



Black Drama and Revolutionary Consciousness: What a Difference a Difference Makes

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Theatre is potentially the most social of all the arts. It is an integral part of the socializing process.

THE BLACK AESTHETIC
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It is critical to the meaning of this essay that the vague and ambiguous term 'black theatre', articulated by many Western scholars and playwrights alike, be examined with some care. Definitions tend to be predictable and generally reflect social and political, cultural and economic biases which exist within particular systems. I propose an alternative prospective towards understanding the essence of the term as it is used within the context of this paper.

'Black theatre' is concerned with those broad movements of action, ideas, concepts and symbols which have crystallized in moral and ethical guidelines that are significant to a given people. A primary emphasis of this paper is to examine those dramatic characteristics and textual aspects which are culturally and socially based; that serve either to relate or differentiate 'black theatre' from 'white theatre' in America. Ralf Dahrendorf suggests that black artists represent a force for change in American society, through resisting coercion by dominant groups, and by creating within a Euro-American tradition that which expresses an alternative aesthetic. By nature art is integrative, but from the perspective of the dominant culture Afro-American art represents a disintegrative force, often resulting in conflict and disagreement as to its merits¹. 'Black theatre' has endured as a medium of expression for the popular working class Afro-American in the face of a society which is predominantly 'white', 'eurocentric', and 'culturally dominant'.

This essay examines socio-political consciousness as a foundation

affecting Afro-American drama and theatre. Dramatic theory, literary criticism and theatrical production are discussed in relation to aspects of these American cultural systems². Ignoring political realities affecting Afro-American artists, one may assume that these individuals share with other American performing and creative artists an equal advantage, or disadvantage, in a highly competitive field. However, historical documentation reveals a discounting of the work of these artists while, simultaneously, using their creative ideas which often result in large gross receipts at the box office. A review of American dramatic literature and theatrical production indicates the presence of such biases, as well as flagrant lack of recognition of serious artistic achievements by Afro-Americans. There is historical evidence of a close connection between socio-cultural dominance and politico-economic control of a 'mainstream' tradition which is often obscured by narrow critical judgements regarding the relative merits of Afro-American artistic expression.

Longevity of the creative role played by Afro-American artists in American society is recognized only by an informed minority. A knowledge of the historical relationships of Afro-American drama to other areas of our socio-cultural and political life will serve to enlighten that part which these artists have played toward creating indigenous American arts and culture. Hopefully such an approach will clarify some of the problems faced by this artistic minority in contemporary American society. Radical changes have occurred in the lives of Afro-Americans since the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement articulated in the early 1960s. Recent political ideologies and material realities have greatly altered traditional idealist and humanist tenets of art in assessing Afro-American creativity. Cultural expression of this underprivileged group cannot be adequately described or evaluated within Euro-American notions of art and artistic conventions which were created by and for Euro-Americans³. Any meaningful examination of Afro-American theatre must proceed from an inquiry which is partially operative outside of Euro-American concepts of theatre and culture.

Separate a person from his/her history, from the context of his/her culture, from the words that are extensions of him/herself, from the specifics of his/her life; and no way is left to provide him/her with a true identification of him/herself related to that history, culture, language and life. There are sub-culture groups in America that have little access to decisions which affect their survival as citizens and human beings; while on the other hand, an exclusive and elite group of individuals maneuver power and control with ruthless autonomy. Division among races, groups and individuals is indicative of our technological society. These changes have created value conflicts wherein individuals are losing a sense of identification with themselves, with their fellow human beings and with their culture. A loss of relevant values in the culture of colonized people occurs when they are obliged to assume cultural values of the ruling class.

The separation that exists between Afro-Americans and Euro-Americans is imposed through class and racial division. It has been established by the dominant culture and reflects its ideological behaviour towards Afro-American creative traditions in contrast to Euro-American traditions. The racial mixture of black people

in America indicates that the primary factor through which Afro-American identity is established is in shared cultural and historical experiences rather than along racial lines. This mode of reasoning explicates the term 'Afro-American' as representing a multitude of influences and experiences common to people of African ancestry. No matter what the ingredients, the truest form of Afro-American dramatic sensibility is modified by an African World view, although the term 'drama' applies to most aspects of performance in broad conceptual terms and connotes a cultural tradition that is Western in origin. Instead of proceeding with an examination of opposing viewpoints of what Afro-American Theatre should be, we will attempt to understand the nature of the theatrical event and the application of those basic materials which are the essence of its form and context. While descriptive and comparative studies are ultimately important, the primary focus of this essay is theoretical in seeking to understand how Afro-American people interpret 'reality' as translated through the fictive images of theatrical production⁵.

