THE REVOLUTIONARY DRAMA OF MARITA BONNER

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By the 1920s, black writers, composers, and entertainers had captivated the American stage with such musicals as *A Trip to Coontown, Bandanna Land*, and *Shuffle Along*. However, portrayals of black life in drama had primarily remained the work of white writers. Many contemporary African Americans dismissed the work of white writers of black drama as being too heavily influenced by the mammies, Toms, shuffling darkies and other offensive black stereotypes of the minstrel stage. Black critic Montgomery Gregory was one of the many who encouraged the development of more black dramatists because he believed "white writers cannot describe the feelings in the heart of American Negroes today."[1]

To alleviate the dearth of plays by African American authors, literary competitions were sponsored by *Opportunity* and *Crisis* magazines of the National Urban League and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, respectively. The playwriting division awarded cash prizes for thirty plays by fifteen black dramatists. These works comprise much of the pioneering efforts in dramatic literature by blacks. The works of these writers concern racial issues, miscegenation, religion and domestic problems.

Following the contests, the professional theatre remained closed to these award winners. Instead, they continued to write for community and educational theatres or earned acclaim through other endeavors.[2] Marita Bonner is one of the finest and most provocative dramatists of the award winners.

Marita Bonner was born in Boston in 1899. At Radcliffe, she studied English and comparative literature. Active in Musical clubs, she twice won the school's song competition. After receiving her B.A. in 1922, she taught high school students in Bluefield, Virginia and Washington, D.C. until 1930.

"On Being Young--A Woman--and Colored" represents one of Bonner's earliest published works. In the essay she advises African American women not to be bitter.

> *You long to explode and hurt everything white; friendly; unfriendly. But you know that you cannot live with a chip on your shoulder even if you can manage a smile around your eyes--without getting steely and brittle and losing the softness that makes you a woman.*

Opportunity was the first to publish a play by Bonner--*The Pot Maker*--in its February 1927 issue. In December of that sameyear, *Crisis* announced that she had won first place honors in its contest for a short story, an essay, and two plays--*The Purple Flower* and *Exit, an Illusion*. *Crisis* published *Purple Flower* and *Exit, an Illusion* in its January 1928 and October 1929 issues, respectively. Despite the honors for her plays, she became better known for her short stories. *Crisis* and *Opportunity* published fourteen of these works from 1925-41. According to literary historian Joyce Flynn,

"Bonner's works offer the perspec-

tive of an educated black female consciousness on a rapidly changing America between the world wars."

For fourteen years, Bonner suspended her work as an educator when she married an accountant named William Occomy in1930. During this time, she bore three children, worked as a secretary for Washington, D.C.'s first settlement house for blacks, ran a soup kitchen for children, and was an active member of her Baptist church. She also served as an advisor to the Washington, D.C. branch of the Krigwa Players--a black theatre company--which was active from 1927-35. After 1941, there is no evidence of further theatrical or creative writing activities by Bonner. The Occomy family moved to Chicago where Bonner taught high school and retarded students from 1950-63. In 1971, she died from injuries suffered in a fire in her Chicago apartment.[6]

According to theatre historian John Rellly:

> *Drama by AfricanAmericans is inherently revolutionary and liberationist within the racial climate in which it has evolved. Its very existence is confrontational to the program of cultural imperialism of the Anglo-Euro-American canonizer of the arts. Blacks liberate themselves through the number of roles and themes they create to depict their lives.*[7]

Bonner's plays certainly can be considered revolutionary as they break the confines of the images created by the minstrel stage and discuss pressing issues concerning African American life.

Bonner's first published play--*The Pot Maker*--is a domestic drama concerning the theme of sin and forgiveness.[8] Set in a rural home, the play begins with Elias Jackson--a newly "called" preacher of God--practicing his first sermon before his parents, wife--Lucinda--and his wife's lover, Lew. When Lew sits beside Lucinda, Elias gives an indication that he suspects an affair between the two. However, he passively accepts the situation.

