The Schomburg Center Celebrates Howard Dodson’s 25 Years as Chief

BY CHRISTOPHER MOORE

The Schomburg Center’s staff was not going to let Howard Dodson’s most recent birthday go unmarked. A surprise 70th birthday party in early June caught the busy Chief momentarily off-guard. Taking a few minutes to receive a staff wish-list of sentiments for his continued good health, prosperity, and peace, he talked briefly and cordially with many staffers, before continuing on his indefatigable daily regiment of Schomburg Center duties, as he approaches his 25th Anniversary of service as Chief.

Reviewing Dodson’s 25 years as Chief of the Schomburg Center is to take a look not only at the Schomburg Center, but at the changes which have taken place in the world. In 1984, Rev. Jesse Jackson, like predecessors Dick Gregory and Shirley Chisholm, staged a valiant though ultimately unsuccessful run for the presidency of the United States; and New York City had yet to elect its first African-American mayor.

On September 17, 1984, after an extensive national search, Dodson began his career as Chief. Since his appointment, he has devoted his talents to making the Schomburg Center a major hub of black cultural life, an institution renowned for collecting, preserving, interpreting, and providing access to materials documenting the history and culture of Africa and the African Diaspora.

In his first newsletter address as Chief, Dodson outlined his initiatives and future plans for the Center. “What are the intellectual, historical, and cultural problems

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The Schomburg-Mellon Humanities Summer Institute

BY SYLVIANE A. DIOUF

This summer the Schomburg Center held its fifth Schomburg-Mellon Undergraduate Summer Humanities Institute to encourage minority students and others with an interest in African-American and African Diasporan Studies to pursue graduate degrees in the humanities. It is a joint effort by the Center and the Mellon Foundation, which share the deep concern of universities and learned societies regarding the low number of African-American graduate students in the humanities. Of particular concern for the Center is the paucity of graduate students in African-American and African Diasporan studies.

In order to help improve this situation, the Institute carefully selects 10 rising seniors, develops and nurtures their interest, and provides them with intellectual challenges and orientations to encourage them to pursue humanities careers and to reach their full potential. The Institute took place from June 15 to July 24. The fellows in attendance were from New York City universities and Historically

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Summer Institute fellows with their mentors and professors (back row: left) James Stewart, State University of Pennsylvania, and Salamishah Tillet, University of Pennsylvania.
“We are working to prepare for the celebration/commemoration of two anniversaries—my 25 years of service at the Schomburg Center and the Center’s 85 years of service to the nation and the world.”

So much is happening as we prepare to launch our 2009-2010 program season, that I’m having difficulty getting my head around it all. First, Michael Jackson dies and unleashes a tidal wave of alternately mourning and celebration that reverberates around the world. Then, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. manages to get himself arrested for being “housed while black,” sparking a national debate on race and racial profiling that even President Obama couldn’t avoid getting involved.

In the meantime, we have been completing a strategic visioning process, co-chaired by Dr. Henry Louis Gates and Dr. Johnnetta Cole that will help us chart the future of the Center and define the leadership qualities of my successor. Before this report could be shared, however, my boss, David Ferriero, The Andrew Mellon Director of the Research Libraries at The New York Public Library, was nominated to become the Archivist of the United States—the head of the National Archives! All of this news comes just as we are completing a major reorganization of The New York Public Library and initiating one at the Schomburg Center.

Because of the local, national, and international financial crisis, the Center and the Library have been forced to make dramatic budgetary reductions this fiscal year 2010 that began on July 1. For the Schomburg Center, this has meant cuts in the range of $1.3 million. Early retirements by several staff members helped us avoid some of the cuts, while others had to be transferred to other parts of the library. Two of my Assistant Directors, James Briggs Murray, a 39-year veteran of the library and Roberta Yancy, a 22-year veteran both decided to take the retirement option. The next issue of Africana Heritage will feature profiles on their contributions to the development of the Center over the last 25 years. Meanwhile, I am working to complete the reorganization that their and other staff members’ departures have required.

