

BLACK THEATRE AND DRAMA: LIFTING A VEIL

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"I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I'll be free".

(Ralph Ellison, *Invisible man*)

In his landmark book *The souls of black folk* (1903) William E. B. DuBois wrote:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eye of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois 1931 : 3).

When studying the history of the black theatre and drama¹ one is always aware of the constant struggle of the black entertainer, actor, director and playwright to shake off the veil to which William E. B. DuBois refers, or, in other words, to fight down the stereotypes imposed by whites on black people. But at the same time, not until the development of the Black Revolutionary Theatre in the sixties, the black entertainer or actor was compelled to succumb to the white man's tastes. The black theatre worker chose to deny his personality because only then could he be accepted and recognized on the white stage, and the acceptance might mean artistic and/or financial success.

According to one of the myths about the black people in America, the "nigger" was a primitive, ignorant and submissive creature, almost untouched

¹ The word "black" will be used rather than "Negro"; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries "Negro" meant "slave" by legal definition, hence the modern trend to avoid the word.

by civilization, to whom any notion of culture was alien. Those who perpetuated that myth seemed to forget that as early as 1820 Mr. Brown and a group of black actors founded the African Grove Theatre, the very first theatre for black people in America. The company performed in an improvised playhouse at Bleecker and Mercer Streets in New York City. Its repertoire consisted mainly of plays by Shakespeare though other classics were played as well. During the 1820 - 21 season the drama *King Shotaway* based on "the Insurrection of the Caravs on the Island of St. Vincent and written from experience by Mr. Brown" (quoted in Hatch 1972: 22) was produced. The script of the play is not extant but it should be pointed out that the first play by a black man in America dealt with revolt.

The company's leading player was James Hewlett, a West Indian Negro, who seems to have been extremely successful as Othello and Richard III. The second of the great black tragedians, Ira Aldridge, began his theatrical education in the African Grove Theatre, standing behind the scenes every night, and watching and listening to the actors.

But whites could not accept the idea of black people being something more than just ignorant though exotic "darkies". The press and police attacked the Grove Theatre; the company also had troubles with white hoodlums who eventually wrecked the theatre. Soon after the destruction of the African Company, in 1824 Ira Aldridge sailed for England because he realized that there was little opportunity for a black actor in America. Soon he became one of the leading actors in Europe. He was particularly praised for his Othello, Macbeth, Lear and Shylock.

While Ira Aldridge was being acclaimed by European royalty, white British actors were coming to America. It should be noted, too, that one year before Aldridge left for Europe, white actor Edwin Forrest impersonated the so-called plantation Negro in *The tailor in distress; or, a Yankee trick*, a farce by white writer Sol Smith. In 1828 another white performer, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, created the character "Jim Crow", and thus launched the era of the minstrel show. Rice has often been referred to as the father of Negro minstrelsy, but the minstrel show originated among the black people on the plantations of the deep South towards the end of the eighteenth century. Historians of the American theatre agree that minstrelsy was the first (and perhaps the sole) authentic theatre form that America has produced. But there has been a controversy as to the nature and function of the original minstrel show:

White historians have suggested that the show took place as an entertainment for ole massa. Black historians say that the singing, dancing and improvised dialogues were for the slaves' own amusement and, further, that much of the material was cannily conceived satire on the master and his house servants. "Everybody talkin' 'bout heaven ain't a 'goin' there" referred to the white Christians. (Hatch 1972: 16)

It seems legitimate to say that the first minstrel shows, like the spirituals, shared the same signifying pattern, that is to say they said one thing to the black slaves and another to their master. The slaveowner would sit on his veranda and listen to his slaves singing "Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus" or "Swing low, sweet chariot", he would sip his mint julep and smile at the religious feelings of his slaves without having the slightest idea that in fact the spirituals were "protest-songs and signals — signals that the Underground Railroad was running tonight or that slaves could steal away to freedom" (Mitchell 1967: 27).

But soon white men began to imitate and distort the original pattern of the black speech, music, song and dance, playing in blackface. Minstrelsy was turned into a very profitable business. It was not until after the Civil War that black performers were allowed to appear in minstrel shows. However, in order to be accepted by white audiences, they had to cover their faces with burnt cork and thicken their lips. They had to imitate their imitators so that the artificial ritual could be kept up.

