

**CORE ENSEMBLE**  
*Of* **EBONY**  
**EMBERS**

**VIGNETTES** *of the* **HARLEM RENAISSANCE**

A chamber music theatre work conceived and performed by

**THE CORE ENSEMBLE**

(cello, piano, & percussion)

“  
...often formidable,  
always intelligent,  
ultimately compelling...  
”  
— *The Boston Globe*



And Featuring  
**JAMYL DOBSON**  
as Aaron Douglas,  
Claude McKay,  
Langston Hughes,  
and Countee Cullen

A chamber music theatre work for actor and trio celebrating the lives of the great African American poets Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay as seen through the eyes of the great muralist and painter Aaron Douglas. The musical score includes works by jazz giants Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton, Billy Strayhorn, Thelonius Monk, and Charles Mingus as well as concert music by Jeffrey Mumford and George Walker.

# Of Ebony Embers

## VIGNETTES OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

### OVERVIEW

The Harlem Renaissance was a period of intense interest in music, literature visual art and culture created by talented young African Americans who migrated to Harlem.

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the late 19th century, Harlem was an affluent white suburb of New York City. Buildings were put up rapidly to accommodate the large numbers of European immigrants who were looking for housing. Builders realized too late that they had put up too many new houses and the price of land and buildings fell. In order to make up for their losses, realtors began to turn to African American real estate agents. African Americans streamed into Harlem, buying and renting property as it became available. African American churches and businesses followed the population uptown to Harlem. African Americans migrated from other areas of New York City, from the South and the Caribbean. Harlem soon became the African American capitol of America. By the 1920's Harlem was a prosperous community in which a flourishing African American culture began to emerge.

This period was known as the Harlem Renaissance because so many talented African Americans settled in Harlem. These artists celebrated their heritage and took pride in their ancestors and themselves. It was also a period in which white Americans began to appreciate African American art, music and literature and made excursions to Harlem to enjoy the colorful and exotic nightlife. The Cotton Club was the most famous of the nightclubs that catered to Whites. These clubs gave whites the opportunity to observe African American culture without becoming part of it. Because of Prohibition, these clubs also sold bootleg (illegal) liquor.



Theresa Bar & Grill, 1933. Photo by James Van Der Zee, The James Van Der Zee Collection.

## HARLEM RENAISSANCE TIMELINE

- 1919** The 369th Infantry Regiment of Black American Soldiers returns from France and marches up Fifth Avenue to cheers from a huge crowd.  
Twenty-five race riots occur as Whites and Blacks compete for postwar jobs and Blacks move to major American cities.  
W.E.B. DuBois\* founds *Brownie's Book*, a children's literary magazine. Claude McKay's poem, *If We Must Die*, is published.
- 1920** The First International Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World is held at Madison Square Garden, NY.
- 1921** *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* by Langston Hughes, is published in *Crisis*, the magazine of the NAACP.
- 1922** The first Negro Broadway show, *Shuffle Along*, with music by Eubie Blake, is produced. *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, by James Weldon Johnson, is published.
- 1923** The postwar economy grows stronger, with unprecedented growth in the stock market, consumer products and corporate profits.  
Duke Ellington arrives in New York City.
- 1924** The Harlem Renaissance is recognized as such.
- 1925** The Cotton Club is closed because of Prohibition.
- 1926** Langston Hughes publishes *The Weary Blues*.  
The Harmon Foundation holds the first of its annual art exhibitions of painting and sculpture by Black artists.
- 1927** Duke Ellington opens at the new Cotton Club.
- 1928** Claude McKay publishes his first novel, *Home to Harlem*, with jacket illustration by Aaron Douglas.  
The Dark Tower, a salon in heiress A'Lelia Walker's\* Harlem townhouse opens. The Dark Tower becomes an extravagant social forum for the fashionable Black elite. Poems by Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen were painted on the walls by a local sign painter.
- 1929** Aaron Douglas is commissioned to paint murals for Fisk University's Erastus Milo Cravath Library in Nashville, Tennessee.  
The Great Depression\* begins with the stock market crash in October.
- 1930** The Theresa Bar & Grill\* becomes the largest hotel in the U.S. catering to Black Americans.
- 1932** Twenty-two Americans sail to Russia to take part in *Black and White*, a film about segregation in the American South.
- 1935** The Harlem Riot\* on March 19 marks the end of the Renaissance.

