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AMERICAN THEATRE AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1945-1965

by

Paul Nadler

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1995

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Abstract

AMERICAN THEATRE AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT,
1945-1965

by

Paul Nadler

Advisor: Professor James V. Hatch

This dissertation surveys American theatre related to the civil rights movement from 1945 to 1965, and demonstrates that it constituted an important and heretofore largely unrecognized category of American political theatre. In over eighty produced plays, African American and white playwrights as well as integrated production groups educated the public, motivated demonstrators, and raised funds for the movement.

The civil rights movement and its theatre both had their roots in World War II. After the war, many reformist works such as D'Usseau and Gow's *Deep Are the Roots* focussed on the discrimination suffered by Blacks. During the McCarthy period, though a chill descended over most forms of American political expression, several activist civil rights plays demanded racial justice.

In 1954, after the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in public schools, the civil rights movement and its theatre entered a new and more activist phase. Most plays,

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notably Mitchell's *A Land Beyond the River* and Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, supported the movement's advocacy of nonviolence and integration, but Louis X (later Louis Farrakhan) wrote plays for the Nation of Islam that prefigured subsequent developments in Black separatism.

In the early 1960s, the civil rights struggle became truly a mass movement. During this period, many shows, including Davis' *Purlie Victorious*, used politically charged humor and satire; and several, notably Genet's *The Blacks*, played with costuming, makeup, and masks in exploring racial identities.

In the mid-1960s, the Black Power movement led to a decline of civil rights theatre. Many works, such as Jones' *Dutchman*, rejected integration and nonviolence outright, and white playwrights, who until now had played an active role, disappeared from the picture almost completely.

Major playwrights covered by the dissertation include Maxwell Anderson, James Baldwin, William Branch, Norman Corwin, Alice Childress, Ossie Davis, Martin Duberman, Randolph Edmonds, Jean Genet, Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), Adrienne Kennedy, John Oliver Killens, Louis X, Loften Mitchell, Douglas Turner Ward, and Theodore Ward. Theatre companies include the American Negro Theatre, the Free Southern Theatre, the Greenwich Mews, the Kaleidoscope Players, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

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This dissertation is for my parents,

Eugene Byron Nadler (1928-1982)

and Harriet Carol Frost Nadler (1930-1994),

whose dedication and love

remain living inspirations.

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Acknowledgments

I owe enormous thanks to William Branch and Loften Mitchell, who welcomed me into their homes to discuss their work in civil rights theatre; and to Ossie Davis, Moe Foner, Tom Engatti, Merlyn Hurd, Gertrude Jeannette, and Mrs. Elihu Winer, who made time in their busy schedules for telephone interviews. Many helpful archivists and librarians assisted me in my research, most of which was conducted in New York at the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, the Hatch-Billops Collection, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Shubert Archive, and the Tamimint Labor Archive. The generous financial support of The Christopher Roberts Dissertation Fellowship expedited my research and writing. My dissertation support group, including Joel Berkowitz, Ed Dee, John Istel, and Jack Shalom, made many valuable suggestions and provided comeraderie in what would otherwise have been a solitary process.

I owe bounteous thanks to my family and friends, who have stood loyally by me throughout my years of graduate study. But my deepest gratitude goes to my wife Anne and our daughter Elizabeth, who did without me for so many lonely nights.

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Introduction

> Wherever liberty slips from a few, liberty slips from all. Bring your Jim Crow to trial, bring the Jew-murderers, bring those who risk their freedom to keep white supremacy, and all the others who try to keep your dream from becoming a reality.[1]

In 1945, African American soldiers in a segregated American military helped liberate Europe and the Pacific from totalitarian rule; in 1965 President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. These events marked the birth and the culmination of what came to be known simply as "the civil rights movement," a popular struggle of tremendous moral force and organizational skill. Thousands of people from dozens of organizations, from local churches and schools to national groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), donated their time, their talents, and sometimes even their lives to the goal of eliminating segregation from the United States. Their efforts succeeded in destroying segregation's legal foundations, though in many other areas their struggle remained—and remains—unfinished.

Art, especially vocal performance, has long been recognized as an important tool of civil rights organizers, but the role of theatre in the movement has been largely ignored. This dissertation surveys the history of American theatre related to the civil rights movement from 1945 to 1965 and demonstrates that such theatre constituted an important and heretofore largely unrecognized category of American political theatre. A number of

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[1] Tom Paine, in Owen Dodson, *New World A-Coming*, 13-14. Typescript in Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.

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active, committed playwrights—Black and white—as well as theatrical production groups created plays to help educate the public about the need for desegregation, to raise funds for the movement, and to help motivate demonstrators. Some of these plays took civil rights issues as their central themes, while others were about the movement itself. Many other plays of the period also touched upon racial and ethnic issues and thus reflected the era's civil rights *zeitgeist*.

Approach and Organization of the Dissertation

The civil rights movement was that post-World War II social struggle whose goals were desegregation and equal opportunity, and whose methods were legal arguments, legislative programs, and organized, nonviolent civil disobedience. For the purposes of this study, civil rights plays are considered to be of three basic types:

1. Plays about the movement's specific goals. Hughes' *The Ballot and Me* (1958), for example, was about voting rights, and Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) dealt with integration in housing. Plays opposed to the movement's goals or methods, including Louis X's separatist tracts *Orgena* and *The Trial* (1956), also fit this category. Pure entertainments, such as Bontemps and Cullen's *Saint Louis Woman* (1946), a fairly standard love story featuring Black characters, are excluded.

2. Plays taking as subjects the movement itself. Mitchell's *The Land Beyond the River* (1957) dramatized the origins of the U. S. Supreme Court's school desegregation case, and Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964) was inspired by a Mississippi murder that became a rallying point for the movement.

3. Productions created in direct support of the movement or sponsored by it. Angelou and Cambridge's *Cabaret for Freedom* (1961) was a fund-raising venture for the

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Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Free Southern Theatre produced an eclectic mix of plays (including *Waiting for Godot*) as part of the 1964 Mississippi voting rights campaign.

Other plays relevant to the civil rights era have also been included. For instance, a number of foreign plays about race—one from France and several from South Africa—that were produced in the United States during the civil rights era were widely interpreted as relevant to the American racial situation. In addition, plays that dealt with ethnic conflicts but were not by or about Blacks—musicals such as *South Pacific* and *West Side Story* are two obvious examples—can be important to understanding the social milieu of the era.

The organization of the dissertation is chronological, covering the years between the end of the Second World War, the cataclysmic event which helped spawn the movement, and 1965, when the Voting Rights Act removed the last obstacle to full legal rights for Blacks. The chronological approach best suits the dissertation's goal of tracing the history of civil rights theatre as it related to the political movement. Where appropriate, individual works are analyzed according to genre (tragedy, comedy, etc.), issue (housing, voting rights, etc.), overall political argument (integrationist, separatist, Marxist, etc.), character type (victim, rebel, "Uncle Tom," cracker, etc.), and other theatrical, literary, and political criteria.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first covers the postwar boom in civil rights theatre, 1945-1949; the second, the dry but significant years of the McCarthy period, 1950-1954; the third, the years of growth inspired by the Supreme Court's school desegregation decision, 1954-1959; the fourth, the period of student activism and the

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mass movement, 1960-1963; and the fifth, the movement's legislative victories and its splintering, 1964-1965. Each chapter begins with a brief overview of its period's political and theatrical history, and goes on to discuss relevant plays and productions in chronological order.

This study considers civil rights theatre as an art movement that reflected the political context of its time. Accordingly, primary sources—newspaper articles, memoirs, interviews, etc.—have been consulted wherever possible, and secondary and tertiary sources used only for general historical information or when primary sources are unavailable. I have of course consulted scholarly commentaries on the better-known plays, but I have found that, in this realm of political theatre at least, the immediate reactions of reviewers and audiences are usually more illuminating than the most careful, after-the-fact formal analyses.

Previous Studies

The history of the civil rights movement has been told many times and from many angles. The long and little-publicized struggle that led up to the civil rights movement is the subject of John Egerton's *Speak Now Against the Day*.[2] Excellent general histories of the movement can be found in Branch's *Parting the Waters* and Williams' *Eyes on the Prize*; Hodgson's *America In Our Time* and Manchester's *The Glory and the Dream* and also give significant attention to the events of the movement. Documents tracing the movement's legal history can be found in Blaustein and Zangrando's *Civil Rights and the Black American* and Friedman's *The Civil Rights Reader*.

[2] Full bibliographical information on this and the other works listed here may be found in the Bibliography.

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Non-theatrical performance has long been acknowledged as an important facet of the civil rights movement. The interaction of music and politics in the movement is well recounted in Seeger and Reiser's popular history *Everybody Says Freedom.* Nor is there any lack of appreciation of the importance of oratory to the movement: *Dissertation Abstracts* lists no fewer than six dissertations dealing in whole or in major part with the rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr.[3]

Few books, however, provide much insight into civil rights theatre. Bibliographies of Black theatre such as Fabre's *Afro-American Drama, 1850-1975* and Hatch and Abdullah's *Black Playwrights, 1823-1977* are helpful in identifying civil rights plays and in suggesting further sources. Some helpful information and commentaries are to be found in Abramson's *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre, 1925-1959* and Mitchell's *Black Drama.* Archer's *Black Images in the American Theatre* gives a useful though poorly organized account of the NAACP's opposition to racist theatre and occasional sponsorship of integration plays. Dent, Schechner, and Moses' *The Free Southern Theatre by The Free Southern Theatre* reprints many original documents from the early years of the radical theatre group, and Harris' dissertation "Mirror of the

[3] Lucy Anne McCandlish Keele, "A Burkeian analysis of the rhetorical strategies of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1972); Brygida Irena Rudzka-Ostyn, "The oratory of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X" (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1972); Rose Mary Sloan, "Then my living will not be in vain" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1977); Donald Hugh Smith, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: rhetorician of revolt" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1964); Mildred Cassandra Foster Smith, "The grammatic structure of oratory" (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 1980); Mervyn Alonzo Warren, "A rhetorical study of the preaching of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1966).

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Movement" sheds further light on the ideological conflicts that marked civil rights theatre in the mid-1960s.

In general, however, the best information about civil rights plays is to be found in the scripts themselves and in newspaper accounts of productions. When scripts are not available, published reviews and other articles often provide enough information to assemble fairly complete plot summaries. For shows that were produced in New York, helpful information about production teams and lengths of runs is also available in Dodd-Mead's annual *Best Plays* series.

Precursors of Civil Rights Theatre

Historically, a very large proportion of American theatre about Blacks has been politically oriented. Since the early nineteenth century both Black and white playwrights have recognized—often with deep moral indignation—the inferior social position of African Americans. Not surprisingly, however, Black playwrights have as a whole been more consistent, more uncompromising, and less prone to stereotyping in their advocacy of Black issues than have their white counterparts.

African American performance traditions can be traced back to victims of the slave trade, kidnapped from their homes in western Africa and conveyed to the New World in slave ships. Despite brutal treatment, many African peoples in America retained important aspects of their performance traditions, such as call-and-response and ensemble improvisation. Early African American performances were carried out on plantations and in homes, and ultimately had a wide influence on American culture, as was first demonstrated in the creation of minstrel shows in the 1830s and 1840s.

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The first recorded American play by a Black writer was *The Drama of King Shotaway* (1823), a drama written and staged by William Alexander Brown for his African Grove Theatre in New York. The play, which is now lost, was about an historical insurrection against the British on the island of Saint Vincent. It premiered shortly before the African Grove ceased operations, driven out of business by an unscrupulous—and racist—competitor, the Park Theatre.[4]

Melodrama dominated political theatre about African Americans for the rest of the nineteenth century. The most popular play of the century—indeed, in all American history—was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), a finely wrought melodrama adapted by the white playwright George Aiken from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel. Despite its stereotyped characters, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* depicted slavery as a monstrous evil, to which violent rebellion as well as Christian forbearance were natural responses. The play appears to have influenced a Black playwright named William Wells Brown, whose melodrama *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858) is a semi-autobiographical account of his own escape north from slavery. Though Brown's work was never produced in its own time, he toured widely in dramatic readings of it. Another melodrama, *The Octoroon* (1859), by the famed Irish-American playwright Dion Boucicault, praised the South's gentility and honor, but clearly called for the abolition of slavery. After the Civil War, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, the daughter of a Black minstrel show owner, combined in her *Peculiar Sam, or The Underground Railroad* (1879) the

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[4] Samuel A. Hay, *African American Theatre: A Historical and Critical Analysis* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 11.

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storytelling style of melodrama, the music and dance of minstrelsy, and the political stance of support for the newly freed slaves.

Professional dramatic performing opportunities for Blacks remained limited to minstrelsy and unstaged readings of classics until the turn of the twentieth century, when a series of Black musicals appeared on Broadway. At the same time, however, segregation was being institutionalized in the South, and some prominent white playwrights reflected this in plays with anti-Black messages. The most notable of these works, Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*, depicted Blacks as savage, beastlike creatures; in 1915, D. W. Griffith adapted it for the screen as *The Birth of a Nation*.

The first great period of Black playwriting and production in America was in the 1920s. The movement called the Harlem Renaissance coincided with economic prosperity and a mass migration of American Blacks from the rural South to Northern cities. Black playwrights produced a number of significant works, almost all of which explored the "Negro problem"—the place of Blacks in American society. According to James V. Hatch, Black-written plays of this era generally could be categorized as either historical, integration-oriented, or militant—divisions which have remained relevant in Black American theatre down to the present day. Angelina Grimke's *Rachel* (1916) asked whether Black couples should bring children into America's racist society. Short, pithy, realistic works such as John Matheus' *'Cruiter* (1926), Willis Richardson's *Flight of the Natives* (1927), and Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) depicted ordinary Black people resisting racism. And Marita Bonner's non-realistic *The Purple Flower* (1928) used techniques inspired by the German expressionists to suggest that racial war was inevitable.

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At the same time, white dramatists also began examining the troubled position of Blacks in American society. Ridgely Torrence began the trend with *Granny Maumee* (1917), an anti-lynching play, and *The Rider of Dreams* (1917), which centers on a Black man's struggle to pay for his family's home—a theme which, four decades later, would provide the foundation for Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924), though effective pieces of theatre, presented Black characters who were little better than stereotypes, as did Marc Connelly's religious fantasy *The Green Pastures* (1930). Somewhat more perceptive were two plays by Southerners: Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom* (1926) concerned a mixed-race man and his white half-brother, and Dubose Heyward's *Porgy* (1927) concerned love and honor in a Black community in South Carolina. Black characters also became common in white-written musicals, notably Oscar Hammerstein and Jerome Kern's *Showboat* (1927) and George and Ira Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1937).

In the Great Depression of the 1930s, most Black theatre companies folded, and many theatre artists of all ethnic groups became politically radicalized. The left encouraged theatre about civil rights issues, in part because its analysis of capitalist society was based on class rather than ethnicity. Langston Hughes, a young poet and playwright, had a great Broadway success with his autobiographical *Mulatto* (1930); later, Hughes founded the Harlem Suitcase Theatre to produce his short plays, including *Don't You Want To Be Free* (1937), which combined the political activism of white agit-prop drama with Black music and Hughes' own poetry. The Negro Theatre units of the short-lived Federal Theatre Project created such works as Hughes Allison's *The Trial of Doctor*

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Beck (1937), a courtroom drama involving racial issues; Theodore Browne's *Natural Man* (1937), about the Black folk-hero John Henry; Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog* (1938), which advocated an alliance of Black, white, and Jewish workers; and Abram Hill and John Silvera's unproduced living newspaper *Liberty Deferred* (1938), a sharp and sardonic history of race in America. Among white playwrights, Paul Peters and George Sklar's *Stevedore* (1933) concerned a race riot in Louisiana, and Paul Green's adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1941) depicted a murderous spree by an angry young Black man named Bigger Thomas.

One other civil rights performance project of this period is worth noting. In the late 1930s and early 1940s the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), which was a division of the National Negro Congress (NNC), organized two teams of puppeteers who toured Alabama and Louisiana putting on shows for Black sharecroppers and townspeople. These puppet shows, which took as subjects the right to vote and ways of increasing wages on plantations, were the earliest documented use of a live theatre-like medium as part of a Southern civil rights campaign, and were almost certainly the last until the Free Southern Theatre and the Kaleidoscope Players were founded in the early 1960s.[5]

Civil Rights Plays During World War II

The Federal Theatre was dissolved in 1939 by Congressional red-baiters, and World War II further fragmented the Black theatre world. Even as the war raged, however, many of the seeds both of the civil rights movement and of civil rights theatre were

[5] Esther and James Jackson, interview with James V. Hatch, *Artist & Influence XI* (New York: Hatch-Billops Collection, 1992), 171.

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planted. Because the war was being fought against the racist empires of Germany and Japan, racism at home came to seem more insupportable than ever. Many Jews and Blacks came to see the war as being fought on two fronts, foreign and domestic. Indeed, throughout the war one Black newspaper featured a double-V logo to symbolize victory on both fronts.

Five plays produced during the war concerned precisely these issues. The first of these was *South Pacific*—an entirely different play from Rodgers and Hammerstein's later musical of the same name—which was written by Howard Rigsby and Dorothy Heyward, the wife of DuBose Heyward. In the play, two Americans, one a Black seaman named Johnson and the other a white Army Captain, find themselves cast away on a Japanese-held island. Johnson is thrilled to be accepted as an equal by the natives, and refuses to join the Captain in a dangerous mission against the "colored" Japanese. Only after the Captain is captured and hanged does Johnson realize that the Japanese too are racists who must be defeated, and the play ends with him preparing his own solo mission against them. Directed by Lee Strasberg and with a fine cast headed by Canada Lee, the production opened at Broadway's Cort Theatre on 29 December 1943. The critics agreed that the script was an admirable but failed effort, and the production closed after only five performances.[6]

A month later, on 2 February 1944, Edward Chodorov's *Decision* opened at the Belasco Theatre.[7] Though the play had few important Black characters, the issues of

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[6] Mantle, *Best Plays of 1943-1944*, 445; John Chapman, "'South Pacific' Barely Misses Being an Exciting War Drama," *New York Daily News*, 30 December 1943; Lewis Nichols, "South Pacific," *New York Times*, 30 December 1943.

[7] Mantle, *Best Plays of 1943-1944*, 452.

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racial discrimination and violence were central to its message. Set in a medium-sized American town, *Decision* opens with the return home of Tommy Riggs, a local boy who was wounded while fighting the fascists in Italy. Tommy soon learns that his father, a high school principal, has been fighting his own battles against local reactionaries, who under the leadership of a corrupt U. S. Senator and a cynical newspaper editor have fomented race riots in a nearby munitions factory. Eventually the father is murdered by the Senator's thugs, and Tommy decides to remain in the town to continue the fight against fascism.[8] The production, which Chodorov himself directed, drew warm praise from many critics: the *Times*' Lewis Nichols, for example, called the play evidence that "the theatre ... has become aware that not all of the war is taking place on distant fields."[9] *Decision* ran for four months.[10]

In mid-February, the Blackfriars Theatre, an off-Broadway company run by Catholic priests, brought a racial satire called *Caukey* to the boards. The fledgling playwright, a priest and sculptor named Thomas McGlynn, was the son of an actor and had played some small roles in silent films in the 1920s.[11] *Caukey* was an early example—possibly the first—of plays that switched the usual roles of Blacks and whites to point up the absurdity of racial discrimination. Set in a Southern town, *Caukey* depicts an all-Black ruling class that refers pejoratively to the struggling white working class as "caukeys" (short for "caucasians"), and uses restrictive covenants and other tools to bar

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[8] Edward Chodorov, *Decision* (New York: Samuel French, 1946).
[9] Lewis Nichols, "Decision," *New York Times*, 3 February 1944.
[10] Mantle, *Best Plays of 1943-1944*, 452.
[11] Richard A. McAlister, *Thomas McGlynn: Priest and Sculptor* (Providence, RI: Providence College Press, 1981), 20, 28.

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them from decent homes, good schools, and well-paying jobs.[12] The play opened 17 February 1944, drew widely mixed reviews, and closed in mid-March after 22 performances.[13]

The only Black-written play overtly opposing racism to be produced during the war was Owen Dodson's 1944 pageant *New World A-Coming*. Inspired by Roi Ottley's like-titled 1943 book, which envisioned an America free of racial divisions, Dodson's play was written specifically for the Negro Freedom Rally, an annual event which Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. sponsored during and for some years after the war.[14] The pageant opens with soldiers from America and allied nations uniting to fight fascism abroad as well as "tyranny at home—here."[15] Robed Klansmen carry swastikas on placards while chanting of their hatred for Blacks and Jews, who, inspired by apparitions of Sojourner Truth and Tom Paine, unite and arrest "Mr. White Supremacy" (15) and Nazi "Jew-Murderers" (16), and try and convict them "for attempting to disrupt the hope of free men" (17). Presented on 26 June 1944 at Madison Square Garden, the pageant was staged arena-style, on a square stage on which was painted a huge five-pointed star. It ran an hour, featured Pearl Primus' dancing and Duke Ellington's orchestra, and starred Will Geer, Langston Hughes, Canada Lee, Abbie Mitchell, Pearl Primus, and Josh White at the head of a cast of a hundred.[16] Its audience of 25,000 also heard speeches from a

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[12] Urban Nagle, *Behind the Masque* (New York: McMullen, 1951), 198-207.
[13] Mantle, *Best Plays of 1943-1944*, 458-459.
[14] Roi Ottley, *New World A-Comin'* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943); Will Hapgood, *King of the Cats: The Life and Times of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 92-97, 212-213.
[15] Dodson, *New World A-Coming*, 2.
[16] N.a., "Rally Tonight Salutes Negro Gains," *The Daily Worker*, 26 June 1944; James V. Hatch, *Sorrow Is the Only Faithful One* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1993), 112-115.

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variety of prominent speakers, including Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who said his only regret about the pageant was that "it couldn't be shown to people all over the country, because it might teach them something."[17] It did, however, inspire a radio show on New York's WMCA, also called *New World A-Coming*, which until the mid-1950s presented weekly dramatizations of Black history and current events.[18]

Back on Broadway, Sid Herzig, Fred Saidy, E. Y. Harburg, and Harold Arlen's *Bloomer Girl* combined musical comedy with a plea for social advancement for Blacks and women. Set in upstate New York on the eve of the Civil War, the show centers on Evelina Applegate, the progressive daughter of a local hoopskirt manufacturer. Evelina shocks her community by advocating that women wear bloomers rather than hoopskirts, by staging her own version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and by helping to free a slave owned by a Southern gentleman who is courting her.[19] Even more than the plot, the show's songs advance a not-so-subtle argument against racial discrimination: "Man for Sale" is a powerful indictment of the slave trade, and "The Eagle and Me" ("River it like to flow / Eagle it like to fly / Eagle it like to feel its wings against the sky") has been called by Arlen's biographers "the first theater song of the fledgling civil rights movement."[20] The production, which starred Celeste Holm and featured *Oklahoma*-like ballets by Agnes de

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[17] N.a., "Freedom Meet Asks End of Jim Crowism," *New York Amsterdam News*, 1 July 1944.
[18] "New World A-Coming" clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.
[19] Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz?* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 186-187.
[20] Ibid., 196-197.

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Mille, opened at the Shubert Theatre on 5 October 1944, drew fine reviews, and ran for 657 performances.[21]

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By the end of the war, the seeds both of the civil rights movement and of its theatre had been sown. The fight against racist totalitarianism had raised the hopes of African Americans and the consciousnesses of many whites. A new, more activist approach to race relations had emerged in five produced plays, of which three had earned good reviews and one a tidy profit. As the sun rose over a newly peaceful world, American activists and theatre artists prepared to transform the dream of a racially just nation into political and artistic reality.

[21] Gerald Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 87-88.

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Chapter One — A Burst of Enthusiasm, 1945-49

> All through this war we've been living on promises—we've had to fight on faith. Now the promises have to be made good, even if we have to begin at the beginning. Even if we have to teach the alphabet.[1]

The war in Europe ended on 7 May 1945, and in the Pacific on 14 August 1945. The United States' now-immense military machine, victorious on two fronts and crowned with the sole possession of the atomic bomb, shifted gears from assault to occupation, and GIs began returning home to a peaceful, prosperous, and generally appreciative nation. Until the Soviet Union's testing of its first atom bomb in late 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean conflict in early 1950, the United States stood, in Winston Churchill's words, "at the summit of the world."[2]

The democratic and egalitarian propaganda of the war years now made the injustice of America's racial situation more glaring than it had been since the Civil War. Returning Black officers and enlisted men, some of whom had helped liberate Nazi concentration camps, were confronted again in the South with Jim Crow and in the North with more insidious prejudices. Jobs, housing, education, and the protection of the U. S. Constitution remained unavailable to many African Americans.

The war had scarcely ended before plays about civil rights issues began appearing. In time these plays would multiply, and for a few years, America's most elite theatre

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[1] Brett, in Arnaud D'Usseau and James Gow, *Deep Are the Roots* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 64.

[2] Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 18.

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district—Broadway—provided the most important venue. From *Deep Are the Roots* (1945) to *Finian's Rainbow* (1947) to *Lost in the Stars* (1949), Broadway helped launch civil rights issues into the American consciousness. At the same time, the growing off-Broadway and regional theatre movements provided forums for less-commercial works, and testing-grounds for plays with Broadway possibilities.

America, Civil Rights, and the World

Among all major developed nations, only the United States emerged from the war with both its military force and industrial base intact, and in the ensuing months and years, America learned to behave like the major power it had now become. What are often interpreted as the twin touchstones of the U.S. Constitution, free enterprise and political democracy, merged into a single foreign policy goal. Did the world need rebuilding? America would invest in it. Did it need policing? America would keep it free. American policy-makers sought to bestow upon the world a *pax americana*, benevolent but firm, to counter what was increasingly (and rather melodramatically) seen as the satanic empire of the Soviet Union. What Godfrey Hodgson has called the "liberal consensus"— an ideology of the center, merging Rooseveltian economic and domestic policies with conservative anti-Communism—became the accepted dogma of American politics.[3]

By 1947, President Harry S. Truman, recognizing America's new role in the postwar world and seeking to counter Stalin's swallowing-up of eastern Europe, could dare to repeal two centuries of peacetime isolationism. Holding that the United States must provide economic and even military assistance to help weak nations fend off

[3] Ibid., 491.

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Communist influence, the Truman Doctrine established as a universal principle "that we must assist free peoples to work out their destinies in their own way."[4] The Doctrine was to become the foundation of American foreign policy for a quarter of a century, paving the way for the Korean conflict, the Berlin airlift, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and even the debacle in Vietnam.[5] Furthermore, the Doctrine's very existence would shed unfavorable light upon America's civil rights record, which as the years went by would be compared more and more frequently to European colonialism.

By and large, with the major exception of *film noir*, the popular culture machine spread images of a happy, peaceful, prosperous America. One might have dreamed that Bill Mauldin's cartoon GIs, Willie and Joe, were educated under the G. I. Bill, married Betty Boop and Rosey the Riveter, and moved into Mr. Blanding's suburban dream house with help from a V.A. loan. Yet in much of the world, and even in much of the United States, despite the beginnings of a new prosperity unparalleled since the 1920s, Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms"—freedom of expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear[6]—remained out of reach for many. Many domestic advances in civil rights had been put on hold during the war, but pressure from Blacks and progressive whites, along with new foreign policy concerns, now made progress

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[4] Harry S. Truman, quoted in Hodgson, *America in Our Time*, 31.