Though the minstrelsy offered theatrical training and jobs to black performers,

it succeeded in fixing one stereotype deeply in the American consciousness: the shiftless, lazy, improvident, loud-mouthed, flashily dressed Negro, with kinky hair and large lips, overaddicted to the eating of watermelon and chicken (almost always purloined), the drinking of gin, the shooting of dice and the twisting of language into ludicrous malformations. Life was a perennial joke or "breakdown" [a noisy, rapid, shuffling dance] Black face minstrelsy underestimated and misrepresented the American Negro in much the same way that the English drama treated the stage Irishman. (Brown 1970: 100)

The late 1880's witnessed the decline of the minstrel tradition, but during the three decades that followed it was again the black American's art and folkways that influenced the mainstream to a great extent. The years from 1890 - 1917 were the years of ragtime and the beginnings of jazz; it was also the period when spirituals came to be recognized as music. The black theatrical pioneer was gradually to destroy the minstrel pattern and get rid of the caricature of himself in blackface; his aim was to prove to the white man that he could do much more than just play Mr. Tambo or Mr. Bones. In 1898 Bob Cole's *A Trip to Coontown* opened in New York; it was the first show to be written, directed and produced by black men. What is more important, this musical made the break with the minstrel tradition complete. It was still stereotypical, to be sure, but it had structure and continuity and it told a story through excellent music, songs and dancing. *A Trip to Coontown* was followed by shows of Bert Williams, George Walker, Jesse Shipp, Ernest Hogan, Alex Rogers, Paul L. Dunbar, S. H. Dudley, J. Rosamond Johnson. Those musicals had plot, characterization and meaning; they were fresher and less artificial than the minstrel show. Some of them — for example *Abys-*

sinia (1906) or *Bandanna Land* (1908) by Jesse Shipp, with Williams and Walker playing the main parts — had a sharply satirical point of view but though white critics and theatregoers considered them “too arty” or too serious they did not get the message. Most of the shows were smash hits because white audiences saw in them a continuation of the minstrel tradition.

As James V. Hatch remarked, without such men as Bob Cole, Paul L. Dunbar or J. Rosamond Johnson, “the American musical might still be waltzing with an umpah-pah-pah to the descendants of *Merry widow* and *Naughty Marietta*” (Hatch 1972: 18), but at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries black composers, actors and producers were fighting a losing battle. The idea which underlined their efforts was basically that of pleasing the white “massa”. They sought to be accepted by those who wanted to laugh at them, but hated them violently at the same time and did not believe they were really human. The black entertainers of the period, for example, often performed in black face and they still appeared in caricature; they also refused to incorporate love scenes in their musicals because they were afraid the white man would not accept the idea that the blacks were romantically inclined. George Walker said once: “The white man won’t let us be serious” (quoted in Mitchell 1967: 49), and throughout his career he wore the mask of a dandy, a sporting Negro who loved ultramodish clothes and whose favorite pastime was to spend money he managed to filch from the Jonah Man played by his partner, Bert Williams. And yet the same George Walker was one of those who in 1906 called for an organization of black performers.

White America treated black performers merely as puppets and when the culture got tired of them, it began to yearn for something new and more exciting. No wonder then that “with the exception of Bert Williams — who was invited to join Abraham Erlanger’s *Follies* in 1910 — few, if any, Negroes worked on Broadway from 1910 through 1917” (Mitchell 1967: 53).

The black man was again in vogue in the twenties. It was the musical *Shuffle Along* (1921) by Flournoy Miller, Aubrey Lyles, Noble Sisle and Eubie Blake which brought the Negro Renaissance to the commercial theatre. Doris E. Abramson mentions “postwar prosperity, liberal white sympathy, black nationalism, black intellectuality” (Abramson 1969: 24) as the main factors which led to the development of the Negro Renaissance. But it was also an era in which Freudian and Jungian psychology was exalting instinct over intellect; the black man became then the reincarnated primitive noble savage — carefree, spontaneous, and sexually uninhibited. A sort of wild abandonment which whites saw in the black man made him appealing, and he suddenly found himself called upon to uphold an old stereotype anew: he became a symbol of that freedom from restraint for which white intellectuals longed for so ardently. Black blues and jazz featured in Harlem night clubs drew many whites uptown. Also theatrical activities thrived

in Harlem at that time and white people flocked to see the exotic primitive in vaudeville sketches, revues and musicals. And the commercial-minded managers of many of the Harlem playhouses sought to captivate the white audiences by selling them what they wanted to see and hear about the black man.

