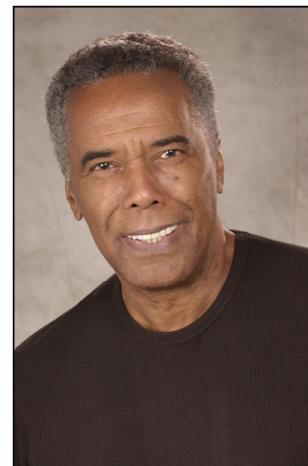


# ROBERT HOOKS – Cultural Architect

Actor, Producer, Political Activist and Creator of Arts Institutions

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Born Bobby Dean Hooks into the rat-infested Foggy Bottom of segregated Washington, DC, a product of the post-Depression Northern Migration, the story of Robert Hooks' life is, in many ways, the story of America in the mid-to-late 20th century. As a young actor in Philadelphia, it was seeing *A Raisin in the Sun* in its out-of-town tryouts which both stunned and awakened him to what might be possible. Almost immediately, he packed his bags and moved to Manhattan where, in a scene reminiscent of a 1930's Stage Door musical, he was soon hired for that same original Broadway production of...yes...*A Raisin in the Sun*. He then segued into the lead role in Jean Genet's long-running, politically incendiary play *The Blacks* (alongside Maya Angelou, Roscoe Lee Browne, Cicely Tyson, James Earl Jones, Louis Gossett, Adolph Caesar, Raymond St. Jacques, Charles Gordone and Godfrey Cambridge), followed shortly afterward by inaugurating the male lead in **Leroi Jones'** provocative two-character piece, *Dutchman* produced by **Edward Albee**. The next decade brought a series of Broadway shows, among them *Arturo Ui*, *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Any More*, *A Taste of Honey*, and *Hallelujah Baby*, for which he garnered a Tony nomination for Lead Actor in a Musical. Off-Broadway he broke theatrical color barriers when **Joe Papp** cast him in the title role of *Henry V*, a first in theatre history.



A celebrated and recognizable performer, and one of the first black leading men, he was repeatedly tapped to shatter the color line in all media decades before the term "colorblind casting" even existed. In addition to his turn as Henry V, he was the first black actor to be cast in as a lead in a dramatic series (see *NYPD* below), and opened the doors for other black actors to receive above-the-title billing with his lead role in **Otto Preminger's *Hurry Sundown***.

It was **Malcolm X** who awakened in him a sense of political responsibility, but it was the **Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** who personally counseled Robert to never forget that artists were an integral and vital part of the struggle for civil rights. That mandate, in combination with his eldest sister's deep belief in the power of theatre to create connections between disparate communities as well as to rescue individuals, has shaped the core of his existence.

Mr. Hooks has enjoyed a long and distinguished career as an actor, producer, arts-institution builder and political activist. He founded not one, but three significant black theatre companies: New York's **Group Theatre Workshop**, the **DC Black Repertory Company** (created in response to the

devastation he witnessed in the wake of the 1968 riots), and New York's internationally acclaimed **Negro Ensemble Company**. Its format based on Hooks' consciousness-changing viewing of Bertolt Brecht's *Berliner Ensemble Company* in East Germany, the NEC remains the most important enterprise of its kind to-date, launching the careers of many of our now-major black artists in all disciplines and media. Its nurturing of black playwrights over the course of four decades created a body of performance literature which provides the backbone of the African-American theatrical canon.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, Robert's visibility as a much in-demand performer enabled him to be of even more service in the endless fundraising for the civil rights movement. So active, involved and publicly outspoken was he in the cause of equality that on the morning after Dr. King's murder, he was summoned by DC Commissioner Walter Washington to help quell the city's growing unrest. In the midst of shooting **David Susskind's** groundbreaking series *N.Y.P.D.*, the first prime-time network drama to feature a black actor as one of its three leads, and with Susskind's blessing, Hooks spent the next days walking the streets of DC, speaking at rallies and, ultimately, returning a year later to found his third theatre institution, **The DC Black Rep**, attempting to rebuild lives through the arts in much the same way he had with the **Group Theatre Workshop** and the NEC.

When television producers realized that John F. Kennedy's book *Profiles in Courage* had no black heroes, it was Robert they invited to star in the episode they hastily added to the series, *Young Frederick Douglass*. Of his more than 150 roles in television, Robert is, additionally, most proud of his participation in two highly-acclaimed mini-series, *Backstairs at the White House* and *Sophisticated Gents*.

Robert's films have included **Otto Preminger's** *Hurry Sundown* with **Michael Caine, Jane Fonda** and **Diahann Carroll**; **Tennessee Williams' Last of the Mobile Hotshots** with **Lynn Redgrave** and **James Coburn**, directed by Sidney Lumet; *Airport '77, Passenger 57* (directed by his son **Kevin Hooks**), the *Star Trek III* movie, and the title role in the uncomfortably political cult hit *Trouble Man*, making him the original "Mr. T." (see the 2012 NPR editorial, "Trouble Man at 40")

Although his active stance in politics cost him some jobs, it engendered continuing requests for him to speak publicly. Significantly, he was invited to speak in front of **the House Senate Committee** both on his own and, in **1973**, in the company of **Sidney Poitier, Maya Angelou, Brock Peters, Bernie Casey** and **Terry Carter** regarding the importance of the **National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act**. He even served as the opening speaker for then-**President Bill Clinton** ...and was feted with an event in his own honor at **the Nixon White House** by future AMPAS **President Jack Valenti**.

To cite Herbert Allen, a Chicago-based television producer, in his paper, *Robert Hooks*:

***Intergenerational Visionary & Institution Builder***, written in 2007 on the occasion of yet another **Lifetime Achievement Award:**

"It is time to acknowledge Robert Hooks as a resource of guiding vision for the African American presence in theater, now and in the future. Contemplating the philosophical and sociopolitical underpinnings of Hooks' gift and commitment to institution building, and in revisiting Hooks' accomplishments, it becomes clear that he should be actively treasured as a resource today. His is the kind of historic vision which informs the present and gives direction for the future."