

Through the Looking Glass

An Interview with Camille Billops and James Hatch

by **Connie Winston**

Quietly nestled away on lower Broadway in New York City is the relatively inauspicious Hatch-Billops Collection, an archive of African-American memorabilia consisting of “4,000 books, 1,500 oral histories on reel-to-reel, 10,000 slides of Black art and Black artists, 1,200 theatre programs of Black actors and/or directors, playwrights... 6,000 black and white photographs, 300 lobby cards and 2,200 exhibition catalogs of Black artists as well as reels and reels of film,” says James Hatch, one-half of the double-billed, “Hatch-Billops.” The other half is Camille Billops, visual artist, filmmaker, former college professor, art consultant, scholar and Hatch’s wife, collaborator, business partner and friend. The Hatch-Billops Collection is probably one of the most important resources of Black American art and culture. Upon entering the more than 120-foot long loft that houses the Collection, you definitely step through the Looking Glass and enter a magical kingdom.

In addition to being a major collection, Hatch-Billops has also been host to one of the premiere African-American salons in New York City for the last twenty-three years. (Salons were extremely popular during the Harlem Renaissance. Renowned figures such as Madame C.J. Walker, Carl van Vechten and the Delaney Sisters opened up their homes to the Black artists and intellectuals of the time, providing a place that nurtured and espoused some of the most important critical thinkers and creative processes of their time.) The accomplishments of the Hatch-Billops’ salon have been documented in 23 published volumes of *Artist and Influence*, an annual journal featuring interviews with noted “marginalized artists” representing every type of genre conceivable. To date, more than 300 interviews have been recorded. Micki Grant, Julie Dash, Owen Dodson, Glenda Dickerson, Arthur French, P.J. Gibson, Errol Hill, Earle Hyman, Frederick O’Neal, Seret Scott, Beth Turner, George Takei and George C. Wolfe are just a few of the interviewees recognized throughout the performing arts world.

In another venture, Hatch-Billops has produced six documentaries, including *A String of Pearls* which was chosen as the premiere Diaspora film at the Toronto Festival in 2000. Another film, *Suzanne, Suzanne*, was selected by MoMA in their New Directors’ Series. Still another, *Finding Christa*, garnered for Billops the Grand Jury Prize in the 1992 Sundance Film Festival, making her the first Black woman producer/director to receive that distinction.



James Hatch and Camille Billops at a protest about fall-out shelters on the campus of UCLA in 1960.

Camille Billops and James Hatch are also theatre producers. Hatch, during the 1962-63 theatre season received an Obie for the musical, *Fly Blackbird*, which was co-written with C. Bernard Jackson. Together Billops and Hatch were awarded an Obie for “Distinguished Contribution to Off-Broadway” in 1997. Their most recent production, *Klub Ka: The Blues Legend* (based upon poet Suzanne Noguere and Hatch’s book, *The Stone House: A Blues Legend*), had its New York premiere at La MaMa, E.T.C. in February 2004.

But just who are Camille Billops and James Hatch? You might consider them to be major patrons of the Black New York “literati-art” scene, or you might call them revolutionary thinkers and intellectuals or even Renaissance warriors. Whatever appellation you decide to use to describe this dynamic duo, there is no doubt that Hatch-Billops, James and Camille, play a major role in the documentation and preservation of African-American art and culture.

Camille Billops was born in 1933 in Los Angeles. Her parents, Alma Gilmore and Lucius Billops, worked “in service”

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(continued on page 6)

Hatch & Billops...

(continued from page 5)

for a Beverly Hills family, enabling them to provide a private secondary education for Billops. From her family, Billops acquired her sense of style and decorum. In 1960, she graduated from Los Angeles State College where she majored in education for physically handicapped children. In 1961, the seeds of Hatch-Billops were first sown when Camille Billops met her future forty-year compatriot, James Hatch, professor of theatre at UCLA, through Billops' step-sister, Josie Mae Dotson, who was Hatch's student.

James Hatch was born in 1928 to a "country schoolteacher and a railroad boilermaker." He was raised in Oelwein, Iowa ("a kind of Grover's Corners of the Midwest") It was in junior high school that Hatch was first introduced to "the world of letters." He eventually made his way to Iowa State Teachers' College and enrolled as an English major. After college, he moved to Monticello, Iowa with his first wife to teach English and "direct the senior class plays." During the summer months, Hatch worked at the University of Iowa where he eventually received his Master's and Ph.D. degrees in theatre. Shortly thereafter, he moved to the West Coast on the heels of the desegregation of the schools in Little Rock, Arkansas and on the ground floor of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. At UCLA, Hatch's life took several fortuitous turns: he made the acquaintance of Bernard Jackson and met his future wife, Camille Billops. No stranger to the stage or screen, a few years earlier, Billops had appeared in Otto Preminger's, *Carmen Jones*. According to Billops, the casting director had originally cast fair-skinned women in most of the roles. However, Preminger would have none of that and promptly recast the film with women who "looked Black." (Incidentally, Billops is the "girl" wearing the flowered skirt in the café scene of the film—in case you're watching late night television.)