A critical look at Afro-American theatre involves some understanding of black African cultures (tradition/history/myth/image) and their contemporary presence in the diaspora⁶. Knowledge of audience expectations is essential in an attempt to identify these elements. There exist identifiable determinants that characterize the function and form of this type of theatre as a cultural expression. Margaret Wilkerson has spent years researching black theatre history and observes that "what...makes a theatre 'black' is its attention to its audience. The extent to which it takes direction for its theatrical events from the hopes, dreams, value systems and cultural patterns of the black audience it serves..."⁶. Afro-American theatre as a concept embraces a collective body of experiences that extends far beyond mere considerations of style and form based on ethnicity. It attempts to reveal some answer, some aspect of the human predicament, some revelation, some shock of recognition, but always within the particular context of established guidelines of values and mores. Even though the focus of this essay is not a sociological study of theatre, nevertheless, there exist relationships that are present in its form, style, theme and tradition which have been influenced by social determinants.

The Revolutionary Movement of the early 1960s identifies, in many ways, the attitudes of Afro-American theatre audiences that are mirrored through the fictive images of theatrical experience. The nature of this type of popular theatre is basically political and ideological in revealing the truth of contemporary life in American society. One cannot apply the same criteria or expectations to the work of most Afro-American writers who perceive art and politics as being synonymous. Any comprehensive study of Afro-American theatre will reflect real problems of racial ideology at its core.

When one speaks of Afro-American theatre, the point-of-reference is necessarily different from Euro-American theatre. Paul Carter Harrison believes that "there is a future for the black theatre when we begin to accept Africa as the antecedent reference to our contemporary American folk styles. It is the source that gives expression to our walk/dance, talk/song, and provides rhythm/

silence at the Sunday chicken dinner table..."⁷. African slaves did not arrive in North America with one cultural identity which persisted or faded away. They were socially and culturally fragmented, and that which resulted from acculturation was a shared experience - African origins, slavery, racism, southern culture, Reconstruction, northern urban migration--which in many respects differed from other American ethnic groups⁸. The black population of the Caribbean Islands have experienced the same type of cultural growth, based in the initial diversity of specific origins and later forged from the experiences of slavery and colonial structures. African characteristics are a large part of this process, but, in many ways, they are based on *generalized* or *distilled* structures and cultural patterns. Most Afro-American writers essentially agree with this viewpoint, but their collective works indicate that the African characteristics present, outweigh all other elements in significance and pervasiveness.

Dramatic expressions in people of African ancestry are similar and representative of African sources from which they originated. Traditions, values and customs are present in the rhythm, dance, song, gesture, spontaneity and creativity. Despite differences of language, culture, and religion, a pattern exists in the African confrontation with *reality* that can be traced wherever black men and women are found. Oliver Jackson describes this pattern as the "African continuum"⁹. It is individually and as a collective body that people of the *continuum* acquire and sustain harmony with their fellow men; with natural forces and with the universe. According to Jackson, "The moral sanctity of all life derives from the idea that all is spiritual and that the Supreme Power embodies the totality of the cosmos in one spiritual unity"¹⁰. The primary source of power in people is identified as "intelligence". The supreme test of this intelligence is present in traditional religious ceremony, in which collective power summons and brings forth the forces of the ancestors, the forces of their sons, and the forces of God¹¹. These forces provide a mechanism through which the community is able to gain spiritual power in modifying and changing their moral and ethical behaviour to reflect the harmony present in universal forces. The influences of 'Christianity' have been widespread among black people around the world. Many traditional African churches employ fundamental and basic modes of worship that are similar in liturgical form to Afro-American churches of the same persuasion.

The Historian Leonard Barrett states that:

When Evangelical Christianity and African religion met in the New World, there was a unique marriage that took place, a marriage which helped produce what we now call Pentecostalism, with its shouting, dancing, speaking in tongues, and receiving of the spirit... Christianity rarely overcame the African element, but rather the reverse was usually the case: Christianity generally became Africanized¹².

The ritualized event is the context of *reality* in these traditional African and Afro-American religious denominations. It externalizes patterns of sensitive and emotional life which reflect the nature of human feelings which Susanne Langer describes as

"giving inward subjective events an objective symbol"¹³.

