Penumbra owes its creation to an intersection of forces: the settlement house movement, with its tradition of culturally specific arts programming; the civil rights and Black Power movements that infused the Black Arts movement; and federal funding. In 1976, the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center in St. Paul was one of many organizations nationwide that received funding through the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). Henry Thomas, the director of Hallie Q. Brown, used the $150,000 grant to create a new cultural arts program and hired Lou Bellamy, a young man from the neighborhood, to lead it. The following year, Bellamy and a troupe billed as Penumbra Theatre Company presented six plays before a total audience of more than 50,000. Word spread quickly throughout the Twin Cities that Penumbra was a theater worth watching.¹

The roots of St. Paul’s Hallie Q. Brown Center, like the Phyllis Wheatley House in Minneapolis, are in the settlement house movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because of discriminatory practices, settlement houses (the best known is Chicago’s Hull House) provided a range of services for their clients. Theater historian Macelle Mahala noted in Penumbra: The Premier Stage for African American Drama, “African American settlement houses necessarily served as gathering places and venues for entertainment as well as places to go for referrals for various forms of social and economic services. Arts programming had always been a component of these centers’ offerings for reasons of necessity as much as philosophy.”²

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¹ Hallie Q. Brown 50th anniversary button, 1979

² KATE ROBERTS is senior exhibit developer for the Minnesota Historical Society.
From its inception in 1929, the Hallie Q. Brown Center offered culturally relevant programs for children and adults in the visual arts, music, dance, and theater. “Hallie did a play a year, and everyone participated,” recalled longtime Rondo resident Marvin Roger Anderson. “If you couldn’t remember your lines, you were a tree.”3 Like many others who grew up in the neighborhood, Lou Bellamy spent much of his free time at the center—taking day trips to area lakes, going to dances, and appearing on stage. After graduating from St. Paul Central High School in 1962, where he remembers doing “a matador routine, pantomiming a fight with a bull to ‘America’ from West Side Story,” Bellamy enrolled in Mankato State College (now Minnesota State University, Mankato).4

Theodore (“Ted”) Paul Jr., who headed the theater program at Mankato State, was committed to presenting plays that raised his students’ social consciousness. “Amid the national emergence of the Black Arts Movement that advocated art for social change as opposed to art for art’s sake,” wrote playwright and director Paul Carter Harrison, “Mankato State began a defining involvement that was to have a lasting impact on Bellamy’s artistic vision.”5

As an artistic counterpoint to the era’s political protests and Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement sought to recover and recast the history, study, and representation of African American culture from black perspectives. Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, art by, for, and about African Americans proliferated, leading to the founding of dozens of black theater companies across the country.

After graduating from Mankato State, Bellamy returned to St. Paul, where he worked a number of jobs. He began to establish himself as a director through productions such as River Niger at Theatre in the Round and Dutchman, the first production at Penumbra has been committed from the start to creating art rooted in the principles of social justice, activism, and creative autonomy that grew out of the Black Arts Movement.
Mixed Blood Theatre. Both theaters were located in Minneapolis’s West Bank neighborhood, adjacent to the University of Minnesota, where Bellamy enrolled in graduate school. He took courses in African American literature and appeared in Othello, the last play presented in the university’s old performing arts building, Scott Hall, and My Kingdom Come, the first play in the new Rarig Center on the West Bank.

In 1973, Bellamy was guest director for a production of Amiri Baraka’s The Death of Malcolm X at the Hallie Q. Brown Center. In the post-production report, Bellamy wrote, “Future productions should be selected on the basis of a wide range of plays that exemplify as many facets of the Black experience as possible.”6 With the infusion of CETA funds three years later that created his new job as cultural arts director, Bellamy was able to practice what he preached.

Signed into law by President Richard Nixon, CETA offered full-time jobs in public agencies and private non-profit organizations to people with low incomes or records of long-term unemployment. Inspired by the Works Progress Administration’s arts programs during the 1930s, the San Francisco Arts Commission initiated a CETA/Neighborhood Arts Program to employ painters, muralists, performing artists, and others. This program became a national model that was replicated in Minnesota and across the country. “CETA . . . was founded on the belief that there was a body of knowledge inside the inner city that was worth saving, and given the resources, that body of knowledge could train people and build institutions,” Bellamy said. “There would be no Penumbra if it weren’t for that federally funded program.”7

Penumbra’s first season (1977–78) included three plays directly connected to the Black Arts Movement

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**Lou Bellamy as Othello, University of Minnesota, 1973. Bellamy went on to become a tenured professor in the university’s theater department.**

**Poster from a 1973 production of The Death of Malcolm X. Productions like this one, directed by Lou Bellamy, acknowledged the Black Arts Movement’s insistence on affirming African American identity through the presentation of culturally specific drama.**
(Eden, by Steve Carter, The Taking of Miss Janie, by Ed Bullins, and The Offering, by Gus Edwards) as well as William Wells Brown’s 1858 work The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom; the premiere of Heartland, Louisiana by Horace Bond, who had been Bellamy’s graduate school adviser at the University of Minnesota; and Neil Simon’s The Odd Couple, chosen, according to Bellamy, “to sell some tickets and let people have some fun, too.” Recalling the company’s first season, Bond wrote, “All we needed to do was to assemble a string of ‘Odd Couples’ together and our theater would be safe for the next season, but that was not the direction we wanted to take.”