Elias tells a parable concerning a potter and his earthenware pots. He says the parable illustrates the need for people to put their trust in God and lead an exemplary life. He admits there will be time when "cracks in one's life" (sins) may surface; however, God is willing to forgive and heal the wounds.

Only Elias's father appears impressed by the sermon. His mother worries the congregation will not listen to a parable featuring a potter who talks to objects which are ordinarily inanimate. His wife openly displays disinterest in his preaching. Throughout the sermon, Lucinda gazes at Lew and comments on her husband's lesson by yawning loudly.

On the pretense of getting Lew a drink of water, Lucinda and her lover leave the room. When she returns without Lew, Lucinda begins to prepare herself for an evening out. After his parents leave, Lucinda berates Elias for quitting his former job to become a minister. When Elias claims, "God chose me," she retorts, "Yas [sic] God chose you. He aint chose you for no preachin. He chose you for some kinder fool."[9] She then harshly criticizes him for being passive in regard to her affair with Lew.

As their argument reaches its climax, a whistle is heard from outside. Before Lucinda can respond, there are sounds of wood giving way and a splash. Realizing that someone--most probably Lew--has fallen in the well, Lucinda tries to go out and save him; However, Elias restrains her until the splashing ceases. Elias releases Lucinda and soon more splashing is heard as she searches desperately for her lover. Realizing she too is in danger of drowning, Elias leaves to save her. His attempts end in futility as he drowns with her.

Despite its implausible melodramatic ending, the play has elements to be commended. The dramatist's character descriptions are deftly drawn with sprinkles of humor. Bonner's descriptions of Lew and Lucinda are especially effective:

> *[Lew] must be an over-fat, over-facetious, over-fair, over-bearing, over-pleasant, over-confident creature. If he does make you long to slap him back into a place approaching normal humility, he is the wrong character for the part.*
>
> *You must think as you look at him: "A woman would have to be a base fool to love such a man!"*
>
> *Then you must relax in your chair as the door at the right opens and Lucinda walks in. "Exactly the woman," you decide. For at once you can see she is a woman who must have sat down in the mud. It has crept into her eyes. They are*

*dirty. It has filtered through--filtered through her. Her speech is smudged... She picks up each foot as if she were loath to leave the spot it rest on.*10

Humor can also be found throughout the dialogue as evidenced in the following exchange occurring when Elias begins to tell his parable:

Elias:...This here talk is about a pot-maker what made pots.

Lucinda: (laughing to herself--to Lew) Huh, huh; Lord ha' mercy.

Mother: (giving Lucinda a venomous glance and raising in defense) Look her 'Lias, is that tale in the Bible? You is called of God and He aint asked you to set nothin' down he aint writ himself.

Elias: This is one of them tales like Jesus used to tell the Pharisees when he was goin' round through Galilee with them.

*Mother: Jesus aint never tol' no tales to Parisees nor run with them either! Onliest thing He ever done was to argue with them when he met them. He gave 'em good example like.*11

Also of interest, throughout the script the dramatist provides ironic comments on the action of the play. For instance, when Lew asks Lucinda to accompany him to the well for water, the playwright states that Lew's "tone is hollow. There will be no water drunk though they may run water."12 These elements make *The Pot Maker* an entertaining piece on domestic life. In contrast, her other two plays--*Exit, an Illusion* and *The Purple Flower*-- speak more to the contemporary social and political issues facing African Americans.

Bonner's first award winning play--*Exit, an Illusion*--deals with the concept of race.13 This concept emerged to handle distinctions among human beings and to legitimize the domination of one group of people over others. During the 16th-19th centuries, the notion of white superiority was used to justify the enslavement of blacks in America. Whites attempted to convince blacks to denigrate their African heritage in order to better accept their subordinate position in a white dominant society. The 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution freed black slaves from their owners, but not from a belief in the superiority of Euro-American culture and values. Before the 1960s, a light complexion and Caucasian facial features and hair texture represented the beauty standard for many African Americans. Consequently, African Americans' sense of self-esteem and relationships with others could be greatly affected by the color of their skin.

