

ROBERT HOOKS

INTERGENERATIONAL VISIONARY & INSTITUTION BUILDER

ON THE OCCASION OF
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Though Robert Hooks is deservedly known for his talent as an actor, when you revisit his role in helping to create the venerable Negro Ensemble Company, it can be argued that other aspects of his accomplishments have uppermost importance. In honoring Hooks as recipient of the BTAA 2007 Lifetime Achievement Award of Merit, perhaps we would do well to focus on these other aspects of him. First, there is his outreach to other artists, especially the young. Second, there is his exemplification of institution building. And, third, it is time to acknowledge Robert Hooks as a resource of guiding vision for the African American presence in theater, now and in future.

Looking first at Hooks' embrace of the young, he speaks to this in his interview with Vincent Williams, BTAA Founder & President. Explaining how the Negro Ensemble Company (hereafter "NEC") was an outgrowth of his first of four theatre arts institutions, the Group Theatre Workshop, in which he worked with disadvantaged youth, Hooks recalls:

"...The Negro Ensemble Company, which we created in 1967, was the successor to the first theater company that I started in New York. That first company was called The Group Theater Workshop. At the time I was starring Off-Broadway in 'Dutchman' by Leroi Jones. It was a huge hit, and I was asked to talk to the Chelsea Civil Rights Council with the hope that I could encourage the neighborhood kids who were facing challenges much as I'd had when I was growing up in DC. This was right in the middle of the Civil Rights movement. I lived in New York's Chelsea neighborhood at the time, and I knew most of the people who were at the event at which I spoke. We were talking about theater in general, blacks in theater, and 'Dutchman.' Afterwards, a group of kids—there must have been about 20 to 25 of them, some of whom I knew—approached me and started asking about how they might get into the industry as actors, writers, or directors. So I decided that I would meet with these kids—because I love kids, and I was a professional—and I would share what I knew with them. So we started meeting in my living room on West 28th Street, between 10th and 11th Avenues. That grew into a very, very successful theater company of teenagers from all over New York. Ultimately, there must have been 120 kids from Manhattan, Queens, Jamaica, Bronx, and Brooklyn in my apartment. We knocked out a wall in my living room (I ended up being evicted for it), we built a theater, and I started this group called The Group Theater Workshop. Of course, the people in the community wanted to know 'What's going on? Why are all these kids coming in and out of this actor's house down here?' So I decided with Barbara Ann Teer, the Co-Director of GTW, to put on a showcase. At the time, Douglas Turner Ward, Lonnie Elder, and I were the three musketeers and doing all kinds of wonderful creative things together. Of course they were writing. Doug had written two one-act plays, and we were trying to sell those plays to "angels" around town, but there were no buyers, no investors. One, "Happy

Ending", was a funny play and I used it in the GTW showcase, casting it with our young actors (Hattie Winston was one of them). The showcase was a big success, and the bigger success of the evening was Douglas's play. So I told him, 'Look if we got reviews like this with kids playing the roles, let me try and produce this play for real.' He finally consented. I went and raised the money to produce 'Happy Ending' and 'Day of Absence', and they became the biggest hits in New York. On the basis of their success, the New York Times approached Doug to write an article about blacks in theater. He wrote a most incredible article ["American Theater: For Whites Only?"] and as a result of that, the Ford Foundation came to us, and asked us to put together a plan for our ideal black theater company. We did, and almost immediately they gave us a huge grant. Thus was born The Negro Ensemble Company. So the Group Theater Workshop folded into that, becoming the training program for the NEC, and then we recruited a small nucleus of some incredible actors to comprise the ensemble company. That's how it started, and that was the beginning of what became true [modern day] history in black theater, black theater in America. The inspiration was working with those young kids..."

As Hooks details the inspiration borne of working with those young kids, it must be noted that the serendipity of that collaboration happened because of his willingness to, as he says, *"...share what [we] knew with them."* That willingness to share, inherently referenced his vision of possibility among our young people, his belief in them as theater artists and representative cultural agents of the future. Based on Hooks' introduction to theatre early in life, we can speculate that his vision of, and belief in, the young echoes the encouragement he himself received from his sister Bernice during his childhood, and later, as a young man, from older actors in the debut production of "A Raisin in the Sun." That interaction with those kids back then, and since, was informed by Hooks' sense of intergenerational obligation to help our young become more empowered to tell our stories, our way, and inject it into the discourse of culture on our terms.

Of course, along with his outreach to young people, he was equally concerned with the well-being of the actors of his own, and earlier, generations back in the 1960's. At one point in his interview with Vincent Williams, Hooks intimates the pain of seeing Black actors the caliber of Roscoe Lee Browne, James Earl Jones, Moses Gunn and others *"...walking around New York, not having anything to do, except maybe a play here and there, but little else to do."* He goes on to explain how Broadway's willingness to ignore and waste proven Black talent was also a pivotal inspiration for creating a company which could create and offer ongoing creative and performance opportunities for such artists back in the 1960s, continuing into the present and the future.

