

AMAS REPERTORY THEATRE: PASSING AS BLACK WHILE BECOMING WHITE

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Amas Repertory Theatre was founded in 1969 by Rosetta LeNoire, an African American actress who pursued a mission of developing original musicals while practicing interracial casting. The company's most successful show was *Bubbling Brown Sugar* (1975). Throughout Amas's history LeNoire's complicated perspective on what constituted discrimination sometimes caused her casting choices to be questioned. LeNoire believed in a colorblind theatre and society, however, as the decades passed, her colorblind perspective was challenged by neo-conservative philosophy which states that in a colorblind society no particular group should receive any more privilege than another. This definition of colorblind is used to justify conservative efforts to eliminate affirmative action and undermine race conscious legislation. In the late 1990s, at her retirement, LeNoire, who always believed that color did not matter, turned her theatre over to white leadership, who still operate Amas today. At that point, Amas changed from a company that had, from its founding, been considered to be a black theatre to one that is now white.

As the history of Amas unfolds, my study examines the complex politics surrounding the concept of colorblindness. Efforts by Actors' Equity to promote interracial or, as it is often called, nontraditional casting are also investigated as well as the conservative backlash against race conscious policies, particularly during and after the

administration of Ronald Reagan. In the present day Amas practices a multicultural mission, however, as my dissertation examines the company's programming decisions as well as its perspective on race, Amas is revealed to be an example of how white operated theatres, even if unintentionally, through the agency of white power and privilege, are affected by the same institutional racism that permeates American society. My dissertation then challenges Amas and other theatres to take responsibility for staying fully aware of the racially charged issues and tensions that exist in America today. When theatre professionals seek out and are committed to engaging in open dialogue on race they are in a stronger position to make knowledgeable decisions regarding the representation of race on stage.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

“Whiteness in the United States has never been simply a matter of skin color. Being white is also a measure . . . of one’s social distance from blackness. In other words, whiteness in America has been ideologically constructed mostly to mean ‘not black’ (*Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society*. x).

“Most of our shows are financed, staged and directed by white men, and most of these white men arrogate the right to tell us when and how. Under the circumstances, I don’t see how we missed being colored so often” (Salem Tutt-Whitney, *The Chicago Defender*. 1930 n.pag.).

In the mid-1980s Amas Repertory Theatre was in its second decade of operation. Its founder Rosetta LeNoire was then in her seventies. LeNoire came of age in the years of the Harlem Renaissance, was a part of the Harlem Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre Project, and continued her acting career through the post-war years of the civil rights movement. Her life spanned the twentieth century and was witness to each political change in American society. For example, her theatre company was founded in 1969, in the middle of the black power, black arts and civil rights movements. Though African American, LeNoire disagreed with the perceived separatist politics of black power and black arts and identified more with the integrationist and assimilationist politics of her upbringing that were being realized in national policy in the 1960s. Reacting to her perception of black power’s rhetoric, LeNoire founded Amas as a company that would cast nontraditionally, that is her intention was to integrate Amas’s casting practices. Interchanging terms throughout the years, she would call her theatre company interracial, multiethnic, multiracial, nontraditional or multicultural, which in many cases substituted for colorblind. Her mission gained her recognition from Actors’ Equity Association (AEA), which

resulted in the creation of the Rosetta LeNoire Award in 1988. However, apart from AEA's validation, in the 1980s Amas struggled amidst the economic downturn of the Reagan years. Even with its early Broadway success, *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, Amas teetered on the brink of closure and was kept viable only through the contribution of LeNoire's salary as a television actress. Finally restaffed and reconfigured in the 1990s, as LeNoire's presence was less visible, Amas has, as a company, been in operation for 45 years.

As Amas struggled in the mid-1980s, while at the same time staying true to LeNoire's interracial mission, Actors' Equity Association (AEA) launched a national initiative to integrate professional theatre and put an end to racial inequality – at least as it affected casting. This initiative was called the Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP) and was galvanized in 1986 by a series of symposia held nationally to discuss, debate and convince theatre professionals. The NTCP was the union's polite method of getting its message across. In the words of Alan Eisenberg, AEA Executive Director, "The play should be served by the best Actors, which may include ethnic minority Actors or Actors with physical disabilities, who may bring a certain resonance to the truths and textures in the play" (*Beyond Tradition* 3). A series of scenes were staged where non-white actors could be demonstrated as the best actors for the roles. Using primarily black actors, playing roles in white authored plays, each symposium was designed not only to stimulate discussion but also to prove that actors of color could satisfactorily portray traditionally white roles while promoting the concept of colorblindness. The NTCP's initiative ran its course over a span of ten years, weakened with time and eventually changed its name to the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts. The NTCP is mentioned in virtually all scholarship tackling the topic of nontraditional casting. Having fused the diverse opinions and feedback

of its participants into what was presented as a workable formula, the results of the NTCP still provide the most structured framework for a national dialogue on non-traditional casting that continues today.

The 1980s were characterized by the conservative politics of Ronald Reagan's presidency. Reagan's influence changed not only economic policies but also made headway to reverse and/or destabilize the policies of integration. Reagan's attacks on affirmative action and voter rights used the argument of America as a colorblind society, a term that gained currency in post-World War II universalist philosophy. In the conservative climate of the 1980s colorblindness meant the erasure of race and therefore supported conservative claims that no group should gain preference over any other. Even white liberals, who were struggling economically in Reagan's America, could be encouraged to think that a policy such as affirmative action gave preference to an individual member of a group simply because of that individual's race. The conservative president's policies reinforced the mood of society. In Tom Wicker's words, "With tacit support from a popular president, it became respectable for whites to express loudly their misgivings about integration . . ." (*Tragic Failure* 13). The legacy of the civil rights movement of years prior was called into question in the 1980s. As the national disenchantment with the policies of integration received political affirmation, the NTCP launched its effort to see that professional theatre kept its casting practices open and, in fact, become more inclusive through a practice of colorblindness. In this context colorblind meant that an audience should be able to overlook race onstage. As AEA and Rosetta LeNoire sought to cure discrimination in theatre through a policy of colorblind casting, national politics sought to

reinstate white domination by subverting the meaning of colorblind and undermine the legislation that resulted from the civil rights movement.

The life of Rosetta LeNoire and history of Amas demonstrates a complex interweaving of politics with theatre practices. My dissertation will examine how LeNoire was influenced by a number of forces that were often in conflict with one another and which led her to make passionate decisions about her mission that had the effect of challenging her politics. Early in the history of Amas, LeNoire adamantly declared that her theatre was not a black theatre, though she was black and the many small musicals Amas mounted were of primarily black subject matter. For many years Amas resided in East Harlem on 104<sup>th</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue in New York. If W.E.B. Dubois's criteria for a black theatre is employed, i.e., theatre must be about, by, for, and near black people, Amas certainly fulfilled, in most circumstances, at least three of those criteria a majority of the time. However, early in the company's history, LeNoire did almost everything possible to resist the identification of Amas as a black theatre. Her political philosophy associated being a black theatre with black power, black arts and most importantly, her concept of what it meant to be segregated. Nevertheless, most scholarship examining black theatre, that includes Amas, includes the company as an example of a black theatre.

In the mid-1990s, in her eighties and ready for retirement, LeNoire turned over the administration of Amas to Donna Trinkoff, who is now Artistic Producer and Eric Krebs, who is Chairman of the Board of Directors. Both Trinkoff and Krebs are white, as are Jan Hacha, Managing Director, and other staff members. Though there is some diversity in Amas's administration – at least enough to be comparable to other not for profit organizations – top managerial and artistic positions are held by whites. With this change



Amas has made a shift that reveals the complicated philosophy of Rosetta LeNoire. My dissertation will document and examine the forces that shaped LeNoire's philosophy. By remaining implacable in her mission, in which she insisted being a black theatre meant being a segregated theatre, and even in light of obvious white domination of theatre on all professional fronts, LeNoire agreed to turn over her company to Trinkoff and other white staff. As with a number of her more perplexing decisions to sometimes cast white performers in otherwise black shows with no consideration of the artistic or political message of her choice, LeNoire "cast" white staff in lead roles, altered the racial dynamic in her company and, I will argue, undermined her original mission. With that alteration, Amas, like the large majority of theatres in the United States, stepped back in time to become a white theatre that, though it still produces what it claims to be multicultural work, does so through the lens of white privilege. My argument is that, despite good intentions, LeNoire's dedication to integrationist politics went to such an extreme that, in the continued effort to separate her theatre company from being black, she, in a reversal of everything that those political views stood for, turned her company over to white artistic and administrative management. Much like the way conservative rhetoric has twisted the meaning of colorblind to signify a so-called post-racial era, LeNoire's notion of what it meant to be colorblind came full circle and delivered her company to the white mainstream.

### **Maybe It's Okay?**

When the transition in Amas's artistic management took place Rosetta LeNoire was drawing near the end of her life with her own needs at the forefront. Krebs and Trinkoff had been given access to operate the company years before LeNoire retired and Amas

survives today, if with a limited season and anticipating another physical move in the near future. Their latest workshop production, *The Countess of Storyville*, brought in Vivian Reed, who was a lead in *Bubbling Brown Sugar* in the seventies, to fill an important role. The show received much publicity and has all the earmarks of going forward in its development. Yet, the show was also created by a white composer, white lyricist and white playwright, as well as a white director, much like the majority of musicals featuring black subject matter in the past, such as *Dreamgirls*, *The Tap Dance Kid* and *Purlie*. If the artistic management of Amas is in white hands does it mean more opportunity for whites in terms of access to the Amas development process? Trinkoff said, in one of my interviews with her, that “the buck stops here,” and that in terms of decisions on new works, “we have so many scripts that are submitted by associates that those are the ones that I really have to pay attention to.” Therefore, known playwrights or composers or those who are recommended by staff get the first reading in terms of what shows are developed. Trinkoff also stated that they look specifically for shows featuring “ethnic themes or the theme of the outsider” (Interview with Donna Trinkoff July 20, 2012). Clearly, Amas continues with a multicultural mission. But, if white creators are known and familiar to white artistic management they will be given preference according to Trinkoff’s own policy to put her associates’ recommendation first. Access to opportunity, as in other segments of society, could be limited by the white composition of most of Amas’s artistic management. Limited access to opportunity continues to be a large measure of why inequality persists in American theatre.

In 2013 *American Theatre Magazine* published the results of a report distributed by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition. The report is the 2011/2012 STATS

designed to tally “the ethnic makeup of cast members from every Broadway show from 2011/2012 season as well as from productions at the sixteen largest not-for-profit theatre companies in New York City.” The Report shows that in the 2011-12 season white actors outnumbered black actors 74% to 19% on Broadway and 81% to 12% in the city’s large non-profit theatres. Other ethnicities fall below the percentages for black actors. As the report states “Compared to their respective population size in the New York City area, Caucasians were the only ethnicity to over-represent” ([http://www.aapacnyc.org/uploads/1/1/9/4/11949532/aapac\\_stats\\_2011-2012.pdf](http://www.aapacnyc.org/uploads/1/1/9/4/11949532/aapac_stats_2011-2012.pdf) .). Over-representation is the Report’s softer way of saying that in a city where whites are considered in a minority, they still represent the majority as far as stage casting is concerned.

As a small not-for-profit theatre, Amas was not part of the tally, however the Report is indicative of a theatre landscape that is being dominated by whites and is designed to give an impression of the general tendencies in casting practices city wide. The Report also does not take into account managerial staff, directing staff or other leadership positions, but it can be assumed that if the racial representation is so unbalanced in casting practices, the decision makers would reflect that lack of balance as well.

The statistics in the report reflect a condition in racial theory that is often called “opportunity hoarding.” In *Whitewashing Race* Charles Tilly observes, “This occurs when members of a group acquire and monopolize access to valuable resources or privileges” (19). Addressing typical economic trends, and analyzing manufacturing jobs, where black workers have often found employment, the book explains that in a robust market,

competition for jobs is tight and demand for workers rises, which benefits black workers as much as it does whites. However, in sluggish markets:

. . . as high-wage manufacturing jobs are eliminated and whites are displaced, competition intensifies between blacks and white for low- and moderate-wage service jobs . . . But unless or until a third party steps in to demand or induce employers to pursue a different recruitment strategy, a homogeneous racial and gendered workforce will almost inevitably be reproduced (19).

Jobs in theatre, acting or otherwise, have never had the luxury of a robust market. Most theatre practitioners struggle for work on a regular basis. It would not be unusual to assume that decisions might be made fairly close to the source creating the work therefore continuing the cycle of opportunity hoarding. In the case of Amas the scripts to be developed are more likely to come from known sources and if the theatre is being operated by whites, those sources may very likely be white, which could result in limiting the opportunities for black subject matter written by black creative teams. This is not to say that black creators, or those from other heritages, never bring Donna Trinkoff prospective material to develop, however, that was more the norm when Rosetta LeNoire was in charge of her company. As Trinkoff stated in our interview, “It’s interesting to me that Amas, all those years with Rosetta at the helm, was perceived as a black theatre company and that’s because she did a lot of African American shows – she had a lot of African American friends” (2012). Trinkoff almost implies that with whites now in charge of Amas, it follows that the company will be perceived as a white theatre company with preference and access being given to shows created by whites.

Some mention of race theory is important in my study due to the almost inevitable nature of white privilege and white authority that remains in place from its long history in the United States. The best intentioned whites are still subject to white privilege and power that is embedded in American society. As Robert C. Smith states in his book *Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, “the ideology of white supremacy is institutionalized, emanating from the base and structure of the society, widely distributed throughout such that it exercises a continuous influence, conscious or unconscious, on attitudes and behavior” (6). Smith goes on to mention that the United States was unique in its “elaborate doctrine of race supremacy” (7). Unlike other parts of the colonized world, America made clear from the beginning that the promise of the Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal and have equal access to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” was quickly amended in Article 1, Section 2 of the Constitution, or the three-fifths clause, that legalized racial inequality.

These ramifications were not the domain of Rosetta LeNoire’s philosophy. She viewed discrimination as universal which could affect any race and therefore took it on as her duty to never practice anything she perceived to be discriminatory. Her integration and inclusion of whites into her theatre, while falling under the universalist view she held on discrimination, ultimately led to her theatre becoming another white dominated organization in a theatre landscape already well represented with white theatres and vastly lacking black theatres.

## **Keeping Rosie Alive**

In 1980 I was in my third year in New York City. The temp agency with which I was registered sent me uptown to 104<sup>th</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue to work for Rosetta LeNoire at Amas Repertory Theatre. When I arrived I was greeted by a small black woman who introduced herself and proceeded to tell me about her life and her theatre. She said she had been raised in the theatre by Bill Robinson and paused as I reacted. I knew Bill Robinson's work and was instantly impressed when LeNoire told me Robinson was her godfather who had raised her in the theatre. She said she'd had musical training from Eubie Blake and again I was enthralled. For one week I worked as her assistant – a very low key position which meant answering the phone for the most part. I think I wrote a play that week because I didn't have enough to do, but at the end of the week I returned to Amas to see the company's youth theatre perform a musical adaptation of *Spoon River Anthology*. From that week on I was quick to point LeNoire out as I saw her on television or occasionally in a movie. To me her memory was one of celebrity, assigned for her association with Bill Robinson and Eubie Blake, but also for my discovery of an unknown professional who was a successful black American actress.

Fast forwarding to the time of my dissertation, I had no idea Amas was still in operation. So many small theatre companies closed during the decades that followed Reagan, especially black ones (since I, like so many, would have considered Amas a black theatre company). I had no idea when I worked there that LeNoire kept up a solid front to deflect any notion that she had founded a black theatre. It is not unusual for a company to change course in order to become more relevant to its times, so I was not surprised to hear not only of Amas's move from far uptown Manhattan to far downtown in the area directly

connected to Washington Square Park on MacDougall Street. I was heartened to find out that the company had found its way and survived, though it still is not well known. I was also heartened to discover that one of the musicals developed and produced by Amas was written and performed by friends of mine from Chapel Hill, North Carolina. As a musical adaptation of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, called *The Merry Wives of Winsor, Texas*, and later *Lonestar Love*, I would not have thought this lightweight and very white show, featuring the Red Clay Ramblers, would lend itself to a multicultural perspective but was certain that, like many theatre companies, Amas was able to spin their mission to justify the show.

Not knowing what course my dissertation would take, having worked for LeNoire, even for a week, was my introduction to contact Donna Trinkoff, Amas's Artistic Producer. I was forwarded the company *Profile*, a document that stated the things I'd learned in my working for LeNoire – again, the Bill Robinson and Eubie Blake references, with additional information on their influence. It was then that the generalized feeling of reverence for LeNoire began to take over my thinking. As I communicated with Trinkoff it was clear that reverence towards Rosie, as Trinkoff called LeNoire, was a part of the Amas culture. Trinkoff shared with me that she sometimes felt Rosie's presence and that she would ask her for a sign in the case of a difficult decision she had to make. I will fully admit I was captured by that image of the ever-present ghost of Rosetta LeNoire.

When I began my research I saw how many times in newspaper articles and interviews LeNoire invoked Robinson and Blake, and sometimes, with the same reverence, her father. I found she kept them close in her heart and mind all through her life and, even after their deaths, attributed moral choices, life lessons and philosophical attitudes she held

to all three men. LeNoire's "Introduction" to Robinson's biography is a letter to him, in the afterlife, starting with "Dear Uncle Bo," and saying:

It has always been my theory that as long as people remember you in their conversations or in any manner after you leave this world, you are never gone or considered dead (*Mr. Bojangles* 9).

At the end of the letter her "p.s." is for Eubie Blake. LeNoire was custodian over keeping Robinson and Blake alive for many people throughout decades when they had been all but forgotten. She endowed them with an almost unrealistic presence and attributed many of her choices to their influence.

As I read more on LeNoire – her decisions, her passionate impulses, her activism, as well as her fumbles, her foibles and her mistakes – I found myself attempting to work around the mistakes and leave off the fumbles and foibles. I was doing with her exactly what she had done with Robinson and Blake – bestowing on her unshakeable admiration fully capable of convincing and possibly controlling my perception, most especially through the agency of my white guilt. Clearly what I was discovering was that she was, in reality, human and had her fair share of stumbling as she managed the balancing act of running a theatre company, maintaining a career, being loyal to the memories of her mentors, being a wife and mother, interpreting the complex and always changing politics of her times and also managing and living life as a black woman, who was also a working actress, in America.

When I dug deeper and perceived how Amas had changed with new white management, I reflected on the information in the *Profile* – most of which is dedicated to the life of LeNoire – and other sources, including the theatre's website and my interviews



with Donna Trinkoff. Again there were the reverent reflections on Rosie's memory, the long tribute to LeNoire on the Amas website, the Rosie Award – given in honor of Rosetta LeNoire's life, and the re-naming of the youth theatre from the Eubie Blake Children's Theatre to the Rosetta LeNoire Musical Theatre Academy. I understood, as a former LeNoire devotee, that Amas, as an organization, is working steadily to keep Rosie alive.

In her last years, after retirement and before passing away, Rosetta LeNoire attended select performances and in particular made appearances at performances of Amas's youth theatre, named in her honor. Since LeNoire's death, keeping her ghost present continues to define the company in a way that provides a politically correct marketing mask. At Amas the dynamic black woman who sustained her theatre company for so many years is still the primary force of the theatre. Keeping Rosie alive seems to provide a special magic that shields Amas from coming to terms with being a white company.

Despite the whiteness of Amas's current artistic management, and often the material's creative teams, the theatre presents a mission of multiculturalism. New musicals are workshopped with audiences that are accustomed to what Amas's mission and brand is and know what to expect from an Amas show. Shows are cast multiculturally, even if it is no more than integrating the chorus, and even as Amas works with original musicals, no show presents itself as too edgy or political. Josephine Lee speaks to this type of comfortable settling of multicultural theatres when she writes, "The very terms of radical culture that seemed to promise "new voices" and the end of the white, masculine, heterosexual domination of the main stage seem instead to have been appropriated by an audience enthralled by their new ability to consume Others" ("Bodies, Revolution and

Magic” 82). However, Rosetta LeNoire and therefore, Amas, never promised to take a stand and use the voice of the company to signal the “end of the white, masculine, heterosexual domination of the mainstage.” Instead, LeNoire concerned herself with integration, so extreme at times that she had to include, true to her own philosophy, the integration of whites into one of the few vestiges of black theatre, though white theatre dominates the national theatrical landscape. As I will show, this policy resulted in Amas eventually being operated by white management through LeNoire’s own choice.

Her distorted political perspective could be attributed to LeNoire’s age in the last decade of her life. Her retirement was late – well into her eighties – and she passed away at the age of 91. However, all through the prior decades of Amas’s operation there are examples of just such decisions having been made for the sake of LeNoire’s allegiance to her perspective on segregation and integration. In the thinking of theatre professionals, critics and scholars the ideas surrounding what constitutes segregation, integration, inclusion and exclusion in theatre are often contradictory and competing viewpoints no matter who is providing the critique. I will examine all of the areas where LeNoire’s ideas intersected with the politics of the times as the dialogue and debate on racism and nontraditional casting took place.

### **Debate on Nontraditional Casting: Never-ending**

The debate on non-traditional casting is now decades long. Once the subject of countless journal articles it has expanded to blog posts, dissertations and legal examination. Performance reviews are also important debate sites and access to reviews has never been

greater. For instance, Charles McNulty of the *Los Angeles Times* comments on a 2013 production of *Death of a Salesman* with a “largely African American ensemble”:

Great works are, of course, elastic enough to accommodate actors of various backgrounds without making race the predominant issue. The test of these revivals is the same for more traditional productions – how well are the characters portrayed and how persuasively is the story dramatized (“Death of a Salesman at SCR erratic yet still shattering” n.pag.).

Aside from this mention, McNulty’s review never brings up race again, which I must say caused me to wonder why he brought it up in the first place. On the other hand, Jocelyn Brown uses *Death of a Salesman* as an example in her 2008 dissertation *Assessing Colorblind Casting in American Theater and Society*. Brown cautions against an all-black version of the play and points out:

A director or producer should consider how the language, speech patterns, and other seemingly minor considerations like character names can be more reflective of a White author’s cultural references rather than a Black American’s cultural references. Twentieth and twenty-first century Black Americans do not generally speak as the character Ben speaks, “William, you’re being first-rate with your boys. Outstanding, manly chaps!” or name their sons “Biff” (159).

With these two examples there are opposite views on the nontraditional casting of the same play. One accepts the casting choice completely; one feels strongly the play should not be cast with black actors. Both are completely valid. Add on the opinion of Jack Marshall of the American Century Theater, which produced Orson Welles’s *Voodoo Macbeth* in 2013.

Marshall writes on the theatre website of another casting configuration of *Death of a Salesman* where roles are randomly cast with black actors:

Charley, Willy Loman's soft-touch neighbor in *Death of a Salesman*, could be cast with a black actor and there would be no resulting confusion. Charley could be black; he just wasn't written that way. But casting Biff, Willy's oldest son, with a black actor would be confusing and suggest a back-story . . . that would be a distraction. A black actor would have to play Biff as a white man, a too-difficult assignment. But playing him as a black man in a white-bread '50s house-hold makes no sense ("Non-Traditional Casting."

[www.americancentury.org/essay\\_nontraditionalcasting.php](http://www.americancentury.org/essay_nontraditionalcasting.php)).

Marshall recognizes the role of the neighbor could be cast as black, but also takes into consideration Brown's concern – the way Charley is written does not fit Marshall's perspective on how a black character would read. Not mentioned is the fact that a black family would more than likely not be living in the same neighborhood as the Lomans in the 1950s, unless the Lomans were also cast as black. Among the three writers a dialogue, or debate, has taken place. One makes little mention of race at all, one warns against colorblind casting and one explores a multiracial production with certain roles being cast as black being possible but not ideal. No one of them is right and no one of them is wrong.

Variation in the debate may include legal issues. The United States has employment laws and professional acting is employment. Auditioning is the path to employment on the stage. For all intents and purposes a professional audition should fall under the law of the land. However, even that is complex, as Russell K. Robinson wrote in his 2007 essay

“Casting and Caste-Ing: Reconciling Artistic Freedom and Antidiscrimination Norms.”

Robinson explains:

The casting process thus lies at the nexus of two quite different doctrinal regimes:

- (1) A First Amendment rule protecting artistic freedom, and
- (2) employment regulation banning hiring decisions based on impermissible factors (2).

When challenged on an institutional level this complexity might read as it did at University of Texas Theatre Department in 2013, where a departmental show, *In the Heights*, excluded white students from being cast due to the material’s ethnic requirements. Because of a majority of white students in the department, it was deemed necessary to pull actors from the community to fill all the roles. As Lauren Franklin wrote in the *Daily Texan*, “According to the department, there were not enough students whose races matched those of the characters of the play and met all the audition requirements, so many theatre students were left without leading roles” ([www.dailytexanonline.com](http://www.dailytexanonline.com)).

The interesting correlation between these two writers, who are also in dialogue, is that the students who were left out or discriminated against, because of artistic choice, were white, or assumed to be white, and took issue with one of the few offerings that could include non-white students. If equal employment standards had been adhered to, white students might have been cast in roles that are written to be cast as Dominican rather than the production looking outside the department. New questions arise when we consider whether every Dominican looks the same. The department decided Dominicans never looked white. As far as the department was concerned the students who identified as white would be inappropriate. However, casting those students might have been explained as colorblind casting, meaning the audience would have been responsible for reading past

race. Ignoring, or getting over, race is one of the features of colorblindness, whether in theatre or in society.

Tanzina Vega's 2014 write up from the *New York Times*, "Colorblind Notion Aside, Colleges Grapple With Racial Tension," was a follow up to an incident at the University of Michigan. The incident was not involved with theatre but rather with race relations on campus between students. Vega writes:

In the news media and in popular culture, the notion persists that millennials . . . are growing up in a colorblind society . . . But interviews with dozens of students, professors and administrators at the University of Michigan and elsewhere indicate that the reality is far more complicated, and that racial tensions are playing out in new ways among young adults (www.nytimes.com n.p.).

The University of Michigan has a ban on affirmative action. Recently challenged in the Supreme Court, the ban was upheld. A decline in black enrollment spurred the tension at the University. The Black Student Union has petitioned to increase enrollment of black students to a low 10 percent. In this situation, both the lack of representation and the assumption of a colorblind society keep discrimination active. At the University of Texas the effort to be more inclusive to minorities created a claim of discrimination towards the department's majority student population. Both of these incidents involve the principles of affirmative action and equal employment opportunity, while calling into question the notion of colorblindness.

Director Carla Stillwell has an equally compelling voice in the debate. Writing for *Howlround* in 2013, in a series on *Diversity in American Theatre*, Stillwell writes:

Every season, someone in some theater decides that it would be cool to do stuff like . . . produce *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, but cast it with two African Americans, a Latino, and another actor of ambiguous race. Let us not forget that no theater season in America is complete without an adaptation of a Shakespeare play (pick one – it doesn't matter with an all white cast except for the one black girl who I like to call the “third black girl from the right,” set in New York during the roaring twenties. This has always bothered me.

Stillwell is black and her honesty confronts whites with the knowledge that she knows, as all black theatre professionals know, that, “however well-meaning this practice is, the underlying message it asserts is that theater was created for, and belongs to ‘white’ people, and said ‘white’ people are graciously finding a place for people of color in their world” (“The Mythology of Color Blind/Conscience Casting.” [www.howround.com](http://www.howround.com)). Now the dialogue has circled back to include McNulty's review and the situation at University of Texas. All of these comments and insights discuss issues that will be shown in my dissertation to correlate with the production history of my subject theatre, Amas, and the politics of its founder.

I include this survey to illustrate how nontraditional casting and race representation on stage is not only intricately complicated but also how theatre casting practices intersect with other forms of institutional race relations. As I investigate Amas and Rosetta LeNoire's philosophy, which grew from her own complex politics, I will be also examining the critical responses of a multitude of journal articles as well as lengthy essays from publications such as the *New York Times*. The debate as it has evolved over decades is as much about politics as it is about art. As Angela Pao writes in *No Safe Spaces*, “A new

element of risk was introduced when resentment against government-mandated integration in other areas of life and anxiety over racial activism carried over into theater” (17).

Through the second half of the twentieth century theatre was being asked to change concurrently with other institutions. Just as universities and other institutions were white dominated, the white dominated American theatre was expected to yield to the policies that were enacted as a result of the civil rights movement. In theatre, this expectation rested almost solely on casting choice, which, as Robinson points out in the above comment, is also complicated and confounded by artistic vision.

Because Amas was active while the debate on nontraditional casting was heating up in the seventies and eighties, it is important to include Rosetta LeNoire’s comments on her theatre’s productions as well as her continuing commentary on where Amas stood when it came to nontraditional casting. Her comments often serve to support my argument that her political perspective was responsible for her final decision to turn her company over to white management, a decision which I argue was misguided. Amas today, with white leadership, is now included with Stillwell’s 2013 blog article, mentioned above, when she says, “that theater was created for, and belongs to ‘white’ people, and said ‘white’ people are graciously finding a place for people of color in their world” (“The Mythology of Color Blind/Conscience Casting.” [www.howlround.com](http://www.howlround.com)).

### **Scope and Structure**

The structure of my dissertation is in the form of a history. Chapter II tracks the influences on Rosetta LeNoire through the course of her life which include the Harlem Renaissance, the Federal Theatre Project, Eubie Blake and Bill Robinson, the politics of



her father, Harold Burton, as well as her participation in the American Negro Theatre. I include the forces of the national response to the civil rights movement that took place in the fifties and sixties up to the founding of Amas to situate how, why and under what circumstances LeNoire sought to found her theatre. Included in this chapter is a look at how arts funding favored inner city not for profit organizations, including those in Harlem through the Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (HARYOU), known for its substantial funding of LeRoi Jones's Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS) in 1965.

The larger events in my dissertation happened at ten year intervals. For instance, Amas's most successful show, *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, opened on Broadway in 1976. Ten years later, in 1986, the NTCP was formed and began its initiatives. Ten years after, in 1996, August Wilson made his important speech, "The Ground on Which I Stand," at the Theatre Communications Group conference and started a new debate on where black theatre stood within the still white dominated theatre mainstream. Beginning with Chapter III, I structure my dissertation to reflect these events and focus on Amas's placement in the decades of the seventies, eighties and nineties. Chapter III will examine the seventies during the time period that *Bubbling Brown Sugar* opened and will track the show's casting and history. An unusual trend in black musicals had swept Broadway such that the critique was focused on how shows were cast and how that casting affected the artistic product. In this chapter I will also reach back to 1967 when an important all-black recasting of the musical *Hello Dolly!* took place and ignited a wave of highly-charged criticism. Chapter IV will examine the 1980s both politically and in terms of how Amas was proceeding. The eighties saw a drop in the funding to the arts which affected black theatres in particular. The Reagan administration's validation of conservative views on color-conscious policies,

such as affirmative action, also began to seep into the conservative backlash against the National Endowment for the Arts and the humanities in general. The NTCP launched their initiative and presented their symposia in cities across the country. The New York symposium resulted in their publication of *Beyond Tradition*, the transcript of proceedings and discussion. This document gives an overview of how theatre professionals were receiving the NTCP's mandate to cast nontraditionally. Chapter V will examine August Wilson's speech as well as critical response and backlash. Amas's reaction will demonstrate the company's misinterpretation of Wilson's focus, however, it is also important to examine the response of Robert Brustein, with whom Wilson debated as a result of the speech. Brustein's comments are often reflective of conservative politics and its target to destabilize or eliminate the color-conscious policies that came out of the civil rights movement. By the mid-nineties a conservative backlash threatened to undo what integration and other civil rights legislation sought to remedy. This chapter also constitutes a conclusion as I examine the events that created Amas as the theatre company it is today and particularly focus on several of Amas's offerings in later years with respect to either their conception or their casting. This chapter returns to the earlier statement from Robert C. Smith as I investigate Trinkoff and Krebs's ignorance of what it could mean for white theatre managers to make uninformed decisions for a multicultural, racially active theatre company. I will analyze how settling into a pattern that reflects a theatre's past mission does not necessarily serve the current circumstances of the world in which it operates.

As a consequence of social/political forces in the second half of the twentieth century the nature of arts funding reveals itself to be linked to the success or failure of many theatres, particularly black theatres. Weaving through each chapter is an overview of

the climate of funding and what effect it had on Amas and theatre in general. From the days of the Ford Foundation's matching grants to the publication of the National Endowment for the Arts' *American Canvas*, the pendulum of arts funding swings with the political times. Because my dissertation is concerned not only with the artistic but also the political it is necessary to take into account how money, or the lack thereof, eventually created financial vulnerability that threatened black theatre companies, including Amas, and may possibly have contributed to LeNoire's decision to finally turn the company over to white management.

### **Terminology**

For the most part I have attempted to use terminology that speaks to the historical time I am examining. This means that the term Negro in the first half of the twentieth century gave way to the term Black in the latter half and interfaced with the usage of African American. I have found it more useful to attempt to be consistent and use the term black, though only capitalized in the case of its use in a quote or a specific title. Because of discrepancies in time period and location, unless a term is included in a quote, I have chosen black as the term to use in my writing. Likewise, I will use the term white, rather than Caucasian, and unless otherwise noted in a specific quote.

Casting practices also changed terminology throughout the twentieth century. What started as integrated casting could change to interracial, multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural or, the most institutionalized, nontraditional, depending on author or speaker including Rosetta LeNoire. The term nontraditional is also presently being discussed as no longer applicable. In a 2013 essay, director Daniel Banks shares, "I have great respect for

the work done in the arenas of ‘non-traditional’ and ‘colorblind’ casting; at the same time, I have concerns about the continued use of these and similar terms” (“The Welcome Table” 1). Banks points out that in the twenty-first century these two terms may no longer be relevant to current theatre practice. However, since there has been no consensus over time on how these terms might give way to new ones, I employ them throughout my dissertation as they have been and are used in the debate; for example, “the casting of ethnic, female or disabled actors in roles where race, ethnicity, gender or physical capability are not necessary to the characters’ or play’s development” (*Beyond Tradition* n.pag.). Additional to that definition, I use other terms, again, as they appear in quotes or as they pertain to different timeframes. Colorblind is used as a societal term as it relates to national politics and as a term as it relates to the practice of casting an actor of a race different than the race most often indicated by the playwright’s work. Another feature of colorblind casting is the expectation of the audience’s ability to transcend, or, in the broadest sense, not see race. In *The Problem of the Color[blind]*, Brandi Catanese points out that, “Very often, transcendence of racial issues is framed as both the tactic and the goal of contemporary racial politics.” To put it more bluntly, she states, “. . . racial transcendence exacts disavowal of our racially mediated reality as the price of progress toward resolving American society’s racial conflicts” (21). In the case of colorblind casting both the audience and the actor are being asked to transcend, or as Catanese says “get over it,” in other words, erasing the meaning of race. As far as Amas is concerned, when it came to colorblind casting, it was often relied upon to buffer LeNoire’s casting decisions which were, on occasion, deemed inappropriate. In my use of the word colorblind and

nontraditional I will avoid hyphenation though other sources which may be quoted include the hyphen.

### **Methodology and Scholarship**

My research to find out about the life of Rosetta LeNoire took me to many sources including a 1983 dissertation by Linda Kerr Norflett, which is solely a biography. However, there were gaps in Norflett's research, or, since LeNoire was alive at that time, perhaps gaps in what LeNoire revealed to her biographer. Articles and reviews helped to fill in those gaps, especially those from the *New York Times*. As black theatre was assessed through the decades, LeNoire was mentioned in numerous journal articles. She had a unique place as a black woman who had started a theatre company in a time when men dominated.

Current scholarship such as Catanese's and Pao's books, and books on race theory, such as *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Colorblind Society*, helped to tie together the political with the theatre practice. *Whitewashing Race* looks at a new term for conservative ideology called racial realism. The book's essays helped illuminate the connection between institutional practices and the national political climate as many conservatives attempt to reclaim white supremacy. The premise in *Whitewashing Race* is that current thinking on race is based on three ideas most white Americans believe:

First, they believe the civil rights revolution was successful . . . They assume civil rights laws ended racial inequality . . . They think racism has been eradicated . . . racial extremists are considered a tiny minority who occupy political space only on the fringes of mainstream America.

Second, if vestiges of racial inequality persist, they believe that is because blacks have failed to take advantage of opportunities created by the civil rights revolution . . . if blacks are less successful than whites it is not because America is still a racist society . . . black Americans do not try hard enough to succeed . . .

Finally, most white Americans think the United States is rapidly becoming a color-blind society, and they see little need or justification for affirmative action or other color-conscious policies (1-2).

These ideas also interface in theatre practice. Since black theatres have not been able to consistently sustain themselves against the better funded block of white professional theatres, the ideas in *Whitewashing Race* could be applied to their lack of success, if using the above three criteria. However, *Whitewashing Race*, as well as other sources such as *Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, not only acknowledge changes for the better in the black community but also make absolutely clear that the longstanding inequality that blacks have endured has been in process for so long by way of unequal housing, employment, finances, healthcare and law enforcement that it is now hidden from public knowledge. More publicly evident is the rhetoric of those who would blame inequality on individual choice. These Americans, who insist the legislation resulting from the civil rights movement was a success, instead choose to blame the majority of blacks who are not doing well for their perceived behavior and attitude.

