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Helen R. Houston

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Dr. Thomas E. Poag: The Life and Works of a TSU Legend

Helen R. Houston

Thomas Edward Poag, a native of Gastonia, North Carolina, had already achieved much academic and artistic success by the time he joined the Tennessee State University (TSU) faculty in 1939 and reorganized the “Tennessee State Teachers College Guild” with Professor Laura Averitte during the same year. In addition to notable acting/performing credits, such as his appearance in the 1933 film version of the landmark Eugene O’Neill play *The Emperor Jones* with the great Paul Robeson (who also starred in the original play production), he also received the A.B. undergraduate degree from Morgan State College (now University) in Baltimore, Maryland, and the M.A. degree in Dramatic Art from Ohio State University. While in the Columbus, Ohio, area Poag also served as founder, director, and producer of the Civic Theatre Guild.

One of the first drama productions Poag produced, directed, and presented at TSU was *Craig’s Wife*, which opened on December 12, 1940. In 1942 he received a General Education Board fellowship to begin his doctoral studies at Cornell University and, upon completion of his degree in 1943, became the first African American to earn a Ph. D. in speech and drama.

His singular achievements underscored the fact that TSU did not have a separate academic department for speech and drama/theater during his first years at the University, and students with interests in the stage could only major in English.

When Elaine Sherrill, a TSU junior from Johnson City, TN, complained to President Walter S. Davis about this fact in 1943 because of her hopes to study drama on the graduate level at Yale University, Davis immediately contacted Poag and instructed him to begin developing the

infrastructure for what would soon become the Speech and Drama Department, with Poag as its founder and chairman.

Poag made it clear that with limited resources, this would be no small task, but was well able to accept and meet the challenges involved in building a drama department “from the ground up.”: It would involve developing courses and curriculum, identifying existing and new faculty to teach in the department, and continuing the practical application of dramatic study by staging theater productions and developing dramatic talent in the TSU community.

Over the next thirty years Poag accomplished all this and more, as TSU theater productions covered the entire spectrum of theater history, decades before “non- traditional casting” became a buzzword on Broadway and in Hollywood. Not only did he develop an undergraduate theater department and major, but also a graduate program which produced not just scores of professional actors and actresses, but playwrights, stage managers, set designers, lighting specialists, sound/special effects technicians, make-up artists, and costumers.

Many long-time members of the TSU and Nashville community recall Poag’s “inner circle” of William Dury Cox II and Herman Devereaux Brady, who teamed with Poag to create a number of memorable dramatic presentations, most often in the “A-Auditorium,” but also in other Nashville venues and beyond the immediate area as opportunities became available (before and after desegregation). The TSU master’s thesis done by Cox under Poag’s supervision, which researched and documented proper stage-lighting techniques for African-American actors of different skin complexions, was recognized as an authoritative source which was widely referenced and applied by numerous academic and professional theater organizations.

Poag also utilized colleagues from other parts of the TSU community in support of his productions and other activities, such as Dolores Ashley Harris from the Home Economics

department in the School of Agriculture and Home Economics (costuming); Carrie Gentry from the Health, Physical Education, Recreation department (dance/choreography); and a variety of faculty/staff from the Music and/or Art departments when their unique or specialized expertise was needed to insure the success of a production or other event.

The quality of TSU productions under Poag was such that TSU became the first college theater program to receive regular reviews of premier performances of each production from *Nashville Tennessean* newspaper arts/theater critic Clara

Hieronimus. She was quoted as saying that Poag was “a walking, talking landmark, a historical site in human form whose personal history has many parallels in theater history” (“Dr. Thomas...”). His daughter, the Rev. Dr. Lois A. Poag-Ray, who was also a graduate of her father’s department, remembers that after an opening performance, TSU student actors and technicians would rush to pick up a copy of the next day’s *Tennessean* to read the Hieronymous reviews, just as Broadway actors sought the reviews of their performances in New York.

Poag also had the vision to develop courses in speech and hearing therapy as part of the curriculum in speech and drama during the 1950s and 1960s. Within this expansion, he made it possible for students to perform observations and practicums at Vanderbilt University, and hired a number of Vanderbilt faculty to teach part-time at TSU as part of this cooperative relationship between universities. This also paved the way for the development of present undergraduate and graduate programs at TSU in what is now known as the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology, as well as sixteen other programs of this type in Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCUs).

