

LeRoi Jones, Home: Social  
Essays  
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## the revolutionary theatre

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The Revolutionary Theatre should force change; it should be change. (All their faces turned into the lights and you work on them black nigger magic, and cleanse them at having seen the ugliness. And if the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves.) We are preaching virtue again, but by that to mean NOW, toward what seems the most constructive use of the world.

The Revolutionary Theatre must EXPOSE! Show up the insides of these humans, look into black skulls. White men will cower before this theatre because it hates them. Because they themselves have been trained to hate. The Rev-

olutionary Theatre must hate them for hating. For presuming with their technology to deny the supremacy of the Spirit. They will all die because of this.

The Revolutionary Theatre must teach them their deaths. It must crack their faces open to the mad cries of the poor. It must teach them about silence and the truths lodged there. It must kill any God anyone names except Common Sense. The Revolutionary Theatre should flush the fags and murders out of Lincoln's face.

It should stagger through our universe correcting, insulting, preaching, spitting craziness—but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments. People must be taught to trust true scientists (knowers, diggers, oddballs) and that the holiness of life is the constant possibility of widening the consciousness. And they must be incited to strike back against *any* agency that attempts to prevent this widening.

The Revolutionary Theatre must Accuse and Attack anything that can be accused and attacked. It must Accuse and Attack because it is a theatre of Victims. It looks at the sky with the victims' eyes, and moves the victims to look at the strength in their minds and their bodies.

Clay, in *Dutchman*, Ray in *The Toilet*, Walker in *The Slave*, are all victims. In the Western sense they could be heroes. But the Revolutionary Theatre, even if it is Western, must be anti-Western. It must show horrible coming attractions of *The Crumbling of the West*. Even as Artaud designed *The Conquest of Mexico*, so we must design *The Conquest of White Eye*, and show the missionaries and wiggly Liberals dying under blasts of concrete. For sound effects, wild screams of joy, from all the peoples of the world.

The Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them a reality. It must isolate the ritual and historical cycles of reality. But it must be food for all those who need food, and daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human

Mind. It is a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dim-witted fatbellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on.

This should be a theatre of World Spirit. Where the spirit can be shown to be the most competent force in the world. Force. Spirit. Feeling. The language will be anybody's, but tightened by the poet's backbone. And even the language must show what the facts are in this consciousness epic, what's happening. We will talk about the world, and the preciseness with which we are able to summon the world will be our art. Art is method. And art, "like any ashtray or senator," remains in the world. Wittgenstein said ethics and aesthetics are one. I believe this. So the Broadway theatre is a theatre of reaction whose ethics, like its aesthetics, reflect the spiritual values of this unholy society, which sends young crackers all over the world blowing off colored people's heads. (In some of these flippy Southern towns they even shoot up the immigrants' Favorite Son, be it Michael Schwerner or JFKennedy.)

The Revolutionary Theatre is shaped by the world, and moves to reshape the world, using as its force the natural force and perpetual vibrations of the mind in the world. We are history and desire, what we are, and what any experience can make us.

It is a social theatre, but all theatre is social theatre. But we will change the drawing rooms into places where real things can be said about a real world, or into smoky rooms where the destruction of Washington can be plotted. The Revolutionary Theatre must function like an incendiary pencil planted in Curtis Lemay's cap. So that when the final curtain goes down brains are splattered over the seats and the floor, and bleeding nuns must wire SOS's to Belgians with gold teeth.

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Our theatre will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are the brothers of victims, and that they themselves are victims if they are blood brothers. And what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they will find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught. We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means some soul will be moved, moved to actual life understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be. We are preaching virtue and feeling, and a natural sense of the self in the world. All men live in the world, and the world ought to be a place for them to live.

What is called the imagination (from image, magi, magic, magician, etc.) is a practical vector from the soul. It stores all data, and can be called on to solve all our "problems." The imagination is the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as "things." Imagination (Image) is all possibility, because from the image, the initial circumscribed energy, any use (idea) is possible. And so begins that image's use in the world. Possibility is what moves us.

The popular white man's theatre like the popular white man's novel shows tired white lives, and the problems of eating white sugar, or else it herds bigcaboosed blondes onto huge stages in rhinestones and makes believe they are dancing or singing. **WHITE BUSINESSMEN OF THE WORLD, DO YOU WANT TO SEE PEOPLE REALLY DANCING AND SINGING??? ALL OF YOU GO UP TO HARLEM AND GET YOURSELF KILLED. THERE WILL BE DANCING AND SINGING, THEN, FOR REAL!!** (In *The Slave*, Walker Vessels, the black revolutionary, wears an armband, which is the insignia of the at-

tacking army—a big red-lipped minstrel, grinning 'like crazy.)

The liberal white man's objection to the theatre of the revolution (if he is "hip" enough) will be on aesthetic grounds. Most white Western artists do not need to be "political," since usually, whether they know it or not, they are in complete sympathy with the most repressive social forces in the world today. There are more junior birdmen fascists running around the West today disguised as Artists than there are disguised as fascists. (But then, that word, *Fascist*, and with it, *Fascism*, has been made obsolete by the words *America*, and *Americanism*.) The American Artist usually turns out to be just a super-Bourgeois, because, finally, all he has to show for his sojourn through the world is "better taste" than the Bourgeois—many times not even that.

Americans will hate the Revolutionary Theatre because it will be out to destroy them and whatever they believe is real. American cops will try to close the theatres where such nakedness of the human spirit is paraded. American producers will say the revolutionary plays are filth, usually because they will treat human life as if it were actually happening. American directors will say that the white guys in the plays are too abstract and cowardly ("don't get me wrong . . . I mean aesthetically . . .") and they will be right.

The force we want is of twenty million spooks storming America with furious cries and unstoppable weapons. We want actual explosions and actual brutality: AN EPIC IS CRUMBLING and we must give it the space and hugeness of its actual demise. The Revolutionary Theatre, which is now peopled with victims, will soon begin to be peopled with new kinds of heroes—not the weak Hamlets debating whether or not they are ready to die for what's on their minds, but men and women (and minds) digging out from

under a thousand years of "high art" and weak-faced dalliance. We must make an art that will function so as to call down the actual wrath of world spirit. We are witch doctors and assassins, but we will open a place for the true scientists to expand our consciousness. This is a theatre of assault. The play that will split the heavens for us will be called THE DESTRUCTION OF AMERICA. The heroes will be Crazy Horse, Denmark Vesey, Patrice Lumumba, and not history, not memory, not sad sentimental groping for a warmth in our despair; these will be new men, new heroes, and their enemies most of you who are reading this.

## Into Nationalism, Out of Parochialism

by Larry Neal

We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means more soul will be moved, moved to actual life understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be. We are preaching virtue and feeling, and a natural sense of the self in the world. All men live in the world, and it ought to be a place for them to live.