[5] Robert H. Ferrell, "Emerging as a World Power," in Arthur M. Schlesinger, ed., *The Almanac of American History* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993), 506. It is worth noting that also in 1947, George C. Marshall, who had been the Army's Chief of Staff throughout the war, and who had recently become Truman's Secretary of State, saw to the restoration of the world economy with his Marshall Plan, which invested $13 billion in the economies of sixteen devastated European countries between 1948 and 1952. Schlesinger, *The Almanac of American History*, 484.

[6] "F. D. Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms' Speech," 6 January 1941. Henry Steele Commager, *Documents of American History* 2, 9th ed., (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 446-449.

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imperative. Specifically, in the growing contest with the Soviet Union, America was hindered by accusations that it abused its ethnic minorities.[7]

The press, for its part, reported the racial situation somewhat more diligently than in the past. A Black officer named Woodard, riding a bus from the deep South toward New York, refused to move to the back while in South Carolina—"I was in the front lines," he is reported to have said, "I'm not going to the back of the bus"—and was beaten senseless and had his eyes gouged out by the local police.[8] In 1946 the nation was shocked by news of racial terror in Louisiana, Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Lynchings remained a major problem. Though they had declined considerably since their heyday earlier in the century, for the first time they were given prominence in news reports in mainstream newspapers.[9] Segregation in housing and transportation, police brutality, abridged rights of suffrage, educational inequity, and limited employment opportunities all received more publicity from the press and from the government than in the past.

Limited but real progress was being made in civil rights. The judicial branch of government, prodded by constitutional lawyers trained at Howard University under Charles Houston, began slowly to reverse half a century of segregationist decisions dating back to *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 case which had established the legal foundation for

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[7] Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando, *Civil Rights and the Black American: A Documentary History* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), 379.

[8] Orson Welles, incidentally, broadcast a radio play on the subject, which helped lead to the arrest of the offending policemen. Oliver W. Harrington, *Why I Left America and Other Essays* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 102-103; Nelson Peary, interviewed by Terri Gross, "Fresh Air" radio program on National Public Radio, 13 July 1994.

[9] Blaustein and Zangrando, *Civil Rights and the Black American*, 372.

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"Jim Crow." In June, 1946, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Morgan v. Commonwealth* that interstate buses could not base seating on their passengers' race.[10] In January, 1948, in *Dipeul v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*, the Court decided that states could not discriminate against law school applicants on the basis of race.[11] Also in 1948, in *Shelly v. Kraemer*, the Court found that "restrictive covenants" barring housing sales or rentals to members of specific ethnic groups were not legally enforcable.[12]

The executive branch of government urged progress in civil rights both for justice's sake and to strengthen its foreign policy. In December, 1946, President Truman, acceding to demands by the NAACP's Walter White, appointed a group of prominent Americans to the President's Committee on Civil Rights.[13] The Committee's findings, released in October, 1947 under the title "To Secure These Rights," held that though progress was being made, recurrent civil rights problems were weakening "the central theme in our American heritage ... the importance of the individual person."[14] Noting that "our domestic civil rights shortcomings are a serious obstacle" to the United States' foreign policy objectives, the report continued:

> We cannot escape the fact that our civil rights record has been an issue in world politics. The world's press and radio are full of it. ... Those with competing philosophies have stressed—and are shamelessly distorting—our shortcomings. ...

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[10] Schlesinger, *The Almanac of American History*, 514.
[11] Ibid., 517.
[12] *Shelley v. Kraemer*. In Blaustein and Zangrando, *Civil Rights and the Black American*, 388.
[13] Friedman, *The Civil Rights Reader* (New York: Walker, 1967), 1; Blaustein and Zangrando, *Civil Rights and the Black American*, 372-373.
[14] "To Secure These Rights," in Friedman, *The Civil Rights Reader*, 2.

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> They have tried to prove our democracy an empty fraud, and our nation a consistent oppressor of underprivileged people.[15]

Incidentally, "To Secure These Rights" was largely responsible for popularizing the term "civil rights" as a replacement for earlier terms such as "the Negro problem" and "the Negro question."[16]

In February, 1948, at the start of his reelection campaign, President Truman introduced a civil rights package to Congress calling for Federal anti-lynching laws, an end to segregated schools and employment discrimination, and for the establishment of permanent Commissions on Civil Rights and Fair Employment Practices.[17] Unfortunately, a Senate filibuster led by Southern Democrats killed the bill.[18] In July of that year, Southern Democrats walked out of the the party convention after a dispute over civil rights: they then hurriedly founded the short-lived States' Rights Party upon a platform of racial segregation, nominating South Carolina's governor, Strom Thurmond, for President.[19] Later in July, Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which began the process of desegregating the United States' armed forces.[20]

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[15] "To Secure These Rights," in Blaustein and Zangrando, *Civil Rights and the Black American*, 379.
[16] Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 66.
[17] Schlesinger, *The Almanac of American History*, 517; "President Truman's Message to Congress, 2 February, 1948," in Blaustein and Zangrando, *Civil Rights and the Black American*, 381.
[18] Friedman, *The Civil Rights Reader*, 1.
[19] Schlesinger, *The Almanac of American History*, 519.
[20] Blaustein and Zangrando, *Civil Rights and the Black American*, 384-385.

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In December, shortly (and perhaps not entirely coincidentally) after Truman's narrow victory, major league baseball was desegregated when the Brooklyn Dodgers moved Jackie Robinson up from their minor league team.[21]

The Theatre Looks at Civil Rights

Between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Korean Conflict, the American theatre produced a score of new dramas and musicals about Black-white racial problems. Of these, nine either opened on Broadway or found their way there after out-of-town or off-Broadway tryouts.

Civil rights plays of this period fell into a number of genres. Of the traditional genres, melodrama, historically America's most popular dramatic form, provided the foundation for many of the most successful plays, including *Deep Are the Roots* and *Trial by Fire* (1946). Comedy and satire, which in later decades would prove among the theatre's most effective weapons against racism, show up only occasionally in plays of this period, notably *Finian's Rainbow*. Tragedy is rare: in my judgement only *Set My People Free* (1948) came anywhere near achieving tragedy, while other plays which aimed for it, including *Strange Fruit* (1945) and *Lost in the Stars*, fell instead into melodrama.

Most civil rights plays of this period were full length, two or three act dramas. Plays produced at the beginning of the period tended to be compact social plays of the Ibsen school, while those produced later tended to be more expansive episodic works. Most of the earlier plays, such as *Deep Are the Roots* and *On Whitman Avenue* (1947) were fictional and were set in the present. In the later years, plays were increasingly

[21] Schlesinger, *The Almanac of American History*, 517.

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likely to be inspired by historical characters or events: some, such as *Trial by Fire* (1947) and *Shame of a Nation* (1948), were exposés of contemporary injustices, while others, such as *Our Lan'* (1947), *Sojourner Truth* (1948), and *Set My People Free*, were heroic dramas inspired by nineteenth-century American history. And at the end of the period, one play, *Lost in the Stars*, meditated on America's racial problems by examining those of a comparable foreign country.

Almost all of the civil rights plays of this period were written by white writers, and about two-thirds of these were men. Only a handful of the plays—*Earth and Stars* (1946), *Our Lan'*, *Shame of a Nation*, *Florence* (1949), and *This Day Forward* (1949)—were by Black playwrights, though the last two of these were by women, Alice Childress and Gertrude Jeannette, respectively. In the early years of the civil rights era, then, African Americans still had to rely upon well-meaning white artists to present their stories before theatre audiences.

In addition to plays centering on racial issues, a number of other shows dealt with related subjects such as anti-Semitism and white-Asian relations. Arthur Laurents' first play, *Home of the Brave* (1945), for example, a drama about the Pacific war, tells the story of a Jewish private, Coney, who becomes psychosomatically paralyzed after fighting not only the Japanese, but also vicious anti-Semites within his own company.[22] When the play was filmed in 1949, as if to point up its applicability to race relations, its central character was made Black rather than Jewish.[23] Similarly, Don Appell's *This, Too, Shall Pass* (1946) concerns a Jewish veteran of the Pacific war, who returns home as the guest

[22] Arthur Laurents, *Home of the Brave*, in John Gassner, ed., *Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre*, Second Series (New York: Crown, 1947), 557-596.
[23] Bosley Crowthey, "Home of the Brave," *New York Times*, 13 May 1949.

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of a gentile buddy and falls in love with the buddy's sister, but has his intentions of marriage opposed by the buddy's anti-Semitic mother.[24] Rodgers and Hammerstein's Pulitzer Prize-winning *South Pacific* (1949), yet another show about the Pacific war, centers on a white nurse who must decide whether to continue a romance after she learns that her beloved, a widower, has mixed-race children from his earlier marriage to an Asian woman. As one character sings:

> You've got to be taught to be afraid
> Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
> And people whose skin is a different shade—
> You've got to be carefully taught.[25]

Lyrics such as these did not go unnoticed. In 1953, when *South Pacific* toured to Atlanta, two Georgia state legislators condemned the show as "offensive to the South" for promoting intermarriage, which they said "produces half breeds which are not conducive to the higher type of race. We in the South are proud people and have pure lines. We want to keep it that way."[26]

Finally, it is worth noting that several films of this period dealt with civil rights and related issues. In addition to *Home of the Brave*, these included *Intruder in the Dust*, *Gentlemen's Agreement* and *No Way Out*.

Deep Are the Roots

The first postwar civil rights play, Arnaud D'Usseau and James Gow's *Deep Are the Roots*, appeared on Broadway less than six weeks following V-J Day. The

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[24] Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1945-1946*, 367.
[25] Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, *South Pacific: A Musical Play*, in Arthur Hobson Quinn, ed., *Representative American Plays from 1767 to the Present* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953), 1233.
[26] "Oscar Hammerstein's Answer To Dixie Bias," *New York Age*, 21 March 1953.

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playwrights, both of whom were white and were servicemen during the war, had previously collaborated on the successful *Tomorrow the World* (1943), about a German Nazi youth's education in America. Their new work, a taut drawing-room drama about a returning Black war hero, was both a critical and a box-office success.

Deep Are the Roots is a three-act drama—or more precisely, a melodrama in the form of a social protest play—set in the spring of 1945 in the parlor of Ellsworth Langdon, a retired U.S. Senator from the deep South. The title refers to the pervasive and fundamental nature of prejudice in the South. As one character observes, "On top the flower is quite beautiful, full of grace and very delicate. But underneath are the roots, and occasionally you glimpse them, twisted and crossed as if choking one another."[27]

The plot concerns the return home of Brett Charles, an educated and highly decorated Black soldier and the son of Langdon's housekeeper, Bella. Langdon's elder daughter, Alice, has helped arrange for Brett to become superintendent of the local Black schools. Brett, who enjoyed the responsibility granted him in the Army, politely but consistently stands up to local racist practices, entering the library by the front door, wearing his Army uniform in public, and openly planning to attend an interracial human rights conference in Atlanta. This infuriates the racist Langdon, who earlier ranted that Brett lost his "black soul" in Europe by "driving his bayonet through white flesh," and who now frames Brett for the theft of an heirloom watch that was actually swiped by a Black housemaid (15).

At the same time, Brett's childhood friendship with Langdon's younger daughter, Genevra—to whose Desdemona he had once play-acted Othello—reignites into a love so

[27] D'Usseau and Gow, *Deep Are the Roots*, 96.

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powerful that she briefly considers marrying him. Alice, hearing rumors of Genevra's and Brett's alleged miscegenation (it is never consummated), has Brett arrested by the local sherriff, who beats Brett and holds him in jail without charges. Brett is eventually proven innocent and released, but the damage has been done: Bella quits, Brett heads North to avoid lynching, Genevra leaves town separately, and Langdon drops his civil facade and decides to join forces with violent white supremacists: "There are men in this very village," he says. "They are armed and waiting every day. ... They have their arsenals—they have their guns. I have already given them money. I'll give them more money. I go to join my allies (204).

In form, *Deep Are the Roots* (originally titled *Walls of Jericho*) is a fairly standard social drama.[28] In their preface to the published edition of the play, D'Usseau and Gow acknowledged their debt to Ibsen's social plays, and also demonstrated a concern with extremes of good and evil typical of melodrama. Now that the war is over, they wrote, and the artist is "no longer in the immediate service of the state," the socially conscious playwright's job is "to define in dramatic terms the forces for good and evil which on every side are doing battle for our moral, social, and historical allegiance" (xix-xx).

Deep Are the Roots also shows the influence of earlier white-written American dramas about race relations. Like Sheldon's *The Nigger* (1909), Torrence's *Granny Maumee* (1916), O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924), and Hammerstein and Kern's *Show Boat* (1927), *Deep Are the Roots* touches on the explosive subject of miscegenation, and like Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom* (1926), its protagonist's goal

[28] Gordon Heath, *Deep Are the Roots: Memoirs of a Black Expatriate* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 98.

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is to run the local Black schools. Bella, until she quits Langdon's service in the last moments, is as wise and long-suffering as Mammy in the film *Gone With the Wind* (1939), and the housemaid is just as harebrained and flighty as the same film's Prissy. In constructing the character of Brett, D'Usseau and Gow consciously avoided repeating the old negative theatrical stereotypes of Black men, instead making him unbelievably upstanding and heroic.

Deep Are the Roots was produced by Kermit Bloomgarden and George Heller. They hired as director the brilliant young Elia Kazan, who had apprenticed with the Group Theatre in the 1930s under Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman, and who in the next few years would direct *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *All My Sons* (1947), and *Death of a Salesman* (1949).[29] The set designs were by Howard Bay, who had begun his career with the Federal Theatre's living newspapers *Power* (1937) and *One-Third of a Nation* (1938), and whose work since had included *The Little Foxes* (1939) and *Carmen Jones* (1943).[30]

The actors chosen for *Deep Are the Roots* demonstrated Kazan's maxim that the better part of directing is casting. Brett Charles was played by Gordon Heath, the fiery young Black actor who had played the second lead in Rigsby and Heyward's *South Pacific* (1943). Bella Charles was played by Evelyn Ellis, whose career dated back to Harlem's Lafayette Players, and who had created the roles of Bess in DuBose Heyward's *Porgy* and Hannah in Richard Wright's *Native Son*.[31] Charles D. Waldron, an established

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[29] John W. Frick and Stephen M. Vallillo, eds., *Theatrical Directors: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994), 215.
[30] Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 63.
[31] Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in America* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1993), 392.

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character actor, played Langdon, and Barbara Bel Geddes, the beautiful and talented daughter of the set designer and architect Norman Bel Geddes, played Genevra.

The rehearsal process began 13 August, the day before V-J Day. Heath later recalled that during rehearsals, "Gadge [Kazan's nickname] taught me what it meant to be black," directing "with the same intensity with which Lenny Bernstein conducted Dvorák—demanding and getting in return love and dogged application." The play premiered out of town, in Princeton, New Jersey, where, ironically, Jim Crow forced the cast to sleep in separate hotels. It then toured to Philadelphia.[32] The play finally opened at New York's Fulton Theatre on Wednesday, 26 September 1945.

Most major critics applauded the play's intent and execution, and all praised the acting, particularly that of Barbara Bel Geddes, whose "exquisite resources of gesture, timing, voice modulations, facial expression and ability to get into her characterization" the *World-Telegram*'s Burton Rascoe called the best he had seen in over forty years of theatregoing.[33] The *Times*' Lewis Nichols, praising almost every aspect of the play and the production, crowed that the theatre had at last "decided to get in touch with the modern world again."[34] And the Black playwright and critic Abram Hill, writing in the *Amsterdam News*, found it "a daring, dignified and distinguished drama ... the most provocative piece of theatre on the stage since *Native Son*."[35]

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[32] Heath, *Deep Are the Roots*, 98, 103.
[33] Burton Rascoe, "Don't Miss Seeing 'Deep Are the Roots,'" *New York World-Telegram*, 27 September 1945.
[34] Lewis Nichols, "The Play," *New York Times*, 27 September 1945.
[35] Abe Hill, "Hill Raves About 'Deep Are the Roots,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 22 September 1945.

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The *Journal-American*'s Robert Garland, however, complained that *Deep Are the Roots* "schizophrenically" combined "two contradictory plays," one a drama about race relations, the other a "claptrap" melodrama about "a missing watch."[36] And *PM*'s Louis Kronenberger agreed, finding the new work unconvincing, inconsistent, and ultimately "a very bad play ... a combination of quite effective melodrama and very pertinent social drama, ably produced."[37] Kronenberger's review evidently touched a nerve in the NAACP's Walter White, who wrote back:

> It is quite apparent that Mr. Kronenberger has been fortunate enough to escape having to spend much time in the South. When he scoffs at the probability of Senator Langdon framing the colored returning officer on a charge of stealing a watch, he forgets what has been in the newspapers continuously for many months—that there are Southern Senators, Congressmen and Governors like Bilbo, Rankin, Eastland and Talmadge. Not only have Negroes in the South been sent to jail on charges of this sort but many have been lynched for equally improbable "crimes." Negroes have been lynched for being too prosperous, for talking back to a white man, for refusing to turn off a road to let a white boy in an automobile pass, and even for wearing the uniform of the United States Army. Getting rid of an "uppity" Negro by charging him with theft has been done so often in the South that only a New York drama critic apparently believes it unlikely.[38]

Throughout the civil rights period, most major critics would remain out of touch with the reality of America's racial situation.

Buoyed by "money" reviews, good word of mouth, and controversy, *Deep Are the Roots* proved that a play about civil rights issues could be good box office, recovering its investors' money after only forty-five of its 477 performances, and later playing well in London.[39] So successful was it that it helped set the pattern for a number of the plays that

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[36] Robert Garland, "'Deep Are the Roots' Opens at the Fulton," *New York Journal-American*, 27 September 1945.
[37] Louis Kronenberger, "Faulty, But Worth Seeing," *PM*, 27 September 1945.
[38] Quoted in D'Usseau and Gow, Preface to *Deep Are the Roots*, xxii-xxiii.
[39] Heath, *Deep Are the Roots*, 104; Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 193.

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followed it, but some people charged that its very success hurt the receipts of comparable plays that opened during its run.

Strange Fruit

In February, 1944, Lillian Smith, a little-known writer from a small town in Georgia, published *Strange Fruit*, a first novel about Southern life.[40] Its major plot elements, miscegenation and lynching, earned it an official ban in Boston, and established Smith as a prominent spokesperson for progressive Southerners for the next two decades.[41]

Critics as diverse as Diana Trilling, Malcolm Cowley, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Theophilus Lewis agreed that *Strange Fruit* was a powerful and important novel. Trilling, for example, wrote in the *Nation* that

> "Strange Fruit" is so wide in its human understanding that its Negro tragedy becomes the tragedy of anyone who lives in a world in which minorities suffer; when it ends in a lynching, we are as sorry and frightened for the lynchers as for the victim. Indeed, we are terrified, for ourselves, at the realization that this is what we have made of our human possibility.[42]

Late in the spring of 1944, Smith signed a contract with José Ferrer and Arthur S. Friend to dramatize *Strange Fruit*. Smith's younger sister, Esther, a drama professor, helped her write the script over the following year. The original plan was to use a single set on a curtainless stage, and to employ blackouts and spotlights to change scenes. The producers, however, considered this form too "experimental," and Ferrer convinced Smith to write a more standard play with set changes. By August, 1945, when the sisters

[40] Lillian Smith, *Strange Fruit* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944).
[41] Anne C. Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 68-72.
[42] Quoted in Loveland, *Lillian Smith*, 69.

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Smith moved to New York for casting and rehearsals, *Strange Fruit* had become large and fairly unwieldy, its dozen scenes requiring thirty-four actors and half-a-dozen complete sets.[43]

Like the novel, the play is set in the small town of Maxwell, Georgia, but unlike the novel, which takes place shortly after World War I, the play's action occurs "in your time and mine."[44] Tracy Deen, a weak-willed and directionless white youth learns that his childhood friend and now lover, a Black girl named Nonnie Anderson, is pregnant with his child. Shaken, Tracy suggests that Nonnie give the baby up or obtain an illegal abortion, but she insists on keeping the baby, and offers to move North with Tracy. Shortly thereafter, Preacher Dunwoodie, a fire-and-brimstone revivalist, who has heard rumors of Tracy's miscegenation, sits him down for a long talk: he says it is understandable for a young white man to desire Black women, but:

> Every time a white man does that, he's doing something unnatural, and unclean. Sinning against his own blood. ... You have a dog, seems right human. You'd a lot rather be around that dog than anybody you every knew. But it's still a dog. You don't forget that (64).

As for Nonnie, Dunwoodie advises Tracy to "find some good darkie to marry her ... Give him some money to light a fire under him and get him moving fast."

The second act begins with Tracy remembering a scene from his childhood, in which his dimwitted Black friend and servant, Henry, calls a little white girl "dirty white trash—white—white trash" after she calls him "you little black nigger"; afterwards, Henry is soundly beaten by his mother, to teach him for his own safety never to

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[43] Louise Blackwell and Frances Clay, *Lillian Smith* (New York: Twayne, 1971), 56; Loveland, *Lillian Smith*, 73-74.

[44] Lillian Smith, *Strange Fruit*, unnumbered page. Typescript in Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

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antagonize white people (11). Back in the present, Tracy pays Henry one hundred dollars to marry Nonnie: Henry then brags in town about the source of his newfound wealth, and Nonnie's brother Ed, furious, tracks Tracy down and shoots him dead. Nonnie and Ed's parents immediately spirit Ed out of town, and a mob of white townspeople, demanding a Black victim for their rage, seize Henry and lynch him. Preacher Dunwoodie, like most of the white people in town, denies any responsibility for the tragic events he has helped set in motion: "A servant of God," he says, "has no business mixing in such matters" (64). Two young white people, however, however, recognize their complicity in their society's racism, and begin to contemplate doing something about it:

> Harriet: Harry and Tracy ... we lynched them both ... We can't keep on—like this ... Would you have the courage to change things?
> Charlie: Right now, I'm more scared not to.
> Harriet: But—tomorrow (64-65).

The play closes as it opened, on the town's main street, with a shadowy Black figure stooping to drink from a "Whites Only" water fountain.

Strange Fruit, like *Deep Are the Roots*, marked an advance over older plays in its emphasis on the evils of lynching, and by stressing the necessity of changing the established system of racism in the South. However, by centering on the titillating subject of miscegenation, both plays continued in the major line of plays written about Blacks by white playwrights since the 1920s.[45]

(Coincidentally, Smith originally intended the title *Strange Fruit* to describe not lynching, but the undesired byproducts of Southern old-time religion, including "hate and fear and guilt." In the song "Strange Fruit," however, which Billy Holliday popularized

[45] The 1930s also saw several films dealing with lynching, including *Fury* and *You'll Never Forget*.

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in her 1942 recording of it, the phrase refers to a lynching, so most readers and playgoers took it to be about lynching rather than about broader societal problems.)[46]

Strange Fruit premiered in Montreal, and toured to Toronto, Boston, and Philadelphia before opening at New York's Royale Theatre on 29 November 1945. The large cast included Jane White (the daughter of the NAACP's executive director, Walter White) as Nonnie, Melchor Ferrer as Tracy, Earl Jones as Henry, and Edna Thomas as Henry's mother. The settings were by Jo Mielziner's protégé George Jenkins.[47]

On the whole, the New York critics felt that the play was a sincere attempt to deal with a difficult subject, but that its message was muffled by its sheer size. The cast and scenic design received consistently fine notices, but "All too often," Wilella Waldorf wrote in the New York *Post*, "Mr. Ferrer, as director, seems to be more of a traffic control officer than anything else."[48] Still, John Chapman in the *Daily News*, Louis Kronenberger in *PM*, and Stark Young in the *New Republic* found *Strange Fruit* better in some respects than *Deep Are the Roots*.[49]

The Black response was more divided. Abram Hill, in the *Amsterdam News*, reported "with a great deal of consternation" that the play was "a sprawling piece of inept theatre that borders on the bore."[50] Walter White, who had helped Smith find the publisher for her original novel, was distressed that the character Nonnie—played, after

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[46] Loveland, *Lillian Smith*, 66-67.
[47] Ibid., 74; Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1945-1946*, 212.
[48] Wilella Waldorf, "'Strange Fruit' Loses Force in Dramatization." *New York Post*, 30 November 1945.
[49] John Chapman, "'Strange Fruit' Splendidly Staged, Honestly Writtern—But Episodic." *New York Daily News*, 30 November 1945; Louis Kronenberger, "Less Power Than Purpose." *PM*, 30 November 1945; Loveland, *Lillian Smith*, 78.
[50] Abe Hill, "Calls 'Strange Fruit' 'Big Disappointment.'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 1 December 1945.

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all, by his own daughter—would squander her education and her love on a white milquetoast like Tracy. And people Smith called "embittered Negro racists" frequently met Jane White at the stage door "to tell her she was disgracing the Negro race."[51]

Paul Robeson, on the other hand, found the play deeply moving. Smith recalled that when Robeson came backstage after one performance to speak to the cast,

> ... he began calmly but in a moment he was weeping as he said he had been looking at his life; that he never expected to see such a truthful, honest, deeply understanding play in his lifetime; but here it was; he stopped and sobbed for a moment; then he went on telling us about his childhood; and by this time we were all crying, whites and blacks together, holding each other's hands, sometimes suddenly putting our arms around the person next to us. It was so beautiful, so real, so genuine, so quietly dramatic. ... He was truly great that night.[52]

Emotion aside, because of its large cast and complex sets, the show needed full houses at most performances to pay its costs. At the same time, *Deep Are the Roots*, which because of its comparable subject-matter had the same pool of potential customers, was pulling in large crowds. When audiences diminished and Ferrer announced that the show would close, Smith used her entire earnings on the play—fifteen thousand dollars—to keep it going another two weeks. It finally closed after 60 performances, on 19 January 1946.[53]

Smith later maintained that some Communists tried to sabotage *Strange Fruit* in order to promote what she called "their official play," *Deep Are the Roots*. She claimed that the Communist line was that "a white girl must be in love with a Negro man and best of all a Negro from 'the masses,'" and that the New York press and even the "Commie-dominated" stagehands had conspired to ruin her play. According to Smith's

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[51] Quoted in Loveland, *Lillian Smith*, 76.
[52] Ibid., *Lillian Smith*, 78-79.
[53] Loveland, *Lillian Smith*, 74; Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1945-1946*, 212.

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biographer, there was little or no evidence for Smith's charges. Rather, feeling "resentful, bitter, even slightly paranoid" she simply had difficulty accepting that her play had not been a success.[54]

After the play closed, Smith remained active, publishing and speaking widely on civil rights and other liberal issues until her death in 1966. But perhaps wisely, she never wrote for the theatre again.[55]

A Young American

The first postwar off-Broadway play concerned with Black-white relations was produced initially by the Blackfriars Theatre, a nonprofit Catholic ensemble on West 57th Street run by two Dominican priests, Urban Nagle and Tom Carey. *A Young American* was written by Edwin M. Bronner, a radio drama critic who before the war had studied playwriting with John Gassner at the New School and Hatcher Hughes at Columbia.[56] His play followed the pattern of *Deep Are the Roots* by moving a young and talented Black man into a white household with a beautiful daughter, but brought it closer to home by setting the action entirely in New York. Though Bronner's play was not written with D'Usseau and Gow's deftness, or produced with Kazan's skill, it garnered respectable reviews and very nearly achieved a Broadway run.

The three-act, five-scene play, which is set in the present, takes place entirely in the elaborate New York apartment of Alexander Cortell, a famous conductor.[57] As the first act opens, Cortell has invited a brilliant young Pennsylvanian composer, William Farrell,

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[54] Loveland, *Lillian Smith*, 77-79.
[55] Blackwell and Clay, *Lillian Smith*, 60.
[56] L. C., "Tragedy of Manners." *New York Times*, 18 January 1946.
[57] Edwin M. Bronner, *A Young American*, typescript in Shubert Archive, New York.

