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Shooting Star Review

Black Stage & Screen

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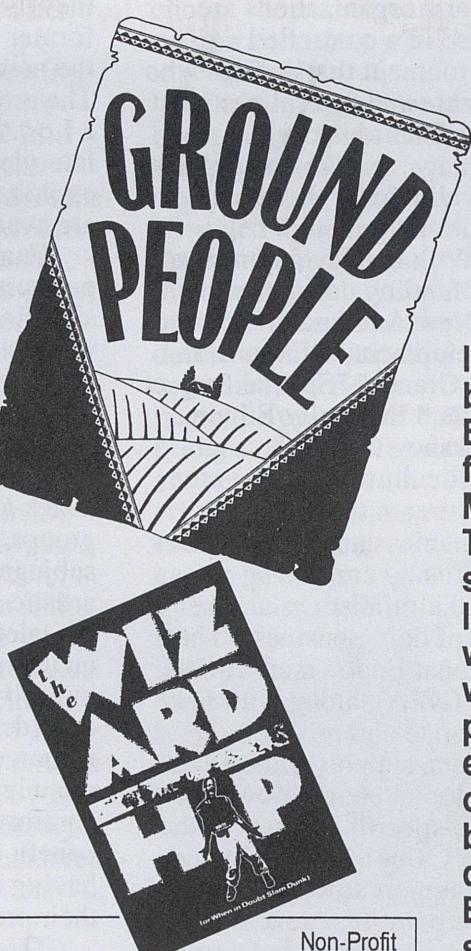
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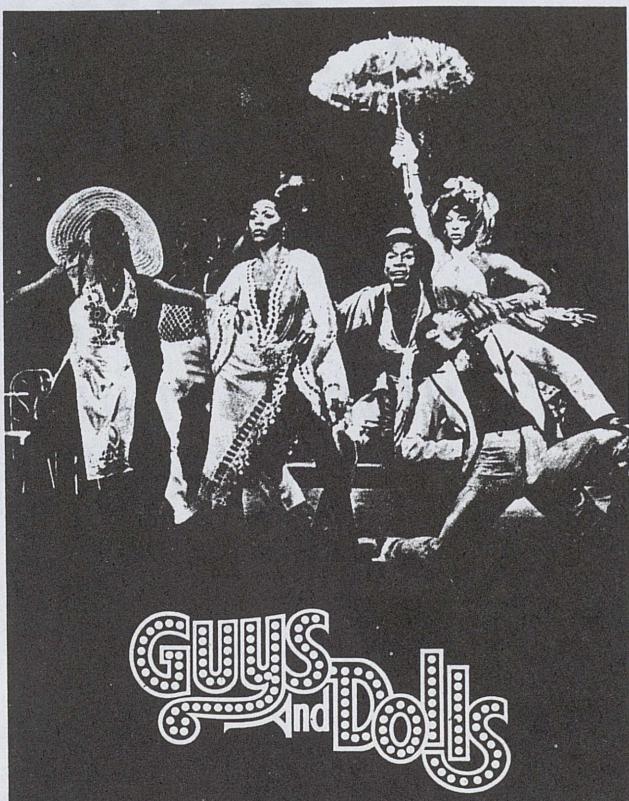
Warriors & Lovers

Mable Haddock
Columbus, OH

Recently, I attended a week-long African American Mental Health Conference and was struck by a refrain echoed by more than a few of the conference participants and speakers, including Maya

Angelou; that one of the essential missing ingredients in the African American community is romance and the need for love and romance between brothers and sisters as an act of healing.

continued on page 23



Guys
nd Dolls

Ellen Stewart's Pushcart

Barbara Lewis
New York City, NY

A pushcart. Can you build a theatre from a pushcart?

It's hard to believe, but that's what Ellen Stewart, the founder of La Mama Experimental Theatre Club (ETC), says. And she's living proof that when one has wheels, one goes places. She's been everywhere, all over the world and back, and she didn't go alone. Beginning in 1965, she took her fledgling theatre company to tour the world and has since delighted and inspired audiences in over thirty-one countries. In addition, she has invited the theatrical worlds of Europe, Asia, Australia, and

Africa to visit and enrich New York at her theatre on the Lower East Side.

Founded over thirty years ago to serve the playwright and all aspects of the theatre, La Mama ETC has certainly fulfilled its mission. Two of the playwrights, Lanford Wilson and Sam Shepard, whose careers she nurtured, have won Pulitzer Prizes. Stewart introduced Harold Pinter to an American audience when the English were less than appreciative of his avant-garde writing. Tom O'Horgan, who later directed *Hair*, and Tom Eyen who wrote the book for *Dreamgirls*, both got their start with La Mama. Jerry Grotowski first came to New York from

Poland at Ellen Stewart's invitation. Andrei Serban, Jean-Claude von Itallie, Joseph Chaikin, Leonard Melfi, Harvey Fierstein, Rochelle Owens, Megan Terry, Ed Bullins, Edgar White and Adrienne Kennedy are some of the other directors and playwrights whose work she has produced over the years. The actors Al Pacino, Billy Crystal, Nick Nolte, and Bette Midler have also worked on her stages.

Ellen Stewart, who was born in Louisiana, came to New York from Chicago in 1950 with a dream to study at Traphagen Fashion Institute. "Colored people couldn't go to a school like that in Chicago," she says.

continued on page 8

Sham, Scam, Thank You Ma'am

The Rise Of Multi-culturalism in the American Theatre And Its Impact On The Funding Of Ethno-Specific Theatre Companies

Dr. Victor Leo Walker, II
Assistant Professor of American Theatre
Stanford University

Dr. Floyd Gaffney, Professor of Theatre, U.C. San Diego
also contributed to this article.

A narrow Western European cultural focus coupled with its comfortable, longstanding isolation from the cultures of other nations, has created conditions in which cultural outreach often disintegrates or stops or is absorbed when the discovery of elements common in other cultures is made manifest.

It is a historical footnote that men view other men through dark glasses created through tunnel vision of their own peculiar culture. In accessing "otherness," people tend to minimize similarities between human beings, exaggerate the differences and distort the changes. The "I" versus "others" and/or "we" versus "them" mentality ranges from a variety of socio-cultural and political biases such as East versus West, developed versus

underdeveloped countries, conservative versus liberal politics, classical versus popular theatre and Eurocentric theatre versus ethno-specific theatre.

The immediate future does not appear to hold a trump card in resolving the problems associated with cultural diversity in this country. Unfortunately, there still exists in the Western world a notion of a pure uncontaminated aesthetic called high art. The irony of this absurd posture is reflected in the popular way culture has significantly influenced all areas of what is labeled high culture during the past several decades. No serious threat is offered by the ethno-specific divergent subgroups to dominant trends of creativity, as long as they exist outside of what is regarded as Europeanized aesthetic concepts of theatre.

There is a new strategy at work among public and private arts agencies, who together with major American theatre institutions have co-opted funds which should have been awarded to solvent ethno-specific theatre groups. A real danger of

American mainstream culture totally dominating "other" fellow Americans exists not only through imposing its theatrical traits and aesthetic values, but also by synthesizing elements of other cultural expressions which they consider to be socio-politically acceptable according to their standard of artistic measurement.

This is possible because established theatre institutions across America have received large grants for ethnic theatre programming through legislative diversification from the board room through the office space to the theatre performance.

Once again, ethno-specific artists and arts organizations are placed in a controlled artistic environment that defines who they are and determines what part of their history, language, culture and politics are valid under the slogan of "multiculturalism."

With the development of new funding categories such as "New Audience Development," "Expansion Arts Grants," "Special Project Grants," "Minority/Ethnic Workshop Grants," "Multicultural Grants," etc., mainstream theatre companies can reap financial benefits by embracing multiculturalism as another way of doing business. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), along with few corporate and private funders, supported the development and growth of ethno-specific theatres in the 1960's. But after the Sixties, that support slowly dissipated to the point that dozens of companies disbanded or went out of business during the 1970's and 1980's. The rise of multiculturalism in the 1990's threatens to reduce further the small pool of grant money available to ethno-

specific arts organizations. Now they are forced to compete for the same dollars with mainstream theatre companies who have co-opted "Black Theatre," "Latino Theatre," "Asian Theatre," "Theatre for the Physically Challenged," under the guise of multiculturalism, in an attempt to expand their funding base. At the heart of the issue is the fact that none of these institutions -- San Diego Repertory Theatre, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Arena Stage, et al. -- have a real commitment to the development and longevity of ethno-specific theatre. Just look at their play selection over the past twenty years, and you'll get a clear picture of their so-called "commitment to multiculturalism." They're committed to the short-term goal of raising much-needed capital during tough economic times; and if that means having to exploit Black, Latino, Asian and/or Native American artists in the name of multiculturalism, they'll do it! Bill Bushnell, former Executive Director of the now-defunct Los Angeles Theatre Center, said it best in a Los Angeles Times interview: "LATC will exploit whatever resources are available to survive..."

Funding patterns over the past ten years changed significantly in support of what I term "Theatrical Colonization," i.e. increased financial support for white theatre institutions to serve as "umbrella organizations" for Black and minority theatre groups willing to be subjugated under a system of artistic colonialism. It is not the talent, experience or quality of the art produced by minority artists that is considered the primary resource for the "umbrella organization." On the contrary, it is the financial benefit to be gained from having artists of color on their premises.

This multicultural wolf in sheep's clothing threatens to eat away at what little funding remains for legitimate theatre organizations solely committed to the presentation



Dreamsuckers

of artists and works of special value and particular interest to residents of Black, Asian, Latino and Native American communities.

(NEC) to submit a proposal for a \$1 million grant in order to "diversify" its audience. I cite NEC in light of the fact they've recently shut down

Although it seems the Lila Wallace Foundation has good intentions, the paradigm they've used to encourage cultural diversity in the American theatre has failed miserably (Need I repeat that old cliche, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions?").

Private foundations nationwide are focusing on multicultural programs and audience development. Leading the pack is the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. Although it seems Lila Wallace Foundation has good intentions, the paradigm they've used to encourage cultural diversity in the American theatre has failed miserably (Need I repeat that old cliche, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions?"). The following example will illustrate my point. Just recently the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund announced the Alabama Shakespeare Festival would receive \$1 million dollars "specifically for diversifying the Festival's audiences." As part of their new plan for achieving diversification two plays with all or majority Black casts will be produced next year -- Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Dumas*, a new play by John MacNichols. It would seem to me that if the Alabama Shakespeare Festival were truly interested in audience diversification, the organization would use some of the nearly \$1 million dollars it has in reserve (the organization is comfortably in the black and is considered one of the most, if not the most, financially healthy theatres in North America). On the flip side of that same coin, none of the major foundations thought it desirable to encourage the Negro Ensemble Company

because they could not raise \$250,000 to remain open.

If the major foundations are truly interested in cultural diversity in the American theatre, then I encourage them to develop what I refer to as "empowerment grants" to develop "empowerment projects." Simply put, funds should be granted directly to well-established minority theatre companies who then choose the mainstream organization they would like to work with.

Once an agreement is reached that is mutually acceptable to both organizations, funds are allocated to both the host institution and its guest. But the choice of plays and their presentation will be the sole decision of the minority organization. Hence, you begin the process of building bridges of mutual acceptance and respect, rather than artistic subjugation and domination. You want to encourage a situation where the host organization welcomes the guest institution as a family member rather than as a servant. Cultural diversity in the American theatre can only be achieved through veneration and cooperation, not by encouraging mainstream organizations to lie, deceive and wave the flag of multiculturalism to get \$1 million.



Be leery
of dreamsuckers
that crack chest
and eat hearts,
twist lives like wisteria
blossom fades
then death starts.

You need
be careful
tie a hanky knot
'round your dreams,
hide them
in your secret place
pin them to soul seams.
Swaddle tight
and bind them
proof'em against
rain-tears,
take them out
on special days
to sustain throughout the years.

For life is a dream
more or less
make it a nightmare or utter bliss
you can seize the day
or procrastinate years
begin starts as an idea.

So dare
dream-on beyond the moon
but lend substance
with leggy-goals,
it's not enough just impression
success comes
by activation of soul.

Cherne' Hampton-Williams
Greenville, SC

Sunglasses

Girl I know it's rainin' out,
But you gotta understand,
I'm frontin' with these sunglasses,
'Cause I'm a profilin' man!

With you on my arm,
And my sunglasses on my face,
My whole world's rainin' sunshine,
Love is lighting up all my space!

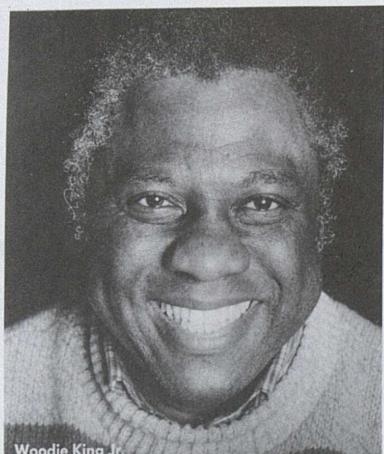
I set a world's record,
On the day that I was born,
I'm the only child to come into this world,
With his sunglasses on!

I'm always frontin' sunglasses,
Whether sunshine, rain or snow,
But here's a little secret girl,
I think you otta know ...

When a fly young thing comes cruisin' by,
And flashes her magnetic grin,
I can always check her out,
Without you checkin' in!

But I've already proved my love for you,
And this is the reason why,
Girl, only you and my sunglasses,
Have seen the color of my eyes!

Don W. Robinson
Jamaica Plain, MA



Guest Editor

Woodie King, Jr.

Producer,
National Black Touring Circuit,
Inc.

