2021

Something Glorious, Act One: Becoming The Hansberry Project

Carol Roscoe

Something Glorious, Act One: Becoming The Hansberry Project

Carol Roscoe

Seattle University

Graduate Management Practicum

August 13, 2021

Abstract

This research paper examines the early years in the life of The Hansberry Project, an African American theater lab in Seattle, Washington. Despite being the fifth whitest city in the United States, Seattle has seen bursts of important black theater during the 20th century. Theater in Seattle, as a whole, thrived towards the end of the century, but when the city's economy faced hardship, so too did theaters and theater artists, particularly artists of color. By the end of the century, there was a dearth of diversity in Seattle's theater scene and established theaters faced uncertain futures. In the midst of this crisis, a conversation between two theater leaders sparked the genesis of what would become The Hansberry Project. "Rooted in the convictions that black artists should be at the center of the artistic process, that the community deserves excellence in its art, and that theatre's fundamental function is to put people in relationship to one another," The Hansberry Project originated as a partnership with ACT Theatre, a historically white-led and white-focused major regional theater (The Hansberry Project website, n.d.). Over the next 17 years, the company would give voice to dozens of developing writers through workshops, commissions, and collaborations with theaters across the country, demonstrating how one theater has sustained and thrived in a challenging environment through a commitment to mission, innovation, and strategic collaboration.

Setting the Scene

"You have something glorious to draw on begging for attention. Don't pass it up. You have something glorious to draw on begging for attention. Don't pass it up. Use it. Good luck to you. The Nation needs your gifts."

Lorraine Hansberry (Hansberry, 1964)

Despite being the fifth whitest city in the United States, Seattle has had a significant history of black theater since the early part of the 20th century. In 1936, during the Depression, Seattle was home to the Negro Repertory Company, part of the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Theater Project. One of fourteen Negro Theater Units across the country, the Seattle company's success was second only to New York City's, producing 15 plays during the three years of its existence (Johnson, 1981). During the Civil Rights activism of the 1960's, the Black Power Movement inspired a new black-led company: Black Arts/West. Between 1969. and 1980, it produced over one hundred plays, including Alice Childress' *Wine in the Wilderness* and Lorraine Hansberry's *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* (Barnett, 2002; Barnett, 2007).

The following decades saw an explosion of small and mid-size companies that served diverse missions and audiences. Together, they "generated Seattle's national reputation as a hot theater town" (Johnson, 1989, para. 2). Theaters like the Empty Space, Greek Active, Aha! Theater, Alice B. Theater, and the Group Theater offered an extraordinary breadth of work to complement larger institutions such as the Seattle Repertory Theatre, and A Contemporary Theater (later re-branded as ACT Theatre) (Zaslove, 2007). Seattle's cultural reputation and affordability drew many artists who wanted to add to the theatrical conversation.

One of those artists was Valerie Curtis-Newton, co-founder of The Hansberry Project. In 1993, Curtis-Newton accepted a scholarship to attend the graduate directing program at the

University of Washington. Curtis-Newton had received offers from East Coast schools, but chose Seattle because of that rich tapestry of black theater history and the diverse and vibrant theater ecosystem, but particularly because of the connection to the Federal Theater Project. In 1990, Curtis-Newton had come across information about the Negro Units unexpectedly, leafing through a book about the Federal Theater Project at a party.

> 'There was this whole tradition of blacks in the American theater that I didn't even know about,' she says. Curtis-Newton sat alone reading a whole chapter in the book and became 'energized and mesmerized. From that moment on, I knew that someday I would stage a revival of a Negro Unit play, in the same theater where it was first produced.' (Curtis-Newton, as cited in Wick, 1996, para. 2)

Six years after making that determination, she succeeded, staging a production of *The Stevedore* in the University of Washington's Playhouse Theater (now the Floyd and Delores Jones Playhouse), the same theater where the Seattle Negro Unit had presented it 60 years earlier. It was an exciting time, but shortly all of that changed. "The bottom fell out," Curtis-Newton relates,

> The Group Theater closed, Alice B. Theater closed, that whole lower-middle tier [of theaters] went away. And when it went away, what they left was largely white, largely straight, largely regional theaters, and there wasn't really a place for people on the margins to control their own destiny. (V. Curtis-Newton, personal communication, July 27, 2021)

Economic changes gutted the theater sector but artists of color were particularly affected. That lack of opportunities concerned The Hansberry Project co-founder Vivian Philips as well.

> The Group Theater was coming to a close. Black Arts/West Theater had long been out of existence. And the Seattle Rep held the rights to all the August Wilson works, right? That [Wilson play] was the 'annual presentation', so to speak, of a black play, where I could enjoy going and being in [a] theater community with other people who look like me. That was pretty much it. There was just this absence of ethnic representation in theater. (V. Phillips, personal communication, July 26, 2021)

Indeed, a review of production history listings for ACT Theatre and the Seattle Repertory Theatre shows that, from the mid-1980s on, these theaters usually produced one play from a non-white playwright per season[1]. For instance, in the 1990s, the Seattle Repertory Theatre committed to producing August Wilson's Century Cycle. Along with ACT Theatre, these two major theaters worked with black playwrights like Charlayne Woodard to develop new plays. This was sporadic and did not usually generate a significant amount of work for Seattle's local black theater artists.

The theaters were not unaware of this disconnect. Kurt Beattie, then literary manager at the Rep recalled that, during the 1990s, the Rep attempted to open itself up to more diverse artists. The theater worked with an African American consultant "to help us really think about how white we were and and how unconscious we were of the way we thought about this" (K. Beattie, personal communication, July 25, 2021). While The Rep's commitment to August Wilson was important, Beattie noted that "it was a very high-profile national kind of journey. And the problem with that initiative at the Rep was that it wasn't really tied to any local journey" (personal communication, July 25, 2021). They did not employ local black artists in the same

[1] A theater-season is about a year in length, often stretching over two calendar years, much like an academic year.

way. For Seattle's black playwrights, actors, directors, and designers, the 'annual presentation' was not enough to thrive.

