THREE PLAYS OF THE BLACK THEATER

-A DISCUSSION-

THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF M.A.

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CORRINE LOUISE JENNINGS

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ABSTRACT

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In "A Discussion of Three Plays of the Black Theater," the stated problem is an examination, exploration and comparison of East of Jordan, Who's Got His Own, and In the Wine Time in the context of the heightened Black consciousness that developed in America during the 60's and found expression in a new Black Arts movement. Therefore, the paper focuses on the artistic innovators and philosophies of the 60's as the framework in which to review these works by Evan Walker, Ron Milner and Ed Bullins. This thesis also places the three dramas in the historical perspective of the Black man's experiences in the West, both in the theater arts and in the socio-economic and political arena.

The plays utilized are full-length structured (crafted) plays and are discussed in terms of the Aristotelian concepts of plot, character, thought, diction and spectacle. These criteria are supplemented with those suggested by the burgeoning Black Aesthetic. Of particular importance in the study are personal interviews with the three authors, in which they stress their objectives in writing these plays. In addition interviews with innovators in the new Black theater in the areas of direction, production, criticism, and acting were conducted and this commentary on both the particular

works and the philosophy of Black Theater are included. Articles by Black writers in the Black media and the mass media are used as secondary sources in examining the plays.

This thesis does not examine the work of Imamu Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), who is certainly a vital force in Black Art, nor does it consider any of the one act plays which are the most prolific form of the new Black Revolutionary Theater. Also this thesis does not discuss any of the ritualistic theater pieces which seem to be developing into a significant direction for Black theater.

The major findings of this research are that all three writers are manipulating the form of traditional European theater to reveal various aspects of the Black experience. And that the writers have attempted to revitalize this traditional form through the use of various devices that are akin to Black culture. However, Ron Milner, author of Who's Got His Own, has been the most innovative by structuring his play on the basis of a form of Black Music ("Jazz"). In all three plays theme and character are the most significant elements. But all three writers have utilized vital cultural material to deal with and raise issues of pertinence to Blacks--particularly the problems of the survival of the Black male in a racist society.

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INTRODUCTION

The intent of this thesis is to examine, explore and compare the following full-length plays, East of Jordan by Evan Walker, Who's Got His Own by Ron Milner and In the Wine Time by Ed Bullins.

The place of these three dramas in the American Theater is specific. They are written by Black authors; they are written from the point of view of the Black man and are directed intentionally toward Black audiences. Thus, these materials represent an expression of the souls and lives of Black people in America.

All three plays were written in the years between 1960 and 1970; each was written by a young man in his early thirties. These plays draw their vigor from the experience of the Black man in the western world and their creation coincides with other creative and virile developments in the Black community on political, cultural and social levels.

CHAPTER I

BLACK THEATER IN AMERICA

A Survey

The 1960's brought a trace of revolution to the Black communities in America, in the form of protests, boycotts, marches, riots and rebellion. But, however, much attention was focused on the Black nation by the white press and white men in general, it was far surpassed by the attention Blacks paid to their own communities. Blacks have always had a dual-consciousness,[1] have always been strained by the antagonistic climate of racism operating in the United States. For Black people, this fact of life generated specific philosophies of change in the mid-Twentieth Century in the form of Black consciousness or Nationalism.

The emergence of the "Black Power" slogan makes 1965 a convenient date for historians to isolate the failure of integration as a practical philosophy in America (this is inaccurate, since it has

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[1] DuBois called this split vision "Double Consciousness": "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness--an American, a Negro--two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1969), p. 16.

always failed, except in isolated instances), and to isolate the appearance of Cultural Nationalism in the Ghettos. While it is true that Black-oriented political, cultural, spiritual and economic developments multiplied rapidly in the Sixties, the seeds and impetus were already present and had many progenitors.[2]

The ten years following 1960 produced outstanding cultural advances in the Black community in music, literature, art, theater, religion, custom and dance. These developed concurrently with political and social events, and influenced one another. One of the most vital of these developments was the growth of the Black theater as a distinct entity.

Historically, Black people have a rich theater heritage, both in the African past and in the West. In traditional African society, what is commonly called "art" was not separated from the rest of life as it has come to be in European cultures. Rather it was integrated into the entire framework of the life of the African peoples.[3]

While there was no formalized theater until recently in Africa of the kind known in Europe, there was a participation in

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[2]As early as 1831 David Walker in his Appeal exhorted Black people to develop Black consciousness. Since that time poets, philosophers, scholars and politicians have fostered the same idea. These men and women are too numerous to name here, but among the most famous were: Frederick Douglass, Martin Delaney, W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and H. "Rap" Brown.

[3]Margaret Trowell and Hans Nevermann, African and Oceanic Art (New York: Harry N. Abrams), p. 12.

what is called here "pure" theater in the form of rituals, which included dance, music and the "call and response" that is still found in the Black Pentecostal church. These rituals, which are in some way a part of the Oral Tradition of African peoples, involved the religious, historical, social, economic and political aspects of life and constitute a kind of traditional theater.

Although this cultural continuum was ripped apart by the Slave Trade and the centuries of slavery which followed, the basis, the style and the instincts were passed down from generation to generation, and reappeared in the early jigs, dances, folk tales, sorrow songs, riddles, jubilees, shouts, work songs, and particularly children's games,[4] creating a fantastic theatrical resource, which, while only partially tapped, has frequently been distorted.

"The year 1767 marked the beginning of interest in the Negro as dramatic material."[5] From this time when the first Black character (played by a white actor) appeared on stage until 1923 when the first Black playwright had a one-act play produced on Broadway, white playwrights established five major stereotypes of Black Americans:

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[4]The African origins of these early forms of Black dramatic effort can be traced. There are certain areas of the south, such as the Georgia Sea Islands, where the Gullah dialect is still used and where many of these forms are preserved intact that clearly show the African connection. A recent book by Bessie Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes, Step It Down (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), includes directions for performing a number of these pieces.

[5]Frederick Bond, The Negro and Drama (College Park: McGrath, 1940), p. 20.

> The Buffoon, a comically ignorant type.
> The Tragic Mulatto, the product of miscegenation who is destined to tragic exclusion from white society, which will not accept her, and black society, which she will not accept.
> The Christian Slave, a docile individual who worships both his mortal white master and his immortal master.
> The Carefree Primitive, an exotic, amoral savage.
> The Black Beast, a villain who seeks equality with white people.[6]

These stereotypes which most frequently appeared in comedy created distorted images of the Black man that still exist.

It is a widely-held opinion that early Black theater in America was insignificant, yet many of the indigenous dramatic forms commonly practiced in America were created or inspired by Black artists. For example, Minstrelsy which began as a crude mockery of Black plantation theatricals, became the most popular form of American entertainment from 1840-1900, and was directly responsible for the development of American musical comedy.[7]

Yet Minstrelsy further personified the caricature of the Black man as a lazy, shiftless, cunning, happily singing and dancing fool. While the early companies of Minstrels were entirely white, and utilized the conventions of burnt cork and thickened lips, when Blacks were admitted to the professional stage they took over the entire Minstrel tradition, including the makeup, and although they

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[6]Darwin Turner, "Introduction," in Black Drama Anthology, ed. by William Brasmer and Dominick Consolo (Columbus: Charles Merrill, 1970), p. 3.

[7]James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan (New York: Atheneum, 1969), pp. 94-98.

added new life to the form, were actually imitating an imitation of themselves, and accepting this negative definition of self.

In the following excerpt from Anna Cora Mowatt's Fashion, produced in 1845, there is an example of a negative definition in an early American comedy.

Act I

A splendid drawing room in the house of Mrs. Tiffany. Open folding doors discovering a Conservatory. On either side glass windows down to the ground. Doors on right and left. Mirror, couches, ottomans, a table with albums, etc. beside it an arm-chair. Millinette dusting furniture, Zeke in a dashing livery, scarlet coat, etc.

ZEKE. Dere's a coat to take de eyes of all Broadway! Ah! Missy, it am de fixins dat make de natural born gemman, a libery for ever! Dere's a pair ob insuppressibles to 'stonish de coloured population.

MILLINETTE. Oh, oui, Monsieur Zeke. (Very politely) I not comprend one word he say (Aside).

ZEKE. I tell ee what, Missy, I'm 'stordinary glad to find dis a bery 'spectabul like situation! Now as you've made de acquaintance ob dis here family, and dere you've had a supernumerary advantage ob me--seeing dat I only receibed my appointment dis morning. What I wants to know is your publicated opinion, privately expressed, ob de domestic circle.

MILLINETTE. Monsieur is a man of business, -Madame is a lady of fashion. Monsieur make the money, - Madame spend it. Monsieur nobody at all--Madame everybody altogether. Ah! Monsieur Zeke, de money is all dat's necessaire in dis country to make one lady of fashion. Oh! it is quite anoder ting in la belle France!

ZEKE. A bery lucifer explanation. Well, now we've disposed ob de heads ob de family, who come next?

MILLINETTE. First dere is Mademoiselle Seraphina Tiffany. Mademoiselle is not at all one proper personne. Mademoiselle Seraphina is one coquette. Dat is not de mode in la belle France; de ladies, dere, never learn la coqueterie until de do get one husband.

ZEKE. I tell 'ee what Missy, I disreprobate dat proceeding altogeder!

MILLINETTE. Vait! I have not tell you all la famille yet. Dere is Mamselle Prudence-Madame's sister, one very bizarre personne. Den dere is Ma'mselle Gertrude, but she is not anybody at all; she only teach Mademoiselle Seraphina la musique.

ZEKE. Well, now Missy, what's your own special defunctions?

MILLINETTE. I not understand, Monsieur Zeke.

ZEKE. Den I'll amplify. What's de nature ob your exclusive services?

MILLINETTE. Ah, oui, je comprend. I am Madame's femme de chambre . . . I teach Madame les modes de Paris. . . .

ZEKE. Yah! yah! yah! I hab de idea by de heel. Well now, p'raps you can 'lustrify my officials?

MILLINETTE. Vat you will have to do? Oh! much tings. You vait on de table,--you tend de door,--you clean de boots,--you run de errands,--you drive de carriage,--you rub de horses, you take care de flowers,--you carry de water,--you help cook de dinner,--you wash de dishes,--and den you always remember to do everything I tell you to!

ZEKE. Wheugh, am dat all?

MILLINETTE. All I can tink of now. To-day is Madame's day of reception, and all her grand friends do make her one petite visit. You mind run fast ven de bell do ring.

MRS. TIFFANY. (Outside) Millinette!

MILLINETTE. Here comes Madame! You better to, Monsieur Zeke.

ZEKE. Look ahea, Massa Zeke, doesn't dis open rich! (Aside)[8]

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[8]Anna Cora Mowatt, Fashion in Six Early American Plays: 1798-1890, ed. by William Coyle and Harvey Damaser (Columbus: Charles Merrill, 1965), pp. 106-107.

In the opening scene of Mowatt's Fashion Zeke is used as a tool of exposition. At the same time the prevalence of exaggerated, poorly written dialect, establishes Zeke as egotistical, superstitious, foolish and above all, satisfied with his menial position. And he is not far removed from Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom, the well-known satisfied slave of the Abolitionist drama. It is interesting to note here that in early productions, Uncle Tom was not played by a Black actor, as Blacks were barred from stage appearances.[9] Thus, the troublesome stereotype of Uncle Tom's passive collusion with the slave system was defined and concretized by whites.

In retrospect it appears that on at least some levels, Blacks tolerated the images promulgated by the racism of Minstrelsy. Perhaps this provides a partial explanation for the slow development of serious dramatic writing from William Wells Brown (1858) to Lorraine Hansberry (1959).

As early as 1821, five years before Daddy Rice[10] became known for his caricatures, the African Company was performing Shakespeare and other classics in New York in the area that is now known as Off-Broadway. Thus, a tradition began that is still operative, of Black companies performing plays written originally for

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[9]Edith Isaacs, The Negro in the American Theater (College Park: McGrath, 1968), p. 126.

[10]Dan "Daddy" Rice was an itinerant actor-singer. He popularized "Jump Jim Crow" and some authorities believe him to be the first white minstrel in blackface.

white casts. This company is said to have influenced Ira Aldridge (1807-1867), and although "neither the company nor Aldridge were a direct factor in the Negro's theatrical development,"[11] Ira Aldridge became the first Black man to achieve a successful career as a serious dramatic actor in Europe, a feat that was not duplicated in the United States until Paul Robeson performed in the 1920's.

The African Company and other similar later groups were not trying to develop plays out of the Black experience. The first serious dramatic efforts of Blacks were not in dramas, but a continuation of the declining Minstrel tradition in the form of musical "Coon Shows" (1895-1905).[12] These successful parodies continued the typical stereotypes, and involved the talents of such serious artists as Paul Lawrence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson, who along with others, "pandered shamelessly to the expectations of white audiences. James Weldon Johnson later described the manner in which Black song writers even avoided love duets for their heros and heroines because American audiences, who presumed sexual amorality to be characteristic of Negro life, refused to believe that romance could be a serious topic for Afro-Americans."[13]

The Black musical theater tradition has been maintained continuously from the earliest stage experiences through the well-known productions of Shuffle Along (1921), Porgy and Bess (1935), Golden

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[11]Johnson, Black Manhattan, p. 87.

[12]Turner, Introduction, p. 4.

[13]Ibid.

Boy (1964) and Pearl Bailey's Hello Dolly. Darwin Turner, who has researched the success of the Black Musical theater and the relative failure of early serious Black drama, believes "it is an indication of a predilection to view Blacks as simple, happy, occasionally pathetic people who constantly express their emotion in song and dance."[14]

> By repetition, white playwrights had given reality to these stereotypes of Afro-American character and life for numerous white Americans who rarely experienced intimate personal relationships with Black Americans. Therefore, producers did not seek plays written about the actual characters and lives of Afro-Americans; from Black and white playwrights, they wanted dramas which would repeat the familiar.
>
> Finally, playwrights, more than other writers, depend upon acquaintance with people who have money. Poets and novelists may submit manuscripts to publishing firms; a dramatist needs to know someone who knows a producer. In the segregated society of the United States, personal contact between Black artists and wealthy producers has been very limited.[15]

Mr. Turner points out that the serious Black dramas that were the first to appear on Broadway in the 20's worked within the framework of stereotypes used by white authors. This includes Black playwrights, such as Willis Richardson (The Chip Woman's Fortune, 1923), Frank Wilson (Meek Mose, 1928), and Wallace Thurman (Harlem, 1929). While there is little comparison in quality of writing and many years between Anna Mowatt and Eugene O'Neill, who was acclaimed for writing two productions about Blacks (Emperor Jones, 1920 and All God's Chillun Got Wings, 1924), both authors depicted stereotypes of the usual kind.

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[14] Ibid., p. 5.

[15] Ibid., p. 5.

Following the Great Depression, the era of the thirties ushered in a period of protest drama that lasted until the end of World War II. During this period Black writers began to deal with such sensitive topics as lynching, and the Scottsboro Case. In 1935, Langston Hughes' Mulatto began the longest run of any Black play on Broadway before Raisin in the Sun. Mulatto dramatized for the first time a violent conflict between a mulatto and a white parent.

While Black writers were trying to move toward real depictions of Black America, productions such as Cabin in the Sky (1940) successfully repeated and reinforced the familiar images. "However, by the late 40's, Theodore Ward's Our Lan' made a definite move toward real characterization, as does William Branch's play about Frederick Douglass, In Splendid Error. At this time the Black dramatists sought to educate white audiences by writing more realistically about problems of the past and present."[16]

"When A Raisin in the Sun won the Drama Critics Circle Award in 1958-1959, Lorraine Hansberry achieved the success dreamed of by so many earlier Black writers. In its initial run, Raisin in the Sun completed 530 performances, and it was the most perceptive presentation of American Blacks on the professional stage up to that point in time."[17] Yet:

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[16]Ibid., p. 13.

[17]Ibid., p. 16.

> The racial values that make up Lorraine Hansberry's fictive world, also could make sense only if projected to a white or white seeking audience. The virtues of the Younger women in A Raisin in the Sun--thrift, caution, hard work, good sense--contrast with the lack of these virtues in the men. Walter Younger attempted to make a quick killing and in the process lost the family's savings to a Black con-man. The women want to leave the Black ghetto. To do this they attempt to buy a house in an all-white district. When the whites try to buy them out, Walter is willing, but the women convince him that it is in the interest of his manhood to insist on fulfillment of the deal.
>
> The Youngers have the viability of their Black lives destroyed, but are denied the white life they seek. They are being forced to measure their lives by the standards set by their oppressors. This is of course, senseless for Negroes. In short, Miss Hansberry is saying to a white audience: here are the Youngers, a good American family, operating in the tradition of thrift and hard work, the trademark of successful mobility in society. They only want a chance to prove to you what good neighbors they can be. Why don't you let them?[18]

Raisin in the Sun marks the triumph as well as the end of a period of growth in the Black American Theater. In 1964 the presentation of Imamu Baraka's The Dutchman caused a furor that resulted in a definite break with earlier traditions and the initiation of a new direction in Black drama.

> It was Leroi Jones' Dutchman that radically reordered the internal structure of black theater, first of all by opening up its linguistic range and breaking with the social realism which dominated the forties and fifties, and second (more important in spite of the vague allusions to the theater of Artaud and the Absurdists) through the decidedly

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[18]Adam Miller, "It's a long way to St. Louis," in Tulane Drama Review, XII, No. 4 (Summer, 1968), 148-149.

> utilitarian strategy that informs the play--it is implicitly but very clearly addressed to the radical sector of black socio-political consciousness.[19]

Throughout the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries there were Black theater groups operating in America, and some Blacks succeeded in the commercial theater. But the difference between the early groups and the Black artists of the sixties and early seventies is that now a significant number of talented artists wish to create and produce from the wellspring of the Black community, and turn their backs on the white artistic establishment, because defining their own goals and directing their attention to the Black life-style, Black experience and Black people is more important. In other words, for a significant number of Black artists, white acceptance and approval are no longer guidelines.