IMAMU BARAKA

It took a long time for the idea of nationalism and the making of black theater to come together. The nationalists of the twenties—the back-to-Africa and separate-states movements—didn't have any understanding of, or interest in, cultural activities. For example, something in Garvey's Jamaican colonial background had left him in awe of European culture; even the uniforms of the United Negro Improvement Association looked like imitations of a bizarre Austro-Hungarian guard troupe. The depth of Garvey's misunderstanding is vividly illustrated in a description from Harold Cruse's *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*:

Garvey held a mass meeting at Carnegie Hall, in downtown New York City. It was packed to overflowing; white people attended too as it was well advertised in white newspapers.... Items on the musical part of the program were: Ethel Clarke, Soprano, singing Eckert's "Swiss Song" and Cavello's "Chanson Mimi"; The Black Star Line Band, in smart uniforms, rendering overtures from *Rigoletto* and *Mirello*; the New York Local Choir, fully robed,

"Into Nationalism, Out of Parochialism" by Larry Neal. From *Performance* Volume I, No. 2 (April 1972), pp. 32-40. Reprinted by permission of the author and the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre.

singing the "Bridal Chorus" from *The Rose Maiden* and the "Gloria" from Mozart's 12th Mass; the "Perfect Harmony Four" in the Sextette from *Lucia*; Basso Packer Ramsay sang Handel's "Hear me ye Winds and Waves." The second half of the program were speeches by the Officers and [Garvey]. Subjects were: "The future of the black and white races, and the building of the Negro nation."

However, the idea of a theater which would address itself specifically to Afro-American socio-cultural reality is not new; it appeared, in a non-nationalist context, in a 1927 essay, "The Negro and the American Theater," by Alain Locke:

In the appraisal of the possible contribution of the Negro to the American theater, there are those who find the greatest promise in the rising drama of Negro life. Others see possibilities of a deeper, though subtler influence upon what is after all more vital, the technical aspects of the arts of the theater. Until very recently the Negro influence upon American drama has been negligible, whereas even under the handicaps of second-hand exploitation and restriction to the popular amusement stage, the Negro actor has already considerably influenced our stage and its art. One would do well to imagine what might happen if the art of the Negro actor should really become artistically lifted and liberated. Transpose the possible resources of Negro song and dance and pantomime to the serious stage, envisage an American drama under the galvanizing stimulus of a rich transfusion of essential folk-arts and you may anticipate what I mean.

This statement is "integrationist," but important. Alain Locke was one of the major forces of the Harlem Renaissance. He had to come to grips with theater and other forms of popular entertainment, because it was in this sphere that the image of the Negro had been most vilified: thus Harlem Renaissance aesthetics called for an art which was a more human reflection of Negro life. By 1927, Negro theater had had some notable successes to its credit, and shows like *Shuffle Along* and *Blackbirds* had a profound influence on Broadway theatrical form, which absorbed and modified—what we'd now call "co-opted"—black singing and dancing style.

In the same period, Zora Neale Hurston, an anthropologist and folklorist, made an important contribution through her work on Afro-American folk culture: blues, spirituals, gospel singing, dance patterns in Jamaican life, the ritual forms that spring from

Haitian voodoo. She wanted to develop "a truly Negro theater," whose speech patterns, visual structure, and movements were clearly rooted in Afro-American folkways. But she had no ideology of blackness in mind at all; she was oriented towards being a part of the American system, and was, at the most, an unconscious cultural nationalist. Hurston thought Garvey was a buffoon; she even wrote an unpublished satire on his organization.

The black theater of the thirties was an off-shoot of the Federal Writers Project. Its orientation was essentially Marxist, and its concerns those of the Communist Party; it was integrationist and had no independent ideology. However, in 1937 Richard Wright wrote an essay, "The Blueprint for Negro Writing," laying out an ideological and aesthetic orientation for the black writer, and combining a nationalistic thrust with thirties leftism. He discusses the development of a specifically black life, and in that sense the essay is the beginning of black cultural ideology, of the idea of "blackness."

Communist influence on Negro theater held sway into the forties, modified into liberalism during the fifties, and reached its apotheosis with Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. *Raisin in the Sun* was, aesthetically, a competent play in the realist-naturalist tradition. Ideologically, it was the embodiment of the liberal integrationism which dominated the black political struggle of the mid-fifties and early sixties. Martin Duberman's *In White America*, Ossie Davis' *Purlie Victorious*, and James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* are all various aspects of the liberal consciousness that found its active expression in the non-violent civil rights movement.

Yet it's in that movement we find the beginning of what's now known as black theater. The Free Southern Theater was first organized as the cultural wing of COFO (Council of Federated Organizations, the overall grouping of southern civil rights organizations), by people actively engaged in SNCC [the Students Non-Violent Coordinating Committee]: Len Holt, Gil Moses, and John O'Neal. It was activist theater: they wanted from the start to do plays "written for a Negro audience, which related to the problems within the Negro himself and within the Negro community." The FST ended up facing all the difficulties that have confronted black theater people in the past eight or ten years. Their public statements were part Marxist, part nationalist.

but *Waiting for Godot* was one of the FST's first main productions—to say the least, an apparently odd play for an activist theater. Yet it wasn't unusual in SNCC, in 1964, to find organizers who were existentialists under the influence of Camus, who leaned towards a theater of the absurd—a theater essentially turned on itself. What's more, the FST, while directed toward the black community, was co-directed by white theater people, co-acted by white northern professional actors, and entirely financed by whites. As the movement changed, with the end of non-violence and the beginning of Black Power, the FST evolved with it and is now an exemplary activist black community theater. But though it first began and then reflected the course of black theater, its influence in the North was small.

It was LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman* that radically reordered the internal structure of black theater, first of all by opening up its linguistic range and breaking with the social realism which dominated the forties and fifties, and second (more important and in spite of vague allusions to the theater of Artaud and the absurdists) through the decidedly utilitarian strategy which informs the play—it is implicitly but very clearly addressed to the radical sector of black socio-political consciousness. After *Dutchman*, Jones created the Black Arts Theater in Harlem, 1965, from which sprang Black Arts West and a multitude of other theaters on its basic model: a theater in the community, and a manifesto for the theater as a total nationalist institution, a reflection in miniature of the entire nation, which was meant above all to be an instrument for the raising of political, ethical, and aesthetic consciousness. The Black Arts Theater believed in political activity on the part of its company members. They held classes in nationalist political theory and black history; Harold Cruse taught there for a while.

