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COMMUNITY BOARD No. 2, MANHATTAN

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May 4, 2022

Lynne P. Brown
Senior Vice President for University Relations
and Public Affairs
New York University
50 West 4th Street
New York, NY 10012

Dear Vice President Brown:

At its Full Board meeting April 26, 2022, Community Board #2, adopted the following resolution:

Resolution in Support of Naming an NYU Theater at 181 Mercer in Honor of The African Grove Theatre

1. **Whereas**, in 1821, at the intersection of Mercer and Bleecker streets, a retired West Indian steward named William Brown founded the African Grove Theatre, the first known Black theater in the United States; and
2. **Whereas**, the African Grove began in 1818 in the backyard of the William Brown's house on Thomas Street as a Black-owned "pleasure garden" or "pleasure ground" at a time when public open space was scarce, and pleasure gardens were reserved for white people only^{1 2 3}; and

¹ <https://publicpleasuregarden.blogspot.com/search?q=african+american>

² <https://maap.columbia.edu/place/23.html>

³ <https://aaregistry.org/story/the-african-grove-theater-begins/>

3. **Whereas**, the African Grove Theatre opened six years before the abolition of slavery in New York State, and almost forty years before the start of the Civil War; and
4. **Whereas**, the 300-seat theater was built of wood and its auditorium consisted of a pit below stage level, tiered house seating not partitioned into boxes so as to enhance the flow of air, and a gallery whose ceiling was too low to permit hats and bonnets to be worn by spectators; and
5. **Whereas**, the first performance staged by the African Company, possibly the first professional African American theater production ever, was a Shakespeare play; “*After several nightly caucuses, they resolved to set up a play, and the upper apartments of the neglected African Grove were pitched upon for the purpose. Richard the Third, after mature deliberation, was agreed on...⁴*”; and
6. **Whereas**, the most popular plays were [Richard III](#) and [Othello](#). James Hewlett was the first black man of record to play the leading role in *Othello*; and
7. **Whereas**, the performances of the African Grove Theatre company were a hit and were so popular that William Brown moved out of the little room on Thomas Street, where they’d been performing, and 11 blocks north⁵, and rented out the bar next door to an established theater, the Park at the intersection of Mercer and Bleecker streets⁶; and
8. **Whereas**, the owner of the Park was not happy about the competition and, because he was well connected, when he called the police to complain about the noise next door causing all the actors to be hauled off to prison and put in prison overnight⁷; and
9. **Whereas**, the African Grove Theatre actors were released from jail on one condition, they had to promise never to perform Shakespeare again⁸; and
10. **Whereas**, in addition to Shakespeare, the African Company performed original plays and skits that dealt with slavery and the plight of Native Americans, which included William A. Brown's now-lost play, [The Drama of King Shotaway](#) about a 1795 Caribbean revolt against British Navy forces on the island of Saint Vincent. Also produced by the African Company in 1823, *Drama* is believed to have been the first full-length play by a

⁴ <https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/african-americans-shakespeare>

⁵ https://maap.columbia.edu/place/then.html#map=CU070096003&z=8.764&cx=0.52&cy=0.367&view=map_marks

⁶ <https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/african-americans-shakespeare>

⁷ <https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/african-americans-shakespeare>

⁸ <https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/african-americans-shakespeare>

black American performed in the United States, and a ballet which featured Native Americans as dignified characters; and

11. **Whereas**, in 1823, The African Grove Theatre was ransacked by a white mob which, aided by police, was responsible for the theater's closure; and

12. **Whereas**, *Transformation!* An exhibition that looks at 100 years of African American theatre was shown at NYU Gallatin and included images and artifacts of the African Grove Theatre, its actors and productions⁹;

Therefore be it resolved that Community Board 2, Manhattan urges New York University (NYU) to name one of the three theaters that will sit on the historical home of the African Grove Theatre at [181 Mercer Street](#) in honor of the The African Grove Theatre, and its significant role in NYC and American history.



⁹ <https://wp.nyu.edu/gallatingalleries/transformation/>

FOR THE BENEFIT OF
MR. HEWLETT.

Mr. HEWLETT has secured the
 balance agreeable to the Ladies &
 of this kind in this City, by
 experience in rendering this kind
 of Colour, being the third at

AN OPERA
 Will take place corner of Mercer
 On **MONDAY EVENING**

SONGS.

