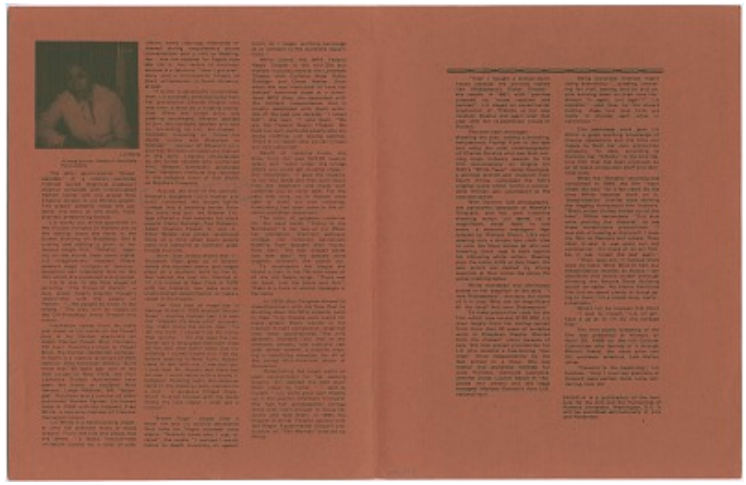
Promotional material for Liz White's film presentation of Othello, May 1980



[[image: black and white photograph with caption "Liz White. Juliette Bowles, Research Associate Publications"]]

The salty, good-natured "Broadwaydese" of a veteran wardrobe mistress turned theatrical producer/director competes with unexpurgated Harlem corner talk and proper New England diction in Liz White's speech. The speech patterns reveal life patterns: the story of one sharp, fluid, and very enterprising woman.

Liz works out of her apartment in the Dunbar complex in Harlem and at the editing space she rents in the Screen Building on Broadway. She is cutting and editing a print of her feature length film, "Othello", sleeping on the studio floor some nights. Liz imaginatively adapted Shakespeare's tragic intrigue of jealousy, deception and interracial love for the film which she produced and directed.

Liz is also in the final stages of scripting, "The Prince of Harlem", a play about Adam Clayton Powell's relationship with the people of Harlem: "...the people he knew in the streets." The play will be staged at the Off Broadway Amas Theatre this winter.

Inspiration comes from the walls and street as Liz works on the Powell play in her Dunbar apartment on Adam Clayton Powell Blvd. (formerly 7th Ave.). Covering a block on Powell Blvd., the Dunbar residential complex, in itself, is a massive landmark of 20th century Afro-American history. Built more than 50 years ago, one of the first co-ops in New York, the Paul Lawrence Dunbar Apartments have been the home to explorer Matt Henson, Leigh Whipper, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and a number of other prominent Harlem figures. Liz moved there in 1950 with her husband, Fred White, a one-time member of Fletcher Henderson's band.

Liz White is a hard-working dreamer who has achieved many of those dreams. From the bits and pieces that she offers a faded, hand-printed invitation bound by a wisp of pink ribbon, some clippings, memories retrieved during long-distance phone conversations and a visit to Washington she has recalled for Sagla how she did it. Her record of hard-won success is a fabulous "How I got over" story and a microcosmic history of black achievement in North America, as well.

If spunk is genetically transmitted, then Liz probably inherited some from her grandfather Charles Shearer who was born a slave on a Virginia plantation. When the Union army was pushing southward, Shearer decided to join the northern soldiers and said so. According to Liz, the master - hurriedly preparing to "move his slaves, money and silverplate to Georgia" - learned of Shearer's plan and had the slave whipped and chained in the barn. Literally emancipated by the Union soldiers who unchained him, Shearer eventually graduated from Hampton Institute and resettled in the religious town of Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard.

^ [[Bought Twin in early 1940's]]

Around the turn of the century, Shearer's daughters (Liz's mother and aunt) converted the simple family cottage into a boarding house. Soon the word was out: the Shearer Cottage offered a fine vacation for black people. Harry Burleigh, Paul Robeson, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. and Jr., Ethel Waters and other vacationed there at a time when black

people were not welcomed at northern guest houses and inns.

Born "just before World War 1", Elizabeth Pope grew up in Boston where she studied dance and staged plays on a platform built by her father behind the coal bin. Married at 17, Liz moved to New York in 1930 with her husband, new baby and an undiminished determination to make a career in theatre.

Her first role on stage was in George Abbott's 1932 musical "Brown Sugar," starring Canada Lee. Liz says she "stopped the show cold" on opening night doing the Lindy Hop: "To tell the truth, I couldn't do the Lindy Hop worths--. On the road the costumer put a long green ballroom dress on me and that damn dress was my undoing. I couldn't work in it. The day before opening in New York, Abbott came to talk with me. I was sad, sad. I told dear Mr. Abbott that there was no way I could dance with a stupid a-- ballgown. Opening night, the costumer came in the dressing room, handed me a box - a gorgeous fringed dress - short! A show stopper with me inside doing my two steps! I even got a notice!"

"Brown Sugar" closed after a short run and Liz quickly discovered that roles for Negro actresses were scarce. "Nobody knew who I was, or cared", she recalls. "I realized I would starve to death knocking on agents' doors so I began working backstage as an assistant in the wardrobe department."

