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...
Mr. Brown found himself presiding over not only a proud and popular facility at Mercer and Bleecker Streets named the African Grove Theater — 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 Caravas 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 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.

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 accommodate 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 assembly 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.
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 flower pot 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.
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.
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 interracial 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.

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.