

# BLACK HISTORY MONTH

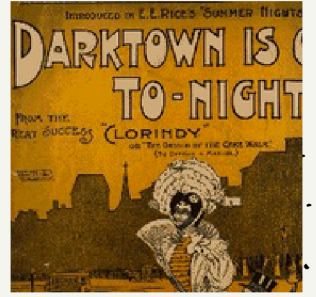
February, 2024

February is Black History Month, which is a perfect and poignant time to celebrate the rich history of Black excellence and artistry in the theater community. Here are 21 key moments in Black Broadway History that have enriched the collective diverse narrative of American Theater.

## 1898

### First All-Black Show Produced at a Major House

Not on the stage, but on the roof garden of the Casino Theatre, a Broadway venue, *Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cake Walk* was a one act musical with an all black cast, performed for an exclusively white audience.



### In Dahomey

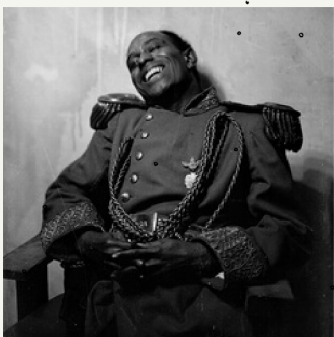
Finally the stage of a major Broadway House, *In Dahomey: A Negro Musical Comedy*, parodied the "back to Africa" movement of the early 1800's. It ran for 53 performances at the New York Theatre, with a national and international tour.

## 1903

## 1910

### Bert Williams and The Ziegfeld Follies

Following his star turn in *In Dahomey*, Bert Williams was the first black performer to be invited by Florenz Ziegfeld to be a headliner in his *Follies of 1910*, billed alongside his white costars. Though he became close with his fellow performers like W.C. Fields and Will Rogers, Williams was still unable to tour with the rest of the *Follies* company through the segregated South.



### Charles Gilpin and the Drama League

Charles Gilpin, as the lead in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, was the first black man to lead an integrated cast on Broadway. That year, The Drama League named him one of 10 people who impacted the American theater, though he was not invited to the awards due to his race. When O'Neill advocated for Gilpin's presence, he was eventually allowed to attend the ceremony.

## 1920

## 1921

### Shuffle Along

*Shuffle Along* was the first Broadway musical to feature an all-black cast, playwright, composer, and lyricist. The production achieved remarkable success, running for approximately 484 nights on Broadway, setting a record at the time. Inspired by the emerging sounds of jazz and Tin Pan Alley songs, *Shuffle Along* holds the distinction of being the first Broadway show to allow African-Americans to sit in the orchestra section downstairs, as opposed to the balcony. Recently, it was reintroduced to the Broadway stage when George C. Wolfe wrote and directed an adaptation, starring Audra McDonald and Brian Stokes Mitchell, which delved into the behind-the-scenes story of the original production.



### Porgy And Bess

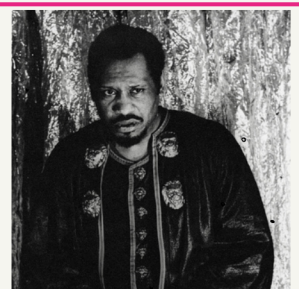
One of the most widely recognized Black musicals/operas in Broadway history, *Porgy and Bess* was crafted by a trio of white composers: George and Ira Gershwin along with DuBose Heyward. The production sparked controversy from its inception, with music and theatre critics panning it, and many African-Americans criticizing the portrayal of Black people for its depiction of drugs, gambling, and casual relationships. Despite this, *Porgy and Bess* has seen seven Broadway revivals, with the most recent in 2012 led by Audra McDonald and Norm Lewis, earning a Tony for Best Revival. The timeless songs "Summertime" and "My Man's Gone Now" continue to be cherished and widely performed in the American Songbook.

## 1935

## 1943

### Paul Robeson's Othello

Breaking all Shakespeare records on Broadway, Paul Robeson's *Othello* ran a whopping 296 performances. Under the direction of Margaret Webster, Robeson became the first African American to be cast as Othello in a major production in the United States, and the first Black actor to perform the role since Ira Aldridge in the 19th century.