Prior to the Sixties, there was Black involvement in theater. But, "those Blacks who worked in the Black Community theaters had a sense of, if I succeed, and if someone sees me here, I can move downtown"[20] (into white theater, success, money). Yet, when Blacks moved downtown, they encountered limited work opportunities, stereotypical roles, exploitation, commercialization and cooptation, which frequently resulted in professional or often personal tragedy, as in

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[19]Larry Neal, "Into Nationalism, Out of Parochialism," in Performance, I, No. 2 (April, 1972), 35.

[20]Clayton Riley, personal interview, July 25, 1969.

the case of Bert Williams[21] or Paul Robeson.[22]

The knowledge of this historical situation has caused many young Black artists: writers, actors, directors, designers and musicians to move instinctively to create their own cultural media, at the same time and parallel with the development of Black controlled political, economic and educational institutions--institutions that will truly serve Black people.

It is significant that in the mid-Sixties a number of Black theaters developed throughout America at the same time, yet independently of each other. Mostly in heavily congested urban areas, these theaters were started and sustained by a small nucleus of people, who fulfilled all the necessary functions. Among these were: The Black House in San Francisco, where Jimmy Garrett, Ed Bullins, Marvin X and Eldridge Cleaver worked; Concept-East in Detroit, founded by Woodie King, Jr. and Ron Milner;[23] Phil Cohran's Afro-Arts Theater in Chicago; The Elma Lewis School in Boston, PASLA in Los Angeles and dozens of other less well-known groups.

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[21]Bert Williams (1872-1922) singer, musician, dancer and comedian was a part of the famous vaudeville team, Williams and Walker (1896-1910), who introduced the cakewalk. Williams wanted to be a serious actor, but was limited to performing in the tradition of minstrelsy. He is generally not credited, but did help to create the Ziegfield Follies.

[22]Robeson's autobiography, Here I Stand, was reprinted in 1971 and details how he was convicted without trial and his career destroyed.

[23]Details of the founding of the Concept-East Theater in Detroit can be found in: "Black Theater: Present Condition," in Black Poets and Prophets, ed. by Woodie King, Jr. and Earl Anthony (New York: Mentor, 1972).

Harlem, located in uptown Manhattan, is often called the Mecca, or cultural capital of Black America. And Harlem produced the vanguard Black theater in America in the ill-fated Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School, established by Imamu Baraka (Leroi Jones), Charles Patterson and others in 1936 and 1964. The Black Arts was a school as well as producing theater company, and offered classes in painting, music, poetry, dance, mathematics, photography, and creative writing.

> from the Black Arts Theater sprang Black Arts West and a multitude of other theaters on its basic model: a theater in the community, and a manifesto for the theater as a total national institution, a reflection in miniature of the entire nation, which was meant above all to be an instrument in the raising of political, ethical and aesthetic consciousness. The Black Arts Theater believed in political activity on the part of its company members. They held classes in nationalist political theory and black history; Harold Cruse taught there for a while.[24]

While it was disrupted in 1965 by internal dissension, and the cancellation of its funding ("with considerable assistance from outside sources in the local and federal government")[25] it established a model of Black community-oriented theater that cannot be dismissed. The Black Arts Theater and School also developed the concept of mobile performing units; its dance, theater and music mobiles made over two hundred appearances on the streets of Harlem.[26] Since

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[24]Neal, "Into Nationalism," p. 36.

[25]Clayton Riley, "On Black Theater," in The Black Aesthetic, ed. by Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), p. 306.

[26]James Hinton, personal interview, July 15, 1972.

the demise of the Black Arts, this idea has been incorporated in the City of New York Park Department's program of summer entertainment in the form of the Jazz and Dance mobile units.[27]

In 1972 the New York area had at least five or six "professional" Black theaters: The New Lafayette, The New Heritage Repertory Theater, Harlem School of the Arts, The New Federal Theater, The Spirit House Movers and Players (Newark) and several other splinter groups, such as the AJASS. These groups are "theaters where the administration is Black, actors and directors and technicians are Black and where the plays that are done are written by Black writers."[28]

Of this group of professional Black theaters, the New Lafayette has the best facilities. It was founded by its present Artistic Director, Robert Macbeth in 1967. This resident company of actors, directors, writers and technicians is located in the heart of Harlem and produces theater based on what they believe the needs and aspirations of the community are.

The New Lafayette opened its first season in 1967 with a production of Ron Milner's Who's Got His Own, followed by Athol Fugard's Blood Knot. Their home base was in the same building occupied by the original Lafayette Theater Company [29] from which they

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[27]Joseph Papp's mobile theater and the Theater of the Streets were working with the same concepts of theater earlier than the Black Arts. However, they did not concentrate on the Black audience, nor did they organize dance and music troupes, which was an innovation of the Black Arts.

[28]Woodie King, Jr., personal interview, July 22, 1969.

[29]The original Lafayette theater housed one of the foremost early Black theater groups in America, the Lafayette Players. Their period of greatest popularity was from 1912-1920.

drew their name. During the first season their headquarters were destroyed by fire[30] and the company was temporarily without a home base, although they continued their training program and productions.

The following season the New Lafayette moved into a restored, beautifully equipped plant (formerly the Renaissance Theater) in a prime Harlem location. In December of 1968 they opened their second season with Ed Bullins' play, In the Wine Time, following it with his We Righteous Bombers. In 1972 Mr. Bullins is still the unofficial resident-playwright of the company. Since it reopened in 1968, the Lafayette has produced several other Bullins plays, as well as their specialty, productions that are called "Rituals." These rituals reflected the concepts of Robert Macbeth as stated in 1969, "The classic function of the theater is to project and illuminate the feelings and concerns of the community which sustains it."[31] Since the New Lafayette receives its funding from foundation grants, and is still not self-supporting, this statement seems somewhat contradictory.

The New Lafayette, which is controlled by Macbeth, sponsors a magazine, Black Theater, which Mr. Bullins and Richard Wesley edit, and which frequently serves the theater as a house "organ." The Lafayette is essentially a closed company and does not provide work opportunities for the countless unemployed Black artists in New York

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[30]Woodie King, Jr., "Black Theater: Present Condition," in Black Poets and Prophets, ed. by Woodie King, Jr., and Earl Anthony (New York: Mentor, 1972), p. 183.

[31]Ed Bullins, personal interview, July 17, 1969.

City, nor do they share their performing space.

Members of the New Lafayette Company participate in a Writer's Workshop, directed by Bullins and Macbeth. During the 1971-1972 season, while the company was producing a movie, Ritual Masters, a pseudo-documentary,[32] several writers from the workshop had productions mounted at other theaters in New York: Marty Charles' Jammima was produced at the New Federal Theater; Richard Wesley's Black Terror succeeded at Joseph Papp's Public Theater, and Sonny Jim's Don't Let it Go to Your Head ended the season at the Henry Street Playhouse. In addition Mr. Bullins' In New England Winter was performed at Henry Street and a controversial production of his The Duplex rocked the complacency of Lincoln Center.[33]

There are several other traditional theater groups operating in Harlem, working in churches, the Harlem YMCA and there is Ernie McClintock's Afro-American Studio, "which did highly competent productions of Amen Corner, Moon on a Rainbow Shawl, Black Nativity (and The Toilet and The Baptism), performing only on weekends. This group survived for some time in Harlem with no foundation or city support,"[34] although in 1971 they received a City stipend for space. During the 1971-1972 season the Afro-American Studio produced a

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[32]Erika Munk, "Up From Politics, an Interview with Ed Bullins," Performance, I, No. 2 (April 1972), 57.

[33]Ed Bullins, "Letters to the Editor," New York Times, March 26, 1972, p. 23.

[34]Peter Bailey, "Report on Black Theater" in Negro Digest, XVIII (April, 1969), 21.

widely-acclaimed version of N. R. Davidson's El Hajj Malik.

The National Black Theater Workshop, Inc., established by Barbara Ann Teer in the Fall of 1968, is of special interest. Miss Teer expressed her philosophy then as follows:

> We are in the first phase of our program: training the company. We have spent the last five months experimenting with new techniques of working and are developing totally new and different methods of communication. Our goal is to establish a black art standard. The first word deleted from our theatrical vocabulary was the word "actor." We have declared ourselves "Liberators," keeping in mind that before we can psychologically liberate black people, we must ourselves be liberated. In order to do this, we have to expose all our nigger/negroness because liberators must first be strong, wholesome, positive African-Americans completely committed to revolution and revolutionary black art. We have, therefore, through a process of decruding ourselves--that is cleansing our minds so that we can change images, reappropriate values and constantly strive to reaffirm our spiritual essence--become revolutionary black artists.[35]

The National Black Theater, Inc. has performed in the community frequently, and is involved with film projects. They have used material by Charles Russell, Larry Neal and Don L. Lee in their workshops. During the winter of 1969-1970 the workshop produced their only formal play to date, Five on the Black Hand Side by Charles Russell and directed by Miss Teer, at the American Place Theater. Since 1970 Miss Teer's group has been performing in churches, and on such television programs as "Soul." National Black Theater (NBT) performed at The Apollo and in the Black Summer Festival at Lincoln Center in July, 1972. NBT performances are

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[35]Barbara Ann Teer, "To Black Artists with Love," in Negro Digest, XVIII (April, 1969), 5.

characterized by high energy and reliance on traditional African forms, as are found in the music and in the religion.

> The nationalist ideology, with its philosophical trappings, when added to a stress on musical structure, was responsible for the development of new ritual forms, while the overtly political and social aspect of Black thinking led to a parallel reliance on naturalistic forms--Ed Bullins is now called the "new O'Neill" by the Times. Barbara Ann Teer of the National Black Theater, for example, moved away from the crafted play and toward a ritualist theater. (The only crafted play performed by NBT was Charlie Russell's Five On the Black Hand Side. And it wasn't done in Harlem, but at the American Place Theater.) Teer came into the Black theater after a considerable amount of work on the off-Broadway and Broadway stage. At first she emphasized the development of the black actor through a training technique that would be an organic extension of black music. One series of improvisational exercises arose out of a blues modality and was called the "Nigger Cycle," another set was accompanied by the music of John Coltrane, and was referred to as the "Righteous Cycle"--I recall this was the highest "cycle." Each cycle below the cycle of righteousness contained negative as well as positive elements, elimination of the negative elements--European values, bourgeois attitudes, self-destructive tendencies--was called "decrudification," i.e., a particular kind of psychic purgation. Teer's pieces are big, with many performers, and she uses her work in a functional manner--at the Congress of African People last year, she opened up one of the sessions by moving her whole brightly costumed troupe into a huge auditorium, carrying red, black, and green flags, singing, chanting, dancing down the aisles. Her texts for the rituals are unimportant and corny, but her company's energy is extraordinary--proved by the fact that they played the Apollo Theater successfully.
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> You could never put one of Robert Macbeth's rituals in the Apollo. The New Lafayette rituals are for me (and such reactions are very personal) failures, failures of energy. Their modality is oriental, characterized by silence and darkness. (I haven't seen the last one, which I understand has African drumming and dancing.) They tend to be slow, plodding, studious, and done with a very solemn air. Pieces open in a darkened theater, perhaps to symbolize a plunge into the inner self. An off-stage voice lays down the text, which is too long, and too mysterious. The only

> reason to stress all this is that when ideology is removed from the rhythms and vigor of the people on whom it is based, it becomes self-defeating and cannot be made into meaningful images and gestures.[36]

Every Sunday afternoon the National Black Theater has a Symposium with a guest lecturer on current topics to keep the "artist liberators" informed. They end each session with spiritual exercises, and these sessions are open to the community. They plan to acquire a permanent house in Harlem, when they have the finances, and since they are one of the groups moving away from traditional European theater, it should be interesting to watch their growth and direction.

Another recent and important development was the establishment of the Puerto Rican Travelling Theater and the Soul and Latin Theater (SALT). These groups attempt a cultural merger between Blacks and Puerto Ricans and they directly service both Blacks and Puerto Ricans in that they perform in the street on floats in the adjacent ghettos--Harlem and El Barrio.

Finally, there is the most well-known producing group in New York City, the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC). While this group was originally organized by Douglas Turner Ward, Robert Hooks, and Lonnie Elder III as a Black Theater, it was located downtown on the Lower East Side and had a Board of Directors, Business Administration Staff and Technical Staff who were not Black. In their first year, NEC fell into the trap indicated by Harold Cruse, "They crossed the

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[36]Neal, "Into Nationalism," pp. 36-37.

integration breach by performing plays by whites with Black casts,"[37] thereby ignoring Black authors. Indeed during its first season (1967-1968) the Negro Ensemble Company did not produce any plays written by American Blacks.

This situation has since been rectified and the Negro Ensemble Company is known for its quality productions. Its training program has been very successful, in terms of preparing such artists as Hattie Winston, Denise Nicholas and Rosalind Cash to succeed in the commercial theater. NEC's work has generated numerous professional drama awards, including those won by Lonnie Elder's Ceremonies in Dark Old Men. During the 1970-1971 season NEC introduced the New York area to the work of Trinidadian playwright, Derek Walcott with an exhilarating production of The Dream on Monkey Mountain that starred Roscoe Lee Brown.

Under the sole leadership of Douglas Turner Ward, the Negro Ensemble Company abandoned its permanent repertory company in the 1971-1972 season in favor of open casting. In the winter months they experimented with an ambitious "Works in Progress Series" in which the work of more than twenty young Black writers received productions. The Negro Ensemble Company has performed a major service in training actors, directors and technicians, and is now actively encouraging young untested writers as well.

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[37]Harold Cruse, Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (New York: William Morrow, 1967), p. 537.

> Most NEC productions are highly polished, and the group is one of the few which presents a wide variety of Black theater. It's too bad they're downtown; the presence of such a theater in the black community would have far reaching effects; particularly now that the extreme separatism of the other theaters is being reevaluated. . . . The NEC just represents another tendency within the movement. It wants to be accepted off-Broadway, wants to be accepted by critics, and honestly says so. Everybody else wants the same thing but won't admit it (When the New Lafayette, for example got bad reviews from white critics they stopped white critics from coming to the theater. Now Eric Bentley gives them a good review of Psychic Pretenders in the Times, and in my mail comes a copy of Bentley's review sent by the New Lafayette theater!) The NEC advertises plays in newspapers, their thing is in the open, they want to be accepted as theater in the same way other theaters are accepted. In other words their ideology is that of the civil rights movement.[38]

Outside of New York, but using professional New York talent, the Free Southern Theater (FST) was established in 1964 by artists working within the Civil Rights Movement in the South. FST has its headquarters in New Orleans, and tours rural areas of the South attempting to bring material to enrich the lives of rural Blacks and energize their political and social consciousness.

Very shortly after its inception, which began the new Black theater movement,[39] FST became caught in the crossfire of the divergent philosophies of Integration and Cultural Nationalism as the book, The Free Southern Theater by Dent, Moses and Schechner[40] documents. However, as Larry Neal says:

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[38]Neal, "Into Nationalism," p. 38.

[39]Neal, "Into Nationalism," p. 35.

[40]Through a publishing oversight Gil Moses' name does not appear as an author of this document.

> Since 1965, FST has moved up tempo in their search for a relevant and committed theater. Under the direction of Tom Dent and a community board of advisors, FST has deepened and extended its base in the black community. More importantly, it has begun to find itself in the spiritual sense. No longer is there the agony of trying to speak out of a sensibility that is not truly their own or not truly rooted in the black community. They are moving to rid themselves of the divided consciousness that has destroyed or marred the work of some of our best artists.[41]

In a move to strengthen local participation, FST established a Writer's Workshop early in 1966. Emanating from this is a literary magazine called Gumbo, and recent seasons have included plays developed in the workshop. While the ambitions of the Free Southern Theater have still not totally come to fruition, they have influenced the development of at least three community theaters in Louisiana and Mississippi. In addition it has proven to be an excellent training ground for a number of artists who have since made significant contributions to the national Black American theater. Among them is Gilbert Moses whose feted production of Slave Ship was first accomplished under the auspices of FST.

Following the legacy of the original Black Arts Theater,[42] there is a recognizable trend toward the development of total cultural institutions, which offer political and educational materials, as well as theater, dance, music and poetry. (Most new Black poetry is a form of theater, as illustrated by the work of the original Last Poets and Melvin Van Peebles). Places like the Black Mind,

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[41]Larry Neal, "Conquest of the South," in The Drama Review, XIV, No. 3 (T47, 1970), 173-174.

[42]Supra, p. 15.

the East Wind and The East are examples of this trend. In Newark, the Spirit House utilizes poetry, music, theater and martial arts, and works to raise the political consciousness of Newark's Black majority. As a direct result of his work at Spirit House, Imamu Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) was arrested by the police. Evidence for prosecuting Black America's outstanding playwright was offered in the form of one of his dramatic poems, "Up against the Wall," which was read at his trial. The success of Baraka's work in Newark and the intent of merging art, religion and social consciousness that is so much a part of new Black Art can be seen as an important factor in the election of Kenneth Gibson as Mayor of Newark, New Jersey,[43] and the proposed construction of Kawaida Towers.

While Black Art based on the ideology of Cultural Nationalism is comparatively new, and has only begun to tap its potential to reach Black people, it is a phenomenon that has made rapid strides in less than ten years, overcoming many serious obstacles. Certainly it has spawned some of the most creative and fertile cultural events of the decade. And these vital forms are being approached with rapidly increasing optimism, encouragement and expectancy by Black audiences.

Yet as the young Black artist builds relevant philosophies on which to base his work and attempts to unify his soul and his

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[43]Michael T. Kaufman, "Leroi Jones Defines Role in Newark Race," New York Times, May 31, 1970, p. 49.

community, he is faced with the need to build a discerning audience. The factors of racism that are so oppressively obvious in the Black man's day-to-day existence, are also still undeniably evident in the media that are meant to determine and reflect the values of the society. Even in the recent appearance of popular films and television shows with Black casts, such as "Shaft" that have proven to be economically rewarding for their white producers, there is little to do with the reality of Black life, and Black audiences know this.

