The Harlem Renaissance is roughly bounded by the end of World War I and the beginning of the Great Depression and is characterized by significant developments in black art, literature, music, and drama. The participants in the Harlem Renaissance were of varied backgrounds and most were born and reared in areas distant from New York City. Harlem, with its large concentration of blacks within the largest U.S. metropolis, was a mecca, a haven, a nurturing ground, and, often, an inspiration for thousands of men and women of African descent who sought to express themselves creatively. James Weldon Johnson, the Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People from 1920 to 1930, declared, in 1930, that the most outstanding aspect of the race’s development in the U.S. during the preceding decade was the “literary and artistic emergence of the individual creative artist.”

In 1925, Alain Locke, who was a Howard University professor of philosophy and a prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance, defined the spirit of that era by describing a “New Negro,” whose mind “seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority.” Notably, Locke’s anthology, The New Negro (1925), contained a one-act drama by Willis Richardson. Richardson had written another short play, The Chip Woman’s Fortune, which was produced on Broadway in 1923, and which inspired many optimistic discussions about the possibilities for black-authored dramas on the American stage. However, literature overshadowed drama, not only in Locke’s The New Negro, but in the Harlem Renaissance, in general. Even more popular than the prose and poetry of Harlem Renaissance writers were the musical products of people like Duke Ellington, Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake, Fats Waller, Fletcher Henderson, Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, and Ethel Waters. Multi-talented musical revue performers like Florence Mills and Josephine Baker were in great demand in Europe as well as New York City.

The influx of blacks to Harlem began in the first decade of the twentieth century. By 1914, nearly 50,000 blacks populated the central region of Harlem. By 1920, the population of black Harlem reached 73,000 and, by 1930, approximately 165,000 blacks, seventy-two percent of New York’s black population, were living within the expanded boundaries of black Harlem. Through the mid-1920s, the leading theatres in Harlem, offering live entertainment and catering to blacks, were the Lincoln and the Lafayette; in 1926, the Alhambra Theatre, which previously discriminated against black patrons, became the third such theatre. Drama, of professional calibre, emerged at the Lincoln Theatre, in 1915, through the entrepreneurship of a young black actress named Anita Bush. Following a successful run at the Lincoln Theatre, the Anita Bush Dramatic Stock Company moved to the Lafayette Theatre, and, in 1916, after Bush’s departure, her group of black actors became known as the Lafayette Players and maintained a close connection with that theatre until the early 1920s, when their popularity seriously declined.

The Lafayette Players performed short plays, or abbreviated versions of recent Broadway hits, mostly melodramatic in nature, on a bill that changed weekly and usually contained some other type of entertainment, often a motion picture. The plays were not about black people, and, if the actors were not light enough to pass for white, they would lighten their skins with make-up. Throughout the 1920s, when drama was produced at the professional Harlem theatres, it was usually in the form popularized by the Lafayette Players and rarely constituted the major portion of an evening’s program. Notable exceptions were several short runs of Broadway vehicles, such as Ernest Culbertson’s Goat Alley and Paul Green’s In Abraham’s Bosom. A few amateur organizations known as little theatre movements, and hereafter referred to as little theatre groups, staged plays, some of them about black people, at the professional Harlem theatres, but almost exclusively on special occasions and as an adjunct to the regular program.

The standard fare of Harlem’s professional theatres was the musical revue. Downtown theatres entertained predominantly white audiences with serious plays about black people, which, for the most part, were authored by whites and focused on the sensational aspects of black life. During the 1920s, nineteen important productions of plays about Afro-
Americans were mounted in downtown New York theatres. Fifteen of the nineteen plays were produced on Broadway. Four of the nineteen plays were written by blacks. The four black-authored plays were Broadway plays, of which only one had a long run, and that one was co-authored by a white writer and was also of the sensational genre. Some black Harlemites were dissatisfied with the status and nature of drama in Harlem theatres and also rejected the validity or utility of downtown plays about black people. The remedy, as these editorialists, critics, and other Harlem spokesmen saw it, was to encourage black playwrights and the growth of a body of black-authored plays, to cultivate community interest in the works of black playwrights and drama, in general, and to develop and support little theatre groups in the community. Many little theatre groups emerged in Harlem during the 1920s. All of the groups included in the following discussion responded significantly to the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance and the call for serious theatre in the black community, and all are further noteworthy because of their continuity, membership, or sponsorship.