While under-utilizing local talent was not unique to Seattle, the practice arguably intensified for artists who were both black and local. Reginald A. Jackson, a local actor and playwright, described Seattle as the kind of town where young black actors might train in their craft. Both the University of Washington and Cornish College of the Arts had strong acting programs. Freehold Theatre Lab/Studio offered professional training outside of the academic institutions. There and in small fringe theaters, black actors might "get their bones," but they didn't stay (personal communication, July 27, 2021). According to Jackson, the common feeling among many in the theater community was that actors wouldn't be taken seriously until they left Seattle. "You get recognized when somebody recognizes you from someplace else," he said (personal communication, July 27, 2021). This was a common experience in Seattle theater in the 1990s and early 2000s. Local actors struggled to get work while living in the city, and found they didn't enjoy professional respect unless they left and were seen working elsewhere (Kiley, 2013).

During economic boom times, larger houses operating under Actors' Equity Association contracts, like Intiman, the Seattle Repertory Theatre, and ACT would bring in Equity actors from out of town, doing very little development of local talent. When theaters produced plays that called for black actors, those actors were hired in from New York or Los Angeles. They considered local black actors for minor roles only, leaving little opportunity for professional growth or stability. Work for black directors or designers was slim to none. For black artists, whose opportunities were already severely limited by the paucity of black playwrights produced on Seattle stages, this created an exodus of talent.

> When they're young, and they're eager and hungry, and they're fighting that. They get to learn and grow and work. And [then] they're gone. They're gone because there aren't the institutions that are lifting them up. Those shows haven't been happening. So they head off. (R. Jackson, personal communication, July 27, 2021)

Phillips acknowledged that the talent drain was a deep concern for the black community.

> … black people specifically could not find work here. So, they left and went to other places. And so, it further impacted the way that we felt, and we felt like what is there? What can we do? What can we do? Is there anything we can do? (V. Phillips, personal communication, July 26, 2021)

An exodus of black residents out of Seattle compounded the talent drain. Historically African-American neighborhoods in Seattle, notably the Central District, rapidly gentrified. Rising property values pushed out long-term residents. This affected renters and homeowners, alike, some of whom found their property values and taxes rising faster than their incomes. Between 1983, three years after Black Arts/West closed, and 2004, when the idea for The Hansberry Project developed, black households in the Seattle metro area fell from 3.1 percent to 1.8 percent of all owner-occupied homes. In the first decade of the century, Seattle's black population fell over a similar period from just under 10 percent to 7.3 percent of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 1983; U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Within Seattle's Central District, the black population plummeted from nearly 75 percent in 1970 to only 15 percent in 2020 (Balk, 2020). In the decades following World War II, black communities and black artists had thrived, but the early 2000s saw the trend reverse.

These same economic factors were creating stressors that many small theaters would not survive. Seattle Times theater critic Misha Berson noted that "expenses like urban rents,

(Seattle's are among the fastest rising in the country), utilities, materials keep escalating" (2014, para. 9). These factors made the theaters' already thin profit margins disappear. By the end of the 1990s, Aha!, Alice B., and the Group Theater had folded.

More economic shocks were in store for Seattle. Protestors converged on the World Trade Organization (WTO) conference in 1999 and a heightened police response led to riots. In 2000, stock market values fell 76 percent when the dot-com bubble burst. ollowing the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, Boeing, one of Seattle's top employers, announced it would cut 20,000 to 30,000 jobs (CNN, 2001). The Seattle metro area saw employment fall by nearly five percent by 2003 (Conway, 2010). It looked like Seattle's heyday was over.

Small theaters were not the only ones at risk of folding. For ACT Theatre, one of Seattle's largest professional theaters, the turn of the millennium was precarious. In 1996, ACT had moved from its longtime home in the lower Queen Anne neighborhood to the Eagles Auditorium Building, a large historic building in downtown Seattle. The move destablized the theater. Higher operating expenses because of the sheer size of the new building; a loss of subscribers under changing artistic leadership; rising artistic costs and high staff turnover combined to create a crisis by 2003. In danger of closing its doors permanently, only enormous efforts by the board, new leadership, staff, and the Seattle community kept the theater going. An exceptional, if smaller season on a tighter budget turned the tide. It was a reminder to leadership that ACT was "here to serve the community from which we derive our support and to nurture the artists and staff through whose work we build our reputation and goodwill" (Trapnell and Janeway, 2004, p. 5).

When Beattie left the Seattle Repertory Theatre to take on the leadership of ACT, he took the idea of service to the community to heart. In 2003, as the new Artistic Director, he designed that turnaround season. From the beginning, he considered how better to serve the community. Also, his experiences at the Rep, encountering his own whiteness, had him thinking about how regional theater needed to change.

> One of the things I needed to do with the theater was to ventilate it. I kept thinking about it being a semipermeable membrane, that it had a metabolism that allowed a little freer access, flowing back and forth between the community and itself… It was really important, I thought, now, at this point in our history, that we develop a deeper sensitivity and understanding of the potential wonderfulness of more inclusion, of us really becoming a theater that is reflective of a lot of different people. (K. Beattie, personal communication, July 25, 2021)

Now he had an opportunity to effect that change. He had been watching Curtis-Newton's career with interest, and had an ongoing dialogue with her about the difficulties black artists faced in Seattle. Here was a potential partner who "had the smarts to start an organization that could either live inside ACT or, as Val put it, a semi-autonomous theater company [that could] get started there and then move out into the community" (K. Beattie, personal communication, July 25, 2021). Beattie called Curtis-Newton and laid out an idea for bringing black artists into ACT. "I said, 'Would you be interested in this?" (K. Beattie, personal communication, July 25, 2021).

"I said no." Curtis-Newton says, recalling the moment (personal communication, July 27, 2021).