In 1962, Hatch received a Fulbright appointment to teach in Egypt at the High Cinema Institute. Camille Billops left her job as an occupational therapist and followed him. Indeed, in Egypt, Billops and Hatch stepped through a Looking Glass of their own. Egypt, in the early 1960s, was a cradle of the Pan-African Movement which, in turn, stoked the flames of the American Civil Rights Movement. They made the acquaintances of W.E.B. Du Bois in Accra, Du Bois's step-son, David and Maya Make, a.k.a. Maya Angelou. It was also in Cairo that Hatch and Billops made their first collaboration. He co-authored a book of poetry with Ibrahim Ibn Ismail entitled *Poems for Niggers and Crackers*; Camille drew the illustrations.

The young couple returned to the States shortly after the

Kennedy assassination. Their friend Leo Hamalian, secured a teaching position for Hatch at City College. Camille matriculated as a graduate student in art and was soon hired to teach ceramics, a position she held for five years before moving on to Rutgers University where she taught for fourteen years.

In 1965, as a result of intense Black and Hispanic student protests, the City College of New York instituted an "Open Admissions" policy. Until that time, students of color were sub-

tly discriminated against, based upon unfair admissions requirements. Hence, the majority of students that matriculated at City College and most other colleges throughout the country were white. Hatch says, "Suddenly my theatre history classes were filled with Harlem faces. I had no African American plays or Black theatre history to teach them." After extensive research on the history of Black theatre and plays (those written by Black playwrights and/or those with Black characters), Hatch, with Black theatre scholar and playwright Ted Shine, published *Black Theater USA, 45 Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974*. This volume would become the first "historical anthology" ever of Black playwrighting.

In 1972, as a direct result of "Open Admissions," The Hatch-Billops Collection was brought to life and incorporated as a library in 1975 under the New York State Board of Regents. During that same year, Billops ran into director Richard Schechner and asked if

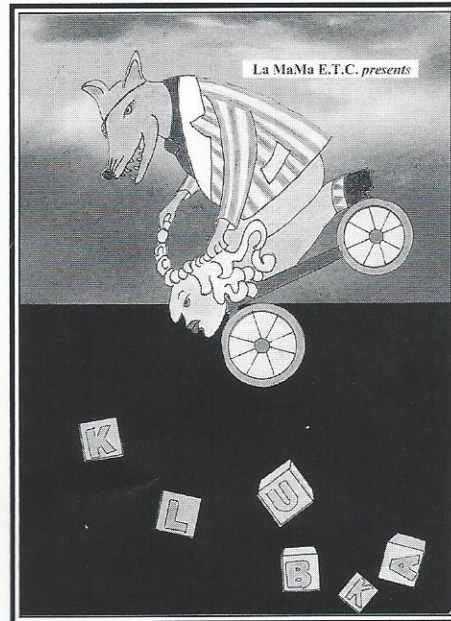
he knew of any loft spaces that might be available. Schechner informed her that Richard Foreman was "co-oping a building at Broadway and Broome." Billops telephoned Foreman and made an inquiry. Foreman said, "Bring me \$11,000." Hatch promptly cashed in his life insurance policy and took a check to Foreman, who slipped it into his pocket and said, "Thanks." "May I have a receipt?" Hatch asked. Foreman shrugged and grabbed a brown paper bag off the floor, tore the side out and wrote, "Received \$11,000 from... what's your name?" And so, the loft home of The Hatch-Billops Collection was purchased "sight unseen."

Almost thirty years later, The Hatch-Billops Collection is more than meets the eye. Unlike many museums and galleries that "contain memories of the dead," the Collection is a living testament to the lives of Camille Billops and James Hatch. "It's about creating your own access... [demystifying] the power. Who do you think you are? Who do you dream of?" asks Camille Billops, who has taken her "anger and frustration" with the "System" and manifested it in something positive, long-lasting and...accessible.

Today, the mission of the Collection is threefold:

- 1) To collect and preserve primary and secondary

(continued on page 14)



Camille Billops' illustration for *Klub Ka: The Blues Legend*, a new play by James Hatch and Suzanne Noguere, which was recently produced at La MaMa's E.T.C. in February 2004.

Hatch-Billops...

(continued from page 6)

resources in the Black cultural arts;

2) To provide access to these materials to artists, scholars and the general public;

3) To develop programs in the arts that would use the materials in the Collection.

As Hatch progressed in his research of Black American theatre history and conducted interviews for his oral histories, he discovered that nearly every person interviewed had a story to tell about "white exploitation." When Hatch first made the acquaintance of Bernard Jackson, he stated the same thing that Billops speaks of today, that "White males have always had Affirmative Action," making reference to the systemized obstacles faced by Blacks in general and Black artists, in particular, who have been hindered in accessing the power that should be made available to all. Needless to say, as Hatch began to receive recognition as a respected scholar and researcher of Black American theatre history, he often met with severe criticism and suspicion and was accused, as historian Lofton Mitchell said, of "exploiting Black artists by publishing their plays and theatre histories."

