symbolized a new mode of play production and attendant economic and critical “success.” I qualify “success” because Arena Stage ultimately lost $50,000 on its original premiere of the play, while Sackler received an advance of $550,000 to adapt the play for Hollywood. These numbers may be surprising, given that the play is often remembered as the germination of profitable non-profit/for-profit collaborations. But the theatre company did not preemptively secure subsidiary rights nor potential financial profits from future productions, since there had been no need with earlier plays it had premiered. Sackler and the Broadway producer, Herman Levin, best known for producing *My Fair Lady*, refused to give the regional theatre a substantial financial cut. On the other hand, the regional theatre gained symbolic capital. The lights of Broadway, the Pulitzer committee, and the Tony Awards shone on *The Great White Hope* and on Arena Stage.

Struggle for capital is part of the fabric of *The Great White Hope* and characteristic of the first black heavyweight champion upon whom the drama is based, Jack Johnson. Born in Galveston, Texas in 1878 to former slaves, Johnson turned to pugilism, one of few career options for working class African Americans. However, black boxers were not permitted to fight white boxers for the heavyweight title. After years of following white heavyweight champion Tommy Burns around the globe, Johnson managed to persuade Burns to box him because of the potential economic profits for this never before staged title match between a white man and a black man. According to American Studies scholar Theresa Runstedtler, the overwhelming desire of white men to prove their own physical supremacy in the ring turned interracial title matches into massive commercial spectacles that reverberated

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around the world. Without the specter of black challengers, the victories of white boxers simply could not hold the same explanatory power for the white man’s burden. Boxing’s burgeoning popularity was closely tied to its very embodiment of contemporary battles over the racial boundaries of Western modernity.¹⁶³

The stakes for justifying white economic and racial supremacy were high, and the body in the boxing ring articulated this struggle. On December 26, 1908 in Sydney, Australia, Johnson beat Burns. The white supremacist world reeled but found relief in Jim Jeffries, who had retired undefeated years earlier and who many considered the true champion. Two years passed before Jeffries agreed to come out of retirement and box Johnson. When Johnson claimed victory on July 4, 1910, he entered a precarious position of symbolic and economic capital. On the one hand, many African Americans and colonized peoples all over the world celebrated him. In addition, he earned money from winning the fight, from the film of the fight, and from jobs shadowboxing and storytelling in vaudeville after the fight. On the other hand, many whites reviled him, and their institutional apparatuses constrained Johnson’s movements and profits. Johnson publicly rejected the burden of racial uplift, choosing to champion rugged individualism rather than bourgeois respectability politics. But he also openly critiqued and mocked white supremacy and came to realize that he could not escape from this power structure. The U.S. convicted and imprisoned Johnson under the Mann Act, originally implemented to deter white female sex trafficking, because its vague language of crossing state lines to commit “immoral” acts could be used to police his sexual encounters with white women.

_The Great White Hope_ traces Johnson’s struggle in the character of Jack Jefferson, and the play title alludes to the white boxers that many promoters, fans, and the U.S. state sought to

retrieve the heavyweight title. I argue that, as the title suggests, Sackler centers his play on whiteness, racial/sexual, and middlebrow anxieties. He illuminates some of the forces upon Johnson through the body of Jefferson, thereby highlighting power structures but denying the boxer opportunities to triumph. Indeed, we do not see any actual boxing; instead, the white playwright focuses the narrative on Jefferson’s romantic relationship with a white woman, combining the three white women Johnson married and eliding the numerous white prostitutes Johnson quite publicly engaged. In interviews, Sackler and even James Earl Jones disavowed the racial politics of the play, despite its resonances with immediate contemporary people and events such as Mohammed Ali, Loving v. Virginia, and the Civil Rights Movement. Still, the play was transgressive in even dramatizing a loving black-white couple and in critiquing stereotypical scripts that African Americans often must follow in order to move through society and space more easily. Just as Sackler and his play practiced ambivalence, the critics struggled with reconciling the play as both for-profit and non-profit and both specific and universal. In the late 60s, especially in Washington, D.C., they could not simply erase the salience of race and racism. As Nelson Pressley notes, “On Dec . 8—the day after the play had its first preview in Washington—Richard Nixon declared that he feared a race war would dwarf America’s involvement in Vietnam.”

Sackler ultimately produced a liberal play that stages racial drama and poses as a universalist man-versus-society epic ripe for high box office receipts and major theatre awards.

_The Great White Hope_ illuminates the complexities of (non)profit theatre in what bell hooks calls imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, a system of intersecting power dynamics that influence the extent and kinds of profit institutions, agents, and cultural

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productions generate. Both real-life boxer Jack Johnson and Arena Stage accumulated more symbolic capital than economic capital from their apparent triumphs over The Great White Hopes and with *The Great White Hope*, but both were also limited by structures of dominance, white over black and Broadway and Hollywood over regional theatre. Although both Johnson and Arena are also known for generating huge financial profits, they did not receive those profits. Both struggled for legitimacy and viability. I argue that Arena Stage, as a non-profit institution, facilitated the production of a more liberal, risky play in the late 60s, pushing at the boundaries of what can be financially viable. I am also critiquing the limits of liberal theatre, specifically how it is still implicated in and still largely upholds systems of power, specifically white supremacy. By naming this term and structure, I mean the historical system of racial hierarchy that enacts racial difference and the unequal distribution of power according to those differences, resulting in racial material inequality. *The Great White Hope* is not a radical play; it is a liberal one that gave Arena Stage and Sackler some economic and symbolic profits, legitimacy, and stability.

This chapter builds upon the previous one by mobilizing Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of culture and how scholars have recently “signified on” his work. By “signify on,” I invoke Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s theorization of African American literature in which authors repeat and revise earlier texts. David Krasner links legitimation of the body to white and black boxers, Harvey Young explores black habitus, and David Savran underscores race in middlebrow anxiety. After reviewing relevant black performance studies scholarship and my Bourdieuian frame, I turn to *The Great White Hope*: how it portrays Jack Johnson via Jack Jefferson, how it

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165 See any number of bell hooks’s written works and speeches but the most relevant here are *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992) and *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).
stages miscegenation, how critics received it, how it at once critiqued and disavowed race and racism, and how it represented struggle and was struggled over for economic and symbolic capital in ways that revealed the dynamics of (non)profit theatre in the late 1960s. Struggle over legitimacy of bodies—raced bodies, gendered bodies, bodies of work, institutional bodies, marginalized bodies—brings together Jack Johnson, *The Great White Hope*, and Arena Stage. The play at once illuminated the structure of white supremacy, critiqued it, employed it, and disavowed it, all in order to produce profit.

**Theorizing Bodies, Blackness, and Brow Level**

Likely influenced by Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* and Joseph Roach’s *Cities of the Dead*, black performance studies scholarship has recently turned toward a methodology of interdisciplinarity and transatlantic movement often from the Civil War through World War I.\(^\text{167}\)

In *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, Jayna Brown offers a twisting, turning, syncopated account of turn of the century black women performers who traversed the Atlantic.\(^\text{168}\) She invokes Walter Benjamin’s concept of the *flâneur*, who must “glance in all directions” while walking along the city streets. Brown focuses on dance and bodies as sites of struggle through which we can see forces exerted, resisted, and physically inhabited.\(^\text{169}\) Dance serves not as a mere metaphor for the modern; rather, Brown shows that black dances such as the cakewalk constituted the modern and the tensions therein. In *Bodies in Dissent*, Daphne Brooks unpacks black performers’ “Afro-alienation acts” such as Henry “Box”


\(^{169}\) Ibid., 17.
Brown’s stagings of liberation through his textual account, boxing reenactments, and panoramas.\textsuperscript{170} According to Brooks, “Calling attention to the hypervisibility and cultural constructions of blackness in transatlantic culture, the historical agents in this book rehearsed ways to render racial and gender categories ‘strange’ and to thus ‘disturb’ cultural perceptions of identity formation.”\textsuperscript{171} Brown and Brooks thus offer a performance-based model to understand how black bodies move through power structures and spaces, and how they contest apparently rigid identity lines. Both Johnson and the character Jefferson exhibit these potentialities. In \textit{Imperfect Unions: Staging Miscegenation in U.S. Drama and Fiction}, Diana Paulin illustrates the anxieties of miscegenation mediated by cultural productions that at once reified the black-white binary but also called that binary into question by revealing fissures, hybridities, and performativities of race.\textsuperscript{172} She positions and historicizes these bodies on stage alongside bodies policed by laws off-stage: “Just as miscegenation only became a grievous social issue after the emancipation of slaves and the spiking of white anxiety about a new, slaveless world, a few decades later the community policing of interracial intimacy had transformed into legal rulings at every level of government.”\textsuperscript{173} These racial anxieties and legal restrictions shaped Jack Johnson’s lived experience and Sackler’s dramatic narrative.

Movement of black bodies also figures into scholarship explicitly about Johnson. In \textit{Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner}, Theresa Runstedtler traces Johnson’s travels around the world, arguing for the presence of a global rather than solely U.S. color line.\textsuperscript{174} As the cover suggests with its photograph of the boxer driving a car—and receiving tickets for Driving While Black

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid, 5.
\textsuperscript{172} Diana Rebekkah Paulin, \textit{Imperfect Unions: Staging Miscegenation in U.S. Drama and Fiction} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid, 130-131.
\textsuperscript{174} Runstedtler, \textit{Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner}. 
but officially for speeding—movement and stoppage emblematized freedom and limitations therein. David Krasner mobilizes Johnson’s achievement of the heavyweight title as the start of the Harlem Renaissance and the start of his book, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927*. He contends that improvisation on stage and in the boxing ring was one the modern modes of black performance. Harvey Young, however, markedly differs from this line of scholarship from *Babylon Girls* to *Bodies in Dissent*, which implicitly argues that movement equals freedom. In *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*, Young puts forth stillness as black experience and resistance from the packed cargo holds of ships traversing the Middle Passage to Mohammed Ali’s refusal to step forward at a military induction center. From the start, he cites Franz Fanon for his now iconic scene of hailing the black body, suggesting that black experiences are shared but also endowed with individual agency.

Both Krasner and Young cite Pierre Bourdieu, whose invocation returns this chapter to its theoretical frame of negotiating (non)profit. The former draws from Bourdieu’s essay “Sport and Social Class,” which theorizes distinction between different sports and their respective origins, practices, players, spectators, social classes, and payoffs. The French sociologist argues that the *social definition of sport* is an object of struggles, that the field of sporting practices is the site of struggles in which what is at stake, *inter alia*, is the monopolistic capacity to impose the legitimate definition of sporting practice and of the legitimate function of sporting activity—amateurism vs. professionalism, participant sport vs. spectator sport, distinctive (elite) sport vs. popular (mass) sport; that this field is itself

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part of the larger field of struggle over the definition of the *legitimate body* and the *legitimate use of the body*.  

Krasner racializes Bourdieu’s theory, illustrating how, at a time of racial science such as phrenology, boxing articulated legitimate, white, male bodies as strong, civilized, and intelligent against illegitimate, black, male bodies read as weak, savage, and brainless. White newspapers lionized Jeffries, and fans overwhelmingly bet on him to win, even though the white boxer was older and out of practice; such was their conviction of white supremacy manifested physically. Meanwhile, cartoons portrayed Johnson as a minstrel character or a cowardly ape.

But Jack Johnson’s defeat of Jim Jeffries unsettled this binary, thereby contesting the monopoly over social definitions. Moreover, the site of struggle over legitimate bodies and legitimate uses of bodies was not only the boxing ring but also the bedroom where the black boxer slept with white women. He repeatedly called into question the rules of the game, revealing the intricacies of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In his sociology of sports, Bourdieu writes that class habitus shapes accessibility and “defines the meaning conferred on sporting activity” and “the profits expected from it” as well as the perception of those profits by different social classes. This is particularly clear in early twentieth century boxing participants and spectators of different races. Whereas most whites reviled Johnson’s victories over white men and intimacies with white women, many working class people of color around the world celebrated and identified with Johnson, while some middle class African Americans such as Booker T. Washington condemned Johnson’s rejection of bourgeois values.

Bourdieu’s framework resonates on multiple levels, and his discourse on sports is not so different from that on culture at large. Differing profits and receptions resonate with acts of

179 Bourdieu, “Sport and Social Class”: 835.
distinction and struggles over production, distribution, and consumption of art. Just as sports involve competing definitions, participations, and uses of bodies, so does culture: “the field of cultural production is the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer.”

Contesting the definition of legitimate body, Johnson as embodied in the character Jefferson sought power through accumulation of economic and symbolic capital, his relationship with white women, and movement across the globe. Wanting to participate as a legitimate institutional body with rites of consecration, Arena Stage sought power through the accumulation of economic and symbolic capital when staging Howard Sackler as a legitimate writer and then when moving to Broadway. In addition, Fichandler sought more racially inclusive and progressive dramas for her stage. But the apparatuses of white supremacy and capitalism delimited Johnson and Arena such that *The Great White Hope* both contested and socially reproduced hierarchies.

Signifying on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, Young articulates blackness through a performative repetition or feel of the game. He theorizes black habitus, which “allows us to read the black body as socially constructed and continually constructing its own self.” He continues, “If we identity blackness as an idea projected across a body, the projection not only gets incorporated within the body but also influences the ways that it views other bodies.” For example, black habitus informed Jack Johnson’s and Mohammed Ali’s movements and representations in and out of the boxing ring. Ali went to see *The Great White Hope* on Broadway several times and after one performance, Ali “asked [James Earl Jones] to sit in the

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182 Ibid.
audience and then proceeded to perform a scene from the play with himself in the role of Jack Jefferson. According to Jones, Ali remarked that he knew the story of Johnson because it was his story. All a person had to do was to replace white women with Ali’s contemporary issues around the draft to see the similarity.”183 Young’s framework links critical memory, community, and individuality or, put another way, agents, their changing relations, and the field of power. The portrayal of Johnson and global white supremacy in The Great White Hope manifests this black habitus.

In addition, the play itself illustrates the workings of the (non)profit world as a prime example of middlebrow theatre and its attendant anxieties over race and capital. It is important to remember that “middlebrow” is a racialized term stemming from phrenology.184 By invoking the “middlebrow,” I do not mean to replicate the derogatory value judgments that often stick to this term. Instead, I mean that theatrical texts, their producers, and their critics designated as middlebrow, an anxious in-between state of race, class, and cultural hierarchies, allow us to unpack struggles over legitimacy and position-takings. Middlebrow cultural productions are both too low and too high, emblematized by Sackler’s inclusion of blackface minstrelsy as well as epic and poetic aspirations. Both critically and commercially successful, The Great White Hope is difficult to categorize as it upends the “Economic World Reversed.” Produced at a non-profit regional theatre and on for-profit Broadway, this text provides a valuable site for teasing out the contradictions of the middlebrow. According to David Savran, the theorization of middlebrow as a site of struggle allows one to recognize that the multifarious makers of theater are by no means free and independent agents … the

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183 Ibid., 109.
184 For more on the distinctions between highbrow, lowbrow, and middlebrow, see David Savran, Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), especially 47. For more on the racialization of science and liberal philosophy, see Denise Ferreira da Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007).
content, style, and forms of American theater must be understood as a compromise, not in the sense of a middle ground, but as an active and evolving conflict and negotiation. Moreover, what we call ‘drama’ can be theorized only by reference to the positionalities of the agents who make it in response to these impossible demands, to theater’s relationship with other cultural forms, to an audience whose tastes and expectations can never be completely known in advance, and to the variable amounts of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—at risk in any performance.  

Savran goes on to analyze the musicals *South Pacific* and *Rent*, whose formal and racial miscegenation coupled with anxieties over authenticity and commodification of art emblematize the tensions of the middlebrow and the qualities of Pulitzer Prize-winning plays, of which *The Great White Hope* is another. *The Great White Hope* was the first play to originate at a non-profit regional theatre and win the Pulitzer Prize in drama. Arena’s precedence is hugely significant because almost every play that has won the Pulitzer since 1969 had its world premiere at a non-profit theatre. In the 1970s, such plays included *No Place to be Somebody*, *That Championship Season*, and *A Chorus Line* (originally produced by the Public Theater, New York) as well as *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* (the Alley Theatre, Houston) and *Buried Child* (the Magic Theater, San Francisco). Sackler’s collection of awards, including the Tony and the Outer Critics Circle, is largely due to his navigation of middlebrow themes, values, forms, and politics as policed by critics and awards committees. In keeping with the middlebrow, there has been very little scholarship on this play, which is mentioned only in passing in books on regional theatre and in biographies of Jack Johnson. In the former, little is mentioned about the racial content. In the latter, little is made of the economics. My intervention seeks to bridge

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this gap in knowledge and reveal the intricacies of race, profit, and legitimacy in *The Great White Hope*.

**Producing and Distributing Profit**

Howard Sackler began working on *The Great White Hope* in the early 1960s. When Arena Stage produced his play *Mr. Welk and Jersey Jim* in 1966, he showed Zelda Fichandler his work thus far on *Hope*. Attracted to its racial themes, she agreed to produce the play. She secured a $25,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to support the production; $7,000 went directly to Sackler as his commission, and he earned an additional $1,000 per week for the six-week run at Arena Stage. This amount is substantial, considering that the average national income at that time was roughly $6,000, and that the average commission for plays circa 2010 was $3,000 to $5,000. Informing neither Zelda nor Thomas Fichandler, Sackler sold the film rights of *The Great White Hope* to 20th Century Fox. He received an advance of $550,000 with the potential of doubling that amount depending upon box office receipts. Sackler then moved forward with a Broadway transfer using much of the same cast, creative team, costumes, and set pieces from Arena Stage. He invested $225,000 in the Broadway staging and partnered with experienced producer Herman Levin who contributed $25,000; they agreed to split the profits 75/25. During the Broadway run from October 3, 1968 to January 31, 1970, Sackler earned approximately $7,000 a week, at a capacity weekly gross of $73,000. Arena Stage ultimately lost $50,000 on its production, and its name was not listed in the credits for the Broadway transfer.

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The economic success of Sackler led to a public tussle explicitly about financial and symbolic compensation for Arena Stage and implicitly about the non-profit theatre’s legitimacy. As I argued in Chapter One, the company occupied an ambivalent state of (not)-for-profit. The Fichandlers attempted to obtain 10% of the profits from the Broadway production. However, Sackler and Levin offered only 5% of the royalties up to a maximum of $50,000, which would have canceled out Arena’s debt from producing *The Great White Hope*. Thomas Fichandler refused the offer and repeatedly called attention to the economic needs of Arena Stage, positioned as a non-profit theatre, saying in an interview, “We think it’s unfortunate that a deficit-operated theater like the Arena Stage, which, like all non-commercial theaters is in need of sustenance, is not participating in the success of ‘The Great White Hope.’”

In 1968, the newly created League of Regional Theatres, of which Thomas Fichandler was the president, met, and the artistic leaders “decided at that time that premieres should be accompanied by some sort of contractual protection.” He specified that “a New York lawyer is currently drawing up a model contract that will call for 5-10% of future earnings, with an option for Arena to produce the play on Broadway.” He followed through, as indicated by the contract for Arena’s next new play that transferred to the Great White Way, *Indians* by Arthur Kopit.

At the same time that Thomas and Zelda Fichandler stressed Arena’s integral role as a non-profit theatre launching, developing, and funding *The Great White Hope*, the *New York Times* used language that positioned the theatre as for-profit. Reporter Sam Zolotow called Arena a “tryout” space distinctly beyond Broadway: “Jones, who portrayed the champion … in the

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187 Quoted in Sam Zolotow, “Arena Stage Fails in ‘White Hope’ Bid,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1968, 38, box 3, clipping from Arena Stage Production Files, GMUL. Unless otherwise noted, all newspaper articles and reviews published in the late 1960s are in this same box.


189 Ibid.
recent tryout at Washington’s Arena Stage, will be retained”\textsuperscript{190} and “Tryout Troupe Sought 10% of Broadway Hit Royalties.”\textsuperscript{191} Times critic Howard Taubman noted that \textit{The Great White Hope} “was received so well that the Arena Stage did something unusual for an out-of-town resident company. It took a substantial ad in the \textit{New York Times} on a Sunday to proclaim its success.”\textsuperscript{192} Again, the regional theatre blurred the non/for-profit line and suggested the primacy of New York, and especially the \textit{New York Times}, in bestowing legitimacy. In a personal letter to Levin, Zelda Fichandler again argued for financial compensation by pointing out how the commercial production rested upon the non-profit production:

You capitalize on Arena Stage’s production in the ads. You also lean on “America’s burgeoning theatre movement” which, in this context, is put forth as a noteworthy item – good for its prestige value, good for ballyhoo and drum-beating, good for selling tickets and making money. But, ironically and unjustly, not good enough to have been tangibly recognized for what it did to make the Broadway production happen!\textsuperscript{193}

Even though she knew that her institution must rely upon a practiced disinterestedness, she was interested in financial profits. In addition, she did not want Arena’s name in promotional materials because she did not have a hand in further changes to the script on Broadway.

An epic play, \textit{The Great White Hope} initially had a running time of three hours and forty-five minutes, which was the critics’ loudest complaint. By the end of the Arena run, the production team had shaved off twenty minutes, and when the play reached Broadway, it ran under three hours. Pausing on these ellipses provides insight into the production process. In a fourteen-page letter commenting on the first draft of the play in 1966, Zelda Fichandler and

\textsuperscript{191} Zolotow, “Arena Stage Fails in ‘White Hope’ Bid.”
\textsuperscript{193} Letter from Zelda Fichandler to Herman Levin, August 27, 1968, box 136, fol.14, Zelda Fichandler Papers 1950-2000, GMUL.
director Ed Sherwin said little of the thematic elements but advised Sackler on the several scenes he should tighten and outright cut because they did not advance the narrative. The playwright rarely took their advice. Having directed some 200 dramas for audio recording, including many of Shakespeare’s plays, Sackler was used to sprawling dramatic structures that changed settings almost every scene. Ultimately, he did cut one monologue by Mrs. Bachman and one scene between Clara and Scipio, somewhat minor characters who respond differently to Jack and Ellie’s romance. The former gave voice to Ellie’s mother and her concern for her daughter’s relationship with Jefferson, at once personalizing and signifying white discomfort with interracial romances. The latter suggested that Clara, a black woman and Jack’s former partner, and Scipio, a black power zealot, were responsible for the disintegration of Ellie and Jack’s relationship. Both engage with the anxieties of miscegenation, an underlying theme of The Great White Hope.

**Racial Representation and Disavowal**

By contesting racial segregation and stereotypes but also disavowing race and racism, The Great White Hope advances both progressive politics of racial struggle and reproduces racist logics. The playbill for the Arena production displays a black-and-white drawing of a black man and a white man boxing one another (see Fig. 1). The former wears white shorts, while the latter wears black shorts. Color coded as opposites, they represent blackness and whiteness as mutually exclusive and yet also mutually constitutive. They are at once pummeling each other, embracing each other, holding each other up, resting upon each other, and using the strength of the other’s body in order to do damage to that body. They are locked in a Hegelian struggle, suggesting

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194 Letter from Zelda Fichandler to Howard Sackler, c. December 21 or 22, 1966, box 136, fol. 9, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
equal push and pull. This dynamic represents a structural racial struggle, but also an individual struggle between two men of apparently equal power.

Advocating for the play’s liberal politics, Carol Bunch Davis argues that *The Great White Hope* explores black subjectivity. By rejecting the “race man” title imposed by black supporters and white journalists, Jack Jefferson “negates racial uplift’s premise that black identity must be recuperated by constructing and projecting acceptable representations to demonstrate African Americans’ humanity and readiness to be assimilated into the US plurality, thereby questioning the efficacy of uplift ideology and repudiating the racial hierarchy that informs it.”\(^1\) In other words, Jefferson, like the real-life boxer, embraced a lifestyle of apparent debauchery by drinking alcohol and sleeping with white women instead of adopting white and bourgeois notions of proper behavior to uplift the black race. Although I agree with Davis’s interpretation of Jefferson’s refusals as elements of black subjectivity, I hesitate to celebrate subjectivity in and of itself. Other cultural productions, such as Ken Burns’s documentary film *Unforgiveable Blackness*, tell a “Great Man” narrative about Jack Johnson and position his individualism as distinct from Booker T. Washington’s and W.E.B. Du Bois’s uplift ideologies and strategies.\(^2\) This kind of political tactic extols exceptional black men who have transcended systems, as if that were possible, rather than working in solidarity with others to challenge radically the imperialist white supremacist capitalist hetero-patriarchy.

Sackler shows Jack’s disavowal of the burden to raise his race, but he does not show Jack’s concrete blows to systemic oppression. As Krasner observes of the early twentieth century, “The legitimation of body ‘style’ became a central objective; boxing would provide

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\(^1\) Carol Bunch Davis, “Ghost[s] in the House!”: Black Subjectivity and Cultural Memory in Howard Sackler’s *The Great White Hope*, *MELUS*, vol. 37, no. 3: 79.

visible “proof” of race-based theories through performative style.”¹⁹⁷ Jack Johnson challenged white hegemonic understandings of the body through his use of improvisation, as opposed to the supposed fixity of whiteness, and through his physical and symbolic harm to white bodies. In the early twentieth century, state laws suppressed the distribution of films over state lines that showed Johnson’s achievement of the heavyweight title. The fact that there is no actual boxing on stage in *The Great White Hope* is hugely significant. The juridical implementation of the Mann Act does not involve a dramatization of Jefferson’s attempts at resistance. We never see Jefferson box any white men literally in the ring or figuratively in the courts. We never see him win. Sackler thus chooses to focus on the tragic repercussions of the black boxer’s achievement, indicting racial hierarchy but also obscuring small victories, in contrast with Young’s and other scholar’s focus on Jack Johnson’s black habitus. Young highlights incidents of Johnson wearing pink pajamas and wrapping his penis in gauze bandages, shaping the perception of his body. By drawing attention to his own performance of blackness and masculinity, Johnson tried to control the hegemonic gaze to view “not the black body exhibited for others but a black body that has chosen to perform itself as an exhibit for itself.”¹⁹⁸

In *The Great White Hope*, a white playwright exhibits a black body for a mostly white audience and from a largely white perspective, though he also critically draws attention to the very construction of this frame. We see the fallout of Jack’s victories, and we hear descriptions of the boxing match when he loses in the end. From the first scene to the last, the audience’s experiences are frequently mediated by white character-spectators. The play begins with Tom Brady, a stand in for Jim Jeffries, and white men coaxing him out of retirement to retrieve the heavyweight title from Jack Jefferson. The scenes with federal and judicial officials developing

¹⁹⁸ Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 91.
ways to arrest Jack and take back the heavyweight title are particularly revelatory of the white supremacist state. They ultimately persuade boxing promoters to refuse Jack work, thereby starving the boxer and forcing him to accept a racist vaudeville role and ultimately the U.S. government’s terms for a match to lose the title and gain reentry into the country. Throughout the play, Sackler has his characters speak their lines directly to the audience at once to estrange them from and to implicate them in the action. On the one hand, this dramatic structure reveals the mechanisms that sustain systemic racism. On the other hand, this dramaturgy prioritizes the impact of Jack’s victories on white men and the actions these men take to restrict Jack, thereby objectifying him.

Jack does very little. For much of the play, he is trying to escape from the institutions of white supremacy. He feels that he can create his own social rules in his nightclub and in his bedroom. But in both spaces, whites intrude and limit his mobility. In the second half of the play, Jack physically leaves the country for Europe and then Latin America only to discover the global reach of racism and the long arm of the U.S. state. A series of unfortunate events happen to him, leading up to his defeat in the ring. His mother and his white mistress die, incidents which intensify the drama but do not match the order of events in Jack Johnson’s actual life. I do not mean to rebuke Sackler for not following historical record. Instead, I am suggesting that his dramaturgical decisions delimit Jack’s ability to drive the story. In so doing, Sackler illustrates the tensions of black movement and stillness that Brown, Brooks, and Young analyze. He shows the audience survival strategies rather than fantastic active resistance. But he also proffers an individual-based viewpoint. If Jack has triggered any action in the play, it is implied that he caused his mother’s death by exiling himself after his arrest and his mistress’s suicide by pushing her away. The blame does not lie squarely on the forces of institutional racism. Rather than being
solely a socio-political drama, the play becomes a tragedy of an individual. When Jack loses the heavyweight title, we are left with ambivalence rather than affirmation that, at the very least, Jack chose to lose the fight in exchange for a more lenient prison sentence back in the U.S. Our last images are of a young, black Cuban boy spitting on a smiling Jack as a group of white men prop up the bloodied Great White Hope, illustrating the violence of racial struggle and continuing to center whiteness. This overdetermined image welcomes varying interpretations from a scathing critique of racial hierarchy to a preservation of focus on white actors, and precisely this ambivalence opens the play to popular appeal.

Throughout the play, Sackler similarly reproduces and condemns black stereotypes in ambivalent fashion. As Krasner demonstrated of real-life Jack Johnson, Sackler shows how journalists framed Jack as a minstrel character: “he’s still got that big banjo smile on him.” In addition, he includes a character in blackface that performs typical minstrel humor and mocks Jack for the enjoyment of white spectators before a boxing match, implying the playwright’s awareness of how minstrelsy haunts black performance. This awareness turns into critique of symbolic violence when boxing promoters refuse to hire Jack, causing him to earn money by performing in Uncle Tom’s Cabin because he has little other choice. Jack plays Uncle Tom, and over the course of the vaudeville performance, he quietly expresses his displeasure, while his white mistress plays Eva and his trainer plays Topsy with great enthusiasm. He is bad at acting this part. The affective economy of this scene and the commentary on the degrading labor and roles that black people take on in order to survive reveal the scripts and inequalities of racial hierarchy and class exploitation. At the same time, these minstrel performances possess the potential for producing uncritical pleasure. Critic Richard Coe observed the double standards of the largely white liberal audience at Arena Stage enjoying this minstrelsy: “How unthinking it

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seemed, after all the head-noddings of approbation, to hear roars of laughter over ‘darky’ humor and struts.” In addition, Jack speaks with a particular dialect raced as black and classed as working class, occasionally verging into minstrelsy. When English officials attempt to deport Jack “for moral deficiency flaunted at the public,” he responds, “Ah ain’t flung no fish at no public!” While it is true that Jack Johnson played the minstrel at times, he did so in particular situations such as in the boxing ring to antagonize his opponent. He was a highly literate man who was familiar with French, and he even affected an English accent at times to disassociate himself from the United States. Sackler’s decision to emphasize Jack’s charisma, which is shaped by racialized narratives, and yet not to include these deliberate performances of race, class, and nationality in the written text suggest that the playwright, like Jack, cannot escape from popular minstrel tropes. Yet, the script leaves room for opportunities for black performers, in this case the talented James Earl Jones, to comment upon playing the minstrel, especially because the play contains moments when characters break the fourth wall. Ultimately, Sackler was telling his own story about the effects of institutions on an individual, rather than adhering closely to history, thereby strategically freeing up understandings of the play as about race but also beyond race.

In interviews, Sackler consistently disavowed race and racism themes as being central to The Great White Hope and instead positioned the “universal” theme of man versus society as the main point. In a profile piece for the New York Times, Sackler asserted that he researched the play between 1961 and 1965, as if to say implicitly that he had not been thinking of Muhammad Ali, who refused to be inducted into the U.S. military in 1967. Moreover, Sackler insisted against the critics who typically brought up contemporary racial politics, “I consider this not to

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201 Sackler, The Great White Hope, 67.
be about blacks and whites. It’s a metaphor of struggle between man and the outside world.”

This is, however, ambivalent because the “man” in this case is black, and “the outside world” is framed as white. Still, Sackler explicitly rejected any association of his play with a liberal project: “Some people spoke of the play as if it were a cliché of white liberalism. But I kept to the line right through, of showing that it wasn’t a case of blacks being good and whites being bad, I was appalled at first at the reaction.” While it is true that Sackler shows different characters from different racial groups as multitudinous in their views, such as black characters who criticize Jefferson, his equation of “white liberalism” with “good blacks” and “bad whites” is reductive. In another interview in 1975, years after the play premiered, he reiterated his position, “My goal in dealing with any subject for a play is to take it and raise it to the level of metaphor, to take it from the level of history or anecdote to the level of universal experience.”

Sackler positions himself, his play, and his politics in this way in order to move into the higher realm of universalism. By writing a highly specific play that engages with race relations and at the same time disavowing its explicit content, he creates a seductive narrative and profits from various capitals. He successfully appeals to liberals of different racial backgrounds, from those who actively advocate for racial equality to those who prize apparently neutral, great art over politics, as if these qualities were separate and objective.

James Earl Jones, who became an overnight star playing Jack Jefferson, also helped the project of favoring universalism over explicit racial politics, yet illustrated the contradictions therein. In 1968, like Johnson and Sackler’s character Jefferson, Jones married a white woman, the actress who played Desdemona to his Othello, Julienne Marie. In an interview with the New

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203 Ibid.
204 Ibid.
York Times, his wife said, “When we got married, we never discussed race as a social issue.”

Jones similarly rejected impositions upon him as a “race man” responsible for racial uplift. He disliked when the Citizen’s Committee for Hubert Humphrey asked for his help: “They make it sound like if I don’t use my influence to get black votes, Wallace will get in. Well I’m not so sure that’s such a bad idea for this country at this time. I don’t know.” By suggesting George Wallace, the infamous segregationist governor of Alabama, might not be “such a bad idea for this country” as President, Jones at most revealed his conservative politics and at the least revealed his political apathy. In 2000, when Arena revived The Great White Hope, Jones echoed Sackler’s rhetoric about “the story of a man who was up against the system.”

He went further to dismiss race: “That was bullshit then, and it is now.” Jones typically remains quiet about explicit politics, though today many believe him to be affiliated with the Republican Party. But Jones has also indicated his consciousness of racial politics and his place within them. In the same interview with the New York Times in 1968, he said, “The public hates Muhammad Ali’s guts because he doesn’t conform. They like me because my social mask is a gentleman. I don’t like to offend people. But I don’t blame Muhammad Ali for being himself. Here I am married to Julienne, but I don’t know if we should take an auto ride together through Mississippi.”

In another interview, he asserted that playing Jefferson on stage was more productive than marching for the Civil Rights movement in order to justify his perceived lack of participation in

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207 Ibid.
209 Ibid.
211 “In This Corner, the New Champion,” New York Times, October 13, 1968.
the struggle for racial equality. Ultimately, like Jack Johnson, he navigated his own black habitus and desired colorblind treatment for his exceptionalism. He declared both, “I would like to be a great actor and recognized as that, and not just as a great black or just a black actor,” and “My Negro-ness does not rule my life,” at once recognizing how white supremacy impedes him and rejecting the impact of blackness on his identity. He exemplifies the anxieties of the hypervisibility of the black body.

_The Great White Hope_ plays out these racial anxieties especially through the interracial relationship between Jack and Ellie, resonating with the specific socio-politics of the late 1960s. In the second scene, the audience meets Jack who is shadowboxing, while his lover Ellie watches him work. The dialogue establishes that they are in a committed romantic relationship, distinct from Jack’s previous engagements with white prostitutes. During the 1969 Tony Awards broadcast, James Earl Jones and Jane Alexander performed this scene and shared a passionate, sweaty kiss, the first of its kind on national television. This powerful act transgressed racial boundaries and bourgeois propriety. While accounts such as the one by Steve Samuels cited at the start of this chapter describe the shock this moment elicited on stage, newspaper accounts of the Tony Awards oddly do not discuss this kiss. Some cultural critics point to an episode of _Star Trek_, having aired four months earlier, as boasting the first interracial kiss because Captain Kirk and Lieutenant Uhura lock lips. But as Daniel Bernardi reminds us, that kiss was controlled by evil on-looking aliens, and _Star Trek_’s liberal humanism continually centers whiteness. During the rest of this scene in _The Great White Hope_, Jack’s white manager attempts to cover up the

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213 Ibid.
214 “In This Corner, the New Champion.”
boxer’s interracial relationship from the press, and then Clara, Jack’s black common law wife, barges in to attack Jack and Ellie. Sackler suggests white and black anxiety over Jack’s relationship with Ellie. Promoting segregation, Clara is represented as an irrational, angry black woman, replicating a troubling racialized and gendered type, and she receives little attention. Meanwhile, Sackler constantly shows us the anxieties and actions of whites. He devotes several scenes to Ellie’s mother’s discomfort, meetings between federal employees and concerned citizens, an interrogation of Ellie, and most melodramatically the scene of arresting Jack under the Mann Act for “immoral” usage of a white woman transported across state lines.

This arrest occurs when Jack and Ellie are flirting with each other in bed in the middle of the night. In a state of undress, they quite intimately and humorously discuss how their skins sunburn differently. All of a sudden, law enforcement officials infiltrate their bedroom. This scene gives the audience the titillating and transgressive pleasure of interracial intimacy as well as its policing. In 1967, it resonated with the contemporaneous trial Loving v. Virginia in which a white man and a black woman married in Washington, D.C. and were arrested in Virginia, where anti-miscegenation laws remained, having been put in place around the time of Jack Johnson’s preeminence:

The three law officers entered the Lovings’ bedroom and awakened them that July night (July 11, 1958). “We were living with my parents,” where “we had a guest bedroom downstairs,” Mildred Loving later recalled. “I woke up and these guys were standing around the bed. I sat up. It was dark. They had flashlights. They told us to get up, get dressed. I couldn’t believe they were taking us to jail.”

The scene in the play is extremely similar, and its staging in Washington, D.C., where the Lovings were able to live together instead of in Virginia, provided local resonance. In 1967, the same year as the premiere of *The Great White Hope*, the verdict in favor of the Lovings allowed for interracial marriages across the nation. Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman argues that mid-twentieth century African American literature often engaged the trope of black-white relationships because “Representations of cross-racial sexual desire provide a space for black writers to investigate—and to interrogate—broader possibilities for meaningful civil cooperation and political equality between the races.” Read in this way, *The Great White Hope*, though written by a white playwright, offers a loving black-white romance literally and metaphorically signifying integration and illustrates the violent state apparatus preventing such unions.

But the play also replicates the troubling tropes of Othellophilia. According to Celia R. Daileader, Othellophilia is the popular narrative of a black man sexually engaged with a white woman in which the former is portrayed as beastly while the latter is portrayed as tainted by the relationship. This racist-misogynist narrative works to justify violent punishment of both parties, police their bodies, fortify white hetero-patriarchy, and obscure a history of white men sexually assaulting black women. Jack’s sexual relationships with white women threatened the white patriarchy. His publicized encounters connected to the fiction of black men raping white women used to rationalize lynching in the Jim Crow era. According to hegemonic white suppositions of the time, the boxer ultimately cannot be in a loving marriage with a white woman. Indeed, in the play, they never actually get married. In the penultimate scene, Jack repeatedly orders Ellie to leave him and return to her “own” “people,” whips her with a towel,

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and verbally abuses her, using racist-misogynist language to the point that her once-innocent protestations become infected with violence:

ELLIE: Oh, I despise you—

JACK: Right, like all resta ya—

ELLIE: Oh, I’d like to smash you—

JACK: Me an evvy udder dumb nigger who’d letya! Now go on home an hustle one up who doan know it yet, plenty for ya, score em up—watch out, brudders! Oughta hang a bell on so dey hear you comin.219

Throughout the play, Ellie is depicted as a kind of saint who is sullied and sexualized by her relationship with Jack. This contrast amplifies the villainy of Jack and by extension all black men, given a history of such types. Finally, this scene drives Ellie to commit suicide, as if moralizing upon how interracial relationships are doomed. Sackler is again ambivalent, because this death can be read as either by the hands of Jack or by the hands of racial hierarchy and hetero-patriarchy. It is not a coincidence that critics often compared the play to Othello. In fact, real life boxer Jack Johnson’s first white wife truly did kill herself because of the hatred she experienced from the systems of misogyny linked with racism. By combining all the white women in Johnson’s life into Ellie and then having her commit suicide, Sackler forecloses radical interracial love in the end, although he also gives us glimpses of this possibility.

Jane Alexander’s testimony to her experience with The Great White Hope further elucidates the complex workings of white supremacist patriarchy. She did not receive hate mail when at Arena Stage, but on Broadway, she “got tons of mail from white bigots, and two death
threats."²²⁰ She categorized the New York audiences as “predominantly white” at first and then “by the end of the year they were predominantly black”:

The white audience was very, “Yes, yes, we’re very racially understanding,” patting themselves on the back and cheering about the play and all that. And then the black audiences looked at my character as the trouble—the total troublemaker who had caused all the problems for this guy, which in some ways is true. And they used to boo me, and they used to cheer when I died. And this was very hard for Jimmy [Jones] to take, because he saw the play as a love story as much as anything else, and was very angry that the black audience could not get past my color.²²¹

I quote Alexander at length because I have little evidence of the racial composition of the audience, though I also believe we should bear in mind her subjective memory and position. She critiques the racist-misogynist mail and threats she received as well as the self-congratulatory behavior of white audiences. She shows some understanding of black audiences’ objections but highlights their cheering and booing as inappropriate; they “could not get past [her] color,” an unfortunate phrase that suggests “reverse” racism. The differences in reactions to and interpretations of Jack and Ellie’s relationship underscore struggles over legitimate uses of bodies.

Although the critiques of racial hierarchy as manifested in the crafting of white perspectives, the attention to blackface minstrelsy, and the portrayal of Jack and Ellie’s romance were in part transgressive and progressive, The Great White Hope also affirmed normative expectations. In Ain’t I A Woman, bell hooks argues,

²²¹ Ibid.
The success of movies like *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* and *The Great White Hope* revealed that the white American public was not averse to acknowledging attractions between black men and white women that led to marriage. The public’s acceptance of these movies indicates that it no longer feared black males and white females uniting.\(^{222}\)

hooks overstates and simplifies “The public’s acceptance” of these films, given that *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* was not screened in some places in the South. Still, her argument about black men and white women being somewhat accepted by normative U.S. society in part because they each have some privilege (male, white) is compelling. To this, Daileader would add the history of Othellophilia that makes certain couplings legible. As Toni Cade Bambara, another black feminist cultural critic, points out, Jack’s estranged wife Clara is the “Evil Black Bitch,” and his mother is the stereotypical, religious “Black Mother” who serve as instrumental tools rather than full subjects in Sackler’s dramaturgy.\(^{223}\) The relative silence about Loving v. Virginia and the interracial relationship in *The Great White Hope* in reviews suggests that Jack and Ellie were not particularly threatening, given that he loses her and loses the heavyweight title, and perhaps marked a turning point in the dramatization and consumption of interracial romance.

**Critics Negotiating the Middlebrow**

The critical reception of *The Great White Hope* articulates middlebrow discourses, namely anxieties over (non)profit, race, and specificity vs. universality, illustrating the thematic tensions and different capitals generated by this play. For this section, I examined dozens of newspaper reviews of the Arena Stage production from New Haven to St. Louis, indicating the growing importance of this company as a site for new work. Local journalists took pride in the


production, particularly upon its move to Broadway and achievement of awards. These reviews were filed in the Arena archives at George Mason University. Dissecting the common themes of these reviews is important because they illustrate reasons for the play’s critical success and contestations over non-profit theatre. Critics have a direct effect on the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, whose symbolic capital became extremely desirable to non-profit companies that subsequently attempted to replicate the success of *The Great White Hope*. Finally, Sackler’s contention for and ultimate winning of the Pulitzer provoked dialogue about changes in the new play ecosystem.

When *The Great White Hope* premiered at Arena Stage, several critics explicitly named the relative economic and artistic positions of regional theatre and Broadway. They offered differing opinions on the extent to which the play is commercial, that is interested in popular audiences, aesthetics, Broadway, and economic profit. Thomas Shales of the *DC Examiner* lauded the play for its “tremendous popular appeal”; he added, “‘Great White Hope’ could, quite single-handedly in fact, deal a welcome and devastating blow to the intellectual snobbery which has so saturated many of the past productions at Arena Stage.”

He distinguished *The Great White Hope* from “the intellectual snobbery” Zelda Fichandler typically produced, perhaps alluding to *Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance* and *Oh! What a Lovely War*. Meanwhile, Richard Coe of the *Washington Post* called it “the most ambitious of Arena’s 149 productions and a play of intrinsic interest, especially to sports addicts and sociologists.” In his final phrase, Coe suggested that the play had appeal for a variety of spectators. Words such as “ambitious” mediated the aspirational qualities of regional theatre, the play, and the production, which several reviewers noted had a cast of more than sixty actors. In part to address paying for all those actors, most critics mentioned that the NEA granted Arena $25,000 for the development and

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production of the play. In *Women’s Wear Daily*, Martin Gottfried opined, “That the National
Endowment has forked over 25,000 taxpayer dollars to mount a play that would probably infuriate most of those taxpayers’ conservative hearts is reason enough for hope that Government subsidy can be reasonable and artistically promotional.”