> [Kurt] says to me one day, 'I can't bring back the Group Theater, but I can curate some plays by people of color. Would you be interested in doing that curation?' I said, 'No, I did not want to be just someone whose job was to bring brown bodies into your building.' But I was willing to partner with him to ensure that black stories are being told at ACT. He came back and said, 'Well, what if we did this? What if I have you program a play in our season every year for five years?' I said, that would be awesome. In exchange for that, I will work for the theater, essentially as an artistic associate, overseeing that slot, but also participating in marketing, fundraising and strategizing. (V. Curtis-Newton, personal communication, July 27, 2021)

Immediately, Curtis-Newton reached out to Phillips, a communications professional and civic arts leader who had recently produced the powerful *Sankofa Theatre: A Maafa Experience*. Phillips and Curtis-Newton had been looking for a collaborative project for years, and now they had found it. Together, they put together a plan for a new company, The Hansberry Project.

For both The Hansberry Project and ACT, the partnership was truly a new beginning. ACT was redefining itself after near collapse; The Hansberry Project was a nascent partnership for Curtis-Newton and Philips; and the two organizations were testing out a brand-new model for collaboration. How would the artistic collaboration function? What influence would each organization have on the other? How that developed over the next several years had lasting effects on both organizations.

2005-2009, The Hansberry Project at ACT Theatre

"ACT considers The Hansberry Project an extremely important and essential next step toward the development of a theatre that is fully curated by African American artists and managers, and fully invested in by the community. While Seattle is a respected regional theatre town, it lacks the voice of an initiative like The Hansberry Project. If Seattle is truly to have a fully voiced theatrical community, we need a theatre that is in and of itself an authentic voice for the expression of the African American experience."

ACT Theatre Statement of Support, 2005

In 2005, ACT and The Hansberry Project outlined the nature of their collaboration. Both Beattie and Curtis-Newton agreed The Hansberry Project would be artistically autonomous within ACT's organization. ACT would program five out of six shows in the theater's season and The Hansberry Project would program the sixth. Part of the understanding was that ACT Theatre would provide a home, but no artistic oversight. That would fall to Curtis-Newton and Phillips. "We had absolute say over all things Hansberry," says Curtis-Newton (personal communication, July 27, 2021). Beattie readily affirms that he had no desire to be any kind of check on the artistic choices of the project. "Am I just going to give [resources] to her, come hell or high water? Yeah. And whether I think it's good or not, you know, it has to have a chance to live" (personal communication, July 25, 2021). The organizations would operate in tandem, but with little crossover collaboration.

Logistically, this created interesting dynamics. ACT produced six shows a season. According to Beattie, they allocated one-sixth of the production budget for the year to the Hansberry Project. ACT covered all the main-stage production expenses, which averaged $580,000 per production (Internal Revenue Service, 2005). Since revenue from from ticket sales and donations barely covered production costs, The Hansberry Project did not receive any ticket

income. Instead, they had the use of other spaces in the theater for ancillary projects and events. The Hansberry Project covered the expenses of those events, kept all related income, and received all donations specified for Hansberry. From this income, The Hansberry Project paid the salaries for Curtis-Newton and Philips. Besides space on the stage, ACT also offered The Hansberry Project office space, which gave both organizations access to each other. Curtis-Newton and Philips shared an office between those of ACT's Artistic and Managing Directors, attended staff meetings, and contributed their thoughts during season discussions. "We felt really clear about where we had a say, where we didn't have a say, where we could be invited in. Asked our advice, we would give it 100 percent" says Curtis-Newton (personal communication, July 27, 2021).

Beattie valued the experience. "She [Curtis-Newton] would always have great ideas when it came to finance, which was wonderful. She was sort of amused by how I would think about this kind of stuff, because she's far more sophisticated about it than I was" (personal communication, July 25, 2021). Philips experienced the situation differently: "There were times where I just felt tokenized. Personally, you know, like, certain people just wouldn't have conversations with you, or even speak to you passing by," she recalled (personal communication, July 26, 2021). Curtis-Newton acknowledged these challenges in the context of the larger institution's economic situation.

> I don't think there was any harm in the beginning. I think it was tough because ACT was trying to get up off the mat. They were always a hair's breadth from closing. So it felt, I think, bold in many ways to folks around them, that they would start a new initiative when there were always these questions about whether or not their doors would be open. (personal communication, July 27, 2021)

Despite those questions, the doors remained open and The Hansberry Project took up residence. With ACT's resources, The Hansberry Project produced professional black theater with the same production values as a major regional theater, something they could not afford on their own. Presenting black theater with exceptional production values and professional artists was vital to the vision that Curtis-Newton and Philips shared. It was important to them that their work not only introduced Seattle audiences to black theater, but placed black theater squarely within the American theater. They were less interested in bringing black audiences to ACT than

> … seeing the black work as equal [in] value to the existing audiences. I remember so vividly, like almost every curtain speech that I gave, or every post show conversation that I hosted, I always had to reiterate that African American theater is American theater. This is an integral part of who we are. (V. Phillips, personal communication, July 26, 2021)

They sought to "elevate and honor the African American theater canon" in all their activities. The Hansberry Project's 2005 Strategic Overview laid out their mission, "to make significant and long-lasting contributions to the vitality of the African American performing arts community by producing work that is stimulating, relevant, entertaining, emotionally satisfying, artistically excellent, and focused squarely on African American life, history and culture" (V. Curtis-Newton, personal communication, July 27, 2021). Besides main stage programming to bring classics of the African American canon and fresh voices to the stage, there would be community discussions on the role of theater in the African American community, and efforts to create a diverse audience for their work. They began the work strategically, convening a national group of black theater leaders to get feedback on their plans and refine their strategy. In addition, they created events that promoted the visibility of black art and artists. Their first "Telling Our Stories" forum with playwright Charlayne Woodard discussed how storytelling connects African

cultures and experiences to African American life. When preparing for the inaugural Hansberry production of Alice Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness* at ACT, they partnered with Town Hall Seattle's "Short Stories Live!" program in April of 2006. Reading excerpts from her writings, they introduced Childress to Seattle and promoted the upcoming production.

