

PART II

BLACK DRAMA

You can make this a real Negro theatre, maybe the best in the world. You could do it. If there aren't any plays get somebody to write them for you. Within your bodies and souls lie the immense possibilities of your race, and it is up to you to make successes of everything you essay.

— Charles S. Gilpin (1923)¹

During the Harlem Renaissance, black playwrights searched for new representations of African America. The idea of drama, and of a national theatre, began to possess a special place in African American culture when Ridgely Torrence's *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre* opened on Broadway in 1917. In this context the claims that black intellectuals, playwrights, and performers made for an indigenous drama as a kind of redemptive cultural ritual became understandable. Harlem Renaissance drama, writes theatre historian Freda Scott Giles, was first an “effective counter-attack against the overwhelmingly powerful minstrel stereotypes,” and second it helped open a “window of opportunity” that would “enable African-Americans to internally and externally value the culture they had created.”² The place of drama in the life of the black community was inspired by the rise of national dramas throughout Europe and the United States, and the desire to create an expressive drama that spoke to the hearts and minds of African Americans.

Not every cultural historian, however, has reacted enthusiastically to Harlem Renaissance drama. In the late 1960s, critic Larry Neal decried Harlem Renaissance drama as “essentially a failure” because it failed to address “the mythology and the life-style” of the black community and “to take roots, to link itself concretely to the struggles of that community, to become its voice and spirit.”³ Largely because

Neal's view has become conventional wisdom, scant attention has been paid to the dramas of the Harlem Renaissance. The editors of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* confirm this dismal perception, encouraging the view that, despite the success of the musical *Shuffle Along* (1921), the Harlem Renaissance period "produced few new plays of quality."⁴ Notwithstanding the entreaties of Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens,⁵ many critics concur that Harlem Renaissance plays were overwrought and unsuccessful, exerting little if any influence over future generations of playwrights.

However, a close examination of several plays will provide some basis for challenging the received opinion. The plays discussed here may not have been box office successes, but the playwrights did attempt to link their messages to the community and its struggles.