

Douglas Turner Ward Archives at Emory University



Emory University's Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library (<http://rose.library.emory.edu/index.html>) which collects and connects stories of human experience, promotes access and learning, and offers opportunities for dialogue for all wise hearts who seek knowledge by preserving distinctive collections; fostering original research; bridging content and context; and engaging diverse communities through innovative outreach, programming, and exhibitions has obtained the archives of playwright Douglas Turner Ward, co-founder of the groundbreaking Negro Ensemble Company (NEC), which provided a platform and carved space for Black actors and playwrights in American theater.

The Douglas Turner Ward visited the Emory campus in October as the Rose Library hosts the NEC's "Legacy Leaders of Color," currently celebrating 50 years of diversity in theater. The free event was open to the public and took place in White Hall; the event featured a screening of the Legacy Leaders video, appearances by NEC alumni and a panel discussion with Ward and producer, actor and NEC co-founder Robert Hooks.

Emory's Douglas Turner Ward Collection, circa 1957-2012 includes manuscript materials, correspondence and drafts of Ward's creative output (38.75 linear feet, 6 oversized papers boxes and AV Masters: .25 linear feet which includes scripts, records of the Negro Ensemble Company, photographs, and printed material).

The archive most notably contains correspondence with the poet and writer Amiri Baraka; the ground-breaking educator Jeanne Noble, who wrote to Ward in a response to his 1966 *New York Times* article; and Ward's copy of "A Raisin in the Sun," dated June 16, 1960.

The Rose Library also is collaborating with Emory's Theater Studies Program on their collection. NEC alumni at the October event special invites included Pearl Cleage and Carlton Molette, Atlanta-based playwrights who have been produced by the NEC; Ruben Santiago-Hudson, a Tony winner who stars in "The Quad," which is shooting in Atlanta; Jefferson Byrd, a Tony winner for August Wilson's "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"; Oz Scott, currently directing a series in Atlanta; Wynn Thomas, production designer for "Hidden Figures," "When Mars Attacks" and "A Beautiful Mind"; and Lisa Watson.

In 1967, Ward joined with Hooks and theater manager Gerald Krone to create the NEC, a theater with the aim to bring the themes of Black life to the stage. Until the 1960s, American theater didn't make space for Black actors and playwrights. If there were roles available, even the most successful actors were often cast as servants.

Ward and Hooks first met in 1959 on the road company production of Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun," the long-running play that portrayed the most realistic version of Black family life to date.

After recruiting theater manager Gerald Krone, the three men produced an evening of Black-themed, satiric one act plays, including, "Day of Absence," a reverse minstrel show where Black actors perform in whiteface. The play takes place in a small Southern town on a day when all the Black people have mysteriously disappeared.

In 2015, Theater 80 St. Marks revived the play with cast members from the original, and Comedy Central's award-winning comedy team Key & Peele reimaged it in reverse in sketch called "Negrotown." The plays were performed at the St. Marks Play House in Greenwich Village and ran for 504 performances, winning Ward an Obie Award for acting and a Drama Desk Award for writing.

In 1966 on the heels of his success, Ward was asked by the *New York Times* to write an article on the condition of Black artists in American theater. Ward's profound piece, "American Theatre: For Whites Only?" went on to become a manifesto for the establishment of a resident Black theater company. With money from the Ford Foundation and a home at the St. Marks Playhouse, the Negro Ensemble Company officially formed. Since its founding, the NEC has produced more than 200 new plays and provided a theatrical home for more than 4,000 cast and crew members. Among its ranks have been some of the best Black actors in television and film, including Denzel Washington, Louis Gossett Jr., Phylicia Rashad, David Allen Grier, Samuel L. Jackson, Angela Bassett and Lawrence Fishburne.