Penumbra is one of only a handful of theaters founded during the Black Arts Movement that is still in existence. “Black theater in America is alive . . . it is vibrant . . . it is vital . . . it just isn’t funded,” said playwright August Wilson in 1996. Penumbra has experienced the funding challenges Wilson described, resulting in staff cutbacks and cancelled performances. But the theater’s mission—to create professional productions that are artistically excellent, thought-provoking, relevant, and illuminate the human condition through the prism of the African American experience—remains unchanged. In 2017, as Penumbra Theatre Company marks its 40th season, Lou Bellamy is primed to turn artistic leadership over to his daughter, Sarah Bellamy.

Preceding pages: photos and images on p. 178 (top), 180 (bottom), 184, courtesy Penumbra Theatre Archive, Givens Collection of African American Literature, University of Minnesota Libraries; p. 179 (right), Lou Bellamy Rare Book Collection, Givens Collection of African American Literature, University of Minnesota Libraries; p. 180 (top), University of Minnesota Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.


Notes

Special thanks to Lou Bellamy, Sarah Bellamy, and Cecily Marcus, curator, Givens Collection of African American Literature, University of Minnesota Libraries, for their assistance with this article.

7. Mahala, Penumbra, 5.
The exhibit *Penumbra Theatre at 40: Art, Race and a Nation on Stage*, on view through July 30 at the Minnesota History Center, is produced in partnership with Penumbra Theatre Company, the University of Minnesota Libraries’ Givens Collection of African American Literature, and Umbra: Search African American History. The exhibit showcases these and other items from each of the partners’ collections as well as from private lenders.

*Program, Ceremonies in Dark Old Men with notes by Peter Vaughan, 1989.* Peter Vaughan became theater critic for the *Minneapolis Star* in 1977, and attended Penumbra’s first performance. Vaughan published more articles on Penumbra than anyone else in the early years. He and Lou Bellamy learned from each other about how to interpret and promote African American theater.
Penumbra’s annual holiday show, Black Nativity uses the power of African American gospel music to tell the story of the birth of Christ. Written by Langston Hughes, this timeless work combines traditional songs, folklore, and African American spirituality.

Joe Carter in Black Nativity, 1993. For many regular attendees, baritone Joe Carter’s full-throated renditions of standards like “I Wonder As I Wander” were among the highlights of Black Nativity.

Black Nativity quilt, designed by Sarah Bellamy, 2007. In 2007, Penumbra teamed up with the Textile Center of Minnesota to form a quilting circle. People of all ages came together to explore the importance of quilting in African American culture while learning technical skills from master artists.

Made under the direction of Cecile Margaret Lewis, this is the first of four works completed by Penumbra’s quilting circle. Finished works were premiered during the performance of the quilting song in Black Nativity.
In 1982, Penumbra presented *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, the first professional staging of a play by August Wilson. Penumbra Theatre scholar Macelle Mahala describes the musical satire as “a fairly unwieldy and somewhat unsuccessful production. It had a 26-person cast and included 14 songs and the liberal use of a strobe light.”

Just three years later, Penumbra presented the world premiere of *Jitney!*, set in a taxi dispatch office in Pittsburgh’s Hill District. *Jitney!* featured the jazz-inspired exchanges between characters that theater-goers nationwide would soon recognize as Wilson’s singular sound.

*Jitney* (the exclamation point was later dropped) is one of Wilson’s 10 plays known as The Twentieth Century Cycle. Together, they capture the American experience from an African American point of view. Wilson was awarded two Pulitzer Prizes for two plays from the cycle, *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. To date, Penumbra has produced more of Wilson’s works than any other theater in the world.
My early attempts at writing plays, which are very poetic, did not use the language that I work in now. I didn’t recognize the poetry in the everyday language of black America.


▲ Poster, Lou Bellamy as Troy Maxson in Fences, designed by Seitu Jones, 1990.
Ma Rainey’s costume from *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, designed by Mathew J. LeFebvre, 2011. The only play in August Wilson’s Twentieth Century Cycle that takes place outside his home town of Pittsburgh, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* digs to the racist core of Chicago’s 1920s blues scene.
Set model, Two Trains Running, by August Wilson, designed by Vicki Smith, 1993.

I like to tell everyone and am proud to say that I was there from the beginning.

Lou Bellamy (left) and August Wilson with Jujamcyn Theaters Award, 1999.
The Jujamcyn Theaters Award honors a resident theater organization that has made an outstanding contribution to the development of creative talent. “Our budget is just big enough to get us into trouble,” Lou Bellamy said in accepting the $50,000 award. “We want to do everything in the world and we don’t have the money to do it. This award will help us smooth the way.”
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