## WHO'S WHO - WHAT'S WHAT

\**W.E.B. DuBois* founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and *Crisis Magazine*, which started out as the literary journal of the NAACP. He was the editor of *Crisis* from 1910 -1935 and published many black poets and novelists. He was internationally acclaimed as a scholar and was a spokesman for all peoples of color.

\**The Cotton Club* - One of Harlem's greatest nightclubs. (Cotton = whites only). White patrons were entertained by Harlem's finest musicians and dancers.

\**Prohibition* - A law forbidding the manufacture, sale, transportation and possession of alcoholic beverages, 1920 -1933.

\* *The Theresa Bar & Grill* - During the 1930's the Bar & Grill was a meeting place for Harlem celebrities.

\**Duke Ellington* - Jazz band leader, Pianist and composer. He wrote symphonies, "sacred concerts", film scores and popular songs.

\* *A'Leia Walker* - Harlem socialite who inherited a fortune in a hair-straightening empire, built by her mother, the first Black millionaire.

\**The Great Depression* -The longest and most severe economic downturn in American history. Widely held to begin with the stock market crash of 1929, the Depression lasted until World War II. Unemployment affected one-third of the population. Homelessness, poverty and general despair characterized much of the nation.

\**The Harlem Riot* - An event which kept Harlem in turmoil for the entire afternoon and night of March 19-20, 1935, resulting in deaths, numerous injuries and arrests, and property damage of \$150,000. It was the result of deep frustration in Harlem, a community of 200,000 in which unemployment had reached nearly 70% of the population after five years of the Depression. This frustration was aggravated by continuing economic and social discrimination, prejudice and rank misgovernment.

\**The Great Migration* - during this period, most African Americans lived in the South. Life in the rural South was very hard and African Americans had difficulty getting jobs and enough money to live on. Because there were more jobs in northern cities, especially in New York, they began to move North. World War I contributed to the rich job market at the time. In wartime, many goods need to be manufactured to support the war effort, and most of the factories were in northern cities. People also migrated from Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Cuba, Jamaica and Puerto Rico and settled in Harlem. The cuisine, known as "soul food" was international and included biscuits, cornbread, fried chicken, pig's tails, mangoes and avocados. During the years 1904 -1929 as more and more Blacks moved into Harlem it became overcrowded. Landlords spent less and less on maintaining the buildings and it eventually became a slum.



Group Portrait In The Dark Tower. Photo by James Van Der Zee. The James Van Der Zee Collection.

## A FEW WORDS ABOUT JAZZ

Jazz began about 100 years ago in New Orleans. African slaves brought their tradition of drumming and complex rhythms to America. In Africa nearly all aspects of life were accompanied by drumming and chanting - planting crops, hunting for food, celebrations and tribal gatherings. The city of New Orleans had its own rich cultural heritage brought by European settlers, both French and Spanish. Jazz was the result of the meeting of these diverse cultures - French and Spanish popular songs and dances melded with African drumming, combined with folk music and Protestant hymns. When African Americans learned to play western musical instruments they incorporated many of the speech patterns and rhythms of Africa. The harmonic structure of European music was adopted.

Improvisation is an important element of jazz. Many early jazz musicians played from memory and by ear. Often they would play tunes that they knew well, and would play them in different ways, making up new variations every time they played them.

Jazz is a uniquely American art form. It is the result of a wonderful blending of different styles of music that could only happen in as culturally diverse a setting as Old New Orleans.



Portrait of Woman Seated At Piano. Photo by James Van Der Zee, The James Van Der Zee Collection.



## CHARACTERS THAT YOU WILL MEET IN OF EBONY EMBERS

### LANGSTON HUGHES (1902-1967)

James Mercer Langston Hughes, a mixture of French, Indian and African blood, was the author and editor of numerous works of poetry, fiction and history. One of his greatest poems, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, was written on the back of an envelope as he rode a train over the Mississippi river. He was considered the poet laureate of Harlem after writing a jazz-inspired collection, *The Weary Blues*. He traveled to Cuba and to Russia where he took part in a film against white supremacy and to Spain where he served as a correspondent for the Baltimore Afro-American newspaper. Hughes wrote children's books and founded theatre groups in Harlem, Chicago, and Los Angeles.



Langston Hughes, photo by Carl Van Vechten, The Studio Museum, Harlem.