Black Stage & Screen

Woodie King Jr.

In June 1992, at a conference of The Association of American Cultures in Los Angeles, I urged Sandra Gould Ford of *Shooting Star Review* to let me be Guest Editor on a special issue exploring issues in Black Theatre and Film. To my surprise, without hesitation, she agreed. In the 1960's and 1970's, Guest Editors of issues in Black, cultural magazines were very common. However, in the 1980's and 1990's, this form of getting ideas to the public was/is rare. This rarity might be due to the small number of literary magazines controlled by Black publishers.

Over the years, I've come to know many Black Writers, Directors, Producers, Filmmakers and Educators who have specific ideas on the changing nature of Black theatre and films. Their ideas are extremely important. I thought how wonderful to have fourteen of the most articulate write on Black Theatre and Black Film for the special issue of the *Shooting Star Review*. First, I would go to each writer with a special topic and give each writer three or four months to write the article. In general, the articles from Don Evans, J. E. Franklin, Paul Carter Harrison, Woodie King, Jr., Lindsay Patterson and Rob Penny would look at Black Theatre in the 1990's and compare it to the 1960's and 1970's. Articles from women contributors such as Pearl Cleage Shaunielle Perry, Sandra Seaton (who interviews theatre, television and film actress Adilah Barnes) also explore feminist issues.

Articles from filmmakers and film administrators were sought from many, including St. Clair Bourne and Mabel Haddock. These articles raised specific questions, such as: How can images of Blacks in films be upgraded? What can the Black consumer do about the way Blacks in films are portrayed? How does film shape the perception of viewers? And all of these questions are well-answered here.

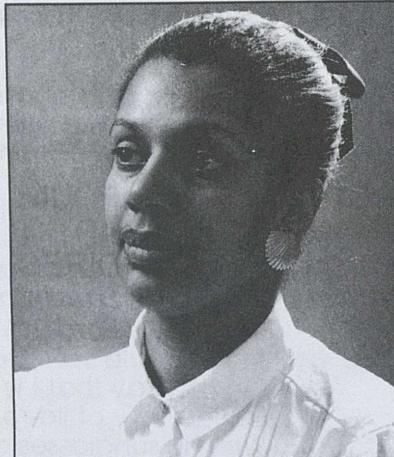
Sandra Gould Ford

Publisher's Statement

Sandra Gould Ford

Founder & Artistic Director

Shooting Star Review



First, a heartfelt thank you to Woodie King, Jr. (Director of New Federal Theatre, Producer of over 50 plays and respected author) for putting together this outstanding exploration of issues facing Black artists and cultural presenters.

Second, readers who have been with *Shooting Star Review* from the beginning must be thanked. They've experienced disappointments, successes and joys. But I believe this new, larger format is worth the wait. The production style allows *Shooting Star Review* to present more writers and graphics more dramatically and economically, and upcoming issues (Black Male-Female Relations, War in Body & Soul and a four-issue salute to regional writers) will get even better.

Keep in mind that, as *Shooting Star Review* and its parent organization, Shooting Star Productions, Inc., move into the eighth exciting year, your insights are needed. How about advice for developing writers? Why not a column for Black reading groups to discuss books. What do you think? Comments will appear in the special, "Star Speak" section.

Sandra Gould Ford



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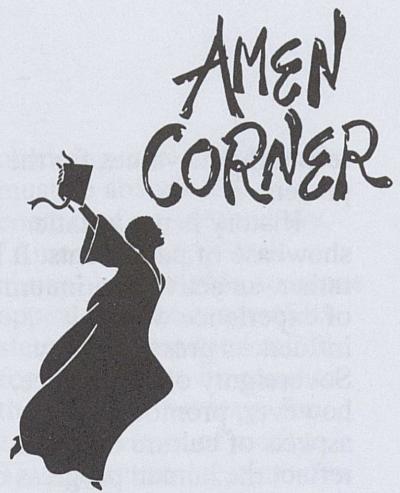
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A visiting Nigerian friend asked me to take him to see some Black Theatre in New York, a ritual we repeat every few years with fond memories. At the new Federal Theatre, we could see Wesley Brown's *Boogie Woogie and Booker T*, a delicious confrontation between the latter and W.E.B.DuBois. We could catch a vintage Charles Fuller at NEC and some West Indian folklore in Brooklyn at the Billie Holiday, check out Elaine Jackson's *Toe Jam* or a new P.J. Gibson play, a ritual at the National Black Theatre, and my own *Celebration at the American Place Theatre*. For my friend, it was his African-American history and culture lesson. For me, it was a great source of pride. We could talk for hours about this 20th Century middle passage re-shaped.

This time was different. I found three plays in three boroughs, all comedies. The two dramas I found closed as I searched for times and locations. As it turned out, he had seen a few early Bullins and Baraka plays in the D.C.-Virginia area, and some new works at colleges in

Black

Theatre *Agenda for the 1990's*

Shauneille Perry
New Rochelle, NY

Tennessee and Alabama. So, what is happening?

Recently, *The Amsterdam News* ran a caption that read, "Black Theatre is Alive and Well!" Alive, yes. Well? Maybe. The diagnosis is ever changing.

This year, one can no longer gauge the health of Black theatre by New York offerings alone. There are probably as many or more productions in Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, or any of the urban areas with a large African-American populace. Furthermore, these works are likely to have originated out of town with the Apple being merely a stop on the itinerary.

Out of all this, a handful of new-styled, Black entrepreneurs have emerged. Much in the manner of their show biz forerunners of the 1900's -- Jesse Shipp, Bob Cole, Williams and Walker etc. -- these modern mavericks have managed to defy the twin demons, cost and critics, and are providing Black audiences with entertainment at prices that fit their purses.

It began with Vi Higgensen, the marketing genius who courted the church audience, defied the unions, ignored the critics, and created the mammoth success, *Mama I Want to Sing* which ran a decade and, according to Black Enterprise magazine, generated millions. Other productions such as *Beauty Shop I* and *II* and the returned Wiz have

enjoyed profitable runs in non-union houses with a moderate ticket price. The runs are short, but cover many cities and can be repeated if there is a demand. And *Beauty Shop* has certainly proven that there can be a big one. Advertising is geared directly to Black audiences mostly through radio, and word of mouth is particularly strong. *The Jeffersons* of television fame was packaged for the stage and began a cross-country tour with most of the original cast. Once more, the Black audience has been found.

Still, there are nagging issues. Although the hungry Black audience has been found and fed, is it to be nurtured on comedy and music alone? Has the Black Theatre of the 1990's completely forsaken the challenging rhetoric of the 50's and 60's, and even before, which insisted that along with music and laughter we were compelled to teach, preach, educate and entertain about social and political issues which were at the core of our survival?

Purlie made us laugh and think. *Cope and Seasons Reasons* made us sing and think. With all due respect to light fare, is it really all that Black audiences will support these days? Will another maverick dare to find out?

We have a generation of young people that do not go to the theatre at all, at least not theatre as we know it. Why should they? They have

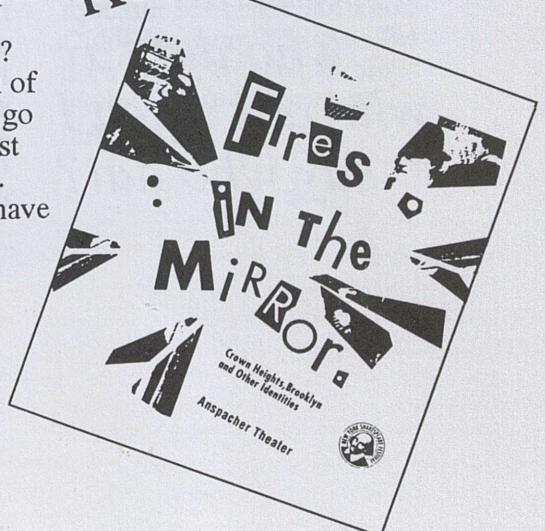
movies, videos, video games, MTV, BET, rap, rock, concerts, and clubs. There would have to be a very big incentive for them to take time out to call for a reservation in advance for an expensive ticket to a play that they might not like or understand. Yet they do go through all of that if it is a singing artist they really want to see.

So how do we reach them? It is not a question of whether we can. We must. Is serious Black Theatre a dying art form? What about the old classics, the experimental, the work of our giants of yesteryear? Are their plays relegated to dusty shelves after one or two productions? Some never reach the publisher, and scripts sometimes vanish forever. If *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Long Days Journey*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, etc. can be revived every few years, (sometimes even with Black casts!) why can't *The River Niger*, *Brownsville Raid*, *Freeman*, *The Great McDaddy*, *Home*, *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, *The Talented Tenth*, *In Splendid Error* and the many, many others? One thing is certain, they won't be resurrected unless we do it. If the kids don't know who we are it is our own fault.

Perhaps an era has ended. If so, it is too bad. Perhaps we are in yet another cycle. Perhaps we cannot truly assess any era until after it has passed, and passing it is. As we approach the dawning of the 21st century and struggle to forge our new history, let us be careful, lest we lose our past ... again.



Do Lord
Remember Me



the
Negro
Ensemble
Company

Wat's His/ Story Got T'do Wit It ... If It Ain't Our Story?

Paul Carter Harrison
Chicago, IL

History is not only his/story, but also the chronicle of African and Native Americans whose authenticity of experience is not privileged by his/story. Valorization of experience is not only a function of point of view, but also who has the power to transmit its significance. Thus, the conundrum: Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of the Great White father...? The Shadow do!

The conceits and deceptions of cultural prerogative in America were based upon earlier assumptions by propertied men of European ancestry that society was homogeneous and reliably capable of eliciting a single-minded response to culture. In the face of clear evidence that America is a pluralistic society with the capacity for heterogeneous cultural expression, my earliest encounter with Howard University might contradict the obvious and serve to

support the view of the patriarchal fathers.

Nineteen-sixty-eight, in the eye of stormy rebellions, Howard University opened the new school year with its formal convocation. The entire faculty was obliged to dress in academic robes and colorful hooded regalia that designated their rank and affiliation with institutional clans. As we solemnly marched into Crampton Auditorium, a specially appointed faculty member, courtly fashioned in Fourteenth Century Italian tights and balloon shorts, minced in

front of us with grand gesture and directed us to our seats with a jeweled scepter while the Howard Choir sang "Listen To The, Lambs...All A Cryin'." It was very difficult to restrain surges of fitful giggles in response to a nagging sensation that there was something woefully wrong with this picture. It seemed peculiar to me that a major Black institution would not have in its possession some form of Afrocentric social ritual capable of enlarging the culturally specific significance of these scholastic exercises beyond the impoverished imitation of European scholastic pomp and circumstance. Perhaps it is time -- long past due -- for African Americans to stop shadowing the specter of Europe and find comfort in revealing an authentic African personality.

Not so long ago, as signs of progress, we invented ourselves as doctors, lawyers and Indian Chiefs. Recently, however, we've begun to invent ourselves as artists, social critics, and scholars in search of the past, making archaeological digs into African culture as if it were a dead, remote "thing," reveling in sanitized discourses about new discoveries without

reframing its values for the present.

History is not a static showcase of past events. It is, rather, an active continuum of experience which influences present reality. Sovereignty of experience, however, promotes those aspects of culture that best reflect the human progress of the group. Self-authentication, rather than the approbation from a titillated mainstream, requires the identification of ethnocentric values within the particularities of experience. It also demands a new rigor in the evaluation of the Black experience.

Between AIDS, drugs, and wars, Black people are being swept off the planet in rapidly increasing numbers. It does not need the assistance of culturally ambivalent Black scholars and artists to help the process of eroding an ethnic presence by denying the specificity of social and cultural objectives of Black people. It is imperative, then, that the Black artist, social critic, and scholar pay closer attention to the mysteries embedded in the secular experience that might advance social and critical models emanating from the particularities of Black experience.

It is alarming to witness a current wave of frivolous, buppie replications of Black experience, presented as snatches of Black life in *Colored Museums* -- pun intended -- with characteristic emotional, political and intellectual detachment. An archaeological dig for literary ruins does not necessarily mean that everything minted in the past is worth salvaging, or otherwise useful if it does not have the evocative power to amplify our present reality. Every detailed aspect of the Black experience may not be worth memorializing. To collect Cotillion dresses or urine in a doorway may not be the most expeditious path to enlightened apprehension of history. In Wole Soyinka's *Strong Breed*, we discover that some rituals of the past no longer have the same potency or usefulness when entering the expansion of reality created by a

or
when the ancestral spirit calls upon us to testify, what lies will we signify?

or

in the oracular voice of the poet Larry Neal searching for Hoodoo Hollerin' Bebop Ghosts: who dat say who dat say who dat when I say who dat?



changing world, and thus must be abandoned. In the context of popular culture, "Amos and Andy" will always have a wide audience appeal, but the range of its stereotypes are too limited for audiences who come to the professional stage for enlarged views of reality. Thus, theatrical testimonies on the Black experience found in mock entertainments such as the *Beauty Shop* offer a socially embattled Black populace the immediate gratification of a jelly doughnut, albeit short on nourishment and merely drawing flies.

