Richardson, Willis m

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by Pattie B. McIntyre, 1994

Related Entry: African Americans [2]

5 Nov. 1889-8 Nov. 1977



Willis Richardson. Photo courtesy of 'Today in African American History' 2010.

Willis Richardson, playwright, was born in Wilmington [4], the son of Willis Wilder and Agnes Ann Harper Richardson. After the to 1898 [5], he moved with his parents from Wilmington [4] to Washington, D.C. There he attended elementary schools from 1899 to 1906 and was graduated from the M Street High School in 1910. Richardson entered government service on 7 Mar. 1911 and on the fourteenth was appointed a skilled helper in the Wetting Division of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing [6]. After receiving numerous promotions, he was appointed custodian of presses effective 17 Sept. 1936. He retired from the bureau in 1954. From 1916 to 1918 he prepared himself for playwrighting by taking correspondence courses in poetry and drama.

Richardson was the first Black playwright to have a serious play produced on Broadway when The Chip Woman's Fortune [8] on 15 May 1923. Earlier this play had opened in Chicago as a production of the Ethiopian Art Players (29 Jan. 1923), in Washington, D.C. (23 April), and on 7 May at the Lafayette Theater [9] in Harlem. In the early twenties Black drama groups were searching for plays by black writers, and Richardson was the first to fulfill this need with his black history plays and plays that "emphasized the physical strength, the nobility, and the courage of his heroes."

The Gilpin Players of Cleveland produced Richardson's *Compromise* at the <u>Karamu Theater</u> [10] on 25 Feb. 1925, their first play by a Black playwright. <u>Reuben Silver</u> [11], in his dissertation on the history of the Karamu Theater, praised Richardson for "urging the retention of the Negro heritage through the Arts." Among the other early Black theater groups producing Richardson's plays were the Howard Players in Washington, D.C., and the Krigwa Players in New York.

Richardson was awarded the Amy Spingarn Prize in the drama contest conducted by <u>Crisis magazine</u> [12] in 1925, with <u>Eugene O'Neill</u> [13] as one of the judges. He won a second time in 1926 and received honorable mention in the <u>Opportunity magazine</u> [14] drama contest in 1925. Richardson, whose play <u>The Idle Head</u> [15] was published in <u>Carolina Magazine</u> (April 1929), was identified by the editor of this "Negro Play" number of the magazine as "the foremost playwright of the younger group." Recognized by <u>Darwin Turner</u> [15], critic of Black theater, as the first significantly productive African-American playwright, Richardson wrote more than forty plays and edited two anthologies of plays by Black writers, <u>Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negrolital</u> (1930) and, with <u>May Miller</u> [18], <u>Negro History in Thirteen Plays</u> [19] (1935).

In his plays and in the anthologies he edited, Richardson attempted to dramatize Black heroes and to give a realistic view of Black life. As early as 1919 in a *Crisis* magazine essay, he stated his philosophy and purpose of the plays he hoped to write: "the kind of play that shows the soul of a people." His plays reflected this philosophy throughout his writing career. Richardson was a member of the Dramatists' Guild of the Authors' League of America, the Harlem Cultural Council, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [20].

Richardson married Mary Ellen Jones on 1 Sept. 1914, and they had three daughters: Jean Paula, Shirley Antonella, and Noel Justine. He was a Roman Catholic.

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Additional Resources:

African American Literature Forum: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041443 [21]

D.C. Library Labs: http://dclibrarylabs.org/blkren/bios/richardsonw.html [22]

Our State, North Carolina: https://www.ourstate.com/willis-richardson-players/[23]

Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negra GoogleBooks [24]

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Authors:

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