Why begin their producing history with a play by Childress and not the eponymous Hansberry? Beattie was solidly behind the choice of the Childress play. He noted that she is a playwright "whose work is really underserved, and [*Wine in the Wilderness*] is just a fine play. A very meat and potatoes play, in a way, and it just [shows] fine craft in her work" (personal communication, July 25, 2021). For both Philips and Curtis-Newton, elevating the lineage of black writers and black theater mattered. Childress was foundational, not just under-recognized. In Seattle, she was virtually unknown. Curtis-Newton sat back as if examining the phenomenon in front of her.

> We kicked off Hansberry with Alice Childress and *Wine in the Wilderness* and people didn't know who she was. That was, you know, apparent to me that she had been erased from theater history. Without her there is no Lorraine Hansberry. (personal communication, July 27, 2021)

That statement is both figuratively and literally true. Childress, one of the first African American women to have a play produced on the professional New York stage, would have been influential as a dramatic role model to any young aspiring playwright, especially another black woman. But Childress and Hansberry seem to have had a more personal connection. In 1950, Hansberry began writing for the publication *Freedom*, founded by Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois. Childress also worked on the magazine and may have encountered the young Hansberry. Aside from this proximity, a script suggests their connection. The earliest recorded

dramatic writing of Hansberry's is a collaboration with Childress, a pageant play which was performed during *Freedom's* Negro History Festival (Anderson, 2008). Given the collaborative nature of theater and of co-writing a play, it seems impossible that the two of them did not meet and learn from each other.

In *Freedom's* offices, extraordinary and influential American writers and culture makers met, challenged and learned from each other: Robeson, Du Bois, Hansberry, Childress, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, and others. This drama and literary circle has received little recognition. Gatherings of white literary talent, such as the Bloomsbury Group or the Algonquin Round Table, are required reading for students of literature. But this confluence of African American talent, had been left out. Like Curtis-Newton's observation on Childress, they had been erased from the history.

This casts a light on the need for The Hansberry Project's mission and vision. American theater has consistently put the spotlight on white playwrights, particularly white men. African-American theater has consistently been under-produced and overlooked. Early press for *Wine in the Wilderness* winked at this side-lining. In 2005, in describing the upcoming production, long-time Seattle Times theater critic Joe Adcock wrote "Major companies, notably the Seattle Repertory Theatre and Intiman Theatre *regularly fit* an African American-themed play into their seasons" (Adcock, 2011, para. 4, emphasis mine). That fit looked like a squeeze when considering the production history of those theaters. Plays by black playwrights, other playwrights of color, or women competed for a single slot in any season while the work of white (primarily) male writers filled the rest, a theatrical equivalent of man-spreading.

Besides the desire to bring awareness to Childress' work and her place in American theater, that kind of "meat and potatoes play" is Curtis-Newton's milieu. "I'm sort of a mid-century American realism addict," she confessed.

> … which makes me a dinosaur in the world of digital, devised, community-created [theater]. I feel like my job as an artist is to go out in the community to observe, then to go someplace, with some sacred energy, with divine inspiration, collaborate with a bunch of people and say this: This is what I saw. And this is how we present it. Tell me what you think. Did we get it right? (personal communication, July 27, 2021)

For Phillips, the answer was yes. Her impression of the inaugural production still glowed years later: "*Wine in the Wilderness* was so beautiful to me. It was so theatrically beautiful; the story was incredible" (personal communication, July 26, 2021).

Theater's ephemerality makes it difficult to go back and experience a show from the past. However, a brief clip from a 2005 video recording of *Wine in the Wilderness* has been preserved on The Hansberry Project's website. In it, the stage lays bare an apartment in Harlem. Incomplete cutouts low to the floor suggest walls. A window sill opens out onto a metal fire escape. It is evening. The room is well lit, it almost feels hot, as Tommy (played by April Yvette Thompson) sits for the artist drawing her. Despite the artist's frantic sketching, Tommy pulls our eyes to her with a deep quietness. Crouched on the edges, Bill (Shanga Parker), sketches her. His movements are filled with a feverish intensity. She speaks, and though the audio is not clear, the audience responds with warmth and laughter. When the artist's barely repressed fervor explodes with a cry of frustration and a sudden startling physical eruption that propels him out the apartment window and onto the metal fire escape, the audience holds its breath. Tommy, seemingly unperturbed, rises and walks out after him, drawing the viewer with her. Darkness

sweeps across the apartment's interior like an exhale, toward the moonlit intimacy of the fire escape.

Even on a recording, the magnetism between the two is palpable, pulling them towards each other until suddenly a flash of thunder startles Tommy and she turns towards the sound. The crash seems to have released Bill's barely suppressed intensity. He hurries to her and kisses her. And then, beautifully, heavily, rain falls from above. Slowly at first, rain drops patter against their skin, against the metal fire escape. She rubs her arms and hurries inside, but he stands barefoot on the metal escape. He tilts his face towards the rain as it increases to a downpour. He moves inside. The rain continues to fall and they move to the bed. Light fades across the stage, like an eyelid closing.

Reviewers found things to praise and to criticize, but The Hansberry Project at ACT was underway. Over the next few years, little changed in the structure of the collaboration. Hansberry continued to program one show in ACT's season, but Curtis-Newton's programming did not stay fixed in American Realism. The next season, she challenged the audience with Aishah Rahman's *The Mojo and the Sayso* (2007). "[A] remarkable play — which is by turns heartbreaking, funny, mystical, overwrought, bleak and affectionate" and "an imagistic, semi-linear blast, with emanations of Beckettian absurdism, Adrienne Kennedy surrealism and Sam Shepard monologistic riffing," wrote Seattle theater critic Misha Berson (2007, para. 2; 2007, para. 9). The review remarked on Curtis-Newton's "impeccable" direction, and an evocative light and set design that included a "storm of glittering confetti" (2007, para. 12). Berson noted "how it sucks you into the consciousness of a loving black, working-class family, trying to bond back together after a shattering trauma" (2007, para. 14).

In 2008, The Hansberry Project produced the world premiere of Michael Bradford's *Fathers and Sons.* In an interview for the *Seattle Times*, Bradford talked about the theme of father-son estrangement.