During his tenure, Poag was also active in numerous professional organizations, including the National Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts, serving as its second president and editor

of its journal, Encore; founder of Beta Kappa Alpha speech and drama fraternity; and established the TSU chapter of Theta Alpha Phi, a national honorary theater fraternity, which was also the first at an HBCU. He established relationships with the American Educational Theater Association, United Service Organizations, Inc. (USO), and the U.S. Department of Defense, which led to the first of three international tours by TSU student theater and musical performers in 1960. The Poag-led ensemble traveled to military installations in Newfoundland, Labrador, Greenland, the Azores, and Bermuda. Two years later Poag and his colleagues created and staged a special production, “The Golden Heritage”, in commemoration and celebration of the University’s 50th anniversary in 1962, and three years later embarked on a second USO tour, this time to Germany and France. Other “symphonic dramas” created and staged by Poag included “The Z. Alexander Looby Story,” which focused on the life and times of the noted civil rights attorney, activist, and Nashville city councilman; and “The Clark Heritage,” a dramatization of the history of his long-time home church in the North Nashville community. The third and final USO tour of “Poag Players” was the 1970 theater/music review titled “Swing Time,” with performances in Germany, Belgium, Holland, and Italy.

His accomplishments and contributions to the University and the academic/theater community were such that Poag was eventually elevated to Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences in 1961, but Poag was quoted as saying that his “biggest reward has been in sending out worthwhile students to work in the field of dramatic art, and stimulate interest in it among Black people.” In that case Poag has been extremely well rewarded, as many of his former students have made major impact in numerous fields of endeavor, not just in theater and dramatic arts/entertainment.

While Oprah Winfrey is easily the most famous former student of Dr. Poag, she was

preceded by such notable persons as Moses Gunn and Helen Martin, who enjoyed long, productive, and highly successful careers on/off Broadway, in Hollywood feature films, and on television. Gunn's many credits ranged from Shakespeare's Othello to Harlem gangster Bumpy Jones in the 1970s landmark film *Shaft*, while Martin was a member of the original cast of *Purlie Victorious* (with actor/playwright/director Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Godfrey Cambridge, and Alan Alda), and enjoyed success in her later career as "Pearl" on the hit television situation comedy *227*. Others include Ellwood Williams, playwright and actor; Joan Pryor, New York-based professional actress; Leo Branton, Jr., civil rights/defense/entertainment attorney, who represented a number of renowned personalities including Nat "King" Cole, Dorothy Dandridge, Miles Davis, Angela Davis, the Black Panthers, Jimi Hendrix, and Richard Pryor; W.V. Harper, Jr., costume and scene designer on Broadway and for national television in Copenhagen, Denmark; and Don Whitehead, the first African-American news broadcaster, correspondent, and community relations director at WLAC-AM radio station in Nashville.

In academia, numerous former students of Dr. Poag completed advanced degrees in the TSU graduate theater program, as well as programs at other universities and in other disciplines. These distinguished TSU alumni include Dr. S. Allen Counter, internationally-acclaimed scientist, explorer, physician, professor, and director of the Harvard Foundation; Dr. Granville Sawyer, president of Texas Southern University in Houston, TX; and Dr. Singer Buchanan, former chair of the Speech and Drama Department at Kentucky State University (who realized his dream/vision of succeeding his mentor when he was selected as chair of the TSU Speech and Drama department).

Several other Poag protégés have returned to teach at the University and/or in the department over the years (which is presently called the Communications Department, after

several name changes). Dr. Bertha Smith-Clark, another Poag colleague, transitioned from his department to teaching speech pathology and audiology at TSU when it became a freestanding program. She continued her academic career at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, TN, where she currently is a professor in Health and Human Performance.

Retired TSU professor of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation Inez Crutchfield was a “leading lady” in a Poag production during her undergraduate years at the University, while Robert Smith, who was part of Poag’s last USO touring group in 1970, is now an attorney and professor in the TSU Criminal Justice Department. Smith has continued his performing career as part of the Princely Players touring ensemble. Twins Horace and Harold Hockett received undergraduate degrees from the department, and wrote/produced original plays as TSU master’s theses in the early 1970s. Horace Hockett went on to teach drama at Fayetteville State University in North Carolina, then at TSU while founding Born Again Church in Nashville. The brothers continue to create and stage Christian theater productions through the church’s Living Parables drama ministry. Dr. Sandra Holt received bachelor’s and master’s degrees in speech communications/theater from TSU, and taught in the department prior to earning her doctorate from Florida State University and assuming her present position as Director of the TSU Honors Program.

His legacy is indicative of TSU’s commitment to students and to excellence, and is reflected in the Walter S. Davis Humanities Building on the main campus (originally the Administration and Health Building when completed in 1932, opened in 1933, and dedicated in 1935), where a photographic portrait of Poag is prominently displayed in the foyer of the building. The “A-Auditorium,” location of many Poag productions as well as numerous other historic occasions and events witnessed by generations of TSU students, alumni, faculty, and

others, was renamed and dedicated as the Thomas E. Poag Auditorium in 1998. The Tennessee State University Players Guild is now known as the T.E. Poag Players Guild, another fitting tribute to the man behind the smiling face in the photograph.



Courtesy of Tennessee State University Library

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