

## African American Theater Before Hansberry

By Danielle Yee



Harlem Federal Theatre Project Production of *MacBeth*

(Image from The Library of Congress and BlackPast.org)

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is best acclaimed for being the first Broadway play by an African American woman, which was an astounding achievement of her time. Though before Hansberry comes a long history of African American theater, most notably from the movement in the 1920's called the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was a result of African American people traversing northward to find greater freedoms in expressing their highly valued culture. Back in the south, African Americans were greatly oppressed and restricted by the infamous Jim Crow laws. This sudden wave of people caused a surge in African American art and literature from well-respected people such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. These writers, like other American modernists such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, used their works to portray their own self-expression and reflection to celebrate their culture (Warren).

Among the various expressions within the Harlem Renaissance were Black theater groups. These groups were most prevalent in Chicago, New York, and Washington D.C., thus spreading the influence of African American talent and culture. This was a revolutionary step forward from the racially insulting minstrel shows, in which white people in blackface would perform for white audiences. Eventually, African American plays were published on Broadway; one such example being Langston Hughes's play *Mulatto*, which was a profound success. This influence of black theater not only expressed the history its people had to endure, but also granted its people a voice throughout America (*Black Theater*).

This important movement in African American theater managed to push out multiple plays and musicals such as *Three Plays for a Negro Theater* (which was the first to feature an all-Black cast), *Shuffle Along*, *Appearances*, *A Raisin in the Sun* and many others. The popularity of theater among African Americans

caused various theaters and companies, both professional and local, to appear, thus introducing various talents and wits of many African American performers to the public. Some prominent examples include the Ethiopian Art Theatre (1922-1925), the Federal Theatre Project (which led to the opening of the American Negro Theater), and the Negro Playwrights' Company. Although African American theater had some way to go to get where it is today, the multitude of plays along with its diverse casts challenged the previously white dominated theater (*SeatUp*).

#### Sources

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