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whose symphony Cortell has awarded a major prize, to live and work with him for six weeks while preparing the symphony for its premiere. When Farrell arrives, however, he turns out to be Black and, incredibly, a naive orphan who has never experienced racial prejudice. Farrell is befriended by Cortell's open-minded daughter Lynn, which worries her racist boyfriend Steve. The old housekeeper, Mrs. Hastings, refuses to work for a Black man and is temporarily replaced by a new Black maid named Sophie.

The second act takes place a month later. Farrell's old music teacher, Harmon, arrives from Pennsylvania, and immediately sees that Farrell has been traumatized by the racism he has found in New York. Cortell, suddenly hostile, berates Farrell for taking a brief break from his work, and forbids him to attend a reception being held that night by the orchestra in his honor. Resentful, Farrell goes out on the town with Sophie, who returns drunk and blackens a portrait of Cortell with a bottle of ink. Cortell blames the vandalism on Farrell, who runs out into the night, deeply hurt.

The third act takes place the evening of the concert. Cortell apologizes to Lynn for his treatment of Farrell, admitting that he was groundlessly worried about miscegenation. Cortell's business manager brings in Farrell, whom he has found standing in the rain outside the symphony hall, reading posters for the concert. Farrell explains that he has spent the last week in Harlem, soaking up Black culture, and Cortell apologizes to Farrell. Farrell attempts to overcome Steve's bigotry, but Steve responds by hitting Farrel and suggesting that he should be lynched. Lynn breaks off her engagement to Steve. Word comes that Harmon is dying, and Farrell decides to return to Pennsylvania to see him rather than attend the concert.

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As Nagle remembered it, Blackfriars accepted Bronner's play because it did "something different from most racial plays," putting "the blame and the hope on people—all people, regardless of their color." It was directed by the Guild's Dennis Gurney. The cast consisted mostly of Guild regulars, but included as Farrell the young Louis Peterson, who would later write *Take a Giant Step* (1953), and who was apparently cast because he could play the piano.[58] Because both *A Young American* and *Take a Giant Step* center talented but naive young Black men who become interested in Black culture after rejection by the white world, James Hatch has conjectured that Peterson's experience with *A Young American* may have helped inspire him to write *Take a Giant Step*.[59]

A Young American opened at the Blackfriars' Theatre, on 17 January 1946, and received some poor but many surprisingly supportive notices. The *Times* reviewer, for example, called it "pungent" and "a work of fine dramatic unity."[60] And the *Herald Tribune* found it "a creditable new drama with moments of intelligence worthy of a more prominent production."[61]

The play ran for 26 performances, closing 10 February 1946.[62] During its run, however, a number of Broadway and Hollywood producers evidently decided it was a valuable property, and had a bidding war for it. The Shuberts won because, as theatre owners as well as producers, they could guarantee the availability of a theatre. They

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[58] Nagle, *Behind the Masque*, 236.
[59] James V. Hatch, interview with the author, 25 February 1995.
[60] L. C. "Tragedy of Manners."*New York Times*, 18 January 1946.
[61] Quoted in Robert Louis Hobbs, "Off-Broadway: The Early Years, 1944-1952" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1952), 55.
[62] Mantle, *The Best Plays of 1945-46*, 400.

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hired de Albert de Courville to direct, and on 26 February 1946, after some cast changes and hasty rewrites, *A Young American* opened for a tryout in Chicago. The Chicago press handed in some deadly reviews, and the play ran for only twelve days, closing for good on 9 March 1946. It never made it to Broadway.[63]

Earth and Stars

One of the most timely as well as one of the most prescient civil rights plays of the immediate postwar era was Randolph Edmonds' *Earth and Stars*. Subtitled "An Original Problem Play of Reconversion," it addressed the impact on civil rights of the nation's return to a peacetime economy.

Born in Virginia and educated at Oberlin and Columbia, Randolph Edmonds (1900-1983) spent most of his career teaching at Black colleges in the South. In 1930 he organized the Negro Inter-Collegiate Drama Association; in 1935 he established the drama department at Dillard University in New Orleans; and in 1936 he founded the National Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts, which in 1970 honored him as "The Dean of Black Educational Theatre." He wrote some four dozen plays, some of which were printed in the three published compilations of his work: *Shades and Shadows* (1930), *Six Plays for a Negro Theatre* (1934), and *The Land of Cotton and Other Plays* (1942).[64]

[63] Nagle, *Behind the Masque*, 239-240.

[64] James V. Hatch, ed., *Black Theatre USA* (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 241-242; Darwin Turner, *Black Drama in America: An Anthology* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1971), 377-379.

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A two-act play in the realistic mode, *Earth and Stars* is set entirely in a home in a Southern community called Southern City.[65] The home belongs to Joshua Judson, a Black minister whose ambitious program of social action for his parish includes the construction of new building to house a cooperative store, a recreation hall, a childcare center, and a nursery school. Judson's allies in these plans include his son (a veteran), his prospective son-in-law, and a Jewish union organizer. His opponents include his wife and daughter, who fear for his safety; two "Uncle Toms" from the congregation; a representative of the bishop, who opposes ministerial involvement in secular matters; two Southern crackers; and a white liberal. Despite repeated threats, Judson remains true to his beliefs and his program, making clear that his life is less important than his principles:

> Right causes must be dramatized, and nothing does this better than the blood of martyrs: Negro people have died in every way except this. ... I consider it my duty to make them see that if we are to advance we must have unity, and as a first step to that unity, I am proposing that those who worship, join hands with those who work. ... I do not wish to destroy, I wish to build. Not fine churches, but an organization of men and women dedicated to the task to help make better this chaotic world.[66]

Even when a mob led by the crackers kills his son, Joshua refuses to adopt violence, deciding instead to preach his reformist gospel on downtown street corners for the white populace—knowing full well that he will probably be martyred in the process.

The prose and characterizations in *Earth and Stars* may sometimes have been a bit wooden, but the play's analysis of the contemporary political situation was penetrating, even prophetic. The most prominent leaders of the civil rights movement would prove to

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[65] The original version of *Earth and Stars* has never been published. This synopsis is based upon the discussion of the play in Allen Williams, "Sheppard Randolph Edmonds: his contributions to Black educational theatre" (Ph.D. diss., University of Indiana, 1972), 202-216.

[66] Ibid., 213-214.

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be Black clergymen working in alliance with left-leaning labor unions. Just such an array of allies and opponents as surrounds Joshua would remain critical factors as the movement progressed. And the martyrdoms of movement leaders and workers, including rank-and-file participants as well as the better-known Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr., would provide the most compelling evidence of their personal commitment to the cause.

The drama department at Dillard University, where Edmonds was then teaching, gave *Earth and Stars* its first production. Directed by Edmonds himself, it played four performances during Negro History Week, running from 13 February to 16 February 1946.[67] Throughout the civil rights era it was among the most frequently revived civil rights plays at Black colleges and universities. In 1961, concerned that the play was losing its currency, Edmonds updated it, deleting references to World War II and adding sit-ins, freedom rides, and other timely references.[68] By the early 1970s the two versions of *Earth and Stars* had been produced over one hundred times.[69]

Jeb

On 21 February 1946, a month after the United Nations General Assembly first met in London, and two weeks before Churchill warned that "an iron curtain has descended across the Continent,"[70] Robert Ardrey's *Jeb* opened at the Martin Beck Theatre. Like *Deep Are the Roots* and *Strange Fruit*, *Jeb*—which Ardrey himself later described as a

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[67] Ibid., 207.
[68] Edmonds' 1961 rewrite of the play has been published in Turner, *Black Drama in America*, 377-463.
[69] Hatch, *Black Theatre USA*, 241-242.
[70] Schlesinger, *The Almanac of American History*, 514.

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"civil-rights" play[71]—centered around a Black war hero, in this case denied a job he became qualified for while in the Army; also like them, it demonized the South and used lynching as a plot element, but it avoided their concentration on miscegenation the better to focus on discrimination. A three-act morality fable with a political message, *Jeb* found little support among either critics or audiences, and quickly closed.

Robert Ardrey was 38 years old, a former writing student of Thornton Wilder and an unapologetic holdover of the 1930s' *théâtre engagé*. Two of his earlier plays, *Casey Jones* (1937) and *Thunder Rock* (1939), had been produced by the Group Theatre, each to less-than-flattering notices. *Casey Jones* dealt with "the enslavement of the individual by his [uncreative] job," but was most notable for providing Elia Kazan his first major production.[72] *Thunder Rock* (1939), about a nineteenth-century shipwreck in Lake Michigan, was really a thinly veiled allegory concerning America's role in the expected European war. *Thunder Rock* was panned by the New York critics, but it was a success in pre-war London, and was one of the first plays produced in Berlin after the war—cast entirely with concentration camp survivors.[73]

Ardrey's motivation for writing *Jeb* appears to have been both personal and political. He later recalled that he "had been with the American Negro always." He had grown up on the edge of a Black neighborhood in Chicago, had attended integrated schools, and had played jazz piano in night clubs. He had also lived for a time in the South, where he had witnessed Jim Crow firsthand.[74] In planning *Jeb*, he consciously

[71] Robert Ardrey, *Plays of Three Decades* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 25.
[72] Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 204.
[73] Ardrey, *Plays of Three Decades*, 20-23.
[74] Ibid., 24.

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rejected the miscegenation themes of *Deep Are the Roots* and *Strange Fruit*, because "I knew that no white attitude more infuriated the Negro than the assumption that his problems could be reduced to sex. Such sentimental postures served to cloud, even to enhance the one problem that mattered to him: discrimination."[75]

The play opens in the spring of 1945, in the Elite Café, a sleazy Black bar in the North.[76] Two uniformed Black veterans, Jeb Turner and his buddy Hazy Saunders, arrive for a quick drink before Jeb returns to his Southern home. Jeb has lost a leg in the war, but has acquired medals for heroism and a skill unusual for Blacks: operating an adding machine. Some of the bar's regulars feel Jeb is crazy to want to return to the South, but Jeb rejoins that "if an ignorant old colored boy like me could learn something, all this fighting, then I got faith and trust white folks, they learned something too." Recognizing Jeb as a *naïf*, the regulars get him drunk and steal his discharge money, leaving him only with his train ticket.

Back home in Louisiana, Jeb is reunited with his family and his fiancée, Libby. He also asks Mr. Devour, the manager of the local sugar factory, for the job of Mr. Gibney, a white drunkard who currently operates the company adding machine. Devour is sympathetic, but nearly loses his own job when he suggests the idea to the plant's owner; Devour then tries to convince Jeb that his "nigra" mind is too emotional to operate an adding machine properly. Shaken, Jeb sneaks into the plant that night with Libby, and using Gibney's adding machine, proves to himself that he really can operate it with skill;

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[75] Ibid., 24.
[76] Robert Ardrey, *Jeb*, in Ardrey, *Plays of Three Decades*, 93-168.

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Gibney, however, arrives drunk, realizes Jeb wants his job, slaps Libby and tries to attack Jeb.

The next day, Gibney spreads rumors through the town that he found Jeb at the plant with a white woman. Armed bands of "white trash" begin searching for Jeb, hoping to lynch him. Jeb learns that Libby has abandoned him and left for the North with another young man: in near-despair, he is chased by a small mob into the middle of a white church service. The parishioners eject him and he is beaten by the mob, though despite his disability he eventually manages to escape.

The play concludes back in the Elite Café, several weeks later. Hazy has taken in Jeb, who now spends each night in the back room listening to the house pianist play the blues. Libby arrives, having tracked Jeb down: she regrets having abandoned him, and hopes that they can now marry and live together in the North. Jeb is touched, but cannot stomach the thought of his brothers in the South having to "bow and scrape and take what the white folks leave them." He resolves to return home to the South to continue his fight for justice in a battle that "ain't much different" from the war in Europe.

Structurally, *Jeb* is a fairly standard morality fable with overtones of melodrama. It makes effective use of the bar scenes as a framing device, and centers around an absolutely honest and upstanding innocent Everyman in a dangerous and corrupting world. Its best episodes are those set in the bar, and the scene (exactly in the middle of the play) in which Jeb works the adding machine—probably not coincidentally the same device chosen by Elmer Rice as the central image of his 1923 expressionist play *The Adding Machine*. The other scenes set in the South are more formulaic and poorer both in characterization and in detail. Music is used with particular skill throughout: almost every

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scene ends with the piano blues, which provides a surprising but fitting counterpoint to the rythmic whirring of the adding machine.

Jeb was produced and directed by Herman Shumlin, best known for his work on Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934), *The Little Foxes* (1939), and *Watch on the Rhine* (1941).[77] The business manager was David Merrick, then Shumlin's assistant, and the scene and lighting designs were by the ubiquitous Jo Mielziner. The cast of twenty-three was headed by Ossie Davis, who had begun his career with the Rose McClendon Players (1938-42), as Jeb, and Ruby Dee, who had previously been involved with Abram Hill's American Negro Theatre (1940-50), as Libby.[78] Davis and Dee, whose work would form one of the strongest threads in the fabric of civil rights theatre, met and began their lifelong partnership on this production.[79]

Jeb drew uneven reviews. The critics liked Davis and the other cast members; John Chapman, ignoring the historical paucity of roles for Black performers, babbled in the *Daily News* that "Negroes must be born actors, for always there is the right man or the right woman for the right part."[80] Most critics were also satisfied with Shumlin's directing and Mielziner's sets, but the script itself received few good notices. Howard Barnes, writing for the *Herald Tribune*, hailed it "a drama of high eloquence and indignation,"[81] but Ward Morehouse, in the *Sun*, was more typical in dubbing it "a

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[77] Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 622.
[78] Hay, *African American Theatre*, 172.
[79] Alice M. Robinson, Vera Mowry Roberts, and Milly S. Barranger, eds., *Notable Women in the American Theatre: A Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 200.
[80] John Chapman, "'Jeb' Honestly Written, Well Acted—But Spotty in Dramatic Effect," *Daily News*, 22 February 1946.
[81] Howard Barnes, "Moving and Disturbing," *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 February 1946.

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sincere, outspoken, awkward drama."[82] The *Post*'s Vernon Rice, who complained that the play replaced characterization with "melodrama and stage effects," observed that "*Jeb* will probably make *Deep Are the Roots* seem a much better play than it is," and even suggested that "a play about the Negro problem" ought to be "written by a Negro."[83] Abram Hill, in the *Amsterdam News*, wrote perhaps the most insightful review: he considered the production and acting superb, but found the drama centered not around "people whose bodies and souls are made thoroughly human," but around a "dumbell hero" whose story is an unbroken series of clichés culminating with his "deciding to go back South and try again to make white people understand!"[84]

Jeb closed after only nine performances, the victim of poor reviews and competition from *Deep Are the Roots*, which was still drawing good crowds.[85] It lost virtually its entire investment of eighty-five thousand dollars, and Shumlin was so embittered that he did no new plays for several seasons. Ardrey too moved away from playwriting for some years, and later concluded that *Jeb* was "almost twenty years" ahead of its time.[86] The actors fared better: Davis, Dee, and Laura Bowman (who played Jeb's mother) were immediately cast in one of the touring companies of *Anna Lucasta*.[87]

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[82] Ward Morehouse, "'Jeb' Is Honest and Outspoken, but Misses Being Actually a Good Play," *Sun*, 22 February 1946.
[83] Vernon Rice, "Robert Ardrey's 'Jeb' Is a Disappointing Play," *New York Post*, 22 February 1946.
[84] Abe Hill, "Jeb: Form No Matter," *New York Amsterdam News*, 2 March 1946.
[85] George Jean Nathan, *Theatre Book of the Year, 1945-1946*, 316.
[86] Ardrey, *Plays of Three Decades*, 25.
[87] Hine, *Black Women in America*, 154.

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Blood in the Night

The first postwar civil rights play written by an African American and produced in New York was *Blood in the Night*. The play's author, Loften Mitchell, was a young Harlemite who would later have a profound impact on Black theatre.

Loften Mitchell was born in North Carolina in 1919, but was raised in Harlem. A theatre devotée from an early age, while still in high school he acted with the Rose McClendon Players.[88] In 1938 he formed his own troupe, Pioneer Drama, which produced his first play, *Shattered Dreams*. This play was about a Black draftee who is killed in battle and goes to heaven, but is sent back to earth by Saint Peter, only to discover that the freedoms he fought for are not to be found there.[89]

Mitchell attended City College in New York, but transferred to Talladega College in Alabama, where he wrote *Blood in the Night* as his bachelor's thesis in 1943.[90] The play was based on the true story of a Black Talladega physician, Dr. Brummitt, who in the 1920s had been flogged by the Ku Klux Klan and forced to move North for having treated both Black and white patients. He eventually settled in Chicago, where he became a successful dermatologist.

Mitchell dramatized the story by pitting the doctor (here renamed Dr. Stuart) against not only the Klan, but also against a conservative Black colleague. The play emphasizes the conflict between the progressive and conservative approaches by alternating scenes between the homes of the two doctors. Dr. Stuart infuriates the Ku Klux Klan and terrifies his "Uncle Tom" colleague by being a union activist and civil

[88] "Mitchell, Loften," *Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series*, 26:281.
[89] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 26 September 1994.
[90] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 21 October 1994.

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rights advocate who treats both Black and white patients. Eventually, a Klan mob drags Dr. Stuart offstage and flogs him; when he reenters, his back is streaked with blood, and as he staggers home, he decides to move his family North, to the comparative safety of Chicago.

The play's title was a quotation from a poem by Mitchell's college friend and roommate, James C. Morris:

> The years will pass, another brown maid's heart will pain,
> And I shall weep blood in the night forever again.

Though one of Mitchell's earliest and simplest works, the basic dramatic situation of *Blood in the Night* gives an unusual insight into the political conflicts faced by many early Black civil rights advocates. On one hand they were confronted with the worst kind of racism, and felt morally obliged to combat it; but on the other they were pressured by some established Black leaders to leave well enough alone. This conflict, between being an activist and an "Uncle Tom," will come up again and again in civil rights plays, especially those by Black playwrights.

After the war, Mitchell's company produced *Blood in the Night* in a small theatre in the basement of Harlem's 115th Street Library. In honor of their performing space and their egalitarian objectives, the group dubbed itself the 115th Street People's Theatre. The cast included Wilfred B. Smith as Stuart, Theodore Grant as the "Uncle Tom," Betty Samuels as Stuart's ingenue daughter, Loften Mitchell as her boyfriend, and George Moore as a sympathetic white townsperson. James C. Morris also played a small part.

Blood in the Night was performed on Friday nights, beginning in March, 1946. Though Mitchell now says "it was terrible," and despite the fact that no reviews of it

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were published, it ran until June, 1946. "People came back to that damned show night after night," Mitchell recalls. "I know people who saw it six and seven times. And only hot weather, I think, closed it down. The community response to it was something else again. They laughed, they cried, they applauded. I don't remember any empty seats in that damned theatre."

On Whitman Avenue

The last civil rights play of the 1945-46 Broadway season was Maxine Wood's *On Whitman Avenue*, which opened a year and a day after the defeat of Germany. A cautionary tale in realistic form, it centers on discrimination in housing; it is unusual in that it is set in the North, and emphasizes the destructive effects of racial prejudice not only upon its victims, but upon its perpetrators.

Maxine Wood was a white native of Detroit who had moved to New York during the Depression to write. During the war years, she created and sold a large volume of work, mostly radio and television scripts (especially soap operas) and short stories. As a child she had followed the case of a Black Detroit dentist named Scott, whose family had been attacked after moving to a white neighborhood; this and the race riots that tore Detroit early in the war inspired her to write a stage play about race and housing in the North. She began work on it in 1942 or 1943.[91]

On Whitman Avenue is set entirely in the yard of a "typical" white midwestern family shortly after the end of World War II.[92] As the play opens, Ed and Kate Tilden are returning home to Lawndale from a short trip to the South with their young son

[91] Maxine Wood, interview with James Hatch, 10 December 1974. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.
[92] Maxine Wood, *On Whitman Avenue* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1944).

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Johnny. They quickly discover that while they were gone, their daughter Toni, an idealistic college student, rented the second floor of their two-family house to a Black family. The Bennetts consist of David, a decorated war hero who spent the previous year in a veteran's hospital, his pregnant wife Wini, his younger brother Owen, his mother, and his grandfather.

The community and soon the Tilden family itself are divided about having Blacks in the neighborhood. A committee, organized by the local realty company and led by a "moderate" named Walter Lund, arrives at the Tildens' to convince them to evict the Bennetts without delay. Kate Tilden, aghast that her family is upsetting the neighborhood, supports immediate eviction, but Ed, fairer and more thoughtful than his wife, convinces the others at least to give the Bennetts a month's notice.

The second act sees the conflict over the Bennetts tear the Tilden family apart. Lund convinces Ed to evict the Bennetts before the month is up by threatening not to renew the lease on Ed's store. Lund's son Bernie incites Johnny Tilden to chase Owen, with whom Johnny was initially friendly; Toni wrestles from Owen a small gardening knife he has picked up to defend himself, and soon the neighborhood racists—now including Kate—are screaming about razors and rape. On moving day Bernie and Johnny bodily attack Owen; Gramp defends his grandson, but suffers a mild heart attack. By the time the Bennetts finally move out, the neighborhood is irrevocably polarized, Toni has decided to leave home forever, and Ed is considering leaving Kate.

Like Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (which opened on Broadway just eight months later), *On Whitman Avenue* uses a midwestern yard as a kind of laboratory for testing the American character. Wood said she named the avenue of the play's title for Walt

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Whitman, the great American poet of democracy.[93] Perhaps she also named it for the "white men" who live there.

About 1944, Wood finished an early draft of the play, in which Ed Tilden fought harder for the Bennetts, who remained in their apartment at the play's conclusion. Wood's agent, Janet Cohn, read the script and wept, but felt it was too radical for Broadway. Herman Shumlin considered it briefly before deciding to do *Jeb* instead. The Black actor Canada Lee, an acquaintance of Wood's, wanted to produce and act in it, and arranged to have his friend Mark Marvin, a white manager, co-produce it.[94] Frank Carlson, a civil rights lawyer, was enthusiastic about the play, and began the long process of raising money for it from small backers (ironically, some red-baiters would later charge that it was financed by "Moscow gold").

The script underwent some changes as it wended its way to production. Lee convinced Wood to change the ending to evict the Bennetts and thereby to destroy the Tilden family. Another small change was suggested after a reading attended by Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, who said to Wood, "Maxine, you know you have too many cuss-words in that play. They're going to try to close it down. They'll do anything to close it down. So can you cut out a few 'bastards'?" Wood toned down the language as suggested, and was grateful for the advice when Detroit's Chief of Police tried to convince her not to bring the show to Detroit.[95]

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[93] Maxine Wood, interview with James Hatch, 10 December 1974. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.

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Lee and Marvin, in association with George McLain, organized a fine production team.[96] Many members of the team were alumni of the Federal Theatre Project. The director, Margo Jones, whose *The Glass Menagerie* opened on Broadway only five weeks before *On Whitman Avenue*, had been the assistant director of the Federal Theatre's Houston office.[97] (Ironically, like other Southern theatres, Jones' Dallas Civic Theatre, which opened in 1947, had segregated seating.)[98] Settings and lighting were by Donald Oenslager, who had designed such Broadway shows as *Johnny Johnson* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *Born Yesterday* (1946).[99] Lee, who played David Bennett, had first appeared professionally in *Meek Mose* (1928) and had performed a number of roles for the Federal Theatre, but his fame rested largely on his portrayal of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* (1941).[100] Ed Tilden was played by Will Geer, who had appeared in John Houseman and Orson Welles' production (originally Federal Theatre, later Mercury Theatre) of Marc Blitzstein's folk opera *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937).[101] David's mother was played by the actress and singer Abbie Mitchell: this prominent actress had debuted at the age of thirteen in *Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk* (1897), had married its composer Will Marion Cook, and had since appeared in such plays as Paul Green's *In Abraham's* Bosom (1926) and Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (1939).[102] Augustus

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[96] John Chapman, "'On Whitman Avenue' Offered at the Cort," *Daily News*, 9 May 1946.
[97] Frick and Vallillo, *Theatrical Directors*, 206-208; Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 297.
[98] Maxine Wood, interview with James Hatch, 10 December 1974. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.
[99] Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 516.
[100] Ibid., 422.
[101] John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, *The Federal Theatre Project: 'Free, Adult, Uncensored'* (London: Methuen, 1980), 28.
[102] Hine, *Black Women in America*, 802-3.

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Smith, who had co-authored the Federal Theatre play *Turpentine* (1936) with Peter Morell, played Gramp.

The show premiered in Buffalo, and in April played Detroit, where it was such a great success that it had to be held over a week to accommodate demand. Wood later recalled that the mixed cast coalesced into a close-knit team: in Detroit, for example, when the road manager tried to house Abbie Mitchell in a "Y," Jones insisted that Mitchell share her hotel room. While in Detroit, however, a committee of actors quietly complained that Ernestine Barrier, who played Kate Tilden, was getting "tighter and tighter and more hysterical," and should be replaced for the good of the play. Wood and Jones let her remain, and the play opened with its cast intact at New York's Cort Theatre on 8 May 1946.[103]

The reviews were mixed but generally negative. The *Sun*'s Ward Morehouse called the play "an awkward and struggling drama and quite the weakest of the racial problem plays that have come along this season,"[104] and the *Herald Tribune*'s Howard Barnes gave it "a high mark for sincerity, [though] it is lean on theatrical effectiveness."[105] The *Times*' Lewis Nichols (who Wood later heard had been "dead drunk" at the performance) called Wood "not a practiced playwright," and her play "not good theatre."[106] The *Post*'s Vernon Rice, however, called *On Whitman Avenue* "that play on the Negro question for

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[103] Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1946-1947*, 13; Maxine Wood, interview with James Hatch, 10 December 1974. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.
[104] Ward Morehouse, "'On Whitman Avenue' Naive and Obvious, Weakest of Race-problem Plays." *Sun*, 9 May 1946.
[105] Howard Barnes, "Rocky Street." *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 May 1946.
[106] Maxine Wood, interview with James Hatch, 10 December 1974. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York; Lewis Nichols, "The Play." *New York Times*, 9 May 1946.

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which we have all been waiting,"[107] and the *World-Telegram*'s William Hawkins wrote that Wood "has the firm painstaking touch of a Hellman."[108]

The production team and actors fared little better. Oenslager's elaborate set was generally admired, but Louis Kronenberger spoke for many when he called Jones' direction "shaky," and "so good an actor as Canada Lee ... guilty of bad overacting."[109] Ernestine Barrier came in for the most withering criticism: Hawkins was typical in writing that "she has unfortunately let her pitch become hysterical to a point where the speeches which should make some explanation of her violent behavior become meaningless."[110] On the positive side, Rice wrote that Geer "at last has a role that is worthy of his talents," and that Mitchell and Smith "have restraint, yet smothered intensity that is exciting to watch."

Despite the poor reviews, and despite competition from *Deep Are the Roots*, *On Whitman Avenue* drew positive word-of-mouth, and eked out 148 performances.[111] Black newspapers were supportive, and Black audiences were unusually large for the period. A Black congressman from Chicago gave $1000 to help keep the play running. Some Southerners, offended in the first act by a play about "damned niggers," decided after the second act to send their friends to see the show. Wood received numerous phone calls

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[107] Vernon Rice, "'On Whitman Avenue' Boldly Faces the Negro Problem." *New York Post*, 9 May 1946.
[108] William Hawkins, "Play Hits Out at Race Prejudice," *New York World-Telegram*, 9 May 1946.
[109] Louis Kronenberger, "A Vital Theme Is Ill Handled." *PM*, 10 May 1946.
[110] William Hawkins, "Play Hits Out at Race Prejudice," *New York World-Telegram*, 9 May 1946.
[111] Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1946-1947*, 13.