Naming the grant from the newly created agency served to distinguish this kind of left-leaning play honed in a non-profit environment from commercial productions. But at the same time, Gottfried exclaimed, “Now, with the presentation of a new and excellent play – a play that would probably have a commercial success in New York – resident theatre becomes an alternative to the commercially produced new play and a force that Broadway has to contend with. That contention will be healthy.”

By stressing non-profit regional theatre and for-profit New York theatre as alternate sites of new play production, Gottfried positions these institutions in the field of cultural production as actually quite similar and as healthy capitalist competition. Peter Altman of the *Minneapolis Star* similarly extolled the play, saying, “It is the first new play I have ever seen in such a playhouse that has the scope, topicality, and excellence of production that could earn a successful Broadway run.”

In so doing, these critics framed the Arena premiere of Sackler’s play as a pre-Broadway tryout, much as the *New York Times* did in reporting on the production.

On the other hand, different critics emphatically averred that *The Great White Hope* was a non-profit cultural production. Don Rubin of the *New Haven Register* wrote it “is precisely the kind of play which could only be staged by a non-commercial producing group,” and added it “is clearly not a commercial venture and would probably never find a production in a commercial theater because of its immense size and scope. That Arena Stage is bold enough and skilled

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227 Ibid.
228 Peter Altman, ‘Great White Hope’ Could Be Knockout,” *Minneapolis Star*, no date.
enough to mount this play is to its great credit.” With such deliberate diction as “precisely” and “clearly,” he named the artistic and financial riskiness of the play as the characteristics of non-profit production. To further his point on Arena’s distinction from commercial producers, Rubin noted, “Arena officials—before the show even opened—expected to lose somewhere about $35,000 on ‘The Great White Hope.’” Here, not making a financial profit is linked with non-profit identity. Russell Shaw of the St. Louis Review similarly argued, “It bears little resemblance to the conventional Broadway hit, nor does it seem a likely candidate for Hollywood. (Sidney Poitier is, for one thing, too light to play a heavy-weight.)” He implied that Broadway and Hollywood have different styles, and that only a black celebrity like Sidney Poitier could generate potential box office sales to merit a film version. Along similar lines, William J. Eaton said of The Great White Hope in the Chicago Daily News, “Such a play would not be commercial enough for Broadway, yet the theater would be poorer without it, in Arena’s view.” Eaton drew from and replicated a value system that frames economic capital against symbolic or cultural capital. Yet his use of “poorer” and his appendage of “in Arena’s view” implicitly acknowledged how value depends upon perspective and the nature of profit.

The reviews almost uniformly celebrated The Great White Hope. Gottfried penned multiple articles to commend the play, “probably the most important new American play ever to come out of any resident theatre and is certainly the most impressive one that I have seen anywhere in a very long time.” None of the reviews I encountered specifically designated Sackler’s portrayal of race relations as reason for the play’s commercial riskiness, but most located the play’s rich cultural capital in its historical and contemporary importance. No one

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230 Ibid.
cited Loving v. Virginia, which is utterly surprising given the case’s immediate relevance. Nearly all the critics who reviewed the production were white men.

Still, the critics engaged the themes of race and racism in *The Great White Hope*, none more stridently than black feminist critic Toni Cade Bambara. She praised the play as “the least harrowing example I know of of whites hustling Black material. And for the first time in my experience of white-on-black theater, it was the drama of the playwright that captured my attention, rather than the comic-tragedy of the Black players trying to cope with bullshit without losing their credibility as either actors or Black people.”234 Her appraisal of Sackler’s dramaturgy suggests that the play was, to her, surprisingly sensitive in its portrayals of black characters and opportunities for black actors. Her interpretation, a somewhat backhanded compliment, suggests why this play might have been popular among white and black audiences. *The Washington Informer*, a black newspaper founded in 1964, did not review the Arena production but the Broadway production. Critic Earl Plater marveled at how the audience accepted this “forthright play” “with the most outspoken dialogue I’ve yet to hear in a theatre” regarding race relations, suggesting again that Sackler successfully advanced palatable anti-racist discourse, and that this was surprising to some black intellectuals.235 At the same time, Bambara critiqued what she viewed as the hypocrisies of white liberalism: “Some critics have called the play the great hope for the white liberal, offered as they are a chance to flagellate themselves … Of course it doesn’t cost anything to cheer the innocent beast/transhuman archangel in the dark of the theater.”236 She thus questioned the political efficacy of *The Great White Hope* in inspiring white spectators to dismantle the structures of white supremacy when they leave the theatre; instead, she believed

that the play offered an affective experience of liberal guilt, sympathy, and expiation for white patrons.

Most critics celebrated the play and its progressive racial politics. Russell Shaw began his review in this way: “The most effective commentary on the country’s racial crisis currently available here is being delivered nightly in a small but elegant theater a few blocks from the Capitol.”²³⁷ He repeatedly returned to the racial themes of the play as manifested in the treatment Jack Jefferson receives for his heavyweight title and white mistress, be he in the United States or abroad. By highlighting the significance of location in Washington, D.C., Shaw implicitly linked the play with recent events of racial politics in the capital such as the March on Washington, the passage of Civil Rights legislation, and the riots after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Along similar lines of addressing space and institutional change, in his review for the Nation, Jules Novick cited Zelda Fichandler’s inspiring call for the production of more plays about and for African Americans, thereby contextualizing the theatre’s aim to be more inclusive.²³⁸ In his review, William J. Eaton specifically named the contradiction between U.S. democracy and inequality as well as the structure of white supremacy by calling The Great White Hope “an exciting new drama about the old American dilemma – racial degradation despite egalitarian ideals” and its theme “the moral destruction of a man, because of his race, by a white supremacist world.”²³⁹ James Earl Jones also received tremendous praise for his powerful performance as Jack. Admiring the actor for his critical commentary on stereotypes through his performance style, Boston Herald critic Samuel Hirsh wrote, “He has bubbling humor and common sense, raising loud laughter with his deft self-mockery of Negro stereotypes.”²⁴⁰

²³⁷ Russell Shaw, “‘White Hope’ Is Powerful Play.”
²³⁹ William J. Eaton, “Premiere of a Significant Play.”
But the critics also betrayed the limits of liberalism. Shaw, for example, concluded his review by writing, “it is an extraordinary powerful study of America’s sickness on the subject of race.”\(^{241}\) Although he astutely attends to the importance of narratives about race and racism, he frames structures of racial hierarchy as “sickness” rather than as historically embedded and actively maintained. Others counseled Sackler to cut the scene between Jack and a young African student in Germany\(^ {242}\) or the monologues of Jack’s mother and of Scipio, whom they compared with Marcus Garvey and more contemporary black power leaders.\(^ {243}\) These recommendations suggest some white critics’ minimal interest in black intraracial dynamics. Moreover, these critics cited Scipio’s speeches as senseless; they did not see sense in critiques of African American assimilation and religiosity. Harry MacArthur of the *Washington Star* for instance mentioned “a strange character named Scipio, who keeps turning up to make ranting Black Power speeches which confuse virtually everybody.”\(^ {244}\) A few critics also argued that Sackler exaggerated the perniciousness of white supremacy. Although *Washington Daily News* critic Tom Donnelly openly admitted that his argument is based on “very scanty research,” he still went ahead to say, “Mr. Sackler has romanticized his black hero and has, just possibly, made Jack’s white oppressors more oppressive than they actually were.”\(^ {245}\) Jules Novick described *The Great White Hope* as being about Jack Johnson, “who was hounded out of the country (or so Mr. Sackler has it) by the white power structure.”\(^ {246}\) His use of parentheses is meant to question the historical record and power of white supremacy. He is even more revealing when he practices some self-reflection:

\(^{241}\) Russell Shaw, “‘White Hope’ Is Powerful Play.”

\(^{242}\) Thomas Shales, “Great Hopes for ‘The Great White Hope.’”


I had it in my mind to accuse Sackler of catering to the absurd, ugly and dangerous kind of Negro paranoia that considers family planning a genocidal plot against the colored races. But then I thought of Adam Clayton Powell and, even more, of Cassius Clay, who has recently been sentenced to a $10,000 fine and five years in prison for refusing induction into the army. The play is by no means a calm and balanced assessment of the situation, but it seems clear to me that what Sackler implies is at least basically true; ours is still a racist society.

Novick tried to position himself as reasonable and objective by showing his process of thinking, which included confronting his assumptions and offering sympathetic references to Powell and Ali. In so doing, he perhaps modeled for readers of the Nation a liberal philosophy that to some extent recognized white complicity and the persistence of racism after 1965.

Critics drew parallels between the early twentieth century and the late 1960s, yet they often did so using broad strokes that occasionally sought to universalize the play. New York Times critic Clive Barnes called the subject matter of The Great White Hope “fascinating and relevant. In these liberal times we can accept a black heavyweight champion, but can we accept a Black Muslim heavyweight champion? It is a question that seems to lurk like a silent ghost in the very corridors of Mr. Sackler’s play.”

He demonstrated a thoughtful self-reflection connecting The Great White Hope to contemporary racial politics, even as he articulated a liberal understanding of us (whites) accepting them (blacks, black Muslims). Almost every review cited the similarities between Jack Jefferson (Jack Johnson) and Mohammed Ali (Cassius Clay) as black boxers oppressed by systemic white supremacy. Some went on to name Stokely Carmichael, again suggesting the shared experiences of black male habitus. Nearly all of the

critics described the plot in detail, including the dramatic ending when Ellie kills herself and Jack does or does not throw the fight. This was and remains typical in reviews of new plays. Instead of unpacking the subtleties of racial dynamics, some critics devoted equal if not more column space to Universal Themes. For example, Martin Gottfried observed, “The threat and doom of Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown are there too, and the fate of Muhammad Ali. And beyond all that, the grim capture of any man caught in too-powerful circumstances, aching only to live his own life with some privacy and just a little joy.” With the phrase “beyond all that,” meaning black habitus, Gottfried elevated Jefferson’s story to “any man,” and he elided race and the fact that Jefferson actively sought the spotlight. Peter Altman similarly worked to individualize and personalize The Great White Hope to include all men: “And the story is not just political allegory; it is the portrayal of one man’s search for fulfillment in love and work, not as a member of a race but as an individual. It is a personal tragedy.” These strategies at once acknowledged and then disavowed the importance of race and racism to focus on the universal and the individual, replicating narratives by Sackler and Jones.

The Great White Hope’s appeal to universalism connects with its middlebrow qualities and viability for awards. With its huge scope of history and setting, the play is, in dramaturgical terms, extremely ambitious. In a lengthy piece for the New York Times entitled “To Make You Feel, Not Just Watch,” Walter Kerr pontificated on the play’s intensity verging on excess, “Mr. Sackler’s ambition is staggering: He is out for total immersion – in the period, in the problem, in the experience. Nothing that can be known of all the factors that went into a horrifying case history, nothing that the theater can do or say in its intimate, artificial, privileged way, is to be

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249 Peter Altman, ‘Great White Hope’ Could Be Knockout.”

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left out. We are to stand away from nothing, enter everything.” Perhaps the most commonly used word to describe the play was “sprawling.” A poet, Sackler wrote the play in verse. He penned occasional dialogue and sometimes whole scenes in different languages, among them French, German, Spanish, and Hungarian, without English translations. Sackler had high aspirations, one of the marks of the middlebrow in the anxiety to accumulate symbolic and cultural capital. Some critics compared the drama to Greek and Shakespearean tragedies. Others linked Sackler to the “father” of legitimate, literary U.S. theatre, Eugene O’Neill, and specifically to *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*, plays that were likely chosen for their racial resonances. Through these linkages, *The Great White Hope* gains proximate legitimacy. Many touted the importance of this new play, given recent seasons of unsatisfying legitimate theatre from U.S. playwrights. Between 1963 and 1968, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama was awarded only twice, to Frank Gilroy for *The Subject Was Roses* (1965) and to Edward Albee for *A Delicate Balance* (1967). By 1968, critics were more interested in transfers from England, particularly from the National Theatre, which brought Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, and from the Royal Shakespeare Company, which brought Harold Pinter’s *The Homecoming*. Given *The Great White Hope*’s middlebrow status and engagement with U.S. culture, it appeared well positioned to win the Pulitzer Prize in Drama, yet its eligibility raised questions and concerns, revealing the tensions between regional theatres and New York City commercial theatres. The play’s chief competitor was the musical *1776*, book by Peter Stone, music and lyrics by Sherman Edwards, which also engaged with U.S. identity and progressive politics, in

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this case implicitly critiquing the Vietnam War. The play ultimately won over the musical. Savran argues that the Pulitzer “functions primarily to reaffirm the critics’ authority by turning their reviews into self-fulfilling prophesies and to reward those plays that have most fortuitously balanced ‘educational value’ against commercial viability.”\textsuperscript{254} Given that most of the critics lauded \textit{The Great White Hope}, it is not surprising that it won the Pulitzer. Its “educational value” and “commercial viability” of historicizing Jack Johnson and engaging with contemporary racial politics were surprisingly high. In “It’s Time the Pulitzer People Woke Up,” \textit{Washington Post} critic Richard Coe called for the committee to look beyond Broadway productions.\textsuperscript{255} He and \textit{Variety} pointed out that the Arena premiere of \textit{The Great White Hope} technically fell outside of the April 1, 1968 to March 31, 1969 parameter, an issue that had not before been of concern, and the secretary of the Pulitzer committee refused to clarify the situation.\textsuperscript{256} In addition, the three jurors were all New York critics: Walter Kerr of the \textit{New York Times}, Richard Watts, Jr. of the \textit{New York Post}, and Brendan Gill of the \textit{New Yorker}. Sackler’s win thus called into question the preeminence of Broadway as the site of worthy new U.S. plays and New York critics as the sole judges. Washington, D.C. newspapers took great pleasure in the accolades of \textit{The Great White Hope} and criticized New York newspapers for downplaying the production’s origins. After Sackler won the Best Play Tony Award, the “Around Town” section of the \textit{Washington Post} asserted, “Our pride in this collective, home-grown achievement is, we must confess, singed ever so slightly by New York’s characteristic attitude that it, it first and it alone had the perception and enterprise to see a major artistic work be born,” and then went on to point out that \textit{1776} had also debuted in Washington.\textsuperscript{257}

\textsuperscript{254} Savran, \textit{A Queer Sort of Materialism}, 25.
\textsuperscript{256} “Pulitzer Prize Due Next Monday (5); ‘Hope,’ ‘1776,’ ‘Ceremonies’ as Favorites,” \textit{Variety}, April 30, 1969.
The 1969 Tony Awards broadcast represented the tensions and reasons for the success of *The Great White Hope*. When James Earl Jones, Jane Alexander, and Howard Sackler won awards, the latter two thanked Arena in their speeches. The platform of Broadway and this national broadcast put the spotlight on the regional theatre in the nation’s capital. Yet no one specified where Arena was or what part it had in producing *The Great White Hope* on the Great White Way. Overall, the theatre gained some symbolic capital but lost economic capital. The best play award for Sackler perhaps said less about alleged intrinsic merit of the play and more about those bestowing the award and wanting to promote a certain liberal politics of integration. That night, the Negro Ensemble Company received a special Tony. Harry Belafonte introduced the multiracial cast of *Hair* by making oblique references to the “confusing, polarizing times” and how audiences must listen to the younger generation.\(^{258}\) Black-white pairs such as Pearl Bailey and Robert Preston flirted with each other while co-presenting awards. Finally, the award show was hosted by Alan King and Diahann Carroll, and the young boy who played the black actress’s son on *Julia* brought the couple together at the start and end as if to suggest a peaceful interracial family. And yet, race, racism, black, and white were terms never uttered during the Tony Awards. The visual bodies and silent discourse on race resonated with the contradictions that mark the struggle of profit, race, and the middlebrow.

**Conclusion**

Although Arena Staged helped to de-center the production of new U.S. plays with its premiere of *The Great White Hope*, the company’s and the play’s legitimacy and legibility still rested upon a relation to New York City. At the same time, the commercial and critical success

of the Broadway production might not have been possible without Arena and its aura of non-profit status. Sackler’s dramatization of Jack Jefferson’s achievement of the heavyweight title and relationship with a white woman generated various kinds of capital and accommodated multiple interpretations through an ambivalent, liberal racial politics. The play was both a “universal” tragedy and a specific historical racial drama. It both centered on white perspectives and drew attention to the constructed systems of white supremacy that circumscribed Jefferson’s movements. It both traded in and critiqued black stereotypes. It presented an interracial romantic relationship and then the loss of love, life, and the heavyweight title, losses that could be ascribed to these individual characters or larger white supremacist hetero-patriarchal structures.

To many critics, the play both mediated late 1960s racial politics and transcended its historical subject. These combinations set the stage for the play’s success. Ultimately, *The Great White Hope* earned Arena symbolic capital through its accolades, transfer to Broadway, and navigation of race, distinguishing this non-profit regional theatre; however, these very acts further blurred the arbitrary line between for-profit and not-for-profit. *The Great White Hope* established precedent for Arena’s future productions that capitalized on non-profit status, commercial potential, and black-white politics.
CHAPTER THREE:
GLOBAL STAGES: FROM RUSSIA AND EASTERN EUROPE TO AFRICAN DIASPORA DRAMAS, ARTISTS, AND AUDIENCES

Introduction

In 1991, Zelda Fichandler sat down to an interview with critic and scholar Edwin Wilson for CUNY TV to discuss the economic and racial politics of Arena Stage. She spoke of Washington, D.C.’s “mostly black government, mostly black city” and public school system in which 90% of the students were black. She concluded, “As time goes by, it becomes more and more incongruent and ridiculous for this theatre to be a little white, western theatre perched in the center of a city in turmoil.” Her frank appraisal of Arena Stage as not only “white” but “western” in contrast with the theatre’s community suggests her social consciousness and plans for institutional change. At this point, the company had applied for and received a $1 million three-to-one matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for programs to institutionalize cultural diversity. In the late 1980s, Arena began to show a commitment to cultural diversity by actively staging, employing, and building an audience of people of color, particularly of African heritage. Prior to this period, the institution imagined itself as a more eclectic, international theatre, which was largely coded as white and western. How and why did this shift from classic and contemporary European theatre to African diaspora dramas, artists, and audiences occur?

In this chapter, I historicize Arena Stage’s programming, branding, and audiences from 1970 to 1990. During this period, the theatre increasingly positioned itself as an international company in the sense that it staged plays from around the world but specifically from the

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260 Ibid.
U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe. At the same time, it represented the United States to those abroad. The historic tour of *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder and *Inherit the Wind* by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee in Moscow and Leningrad in 1973 put Arena Stage on the map. Arena also produced and presented many works by African, Caribbean, and African American artists, but they were held at arm’s length; they were not explicitly part of the international branding. Behind the scenes, the theatre staff regularly bemoaned the company’s dearth of black artists, employees, trustees, and spectators, although 70% of Washington, D.C. residents were black. Toward the end of the 1980s, Arena Stage began a fuller commitment to cultural diversity and negotiated with changing audiences and staff, as diversity started to become a U.S. value worth funding.

According to Jodi Melamed in *Represent and Destroy*, the U.S. state started to mobilize narratives of diversity and equality post-World War II in part to combat anti-American U.S.S.R. narratives. She historicizes racial liberalism through agencies, specifically the Julius Rosenwald Fund, which financed and distributed race novels. Melamed asserts, “At racial liberalism’s core was a geopolitical race narrative: African American integration within U.S. society and advancement toward equality defined through a liberal framework of legal rights and inclusive nationalism would establish the moral legitimacy of U.S. global leadership.” In this chapter, I show that Arena Stage mediated a similar process but in the 1970s and 1980s, the end of the Cold War and the beginning of multiculturalism. Support for novels likely came earlier than that for plays because the bearers of twentieth century U.S. cultural hierarchy placed theatre

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at a lower rank, and performance entails a different kind of circulation. In addition, as I discussed in Chapter One, organizations such as the NEA did not emerge until the 1960s.

When I began research for this chapter, I expected to find a clear statement articulating why Arena Stage produced multiple plays by Athol Fugard, Derek Walcott, and Mustapha Matura from the late 60s through the early 90s. I examined meeting minutes, letters, and promotional materials for evidence to support my hypotheses: Arena produced works from South Africa and the Caribbean in order to comment on U.S. race relations from the safer distance of apartheid and European colonial dynamics; to attract black audiences with ostensibly black theatre; to brand the theatre as global; and to accumulate economic, symbolic, and cultural capital. I did not find directly stated support for my theories to account for African diaspora theatre until I looked at documents from the late 1980s. However, this earlier absence is meaningful. It suggests that staging African diaspora drama was not part of a meticulous, conscious plan. The acts of both including this repertory and sideling it, or at least not conceiving it as an assemblage of African/Caribbean/American theatre that was part of Arena’s bent toward international work, illustrates Arena’s push-pull relationship with incorporating black theatre artists and audiences into its community on staff, on stage, and in the seats of the theatre.

Throughout this chapter, I invoke “African diaspora” to underscore circulation of productions and peoples. Influenced by Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, I focus more on routes than on roots.263 Recent scholarship in black performance studies such as the anthology *Black Cultural Traffic* unpacks case studies of the production, distribution, and consumption of black

culture and U.S. racialization of African diaspora works.\textsuperscript{264} I find Sandra Richards’s definition of “diaspora” useful for its multivalent, productive tensions between specific histories and spatial-temporal imaginings of collective homes. For Richards, “diaspora” means,

(a) a “backward” glance and affective affiliation with the site of collective origin; (b) alienation from, varying degrees of accommodation to, and critical appropriation or creolization of, norms of the host nation, which is ambivalent about the presence of diasporans within its borders; (c) subjective experience of identity as both rooted or fixed in a distinctive history, and routed or continually (re)articulated in relation to intersections of local, regional, national, and global particularities; (d) recognition of affinity with other ethnonational communities displaced from the original homeland, accomplished by privileging similarity and unity over difference; and (e) identification and nurturance of a home in the world.\textsuperscript{265}

I am interested in why Arena Stage took such an interest in plays by Fugard, among others, and how those plays were positioned and received in Washington, D.C., an African diaspora city. These plays produced a discursive diasporic black aesthetics and politics welcomed by middlebrow white audiences and growing black audiences. Initially held at a distance from Arena’s identity, particularly with Russian and Eastern European drama and whiteness writ large, African diaspora drama and cultural diversity programs driven by social consciousness and funding came to transform the theatre institution.

\textbf{On the International Stage}

Arena’s invitation to perform behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War and its subsequent productions on tour in the fall of 1973 were part of cultural diplomacy initiatives between the United States and the U.S.S.R. The U.S. had previously sponsored tours of jazz musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie and the opera \textit{Porgy and Bess}, in part to counter Soviet propaganda that depicted U.S. race relations as tumultuous and undemocratic. In 1958, the Lacy-Zarubin Agreement facilitated further cultural exchange between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. To abrogate the anxieties of détente, the U.S. Department of State mobilized art. In this case, officials surveyed existing productions at major regional theatres and ultimately selected Arena Stage and its productions of \textit{Our Town} and \textit{Inherit the Wind}. According to director Alan Schneider, the Department of State had also considered the Guthrie Theater and the American Conservatory Theatre (ACT) as its U.S. regional theatre representative; however, the Soviet cultural attachés responded poorly to the former’s production of \textit{Of Mice and Men} and determined that ACT’s productions were insufficiently “American.” Meanwhile, the wife of one of the attachés found Arena’s \textit{Our Town} to be moving and reminiscent of Chekhov.\textsuperscript{266} The selection of Arena Stage also likely involved a consideration of Zelda Fichandler’s and Alan Schneider’s Russian backgrounds. Fichandler had majored in Soviet Studies; worked for U.S. military intelligence; taught Stanislavski-inspired acting techniques; and produced plays by Chekhov, Gogol, and Turgenev. She was of Russian descent, while Schneider was born in Russia. They both assisted with the Russian translations of \textit{Our Town} and \textit{Inherit the Wind}.\textsuperscript{266}

The Department of State agreed to cover the estimated cost of the tour, nearly $150,000. This included travel and accommodations for sixty-eight actors and crew members, sets by Ming Cho Lee, and even a monkey for *Inherit the Wind*. The Department also sought Arena’s assistance in promoting the tour. For example, Mark B. Lewis, the Director of the Office of Cultural Presentations, asked executive director Thomas Fichandler if the United States Information Agency could videotape excerpts of Arena Stage’s productions for Soviet students before and after the tour. The Department’s press release emphasized the cultural and political importance of this tour. Under the 1972-73 Exchanges Agreement, Arena would be joined by the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Orchestra, the New York City Ballet, the José Limón Dance Company, the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, and Holiday on Ice. Holiday on Ice aside, the U.S. was crafting a higher brow cultural image abroad. Prior to Arena’s tour, the only other U.S. theatrical production to play in the Soviet Union during the Cold War, other than *Porgy and Bess*, was the musical *My Fair Lady*. By selecting Arena Stage and its productions of *Our Town* and *Inherit the Wind*, the Department of State sought to brandish “legitimate” U.S. theatre. In addition, the press release underscored “efforts to increase understanding by strengthening through educational and cultural exchanges ties that bind the American people with the peoples of other nations” that would help lead to “an improved climate for international cooperation.”

The Arena company played for one week at the Moscow Art Theatre and one week at the Pushkin Theatre to wide acclaim and sold-out houses. While the company performed the plays in English, the audience members listened to a Russian translation via headsets. The company included resident actors such as Robert Prosky and Dianne Wiest who spoke effusively about

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267 Letter From Mark B. Lewis to Thomas Fichandler, June 7, 1973, box 7, fol. 14, Thomas Fichandler Papers, GMUL.
268 Letter From Mark B. Lewis to Thomas Fichandler, July 2, 1973, box 7, fol. 14, Thomas Fichandler Papers.
270 Ibid.
their experiences in the Soviet Union. Arena’s company also boasted a couple of African American actors, which likely appealed to the State Department’s desire to impart a diverse, harmonious vision of the U.S.

Many members of the company became invested in protesting Soviet oppression, particularly of Jewish peoples and specifically the U.S.S.R.’s prevention of dancers Valery and Galina Panov from immigrating to Israel. When the company returned to Washington, D.C., some of them protested outside of the Soviet Embassy and signed a plea to free the couple, who had begun a hunger strike. The theatre also demonstrated its interest in social justice for Soviet Jews through its production of Elie Wiesel’s *Zalmen or The Madness of God* in 1974. The play focuses on a politicized Rabbi in post-Stalinist Russia. The production later transferred to Broadway and was televised as part of the PBS series *Theatre in America*. In addition, the theatre held a benefit performance for Soviet Jews with a post-show discussion featuring Wiesel and Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg.²⁷¹ That season, 1973-74, Fichandler took a sabbatical, in part to recover from the tour from which some company members became ill with *giardia lamblia*. Schneider, who directed Wiesel’s play, became the interim artistic director.

Before, during, and after the tour, Arena Stage received significant political approbation. Shortly before the company departed for the Soviet Union, Mayor Walter Washington declared September 27, 1973 to be Arena Stage Day. Walter Mondale, Hubert Humphrey, and Jacob Javitz, among others, sent the theatre letters of congratulations upon the successful tour. On Capitol Hill, Senator Charles Percy of Illinois called for unanimous consent for two news articles on Arena’s tour to be entered into the Congressional Record. Representative George Hansen of Idaho spoke in the House for fifteen minutes extolling the tour in particular and Arena in general. Hansen made explicit political points about how *Inherit the Wind* “cannot fail to have made an

imprint on the capital of a country which is wracked with internal tension caused by the challenge of dissident intellectuals. Its theme is freedom of speech, a freedom denied citizens of the U.S.S.R.”

He congratulated the company for “representing the American people by carrying in their persons and in the words of American plays, a message of good will from the citizens of the United States.” For many, the company symbolized an ideal U.S. culture, politics, and peoples emblematized by freedom in contrast with the Soviet Union.

In addition, Zelda Fichandler sought more opportunities for touring around the world. At a meeting in 1974, Thomas Fichandler reported that a mayor in Martinique was interested in bringing the Arena company to the Caribbean to perform *Death of a Salesman*. A German television station contacted Arena about producing a half-hour special about the theatre. Although nothing came of these overtures, they still suggested a growing international interest in this regional theatre. According to meeting minutes, in 1976, “Gene Feist of Roundabout Theater called to say he would like to be Arena’s New York outlet,” and the transcriber noted, “This is not a focus point now. Zelda would rather go to Holland, Poland, Romania & Israel—more important to this company.” She was more interested in taking Arena abroad than to New York. In part because of Arena’s tour to the U.S.S.R., the Holland Festival invited Arena to present *Death of a Salesman* as the sole representative of U.S. theatre for the U.S. bicentennial. Limited funding, however, inhibited the trip, because Holland was willing to cover only $14,000 in local expenses. Arena did present another one of Arthur Miller’s plays, *The Crucible*, at the Israel Festival in Jerusalem in 1987. Expanding to a more recent play and a

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273 Ibid.
274 “Staff Meeting,” September 27, 1974, box 13, fol. 1, Arena Stage Production Correspondence, GMUL.
275 “11am Friday Meeting,” July 11, 1976, box 25, fol. 2, Thomas Fichandler Papers.
276 “Staff Meeting,” March 10, 1976, box 13, fol. 3, Arena Stage Production Correspondence.
comedy, Arena took its productions of *After the Fall* and *You Can’t Take It With You* to the Hong Kong Arts Festival in 1980.

Finally, the Soviet tour shifted season programming and directing opportunities toward more Russian and Eastern European artists. In *The Arena Adventure*, an essay entitled “The Eastern European Connection” argues that Arena’s commitment to contemporary political plays from Eastern Europe distinguished the company from other regional theatres.278 Before the tour, Fichandler had already developed a taste for Russian and Eastern European work. This taste translated to the production of classic plays such as *The Cherry Orchard* and *A Month in the Country*. In the early 1970s, she produced less well known work, namely *Wipe-Out Games* by Ionesco (1971) and *Enemies* by Gorky (1973). Having seen *The Ascent of Mount Fuji* by Chingiz Aitmatov and Kaltai Mukhamedzhanov while in the U.S.S.R., Fichandler directed it in 1975, making it the first new Soviet play produced in the U.S. since 1967.279 From the 1970s through the 80s, Arena produced three plays by Polish playwright Sławomir Mrożek, *Enchanted Night* (1970), *The Police* (1970), and *Emigrés* (1974), and three by Hungarian playwright István Örkény, *The Tot Family* (1975), *Catsplay* (1977), and *Screenplay* (1983). In 1978, Fichandler directed the world premiere of *Duck Hunting* by Alexander Vampilov, a meditation on the post-Stalinist generation, and in 1981, Arena staged Richard Nelson’s adaptation of *The Suicide* by Nikolai Erdman, a play that had been repressed by Stalin. Many of these productions were U.S. premieres, and their themes of political anxieties likely resonated with D.C. audiences after the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal and in the context of the Cold War.

Arena Stage also developed relationships with Eastern European directors. Romanian director Liviu Ciulei made his U.S. directing debut at Arena in 1974 with *Leonce and Lena* by

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279 Ibid., 56.
Georg Büchner and subsequently directed several other productions of classic European plays including *The Lower Depths*, *Hamlet*, and *Don Juan*. When Ciulei became the artistic director of the Guthrie in the 1980s, Fichandler visited Minneapolis and saw the Guthrie’s production of *Tartuffe* directed by Ciulei’s student from the Bulandra Theatre in Romania, Lucian Pintilie.

Fichandler next brought Pintilie to Arena to direct *Tartuffe* and *The Wild Duck*. Having met Yuri Lyubimov during the U.S.S.R. tour, she brought him and his adaptation of *Crime and Punishment* to Arena Stage in 1987, which was during the period when he had lost his citizenship and directorship of the Taganka Theatre.

Arena’s tour had lasting impact on the theatre’s reputation. In 1974, the Theatre Panel of the NEA recommended that Arena Stage be awarded $200,000, $50,000 more than the Endowment’s ceiling grant.280 This grant suggested a recognition of the company’s achievements and of its difficulty raising contributed income in Washington, D.C. Following the tour, in 1976, Arena Stage received the first Tony Award given to a regional theatre. This symbolic capital granted the institution greater legitimacy and national attention. At a staff meeting, Fichandler pondered “How to react to award—important to be recognized by establishment forces, esp. for funding. Change in reaction to regional theaters—now benign recognition by forces that were hostile, before that indifferent.”281 Director of Public Relations Alton Miller however cautioned against over-publicizing the award because of the irony of gaining such legitimacy from Broadway, an institution against which Fichandler had positioned herself.282

And yet, the Tony and the tour became indelible parts of Arena’s self-promotion and identity. “The Arena Stage Story,” a self-narrative covering 1950 through 1976, emphasizes the company’s national and international repute: “Today, in its 27th year, Arena Stage is variously

281 “Staff Meeting,” March 10, 1976, box 13, fol. 3, Arena Stage Production Correspondence.
282 “Minutes of a Meeting of the Board of Trustees,” March 25, 1976, box 30, fol. 5, Thomas Fichandler Papers.
described as ‘a national institution’, [sic] as having ‘a worldwide reputation,’” and its “landmarks” include the first Tony Award for a regional theatre, its productions that went on to Broadway, film, and television, and the fact that it “has been singled out by the U.S. State Department and the Soviet Ministry of Culture, and selected as the first ‘ambassador’ theater company to tour the Soviet Union in 1973.” An advertisement for *Our Town* and *Inherit the Wind* as part of the theatre’s regular season declared, “You Don’t Have to Go Around the WORLD To See the First American Drama in the USSR.” The subscription mailer for the 1981-82 season pronounced, “One of the world’s best theater companies is just around the corner” at once signaling world-class theatre, global programming, and local accessibility. For *Theatre Profiles* in 1978, Arena again touted its tour, Tony, and television presence. The profile articulated the repertory as “New American plays, premieres of important European plays, plays from the past re-embodied in vivid modern interpretations, [and] recent plays that proved financially unsuccessful in the commercial theater but can be given new life.” The theatre had been employing this diction emphasizing its eclectic repertory, specifically the categories of new plays and classics from the U.S. and Europe, and works that had flopped on Broadway, at least since the 1960s. *The Arena Adventure* highlights the repertory’s international reach: “The theater’s repertoire was particularly adventurous during the seventies. New plays from England, Canada, France, Germany—East and West, Switzerland, Austria, Poland, Hungary, Romania, the Soviet Union, and Australia broadened Arena’s scope and were greeted enthusiastically by the cosmopolitan audience from the nation’s capital.” But the repertory had changed by this point,

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284 Arena Stage Mailer, c. 1973, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, District of Columbia Public Library.
287 Lawrence Maslon, *The Arena Adventure*, 44.
not only in the concentration of explicitly political, contemporary plays from Eastern Europe, but also in the production and presentation of black performance. South Africa is a glaring omission from these descriptions. African/Caribbean/American work at Arena gained legibility by the late 1980s when the theatre and U.S. culture at large began to name cultural diversity, which in the case of Arena Stage and context of Washington, D.C. was code for African Americans.

**African Diaspora Performance**

From the late 1960s onward, Arena Stage produced black-centered narratives. The repertory included plays by African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American artists. However, the company held these plays at a distance. Rather than homegrown productions, they were often presentations that were included in the regular subscription series and toured to other U.S. cities. Nearly all of the African works were penned by white South African playwright Athol Fugard, and the Afro-Caribbean works were typically adaptations of canonical “western” plays and forms. In short, these African diaspora productions were intercultural, liberal, and middlebrow, easily fitting into Arena’s aesthetic. Although the plays were not explicitly marketed as part of the theatre’s global branding, they still helped to position the company as a center for international performance in the 1970s and 1980s. This tension of inclusion and exclusion is illustrated further in the reception of the plays that at once portrayed the productions and their racial political issues as both foreign and American.

As I discussed in Chapter One, the polarized racial climate of Washington, D.C. in the mid-to-late 1960s prompted Fichandler to confront the whiteness of her theatre. She secured a grant from the Ford Foundation to hire and train black actors for the resident ensemble. This resulted in multiracial productions of canonical plays with newly racialized resonances. In *King*
Lear, for example, Lear and Cordelia were played by black actors across the villainous characters embodied by white actors. Fichandler also famously produced The Great White Hope, portraying a history of real-life heavyweight champion Jack Johnson that reverberated with contemporary calls for racial justice and interracial relationships.

What is much less talked about is that after the Arena run of Howard Sackler’s play, James Earl Jones stayed on with the company to perform in The Blood Knot by Athol Fugard. Jones had previously played the role of Zachariah off-Broadway in 1964. In a letter to subscribers, Thomas Fichandler framed this one week of performances in January 1968 as a special “Subscriber Bonus” to see “Athol Fugard’s universal drama.”288 The production was received fairly positively and set the stage for future critical vocabulary that moves back and forth between the constructed poles of art and politics, at once acknowledging Fugard’s politics, and then disavowing them for universal, humanist, and personal themes. Emerson Beauchamp of the Washington Star for instance remarked, “That such a play could be produced in South Africa seems remarkable, but ‘The Blood Knot’ has little to do with politics, though apartheid is certainly a large part of its subject. What makes it such a moving theatrical experience is its humanity.”289 Arena presented four more works by Athol Fugard, two of which were collaborations with John Kani and Winton Nsthona, between 1968 and 1992, when the theatre revived The Blood Knot. I will return to Fugard, treatments of African theatre as a special event, and negotiations between specific, African politics and claims to universality and U.S. centeredness.

In the early 1970s, Zelda Fichandler provided a stage for African American artists. The first play by an African American author to be produced at Arena was *No Place to Be Somebody* in 1970. Written by Charles Gordone, the play was the first by a black playwright to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. A meditation on racial politics with more than a dozen characters from different backgrounds brought together in a Greenwich Village bar, the play somewhat alienated and confused the D.C. critical establishment. In 1971, Arena produced *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* by Lorraine Hansberry, a more cerebral exploration of bohemian life and socialism. In part because of a growing relationship with Hansberry’s ex-husband and estate manager, Robert Nemiroff, Arena worked with him again on *Raisin*, the musical adaptation of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Arena premiered the musical in 1973, and then Nemiroff took it to Broadway. I will discuss *Raisin* in detail in Chapter Four, where I argue that the unprecedented success of this production signaled the popularity of liberal black musicals to come at the theatre. The next season, Fichandler hired African American artist Glenda Dickerson to direct the newly initiated Black Writers Project. The Project included programming such as a brief run of Dickerson’s adaptation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neal Hurston and a staged a reading of *East of Jordan* by Evan Walker, whose work had been previously produced by the D.C. Black Repertory Company.

Robert Hooks, who had worked at the Negro Ensemble Company in New York, developed the D.C. Black Rep mainly to develop and produce black artists, administrators, and audiences in this majority-black city. In 1970, he reached out to Arena Stage for resources. He negotiated with the Fichandlers for usage of the Kreeger Theatre and administrative offices during the summer when the theatre was dark. But, according to Zelda Fichandler, “it turned

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290 “Staff Meeting,” October 2, 1970, box 13, fol. 2, Arena Stage Production Correspondence.
out he wanted us to finance [the company].”

She also charged the significant black bourgeoisie of the D.C. area with an unwillingness to donate to theatre. Given limited financial support, the D.C. Black Rep ran as a production company for only six years, closing in 1978. It may be that because Hooks produced new African American plays and musicals that Arena Stage produced less black theatre during this period. In 1976, Arena promoted its “All American Rep” to celebrate the bicentennial. The three plays running in repertory were *Death of a Salesman*, *Our Town*, and *The Front Page*, commemorating a particularly white and male-centric United States. Although the season featured other canonical U.S. plays such as Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, the season also boasted European works, *An Enemy of the People*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *Heartbreak House*, emphasizing Arena’s continuing international connections. Fichandler’s letter to subscribers pronounced, “The accent is American; the playwright may be American or Russian or Hungarian or South African or English.”


291 Zelda Fichandler, in discussion with the author, December 2012.
292 Letter from Zelda Fichandler to Subscriber, April 7, 1975, box 13, fol. 1, Arena Stage Production Correspondence.
claim a history of including African Americans, yet the act of presenting, and irregularly at that, suggested that African Americans were infrequent guests invited to the theatre rather than an integral part of the Arena family.

Part of the increase in book-in shows came about because in 1971, with the opening of the Kreeger Theatre, Arena Stage had to juggle two large spaces, the 800-seat in-the-round theatre and the 500-seat thrust/proscenium theatre. In meeting minutes from 1971, Zelda Fichandler informed the staff, “we are still experimenting on how to run two theatres with one staff efficiently, economically and artistically.”293 In 1975, the company opened another venue, a 150-seat space called the Old Vat Room for presentations of small shows and bare bones productions of new work. Operation costs rose, and the company needed to maintain a reasonably balanced budget. Book-in productions kept down Arena’s costs and offered the potential of high box office income with a built-in subscriber base. The new spaces also provided flexibility for different running lengths in case productions turned out to be extremely financial successful. Banjo Dancing by folk musician Stephen Wade ran in the Old Vat Room for a decade. In addition, the resident acting ensemble felt exhausted having to perform and rehearse in back-to-back and simultaneous productions, which these multiple theatres now afforded. Thus, presenting work by other companies provided the resident actors with some time to recharge. Moreover, by using the Kreeger as a space to showcase international touring productions, Arena competed with the Kennedy Center and the National Theatre as a world-class venue but also distinguished itself with black productions that often exhibited virtuosic spectacle and overt politics. In “When Is African Theater ‘Black,’?” Catherine M. Cole argues that “theater in the form of touring performances travels beyond African only rarely” in contrast with play scripts.

293 “Staff Meeting,” September 29, 1971, box 13, fol. 1, Arena Stage Production Correspondence.
and recordings, making the African tours at Arena Stage from the mid-70s to the mid-80s particularly significant.\textsuperscript{294}

In February of 1975, Arena Stage presented the Yoruba opera \textit{Oba Koso} for a two-week engagement. Writer, director, and performer Duro Lapido had popularized this form and this particular opera about the leader-deity Shango, having toured the production in Africa, Asia, and Europe. Lapido brought it to the Kreeger Theatre for its U.S. premiere. Arena’s press release emphasized \textit{Oba Koso}’s authenticity, spectacle, and exoticism; the company included the Elewe War Dancers of King Oba Adetona Ayeni and the wives of Lapido, points that were often repeated in press materials.\textsuperscript{295} Arena’s newsletter underscored the production’s accessibility: “\textit{Oba Koso} will be performed in English and Yoruba and is magnificent entertainment for the whole family.”\textsuperscript{296} The playbill accompanying the production included lengthy articles about Lapido, Yoruba opera, the plot, and the history of Nigeria, largely erasing colonialism and imperialism.\textsuperscript{297}

\textit{Oba Koso} was enthusiastically received. According to meeting minutes, “\textit{Oba Koso} was a great success—we made a good deal of money from those performances which will help to reduce our deficit.”\textsuperscript{298} The production grossed $42,577, and Arena netted approximately half that amount.\textsuperscript{299} Several critics framed \textit{Oba Koso} as a special cultural, educational, and entertaining event not to be missed, especially considering the makeup of Washington, D.C. Roger Meersman of the \textit{Sentinel} began, “For those thousands of black Washingtonians who yearn to understand, appreciate and investigate their African heritage a visit to Arena Stage this week is a must. And

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{294} Catherine M. Cole, “\textit{When Is African Theater ‘Black,’?” in \textit{Black Cultural Traffic}, 45.
\bibitem{295} “Famed Nigerian Dance and Theater Company at Arena Stage,” December 20, 1974, box 2, fol. 20, Arena Stage Production Correspondence.
\bibitem{296} Marx C. Sterne, Mary Ellen Hines, Eleanor Gomberg, and June Jackson, \textit{Arena Stage Associates Callboard}, 3 no. 3 (February 1975), box 17, fol. 1974-75, Arena Stage Printed Materials.
\bibitem{297} Playbill for \textit{Oba Koso}, box 85, fol. 5, Arena Stage Production Notebooks and Programs, GMUL.
\bibitem{298} “3:30 Friday Meeting,” March 7, 1975, box 13, fol. 3, Arena Stage Production Correspondence.
\bibitem{299} “Gross Box Office Income,” box 2, fol. 20, Arena Stage Production Correspondence.
\end{thebibliography}
for those who are not black, a visit will be just as rewarding.”

Critic Richard Lebherz similarly used a black-white understanding:

One leaves the theatre as if one had just paid a long visit to an African museum. For the white man, he may admire the colors, the energy, the drumming skill, and he is quite patient with their almost childish desire to please. To the black, I imagine two things. He experiences a certain uncomfortableness on the other hand, [sic] (setting [sic] there in an elegant tuxedo) and a certain yearning, on the other hand, for a world that was as simple as the one depicted in “Oba Koso.”

