

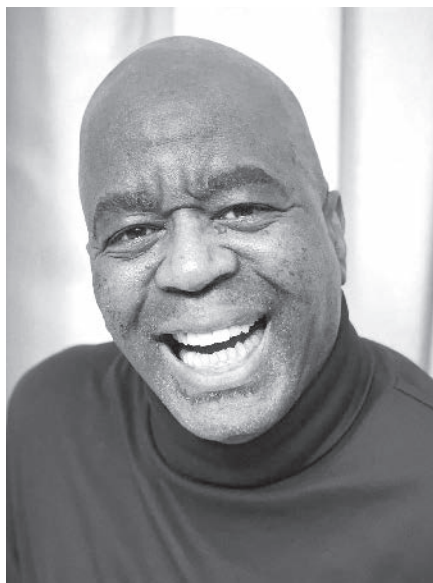
## KENNETH LEE ROBERSON

Kenneth Roberson joined the Indiana University theatre and dance faculty in 2014, bringing with him a long, varied, and deep career in theatre. A Georgia native, he grew up loving dance, but wasn't sure he could see himself having a career in that field. With a sense of responsibility to his family and community, he attended the University of Georgia, graduating with a degree in journalism. Afterwards, he landed a job at a newspaper in Athens, Georgia, but he knew he wasn't following his true passion: theatre and dance. He auditioned for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater after having enlisted in one of the company's workshops in Atlanta, won a spot with a scholarship from the prestigious dance company's school, and moved to New York.

There, he studied with legendary tap dance choreographer and teacher Henry LeTang, who recommended he look into a new musical titled *Black and Blue*, a celebration of black culture in Paris from the 1910s to the 1940s. Kenneth was cast in the show, which originated in Paris. The show eventually moved to New York and Kenneth made his Broadway debut. He was also featured in the European tour of *Sophisticated Ladies*, a revue of the music of Duke Ellington, and appeared on Broadway in a revival/revision of the Gershwin musical *Oh, Kay!* and the new musical *Jelly's Last Jam*.

During this time, he started to explore a living as a choreographer. In 1998 he provided the musical staging for John Leguizamo's play *Freak* on Broadway (also filmed for HBO), and brought "uplifting movement and physicality to every scene" (*Variety* review) in the New York City Centre Encore! production of the musical *Purlie!* He choreographed the same show in Chicago at the Goodman Theatre. He also choreographed the national tours of Frank Wildhorn's *The Civil War*, *Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella*, and *Guys and Dolls*.

Off-Broadway he choreographed *A Boy and His Soul* at the Vineyard Theatre and directed and choreographed *Jazz a La Carte* and *Harlem Song* at the world famous Apollo Theater. He then landed a job choreographing a new musical that spoofed television's *Sesame Street* while aiming the humor at a more mature audience at the Vineyard. The show incorporated puppets and humans inhabiting the same slightly cynical world:



*Avenue Q*. The show successfully moved to Broadway and won Antionette Perry Awards (Tonys) for Best Musical and for Best Original Score. What followed was a long run on Broadway as well as a national tour. After a six-year run at the Golden Theatre on Broadway, *Avenue Q* returned to its off-Broadway roots for a lengthy run at New World Stages. Kenneth continued to work as a choreographer on the Broadway productions of *Drowning Crow* (inspired by Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*) and *All Shook Up*, which was inspired by and featured the songs of Elvis Presley.

In regional theatre, Kenneth directed the world premiere of *Frog Kiss* at Virginia Stage Company; *Ethel* (also a world premier), a one-woman musical about Ethel Waters, at Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theatre and Alabama Shakespeare Festival; *Crowns*, *Lady Day at the Emerson Bar and Grill*, and *Ain't Misbehavin'*, all at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C.; and *Once on This Island*, Baltimore Center Stage. Most recently, he directed *Nina Simone: Four Women* in Chicago, and he will revisit that show at Merrimack Repertory Theatre in Lowell, Massachusetts, in January 2020.

As a choreographer in regional theatre, he worked on the world premieres of *Ray Charles Live!* at the Pasadena Playhouse and *The Color Purple* at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta. He has taught workshops specializing in the black vernacular of theatre dance across the globe, including in New York City; Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Stuttgart, Germany; and Osaka, Japan.

His work on the screen has been seen in HBO's *Lackawanna Blues*, *Preaching to the Choir*, *Brother to Brothe*, and the Fox television series *House of Buggin* starring John Leguizamo, for which Kenneth received an Emmy Awards nomination for his choreography. He is the recipient of two NAACP Awards, two Lucille Lortel Award nominations (for the off-Broadway productions of *Avenue Q* and *A Boy and his Soul*), and a Drama Desk Award nomination (for *Harlem Song*), along with an AUDELCO (Audience Development Committee) Award, BET Spirit Award, and NPT Spirit Award.

At Indiana University, he has directed and choreographed *Into the Woods*, *Sweet Charity*, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, *Urinetown*, *Dames at Sea*, and most recently, *Pippin*, upon IU theatre's main stages. In the academic studio, he has taught intermediate and advanced tap classes, Broadway dance styles, and an ever-popular and unique class called Devised Theatre Through the Medium of Solo Performance, in which students learn the craft of bringing their own stories forth in theatrical writing.

Not having completely given up performing himself, Kenneth has been working on his one-man show, titled *Middle Aged Passage Crisis*, which has garnered a cult following and played Joe's Pub in New York City and Baltimore Center Stage in Maryland.

"I love working with the students," he said to *Inside IU Bloomington's* Daniel Morgan in a 2015 interview. "They're so full of energy, and they're the reason I'm here." Kenneth's love of theatre and dance is inextinguishable, and the students (and colleagues) who have been the beneficiaries of that joy will never be without it again.

Richard Roland