Though the black performers were accepted and acclaimed in the legitimate theatre by that time, the black influence upon the American drama had been negligible. The blacks, however, have been writing non-musical plays since 1820 when — as I have already mentioned — the African Grove Theatre produced *King Shotaway*. In 1858 William Wells Brown, an ex-slave who chose a career of a professional lecturer and writer, published his drama *The escape; or, A leap for freedom*. Almost half a century later, in 1903, Joseph S. Cotter, Sr., wrote *Caleb, The degenerate; A study of the types, customs and needs of the American Negro*. Though both plays were read at meetings, most probably they were never performed on stage; this may have been due to the fact that their authors were black men. The main difference between the two plays lies in the message they convey: while Brown’s drama urged protest against the status quo, Cotter’s *Caleb* favored acceptance of the white establishment. From an artistic point of view both plays are crude tracts meant for the library rather than for the theatre, and both are written in a melodramatic vein so typical of the nineteenth-century white theatre. There is also another important point to be made about the two plays. As Doris E. Abramson noted, the predominantly white audiences of Brown and Cotter “forced them (...) to portray the Negro as the whites wanted to see him rather than as the playwrights knew him” (Abramson 1969: 20).

The first non-musical full-length play by a black dramatist reached Broadway in the twenties. It was Garland Anderson’s *Appearances*, which opened at the Frolic Theatre on October 13, 1925². *Appearances* as well as *Harlem* (1929) by Wallace Thurman (written with the assistance of white dramatist William Jourdan Papp), which became the first successful play by a black playwright on Broadway, were obviously meant for the white audience rather than for the black community. The two plays bear no resemblance save for the fact that both of them were again about black people as whites were used to seeing them, the former employing stereotypes from previous generations, the latter drawing on the newer stereotypes of the Negro Renaissance.

The protagonist of *Appearances*, Carl, is an Uncle Tom who has been accused of — strangely enough — the attempted rape of a white woman. But it turns out that she is not only guilty of blackmail as well as of deserting her husband and children but she is not even white — she is just light enough

² *Appearances* was preceded only by *The chip woman’s fortune* (1923), a one-act play by Willis Richardson.

to pass for a white woman. At the end the humble Carl triumphs but the white audience did not have to feel uneasy that a black playwright dared to portray a white woman as an immoral character in a play about a virtuous black man. A reviewer for the *Wall Street Journal* observed that "*Appearances* was careful to tread on no dangerous ground", (quoted in Abramson 1969: 32), and it takes no effort to understand why — Anderson was afraid to offend and to lose a white audience in the theatre of his day.

Like *Appearances*, *Harlem* carried on the glorious white American tradition of melodrama. It capitalized on the Harlem mania of the twenties, on the "primitivism" and "exoticism" as well as the "naturalness" and "emotional richness" of the black race. It must be admitted, however, that Thurman attempted to show black life with a degree of realism. He touches upon such problems as unemployment among black people who came from the South to the northern ghettos or upon the poor living conditions in Harlem, but he emphasizes the elements of exotic sensationalism, sentimentalism and minstrelsy in order to succeed in the commercial theatre. Life in Harlem as presented in the play was stogy rather than full of complexity, no wonder than that the whites did not get the message again.

In January 1928, a year before *Harlem* stormed into the Apollo Theatre, *The purple flower* by Marita O. Bonner appeared in *The Crisis* magazine³. This one act play is the first extant black militant play. "The Argument" of the play reads as follows:

The White Devils live on the side of the hill. Somewhere. On top of the hill grows the purple Flower-of-Life-At-Its-Fullest. This flower is as tall as a pine and stands alone on top of the hill. The Us's live in the valley that lies between Nowhere and Somewhere and spend their time trying to devise means of getting up the hill. The White Devils live all over the sides of the hill and try every trick, known and unknown, to keep the Us's from getting to the hill. For if the Us's get up the hill, the Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest will shed some of its perfume and then and there they will be Somewhere with the White Devils. The Us's started out by merely asking permission to go up. They filled the valley, they cultivated it and made it as beautiful as it is. They built roads and houses open for the White Devils. They let them build the houses and then they were knocked back down into the valley. (Bonner 1928: 9)

Marita O. Bonner concludes the play by saying that only blood will set the Us's free. Those who believe that it was the black theatre and drama of the sixties which introduced the revolutionary ideas should keep in mind the message of *The purple flower*.