While everything about the culture of Black people indicates that it is rich in the resources that are "the meat" of the theater, formalized theater, as accepted by white society, has played so significant role in the lives of millions of Black people who also populate North America. This is partially explained by the failure of Western theater to deal with the actuality of Black people. Ron Milner suggested that Blacks are not theatergoers because:

> The American theater still deals with white lives, white culture, white stereotypes and white conceptions. For example, if an American play deals with white family life, it would not involve Black people except in the capacity of servant or employee; if the play created a love story, it would not involve Black people unless the integrated couples were being ostracized; if the play dealt with heroes, it would not be a Black hero, unless it was a runaway slave, because on practically no occasion have whites accurately portrayed Black heroes.[44]

Stereotypes and derogatory images of Blacks are still being perpetuated through the performing arts. The Minstrel tradition

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[44]Ron Milner, personal interview, July 16, 1969.

gradually passed out of practice in the early Twentieth Century, yet "Blackface" was alive and well on the American stage in the winter of 1969. Peace, an off-beat musical, adapted from the Aristophanes comedy by Al Carmines and Tim Reynolds utilized two slapstick characters, played by white actors who used exaggerated blackface makeup and postures until they were removed by the pressure of angry Blacks.

Big Time Buck White, produced by Budd Schulberg, was the effort sent to the New York stage by the Watts Writer's Workshop, a group established after the Watts riot with public funding. "Supposedly a satire on the shenanigans of Black militants (stealing poverty funds), what it turned out to be was a white author creating Amos and Andy images of Black men to the immense pleasure of the predominantly white audience . . . Big Time Buck White had no meaning for Black people. A satire on some of the more rhetorical militants we may need, but a satire on Black militants by a white author we can do without. . . ."[45]

Since 1969 three plays about three well-known Black heroes were written by white authors that resulted in plain distortions. The first, Message to Grass Roots, was based on the life of Malcolm X, and covered a thirty-year period of his life. "It was the white playwright's interpretation of what he wanted Malcolm to be, not

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[45]Peter Bailey, "Report on Black Theater," in Negro Digest, XVIII, No. 6 (April, 1969), 21.

the forceful Black Nationalist that Brother Malcolm was. Author Robert Riche almost made him into a minor Martin Luther King, Jr. . . ."[46]

In the spring of 1970, a statesman of international reputation, Patrice Lumumba, was turned into a vaudeville stock character in a production entitled Three Murderous Angels, which was written by Conor Cruise O'Brien and performed in Los Angeles during a three week run. This piece was later resurrected and produced on Broadway in the winter of 1972 to the accompaniment of picket lines from several African legations.

The third, according to Black critic Peter Bailey, was the "most ballyhooed play to open during the 1969-1969 season."[47] Howard Sackler's Great White Hope became the hit of the year and won all the major awards. "The Broadway hit was based on the life of the heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson and gave veteran actor, James Earl Jones a vehicle for a bravura performance. A Black person attending the play had best keep in mind that this was a white man's version of Jack Johnson, just as William Styron's book is a white man's version of Nat Turner. If you take a hard look, forget all those rave reviews, you will see that many of the old stereotypes creep through. For instance Jack Johnson's white woman is sanctified, while his Black woman is depicted as a constantly

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[46] Ibid., p. 22.

[47] Ibid., p. 20.

nagging shrew. Be aware that the real Jack Johnson married three white women, with at least one rumored to be a whore."[48]

Of obvious importance here is the fact that when white writers deal with Black material they are not speaking to Black people, but to whites. As Ron Milner said:

> The minute I began to identify and get in a groove behind what they (white writers) were saying, if any one of them introduced a Black character, I knew automatically they weren't talking to me from the way they treated their Black characters. That's true of nearly all the great white writers, who dealt with Black characters. The minute they bring in what they call an African or Negroid or whatever it is, they would bring in this strange creature that they didn't know what to do with, which was supposed to be me.[49]

Milner's comments illustrate Black reactions to most plays by white authors with Black themes. While occasionally white distortions of Black material seem deliberate, frequently it is also caused by ignorance of Black culture, which may be the case of Howard Sackler who compiled much of his information from Black Fire, written by Robert De Kuy, the author of the Nigger Bible.

It is interesting to note that Mr. Sackler also drags out the strange creature that Ron Milner discussed. Sackler included an African student in the script, and as Milner suggests, he did not know what to do with him. Although most Africans studying in Europe are erudite and lettered, Mr. Sackler's African was strange and stumbling and could not be understood without the help of sign

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[48] Ibid., p. 20.

[49] Milner, personal interview.

language. This scene was as pointless as the Uncle Tom and Topsy scene that followed. Thus, the Great White Hope remained in the same vein as other white authored plays on Black themes. Luckily for Howard Sackler, excellent direction and fine performances gave his play an undeserved credence and credibility.

Sackler had the controlling interest in the production, owning eighty-five percent, after having sold fifteen percent to Herman Levin to act as producer. There was also a film version and a national tour. Thus, Sackler's Black venture was highly profitable. One question raised by his project is that if a play based on the life of Jack Johnson had been written by a Black author from a Black point of view, would it have been produced on Broadway at all?

Black writers have great difficulty getting their work produced in the American Theater. Woodie King, Jr., producer of The Black Quartet, The Perfect Party, Slave Ship, Black Girl, Jammima and numerous other Black productions commented on this issue:

> If a Black writer can't get a production, then that play, no matter how you read it and look at it, is only fifty percent of the whole theatrical experience. That's all it is . . . unless the play gets on. And that's what whitey has really stopped, because they can't understand what the Black life-style is. . . . There are no real difficulties, except getting the money--if you can get the money. Black people don't invest and white people invest in traditional theater pieces, and Black theater is not traditional. You can lie, you know, like Leroi could write a play with no sweat that would make money, if he wanted to sell out.[50]

While preparing to mount The Black Quartet, Mr. King encountered

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[50]King, personal interview.

other problems. Many theater managers refused him the use of their empty theaters, because they did not want the Black plays, The Militant Preacher by Ben Cauldwell and Great Goodness of Life by Imamu Baraka, in particular, to be shown in their premises. In some instances, managers even refused to read the scripts. King was also offered investment capital, provided he would change certain material.

Most of Woodie King's producing experiences have been Off or Off-Off Broadway, but Melvin Van Peebles and Gilbert Moses encountered the same hostility with their Broadway production of Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death. Natural Death was a brilliant, exciting and polished evening of dramatized poetry with music, and was certainly one of the best entries of the 1971-1972 season. While the tone and tenor of the material was not that far removed from the earlier work of Langston Hughes, most of the critical establishment found the piece angry and threatening and attempted to kill the production.

Natural Death's reception was so hostile that Van Peebles went on record in the press and on the air to state his determination to keep the production alive. Not only was he able to do this for six months, but he accomplished the coup of opening a second and simultaneous Broadway musical, Don't Play Us Cheap. During Natural Death's run Van Peebles frequently supported the show with his own personal financing. And of course, as Woodie King suggested, the key is that Van Peebles had his own money, from early film investments,

particularly Sweet Sweetback's Baddasss Song.[51]

White investors generally want control of the production, and as Mr. King states, "These problems are further compounded because white sponsors often insist that Black material be directed by white directors."[52] There is thus an implicit conclusion that no qualified Black directors exist

> Most whites can't really perceive what the Black life style is all about. So I don't see how you can have Black theater with them directing the life styles of the performers on stage. Let me be more specific, I don't see how a white critic or director and white theater company can really understand what a play like Ceremonies (In Dark Old Men) or Who's Got His Own is saying. And I know what happens in those cases, because I've been involved in so many theater productions that you can't miss it. What they do is run past that small nuance that's very meaningful, into the next thing, or either the director will cross it out.[53]

This recognition is responsible in part for the development of the new Black theater that has moved home, "psychologically, mentally, esthetically and physically."[54]

It is no longer necessary for the young Black writer's work to be vindicated by Western Aesthetics or to win the acceptance from white audiences or critics. As in the case of Who's Got His Own, "the critics did not want to hear Mr. Milner saying that nothing had changed in terms of the Black Experience. They didn't want to hear this and they went into all kinds of academic jujitsus to find

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[51]Mel Gussow, "The Baadasssss Success of Melvin Van Peebles," in the New York Times Magazine, August 20, 1972.

[52]King, personal interview.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Ronald Milner, "Black Theater, Go Home," in Negro Digest, XVII, No. 6, 5.

things wrong with the play. They were not unsuccessful and unlike many other American Place (Theater) productions, this one did not move to another house to continue for a run."[55]

The opinions of the white critical establishment are not of great significance to most young Black writers, and "this is a very liberating factor."[56] Many earlier Black writers lost precious time and sacrificed their creative style in an effort either to explain or placate:

> The more seriously the Black Artist tries to affect the white consciousness, the more explicative he must become. The more explicative he becomes, the less attention he gives to the essentials of his art. A kind of negative value field is established. Racism systematically verifies itself when the slave can only break free by imitating the master, contradicting his own reality.[57]

Young Black writers turn to the theater, because it is a direct and immediate method by which they can communicate to other Blacks, and they know that the Black audience is their most critical, most aware and most sensitive forum.

Introduction to this Study

> To be known, to be called by one's name, is to find one's place and hold against all the hordes of hell.
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> Howard Thurman

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[55]Lofton Mitchell, Black Drama (New York: Hawthorn, 1967), p. 22.

[56]Evan Walker, personal interview, July 10, 1969.

[57]Thomas C. Dent, Richard Schechner and Gilbert Moses (eds.), The Free Southern Theater by the Free Southern Theater (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p. 175.

> "Black is beautiful" is presently the password during these times of heightened and assertive ethnic consciousness among Black Americans. It is a time when old negative images are being discarded and new positive ones are emerging in their place. No more cringing or flinching or even fighting when called black; no more disgust and shame at kinky hair; no more self-hatred, but a new confidence that comes with arming oneself with a shield of black pride and black consciousness.[58]

Something new, yet something somehow linked with the past began to happen all over America in the sixties. After four hundred years of subjugation and oppression, Black people began to find themselves, primarily in a spiritual sense, but which affected every aspect of life. The sixties were about coming together and about change: the dynamic and emerging power in Black life--the Arts.

The current Black Art movement is in many ways older than the concomitant "political" movement.

> It is primarily concerned with the cultural and spiritual liberation of Black America. It takes upon itself the expressing through various art forms, the Soul of the Black Nation. And like the Black Power movement it seeks to define the world of art and culture in its own terms. The Black Arts movement seeks to link, in a highly conscious manner, art and politics in order to assist in the liberation of Black people. The Black Arts movement, therefore, reasons that this linking must take place along lines that are rooted in the Afro-American and Third World historical and cultural sensibility. By "Third World", we mean that we see our struggle in the context of the global confrontations occurring in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The identity with all the righteous forces in those places which are struggling for human dignity.

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[57]Peter Bailey, "The Black Theater," Ebony, XXIV, No. 10 (August, 1969), 126-134, cited by Edgar H. Sorrels, "To Be Known . . . (A Discourse on My Role as a Black Artist Today)," Monograph in Art, Pennsylvania State University, 1971.

The Black Arts movement seeks to give a total vision of ourselves. Not the split vision that Dubois called the "Double Consciousness". Today the sons and daughters of DuBois in the Black Arts movement, go forth to merge these "warring ideals" into one committed Soul, integrated with itself and taking its own place in the world. But this is no new thing. It is the road that all oppressed people take enroute to total liberation. In the history of Black America, the current ideas of the Black Arts movement can be said to have their roots in the so-called Negro Renaissance of the 1920's. The 20's was a key period in the rising historical and cultural consciousness of Black people. This period grooved with the rise of Garvey's Black Nationalism, danced and made love to the music of Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, Perry Bradford, Fats Waller, and the Holy Father, Duke Ellington. There was a flowering of black poets, writers and artists. And there was the ascendancy of hip, blues talking Langston Hughes who came on singing songs about Africa, Haiti and Harlem:

> Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
> Rocking back and forth to a mellow
> croon, I heard a Negro play.
> Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
> By the pale dull pallor of an old gas
> light
> He did a lazy sway . . .
> He did a lazy sway . . .
> to the tune o' those weary Blues . . .

There were other writers of that period; Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen. . . . But Langston best personifies the Black artist who is clearly intent upon developing a style of poetry which springs forcefully and recognizeably from a Black life style. No matter how it is cut, the blues and the people who create them are the soul force of the race, the emotional current of the Nation. And that is why Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison based their esthetics on them. The Black Arts movement strives for the same kind of an intimacy with the people. It strives to be a movement that is rooted in the fundamental experiences of the Nation. Artists of today such as Leroi Jones, Quincy Troupe, Max Roach, Aretha Franklin, Abdul Rahman, Evan Walker, Ed Bullins, Maya Angelou, Eleo Pomare, Sun Ra, Don L. Lee, Ron Milner, Romare Bearden assert . . . assert that Black art must speak to the lives and the psychic survival of Black people, they are not speaking of "protest" art. They are not speaking of an art that screams and masturbates before white audiences. This is the past of Negro

> literature and civil rights literature. Instead they are speaking of an art that addresses itself directly to Black people; an art that speaks to us in terms of our feelings and ideas about the world; an art that validates the positive aspects of our life style; an art that opens us up to the beauty and ugliness within us; an art that makes us understand our condition and each other in a more profound manner that unites us, exposing us to our peaceful weaknesses and strengths; and finally, an art that posits for the vision of a liberated future. So the function of Artistic technique and a Black esthetic is to make the goal of communication and liberation more possible.
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> The Black artist studies Afro-American culture, history, and politics and uses their secrets to open the way for the "brothers" with the heavy and necessary political rap. We know art alone will not cause the liberation of Black America and that culture as an abstract thing within itself will not give us Self-Determination and Nationhood. However, a cultureless revolution is futile. It means that in the process of making revolution, we lose our vision. We lose the soft undulating side of ourselves--those known beauties lurking rhythmically below the level of material needs. In short, a revolution without a culture would destroy the very thing that unites us; the very thing we are trying to save along with our lives.[58]

Peter Bailey writes:

> Black theater advocates accept the idea that the theatre along with other aspects of black culture, must play a strong supporting role in the overall black movement. Culture cannot replace politics or economics, but in the total black movement, it has an important function.[59]

Vantile Whitfield of the Performing Arts Society of Los Angeles explains:

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[58]Larry Neal, "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation," Ebony, XXIV, No. 10 (August, 1969), 54-62. Excerpted and cited by Edgar H. Sorrels, "To be known. . . ."

[59]Bailey, Black Theater, pp. 126-134.

> Black people have been robbed of their culture and are therefore lacking in direction and self-awareness, self-respect and direction. Without these things, we fight a futile battle and even if it is won, the people will only destroy themselves in the aftermath without this love of self and knowledge "from whence we come".[60]

Larry Neal states:

> The Black Arts movement is rooted in a spiritual ethic. The artists carry the past and the future memory of the race, of the nation. They represent our various identities and link us to the deepest, most profound aspects of our ancestry. In saying that the function of art is to liberate Man, we propose a function of art which is now dead in the West and which is in keeping with our most ancient traditions and with our needs. Because at best, art is religious and ritualistic; and ritual moves to liberate Man and to connect him to the Greater Forces. Thus man becomes stronger physically, and is thus more able to create a world that is an extension of his spirituality--his positive humanity.[61]

Ron Milner says:

> Affirmations and inspiration that is what the black artist must mean to the black man. Speaking of himself and his living-place as truthfully and artistically as he can with no one's standards or acceptance in mind but his own, the artist strikes empathy and identification; there is the reaction of acknowledgement and the changing and toppling--first inner, with the body personal, then outward through the bodies, social, political, etc.--is on its way.
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> And if you think all this sounds very romantic, you are right. In any revolution, or evolution--if you'd rather--there must be romantic art; the wishes and longings must be symbolized and projected; the pains and transgressions must be fixed in hated

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[60] Vantile Whitfield, "The Black Theater," Ebony, XXIV, No. 10 (August, 1969), 126-134, cited by Edgar H. Sorrels, "To be known . . ."

[61] Neal, "Any Day Now," pp. 54-62.

> pictures. Jazz so far, the blackest of the arts--is probably the most romantic music since brother Beethoven gave up the ghost. And that is how it should be.[62]

Ron Karenga adds:

> Let it be enough to say that the artistic consideration, although a necessary part, is not sufficient. What completes the picture is that social criterion for judging art. And it is this criterion that is the most important criterion. For all art must support and reflect the Black Revolution, and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid no matter how many lines and spaces are produced in proportion and symmetry and no matter how many sounds are boxed in or blown out and called music.
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> All we do and create, than, is based on tradition and reason, that is to say, on foundation and movement. For we begin to build on a traditional foundation, but it is out of movement, that is experience, that we complete our creation. Tradition teaches us, Leopold Senghor tells us, that all African Art has at least three characteristics: that is, it is functional, collective and committing or committed. That is why we say that all Black art, regardless of any technical requirements, must have three basic characteristics, which make it revolutionary. . . . For art reflects the value system from which it comes . . . art is everyday life given more form and color. And what one seeks to do then is to use art as a means of educating the people and being educated by them, so that it is a mutual exchange rather than a one-way communication.[63]

Finally Imamu Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) states the seven principles of Nguzo Saba in the doctrine of the Kawaida, "literally that

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[62]Ron Milner, "Black Magic, Black Art," in Black Poets and Prophets, ed. by Woodie King and Earl Anthony (New York: Mentor, 1972), pp. 169-170.

