



A review of *Black Theater Is Black Life: An Oral History of Chicago Theater and Dance, 1970-2010* by Harvey Young and Queen Meccasia Zabriskeie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014. 421 pp., ISBN 978-0-8101-2942-9) by Sharon Wallace, Ph.D. (Sharruth@hotmail.com), Department of English; Wayne County Community College District.

Harvey Young and Queen Meccasia Zabriskeie raise the curtain on a rarely discussed subject of the Black Theater in their book, *Black Theatre Is Black Life: An Oral History of Chicago Theater and Dance, 1970-2010*. Here they interview 22 artists who illustrate their connection to Black Theater in Chicago. These oral narratives show the artist's professional development as theatrical artists, activist, and mentors in the Black community. This book takes a close look at the relationship between Black Theater and the Black community. What comes through these interviews is the passion the artists have for their art, and the generosity of sharing it with their audience. This comes through the interviews Young and Zabriskeie has with, theater director Chuck Smith, Goodman Theatre's resident director, Jackie Taylor, author/producer and founder of Black Ensemble Theater, Daniel "Brave Monk" Haywood, a member of Chicago's legendary and internationally recognized breaking Crew Phaze II-Crosstown Crew and founding member for Awesome Style (A.S.K), as well as F.E.W. Collective, and Darlene Blackburn, former professional dance with Kelan Phil Cobran and the Artistic Heritage Ensemble, as well as other Black theater/dance artists. The artists emphasize the value of Black Theater in the Black community and their commitment to show Black life/experience on stage through drama, and dance in a significant and meaningful way.

*Black Theater Is Black Life: An Oral History of Chicago Theater and Dance, 1970-2010*, is an important book because it gives voice to a medium that does not achieve the spotlight of more commercially exposed areas of the arts. Harvey Young is an associate professor of theater at Northwestern University and Queen Meccasia Zabriskeie is an assistant professor of sociology at New College of Florida. By engaging the assistance of playwrights, producers, actors and dancers through interview who critically discuss and analyze the theatrical culture of Black Theater in Chicago, Young and Zabriskeie present a book that vibrantly presents the passion of the artists for Black theater and the need for Black theater in the African American community.

Young and Zabriskeie asserts that the book shines light on the continuous development of theater and dance that focuses on four decades of Black Theater in Chicago from 1970 to 2010, which is a topic that is scarcely analyzed mainstream discussions on the theatrical arts. The authors further suggest that the book contributes to the history on Black Chicago by concentrating on the contemporary art scene.

Young and Zabriskie propose that “The book documents the creation of new theater and dance companies in the waning years of the Black Arts Movement and the popular reemergence of black theater and dance in Chicago within the twenty-first century” (p. 5). In this work, the interviews provide an oral history that chronicles their theatrical experience in Black Chicago Theater. Young and Zabriskie relate that the history of Black theater in Chicago is experiencing a rebirth in the black community. Young and Zabriskie contend that books like this cause us to remember that our shared history lives within us and that to gain passage to history we must merely listen and learn from those near to us.

In general, this book shows how committed Black artists are in developing theater in the Black community. What can be taken from this book is that theater does not occur in isolation but through relationships within the theater community among artists and community members. Moreover, theater and dance gives the Black community hope and political voice while presenting entertainment. Through the oral history shared by the artists we learn of comradery between the artists from the early days to the present that supports the longevity of Black Theatre in Chicago. This volume has twenty-four chapters. The first seven pages provides a chronology of historical events that begin in the early nineteen hundreds 1905 with Robert T. Motts opening the Pekin theater and Robert S. Abbott founding of the *Chicago Defender* newspaper; To the reelection of President Barack Obama in 2012. In the introduction of the volume Young and Zabriskie provides us with an overview that examines value of Theater and Dance and how both signify life. The chapters in this work are written thematically and begin with interviews; eleven chapters on theater and twelve chapters on dance.

Young and Zabriskie state that, this book shows us that it takes a community of artists to create a dynamic atmosphere of Black Theater in Chicago. The authors allow us through an oral history of Chicago Theater to relive the experience of those contemporary artists who populate the evolving theater scene. We learn of their humble beginnings and struggles to sharpen their creative skills and establish careers, and later found theater companies. The authors introduce us to Black artists from the world of Theater, such as Chuck Smith, Kemati J. Porter, Gloria Bond Clunie, Jackie Taylor, Johnathan Wilson, Ron O.J. Parson, Kathy A. Perkins, Derrick Sanders, Rashida Z. Shaw, and Sydney Chatman; and Dance, Najwa I, Darlene Blackburn, Geraldine Williams, Idella Reed-Davis, Babu Atiba, Joel Hall, Alfred (Fred) Baker, Amaniyea Payne, Idy Ciss, Kevin Lega Jeff, Tosha Alston, and Daniel “Brave Monk” Haywood: Their interviews contribute to the rich oral history of Chicago’s Black Theater, moreover each discussion offers a unique perspective on their theater experience that range from 1970 to 2010.

Young and Zabriskie provide insight into the workings of the Black Theater world. Black theater receives little exposure and notoriety compared to its white counterpart. However, Black theater in Chicago is experiencing new life in recent years, due to artists from the new generation of Black theater artists, who have fresh energy, as well as an innovative approach to theater and dance.

The nostalgic “Introduction” takes us back to a historic event on July 4, 1910 when the great heavy weight boxing champion Jack Jones defend the “Great White Hope” Jim Jeffries who had retired undefeated to challenge Jack Jones. Young and Zabriskie’s analysis of this legendary match between Jack Jones and Jim Jeffries exquisitely illustrates the link between theater and life. The phrase “life is a stage” is a cliché but a saying that has merit. This slice of history Illuminates the main theme of the book, as well as underscores the book title.

The historical anecdote highlights the book title *Black Theater Is Black Life* which is a testament to the premise of the book, it shows that the two concepts cannot be separated they are indeed one. The championship match between Jones and Jeffries possessed elements of great theatrical and social drama. Where the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist was vetted in racial segregation, lynching, and racial supremacy, it was high drama at its best. Moreover, this book is about how Black Theater is connected to Black Life, as the issues that are seen on the stage correspond to real life experiences of Black people.

The artists in each chapter share their theater experience via a firsthand account of their personal journey and evolution within the Black theater in Chicago. The book openings and closes with insightful stories that invite us backstage and gives us a look from the inside of the aesthetics of being Black artists. Young and Zabriskie captures the passion for performing theatre in Chicago through fascinating stories from artists, who are dedicated to producing quality theater that represents the passion of the people. Whose lives are reflected in the artistry of theater and dance performances. In the end, the authors manage to show the necessity of theater in the Black community; the oral history which is told by the artist provides us with a record of the times. The artists paint a picture of how social, racial, political, and economics influences Black culture.

Overall, the contribution this book makes in the scholarship of theater studies is valuable and long overdue. The oral history of Chicago Theater and Dance engages those with a theater background, those that attend theater, or those interested in Black history. This book gives Black Theater the attention it deserves. *Black Theater Is Black Life* will encourage others to explore the topic of Black Theater further and introduce a new audience of Black artist and theatergoers. This book is an edited collection of interviews that provide an oral history of Chicago’s Black Theater and Dance community. If there are any shortcomings in this volume, it would be the limitation of the book’s capacity to examine every aspect of a topic that is as large as theater and dance. However, the authors proposed questions to the artists that produce short memoirs that collectively create a picture of theater life in Chicago, as experienced by twenty-three theater/dance professionals who share their stories.