> 'It's one of those secret problems everybody knows about it, yet most people don't want to talk about it deeply. But we need to be thinking and talking about how we got into this particular position. This situation has laid on us for hundreds of years, kind of like wet muslin.' (Bradford, as cited in Berson, 2008, para. 16)

In 2009, Hansberry presented Marc Bamuthi Joseph's *the break/s: a mixtape for the stage*.

> Bamuthi is too sophisticated and analytical [a] performer to apply simplistic parameters to the many aesthetic, sociological and psychological concerns he raises in his engrossing show. And he's well aware that much of ACT Theatre's largely white, over-40 audience don't know hip-hop from a hole in the wall. (Berson, 2009, para. 3)

Despite being a self-described "mid-century American addict," Curtis-Newton expanded the idea of black theater, identity, and community on and off ACT's mainstage (personal communication, July 27, 2021). During that handful of seasons, Curtis-Newton and Phillips built community and developed black artists through workshops and staged readings by playwrights local and national, including David Scully, Tina Vernon, Dan Owens, Zakiyyah Alexander, Keith Josef Adkins, and Dominique Morisseau. They launched a Juneteenth Gala, a Legends Award for outstanding black female playwrights, community conversations, and other initiatives. From a "meat and potatoes play", to an "imagistic semi linear blast", a world-premiere, and a "theatrical memoir-slash-travelogue" The Hansberry Project had not played it safe (Berson, 2009, para. 5). They produced hugely varied, uniquely challenging plays that showed African American theater was not a monolith. They demonstrated, with a handful of

plays, what August Wilson proclaimed about black artists, “We are unique, and we are specific” (Wilson, 1996, as cited in Theatre Communications Group, 2009, p. 158). As Curtis-Newton reflected on the beginning of The Hansberry Project, she added, “We have always had the idea that what we were doing was of service. And there are these moments with the service of representation. At the beginning, that’s what it was, was the service of representation” (personal communication, July 27, 2021).

Closing the run at ACT

From the beginning, Beattie, Phillips, and Curtis-Newton agreed the experimental partnership would run for five years. At that point, the organizations would determine if it was a mutual advantage to continue. As the five-year mark approached, both external and internal pressures came into play that would affect the collaboration. The sub-prime mortgage market collapsed in 2007-2008. The resulting recession threatened theater budgets across the country, and ACT was still digging itself out of the debt dating back to 2003. The company’s public financial documents show a steep increase in the theater’s liabilities in 2009, a change in the executive directorship, and a decrease in compensation for the theater’s leadership. No one knew what would happen to the economy, nor how badly the collapse would affect Seattle’s formerly explosive real estate market.

The commercial viability of every show became more important than ever as the pressure to have a “sure thing” mounted. Hansberry projects at ACT had frequently been challenging pieces of theater, taking on tough issues, that did not always translate into solid returns at the box office. More African American audience members attended the theater but not in numbers that ACT saw as a success. Whether they ever would was uncertain. In 2005, for instance, ACT’s non-holiday mainstage productions averaged 10,700 audience members over the run of a

production. For white audiences, this would be roughly 2.5% of the city's total white population in the early 2000's. However, for a similar black audience this would require about 22% of the city's total black population at the time to attend. How likely would that be in any city? In 2012, the National Endowment for the Arts released data that put the average non-musical play attendance at 8.8% of the population, nationally. For a black audience to fill the theater at ACT, they would need to turn up at over twice the national average. For such an extraordinary thing to happen, the black community would need to feel wildly welcomed, at home, and connected to ACT. That wasn't happening. Curtis-Newton recalled:

> We [Hansberry] were more interested in telling black stories than we were about getting black people into the theater. We thought if we told the stories over time that people would come. But Vivian and I both agreed that at the time, you see, Seattle was the fifth whitest city in the country, it was unrealistic to think we were going to sell out. That was just not going to happen. Eventually that came to the fork in the road, and we went our separate ways. (personal communication, July 27, 2021)

Beattie concurs. The possibility had always existed that Hansberry might develop to the point they were ready to move out into the community, "and that it needed to be situated more fluidly, in closer reach to an African American audience" (personal communication, July 25, 2021). Phillips adds,

> It didn't make sense for us to be in residence any longer at ACT Theatre. We had more opportunity to expand the way that we wanted, to impact the black arts and cultural community. It just felt like our hands were tied [at ACT] and we had this obligation, as opposed to our relationship. So, we made the decision: let's just wrap this up and move

> on. So we did that. I went to work at the Seattle Theater Group. But that decision was purely economic. (personal communication, July 26, 2021)

Economic and artistic choices are always two sides of the same coin. Not only were the economics impossible at scale in Seattle, but that made the artistic choices fraught as well. That year, ACT made a suggestion regarding Hansberry's programming choice. The theater encouraged Hansberry to take on something that might have strong commercial appeal. This artistic pressure forced a tough moment. The recommended piece did not appeal to the Hansberry aesthetic, and Hansberry's counter offer did not appeal to ACT. The goals of Hansberry and ACT were no longer running in the same direction, and the first act of Hansberry's production history ended.

Postmortem on the ACT Partnership: Lessons Learned, Missed Opportunities

"All our ambitions were starved by the lack of resource."

Kurt Beattie, 2021

After a theater production closes, particularly educational theater, it is customary to hold a discussion examining the production process, to ask what worked and why and what could be improved. In looking back nearly 15 years on the Hansberry/ACT experiment, what lessons did the participants carry forward? How did the experience change The Hansberry Project or ACT?