Locating the spectator as either a white man or a black man of the upper class, Lebherz posited different perspectives on and the appeals of the alleged cultural primitivism of the opera from a U.S.-centric lens. In the review, he also used the war-driven plot to critique the expenses and warmongering of the Pentagon. His mention of museums and the government were not far from fact. Arena held a benefit performance for the Museum of African Art attended by ambassadors and politicians. The Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Donald Easum, represented Henry Kissinger, who did not attend, and remarked, “Cultural relationships, like our political and economic relationships, are very close with Nigeria, and that’s a particular reason why we are happy to be here,” suggesting recent U.S. oil investments with Nigeria. Oba Koso was a special event that brought a taste of Yoruba culture to critics, diplomats, and D.C. audiences and generated box office income for Arena Stage, foreshadowing future success with these sorts of productions. When planning Oba Koso and Glenda Dickerson’s Jump at the Sun at a meeting in

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1974, Fichandler noted, “There are now 2 works of interest to the black community,” intertwining black artists and audiences.\(^{303}\)

Later that year, the company presented John Kani, Winston Ntshona, and Athol Fugard’s *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* and *The Island* in rotating repertory. *Sizwe Banzi* dramatizes a black South African man’s decision to take up the identity of a dead man whose passbook will grant him work and greater mobility. Based on real events, *The Island* focuses on two inmates passing time by rehearsing *Antigone* within the setting of Robber Island, where anti-apartheid political prisoners were detained, and the knowledge that one inmate will be released very soon. Both plays emerged through collaborations between the actors Kani and Ntshona improvising, with the guidance of playwright-director Fugard. In the context of a non-South African audience, the plays took on a didactic quality of educating attendees about passbooks, Robber Island, and the daily life of black men under apartheid. The advertising meanwhile celebrated the Tony-winning actors and their indomitable “human dignity” and “human spirit.”\(^{304}\) Critics raved about Kani and Ntshona’s affective and effective performances. David Richards of the *Washington Star* concluded, “What the two plays reveal about South Africa is appalling. But what they reveal about men in appalling circumstances is exalting.”\(^{305}\) *Post* critic Richard Coe deemed *Sizwe Banzi* “one of the extraordinary theater experiences of our time … Beyond making South Africa’s apartheid more clear and harrowing than merely reading about it, this collaborative venture uses theater in its most powerful form.”\(^{306}\) When one spectator wrote to Arena’s artistic leadership that she found the play to be “in poor taste” and “most shallow,” Thomas Fichandler

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\(^{303}\) “Staff Meeting,” December 10, 1974, box 13, fol. 1, Arena Stage Printed Materials.


wrote back noting the wide critical praise and popular praise: “Performance after performance, the audience has stood and cheered and more people have thanked us for bringing them this play than almost anything else we have done.” While these critics connected the plays to specific South African politics and to humanist values, others attempted to make connections with African American politics.

According to Douglas Wager, who worked as the stage manager for these productions and would later become artistic director of Arena Stage, Kani and Ntshona “played to a largely African American audience.” He recounted,

I remember sitting in the green room with John Kani and having him excoriate the people. He—he had no time for the African American people who came back stage and tried to identify their experience with his. And he said to me, he said, “We were never slaves.” And he was offended by the fact that American black audiences would try to identify their experience with his because … indigenous cultural and racial strife that is born out of a whole different set of given circumstances is—the only parallel is the struggle. But, you know, here’s John and Winston, who in their passports it said “houseboy to Athol Fugard” because they couldn’t get out of the country without that.

Wager articulates how African American spectators attempted to connect with Kani and Ntshona, and how Kani rejected such connections because African American and black South African experiences are different. While a shared history of imperialism, colonialism, and white supremacy provided the foundation for unequal black-white relations in both the United States and South Africa, these structures subsequently shaped alternate paths. I quote Wager at length.

307 Letter from Linda Platshon to Zelda Fichandler, August 15, 1975; Letter from Thomas Fichandler to Linda Platshon, August 18, 1975, box 99, fol. 2, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
308 Playbill of The Blood Knot, “Perspectives from the Artistic Director,” p. 7, December 11, 1992, box 30, fol. 6, Arena Stage Dramaturgical Files, GMUL.
309 Doug Wager, in discussion with the author, October 2014.
to illustrate another angle of reception of *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island*, different experiences of anti-black racism, and what seems to me a need from African American audiences in Washington, D.C. for black theatre about racial struggle. *Sizwe Bansi* in particular discusses black Americans and black South Africans, meaning that the play to some extent invited comparisons. In the first part of the play, Styles describes Henry Ford, Jr.’s visit to a car plant in South Africa, and how his boss ordered him to instruct the black workers: “Say to them, Styles, that they must try to impress Mr. Henry Ford that they are better than those monkeys in his own country, those niggers in Harlem who know nothing but strike, strike.”

310 Styles relays to the workers, “Gentlemen, he says we must remember, when Mr. Ford walks in, that we are South African monkeys, not American monkeys. South African monkeys are much better trained.” Kani, Ntshona, and Fugard thus comment upon the performance of subservience for whites and characterize African Americans as more defiant than black South Africans. The production also toured to other regional theatres, including the Guthrie, ACT, Seattle Repertory Theatre, and the Mark Taper Forum, suggesting its popularity, accessibility, and felt need. As the President of the League of Resident Theatres, Thomas Fichandler wrote to the South African Embassy and the government of Transkei upon the imprisonment of John Kani and Winston Ntshona in 1976. At a meeting with the Arena board of trustees, he reported “with some satisfaction that partly due to the action of the League of Resident Theatres,” Kani and Ntshona were released from prison. 312 His letter underscores the important relationship between U.S. regional theatres and these artists. Arena was far from unique in its presentation of works from South Africa; however, the differences of location and audience shaped context and reception.

311 Ibid.
312 “Minutes of a Meeting of the Board of Trustees,” October 27, 1976, box 30, fol. 5, Thomas Fichandler Papers.
When Arena regularly produced Fugard’s plays and Washington, D.C. critics regularly praised them, they drew attention to apartheid for a theatergoing audience in the nation’s capital, for diplomats and elites who held sway, and for black residents who made connections with the plays’ racial politics.

In 1984, Arena presented *Woza Albert!* by Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema, and Barney Simon. Like *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island*, *Woza Albert!* dramatized South African apartheid, and like them it toured to New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. Once again, two black actors were working with one white director from the Market Theatre. Post-colonial theatre scholars Brian Crow and Chris Banfield claim that *Woza Albert!* “represents one of the most artistically and commercially successful examples of a by now well-established tradition of making theatre through ‘workshops’ involving the contributions of (usually) black actors and (usually) white director-writers.”313 This dramatic work differed from the Kani-Ntshona-Fugard collaborations, however, in its tone and structure. *Woza Albert!* consists of a set of satirical rapid-fire scenes that imagine what would happen if Morena, or God, visited South Africa. Arena again framed the production as a special event in its mailers, which opened with “Woza Washington! Arise! *Woza Albert!* is here,” and concluded, “Don’t miss this remarkable event.”314 The production was generally well received, although critics had difficulty grasping all of the references. Many reviewers rehashed information from their programs on the history of apartheid and the historical figures that Morena brings back from the dead at the end of the play, suggesting an educational element to the production. Some compared the play to *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island*, putting these South African plays at Arena in conversation with one another. Critic David Richards noted that all three of these works

314 Letter from Richard Bryant to “Associate,” August 17, 1984, box 29, fol. 6, Arena Stage Printed Materials.
came out of collaborative improvisations; “The difference, however, is that Fugard is a playwright (maybe the world’s best right now), and that he molded and fixed what was most pertinent in his actor’s improvisations. No one connected with ‘Woza Albert!’ seems to have his rigorous eye.”

Richards preferred the more linear, coherent narrative, which he attributes to Fugard, an attribution that is not without racial valence. Although the Arena Stage program for *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* cites authorship as “Devised by” Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona, some other publications obscured the black actors’ contributions.

I argue that much of Fugard’s popularity among the U.S. critical establishment has to do with his white identity, liberal politics, and writing in a “western” tradition. In “Athol Fugard and the Problematics of the Liberal Critique,” Jeanne Colleran argues that Fugard’s works were extraordinarily popular among U.S. regional theatres in the 1980s and 1990s because the plays and productions dehistoricize South Africa and advocate liberalism. His aesthetic and politics allowed for an easy mapping of U.S. racial politics, as Wager recounted of some African American spectators, and called for individual freedom rather than radical, collective redistribution of power. The success of Arena Stage’s production of *The Great White Hope* by Howard Sackler in 1967 indicated that racially liberal dramas by white playwrights could achieve success with middlebrow audiences and critics. Russell Vandenbrouke reasons that of Fugard’s works *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* in particular appealed to rather than alienated whites outside of South Africa:

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316 *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* in repertory with *The Island* Program, box 137, fol. 1, Arena Stage Production Notebooks and Programs, GMUL.
317 Consider for example the edited Papers *Township Plays*, whose front cover and title page make it seem as if Fugard was the sole author of not only *No-Good Friday*, *Nongogo*, and *The Coat* but also *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island*. Athol Fugard, *Townships Plays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
In *Sizwe Bansi*, tension between the characters and the audience is minimal; when the white man’s ways and laws are directly attacked, audiences (predominantly white when the play has been performed outside Africa) have not felt personally threatened or castigated. Despite moments of caustic condemnation and unbridled anger, *Sizwe Bansi* is more loving and ingratiating than strident; it embraces man instead of rejecting him … When *Sizwe Bansi* stresses black dignity, solidarity, and pride, it does so without the bitterness and antagonism that characterize many American black plays of the 1960s.\(^{319}\)

White American audiences may not have felt directly implicated in apartheid, despite the racial material inequality and segregation in Washington, D.C. *Sizwe Bansi* fit in with Arena’s repertory, which eschewed radical dramas from the Black Arts Movement. Fugard’s collaborations with Kani and Ntshona employed comedy, sympathetic characters, virtuosic performances, realism, and symbols to dramatize stories of resistance. Influenced by Beckett, Brecht, Camus, and Grotowski, Fugard hailed from a tradition of western drama and had gained legitimacy when his work was produced by the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1973.

Authorized by white patriarchy, Fugard and his plays had the privilege of being interpreted as universal and liberal. Many critics used language that acknowledged the politics of the plays but also their aesthetic transcendence and personal grounding. For example, Morrie and Zachariah in *The Blood Knot* represent both black-white struggle and mutual constitution, as well as Fugard and his brother. In *Truths the Hand Can Touch*, Vandenbrouke argues that “race is only one component of the human condition; the suffering and degradation rife throughout Fugard’s work is, finally, a poetic image of the plight of all men.”\(^{320}\) Race, white supremacy, and specifically apartheid are transposed to symbols for all struggles and “all men,” erasing


\(^{320}\) Ibid., xx.
differences and power dynamics. Indeed, the title of Vandenbrouke’s monograph on Fugard, which comes from a self-reflective quotation by Fugard, suggests that the playwright can locate “Truths” and make them tangible to everyone. Countering Marxist critiques of Fugard, Albert Wertheim similarly asserts in his own book on the playwright, “The reality is that Fugard is a world-class playwright, who often uses the South Africa he knows so intimately as a setting for more universal examinations of human life, human interactions, and the powers of art.”

Fugard himself to some extent encouraged personal but also explicitly political readings of his plays. When he called for an artistic boycott of South Africa, a position that he later retracted, he became a kind of icon of social consciousness. At the same time, as Mel Gussow wrote in an extensive *New Yorker* profile, “he is seldom an activist.” His identity, actions, and art positioned him as a liberal playwright ripe for U.S. regional theatres.

Fugard was frequently produced by non-profit institutions such as the Yale Repertory Theatre. Lloyd Richards, the artistic director of Yale Rep and original director of *A Raisin in the Sun*, took a particular interest in black narratives and would later cultivate the works of August Wilson. In part for personal and political reasons, Fugard’s largely autobiographical play *Master Harold…and the boys* premiered in 1982 at Yale Rep rather than in South Africa as his other plays had done. In the mid-1990s, William Morris Agency and Samuel French received lots of requests from regional theatres to stage Fugard’s plays, requests second only to Edward Albee’s works. The Arena Stage Historical Documents Collection includes three huge folders of published materials on Fugard, which is unique in this archival collection. The hundreds of pages of articles point toward Arena’s, the regional theatres’, and the critical establishment’s intense interest in him. Many of the materials come from *Theater*, the journal published by Yale, again

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323 Jeanne Colleran, “Athol Fugard and the Problematics of the Liberal Critique,” n. 6
indicating the institution’s close ties to Fugard. While *Sizwe Bansi* and *The Island* went on a U.S.
national tour, Fugard’s solo works tended to circulate U.S. institutions via Broadway and
multiple regional theatre productions. Many of these works focus on the effects of apartheid on
noble, complicated, white characters in relation to black characters.

Although Arena Stage did not produce *Master Harold*, the company did produce *A Lesson from Aloes* (1981) and *My Children! My Africa!* (1991). Doug Wager directed the former, starring Zakes Mokae, and he described his admiration for Fugard in an interview with me:

“Fugard was … sort of singularly committed to theatre for cultural change … he was able to
capture—to do what theatre could do, which was to create a safe place for talking about
dangerous things as a poet of the stage.”

*A Lesson from Aloes* centers on Piet, a white bus
driver, who was inspired by Steve, a black man, to join the anti-apartheid movement, and Piet’s
wife Gladys, who struggles with the trauma of a police raid on their house. Piet recounts, “My
first lesson from Steve, and the most important one. An evil system isn’t a natural disaster.
There’s nothing you can do to stop a drought, but bad laws and social injustice are man-made
and can be unmade by men.” This lesson is more radical than the lesson of quiet persistence in
the survival of aloes amidst drought. In *Apartheid and Beyond*, Rita Barnard critiques Fugard’s
celebration of art as individual liberation and reduction of “complicated political realities to
homespun analogies.” But she also argues that the symbol of the aloe plant attends to material
politics of place: “it is a figure of defiant indigeneity and survival, but it also denounces, with its
grotesque thorns, thick leaves, and waxy surfaces, the extreme conditions that have produced

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324 Doug Wager, in discussion with the author, October 2014.
University Press, 2007), 96.
these protective traits.” Fugard took his inspiration from real-life incidents that he recorded in his diary, and Arena Stage reprinted excerpts from his diary in the program, to some extent encouraging spectators to understand the play through personal struggles. Edward Merritt of WAMU Public Radio for instance celebrated Arena’s production of *A Lesson from Aloes* for its “overwhelming argument of individual values and the human spirit” in contrast with “the gross, filthy and self-serving plays of such as Leroi Jones.”

*My Children! My Africa!* takes an even more explicitly didactic approach by dramatizing the relationships and debates between Mr. M, a black teacher, his black student named Thami, and a white student named Isabel in response to a new policy conferring second-tier and whitewashed schooling on black South Africans. Mr. M advocates reform through racial integration and education. Although Thami initially agrees and studies for a trivia competition with Isabel, he comes to critique the limits of his colonized education, and he calls for immediate, violent revolution to counter the inequities of apartheid. Wertheim observes that liberal spectators may too easily applaud Mr. M and therefore themselves, but he argues that the play offers a more complex lesson: “actions and words—can educate and spur reform even as Fugard’s own playwriting can educate and suggest reform through its combination of dialogue and physical action.” Meanwhile, Colleran critiques the play’s liberal “middle position” of “nonalignment” that “reduces active social and ideological conflicts to isolated instances” and questions of moral behavior; moreover, she argues that U.S. productions further dehistoricized specific South African history concerning fights over education. In both *A Lesson from Aloes* and *My Children! My Africa!*, Fugard features highly literate characters who recite English

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327 Ibid., 106.
poetry and who encourage dignified perseverance under systems of oppression, bringing politics to a particularly literary and humanist realm that appealed to U.S. theatre institutions.

In contrast with Fugard, Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka did not achieve popular success on U.S. professional stages. When Soyinka received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, he became the first African artist to be awarded this honor. His play *Death and the King’s Horseman*, his only work to reach Broadway, opened at Lincoln Center the following year for a four-week run. The play was produced by artistic director Gregory Mosher, who had previously staged the U.S. premiere in 1979 at the Goodman Theater in Chicago where he had been the artistic director, as well. *New York Times* critic Frank Rich found the Lincoln Center production “baffling,” even with the immense dramaturgical material in his program, and he concluded by facetiously asking of Mosher, “Is this what’s meant by beating a dead horse?”331 He also critiqued Soyinka’s direction of *A Play of Giants*, which had its world premiere at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1984.332 Grounded in Yoruba traditions such as the griot and explicit anti-colonialist politics, Soyinka’s plays may have been too inaccessible for U.S. audiences. Moreover, Rich’s powerful pronouncements against some of these plays likely contributed to their not gaining a foothold in the network of regional theatres.

Meanwhile, given the liberal political and aesthetic qualities as well as support by the U.S. critical establishment and circulation by multiple major U.S. regional theatres, Fugard’s plays fit Arena’s mandate to produce contemporary, international, left-leaning, non-profit theatre. The most produced playwrights of Arena Stage’s subscription seasons from 1970 to 1991 were Shakespeare, Brecht, Shaw, Beckett, Fugard, Molière, Chekhov, Miller, Durang,

Shepard, Örkény, and Hansberry, in that order, representing a classic and contemporary repertory of mostly western, male writers. Many of the African diaspora plays that Arena staged were adaptations of canonical western works: *The Island* and *Gospel at Colonus* were at least partly adapted from Ancient Greek tragedies. Derek Walcott drew from British and Greek traditions for his productions of *Pantomime* and *The Odyssey*. Mustapha Matura transposed *Playboy of the Western World* and *Three Sisters* to Trinidad. Moreover, Fugard, Walcott, and Matura gained greater recognition when their plays were produced in urban centers by major western institutions.

Derek Walcott has been widely celebrated for his creation and leadership of the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, although he actively sought opportunities and legitimacy beyond the West Indies. Born in St. Lucia, Walcott emerged as a major literary voice, in part with the help of the Rockefeller Foundation, which provided him with substantial funding for his art, travels, and studies. As a result of connections with the Rockefeller Foundation, he networked with major

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Shaw (6 productions) – *Heartbreak House* (75-76), *Saint Joan* (76-77), *Major Barbara* (81-82), *Man and Superman* (84-85), *Heartbreak House* (86-87), *Pygmalion* (90-91)

Beckett (4 productions) – *Jack MacGowran in the Works of Samuel Beckett* (70-71), *Two by Samuel Beckett: Krapp’s Last Tape and Not I* (73-74), *Waiting for Godot* (75-76), *Play/That Time/Footfalls* (76-77)

Fugard (4 productions) – *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* (74-75), *A Lesson from Aloes* (81-82), *My Children! My Africa!* (90-91)

Molière (4 productions) – *Tricks* (based on Scapin, 71-72), *Don Juan* (78-79), *The Imaginary Invalid* (82-83), *Tartuffe* (84-85)

Chekhov (3 productions) – *The Three Sisters* (83-84), *The Cherry Orchard* (87-88), *The Seagull* (90-91)

Durang (3 productions) – *A History of the American Film* (76-77), *Beyond Therapy* (83-84), *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* (86-87)


Miller (3 productions) – *Death of a Salesman* (74-75, 75-76), *After the Fall* (79-80), *The Crucible* (86-87)

Örkény (3 productions) – *The Tot Family* (75-76), *Catapult* (76-77), *Screenplay* (82-83)

Shepard (3 productions) – *Curse of the Starving Class* (78-79), *Buried Child* (82-83), *A Lie of the Mind* (88-89)

Nearly all of these were main-stage productions.
regional theatre directors and companies including Tyrone Guthrie and Andre Gregory.

Influenced by West Indian culture and the European traditions of Brecht, Artaud, Shakespeare, and the Abbey Theatre, Walcott penned intercultural dramas that appealed to local and global audiences. Plays such as *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, *The Charlatan*, and *Ti-Jean* were developed and produced by institutions such as the O’Neill Playwriting Center, the Mark Taper Forum, and the Public Theater, respectively. This popularity, however, had a drawback because Walcott found U.S. actors and audiences lacking in an understanding of West Indian culture that, in its stead, was replaced by a lens of African American aesthetics and politics. Stressing both specific cultural setting and general humanistic resonance, he and his plays were reminiscent of Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona.

In 1981, Arena Stage produced Walcott’s *Pantomime*, a two-hander about a white hotel proprietor and a black servant and their collaboration on a racially-themed pantomime based on the story of Robinson Crusoe. According to Bruce King, Walcott was inspired by an encounter with Arthur Bentley, a British actor who managed a hotel in Tobago: “As Walcott listened to the banter between Bentley and one of his employees the idea for the play came to him. Although the situation involved a white English hotel manager and a local black employee, there was an equality in the exchange of repartee that dissolved the racial, class, and economic differences. This was Walcott’s idea of the Caribbean.” In the program for the original production of *Pantomime*, Walcott said the play “is about two actors, and their different racial and cultural origins, creating whatever conflicts exist from their different approach to the theatre, its ritual, its meaning, its style,” and “It may also be a political play, with its subject independence; but that

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process first has to be human before it can become political.” Playing upon the racialized master-slave dialectic, *Pantomime* suggests liberal notions of equality and humanity appealing to Arena Stage’s audiences. The program for the company’s production provided a history of the pantomime form, thereby framing the play as one about theatre rather than post-colonial politics. Local critics had a tepid response to the play, although they gave high praise to Avery Brooks, who played the black servant. Still, James Lardner of the *Washington Post* cheered Arena Stage for continuing its productions of contemporary global drama: “It’s not every day of the theatrical week that you get to see a play from Trinidad … Arena should be saluted for this latest evidence of an internationalist spirit that has already given us a Russian play (‘The Suicide’) and a French play (‘Kean’) this season.” Arena did not produce another drama by Walcott, *The Odyssey*, until the early 1990s, by which point the theatre had begun a concerted effort to include black artists and audiences.

**Building a Black Base**

The 1987-88 season marked a turning point in Arena Stage’s programming toward black drama. The theatre produced an unprecedented three plays written and directed by African Americans: *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* written by August Wilson and directed by Lloyd Richards, *Les Blancs* written by Lorraine Hansberry and directed by Harold Scott, and *Checkmates* written by Ron Milner and directed by Woodie King, Jr. At the same time, Arena initiated outreach programs to develop black audiences and to recruit and retain black staff members. At least twenty years earlier, Fichandler had expounded upon the racial discrepancy between Arena Stage and Washington, D.C. As I discussed in Chapter One, Fichandler made a

335 Quoted in Ibid.
case for the training and casting of black actors in the company’s resident ensemble, and she received significant foundation funding to implement these programs in the late 1960s. Critics, audiences, foundations, and government agencies, however, were not interested in sustaining the racially integrated company. By the start of the 1990s when Zelda Fichandler handed the artistic directorship to Doug Wager, the theatre was on course for institutionalized cultural diversity.

Meeting minutes, letters, and reports reveal that Arena’s artistic leadership was regularly concerned about the dearth of African Americans among the theatre’s staff, trustees, patrons, and plays. In 1972, the top staff members met “to talk over the problem of employing minorities at Arena Stage – blacks specifically but also other minority groups.”\(^{337}\) One attendee declared, “Arena Stage is too white an organization. We should have more blacks in the technical area and in the company. We will have one black in the shop and, hopefully, 3 in the company this coming season but we should have more.”\(^{338}\) Another stressed the importance of retaining the people of color currently on staff and named three people, implying that the additional 150 or so non-acting employees of Arena Stage were likely white.\(^{339}\) To begin to address and redress racial inequality in hiring, staff members planned to reach out to historically black colleges with theatre departments and to young people of color in the company’s production intern program. In the Arena Stage Archives, an article pointing out a disturbing trend in Americans thinking that black people are better off than white people despite rampant inequality was placed right behind these meeting minutes, suggesting that the company’s leadership supported active recruitment and employment of African Americans and understood the larger structural barriers due in part to

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\(^{337}\) “Mini-Staff Meeting,” August 25, 1972, box 13, fol. 1, Arena Stage Production Correspondence.

\(^{338}\) Ibid.

\(^{339}\) My estimate of 150 is based upon a table with information about the 1981-82 season, which lists fifty eight full-time and one hundred and thirty four part-time employees, “Number of Administrative and Non-Acting Artistic Employees,” box 3, fol. 2, Zelda Fichandler Papers, GMUL.
white supremacy.\textsuperscript{340} In a letter to Thomas Fichandler, Alan Schneider, and Hugh Lester, Zelda wrote, “It is really astounding to be behind radio stations, newspapers, and other employments without half so large a (professed) concern for the general welfare.”\textsuperscript{341} Here she is indicting her own organization for its “(professed) concern” for African Americans in contrast with its disproportionately white staff.

In the 1970s, Arena Stage also confronted the whiteness of its board of trustees, but in ways that sometimes disavowed responsibility and stressed finances rather than social justice. On April 14, 1977, the board of trustees began its meeting by announcing possible collaborations with the Negro Ensemble Company and then ended by discussing Arena’s racial politics, which merits a long block quotation to unpack different attitudes and strategies:

Mr. Cohn noted that there is a large black community to be drawn on if some way can be found to break down the image of Arena as a white man’s theater. Mr. Fichandler said the theater is continually on the lookout for good black plays but there just aren’t many to be found. Mr. Clark suggested greater involvement with the black community. Mr. Hayes concurred, saying there aren’t enough blacks and not enough women on the Board. Mr. Fichandler called the Board’s attention to the fact that a few years ago Arena made a valiant effort to integrate the company. The result, he said, was discouraging—“the blacks didn’t come and the whites stayed away.” Mr. Convisser cautioned against impatience. The problem of attracting blacks will be extremely difficult, he said. We tried in the past and made the mistake of having only one or two at any one time. If we are to succeed now we should avoid tokenism and make sure there are several on the Board at

\textsuperscript{341} Letter from Zelda Fichandler to Thomas Fichandler, Alan Schneider, and Hugh Lester, circa 1973, box 196, fol. 1, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
the same time. Mr. Hayes suggested that if the Board is looking for greater Government support in the future, it would do well to note the composition of the congressional committees for D.C. on the Hill and move towards a more balanced Board and more black representation.  

Cohn articulates the problem as one of “image” rather than artistic programming, economic inequality, or white supremacy. Thomas Fichandler repeatedly defends Arena by noting its attempts to produce black plays and integrate the acting ensemble, but his judgment that there are few “good black plays” suggests a limited categorization that includes artists such as Lorraine Hansberry but not Langston Hughes, Alice Childress, and Ntozake Shange. The Zelda Fichandler Papers includes *Black Theater: A Resource Directory*, published by the Black Theatre Alliance in 1973, and its pages listing black theatre companies, directors, playwrights, plays, administrators, and technicians suggest that at least Zelda was aware of the larger field of black theatre. Hayes argues that there are too few blacks and women on the board of trustees, showing an attention to racial and gender inequality. This dearth of diversity may have been in part because people of color and women were perceived as not having, and to some extent truly did not have, significant wealth and connections to potential donors. Convisser adds that the board must avoid tokenism and instead recruit several black members. However, he also identifies the “problem” as one of attracting blacks, just as Thomas Fichandler sees the dearth of “good black plays” as a problem, rather than a structural problem of white supremacy intersected with capitalism. This rhetorical maneuver occurs repeatedly in meeting minutes about race.

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342 “Minutes of a Meeting of the Board of Trustees,” April 14, 1977, p. 3, box 30, fol. 5, Thomas Fichandler Papers.
audiences, and artists well into the late 1980s. Finally, Hayes concurs because Washington, D.C. governance consists mostly of African Americans, and he reasons that having a “more balanced Board” with regard to racial representation could lead to more grants from the bodies on which local representatives serve.

But Arena’s largest concern was audiences. In 1978 and 1980, Thomas O’Connor, director of public relations, conducted surveys to determine the makeup of the theatre’s audiences. One-third worked in government, one-third worked in a non-government professional capacity, and three-quarters had at least some graduate education. The quality that most appealed to spectators was Arena’s “variety of plays and styles,” indicating that eclecticism was a value if not a marker of distinction for this theatre company. In 1985, the institution hired a professional consultant to research Arena’s audiences. The report summarized: “Most people who have been to the Arena in the last year are white (93%), earn over $50,000 a year (51%) and have a graduate or professional degree (61%). They are more likely than most Washingtonians to be government employees (41%) and to have lived in the area for more than five years (86%).” The theatre’s audience was highly privileged. To my knowledge, this survey was the first time that Arena’s patrons were asked to identify their race, meaning that, by the mid-80s, it was worthwhile for the institution to ask instead of assuming total whiteness and to have these numbers ready when planning seasons and applying for grants.

On the one hand, Arena Stage attempted to portray its patrons as diverse. “The Arena Stage Story,” written in 1976, describes “A Profile of Arena’s Audience” as “largely upper

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344 See for example the meeting minutes for Washington, D.C. theatre leaders discussing the Non-Traditional Casting Project and concluding “the problem is a lack of minority participation in theater in Washington.” “Minutes of the Meeting – Non-Traditional Casting Project,” March 30, 1987, box 5, fol. 1, Arena Stage Printed Materials.


347 Abramson Research, Attitudes of the Arena Stage Audience, 1984-85, p. 5, box 17, fol. 3 Thomas Fichandler Papers.
middle-class, white, in the 18-60-year-old [sic] range.” Immediately afterward, the profile asserts, “Black support and attendance is increasing significantly. In 1975 and 1976, the Council of the District of Columbia and the Office of the Mayor issued proclamations and resolutions ‘calling upon all of our citizens to join in expressing appreciation to this excellent theatrical company for its role in giving vitality to the artistic life of our Nation’s Capital.’” By pointing to local officials, the narrative highlights approval from black institutions.

On the other hand, Zelda Fichandler was fairly straightforward about the lack of audience diversity. At a meeting with the artistic directors of ACT, the Guthrie, and the Mark Taper Forum in 1974, Fichandler first discussed her homogenized audience versus the demographics of Washington, D.C., a point that she has repeated for decades. She remarked bluntly, “Except for the times when we do black plays, we play to a suburban audience,” meaning whites. She added, “We found that when we did ‘The Great White Hope’ ‘Raisin’ No Place to Be Somebody’, [sic] in varying degrees we had a large black audience depending upon what part of their lives we were hitting them. For ‘No Place’ we had about a 90% black audience. ‘Raisin’ had a 75% black Audience. [sic] ‘The Great White Hope’ had a 50% black audience.” She argues that staging more stories about black people brought more black spectators, from African American playwright Charles Gordone’s dramatization of working class people to the deradicalized musicalization of *A Raisin in the Sun* to white playwright Howard Sackler’s liberal portrayal of Jack Johnson. Fichandler’s numbers do not quite add up, but they underscore the notion that black actors on stage attracted black patrons in the audience because the latter desired

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349 Ibid.
351 Ibid, p. 20.
representations of themselves. She seemed uniquely concerned about audience racial
dynamics, while the other artistic directors spoke mostly of the difficulties balancing their
budgets. Thinking of the D.C. Black Repertory, Fichandler insisted that black-led and black-
funded institutions should produce African American plays and raise money from a growing
black bourgeois audience.

The D.C. Black Rep closed only four years later, at which point Arena’s staff meeting
minutes reveal another round of discussing the need to produce black plays to draw black
spectators. On May 4, 1979, Edith Cohen, who was in charge of group ticket sales, repeatedly
brought up “that there should be a steady program of presenting black plays in order for Arena to
develop a solid black audience.” Others said that the institution had been attempting to recruit
black audiences for years, a “frustrating goal,” and pointed to the Negro Ensemble Company’s
_Nevis Mountain Dew_, which was then currently running, but had “drawn disappointingly from
the black community.” Two weeks later, Cohen argued “that we must make a firm
commitment to develop local black audiences,” by inviting the Negro Ensemble Company back
to Arena. Another staff member “insisted that we need to develop black audiences to come
and see ‘plays,’ not exclusively ‘black plays,’” while Thomas Fichandler “countered that the
Arena, historically, has never drawn a black audience without a black play.” This definitive
statement by Fichandler, who had been executive director for nearly three decades by this point,
reasserts the conviction that only plays about black experiences would appeal to black spectators.
Benny Sato Ambush, an African American director, said “that the Arena is, to Washington black

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352 In the stage manager’s reports, I identified only one comment racializing the audience during the run of _No Place to Be Somebody_: “Good performance. Audience was more black than we’re used to.” “Stage Manager’s Report,” July 4, 1970, box 5, fol. 34, Arena Stage Stage Manager’s Reports, GMUL.
353 “Summary of Conference of Four Resident Professional Theatres,” p. 15.
354 “Friday Meeting,” May 4, 1979, box 13, fol. 4, Arena Stage Printed Materials.
355 Ibid.
356 “Weekly Staff Meeting,” May 18, 1979, box 13, fol. 4, Arena Stage Printed Materials.
357 Ibid.
residents, a white institution,” and recommended “that blacks must be ‘baited’ to attend shows here, then that their interest be prolonged and encouraged by the Arena’s interest in having them become a part of the organization.”358 These meeting minutes illustrate a discursive struggle over black audiences—what will attract them, what will keep them at Arena, how the institution has attempted to reach such audiences historically, and to what extent Arena truly is and/or appears to be white. The staff members repeatedly use a logic that plays with black characters and actors will attract black spectators who would hopefully become subscribers to the rest of the season. Ambush’s notion of sustained commitment, however, would not be carried out until the late 1980s. Perhaps little was done immediately to address these concerns on a systemic level because Zelda Fichandler took another sabbatical from 1978 to 1980. Director David Chambers led the company, and his programming largely followed Fichandler’s tastes.

In 1979, Ambush sent proposals to Fichandler and Chambers about creating an affiliated black theatre company that would produce black plays by black writers, acted by black performers, and staged for black audiences with himself as the artistic director. He proposed a repertory based on rarely produced pre-World War II drama, such as the plays of Angelina Grimké, and of works produced by the Federal Theatre Project. The latter suggestion was because an abundance of FTP materials had been recently discovered and deposited at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, where Arena Stage’s archives are also held. Ambush repeatedly used diction such as “I hold Arena’s public image at its word,” pointing out Arena’s alleged commitment to the Washington, D.C. community and relative neglect of black people as artists and audiences.359 Part of his proposal included a list of the 260 productions that Arena had produced and presented so far, and he circled the seven plays that he considered black: The

358 Ibid.
359 Letter from Benny Sato Ambush to David Chambers, February 14, 1979, p. 4, box 1, fol. 5, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
Great White Hope, The Blood Knot, No Place to Be Somebody, The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window, Raisin, Sizwe Bansi Is Dead, and The Island. He also mobilized statistics to show the importance of local black residents:

Washington, D.C., in population the 12th largest city in America with 711,518 residents (1975 U.S. government census report), boasts a black percentage of that population of 71.1%. … That same percentage holds true for the D.C. metropolitan area … Yet, on any given performance night of any play on any stage here at Arena, one can count the number of black audience members on one’s hands and most often have fingers to spare. The Southwest D.C. area is largely inhabited by blacks who almost never so much as cross the street to participate in theatre at Arena Stage.360

According to Arena’s audience surveys in the late 1970s, most of the theatre’s patrons came from the suburbs of Virginia and Maryland.

At this point, it becomes imperative to historicize the majority black population in Washington, D.C. to contextualize Arena’s interest in cultivating a black audience. The city has long been a center in the black public sphere. In 1867, Congress approved the foundation of Howard University specifically to educate freed slaves. The city’s location, educational opportunities, and federal jobs attracted working-class and middle-class African Americans during the Great Migration. The postal service integrated soon after the Civil War ended. African Americans also obtained posts such as ambassadorships to Haiti and supervisory roles in the federal government, until Woodrow Wilson replaced them with whites and segregated government offices in the 1910s. According to sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, writing in the mid-1950s,

360 Ibid., p. 3-4.
Because of its relatively large Negro professional class, including teachers in the segregated public school system, doctors, dentists, and lawyers, and large numbers of Negroes employed in the federal government, Negroes in the nation’s capital had incomes far above those in other parts of the country. This enabled Washington’s “colored society” to engage in forms of consumption and entertainment that established its pre-eminence among American Negroes.

In *Black Bourgeoisie*, Frazier oversimplifies his object of study, which he argues disavowed “authentic” black culture, by which he means folk culture, in favor of hegemonic white culture, and has little to no power. He did not foresee the power of the black middle class in the Civil Rights Movement. Still, some of his observations concerning the black bourgeoisie in Washington, D.C. are useful. Although Harlem claimed the title of center of African American culture in the 1920s, Soyica Diggs Colbert reminds us that the nation’s capital “was the locale for drama” thanks to Georgia Douglas Johnson, who held salons with black playwrights and intellectuals. These artists, however, did not receive frequent professional productions then or now.

Washington, D.C. became a majority black city in the late 1950s. In 1967, after nearly a century without substantial local governance in part due to anti-black racism, Lyndon B. Johnson appointed Walter Washington as Mayor-Commissioner. The city gained home rule, meaning an elected mayor and city council, in 1973. Washington, the first appointed and then elected black mayor of a major city, made Washington, D.C. known as what singer George Clinton called a “Chocolate City.” This representation was more symbol than substance, given that local

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politicians still had little power to govern the district, and white and black middle class flight to the suburbs left a reduced tax base for funding public services such as education. As Mark Anthony Neal notes, “Like the mass migrants of the early twentieth century, black middle-class people in the late 1960s and 1970s were driven by aspirations to improve their quality of life, often at the risk of hurting communal and familial relations.” Nealy also points to the larger change in U.S. economic structure from an industry-based to a service-based economy. As a result, manufacturing-centered cities and their African American male workforce were left behind. Washington, D.C. was an exception in this case. Because the nation’s capital had never been a major manufacturing hub and instead had a local economy based on the federal government, this economic shift did not have as large a local impact. In addition, middle class African Americans typically moved to Maryland but stayed within the metropolitan area. Thus, while Neal points to fractures in the black public sphere, Natalie Hopkinson notes new and continuing traditions within the District of Columbia. In *Go-Go Live: The Musical Life and Death of a Chocolate City*, she traces the black music, dance, and fashion culture of go-go, a style unique to Washington, D.C., and its rise in the 1970s.

In addition, new immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean came to Washington, D.C. Immigration reform in 1965 abolished previous quotas and exclusions of African and Asian peoples. As a result of independence movements in the late 1950s through the 1960s, embassies for new African nations appeared in the U.S. capital. According to Bereket H. Selassie, “an increasing number of students, scholars, embassy staff, and employees of such international organizations as the World Bank came to Washington, setting the stage for the arrival of more

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African-born immigrants who, in the 1970s and 1980s, built on established networks of compatriots to create new communities.³⁶⁵ For decades, the D.C. metro area has had one of the highest concentrations of African immigrants in U.S. cities, and many are refugees from the Eritrean-Ethiopian War from 1961 to 1991.³⁶⁶ Keith Q. Warner points out that students from Jamaica, Trinidad, and Tobago arrived in Washington, D.C. in the mid-twentieth century because of their own independence movements, and because they were drawn to Howard University.³⁶⁷ The economic downturn in Caribbean nations in the 1970s through 1980s prompted more working-class people to immigrate to the U.S. Although U.S. Americans tend to translate “black” to “African American,” it is important that black residents in Washington, D.C. came from different places, histories, and class positions. By the late 80s, Arena Stage became more attentive to specific racial-national differences and actively sought to change the culture of the institution. As Doug Wager noted, “because of the embassy world and the ambassador world, there was a lot of interest in international work. And Zelda knew that from the get-go, and part of the reason [Arena Stage] succeeded earlier on, and [was] sort of looking at that kind of work in a way that no other theatre in the country was looking at, was because we were in D.C.”³⁶⁸

Arena Stage launched several initiatives within and beyond the theatre to cultivate a more racially diverse clime. The fact that such explicit recognition and adaptation took so long is indicative of institutional inertia, if not active resistance to social change. In 1986, the administration sent a memo to all staff members requiring job postings to include the equal opportunity clause, go through offices to insure compliance, and be distributed to local

The staff also underwent cultural diversity training to become more sensitive to and knowledgeable of cultural differences, training that some resented, while others appreciated the inclusive gesture. Realizing that memos and exercises were not enough to create a more diverse and welcoming institution, some staff members initiated a Cultural Diversity Committee. The Committee hired a sociologist of race studies for guidance on facilitating a more inclusive atmosphere. They researched minority recruitment procedures in order to draft their own set of best practices and pinpointed a need for “a well-worded mandate to our staff in order to change the attitude that there are no qualified and interested minority candidates out there.” They also produced an in-house publication entitled *The Arena Arrow* that sought to educate staff members about histories of people of color in the United States and personal anecdotes of perseverance and micro-aggressions that staff of color had experienced. The theatre also began to celebrate Black History Month in February 1987 with staged readings of plays by African American authors, symposia on African diaspora dramas and influences, and lobby displays of African/American art. In addition, the theatre formed an Outreach Advisory Committee consisting of several people of color from important local institutions such as the Smithsonian.

These outreach initiatives complemented more racially diverse programming on stage. An in-house document entitled “Arena Stage: 1987-88, Toward Cultural Diversity” attempted to soften the transition and define “cultural diversity” broadly: “In the past we have looked into and through the eyes of European and Russian culture. Today we turn to the cultures present within our own country and community. Not to limit our field of vision but to enlarge it. We do not give

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370 “Cultural Diversity Committee Meeting,” March 6, 1989, box 5, fol. 1, Arena Stage Printed Materials.
up the vision of Chekhov when we welcome the vision of August Wilson.” For the 1987-88 season, Arena produced and presented *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, *Les Blancs*, and *Checkmates*, each by African American artists. August Wilson’s play had premiered at Yale Rep before moving to Arena, other regional theatres, and then Broadway, a path that became typical for his Pittsburgh cycle. *Les Blancs* built upon Arena’s previous engagement with Hansberry’s work and productions of plays that engaged with colonialism and imperialism. As part of the Stage Four series for developing and producing new work, *Checkmates* attracted significant ticket sales, donations, and attention from the black media, particularly with the help of its star, Ruby Dee. Meeting minutes suggest that this trio of productions began to build consistent African American audiences. Arena’s archival file on cultural diversity includes *A Basic Guide to Audience Diversity*, developed by the Virginia Commission for the Arts in 1988. The document offers strategies on marketing to black audiences in Virginia, and this particular copy shows ideas for developing an advisory committee and marketing to black churches underlined, tactics that Arena put into action. The following season, the theatre brought in *Abyssinia*, a musical set in an all-black town in Oklahoma in the early twentieth century, about a musically gifted woman who undergoes Job-like trials. The musical came from the Goodspeed Opera House in Connecticut and was directed by Tazewell Thompson, who would become actively involved with Arena Stage.

In 1988, Thompson directed *Playboy of the West Indies* by Mustapha Matura, a production that prompted much discussion about Arena’s new commitment to black work. The theatre coordinated with local Caribbean institutions to give the production more dramaturgical authenticity and reach out to new audiences. For example, Arena hired Von Martin, the host of

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the local radio show *Caribbeana* to help the actors with Trinidadian dialects and show them items such as 1940s Caribbean newspapers from his personal collection. In addition, the Embassy of Trinidad and Tobago hosted a reception with Matura and Arena Stage’s artistic leaders. Black newspapers including the *Washington Afro-American*, *Washington Informer*, and *Caribbean Sun* covered this special event. Furthermore, the theatre used different marketing techniques by obtaining from the Embassy a mailing list of local Trinidadians and by sending flyers to Caribbean restaurants, stores, and lawyers. Coverage from the *Washington Post* described these initiatives as well as criticisms of the theatre company. In “Arena’s Other Worlds On Stage,” Elizabeth Kastor reported that one of the institution’s Outreach Committee members, Stella Gomes, the assistant director for education of homeless children in the nation’s capital, indicted the theatre for doing “too little, too late” and for presenting a play set in a rum shop because of the potential to reify Caribbean stereotypes of drunkenness.\(^{373}\) Another Committee member, James Early, the Smithsonian deputy assistant secretary for public service, however, maintained that Arena’s leaders “are beyond the stage of rhetoric. They are actually implementing many of the ideas.”\(^{374}\) Director Tazewell Thompson recounted that, after a performance, a Trinidadian woman said to him, “I can’t believe someone is doing a play set in the West Indies. I’ve been here a long time and never seen anything like this. It’s very important that my children know what it was like to grow up there.”\(^{375}\) She had brought her parents to the production, and her mother was in tears.

The local critics praised the play for not only its representation of cultural diversity but also its comedy and impressive Caribbean transposition of *Playboy of the Western World*. Like

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\(^{374}\) Ibid.

