An interview with Gus Edwards

BY MICHELA A. CALDERARO

Transferring the Caribbean Babylon to the Stage

GUS EDWARDS IS FROM ST. THOMAS, V.I. in the Caribbean. He came to the U. S. (New York City) where he studied acting mostly with William Hickey at the H.B. Studios and then film-making at the New York Institute of Photography. In 1977 he had his first full-length play (*The Offering*) produced by the famed Negro Ensemble Company (NEC). Between 1977 and 1993 he had 9 plays presented there, making him (along with Charles Fuller) that Company's most produced playwright.

In 1985 he co-wrote the TV adaptation of James Baldwin's novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and in 1988 co-authored the narration for the PBS American Masters documentary, *The Negro Ensemble Company*.

His play titles include: *The Offering* (1977), *Black Body Blues* (1978), *Old Phantoms* (1979), *Weep Not For Me* (1981), *Manhattan Made Me* (1983), *Louie & Ophelia* (1986), *Moody's Mood Café* (1989), *Lifetimes on the Streets* (1990), *Restaurant People* (1990), *Tropicana* (1992), *Frederick Douglass* (1992), *Testimony* (1993), *Confessional* (1994), *Dear Martin, Dear Coretta* (1995), *Slices* one-acts (1996), *Drought Country* (1997), *Night Cries* (1998), and *Black Woman's Blues* (1999).

As a Playwright, Director and Educator, Mr. Edwards has taught at North Carolina School of the Arts, Lehman College (Bronx, N.Y.), Iona College, N.Y., and Bloomfield College, N.J. Currently he is a tenured Associate Professor at Arizona State University (Theatre Department) where he teaches Film Studies and directs a Multi-Ethnic Theatre program.

He has served on many Literary Advisory Boards and Committees including: Theatre Communications Group (TCG), as an OBIE (Off-Broadway) Awards Judge, The Creative Arts Program Services (CAPS) NYC, The Artists Foundation (Boston), Hartford Arts Council (Hartford, CT), New York State's Council of the Arts, Arizona Commission of the Arts, Nebraska Arts Council and The National Endowment for the Arts. He has received playwriting grants from The Rockefeller Foundation, The Drama League, the Arizona Commission of the Arts and The National Endowment for the Arts.

Published works include: *The Offering* and *Old Phantoms* (Dramatists Play Service), *Monologues on Black Life* (Heinmann), *Classic Plays from the NEC* – co-editor (Pittsburgh University Press), *Black Theatre in the African Continuum* (co-editor), Temple U. Press, and *More Monologues on Black Life. Vol. II*

(Heinmann). His short plays have been published in the anthologies *Lucky 13* (University of Nevada Press), *Center Stage* (University of Illinois Press), and *Best American Short Plays 1996-97* (Applause Books).

Q. In *New Century/New Learning: Diaspora and Continuum* you quote, or possibly state your own opinion, saying, "Our aesthetic is performative, and not didactic. In practice it subverts the European definition of aesthetic [...] Resistance is central to the aesthetic. The work of African American artists is based upon resistance. This aesthetic subverts the hegemonic character of the European tradition. In the process it amplifies our self-definition."

Does that mean that resistance (or disavowal) of European aesthetic is required for the development of the black American aesthetic?

A. In the article, *New Century/New Learning,* etc. the quote concerning the "Black Aesthetic" was taken from an ongoing attempt to identify what the Black Aesthetic in theatre is. It was not written by me but by a group of African American artists and scholars, the principal investigator being Dr. Beverly M. Robinson of UCLA. It was one of the reports that came out of the "On Golden Pond" symposium at Dartmouth College in 1998. My inclusion of it in my article was as a form of reportage, but also because I fully agree with its philosophy.

Before going on, I'd like to make one thing clear concerning this so-called "Black Aesthetic Manifesto." This document is a work in progress that is constantly being altered when some new insight or perspective is illuminated or discovered. Things can be removed or changed while others can be added. It is a flexible document designed to be altered or change with the times, because it is being developed to hopefully serve the needs of African American theatre artists at various and different times in our history.

So what I guess I'm saying is that the document is not written in stone, although the basic tenets it espouses are steadfast.

In direct answer to your question I think yes it means some sort of resistance or disavowal of the European aesthetic because for too long this has been the critical yardstick by which all of our work is measured even when in content and in form the work is clearly in opposition to that paradigm. Therefore a clean break must be made if we're going to make a serious attempt at redefining artistically who we are and where we're coming from.