63. Ron Karenga, "Black Art: Mute Matter Given Force and Function," in Black Poets and Prophets, ed. by Woodie King and Earl Anthony (New York: Mentor, 1972), pp. 174-179.

which is customary, or traditionally adhered to, by Black people."[64]

> Umoja (Unity)--to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race.
> Kujichagulia (Self-Determination)--to define ourselves, name ourselves, and speak for ourselves, instead of being defined and spoken for by others.
> Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility)--to build and maintain our community together and to make our brothers' and sisters' problems our problems and solve them together.
> Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics)--to build and maintain our own stores, shops and other businesses and to profit together from them.
> Nia (Purpose)--to make as our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.
> Kuumba (Creativity)--to do always as much as we can, in the way we can in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than when we inherited it.
> Imani (Faith)--to believe with all our heart in our parents, our teachers, our leaders, our people and the righteousness and victory of our struggle.[65]

Baraka continues:

> Black creativity, Kuumba, is the sixth principle. Which tells us how we must devise a way our of our predicament. How we must build, with what methodology. In what emotionalism, the fire of blackness. So that Ujamaa is Kuumba in regards to the distribution of wealth among men. When we said, Black Art, we meant Kuumba the spiritual characteristic of revelation through the creative. The artist is respected in the Bantu philosophy because he could capture some of the divinity. Because it flowed through his fingers or out of his mouth, and because he would lend his divinity to the whole people to raise them in its image, building great nations reared in the image of

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[64]Imamu Amiri Baraka, "Esthetics, a Black Value System," in Black Poets and Prophets, ed. by Woodie King and Earl Anthony (New York: Mentor, 1972), p. 139.

[65]Ibid., pp. 137-138.

> righteousness. What is soul (like the one sun the sole solar force in this system) is our connection, our relation with the infinite. And it is feeling, like inner revelation, that is the connection, the force of the uncreated, which we constantly make reference to, bringing into creation. Yehh! we scream, bringing witness to the power of Kuumba.
>
> But Black creativity is what will save us--not just "artists" but all of us--after all is said and done--nothing else. An antidote to birth and mind control! The Nguzo Saba itself is one of the strongest examples of Kuumba and each idea or act must be measured against the Nguzo Saba in each of its components. You must ask of each new idea or dissociation that comes to mind, what does this have to do with bringing about unity for black people, what does it contribute to black people's self-determination--does it have anything to do with Ujima, collective work and responsibility, and so on. So, for instance, a "black TV program" with a straight-haired sister dancing a Martha Graham--Merce Cunningham tribute to the ghetto(?) is not Kuumba--neither the dance nor the program.[66]
>
> To be known, to be called by one's name, is to find one's place and hold against all the hordes of hell.
>
> Howard Thurman

There is a certain ineffable magic that makes Ella Fitzgerald's scatting and Aretha Franklin's singing so great, or Coltrane's music electrifying; that makes a way of walking down 125th Street spectacular--that explains why this same walk-style can be found in Georgia or Accra. If the words could be found to describe this certain celebration, this would be the basis of the Black Aesthetic--perhaps this quality cannot be yet verbally identified, in the English language, and should not be separated, therefore Kuumba.

The statements quoted previously begin to formulate a Black Esthetic--an area that is still essentially virgin territory. While

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[66] Ibid., pp. 144-145.

these statements are primarily philosophical and ideological, certain general criteria are common to each passage:

1. Black Art must give back self-knowledge and self-respect to the Black man.

2. Black Art must come from the actual source--the life of Blacks.

3. Black Art in order to be relevant--to create change must have a social commitment to the liberation of Black America.

Thus it becomes the responsibility of the artist, in this case the playwright, to "help Black folks more clearly see and understand the life forces that engulf us so that we might deal more intelligently with our problems--problems such as the master-slave psychosis, acute self-hatred and feelings of inferiority. The Black writer can help us to see the beauty, goodness and strength inherent in the experiences of Black people and to achieve positive collective images which would serve us in celebrating and developing this strength, beauty and goodness, as we seek to restore order and harmony in our lives."[67]

The Black man is African, yet that very distinct cultural background has been filtered through many violent centuries of Western experience, which have had important effects on the Black American. Thus the developments of the sixties and early seventies in the Black Nation did not happen in a vacuum, but are intrinsically tied with the past. Consequently, this thesis which deals with three contemporary Black plays, presents a brief historical overview of the

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[67]George Bass, personal interview, August 12, 1972.

major trends of the Black experience in American Drama, particularly in terms of the stereotypic molds which have been cast on Blacks that have had a major impact on the quality of Black life in America.

The thesis also presents a cursory view of the important developments in the Black Theater Art of the sixties, and discusses some of the major producing groups out of the sixty Black theaters that have come into being in the last ten years, when a definite change in the sense of a new direction occurred. Yet this change has been and is gradual, and can be seen as the logical development of earlier Black philosophies.

The three plays discussed in this thesis are full-length and structured in form. Although the playwrights attempt to make them relevant to Blacks, both in terms of content and to some extent form, they are crafted pieces and are not a part of the alternative move toward ritualistic theater that utilizes the Africal Oral Tradition.

While these plays form an important part of new Black theater, they are not blunt, angry, primarily political, and satirical, as many of the one-act plays from the sixties were.

The three plays were all produced in the Black theaters discussed earlier, and in each case the initial productions represented different phases and levels of Black theater: East of Jordan by Evan Walker was produced by the Free Southern Theater in a rural, activist Black theater experience. Who's Got His Own by Ron Milner premiered at the Off-Broadway American Place Theater in an integrationist setting, and In the Wine Time by Ed Bullins was performed at the New Lafayette Theater in an urban Black theater.

In correspondence with the impulse and tenets of the Black cultural Revolution, this thesis does not utilize the evaluations of white critics. Supplementary material to the actual scripts includes personal interviews with each author, and interviews with Woodie King, Jr., influential producer, actor and writer; and Clayton Riley, Drama Critic and Arts Editor of the Amsterdam News. Further secondary sources were provided by papers, periodicals, journals and magazines, published by Black artists and writers; Black reference books and articles by Black writers appearing in the white press.

The plays are generally evaluated through the traditional criteria of plot, character, language, thought and spectacle with the relevance of the criteria being determined by the content and form of the plays themselves. The individual discussions of the plays are not divided into these distinct segments. The plays are also discussed in terms of what the authors, themselves, said about their work, and the final chapter is a comparative study of the three plays. An attempt has been made to point out specific instances where the authors work with important Black cultural material. These concepts have been supplemented wherever possible with the characteristics of the Black Esthetic that are developing at this very time and are discussed earlier. In all cases an attempt has been made to tie the theoretical analyses of these plays in with the current realities of the Black experience and the Black Arts movement that is defining it.

CHAPTER II

EAST OF JORDAN BY EVAN K. WALKER

East of Jordan was performed by the Free Southern Theater in the 1969 touring season, premiering April 13, 1969 in New Orleans, Louisiana. It was presented in a repertory that included Slave Ship, a one act play by Imamu Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), and Roots by Gilbert Moses, then Artistic Director of FST, and several plays developed in their Writer's Workshop. These productions toured more than forty rural communities in the Southern states of Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Alabama and Georgia.

During the month of May, 1969 East of Jordan was also presented in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania by the Freedom Theater, one of the burgeoning number of small Black theater groups.

East of Jordan was an astute selection for the reperteire of the Free Southern Theater's 1969 season. From earliest times Black people in the South considered the North the "promised land of freedom." From the days of the Underground Railroad through the large scale migrations during and after World War II, Blacks believed they could find a better life in the Northern industrial areas. Although these illusions were shattered during the aftermath of Watts, Detroit and Chicago, Evan Walker's play details and dramatizes the social conditions that the migrants found in Harlem.

Walker's East of Jordan is a forceful, realistic drama that illustrates the destruction of a Black man and his family by the inhuman forces operating in an acquisitive society. Although the play was written around 1967, the action of the play takes place in 1949-1950, when most Black people still believed that the American dream and the Protestant Ethic were meaningful approaches to life for Black people. Yet this play is 'relevant' to Blacks in the Seventies, because the many facets of the failure of this approach to life for Blacks are of enormous pertinence.

The complex situation in East of Jordan develops from an initially simple plot that could be called universal: A man (Sam Knight) marries the woman he loves (Gussie Slater) and attempts to provide her with a home he builds with his own skill. This is the point at which the play begins and the peculiar urban American experience of Blacks initiates the conflict. The house is complete except for the wiring, which must be city-approved and installed by a licensed contractor at a cost of fifteen hundred dollars. Knight's futile attempts to raise the money legitimately, result in a deal with a loan shark that leads eventually to his death.

The internal tension of East of Jordan results from the irreconcilable nature of Walker's thematic operatives. Sam Knight is the personification of the Booker T. Washington philosophy that hard dedicated work by Blacks would open the doors to full participation in American life. ("Pull ourselves up by our boot straps!")[1]

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[1]Booker T. Washington, "Atlanta Exposition Address," in Black Protest, ed. by Joanne Grant (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1968), p. 197.

Pitted against the strength of Knight's ambitions is a hierarchical, mercenary and sacrosanct social system that maintains its operation by the servitude of Blacks: a system that splinters the spirit and finally takes the life of Sam Knight.

Secondly, Mr. Walker raises the question that if the philosophy proselytized by Washington is not sufficient, then what will enable Blacks to survive in a system meant to exploit them? Walker does not directly answer, but he does suggest several alternatives.

Finally the racial issue, which is the larger issue is not directly stated, but it permeates the entire play and is revealed through most of the situations. Since East of Jordan was written for Black audiences, Mr. Walker seems to have addressed himself to internal problems, rather than explanations of things already known.

An important thread running through the play is the gradual destruction of Sam's family, his dreams and ideals. This is accomplished technically through a series of sub-plots. Before their marriage, Sam worshipped Gussie for at least fifteen years. At the time of the play he is in his late thirties, as is his bride. Gussie, the daughter of a preacher, was supposedly widowed before the birth of her eighteen year old son, Johnny Slater. Charlie Knight, Sam's brother, attended college in the South with Gussie, and knows that Gussie was never married and that the romanticized tales of her first husband are lies. He and his wife, Ella, share a tenement flat with Sam, Gussie and Johnny Slater. Sam has never been told the truth.

Walker's technical skills as a playwright are illustrated in the way he has woven the strands of his plot into a tightly knit unit

that flows rapidly toward the climax. While his structural techniques are important, it is through characterization that he makes his statements about the world in which Black people live. Walker's characters are recognizable, believable, and well-developed; they also embody specific Black life-styles.

Sam Knight is the major figure in the play and its protagonist. The antagonist in East of Jordan is not a specific character, but a ruthless, oppressive, materialistic society that crushes the life force from its victims, although to an extent this is represented by the Candy Stick Kid, the loan shark and Abe Martin, Sam's employer: characters who have accepted the values of the society. Sam is driven in his desire for success, and he fails because he has accepted 'lock, stock and barrel' the ideals and symbols of a predatory society. He actually believes he can get his 'shot,' as he calls it, by hard work, without ever realizing what that means. Sam has forgotten where he comes from (his roots), and he is blind. He cannot see what his brother Charlie sees with one eye and has learned from experience. Sam is determined and steadfast and he has been fooled into believing the American dream applies to him.

Sam is branded by the definitions devised for him by society. In his Georgia home, he was classified as a "field nigger" and was led to believe that this was something negative that should be overcome by strict adherence to the Protestant Work Ethic. Having accepted this illusion, Sam allows himself to be misused by his family, his wife, his employer and his own dreams.

When Knight brought his aging bride to the Northern 'promised land,' after their interminable courtship, he fully intended to indulge

Gussie and provide her with every material symbol her mythical first husband would have provided. Gussie represented all Sam wasn't; she was educated and respected, and so he worshipped her. Because of this, Sam accepts all kinds of affronts in his dogged battle to maintain his pride.

The harder Sam Knight struggles, the more complex and impossible his life becomes. As his world begins to fall apart, he becomes increasingly desperate and increasingly irrational. Sam is already beaten at the time he is forced to perform on his knees in order to get the loan from the Candy Stick Kid. Therefore, when Slick, Candy's 'main squeeze' (woman), kills Sam at the end of the play, she is killing a man who is already dead. As Mr. Walker says, "I killed Sam off at the end of the play, because he had no right to live."[2]

In direct contrast to Sam, his brother, Charlie Knight, is arrogant, bitter and worldly, in the sense that he knows from experience what to expect from society. Yet, Charlie is another kind of casualty. He began his life with more promise and possibility than Sam. He was bright and attended college, planning to become a doctor. But Charlie left college to serve proudly, in the Air Force, a decision that changed his life.

In a direct and stabbing exchange, Walker discloses Charlie's background and sets up the relationship between the two brothers, showing their contrasting personalities:

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[2]Walker, personal interview.

SAM

Man, you could be a king. You had a scholarship to Capstone University to be a doctor. You could've been somebody.

CHARLIE

You wish it was you insteada me?
(a slight pause. CHARLIE senses He might have hit a sore spot)
You'd show 'em, wouldn't you. Yeah, you'd magically cease being a cotton picker. Then some old jack leg preacher, like Gussie's daddy, might let you in the house nigger's church, and the white folks would call you Docter Boy insteada just plain boy.

SAM

You just got no respect, no faith in nothin'.

CHARLIE

Faith! Hell, no. You got two eyes and can afford that luxury. One of my eyes is ground up in the Alabama dirt.
(Anger pours out of him now. He imitates the speech of Southern Negroes)
I say white folks, boss, y'all can't whup this nigger's head for walkin' on the sidewalk. I's an ossifer and g'lman in the Newnited Stated Air Corps. I's flyin air plans. Gonna kill me some Gemans. Plus, white folks, I's an eddicated nigger to boot. Been to the Capstone. I can spell big words, E-L-E-P-H-A-N-T, I-N-D-I-A Shittt! Them motherrapers played the Star Spangle Banner on my head till they got tired, and my eye rolled around on the ground like a bloody marble. Now that's where my faith in this lunatic asylum is, ole ever believin' brother. That's where it is.

SAM

Forget that, man, you still got a future. All that's in the past.

CHARLIE

What the hell am I, but my past? You, any man but his past? A man gotta be rooted in something. You don't suddenly wake up and shake your roots off like some nightmare.

SAM

Charlie, don't let bitterness eat . . .[3]

Mr. Walker continues this exchange between the two brothers in a stunning and accurate description of hate welling up inside a Black man.

CHARLIE

> Don't start lecturing me. Get a job. Comb my nappy hair. Grease my ashy legs. Man . . . man, this mornin' I went to get that soul savin' job, you always talkin' about. Well, on the train I got to lookin' at this fat, rosy cracker. Just like Abe, grown fat and greasy off the war.

SAM

Man, Abe got no money.

CHARLIE

> That's the lie he tells you. Right now he just like that bastard on the train this mornin', readin' the Wall Street Journal, dreamin of bulls and bears, and figurin' how he gonna steal all the world's bread (money) when the next war comes. And Sam, I wanted to. . . . To kill him. Me, Charlie Knight, who studied to be a doctor. I wanted to squeeze his throat, squeeze until his eyes popped out and rolled down his fat greasy face like squashed eggs. Now Sam, I get that feeling all the time and one day I might just flip out there. So, I got off that train and ran back to Harlem . . . because <u>that</u> is a very dangerous thing.

The feeling that Charlie describes is beyond the scope of Sam's experience and he does not want to hear about it:

SAM

> You ain't gonna do nothin' but talk. Any excuse for what you could've been. I used to think you had some

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[3]Evan Walker, <u>East of Jordan</u> (unpublished play).

brains, but you ain't nothin' but a damn fool.[4]

Charlie has a knowledge and respect for the ways of the 'street' that Sam does not have. Yet in spite of Charlie's awareness, he is still a victim. He cannot move beyond his knowledge, his recognition, his bitterness, in a sense, his past, to the next step, which would be a plan of action. Instead he continues to internalize the effects of his predicament (the predicament of most blacks). When Charlie finally does act, whether consciously or unconsciously, he directly causes the ultimate destruction of his own brother.

Charlie entered the Lucky Dollar Bar and Grill and saw Sam on his knees (a condition ordered by Slick), begging for the loan from Candy. Knowing that Candy Stick Kid is a leech, who will drain Sam, Charlie tries to prevent the transaction. When he cannot stop Sam, he tells him that Gussie isn't worth the trouble Sam is about to bring down on himself. Charlie turns Sam's world upside down by revealing the truth of Johnny Slater's conception.

From the turning point of Charlie Knight's revelation to his death, Sam deteriorates rapidly. He perceives Gussie differently and cannot withstand the weight of his newly-received knowledge and the snowballing situation he has created.

Ironically, Charlie is rather pleased with himself for finally uncovering the 'truth' and vindicating his own approach to life, until he has a confrontation with Gussie, who guessed that Charlie finally told Sam about her past. In the following dialogue, Charlie Knight

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[4] Ibid.

is forced to recognize some truths about himself:

CHARLIE

You could have tried honesty.

GUSSIE

Honesty! Honesty? Who the hell wants honesty in this world.

CHARLIE

I do!

GUSSIE

Well, try this on for size. Your little brains haven't gone soft with whiskey, but with bitterness and hate. And what's worst you envy, despise your own brother.

CHARLIE

No. . . .

GUSSIE

That's just for starters.

CHARLIE

That's a lie.

GUSSIE

More truth. And you won't be happy until he's laid out in the gutter with you.

CHARLIE

Shut you goddamn mouth.

GUSSIE

Did not want to hear that, did you?

CHARLIE

Shut your fuckin' mouth.

GUSSIE

Honesty! Humph, you can't even live with it for two seconds.
(Pause)

CHARLIE

No! Neeeeellllll, no. Sam is a prince . . . my God. . . . I never wanted to hurt him.

GUSSIE

That you will have to take up with your conscience.

CHARLIE

But . . . why, when I love him so much? He's my brother.[5]

Ella, Charlie's wife, whom Evan Walker described as the "only one who's clean in this,"[6] offers a contrast to Gussie through her warm, sincere, and down-to-earth manner. Ella understands her man and tries to ease his painful existence, although she succeeds mostly in holding his head. Charlie no longer seems to see or hear his wife, and it takes Gussie to bring him to this realization.

Throughout East of Jordan Ella uses her basic 'motherwit' to bring sense to a rapidly eroding situation. Ella recognizes who and what Gussie is, and tries to help her to see and respect Sam for what he is. It is Ella who tries to bring Sam back to reality, after Charlie has shattered Gussie's image. In a very moving scene in the backroom of the Lucky Dollar Bar and Grill, Ella attempts to steady Sam and nudge him back on his course with her kindness and good sense.