In October, 1917, the Circle for Negro War Relief was organized in New York City, with units across the country working to improve conditions for black soldiers. The executive branch of the Circle was staffed by blacks and whites, but, according to the organization’s report for 1920, the bulk of fundraising was accomplished by blacks among blacks. The end of the war necessitated a change in direction for the Circle for Negro War Relief, so “War” was dropped from its name; health care and other community needs became the focus for the Circle for Negro Relief. In 1919, the New York City unit of the Circle was reorganized into the Players’ Guild of the Circle, under the leadership of Dora Cole Norman, who, several years later, performed the role of Hattie in the Provincetown Players’ production of Eugene O’Neill’s controversial drama, All God’s Chillun Got Wings. The two-fold purpose of the Players’ Guild was, according to the 1920 report, “to encourage and foster the development of dramatic art among our [black] people and in so doing to raise money for the assistance of the Circle.”

On a Saturday afternoon, in January, 1920, the Players’ Guild produced, in the auditorium of the Harlem Y.W.C.A., a short, non-extant black drama called Confidence, by Frank Wilson. Wilson, an actor and a playwright, was a leading figure in Harlem little theatre organizations and eventually transferred most of his energy to the professional stage, appearing on Broadway in Taboo (1923), In Abraham’s Bosom (1927), and Porgy (1927). In 1928, Wilson’s full-length drama, Meek Mose, ran for five weeks on Broadway. A critic on the staff of Harlem’s leading newspaper, the New York Age, praised the Players’ Guild and Wilson for their work at the Harlem Y.W.C.A. Confidence was “interestingly written and well played,” he wrote. A host of notables attended the performance; among them were several officials of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, including W.E.B. DuBois. Among the influential whites in attendance were Ridgely Torrence and Emilie Hapgood. In 1917, Torrence and Hapgood combined their respective talents as playwright and producer to bring black actors and plays about black people to Broadway in a revolutionary experiment which foretold the prominence of black actors and plays about black people on Broadway during the 1920s.

Torrence may have influenced the players in their next choice of a play, for, in June, 1920, and having changed their name to the Colored Players’ Guild, they gave two performances of Torrence’s one-act play, Simon the Cyrenian, at the Harlem Y.W.C.A. Simon the Cyrenian is about the African who carried the cross for Jesus, and it was part of the Torrence/Hapgood experiment of 1917. Frank Wilson was again a member of the Players’ Guild cast, and so was Paul Robeson, in the role of Simon. Due to the fact that Kenneth MacGowan and Robert Edmond Jones, prominent members of the Provincetown Players, were in the audience, Robeson’s performance was instrumental in his rise to stardom, later, in the 1924 production of All God’s Chillun Got Wings, which, as already noted, also starred the Guild’s director, Dora Cole Norman. A New York Age critic, identified only as “Morgan,” bemoaned the paucity of “good Negro dramas” which accounted for the Players’ Guild’s choice of “such an inadequate and unconvincing drama as Simon the Cyrenian.” ”Morgan praised the Guild for its efforts in stimulating the growth of a black drama movement and for creating an alternative to the “cheap melodrama and the cheaper musical comedy” which dominated Harlem theatres. He described the Guild’s “acting, directing and producing” as “excellent” and was optimistic about the future of “Negro drama” if good plays emerged.

