

FROM THE NEWSPAPER PAGE
TO THE BROADWAY STAGE:
PAUL GREEN IN THE
POET/PRIEST TRADITION

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I have in other venues expressed my dismay that more critical attention has not been given to preeminent North Carolina playwright Paul Green, admitting even as I complain about this oversight that were I not editor of the *North Carolina Literary Review*, I would likely have to count myself among those who neglect this important Southern writer. Residents of North Carolina are most likely to associate Green with the symphonic outdoor drama *The Lost Colony* (1937), which continues to be performed in Manteo every summer. Paul Green is actually responsible for the *origin* of both outdoor drama and symphonic drama, but it takes very little digging to realize that Green's influence is *even more significant than the creation of two literary genres*. As one of the first generation of the Carolina Playmakers, Green embraced Frederick Koch's dictum to write about the *folk* of his region, and I can tell you, having read numerous one-act plays submitted to the *North Carolina Literary Review* for the 2009 issue's special feature section on drama, that Green's folk plays continue to influence playwrights—at least in North Carolina. Also, when Green wrote about “the folk,” his plays inevitably explored the social injustices his characters endured. And furthermore, not only did Paul Green *write* about race relations and poverty, so too did he view his responsibility, as a poet/priest with some little fame to his name, to *do* something about what he wrote about. Not only did he expose his region's social prejudices in his plays, novels, and stories, but so too did he expose social injustice in the media, statewide and nationally.

I begin with Green's written and dramatized “exposés”: although readers may find more than one caricature or stereotype in Green's folk plays (usually employed for comic relief within an otherwise dark drama), Green did not romanticize his characters. Many are embittered or corrupted by their plights, and the tone of his work is reminiscent

of Thomas Hardy (indeed, Green's 1935 novel *This Body the Earth* is specifically reminiscent of Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*). The black title character of Green's 1927 Pulitzer Prize play, *In Abraham's Bosom*, who has dreams of educating his community, loses the respect of his militant son and ultimately kills his white brother. By final curtain, the young black woman of "End of the Row" (1923) seems to give up on her dreams of pursuing an education so that she might teach the black children of her community. The implication of the somewhat ambiguous final scene of this play is that she will give in to the white man's offer to make her life more comfortable if she stays, presumably in exchange for a sexual relationship.

Tragedy comes to Green's poor whites as well: the daughter of a tenant farmer in *The House of Connelly* (1931) who marries a son of the aristocracy does not live long after her rise above her station. Apparently afraid of change and displacement by this self-sufficient, enterprising woman, the black servant women smother her in the play's original final scene, before she has slept a single night in "the Big House" (the stage and movie versions have alternate, happier endings). It is interesting to ponder whether Green killed off his female lead as a kind of punishment for achieving her new position through manipulation of the weak Connelly heir. However, the play also directs our attention more toward how lucky the Quentin Compson-like male lead was to find this woman since she was more likely to save what was left of the Connelly fortune than he would have.

In a 1995 article on the "Tragic Power and Poetic Influence" of Green, Frances W. Saunders lists the "number of evils" Green explores in his Pulitzer Prize play: "poor to nonexistent educational facilities, racial injustice, the tenant farmer system, poverty, brutality, and murder," all of which resulted in audiences finding the play "distressing and unsavory." Saunders adds, "To southerners, the fact that a native son had aired such taboo subjects on Broadway did not make the play any more palatable." But, Saunders also notes, "The admiration of some of Green's colleagues and pride in the honor he had brought to the university in the form of a Pulitzer Prize helped to moderate the resentment among less enthusiastic North Carolinians" (279). Thus, even as Green often caused trouble for his university with his progressive views, particularly about race relations, the administration at the University of North Carolina took advantage of the writer's predilection for living in his home state and, in order to keep him on

the faculty, allowed him time off to travel when performances of his work needed his presence, and sabbaticals when he needed more time to write—and they tolerated his choice of subject matter and occasional trouble-making.