The ideology of blackness sprang out of American blacks' legitimate need to develop a philosophical orientation which would let them find some space within themselves to move, a (private space) that set them apart from whites, from the European value system. It was also a reaction to a racist language and imagery that had made blackness a thing of evil; it is analogous to the ideology of negritude shaped by Sékou Touré and Aimé Césaire and to the self-realization movements developed in the Caribbean. It's a frame which finally provided operational iden-

tity to black artists. Because this ideology was primarily created out of psychological need, it has no single text. The word "black" is the key to all its meanings, but sometimes black stands for spiritual commitment to black people; sometimes it means establishing a natural relationship with one's own culture; sometimes it has religious connotations (you don't need Christ, find your blackness instead). When one person says of another, "he's a Negro, he's not black," all these meanings overlap. And it's these meanings which are involved, and intertwined, in the search for a "black" form.

Throughout the sixties, many black artists and intellectuals engaged the question of a "black aesthetic" through Afro-American music. The blues singer, the jazz musician, and the show business entertainer were seen as secular extensions of the ritual first shaped in the church service, out of the songs and movements brought from Africa. That's why Ellison describes Bessie Smith as a "priestess," a "celebrant"—the same thing can be said for Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, John Coltrane, Duke Ellington. Music was considered an instrument of truth, the "purest expression" of the black reality in America; Sun Ra attempted to construct a cosmology around it. And writers lamented the fact that literary expression was incapable of having the same effect on black people as music. From the point of view of craft, the central problem confronting the black playwright is that play craft involves procedures that are cognitively different from those of music. But that didn't prevent black literary artists from trying to make some kind of aesthetic link between literature and music. In poetry, for example, the emphasis was on oral delivery and some poets formed ensembles much on the order of rhythm 'n' blues groups.

The nationalist ideology, with its philosophical trappings, when added to this stress on musical structure, was responsible for the development of new ritual forms, while the overtly political and social aspect of black thinking led to a parallel reliance on naturalistic forms—Ed Bullins is now called the "new O'Neill" by the *Times*. Barbara Ann Teer of the National Black Theater, for example, moved away from the crafted play and toward a ritualist theater. (The only crafted play ever performed by the NBT was Charlie Russell's *Five On the Black Hand Side*. And it wasn't done in Harlem, out at the American Place Theater.)

Teer came into the black theater after a considerable amount of work on the off-Broadway and Broadway stage. At first, she emphasized the development of the black actor through a training technique that would be an organic extension of Black life styles. Exercises were done against the background of black music. One series of improvisational exercises arose out of a blues modality, and was called the "Nigger Cycle," another set was accompanied by the music of John Coltrane, and was referred to as the "Righteous Cycle"—I recall this was the "highest cycle." Each cycle below the cycle of righteousness contained negative as well as positive elements. Elimination of the negative elements—European values, bourgeois attitudes, self-destructive tendencies—was called "decrudification," i.e., a particular kind of psychic purgation. Teer's pieces are big, with many performers, and she uses her work in a functional manner—at the Congress of African People last year, she opened up one of the sessions by moving her whole brightly costumed troupe into a huge auditorium, carrying red, black, and green flags, singing, chanting, dancing down the aisles. Her texts for the rituals are unimportant and corny, but her company's energy is extraordinary—proved by the fact that they played the Apollo Theater, successfully.

You never could put one of Robert MacBeth's New Lafayette rituals in the Apollo. The New Lafayette rituals are, for me (and such reactions are very personal) failures, failures of energy. Their modality is oriental, characterized by silence and darkness. (I haven't seen the last one, which I understand has African drumming and dancing.) They tend to be slow, plodding, studious, and done with a very solemn air. Pieces open in a darkened theater, perhaps to symbolize a plunge into the inner self. An off-stage voice lays down the text, which is too long, and too mysterious. The only reason to stress all this is that when ideology is removed from the rhythms and vigor of the people on whom it is based, it becomes self-defeating and cannot be made into meaningful images and gestures.

I'd like to mention one other specific group in contrast to the NBT and the New Lafayette which, working in Harlem, a nationalist community, have had to be nationalist and separatist or lose contact with their milieu: the Negro Ensemble Company never announced itself in the same terms as these other black theaters. It is located in the East Village. When the NBT and the New

Lafayette discouraged white critical attention, the NEC welcomed it, and functioned among other things as a link between black community theater and white American theater. The nationalist reaction a few years ago was strong, and hostile; Imamu Baraka referred to the NEC company as "Negro Theater Pimps"

They are square on the definition. Negroes who have been blown up to prominence (actually, the founders, and movers, etc., less than second rate talents who because of their lack of skill can play tagalong to white arts, but also continue the dead myth of black inferiority... because most of them *are* inferior, if you can dig it... that's why Whitey pushes them) because of their commitments to white desires rather than black needs....

Pretty harsh, and somewhat exaggerated. Most NEC productions are highly polished, and the group is one of the few which presents a wide variety of black theater. It's too bad they're down town; the presence of such a theater in the black community would have far reaching effects; particularly now that the extreme separatism of the other theaters is being reevaluated. A black critic is expected to attack all playwrights working, and all theaters playing, anywhere outside the black community, but I don't think that's necessary. The NEC just represents another tendency within the movement. It wants to be accepted off-Broadway, wants to be accepted by critics, and honestly says so. Everybody else wants the same thing but doesn't want to admit it. (When the New Lafayette, for example, got bad reviews from white critics they stopped white critics from coming to the theater. Now Eric Bentley gives them a good review of *Psychic Pretenders* in the *Times*, and in my mail comes a copy of Bentley's review sent by the New Lafayette Theater!) The NEC advertises plays in newspapers, their thing is in the open, they want to be accepted in the same way other theaters are accepted. In other words, their ideology is that of the civil rights movement.

In the sixties, the idea spread uptown that whites contaminated the theater, and one reason for this was that some blacks had gotten tired of entertaining white people, of being part of the Negro image as someone who made his money playing to white folk. Another reason was the feeling that blacks needed a theater where they could be themselves without being spied on; a kind of psychic withdrawal from whatever might harm a group's spirit.

tual integrity, into a self which didn't have to be expressed in opposition to white people. It was a protective move.

Now that black artists are surer of themselves I think the New Lafayette has taken the right course, one which other black community-based theaters will follow. It is trying to break away from parochialism (and parochialism meant fear). They want to get the works of their playwrights done everywhere they can be done. This year [1972—Ed.] two New Lafayette playwrights have had their plays produced, by the Public Theater and by Lincoln Center: They are making *forays* out to other institutions but maintain their base. Our theater should challenge the establishment theater; black artists must confront western art, not withdraw from it. Remember how black sound dominates the American musical sensibility. Part of what we should do now is take on the American theater sensibility and replace it with ours. Or, at least, place our statement in the arena.

Already, our development has led to the emergence of a clear community orientation toward black artists and toward art as a means of discovering the essential issues of our existence. For the first time many black people are aware that something is happening vis-à-vis art that relates to them and that they can partake of on a serious level. For example, my mother has been going to the theater, and not because she's my mother. She is straight-out working-class, but she and her friends go to plays in search of some kind of fundamental understanding about the texture of life: her life, and life in general. An ideological artist can speak to a community who understands his vocabulary; before the black arts movement, and the linking of nationalist politics with art, there never was an organic relationship between the community and the black artist, except singers and jazz musicians. The new acceptance of art has had an important effect on consciousness, on attitudes toward oneself, and, above all, on that level of aspiration which is necessary for any ideology of change. When you present a horizon, you can show the need for change, and build a model for what change should be.