In the drama--*Exit, an Illusion*--a light skinned woman named Dot cannot persuade Buddy--a dark skinned man--to admit his affections for her. The drama takes place in an inexpensive flat in disarray--clothes, household goods, and trash are scattered across the apartment. The play begins with Dot asleep on a sofa bed. In a subordinate position, her lover--Buddy--sleeps on the floor under Dot's dangling arm. As soon as they awaken, Dot prepares herself for a date with someone she calls Exit Mann.

When Dot reveals she has known Exit for the greater part of her life, the banter between Dot and Buddy becomes bitter. As she continues to dress for her date, Buddy tells her not to meet with Exit. Dot defiantly replies: "Aw cut that stuff! How long since you could tell me when to go and when to come!"14 Dot then encourages his jealousy by heavily applying white powder to her face. Buddy becomes enraged that she will not obey him. Convinced that Exit is a white man, Buddy angrily denounces the tryst. Dot then tells Buddy that he can prevent Exit from seeing her if he loves her; however, Buddy refuses to admit his affections for her.

Exit mysteriously appears in the room, but his face cannot be seen due to the lighting of the room and positioning of his body. Buddy brandishes a pistol and fires it toward Exit. However, the bullet misses him and knocks out the sole light fixture sending the set into darkness. Buddy strikes a match whose light reveals Dot's lifeless body and Exit's face covered by a mask symbolizing death.

After the blackout, the setting returns to that found at the beginning of the script. As before, the couple are asleep when Dot suddenly finds it difficult to breathe. She tries to awaken Buddy but dies before he realizes what is happening. As in the preceding scene, she has died before she can hear him declare his

love for her.

Bonner has fashioned a compelling psychological drama based on the strength of two lower class black characters. Both Dot and Buddy speak a black urban dialect and live in a desperate environment; however, the two are separated by the color of their skin. The dramatist describes Buddy as "blackly brown with thin high poised features that mark a keen black man. [His] slender body is cast for high things"--one of them being Dot, a "high yella" woman. Seemingly, Buddy's only attraction to Dot is her fair skin, for she is sickly and described as "flat where she should curve, sunken where she should be flat."[15]

Dot's light complexion appeals to Buddy, but also threatens him. He realizes her color can provide Dot with an exit--commonly known as passing. Pretending to be a white woman, Dot could experience opportunities enjoyed by the dominant white society. What Buddy does not understand is that this exit amounts to the death of Dot since she must deny an integral part of herself--her African heritage--to make the transition to the white world. Only Buddy's love and acceptance can save Dot from this death, but hate and pride will not allow him to admit his affections for her. Consequently, Dot's life ends tragically.

The play depicts how differences in skin color between African Americans has led to feelings of hostility, inadequacy, and low self-esteem. Instead of affirming and gaining strength from the common bond of their African heritage, the characters focus on elements emanating from miscegenation which divide the race. Consequently, this divisiveness leads to tragic results which could have been averted if the characters would have foreseen the detrimental effects of their destructive thoughts and actions.

Bonner's second prize winning play--*The Purple Flower*--is an allegory which describes a militant solution for blacks to overcome oppression by whites.[16] When the play begins, the White Devils are "Somewhere" on the side of a hill. The Us's (blacks) sit in "Nowhere" in a valley with their faces toward "Somewhere." To obtain the same opportunities as the White Devils, the Us's must reach the purple "Flower-of-life-at-its-Fullest." However, the White Devils will not let the Us's gain access to it.