Ritual in theatrical events often elicit the same dynamic and empathetic responses from audiences as those which motivate religious ritual. A context of reality illuminates from the event which has been created to achieve power evoked in the event. There is no separation between performer and spectator. Among Afro-American playwrights who frequently employ this ritualized mode of expression are works such as *Ritual Performance* by Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre, *Ain't Suppose to Die a Natural Death* by Melvin Van Peebles, *Funny House of a Negro* by Adrienne Kennedy, and *Great Goodness of Life* by Imamu Baraka (Leroi Jones). Baraka's drama entitled *Slave Ship* is an exemplary prototype of ritual theatre. With the absence of traditional plot line and little use of dialogue and connective speech, the author has directed all his energy towards creating an environment which totally engages all human sensations. Audiences, as performers, experience the same emotional responses to the horrors of a slave ship, the inhumanity of the middle passage and the historical degradation visited upon African people in America. *Slave Ship* emphasizes concrete images of pain, suffering and death. According to Baraka, the play is "a historical pageant"; and the moral significance of the play, as it relates to Afro-American history, is more important than the factual accuracy of the script.

Slavery is viewed as a condition through which Afro-American audiences struggle to survive and transcend the conditions of slavery, as did the slaves. The action of *Slave Ship* has the dynamic capacity to transform audience members from passive spectator roles into those of active participation. All the senses are engaged through watching, thinking, feeling, smelling, hearing and touching. This ritualized event is shared through a series of dramatized tableaux and symbolic actions. Baraka creates a pseudo-historical ritual which ultimately identifies Afro-American life as fundamental, communal and African in spirit. A succession of dramatic 'images' provide a framework through which the origin, evolution and eventual transcendence of the slave condition is examined; and the entire historical spectrum of Afro-American experience from the primordial power enacted in dance, to the final and complete communality of the event is celebrated by both spectator and performer.

Mole Soyinka has, in contrast, developed an innovative theory of drama which is based upon a re-examination and modification of major ritual approaches that have been conceived and articulated in western culture. He is one of the most important contemporary writers on the African continent and also highly regarded among western writers of intellectual theory and criticism. His dramatic theory is most useful when discussed in reference to Western theories which it modifies. A marked difference exists between the dramatic theories of Soyinka and earlier theorists such as G Wilson Knight, his English mentor, and the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche¹⁴. Soyinka postulates a concept which extends beyond the simple relationship between ritual and tragedy. Adopting a metaphorical rather than a historical link between ritual and dramatic experience provides a structure through which he is able to explore social and psychological processes of contemporary life. Soyinkian dramatic theory focuses on the dynamics of social and psychological processes within the dramatic experience. He

states that drama affects change by employing recognizable rites¹⁵ and theorizes that these occur through the incorporation of universal ritual¹⁶, audience participation¹⁷, and satire.¹⁸

The theoretical grounds upon which Soyinka claims dramatic form are similar to those ideas articulated by Oliver Jackson and Paul Carter Harrison. Unlike these individuals, he has formulated a theory which embraces Aristotelian aesthetic principles but, concomitantly, he expands the definition of ritual to include contemporary Nigerian social and psychological systems. His work is deeply committed to traditional Yoruba values and those which reflect localized African customs and mythologies. He describes the essence of theatre as: its simultaneity in the forging of a single human experience... affirmation of the communal self was the experiential goal. The search even by modern European dramatists for ritualist roots from which to draw out visions of modern experience, is a cue to the deep-seated need of creative man to recover this archetypal consciousness in the origins of the dramatic medium¹⁹. The *Bacchae of Euripides* by Soyinka, is an adaptation of Euripides' play by the same title and a re-interpretation of the Dionysian myths. Traditional Greek characters and situations are used in this script with the exception of the Slave Leader and Slave Chorus who, conceptually, are Africans. The language is poetically sophisticated, the emotions are classically controlled and the *sensible* form of the play is western in structure.

Soyinka's version of the *Bacchae* has many speeches that are not found in the original play, the slaves are politically aware of their position within Greek society, and three faces of deity are present in one god: Dionysus, the Yoruba god Ogun, and Jesus. The 1973 production of this play presented by the National Theatre at the Old Vic, London, England, received mixed responses from critics. *Plays and players* reviewer, John Lahr, felt that the "production parades its ecstasy as laboriously as a nudist magazine" and that "the god Dionysus, the symbol of gratification and joy, is turned into some tantric poseur with closer links to the programme notes than the guiltless, divine, primal sexuality for which he stands"²⁰. On the other hand, Albert Hunt, critic for *New Society*, observes that "Soyinka sets the Greek myth inside the framework of his own response to Nigerian reality"²¹. He felt that the failure of the production was due to the technical inadequacies within the company, "Faced with a text that calls for precise and strictly meaningful gesture for narrative clarity, and for a theatre language built in ritual, the director has opted for imitation orgies, fake horror, and whooped up excitement"²². The meaning of Soyinka's interpretation of this classic can only be fully realized through familiarity with Yoruban metaphysics and mythology of the deity Ogun: god of metals, creativity, the road, wine and war, as a parallel to the mythological journey of Dionysus throughout Greece.