Curtis-Newton looks back on how Hansberry brought benefit to ACT:

> Kurt had this idea of ACT being a sort of reef and organizations in the city having the ability to come and feed from the reef. So we did that. We also were a part of their fundraising piece. I went to lots of donor meetings and met with grantors and talked about the narrative, essentially, of power sharing, of enriching the entire community. We

> brought that resource to ACT. And we also brought our own honesty and bluntness. (personal communication, July 27, 2021)

For example, in one ACT season, aside from The Hansberry Project's production, all the proposed plays were written by white men. In an upper-level artistic meeting, Curtis-Newton drew attention to this, propelling a conversation about how and why certain plays were being chosen. Curtis-Newton relates, "we didn't ultimately have the juice to change anything. We could just eliminate the veil of ignorance, which to my mind is a huge first step in overcoming the institutional-isms" (personal communication, July 27, 2021). ACT did not change the plays for the season, but the conversation mattered. Beattie speaks of The Hansberry Project having a consciousness-raising effect on the staff at ACT. "To go at it simply, I was more in touch with a larger part of the world. It taught me a lot" (personal communication, July 25, 2021). The experience opened him up to more multicultural thinking about programming, which led to new initiatives at ACT (personal communication, July 25, 2021). The collaboration had obvious benefits for Hansberry as well. It brought the organization and black theater to a much larger audience than its own budgets would allow. While in residence at ACT, Phillips and Curtis-Newton built the organization's résumé, a strong marketing list of audience members, a solid reputation for thought-provoking work, and a small cash reserve. But did the end of the partnership signal unresolved challenges? How could it have been improved?

"How would I do differently? Well, I would have to raise more money," Beattie says immediately (personal communication, July 25, 2021). Hindsight revealed that, production budgets notwithstanding, they needed a bigger marketing budget to be truly successful. "To get the work into the African American community, we needed more resources than a sixth of our PR and marketing. It needed an exceptional effort and more money spent in that direction,"

Beattie said (personal communication, July 25, 2021). Besides marketing, the artistic staff needed more resources as well. Both Curtis-Newton and Phillips were working other demanding jobs outside of Hansberry. “One way that we could have really helped the development of that project was for Val to have been salaried enough to be a full-time artistic director so that she could give her whole life to that” (K. Beattie, personal communication, July 25, 2021). Beattie spoke admiringly of Curtis-Newton’s ambitions for Hansberry, but also of how ambitions in regional theater are often starved for lack of funding. “There were just so many really wonderful opportunities that could have emerged from that if we’d had the resources to do it. So I’d be devoted to raising a hell of a lot more money” (personal communication, July 25, 2021). Beattie acknowledged that’s not a very original idea, but it is certainly pragmatic. With more money, Beattie suggested that ACT and Hansberry could have done more parallel programming and outreach into the community. “Our ambitions were circumscribed,” Curtis-Newton agreed (personal communication, July 27, 2021). Without sufficient funding, neither organization could fully realize their goals for the partnership.

Another element surfaced beyond logistics. Looking back, Phillips said, “We just felt like it was a lot of missed opportunity. Because in addition to trying to create a space for black thought and theatrical brilliance, we wanted to help the theater be more than it was, you know? It was possible at times, but it’d be like two steps forward, one step back” (personal communication, July 26, 2021). In the context of the question of equity and inclusion in American theater, she states,

> I think that there's this misconception that equity means you have three blacks, three indigenous, and other people of color at the table, and you’ve got it made. That’s not what equity means at all. In its purest form, equity means somebody’s got to give up

> something in order to make somebody else whole. So it's not power sharing in a white supremacy idealistic way, which means that we will invite you to the table…but we're going to do everything else, the way we usually do it. It is not sharing power, it's giving up power, and stepping into that level of discomfort to actually give up that power…Butts-in-seats is a very important piece of formula but I think you have to earn butts in the seats too. That's not a once a year task. So, yeah, I think their hearts were willing, but their minds were not in sync. (personal communication, July 26, 2021)

Being out of sync with each other posed challenges to the partnership. While ACT and Hansberry worked side-by-side, their efforts were not fully integrated. They built the partnership along parallel lines, with very little interweaving between the organizations. There didn't appear to be much camaraderie, interdependence, or mutual support. When asked about artistic collaboration or dramaturgical support, Beattie said "she never asked, and I never offered," (personal communication, July 25, 2021). His approach was to give The Hansberry Project resources and get out of the way. Beattie sees that, in hindsight, this may have been a failure on his part. The Hansberry Project was a new company and, as a seasoned theater producer, some of his experience may have been useful. Overall, Beattie felt the experience had positive effects. "I think ultimately it was really good. I think it promoted possibility and a new understanding of what theater could be and what its ambitions should be institutionally" (personal communication, July 25, 2021).

Curtis-Newton had a balanced view of the collaboration. She turned down Beattie's first offer for co-curation, but he came back with another. "If he had said, you know, 'I tried but she turned me down, so I'm good,' he could have done that. I give him tremendous props for not doing it, for saying, 'you know, let's take the ride at least as far as we can'" (personal

communication, July 27, 2021). Now that the ride was over, how would Hansberry navigate into the future?

Moving Forward After ACT

"I decided that we could be the Hansberry project at any theater in the city."

Valerie Curtis-Newton, 2021

The Hansberry Project was at a crossroads. Without access to the League of Resident Theatres (LORT) resources, the scale of production going forward would be extremely limited. The company faced a choice. Their production budgets could be curtailed to a level that prohibited them from offering professional wages to their artists or they could close the company and end the experiment entirely. The economic challenges were profound. Could The Hansberry Project sustain itself with only one staff member, a couple thousand dollars in the bank, and a mailing list? Could they still be of service?

"At the beginning, that's what it was, was the service of representation. And then it became the service of awakening our community, all of it." Curtis-Newton made an emphatic circle with her hands, encompassing white and black audiences and beyond.

> … to *all* of us, to the humanity of black people. I became really enamored with the idea that I unabashedly love black people. And I want to allow everyone else the chance to fall in love with us, too. That means they have to meet us. So our mission became more and more about introducing the community to our humanity. (V. Curtis-Newton, personal communication, July 27, 2021)

Curtis-Newton noted that The Hansberry Project could be fleet and adapt quickly to the new circumstances because of one unique characteristic. Unlike many theaters, it was an LLC which had operated under the fiscal-sponsorship of ACT's 501(c)3 non-profit status. Because of

this, neither Curtis-Newton nor Philips needed to get permission from a board of directors to change the way they operated. This gave them an entrepreneurial nimbleness. They could simply make a decision and pursue it.