#### To You (seen on videotape)

To sit and dream, to sit and read,  
To sit and learn about the world  
Outside our world of here and now-  
Our problem world-  
To dream of vast horizons of the soul  
Through dreams made whole,  
Unfettered, free-help me!  
All of you who are dreamers, too,  
Help me make our world anew.  
I reach out my hands to you.

#### The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers as ancient as the world and older  
than the flow  
    of human blood in human veins.  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.  
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above  
it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe  
Lincoln went  
    down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers.  
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like rivers.

#### I, Too

I, too, sing America.  
I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the  
kitchen  
When company comes.  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

To-morrow  
I'll sit at the table  
When company comes  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me  
"Eat in the kitchen"  
Then.

Besides, they'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed -  
I, too, am America.

#### Mother to Son (seen on videotape)

Well, son, I'll tell you:  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And no carpet on the floor -  
Bare.  
But all the time I's been a-climbin' on,  
And reachin' landin's,

And sometimes goin' in the dark  
Where there ain't been no light.  
So boy, don't you turn back.  
Don't you set down on the steps  
'Cause you find its kinder hard.  
Don't you fall now -  
For I'se still goin', honey,  
I'se still climbin',  
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

## CHARACTERS THAT YOU WILL MEET IN OF EBONY EMBERS

### COUNTEE CULLEN (1903-1946)

Countee Cullen came from Kentucky, but much of his background remains a mystery. He kept his parents identities secret and never revealed his birthplace. He was raised in Harlem by adoptive parents, Reverend and Mrs. Frederick Cullen. Countee Cullen graduated from New York University and Harvard University and won numerous literary prizes including a Guggenheim Fellowship. His poetry was published in national magazines such as Harper's, Century, and The Nation. His literary models were the English Romantics.



Countee Cullen, Photo by Carl Van Vechten. The Studio Museum in Harlem.

#### Yet Do I Marvel (excerpt - seen on videotape)

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind,  
And did he stoop to quibble could tell why  
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:  
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

#### For a Lady I Know

She even thinks that up in heaven  
Her class lies late and snores  
While poor black cherubs rise at seven  
To do celestial chores.

#### Heritage (excerpt)

What is Africa to me;  
Copper sun or scarlet sea,  
Jungle star or jungle track,  
Strong bronzed men or regal black  
Women from whose loins I sprang  
When the birds of Eden sang?  
One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his fathers loved,  
Spicy grove cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me?

#### Incident

Once riding in old Baltimore  
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,  
I saw a Baltimorean  
Keep looking straight at me.

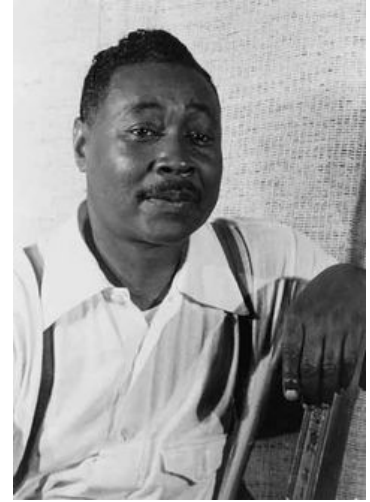
Now I was eight and very small,  
And he was no whit bigger,  
And so I smiled, but he poked out  
His tongue and called me "Nigger".

I saw the whole of Baltimore  
From May until December;  
Of all the things that happened there  
That's all that I remember.

## CHARACTERS THAT YOU WILL MEET IN OF EBONY EMBERS

*CLAUDE MCKAY (1889–1948)*

Claude McKay was born in the hill country of Jamaica. He published two volumes of Jamaican dialect poetry before coming to the United States where he attended college in Alabama and Kansas, and finally settled in New York. He published two more volumes of poetry in the early 20's. Increasingly unhappy with American race relations, he left for Russia in 1922, traveled in France and North Africa and did not return to the U.S. until 1934. He received numerous prizes for his writing. His 1919 poem *If We Must Die* received wide attention on both sides of the Atlantic. It was read by Winston Churchill to a joint session of Congress as a plea for American intervention in World War II.



Claude McKay, photo by Carl Van Vechten. The Studio Museum in Harlem.