## It's a Long Way to St. Louis: Notes on the Audience for Black Drama

by Adam David Miller

As we examine a play, we can experience the playwright grappling with such questions as: Who am I? Who are these characters I people my world with? What is my world? *Who am I creating it for?* The play, that most public, most social of the arts is created for an audience, and it is this question of audience more than any other single question, that has bedeviled the country's Negro playwrights.

James Weldon Johnson thought the question not one of a single audience but rather one of audiences. In "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" he wrote:

...the Aframerican author faces a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about—the problem of the double audience. It is more than a double audience; it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite points of view. His audience is always both white America and black America. The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter, he is immediately called upon to solve, consciously or *unconsciously*, this problem of the double audience: *Whom shall he address himself, to his own black group or to what America? Many a Negro writer has fallen down, as it were, between these two stools.*<sup>1</sup> (emphasis added).

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<sup>1</sup>*The American Mercury*, December, 1928, p. 477.



## Some African Influences on the Afro-American Theatre

by James Hatch

*Blk Love Song #1* by Kalamu Ya Salaam begins with a Black woman intoning "Where is the seed of Africa? Where are the first men who walked the earth? Have they vanished?" The chorus answers, "They are gone to America. They are gone to the New World."

In the American theatre, the African seeds took root. Some produced great vibrant blossoms, visible, self-conscious imports known as *Neo-Africanisms*; these are the deliberate and conscious attempts by Black Americans to use African themes and materials. Other seeds transmitted *Africanisms*, fruit as familiar to Americans as yams in the grocery store, and because they are common as the earth, they are less visible and therefore unacknowledged.

The distinction between *Africanisms* and *Neo-Africanisms* is in part an artificial discrimination to speed the discussion, and no invidious value is attached to either term to imply that one is more genuinely "African" than the other.

### *Neo-Africanisms in Afro-American Theatre*

Every tide of liberation for Black America has thrown up waves of renewed interest in folk customs of African origins. The respon-

"Some African Influences on the Afro-American Theatre" (originally "Speak to Me in Those Old Words, You know, Those La-La Words, Those Tung-Tung Sounds") by James Hatch. From *Yale/Theatre*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Fall 1976), pp. 25-34. Reprinted by permission of *Theatre* (formerly *Yale/Theatre*) and the author with slight emendation by the author.

sibility for resurrecting and dramatizing these customs and beliefs of "our ancestors" has fallen to the intelligentsia, to the artists, and to the public platform of the theatre.

The 19th century saw several militant movements that advocated emigration back to Africa, especially to Liberia or to the island of Haiti, which was regarded as a free "African" state because its slaves had successfully rebelled against the French. William Easton, an Afro-American, used the Haitian revolution for the subject of his play *Dessalines* (1893), a rhetorical drama that may have been performed at the Haitian pavilion at the Chicago World's Fair (World Columbian Exposition, 1893). In the first scene of the play, Dessalines challenges a mulatto by throwing a dagger at his feet and saying in part, "Thou claimst race with those who rule, and I, a full blood African, dare thee to mortal combat." Dessalines then strangles the mulatto and tells the other slaves a tale of when he "was wont to hunt the great king of the jungles, whose roar is like the distant thunder and whose bite is death."

Although this may not be the first conscious alliance with the motherland published in an Afro-American drama, it is among the earliest extant. It's worth noting, however, that the first professional Black company acting in America, the African Company (1820-1827) worked in a Manhattan theatre, the African Grove; here they performed for the Black community exclusively until a partition was made "at the back of their house for the accommodation of the whites."

At the end of the century as the ragtime musical emerged, the minstrel show declined in popularity. A Neo-African emphasis appeared in a number of shows: *Senegamian Carnival* (1898), *The Sultan of Zulu* (1900), and of course, the famous shows starring Williams and Walker—*In Dahomey* (1902) and *Abyssinia* (1908). *In Dahomey*, billed as a Negro Musical Comedy by J. A. Shipp, Paul L. Dunbar, et al., with music by Will Marion Cook, is the story of an old Southern Negro, Lightfoot, who is president of the Dahomey Colonization Society. He hires two detectives (Williams and Walker) to find a missing treasure, and they all end up traveling to Dahomey with the colonists. After comic mix-ups in which the colonists are nearly executed by the King of Dahomey, they decide there's no place like home.

In addition to its topical interest, the theme of colonization expresses a romantic longing for homeland, and the resolution in the

play may have been the one chosen in life: one cannot go home again. The music is composed of marches, cakewalks, and songs two of which concern the beauty of the African woman—"My Dahomian Queen" and "Brownskin Baby Mine."

Among the popular show writers of the era were Bob Cole and Rosamund Johnson whose "Under the Bamboo Tree" and "The Congo Love Song" were hits. A verse from another effort of theirs, "My Castle on the Nile," expresses the Afro-American's dilemma:

Dere ain't no use in try'n to rise up in de social scale,  
less you kin trace yo' name back to de flood. You  
got to have ancestral halls an' den you mu'nt fail.  
To prove dere's indigo mixed in you blood, I done  
found out dat I come down from ole chief  
Bungaboo. My great gran'daddy was his great  
gran'chile an' so I'm gwinter sail away across de  
waters blue to occupy my castle on de Nile.

It might be inferred that the writers, who were both sophisticated gentlemen, are expressing more than comedy. The performance of Bert Williams, who excelled in the role of the sad clown, evoked laughter; it may have been a laughter too deep for tears.

In the decade that followed, the single greatest tribute to Africa was organized and written by Dr. W. E. B. DuBois. *The Star of Ethiopia* (1913), a pageant, was presented to audiences of 30,000 at the Armory in New York City. The Egyptian Art Temple was constructed in the center of the floor, and around it were shown the paintings, sculpture, and other works of art executed by "colored peoples." The pageant itself used 350 actors in six episodes. The spectacle was such a success that it was performed in other cities, and was revived in Los Angeles as late as 1925. Du Bois wrote that he chose a pageant because "All through Africa, pageantry and dramatic recital are closely mingled with religious rites."

When the First Great War to Save Civilization and its vast migration of Black folk to the industrial North ended, the disappointment of that "freedom journey" sparked the summer riots of 1919. With the return of the segregated Black troops, Black nationalism surged again. W. E. B. DuBois held four Pan-African Congresses between 1919 and 1927. Marcus Garvey organized the Universal Negro Improvement Association with its hope of owning a homeland in Black Africa; Afro-American writers like Countee Cullen asked "What is Africa to me?"