However, Marita O. Bonner was an exception among the black playwrights of the period. While Marcus Garvey was preaching that the black man should have pride in his origin and faith in himself, while black novelists and poets

³ *The Crisis* was the organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), composed initially of intellectuals militantly protesting. William E. B. DuBois was the founder of the magazine and served as its first editor.

were adding significantly to the body of black literature and were not ashamed to write about the Negro existence, black theatrical activity was primarily dominated by revues, popular musical comedies and melodramas. Though there were black theatres in Harlem, black playwrights adapted their work to a white audience and geared their work towards the Broadway commercial theatre. Their aim was to be dissolved in the American mainstream. And the outstanding black company at that time, the Lafayette Players, founded in 1919, was basically — in Lofton Mitchell's words — a "me-too" organization", that is to say it was

devoted to showing white folks that I, too, can play roles that you think are yours alone, that I, too, am human. It was, in short, a defensive organization, unsure of what might have been unleashed had it said: "I am black, so what? This is me, and this is my creative effort". (Mitchell 1967: 70)

And yet, in that decade of *Plantation revue*, *Chocolate dandies and runnin' wild*, Montgomery Gregory, who in 1920 organized an experimental laboratory of black drama and for the development of a national black theatre at Howard University in Washington, D. C., insisted that

it is in this field of legitimate drama that the Negro must achieve success if he is to win real recognition in the onward sweep of American drama. (Gregory 1968: 28)

William E. B. DuBois, who three years later in Harlem founded the Krigwa Players, a little theatre group whose aim was to present black reality, advocated drama written by Negroes, produced by Negroes and supported by Negroes.

The most vital challenge to the Broadway standards and stagnant conventionalism, however, came from Alain Locke. Though he sounds like a theoretician of the Black Arts Movement of the sixties, the following statement was made by Locke in his essay written in 1927:

Negro dramatic art must not only be liberated from external handicap and disparagement, but from its internal and often self-imposed limitations. It must more and more have the courage to be original, to break with established dramatic convention of all sorts. It must have the courage to develop its own idiom, to pour itself into new molds; in short, to be creatively experimental. (...) One can scarcely think of a complete development of dramatic art by the Negro without some significant artistic reexpression of African life and the traditions associated with it. This may seem a far cry from the conditions and moods of modern New York and Chicago and the Negro's rapid and feverish assimilation of all things American. But art establishes its contact in strange ways. The emotional elements of Negro art are chocked by the conventions of the contemporary stage; they call for freer, more plastic material. (Locke 1968: 24)

He also expresses his belief that "more and more the art of the Negro actor will seek its materials in the rich native soil of Negro life, and not in the threadbare traditions of the Caucasian stage" (Locke 1968: 24); this statement seems also to be extremely pertinent to the situation of the black playwright.

With the Depression Years came the Federal Theatre Project. Sterling A. Brown calls it "a helping hand" (Brown 1968: 101). The Federal Theatre

indeed offered a helping hand to black playwrights, directors or actors. What is more, one of the aims of the Negro units of the Project was to introduce the legitimate drama to black people throughout the country,

whose only theatrical tradition was the song-and-dance tradition. One Negro editor stated that the average Negro theatregoer started laughing in the lobby as soon as he had put down his money for a ticket. When he paid his hard earned money he expected the theatre to make him laugh, and he started early to get his money's worth. (Brown 1968 : 102)

Two separate studies, *Drama and commitment: politics in the American theatre of the thirties* by Gerald Rabkin and *Drama was a weapon: The left-wing theatre in New York, 1929 - 1941* by Morgan Himmelstein have proved that the American theatre of the thirties was not, as has been frequently concluded, dominated by plays of social protest. The Federal Theatre Project, for example, was commercially oriented and tended to produce smash hits rather than propaganda plays because there was a need to draw people to the theatre and a need for the nation to be cheered. The repertoire of the black units of the Federal Theatre Project included, among other productions, *Run, little Chillun* (1933) by Hall Johnson, *Walk together, chillun* (1936) by Frank Wilson and *The natural man* (1936) by Theodore Browne, three folk dramas interspersed with music; Frank Wilson's *Brother Mose* (1934), a "problem" drama, laced with songs and dances and perpetuating stereotypes of black people; *Conjur man dies* (1936) by Rudolph Fisher and *The trial of Dr. Beck* (1937) by Hughes Allison, which were detective plays; *Haiti* (1938) by William E. B. DuBois, a historical romance, melodramatic and spectacular, about the West Indians' struggle for freedom in 1802. Two propaganda plays by black dramatists produced by the Federal Theatre — *Turpentine* (1936) by Peter Morell and Augustus Smith, dealing with the desperate struggle of the black laborer in the South, and Theodore Ward's *The big white fog* (1937) about the plight of a black family in Chicago's Southside — proved to be successful with black audiences. The latter one, though it has more discussion than action and is overloaded with problems, seems to be particularly important: the play implies that it will take a revolution to correct the evils of American society.