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[5]Ibid.

[6]Walker, interview.

ELLA

. . . . You ain't the only one who got pride. You think she want to say she got a son and ain't married? You think it's easy livin' a lie so long it becomes the truth? Oh, Sam, there are some things we got to walk with. Like me. There are things I'd never tell Charlie about himself, some things I got to keep in my secret heart.[7]

Ella is determined to make Sam realize what he is doing. When understanding and reason don't work, she tries another approach:

ELLA

. . . . Love is the strongest weed in the garden--if it's real love. You got to see her now and love her now, when ain't no sun shinin' through no pines.

SAM

No! Hell, no.
(He moves upstage to leave)

ELLA

You ain't man enough to love a whore?
(Sam turns on Her. The word has stung him to the quick)
That's what you called her, a whore. Hell, nigger, go on and be like all the rest. Go on and call her a whore to her face. On on, pull her down when she needs you to build her up.
(He moves toward the door)
I used to think you were made of better stuff.
(Sam stops, faces her)
But I see you ain't no different. Bitterness come drippin' off you like stale sweat.

SAM

It ain't just like that Ella. The job, debts, everything comin' at me at once.

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[7]Walker, East of Jordan.

ELLA

> Ain't none of that no cause for your sweetness and love and kindness to go on a permanent vacation. Now if you lost all that, you just go on up there and tell her to her face.[8]

As one critic said, "East of Jordan, if it is understood, tells us very plainly that TRUTH is in the understanding which we find in relating to one another."[9] Ella is the character who represents and understands this most clearly.

Gussie Slater, Sam's wife, is an attractive woman in her late thirties, who has never matured. Through her lies, selfishness and egotism, she destroys her family and is the indirect cause of her husband's death.

Gussie has been victimized by the society. The brutalizing experience she encountered in her youth has left an indelible stamp on her personality. But, she consciously and willfully perpetrates deceit as a way of life for herself and extends it to include her son and her husband.

Gussie was a preacher's daughter in a rural Georgia town, and grew up in what is suggested as the hypocritical, superficial and self-righteous atmosphere of the Black middle-class, or 'houseniggers' as they are called in the play. In her pursuit of the false values stressed by her father, she went away to college and encountered a number of harsh realities. Returning to her hometown with a child

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Vernelle Scott, "East of Jordan, a review," Gumbo (fall, 1969), p. 27.

born out of wedlock, she manufactured a childish and romantic explanation which she maintained for eighteen years.

Not strong enough to live or think for herself, Gussie chooses illusion as a philosophy. She conducts her life according to Emily Post--Better Homes and Gardens and Ladies Home Journal; and the rigid precepts that were instilled in her youth. She has also raised her son, Johnny Slater, according to her delusions.

Knowing that Sam Knight adored her, she finally consented to marry him, but kept him waiting until after the death of her father, who thought Sam was not good enough for his daughter. Gussie enjoys the pedestal Sam has placed her on and accepts every indulgence, as her due. She recites her romantic fantasies of her first 'husband' like a whip, whenever she wants something, whether it is to keep her son from joining the Navy, or to acquire a home in Yonkers.

It is not likely that Sam could ever satisfy Gussie. The direct cause of his paralyzing situation is that Gussie can not stand her neighbors, their Harlem neighborhood, nor living with Charlie and Ella, who knew her 'truth.'

Because Gussie is immersed in the values of this society, she, too, helps to drive Sam to his death. It is questionable that she cares for him in any sense other than his providing for her basic needs. She deliberately refuses to prepare the kind of food Sam likes to eat, because she considers it 'low-brow,' and insists on preparing expensive meals when he has asked her to economize. When Sam was refused money at the loan company, he was ashamed to tell Gussie, and so he lied to her and made the contract with the hustler, Candy

Stick Kid.

Gussie's final condemnation of herself occurs midway through the second act, and nothing will serve to rectify it later.

SAM

Goddamn friggin' Brussels sprouts!

GUSSIE

Rave field hand! Rave! I curse the day I ever laid eyes on you. Animal!

SAM

Animal. You liked this animal. There was a time you couldn't get enough of this animal. Hadn't had none since your husband died. Crap!
(Gussie crosses to the bedroom door)
That's all you married me for.

GUSSIE

What other reason could I have possibly had? A field hand has got to be good for something.
(Sam slaps her across the mouth. Without blinking an eye, Gussie enters the bedroom and locks the door.)[10]

Neither this scene nor the confrontation with Charlie significantly change Gussie's perspective. It is not until the last minutes of the play that she begins to realize what she has done. In the last scenes of East of Jordan, Gussie is also confronted by her son, Johnny, who asks the truth about his birth; she still tries desperately to deceive him. This confrontation between mother and son illustrates what a pathetic figure Gussie is. When she receives considerable verbal abuse from her son, it does not penetrate. She prefers to blame Sam for revealing information to her son, rather than accept the

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[10]Walker, East of Jordan.

responsibility for the consequences of her deceit. Gussie's realization comes only in the final moments of Sam's life.

Evan Walker commented on Gussie's impenetrability: "I didn't want Sam to live, because I thought that he must be the ultimate penalty for her. I wanted Gussie to go on--and I didn't want him in the action. The reconciliation, that time, did not work; the only thing that could bring her out of her selfishness and egotism was to see a good man die in the gutter, and that was her man."[11]

Gussie's son, Johnny Slater, also contributed to Sam's demise. Johnny is eighteen years old, was raised in the South and has been in Harlem for about a year; he is contrasted with other boys of the street who are more worldly and 'hip.' Johnny's character is drawn with a considerable amount of romanticism; he is frequently described as "having the gypsy in his soul." Johnny is approaching manhood and has just fallen in love with a girl named Salena; he dreams of going into the Navy and seeing far-off places. Johnny wants to be a writer.

It is his poetry-writing on his dream-killing and dreary job in the garment district that causes his conflict with Sam. While daydreaming he sent a costly shipment of dresses to the wrong store. In the midst of this commotion at Silver fashions Sam confronts his boss, Abe Martin, to demand a long overdue promotion and raise, in a desperate attempt to keep his house from the loan shark. Because of the trouble caused by Johnny, Abe ignores Sam. The scene in which Sam reproaches Johnny and blames him for costing him 'his shot' is one

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[11]Walker, personal interview.

of the most effective in East of Jordan. Sam and Johnny trade verbal punches with each other reaching deeper and deeper, laying bare each other's innards:

SAM

Boy you cost me my dream.

JOHNNY

(quietly)
Abe was never going to make you a cutter.

SAM

What you say?

JOHNNY

I said Abe had no intention of giving you the cutter's job.

SAM

That's a bare-faced lie.

JOHNNY

They laugh at you. Abe was using you.

SAM

Who laughs at me!

JOHNNY

All the guys on the job.
(viciously)
They were all wondering when you'd get the score.

SAM

You lie, you bastard.

JOHNNY

They laugh at you, old man!

SAM

You lyin' bastard!

JOHNNY

Don't call me that. Don't call me that because I tell you the truth.

SAM

Truth. You want to hear some truth? Your daddy. . . .[12]

Sam is outraged and tells the story of Johnny's birth. Johnny is forced to change abruptly from boy to man. Shortly after, Johnny has another vicious session with his mother, in which he repays Gussie for the spiritual abuse she has heaped on him for eighteen years.

The minor Characters in East of Jordan with the exception of Abe Martin and Mr. Jones, are representatives of the 'streets.' These whores, pimps, hustlers, number runners and spiritualists are the people Gussie wants to escape in Yonkers. These characters supply East of Jordan with some lively and vital moments, and through them Walker employs many visual elements of the Black life-style and suggests many cultural references. They are skillfully drawn and challenge the actor's creativity to find the exact stride, rhythm, gesture and style to project their images. These characters give the play considerable richness of flavor.

The Candy Stick Kid, for example, projects an immediate visual image with his overly expensive clothes, diamond rings, bankroll and Stacy Adams shoes. Except for the clothes, Candy's style ("superfly") is essentially the same today, as it was twenty years ago. While

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[12]Walker, East of Jordan.

Candy and Slick are technically antagonists in the play, they are distinct from Abe Martin in that they represent forces operating outside the mainstream of the American Society, like the Cosa Nostra. They know the 'score' and operate accordingly. Sam has always rejected them and their means of survival, but when he, too, realizes that legitimate access to the economic system is denied him, he is forced to return home to the very forces he has rejected and they destroy him.

Evan Walker utilizes two white characters in East of Jordan who represent the white liberal buffer between Blacks and the reality of racism. Walker describes Mr. Jones of the Loan Company as, "that kind of cat, like Norman Mailer, who says, I'll help you . . . the old liberal Norman Mailer. . . . But he says and does all the wrong things in his eagerness to help."[13] Abe Martin, Sam's employer has used a patronizing and friendly manner toward Sam all the years he has been misusing and exploiting him. The scenes between Sam and Abe Martin are skillfully drawn and accurate.

While the language in East of Jordan is theatrical, it is reminiscent of the real idiom. Mr. Walker has indicated intonations and dropped word endings to indicate the soft flowing speech and Southern background of the characters. As critic Clayton Riley says, "One of the events that strikes me is the scene between Sam and Abe Martin, when Sam wants to be a Cutter and Abe won't give him the job. It is very economically written, very spare in the use of the language,

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[13]Walker, personal interview.

but a tremendously accurate recreation of the sound of the human voice. People talk about an ear for dialogue, but it's much more rare than people think. Evan Walker seems to have that gift."[14]

Throughout the play the language sets the tone of the events. The ironic qualities and double meanings in the speeches of the root-worker and oracle, Shango, are particularly interesting. Shango accepts the responsibility for moving the events that take place between July and September, 1949 and sets the atmosphere in which the play unfolds. It is through him that we learn of the past, present and future. As a medium and narrator Shango establishes the point of view from which to understand the events, and he effectively describes the nature of American society and the predicament of Blacks in a 'land without seasons':

SHANGO

. . . . This is a land without seasons. And they are trapped here in the purgatory of all their days.
(Steps forward)
Because nothing changes in a land without seasons. Sounds, smells. Illusions. Nothing. Not even the silence when they cease to dream--and that is a religion up here, dreaming, but secretly money is God. And I, Shango have looked deeply into the jungle of their souls
(Points his swish stick at the sky and suddenly it is night and the North star shines brightly)
The North Star
(of the stick)
And it makes me privy to their desires, hopes, hates and loves . . . which is a most surprising emotion to find in such wonderous desolation.
(of the frozen People)
They fled, escaped, followed the North Star. And each

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[14]Clayton Riley, personal interview.

> in his own way wanted in on the biggest hustle of all. They blindly followed the lady up there. That blinking lady who winked false promises of hope, happiness and Yankee gold. However, most soon realized their singular fate; the lady is a slut and not to be trusted. But there is always one man who is blinded by her seductive and fancy ways.[15]

The economic theme, stressed by Shango is carried throughout the play, not only in the action, but in the images of the hustlers, number runners, as well. It is also present in the imagery of Silver Fashions, Golden Loan Company, Lucky Dollar Bar and Grill, etc.

Shango continues to describe how the stifling economic and social environment affects the lives of Blacks, and asks the viewer to follow him back in time to see the situation of one man, Sam Knight. In a pointed description he gives us the key to the character of Sam Knight and the basic theme of East of Jordan:

> . . . . But this one man in particular, I remember. Yes, it was shortly after the last war--the last good war, the one that ended with a bang and made him and reason obsolete. This man, Sam Knight was his name, did not hear the news. He still clung precariously to such passwords into oblivion as faith, love, loyalty, ambition and power of positive work, not knowing these absurd notions were away for the duration. Sam Knight was an anachronism, a man who loved baseball but never wanted to know the score. A man out of joint with the times that never were, holding on to diseased transplanted roots.[16]

Roots in East of Jordan have a double meaning. Not only do they refer to the past and Southern background of Blacks, but also to the various plant roots and magical hoodoo potions dispensed by Shango.

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[15]Walker, East of Jordan.

[16]Ibid.

And they tie in with the alternatives Walker allowed Sam Knight, but he refused. As Evan Walker said:

> Roots have a special significance for Sam; they offer him the way out. One operative line is, 'don't forget your roots, brother.' Roots are to do what's natural to survive, and Sam does unnatural things so he doesn't survive. The cat (Shango) was going to give him the number, but he was a fool and wouldn't do it. Everybody plays the number, but he said no, he didn't believe in numbers. That's his alternative right? He's got two or maybe more. The alternative comes when Charlie says I got the number right here. I got the number right here, and the number came out. He would have been home free and never had to go to the Candy Stick kid, had he followed his roots. Now we know we got to hustle, and do everything we can to make it. But no, he didn't do it and that's his coming off as a hard-working stud. That's his reality.[17]

The character, Shango played an important role in the structural development of East of Jordan. Mr. Walker says, "I tried first to make it a one room play--one set, then I realized it wouldn't work because too much action would have to be told and I didn't feel like telling it. . . . I decided to open it up . . . then all the characters became very clear to me. And all of a sudden Shango came to me . . . the form came from the material.[18]

The structure of East of Jordan is both fixed and fluid, and thus, suited to dealing with many facets of the Black life-style. While the play is realistic in style, the format and the character of Shango do not conflict, rather they add theatricality and expand its conscious intent. The street scenes add cultural reference to the play and coordinate well with the music of the guitar and the saxophone.

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[17]Evan Walker, personal interview.

[18]Ibid.

They add to the internal rhythm and have the same contrasting effect as the use of the music.

Mr. Walker's use of musical themes adds to the texture. He has used both the Blues and BeBop. Walker calls for the use of the twelve string guitar, because the country people of the South used that instrument for their Blues, but when they moved North to the urban environment "it was the music of jazz and BeBop--Be . . . bop. At that time most Black people had to make a transition in their music as well as their lives. In music it was the whole jazz thing, but in the South it was the guitar and Blues. When the two blend in the end, the transition is made musically, and that's it. The play is over (literally) and figuratively with the characters in the play."[19]

Aside from the social and political considerations, East of Jordan is full of cultural references that add to its credibility and enrich its value as a theatrical experience for a Black audience. Black viewers know the spirituals that influence its title and understand the musical reference points and its street scenes. They know that Gussie's refusal to fix Sam the food he wants and needs is a serious matter, and how foolish Sam is not to play the number. Many would recognize Capstone as Howard University.

Black audiences can appreciate the role of Shango as a medium-rootworker in both their Southern and Northern experience. They know the legends that go along with his offerings of High John the Conquerer roots and Black snakeskins. While these myths vary somewhat

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[19]Ibid.

according th locale, the following story illustrates one of the folk references East of Jordan utilizes:

> Black snakes are often called coach whips and they mostly frequent the South. It is said they will gang up on you and chase people. If you run through the tall grass, and they can't see you, they will stand up on their tails, and whistle. Then they tie you to a tree and beat you til you're dead with their tails, which are plaited like whips, and if you pretend you're dead, they will stick their tails up your nose, so you can't breathe. It is said they will bring you good luck and love, or conversely will put spells on someone who is feeling with your love.[20]

Shango, himself, is recognizable on several levels. Most commonly, of course as the rootworker. But the African reference of his name and character is not lost to Black Americans, since the transplanted Shango faith is practiced in the Caribbean, South America, in the South and even New York City. In the African past, Shango is represented by lightning and is a major figure in West African traditional religion. For example, among the Yorubas, "Shango is the personification of the tragic hero who brings calamity on himself which is terrible and out of proportion to the fault. . . . And it is the intensity of life that attracts men to Shango. When they pray to him they share in his life force, and it helps them to achieve a higher life."[21]

The presentation of East of Jordan is meant to be a dialogue about Blacks and between Blacks. Walker's play was criticized for

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[20]Nick LaTour, personal interview, August 5, 1969. This tale is from the region near Montgomery, Alabama.

[21]Jahnheinz Jahn, Muntu (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 44.

dealing with "age old problems of Negro life,"[22] implying that the play and the content are dated. The time of the play is 1949-1950, which was a period when many Black soldiers, returned from the Armed Services with high hopes for a different life in America, only to find things unchanged. Yet numerous Blacks like Sam Knight felt and still feel that hard work will achieve success and a better life within the present system. This philosophy, which was also promulgated by Booker T. Washington, can be seen in 1972 in the number of Blacks in leadership roles who support the philosophy of Black Capitalism or Nixonian policies of national government.

Walker's play is relevant in the sense that he criticizes the system, and also questions certain popular Black responses to it. Walker raises questions; he does not provide easy answers, as indeed there are no easy answers to the predicament of Blacks. He suggests that in order to survive Blacks must be flexible, which Knight was not. Yet, it is not sufficient to hope that hitting the number will solve anything. As the number racket provides significant income for organized crime to invest in extensive heroin traffic, prostitution, bars, and the control of Black Music, playing the numbers as a vehicle for Black liberation is regressive at best. Perhaps if Walker had further developed the concept of returning to the roots, other viable alternatives would be suggested.

Walker was also criticized because the conflict between and among Blacks in the play was stronger than the conflict with whites,

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[22]Jan Horne, "Review: East of Jordan" in Black Theatre (No. 4, April, 1970), p. 37.

where the actual cause was.[23] However, Walker seems to be illustrating very real aspects of the "master-slave psychosis and self-hatred."[24] One critic said, "Pimps don't have to be negative,"[25] yet most of them are, and Black predators in the Black community need to be controlled and eliminated as well as the while, for there is little real difference.

In terms of self-knowledge, Walker deals with a very real and prevalent problem through the character of Gussie. Since slavery many Blacks have allowed their psyches to be manipulated by foolish class definitions, such as "house nigger," and "field nigger." In East of Jordan, the terrible despair, and ugly results of lack or loss of identity are illustrated. The most positive collective images are represented in the characters of Charlie and Ella Knight. Although Charlie is still victimized by self-limitations, Ella Knight is a positive portrayal of a strong and graceful Black woman.