This was a serious question for the artists of the Negro Renaissance. The Cult of Primitivism presented the Negro as "An uncorrupted remnant of preindustrial man," which laid the double bind (damned if you do, damned if you don't) of American racism at the Black artist's door. As exploited by white writers like Eugene O'Neill, Carl Van Vechten, and Ronald Firbank, the idea smacked of Tarzanism with its images of savagery, superstition, and illiteracy; in the sometimes uncertain hands of Black playwrights, the image was meant to be one of nobility, innocence, and ancestral wisdom, a creature unspoiled by European decadence. If Whitey said the Negro had rhythm, the Black perceived a pejorative intent; when the Afro-American artist claimed a superior élan for rhythm in his people, he was asserting a positive political shibboleth of racial identity with Africa. Professor Alain Locke sometimes supported this latter view by asserting his people had something special, an "almost naive reflection of poetry and folk feeling of a people who have, after all, a different soul and temperament from that smug unimaginative industrialist and self-righteous and inhibited Puritan."

Professor Locke proposed using "ancestral sources of African life and tradition. No one," he maintained, "with a sense of dramatic values will underestimate the rich resources of African material in these respects. Not through a literal transposing but in some adaptation of its folklore, art-idioms and symbols, African material seems likely to influence the art of drama. . . ." Professor Locke may have had in mind two one-act plays, both produced at Howard University in the twenties—*The Death Dance* (1923) by Thelma Duncan and *Sadhji* (1927) by Richard Bruce. Both are tales of love and death in an African village, both use African names for their characters, and both center about a "Medicine Man" and a beautiful female dancer. Both use dance and drums as theatrical and dramatic spectacle. *The Death Dance* is subtitled "An African Play," *Sadhji* is described as "An African Ballet." In addition, the latter boasts a ballet score by Grant Still and a chanter who recited "actual proverbs of the Azande of the South-Central Congo." Example: "Those who pick berries in the same wood do not love each other." These two plays, to use Locke's phrase, are "adaptations of art-idioms and symbols"; they express an Africa researched more in imagination than in the village. The plays are dramatic parallels to the lyrical African figures

drawn by Aaron Douglas who illustrated the printed texts.<sup>1</sup> They deliberately employ ethnic material in a positive assertion of cultural value to reveal the "beauty which prejudice had buried."

The double bind of racism with its double vision of the African as a noble/savage is apparent in the commercial theatre of the time; a good example is the show number "Mozambique" from *Blackbirds of 1930* written by Flournoy Miller, Eubie Blake, and Andy Razaf. "Mozambique" featured the song "Jungle Moon" and was set in a Rousseau-style jungle painted with a touch of Disney. Seventeen women in belly dance costume and tail feathers à la the Folies-Bergère rolled their bellies, eyes, and palms as they shook their blond Afro-wigs. These "jungle bunnies" were pure Broadway.

The decade of the thirties saw a serious number of non-commercial efforts employing African themes. Just earlier, in 1920, John Matheus and composer Clarence Cameron White wrote an opera on Dessalines, *Ouanga*. The Cleveland Opera series of 1932 produced the three act opera, *Tom Tom*, with music and libretto by Shirley Graham (Du Bois). She stated that her brother had brought the African situations and rhythms from Liberia.<sup>2</sup>

In 1935 Black playwrights Willis Richardson and May Miller published the book *Negro History in Thirteen Plays*, which contained several dramatizations of African history, heavily romanticized. The Federal Theatre Project used its Negro units to stage Orson Welles' Haitian *Macbeth*. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia inspired Theodore Ward to write *Falcon Of Adowa*; however, like white playwright Arthur Arent's stage documentary *Ethiopia*, Ward's play was never staged.

Perhaps the strongest boost to Neo-African theatre came when Asadata Dafora, a native of Sierra Leone, created a dance opera, *Kykunkor: Or Witch Woman* (1934), which employed authentic drums and dances. This much acclaimed New York production stimulated a continuing interest in African dance and theatre. In 1935 Katherine Dunham traveled to the Caribbean, and in 1948 Pearl Primus sailed to Monrovia; both brought back ethnic dances that were to appear in concert halls and Broadway shows over the

<sup>1</sup>Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory, *Plays of Negro Life* (N.Y.: Harper and Brothers, 1927).

<sup>2</sup>Interview with Shirley Graham (DuBois), May, 1975. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York City.

next thirty years. Nonetheless, for some the double vision of Africa remained. Lofton Mitchell reports that a revival of *The Emperor Jones* in Harlem with Jules Bledsoe running through the stage bush was greeted by the audience with some derision, "Man, you come on outa that jungle. This is Harlem."<sup>3</sup>

With few exceptions the African heritage on the American stage in the thirties and forties was embodied in the musical, not only because music and dance were an intrinsic part of African culture, but because the musical, opera, and dance-drama were forms that lent themselves to romantic feelings about un-particularized African characters. In 1959 Lorraine Hansberry took a giant step toward creating a particularized African.

Joseph Asagai, from Nigeria, walked into the Younger family's flat in Chicago, bringing the African into serious drama. Somewhat self-consciously and with an acute historical perspective, he asked Beneatha Younger to go "home" with him.

*Asagai.* Yes...three hundred years later the African Prince rose up out of the seas and swept the maiden back across the middle passage over which her ancestors had come.

*Beneatha.* Nigeria?

*Asagai.* Nigeria. Home. I will show you our mountains and our stars, and give you cool drinks from gourds, and teach you the old songs and ways of our people.

The forest prince, a Nigerian intellectual, had come to awaken the urban princess from a sleep of 300 years. Eleven years later, Ms. Hansberry's *Les Blancs* placed Tshembe Matoseh on stage. This African leader, a product of missionary humanism, must seize independence for his own nation by tossing Shakespeare into the River Niger and by killing Whitey. In his agony, he kills his own revolutionary brother, but for no purpose. History sweeps past him. The Afro-American stage has kept its double bind with a new double vision. The more Ms. Hansberry succeeded in particularizing the African, the more perfectly he spoke the King's English; the more she dispelled romanticism, the more the kinship of the American Express Card superseded ethnic ties.

As the African nations achieved independence and U.N. membership in the sixties, an ever-growing number of Afro-Americans made their "hajj" to the homeland, first to North Africa, to Egypt;

<sup>3</sup>Lofton Mitchell, *Black Drama* (N.Y.: Hawthorn Books, 1967).

later to Nkrumah's Ghana, where the patriarch of Pan-Africa, W. E. B. DuBois, spent his last years assembling the *Encyclopedia Africana*. The result: By the end of the decade, more Afro-American artists had had firsthand experience with nationhood than ever before. Upon returning to the U.S. they found others hungry for knowledge of their roots. Many dropped their "slave" names, Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) the most in evidence among them. His Black Arts Movement in Harlem (1965) set in motion a Black theatre revival that was to develop a strong mythic and ritual wing based in African religious and secular life. Contemporaneous with Imamu's chants, rituals, and neo-myths performed at Spirit House in New/Ark, New Jersey,<sup>4</sup> were the manifestoes and productions of rituals at the New Lafayette Theatre (NLT) in Harlem (1967-1972).