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from audience members who had signed restrictive covenants, and who wanted her advice about what to do.

When *On Whitman Avenue* finally closed, there was some discussion of putting it on the road, but according to Wood, Oenslager's huge sets made a tour impossible.[112] The play was revived off-Broadway in January, 1957, but has rarely been revived since. Wood later wrote at least one other play, *A Dowry for My Daughter*, which does not appear to have been about civil rights.[113]

Finian's Rainbow

The first postwar Broadway musical dealing with America's racial situation was *Finian's Rainbow*. With a book by E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy, lyrics by Harburg, and music by Burton Lane, this successful show parodied a number of timely political subjects, notably America's myopia about race relations. Like its predecessors, it focussed on the South as the center of America's racial problems, but replaced their tone of high seriousness with an effervescent blend of fantasy and satire.

Harburg had been writing song lyrics for Broadway since 1929. His work almost always had a progressive, leftward slant. His 1932 song "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" had become a Depression anthem, and his song "The Eagle and Me" (with music by Harold Arlen) from *Bloomer Girl* (1944) was a plea for racial equality. With Harold Arlen he had also produced the spritely yet wistful score for the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*.[114] In addition to writing the lyrics for *Finian's* Rainbow, Harburg co-wrote the book

[112] Maxine Wood, interview with James Hatch, 10 December 1974. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.
[113] N.a., "Author Completes New Play," *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 January 1957.
[114] Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 321.

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with Fred Saidy, one of *Bloomer Girl*'s librettists.[115] Burton Lane, *Finian's Rainbow*'s composer, began his career as a tunesmith for Broadway revues, but had spent most of the 1930s in Hollywood.[116] He and Harburg had first met in the early 1930s, when Lane was a protégé of the Gershwin family.[117]

Harburg came up with the initial idea for *Finian's Rainbow* during the Roosevelt administration, when African Americans were beginning to receive some political recognition, but were still being fought at every turn by Southern politicians such as Mississippi's Senator Bilbo and Congressman Rankin. "It occurred to me," Harburg later recalled, "to do a show about Bilbo and Rankin. The only way I could assuage my outrage against their bigotry was to have one of them turn black and live under his own [Jim Crow] laws and see how he felt about it." Later, he combined this story idea with an allegory about the gold-based American economic system, and encased them both in an Irish-style fable.[118]

Finian's Rainbow is set entirely in the Rainbow Valley in the fictional Southern state of Missitucky.[119] Most of the local citizens are tobacco-growing Black share-croppers, and most of the land is owned by a racist U.S. Senator named Billboard Rawkins. The play's central conceit is that Finian McLonergan, a daffy Irishman, and his daughter Sharon arrive in the Rainbow Valley with a pot of magical gold swiped from a leprechaun named Og: Finian buys a tiny parcel of land, buries the gold, and waits for it

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[115] Ibid., 87-88.
[116] Ibid., 415.
[117] Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in The Wizard of Oz?*, 226-227.
[118] Ibid., 222-223.
[119] E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy, *Finian's Rainbow*, in Edward Huberman and Robert R. Raymo, eds., *Angles of Vision* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 390-441.

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to multiply. Rawkins, learning from a surveyor that the land contains gold, tries to oust Finian and his Black friends with a restrictive covenant; Sharon, angered, wishes out loud that Rawkins was Black, and poof! the magical gold instantly turns Rawkins Black.

Rawkins runs into the woods in horror, but after a time he meets up with three Black gospel singers and joins their quartet. Rawkins' henchmen threaten to burn Sharon as a witch, and Og helps turn Rawkins white again to save her. By this time, the news that gold is in the ground has given the sharecroppers a large credit account, with which they have bought farm machinery and grown wealthy. In the end, Sharon marries a local guitarist and labor organizer named Woody, Og marries Woody's sister, and Finian heads off toward his next rainbow, in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

The basic story of *Finian's Rainbow*, then, satirizes the gold standard, the Federal Reserve, and the byzantine workings of capitalism. The character Woody, who carries a guitar and sometimes speaks in the rhythm of Woody Guthrie's song "Talking Union," is clearly supposed to represent the famed dust bowl balladeer. But the subplot surrounding Billboard Rawkins—an amalgam of Mississippi's all-too-real Bilbo and Rankin—supplies much of whatever real meat the musical contains.

In Rawkins' first scene, one of his henchmen insists that an intelligent Black college student, hired as a servant during summer vacation, must learn to shuffle and scrape. The henchman himself demonstrates what a stage direction calls "the minstrel tradition of Dixie shuffle and exaggerated accent," and explains that in the South, shuffling is "a mark of breed" that "makes for kindly feelings between master and servant" (405). Rawkins enters with a tirade that satirizes not only Bilbo and Rankin but the whole Southern reactionary tradition:

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> ... before I yield up our glorious South—and her sister commonwealth, the U.S.A.—I will lay down my life. I will go further than that—I'll filibuster. Back, you crackpots, and forward, America! Forward to the hallowed principles of our forefathers! Forward to the sweet tranquility of the status quo! Forward to yesterday! (406)

When Rawkins' knowledge of the U.S. Constitution is questioned, he replies "I haven't got time to read it! I'm too busy defendin' it!" (419). When Rawkins turns Black—making "permanent," in effect, the minstrel-like blackface that his henchman earlier mimicked—Finian remarks that "Mr. Rawkins seems to have a rainbow all his own" (420), and Woody jokes that Rawkins' new color is actually "triple jaundice" brought on by prejudice (427). Rawkins has this significant exchange with Og, whom he meets while roaming in the woods:

> Og: I see nothing wrong with you.
> Rawkins: You don't? You must be blind. Can't you see I'm black?
> Og: Yes, and I think it's very becoming.
> Rawkins: But I'm a white man, dammit, a white man! At least, I was a few weeks ago.
> Og: Well *that*'s a coincidence. I was *green* a few weeks ago. Don't you find an occasional change of color interesting?
> ...
> Rawkins: You moron! Don't you realize what it means to be black?
> Og: But you're still a human being. You can still smell bee honey and listen to bird music. A rose is still a rose, despite the color of your nose.
> Rawkins: But you can't get into a restaurant. You can't get on a bus. You can't buy yourself a cold beer on a hot day. *(With disgust)* You can't even go into church and pray.
> Og: Who says you can't?
> Rawkins: The law says you can't.
> Og: The law? Mmm ... that's a silly law. Is it a legal law?
> Rawkins: Of course it's legal. I wrote it myself (429).

Og concludes that when Sharon turned Rawkins Black, "she gave you a new *out*side, when she should have given you a new *in*side" (430). In the end, when Rawkins is turned

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white again he shows that he has learned from his experience, campaigning for reelection as a populist whose platform includes opposition to poll taxes (440).

In Harburg's first draft, civil rights was an even more central concern than in the final, produced show. Originally, in Rawkins' adventures as a Black man, he is refused service at a restaurant, denied admittance to a bus, and nearly lynched for having had sex with a white woman—his wife. Composer Burton Lane, feeling that this was too heavy-handed for Broadway, convinced Harburg to excise these passages, along with all references to lynchings and sex. In the end, then, *Finian's Rainbow*'s civil rights concerns are merely a major subplot of a show that is primarily "an attack on capitalism with a countervailing praise for cooperative human behavior."[120]

Finian's Rainbow was produced by Lee Sabinson and William R. Katzell, who had also produced the short-lived *Home of the Brave* a year earlier (they chose *Finian*, by the way, over a dramatization of Howard Fast's novel of the Reconstruction era, *Freedom Road*).[121] Bretaigne Windust, the show's director, had never done a musical before, but was known for stylish productions and precise pacing: his previous work had included *Amphitrion 38* (1937) and *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1941).[122] Jo Mielziner provided the scenery and lighting, and the balletic dance sequences—the first in Broadway history to feature a mixed-race ensemble—were staged by Michael Kidd, who later choreographed

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[120] Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in The Wizard of Oz?*, 223-225.

[121] Fast originally hoped that *Freedom Road* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1944) would be filmed, starring Paul Robeson, but this hope faded in the face of the McCarthy-era blacklist. However, according to an article in the 18 October 1949 *New York Times*, a dramatization of the novel was performed in the Soviet Union. Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in The Wizard of Oz?*, 226; Howard Fast, *Being Red* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 80.

[122] Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 719.

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Guys and Dolls (1950).[123] The all-white leads were balanced by an integrated chorus that included Augustus Smith and Sonny Terry, the blind harmonica-player.

Finian's Rainbow opened at the 46th Street Theatre on 10 January 1947.[124] Reviews were overwhelmingly positive. The *Sun*'s Ward Morehouse called it "the best musical piece that has turned up in New York this season,"[125] and the *Journal American*'s Robert Garland wrote that it "has everything a grand new musical should have."[126] The Black critic Miles Jefferson, writing in *Phylon*, cheered the show both for subjecting "intolerance in the Deep South ... to light, but peppery, spoofing," and for hiring a company of performers more than one-third of whom were Black.[127] The songs (which included the hits "How Are Things in Glocca Morra?" and "Old Devil Moon"), the dancing, the acting, the directing, the sets, and the choreography all garnered high praise, and even the show's unabashedly left wing point of view drew surprisingly little carping. Only to the *Times*'s dour Brooks Atkinson did *Finian*'s "shotgun marriage of fairy-story and social significance" seem "not altogether happy," though as a whole he agreed the show "puts the American musical stage several steps forward."[128]

Armed with hit songs and these notices, *Finian's Rainbow* ran for 725 performances. In 1960, when the civil rights movement was nearing its height, the show was successfully revived at New York's City Center, opening on 27 April 1960.[129]

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[123] Ibid., 402; Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1946-1947*, 279.
[124] Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1946-1947*, 279.
[125] Ward Morehouse, "'Finian's Rainbow,' Colorful Musical Play, Jubilant Hit at 46th St. Theater," *Sun*, 11 January 1947.
[126] Robert Garland, "'Finian's Rainbow' Opens at 46th St. Theatre," *New York Journal American*, 11 January 1947.
[127] Quoted in Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in The Wizard of Oz?*, 268.
[128] Brooks Atkinson, "The Play," *New York Times*, 11 January 1947.
[129] Kronenberger, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1959-1960*, 338.

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Trial by Fire

In December, 1945, a Black family named the Shorts, that had recently moved from Los Angeles into the rural community of Fontana, California, died in a fire in their home. At the coroner's inquest, evidence was introduced that the family had previously been threatened by racists, including two sherriff's deputies, for living in a white neighborhood; that Mr. Short had reported the harassment to the local Black newspaper and to the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and that the fire's origins were highly suspicious. The district attorney, behaving more like a defense lawyer than a prosecutor, convinced the coroner's jury that a crime *might* not have been committed, and squelched further investigation of the matter.

The case did, however, come to the attention of the Rev. George H. Dunne, a Jesuit priest then working in Los Angeles. Dunne, a liberal activist, saw the Short case as just one of a series of ugly racial incidents—among them cross-burnings and synagogue-desecrations, probably Ku Klux Klan-inspired—that had been disturbing the peace of southern California.[130]

Dunne wrote two articles on the Short case for the Catholic lay journal *Commonweal*. The first strongly condemned restrictive covenants in general and the Shorts' deaths in particular, and also praised Lillian Smith—whose *Strange Fruit* had opened just months earlier—as an artist responsibly exposing a social evil.[131] The second article demonstrated,

[130] George H. Dunne, *King's Pawn: The Memoirs of George H. Dunne, S. J.* (Chicago, IL: Loyola University Press, 1990), 123.
[131] George H. Dunne, "The Short Case," *Commonweal* (1 March 1946), 454-497.

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through extensive quotations from the coroner's inquest, that the legal system itself was part of the conspiracy of silence surrounding racism in the area.[132]

Shortly thereafter, Sr. Marie de Lourdes, a professor of drama and theatre at Mount Saint Mary's College, urged Dunne to dramatize the Short case. As he remembers it, he read several volumes of recent plays, shut himself up with a typewriter, "and in three days wrote the play *Trial by Fire*." Referred by Sr. Marie, Dunne received the services of no less a dramaturg than Emmet Lavery, the playwright, former head of the Federal Theatre Project's National Service Bureau, and president of the Screen Writers Guild. At Lavery's suggestion Dunne rewrote his play, using flashbacks rather than the plodding chronology he had originally employed.[133] The resulting play owes much to the living newspaper form, with which Lavery had been closely connected at the Federal Theatre.

The title *Trial by Fire* contains three meanings. First, the play is a courtroom drama dealing with a possible arson. Second, "trial by fire" was a medieval procedure whereby accused people were burned, allowing the almighty to determine their innocence or guilt.[134] And third, the experience of watching the play was intended by the playwright to be a searing and purifying experience in itself.[135]

Trial by Fire's action alternates between a courtroom and (behind a scrim) other locations, primarily the home of the Black family, here renamed the Johnsons.[136] All the characters in the courtroom scenes treat the audience as if it were the coroner's jury

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[132] George H. Dunne, "No Accident! More on the Short Case." *Commonweal* (24 May 1946), 134-138.
[133] Dunne, *King's Pawn*, 134.
[134] Nagle, *Behind the Masque*, 266-267.
[135] Dunne, *King's Pawn*, 173.
[136] George H. Dunne, *Trial by Fire*. Unpublished typescript, gift of the playwright, collection of the author.

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investigating the Johnsons' deaths. These scenes include the testimony of the editor of the local Black newspaper, whose conclusion that the Johnsons were murdered is ignored as inexpert testimony; of Roy's brother-in-law, a lawyer whose demand that the case be pursued properly is also ignored; of Rita's sister, whose attempts to tell the district attorney about threats she overheard are rebuffed; of a real estate agent who offered to buy the Johnsons' house back from them to get them out of the area; of a terrified "Uncle Tom" businessman who claims that the Blacks in town are satisfied with segregated housing; and of an arson expert whose opinion that the house was booby-trapped is disregarded. (Incidentally, the dialogue in at least two of these scenes is lifted almost verbatim from the stenographers' transcripts of the actual Short hearing, portions of which are included in Dunne's second *Commonweal* article.)[137]

The flashback scenes are richer and more varied than the courtroom scenes. The Johnsons, Roy and Rita, and their children David and Carol Ann, are the model of a happy nuclear family: they go about their chores joking and chatting lovingly with one another, but are increasingly disturbed by the vicious threats of some of their new neighbors. Roy is visited by the deputies and the real estate agent, refuses to sell out and move back to the city, and asks in vain (as would later civil rights activists) for the FBI's help in protecting his constitutional rights. Also depicted are the events leading up to the explosion, and Applegate's climactic interview with the fatally burned Roy—in which the

[137] Specifically, Helen Parks' testimony (pp. 41-42 of *Trial by Fire* MS) is almost identical to that of Rita's sister, Marian Downs (p. 136 of "No Accident" in *Commonweal*), and Roy Johnson's final speech (pp. 67-69 of *Trial by Fire* MS) is also very similar to Mr. Short's testimony (pp. 137-138 of "No Accident").

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D.A. callously mentions to Roy, who has been kept uninformed by the doctors, that his entire family died in the fire.

The form of the final scene is especially reminiscent of the Federal Theatre's living newspapers. A disembodied voice, apparently that of God or a saint, speaks with two white men observing the Johnsons' funeral:

1st MAN: Niggers! What's the idea? Burying them alongside white folks?
VOICE: That's right, mister. Here they all lie down together, the dark and the light, the good and the bad, the sheep and the goats.
2nd MAN: That's the trouble with these niggers. Give them an inch and they'll take a mile. They're pushing their way in everywhere.
1st MAN: Yeah, and the war didn't help any, putting uniforms on them, making them think they was as good as other folks. Where's it going to end?
VOICE: In the grave, mister, where you're going to end.
...
1st MAN: ... I'm as good a Christian as the next man, and I ain't got anything against a nigger knows how to keep his place. But you can't tell me niggers is going to mix with white folks in heaven.
VOICE: No restrictive covenants in heaven, mister.
...
1st MAN: Imagine! I'll be damned if I'd stand for it.
VOICE: You'll be damned if you don't (71).

The play concludes with the jury's stark finding: "Death resulting from a fire of accidental origin" (72).

Trial by Fire is a committed play, almost agit-prop in its fervor, though unlike most such plays, it is quite religious in tone. In the scene in which Roy decides not to leave his new home, he makes the following speech to his wife:

> It's not just you and me and the kids. It's millions of us, north, south, east and west. Millions of men and women and children forced to crawl on their bellies. But some time, some place, somebody has to stand and fight. Somebody has to say NO! If one man stands and fights, tomorrow another will stand and fight and another and another until all over the land men will climb to their feet and say NO! Don't you see, Rita? By making a coward of one of us they make slaves of us all (48).

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The play's thesis, that all Americans should live together in peace under the U. S. Constitution and the law of God, shines through despite uneven writing and crude technique.

Dunne's connections to the national Catholic theatre network helped make *Trial by Fire* one of the most widely produced early civil rights dramas. It was first produced by the Catholic Theatre Guild at the Wilshire Ebell Theatre, probably in 1946 or early 1947. I have found no records of this production, but Dunne and Nagle agree that it was well-received.[138] One critic mistook a light-skinned Black actress for white, and in his review praised Dunne's daring in dramatizing an interracial marriage. "The critic's mistake," Dunne noted, "underlined the utter folly of racial discrimination based on race or color."[139]

Trial by Fire was produced in New York by the Blackfriars Guild, which had earlier produced Bronner's *A Young American*. This production, which opened 4 December and ran through 21 December 1947, concluded with the entire cast satirically singing the "Star Spangled Banner."[140] William Marshall, who played Roy Johnson, had played John Henry in the 1944 Madison Square Garden Negro Freedom Rally, and the director, Albert McCleery, was the head of the Fordham University Theatre.[141] Reviews were generally kind, but sometimes condescending. The *Post*'s Vernon Rice accurately described the play as "a rural 'On Whitman Avenue'" by a priest who "apparently, saves

[138] Dunne, *King's Pawn*, 134; Nagle, *Behind the Masque*, 267.
[139] Dunne, *King's Pawn*, 134.
[140] Unattributed review of *Trial by Fire*, dated January 1948. Schomburg Collection, New York.
[141] Program for Blackfriars production of *Trial by Fire*. Schomburg Collection, New York.

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his preaching for the pulpit."[142] And George Jean Nathan dubbed it "a sincere effort" marred by "elementary dramaturgy" and covering "ground already often thrashed in the theatre."[143] Audiences were disappointingly small.[144]

Trial by Fire was later produced in Chicago, Omaha, Phoenix, Pasadena, and Hollywood. The Pasadena production is memorable in that Charlie Chaplin, then near the bottom of his reputation because of his public left leanings, sat in on the rehearsal process, and advised the playwright, actors, and director about certain scenes and bits of stage business.

Max Gordon, the producer of *Born Yesterday* (1945) and many other successful shows, briefly considered producing *Trial by Fire* on Broadway, but finally decided it was not commercial enough. Dunne, who never accepted any royalties for the play, later recalled that Gordon was probably right. *Trial by Fire*, he wrote, "was not designed for the commercial theater. ... It was made to change hearts."[145]

Our Lan'

On Whitman Avenue and *Trial by Fire*, both by white playwrights, dealt with the contemporary issues of equal housing and property rights. Theodore Ward, the first African American playwright to have a serious work reach Broadway after the War, put these issues in historical perspective with his play *Our Lan'*. Though the Black characters in this play ultimately lose, they are not mere victims, but activists who try forcefully to defend their rights.

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[142] Vernon Rice, "'Trial by Fire' Deals With Racial Problem," *New York Post*, 5 December 1947.
[143] Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1947-1948*, 167.
[144] Nagle, *Behind the Masque*, 268-269.
[145] Dunne, *King's Pawn*, 134, 136-145, 173.

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Theodore Ward was born in Louisiana in 1902. He ran away from home at thirteen, but even as he wandered, he managed to write, and in 1931 he won a Zona Gale Scholarship in Creative Writing at the University of Wisconsin, where he studied for two years. Moving to Chicago, he joined the Federal Theatre Project, which produced his *Big White Fog* (1938), a realistic drama that explored the Garvey back-to-Africa movement, capitalism, and socialism as three common responses by African Americans to racial oppression. After the FTP was dismantled, Ward moved to New York and founded the Negro Playwrights Company, which produced *Big White Fog* at the Lincoln Theatre in 1940 and then folded. He began writing *Our Lan'* in 1941, won a Theatre Guild Award for it in the mid-1940s, and polished the script in a drama workshop led by Kenneth Rowe. However, he spent most of the war years shining shoes for a living.[146]

An episodic drama in two acts and ten scenes, *Our Lan'* is at once large in conception and carefully focussed. It tells the story—fictional, though inspired by historical events—of a group of freed slaves who fought to retain the "forty acres and a mule" promised and then denied them by the U. S. government at the end of the Civil War. In March, 1865, Congress enacted and President Lincoln signed a bill establishing the Freedmen's Bureau, which was authorized to divide abandoned and confiscated land in the South into forty-acre plots for the use of former slaves and loyal whites. General Sherman enforced this law for a short time, but was soon ordered by President Johnson to return the land to its former owners.[147]

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[146] Fahamisha Patricia Brown, "Theodore Ward," in Trudier Harris, ed., *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Afro-American Writers, 1940-1955* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1988), 182-185. Also see Rena Fraden, "The Cloudy History of *Big White Fog*" (*American Studies*, Winter 1988), 5-27.

[147] Blaustein and Zangrando, *Civil Rights and the Black American*, 210-217.

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Our Lan' begins in Georgia in January, 1865, the last winter of the Civil War.[148] A group of homeless, wandering, recently freed slaves is cheered by the news that General Sherman has promised to break up the old plantations, distributing to each freedman forty acres and a mule. The group finds its way to an island off the coast, and under the leadership of a freedman named Joshua Tain, appropriates a large farm abandoned by John Burkhardt, a planter. With some support from Oliver Webster, a long-free mulatto entrepreneur, and Captain Stewart, a white officer from the Freedmen's Bureau, they fix up the property, hire a white woman from the North as a teacher, and begin to raise a crop of cotton. A native of the island, an attractive young woman named Delphine, falls in love with Tain, who because he is older than she, hesitates to reciprocate.

In April, when the news comes that President Lincoln ("Father Abraham") has been assassinated, and a Southerner, Andrew Johnson, has assumed the Presidency, the question arises of what the freedmen can do to protect their interests. Webster's analysis is that the planters "want a full pardon for their rebellion and the restoration of their lands," and suggests that the freedmen concentrate on getting political representation through the right to vote, which "all over the world ... is prized as the people's most precious possession" (163). Tain's own experience, however, tells him to concentrate on keeping the land:

> Votin' ain't much. Ah's seed it all mah life, here in Gawgie 'n down in Lusana too. De man what holds de lan' holds de office. Look at de poor white folks. They vote. But what do they git out-er it? A gallon or two of corn likker come 'lection day, 'n atter tha, nothin but de same old struggle 'n de same old shack full of raw-boned babies. ... We got this lan', 'n votin' or no votin', we tend t' keep it! (164)

[148] Theodore Ward, *Our Lan'*, in Turner, *Black Drama in America*, 115-203.

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The first act concludes with the spiritual "Steal Away Home," the last line of which, significantly, is "Ah ain't got long t' stay here" (164-165).

In the second act, Webster, fearing that the freedmen will have their property confiscated, takes back the farm equipment he has loaned them. At the same time, his son Ollie seduces the lonely Delphine, who then infuriates Tain by not telling him she is pregnant with Ollie's baby until after Tain asks her to marry him. In October, word comes from Washington that President Johnson has vetoed the freedmen's Civil Rights Bill, which included the "forty acres and a mule" clause. Shortly thereafter, Captain Stewart arrives with Burkhardt, who asks the freedmen to contract to be employees on his land; they refuse and drive off Burkhardt and the soldiers, following the advice of Tain, who observes "We'll still be slaves till every man can raise his own bale of cotton 'n say: 'This is mine!'" (183). Ironically, even two poor Confederate soldiers side with the freedmen: "Like Ah was tellin' mah wife," says one,

> They should er took de lan' 'n gin it t' yuh niggers 'n us." De damn planters got everything, 'n er poor son-of-a-bitch of a white man like me 'n yuh ... why, we can't even light in de swamp! (188-189)

Over the next few days, Tain, realizing that few slave women "ever had no *sayso* 'bout de father of thar chillun," apologizes to Delphine for his callousness toward her, and they agree to marry (194). Unable to sell their cotton at a decent price, the freedmen use most of it to build barricades. But Burkhardt and the soldiers return with a cannon, powerful enough to destroy the barricades and freedmen together with one round. The freedmen decide, fatalistically, to stay and fight, and Tain tells Burkhardt why:

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> Cuz neither yuh nor all de rest of de planters put together goin' ever kill de thing we's after. ... Yuh think if we ain't got no lan', we have t' wuk for yuh for nothin'. But yuh never git way wid it. This is ouah lan'. We done wukked 'n paid for it. Not only here, but all ovah this cruel South. De graves *(Pointing off right)* ovah yonder is mah witness. De slaves sleepin' in 'em declare Ahm right 'fore Gawd. It was us what first did de tillin' t' make it give up de sweet sustenance of life, 'n yuh kin mark mah word: Though yuh won't even sell now, tha same sun yuh see yonder goin' yit rise 'n find dem what does de tillin' gatherin' in de harvest (198).

Finally, there is a brief, tender dialogue between Tain and Delphine, who laments that "if things had been diffunt, maybe me 'n yuh'd both been somebody" (202). The chorus sings "Deep River" as the curtain falls, and at the moment it closes completely, the roar of the cannon is heard.

Like Ward's earlier *Big White Fog*, *Our Lan'* sees the American landscape through a socialist lens. There is no talk in the play of dividing up the island into individual family farms: instead, the freedmen led by Joshua Tain work together for communal wealth. In addition, the land is considered by all, planters and freedmen alike, to be the primary tool of production from which wealth can emerge. In fact, one could imagine a comparable play being written about the seizure and defense of a factory by union workers.

Interestingly, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, the film of which was released only two years before Ward began work on his play, has a strikingly similar attitude toward the land. Joshua Tain might not use the same phrasing, but he would agree with Scarlett O'Hara's father that in economic terms, "Land's the only thing in the world that matters! The only thing worth working for, fighting for, dying for! Because

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it's the only thing in the world that lasts!"[149] In this regard, *Gone With the Wind* and *Our Lan'* differ not in their views of the historical economic conditions present during Reconstruction, but in their choices of heroes.

Our Lan' was first performed off-Broadway at the Henry Street Settlement House on 18 April 1947, and closed on 27 April after twelve performances.[150] It was produced by the Associated Playwrights, a group of eight writers (including Ward) who had attended the Theatre Guild's playwriting seminar. The director was Edward R. Mitchell.[151] By all accounts, the production was a fine one. The *Post*'s Richard Watts, Jr., found the play one "of dignity, forthrightness and simple forcefulness ... infinitely superior to virtually everything that the commercial theatre was offering at the time."[152] The *Journal-American*'s Robert Garland called it "genuine, stirring, and naive," with "moments of heartbreak and exaltation."[153] And Virginia Reel, in *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1946-1947*, called Ward "a dawning and watchable talent" whose play "manages to project, and in simple unstrained dramatic terms, a considerable emotional force."[154]

Such a warm response convinced the Theatre Guild to help move the play to Broadway. The Guild was not actually the producing organization, but lent its

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[149] Sidney Howard, *Gone With the Wind: The Screenplay* (London: Lorimer, 1983), 63-64.
[150] Hobbs, "Off-Broadway," 110.
[151] John Chapman, "'Our Lan' No Thriller, but Brings A Needed Dignity to the Theatre," *Daily News*, 29 September 1947.
[152] Richard Watts, Jr., "A Tragedy of the Negro In Reconstruction Days," *New York Post*, 29 September 1947.
[153] Robert Garland, "Soul of Folk Play Lost on Broadway," *New York Journal-American*, 29 September 1947.
[154] Virginia Reel, "Off-Broadway," in *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1946-1947*, 308.