"Doubt in his soft expressive face,"
 The Light House,
 "Not who has 'at Walker's Hall,"
 Corporal Casey,
 "Is there a heart that never leaves,"
 "I once by the smoke that as gracefully roars,"
 "My Fairy,"
 "Walk of the Mill,"
 "Milk Aids,"
 "The Hunter's Horn,"

Mr. Hewlett,
 Hutchinson,
 Hewlett,
 Thompson,
 Hewlett,
 Hutchinson,
 Hewlett,
 Hewlett,
 Hewlett,
 Hewlett,
 Hewlett,

After which will be performed, for the last time
 this Season, the **TRAGEDY** of
Richard the Third.

KING HENRY, Mr. Hutchinson
PRINCE OF WALES, Miss S. Webb,
RICHARD, Mr. Hewlett,
BUCINGHAM, Mr. Hewlett,
LORD STANLEY, Mr. Hutchinson,
RICHMOND, J. Hutchinson,
LADY ANN, Matthews,
QUEEN ELIZABETH, Miss Webb,
 J. Webb.

PANTOMIME ASAMA.
 Mr. Hewlett,
 S. Webb.

The **BALLET** put up under the direction of Mr. Hewlett, being received on **Monday Evening, October 1st, 1821.**
 Columbus, Miss S. Webb, Old Man, Thompson,
 Dupin, Mr. Hewlett, Servant, Master Cobb

ADMITTANCE 50 CENTS.

PLAYBILL, NEGRO THEATRE, 1821

THEATRE,
MERCER-STREET,
 Rear of the 1 Mile-Stone, Broadway.
 It is expected that every man will do his duty on this occasion

For the Benefit of the
GREEKS.
MR. HEWLETT,
 The Colored Comedian,
 Is for the last time "At Home" for the benefit of the Greeks,
 and respectfully informs the Ladies and Gentlemen of
 this City, that he will have the honor of exhibiting
 his theatrical talents for their amusement.
 Manager of the Theatre, Mr. Hewlett, assisted by Mr. Benedict.

Monday even'g Jan. 19,
 The Performance will commence with Imitations of 1827

MATTHEWS
AT HOME.

Nat. Mr. Hewlett
 Avonator Zephyr, Hewlett
 Mark agoun, Hewlett
 Epily, Hewlett
 Hewlett, Hewlett
 Hephulm Tull, Hewlett
 Dan I O'Rourke, Hewlett

He will then give Scenes from the

Devil's Bridge.
 Count Belino, Mr. Hewlett

In which character he will sing the following SONGS—
 Bed of Roses, Crookeden Lawn, as sung in the Youthful
 The Day of Bicy O Days of Matthews
 The love is warm awhile I left thee where I found thee, love,
 I love thee, dearly love thee Mail Coach, as sung by Matthews
 Love has eyes Robin Adam
 Is there a heart Behold in his soft expressive face

After which, Imitations of Matthews in

La Dilligence,
 In which Mr. Hewlett will personate the following characters:
 Jemmy, an English boot-cleener at the foreign office,
 Mons. Peremptoire, a travelling tutor,
 Master Tommy Tarragon, his infant pupil,
 Samuel Starch, esq., a tailor made him,
 Hezekiah Hank, a great Attorney of Size-lane,
 Miss Evelyn Evergreen, an old maid,
 Mons. Poudre Aneur, a French Postillion



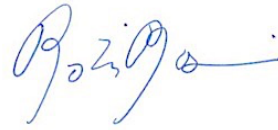
Vote: Unanimous, with 39 Board Members in favor.

Please advise us of any decision or action taken in response to this resolution.

Sincerely,



Jeannine Kiely, Chair
Community Board #2, Manhattan



Robin Rothstein, Chair
Arts & Institutions Committee
Community Board #2, Manhattan



Mar Fitzgerald
Equity, Race & Justice Committee
Community Board #2, Manhattan

JK/EM

c: Hon. Jerrold L. Nadler, Congressman
Hon. Brad Hoylman, NYS Senator
Hon. Deborah J. Glick, NYS Assembly Member
Hon. Mark Levine, Manhattan Borough President
Hon. Christopher Marte, Council Member