The *Profile of Amas* has been very helpful. However the *Profile* is biased towards the infallibility of LeNoire's philosophy and the current leadership's political correctness. Nonetheless, the document will be helpful while analyzing the TCG speech of August Wilson because Amas, as did many critics of the speech, misinterpreted what Wilson was

saying. Again, the *Profile* juxtaposes Wilson's ideas with LeNoire's and seems to be saying that Wilson's have less nobility and credibility than LeNoire's. Comparing interpretations and also examining Wilson's follow up efforts to organize a black theatre organization that would work to solve the issues of funding, audience development, playwriting and new works shows that he was serious in his philosophy and sought to reach out and create a strong foundation for black theatre.

### **Why Not a Black Theatre?**

I also must ask finally why did LeNoire resist Amas being identified as a black theatre? Why was there such a concerted effort on the part of LeNoire to maintain and publicize her opposition to founding a black theatre? Rosetta LeNoire had many black colleagues and friends who were theatre professionals. For years they brought her material to stage, new musicals written by themselves and others and concepts to develop. In the 1970s alone, Amas developed and produced original musicals using the work of Langston Hughes, Bill Robinson, Scott Joplin, Micki Grant, Vy Higginson, Maya Angelou, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Ethel Waters, and the life of Adam Clayton Powell. Their Broadway success, *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, was based on music from the Harlem Renaissance. The decades following the seventies show the same pattern. With this history, I hope to interweave the politics that influenced LeNoire's thinking to shed light and offer different perspectives on the question of why she so vehemently opposed Amas being considered a black theatre while at the same time produced so much work by black artists, musicians, poets and historical figures.

## **Black Theatre and “black theatre”**

In an essay first written in 1994, and reprinted in 2011, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) discusses the one year of his Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School. He writes of his admiration for Malcolm X and the black power ideal of black self-determination. He describes the summer of BARTS being in the streets of Harlem, working with youth, teaching classes and doing theatre in parks and playgrounds. Art was the revolution for Baraka and he states, “That’s what it was all about. That’s what the whole movement and essence of the Black Arts was raised and forwarded by . . . To resist and finally destroy the slave system of racism and national oppression” (“The Black Arts Movement: Its Meaning and Potential” 29). Baraka fully admits to the “Hate-Whitey” language that so repelled LeNoire. The company eventually folded, after one year, and Baraka moved to New Jersey. He closes by reflecting on the period after his theatre shut down:

The very people who even denied the existence of Black Art were immediately given grants to claim it . . . The Lesson: Where are our institutions and organizations of the Black Arts? Where are our theaters and newspapers and journals and truly independent films? That no one has the right to rule our lives for a second, the true self-consciousness, who we are, who we were, and who we would become! (31)

As I read this essay I had to ask myself, in fact, “Where are they?” – all the things Baraka mentions – and also, was Rosetta LeNoire one of those he is critiquing when he says “the very people who even denied the existence of Black Art were immediately given grants to claim it” (31). In her disregard of the political maelstrom that was swirling around her, did LeNoire turn her back on a movement that might have, with full support, secured a



foundation for black arts in the United States? And did she attempt to reclaim blackness by creating her company while at the same time developing the many small and politically safe black musicals that Amas became known for?

I do not believe Baraka was speaking specifically about LeNoire when he wrote his essay, but I do feel his questions deserve to be considered. Likewise, the impact of August Wilson's speech, his follow up initiative with the Black Theatre Summit, and the comments of those either critiquing him or agreeing with him are worthy of analysis in terms of the present day state of black theatre and particularly in light of Amas's statement to "return frequently to its African American roots" (*Profile of Amas Musical Theatre* 11). I believe this statement carries a responsibility to a large segment of American theatre that has been sent the message: blend or disappear. August Wilson's strong and often confrontational speech in 1996 offered a challenge that still has not been met. It does not help that a black theatre leader turned her company over to white management. I will examine the many years Amas has been in operation, the strong and complicated woman who founded the company and the lack of solution she discovered while clinging to her philosophy and politics over the course of several decades. In Amas's fourth decade she turned her theatre over to white management and ended the issue of whether hers was a black theatre once and for all. In the future the question for Amas will be whether a white theatre can responsibly serve the black theatre community or not.

## CHAPTER II

### THE JOURNEY TO AMAS: BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES THROUGH THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

“Onstage he was in the habit of quipping that he was ‘having the best time I’ve had since I was colored.’ Offstage, he was continually reminded of his second-class position in society by being denied service by whites and suffering the numerous indignities particular to the life of a black man on the road” (Haskins and Mitgang. *Mr. Bojangles: The Biography of Bill Robinson*. 106).

“The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, white ways of looking at the world” (Larry Neal. “The Black Arts Movement.” 30).

Rosetta LeNoire was fifty-eight years old when she incorporated her theatre. She was raised and came of age amidst the political and artistic climate of the first half of the twentieth century and maintained the major portion of her acting career and her theatre company through the second half. The influences on her encompass the events and people that were a part of her long lifetime and include the critical and artistic achievements of the Harlem Renaissance, her relationships with Eubie Blake and Bill Robinson, and the strong political views of her father particularly as they are expressed in Wendell Willkie’s book, *One World*. Also included are LeNoire’s participation with the Federal Theater Project’s (FTP) Harlem Negro Unit and the American Negro Theatre, two experiences that helped shape her training in all theatrical practices but also gave her experience as a collaborator. The FTP, in particular, gave LeNoire insight to how creative process could form a bond among a diverse gathering of collaborators. The premise that creative work acts as a mediator in racially charged circumstances is one of the main assertions of Amas’s mission.

From the beginning LeNoire was surrounded by theories of how art could sway political and social ideas. In *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics*, Mikell Pinkney views black dramatic theory from seven specific eras. He states the eras as:

the Plantation or Slave era, the American Minstrel era, the New Negro Renaissance era, the Assimilationist era, the Black Revolutionary era, the Afrocentric era, and a currently evolving New Age Post-Revolutionary Movement (12).

Rosetta LeNoire lived through four of these eras and died as the last, the New Age Post-Revolutionary Movement was in its first years. However, it was the New Negro Renaissance, the Assimilationist and the Black Revolutionary eras that had the greatest influence on her. This chapter will discuss these influences and how they supported her philosophy that creative process is capable of ending prejudice. The examination of these influences will also illustrate divergent points of view as the United States shifted from one political movement to the next. These differences sometimes created conflicting and confusing messages and perspectives.

### **The Harlem or New Negro Renaissance**

LeNoire was not born in Harlem, however her father, Harold Burton, moved the family uptown from Hell's Kitchen, in the midtown area of Manhattan, when LeNoire was an adolescent. Born in 1911, she would spend her teenage years in what Henry Louis Gates called, "not so much a *place* as it was a state of mind, the cultural metaphor for Black America itself" ("Harlem on Our Minds" [italics the author's] 11). The 1920's was the decade of the so-called New Negro or Harlem Renaissance. As Langston Hughes (whose works would make up three of Amas's future shows) wrote in 1925, "Harlem was like a

great magnet for the Negro intellectual, pulling him from everywhere. Once in New York, he had to live in Harlem” (Hughes qtd. in Gates 10). Though not necessarily an intellectual, Harold Burton was honored with being the first black licensed plumber in the State of New York. Burton was also the first black Vice President of the Republican Committee in New York (Norflett 6). He strove to locate his family in the best possible living conditions and for the Burtons that meant moving to “the ultimate symbolic black cultural space – the city within a city, the ‘Mecca of the New Negro’ (as Alain Locke put it)” (Gates 10).

Gates credits Booker T. Washington with the concept of the New Negro. In the aftermath of the Civil War, with degrading images of black Americans spread throughout the nation, creating stereotypes that were used not only in print but also in all manner of popular culture and public policy, Washington stated, “We must turn away from the memories of the slave past . . . a New Negro for a New Century” (Washington qtd. in Gates 3). The concept continued to grow in Europe as jazz and African visual art were introduced and became influential in the work of modernist composers and artists. As Gates traces the movement, both theorist W.E.B. Du Bois and philosopher Alain Locke saw the potential of Europe’s admiration of African art as a political tool in the United States. As Gates comments:

If European modernism was truly mulatto, the argument went, then African Americans could save themselves politically through the creation of the arts. This renaissance . . . would fully liberate the Negro . . . For Locke and his fellow authors, the function of a cultural renaissance was inherently political: the production of great artworks, by blacks, in sufficient numbers, would lead to the Negro’s reevaluation by white and black alike (3-4).

Though Locke and Du Bois took differing points of view on how art should be represented in the black community they agreed in the theory that art was a vehicle for change.

In *Theorizing Black Theatre*, Henry D. Miller states that there “are but two pertinent historical figures who can reasonably be described as theorists,” and credits Du Bois and Locke with that honor. Throughout the twenties Locke and Du Bois exchanged opinions on art as propaganda. Du Bois commented in 1921:

We want everything said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that *Art and Propaganda be one* . . . With a vast wealth of human material about us, our own writers and artists fear to paint the truth lest they criticize their own and be in turn criticized for it. They fail to see the Eternal Beauty that shines through all Truth, and try to portray a world of stilted artificial black folk such as never were on land or sea (Du Bois qtd. in Miller [italics the author’s]53).

Locke took the opposite point of view insisting that Du Bois’s Truth and Beauty did not justify propaganda as a driving force in art. Locke believed that art was a means to an end in and of itself. What good was propaganda if the art was inferior? To further separate himself from the elder Du Bois’s sentiment, Locke wrote in “Negro Youth Speaks”:

The elder generation of Negro writers expressed itself in cautious moralism and guarded idealizations; the trammels of Puritanism were on its mind because the repressions of prejudice were heavy on its heart . . . And so, not merely for modernity of style, but for vital originality of substance, the young Negro writers dig deep into the racy peasant underoil of the race life (Locke qtd. in *The Black Aesthetic* 21).

Locke's essay was written in 1925 when Rosetta LeNoire was fourteen years old. His words serve as a rally to a younger generation just coming of age to take the artistic lead and heal the wounds of the past. In his first sentences he valorizes youth with:

The Younger Generation comes, bringing its gifts. They are the first fruits of the Negro Renaissance. Youth speaks, and the voice of the New Negro is heard . . . Here we have Negro youth, with arresting visions and vibrant prophecies; forecasting in the mirror of art what we must see and recognize in the streets of reality tomorrow . . . the maturing speech of full racial utterance (17).

Locke's exuberant words were a challenge to his "Younger Generation" to take up the artistic gauntlet. Rosetta LeNoire was surrounded with the enthusiastic dialogue of Locke, Du Bois, George S. Schuyler, Charles Johnson and Marcus Garvey, to name a few, which was readily available in publications such as *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. The essays that came from this era, "have a particular focus in the realization of the need for African American artists to define and assert themselves by their own standards and in their own words" (Pinkney 15). It was Locke who spoke directly to young people, validating their artistic contribution when he said:

"It has brought with it, first of all, that wholesome, welcome virtue of finding beauty in oneself; the younger generation can no longer be twitted as 'cultural nondescripts' or accused of 'being out of love with their own nativity'" (23).

Locke distinguished the younger generation as one that learned to navigate with pride in a world where Jim Crow was a close companion that controlled individual choice and fulfillment. As a representative of Harlem youth in the 1920s, LeNoire would embrace the ideology that art could translate into political statement and transform society. Her artistic

vision for Amas was one where the process of artistic collaboration served as a social microcosm, bringing people of all backgrounds together to work and create.

Locke was optimistic about the art of the younger generation, and the Renaissance in general, just “as Harlem was turning into the great American slum” (Gates 11). Locke and his colleagues mythologized Harlem while, as Henry Louis Gates points out:

The death rate was 42 percent higher than in other parts of the city. The infant mortality rate in 1928 was twice as high as in the rest of New York. Four times as many people died from tuberculosis . . . The unemployment rate was 50%. There was no way to romanticize these conditions, but Locke and his fellows valiantly attempted to do so (11).

Despite conditions that conspired to isolate Harlem for many years as a ghetto, Locke and Du Bois continued to promote the benefits of a robust New Negro culture as a means to rise above and, in many cases, escape the neighborhood’s urban sickness.

A document from the Amas Musical Theatre archives illustrates how Rosetta LeNoire took the musical accomplishments of the Harlem Renaissance and created a show that was intended to teach Harlem youth about its past. In the 1970s, a time when New York City generally, and Harlem specifically, were both at an economic and social nadir, Rosetta LeNoire and Loften Mitchell developed Amas’s most successful show to date, *Bubbling Brown Sugar* – a show that moved to Broadway and toured internationally. The document, which is anonymous and appears to be for promotional purposes, states:

*Bubbling Brown Sugar* actually began as a project to show young Harlem black men and women something of the culture they were heirs to, to show them that Harlem is much more than a run-down, underprivileged, overcrowded section of an

indifferent city. By 1920, it had become, without trying, the capital of black America.

Using a brief history of the Harlem Renaissance, particularly in the 1920s, to enhance the show's subject, the document is proof that LeNoire brought forward her personal history of Harlem and its influence on the work that she was dedicated to produce at Amas. Work on the show began in the late 1960s when Amas was first founded and served as LeNoire's celebration of a neighborhood that she hoped, as did Locke and DuBois before her, might eventually be better known for its artistic contribution rather than its urban decay. The document also points out, "Sports and entertainment were always the twin routes out of the ghetto for the talented and the ambitious," and is careful to make clear:

If all this activity seems to betoken a willful ignoring of the true state of Harlem on the part of the entertainers, it was really nothing of the sort. They all knew that while the Lindy Hop and the Suzie Q and Truckin' were being worked out by the dancers at the Savoy, while the great bands battled there for musical supremacy . . . while Louis Armstrong was pouring out successions of what in those days were high notes, there was much injustice and callousness being meted out to their less fortunate, less talented fellow citizens (*Amas Musical Theatre Archive*. Production files. Box # 3 MG 463. *Bubbling Brown Sugar*).

In his book, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, George Hutchinson points out that, "Race remains a powerful social determinant; it is useless to speak of 'transcending' it or to wish it away, however fictional it may be. What then to do?" Hutchinson's book complicates the myth of the Harlem Renaissance as a singularly black



historical moment by interweaving the movement's strong interracial relationships into the narrative. He writes:

A place to begin is with a recovery of historical complexity, particularly at those moments when and places where the intertwined discourses of race, culture, and nation were exposed to questioning, to skepticism, to transformation, however small and localized, and when possibilities for coalitions of cultural reformers were envisioned and exploited (26).

While appreciating the web of relationships between blacks and whites, who worked more closely together than is usually revealed, my inclusion of the Harlem Renaissance, as an influence on Rosetta LeNoire, is more aligned with the myth than the reality. Born in 1911, LeNoire was a child when the twenties began and never moved out of adolescence throughout the decade. Being a very young woman in the 1930s, she would marry, have a child and divorce. My feeling is that, while possibly being aware of blacks and whites working together during these years, LeNoire, as a young girl, was likely not aware of the complexities of history being made. I frame the movement's influence on her more within the context of a passage from Toni Morrison's book about the Renaissance, *Jazz*:

Up there, in that part of the City – which is the part they all came for – the right tune whistled in a doorway or lifting up from the circles and grooves of a record can change the weather. From freezing to hot to cool (51).

LeNoire absorbed the music and performance of the twenties and thirties and brought it forward later in her life to make it a part of her theatre company's most successful production. It is that important product of the Harlem Renaissance that would continue to live for her even after the historical moment had subsided.

Despite the romance of the Renaissance's atmosphere, LeNoire's family was not immune to Harlem's inferior conditions. Her mother died of pneumonia after being made to wait on the hospital steps at the birth of LeNoire's brother. Her brother died in infancy soon after. LeNoire was a victim of rickets and had her legs broken and re-set in braces as a girl. She spoke in an interview for City University Television's program *Spotlight* of being so humiliated she walked stooped over, staring at the ground.

Already displaying performing talent in the 1920s LeNoire was given formal music training by one of Harlem's most talented citizens, Eubie Blake, and was trained in stage performance by another, Bill Robinson. Her relationship with both men lasted from the 1920s until their deaths, Robinson's at age 71 and Blake's at age 100. Both men were of mature years when they first met LeNoire. Blake and Robinson were praised by both Locke and DuBois as examples of black achievement and artistic success. It is important to examine their lives and biographies to place them more specifically within the context of Rosetta LeNoire's life. Both Blake and Robinson came from backgrounds that caused them to begin their work at early ages. By the time they met the adolescent Rosetta Burton they had achieved a degree of success and were considered to be pioneers in the twentieth century progression of black artistic achievement. Deprived of formal training, they were largely self-educated in their art – Blake by playing piano in bawdy houses as a child and Robinson by growing up on the street dancing for pennies. What they passed along to LeNoire was not only a type of training they had to seek out for themselves as youths but also a resolve to set their sights high, do everything possible to develop their talents and turn that talent into successful, lucrative work while negotiating a society that largely created obstacles to black achievement.

LeNoire's relationship with Eubie Blake preceded her relationship with Bill Robinson. She was a young adolescent at the time she met Blake and would know him until his death. She credited Blake for having given her the advice that would serve as her central metaphor for the founding of Amas. Throughout the decades LeNoire referred to Blake's words, however, in examining Blake's life it is revealed that he, like Robinson, also exemplified the artistic vision that Locke and Du Bois were seeking and which Locke continued to incorporate in his message to Harlem youth. The reverence with which LeNoire held Blake and Robinson is indicative of the enduring presence and effect the two artists had on their young protégée.

### **James Hubert "Eubie" Blake and the Beautiful Garden**

Alain Locke's "The Negro and the American Theatre" (1927) spoke of his interview with Austrian director Max Reinhardt who expressed enthusiasm for what Locke described as "the tawdry trappings of such musical comedies as *Eliza*, *Shuffle Along*, and *Runnin' Wild*, which were in vogue the season of his [Reinhardt's] first visit to New York" (qtd. in Gayle 266). Locke did not consider these musicals representative of what he sought for his new art-drama. He was soon corrected by Reinhardt who told him the musicals were full of potential, "They are most modern, most American, most expressionistic. They are highly original in spite of obvious triteness, and artistic in spite of superficial crudeness. To me they reveal new possibilities of technique in drama" (qtd. in Gayle 266). Locke began to change his perspective and wrote:

Negro dramatic art must not only be liberated from the handicaps of external disparagement but from its self-imposed limitations. It must more and more have

the courage to be original, to break with established dramatic convention of all sorts. It must have the courage to develop its own idiom, to pour itself into new molds; in short to be experimental (267).

Locke was late in recognizing the contribution of *Shuffle Along*, a musical created by Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle, Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles. In 1921, when the show opened, it enjoyed the distinction of putting black musicals back on Broadway after a period of almost ten years dubbed by James Weldon Johnson as “The Term of Exile.”

In her interview for *Spotlight*, LeNoire tells the story that her father, as did everyone in Harlem, went to the street corner to get their newspapers from a truck that dropped them off in the morning. The Burton’s home was close to Eubie Blake’s residence and the two men found themselves chatting one day about Rosetta while waiting for the papers to arrive. Harold Burton had already noticed his thirteen-year-old daughter’s musical ability and mentioned to Blake that she needed lessons. Blake apparently told Burton to send his daughter to see him.

Blake questioned his student on her stooped posture, a result of her fear and low self-esteem. When Rosetta told him about her mother’s death and the children who bullied her in school because of her leg braces, Blake, according to LeNoire, walked her to the window that faced out on the common gardens of the adjoining houses and told her to look at the colors of all the flowers planted there; the flowers, just like people, were different and special but together they created a beautiful garden, Blake explained. He also told her to stand up straight or she’d get tuberculosis. However the vision of humanity as a garden of many colors resurfaced through the years as the primary metaphor that supported LeNoire’s founding of Amas as a theatre that practiced nontraditional casting. In interviews

she often quoted some variation of Blake's words. In a 1977 radio interview she stated, ". . . my world is not all-black. My world is as God created it, all colors . . . a glorious bouquet," (LeNoire qtd. in *Profile of Amas Musical Theatre* 4). During a taped oral history conducted by The League of Professional Theatre Women in 1994 LeNoire again explained her philosophy, "All of us are God's children. We are all his flowers in his garden on earth" (qtd. in *Backstage* n.pag.).

Eubie Blake's residency in Harlem (when LeNoire took music lessons with him in the twenties), was the result of a lifetime of tenacious work doing what he did best – creating music, whether playing the piano or composing. LeNoire's study with him was part of the background that gave her expertise in founding Amas as a theatre that worked with original musicals. Additionally, Eubie Blake's, and Bill Robinson's, ineffable drive to work hard developing their talents inspired an adolescent LeNoire. Honoring her mentor, LeNoire later created The Eubie Blake Children's Theatre which trained disadvantaged youth in musical theatre. The productions of this youth group (later renamed The Rosetta LeNoire Musical Academy) were as important to Amas as its adult productions. Until his death, at age 100, Eubie Blake was present at some rehearsals and opening nights. LeNoire's love and respect for Blake started with their friendship in the twenties when she was an adolescent and continued until his death.

Eubie Blake, like Bill Robinson, was not from New York but came to Harlem in the early 1920s. He served as a model for the type of artist Du Bois and Locke were celebrating. Much like the message of *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, in the twenties Blake and Robinson were living examples to Harlem youth of what talent and hard work could achieve. Both men were the sons and grandsons of slaves. Their lives were very different in

many aspects than LeNoire's though what ultimately connected them to their younger protégée was a lifelong capacity for hard work developing their talents.

What there is of biographical information on Eubie Blake was gathered later in his life after he returned to public recognition from near obscurity. According to Allen Woll, he “virtually disappeared and his reputation faded” after a disastrous attempt to resurrect *Shuffle Along* in the nineteen-fifties. There has even been a question as to his actual birthdate – some sources reporting 1887 as his birth year while most have documented it as 1883. However, whether he lived to be 100 or ninety-six, he outlived virtually all of his contemporaries. Eileen Southern's 1969 interview, published in 1973, “A Legend in his Own Lifetime” and Max Morath's extensive 1976 interview, “The 93 Years of Eubie Blake,” are excellent resources, as well as Robert Kimball and William Bolcom's 1973 book, *Reminiscing with Sissle and Blake*. The book, along with the 1979 musical, *Eubie!*, helped bring Blake back into public recognition shortly before his death in 1983. It is important to discuss his life not only for the sake of its influence on Rosetta LeNoire but also to remember that like many participants in the decade of the Harlem Renaissance, Blake is responsible for helping to shape the artistic achievement of those years which became part of the larger history of twentieth century American art, particularly with respect to *Shuffle Along*'s place in that history.

James Hubert Blake, sometimes called “Little Hubie,” “Mouse,” and, eventually, “Eubie,” was born in 1883 in Baltimore, Maryland. Both his parents were former slaves in Virginia. Eubie's mother was a devout self-righteous woman with a quick temper that often found expression in the disciplining of Eubie. From a very early age Blake showed a

determination to play music, despite his mother's efforts to keep him away from any music but that of the church.

Blake was a musical prodigy and according to Max Morath the typical trajectory of musical prodigies, i.e., "impressive gift revealed early in a chance encounter of a toddler's fingers," along with rigorous training and early public recognition, was slightly askew when it came to Blake's story:

But while he got a taste of legitimate teaching, most of his instruction came from his own intuition and from a drifting band of brilliant but doomed black musicians whose very names are lost to us. And recognition? For years it was limited to that audience he encountered in the wine shops and sporting houses ("The 93 Years of Eubie Blake" n.pag.).

In his interview with Eileen Southern, Blake revealed that he was six years old when a neighbor recognized his gift and proposed to give him piano lessons. His mother answered, "I don't want my boy to be a musicianer; I want him to be a preacher" (Blake qtd. in Southern "A Legend in his Own Lifetime" 53). Nonetheless his mother and father were tricked into buying a small pump organ on an installment plan and that was how Eubie taught himself to play.

Despite the respectable path his mother wanted, he was a child in short pants when he snuck out of his house at night to play in the bawdy houses of Baltimore. He first arrived in New York in 1902, at age 19, to dance in *Old Kentucky*, a mixed cast show where Blake recalled, "After the show a furniture wagon used to back up right there on the pavement, all of us kids would get in, and we'd go down to a dump on Bleeker Street. That's where we

lived. You talk about a ghetto. That was a ghetto” (Blake qtd. in Morath n.pag.). Blake’s mother eventually made him quit the show and come home.

Disobeying his mother’s attempts to keep him safely, and righteously, away from the vices of a musician’s life, Eubie immediately returned to playing in Baltimore and Atlantic City where he encountered a host of talented musicians with the names of “Slue-Foot and Yaller Nelson, Cat-Eye Harry, Big Jimmy Green, my competitor Huey Wolfert, and James P. Johnson. And Luckey Roberts” (Blake qtd. in Morath n.pag.). When asked who Blake thought was the most talented he answered, “One-Legged Willie Josephs, from Boston,” with the next best being Cat-Eye Harry, who happened to be white (n.pag.). Some musicians were white and some were black, though all of them are virtually unknown, forgotten, many succumbing to drugs and early death. He met one of his inspirations, George M. Cohan, who he considered to be a greater showman than P.T. Barnum, in Atlantic City. In 1915, at age 32 Eubie moved to New York for good.

In tracing Eubie Blake’s early life it reveals a human being who was driven by his musical gifts. As a neighbor told his mother early on, during the bordello days, “That boy’s going to play somewhere” and, finding ways to work around his mother’s attempts to save him, Eubie continued to play. His ambition took him many places, playing with people of different races and backgrounds. By the time he was teacher to Rosetta LeNoire he would have been in his forties and already experienced recognition and success for his most significant work – the musical *Shuffle Along*.

The racially mixed collaborative that Blake grew and developed within was echoed many decades later in LeNoire’s choice of mission for Amas. For LeNoire, as for Blake, the importance was racial understanding through a focus on working creatively in a mixed



environment. Her productions were always cast multi-racially and her youth theatre's membership included children from all racial backgrounds.

In 1921 the collaboration between *Shuffle Along*'s four creators – Eubie Blake, his performance partner Noble Sissle, Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles – resulted in a show that legitimized black musicals at a time when no black shows were on Broadway. For the first time both black and white audiences were attracted to the same show. Allen Woll comments, “The score for *Shuffle Along* was one of the most highly praised of the 1920s. When James Weldon Johnson reviewed the musicals of the decade, he found it “difficult to remember a show with as many song hits” (*Black Musical Theatre from Coontown to Dreamgirls* 69). The show also brought stardom to its cast which included Florence Miller, Josephine Baker and Paul Robeson. Woll called the show, “a milestone in the development of the black musical, and it became the model by which all black musicals were judged until well into the 1930s” (75). Blake and Sissle wrote other shows though none were as successful as *Shuffle Along*. They returned to vaudeville as top performers, who never made the same money as the white stars, and eventually split apart.

Interviews with him did not include questions regarding discrimination or his views on humanity. His accomplishments and contribution to twentieth century music were the subjects that intrigued his biographers. However, in an exchange with Eileen Southern, Blake brought up what he thought might be delicate material:

See, my mother worked, washed white folks' clothes. Maybe you don't want me to say this, but she worked. You people are very sensitive.

*No, tell it like it was.* [italics are Southern's to point out her questions.]

You see, you shouldn't be ashamed. We didn't pick it out; it was forced upon us  
(54).

Showing empathy towards how Southern, a white woman, would feel hearing about Blake's mother toiling for whites, he puts himself in her place and acknowledges her possible embarrassment. It is this sort of tenderness that was shown to Rosetta LeNoire as a young girl in an attempt to help her see her world from a different perspective.

Kimball and Bolcom's extensive look at Sissle and Blake's lives – focusing on the story of *Shuffle Along*'s development and success, and the years after *Shuffle Along* – includes a chapter, "Conclusions and Questions," where the authors delve into the inequalities that existed in musical theater that caused so many black artists to fall into obscurity. They admit:

This is a touchy part of this book, for neither of the writers of this book is black. We cannot feel firsthand any part of the weight of prejudice a black person feels and we have intentionally underplayed to an extent the larger racial issues that surround this story (238).

It was as much the wish of their subjects that race relations did not play a significant part in the authors' study. Noble Sissle told them, "We've been banged around so much, and enough has been said about it, that we needn't print any more stories" (Sissle qtd. in Kimball and Bolcom 238). Kimball and Bolcom may have missed an opportunity to excavate the deeper racial history associated with Blake and Sissle, particularly in light of the scarcity of information on any of the artists from this time period. Nonetheless, the more subtle anecdotes Blake shared, i.e., herding young black men out of a theatre by the back door after a performance and depositing them in a sub-standard rooming house and

his comments to Southern about his mother, have their own way of informing readers of the difficult times he and Noble Sissle experienced.

Consistent with two elderly gentlemen's reticence to dig up the uglier side of their past in the 1970s, in the mid-1920s, as a much younger man, Eubie Blake was able to share a kinder vision of the world that appealed to and impressed the adolescent Rosetta Burton. With the many times she referred to Blake's "beautiful garden" he was evidently a strong and enduring influence on her life who guided her determination to create Amas as a model and means for creative collaboration to form a basis for healing the effects of prejudice. Amas's first fully mounted production was one that celebrated the music of Sissle and Blake. It was this show that was reconfigured with a different concept and became *Bubbling Brown Sugar*. LeNoire sought to honor her artistic heritage by showcasing the talented mentors who helped break ground for artists who came after them. Her celebration of Blake and Bill Robinson also embraced their capacity for work as a means of bridging racial tension and creating racial harmony. She founded Amas decades later with these principles as her mission.

### **Bill "Bojangles" Robinson: The Godfather**

Throughout her life Rosetta LeNoire referred to her relationships with Eubie Blake and Bill Robinson as important to her upbringing and as explanations for her point of view on race and her mission for her theatre. She was proud of having both men in her life and identified with the principles and work ethic they represented. Within Amas's first decades she not only celebrated Blake's work but also developed the musical *Bojangles* that centered on Robinson's life. Amas's printed material in the 1980s, i.e., programs and

newsletters, contained information about a long term funding drive in order to “move to a permanent home to be named as a living memorial to Mr. Blake and Mr. Robinson – the Amas Eubie Blake Bill Robinson Cultural Center” (*Conrack*. program. 1988. *Amas Musical Theatre Archive*. Production files. Box # 4 MG 463). Unfortunately this project never got underway but the effort serves as proof of LeNoire’s dedication to and reverence for the two artists both personally and as contributors to the larger cultural heritage that came out of Harlem. Both men were like family to LeNoire, but Robinson was her self-declared godfather and put her on the stage to work with him.

Robinson was a well-known celebrity for most of his career and today retains a strong presence for his contribution to the history of vernacular dance as it developed in the twentieth century. However, in Harlem, Robinson shared a personal relationship with the Burton family. Harold Burton and he were both members of the Elks and Robinson was a frequent visitor to the Burton home. LeNoire reported:

He asked my father, ‘What’s going to happen to Brown Sugar?’ [Robinson’s nickname for LeNoire] Papa said, ‘Well if she wants to go to college she can go. She’ll have to work to help out, but we’ll see her through. I would like her to become a nurse. And Uncle Bo said, ‘No, she’s going to come with me’ (LeNoire qtd. in Norflett 13).

The conversation took place in the late 1920s or early thirties. After that, LeNoire said, Robinson went to Hollywood to make films and she got married and had a son.

Robinson’s Hollywood career which most notably included three films with child actress Shirley Temple, began in the mid-1930s when he was in his fifties. Bill Robinson was five years older than Eubie Blake and had danced professionally since he was a young

adolescent. At the time the Burtons knew him he was well on the way to becoming one of the most successful black performers in the world.

In 1988 James Haskins and N.R. Mitgang completed their biography of Robinson, *Mr. Bojangles*. The book's "Introduction" is a letter from Rosetta LeNoire to the late Bill Robinson. The letter is as sentimental as it is revelatory and reflects the nostalgia of LeNoire, then seventy-seven years old, for her former friend and mentor. However, it is also testimony to the closeness she felt towards Robinson and the life lessons he taught her. She writes:

Your generosity to everyone, regardless of sex, race, creed, or color, will never be topped . . . You were in some ways looked down upon as an Uncle Tom by your own race. And yet you opened doors for so many of every race. For me, you will remain . . . an uncle, godfather, friend, and a model . . . You know, I can remember you constantly saying, "Believe in yourself. You can accomplish a great deal with whatever you've got if you believe in yourself (LeNoire qtd. in Haskins and Mitgang 11).

LeNoire adds, "P.S. Next time you see my piano teacher, Eubie Blake, say, "His daffodil sends love and kisses" (11). Including Blake in her tribute to Robinson illustrates the extent of both men's continued influence on LeNoire, though Robinson was a much more colorful and complicated individual.

Alain Locke mentions Robinson in "The Negro and the American Theatre," as one of several examples of new theatrical potential when he writes:

Give Bojangles Robinson or George Stamper, pantomime dancers of genius, a Bakst [artist and designer for the Ballet Russes] or an expressionist setting . . . a

dignified medium, and they would be more than a sensation, they would be artistic revelations (Locke qtd. in Gayle 265).

Robinson was still performing in what Locke considered to be the “tawdry trappings” he described as the domain of *Shuffle Along*. However, in 1927, when Locke’s essay was written, Bill Robinson was in preparation to appear in *Blackbirds of 1928*, one of a series of black musicals that spun from the success of *Shuffle Along* and Robinson’s first Broadway appearance after decades of success in vaudeville. The show may not have fulfilled Locke’s artistic expectations but it was one more step in a long career that proved Robinson was, in fact, “more than a sensation” (265). At fifty years old, Robinson was coming off the vaudeville stage to Broadway with his next stop in Hollywood. When LeNoire wrote of his advice, “You can accomplish a great deal with whatever you’ve got if you believe in yourself,” it spoke to a life that, like Eubie Blake’s, had resulted in success by never questioning the artistic gifts that gave Robinson his unwavering upward mobility in a racist America. However, unlike Blake, the early life of Bill Robinson was not stable.

Bill Robinson and his younger brother were orphaned at a young age and placed in the care of their grandmother, a former slave whose embitterment towards life caused her to turn away from her grandsons. Robinson grew up on the streets of Richmond, Virginia, shining shoes, stealing food from shops and occasionally picking up a few cents dancing with his first partner, Lemuel Eggleston (Haskins and Mitgang 33-8). At age twelve, Robinson ran away to Washington, D.C.

In 1892, at the age of fourteen, he appeared as a pickaninny in *The South Before the War*, a large spectacular production that attempted to emulate the lives and activities of blacks on a plantation. The term pickaninny was used theatrically for those black children

“who could sing, dance, tell jokes, and look cute up onstage” (Haskins and Mitgang 40).

Advertisement for *The South Before the War* read:

Hear whoops of terpsichorean ecstacs [sic], shrill whistles, catcalls, the rhythmic clapping of hands, and see the colored folk shuffle their enormous feet on sanded floors, do live jigs, sing, and do comical antics of niggerdom (qtd. in Haskins and Mitgang).

This comment is reflective of the open insults black performers had to endure and, if they wanted to work, openly ignore, at least to the white people who were in authority. In the racially charged world inhabited by the young Bill Robinson, accommodation often yielded work, a scarce commodity for any black person in the late nineteenth century.

Robinson’s youth preceded the years W.E.B. DuBois served as the philosophical and political spokesperson for black Americans. Booker T. Washington held that position in Robinson’s early years. Washington advocated that it was in the best of interests of blacks in America to “accommodate themselves to racial prejudice and concentrate on economic self-improvement” (Washington qtd. in *Digital History*). To Washington it was a more expedient path out of hardship to get along as best as possible while building skill sets and gaining education. As the years went on, Robinson found himself, as LeNoire mentions in her letter, accused of being an Uncle Tom – a term which translated accommodation into undignified kowtowing to the dominant white authority. However, the conditions for black performers in the early years of the twentieth century proved that survival depended on a combination of strategies.

For the first decade of Robinson’s career in vaudeville it was necessary that he join another performer and create a team act due to what was called the “two colored” rule,

“that blacks in vaudeville could only perform in pairs, never as singles” (Haskins and Mitgang 91). In his first and only partnership, Cooper and Robinson, Robinson was given the typical role of buffoon to Cooper’s straight man. His costume was the standard costume of a clown: a tutu over long pants and a derby. The act “featured comedy routines in which Cooper played the straight man and Robinson a combination of Tambo and Bones [two clowns from minstrelsy]” (59). A typical notice of the team read:

The men, who are honest to goodness Ethiopians . . . have that provoking flavor of real down South ‘darky’ about them . . . Both Cooper and Robinson are the genuine article and their chuckling guffaws, pigeon wing steps and cachinnating songs are a real vaudeville entertainment (qtd. in Haskins and Mitgang 87).

Though typically patronizing in its tone, such a review sealed the success of Cooper and Robinson. Eventually Robinson was promoted to a better position in the act and lost his clown costume, a welcome relief for Robinson who was an obsessively fastidious dresser and often borrowed money against his wages to keep himself in fine clothes and pay his gambling debts.

Haskins and Mitgang’s biography reveal Bill Robinson to be a man of personal contradictions. He was a tirelessly driven professional in every respect while still a compulsive gambler who died penniless. Additionally, Robinson was often without funds and in need of a loan due to his own good will. His generosity, mentioned by LeNoire in her letter, was well known. He was known for giving handouts to people in need, bailing people out of jail and donating to charitable causes, particularly in Harlem. While others struggled in the 1930s, Bill Robinson, whose fame was secure, gave of his time and money.