\(^{375}\) Ibid.
most of the reviewers preoccupied with issues of adaptation and exoticizing the Caribbean, David Richards of the *Washington Post* called the play “Synge-song,” remarking upon the “cinnamon-flavored English patois.” Critic Bob Mondello meditated on the production’s relation to Arena’s history with black actors and plays and continuing movement toward cultural diversity: “the play is a near perfect reflection of Arena’s strategy for reaching D.C.’s huge, largely untapped black audience. Its appeal is obvious: This *Playboy* has an all-black cast, is based on a modern classic, and (having premiered just a few years ago in London) is practically brand new, which means Arena can use it to fulfill three different mandates at once.”

As Mondello argues, Mustapha Matura and his work were well positioned for Arena Stage’s mission. The theatre had produced a monologue he penned, *Nice*, in 1980, and then reached out to his agent again years later. Matura was born in Trinidad and, like Walcott, had gained prominence and legitimacy when his work was produced in London. His adaptation of Synge’s play came about when he won a playwriting grant from the UK Arts Council, suggesting again an interest in funding intercultural productions based on the western canon. *Playboy of the West Indies* subsequently premiered at the Tricycle Theatre. Matura soon began a similar treatment of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* called *Trinidad Sisters*, which had its U.S. premiere at Arena Stage in 1992. The theatre then commissioned him to write an original play, *A Small World*, about Caribbean-Americans, which debuted in 1994. Preferring to call *Playboy* a “translation” rather than an “adaptation” because he believed that he did not stray far from the original text, Matura still noted his allusion to escaped slaves and “a black Americanness” in the

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In an e-mail exchange with me in 2014, Matura sounded much less rosy. He recounted, “My experience working at Arena was non engaging, there was no meeting of [m]inds, was like a big factory assemble [sic] line,” and he suspected that “black plays were done to meet some political agenda.” Playboy does appear to have been quite successful in drawing black audiences and drawing attention to Arena’s outreach and programming initiatives. According to Zelda Fichandler, African diaspora works at Arena from 1987-1989 “brought in third world and primarily black audiences; several of these productions played to 95% capacity.”

Letters from Arena’s patrons illustrate the stage as a site of struggle over politics, representations, and the ideal spectator. Most of the letters in the archive skew toward objections rather than approval, often with regard to the (male) nudity and explicit language in productions. In addition, Zelda Fichandler received complaints about “the anti-war, anti-establishment theme” as her repertory became increasingly leftist from the 1960s onward. During the 1970s and 80s when Arena presented and produced more black works, the theatre had to negotiate racial hierarchy through old and typically white audiences who wanted less, and new typically black audiences who wanted more. One patron mailed back the 1988-89 season subscription mailer having crossed out The Piano Lesson and written in the margin, “Dear Madam Fichandler, please no more than one play by black authors!!” Another patron remarked that Lorraine Hansberry’s work should be “left on the cutting room floor,” and he insisted that many of his colleagues

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380 E-mail October 9, 2014.
381 Zelda Fichandler, “Remarks by Zelda Fichandler at Ford Foundation,” February 8, 1989, p. 11, box 37, fol. 9, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
382 Letter from Joseph C. Dixon to Frank Kirby, February 8, 1971, box 37, fol. 2, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
383 “Life Shouldn’t Be All Work and No Plays,” Arena Stage Subscription Mailer, 1988, box 93, fol. 1, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
agreed that Arena should avoid “evenings of editorials.” On the other hand, another patron had subscribed to the theatre with “the understanding that there would be at least three play [sic] with Afro-American themes,” but when *The Piano Lesson* ultimately was not included in the 1988-89 season, the patron canceled the subscription. A few self-identified black patrons wrote to Arena’s artistic leadership objecting to the inclusion of Randy Newman’s song “Keeping the Niggers Down” in the theatre’s production of *All the King’s Men* in 1987 because, to them, the song replicated anti-black racism and was dramatically unnecessary. One patron congratulated the company on presenting *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and added, “As a black person, if you can integrate a play or two like this in your season, I would again become a regular subscriber.” This patron wrote on stationery from the law school of the Catholic University of America, suggesting that Arena was tapping into the black bourgeoisie market.

Arena’s commitment to the local black community was in part driven by social conscience but also economies of theatre, a combination of a need for economic capital intersected with symbolic and cultural capital. After the company’s tour to the U.S.S.R. and production of the musical *Raisin* in 1973, the institution had more than 16,000 subscribers and filled approximately 90% of the seating capacity. By 1980, however, the theatre had begun to lose subscribers and fill only 77% of its houses. Meeting minutes with staff during the 1980s include panicked notes about cuts to the NEA by the Reagan administration. Minutes with the board of trustees reveal deep anxieties about cost-saving measures, fund-raising activities, and artistic decisions guided by limited budgets. Furthermore, when new professional theatres such

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386 Letter from Jewell Robinson to Douglas Wager, November 2, 1987; Letter from Emma S. Harrison and Oscar J. Harrison to Zelda Fichandler, November 4, 1987, box 93, fol. 1, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
387 Letter from Leroy D. Clark to Persons, n.d., box 93, fol. 1, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
as the Studio Theatre and Wooly Mammoth Theatre Company emerged in 1978 and 1980, respectively, Arena faced increased competition.

Zelda Fichandler also received less support for her interests in Soviet culture and exchange as the Cold War was cooling down. In the late 1980s, Arena attempted another tour to the U.S.S.R. in which Arena would perform *The Crucible* and, in turn, the Taganka Theatre would come to Washington, D.C. to perform *The Master and Margarita* and *Vladimir Vysotsky*. Elspeth Udvarhelyi, Arena’s director of development, wrote to David O. Maxwell of Fannie Mae, “The USIA has designated the Arena-Taganka exchange as ‘part of the official program of cultural exchange between the US and the USSR.’ This doesn’t mean whole lot as there is no money attached to it. But, it might impress someone.”

This tour never materialized because neither the Department of State nor major corporations such as American Express nor major philanthropists such as George Soros were willing to fund Arena. Perhaps in this era of glasnost, perestroika, and the brink of the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Department of State found cultural exchanges to be less urgent than they were fifteen years prior.

Making a commitment to African diaspora drama and audiences may have been a financial, ethical, and cultural solution to address the theatre’s increasing expenses and to capitalize upon an under-tapped market. In remarks to the Finance Committee in 1987, Zelda Fichandler asserted,

> There is a strong sense, and it is justifiable, that we are inadequately addressing the interests of the black community… At bottom, it’s a question not of public relations or of box office, but of exchanging energies between an art institution and its community in the

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389 Letter from Elspeth Udvarhelyi to David O. Maxwell, November 9, 1988, box. 7, fol. 1, Thomas Fichandler Papers.
interest of both becoming more fully alive. Black playwrights can deepen Arena’s aesthetic and sense of reality even as they broaden its audience base.\footnote{Zelda Fichandler, “Remarks to the Finance Committee,” February 25, 1987, p. 4, box 8, fol. 1, Thomas Fichandler Papers.}

She frames Arena’s reenergized dedication to black Americans in humanist terms, “community,” “aesthetic,” and “fully alive,” instead of the practicality of “public relations” and “box office.” At the same time, however, she ultimately links black artists and residents to “audience base,” and she is after all addressing the Finance Committee. The “non-profit” values of engaging with “the black community” can help to accrue ticket sales as well as to “deepen” the cultural productions. By dedicating itself to black producers and consumers, Arena Stage could apply for diversity-driven grants and raise more income.

During the 1988-89 season, the theatre’s leadership and development office rallied for funding to develop sustained programs for producing, attracting, and employing people of color. They approached organizations that had previously sponsored Arena’s cultural endeavors including the Ford Foundation, the NEA, the Hitachi Foundation, and the Lila Wallace Reader’s Digest Fund. Hitachi, a Japanese conglomerate, had helped to fund Tadashi Suzuki’s Tale of Lear at Arena, while Lila Wallace had supported new play development. Addressing the Ford Foundation, Fichandler began her speech by citing studies of racial inequality and projected demographics for racial minorities. Her personal files among the Zelda Fichandler Papers include hundreds of newspaper articles about racial disparities across fields such as media representation, employment, and education. She also underscored Washington, D.C. census data of 70% of residents being black, a statistic that is brought up repeatedly across funding proposals. These citations illustrated a “cultural apartheid,” the gap between white institutions and the world beyond these institutions, and the urgent need to bridge this gap, “if not out of
conscience, compassion, and good citizenship, then for reasons of economic survival and the very perpetuation of these institutions.” According to Doug Wager, the idea of “the cultural diversity grant, was to take a step that was genuine and that was not missionary culture, that was clearly embedded in the whole notion of affirmative action.”

Arena Stage’s proposal called for $1 million to fund employment and artistic endeavors: a fellowship program to train young artists and administrators of color, a coordinator to recruit young people and to run this program, an artistic associate of color, large-scale productions of classic works with casts or color and of new works by writers of color, and collective training for the resident acting ensemble.

The proposals shared a particular narrative to distinguish Arena Stage. They emphasized the theatre’s long history of reaching out to African Americans, beginning with the racially integrated acting ensemble in the late 1960s. This history then jumps to the mid-1980s, not acknowledging the African, Caribbean, and African American works between these periods. This erasure suggests that the artistic leaders viewed these productions as not part of a thread of U.S. cultural diversity and Arena’s identity, in part because many of them were touring presentations or plays that had premiered elsewhere. The narrative then locates the shift to cultural diversity in 1984 when Fichandler began to chair the graduate acting program at NYU. She noticed that few students of color applied to, were accepted to, and thrived in the program, and she investigated the underlying problems rooted in racial hierarchy. Arena Stage subsequently produced and presented *Joe Turner, Les Blancs, Checkmates, Abyssinia*, and *Playboy*, five works by and/or about black people, within two seasons. In addition, the institution had enacted initiatives such as active recruitment of people of color. Finally, the proposals illustrated a complex understanding of institutional racism.

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391 Ibid., p. 6, 3.
392 Doug Wager, in discussion with the author, October 2014.
at the NEA, Elspeth Udvarhelyi adopted some of Fichandler’s language from her speech to the Ford Foundation: “It is still difficult, very difficult, to locate and support young, talented minority artists and administrators. It’s the cycle, the circle, we know about. They don’t emerge because they see no place for themselves. There is no place for them because they haven’t emerged.” Udvarhelyi located barriers in structural issues instead of blaming people of color themselves. She added, “Arena is well positioned to break this cycle. We hope that our experience and achievement will help other theaters towards similar goals.” Thus, the theatre staff mobilized Arena’s long and recent history of engagement with people of color, often underlining the context of Washington, D.C. as the nation’s capital and as a majority-black city, to situate the theatre as uniquely qualified for leading the charge in institutionalizing cultural diversity.

Soon afterward, the NEA granted Arena Stage $1 million in a three-to-one matching challenge, meaning that the theatre would have to raise an additional $3 million, to implement its cultural diversity programs. The fellowship program was named for Allen Lee Hughes, the long-time African American lighting designer at Arena, to train young people of color as the next generation of arts administrators. The theatre commissioned more playwrights of color, starting with African American writer Cheryl West. Finally, Arena promoted Tazewell Thompson to artistic associate, coinciding with more productions of black drama, multiracial versions of plays such as *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and all-black takes on U.S. plays such as *The Glass Menagerie*. These productions built upon others from the 1980s to develop a staying, significant black audience. Articulating Arena Stage’s mission for the theatre’s fortieth anniversary, Fichandler summarized:

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393 Letter from Elspeth Udvarhelyi to Jeanne Hodges, December 8, 1988, p. 1-2, box 37, fol. 9, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
394 Ibid., p. 2.
The institution seeks now to transform itself in order to be responsive to the significant minority populations who constitute its community. It wants to train minority theater professionals, develop and present the work of black, Hispanic and Asian playwrights, probe still further with its policy of ethnically diverse casting, draw to it an increasingly diverse audience … Minority exclusion and disengagement can only be changed by means of deep and real revision in the institutions through which we lead our lives.  

Fichandler underscored sustained commitment to artists and audiences of color, and change within and beyond the theatre.

At the end of the 1990-91 season, she stepped down as producing director, giving the leadership to longtime Arena employee Doug Wager. The culture wars, emblematized by the Robert Mapplethorpe controversy and the NEA four, had taken a toll on Fichandler, who had given testimony to support the NEA. The U.S. had taken a rightward turn attacking provocative artworks and their funding sources. In an interview with me, Fichandler reflected, “I didn’t know exactly why I left at [that] point. I just thought I’m not pushing this. I’m not starting at the bottom again and pushing this rock up the hill.” Wager, who had been a part of Arena Stage since he was an intern in the early 1970s, subsequently became the artistic director. He had been serving as the associate producing director since 1984, when Fichandler was appointed as the head of the graduate acting program at NYU. Wager recounted, “Guy Berquist, who was the production manager at the time, and myself basically took over the day-to-day operations of the theatre with her being the uber person,” meaning that Fichandler remained the artistic head.

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396 Zelda Fichandler, in discussion with the author, December 2012.
397 Doug Wager, in discussion with the author, October 2014.
According to Wager, “when Zelda left, it wasn’t so much a changing of the guard as a passing of the torch. Or, as she said, maybe I’m not passing the torch. I’m just passing the fire.”  

**Conclusion**

The 1970s through the 80s marked a major transition for Arena Stage. The theatre had long identified as a white institution geared toward international work, which largely meant Russian and Eastern European plays, especially at the height of the Cold War and the impactful tour to the U.S.S.R. Still, Arena’s less emphasized productions and presentations by African, Caribbean, and African American artists played an important role in complicating this identity. The liberal politics of these works and Arena’s artistic leadership, as well as funding concerns, drove the theatre further in the direction of cultural diversity, specifically engagement with black artists, audiences, and staff. This concentration of programming on and off stage in the late 1980s provided space for more work by artists of color, especially African Americans such as Anna Deavere Smith and Cheryl West, over the next twenty years. Although Zelda Fichandler left Arena Stage in 1991, the institution continued her spirit of inquiry and liberalism but moved increasingly toward an image as an “American” theatre.

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Ibid.
CHAPTER FOUR:
CULTIVATING RAISIN AND THE POPULAR BLACK MUSICAL

Introduction

On January 4, 2010, Arena Stage hosted a salon to discuss race on stage with artistic staff and actors from its multiracial production of the musical The Fantasticks and new production of Stick Fly by African American playwright Lydia Diamond. During the open forum, an Arena sales associate described his interactions marketing group tickets to black churches. When a church member asked why her congregation should be at all interested in The Fantasticks, the associate pointed to the casting of an African American actor in one of the lead roles, the young man Matt. In so doing, he suggested that black audiences desire seeing bodies that resemble their own on stage, and that black actors can turn a “Golden Age” implicitly white musical into a black musical. This sales associate also informed the salon attendees that black musicals comprise most of the top ten highest-grossing productions in the company’s history. For example, Crowns, a gospel musical by Regina Taylor, portrays the journeys of several African American women through a church service full of song, dance, and elaborate hats or “crowns.” This musical was so popular that Arena produced it four times during the 2000s, and all four of those runs appeared on the top-ten list of hit productions through 2010.

Premiering in 1973, Raisin, the musical adaptation of A Raisin in the Sun, marked Arena Stage’s first foray into black musical theatre and foreshadowed the popularity of similar productions. The musical ran for an unprecedented 110 performances, becoming “the most successful show” in the company’s history.³⁹⁹ Raisin received glowing reviews from D.C.-area critics and, by some measures, it was more successful than Lorraine Hansberry’s play. After an extended run, the production transferred to Broadway, won multiple Tony Awards, and went on

an extensive national tour. The musical was written by a mostly white production team: Robert Nemiroff and Charlotte Zaltzberg penned the book, Judd Woldin the music, and Robert Brittan the lyrics, while African American artist Donald McKayle directed and choreographed.

I argue that *Raisin* is crucial to understanding Arena Stage’s investment in and identity with black musicals. Through this production, the company articulated a genre of popular black musicals that would become a significant part of its repertoire and attract a more racially diverse audience. In addition, *Raisin* raises questions concerning the meaning of “black musical” through its multiracial authorship, musical styles, storytelling, consumption, and discourses of “blackness” versus “universal” “humanity.” In this chapter, I unpack definitions of “black” musical, stressing the genre’s multiplicities, social constructions, and claims to authenticity by different agents leveraging the term. To contextualize *Raisin*, I will discuss Hansberry’s play, contemporaneous black musicals, and Washington, D.C. in the early 1970s. I subsequently trace the development of the musical and perform a close reading of this adaptation. I suggest that the very act of musicalization, haunted by minstrelsy, as well as other decisions to de-radicalize the core text, turned *Raisin* into a feel-good, liberal musical that was largely welcomed in an era of economic depression, racial upheaval, Watergate, and the Vietnam War. My qualification “largely” highlights different reception of the musical by different spectators. By analyzing critical discourse and audiences’ responses, I illustrate how various players positioned *Raisin* and thereby positioned themselves and Arena Stage as well as the meanings and values of black musicals.

**What Makes a Musical Black?**
Artists and scholars have staked out many different definitions of blackness, locating it in certain racialized bodies and cultural expressions as well as deconstructing it as an arbitrary yet powerful, material signifier. Many practitioners and academics cite W.E.B. Du Bois’s formulation that black theatre should be about us, by us, for us, and near us, “us” being black people. By pinpointing that black dramatic narratives should center on black experiences, black authorship, and black audiences in black communities, Du Bois articulates a multifaceted approach to theatre and the racialization of production, distribution, and consumption. Allen Woll employs a similar understanding in *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls*, which was published in 1989 and remains the only critical text on black musicals. He turns to playwright-director Douglas Turner Ward to define black theatre as “by, about, with, for, and related to blacks,” but Woll says that it need not include every one of these attributes. Leaving out Du Bois’s “near,” Woll focuses on the white institution that is the Great White Way. Adding “with,” “related,” and a non-exclusive clause, he opens up the possibility of collaboration with non-black artists, producers, and spectators as still counting as black theatre.

Other scholars underscore certain musical expressions as identifiably black. In his analysis of Melvin van Peebles’s *Ain’t Supposed to Die a Natural Death*, Sam O’Connell insists upon the blackness of soul music because of its political and musical style. O’Connell distinguishes *Ain’t Supposed to Die* from other 1970s black musicals such as *The Wiz*, which he views as a feel-good and implicitly whiter musical. In “Africanisms in African-American Music,” Portia K. Maultsby delineates distinct African or African-American qualities of soul,

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jazz, and gospel such as improvisation, syncopation, and call and response.\textsuperscript{403} She also argues for black collectivity: “The fundamental concept that governs music performance in African and African-derived cultures is that music-making is a participatory group activity that serves to unite black people into a cohesive group for a common purpose.”\textsuperscript{404}

These articulations attempt to codify blackness in ways that are complex and yet are still limited. Many of them presume an essential, stable, and legible racialization of bodies that directly translates to the art those bodies produce and consume. Black people equal black art. I would argue, however, that race is dynamic and contingent. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant articulate in their foundational text \textit{Racial Formation in the United States} that race is overdetermined by social construction, historical context, macro state structures and policies, and micro daily lived experiences.\textsuperscript{405} Artists such as Suzan-Lori Parks complicate one-to-one correlations of black bodies with black theatre. Famously in “New Black Math,” she argues in part:

\begin{itemize}
\item A black play is blacker than black.
\item A black play is written by a black person.
\item A black play has black actors.
\item A black play is written by a white person and has white actors.
\item A black play doesn't have anything to do with black people. I'm saying \textit{The Glass Menagerie} is a black play.
\end{itemize}

\textit{SAY WHAT?}

\textsuperscript{404} Ibid., 187.
\textsuperscript{405} Michael Omi and Howard Winant, \textit{Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994).
EXCUSE ME?!?!\(^{406}\)

She throws into confusion stable, singular definitions of “black,” often marked by the presence of black people, by avowing that white-authored plays about white people, such as The Glass Menagerie, can be considered black. Exemplifying this particulate site of struggle, Arena Stage produced a version of The Glass Menagerie in 1989 with an all-black cast starring Ruby Dee and directed by Tazewell Thompson that provoked critical discourse on blackness and believability.\(^{407}\) Scholars such as Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Douglas A. Jones, Jr. have recently promoted the term “post-black,” not to be equated with “post-race,” but to signify a post-Civil Rights era, post-modernist aesthetic of black artists.\(^{408}\)

I am less interested in designating a particular definition of “black” as the single, correct one, and more interested in various positionings of blackness whose spectrum produces discursive, performative, and material blackness. Because of the particulars of U.S. history, the meaning of blackness is often posed in relation to the meaning of whiteness.\(^{409}\) Black and white are often seen as mutually exclusive but also mutually constitutive. Raisin proffered a particular liberal, popular blackness, which some critics and audiences viewed as valuable and authentically black, while others derided Raisin’s portrayal of black experience as false and whitened. By “liberal,” I mean a left-leaning but non-radical approach that celebrates equal, individual choices and rights, especially rights to private property. For “popular,” I turn to Stuart Hall’s conception of popular culture as a site of struggle, of shifting relations to power, much

\(^{407}\) For more on this production and other productions of “western” modern drama cast with actors of color, see Angela Pao, No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2010), 120-22.
like blackness, rather than a homogenous working class or a condescending term for the masses. I also find E. Patrick Johnson’s critical text *Appropriating Blackness* useful because he theorizes blackness as unstable, dependent on socio-political factors, and historically contested by agents with different investments. Johnson argues that “the mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness is the very thing that constitutes ‘black culture.’” By defining blackness through claims to authenticity, agents position themselves and others: “individuals or groups appropriate this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals or groups.” These boundaries are malleable yet material: “Authenticity, then, is yet another trope manipulated for cultural capital.”

Consider for example the interview Studs Terkel conducted with Lorraine Hansberry in 1959. He remarked, “I’m sure you’ve been told a number of times, ‘This is not really a Negro play. It could be about anybody,’” to which Hansberry sighed and replied:

Invariably. I know what they’re trying to say: it is not the traditional “Negro play.” It isn’t a protest play. It isn’t something that hits you over the head. What they’re trying to say is something very good; that they believe the characters transcend category. Unfortunately, they couldn’t be more wrong. I believe one of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that in order to create the universal, you must pay great attention to

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412 Ibid., 3.  
413 Ibid.
the specific. Not only is this a play about a Negro family, specifically and definitely culturally … it is definitely a Negro play before it is anything else.  

First, Terkel gestures toward others’ interpretations of *A Raisin in the Sun* as potentially being “about anybody” versus what “really” constitutes “a Negro play.” Hansberry subsequently translates the hegemonic definition of “Negro play” as only “protest play” such as anti-lynching plays. She criticizes both this limited definition and the argument that her characters achieve racial and political transcendence, making them not part of a proper “Negro play.” By arguing that progressive politics and specific African American experiences have broad appeal, she re-appropriates blackness from those who would distinguish it from implicitly white universality, perhaps thinking of critics who compared *A Raisin in the Sun* to *Death of a Salesman*. To claim her play as “Negro” and “universal,” Hansberry challenges and rearticulates common understandings of those two terms and repositions her play and herself. Rather than having the final word on the matter, she participates in an ongoing discursive production of blackness.

Indeed, contemporary African American playwrights continue to be haunted by certain expectations of blackness. In *The Colored Museum* (1986), George C. Wolfe satirizes *A Raisin in the Sun* with “The Last Mama on the Couch Play,” just as Robert O’Hara in *Bootycandy* (2011) mocks a white literary manager who assumes that black playwrights always and necessarily write racialized political messages. As I discuss below, the artists and critics of *Raisin* the musical also mobilize “black” and “universal” to make claims about the authenticity and quality of the adaptation.

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Production History

When *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in 1959, critics recognized the watershed moment of the first play to be written by a black woman and directed by a black man, Lloyd Richards, to reach Broadway. The play was a serious, realist, domestic drama about the working-class, African American Younger family who live on the South Side of Chicago. When Big Walter dies, the matriarch Lena decides to use the insurance money for her daughter Beneatha to attend medical school and for a down payment on a house in a white neighborhood, whereas her son Walter wants to use the money to open a liquor store. While some black radicals such as Harold Cruse and Amiri Baraka condemned the play as “bourgeois,” scholar Harilaos Stecopoulos argues that the play “is less a symptom than a diagnosis of the black ambivalence about normative (white) notions of embourgeoisement.” \(^{416}\) Stecopoulos points to Hansberry’s use of 1930s leftist, white ethnic melodrama such as Clifford Odets’s work to center domestic women and their critique of capitalism and racism. It is likely because of the ambivalent interaction of these aesthetic and political qualities that Hansberry won the New York Drama Critics Award, another triumph as the first black playwright to do so.

Aside from the critical accolades, however, *A Raisin in the Sun* was not immediately, widely embraced. Hansberry was, as many scholars now remind us, a radical advocating for black, women’s, and gay rights.\(^{417}\) Her first play ran on Broadway for just over a year. Although it became a film to reach a potentially larger audience, Hansberry’s screenplay was heavily policed, and the film was not commercially successful. Her then ex-husband Robert Nemiroff kept her second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (1964), running until Hansberry

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died of cancer in 1965. In charge of Hansberry’s estate, Nemiroff devoted himself to producing her legacy.\footnote{For a critique of Nemiroff’s handling of Hansberry’s plays, see Woodie King, Jr., “The Restructuring of Lorraine Hansberry’s ‘A Raisin in the Sun,’” \textit{The Impact of Race} (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2003), 117-123.} He edited \textit{Les Blancs} and adapted \textit{To Be Young, Gifted, and Black} for the stage. Nemiroff had been pitching a musical adaptation of \textit{A Raisin in the Sun} to commercial producers for eight years before Arena Stage agreed to develop and stage it.\footnote{Laurence Maslon, \textit{The Arena Adventure}, 50.}

Producers may have been hesitant to support a musicalization of Hansberry’s play because of the poor state of black musicals in the sixties. According to Allen Woll, the black-written-by-white musicals of the sixties, such as \textit{Kwamina}, \textit{No Strings}, and \textit{Hallelujah, Baby}, were flops because they avoided dealing with the complexities of racial tensions. He cites the musical \textit{Purlie} in 1970 as a turning point marking the revitalization of successful black musicals.\footnote{I would add that the creative team of Garry Sherman, Peter Udell, and Philip Rose behind \textit{Purlie} may have initiated a trend in musicalizing recent black plays. This same team musicalized James Baldwin’s \textit{The Amen Corner} and developed a Harlem-based version of \textit{A Christmas Carol}, neither of which were commercial successes.} The links between \textit{Purlie} and \textit{Raisin} are significant. When Ossie Davis replaced Sidney Poitier in \textit{A Raisin in the Sun} on Broadway, he persuaded the producer to stage his play \textit{Purlie Victorious}. In turn, the musical version of \textit{Purlie} arguably facilitated the production of the musical \textit{Raisin}. Woll also cites the growing number of black dramas of the sixties, the foundation of the Negro Ensemble Company, the support from the Ford Foundation, and the growing black audience as reasons for the renewed popularity of black musicals by the 1970s.\footnote{Woll, \textit{Black Musical Theatre}, 193-273.}

Musicals such as \textit{Ain’t Supposed to Die a Natural Death}, \textit{Eubie!}, and \textit{Ain’t Misbehavin’} became part of this trend.

Broadway was not the only site for new musical productions with black artists. In Washington, D.C., new theatre companies produced world premieres of black musicals. In 1971, the reopened Ford’s Theatre premiered Vinnette Carrol’s \textit{Don’t Bother Me, I Can’t Cope}, a revue
that engaged with poverty, black power, women’s liberation, and other experiences of modern African Americans. The musical subsequently transferred to the Great White Way, making Carrol the first African American female director on Broadway. Three years later, Ford’s Theatre brought back the production. In 1975, following the same pattern of success, the company premiered Carrol’s musical telling of the Book of Matthew, *Your Arms Too Short to Box with God*, moved it to Broadway, and presented an encore production in 1976. Meanwhile, Robert Hooks founded the D.C. Black Repertory Company in 1972. The company produced musicals including an adaptation of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry entitled *Among All This You Stand Like a Fine Brownstone*; a revue of original songs about the daily life of people living in Washington, D.C. called *A Day, A Life, A People* by Bernice Reagon; and *Changes* by Vantile Whitfield, which “was considered the most successful of the D.C. Black Rep’s musical productions.”

Although the theatre had box office appeal and held a fundraiser with singer Isaac Hayes, it did not raise enough money to keep running as a production company and therefore closed in 1978.

Arena’s decision to produce *Raisin* thereby coincided with more productions of black works. As I discussed in previous chapters, Zelda Fichandler grew more attentive to the racial politics of Washington, D.C. and its majority black population. The D.C. metro area’s black bourgeoisie presented a potential audience. Instead of plays by radical Black Arts Movement writers such as Amiri Baraka, however, Fichandler turned toward plays by Lorraine Hansberry, Athol Fugard, and Derek Walcott. She also turned to *Raisin*. In the wake of war, Watergate, race riots, and recession, a liberal, popular, and ultimately optimistic black musical suggested a recipe for critical and commercial success.


423 Originally named LeRoi Jones, Baraka changed his name in 1967 to accord with his Afro-centric beliefs.
Developing *Raisin*

Robert Nemiroff, as heir to Hansberry’s estate and at this point a seasoned producer of her work, appears to have been the head of this project because he had final approval over all production hires and changes. His agreement with Arena Stage treated the theatre company as more of a presenting than a producing organization. Arena paid for a license to stage *Raisin* and would later receive a small percentage of profits from future productions and subsidiary rights. In addition, Nemiroff promised $60,000 to Arena Stage to offset additional costs. Given the contract and enhancement money, *Raisin* seems to be an early example of a Broadway tryout via a non-profit theatre company. Letters between Thomas Fichandler and lawyers negotiating the contract indicate that more than economic capital was at stake. Fichandler wrote, “Nemiroff’s credit should not be as associate producer: Zelda will never agree to this. Nor should we endanger our tax-exempt status. Arena Stage is the producer. The words should be ‘by arrangement with Robert Nemiroff,’ and the size should be the same as afforded to Zelda Fichandler as Producing Director.”

To avoid appearing as a commercial tryout company, Arena had to be credited as the producer. The theatre may have been particularly sensitive because, by 1973, Arena Stage had a regular presence on Broadway. In the playbill, Fichandler boasted,

*Raisin*, now in its second extension and one of a list of productions created for Washington audiences by Arena Stage is one of the most successful new productions in the theater’s history. The Arena production of *Raisin* is now scheduled to open on

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424 Letter from Elliot Axelrod to Thomas Fichandler, December 7, 1972, box 27, fol. 23, Arena Stage Financial Documents and Projects 1980s-1990s, GMUL.
Broadway in October. In this route it follows such previous Arena premieres as the *Great White Hope, Indians,* and *Moonchildren.*

She touted Arena’s productions as both Washington-specific and national in their scope. And yet, when Nemiroff picked up the Tony Award for Best Musical, he thanked Zelda and Thomas Fichandler, but he did not name Arena Stage.

Arena was far from being merely a venue for *Raisin,* given that Zelda Fichandler actively participated in the development of the musical. In November of 1972, Nemiroff sent her an outline of the musical book, and she sent back an eighteen-page memo detailing her thoughts. These documents provide insight into the musical-making process in which the producing team intended to capitalize upon but also distinguish themselves from *A Raisin in the Sun.* At this point, the musical was entitled *A Long Time Comin’,* which has a ring of racial uplift and, as Fichandler wrote, “is about the reclamation of adulthood, the assertion of personal power.”

Why the artistic team changed the title to *Raisin* is unclear. The new name did serve to remind audiences that the musical is based on *A Raisin in the Sun* and to invoke the authentic stamp of a black playwright being musicalized by a mostly white creative team. Although marketing materials prominently featured Hansberry, the artistic team also wanted to justify the musicalization. According to Nemiroff’s outline, the musical opens with “an overture of dance and movement that sets the stage, introduces the community and cast—and in the process establishes from the get-go that this is not the play *A RAISIN IN THE SUN.*”

He, Fichandler, and director-choreographer McKayle sought song-and-dance opportunities for the ensemble

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428 Memo from Robert Nemiroff to Zelda Fichandler, November 4, 1972, p. 2, box 44, fol. 1, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
beyond the confines of the Youngers’ apartment. Musicals are, as many scholars have argued, fundamentally about community.\textsuperscript{429} For instance, this earlier version of the musical called for a nightmarish dramatization of Walter’s societal frustrations with black actors playing whites. At the same time, the creative team resisted producing a “traditional musical,” by which they meant a big Jerry Herman-like production, perhaps because the Carol Channing vehicle \textit{Lorelei} was running in Washington, D.C. the same season. Nemiroff wrote of an “old book,” a previous version of the musical that does not appear in the Arena Stage Archives, being “rather old-fashioned with elaborate production numbers involving heavy sets, wagons, flies, and a large cast,” while the new book alluded to in the outline was closer to “STORY THEATER” because of its fluidity and nearly bare stage.\textsuperscript{430} The latter was more attuned to the setup of the arena space, economized budget, and Fichandler’s aesthetic.

Fichandler gave voice to important concerns about the art and liberal politics of \textit{Raisin}. She repeatedly asked questions grounded in structural and specific understandings of the characters: “What choices does Walter have in being a man-father? Who keeps him from these choices? How are Walter’s own choices limited by the kind of mother and father he had and the kind of choices available to them? How did the white people, how do the white people, affect these choices? How can they be reclaimed by black people?” and “how does Walter’s fantasy get theatrically embodied in such a way that it is sophisticated, personal, related to his son, anti-white-capital and yet doesn’t end up by making him seem like all he wants to do is take over white values???????”\textsuperscript{431} Here, she frames choices as both dramatic and systemic. Throughout the memo, she poses black or African values as the opposite of white values, which align with

\textsuperscript{430} Ibid., p. 1.
\textsuperscript{431} Memo from Zelda Fichandler to Robert Nemiroff, December 13, 1972, p 5, 13.
capitalism, thereby constructing white/black, capitalism/anti-capitalism binaries. In another example of her attentiveness to politics, Fichandler pointed out that cutting George Murchison and Ruth’s abortion left act two with too little dramatic action and too little resonance with the contemporary issue of women’s liberation.432

The excised parts of A Raisin in the Sun are significant in constituting and being constituted by popular black images. According to Steven Carter, who dealt extensively with Nemiroff when writing his book Hansberry’s Drama, “To gain time for the music, large chunks of the play, such as Ruth’s deliberations about abortion, Asagai’s male chauvinist speeches, everything relating to George Murchison, and the bulk of Lindner’s first visit, had to be eliminated.”433 Although Carter has a point about time constraints for the musicalization, cutting those particularly political parts was a deliberate decision that resulted in a safer cultural production. In the musical, Ruth not only does not deliberate about abortion, she is not even pregnant, perhaps because abortion would have been extremely contentious in 1973, the same year as the Roe v. Wade decision. Asagai’s “male chauvinist speeches” are those related to radical Black Nationalism that become vaguer and even a joke in the musical. In his Yoruba regalia, Asagai unintentionally scares the neighbor Mrs. Johnson, who shrieks, “Lord have mercy, the Maus Maus!!!,” the sole reference to violent resistance to colonial oppression.434 Finally, the removal of Beneatha’s wealthy suitor George Murchison flattens the intraracial class conflicts and conflicts about African/American identity that Hansberry explores in the play. In a sense, Beneatha and Asagai become the comic b-plot couple to the a-plot romance of Ruth and Walter, a common musical theatre trope that tames A Raisin in the Sun. The creative team’s

432 Ibid., p. 2-3.  
decisions on which parts to add and musicalize further illustrate an attempt to produce a popular, liberal black musical and a struggle to articulate blackness.

**Popularizing *Raisin***

*Raisin* signals from the start that it will expand upon *A Raisin in the Sun* to musicalized and danced representations of not only the Younger family but also the black community on the South Side. During the overture, which interweaves jazz and blues themes from the score, the ensemble dances a mini-drama, an allegedly typical night on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s, and perhaps more closely Washington, D.C. and New York City in the 1970s. This includes “groovy cats” wearing “doo-rags,” attractive “chicks,” a drunk, a drug pusher, and his “victim.”

The dance-drama suggests the higher brow emulation of *West Side Story*. By confirming hegemonic expectations of poor, black neighborhoods, the setting establishes conditions that an exceptional and aspirational black family like the Youngers would want to leave.

When the spotlight shifts to the Younger family, Walter emerges as the protagonist. His is the first song, “Man Say,” which appropriates much of Hansberry’s dialogue set to a Calypso tune. While Ruth speaks her lines urging Walter to eat his eggs and come down to earth, Walter and his triumphant, horn-backed music in this I am/I want song easily overcome her, letting the audience know that they and the music should be on his side. Indeed, throughout the musical, the spectator is following Walter’s journey. He sings eight songs, whereas the play emphasizes the power of the female characters, Lena, Ruth, and Beneatha. During the development process at Arena, a trio between the three women was cut, along with several other songs, in part to reduce the running time. Beneatha in particular lost songs, perhaps because the director had trouble with

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435 Ibid., 13.
the actress, who was replaced by her understudy Debbie Allen. Critics typically viewed *A Raisin in the Sun* as a struggle between Walter and Lena due to battles between the stars, Sidney Poitier and Claudia McNeil, and Hansberry’s attentiveness to their opposing views.\(^{436}\) Nemiroff’s early outline for the musical places Lena and her I am/I want song “A Whole Lotta Sunlight” at the top of the musical, but ultimately this song comes with her later entrance during the morning scene of the play. In the musical, Lena tends to sing bluesy songs full of nature imagery, grounding her. These changes suggest that the production team desired a more popular black narrative with Walter at the forefront.

Hegemonic claims to “authentic” blackness often prioritize working class heteronormativity and masculinity. E. Patrick Johnson offers as examples artists from the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes who located true blackness in the “folk” and from the Black Arts Movement who prioritized male leadership and denigrated women and homosexuals.\(^{437}\) Popular depictions of wealthy African Americans did not appear until later with, for instance, *The Cosby Show* in the 1980s as well as Arena’s productions of *Blue* by Charles Randolph-Wright and *Stick Fly* by Lydia Diamond in the 2000s. In addition, in *Aberrations in Black*, sociologist Rod Ferguson demonstrates that, in the 1960s and 1970s, the hetero-patriarchal through-line of Black Nationalism worked in tandem with the Moynihan Report to pathologize black female-headed households and subsequently to regulate black gender and sexuality.\(^{438}\) By prioritizing Walter and his point of view, *Raisin* accorded with contemporary expectations of normative hetero-patriarchal blackness.

\(^{436}\) See for example Gary Wiener, ed., *Gender in Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun* (Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2011).

\(^{437}\) E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*.

As a musical, *Raisin* purported to deliver black music. “Black” music is often defined by its alleged authenticity of feeling in contrast to the rehearsed performance of its converse, white
music. For Walter and Ruth’s romantic duet, “Sweet Time,” the stage directions advise:
“Musically, the quality should be Black—the Blackest interpretation possible—a cry from the
heart with all the subtleties, the broken lines and jagged edges and, where appropriate, the freely
improvised quarter-notes of Soul. But none of this for embellishment—only where and to the
extent it enhances true feeling.”

The underscoring of soul music and soulful feeling relate to O’Connell’s definition of an authentically black musical. Improvisation and unadorned emotion translate black body to black sound. In addition, the rawness in musical style serves to work against musical theatre’s associations with whiteness and a polished, rehearsed, allegedly inauthentic quality.

These emphases on black authenticity were likely necessary because the production team was white, aside from McKayle, the music director, members of the orchestra, and the cast. By 1973, McKayle was a renowned choreographer known for compositions such as *Ring ’Round My Shoulder* (1959) that incorporated African-inspired movement and African-American-inspired issues. In addition, he was the choreographer for the Broadway musical *Golden Boy*, which starred Sammy Davis, Jr. Joyce Brown had also worked on *Golden Boy* and later *Purlie* as the conductor, becoming the first African American woman to conduct the opening of a Broadway show. For *Raisin*, Brown served as the music director, vocal arranger, conductor, and pianist. The principal actors, Virginia Capers (Lena), Joe Morton (Walter), Ernestine Jackson (Ruth), Debbie Allen (Beneatha), and Ralph Carter (Travis), all had Broadway credits, and some went

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on to achieve significant fame on television: Allen in *Fame*, Carter on *Good Times*, and Morton on *Scandal*. As performers, they were in some sense co-creators of the musical, and their interpretations were preserved on the original cast recording. During the live performance, the black performers on and off stage somewhat authenticate the music composed and written by white artists Judd Woldin and Robert Brittan.

The musical also constructs blackness by juxtaposing silent white and singing black characters. Aside from Walter’s unseen boss, the only other white character in the musical is Karl Lindner, who does not sing. When he enters the Youngers’ home, the reprise of “Sweet Time” ends abruptly, emphasizing Lindner’s dramaturgical function as a non-musical force. The audience is not meant to be on his side. Instead of Hansberry’s long, intricate scene in which Lindner appears concerned for the Youngers and for himself, Lindner barely speaks in the musical. His dialogue is full of ellipses, dashes, “ah”s, and stage business such as clearing his throat until he says he is from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, at which point “With controlled anger, Walter takes a step towards him, brandishing the card almost under his nose, and Lindner draws back,” and the scene ends immediately.⁴⁴² Perhaps the deletion was due to a presumption that the audience was already familiar with Lindner’s ultimate intentions, as Walter seems to be here. Nemiroff appears to have had little concern for this character. In a memo to Zelda Fichandler, he said that the cast should have twenty or fewer actors, and “Lindner would presumably be an assistant stage manager.”⁴⁴³ In any case, part of the consequence is the definition of Lindner and whites in general as precisely not black, not musical in that he cannot express himself through song and dance, and he can barely speak.

⁴⁴³ Memo from Robert Nemiroff to Zelda Fichandler, November 4, 1972, p. 1.
Walter, Ruth, and Beneatha sing mockingly on Lindner’s behalf to Lena in what is on the one hand the most radical and on the other the most moderate song in the score, “Not Anymore.” The characters act like they are the Clybourne Park welcoming committee by whiting up. Walter in particular adopts a nasally voice and affected, upper-class gestures, suggesting an intersection of whiteness and wealth. In this intensely ironic number, the characters sing of racist acts they do not do anymore (“We didn’t bring no rope!”), though the mock-hymn, vaudeville-style music, and exaggerated movements act as punchlines (“The three hang themselves—one arm up taut, the other at the neck, head dangling limp”). But perhaps the most critical part of the song is the point at which the characters exalt the NAACP, Lena Horne, and Harry Belafonte, sexy-without-being-threatening bourgeois representations of blackness. Beneatha remarks, “I wouldn’t mind him livin’ next door to me!” while the song ends with the characters insisting that they will pay to keep their neighborhood white. Walter, Ruth, and Beneatha demonstrate a certain hypocrisy and performativity to whiteness by pointing out how whites disavow race and racism except for a few comfortable examples of blackness in order to fortify whiteness. Meanwhile, their gestures counter their lyrics; they did bring rope. Thus, whites do not deliver believable musical performances. Many of the lyrics are spoke-sung and taken from Lindner’s speech in the play. In contrast, then, blackness as tied to song and dance takes on an apparent naturalness, haunted by a history of minstrelsy. This occurs despite the form of the musical, which constantly draws attention to itself as performance, and the black performers as performers, through its numbers alternating with book scenes. But overall “Not Anymore,” a kind of “reverse” minstrel number given the musical idiom, reveals the complex layers and instability of performing race:

445 Ibid., 85.
black actors playing black characters mock-playing white characters perform a song written by white artists using lines from a black playwright.

On the other hand, “Not Anymore” can be considered rather moderate when the spectators are placed in the privileged position of believing themselves to be not racist, unlike the whites being mocked in the song. Unlike A Raisin in the Sun, the musical emerged from the post-Civil Rights era. Even attending Raisin the musical involves a self-selecting audience that would likely be at least sympathetic to African Americans. But again, the song does not strongly challenge the spectator to become not only not racist but antiracist; it does not necessarily implicate the audience in the structures of white supremacy. Because the musical is set in the 1950s, “Not Anymore” may be ironic for that time period, and the audience might believe that by 1973 the lyrics are not true anymore, as if racism has been solved, and they can congratulate themselves on their liberal beliefs. Such a message and musical presentation would be much more comforting than another Black Arts play with a radical structure and politics such as Amiri Baraka’s Slave Ship or Adrienne Kennedy’s Funnyhouse of a Negro.

