



Theatre Naming Campaign
in honor of

Dr. Vernell Audrey Watson Lillie
May 11, 1931 – May 11, 2020

Dr. Vernell Audrey Watson Lillie was a force in Pittsburgh theatre for 39 years. Founder and Artistic Director of **Kuntu Repertory Theatre**, Dr. Lillie attended Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she earned a B.A. degree in Speech and Drama. Upon graduation in 1952, she returned to Texas where she married jazz musician, Richard L. Lillie, Jr. They had been friends since childhood. Two daughters were born to this union – Charisse R. Lillie and Marsha D. Lillie.

While in Houston, Dr. Lillie began what would become a distinguished career in the theatre community producing and directing local productions at Worthington and Wheatley High Schools where Dr. Lillie taught Speech and Drama for nineteen years. Dr. Lillie was a member of the Black Theatre Movement in the late sixties. In 1969, Vernell and Richard moved to pursue her doctoral studies in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Dr. Lillie earned her Master of Arts (1970) and Doctor of Arts in English (1971) from Carnegie Mellon University and in 1972 joined the faculty of the **University of Pittsburgh**, where she served as an **Associate Professor in the Department of Africana Studies** until her retirement in 2006.

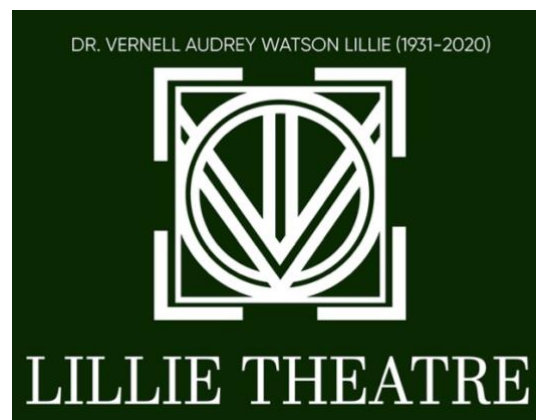
Dr. Lillie's love for the theatre continued and she influenced the lives of hundreds of theater-makers locally and nationally through mentorship, leadership, and inspiration. **At City Theatre, she had a hand in more than a dozen productions** through casting, co-producing, and partnership. Artists like Montae Russell, Javon Johnson, Ron McClelland, Linda Hunt, Don Marshall, Ben Cain, and many others came to share the stage at City Theatre over the years. Kuntu was unique because it was a university theatre but rooted in Pittsburgh's Black community. Lillie used drama to educate while being deeply entertaining and enriching. Kuntu naturally developed into a supportive community for Black writers, actors, and artists.

Noted playwrights, including **Rob Penny** and **August Wilson** among numerous others, were closely associated with Kuntu. The theatre sponsored countless activities which highlight the African American community. Dr. Lillie directed many productions including: *The Buffalo Soldiers Plus One*, *Little Willie Armstrong Jones*, *Whispers Want Her to Holler*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Good Black Don't Crack*, *Mahalia Jackson: Standing on Holy Ground*, *Sister Son/ji*, *Homecoming*, *Radio Golf*, and Chadwick Boseman's *Hieroglyphic Graffiti*.

Dr. Lillie was the recipient of many prestigious awards including:

- University of Pittsburgh “Chancellor’s Distinguished Teaching Award.”
- “Outstanding Award for Women in the Arts” by Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., (President of the Houston chapter).
- 2003 “Career Achievement in Education Award” from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.
- “Lifetime Achievement Award” by the National Black Theatre Festival in 2005.
- Pennsylvania Governor’s “Creative Community Award.”
- “Distinguished Daughters of Pennsylvania” by Governor Tom Ridge.

With the naming of the **Dr. Vernell Audrey Watson Lillie Theatre** at City Theatre, we honor her legacy of excellence and accomplishment, and recognize the critical and transformative impact she had on African American artists and lovers of theater nationwide. Dr. Lillie was a passionate woman and made the world and community a better place through her art and her influence. Funds raised will support facility and equipment upgrades, lobby improvements, programming, operations, rebranding, and recognition for Dr. Lillie’s life and career in Pittsburgh’s premier intimate theater space.



ABOUT CITY THEATRE:

Now in its 47th season and the largest performing arts organization outside of Pittsburgh's Cultural District, City Theatre’s mission is *to provide an artistic home for the development and production of contemporary plays that engage and challenge a diverse audience.* Its recently completed strategic plan affirmed this mission and established the following core values: *Community; Collaboration; Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility; and Creativity.* These values, along with the organization's vision to be the finest mid-size theater in America, are lived out through an annual season that features five new plays; special events; a robust education program (Young Playwrights, now in its 21st year) that serves 35 classrooms throughout the region; a new play festival; and its signature annual block-party, “The Bash” (September 2022). In addition, City Theatre has become a national leader in the intersection between art and community with its "City Connects" program that ensures the work and stories seen on its stages are accessible and available to all facets of the Pittsburgh community. As part of this initiative, the organization has innovated with unique pricing models, namely its "Pick Your Price Previews," which allow patrons to see world-class art for as little as \$5. Over 40% of these patrons have never attended a play at City Theatre before. The organization serves over 30,000 individuals annually and continually provides some of the most diverse -- in terms of gender, race, and style -- programming and creative teams of any cultural organization in Pittsburgh. **CityTheatreCompany.org**