In the decades since his death in 1981, Paul Green has been put on a pedestal in his home state (by those who remember him, that is). His “betrayal” of his home with the controversial subject matter he explored is forgotten, as his audience focuses on his still-viable contribution to the state’s dramatic heritage, evidenced by the continued popularity of outdoor dramas from the Outer Banks to the mountains. But in Green’s own day, he suffered criticism and censorship for the issues he took on in his drama throughout his career: from the sudden program change in 1922 once word reached the university administration that his early play, *White Dresses*, which would have been his first Playmaker production, dealt with miscegenation,¹ to the fact that his Pulitzer Prize play, which also dealt with the subject of miscegenation, has *never* been performed in the South. Still, the playwright was well-respected in his day. After his Pulitzer, he was hired to write movies in Hollywood, and more of his plays were performed on Broadway.

From the start of his career, Paul Green wrote about the black folk of his region, and taken together his folk plays, sketches, and essays are comparable to Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (a topic for future exploration). It is therefore not surprising that in 1927 he was asked to write the introduction to a University of North Carolina Press collection of African American folklore called *Congaree Sketches*. His remarks are somewhat patronizing, echoing a bit the tone of the Agrarians in *I’ll Take My Stand*, but also liberal-minded enough that the Board of Trustees tried to get the published book recalled. Green wrote “that the United States ‘is awakening to the fact that the destiny of the Negro is its destiny, that black and white are inextricably mingled in blood and intention, and that as the white man fails the Negro fails and as the Negro rises the white man rises.’” Further along he added, “The Negro is crawling out of his ditch to stand on the bank with the white man. And the white man is reaching a hand to pull him up: but let it be a stronger hand and one that reaches farther than before. It may be that they will stand in their separate places apart, but I doubt it” (qtd. in Saunders 295-96). Green’s reputation was such that when the assistant director of the press suggested that the book’s editor, Edward Adams, read what Green had submitted, the editor “declined, saying that

anything Paul Green wrote was fine by him” (Saunders 296). Advance copies of the book were sent to reviewers across the US, including such venues as the *New York Times* and the *Nation*. The press’s Board, which had readily approved the innocuous sketches for publication, worried when they read Green’s introduction, but realized it was too late. Recalling the books would call more attention to the introduction (which ended up, sadly, overlooked or ignored by reviewers).

Green wrote about the black folk of his region and supported others doing the same, like the compiler of *Congaree Sketches*. But he also recognized the importance of hearing the voice of the black folk *from* the black writer, so, again testing the UNC administration, Green invited black writers he corresponded with to Chapel Hill before the campus was desegregated. In the Paul Green Papers are letters to and from writers like James Weldon Johnson, for example, about whom Green reported to interviewer Rhoda Wynn that in 1923, when he (Green, that is, a new faculty member at the time) was unsuccessful in convincing university administration to allow Johnson to read on campus, he hosted a reading by Johnson at his own home.² I have spoken and written elsewhere about Green’s collaboration with Richard Wright in 1940 on dramatizing *Native Son*, which began with a telegram from Green to Wright’s publisher, sending congratulations to the young writer on the new novel and offering his service as a playwright to adapt the novel for the stage.³ I will go into the story here only so far as to note how Green, who usually adapted novels for the screen without author input, brought Wright to the UNC-Chapel Hill campus to work on the play, thereby, at least for the period of time that they worked in Bynum Hall, desegregating the campus.

But Green not only supported fellow writers like Johnson and Wright, whom he brought to North Carolina, he also sought to help citizens of his own state who had more in common with Wright’s Bigger Thomas than with Paul Green. Green called attention to the horrors of chain gangs and the inequality among the races reflected on death row. He found one incident so disturbing that he wrote about it in both his 1935 novel *This Body the Earth* and his 1936 play *Hymn to the Rising Sun*. He also tells about it in interviews: a reporter took Green to a prison, where he met two African American inmates whose feet had suffered frostbite so extreme that they had to be amputated. The men had been forgotten by the drunken prison warden and left to spend a cold night in a steel cage used to haul the chain gang to and from a

work site. In the play, Green drew from his own Army experiences—recalling a particular captain he had served under in World War I—in order to explore the character of a guard in a place like this prison. The play was performed in New York by the Let Freedom Ring Actors' Troupe of Chicago as part of the Federal Theater Project—it had been recommended for production by Richard Wright, and Will Geer (later the grandfather on the television series *The Waltons*) played the brutal captain. Not only did Green write about this incident, but also, back home in North Carolina, he had threatened to alert the media to the crime against the actual maimed inmates he would later write about: if the governor didn't take action against the inhumane treatment of these prisoners, Green promised to spread photographs of them, with their bandaged stumps, from Hollywood to New York. I have seen the photographs, so he could easily have gone through with his threat.⁴ The governor agreed to give the men a pension. So Green “confined” himself to immortalizing the incident in literature.

