

THE BLACK STUDENT THEATRE EXPERIENCE

by Gabby Randle

Northwestern's history of black students in theatre is at once complicated, fascinating, and problematic. With the assistance of University Archives, second-year interdisciplinary theatre and drama PhD candidate Gabby Randle highlights notable students and the societal climates in which they studied and performed.

African American students and alumni have been a documented part of Northwestern's theatre community for nearly a century, and they have played a crucial role in the success of some of the University's most treasured traditions. From Waa-Mu to Winifred Ward's Children's Theatre of Evanston, black students in the School of Speech (now the School of Communication) helped shape the emerging culture of theatrical production at Northwestern and, in turn, the world.

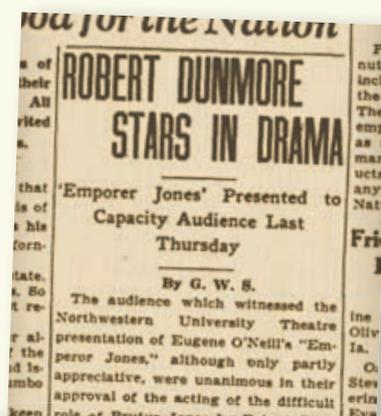
Though black students were working on and in campus theatre productions from as early as 1927, an integrated stage was a complicated reality. The Northwestern University Archives show that the earliest black performers found success through their experiences at Northwestern—and sometimes in spite of it. Barred from much of campus social life (such as prom and other coed social functions), they made communities of their own, performing in Evanston, in Chicago's Loop, and eventually in New York City and Europe.

Robert Dunmore was one of the first African American graduates of the School of Speech's dramatics program. After the Chicago native earned his Northwestern degree in 1930, he went on to work as an actor, playwright, and director. Although as a recent alumnus Dunmore continued to appear on Northwestern stages, he also became involved in the Harlem Experimental Theatre and the Negro Little Theatre of Evanston.

Dunmore initially became involved in University theatre as a crew member on a 1927 production. He first appeared onstage on April 10, 1929, in the Town and Gown Playhouse production of *Quagmire* by School of Speech student Anne Frierson, who drew on her upbringing in South Carolina and the Gullah community living near her family. A narrative indicative of its time, the play tells the story of an archetypal "tragic mulatto," a young woman trapped between the civilized nature of her whiteness and the savagery of her blackness. The play employed over 30 black actors from Evanston and Chicago; Dunmore was cast in a principal role as "Black Boy Ben" (later billed "Big Boy Ben"). Although by coincidence *Quagmire* premiered the same night as the very first Waa-Mu Show, it sold out to capacity crowds for three nights in Annie May Swift Hall's theater.

At Northwestern, Dunmore played Brutus Jones—the title character in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*—no less than four times: twice in 1929, again in 1933, and once more in 1939. In both 1929 productions, 25 School of Speech students made up the rest of the cast, with white students playing the roles of convicts, slaves, native revolutionaries, and planters.

In November 1929, Dunmore starred in a children's theatre version of *Aladdin*. The following March he finished first among all speech seniors in the school's dramatic poetry reading contest, and just before graduation in May he led a cast of almost 500 in celebrating the 75th anniversary of Garrett Seminary. In little over a year, his star power at Northwestern had soared; but after graduating, Dunmore had trouble finding acting work in the midst of the Great Depression. He then tried playwriting, cowriting *Romey & Julie*, an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* centering on two Harlem families, one black and the other West Indian. It played in Hyde Park's Ridgeway Theatre as part of the Federal Negro Theater Project and featured Kelsey Pharr, a black School of Speech student from Miami whose



Robert Dunmore in the 1930 *Syllabus* photo of Delta Epsilon professional fraternity

father, Kelsey Pharr Sr., was a well-known civil rights leader.

Pharr entered the School of Speech as a 16-year-old in 1933, the same year as Mary Louise Foster (sometimes billed as Louise Foster). The two costarred in multiple campus productions with alumnus Dunmore, including a 1934 children's theatre production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* directed by Winifred Ward.

In 1937 the three actors appeared onstage together again in graduate student Albert Randall Crews's master's thesis, *Let My People Go*. (Crews went on to a prolific career at NBC Radio.) The *Daily Northwestern* ran a review by Charles Nelson praising the show: "I never saw a better coordinated group of actors of any race." He was especially complimentary to one actor: "Robert Dunmore dominates the entire action, turning in the sincere, well-rounded performance that has come to be expected of him." Nelson goes on to give an interesting critique of Foster's performance, betraying the slippery nature of racial formation during that era: "Louise Foster as the ill-fated heroine does a great deal to adjust herself to a role to which she is not especially suited. La Foster belongs in no pedestrian role: she is an exotic, and as such is above race."

Pharr and Foster were the breakout stars of the 1937 Waa-Mu Show, *Don't Look Now*. Pharr also was a lead vocalist in the 1939 show *Guess Again!* Foster went on to a stage career in Chicago, and Kelsey Pharr became an international star as a member of a popular vocal group, the Delta Rhythm Boys.

Mirroring the conservative climate of the country, the number of black actors on Northwestern stages dropped significantly through the 1940s and '50s—with the notable exception of William Branch, later a producer, actor, screenwriter, and Guggenheim Award-winning playwright. Fittingly, worldwide student activism in the '60s extended to black students on Northwestern's campus, bringing diversity back to campus theatre. In 1967 dancer and School of Speech student Ernest Morgan appeared in the Waa-Mu Show

and as the only male dancer in Northwestern's Orchesis dance concert, where he danced the solo "Wounded Bird."

Black Folks Theatre (BFT), a satellite of the black student group For Members Only, was founded in 1970 to provide black students—especially those in theatre—with opportunities to produce, perform, and support black plays. From 1970 to 1975 most plays that the group produced were student written. In 1972 School of Speech first-year student Renee Ward led a group of 25 black students to Joliet Prison to perform for the inmates. In 1978 BFT was at risk of being absorbed into a larger student theatre group but successfully advocated for the importance of its specific role on campus. BFT also coproduced work with the Northwestern theatre department.

During the 1980s theatre professor Phyllis Griffin helped advocate for students of color, especially for expanded options in casting. In 1983 she directed Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, casting a black woman and a Japanese American man in lead roles traditionally cast as white. Griffin also worked as a production supervisor for many student productions.

Harry Lennix (see page 11), a 1986 graduate now known for his work in Hollywood (including *The Blacklist* and *Batman vs. Superman*), was an active School of Speech student and the president of For Members Only. In collaboration with actor and student leader John Marshall Jones, who graduated in 1984, Lennix oversaw the name change of Black Folks Theatre to African American Theatre Ensemble. Jones also lobbied the University to produce Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and the production was a huge success. He has gone on to a career boasting nearly 100 high-profile film and television credits.

Today's black theatre students share many of the same experiences as their predecessors. There is warmth and community, but there are also struggles. Central concerns among students include limited access to roles and the perceived burden for those who are cast to represent black students well so that more will be cast in the future.