Q. It is my perception that your earlier plays (*The Offering,* for one) were, to my definition, closer to what one may call "European aesthetic." Would you agree to such view, and if you do, could you point to a moment in time when you embarked on a course that one may say is guided by a "performative aesthetic" so brilliantly exemplified in *Caribbean Babylon.*

A. Oh yes. Absolutely. They (the earlier plays) were not just close to the "European aesthetic," they were completely steeped in it and written out of that influence because at that time my knowledge of and education was all about European theatre. And only about it. Asian, African, Latin American or Caribbean theatre didn't exist for me. Just European and American theatre did. Those were the ones I knew about and thought valid. Therefore when I embarked on my own playwriting career those were the models I worked from.

I'm not exactly sure when I began to move closer to working out of a "performative aesthetic," but my best guess is that it began somewhere around 1988-89, ten or eleven years after my first work (*The Offering*) had been produced. Two things, I think, prompted the move in that direction. One was the fact that I had become restless (creatively speaking) about what I was doing. The kinds of plays I was writing. It seemed to me that I was covering the same ground over and over in various ways. I was in search of new directions and new forms to stimulate and challenge me.

It also annoyed me that I was being compared to the British playwright, Harold Pinter. I like and greatly admire his work, but I do have my own identity and I wanted to assert that (through my work) in a more forceful way. So I tried various forms and stumbled on the monologue/direct address style of *Caribbean Babylon*. It was really to explore and work out of the oral tradition of African and Caribbean storytelling.

Secondly, I think the older we get the more we become curious about our past, and the impact the experiences of our formative years might've had on who we've become as adults. I know this was true of me anyway. So I wrote a play, *Ramona*, which was announced and scheduled for production by the NEC, then canceled at the last minute due to budget constraints. I had worked hard on that play. It had taken some time, a lot of thought and a lot of revisions to get it (on paper at lest) to the point where it was satisfactory to me. When it was cancelled, I understood why, but still I was disappointed. Because I wanted to see the play reach its full point of realization, which is of course presentation on a stage before some kind of audience.

Still, its existence and the work I had put into getting it down on paper represented some sort of breakthrough (or break from the past) and led the way toward *Caribbean Babylon*.

I hasten to add that I am always playing (experimenting) with form and style. *Caribbean Babylon* represents one step in that direction but there have been others since then.

Q. Is *Caribbean Babylon* to be considered a choral play, an exercise in point of view, or rather a sort of new medieval play where each character represents a vice or a virtue?

A. I guess one could call it all of the above. I think that if I was directing it, I would approach it from that perspective. When I was writing it, I didn't think of it in that manner. It just evolved that way.

Q. Would you say that the play's form is influenced by Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, or even by Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*?

A. I don't know. I think this whole business of specific influence is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down. I'm certainly aware of the works that you've mentioned but have no idea how they influenced the style or content of *Caribbean Babylon*, if indeed they did influence it at all. In fact, I never thought of them in relation to that work until you mentioned it. I'm not saying that you're right or wrong. I'm just saying that I don't know.

Q. I may be going too far in my interpretation, but I see the native boys in *Caribbean Babylon* as a clear metaphor for the island: After colonizing the island through force and violence and after setting it free, the colonizer comes back and with the power of money colonizes the body/island, his/its culture, his/its integrity. First came the exploitation of the islands, which could provide fruits, spices, and land for European outcasts. Now comes the exploitation of bodies, the trade in flesh for daily consumption by white men and women alike. Now the body/island is not only degraded but actually stripped of its dignity, dispossessed of any illusion of freedom. Yet the characters in your play entertain the illusory dream that money earned through degradation will set them free. Do you personally see any hope for your characters, are you optimistic about their chances of winning redemption?

A. Your interpretation is a good one. And it's as valid as any other I suppose. As the creator of the piece, I am not objective enough to stand away and view it from an analytic or interpretive perspective. When I wrote it, I wasn't thinking about those things. I was more concerned with making the characters dimensional and dynamic (in a theatrical manner) within the confines of the form I had chosen for this material.

Interpretation is the business of the viewer or audience, I think. A good work is open to any number of interpretations. But I think it's foolhardy for a writer to embark on attempting to interpret the meaning of his/her own work.