Mr. Walker is a very skilled and perceptive playwright. He is quietly producing a substantial body of work, defining aspects of the Black experience. He has had difficulty getting his work produced, and is not in vogue as a Black playwright at the present time. But that does not detract from the fact that Evan Walker is one of the very skilled Black playwrights working today.

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Supra, p. 41.

[25] Horne, "Review: East of Jordan," p. 37.

CHAPTER III

WHO'S GOT HIS OWN BY RONALD MILNER

Who's Got His Own was initially presented as a rehearsal reading on October 17, 1965 at the American Place Theater in New York, directed by Woodie King, Jr. The following season in the fall of 1966, it premiered at the American Place Theater under the direction of Lloyd Richards. During 1967 Who's Got His Own was produced twice: as a touring show for the New York State Council on the Arts, and its Harlem debut at the New Lafayette theater, under the direction of Robert Macbeth.

Since 1967, Who's Got His Own has been produced in many of the young Black theaters in America, in the community and on college campuses. In 1972 it was published in an anthology, edited by Woodie King and Ron Milner.

The title Who's Got His Own was taken from a tune that Billie Holliday wrote and sang in the fifties. This song has a deep personal meaning for Ron Milner, as it does for many Blacks, and while it does not derive from the play internally in the usual sense, it's mood and theme are directly applicable.

The following words are those set to the tune of "God Bless the Child" as written and sung by 'Lady Day,' one of the greatest Blues and Jazz interpreters:

GOD BLESS THE CHILD

Them that's got shall get
Them that's not shall lose
So the Bible says
And it still is news

Mama may have
Papa may have
But God bless the child
That's got his own
That's got his own.

Yes the strong gets more
While the weak ones fade
Empty pockets don't
Ever make the grade.

Mama may have
Papa may have
But God bless the child
That's got his own
That's got his own.

Money, you got lots of friends
Crowding round the door
When you're gone
And spending ends
They don't come no more.

Rich relations give
Crusts of bread and such
You can help yourself
But don't take too much.

Mama may have
Papa may have
But God bless the child
That's got his own
That's got his own.

Mama may have
Papa may have
But God bless the child
That's got his own
That's got his own.

He just don't worry
bout nothin'

Cause he's got his own.[1]

Who's Got His Own received its premiere production at an Off-Broadway theater in an integrationist setting. The major New York Drama Critics disliked this play so intensely in their reviews that it brought many Black artists and writers to Milner's defense. These artists publicly stated their feeling that white critics are unable to understand Black plays or that they enjoy as writer Clifford Mason phrased it, "the killing of Negro plays."[2] "The white theater

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[1]Billie Holiday Story (Decca DXB 161).

[2]Clifford Mason, "The Killing of Negro Plays," Weekly Voice October 27, 1966, p. 2.

establishment roasted Who's Got His Own and did succeed in preventing a move to a permanent house (the usual procedure for the American Place Theater)."[3] It is the contention of Black critics that the play "does attend skillfully the sociological causes of conflict within the [Black] family."[4]

Mr. Milner began his writing career as a novelist, but developed an interest in theater through the encouragement of Woodie King, Jr., with whom he founded the Concept-East Theater in Detroit, Michigan, one of the earliest of the new Black theaters. Who's Got His Own is Ron Milner's first full-length play. It was carefully constructed over a period of two years from an earlier one act play, entitled Life Agony, written in 1963.

The direction of Milner's work has made him a major voice in the forum devoted to developing concepts of what Black theater is and will become. In 1968 Milner expressed his perspectives as follows:

> By a new Black theater I myself mean the ritualized reflection and projection of a unique and particular conditioning of Black people, leasing time on this planet controlled by white men; and having something to do with breaking the 'leasing syndrome.' A theater emerging from artists who realize that, for Black people of this world, and specifically this country, every quote 'universal' malady, dilemma, desire, wonder, is, by the heat of the pressure of white racism, compounded and enlarged, agitated and aggravated, accented and distilled to make the omni-suffusing, grinding sense of being we once called the blues, but now we just term Blackness. From this peculiar and particular extra-dimension of being of experiences, of conditioning will come the kind of theater I'm looking for.[5]

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[3]Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 224.

[4]Harrison, Paul Carter, the Drama of Nommo (New York: Grove Press, 1972), p. 26.

[5]Ronald Milner, "Black Theater-Go Home" in Negro Digest, XVII, No. 6 (April, 1968), 5.

In July of 1969 Mr. Milner enlarged and expanded his definition of Black theater:

> Theater is like an essay or a poem that is personified. It moves, it dances, it talks. You can see the message and become personally identified with a thought that walks, that drinks water, that sits down. You immediately become involved in a way that you can't with cold paper. Especially people that don't have a strong literary tradition. Ours is an oral tradition. When we came here, we were miseducated, purposefully miseducated, and don't read as a group. Theater talks in a way that nothing else does, or even better than electronic things, than film or recordings. Because we see and immediately identify with that person that moves, even if the words should go beyond your head. . . . Theater gives you that whole human personalness that no other art form gives. That makes it something that nothing else can be for Black people.[6]

Expressing his goals for the Black Theater, Milner said:

> I want to involve the community. I think the first theater was in the dancing that came around the campfire. It was in the center of the village. It was the first school, the first religious and political training. All the myths were handed down from that theater, and it was total theater. What Brecht talks about, we started with: Total Theater. You sing it, dance it, talk it and costume it; do it all in one bag. . . . Spiritually too, and it's all one type of entity. Now the West started splitting things down into categories. They made the religious thing a bag for once a week, and they put your mental thing on a shelf called intelligentsia and only special people could get it, and it would come down through television, and all you had to deal with was the physical thing. Actually the mental, physical and spiritual that's the Trinity, but they split that . . . and tell you what you should think. As for spirituality, they don't really try to live by it, that's for once a week, and it has nothing to do with their real life. As an artist you're not supposed to have anything to do with believing in God. Then when you split a man from himself, you can easily split him from his brother. And this is what the Black theater is, I'm thinking of: It can unify, to bring back a sense of wholeness to a people, a person, a community--spiritual, mental, physical, political and educational and entertainment. All these would be brought back together. It would come back to the whole idea, with the part as a function. The theater would also be a school. . . . The Black theater must become a functional part of the community.[7]

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[6]Milner, personal interview.

[7]Ibid.

Who's Got His Own was written four years before the ideology expressed in these writings and interviews; nevertheless, it still reflects his concern for these ideas.

Because it has only three characters, Who's Got His Own appears deceptively simple. Actually it is a very complex play dealing with the problems of self-hate and alienation in a Black family. Perhaps this surface simplicity is what cause Lofton Mitchell to say, "Without impugning Mr. Milner's intelligence, it takes no genius to see that he was saying nothing has changed in terms of the Black experience."[8] However, Mr. Mitchell's statement barely skims the surface of Milner's intricate and hard-driving play that is aimed right at the heart of Blackness.

Who's Got His Own is set in Detroit, Michigan, although it could be any other urban environment. The time of the play is described as the continuing past, during the fifties and sixties. The language of the play would seem to indicate that it is set slightly later in time than either East of Jordan or In the Wine Time.

The action of the play takes place in the Bronson home after the funeral of Tim Bronson Sr. Mrs. Bronson and her daughter, Clara, accompanied by her Baptist Preacher and two Deacons, return home from the funeral and the burial to find that Tim Bronson Jr. has sent all the grieving friends home, and is restlessly waiting for his mother and sister to arrive in order to begin his own services for his dead father.

Time Jr. has spent most of his life hating his father and so he refuses to glorify or respect him in death. He believes that his

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[8]Mitchell, Black Drama, p. 224.

father's brutality destroyed their family. And Tim Jr. is disgusted with the hypocrisy of those people that knew Tim Sr. and now gloss over his faults. So he embarrasses the Deacons into leaving by initiating a family confrontation that he hopes will bury his father finally, with truth, rather than prayers, and that will reclaim his living mother and sister.

After accusing his mother of not knowing or understanding either of her children, Time forces his sister Clara to shed her pretenses. Tim knows that Clara has imprisoned herself at home for two years since her involvement with a white boy that ended with a near-fatal abortion. In a very emotional scene he forces Clara to tell her mother about her affair that ended abruptly in ugliness. Tim follows by describing the essence of his hatred for his father, based on his discovery that while his father was a tyrant at home, he was meek and subservient in the white world.

Mrs. Bronson tells her son that he is not a man yet or he would not try to destroy her and his sister. Tim leaves the house and goes to find his own white friend, Al de Leo, to tell him about his problems. When Al de Leo responds without concern, Tim Jr. attacks him and beats him until he is unconscious.

Believing he has killed de Leo, Tim returns home to straighten out the upheaval he created, before making plans to escape. By the time he arrives home, his mother and sister have accepted some of the truth in what Tim said earlier and they force him to admit his own brutal assault on de Leo. Tim Jr. describes the emotions that drove him near the point of murder; and his mother reveals that Tim Sr. was not a 'Tom'

but was very much like his son. Mrs. Bronson tries to explain the mechanism that turned Tim Sr.'s violence inward toward himself and his family as a result of witnessing the violent murder of his own father by whites, when he was a child in the South.

Finally Clara discovers that Al de Leo is not dead, and Mrs. Bronson plans to visit him to ask him not to press charges against her son. As the play ends Tim Jr. has not resolved his attack on Al and seems to wish he had been successful in order to break the cycle.

Ron Milner portrays a Black family that has been destroyed by racism, regardless of the various types of human reactions they exhibit. Although the father is dead and now a part of the past, his spirit entirely pervades the atmosphere of the play. In fact, "Rarely has a dead man spoken so eloquently of his life, or had its intricate design articulated for him within the context of a play."[9]

The struggle to survive and the skills Black people need to live are primary concerns of Who's Got His Own. Milner masterfully captures the essence of Black survival, particularly on the psychic level. Instinctively and violently Tim Jr. tries to wrestle back control of his own life and that of his mother and sister who are now in a state of limbo.

In Who's Got His Own the dramatist does not enact the events that have shaped the Bronson family, instead the characters tell their stories. As Clayton Riley said, "Ron's plays are always filled with exposition. He gives large patches of dialogue to characters that tell

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[9]Clayton Riley, "On Black Theater," in the Black Aesthetic, p. 306.

about something that happened somewhere else, which is a dangerous device to use. In any visual medium such as theater things should be represented rather than told. Most of Who's Got His Own is composed of an explanation or a clarification of events that have taken place prior to the play or somewhere else. Because Ron writes so well he can get away with it, while a lot of playwrights can't."[10]

Milner is very deliberate in selecting this approach to his material and as Clayton Riley suggests, because of his skill with language and structure, he is successful in using it to achieve his ends. Of this style, Milner said, "I still want to do Who's Got His Own without acting things out. Because one of the ideas is that the people are in limbo. They cannot have a present because they don't understand the past and cannot move into the future. They can't do anything but figure out where they are."[11]

Thematic concerns are much more significant in Milner's play than any other aspect; for example, spectacle is not an important consideration at all. Character delineation is vital to the dramatic material presented, but because of the psychological sociological nature of the play, while Milner's three protagonists are finely and carefully developed, they can easily be identified and abstracted.

The form and structure of Who's Got His Own receives added significance, because of the intensely high-pitched and compressed emotions unleashed in the play. These are contained in the rhythms and tempo which are inseparable from the content. On many levels the structure of

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[10]Clayton Riley, personal interview.

[11]Ron Milner, personal interview.

Who's Got His Own is comparable to the hard-driving jazz form, the urban Black music of John Coltrane or Sonny Rollins.

Mr. Milner's success in using the innovation of an internal and external music structure has considerable significance for the development of Black Theater. Poet-Critic Larry Neal says, "It is here that any discussion of the Black Esthetic must begin. Because Black music in all its forms, represents the highest artistic achievements of the race. It is the memory of Africa that we hear in the churning energy."[12] While several young Black poets have been very effective building their material from a musical basis (Yusef Rahman, Imamu Baraka, and the Original Last Poets have done exceptional work with this connection). Ron Milner has structured his entire play on that source. He thinks of himself as a musician, and is interested in creating the same immediate contact between actors and audiences that exists between Black musicians and audiences.

The jazz[13] musician's impact sweeps the audience in a compelling exchange. The more soulful or beautiful, funky or truthful his statement, the more his audience responds following his rhythms and changes by moving or shouting encouragement. Jazz is an attitude, it is feeling, and it is about truth and meaning. And the urban Black musicians rely to a great extent on the closeness of vocal reference that has always been characteristic of Black American music, as it is in traditional African music (the talking drums). "Players like Ornette Coleman, John

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[12]Neal, Larry, "Any Day Now: Black Art and Liberation," Ebony, August, 1969, p. 55.

[13]Many Black musicians object to the use of the label "jazz"--as a European label and a lever to separate the various kinds of Black music that actually come from the same source.

Coltrane, and Sonny Rollins literally scream and rant an imitation of the human voices, sounding many times like unfettered primitive shouters."[14]

The traditional African music form of the call and response which was used here in the work song later blended easily into Black instrumental music and now lends itself easily to Milner's writing style. Milner seems to have devised Who's Got His Own according to an ensemble pattern, using solos and riffs, or repeated phrases, as important techniques. Mr. Milner indicated that this form came from the material naturally, and in the following selections from the play this approach is very evident.

TIM

. . . I waited for something--anything--to come and fill this--this--dead empty shell, that used to be the hard knot of my hate for him. (solo break)

2ND DEACON

What're you saying boy! (riff)

1ST DEACON

Lord. Jesus forgive him.

MOTHER

(Moaning) Tim Jr. -- Tim Jr. --

TIM

(With an almost vindictive resolution to say it) I tried, Mama. I waited. I--but then I saw the truth! The truth, Mama. That for as long as I can remember, I'd felt only one thing when he was gone, he was outta' this house--a sense of relief, Mama! A sigh of re-- (solo break)

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[14]Le Roi Jones, Blues People (New York: William Morrow, 1963), p. 227.

CLARA

Who asked you how you feel!! -- (change)

1ST DEACON

Hush, boy! (riff)

REVEREND

Where's your respect, boy!

2ND DEACON

Respect the dead, boy!

MOTHER

(Eyes closed, rocking to and fro, shaking head plaintively.) Lord, touch his heart. Touch his heart.

TIM

Did you really expect me to feel different because he's gone for good now, Mama? Did you expect me to come back here after four years, screaming and crying for him. Did you, Mama? Well, I'm crying, Mama. Crying. Because I can't find any tears for a father I've cursed all my life! (solo break)

MOTHER

(Rocking, moaning) Put forgiveness in him, Lord! Put forgiveness in him! (riff)

CLARA

(Bitterly) Well why did you come to the funeral, then! Why are you here now! Just go on and leave us alone. Go back where you came from![15] (change) (solo break)

Jazz like most Black American music has always been a communal collective statement, but within this ensemble there is room for personal, individual expression. The following example from Act II illustrates the

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[15]Ronald Milner, Who's Got His Own in Black Drama Anthology, edited by Woodie King, Jr. and Ron Milner (New York: Signet, 1972), p. 96.

ensemble technique and also Milner's decision to integrate the church and secular forms. The use of the short repeated phrases is very effective.

MOTHER

(Standing. A pitying tone.) Clara, you sound like a common street hussy. Just a common hussy.

CLARA

Humph. No. No, Mama, I wasn't common at all. I felt special, unique, inimitable! Until--(Stares, smirks)--until that night I opened my eyes in the motel and saw his look--

TIM

(To Mother) Will you listen to her?! (Going a step or two toward Clara) Heifer! This is your mother sitting here! What the hell're you trying--! Whatta you think you're--?

CLARA

(Staring at him through his outburst, seeing her memory)-- And saw him looking at me--like--like I was something he coughed up and spit out. (Pauses)

MOTHER

(Taking an instinctive step toward her) What baby--?

CLARA

Disgusted! I saw disgust lying there with me on that-- that motel bed and I felt low down then, Mama. I felt common then. (Stops; stares)

TIM

(After a moment) Uh-huh. And I'll bet you just couldn't understand it at all, could you. Yeh-- (Turning away with an irritation that might be empathy.)

MOTHER

(Watching Clara carefully) Just be quiet, Tim Jr. Hush now.

CLARA

> Oh, I understood it immediately, and it's not what you--at least I didn't think it had anything to do with--with anything between us. But there it was looking at me: disgust, disgust and hate (Still incredulous, shocked) Yes, hate! Hate![16]

Ron Milner explained and clarified the form of Who's Got His Own shown in the preceding selections:

> I had a whole sense of style going where it was like a jazz piece. I started the ensemble, then I opened it up with a solo, then the ensemble again and back to a solo. In most of the third act that worked, but in the second act it became one long, long, long solo and I never really controlled it the way I wanted to. . . . You see each solo is a different instrument. Like the solo in the first act is basically Tim Jr. and people brushing in on him form the ensemble imposing upon him. In the second act, Clara gives her violins or whatever it is: the whole crappy, pop music she tries to reach; Mama's got this whole church, Baptist Spiritual sense. In the third act I have a solo, by the sax, Tim Jr. as soon as that clears then Mama comes in with the spiritual thing and there are two solos in the third act. That doesn't really happen at any other time.[17]

Mr. Milner's conception of each member of the Bronson family representing a kind of music, a type of Black experience, further delineates and enriches Who's Got His Own. As in Jazz these various streams of feeling combine together into Milner's whole statement. On one level this is indicated by the internal rhythms and cadences of their respective styles of speech. For example, Tim Jr.'s speech has a quality of 'hipness' that comes from his experiences outside of the family in the streets; and it is his usage that indicates that Who's Got His Own is set later in time than either East of Jordan or In the Wine Time, as expressions like 'heifer,' 'whitey,' 'groovy,' and 'hip' were

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[16]Milner, Who's Got His Own, pp. 119-120.

