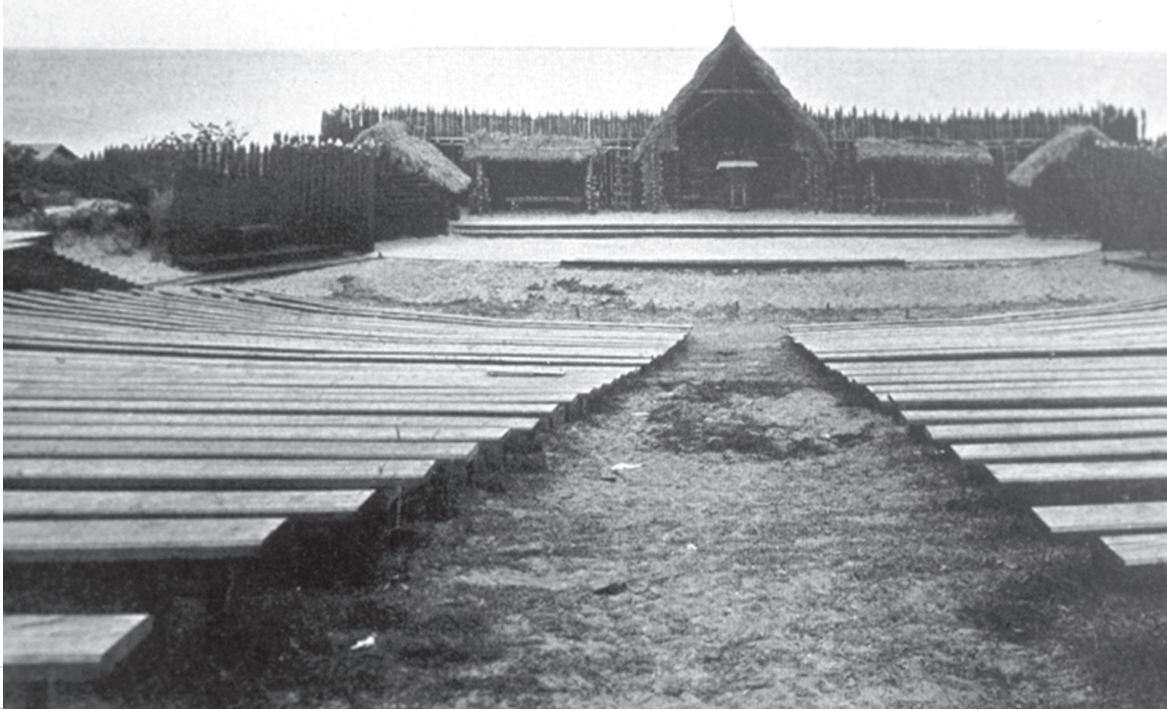


COURTESY OF BETSY GREEN MOYER AND THE PAUL GREEN FOUNDATION



“(WHAT) THE AMERICAN PUBLIC NEEDS”: A “THEATER OF THE PEOPLE”

FEBRUARY 2009

an interview with **PAUL GREEN**

by William Howard Rough

notes added by NCLR editor

IN REVISITING THE TRANSCRIPT OF AN interview conducted almost a half-century ago, I am struck by the graciousness and kindness of a man I met only one time. I am also struck by the naïveté and contradictions of myself as interviewer, this pretentious radical-leftist-conservative young patriot. Paul Green would never know how great an influence he had over how I would choose to conduct my life and the things I would find to be important in it.

Under the guidance of the distinguished Charles Davis, Princeton's first African American professor and my academic advisor, I had determined in the spring of 1960 that I would write my undergraduate senior thesis on the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paul Green. I knew him as the author of *The Lost Colony*, which I had been enjoying every summer on the Outer Banks of North Carolina since I was nine years old. So I read a few more of his plays, spent the following summer visiting several outdoor dramas, and knocked on the Greens' door in Chapel Hill on the evening of August 26, 1960.

ABOVE Roanoke Island's Waterside Theatre, stage of Paul Green's *The Lost Colony*, 1937

RIGHT TOP AND BOTTOM Paul Green in his home on Greenwood Road in Chapel Hill

In re-reading the interview in 2009, I recall that there was one small piece missing from our conversation. As the interview concluded, we paused at his front door, and he asked me what I was going to do with my life and if I had ever tried to write any plays myself. "No," I replied, and stumbled on about how I wasn't really up to the task, how theater and drama were sideline interests of mine only, a "frivolous interest" as defined by my parents. No, I planned on going into international diplomacy or some such profession that might earn me a decent living. He nodded, smiled knowingly, and wished me well.

After graduating from Princeton, I went on to get a master's degree in International Education from Columbia and then became a high school English teacher in New England. I quickly took up teaching drama and directing plays, acting in a few along the way, and subsequently I enjoyed a long and rewarding career in theater education.

And then, finally, I began to write my own plays. All too belatedly, Thank you, Paul Green.¹



COURTESY OF THE PAUL GREEN FOUNDATION



COURTESY OF THE PAUL GREEN FOUNDATION

26 AUGUST 1960

It was a large white house, located in a well-to-do suburban neighborhood in Chapel Hill. As I walked up the path to Paul Green's residence, the only things that disturbed the silence of the night were the bustle of a light drizzle and the tapping of a typewriter from somewhere inside the house. The front door stood wide open, and as I rang the doorbell, I wondered if the man would be as friendly as his house appeared. Almost immediately a voice called for me to come in, and as I nervously opened the door, Mr. Green arrived from the next room. He looked somewhat older than I would have expected from his pictures but certainly much younger than his sixty-six years.

PAUL GREEN: Well, where would you like to begin? I guess you've had quite a trip by now, haven't you? You must be getting pretty fed up with driving.

WILLIAM HOWARD ROUGH: *It surely has been a fine trip, but I've been lucky on the driving. I left Washington just a week ago this morning and drove straight to Winston-Salem. I met a friend there, left my car in a garage, and we drove the rest in his little Morris. I guess he didn't trust my driving because he did most of it, and I can't say I really minded.*

Now just what plays did you finally get to see?

¹ The following interview has been edited only minimally from Rough's original typescript. Rough had transcribed the interview as a narrative and used quotation marks, paragraph breaks, and some interspersed narration to distinguish the voices of the interviewer and interviewee.

Employing *NCLR's* usual format for interviews, italics were added to the interviewer's questions to distinguish them more clearly from the playwright's responses. Also, the introductory narrative was shortened somewhat.