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subscription lists to the producers, Eddie Dowling and Louis J. Singer, who together had produced *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). The production was also directed by Dowling, whose previous credits included *The Time of Your Life* (1939), *The Glass Menagerie*, and *The Iceman Cometh* (1946);[155] Henry Street's Edward R. Mitchell was credited as the associate director.[156] Sets and lighting were by Ralph Alswang, who had studied with Robert Edmund Jones and whose work included *Winged Victory* (1943) and *Home of the Brave* (1945).[157] The large, mostly Black cast was headed by the bass-baritone William Veasey as Tain, and as Delphine, Muriel Smith, who had created the title role in *Carmen Jones* (1943).[158] The cast also included Augustus Smith and the young Louis Peterson.

Dowling, unfortunately, appears to have had a limited understanding of the play. As Loften Mitchell saw it, Dowling "took a play that had a revolutionary theme and he tried to make it into *The Green Pastures* all over again."[159] He seems in general to have taken a condescending, paternalistic attitude toward his largely Black cast. One actor later remembered:

> ... we were all optimistic. We knew we had a hit. Then—one day when we were in rehearsal—I was sitting out in the audience behind Dowling. Something went wrong onstage and his assistant told him about it. The assistant repeated the criticism. Dowling jumped up and said: 'Leave them alone! Aren't they beautiful? So simple! Just like children!'[160]

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[155] Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 206-207.
[156] Ward Morehouse, "'Our Lan' Is an Eloquent, Ungainly Drama, and a Disappointment at Royale," *Sun*, 29 September 1947.
[157] Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 21.
[158] Ibid., 126.
[159] Loften Mitchell, *Black Drama* (New York: Hawthorne, 1967), 134.
[160] Charles Griffin, quoted in Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 134.

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Among the specific changes Dowling made was the deletion of the cannon blast from the end of the play: he apparently feared that the sound might panic the audience.[161]

The production opened 27 September 1947 at the Royale Theatre,[162] and drew generally poor notices. The *Catholic World* concluded simply that "Little Theatre prize blooms don't always stand transplanting."[163] Brooks Atkinson's review in the *Times* was typical: it praised the performers and the "heart-breaking emotional force" of several scenes, but found much of the story "unresourceful" and "artless," Dowling's direction lacking in "spontaneity and intimacy," and Alswang's "wide though unlovely setting" to have "lost the sunny hospitality of the downtown set."[164] Several critics also complained about the subplot concerning Delphine's seduction and pregnancy: the *Sun*'s Ward Morehouse, for example, found it "of no value at all."[165] George Jean Nathan, however, though he found the writing at times repetitive and clichéd, concluded that Ward's skillful use of folk music and pacing, as well as his respectful attitude toward his audience, put both him and his play "in a class apart."[166]

Our Lan' lasted only forty-one performances at the Royale.[167] Many would later point to its failure as evidence that drama on Black themes could not succeed commercially—though as Loften Mitchell observed, "no one added that it fails when

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[161] Turner, *Black Drama in America*, 115.
[162] Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1947-1948*, 47.
[163] Euphemia Renssalaer Van Wyatt, *Catholic World*, November 1947. Quoted in Hobbs, "Off-Broadway," 113.
[164] Atkinson, Brooks, "'Our Lan', Brought Uptown to the Royale, Presents Scenes of Heart-Breaking Emotion," *New York Times*, 29 September 1947.
[165] Morehouse, Ward, "'Our Lan' Is an Eloquent, Ungainly Drama, and a Disappointment at Royale," *Sun*, 29 September 1947.
[166] Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1947-1948*, 48.
[167] Ibid., 47.

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polluted and misinterpreted."[168] *Our Lan'* was not performed again until 1967, and even then only in a production organized by Ward himself.[169]

The Respectful Prostitute

One of the more successful civil rights plays of the late 1940s was written not by an American, but by a Frenchman. Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Respectful Prostitute* was an existentialist drama that, though it probably said more about postwar France than America, drew good audiences both off and on Broadway for the better part of a year.

Sartre wrote *La Putain respectueuse* in 1946, shortly after a brief visit to the American South.[170] In that same year, Sartre also wrote his influential theoretical essay "Forgers of Myths," in which he argued for a theatre which shows "certain situations which throw light on the main aspects of the condition of man" and which forces the spectator to "participate in the free choice which man makes in these situations." Such a theatre would be marked by "a single set, a few entrances, a few exits, [and] intense arguments among the characters who defend their individual rights with passion."[171]

Like Sartre's 1944 play *Huis Clos [No Exit]*, *La Putain respectueuse* follows this plan almost exactly.[172] A one-act play in two scenes, it is set entirely in a bedroom in a Southern town. The room is rented by Lizzie, a white prostitute who has recently arrived from New York. As the play opens, a Black man known only as "the Negro" comes to her door and begs her to tell the truth about an incident that occurred as she rode the

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[168] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 134.
[169] Brown, "Theodore Ward," 186.
[170] N.a., "New Play in Manhattan," *Time*, 5 April 1948.
[171] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Forgers of Myths," in Barrett H. Clark, ed., *European Theories of the Drama* (New York: Crown, 1965), 402-403.
[172] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Respectful Prostitute*, in Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage, 1955).

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train into town. The Negro and a friend of his were also on board when four drunken white men boarded the car and started a fight with them; the Negro and his friend fought back, and one of the whites shot the friend dead. Now the white townspeople are conspiring to cover up the murder by charging the Black men with raping Lizzie. Lizzie promises the Negro that she will tell the truth about the incident if asked in court. She endures pressure from a customer, the police, and Senator Clarke, who deftly argues that her duty as a white woman is to side with her race. Exhausted, she finally signs an affidavit to frame the Black men.

In the second act, Lizzie guiltily allows the Negro to hide in her apartment while she convinces a lynch mob not to search there. She realizes that she and the Negro are both "alone in the world," outsiders "like two orphans" (278). Her customer Fred arrives and reports that the mob caught and lynched the wrong man. Fred then discovers the hiding Negro, whom he chases outside and tries to shoot, but misses. When he returns, Lizzie threatens to shoot him with her own gun, but he calms her by promising to support her as a "kept woman" in high style. She acquiesces.

The play's title refers to Lizzie's decision to "respect" and thereby retain her position in white society. Sartre, perhaps thinking of the Nazi collaborators against whom he had fought in the war, forces Lizzie to choose between betraying either the Negro or the whites. "You'll just have to give away one of them, whatever you do," Fred tells her. "You'll just have to choose" (263). In good existentialist style, Lizzie's choice affects not only her own life and the life of the town, but has implications for all of society.

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The play also seems to have been influenced by earlier American civil rights dramas, notably Wexley's *They Shall Not Die* (1934), about the Scottsboro case, and D'Usseau and Gow's *Deep Are the Roots* (1945). As a portrait of America's racial situation, however, *The Respectful Prostitute* is almost a cartoon. Sartre reportedly supplemented his slender knowledge of the South with information from two American friends.[173] The play's white people are all vicious thugs who alternately torture each other and their Black prey; the Negro is a perfect victim, who refuses to defend himself against the mob because "they're white folks."[174] The Senator, even more than *Deep Are the Roots*' Langdon, is a caricature of a smooth, corrupt Southern patrician. Furthermore, both the whites and the Negro utter one insipid cliché after another. For example, Fred repeatedly calls both Lizzie and Negroes "the Devil," and the Negro says "When white folk who have never met before, start to talk to each other, friendly like, it means some nigger's goin' to die" (252).

La Putain respectueuse opened at Paris' Théâtre Antoine on 8 November 1946.[175] Shortly thereafter, the Experimental Theatre, an offshoot of the American National Theatre and Academy (ANTA), arranged to produce the play in New York. The Experimental Theatre, however, had recently produced a number of foreign plays, and was under pressure to do more American works. It cancelled its plans to do Sartre's piece, which was immediately picked up by a small New York ensemble called New Stages.[176]

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[173] Chapman, *Best Plays of 1947-48*, 13.
[174] Sartre, *The Respectful Prostitute*, 277.
[175] Ibid., 250.
[176] Chapman, *Best Plays of 1947-48*, 12-13.

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As *The Respectful Prostitute*, the play opened 9 February 1948, at the New Stages Theatre at 159 Bleecker Street.[177] The translation, by Eva Wolas, appears never to have been published.[178] To fill out the evening, the play was paired with *Church Street*, an Irish one-act by Lennox Robinson. Directed by Mary Hunter and with sets by Robert Gundlach, *The Respectful Prostitute* featured a fashion model named Meg Mundy as Lizzie, John Marriott as the Negro, Karl Weber as Fred, and Wendell Holmes as Senator Clarke.[179]

The reviews were excellent. The *Times*' Brooks Atkinson, for example, called it "a tautly written melodrama played sharply and brilliantly by a keenly-directed cast." Though the script's credibility had "some weak spots," Atkinson found that the acting (especially Mundy's) "played with the cutting stroke of a knife."[180]

Audiences poured into the tiny Bleecker Street theatre. After five weeks, New Stages moved the play to Broadway, where it opened at the Cort Theatre on 16 March 1948, paired now with Thornton Wilder's *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*.[181] Most reviewers continued to praise it. The *Herald Tribune*'s Howard Barnes called the production "incandescent" and Mundy's performance "nothing short of inspired."[182] Several critics, though, compared it to the shallow but harrowing fare of Paris' Théâtre du Grand Guignol. In the *Saturday Review*, John Mason Brown attacked the play a "synthetic product" that used every hackneyed device of melodrama to generate suspense

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[177] Brooks Atkinson, "The Respectful Prostitute," *New York Times*, 10 February 1948.
[178] Brooks Atkinson, n.t., *New York Times*, 15 February 1948.
[179] Brooks Atkinson, "The Respectful Prostitute," *New York Times*, 10 February 1948.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Chapman, *Best Plays of 1947-48*, 390.
[182] Howard Barnes, "One Hit, One Error," *New York Herald Tribune*, 10 February 1948.

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and emotion.[183] And Robert Sylvester, conflating Sartre's existentialism and Soviet communism, complained in the *Daily News* that Sartre "proved that he knows as much about the American Negro problem as he can learn from Pravda."[184]

Despite these critiques, *The Respectful Prostitute* was a hit: it chalked up 348 performances before it closed on 18 December 1948.[185] The New Stages company, destabilized by the production's very success, disintegrated shortly thereafter.[186] The play, however, continued to be produced by different troupes around the country. It was seen briefly in Chicago in mid-1949, after an abortive attempt by the city government to ban it.[187] It also appeared in Baltimore in 1949, and in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1950.[188] In 1953, in what must have been a fascinating production, it was performed at Brooklyn's Parkway Theatre in a Yiddish translation by Israel Rosenberg.[189]

The Respectful Prostitute, like *Deep Are the Roots*, depicted America's racial situation as a melodrama, with good and bad characters and almost none in between. Though it pushed many standard racial buttons, it avoided the most inflammatory theme of race relations, miscegenation. And it foreshadowed Genet's *The Blacks* by showing that a stylishly written play about an American problem, even if by a foreigner, could be a success on the American stage.

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[183] John Mason Brown, "Guignol à la Sartre," *Saturday Review*, 13 March 1948.
[184] Robert Sylvester, "Sartre and Robinson Plays Are Offered by New Stages," *Daily News*, 10 February 1948.
[185] Chapman, *Best Plays of 1948-49*, 431.
[186] Stuart W. Little, *Off-Broadway: The Prophetic Theatre* (New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1972), 39-40.
[187] Anne Dawson, "Curtain Time," *This Week in Chicago*, 4 June 1949.
[188] Playbills for Baltimore and Princeton productions, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center Library, New York.
[189] N.a., "2 Plan Yiddish Version of Hit," *New York Times*, 30 January 1952.

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Sojourner Truth

Katherine Garrison Chapin's *Sojourner Truth* was the first postwar play about a historical Black woman. Chapin was a white novelist and poet with a long interest in race issues: among her earlier works was a verse-narrative, "And they lynched him on a tree" (1940), which had been set to music by the composer William Grant Still.

The historical Sojourner Truth (1799-1884) was an evangelical preacher who began life as a slave named Isabella Bomefree in upstate New York. Emancipated by state law in 1827, she moved to New York City, where she became active in the Methodist movement and began to preach. She lived for a time in a religious commune in the Hudson valley, and in 1843 changed her name to Sojourner Truth to signify her calling as an itinerant preacher. A fiery and witty speaker, she became known as an abolitionist and feminist, achieving fame for her 1851 "And a'n't I a woman?" speech, and for baring her breasts to a hostile audience in 1858. After the Civil War, she continued speaking on feminism and the rights of freedmen.[190]

Chapin's three-act play presents the major events of Truth's life from her early years as a slave to her middle years in New York, when she decided upon her life's mission.[191] In a series of short episodes, she is seen first as a slave-girl in a tavern, then as a house servant, next as a mother of a troubled son, and finally as a spiritual leader. In the last act, set in New York's Broadway Tabernacle, she subdues some ruffians by sheer

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[190] Hine, *Black Women in America*, 1172-1175.

[191] *Sojourner Truth* has never been published. This synopsis is derived from Brooks Atkinson, "Muriel Smith Acts Principal Part in 'Sojourner Truth' for the Negro Theatre," *New York Times*, 22 April 1948; Lee Newton, "Muriel Smith Sparkles in Weak 'Sojourner Truth,'" *Daily Worker*, 27 April 1948.

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force of character, and explains the quality of her leadership by saying that she has been called by God.

Sojourner Truth was produced by the American Negro Theatre in New York. The production opened 21 April 1948 at the Theresa I. Kaufmann Auditorium, and continued its run at the ANT's usual space at 15 West 126th Street. It was staged by Osceola Archer, the pioneering Black actress and director. Muriel Smith, who had recently played Delphine in *Our Lan'*, starred as Sojourner, and the young Harry Belafonte played her son Peter. The rest of the almost fifty parts were distributed among a mixed cast of both professional and amateur actors.

The two reviews I have found agreed that the play was dramaturgically weak, but that Muriel Smith gave a brilliant performance. Brooks Atkinson, in the *Times*, found "very little theatre skill in the writing," and "no firm hand in the director's box"; Smith's acting, however, full of "dignity, power and magnificence" and reminiscent of Rose McClendon's, "ranks with the finest work of the season."[192] The *Daily Worker*'s Lee Newton agreed, writing that Smith's "accomplished and dynamic" acting almost saved the play, which contained so many episodes that "the powerful impact inherent in the material is scattered."[193]

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[192] Brooks Atkinson, "Muriel Smith Acts Principal Part in 'Sojourner Truth' for the Negro Theatre," *New York Times*, 22 April 1948.

[193] Lee Newton, "Muriel Smith Sparkles in Weak 'Sojourner Truth,'" *Daily Worker*, 27 April 1948.

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Set My People Free

In 1941, Dorothy Heyward, co-author of *Porgy*, *Mamba's Daughters*, and *South Pacific*, had crafted a historical play depicting African Americans in revolt.[194] Entitled *Set My People Free* (a variant of the last line of the spiritual "Go Down Moses"), the play dramatized Denmark Vesey's abortive 1822 slave revolt.

The historical Denmark Vesey was a slave in Charleston, South Carolina, in the early nineteenth century. He bought his freedom after winning a lottery and went on to become a successful carpenter. Inspired by Haiti's Toussaint L'Ouverture, Vesey organized a massive slave uprising, drawing support not only from slaves, but also from a handful of whites. In May, 1822, however, shortly before the uprising was to begin, it was betrayed by a Black informer. One hundred thirty Blacks and four whites were arrested and tried; Vesey and thirty-four other Blacks were hanged, and the whites were all jailed and fined. Though the rebellion was quashed, it inspired further uprisings, including Nat Turner's, and also convinced the South to further limit the slaves' few freedoms.[195]

Heyward's three-act, eleven-scene play is set entirely in and around Charleston.[196] In the first act, a slavemaster named Wilson introduces his new bride Phyllis to his house slaves, one of whom, Rose, asks permission to marry Denmark Vesey, a slave on a neighboring plantation. Learning that Vesey has resisted his master in the past, and is

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[194] John Chapman, "'Set My People Free' Promises An Uprising, But It Fizzles Out," *Daily News*, 4 November 1948.

[195] Schlesinger, *The Almanac of American History*, 211.

[196] Dorothy Heyward, *Set My People Free*, unpublished typescript in the Hatch-Billops Collection, New York. Pencil and ink markings in the typescript indicate that in production, a number of cuts were made, including the deletion of Act III, Scene 1, a sermon Heyward based on the foreword from her husband's novel *Porgy*.

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now working to buy his own freedom, Wilson refuses her plea and orders her to marry his trusted head slave George instead. Later, Vesey kills a slave trader for beating a slave, and joins forces with a preacher named Gullah Jack to organize the slaves to work for freedom.

The second act is set a dozen years later, in April, 1822. Great numbers of slaves are now participants in Vesey's plan, but George, who is widely respected by both Blacks and whites, hesitates to join. He goes so far as to annoy his beloved master Wilson by asking him about the biblical justifications for slavery. Finally George agrees to participate, on the condition that Vesey push back the date of the insurrection a week, after Wilson and his family have left for their summer vacation.

The third act takes place in May, 1822. Shortly before the uprising is scheduled to begin, Wilson's little girl develops a slight fever. George tries to persuade the Wilsons to leave for their vacation on schedule, but Phyllis convinces Wilson to delay their departure. Desperate, George betrays the insurrection to Wilson, who immediately alerts the white community.

The final scene takes place that night in George's cabin. Vesey, fleeing soldiers while waiting for a ship to take him to freedom, breaks in and finds Rose there alone with her children. He and Rose share a tender moment, remembering their old love. Vesey hides when George enters and reports sadly that Wilson has freed him but not the family. After George leaves, Vesey explains that he did not kill George because he wants people alive who will remember him. Through the window, Vesey sees his ship arrive at the port, but just at this moment he is discovered by the soldiers. He surrenders, begging Rose not to let the slaves forget the dream of freedom:

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> Say to um: "Denmark Vesey says to tell yuh, 'Freedom don't die wid any one man—'cept only if de day comes when men forget about freedom. But dat day can't ever come, 'cause dere'll always be some men dat remembuh—and keep remindin' dem what forgets.'" (p. 3-4-34)

Like Ward's *Our Lan'* and Peters' later *Nat Turner, Set My People Free* depicts some Blacks as effective leaders, offers rebellion as an appropriate response to racial oppression, and combines the history of an uprising with a love story. Also, as in *Nat Turner,* its hero is frequently compared to biblical liberators like Moses and Christ, his followers to the disciples, and his betrayer to Judas. The writing is at its best in the passages concerning George, torn tragically between loyalty to his people and affection for his master.

In its depiction of Black religion, however, *Set My People Free* continues an old white-created theatrical stereotype. Though most of the play is strictly representational in style, many of the ensemble scenes include stylized, expressionistic treatments of Gullah Jack's voodoo-heavy brand of Christianity. As such, they hearken back to the superstition attributed to Blacks in such plays as William Vaughn Moody's *The Faith Healer* (1909), Ridgely Torrence's *Granny Maumee* (1916), Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920), and Heyward's own *Porgy* (1927).

Before 1948, *Set My People Free* was performed in some smaller cities under the title *Charleston, 1822.*[197] It also appears to have been done by the Neighborhood Playhouse.[198] It was brought to Broadway by the Theatre Guild, after a "personal investment"

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[197] Robert Garland, "To Avoid Confusion, Call It Melodrama," *New York Journal-American*, 4 November 1948.
[198] Hobbs, "Off-Broadway," 193.

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by its associate producer, Allyn Rice.[199] The director was Martin Ritt, the set designs were by Ralph Alswang (who had also designed *Our Lan'*), Ernest Schraps did the costumes, and Joshua Lee was the choral director. The cast of thirty-five was headed by Juano Hernandez as Vesey, Canada Lee as George, and Mildred Joanne Smith (who had starred in Duke Ellington's *Beggar's Holiday*) as Rose. Frank Wilson, William Warfield, and Earl Jones also had small parts.[200]

Set My People Free opened at the Hudson Theatre on Wednesday, 3 November 1948. It drew disappointing reviews, most critics thinking more highly of the production than of the script. The *Daily Mirror*'s Robert Coleman found it "amazingly static,"[201] and Robert Garland wrote in the *Journal-American* that both the writing and the production were "uncertain" and "confused."[202] The *Sun*'s Ward Morehouse took a middle ground, finding it "a diffuse and episodic play but one of considerable power and eloquence."[203] Brooks Atkinson sniffed the political winds and suggested in the *Times* that the play's plot might seem to some theatregoers "a handbook of political revolution by a minority group," though he went on to conclude that the play "has a theme worth conjuring with."[204] Of the major critics, only the *Post*'s Richard Watts, Jr. turned in a rave, writing

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[199] Robert Garland, "To Avoid Confusion, Call It Melodrama," *New York Journal-American*, 4 November 1948.
[200] Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1948-1949*, 153.
[201] Robert Coleman, "'Set My People Free' Doesn't Measure Up," *Daily Mirror*, 4 November 1948.
[202] Robert Garland, "To Avoid Confusion, Call It Melodrama," *New York Journal-American*, 4 November 1948.
[203] Ward Morehouse, "A Crude but Effective Play," *Sun*, 4 November 1948.
[204] Brooks Atkinson, "At the Theatre," *New York Times*, 4 November 1948.

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that "this is a provocative and almost steadily absorbing drama, admirably acted and skillfully staged."[205]

Black critics were somewhat more understanding. Loften Mitchell remembered the play as "moving, pulsating ... an extraordinary attempt—ahead of its time," but he also noted that it had "dramaturgical problems," hitting an unmaintainable peak at the end of the first act.[206]

As usual, the performers and production team fared better. Atkinson was typical in rating Ritt's direction "competent," Alswang's sets "agreeable," both Hernandez' and Lee's performances "remarkably stimulating," and the rest of the cast "able." The *Daily News*' John Chapman, however, complained that Lee "was playing the part too hard and really hamming it in a last-act soliloquy."[207]

Audiences apparently liked the show better than the critics. Coleman reported that the "robust and often spontaneous" opening night applause demonstrated that the crowd "appeared to be stirred" by the play. Nevertheless, the play had a poor run, eking out only thirty performances.[208]

Forward the Heart

The first civil rights play of 1949 was Bernard Reines' *Forward the Heart*. A compact, introspective work, it argued in favor of integration in postwar America by combining the figure of the returning G.I. with the theme of interracial love.

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[205] Richard Watts, Jr., "Carolina Slave Revolt In Provocative Play," *New York Post*, 4 November 1948.
[206] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 132.
[207] John Chapman, "'Set My People Free' Promises An Uprising, But It Fizzles Out," *Daily News*, 4 November 1948.
[208] Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1948-1949*, 153.

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Forward the Heart is set entirely in the suburban Boston home of Mrs. Gibbs, a widow.[209] In preparation for the return from the war of her son David, a once-promising artist who was blinded in combat, she has hired Julie Evans, a young Black woman, to nurse him back to health. On his arrival, David is depressed and panicky, but Julie's tenderness helps restore his hope and optimism. Not realizing that she is Black, David quickly falls in love with her and asks her to marry him; when she reveals her race to him, he is aghast, and she, startled by his bigotry, leaves heartbroken. Soon, however, they decide that their love is deeper than race, but find that their real problem is the reaction of the rest of the world. When they announce their plans to Mrs. Gibbs, for example, she declares interracial love impossible and refuses to bless the marriage. David responds:

> You mean that Christianity is not a creed to live by? Stop preaching brotherhood and Christianity until you are ready to take the consequences. I am ready now![210]

The play ends with David leaving home resolved to marry Julie.

Produced on Broadway by Leon J. Bronesky and an organization called Theatre Enterprises, *Forward the Heart* was directed by Peter Frye, designed and lighted by Perry Watkins, and starred William Prince as David and Mildred Joanne Smith as Julie. It opened 28 January 1949, and drew mixed notices. Brooks Atkinson, writing in the *Times*, found the writing "a little spare perhaps, but honest," with "several scenes of

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[209] *Forward the Heart* has never been published. This synopsis is derived from Brooks Atkinson, "Forward the Heart," *New York Times*, 29 January 1949; S. W. Garlington, "New Play of Interracial Love Needs Helping Hand," *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 February 1949; Lee Newton, "'Forward the Heart' and City Center 'Carousel' Revival,'" *Daily Worker*, 1 February 1949.

[210] S. W. Garlington, "New Play of Interracial Love Needs Helping Hand," *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 February 1949.

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heart-breaking drama and the responsible statement of a tragic situation."[211] The *Daily Worker*'s Lee Newton felt that "Reines' heart was trying to tell us things worthwhile hearing," but "climaxes don't climax, crises are passed without any sense of tension, the dialogue and the acting are choked with too many theatre clichés, and, in general, the production is unimaginative and dull."[212] The *Amsterdam News*' S. W. Garlington found it "wholesome," "moving," and "entertaining," but observed that this rare "play for Negroes" was playing to almost-empty houses and that its producer "was looking around 'for just $5,000 or $6,000' to put into the show 'until it catches on.'"[213]

It never did catch on. *Forward the Heart* closed in mid-February after only nineteen performances.[214]

Freight

The next civil rights play was unusual for the directness with which it confronted racial hatred. *Freight*, a one-act by a white playwright named Kenneth White, dealt with lynching, interracial homosexual rape (a decade and a half before LeRoi Jones' *The Toilet*), and asked the important question of whether, or how, violence should be used by Black Americans in fighting the violence of racial oppression. Its dramatic situation was reminiscent of the Scottsboro case, but because it switched the stereotypical positions of its white and Black characters, it became the first "reversal" play since *Caukey* (1944).

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[211] Brooks Atkinson, "Forward the Heart," *New York Times*, 29 January 1949.
[212] Lee Newton, "'Forward the Heart' and City Center 'Carousel' Revival,'" *Daily Worker*, 1 February 1949.
[213] S. W. Garlington, "New Play of Interracial Love Needs Helping Hand," *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 February 1949.
[214] Doris Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre, 1925-1959* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 255.

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White's play is set at night in a railroad boxcar in the South.[215] As the play opens, a group of nine Black men, fleeing a lynching, scramble into the car and hide in the shadows. Just after the car begins to move, a poor white man named Jake jumps on board. It is so dark that Jake sees no one except one of the younger Black men, and at first cannot even make out the youth's skin color. Jake attempts to rape the young man, who saves himself only by gasping that he is a "nigger." Angry at the "deception," Jake reveals himself to be a racist and a lyncher.

The eight other men make themselves known, but Jake holds them at bay with his knife. He berates and humiliates them, describes the sensual pleasure he takes in lynchings, and even seizes one man's home-made wooden leg and tosses it overboard. The men eventually overpower him, and some argue that he should be killed. Even in his terror, Jake taunts them: "There's one thing you can't take away from me," he says. "I'm white and you're black." Eventually the wiser men among the group convince the rest that Jake is not worth killing, which Jake takes as the supreme insult. When the train finally reaches its destination, they leave him in the boxcar, writhing and screaming "I'm white! You can't do this to me!"