Doris E. Abramson as well as Clyde G. Sumpter emphasize the fact that though black playwrights of the thirties attempted a realistic portrayal of the black man's life in America, their plays often ended in a compromise — a tribute to commercial success. To use Doris E. Abramson's phrase, the "minstrel-melodrama syndrome" (Abramson 1969: 46) reoccurred in almost all of the black plays of the period.

But at the same time it should be pointed out that for the first time in the thirties more and more black playwrights began to manifest their interest not only in the black experience in America, but also in Afro-American culture

with a special emphasis on black American folklore. *Run, little chillun* might appear to some as "one of the most thrilling of spectacles" (Quinn 1937: 289) but the spirituals in the play were something more than an expression of naive and exuberant religiosity of the black people as the following statement by Hall Johnson about the play proves: "It's about what's behind the spirituals, you know" (quoted in Abramson 1969: 54). In *Conjur man dies* Fisher combines Harlem humor and jive with voodoo and sorcery. Theodore Browne's *The natural man* was based on the legend of John Henry, one of the great subjects of black folklore; he "has become a symbol of indomitable human pride and an expression of the Negro's will to survive against seemingly impossible odds" (Abramson 1969: 103), a figure many blacks could easily identify themselves with. And although Sterling A. Brown insists that the success of *Haiti* "as a historical drama of Negro life was tentative" (Brown 1968: 104) Lofton Mitchell, on the other hand, says that the play was extremely popular when it was produced by the Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre housed at Harlem's Lafayette:

It was the first time many Harlemites sat in the theatre and saw Negroes beating up whites and getting away with it. And all their deep-seated resentments rushed to the surface. During the course of the play you could hear shouts from the audience: "Hit him again!" "Give him a lick for me!" "Man, that's it! That's it!" (Mitchell 1967: 103)

In the forties, when the dominant trend among black people continued to be towards integration by assimilation into the larger, presumably "color-blind" white society, black theatre artists again strove for acceptance in the white theatre and considered the omnipotence of Broadway unquestionable. With the exception of *Our lan* (1946), a fine historical play by Theodore Ward about the dilemma of the freedmen during the Reconstruction era, black

drama was playing to Broadway standards. The criterion became not what the drama said to the people of the community, but whether or not it had anything that would interest the commercial theatre. (Mitchell 1967 : 136)

When discussing *The green pastures*, Arthur Hobson Quinn had theorized that "the Negro in his wistful, exalted phrases is much better suited to the stage than when he is being exploited as the symbol of a struggle for racial equality" (Quinn 1937: 284). Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native son*, was neither exalted nor wistful, and yet — strangely enough — when the dramatization of Wright's novel opened on March 24, 1941, at the St. James Theatre on Broadway, it was an immediate success. Edith J. R. Isaacs explained the popularity of the play in the following way:

The commercial theatre sometimes — in fact, far too often — gulps hard over new ideas or new forms when they are presented in what is strangely named "legitimate drama", that is, drama that kneads some thoughtfulness into its action. But give a theatre audience the roughest possible material and if it is fast-moving, well-acted and directed and has a heavy coating — either farce or melodrama — and nine chances

out of ten the theatre will swallow it without strain. It would have been a strange theatre indeed that refused anything as powerful as *Native son*, acted by a man as perfect for the part as Canada Lee. (Isaacs 1947: 115)

Wright, however, was not interested in presenting a work that would be palatable to white audiences. Like *The purple flower*, *The big white fog* or even *Haiti*, *Native son* contained a revolutionary message, no matter whether whites liked it or not. On the whole, the dramatic techniques of those plays still followed the white pattern but their authors were not afraid to present the growing impatience of black Americans and the more violent nature of the civil rights movement in clearly overt terms.

