A Medal For Willie *by William Branch was originally produced by the Committee for the Negro and the Arts in 1951 at the Club Baron in Harlem. The morning after it opened, Mr. Branch reported for induction into the United States Army.*

Excerpt from *A Medal for Willie*
by William Branch

Scene 1

(Lights come up revealing Mrs. Jackson seated at a table while her daughter, Lucy Mae, applies a hot pressing comb to her hair. The table is spread with newspaper, upon which stands a small mirror, a hot plate, a box of hairpins, and a jar of "Dixie Peach" pomade. Mrs. Jackson is in her slip and has a towel around her shoulders. She is still fairly young, though hard work and lack of care have left her tired and wilted. Lucy Mae is wrapped in a non-descript bathrobe and wears bedroom slippers. Her fresh hairdo is protected by a hairnet. She is fifteen.)

MRS. JACKSON
Ouch, baby, be careful! You came a little too close that time.

LUCY
I'm sorry, Mama, but you got to hold still. How do you think I'm goin' to get through if you keep movin' your head around?

MRS. JACKSON
I'm doing the best I can, Lucy Mae.
(Sighs.)
What time is it?

LUCY
It's something to one. We got plenty of time. They won't be here to pick us up before two.

MRS. JACKSON
I know.
(Wearily.)
Lord, I wish it were over already.

LUCY
Don't say that, Mama! Why, this is a day we

WILLIAM BRANCH

Note: Branch's comments on African American theater extended to the present. For this report, only his remarks through the 1950s have been excerpted.

This morning we are dealing with a number of different areas; my area happens to be the first African American community theater. The first African American community theater? Well, let me see, now, when could that have been? I suppose some of you would think, "Well, in terms of what history I know, that would be back in the Harlem Renaissance of the '20s or maybe a few years earlier." There have been people who have speculated on that to some extent. Unfortunately, some of them have been vastly, vastly wrong.

In 1988, Richard Bernstein, writing in the New York Times, on Sunday, March 27 — in case any of you are interested in looking it up — in an article entitled, "August Wilson's Voices From the Past," wrote the following: "The tradition of a Black American theater is not a long one, going back only a generation or so to the work of such playwrights as Amiri Baraka." Now, with all due respect to Baraka, how a supposedly trained and competent newswriter such as Bernstein can cavalierly pen such rubbish without doing a lick of research, without even feeling the need to do a lick of research — and get away with it! — says something about the current state of journalism at the vaunted "gray lady on 43rd Street." A letter to the editor on that score, by yours truly, predictably went unpublished and unanswered.

But as Loften Mitchell's *Black Drama: The Story of the American Negro in the Theater* and other readily available sources amply document, substantial contributions by black playwrights and black theater companies to a long-established black theater tradition, occurred long before a generation or so.

If you will permit me, I'd like to quote from a work of my own, *Black Thunder, an Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama*, in which I have an introduction entitled, "The Legacy of the African Grove: From *King Shotaway* to *The Piano Lesson*":

> When the ubiquitous Mr. Brown opened a tea garden behind his home on Thomas Street in lower Manhattan, New York City, in the early nineteenth century, and began presenting "acts" and "exhibitions" for his customers' entertainment, little could he have realized that he was about to launch an artistic and cultural tradition that was to last far beyond his own lifetime, and that today has become known as Black Theater — or as the term is increasingly re-employed, African American Theater.
>
> Mr. Brown (his given names are apparently still in some question among theater historians, although at least one has identified him as William Henry Brown) was at first seeking merely to broaden the cordiality of his modest establishment, which catered to a small but growing community of free African Americans in the City, and possibly to enhance his economic situation somewhat as well. But by 1821, when these occasional entertainments of song, recitals, and skits had expanded and grown to a formal organization called the African Company — which, under its leading actor, James Hewlett, had established its own

facility at Mercer and Bleecker Streets named the African Grove Theater — Mr. Brown found himself presiding over not only a proud and popular entertainment attraction, but also an activity perceived as a potential threat to a long-established white theatrical enterprise in the area: the Park Theater, run by one Stephen Price.