The American Negro Theatre opened *Freight* on a double bill with Synge's classic one-act tragedy, *Riders to the Sea*. The shows opened at the Harlem Children's Center on Thursday, 3 February 1949, and played three nights a week for four weeks, closing Sunday, 27 February. Both plays were staged by a white director named John O'Shaughnessy, and the cast of ten included such seasoned performers as Maxwell

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[215] *Freight* has never been published. This synopsis is derived from n.a., n.t., *New York Times*, 4 February 1949; n.a., "Kenneth White's 'Freight' by the American Negro Theatre," *Daily Worker*, 10 February 1949.

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Glanville, William Greaves, and Kenneth Manigault, as well as the young Sidney Poitier.[216]

The reviews were respectful, even admiring in some regards, though they faulted the play's moral stance, or lack thereof. The *Times*' critic found it "harsh and smoldering," with "a certain primitive vigor and mass," but concluded that it "lacks the focal point of one thoroughly enlightened character," and in the end was "no wiser as a piece of writing than the loudest of its simple-minded characters."[217] The *Daily Worker*'s review held that the play "displays more dramatic skill and power ... than most of the stuff on exhibit at the Broadway houses downtown," but criticized it for making "the struggle for decency simply one of Negro against white" rather than "against any particular class of white."[218]

Presumably on the basis of such reviews, *Freight* was picked up by a pair of Broadway producers, Steven H. Scheuer and Bernard Carson. On Wednesday, 26 April 1950, they presented it (with some cast changes) at the Fulton Theatre on a double bill with Christopher Fry's one-act verse drama "A Phoenix Too Frequent." The *New Republic*'s Robert Hatch wrote that "A production that coerces participation in, and thus knowledge of, an extreme and terrible situation is worth at least some run for its

[216] N.a., "Kenneth White's 'Freight' by the American Negro Theatre," *Daily Worker*, 10 February 1949.
[217] N.a., n.t., *New York Times*, 4 February 1949.
[218] N.a., "Kenneth White's 'Freight' by the American Negro Theatre." *Daily Worker*, 10 February 1949.

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money."[219] The daily newspaper critics, however, panned it.[220] It ran for only five performances before closing.[221]

The Higgins Touch

In mid-May, 1949, a "new three act comedy drama with a 'civil rights' theme" was advertised in both the *Amsterdam News* and the *Worker*. *The Higgins Touch*, by Virgil Richardson, was to be directed by Alvin Childress, feature an "excellent cast of fourteen," and appear at the Harlem Children's Center from 16-18 and 23-24 May 1949.[222]

Sadly, nothing more is known about *The Higgins Touch*. Loften Mitchell remembers meeting Richardson in 1938 when he was with the Rose McClendon Players. He found him "an imposing actor," sturdy but trim, and with a booming voice. He was "too eloquent for a writer," says Mitchell, but "would have made a hell of a lawyer." Richardson later moved to Mexico, where he died.[223]

Shame of a Nation

In late January, 1948, a second-hand furniture dealer was bludgeoned to death in the rear of his story in Trenton, New Jersey. Over the next few weeks, six local Black men were arrested, and after a trial lasting fifty-five days, were convicted of the murder and sentenced to death. The case quickly became a cause célèbre: communists and other left-wing groups dubbed the convicted men the "Trenton Six," and characterized the whole

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[219] Robert Hatch, *New Republic*, 15 May 1950. Quoted in Hobbs, "Off-Broadway," 254.
[220] Hobbs, "Off-Broadway," 254.
[221] Chapman, *Best Plays of 1949-1950*, 378.
[222] Advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, 14 May 1949; advertisement, *The Worker*, 15 May 1949;
[223] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.

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affair as a "Northern Scottsboro case," hearkening back to the furor over the 1933 conviction of nine Southern Black men on a dubious rape charge. The American Civil Liberties Union charged that unconstitutional measures, including beating and drugging, had been taken to extort confessions from the men, and the Civil Rights Congress helped with their appeal, which eventually resulted in a new trial.[224]

The young Black playwright Loften Mitchell (b. 1919) dramatized the history of the Trenton Six case in his play *Shame of a Nation*. Mitchell based his play on William A. Reuben's reporting of the case in the *National Guardian*, a left-wing weekly. "Mr. Reuben did a hell of a reporting job," Mitchell recalls, "and I stole from him."[225] In addition, Mitchell used portions of verbatim trial testimony, which had been published by the Six' defense attorney, O. John Rogge, also in the *National Guardian*.[226]

No script is extant, but Mitchell, who proudly calls himself "a product of the thirties," says it was "real agit-prop."[227] The play begins, Mitchell recalls, with Senator Vandenberg (who had helped block the recent Civil Rights Bill) speaking "about the glories of this nation." A man jumps up from the audience, shouts "It's a damned lie!" and then recounts the facts of the Trenton Six in a fairly straightforward, episodic

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[224] N.a., "New Trials Ordered for 6 Negroes Under Death Sentence in Jersey," *New York Times*, 1 July 1949.

[225] Loften Mitchell, telephone interview with the author, 2 October 1994. Reuben's first Trenton Six article was "Scottsboro in Trenton: Witnesses Put Condemned Men Far From Horner Murder Scene," 8 November 1948. The *National Guardian* published additional articles by Reuben and others every week or two until 30 May 1949.

[226] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994. The trial transcripts Mitchell used were: O. John Rogge, "The record makes clear the use of force and violence by the police," *National Guardian*, 14 February 1949; and O. John Rogge, "The Case of the Trenton Six: This testimony convicted them," *National Guardian*, 21 February 1949.

[227] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.

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manner. A Black Trenton resident named Al goes to his local precinct to ask if the police know anything about his missing brother-in-law. Al is arrested, and along with his brother-in-law and a number of other men is charged with and convicted of murdering a local shopkeeper. Al's wife contacts a reporter (resembling Reuben, but with a different name) who begins investigating, and over a number of months turns the case into a national story. The play ends with a direct appeal to the audience to help: "Everybody here, stand up, fight with us. Let's free these young men!"[228]

Shame of a Nation was fully staged by Mitchell's troupe, the Harlem Showcase, and was presented for one night only (possibly Friday, 20 May 1949) as a fundraiser for the Civil Rights Congress. The cast, all of whom worked for free, consisted of Helen Marsh (Mitchell's wife), Melvin Mitchell (his brother), Albert Grant, Larney Rutledge, Dorothy and John Tarrant, Doris Higgins, Leslie Slote, Martin Corbin, and Altman Fisher. After the performance, William L. Patterson, the head of the Civil Rights Congress, spontaneously delivered a stirring speech about the case to the audience.[229] There are no known reviews of the production.

The left-wing theatre group People's Drama responded to the Trenton Six case by reviving John Wexley's old agit-prop chestnut inspired by the Scottsboro case, *They Shall Not Die* (1934).[230] The only change made to the script was to reduce the number of defendants from nine to six to emphasize the Trenton case's similarity to Scottsboro.[231] It was produced by Lee Nemetz, and was performed by an interracial cast at the Yugoslav-

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[228] Ibid.
[229] Loften Mitchell, interviews with the author, 2 and 7 October 1994; Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 136.
[230] John Wexley, *They Shall Not Die* (New York: Samuel French, 1950).
[231] Loften Mitchell, telephone interview with the author, 2 October 1994.

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American Hall at 405 West 41st Street in New York City. Its brief run began 7 June 1949.[232]

Incidentally, according to the screenwriter Budd Schulberg, in 1951 he and Elia Kazan considered doing a film based on the Trenton Six. Schulberg spent some time in Trenton investigating the matter, but decided that "it wasn't a clear-cut case." In the process, however, he became interested in the travails of the New Jersey longshoremen's union, and the film he and Kazan eventually fashioned on that subject was *On the Waterfront* (1954).[233]

Fighters for Freedom *and* Whole Hog or Nothing

In June, 1949, a publicity piece appeared in the *Daily Worker*, promoting an upcoming production by the Harlem Unity Theatre, a "new progressive, interracial drama group ... set up to present plays, skits, pageants on a community scale." Two one-act plays were said already to be in rehearsal. Ben Bengal's *Plant in the Sun* was a revival of a 1937 play, and Carl Abrams' *Fighters for Freedom* was a new "pageant combining choral work, dance, narration, etc. ... based on the history of the Negro in the United States."[234] If the two plays were actually in rehearsal, presumably they were eventually performed, though no further record of the production or of the company survives.

The same publicity piece mentioned that the theatre also planned to produce Theodore Ward's new one-act play *Whole Hog or Nothing* sometime "in the near future." Ward's piece, a war drama set in the Pacific, deals with racism and anti-semitism

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[232] Robert Arthur Cowan, "Off-Broadway: A History, 1915-1962" (Ph.D. diss., Purdue University, 1962), 204; Hobbs, "Off-Broadway," 228.
[233] Budd Schulberg, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, 14 September 1994.
[234] N.a., "Theatre," *Daily Worker*, 20 June 1949.

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between white sailors and Black soldiers stranded on a Japanese-held island. One of the Blacks kills himself rather than be evacuated on a segregated troop-ship, and the play ends with a white communist proclaiming "Freedom belongs to those who're willing to die for it!"[235]

As with *Fighters for Freedom*, there is no further evidence that *Whole Hog or Nothing* was actually performed. If it was, however, it would have been among the most politically radical of the era's civil rights plays.

Florence

Sometime in 1949 (the precise date has been blurred by time) a one-act civil rights play by a little-known actress was presented for a single weekend. Though hardly noticed then, the play had an influential afterlife, and the playwright would earn a respected position in the world of Black theatre. The play was *Florence*; the playwright, Alice Childress.

Born in North Carolina, Alice Childress (1920-1994) was raised in Harlem by her grandmother. About 1940, she became one of the founding members of the American Negro Theatre, where she studied acting, performed, directed, and served on the board of directors. Productions in which she appeared included *On Strivers Row* (1940), *Natural Man* (1941), and *Anna Lucasta* (1943). In 1949, on a dare from fellow actors (including Sidney Poitier) who said that in plays about Blacks and whites only violent actions like lynching are interesting, she wrote her first play, *Florence*."[236]

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[235] Theodore Ward, *Whole Hog or Nothing*. Typescript in Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.

[236] Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, *Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Greenwood, 1990), 98; Trudier Harris, "Alice Childress," in Thadious M. Davis and Trudier Harris, eds.,

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Florence is set in the Jim Crow waiting-room of a railway station in the South.[237] One side of the room is for whites, the other for Blacks; even the rest-rooms are segregated, labelled "White ladies," "White gentlemen," "Colored men," and "Colored women" (110). A middle-aged Black woman, Mrs. Whitney ("Mama"), arrives with her daughter Marge; Mama is bound for New York to retrieve her other daughter, Florence, who has impoverished herself while trying to become an actress. Like other Black people who have "been talkin' about their rights," Florence is also an assertive young woman who hates segregation, and whose husband was killed one election day for demanding to be allowed to vote (112). Marge soon leaves, but shortly a white woman named Mrs. Carter arrives and, sitting on her own side of the Jim Crow bar, strikes up a conversation with Mama. Mrs. Carter claims to dislike segregation, and tells Mama about her brother, who recently wrote a novel about a mulatto so beset by shame and self-doubt that he kills himself. Mama replies that she never heard of any light-skinned Black people driven to shame or suicide because of their skin color: in fact, she says,

> Don't my friend Essie Kitredge daughter look just like a German or something'? She didn't kill herself! She's teachin' the third grade in the colored school right here. Even the bus drivers ask her to sit in the front seats cause they think she's white! ... an' ... an' ... she just says as clear as you please ... "I'm sittin' where my people got to sit by law. I'm a Negro woman!" (116)

Next they talk about Florence, and we learn that Mrs. Carter is an actress herself. Mama begs her to help Florence get work in New York, and Mrs. Carter agrees to help set

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Dictionary of Literary Biography: African-American Writers After 1955 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1985), 68; Hine, *Black Women in America*, 234; Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre*, 188-189.

[237] Alice Childress, *Florence*, in Brown-Guillory, *Wines in the Wilderness*, 110-121.

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Florence up as a domestic. The play concludes with Mama, disgusted, deciding not to go to New York after all, but to send Florence money to help her stay there.

Despite its apparent simplicity, Florence paints a rich portrait of the segregated South of the late 1940s. The color bar keeps whites ignorant of Blacks, with the result that even a well-meaning white person unintentionally behaves ignorantly and condescendingly toward her Black neighbor. The stationmaster, perhaps symbolizing the South's ruling elite, is said to be "real mean" to Black people heading North. The rest room for "Colored women" is out of order, perhaps implying that Black women in the South have no room for rest. And many Blacks' opinions on how to deal with discrimination are discussed, ranging from Marge, who is worried that Florence does not know her place, to Florence and her activist husband, who are willing to risk their lives and their livelihoods to achieve liberty.

Florence was first presented by the American Negro Theatre, probably as an unstaged reading.[238] Later in 1949 it was produced, possibly for a run of a single weekend, by People's Drama on Eldridge Street.[239] I have found no press notices or reviews of this production. In a reworked version, however, *Florence* was produced again, and its influence continued into the early 1950s.

This Day Forward

Another drama by a Black woman was produced by the American Negro Theatre at about the same time as *Florence*. Gertrude Jeannette's *This Day Forward* was the first of

[238] Harris, "Alice Childress," 68; Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 21 October 1994.
[239] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 169.

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several civil rights plays about equal educational opportunities for African American children.

Jeannette was born in 1914 in a poor Black farming community in southwestern Arkansas.[240] She eventually moved to New York to work in the theatre: there she tried unsuccessfully to break into directing, and as a fallback decided to write a play.[241] The result was *This Day Forward*, a work which drew heavily on her Arkansas childhood. The children of her community attended a one-room schoolhouse, five miles away and reachable only by foot, that provided a fifth grade education, after which the students were expected to leave to do farm work. The nearby white school, on the other hand, provided a ninth grade education, and helped prepare its students for college. The Rosenwald Foundation, a philanthropic group founded by a Chicago Jew, offered the Black school $5,000 if the community could come up with $5,000 of its own money. After a long effort, which included barbecues, ball games, and egg sales, and which involved many arguments over whether Black students should aspire to education at all, the $5,000 was finally raised, a modern new school was built, and the community was much the better for it.[242]

This Day Forward tells much the same story. The play centers on a rural Black couple, Dan and Bertha Crawford, who have two sons. Other characters include Tom Williams, a farmer and storyteller; Aunt Liz, a midwife who sterilizes her instruments with medicinal herbs; and Mr. Henderson, a well-meaning but ineffectual white superintendent of schools. Bertha encourages her boys to complete their educations at the

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[240] Gertrude Jeannette, interview with the author, 28 November 1994.
[241] Lofton Mitchell, interview with the author, 26 September 1994.
[242] Gertrude Jeannette, interview with the author, 28 November 1994.

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Jim Crow school, but with Dan's tacit support, the elder child drops out of school to go to work. He falls in with a bad crowd, and eventually dies in a fight over a crap game. Bertha blames Dan for the boy's death, and moves to town with her surviving son to live with her stepmother. Recognizing his partial responsibility for his son's death, Dan organizes the adults in the community to do all the farm work so the children can remain in school. He hears about the Rosenwald Foundation, and asks the preacher to write a letter to Rosenwald. Dan and Bertha together lead a movement to raise money for the Rosenwald Foundation's matching funds, and eventually the new school is built.[243]

This Day Forward was the first postwar play centering on the need of African Americans for equal education. It depicts a hard-working and self-reliant Black community which finds in itself the strength, the resolve, and (with some philanthropic encouragement) the resources to accomplish a difficult social goal. Surprisingly, it argues that in the absence of integration, "separate but equal" schooling is better than nothing—education itself is the major goal. And compared to later plays about education, the judicial system is strikingly—and, for the period, accurately—absent from the picture.

This Day Forward was produced by the American Negro Theatre in September, 1949. It had at least a dozen performances, and was mentioned in Eleanor Roosevelt's newspaper column. Frank Silvera later showed the script to a film producer, who optioned it but never produced it. Some time later, according to Jeannette, the play's basic idea and many of its characters were copied—without permission—by a television series which ran for about a year.[244]

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[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid.

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Two decades later, incidentally, Jeannette wrote a sequel to *This Day Forward.* Entitled *A Light in the Cellar*, this play carries the story forward from Arkansas to New York, where Dan and Bertha buy and manage an apartment building. The surviving son drops out of school and becomes involved with a Muslim-like group called the Nationalists. There is a violent incident in which another youth is shot and killed by the police, the son spends a short time in jail in Harlem. Dan dies of a heart attack, and the son decides to go back to college, retaining some—but not all—of the Nationalists' ideas.[245]

Lost in the Stars

In December, 1947, Maxwell Anderson, the author of *Elizabeth the Queen* (1930), *Winterset* (1935), and other distinguished verse dramas, sailed from London to New York with his wife on the S.S. *Mauritania.* By chance, among the other passengers were Oscar and Dorothy Hammerstein, as well as Dr. Everett Clinchy, a Presbyterian minister and the president of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and his wife. The three couples spent much of the voyage together, and decided to try to organize the theatre community to confront some world problems in the postwar era.[246]

In New York, with this purpose in mind, they arranged meetings of prominent theatre people, including Howard Lindsay, Russel Crouse, Kurt Weill, Robert Sherwood, Elmer Rice, Howard Dietz, and Elia Kazan.[247] The invited speaker at one of these meetings, the historian Dr. Arnold Toynbee, especially impressed Anderson. "There is

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[245] Ibid.

[246] Ronald Sanders, *The Days Grow Short: The Life and Music of Kurt Weill* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), 375.

[247] Laurence G. Avery, *Dramatist in America: Letters of Maxwell Anderson, 1912-1958* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 300.

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nothing that can save us," Toynbee said, "except brotherhood. Brotherhood, amity, tolerance, understanding—understanding that crosses all the boundaries—this is the great need."[248]

On the *Mauritania*, Dorothy Hammerstein had told Anderson about a not-yet-published South African novel of which she had learned in London, and which she suggested could be the basis for a fine play. *Cry, the Beloved Country* was the first novel by Alan Paton, then the principal of a South African reformatory. A simple but powerful anti-apartheid epic, it tells the parallel interlocking stories of three generations of two South African families, one Black and one white, through the perspective of the Black patriarch, Stephen Kumalo. It was published in February, 1948, and at a party in early March, Mrs. Hammerstein gave Anderson a copy.[249]

Anderson was struck by the parallels between South African apartheid as depicted in Paton's novel, and America's own system of racial oppression. Over the course of centuries, the white rulers of both nations had developed elaborate systems of legally separating themselves from people of African origin, while at the same time subjugating them financially and socially. In addition, in both nations, economic hardship had recently begun to force many young Blacks from their rural homes, where they had social support structures such as families and churches, to faraway cities, where they often foundered in a sea of poverty, vice, and crime.

Excited by the novel's dramatic possibilities, Anderson wrote to Paton in mid-March that "For years I've wanted to write something which would state the position and

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[248] Alfred S. Shivers, *The Life of Maxwell Anderson* (New York: Stein and Day, 1983), 227.
[249] Ibid., 227.

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perhaps illuminate the tragedy of our own negroes. Now that I've read your story I think you have said as much as can be said both for your country and ours."[250] Like many playwrights before him, then, Anderson wanted to speak to his own people by telling them the comparable story of another. He proposed to Paton to create a tragic musical, using "a sort of Greek chorus ... to tie together the great number of scenes, and to comment on the action as you comment in the philosophic and descriptive passages." Anderson suggested the project to Kurt Weill, the German-Jewish refugee who had composed Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* (1928) and *The Rise and Fall of the State of Mahagonny* (1930), as well as Anderson's *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938), and who had long wanted to write music for a Greek-style chorus.[251] The legal arrangements were quickly made, and Anderson and Weill set to work.

The dramatization, in two acts and eighteen scenes, was entitled *Lost in the Stars*, probably to emphasize the theme of humans searching for connections to one another under the cold eyes of the heavens.[252] The first act depicts Stephen Kumalo, a Black minister in the rural South African town of Ndotsheni in the Ixopo hills, going to Johannesburg in search of his son Absalom. Absalom had gone to Johannesburg earlier to find work, but has not been heard from in a year. Stephen follows Absalom's trail from one squalid residence to another, and discovers that Absalom has been living with a young woman, Irina, who is pregnant with his child. Just before Stephen reaches

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[250] This and the subsequent quotation come from a letter from Maxwell Anderson to Alan Paton. In Avery, *Dramatist in America*, 221.

[251] Phyllis Hartnoll, ed., *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1979), 68; Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to the American Theatre*, 28; Shivers, *The Life of Maxwell Anderson*, 229.

[252] Maxwell Anderson, *Lost in the Stars*, in Henry Hewes, ed., *Famous American Plays of the 1940s* (New York: Dell, 1960), 289-369.

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Absalom, however, Absalom and two accomplices are arrested for killing a white man while robbing his home. The victim, Arthur Jarvis, was a native of Ndotsheni and a childhood friend of Absalom who had tried to treat Blacks as equals, even though his father, James Jarvis, was a typical white racist.

In the second act, Absalom, heartsick over the murder, decides to plead guilty despite a lack of evidence against him. Stephen humbly asks James Jarvis to plead with the judge for leniency for Absalom, but Jarvis angrily refuses, saying that of the nation's two races,

> One is capable of mastery and self-control—the other is not. One is born to govern, the other to be governed. One is capable of culture and the arts of civilization—the other is not. ... There is only a handful of whites in South Africa to control the great tide of blacks—and the blacks have no control of their own! They have no mind to it—and no mind for it! ... Those who will not keep order must be kept in order! (346-347)

The court acquits Absalom's accomplices, but he is sentenced to death by hanging. Stephen convinces Absalom and Irina to marry, and performs the wedding himself in the prison. Irina returns to Ndotsheni with Stephen, who soon resigns his pastorate because he has grown to doubt his faith. Finally, on the morning of the execution, the Kumalos are visited by James Jarvis. After much soul-searching, Jarvis has realized that the hatred between Blacks and whites has cost both him and Stephen their sons, and that if they wish to make the world better for their grandchildren, they must forgive and try to befriend one another. Jarvis convinces Stephen to remain in Ndotsheni, and the play concludes optimistically with the chorus singing:

> Each lives alone in a world of dark,
> Crossing the skies in a lonely arc,
> Save when love leaps out like a leaping spark
> Over thousands, thousand of miles! (369)

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Weill's score, dark and richly orchestrated, contained curiously little music having a distinctly African or African American sound. "I wasn't trying," he later said, "to reproduce the native music of Africa any more than Maxwell Anderson was trying to provide with words a local-color picture of life there." He was trying "to get to the heart of the public," and feared that his message would be lost if he used either "African chimes" or the rythms and harmonies of jazz.[253]

By mid-March, 1949, Anderson and Weill reported to Paton that the script of *Lost in the Stars* was finished, and that The Playwrights Company, of which both Anderson and Weill were members, was planning to produce the play, beginning rehearsals in September.[254] The budget was set at $90,000, even then a modest figure for a Broadway musical: the orchestra was kept to twelve pieces, and the small Music Box Theatre was rented.[255] The director was the Russian-born Rouben Mamoulian, whose previous work included *Porgy* (1927), *Porgy and Bess* (1935), *Oklahoma!* (1943), and *Carousel* (1945).[256] Maurice Levine, the musical director of the 92nd Street YMHA, was hired to conduct, as Weill's first and second choices, Maurice Abravenel and Lehman Engel, were not available.[257] George Jenkins, who had designed *Strange Fruit*, created a series of skeletonized sets behind which the hills of Ixopo and the skyscrapers of Johannesburg loomed.[258] Paul Robeson, whom Anderson wanted for the role of Stephen Kumalo, was

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[253] Sanders, *The Days Grow Short*, 380-381.
[254] Letter from Anderson and Weill to Paton. In Avery, *Dramatist in America*, 229.
[255] Shivers, *The Life of Maxwell Anderson*, 230.
[256] Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 454.
[257] Sanders, *The Days Grow Short*, 380.
[258] Ward Morehouse, "Beautiful and Enthralling," *Sun*, 31 October 1949; Brooks Atkinson, "'Lost in the Stars,' the Musical Version of Alan Paton's 'Cry, the Beloved Country,'" *New York Times*, 31 October 1949.

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unavailable, and Todd Duncan, who had played the lead in *Porgy and Bess*, was assigned the part instead.[259] The cast also included Gertrude Jeannette as Stephen's wife Grace, Julian Mayfield as Absalom, and Warren Coleman, who had played Crown in *Porgy and Bess*, as Stephen's brother John; William Marshall, who would later star as Frederick Douglas in William Branch's *In Splendid Error* (1954) also had a small part.[260]

Lost in the Stars opened 30 October 1949, and drew generally good reviews. Most critics, many of whom claimed to have read and loved the novel, found the script a little sketchy in its opening scenes, but very strong in its final ones. Interestingly, not a single major critic seems to have noticed the story's applicability to the American racial situation, which after all was Anderson's reason for dramatizing it in the first place. Even Harold Clurman, among the most political of critics, went no farther than to call the show "a tear-jerker on the Negro-white theme."[261] Perhaps the critics were misled in part by Weill's basically European score, which drew opinions ranging from near-veneration (the *Daily News*' John Chapman hailed it as "a true and splendid creation") to boredom ("modest and unobtrusive ... not ... particularly interesting or distinguished," yawned the *Post*'s Richard Watts, Jr.).[262] The cast, almost without exception, received fine notices, especially Duncan, whom the *Herald Tribune*'s Howard Barnes called "savagely right" for the part.[263] The *Daily Mirror*'s Robert Coleman, however, was prescient in calling the

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[259] Shivers, *The Life of Maxwell Anderson*, 230.
[260] Nathan, *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1949-1950*, 72.
[261] Harold Clurman, "Two Hits," *New Republic*, 7 November 1949. In Harold Clurman, *The Collected Works of Harold Clurman*, eds. Marjorie Loggia and Glenn Young (New York: Applause Books, 1994), 223.
[262] John Chapman, "Anderson, Weill, Mamoulian Make 'Lost in the Stars' a Work of Art," *Daily News*, 31 October 1949; Richard Watts, Jr., "'Lost in the Stars,'" *New York Post*, 31 October 1949.
[263] Howard Barnes, "All-Star Triumph," *New York Herald Tribune*, 31 October 1949.

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show "an artistic, rather than a commercial, achievement," with much to praise but not "quite sufficient to give it wide popularity."[264]

Business was initially brisk. Two months after the opening, the show was still selling out when the National Conference of Christians and Jews honored Anderson with a Brotherhood Award for his contribution to the production.[265] But the show's business manager had earlier warned that racial hatred would make this musical a difficult sell, and by early March, attendance had dropped off enough to worry the management. To help make up the loss, the Playwrights Company decided to move the show to San Francisco and Los Angeles for the summer, all the while hoping to reopen in New York in the Fall. Weill, who like Anderson had invested heavily in the show, became (in Anderson's words) "somewhat hysterical": in mid-March he suffered a heart attack, and died in early April. Weill's epitaph, fittingly, would be a Beckett-like quatrain from *Lost in the Stars*:

> This is the life of men on earth:
> Out of darkness we come at birth
> Into a lamplit room, and then—
> Go forward into dark again.[266]

Lost in the Stars closed in New York after 281 performances.[267] It continued with a 14-week tour—including an appearance at St. Louis' segregated American Theatre, for which it was picketed by the NAACP—but it never reopened in New York. When it finally closed for good in Chicago, Anderson sent the cast a telegram that read, "I

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[264] Robert Coleman, "'Lost in the Stars' Not Up To Authors' Standards," *Daily Mirror*, 31 October 1949.
[265] Avery, *Dramatist in America*, 298.
[266] Sanders, *The Days Grow Short*, 392-395.
[267] Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 441.