Q. But then, your characters in *Voices in the Wind* speak a very refined language – the language of the "colonizers" (or, as Tom Wolfe would say, "Masters of the Universe") – and this leads me to something that's been bothering me for a while. Is there a real difference between the "whites" in *Caribbean Babylon* and the African-American bourgeois in *Voices in the Wind?*

A. Not much except perhaps the color of their skin.

Q. Do you see any parallels between certain powerful African-American characters (in such plays as *Voices in the Wind*) and the European colonizers of near and distant past?

A. Yes, very definitely. That's why the play was written. To illustrate, through drama, how far from our original goals we have strayed. (The play of course is a futuristic fantasy so it cannot be accepted as historical or sociological fact. It's really one writer playing with: "What if - ?" and asking, "Where are we going?"

The dialogue in the play is written to be deliberately banal and echo that of the white bourgeoisie we once called oppressors. The dramatic question at the center being, "Have we become a new form of what we fought against?" The true villain in this piece to me is capitalism.

Q. When you have the rich folks in *Voices in the Wind* define themselves as "quality people" (as opposed to "servants, service guys. People of no consequence"), do you hear the echo of the famous definition of the British upper classes at the turn of the century as "good people"?

A. Yes, for sure. And as I indicated before, that was part of my intention in writing the play. To have them echo and repeat what had been said by others (the colonizers of the past) without being aware they were doing so. The voices on the wind that we hear is intended to serve as an ironic counterpoint to all that.

Q. Is there such a thing as a Caribbean play? If there is, what is it that makes it Caribbean? Do you believe there are certain traits that identify any artistic work (also literary) as Caribbean? And how would you define your own writing, in matters of belonging?

A. This is a tough question for me because I can't answer it in any satisfactory way. Therefore I'm not going to try.

I'll only explain that the reason it's tough is because I have lived in the United States continuously from 1959 to now. When I visited the Caribbean (St. Thomas, V.I. where I was brought up), it was only on periodic vacations to see my parents. Last March on an

invitation from the Humanities Department of the University of the Virgin Islands was the only time I visited the area as an artist or scholar. During that week I got to meet several Caribbean writers and scholars first hand. And I got to read their work as well. Prior to that I'd read the works of several Caribbean writers who were widely published in the U.S. (Kincaid, Naipaul, Walcott, Churchill, etc.) and thought of them as individual phenomena and not part of a collective identified as "Caribbean." Now I do because I've read a lot more Caribbean writers whose names are not as recognizable as those I just mentioned and I see common themes, concerns, etc., showing up in all their works.

In defining my own writing I don't think I fit into this pattern as of yet. Virtually all my adult years have been spent in the United States. This doesn't mean that I am of the U.S. But it does indicate that I was not around the Islands when so many Caribbean writers were developing what is now identified as a distinctive Caribbean voice.

I am Caribbean but my development, artistically speaking, is both Anglo Saxon and African American. This gives me a sort of hybrid identity which I think is unique and interesting if I can find valuable ways to utilize it in my work.

My rediscovery and investigation of my own Caribbean background/culture is too recent for me to discuss it with any clarity whatsoever. I view it as part of a growth process. A process, by the way, I always thought I would arrive at, at some time or other. I just didn't know when. But here I am.

Ask me the same question 3 to 5 years from now and I think then I might be able to give you a clearer response.

Q. Your plays I've read are set on a rather austere stage, as if suggesting a vacuity beyond the visual or theatrical effect. Can you elaborate on that?

A. Sure. This represents a personal bias. And the bias is this: For virtually all the years of my playgoing in the U.S. (especially Broadway in New York) I've always felt that too much emphasis was placed on the design elements of a play, frequently at the expense of content and characterization. Also I felt that this emphasis on opulent and (more often than not) expensive production trappings endowed the theatre with a kind of empty materialism that I found repugnant to my personal theatrical aesthetic.

Beyond that, I also thought it elitist. Because it is saying in certain ways that only people with a substantial amount of money, or access to it, can or should practice theatre. That to me is absurd and snobbish in the extreme. So in my work I try to write so that anyone or group, no matter what their financial circumstances are, can do the play, and if they have the talent, realize its full artistic potential.

The most extreme step I've taken in the direction of "spareness" in the theatre was with the play *Confessional*. One of the challenges I gave myself when I was writing it was to create a work that required no set, no special lighting set-up, no costumes and not even a theatre. All that was necessary is a bare light bulb and a chair. The actor could be dressed in whatever he was wearing that day when he performed it. And the play could be done anywhere. In a living room, on a street corner, in a park, a restaurant, a church or even in a theatre.