After an interval of several months, the Colored Players’ Guild surfaced again at the Y.W.C.A., in February, 1921, for one performance of a double bill which featured a one-act, nonextant play by Dora Cole Norman titled The Niche. Harold Simmelkjær, who, in 1919, starred in the Provincetown Players’ production of O’Neill’s The Dreamy Kid, appeared in The Niche. The companion piece was G. Alfred Woods’ also nonextant Pitfalls of Appearances, starring Woods and Frank Wilson. The critic for the New York Age was favorably impressed with the
plays and the acting and recommended that similar efforts should be encouraged. The players' double bill entertained a distinguished audience which again included W.E.B. DuBois, as well as Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. Despite such support and encouragement, the Colored Players' Guild soon disbanded, and leading members were associated with other groups, such as the Acme Players, which claimed Wilson and Woods.

In May, 1922, the Acme Players performed three one-act plays in a midnight show at the Lafayette Theatre for the benefit of the Urban League. Midnight shows at Harlem theatres were performances, sometimes amateur, which were staged after the regular evening program, usually on a weekday. The Acme Players' midnight performance included only one play about black people, Frank Wilson's Confidence, featuring Wilson and Woods. Wilson had recently acted on Broadway in Taboo. The moving force behind the Acme Players was a white woman, Anne Wolter, who was associated with the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. In an intermission speech during the midnight show, Wolter explained that, several years earlier, she and her colleagues had organized classes in dramatic training composed of black students. Eventually, Wolter took charge of the students, and the Acme Players were the result. The performance at the Lafayette Theatre was their initial public effort. Wolter spoke of the "hard work and endurance" of the players and "the latent talent in the race which needs only opportunity for expression, coupled with a chance for training." She called upon the members of the audience for assistance in developing a Harlem art center and securing a permanent little theatre building in Harlem. Lucien White, a New York Age writer, considered the Acme Players' premier performance "commendable," though somewhat less than perfect, owing to the players' lack of experience. He indicated that the players were warmly received by a good-sized audience.

One year later, the Acme Players again earned the attention of the Harlem press. In May, 1923, at the Y.W.C.A., they gave a performance of two more short plays by Frank Wilson, A Train North and The Heartbreaker. Both plays are now lost. Nine months passed and Anne Wolter announced the formal organization of what would become known as the National Ethiopian Art Theatre and the National Ethiopian Art Theatre School, not to be confused with the Ethiopian Art Players of Chicago, who performed works by Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, and Willis Richardson on Broadway in May, 1923. Wolter had severed her ties with the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and was embarked on a course toward goals which she articulated during the first performance of the Acme Players nearly two years earlier. Her outline for the National Ethiopian Art Theatre School included instruction in dramatic arts, dancing, music, diction, and public speaking, plus regular performances and the eventual erection of a National Ethiopian Art Theatre building. Enrollment fees were fifty cents or one dollar monthly, depending on the student's age. In March, 1924, the National Ethiopian Art Theatre School was formally opened in Harlem at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library. At the outset, 140 students registered for classes, which were to be held at the library and at several other locations in Harlem. The predominantly white faculty, said to be thirty in number, was headed by theatre professionals. Faculty services and facilities for instruction, all located in Harlem, were provided voluntarily. Enrollment fees were used to cover the cost of supplies, and students who were unable to pay were given scholarships.

The first performance of the National Ethiopian Art Theatre School students was at the New Star Casino in Harlem in June, 1924, two weeks after the close of the first term. The performance was billed as "Premier Dance Exhibition and Song Recital...100 GIRLS and Boys DANCING like Wildfire[,] SINGING like mad." In advertisements, the words "girls," "dancing," and "singing," were prominently enlarged. The nature of the National Ethiopian Art Theatre exhibition and recital suggests that the leadership of that organization was not entirely in tune with the ideals of Harlem spokesmen who decried the dominance of song and dance over drama in Harlem. According to reports, the outstanding feature of the National Ethiopian Art Theatre program was the dancing chorus of 100 students, under the direction of Henry Creamer, the prominent producer of professional musical revues.