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believe we were engaged in a great cause together, that we benefitted that cause extraordinarily and that our country will be a better place in which to live because of what we were trying to do."[268]

Perhaps. But by the time *Lost in the Stars* closed, it had lost $45,000, half of its original investment.[269] To most producers, its artistic success but commercial failure must have demonstrated yet again that serious shows about racial issues, whether dramas or musicals, were doomed to lose money. Indeed, *Lost in the Stars* was the last such show to play Broadway until Louis Peterson's much milder *Take a Giant Step* opened in September, 1953.

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In the four years from 1945 to 1949—from the end of World War II to the beginning of the McCarthy period—the American theatre produced a score of shows on civil rights issues, nine of them on Broadway. Most of the Broadway productions, from *Deep Are the Roots* to *Lost in the Stars*, were reformist works polished to a fine sheen by well-meaning, professional white playwrights. On the other hand, though often rougher-hewn, off-Broadway and out-of-town shows displayed a wider array of moral stances, ranging from the gentle persuasion of *Florence* and the religious fervor of *Trial by Fire* to the prescient activism of *Earth and Stars* and the documentary muck-raking of *Shame of a Nation*.

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[268] Shivers, *The Life of Maxwell Anderson*, 231.

[269] Matthew Scott, "Weill in America: The Problem of Revival," in Kim H. Kowalke, ed., *A New Orpheus: Essays on Kurt Weill* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 285

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After 1949, as we shall see, civil rights plays were diverted from Broadway by political dangers and investor fears; but they continued to find a welcome (if impoverished) home off-Broadway and in Harlem.

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Chapter Two — Keeping the Faith, 1950-1954

It's easy to kick a man if you call him a nigger and a commie first.[1]

America had begun distancing itself from its Soviet allies even before V-E Day, and the Cold War emerged in the late 1940s. But between 1950 and 1954, the United States was nearly consumed by anticommunism. Internationally, the Soviets acquired the atomic bomb, the arms race began in earnest, and Korea became the site of the first of many surrogate wars fought between the Soviet Union and the United States. At home, Senator Joseph McCarthy, the most audacious of the anticommunist demagogues, so chilled the era that it has become known by his name.

Throughout this period the American theatre continued to produce new civil rights plays, but the output was significantly diminished, and both the venues and the tone of the productions changed. The Broadway theatre, which had hosted a dozen productions in the previous four years, now presented only one. The Off-Broadway, Harlem, and regional theatres continued producing civil rights plays at roughly the same rate as before. Many of these plays, however, were no longer reformist works pleading for tolerance, but activist tracts demanding racial justice. As such, they helped pave the way for the more prominent activist plays that would begin to appear later in the decade.

The Muffling of Political Discourse

In September 1949, President Truman announced to the American people that the Soviet Union had acquired the atomic bomb. Five months later, Senator Joseph McCarthy

[1] Cookie, in Herb Tank, *Longitude 49* (New York: New Playwrights, 1952), 78.

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claimed to have compiled a list of 205 communists working for the State Department. And in June 1951, North Korean troops, armed with Soviet-made weapons, invaded South Korea, leading within days to American military involvement.[2]

The country's anticommunist mood had been building since the end of World War II, but these events were to set the pattern of American politics for the next four years. After a long and controversial trial, two lower-middle-class New York Jews, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, were convicted and executed for passing atomic secrets to the Soviet Union.[3] The Truman administration, entering what was to become a forty-year arms race, set many of the country's top physicists to work on the "Super," or hydrogen bomb.[4] The Korean conflict grew to include China, but was finally fought to a standoff; the next president, Eisenhower, paved the way for the Vietnam debacle by establishing the policy that no additional Asian country would fall to communism.[5]

Domestically, the anticommunist witch-hunt spearheaded by Senator McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) ruined or damaged hundreds of lives and careers, including those of many theatre and film artists. Those whose names were mentioned in congressional testimony, in newspapers, or in the periodicals *Red Channels* or *Counterattack* as communists, communist sympathizers, or even as left liberals often found themselves blacklisted, unable to find work in Hollywood or on television for years at a time unless they turned in other "fellow travellers." Arnaud D'Usseau, Howard Da Silva, Zero Mostel, Paul Robeson, and hundreds of other writers

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[2] Schlesinger, *The Almanac of American History*, 522-525.
[3] Ibid., 528.
[4] David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard, 1993), 28-48.
[5] Ibid., 404.

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and performers saw their careers ruined after they refused to testify. And professionals as respected as Lee J. Cobb, José Ferrer, Elia Kazan, Clifford Odets, and Jerome Robbins polarized the arts community and much of the nation by "naming names" of people they had known—often many years in the past—to be members of the Communist Party.[6]

The ultimate influence of the anti-communist hysteria on the course of American theatre history is difficult to quantify, though it certainly had a significant effect. A more anarchic industry than film or television, Broadway never applied the blacklist very systematically, but still often avoided hiring performers known for their left-wing political stands.[7] More telling was the limited range of subject matter of the plays that were produced. As one blacklisted director remembered, "there were really no noteworthy plays about such enormous events as the Korean War, the developing nuclear threat, the tragic deterioration of white-black relationships."[8] The chill of the era took its toll, then, not so much in what was produced, as in what was shelved.

But even as civil liberties suffered, quiet but significant legal progress was being made in civil rights. Howard University's Charles Houston died in 1950, but under the leadership of his protégé Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP's legal staff continued the fight against the constitutionality of segregation.[9] They called their approach the "bow with two strings": their main argument was that separate-but-equal was unconstitutional under the

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[6] For a superb—and appalling—documentary history of HUAC, see Eric Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities* (New York: Viking, 1971).

[7] Brooks Atkinson, *Broadway* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 434-437.

[8] Robert Vaughn, *Only Victims: A Study of Show Business Blacklisting* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1972), 253.

[9] Genna Rae McNeil, *Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), xvii.

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Fourteenth Amendment, but as a backup they could argue that the only way to equalize schools and other public facilities was to integrate them.[10]

The approach worked. In 1950, the Supreme Court upheld African Americans' right to attend state law schools.[11] In 1952, the Court let stand a lower court decision barring segregation in interstate travel.[12] And in 1953, the Court ruled that states could not allow Blacks to be prevented from voting in primaries.[13] But though it had narrowed the legal realm of Jim Crow, the Court still had not overturned its 1896 pro-segregation decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Late in 1953, however, Earl Warren, California's liberal Republican governor, was appointed Chief Justice just as a series of five related school desegregation cases, collectively known as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, were being brought before the Court.[14] The 1954 *Brown* decision, the first of many major activist decisions to be made by the Warren court, would destroy the legal foundation of segregation and put the onus back on society to stay within the law.

Alternative Theatres Take Over

Though the civil rights movement continued in the courts, it all but disappeared from the country's most important theatre district. Several plays with wholly or mostly Black casts did appear on Broadway—an all-Black *Tobacco Road* (1950), for example, the Breen revival of *Porgy and Bess* (1953), and *Take a Giant Step* (1953)—but only the last of these had anything to do with civil rights. Civil rights plays continued to be

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[10] Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 19.
[11] Schlesinger, *The Almanac of American History*, 524.
[12] Ibid., 531.
[13] *Terry v. Adams*. In Blaustein and Zangrando, *Civil Rights and the Black American*, 397-406.
[14] Blaustein and Zangrando, *Civil Rights and the Black American*, 416.

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written and produced, but virtually all of them were done at off-Broadway and Harlem theatres. New York remained the center of civil rights theatre, but the fact that a few shows were produced elsewhere demonstrated that the subject was not one with a purely regional appeal.

There were two primary reasons for the disappearance of civil rights plays from Broadway. First, few of them had made profits in the late 1940s, and producers, then as now, were reluctant to take risks with plays that seemed likely to lose their investments. Probably more importantly, however, the atmosphere of paranoia engendered by McCarthy and his cronies effectively censored almost anything—plays, films, books, songs—that could conceivably be accused of having communist or other subversive content. Much of this censorship was self-imposed and therefore cannot be documented: afraid of blacklists and jail, many artists and producing organizations appear to have silently softened the content of their work to make it unobjectionable. During the four years of McCarthy's misrule, only two significant theatrical statements about the politics of the cold war era appeared on Broadway: Sidney Kingsley's adaptation of Arthur Koestler's vehemently anticommunist novel, *Darkness at Noon* (1951), and Arthur Miller's equally fervent anti-witchhunt play, *The Crucible* (1953).

Asked about the economic and political pressures felt by managers who might have considered producing civil rights plays, Ossie Davis said, "I would say that those two causes were functional, but the basic one has to be the devastating effect of the McCarthy attitude."[15] The left had long made civil rights a major part of its agenda (or at least a major part of its propaganda), with the result that civil rights advocates were often falsely

[15] Ossie Davis, interview with the author, 20 December 1994.

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accused of communism. Black theatre artists, few of whom had found steady work even in better times, often could not determine for certain whether they were being blacklisted, though many were. The actor and director Lloyd Richards, for example, learned only after the blacklist ended that he had been on it.[16] Similarly, the playwright William Branch found that he had been on the CBS blacklist while serving in the Army in Europe.[17] And the actor Roosevelt Ward changed his name to Douglas Turner Ward to avoid the blacklist for having refused induction during the Korean Conflict.[18]

In this stifling atmosphere, perhaps only the most committed could summon the courage to produce civil rights plays. In any case, as the moderating effect of Broadway ceased to be a factor, the radicalism of the average civil rights play increased. Several of the civil rights plays produced during McCarthy's witch-hunt—*Longitude 49*, *John Brown*, and *Nat Turner*—are very radical in outlook and were produced by solidly left-wing troupes. Others, including *The Moon Besieged*, *A Medal for Willie*, *Alice in Wonder*, and *The Cellar*, were no less radical, though they were produced by somewhat less doctrinaire companies. The trend, especially in *John Brown* and *Nat Turner*, was away from Blacks as victims and toward Blacks as dynamic shapers of their own destinies. Even when major Black characters are victims—in *Longitude 49*, *A Medal for Willie*, and *Alice in Wonder*, for example—other characters do not merely question the status quo, but actively engage themselves against it.

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[16] Lloyd Richards, interview with Ernest Wiggins, 8 December 1975. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.
[17] William Branch, interview with the author, 26 August 1994.
[18] William Branch, interview with the author, 23 September 1994.

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The heightened activism of these plays is probably attributable in great part to the higher proportion of Black playwrights. Roughly two-thirds of the civil rights plays produced between 1950 and 1954 were by Black playwrights, whereas the vast majority in the previous period were written by whites. Among Black women playwrights, Alice Childress remained active, and Beah Richards contributed her poetic performance pieces. While some civil rights dramas were written by whites, the majority of the most effective ones were by Black playwrights, thus beginning a trend which continued throughout the civil rights era. By the mid-1960s, in fact, when Black separatism splintered the movement, only the most daring white writers and companies presented plays with racial subjects.

As before, some plays touched on civil rights themes without being full-fledged civil rights plays. In *The Wisteria Trees* (1950), Joshua Logan reset Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* in the deep South in part to emphasize the parallel demises of Russian and American feudalism, including the aftereffects of what Brooks Atkinson called "the liberation of the Russian slaves in 1861 and the American slaves in 1863." In Logan's version, most of Chekhov's ex-serfs predictably become African American freedmen, but the most important of them, Lopahin, remains white, and even proposes marriage to the Madame Ranevskaya character.[19]

Rodgers and Hammerstein continued their interest in the contacts between Western and Eastern cultures with *The King and I* (1951).[20] Based on Margaret Landon's novel

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[19] Brooks Atkinson, n.t., *New York Times*, 9 April 1950.

[20] Bruce A. McConachie has recently suggested that Rodgers and Hammerstein's "oriental" musicals, like U. S. foreign policy, were built upon symbols of containment, and that they were part of a pattern through which art helped legitimize the U. S. war in Southeast Asia. McConachie's argument is learned and ingenious, but I find

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Anna and the King of Siam (1944), which was itself based on the memoirs of Anna Leonowens, this sumptuous musical recounts the adventures of a British woman hired in the 1860s to teach the children of the Siamese royal family. Largely a plea for understanding between peoples, it features a tolerance song, "Getting to Know You," and a ballet, "The Small House of Uncle Thomas," in which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is translated into a more or less Siamese context.[21]

Another show that touched peripherally on the American racial situation was Charles Laughton's staged reading of Stephen Vincent Benet's Pulitzer-winning epic poem of the Civil War, *John Brown's Body* (1928). Cast with well-known actors, a large chorus, vocal solists, and dancers, the piece, which appeared in Los Angeles in 1952 and New York in 1953, was remarkable for dealing only peripherally with the Black slaves whose destiny was the central question of the war.[22]

The McCarthy period, then, significantly diminished the prominence and volume of civil rights theatre, but it did not slow—and may actually have hastened—its progress. Many of the civil rights plays produced during the Wisconsin Senator's period of greatest influence were markedly more radical than those of the previous era, and Black playwrights for the first time wrote the majority of the plays.

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it a little overblown, and in any case, Rodgers and Hammerstein's east-meets-west musicals seem to me to reflect their era's domestic concerns more than foreign policy. Bruce A. McConachie, "The 'Oriental' Musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein and the U. S. War in Southeast Asia," *Theatre Journal* 46 (1994), 385-398.

[21] John McClain, "Another Great Hit For Dick and Oscar," *New York Journal American*, 30 March 1951.

[22] Kronenberger, *The Best Plays of 1952-53*, 288; Walter F. Kerr, "'John Brown's Body,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 February 1953.

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Longitude 49

The first civil rights play of the McCarthy era was a solidly left-wing sea play reminiscent of Jack London's fiction and the early plays of Eugene O'Neill. Its author, Herb Tank (1922-1982), was born in Germany, but grew up in California, was a sailor during World War II, and thereafter became active in the National Maritime Union, for which he made several documentary films. *Longitude 49* was his only play.[23]

Tank's experiences both as a seaman and as a union activist are apparent in *Longitude 49*. The three-act play is set entirely on an American oil tanker, the *Mackey*, docked at Abadan, Iran (which happens to be situated at longitude 49). The action of the play occurs in an eight-hour period "on a night in the recent past," and the scenes alternate between the seamen's and the captain's quarters. The seamen's union representative, Brooks, who is both Black and a communist, asks the Captain for better working conditions for the men. The Captain rebuffs him, but then conspires with the First Mate, who is both a racist and an anticommunist, to have Brooks arrested on false charges. Later, during a chaotic moment when Brooks has just stopped an angry sailor from attacking the Mate, the Mate takes the opportunity to shoot Brooks. While the seamen debate how or even whether to respond, the Captain and the Mate attempt to convince a white Southern youth who witnessed the shooting to support their false story that Brooks was attacking the Mate when he was shot. Eventually, Brooks dies, the men undertake a work stoppage which succeeds in preventing the ship from leaving port, and the Southern lad reveals that not only has he refused to lie about the shooting, but that he had his own blood transfused to try to save Brooks.

[23] "Tank, Herb," *Contemporary Authors 108*, 481.

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The play shows some clear parallels to earlier works. As in Shakespeare's *Richard II* and Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), a commanding figure speaks vaguely of wanting to be rid of a political opponent, who is murdered shortly thereafter by an overzealous subordinate. There is also a strong correspondence to Clifford Odets' classic agitprop play *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), in which a union group debates whether to hold a work stoppage while awaiting their union representative, news of whose murder by management goons galvanizes the membership to strike.

Longitude 49, however, adds the complicating issue of race to the earlier play's depiction of class warfare (*Lefty* briefly touches upon anti-Semitism, but only in passing). Like Theodore Ward's Joshua Tain in *Our Lan'*, Brooks is a Black activist intent on defending his rights: "Here's one *black* man," he says during his interview with the Captain, "that's taken all he's ever going to take! It's up to here! I'm not taking any more! From here on in I'm dishing it out!" (24). After Brooks' shooting, the one other Black character, the West Indian cook, gives the opposing viewpoint: complaining that Brooks has called him an Uncle Tom, he replies that "Uncle Tom stay alive! He don't get shot!" (55). Later, justifying the shooting, the Mate raises the old spectre of miscegenation: "*You* know why they [Blacks] become commies. They're not satisfied to work with white men and live in the same quarters. They want to have their women, too" (62). And the British doctor adds a global (if colonialist) perspective, noting that the local "native community ... have come to believe that a brown skin signifies brotherhood—a white skin, an enemy. In their rather childish minds a white skin has come to symbolize what some propagandists have taught them is fascism" (66).

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Longitude 49 was produced in New York by a left-wing Brooklyn-based company called Freedom Theatre (later renamed New Playwrights), headed by Michael Gold.[24] The production was directed by Tank himself, with incidental music by a Black composer named William Moore, Jr. The cast included Sidney Poitier as Brooks, the versatile Frank Silvera—playing white—as one of the other seamen, and Al Nadler (no relation to this writer) as the Captain. The production was in previews for at least a week, and opened 21 April 1950, at Czechoslovak House, 347 East 72 Street.[25]

The opening night crowd was reported to have cheered the cast and to have yelled "Bravo! Bravo! Author! Author!"[26] The few reviews the show received were very positive. The *Post* praised the play's "true characterizations, salty dialogue and right-as-rain detail."[27] And the *Daily Worker*'s Barnard Rubin was downright effusive, writing that

> The tremendous success of Herb Tank's new play, *Longitude 49*, is an occasion for dancing in the streets, for joyous celebration! The working-class movement in this country, at a time when it is under severest pressure, at a time when the dominant money culture of the nation is directed only toward weakening and poisoning it, has produced a new playwright, who with his very first play, has provided his class with a magnificent weapon wrought from the most genuine artistic materials.
>
> Here we have a playwright who with poetic feeling, lusty humor, theatre craftsmanship and dramatic excitement, tells the world that American workers, Negro and white, despite what has been done to them, can have hope and can act on that hope.[28]

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[24] Karen Malpede Taylor, *People's Theatre in Amerika* (New York: Drama Books, 1972), 198.

[25] Promotional blurbs in *Daily Worker*, 19 April and 23 April 1950.

[26] Barnard Rubin, "Herb Tank's Working Class Play a Smash Hit," *Daily Worker*, 25 April 1950.

[27] Rice, *Post*, 22 May 1950. Quoted in Cowan, "Off-Broadway," 214-215.

[28] Barnard Rubin, "Herb Tank's Working Class Play a Smash Hit," *Daily Worker*, 25 April 1950.

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Some major papers, however, including *The New York Times*, never reviewed the play. Whether they so chose because Freedom Theatre was a small new group or because it was communist-oriented can no longer be known.

Longitude 49 ran for at least a month in New York. It developed quite a following, and was produced again at London's Unity Theatre in October 1950, at Berlin's Theatre Am Schiffbauerdamm in September 1951, and in Czechoslovakia in October 1951.[29]

John Brown

The next civil rights play of the McCarthy period was also produced in New York by a communist company. Unlike *Longitude 49*, however, Theodore Ward's *John Brown* received devastating notices, and quickly closed.

In 1948, after *Our Lan'*, Theodore Ward won a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship to begin work on a new historical drama about the abolitionist John Brown. He completed most of the research at Dartmouth College, and there wrote an early draft of the play. In time, he came to consider *John Brown* his life's work, "the play that may some day be regarded as my finest achievement."[30] Ward explained his fascination with Brown thus:

> To me, he is the first real American, and not just because he was interested in the Negro problem. He was a rounded man, lost to our society. He saw values in American democracy.

Ward added that his challenge in dramatizing the life of John Brown was that "it's almost impossible to get an image powerful enough, because of the historian's view of him."[31]

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[29] Rice, *Post*, 22 May 1950, quoted in Cowan, "Off-Broadway," 214-215; Tank, *Longitude 49*, i.

[30] Brown, "Theodore Ward," 186; quoted in Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre*, 257.

[31] Quoted in Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre*, 257.

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The historical John Brown was born in 1800 to an old anti-slavery New England family. He held various jobs, but his real life's work was radical abolitionism. In 1856 he and his sons led violent raids in the Kansas Territory to bring it into the Union as a free state. Later, with the financial support of leading abolitionists, Brown drew up a plan to use the Appalachian Mountains as a stronghold for escaped slaves. To obtain munitions, in October 1859, Brown and a score of supporters seized the U. S. Armory at Harper's Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). Within a day, Brown and the survivors of the raid were captured by U. S. Marines under the command of Robert E. Lee, and in December 1859, after a quick trial, Brown was hanged for conspiracy and treason. Brown's eloquent defense at the trial helped further polarize a nation already slipping toward civil war; when the war did come in 1861, the song "John Brown's Body" became the Union forces' unofficial marching anthem.[32]

Ward's play *John Brown* (which he later renamed *Of Human Grandeur*) is a long, episodic, and surprisingly prosaic work.[33] Its four acts and twenty-two scenes call for a total of seventy-five characters, though many of these can be doubled. The first act covers the growth of Brown's abolitionism from 1835 to 1855: Brown lays out his plan for using the Appalachians as a fortress from which to destroy the economic value of slavery, and later decides to leave his impoverished wife in upstate New York in order to fight the pro-slavery forces in Kansas. At the end of the act, Brown explains to his family that his abolitionism dates to his childhood, when he witnessed the brutal beating of a Black friend by his master.

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[32] Schlesinger, *The Almanac of American History*, 275.
[33] Theodore Ward, *Of Human Grandeur*. Typescript in Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.

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In the second act, Brown's followers recount his military prowess as a guerilla fighter in Kansas, and wonder at his "capacity to lead and endure, which, I think, makes him an unparalleled example of what men mean when they speak of human grandeur" (p. 2-1-10). Later, in 1858, Brown refuses to change his plans for building the Appalachian stronghold even after learning that they have been revealed to Washington by his own military expert.

The third act depicts the raid on the arsenal at Harper's Ferry. Brown's small band of followers manages to hold off several attacks by federal troops, and Brown refuses to harm his hostages even after one of his own sons is shot while carrying a flag of truce. Finally he surrenders, explaining to his captors that his goal was not insurrection, "not to act the part of an incendiary or ruffian," but merely to follow "the Golden Rule" in helping "those suffering great wrong ... the poor in bondage who have none to help them" (pp. 3-4-3 to 3-4-5).

The fourth act begins with Virginia's Governor Wise ordering that Brown be quickly tried and hanged, to quell the slave revolts that his rebellion has inspired all over the state. The rest of the act consists largely of what Brown calls his "mockery of a trial" (p. 4-4-2). The play concludes with Brown's historical closing statement to the court, in which he proclaims his willingness to die for his cause. "Had I so interfered," he says,

> in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends ... and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right; and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment. ... I believe that to have interfered as I have done—as I have always freely admitted I have done—in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right (p. 4-10-2).

Not only is this speech an eloquent justification of forceful resistance to oppression, but

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its emphasis on class conflict rather than race must have had special meaning to Ward, who made no secret of his leftist political orientation.

Ward's conception for *John Brown* was huge, even larger than that of *Our Lan'*. Depicting an inspired reformer who takes up the sword to accomplish God's work, and who is tried and executed but still emerges victorious, *John Brown* can well be compared to Shaw's *Saint Joan* (1923). But unlike Shaw's work, which consists of only six scenes and an epilogue, Ward's play is sprawling and unfocussed, with little effective dialogue and less dramatic conflict. Knowing the quality of writing of which Ward was capable, it is difficult not to conclude that in *John Brown* Ward's artistic vision was blurred by his over-fascination with trivial historical details. Moreover, Ward's left-wing perpective may have led him to overemphasize Brown's heroism while underplaying his personal conflicts (later in 1950, as we shall see, the opposite approach was taken by Seyril Schocken in her drama about Brown, *The Moon Besieged*).

John Brown was produced by People's Drama, the integrated leftist ensemble which the previous summer had done Wexley's *They Shall Not Die*. The performing space, a converted garage on New York's Eldridge Street, was arranged as an arena—possibly the first professional arena production in New York—with rows of seats set up on four sides.[34] The director was Gene Frankel, who would later direct Paul Peters' *Nat Turner* and Jean Genet's *The Blacks*. Elmer Bernstein, who would later become a prominent composer of Hollywood film scores, created the incidental music. The cast was made up

[34] Cowan, "Off-Broadway," 209.

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almost entirely of unknowns: it was headed by an actor named Irving Pakewitz as John Brown, but also included the young Rod Steiger as one of Brown's sons.[35]

The play premiered 3 May 1950. Brooks Atkinson, who had liked the original downtown production of *Our Lan'*, published a withering critique in the *Times*. He based his review on the first half of the play—"all your correspondent had the patience to sit through"—finding the characters "acid and peevish," the prose "stilted and monotonous," the direction "studiously torpid," and the performances "more like nervous tension than acting." In sum, he wrote, "Ward has made a dull chore out of a fiery theme," reducing "the John Brown legend to the level of an enigmatic family squabble."[36]

The *Daily Worker*, which had given the play a fair amount of publicity, was predictably kinder. Their reviewer, Barnard Rubin, called *John Brown* a play of "passion and eloquence" with "exciting moments" and dialogue with "a soaring, heroic beat." He particularly praised the play's political commitment as "a welcome change from the petty, pick-nose morality of the Broadway-T. S. Eliot tripe." Even Rubin, however, found Ward's selection of incidents "a major weakness," resulting in an overall lack of focus on "the essential and true meaning of the driving motive of John Brown's life's work."[37]

The play had only a brief run, and though Ward continued to work on it for the rest of his life, to my knowledge it has never been revived.

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[35] Brooks Atkinson, "John Brown," *New York Times*, 4 May 1950.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Barnard Rubin, "Theodore Ward's Courageous Play 'John Brown,'" *Daily Worker*, 11 May 1950.

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Just a Little Simple

In the 1940s, Langston Hughes contributed a series of humorous columns to the *Chicago Defender* about a fictional Harlem character named Jesse B. Simple. Later these columns were collected in a book, *Simple Speaks His Mind*. Fun-loving, beer-swilling, womanizing, and loquacious, Simple seemed to most Blacks to be Hughes' way of "telling off middle-class colored folks, reminding them to 'just be simple,'" though to many white liberals he seemed just a new turn on an old stereotype.[38]

In the fall of 1950, Alice Childress, one of Simple's more talented admirers, put on a revue-like adaptation of the Simple stories. Called *Just a Little Simple*, this show used Simple as a master of ceremonies who made speeches and who introduced various acts, including songs, poetry readings, interpretive dances, and two one-act civil rights plays. The plays were *Grocery Store*, a play about voting rights, and Childress' own *Florence*.[39]

Simple's speeches in the show reveal a realistic but humorous view of the difficulties of life as a Black person in America. "If you want to know my age," he says, "don't look at my face, look at my feet. These feet have stood on the Rock of the Ages. These feet have worn out thousands of pairs of sox, sneakers and shoes. These feet have had one hundred corns, ten bunions and has run from white folks." Later he imagines himself before the House Un-American Activities Committee, accused of wanting to "tear his country down." "Not all of it," he replies, "just from Virginia on down to Texas."

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[38] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 145.

[39] John Hudson Jones, "New Theater Thrills Harlem," *The Worker* [Harlem edition], 24 September 1950.