It appears that Price and a powerful friend — a local newspaper editor, politician, and sometime playwright named Mordecai Noah — took umbrage at the audacity of former slaves and their descendants presuming to undertake the high Caucasian challenge of the introspections of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Richard III*, let alone the dire threat to Western civilization — particularly the sanctity of white womanhood — posed by the "miscegeny" implicit in *Othello*. In addition, Mr. Brown's thriving enterprise had become so popular, despite denunciations by the white press (including the *National Advocate*, edited by Mordecai Noah), that white people were clamoring to pay good money to be let in — albeit in a segregated area set aside by Brown because, as he saw it, some whites did not know "how to behave themselves at entertainments designed for ladies and gentlemen of color." Further, these black pretenders to the art of dramaturgy had had the nerve to fashion a play of their own, entitled *The Drama of King Shotoway*, in which they called upon their enslaved brethren in the U.S. to emulate the Caravs of the Caribbean and revolt against their masters.

But worst of all, as a politician, Noah was alarmed about a pending proposal before the New York State constitutional convention that would open the franchise to African Americans, fearing that local black folk, if enfranchised, would vote for his political opponents. "These people do not want to vote," he editorialized in his paper. "They are perfectly happy to visit the African Grove [theater] and talk scandal."

Something had to be done — and, of course, it was. Whether at the direct instigation of Mr. Brown's competitors or not, white hoodlums began to heckle and disrupt the troupe's performances, and when the police were summoned — you guessed it! — they arrested and carted off not the white hoodlums, but the black actors on the stage. (It seems Mr. Noah had been appointed sheriff!) The African Grove Theater ceased to exist in 1823, closed by the authorities as a public nuisance.

Importantly, it must be added that Ira Aldridge, a young actor with the African Company, migrated to London, where in short order he became a stellar attraction as a Shakespearean actor — for example, playing Othello to Ellen Tree's Desdemona. Later, as the head of his own troupe, Aldridge toured the leading theaters of Britain and Europe, garnering high praise from critics and decorations from royalty until his death on tour in Lodz, Poland, in 1867. To this day, his portrait hangs in a place of honor at the Bakhrushin Theatrical Museum in Moscow, and a chair adorned with a plaque in his name is to be found in the fourth row of stalls at the Shakespeare Memorial Theater in Stratford-Upon-Avon. Ironically, though records and references to Aldridge's extraordinary career are readily found in numerous European theater histories and reviews, Ira Aldridge remains little known in this, the country of his birth, having been left out of many works on European theater by white American writers.

Nonetheless, by establishing the short-lived African Grove Theater, Mr. Brown had succeeded in providing an invaluable legacy. In initiating an African American theatrical tradition that refused to accomodate to pressure, he ennobled himself and his peers, and left to his many unborn heirs an inspiration, and a challenge, that is no less vital today than it was in 1823 — a tradition which, though oft-times sputtering, gasping and wheezing, has managed, against both the usual artistic odds and those additional roadblocks created by prejudice, to survive and occasionally even to flourish in the nearly two centuries succeeding.

Mr. Brown was a very important figure in New York at the time

can be proud of all the rest of our lives. It's not like it's going to be a funeral, Mama. We're not supposed to be sad.

MRS. JACKSON

(Slowly.)

No, it ain't a funeral, exactly. Don't guess Willie had a funeral.

LUCY

Oh, they always have something. They always read over them before they – I mean, before –

MRS. JACKSON

Go ahead and say it, Lucy Mae. Before they bury 'em. Ain't no use in us tryin' to make Willie ain't dead and buried. We all got to die sometime.

LUCY

It still seems kinda — kinda funny, Mama.

MRS. JACKSON

What?

LUCY

About Willie. I keep thinking he's still just away with the Army. I just can't get used to thinking he's not coming back — ever.

