

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

**ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITA ESTHER M. JACKSON (1922–2006)**

Esther M. Jackson, professor emerita of theatre and drama, died on 1 August 2006 in Brooklyn, New York at the age of 83, following a long, debilitating illness. As a specialist in dramatic literature and criticism in the field of modern American theatre and drama, Dr. Jackson is remembered as a brilliant and pioneering scholar and inspirational teacher. She wrote extensively on the development and form of American playwrights as well as the cultural relationship of their work to society. Her book, *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams*, written in 1965, is considered a classic in terms of Williams scholarship.

Born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas to African American parents who were both educators, Esther Jackson received a B.S. from Hampton University in 1942 and an M.A. from Ohio State University in 1946. After her first two college teaching positions, Jackson returned to Ohio State for her doctorate. Upon graduation in 1958, she became one of the first African American women to receive a Ph.D. in theatre and drama.

From 1946 to 1966, Dr. Jackson taught at historically black colleges: assistant professor of speech and drama, Hampton Institute, VA, 1946-49; assistant professor of drama, Clark College, Atlanta, GA, 1949-56; professor of English, North Carolina A. & T., Greensboro, 1958-59; visiting professor of humanities, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, 1959-60; and professor and chairman, Department of Speech and Drama, Clark College, Atlanta, from 1961-64.

Throughout her career Dr. Jackson's publications, articles and presentations were innovative, incisive and intellectually challenging to those within and outside of her field of study. Although her scholarship often focused on Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill, her writings included playwrights Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Thornton Wilder, LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka) and Shakespeare. She often wrote on broader topics in her field such as "Drama: a Mirror of Conflict" published in *Social Responsibility in an Age of Revolution* by the Institute of Ethics, Jewish Theological Seminary of America and "The American Negro and the Image of the Absurd" published in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man*. Of the 13 articles written in the 1960s, one had been commissioned for publication as part of an edited collection while three were later selected for publication in edited collections. Of nine articles written in the 1970s, one was reprinted and five were commissioned as contributions in the same format.

Ever searching for new experiences which would enrich her symbiotic approach to theatre as literature and performance, Dr. Jackson worked with Joseph Papp on his theatre productions for the New York Theatre Festival's Shakespeare in the Park – in the 1963 season as Papp's assistant and in the 1965-66 seasons as the festival's director of education. Because of the opportunities made available to African-Americans in the America of the 1960s, Dr. Jackson decided to accept the position offered to her in the U. S. Office of Education for the years of 1964-65. As the specialist in theatre and dance, she hoped to make theatre an integral part of the Great Society being shaped at the time. Throughout her career Dr. Jackson's contribution to the mission of American theatre associations and institutions was intensive and significant in scope.

Dr. Jackson was awarded a Fulbright Senior Research Fellow at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London for 1960-61. She became a Fulbright professor of American drama at the J.F. Kennedy Institute of American Studies, Free University of Berlin in 1968-69 as well as a Guggenheim fellow for the same time period.

This extraordinarily diverse scholar and teacher joined the UW-Madison faculty of the Department of Theatre and Drama as a full professor in 1969. In one of the recommendation letters solicited for her professorship, Esther Jackson was described as "one of the truly outstanding theatre personalities of our day."

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Esther's creative and innovative approaches to teaching benefited the department as a whole. She encouraged the research of young faculty members, especially those who guest lectured in her classes. They were given a topic that challenged thinking beyond normal patterns of reference within their subject matter. Esther expanded their perspectives by urging them to foreground the importance of societal forces that ultimately determine decisions as to form and content of costume design in theatre productions. The search became not what but why and, indeed, the keystone for research on the contemporary theatre aesthetic then prevalent in Germany.

Her collaborative endeavors reached beyond the department as well. Professor Emerita Anna Nassif, then choreographer of the UW Dance Program, relates her own experiences. "As soon as Esther arrived on campus, she contacted the dance program and expressed interest in working with dance faculty and dance graduates. She continued to demonstrate her leadership skills and her interest in getting faculty [from various disciplines] to work together on interdisciplinary projects. On a more personal level, in 1970 Esther invited me to choreograph *Camino Real* by Tennessee Williams for the University Theatre . . . . Esther Jackson was a rebel, a revolutionary, a great teacher and friend."

Esther's innovative work with her students is described by the following excerpts selected from a memorial tribute written by one of Esther's most successful former students – Kim Marra, professor of theatre and American studies at the University of Iowa, Iowa City. "Dr. Jackson fervently believed in the power of American theatre and drama to reveal and transform American lives and culture . . . . This conviction about the uniquely revelatory and educational power of the theatre is the Promethean Fire she lit in her students. Inspired by her vision, we learned that we were not simply studying theatre history but were studying history through the theater and, indeed, that the theatre may well be the most powerful tool we have for learning about the world both past and present . . . . When it came to interdisciplinary studies, Dr. Jackson was way ahead of her time, inviting guest lectures from colleagues in German, classics, rhetoric, philosophy, religion, history, English, music/opera and communication studies to offer their multiple vantage points on a seemingly inscrutable play, such as that of *The Alcestiad* by Thornton Wilder. She was also interdisciplinary in terms of trying to understand the play in its performance dimensions. Experts and collaborators from the areas of acting, directing and design frequented her classes [and often team taught with her in her classes]. In Dr. Jackson's life and legacy, we celebrate an academic visionary of the civil rights era who ventured across racial and gender barriers to shape the field of American theatre studies and inspire generations of students."

Dr. Esther Jackson remained a vital, vibrant scholar, teacher and colleague until her retirement in 1987.

MEMORIAL COMMITTEE  
Marna King