In contrast to the gentleman who generously contributed time and service to those who needed it, Robinson had an explosive temper and did not tolerate mistakes, disloyalty or infringement of the strict professionalism he demanded. He also erupted at the slightest hint of discrimination, particularly if it was directed towards others. He successfully played the game in a business that marginalized black performers and had high expectations of anyone he was close to professionally and personally.

Robinson navigated the country carrying his pearl handled revolver everywhere he went. He made friends with every policeman in every town he played and donated money to their retirement fund. Therefore, if backup in a difficult situation was necessary or a fast departure was required he had assistance. His biographers comment, “Anyone who knew Bill Robinson soon realized that he, like others, was only starting to ask for more than the white world thought he, or any other black, deserved – recognition and equality for his race” (133). After many decades in vaudeville, appearing on Broadway in *Blackbirds of 1928* and sustaining a successful film career, another of Robinson’s greatest successes occurred when he was sixty-one years old – Mike Todd’s *Hot Mikado*.

In her open letter to Robinson, LeNoire recalls:

There has never been before, or since, as glamorous and exciting an opening night as the night *The Hot Mikado* premiered at the Broadhurst Theater, starring the Mayor of Harlem, the Mikado himself, tap dancer extraordinaire, Mr. Bill “Bojangles” Robinson with your cast of 125 black Japanese – all from Harlem (LeNoire qtd. in Haskins and Mitgang 10).

LeNoire’s memory reflects the heightened reaction of a young woman’s first opening night on Broadway, however she also makes a point to mention the “125 black Japanese,” who

made up the cast of this adaptation of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. The production's cross cultural nature was reflected in Amas picking up this practice in the latter decades of the twentieth century to make it part of its signature mission:

Amas is a unique multi-racial performing arts organization, dedicated to bringing people of all races, creeds, colors, religions and backgrounds together through the creative arts (*Amas Mission Statement* qtd. in Norflett "Rosetta LeNoire: The Lady and her Theatre" 70).

*The Hot Mikado* was one of two important revivals of Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta to open almost simultaneously in New York. The first, *Swing Mikado*, was a product of the Chicago Federal Theatre Project and so successful it was able to move to Broadway. Mike Todd launched his version, with Bill Robinson as his trophy performer. Todd used the casting of Robinson as leverage in his campaign to raise the capital necessary to mount the show. With the shows both facing the same critics, it was *The Hot Mikado* that came out on top with Robinson receiving raves. Todd could afford to hire the best performers in town. In contrast, *Swing Mikado* had to comply with FTP rules and hire any unemployed actors, many of whom were inexperienced. As Allen Woll writes, "*Hot Mikado* had a Broadway sheen that the FTP show could not hope to duplicate" (*Black Musical Theatre from Coontown to Dreamgirls* 182).

One of Robinson's requests of Mike Todd was the casting of Rosetta LeNoire as Peep-Bo, one of the Three Little Maids. LeNoire was introduced to Bill Robinson's strict work ethic while she appeared in his show. Robinson was exacting when it came to cleanliness and insisted everyone keep their dressing rooms immaculate and in perfect shape before they went onstage. Robinson was also unforgiving when it came to rehearsals

and commitment to perfection. Often he was working at two or more different shows at the same time. While performing in *The Hot Mikado* he was also keeping a tight schedule performing at the new downtown Cotton Club. He demanded the same discipline and stamina from anyone who worked with him.

Robinson's capacity for hard work, discipline and high standards in everything he did is reflected in the influence he had on Rosetta LeNoire. LeNoire worked steadily as an actress up to only a few years before she passed away and for the last third of her life poured her wages into her theatre company to help keep it operating. Working with Bill Robinson also gave her the experience and training to found Amas as a company that developed musical theatre.

Though extremely different men, Eubie Blake and Bill Robinson shared the experience of persistence followed by success through the stifling racism of late nineteenth and early twentieth century show business. Their success is shown not only in notoriety and material gain but also in the dignity they projected. Both men were at their best when they worked with their own self-generated creative material. In 1921 *Shuffle Along* was a landmark production that put black musicals back on Broadway after almost a decade of absence. Cary D. Wintz writes in *Harlem Renaissance Lives* that, "Both the poet and diplomat Langston Hughes and the influential poet James Weldon Johnson saw the incredibly popular *Shuffle Along* as a sign of the emerging Harlem Renaissance" (vii). Robinson came into his own and conquered the restrictions of vaudeville only after he left his "two colored" act and struck out as a solo performer using his own material. In comparison to this degree of autonomy, when Robinson went to Hollywood and made the best known of his films, those with Shirley Temple, he was forced back into what other

black film stars endured – playing butlers, farm hands and doormen – in other words, the stereotypes LeNoire became familiar with in her own career and vowed to eliminate once she was in charge of her company. From Blake she gained musical training and an overarching metaphor under which to found Amas. From Robinson she gained training in performance and the process of creating musical theatre. From both men she gained a heritage of hard work and developing one's talents as leading not only to success but also to leadership in one's chosen pursuit.

The third man to influence Rosetta LeNoire was her father, Harold Burton. While Blake and Robinson were training LeNoire's artistic gifts, her father was training her life perspective by his example as a humanitarian and, in particular, his advocacy of the philosophy of Wendell Willkie as expressed in Willkie's book *One World*.

### **Harold Burton and Wendell Willkie's One World Philosophy**

Before examining LeNoire's experience with the Federal Theatre Project, it is important to weave the influences of Eubie Blake and Bill Robinson with the enduring influence of Harold C. Burton, LeNoire's father, who brought his philosophy into the home and ran his family by it. In many references LeNoire states proudly that he was a humanitarian and a staunch Republican. She explained:

Back then Republicans got black support by using Lincoln and saying he freed the slaves and he was a Republican. Now the Republicans have reverted . . . Back in my time the Republican Party was the party that Blacks supported (LeNoire qtd. in Norflett 6).

Because of his Republican affiliation, the philosophy of Wendell Willkie, another Republican with humanitarian views, was embraced by Burton. Willkie published his philosophy in the popular book, *One World* and it was this work that further influenced Burton's point of view and was therefore important to Rosetta LeNoire.

In a 1986 interview for the *New York Times* LeNoire spoke of her founding of Amas as a company that not only practices nontraditional casting but also one that develops original musicals. She stated:

It was the end of the civil-rights movement, and I felt a great deal of polarization in the air. Neither *Bojangles* nor *Eubie Blake* had thought in terms of color, and my father had believed in Wendell Willkie's "One World" doctrine. But I knew from my experience on the stage that you can bring people of all races, color and creeds together through theatrical techniques, particularly if you have music. That's why Amas is devoted to musicals. People said I was a fool to insist on producing only mixed companies, but this April we will have been in existence for 17 years. All that time we've been marinating in love ("Black Musicals Have Cause to Sing" *New York Times*. C19).

Again, LeNoire invokes Blake and Robinson, as well as her father, as people she holds in high regard when it came to how she structured her company. In 1972, the first year Amas announced a full season, an article for the *New York Post* called the company "Amas Repertory Theater of One World" ("Amas Opens 1<sup>st</sup> Season of 'Integrated Theater'" *New York Post*. n.pag.). Apparently LeNoire was so committed to her father's philosophy that, early in the company's history, she added "One World" to its name. Though practically forgotten today, Wendell Willkie was well known for his attempt to run against Franklin D.

Roosevelt in the presidential election of 1940. He became the first candidate to ever campaign for civil rights and supported an equal rights amendment for women. He was unabashed in his liberal views turning down the support of those he believed were racist – a move that, being a Republican, did not help his campaign. He stated, “I don’t have to be president of the United States, but I do have to live with myself” (Willkie qtd. in Ehrlich 29). When he lost the election Willkie still served Roosevelt’s administration. In 1942, Willkie was sent on a world trip to talk with leaders and visit the war front. This trip, on behalf of FDR, inspired *One World*, the book that intrigued Harold Burton.

In the book’s 13th chapter, entitled “Our Imperialisms at Home,” Willkie calls the United States to task for professing scorn towards the aggressive imperialism of foreign countries:

Our very proclamations of what we are fighting for have rendered our own inequities self-evident. When we talk of freedom and opportunity for all nations, the mocking paradoxes in our own society become so clear they can no longer be ignored. If we want to talk about freedom, we must mean freedom for others as well as ourselves, and we must mean freedom for everyone inside our frontiers as well as outside (Willkie 191).

Willkie boldly challenged American society and its politicians when he wrote:

The attitude of the white citizens of this country toward the Negroes has undeniably had some of the unlovely characteristics of an alien imperialism – a smug racial superiority, a willingness to exploit an unprotected people” (190).

Though this was not a popular Republican platform, even in the mid-nineteen forties, it was what Rosetta LeNoire referred to when she reflected on earlier forms of Republicanism as

it applied to Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation. Harold Burton's Republican Party was the party of Lincoln and of sweeping social change as it applied to ending slavery. By the time Willkie wrote his book, that vision had changed.

With the popularity of Willkie's book it is no wonder that Harold Burton took it as a hopeful statement that better times would soon be on the way for blacks. Willkie's vision seemed to form a bridge between the inspiration of the Harlem Renaissance and the downturn of the post-Depression as the United States engaged in World War. In an interesting parallel to Eubie Blake's "beautiful garden" vision, Willkie wrote:

Our way of living together in America is a strong but delicate fabric. It is made up of many threads. It has been woven over many centuries by the patience and sacrifice of countless liberty-loving men and women. It serves as a cloak for the protection of poor and rich, of black and white, of Jew and gentile, of foreign- and native-born (195).

Willkie's delicate fabric, like Blake's garden, included not only blacks and whites but also those of varying classes, religions and nationalities. Willkie's philosophy gave credibility to Blake's beautiful garden metaphor, so taken to heart by LeNoire, and further supported the idea that difference was something to celebrate.

In his 1995 book *Postethnic America*, David A. Hollinger critiques Willkie's thinking as the essence of universalism where, "The justification for a global perspective turned out to be that all people were, after all, pretty much alike, a view widely discredited today" (52). Hollinger claims, "This extraordinary best-seller of 1943 left the impression that Ukrainian farmers near Kiev deserved our sympathy and respect because they were just like farmers near Kokomo, Indiana" (52). To clarify, as a war trip, Willkie visited sites

around the world either directly near the war front or in other areas of mobilization, such as Russia's enormous factories and collective farms. His findings were reported directly to President Roosevelt and many of his assessments were kept secret. In reading *One World* I was hard pressed to find any reference to Hollinger's farmers in the Ukraine, though Willkie does talk about visiting a collective farm on the Volga River near Kuibishev. He lunched with the farm manager and his family and does draw a connection between his own experience eating in farmhouses in Indiana and the way, both there and in Russia, he was encouraged to eat more and not go away hungry. That reference is of the type Willkie makes sporadically throughout the book but never does he state or infer that anyone in any other culture is, as Hollinger puts it, "pretty much alike." In fact, Willkie is adamant that all the countries and cultures he visited were different except for their vehemence when it came to ridding themselves of any foreign occupation.

*One World* had plenty of critics, but at a price of \$1.00 per copy, the book was so popular that, according to John M. Jordan, it:

struck several divergent popular chords. Did readers favor Willkie as a 1944 presidential candidate? Were they intrigued by his tales of faraway countries? Did they entertain hopes for a peaceful postwar order based on a successor to the League of Nations? Or was Willkie's self-confidently unconventional persona appealing in its own right?" ("A Small World of Little Americans" 174).

Nowhere in Jordan's list is there a question about Chapter 13 and Willkie's view on racism – a view that would likely have captured Harold C. Burton and, therefore, his daughter, and others in Harlem who were anxious to see change in America's policy towards race.



Whether symbolized as fabric of many different threads or a garden of many different flowers, both Willkie and Blake espoused metaphors that seemed to take a multicultural approach to racial, and human, understanding and awareness. In his article, “Remembering Wendell Willkie’s One World,” Philip Beidler also finds the early influence of multiculturalism in Willkie’s book. Beidler includes the following:

“. . . within the tolerance of a democracy, minorities are the constant spring of new ideas, stimulating new thought and action, the constant source of new vigor. The human mind requires contrary expressions against which to test itself” (Willkie qtd. in Beidler n.pag.).

In this passage, as in others, Beidler claims that the term “multiculturalism” seems to be a better fit for Willkie’s philosophy, “Whatever the term,” he points out, “the new principle of unity here embodied is the active cultivation of difference . . . Willkie remains a remarkably prescient early exponent” (n.pag.). We will never know how Willkie would have reacted to or possibly been involved in the changes that took place in the decades that followed his death. Perhaps his enthusiastic voice would have smoothed the road for the world he advocated. However, at the same time of its popularity *One World* served as inspiration to Harold Burton and, whether from a multicultural or a universal perspective, also inspired and influenced his daughter to create her theatre.

LeNoire’s philosophy, as a combination reflective of Blake’s garden and Willkie’s fabric, was to bring people from different backgrounds together to share the act of creating musical theatre. Angela Pao states the political results of multicultural casting:

The premises and goals of multicultural casting are the same as those of a national diversity project. In a specifically theatrical context, this means not just superficially using the visible racial characteristics of actors, often in ways that

inadvertently promote stereotypes or essentializing models of difference, but having artists of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds actively and assertively contribute to the creative process” (*No Safe Spaces* 6).

Coming from an interracial heritage, LeNoire grew up with people from different backgrounds. Harold Burton was a black West Indian and LeNoire’s mother was white. Burton’s second wife was also white and of German descent. In a letter written to the *Black Theatre Alliance* in 1980, LeNoire wrote:

I come from a mixed background. I had a German Jewish stepmother who raised me, a daughter who is Japanese and two wonderful grandchildren, one who is Korean and Black and another who is French, English and Black (*Black Theatre Alliance Newsletter* qtd. in Norflett 432).

LeNoire was responding to the ever diminishing public funding available to black theatres and in the course of her letter expresses once again her belief in art, particularly theatre, as a tool for combating discrimination:

I am certain that they [policy makers] are not honestly empathizing with and evaluating the inequities of the past in which the history of Third World people has been generally ignored. I am especially concerned about the Third World (multiracial) history being told through theatrical techniques which have a universal way of educating people (432).

Her words reflect Willkie’s cultivation of difference in society as a resource for new ideas, “stimulating new thought and action, the constant source of new vigor,” by pointing out that by safeguarding the histories of individual cultures through theatre, education, leading to understanding, will take place.

The idea that art can be used positively as a political tool to bring about change reflects on LeNoire's years growing up during the Harlem Renaissance where it was believed that black Americans could change their circumstances in the white dominant society through their art and music. The Depression interrupted the momentum of the Harlem Renaissance. Willkie's philosophy, to end oppressions at home and embrace difference, picked up the torch and offered reasons why the eradication of racism was in the best interest of sustaining a strong America. Unfortunately, Willkie died before his philosophy saw some degree of resolution in the civil rights movement of the 1950s.

Between her childhood and adolescence in Harlem and her later experience in the *Hot Mikado*, LeNoire was a member of the Harlem Unit of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). Whereas her time with Bill Robinson shaped her as a musical theatre performer, the experience with the FTP exposed her to a multitude of people all hoping for work and being trained in how to operate the Harlem Unit as a company that, at least in the beginning, was believed to be the start of a national black theatre.

### **Federal Theatre Project**

The Harlem Unit of the Federal Theatre Project was run by Rose McClendon, an actress and teacher, who was appointed by the Federal Theatre Project's Hallie Flanagan. When Flanagan asked McClendon whether a black or a white person should run the Unit, McClendon intimated that it would be better to have more experienced direction, in other words, from a white theatre professional. Though there was resentment from the already active Harlem theatre community, John Houseman became McClendon's associate and moved on to direct the program after McClendon's premature death from cancer.

Houseman put both whites and blacks in various positions within the Unit with the idea that eventually black participants would take over the operations completely.

Mikell Pinkney places the Federal Theatre Project in the Assimilationist Era of African American theatre theory. The era carries through the years of World War II and into the 1950s. Pinkney states that the era is considered assimilationist:

Because it was dominated by Negro Artist's attempts to gain respect through traditional Eurocentric means . . . Many black performers appeared in musical entertainments, mostly devised and suited for the tastes of white audiences (19).

The entire FTP was generated by the white dominated government and in the case of the Negro Units they were placed in the hands of white theatre professionals. It was those white theatre makers who set the tone and standard of the Units. And often the Units were as appealing to affluent white audiences as they were to audiences from their own communities.

As LeNoire stated in Bonnie Nelson Schwartz's *Voices from the Federal Theatre*, "The Federal Theatre gave you, me, and everybody else an opportunity for a larger education on many levels. It enlightened you to the background of every nationality. There is something wonderful about it. It made me open my mind" (LeNoire qtd. in Schwartz 25).

In Linda Norflett's dissertation, LeNoire talked of Welles and Houseman's commitment:

I remember them working to introduce all of us to legitimate theatre: how to organize, how to produce, how to be technicians. They were teaching while producing . . . They were opening up a whole new vista of new things for us in the theatre. They realized and appreciated it and they went out of their way to give us time that they really didn't have (45).

LeNoire and others were learning how to operate theatre companies from their experience with the FTP. Houseman was educating his actors and technicians because he knew he would not remain with the project. His reputation, and that of Orson Welles, would ascend from the popularity of the Harlem Unit's production of *Macbeth*.

Rosetta LeNoire joined the Harlem Unit and was cast as a witch in the John Houseman/Orson Welles production of *Macbeth* in 1936. Welles set the production in Haiti and made the witches voodoo priestesses. In his adaptation the supernatural presence became the force of evil such that the production became known as the "Voodoo MacBeth." In his adaptation Welles cut great portions of Shakespeare's play to accommodate his concept. In her 1985 article, "Shakespeare, Orson Welles, and the "Voodoo" Macbeth," Susan McCloskey wrote:

Clearly, Welles calculated Scotland's loss against what he gained by transporting the play to Haiti. His largest gain was the chance to turn *Macbeth* into a theatrical tour de force. He filled the great vacancy where Scotland had been by making costumes, stage sets, sound effects, and lighting do the work of Shakespeare's world-making words. And he made no apology for the substitution. Everything about his production was big, startling, almost impossibly lavish, and loud" (409).

The production gained so much attention and anticipation that its opening was treated like a Hollywood premiere with floodlights and a brass band playing.

Though bringing white patrons uptown to Harlem was not the goal of the FTP, Welles and Houseman, "had no intention of forgetting about downtown audiences: indeed, they geared and produced with an eye to downtown audiences" (*Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre* 153). Houseman knew the Harlem Unit needed a signature production that

would gain notoriety and therefore bring positive attention to the project. The *Voodoo Macbeth*, with the abundance of attention it drew, was just such a project.

Despite its popularity, the changes in Shakespeare's work, as well as the use of actors and non-actors untrained in Shakespearean text offended many critics. As Lofton Mitchell wrote, with reference to *MacBeth*'s critical response, "One esthetic critic wanted to elaborate on the rendering of the verse, but Harlem couldn't have cared less. It had exciting theatre and they took full advantage of it – 59,271 patrons saw it" (*Black Drama* 102).

Aware of the impact from *MacBeth*'s popularity, Welles, only twenty-years-old, would see his career swiftly take off after his spectacular work with the FTP. Houseman also made plans to cultivate his career elsewhere and, after suitable training had been achieved, appointed Harry Edward, Gus Smith and Carlton Moss to direct the Harlem Unit. In 1939, with the House Un-American Activities Committee's scare of Communist infiltration in the FTP, Congress denied its further funding. Despite the employment, education and training of thousands during its four years in operation, the Federal Theatre Project closed. Lofton Mitchell wrote:

By killing the Federal Theatre, powerful American Forces took the drama away from the masses and lodged it firmly in the bosom of the aristocratic and middle-class groups . . . That all of this was taken away from the people is one of the great tragedies of the American theatre (*Black Drama* 103).

Mitchell's comment also speaks to the ongoing struggle to establish professional black theatre in the United States, a struggle that might have been curtailed if the FTP had continued.

At a time when Broadway productions remained segregated, the Federal Theatre Project was founded with the idea of integrating all theatrical practices, while still encouraging black playwrights and supporting black dramatic theatre. Donald Bogle writes of the project:

The creative process, which in the 1920s had slowly been removed from black control, now brought whites and blacks together in all aspects of theatrical planning . . . The advances were apparent onstage as well, for black performers were no longer limited to roles as menials or to roles specifically designed for black characters. Interracial casting became commonplace as the FTP program flowered . . . (*Black Musical Theatre* 212).

Bogle's comment is also reflective of what LeNoire may have learned and taken with her from the FTP that would eventually lead her to create the mission for her company.

Hallie Flanagan's insistence that the Federal Theatre as a whole be free of discrimination was strictly enforced. As far as the Negro Units were concerned, though initially trained by white professionals, black leaders were always included in planning and administration of policy. Not only were administrative and artistic practices fully multiracial but audiences were as well, with no black spectators being relegated to the balconies or other less advantageous parts of the theatre. The Harlem Unit included a youth theatre and a playwrights' laboratory, one of the very few opportunities for black playwrights to develop. All of this nurturing and educational innovation created an environment where black theatre artists, LeNoire included, believed that they at last had a chance to fully participate in American culture. However, it was only a matter of time before the Dies Committee, which investigated any suspicion of communist infiltration,

cited the FTP for its openly democratic practices and ended the project after only four years. The impact and disappointment for the Negro Units was significant. As critic Fannin S. Belcher points out:

It must be recognized, however, that there was a difference in attitude between the white and the Negro groups. The former, to a large extent, viewed the Federal Theatre Project merely as a temporary job to tide them over the lull in stage activities; the latter were securing their first opportunity to have steady employment in their profession, to produce the plays they wanted . . . and were hoping to do so well that the group might be self-supporting if and when Federal Theatre was dissolved. The Negro units also thought of the project as a training school (Belcher qtd. in “The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre” 49-50).

The Harlem Unit was not only a means of employment for its participants but also a training ground and experiment in multicultural collaboration. LeNoire had a significant model going forward to use as a prototype for the founding of Amas.

Because of the FTP’s dedication to training the members of the Harlem Unit, Rosetta LeNoire gained theatre experience that she took with her when she joined her godfather, Bill Robinson, in *The Hot Mikado*. It was her experience in both of these significant theatre events that she also applied to her participation with the American Negro Theatre in the 1940s – a company that James V. Hatch stated, “became the most important, self-contained black theatre troupe between the demise of the African Company in 1823 and the birth of the Negro Ensemble Company in 1967 (*History of African American Theatre* 350).



## American Negro Theatre

The American Negro Theatre (ANT) sought to draw on the principles of the Federal Theatre Project and bridge the loss of the FTP through the creation of a people's theatre that would become a national theatre. LeNoire pointed out that ANT, "trained over two hundred people, attracted fifty thousand patrons to witness 325 performances . . . we raised enough to finance these productions" (LeNoire qtd. in Norflett 90). Linda Norflett further comments, "In its time, with the advantage of being in New York, the theatre capital of the country, no other black theatre in the country could compare with it" (*The Theatre Career of Rosetta LeNoire* 90). Certainly the first few years of ANT's operations seemed to be moving in the right direction. To boost subscriptions, "by the second year, after a vigorous campaign with Harlem organizations to buy tickets, two-thirds of their audience were local. By the third year 90 percent came from Harlem," and their successful production of *Anna Lucasta* drew an audience of five thousand (James Hatch. *History of African American Theatre* 351).

Unfortunately, it was the success of *Anna Lucasta*, in which LeNoire was cast, that was the beginning of ANT's demise. After the show was a success on Broadway, ANT continued to only look for shows that would make the move downtown while neglecting its higher goal of serving the people and the Harlem community. Money was lost on the show's transition to Broadway through bad deals with producers, including the mysterious loss of an important Dramatists Guild contract. Quality of production dropped in later years, funds were mismanaged despite various grants the organization had been awarded, and there was discord within the group. Abram Hill, who had initiated ANT's startup, commented on ANT's dependence on outside funding, "As long as we have inequities in

our society, we, as an ethnic group, will have to rely more and more upon ourselves and not anybody else” (Hill qtd. in Hatch 356). The company closed in 1951 after having achieved an unprecedented success and trained future theatre professionals such as Ossie Davis (who later would write the book for the Amas musical *Bingo!*), Ruby Dee (who currently serves on Amas’s Advisory Board), Sydney Poitier, Alice Childress and Harry Belafonte.

Nevertheless, LeNoire was part of an important moment in black theatre history putting into practice the experience she gained from the FTP. Throughout the 1950s LeNoire worked constantly in theatre and a few films, including the film of *Anna Lucasta*. She was a member of the Actors Equity Committee on Integration and helped publish a book of hotels and other accommodations across the country that would serve black performers while they were on tour. She also served on the board of the Negro Actors Guild, a welfare organization for black actors started by Bill Robinson and Noble Sissle.

In the 1950s, as the civil rights movement was gaining momentum, LeNoire and FTP colleagues Fred O’Neal and Dick Campbell created the Coordinating Council for Negro Performers. At the time, black actors would rarely if ever be cast on television and virtually never in television commercials. As the NAACP lobbied against and succeeded in ridding television of black stereotypes even those less than desirable jobs vanished and the need for employment grew. Commercials were an opportunity the Council felt needed to be exploited. The Council ran a survey and published results that showed “Negroes spend 15 billion dollars a year on commodities such as soap, food, drugs, beverages and automobiles,” yet, “Negro performers received only one half of one percent of the total of television performer employment, one out of every two hundred jobs” (qtd. in Norflett

304). The Council then pushed for a boycott of television in February 1955 that proved their point:

The American Association of Advertising Agencies called us in and said enough is enough . . . so we went through with it and sure enough a drop of viewers took place on that night that showed itself in the TV polls. And that was a breakthrough for black performers on tv . . . A lot of people don't know it, but we were the ones that did that. For doing it we were blacklisted (Campbell qtd. in Norflett 306).

Real change would not happen in television employment until the 1960s. At the time the Council members were blacklisted, LeNoire requested the FBI run an investigation to clear her name. With her wealth of performance and organizational experience, as well as her eagerness to become involved in the fight for integration of theatre and other performance media, it seemed she had everything she needed to form her theatre company but Amas was more than ten years away. In the late sixties the end of the civil rights era exploded in a push towards black nationalism that LeNoire reacted to by founding Amas.

Integrationist policies had embraced the new universalist paradigm that had sprung up after World War II. Finding its way into the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s policy, it stated, "Scientists have reached general agreement that mankind is one; that all men belong to the same species . . ." (qtd. in "The *Brown* decades" 337). From this perspective it was conceived that all human beings are alike and that particularism when it came to, "modes of identity, involving religion, ethnicity and race," had no, "deep ontological or moral status" (338). As it applied to universalism, colorblindness was a virtue.

LeNoire's comments through the years often refer to universalism. In one of my interviews with Donna Trinkoff she mentioned that LeNoire "was a great believer in the universality of man" (Interview 07/20/2012). Universalism did not precisely align with either Wendell Willkie's ideology or the beautiful garden of Eubie Blake. In both Willkie and Blake people and cultures retained their individuality. Universalism, particularly as espoused by post-war integrationist politics, claimed that skin color did not matter because we were all the same under the surface. With this interpretation, that came many years after Blake's and Willkie's, LeNoire's own colorblind philosophy could have been shaped by conflicting social and political policies that shifted and reconfigured throughout her life.

Universalism was a force in the decision of Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, for though human beings are all one, it was recognized that certain groups could be assessed as inferior due to "Disabling cultural and psychological effects among minority cultures," therefore, as Chief Justice Warren declared, when it came to segregated black schoolchildren:

To separate them from others of similar age and qualification solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone (Warren qtd. in "The Brown Decades" 339).

Warren was explaining that unless schools were integrated, and all children blended together, there would be a negative effect on the "hearts and minds" of black children.

Rosetta LeNoire embraced integrationist policies and became active in integrationist causes. She brought this philosophy forward when she founded Amas and it

was at this point, despite being black and despite her involvement with black theatre organizations all her life, she declared her theatre was not black. In 1973 she clarified:

I'm not against black theater, but I'm for everything in the U.S. Constitution. Amas is interracial from top to bottom: the administration, the faculty, the classes. We have Orientals, Puerto Ricans, blacks, whites of all ages and religions, and from the five boroughs. Anything that's creative in learning automatically wipes out prejudice (*New York Post Magazine* 35).

With such a statement she put Amas in the position of an institution that had been constitutionally ordered to integrate. If she had looked at the larger perspective she might have understood that establishing a black theatre in a white dominated theatre world was also a method of integrating the larger world of the theatrical mainstream. As time went on, decisions she made would take the concept of integrated theatre to an extreme.

### **Black Arts/Black Nationalism and the Founding of Amas**

Having grown up in Harlem, Rosetta LeNoire was connected to the neighborhood most of her life. She lived through the Harlem Renaissance, was a member of the Harlem Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre Project, was a founding member of the American Negro Theatre, a Harlem based company, and would eventually found her own theatre, Amas, which had its home for many years in East Harlem. In the nineteen sixties, before LeNoire founded Amas, Harlem was the focal point of what Henry Louis Gates called a third renaissance – the black arts movement.

In “Harlem on Our Minds,” Gates points out that there were not one, but four cultural movements in black American history that could be called a renaissance. The first

took place during the last decade of the nineteenth century when “the unprecedented literary productions by black women – who published a dozen novels and edited their own literary journal between 1890 and 1900” (2). This time period was called the New Negro Literary Movement and continued to develop through the first part of the twentieth century to the second cultural explosion known as the Harlem Renaissance. The fourth renaissance began, according to Gates, in the 1990s with writer Toni Morrison’s 1993 win of the Nobel Prize in literature. However, according to Gates, the black arts movement, from 1965 until the early 1970s, comprised a third renaissance. He states:

Defining themselves against the Harlem Renaissance and deeply rooted in black cultural nationalism, the Black Arts writers saw themselves as the artistic wing of the Black Power movement. Writers such as Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Sonia Sanchez saw black art as fulfilling a function, primarily the political liberation of black people from white racism (4).

The writings of Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal were important in defining the black arts aesthetic as one that was characterized by black power militancy and racial solidarity. In his 1965 essay “The Revolutionary Theatre,” which served as a Black Arts Theatre manifesto, Baraka, then Leroi Jones, writes:

The Revolutionary Theatre must EXPOSE! Show up the insides of these humans, look into black skulls. White men will cower before this theatre because it hates them. Because they have been trained to hate. The Revolutionary Theatre must hate them for hating. For presuming with their technology to deny the supremacy of the Spirit. They will all die for this (1).

Mikell Pinkney places black arts and black nationalism in the Black Revolutionary Era and draws parallels between it and the New Negro Renaissance Era. When he writes of Baraka's Revolutionary Theatre he suggests:

It was his prospective theory on the nature of black theater as a revolutionary tool and weapon for positive propaganda and consciousness raising that recapitulated and reinforced the New Negro Renaissance ideology of DuBois in a radically political manner (19).

The philosophy that art could support politics was coming full circle and being amped up with new work coming from the black arts movement.

The mid-sixties was a time of increasing unrest stemming from the civil rights movement's intersection with new left radicalism and black nationalism. Culminating with riots in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in August 1965, the self determination of the black nationalist movement, heightened by the leadership of Malcolm X, drew strength in its distinction of a separate African based cultural heritage. In his 1968 essay, "The Black Arts Movement," Larry Neal wrote:

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America (29).

Speaking to the "needs and aspirations of Black America" with a function to liberate aligns the black Arts movement with the same objective as the Harlem Renaissance, which was to motivate political change through art. Jones's founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School (BARTS) in 1965 served as a symbolic centering of the black arts movement in

Harlem, though the movement was national. BARTS shared similar goals as Amas – to use theatre as a means to change. However, LeNoire positioned Amas in opposition to the separatism she perceived black nationalism advocated.

Rosetta LeNoire was in her fifties during the 1960s, making her at least twenty years older than most of the participants in black arts theatre in New York. Coming of age in the nineteen-twenties and actively taking part in organizations that fought for equality in the performing arts, her priority was not separatism as much as it was integration, towards the ultimate the goal of equal employment. She had personally been discriminated against, blocked from auditions and seldom cast in any role other than a servant. By the sixties she had two decades of experience in the same activism that fueled the civil rights movement – that of equality and integration. Many times through the years LeNoire recalled the moment which sent her into the planning stages of Amas. In a 1977 interview she told a story she would tell many times when asked what led her to found Amas:

One day, I was waiting for a young friend of mine, who had gone into a Harlem church to be interviewed for a job with a cultural group there, and I overheard a teacher saying to a group of little children, “Who do we love?” And their answer was, “We love black!” and she said, “Who do we hate?” And they said, “We hate whitey!” And I thought, my God! We worry about alcohol, we worry about dope, but this is worse, because this is poisoning their minds, and they’re so young and they’re not at an age when they can make decisions for themselves (LeNoire qtd. in *Amas Musical Theatre – Profile 4*).

LeNoire told her husband, who suggested she use what she knew best to do something about the problem. She began writing letters to everyone she could, including the New



York State Council on the Arts, with whom she also made an appointment. When she told them what she wanted, they said:

“Well, why don’t you want to have an all-black theater?” and I said, “Well my world is not all-black. My world is as God created it, all colors . . . it’s a glorious bouquet.” And they said, “You’re going to have a very hard time, because right now people are giving money to mostly black cultural organizations.” I said, “I’ll take my chances, because I believe this from my very gut” (4).

In a month LeNoire received a letter stating the Council would give her \$25,000, and that was the starting point of Amas.

The momentum of the black arts movement must have seemed like a contradiction to the atmosphere in which LeNoire grew up in the 1920s, though on examination it was similar. After struggling through the years since the Civil War the black population was seeking equality as citizens. The struggle was continued from the years of the Harlem Renaissance into the democratic policies of the FTP onward to the civil rights movement and Brown vs Board of Education, all perceived as positive gains in the fight for equality. In his article, “The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theatre,” educator Ronald Ross states:

Unquestionably such dispersed exposure [vis a vis the Negro Units] was important not only to its black participants but also to the black population in general because it previously had not been allowed to surface in the national culture (41).

Ross continues by quoting New Deal historian William Leuchtenburg, “What is much more to the point is the shocking degrees to which Negroes in the past were not permitted to be a visible part of the national culture. The New Deal began the process of change (Leuchtenburg qtd. in Ross 42). Though Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois might have

argued that the Harlem Renaissance was also an agent of change, it remains clear that equality and inclusion were goals of each of the movements that finally resulted in institutionalized integration. The black nationalist and, therefore, black arts movements would have been perceived, by others like LeNoire, as pushing against the decades of work that had already been achieved. Integration had hardly been given a chance to work by the nineteen sixties and having a strong force, i.e., black nationalism and black arts, striving to possibly re-separate the races must have seemed to LeNoire to be an affront to the years of activism she and her mentors had brought to bear against the forces that already separated blacks from their rightful place in American culture.

The first years of Amas went slowly with any offerings being staged in LeNoire's basement. Small productions toured the New York boroughs and played in parks and recreation centers. The first full season did not take place until January 1973 and was mixed with original works, adaptations and established plays. *An Evening with Bourgeoise* was a collection of one act plays which was followed by *Othello*, directed by Earl Hyman and *The Three Sisters*, directed by Brock Peters. According to a December 1972 article in the New York Post, Milton Adams wrote, "The concept of the theater [Amas] has been to use the creative arts as a communicative vehicle for bridging the polarization of racial groups in the city" (n.pag.).

As early as 1973 plans were being made for the production that would eventually be *Bubbling Brown Sugar*. The show was seen by entertainment lawyer J. Lloyd Grant who was joined by Richard Bell and Ashton Springer to act as producers of the show. *Bubbling Brown Sugar's* journey to Broadway in 1976 is one that, like *Shuffle Along* in 1921 and *The Hot Mikado* almost two decades later, started a boom of black musical production on

Broadway in the 1970s. Like the other two groundbreaking shows the trend came to its eventual end, but while it continued the work of past artists was re-introduced to a new generation who had never been exposed to music from the earlier part of the twentieth century. Additionally, *Bubbling Brown Sugar* should have put Amas firmly on the track of future success. Unfortunately the story of the production, to be discussed in Chapter III, was one of mismanagement, miscommunication and misplaced trust.

Amas's residency at 1 East 104<sup>th</sup> Street was on the periphery of Harlem, away from the swiftly growing urban decay taking place once the black arts movement subsided. With the demise of BARTS, seen as a symbol of the movement's exit from Harlem, the neighborhood lost the movement's power to maintain the myth of Harlem while the movement, likewise, lost Harlem's historic presence to give it national importance. As James Smethurst writes:

In short, the symbolic importance of Harlem had been vital in imparting a certain sort of national status to the Black Arts movement, inspiring, influencing, and giving a sense of national connection to a number of proto-Black Arts groupings individuals, and institutions . . . the romance of Harlem as race capital was less important or even inimical to some degree (*The Black Arts Movement* 153).