It is alarming to witness a current wave of frivolous, buppie replications of Black experience, presented as snatches of Black life in Colored Museums -- pun intended -- with characteristic emotional, political and intellectual detachment. An archaeological dig for literary ruins does not necessarily mean that everything minted in the past is worth salvaging

Is it not a sign of relaxed vigilance on our control of culture when, thirty years after the inception of a new Black Theatre vision which had extricated itself from patriarchal priorities, the Lincoln Center thrives and the Negro Ensemble Company is fighting for its life, pointing glaringly to our cultural ambivalence and social impotence. As one of the Black world's most celebrated cultural institutions, NEC has done much to legitimize Black theatre nationally, and has made the most formidable contribution toward the development of an authentic contemporary Black theatre literature. Ironically, the birth of the NEC was seminally influenced by Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*, which featured a deconstructive, parodic stylization of minstrelsy, while the Lincoln Center's recent production of

Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's *Mule Bone* was a celebration of self-parody normally associated with the denigrating caricatures of traditional minstrelsy. While Hughes and Hurston will always be held in high esteem and even revered for their unimpeachable contributions to African American literary history, *Mule Bone* should have never been resurrected from its earlier demise. It was a work that never realized full fruition, having died at birth, so to speak, and was buried sixty years ago. Its reinvention on the basis that it

In the Black oral tradition, we discover that dialect is only useful as a storytelling device when its intonations amplify the authenticity of the event without arresting the event in reductive verbal elaborations which do not "lift the veil," but arrest the true character of Black life in folksy, down home replications of reality. There is much more to experience through vernacular expression than its surface soundings, which are often confused as being representative of the whole picture.

Predictably, when dialect is exploited as the sole source of vernacular expression, it is suspiciously voyeuristic, exhibiting a certain social and emotional distance on the part of those recording the experience. This was typified in Hurston's invitation to Hughes to share with her the opportunity to construct a play around the tales of the "naivete of the primitive 'bama Nigger." When reduced to the singular persuasion of dialect, the folk audience recognizes that it is self-mockery, at best. At worst, it is a rude and disingenuous parody of Black folk life, its social interactions depicted as simplistic and adolescent, a picaresque, non-threatening sampling of retrograde behavior without the "symbolizing function" or ideological imperatives of myth. While the authors of *Mule Bone* had higher literary intentions than the entrepreneur/author of the *Beauty Shop*, both works are equally self-conscious, socially distant invasions into the privacy of Black folk life, recording the irregularity of customs and social manner for the sake of titillation, the lifestyle lowered to vulgarizations which invite knee-jerk, nervous laughter. We could almost forgive the nascent spirit of entrepreneurship of the *Beauty Shop* producers who never had any pretense that the project was anything more than a marketable product, as opposed to high art. However, in the case of the Lincoln Center revival of the project, sixty years after Hughes and Hurston had buried the project following the self-realization that the project had an uncharacteristic lack of literary achievement, instead of taking the *Mule* by the head, the Lincoln Center had taken it by the ass and picked its bones clean without discovering what's in its head, the corpus of the experience cannibalized without affection. Such a self-conscious burlesque prohibits meaningful resonance of the particularity of folk experience. The complexity of the novel genre in literature may very well be a supreme construction of Western culture which resists alteration from alien cultures. However, the theatre is a manifestation that springs from ritual and belongs to the world through the prism of each culture's social construction of experience. The theatre, then, has its own critical conjunctions and should not be held hostage to the aesthetic expectations of literature. Thus, the Lincoln Center's reclamation of a Black rural burlesque without first determining if it had any theatrical merit was clearly bad judgment, if not otherwise a reflection of its indifference to the Black community, thereby insulting. And certainly, such a critical judgment has nothing whatsoever to do with the presentation of unfavorable images of Black life: compared to "wilding" and other devastating social reactions to oppression which have been exploited in the public media, there is not much left of Black experience to hide "behind the veil". Most troublesome is the lack of serious application of dramaturgical standards to alter the perpetuation of stereotypes that violates the legitimacy of the folk experience with cheap humor. We must keep in mind that while Bo knows football, but might not know Diddlelee 'bout Theatre...Bo does know, fo' sho', he ain't havin' no fun laughin' at himself!



Ellen Stewart's Pushcart

continued from page 1

There were only two fashion schools in the country she could attend. The other school was in San Francisco. That's where she wanted to go, but her parents were opposed to the idea of her being so far from home. They decided to flip a coin. Heads, New York; tails, San Francisco. The toss turned up heads. Stewart knew someone in New York who agreed to let her stay in her apartment. The plan was that she would meet her under the clock in the train station. She waited and waited. The friend never appeared. So there she was alone in New York with less than a hundred dollars.

"I had to find a job. I got lost and went into St. Patrick's. I didn't know it was St. Patrick's then. I lit a candle and asked for a job. Thirty minutes later, I had one." She walked across the street and into Saks. While she was waiting in the personnel office, someone called saying they needed a thread cutter. Ellen Stewart got the job. On Sundays, her day off, she would take the subways and get off somewhere different each time and walk around in an effort to learn the city.

That's how she discovered Delancey Street and Papa Abraham Diamond, the Romanian-born Jewish man who adopted her after she became a regular at his Delancey Street fabrics store. "I became his artistic daughter," she continues. "He told me to get a pushcart. Even if all you have is in a pushcart, he said, push it, not only for yourself, but for the

whole world. I would visit the family every Sunday. When I would leave, he'd give me a piece of fabric in a package." From that fabric, she would make her own clothes. "Colored girls had to wear a blue smock over their clothes in Saks then," she recalls. "So here I was, like Cinderella, underneath my smock!" But people saw and liked her original designs. And Saks liked them enough to give her a promotion. Stewart then became an Executive Designer, a position she kept for eight years.

Even if all you have is in a pushcart, he said, push it, not only for yourself, but for the whole world.

Then Stewart got seriously ill, and had to have several operations. "I didn't know if I was going to live," she says. She went to Morocco for rest and recuperation. One day, she was sitting with a friend, Theresa Klein, talking about one thing and another, when Klein started telling her about the importance of having a pushcart. Papa Diamond was dead by then, and it was as though he was speaking to her through Klein. Stewart felt it was an omen, and immediately returned to New York.

Fred Lights, her adopted brother, who had always wanted to be a playwright and had studied at Yale, and

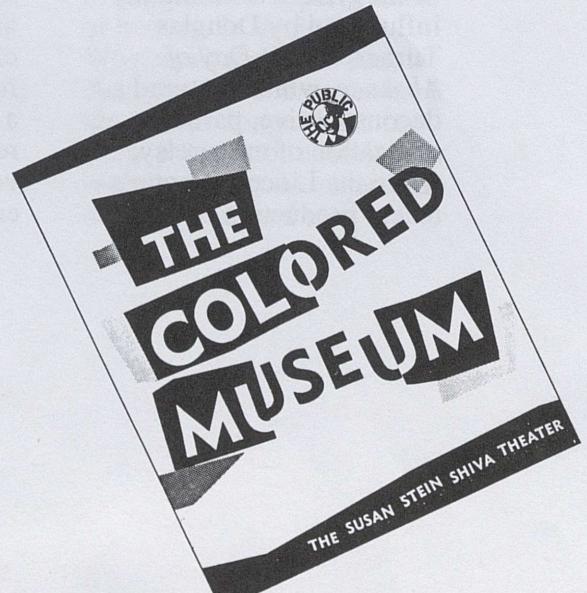
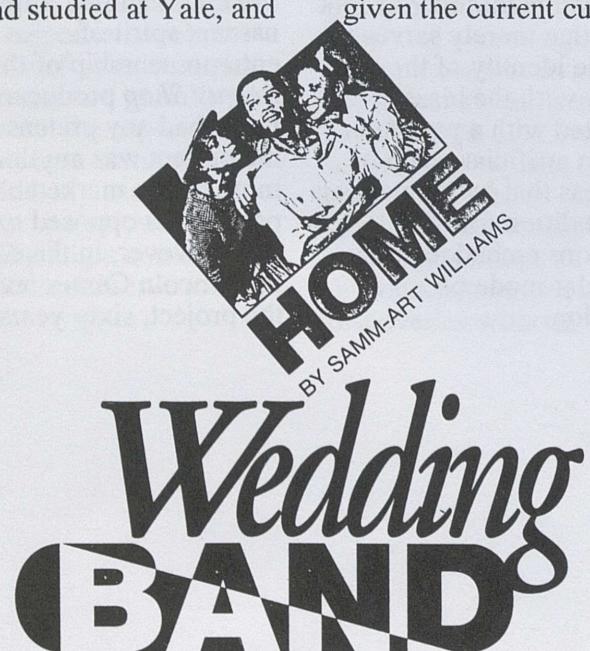
Paul Foster, "who was like a brother to me," had been having their plays rejected by all these theatres. "So, I decided that my pushcart would be a little theatre for Lights and Foster."

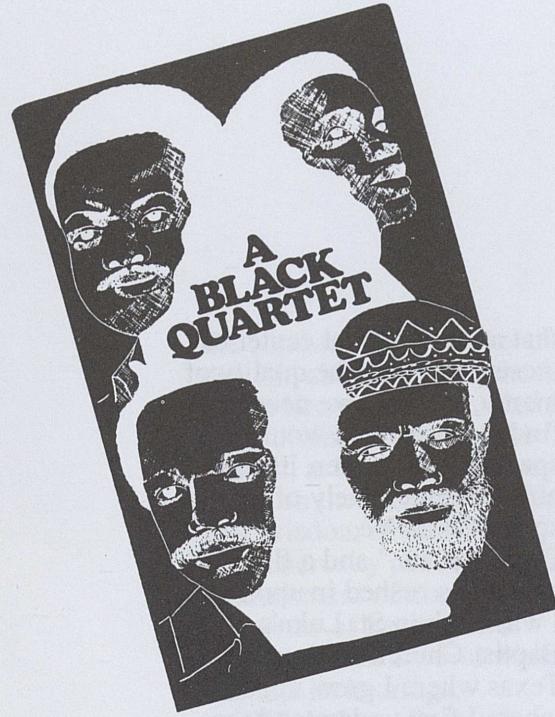
She rented a basement on East 9th Street that was going to be a boutique by day and a theatre by night. It was basically a shell. She had a lot of work to do to make it serviceable. She talked some friends and friends of friends into helping her. Her neighbors didn't like the idea of having a Negro (that was the term they used in those days) in such close proximity and so they alerted the authorities that there was a Negro woman in the building entertaining white men with undue frequency. The officer who came to investigate realized that Ellen Stewart was not a prostitute, and besides, he had been in

climate. Her king of cutting-edge plays, her emphasis on European theatre, and her refusal to define herself as a minority theatre are unattractive features to many important people, and so her funding has been slashed. "They've cut me to my knees," she says. But Ellen Stewart hasn't stopped fighting. Her ingenuity is what has kept her going. Other theatres have come and gone, but she is still in business.

One reason she hasn't succumbed, although the pressure and setbacks have been serious, is that under her ideals, there beats the strong heart of a business woman. Ellen Stewart got tired of being pushed around from this place to that, being told that she couldn't have this crumb or that plum, and so she bought the theatre she now occupies on East Fourth Street. Then, she bought a building where her actors could rehearse. Eight years ago, she won a MacArthur Fellowship, popularly known as the "genius" award. With her first check she made a down payment on a 16th century convent in Italy, but financial considerations have interrupted her dream to develop it as an international artist residence.

Don't push your pushcart only for yourself, Papa Diamond told her, but for the whole world. Ellen Stewart has done just that. She had pushed it for the world, and at seventy-three she is still pushing. Whatever the future holds for Ellen Stewart, whether it's extinction at the hands of the funding agencies or continued longevity, one thing is undeniable. She has consistently pushed past racial and international boundaries and inserted herself and others into the theatrical history of America and the world.





Black Theatre in Europe

Lindsay Patterson
New York, NY

The modern Black Theatre Movement, which had its genesis in New York City during the 1960's, is now a worldwide happening. In the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa the Movement is steadily expanding, while in Europe it has taken firm root in several capitals. In London, where more Black theatre groups have sprung up than in any other European city, the Black Theatre Co-operative was founded in 1978 as a protest against the reluctance of British theatre companies to include Black plays and actors in their repertoire. To rectify this artistic and racial slight, the Black Theatre Co-operative sought to give "organisational permanence to Britain's black theatre" and to provide "a continuity of development for the black arts."

But from its inception, the Black Theatre Co-operative never thought of itself as exclusively British or inflexibly racial because "Black culture," it asserted, "had the makings of an internationalism which (it would) strive to adopt and express" by continuing to produce plays from the West Indies, Africa and America.

While the Black Theatre Co-operative is primarily a Black organization, the Black Theatre Forum Limited is a consortium of fifteen theatres that include Asians, Indians and other people of color. And in the early eighties, the Forum developed a plan that envisioned the building of a resource center and the establishing of Black theatre branches throughout England. The organization also inaugurated an annual Black theatre season.

Currently, there are six very prominent Black theatre groups in London. Among them is the Talawa, a company that recently moved into its own theatre and staged its first plays *The Love Demands* by Ntozake Shange and *The Road* by Sole Woyinka.

Another particularly vibrant hub of Black European Theatre activity is in Amsterdam; and at the center of its theatre activity is Rufus Collins, a Harlem native who received much of his directorial training in London during the 1970's, where he choreographed the original *Jesus Christ Superstar* and was artistic director for a number of West End productions. In 1977, Collins was part of a group that founded the first Black repertory company in England; and in 1982, he was invited by the Dutch

government "to raise the Netherlands level of ethnic minority theatre" and given a yearly budget of 1.4 million guilders (\$700,000).

Although Collins has the kind of artistic opportunity rarely afforded a Black director in America, he has no

racial delusions about the Europeans who he contends "feel that they are the sole possessors of art" and "have the right to do a play about Africans -- with whites blacked up -- and call it art, yet when Africans do a play about themselves, it is (to the Europeans) not art."