The musical also boasts a gospel number, “He Come Down This Morning,” which plays upon popular African American music and religiosity. The number is full of call-and-response, repetition, a certain idiolect (“He Come Down” instead of “He Came Down”), movement, and virtuosic performances by Travis and Lena, rather than significant character development. In musical parlance, it is the second-act opener to welcome back the audience into a comfortable theatrical world. In this case, it is a particularly marked world where the black community minus Walter and Beneatha sing and dance the gospel, while the audience generally remains seated. Black spectators may have enjoyed this portrayal of a significant part of the bourgeois black public sphere: the church. According to Allen Woll, Langston Hughes introduced gospel to the
musical stage.\textsuperscript{446} Soyica Diggs Colbert argues that Hughes’s \textit{Tambourines to Glory} flopped in part because of its criticism of the black church at a time when the institution was crucial to the Civil Rights Movement.\textsuperscript{447} In more recent years, African American gospel plays have been enormously financially successful among African American audiences.\textsuperscript{448} But the Arena audience was far from homogenous; indeed, it was majority white. White spectators may have enjoyed this voyeuristic view into lively black life and conceived of white congregations as the supposed civilized, less performative opposite.

This issue of civilization is particularly fraught with respect to the two Africana numbers in the musical. When Asagai explains to Beneatha the meaning of the name he has given her, “Alaiyo,” he drapes the cloth he has given her, as African drums begin to play in the background. His lyrics name these drums, “Heartbeats tell me… / Beating like drums of my home / Calling my name / We have made our two diff’rent worlds the same, Alaiyo.”\textsuperscript{449} This is a didactic song meant for Beneatha but also for the audience, who can assemble the clothing, musical, and linguistic signifiers of American Africanism. Over time, the orchestrations become fuller, resembling descent-into-the-jungle motifs, as a flute for instance sounds an exotic bird. Shortly thereafter, an extended sequence directly from Hansberry’s text shows Beneatha critiquing Ruth for listening to “assimilationist junk,” popular blues, in favor of “real music,” which was Michael Olatunji’s “Drums of Passion” in the original musical production.\textsuperscript{450} When Beneatha performs what she believes are African dances, Ruth in turn critiques her and implicitly the ease of appropriating culture. This critique, however, becomes muddled in the musical. Upon

\textsuperscript{446} Allen Woll, \textit{Black Musical Theatre}, 229-248.
\textsuperscript{450} Ibid., 76. Italics in original.
Walter’s drunken entrance, the stage becomes full of African women and male warriors. A production still (Fig. 2) shows that the ensemble wore little more than thongs, reinforcing the idea of Africans as tribal and barbaric. By physically manifesting Walter’s drunken vision of Africa, the musical undermines Beneatha’s critique, and implicitly Hansberry’s critique, of stereotypical portrayals of Africa. In an earlier scene, Beneatha lectures her mother on how most people think only of Tarzan when they think of Africa rather than the rich history and culture of specific tribes, and modern Africans such as Asagai who are resisting colonial governments. This musical number and its costumes authorize a skewed view of Africa and provide potential pleasure of consuming bare black bodies. When Raisin moved to Broadway, producers aired television commercials consisting primarily of this dance number. This move is significant as one of the earliest television commercials for a Broadway musical—Pippin was first—and indicative of the imagined appeal of these “African” images and sounds to U.S. audiences. Then again, this commercial may have discouraged African Americans who viewed the musicalization as denigrating to Hansberry’s critical play.

In addition, many of these ensemble numbers expand upon the Younger family unit to the larger community and serve as release valves for the dramatic tension. In so doing, they often reify the cultural values embedded in the serious drama versus light-hearted musical dynamic. Between Lena’s bluesy yet optimistic “A Whole Lotta Sunlight” and “Booze,” for example, is Hansberry’s scene of Beneatha proclaiming her atheism and Lena slapping her, a sound that registers much louder than the surrounding musical scenes. The musical team largely avoids musicalizing the most dramatic moments of A Raisin in the Sun, which is the opposite approach

452 After I presented some of my work on Raisin at the Black Theatre Network conference in New York City in 2014, Michael Dinwiddie, the President of the Black Theatre Network, told me that he remembered seeing this commercial of “fauna dancing Africans” and deciding not to see the musical as a consequence.
of many integrated book musicals, because the music can help to express those heightened moments more deeply and complexly. Instead, the libretto preserves much of Hansberry’s personal and political drama, while the music tends to express emotion with little change throughout the song or to entertain the audience with its familiar portrayals of African Americans. One exception, however, is “You’ve Done Right,” which musicalizes the scene of Lena telling Walter that she put a down-payment on a house and refusing to give him money for his liquor store. Still, the music is on his side, punctuating his angry, sarcastic rant.

Silence is used purposefully to indicate where Walter has gone wrong. Music underscores the scene in which Walter tells his family he will call Karl Lindner and accept his offer until he plays the minstrel slave. The speaking over the music—not singing—and then silence work to locate the power in Hansberry’s text and to clarify for the audience that they should condemn this particular unsympathetic portrayal of a black man, in contrast to the music-supported supposedly authentic ones. Ultimately, Walter changes his mind and asserts his pride, masculinity, and decision to move to Clybourne Park. During this transition, Lena hums and the orchestra plays “He Come Down this Morning,” which points to the influence of God in this outcome “to show His children the way” rather than the movement of black habitus.453 Instead of the final tableau showing Lena retrieving her potted plant alone, Walter picks it up and gives it to her, spotlighting Walter’s dramatic arc.

**Positioning Raisin**

Marketing materials and critics positioned *Raisin* in various ways; spectators contested blackness and who authorizes blackness. The playbill included a welcoming cover image and director’s notes that probably influenced audiences. White and black critics did not have

necessarily the same responses within and between groups. While most white reviewers lauded the musical for its humanity, joy, and black score, others such as R.H. Gardner of the *Baltimore Sun* deemed *Raisin* whitened and inauthentic. While the *Amsterdam News* and *Washington Afro-American* reviewers praised the racial uplift work of *Raisin*, Judith L. Howell from *Black Stage* critiqued the whitened score and white artists behind it. Finally, Arena’s audiences were becoming more racially diverse and largely responded well to the musical.

The Arena Stage playbill for *Raisin* likely primed spectators in their responses to the production. The cover boasts a drawing of a black man and a black woman dancing closely and sporting 1970s-style hair and clothing (Fig. 3). This warm image suggests romance, music, and movement. Although the playbill clearly states that the setting of the musical is the 1950s, this image and much of the music speak more to 1970s aesthetics. Several critics reflected upon the 1950s setting and insisted that *Raisin* was timeless. Critic Ernest Schier wrote, “[*Raisin*] may be slightly dated but it has those ingredients of warmth, compassion, drama and humor that are never dated.”

David Richards of the *Washington Star* similarly argued, “It is true that some of the specifics of the play—the first stirrings of Africanism, black pride and militancy—have come into sharper focus since then, and in its details ‘Raisin’ reminds a period piece. But the human dynamics of the drama are as timeless as ever.” Donald McKayle’s note in the program highlighted the musical’s humanity, gendered as male, and blackness: “Because it is so basically human, it contains man’s tears and pain as well as his laughter. Because it is black, it is filled with the rich heritage of black music—blues, gospel, jazz, and the polyrhythms of Africa.”

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Critics may have picked up on McKayle’s wording. They repeatedly remarked upon the musical’s “humanity” as if to assure white spectators of the musical’s universality and to assure black spectators of its liberalism. According to CBS radio critic Mike Heid, “The playwright avoids caricatures, drawing for us vibrant beings – not just black beings, but beings. As Fiddler on the Roof enveloped us with its sense of Jewishness, so Raisin envelops us with its blackness, but transcends all racial bounds to bring us a poignant series of encounters.”

Heid at once registers the musical’s racialized specificity and transcendence of racialized specificity, using Fiddler on the Roof as an apt comparison of a musical that showcased and disavowed its Jewish themes. He gestures toward a history of portrayals of African Americans as “caricatures” and supports Raisin’s project of humanist subjectivity. Tom Basham bluntly stated, “It is a tribute to the skill of the entire company that this story of a black Chicago family has pulling power for a mostly white audience,” implying that white spectators rarely attend black drama; he argues that because Raisin draws a white audience, the musical has broader appeal and supposedly higher standards.

Clive Barnes of the New York Times argued that the libretto was stronger than the play, and in a universalist-colorblind turn claimed, “Today it is not the color of the piece that overwhelms one but its tremendous story.” Schier proffered, “‘Raisin’ seems likely to score as the kind of musical hit everybody loves.” Richards wrote somewhat reductively that Raisin “views its characters as simple human beings,” and “Perhaps the most rewarding discovery is that ‘Raisin’ s humanity is still an essential one, rooted in a firm belief in human dignity.”

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460 Ernest Schier, “A ‘Raisin’ with Fantastic Potential.”
461 David Richards, “‘Raisin’ Gives Cause to Stand and Cheer.”
Despite these appeals to universalism, “dignity” has a particular black bourgeois connotation, and the word appears several times in reviews. Clifford A. Ridley of the *National Observer* argued that *Raisin* boasts “a deeply felt salute to human dignity.” Tom Basham admires the “sense of dignity with which the characters fill their roles.” In an unusual move, Charles B. Jones, editor of the African American newspaper the *Amsterdam News*, used his editorial space to celebrate the black family values of *Raisin* in contrast to other black popular culture: “In this age of exploitative Black movies, it is rejuvenating and inspiring to return to images of human dignity.”

Critics distinguished *Raisin* from other black dramas. In the early 70s context of the Vietnam War and Black Power, it is not surprising that critics would largely favor upbeat integration narratives and more palatable representations of African Americans, especially through a musical. Schier separated Hansberry and thus *Raisin* from “newer, militant playwrights like Ed Bullins.” Gerard Perseghin wrote, “In comparison to the real-life visual drabness of other black shows of recent years, ‘Raisin’ makes them all seem lumpenprol. It is beautiful in sight and sound.” Richards similarly asserted, “There may be a few grumblings among those who expect black theater to be abrasive and accusatory, and who will hence be impatient with the love and humanity that fill the theater to the bursting point,” thereby contrasting the musical with what is perceived as the typical Black Arts play. Philip F. Crosland preferred *Raisin* to the D.C. Black Repertory Company’s simultaneous production of Jean Genet’s *The Blacks* in part because it was difficult “to become emotionally involved” in the latter.

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464 Tom Basham, “Arena presents warm, believable *Raisin*.”
466 Ernest Schier, “A ‘Raisin’ with Fantastic Potential.”
468 David Richards, “‘Raisin’: Season’s Best Musical.”
I want to stress that, of the two dozen reviews of *Raisin* that I analyzed, almost everyone raved about the musical, and many emphasized the musical’s affective dimensions. Critics’ attention to the musical’s affective optimism suggests that D.C. audiences needed cultural productions to provoke such feelings in light of the dark news coming out of Washington in the early 1970s. Richards detailed his experience of the second act opener, “He Come Down This Morning”:

Normally, I consider my privacy in a playhouse inviolate, and take fierce umbrage at any performer who insists on sitting in my lap, kissing me, accusing me of war crimes, or any of the thousand and one participatory acts the theater seems bent on cooking up these days. But at Arena, I wanted to shake the hands of all the performers who passed my way. And I wasn’t the least bit self-conscious about returning the smile.\(^{(470)}\)

Critiquing avant-garde, environmental performance of the 1960s and 1970s, Richards welcomes the exuberance of this gospel number. The musical produced, for many, a sense of uplift and profound, emotional movement. According to stage manager notes and some of the reviews, the audience regularly gave standing ovations, which was rare at the time. Reiterating *Raisin’s* difference, Perseghin claimed, “Where other shows have made a point of getting across the black experience by depressing, ‘Raisin’ exhilarates by serving up the spirit of the American negro. And in the spirit, there seems to be more truth.”\(^{(471)}\)

Truth claims bring us back to disputes over the constitution of authentic blackness. With closed eyes, rocking back and forth in her chair, Virginia Capers for instance created a serious portrayal of Lena, a black mother that can easily slip into the mammy type in popular depictions. Her performance was so successful that she won the best actress in a musical Tony Award.

\(^{(470)}\) David Richards, “‘Raisin’ Gives Cause to Stand and Cheer.”

\(^{(471)}\) Gerard A. Perseghin, “When black is right.”
According to critic Richard Lebherz, “There was something brutal and unpleasant about Claudia McNeil’s Mama in the original production, but Virginia Caper’s Mama has all the warmth, confusion and beauty that she was meant to have.”472 By adding, “that she was meant to have,” he became an arbiter of what constitutes acceptable black womanhood, and he collapsed the play character and the musical character, who share similarities but are also expressed differently. Charles Farrow of the Washington Afro-American, on the other hand, acknowledged type and performance as opposed to essence when he complimented Capers, “When they talk about the classic, strong black woman, they are probably talking about the ‘Mama’ Lena Younger as played by the brilliant actress Virginia Capers. By her forceful stage wisdom and voice, she has moments of incandescent beauty, and insight.”473

Critical discussions about racializing the score reveal fissures in interpretations of authenticity and performance. Perhaps because he wrote for a black newspaper, Farrow was one of very few critics to note the race of Woldin and Brittan—white—before stating that they “have created [a] fairly representative ‘soul’ quality.”474 Again, his careful diction suggested understandings of race and representation. In addition, Gerard A. Perseghin applauded the “Afro-influence music,” particularly the jazz and scat singing of “Booze,” the gospel number “He Come Down This Morning,” and “Man Say,” which showed “the influence of the delicate West Indian Islands ballads.”475 Schier remarked that the jazzy score resembled the work of George Gershwin and Kurt Weill, implying an identification of jazz with white Jewish composers, who

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473 Charles Farrow, “Raisin’ a great musical; 2-handkerchief sniffler,” Washington Afro-American.
474 Ibid.
475 Gerard A. Perseghin, “When black is right.”
were, granted, inventors of the Broadway sound that was in turn influenced by African Americans.\textsuperscript{476}

Meanwhile, a few other critics asserted that the music is not black at all. In \textit{Black Stage}, Judith L. Howell wrote with disappointment, “They needed Curtis Mayfield, or Marvin Gaye or Jerry Butler, (he’s right there in Chicago; he’ll tell you ‘bout Southside songs).”\textsuperscript{477} Her diction implies an empathetic insider African American audience, and her critique confronts the white construction of black music. She added, “Leave it to white folks to write a poor score and then go out and get some baad [sic] musicians to try and salvage it,” at which point she named Joyce Brown, the black musical director, and the many black musicians who “really gigged and try to funk it up as best they could.”\textsuperscript{478} Somewhat like the inner musical-dramatic world of \textit{Raisin} itself, Howell locates authentic black music in black artists. R. H. Gardner similarly disparaged the score for its lack of black authenticity: “[It] is far from being a jazz score. Nor, despite one number performed in a church, is it gospel, soul or any of the other idioms associated with the black experience. Indeed, the only ‘ethnic’ influence apparent in the music—and the same goes for Mr. Brittan’s lyrics and Donald McKayle’s choreography—is Broadway.”\textsuperscript{479} Because the score, for Gardner, did not resonate with authentically black idioms and instead sounded like Broadway, Gardner deemed \textit{Raisin} “the whitest black production since the beginning of the black revolution.”\textsuperscript{480} By white, he maybe means comfortable, apparently unmarked, Tin Pan Alley, or commercial as opposed to provocative, raced, soulful, improvised, and for aesthetic or political purposes. He viewed music in black and white terms, though Broadway is more mixed, but the point that the musical seemed “white” made him skeptical of the musical and the

\textsuperscript{476} Ernest Schier, “A ‘Raisin’ with Fantastic Potential.”
\textsuperscript{477} Judith L. Howell, “Raisin…,” \textit{Black Stage}, 1, no. 7 (August 1973), 16.
\textsuperscript{478} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{480} Ibid.
audience’s standing ovation, which he thought might represent either “genuine enthusiasm” or “guilt-feelings.” He added that he saw only two other productions at Arena Stage that received standing ovations: The Great White Hope and No Place to Be Somebody. By noting the common theme of blackness among these plays and suggesting that they earned praise due to “guilt-feelings,” Gardner implies that white liberals supported Raisin for political reasons rather than aesthetic ones, as if these can be separated.

Although some of the reviews emphasize the predominant whiteness of the audience, Arena Stage’s internal documents suggest that black audiences attended Raisin, and that this was a noteworthy event. For the opening night of the production, Arena invited members of the Congressional Black Caucus. The stage managers occasionally noted the presence of black spectators, as if this were an unusual occurrence. The entry for June 10, 1973, observes that the house was “only about half full, and half of that black. A good show with very good response from the house, which particularly appreciated the black idiom.” On July 21, there was allegedly a “Very good audience – lot of Blacks in the audience,” while the next day the “Audience was all white (mostly) and dull.” These reports racialize spectators and their reactions, noting that black audiences were “good,” likely meaning enthusiastically responsive, in contrast to “dull” white audiences. An Arena audience survey from 1978 observes that 74.5% of the audience had more than four years of college education, and they were most frequently professional and government service workers. Although the survey does not mention racial demographics, probably because the audience was still almost entirely white, Washington, D.C.

481 Ibid.
482 Elizabeth Darr, Stage Manager’s Report, June 10, 1973, box 4, fol. 6, Arena Stage Stage Manager Reports 1950-2000, GMUL.
483 Helaine Head, Stage Manager’s Reports, July 21, 1973 and July 22, 1973, box 4, fol. 6, Arena Stage Stage Manager Reports.
had developed a large black bourgeoisie during the twentieth century. Indeed, “By 1970, government employed 57 percent of college-educated black males and 76 percent of college-educated black females.”485 At this time, 71% of Washington, D.C. residents identified as black. At a meeting with other regional theatre leaders in 1974, Zelda Fichandler alleged that 75% of the audience for Raisin was black.486 This is surely an exaggeration, but Fichandler’s account suggests that the racial mix of the audience for Raisin was a singular event.

The specific clime of D.C. likely made locals receptive to Raisin. Richard L. Coe, the foremost critic because of his position at the Washington Post, praised the musical, and the theme of his review was the sentiment: “There is an inevitability, a rightness, in the union of this musical and this theater.”487 Although he was mostly referring to the arena space matching the musical, and imagining that staging would be lost in a Broadway proscenium theatre, he may also have been alluding to the “rightness” of the racial dynamics of Washington, D.C. While Raisin was extremely commercially successful at Arena, internal documentation suggests that the musical “grossed under 60% of dollar capacity” during its first year on Broadway.488 Nemiroff asked the Fichandlers to reduce their 1% stake in the profits to 0.75% because of poor box office performance due to “resistance” from “the white theater-going audience.”489 Zelda Fichandler expressed surprise, “since the Washington audience responded so freely and fully to a play that is, is it not?, so universal in its appeal.”490 When Nemiroff took the musical to 3.5 million people across forty-two cities, he did not recoup the commercial investment. In his letter to the investors, he underscored the production’s accomplishments, including, “It was part of the

485 Rod Ferguson, Aberrations in Black, 145.
490 Ibid.
theatrical revolution of the ’70’s—indeed a forerunner that helped to change audience patterns and to bring out new audiences, on Broadway and across the nation.”

Conclusion

*Raisin* followed *The Great White Hope* in dramatizing African American struggles in ways accessible to white and black audiences; it also followed the play to the Great White Way. As an unprecedented hit in Arena Stage’s twenty-three-year history, *Raisin* signaled the appeal of popular black musicals with liberal politics. Amidst other cultural productions that either seemed too light on politics or too radical, and amidst racial, economic, and political upheaval, its sense of optimism through its very musicalization distinguished it. Finally, its multiracial authorship and music prompted position-takings on the musical’s authentic blackness.

After *Raisin*, Arena did not produce black musicals for another decade. Personal notes in the early 1970s reveal that Zelda Fichandler wanted to bring more black narratives to the stage. She created a list of possibilities: “*Les Blancs*, repeat *No Place to Be Somebody*, Ed Bullins, and Glenda Dickerson’s stuff.” This paltry list suggests that Hansberry’s work had made an impact on Fichandler given her relationships with Nemiroff and *Raisin*, that Gordone’s play was sufficiently successful with local black audiences if not with critics to bear repeating, that Bullins’s radical work was on her mind but not on her stage, and that African American director-educator Glenda Dickerson, whom Fichandler hired, provided resources for black drama.

Writing to Thomas Fichandler, Alan Schneider, and Hugh Lester on the 1973-74 season, Zelda asserted, “I think it bad if we don’t do a black play somewhere in there next season. I wanted to do one this season (I mean outside of RAISIN which, as black goes, is not really Black), but was...

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unable to find one that suited or satisfied.”^493 Marking a distinction between “black” and “Black,” she implied that the musical’s form, politics, and authorship were not radical like the work of the Black Arts movement but still within the definition of “black.” In so doing, she articulated a struggle over the meaning of blackness and a compulsion to stage a “black play”—note: not a Black play. According to meeting minutes in 1977, Thomas Fichandler also wanted to produce black plays: “the theater is continually on the lookout for good black plays but there just aren’t many to be found.”^494 In these assertions, both Fichandlers make explicit value judgments about the constitution of Black/black theatre and what counts as “good,” and decisions about season programming. As the previous chapter explored, the theatre focused on international portrayals of blackness from the 1970s through the early 1990s with a few productions by African Americans.

During this period, Ford’s Theatre took the lead with black musicals by producing the musicals conceived by Vinnette Carrol in the 1970s, Black Nativity (1981) by Langston Hughes, the world premiere of The Amen Corner (1983) based on James Baldwin’s novel, and even The Hot Mikado (1986). But starting in the 1980s, when Zelda Fichandler began a dedicated effort to African American-centered works, black musicals became an indelible part of Arena Stage. She brought to the theatre the black vaudeville show One Mo’ Time (1980), Lee Breuer’s The Gospel at Colonus (1984), the 60s revue Beehive (1986), Sandra Reaves-Phillips’s one-woman show The Late Great Ladies of Blues & Jazz (1987), and the gospel retelling of Job’s narrative Abyssinia (1988). Under Doug Wager’s artistic leadership in the 1990s, Arena presented the revue It Ain’t Nothin’ But the Blues (1996) courtesy of the Denver Center Theatre Company. When Molly Smith became artistic director in 1998, she regularly produced black musicals:

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493 Letter from Zelda Fichandler to Thomas Fichandler, Alan Schneider, and Hugh Lester, circa 1973, box 196, fol. 1, Zelda Fichandler Papers.
494 “Minutes of a Meeting of the Board of Trustees,” April 14, 1977, p. 3, box 30, fol. 5, Thomas Fichandler Papers.

The theatre’s initial venture with Raisin led the way for popular black musicals and audiences becoming a major part of the theatre’s identity and income. Toward the end of the 2009-10 season, Arena Stage produced the black revue of Duke Ellington’s music Sophisticated Ladies. The production starred Maurice Hines, who had previously been in Arena’s multiracial version of Guys and Dolls, and local talent, including the Manzari brothers, teenaged tap-dancing African Americans ghosted by Gregory and Maurice Hines. The marketing capitalized on not only the black music and performers but also the black space. Because the company’s home in Southwest D.C. was under renovation from 2007 through 2010, Arena produced and presented plays in different locations. One of those locations was the historic Lincoln Theatre on U Street, an area once known as Black Broadway, where Ellington launched his career and where black residents are highly concentrated. Arena’s investment in black capital paid off, because
*Sophisticated Ladies* broke box office records and attracted substantial black audiences. The next year, Arena Stage reopened its glistening complex with a multiracial production of *Oklahoma!*, which surpassed the sales for *Sophisticated Ladies*. Racial diversity, musicals, and U.S. branding established a blueprint for the company’s success.
CHAPTER FIVE:
ARTICULATING AMERICAN VOICES

Introduction

In 1990, to inaugurate the fortieth anniversary season, Arena Stage produced *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, a play the company had first staged in 1961 to open its permanent building. This time, in the world at large, instead of the Berlin Wall going up, the Wall had come down. In the early 1990s, U.S. non-profit stability was still shaky, as the nation experienced a recession, and the federal funding climate had become more conservative and hostile to the arts. New support for multiculturalism from foundations, corporations, and governmental agencies facilitated this production, which complicated “Caucasian,” with a multiracial cast led by Tazewell Thompson, an African American resident director and artistic associate of Arena. At the end of the 1990-91 season, Zelda Fichandler stepped down, and Doug Wager, who had worked at Arena since the 1970s, took up the artistic reins. This transition entailed both change and continuity in leadership, programming, and historical context. Increased economic and political pressures plagued Wager’s tenure, and his eclectic repertory created a blurry institutional image, ultimately leading to the appointment of Molly Smith as the new artistic director in 1998. Building upon Wager’s and thus Fichandler’s cultural diversity policies, Smith rebranded the company as a center for what Arena calls “American” voices.

Unlike Arena Stage, I put “American” into scare quotes here in order to denote the imprecise, in-process construction of U.S. nation and identity, as well as the particular problems with this term. Benedict Anderson’s theory of the “imagined community” that forms and legitimizes the bounded, sovereign nation points up the process of construction.495 In general

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usage, “American” and “America” gesture at the North American and South American continents yet often stubbornly and troublingly refer specifically to the United States of America, a rhetorical act of colonialism. I believe that the empirical and Empirical usages of “American” and “America” are nevertheless valuable to connote U.S. imperialism and exceptionalism, and the continued struggles over the nation’s meanings. In Theatre, Society, and Nation, S.E. Wilmer writes, “notions of national identity are constantly being reformulated, revised, and reasserted in an ongoing battle to assert and maintain a hegemonic notion of the nation. Likewise, subaltern groups have confronted the homogenous image represented by the dominant group in asserting a more pluralistic or counter-hegemonic identity.”496 His invocation of hegemonic discourse is crucial to my understanding of nation as narrative and power struggle. As for the connection of nation to theatre, Jeffrey D. Mason writes in the introduction to the edited collection Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater that the stage “becomes a site of this struggle, a platform where players and audience may enact conceptions of identity and community, where ‘America’ becomes both the subject and the consequence of artistic, cultural, and social negotiation.”497 The stage as space for struggle and enactment of identity, policy, and nation largely correlate with my own approach to Arena Stage and its stakes as “American.”

Arena itself has wrestled with defining “American.” Playbills from productions in the early 2000s included the following credo by Molly Smith: “Arena Stage has a special focus on VOICES OF THE AMERICAS. I believe these voices are unique to our part of the world and deserve a place to sing from,” and “Under the leadership of Artistic Director Molly Smith, Arena

497 Jeffrey D. Mason, and J. Ellen Gainor, eds., Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 4. I am nevertheless skeptical of Mason’s use of “America” versus America without scare quotes as if the former is the constructed nation whereas the latter is the somehow more real state.
Stage’s core purpose is to produce huge plays of all that is passionate, exuberant, profound, deep and dangerous in the American spirit.\textsuperscript{498} “The Americas” have been far from represented by this theatre company. While Arena had produced one play by Canadian writer Michel Tremblay, it has never produced works from Central America and South America. The string of adjectives used to describe Arena’s directive try to invoke boldness and excitement, attributing such qualities to the “American spirit” if not histories of frontiersmen and the U.S. as a superpower. Because Arena uses the locution of “American” to designate U.S.-based artists, narratives, diversity, and boldly going where few have gone before, I have chosen to follow suit so as not to misrepresent the company’s understanding of its identity and national identity. I nevertheless remain critical of how Arena mobilizes “American” in imagining its mission, repertory, and community.

In this chapter, I chart Arena’s stagings from 1990 to 2010 of American identity, which I argue is indelibly grounded in contestations over race and aspirations for equality. For my analysis of Wager’s tenure, I use interviews and materials such as letters, playbills, and grant narratives from the Arena Stage archives at George Mason University. Although some of the production materials from early in Smith’s directorship are in the archives, the collection ends effectively in 2000. My sense is that record-keeping shifted to electronic formats, and the theatre has been unwilling to share meeting minutes, financial documents, and audience survey data. As a result, I rely to a large extent upon interviews I conducted with former and current Arena Stage staff members when discussing Smith’s tenure. In addition, my experience as a dramaturgy intern in 2009 informs my understanding of the “American” rebranding. I contend that the theatre had long been invested in U.S.-based playwrights, but the period of Wager’s and Smith’s artistic directorships was particularly marked by struggles over who counts as “American”

\textsuperscript{498} \textit{Polk County} program, 2000, p. 2, 5, box 89, fol. 6, Arena Stage Dramaturgical Files, GMUL.
because of the contentious discourses in U.S. society over “cultural diversity” and “multiculturalism” and the greater competition over limited resources, pushing Arena to distinguish itself in the Washington, D.C. marketplace. From 1990 onward, Arena Stage increasingly centered on American theatre, defined as a mix of canonical plays and musicals by white male playwrights, often with multiracial casts, and new plays by emerging and established U.S. artists of color.

While Wager developed strategies of diversity management, Smith more successfully capitalized upon racial diversity as a selling point and as integral to U.S. identity. Wager collaborated with Cornerstone Theater Company and commissioned and produced works by African American artists such as Cheryl West and Anna Deavere Smith. These works formed a small but important part of the season, which was mostly devoted to European classics, as they had been under Fichandler’s directorship. New works by playwrights of color and classics featuring actors of color alienated some of Arena’s base at a time when the institution had become more financially vulnerable. In the late 1990s, Smith negotiated with the commitment to solely U.S. work and with those who objected to her stewardship as an outsider. She maintained some continuity by producing not only Cheryl West and Anna Deavere Smith but also occasional works by European playwrights. Signaling the turn to American voices, Molly Smith staged many plays by the most heralded of U.S. playwrights, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Eugene O’Neill, and Edward Albee. Her conception of American voices also deliberately included the popular form of the musical, particularly Golden Age musicals with multiracial casts, which are further explored in Chapter Six, and black musicals, whose origins I unpacked in Chapter Four, but here I draw attention to Polk County and Crowns. Smith had inherited from Wager an image crisis and the stresses of a capital campaign, which lasted from the start of her
tenure in 1998 through 2010. She ultimately turned the flagship to a steady course of racially diverse American drama for racially diverse American audiences.

My history concludes in 2010 to capture this moment of articulating Arena Stage as a kind of national theatre with the new Mead Center for American Theater in the era of President Barack Obama. The company launched the American Voices New Play Institute and a monumental edifice that encompassed the in-the-round and proscenium theatres as well as a new black box space. Both the Institute and the Center rebranded Arena as “Where American Theatre Lives.” At the same time, the election of Obama signified on the one hand the racial parity that the theatre espouses and on the other neoliberal multicultural business as usual, in which circumscribed staged diversity provides visibility for people of color but also has the potential to obscure structural material inequality.

Backdrop to Staging U.S. Drama

Notions of performing American inclusion and American playwrights had long been a part of Zelda Fichandler’s vision of Arena Stage. Arena’s promotional materials and staff members regularly call attention the theatre’s beginnings as the first theatre in Washington, D.C. to welcome a racially integrated audience, given that the National Theatre had closed down rather than obey a court order to seat black and white patrons together. They did and still do highlight both change and continuity. Alison Irvin, who arrived as a communications intern in 1994 and is now the leadership office manager, remarked, “Some specific ways change; once it was about opening doors to all audiences, and now it’s about hearing all American voices, but I feel that essence is the same.” Arena employees also emphasize that the in-the-round space

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499 “Our History,” http://www.arenastage.org/about/history/.
500 Alison Irvin, in discussion with the author, January 2015.
from the original home at the Hippodrome to the permanent space in Southwest Washington, D.C. is a democratic one. Every seat has a good sightline, and the seating arrangement cultivates a sense of *communitas*, bearing witness to and participating in the theatrical experience. Edgar Dobie, the current executive producer of the theatre, averred that the ideas of “everyone being welcome” and experiencing theatre communally are “embedded in the architecture and the actual name of [Arena Stage].” These arguments link American ideals of democracy, particularly multiracial inclusion and equality, with Arena. American playwrights also found an early home at this regional theatre. During the first season, 1950-51, Fichandler directed *The Adding Machine*, and Alan Schneider made his Arena directing debut with *The Glass Menagerie*. In 1954, Fichandler produced the Washington premiere of *The Crucible*, a play to which she returned several times. The foreword to *The Arena Adventure* was significantly penned by Arthur Miller, suggesting his close ties with the theatre.

Arena Stage continued to serve as a representative for American drama in the U.S. and abroad in the late 1960s and early 1970s. *The Great White Hope*, which I explored in Chapter Two, marked Arena’s early commitment to commissioning and producing new plays by American dramatists who often explicitly engaged with U.S. black-white racial dynamics. In addition, Fichandler’s innovation with a racially integrated acting ensemble lent new meanings to *King Lear*, *The Threepenny Opera*, and *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and again grounded U.S. identity in racial diversity. But the most momentous occasion of linking Arena Stage to American identity was its tour behind the Iron Curtain in 1973. Having been selected by the U.S. Department of State to tour *Our Town* and *Inherit the Wind*, two of the most “American” plays in the canon, Arena became a major representative of U.S. theatre and went on to tour American plays in Israel and Hong Kong.

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^501 Edgar Dobie, in discussion with the author, January 2015.
When Doug Wager arrived at Arena Stage in 1973, he brought with him an interest in European classics, new American work, and progressive politics as well as a passion for comedies. He fit Fichandler’s aesthetic and complemented it. At Boston University, he studied directing with Fichandler, and he assisted Schneider, whose productions of Albee, Pinter, and Beckett he greatly admired. As a result of his work with Schneider, Wager was invited to intern at Arena Stage, “I went there to stay for ten weeks, and I stayed for twenty-five years.”

He worked on the running crew, stage managed, read scripts, directed new works for the series called “In the Process,” and, when a director dropped out, he was invited to direct his first mainstage production, *Gemini* by Albert Innaurato, during the 1977-78 season. The following season, he directed *Curse of the Starving Class* and then the next year *You Can’t Take It with You*, which Arena took to Hong Kong. At this point, he became the theatre’s first literary manager, and he was promoted to associate director, receiving Fichandler’s tutelage on how to manage the institution. During the 1980s, Wager directed several more works by George S. Kaufman (*The Man Who Came to Dinner* with Moss Hart; *Animal Crackers* with Morrie Ryskind, Bert Kalmar, and Harry Ruby; *The Cocoanuts* with Irving Berlin) as well as other musicals including *Candide*, *Tomfoolery*, *On the Town*, and *Merrily We Roll Along*. By staging popular plays and forms that also had cultural capital, Wager brought more levity to Arena’s seasons. He also directed classics such as *Measure for Measure* and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Wager had shaped and strengthened Arena Stage’s aesthetic for many years, and Fichandler had given him guidance long before he gained the position of artistic director, thereby facilitating a fairly smooth transition in leadership in 1991. He already had relationships with the staff. Having worked in stage management, Wager helped to ease friction between the “upstairs” management

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502 Doug Wager, in discussion with the author, October 2014.
and “downstairs” production employees. However, he would have to negotiate new and intensified difficulties with balancing the budget and the demands of multiculturalism.

**Doug Wager and Managing the Economics of Cultural Diversity**

From the start of his tenure as artistic director, Wager signaled that he would continue Fichandler’s aesthetic and cultural diversity policies. In a letter to subscribers, he described Arena Stage as his home for years and “yours” too, evoking a sense of communal ownership. He added, “I intend to build on our legacy of artistic excellence, providing a rich mix of classics, new works, musicals and culturally diverse offerings.” He thus continued to produce an eclectic repertory with new work by playwrights of color. Wager also continued the Allen Lee Hughes Fellowship program, which uniquely offered opportunities to young theatre artists and administrators of color. This program was remarkably successful, considering that solely during Wager’s tenure, the dramaturgy fellows included Marvin McAllister, Faedra Chatard Carpenter, and Yuko Kurahashi, who have all become theatre professors. In addition, Wager worked to sustain Fichandler’s multiracial acting ensemble, but over time it fell apart due to internal and external tensions interwoven with economic and cultural diversity concerns.

Although Wager worked to extend the path formed by Fichandler, the terrain of multiculturalism was uneven and unexplored, and the federal financial climate was increasingly inhospitable to the arts. By the early 1990s, “multiculturalism” had become a highly contested term and policy, particularly in the context of canonical literature taught in elite universities. To map out the field briefly, the right bemoaned attacks on the white, male, western canon; attempted to separate arts from politics; and implied that artistic works by women, people of

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504 Ibid.
color, and authors from the Third World were of inferior aesthetic quality. The left critiqued the
canon for its social reproduction of power structures and called for new systems and approaches
that attend to material inequalities and differences. Finally, the center positioned itself as neutral
in order to advise reforming the canon through pluralism, the inclusion of some Others whose
artistic productions represented differences but ultimately confirmed shared humanistic and
aesthetic values. In the sphere of theatre, these arguments played out in the Miss Saigon
controversy and the Robert Brustein-August Wilson debates, which took place in New York
City.

Because Brustein was an influential center-right interlocutor during the 1990s, it is
important to spend some time unpacking his views. Since 1959, he has been writing for the New
to be either a suitable or effective place for social reform or moral blackmail … we must beware
of confusing quality with good intentions.” Because he disavowed the politics of art, his
definition of art necessarily excludes cultural productions that articulate a progressive political
point of view and that make him feel guilty as a wealthy white man. During and after the debate
with Wilson, Brustein insisted that he supports a particular kind of multiculturalism: “My

505 For staking out different positions around multiculturalism, see Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield, eds.,
Mapping Multiculturalism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). For liberal humanist arguments, see
Amy Gutmann, ed., Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
1994). For critical multiculturalism, see David Palumbo-Liu, ed., The Ethnic Canon: Histories Institutions and
Interventions (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
506 For more on Miss Saigon, see Karen Shimakawa, National Abjection: The Asian American Body on Stage
Cambridge University Press, 2006). For more on the Brustein-Wilson debates, see Angela Pao, No Safe Spaces: Re-
casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010) and
Brandi Wilkins Catanese, The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black
507 For more on the political history of The New Republic, see Jeet Heer, “The New Republic’s Legacy on Race: A
legacy-race.
(Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1994), 16. Most of the articles published in this book and in Cultural Calisthenics were
originally published in the New Republic.
writings and actions are clear testimony to my support for the richness of multiculturalism so long as it is not a pretext for promoting race hatred or generating separatism.”

He therefore condemned plays by Wilson, David Henry Hwang, and George C. Wolfe for critiquing white supremacy and imperialism, and he believed that these playwrights were produced solely because they were U.S. racial minorities. His arguments called for “quality” plays that maintain status quo power structures. Brustein particularly condemned foundations such as the Lila Wallace Reader’s Digest Fund for funding the diversification of theatre artists and audiences. This Fund was a major source of contributed income for Arena Stage. Brustein saw less value in producing plays of color and in diversifying audiences due to their explicit politics or “social engineering.” On a highly personal note that betrays Brustein’s subjective position, he objected to new funding criteria because his theatre company, the American Repertory Theatre, had received less funding from these sorts of organizations in the early 1990s than it had in earlier times.

Contestations over which theatremakers and theatergoers should be funded were part of a larger national debate on multiculturalism. During President George Bush’s term, the federal government and thus other funders became averse to supporting any art that appeared controversial, meaning shocking and often leftist. The congressional allocation for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) had been decreasing or stagnating since the 1980s under Ronald Reagan. In 1990, John Frohnmayer, the head of the NEA, vetoed the grants that had been awarded to performance artists Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes, who became known as the NEA 4 and whose work critically engaged with bodies, gender, and sexuality. From then on, the NEA no longer distributed grants to individual artists, and the grants

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included a decency clause. Although most Americans supported at least some federal subsidy for the arts, right-wing politicians and pundits steered the conversation toward how taxpayers’ money should not be given to purportedly objectionable art.

Challenges to critical multiculturalism and to the NEA influenced Arena Stage’s artistic, financial, and institutional programs. Because it is located in Washington, D.C., the theatre could rely on governmental support only at the federal and city levels, not state. In 1990, Zelda Fichandler testified to the congressional subcommittee on interior appropriations to call for support of the arts. Arena had recently received a $1 million three-to-one NEA challenge grant, the largest in its history, for its cultural diversity initiatives. That one-time grant covered four years, and it did not appear that other foundations would sustain those programs thereafter. The upheavals over what deserves to be funded caused the theatre to develop more stable streams of income and to alter its policies accordingly. When Wager became artistic director during the summer of 1991, his first action was to furlough everybody for two weeks in order to balance the budget. This fierce gesture became an annual practice during his tenure. Although Arena had an endowment of approximately $6 million, it was still reeling from deficits of $450,000 two years in a row in the late 1980s. In 1991, the budget was $10 million, and at the financial low point of Wager’s tenure, it was $8 million. According to Wager, “My tenure as artistic director began in a crisis, and the crisis only got worse as I went along no matter what we did. We had to keep up the appearance that nothing was wrong on stage. We had to keep the quality of the work going, but we had to compromise our commitments to people in ways that would somehow try to preserve the ethos and the emotional integrity of what we committed to doing without being able to back it up financially.”

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511 Doug Wager, in discussion with the author, October 2014.
As a result, Arena collaborated with more business partners and reduced aspects of its artistic programs, much of which was intimately tied up with cultural diversity initiatives. To associate its corporate branding with cultural diversity, AT&T sponsored several productions written and performed by black artists including *A Small World* by Mustapha Matura, *Blues for an Alabama Sky* by Pearl Cleage, and *House Arrest* by Anna Deavere Smith. Arena also sought out more co-productions with regional theatres to save on costs. During the 1996-97 season, Arena staged four co-productions: *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, *It Ain’t Nothin’ But the Blues*, *Molly Sweeney*, and *Sunday in the Park with George*. By the end of Wager’s tenure, Arena produced eight mainstage plays as opposed to nine, resulting in shorter seasons.

Because of economics and racial politics, the acting company also suffered. In my interviews with various staff members who have worked at Arena Stage, almost every one of them emphasized that the resident ensemble distinguished this regional theatre from the rest. Therefore, its loss significantly altered the theatre’s identity. In 1984, Arena had won a four-year ongoing ensembles grant from the NEA to support twenty actors for entire seasons. In 1992, Arena’s resident acting ensemble boasted eighteen company actors, ten of whom were on full-season contracts. Over time, the theatre could offer only part-season contracts. As a consequence, some actors were drawn to other acting opportunities beyond the stage. By the end of Wager’s tenure, the acting company no longer existed. Offering full season contracts and producing large-scale plays were expensive endeavors. According to Wager, the fundraising efforts of the development office shifted toward cultural diversity rather than the ongoing ensemble, meaning that the latter lacked grant support.\(^{512}\) Because productions in the Arena and Kreeger spaces overlapped with one another, it was difficult to schedule seasons that used the actors efficiently. Wager attempted to align actors with new play workshops and readings when

\(^{512}\) Ibid.
not on the mainstage, but the new play program lacked a predictable timetable. According to Kyle Donnelly, who served as associate artistic director from 1992 to 1998, “Some members of the company had been there for many, many years, and it was quite shocking and painful for them to consider having to go out and drum up work as actors. Part of the problem I think is that the company hadn’t had new blood or been shaken up in a while.” Laurence Maslon, who had worked as literary manager of Arena since the 1980s and then became an associate artist under Wager, reflected, “We had a resident ensemble that was skewed older, and they were never terribly psyched about doing new plays.” At the end of Fichandler’s tenure, more actors of color had joined the resident ensemble, changing programming. The increase in productions of classics with actors of color and of new plays by writers of color triggered some ill will within the company. For example, a white actress in the company is said to have resented that when Arena produced *The Glass Menagerie*, she was finally the appropriate age to play Amanda, but because this was an all-black production, the role went to Ruby Dee. To some of the white actors, it appeared that the actors of color received more opportunities. Although it is true that people of color secured more roles than they had before, some new plays by black playwrights such as *I Am a Man* by OyamO had prominent roles for white actors, while updated classics, namely *The Odyssey* by Derek Walcott, were cast with white leads.