Amas would remain on 104<sup>th</sup> Street until the nineteen eighties when the company moved downtown and away from LeNoire's association with Harlem. After living most of her life in or near the neighborhood that became, as Smethurst puts it, "a sort of 'every ghetto' rather than the unique 'city of refuge' . . . of African American potential invoked both straightforwardly and ironically during the New Negro Renaissance," LeNoire would operate her theatre elsewhere (110). However, through the years, with its many changes,

Amas would never deviate from its first intention and eventually, as the years took their toll on black theatre, LeNoire's mission was caught between the integrity of her cause and the implausibility of her casting decisions.

### CHAPTER III

#### AMAS IN THE 1970s-1980s: BLACK ARTS, *BUBBLING BROWN SUGAR*, AND *BINGO!*

“Every time you see one black person in a show or one Asian person or an interracial cast, unless the piece is saying something to mankind, unless the director has some kind of vision . . . then it’s just a coloring book of colors and not necessarily anything of substance” (TicoWells qtd. in *Beyond Tradition* 103).

Rosetta LeNoire’s mission to develop Amas with an interracial focus grew out of influences from her own life history. She was also reacting to what she perceived as destructive forces building in the black community as a result of black nationalism. Having personally witnessed an example of the racially charged rhetoric she believed to be a part of black nationalism’s separatist thinking, she vowed to make her theatre inclusive. Historically the national conversation on nontraditional casting involved participation of white establishment theatres opening their casting process to minority actors. In the case of Amas, LeNoire was a black theatre founder who defined her mission to cast interracially as a way to push against separatism. The complicated critical reaction to nontraditional casting in the 1960s created a challenging atmosphere for any theatre professional venturing forward with a project that focused on racially diverse casting. A theatre like Amas often faced white establishment critics who were sensitive to and deeply analytical in their responses towards the changing racial climate on New York’s professional stages. Generally debated were the concepts of where integration of casts was appropriate and what constituted segregation. Black theatres were often perceived as segregated. As the seventies and eighties progressed Amas was still perceived as a black theatre despite LeNoire’s sometimes clumsy efforts to contradict that perception.

At its founding LeNoire took her proposal to start Amas to the New York State Council on the Arts where she was told it would be financially more advantageous for her to start an all-black company. In Chapter III I will examine the complicated politics from the second half of the twentieth century as they shaped events and influenced LeNoire's founding of Amas. From post-World War II integrationist/assimilationist thinking, leading to legislation passed during the civil rights era and the subsequent influence of the black power movement, LeNoire was reacting to and attempting to negotiate swiftly developing changes in attitude and ideologies. A complicated series of events took place in the nineteen sixties that favored government support of the arts. New models for public funding were being developed through the Ford Foundation and other institutional contributors. Again, politics was in play as funding options changed. Chapter III will examine the events leading to the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts as well as the influence of the Ford Foundation on public funding of the arts. Additionally, the chapter will encompass the impact of HARYOU funding for black arts organizations, most specifically Leroi Jones's Black Arts Theatre/School (BARTS) and contrast it with Rosetta LeNoire's founding of Amas. Chapter III will also follow Amas through the 1970s, the success of *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, and the continuing paradox of LeNoire's insistence that Amas was not a black theatre in contrast with her choice to develop primarily black musicals created by black artists. How did this choice affect casting? And were her casting choices always advantageous to her mission? I will show that the critical dialogue on nontraditional casting that exploded in the late 1960s often carried with it the tone of racism and the language of convoluted notions of what constituted segregation and integration as those ideas pertained to theatre. Further examination of political forces in the

1980s which began the downward turn in funding for black theatre will conclude the chapter. Throughout this time period, as LeNoire stumbled in the attempt to appear interracial, Amas continued to be perceived as a black theatre.

Older than many of participants of black nationalism and black arts, LeNoire had been active in the Negro Actors' Guild in the late 1930s and early forties. The Guild was an organization that promoted black artists and their welfare. As Jonathan Dewberry reports, the articles in the Guild's Certificate of Incorporation included clauses that stated the exclusive nature of the Guild. Whites could join but could only be members in an advisory position. "Only black performers, for example, could serve on the executive board," Dewberry writes, while other articles stressed, "The importance of racial pride, brotherhood, and fellowship among black performers" ("Black Actors Unite" 2) In other words, the exclusivity of the organization (with only a limited participation from whites) and the call for racial pride had similarities to the call for solidarity and racial pride promoted by black nationalism thirty years later. The Negro Actors' Guild understood the importance of maintaining black leadership in higher, more important positions with white members involved in what could be termed a token capacity only.

In the 1950s, LeNoire's participation on AEA's Committee on Integration, while concerned with employment equality, was in conflict with the idea of exclusivity and approached activism from an integrationist philosophy. The Committee's boycott of television and subsequent blacklisting of its members, mentioned in Chapter II, took place in 1955, one year after the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that called for institutional integration. LeNoire's 1973 statement, quoted in Chapter II, declaring her allegiance to everything in the Constitution, proves her dedication

to legalized integration in contrast to her former activism with the Guild, which maintained a more exclusive point of view. However important the political ramifications of *Brown vs Board of Education* was to LeNoire, the decision of the Supreme Court was not so much the answer to institutionalized racism as it was a matter of image for the United States.

### **Brown vs. Board of Education**

The Supreme Court's 1954 decision – that segregation was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment – was the result of five separate cases which collectively made up *Brown vs. Board of Education*. The case was a landmark of the civil rights movement, though, as mentioned above, it was also determined by other political positions, such as the fear of racial unrest and the need for the United States to appear able to manage its race problems to the rest of the world. However, in terms of the case and its outcomes, Henry D. Miller writes, “. . . in the theoretical terms . . . it must be noted that in black communities through the United States, especially among Negro artists, the terms “civil rights” and “integration” were not synonymous” (*Theorizing Black Theatre* 140). At stake was the difference between gaining equal rights as citizens and being expected to identify with a white American image and culture. As Miller states, “The push for “integration” as opposed to “civil rights,” was not the product of a groundswell of Negro public opinion,” and continues:

Throughout Negro America there were real questions about the relative value of what can be called cultural and social integration as distinguished from Adams' [John] “government of laws” that blindly bestowed on all its citizens equal civil rights, whatever their differing measures of wit, wealth or beauty (142).



Miller is careful to include the word “blindly” which hearkens back to the concept of inalienable rights. In theatre, integration, as bestowed by the white establishment on non-white minorities, was exemplified by white establishment theatres casting non-white actors, i.e., minority actors were temporarily given a place at the table. Despite the divergent opinions on the societal aspects of integration, the decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* also was immersed in the politics of the time that had as much to do with the United States tending to its democratic image and very little to do with the Supreme Court’s moral or educational responsibility.

As “European colonial powers came under increased pressure from indigenous political forces and certain sectors of western public opinion to break up their colonial empires,” the United States also was pressured to give attention to what Wendell Willkie called America’s imperialisms at home (King. “*The Brown Years.*” 339). It was advantageous for the U.S. to at least appear to be making steps to end racial segregation. Damon Freeman points out “that it would not serve American interests to maintain racial segregation – particularly the most vicious symbols existing in the South – while seeking to influence much of the non-white world (“*Kenneth Clark and the Problem of Power*” 430). However, the cause of civil rights moved slowly through the 1950s and required further action that culminated in President Johnson’s passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. These actions on the part of the federal government would have served as the references LeNoire chose when she stated she was “for everything in the U.S. Constitution,” (mentioned in Chapter II) and, therefore, remained determined to establish an interracial theatre rather than one that she considered all-black (*New York Post Magazine* 35).

At the time of Amas's founding, the government climate was also in support of black theatre. Funding for black cultural projects was at a peak and, once again, national politics and image influenced social policies and trends. In fact, the path arts funding took throughout the post-World War II years was determined by specific influences from the cold war.

### **Arts Funding Climate 1950s-1970s: American Culture Control**

It was in a climate of government support for black theater that Rosetta LeNoire founded Amas, a theatre that she insisted would not be all black. Multiculturalism as an accepted term had yet to gain ground during the years of the civil rights movement and yet, LeNoire's term for her theatre – interracial – did not fit the compartment into which government funding was awarded in the sixties. Government involvement in arts funding was part of a progression that began in the years following World War II and culminated in the 1960s with the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ford Foundation's creation of matching grants. In an atmosphere filled with funding for programs in the arts, Rosetta LeNoire, as well as other black theatre leaders, found theatre companies and received support from sources that were operating from highly politicized agendas.

In the years directly after World War II the political residue from the so-called communist infiltration of the WPA's federal arts programs kept government away from participation in arts funding. However, as the cold war years moved forward there was a push to distinguish the United States culturally from the rest of the world. This initiative, backed by liberal politicians, became policy after Russia's successful launching of *Sputnik*

– an event that underscored American deficiencies in education, science and culture that the United States had yet to address. “The cultural heritage of America – one of the great building forces holding together and enhancing our varied national life – has been relegated to a lesser role in the pageant of America,” stated liberal Republican Jacob Javits, who campaigned for government activism in supporting the arts (Javits qtd. in Howard. “Between Avant-Garde and Kitsch” 293). In 1960, historian Arthur Schlesinger published his article “Notes on a National Cultural Policy” and advocated the formation of a Federal Advisory Council on the Arts. August Heckscher, Jr., who directed the Twentieth Century Fund, believed that the avant garde and beatniks served as a tonic to a conformist country that desperately needed a new sense of individuality. In 1963 Heckscher issued a report, “The Arts and the National Government,” and in that same year President Kennedy formed the President’s Advisory Council on the Arts. This step paved the way for the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965.

Steps leading up to the founding of the NEA were the efforts of politicians seeking to help subdue public anxiety created by the cold war and launching of *Sputnik* and replace it with the illusion of a strong American culture that would serve to mend society’s sense of instability. As Michael Wreszin comments in “Cultural Freedom versus Cultural Spin,” “The entire mass culture debate became politicized in the fifties and was more often concerned with cold war politics than with art or culture” (610). Though appearing to free non-conformity and individuality, the move towards government funding of the arts was carefully planned and orchestrated to create a society, motivated by a new sense of cultural freedom, which would mobilize to meet the educational, scientific and political demands of the cold war.

Rosetta LeNoire founded Amas later in the 1960s several years after the establishment of the NEA. Her request for funding, sought from the New York Council on the Arts, fell within a new paradigm of arts funding that included the NEA and additionally the support of the Ford Foundation, an organization that is known for having created the matching grant. Ford's invention of the arts grant changed the environment of funding from one of private donorship to one of foundations, corporations and government agencies in a chain reaction of support that relied on the notion of matching funds. Matching grants required that organizations raise, on their own, an amount equal to or more than a gift from an outside donor. While private donations were necessary to the life of an organization, "they were rarely associated with a formally constructed plan for that institution's progression, and even less often with a grand scheme for systemic advancement of the entire arts field," (Kreider "Leverage Lost: The Nonprofit Arts in the Post-Ford Era" n. pag.). In contrast, Ford Foundation had a clear mission to revitalize existing institutions, establish regional arts organizations, form arts service organizations, and enhance arts education. Particularly of interest to funding entities were black organizations, including black theatres, as part of their initiative to democratize the arts. One of the initiatives focused on minorities in the inner cities were the Community Action Programs (CAP) of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. The Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Inc. (HARYOU), a CAP program, was a part of LeNoire's community and used the arts as a tool to push against continued segregation that lingered on despite the 1954 decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. George Yudice writes:

Government thus sought to use subsidies for cultural activism as a way of channeling the expression of opposition. Johnson's Great Society was a complex

mechanism for crisis management: to deal with the deterioration of social control unleashed by migration to the cities . . . and to shape and direct African Americans as an electoral constituency in urban centers (“The Privatization of Culture” 20-1). HARYOU was one of the service organizations formed to fulfill the government’s plan.

HARYOU was organized and run by Kenneth Clark, a psychologist who was known for his research on the long term negative effects of segregation on black youth – research that was presented in the effort to influence the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown vs. Board of Education. However, any idealism Clark possessed during Brown vs. Board of Education had all but dissolved by the late sixties. Integration had not been achieved significantly enough to save complex urban communities like Harlem and, due to continued segregation, racial unrest was erupting in many large cities including New York and Los Angeles. The very thing the Supreme Court was hoping to avoid needed new power and energy behind it and HARYOU was one of the vehicles put to use with the hefty support of \$118 million. Clark’s focus was to implement programs that would:

. . . empower the Harlem community politically, not only thereby changing the status of the poor but revolutionizing the political and economic relationships that existed between Blacks and Whites . . . Only a holistic community-oriented approach that addressed the wider political and economic issues caused by racism would lead to a more prosperous Harlem (Freeman. “Kenneth B. Clark and the Problem of Power” 417).

Despite the aspiration to consider the relationship between the two races, Clark’s approach was to deliver the function and oversight of the Harlem community from the hands of whites to the blacks who lived there. Though having been involved with the civil rights

activism of the 1950s, Clark was now turning to every possible means to elevate the despair he found in Harlem. His open-minded approach meant finding sympathy with some of the ideology of the black nationalist movement and the Nation of Islam's (NOI) Malcolm X. Empathetic to black nationalism's rejection of integration, Clark also understood its philosophy that "black economic self-sufficiency, racial self-love and separation from Whites were critical to a politics of liberation" (432). Blacks in the north were not as in favor of Martin Luther King's non-violence coupled with a 'love the oppressor' and turn the other cheek philosophy. "While King's approach seemed reasonable, healthy and stable on the surface," Freeman writes, "King asked his followers to carry a heavier psychological burden" (433). While eschewing much of the philosophy of black nationalism, Clark still understood the tension between those Harlemites who were compelled by the movement and those, like LeNoire, who, in contrast, were repelled by it.

The same principles black nationalism espoused were taken up by a young Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones). Baraka moved to Harlem following the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965. He quickly formed a group of artists under the principles Malcolm believed were the goals of black power: self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense. Forming his Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in 1965, Jones was awarded \$200,000 from HARYOU to organize a program for Harlem youth that toured through the community with theatrical presentations, involved youth in all aspects of production, and taught classes.

It is interesting that Amas and BART/S had strong similarities in the programs they included. Amas developed its youth theatre and also trained youth in performance and

production; in its first years it toured the boroughs of New York and played in parks and parking lots. Similarly, Baraka writes:

. . . that one glorious summer of 1965, we did . . . bring advanced Black Art to Harlem. We organized, as part of HARYOU ACT, the nation's first antipoverty program, a summer arts program called Operation Boot Strap . . . For eight weeks, we brought Drama, Poetry, Painting, Music, Dance . . . all across Harlem . . . each night our five units would go out in playgrounds, street corners, vacant lots, play streets, parks, bringing Black Art directly to people ("The Black Arts Movement: Its Meaning and Potential" 28).

Additionally, as Amas focused on musical theatre, feeling this was the genre that would unite people in creativity, Baraka states, "We wanted Black Art that was identifiably Afro-American. As Black as Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday or Duke Ellington or John Coltrane. That is what we wanted it to express – our lives and history . . ." (28). In other words, his goals with BART/S were similar to those of Amas – to use the great artists of Harlem, many of them musical artists, to help in educating a community of individuals and bring about self-determination and self-respect.

The area where BART/S was in contradiction with Amas was in the underlying message of black nationalism that whites were hated and excluded. As Baraka states, BART/S, and much of the antipoverty program, "came under attack fundamentally because we had initially cloaked our call to battle in the starkest terms of cultural nationalism and Hate-Whitey language" (30). Daniel Matlin states that it was Jones's "political immaturity and the lingering specter of black macho" that sealed the end of BART/S ("Reinterpreting Amiri Baraka" 98). While the company thrived on the funding from a federal program

Jones still was disgusted by accepting the patronage of the white establishment. Sargent Shriver, who directed the Community Action Agency, made a ‘site visit’ to 130<sup>th</sup> Street where BART/S was housed only to be greeted by Jones with “Fuck Shriver” and a refusal to allow Shriver’s entrance. Shortly afterward, financial support was pulled from BART/S. The company folded after one year and Jones went to Newark, New Jersey.

It was the philosophy and language of radical exclusion coming out of black power and the black arts theatres that started LeNoire on her mission to create Amas. Her experience in the Harlem church – over-hearing hate rhetoric directed towards children (mentioned in Chapter II) – was the catalyst that compelled LeNoire to take steps towards founding her company with the opposite intention. Amas means “you love” and LeNoire was convinced her organization must practice inclusion and interracial casting. She also believed Amas should distance itself from the concept of being a black theatre. Her first wave of funding from the New York Council on the Arts was only \$25,000 – hardly the huge sum BART/S had received.

LeNoire would always have to face the question as to whether Amas was a black theatre or not. Because she was black and had numerous black friends and colleagues much of the original material Amas worked with came from black creators and involved black subject matter. Her philosophy was in keeping with the policies of integration. However, In 1967, two years before LeNoire founded Amas, *Hello Dolly!*, one of the most successful musicals of the twentieth century, chose to replace its star, Carol Channing, with another well-known performer, Pearl Bailey, who was black. In the course of replacing the lead roles, the entire white cast was replaced with black performers including band leader Cab Calloway. The decision was one that lit a fire under the conversation on nontraditional



casting. Critics applied integrationist philosophy and black nationalist ideology to their comments until even Pearl Bailey was driven to ask, “Why do they have to talk racial into everything? Is everybody looking to separate the whole world?” (“Dolly Levi Now Finds Her Match in Pearl Bailey” *New York Times* 12). Focused on segregation, many of the white critics seemed offended by the idea of an all-black production of what had originally been an all-white show.

### **An All-black *Hello Dolly!* Fighting the Good Fight for Integration**

Making the shift to an all-black cast in 1967 – the middle of the civil rights and the black arts movements – produced conflicting responses to Pearl Bailey’s *Hello Dolly!*. Critics of the show found performances to be superior, particularly that of Ms. Bailey, however, they could not refrain from commenting on the producers’ decision to keep white performers from the cast. Clive Barnes’s November 1967 review for the *New York Times* stated that Pearl Bailey, “took the whole musical in her hands and swung it around her neck as easily as if it were a feather boa,” but Barnes admitted:

I went prejudiced. I had not been bowled over by it earlier, and frankly my sensitive white liberal conscience was offended at the idea of a nonintegrated Negro show. It sounded too much like “Blackbirds of 1967,” and all too patronizing for words. But believe me, from the first to the last I was overwhelmed. Maybe Black Power is what some of the other musicals need (61).

Barnes’s comment illustrates a complete lack of awareness of how racially charged his reference to black power was, despite the intention of complementing the quality of the show. He also demonstrates his indifference towards acknowledging the dominant white

presence on Broadway that had never, in the course of the century, been satisfactorily equalized by black representation whether in numbers of performers or numbers of shows. Likewise, Frederick O'Neal, who was black and a friend of LeNoire's, commented from his position as the president of Actor's Equity:

This seems to be a favor in reverse. It's very difficult for our policy to get through to producers – casting should be done according to ability. Having an all-Negro cast – or an all-Jewish or all-Chinese one, for that matter – is not the idea at all. Of course, Negroes need the work they will get in the new production of 'Hello Dolly!' But we are sacrificing our principles for a few bucks ("Dolly Levi Now Finds Her Match in Pearl Bailey" *New York Times* 12).

Again, O'Neal's idea limits the scope of what integration can mean. If *Hello Dolly!* was the only black offering, or one of a small number of black shows, then the white dominated Broadway season had been integrated. If Actors' Equity denounced shows which cast all black performers they narrowed the employment possibilities for black union members.

The STATS Report mentioned in the Introduction has only conducted research from 2006 forward. However, in 2006 the total number of minority actors acting on the New York stages was 15% where Caucasian actors totaled 85%. As if the 2006 statistics aren't bad enough, and given the historical timeframe of minority representation on professional New York stages in 1967, it can be assumed that the percentages in the sixties would be much lower in the case of minority actors and much higher as the numbers apply to Caucasian actors. Given that *Hello Dolly!* was a large cast musical, it would have driven up the number of working minority actors, if only in a small way. Integration at any cost to

employment, in this situation, appears to be a matter of political image rather than practicality and completely disregards the positive response to the artistry of the work.

In 1967 Rosetta LeNoire was in the early stages of forming Amas. Being a loyal union member for many years and having served on AEA's Committee on Integration, she also followed an integrationist philosophy that she eventually applied to Amas by casting white performers in shows that were primarily black in order to desegregate. With the continued critique and attention *Hello Dolly!* received before and after its opening, LeNoire would have been well aware of this backlash against the all-black production, particularly from her union. The critical and union response to *Hello Dolly!* may have affected her decision to create a theatre company that was not all-black.

The critical dialogue surrounding the casting of *Hello Dolly!*, and the larger issue of nontraditional casting, was given thorough treatment in Walter Kerr's lengthy October 1967 essay for the *New York Times*, "The Negro Actor Asks Himself: 'Am I a Negro or Am I an Actor?'" Appearing one month before the show's opening, Kerr's essay was predominantly focused on the casting circumstances of *Hello Dolly!* and lays the groundwork for possible audience reception based on race rather than quality of performance. His examination of the theatre environment in 1967 made use of language from the civil rights movement when he asked, taking on the perspective of a Negro actor, "Should he accept a role in the all-Negro company of "Hello Dolly!" which Pearl Bailey will be heading this season, or should he avoid what is on stage and in effect, a segregated display?" He includes the newly formed Negro Ensemble Company in his query, also written from an imaginary Negro point of view, asking:

Should he cut loose altogether and join with Robert Hooks in a new enterprise to develop an all-Negro theater staffed with its own growing playwrights, directors, producers? What is the difference between an all-Negro company sponsored by Negroes and an all-Negro company sponsored by whites? Is one more segregated than another? (250)

In the case of Kerr's essay, both concerns of Rosetta LeNoire's – whether to found an all-black company and whether to cast all-black productions – are open for critique and both are labeled as segregated – a concern LeNoire had based on her sensitivities regarding the separatism of the black arts movement and her relationship with O'Neal and AEA.

Kerr, who was white, went so far as to inject first person into his answers:

If equivocally and irrevocably a Negro, I must either make my own black theater on my own terms or accept just those roles in the conventional theater which require my uniqueness as a Negro. If an actor, then I am free to do what every actor does: impersonate. And I can impersonate anyone (250).

Kerr's thesis is based on an either/or premise – where one either identifies as a member of one's racial heritage or identifies with one's occupation:

A man born black asks himself: am I a Negro, or am I a person? If his answer is “Negro” then he may wish to assert his distinctiveness by joining the forces of Black Nationalism and putting up self-designed, rather than imposed, barricades. If the answer is “person,” then he will probably try hard – against all known odds – to function socially in tandem with other persons who are white, counting on what is common between the races sometime to carry the day (250).

Kerr blames black nationalism for creating more barriers than already exist. The alternative he describes could read as if he is calling the Negro who functions “socially in tandem with other persons who are white” an Uncle Tom. More likely, he finds the Negro who tries hard against all odds and ignores imposed barricades, as he relies on a universal commonality with white people, to be the white ideal – a well behaved Negro who stays in his place and doesn’t disturb societal norms with radical behavior.

Kerr then uses *Hello Dolly!* to illustrate his point:

An all-black *Hello Dolly!* may be very like the *Blackbirds* revues of 30 years ago, which white people went to see because Negroes sang so well and because they had such gleaming, happy teeth. But it does mean work, and a job is indispensable if time and energy are to be found for the next step in the fight forward (250).

Though Kerr ends this statement by putting the onus on the individual black performer for taking a job in a black production, the mention of *Blackbirds* is a reference to black musicals from the twenties and thirties which were, by the mid-1960s, identified with the stereotypes of minstrelsy. The concern that all-black productions were not only boldly segregated but were also referencing a past that was considered offensive was also saying that all such productions would carry the burden of portraying stereotypes no matter what their subject was. Since the accusation of segregation assumes that some performers were discriminated against, it follows that the same could be said of *Blackbirds*, though it is highly unlikely there were white performers who were turned away from the *Blackbirds* casting sessions.

Angela Pao asked in 2010 if *Hello Dolly!*’s producers had possibly, “eschewed a black and white cast in order to avoid dealing with the issue of having an actor of one race

playing a character romantically pursuing a character played by an actor of a different race?" (*No Safe Spaces* 184). However, Kerr points out in his 1967 essay that Broadway audiences had already been broken in when it came to interracial romance with *The Owl and the Pussycat*, "a Broadway play in which the matter of color was never mentioned," and in *No Strings*, where "Color was to be dismissed as an issue." Kerr found the first situation to be believable because the lead female character in *Owl and the Pussycat* was a prostitute, played by Diana Sands, a black actress, and "White audiences do not have much difficulty imagining an intimate relationship with a Negro prostitute" (250). This is only one of a number of Kerr's comments that could be read as racist. His polemic spans seven pages in the *New York Times* and teeters between sarcasm and irony that could just as well be construed as bold racism. The essay is one of the first to confront nontraditional casting in a detailed way and asks questions that would be asked again and again in the decades to follow. Though Kerr's opinion is still ruled by a need for historical and societal believability he redeems whatever hint of prejudice is eluded to when he states:

Yet the need for a wide-open door is there and is going to become greater hour by hour and decade by decade. The fact of the matter is that the United States is a mixed society. It isn't a white society. It's a white and black society. It is, with the passage of time, going to become ever more mixed, socially, sexually, psychologically . . . I take this to be as certain as anything I know (n.pag.).

Kerr points out the rigidity of a naturalist theatre and advocates "formalizing" or making the theatre more theatrical to break down the restrictions of naturalism. As Kerr suggests:

When the play is sufficiently formalized, no period of adjustment is required. The very first gestures of the evening say immediately that we are to suspend any

lingering, literal historical sense or any interest in photographic duplication. What this sort of theater does require is a shift in the playwright's habit of mind and of eye: he must give over his slavish copying of the surfaces of life and go for the depths (n.pag.).

Kerr therefore believes that if theatre opens itself to all manner of possibilities "we may very well find that we have solved the problem of Negro employment" (n.pag.). The "we" in this statement stands for whites, who, it's assumed, have a problem with when, where and how Negroes work in the theatre, such that new forms of theatre must be created to find a solution. In fact, musical theatre is one of the most unrealistic forms of theatre. It is the genre on which Rosetta LeNoire focused her founding of Amas. Still both Kerr and Barnes have a problem with the all-black *Hello Dolly!*, even if it is a non-realistic musical, and call it segregated. If they were truly attempting to hold up the production to the scrutiny of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 they would also need to examine if there had been discrimination as far as gender goes. Should the character of Horace Vandergelder be played by a woman if a woman was the best actor who auditioned for the role? If the producers had decided to cast an all-female *Hello Dolly!* would there have been the same tone of critical response? What Kerr seems to be saying as he imagines the perfect theatre where Negroes could work with no issues is that only in this theatre would the concept of colorblindness work to deracialize the black performer such that white audiences had no problem with his/her presence on stage.

Writing one month from the opening of *Hello Dolly!* Kerr's essay anticipates what public reaction might be based only on race, casting choice and integrationist politics. He

was unable to comment on the performances or the artistry of the production because he had not seen it.

Editor of *Anthology of the American Negro in the Theater*, Lindsay Patterson took up the criticism in early 1968 when he declared:

Fifteen years ago, the arrival of an all-Negro cast in “Hello Dolly!” would have given the nation its catchphrase of the century – “Hello Darcy!” Today, of course, the Negro is serious business. No one thought to, or dared, make a joke of the new “Dolly.” Everyone was busily expressing indignation, and rightly so, over a non-integrated cast (“To Make the Negro a Living Human Being” *New York Times* 92). Patterson’s use of the term “non-integrated” implies there was no concerted effort made to assure there was representation, no matter how it was done, by another race or ethnicity, for the sake of removing the stigma of segregation. If the producers of *Hello Dolly!* had cast one or perhaps two white performers, would it have silenced Kerr and Patterson’s concerns? Patterson’s solution for the controversy surrounding the casting of black actors in otherwise white productions is to begin utilizing the “wide color range” of skin tones available, which could help to differentiate character types according to how dark or light skinned the actor may be. He further recommends that black theater companies stay away from protest theater in the hope that the image of black America be tempered down and away from one of menace. His opinions are the view of integrationist/assimilationist philosophy as opposed to those of black nationalism.

Larry Neal, summed up black nationalism’s opinion by stating in his 1968 essay “The Black Arts Movement”:



The theatre of white America is escapist, refusing to confront concrete reality. Into this cultural emptiness come the musicals, an up-tempo version of the same stale lives. And the use of Negroes in such plays as *Hello Dolly* and *Hallelujah Baby* does not alert their nature; it compounds the problem. These plays are simply hipper versions of the minstrel show. They present Negroes acting out the hang-ups of middle-class white America (33).

Neal's comment seems to take a similar tone as more mainstream white critics, though on a closer read he objects to black actors performing in white material because he considers it unworthy. *Hallelujah Baby* was a musical written by the all-white creative team of Jule Styne, Adolph Green and Betty Comden, presenting the story of a black woman. Neal is not only objecting to black performers appearing in white authored shows presenting what would typically be white subject matter but also white authored shows that attempt to present black subject matter. Neal's position, a black nationalist one, was that black actors should be appearing in black authored shows depicting black subject matter. If that scenario were pitched to Walter Kerr or Clive Barnes, would they have considered it segregationist?

The confusion in the late sixties over what constituted integration and segregation in the theatre and the vastly differing points of view, is also confusing in the present. Rosetta LeNoire was in her fifties in the 1960s and was being challenged with complex, and often conflicting, politics, opinions and ideologies. Many in her age group must have thought the solution to all racial issues was integration into mainstream American society, which meant white society. This was what LeNoire and her contemporaries had been fighting for over the course of several decades. However, the new philosophies coming from black nationalism, black power and black arts explored black identity, Afrocentrism

and called for group solidarity that, to those who espoused integrationist thinking, appeared as separatism.

Not only did criticism of *Hello Dolly!* discuss the credibility and plausibility of having upper middle class black people inhabiting Yonkers, New York in the late nineteenth century, but the argument also boiled down to employment needs and practices as articulated by Frederick O'Neal and Actors' Equity in keeping with the civil rights movement's focus on integration. It is also apparent that in order to hope for a more positive reception from the white establishment theatre profession, including white critics, the best course would be to establish an integrated company and publicize it as such. LeNoire worked with many white actors and other white theatre professionals. The message must have been loud and clear to her that, not only for philosophical and political reasons, her best direction was to found an interracial company that would fulfill the expectations of the civil rights movement by staying clear of accusations of segregation by the New York white theatre establishment and AEA. After incorporating Amas, the company spent several years planning and performing in small found spaces all over the boroughs of New York before announcing their first season in 1973. Very quickly Amas found itself developing and producing a show that captured the imagination of producers who wanted to take it to Broadway. After the critical uproar over the all-black *Hello Dolly!* in 1967, *Bubbling Brown Sugar* found its moment ten years later in a decade that re-discovered the commercial viability of black music and performers. All-black shows were a trend in the seventies. However, *Bubbling Brown Sugar* was one of the few with a black creative team behind it.

### ***Bubbling Brown Sugar 1975-1977***

*Bubbling Brown Sugar* opened at Amas in a space at 263 West 86<sup>th</sup> Street and subsequently went on tour before opening on Broadway. The show's subject matter involved two couples – one white, one black – being given a fantasy tour of Harlem in the timeframe of 1910 until 1930. A review of the first production at Amas stated the show:

is as much bitter as it is sweet. Much of the impact of this musical is drawn from its closeness to the real passion of a community struggling for its very soul. The songs chosen here . . . sizzle with something beyond the words and music: the aspiration of a people who would call the subway entrance 'the pearly gates'; they spring from a people who vow that only Harlem prevents them from cutting their throats

(Moran. "Amas Conquers All." *Show Business*. n.pag.).

The heartfelt tone of Edward Moran's review of the uptown production was not reflected in Clive Barnes's review of the Broadway opening, which instead focused on the issue of a weak book, race and casting. Barnes writes:

it is really rather a thin, but acceptable excuse for a bundle of old Harlem tunes, interspersed with some evocative names and some rather bad jokes . . . Here and there the book does attempt to make labored social comment about the changing stature of the black man, but this tends to be a little exploitative and even patronizing. However, the many blacks in the audience did not seem to think so.

What would a honky know? ("Bubbling Brown Sugar Boils at ANTA" 29)

Unlike Moran, Barnes can only see the music as a "bundle of old Harlem tunes," and moves on to the show's weak commentary on the condition of blacks in society. Once again, as with his review of *Hello Dolly!* he uses the term "patronizing," in a way that

doesn't actually say anything other than from his white perspective he finds the politics of the show to be lacking. Ending the paragraph he removes himself from the entire experience by sarcastically offering that his lack of understanding is based on being a "honky," a slang term for being a white man, and an attempt to come across as hip. Rosetta LeNoire, in speaking of changes in the show before it moved to Broadway, mentioned that her producers wanted to remove the few whites who were in the cast, "I had them [whites] put in there because I didn't want anyone to think that I would do an all-black show" (Norflett 366). The statement, particularly with the use of "them" to mean the white couple in the story, sounds like tokenism. The implication is that to serve her determination that *Amas* was not a black theatre she concocted a scenario where she could include a few white performers to satisfy that mission. Barnes comments in his review, "The blacks are given a new sense of their heritage, natch, and the whites, equally natch, fall so fulsomely in love with it that they find Harlem is the place on earth where they can feel fully alive. Oh, yeah?" (Barnes 29). Barnes questions the plausibility of such a transformation taking place. Historically, given that the two couples are from the 1970s in New York, a time when Harlem was suffering from extreme urban decay and crime, Barnes, despite his sarcasm, has a point. LeNoire justified her inclusion of whites in the cast with, "a lot of whites did ask if they could work up in Harlem . . . It gave you a full story of what I saw and what I lived in Harlem" (Norflett 366). LeNoire may have been speaking of white entertainers in Harlem. She does mention a role that was the embodiment of white singer Sophie Tucker being eliminated from the Broadway version of the show by the producers who "wanted an all-black show and I told them they just couldn't do it . . ." (366). Aside from white entertainers, white landlords charged exorbitant rents in the Harlem of

LeNoire's youth and therefore forced overcrowding in apartments as a means of paying the rent. Whites came into the neighborhood to staff businesses and social services. Damon Freeman writes that these whites, who were exploiting the disadvantaged, saw the neighborhood:

as not only pathological but dependent on outside help for survival. Most social welfare agencies that operated in Harlem did so reluctantly and independently of both financial support and co-operation from the local community they purportedly served ("Kenneth B. Clark and the Problem of Power" 422).

Nevertheless, *Bubbling Brown Sugar* was not only a musical, which already adds a layer of heightened non-realism to theatre, but it was also considered a fantasy. It was LeNoire's love for her childhood memories of Harlem, with its art and artists, that delivered the optimism needed to take a white couple, from the 1970s, back in time to experience the romance of a myth rather than the reality of a slum.

Two white performers in *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, particularly in light of their presence carrying the entire burden of interracial casting, reflects on a larger question of what constitutes black theatre. If the show is written from a black point of view, with a subject matter that reflects on black life and black history, does the presence of two white performers negate the show's blackness? The archival document mentioned in Chapter II clearly states that *Bubbling Brown Sugar* was "a project to show young Harlem black men and women something of the culture they were heirs to," and further states that, "By 1920, it [Harlem] had become, without trying, the capital of black America" (*Amas Musical Theatre Archive*. n.a. Production files. Box # 3 MG 463. *Bubbling Brown Sugar*). All factors point to *Bubbling Brown Sugar* perhaps not being all-black in terms of the

employment of actors, but certainly being a black show. If this were an all-white show that wanted to integrate through the inclusion of two black actors, their inclusion could be considered tokenism, or casting not for any sense of artistic vision but rather to satisfy an appearance of diversity. LeNoire and Loftin Mitchell structured the story around the two couples going to Harlem, so the white actors were justifiable. However, LeNoire stated that the book had been written that way so her show would not be perceived as all-black. Therefore the casting of white actors had utility. They were tokens – used to signify diversity in what was, in every other respect, a black show. They were playing a white couple so there was nothing extraordinary in the way of colorblind casting that required the audience to transcend their race, other than they were alone in their whiteness. Brandi Catanese states in *The Problem of the Color[Blind]*:

In American theater . . . colorblindness and multiculturalist agendas are two sides of the same coin: transcendence to a state of racelessness in American theater reproduces the aesthetic, economic, and institutional marginalization of black art, while “multicultural” resources bolster the influence of white art, which remains intact, unsullied by race as a category of exclusion (67).

Catanese is writing within the context of a white establishment theater which practices colorblind or multicultural casting. How does this differ within the context of a black theater and, in the case of Amas, a black theater that does not care to pursue being a black theater? The inclusion of two white actors in an otherwise all-black production has the same effect as the inclusion of two black actors in a white production – whiteness is enhanced and, as Catanese states, is “unsullied.” The white actors are portraying a white couple in Harlem and therefore their whiteness is amplified and the production becomes

about the white characters. What was interesting about the timing of *Bubbling Brown Sugar* was that Broadway was experiencing an unprecedented wave of black shows and with or without the inclusion of a few white performers, *Bubbling Brown Sugar* became part of this unusual trend.