No longer tethered to ACT, The Hansberry Project sought partnerships with theaters across the city. In short order, Hansberry collaborated with Intiman Theatre, Seattle Public Theater, Theatre Off Jackson, the Central District Forum for Arts and Ideas, ArtsWest, Sound Theatre Company, Earth Pearl Collective, Washington Ensemble Theatre, West of Lenin, Ese Teatro, Pradthidiwani, and occasionally, ACT. Each collaboration functioned slightly differently based on the collaborating organization or venue, production needs, and resources. The Hansberry Project used its resources to subsidize salaries, pay for Equity actors' health and pension benefits, or underwrite production costs. This allowed Hansberry to fulfill its mission while helping other theaters bring work and artists to their stages that they could not otherwise afford to produce on their own. Over the next decade, Hansberry brought 33 plays by black playwrights to Seattle stages in a combination of new play commissions, festivals, staged readings, and full productions.

As this research was conducted in 2021, Curtis-Newton continued to leverage relationships and co-productions offering work to black theater artists. The Hansberry Project has expanded to national projects and partnerships. *The Drinking Gourd: Black Writers at Work*, a joint project with True Colors Theater Company of Atlanta, is a network of nation-wide rolling co-premiers, where multiple theaters collaborate to produce one new play in multiple cities. Through these creative collaborations, Hansberry has built a powerful brand and reputation, nationally and in Seattle, offering more and more opportunities "for folks to fall in love with black people."

American theater has seen a long line of white men stride across the stage. Even plays by or about black artists were often interpreted by white directors and producers. By placing the black artist at the center of the artistic process, The Hansberry Project has interrupted the single narrative. In 2005, The Hansberry Project noted that "the effectiveness of our work will be measured not only in our ability of produce plays that are 'culturally specific, multi-faceted, entertaining, stimulating, relevant, emotionally satisfying, and artistically excellent,' but also in our ability to connect with diverse audiences." They have done so by pursuing "theater's fundamental function [of] putting people in relation to each other" and to other organizations. Through a myriad of partnerships, collaborations, and other creative intersections, the Hansberry Project has thrived in pursuit of this mission for almost two decades, creating something glorious. This paper covers only a fraction of that work. Further study would yield rich insights into how theaters might leverage assets to support under-resourced artists in their own communities, create a more equitable environment for all theater artists, and a richer, more nuanced definition of 'American' theater.

Method Note: This case study was developed by Carol Roscoe, MFA 2022 for Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership course Graduate Management Practicum. Interviews were conducted with Valerie Curtis-Newton, Artistic Director and co-founder of the Hansberry Project; Vivian Phillips, co-founder of the Hansberry Project; Kurt Beattie, former Artistic Director of ACT Theatre; and Reginald A. Jackson, a playwright and actor who has collaborated on several Hansberry projects. Primary research was conducted during Summer Quarter, 2021. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing. Citations and references may not conform to APA standards.

Appendix

The Hansberry Project Production History

2005-2021

†Staged Reading

2005

My Jim† by Nancy Rawles with ACT Theatre

2006

Wine in the Wilderness by Alice Childress with ACT Theatre

Ghetto Mansion† by David Scully with ACT Theatre

2007

Etta Pfifer and the Testimonial Shoe Kismet by Tina Vernon with ACT Theatre

The Mojo and the Sayso by Aishah Rahman with ACT Theatre

Mutombi & Linstrom† by Dan Owens with ACT Theatre

2008

Fathers and Sons by Michael Bradford with ACT Theatre

Wild Black-Eyed Susans by Kara Lee Corthron with UW School of Drama

2009

the break/s by Marc Bamuthi Josef with ACT Theatre

Sweet Maladies† by Zakiyyah Alexander with ACT Theatre

2010

The Final Days of Negroville† by Keith Josef Adkins with ACT Theatre

Paradise Blue† by Dominique Morisseau with ACT Theatre

2013

Trouble in Mind by Alice Childress with Intiman Theatre

Broke-ology by Nathan Louis Jackson with Seattle Public Theater

Wanted by Tina Vernon with Theatre Off Jackson and the CD Forum for Arts and Ideas

The Many Faces of Nia† by Lenelle Moise

The Mountaintop by Katori Hall with ArtsWest

2014

For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf†

by Ntozake Shange with Project1Voice

2015

The Every 28 Hours Plays†

76 - one minute plays focused on the policing of black bodies.

In collaboration with the Central District Forum, Langston, Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute and Northwest African American Museum

2016

Wedding Band by Alice Childress with Intiman Theatre

Stick Fly by Lydia Diamond with Intiman Theatre

Black Women Wisdom Summit with Intiman Theatre.

The Hansberry Project convened playwrights in various stages of their careers to share their experiences and offer a new perspective on the state of the field. Playwrights included Dominique Morisseau, Regina Taylor, Lisa B. Thompson, Lydia Diamond, Rosalind Bell, Kathya Alexander, Shontina Vernon, Alma Davenport-Person, Sharon Williams, Chisa Hutchison, Amontaine Aurore, and Valerie Curtis-Newton.

Can You Hear Me Now? with Intiman Theatre Festival

A five-day series featuring five contemporary plays written by black women:

Sunset Baby by Dominique Morisseau

Sojourner by Mfonsio Udofia

Bright Half Life by Tanya Barfield

A Lovely Malfunction by Shontina Vernon

In Her Own Words

A sampler of work from local writers including Kathya Alexander, Rosalind Bell, Alma Davenport, Nina Foxx, and Storme Webber

2017

Hoodoo Love by Katori Hall with Sound Theatre Company

2018

Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill by Lanie Robertson with ArtsWest

Tail Feather by Earth Pearl Collective with Earth Pearl Collective

2019

Sunset Baby by Dominique Morrisseau with ArtsWest

IS GOD IS by Aleshea Harris with Washington Ensemble Theatre

Citizen by Claudia Rankine with Sound Theatre Company

Bulrusher by Eisa Davis with Intiman Theatre

The Agitators by Mat Smart with West of Lenin

Riverwood† by Andrew Lee Creech, play commission

2021

A Soldier's Story by Charles Fuller with Project1Voice, the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute and Brownbox Theatre

The Drinking Gourd: Black Writers at Work

Hansberry and True Colors launched a multi-year project to create a pipeline of new works for eventual full productions with black theaters across the country.