MRS. JACKSON

(Quietly, half to herself.)

I know, Lucy Mae, baby. I get that way too, sometimes. I hear a step — somebody comin' up the street — and I get real quiet-like and listen, just hopin' to hear 'em turn in the yard and come up the steps. I know in my head it can't be Willie. But I listen just the same. Guess it'll be a long time before I stop listenin'.

(She turns.)

Better heat up that iron some more, honey.

LUCY

Okay.

(Places the iron on the hot plate.)

Aren't you awfully proud of Willie, Mama? Winnin' a medal and all? I always knew Willie'd do something someday, 'spite of the way Daddy used to call him no-count.

MRS. JACKSON

Your daddy didn't understand Willie.

Handbill from *A Medal for Willie*

LUCY

(Going on.)

All the kids at school are just so thrilled. They even point me out when I walk down the halls. "There goes Willie Jackson's sister," I can hear them whispering! And all the teachers are so nice. And the Principal, too, Mr. Torrence. He got up in assemlby that day and made the announcement about the ceremony and all, and he said we should all be very proud because Willie was a product of our own school.

MRS. JACKSON

Yes, child, I know, but I guess you done 'bout forgot the times I had to get off from work and go up there to beg Mr. Torrence to let Willie back in school. I guess Mr. Torrence has 'bout forgot it by now, too.

LUCY

That's nothing, Mama. You know Willie just didn't like school. He never got along with any of the teachers except for the football coach. And he wasn't learning anything.

MRS. JACKSON

They sent him to school in the Army, Lucy Mae. They taught him all about machine guns and fightin' and how to kill and they didn't have no trouble. Why couldn't they take a

and there are many references to him in the annals of New York. Yet, those references cease shortly after the demise of the African Grove Theater. Nobody knows what happened to Mr. Brown after that; he merely disappears from the record. He is not forgotten, however. Among other honors, the National Conference of African American Theater, which meets every spring in Baltimore, Maryland, each year presents an award to a person outstanding in African American theater circles. The award is known as the "Mr. Brown Award."

The reason his first names are in some doubt is the fact that there are a number of references to him under several names, but identifying him at known addresses where he had lived. Why he used various first names, or aliases if you wish, we don't know. Could be that he had the same problem with bill collectors that some of us do now and then. Nonetheless, Mr. Brown is the term under which he is affectionately known in today's African American theater circles.

After the demise of the African Grove Theater, it was a long time before other organized theatrical activity took place among African Americans. There were reasons for this, of course. Most African Americans were enslaved in the South and those who were free in the North had other concerns — trying to get an education, trying to survive and, unfortunately not infrequently, trying to stay ahead of lynch mobs. For many decades thereafter there was a period known as minstrelsy, which pretty much blanketed out the possibility of any African American legitimate theater activity.

Minstrelsy, which began as occasional entertainments on Southern plantations by slaves for their masters and the ruling class, was adopted by white commercial producers who sent troupes of whites with burnt cork on their faces throughout the country. It fast became America's first indigenous theatrical form, as well as its most popular for most the nineteenth century. Blacks were not used and were not welcome in this activity for many years, but eventually black troupes, too, began to mount minstrel shows and, ironically, they, too, had to black their faces in order to be accepted as "authentic" minstrels. This prompted one critic, James Weldon Johnson, to call this "a caricature of a caricature," insofar as the white minstrel tradition was satirizing and caricaturing the original black tradition on the Southern plantation. The blacks, in effect, had to caricature those that had been caricaturing them.

Minstrelsy continued well into the twentieth century, with whites continuing to dominate the field. A black-faced Al Jolson sang "Mammy" in the first talking motion picture, while two white radio minstrels, known popularly as "Amos 'n' Andy," made fortunes, first in radio and then in television — albeit the latter with an African American cast. Bert Williams became the most successful African American minstrel, starring on Broadway in the Ziegfeld Follies, while privately eating his heart out at what he was doing to the image of his people.