### Juanita Hall

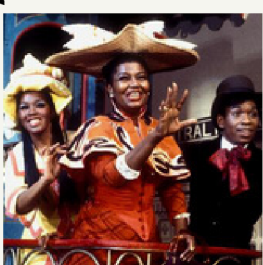
Juanita Hall, for her performance as Bloody Mary in the 1949 staging of *South Pacific*, was the first African-American artist to win a Tony Award. With an impressive tally of 12 additional Broadway credits, including *Flower Drum Song*, she also took on leading roles in the film adaptations of both musicals.

## 1950

## 1959

### Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun

Based on Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem" ("What happens to a dream deferred?/ Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"), Lorraine Hansberry's famous play debuted on Broadway in 1959. The play focuses on a black family in 1950s Chicago dealing with challenges of disenfranchisement and segregation, coming just five years after the Brown v. Board of Education decision ended segregation in the U.S. Directed by Lloyd Richards, who later led the Yale School of Drama, the production broke another barrier by making him the first African-American to direct a drama on Broadway.



### Pearl Bailey's All-Black Hello, Dolly!

In a move that could still be considered groundbreaking today, the complete Broadway ensemble of *Hello, Dolly!* switched over to an all-Black ensemble in 1967, lead by Pearl Bailey as Dolly Levi. The reviews for Bailey and the fresh cast were highly positive, leading to a successful run of an additional two years. In recognition of her outstanding performance, Bailey was honored with a Special Tony Award in 1968.

## 1967



# 1975

## Geoffrey Holder and *The Wiz*

Geoffrey Holder was the first African-American director to win Best Director of a Musical, as well as the first to win Best Costume Design in a Musical. He won both trophies for *The Wiz!*, another seminal musical that featured an R&B/soul score and an all-black cast. This show was a made a hit not by the critics but by the public, who through word of mouth helped the musical run for for four years and win seven Tonys



## August Wilson

The playwright started on Broadway with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 1984, a play about blues musicians in the 1920s. Over the next 20 years, he wrote one play for each decade of the 20th century, completing the last one before he passed away in 2005 at the age of 60. In 2017, *Jitney*, part of his Pittsburgh cycle, won Best Revival of a Play at the Tony Awards. All ten plays in his Pittsburgh cycle have been performed on Broadway, and two of them, *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*, won Pulitzer Prizes.

# 1984

# 1996

## *Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk*

Director George C. Wolfe teamed up with the talented young choreographer Savion Glover to bring the story of the Black experience in America to life on stage. The production, featuring tap dance, received five Tony Awards. While tap dancing had always been a part of Black shows, Wolfe (then-artistic director of The Public Theater), and Glover transformed it into a powerful storytelling tool. They used tap dance to narrate the history of Black Americans, from their arrival as slaves to the rise of hip-hop in pop culture. This contemporary blend brought a fresh perspective to Broadway, contributing to the show's success with a run of 1,135 performances.



## Suzan-Lori Parks and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama

Suzan-Lori Parks, achieved success off-Broadway with acclaimed works such as *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, *In the Blood*, and the Public Theater's *White Noise*. In 2002, her Broadway production of *Topdog/Underdog*, directed by George C. Wolfe, earned her the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, a historic accomplishment as the first black woman to receive this honor. The play delves into the exploration of what it means to be a Black man in 21st-century America, focusing on two brothers metaphorically named Lincoln and Booth.

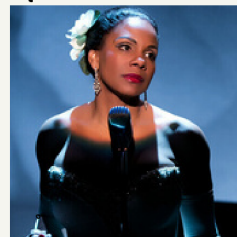
# 2002

Also in 2002: Whoopi Goldberg made history as the first black woman on the shortlist of EGOT achievers.

# 2014

## Audra McDonald: Tony Awards Record

In 2014, Audra McDonald, for *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar & Grill*, made history by becoming the first person ever to win six Tony Awards, and also becoming the first person to win in all four acting categories.



## Tony Award History!

2016 was a huge year in Black Excellence at the Tony Awards. The musical *Hamilton* won big, with three of its leads, Renée Elise Goldsberry, Leslie Odom Jr., and Daveed Diggs, taking home awards. Cynthia Erivo, from *The Color Purple*, also won for Best Leading Actress in a Musical, making her part of the all-black winners circle.

That season, Danaï Gurira's *Eclipsed*, made history as the first Broadway play written, directed, and acted by Black women.

# 2016

Also this year: Broadway Advocacy Coalition was founded. Their first event, Broadway for Black Lives Matter, used storytelling to combat systemic racism in the American arts.