Green's primary goal was to help relieve the suffering of the individuals whose plights were brought to his attention. He once had a disagreement with Theodore Dreiser over how best to help the Scottsboro Boys and wrote to chastise the writer “and your ignorant but well-wishing friends” for “hang[ing] your political theories around [these men's] necks,” which Green believed was not helping to stop their impending execution: “You keep on stirring up trouble by linking your half-baked Marxism and social therapies to the race question, and thereby prepare seven blind and dumb but suffering victims for more certain sacrifice. . . . [I]t would be an ever-lasting sin for you to use the bones of seven Negro boys to hammer the drums of a social revolution” (Avery, ed. 201-202). James R. Spence describes Green's intent “then and in later fights [as being] to save the individual, without regard for long-range social goals” (169). Green was a civil rights *activist*, not an armchair/academic Marxist. As Alma A. Ilacqua put it in an “in memoriam” essay, “Green could never have been accused of retreating into an ‘ivory tower’ existence. He was always actively involved not only in academia and letters, but in the welfare of his fellow man” (85).

This essay's title, “From the Newspaper Page to the Broadway Stage,” is intended to reflect Green's tendency to write about what was going on in the world around him. One story that goes “from the Broadway stage to the newspaper page” shows how well Green captured reality in his drama: in March 1934, when Green was called

to help a possibly wrongly accused man who faced the death penalty, the *Raleigh News & Observer* headline noted the “Parallel in Paul Green Play,” and the story of the playwright’s defense of the convicted man began by commenting upon how the situation surrounding the crime echoed Green’s *In Abraham’s Bosom*. Life had imitated art in this case.

The Paul Green Papers, in the Southern Historical Collection at UNC–Chapel Hill, include much correspondence related to Green’s tangible efforts to save individual prisoners from execution—some justly, many unjustly convicted—and to the attention Green demanded be paid to the inequality on death row: many, *many* more convicted black criminals were sentenced to death than white. While working on a movie in Hollywood or a play in New York, Green would receive and send telegrams related to such efforts. At home, he would use his political connections to get an audience with the governor; he was also able to correspond with President Truman on the issue of the atomic bomb—another form of death penalty that he vehemently argued against. As Saunders puts it, “Paul Green was a person of unflinching courage and integrity at a time when he was one of less than a half-dozen people in North Carolina to speak out and write about controversial social issues” (299-300).

But even before Green had political clout, he saw the stage as a place to explore social injustice. In response to questions posed by *Theatre Arts Monthly* editor Edith Isaacs, Green wrote about “what the playwright should be to the theatre and to the world he lives in”: “his business is simply to express in dramatic form the human struggles, both evil and good, that exist in that world” (Green 52). For example, Saunders talks about Green’s play *The Lord’s Will*, in which he “touche[s] on the issue of exploited mill workers and ‘lung lint’ disease.” Saunders reports that in 1922, two years after Green’s *White Dresses* was cancelled for its subject matter, UNC’s President received a complaint “from a millowner (and university trustee)” that this play “malign[ed] his mill”; the trustee apparently requested that the production be cancelled. This time the play was not closed, and the President merely called Green (then a student) in to let him know “the effect your play is having” and to encourage him to “keep on writing” (Saunders 286). (It is interesting that working-class industrial issues were seemingly deemed by the university administration to be okay to explore on stage, although the race issues in his earlier play had been considered too discomfiting.) It appears that Green took the President’s advice to heart, for he did

“keep on writing,” and his writing reflects his recognition of the effect that literature can have upon its audience, both negative and positive. Thus, a year after Green’s Pulitzer (still relatively early in Green’s career), Walter Prichard Eaton would bring Green up in a 1928 *New York Times* article on “Charting the American Drama’s Drift,” saying of the North Carolina playwright, “he demonstrates that out of the amateur and academic theatre of his State can come a genuine and powerful expression of the local life. His plays may well become weapons for the liberalizing of the lives of his people” (20).