Towards the end of the 1800s, some black theatrical activity did begin to surface. During minstrelsy itself, there were a number of important black theater troupes, including Charles Hicks and a group called the Slave Troupe, which was founded in 1866. This troupe toured widely in the North in the United States and went to

Europe and even to Asia with their shows. During that period, a second group was known as The Hyer Sisters Negro Operatic and Dramatic Company. Great title. It came out of San Francisco in the 1870s. They produced two musicals with abolitionist themes, *Out of Bondage* was one and *The Underground Railroad*. The authors are not listed, per se, but the troupe apparently collaborated in the presentation of these musicals. In New York City, there was a black group called the Astor Place Colored Tragedy Company in 1884, which lasted for a while. Then another, Robert Cole's Worth Museum All-Star Stock Company, founded in 1896, which specialized in Shakespearean productions, harking back, of course, to the days of the African Grove Theater.

With the turn of the Century, there were other theatrical companies that developed. In 1906, a group was formed called the Peking Stock Company of Chicago. Why it was called the Peking Stock Company, I've never been able to find out. In 1915, in New York City, an African American woman named Anita Bush established a company of her own, called the Anita Bush Company, which after having a spectacular success, suddenly went broke. She was obliged to hand over the company to Robert Levy, who operated the Lafayette Theater in Harlem, which still stands today.

In the 1920s, Rose McClendon, a splendid African American actress flourished for a time and in the 1930s when the Federal Theatre was established, she allegedly persuaded Hallie Flanagan, who was the head of it, to establish Negro Units. The Federal Theatre was not, apparently, conceived to embrace African Americans. Rose McClendon insisted that African Americans have a part in this and segregated Negro Units were set up. These produced a number of original works by black playwrights.

The Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre in New York is most famous, perhaps, for the production of a "voodoo" *Macbeth*, directed by Orson Welles. During that time, the premiere of the "voodoo" *Macbeth*, which took place at the Lafayette Theater, was a prime opening. They had limousines with people coming up from downtown and there were lights and marquees and festivity. This became the "in" kind of thing to do. This was the period, as Langston Hughes called it, "when Harlem was in vogue."

The Ethiopian Art Theater of Chicago was organized in 1923 and among its sponsors was the wife of the famous white author Sherwood Anderson. Mrs. Sherwood Anderson was instrumental in helping to found that theater. The Art Theater came to New York and presented several productions from time to time and stimulated further activity in New York.

I don't know for sure whether W.E.B. DuBois saw the Ethiopian Art Theater of Chicago when it performed in New York, but somewhere along the line, he too became particularly interested in using the theater to advance the cause of black Americans, to advance the quest for equal rights. Though he never considered himself a playwright, he did write an expansive pageant which was produced in 1913. This in turn led him to establish in *The Crisis* magazine, which he founded and edited for the NAACP, a one-act playwriting contest. He invited submissions from people all over the country.

little patience with him in school, 'stead of puttin' him out in the street where he could get into trouble.

LUCY

But, Mama, you know Willie just couldn't stay out of trouble.

MRS. JACKSON

What you mean?

LUCY

Well, what about the time he and them boys broke into that grocery store and stole some beer? If it wasn't for Daddy's boss-man down at the icehouse, they'd had put Willie in jail.

MRS. JACKSON

Willie wasn't no angel, honey. I know that. And I never stuck up for him when he was wrong. I whipped him myself for doin' that — wouldn't let your father touch him — he'd a killed him. But if Willie'd been in school that day 'stead of bein' put out in the street, he'd never got into that trouble.

LUCY

Maybe so, Mama.

MRS. JACKSON

I couldn't blame him much when he quit. I tried to get him to go back, but he said he was gonna get him a job and work awhile.

LUCY

(Scoffs.)

Humph! Shining shoes at the barber shop wasn't much of a job, was it, Mama?