Nevertheless, Collins, a slight, energetic man with an impeccable English accent and Rastafarian dreadlocks, is in an enviable position to create an institution that would be the archetype for ethnic theatres worldwide. For, like the Black Theatre Co-operative in London, Collins too has an international outlook. He is especially interested in doing more plays by Allison West (whose works are popular with European theatre groups) and other Black American playwrights. At the center, too, of Black Theatre activity in Amsterdam is Cosmic Illusions, a private non-profit arts foundation which had its origins in the Caribbean and which sponsors a Black theatre festival each fall. Four years ago, the organization commissioned Allison West to write *And Who Created Lovers*, a one-act play that is currently being made into a film.

Overall, Third World Theatre is perhaps a more apt term for Black theatre in Europe since most are government-funded consortia that include other ethnic groups. And perhaps it is time, too, for American Black theatres to become more international in their outlook and more racially diverse in their products.



THE GREAT MACDADDY

Happy &
ending

day of
Absence

DOUGLAS TURNER WARD'S

New Kids On The Block.

The Grey Panther Plays

J. E. Franklin
New York City, NY

The elder has always been the repository of values in each of the nation's cultures, and has certainly been a central figure in African-American life. But the dominant culture, with its emphasis on youth-beauty, sex, violence and consumerism, has severely encroached on every cultural unit and has removed the elder from the center of life, forcing the young to look elsewhere for the values and messages which guide their lives.

The Ten-Minute play for the veteran actor is the new kid on the block; and it is a perfect genre, not only for the veteran actor but for the student actor as well. To conform to the technical definition of a Ten-Minute play, the text does not exceed ten typewritten pages. Playing time for each work may vary from twelve to fifteen minutes. I submit these works in sets of ten under the umbrella title *Grey Panthers*. A theatre need not stage all ten of the works, but may select as many as suit its needs. There is no set and only a few props, which actors easily find in their own homes. All central characters in these plays are over sixty-five, but many of the plays have younger characters as well. For reasons which will become clear later on, I write these works for the elder actor. But first, allow me to share the history of my involvement in this genre.

In the Spring of 1990, I was visiting professor in the MFA program in theater at the University of Iowa. I had written only one Ten-Minute play at the time, and it had been submitted along with my application for the position. The play *Hot Methuselah* was the story of an elderly woman struggling with her decision to end her forty-year marriage after catching her husband at an adulterous affair. Bob Hedley, the director of the Iowa Playwrights' Workshop, passed the play on to one of my students, who was having an impossible time convincing the white playwrights to engage her as a director of their works. Tisch Jones, the directing student, came to me with *Hot Methuselah* and asked if she could direct a reading of it in Lab. I thought that reading would be the end, but it was only the beginning.

Toward the end of the semester, Tisch needed yet another directing project to satisfy the requirements of the program. She conceived the idea of staging three, Ten-Minute plays and connecting them thematically with music. I liked the idea, but I had only one Ten-Minute play, not three, and I had no plans to write others. But I understood her predicament, and when I returned to New York for Spring Break, I wrote two more Ten-Minute plays: *Two Mens'es Daughter*, the story of an elderly invalid seeking to avenge the wrongs done to her Black mother by disrupting the funeral of her White father; and *S'pozed-to-be Daddy*, the story of an elderly man who cannot forgive his prodigal, young son. Tisch and I recognized

that at the spiritual center of these plays was the quality of mercy, and that we needed to find a song which would speak to that center. I thought almost immediately of the song "Come Ye, Disconsolate," and a flood of memories rushed in upon me. I was back in St. Luke's Baptist Church in Houston, Texas where I grew up, and where I first understood the meaning of "the Mercy Seat." It was there in that little church, with its tolling bell, where both the offender and the offended could bring their "wounded hearts," and where no one who asked for Mercy was ever denied it.

Tisch and I chose the Roberta Flack-Danny Hathaway rendition of "Come Ye, Disconsolate" to connect the three plays; and Tisch used a bench to represent the Mercy Seat. We could find no elder actors on the campus, but the student actors and the one faculty member we managed to recruit were able to achieve complete unity with the characters. Like Archimedes, who is said to have shouted "Eureka" when he discovered the principle of buoyancy on water, I experienced a "Eureka!" moment in the theater that afternoon in Iowa, and I knew I would continue to work in this genre.

The *Grey Panther* plays are inter-generational dramas about family and family matters and are intended to help us all, both the young and the elderly, face problems we might otherwise duck. Although I write these works from an African-American point of view, this positioning is a starting point rather than a limitation. The African-American value structure allows for a unique angle on problems and issues which are relevant to us all; and the plays capture the rhythms and language of African-American life, while accessing the emotions and responses common to us all as human beings. I consciously seek to codify an ideology and I use the genre as a means of recovering, preserving and passing on an enduring value system created by African-American elders who have confronted

the contradictions of every day life and who have shown us the benefit of their wisdom in resolving these conflicts. Indeed, at base, the dramas stand on the premise that the folk wisdom of the elderly, the generosity of love and the commitment of kinship can be agents of healing and redemption in a world which has lost its bearings.

When I returned to New York, after the Iowa experience with *Grey Panthers*, I completed a body of ten plays which I call *The Decatet*. Tisch came to New York to direct script-in-hand readings of the new works at The New Federal Theatre; and in the Fall of 1991, I saw my Ten-Minute plays fully produced for the first time by The Arthur A. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Six of the plays were staged in the Langston Hughes Theatre, and starred Minnie Gentry, Roseanna Carter, Clarice Taylor, Lee Roy Giles and W. Benson Terry. Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee hosted the production and moderated a post-play dialogue with the audience. In the dialogue, Ruby and Ossie conducted an investigation into the substance of each work, focusing on the issues raised and on the solutions proposed for resolving the conflicts the plays introduced. These post-play dialogues became a part of the overall process in the search for a healing form, and both the young and the elderly were a part of this process.

The elder has always been the repository of values in each of the nation's cultures, and has certainly been a central figure in African-American life. But the dominant culture, with its emphasis on youth-beauty, sex, violence and consumerism, has severely encroached on every cultural unit and has removed the elder from the center of life, forcing the young to look elsewhere for the values and messages which guide their lives. Hopefully, if the elder is returned to the center of the culture, and if both the young and the elderly can recognize some of the problems each faces as their own, then, perhaps, it will be

possible to discuss, inter-generationally, some of the pathways by which we all can emerge from the wilderness of pain, confusion and rage.

These Ten-Minute plays accommodate not only an inter-generational theatre audience but an inter-ethnic audience as well. Only a few of the plays are ethnic-specific. I attended a multi-ethnic production of *Grey Panthers* in the Spring of 1992, at Grinnell College in Iowa. Director James Lincoln was looking for a vehicle which could include the theatres ethnic mix of students. It was from the Grinnell production that I learned the new meaning of "non-traditional" casting.

James had cast the plays as ethnic-based units with White, Hispanic and African-American students. Using latex make-up, these young actors faced the challenge of identifying with their elders, of accessing their pain, and of re-creating on the stage the unified characters who must make common cause with the human heart across generational, ethnic and national lines. Before I saw this Grinnell production, I had thought these plays would only work effectively with African-American actors. But these young students, with their Appalachian, Hispanic and Asian accents and rhythms, helped me to see the universality of the plays. Future productions of *Grey Panthers* should certainly consider this ethnic-units model of casting.

My Second Decatet of *Grey Panthers* will include little-known or rarely written-about historical personalities. Plays presently available include a drama about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s mother, a drama about Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s father, and a host of others.

The *Grey Panther* plays use very few actors and work well in church theatre or in community, educational and professional theatre. The greying of America is at hand; the elder actor is on the horizon.



Dressed for Work

How can you not be with me this afternoon?
I am wearing the long black dress,
the one your hands smooth over my hips; knit,
the way it drapes my shoulders.

The winter sun is valiant.
We could walk in the park,
stop next to the swing set
and kiss,
the dead leaves gathering at our feet
like old wool.
Trees so grey and weary
they expect old friends on days
when children would stay indoors.

Leather shoes snug-fitting;
my ankles are slim, silk.
Stockings sleek to my thighs and
I would remove it all for you or
button my coat to the neck,
be cool and still and distant,
wear gloves.

Slip back. My breath lifts
in dark warm whispers that hold still
for you in the December ice.

Come to the park this afternoon.

Mary Legato Brownell
Jenkintown, PA

Rahsaan!

Behind shades,
cry at what
you can't see,
with the practice
of circular breathing
and a collection of sounds:
flute, nose flute
black mystery pipes
manzello, flexaphone
lyricon, stritch
babe E-flat sax
tenor,

you roister
on stage wearing
a piper's hat,
your puffed cheeks
hold three horns at once,
and you blow,
black saxman,
blow,
a tongue of fire
through brass
that stretches out sound like joblessness

(In celebration of the art of the late
saxophonist, Rahsaan Roland Kirk)

Frank E. Dobson

Lorraine Hansberry's

a raisin
in the
sun



Roundabout
Theatre Company

*My view of
culture and
the role of
cultural
institutions
is shaped
by the
presence of
oppression
in my life.*

Remarks By Pearl Cleage
British-American Project
November 12, 1992
Atlanta, Georgia

BEHOLD!
COMETH
THE VANDERKELLANS



Black Stage & Screen Issue 12

A Hollering Place

As a third generation Black Nationalist and a radical feminist, my task here today is immeasurably easier than that of my fellow panelists. Given my particular set of specifics, it is impossible for me not to endorse, encourage, applaud and create cultural institutions dedicated to the most radical kind of social change. I am not so naive as to think that the creation of art is in itself revolution, understanding as I do that revolution is about the transfer of land and power and resources to the people and knowing in my heart that revolution cares nothing for audience development and grant application deadlines and cracking the code of corporate funding.

But as a product of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's (Rest In Peace!), I also know that conscious Black art is a necessary and vibrant part of any long-range plan to change Black people's hearts and minds on the way to changing how they live their lives. If I did not understand and believe this as strongly as I believe anything, I would move to the country and become a wheat farmer, but that's not this story...

As a Black artist, my cultural heritage is a rich legacy of protest and resistance, from the novels of Richard Wright to anything by Alice Walker. The Black literary tradition that I embrace is one which demands, as Amiri Baraka once said, that we write something "so ba-a-a-a-d they have to ban it."

As a woman artist, my cultural sheroes cross racial and national boundaries effortlessly, joined together at the womb by a sisterhood based on the worldwide presence of sexism in our lives and the unbroken legacy of our resistance to it. I can approach Georgia O'Keefe and Martha Graham, Frieda Kahlo and Sandra Cisneros, Maxine Hong Kingston and Naomi Littlebear with the same level of passion with which I embrace my homegirls, Lorraine Hansberry and Audre Lourde, Toni Cade Bambara

and Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange and Maya Angelou, Gloria Naylor and Terry McMillan and our foremother and shining pride, Sister Zora Neale Hurston.

My view of culture and the role of cultural institutions is shaped by the presence of oppression in my life. I don't say this in rage and frustration (although being Black and female in a place that is both racist and sexist can, and should, provoke both of those responses regularly) or as a way of claiming some exalted status because I suffer the effects of two deadly "isms" more acutely simply because I am a cultural worker.

Of course, it is difficult to be a Black female artist in America, but it is also difficult to be a Black female union organizer in a southern poultry processing plant or a Black female teacher in an urban middle school or the first Black female member of the United States Senate.

On the other hand, it is this difficulty, this tangible and omnipresent effort to confine and define our lives which make us a *group*, disparate and often despairing, but irrevocably joined by oppression and our responses to it.

It is impossible for me to conceive of a Black arts institution -- and especially a Black female arts institution -

HOSPICE



- that would not be committed to social change. How could we possibly build cultural institutions to preserve and praise a status quo that excludes us with such arrogant vigor? To attempt to do so would be a monumental act of madness and self-hate that could not possibly survive.

It is impossible for me to conceive of a Black arts institution -- and especially a Black female arts institution -- that would not be committed to social change. How could we possibly build cultural institutions to preserve and praise a status quo that excludes us with such arrogant vigor? To attempt to do so would be a monumental act of madness and self-hate that could not possibly survive.

Which is not to say that all Black and/or female arts institutions define themselves as bastions of revolutionary change, but to suggest that their very presence -- born of exclusion from, and invisibility within, the dominant white, male culture -- their very presence is a political act, defining, as such institutions must, our inherent otherness, and illuminating (sometimes

consciously, sometimes in spite of ourselves) the full range of our artistic responses to it. And these responses can only be truly nurtured within institutions that are deeply rooted in and reflective of our specific cultural realities. Culturally specific institutions must define a specific perspective;

necessity, reflect another agenda.

In my own play, *Flyin' West*, set in the all-Black town of Nicodemus, Kansas, in 1898, the eighty-year-old Black female character, Miss Leah, who was born into bondage and had ten of her children sold away before Emancipation, explains her eagerness to move from the familiar ground of rural Tennessee to the unknown dangers of the western frontier by saying: "I needed to be someplace big enough for all my sons and all my ghost grandbabies to roam around, big enough for me to think about all that sweetness they had stole from me and James and just holler about it as loud as I want to holler."

Which is what our Black and/or female cultural institutions must be -- hollering places; built by us, valued and supported and protected by us, situated among us and open to all people who have commitment to, interest in, or genuine curiosity about, us.