The first name of the main character of *Native son* rhymes with the word "nigger" and immediately brings to mind the phrase "bad nigger". As James V. Hatch noticed, Bigger Thomas belongs to the same tradition as Stagolee, a black folk hero immortalized in numerous ballads, John Henry of Theodore Browne's *Natural man* or Caleb, the protagonist of Joseph Cotter, Sr.'s play (cf. Hatch 1972: 10-11). The "bad nigger" is not a boy who knows how to keep his place; he is a troublemaker, hated by the whites but admired by the black people.

Thomas's first name seems also to suggest that he is somebody bigger than an Uncle Tom. He is not like the law-abiding Bishop of *Caleb*, *The degenerate* or Carl of *Appearances*. And in a metaphorical sense, Thomas does grow bigger in the course of the play. Because the black people have been traditionally taught that whites act and blacks react, the reversal of that formula provides Bigger with a sense of control and freedom. Before he killed Mary he never felt that he had any real power over his life, that he really owned anything. He always felt manipulated by the white power structure though he was not able to articulate his anguish. The murder of Mary brings life to Bigger. This action is his own and it gives him hope in the face of hopelessness, power in the face of powerlessness, meaning in the face of meaninglessness. The process of destruction is simultaneously the process of creation, thus the play showed a new dimension of violence to the white audiences.

However, the drive for civil rights and integration still motivated the black man during the fifties. This drive was predicated on the desire not to change the system but simply to join it, to obtain that which had been denied; there was still a profound faith in the American dream.

One of the most perceptive comments on the black theatre and drama of the fifties came from Alice Childress. In her play *Trouble in mind* (1955), which is based on the theatre-within-the-theatre pattern, Willetta, a black actress, accuses the white director, Manners, of putting on stage a play that misrepresents black people. Manners does not insist that the play is true to life. Who would like to pay for "the unvarnished truth?", he asks. And he defends the play by calling it an honest lie:

So, maybe it's a lie... but it's one of the finest lies you'll come across for a damned long time! Here's bitter news, since you're livin' off truth... The American public is not ready to see you the way you want to be seen because, one, they don't believe it, two, they don't want to believe it, and three, they're convinced they're superior. (Childress 1971: 170)

Trouble in mind did not reach Broadway because Alice Childress refused to change anything in the play. But both *Take a giant step* (1953) by Louis Peterson and *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) by Lorraine Hansberry had very successful runs on Broadway and it is not difficult to understand why⁴. The two dramas may be best called "me-too" plays, to use Loftin Mitchell's phrase. In both of them the emphasis is on the universal, not the special. Peterson's point is that a black adolescence is not very different from any other kind of adolescence; Hansberry's point is that a black family life is not very different from any other kind of family life. What is more, there seems to be no doubt in the minds of the playwrights that the white standard of success is the standard which must be aspired to by black people. Black critic Adam David Miller observed about *A Raisin in the Sun*:

The Youngers have the viability of their black lives destroyed but are denied the white life they seek. They are being forced to measure their lives by the standards set by their oppressors. This, of course, is senseless for Negroes. In short, Miss Hansberry is saying to a white audience: here are the Youngers, a good American family operating in the tradition of thrift and hard work, the trademark of successful nobility in the society. They only want a chance to prove to you what good neighbors they can be. Why don't you let them? (Miller 1968: 149)

White theatregoers could sit back and salve their guilt complexes as they sympathized with the Younger family, but if they thought that *A Raisin in the Sun* — or *Take a giant step* — was all the black plays of the fifties were about, they were mistaken. That decade also brought plays in which black playwrights tried to transcend the double consciousness William E. B. DuBois wrote about, in which they attempted to look at black people through their own eyes rather than through the eyes of their oppressors.

In William Branch's *A medal for Willie* (1951) a black soldier's mother refuses to accept the medal which was to be presented to her after her son had died a hero's death fighting for his country. *A medal for Willie* shocked not only white people. It also shocked many blacks who did not want the white man to know how angry they really were. Perhaps they still preferred to smile and shuffle while trying to find the means to destroy white oppressors, perhaps they wanted "to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction" (Ellison 1972: 13).