White joined the WPA Federal Negro Theatre in the mid-'30s and worked in productions at the Lafayette Theatre with Carleton Moss, Hallie Flanigan and Orson Welles. Once when she was instructed to have her dancers' costumes made at a downtown WPA shop, she responded with the militant independence that is usually associated with black activities of the past two decades. "I raised hell", she says, "I told them, "We are the Federal Negro Theater. We have our own wardrobe people who are doing nothing, just sewing patches. There is no reason why we can't make our own costumes!"

Bereft of costume funds, she drew from her own $23.86 weekly salary and "went under the bridge where you could get material cheap," she remembers. "I gave the material to our two ladies and they went down into the basement and made such costumes you've never seen. For the very first time, we in Harlem were able to make our own costumes. Everything had been done in the all-white workshop downtown."

The irony of gorgeous costumes for the slave ballet, "Going to the Barndance" is not lost on Liz. When her plantation charmers sashayed onstage, red ribboned pantaloons flashing from beneath their frocks, they were "the best dressed slaves you ever saw!" My dancers wore organdy drawers!, she points out.

To accompany the troupe she found a man in his 70s who knew all of the old Negro songs. "There was no band, just the piano and him". There is a trace of wistful nostalgia in her voice.

In 1939 after Congress showed its disenchantment with the New Deal by shutting down the WPA projects, parts in New York theatre were scarce for black actors. Black women in the medium-to-light complexion range had even fewer opportunities. The only generally available role, that of the domestic servant, was typically cast with darker women, a

practice creating a stultifying situation for all of the young Afro-American actors of the period.

Determining the larger world an alien environment for her seeding dreams, Liz decided she best plant them closer to home: "I said to myself," Liz build your own theatre up in the country (Martha's Vineyard). She had her grandparents' cottage there with room enough to house her actors and feed them. In 1945, the Shearer Summer Theatre opened with the Negro Experimental Group's production of "The Woman" directed by White.

"Then I bought a broken-down house because the porches looked like Shakepeare's Globe Theater." she recalls. In 1961, with "porches propped up, house repairedd and painted", Liz staged an experimental production of "Othello at her new outdoor theatre and again later that year with her re-assembled troupe in Harlem.

The next year, she began shooting the play, casting a brooding, tempestuous Yaphet Koto in the lead and using the color cinematography of Charles Dorkin who was then winning major industry awards for his film documentary on Angola for NBC's "White Paper" Jones Gwangwa, a political activist and musician from South Africa, composed the film's original score which forms a provocative African jazz countepart to the onscreen action.

With Dorkins' lush photography, the panoramic seascapes at Martha's Vineyard, and her own inventive shooting script, Liz serves up a magnificent visual feast. In one scene, a muscular mahogany Iago (played by Richard Dixon, Liz's son) wearing only a simple loin cloth tries to calm the Moor whose jet skin and towering black rage is stark against his billowing white caftan. Meeting atop the rocky cliffs at Gay Head, the two actors are dashed by strong seawinds as their voices rise above the waves crashing below.

White shortened and eliminated scenes in her adaption of the play. "I love Shakespeare", she says, but some of it is crap. Who can be magnificent all the time? Not even Shakespeare."

To meet production costs for the film which now exceed $150,000, Liz drew largely from her savings earned from more than 30 years of lucrative work in Broadway theatre. Banned from the dressers' union because of race, this bias proved providential for Liz who became a free-lancing "star dress" hired independently by the lead actress in a show. She was dresser and wardrobe mistress for Judy Holliday, Gertrude Lawrence, Jennifer Jones, Lauren Bacall in "Applause and others; and she stage managed Marlene Detrich's first U.S. national tour.

Being wardrobe mistress meant doing everything:"...dressing, answering fan mail, sewing, and on and on, plus advising them on their love life -- always 'in again, out again'!" Liz explains. "...and love, by the show's closing, these two love birds are ready to murder each other in cold blood."

The backstage work gave Liz White a good working knowledge of theatre operations and the time and means to form her own production company. To date, according to Dorkins, her "Othello" is the only feature

film that has been produced by an all black production staff and technical crew.

When the "Othello" shooting was completed in 1966, the film "went under the bed" for a few years. By the time White resumed work on it, 'blaxploitation' movies were reviving the flagging Hollywood film industry. "Shaft pulled United Artists out of the hole", White remembers. "Our kids were packing the theatres" to see these meretricious productions. "I was sick of looking at that stuff. I took my film to Warners and others. They liked it--said it was good but not commercial. It's more of an art film. So, it was 'under the bed' again."

"Then, says Liz, "I noticed there were no black films. Shot to hell, our blaxploitation movies, so maybe I can distribute this movie myself although climbing the Empire State Building would be easier. No blacks distribute film but we spend plenty of dough going to them. It's a closed shop, really--a monopoly."

Would Liz be stopped this time?

"I said to myself, "Liz, ol' girl, have a go at it' I'll try the colleges first."

The first public screening of the film was presented at Howard on April 20, 1980 by the HU Cultural Committee who learned of it through White's friend, the visual artist and HU professor emeritus, Lois Mailou Jones.

"Howard is the beginning", Liz bubbles. "And I must say everyone at Howard were perfect dolls. Love 'em, darling, love 'em.

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