At a public meeting in Harlem in July, following the song and dance recital, future plans for the National Ethiopian Art Theatre School were announced. Those plans included the construction of a school building in Harlem and a "legitimate theatre" in the downtown theatre district, where "Negro drama will be presented and encouraged." Funds were to be raised through a series of plays to begin in September. Theophilus Lewis, the theatre critic for The Messenger, a Harlem journal, objected to the plan for a downtown theatre. It will be recalled that during the initial performance of the Acme Players, Anne Wolter expressed her desire to obtain a theatre in Harlem. Lewis favored the original idea. In his opinion, a black community theatre such as Wolter's organization proposed, should, for reasons of convenience, be located in a black neighborhood.
Lewis also maintained that a “Negro theatre” could not prosper downtown unless it capitulated to current, racially exploitive trends. The second term of the National Ethiopian Art Theatre School began in September, 1924, with no change in facilities. The following month, the students presented a program of one-act plays at the Lafayette Theatre in a midnight show which included Eulalie Spence’s Being Forty and Eloise Bibb Thompson’s Cooped Up. Spence and Thompson were both students of the National Ethiopian Art Theatre School. George Schuyler, a leading black journalist, substituting for Theophilus Lewis in The Messenger, was very impressed by Thompson’s drama about a conniving husband stealer but considered Spence’s story about a brother-dominated spinster not sufficiently true to black life. The acting in Being Forty was also disapproved. Neither Being Forty nor Cooped Up is extant, but synopses indicate that racial issues did not figure significantly in either play. Apparently Schuyler found Spence’s characters deficient in what one might call “black flavoring.” Spence was similarly criticized in regard to some of her other plays during the 1920s. For the most part, Spence’s surviving plays from the 1920s are built around characters who are identifiably black, but she did not write about issues related to the color line in America. In 1973, in a taped interview, Spence defended her early work by stating that she wrote for fun and did not believe that the theatre was an appropriate place for propaganda or the illumination of racial conflicts. Spence’s viewpoint was not shared by most black critics and playwrights who were her contemporaries.

Schuyler concluded his analysis of the National Ethiopian Art Theatre performance by indicating his optimism about the future of the organization despite a scarcity of capable black playwrights. However, optimism did not sustain the National Ethiopian Art Theatre. A musical recital was staged in December, 1924, and another song and dance exhibition was held the following month. Theophilus Lewis did not comment on the irony of a little theatre group devoting so much energy to non-dramatic performances, but he did criticize the National Ethiopian Art Theatre for not forming a company of advanced pupils who could appear in a repertory of plays two or three times a month and, thereby, hold the attention of the community. The January exhibition was, according to Lewis, not as good as the one presented the previous summer, and the students involved were fewer in number and less well-trained.

The National Ethiopian Art Theatre closed its second season, and its final chapter, in May, 1925, with a program of white-authored one-act plays in another midnight performance at the Lafayette Theatre. The only drama about black people on the bill was Ridgely Torrence’s play about an irresponsible husband who is forced to mend his ways. Surveying the progress of the National Ethiopian Art Theatre, Theophilus Lewis heartily approved Torrence’s The Rider of Dreams as a vehicle for the players’ talents, and, in expectation of a third season, he was hopeful that the organization’s plans included more frequent performances. Writing after the National Ethiopian Art Theatre terminated, Lewis considered the infrequency of dramatic performances one of the group’s “numerous mistakes.” An adequate explanation of the demise of the National Ethiopian Art Theatre remains un-earthed. Persistent student members of the organization were soon found applying their theatrical energies elsewhere.

