

BLACK MASKS

Winter 2023

Spotlight on Black Theatre

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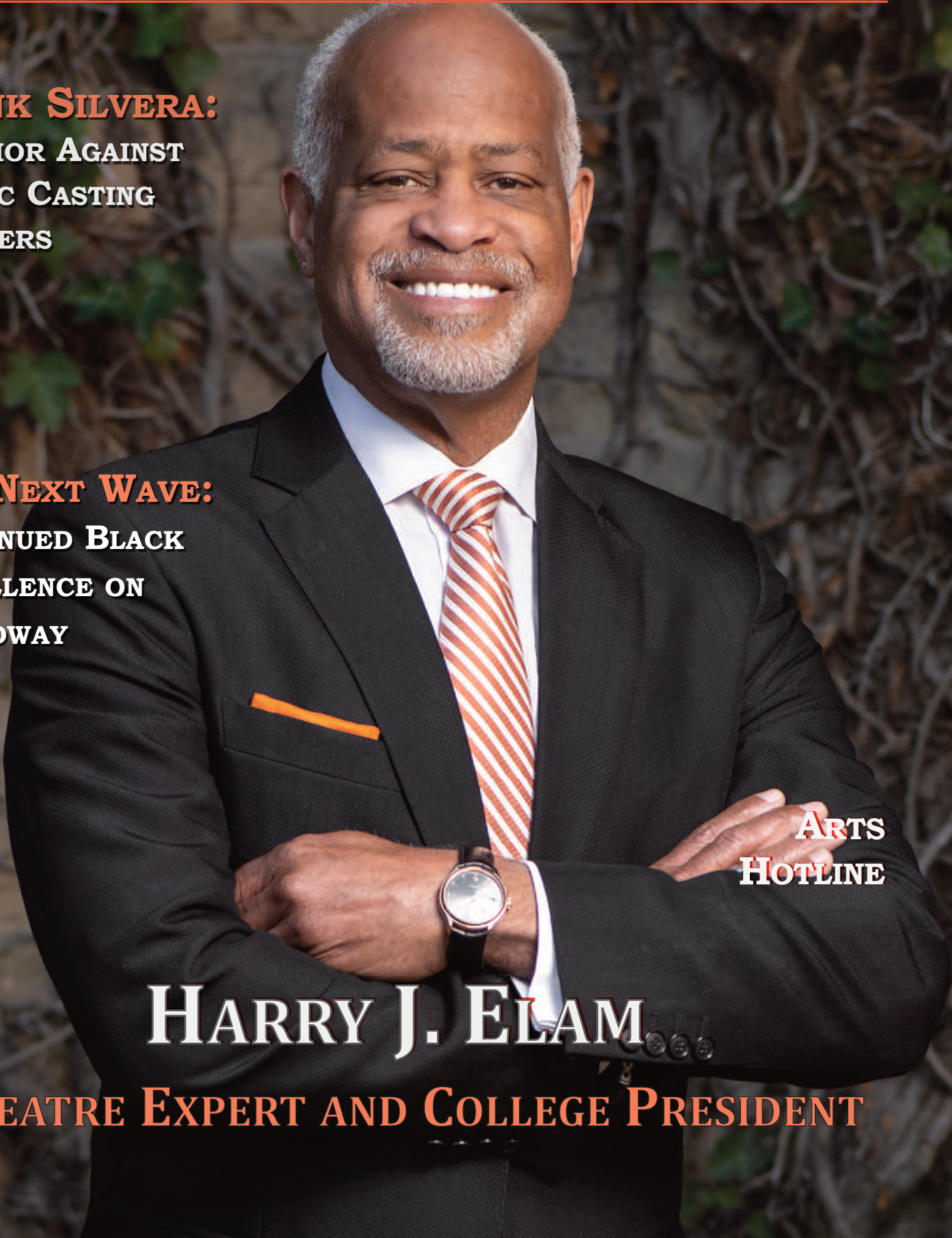
FRANK SILVERA:
WARRIOR AGAINST
ETHNIC CASTING
BARRIERS