MRS. JACKSON

No, but it was all he could get. He did right well with it, too, considerin', till he got girls on his mind.

LUCY

I know who, Mama! Bernice Myers! Willie was *crazy* about her!

MRS. JACKSON

(Smiles.)

I know. I met her. She was a right nice girl. Willie sure 'nough wanted a real job then. I bet he was even thinkin' about gettin' married.

(Her smile fades.)
But he couldn't find no better job. So he got tired and went ahead and joined the Army.

LUCY
(Resumes her hair fixing.)
Hold still now, Mama. I guess Willie just kinda took to the Army with his rough ways and all.

MRS. JACKSON
You been listenin' to your father again, Lucy Mae. Willie wudn't all that rough. You remember that little wall-thing he made me in his shop class? The one that's hangin' in the corner in the front room with the little flowerpot on it?

LUCY
Uh-huh. That's a whatnot.

MRS. JACKSON
A what?

LUCY
A whatnot. That's what you call it.

MRS. JACKSON
Yeah? Well, *whatever* it is, it's beautiful! It took lotsa time and lovin' care to make that. Willie wudn't rough. He was a little stubborn sometimes when somebody was botherin' him, but he wudn't rough.

LUCY
Well, anyhow, we can all be very proud of Willie, now, Mama, can't we?

MRS. JACKSON
Yes, baby. Only I been proud of him all along.

LUCY
Everybody's gonna be at the ceremony today, Mama. Just everybody! And for the first time at a public meeting in Midway, the seating's going to be unsegregated. Anybody can sit anywhere they want, no matter whether they're white or colored. That's makin' history!

MRS. JACKSON
(Patiently.)
Yes, Lucy Mae.

Hundreds, hundreds of plays poured in to that contest. Only a few of them were ever published or produced, but it is amazing that as early as that there were people in the African American communities all over the country who were interested in theatrical activity, who actually sat down and wrote original plays and submitted them to these contests that were organized by Dr. W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois, himself, then, decided to found a little theater group of his own. He founded one in New York and groups with the same name were established in other cities across the country. The group was called the Crigwa Players and the reason for "Crigwa" was that it was an acronym for The Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists. They gave their productions in the basement of the old Carnegie Library, which still stands on 136th Street, right next to the modern building which is the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture on the corner of 137th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem.

DuBois' founding of the Crigwa Players and his championing of black theater led to the establishment of other groups across the country, including the Aldridge Players of St. Louis. Now, this was particularly significant because this was founded by a man named Frederick O'Neal in 1926. He directed the Aldridge Players for a number of years and eventually came to New York City. In New York, he established another group with Ford Foundation money and in collaboration with a black playwright named Abram Hill. That group was known as the American Negro Theater, active in the 1940s, and we'll come back to that.

In 1927, in Cleveland, Ohio, the famed Karamu Theater was established by a white couple named Russell and Rowina Jelliffe. Mrs. Jelliffe, the last I heard, was still alive, she's about 101 years old. Karamu Theater spurred all sorts of theatrical activity in the Midwest. Among its proud graduates are some names that you might reconize: Ruby Dee, Robert Guillaume, and last by not least, Langston Hughes. Langston Hughes was playwright-in-residence at the Karamu Theater for many years. Hughes eventually left Cleveland and came to New York where he established a group of his own, which he called,interestingly enough, The Harlem Suitcase Theater. People in theatrical activity are always bemoaning the fact that they have to live virtually on a shoestring and all that sort of thing. He accepted that as natural and just called his theater the Suitcase Theater because he pretty much lived out of a suitcase.