At the same time, I/we are working to prepare for the celebration/commemoration of two anniversaries—my 25 years of service at the Schomburg Center and the Center’s 85 years of service to the nation and the world. Special programs and activities have been planned to celebrate these two anniversaries throughout the year including a major retrospective exhibition in February and a Gala event in May. Please plan to participate in as many of the commemorative activities as you can.

Needless to say, given the sharp budgetary reductions, we will be decreasing the number of public programs and exhibitions we offer, and we will only produce three newsletters this year. What we promise, however, is that we will do everything we can to make each and everyone of them as entertaining, inspiring and/or educational as anything we have ever done—indeed more so. We ask that you commit and recommit yourself to support the Center and its work by giving as much as you can this year.

“We ask that you commit and recommit yourself to support the Center and its work by giving as much as you can this year.”
—Howard Dodson, Schomburg Chief
Michael Jackson: ICON

BY HOWARD DODSON

Michael Jackson’s sudden and tragic death has revealed the truly iconic status he had achieved in the world. While some of the news media has chosen to continually harp on what they have labeled as Michael’s eccentricities, especially what they have called his bizarre appearance and behavior over the last few years, his 40 years of unbroken creativity and musical genius have secured his enduring iconic status in the minds of an adoring global public. No death in the last century, including Elvis’s and Princess Diana’s has generated the kinds of spontaneous and sustained expressions of love, respect, and tribute that Michael’s passing has. His musical genius and his iconic status have earned him a permanent and revered place in the hearts, minds, and memories of people of all races, colors, creeds, cultures, and genders throughout the world. The bigger than life icon that Michael Jackson became did all of that for him. Becoming an icon has its price however. Icons frequently consume, confuse, and destroy their hosts. They compete with and frequently engulf the real self. They rob the person of their identity and privacy, then turn them into objects of prey, subvert normal human relations, and induce aberrant behavior. (Witness icons like Elvis, Anna Nicole Smith, and most recently Heath Ledger.) Such was likely the case with Michael Jackson.

The foundation of his being was an extraordinary god-given musical talent—let’s call it the genius that it was. It was enough to make him a star entertainer by the time he was 12 years old. Though the youngest member of the Jackson Five, he clearly stood head and shoulders above his older brothers as a musician, dancer, and entertainer. And no one questioned the fact that he was their leader. But he was also still himself—Michael Joseph Jackson, a talented, hard working, exuberant child prodigy whose contagious infectious spirit and energy brought joy into the lives of all who saw or heard him. Still one of the Jackson children, albeit the most talented and attractive one, Michael Jackson still struggled to live as normal a life as a genius child can live.

Michael sensed that his public wanted more and the perfectionist in him demanded that he give more, become more, become larger than his human self, become larger than life. On the way from stardom to superstardom, Michael Jackson the child prodigy invented Michael, the larger than life icon. Along the way, he lost track of who he was. Struggling to sustain the larger than life icon image—the public face and persona of superstar icon Michael, Michael Jackson still struggled to live as normal a life as a genius child can live.

Ironically, in the final analysis, his iconic status had little or nothing to do with his physical appearance. Granted, the glove, the unique military-like dress, the penny loafers, the white or sequined socks, the moonwalk and other dance moves were all props in the making of his iconic image. But it was his music and his showmanship that endeared him to his global audiences and lifted him head and shoulders above the rest of the entertainment world. The public image of Michael, the Superstar, left little room for Michael Jackson the human being to live and be. Confused, anxiety-ridden, and depressed, the warring Michael Jackson and Michael, the iconic Superstar both finally called it quits. But the musical legacy lives on.
The Gloria Foster Collection and Clarence Williams III Papers

Long before being introduced to contemporary audiences as the “Oracle” in the popular Matrix films, Gloria Foster had amassed an impressive reputation as a gifted stage and screen actress. She made her Broadway debut playing "Ruth" in Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun in 1961. Two years later she starred in Martin Duberman’s In White America, for which she won an Obie award. Foster made her film debut with, The Cool World, co-starring with future husband, actor-director Clarence Williams III, popularly known as, “Linc Hayes,” from the 1960s television series, The Mod Squad. Considered groundbreaking for his portrayal as Hayes, a
Betty Garman’s Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Files