The problem of nonviolence versus violence as a way of dealing with white aggression was raised by Branch in his second play, *In splendid error* (1954)

⁴ As a matter of fact, *A Raisin in the Sun* has been the most successful play by a black playwright ever performed on Broadway — it ran 530 performances.

as well as by Loftin Mitchell in *A land beyond the river* (1957). The former is a historical drama whose main characters are Frederick Douglass and John Brown; the latter deals with the contemporary events, i.e. with the struggle of the Reverend Joseph A. DeLaine of Clarendon County, South Carolina, and his followers for desegregated schools. The conflict between the violent and nonviolent strategies does not seem to be resolved by the two playwrights. But on the other hand Branch made the following comment about *In splendid error*:

I saw in the Douglass-Brown story certain parallels — remarkable and uncanny parallels — between the climate and events of the 1850s and those of the 1950s. Like Douglass, I found it hard to discard an ingrained belief that change could somehow take place without the necessity of outright overthrow of the government. (...) Like Douglass in the play, I found myself taunted by more revolutionary souls and inwardly organized over wanting to join in more active methods to speed legitimately needed reforms. (Quoted in Abramson 1969 : 187)

And in *A land beyond the river*, when Mary tells the militant Bill that they will teach white people "better ways of fighting than with fists and guns", he answers:

Well, they better start learning, 'cause I ain't gonna keep on waiting. (Mitchell 1970 : 394)

Seven years after *A land beyond the river* had been produced, came the first of the "long hot summers" of the sixties, with rioting in Harlem, quickly followed by disturbances in several other major cities. Protest changed to revolution, and with the emergence of the Black Power movement evolved the recognition of the importance of black art in the revolutionary struggle. Ron Karenga, one of the main advocates of black cultural nationalism, said: "... all art must reflect and support the Black Revolution and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid" (quoted in Sumpter 1970: 169).

As a result of the Black Revolution and the Black Arts Movement, drama and theatre — like other black arts — became a "weapon for change" (King 1967: 35). The long period during which the black dramatist reflected the desire of many blacks for cultural assimilation was over. From the mid-sixties on black playwrights were no longer bothered by the question whether a white audience was ready to see them the way they wanted to be seen. They also rejected the idea of protest literature because this kind of literature implies an appeal to white morality, and the new black playwrights do not want to cater to the good will of a white audience. They are much more concerned with their black audience than before; they write with the black audience in mind. One of the basic efforts of the Black Arts Movement in general, and of the new black theatre in particular, is to address itself directly to black people, to speak to their spiritual and cultural needs, to describe the world in their own terms, to define black consciousness. Peter Bailey, a young black writer,

regards "soul theatre", or more officially, "Black Theater as that theater which is written, directed, produced, financed by black people, located in a black community, and which uses that community as its reference point" (Bailey 1969: 102). Bailey's words immediately bring to mind the statements William E. B. DuBois and Alain Locke made nearly half a century ago.

Since the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School (BARTS) opened in Harlem in 1964 and thus began a new era in the development of black theatre, two trends have evolved: the Black Revolutionary Theatre and the Theatre of Black Experience. In the black theatre issue of *The drama review* the former is defined as "that special Black American strain of theatre, film and agitprop activity that originated in the Black Arts Movement, the Black religious and spiritual sects, and in Third World Revolutionary Cultural and Political societies" (*The drama review* 1968: 28). And in his famous essay "The Revolutionary Theatre" LeRoi Jones expresses his belief that "the Revolutionary Theatre should force change: it should be change" (Jones 1965: 5). In the same essay he also says:

Our theatre will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are 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. (Jones 1965 : 4)

The Theatre of Black Experience, on the other hand, is the "theatre coming out of the life experience of Black Peoples in America" (*The drama review* 1968: 125). It may seem then that while the Revolutionary Theatre is purely political because it focuses on the forcing of change and commits black people to active participation in the revolution, the Theatre of Black Experience has very little to do with the Black Power movement since it does not demand any direct action. And yet it may be said that both kinds of black plays, whether it be agitprop plays of LeRoi Jones, Jimmy Garrett or Herbert Stokes, or plays of black experience by Ed Bullins, Ronald Milner, Joseph White, Charles H. Fuller, Jr., or Dorothy Ahmad, are political in the sense Konstanty Puzyna, for example, uses this term (cf. Puzyna 1971: 19 - 23).