Earlier, in 1924, when the National Ethiopian Art Theatre was alive and seemingly well, Opportunity magazine, a publication of the National Urban League, and The Crisis, the organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, both initiated literary contests. The contests included prizes for short plays. Contest guidelines stipulated that works submitted must be by and about black people. By the summer of 1926, after the National Ethiopian Art Theatre had ended, the Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre was organized in Harlem under the auspices of The Crisis and its editor, W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois, the leading civil rights activist of that era, maintained a position as chairman of the group, though he did not participate in the Krigwa Players’ productions. For DuBois, the Krigwa Players were the embodiment of his philosophy for “a New Negro theatre.” DuBois considered the black man’s current and long-standing participation in the American theatre a perverted association. “The demands and ideals of the white group,” he wrote, “and their conception of Negroes have set the norm for the black actor.” Consequently, DuBois concluded, “the best of the Negro actor and the most poignant Negro drama have not been called for.” He insisted that “a new Negro theatre” was necessary, a “Negro theatre” not tied to a repertory of “Shakespeare or Synge” or white Broadway successes reset with black casts. According to DuBois, “the plays of a real Negro theatre must be” written by blacks and deal honestly with black life. The “Negro theatre,” he said, must seek, and be supported by, black audiences and be located in a black neighborhood. DuBois felt that the Harlem literary competitions were serving to eliminate the problem of finding suitable plays. Not surprisingly, the Krigwa Players’ first performance included two prize-winning plays.
For the premier performance of the Krigwa Players on May 3, 1926, the small basement lecture room of the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library was transformed into the Harlem Little Negro Theatre, complete with stage and dressing rooms specially constructed by library personnel. Willis Richardson's Compromise and The Broken Banjo shared the bill with Ruth Gaines-Shelton's The Church Fight. Compromise, a drama about a southern black family repeatedly victimized by a white neighbor, was published during the preceding year in Locke's The New Negro. The Broken Banjo, which tells of a black man whose uncontrollable temper gets the best of him, won first prize in the 1925 Crisis playwriting competition. The Church Fight, a comedy, depicts a meeting of church folks who are interested in ousting their preacher. The performance of the three one-act plays was repeated twice, at one week intervals, and attracted capacity crowds totalling approximately 600 people. Still attentive to the activities of Harlem's little theatre groups, Theophilus Lewis was pleased that the Krigwa Players were seriously involved in the production of plays at the outset. The plays, he said, were "sensibly selected" and "tastefully presented." He considered Eulalie Spence's forceful acting of the leading role in Compromise an excellent example for the other members of the group to follow.23

When more than five months elapsed before the Krigwa Players performed again, Lewis' praise turned to scorn. He was sarcastic and considered the group's inactivity "a first class imitation of slow motion pictures."24 The occasion was the Crisis literary competition awards ceremony at Columbia University's International House. Eulalie Spence's Foreign Mail, which won the Crisis second prize for 1926, and W.J. Jefferson's Mandy were the two one-act plays presented. The same program was staged in the basement of the 135th Street library three months later, in January, 1927, with another play by Spence added. The additional play was titled Her. According to the critic for the New York Age, neither of Spence's plays was "Negro" in "theme" or "treatment." Neither play is extant, but descriptions of the plays support the critic's analysis. That is, it is clear that matters of race were not significant in either plot. "The one real Negro play of the program," wrote the New York Age critic, was Mandy, a nonexistent play about lynching, placed in the south. Both Theophilus Lewis and a critic for Harlem's New York Amsterdam News found fault with some of the Krigwa Players' acting but joined the New York Age critic in generally positive and encouraging assessments of the group's progress. The program was repeated twice.25

Lewis' scolding about dawdling was insufficient motivation to increase the Krigwa Players' output. In a personal interview held in 1980, Eulalie Spence explained that lapses between performances of the Krigwa Players were due to the fact that members were involved in other affairs, such as working at paying jobs. Thus, another three and one-half months passed before the Krigwa Players staged their next, and most noteworthy, production. It was a performance of Spence's southern folk drama, The Fool's Errand, in the National Little Theatre Tournament in May, 1927, at the Frolic Theatre, on Broadway. The Fool's Errand won the Samuel French Prize of $200 for original playwriting and was later published by Samuel French. Ironically, the Krigwa Players' most auspicious achievement was also the group's death knell. During the 1973 interview, Spence stated that W.E.B. DuBois, who lacked enthusiasm for The Fool's Errand because it was not a "propaganda" play, insisted that the Samuel French Prize money be used to cover the expenses of the venture. He would not, she said, permit either her or the players to share it. The check was made out to The Crisis. Angry, and blaming Spence for DuBois' actions, the players disassociated themselves from the organization. "DuBois was very disappointed," said Spence, "because he thought he had established a permanent little theatre group."