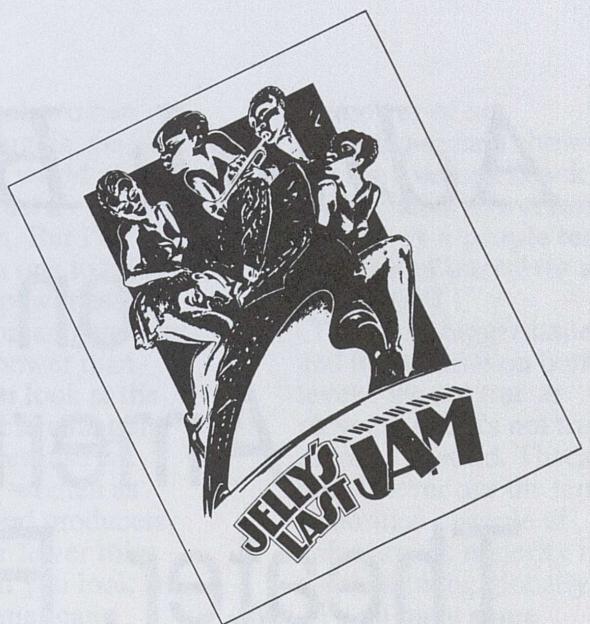
Our status in our communities must be accorded in direct response to how actively we reflect our collective cultural specificity in every phase of our work, defined by our specific reality, without regard or respect for the opinions of those who are not members of our specific group, no matter how often they tell us

this disregard is proof that we are inferior, insecure, insane, exclusionary, arrogant, afraid of, and incapable of, competing with them in their arena, and therefore doomed to failure.

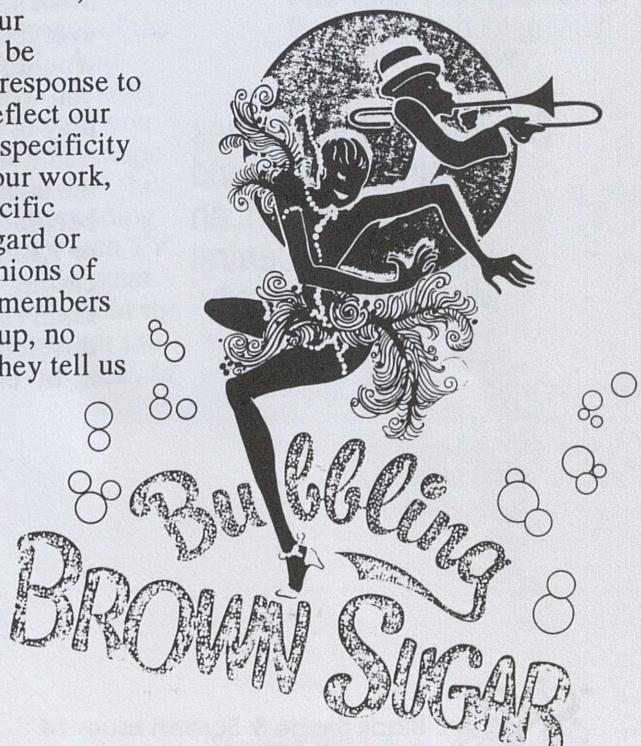
We must turn a deaf ear to their indignant whining, their withering reviews and their petulant demands that we spend our time engaged in artistic missionary work to explain our anger at them, to them.

We must, instead, seek our reflections in each other's eyes, reach out only to those who come with open and inquiring minds, and holler just as loud as we wanna.

After all, Sister Alice Walker's latest book teaches us that *resistance is the secret of joy*. Which must be why we're so beautiful when we're angry.



a specific point of view; a specific, culturally and historically based reality, without regard to the usually counter opinions of those outside of our group who see our reality differently. We have to reject as equally worthless the condemnation and the praise of critics, funders and audience members whose opinions are based in another tradition and whose politics must, of



Adilah Barnes

on African Americans in Theater, Film and Television

Adilah Barnes is an actress, teacher, director and producer. Her recent credits include three seasons in the recurring role of Anne Marie on ABC's *Roseanne*, feature films, including *Basic Instinct*, and a co-starring role in the April, 1993 television movie, *A Place to Be Loved*. Sandra Seaton's play *The Bridge Party*, which won a Theodore Ward Prize for Playwriting in 1989, will be published in a forthcoming anthology edited by Kathy Perkins of the University of Illinois.

Sandra Seaton teaches Creative Writing and African American Literature at Central Michigan University.

Sandra Seaton
Ypsilanti, MI

SS: As a Black actor/actress -- which term do you prefer?

AB: Actually, I use the two terms interchangeably. I guess the term actor is more politically correct. There are women, either feminists or womanists, who feel that if you use the term actress, you have given up some of your power, because some people still make a distinction between male and female actors. I use the terms interchangeably; I'm both an actor, speaking of what I do as a member of that profession, and I'm an actress, a female who does this work.

SS: Is there a difference between color-blind casting and non-traditional casting?

AB: Some people use the terms interchangeably, but in my mind they really are different. Using non-traditional casting for a classic piece like *Medea*, you could make everybody Black. You wouldn't mix the races; you would just do the play in a way that's not traditional, so that all of the characters in it might become Black, or Asian, or Latino. In color-blind casting you can have a family that has six different nationalities in it. In reality, you wouldn't

have that, but in a world with all possibilities, you could do that through color-blind casting. When I was at the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, I played Mrs. Cratchit in *A Christmas Carol*. My husband was white, and we had Black, Asian, and white children. Sometimes when the curtain went up, I could feel the audience sitting

up as they began watching because it was so unreal. Yet I could also feel it, a few minutes later, when they just relaxed and sat back in their seats, because we as the actors accepted that reality.

SS: So then you're saying that the role of actors in our society is to create a reality?

AB: Either to mirror reality as we know it in everyday life, or in some cases to be able to create a reality that we aspire to.

SS: In the late sixties and early seventies, isn't that what the Black Arts Movement tried to do, aspire to something and try to present that? They spoke to the possibilities.

AB: What stands out a little bit more for me during that period was that we had writers who really were right on the pulse of our collective voice at that time. It was a time of metamorphosis, when we began, many of us, to really experience our identities as African Americans in a very positive way, through the naturals, through the Black Power movement, through the clenched fist, through the Black Panther Party, with the leather jackets, all that. Some of that writing was labelled

as angry, and in fact some of it was, but I also felt it was a time when writers like Ed Bullins were right there feeling the pulse of the people and expressing it.

SS: In television and film, is there something that comes from the top that says you can have only so many Blacks in a production?

AB: Of course nobody's going to say we have a quota. At the same time, I know that actors of color are not given the same breaks as white actors. And in part that's because the powers that be are white. Their frame of reference is white. So they oftentimes don't think of people of color unless they think of roles where we're talking gangbangers, drug dealers, pimps, prostitutes, those kind of roles--and then they automatically think of us, and almost exclusively about us--but those are very negative images.

SS: You talk about the stereotypical roles that Black people get on TV. Have you seen much change?

AB: Overall, quite frankly, I really haven't. I'm very disappointed by most of the programming on television as it relates to African Americans. Every now and then you get a nice gem of a show, you get a Bill Cosby that shows another slice of Black life, which is much bigger than many want to admit; we do have many doctors and lawyers and professionals, though there are those that are responsible for programming who would say, "But Blacks don't live that way. That's not realistic." Well, it is realistic. And it's important that we show that slice as much as we show some of these others.

SS: You really liked the Cosby show?

AB: I thought it showed a slice of life that is much bigger than many want to admit exists, and I also

felt that it was a clean show, and it was a message show. Every week you were left with something to think about. Having Dr. Alvin Poussaint as the consultant really kept the show within a certain level of integrity. I'm really sorry it left the air.

SS: How about movies? How do you see the movie industry?
AB: It's not enough, to my way of thinking, to just pump out stuff that shows Black people. I want to be a part of and I want to see work that I can feel proud of.

SS: Is there anything the Black public can do?
AB: Yes. What we can do is write letters, and specifically now I'm talking about television. Every letter that's submitted to a TV show represents ten thousand viewers. The NAACP, the Beverly Hills chapter, has been a watchdog organization in that regard by speaking out when they feel that either films or television shows are being produced that show us in a negative light. I'd like to see them become even more vocal.

SS: Do you see the African American viewing public as having a different mission when it comes to movies? Because I feel overwhelmed by the sex and violence in the depiction of African Americans. Can we make a difference?

AB: Sure we can. By not going to see those movies. That's one way we can respond. And we have a responsibility to support quality Black films, to actually get out there and buy tickets, especially the first weekend of a release, because that's when it really counts.

SS: Do you see some progress?

AB: We are creating more work for African Americans. You look at a Spike Lee, who employs so many African Americans on his crew;

he probably creates more jobs than any other Black film maker today. So you've got those who are being trained, those who are learning the craft, those who are getting work.

SS: But before you said you didn't think that things had changed that much.

AB: I don't think that imaging has changed an awful lot at all. We do have more numbers in terms of films. Just like in the late sixties, in the blaxploitation films period, we saved Hollywood. Because we're really the ones who went out to see the movies, so all of a sudden they had all these Black films that came out--late sixties, early seventies--they were pumping them out like crazy. *Charleston Blue*, *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, *Superfly*, you name them. And they did it not because they liked us, not because they wanted to tell our stories -- because they usually weren't telling our stories -- but because they knew we were going to go out there to see them. And the same is true today. That's one reason we have nineteen Black films in 1992. They know there's a youth market. And that's why you see these young rappers who are crossing over into acting in films.

SS: Who was a role model for you?

AB: I was inspired by Cicely Tyson's work. And Beah Richards, her work always has integrity, always strong and yet a kind of quiet strength. Very eloquent. And Ruby Dee, I respect her work. Among my generation I would add Starletta DuPois and Angela Bassett, who portrays historical Black women; she played Betty Shabazz in *Malcolm X*, and now she's playing Tina Turner in *What's Love Got To Do With It*.

SS: So many Black women in the theatre have to struggle.

AB: Well, Black women have to struggle, period. And so the world of theatre is just a microcosm. But I've never been one to think of myself as powerless. Of course, women generally have less power than men. If you look at the job ratio, it is changing, as I said, because we have more women as directors and producers, but still far fewer roles. And then if you look at African American women, you've got less than that.

SS: What are the innovations in Black theatre right now?

AB: I think this is an exciting time. A number of people in LA and elsewhere are creating solo shows that have to do with their personal lives. I have my own one-woman show that I have developed called *I Am That I Am: Woman, Black*, in which I trace seven historical African American women: Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Mary McLeod Bethune, Zora Neale Hurston, Lorraine Hansberry, Angela Davis, and Maya Angelou. I'm also part of a theatre collective, a group called Women on a Mission, with four other women. Each of us has very different solo shows that we've created: I do an excerpt from *I Am That I Am: Woman, Black*, and the other women do pieces on AIDS, breast cancer, homophobia, and gender relationships.

SS: What are the other issues that are facing the Black audience now?

AB: I can't quote the exact figures, but I know we're at least 60 percent of the TV viewership. And that's an extraordinarily high number when you consider our percentage of the population of this country. It's astounding how much we watch TV. This goes back to what we were saying about the power of the pen, or the power of the NAACP, or

the power of not watching certain shows.

SS: So the average Black viewer feels powerless and we as a people tend to think of ourselves as powerless?

AB: That's the bigger issue; and it's not true on both levels; it's not true as viewers, and it's not true in today's world. That's why I never use the term minorities; people of color are the majority if we're thinking globally.

SS: We do have some power and resources, don't we?

AB: We have to think more about producing our own works. Those of us who have the money should recycle that money back into our own theatre and film companies. When Spike Lee was making *Malcolm X* and he needed more money, Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan and several other Black celebrities kicked in money to help him.

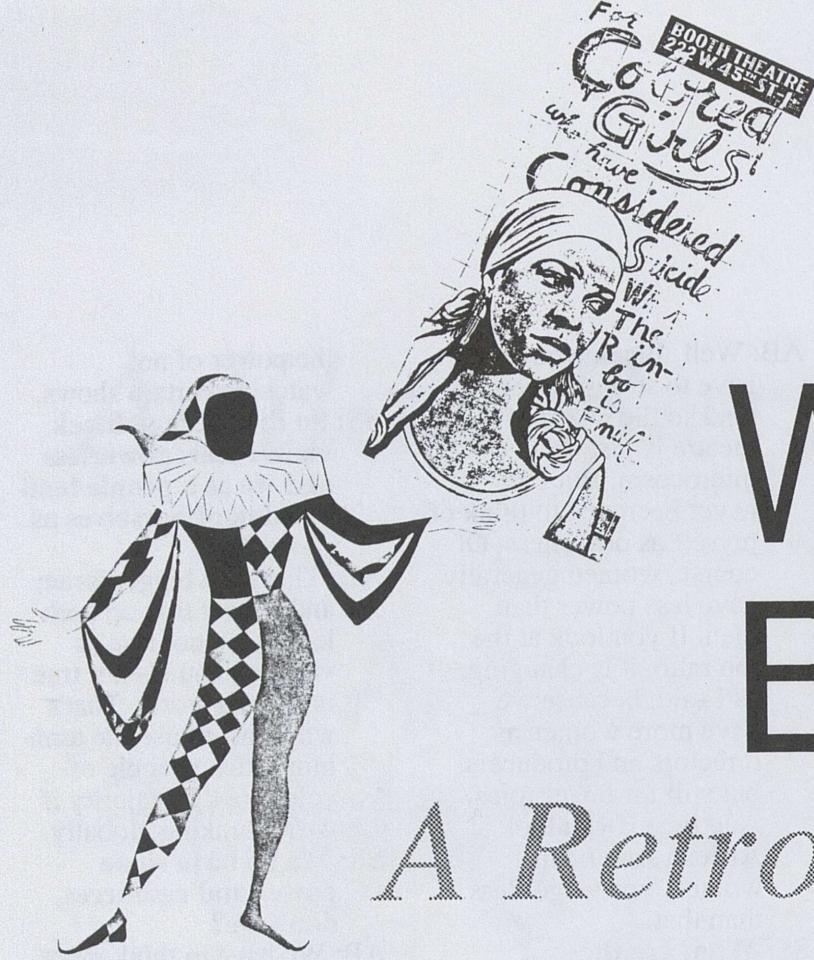
SS: We need more people to do that.