Wager nonetheless remained committed to a center-left version of multiculturalism as a strategy to try to hold onto older white subscribers, welcome younger audiences of color, and adhere to cultural diversity grant guidelines. In early articulations of his vision, Wager mobilized economic diction with the belief that increased cultural diversity would generate economic and cultural capital. He called for the “participation of multicultural artists working with a

513 Kyle Donnelly, in discussion with the author, March 2015.
514 Laurence Maslon, in discussion with the author, September 2011.
515 Guy Bergquist, in discussion with the author, January 2015.
multicultural ensemble to attract an ever-increasing multicultural audience.”\footnote{516}{“Arena Stage Announces New Voices for a New America a Comprehensive New Play Research and Development Program,” Press release, November 12, 1992, box 40, fol., 19, Arena Stage Historical Documents, GMUL.} To Wager, cultural diversity was “a resourceful investment in the growth of Arena’s artistic mission. Growth, not retrenchment, is critical to our desire to invigorate, deepen and clarify our sense of purpose, especially in light of the current economy and the challenge of creating a new theater for a new America in our nation’s capital in the nineties.”\footnote{517}{Ibid.}

### Change and Continuity in Repertory, Marketing, and Audiences

The 1991-92 season—Wager’s first as artistic director—as well as playbills in which he articulated his vision, demographic information, and subscribers’ responses to that first season illustrate contestations over cultural diversity and who has ownership of Arena Stage. During Wager’s tenure, the playbill for almost every show included a full page entitled “Perspectives from the Artistic Director.” In the playbill for \textit{Trinidad Sisters}, Mustapha Matura’s Caribbean adaptation of Chekhov, Wager pontificated on multiculturalism, asking “When we use the term multiculturalism, do we really know what we are saying?” and “Multiculturalism has, in a sense, become a euphemism for the new America, and yet has America ever truly been anything other than multicultural?”\footnote{518}{“Perspectives from the Artistic Director,” \textit{Trinidad Sisters} playbill, 1992, p. 3, box 103, fol. 3, Arena Stage Production Books 1950-2000, GMUL.} By positing these questions, Wager demonstrates that definitions are up for debate, and that they are historical. He shows an attentiveness to material differences as part of American identity. At the same time, however, he positions the varying definitions as “Fundamentally … an issue of perception” and writes, “I willingly accept the role of navigator,” identifying multiculturalism as a liberal philosophy that you may choose, interpret, and navigate
as a free willed subject rather than as a structural policy that organizes people and distributes resources. The program for Trinidad Sisters includes essays on Trinidadian history, on The Three Sisters, and on remapping Chekhov’s play to the economic, racial, colonial, and educational anxieties of three Trinidadian sisters. Indeed, all the playbills during Wager’s tenure include extensive dramaturgy to teach the audience about the cultural and historical contexts of plays as well as about the various cultural diversity programs Arena Stage produced, positioning the theatre as an educational and liberal institution that was up to date with the 1990s.

The 1991-92 season largely maintained Fichandler’s aesthetic, although the slots for Eastern European and Russian plays were filled by new black plays, and the season was representative of what Wager produced during the rest of his tenure. The season included The Time of Your Life, by William Saroyan; Yerma, by Federico Garcia Lorca; A Wonderful Life, book and lyrics by Sheldon Harnick and music by Joe Raposo; Jar the Floor, by Cheryl West; The School for Wives, by Molière; The Father with The Stronger, by August Strindberg; Trinidad Sisters, by Mustapha Matura; Mrs. Klein, by Nicholas Wright; and The Visit by Friedrich Durrenmatt. Thus, the nine-play season template typically included one musical, two black plays, one classic American play, three or four European classics, and one or two new American plays; and of those plays, at least one would be a comedy. These categories crudely and significantly distinguish “black” from “American,” the latter tacitly denoting “white,” but as playwrights and literary managers aver in the new play study Outrageous Fortune, the slot for a playwright of color, typically African American and produced in February for Black History Month, is common practice at major regional theatres.

519 Ibid.
But demarcating race, artists, and plays is not that simple. The 1994-95 dramaturgy fellow Faedra Chatard Carpenter remarked, “I do think there was a reason why I dramaturged, [as] the young black dramaturg, Derek Walcott’s *The Odyssey*, because the other play that I got assigned while I was there was Cheryl West’s *Holiday Heart*, so another African American play. But here is the wrench thrown in: I also dramaturged *Long Day’s Journey into Night* by Eugene O’Neill, directed by Douglas Wager.” Carpenter offers a complex narrative of black artists working on “black” and “white” plays. Moreover, any play that is off-white is frequently counted as cultural diversity. By this mode of multiculturalism, certain artists and stories of color that signify difference and similarity are included under an already existing white, western rubric rather than calling that rubric into question. Such was the logic of Wager’s using the “Perspectives” page in the playbill for *Yerma* to draw attention to Arena’s cultural diversity initiatives, specifically by means of an anecdote about the Latina directing fellow and Asian American literary manager. Because the play was written by a Spanish playwright, not a Latina/o American playwright, and directed by Tazewell Thompson, an African American director, *Yerma* functioned as cultural difference but also as comfortable European contemporary classic. In the “Long Range Plan,” Wager commented that “eclecticism can be an approach to programmatically achieving the thematic diversification of our mission,” subsuming diversity within eclecticism, or instead of racial and cultural diversity, posing a diversity of ideas, practices, and aesthetics that maintain the center.

Arena surveyed its audience during the 1991-92 season, revealing increased racial diversity and corresponding ticket-buying patterns. When the theatre had conducted

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521 Faedra Carpenter, in discussion with the author, November 2014.
demographic research in 1985, it determined that 93% of the audience was white.\textsuperscript{524} In 1992, the audience was 88% white, 7% black, 1% Latina/o, 1% Asian, and 3% other.\textsuperscript{525} Marketing minutes from this period indicate that “Funders are looking to Arena to achieve an audience comprised of at least 5% people of color,” which seems like a low bar that Arena cleared easily and suggests that other regional theatre were lagging far behind.\textsuperscript{526} White patrons were on average much older than black patrons.\textsuperscript{527} Out of all the tickets purchased by black patrons in the 1991-92 season, half of them were for \textit{Jar the Floor} by Cheryl West, and one fifth of them were for \textit{Trinidad Sisters}.\textsuperscript{528} Black patrons tended to be single-ticket buyers rather than full-season subscribers.\textsuperscript{529} These data indicate that black consumers were more interested in specific plays written by and about black people than in plays such as \textit{Yerma}, which made up only 5% of the black audience ticket sales.\textsuperscript{530}

These trends are also the result of marketing directives. While implicitly white stage productions were marketed widely, black plays were marketed to specific minoritized groups, reinforcing the idea that the former were universal, while the latter were special interest-oriented. The 1995-96 Communications Plan illustrates these different strategies. For example, the Communications Committee located the target audiences for \textit{Candide} as “Active Theater Goers, Traditionalist, Pop, Family, Student, Tour and Adult Groups. Previous musical, and comedy buyers to Arena. Musical buyers from other arts organizations,” and therefore advertised in

\textsuperscript{524} Abramson Research, Attitudes of the Arena Stage Audience, 1984-85, p. 5, box 17, fol. 3, Thomas Fichandler Papers, GMUL.
\textsuperscript{527} “Age Ranges, By Ethnicity,” c. 1992, box 121, fol. 22, Arena Stage Production Books.
\textsuperscript{528} “Show Distribution & Breakdown By Ethnicity,” Ibid.
\textsuperscript{529} “Subscriber Distribution By Ethnicity,” Ibid.
\textsuperscript{530} “Show Distribution & Breakdown By Ethnicity,” Ibid.
major newspapers such as the *Washington Post*.\(^{531}\) Meanwhile, the imagined audiences for *Holiday Heart* by African American playwright Cheryl West were “Pop, Experimental, African American, Group, some crossover with Active Theater Goers. Previous ticket buyers for Cheryl’s plays at Arena.”\(^{532}\) The committee aired many concerns about how to market this play because of its dark ending, “literary content, plot twists and character of the drag queen are difficult to talk about. Tends to put people off.”\(^{533}\) As a consequence, the communications team planned to spend most of its advertising resources on black radio stations and to reach out to black churches, drug rehabilitation groups, and lesbian and gay organizations. By producing West’s works, Arena fulfilled missions of staging African Americans, diversifying audiences, and connecting with local social justice organizations.

From 1990 to 1996, Arena Stage produced three plays by Cheryl West: *Before It Hits Home*, *Jar the Floor*, and *Holiday Heart*. Newly appointed artistic associate Tazewell Thompson brought her work to the attention of Zelda Fichandler because part of his job as the sole African American artist-administrator on the leadership team was to help diversify the theatre’s programming. West had studied U.S. socio-cultural politics and worked as an HIV counselor, a background that informed her playwriting about African American experiences. In *Before It Hits Home*, West dramatizes the struggles of a bisexual black man with HIV/AIDS and a bourgeois family that largely rejects him. She recounted her difficulty getting the play produced, “I heard disparaging comments such as, ‘Our subscribers would be offended by the language’; ‘We have already done our black play and we don’t want to exhaust our black audience.’ There were even threats of boycotts, outrage that I must be a white woman, because no responsible black woman


\(^{532}\) *Holiday Heart,* Ibid.

\(^{533}\) Ibid.
could have written such a lie—after all, blacks don’t get AIDS.” By the early 1990s, blacks made up a quarter of Americans diagnosed with AIDS. In “Engaging Social Issues, Expressing a Political Outlook,” Gwynn MacDonald links black bourgeois silence about HIV/AIDS and homophobia to respectability politics, developed to cope with a history of over-sexualized images of blacks and of white supremacy. In this context, “During the Washington run, audience reaction to Wendal and his male lover was often hostile – at several performances, men in the audience groaned, hissed and sometimes even shouted their disapproval.” But the professional premiere by Arena Stage received tremendously positive reviews for the play’s realistic aesthetic and politics. Jacqueline Trescott of the Washington Post asserted, “the Bailey family groans, fights, laughs, yells, lies, and hugs in a manner like the social realism of Lorraine Hansberry, Charles Gordone and August Wilson,” thereby placing West alongside other African American playwrights Arena had produced and who had been legitimized. West earned further symbolic capital when Before It Hits Home won the Susan Blackburn Prize, the first time a black playwright had ever won this award for best play written by a woman. Wager subsequently produced Jar the Floor, which dealt with four generations of black women and the social reproduction of domestic abuse, and Holiday Heart, which explored the coming-of-age of a black girl raised by a drug-addicted mother and a drag queen.

West’s rise to prominence mediated a growing trend in major regional theatres producing new plays by African American artists, largely due to the support of foundations interested in cultivating cultural diversity. According to Kathy A. Perkins, the number of plays written by

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African American women and produced by regional theatres was three in 1989, fifteen per year from 1990 to 1993, and then twenty-five per year from 1993 to 1998. She adds that, “From roughly 1992 to 2003, Cheryl West, Pearl Cleage, Suzan-Lori-Parks, Endesha Holland, and Anna Deavere Smith were the most produced black playwrights.” All five of these black women were produced at Arena Stage in the early 1990s and thereafter, suggesting that this company was a leader in regularly staging their work. Reflecting upon her history with this theatre, West praised Fichandler and Thompson, described Arena as a “home” for her work, and emphasized that Arena was “risky” in its programming. During Wager’s tenure, mainstage productions by black artists or about black people were the following: *Jar the Floor* by Cheryl West, *Trinidad Sisters* by Mustapha Matura (91-92); *The African Company Presents Richard III* by Carlyle Brown, *Blood Knot* by Athol Fugard (92-93); *Fires in the Mirror* by Anna Deavere Smith, *A Small World* by Mustapha Matura (93-94); *The Odyssey* by Derek Walcott, *I Am a Man* by OyamO (94-95); *Holiday Heart* by Cheryl West, *Coming of the Hurricane* by Keith Glover (95-96); *Blues for an Alabama Sky* by Pearl Cleage, *It Ain’t Nothin’ But the Blues* by Charles Bevel, Lita Gaithers, Randal Myler, Ron Taylor, and Dan Wheetman (96-97); and *House Arrest: First Edition* by Anna Deavere Smith, *Black No More* by Syl Jones (97-98). Most of these plays were written in realistic modes and engaged with either histories of struggle and bittersweet triumph or pressing contemporary issues.

West’s relationship with Arena was not, however, entirely smooth, indicating a tense inclusion of black artists. West’s letters to Fichandler and to Wager suggest that she felt slighted by specific staff members who openly disparaged her work, likely for racist and sexist reasons,
and there was poor communication between the theatre and her agent: “Unfortunately, I no longer feel trusting or welcome at the Arena. It pains me because it has been such a fertile learning ground for me as an artist. Am I to assume that the above are isolated incidents that happen to every artist who works at the Arena or am I to assume that this treatment is particular to me?”

Preserving a relationship with West and an image of friendliness with African American artists and audiences was important to Arena at the same time that the theatre was losing some of its longtime subscribers. In a communications meeting about I Am a Man, a historical play about the black sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis in 1968 alongside the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., audience researcher Mark Shugoll advised “that Arena be careful about emphasizing this show as a black play that might evoke negative feelings about Arena’s multicultural efforts.” Yet I Am a Man became the second highest group ticket-selling show in Arena’s history, grossed more than $500,000, and was their twenty-eighth most profitable play up to that point. Even as producing such plays may have lost white subscribers, this practice drew new audiences.

At the end of Wager’s first season as artistic director, Arena studied focus groups consisting of lapsed subscribers. The exigency for this research was because of a “predicted $250,000 shortfall in subscriptions income due to decrease in renewal rate” for the 1992-93 season, and 70% of non-renewers contacted said that they did not like last season’s play selection and felt that “Arena is becoming an African American theater.” Arena staff had also collected letters from former subscribers, circulated them amongst themselves, and put post-it notes on

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541 Letter from Cheryl West to Doug Wager, January 31, 1992, box 40, fol. 11, Arena Stage Historical Records.
542 “Minutes of the Arena Stage Communications Committee Meeting,” April 28, 1994, p. 5, box 123, fol. 22, Arena Stage Production Books.
544 “Minutes of the Arena Stage Communications Committee Meeting,” September 14, 1993, p. 4, box 122, fol. 18, Arena Stage Production Books.
them with remarks such as, “Did we just lose another racist?” Most of the letter writers avowed that they were not racist because they enjoyed new plays by African Americans about African Americans, but they found mixed-race casting in classics to be “disconcerting,” “distracting,” and “contrived” and “interfered with the integrity of many of the plays.” These former subscribers often asserted that Arena would not put white actors into Fences or A Raisin in the Sun, collapsing the material differences and inequalities of blackface with casting people of color in implicitly white classics. Many of them critiqued black artists in an attempt to frame the issue as being about quality. Others distinguished true art from politics: “Arena may not consider itself a professional theater company but rather a community activist organization which produces plays.” Moreover, they resented what appeared to be a prioritizing of black patrons over white patrons, who were positioned as the “real” and loyal audience and a powerful bloc force: “What is driving this perceived need for increased cultural diversity? If, as one of your personnel indicated to me on the phone, it stems from a desire to meet the ‘culturally diverse’ needs of the community, then I can only say, based on our years of observation, that this cultural diversity is not now, nor has it ever been, reflected in the Arena Stage audience.” Another threatened, “Beware that you do not alienate your longest, strongest, and most loyal supporters who will leave Arena and Kreeger in protest over your shoving your latter-day liberalism down their throats.” Others were more explicit in their allegiances to white supremacy, such as one patron who returned the 1992-93 subscription brochure and wrote on it,

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545 Unsigned letter to Doug Wager, April 28, 1992 with post-it note likely written by Wager, box 18, fol. 13, Arena Stage Correspondence, GMUL. Next eight letters in the same box.
546 Letter from Mari Noster to Director, July 16, 1991.
550 Letter from Mari Noster to Director, July 16, 1991.
552 Unsigned letter to Doug Wager, n.d.
“You must be kidding! Looking through this brochure was such a sickening experience – hardly a white person anywhere. No wonder everyone we know has stopped going to Arena.”

The research from the focus groups, which were all-white in order to make patrons feel more comfortable expressing themselves, confirmed the tenor of these letters. Many of them remarked that the cultural diversity initiatives were “admirable,” but they expressed “negative attitudes about non-traditional casting, selecting plays too laden with social messages, producing inferior plays just because they are written by non-white playwrights or deal with issues of interest to non-white audiences, casting non-white actors that are not as strong as some other actors in the company, and employing black directors not as talented as other directors used in the season.”

The former subscribers said that they were emphatically not affected by the change in leadership from Fichandler to Wager. This suggests that Wager was continuing the artistic and political policies of his predecessors, and older white subscribers were alienated to discover that multiculturalism at Arena Stage was to be an institutionalized effort rather than a passing fad.

New Voices for a New America

Wager called his chief cultural diversity initiative New Voices for a New America. He wrote, “A new America is forming on the horizon. It is incumbent upon Arena Stage to recognize that, as Americans, we are citizens of a growing, diverse, global community, and, as a theater, we strive to fulfill our destiny as visionary interpreters of the human experience.” The end of the Cold War and the rise of globalization shifted U.S. international positioning.

However, I would not go as far to say that the 1990s marked the dawn of a “new America”

553 “Give the Gift of Theatre,” 1992-93 season brochure.
554 Mark Shugoll, “Focus Group Study with Long-Term and Short-Term Subscribers,” December 1993, p. 3-4, box 123, fol. 1, Arena Stage Production Books.
conjured here because people of color had long constituted the nation from African slavery to Asian immigration. Still, Wager argued that Arena’s artists and audiences as Americans and global citizens had a responsibility to attend to diversity, framed as global and grounded in humanism. He located Arena as leading the charge. As a result, Arena’s repertory recommitted to global, mostly European classics—but not Russian and Eastern European works—and opened up space for generating new plays by U.S. playwrights of color, specifically African Americans who, in the context of Washington, D.C. and American identity, stood in for notions of diversity and modernity.556

The centerpiece of New Voices for a New America was PlayQuest. This program followed in the tradition of Arena’s earlier new play development initiatives, a narrative that often begins with The Great White Hope and then In the Process in the 1970s and Stage Four in the 1980s.557 A program to commission, develop, and produce new plays largely by artists of color, PlayQuest was designed to create a new body of work for the American theater as we approach the twenty-first century: plays that tell new and multivared stories, which invite the participation of a multicultural ensemble for artists and an increasingly multicultural audience. Because Arena Stage does not believe that these stories will come magically over the transom with the morning mail, we are creating, commissioning and developing new work so that it might appear on our mainstage and become a component of the great plays of world drama that annually form Arena’s eight-play season.558

556 The only Asian play produced at Arena Stage was Lady Precious Stream by S.I. Hsiung in 1952. The staff of the Chinese Embassy attended the production, and the U.S. State Department took photographs for its publication in Hong Kong. In 2012, Zelda Fichandler told me that one of her regrets is not staging more Asian works at Arena. 557 See for example, “Arena Stage New Works Statement of Purpose,” box 4, fol. 13, Arena Stage Production Notebooks. 558 “What Is PlayQuest?,” c. 1993, box 4, fol. 14, Arena Stage Production Notebooks.
This multiculturalist model of inclusion sought to produce works for the theatre’s multiracial acting ensemble and increasingly diverse audience. These new plays would theoretically move up from a barebones staging in the Old Vat Room to the mainstage. The program aptly identified the reality that playwrights of color do need dedicated support. But it implied that their great plays did not exist outside the purview of Arena, and it centered Arena as the white arbiter of excellence on who might enter the canon. Although the grant requests and promotional materials for PlayQuest emphasized the commissions of writers of color including Cheryl West, Silas Jones, Alonzo Lamont, Jr., Mustapha Matura, and Carlyle Brown, these materials often deemphasized the fact that the program also commissioned many white playwrights to write new plays and translations of European classics. While many of the slots in the Old Vat Room went to playwrights of color, few of those productions actually transferred to the mainstage. Although some of the plays were published, Laurence Maslon lamented, “We never really created what I wanted, which was a kind of battalion of writers out there who could write for our city and write for our company.”

In a grant application to the Rockefeller Foundation in the early 1990s, Arena asserted, “We have clearly come to the crest of the hill in support of minority playwriting voices, both at Arena and in the nationwide theatrical community.” This assertion is rather premature by implying that racial justice has already been achieved. The grant narrative continues, “Plays are no longer concerned solely with racism and revolt, but with identity issues, health issues, cultural issues, entertainment issues, business issues, as they affect both non-white and white society.” This claims a logic of center-liberal multiculturalism that celebrates plays that have moved away from “racism and revolt” and toward other issues. To the Rockefeller

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559 Laurence Maslon, in discussion with the author, September 2011.
560 Grant Proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation, p. 5, box 4, fol. 13, Arena Stage Production Notebooks.
561 Ibid.
Foundation, such an aesthetic-political move would be viewed as making works of color more varied and more appealing to white subscribers while still attracting bourgeois black audiences.

As part of New Voices for a New America, Arena Stage collaborated with Cornerstone Theater on *A Community Carol* in 1993. The company was co-founded by Bill Rauch and Alison Carey and works with U.S. communities to create and stage performances, often adaptations of classic works that resonate with local and contemporary socio-political issues. Cornerstone was initially an itinerant company that traveled to mostly rural communities but then settled in Los Angeles in 1992 to develop cycles of plays with the city’s multiracial population. In 1991, after Wager watched Cornerstone’s production of *The Winter’s Tale* on the National Mall, he reached out to Rauch and Carey. In *Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-Based Theater*, Sonja Kuftinec documents the Arena-Cornerstone collaboration on adapting Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* with the largely black and working-class community East of the Anacostia River. This community is physically close to Arena Stage but cut off by various barriers including a river, unaffordable ticket prices, and the appearance of inaccessibility to an elite, white space. According to Kuftinec,

> Arena would be sharing a classic holiday story with its traditional audience base while the production would also serve the company’s growing concern with diversity. Arena’s resources and experience would allow Cornerstone members to invest more time in the community, produce a more fully realized production, reach a larger audience in the nation’s capital, and expose this audience to a rethinking of regional theatre conventions.\(^{562}\)

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The companies developed an advisory board to work with the East of Anacostia community and ultimately cast ten adults and ten children from the community.

Still, Kuftinec highlights tensions among Arena, Cornerstone, and the East of Anacostia participants. For example, Arena had budgeted the production to be the highest grossing of the season and lamented the lost income from pay-what-you-can tickets, which were offered to members of the East of Anacostia community. Kuftinec critiques Arena’s liberal humanist approach that celebrates “artistic excellence” and disavows politics, which manifested in some company members thinking of Cornerstone as amateurish and overly inclusive or “politically correct.” Maslon, who worked with Rauch, Carey, and short story writer Ed Jones on the text of *A Community Carol*, remarked that the production was “a little too much of a Christmas pudding. Every possible person, sexual preference and religion was on the stage.”

Kuftinec observes that the collaboration ultimately changed little of Arena’s hierarchical structure, profit motives, and elite audience base. But at least Wager was open to expanding Arena and conceptions of the United States to include greater racial and economic diversity. In the program for *A Community Carol*, Wager wrote,

> I pray that all those politically correct buzzwords [i.e. “community” and “outreach”], so helpful to us in our recent past, are quickly rendered obsolete for the sake of our common future. As theater artists and audiences we have the power to imagine them out of

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563 Quoted in Ibid., 162.
564 Quoted in Ibid., 181.
565 Marvin McAllister, in discussion with the author, November 2014.
existence by participating in our creative community in a new way, like this season’s Dickens project.\footnote{Doug Wager, “Perspectives from the Artistic Director,” 1993, p. 5, box 28, fol. 4, Arena Stage Production Books.}

By inviting Arena’s artists and audiences to imagine a new American community, Wager emphasizes commonality and posits a utopia based on shared art that hurriedly gets over “politically correct buzzwords,” without attending to the traction and history of material inequality and differences. Perhaps because Arena’s multicultural repertory alienated some subscribers, Wager was trying to use specific celebratory diversity-driven productions and meditations on those productions to ease frictions.

Arena’s commission of Anna Deavere Smith underscores these tensions of desiring cultural productions that imagine multicultural harmony in ways that do not necessarily radically restructure power dynamics. As another part of “New Voices for a New America” that centered on the nation’s capital, Arena developed “Millennium Voices” “to illuminate American character and values in all of their diversity as we approach the year 2000.”\footnote{“A Proposal to Philip Morris Companies in Support of Millennium Voices: A New Initiative of Arena Stage,” October 23, 1996, box 29, fol. 14, Arena Stage Dramaturgical Files.} In 1993, Arena had presented Smith’s \textit{Fires in the Mirror}, and Wager approached the performance artist to create a new piece about the culture of Washington, D.C. for this new program. By the mid-1990s, Smith had won a MacArthur “genius” grant and gained acclaim for \textit{Fires in the Mirror} and \textit{Twilight: Los Angeles}, which explored racial tensions in the Crown Heights riots and Rodney King riots, respectively. For her series \textit{On the Road: A Search for American Character}, her process involves interviewing a diverse array of Americans related to her subject of study and then embodying their words, mannerisms, and movements in ways that illustrate their multiple perspectives and histories. Her performance is foregrounded by her own body and identity as a light-skinned African American woman. In “Embodying Hybridity: Anna Deavere Smith’s Identity Cross-
Overs,” Xavier Lemoine celebrates how “Smith displaces fixed understandings of identity in her own characters, and potentially in the audience, by mobilizing a hybrid theatricality based on process, difference, and multiplicity.” Precisely this model of multicultural hybridity that destabilizes identity and implies that identities are separate and offers embodied empathy with “Others” made and continues to make Smith’s work attractive to liberal theatre institutions. Cherise Smith suggests this argument in Enacting Others when she asks, “Is the artist’s display of her dissimilarity a critical intervention in the re-presentation of identity, difference, and the politics of identity, or is it a strategy for reveling in difference in order to engage in liberal humanist homogenizing?” and her answer is, “Both.” The scholar problematizes how the performance artist frames the performance as neutral and potentially reifies racialized stereotypes, but ultimately “promulgates a discursive ambivalence that leaves the texts open to radically different interpretations wherein difference matters, or it doesn’t,” a politics and aesthetic allows Anna Deavere Smith to accommodate spectators across a right-center-left spectrum.

For Arena Stage, Smith developed a new work entitled House Arrest to explore the press and the presidency. The project initially emerged from a desire to analyze Bill Clinton’s campaign. Smith realized that all she knew about the U.S. President was mediated by the press, and that Washington, D.C. culture was deeply imbricated in white patriarchy and navel-gazing: “This is what I see in Washington in 2000. The people there have themselves to identify with.” Smith therefore attempted to complicate identification by showing myriad viewpoints, adopting

570 Ibid., 188.
critical empathy, and teasing out the power dynamics of political representation. A proposal for funding, however, referred to *House Arrest* as “this deeply probing and non-partisan effort,” deemphasizing politics. In her autobiography *Talk to Me*, Smith recounts her three-year research process, for which she conducted 500 interviews that revealed how the popular narratives that circulate and ideas of what constitutes the truth are in the hands of a few privileged storytellers. Unlike previous productions by Smith, *House Arrest* employed a multiracial ensemble to embody the interviewed politicians, press people, and historians. Part of the process was teaching her methodology to a dozen artists. The project was therefore much more expensive than Arena’s typical productions at nearly $2 million, and meeting minutes indicate anxieties over controlling costs and saying no to Smith’s requests. The company co-produced the play with the Goodman Theatre, the Mark Taper Forum, and Intiman Theatre, but Arena remained the lead producer. Arena also received hundreds of thousands of dollars from the National Theatre Artist Residency Program funded by the Pew Charitable Trust and from AT&T.

When Arena produced the first edition of the play in 1997, it was deeply colored by two major scandals: President Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky and the DNA testing results that suggested President Thomas Jefferson had children with his slave Sally Hemings. Smith’s work, which was already invested in critiquing white patriarchy, suddenly took on greater immediate relevance. Yet the scandalous news threatened to overwhelm the narrative and locate the text too specifically in its time and place, which may be why this particular production by Smith has received less critical attention than others. Because this piece employed an ensemble, it opened up opportunities for overlapping monologues and strayed from Smith’s signature solo style. *House Arrest: First Edition* also included a fictional story and incarcerated...
group at the center, playing with the idea of “arrest.” According to Wager, these departures from *Fires* and *Twilight* led to only a workshop production at the Mark Taper Forum and no productions at the Intiman and the Goodman. When the play was ultimately published, the prison narrative was removed, and Smith performed the piece solo at the Public Theater in 2000. Still, this ambitious project allowed Smith to experiment, to tell a Washington-specific story, to shed light on the presidency and the press, and to teach her methodology to other theatre artists. This endeavor was made possible because Arena’s infrastructure provided significant support for exploring multiculturalism in performance.

**Wager’s Exit**

The 1997-1998 season marked Wager’s last as artistic director largely due to board pressure to balance the budget, to move to a new theatre space, and to refocus institutional branding. In 1996, Wager presented his reinvention initiative: “Above all we must forge a new streamlined economy of possibility of both human and financial resources that allows us to achieve our goals within our available means. We must radically reassess how we gather and allocate these resources to overcome the loss of entitlement and become more independent and entrepreneurially responsive to opportunity.” These assertions for economic restraint and entrepreneurship translated to a plan for more co-productions and book-in productions in the Kreeger proscenium space, while company productions stayed in the Fichandler in-the-round theatre. The board was largely unmoved by Wager’s proposal. At the same time, fiscal restraints directly affected the size of the plays produced. In the 1990-91 fortieth anniversary season, Arena’s repertory boasted one hundred and twenty characters. In the 1995-96 season, there were

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573 Doug Wager, in discussion with the author, February 2015.
only seventy characters. This trend continues into the present day. In *The Playwright’s Voice*, David Savran interviewed leading playwrights in the mid-to-late 1990s, and nearly all of them from Tony Kushner to Terrence McNally expressed pessimism over the state of the NEA and the theatre, especially regional theatre, on account of conservative subscriber bases and tightened budgets, both of which led to producing smaller, safer plays.\(^{575}\) Robert Brustein also observes that, during this time period, many boards had gained greater power and pushed out second-generation adventurous artistic directors including Joanne Akalaitis at the Public Theater, Liviu Ciulei at the Guthrie, Adrian Hall at the Dallas Theatre Center, and Anne Bogart at the Trinity Repertory Theatre.\(^{576}\)

Arena’s board similarly pushed out Wager, in part because he wanted to keep Arena Stage in its Southwest home, whereas the board wanted to move to a new, smaller space in downtown Washington, D.C. In the 1990s, Northwest Washington was developing significant cultural activity particularly for wealthy, white consumers, and the city began an era of gentrification that continues today. In 1991, the Metro had opened a station at Waterfront near Arena Stage, finally giving fast subway access to less privileged audience members and residents. Debating this move from Southwest to Northwest was thus embedded in institutional identity as reflected in geographic location and the social, economic, and racial connotations of that location. In addition, according to some staff members, the institutional home was physically falling apart. Guy Bergquist, however, contests that claim.\(^{577}\) He served as production manager from 1982 through 2005, except for a period when he became the interim managing director and when he left the company during part of Wager’s tenure. Bergquist was a key player in keeping


\(^{577}\) Guy Bergquist, in discussion with the author, January 2015.
Arena in the arena space. According to Wager, the cost to renovate the company’s home would have been $50 million, and an additional study determined that Wager would be able to raise only $30 million.\cite{578} Arena ultimately stayed in Southwest, with its physical proximity to working-class black communities, while Wooly Mammoth Theatre Company now occupies the targeted space in Northwest Washington.

Arena Stage also suffered from a blurry institutional image. Fichandler recalled when a board member criticized her theatre for lacking a brand: “We were having a rough time with box office. ‘The problem with this theatre is that it doesn’t have a brand.’ And I said, ‘What?’ She said, ‘You don’t have a specialty.’ I said, ‘My specialty is the human animal. That’s my specialty.’ And she said, ‘Well, the audience doesn’t see it that way.’ It really hurt me a lot.”\cite{579}

When Wager became the artistic director, the New York Times similarly reported, “Mr. Wager said the Arena has no specific artistic mission. ‘Arena just is,’ he said, ‘but we seem to gravitate to doing or developing plays that speak to the human condition, plays that resonate to what we feel is going on in the world around us.’”\cite{580}

During his tenure, the theatre conducted institutional image studies. In a communications committee meeting, staff members “stated that it is difficult to pin down what Arena Stage is in one slogan,” and that “New Voices is an artistic theme, but not a marketing objective” and “to some long-time Arena patrons, the term New Voices implies something young, unheard of, and unfamiliar that may or may not be interesting. People who are used to Arena may or may not feel included or interested by this concept, especially when it has a multicultural emphasis.”\cite{581}

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\cite{578} Doug Wager, in discussion with the author, October 2014.
\cite{579} Zelda Fichandler, in discussion with the author, December 2012.
\cite{581} “Meeting of the Arena Stage Communications Committee,” April 27, 1993, box 122, fol. 16, Arena Stage Production Books.
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communications committee concluded that “Arena could build an institutional focus around a personality. This takes time, especially because Doug’s style is so different from other leaders like Zelda and Michael Kahn, who have very strong public personas.”\footnote{Minutes of the Arena Stage Communications Committee Meeting,” March 17, 1994, box. 123, fol. 6, Arena Stage Production Books.} The implication, echoed in some interviews I conducted with Arena employees, was that Wager did not excel in visionary leadership and management, although he is a gifted theatre director. An internal study of Arena Stage staff members, managers, and trustees revealed that they found the company to be lacking in excitement and distinction. One unidentified employee remarked, “Everyone used to call it the flagship. Now, people refer to it as, ‘the flagship is sinking.’”\footnote{Shugoll Research, “Assessing the Image of Arena Stage,” 1995, p. 4, box 123, fol. 7, Arena Stage Production Books.} In addition, the study reported that “Several respondents do not feel Arena Stage has realized its reputation for being the ‘multicultural’ institution is professes to be” because the productions appeared black and white, rather than also including Latina/o Americans.\footnote{Ibid.} Much like multiculturalism, Arena’s aesthetic and politics were difficult to name and thus difficult to sell in an increasingly competitive theatre market.

Wager had not had a contract since 1994, and according to his account, the board led by its president Steven Bralove exhorted him to step down. According to Maslon, “It wasn’t enough to have a star anymore. They wanted a superstar.”\footnote{Laurence Maslon, in discussion with the author, September 2011.} When the Washington Post remarked, “A frequently heard criticism during Wager’s regime has been that Arena is ‘adrift,’” Wager responded, “In some cases, I think it was a response to our doing more black plays than we ‘should’ be doing. And we were changing, but not radically, so no one could put a finger on what
we were changing into.” He thus critiqued white resistance to producing multiple works by black playwrights each season, and he also named the difficulty of articulating Arena’s change and continuity. Although articles reporting Wager’s resignation touched upon board and financial strife, they quoted Wager, who framed the end of his artistic directorship as about personal goals and artistry, specifically his desire to direct more productions. Upon hearing news of the change in leadership, Fichandler commented, “There is an inherent conflict between the demands of an artist and the demands of an institution.” In a recent interview, she remarked, “I think Doug is an A-1 artist, and he hit a piece of history where he had to be—I don’t think I could have done any better in that period. It was the period where everybody suffered.” The 1997-98 season was the last of Wager’s seven years as artistic director. However, in 1998 and 1999 under the new leadership of Molly Smith, Wager returned to direct *Expecting Isabel*, by Lisa Loomer; *Animal Crackers*, book by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind with music and lyrics by Burt Kalmar and Harry Ruby; and *The Royal Family*, by George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber. He is now a Professor and Associate Dean of Theater, Film, and Media Arts at Temple University.

**Enter Molly Smith and Bridging the Old and New Arena Stage**

In 1998, Arena Stage shifted to strictly “American” work under its third artistic director, Molly Smith. The shifts in aesthetic and leadership were not entirely smooth. An institutional identity problem and a multi-million-dollar capital campaign posed huge challenges, yet Smith deftly navigated them. Smith produced some European classics, but otherwise committed the

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588 Zelda Fichandler, in discussion with the author, December 2012.
theatre to canonical white American male playwrights and emerging and established playwrights of color. Instead of producing African and Caribbean drama and positioning Arena as global as in the 70s and 80s, Arena under Smith turned to plays and especially musicals spotlighting African Americans. In addition, she staged classic musicals with multiracial casts, which I explore in Chapter Six. She also included a handful of works by or about Latina/o, Native, and Asian Americans. Such inclusion staged a particular U.S. multiculturalism in which artists of color became a larger part of the repertory and deeply intertwined with conceptions of American identity, yet replicated racial hierarchies by focusing on black-white dynamics and permitting only certain black representations. Interested in distinguishing itself and becoming a center for American theatre, by 2010, Arena had formed the American Voices New Play Institute and opened its new theatre complex, the Mead Center for American Theater.

The board of trustees searched for a new artistic director and a new identity for Arena Stage. At the age of 45, Smith had plenty of leadership experience having founded Perseverance Theatre, the first and only professional regional theatre in Alaska since 1979. She also had a connection to Washington, D.C. because she had studied at American University and Catholic University, where she developed an artistic relationship with Paula Vogel. Smith was, and remains, one of very few female artistic directors of major non-profit regional theatres. When Smith met with the Arena board, she presented two visions: all-American or all-international. She recounted that concentrating on American artists and works connected with Arena’s positioning in the nation’s capital and her history at Perseverance Theatre:

[it] made a tremendous amount of sense to me because of Washington, D.C., being here as a crossroads of the nation. This is a city that we expect to have a conversation about the national character. Later I realized that this was a through-line from my work in 

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589 Smith may be the only out and married lesbian leading a major regional theatre.
Alaska. In Alaska, I was searching for Alaskan voices. Our mission statement was by, about Alaskans. So, in a sense, it was the same idea writ large, writ nationally. And then the other idea that one could focus on was all international work. So I felt there was one major work or the other. For me, it was American work, and that was happily what the search committee responded very, very strongly to, as well.590

“American” could serve as a marker of distinction. In 1950, Arena Stage had been the only professional resident theatre in Washington, D.C., and therefore an eclectic sensibility was welcomed. In 1998, the company competed with approximately seventy local theatres for ticket sales, donations, grants, and Helen Hayes Awards. Under the leadership of Michael Khan, Shakespeare Theatre Company appeared to many as the foremost theatre in the nation’s capital, and its productions of classical work rivaled those by Arena Stage. Although some leading local theatres such as Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Studio Theatre, and Signature Theatre largely produced new American plays, they did not necessarily market themselves as American. While some charged Arena’s American repertory with being narrow, Smith insisted upon its diversity,

Just about anybody, unless you’re Native American, you step back several generations and you’re on your way to Africa; you step back several generations, and you’re in Ireland; you step back several generations, and you’re in India. So that’s why I think there is a tremendous diversity of voices here, and I believe that part of the vitality of all these American voices in the theatre comes from this background of being a country of immigrants. So I don’t think you can really define an American voice. It’s more like a cacophony of voices in America.591

590 Molly Smith, in discussion with the author, December 2012.  
591 Ibid.
Smith thus located American identity in indigeneity and immigration but also insisted on the
difficulty of articulating unharmonious American voices. Instead of Wager’s earlier conception
of cultural diversity as multipart harmony and unity, Smith emphasized difference. Still, she did
not precisely name power structures.

Because Smith, unlike Wager, was an outsider to Arena, she was not easily and wholly
embraced. According to Wager, he and Fichandler were supposed to provide input to the board
of trustees when they decided upon the final candidates, but neither of the former artistic
directors was consulted.592 Because Smith agreed with executive director Stephen Richard and
the board of trustees on moving to Northwest Washington, D.C., she estranged some staff who
wanted to remain in their home in Southwest. Staff meeting minutes prior to Smith’s arrival
suggest some discontent among employees and “the importance of not allowing negativity to go
beyond the theater.”593 To soften the transition, the company planned for Smith to share her
history at Perseverance, for her directorial cultural mapping exercise, and for communal events
such as a retreat and a potluck. From the start of her tenure, Smith and the administration
concluded that there would be no more annual two-week furloughs. According to Alison Irvin,
who has worked almost continuously at Arena Stage since 1994,

One of Molly’s first initiatives was to brighten the Fichandler Lobby and hang giant
posters of previous Arena productions. She definitely looked to the future. She did not
entirely discard the past, although it is hard to truly move forward without making some
big changes. The idea of an American focus was scary to some, and there were focus
groups that indicated it might be best to not make the change in mission a public focus.594

592 Doug Wager, in discussion with the author, October 2014.
593 “Minutes of Senior Staff Meeting,” April 7, 1998, box 3, fol. 6, Arena Stage Newsletters, GMUL.
594 Alison Irving, in discussion with the author, January 2015.
Smith therefore had to bridge the old and new Arena, particularly its image and repertory. The “Arena Stage Identity Redesign Creative Brief” emphasized that Arena would produce American work, meaning classics and new plays by U.S.-based artists, and that the theatre had to contend with financial hardships, namely cuts to outside funding, shrinking subscriber base, and greater competition. The brief linked artistic and fiscal decisions concerning long-time and new audiences to the company’s survival in a system of capitalist precarity:

If we ignore our rich history we run the risk of losing a base of supporters that are deeply entrenched and loyal to the institution. We miss the opportunity to capitalize on this legacy and move it forward into the next century. If we don’t signal to our key publics and potential new audiences that we are an exciting, vibrant, ground-breaking institution we sentence ourselves to a future of dwindling audiences and dwindling resources.  

Although Smith articulated an all-American repertory, she continued to produce a few plays by Canadian and European artists: *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again* by Michel Tremblay (00-01), *The Misanthrope* by Molière (02-03), *A Man's a Man* by Bertolt Brecht (03-04), *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde (04-05), and *Noises Off* by Michael Frayn (06-07). In so doing, Smith revived the kinds of plays that Fichandler and Wager championed and perhaps hoped to hold onto patrons who had subscribed to Arena for decades. She also produced canonical U.S. playwrights such as Arthur Miller, who had a longstanding relationship with Arena Stage; new productions included *All My Sons* (99-00) and *Death of a Salesman* in repertory with *A View from the Bridge* (07-08). In 2000, for the fiftieth anniversary of Arena, she revived *The Great White Hope* by Howard Sackler and *K2* by Patrick Meyers, plays that were closely bound up with Arena’s history and identity. The former is heralded repeatedly in Arena’s

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self-narratives as the defining new American play that transferred from a regional theatre to Broadway and that tackled racial politics. The latter also went to Broadway, and it happened to be running at Arena when the national critics’ convention was held in Washington, D.C. in 1982. By producing classic plays as well as new ones, Arena sought to rebrand itself as “An American Original” and as “adventurous, classy and fresh.” Local critics appeared excited by this new Arena Stage. Colin Flanigan of *DC Onstage* wrote, “Ever since Molly Smith took the artistic director helm at Arena Stage, great things have been happening at this forty-year old establishment.”

### Rebranding Arena as American and Raced

Smith shrewdly called attention to Arena’s foundation in American works and then built upon that foundation, as emblematized by her first season as artistic director. In the 1998-99 season, she produced *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, by Tennessee Williams; *Expecting Isabel*, by Lisa Loomer; *Thunder Knocking on the Door*, by Keith Glover with music and lyrics by Keb’ Mo’ and Anderson Edwards; *The Faraway Nearby*, by John Murrell; *The Women*, by Clare Boothe Luce; *Oak and Ivy*, by Kathleen McGhee-Anderson; *Animal Crackers*, by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind with music and lyrics by Burt Kalmar and Harry Ruby; and *How I Learned to Drive*, by Paula Vogel. Smith directed the first and last productions. She selected Williams’s play to signal Arena’s turn to American classics, while most of the season consisted of new work. The program for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* included an extensive interview between Smith and Cathy Madison, who had served as the literary manager also under Wager. Smith introduced herself and her American vision to Arena’s audiences by establishing, “I’m very interested in

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596 “Minutes of Senior Staff Meeting,” April 7, 1998.
focusing the theater’s repertoire on American writers. It seemed to me the first play needed to be a great American classic, and for me, Tennessee Williams ranks right up there,” and articulating her directorial approach and her journey from Alaska to Washington, D.C. She went on to produce *A Streetcar Named Desire* (00-01) and *Orpheus Descending* (03-04). In addition to Miller and Williams, the white American playwrights that she produced most frequently were Edward Albee and Eugene O’Neill. For the 2010-11 season, Arena presented *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and produced *At Home at the Zoo* on the main stage, and then a festival of readings of Albee’s entire repertoire. The following season, Arena produced *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* alongside a festival of plays by and about O’Neill. These practices demonstrate Arena’s commitment to the canon of legitimate U.S. drama that centers white male playwrights or in the theatre’s parlance, “American Giants.”

At the same time, Arena articulated American identity as racially diverse, especially as including African American artists. Just as during Wager’s tenure, playwrights of color contributed at least two mainstage plays, and now sometimes as many as four to each season, which also featured productions of classics with multiracial casts. Smith similarly oversaw several diversity-specific new play development initiatives such as Voices of Women and District Views, workshops and readings under the banner of “Downstairs in the Old Vat Room.” By bringing back Cheryl West for *Play On!* in 2000 and Anna Deavere Smith for *Let Me Down Easy* in 2010, Molly Smith wisely continued to produce African American playwrights who had had long relationships with Arena Stage. She also provided playwriting and directing opportunities to Tazewell Thompson. He had directed many multiracial productions of classics

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599 West did not recall this musical being performed at Arena Stage. She recounts that she rekindled her relationship with Arena and met Molly Smith when she suggested a co-production of *Pullman Porter Blues* by Arena and Seattle Repertory Theatre in 2012. Cheryl West, in discussion with the author, March 2015.
and new plays by black playwrights in the late 1980s and early 1990s and had been appointed
Arena’s artistic associate until he left to become the artistic director of Syracuse Stage in 1992.
In addition, African American directors and playwrights such as Charles Randolph-Wright,
Kenny Leon, Lydia Diamond, and Daniel Beatty received several production opportunities at
Arena Stage.

