



The Black Artist's Way: Topics in Black Theatre and Performance

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Abstract

Post George Floyd, the world recognized that there are major social, political, and economic issues concerning racial diversity, equity and inclusion in the United States. Corporations, educational institutions and families desperately searched for ways to close the identified gap in racial equity. Though there have been great gains, this problem persists. In 2018, a Black Theater and Performance Group, the Essential Theatrical Associates, created a children's program named *Talk Dat Talk*; which implemented artistic ways of teaching children about the folklore of enslaved people. During the abrupt emergence of Coronavirus, ETA decided to present the program virtually; in turn, it became well-known and used to inform public school students about African storytelling and increase diversity in classrooms (Selmore, 2022). The success of this virtual experience has inspired the creation of *The Black Artists' Way*, a series of online videos produced to educate students on significant Black women in Black Theater and Performance. The six women researched were Toni Morrison, Billie Holiday, Lorraine Hansberry, Dorothy Dandridge, Zora Neale Hurston, and Nina Simone. This project presents research on the works, lives, and influence of these six women. The goal of this virtual series is to increase equity and diversity in classrooms, give teachers the tools necessary to create impactful lesson plans, and enhance the knowledge students have about African Americans. Through the creation of this online video series, the information will be accessed by a variety of students and educators—from middle schools to universities.

Introduction

Billie Holiday, an iconic Black woman jazz musician, once quoted "You can't copy anybody and end with anything if you copy, it means you're working without any real feeling" ("45 Best", 2021). This quote highlights one of the major issues occurring in Black Theatre today—the struggle of receiving credit for our original works. These are some of the few issues that are prominent in Black theatre in the present, as well as in the past. Black Theatre in the United States was a movement that focused on plays that were written for, by, and about Black individuals. People assume that minstrel shows were the beginning of this movement; however, these shows were played by white individuals portraying stereotypes of Black people using blackface. This movement started after the American Civil War and has been ongoing since during the Harlem Renaissance, this movement was blossoming with other creative moments occurring (Kuiper, n.d.). In present time, Black theatre continues to artistically rites and portray Black people in plays to entertain and educate. In this research, we are researching Black women who greatly impacted Black theatre and the Black community. The goal of this research is to create an informational video series to show students in high schools and colleges to educate them about this topic.

Methods

For this research, there was one type of qualitative research method that was utilized to find information about the three women connected to black theater; Toni Morrison, Billie Holiday, and Lorraine Hansberry. To conduct this research, the Florida State University online libraries were used to find significant information about each of the women. While researching, all the sources found were filtered to be written within a ten-year span; by doing this, it ensured that the sources were not outdated and unreliable. Other resources that were used for this research were documentaries and biographies. By using these resources, it gave important perspectives from people close to the women along with their childhood experiences that are not well-known. Also, it gave more personal information than the previous method with academic resources.



Predicted Results

Over the past few months, researchers have compiled information and research regarding Toni Morrison, Billie Holiday, and Lorraine Hansberry in order to help create scripts for the video series "Talk Dat Talk" by the ETA program. Unfortunately, due to Coronavirus, there will not have video results until possibly spring of 2023. At the completion of our research and with permission to begin filming, researchers will have created videos that are meant to be shared with children and young adults in schools. From the creation and publication of these videos, researchers expect students to learn more about Black artists who have had an impact on the society that we currently live in today. Additionally, researchers expect to see that the videos are introduced into the curriculum help students to become more interested in learning about other Black individuals who will have an impact on society.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that there are significant Black individuals who had an impact on both the Black community and the society that we live in currently. This shows with the current research on the Black women (Toni Morrison, Billie Holiday, and Lorraine Hansberry) who were connected to Black Theatre. Without these women, we would not have the same writing, music, and/or performances as we would with their existence. Moving forward with this research project, we will have more information about the other 3 Black women that contributed and helped shape the Black community and society.



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