The Euripidean conflict between man and nature is extended in Soyinka's play to include the conflicts existing within a cast system. The link between ritual and revolutionary social consciousness is dramatized through the collective action of slaves in overthrowing an "oppressive social system". Soyinka's use of traditional Greek myth and contemporary Nigerian social thought appear to validate and universalize his approach to drama, which he considers to be the language of the people. The focus of dramatic perfor-

mance forces audience members into a state of communal consciousness and provides the context from which a new sense of self may be created. Ann Davis, in her interpretation of Soyinkian dramatic theory, observes that the "social conflict... becomes symbolic of what Soyinka terms the universal need of man to match himself against nature; in that both struggles are shown to demand solidarity, forceful challenge, and sacrifice"²³. Aspects of culturally patterned behaviour are crucial to his concept of ritual. They illuminate the potential revolutionary character of drama; which after all, is the most social of the art forms.

Soyinka is keenly aware of the struggles with which Afro-American writers are faced in developing, sustaining and expanding a sense of community through the social values present in creative activity and aesthetic principles of art. He fully comprehends why this search has led most of them back to mother Africa as the generative source of ritual from which Afro-American drama emerges. Yet, he believes that it "has bred some distortions, some superficiality, created even comic melodrama where none is intended"²⁴. Afro-American playwrights should be cognizant that existing ritual idioms present within America's socio-political and culture systems may, perhaps, provide the format necessary to explicate traditional and historical references. Soyinka cautions these writers that "ritual...contains its own stringent dialectic; it is not merely a visual decorative framework. It is the difference...between whether the son expresses his self-liberation by hitting his grandfather or does it by breaking a sacrificial gourd"²⁵.

A number of Afro-American playwrights from W E B DuBois and Langston Hughes to Imamu Baraka and Richard Wesley persist in revealing the truth of being black in the United States. This has been achieved in spite of what has been decreed as reality for Afro-American people by the dominant culture. Baraka, for example, believes that any art "must issue from real categories of human activity, truthful accounts of human life, and not fancied accounts of the attainment of cultural privilege by some willingly preposterous apologist..."²⁶. Perhaps more than any other Afro-American playwright, he remains a significant figure in American drama, as well as Western theatre. This status may be traced in part to his effective use of idiomatic forms, especially in his ability to mediate between the world of ideas and the language of the common community. Although he has mastered the structural and technical advancements of Western theatre, his plays demonstrate a social philosophy and political ideology that are basically African: in adherence to moral and ethical realities of a spiritual nature. His plays reflect an understanding of ritualistic form as it relates to the social reality of Afro-American drama in America. Formal structure of ritual remains dynamically within recognizable socio-political idioms.

Baraka's advocacy of African moral and ethical realities is evident in his play entitled *A Black Mass*, which dramatizes an Islamic myth which examines the origin of the species. It is the story of Yacub, a black scientist, who insists upon creating a "super-natural being," a being who will make its own will and direction. His experiment evolves as a White Devil, a mutation. It corrupts and destroys everything within its grasp that is beautiful. The ritual ends with the murder of Yacub and the other magicians. On a metaphysical level the drama presents a severe

and brutal struggle between the spiritual and bestial nature of man. As a moral essay it dramatizes the subjection of blacks to "anti-spiritual" forces. Yet as a social essay it suggests that individual action, without collective consent, jeopardizes the future of the black race, and integration dehumanizes and demoralizes black identity. Baraka accomplishes his ritualized purpose: to caution black people against the anti-humanist nature of the white man which is bestial in its drive to control, oppress and annihilate black people.

Significant theatre in Afro-American communities focuses on the psychic, the emotional and the spiritual health of the audiences served. It was stated earlier in this essay that the label *black theatre* refers to a set of values and mores. Maulana Karenga, identifies seven principles which reflect a set of values expressing an African philosophy of life: *Umoja* (Unity), *Kujichagulia* (Self-Determination), *Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility), *Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics), *Nia* (Purpose), *Kuumba* (Creativity) and *Imani* (Faith)²⁷. These categories comprise the doctrine of Kawaia; the formal teachings of Karenga. They are consciously designed as a means for Afro-Americans to seek unity of thought, feeling and action.