He wrote a piece for his theater, which was a compilation of poems and songs called *Don't You Want to be Free?*, which opened in Harlem and had a phenomenal run for the time. It ran for over a year, principally on weekends, and also played at downtown theaters. This was Langston Hughes' first success in the theater. Prior to that he had collaborated with Zora Neale Hurston on a piece called *Mulebone*. That unfortunately led to a split between the two of them. They were collaborating by mail and somewhere along the line Zora Neale Hurston informed Langston that she was either fed up with the project or tired of it and it was left presumably in suspension. However, Zora Neale Hurston then went ahead to finish it on her own and to offer it for production by groups. The next thing Langston knew he was reading in the paper that Zora Neale Hurston's

Mulebone was going to be produced somewhere else. That led to some unpleasantness. *Mulebone* was recently done in New York in its original version at the Lincoln Center Theater.

The Rose McClendon Players arose in the 1930s. I've already mentioned that Rose McClendon was a stellar figure in black theatrical circles in New York City. After her death, a group dedicated to her was founded by the legendary Dick Campbell, who is still alive today and to whom we presented The Mr. Brown Award at the National Conference on African American Theater just a couple of years ago.

As I mentioned, in 1940, the American Negro Theater was founded by Frederick O'Neal and Abram Hill. The American Negro Theater lasted for approximately ten years. It's most famous production was a rewriting of a play called *Anna Locasta*. It was originally a play about a Polish American prostitute. Nobody, but nobody was interested in producing that play in New York, but somehow or other the playwright was told to take it to Harlem where the American Negro Theater was beginning to get somewhat of a reputation for doing black versions of white plays. They took *Anna Locasta* and Abram Hill virtually rewrote the play; it was transferred into an African American idiom. It was presented in Harlem and then optioned for Broadway, where it became a huge, huge success.

The production had several companies. There was a national company — in effect the original company, which was taken out of New York and moved to Chicago, while a new company, headed by Ruby Dee, was put into New York. The original company had such stellar figures as Hilda Simms, Earle Hyman, Canada Lee, Frank Silvera, Frederick O'Neal, Alvin and Alice Childress, Rosetta LeNoire. The second company also featured Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, and, eventually, a young man named Sidney Poitier. There was also another young man who got involved with *Anna Locasta* when he was a freshman at Northwestern University. He became an understudy with the national cast in Chicago and, for better or worse, this launched his career in theatrical circles. His name was William Branch.

In 1940, also, there was the brief appearance of a company called The Negro Playwrights Company, which was managed by a black playwright named Theodore Ward. He had written a play called *Big White Fog* that was originally done by the Federal Theatre. This was particularly interesting. Theodore Ward, in *Big White Fog,* gave a decidedly negative view of American democracy and its capacity to address equality and equal opportunity for African Americans. So much so, that at one point in the play, one of the characters speculates that if America did not lighten up in terms of its discrimination and segregation against black Americans that black Americans just might find Communism of some attraction. Well, it took the personal intervention of Hallie Flanagan to afford *Big White Fog* a staging under Federal Theatre auspices.

The Negro Playwrights Company in 1940 restaged the play. Unfortunately, it was the first and also the last production of the Negro Playwrights Company. Dissention over the Communist issue tore the company apart and it ceased to exist.

LUCY

And they're going to name the new colored park after Willie, too! When they get it built, that is.

MRS. JACKSON

Yes, Lucy Mae. And after two years already of notin' but promisin', you better make that "*if*" they gets it built.

LUCY

(Undaunted.)

And you and me and Daddy's going to sit right up on the platform right along with the Mayor and the Superintendent and the General from Washington — !

MRS. JACKSON

Yes, Lucy Mae.

LUCY

And they're going to present you with Willie's medal! Oh, Mama, won't you be just thrilled?!!!

MRS. JACKSON

(Slowly, with great feeling.)

Yes, Lucy Mae, I'll be thrilled, I guess. It's all very nice what everybody's doin' and I'm proud, very proud. Only — where was everybody when Willie was alive? Where was they when your father and me was strugglin' to feed him and put clothes on his back and bring him up decent? Where was everybody when he needed help in school, but they put him out instead 'cause they "didn't have time to fool with him." An' where was they when he was walkin' the street lookin' for work? It's all very nice to give him a program he can't come to, and a medal he can't wear, an' name a park after him they ain't built yet. But all this can't help Willie now! It ain't doin' him no good.