NLT's director, Robert Macbeth, announced in *Black Theatre Magazine* #3 his intention to visit Africa for three months and "study with the Brothers. I think at that point we can really begin to learn some things about the ritual." Marvin X told Macbeth, "I'm just wondering if the new rituals aren't over here."

**MACBETH:** They are, they are. See, wherever the rituals come from, more of their vibrations still exist there. Now all I'm interested in is to become more in tune with the vibrations of the rituals... I'm afraid to do the rituals—it's a difficult environment to do the rituals in, so I need strength, I need some more support in doing the rituals. So, to be able to say, yes, I saw the Brothers doing them...it reassures me of the value of the rituals, and allows me to know that as we perform them they will be true, they will be real, as they should be. It's again a step away from any other kind of theatre that we would know about. You see the difficulty even now as we talk about them, is that I'm certain you understand what I'm saying, but I'm sure that nobody else would have the faintest notion of what we're talking about.

In its 1969-70 season the NLT created three major rituals, *Ritual To Bind Together and Strengthen Black People So That They Can Survive the Long Struggle That Is To Come* (August-Sept. 1969); *To Raise the Dead and Foretell the Future* (March-April 1970); *A Black Time for Black Folk; A Play Without Words* (August-October 1970).

<sup>4</sup>Woodie King in 1972 produced a record with Motown entitled *It's Nation Time*. On this disc the Spirit House Movers and other groups can be heard in Baraka's ritual chants.

ber 1970). Richard Wesley, then an administrator of the theatre, issued a statement in 1971 that described them: "music, art, drama, and dance are all combined in a totality"; the distinction between audience and performer is destroyed; space and time are available for improvisation and personal exploration in the event; the theatre group, in and out of performance, lives a tribal collective life; the group is an "organic part of Harlem, the African Nation in the West!"<sup>8</sup>

Except for the last statement, one of non-European identity, the manifesto is similar to those conceived by Richard Schechner at that time. Whether the NLT rituals were truly African in form and/or content need not be discussed here, but the conscious intent of the group to employ ancestral ceremony for *efficacious* purpose rather than for entertainment is relevant. Schechner's incisive distinction between ritual and theatre is pertinent.<sup>9</sup>

Although NLT blended some ritual qualities with theatre, the ritual raised the Black consciousness and created spiritual and psychic energy. A note in the fourteen page ritual *To Raise the Dead and Foretell the Future* warns the participant:

Do not conjure this spirit unless you feel pure and righteous, for it is told that when this deity is summoned it never returns where it comes from without a soul, and if the caller is not righteous in the way of his people then his dearest loved one will be taken back to the land of the dead to return never again.

The participant-audience varied in reaction from "Y'all got to

"The New Lafayette Theatre." Mimeograph paper.

<sup>8</sup>*Efficacy*

(Ritual)

results

link to an absent Other

abolishes time, symbolic time

brings Other here

performer possessed

audience participates

audience believes

criticism is forbidden

collective creativity

*Entertainment*

(Theatre)

fun

only for those here

emphasizes now

audience is the Other

performer knows what he's doing

audience watches

audience appreciates

criticism is encouraged

individual creativity

Richard Schechner, "From Ritual to Theatre and Back: The Structure/Process of the Efficacy-Entertainment Dyad," *Educational Theatre Journal* (December 1974).

be kiddin'," and "Hey man! What's this here? I came to see a play. Man!" to Larry Neal's comment that the spirits and ancestral ties of Blacks could be raised, but "not by using vague pseudo-African rituals rather than rituals created by their mothers and fathers."

It was this last concept, that of using the Afro-American styles that had evolved from the African over the last three centuries, that Barbara Ann Teer has sought to develop in her National Black Theatre (NBT), founded in 1968. Any facile summary of her theories is unfair. However, one point can be made here. Ms. Teer has traveled to Nigeria and has worked with a number of Africans in her theatre on 125th Street, not to impose Yoruba rituals on Black Americans, but rather to develop eclectic forms based on close examination of Black life in America with its intuitive and acquired rhythms and rituals of the street, church, bar, school, and family. All offer form, content, and style that can be used to raise the consciousness of Afro-Americans as to who they are, and who they can be. "Our institution is not really a theatre; it's an institution of re-education, a temple of liberation; we're a family organization, and we happen to use theatre as a vehicle to perform, to teach, to educate."<sup>7</sup> The thrust, then, is not to superimpose Africanisms on Afro-Americans, but to discover these Africanisms in the group and in the self.

This concept is similar, as we shall see, to Paul Carter Harrison's "African Sensibilities in an African Continuum"; the major difference is that Mr. Harrison uses a prepared text, a play script much closer to "theatre" than does Ms. Teer. However, both agree that the Black American of the seventies has in him a spirit passed on not by his environment alone, but by blood and bone from his ancestors. This idea can be seen in Joseph Walker's *The River Niger* (1972). The poem the father writes in praise of the river Niger is a self-conscious Neo-Africanism; the rituals that he and his family live by contain African Sensibilities.

#### *Africanisms in the Afro-American Theatre*

Orlando Patterson has identified three main currents in the writing of Black history: catastrophism, contributionism, and

<sup>7</sup>Interview with Barbara Ann Teer, January 3, 1973. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York City.

survivalism. The first current is composed of historians who deny that any significant African culture survived the infamous Middle Passage of slavery. The second group of writers concentrate upon the contributions of Black scientists, inventors, and artists to the American mainstream. The third, the survivalists, maintain that a considerable number of cultural, spiritual, and material artifacts did survive and that these have had extensive influence upon American life. Black historians like J. A. Rogers, John Hope Franklin, and John Henrik Clarke have had a continuing battle with uninformed and Anglocentric writers who stripped the Afro-American of his accomplishments. Typical of this racist denial of African contribution is George Pullen Jackson's elaborate study of white and Negro spirituals. He concludes,

I do not deny the possibility that there are, in American negro religious folk songs, certain hangovers. I would merely state that I haven't found any yet, nor do I know of any other who has found any. I have found what seems to be an American negro racial emphasis, nothing more. Others may in the future be more successful because more intent on finding the Ethiopian in the song-fuel heap.<sup>8</sup>

One such man "more intent" was LeRoi Jones, whose book *Blues People* traces the African influence in American music. Although racists were able to deny Africa's influence in the arts in America, it was more difficult to deny it in South America and the Caribbean. (The Cuban ritual drama *Shango De Ima* contains the Yoruba pantheon with many Yoruba words and chants. This play has been in repertory at the Afro-American studio in Harlem.) Because of the work of cultural anthropologists like Herskovitz, Jahn, Thompson, Turner, and others, there is hard evidence in the arts that African culture, though greatly modified, has not only survived but flourished. How it has been transmitted and transmuted is still debated. Those who argue that it is learned have until recently held an edge over those who assert that cultural memory can be inherited.

