

Davis, Harry Ellerbe ^[1]

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by Samuel Selden, 1986

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Harry Ellerbe Davis, professor of dramatic art, distinguished himself as constructional engineer, as craftsman and lighting expert, as actor and playwright, and, especially, as stage director. What established his continuing reputation as a practical theater artist, more than anything else, was his direction of [Kermit Hunter](#) ^[2]'s outdoor play on the conflict between the Cherokee Indians and the white pioneers in the Great Smoky Mountains, which Davis staged and supervised from 1952 until 1967.

The son of Braxton Bragg and Ada Boland Davis, he was born in Little Mountain, S.C. When he was five years old, his family moved to Columbia, which has long boasted one of the leading community theaters in the South. Here he attended school and went on to the [University of South Carolina](#) ^[3], from which he was graduated with an A.B. degree in English literature. He played football, and he won prizes for essays. Attracted to the Town Theatre, he became involved in acting and directing, then went to Mississippi to teach for a year at the State College for Women. In 1931, when Professor [Hubert Heffner](#) ^[4] left [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[5] to accept a position at Northwestern University in Illinois, Professor [Frederick Koch](#) ^[6], director of the [Carolina Playmakers](#) ^[7] at Chapel Hill, invited Davis to join his staff as business manager of the Playmakers and as Koch's assistant in his playwrighting classes.

Unlike many academic administrators who separate their official life from their home life, Davis made the two one. He liked to have his university colleagues and his students around him; consequently the Davis residence on Mallette Street became a favorite rendezvous for everyone interested in theater. Harry Davis and his wife Ora Mae were expert cooks. In the Davis home there was always an abundance of good food as well as good conversation.

In 1939, with the help of a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship, Davis took a year's leave of absence to do advanced study at Columbia University, from which he received an M.A. degree in 1940. In 1962 he was awarded an honorary doctorate of fine arts by [Catawba College](#) ^[8].

During World War II Davis entered the army as a private and served in England, France, and Germany, first as an interpreter in military government, then as a commissioned officer supervising education and religious activities in Upper Bavaria. For a while he helped to revise textbooks for use in postwar Germany.

Upon his return to The University of North Carolina, Davis assumed the directorship of Kermit Hunter's [outdoor drama](#) ^[9], *Unto These Hills*, and continued to administer this enterprise, summer after summer, until his death. Under his direction *Unto These Hills* ^[10] developed into a distinguished drama, drawing more than a million spectators from all over the country. It opened up new fields of employment for the Indians of the area, provided funds for the education of many of the young men and women of the mountains, and benefited the economic life of several of the surrounding counties. In 1960 Davis was elected to the board of directors of the American Educational Theatre Association. He was a member of the National Theatre Conference, the South-eastern Theatre Conference, the American National Theatre and Academy, the Cherokee Historical Association, and the Administrative Board of the Institute of Outdoor Drama. From 1960 to 1963 he served on the faculty council of the university.

When Samuel Selden went to the University of California in 1959, Davis replaced him as chairman of the Department of Dramatic Art at North Carolina and held this position until he died. He was married three times, to Ora Mae Jackson, Susanne Marden, and Anne Osterhout. Two of his wives died. He was survived by his last wife, Anne. Though he had no children of his own, he was very fond of young people and wrote and produced several plays for them.

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Who's Who in the South and Southwest (1967).

Additional Resources:

Harry Ellerbe Davis papers, 1911-1969. South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina. <http://libcat.csd.sc.edu/search/o28408848> ^[11] (accessed January 29, 2014).

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Authors:

[Selden, Samuel](#) ^[19]

Origin - location:

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