

**PSC-CUNY Research Award Program Cycle 46****Traditional A Award Proposal****Tom Marion (Principle Investigator)****York College****December 15, 2014****Project Description: *Langston Hughes in Harlem*****INTRODUCTION:**

Funding from a PSC-CUNY Grant and other sources will enable me to expand my show, *Langston Hughes in Harlem*, into a full production. I conceived the show and directed it as a reading eight years ago at the Bowery Poetry Club. A reading is done with actors sitting in chairs, scripts in hand, presenting material with no attempt at theatricality. Expansion of the production will allow the show to be fully realized with complete musical orchestrations, added scenery and choreography, costumes, and enacted dramatic scenes. I believe the show is worthy of this further endeavor. The reading by itself received acclaim. Bob Holman ([www.bobholman.com](http://www.bobholman.com)), poet and proprietor of the bowery club, has given me permission to quote him: "The best retrospective of Langston Hughes' work I've ever seen – by far." *The Culvert Chronicles* ([www.theculvertchroniclesusa.com](http://www.theculvertchroniclesusa.com)) stated: "Great poetry [with] a wide range of emotional and intellectual content." A fifteen-minute selection was subsequently featured at BAM's *Expression in the Right Direction* in 2006 with Will Powers. For 2016, I am looking to offer the expanded production to various NY cultural institutions for inclusion in their 2016 Black History programming. I have budgeted for three performances. I am already in negotiations with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Additional funding may allow for a longer tour.

**OBJECTIVES:**

1. **To provide** high quality programming for Black History Month 2016 at established NY institutional venues. A high quality production will demand a performance capable of filling a traditional theater stage.
2. **To strengthen** the institution of York College through greater community involvement and artistic recognition.
3. **To educate and inspire** audiences, including my students in oral interpretation of prose and poetry, and serve as academic reinforcement for the York College Speech discipline in general, and all "Speech Across the Curriculum" classes throughout our CUNY system.

4. **To offer** professional opportunities and experience to York College graduates as performers, stage manager, and/or backstage crew.
5. In the long run, a successful production could serve **to create** groundwork toward future funding and future projects as an outreach theatre in coordination with York College, Department of Performing and Fine Arts. A successful production will be assessed by venue or institutional acknowledgement, attendance, and audience feedback. The ultimate goal is to create a permanent professional outreach theatre called *The York College Language Lab Theatre*. Well-known examples of collegiate initiated professional theatres in the eastern United States have included the Shoestring Players from Rutgers University, and the Chamber Theatre from Emerson College. The mission of our theatre would be to produce compelling theatrical works which explore the power and possibilities of the spoken word – of the capacities of language – as a vital force in cultural identity, global and national social harmony, and personal empowerment.

**METHODS:**

The project must include: The hiring of two professional musicians, seven actors, and one stage manager; special lighting suitable for touring; theatrical material for curtains and rigging; costume supply; and a three week rehearsal period in a professional rehearsal space.

Work on musical arrangements and the actors' text develop together out of a clear investigation into poetic form. Langston Hughes didn't want to conform to the accepted tastes of his times. He was an innovator. Using the real life words of African-Americans from urban and rural America, he wrote an entire new literary tradition and that meant using the slang and rhythm of his day – for Langston that was Jazz. Several different jazz forms are knit into the various structures of his verse – blues, boogie-woogie, bebop, to name a few. The musicians must work to find the right musical phrases for each piece, and have the experience for effective orchestrations with spoken word performance. Musicians with this experience can be difficult to acquire; therefore they have the lion's share of the budget. At least two are mandatory to create the rhythmic and dynamic interaction necessary for this piece. For actors, the primary concern is personalization of text, as most of the poems are dramatic in nature. In addition, I will coach the actors on textual issues – the connotation of the words, the rhetoric of idea development, the coining of image and metaphor, and the prosody of jazz. This work is essential to make the poetry come alive for a stimulating audience experience of Langston's inner meanings. The

addition of choreography is necessary as an entertaining visual dynamic, but also as a method to illuminate dramatic tension and establish character relationship.

Working in cooperation with the York College Department of Performing and Fine Arts, many of the show's other necessities will become immediately available, free on loan: Select period costume pieces – hats, women's gloves, suit jackets – are available from York College Theatre costume supply; specialty curtains and rigging materials for scenery are available from the Milton G. Bassin Performing Arts Center at York College; and most importantly, rehearsal space is available during the York College 2016 winter recess. The latter is a major assistance. Eight years ago I rehearsed the reading of the show in a studio apartment. However, added choreography and blocking (actor movement) will require ample room. Using the York College rehearsal space will preclude costs up to and above \$30 an hour at rented rehearsal studios. In addition, the purchase of a lighting instrument suitable for touring is outlined in the budget. Royalties for performance of Langston Hughes poems are held with Harold Ober Associates, NYC. As fees depend on audience size I will endeavor to work with performance venues for funding.

#### **CONCLUSIONS:**

Langston Hughes was born in Missouri in 1902 and became the most prolific African-American writer of his time. He wrote sixteen books of poems, two novels, seven collections of short stories, two autobiographies, five works of non-fiction, nine children's books, and over thirty plays. But knowledge of who Langston was and what he did is not enough. Familiarity with his poetry is not even enough. I believe the significance of his work lives in the experience of the living embodiment of his words. And Americans, especially New Yorkers, deserve the opportunity of that experience.

Langston made his home in Harlem in the 1920's along with other like-minded artists. Their work came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. During the early 1900's, hundreds of thousands of Black Americans were leaving oppression in the South hoping to find a better life in the North. Mostly they came to Harlem, a special place in the history of America, a special place between the Hudson and East rivers, just north of Central Park .....or as Langston said:

Between two rivers,  
North of the park,  
Like darker rivers  
The streets are dark....  
  
Dream within a dream,  
Our dream deferred.  
  
Good morning, daddy!

***Ain't you heard?***