An example of artifacts passed on can be found in a script by William Wells Brown, an escaped slave who wrote a play, *The Escape: Or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858), in which he presented some aspects of plantation life including a slave wedding in which the mistress of the house marries the slave couple by having them "jump the

<sup>8</sup>George Pullen Jackson, *White and Negro Spirituals* (Locust Valley, N.Y.: J. J. Augustin, Publisher, 1943).

broomstick," a custom common in slave days. Mrs. Gaines, the mistress, says:

Now, Dolly, you and Susan get the broom, and get out in the middle of the room. There, hold it a little lower—a little higher; there, that'll do. Now, remember that this is a solemn occasion; you are going to jump into matrimony. Now, Cato, take hold of Hannah's hand. There now, why couldn't you let Cato take hold of your hand before? Now get ready, and when I count three, do you jump. Eyes on the *broomstick!* All ready. One, two, three, and over you go. There, now you're husband and wife, and if you don't live happy together, it's your own fault.

Dolly, the house servant who held the stick, then comments after her mistress has left the room, "When I get married, I is gwine to have a preacher to marry me. I ain't a-gwine to jump de broomstick. Dat will do for fiel' hands, but house servants ought to be 'bove that."

What once seemed to be a slave owner's depreciation of Black marriage may be the remnant of an African ceremony. A late 18th-century watercolor, "On the Plantation," pictures a slave entertainment that may be a wedding in which not only the broomstick appears but a stringed instrument identified as the *molo*, and a drum called *gudu gudu*, as well as the Yoruba head ties worn by the women.<sup>9</sup> An examination of the stick in the painting suggests that it is not a broomstick but a "conjur stick," a ceremonial cane whose power is symbolic and actual, a simple version of the juju cane that Paul Carter Harrison places in his play *The Great MacDaddy* (1974):

a heavy wooden cane bedecked like a fetish and shaped like an elephant's head at the top. It has the appearance of a carved tree branch. The object is a cane inherited from his father; MacDaddy's juju stick. He moves down to hold up the juju cane for inspection of its power. Confident, his attitude locked into place, he now looks out into the audience as if confronting the dangers in the world lurking behind their eyes.

At the play's climax, the Great MacDaddy invokes the power that resides in the stick, the power of African sensibility, and exorcises Scag and bad times; he then invokes a communal celebration with

<sup>9</sup>Judith Wragg Chase, *Afro-American Art and Craft* (N.Y.: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1971).

the audience that is a revitalization through music, song, drum, and dance. "We gonna rise up this mornin'/We gonna stay up all day," to reconstruct a harmonious balance for the American Black man with his universe. The playwright states, "The intention of the ritual, then, is to identify rather than simulate African sensibilities."<sup>10</sup>

Although this use of the juju stick is a conscious Neo-Africanism, the author suggests that there is a larger sensibility, an innate Black aesthetic. He has set forth these theories in two books, *Nommo* and *Kuntu Drama*, an anthology, in which he advocates the Continuum of African Sensibilities based in part on racial memory. His premises are taken from Jahn's *Muntu*, an anthropological study that posits that the world (cosmic) view of the Bantu peoples is one held generally by Africans south of the Sahara. This philosophy perceives that everything is everything; that is, the universe is not a series of dichotomies of good/bad or spirit/material but is a vast intricate harmony of man, nature, cosmos, God—each having some element of spiritual as well as material being; and man, because he has consciousness and the invocative power of the spoken word, is responsible for maintaining the balance between man and nature. If this balance be violated through stupidity, greed, or folly, man must expect to suffer. In the proverb of the Yoruba, "He who shits on the road will meet flies on his return." The song of the babalawos, fathers of the secrets, tells us,

Enjoy the world gently  
if the world is spoilt  
No one can repair it  
Enjoy the world gently.<sup>11</sup>

If the Black world of America be spoilt, the theatre event of the African Continuum can at least engage "the body/spirit, thereby testifying to our continuation as an African people on this continent." Mr. Harrison asserts that his theatre will find a response in the racial memory of Afro-Americans, through the Neo-African structure they have constructed to preserve this life view: the Black

<sup>10</sup>For a discussion of the Nigerian diviner staff in the Western Hemisphere, see Robert Farris Thompson's essay "An Introduction to Transatlantic Black Art History: Remarks in Anticipation of a Coming Golden Age of Afro-Americana."

<sup>11</sup>Bakare Gbadamosi and Ulli Beier, *Not Even God Is Ripe Enough* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1968).

church, the social rituals of story-telling in beauty parlors and bars, the language and gestures of Black people wherever they gather away from "profane eyes."

In a more specific case, Robert Farris Thompson has identified what he calls the "aesthetic of the cool" as a subsaharan characteristic that has not only survived in Afro-Americans but which in turn has helped them to survive.

In a strict West African sense...mystic coolness is an ancient charter for entire black civilizations passing through fire and passing through heat (African wars, slavery, imperialism, colonialism, racism, hate) to affirmation and self-determination.

He insists that he is not speaking of the western *sang-froid* of Cool-Hand-Luke, the existential loner who challenges the mountain because "it is there." Rather the Black master of cool

shares his heroism by leaving his performance where possible with humor and other invitations to audience participation, even in the process of being challenged. He more than keeps his head; he has the presence of mind to direct both audience and enemy in a crisis situation.<sup>12</sup>

(Consider the public performances of Muhammad Ali!)

If an aesthetic may be defined as a dialectic of production and appreciation,<sup>13</sup> there is a Black style, a Black sensibility, and it is one that has now been traced directly to African philosophy and social behavior.

How then is this aesthetic manifested in behavior? The cultural anthropologists give us clues. Examples: (1) Subsahara Africans impregnate the universe, animate and inanimate, with a life force that can metamorphose, under proper conditions, from form to form or from material to spiritual and back again. (2) Words and the art of using them are a special power that can summon and control spirit. (3) Africans often treat a part of the body or personality as if it had a separate existence of its own. (4) They are given to "projecting" human behavior onto animals and insects, etc., and then laughing at that behavior. (5) Afro-American behavior acknowledges a sense of community that manifests itself by assuming

<sup>12</sup>For a discussion of the concept of cool, see Robert Farris Thompson's "Aesthetic of the Cool," *African Arts* VII, 1 (Autumn).

<sup>13</sup>This definition is from Prof. Dan Rose of Temple University.

familiarity and complicity with anyone of their color. There are more. The question now is how these characteristics are distinct from, say, Irish-American or Chinese-American ones? The answer: the mode. For clearly there is an Afro-American life style (which is not to say all Africans or Afro-Americans behave in the same way!); however, parts of the African continuum can be identified in many Afro-American plays.