THE NEXT WAVE:
CONTINUED BLACK
EXCELLENCE ON
BROADWAY

ARTS
HOTLINE

HARRY J. ELAM

THEATRE EXPERT AND COLLEGE PRESIDENT



HARRY J. ELAM JR.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER AND CHAMPION FOR THE ARTS

by Isaiah Matthew Wooden

An award-winning scholar, author, editor, teacher, mentor, actor, director, and administrator, Harry J. Elam Jr. has been a transformational leader and champion for the arts in higher education for four decades. On July 1, 2020, he became the sixteenth president of Occidental College (Oxy), ushering in a new era for the private liberal arts institution in Los Angeles. Before his appointment at Oxy, Elam was the senior vice provost for education, vice president for the arts, Freeman-Thornton Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, and the Olive H. Palmer Professor in the Humanities at Stanford University. He joined the faculty of Stanford's Department of Drama (now the Department of Theater and Performance Studies) in 1991 and currently holds the rank of professor emeritus. In a speech delivered April 23, 2022 at his inauguration ceremony, Elam reflected on his investments in advocating for the essentiality of the arts in our ever-evolving lives. Anchoring his message was a call for "new harmonies" that might bring about more imaginative, expansive, and just ways of being and creating in the world. He stated, "New harmonies will emerge when we challenge purportedly contradictory values that are in fact not contradictory at all. After all, equity and excellence are two sides of the same coin. Global concerns are also local. Liberal arts edu-

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Harry J. Elam Jr. giving his inauguration speech as Occidental College's 16th president on April 23, 2022, an event that had been delayed almost two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

cation can have real-world application and direct social impact."

Born and raised in the Boston area, Elam developed a deep love of the arts and of education at an early age. His parents, Harry J. Elam Sr. and Barbara Clark Elam, both were trailblazing leaders in their own right. In 1971, Elam's father became the first Black judge appointed to the Boston Municipal Court. He would later serve as the court's chief justice and as an associate justice for the Massachusetts Superior Court. Elam's mother, a lifelong activist, educator, and advocate for young people, was a librarian who also spearheaded important initiatives to promote literacy and mental health within the Black community. Both parents instilled in their children a lasting appreciation for learning, teaching, and writing. Not surprisingly, there are several artists and educators amongst the four Elam siblings.

Elam attended the Noble and Greenough School in Massachusetts and was among the students who began the Black

Student Union in 1971. He was also elected president of the Noble and Greenough school council in 1973. In addition, he helped launch a political theatre troupe called The Family at the school with several classmates and his younger brother, the pioneering hip hop artist and producer Keith "Guru" Elam. "We formed The Family ostensibly to raise scholarship funds," he explains. "The first play we did was *Day of Absence* by Douglas Turner Ward, which really galvanized us to want to do more theatre." Elam also shared in an essay in *The Boston Globe*, following the untimely death of his brother, how a subsequent production of William B. Branch's *A Medal for Willie* further proved inspiring for both siblings, affirming their passion and talent for being center stage.

After finishing high school in 1974, Elam attended Harvard University, where he earned his AB in Social Studies and served as an undergraduate commence-

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ment speaker in 1978. He enrolled in the doctoral program in Dramatic Art at the University of California, Berkeley thereafter. It was at Berkeley that he began sharpening his scholarly and pedagogical interests in African American theatre and performance. Working closely with faculty members like noted Lorraine Hansberry scholar Margaret B. Wilkerson and Black literature professor Erskine Peters, Elam received his PhD from Berkeley in 1984, writing a dissertation titled, “Theater for Social Change: The Artistic and Social Vision in Revolutionary Theater in America, 1930–1970.”

Elam’s first full-time faculty position was at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMD), where he was an assistant professor from 1984–90 and an associate professor from 1990–91. He taught a range of topics during this time, including some practice-based courses. He also worked professionally as an actor. In 1986, he was cast as Sylvester in an early regional theatre production of August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* at the Studio Theatre in Washington, DC. The project would prove life-changing and launched his decades-long association with Wilson’s body of work.