Betty Garman was a student at Skidmore College in Upstate New York, and on the staff of the National Student Association, when the student sit-ins started in the South in the spring of 1960. In solidarity, she and other students organized a picket line at the local Woolworth. The following year, she joined efforts to raise funds through the Southern Student Freedom Fund for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Influenced by Tom Hayden’s reports on the civil rights movement in the South, she joined the newly formed Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and was at its founding convention in Port-Huron, Michigan in June 1962. She joined SNCC in March 1964, and as a member of its executive committee helped plan the Oxford, Ohio orientation for the historic Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964. Assigned to the SNCC headquarters in Greenwood, Mississippi, she helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s challenge to be seated at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Later as SNCC Northern Coordinator, she initiated Friends of SNCC groups on college campuses, and co-authored with Marion Barry “SNCC: A Special Report on Southern School Desegregation” in 1966. The collection documents Garman’s role as a Southern Student Freedom Fund activist and as a member of SNCC’s executive committee. Included are minutes of SNCC staff and executive committee meetings; daily compilations of incidents and civil rights violations reported by SNCC staff and volunteers; documents of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer project and of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party; subject files on the civil rights movement; and compilations of SNCC publications and local Mississippi community newsletters. These files complement other civil rights holdings in the Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, including the Ruth Schein, Iris Greenberg, Robert and Anita Stein, and Roberta Yancy collections.
Women’s Jazz Festival 2009

Carmen Lundy at the Women’s Jazz Festival on March 9, 2009.

Geri Allen performed on March 2, 2009.


The Harlem Opera Theater presented “Black Swan,” to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Howard Swanson on February 27, 2009.

Spelman Jazz Ensemble performed at the Center’s annual Women’s Jazz Festival on March 16, 2009.
The Fisk Jubilee Singers performed at the Center on May 22 and May 23, 2009 as part of the Carnegie Neighborhood Concert series.

St. Philips Episcopal Church Bicentennial Exhibition

Cutting the ribbon to the St. Philip’s Episcopal Church: The Bicentennial Exhibition: (l to r) Rev. Chester Lovell Talton, Bishop Suffragan of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles; Exhibition Coordinator Joyce Cleveland; New York City Council Member Inez Dickens, St. Philip’s Prest-in-Charge Rev. Rhonda J. Robinzon; Schomburg Chief Howard Dodson, and St. Philip’s Warden Elliot Bailey.
Howard Dodson: 25 Years as Schomburg Chief

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of black peoples present and future? What is the role of a modern research library/center in defining the problems and providing the resources to resolve them?” he wrote. “These questions must be addressed if the Schomburg Center is to face the future with vision, confidence, and wisdom. My concern is to situate the future development of our collections, programs, and other activities in the context of problems facing blacks and world society from today into the 21st century.”

“Prior to that time,” Dodson recalled several years later, “I had never spent more than five years working at any job. I signed on for five thinking I’d be ready for some new challenges and new opportunities at the end of my five-year tenure. Well, I was. But the most interesting challenges and opportunities I faced were right here at the Schomburg Center.”

Under Dodson’s leadership, the institution has developed into the world’s most comprehensive public research library devoted exclusively to documenting and interpreting African and African Diaspora history and culture, doubling its collections and increasing its users more than threefold in the last 25 years. Every day he brings enormous dedication, energy, creativity, and determination to the Center’s operation.

In addition to his innovations on behalf of collections, Dodson cultivated an aggressive outreach programming agenda that produces and presents 50 to 75 public educational and cultural events and four to six exhibitions annually. He has guided two unprecedented capital campaigns: the first raised private gifts as well as public funding and culminated in the opening of the Center’s renovated facilities in 1991; the second was a 75th Anniversary capital campaign that exceeded its goal and raised $26.2 million dollars. Dodson has also overseen and developed several major construction projects and programs, including: renovating the original Schomburg Center landmark building and creating the Langston Hughes Auditorium and Scholars-in-Residence Center; developing the Scholars-In-Residence, Undergraduate Summer Humanities, and Junior Scholars programs; and producing a dynamic series of publications, which include commercial book ventures as well as articles and essays in newspapers, exhibition catalogs, and professional journals.