In the meanwhile, as Hatch continued to make a name for himself, so too did Camille Billops. She has held several one-person exhibits, beginning in 1965, at the Gallery Akhnaton in Cairo, Egypt, as well as in Taipei, Republic of China and in Hamburg, Germany. Perhaps one of Billops' best known works is the now out-of-print, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, a collaborative effort with legendary Harlem photographer James Van Der Zee and poet Owen Dodson, who was also an accomplished Black theatre scholar and playwright.

To call Camille Billops' works "unique," in whatever medium she may be using, is an understatement. Upon first viewing her work, you are hit with a sense of complete "unabashedness." The artist makes no excuses and takes no prisoners. One of her most provocative works, *The KKK Boutique Ain't Just Rednecks*, was created in 1994 as a film and a series of paintings, prints and mosaics (including mirrors) depicting stereotypical images of Black America from Jim Crow to the present. The messages conveyed reflect the sheer absurdity of American racism.

During a tour of the Archives, which is also Hatch and Billops' home, you are graciously given a lesson in the importance of documenting Black America. You can point to any one of the hundreds of drawings, paintings, prints, sculptures, photographs that line the walls of the 3900 square foot

Hatch-Billops space and Camille Billops will give you a complete history, almost down to the moment, that the artwork was created: who, what, when, where and why. "It's all about documentation," Billops says, time and again. "No one rescues us....Ain't nobody comin' for us....You are your best resource."

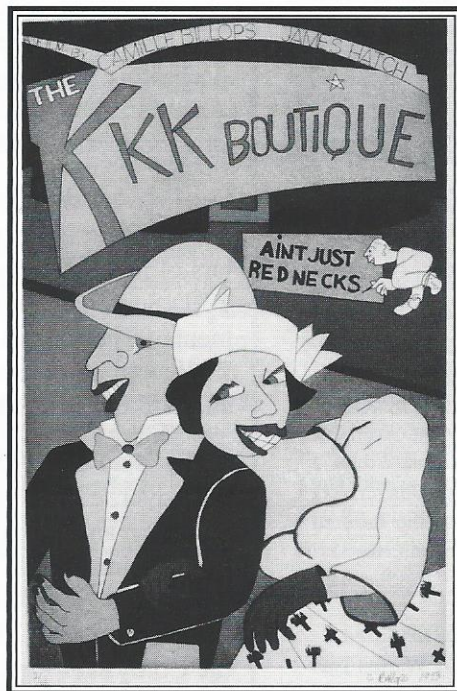
So, what's next? Do Hatch and Billops retire to a seaside resort in Florida and watch the tides roll in and out? Hardly. Hatch's most recent book, *A History of African American Theatre*, co-written with the late Errol G. Hill, formerly of

Dartmouth College, was released in November 2003 by Cambridge University Press. In June 2004, Hatch will receive (and posthumously for Hill) the Theatre Library Association's George Freedley Memorial Award, honoring excellence in writing on live theater during 2003. Presently, Billops and Hatch are developing their next film. Also, the "line-up" for *Artists and Influence, 2004-2005* is already in place. Prospectively, they include visual artists, Moe Booker, Carrie Mae Weems, Mel Edwards, Cynthia Hawkins and Ted Pontiflet; Bob Lee, director of the Asian Arts Institute; Joe Weixlmann, editor of *African-American Review*; dramaturg Sydné Mahone; performance artist, Ruben Santiago-Hudson; Margaret Burroughs, founder of the DuSable Museum in Chicago; and taken from the Archives, journalist David DuBois and actress Beatrice Winde.

Although the Hatch-Billops Collection is funded in part by the New York State Council for the Arts and the

National Endowment for the Arts, Hatch and Billops are not beholden to a "higher power." They dance to the beat of their own drum. Thus, they have the distinct privilege of deciding to whom they will leave the Archives. The lucky recipient is Atlanta's Emory University where the voluminous Hatch-Billops archives will join the papers of John Killens, and Louise Patterson, as well as the music collections of William Dawson and Geneva Handy Southall.

Being in the company of Camille Billops and Professor James Hatch is like being in the company of kindred spirits from long ago. It is at once exciting and relaxing. When you enter their world you have entered a world that is vibrant, visceral, tangible, and...accessible. Memories of childhoods and a time that was better than now spring forth. You can remember the beauty and creation of a people that today's society tends to forget and sometimes dismisses. History, memory, the art of remembering reside here. You are also taken with the mutual respect and admiration that Camille Billops and James Hatch have for each other. On the other side of the Looking Glass with them, you are at home.*



One of Camille Billops' paintings from her award-winning film and series of artwork entitled *The KKK Boutique Ain't Just Rednecks*.