



Harlem's Theaters: A Staging Ground for Community, Class, and Contradiction, 1923-1939

By Adrienne Macki Braconi

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Honorable Mention, 2016 Errol Hill Book Award for Outstanding Scholarship in African American Theater, Drama and/or Performance

Based on a vast amount of archival research, Adrienne Macki Braconi's illuminating study of three important community-based theaters in Harlem shows how their work was essential to the formation of a public identity for African Americans and the articulation of their goals, laying the groundwork for the emergence of the Civil Rights movement. Macki Braconi uses textual analysis, performance reconstruction, and audience reception to examine the complex dynamics of productions by the Krigwa Players, the Harlem Experimental Theatre, and the Negro Theatre of the Federal Theatre Project. Even as these theaters demonstrated the extraordinary power of activist art, they also revealed its limits. The stage was a site in which ideological and class differences played out, theater being both a force for change and a collision of contradictory agendas. Macki Braconi's book alters our understanding of the Harlem Renaissance, the roots of the Civil Rights movement, and the history of community theater in America.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Macki Braconi examines how the works of three major community-based theater companies—the Krigwa Players, the Harlem Experimental Theatre, and the Negro Theatre Unit of the Federal Theatre Project—both impacted and were impacted by the surrounding social circumstances. As Macki Braconi astutely points out, these theaters sought to adhere to and activate W. E. B. Du Bois’s famous 1926 declaration that Negro theater needed to be ‘About us, For us, Near us, and By us,’ and in so doing, complicated notions of both community and class. An interdisciplinary audience of scholars and students of African American history, African American theater, and American theater more generally will find this book a very valuable resource.”—Harry J. Elam Jr., author of *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*

“This book powerfully makes the case for the social and political importance of community theater. Macki Braconi shows how both theater practitioners and theater audiences worked together not only to redefine the meaning of blackness but also to create the foundation for the subsequent civil rights movement.”—Harvey Young, author of *Theatre and Race*

“Adrienne Macki Braconi’s compelling book examines in vivid detail the complex challenges facing African American playwrights, actors, producers, scholars, and critics seeking to create community-based theater during the period from the Roaring Twenties through the Great Depression. Focusing on three crucial and often overlooked theater companies, Macki Braconi sheds light on the Sisyphean task faced by black artists of creating a black public sphere of art and racial uplift. Integrating class, gender, race, politics, theory, economics, and social movements, she illuminates the big picture of American theater history. This important book advances our knowledge of the interstitial period between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement.”—David Krasner, author of *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1927*

About the Author

Adrienne Macki Braconi is an assistant professor in the Department of Dramatic Arts at the University of Connecticut, USA.

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