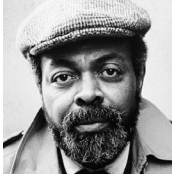


# IN HONOR OF JUNETEENTH, HERE ARE TEN AFRICAN-AMERICAN DRAMATISTS TO CHECK OUT.

Article: *Ten Major African-American Playwrights*, by David Lefkowitz

## Amiri Baraka (nee Leroi Jones)



Baraka's confrontational dramas set the tone for the more militant side of black politics in the 1960s. His best-known plays include *The Toilet*, *Baptism*, and *Dutchman*, which showed a trashy white woman verbally emasculating (and then knifing) an intellectual Black man who struggles to embrace white middle class values. According to *The Back Stage Theatre Guide*, more Black plays were written and staged since *Dutchman* than in the previous 130 years of American Black theater history. Marxism also played a part in Baraka's politics, as evidenced by such play titles as *What Was the Relationship of the Lone Ranger to the Means of Production?* and 1982's *Money*.

## Lorraine Hansberry



For nearly 40 years, her reputation has rested on *A Raisin in the Sun*, a poignant work about a Black family struggling to move into the middle class. Lately, her unfinished *Les Blancs* has also been making the regional rounds. Dead at 35, Hansberry completed only one other play, 1964's *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*.

## Langston Hughes



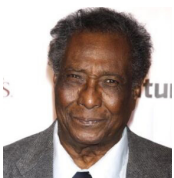
Best known as a poet, Hughes began his playwriting career with 1928's *Mulatto* and is best known these days for co-scripting *Mule Bone* with Zora Neale Hurston. He also penned the still-popular *Black Nativity*, the commercially successful *Simply Heavenly*, and assisted on the lyrics of Kurt Weill's *Street Scene*.

## Adrienne Kennedy



NY's Signature Theatre, which has devoted entire seasons to the works of Arthur Miller and Edward Albee, gave over 1995-96 to the works of Kennedy. Most celebrated was the chilling drama *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, with more surreal, poetic works like 1964's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and the recent *June and Jean in Concert* earning mixed reactions.

## Leslie Lee



Lee's works, like those of Samm-Art Williams and Lorraine Hansberry, often look at familial values and black pride. 1975's Tony nominated *First Breeze of Summer* contrasts two generations, while *Colored People's Time* takes place during the Harlem Renaissance. Lee's Off-Broadway hit *Black Eagles*, about a Black WWII squadron, was recently made into a cable film. His newest play, *Spirit North*, world premiered at NJ's Crossroads Theatre in January 2024. Lee told Crossroads spokesperson Ernie Johnston he still feels a strong kinship to the poor Blacks of the south. "My heroes are some of those old folks—the sisters and brothers who struggled and worked and died. They're not remembered, and my mission is to make sure they are remembered."

## Suzan-Lori Parks



Critics are divided over the merits of her work, but she's become a strong force in Black cultural satire, from *Venus*, about a Hottentot with enormous buttocks exhibited in 19th century Europe, to *The America Play*, which uses the assassination of Abraham Lincoln as an historical reference point. Other works include the Humana Fest entry, *Devotees in the Garden of Love*, and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (Yale Rep, 1992), which features such characters as Black Man with Watermelon, Black Woman with Fried Drumstick, and Lots of Grease & Lots of Pork.

## Ntozake Shange



Though her first play—*for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*—was her greatest success, Shange continues to weave Black and feminist themes into poetic, often non-narrative pieces. Other plays include *from okra to greens* and *Savannahland*.

## Samm-Art Williams



It's rare that a year goes by when some regional or NY theater company isn't reviving 1979's *Home*, Williams's Tony-nominated drama about a young Black man leaving the south to visit relatives up north. Said Williams of that play, "We've got to show a different side of Black lifestyle... All Black characters don't have to be heroes. All Black men do not have to be Black macho, strong leaders of the household, knocking everybody down on stage. You can have very sensitive, very kind, very gentle, kinds of Black men." Other Williams plays include *Cork* and *Welcome Back to Black River*.

## August Wilson



Alas, the only Black playwright to have recent success on Broadway. Wilson has been penning a cycle of plays that run decade-by-decade through the 20th century. Among those works are the early *Jitney*, recently revived at NJ's Crossroads Theatre, the Broadway hits *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars*, and *Two Trains Running*. Wilson has also made a name for his outspoken antagonism towards multi-racial casting of the classics. He's won the Pulitzer Prize twice: for *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*.

## George C. Wolfe



Poised to be a major Black playwright thanks to *Spunk*, *The Colored Museum*, which sniped at the kinds of plays the aforementioned Hansberry used to write, and his book of *Jelly's Last Jam*, Wolfe instead turned to direction and management. He runs the NY Shakespeare Festival/Public Theatre and recently directed *On The Town* in Central Park. His next project is an Alec Baldwin/Angela Bassett *Macbeth*.

Other major Black playwrights worth exploring: Ed Bullins, Pearl Cleage, Oyama, Douglas Turner Ward, Charles Fuller, Anna Deavere Smith, Ron Milner, Keith Glover, Kia Corthron and Vy Higginson.

– By David Lefkowitz

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