After spending a year as a visiting faculty member at Stanford, Elam left the University of Maryland for the California campus. Part of what drew him to the institution was the opportunity it presented to lead its Committee on Black Performing Arts (CBPA). Formed in 1969 in the wake of student protests for more meaningful racial progress on campus, CBPA served as an artistic and cultural hub for the Stanford community. In addition to producing shows and hosting guest artists, workshops, and masterclasses, the Committee, which scholar Sandra L. Richards steered for many years, also published a literary journal, *Black Arts Quarterly*.

Soon after Elam arrived at Stanford, budget woes sparked conversations about the viability of the Department of Drama. As he recounted in a speech delivered at the ceremony celebrating his 2019 induction into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, there were some at Stanford who viewed theatre as a recreational ac-



L.A. Cleaver

Stanford President Marc Tessier-Lavigne announced Elam’s Oxy appointment saying, “For 30 years, Stanford has benefited from Harry’s wisdom, his hard work on behalf of undergraduates and his advocacy for the arts. We’ve been proud to call him one of our own.”

tivity and thus not worthy of being a full academic department. Elam and his colleagues, who included renowned playwright-performer-activist Anna Deavere Smith, mobilized to protest the proposed cuts, using the tools of theatre and performance to make clear to administrators, students, and their peers across the campus the intrinsic value of their work and the critical role that art can play in fostering civic dialogue and engagement. These efforts proved successful. Elam would go on to garner multiple awards for his teaching at Stanford between 1992–1997.

This period would also see the publication of Elam’s first play collection, *Colored Contradictions: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama* (co-edited with Robert Alexander, Penguin Press, 1996), and a monograph, *Taking It to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Amiri Baraka and Luis Valdez* (University of Michigan Press, 1997). Building on the research he began as a graduate student, *Taking It to the Streets* provides a compelling and comparative examination of the theories, practices, and strategies that two pioneering theatre companies, Amiri Baraka’s Black Revolutionary Theatre (an overarching term Elam uses for Baraka’s two theatres—Black Arts Repertory Theatre and Spirit House) and Luis Valdez’s El Teatro Campesino, both developed and deployed in the 1960s and ‘70s to contribute to efforts to bring about radical social, political, and

cultural change. The book was groundbreaking, in part, for the innovative and interdisciplinary methods Elam brought to bear to the study of theatre, performance, race, and ethnicity.

Elam would publish five additional books: *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader* (co-edited with David Krasner, Oxford University Press, 2001) and *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (University of Michigan Press, 2004), both of which received the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) Errol Hill Award; *The Fire This Time!: A New Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama* (co-edited with Robert Alexander, Theatre Communications Group, 2004); *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Black Performance and Black Popular Culture* (co-edited with Kennell Jackson, University of Michigan Press, 2005); and *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays* (co-edited with Douglas A. Jones, Jr., Methuen Drama, 2013). *The Past as Present*, quickly became a foundational text for those interested in studying and performing August Wilson’s plays. Elam’s rigorous engagements with Wilson’s Century Cycle provided a blueprint for scholars on ways to take seriously the contributions of Black artists to the representation and exploration of Black life, history, and culture.

Even as he dedicated significant time and attention to research, writing, and teaching, Elam also continued to work as a professional director. He staged playwright-director-dramaturg Talvin Wilks’s piercing meditation on Black identity, *Tod, the Boy, Tod*, at the Oakland Ensemble Company in 1995 and helmed Wilson’s *Two Trains Running* at TheatreWorks in Silicon Valley a year later. His 1997 staging of Pearl Cleage’s *Blues for an Alabama Sky* at TheatreWorks earned widespread acclaim, garnering nine Bay Area Theater Critics Award nominations, and receiving Drama-Logue Awards for Best Direction, Best Design, Best Ensemble Cast, and Best Production. His subsequent direction of Wilson’s *Fences* and *Radio Golf* at TheatreWorks in 2000 and 2008, respectively, served to demonstrate his commitment to synthesizing theory and practice in his professional life.