During his tenure, the Schomburg Center has become a leader in the national and world communities of research libraries. The Center is a leader in the fields of history, literature, religion, philosophy, sociology, and
the arts. Five years ago, the emerging 21st century technological innovations deeply swayed his thinking away from retirement. “I want and need to be part of this digital and technological revolution. So, I’m re-upping!” Dodson announced in 2004. The following year the Center launched its innovative and award-winning web site In Motion: The African American Migration Experience.

His outreach efforts have brought attention to the Center in national and international arenas. Dodson served as a member of the Scientific and Technical Committee of the UNESCO Slave Route Project, and has been an advisor to numerous new archival institutions in the US and abroad. Although New York City’s cemetery of enslaved Africans, perhaps the ultimate in neglected African-American history, finally gained much belated recognition in 2006 when it was designated as a National Monument, Dodson’s role with it began in 1991. Shortly after it was unearthed in Lower Manhattan he was asked by Mayor David Dinkins, because of his leadership role at the Schomburg Center, to chair the Federal Steering Committee for the African Burial Ground project. He also organized and led the five-city reinterment ceremonies in 2003 when the remains were returned to New York from the study conducted at Howard University. The Schomburg Center has been designated as the archival repository for the African Burial Ground Project.

The Schomburg Center’s opening exhibition for 2009, Becoming American: African Americans in American Politics, featured the most remarkable presidential election in American history. It followed too the arc of the Schomburg Center’s mission, from Arturo Alphonse Schomburg to Barack Obama. The Schomburg Center’s leadership and importance to its local and national community—in so many facets of scholarship, research, history, culture, education, and learning continues. Like Howard Dodson’s birthday, we are not about to let either Dodson’s 25th Anniversary or the Schomburg Center’s 85th Anniversary in May 2010 go by without celebration!
EXHIBITIONS

Courage: The Vision to End Segregation, the Guts to Fight for It
Main Exhibition Hall and Latimer/Edison Gallery

Courage: The Black New York Struggle for Quality Education
American Negro Theater
October 2 through December 31, 2009
These two exhibitions focus on the local and national struggles for quality education in black communities during the era of legal segregation in South Carolina and black New Yorkers 200 year struggle for quality education in New York City.

Courage: The Vision to End Segregation was organized in 2004 by the Levine Museum of the New South to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

New Season of Public Education Programming at the Schomburg Center!

The Schomburg Center has heightened its commitment to serving youth and educators by creating a full season of Public Education Programs for students (grades 6-12) and teachers (in-service and pre-service). These innovative offerings include daytime programs for school groups, Saturday classes for youth, and teacher training workshops.

In conjunction with the opening of the new exhibitions, COURAGE: The Vision to End Segregation, the Guts to Fight for It and Courage: The Black New York Struggle for Quality Education, there will be two Educator Open House Events on Monday and Tuesday, October 5 and October 6 from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. School teachers and college faculty are invited to come in for exclusive tours of the exhibitions and to learn more about incorporating the Schomburg Center’s vast collections into their curriculum for the coming academic year.

On Saturday, October 24 at 10 a.m. the Public Education Program’s Fall Kick-Off Event will get the season rolling with registration for Saturday classes and fair-style information tables highlighting education and public program opportunities throughout the New York Public Library. We invite students, families, and educators to stop by and find out what’s new.

Highlights of the Public Education Program season include: A youth forum on The Human Rights of Children in collaboration with the CUNY Children’s Studies Center on Friday, November 20 at 10 a.m.; The First Annual Youth Celebration of the Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on Friday, January 15 at 10 a.m.; A week-long, daytime Black History Month Film Series for school groups from Monday, February 8 through Friday, February 12 featuring classic and contemporary film screenings at 10 a.m. and 12 p.m.; The Schomburg Center’s 9th Annual Youth Summit on Saturday, May 15 featuring multimedia youth presentations; and the debut of The Schomburg’s first Africana Heritage Quiz Bowl in June 2010!

For more information about these and other education events, visit the public program calendar at www.schomburgcenter.org, or contact, Deirdre Lynn Hollman, Public Education Programs Manager, at dhollman@nypl.org.