AB: That's important, that really matters. We have to think more in terms of collective economics; we have to think more in terms of creating our own--I'm not trying to sound separatist--but I mean that if we're waiting for others to do it, it may never get done the way it needs to be.

SS: We have to do it ourselves.

AB: Exactly. And the possibilities are exciting, because we have more African Americans with more money today than ever, and if more of us decide to invest in the arts, which is really investing in ourselves, then we're talking about a future that will be greater than what we have.





FOR COLORED GIRLS

who have considered suicide
when the rainbow is enuf

The Black theatre artists of today are better trained than we were. Many of them have learned their craft in colleges and universities and some of them have even studied the works we produced back then. The problem is that there are few places for them to use what they have learned.

It has been approximately twenty years since I saw my first plays onstage. Watching the early productions of Sugarmouth Sam Don't Dance No More and Orrin removed all doubt as to what my mission in life was to be. I was a writer, an artist. More importantly, I was a member of a community of others who struggled to fix the world and/or reduce its contradictions through music or dance or painting.

Being a black artist, I had the added strength of commitment. There were stories to be told and we were the only ones who could tell them. We wrote to a purpose and that purpose was freedom. We identified the enemy, both within and without; proposed avenues of change that we hoped would lead to self-realization and increased autonomy. We aimed for The New Day that we knew was just about to happen.

The community of black theatre artists was large and varied in the early seventies.

are better trained than we were. Many of them have learned their craft in colleges and universities and some of them have even studied the works we produced back then. The problem is that there are few places for them to use what they have learned. Black playwrights are making plays that will never see a stage.

The storefronts have died and nothing has taken their places. Colleges and universities generally do not mount works by African-American playwrights. Black students in American colleges are led to believe that their hope of employment lies in their ability to master an Irish brogue or a cockney accent. Writers are told that they must approach "the universal questions of man's existence" and sidestep situations and presentations that are too deeply rooted in the specifics of being Black and American. They are not told that the most direct route to universality is through the specific.

The point, then, is that while the number of Black artists has grown, the number of theatres has diminished. It should be noted that no distinction is being made between the professional and the amateur theatre here. We need showcases for our work. It used to be said that there is no audience for Black theatre. Recent tours of works like *Beauty Shop* and my own *One Monkey Don't Stop No Show* evidence the ticket buying potential of the Black community.

We have the people but we must now be about the business of offering them quality work. In the seventies we talked about a Black alternative to Broadway and the nineties have indicated that there is one. The bold insight that led producers to take plays that seemed to lack cross over appeal directly to those cities having the largest Black populations....at popular prices---is exactly the kind of thinking that can save and encourage a Black theatre in America. Understandably, unions and the star system make these ventures difficult, but the

Writing Black. A Retrospective

Don Evans
Princeton, NJ

Like storefront churches, little theatres seemed to grow on every corner in Black America. Kids, who a generation before had looked to sports or music as their only way out of the uglinesses of the ghetto, began to set their sights on being writers, actors or technicians in the theatre that was being built.

Few of us made big bucks back then but we could always find a place to do our plays. For a time we were able to pay the rent through governmental programs like CETA or some other federal or state agencies. Some theatres were fortunate enough to gain the support of more mainstream foundations. For the writers, it meant that we often had works produced but seldom collected the royalty. For the most part, we didn't care. As long as there was a play on the boards somewhere, we were what we said we were, and we were doing what we set out to do.

The strength of our theatre was in the people. We had the artists - actors, technicians, designers, directors and writers. What we didn't have was property. The storefront theatres died as the political posture changed and the funds dried up. A few of us truly made the big bucks and kept on going, ignorant of the value of property when a theatre is being built.

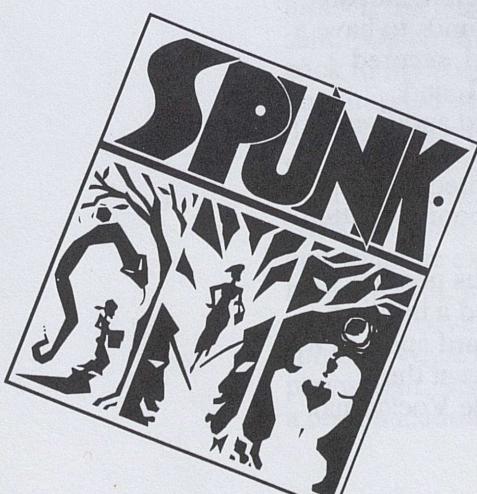
So, now where are we? We still have the artists. The black theatre artists of today



alternatives are devastating. In spite of color-blind and non-traditional casting, there is no affirmative action for the Black artist in today's theatre. To work or not to work remains the whimsical choice of the individual institutions. This is particularly difficult for the playwright. The storefronts offered ego gratification, if nothing else, and this was often enough to keep one at the typewriter. The big question for the Black playwright in the nineties is not whether the play written is good, but where can it be sent to get serious consideration.

The most unfair thing to happen to the Black theatre artist since the seventies has been the tease. Back then we could be satisfied with a few tracklights and a door switch and call it a "lighting design." We didn't ask that costumes be designed and built, we simply hit The Salvation Army. We just wanted the play to be seen. Between then and now some of us have learned about pre-sets and augmented sound. We have enjoyed royalties and found that actors and writers really do get paid. In short, we know how it should be and want it to be that way.

We are not better off than we were twenty years ago. We have fewer theatres and, therefore, fewer opportunities to work. This realization has caused many of our most gifted writers to turn to other art forms or simply throw in the towel. This comes at a time when an audience that can truly support a Black theatre has been identified. The charge for the nineties is to challenge that audience by giving it the best of what we have to offer.



Ed Bullins' 1968 arrival in New York City with a dozen plays in his trunk signaled a change in Black theatre direction. He had sent me some of his plays, and I had read *In The Wine Time*, *Clara's Ole Man*, and *Goin a Buffalo* as well as his articles in *Negro Digest*. When I met Ed Bullins in 1968, we talked late into the night. Ed said very little, but he drank plenty of wine. We laughed a lot, and the bottom line was/is, I loved his plays and totally committed to his writings because he was dedicated to playwriting and to exploring the lives of Black people.

I introduced Bullins' work to Wyn Handman at American Place Theatre. That same week, American Place Theatre presented Bullins' one act *Electronic Nigger And Others*, including *A Son Comes Home*, and *Clara's Ole Man*. In following years, they presented his full-length plays *The Pig Pen* and *House Party*, and did a rehearse reading of *Goin a Buffalo*. Robert Macbeth's New Lafayette Theatre produced Bullins landmark *In The Wine Time*. That production with Sonny Jim Gaines, Gary Bolling, Bette Howard, George Miles, Kruis Keiser, Bill Lathan and the other New Lafayette Players was the most brilliantly produced and directed work in the Bullins canon. Robert Macbeth directed *In The Wine Time* with awesome detail.

I've produced (or directed) seven of Ed Bullins plays. Why? Bullins is a Master Craftsman and,

without question, Bullins' plays reaffirm Black life. The language and violence in his early plays, especially *Clara's Ole Man* as well as the plays in the twentieth-century cycle, are so precise they could not be ignored.

Seven months after Bullins arrived in New York, I produced *A Black Quartet* and Bullins' *The Gentleman Caller* was included. This piece is an *avant garde* play in the tradition of Albee, Pinter and Beckett. However, it is very Black in terms of language. Bullins' exploration of new forms within the Black theatre structure resonates throughout all of his plays.

The language and concise Blackness of Bullins' *In New England Winters* takes Black theatre to a level of beauty not found in the American theatre; certainly not in Eugene O'Neill or Tennessee Williams. New Federal Theatre's 1971 production directed by Dick Anthony Williams combined

take their places among the finest plays written for the Black theatre.

When I listened to Bullins (an astute historian) destroy a theatre historian in a radio discussion on Black theatre, I learned never to mistake his quietness for lack of knowledge. To understand the language and characters within Black culture as well Bullins, we must assume he was a witness.

As we near the new century, an anthology of plays by Ed Bullins on historical characters edited by Dr. Ethyl Pitt Walker, gives the Black theatre much-needed, new work. Even though I produced one of Bullins' historical plays (*Phyllis Wheatley*, 1976/77), I was surprised to learn from Dr. Walker the vast number of these plays he had written. One forgets Ed Bullins is a playwright; a playwright writes plays.

Ed Bullins' plays are included in many of my anthologies. His work has always been integral to the Black theatre movement. Bullins has given the Black

theatre anthologies, criticism and scholarship, exploring its theories, its practices and its aesthetics.

I often think of Bullins when I recall a speech given by Eleanor Taylor. She was speaking about James Baldwin, though she could just as easily have been speaking of Ed Bullins. Baldwin had written hundreds of articles, eight nonfiction books, ten novels, hundreds of speeches, expatriated to Europe in the early 50's, and created a body of work on Black America any new writer must come by to be in the same league. Baldwin quoted the Bible wherein the Lord said in order to get into heaven you must, "Come by Me." I am reminded of the vast body of work by Bullins and, once again, I would warn any playwright, you must come by Bullins.



the violence, the language, and the characterizations of Black life. The violence of America was further explored in my production of *The Taking of Miss Janie* (1974). That production was directed by Gilbert Moses. Miss Janie was co-produced by Joseph Papp, moving from New Federal Theatre to Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. It won three Obie Awards as well as the Drama Critic Circle Award as Best New American Play of the Season. My production of *Daddy* (1977) explored this violence within the context of the Black family and redemption wherein Bullins seemed to be analysing himself as an artist and father. Language and character are so clear in *The Fabulous Miss Marie* (1975), one leaves the theatre realizing how accurately Bullins captures the new, Black middle class. *The Fabulous Miss Marie* and *In New England Winters* can

Mbulu

Rob Penny
Pittsburgh, PA

He Who Has Found His Song

I first knew August when we both attended Holy Trinity Elementary school. Today, when I look back over my shoulders, searching among the lovely memories of our shared experiences, I remember the fine poet and friend Charlie P. Williams who reintroduced us. That meeting on the mean pavements of Centre Avenue was, for me, the beginning of our adult relationship.

August Wilson's soul is a blessing from the ancestors. Back in the day, as a member of the arts community in Pittsburgh, August served consistently as poetry editor of various literary magazines and journals. And he was one of the backbone members of the Centre Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop. Issuing like biddies out of the womb of this group, four poets (Williams, Flounoy, Penny, Wilson) emerged and identified ourselves as "Four in the Centre Avenue Tradition," a tradition that found its creative energies and social vision from the various musicians (from Art Blakey to Eddie Jefferson to Dakota Staton) and writers (Bill Demby to Adrienne Kennedy) and artists (from Henry O. Tanner to Romare Bearden) who came before us and left memories so strong, the funk's still with us.

I bring tears of joy in my heart and words of admiration to August from

the remarkable poets and friends, Charlie Williams and Nick Flounoy.

I can remember, as tho it was happening rat now, the times when Nick, Charlie and August were engaged in poetic contests which consisted of someone reading several lines from a poem, selected at random from the pages of an anthology, to see which one would be able to name the poet and identify the poem.

I'm not going to tell you who won most of the time, but I will read my palms and tell you who never won. Me. The only poetry I knew back then by heart, as we use to say, was the romantic lyrics of Nolan Strong and the Diablos, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, Clyde McPhatter and the Chantels.

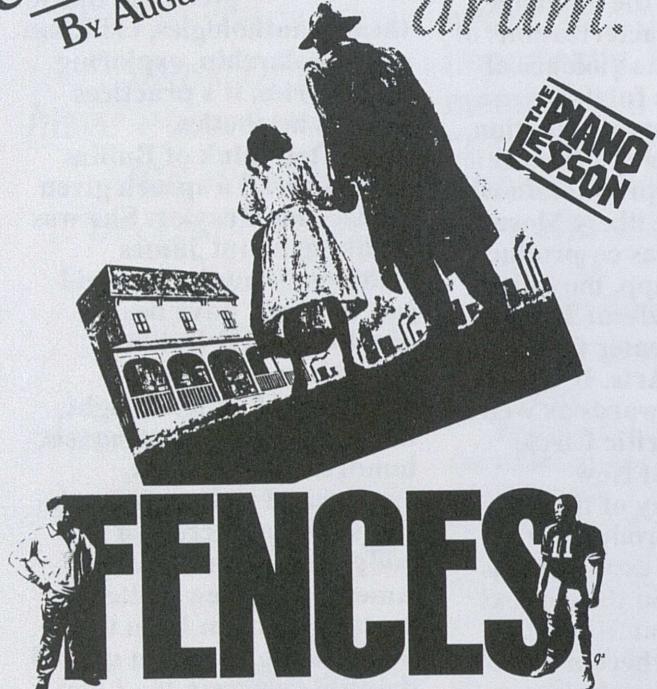
August, I climb into your eyes when I read your magnificent works of art. The nappy strands of my gray hair touch clouds, and I embrace you. In the silence of my mind, especially when there is a soft breeze dancing across my eyes, I think that you are teaching us how to embrace the universe.

In 1967, Langston Hughes, Otis Redding and John Coltrane (St. John the Divine) had to cut out; it was also the year that August Wilson gave birth to the Black Horizon Theatre of Pittsburgh. Single-handedly, August raised funds to have a program printed, secured patrons, did P.R. and advertising, held auditions, selected plays, built sets, painted sets, edited and directed some poorly-written plays.

