

## A History of the Department of Theatre



In 1948-49, the late Mary Bohanon was named as the first official chair of the North Carolina Central University Department of Dramatic Art. Though dramatic art courses had been taught at NCCU since the year 1935-36, when Marjorie E. Bright was appointed as English and dramatic art instructor, no instructor had been given the title of chair. According to Bohanon's biographical sketches in her publications, she established the Department of Dramatic Art in 1949.

There is evidence that plays were produced as early as March 29, 1938, as indicated on a flier announcing the presentation of *THE YELLOW SHADOW* by Clark Willard and acted by the Bri-Dra-So Stagers of North Carolina College for Negroes. The prefix to the name of the drama group (Bri) suggests that Marjorie Bright may have started the first drama organization at NCCU, known then as North Carolina College for Negroes.

The 1939-40 North Carolina College Catalog was the first to list Dramatic Art courses separately from English courses. Previously, they had been listed with music courses under Fine Arts. The curriculum design was arranged in three academic periods, each period having three sections. The curriculum emphasized dramatic literature (English and American), history of the theatre, voice, acting and directing training, scene construction, set painting, and stage lighting.

A number of respected scholars headed up the Dramatic Arts Department over the years. The year 1939-40 was also the same year that the nationally renowned folklorist, novelist, and playwright Zora Neale Hurston was hired by Dr. James E. Shepard to teach drama. Her reputation for staging folkloric performances caught Shepard's attention. While at NCCU, Miss Hurston directed most of her attention to developing her folklore theatre with Paul Green in Chapel Hill and left before she staged any plays at the University. She was followed by Caroline B. Day in 1940-41. Between the academic years 1941-46, the noted Professor Emeriti, Dr. Helen Gray Edmonds, was hired to teach history and dramatic art courses. She recalls staging annual productions of European and American classics as well as writing and producing the pageant entitled *THE LIFE AND TIMES OF DR. JAMES E. SHEPARD*, with two hundred characters and a forty-voice speaking choir. Val Dora Turner was hired as a dramatic art instructor from 1943-48 and shared responsibilities with Edmonds for three years. Blanche D. Sanders, hired to teach drama the year before Bohanon, expanded the curriculum from three courses, to twelve courses which included "The Negro in the Drama." This course was the first emphasizing the study of the "Negro" in drama at NCCU. The class was dropped the following year and one of this nature was not taught again until 1969-70, when Norma Sutton Brown created the course Afro-American Drama.

The late Mary L. Bohanon was chair of the Dramatic Art Department from 1949-64. During her sixteen years as chair, Bohanon increased the course offerings from twelve to fifteen courses, emphasizing dramatic literature, play production, acting, directing, oral interpretation, voice, stage craft and stage lighting. She increased the faculty from one to three members and staged two major productions annually. It was through the production program that Bohanon earned an outstanding reputation in theatre. She devoted her directing energies to staging American and European classics and the quality of her productions is discussed today with great respect and admiration. Her productions included *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*, *KING LEAR*, *A HATFUL OF RAIN*, *THE MEDIUM*, *ANTIGONE*, *DON JUAN IN HELL*, *MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL*, and *MEDEA*. Notable faculty members who collaborated with her over the sixteen years were Stanley Ferber, Arthur Hartell, Edna Mills, Marlo Ubans, Terry Williams, and William A. St. Clair. Several of her students became successful theatre professionals; most notable are Jacqueline Bames, who performed Off-Broadway with William Marshall, and Ivan Dixon, film actor, director, and producer.

James P. Cochran was appointed chair after Mary L. Bohanon was transferred to the English Department in 1964-65. He was chair for two years and maintained the curriculum and production program format of previous years. Faculty members who collaborated with him were Edward Kenestruck, John Tasker, Helen Adams, and Jean Williams.

Between 1966-70, Helen Adams served as chair, and the faculty during this period included Ronald Spandour, Jean Williams, Oh Kon Who, and Randolph Umberger. This faculty maintained the curriculum design and production format of previous years but made efforts to feature the works of African-American playwrights (*A RAISIN IN THE SUN* by Lorraine Hansberry - *DAY OF ABSENCE* and *HAPPY ENDING* by Douglass Turner Ward - *EL HAJJ MALIK* by R. N. Davidson - *THE BAPTISM* by Leroi Jones, and *THE AMEN CORNER* by James Baldwin) along with traditional and classical

productions such as *RIDERS TO THE SEA* by Synge, *THE IMAGINARY INVALID* by Moliere, *MEDEA* by Euripides, and *TELEMACHUS CLAY* by Carlino.

The last faculty member hired by Adams was Norma Sutton Brown in 1969-70. Having received her M.A. in theatre from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she was the first alumna of NCCU's Dramatic Art Department to be hired by the University to teach drama. She created two courses to revive the study of African Americans in theatre and encouraged the emphasis on black playwrights along with traditional white writers for the production program.

Adams was succeeded as chairman by the Carolina Playmakers' award winning playwright Randolph Umberger. Umberger was the University of North Carolina's first student to win a Shubert Fellowship in Playwriting. The following individuals served on the faculty during Umberger's chairmanship (1970-75): Norma Sutton Brown, Linwood Taylor, William Shawn Smith, Betty Setzer, Jean Arrington, Glen Dunn, and Linda Kerr Norflett. They collaborated with him to make dramatic changes in the curriculum and the production program. The faculty was increased to four full-time and one borrowed position; twelve new courses were added/ revived (Scene Design, Playwriting, Tech. III, Shakespeare, Children's Theatre, Afro-American Drama, Afro-American Theatre, Theatre Administration, Costume Design, and Western Drama from 1600-1850). Additionally, the development of a Theatre Education concentration was initiated; the budget was increased to include revenues from productions, and the production program was increased from two to four major shows annually, including classical, traditional modern, and contemporary plays. Construction was completed for the new University Theatre facility, which greatly expanded acting, scenery construction, and classroom spaces. Randolph Umberger earned his Ph.D. in theatre from Tulane University during his chairmanship. Dr. Johnny Alston, an Associate Professor of the NCCU Department of Theatre, graduated from the Department during Umberger's chairmanship. He earned his Ph.D. at the University of Iowa.