After apprenticing with “Proff” Koch at the university, Green believed in the power of the stage for spreading socially and culturally responsible themes, but was disillusioned first by Broadway and then by Hollywood—perhaps even more so by Hollywood, for he saw the movie theater as having the potential to reach the masses. He called movies “a completely democratic art form . . . capable of answering any vital demand made upon it by the imagination of any human being. For the first time in the history of the world we had a dramatic medium in the movies which could be understood by black and white, yellow or red, the only requirement being that the audience must be able to see or hear—better if it could do both” (Green 88). One may hear an echo here of Christ, another poet/priest, saying, “If any man have ears to hear, let him hear.” But to Green’s resistance to unrealistic happy endings, he was told, “Listen, this is a business out here, not an art” (Green 90). His disappointment in the movie-making “business” brought him back to the stage—back to the little theater, the people’s theater, where messages of change could be narrowed down to address local issues with universal themes. He talks about the “theater of the people” as “what the American public needs” in a 1960 interview with William Rough:

Once the theater can spread out and take its roots in the history and peoples of our country, then it becomes a mode of expression for more artists, trying to put forth a wider and greater range of ideas. This is why, when people come to me to ask for help in breaking into the New York theater world, I encourage them to go home and form their own local theater groups. The talent wasted in New York every year, which could be working toward the establishment of local theaters across the country, is unlimited. The real theater of our country should

be – and is rapidly becoming—the theater of the people, the amateur theater. (Rough 12)

After spending the past few years reading Green plays for a book I was editing (see the Spence citation listed in the Works Cited) and in preparation for collecting the Green interviews so that they might be more accessible to the general public, I was struck when it came time to write the introduction to the 2009 issue of the *North Carolina Literary Review* by how North Carolina's twenty-first-century playwrights, in the tradition of Paul Green, are carrying on his idea of a theater of the people. As evidence, I invite you to read the contemporary one-act plays by Richard Krawiec, Kat Meads, and Sam Post that we published in the “drama” issue as evidence.⁵

While Green's writings might not be read so often anymore, his legacy continues. In the tradition of Green's activism beyond the stage, which brought his name to the newspaper page (and more important, brought the press's attention to the victims he championed), the Paul Green Foundation remains active not just in supporting the theater arts in North Carolina but also in the field of human rights, its largest current project being the North Carolina Freedom Monument Project, a memorial planned for the capitol grounds in Raleigh that will recognize, as Green scholar Laurence G. Avery describes it, “the long, often tragic, but varied experience of African Americans in North Carolina” (Avery 38). A visit to the website for this project (www.ncfmp.org) will reveal writers and literary scholars involved, following in the tradition of poet/priest Paul Green, who took seriously the responsibility of a writer to *act* as well as to write.

NOTES

¹ Green's *White Dresses* is reprinted in the 2009 “drama” issue of the *North Carolina Literary Review*, with an introduction that provides the details about the play's production history (22-33).

² See the Rhoda Wynn Interview with Paul Green, pages 7-8 of the transcript of tape XII. (February 1974, Southern Oral History Program Collection, #4007 Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).

³ See my article, “Call Me Paul: The Long, Hot Summer of Paul Green and Richard Wright.” *Mississippi Quarterly* 61 (2008): 517-38.

⁴ See the photograph on page 201 of Spence's *Watering the Sabara*.

⁵ I also encourage those interested in Paul Green to explore the Paul Green Papers located in the Southern Historical Collection of Wilson Library at UNC-Chapel Hill. These papers are a gold mine of interesting material, and I would welcome hearing about others' findings for publication consideration in the *North Carolina Literary Review*.

The Paul Green Foundation is also very supportive of Green research, believing as I do that it is time to give this writer, who gave so much of himself, another look.

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