While on the out of town tour *Bubbling Brown Sugar* was highly successful. After it was presented at Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theatre it was so commercially viable it was financially able to sustain itself. The tour's positive reputation and response followed the show into New York, where it opened in March 1976 and ran for 766 performances. By fall of that year Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls* had opened as well as a revival of *Porgy and Bess*. These two shows joined *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, *Me and Bessie*, a limited run of *I Have a Dream* and the long running *The Wiz*. Mel Gussow's surprise at the trend is evident from his article "Broadway Enjoying Black Talent Boom" where he assures his readers:

There is so much black talent working there . . . and such a lively black audience that the theater district could almost be retagged the Great Black Way. At the same time, white audiences are discovering black theater. This is not an insular variety of entertainment, but very much part of the mainstream (55).

Gussow is quick to let his white readers know that they are welcome at these shows as well as others, such as *Pippin* and *Godspell*, which also included significant roles for black performers.

The black musical trend continued through the 1970s with *Eubie* and *Ain't Misbehavin'* (1978) and into the 1980s with *Sophisticated Ladies*, *Dreamgirls* and *The Tap Dance Kid*, after which the wave tapered off. In a 1977 interview for *Black Enterprise*

*Magazine*, Douglas Turner Ward commented, “Broadway was in a vacuum. Major playwrights were not producing blockbusters. So now they have re-discovered black entertainment and they find the audiences still amused by our presences as long as it isn’t controversial” (79). To Ward the trend was a fluke that would not have otherwise happened if white playwrights were generating more commercial properties. Ward’s statement is supported by an unidentified white producer’s comment in the same interview, “When they [black musicals] stop making money people will start making something else – Chinese musicals perhaps. It’s all economics” (79).

In 1976 *Bubbling Brown Sugar* was early to open with more black shows to follow. Whether LeNoire intended her show to be considered all-black or not, it was received and recorded in reviews as a black show. A few white performers did not change the show’s focus on black music and black community. However, LeNoire’s use of a few white actors in *Bubbling Brown Sugar* for the sake of the show appearing to be integrated is the same motivation behind institutionalizing integration to begin with – for appearances. Whiteness is particularized in this situation as if to say that Harlem needed to prove to whites that they were welcomed. The purpose of integration is therefore undermined by the need for validation from whites.

Between *Hello Dolly!* in 1967 and the opening of *Bubbling Brown Sugar* in 1976, the controversy generated by an all-black show and the terminology of nontraditional casting had changed. Actors’ Equity would continue the struggle for integrated theatre beyond the sixties and seventies, but in general white society had settled for an overall acceptance that integration had taken place and opportunities for blacks were growing. The 1976 opening of the all black version of *Guys and Dolls* once again challenged the



principles of integration against the appearance of believability. Since Harlem was, at that time, considered to be a black community, could hinting at a re-location from Times Square to Harlem make an all-black *Guys and Dolls* easier to accept by a primarily white audience?

### ***Guys and Dolls: Ghetto-izing Acceptance***

The success of the all-black *Guys and Dolls* was the result of director Billy Wilson's vision. Coming from his work as choreographer for *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, Wilson worked with *Guys and Dolls*' co-author, Abe Burrows, to tweak the show to a more suitable language and environment. As Wilson described the approach:

It's not so much the changing of words that makes the difference . . . It's the delivery. We have such a rich attitude among blacks. It's something that's intrinsic with us. It isn't what you say, it's how you say it, which is beautiful to me . . . My biggest point of direction to them [the cast] was, 'Find the equivalent in your own experience, and go from there. Get the rhythm, the way you would really say that ("Guys and Dolls Comes Back Black" 48).

Some phrases were changed and the show's setting seemed to have moved uptown from its original Times Square location. As Clive Barnes commented, "The musical works as admirably black as it worked admirably white, and while one remembers such luminaries as the original Vivian Blaine, Sam Levine and Stubby Kaye, their successors seem perfectly at home in Harlem" ("New Guys and Dolls Comes Seven Again" 26). The show was structured to be more immediately accepted than the all-black *Hello Dolly!* almost ten years before. Where *Hello Dolly!*'s black cast was thought to be forced on the source

material, *Guys and Dolls* met the task and adapted the musical to supposedly fit its cast, if it can be surmised that full acceptance of an all-black cast in a classic American musical means sending the show to the ghetto.

In the case of the *Guys and Dolls* critic Mel Gussow took up where Walter Kerr left off, without the demeaning first person references to how black actors feel. In “Casting by Race Can Be Touchy,” written a month after *Guys and Dolls* opened, Gussow addresses the same issues Kerr’s essay tackled in 1967:

The crucial question is whether a play should be cast entirely with black performers or with a mixed company. The former can seem racist if there is no artistic validity for the switch in color. Then its only justification is to give minority actors employment. The mixed company makes far more sense, but there are those special cases, such as “Guys and Dolls” . . . (57).

Gussow’s questions are the same questions that arose in any dialogue on nontraditional casting, the most important being: is employment the only justification needed for nontraditional casting? And, once again – what defines racism in the theatre? Is it racist to present shows with all-black casts and not racist to cast shows all-white? Does it work to have black actors portray traditionally white characters that do not necessarily reflect black experience? *Guys and Dolls* answered these questions by reconfiguring the show to reflect the plausibility of a black cast in what was assumed to be Harlem. Though the location was never actually stated, the all-black *Guys and Dolls* placed Damon Runyon’s relatively benign gamblers, con artists and thieves in an uptown New York black neighborhood. The producers and director had no qualms portraying stereotypes when they placed their henpecked male criminals idling on the street corners of an otherwise unnamed location

which could be associated with a ghetto, particularly in the mid-seventies. A decade before *Guys and Dolls* opened, the role of the black male was called into question by the Moynihan Report. Ten years later, the image of the unemployed, uneducated loiterer, involved in crime and abandoning his responsibilities was becoming a stereotype that still remains unshakeable.

In 1965 Daniel Moynihan's paper, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," was published. According to journalist Tom Wicker, Moynihan contended:

That slavery, segregation, and rising unemployment had undermined the role of the black male as family head and economic provider . . . Moynihan suggested, the black family had tended to disintegrate, leaving unemployment, divorce, abandonment, and illegitimacy prevalent in the inner city, and delinquency, crime, narcotics addiction, and educational failure on the rise (*Tragic Failure* 123).

Moynihan's report was greeted more with outrage than with recognition that work needed to be done to correct these problems. As Wicker reports, both blacks and whites saw the report as blaming the victim or as a finger pointed at the failure of the civil rights movement. He explains:

The report also piqued the latent guilt feelings of leaders of both races who had focused their efforts on civil rights and the South rather than on the inner city's economic and social problems (or pathologies, as Moynihan perhaps unfortunately termed them) (123).

Also unfortunate, was the placing of *Guys and Dolls*' black criminals on the streets of an imaginary black urban neighborhood. The show was much more acceptable to the white critics, but if the statement of the Moynihan Report was maligned by both races, Billy

Wilson's production gave little thought to how it perpetuated and, indeed, embodied racial stereotypes.

Although the seventies brought a commercial viability to more black shows being presented on the New York professional stage, a show like *Guys and Dolls* appeared to reinforce racial stereotypes that were swiftly becoming a mainstay of conservative thinking on the issues of continued black urban poverty. Inferiorization of blacks had been a theme of white supremacy for several hundred years, yet, in the late twentieth century it gathered momentum as conservatives blamed poor blacks for their own problems. The gathering forces of a backlash to race conscious policies that used the perception of individual behavior, as portrayed in media coverage, film and, as innocent as it might have seemed, theatre, such as *Guys and Dolls*, to support pushing against the outcomes of the civil rights movement. The image of urban blight was translated as crime, violence and, in the seventies, the growing problem of drug trafficking. The inclusion of blacks in this image was used politically as a weapon against race conscious policies. Again, the politics of black theatre, or in the case of Amas, black theatre attempting to be non-black, were complex and confusing. There was an entire package of political and critical considerations that accompanied any theatrical choice that attempted to maintain balance between being black theatre and, like Amas, a necessity to integrate.

### **From *Bubbling Brown Sugar's* Success: No Future Guarantees**

Audiences flocked to all-black shows in 1976 and Amas enjoyed a relatively quick success with *Bubbling Brown Sugar*. Mel Gussow continues the conversation on nontraditional casting with his article "Broadway Enjoying Black Talent Boom." Gussow

mentions new black directors and choreographers working on new black material, including straight plays, and new black audiences which joined a vast number of white audience members. As Gussow states, “Once initial resistance is overcome, theatergoers realize the diversity of black theater” (55). Though he does not precisely mention which theatergoers are working to overcome resistance the implication is that it is whites resisting to attend the theater with blacks or possibly white resistance to black subject matter. Many of the black shows of the mid-seventies and early eighties were musicals in a nostalgic revue format, such as *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, and were therefore considered non-threatening to white audiences. *Bubbling Brown Sugar*’s inclusion of two white cast members did more to reach out to white theatergoers and therefore ensured the possibility of a mixed audience.

The success of *Bubbling Brown Sugar* could have given Amas the financial foundation it needed to continue its operations with confidence and security. The show had been managed by a team of black producers who, after the show’s opening were featured in *Black Enterprise* magazine’s coverage of the new trend in black production teams. Also featured were Ken Harper, producer of *The Wiz* and Woodie King, Jr., producer of *For Colored Girls*. While detailing the successful history of each of these shows from the perspective of their producers, another large feature dealt with the funding of black arts. Hazel Bryant, then the head of the Richard Allen Cultural Center, commented that *Bubbling Brown Sugar* and *For Colored Girls* had first been produced by black theater companies, “But neither had the money to produce them on Broadway so they had to turn them over to someone else. That someone else is making the big money” (“Feuding, Fussing and Fighting: Funding the Arts in America” 80). Bryant’s comment reflects on

*Bubbling Brown Sugar*'s producing team, who were also included in the same *Black Enterprise* issue as representatives of new black producers enjoying success on Broadway.

In fact, the story not mentioned in *Black Enterprise*'s coverage of Ashton Springer and his partners was that, according to Rosetta LeNoire, they failed to pay her, Lofton Mitchell and Amas \$90,000 that was due for her original staging and concept and Lofton Mitchell's book. Additionally the producers never paid the costume designer or choreographer Billy Wilson. The money had been spent and LeNoire reported:

We all checked and they didn't have the money. So we couldn't sue. We did the next best thing, we went into arbitration and it was decided that the show could not be continued without two people saying yes and that is Lofton Mitchell and myself . . . Also the producers are not handling the money. One of the legal stipulations was that the profits would go to the attorney and he would net out the money (LeNoire qtd. in Norflett 374).

Compounding the problem was LeNoire's dismay over her decision to allow Ashton Springer and his partners to produce the show. Black producers were new to Broadway and LeNoire felt a responsibility to do what she could to give them an opportunity.

Unfortunately, the decision was not the best. She commented:

And the thing that hurts is that I had two choices – not to say that wouldn't have gone the same way. But I could have given it to a white combination [of producers] who had had plenty of experience and wanted it. But I said, No. If I don't let these three black men take this show to Broadway, who the dickens will let them in? They have got to get into the mainstream. Ken Harper had gotten in with *The Wiz*

and I said it's about time. I must do it. That's what I got for it – that this should happen to a black woman (LeNoire qtd. in Norflett 374-75).

The show went on tour in Europe, with LeNoire and Mitchell's permission, and made a small amount of money for Amas, but it was not enough to set Amas on a successful, well-funded course and LeNoire found herself back to begging for money from public and private sources many of which shifted gears well away from the open generosity of the 1960s and 1970s. The 1980s would see a decline in public funding as Ronald Reagan's administration shaped the decade. Amas entered the new funding terrain directly after its success with *Bubbling Brown Sugar*.

*Bubbling Brown Sugar*, though not a great money maker for Amas, would remain the company's signature success story. Often mentioned upfront and visibly in all Amas's promotional literature, the show sealed the company's reputation and gave it enough importance to always have a surplus of scripts to choose from and the ability to attract reviewers from the *New York Times*. Every production was mounted with the hope for a move up, either to an Off Broadway or a Broadway production. Two shows that were developed after *Bubbling Brown Sugar* – Micki Grant's *It's So Nice to be Civilized* and Vi Higginson's *Mama, I Want to Sing* – showed the potential for the move to Broadway. In the case of *It's So Nice to be Civilized* the entire concept was changed for the worse by the Broadway producing team. The show closed after six performances. Micki Grant took the brunt of harsh criticism that was aimed at changes in which she had no part. The situation with Higginson's show was more complicated. All set to be taken to Broadway, the show became embroiled in an actors' dispute over contributions they had made to the original script and their option to be paid for roles they created but in which they may or may not be

cast as the show was moved. One evening before the curtain went up the music director absconded with the score and the show had to close. Amas had invested \$13,000 in the production. Situations like the circumstances with Grant and Carroll's shows put Amas more and more in a financial hole that was deepened by the funding changes beginning in the 1980s.

### **Funding Changes in the 1980s: A Temporary Place at the Table**

By the nineteen-eighties Amas had been in operation for over a dozen years and was feeling the financial crunch of the slowdown in funding that was one of the many economic features of Ronald Reagan's administration. Rosetta LeNoire kept Amas afloat through her work as an actress but was finding her paycheck not enough to keep Amas running. In 1980 She stated:

We have been picking up small donations from Con Edison, from McGraw-Hill, and Avis . . . Every now and then a few dollars comes in to keep us from getting put out into the street. But it's rough and it's getting tougher. It used to be a lot easier (LeNoire qtd. in Norflett 382).

Government funding of theatre was diminishing considerably. Woody King, Jr., who founded the New Federal Theatre, pointed out that in the sixties and seventies it was "politically expedient" to fund black theatres, "In order that the destruction of the cities might be stopped, we were given token handouts," because, as King explains it, art is political, and "We Black artists are as controlled in our art as we are in influencing social and economic change here in this man's land." King continues, as funding pertains to black theatre in the eighties:



The very same people are the ones suggesting that these cultural programs be cut or merged into white-controlled organizations, by virtue of their supposed administrative skills, should save taxpayers their hard-earned money. These whites react immediately, as if 30,000,000 Blacks do not pay their share of tax dollars (“The Politics of Black Arts” 30).

James V. Hatch points to the policies of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s as the beginning of a downward spiral for many black theatres. He comments, “Like a rock thrown into a pond, Reaganomics sent shock waves through state art councils and corporate donors. What the government programs had given, the government took away” (*A History of African American Theatre* 431). The Negro Ensemble Company’s funding was cut in half and Woodie King Jr.’s New Federal Theatre took a debilitating cut as well. Eventually the Negro Ensemble Company was forced to close as were many black theatres.

The economic condition of black theatre in the 1980s was a result of Reagan’s swift work at diminishing and often disabling many of the programs that were important to the progress of African Americans from the years of the civil rights movement forward. James Hatch’s insight regarding the state of black theatre was part of the larger agenda of Reagan’s administration that had its roots in opposition to integration that began soon after the civil rights movement’s advances. Journalist Tom Wicker writes in *Tragic Failure*:

By 1966 opinion surveys were showing a startling reversal [to civil rights legislation]: Three quarters of white voters thought blacks were moving ahead too fast, demanding and being given too much, at the expense of whites. As white backlash mounted, polls the next year suggested that the number one concern of

most respondents was fear that black gains would damage the well-being of whites (8).

As early as the 1960s it was clear that white conservative backlash against the policies of the civil rights movement was gaining momentum. In their 1965 essay “Who Has the Revolution” John B. Turner and Whitney M. Young, Jr. mention a new, at that time, white supremacist group, SPONGE, or the Society to Prevent Only Negroes Getting Everything. In the mid-sixties the same conservative ideology that Reagan pushed in the 1980s, and exists today, was clear to Turner and Young who wrote:

If the Negro really wants to improve himself, it is up to him. If he is down and out, if he has fewer life chances, he has only himself to blame. People who see the cause of the Negro’s problem as individual failure say to the Negro, ‘Learn to speak better, dress well but less conspicuously, become quieter and more moderate in your behavior, work harder, save your money, fix up your property, attend concerts . . . This prescription for solving the Negro racial problem is called acculturation or, more commonly, the ‘melting pot’ approach. People who believe in this approach would seek to help the Negro equalize his life chances by making him a ‘dark white man’ (1156).

By the 1980s the message was, as Ronald Reagan made cuts or changes in policies that directly affected black communities, that even the concept of the “dark white man” was unwelcome to many white Americans. While promoting a political culture that vilified blacks as thugs and welfare queens, Reagan ushered in the age of racial realism – an ideology that claims the civil rights movement equalized American society, racism is over and if blacks were still behind and suffering it was the result of their own attitude and

behavior, much like Turner and Young's 1965 statement. The arts were no exception when it came to the ideas of racial realism.

Reagan conservatives looked seriously at the NEA's Expansion Arts programs, which were created to focus on minorities, emerging artists and underserved organizations. The grants from this program were one of the lifelines of black theater companies, including Amas. In 1980, The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, produced a report on the NEA which stated:

The NEA spends millions of dollars yearly to fund programs and policies which are unconcerned in any way with enduring artistic accomplishments; the best of these projects do no more than fossilize the popular culture of the past, and the worst are little more than high-flown welfare and employment schemes (qtd. in Koch, "The Contest for American Culture" 23).

Reagan also called for a colorblind society that would eliminate the preferences shown in the Voting Rights Act and Affirmative Action. As one of the principles of racial realism, colorblindness, in this context, means that no one group should receive preference because society has transcended race. Again, under this philosophy, responsibility lies with the individual's behavior and attitude no matter what color they are or what circumstances they come from. As funding was lessened or stripped completely from programs that benefited black communities, black theatres also suffered. Since Amas still carried the perception of being a black company, it also carried the burden of limited funding.

After over a decade in operation, and aside from LeNoire's original mission to cast interracial and not be labeled as a black theatre, Amas was, in fact, identified with black theatre. Whether it was because the company founder was black or because black subject

matter made up the majority of the company's production history, in sources examining the condition of black theatre, Amas was mentioned alongside others. A. Peter Bailey's "A Look at the Contemporary Black Theatre Movement," written in 1983, mentions Amas as one of a group of theatres "that have played a role in the contemporary black theatre movement," along with Vinnette Carroll's Urban Arts Corps, Aduke Aremu's Harlem Children's Theatre, as well as several others (21). Additionally, Addell Austin's 1988 essay "The Present State of Black Theatre" includes Amas in her "Catalog of American Black Theatre Companies", with the further explanation that "These are companies which are primarily concerned with plays about the black experience" (95). As late as 2008 Glenda Dicker/sun wrote in *African American Theatre: A Cultural Companion*:

Though the Black Power and Black Arts Movements were dominated by male voices, women were active nationally in founding and sustaining theatre companies. In New York alone these included Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre in Harlem, Hazel Bryant's Richard Allen Cultural Center, Rosetta LeNoire's Amas Repertory, and Marjorie Moon's Billy Holiday Theatre in Brooklyn (147).

Dicker/sun not only aligns Amas with other black theatre companies but also infers that Rosetta LeNoire was a participant in the Black Arts theatre movement, something that LeNoire had specifically attempted to distance herself from. Nevertheless, this sample of scholarship reveals that as the decades passed Amas was considered a black theatre established by a black theatre professional.

A look at Amas's productions through the eighties illustrates that LeNoire was, for all intents and purposes, primarily presenting musicals with black subject matter. However,

to be thorough, there were some musicals interspersed that were not necessarily of black subject matter like *The Buck Stops Here*, about Harry Truman. Many of the reviews mention that casts were multiracial or multiethnic.

In 1980 LeNoire appeared to be more accepting of her role in black theater as shown in her letter to the *Black Theatre Alliance Newsletter*:

I am concerned about funding for Black theatre in the 1980s . . . I am positive that the people in charge are not stumbling in the dark. They know how their policies will affect Black theatre people. I am certain that they are not honestly empathizing with and evaluating the inequities of the past in which the history of Third World people has been generally ignored (*Black Theatre Alliance Newsletter* qtd. in Norflett 432).

Her letter uses the term “Third World” several times, such as, “I am especially concerned about the Third World (multiracial) history being told through theatrical techniques which have a universal way of educating people” (432). In using the term, LeNoire may have been associating herself with an African heritage, since countries of Africa are considered to be third world. She may also have been attempting to appeal to the Black Theatre Alliance (BTA), a group that served as a support network for black theatres. For whatever reason, the language in the letter illustrates an awareness of changing times and politics within the black theatre community. LeNoire is saying she feels there is a deeper political agenda to the withdrawal of funds. If LeNoire continued to promote Amas as a theatre that was not black, the BTA may not have been sympathetic. The language in her letter positions her more in common with the concerns of black theatres. As it turned out, the BTA closed after its main government support organization, the Comprehensive

Employment and Training Act (CETA), was dissolved during the next few years of Reagan's administration.

Where most battles on integration were fought from the side of white organizations' inclusion of minorities, Amas was conversely a black organization working hard to include whites, as well as all other ethnicities, in their productions. LeNoire used this as a point of pride and distinction when she spoke about Amas, to set it apart from other theatres. In a 1990 interview in *Back Stage* she pointed out:

We buried that maid [a role in which LeNoire had been typecast] stereotype right with any others we happened to come across, and became pioneers in what is known today as "non-traditional casting." In Amas productions over the years we have had the first black pope, Oriental cowboys, and the first Caucasians ever to play in the old all-black baseball league ("Being a black female actress is no challenge compared to keeping Amas alive" 25).

By this time she was taking some ownership for the practice of nontraditional casting, positioning Amas as pioneering the practice, and through her bold choices having dispatched stereotyping and discrimination. The black pope LeNoire mentions was a character in the musical *Anonymous*, but it was the 1985 musical *Bingo!* which brought "the first Caucasians ever to play in the old all-black baseball league" to the stage, a choice that pushed LeNoire's casting policy to what seemed like unreasonable, if not absurd, limits.

### ***Bingo!* (1985): Forgoing Blackness for the Sake of Politics**

Ossie Davis and Hy Gilbert adapted the musical *Bingo!* from the novel *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars*. Already having been adapted to a film starring Billy Dee Williams, James Earl Jones and Richard Pryor, it told the story of black baseball teams of the 1930s. Mel Gussow's review in the *New York Times* points out that the film "focused on racial inequities," and because of the team's exclusion, "they were forced to become showmen in the manner of basketball's Harlem Globetrotters," as excellent athletes went unnoticed. Gussow's review points out the lightweight treatment given to what could have been rich dramatic possibilities, while mentioning the "congenial" performances. His review hits home with:

Inexplicably, there are several white athletes on Bingo's all-black team; their presence vitiates whatever pretense the musical has of making a political statement. Watching *Bingo!* the musical, one remembers the movie – the flamboyance of Billy Dee Williams and James Earl Jones and, especially Richard Pryor as the baseball player who would do anything to break into the majors, even lie about his color ("A Baseball Musical: *Bingo!*" C36).

By insisting on interracial casting, in a situation where it was clearly, per the source material, inappropriate, LeNoire devalued the dignity of black baseball teams that were ostracized because of color. As if it were not enough to affirm the courage and dedication of an all-black baseball team for its own sake, without the baggage of a muddled casting choice, LeNoire made a decision that negated the team's struggle. These players were segregated and no casting decision could change that fact, other than to make it less historically significant and somewhat silly.

Gussow's review was not the only place where *Bingo!*'s casting was questioned. Actress and director Billie Allen also recalled *Bingo!*'s gala opening where she had brought two of Harlem's most important politicians whom she had been attempting to woo over in support of Amas. Allen recalled:

They both thought I was crazy! And when I confronted Rosetta with this, shall we say, inconsistency, she responded rather sharply, 'All my career I was denied roles because of my color. I'll be damned if that will ever happen in my theater!' (Allen qtd. in *Profile of Amas Musical Theatre* 5)

Allen remembered that LeNoire's only compromise was to have them wear darker makeup – a decision that would have pitted one mistake against another. Clearly when casting interracially with no regard for its lack of plausibility or respect for the source material the consequences will work against the intention. Putting a white actor in blackface added minstrelsy to the problem and presented a clear admission of LeNoire's naiveté when it came to considering what race means onstage. Her own experience of racial discrimination should have been the clear motivation for leaving a black baseball team black. Rather than the audience being concerned about the odd color composition of the so-called black baseball team it would have been a better choice to tell the story as it happened.

The casting of white actors in black roles could have been LeNoire's attempt to venture into the unrealistic, where earlier Walter Kerr felt cross-racial casting found its place. Instead her decision was one that forced her philosophy on *Bingo!* LeNoire could have simply accepted the production for something that it most obviously was – a show about black experience in a white world. Instead, she pushed against casting expectations to confuse and strain the concept of colorblindness.



In 2013 director Daniel Banks discussed casting choices by pointing out that the heritage of actors may reveal more than their appearance. “Since USers [Banks’ term for Americans] live in a multiethnic society, we cannot rely on the visual to know a person’s identity, or, more importantly, how he identifies” (“The Welcome Table: Casting for an Integrated Society” 6). LeNoire’s white baseball players may have come from a heritage that was not evident from their appearance, adding further complexity to her casting choice. To illustrate, in her autobiography, *Just Lucky I Guess*, Carol Channing, who originated the role of Dolly Levi in the first white cast of *Hello Dolly!*, revealed that her paternal grandfather was of African heritage. Channing was eighty-one when she disclosed:

When I was sixteen years old, packing for leaving home alone for the first time to go to Bennington College, my mother announced to me I was part Negro. “I’m only telling you this,” she said, “because the Darwinian law says you could easily have a black baby (8).

Channing’s father identified physically as white though his original birth certificate had a “c,” meaning colored, as his race. Channing kept this secret all her life. Physically she also identified with being white and, considering the times in which she worked, it could have put her performing career in jeopardy.

LeNoire was of a mixed racial heritage herself, though physically she identified as black and spent her life being discriminated against. Banks asks, “How ‘non-traditional’ or ‘color-blind’ would a production with actors of color be considered if audiences could not read the actors as being from historically marginalized groups?” (8). In the case of *Bingo!* actual team players who identified as white, though of African heritage, would not have suffered the same, or the extent of, discrimination that players who physically identified as

black. In fact, players who identified physically as white would have qualified for the white major leagues as long as their heritage remained undisclosed. It is these types of complications that LeNoire did not weigh when she made her choice. Like insisting a few white performers be present in *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, LeNoire forced her politics on the material, even if the result was obvious tokenism that confused both black and white audiences.

*Bingo!* may not have been an example of the most successful of casting choices but it did put Amas and LeNoire in the middle of a dialogue on nontraditional casting that was gaining momentum as the eighties moved forward. Actors' Equity continued to monitor casting and had taken action against productions that ignored giving minority actors equal opportunity. In 1980 the union developed a committee to read scripts prior to casting and give nontraditional casting recommendations to directors and producers. Again, it may have been a mixed up notion of breaking union rules or going against her union colleagues that caused LeNoire to clutter *Bingo's* story with white actors. However, there were black theatre companies that had formed by this time, were suffering in the backwash of Reaganomics and still stuck to their missions. LeNoire's mission was, after almost two decades, lodged somewhere between public perception of her theatre as a black theatre and her need to make it appear otherwise.

In 1986 Actors Equity conducted the first Non-Traditional Casting Symposium in New York City. The event drew over one thousand theatre professionals to discuss the status of nontraditional casting and make suggestions for how to get more theatres to pay closer attention to their casting policies in the future. From the Symposium came a publication, *Beyond Tradition*, which served as a record of the Symposium activities,

particularly its many panel discussions. Guidelines were given as to how nontraditional casting might work and make sense. The Symposium called attention to the seriousness with which Equity was treating the issue and set the stage for a dialogue that would carry forward into the nineties and the twenty-first century. The Non-Traditional Casting Project and its Symposium remained at the forefront of all discussion of cross-racial, integrated and multicultural casting as the times and terminology changed and as the next turn of a century approached.

## CHAPTER IV

### NONTRADITIONAL CASTING FORMALIZES

“When are we not going to try to get blacks to pretend that they are something other than they are?” (Henry Miller qtd. in *Beyond Tradition* 58)

In 1985, the same year Amas produced *Bingo!*, LeNoire began a steady career in television that would continue well into the 1990s. She was cast on a number of episodes of *Gimme A Break* in 1985 followed by work on *Amen* and finally settled into a regular role on the long lived *Family Matters* in 1989. Her lucrative salary was helpful with a struggling theatre company to support, but LeNoire’s absence, while filming in California, made administering Amas difficult. Amas began experiencing a period of decline at the same time Actor’s Equity took a serious step towards institutionalizing and organizing nontraditional casting. Because of Equity’s initiative, nontraditional casting became a challenge for all theatre companies rather than the isolated mission of a few select groups such as Amas. The union’s push for more diversity in casting came at a time when black theatres were suffering from debilitating losses in funding. Chapter IV will examine and discuss Equity’s Non-traditional Casting Project (NTCP), the First Symposium of the NTCP and the surge of critical debate that was the result of the NTCP’s initiatives.

The difficulties Amas experienced from the mid-1980s until a change in its administration in the 1990s will also be discussed. Shifts in the political landscape that caused changes in funding were ongoing through the 1990s and will be shown to be inextricably linked to a new ideology pushing back against race conscious policies. Also important was the growing national realization that civil rights legislation had lost momentum and integration as a means for resolving inequality was failing. As integration

lost ground, theatres were as culpable for that failure as other institutions while at the same time being targeted with the rest of the arts as federal funding was cut. Chapter IV discusses the political forces at work that diminished the progress of integration and what the effect was on the fate of black theatre and of Amas. Amas, still identified as black theatre, was threatened with closure throughout the late eighties and mid-nineties.

Prior to her move to the west coast, Rosetta LeNoire received a letter from Actors' Equity Association praising her for her casting practices. "Your theatre," the 1984 letter reads, "embodies the goals of Actors' Equity: that is, that Black and White actors can perform together in an integrated setting with wondrous creative results." Written by Anthony LeGrand, Business Representative for Equal Employment Opportunity, the letter further states, "I intend to keep an open line of communication with you because your endeavors at AMAS are an example to the professional theatre" (*Amas Musical Theatre Archive*. Production files. Box # 2 MG 463 *Blackberries*). The letter clearly communicates AEA's approval of LeNoire's mission as it was realized in her casting choices. The year of the letter is one year before *Bingo!* was produced and may have informed her controversial casting of that show. Also worth noting, the show that convinced LeGrand was *Blackberries* – a show about minstrelsy which included not only the depiction of a minstrel show but also white performers in blackface. Andre de Shields directed and claimed, "I don't know how many people realize that Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney and Ethel Merman performed in blackface or brownface. It's the kind of information that I know people automatically think is offensive, but that isn't true" (qtd. in Nelson. "Blackberries – a musical odyssey." *Daily News*. n.p.). The article contains information that director de Shields had high hopes for *Blackberries* going to Broadway, but these hopes were not

realized. The title, *Blackberries*, hearkens back to comments made in the mid-1960s when the all-black *Hello Dolly!* was unfavorably compared to the *Blackbirds* revues. However, *Blackberries* would be praised by AEA while theatricalizing offensive subject matter. Again, a show like *Blackberries*, with white actors in blackface, may have informed LeNoire's comments regarding *Bingo!* the following year. Setting aside how race was represented in *Blackberries*, the letter from AEA, concerned with integrated employment and not an offensive subject, told LeNoire that she was doing exactly what she should be doing, whether or not her audiences remained perplexed and possibly offput by her choices. AEA's continued zeal for integrating theatre in whatever way possible led to the formation of the Non-Traditional Casting Project in 1986 – an initiative that mobilized the union and its members toward the common goal of expanding integration of theatre once and for all.

### **The Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP) and the First Non-Traditional Casting Project Symposium: Integration in All Forms**

The NTCP was only one step of many that Actor's Equity took to combat discrimination through the years. In 1947 Equity demanded theatre owners cease the practice of segregating audiences. "We state now . . . to the public which is looking to us to do what is just and humanitarian," the union stated, "that unless the situation is remedied, we will be forced to forbid our members to play there" ([www.actorsequity.org](http://www.actorsequity.org)). In the nineteen fifties Equity forbid its members to perform in South Africa as long as apartheid existed. The union also produced "Integration Showcases" which presented scenes with mixed casting to an audience of casting directors and producers. The Ethnic Minorities Committee, of which Rosetta LeNoire was a member, was formed in the nineteen sixties

and an Equal Employment Opportunity Business Representative was added in the nineteen seventies. Still there was work to be done to finally ensure that theatre companies, directors, playwrights and theatre administration fully understood the serious position the union held towards diversity in all areas of theatre production. The Non-Traditional Casting Project was a larger initiative that oversaw the next stage of Equity's work in the 1980s.

In November 1986 NTCP's First National Symposium on Non-Traditional Casting was held at the Schubert Theatre in New York. Subsequent to the symposium *Beyond Tradition*, a transcript of the proceedings, was published. Keynote speeches by John Houseman, Raul Julia, Paul Robeson and Frances Foster bookended each of the three panel discussions. Like the integrated showcases of the past the symposium also presented groupings of scenes before each panel, all from plays by white playwrights such as Neil Simon, David Mamet, Shakespeare, Lanford Wilson and others. All scenes were cast with non-white actors or mixed combinations of actors. The scenes were presented as proof that black actors, as well as a few Asian and Latino actors, could viably portray characters in plays that had a long history of being perceived as white only. There were no scenes from plays written by non-white playwrights cast with white actors. Clearly the message was that it was white institutions appealing to white audiences by presenting white plays that needed to come forward and embrace nontraditional casting, primarily because American theatre was founded and operated from a white majority point of view. In terms of policy, the provocation to focus on white institutions is reflective of integration politics that initially focused on desegregating white schools. Additionally, the focus on white theatres reveals where the majority of employment was for all actors.

Rosetta LeNoire was not in attendance at any of the NTCP symposia. In the late 1980s she was well into her television work and may not have had the ability to attend. She may also have felt that Amas had fulfilled the mandate for nontraditional casting well before the NTCP existed. She had validation from AEA that Amas was an example of exactly what AEA wanted from other theatres.

Where LeNoire's philosophy was more concerned with ending prejudice through creative collaboration, AEA's concern was employment. It was the plausibility, practicality and commercial nature of employing or casting nontraditionally that comprised the arguments behind questions, concerns and insights from the symposium's participants. For example, from a panel entitled "Non-Traditional Casting: What Tradition?" Carl Harms makes the statement:

I am the Chairman of the LORT Committee of Actors' Equity. Actors' Equity has a very basic interest in this subject – employment for our ethnic actors . . . I think this problem is related to the managers of our theatres, our producers and how they are going to break down their own feeling of what they think their audiences want.

How do we get to the point where our producers are really going to be brave enough to do some creative work on their audience? (29)

Sara O'Connor, Managing Director of Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, is the first responder to Harms' question:

I am not being slick when I say there is no way to do it but to do it . . . Milwaukee Repertory Theatre last spring had the largest subscription renewal in its history after a full season of non-traditional, non-conventional, should-be-traditional, color-blind



(I don't care what you call it) casting for a variety of plays with a multi-racial resident company. You can't just run scared (29).

In this one exchange several different perspectives have been presented, for example: the need for more employment of minority actors, the idea that the problem resides with those in charge of theatres, the need to confront audiences with nontraditional casting, the efficacy of making bold season and casting choices and the more ambiguous notion that theatre companies are afraid of the results of casting nontraditionally.

Amas's mission fell more in line with the thoughts of O'Connor. LeNoire did not question her casting decisions and made choices according to her personal philosophy and politics. Her audiences were not asked what they would and would not accept. However, what is apparent from the symposium is that Amas was nowhere near the first or only theatre that was tackling nontraditional casting.

*Beyond Tradition* reveals the symposium as a microcosm of the national debate on nontraditional casting. It also reveals a lack of focus as discussions began on one subject matter and ended on another. As Robert Nemiroff stated in his opening to the panel "Reviewing the Audience," "The purpose of this conference is not to pay lip service any more, not to say the pro forma things we think somebody wants to hear, but to talk honestly" (72). On a panel dedicated to how audiences could be convinced to accept nontraditional casting, Jack Reuler, Artistic Director of Mixed Blood Theatre, said, "If we presuppose the audiences' ignorance we are making a mistake. Our job is not to ask the audience what they want to see, but tell them what they want to see" (72) Reuler's statement, which referenced Mixed Blood's commitment and history with non-traditional casting, is hopeful that if a company courageously goes forward the audience will follow. His statement is somewhat

negated by press agent Irene Gandy who responded, “There is no problem, I don’t think, with the audience accepting color-blind casting, but will they pay to see it? Will the critics come to review it?” (72) Bernard Jacobs, who headed the Schubert Organization, then puts the responsibility directly on the critics citing the treatment a female actress received playing Hamlet at the New York Shakespeare Festival, “the critics tore her apart. There has to be some education of the critics. We will not succeed . . . unless we have the support of the press, because the public, unfortunately, are like sheep and they are going to follow the press” (78). Jacobs’s concern is interesting when reflecting on the Broadway theatre of ten years prior to the symposium when a multitude of black shows, including *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, were playing successfully. Critics used the trend to comment on casting choice and however contradictory their comments were, as surveyed in Chapter III, the audiences were still attracted. Additionally, Amas, as a small off Broadway theatre had always been able to get critics to review their shows. Whether it was because LeNoire was known or because of the legacy of *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, the *New York Times* reviewed many of Amas’s productions through the years. With respect to the black trend in the 1970s, in contrast to what the NTCP was requiring, shows using black subject matter and casting black performers did not constitute nontraditional casting no matter how such shows integrated the white establishment theatre. AEA’s concern was the employment of actors only.