After receiving the M.A. in Theatre from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and serving as a faculty member of the NCCU Dramatic Art Department for one year, Dr. Linda Kerr Norflett was appointed acting chair in 1975-76. During her chairmanship, the following faculty members have collaborated in the continuing development of the Department: Dr. Randolph Umberger, Dr. Johnny Alston, Doris Schneider, Karen Dacons-Brock, Linwood Taylor, Brenda Mezz, Michael Dixon, the late Kenneth Steed, John Harris, and Artist-in-Residence Chuck Davis, who has since served as Theatre Movement Instructor and Choreographer. Under the leadership of Norflett, continuous advancements were made in the Department. The faculty increased from four full-time positions to five full-time and two part-time positions. Six new courses were added to the curriculum including Methods for Dramatic Art Teachers, Independent Study, Senior Seminar, Theatre Practice, Theatre Movement, and Touring Theatre. Exciting productions were staged emphasizing the award winning works of prominent African-American and African playwrights along with the works of other prominent American writers. Practical theatre concentrations received official University/state approval to enhance the employment flexibility of our majors (Theatre Education, Theatre Management, Theatre Communications, Performance, Technical Theatre, Theatre Costuming and General Theatre).

Additionally, the Department began to maintain membership and participate in programs of national, regional, and state organizations to increase professional development, exposure, and opportunities for our students and faculty through scholarly and artistic exchange, competitions and auditions. These organizations include the National Association of Drama and Speech Arts (NADSA), North Carolina Theatre Conference (NCTC of which Norflett was president in 1980), Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC), Black Theatre Network (BTN), the University Resident Theatre Association (URTA), and the American College Theatre Festival (ACTF). Through ACTF, the Department has been recognized annually for its outstanding production program. *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN* directed by Karen Dacons-Brock placed among the top six finalists for the Southeastern Region in 1982-83. *HOME*, directed by Dr. Randolph Umberger, placed among the top six finalists in the Southeastern Region in 1985-86. Additionally, 90% of the productions entered into ACTF were recommended for the Regional Festival. In 1991, the Department's production *OF MULES AND MEN*, written and directed by Dr. Randolph Umberger, won the national ACTF competition and was performed at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. In addition, the department was recognized as one of the top five university theatre programs in the country. Over 850 universities were evaluated as part of this competition.

One of the most meaningful accomplishments of the Department was the establishment of the FRIENDS OF THE NORTH CAROLINA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY THEATRE by the Triangle Park Chapter of the Links, Inc., in 1984. They have raised over \$100,000 for the Department's production program. In addition, the 1993-94 academic year brought a major upgrade to the production facility including lighting, sound, stage rigging and scenery construction capabilities.

After twenty years as chair, Dr. Linda Kerr-Norflett passed the reins of leadership to Dr. Johnny Alston who was appointed chairperson in 1996. Also in 1996, official approval was given for a name change. The Department of Dramatic Art became the Department of Theatre. In 1997 the Department was fully accredited by the National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST). Since becoming chair, Dr. Alston has guided the department through a re-accreditation (2003), added two staff positions (2004) (a costumer, Ms. Pamela Ross and a shop supervisor, Mr. James Nuss), hired a replacement for the retiring Dr. Randolph Umberger (Dr. Asabi, i.e. *Stephanie Howard*) (2007) and obtained the services of Artist-in-Residence, Mr.

Samm-Art Williams, as instructor of playwriting (2007). The Department looks forward to celebrating its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary along with the university's centennial (2009-10).



The Department arranges additional professional exposure and opportunities for students through summer employment at outdoor dramas and dinner theatres, auditions for seniors at graduate schools, trips to a variety of Theatre Centers, and invitational visits of guest artists, such as: Ruby Dee, Ivan Dixon, Daphne Reed, and Ben Harney.

The success of the Department today is measured in part by the former students who have been able to make theatre a practical part of their lives. Graduates from the Department of Theatre are currently working in a variety of positions as actors, directors, and technicians in professional theatre, as teachers in the public schools or higher education; as graduate students in advanced degree programs, or as professionals in related fields. A degree in theatre does not limit a student's ability to work in other areas. Many students use this program as a pre-professional degree in preparation for graduate study in law, business (especially public relations), and the ministry, architecture, product design and other media areas such as radio, television, or film. An undergraduate degree in theatre prepares a young adult for the professional work force through increasing personal discipline, organizational skills, creative outlook, and the ability to collaborate and work with others. It encourages a broader appreciation of other cultures and beliefs and fosters the ability to present oneself in public in a positive and dynamic way.

Over the years the Department's mission has been to provide a stimulating academic and artistic environment which advocates the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge and skills, emphasizing the interdependence of theatre with our culturally diverse world of ideas and actions. We have a proud heritage of equal opportunity for all students, embracing a full spectrum of social and cultural orientations. The Department further advocates excellence in the personal and professional development of our students as they prepare to become proficient leaders of tomorrow.

Prepared by Johnny Alston, Ph.D.  
Sources: Department of Theatre Records