An ingenious person, August designed a lighting and dimmer board and had it built by students at the Connelley Trade Vocational

*JOE TURNER'S
COME AND GONE*
By AUGUST WILSON

*August
Wilson is
shaped
like an
Afrikan
drum.*



FENCES

A revised version of a paper presented at City College of New York, Harlem campus when August Wilson received the Langston Hughes Award, November, 1992.

School. And August went on to direct plays of such progressive writers as Sonia Sanchez and Ed Bullins, to name a few.

As I said before, August and I spent a lot of days and evenings together. We spent time absorbing and participating in the blood's world. A world in which the blood is still today trying to carve out and shape a landscape and environment for herself and his children. It was a world like today, full of dope and, as Jesse Jackson would say, full of hope. It was a world in which the young August Wilson learned that he had to have strong heart-muscles to survive on a personal and social tip; he had to be conscious of everythang and everyone around him; a world in which he knew hate, love, abuse, growth, Negro petty-bourgeois corruption; and a world where names conjure his own private memories: Carl "Dingbat" Smith, Snooky, Brenda, Deidre (Hasafa), Frankie, Judy, Barbara P. to Constanza.

It was also a world where we learned, loved, and memorized the wisdom words of Minister Malcolm (X) Kawaida, the Teachings of Maulana Karenga and the tenets of Black Cultural Nationalism, Pan-Africanism, Afrikan Communalism (Socialism), the Master Poet Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement.

August was active in the cultural and political activities of the sixties and seventies while he lived in Pittsburgh. One day, while we were drinking coffee and he was writing on a napkin or a piece of brown paper, he paused in one of his journeys from star to star, looked at me and said the he had given himself the name Mbulu. I said, "Okay...Mbulu." I went back to my coffee, and he continued to the next planet, drinking his coffee and writing on a napkin.

I think when the breath of Afrika entered August's nose and when he exhaled the name Mbulu, he was on his way to discovering his spiritual voice as a playwright. Mbulu gave him a re-connection to Afrika

while the Blues gave him the tongue to speak in the rhythms of revolution and the memories where he could sing of them in the Ebonics (Afrikans language in America; by Moleski Kete Asante. Thanks, bruh.) suitable to his history and culture.

histories and to dab their special imprints on him.

Yebo (yes, in Zulu). We are here to pay tribute to August Wilson.

We are here to give witness to him.

We are here to sanction his Afrikaness, his spirit, his creativity and his

*In the silence of my mind,
especially when there is a soft
breeze dancing across my eyes, I
think that you are teaching us
how to embrace the universe.*

Whether consciously or unconsciously, August began to affirm Langston Hughes' "Note on Commercial Theatre." And, because she has a long neck like a bird and can see far down the road, Dr. Vernelle Lillie was one of the first to notice something promising and outstanding in August's early playwriting efforts. The Kuntu Repertory Theatre, under the direction of Dr. Lillie, produced and directed August's first play written in the Afrikan Aesthetic tradition, entitled *Homecomin*.

August had opened himself up to the Sun Ra/rays and reached out and collected in his heart the teachings that ran from Unkulunkulu thru Amilcar Cabral thru Martin Delaney thru Sojourner Truth thru Mary McLeod Bethune thru Marcus Garvey thru the Honorable Elijah Muhammad thru Lorraine Hansberry thru Ed Bullins thru Amiri Baraka thru June Jordan thru Maulana Karenga thru Romare Bearden thru Audre Lorde thru Ma Rainey thru Claude Purdy thru Lloyd Richards to the Father of the Black Aesthetic Movement in theatre, Woodie King, Jr.

I believe a male cannot grow, develop and reach a higher level of humanity until he submits to his feminine side. I believe August Wilson, whether consciously or unconsciously, achieved this, not by entering a woman sexually, but by allowing Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Ma Rainey, to mention a few, to enter into him and fill him up with their great

contributions.

We are here to affirm him in his Afrocentric affirmation of the collective creative consciousness of his people's contribution to civilization and humanity.

We are here to bless him by showing our acceptance and appreciation of him by bestowing upon him our smiles.

We are here to touch and to embrace him.

Halala! We bring our own thang to this table of democracy and put it into the pot for all to dip our fingers into and to share this wholesome time with our brother, our friend and our comrade.

I am here with my palms up and my arms extended to my brother.

I carry with me many congratulations and expressions of thanks from brothers and sistuh back on the Hill District in Pgh.

I bring the food and hospitality of my wife to you, my brother.

As I address you in the captive language of our enslavement, I say to you, Congratulations. You deserve it. May your ancestors and your family have peace and happiness for as long as the sun shines and water flows.

August Wilson, I say to you in the presence of this community this evening, and before our blessed ancestors, I love you, bruh.



The Continuing Drama of African-American Images in American Cinema

St.Clair Bourne
New York, NY

"There's no Santa Claus and everybody's sitting around the tree with their stockings."

Melvin Van Peebles
The "Think Piece" Section,
Chamba Notes Newsletter, 1979

This essay is from *Picturing Us*, a book of essays edited by Debra Willis to be published by The New Press in Spring, 1994. St.Clair Bourne has over thirty productions (ranging from educational films, documentaries for domestic and foreign television and dramatic films) in his distinguished, independent filmmaking career. His most recent films include two broadcast documentaries on the racial politics of sports for *Will to Win*, a six-part BBC series. Bourne is currently making a documentary on "The Black West".

James Baldwin's writings about the African-American quest for freedom and justice always questioned the wisdom of integrating into a "burning house," his metaphor for this country. To me, a survey of past and present African-American activity in both the independent and the mainstream Hollywood film scenes raises the same issue. What is the nature of "African-American progress" in the movies and in American life in general?

One thing is obvious, American film and television images are greatly influenced by the political conditions of the times and these images have tended to serve the psychological needs of those that create them. For example, the purpose of the Africans brought here by white male Europeans was to provide service labor and nothing more. Therefore, European-Americans economically, socially and cinematically positioned the Africans and their descendants in a society as

the European-Americans conceived it. This process continues in media; sometimes with the assistance of African-American filmmakers themselves.

When I reflect on the politics of media, I always think back to my own beginning in filmmaking. Becoming one of the original

staff producers for *Black Journal*, the first national public affairs documentary series in American television, was due as much to the social conditions of the times as my own energy. During the days of the "Black cultural revolution," there was general unrest among the African-American population due to racial discrimination and treatment as second-class citizens. A specific complaint was the overall lack of presence in the electronic media and the negative distortion that took place when we were represented. The tactics of non-violence and petitioning white society for justice of the Civil Rights movement were beginning to be discredited as the marchers and activists were thwarted by violent resistance and government complicity. Thus, planned and spontaneous rebellions erupted in the cities where there were large Black populations.

The government's response was two-fold: repression and concession. The FBI's Cointelpro operation, the murder by the Chicago police of Black Panther Fred Hampton, the frame-up of LA Panther Geronimo Pratt for murder, and many other such incidents, are examples of the first response. Concessions came in the form of programs and positions that were made available to provide African-Americans access to broadcast media. It should be noted that these measures were taken not out of

benevolence nor goodwill but rather were the result of pressure placed on them by Black protest for a share of the American pie as we perceived it.

One of these earned concessions was the creation of the PBS *Black Journal* series under the leadership of veteran filmmaker William Greaves as the executive producer. The *Black Journal* series provided an African-American "from the inside" advocacy voice in its documentaries and as a result, this technique helped change the editorial treatment of African-Americans in mainstream television in which material from a Black point of view had rarely been presented.

Political and social change was in the air. As African-Americans began to establish a base of power, other disenfranchised groups (Latinos, women, gays, etc.) began using the techniques of Black activists and they too slowly began to gain media access. Other elements, too, were at work. In the theatrical film industry, skyrocketing production costs and dwindling attendance figures were creating a crisis for several of the major Hollywood studios. The co-option process, buffeted by economic market forces, kicked into high gear as a wave of profitable movies oriented toward Afro-Americans became the period economic lifesaver for Hollywood.

Outside of Hollywood, an African-American independent cinema has existed since the early 1900s in direct response to the racist "characteratures" in America's pioneer white movies. Approximately 150 companies produced hundreds of films that ranged from imitation Black Hollywood images to images that showed the diversity and depth of our community. However, it was Melvin Van Peebles, the Charlie Parker of American cinema, with his film *Sweet Sweet-Back's Baadass Song*, who played the key historical role in re-establishing African-American films as a cultural force.



A WOZA ALBERT! 'SISTERS' HALALA!

Searching for Our Real Theatre

Dr. Abena Joan Brown
Chicago, IL

Melvin Van Peebles was born in Chicago, graduated from Ohio Wesleyan University, then served as an officer flying as a navigator/bombardier with the U.S. Air Force's Strategic Air Command. Returning to civilian life, he trained as a painter in Mexico.

Subsequently, he worked as a cable car gripman in San Francisco. On the basis of several short films he made while living in San Francisco, Van Peebles was invited to France by the Cinematheque in Paris.

After having written five novels in French and thereby qualifying for a French Director's card, he made his first feature *La Permission (Story of a Three Day Pass)*, a bitter-sweet romance between an American soldier and a French girl. That film brought him back to America as a "French" delegate to the 1967 San Francisco Film Festival, where it was acclaimed the critic's choice. Shortly thereafter, he was hired by Columbia Pictures to direct *Watermelon Man*, a comedy about a white bigot who one day wakes up and discovers he's black. In 1970, instead of accepting a three-picture contract with Columbia Pictures, Van Peebles struck out on his own. His 1970 film *Sweet Sweet-Back's Baadass Song* was a celebration of resistance, telling the story about a "Black underclass" brother's growth in consciousness, fighting and beating the police and, most important of all, escaping.

When Melvin Van Peebles started production on *Sweetback*, he had no idea that his pioneering efforts would produce not only another film but an attitude. That attitude, based on Van Peebles' desire to see images of African-American life as he had perceived it, was reflective of and, in turn, energized by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Melvin Van Peebles, in creating his own images that tapped into the Black rage of the times, encouraged a generation of others to create their own visions of life on film as well.

Sweetback was commercially successful and

Black people need and must have a Black theatre which is affirming and transforming. To achieve this mission, African-American theatre must authentically tell our own story. That should be easy, and it would be if we knew our story and, more importantly, if we were able and wanted to differentiate our story from that of others.

Paul Carter Harrison, in a recent meeting of outstanding African-Americans in and related to the theatre, symbolized this question when he asked: "What ever happened to Sam after he played it again?" The answer, of course, is nobody knows and nobody cares. Even though in some Black communities, theatre marqueses proclaimed Dooley Wilson in *Casa Blanca* with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, it wasn't Sam's story.

Historically, there has been too much mimicking of the Euro-centric paradigm. This symbiosis suggests that the African-American has no life experience which is integral to our lifestyle, interest, concerns, values and aspirations. In this sense, the Black theatre, as it mirrors the African-American experience, is the personification of "double consciousness" or "two-edness" as defined by W.E.B. DuBois in *Souls of Black Folk*.

The theatre is a place where stories are told. We cannot tell our story until we know what our story is. Central to this discovery is the griot, the playwright who must be discovered, nurtured and developed within the collaborative process of the theatre where, more often than not, he/she is not to be physically found. Among various complexities, the lack of Black cultural institutions being foremost, many Black playwrights simply do not have sufficient theatres to produce their work and, of those which exist, many are not financially viable enough to mount professional

productions on a consistent and continuous basis. John Allen of the Freedom Theater in Philadelphia has said that the significance of the regional, non-profit theatre goes beyond cultural enrichment; "it is the last platform for the average (Black) person to be represented. This is not a service performed by television, films or even Broadway . . . We must be the ones to do it."

If we want to validate ourselves as all world-class people do, the importance of knowing what is our work to do becomes paramount. Particularly so in the current "multi-culturalism," "outreach" and "cultural diversity" climate which are the '90's euphemisms for "integration" as a strategy for the maintenance of cultural hegemony.

While the dearth of theatres to produce the work of Black playwrights exists, the other problem is that writers can only rarely develop their work and hone it from the page straight through production. Generally, the playwrights work in isolation, presenting a script to be produced by theatre persons whose roles are only minimally understood but who are involved in a collaborative process that ultimately embraces the audience as part of that process. While the difficulties of uncovering a flow of producible work is endemic to theatre in general, the African-American theatre faces special impediments.

Opportunities to be produced are so few, those writers with the inclination and the talent, however latent, are not encouraged to tell our story. Rather, as they pursue the popular media's carrots of success, writers are encouraged to project homogenized and/or caricatures of Black people. Moreover, there have been spurts of Black writers emerging and being recognized by having their

work produced (August Wilson and George Wolf the current and prominent ones), but there is no historical continuum. Thus, the Black cultural community is constantly confronted with the phenomenon of either "discovery" or "renaissance."

And yet, work is out there. But so much of it . . . indeed, too much . . . is in the deficit or deviant modality, presenting stereotypical characters which are limiting and lack resonance for the great majority of Black people who have transcended and for those who are or could be transformed by theatre of truth. In fact, the need to develop and incorporate writers into the theatre toward the goal of creating a body of Black dramatic literature is imperative if Black theatre is to achieve its special mission.

As Woodie King, Jr., Director and Founder of the New Federal Theatre of New York says, "plays live on and become a record of our times." The Black theatre needs plays with memorable language, classic relationships and viable resolutions. We need Black, dramatic literature that presents heroic figures who have transversed time and place to point up the strength of a people, who (despite a holocaust of immense proportions) have not only survived, but have shaped world culture.

The African-American theatre needs griot-playwrights who are masters in definitive ways, who can bring forth stories that are meaningful and deeply lodged in the memory, but are yet to be told. The Black theatre needs voices which build on past traditions and harken toward the future.