In the next exchange, David Visser, booking agent for the Negro Ensemble Company, passes it on to playwrights while also confusing what is traditional and what is nontraditional:

You have to go to the Gus Edwardses and the Charles Fullers to find the inter-racial plays being written in any quantity in 1986. I think that we really have to put a demand on our playwrights to begin to think about the society at large and the society which they are writing about (78).

Again, plays dealing with interracial subject matter being cast according to their interracial requirements is not necessarily nontraditional casting. One of the results of the symposium was the NTCP's formal definition of nontraditional casting: "the casting of ethnic, female or disabled actors in roles where race, ethnicity, gender or physical capability are not necessary to the characters' or play's development" and its outline of four separate categories in which nontraditional casting might prove appropriate:

**Societal Casting:** ethnic, female or disabled actors are cast in roles they perform in society as a whole.

**Cross-cultural Casting:** the entire world of a play is translated to a different cultural setting.

**Conceptual Casting:** an ethnic, female or disabled actor is cast in a role to give a play greater resonance.

**Blind Casting:** all actors are cast without regard to their race, ethnicity, gender or physical capability (*Beyond Tradition* n.pag. [bold type the author's choice].).

Though Harry Newman, the Executive Director of the NTCP states, "These definitions and ideas are presented solely to stimulate creative decision-makers to begin thinking in the broadest terms," both the definition of nontraditional casting and the four categories are problematic (6). For instance, "Societal Casting," though appearing to be what Visser called for, is actually aiming to have roles which could be cast from any ethnicity, and

usually cast as white, being cast instead with minority actors. The category is defined as actors being cast in roles they perform in society and presumes knowledge of what these societal roles are and how they manifest themselves. In the case of race, or “ethnicity,” as much of the text states, there is a question of what specifically defines an actor’s ethnic role. Is this role defined by skin color, genetic makeup, cultural heritage or behavior? Is this presumed societal role a stereotype? In the case of Rosetta LeNoire’s history as an actor, is it “societal casting” to continually cast her in the role of a maid in a white household because somewhere in American society black women are working as maids? “Conceptual Casting” is defined as a specific ethnic, female or disabled actor being cast in a character to “give the play greater resonance” without any explanation of what “resonance” means in the context of a casting decision. In the case of LeNoire’s casting of *Bingo!*, a greater resonance was achieved in furthering LeNoire’s political and philosophical concept while robbing the play of its resonance as a story of discrimination. The politics of the play’s statement were sacrificed to the politics of the company’s founder. It could also be questioned as to whether the term “ethnic” in the definition of conceptual casting applies only to actors of color or if, as in the case of *Bingo!*, it also applies to white actors.

The category of “Blind Casting” might best fit LeNoire’s casting of *Bingo!* if she expected audiences to not notice that she had cast white actors in the roles of black baseball players. However, the idea was distorted when, after being questioned by audience members who absolutely did notice her casting choice, she suggested putting the white actors in blackface. Blind casting, or as it is often called – color blind casting – is

problematic inasmuch as it asks audiences to look beyond, or transcend, ethnicity, gender or body type in an attempt to erase difference.

Despite problematic terminology in its casting concepts the NTCP's Symposium was the strongest statement by Actor's Equity to date, proving its commitment and seriousness towards seeing that all of its artists were treated fairly. Following New York, symposia were held in Washington D.C., San Francisco, Boston, Los Angeles, and Toronto. In all, it took until 1989 to complete the symposium phase after which – using *Beyond Tradition* and a video called *Breaking Tradition* – 25 forums and seminars were held with industry professionals and educational groups such as ATHE, The Dramatists Guild, LORT and others. Nonetheless, the implementation of casting change remained slow and seemed to peak with enthusiasm generated by open discourse as the NTCP was holding symposia. Unfortunately “doing” rather than talking remained an issue once decision makers were left on their own. Harry Newman writes, in his 1989 article “Holding Back: The Theatre's Resistance to Non-Traditional Casting”:

Most express support or interest . . . Such indirection, however, only makes it difficult to determine whose professed commitment . . . is genuine. Whether and how nontraditional casting appears in the work itself is our only gauge of sincerity. Of course, at some point in the history of almost every theatre, an ethnic person was cast . . . or there was an incidence of cross-gender casting or whatnot . . . The point, however, is not to seek refuge in token examples, but to include these American artists regularly and fully in our performing arts (27).

Newman's article, written three years after the 1986 symposia initiative, illustrates the reticence of theatres to seriously adopt nontraditional casting as a mission rather than what might be called a novelty.

Despite the efforts of the NTCP, change did not take place fast enough or thoroughly enough to significantly affect the landscape of American theatre. Theatre had conspicuously lagged behind other institutions in implementing the changes brought about by the civil rights movement and the constitutionality of integration. Amas, and other organizations such as the New York Shakespeare Festival made integrated casting an important part of their operation many years ahead of the NTCP. However, the NTCP worked to break ground in all theatre organizations based on a common sense idea that the United States was no longer the exclusive realm of a white majority and that theatre was operating in a time long since gone. The NTCP's mission statement reads:

Our principle concerns are that ethnic, female and disabled artists are denied equitable professional opportunities; that this lack of participation is not only patently discriminatory, but a serious loss to the cultural life of the nation and has resulted in a theater that does not reflect the diversity of our society (qtd. in Pao 8).

Harry Newman's 1989 article points to U.S. Census Bureau statistics in the attempt to convince readers that the term "ethnic minority" would be obsolete by the year 2000 as ethnic populations grow and "The United States will have become a nation where every group is a minority" (25). Holding the performing arts community to account he asks, "Why don't we have a multiethnic, multicultural performing arts already? If I were describing the NTCP's work to a Brazilian or an Icelander or a person from China it might seem silly. What's the big deal? Why has this change been so long in coming?" (27).

Unfortunately, as Newman begins to examine the answer to his questions, he comes up against the reality of American life:

Naturally the deeper resistance to non-traditional casting is a reflection of the racism, sexism, and prejudice operating within our society itself. No matter how much performing artists behave as though they work in a vacuum, we are a part of the greater culture, and affected by it . . . It is a culture in which differences of any kind are discouraged . . . Individuals who are “different” are tolerated only if they can be categorized, or if they can prove that they are in some way “just like the rest of us” (28).

Though Newman acknowledges racism, sexism and prejudice as components in resistance to nontraditional casting he also fully recognizes that theatre institutions work within a bureaucracy that tends to maintain status quo in order to assure survival both of the institutions and its employees, such as artistic directors, who jealously stand guard over their jobs. Nevertheless, Newman brings his argument back to the landscape of the nation when he writes:

Yet whether for artistic or practical reasons, those who make decisions in the theatre must recognize that American society has transformed . . . There may be a longing for the status quo of one’s formative years, but for demographic reasons alone the status quo is changing too (31).

As a piece of the NTCP’s entire package to persuade theatres to take on a challenge to their outmoded means of operation, Newman’s article tackled bold issues such as racism, job protection and old fashioned thinking entrenched in a no longer relevant past. Written three years after the NTCP’s initiative, while still waiting for substantive action to take place, his

article took a stand in the national conversation that was less polite than the symposia. As Amas struggled and LeNoire's voice and presence subsided, the debate on nontraditional casting picked up strength from the contribution of new critical responses in the late eighties that fueled the national conversation for the next 30 years.

### **As the Nation Goes So Goes Nontraditional Casting**

Newman's article was one of many critical essays on nontraditional casting that appeared during and after the NTCP's symposium years. The debate was reinvigorated not only by the NTCP's formal categories but also by the more positive outlook that perhaps, with imagination and courage, a new theatrical environment could be created.

Writing from 1988 through 1989 Zelda Fichandler – of the Arena Stage – The Drama Review's Richard Schechner, and theatre critic Richard Hornby all wrote often quoted essays on nontraditional casting. All three essays discuss not only the reasons why ambivalence continued but also offered perspectives on the practice's implementation. In all three cases the perspectives involve intersections of three areas that Zelda Fichandler compresses when she states, "Nontraditional casting in the end becomes not a matter of employment, but of politics and art" ("Casting for a Different Truth" 21). Employment, politics and art are the unstable moorings in the debate with much of their resolution coming from pre-conceived ideas on audience reception.

Writing for *American Theatre* in 1988, Zelda Fichandler's "Casting for a Different Truth" reflected on a time many years prior when the Arena Stage implemented what Fichandler calls an "experiment . . . with a totally integrated acting company." The experiment was, according to Fichandler, not successful. Fichandler writes of casting as



breathing life into an imagined figure that “exists in a specific social, political and philosophic imagined world.” Once the director and producer step away:

The actors and the audience will be left to share the implications of each other’s presence within the tale enacted between them . . . a highly political act of communication and empathy. They speak to each other through and under the lines of the play, of their daily lives and of what they want to come of them, for themselves and for their children (21).

The delicate reciprocity between actor and audience, which is quite separate from the actor’s employment with the company as an institution, is where the success or failure of nontraditional casting resides. Fichandler idealizes an integrated company where “the human spirit could be embodied in unpredictable and newly imagined ways, astonishing the spectator and revealing meanings never before anticipated, sloughing off old ways of looking at things and opening them up to their very heart,” and concludes, “I can imagine such a company, and it excites me. I can imagine it, though I wouldn’t yet know how to make it real. Surely it is not an abstract possibility.” Fichandler’s weary comment is reinforced with nostalgia for the Arena’s past experiment in integrated casting, about which she does not reveal any more than to say “a variety of reasons” were responsible for its failure. However, the relationship between the world of the actor and “the world that the audience brings in from the outside” seems to play a large part in the unpredictability of success (21).

Fichandler’s words, though more poetic in style than reactions to Amas’s work over the years, could, in their most basic interpretation, be applied to Amas. To pull from Fichandler’s language, the unpredictable way in which the baseball team was embodied in

*Bingo!* astonished at least part of the audience and caused them to question and possibly arrive at different meanings for LeNoire's casting choice. LeNoire imagined her company and went forward without over thinking many of her decisions. This courage worked for and against artistic results however she never flinched from doing exactly what she wanted with her company.

Each of the three essays puts forth an imagined theatre where nontraditional casting might work. This imagined theatre differs, according to the author, from the theatre already in existence. Richard Schechner's 1989 "Race Free, Gender Free, Body-Type Free, Age Free Casting" presents his argument:

for a dance and theatre where several different kinds of responses are possible: times when perceiving the race, gender, etc., of performers matters; times when spectators perceive the categories but it doesn't matter; and times when it should not even be perceived – not because of disguise but because spectators have been trained to be race, gender, age, and body-type "blind" (9).

However, Schechner admits, while sounding somewhat like Fichandler:

It is extremely difficult even to spell out this kind of situation because it is so unlike what currently goes on in America. It is hard to imagine flexibility with regard to these categories which are felt to be either "naturally" or "historically" fixed" (9).

Schechner does admit that one group, the Mixed Blood Theatre Company, is successful with color-blind casting but it isn't enough. He wants blindness on all fronts while simultaneously acknowledging that the "nature/nurture" or "biologically determined/socially constructed" debate is a classically irresolvable conflict" (10).

Therefore, since the data derived from biological data is always changing "in terms of

social constructions and interpretations” the type of flexibility he seeks in an audience would always be unstable.

Once again, without knowing Amas, and without LeNoire’s input, Schechner points to the way Amas pushes its audiences to adjust as the work changes. As previously mentioned, LeNoire did as she wanted, giving little thought to concepts such as nature/nurture or social constructions. As small a company as Amas was, it likewise had a small core following that understood the work the company did, understood that they might possibly see any configuration of race on stage and also understood that the interpretation of what was on stage was largely in the hands of the spectators. Schechner’s ideal “trained” audience may have already been realized at Amas.

Published later in 1989, Richard Hornby’s “Interracial Casting” supports shifting the responsibility to critics. After citing several examples of negative critical response to occasions of interracial casting – including John Simon’s admonishing the New York Shakespeare Festival for casting black actors in *The Winter’s Tale* and Kenneth Tynan’s objection to *Flower Drum Song*’s casting a Japanese actor in a lead role rather than a Chinese actor – he mentions the generally negative critical response to casting James Earl Jones as Judge Brack in Ibsen’s *Ghosts*:

They couldn’t help pointing out that there were . . . no blacks in nineteenth-century Norway . . . at the same time, no critic took issue with the fact that the cast were speaking English, though I think nineteenth-century Norwegians actually spoke Norwegian. Speaking English was simply a convention, a neutral means for American actors to convey the play to an American audience . . . (460)

Hornby then proposes, rather than color-blind casting, “color-neutral casting, in which we accept the conventionalized nature of the stage, and suspend concern about the race of an actor unless the play itself stresses it.” He also points out that the way to achieve color-neutral casting, “is to practice it as often as possible” (460).

By analyzing critical reaction to nontraditional casting Hornby pulls back from focus on general audience reaction and places it specifically on the critics who sometimes wield the power to deter productions from making bolder casting choices. In a section devoted to racism in theatre practices, Harry Newman’s “Holding Back” (1989) explicitly points to John Simon’s “repeated attacks on non-traditional casting” and blatantly asks if they are “fueled purely by artistic considerations” (28). Though not calling Simon a racist outright, Newman has planted the question of Simon’s underlying intentions and therefore his possible negative affect on an audience and theatre professionals where, as was pointed out above, “the deeper resistance . . . is a reflection of the racism, sexism, and prejudice operating within our society itself” (28).

While Fichandler and Schechner are attempting to comment on art, essays by Hornby and Newman are concerned with critical response and social implications as it pertained to employment. Art is hardly a consideration in Newman’s, though he does examine critical response as Hornby does. While posing the question of whether Simon is considering art in his responses, Newman brings his essay back to questions of racism and prejudice.

1989 also saw Newman’s article “Casting a Doubt: the Legal Issues of Non-traditional Casting” published in *The Journal of Arts Management and Law*. He includes adjustments in the wording of the four NTCP casting categories as well as some further

degree of explanation. For instance, societal casting includes the roles of “clerks, judges, scientists and salespersons” as examples of roles performed in society. A description of conceptual casting included the wording “extra dimension to that part” rather than “resonance.” Later in the same paragraph Newman states the categories do not “negate actors’ cultural identities.” Newman is anticipating legal issues occurring with the new casting territory the NTCP is proposing. He poses questions such as “What role can the law play in opening up casting choices” and “Can the creator operate freely without regard to the law” (57). In the effort to cover all possible legalities, Newman presents a review of civil rights law and the legal questions which may be raised as theatres attempt to implement the four casting categories. In the case of blind casting Newman states that it is:

Often the kind of nontraditional casting that is thought to be the most problematic from an artistic viewpoint. Legally, however, it is the easiest to accept. It is simply the broadest extension of all civil rights legislation . . . No one is excluded at any stage. There seem to be no legal difficulties with blind casting (60).

Again, examining the legalities of nontraditional casting is acknowledging the union’s primary concern – employment. Newman’s concerns are early reflections on what Russell K. Robinson examined in his 2007 essay mentioned in the Introduction – casting is caught between First Amendment protections of artistic freedom and employment regulations. When applying civil rights law to casting how does the subjectivity that was once the nature of casting, i.e., casting the right actor for the role based on the artistic perspectives of directors, playwrights and producers, affect the legal aspect of hiring practices? After the civil rights law in 1964, and its creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, want-ads contained language that eschewed discrimination “because of such

individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin”

([www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-rights-act/](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-rights-act/)). Later language included disability and age and often creed was used as a substitute for religion. Newman's article was considering how such terminology affected casting practices. As an example, what were the legal implications in casting a play with a role written, for instance, to be young, presumed white, and female if a middle-aged black male had a better audition than the young females? If AEA's stipulation – to cast the best actor for the role – was taken literally, how would such casting change the artistic product? In such a case, if the male actor were passed over for the young, white, female actor, what could be the legal ramifications according to the civil rights law and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)? Though the scenario seems highly unlikely, to shape it a little differently, a similar hypothesis could have applied to the casting of *Bingo!* at Amas. If a company, such as Amas, is fully implementing the criteria of the EEOC, and only seven black actors came to *Bingo*'s audition and if two white actors also auditioned, is the company not legally committed to cast the two white actors, since baseball teams have 9 players? Casting is further complicated if nine black actors and two white actors came to the audition and the two white actors had better auditions than two of the black actors. The nuances of the civil rights law, when applied to theatrical, or any, casting practices are put to a test. However, nowhere in the law or in Newman's essays is art made part of the dialogue.

Though Newman's essay is meant to question, discuss and solve legalities surrounding nontraditional casting, the threat of being involved in a discrimination suit may have been a reason for theatres remaining sluggish as far as change in casting practices.

Casting has always been perceived as part of the artistic process of creating theatre and AEA and the NTCP were approaching it as an employment practice.

In the case of Amas, reviews written of shows produced in the 1980s reveal that, over all, artistic product was lacking. Mention of weak books, inconsistent casting and, in the case of 1986's *Sh-Boom!*, the work not showcasing "even one singer of promise" appear throughout the decade (*New York Times* C20). This trend, from shows for which there are reviews, may be attributed to Amas's commitment to original musicals and be part of a developmental process. However, LeNoire's mission "dedicated to bringing people of all races, creeds, colors, religions and backgrounds together through the creative arts" used language from the EEOC and was as much to do with process as it was with product (Norflett 70). In Norflett's 1983 article, "Rosetta LeNoire: The Lady and her Theatre," LeNoire states:

We have set an example that people of all races, cultures, creeds, and backgrounds can work together . . . they can do it in the offices and in the corporations. It can be done everywhere . . . it certainly does not come about with just laws. It hasn't worked this far with legislation (72).

LeNoire, like AEA and the NTCP, was concerned with employment and work process in her mission as much to facilitate equality in the work as to produce a praiseworthy piece of art. Her reference to "offices and corporations" speaks to work and employment on a broader scale with Amas as an example of how equal employment succeeds.

While LeNoire's mission is admirable, with Amas struggling through the eighties, and particularly after her lengthy television career commenced, more attention to art than to politics may have resulted in the show it needed to pull it from the realm of small off off

Broadway groups and give it a more solid foundation to survive the shaky years ahead. Most shows at Amas were one run offerings with little to no future. A production such as *Bingo!*, with its challenging casting decision, that, in the end, reduced the political message of the piece, might otherwise have had a life after Amas, particularly with its creator, Ossie Davis, being a well-known actor, playwright and director. Without specific knowledge of why shows at Amas did not go on to be developed in the future, other than the evidence in reviews, I can only speculate, with the great quantity of productions coming out of Amas, that possibly a lack of artistic quality formed a pattern that was not resolved against the priority of LeNoire's politics and the company's mission.

While AEA was launching an initiative to mobilize professional theatre to implement what might be viewed as a form of affirmative action towards the eventual full and equal integration of theatre, national politics was chiseling away at corresponding policies to diminish, or remove altogether, their influence. As LeNoire said, in the comment mentioned above, "it certainly does not come about with just laws. It hasn't worked this far with legislation" (72). While theatre continued to use the term "color-blind" to support integrated casting, the term was changing sociologically to mean that it was no longer the domain of government policy to push against inequality but rather, after only three decades since *Brown vs. Board of Education*, any claim of inequality rested solely with the individual. Tom Wicker points out that:

Following the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, federal policies reduced funds for desegregation efforts and even encouraged court action to end successful desegregation programs, with administration officials piously maintaining that these



programs no longer were needed since desegregation had been achieved (*Tragic Failure* 95).

As Reagan's economic policies began to grow the divide between the haves and have nots, conservative whites guarded against minorities getting a fair share of any available prosperity. The tendency was well known even as far back as the sixties. Turner and Young wrote in 1965:

It is, in fact, easy to believe that the walls of exclusion have fallen; having won the opportunity to enter barbershops in one community, it is possible to conclude that barbershops in all communities are open, or having integrated housing on one street, to think the street will remain integrated forever ("Who has the Revolution" 1151).

Turner and Young acknowledged that integration was failing even in the sixties because it required constant government attention to succeed after three hundred years of oppression.

As Kenneth Clark wrote in *Dark Ghetto*:

It is not sitting next to a white, but the fact that this implies equal status.

Historically, the most intimate relationships have been approved . . . so long as the status of white superiority versus Negro inferiority has been clear. Trouble comes only when Negroes . . . seek a status equal to that of whites (qtd. in Wicker 78).

In the 1980s the Reagan administration sent a message that the notion of privileging blacks over whites in government policy would be ending. Affirmative action was characterized as showing preferential treatment towards minorities, as did voters rights legislation. In Reagan's color-blind society, policies such as these were deemed unnecessary. In such a political climate, how would a white majority theatre react to a union mandate to integrate?

Being somewhat late to strongly commit to an integrated theatre, AEA and the NTCP were not seeing the hoped for results after their wave of symposia in the late 1980s.

Angela Pao's *No Safe Spaces* takes a historical stance when she comments on the integrationist politics that inspired nontraditional casting practices:

For directors and administrators . . . that attracted predominantly if not exclusively white audiences . . . the decision to cast actors of color in canonical Euroamerican plays was an acknowledgment of the abilities of black and other racial minority Americans and of their rightful claim to all aspects of the national heritage (17).

She traces how the experiment was subverted in time “when resentment against government-mandated integration in other areas of life and anxiety over racial activism carried over into the theater,” and a challenge to the institutionalized white theatre undermined the good intentions of social justice. Pao comments:

The power and privilege to define dominant social and cultural values that had been assumed and protected as the exclusive privilege of white Americans of European . . . origins was very visibly challenged by cross-racial and interracial casting, as black bodies both literally and metaphorically were placed in roles previously assumed only by whites (17).

When examined from this perspective, color-blind casting fell victim to the same politics as other institutions. White audiences questioned nontraditional casting choices in theatrical roles that were traditionally embodied by whites. Pao continues to point out that polarization over nontraditional casting remained while the NTCP, more or less, attempted to force the issue hoping to alter the otherwise territorial landscape of American theatre practices.

Josephine Lee's 2003 essay "Racial Actors, Liberal Myths" points to liberal integration being used as a cure for inequality only after it acknowledges difference. Once acknowledged these differences were considered mere surface "masks" that must be rejected in order to achieve full integration. In examining the NTCP's casting categories, Lee recognizes that the first three categories – societal, cross-cultural and conceptual casting – "all have the potential to highlight racial difference." However, color-blind (or "blind") casting does not. "The ordering of these categories," she states, "first looks at 'race, ethnicity, gender or physical capability' and then looks away, towards a kind of integrated utopia brought into being by color-blind casting" (101). In terms of political ideology, the conservative backlash against race conscious policies sought to eliminate government programs by claiming that integration had been achieved and like Lee's insight, chose to look away, a feature of color-blind casting, and no longer acknowledge race. Unfortunately, to use the casting of *Bingo!* again, there is no method, other than physical masking, to eliminate race on stage or in society. However, LeNoire's solution, to use blackface, only served to amplify race. The practice of blackface had been used, and validated by AEA's letter, mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, in 1984, one year before *Bingo!* in the production *Blackberries*.

Seeking to solve the issue of integrated theatre the NTCP and Actors' Equity also attempted to get over race by offering several types of nontraditional casting. Nonetheless, as society attended to racial issues so did theatres follow – the results were slim and inadequate. In 1989 the NTCP still had hope that their suggested casting practices would be implemented and proven to be successful through a wide range of theatrical participation. Theatres would absorb the practice into their operations, audiences would adjust and the

necessary artistic and employment questions would be put to rest. Newman claimed in “Holding Back,” “Our organizational goal is obsolescence” (24). In other words, traditional theatre practices would become non-traditional which would then, in a reasonable timeframe, settle into a new tradition and the NTCP would no longer be necessary. Newman had no way of conceiving how genuinely complicated and multi-faceted the conversation would become or how long it would continue. Also, in the 1980s, and running parallel to the work of the NTCP, black theatre continued to suffer from lack of funding. In 1992, sociology professor Samuel Gilmore’s research, spanning from 1987 to 1990, showed that the percentage of funding from the National Endowment for the Arts in that time period was drastically limited in its distribution to minority arts groups. The *Los Angeles Times* reported Gilmore’s findings that low funding to minorities appeared to be directly linked to low minority representation on NEA peer panels and not to lower numbers of applications for funds. Zan Dubin’s article also revealed:

he believes federal minority art support could be threatened as never before because of ‘right-wing’ attacks against the NEA for supporting what some deem obscene art. Some observers have speculated that this could lead the agency to support only large, mainstream, mainly Euro-centric arts institutions” (“NEA Funds Don’t Reach Minorities” n.pag. [http://articles.latimes.com/1992-08-04/entertainment/ca-5187\\_1\\_minority-arts](http://articles.latimes.com/1992-08-04/entertainment/ca-5187_1_minority-arts)).

As previously quoted in Chapter III, “What the government programs had given, the government took away” (Hatch. *A History of African American Theatre* 431).

The late 1980s brought about an outpouring of critical response to the NTCP’s initiatives that continued through the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. 1989 was

particularly important for the contribution of Harry Newman's two essays and that of Richard Schechner. 1989 was also the year Rosetta LeNoire began her long run on the television show *Family Matters* and spent much of her time on the west coast. However, her work and dedication to Amas was acknowledged when, in 1988, AEA established the Rosetta LeNoire Award, with her as its first recipient and honored at a ceremony in February 1989.

### **The Rosetta LeNoire Award: What the Union Wants**

Colleen Dewhurst, the executive secretary of Actor's Equity in 1989, delivered her address at LeNoire's award ceremony via tape due to her work schedule. She said:

You always knew what it meant to be as one – admitting no barriers to stand in your way, and admitting no barriers to stand for anyone else. I think you were always nontraditional before any of us thought of it. Fortunately, under that love and heart has always been strength and steel, and you and I both know . . . that when push comes to shove, don't fool with Rosie (“In the Sun” *The New Yorker*. 24).

Dewhurst's remarks give a nod to the NTCP with its reference to LeNoire's being “nontraditional.” The timing of the award – in 1988, during the symposia years – points to LeNoire's founding of Amas as an example of what the NTCP was striving for with other theatres. The award also proves that a theatre as small as Amas could take a significant stand against discrimination in theatre practices and have an impact. The award's page on Actor's Equity's website reads:

Established in 1988, the award was named in honor of the actress Rosetta LeNoire, who was also the first recipient, not only because of her body of work in the theatre – and her work with the then titled Actor’s Equity Association’s Ethnic Minorities Committee – but also for founding Amas Repertory Theatre Company, an organization dedicated to maintaining and interracial company of actors ([http://www.actorsequity.org/aboutequity/equityawards/lenoire\\_award.asp](http://www.actorsequity.org/aboutequity/equityawards/lenoire_award.asp)).

Having awarded its 25<sup>th</sup> recipient in 2013, the award has been given annually since its inception. Its criteria are published on the AEA website as:

The Rosetta LeNoire Award, established in 1988, recognizes outstanding artistic contributions to the universality of the human experience in American Theater. The Award is given to an individual, theater or producing organization with an exemplary record in the hiring or promotion of ethnic minorities, female actors and actors with disabilities through multi-racial and/or nontraditional casting ([http://www.actorsequity.org/aboutequity/equityawards/lenoire\\_award.asp](http://www.actorsequity.org/aboutequity/equityawards/lenoire_award.asp)).

By using language that is pulled directly from the definition of nontraditional casting published in *Beyond Tradition*, AEA linked Amas not only with the NTCP’s initiative but with the national debate that occurred as a result of the NTCP’s initiatives. By establishing the award in LeNoire’s name AEA and the NTCP acknowledged her as a leading example of what they sought from other theatre professionals. Further language explaining the motivation for the award states it is given in order to:

recognize those members that adhere to the union's policy regarding non-traditional casting, and increasing diversity within the theatre, but were unrecognized for efforts in this arena. In addition, Council felt that holding up as

a positive example those theatres and/or producers that do create ethnically diverse casting opportunities, that it would serve as an incentive for other theatres to also make strides in this area

([http://www.actorsequity.org/aboutequity/equityawards/lenoire\\_award.asp](http://www.actorsequity.org/aboutequity/equityawards/lenoire_award.asp)).

This statement supports the idea that LeNoire was bound in her mission to follow the requirements of AEA's mission to integrate theatre. Through the years many of the recipients were participants or attendees at the first symposium, including Milwaukee Repertory (mentioned earlier), Ellen Stewart (La Mama Theatre Company), the New York Shakespeare Festival (represented at the first symposium by Estelle Parsons of the Shakespeare Project), Paul Robeson (who gave a keynote address at the first symposium) and also Mixed Blood Theatre Company (mentioned in Schechner's article).

Ironically, as with the success and notoriety of *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, the Rosetta LeNoire Award did not have a visible impact on the success of Amas. LeNoire was entering her eighties and still working on the west coast. Despite her frequent commutes back to New York, her presence and determined voice had subsided as her schedule became inflexible. There were no more articles or interviews filled with passionate advocacy for her mission. Other leadership was coming on board and LeNoire's role was diminished. Consequently, Amas struggled through the first half of the 1990s as the national debate on nontraditional casting continued and built momentum. Still primarily identified as a black theatre, Amas took its place alongside others and came near closing due to lack of funding.

## **Amas Struggles as the Culture Wars Take Their Toll**

1989 marked the first ceremony honoring the Rosetta LeNoire Award. The year also saw the culmination of the first wave of initiatives from the NTCP and a surge in critical responses commenting on nontraditional casting. Additionally, 1989 was the last year of Ronald Reagan's presidency – a decade that altered the economy of the United States from that point forward and fostered a conservative ideology that fueled the so-called culture wars of the nineteen eighties and nineties. In "Cultural Wars and the Attack on Multiculturalism," Teasley and Tyson assert:

Cultural wars are intellectual, political, religious, and social conflicts over cultural pluralism in Western society. Cultural wars have many points of departure and have polarized American liberal and conservative forces over issues such as abortion rights, homosexuality, political correctness, social welfare policies, racial and ethnic identities, education, the separation between church and state, and multicultural education (391).

Backed by religious neo-conservatives the economic policies of the Reagan years grew the class divide between the haves and have nots while using a rhetoric of patriotism and individualism. The concept of national identity was put in contention with the growing movement of multiculturalism. The arts environment was also challenged as conservative forces policed artistic commodity for signs of divisiveness and anything that was deemed a threat to conservative American values. As Cristyn Davies stated:

Throughout that troubled era, the performing and visual arts and mass media were increasingly seen as the cause, rather than the reflection, of social instability, and quickly became subject to governmental regulation. The ongoing struggle over



American cultural values and the representation, production and consumption of those values made for a tenuous relationship between cultural production, regulation and the law (“Constructing ‘Decency’” 93).

In 1989 controversy over the photographic image *Piss Christ* by Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography, which contained homoerotic images, questioned the National Endowment for the Arts’ funding of artists. Extreme commentary from religious leaders such as Reverend Donald Wildman, of the American Family Association, and television commentator Patrick Buchanan, claimed Serrano’s work was part of an anti-Christian campaign. Additionally, performance artist Karen Finley and three other artists caught the attention of conservatives in the early 1990s who held the NEA accountable for funding artistic work that was deemed indecent. Eventually the agency pulled its funding to individual artists, however, funding of the Endowment also dropped nine percent from 1989 to 1998 (Caldwell “Art for Politics Sake” np). Along with the NEA, corporate and foundation funding began to diminish considerably throughout the late eighties and nineties.

As noted in Chapter III the type of matching-grant donations resembling Ford Foundation grants were never intended to support organizations in perpetuity. Organizations were expected to developed streams of income that would sustain them as large funders decreased their donations. Unfortunately, many small theatres, such as Amas, had not developed reliable means of income and relied on outside support. In 1990 LeNoire commented, in an article for *Back Stage*:

in this fragile financial climate, with production costs rising, and grant money declining, the very survival of Amas is in jeopardy . . . we seem caught in an

endless re-run of “The Perils of Pauline,” only managing to hang on by our fingernails” (Bilowit. *Back Stage* 25).

In “The Earnings Shift” Louise K. Stephens mentions that not for profit arts organizations, in the “fragile financial climate” of the late eighties and on, were required to adapt to new paradigms, not the least of which was “funder driven to market driven,” as well as becoming conscious of audience expansion in order to generate income. However, she states:

Entrepreneurship, which often flourishes at the initial stages of organizational development in nonprofit organizations, disappears once the initial organizational phase is completed. Nonprofit managers commonly slip into environmentally induced management drowsiness. They also adopt the ‘struggling to survive’ mode vs enterprise development, quality management and products (10).

By the early nineties Amas had been in operation for twenty years, Rosetta LeNoire was settled into a steady television career on the west coast, and strong leadership was absent.

The *Amas Profile* explains:

The period of time in the early nineteen-nineties, when Amas experienced an extended period of disarray, is worthy of more than passing attention because of the confluence of forces at work then. Rosetta’s absence and Amas’s institutional torpor were seized upon by some as proof that the organization had served its purpose and was no longer needed (6).

The *Profile* implies that nontraditional casting had been adopted broadly throughout the country. It continues, “Most every theatre now practiced, in one form or another, what once only Rosetta had preached. Amas seemed . . . a victim of its own success” (6). The

mistaken ideas of the *Profile*'s information are twofold - 1) Amas was not the first theatre to practice interracial casting. Not only did the New York Shakespeare Festival integrate their casts but others did as well, even for short periods of time, such as the Greenwich Mews Theatre, that practiced interracial casting in the nineteen fifties, and the Arena Stage, mentioned above; 2) nontraditional casting had not "caught on" to the extent that it was taken for granted as a norm in American theatre. In fact, in January 1990 the NTCP launched a new symposium entitled "The Continuing Challenge." In her article that reported the event, "The Non-Traditional Casting Project Continues into the '90s," Ana Deboo states:

But despite differences in intention, some things had not changed over the intervening years. The personal testimonies, reports of progress, bitter anecdotes, angry calls for justice, and challenges to the establishment heard in '90 echoed those found in the '86 transcripts (188).

As in the first symposium extensive follow-up including attending the Performers with Disabilities Conference and the Association of American Cultures' "Open Dialogue IV" was necessary to re-generate momentum. Deboo ends her article:

Newman [Harry] had expressed the hope that the NTCP would be a 'catalyst for change,' that in time, 'like our organization – the phrase itself will disappear, and 'non-traditional' casting will become the performing arts' new tradition.' Not yet, but they're working on it (191).

Clearly, the NTCP's goal of obsolescence had not been reached. In time, the NTCP would change its name to The Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, which continues to be active today.

Though the *Amas Profile* may present the idea that the company was losing momentum due to their mission becoming antiquated, by 1992 the *New York Times* reported Rosetta LeNoire would suspend operations, “until we find the money to continue,” the company having lost “90 percent of its Federal funds and 65 percent of its city funds.” Amas was not the only smaller company in trouble in the early nineties. The crisis hit small companies the hardest because they “lack large subscriber lists and thus must rely almost solely on public and corporate financing for their existence,” corroborating the problems cited by Stephens. Solutions were also what Stephens outlined in her article as stated by Robert Crane of the Arts Forward Fund:

. . . nonprofit companies need to develop new sources of earned income, to market themselves more effectively to their target audiences, and to cut costs by sharing resources and space with other arts groups” (“While Broadway is Feasting” *New York Times* n.pag.).

Looking at the diversity and history of the companies cited in the article it is evident that the changing funding climate, and not old fashioned missions, was the culprit that closed so many small groups. The well-established Manhattan Punch Line fell between the cracks and closed; the Negro Ensemble Company was threatened as was Woody King’s New Federal Theatre; the South Street Theatre Company, the New Theater of Brooklyn and the Quaigh Theater all faced closure (n.pag.). The economics of the not for profit business model were culling theatre companies that were not able to adapt to a more barren funding environment. Amas was caught in the same predicament as other companies and money was the primary reason it was floundering. Nonetheless, as Amas’s future was threatened, the conversation on nontraditional casting continued through the nineties. In the face of the

funding crisis and the culture wars, the effort to bring equality to theatre casting was joined by others who still believed nontraditional casting was the only means.

### **The Debate in the Early 1990s and a Multicultural America**

As the culture wars carried over into the 1990s university theatre departments became more inclusive and diverse. Therefore the nontraditional casting debate expanded to encompass departments in need of adjustment that would help serve all student actors. In 1992 J. Robert Wills's "Non-Traditional Casting: A Case Study" presented a step by step process for changing a university theatre department to one that adopted and practiced nontraditional casting. The article presents eight points to be considered and followed in order to create and implement the new departmental policy. The points include developing written policy, a grievance procedure for students, teaching the policy, developing an assessment tool and several others (Wills 118-9). Wills fictitious case, at "Northern State University," by "Director Torg Anderson," is stated to have arisen from Anderson's reading of *Beyond Tradition* after he had attended the NTCP's first symposium. Again, the NTCP's initiative provides the foundation for ongoing critical response. Wills closes his article illustrating how his case study can be useful in future educational settings, "to encourage discussion and debate about multiculturalism in theatre, and particularly about nontraditional casting as it affects both theatre organizations and individual directors" (120). Adhering to the term "nontraditional" casting illustrates Wills's support for the language of the NTCP even as the term "multiculturalism" was gaining ground in universities. However, Wills's plan could just as well apply to a theatre company seeking to develop a written policy for integrating their casting practices while also making certain

it was following equal employment guidelines. A plan such as Wills's called for oversight from a casting perspective which could also be expanded to include oversight of season programming.

