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## Library acquires papers of Kuntu Repertory co-founder Rob Penny

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The University Library System has acquired the papers of Rob Penny, former chair of the Black Community Education, Research, and Development department (now the Department of Africana Studies) and a noted activist, playwright, and poet.

“With the acquisition of Rob Penny’s papers, the University Library System is proud to continue to be a repository of such influential voices of Black performing arts and culture for both the region and the nation,” said Ed Galloway, associate University librarian for Archives & Special Collections. “The Penny papers, along with those of August Wilson, Erroll Garner, Vernell Lillie, Sala Udin, Bob Johnson, Bebe Moore Campbell, K. Leroy Irvis, Albert French, Tim Stevens and the records of the Kuntu Repertory Theatre Company, create a significant body of research materials on Black Voices in America held by Pitt.”

The Penny collection includes approximately 150 boxes, with correspondence, writing tablets, photographs, scripts, audio and video recordings, awards, books and magazines. The collection documents Penny’s career as an instructor in the Africana/Black Studies department and includes production files and scripts for Kuntu Repertory Theatre performances, handwritten and typed poetry by Penny, documentation on the activities of the Kuntu Writer’s Workshop, and meeting minutes for the local chapter of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America.

Penny was born in Opelika, Ala., in 1941, but grew up in Pittsburgh’s Hill District where he was childhood friends with August Wilson and Sala Udin, a Pittsburgh activist and former city councilman.

“We called him Oba — Yoruba for king,” said Udin when describing Penny. “Oba was a quiet, but strong king. He, August and I were educated in the Catholic school system in the Lower Hill District, and then at Central Catholic High School. He wrote revolutionary poetry and plays incessantly.”

In 1965, Penny, along with Nicholas Flournoy, Chawley Williams, and Wilson, cofounded the Centre Avenue Poets, and according to Larry Glasco, associate professor of History, “set out to write poetry that would capture life on and around Centre Avenue.”

Penny was hired as part of the first cohort of faculty for the department of Black Community Education, Research, and Development by Curtiss Porter and Jack Daniels in 1969. He served as chairman of the department from 1978 through 1984. As an associate professor, he taught several courses, including Black Consciousness, Introduction to Black American Theatre, and Introduction to Black Poetry in America.

Along with Vernell Lillie, Penny founded the Kuntu Repertory Theatre in 1974. Penny served as the playwright-in-residence of the Kuntu theater for nearly 30 years, writing many of the plays they staged, including their first production, “Little Willie Armstrong Jones.” His plays were produced by the New Federal Theatre and the Billie Holiday Theatre in New York and other venues across the U.S.

In 1976, Penny, along with Wilson, launched the Kuntu Writer’s Workshop, which helped local writers develop and publish their work.

Penny died at his home in the Hill District in 2003.

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