The political theatre does not necessarily have to deal with politics and politicians. It is a living theatre which is consciously intended to evoke a spontaneous response from an audience, which is meant to excite an audience to think and act decisively, and not to put on a nicely written and nicely acted play. But this kind of theatre can exist only when the audience can and wants to respond politically, i.e. when people come to the theatre not to spend a nice evening but to find the answers to the questions they have been asking themselves, and this may happen only when people refuse to be manipulated and brutalized any longer. "Oppressed people and classes have historically channeled their images and passions to the stage" (King 1967: 36), says black critic

Woodie King, Jr., and this is exactly what happened in the black theatre of the sixties. Thus the black revolutionary plays as well as the plays of black experience are political because one of their central issues is that ethics and aesthetics are one; their authors refuse to believe that "art is one thing and the actions of men another" (Neal 1968: 31). They are political because their objective is to induce a change in the black community as a whole and in every individual black man. They are also political because they aim at the re-evaluation of the black man's presence in America; their purpose is to create a new cultural awareness — pride in blackness. And if the Revolutionary Theatre may be called a weapon for an actual revolution, the plays of black experience are those which promote a more subtle change — a change "that psychically redirects the energy of the oppressed" (Neal 1968: 38).

One of the most characteristic features of the black dramatic literature of the sixties is bold-faced, overt rather than covert didacticism. And this more emphatic direction towards didacticism necessitates a form that would not hamper the play's message. This often meant that black playwrights made use of some of the existing dramatic styles and techniques. In 1968 Richard Schechner complained that black plays were "too conventional". He went on to say that

while rejecting the white avant-garde, the black writers had, perhaps inadvertently, accepted white Odets. (...) Naturalism may be a compromise, but not a very serious one. Given the premise that these black writers want to relay information, are more interested in content than in form, naturalism is the most effective tool at hand. (Schechner 1968: 26 - 27)

But naturalism has not been the only option to the black playwrights. They also attempted revolutionary forms similar to those used by Brecht, Peter Weiss or The Living Theatre. As Michael W. Kaufman pointed out, the lack of "dramatic texture", typical of those techniques, that is to say

allegorical characters, melodramatic actions, simplicity of language, uncompleted actions — are intended to negate the formal assumptions of drama, to prevent literary critical formulations from interceding between the audience and the political act. (Kaufman 1971: 458)

Though many black playwrights would agree with Woodie King, Jr., that "content should always be more important than its package" (King 1968: 118), they are concerned with altering old or developing new dramatic forms to better meet the needs of the black community. They want to be free of the restrictive influence of plot and set dialogues and to move toward a more fluid, flexible form, and often they turn to the blues and jazz for inspiration to find in them the means of making their address to Black America more understandable.

One of the forms which the black revolutionary theatre groups (e.g. The New Lafayette Theatre and The National Black Theatre in Harlem, The Spirit House in Newark) are trying to work out is the ritual. This they see as ema-

nating not from the ritual theatre concepts of The Living Theatre or Jerzy Grotowski, but from African mysticism, still present in the voodoo ritual of Haiti, and the ceremonies of the Maroons in the mountains of the West Indies. Robert Macbeth, the director of The New Lafayette Theatre, believes that through the use of black ritual drama, black revolutionary theatre will be able to break down the distinction between audience and performer, with the aim of ultimately encompassing the audience in the ritual.

The black playwrights have also been seeking for a new language to communicate their meaning. LeRoi Jones, who has recently assumed African name Imamu Amiri Baraka, has an idea of what the needed language may be:

The language that we speak as conquerors will be different than that we speak now as slaves. The artist can maybe have a glimpse or vision of that sometimes. Sometimes I try to work out of a purely emotional language that sometimes doesn't even have much to do with English. It has to do with sounds, and silences, and emphasis and using rhythms in certain ways. (...) Sometimes, I think, if you listen to Black music, you get an indication of what it might be. I try to write out of rhythmic notations, or rhythmic nodes that I have, that I can feel, like rhythms. (Quoted in Marvin 1968: 20)

Alain Locke's vision of the black theatre seems finally to come true. Those attempts to create a separate mode of expression prove that the black playwright does not need to develop the double consciousness any more. He does not feel he has to interpret the black man for white America or appeal to the conscience of white America through protest drama. He is very much concerned with his relationship with his community; he can speak directly to his people and he will be understood and accepted by them. Self-identification becomes for him communal identification. He can be himself. He does not need the veil any more.

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