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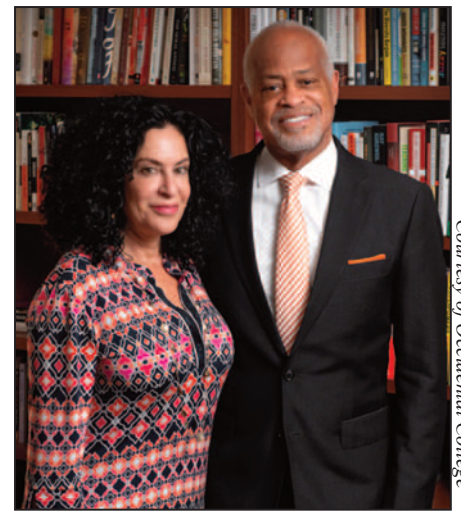
Beyond his award-winning scholarship and theatrical artistry stands Elam's record of institution-building and his remarkable dedication to providing students with generous and gracious mentorship. In 2000, building on his work with CBPA, he became the founding director of the Institute for Diversity in the Arts at Stanford (IDA). Central to IDA's mission is holding space and creating opportunities for the promotion of work by artists of color. For many years, IDA brought world-renowned artists to Stanford to teach and lead workshops with students. Choreographers Rennie Harris and Ralph Lemon, visual artists Blitz the Ambassador and Favianna Rodriguez, and writers Saul Williams and Joan Morgan are just some of the luminaries that IDA has hosted. "I am glad to see that the Institute for Diversity in the Arts is continuing on and is now on firm financial ground. That is certainly something I am really proud of and excited about," Elam remarks.

Despite ever-increasing administrative duties, Elam's verve for guiding the next generation of theatre artists, scholars, and educators has never wavered. He remains legendary for scheduling early morning phone calls with prospective students to discuss their future plans and goals and for getting meetings on the books regularly to ensure that his advisees' dissertation writing stay on track. That his graduate and undergraduate advisees include endowed professors, col-

lege and university deans, Emmy Award-winning actors, and McArthur "Genius" Fellowship recipients is a testament to the tremendous time, care, counsel, and compassion he has devoted to his students over the years. "My relationships with students—seeing people go on to do extraordinary things—is one of the things I have loved the most about being a professor. I had a great mentor, and I see it as my role to model excellent mentorship for my students. The role of the advisor does not end when a student graduates. It's a lifelong relationship," Elam reflects.

Elam is fast to acknowledge the ways having a strong familial support system helps create the conditions for him to do his best work. His wife Michele Elam, the William Robertson Coe Professor in the Humanities in the English Department at Stanford, and their daughter Claire have been especially critical in demonstrating for him the world-remaking power of love, laughter, and companionship. His scholarly collaborations with Michele have been especially generative, yielding fresh insights about the performative dimensions of race and racial formations and the reparative possibilities of narrative and storytelling, among other inquiries. In his inaugural address he gave heartfelt recognition to both, saying: "My deep thanks to my daughter Claire, who has taught me so much about the gift of parenthood. And I am so grateful for Michele—my wife, my life, my soul, my confidant, my love."

Assuming the top leadership position at Oxy during a global pandemic has cer-



Courtesy of Occidental College

tainly presented Elam with many unexpected challenges. However, it has also provided him with rich opportunities, as he asserts in his inaugural speech, to seize the moment and help "fully realize what a vibrant, relevant, social-minded liberal arts education can be" in the twenty-first century. "Being a college or university president is not so far removed from being a theatre director. What you are trying to do when you are a theatre director is inspire everybody on the production and creative teams to do their best work. You want to create an environment conducive to collaboration. The same is very much true when you are a college president. You work to create a space where faculty can be exceptional teachers in the classroom and great scholars in their fields. You also try to create an environment where everyone feels encouraged to collaborate. That again is not unlike doing theatre, where everyone is working toward a collective, collaborative vision. And, ultimately, the show must go on," Elam says. "While I may be among the very few college presidents from theatre or the arts, I think having that background has been a great asset," he states. Oxy, of course, could not have asked for a more empathetic, bold, and visionary leader to guide it through its next phase. Much as he has done for the field of theatre and performance studies, Elam will certainly make a huge difference and have a tremendous impact at the college, and in the academic and theatrical worlds in the years to come.*



Zachary Dammann

Harry J. Elam Jr. (c) with the cast of Stanford's production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.