Various Us's discuss strategies to reach the purple flower. These plans include: working diligently to convince the whites that they deserve the flower; demanding God to act on their problem; and trying to bribe the whites with gold. After realizing that none of these strategies have been successful in the past, a character called the Old Man finally provides the Us's with another option. The Old Man makes an appeal to the living Us's and the spirits of their ancestors. In an iron pot, he asks the Us's to put dust, books, gold, and blood inside of it because these ingredients are needed to form the New Man. The elements for the creation of this new being each has symbolic significance. According to the Bible, God formed the first man from dust. The books provide knowledge and gold allows people the means to acquire clothing and food. The blood is needed to give life to the New Man.

According to the Old Man, blood will be shed when the Us's and White Devils fight each other. Us's may die in the struggle, but he claims there is no other way to reach the purple flower. Thus, this new being represents a radical strategy--the people must work together sacrificing individual interests for the common good. The play ends as the first of the Us's volunteers to fight the White Devils.

The author gives only one view of the White Devils. They are deceitful tyrants who exploit the Us's and give them nothing in return. All White Devils are alike and are described as "artful little things with soft wide eyes such as you would expect to find in an angel. Soft hair flops around their horns. Their horns glow red all the time--now with blood--now with eternal fire -- now with deceit--now with unholy desire."[17]

In contrast, the dramatist says the Us's "can be as white as the White Devils, as brown as the earth, as black as the center of a poppy. They may look as if they are something or nothing."[18] The author gives the Us's a variety of names to denote different types of characters, such as Old Lady, Cornerstone, Sweet, Average, Finest Blood, and New Comer. Each age group--young, middle-aged, and seniors--is blamed for a failed strategy to reach the purple flower. However, it is the Old Man--the voice of experience--who recognizes that it will take the concerted efforts of the entire community to finally obtain their objective. Moreover, the Old Man contends that "God is using [each Us] for His instrument" to fight the White Devils.[19] Thus, their mission can also be seen as a

holy offensive against a cruel and insensitive opponent.

At the end of the script in a production note, the dramatist asks--"Is it time?"[20] In other words are blacks ready for such a revolution? This question was asked four decades before it was more commonly expressed in the popular media of the 1960s.

Undoubtedly, Marita Bonner is a revolutionary black playwright. The mammies, Toms, and pickaninnies are conspicuously absent from her work. She unabashedly presents African Americans with significant issues affecting their lives. Bonner tells blacks they must not be passive in their struggle for human dignity and civil rights. She compels her audience to think about these issues and to act on the appropriate solution no matter how painful may be the implementation of that solution. Clearly, her legacycan be seen in the current revolutionary works of such dramatists as Elaine Jackson, Ntozake Shange, P.J. Gibson, and Elois Beasley. While we support the works of our contemporary writers, we should continue to promote, study and honor through performance the work of the gifted pioneering black dramatist--Marita Bonner.

ENDNOTES

1. Montgomery Gregory, "Why Not A Negro Drama For Negroes by Negroes?," Current Opinion, 72 (May 1922): 640.

2. For more information on the Opportunity and Crisis playwriting contests, see Addell Austin, "Pioneering Black Authored Dramas: 1924-27," Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1986.

3. Marita Bonner, Archive File, Radcliffe College, Cambridge Massachusetts.

4. Marita Bonner, "On Being Young--A Woman__And Colored," Crisis 31 (December 1925): 64-65.

5. Joyce Flynn, ed., Fry Street & Environs: The Collected Works of Marita Bonner (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), xii.

6. Bonner, Archive File.

7. John Reilly, "Black Liberation Theatre: An Overview," Unpublished Paper, 1988.

8. Marita Bonner, The Pot Maker, Opportunity, 2 (February 1927): 43-46.

9. Ibid., 45.

10. Ibid., 43.

11. Ibid., 44.

12. Ibid., 45.

13. Marita Bonner, Exit, an Illusion, Crisis, 36 (October 1929): 335-36, 352.

14. Ibid., 335.

15. Ibid., 335.

16. Marita Bonner, The Purple Flower, Crisis, 35 (Jan 1928): 9-11, 28, 30.

17. Ibid., 9.

18. Ibid., 9.

19. Ibid., 11.