Also writing from a university perspective, Ethel Pitts Walker's "The Dilemma of Multiculturalism in the Theatre" tackles the issue of programming decisions as it points out that institutions often will include one token ethnic production in a season, "and believe the mission of diversity is achieved; for a brief time the house is peppered with new faces who want to hear their voices; and then, the "store is closed" until next year," as opposed to creating a season that reflects productions from a variety of ethnic playwrights or genres, such as Noh drama (8). Walker calls attention to the hypocrisy behind such a limited inclusion when she states:

Unfortunately, many institutions consider themselves multicultural and nontraditional in their approach to theatre simply by casting people of color or the disabled or females in roles normally not given to members of these groups.

However, how many institutions include works by playwrights from underrepresented groups? (8).

Walker also separates multiculturalism from nontraditional in the effort to point out that as institutions and society were moving into a time when multiculturalism became the favored approach to diversity, theatrically it required a different means to an end than nontraditional casting, which could be achieved through exactly the casting practices Walker describes.

The simplicity of nontraditional casting was not sufficient to meet the demands of multiculturalism.

Both Wills and Walker present compelling insights which have relevance in a university setting and also could be directly applied to theatre companies that were becoming more organized from a business perspective. Theatre companies were challenged through the later decades of the twentieth century to behave more like corporations and develop company policies and procedures to better ensure that they were operating at the standard that would attract funders. Programming for an increasingly more multicultural America also became important as a step to prove diversity to funding sources. As far as Amas was concerned during this timeframe – the company had a history of diversity, however its struggle and requirement for underwriting from its founder proves that Amas was not only in constant need of funding but also could have benefited from better business guidance. This guidance would come forward as the 1990s progressed.

In the nineteen eighties the concept of multiculturalism was gaining ground over other ideologies that were not equipped to speak to a society in which diversity was expressed in a multitude of ways. Old concepts were proving, like nontraditional casting, to be inefficient at fully addressing diversity. One of these concepts was the ethno-racial pentagon that David Hollinger explains in his 1995 book *PostEthnic America*. Hollinger points out that “residents of the United States are routinely asked to identify themselves and their contemporaries within one or another of five presumably involuntary communities of descent.” These communities are African American, Asian American, Euro-American, Indigenous and Latino – a means of classification that Hollinger reminds us “replicates precisely the crude, colloquial categories, black, yellow, white, red and brown” (8). The pentagon is rendered obsolete by the numbers of Americans who were then, and are now, of mixed heritage and may not be able to so rigidly classify themselves. Multiculturalism

examined the many forms of diversity but also carefully analyzed perceived economic and political inequalities associated within groups. In fact, as Hollinger tells us, “multiculturalism was frequently advanced as a means of empowering young people said to be psychologically victimized by a Eurocentric curriculum that displayed few achievements by members of their own ethno-racial groups,” hence the movement’s close association with changes in education. Hollinger comments, “Multiculturalism has proved to be a major preoccupation in American life as registered in the deliberations of local school boards and in the professional journals of the humanities and social sciences,” a feature that explains why, in Ethel Pitts Walker’s view, it is not enough to implement nontraditional casting as the only means to achieve multiculturalism (100). Hollinger points out:

The heightened sensitivity to diversity fostered by multiculturalism has had the ironic result of diversifying diversity . . . the most dramatic indicator of this diversification of diversity has been the demand for recognition voiced by mixed-race Americans whose affirmation of their own difference has complicated the argument over what kinds of sameness and what kinds of difference matter (102).

Arguments against multiculturalism professed it to signal an end to the ideology that the United States was, and should be inhabited by, citizens who transcended diversity to achieve a single American identity, i.e., color-blindness. Multiculturalism instead cultivated the idea that difference, in all its many forms, was more American than the older notion of *E Pluribus Unum*. By exalting difference, multiculturalism could be said to be an opposite view to colorblindness as an answer to racial tension. However, those who believed firmly in an America where differences were better overcome, or transcended, than cultivated,



distrusted multiculturalism as a force that chipped away at the ongoing effort to maintain the concept of an American identity. The overall failure of the NTCP to fully integrate theatre across the country was one way that diversity was being challenged by the culture wars. As Teasley and Tyson state in “Cultural Wars and the Attack on Multiculturalism:”

The need to maintain power relationships has caused the American antimulticultural movement to engage in cultural wars on several fronts: This includes an outright attack on academic professors; xenophobic tendencies toward immigration policies . . . continued stereotypical media projections of non-White people . . . and revisionist history (398).

The authors’ list could also include an attack on the arts in general and, more specifically, the inability of theatres across the country to fully integrate, the decline of many black theatres through the 1980s and 1990s and the fragile position of theatres like Amas that operated more from a position of multiculturalism. The authors then assert that conservative think tanks, such as The American Enterprise Institute, have held symposiums to “develop young conservatives” and promote multiculturalism as reverse racism. They quote *Diversity and Multiculturalism: The New Racism* (2002), developed from the Rand [Ayn] Institute:

The diversity movement claims that its goal is to extinguish racism and build tolerance of differences . . . One cannot teach students that their identity is determined by their skin color and expect them to be colorblind. One cannot espouse multiculturalism and expect students to see each other as individual human beings (Berliner and Hull qtd. in “Cultural Wars and the Attack on Multiculturalism” 397).

The statement's reference to an expectation that students will be colorblind is one that coordinates with the integrationist politics of the colorblind in theatre. Once integrated, race will be gotten over, or transcended, as Catanese mentions, and therefore erased. Other methods that celebrate race, such as multiculturalism in this context, are accused of calling attention to something thought to be best left forgotten. This is a conservative argument meant to undermine antiracist policies.

With the conservative backlash, that grew from economic struggles starting in the 1980s, battling diversity on so many fronts, it is no surprise that nontraditional casting had barely made a footprint in white dominated theatres since the initiatives of the NTCP.

Another quote from *Diversity and Multiculturalism: The New Racism* reads:

Advocates of "diversity" claim that because the real world is diverse, the campus should reflect that fact. But why should a campus population "reflect" the general population (particularly the ethnic population)? No answer. In fact, the purpose of a university is to impart knowledge and develop reasoning, not to be a demographic mirror of society

([http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=objectivism\\_diversity](http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=objectivism_diversity)).

This statement is an assault on affirmative action programs in college admissions. It also reflects on the situation at the University of Michigan cited in the Introduction where low admissions of black students had resulted in such a small percentage of students that the black population had no voice on campus and racial tension was at a high point. It is also ironic that the argument the writers are refuting – that a campus population should reflect the mixed population of society – is one that proponents of nontraditional casting used and still use to continue to push theatres to integrate. As early as Walter Kerr's essay discussed

in Chapter III the reasoning behind nontraditional casting was its realistic reflection of American society.

In “Racial Prejudice in a Capitalist State,” (1986) Richard T. Schaefer points out the realization in the nineteen eighties that attempted solutions to racism had slowed down during the years of Reagan’s administration. He states:

More progress in attitude and behavioral change was made a generation ago. True, the black community and sympathetic non-blacks were making more demands on whites than now. But more importantly, the white community is now more preoccupied with its own economic welfare than in the 1960s. The welfare state, if it has not declined, has redefined whose welfare is to be protected (198).

Shaefer’s comment offers a societal context that supports Angela Pao’s statement confirming the proprietary hold white institutionalized theatres, and their audiences, placed on white European work as part of a larger national political movement.

The confluence of political, economic and social forces on theatres in the nineteen nineties, particularly smaller theatres with a mission of diversity, or black theatres, put Amas in the position of possible closure. In a paper written for the Black Theatre Network Conference in 2013, Sade Lythcott, daughter of National Black Theatre’s (NBT) founder Barbara Ann Teer, reflected on the “imperative call to action” of the black arts movement, “In the roughly ten-year span of the Black Arts Movement in New York alone (1965-1975), over two hundred black theaters emerged; today there are less than ten” (“The Way Back Home.” *Making the NetWORK: The Black Theatre Network Conference Program 2013*. 23). Erroll G. Hill and James V. Hatch give another statistic in *History of African American Theatre*, “In 1973 the Black Theatre Alliance counted 139 ‘professional’ [black]

theatres around the nation. In 2001 it was estimated that no more than fifty existed” (480). Though none of these writers list which theatres closed the numbers still speak to an overwhelming start-up of black theatre in the 1960s and seventies followed by an overwhelming decline. Amas, as one of those start-ups from the sixties, was vulnerable through the eighties and nineties and survived only by the consistent transfusion of funds from LeNoire’s television salary. However, a cluster of new influences gathered in the 1990s to re-direct Amas’s downward trajectory and give it another chance for survival.

### **The Founder Lets Go**

By 1994 Amas’s Board of Directors insisted Rosetta LeNoire, who was then in her eighties, cease underwriting the company’s operation with her salary and begin to save for her own retirement. The Board also voted to close Amas, however, a new wave of funding from New York City’s Department of Cultural Affairs caused them to re-think their decision. Producer Eric Krebs stepped in to offer Amas a new home in the John Houseman Theater Center and to organize new leadership so the company could stay in operation. Krebs was subsequently made Chairman of Amas’s Board of Directors, a position he still holds. A limited number of programs, including the Eubie Blake Children’s Theater and some low budget productions, were all Amas could manage until it had achieved recovery. Also brought into the administration was Donna Trinkoff, who, like Krebs, is white and who eventually became Artistic Producer. At this point in Amas’s history, with LeNoire stepping into the background, the company began a process to change the perception that it was a black theatre. In an interview with Donna Trinkoff she stated:

It's interesting to me that Amas, all those years with Rosetta at the helm, was perceived as a black theatre company and that's because she did a lot of African American shows – she had a lot of African American friends – but she also did Asian shows and Jewish shows – all kinds of points of view (Interview 7/2012).

Trinkoff does not acknowledge the fact that Amas may have also been perceived as a black theatre company not only because the majority of its shows were of black subject matter but also because its founder was black. However, Trinkoff also points out, “She was a great believer in the universality of man,” and later, in discussing the casting process of a particular show, “I wanted to cast it multiculturally,” and further, “there are more and more companies using colorblind casting . . .” (Interview 7/2012). Trinkoff demonstrates the intermingling of terminology that exists, as a result of the culture wars and into the twenty-first century, and as the terms apply to what is generally still called non-traditional casting. Universalism, which espouses more of a melting pot philosophy, i.e., everyone is the same, is vastly different from multiculturalism, which celebrates difference. Colorblind casting is a practice that, as has been discussed, grew from the need to erase race on stage, again from the premise that everyone is the same. In the 1980s and 1990s the term colorblind also took on a strong political message from conservative forces that turned its once liberal ideal inside out to be used as a means to continue rather than to eradicate racial inequality.

In 2011 Brandi Catanese wrote of the intertwining of the political nature of colorblind with colorblind casting as it exists in the twenty-first century:

Color blindness and integration (as new or increased access to space and virtually all forms of capitalism) are bedfellows . . . Constant, careful attention to just how many people of color receive access to material resources and opportunities is

essential to preserving the distinctions between color blindness, racism, and racial opportunism . . . many non-white theater artists have deep concerns about becoming signifiers of diversity (evidence of blindness to color as an automatic criterion of inclusion or exclusion) who are always figured as occasional incursions rather than as central and consistent contributors to the representation and production of American culture within the relatively privileged sites of regional theater in particular (*The Problem of the Color[Blind]* 36-7).

As theatres such as Amas continue to practice colorblindness in this context they are also guarding themselves from accusations of non-diversity in a political, not an artistic, context. In fact, as seen earlier in Berliner and Hull's conservative *Diversity and Multiculturalism: The New Racism* (2002), the notion of color blindness was, by the new century, being used as a defense against multiculturalism and diversity in the debates of the culture wars. In 2005 Harvard Law Professor Patricia J. Williams explains the paradoxes that now exist in discussions of race. Her statement is one that perplexes while at the same time makes clear that the language of integration had run its course:

The debates are always in this clouded sense of upside-down thinking, in which segregation becomes mere choice, in which multiculturalism is attacked as if it's about monoculturalism or tribalism . . . In other ways, race is dropping out of our political discourse altogether. Remember that great national conversation we were going to have about race? It's completely silent. Even basic issues, such as racial profiling, have been completely turned upside-down ("Conversations: How Many Americas?" 17).

Trinkoff mentions, in speaking of LeNoire, “the impetus . . . for her beginning Amas was to combat a reverse racism,” (Interview 7/2012) not realizing that reverse racism is a term now being used in the effort to eliminate affirmative action and other race conscious policies. Reverse racism was conceptually underlying the segregationist claims from the critics who commented on black theatre in the 1960s. The idea of reverse racism in this context, i.e., “we [meaning white people] had to integrate and so do you [meaning black people]” is ironic when taking the subordinate positioning of black actors and black theatre into account.

Tracing a history of racial tension both in social and political spheres once again proves how theatre, while grappling with and debating highly similar problems, falls under the pressures and influences of the same political forces as other institutions. Theatres such as Amas may have no idea how their casting practices may be held up to more discerning scrutiny in the twenty-first century, what the impact of replacing a black leader with white leadership could be or how flexible the use of terminology must remain. As the times have changed, so have the meanings of concepts, words and practices.

### **Towards the Millenium**

In 1997 the National Endowment for the Arts published *American Canvas*, a lengthy report compiled over several years and using the national conversation model to gather information from theatre practitioners. *American Canvas* admits openly, while at the same time expressing frustration over the culture war debates, that when it comes to issues of color in society:

the arts community has long labored under a stubbornly persistent class system of its own, one that continues to haunt the field: the recognition, palpable even in our democratic protestations to the contrary, that the audience for the nonprofit arts remains highly skewed, betraying a demographic profile that tends to be older, wealthier, better educated, and whiter than a typical cross-section of the American public. Defenders of the field . . . point proudly to the progress that has been made in this regard . . . But these figures, subsumed under categories that are largely class-based themselves, have as much to do with the cultural apartheid in which we began this century as they do with the cultural equality that, for all our efforts, remains as elusive as social, economic, and educational equality (75-76).

In many respects *American Canvas* had a sweeping influence on missions and programming decisions made in theatre companies through the nineties and into the next century. For practitioners who longed for a formula that would return the Endowment's highly sought after subsidy, the document, for the most part, delivered the information. However, in its statement regarding primarily white, wealthy audiences and the relentless race and class divide that persisted in theatre exactly as it did in American society, it made a stark accusation that access was being withheld to a larger, yet untapped, audience base and that the lazy attempts to provide access in the past were not working.

The type of raw information in *American Canvas*, at least in one singular section, was part of the subject matter of a keynote address given by playwright August Wilson on June 26, 1996, for a conference held by the Theatre Communications Group. Entitled "The Ground on Which I Stand," Wilson's words reflect the "cultural exclusivity" mentioned in the *Amas Profile* and sent shock waves into the theatre community at large, at least



temporarily. On closer examination, however, Wilson's words were more reflective of his admonishment of a white professional theatre community that failed to support black theatre. Chapter V will examine Wilson's speech, its influence and the commentary and debate that followed. Chapter V will also take a closer look at Amas today and how it settled into maintaining LeNoire's mission with very few changes even as the status of black Americans fell through the next few decades. Chapter V must also consider what a shift from black leadership to white leadership means and what impact it will have in the future. How will a theatre like Amas change if decision making is seen through a lens of white privilege and power?

## CHAPTER V

### AMAS AFTER ROSIE: TRANSITION, SUCCESSION, CONCLUSION

“The issue of separatism is intriguing . . . Separate from what? You have to be a part of something before you can separate yourself from it . . . When has White Theater ever invited more than 1 or 2 Black playwrights at a time to share its resources?” (Elmo Terry-Morgan. “The Making of the African Grove Institute for the Arts.” 32)

This dissertation has sought to track the history not only of Amas as a theatre company but also examine influences on the life of Rosetta LeNoire, her activism and politics throughout the twentieth century and the complexities of her philosophy as it affected her company’s mission. As I have shown, the political landscape of American society served to complicate employment equality in theatre. AEA’s advocacy for the employment of non-white actors was only partially successful as conservative political forces pushed against civil rights legislation. By the late 1990s the language of race had turned itself around and terms once considered to be liberal, such as colorblind, were used as weapons against race conscious policies. In this concluding chapter one more significant event – the 1996 speech, “The Ground on Which I Stand” – delivered by August Wilson – must be examined. I will examine how Amas, now under white leadership, has not sought out the densely varied meanings and readings of race on stage. While still practicing a multicultural mission and seeking to generally cast actors from all backgrounds and heritage, Amas does so in ways that still question taste, intention and logic. I will use several examples of productions to ascertain how Amas currently approaches their casting and programming decisions.

## August Wilson's "The Ground on Which I Stand"

August Wilson's 1996 speech provoked a myriad of responses such that, like coverage of the NTCP's initiatives, no volume on nontraditional casting is complete without mention of it. The only reason for including it here is that Amas's *Profile* singled the event out as a significant turning point in the company's examination of its mission in the 1990s as its leadership was changing. Coverage in the *Profile* reads as a broad misinterpretation of Wilson's words. As did many sources, the *Profile* has focused on one element of Wilson's message while ignoring its larger meaning. Many critiques also focus on the subsequent debate between August Wilson and Robert Brustein. My examination of the event will focus on Wilson's speech, survey reactions to it, and forego the public debate. Brustein's response, "Subsidized Separatism," also picks and chooses among Wilson's text to extract what serves Brustein's thesis, which is clear in the title of his essay.

Amas's *Profile* claims, "Most every theatre now practiced, in one form or another, what once only Rosetta had preached. Amas seemed, in a very real sense, a victim of its own success." These statements are in reference to the company assumption, at least in print, that Amas was the only theatre practicing some form of nontraditional casting, which, as mentioned in other chapters, is incorrect. However, directly following is the *Profile*'s response to August Wilson's speech:

An extremely important voice in American theatre was emerging, that of playwright August Wilson, whose opinions seemed diametrically opposed to LeNoire's and were emblematic of the time. Wilson's brilliant plays were, he contended, written for his fellow African Americans, and not for anyone else. Although he was happy that others found his work significant and meaningful, he

didn't really care if they saw it or not. He had one audience, and one audience only, and making the tent larger by bringing people together seemed not on his agenda at all (6).

The *Profile* interprets Wilson's speech to be the antithesis of LeNoire's philosophy. Wilson is portrayed as recalcitrant and writing his plays for African Americans only.

"The Ground on Which I Stand" is quite long and much of its language is strong – so strong that Benny Sato Ambush writes:

His candid self-revelation, the historical rationale supporting his views, his political point-of-view, and his unapologetic assertiveness in a setting that neither expected these views nor had such prior precedent exhilarated some, traumatized others, and opened the eyes of those who had never heard such reasoning ("Culture Wars" n.pag.).

To distill the speech to one thesis is extremely difficult and Amas's attempt is oversimplified. Wilson explored ideas that grew out of black nationalism, European theatre, black American history and the present day League of Resident Theatre (LORT) organization. As Ambush expresses, "He drew a line in the sand about race, culture, identity, politics, funding, cultural power, critics and certain theatrical casting practice" (n.pag.) At the time of Wilson's speech there was one black theatre in the LORT organization. His plea is directly to the participants of the Theatre Communications Group conference and is for more black theatre, more black playwrights and more black actors working in black theatre. He points out the politically skewed dynamic in the LORT organization that leaves black theatre begging while large subscription based institutions manage to get the greatest portion of public funding. He speaks of black spirituality and the

need for protection of black cultural heritage. However, nowhere in his speech does he say that his plays are only for African Americans or that he does not care if others see them. The Amas *Profile* is one that demonizes Wilson while attempting to elevate LeNoire's philosophy. The *Profile*'s next statement, "and making the tent larger by bringing people together seemed not on his agenda at all," proves that Amas is willing to use its ostensible mission (bringing people together) to prove Wilson wrong. None of the language used in these statements comes from Wilson. Wilson's advocacy of funding and support for black theatre has been turned around in the *Profile* to mean that Wilson is also advocating for actively preventing all non-African Americans from his work. Wilson's popularity with all races is proven from his many Broadway productions, his Pulitzer Prizes, Tony and Drama Desk awards, as well as his stature as an American playwright, revealed in his having been invited to deliver the TCG keynote address.

Wilson does make statements regarding colorblind casting from which the *Profile* extracts occasional words or phrases to continue building a case against Wilson. In his speech Wilson states:

By making money available to theaters willing to support colorblind casting, the financiers and governors have signaled not only their unwillingness to support Black Theater but their willingness to fund dangerous and divisive assaults against it. Colorblind casting is an aberrant idea that has never had any validity other than as a tool of the Cultural Imperialist who views their American Culture, rooted in the icons of European Culture, as beyond reproach in its perfection (Wilson 498).

This strongly worded statement is connected to Catanese's statement mentioned in Chapter IV:

. . . many non-white theater artists have deep concerns about becoming signifiers of diversity (evidence of blindness to color as an automatic criterion of inclusion or exclusion) who are always figured as occasional incursions rather than as central and consistent contributors to the representation and production of American culture (*The Problem of the Color[Blind]* 36-7).

Wilson and Catanese are referring to regional theatres claiming the employment of non-white actors to fulfill the diversity portion of their missions and therefore qualify for funding that requires a diversity component in the production season. While non-white actors are finding occasional employment forays in white establishment theatres that use colorblind casting, black theatres are suffering financially and cannot compete with the jobs available in mainstream theatres. However, non-white actors are aware of their use as “signifiers of diversity” to the mainstream theatres. With Amas under white leadership the company is also open to interpretations of how they are representing race on stage. As Carla Stillwell’s comment underscores, “however well-meaning this practice is, the underlying message it asserts is that theater was created for, and belongs to “white” people, and said “white” people are graciously finding a place for people of color in their world” (“The Mythology of Color Blind/Conscience Casting.” [www.howround.com](http://www.howround.com)). Mentioned in the Introduction, Stillwell’s insight would not be applicable if Amas was under black leadership. However, by continuing with the mission of nontraditional casting Amas proves its loyalty to Rosetta LeNoire through a lens of white privilege.

Why Amas’s *Profile* misinterpreted Wilson in order to make a case for their mission is unknown. When I asked Donna Trinkoff about the coverage of Wilson in the *Profile* she said, “I have no idea what’s in that thing,” meaning the *Profile* and also

meaning she did not write it. Again, ignorance as to how Amas is presenting itself illustrates the company's denial of the politics of race on stage.

As far as how the *Profile* is interpreted, surely there is room for black theatre and every other sort of theatre without the stigma of exclusion or separatism being attached. There is also a clear message in the writing as to which of these positions is right and which is wrong when, again, there is no reason why both cannot be right and exist independently of each other without a diametric being constructed to negate the one at the expense of the other. However, by dignifying difference between Wilson's advocacy of black theatre and LeNoire's philosophy that was, in the 1990s, being re-examined, Amas seems to have been out of touch with what was taking place politically in terms of backlash against integration and other race conscious policies and the identity politics that emerged from the culture wars. As mentioned in Chapter IV, terminology that had once worked to communicate liberal diversity was, in the nineties, as well as today, being used for conservative purposes to push against diversity. Colorblind casting, as a concept, with its goal to eliminate race on stage under the premise that we are all the same inside, was in contention during the years of the culture wars when the idea of assimilation and the melting pot was losing favor.

Ambush comments on colorblind casting:

Many, myself included, find it a fallacious, misguided attempt to improve a severe, chronic underemployment issue for black actors (and by extension . . . women, the disabled, gay and lesbians) by pretending that racial and cultural markers which hold great significance in the world outside the theater do not matter inside the theater, and that these markers can be rendered invisible by the willing suspension of disbelief (n.pag.).

After many decades, critics such as Ambush were examining how white mainstream theatres were continuing to cast with no thought to what race means on stage. Unfortunately, with fewer and fewer black theatres offering employment to black actors, these mainstream theatres presented more options. Wilson's plea for financial support of black theatres, and black playwrights, offered an alternative solution that went against the grain of those who insisted that the better solution was integrating white establishment theatre. As far as Amas was concerned, in light of the company's problematic relationship with the entire concept of black theatre, Wilson's speech, with the power of Wilson's success and popularity behind it, may have seemed like a threat. Wilson does bring forward his own experience in the causes of black nationalism which served to inspire him in his life as an artist. LeNoire's opposition to black nationalism's influence was one of the catalysts in her founding of Amas. Though the black nationalist movement, along with black power, was silently well in the past, Wilson's reminder of what the movement stood for could have, for Amas, signaled the need for a bold statement against Wilson's ideas. Unfortunately, the rhetoric used in the *Profile*, written nearly ten years after the speech and five years after Wilson's death, was largely concocted.

Others who commented on Wilson's speech include Harry J. Elam, Jr., who wrote, in his essay "Keeping it Real:"

He confronts the status quo . . . these politics concern not only understanding the power inherent in the visible representation of African Americans but with controlling the mechanisms of production that dictate the dissemination of these images . . . Wilson advocates a black art that is not suppressed by the dominant culture but an active expression of African American experiences, a practice that is



historically grounded, socially committed, and culturally specific” (qtd. in *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics* 82).

Elam’s focus is not on the black nationalistic references in Wilson’s speech but rather Wilson’s call to re-claim black culture from the dominant culture that controls its interpretation and meaning. This point of view is re-stated by Ambush:

Many African-Americans responded warmly to his affirmation of the enlightening and almost sacred mission of black theatre to help correct historical distortions of black people; repair the ravages of oppression; build collective self-esteem and self-respect; commune with black audiences in terms they understand; develop black talent . . . tell stories and present images which celebrate and nurture the innate dignity, beauty, and worth of black people . . . (n.pag.)

Both of these comments put the responsibility on black theatre to tell the stories of black people. However, if Amas, as so often stated by its founder, was “not a black theatre,” the company would have been, according to both Elam and Ambush’s interpretation of Wilson, unequipped to claim the stories of black Americans. This interpretation of Wilson, misconstrued in Amas’s *Profile*, would constitute a challenge to the company’s mission, which at the time of Wilson’s speech was going through a transition.

Robert Brustein’s response to Wilson’s speech reveals that he is not certain what a “black theatre” is and asks:

But how does one describe the New York Public Theater, and the Atlanta Alliance Theater, under the black artists George C. Wolfe and Kenneth Leon? Or the Yale Repertory Theatre and Syracuse Stage when they were led by such black directors as Lloyd Richards and Tazewell Thompson? (“Subsidized Separatism” 40).

Brustein's questions could serve as answers to Donna Trinkoff's previously mentioned interest in why Amas was considered a black theatre. From the company's reaction to the Wilson speech it appears that even into the nineties its leadership was sensitive about the possibility Amas would be perceived as a black theatre. According to Brustein, it might be seen as obvious that if a theatre company had black leadership it would be perceived as a black theatre. Again, Amas's attempt to avoid that perception poses a question: why was being perceived as a black theatre such a problem for the company? LeNoire had always associated black theatre with exclusion and segregation – a reflection of her integrationist/assimilationist politics. Wilson's speech challenged that thinking. Robert Brustein took the position of LeNoire's philosophy – that Wilson's words constituted separatism and segregation, like the critics of the 1960s who discussed the all-black *Hello Dolly!* Once again, theatre practices are intertwined with politics that reach into the past to justify their interpretation of the present, which in this case was 1996. As Ambush wrote:

Like those who currently oppose Affirmative Action in the belief that in less than thirty years the ravages of centuries of oppression have been reversed, that all debts have been paid, and that the statute of limitations on white accountability and guilt has been reached, Brustein seems to be asking blacks simply to overcome, transcend, or outright forget their history and buy into an assimilated American aesthetic melting pot (n.pag.).

Amas's *Profile* continues with its admonishment of Wilson, "And in his [Wilson's] famous ongoing argument with Robert Brustein he attacked the notion of a 'melting pot,' in general, as 'culturally imperialist . . .'" (6). Though the reasoning Ambush and others like him bring to the challenge of Wilson's words is plausible, logical and based both in history

and in the politics of the times, Amas clearly sides with Brustein. The simplistic way in which the *Profile* explains its reaction to Wilson's speech speaks to a philosophy that is mired in LeNoire's politics of the 1960s. Not staying in touch with how race relations in the United States had progressed and stagnated as the decades wore on seems irresponsible for a theatre that professes to be, "Encouraging tolerance and civility among people of our diverse society by bringing them together through the art of musical theatre" (*Amas Mission Statement* <http://www.amasmusical.org/missionstatement.html>). However, both terms, "tolerance" and "civility," are problematic. The need for either assumes a situation where tension already exists between participants. In such a circumstance Amas's role is no more than that of a mediator. Josephine Lee points out:

Theatrical performance focuses attention on the human body in action; constructions of race, of course, rely on the perception and interpretation of live bodies. Studying the theater thus brings to the forefront – makes visible in a particular direct and immediate way – how our contemporary lives are shaped by race ("Racial Actors, Liberal Myths" 89).

Writing in 2003, Lee's comment illuminates Wilson's words:

Our manners, our style, our approach to language, our gestures, and our bodies are not for rent. The history of our bodies . . . the body that is capable of inspiring profound rage and pungent cruelty . . . is not for rent. Nor is the meaning of the history of our bodies for rent ("The Ground on Which I Stand" 499).

Wilson's speech confronts his audience with the idea behind how the lives of Americans are, as Lee puts it, "shaped by race." Amas, caught in the same moment as Wilson, was

behind the times in understanding how race on the stage was being examined and interpreted by the very non-white actors who were being colorblind cast.

The inquiry in Lee's essay grew from the pro-Brustein reaction her students had to his debate with Wilson, which was in contrast to their enthusiasm when Lee introduced them to the playwrights of the black arts theatre. Excited to read the revolutionary plays of LeRoi Jones, Sonia Sanchez, Ed Bullins and others, the students still managed to approach the debate between Brustein and Wilson as if Brustein, with his "hidden racisms embedded in neoconservative arguments over meritocracy, white privilege, and affirmative action," was actually the more liberal of the two (89). In her dismay over their reaction she recognized the difficulty in teaching her students "to be critical of the fault-lines of their own liberalism" and asks questions that are also relevant to Amas:

Broadly, several critiques might well be made here: among them, how the partial success of civil rights reforms created a false sense of "progress" and "safety" in the past few decades; how neoconservative appropriations of terms such as "color-blindness" have been made that in fact maintain and perpetuate exclusionary practices and racist ways of thinking; and finally, how the liberal management of racial difference might lend itself to a "multiculturalism" that carefully displays racial visibility in order to "sell itself" as progress (89-90).

Again, Lee's writing reflects on Wilson's concern for bodies being "rented" to satisfy diversity standards in mainstream theatres, as well as the comfort of theatres, like Amas, adopting multicultural missions that appear to represent racial progress. With their overreaction to and misinterpretation of Wilson's speech, Amas signaled that their "safety" net of colorblind casting was no longer as sound as they believed, particularly if they were

considered a black theatre that was not actively cultivating, though still primarily producing, black musicals, creators and actors. Later in the 1990s LeNoire would resolve the question of whether or not Amas was a black theatre when the transition to new leadership took place.

### **Rosie Retires: Transitioning to White Leadership**

In the late 1990s Donna Trinkoff had been in her position of Artistic Producer with Amas for several years. Rosetta LeNoire was finishing up the long run of *Family Matters*. She would be 87 years old when the show was finally cancelled. After returning to New York, it was clearly time for her to retire. Trinkoff and LeNoire were awarded the Municipal Art Society of New York Award in 1998 and in 1999 Trinkoff nominated LeNoire for the National Medal of Arts and accompanied her to the award ceremony in Washington, D.C.. In this timeframe LeNoire asked Trinkoff to take over Amas. Trinkoff recalls:

And I said to her, ‘Rosie, if you really think I can do it and you want me to do it, but wouldn’t you rather have an ethnic person in this position?’ and she said, ‘That’s not what I started Amas for. It doesn’t matter what color you are. Color is not important; that’s what Amas is about.’

Trinkoff continued that, “there have been some, and not ever to my face, but there were people who were upset when I took over the company, because I wasn’t black. That was the perception” (Interview with Donna Trinkoff 07/2012). Nonetheless, with this decision, it would follow, if having a black leader caused the perception that Amas was a black

theatre, having a white leader, with all primary leadership positions also filled by whites, creates the perception that Amas has become one of many white theatres.

The decision to place Trinkoff in the main leadership position grew from LeNoire's respect for Trinkoff. The bond and love between the two women was strong. This was a clear and independent decision of LeNoire's, based on her need for the kind of leadership to make certain Amas went forward after her death and her firm belief in the type of integrationist philosophy which had guided Amas for three decades. Trinkoff did not change titles. She had been Artistic Producer for several years in LeNoire's absence. LeNoire's decision made Trinkoff's Artistic Producership the lead position in the company. It is interesting to note that the 1998 season of Amas again featured several shows of black subject matter: *Rollin' on the T.O.B.A.*, a musical about the black vaudeville circuit, *Reunion: A Civil War Musical*, with strong black roles (portraying blacks during the Civil War, i.e., slaves), and *Stormy Weather, The Story of Lena Horne*. After this season Amas changed its mission to solicit and include more multicultural material in contrast to the reality of a usual Amas season where a majority of shows concerned black subject matter. This change was stated as, "a real opportunity to help Amas evolve into the coming century," though it may also have been to shift it away from being perceived as a black theatre after it had become a white theatre (*Amas Musical Theatre Profile* 10).

In 2001 Trinkoff issued a statement that "*Amas is not color-blind. We celebrate color!* All colors . . . there is a continuing richness in non-traditional casting, and it's not because it's color-blind, but because it's color-aware" (11). The italics and exclamation point are the *Profile's* author's. Still speaking to August Wilson's speech, and in fact mentioning him in her statement, she continues, "And when I put someone of color or of a

different background than usual in one of my shows, not only do they *not* lose their identity, but the show gains immeasurably in terms of its own identity” (11). Trinkoff’s sentiment is admirable and seems like exactly the right words to mitigate the touchy terrain of nontraditional casting. However, the statement has the sort of “come one; come all” generality that does not answer the question of how Amas negotiates the identity of actors of color in their productions or how shows gain in their own identity. The example given in the *Profile* – a show that attended to black identity – is an all-black *Damn Yankees* placed during the time of the black baseball leagues. Apparently there were teams that were the black counterparts to the white Washington Senators, the show’s team, and the Yankees (one of the Black Yankees’ founders was Bill Robinson). The score was reconfigured as gospel and R&B.

Being familiar with the score of *Damn Yankees* I might ask why it needed to be reworked. As with the black *Guys and Dolls*, that moved the story up to Harlem, Amas’s *Damn Yankees* neatly solves the issue of black identity by “blacking up” the music, as if all black people identify with gospel (Rosetta LeNoire was Catholic) and R & B. Why not use the score as it is written? A racial statement was made by casting the show with black performers. Changing the music assumes that these black characters, in a non-realistic musical comedy world, would not be authentically black unless the music smacked of gospel and rhythm and blues.

The black baseball leagues existed because of discrimination in the white leagues. *Damn Yankees* has nothing to do with discrimination, unless it might possibly be age discrimination. It is difficult to think that the white world of baseball, which excluded black players, would have no presence in any story claiming the black leagues as its subject

matter. *Damn Yankees* is about a middle aged man longing to be young and strong so he can live out his dream of playing baseball and saving the team. It is essentially a story of the American dream, as seen through the vision of white creators, in the 1950s. Adding gospel and R&B to the score does not diminish the fact that the story line does not explore what it was like to be a part of the black baseball leagues specifically, or being black Americans in the racially charged 1950s. Amas was saved from the larger issue of rewriting the show's book by presenting *Damn Yankees* as a concert version and not a fully mounted production.

Trinkoff mentions in her statement that she and the director were thanked by actors for the opportunity to “play parts they were never, ever considered for before in all their wonderful careers” (11). This statement is both disturbing and confusing. Any present day production of *Damn Yankees* would be completely inappropriate if it was not multiculturally cast. The show could be updated from the 1950s to reflect that change, though not if it were placed in the black baseball leagues because they are no longer in existence. Baseball is integrated and highly representative of the wide range of American society. The pride in the statement also evokes the image of a white employer bestowing opportunity on grateful, black employees from a position of white privilege, which connects, once again, with Carla Stillwell's comment on nontraditional casting, “theater was created for, and belongs to “white” people, and said “white” people are graciously finding a place for people of color in their world” (“The Mythology of Color Blind/Conscience Casting.” [www.howlround.com](http://www.howlround.com)). Stillwell's insight, once again, would not apply if LeNoire, or another black artistic administrator, was running the company.



Trinkoff's comment on the gratitude given by non-white actors, is also ironic in contrast to how Rosetta LeNoire coped with casting white actors and hiring white administrative staff in her years leading Amas. In 1983 she revealed:

Then there ought to be a training school for whites who want to work with an organization headed by a black. They don't understand, whether they are conscious of it or not, that it is very hard for them to work under your guidance . . . I see it and feel it around me, and I'm hurt by it. Who told them it was going to be easy on either side because of their beliefs? But Amas is significant on their resume . . . (Norflett. "Rosetta LeNoire: The Lady and her Theatre." 72).

Where once LeNoire had her feelings hurt by whites who scorned working for a black woman, Trinkoff boasts of appreciation by grateful black actors for giving them parts they'd never get otherwise. The contrast in these two stories is indicative of the risk that was part of LeNoire's experience running her company and the lack of risk when a white manager is in charge.