Smith also produced *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (02-03), *The Piano Lesson* (04-05), and
*Gem of the Ocean* (06-07) by August Wilson. His works had been missing at Arena during the
1990s because they had been presented by the Kennedy Center. Shakespeare aside, Wilson was
the most produced playwright at large regional theatres in the 2000s. His often realistic,
historical, and literary dramaturgy and use of music and themes positioned him as a legitimate
African American playwright, whose work often took the single season slot reserved for “the
black play.” In *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, Harry J. Elam, Jr. argues that
Wilson (w)rights history to de-center white hegemony and “mediate productively the tensions of
being both African and American.” He suggests, “Perhaps one of the reasons for Wilson’s
success with white audiences is that his proposed racial radicalisms do not overtly threaten
whites but hide behind the distance of history and the safety of spirituality.” In Wilson’s
polarizing speech, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” delivered at the Theatre Communications
Group conference in 1996, the playwright critiqued white regional theatres for inviting black
audiences and artists only once per season and for casting actors of color in white canonical
works as a form of cultural imperialism. Elam agrees that funding efforts directed toward
diversifying large white institutions rather than maintaining small culturally-specific ones “have

600 Harry J. Elam, Jr., *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan
Press, 2006), 231.
601 Ibid., 25.
kept theaters of color on the bottom of the stratified professional theater system and maintain predominantly white regional theaters as the arbitrators of art and culture.”

Capitalizing upon cultural diversity, particularly in the production of black playwrights, helped to keep Arena Stage afloat. This regional theatre uniquely went beyond the one-slot tokenism common among other companies by producing several writers of color each season, casting actors of color in classics, hiring directors of color, reaching out to audiences of color, training young artistic administrators of color, and working with local communities. This does not, however, negate the structure in which white artists, plays, spectators, and administrators remained at the center, and cultural productions by artists of color typically offered familiar aesthetics and liberal rather than radical politics. Expanding upon Fichandler’s and Wager’s cultural diversity policies, Smith successfully concretized Arena Stage as the major non-profit institution in Washington, D.C. that worked to make black patrons feel like they were not mere guests to this theatre but part of its home. When she won an award from theatreWashington in 2012, she recounted visiting local churches at the start of her tenure:

At a number of African American churches, there were greeters welcoming people in. I realized we didn’t have that at Arena so we now have ushers welcome people as they enter the building. Theatres can be threatening for people — especially coming to a theatre for the first time. We wanted to find ways to open people to the experience. From very simple ideas, something profound has happened in our audience demographic.

Smith illustrates an attentiveness to African American communities and to active gestures of greeting in order to create a more diverse, welcoming environment. This is in contrast with an institution such as the Guthrie Theater. Although both regional theatres shared similar

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603 Harry J. Elam, Jr., *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, 221-222.
programming and practices in the 60s, their artistic missions have since come into sharper, distinct focus. Whereas Arena now commits to producing multiple plays by, about, and for African Americans each season, the Guthrie typically presents rather than produces work via Penumbra, a separate African American company that is often invited to present their work on one of the Guthrie’s smaller stages.605

Distinct from Wager’s repertory, Smith’s seasons often included a black musical. In Chapter Four, I theorized this genre and term as popular contestations over blackness through the case study of Raisin. Although Raisin was produced by Fichandler, and It Ain’t Nothin’ But the Blues was presented by Wager, it was truly under Smith that musical productions with black performers took center stage. Between 1998 and 2010, Smith produced Thunder Knocking on the Door, Play On!, Polk County, Ain’t Misbehavin’, Hallelujah, Baby!, 3 Mo’ Divas!, Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar & Grill, The Women of Brewster Place, Ella, Sophisticated Ladies, and Crowns four times. In 1999, Charles Randolph-Wright directed Guys and Dolls starring Maurice Hines in a production that was so successful at Arena that it went onto a national tour. Collaborating with the comic-political group Culture Clash, he also directed Señor Discretion Himself, an unfinished musical by Frank Loesser whose widow had seen the Arena production of Guys and Dolls and encouraged Wright to stage a completed version. These musicals often showcased the virtuosity and history of African American artists such as Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington in ways that provided uplift for black bourgeois audiences. At the same time, minstrelsy haunts such performances, and the revue format of singing only popular songs frequently avoids explicit critique of anti-black racism. Bring in ‘da Noise/Bring in ‘da Funk by George C. Wolf is unique in critically addressing historical and continuing systemic racism through tap. While that musical

605 Penumbra nearly closed due to bankruptcy in 2012, suggesting the limited support there is for African American-specific regional theatre.
has never appeared at Arena Stage, the company recently presented Maurice Hines’s *Tappin’ Thru Life*, a charming autobiographical revue in which Hines tells stories about segregation and shows off tap steps inspired by the Obamas. Black musicals and plays with music largely appealed to African Americans, especially via group ticket sales, without driving away white consumers. They provided much-needed feel-good entertainment and validation. Arena has been more successful than any other large Washington metro area theatre in consistently attracting racially diverse, especially black, audiences.

Two of the most successful productions, *Polk County* and *Crowns*, reveal the complexities of black musicals as racial projects. The process of developing the former began when the Library of Congress publicized that it had discovered many important yet neglected U.S. manuscripts. Literary manager Cathy Madison came across plays by Zora Neal Hurston that had been thought to be lost, and she was particularly struck by *Polk County*, which was written in 1944. Based on Hurston’s ethnographic work of the first incorporated black township in the United States, the play weaves early blues and folk culture into a story about romance and violence between working class African Americans. To call attention to the Library of Congress’s collection of Zora Neal Hurston materials, and to celebrate its bicentennial as well as Arena Stage’s fiftieth anniversary, the two Washington institutions coproduced a staged reading of *Polk County* in 2000. Because the reading was so well received, Smith decided to program a full production the following season.

As dramaturg, Madison shaped the script by Hurston and Dorothy Waring with director Kyle Donnelly, and she recounted racial tensions during the production process. She attributed much of the anxiety and conflict to the folksy nature of the piece and the direction by white artists: “there was a lot of tension going into the project, with the black staff at Arena really
wanting to be supportive, but really being afraid because not only was it a white director with a black show, but it was a folksy show … these were black people from the early half of the twentieth century and poor as poor can be, just dirt poor, undereducated. So there was a real fear about representing those people correctly.\footnote{Cathy Madison, in discussion with the author, December 2014.} Madison articulates the difficulty of black representation, especially because there are few opportunities, and those opportunities are overdetermined by racial stereotypes and material inequality. She remembered when a black female scholar of Hurston approached her with coldness as if bracing herself before a performance of Polk County but then afterward cried because the experience was magical and exceptional. Meanwhile, the black actors seemed to embrace the folk culture of the play at first but then appeared uncomfortable working with a white director, Donnelly, and a white music director, Stephen Wade. Donnelly had directed many Arena productions, most of which were classics but also Mustapha Matura’s A Small World. She recounted, “Being the only white person in the room for the most part [and] directing a group of African-American actors and musicians was challenging yet exhilarating.”\footnote{Kyle Donnelly, in discussion with the author, March 2015.} Although Madison affirms that Donnelly was passionate about the project and likely performed the strongest possible directing job, she believes that a black director would have alleviated tensions and spurred more future productions of Polk County. Wade was behind the long-running show Banjo Dancin’ in the Old Vat Room, and just prior to the opening of Polk County, he allegedly alienated cast members by suggesting that he knew more about black music than they did. The production thus mediated artistic and racial hierarchies amidst staff members, artists, and audiences, and brought to the stage Hurston’s vision of African American folk culture as aligned with Arena Stage’s American
vision. Polk County ultimately earned six Helen Hayes nominations and won the Charles MacArthur Award for Outstanding New Musical.

During its initial run in 2003, Crowns received eight Helen Hayes nominations and won for best director, musical director, and musical among resident productions. Regina Taylor adapted this gospel musical from the best-selling book Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats by Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry. The musical traces the self-discovery of a young African American woman who moves from New York to South Carolina to live with her grandmother and learns about the different histories, rituals, dances and most of all the crowns or elaborate hats that give strength to a group of black women when they attend church. Arena initially co-produced this musical with the Goodman Theatre and the Alliance Theatre. Because the first run of Crowns was one of the most financially successful productions in Arena’s history, the company restaged the piece three additional times, and all three times were huge box office successes. The uplifting narrative, music, and bourgeois culture celebrated in Crowns pleased audiences who desired and needed such a production and its affirmation.

According to Kathy A. Perkins, “From 2003 onward, the dominant [African American women] playwrights have been Lynn Nottage, Regina Taylor, and Dael Orlandersmith. But closer scrutiny reveals how few African American women are actually produced. The 2005-06 season saw forty-one productions of black women’s plays, but only two women—Nottage and Taylor—accounted for thirty-three of the forty-one produced.”608 This pattern suggests that once white institutional gatekeepers accept a particular playwright of color, particularly a woman of color to accrue more diversity points, then the rest of the regional theatres follow suit.

Although Molly Smith mostly defined “American” in black and white terms, she extended some mainstage opportunities to other stories and artists of color, illustrating a richer

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understanding of the nation. In 2001, she directed *Coyote Builds North America*, a theatre piece with music and dance inspired by Native American creation myths that she had originally produced at Perseverance Theatre. In 2004, David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, the most canonized play of Asian American theatre, was directed by Tazewell Thompson. It remains the only full-length play by an Asian American to receive a mainstage production at Arena. Smith has fared better in producing Latina/o artists. Nilo Cruz has received several opportunities for his work at the theatre, and Culture Clash has collaborated with Arena on three mainstage productions: *Radio Mambo: Culture Clash Invades Miami, Señor Discretion Himself*, and *Anthems: Culture Clash in the District*. Culture Clash consists of three Latino artists, Richard Montoya, Ric Salinas, and Herbert Siguenza, who construct and perform political, comic plays inspired by specific cities. *Anthems* was a commission from Arena to create a Washington, D.C. version of *Radio Mambo* based on interviews with locals whose experiences represented the socio-politics of the nation’s capital. This process is reminiscent of the work by Anna Deavere Smith, suggesting the popularity of local docudramas that mediate racial and national identities. The events of September 11, 2001 strongly impacted the sound of *Anthems*. Only Montoya traveled to Washington shortly afterward. His identity as not only Latino but also Middle Eastern and his chance meeting with a grief counselor who urged him to find an anthem for Americans shaped *Anthems*, which follows the journey of The Writer. In *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance*, James Harding proposes a dynamic understanding of avant-gardes according to changing historical contexts, political actions, and seeming failures. He praises *Anthems* as an avant-garde work that reminds audiences how 9/11 marked a history of racial terrorism within the United States, and now particularly directed toward Muslims: “[the play] is remarkable for its refusal to let the call for unity, the call for an
anthem, to become a sentimental whitewash that elides a national history full not only of acts of aggression on behalf of corporate interests abroad, but also of acts of terror against the weak, the poor, and the minorities at home.  

Arena, under Smith, thus provided a stage for some works by artists of color that challenged hegemonic national narratives of simplified harmony precisely at a time of passionate patriotism and policing of brown bodies. *Anthems* also included an extended sequence with Jaylee Mead, a NASA scientist turned cultural philanthropist whose name would soon appear on the new complex housing Arena Stage.

**Southwest Roots**

Some powerful members of the board of trustees lobbied for Arena to move to downtown Washington, but upon calculating the high risks involved, the board decided to keep the company in its home in Southwest, to build a new structure, and to renovate the existing theatres. According to executive director Stephen Richard, who worked at the theatre from 1991 to 2008, “the board concluded that the deal that was involved in moving downtown contained too much financial risk. And we concluded that we could build what we wanted to build in the current location which required zoning variances that we ultimately were able to get.”

Arena selected the theatre design by Bing Thom, who had designed other arts centers but never before a theatre. Production manager Guy Bergquist, with his decades of experience at Arena, oversaw the construction as Facility Project Director to make certain that the result would be a functional and beautiful space for theatremakers. Thom’s design called for building a glass wall to surround the Fichandler in-the-round stage and Kreeger proscenium theatre and a new oval-shaped black box theatre called the Kogod Cradle. Tall wooden trunks served as columns to hold up the metallic

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610 Stephen Richard, e-mail to author, January 18, 2015.
roof, which, along with the glass, created a contemporary look of natural and manmade materials that brought together the three theatre spaces and the patrons of those spaces. (See Fig. 4-8)

To deepen roots in Southwest, Smith called for changes in community engagement and education. Arena had long provided support for Living Stage, an artist-activist group founded by Robert Alexander in 1969. For decades, Alexander and other teaching artists worked with local public school students, inmates, differently abled people, and other underprivileged groups to produce plays that provided opportunities for self expression and interrogation of issues such as racism, poverty, teenage pregnancy, and drug abuse. In 1995, Alexander passed the leadership to Oren Sandel, who had worked with Living Stage for many years and who extended programs to Latina/o and Asian American groups. Because Living Stage was aesthetically and functionally quite separate from Arena Stage, Smith decided to end that program and develop new ones more in keeping with her mission and the practices of other major regional theatres. She commissioned Rebecca Rice, who had worked with Living Stage, to create a theatre piece based on the histories and testimonies of people living in Southwest Washington, D.C. The land on which Arena had been built used to house working class African Americans who were removed by the Southwest Land Development Agency in the late 1950s and early 1960s. According to Cathy Madison, who performed extensive research for this project, “The basic idea of the project was to celebrate the developmental arc of the neighborhood over time, culminating in the rebirth of Arena Stage.”

Meanwhile, the education department continued some programs from the previous leadership and initiated new ones. According to Anita Maynard-Losh, the current director of community engagement, Arena had a longstanding DC Ticket Partnership through which public school students received study guides and free tickets to Arena Stage productions. Maynard-

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611 Cathy Madison, in discussion with the author, December 2014.
612 Anita Maynard-Losh, in discussion with the author, January 2015.
Losh, who had worked with Smith at Perseverance Theatre, first joined Arena in 2002 when she assisted Smith with *South Pacific* and then with *Camelot* the following year before directing community engagement. Early in Smith’s tenure, the theatre launched Voices of Now, which Maynard-Lost described as

originally an after school program at Jefferson Middle School, which is just a block from Arena, and came out of a problem the community was seeing with gang violence and a rift between younger and older members of the community. Voices of Now gave the middle school students a program in which to work as an ensemble to create original autobiographical theater around a theme important to them.\(^{613}\)

Since then, the program has expanded to include different groups such as young people dealing with grief or with HIV/AIDS. Voices of Now has also worked with the U.S. Department of State to travel to India, Croatia, and Peru. In 2004, with Rebecca Campana and others, Maynard-Lost launched Camp Arena Stage to raise revenue for other programs and to teach economically and racially diverse young people to explore and create art during summers.

Stacey Stewart, who had worked in the box office and development department but was interested in community engagement, became the director of education, schools, and professional development in 2007. She headed the Student Playwrights Project, founded in the late 1990s, and made some apt changes: “[the] program had been conceived in part as a training program for college students, but I thought it was unfair to put young, inexperienced teachers into some of the toughest classroom environments in the city – those students really needed teaching artists who knew what they were doing.”\(^{614}\) She also worked with the Allen Lee Hughes Fellows, one of the programs that began with the original NEA cultural diversity grant in the early 1990s. According

\(^{613}\) Ibid.
\(^{614}\) Stacey Stewart, in discussion with the author, February 2015.
to Stewart, by the late 2000s, these fellowships were no longer solely offered to young artists and administrators of color, because consultants said that the practice of denying white applicants was probably illegal. These community and educational programs helped to anchor Arena as a non-profit institution invested in Southwest and Washington, D.C. That investment paid off in accruing symbolic capital and providing much-needed opportunities, but as suggested by the major shift in the Allen Lee Hughes Fellowship, such opportunities were highly circumscribed and lost some of the radical equalizing spirit of earlier programs.

**Enunciating American Voices**

As I have been suggesting, between producing European plays, canonical American plays, and new American artists of color plays, Arena’s American identity under Molly Smith was multifaceted and, in the beginning, imprecise. When David Dower was hired as artistic associate in 2006, he pointed out the lack of clarity in Arena’s mission and the lack of an artistic strategy. Dower had come from San Francisco, where he co-founded the Z Space, a place to develop new work by Bay Area artists. He recounted the difficulty of rearticulating Arena’s repertory as solely American during a senior staff meeting; he said, “we have to change the mission statement,” to which he received pushback and finally the promise to update the company’s website that described Arena as a “Theatre of the Americas” “to take the ‘s’ off of ‘Americas.’” The theatre did not revise the mission statement as literally “Theatre of the America” but moved toward discussing “American voices” and “American theatre.” Drawn from Smith’s vision that located “American” in multiculturalism and in not only classic and new U.S.-based plays but also in U.S.-based directors and actors, Dower subsequently drafted an artistic strategy. For example, the strategy statement hypothesized that if Meryl Steep, a great American

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615 David Dower, in discussion with the author, August 2014.
actress, wanted to star in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, then Arena would produce Brecht. In 2014, Arena wound up producing this play with celebrity Kathleen Turner, who earned strong reviews and a Helen Hayes nomination. In addition, the strategy outlined performing festivals of major U.S. playwrights, Golden Age musicals as a uniquely American form, and plays about American Presidents. To Dower, the strategy was a move to heal the transition from Fichandler’s spirit of inquiry to Smith’s tenure and maintain the through-line of asking big questions.

The need for Dower’s artistic strategy was also exigent because of the new building, to be called the Mead Center for American Theater. This name was a contractual agreement with Gilbert and Jaylee Mead, who donated $35 million to the capital campaign, the largest gift in Arena’s history. According to Dower,

> But what the plan was, if there was any plan, it was just to move back into the building after it had been opened and do what we had been doing there before. So that means eight plays a year. But now there was a third theatre, and there was all this other space, and a name that said Center for American Theatre. [...] I was pretty aggressive about saying it was insufficient for us to just move back in.616

With an American brand name and three spaces, but the same number of seats and same number of staff members, Arena had to program differently from beforehand. Part of the result, to save on production costs within this capitalist system, was more co-productions with and presentations by theatre companies as well as stronger relationships with commercial producers. While Arena presented U.S. touring and regional productions, Shakespeare Theatre Company agreed to complement the theatre and present only international productions. Shakespeare also had difficulty maintaining its new building, which opened in 2007, without new staff and funding support. Although many Arena employees came to understand and absorb the American

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616 Ibid.
identity distinction, some of them who worked directly on crafting homegrown productions and who had worked at Arena for decades resented the turn toward booking in productions. Guy Bergquist, for instance, remarked that “the Mead Center is a presenting house” and “most of us who were there before will say that it’s not Arena Stage anymore.”

He also pointed out that because of the Old Vat Room, Arena had successfully produced in three spaces in the past. While true that Arena increased the number of presentations in its mainstage season, book-in productions had been part of the company’s tradition at least since the 1960s when Arena experienced its first budget shortfall and presented the musical revue *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*.

Between 2007 and 2010, the company commenced “Arena Re-Staged,” a campaign to reconstruct the theatre building and its American image. Arena produced work in two temporary operating spaces, one 460-seat proscenium theatre in Arlington, Virginia and the historic 1225-seat Lincoln Theatre on U Street, a neighborhood ghosted by a history of black musical performers from the 1920s. All the productions were American, several of them were presentations, and some of them were solo endeavors, adding up to lower production costs. The 2008-09 season included *Citizen Josh*, by Josh Kornbluth; *A Long and Winding Road*, by Maureen McGovern and Philip Himberg; *Wishful Drinking*, by Carrie Fisher; *Next to Normal*, with music by Tom Kitt and book and lyrics by Brian Yorkey; and *Looped*, by Matthew Lombardo. The latter three shows subsequently moved to Broadway. Because of the fiscal crisis in 2008, the design for the Mead Center changed. Raising contributed income for the capital campaign and paying for the rising costs of materials and construction became increasingly difficult. As a consequence, the income-generating aspects of the building, specifically apartments for actors and a full restaurant for patrons, were eliminated. Still, Bergquist

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617 Guy Bergquist, in discussion with the author, January 2015.
underlined the fact that the crucial parts of the theatre remained for the staff to do their work, and he is proud of the outcome. He left the company upon completion of the building. The Mead Center ultimately cost $135 million, and the impact of paying for the construction and maintenance of the building will be explored in the conclusion of this dissertation.

Interested in becoming a center for research, Arena formed the American Voices New Play Institute (AVNPI) in 2009. In 2007, Dower had written a report for the Andrew Mellon Foundation entitled “The Gates of Opportunity” about the ecosystem of new play development, illustrating his expertise in this field. In part thanks to Dower’s relationship with the Mellon Foundation, Arena won a $1.2 million grant to explore and support new play development in 2009. The AVNPI included a slew of initiatives, but at the core were five three-year playwriting residencies for Amy Freed, Katori Hall, Lisa Kron, Charles Randolph-Wright, and Karen Zacarías. In selecting these playwrights, Arena addressed gaps in support for mid-career artists, women, and people of color. The residencies included an annual salary of approximately $40,000, health benefits, housing, funding for research and development, and a commitment to produce one play as part of the mainstage season. This was an experiment to see if providing stability and resources, which artists could self direct, would lead to stronger artwork, rather than the model of non-profit theatres commissioning plays for $3,000 and ultimately not producing those plays. In providing these residencies and production opportunities, Arena addressed economic, structural precarity. Arena took a huge risk in supporting these playwrights and showcasing the possibility of a non-profit regional theatre providing an artistic home for American voices. In addition, the literary office closed its open submission policy in the name of transparency because practically zero scripts mailed to the office this way actually moved to the mainstage. The hundreds of scripts sent to Arena each year were read by interns and volunteers
who wrote reports and then rejection letters. Mainstage productions developed as a result of commissions and relationships with artists. To show audiences the production process and give them a sense of ownership at Arena Stage, the company created Theater 101, a program in which spectators could attend a series of rehearsals and see a play from the start to the stage. In addition, Arena hosted what they called convenings on the state of the field, produced white papers resulting from those convenings, trained new play producing fellows of color, launched an online journal devoted to institutional practices called HowlRound, and invented the New Play Map in which playwrights and companies could literally put themselves on a digital map of the United States to show the journeys of new works.\(^{618}\) Arena also won a major grant from the NEA to administer the New Play Development Program that awarded funding to promising new plays. These myriad programs positioned Arena as a leader in the field of new plays by U.S. artists. The language to describe Arena’s mission became the “production, presentation, development and study of American theatre.”\(^{619}\)

The 2010-11 season marked Arena’s sixtieth anniversary and the inauguration of the Mead Center for American Theater. By directing a multiracial production of Oklahoma! in the Fichandler in-the-round space to open the new center, Smith sited Arena Stage as a center for American voices. She employed a thoroughly American genre, the musical, and a story of community formation marked by racial and national politics. I explore this production further in Chapter Six. In the Kreeger theatre, Arena presented Second Stage Theatre’s production of Let Me Down Easy by Anna Deavere Smith, extending the company’s relationship with Smith and commitment to exploring U.S. current issues, in this case health care. In the new Kogod Cradle black box, the theatre staged the world premiere of every tongue confess by Marcus Gardley,

\(^{618}\) To read these white papers, visit http://arenastage.org/artistic-development/past-projects/convenings/index.shtml.
\(^{619}\) “Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater,” http://www.arenastage.org/plan-your-visit/the-mead-center/.
who used Ancient Greek and magical realist devices to tell a story about the hundreds of black church burnings in the Deep South in the 1990s. The production starred Phylicia Rashad of *Cosby Show* fame. Through the multiracial *Oklahoma!, Let Me Down Easy*, and *every tongue confess*, Arena Stage made a bold statement about its dedication to African American artists and audiences and its location of race in American identity. The company also produced *Ruined* by Lynn Nottage, a work and playwright that Brandi Wilkins Catanese notes as one of the most produced at regional theatres that season.\(^{620}\) Arena co-produced *The Arabian Nights* by Mary Zimmerman and presented *The Laramie Project* alongside *The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later*, the pre-Broadway tryout of *A Time to Kill* based on the John Grisham novel, and Steppenwolf Theatre Company’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* These collaborations point to a sharing of aesthetics and financial burdens among companies. Finally, Arena produced *At Home at the Zoo* and a festival of all of Edward Albee’s works, highlighting the importance of the U.S. canon to the theatre’s American identity and legitimacy. The festival also provided opportunities for theatre artists at Arena such as Dower, Freed, and Maynard-Losh and companies across Washington, D.C. such as Shakespeare Theatre Company and Faction of Fools to stage readings. The repertory that Molly Smith crafted thus articulated the intersections of non-profit, black, and American identities with Arena and the nation’s capital at the center.

**Conclusion**

Although Arena Stage embodied a more eclectic identity under the leadership of Zelda Fichandler and Doug Wager, American drama and ideals had long been part of its repertory and mission. Wager built upon Fichandler’s cultural diversity initiatives by producing more works by black artists. His approach to multiculturalism was largely a center-left management strategy to

maintain the artistic and financial integrity of the theatre in an atmosphere that was increasingly hostile to the arts. Because some board members and outside critics viewed his aesthetic and leadership as ineffective, Wager stepped down as artistic director in 1998. Molly Smith was hired with a unifying vision of Arena as a center for American theatre, a vision that became clearer over time as African Americans in particular became an indelible part of the theatre’s identity on stage and in the audience. She successfully raised funds for a capital campaign and built the Mead Center for American Theater, thereby raising the company’s profile and steering a clear course for staging American voices. When Mary Zimmerman stood in the lobby with Dower, she remarked, “Your collection is the American theatre, and you bring out different pieces like any museum would do, and your focus of the museum is both contemporary and historic, but that any time you come into the building, you’re gonna see part of your collection on display.”621 Under Smith, Arena has worked to institutionalize American identity, history, and theatre.

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621 David Dower, in discussion with the author, August 2014.
CHAPTER SIX:
REDEFINING AMERICA, ARENA STAGE, AND TERRITORY FOLKS IN A MULTIRACIAL OKLAHOMA!

Introduction

In 2010, to celebrate the Arena Stage’s sixtieth anniversary and its new theatre complex, the Mead Center for American Theater, artistic director Molly Smith opened the season with perhaps the most “American” of musicals: Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein’s Oklahoma! It became the highest-grossing initial-run production in the company’s history. It won rave reviews and four local Helen Hayes Awards including Best Resident Musical. The selection and success of this musical helped to distinguish Arena as a home for U.S. theatre. Yet, it was Smith’s multiracial directorial approach, I contend, that worked to engage audiences, redefine America and Arena, and reverberate with the optimism of symbolic racial progress, as well as with the dangers of colorblindness and neoliberal multiculturalism. I invoke this term from Jodi Melamed, who argues that twenty-first-century U.S. neoliberal practices and multiculturalist literature obscure racial hierarchy and normalize violence by mobilizing capitalist logics of competition and fairness. Through Smith’s approach, this Oklahoma! provides rich opportunities for understanding the ways multiracial theatre production and consumption uphold, challenge, and transform racial-national structures. Staged in the nation’s capital, Oklahoma! resonates with the racial triumphalism and transcendence of Barack Obama’s presidency; at the same time, however, the multiracial casting obscures historic and continuing material inequality. By producing this classic musical with a multiracial cast, Arena staged a production of whose American voices may sing and under what conditions. The production articulated power dynamics at the crossroads of race and nation, at a time when post-racial

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projects increasingly co-opt representations of interracial harmony to deny the salience of racial hierarchy and eclipse widening disparities.

Often hailed as the first “integrated” musical, *Oklahoma!* indexes the Golden Age\(^ {623}\) of American musicals, roughly the late 1920s through the 1960s, and performs U.S. identity. The musical is based on the play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, written in 1930 by Lynn Riggs, a playwright of Cherokee and European descent who dramatized mixed-race characters and an ambivalent ending. For the musical, which premiered in 1943, Rodgers and Hammerstein turned the narrative into a celebration of nationhood through the union of romantic couples, farmers and cowmen, and the Indian and Oklahoma Territories. The libretto mainly deals with Laurey choosing between cowboy Curly and farmhand Jud to take her to the box social.

The Arena Stage production went further than typically all-white-cast productions of *Oklahoma!* to encourage a multiracial reading and challenge assumptions about who lived on the frontier and, by implication, who comprises the nation today. As an example of what Jill Dolan calls “utopian performatives,” this production illustrated how exhortations for togetherness can map onto calls for racial diversity, equality, and eradication of identity lines that alienate individuals.\(^ {624}\) According to Dolan, imagining utopia as a “what if” “allows performance a hopeful cast, one that can experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that’s always, itself, in process.”\(^ {625}\) Because Smith and her creative team asked “what if” and wanted the racial makeup of the nation to be reflected in the cast and therefore the new Arena Stage, their *Oklahoma!* featured a racially diverse ensemble and

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\(^{623}\) As I wrote earlier in the dissertation, I put “Golden Age” in quotation marks here but not in the body of the text to indicate that I do not believe the so-called integrated musicals typically classified in this way are the best, though I still find its historical connotation of musicals from the 1920s through the 1960s to be useful.


\(^{625}\) Ibid., 13.
principals. Black, Latina/o, Asian, Native American, and mixed-race performers made up nearly half the cast. Laurey and Aunt Eller were played by black actresses and Curly by a white Latino-Native American actor, while Jud, Will, and Ado Annie were played by white actors and Ali Hakim by a South Asian actor. Sensitive to stereotypes, the creative team made these casting choices carefully and provoked spectators to read and reframe the territory folks both racially and temporally. Throughout this chapter, I invoke “territory folks” because of the connotations of unstable positioning and Hammerstein’s lyrics in “The Farmer and the Cowman” that call for them to stick together. Not quite yet U.S. citizens and not exactly all white, the people of the Indian Territory, which did not combine with Oklahoma Territory to become a state until 1907, can be “in between,” “now and then,” “all or nothing,” suggesting the social construction and contestation of racial and national identities. Multiracial casting and interpretations of that casting raise high stakes for practitioners, academics, and audiences invested in social justice. How we read bodies on stage mediates and is mediated by how we read them off stage.

This chapter parses the productions and interpretations of racial and national identities of multiracial Oklahoma! territory folks in the age of Obama. Arena’s production stages a utopian performative of inclusion, but that utopia troublingly rests on indigenous genocide and elision of racial difference and inequality. Both parts of this argument are crucial when a majority of white Americans openly celebrate diversity but deny the significance of race and racism, despite vast disparities in income, housing, education, hiring, media representation, policing, and sentencing of those convicted of crimes. The production represents a moment of apparent racial progress through diversity, hope, and change, but largely a continuation of the status quo through the avoidance of addressing institutional racism. My identification as a woman of mixed color as well as my experiences having worked at Arena Stage the season prior and having seen its
production of this musical, among many others, influence this study. I also wish to draw attention to Arena Stage as having a long history of multiracial productions of classic plays.

First, I offer terms for understanding how bodies become variously interpellated and interpreted into existing racial projects and the shifting (re)productions of Americanness: multiracial-conscious, whitened, and post-racial. Using promotional materials and interviews with artistic staff members, I analyze the marketing and casting of the production. Angela Pao’s key work on casting, *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater*, informs my close readings of specific characters and actors as well as the possibilities and limits to redressing and representing Americans. Finally, I turn to critical reviews, although I recognize that critics write from privileged positions, symbolically and literally having the best seats in the house. The reviews help to exemplify negotiations of the multiracial *Oklahoma!* and its synecdoche for Arena Stage and the United States as multiracial, white, and/or post-racial. They reveal the struggles for defining and who gets to define race and American identity at a moment when people of color appear to have significant representation, enabling many with privilege to disavow that privilege and therefore perpetuate systemic oppression.

**Theorizing Multiracial Musical Revivals**

As open texts, musical revivals allow artists and audiences to reconsider new historical contexts and new racial projects. According to sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, “[a] racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial

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627 For more on musicals as open texts, see Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).
dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines.\textsuperscript{628} Their work on racial formation conceives race as both social construct and material lived experience. The term “post-race” has gained currency after Obama’s election, at once signaling a belief that Americans no longer notice race and, at the same time, contradictorily do notice the remarkable achievement of electing a black President. Staging a multiracial \textit{Oklahoma!} in 2010 puts forth competing visions of race that resonate with Obama’s presidency and that encourage attendant policies ranging from cultivating equality to preserving white privilege.

Arena’s artists and patrons navigated the racial projects and overdetermined texts of \textit{Oklahoma!}, its marketing, casting, and dramaturgy, to negotiate a sort of semiotic contract to make sense of race and U.S. identity in this production. The imprecise diction here and below—“sort of”—denotes the struggle of articulating race and theorizing spectatorship. Naming racial identities should not be taken as ahistorical, essentialized, and knowable, though an attempt at naming may be necessary to articulate race even as it problematically reifies race as if it were fixed. To underscore and examine race, I use the term “multiracial” casting instead of “colorblind” or “non-traditional” casting. “Multiracial” avoids the not-so-blind spots of “colorblindness” and the false binary of “non-traditional,” while still leaving room for dynamic interpretations. In \textit{The Problem of the Color[blind]}, Brandi Wilkins Catanese shows the ironies of colorblindness: “a heightened and sublimated awareness of race” that can lead to tokenistic casting of non-white actors “to prove that they no longer face specific barriers” and mark “the triumph of racial transcendence.”\textsuperscript{629} In recent essays on race and casting, director and educator Daniel Banks offers the term “integrated” casting, while playwright Dominique Morisseau

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{628} Michael Omi and Howard Winant, \textit{Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 56.
proposes “color-consciousness,” the latter being a term that Arena staff members use themselves. I intend for “multiracial” to encompass Banks’s and Morisseau’s critiques of whiteness as the apparently neutral, unmarked default. “America” is also a term that spills over boundaries and can therefore be useful to stress the nation’s construction, containment, and implications of empire. A site of struggle, “America” largely exists in imagined and material tension between the privileged white citizen and disenfranchised people of color, as seen in the nation’s theatre broadly and in this production more particularly.

I outline three primary modes for understanding the casting of Oklahoma! and mediating of struggles over America as multiracial-conscious, whitened, and post-racial. In No Safe Spaces, Angela Pao stresses the hegemony of realism in U.S. media and audience expectations so that the body in performance, especially when people of color portray implicitly or explicitly white characters, reshapes reception. Following Pao and highlighting the importance of production as well as consumption, I offer multiple lenses through which to read bodies performing racial projects in the age of Obama. In the multiracial-conscious mode, producers and spectators could make the racialized bodily equation of actor and character, using the “logic” of racial legibility. This race and body-conscious lens would present a multiracial utopia of black, Latina/o, Asian, Native American, white, and mixed-race actors singing and dancing together as black, Latina/o, Asian, Native American, white, and mixed-race characters. Second, producers and spectators could whitewash the roles, at once registering the different races of the actors and assuming they were for the most part playing white characters. In this case, the black actresses who portrayed Laurey and Aunt Eller could appear white in order to conform to earlier productions of

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631 Angela Pao, No Safe Spaces, 28.
Oklahoma! and hegemonic narratives of the state’s history. Third, producers and spectators could, through sense-making of the cast in a present-day allegedly post-racial, non-racist, colorblind world, perceive the cast and characters as transcending race and ultimately deeming race unimportant. For example, this view permits the disavowal of any racial meaning in Jud, played by a white actor, breaking up the romance of Laurey and Curly, played by actors of color. The multiracial, whitened, and post-racial modes of understanding bodies as performing racial projects are not static but dynamic, and they are not necessarily discrete. They can be contradictory within and between modes. They have different political valences in affirming, challenging, and changing race and racism.

In addition, audience members are not all alike. They have different horizons of expectations with respect to Oklahoma!, Arena Stage, and other multiracial productions, and different processes for understanding race and the United States. Multiracial casting can thus trigger numerous questions, especially because American spectators versed in realism tend to read the body of an actor into the character and try to make sense of that character in context. In this production, the context could be one or more of several multiracial, whitened, and/or post-racial frames with which the audience could measure “reality”: the Oklahoma and Indian Territories in the early 1900s, the time of the debut of the musical in 1943, and/or the season in 2010-11.

But these three modes rest on the fundamentally troubling premises of Oklahoma!’s narrative and of multiracial productions in general, namely the erasure of Native Americans and appearance of effortless racial egalitarianism. The history of Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory is uniquely bound up with the United States’ violent resettlement and containment of indigenous people. “Oklahoma” comes from the Choctaw words for “Red People.” This name
and history are often silenced. Musicologist Raymond Knapp argues that the musical reproduces that silencing because Rodgers and Hammerstein whitened and Americanized the characters of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the source of *Oklahoma!*  

White-Native American playwright Lynn Riggs was far more attentive to racial specificity and history in *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which has a significantly different ending from the musical version. In the play, after Curly and Jud fight and Jud dies by falling on his own knife, Curly goes to federal prison to await a formal trial. When the territory folks catch him escaping from prison, Aunt Eller persuades everyone to allow him to spend his wedding night with Laurey. She admonishes them, “[w]hy, the way you’re sidin’ with the federal marshal, you’d think us people out here lived in the United States!” to which they reply, “[n]ow, Aunt Eller, we hain’t furriners. My pappy and mammy was *both* borned in Indian Territory! Why, I’m jist plumb full of Indian blood myself.” Citing blood, which reduces race to biological essence, they claim to be part Indian, and they identify as Indian Territory folks, not as Americans, so they are willing to flout U.S. federal law. To then Americanize the musical, Hammerstein erased this indigenous complexity, lightened Curly’s sentence, and celebrated the U.S. In the musical, Curly does not go to prison; instead, the ensemble immediately stages an informal trial and exonerates him, and they gleefully sing about the territory becoming a state.

The multiracial casting and the celebratory ending also have the potential to elide material differences, as if territory folks are all the same and have always harmonized. With the rise of post-racial rhetoric, audience members may enter and leave the theatre believing that

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racial parity has already been achieved and that race does not matter. As sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has illustrated in *Racism without Racists*, the vast majority of white Americans disavow white privilege.⁶³⁴ They deny systemic white supremacy and their implication therein typically using a frame of abstract liberalism that celebrates equal opportunity, which assumes an already level playing field and ultimately obscures and justifies racial material inequality. The Supreme Court’s recent overturning of the still much-needed Voting Rights Act is but one example of the severe consequences of believing that structural racism no longer exists.

Although Arena Stage’s casting decisions productively redefine the borders of the United States to include multiracial territory folks, those same decisions exclude and flatten others. The result largely maintains racial hierarchy because neoliberal multiculturalism mobilizes images of diversity to drown out radical articulations of race and nation and distribution of power.

**Branding America, Arena, and *Oklahoma!* as Multiracial**

Arena Stage had experimented with multiracial casting in classic plays and musicals since the 1960s, positioning this particular regional theatre in the nation’s capital as a laboratory for staging racial integration. As I discussed in Chapter One, Zelda Fichandler was, along with Joseph Papp, an early advocate for multiracial casting. In 1968, after the success of *The Great White Hope*, she formed a resident acting ensemble of black and white actors who performed in three plays, including *The Threepenny Opera*. Ultimately, the productions proved unpopular and financially unsustainable. In 1987, she recalled her experiences with the ensemble in her remarks at the Non-Traditional Casting Symposium sponsored by the League of Washington Theatres and hosted by Arena Stage, suggesting Arena’s sense of continuity with respect to exploring race

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and casting issues. She theorized multiracial casting in memos to the Arena Stage staff, in newspaper articles, and in interviews. In Chapter Three, I discussed how Fichandler attempted to enrich Arena with cultural diversity initiatives, including building a multiracial resident acting ensemble once again and hiring African American director Tazewell Thompson, who directed an all-black production of *The Glass Menagerie* and a multiracial production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

When Doug Wager became artistic director in 1991, he continued to cast an array of differently raced actors in contemporary and canonical plays. The most controversial production was likely his direction of *Our Town*, which included eighteen white actors, seven black actors, and one Latino actor to represent a multiracial America.635 Jonathan Yardley of the *Washington Post* censured this multiracial casting on the grounds of inappropriate political correctness and inaccuracy. To him, the cast did not reflect the demographics of New Hampshire, the racial logic of siblings, and the way Doctor Gibbs should sound (i.e. “American” rather than like “Ricky Ricardo”).636 His article prompted rebuttals by Fichandler, Wager, and Arena Stage’s patrons that emphasized the U.S. as multiracial, the play as non-realistic, and the casting as in keeping with Thornton Wilder’s specific note calling for artifice. Meanwhile, many letters from former subscribers revealed that Yardley was far from alone in his objections to multiracial casting.

Appointed as artistic director in 1998, Molly Smith shifted Arena Stage decidedly to American work, a mission that included continuing the theatre’s history of multiracial casting. According to Smith, there were approximately seventy professional theatre companies in the

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635 For more on the controversy over *Our Town*, see Angela Pao, *No Safe Spaces*, 169-174.
Washington, D.C. area, and none of them sufficiently attended to the market for U.S. drama. Now Arena Stage presents itself as “Where American Theater Lives.” The new mission includes developing U.S. plays as well as staging festivals of “American Giants,” who, so far, turn out to be the white patriarchs of U.S. theatre: Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, and Eugene O’Neill. In 2010, Arena Stage opened the new Mead Center for American Theater, rebranding its space, image, and programming. The Fichandler in-the-round stage and Kreeger proscenium theatre were remodeled; the Kogod Cradle, a black box, was built to “cradle” new work; and the three theatres were encased by a glass-curtained structure.

Producing Golden Age musicals has been an important part of establishing the American brand. Knapp argues that musicals are American in their production, consumption, and themes of community-building. Smith agrees, considering musicals to be one of the true American art forms: “[i]t’s in our bones. It’s in our sensibility. The best of the musicals really define the American character.” In the 2000s, Arena Stage repeatedly sampled the American songbook, showcasing more well-known musicals such as South Pacific and less well-known examples such as Hallelujah, Baby! that often have explicit racial themes. In addition, the company regularly staged multiracial productions of musicals, including Guys and Dolls and The Fantasticks. According to Smith, “[w]hen one does American work, it is often about race, because race is our underlining tragedy in this country. It’s the wound that we are continually trying to heal. So a theatre that focuses on American work, it’s always gonna be there. So in a profound way, I’m answering that through casting.”

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638 “Our History,” http://www.arenastage.org/about/history/.
640 Molly Smith, in discussion with the author, December 2012.
641 Ibid.
Oklahoma! in the Fichandler Stage, the largest space, was a way to cement Arena’s branding as American and as intimately woven into racial dynamics.

When advertising Oklahoma!, Arena Stage linked the redefined theatre space, the musical, and the United States past and present. Smith pronounced, “[i]t’s a beautiful morning for Arena Stage,” implicitly evoking political diction and dawn imagery while explicitly connecting the opening number to the theatre’s opening of the Mead Center. She and the marketing materials stressed the theme of change for Arena, the Territories, and the musical form. The header “GREAT AMERICAN MUSICAL” accompanied Oklahoma! in overviews of the season that claimed, “Oklahoma! introduced a change in musical theater—the fully developed book musical.” “Book” or “integrated” musical means that the artistic elements from the score to the sets seemed of a piece in telling a serious, realistic story as opposed to earlier musical comedies such as Anything Goes (1934) with loosely strung together numbers and plotlines typically about show business. However, scholars such as Tim Carter have traced the construction of this suspect evolutionary narrative, in which Hammerstein himself played a major part, and pointed to the existence of book musicals prior to 1943 such as Kurt Weill, Ira Gershwin, and Moss Hart’s Lady in the Dark (1941). In addition, some recent scholarship has questioned the privileging of book musicals over other forms such as megamusicals.

Despite scholarly critiques of musical historiography and cultural hierarchy, Arena capitalized on the more common acceptance of Oklahoma! as one of the chief Golden Age musicals that legitimized the genre and embodied U.S. identity. This narrative is fundamental not

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only to Arena’s re-branding but also to Gerald Mast’s larger claim that Rodgers and Hammerstein “sought to define exactly what America meant and Americans believed.”