The Krigwa Players disbanded, but DuBois had established the 135th Street library basement lecture room as a theatre space which could serve other little theatre organizations. Dubbed the Krigwa Playhouse, the theatre was utilized by other groups even while the Krigwa Players were intact. One of those groups was Hemsley Winfield's Sekondi Players. Winfield was a twenty year old veteran of the National Ethiopian Art Theatre School and, in 1926, had appeared on Broadway in David Belasco's production of Lulu Belle. At the Krigwa Playhouse, during February 21-28, 1927, the Sekondi Players staged three original plays, including Winfield's A New Horror Play, plus Torrence's The Rider of Dreams. The Ride of Dreams is the only script which survived.

Organized in 1925, the Sekondi Players had already performed several plays for private audiences, but the February, 1927, undertaking was their first public appearance. Theophilus Lewis described the Sekondi Players as "the most enthusiastic and active of all the groups working to establish a real Negro theatre."26 During March, 1927, Hemsley Winfield was back on Broadway, appearing in a short-lived production of Em José Bashe's voodoo drama, Earth. In May, after Earth closed, Winfield activated the Sekondi Players under a new organization title, the New Negro Art Theatre. At the avant-garde Triangle Theatre in Greenwich
Village, the New Negro Art Theatre presented a program of one-act plays which included *Blue Blood*, by black writer Georgia Douglas Johnson. *Blue Blood* tells of a young black couple, engaged, but unaware that they have the same white father. Also on the bill were Paul Green's *White Dresses* and another lost play by Winfield titled *On*. The New Negro Art Theatre was scheduled for three performances, but a fire at the Triangle Theatre closed the engagement prematurely.29

The fall, 1927, season of the New Negro Art Theatre is sketchy. Productions were announced in the press, but only one is verifiable. *The Princess and the Black Cat*, a play for children, written by Winfield's mother, was staged in November. Though Jeroline Winfield's play was performed in a Harlem church, the 135th Street library was serving as headquarters for the New Negro Art Theatre.30 The Krigwa Players had dispersed several months before.

Early in 1928, as the New Negro Art Theatre prepared for a radio performance of Wilde's *Salome* and a midnight performance of the same play at the Alhambra Theatre, Harlem's weekly tabloid, the *Inter-State Tattler*, invited Hemsley Winfield to contribute several articles related to his little theatre experiences. At the time, Theophilus Lewis was General Editor and a theatre critic for the *Tattler*. Though Lewis did not comment on Winfield's articles or the recent work of the New Negro Art Theatre, the invitation which was extended to Hemsley Winfield by the *Tattler* was probably due to Lewis' great interest in Harlem's little theatre groups. Lewis' praise of the New Negro Art Theatre, when the group was still known as the Sekondi Players, has already been noted. Unfortunately, Winfield's *Tattler* articles are very superficial and chatty and provide little information about his little theatre goals or philosophies. He did not mention the performance of *Salome* which was broadcast on WCGU radio on February 19, 1928, but he did confirm the midnight performance of *Salome* on March 9 at the Alhambra Theatre.31

By the fall of 1928, Hemsley Winfield's New Negro Art Theatre attracted the attention of the amusements editor and chief theatre critic for the *New York Amsterdam News*, Romeo Doughtery. Heralding an exceptional accomplishment by a little theatre group, a two week booking of the New Negro Art Theatre on the regular program of a professional Harlem theatre, Doughtery noted, prior to seeing the show, that despite poor community support and other, unspecified, obstacles, the members of the New Negro Art Theatre had persevered in praiseworthy fashion. Though amateurs in status, he said, some performers in the company were better than some professionals.32 The New Negro Art Theatre opened at the Lincoln Theatre on November 5, 1928 in Torrence's *The Rider of Dreams*. After seeing the play, Doughtery remained optimistic about the group's future but noted that the performance "lacked the punch" expected by Harlem audiences and was below the standard set by professionals. Anticipating the following week's production, Doughtery stated that "much more will be expected of the players."33 Eloise Thompson's *Cooped Up*, which was produced by the National Ethiopian Art Theatre in 1924 and was greatly appreciated by George Schuyler, was the play performed by the New Negro Art Theatre during its second week at the Lincoln Theatre. *Cooped Up* was not reviewed.