### The Tropics in New York

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,  
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,  
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,  
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

Set in the window, bringing memories  
Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,  
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies  
In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;  
A wave of longing through my body swept,  
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,  
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

### When Dawn Comes to the City (excerpt)

The tired cars go grumbling by,  
The moaning, groaning, cars,  
And the old milk carts go rumbling by  
Under the same dull stars.  
Out of the tenement, cold as stone,  
Dark figures start for work;  
I watch them sadly shuffle on,  
Tis dawn, dawn in New York.

But I would be on the island of the sea,  
In the heart of the island of the sea,  
There, oh, there! On the island of the sea,  
There would I be at dawn.

### Harlem Nights (seen on videotape - excerpt)

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass  
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall its veil.  
Through the long night until the silver break  
of day the little gray feet know no rest.

Ah, the stern harsh world, that in the wretched way  
of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,  
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,  
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!  
Ah, heart of men, the weary, weary, feet  
In Harlem wandering from street to street.

## CHARACTERS THAT YOU WILL MEET IN OF EBONY EMBERS

*AARON DOUGLAS (1899-1979)*

Douglas was the most prominent painter of the Harlem Renaissance. He established a reputation as a proponent of Africanism in modern art. His illustrations and sketches appeared in many literary journals and publications of the Harlem Renaissance. He joined the great Black writers of the period in interpreting Negro life in spirit, form and content. His renowned murals in the Fisk University Library, in Nashville, Tennessee, were completed in 1930. They are executed in a modernist style, illustrating mythology and the history of African-Americans. He created canvases, murals, illustrations for books and magazines, showing the progress from ancient to modern times of the African people. His most famous murals illustrate African history -the natural world, Egyptian enslavement, alternate world views of spirituality such as Voodoo and Santeria, drumming and slave ships - interpretations of Negro Spirituals and emancipation.

Douglas and his wife Alta knew all of the prominent people engaged in the Harlem Renaissance and their apartment at 409 Edgecombe Avenue was a popular gathering spot.



**Aaron Douglas, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.**



Portrait of Couple, Man With Walking Stick. Photo by James Van Der Zee, The James Van Der Zee Collection.

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

### After the program ask students to name:

- Three major poets of the Harlem Renaissance
- The "father of Black Art"

### Topics for discussion:

- The origins of the Harlem Renaissance
- Which character made the biggest impression on you? Why?
- Discuss the experience of being a member of a minority group.
- What are the struggles/advantages of being an African American, a Latino or Asian American?

### World Wide Web Search:

- Harlem Renaissance
- The Great Migration
- Jazz History
- Langston Hughes
- Countee Cullen
- Claude McKay
- Aaron Douglas

### Map Study:

- Find New York City on a map.
- Find Harlem.
- Find New Orleans.
- Find Africa.
- Find out which countries most African Americans came from.
- Make a column list of those countries. In a second column write what those people are called (Ghana/Ghanaians; Senegal, Senegalese); make a third column write something for which each country is known (natural resources, folk art, agricultural product).

### Connecting poetry to visual art:

- Show students *To Midnight Nan at Leroy's* by Aaron Douglas. Generate a list of words by asking students to offer any word or phrase that the work inspires. Then discuss the life and work of Aaron Douglas.
- Then show Douglas' *Ma Bad Luck Card*. Generate a word/phrase list for this picture.
- Ask students to create poetry based on either or both of the pictures, using the word lists or on immediate creative impulse.

### Listening Activity:

- Play a recording of music from the Harlem Renaissance. (Music by Eubie Blake, Duke Ellington or Fats Waller.) Ask the students how the music of Harlem in the 1920's differs from the music that they listen to today.

- Listen to short excerpts of European classical music, African drumming, a Spiritual, ragtime music. Discuss how these very different styles of music were blended to make jazz. Ask students to find similarities and differences among the different styles.

**Oral Reading Activity:**

- Have students read aloud *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*.
- Ask students to find on a map the rivers named in the poem.
- Ask why the poet cited these particular rivers.
- What do you know about Harlem?
- How do you think it differs today from the Harlem of the 1920's?

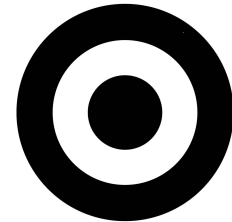
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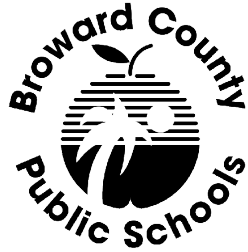
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