Q. A question about language: The discoursive capacity of Clark in *Confessional* threw me off a bit. He appears, to me at least, somewhat too refined, too educated, for the kind of character he portrays. As if holding back something, a secret perhaps that he keeps hidden from us even while confessing. Was this a conscious choice, or am I totally wrong here?

This was a conscious choice. I wanted to indicate that behind the façade of refinement and education a monster can reside. And perhaps this hidden monster was in part created by an unhealthy confluence of education and refinement.

I directed the first production of this play and extended this idea even further in my choice of actor to play Clark. I selected someone who unconsciously projected education, refinement and trustworthiness. That to me is the threat of the play. Clark is the Frankenstein monster we've created. Only thing now is he doesn't look like a monster. He looks like one of us.

Q. [A biographical question] What was the artistic climate in St. Thomas when you still lived there, and did the move to the US cause a shift in your artistic outlook?

A. To the best of my knowledge, there was none. In the area I grew up, art was considered a luxury and an indulgence. An attempt by lazy and worthless people to get out of doing "real" work. It was ridiculed and frowned upon by adults.

I went to the U.S. (New York specifically) because I thought I could find and become part of a community that would be more sympathetic to my artistic leanings. It took some time but I did and that is when I began to develop an artistic outlook.

So nothing shifted from the Island to the U.S., because there was no outlook prior to my living in America.

Q. For many years you were active with the Negro Ensemble Company, which in 1991 closed down due to a $250,000 deficit. Has the NEC experience influenced your view of yourself as a playwright?

A. Actually the NEC still exists. But due to the deficit and several attempts at reorganization, they have been only sporadically active as a producing entity.

I was an aspiring playwright before my involvement with the NEC. I became a professionally produced playwright because of the NEC. Specifically because of its artistic director, Douglas Turner Ward.

How the NEC experience influenced my view of myself as a playwright is that it gave me confidence. It told me that my playwriting voice was as worthy as any other to be put on the stage and be scrutinized by critics and the public alike.

My work ethic was something that I consciously developed on my own, but the NEC, via its continuous production of my plays, inspired me to continue trying and to work harder.

Q. Do you see the possibility of a similar theater opening anywhere in the U.S.?

A. There are many African American theatres now operating all over the U.S. Some are professional companies, but most are community based.

The NEC was unique because it was created at a specific time to fulfill a specific need. And that was to give theatrical voice to the African American community of the time. In its original formation the NEC trained actors, directors, designers, publicity people and playwrights. But it was primarily a playwright's theatre. And for 25 years, one quarter of a century, it produced 4 new black plays each year. And in so doing, it added many works to the now accepted literary canon of the American stage. This was a unique and spectacular contribution. I don't see any theatre in the U.S. (at this moment) providing this service. It may be possible that there is one or more out there doing it but I'm not aware of them.

The possibility of someone opening a similar theatre always exists. But to do it one would need to construct a bold artistic vision that would address the needs of this time. I'm optimistic that it will happen. I just don't know when.

Q. Can you name a person or persons who have influenced your work, be they writers, artists or ordinary people.

A. There were many but the two who come quickly to mind are:

J. Antonio Jarvis – in St. Thomas. A local historian, teacher and artistic jack of all trades. He started a newspaper, taught school, wrote plays, wrote a history of the Islands, painted a little, wrote poetry, and played music. I studied one summer with him. It was an unforgettable experience.

The breadth of his knowledge and his imaginative approach to teaching (by this I mean he eschewed orthodox methods when he felt another approach would be more useful), were things I never forgot. He took a dim view of the acquisition of practical knowledge and placed an emphasis on developing a philosophical approach to life. He encouraged an interest in the arts as a means of both intellectual and emotional pleasure.

He also encouraged one to live a moral life. Not morality based on religious precepts. But morality based on *decency, patience,* a *kindly outlook, understanding of your fellow man* and a *generosity of spirit* that would eliminate snobbery of any kind. He also encouraged me to be a bold thinker and to pursue my dreams no matter how difficult that might prove to be.

The other is *Douglas Turner Ward* who by the example of his own life has taught me to never apologize for who I am, what I think or how I write. It is easy to say: "To thine own self be true." It is something else to practice it. Doug Ward does. And that is and has always been an inspiration to me.