Academic articles on Oklahoma! often argue that the musical invokes positive “American” ideals of inclusiveness, reconciliation, and community. Many scholars locate this musical’s American identity on the frontier, deploying Frederick Turner’s influential thesis that encounters between indigenous and pioneering white ethnic peoples along the westward frontier produced a distinct, democratic American character. Accordingly, in one promotional YouTube video, Smith earnestly claimed that Oklahoma! represented “the kind of grit, the kind of robustness, that I think America is made of.” This spirit of rugged pioneering translated to the new Arena and cast. Some Washington critics connected the frontier spirit of the musical to Smith’s former leadership of Perseverance Theatre in Alaska. In the same video, Smith noted that “the territory” was “completely diverse,” at which point a photograph of a Native American man and a white frontiersman standing side by side appeared. Such a claim and the accompanying image suggest on the one hand a knowing sense of indigenous peoples and American colonization, and on the other a sense of confusion in not naming “the” Oklahoma and Indian Territories and the tensions therein. What adds up to a “completely diverse” territory?


648 “Molly Smith discusses OKLAHOMA!, the 10-11 season opener,” YouTube video.

To unsettle preconceptions of the frontier as white, in part due to cultural productions such as *Oklahoma!*, Arena used historical documentation to justify its multiracial casting. Extensive dramaturgy in patrons’ programs detailed the racial demographics and histories of the Indian and Oklahoma Territories. Dramaturg Janine Sobeck shed light on ways race and labor were tied with respect to Asian immigrant workers, and how tribes such as the Cherokee participated in enslaving black people. This historical rationalization for casting people of color helped to persuade skeptics and satisfy *Oklahoma!’s* reputation as a more “realistic” book musical than earlier ones. In the director’s note, Smith asserted, “Arena’s cast is an American tapestry, with all colors and types. African-Americans, Native Americans and Asian-Americans lived in Oklahoma at [the] beginning of the 20th century. They shared a territory but lived in separate communities … Arena’s frontier is a fully cross-cultural one.” With romantic imagery of the “tapestry” and “frontier,” Smith wove together a rationale for the multiracial cast to represent both the territory folks in 1907 and the United States of today.

Yet the multiracial casting can be troubling in how it rewrites historical racial segregation and obscures persistent segregation, particularly in the racially fraught metropolitan area. Despite the theatre’s being in a majority black neighborhood in a predominantly black city, the majority of Arena’s patrons are white. Still, in my theatregoing experience, I have noticed that Arena has a relatively racially diverse audience, to some extent because it markets to black churches and invests in multiracial productions. Distinct from local peer institutions including Signature Theatre, Shakespeare Theatre Company, Studio Theatre, and Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Arena Stage regularly stages drama by and/or about African Americans. In addition to *Oklahoma!* during the 2010-11 season, the company produced Marcus Gardley’s *every tongue*

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650 Pao observes other companies have employed this strategy of citing historical populations because contemporary U.S. audiences demand realism. Angela Pao, *No Safe Spaces*, 136.

confess, Anna Deavere Smith’s *Let Me Down Easy*, and Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined*. During Smith’s tenure from 1998 through 2014, 30% of plays produced were written by playwrights of color, and 26% of productions were directed by directors of color.\(^652\) Because Smith staged *Oklahoma!* in the round, the diverse audience helped form the “tapestry” that is the backdrop to the production. The theatrical space attempted to promote a spirit of U.S. patriotism through the use of dozens of flags hung along the interior perimeter of the in-the-round theatre. The flags enveloped the spectators, actors, and musicians, encouraging inclusiveness in the “brand new state” that promises to “treat you great.” The multiracial cast mediated the optimistic sense that equality is possible under the star-spangled banner, although such a banner of nationalism often covers up racial material differences.

But multiracial casting can also inspire social change. For audiences of color, seeing performers of color especially in leading roles can provide validation. The affect of joy and hope provoked by witnessing and participating in multiracial harmony can in turn provoke actions to make that harmony a reality outside the theatre. Describing the utopian performative of Def Poetry Jam, Dolan writes,

> [t]he performance creates a need, a desire to strive for this affective measure of goodwill, so that the glow of intersubjectivity and community might extend not just through the rest of this night, but through many others, as well. By creating this hope, by engaging this anticipatory illumination and watching these fantasy pictures, the performance can change consciousness and move people to change social conditions.\(^653\)

\(^{652}\) “Arena Seasonal Stats 98-14,” Khady Kamara, e-mail to author, July 15, 2014.

Particularly in the context of a major theatre institution in Washington, D.C., and one that politicians often patronize, a multiracial *Oklahoma!* can ring a note of hope and progressive policy that resounds across the capital.

**Multiracial-Conscious Casting and Interpretation**

When casting the musical, the creative team was sensitive to the storytelling aspect of having certain characters played by actors of certain races because of histories of racial representations. They were conscious of the multiracial implications of their decisions in that they anticipated that spectators would pay attention to bodily racial legibility and then map the race of the actors onto the race of their respective characters. As a consequence, they decided that the comic couple Will Parker and Ado Annie should not be played by black actors for fear of recalling minstrelsy, and that Jud should not be played by a black or Native American actor to avoid stereotypes of drunk, sexually threatening, working-class, male villains of color. The creative team briefly considered casting a Native American actor as Jud because his outsider status and death would resonate with the violent treatment of indigenous peoples by the U.S. state. They ultimately claimed that they did not find a suitable singing actor, and they expressed concerns about offending audiences with such a portrayal. White actors were cast in these three parts, suggesting an apparent unmarkedness to whiteness that can be safely laughed at or villainized.

To avoid simple tokenism, the creative team cast the rest of the principals, not just a few ensemble members, with actors of color. Ali Hakim, a Persian peddler, was originally played on Broadway by a white Jewish actor, and white actors often continue to play this role in contemporary productions. Casting director Dan Pruksarnukul, however, determined that the role
Illustrating sensitivity to a history of brownface, he cast South Asian-American-identified actor, Nehal Joshi. The creative team actively reached out to the African American actress, E. Faye Butler, who initially did not think the offer of Aunt Eller was serious because the idea of a multiracial production of *Oklahoma!* felt so farfetched; her response suggested that multiracial stagings of Golden Age musicals are rarities. Once she accepted, Arena Stage cast another black actress as Laurey: Valisia LeKay. When LeKay left the production shortly before the opening, Arena hired another black actress, Eleasha Gamble, instead of turning to the white understudy. Because the creative team wanted Curly to be of a different race from Laurey, they cast a white Latino-Native American actor, Nicholas Rodriguez. Finally, the ensemble boasted black, Latina/o, Asian, Native American, white, and mixed-race performers, resulting in an *Oklahoma!* where approximately half the performers were people of color.

Arena Stage’s multiracial casting practices are unusual and laudable. During the 2010-11 season, actors of color received eight per cent of roles (nine out of 114) at Shakespeare Theatre Company, although nearly all of the roles lacked racial specificity. Signature Theatre cast only three actors of color, one of them being Eleasha Gamble. Largely focused on new plays by U.S. and U.K. artists, Studio Theatre and Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company each produced two plays by artists of color with majority casts of color. The former produced *Marcus, or the Secret of Sweet* by Tarrell Alvin McCraney, and *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* by Young Jean Lee. The latter produced *Oedipus el Rey* by Luis Alfaro and *Bootycandy* by Robert O’Hara. For another look at employment data, the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC) compiled statistics on race, ethnicity, and casting in New York City. From 2006 to 2011, white

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654 Dan Pruksarnukul, e-mail to author, July 10, 2012.
actors made up four-fifths of roles on and off Broadway, though white Americans make up only two-thirds of the U.S. population.\textsuperscript{656} According to the 2010 census, Washington, D.C. residents were 51% black, 39% white, 9% Latino/a, and 4% Asian.\textsuperscript{657} According to AAPAC, actors of color received less than 10% of the roles in which race purportedly did not matter or race was implicitly white, meaning that they typically played parts that correlated with their races.\textsuperscript{658} Faring better than the average New York professional production, this multiracial production of \textit{Oklahoma!} more accurately reflected U.S. and D.C. demographics and provided greater opportunities for performers of color.

Spectators may not have known the specific rationales for the casting of each character, yet the marketing likely prepared many of them for the multiracial production. The subscription brochure avowed that the production was “not your mother’s \textit{Oklahoma!}”\textsuperscript{659} Although the phrase hinted at a kind of daring progressiveness in this production, it also implied a homogenous “your mother” and avoided explicitly naming race. At the top of the performance, Curly, performed by Nicholas Rodriguez, played “Oh What a Beautiful Morning” on his harmonica as he walked through the audience to reach the stage and Aunt Eller, performed by E. Faye Butler. Registering racial difference in the actors and audience around the Arena, spectators could actively think about the performativity and legibility of race. According to casting director Pruksarnukul, “[i]nitially an audience reaction could be wondering, ‘why are people of a certain race?’ But […] eventually our hope was that that would be such a seamless, integrated, and well-balanced production and cast composition that it would no longer become a thought.”\textsuperscript{660} His remark

\textsuperscript{658} Asian American Performers Action Coalition, “Ethnic Representation on New York City Stages.”
\textsuperscript{659} Arena Stage, “Great American Musical,” 2010-2011 Inaugural Season brochure. Author’s collection.
\textsuperscript{660} Dan Pruksarnukul, in discussion with the author, January 2013.
resonates with Harvey Young’s observation of multiracial productions: “[a]s the play progresses, spectators become less conscious of an individual actor’s race as the performer melds into her role and the audience becomes absorbed into the world of the play.”

Pruksarnukul and Young touch upon changes and contradictions between modes of reading productions as multiracial, whitened, and post-racial. Arena’s artists wanted to ground the multiracial cast in historical and contemporary demographics and redefine how America and Arena are racialized; at the same time, they wanted patrons to forget race. These contradictory desires reveal the intricacies of racial formation, intention, and reception. Although the creative team cast the production with progressive politics and a multiracial-conscious lens, the production can also serve more conservative ends when spectators view it through different lenses that whiten the characters or render race and racism invisible.

**Whitening and Erasing Race**

Because of a history of racial inequality and whitewashed productions, a multiracial version of *Oklahoma!* and the musical itself lend themselves to whitened readings. As discussed above, when Hammerstein adapted Lynn Riggs’s play into a musical, he whitewashed the dramatic narrative, characters, and history. Marvin Carlson’s concept of haunting is useful for thinking through how white actors in earlier productions of *Oklahoma!* and histories of Oklahoma influence audience’s expectations of revivals. Spectators may use the original Broadway production, white community or school productions, or the 1955 film version as sites of authority that position the territory folks as white and therefore haunt contemporary productions.

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productions. The more received demographics of the early twentieth-century frontier as white American pioneers may also paint a white picture. To justify the equal treatment of all the characters in a multiracial revival, some spectators may consider the characters white, thereby putting them on a level playing field. The solely explicit dialogue engagement with race is the naming of Ali Hakim as Persian, leading to a presumption of whiteness for the other characters. Thus, given the whitened preconceptions of Oklahoma!, spectators may reshape their understanding of the multiracial production to fit the white mold.

This whitened view is particularly dangerous because, as scholar-activist Andrea Smith notes, rendering Native Americans invisible is related to reproducing and coping with a U.S. history of genocide. In the eighteenth century, many tribes were forcibly removed to what became known as Indian Territory. Land runs by settlers from nearby states then resulted in parceling the area into Indian and Oklahoma Territories. While an attempt to turn Indian Territory into a state failed, the union of the territories made Oklahoma a state in 1907. This disturbing historical narrative is not accounted for in Oklahoma! The musical demands a simpler one in which implicitly or explicitly white characters stand for all the territory folks.

Another portion of the audience may subscribe to the post-racial project, which performs the symbolic violence of erasure to maintain unmarked and unremarked whiteness and its attendant privileges. As opposed to the whitened view, the post-racial view denies the significance of whiteness. This view argues that race no longer matters because racial equality has been achieved. Spectators may recognize race but then disavow it, because somehow in

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663 For an example of the frequency of such productions, consider when the characters in Young Jean Lee’s Straight White Men (2014) recall protesting an all-white high school production and parodying Oklahoma! by singing “O-K-K-K!”

singing, dancing, and casting actors of color, race and racism have been overcome. Upon seeing a multiracial production of a musical, they may conclude that there is no need to unpack the racial dynamics of the production because we are beyond race.

The very existence of a multiracial cast, or a black President, paradoxically provides proof that systemic white supremacy no longer exists, even as such a conclusion uncritically equates representation with material equality, and is the privilege of those who retain power. Addressing this paradox, Pao describes neoliberal understandings of multiracial casting in plays by canonical white writers as both “a bold way for nonwhite actors to actively redefine national identity not only as individual artists but as representatives of their respective communities” and “a broad move [that] reinstates rather than destabilizes whiteness as the racial and cultural norm by reinforcing the illusion that white experiences, attitudes, and behavior exist outside history.”665 By casting actors of color in what is essentially a white version of Oklahoma history, the production to some extent legitimizes that narrative as seemingly timeless and universal. Through Rodgers and Hammerstein’s avoidance of naming race, the musical suggests it does not exist as lived experience. Some spectators could subsequently slip into the post-race belief that race is merely a mask that can be put on and taken off at will. Such is Josephine Lee’s critique of “colorblind” casting, and the “paradox of seeing and not seeing race—where visible difference is important only to suggest that ultimately ‘color doesn’t really matter.”666 Because the characters were cast racially in ways to limit potential offense, some spectators could more easily erase color. For example, casting a white actor rather than a black or Native American actor as Jud reduces spectator fixation on racial stereotypes and violence performed on the bodies of men of color. Championing a post-racial society could be a utopian performative of territory folks bound

665 Angela Pao, No Safe Spaces, 136.
by their common humanity, but in the present reality beyond the theatre, there are political consequences for cultural producers perpetuating a belief of equality as already having been accomplished, a belief that may privileged people hold, when that is far from the case.

Racial difference can exceed, challenge, or conform to spectators’ expectations and demands, which are shaped by different racial projects and understandings. Through careful casting, Arena Stage created a multiracial production that availed itself to multiple readings and therefore popular success. Interpretations of the multiracial Oklahoma! production as multiracial-conscious, white, and/or post-racial become more concrete yet also more complex when audiences engage with racialized bodies on stage. The principal actors and characters raise different issues for racial legibility and relations between one another.

**Reading Racialized Actors/Characters**

An actor of mixed heritage, Nicholas Rodriguez posed opportunities for multiple readings of Curly. Regular theatre patrons of Arena Stage might have remembered him as Fabrizio in the Italy-set musical The Light in the Piazza the previous season, suggesting that the actor convincingly plays “ethnic” whites, although this assumes Italians look homogenous. Curly’s dream ballet double was, interestingly, played by a white dancer, signifying that Rodriguez passed as white for spectators since they must make the connection between these actors as the same character. Meanwhile, Rodriguez’s recurring role as a gay, Latino character on the televised soap opera, One Life to Live, in 2009 also haunts the actor, encouraging audiences to draw comparisons between these different performances. Reviewers called the actor either Hispanic or Latino, likely because his last name is identifiably Latino, resulting in an erasure of his mixed background. Rodriguez identifies as Mexican-American, Welsh, and Cherokee.
Mixed-race people are often racially illegible because they exceed and complicate the boundaries of boxes, be it on census forms or on stage. Difficulty categorizing an actor’s race and consequently a character’s race can cause discomfort, self-consciousness, and critical thinking about the performativity of race. Through a multiracial lens, spectators could see Rodriguez and Curly as Latino, Native American, and/or mixed-race. But because the actor also reads as white and the character does not name race, both may be whitened or read as post-racial. In an interview, Rodriguez underlined, “I’m not playing Curly as a Latino; I’m just Curly.”667 Making a post-racial move, he wanted to transcend race and asserted that “just” playing Curly is necessarily distinct and unmarked as opposed to “playing Curly as a Latino.”

Aunt Eller as played by E. Faye Butler also mediated racial signifiers and tensions. With her flirtations, shrewd remarks, and hands on hips, she resembled the sassy black woman and the old, wise, black matron; these racialized and gendered stereotypes can be read as empowering, if clichéd. For the spectator using a multiracial reading of the production, her interactions with Curly took on different racial charges. When Curly said to her, “I wouldn’t marry you ner none of yer kinfolks, I could he’p it,” the playful line became extremely striking because he could seem to hold anti-black and anti-miscegenation views.668 Curly would marry Aunt Eller’s kinfolk, and he soon asked for Laurey, portrayed by Eleasha Gamble. (See Fig. 9) Because Butler and Gamble, two black actresses, played family members, the casting implied that their characters too are black, a choice Smith often makes as a director.669 Discrepancies in the racial makeup of actors portraying relatives often disturb audience members expecting realism and

669 Molly Smith, in discussion with the author, December 2012.
biological “logic” to race. Such thinking reveals the mode of equating an actor’s race with her character rather than erasing race.

Along similar lines, some spectators object to actors of different races playing romantic couples. Arena Stage received criticism from patrons who objected to Laurey’s being black, or being played by a black actress, or being involved with an apparently white actor/character. The slipperiness here relates to anxieties over race but also to uncertainties over meaning. Moreover, a black actress in the role of Laurey has the potential to trouble notions of innocent, white femininity, mainly for spectators ghosted by Shirley Jones in the film version of Oklahoma!, among other productions. According to new play producing fellow Amrita Ramanan, some patrons complained that the production was “taking away their nostalgic impression of what this musical was meant to look like.” Meanwhile, she added that casting African Americans in lead roles gave local public school students who attended the production “a new sense of inspiration” and “connected to the D.C. cultural zeitgeist at the time.” These mixed responses demonstrate that audiences are not homogenous. They cannot be assumed to perceive, withhold, and/or express the same beliefs about race and racism. Both explicit racism and racial progressiveness are vibrant, resonating with Americans’ ambivalence toward Obama, another black actor in a typically white role.

White actors played Will, Ado Annie, and Jud, but such casting, expected in white versions of Oklahoma!, does not necessarily simplify their racial interpretations and positions in this multiracial production. I will focus on Jud because of his racialized outsider status. Many scholars have written on how he does not sing or dance with the community, and his exclusion largely rests on his racialization as non-white. In Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway

670 Angela Pao, No Safe Spaces, 38-40.
671 Amrita Ramanan, in discussion with the author, December 2012.
672 Ibid.
Musical, Andrea Most asserts that Jud reads as black or at least an instance of “racial
otherness.” She points to the smoke house in which he lives, the resonances of lynching, and
the stage direction in “Pore Jud Is Daid” in which Jud sings “like a Negro at a revivalist
meeting.” The new edition of the libretto states, “[r]peats reverently as if at a revivalist
meeting,” revealing a discomfort bluntly characterizing Jud “like a Negro” today. Expanding
on Most, Bruce Kirle and Raymond Knapp suggest that the character can be read as Native
American, whereas Derek Miller adds that he might be seen as Jewish. These readings gain
greater legibility on the bodies of non-white actors, and another recent multiracial production of
Oklahoma! provides such an example.

In February 2012, 5th Avenue Theatre in Seattle produced Oklahoma! with a black actor
as Jud among white principals and a multiracial ensemble from Spectrum Dance Theatre. This
significant regional theatre is devoted to presenting and producing musicals, some of which have
transferred to Broadway. Many critics cited its casting of a black actor as Jud as “problematic” or
“provocative,” pointing to when Curly encouraged Jud to hang himself and when Curly was
acquitted of Jud’s death. Most mentions both examples to support her interpretation of Jud as
black. Her interpretation gains even more currency in this staging because the actor portraying
Curly was white. The theatre company apparently did not anticipate such an uproar, since it
subsequently scheduled panels to discuss the casting. These reactions suggest that some
spectators saw the production in a multiracial mode, translating the race of actors to their

673 Andrea Most, Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
2004), 117.
674 Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, Oklahoma!, 63.
675 Bruce Kirle, Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process, 135; Raymond Knapp, The
American Musical and the Performance of National Identity, 134; Derek Miller, “‘Underneath the Ground’: Jud and
676 See for example Misha Berson, “Provocative ‘Oklahoma!’ hits 5th Avenue stage,” Seattle Times, February 10,
677 See http://www.5thavenue.org/show/oklahoma for a catalog of reviews and a video of the artistic director
interviewing Kyle Scatliffe, the black actor who played Jud, as a way to defuse readings of this production as racist.
respective characters. The theatre company saw its *Oklahoma!* as multiracial, yet, in a post-racial turn, saw beyond race for the casting of Jud, ultimately disavowing black stereotypes and continuing racial inequality.

The 5th Avenue Theatre production throws the Arena Stage production into relief because, for the latter, Jud was cast as white amidst a racially diverse cast of principals and ensemble. When he tried to break up Curly and Laurey’s wedding, he could be seen as the white who refuses to integrate, so his whiteness amplified rather than neutralized his villainy. In this light, his behavior could bring to mind racial tensions on the frontier in 1907 but also today, when some lament the passing of white majority America. In the multiracial mode, Jud stood for the outlier of the imagined diverse, neoliberal society in Arena’s *Oklahoma!* and in the United States. For those communities to thrive, Jud must be removed. Then again, Smith directed Jud as a genuinely possible romantic partner for Laurey, played by a black actress, and sympathetically in his death, creating a long, tense pause after Curly emerged from the knife fight alive. As a consequence, Jud could be read as a white ally who deserves to be mourned. To reconcile the complexities of Jud’s outsider status, desire for Laurey, and death, spectators could relinquish racial meanings for a post-racial understanding. The move toward colorblindness can be seductive because it glosses over the complexities of racial power dynamics in order to make sense of the dramaturgy on stage and off stage and, in this case, it can exempt white complicity in maintaining racial structures.

Scholars’ arguments about Jud as outsider frequently involve Ali Hakim as his counterpart assimilated other, yet reading his race is another complicated process. Most offers a

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compelling case for the character’s Jewishness because of his coded mannerisms and dialogue.\textsuperscript{679} Ali Hakim was initially Armenian in honor of director Rouben Mamoulian and later became a Persian played by a Jewish actor.\textsuperscript{680} When Nehal Joshi played Ali Hakim in Washington, D.C., the actor’s South Asian identity related in various ways to the rest of the cast. If the races of the other actors were meant to be reproduced in their characters, as in the multiracial mode, then Ali Hakim was part of that diverse community and would be subsequently welcomed by Ado Annie, her father, and finally his betrothed Gertie Cummings, as he was. But such a directional interpretation disrupts how his character is meant in the whitened script to be racially and ethnically distinct from the other territory folks. Joshi used a different accent from the rest of the actors, implying that his actor-character race be taken literally, while those of the other characters were whitened. As with Jud, however, difference and assimilation are not so clear cut amidst a multiracial community.

Ultimately, \textit{Oklahoma!} the musical celebrates community, and the multiracial production largely encouraged a multiracial reading of U.S. nationhood. In lyrics that resonate with class and race equality, Aunt Eller teaches the farmers and cowmen, both played by actors of multiple races, to sing together, “I don’t say I’m no better than anybody else, / But I’ll be damned if I ain’t jist as good!”\textsuperscript{681} The choreography for this number mediated this sentiment with grounded footwork and athletic moves that men and women, farmers and cowboys, and the multiracial ensemble performed in sync as if all were strongly and equally capable. Spread out across the stage with their toes turned out and arms akimbo, the actors took up equal shares of space. (See Fig. 10) In this scene, Curly tells Laurey, “[c]ountry-a-changin’, got to change with it!, ” a line

\textsuperscript{679} Andrea Most, \textit{Making Americans}, 101-118.
\textsuperscript{680} According to Carter, Rodgers and Hammerstein at one point intended for the character to sing a coon song and couple with an “exotic” Latina, further suggesting his racialization. Tim Carter, \textit{Oklahoma!}, 90, 92-94.
\textsuperscript{681} Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, \textit{Oklahoma!}, 85.
that several reviewers of the Arena production highlighted as racially inflected toward a more diverse America.\textsuperscript{682} Knapp, among other scholars, points up the musical’s marriage trope,\textsuperscript{683} which gathers great significance given 2010 U.S. census data that eight per cent of all marriages are interracial, a new high, and 15\% of new marriages are interracial.\textsuperscript{684} As for children, “the multiracial population has increased almost 50 percent, to 4.2 million, since 2000, making it the fastest growing youth group in the country,” an important statistic because Curly’s next line is about children.\textsuperscript{685}

Finally, after Jud and Ali Hakim leave the stage, the company sings the rousing titular song to proclaim multiracial, American belonging: “[w]e know we belong to the land.”\textsuperscript{686} The black, Latina/o, Asian, Native American, white, and mixed-race performers, led musically by the white Latino-Native American actor playing Curly, formed a circle around a float, an oil rig bedecked with Americana, and faced the audience on all four sides of the arena. In singing their belonging, the performers and characters staked a claim to what constitutes American identity historically, today, and in the future as a multiracial, equal collective. This claim is exceedingly important at a time when Oklahoma, “the Land of the Red People,” is one of the most conservative states in the union—red in an entirely different way. Musical harmony suggested the possibility of national harmony. When watching this number, I felt brief hope, the affect of Dolan’s utopian performative “that beyond this ‘now’ of material oppression and unequal power

\textsuperscript{682} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{686} Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, \textit{Oklahoma!}, 119.
relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we’re seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later.”

And yet, after leaving the theatre and its *communitas*, I was “seared” by the discrepancy between representation and reality, and how the former has the potential to obscure the latter. Bonilla-Silva uses an apt musical metaphor to diagnose post-Civil Rights era colorblind racism: “[i]ts ‘we are beyond race’ lyrics and color-blind music will drown the voices of those fighting for racial equality (‘Why continue talking about race and racism when we are all Americans?’) and may even eclipse the space for talking about race altogether.” Privileging Americanness forms an imagined community of shared nationality at the expense of racial, gender, class, sexuality, and ability differences and discourses. Moreover, images of racial diversity potentially frame debates over resources as only debates over representation. Multiracial casts in musical revivals may be pleasing and inspiring utopian performatives, but they do not directly counter hegemony; they can be deployed to maintain power structures. When the multiracial ensemble sings, “Oklahoma / OK!,” a largely middle class, white audience can come away with the message that that state of the union is “OK!,” thereby sustaining the status quo of material inequality and belief that racism is no longer salient. As Pruksarnukul and Young suggest, audiences may begin viewing multiracial actors as multiracial characters, but as the performance progresses, they may see the characters as white or the world as post-racial. When people of color deal with systemic violence daily, and when many with privilege see our systems as fair, multiracial musicals can both symbolize hope and do symbolic violence.

**Critical Gazes**

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Reviews of the Arena production represent a range of spectatorship experiences in the modes of multiracial-conscious, whitened, and/or post-racial. For the most part, critics using the multiracial-actors-as-multiracial-characters frame were extremely enthusiastic. Several of them cited the multiracial casting as the fresh element that justified the production of such a “chestnut” as Oklahoma. The reviewers tended to detail the races of the actors playing Curly, Laurey, and Aunt Eller but never discussed those of Jud, Will, Ado Annie, and Ali Hakim. This implies that performers of color in typically white roles must be named, while whiteness need not be identified because it is presumed. Meanwhile, the silence about Ali Hakim suggests that Joshi’s South Asian background was normal or expected, despite a history of casting white actors in that role. These critics celebrated the racial diversity of the U.S. both in 2010 and in the past, registering surprise because of the historical information regarding Oklahoma’s frontier diversity in their theatre programs.

Other critics adopted more ambivalent views that gestured toward the multiracial mode but concluded with normative whiteness and disavowals of race. Terry Teachout of the Wall Street Journal asserted that “Ms. Smith’s ‘Oklahoma!’ is a perfectly, almost baldly straightforward production that deviates from the norm in only two ways: It is performed in the round by a multicultural cast whose members include a Latino Curly (Nicholas Rodriguez) and a black Laurey (Eleasha Gamble). Otherwise, this is much the same ‘Oklahoma!’ that your grandfolks loved.” Leslie Milk of the Washingtonian similarly wrote, “Smith has assembled a
multicultural cast, but to be honest, you hardly notice.” These reviews work against Arena’s marketing and further reveal how the identity of “your grandfolks” and “you” shape conceptions of race, in this case, among privileged white critics who work for bourgeois newspapers and presume that “you” identify similarly. Claiming that the multiracial production resembles earlier productions and that race is hardly noticeable works to depoliticize and ahistoricize race. Moreover, Teachout and Milk use the term “multicultural” instead of “multiracial” to downplay race further, even though the former refers to the characters as “Latino Curly” and “black Laurey.” A few reviewers never mentioned the multiracial casting, perhaps not wanting to show that they see race in the first place or, again, not seeing it as significant. Not naming race could also be because production stills accompanied the reviews, allowing the reader to interpret the visual, bodily “evidence” of the actors. Through these reviews, the critics, like Arena Stage, took part in redefining race and America when making sense of the multiracial production of Oklahoma!

The review by Peter Marks, chief critic of the Washington Post, was noteworthy because he is at present the most powerful critic in the nation’s capital, and he negotiated several positions but primarily that of post-race. He remarked that the production had a “cast whose faces reflect the America of this moment. [Molly Smith’s] exciting take … touches on the uplift you feel merely walking into Arena’s newly glittering complex, itself a representation of the nation’s optimistic impulse for reinvention.” Like Smith, Marks connected racial diversity with America, Arena Stage, and its new theatre building, using a positive, neoliberal outlook of “reinvention.” After identifying the lead actors’ ethnicities he stated, “[b]ut not only is there some historical support for these choices, it’s also a fact that each of them sings like a dream. In

693 Peter Marks, “A Grand New State: You Just Cain’t Say No to Arena Stage’s ‘Oklahoma!’”
the benevolent land of opportunity that is conjured here, they’ve earned these jobs, on merit.” He highlighted the historical justification for the multiracial cast, implying that he was skeptical before reading the dramaturg’s and director’s notes. In his praise of the performers, Marks subtly criticized affirmative action, suggesting that not all people of color in other productions and perhaps in other capacities have gotten their parts “on merit.” He performed a dangerous move here as if people of color, not white people, are the ones who profit from systemic advantages. Marks also praised Oklahoma! in contrast with Smith’s prior direction of Golden Age musicals such as Cabaret and Damn Yankees!, which “too often seemed to feel the need for intrusive statementmaking and stagy embellishment.” In so doing, he intimated that the multiracial cast in Oklahoma! was not “intrusive statementmaking and stagy embellishment,” thereby obscuring the profound racial dynamics of the production. For Marks, the key theme of the musical is “American resilience” in an unmarked way, even though he begins by remarking upon the “faces” of the actors and ends by saying “that beleaguered-looking guy in the White House might want to swing by one night soon.” His contradictory understanding of this multiracial Oklahoma! in seeming to recognize race and at the same time refusing to name race explicitly and recognize racial, material disparity emblematizes the complexity of spectatorship and race. Marks represents the currently hegemonic racial project of post-race, which is paradoxically race-conscious. Furthermore, Marks’s review likely primed some spectators before they visited Oklahoma!, signifying the power of reshaping and reproducing racial and national identity formation. However, his review does not foreclose resistant readings, as we acknowledge the salience of race and racism, join Dolan in looking for hope in the theatre, and imagine a radical, materially equal, multiracial America.

694 Ibid.  
695 Ibid.  
696 Ibid.
Conclusion

Arena Stage’s production of *Oklahoma!* demanded that artists and audiences negotiate American identity as multiracial, white, and/or post-racial. The production was a celebration of racial diversity in the United States but also a whitening or erasure of difference therein that has the potential to eclipse struggles for power on the frontier and in the nation’s capital. In these ways, multiracial territory folks accommodated different perceptions and desires and resulted in a highly popular and acclaimed production. Moreover, the theatre continues to stage multiracial productions of Golden Age musicals.

In 2012, Molly Smith directed *My Fair Lady* featuring Manna Nichols, an Asian-white-Native-American actress, as Eliza Doolittle, an Asian American actor as her father, white actors as Henry Higgins and Colonel Pickering, Nicholas Rodriguez as Freddy, and a multiracial ensemble. Through a multiracial reading, the casting provoked considerations of imperialism and performance of race as intersecting with class. Similar to the treatment of *Oklahoma!*, the marketing and dramaturgy cited historical demographics of Asian immigrants in England to justify the casting. At the same time, audiences could whiten the characters to conform to expectations of *My Fair Lady, Pygmalion*, and England, or they could rationalize race as irrelevant in this allegedly post-race world.

Multiracial musical revivals are a major part of Arena’s branding as the largest regional theatre devoted to American voices, and their modes of production and consumption importantly mediate contemporary racial politics. Cara Mazzie, who played Gertie Cummings in *Oklahoma!*, said that she thought the production was successful because it reflected the diversity of the
That final, hopeful word gestures at how the multiracial production of this particular musical staged a utopian performative and keyed into the age of a black President sitting in the White House a few miles from the theatre; it signals a step forward in representation but also a continuation in structure. Although Arena Stage’s multiracial casting decisions can reinforce troubling visions that occlude Native Americans, material difference, and ongoing fights for equality, they can also trouble visions of territory folks as implicitly white farmers and cowmen, offering instead multiracial territory folks who ought to stick together. As scholars, spectators, and theatremakers, we must attend to the implications of multiracial casting as multiracial, whitened, and/or post-racial and consider the progressive opportunities and symbolic violence of casting practices. Arena Stage’s historic and continuing commitment to producing multiracial narratives on stage locates this regional theatre as a key center for performing American racial and national identities and reimagining communities.

EPILOGUE

Arena Stage has not only survived but thrived for more than sixty years by developing sustainable non-profit practices and staging racially liberal dramas. The first professional resident company in the nation’s capital, Arena now competes with approximately eighty local companies. When the Helen Hayes Awards were first given in 1983 to recognize excellence in Washington, D.C.-area theatre, there were twenty professional theatres. Ten years later, there were forty-four.698 When Molly Smith became artistic director in 1998, Arena Stage was among seventy resident companies. After the Kennedy Center, the Mead Center for American Theater is currently the second largest performance complex in the nation’s capital. Only New York City has more theatre productions each year than Washington, D.C. does. Although Arena’s aesthetic has changed from eclectically global to definitively American, the through-line of Zelda Fichandler’s, Doug Wager’s, and Molly Smith’s tenures has been a commitment to U.S. racial diversity, particularly in cultivating black artists, audiences, and stories. This assemblage of performing non-profit, black, and American identities coalesces at Arena Stage and in Washington, D.C., key sites of contestation for capital and belonging.

Foundational to the conception and implementation of U.S. non-profit theatre, Arena has continued to struggle with generating income since the opening of the Mead Center in 2010. Paying for building and maintaining this structure created a huge financial burden that has subsequently influenced programming decisions. In David Dower’s account, due to the economic recession in 2008, “the financing fell apart, and the fundraising stalled, and then the audiences didn’t come in the years that we were out of the building … So we had to spend money out of the campaign to finance the years that we were out of the building. So we were

698 “Number of Washington Area Theatres,” Arena Stage Long Range Plan, 1994, box 121, fol. 22, Arena Stage Production Books, GMUL.
spending more before we even moved into the building.↵699 Jamie Gahlon, who co-directed the American Voices New Play Institute (AVNPI) and had worked in the human resources and business departments, added, “by the time the opening actually happened, like as soon as the doors opened, people thought, ‘Oh, it’s all raised, right?’ But that wasn’t the case.”↵700 Dower argued that “the building really distorted the ambition and aspiration,” leading the company to produce known commodities rather than taking more risks.↵701 The artistic development team needed more time to figure out how to operate effectively in the new building, but they could not afford that time. Nelson Pressley of the Washington Post has critiqued Arena for producing few world premieres, especially in its new black box Cradle, which had been designated as the space to “cradle” new work.↵702 At the same time, Arena alienated some theatre organizations by calling itself a “Center for American Theater,” because they had considered themselves such centers. In addition, Arena appeared to have a conflict of interest in being a producing-presenting institution, researching new plays, and administering the NEA New Play Development Program. Arena blurred the apparent divide between commercial and non-commercial theatre. In 2012, Dower and Gahlon, along with AVNPI staff members Vijay Prashad and Polly Carl, moved HowlRound, Arena’s hub for studying contemporary U.S. theatre, to ArtsEmerson at Emerson College, a more fitting location as an educational institution. The American Voices New Play Institute has been significantly reduced, leaving the core of playwright residencies and commissions. Meanwhile, Arena has presented more productions and accepted enhancement

699  David Dower, in discussion with the author, August 2014.
700  Jamie Gahlon, in discussion with the author, August 2014.
701  David Dower, in discussion with the author, August 2014.
money from commercial producers to stage Broadway-bound plays including *A Time to Kill*, *One Night with Janis Joplin*, and *The Velocity of Autumn*.

*The Velocity of Autumn* was Molly Smith’s Broadway directing debut, and the production represents the regional theatre’s continuing (non)profit anxieties. Written by Eric Coble, the play premiered at Arena Stage in 2013 and played for five weeks on Broadway in 2014. It features a single set designed by Eugene Lee and only two characters played by theatre stars Estelle Parsons and Stephen Spinella. Engaging with themes of property, queer identity, and support for elderly parents, *The Velocity of Autumn* focuses on an old woman who threatens to blow up her apartment if her son forces her to leave. In New York, the production earned little more than a Tony nomination for Parsons. The small size of this new American play, in contrast with *The Great White Hope*, enabled it to reach the Great White Way, as Arena attempted to glean more cultural and symbolic capital. What is particularly telling is that the Broadway playbill included an insert to provide an additional biography for Arena, suggesting that the company had been forgotten in the official publication. The biography is worth quoting in full:

**Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater**, under the leadership of Artistic Director Molly Smith and Executive Producer Edgar Dobie, is a national center dedicated to American voices and artists. Arena Stage produces plays of all that is passionate, profound, deep and dangerous in the American spirit, and presents diverse and ground-breaking work from some of the best artists around the country. Arena Stage is committed to commissioning and developing new plays through the American Voices New Play Institute. Arena Stage impacts the lives of more than 20,000 students annually.
through its work in community engagement. Now in its seventh decade, Arena Stage serves a diverse annual audience of more than 300,000. arenastage.org.703

This description emphasizes the American identity, new work, huge size, diversity, and educational initiatives of Arena Stage in order to distinguish this institution from others and to draw attention to its programs made possible by non-profit classification. Nowhere does the biography locate the theatre in Washington, D.C. This absence suggests Arena’s move to position itself as a national center rather than a regional theatre, just as the move to Broadway works to boost the company’s status. Yet anxieties over how to accumulate capital remain.

In contrast with this somewhat bland play and desire for attention from New York institutions, locally commissioned and produced world premiere plays at Arena Stage illustrate the company’s continued layered performance of U.S. racial and national identities. In 2014, in part inspired by Center Stage’s My America project, Smith commissioned twenty-five playwrights to pen short monologues or scenes and assembled them into Our War, directed by Anita Maynard-Losh.704 The project sought to commemorate and unpack the legacy of the Civil War through not only black and white perspectives but other past and presently marginalized voices bound up in histories of U.S. material inequality. The playwrights included artists who have ongoing relationships with Arena (Amy Freed, Charles Randolph-Wright, Tazewell Thompson), white playwrights (David Lindsay-Abaire, Samuel D. Hunter), black playwrights (Lydia Diamond, Lynn Nottage), Latina/o playwrights (Tanya Saracho, María Agui Carter), Asian American playwrights (Aditi Brennan Kapil, Ken Narasaki), Native American playwrights (Joy Harjo, William S. Yellow Robe, Jr.), queer playwrights (Taylor Mac, Robert O’Hara), and

703 Bold in the original text. The Velocity of Autumn playbill, April 2014. Author’s collection.
704 In 2012, Center Stage, the leading professional theatre of Baltimore, celebrated its fiftieth anniversary by asking fifty prominent U.S. playwrights, “What is my America?” To see their responses, visit http://myamerica.centerstage.org/About-My-America.
playwrights who embody multiple identity categories (Karen Zacarías, Naomi Iizuka, among others already named above). The ensemble of actors was multiracial, and each performance featured an important local figure such as Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Washington Delegate to the House of Representatives Eleanor Holmes Norton to deliver one monologue. According to actress Kelly Renee Armstrong, who is African American, audiences responded mostly positively to Our War, “I had the pleasure of performing a monologue by Tazewell Thompson. One performance house right had some audience members like me. That is to say, they respond to theatre in a vocal way that everyone can hear. It was an ‘amen corner’ type experience, and we just had fun. I love audiences, artists, and the work communing with one another.”

Armstrong recounted that, after performances, audiences often pondered the future life of Our War just as they noted its aptness for production in Washington, D.C. Arena Stage’s American scope and site in the nation’s capital gave this production particular resonances performing racial and national identities haunted by a history of productions including The Great White Hope, Raisin, and Oklahoma! Our War illustrates the generative possibilities for a non-profit theatre staging multifaceted, multiracial understandings of representation in the United States, and the queries concerning which city the production might appear in next hint at the national economies of regional and New York theatres.

More than fifty years after the construction of Arena’s permanent home, Southwest, D.C. is experiencing the development that urban planners had long desired. In 2015, Edgar Dobie remarked enthusiastically, “Everything’s demolished across the street. They’re building two hotels. And eventually 2,000 new condos, a 4,000 seat music hall, at least probably a dozen restaurants. It’s really, really an exciting place to be. We discovered the architecture was really

705 Kelly Renee Armstrong, in discussion with the author, March 2015.
embraced. The community itself is proud of that.” The theatre permits community members to use a library named “Molly’s Study” as a meeting space. In 2013, during the run of David Lindsay-Abaire’s Good People, which deals with class issues, Arena hosted a job fair. Such endeavors symbolize Arena’s commitment to its community and how that commitment is bound up with capitalist urban development. Since the 2010 census, the black population of Washington, D.C. has dipped to under 50 percent. The city has become increasingly white, wealthy, and educated, particularly in the Northwest quadrant.

Still, Smith has remained committed to theatre by, about, for, and near Americans, especially people of color. Aside from Edward Albee and Eugene O’Neill, who have had festivals devoted to them, the most produced playwright at Arena from 1990 to 2016 has been Cheryl West. The six mainstage productions of West’s work represent the company’s strong support of her voice and stories about African Americans. In the same season that Smith directed The Velocity of Autumn, she produced Love in Afghanistan, by Charles Randolph-Wright; Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, by Todd Kreidler; Tappin’ Thru Life, by Maurice Hines; Smokey Joe’s Café, by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller; and The Tallest Tree in the Forest, by Daniel Beaty. In this repertory, she offered dramas of interracial relationships, feel-good black musicals, and a history of Paul Robeson. She also directed a world premiere play entitled Camp David by Lawrence Wright about the Camp David Accords. This was a remarkable theatrical event because Rosalynn Carter allowed the playwright to use her personal diary for his text, and she attended the production along with President Jimmy Carter and Jehan Sadat, the widow of Anwar el-Sadat, the former President of Egypt. Performing powerful American stories in the nation’s capital, Arena provides sounding boards for voices that are often silenced and spaces for Americans to assemble and think critically about history and identity. By 2015, the theatre’s

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706 Edgar Dobie, in discussion with the author, January 2015.
budget has grown to $18 million to support a new complex, new plays, epic productions, and a community of multiracial American artists and audiences.

This study of Arena Stage sheds light on how one regional theatre significantly participates in the fields of culture and power. My critical history has traced the course of not only a major U.S. regional theatre but also larger economic, racial, and national structures that shaped the contours of its liberal institutional practices on stage and behind the scenes. It is my hope that future studies will continue to complicate understandings of theatre institutions as complicit with and contesting power dynamics. The interdisciplinary approach I used works toward a sociology of theatre and demands that scholars consider intersectional and institutional frameworks. Instead of automatically privileging New York City and avant-garde work, as a large portion of theatre and performance scholarship does, we should attend to circulation and contestation over different kinds of capital in different spaces. By studying more popular U.S. performance sites instead of uncritically looking down upon them, we can see rich racial and national politics at play.
APPENDIX A

Fig. 1. Playbill of *The Great White Hope*, 1967, box 157, fol. 6, Zelda Fichandler Collection, GMUL.
Fig. 2. Production still of *Raisin*, 1973, box 7, fol. 25, Arena Stage Photographs, GMUL.
Fig. 3. Playbill of *Raisin*, 1973, box 99, fol. 1, Arena Stage Production Notebooks and Programs 1950-1991, GMUL.
Fig. 4. Exterior of Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater, photo by Nic Lehoux courtesy of Bing Thom Architects.

Fig. 5. Interior of the Fichandler Stage. Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater, photo by Nic Lehoux courtesy of Bing Thom Architects.
Fig. 6. Interior of the Kreeger Theater. Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater, photo by Nic Lehoux courtesy of Bing Thom Architects.
Fig. 7. Interior of the Kogod Cradle. Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater, photo by Nic Lehoux courtesy of Bing Thom Architects.

Fig. 8. Lobby of Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater, photo by Nic Lehoux courtesy of Bing Thom Architects.
Fig. 9. Eleasha Gamble as Laurey and Nicholas Rodriguez as Curly in the Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater 2010 production of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* Photo by Carol Rosegg.
Fig. 10. The company of the Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater 2010 production of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* Photo by Carol Rosegg.
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