During April and May of 1929, the New Negro Art Theatre revived Jeroline Winfield's *The Princess and the Black Cat* for three Saturday mornings at St. Martin's Chapel in Harlem. The New Negro Art Theatre players were advertised on that occasion as "all professionally trained" and containing some "professionals."34 Ardelle Dabney, who had appeared in other New Negro Art Theatre productions, fitted both categories. She was a veteran of the National Ethiopian Art Theatre School and had been a member of the Krigwa Players. While appearing in *The Princess and the Black Cat*, she was also in the cast of *Harlem*, a play by Wallace Thurman and William Jordan Rapp, which was then on Broadway.

Hemsley Winfield, still directing the activities of the New Negro Art Theatre, was also in *Harlem*.35 Winfield's personal aspirations clearly involved the professional stage, and it is, therefore, not surprising that the New Negro Art Theatre was moving, or being guided, toward professional status. The transition was completed in the summer of 1929 when New Negro Art Theatre productions of Wilde's *Salome* and Jeroline Winfield's anti-lynching drama, *Wade in de Water*, were staged at the Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village. Inez Clough starred with Winfield in both productions. A theatre professional of long standing, and a former Lafayette Player, Inez Clough was in the company that performed three plays by Ridgely Torrence on Broadway in 1917. She was also in *Earth* and *Harlem* with Winfield. *Wade in de Water* earned the attention of the *New York Times*, but the critic who reviewed the play was only impressed with the "revival" scene.36 Nevertheless, the New Negro Art Theatre had passed out of the ranks of Harlem's little theatre groups. In 1931, the New Negro Art Theatre became the New Negro Art Theatre Dance Group, under Winfield's direction, and, in 1933, the company of dancers, including Winfield, appeared in the Metropolitan Opera version of Louis Gruenberg's
The Emperor Jones.

Foremost among other little theatre groups in Harlem during the 1920s was the Negro Experimental Theatre which was born in February, 1928, in the much-utilized basement of the 135th Street library. Dorothy Peterson, who was employed much-utilized hasement of the 135th 1928, in the activities of the Negro Experimental Theatre. Theophilus Lewis was the assistant business manager. During 1928 and 1929, the activities of the Negro Experimental Theatre were mostly organizational. By 1930, the Negro Experimental Theatre became the Harlem Experimental Theatre, several staff changes were made, and the group was actively producing plays, some of them by black writers. The group survived through 1934.

No continuously active, long-lived little theatre group emerged in Harlem during the 1920s. The expectations of members of the Harlem community, who were concerned about the state of black theatre in New York City, were not entirely met. However, no one expected that the goals which were voiced could be attained within a short, ten-year period, particularly when no strong dramatic tradition preceded, other than that which exists in the ritual of the black church. The leaders and members of Harlem’s little theatre groups did not share a common philosophy or identical aesthetic principles, but the groups did have several things in common, and their activities were often in harmony with the expressed ideals of Harlem spokesmen. All the outstanding little theatre groups in Harlem produced plays by black playwrights, focused most of their energies toward the black community, and worked mostly within the black community.