At the 1998 National Black Theatre Summit, in a follow up to August Wilson's speech, playwright Joe Walker said, "Anything that looks like it reflects us, just throw a little gospel in there, put in a little controversial love story and boom!" ("The Diaspora Comes to Dartmouth" n.pag.) Walker's comment was made during a discussion of "clear disdain for the enormously popular genre of plays . . . staples of the "Chitlin Circuit," that draw large audience support and are known for perpetuating stereotypes. Walker, who won the Tony for his play *The River Niger*, commented, "Black people are ignorant. We got to admit that. We got a lot of training to do" (n.pag.). The issue of stereotyping could also arise from a black production of *Damn Yankees*. In the show the lead character makes a

pact with the Devil who sends his sexy assistant, Lola, who represents one half of the “controversial love story,” to administrate the deal. Could casting the Devil and Lola as black be crossing the line of stereotype? In *Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Robert C. Smith points out the long held negative attitudes towards blackness and quotes the sixteenth-century Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of black:

Deeply stained with dirt, soiled, dirty, foul . . . Having dark, deadly purposes, malignant, pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister . . . Foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked . . . Indicating disgrace . . . (11).

The negative associations of blackness were used to prejudice whites against enslaved Africans. Smith uses the definitions to point out the long term effects of such attitudes on the perpetuation of racism in the United States and the sustained inferiorization of blacks by whites. Could casting a black actor as the Devil bring forward such negative associations and therefore present what could be termed a stereotype? Conversely, could that negative stereotype be heightened by casting a black actor in the lead role as a gullible would-be baseball player who sells his soul?

There is nothing wrong with reconfiguring *Damn Yankees*, however it is clearly a decision not to be made without deep consideration. The re-working of the musical score to satisfy what Trinkoff said produced “new revelations and meanings,” was contrived to assure black actors would not “lose their identity” (*Amas Profile* 11). It is a lack of examination of the ‘revelations and meanings’ that may not be as felicitous as Trinkoff describes that complicates Amas’s programming decisions. If, since the years of LeNoire’s sometimes inappropriate casting choices, some degree of education and understanding of the politics of identity and representation on stage has not taken place, it may be the result

of white leadership's colorblindness which produces the circumstances pointed out by Lee as "liberal management of racial difference might lend itself to a 'multiculturalism' that carefully displays racial visibility in order to 'sell itself' as progress" ("Racial actors, liberal myths" 90). In the case of Trinkoff's statement, she sells Amas's philosophy of color awareness as the new, more effective, nontraditional casting option that safeguards a non-white actor's "identity," as if Amas is capable of correctly determining the measure of any actor's identity and formulating methods by which to both protect it and use it to the company's advantage.

The point of examining a project such as *Damn Yankees* is not to say the show did not fulfill its vision or that it fell short in terms of entertainment. The *New York Amsterdam News* review reads "Damn Yankees' damn good at Amas benefit" (Armstrong. n.pag.). The work was presented at an annual benefit where Amas presents the Rosie Award, an honor given in LeNoire's name. My analysis examines the project through the lens of Trinkoff's words which reduced the concerns of August Wilson to a few catchphrases and made claims about Amas's ability to safeguard its actors' identities and use them to create more meaning for the show.

Amas has produced some fine productions in recent years that have received recognition such as 2002's *Zanna, Don't*, which received the 2003 Lucille Lortel Award for choreography and 4 Drama Desk Awards nominations, *Lonestar Love*, which received several Lucille Lortel and Outer Critics Circle awards nominations, and *Wanda's World*, which also received a number of award nominations in 2008. In many ways Amas has been legitimized under the leadership of Trinkoff. The multitude of musicals the company receives for development is testimony to its uniquely valuable position in the New York

theatre community (Interview 7/2012). Nonetheless, there are yet miscommunications by Trinkoff in terms of how and where to manifest the Amas commitment to nontraditional casting. One such example is the 2010 production of *Signs of Life: A Tale of Terezin*.

### ***Signs of Life: Is the Holocaust Rwanda?***

In my interviews with Donna Trinkoff she mentioned *Signs of Life: A Tale of Terezin* as a show that could have been multiculturally cast but was not because the writers did not want it. It was, instead, cast with whites who were Jewish or who could portray Jews. The show is about Theresienstadt, or Terezin, a concentration camp created primarily for Czechoslovakian Jews. The camp was extremely overcrowded and served as a feeder camp to Auschwitz where the Jews were systematically put to death. However, Terezin was publicized by the Nazi party as a model camp and went through a false transformation when the Red Cross inspected in 1944. The Nazis insidiously re-modeled, transformed and decorated the camp, as if constructing a movie set, for the length of time the Red Cross visited to make it appear to be more like a retreat or country club than a prison. After the Red Cross left, the Nazis made a propaganda film about the camp to prove the excellent conditions. Some wealthy, more celebrated, inmates paid to be taken to Terezin under the misconception they would be protected. Terezin was also known for its high level of art and culture which, while giving the camp a false sense of elitism, also served to help its inmates get through the days until they were shipped to the gas chambers (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum <http://www.ushmm.org/research/publications/academic-publications/full-list-of-academic-publications/i-never-saw-another-butterfly-childrens-drawings-and-poems-from-terezin>).

According to the *New York Times*, the musical's story centers around a young Jewish girl, Lorelei, living in Prague until "the Nazis round up her and other creative folks and relocate them to Theresienstadt," where they cooperate before realizing that the camp is being used for propaganda purposes and their fellow detainees are being shipped away to their deaths (Genzlinger. "In a Bleak Era, Trying to Stay Connected Through Art." n.pag.). Genzlinger's review mentions that *Signs of Life* is "a grim theatrical journey." Keeping in mind that Amas only produces musicals, the review does not delve deeply into either the music or the book except to say some of the heavy plot devices are gimmicky. Primary to what is said is the sad nature of the subject and "Whether you emerge feeling emotionally drained, which is certainly the intent, may depend on how much you already know about Theresienstadt . . ." (n.pag.).

Trinkoff used *Signs of Life* as an example of a show where the creators specifically requested Amas forego their usual multicultural casting. She stated:

It's a Jewish story but it speaks to the terrible ongoing story of genocide that continues to this day. In fact, on the front page of the *New York Times* – they just exhumed 600 bodies from Rwanda . . . It's horrendous that this is still going on in our lifetime and so *Signs of Life* is very important to raise that awareness (Interview 07/2012).

Later in the interview I brought up a statement in the *Amas Profile* that Amas will sometimes be politically incorrect. In her answer Trinkoff said:

Well, there is controversy in casting. That there would have been controversy to have ethnic or diverse casting of *Signs of Life* and, it might have gotten in the way, I

don't know, sometimes I'm a little torn about it myself (Interview with Donna Trinkoff 07/2012).

In my second interview with her I asked about her statement "sometimes I'm a little torn about it myself," thinking that perhaps she was questioning the mission to always cast multiculturally. Instead she said that the story of *Signs of Life* was "universal enough" that she felt it could have been multiculturally cast but the writers were opposed to that approach (Interview with Donna Trinkoff 11/2013).

From a purely dramaturgical standpoint, based on research, there were no blacks or non-whites at Terezin. Blacks were persecuted by the Nazis but if they were interred it was not at Terezin. There weren't that many blacks or Asians in Germany at the time and they were not part of the plan to exterminate the Jews (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum <http://www.ushmm.org>). What would it mean to have black or Asian actors in *Signs of Life*? Would the audience understand that the story was being purposely manipulated away from being a story of Terezin to a story about genocide generally? How would that re-adjustment help or enhance the original musical, which is very specifically about Jews in one particular camp? It could also serve the subject of genocide awareness to revisit the hideous memory of the Holocaust, even without casting black or other non-white actors as residents of the camp. Because there is still the horror of genocide in the world does not mean all circumstances surrounding it are the same.

After reading the *New York Times* review and visiting the Holocaust Museum webpage it is clear that the creators of *Signs of Life* made their story very specific to the Jewish experience. They used artifacts that are described in great detail in the Museum website. One of the songs, described in the review as referencing the children's drawings,

contains the lyric, “We won’t live forever, but these memories will,” which is a direct reference to the website’s description of the drawings and poems of children who lived at Terezin (Genzlinger n.pag.). The website states, “The drawings and poems are all that is left of these children.” The website pulls its information from a collection of these documents entitled *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum <http://www.ushmm.org/research/publications/academic-publications/full-list-of-academic-publications/i-never-saw-another-butterfly-childrens-drawings-and-poems-from-terezin>).

The lack of understanding that Trinkoff exhibits towards the specificity and intention of *Signs of Life* seems to be a product of her own good intentions clouded by her dedication to the integrationist politics of LeNoire. Wanting to feature genocide prominently for the sake of making the public more aware is a noble objective. However, to not take into account the impact of having black or, perhaps, Asian actors, in a show that is so focused on Jewish subject matter, is irresponsible and reminiscent of having white actors on a black baseball team.

In our first interview, I asked Trinkoff if Amas conducted surveys to ascertain if their audiences understood and were enlightened by the company’s casting choices, or to assess the efficacy of multicultural casting to communicate a specific message, and she said they did not. However, when I mentioned in our second interview how much scholarship and debate there was surrounding the subject of all forms of nontraditional casting she responded, “I don’t think about it very much” (Interviews 07/2012 and 11/2013). The casting of non-white actors in a show to fulfill a multicultural mission refers back to LeNoire stating, as it pertained to *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, “I had them [whites] put in there

because I didn't want anyone to think that I would do an all-black show," and again complicates the issue of tokenism (Norflett 366). It also echoes Brandi Catanese's remark that "many non-white theater artists have deep concerns about becoming signifiers of diversity" (*The Problem of the Color[Blind]* 36-7). We have already learned that Trinkoff receives gratitude from actors for being cast multiculturally but how would they react if they were cast as obvious signifiers of diversity in a show with such a strong story having to do with the Holocaust? The manipulation of focus by casting non-white actors could have also taken the audience out of the story while they pondered why there were non-whites in a Nazi concentration camp. Again, yes, there were non-whites persecuted by the Nazis; they were not at Terezin.

In the case of *Signs of Life*, the creators' casting wishes were honored. Though the production took place in 2010, Trinkoff still references it, in 2013, as an example of her belief that the material was universal enough to lend itself to a multicultural casting approach. As Trinkoff comments on *Signs of Life*, and also on Amas's "color awareness," she reveals her own white guilt, demonstrating the liberal posturing described by Lee in her essay "Bodies, Revolutions and Magic." Lee refers to "certain multicultural initiatives [being] called into question for adopting the 'face' of diversity without its political 'heart'," and continues, "the appearance of such "radical" bodies has less to do with revolution than with marketing" (78). Though I feel like Donna Trinkoff, and everyone at Amas, has heart, I do understand they are, as white people, attempting to live out the legacy of their black founder no matter what their decisions mean or how they are read. Perpetuating the philosophy of colorblindness, because this is what LeNoire would have wanted, allows Trinkoff the space to conceptualize Amas as, in Lee's words, "both a cure for racism and



the living proof of a newly pluralistic society . . . targeted not so much at old racists but at more liberal audience . . . testifying to the myth that civil rights has actually worked to resolve racism” (82). While colorblindness was used politically, Rosetta LeNoire played into the hands of conservative backlash by turning her company over to white leadership. If her politics had changed with the times, if her aversion towards Amas being identified as a black theatre had changed through the years, the outcome may have been very different. As it is, she left a theatre company that attempts to hide its whiteness beneath a residue of colorblindness that dates from the 1950s.

### **Checking in with Wilson**

Though the *Amas Profile* continues to use August Wilson as a point of departure for the transition that occurred after LeNoire’s retirement, Wilson died in 2005 and, aside from scholarly study of his speech and debate with Brustein, his words are not necessarily at the forefront of casting decisions made in American theatres. However, within two years of his TCG speech, the next phase of Wilson’s vision took place – The National Black Theatre Summit “On Golden Pond.”

The National Black Theatre Summit and its subsequent one day conference was held in March 1998 at Dartmouth College’s Minary Conference Center located in Ashland, New Hampshire – the location of the filming of *On Golden Pond* and historically the last leg of the Underground Railroad in the United States before escaped slaves crossed into Canada. The Summit lasted five days, had doors closed to the public and the press and had a small select list of invited participants. No one from Amas was invited. The Summit centered on black theatre and, even if its planners had considered Amas a black theatre, and

Amas was sympathetic to Wilson's efforts to support black theatre, they were one of a number of companies not represented.

Summit topics discussed included, but were not limited to, economics of black theatre, developing black playwrights, audience and community development and diversity within the black arts community (Walker. "The National Black Theatre Summit"). Position papers were written on each of the topics to be presented by the one day conference that followed the Summit. August Wilson had been given a residency at Dartmouth College during this time. One of the results of the conference was the establishment of the African Grove Institute for the Arts, that now has chapters in a number of cities.

In 2004's *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics*' Sandra G. Shannon, who was one of the forty invited participants at the National Black Theatre Summit, wrote of her experience:

After several days of workshops, breakout sessions, and heated fireside debates, I left the cozy quarters of the Minary Conference Center feeling as if I had been to a revival. This invitation had led me to shift my third-person perspective on black theater to that of one who shared a vested interest in its survival as well as in its future direction (224).

Shannon, who is Professor of African American Literature at Howard University, writes of her interview with Wilson, conducted in 2004, where she asked Wilson, "what do you see as the most significant advances of the speech and the subsequent conference at Dartmouth?" Wilson responded:

The African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA) came out of that. But the concrete results of black gains – I don't see any, none. I think it's been the opposite . . . But

the important thing is we started with one black LORT theatre, and we don't have any now. Jimandi Productions in Atlanta, a city that is something like 73% black cannot support a black theatre. They closed. It's closed. It's not there anymore. I'm willing to bet that if you go back and look, after the speech there was less money given to black theatres than before (qtd. in "Afterword" *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics* 225).

In 2002, two years before Wilson's remarks, Marvin L. Sims, president of the Black Theatre Network, wrote regarding diversity and inclusion in American theatre:

I can say empirically there has been little to no change . . . I would have to say inclusion and diversity has regressed somewhat in this country due to the climate of the Reagan/Bush years. During the latter part of William Jefferson Clinton's second term of office, socio political advances favoring inclusion and diversity were either adjusted to a more palatable conservative offering or they were eliminated altogether (*Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts*. "National Diversity Forum." n.pag. <http://inclusioninthearts.org>).

Conservative colorblind politics applied to theatrical institutions would mean if black theatre is still suffering, and unable to sustain itself, it is the result of its inability to pull itself up to the level of white theatre. However, if black theatres reside in black communities, and black communities are still experiencing a depressed economy due to lack of access to opportunity and services as a result of those same colorblind politics, how can black theatre thrive without outside, usually white controlled, funding sources? The cycle seems endless, particularly if black theatre is continually viewed as separatist, self-

segregating and, therefore, the agent of reverse racism. The ideas of separatism and reverse racism were ideas Rosetta LeNoire associated with black theatre.

The quote at the beginning of this chapter is Terry-Morgan's logical perspective on the notion of separatism – if blacks have never been fully made a part of American society and, consequently, if black theatre has never been fully made a part of American theatre, how can it separate? Benny Sato Ambush offers questions to Robert Brustein, specifically, in response to Brustein's essay "Subsidized Separatism":

Were those LORT theaters who for decades produced virtually exclusively from the Euro-American canon themselves self-segregating? Are Jewish theaters, women's theaters, gay/lesbian theaters, or theaters of the disabled self-segregating? . . . Does a claim of separatism imply that blacks and whites were in fact united at some time? What's the real threat to whites (and Brustein) in a theatrical landscape that includes self-defining, culturally specific theaters? A loss of power, control, centrality, importance, funding? Some things don't involve white people. Must you define and control everything? Does being pro-black have to mean anti-white? ("Culture Wars" n.pag.)

How fascinating it would be to offer the same questions to Rosetta LeNoire at a later moment in her life and find out what her response would be. In a country that ostracizes great portions of the black population to run down inner city ghettos and prisons how can there be more separatism? These are also questions that could be put to Amas in the present day, particularly since the company still professes the need to stay connected to the theatre's "African American roots" (*Profile* 11). Will this always mean shows written by

white people using black actors, such as *Countess of Storyville* (mentioned in the Introduction) or re-workings of old shows like *Damn Yankees*?

The *Profile* mentions a production of Langston Hughes's *Little Ham* in 2001 that was re-worked to somehow become an "uptown *Guys and Dolls*," a concept that had already been realized in 1976 with the all-black *Guys and Dolls* (11). However, considering the source material, Victor Leo Walker's essay on the National Black Theatre Summit (1997) quotes Langston Hughes's poem "Note on Commercial Theatre":

You've taken my blues and gone –  
You sing 'em on Broadway  
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,  
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies  
And you fixed 'em  
So they don't sound like me  
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

Written in 1940, Hughes continues and ends with:

But someday somebody'll  
Stand up and talk about me,  
And write about me —  
Black and beautiful —  
And sing about me,  
And put on plays about me!  
I reckon it'll be  
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me (qtd. in Walker 621).

The *New York Times* wrote of *Little Ham*, “Eric Krebs . . . insists that his show has universal appeal,” and quotes Krebs as saying, ““This is not a black musical in the sense that it deals only with black issues”” (Rosen n.pag.). Krebs has been the Chairman of the Amas Board of Directors for many years and is a well-known producer. *USA Today*'s review of *Little Ham*, retitled *Langston Hughes' Little Ham*, mentions that Krebs and his colleagues' approach to the material delivered “cartoonish, patronizing characters and a plot that is pedantic and toothless, doing justice to neither Hughes' hip wit nor other worthy influences.” Elysa Gardner's review also points out that Krebs and his team are white, with only Dan Owens, the librettist, being black. *Little Ham*, she writes, reveals a “self-conscious, self-righteous approach to race relations,” resulting in “easy, awkwardly drawn stereotypes” (Gardner. “Little Ham means well, but it's not well done.” n.pag.). David Finkle's review on *Theatermania* revealed, “The first thing to be pointed out is that the show . . . doesn't have a great deal to do with Langston Hughes or the *Little Ham* he wrote in 1935; instead it might better have been labeled *Eric Krebs's Little Ham*” ([www.theatermania.com/new-york-city-theater/reviews/09-2002/little-ham](http://www.theatermania.com/new-york-city-theater/reviews/09-2002/little-ham)). If Hughes meant for *Little Ham* to be a black musical that was dealing with black issues, why would Krebs and his creative team dilute the material in an attempt to force their own interpretation? Would the original work, by a black writer, have been less desirable as far as Amas was concerned?

In 2000 Newark, New Jersey's Crossroads theatre, the only black theatre in the country to have membership in LORT at the time August Wilson made his historic speech, struggled with financial issues that threatened to close it. Eric Krebs, once a supporter of

Crossroads, asked, in a *New York Times* article covering Crossroads' dilemma, "Is it appropriate to have an exclusively African-American theater in a culture that is so multiethnic today?" The response to Krebs' question, from Crossroads' board president, Rhinold Lamar Ponder, was that the idea of there being no need for a theatre like Crossroads was "absolutely ludicrous . . . Crossroads is home for . . . the millions of stories and perspectives that come out of the black experience on this planet" (Krebs and Ponder qtd. in Capuzzo. "The Future, if Any, of Black Theater." n.pag). Krebs's self-positioning as a spokesman for the possible dissolution of black theatre into multiethnic theatre is revealing inasmuch as he also feels qualified to rewrite and rework black art such as *Little Ham*. Re-working Hughes's show to serve Krebs's version of universalist philosophy constitutes precisely what Hughes's poem is saying. Krebs is appropriating Hughes's art and fiddling with it so it no longer sounds or reads like Hughes.

The larger question, with respect to Krebs's perspective, i.e., that black theatre is inappropriate in a multiethnic world, is whether this type of judgment is being used to guide Amas. As Chairman of Amas's board of directors Krebs is in a powerful leadership position. Being a multiethnic theatre, as interpreted by its white leadership, does Amas now take the position that all black theatre is inappropriate? In stating their intention to "return frequently to the company's African American roots," it would now appear that possibly these roots come with additional qualifications as determined by white interpretation. If black theatre is deemed inappropriate, as far as Amas is concerned, I return to my initial statement from the Introduction, that the message to black theatre appears to be: blend or disappear. Blending is either achieved by being sporadically included in the seasons of white establishment mainstream theatres or through multicultural programming, such as

Amas practices. Either way black theatre art is filtered through and distilled by white perspective. The result of this arrangement is often, at best, safe, non-controversial and possibly mundane theatre. However, if black subject matter is only acceptable inasmuch as it must appeal to and appease white sensibilities, at worst this arrangement is dangerous. Amas is one small theatre that believes it operates from the best of intentions but if many theatres, operated by whites, adopt the outlook that culturally specific theatre is now inappropriate, theatre will be controlled in favor of white dominance, whether it puts multiculturalism on display or not. Could theatre become a white refuge from, rather than a challenge to, the often messy realities of a multiethnic America? In this scenario all ethnicities blend and disappear and colorblindness is reinforced as the best solution. Writing in 2003, director, actor and playwright Seret Scott pointed out, “As I travel to regional theatres around the country I find a less welcoming atmosphere in more and more places, from both the artistic and admin staffs.” Scott takes on the scant representation of black playwrights in mainstream regional theatres and how that affects the work available for black actors and directors. She comments:

There are about five black playwrights who are being produced over and over . . . it will be the single black show of the season and perhaps the single black show for several years . . . With an ethnically-specific space for these artists there may be a chance of five more plays being produced . . . giving artists a chance to work with many people in many styles.

Scott shares a personal experience interviewing for a directing position at a white mainstream theatre where she was told, “Oh, we don’t have to hire you as a director for us to qualify for federal funding, we only have to interview you. This is your interview”



(Alliance for the Inclusion in the Arts. “National Diversity Forum.”

<http://inclusioninthearts.org>). Mainstream theatres who satisfy the barest of inclusionary practices qualify for much greater funding than the usually smaller culturally specific theatres. From his comments regarding Crossroads, I have to wonder if this type of stingy employment terrain is what Eric Krebs expects non-white theatre artists to endure once all the culturally specific theatres have closed. In such a scenario the offerings of theatres like Amas, possibly created by whites and administered by whites according to a white point of view, are the only opportunities left. Is this type of reasoning what Rosetta LeNoire wanted as her company’s policy?

### **Why Not a Black Theatre?**

I return to the question in my Introduction. Formulating ideas for why Rosetta LeNoire was so opposed to Amas being perceived as a black theatre has occupied a great part of my research and writing. She related her anecdote of hearing the hate speech to children in a church in Harlem but I can hardly believe that was the only reason. LeNoire had been in show business for many years at that point. I’m certain she heard some terrible and damaging things said both to her and her friends and colleagues. That incident may have been one that tipped her over the edge to start a theatre but I cannot believe it was all that made her so adamant to distance herself from the idea of being a black theatre.

I grew up in the south in the civil rights era. As a child I remember the images of that time. The civil rights movement was portrayed in the national media as normal people – men in their shirt sleeves; women in their house dresses – being set on by dogs, police with clubs, hoses turned on them and tear gas. There was a palpable sense of suffering,

sacrifice and victimization portrayed on television and in print. In contrast, and mainly in the north, the images of black nationalism and black power were of athletically built, young black men with arm bands, fists in salute and weapons. They were not singing gospel songs but instead were angry and seemingly militant. Even Amiri Baraka pointed out when forming BART/S:

Many of our strongest supporters refused to join the actual organization, because they felt some of us were just too crazy and hard to get along with. And there is no disputing that – a couple of those dudes I couldn't even get along with. Ironically, two brothers who had split from the Umbra organization . . . were the sickest, most disruptive negroes in militant clothing I have ever met (“The Black Arts Movement” 27).

Rosetta LeNoire grew up in Harlem and when I read statements like Baraka's and reflect on the images of the times I begin to think fear was also a motivating factor in her need to keep Amas disassociated with being an all-black theatre. Additionally, LeNoire was blacklisted in the fifties for being part of the boycott of television. Her reaction was to contact the FBI and have them conduct a formal investigation and clear her name. Given the nature of the times, any activity considered radical and extreme coming from Harlem and other urban neighborhoods was under close scrutiny. If she was afraid of being associated with the black arts movement, black nationalism or black power, it could have also been because she did not want a repetition of being blacklisted or any other government surveillance on her life and work.

My curiosity has kept the question alive. I couldn't help but feel like the story was more complicated than not wanting to discriminate against anyone, though I do believe that

was at the heart of her mission. Amas did such a lot of black theatre; she was obviously not so rigid that she would turn away projects for the sake of not being perceived as a black theatre, but her very strong verbal protests against all-black theatre contrasted with the company's programming. Would she have deemed all black theatre to be inappropriate and therefore obsolete as the world became more multiethnic? I also must return to her 1980 letter to the Black Theater Alliance where she wrote:

I am concerned about funding for Black theatre in the 1980s . . . I am positive that the people in charge are not stumbling in the dark. They know how their policies will affect Black theatre people. I am certain that they are not honestly empathizing with and evaluating the inequities of the past in which the history of Third World people has been generally ignored (*Black Theatre Alliance Newsletter* qtd. in Norflett 432).

At least in this instance LeNoire was not so averse to claiming her right to speak on behalf of black theatre. Though she may have been calculated in her approach towards addressing the Black Theatre Alliance, up to this point, throughout the seventies she was adamantly against Amas being identified as a black theatre. By 1980 she was able to advocate against the possible disappearance of black theatre, something Eric Krebs seemed to feel was inappropriate in 2000.

I recognize and acknowledge LeNoire's political ambiguities throughout the years Amas was under her leadership. She oscillated between producing many black shows and arbitrarily casting actors of one race or ethnicity in roles of different races or ethnicities to serve her concept of non-discrimination. However, as a black woman who was involved in black theatre in its many forms all through the course of the twentieth century, I do not

believe she would ever say that a black theatre, such as Crossroads, was inappropriate and possibly should close or blend, which is the implied message in Krebs's statement. I

believe that sentiment could only come from a white person who is obviously cavalier, and also ignorant, in his judgment of what is and is not appropriate in the theatre, particularly when it comes to race.

If Krebs and Donna Trinkoff are, whether by choice or not, ignorant of how race is being continually debated in theatre practice, I might suggest they take the time to research and investigate the most recent thinking, writing and reflection. It is not difficult to do and does not take an academic's access to information. Typing a simple search of "black theatre struggle" in Google reveals several articles including Charles McNulty's coverage of a diversity forum held in Los Angeles in 2013 where artistic directors revealed the state of the American economy as a determining factor in their programming decisions. McNulty writes:

It's no wonder that in lean economic times artistic decision-making bends in a more conservative direction. Translation: more shows featuring white folks singing light FM and more old comedies featuring white folks telling jokes that weren't funny the first time around.

The diversity forum is an example of how theatre leaders are attempting to keep the conversation going whether they arrive at new, efficient solutions or whether they are only paying lip service to the issue. McNulty's comment on the tone of the forum reveals a lack of real forward moving action, "What the proceedings needed was a troublemaker to flush out the unspoken tensions. A spirit of civility censored the most difficult truths" ("Difficult

times to face as theater leaders talk diversity, economic.” *Los Angeles Times*. n.pag.). This type of touchy atmosphere is why the national conversations continue.

Less civil is Michael Dinwiddie, quoted in Christine Jean Chambers 2013 article featured on the website *The Root*. Dinwiddie, according to Chambers, “proclaimed black theatre to be in a state of emergency,” because, as Dinwiddie observes:

the perverse notion we have in this country that people are being reverse racist by creating their own cultural institutions . . . funders would rather give money to a white theater doing a black play than a black theater doing a multiracial play . . . I don’t want to call it reverse racism. Is there such a term as inverse racism? (“Black Theaters Struggling to Survive.” n.pag.)

Dinwiddie is the president of the Black Theatre Network (BTN), an organization “Dedicated to the Exploration and Preservation of the Theatrical Visions of the African Diaspora” (Black Theatre Network.

[http://www.blacktheatrenetwork.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=2&Itemid=78](http://www.blacktheatrenetwork.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=2&Itemid=78)). BTN maintains a professional development directory and holds annual conferences. Their 2013 Conference, entitled *Making the NETWORK*, re-published essays on black theatre and diversity in the conference program. The essays had originally been published on the website *HowlRound* in the series “Diversity in American Theater”, where Carla Stillwell, quoted throughout this dissertation, also published her essays. One of Stillwell’s essays, “What Shall We Tell Our Young Playwrights Who Are Black,” is also reprinted in the BTN conference program. In her essay Stillwell pleads to young playwrights, “Don’t allow your voice and unique black experience to be muted by this country’s efforts to move us all past race. Because when you allow your voice to be

muted, you participate in the genocide of the black experience and the death of the black story” (*Making the NetWORK: The Black Theatre Network Conference Program 2013*. 24). Stillwell’s plea is meaningful when discussing theatres like Amas that continue to recycle warhorses, like *Damn Yankees*, with supposed black trappings in order to serve their intention to return to “African American roots.” The BTN essays reveal a range of subject matter but the point of mentioning all of these options is to prove how easy and non-labor intensive it is to seek out various points of view on race in theatre. Nowhere in discussions of black theatre’s survival does the notion of inappropriateness surface.

Searching the Web with “nontraditional casting” pulls another set of information including Sharon Jensen’s 2013 essay in *The Stage*, a website from the United Kingdom. Jensen is the former executive director of the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts (AIA), an organization formed as the continuation of the Non-Traditional Casting Project once the NTCP included disabled, non-hearing and non-sighted actors in its policy. Jensen makes clear that the NTCP always felt it was important for creative teams to accurately represent the “cultural needs of the piece and cast accordingly.” Jensen continues:

If actors are not given the opportunity to portray their own ethnicity, let alone anyone else’s, how will we ever understand this dimension of our humanity and how will these artists have the opportunity to grow and develop as their peers do . . . . When we speak of authenticity, it is to insure that actors of color are allowed to inhabit their own cultural identity whenever appropriate.

Jensen adds that nontraditional casting “was intended to open what was primarily a Euro-centric, Western repertoire to artists who had been systematically excluded,” not the other way around. Her “two-way” street – mentioned in the article’s title – is addressing the idea

that Caucasian actors are being cast in roles of other cultures and her goal is equality. She points out that “Even if . . . as a society and as an industry, we are able to achieve an equal playing field there must always be room for culturally-, disability-, gender-, sexual orientation-, age-specific work” (“Non-traditional casting is not a two-way street.” *The Stage*. n.pag). Jensen’s article negates Eric Krebs’s assertion that a theatre such as Crossroads is inappropriate.

Via Sharon Jensen and the AIA, Actors’ Equity is further clarifying what its original intention of nontraditional casting meant while recognizing that equality still favors whites in theatre in the twenty-first century. Nontraditional casting therefore serves the same purpose as affirmative action – a means for members of underrepresented groups to gain access to opportunity. Actors Equity, an organization that praised Rosetta LeNoire for her attempts to colorblind cast, even when it meant putting white actors in black roles, is making clear that, in the present time, non-discrimination does not apply in the case of whites. Whites in theatre are as privileged when it comes to opportunity for employment as they are elsewhere in society. Jensen has also dispelled the notion that culturally exclusive theatre is a form of reverse racism, another of LeNoire’s and therefore Trinkoff and Krebs’s contentions. Jensen’s clarification also negates Krebs’s comment during AEA’s 1990 *Miss Saigon* debacle, where a Caucasian was cast in the role of a Eurasian. At the time Krebs’s viewpoint was:

Equity has its head up its tochis . . . They’re grandstanding in the wrong ballpark. The right ballpark is their own non-traditional casting policy, and the letter that producers have to sign saying they’ll adhere to non-discrimination” (Krebs qtd. in “The Fall of ‘Miss Saigon.’” *Los Angeles Times*. n.pag.).

According to Jensen, questioning and attempting to interfere with a Caucasian being cast as Eurasian *is* part of Equity's nontraditional casting policy. Krebs was applying colorblind philosophy to his opinion as if non-discrimination meant giving a white actor the role of a non-white character. This is the same sort of subversion of race conscious terms that neoconservatives apply to weaken or eliminate affirmative action. It was a misinterpreted sense of what discrimination meant that put Krebs, Trinkoff and Managing Director Jan Hacha in their positions at Amas. At this writing, nine out of eleven board of director positions, including all three top positions of Chairman, President/Secretary and Treasurer, are held by whites.

Because all three top leadership positions are held by white people, as well as a large majority of both board of directors and advisory board members, Amas now has the physical appearance of being a white theatre. It was easy to identify board members through photographs of a recent benefit gala on the Amas website. Not only was the entertainment of the evening, well-known black singer Leslie Uggams, backed by a white band, all board members were identified in photo captions. Group photos of attendees showed a large gathering of primarily white people. This appearance of whiteness is in stark contrast to the original founder and leader of Amas.

In the Introduction I examined Amas's culture which includes the continued effort to keep Rosetta LeNoire's ghost present, there also seems to be the appearance of the company's clinging to a version of her old integrationist philosophy – the same philosophy that put white people in charge of her theatre and a justification to load the board of directors with white representation as well. However, not only does the continued cultivation of policy that serves to support white leadership put Amas behind the times in a



society that is struggling to keep its democratic ideals afloat when it comes to racism, it also serves current conservative perspective where “the language of civil rights is mobilized to protect whiteness, which is cast . . . as a minority identity” (Wiegman. “Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity.” 115). Rosetta LeNoire made her decision based on a philosophy that to do otherwise would constitute a form of discrimination, though whites were then and are now, overrepresented when it came to employment in theatre. In this case, Trinkoff and Krebs were treated as if they were members of an injured minority.

Because I feel that American theatre is influenced by all political forces active in American society, those in charge of theatre also bear the responsibility for learning what these forces are and doing their best to offer solutions rather than settling into a comfortably removed status quo. The effect of institutional racism is the same in theatre as it is for every other system in our society. The economic, financial and legal institutions that are structurally biased in favor of whites have direct results on how theatres operate, what programming decisions are made and how race is represented. In the present volatile political and social atmosphere, particularly as it applies to race, theatres have the responsibility for what is presented on their stages.

My premise is proven by a recent initiative in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area of Minnesota. A coalition of culturally specific theatres has formed to discuss and offer counsel to area theatres regarding the representation of race. Sharon Bellamy, co-artistic director at The Penumbra Theatre, said in an interview with Minnesota Public Radio (May 2014):

There's a difference between black theatre, and plays with black people in them. One has a social justice imperative that deals directly with the community. The other uses those people – or representatives of that community – in ways that are not necessarily beneficial to that community.

The Penumbra is a black theatre founded in 1976 that has struggled financially over a period of several years, almost closing in 2013, and recently having received enough community support to continue. Sharon Bellamy continues her interview by addressing the current racial tensions that theatres should not ignore:

The stakes are too high right now. Any little bit of misrepresentation or mis-characterization of who we are has so much leverage in this very vitriolic impassioned environment where we're just grappling with our national history, and we're doing so quite poorly (Combs. "New theater coalition wants end to racial, ethnic stereotypes." *Minnesota Public Radio*. [www.mprnews.org](http://www.mprnews.org)).

Statements like Bellamy's are proof that the issue of racial tension is currently in the foreground when it comes to theatre programming just as it is in all other aspects of American society.

In the case of Amas, no matter what the color palette is on stage, the company is now operating from a position of white power and privilege that controls what work is produced and how it is presented. Operating from a decades old colorblind policy, where racial tension is supposedly cured by a misguided notion of transcendence and erasure, Amas has the same responsibility as other theatres to broaden awareness when it comes to race. The claim of a white company to return frequently to its "African American roots" carries with it a host of complex interpretations. It is now a dozen years since LeNoire's

death. In the future, as her ghost continues to fade, a claim of returning to African American roots will become empty and artificial.

Without close assessment of how best to present race onstage, Amas continues to risk practicing the type of white appropriation so beautifully expressed in Hughes's poem: "You've taken my blues and gone . . . And you fixed 'em so they don't sound like me" (qtd. in Walker 621). Such a practice is perilously close to representing race as minstrelsy, a form where whites performed misrepresentations of black behavior, presence and music resulting in the creation of degrading stereotypes that are still promoted in racist American society. LeNoire stumbled in this area by presenting shows like *Blackberries* that explored blackface performance. For Amas to continue to stumble out of ignorance is wrong, particularly since the company is now administered by whites. If for no other reason than bad taste, with the additional, and more important, possibility of perpetuating stereotypes in a highly polarized and racially sensitized America, theatres such as Amas should strive to be more guarded and aware as to how they present race on their stages.

### **Afterword and Update**

In the course of writing this dissertation, Amas has moved from their location at MacDougall Street in Greenwich Village to offices at West 52<sup>nd</sup> Street. The Amas website says that the company is now back uptown, in the theatre district, after eight years downtown. Ironically, the website also boasts, "We are sitting at the top of the August Wilson Theatre – right up there with the fly guys" ([www.amasmusical.org/home](http://www.amasmusical.org/home)). Fly guys is not only a term for the people who run the fly system in a theatre but is also the name of a current black band, a term for someone who is cool and also "a self-proclaimed pimp – a

70s throwback often dressed in platform shoes and colored polyester suits”

([www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)).

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