This intergenerational sense of responsibility compelled Hooks and his collaborators—Douglas Turner Ward and Gerald Krone—to build the Negro Ensemble Company on a solid foundation of excellence so that it might endure as the acclaimed institution it is. Indeed, for almost five decades, and up to the present, the Negro Ensemble Company's dedication to excellence has earned it worldwide respect and numerous highly coveted honors and awards. But such accolades fail to measure the true and lasting triumph of the NEC; namely, its role as an incubator for Black actors, directors, playwrights, composers and technicians who are committed to creating theater which tells the human story and breaks down walls of racial prejudice. This is the true

accomplishment for which the NEC should be praised. And it is reiterated, at a glance, when you visit the NEC website listing of just some alumni who got their starts there. Rich with historic meaning, that list—that "honor roll"—is shown below. Take a moment to study it, reflect on the names you recognize (and this partial list does not include the directors, playwrights, and scenic artists who got their starts there) and praise NEC's awesome tradition of excellence. (A complete list of alumni can be found at: <http://www.necinc.org/#!/alumni-of-nec/ca15>)

The common reference to Robert Hooks as a "distinguished actor" is, as stated earlier, most deserved. It befits his extensive and very impressive body of work in theater, film and television. But it's important to note the label of "distinguished actor" is what others say about him. *He*, by comparison, refers to himself as "...a producer and director." Here we are reminded of Hooks' focus on institution building to benefit others, a whole community, and the theater, not just himself. Indeed, as co-founder and executive director of the NEC, it was Hooks' job to "raise the money" and oversee the organization's evolution as enduring cultural institution that would help others. This is not to say Hooks did it all by himself; after all, Douglas Turner Ward and Gerald Krone were his formidable co-founders. Still, Hooks, as executive director, had to bring that management skill—his and theirs—to bear. And as we ponder his track record for institution building, let's remember that Hooks solely created two other significant African American theater companies—New York's Group Theater Workshop, as stated above, and the DC Black Repertory Company—before and after he helped to create the NEC.

Contemplating the philosophical or sociopolitical underpinnings of Hooks' gift and commitment to institution building, we are reminded it was Malcolm X who awakened Hooks' sense of political responsibility and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who helped Hooks to understand the pivotal role of artists in the struggle for social justice and racial equality. The call to consciousness from those two historic visionaries helped to give shape and direction to Hooks' political activism and sense of mission at the NEC and elsewhere.¹ This activism and mission that attended Hooks' focus on institution building were challenged, tested, many times but, steadfast in his commitment to theater as a catalyst for enlightenment, social justice, racial equality and change, Hooks led the NEC through hard times, the vicissitudes of creative visioning, detractors' lies and brickbats, and myriad other threats which would have destroyed a lesser man and a lesser institution. Ultimately, the NEC's continued existence today, over four decades later, attests to Hooks' and his colleagues' gift and commitment for institution building.

In recounting the past accomplishments of the now semi-retired Hooks, it becomes clear that he should be actively treasured as a resource today. Here reference is made to the need to pick his brain in some sort of forum, workshop or Master Class on leadership and vision in the psychosocial and sociopolitical implications of theater. His is the kind of historic vision which informs the present and gives direction for the future.

When Vincent Williams asked Hooks 'If things have changed significantly? Have we overcome today?' Hooks replies, ***"We're a long way from overcoming ...first of all, 85% of Black actors in this industry are out of work. I would say the best improvement, as far as I'm concerned, is in television because we have cable. Not that much in film or theater—but TV. The coming of cable, and the fact that they need programming so desperately, opens the doors for Black writers, directors and actors to work more. But as far as the major networks—we have not seen that many improvements as it relates to employment, image, and executive positions of decision making, which is why we***

don't see our images improving that much in television and film... "Now theater is another story—there we've lost our way. There are a lot of regional theaters, but as it relates to Broadway, there is a lot to be desired. Woodie King, Jr. is probably the busiest producer in New York, and his work has not been given the kind of attention that it should be given. Theater has kind of lost its way as it relates to the national audience. Except for the regional plays and festivals here and there, there hasn't been that much positive improvement on a steady basis."

Hooks advises current and emerging theater artists to study and understand the history of theater, producing, acting and the artists who have come before. He implores those who are now producing Black-oriented theater—be they the money-grubbing 'entrepreneurs' of the new 'chitlin' circuit', or rappers, or true theater artists—to offer Black audiences more well-crafted drama and comedy which entertains and enlightens with significant themes and in-depth character development. Hooks also appeals to successful Black artists—whether from the theater, film or television—to give something back to the communities from which they come.

Some forgotten African scholar once defined culture as "...the sum and substance of art and artifacts used by a people in their struggle for autonomy and survival." Robert Hooks brings that scholar's observation to mind since the text and subtext of everything Hooks has to say is about our engagement with culture for our autonomy and survival as theater artists and as a people. And, lest the point was not made clear earlier in this piece, we need to spend more time with Robert Hooks. Intergenerational visionary and institution builder that he is, there is much he can teach us, while reminding many of us of what we have forgotten; and reminding the more successful among us of what we are pretending to have forgotten.