[17]Milner, personal interview.

popular in Black usage in the middle fifties. Mother Bronson's speech is very traditional and both her reference and her approach indicate her ties with her religion, or as Milner called it, "her Baptist Spiritual thing." Clara Bronson's language is the least rich and probably the least Black, and is consciously diluted to show her exposure to the white world. ("that pop thing Clara tries to reach.")

Milner's use of the language within this framework is very dynamic. There is distinct artistry in the driving usage of Blues-oriented rhythmic language to state complex thoughts in a simple and direct manner. His imagery is strong and vivid and poetic. Nor is Milner's language without ironic humor: "After all a feast celebrating the fact that you ain't the one dead, is cool, no matter what the address, Right?"[18] And frequently it reflects the homespun wisdom common in Black American speech habits: "Now you can't lay in ambush for yesterday; it ain't ever coming down this road again. It's gone its way and you have to go yours."[19]

The fluidity of Milner's language amplifies the characters and fully expresses the nuances of the situation, and Milner has brought a great depth of understanding to his characterizations. Mrs. Bronson, for example, is a matriarchal figure or what Milner would call a "female sustainer," and she is drawn with sensitivity. Milner goes beneath her calm, protective strength and pulls out the "terror that is beneath her anguish, and forces understanding of why she would accept the brutality of her husband, and what that recognition must have done to her at

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[18] Milner, Who's Got His Own, p. 132.

[19] Ibid., p. 144.

eighteen years of age: to be able to accept her role as the only means of saving Tim Sr."[20] Implicit in the character of Mother Bronson is the role the Black Baptist Church has played in the survival of Black people.

Clara Bronson is also drawn with compassion. Milner has achieved a brilliant analysis of a young woman struggling with a paralyzing self-hate, and a mammoth desire to escape everything Black. He describes her as having been sucked into the white world, leaving her family, her church, her 'roots.' While Milner describes these events, the characters and situations are very real and vividly traced, so that the narrative portions of the play do much to enhance the dramatic value.

Clara's relationship with the white youth, Wreyford Louis Tildon is, as Clayton Riley said, "handled very well, with no condemnation; and not from the playwright's point of view,"[21] but from his understanding of Black people. Milner further indicates his perception by suggesting that Clara was cared for by white lesbians after the failure of her affair. Clara's character is drawn in a distinct arc, while Milner portrays her progress further and further away from herself, and her heritage, he also allows Clara the position of achieving the most growth within the play.

The catalyst for the action of the play is Tim Jr. His hatred of his father has been consuming him actively and consciously; he was forced to confront it, while Clara attempted to escape, failed and returned to her mother's solace. Tim Jr. instinctively understands the

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[20]King, personal interview.

[21]Riley, personal interview.

state of limbo his family is in, and is determined to bring their situation from under its wraps at whatever price.

Tim Jr. exemplifies the Blackness of Who's Got His Own, "He is young but very old in insight and thought and way of tackling problems. His whole very early break with his family and staying somewhere else, and going to school. But yet looking back at his family, trying to be independent, but not being independent, knowing his white friend is not his friend, but wishing he was. He's a whole series of complexities. He knows his sister is not as true or holy as she appears, because no Black person who really deals with the system can be sheltered."[22]

As a result of Tim's confrontation, Clara is forced to examine herself, and Mrs. Bronson is made to see her family for the first time. Tim, himself, reacts impulsively, as when he assaults de Leo. This instinctive attack causes the mother to reveal important information she has withheld from her children, concerning their father's past. At this point Mrs. Bronson acknowledges the failure of her method of accommodation. She has preferred to pretend that their life situation was normal, because it was her means of protecting her sanity and her family. Her final recognition admits that this approach failed to bring her children up healthily (an approach common to the Black middle class). Mrs. Bronson's attitudes are not revealed until she is shocked by Clara's revelation.

Tim Jr. does not have the capacity for perspective on his own attitudes, because he does not have a frame of reference for his father's

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[22]King, personal interview.

behavior. He overlooks the fact that his father never left the family, which makes him assume larger proportions. "This man's humanity is continually explored as a way of saying to Blacks, if you have a father, grandfather, uncle, if he was anything like this, or if you thought ill of him for any reason, here is a possible explanation. And I think that takes Ron's work out of the realm of just being a play or even a sociological tract and into the area of being fantastically human and instructive."[23] When Tim Jr. finally unearths the information he desires, it causes him to conclude at the end of the play that nothing has changed in terms of the conditions Blacks are forced to endure.

It is interesting that both the father and mother thought they were preparing their children with sufficient skill to exist in an alien climate: the father by making them strong and the mother by feigning ignorance. Neither method worked . . . the children must find out for themselves and forge their own tools:

> Mama may have
> Papa may have
> But God bless the child
> That's got his own
> That's got his own[24]

The major theme of Who's Got His Own is that one must understand and examine the past to move into the present and future, and this is also its message to Black people. But there are many levels on which the play can be understood and interpreted. As Mr. Milner suggested: "One of the levels of the play is that the father is the dead past and there are three reactions to it, one nationalistic, one escapist to the

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Supra., p. 70.

right, and the mother who accepts. It has been suggested to me that these are three psychic reactions to the Black thing."[25]

It is evident that Mr. Milner presented meaningful and relevant material for a serious self-analytical dialogue among Black people, treating in the process the problems of Black family life, relationships between Black men and women, and the problems of Black youth suffering identity crises, because they do not have the images they need to exist nor the information to gain perspective.

Finally, another interpretive layer is suggested by the following passage:

> One of the most profound reactions I've had to Who's Got His Own came from an African brother who told me I was dealing with some of the ancestor concepts of African religion--where the father returns in the son, mother in the daughter. One of the reasons why children get so much respect (in Africa) is that they say the grandfather has returned in the child . . . so you get your respect because the grandfather's spirit is alive. And Tim Jr. carrying the father's spirit and wanting to retaliate for what the whites did to his father and grandfather is a whole religious concept. He said I almost had it perfectly and I had never heard or read that. I had done it almost impulsively, trying to get the sense of--you will pay now for what you have done to my father, and what you are now doing to me.[26]

Milner examines very difficult problems that are common among Black people, and he does this in a manner that is incisive and innovative. Who's Got His Own is an important play, because of its in-depth exploration of the psychic results of racism. Milner has also opened stylistic directions for other Black artists to explore and he is a very sensitive writer at work expressing the Black experience in America.

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[25]Milner, personal interview.

[26]Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

IN THE WINE TIME BY ED BULLINS

In the Wine Time premiered at the New Lafayette Theater in Harlem on December 17, 1968. This production opened the second season and was the first play produced in a fully equipped and beautiful theater at 137th Street and Seventh Avenue.

In the Wine Time was published late in 1969 in an anthology entitled New Plays of the Black Theater, edited by Mr. Bullins.

Ed Bullins began his writing career as an essayist and novelist. This fact is a key to the shape of Bullins' work, because he seems to have maintained his novelist's point of view, which gives his work many narrative characteristics.

In the Wine Time is the first play of a cycle that Bullins is writing about Black life in America, "that starts in the mid-part of the twentieth century and goes forward in time and back in time. I plan to have twenty plays in the cycle. It will deal mostly with the latter half with some things about the earlier period."[1]

In this context Wine Time exists like the first chapter of a novel that continues in the second chapter, Goin' a Buffalo; third, In New England Winter; fourth, The Duplex; fifth, The Corner. In 1972

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[1]Ed Bullins, personal interview.

these first five have all been produced and in them Bullins is tracing a family unit, a group, a community through its transitions in time, and he has been very successful.

There are certain early keys to Mr. Bullins' philosophy which appeared in the West coast literary journal, Contact in 1963:

> Negroes have been burning for a new identity in letters for years; perhaps unknowingly this desired image is a more secular and universal identity. Negroes most of all, splinter in thinking of their national worth, role and identity, but only the activity of a passive minority are getting belated recognition by the mass media. . . . There can be no new forms of widely broadcast Negro ideas in America, until the Negro himself realizes that he must break out of the Blackest ghetto of all, the stereotyped 'Negro' mind. The Black writers must realize this above all else. With such fragmented and isolated areas in the whole of Negritude, it is unfortunate that the Black writer is not creatively weaving these shreds into a comprehensible cloak which can be worn or identified by all Black people, instead of addressing the empty statements of yesterday in loud and flashy outfits, manufactured in commercial, mass produced lots. And finally . . . the serious writer should first seek honesty with himself, concerning his work, he must honestly consider what he wishes to make of his writing--art or facile craftsmanship for money, recognition, glamour, or proselytizing for a cause.[2]

While these statements were written about ten years ago, when Bullins was admittedly an angry young writer, they indicate an important facet of his work. Bullins says he wishes to exalt the worth and value of Black people and their life style. He weaves shreds of memory and experience into a new entity. Mr. Bullins says he meant Wine Time to be a spiritual experience. Since the ensemble of artists at the New Lafayette have a unity, a collective spirit of their own,

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[2]Ed Bullins, "The Polished Protest: Aesthetics and the Black American Writer," in Contact Magazine, IV, No. 1 (July, 1963), 67.

this sense of community in the company effectively coincides with the impulse of Ed Bullins' work.

In the Wine Time captures some of the essence of community life in a Black urban ghetto, specifically South Philadelphia, in the early fifties. It begins with an interesting and well-written prose prologue that establishes the mood and circumstances of the play. It projects an incident in the growth of a young boy, Ray, into manhood and suggests that what is about to unfold is another sequence in an unending series of 'wine times.' The prologue has a very slow drifting bittersweet quality that explores Ray's feelings and establishes him as the central character.

It is difficult to discuss Wine Time in terms of plot. Mr. Bullins has said, "I am not a plot person. I don't care about plot. If I can, I like to reveal things through character, but I don't think about it. I just write and it flows and I accept that."[3] This statement provides insight into Mr. Bullins' approach to his work, but the key to his construction was suggested by Woodie King Jr. "Ed's got that descriptive thing of time and place. Like situation, Ed told me once, moves through time and place, and you follow your thread, and you've got to have theater. You can't miss. . . ."[4]

The situation in Wine Time takes place on a sultry evening in late August in a small street in South Philadelphia. Cliff Dawson, his wife Lou and her nephew Ray, who lives with them, are sitting on

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[3]Bullins, personal interview.

[4]King, personal interview.

the stoop trying to escape the heat and drinking wine. Ray's girl friend, Bunny Gillette goes up on the "Avenue" and meets another fellow. Time passes and Ray continues drinking. Bunny returns and tells Ray that she is no longer his girl, but Red's. Ray hits Bunny; Red attacks Ray and pulls a knife on him. In the ensuing struggle Red is killed by Ray, but Cliff Dawson steps in and takes the blame in order to protect Ray and insure his future.

Thus, the situation when stripped of its layers appears very simple. "If you've got two people who dislike each other, just moving through time and place something is bound to happen. Like Red and Ray, something had to happen because the girl was too strong a force in Ray's life. It was impossible for him to have not let anything happen."[5]

On top of this skeletal framework, Bullins has sketched in the environment. The play takes place around 1950 and the tone and style are reminiscent of that period when Rhythm and Blues were very popular. Bullins has focused on a small community of the era, and has constructed characters and a situation that are recognizable.

Bullins defines his major characters carefully and he has the gift of selecting what seem to be insignificant details of the Black life-style and making them meaningful. As Bullins said of his own work, "I am more of a 'shower.' And I don't know if you can sum up everything that is shown by something that is said."[6] Therefore,

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Bullins, personal interview.

much of the reality of In the Wine Time must take place in the soul of the audience.

Bullins is especially concerned with the relationship between Cliff and Lou Dawson and Ray. Ray, of course, is not the Dawson's child but the son of Lou's dead sister. This is not an uncommon occurrence among Black families where circumstances often prevent consistent family life and children are sent to live with relatives. Superficially, Ray may seem to be an outsider in this relationship, but Lou and Cliff try to treat Ray like a son, and they do love him, although they argue over him and with him. In a sense Lou and Cliff battle for control over Ray, each trying to be the stronger influence.

Bullins' writing frequently deals with families, as the basis of society. As he expressed it, "the cycle deals with a number of families that are interrelated. It's the fabric of that society and how the people disperse and how they mingle. Through tracing the members of a family, I knew I could encompass a lot of territory."[7]

The community In the Wine Time has a great importance in establishing the mood, mores and atmosphere. Bullins suggests some of the different forces and strata operating in the neighborhood. And he has done this mostly through character.

The dialogue between Cliff and Lou reveals that they have not lived on Derby Street as long as some of their other neighbors. And that their presence is not appreciated by Miss Minnie Garrison, who lives next door [the community busybody]. Miss Minnie is always

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[7]Ibid.

meddling and seldom seen. She is represented as a cross voice who slams doors and bangs windows in an effort to keep order. While Minnie is a stock type, the character is handled dramatically and is entertaining. "What Ed knows very well--a stock character, if she's talking, does not have to be seen, so you can put her behind a screen door or upstairs. Instinctively, Ed knows theater."[8] Miss Minnie sanctimoniously looks down on the Dawsons as low life and represents the internal class conflict in the Black community.

On the other side of the Dawsons live the Krumps, a poor white family. In the New Lafayette production they were off-stage voices. They are loud and Mr. Krump comes home drunk every night, with Ray's help. The Krumps are generally accepted and ignored, and always addressed as Mr. and Mrs.

The Black residents of the Derby Street area are a closely knit group. Everyone knows everyone else's business and all move freely around one another's homes. A favorite pastime among the residents, along with drinking wine, is "signifying," (also called 'sounding' or 'jugging') which is the "African inherited gift of being able to get into the nature of human nature," (verbal 'one-upsmanship').[9]

Although the play is about Ray, most of the emphasis is placed on Cliff Dawson. While Cliff does not work, he attends school on the G.I. Bill and is not satisfied with his present life style. He spent

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[8]King, personal interview.

[9]N. Owano, "What was your slave name?" in Village Voice, August 17, 1972, p. 24.

many years in the Navy leading what he recalls as an exciting, romantic and dangerous life. Thus, settling into the Derby Street routine, where nothing seems to change, is very stifling for him. He and Lou are about to have their first child and he is pleased, although he wonders how he is going to support another life.

Cliff is a strong man. He is very 'worldly' and also has plenty of 'motherwit.' He is fond of Ray and likes to practice his father-role by instructing Ray. He doesn't like Lou and Miss Minnie to tell Ray what to do. Cliff seems to treat Lou roughly, but at the same time he is gentle and loving. The more Cliff drinks, the more he swears and the more sarcastic he becomes, which is a source of irritation to Lou.

But Cliff has an initial awareness of the context of life on Derby Street that the others do not have. He has a monologue in which he scorns these Blacks who believe in a white God. It is a very cutting speech that criticizes Lou's beliefs:

> Nice night we havin' out here on our well-scrubbed steps . . . with all God's white stars shinin' above your Black heads. Ain't that right, Lord? You old shyster. You pour white heat on these niggers, these Derby Street Donkeys, in the daytime and roast and fry them while they shovel shit next to nuthin' and steam them at night like big Black lobsters . . . ha ha . . . the Krumps are little red lobsters of yourn . . . and they just drink and screw in the dark and listen to jive talk an' jive music an' jive holy music . . . but they still have to face you in the mornin'. That's right, face you, you jive ass sucker! They don't know they ain't got to face your jive, hot blazin' face . . . simple niggers . . . but they do 'cause they believe in you and your lies. Stupid donkeys! They only got to look my God in the face once and forget you, you jive time sucker . . . (remembering an old joke) ha . . . ha . . . she's Black as night and as

as cool and slick as a king snake. . . . Yes, Lord, yes, Lord, yes, Lord, Yes Lord, yes, Lord.[10]

One of Cliff's desires is for Ray to go into the Navy to see how real men live.' He becomes furious when Lou tells him he is Ray's step-uncle and cannot sign the papers for Ray to enter the service at sixteen. He slaps Lou; Cliff knows Ray has to escape Derby Street in order to survive.

CLIFF

Damn it! Damn it! I don't care what his dead mother wants. Who the hell cares what the dead want? It's what Ray wants that counts. He's got to get out of here . . . don't you Ray? Off'a Derby Street and away from here so he can grow up to be his own man.

LOU

Like you?

CLIFF

No, not like me . . . not tied down to a half-grown, scared childish bitch!

LOU

You don't have to be.

CLIFF

But I love you.[11]

When Cliff slaps her, Lou accuses Cliff of not wanting their baby, and Cliff admits that he didn't want children until he could afford them. He says that he is going to night school, so he can go into business and earn a decent living. He refuses to work in a

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[10]Ed Bullins, In the Wine Time in Five Plays by Ed Bullins (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), pp. 130-131.

[11]Ibid., pp. 135-136.

laundry for a dollar an hour. Cliff vows to ship out again and let Lou and the baby go on relief, before he will submit to neo-slavery. Cliff like Sam Knight in East of Jordan wants his share of the world:

> I'm going to get me a part of that world and stare your God in the eye and scream why. I am not a beast . . . an animal to be used for the plows of the world. But if I am one, then I'll act like one. I'll be one and turn this fuckin' world of dreams and fancy tales into a jungle or a desert. And I don't give much of a happy fuck which. There's a world out there woman. Just beyond that lamp post. . . . Just across the "Avenue," and it'll be mine and Ray's.[12]

Cliff makes Lou scream in anger and she tells him she doesn't want Ray to be like him.

Cliff is both brotherly and fatherly toward Ray. He encourages Ray to drink and praises his capacity. He likes to instruct Ray in ways to handle women, and to ask about Ray's personal life. Cliff warns Ray not 'to get stuck on one girl' although he explains that he loves Lou, he makes Ray promise not to reveal these confidences to his aunt. Still most of Cliff's time is spent encouraging Ray to leave Derby Street and discover the rest of the world.

The relationship between Ray and Cliff unfolds In the Wine Time. When the play opens, Cliff appears as a surly, hard-drinking man who beats his wife, but gradually he develops into a heroic figure of considerable strength. When Cliff accepts the responsibility for Red's death, it seems a natural extension of his desires to protect his family and insure Ray's future.