In addition to those compiled by Mr. Harrison in his anthology, others come to mind. In Jean Toomer's *Balo* (1924), a lyric one act, a sensitive young man finds the spirit amid the social quiet of his neighbors and family; in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), and nearly all of Adrienne Kennedy's plays, the characters metamorphose from identity to identity and even objects change form; in *Divine Comedy* (1938) by Owen Dodson, church, leader, chorus, and response; the rap (urban version of the southern sermon) is found in *No Place To Be Somebody* (1969) by Charles Gordone; in *Run Little Chillun* (1933) by Hall Johnson, the uses of music and church ritual; in *Natural Man* (1937) by Theodore Browne, its collective energy of song and spirit versus the steam machine; and finally, the plays of Langston Hughes, particularly *Mule Bone* (1930), which he wrote in collaboration with Zora Neale Hurston, contain African elements. This play, set in the street and on the porch of a general store in a tiny Black Southern town, is a treasury of folklore, filled with proverbs, riddles, dance, song, story-telling, call-response, children's games, and a language rich in imagery and polyrhythms. ("I wouldn't give a poor consumptive crippled crab a crutch to cross the River Jurdon [sic].") Or, in response to a woman walking past, a man says, "Mama throw it in the river, papa come get it!"<sup>14</sup>) The "it" is more than the woman's undulating ass; "it" is the quintessence of femaleness that the man *detaches* from the person of the woman. The "it" has a life of its own in much the same way a Black person who commits a *faux pas* might say, "I'm goin' outside and have a talk with my mouth." This form of detachment is a quite different mode from the sophism that Euripides put into Hippolytus's mouth: "It was my tongue that swore the oath, not I."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, *Mule Bone* (Typescript: Hatch-Billops Collection).

<sup>15</sup>Dan Rose, "Detachment: Continuities of Sensibility Among Afro-American Populations of the Circum-Atlantic Fringe." In *Discovering Afro-America*, Roger D. Abrahams and John F. Szwed, eds., (Leiden, Holland: E. J. Brill, 1975).

All of the plays mentioned above share the African Continuum of Sensibilities not only in content, but in form and style. They are: (1) by nature anti-well-made plays, assuming the Scribe-Sardou-Ibsen formula to be a special European characteristic. The "plots" of the Afro-American plays "meander" in circuitous association, returning at key moments to the center (altar) of the action. The stories are much like the courtship of a male pigeon: he circles the female, doubles back, walks away, plumes himself, pecks at the earth, struts back, circles her again, all the while burbling, cooing, clucking various songs in a slowly developed dance, which for all its apparent diversion still has but one purpose to be fulfilled when the female is ready. (2) This style of writing is quite different from the straight line, build-to-a-crisis at the end of the scene, Western formula, which is complementary to the capitalist mode: Time is money; ergo, jump it, fuck it, and get back to the office! In fact, these two conflicting life styles and life views are presented by Alice Childress in her beautiful play *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969) in which a hustling Black artist has to relearn what the spirit of African Continuum is.

The concept of African sensibilities is a large and complex set of ideas, which, at its extreme edges, allows room for fuzziness of criticism and for political chauvinisms; however, its central thesis demands the re-evaluation of American and Afro-American theatre history. For example, minstrelsy, which important theatre historians like Richard Moody claim is America's first and most original contribution to world theatre, now reexamined by Amiri Baraka, Eileen Southern, and others, can be seen as an African creation that Daddy Rice, Dan Emmett, and thousands of other white men ripped off. The beautiful wrist-articulated hands of an African dancing the *Adowa*, a festive dance of Ghana, immediately suggest that if a pair of white gloves were placed on them, we would see the classic minstrel gesture. Or again, the shuffle, which has been so denigrated as a sign of subservience, is an African step commonly used in the New World when slave masters suppressed dancing, which they defined as one foot crossing in front of or behind the other. The "ring-shout," a common element of African dance, can be seen as the "walk around" of the minstrel show.

It is often said, and never really documented, that the best plays of Ed Bullins are structured like jazz, with theme line and space for improvisation; certainly their productions at the New Lafayette Theatre in Harlem emphasized this characteristic as each play was



allowed to take its own time and run for over three or more uninterrupted hours. The claim that Afro-Americans have developed their stories like their music (in an African manner), is a claim that in the mouth of a Western-oriented critic is still a damning cliché. That an Afro-American play is "loose" doesn't make it a genuine African theatre piece, but it does suggest that it be judged by other standards than those of European sensibility alone. The last decade of theatre reviews from LeRoi Jones' *Toilet* to the Black production of *The Wiz* is strewn with white misjudgments based on ignorance of Black aesthetics. The pleas for Black reviewers has more merit than providing work for a few intellectuals; nor is the cry one of mere chauvinism: Black critics are often more severe on their brothers and sisters than white critics. The need is for what lies beneath the skin—an African sensibility.

The particular manifestation of these sensibilities in drama may often appear to be identical or congruent with that of other cultures. For example, other ethnic groups have proverbs or leader-chorus responses, but the philosophical intent as well as the mode and feeling of performance may be quite distinct. Hence the need for Black directors, actors, designers, and even theatre architects.

In this decade there are influences at work whose results we cannot yet know. Since 1972, at least three books on African theatre have appeared in English. Anthony Graham-White reports that 148 African plays are available to English readers, not including works of white Africans like Athol Fugard whose recent and successful plays *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* and *The Island* were developed with two South African actors—John Kani and Winston Ntshona. Among Black African playwrights Wole Soyinka's plays (*Kongi's Harvest*, *A Dance of the Forests*, etc.) have been the most widely produced in this country. A variety of authentic African musicians and dance troupes have toured here. Finally, those Black African scholars who a generation ago attended British and French universities are now in residence here. What all this imports may be glimpsed in an annotated bibliography of Afro-American plays listing nearly 100 of the more recent scripts with African titles, characters, or stories.<sup>16</sup>

For the last 150 years Afro-American theatre has been drawing its energies from both sides of the hyphen, sometimes consciously, sometimes intuitively. As acquaintance with things African grows,

<sup>16</sup>James V. Hatch and Omanii Abdullah, *Black Playwrights, 1823-1977: An Annotated Bibliography of Plays* (N.Y.: R. R. Bowker, 1977).

as the essential and difficult work of tracing Africanisms in American culture continues, we will come to know how really vast and invisible the African influence on all American theatre has been. The ancient juices have mingled with the new. The next few years may be vintage ones for the Afro-American theatre. In the words from Camille Billops' picture poem, "Go well, world, you Mama and Papa La-la."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup>The [original] title of this article and the concluding words are taken from a picture-poem by Afro-American artist Camille Billops.