The obstacles were many which confronted Harlem’s little theatre groups and which account for the modicum of success and stability attained. As already noted, and excepting the dramatic nature of the black church, drama was not a significant part of the theatrical tradition within the black community. That is, the theatrical tradition for black performers, as well as black audiences, was of music, dance, and blackface humor (with or without makeup). Writing in 1929, Theophilus Lewis noted that while white little theatre groups of the era were seeking to correct the vices of the white theatre, black little theatre groups were involved in the tremendous task of establishing a dramatic theatre where none had previously existed. Harlem’s little theatre groups were unsubsidized and in competition with the slick entertainments of professional theatres, night clubs, and other entertainment establishments. The personnel of Harlem’s little theatre groups were mostly amateurs, and their participation was only part-time. Scripts by developing black playwrights sometimes bore marks of inexperience. Roles were performed, primarily, by inexperienced and, sometimes, ineffective actors, and the little theatre productions lacked sophisticated staging and technical effects. Finally, Frank Wilson, Dora Cole Norman, Hemsely Winfield, and others who were active in Harlem’s little theatre groups apparently did not see those groups as ends but as stepping stones toward the real, paying theatre. Young men and women, often with little or no theatrical background, saw the Broadway market, with its financial and personal rewards, at their doorsteps and sought the training, experience, and exposure which Harlem’s little theatre groups provided. As they gained experience and improved their crafts, the best were absorbed by the professional theatre. While the defection of talented members to the professional theatre hampered the growth of little theatre groups, the fact that they produced professionally competitive individuals is also indicative of the success of Harlem’s little theatre groups. However, most importantly, in terms of achievements, Harlem’s little theatre groups were prototypes for black theatre groups which emerged in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, including the Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre and the American Negro Theatre. The black theatre groups which proliferated during the 1960s, and those which exist today, are also descendants of Harlem’s little theatre groups of the 1920s.

Notes


2 Johnson, p. 260.


4 Osofsky, pp. 122-23 and 130.


6 New York Age, January 10, 1920, p. 6.


8 Age, June 19, 1920, p. 6.

9 Age, March 5, 1921, p. 6.

10 Age, May 20, 1923, p. 6.


12 Age, March 1, 1924, p. 6; March 22, 1924; p. 6; April 5, 1924, p. 6; September 6, 1924, p. 2.

13 Age, June 14, 1924, p. 6.


15 Age, July 19, 1924, p. 6.

16 Lewis, Messenger, 6 (1924), 250.


Lewis, Messenger, 7 (1925), 92.

Lewis, Messenger, 7 (1925), 298-9.

Lewis, Messenger, 8 (1926), 182.

In the fall of 1924, regarding the Crisis literary competition, there appeared the acronym CRIGWA, Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists. Prizewinners would automatically be installed as members (W.E.B. DuBois, “Opinion,” The Crisis, 28 [1924], 247). Inexplicably, by June, 1925, CRIGWA became KRIGWA and the first drama-related activity was announced (W.E.B. DuBois, “Opinion,” The Crisis, 30 [1925], 59).


Lewis, Messenger, 8 (1926), 182.

Lewis, Messenger, 8 (1926), 362.


Personal interview with Eulalie Spence, July 16, 1980.

Age, February 19, 1927, p. 6; Lewis, Messenger, 9 (1927), 121.


Age, September 3, 1927, p. 6; November 12, 1927, p. 6; November 19, 1927, p. 6.

See the Inter-State Tattler, January 27, 1928; February 3, 1928; February 17, 1928; March 2, 1928; and March 31, 1928. Regarding Salome on radio, see Age, February 11, 1928, p. 3; New York Times, February 19, 1928, Sec. 9, p. 20.

Amsterdam News, October 31, 1928, p. 6.

Amsterdam News, November 7, 1928, p. 6.

Amsterdam News, April 17, 1929, p. 11; Age, April 27, 1929, p. 6; May 11, 1929, p. 6.

On or near April 30, 1927, Dabney was fired from the Harlem company because of her participation in a strike. Winfield, because of his sympathy with the strikers, was reduced from stage manager to the ensemble. See my diss., pp. 120-21.

Times, September 14, 1929, p. 17.

This information results from telephone interviews, in August, 1982, with Regina Andrews, who succeeded Dorothy Peterson as director of the Harlem Experimental Theatre, and material found in Andrews’ Harlem Experimental Theatre scrapbook, which she donated to the Audience Development Committee, Inc. (AUDELCO), in New York City.

Theophilus Lewis, “Trailing the Spotlight,” Inter-State Tattler, January 25, 1929, p. 3.

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