Lou Dawson is "in love with Cliff. She wants to hold the

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[12] Ibid.

family together, and she's bearing a child. This is what she does, it doesn't say what she's about. She has values and her world is disintegrating. So . . . she's desperate, anxiety ridden. . . . She's a strong woman."[13]

Cliff describes Lou as a woman of principle. Lou is the daughter of a preacher and holds tenaciously to the way she was brought up, and to the way she would like her life to be. She goes to her job in the laundry every day and struggles to keep her life on an even keel. She is over-protective of Ray and tries to control him, in a way she cannot control Cliff. Her instincts are to hold her family close to her.

Constantly, Lou argues with Cliff about his drinking and swearing and lack of employment. She understands some things about Cliff, but wants him to be different. Although she loves Cliff, she is also thinking about the kind of life her child will have, and so Lou throws the image of her father at Cliff as an example.

In the Wine Time is primarily concerned with Ray, Black manchild,[14] who is half-boy, half-man. He is in the middle of the relationship between his aunt and uncle; the mores of the street and the era. He is romantic and in love for the first time, and at sixteen, Ray already has considerable experience. Ray Admires Cliff and would like to emulate him and join the Navy, but he also wants to please Lou. He is different from the other Derby Street boys--younger and probably

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[13]Bullins, personal interview.

[14]Ibid.

more sensitive, but he has strength and will vie for his girl with Red. When Ray is challenged, he has no choice, but to respond in accordance with the laws of the 'street."

Ray is in love with Bunny Gillette, his part-time girl friend. She is a strong enough force in Ray's life to make him fight for her against older and more experienced boys. Bunny is half-girl and half-woman: the girl is drawn to Ray, but the woman seeks excitement up on the "Avenue" with young men like Red and Bama.

Many of the minor characters that people the Derby Street community are not fully drawn characters. Like Miss Minnie, the busybody, they are stereotypes and tend to be cliches. Red is very antagonistic toward Ray and everyone else. He is aggressive and representative of the street gangs of that period. While Red thinks he is a man, he is immature. He constantly torments and challenges Ray, and eventually Ray responds and Red is accidentally killed. Red's side man, Bama, acts as a foil, and does as he is told.

The females Bullins has drawn, with the exception of Lou, are all distinct types, but without much depth. Beatrice is young, sheltered and religious. Tiny poses as Lou's friend, but is really interested in Cliff, and Doris is knife-wielding and tends to be crude.

The most interesting minor character is Silly Willy Clark. Clark is a rogue drunk, and has very little dialogue. His humor potential is considerable, and it is unfortunate that he is not more fully developed.

The language of <u>In the Wine Time</u> is rich in imagery and rhythmical. "People say how close the language is to the real idiom

. . . but it's not. It could be. Anyway it's theatrical language. It's heightened and I do little things that have the language appeal to the ears and the senses; it carries the ideas and the action. Like Cliff likes to play word games and so on, and I use it to move the play on."[15]

Bullins has a sensitive ear for dialogue, and it is close to the real argot. He suggests speech patterns and rhythms and the language style of the fifties, and frequently the characters slip into a distorted dialect, which he suggests is a favorite game:

CLIFF

(Fake dialect)
Wahl, hon-nee chile. . . . I just to tell yawhl dat yo husband is one ob dem connoisseurs of dem fleshy hottentot parts which'n yous is so wonderfully invested wit'[16]

Throughout Wine Time Bullins has captured the affectionate play that is a characteristic of Black life. While this is usually good-natured, it is almost always clever and perceptive but it sometimes strips bare the person it is directed to:

CLIFF
Ray. . . . You know Lou is a lot like your mother used to be. Quiet, except that your mother usually had a glass up to her mouth instead of her mouth clamped tight.[17]

Bullins includes "the dozens" as part of the verbal game playing In the Wine Time. In this instance Ray is carrying his drunken neighbor,

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[15]Bullins, personal interview.

[16]Bullins, In the Wine Time, p. 122.

[17]Ibid., p. 129.

Mr. Krump into the house, as Red and Rama enter Derby Street:

RED

Hey . . . Ray . . . is this lump ah shit a friend of yours?

RAY

Nawh

RAMA

Maybe the're related. [a reference to Ray's mother]

RED

(Chuckling)
Hey, man, cool it. I know Ray don't play that. Do you Ray?

RAY

(Trying to support Mr. Krump)
Nawh, Red, Nawh.

RED

See Rama, Ray don't play the dozens. You better be careful.

RAMA

Shit.[18]

Bullins is not only concerned with language, he is also fully aware of character differences caused by the period of time, and he is careful to connect the characters with the elements surrounding them. This concern makes the expression and form very fluid and natural and the force of events logical. There has been some criticism of what has been called the senseless and unnecessary death at the end of the play. Mr. Bullins commented on this:

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[18]Ibid., p. 113.

> There is a theme of death hovering in my work. It is indicative of a cultural thing. The American culture is very antagonistic to Black people. We get taken off. I grew up in and around street gangs. There were always casualties. I've had friends who died because they didn't receive proper medical attention. . . . And I knew a girl who died in a fire, a vibrant healthy girl, because the building she lived in didn't have a fire escape. These things occurred all through my life.[19]

There is a natural theatricality In the Wine Time that evolves from the life style and the form that Bullins has developed. Much of the play's humor is visual and aural: Miss Minnie banging windows, drunken Silly Willy Clark, Doris shouting for hot dogs. And Rhythm and Blues is used throughout the play to set the tone and style of the environment. One of the successful devices Bullins used frequently was simultaneous action on "the Avenue" and Derby Street; in the New Lafayette production this was staged with a catwalk.

Bullins shows facets of Black urban life in the early fifties. There is no comment on that life style within the play. Possibly, because the approach is nostalgic, the playwright seems to leave the people where they are. While this may raise questions, there is no doubt that the situation In the Wine Time is very moving.

One Black artist, writer and critic, Sam Anderson, was very disturbed by the content of In the Wine Time. Mr. Anderson lives in the Harlem community and is the Afro-American Editor of the New African magazine. His review is included here in its entirety, because it raises some important issues.

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[19]Bullins, personal interview.

After seeing In the Wine Time at the New Lafayette Theater, one could ask: is the play really necessary? It attempts to reflect what is happening with the grass roots brother and sister, telling it like it is but not like it is and like it should be. What is needed is our community is a Black theater that will produce Black plays: plays that create positive images of brothers and sisters; Black people who attempt to build families and themselves around the ways and means of destroying the now America and all those who support it; plays that give us new habits, new ways of living; plays that move brothers and sisters from spending their lives drinking rotgut and rotmind wine to become the warriors that have a revolutionary task at hand and a new world to create.

In the Wine Time is full of stereotypes. There is the typical sister in everybody's business; the typical wino, typical sanctified young sister, typical Negro cop. But so what, since the play doesn't move from being a reflection of Negroes doing their self-defeating thing. Ed Bullins does not offer Black people any way out of the negative environment he depicts. One expected to see In the Wine Time's sluggish beginning resolved in a way that did not resemble Eugene O'Neill's plays. In the Wine Time's style is the same as an off-broadway play that legitimizes the decadence of the white man.

For example, Cliff Dawson, ex-sailor/student tells his nephew Ray, that to be a man he must go into the racist American Navy. Ray would be more of a man resisting the Navy and fighting for Black people. Ray finally winds up killing a brother. Why did Bullins put in this senseless killing? Was it because this is what really happens in the Black community? Partially. It appears, however, that the play was slowing down, not going anywhere--even though the dialogue was natural and done extremely well. Thus, what was needed was some violent action. And we got it.

Generally speaking In the Wine Time is not a Black play. It is militant Negro entertainment for Negroes who feel lost and guilty about their middle class economic status and want to get down with the nitty gritty folk. This may be a psychological necessity for some Blackfolks, but it is not sufficient. Let us hope that Brother Bullins will get the "rainbow sign" no more wine; the fire this time.[20]

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[20]Samuel E. Anderson, "Review of In the Wine Time" in Black Culture Weekly, I, No. 3 (January 27, 1969), 18.

Anderson's comments are very exact and at least partially true, but they do not take into consideration that the play's designated time is the early fifties. Although, even at that time most Blacks were disillusioned with the Armed Services as a real solution Ander said he wrote the review in anger immediately after seeing the production, and before he was informed that Wine Time was meant to be seen with a sequel, entitled We Righteous Bombers.[21] Yet, in spite of this justification a play must stand by itself as a separate entity and on its own merits. Its validity should not depend on a sequel or cycle.

There are several extraneous characters In the Wine Time, who have no significance in terms of moving the action of the play forward. While it is possible their presence might be explained in a later production that argument does little to enhance the significance of this introductory piece.

Ed Bullins is one of the most prolific and also most well-known of the new Black playwrights. His work has been very influential and his style is emulated by a number of other young writers, in and outside of his writer's workshop. Bullins works in an ideal situation, as resident playwright of an autonomous well-funded theater in New York City. As such he has a very dominant role in the Black theater community.

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[21] We Righteous Bombers resembles Camus' The Just Assassins.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The primary factor in the plays that are discussed here is that they are consciously directed to Black audiences and therefore have a Black point of view. This is significant because it indicates that the authors are engaging in a familial dialogue with other Blacks. They, therefore, have a commitment to deal with the truth and reality of the Black experience in terms of the racial values of Blacks. This represents a break with the earlier tradition of Negro literature and classifies these writers as part of the contemporary Black Art and Literary movement.

The priority of these writers: Walker, Milner and Bullins is to clarify the world from the point of view of their people. To accomplish this goal, they have delved deeply into their personal psychic experience, pulling out moments, realizations, and sensory perceptions, and have woven these into comprehensible situations that are instructive and meaningful to Black people.

In translating the Black experience to the stage, all three playwrights have produced work that is semi-autobiographical in nature. Their plays are almost exclusively drawn from their collective environments and various personal experience. In East of Jordan the background reference is that area of Georgia, where Evan Walker was

born. Who's Got His Own occurs in Detroit, where Milner was born and raised, and the protagonist, Tim, Jr. wrestles with problems Milner confronted. Ray, In the Wine Time, grows to manhood in South Philadelphia, Ed Bullins' hometown.

These writers are all young men in their thirties. Thus, it is not surprising that they have chosen the fifties as the time of their plays, as that was the time when these men began to mature. As Milner said, "Most of us started to become aware at that time . . . and the music . . . and things started to happen to you. At that time you started to say, 'Hey I love these people'."[1] Milner is the youngest of the three playwrights, and Who's Got His Own is set latest in time; Evan Walker is the eldest, and East of Jordan is set in 1949-1950, the earliest point in time. Milner continued to say that most of the Black writers of his generation are nostalgic about the period of the fifties, looking back at it, as a time when they lived more fully. The nostalgic feeling is evident in all three plays, least so in Who's Got His Own, because it is so analytical; mostly In the Wine Time, because it is romantic and part of a continuum; and partially in East of Jordan in the character of Johnny Slater and in Shango.

The placing of the plays in the fifties gives them a kind of historical perspective. These writers were the children of World War II, when the all-Black batalliens contributed in the patriotic effort and returned home to the same segregated conditions that existed before the war. This created an atmosphere of cynicism and

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[1] Milner, personal interview.

resistance in the communities, which spawned these writers, and also paved the way for the rebellion of the late fifties and sixties. All three plays accurately reflect the conditions that are responsible for this rebellion, rather than the rebellion itself.

The Black revolution is ethical, cultural and political. And in these three plays, in particular, there is no major concentration on the political aspects of Black liberation. Each of the writers, however, has dealt with the political struggle in other works. There are few full-length plays of the new Black theater that examine the problems of revolution--most commonly this particular subject is treated in one act forms. One exception, of course, is Richard Wesley's Black Terror.

In terms of ideology, and the content of these plays, the playwrights have moved past Raisin in the Sun, and are not dealing with wish-fulfillment, but the hard facts of the Black experience. Implicit in each of these three plays is the playwright's understanding that Black people need a new approach to their existence in America.

For example, East of Jordan examines a man who is trying to achieve success in the same fashion as the Younger family in A Raisin In the Sun: through thrift and hardwork. Unlike the Youngers who are left hoping for a new day, Sam Knight fails and loses his life through the process. Playwright Evan Walker emphasizes the reasons for Knight's failure, and his implicit statement to Black people is that since Knight's approach was incorrect, a new direction is needed for Blacks in America.

Who's Got His Own deals with the personal problems of a family that has been destroyed by racism. It details their attempts to pull themselves back together after the destruction has taken place. The Bronson family actively searches for a new way of focusing their lives, as they have learned from their experience that the old approaches will not allow them to live in the present or future.

In the Wine Time the social situation is understood, Mr. Bullins is mainly concerned with a Black life style, the personal relationships and the natural human desires of the people he portrays. He said, he meant In the Wine Time to be a spiritual experience, not a message to a white audience. But, In the Wine Time the only suggested change is for Ray to join the Navy and escape the Derby Street syndrome by living a fuller individual life. The collective experience of Blacks has shown that this is not the solution. Thus, any alternatives illustrated from In the Wine Time would have to occur through recognition in the response of the audience. However, Who's Got His Own shows a family attempting to pull the pieces of their lives back together after at least one member has realized the destruction caused by living in a racist society. Thus, the Bronson family is struggling to change during the course of the play, and through their personal realizations the audience comes to grips with the idea that it is very important to know who you are.

While the ideology of the plays that are explored here is significantly different from Raisin in the Sun, the style of these plays is still similar to Lorraine Hansberry's. Some young Black writers are experimenting to find theatrical forms unique to Black culture,

yet among the writers of crafted plays such as these discussed here the most common technique is still realism/naturalism, perhaps because this traditional form is very suitable to socio-political content.

Although these playwrights utilize traditional theater forms, they have each worked to make the material reflect the Black experience and culture. Walker and Bullins specifically include a number of distinct cultural elements, and all three playwrights have been creative in the use of language. Milner, however, seems to have moved a step further by bending the structure of his play to incorporate the Afro-American musical tradition, in an attempt to capture the immediate response that is so much a part of Black heritage. All three playwrights, of course, utilize various styles of Black music to make specific points, because Black American culture is very closely tied with its music.

In terms of secondary themes and subject, there are a great many similarities in these three plays. They are all based on a family unit and specific sets of relationships. The family is a matter of great concern to Black people in America, because the family structure was destroyed (by the middle passage and slavery) and has been extremely difficult to maintain under American conditions. In these plays the family units either were, or are destroyed.

Along with the concentration on the family, another distinct operative in these plays is sudden and violent death, which is also a harsh reality of Black life. (Melvin Van Peebles used this idea in the title of his play, Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death). In East of Jordan the family unity is first destroyed by the 'system' and

secondly by the actual murder of Sam Knight. In the Wine Time the Dawson family is torn apart by an accidental gang killing. The sudden death of Tim Bronson Sr. in Who's Got His Own brings to light the paralysis of the family, which has indirectly been caused by the brutal and violent murder of Bronson's father: an act which essentially destroyed three generations.

In most societies, the man is the strength and provider of the family. The very qualities that are most necessary for a man to achieve self-respect are the qualities considered most dangerous and therefore to be eliminated in the Black man. So in this sense, which is closely tied with ability to function, the Black man carries a horrendous burden in America. Thus, all three of these plays concentrate on the struggle of the Black man to live with rightful dignity in this society, and emphasize the struggle to raise healthy Black male children. Sam Knight died to salvage a decent home for his wife and step-son. Cliff Dawson went to prison to protect his family and insure an unimpeded future for his foster son; Tim Bronson, Sr. worked a degrading and menial job in an attempt to maintain both psychic and physical survival.

The role of Christianity is significant in all three plays, and in each instance, its value for Blacks is challenged, usually on the basis of hypocrisy. In two instances, the women in the plays are daughters of preachers and this provides a source of conflict with their husbands. Another vital issue that is treated in all three plays is the enormous difficulty of maintaining a firm relationship between Black men and women. This problem still reflects the shadows

of the dehumanizing, destructive aspects of slavery.

Each of these playwrights has managed to include many rich details of the Black life style. All three plays indicate the variety of life styles in Black communities, where all kinds of people live together; for instance Lou Dawson and Miss Minnie are neighbors, as are Slick and Gussie, and while the Bronson family is in mourning, there is a party going on upstairs. Walker and Bullins both dealt with this characteristic of Black neighborhoods, by staging simultaneous action in an attempt to capture some of the activity and tempo of Black life. This technique was also used effectively in Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death, and in several other recent productions, and may be a developing style.

In each of these plays the authors have clarified and distilled many facets and levels of Black life, and these materials can create meaningful experiences for their audiences. Evan Walker, Ron Milner and Ed Bullins are playwrights who can strongly influence the people for whom they write and thereby exert great force on the nature of the Black experience in America.

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APPENDIX

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At the inception of this research, Drama Department requirements restricted this study to full-length plays and Aristotelian definitions of dramatic criticism. These restrictions not only eliminated significant Black authors and plays from the study, but also added certain 'seemingly' contradictory elements. Later Department inquiries raised questions about the validity of using the "White Aesthetics" of this same preset requirement--in a paper on Black drama.

It is a common practice of European scholars to ignore the existence of thriving ancient cultures on the African continent and to diminish this very important influence on Greek culture, prior to and during the "Golden Age" of Greece. Yet it is significant to note:

> that Aristotle not only received his education, but stole an entire library of works belonging to the Egyptian Mystery System, when he entered Egypt with Alexander "the great", placing his name as the author on most that he kept for his private collection . . . others he sent to friends in Greece--of which they too claimed authorship, and others he allowed to remain in the library of Alexandria, where he brought students from Greece. He also had others burned or otherwise destroyed.[1]

Despite the irony of this rather revealing view of the 'father of Dramatic Criticism' as a plunderer of the riches of Africa, the choice of the critical format was not voluntary, and successfully changed the focus of this thesis. Therefore, many ideas that ought to be aired here are omitted, as this simply is not the correct forum.

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[1]Yosef ben-Jochannan, Black Man of the Nile, (New York: Alkebu-Lan Books, 1970), p. 189-190.