

Harvey Young
ASTR Distinguished Scholar Intro
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Today, we recognize a scholar whose research and teaching has taught our field how to see and, in so doing, has opened our collective eyes to the artistry and sophistication of a generation of theatre makers (and their audiences) who had previously been underappreciated and overlooked. We honor not only a brilliant researcher, a skilled theorist, and a critic with a gift for writing engaging prose but also an advocate: a scholar who believes that scholarship should not be separated from the communities that it can best serve.

Before our Distinguished Scholar became the first member of her family to graduate from college and, later, to receive a doctorate, she was a kid in a working class neighborhood in Boston. Education was valued in her household. Her father, who had moved from Jamaica in search of better opportunities, instilled a deep respect for learning. Our Distinguished Scholar enrolled at Boston's prestigious Girl's Latin School, the nation's first public college preparatory school for young women. Despite being a high achieving student, our honoree was encouraged to apply to the local state college, State Teacher's College, by a guidance counselor who could not appreciate her (or any) black girl's potential. Fortunately, a NAACP representative familiar with her academic record urged her to aim higher. If she wanted, she could go to Radcliffe College. Wanting some distance from home, she opted for Pembroke College in Brown University. Neither Harvard nor Brown were fully coeducational institutions at the time.

At Pembroke in Brown, the world must have appeared to be in chaos. The summer before freshman year was Freedom Summer. The remaining years were marked by the assassination of Malcolm X, the escalation of the Vietnam War, the founding of both NOW (the National Organization for Women) and the Black Panther Party, and, in the final months of her senior year, the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. Reflecting on her Pembroke experience, our honoree recalls the absence of African Americans in the university's curriculum, "I quite frankly can't remember black people coming up in class." Our Distinguished Scholar taught herself. The reading of Black literature, especially the writings of a new voice LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) became her extracurricular pursuit.

Having spent her first twenty years navigating New England winters, our honoree elected to spend what would become the next 20 years on the west coast, in the Bay Area. The first stop, in 1968, was the doctoral program at Stanford, where she would continue her exploration of the dramatic world of Amiri Baraka. The culmination of that work was a dissertation with a memorable title: *The Sweet Meat from Le Roi*. After a few years at Stanford, our honoree could be found in Oakland (and her dissertation still in-progress).

Our Distinguished Scholar was everywhere throughout the Bay Area. She taught at San Francisco State and City College-San Francisco. Actively making, producing, and directing theatre in the area, she cofounded West Coast Black Repetory Company. In a 1974 *Black World* article, our Distinguished Scholar assessed the regional theatre scene at the time: introducing the periodical's national readership to the work of the Grassroots Experience, Black Writer's Workshop, African People's Repertory Theatre, Mary Booker's B & D Experimental Theatre among others and commenting that "On the college scene, Black theatre seems to be flourishing." She praises Black Studies departments for championing the work of new artists and calls upon theatre departments to not only embrace Black theatre but also to make a more concerted effort to train African American designers and technicians.

Returning to Stanford, in 1979, with a dissertation in hand, after a year as a Fellow at UC Santa Barbara, and now as a member of Stanford's faculty, our Distinguished Scholar spent the next decade writing and

some of our fields' first critical readings on the theatre of Amiri Baraka and Ntoshake Shange as well as critical surveys of the state of contemporary theatre. Within this period, she left for Nigeria, taught as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Lagos, and returned to California with a deeper appreciation of the range of artistry occurring on parts of the African continent.

After two decades in the sun, our Distinguished Scholar moved in 1990 to the Windy City and Northwestern, where she would spend the next 20 years. In these decades, our honoree became an undeniable, unstoppable force within the academy. Her book *Ancient Songs Set Ablaze* set the standard for critical engagements with the work of Nigerian writer Femi Osifisan. Her numerous articles increasingly placed a spotlight on Africanist elements and traditions within theatre on both sides of the Atlantic. Her commitment to attending to “the non-middle-class, the masses of working, underemployed, or unemployed people who do not share the aspirations of the bourgeois, American mainstream” inspired an oft-cited article focusing on the need to identify the “absent potential,” the embodied, staged, and imagined elements given to a story by its audience and performers (and existing beyond, perhaps, between the text). There's more to emphasize here. Her brilliant reading of “combat breath” in the plays of Shange. Her recent work on slave tourism and theorization of the embodied memory of the transatlantic trade involving African captives. Her collaborations with Kathy Perkins and Sandra Shannon, which resulted in books on African American women dramatists and also the theatre of August Wilson.

After two decades in Chicago, our honoree returned to the sun. This time, five years in Qatar, in the United Arab Emirates. I love the fact that our Distinguished Scholar, a graduate of Girls' Latin and Pembroke, stood tall as a model of the possibilities of education and of the potential for women to set the agenda

Our Distinguished Scholar has taught us through scholarship, teaching, and service how to be a scholar in the world. Gifted with a capacious intellect, one cultivated over decades of study, our honoree is a global thinker and her influence can be seen not only in the circulation of her work but also in the work of her students on national theatre movements within the US, Martinique, Ghana, Ireland, and, more recently Russia. Our Distinguished Scholar has served as a mentor to colleagues near and far—and, to speak personally, as a guide helping me and many others to better navigate the academy while also feeling at home within it. It is no surprise that she was honored by ATHE as an Outstanding Teacher of Theatre in Higher Education.

In conclusion, it only takes a few seconds in the presence of our Distinguished Scholar's West Coast theatre collaborators—people like Anna Deveare Smith and Danny Glover—to appreciate how valued and loved she is. With a gleam in their eyes, they see her across the room and call out “Sandi.” It only takes a few seconds in the presence of our Distinguished Scholar's students to understand how respected she is. Behind closed doors, they talk about her with a hushed reverence. Every so often, you will hear someone say, “She asked me to call her Sandra, but she's always going to be Dr. Richards to me.” Whether it's Sandi, Sandra, Dr. Richards, or the often cited author Dr. Sandra L. Richards, the influence of this year's Distinguished Scholar cannot be denied. Please join me in congratulating Sandra Richards.