# 2018

## George C. Wolfe: Most Nominated

The playwright-director-producer, George C. Wolfe, made history as the first Black director of a Broadway production that didn't focus on a Black family. This groundbreaking moment came with the 1993 production of *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, for which he won his first Tony Award for Best Direction. In 2018, Wolfe directed the revival of *The Iceman Cometh*, earning his 23rd Tony nomination for Best Direction, setting a new record as the most Tony-nominated Black artist. Among these nominations, he has won five Tony Awards.



2019: Black Theatre Coalition is founded, an effort to close the disparity between growing inclusivity onstage and lack of Black professionals off stage



## Michael R. Jackson's Pulitzer Win

Michael R. Jackson became the first Black musical theatre writer to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama with *A Strange Loop*, a musical exploring the narrative of a Black queer writer creating a musical about a Black queer writer. The show also clinched the Tony Awards for Best Musical and Best Book of a Musical in 2022.

# 2020

Also in 2020: Black Theatre United is formed, targeting transformations within the Broadway community to foster equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility throughout the industry.

# 2021

## A Historic Season for Black Playwrights

As Broadway came back to life after the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a call for more diversity. In the 2021-22 season, a record nine works by Black playwrights were featured. These shows had more people of color involved in design and production than ever before. Zhailon Levingston, director of *Chicken & Biscuits*, became the youngest Black director on Broadway. *Thoughts of a Colored Man* was the first play written and directed by a Black man, with a Black actor in the lead role. At the 2020 Tony Awards in 2021, *Slave-Play* received a record 12 nominations for a non-musical play.



## Recasting of Classic Roles

In the 35 years since *Phantom of the Opera* started on Broadway, 37 actresses played Christine Daaé. Emilie Kouatchou, who began the role in January 2022, is the first Black woman to do so. In the same year, Brittney Johnson became the first Black actress to play Glinda full-time in Broadway's *Wicked*.

# 2022

# 2023

## This Past Year!

National Black Theatre (founded in 1968) made its Broadway debut with the transfer and co-production of *FAT HAM*, making it the third Black theatre company in the history of Broadway to do so.

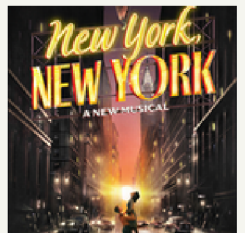
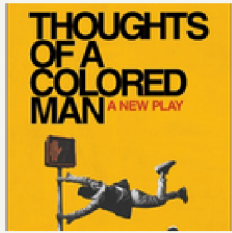
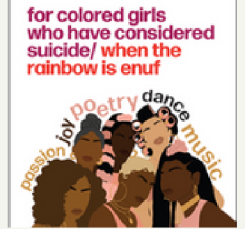
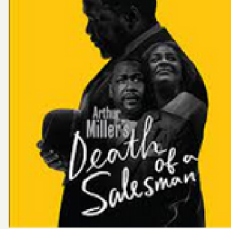
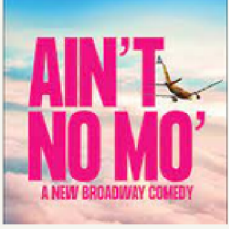
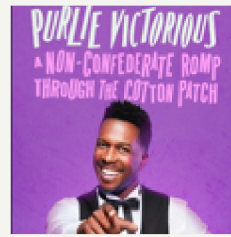
Additionally, Viola Davis snagged her EGOT, becoming the first Black actor to EGOT by winning awards exclusively for her performances.





# 2024 AND BEYOND!

As a Black, Woman owned business, K + K Reset continues to take pride in supporting productions that celebrate and amplify Black storytelling, music, performance, and unbelievable talent. We look forward to the future of Broadway and continuing to uplift Black history-makers on and off the stage.



## Resources

Black Theatre United:  
<https://www.blacktheatreunited.com/>

Black Theatre Coalition  
<https://blacktheatrecoalition.org/>

Broadway Advocacy Coalition  
<https://www.bwayadvocacycoalition.org/>

Broadway Black  
<https://www.broadwayblack.com/>

Women of Color on Broadway, Inc  
<https://www.womenofcoloronbroadway.org/>

The Black Theatre Project  
<https://www.blacktheatreproject.com/>

Broadway Diversity Project  
<https://www.facebook.com/BroadwayDiversity/>

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