Kuumba (creativity) speaks collectively of the arts and the function of the artists in bringing truth and beauty into the life of the community. Building socio-political ties and physio-cultural bonds of an afrocentric nature is essential. Creating independent institutions which meet the needs of black people still remains a necessary dream throughout the world. Cultural values, political ideologies and social behaviour are shared by people of African ancestry who exhibit a wide range of experiences and influences. Despite the particular lifestyles of black humanity, there exists an African world view of confronting life called *Pan-Africanism*. It has significantly altered the process of acculturation instituted by slavery, colonialism and racism.

Most Afro-American theatre groups attempt to achieve cohesion between the philosophical and the practical elements of theatrical events by being cognizant of their ultimate function. A play, therefore, should not be evaluated solely in terms of its "truth and beauty" apart from the needs and perceptions of the community it mirrors. Neither the script, the performer, nor the technical support systems represent the total theatrical event; they merely serve to externalize particular cultural behaviour through which values, attitudes and beliefs of Afro-Americans are manifested. The majority of plays are created to reach a select and limited popular working class audience, through a vernacular indigeneous to that audience. The theatricalism of production is often more important than the literary element of presentation in which images displace verbal expression, and ritual action is symbolic, abstract and imaginative. An example of a play which externalizes and reflects this consciousness is present in *Great Goodness of Life*, (1966) by Baraka. The irony implicit in the title is mirrored in the triumph of evil over good and the oppressor over the oppressed. Baraka's prophecy of the psychological and spiritual death of middle class Afro-Americans provides the theme for this drama. He does not, indeed cannot, arrive at a final resolution to the issues which he has raised because, contemporary existence for the Afro-American man is interpreted as a continuation of ir-

resolvable crises. But Baraka successfully achieves integration of ritual form through action, character, conflict, political and social moralities in dynamic tension, eventually culminating in the murder of a victim on the alter of American racism.

The contributions of Afro-American artists and technicians, that enrich our 'national' artistic traditions, have been historically and aesthetically distorted, belittled and ignored. Concomitantly, African sources of creative genius have been bastardized and plagiarized for cultural and economic exploitation. For example, blues, jazz, gospel, dance and black theatre have been co-opted with little, if any, recognition of the creators. In contrast to this practice is the determination and strength of Afro-American theatre practitioners to speak forcefully to the needs of the community it serves. Most Afro-American writers recognize that much of the tragedy visited upon black men worldwide is sociological rather than cosmological and political rather than metaphysical. Therefore, the thrust of their writings emphasize socio-political relationships between the races, rather than focusing on the commonality of the human condition.

Drama is an important factor in the development of Pan-African culture. Whether forged by North or South American, Caribbean or African experiences, it is essential that *black drama*, worldwide, demand the same seriousness of aesthetic intentions and precision of artistic execution as evident in *other* cultures. This kind of clarity will be achieved through evolution capable of (1) rendering the conditions of crisis transparent; (2) illuminating collective meanings; (3) analyzing critical societal problems; and (4) suggesting social, moral, psychological and aesthetic alternatives of thought and action. The necessity of refining and extending Western concepts of dramatic theory to illuminate the relationship existing between ritual and drama, and between social and psychological consciousness, will be achieved by men and women committed to the political, social and cultural liberation of black people. The dramatic expression of black African and people of African ancestry represents a significant level of achievement in the total development of western theatre. Materialistic and technical elements drawn from the West have been meshed with aesthetic and ritualistic forms of traditional African theatre. The fusion of these elements has in part restored to the theatre not merely its creative power but also its ancient moral function and ritual power.

Black theatre is functional only to the degree that it relates directly and intimately to the varied needs and desires of the communities served. Systematic planning, socio-political organization, Pan-African Association and artistic commitment by playwrights, technicians, performers, producers, and audiences are essential for survival. This procedure will serve to further recapture the dynamics of their history, the context of their culture, the words, and images which are extensions of themselves; and finally, the specific realities of their lives.



NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. In the context of this essay the term *cultural systems* has reference to the socio-political and economic conditions of black people, and their reactions to these conditions
3. *Underprivileged* connotes the presence of ideological, political and socio-economic contradictions that are reflected in the lives of Afro-Americans
4. The term *reality* connotes the totality of real things and events in the lives of black people, accurately represented with fidelity in art and literature
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19. *Ibid.* p. 38
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23. Davis, *op. cit.* p. 151
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25. *Ibid.*
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