As Simple As it Seems† by Faith Bennett Russell

Las Hermanas† by Aviona Rodriguez Brown

Dependency† by Ty Greenwood

7-11† by Brandon Jones Mooney

The Hue Festival with Seattle Public Theater

Homecoming† by Sandra Holloway with Seattle Public Theater

The Rent Party Prologue† by Valerie Curtis-Newton with Seattle Public Theater

Original Intent† by Jasmine J. Mahmoud with Seattle Public Theater

The Third Party after the Big Party† by Monifa T. Christian with Seattle Public Theater

Community Conversation:Black Theater & the BLM Movement with Vivian Phillips

A conversation by Black Theatre and the Black Lives Matter Movement which centers on the role of black theatre companies in shaping by influencing by and amplifying the Black Lives Matter movement by as well as the role that black theatre companies by such as New Federal Theatre and the Negro Ensemble Company by have historically played in giving a voice to civil rights and other black-related issues

References

Adcock, J. (2011, March 19). 'Wine in the Wilderness' expands black theater. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. https://www.seattlepi.com/ae/article/Wine-in-the-Wilderness-expands-black-theater-1205671.php

Anderson, M. (2008). Lorraine Hansberry's Freedom Family. *American Communist History 7*(2), 259-69.

Balk, G. (2020, June 16). Percentage of Black residents in Seattle is at its lowest point in 50 years. *Seattle Times*. https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/data/percentage-of-blacks-living-in-seattle-at-lowest-point-in-50-years/

Barnett, D. (2002, August 2). Black Arts/West A History 1969-1973. *HistoryLink.org Essay 3291*. https://www.historylink.org/File/3921

Barnett, D. (2007, January 18). Black Arts/West (1969-1980). *BlackPast.org*. https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/black-arts-west/

Berson, M. (2007, September 10). Heartbreaking, mystical "Mojo and the Sayso" at ACT. *The Seattle Times.* https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/heartbreaking-mystical-mojo-and-the-sayso-at-act/

Berson, M. (2008, April 25). "Fathers and Sons" Brings Michael Bradford Full Circle. *The Seattle Times.* https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/fathers-and-sons-brings-michael-bradford-full-circle/

Berson, M. (2009, June 19). Theater review | 'the break/s' brings hip-hop drama to ACT. *The Seattle Times*. https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/theater-review-the-break-s-brings-hip-hop-drama-to-act/

Berson, M. (2013, October 2). 'Broke-ology': Family's hard times, strong ties | Theater review. *The Seattle Times*. https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/lsquobroke-ologyrsquo-familyrsquos-hard-times-strong-ties-theater-review/

Berson, M. (2014, October 26). Seattle: Paradise or deathtrap for live theatre? *The Seattle Times.* https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/seattle-paradise-or-deathtrap-for-live-theater/

CNN. (2001, September 18). Boeing to lay off up to 30,000. https://www.cnn.com/2001/US/09/18/gen.boeing.layoffs/

Conway, D. (2010, January). A Hard Fall. *Seattle Business Magazine.* https://www.seattlebusinessmag.com/article/hard-fall

Hansberry, L. (1964, May 1). *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* [Speech]. Readers Digest/United Negro College Fund, New York, NY.

Internal Revenue Service. (2005). *Form 990: ACT Theatre*.

Johnson, E. A. (1981). *A production history of the Seattle Federal Theatre Project Negro Repertory Company: 1935-1939* (Publication No. 8212558) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Johnson, W. (1989, January 8). Sense of fair play in Seattle theater. *The Seattle Times,* L1. https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.spl.org/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=WORLDNEWS&req_dat=C12EB6BE1393489FA580F5880B8B058E&rft_val_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews%252F0EB5333552332C04

Kiley, B. (2013, September 11). Should I stay or should I go? *The Stranger*. https://www.thestranger.com/seattle/should-i-stay-or-should-i-go/Content?oid=17706842

National Endowment for the Arts. (n.d.). *Sample Findings: Performing Arts Attendance by State.* https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/arts-data-profile-series/adp-5/sample-findings

Theatre Communications Group. (2009). The Ground on Which I Stand. In *The American Theater Reader: Essays and conversations from American Theatre Magazine.*

The Hansberry Project. (n.d.). *Productions*. https://hansberryproject.weebly.com/productions.html

The Hansberry Project. (2005). Strategic Overview. [Strategic overview document]. Copy in possession of Valerie Curtis-Newton.

The Hansberry Project. (2010). *Wine in the Wilderness* [video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/FHBsExha-o4

Trapnell, S. & Janeway, K. (2004). A year of disaster and grace: ACT Theatre survives its near demise. *Centerpiece*. https://www.tcg.org/pdfs/publications/centerpiece/centerpiece_0304.pdf

U.S. Census Bureau. (1983). Current housing reports: Housing characterists for selected metropolitan areas, Seattle-Everett, WA. (Report No. H-170-83-60). https://www2.census.gov/prod2/ahsscan/h170-8360.pdf

U.S. Census Bureau. (2004). American Housing Survey for the Seattle-Everett Metropolitan Area: 2004 (Report No. H170/04-60). https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/ahs/2004/seattle04.pdf

Wick, N. (1995, December). Playing with history: The revival of a 1936 Black drama--Part of a controversial new deal project--Fulfills the dream of one determined UW director. *Columns*. https://www.washington.edu/alumni/columns/dec95/stevedore.html

Zaslove, A. (2007, May 7). They shoot mid-size theaters around these parts. *Crosscut*. https://crosscut.com/2007/05/they-shoot-midsized-theaters-around-these-parts