(She blows her nose into the towel and wipes at the corner of her eyes.)

That's 'bout enough, baby. My hair ain't been like nothin' since I been bendin' over them hot stoves in the white folks' kitchens. I don't guess you can do much with it now. I'll finish fixin' it. You go and see if your father's through with the wash tub and go get your bath.

LUCY

(Near tears.)
Mama — !

MRS. JACKSON

Go on now, Lucy Mae baby. We won't want to keep the Mayor and the Superintendent and the General waitin', now do we? We all want to be on time.

(She pats her arm.)
Go on now, go get your bath.

(Lucy starts off, pausing for a last glance of concern at her mother before she exits. Mrs. Jackson stands looking after her for a moment, then her hands reach up to touch her hair as the lights black out.)

In 1950, the Committee for the Negro and the Arts emerged. It's first production was a play by Alice Childress called *Florence. Florence* is a very key play in the history of African American theater in that it established for a number of people the viability and attractiveness of addressing political issues having to do with black activism and black aspiration on the stage. Among those who saw and were enlightened by Alice Childress was yours truly. A year or two later, the same group, the Committee for the Negro and the Arts, presented a play of mine called *A Medal for Willie.* Other plays that were done by the Committee for the Negro and the Arts included *Just A Little Simple,* also by Alice Childress, a musical which was based upon the Simple Stories by Langston Hughes, not to be confused with his own later musical known as *Simply Heavenly.*

In 1953, a group was established in Baltimore, Maryland, which still exists to very this day, the Arena Players of Baltimore, founded by Samuel Wilson. It is the oldest, continuous producing African American community theater in the United States. We are indeed fortunate to have Mr. Wilson with us today.

In the 1950s, the Greenwich Mews Theater, which was an inter-racial theater in New York City, became a prime production group in terms of black theater. Interestingly enough, the Greenwich Mews Theater was founded inter-racially with the idea of providing what is known as non-traditional casting opportunities for non-whites. As a result, originally, they did essentially white plays, but cast them irrespective of race. I recall the first play I ever saw there was a play about a Jewish household. The mother, the Jewish mother, was portrayed by a black actress, Hilda Haynes; she had two sons, one was white, one was black. The neighbors, some were white and some were black, but they were all Jewish. This was a Jewish play. Now, people coming to the Greenwich Mews Theater for the first time and not knowing the policy understandably were somewhat confused for the first few minutes of the play at least, but eventually, catching onto the idea, they would then settle back and enjoy the play and enjoy the performances, the actors and actresses for what they were worth.

Scene from the premiere of *A Medal For Willie* by William Branch, Oct. 15, 1951, at the Club Baron in Harlem. Photo by J.A. Harrison

That policy was carried out for a number of plays, until a play was submitted to the Greenwich Mews Theater that they decided to do which had as its basis a racial theme. That play was *In Splendid Error* by yours truly, which was a historical play about John Brown and Frederick Douglas just prior to the Harper's Ferry incident in the Civil War. After the relative success of *In Splendid Error,* the Greenwich Mews Theater went on to produce a number of other plays on African American themes by African American playwrights, including Alice Childress' *Trouble in Mind,* Loften Mitchell's *A Land Beyond the River* and, eventually, Langston Hughes' musical *Simply Heav-*

enly, which transferred to Broadway.

The leading lights behind the Greenwich Mews Theater were unusual. Early on, the Artistic Director was a woman named Osceola Archer Adams. If any of you are members of the black sorority the Deltas, you will recognize the name. She was one of its founders. She was active in theater as an actress and director right on up until to her death a few years ago at 95 or 96. She was succeeded at the Greenwich Mews Theater by a blind woman named Stella Holt. Stella Holt and her companion, Fran Drucker, then ran the theater for a number of years until her death. They concentrated very successfully on presenting plays by African American playwrights.