Get a Piece of Black History at The Schomburg Shop

Becoming American: The African-American Journey (Sterling Publishing)
By Howard Dodson

Becoming American: The African-American Journey offers a unique chronological approach that affords readers an opportunity to begin discovering the active, generative role blacks have played in the making of America as we know it today. It also reveals the ways in which blacks’ attempts to make America live up to its founding creed have kept them on the path to “Becoming American.”
Price $13.95

African Americans in Politics Postcard Book

A special commemorative postcard book, produced by the Schomburg Center and Pomegranate Communications, features 30 cards highlighting individuals and events of the black experience in American politics. This postcard book also serves as a companion piece to the Schomburg Center exhibition, African Americans and American Politics.
Price: $9.99
The Schomburg-Mellon Humanities Summer Institute

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Black Colleges and Universities. Six students joined the program from HBCUs in various states: Amber Marie Courtney (Tuskegee University), Sarah-Anne Levrette (Hampton University), Alexandra Mitchell (Howard University), Charity Pate (St Augustine’s College), Kenton Rambsy (Morehouse College), and Ana’ Marie Rector (Clark Atlanta University). From New York came Akeema Anthony (The New School University), Rachel Johnson (New York University), Alexandria Lust (Sarah Lawrence College), and Johari A. Malik (Fordham).

Nicole Burrowes, who is pursuing a Ph.D. in history and Latin American Studies at the City University of New York, and Sean Greene, a doctoral student in history at the University of Pennsylvania, served as their mentors. The students explored the theme “Africana Age:” the dominant political, economic, and cultural events of the 20th century in Africa and the African Diaspora, as well as issues of race and identity.

Twenty-five distinguished scholars from the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean, working in various disciplines such as history, English, theater, women’s studies, black studies, political science, art history, religion, and philosophy, gave the Fellows three-hour seminars every day. Among the scholars present this year were Salah Hassan (Cornell); Simon Gikandi (Princeton); Frederick Harris (Columbia); Ehi Ewere (Hunter College); Alondra Nelson (Yale); James Stewart (Penn State); Robert Hill (UCLA); Salamishah Tillet (University of Pennsylvania); Benjamin Talton (Temple); and Toyin Falola (University of Texas).

Students worked on a personal research prospectus and, as a collective project, they identified, selected and interpreted photographs, prints, articles, books, and manuscripts for the development of a website illustrating the “Africana Age.” They toured the African Burial Ground and Harlem, saw the documentary film I Bring What I Love about Senegalese singer Youssou N’Dour, and had a private discussion with its director, Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi. They went to the theater to see Lynn Nottage’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play Ruined; visited two exhibitions on African Americans in New York at the New-York Historical Society, and enjoyed a mini-cruise around the city.

Morehouse student Kenton Rambsy, an English and philosophy major, spoke for the others when he said he appreciated the rigor of the Institute. He stressed he had gotten a healthy dose of grad school prep during the six weeks. Although the program was intense—a “good intense”—he was already thinking ahead. “If I could lift weights with my mind, that’s what I was doing. From now on, I’ll be able to flex my intellectual muscles.”
A Message from the National Membership Chair

Knowing our legacy—undistorted by others and documented by those who lived it—correctly aligns you and me and our children in the continuing struggle to fully claim our dignity in all areas of life.

Please join with me and thousands of others who are making certain that the Schomburg has the funds not only to continue its unique mission, but to expand its outreach into every home, school, and library.

Please join me as a Schomburg Society Member now!

(A)FRICANA HERITAGE
The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
The New York Public Library
515 Malcolm X Boulevard
New York, NY 10037-1801

Visit the Schomburg Center On-Line at www.schomburgcenter.org

The Schomburg Center is available for space rental.
For further information contact: (212) 491-2257.

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• A quarterly program calendar
• A personalized membership card
• Up to 20% discount on tickets to select Center-sponsored programs

$100 SUPPORTER
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$2,500 HERITAGE CIRCLE
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• A private behind-the-scenes tour led by the Center’s Chief

$5,000 CHIEF’S CIRCLE
($4,810 tax deductible)
All Heritage Circle benefits, plus:
• An invitation to an annual luncheon with the Chief

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