Finding those voices in their many expressions and providing ways and places for those voices to be heard is the African-American theatre's penultimate work. Until this is done, the Black theatre will persist in its historical ambiguity; lacking clarity, direction, integrity. Finding those voices will give Black theatre real potency in shaping the destiny of our people.



Dr. Brown is Co-Founder of ETA Creative Arts Foundation, Inc., Chicago's first Afri-centric professional training and performance center.

Reggae

Don't Get God Started

THE FORBIDDEN CITY

demonstrated to Hollywood the box office power of the African-American audience. Hollywood then did what it does best, absorb elements from a new, innovative cultural expression and use it to create a bland version of the original. As before, these "blaxploitation" films, as they came to be known, fulfilled specific economic and psychological purposes on behalf of the notion of white superiority, not an unusual pattern for the managers of European-American culture.

"Blaxploitation film" was full of contradictions. Most of the stories in these films took place in a Black community and featured a largely Black cast. Yet, most of the crews, writers and directors were usually white. The villains were always white males, but white males that other whites could be comfortable with as "bad guys" (crude mafia thugs, drug dealers or "crazies"). Because the Black movement of the times over-emphasized the rhetoric of "regaining lost manhood" (a concept which would now be termed male chauvinism), the Black male image in these films ultimately became a new stereotype. African-American women were ill-treated as well, usually assigned a role in which they lounged in scanty clothes being beaten up by the bad guys or waiting to be rescued by the good guys. Later, Black women were updated with their own gun-toting, mini-skirted stereotype roles like "Foxy Brown" or "Coffee" (today they would be called "gangsta bitches"). After roughly two dozen films in which the formula story line was recycled again and again, audiences stopped going and this genre died.

Still, the question remains: Why did so many Black people pack the theaters where these films played? A key element in African-American cultural expression is the resistance to racist treatment and the assertion of collective and individual strength to overcome those barriers. The African-Americans portrayed in the blaxploitation films were shown and seen as fighting the system in some

form and winning, although "winning" consisted of beating up only the scum of the white community, exploiting and mistreating women and even selling dope. But to people who had seen only "coon" roles in a steady stream of Hollywood films, these new films were a step forward.

There were African-American independent filmmaking attempts to counter the blaxploitation films. *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, *Ganga and Hess*, *The Long Night*, *Top of the Heap* are some of the efforts that come to mind. In addition, film journalist Clyde Taylor has written extensively about the burst of creativity that occurred at UCLA's film department in the mid-1970's. Energized by the momentum of the Black Power, Pan-Africanist and cultural nationalist movements, a group of young film students, Haile Gerima, Julie Dash, Larry Clark, Charles Burnett, Pamela Jones, Ben Caldwell, Billy Woodberry and others shared in the production of each other's films, works that went largely beyond the category of student films and aimed toward developing a new wave of Black dramatic films different from the Black exploitation films that Hollywood was then producing. Taylor has also commented that what is remarkable about this movement was the portrayal, for nearly the first time, of Black women with a legitimately positive existence for themselves. Although varied in approach, the films of Julie Dash, Alile Sharon Larkin, Pamela Jones and Barbara McCullough began exploring the interior complexity of the Black woman persona.

There were several spin-offs from independent African-American film activity. Film groups like the African Film Society in Atlanta and San Francisco and the Blacklight Film Festival in Chicago sponsored film screenings and invited filmmakers to appear with their work. At the same time, films by early African filmmakers like Ousman Sembene, Med

Hondo and Ola Balagun began to be shown here and, even though they were not seen by a large mass African-American audience, they did influence Black critical taste by providing a point of comparison with black Hollywood films. Where white Hollywood films featured perhaps one stereotypical Black character and black Hollywood films featured updated "coon" roles, most of the African films that made it to these shores showed a range of black characters, often in heroic postures.

Looking forward, there are both frustrating and hopeful signs. Although this current generation of working Black filmmakers are the benefactors of the cultural nationalism and Black Power movements from the late 60's and early 70's, the latest group of filmmakers seem to move to a different ideological drumbeat, distinct from African-American independent filmmakers. For starters, their films do not invoke the theme of "resistance" and in some instances actually avoid an upfront sense of politics, a traditional characteristic of independent Black films. They eschew the same political sensibilities that fueled the social conditions that enabled these filmmakers to be where they are.

Secondly, most of the Hollywood African-American filmmakers are stuck with the same old, albeit updated, characters. Whereas before the stereotypes demanded "cool cats" and "fine mammas," now the scripts that the Hollywood studios are willing to underwrite call almost exclusively for working class "urban" (read African-American) "hip-hop B-boys" and "gangsta bitches," thus restricting the contemporary director into the valid but formulaic "Black life is oppressive in the ghetto" message. In the process, these films limit the responses to this oppression to dancing your way out (a la *House Party*), losing your soul to middle-class corporate life (a la *Strictly Business*) or dying in a nihilistic blaze of bullets (a la

Menace II Society). These concepts are a reinvention of the same old artistic wheel, perhaps with bigger budgets and, in fact, distort the depiction of African-American response to American racism.

On the other hand, a Black independent film like Norman Loftus' *Small Time* shows that you can examine the world of the Black underclass with intelligence and insight. Another independent film, Wendell Harris' *Chameleon Street* explores the complexities of Black middle-class life in a creative way rather than reduce that lifestyle to a well-dressed corporate cliche. Of course, Spike Lee has shown a well-publicized commitment to political themes and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* combines Afro-centric cultural politics and cinematic lyricism in a style and scale unprecedented in the history of American cinema. Charles Burnett's films (*Killer of Sheep*, *My Brother's Wedding* and *To Sleep with Anger*) explore with sensitivity the ways in which working-class African-American life deals with the pressures that accompany it. Bill Duke's *Deep Cover*, too, has shown that, even within the confines of the standard Hollywood "cop" genre, he has the ability to create a filmic "outside renegade" vision, an artistic element central to the depiction of African-American life in America.

Everyone should have the opportunity to see their lives dealt with honesty, depth, variety and, most all, vision. Hollywood has proven that, up to now at least, it is unwilling to do that with American life in general and African-American life in particular. To their credit, Melvin Van Peebles and other independent filmmakers have and will continue to fill that vacuum. Hopefully, these efforts will change Baldwin's "burning house" to a house with a beacon on enlightenment.



Warriors & Lovers

continued from page 1

Warriors without belief, discipline or training become thugs, criminals leading to a state of unnaturalness. A state where the street/gangs substitute for family; where guns and "juice" symbolize manhood and power.

The same week, I went to see *Menace II Society*, which set me to pondering about why so few films from/about the African-American community deal with romance. Are we capable of imagining ourselves as lovers, as romantics, when we have been historically represented in media as slaves, servants, buffoons, rapists, whores, gangsters and criminals? Do we see romance in our families and communities? Can one begin to even imagine romance when many of us live in warlike conditions both in the states and abroad? When what we see and say about ourselves has so much to do with destruction and so little to do with construction? When the defenses we require for dealing in a hostile world keep us from touching each other?

A definition of romance

according to Webster is "a love story; an emotional attraction or aura belonging to an especially heroic era, adventure or calling; to carry on a love affair with." Romance, then, goes beyond male/female intimacy to a world view which embraces an African spirit/soul force; that which is born in a concept of family including the living, the dead and those yet to be born (witness Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*); where the *family* entity constitutes more power or force than the *individual* entity (witness Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* and *To Sleep with Anger*). These films center around a belief in life as paramount and of primary importance. Films like *Menace II Society*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, *New Jack City*, *Juice*, et al. seem to be rooted in a belief whose primary universal force and world view is death and destruction.

The argument often heard in favor of these *New Jack* films is that they present a realistic view of the filmmakers' world and reflect a vision that many would deny exists. Reality,

however, as defined in Afrocentric ideology is broadened to include not only the now, but its driving force is grounded in answering the questions: Who are we? Where did we come from? How did we get here? Where do we wish to go? A people's world view also defines what they believe to be their "nature" and the way in which the world should operate.

To merely answer the question "who are we," without dealing with the other questions would lead one to believe that our "nature" is unnatural; out of tune with universal, humane principles and clearly out of touch with family and community as the driving force for our actions.

To be sure, the representation of African American film would substantiate this claim of a state of being unnatural. While it is natural to become defensive and war-like in a hostile environment, it is unnatural to turn that hostility randomly on family, community and self. Some of history's greatest warriors have been some of history's great romantics; warriors fight for and defend family, beliefs, loved ones. In becoming a warrior it is necessary to have motivation, belief in something greater than self and disciplined training. Warriors without belief, discipline or training become thugs, criminals leading to a state of unnaturalness. A state where the street/gangs is a substitute for family; where guns and "juice" are symbolic of manhood and power.

In life, a return to family is crucial; in film, an encouragement of films about love, life, romance and hope needs to find a place alongside and ultimately overshadow the New Jacks.



What to do:

- Demand more films about the total Black community
- Go to see them when they are shown
- Monitor young adults' viewing habits
- Train our young men to become warriors and lovers (warriors is broadly defined)
- Treat family as priority (family is broadly defined, but does not include gangs who enact random acts of violence on the community)
- Love our children ferociously and discipline them as well
- Become media literate, attend community film festivals and support African American independent films
- Talk back to your TV, film screen, advertisers by writing, calling, boycotting, organizing
- Ask your local papers to hire African American movie/TV critics to give in-depth analysis (this includes Black and white press)
- Fight back against negative actions in real life and negative images on the screen
- Try to imagine love, being loved and giving love as many times a day as you can



Shooting Star Productions, Inc. exists to build awareness and appreciation for the Black experience via arts and cultural activities.

Shooting Star Productions, Inc. provides its services to all racial, ethnic, religious, age and economic populations, with its most specific and immediate work geared toward African-American youth and adults.

Shooting Star Productions, Inc.'s services include:

Promoting the arts and artists (literary, visual and performing) whose work explores the Black experience; and

Generating programs consistent with the Mission Statement that develop artistic capacity and cultural breadth. These programs can include production of a literary/cultural magazine, a system of Ceremonies, Commemorations and Conferences (such as Writers Conferences, Middle Passage Commemorations, Jubilee and Kwanzaa Celebrations and Literary Readings), and other arts activities and cultural events as opportunities arise.

Shooting Star Productions, Inc.'s Mission and services are provided so that opportunities exist for greater appreciation of the Black experience through knowledge and understanding of the challenges endured and the significant contributions created by people of African descent. **Shooting Star Productions** seeks to generate self-understanding and a sense of pride and accomplishment in Black people of all ages and circumstances while providing information and resources that could reduce racial and ethnic intolerance and allow the creative potential of all Americans to be better realized. Further, **Shooting Star Productions** will expand general interest in and access to the diverse expressions of Black culture.

Shooting Star Review SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Shooting Star Review is copyrighted and provides fine writing and art about the Black experience. This award-winning magazine publishes established writers and new talent. Work by non-Black writers on the Black experience is welcome. Sandra Gould Ford began *Shooting Star Review* in 1987 with the founding belief that art provides enduring truths and deeply meaningful, human understanding.

Rigorously juried, *Shooting Star Review*'s acceptance rate is about one in twenty. All visuals, graphics, photography, short fiction, poetry and narrative essays are provided by free lance talent from all over the world. The magazine is 11x17 inches. Print run: 1,500. Writers with the best chance of publishing in *Shooting Star Review* demonstrate these characteristics:

- ★ Well read, especially within their artform
- ★ Active voice with minimal passive verbs and prepositions
- ★ Honest and authentic voice(s)
- ★ Succinct with inviting & compelling openings

IMPORTANT

Include cover letter with name address and phone on every page. All text must be complete & clearly copied or printed (double space) on one side of plain, white paper. Multiple submissions OK. Return envelopes with proper postage required.

FICTION: Up to 3,500 words. Fiction under 1,000 words encouraged. Up to three stories per quarter.

ESSAYS: Up to 2,500 words. Conversational voice preferred. Bibliographies accepted but no footnoting.

POETRY: Max. 70 lines per poem. Up to six poems per quarter. One poem per page.

PAYMENT upon publication for 1st N.Amer. serial rights and as funds permit. Fiction and Essays: \$10 to 1,000 words, \$20+ up to 3,500 words. Poetry: \$5+. Reprints are a third of standard rate. Artists also get 2 magazines (extras available at 40% discount). Visuals \$8+.

Sample copies of *Shooting Star Review* are \$3 with SASE. One-year subscription is \$10.

INTERNATIONAL: Subscriptions are \$23/year airmail and \$15/year surface in U.S. Dollars.

RESPONSE TIME & RIGHTS: Queries response in 3 weeks; 4 months on mss. Themes determine time to publication. All rights revert to author upon publication. Galleys are sent to authors if time permits.

Submissions should be sent to 7123 Race Street, Pgh, PA 15208-1424.

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Shooting Star Review distributes in 30 states, Canada, Japan and Switzerland.

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3rd Shooting Star Writers Conference

October 7 & 8, 1994

For details, send a self-addressed, stamped, business-size envelope to **3rd SSWC**, Shooting Star Productions, 7123 Race St., Pittsburgh, PA 15208-1424.

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Presenters sought for **3rd Shooting Star Writers Conference** for Mini-Lectures on aspects of writing, including fiction, poetry, journalism, essays, non-fiction, stage, screen, youth, literary history, criticism, agents & genres including science fiction, mystery, romance, etc.

For consideration and information, send resume, including previous teaching and/or presenting experience and brief (up to 100-word) description of a 30-minute presentation before June 30, 1994.

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Write: Ms. Sheri Johnson, Artistic Coordinator
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