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Accused by the Committee of being a "red," he asks "When I ride the railroad next time, do I get in the black car or the red?"[40]

Grocery Store was written by a white playwright and screenwriter named Les Pine.[41] Originally from Hollywood, where he had found a "shrinking market for his social satire," he relocated in 1950 to the "comparatively freer atmosphere" of New York. In addition to *Grocery Store*, while in New York he wrote *Monday's Heroes* (1952), a full-length Jewish family drama which the Greenwich Mews Theatre produced with an interracial cast; *The Fishermen* (1952), about a fishermen's strike in Virginia; and a one-act play called *Ashcan* (1954), about inner-city youth. In 1954 he returned to Hollywood, and eventually wrote the film *Papi* (ca. 1968).[42]

Grocery Store is about a group of Southern Blacks, headed by a young man named Henry, who decide to exercise their right to vote. The polling-place in their small town is the local grocery store, run by a sympathetic white man named Mr. Crotty. Henry runs up against a band of local hoodlums headed by a thug named Pease, and in the end, faced with Pease's threats, Mr. Crotty backs down and refuses to allow Henry to vote.

Just a Little Simple was produced by the Committee for the Negro in the Arts (CNA), an interracial group of actors and technicians who had banded together in 1947 to encourage "the integration of Negro artists into all forms of American culture on a

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[40] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 145-146.

[41] *Grocery Store* has never been published. This synopsis is derived from John Hudson Jones, "New Theater Thrills Harlem," *The Worker* [Harlem edition], 24 September 1950; and Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.

[42] N.a., "Climax This Saturday To Les Pine's 4 Years," *Daily Worker*, 26 October 1954.

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dignified basis of merit and equality."[43] The show was performed at the Club Baron, a night club at 132nd Street and Lenox Avenue that allowed its small stage to be used for plays on weeknights. It was directed by John Proctor, and the piano accompaniment was by Ernest V. Warren. In the revue's Simple frame, Kenneth Manigault starred as Simple, Elton Warren played his girlfriend Joyce, and Maxwell Glanville played a bartender. In *Florence*, Clarice Taylor played Mama, Bettye Haynes played Marge, Sara Cunningham played Mrs. Carter, and Charles Griffin played the porter. In *Grocery Store*, Lou Polan played Mr. Crotty, Bill Robinson (*not* the famous dancer) played Henry, and Jerry Ross played Pease.[44]

Just a Little Simple opened 18 September 1950. In the only review I have found of the show, John Hudson Jones wrote in *The Worker*'s Harlem edition that "an oasis has finally come to the entertainment desert in Harlem." Jones praised *Florence* as "the most impressive and well done piece of the evening," and particularly lauded Clarice Taylor's acting, a single word of which, he said, "contained a whole book full of refutation for ... white chauvinist trash." He also found *Grocery Store* "an excellent little piece."[45]

Despite the paucity of printed reviews, word of mouth made *Just a Little Simple* an immediate success. Originally slated for a three-week run, it was held over until at least mid-December.[46] Several downtown producers suggested moving the show to a Broadway theatre. The Committee for the Negro in the Arts, however, mindful that problems had

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[43] CNA *Organizational Bulletin*, quoted in Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre*, 168.
[44] John Hudson Jones, "New Theater Thrills Harlem." *The Worker* [Harlem edition], 24 September 1950.
[45] Ibid.
[46] News item in *The Daily Worker*, 11 December 1950.

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developed in the American Negro Theatre as a result of *Anna Lucasta*'s downtown success, rejected the offer. Their reason, they said, for doing the show in Harlem was to try to build a Negro theatre, not to hold an audition for Broadway.[47]

The Moon Besieged

In 1950, Chicago's Goodman Memorial Theatre instituted an annual award for playwriting. The first award—consisting of a thousand-dollar prize and a production—went to a young white playwright named Seyril Schochen for her play *The Moon Besieged*. Produced seven months after Theodore Ward's *John Brown*, *The Moon Besieged* was the year's second play about the scourge of Harper's Ferry. Both more focussed and more balanced than Ward's work, Schochen's play examined the ethics of violent versus nonviolent means to achieve just ends.

In three acts, and with a cast of twenty-one, *The Moon Besieged* is set in 1859, shortly before the raid on Harper's Ferry.[48] The first part of the play takes place in Brown's farmhouse in North Elba, New York. Martha Brewster, a young Quaker woman, arrives from Illinois and marries Brown's son Oliver, to whom she has been engaged for a year. Oliver was wounded three years earlier in Brown's Kansas raids, and is guilt-ridden for having had a role there in the murder of four men and a boy. Oliver

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[47] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 147.

[48] *The Moon Besieged* has never been published. This synopsis is derived from Seymour Raven, "Goodman Prize Play is Worthy; Lacks Feeling," *Chicago Tribune*, 3 November 1950; John Chapman, "'The Moon Besieged' Historic Folk Drama," *Daily News*, 6 December 1962; Robert Coleman, "'Moon Besieged' Won't Shine for Long," *New York Mirror*, 6 December 1962; Walter Kerr, "'The Moon Besieged,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, 6 December 1962; John McClain, "Little Entertainment Value," *New York Journal American*, 6 December 1962; Norman Nadel, "'The Moon Besieged' Opens at Lyceum," *New York World-Telegram*, 6 December 1962; Howard Taubman, "Theater: 'Moon Besieged,'" *New York Times*, 6 December 1962; and Richard Watts, Jr., "The Tragedy of John Brown's Raid," *New York Post*, 6 December 1962.

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and Martha together argue with Brown that even a noble end cannot justify evil means, and that any new protests against slavery must be nonviolent. Brown emerges as a Bible-thumping villain, as merciless to his family as to his enemies: believing his cause to be God's, he calls Martha a jezebel for opposing him, and curses his unborn grandchild. Later, he convinces Oliver to rejoin him by falsely claiming that the campaign at Harper's Ferry will be nonviolent.

The play concludes at Brown's hideout in Maryland. When Brown's followers vote whether or not to go ahead with the raid on Harper's Ferry, the votes are presented as "for God" or "against God." When Oliver learns that his father is planning not only to use violence, but to commit some truly horrible acts, he argues passionately, and at length convinces him that if the campaign cannot be nonviolent, at least every attempt should be made to minimize the violence. As the play ends, it is clear that Oliver's counsel will later help Brown's achieve his post-Harper's Ferry reputation as a fighting angel.

The Moon Besieged opened at Chicago's Goodman Memorial Theatre on 2 November 1950. It was directed by David Itkin, and was cast entirely with Goodman students. Seymour Raven, writing in the *Chicago Tribune*, considered the play's central issue "of bloodshed versus peaceful persuasion" admirable, and thought Schochen showed "some signs of real talent for tersely poetic summations." The play as a whole, though, he found "wordy," with "little evidence of feeling for the long line which such a subject would need in order to justify itself on a stage."[49]

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[49] Seymour Raven, "Goodman Prize Play is Worthy; Lacks Feeling," *Chicago Tribune*, 3 November 1950.

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The play's message—of nonviolence even in the face of America's worst racial injustice—was perhaps ahead of its time in 1950. However, as the decade progressed and the civil rights movement grew, the debate between violence and nonviolence became increasingly relevant. In 1962 *The Moon Besieged* was produced again, this time on Broadway. As Howard Taubman wrote in the *Times*, "It may be that John Brown's career has fresh significance for our day when the Negro is fighting for the next advance—full equality of opportunity."[50]

The new production, though, proved a disaster. The producers, Lorin E. Price and Louise Arnold, put together a fine production team, featuring the director Lloyd Richards, the designer Ming Cho Lee, and the musical arranger Fred Hellerman of The Weavers. Cast largely with unknowns, the show opened at the Lyceum Theatre on 5 December 1962, and drew poor notices.[51] The *Post*'s Richard Watts Jr. spoke for most of his fellow reviewers when he praised the play's basic idea but damned its "pretentious, oratorical and ponderous style."[52] What had been mildly daring in 1950 now seemed merely dated. The production closed before its second performance.[53]

Lift Every Voice

On Thursday, 30 November 1950, the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, which was still running *Just a Little Simple*, presented a show as a one-night fund raiser at the Hotel Sutton on East 56th Street. Entitled *Lift Every Voice* (after James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson's song "Lift Every Voice and Sing," often called the Negro National

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[50] Howard Taubman, "Theater: 'Moon Besieged,'" *New York Times*, 6 December 1962.
[51] Hewes, *The Best Plays of 1962-1963*, 290-291.
[52] Richard Watts Jr., "The Tragedy of John Brown's Raid," *New York Post*, 6 December 1962.
[53] Hewes, *The Best Plays of 1962-1963*, 290-291.

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Anthem), this revue was advertised as "an evening of drama, music and dance depicting Negro influence on American culture."[54] It included "original African dances blended with old and new Negro songs interspersed with narration of poetry of famous Negro poets such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Paul Laurence Dunbar."[55] The piece was written by Walter Christmas and Bernard Katz, directed by Alice Childress, and featured Hilda Haynes, Joseph McFadden, Bill Robinson, Rai Saunders, and Ellyce Weir. It also included African dances performed by Miranda Burney Michel.[56]

Sadly, this performance of *Lift Every Voice* was not reviewed, and little more is known of it. However, on Sunday, 18 February 1951, it was presented again at a gala organized by the Upper Manhattan Division of Local 1199, the drugstore workers' union, in celebration of Negro History Week. Local 1199 was then mostly white and largely Jewish, but under the leadership of Leon Davis, its Russian-born cofounder and president, it had long championed ethnic diversity in the workplace. As early as 1939, for example, it had organized a successful campaign for Harlem drugstores to hire Black pharmacists.[57]

In addition to *Life Every Voice*, 1199's Negro History Week event included "a talk by a nationally prominent labor leader"—his or her identity has been forgotten—"on the

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[54] N.a., "An Evening of Drama, Music and Dance of The American Negro," *Daily Worker*, 30 November 1950.
[55] N.a., "'1199'ers to See Hit Play At February 18 Affair," *1199 Drug News*, January 1951.
[56] N.a., "An Evening of Drama, Music and Dance of The American Negro," *Daily Worker*, 30 November 1950.
[57] Moe Foner, interview with the author, 2 August 1994.

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contribution of the Negro to the American Labor Movement." It took place at the union's Recreation Hall, then located at 210 West 50th Street.[58]

The event was a success, and over the next two decades, Local 1199 made the Negro History Week celebration an annual affair. Later renamed the Salute to Freedom, it evolved into an evening of drama, poetry, music, and dance, usually hosted by a popular actor and featuring a well-known speaker. The next year's presentation, which took place on Sunday, 24 February 1952, included the one-act plays *Grocery Store* and *Florence*, performed by members of the original cast of *Just a Little Simple*.[59] The following year, on Friday, 8 February 1953, Alice Childress, Clarice Taylor, William Robinson and Beulah Richardson appeared "in a series of individual and group scenes specially prepared for this occasion."[60] And the year after that, on Sunday, 14 February 1954, under Bill Robinson's direction, *Florence* was again performed, along with scenes (probably from *Just a Little Simple*) based on Langston Hughes' "Simple" stories. The performers included Clarice Taylor, Ellyce Weir, Norma Margolin, and Charles Griffin. The proceeds of the evening went to an interracial summer camp sponsored by the union.[61]

Beginning in 1955, as we will see, 1199's Negro History Week celebration would take a more contemporary—and a more activist—turn when Ossie Davis became involved with it.

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[58] N.a., "'1199'ers to See Hit Play At February 18 Affair," *1199 Drug News*, January 1951.
[59] N.a., "Big Affair to Climax Negro History Week," *1199 Drug News*, January 1952.
[60] N.a., "Negro History Program Feb. 8," *1199 Drug News*, January 1953.
[61] N.a., "Dramatic-Musical Presentation To Highlight Annual Negro History Week Celebration," *1199 Drug News*, January 1954.

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Nat Turner

In 1934, Paul Peters and George Sklar's play *Stevedore*, about a race riot in Louisiana, had been produced to great acclaim by the left-wing Theatre Union in New York.[62] In 1940, while the winds of Depression-era radicalism were still gusting, Peters wrote another play about African Americans rebelling against racism. This play, *Nat Turner*, was published in 1944, but remained unproduced until December 1950.

The play was based on the historical uprising led by Nat Turner, a slave in southern Virginia. Beginning in 1820, the South experienced over a decade of slave rebellions, notably the one led by Denmark Vesey in 1822. Turner, bright and unusually well-educated, studied the earlier uprisings, and built a religious revival around the idea that he had been chosen by God to lead his people to freedom. In August 1831, he led about seventy slaves in a two-day revolt, killing his own master and some seventy other members of slave-owning families. The revolt was quickly crushed, and Turner was tried and hanged, but his uprising so shook the South that more restrictive laws regarding slaves and abolitionist literature were passed.[63]

Peters' play, in three acts of three scenes each, is set in and around the plantations on the Virginia-Carolina border, and covers the period from early August to mid-November 1831.[64] In the play, Turner is owned by a fairly kind master, Joseph Travis, but Turner's wife Stasia is owned by a Legree-like character, Salathiel Francis. Francis,

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[62] Garff B. Wilson, *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982), 276.
[63] Schlesinger, *The Almanac of American History*, 225.
[64] Paul Peters, *Nat Turner*, in Edwin Seaver, ed., *Cross-Section: A Collection of New American Writing* (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1944), 229-280.

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practising human husbandry, tries to marry Stasia to a new man, which infuriates Turner and helps convince him to lead an uprising.

Much of the second act depicts Turner convincing other slaves to join his rebellion: some are enthusiastic, some are scared, some feel the uprising is doomed, some are too devoted to their masters to want to hurt them, and—most ironically—some are hesitant to risk the stature they have achieved within the slave system. As in *Our Lan'*, the conflict between the slaves and their masters is depicted as more economic than racial: a sympathetic white overseer, for example, pointedly complains that he "used to have thirty acres of my own" until Francis "squeezed me out," and Turner himself dreams that his armies of rebellion will include "even white folks" (252-253). And as in *Set My People Free*, when the uprising actually begins, it is quickly betrayed by a cowardly slave—here named Dred, perhaps in reference to the 1857 Dred Scott case, in which the U. S. Supreme Court found slaves to be mere property, essentially devoid of civil rights.

The play concludes in Turner's prison cell shortly before his execution. Exposition reveals that dozens of Turner's followers have been killed, and that Turner himself hid in the woods for a month before being captured. In one of the play's only references to religion, Turner compares his impending martyrdom to Christ's, and is gratified to hear from an itinerant Yankee peddler that news of the rebellion has shaken up the South and re-energized the abolitionist movement: "They used to say," the peddler begins, that

> the slaves were happy. Nat Turner wasn't. They used to say the slaves were satisfied. Nat Turner wasn't. They used to say the slaves didn't want no freedom. Nat was ready to die for freedom. ... Nat Turner was a slave, but he opened their eyes. And when he dies, they'll say: "Nat Turner was right. What he said was true. What he done was brave. In the name of Nat Turner, slavery must go. In the name of Nat Turner, his people must be free" (280).

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The peddler gently bids Turner "sleep easy in the ground," because the armies he has awakened will soon "be marching." Moments later, the play ends with Turner striding resolutely off to his execution (280).

Nat Turner was performed in December 1950, by People's Drama.[65] It was directed by Gene Frankel, and co-produced by Frankel and Sidney Bernstein, an accountant who was interested in social theatre and who was married to the Black actress Brunette Bernstein.[66] The cast was headed by Frank Silvera (later replaced by James Edwards) as Turner, and also included the young Lloyd Richards and Milroy Ingram.[67]

The production drew few reviews, perhaps due to the repressive political atmosphere of the McCarthy era.[68] Yet it had a good run, and was soon moved to the Elks Community Theatre at 15 West 126th Street in Harlem, where it attracted large audiences.[69] One writer has described it as "two waves too late," better suited to the Depression-era Theatre Union or Theatre of Action.[70] But late or early, it was influential. The young Lorraine Hansberry, whose *A Raisin in the Sun* Richards would later direct on Broadway, was fascinated by the show, seeing it no fewer than sixteen times.[71]

A decade after its first production, when the armies of the civil rights movement were marching, *Nat Turner* was performed again in New York, this time by the Arrow

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[65] Chapman, *The Best Plays of 1950-51*, 374.
[66] James Hatch conjectures that the interracial couple in Lorraine Hansberry's 1964 *The Sign in Sidney Brustein*'s window may have been inspired by the Bernsteins. James V. Hatch, interview with the author, 25 February 1995.
[67] Little, *Off-Broadway*, 122-124.
[68] Hobbs, "Off-Broadway," 258.
[69] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 144; "Ruby Dee Stars In 'Alice In Wonder,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 September 1952.
[70] Cowan, "Off-Broadway," 219.
[71] Little, *Off-Broadway*, 123.

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Players, at the Casa Galicia on West 41st Street. *The Times*' Louis Calta panned the production, calling Peters' writing "crude and ineffectual," the characterizations "surface," the story line "spasmodic," and the actors "lack[ing] the experience to bridge the gap between the author's high purpose and the inadequacy of his script."[72] Like *The Moon Besieged*, *Nat Turner* was apparently unable to withstand the passage of time.

Southern Wild

At some point during the 1950-51 season—the precise date is no longer known—a civil rights play called *Southern Wild*, by a Jewish playwright named Elihu Winer, had a brief run at the Bleecker Street Playhouse.

Winer (1914-1994) was a Tennessee-born New Yorker who made most of his living writing television and film scripts. He also dramatized F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Three Hours Between Planes* (1958) and Robert Travers' *Anatomy of a Murder* (1964), and in the late 1960s served as executive director of the National Council on the Arts and Government.[73]

Little is known about the plot of *Southern Wild* except that it highlighted racism in the South by focussing on the conflict between conservatives and liberals on racial issues. *Phylon*'s Miles Jefferson commented that Winer "substituted buckshot for cannonballs and the play gave off popping sounds scarcely damaging to its evil target." It ran for only a few performances.[74] It was later produced again, at the Bucks County Playhouse in Pennsylvania.[75]

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[72] Louis Calta, "The Story of a Slave," *New York Times*, 7 November 1960.
[73] "Winer, Elihu," *Contemporary Authors* 111:517; Mrs. Elihu Winer, interview with the author, November 1994.
[74] Miles Jefferson, "Empty Season on Broadway, 1950-51," *Phylon*, 1951, no. 2:134.
[75] Mrs. Elihu Winer, telephone interview with the author, 21 November 1994.

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A Black Woman Speaks

One of the most unusual performances pieces—it is not exactly a play, though it is sometimes referred to as one—of the early civil rights period was *A Black Woman Speaks*, a poetic monologue about civil rights and women's rights. Written and performed by Beah Richards, *A Black Woman Speaks* hearkened back to the abolitionist and feminist speeches of Sojourner Truth, and helped pave the way for later poetic works such as Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1975).

Beah Richards was born Beulah Richardson in the early 1930s in a small Mississippi town near Vicksburg. "In the community I lived in," she has said, "I had at least nine mothers ... nothing was personal, most things were communal."[76] From her mother she learned perseverance and community spirit, and from her father, who was a minister, she learned the power of motivational poetry. She briefly attended Dillard University in New Orleans, where she studied drama with Randolph Edmonds, but she left after one year, appalled by the racism she found there. She then moved to San Diego, where she studied, acted, and choreographed for the Globe Theatre and the San Diego Community Theatre. In later years, under the name Beah Richards, she performed in Alice Childress' *Trouble in Mind* (1955), Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* (1959), Davis' *Purlie Victorious* (1961), and Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* (1964). She also appeared in a number of films, including *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1965) and *The Great White Hope* (1970), as well as in dozens of television shows.[77]

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[76] Beah Richards, interview with Camille Billops, 25 March 1975. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.

[77] Hine, *Black Women in America*, 977-978.

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About 1950 or 1951, while still known as Beulah Richardson, she wrote *A Black Woman Speaks*, a Whitmanesque dramatic monologue in which the speaker, representing all Black women, rhetorically addresses all white women.[78] She first compares the different ways in which women of the two races have been oppressed. She says white women have been imprisoned by being set on pedestals, while Black women have suffered the worst kinds of physical abuse:

> And you, [white] women seeing
> spoke no protest
> but cuddled down in your pink slavery
> and thought somehow my wasted blood
> confirmed your superiority.

The speaker notes that white supremacists "will use your naked bodies to sell their wares / though it be hate, Coca Cola or rape." She admits that many white women were abolitionists, though for the wrong reasons:

> ... you acted not in the way of justice
> but to preserve the Union
> and for dear sweet pity's sake;
> ...
> You abhorred slavery
> yet loathed equality.

Finally, after a warning to "Remind me not of my slavery, I know it well / but rather tell me of your own," the speaker invites white women to join her in the fight for "PEACE IN A WORLD WHERE THERE IS EQUALITY."

A Black Woman Speaks was unusual in at least two ways. First, its use of the term "Black" was slightly surprising in an age when "colored" was just being supplanted by "Negro" as the accepted term for African Americans. More shocking was the poem's

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[78] Beulah Richardson, *A Black Woman Speaks ... of White Womanhood, of White Supremacy, of Peace* (New York: American Women for Peace, 1951).

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critique of white women—including those who had been abolitionists and crusaders for women's rights—as unwitting tools of white supremacy. The poem was intended (and appears to have been received) as a wake-up call to all women to drop false distinctions of class and color in the struggle for full equality. It was prescient in addressing the divisive but seldom-mentioned racial and class distinctions of the early women's movement.[79] Like Sojourner Truth's famous 1851 "a'n't I a woman?" speech, *A Black Woman Speaks* establishes the humanity of its Black speaker before an audience of white women.

Margaret B. Wilkerson reports that the first performance of *A Black Woman Speaks* took place in 1950, for a white women's organization in Chicago called Women for Peace.[80] Wilkerson may actually be referring to Richards' performance of the poem at the American People's Peace Congress, which was held in Chicago from Friday, 30 June to Sunday, 1 July 1951. This Congress adopted a statement on racial unity affirming that "there can be no peace movement unless, on every level, Negro and white Americans work on the basis of brotherhood and equality." At the Congress, Richards twice performed *A Black Woman Speaks*, first at the Women's Workshop and later at a Cultural Program at the Coliseum. Both performances were greeted with standing ovations, and at the Congress' final session, Richards was honored with a special award. Later in July, the poem was published as *A Black Woman Speaks ... of White*

[79] For more on the absence of minority and working-class women from the early women's movement, see Carol Hymowitz and Michaele Weissman, *A History of Women in America* (New York: Bantam, 1978), 361.

[80] Margaret B. Wilkerson, *9 Plays by Black Women* (New York: Mentor, 1986), 27-28.

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Womanhood, of White Supremacy, of Peace by a New York group called American Women for Peace.[81]

Richards has continued to perform *A Black Woman Speaks* throughout her career. Little has been published about the structure of her performances of it, but one element which figured prominently, at least in later years, was an African hermaphroditic statuette, which symbolizes fertile coexistence: whites, she explained, "deal with the unity of opposites," while Blacks "speak of the right eye and the left eye" which together make up "one organ of sight."[82] In 1975, Los Angeles KCET-TV taped and broadcast one of her performances of *A Black Woman Speaks*, which later won an Emmy Award.[83]

The June 1951 issue of *Freedom* included another poem by Richards. This poem, entitled "Paul Robeson," thanks the great actor, singer, and activist as one who "refused to sing before a segregated crowd" and who "must speak ... / for me / for us / even yet. Today." Written in a style similar to *A Black Woman Speaks*, this poem may also have been performed, though I have found no record of any performance.[84]

A Medal for Willie

Among the patrons at the Club Baron during the 1950 run of *Just a Little Simple* was a young man named William Blackwell Branch. Born in 1927, this son of an African Methodist Episcopal minister, one-time member of the touring company of *Anna Lucasta*, and graduate of Northwestern University's theatre program had recently arrived in New York, where he was trying to make it as an actor. Branch found Alice Childress'

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[81] Richardson, *A Black Woman Speaks*, Foreword.
[82] Beah Richards, interview with Camille Billops, 25 March 1975. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.
[83] Hine, *Black Women in America*, 978.
[84] Beulah Richardson, "Paul Robeson," *Freedom* Vol. 1, No. 6 (June 1951).

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Florence a revelation: it opened his eyes, he later said, to using the theatre not just for entertainment, but as a forum for discussing ideas and current affairs, especially America's racial situation.[85]

Most parts for Black actors at the time were as servants or other subservient characters. Branch had been encouraging his actor friends to turn down "these rewrites of *Amos and Andy*, by white writers who didn't know a damned thing about the African American experience and couldn't care less." Branch's friend Elwood Smith encouraged Branch to take the initiative and write a play himself. Shortly thereafter, Branch says,

> I recall seeing a little notice in one of the papers, one of the tabloids, which merely announced that there was to be a ceremony in a town in the South in which a three-star general from Washington was flying down to present the mother of a Black soldier killed in the Korean War with a postumous award for bravery. For some reason or other, that caught my eye, and I clipped it, and put it in my wallet, and walked around with it for a couple of weeks. And one day I sat down with a pencil and paper—I didn't have a typewriter—and began writing, and in fairly short order turned out a first draft of a play called "A Medal for Willie."[86]

From this simple germ of an idea came a very influential first play.

Consisting of a brief introduction, seven scenes, and an epilogue, *A Medal for Willie* dramatizes the events in the Southern town of Midway following the news that Willie Jackson, a local Black casualty of the Korean conflict, is to be posthumously awarded a medal for bravery.[87] The presentation—to be performed by a three-star general specially flown in from Washington—is to take place in the auditorium of the Black high school, before the school's first-ever integrated audience.

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[85] William Branch, interview with the author, 26 August 1994.
[86] Ibid.
[87] William Branch, *A Medal for Willie*, in Woodie King and Ron Milner, eds., *Black Drama Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1986), 439-473.

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The story is framed by narration by a Black high school teacher, who in a folksy style describes the town and its inhabitants. In the first scene, Willie's mother responds to her daughter's comment that they should be thrilled about the upcoming ceremony:

> It's all very nice what everybody's doin' and I'm proud, very proud. Only—where was everybody when Willie was alive? Where was they when your father and me was strugglin' to feed him and put clothes on his back and bring him up decent? Where was everybody when he needed help in school, but they put him out instead 'cause they "didn't have time to fool with him." An' where was they when he was walkin' the street lookin' for work? It's all very nice to give him a program he can't come to, and a medal he can't wear, an' name a park after him they ain't built yet. But all this can't help Willie now! It ain't doin' him no good (446).

Later scenes include the General's arrival (a white Southerner, he is depicted as a racist and an anti-Semite), a barbershop conversation between a local father and a draft board member, an editor assigning a junior reporter to cover the presentation, and a white youth attempting a sexual assault on Willie's fiancée. In the penultimate scene, the Principal, an Uncle Tom whose own success is due to his acceptance of segregation, comments on the status of Jim Crow education:

> You see, the State's getting worried to death about all these Supreme Court rulings about equalizing education between white and colored in the South. They've spent millions trying to make sure that Negroes don't ever enter the white schools, and now they're scared the government is liable to make them do away with Jim Crow school systems altogether—and you know they don't want that to happen! They may sound rebel yells and make speeches about never giving up segregation and all, but if the government ever really gets after them, they'll have to comply and they know it! (463)

The final scene depicts the presentation ceremony itself. After the local dignitaries deliver boilerplate speeches about Willie's heroism, America's perfection, and the importance of fighting communism, Mrs. Jackson gets up to read a speech which has been prepared for her. Soon, however, she tosses it aside in disgust, and tries to give the medal back to the

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General:

> What has all your fine talk ever meant to Willie? ... You jim-crowed him and shunned him and you shoved him off in a corner. You gave him a third-rate schoolin' and when he wasn't quiet like a mouse, you put him out in the street. ... even while you-all's here supposed to be honorin' Willie, you keep talking' 'bout keepin' things the way they is. Willie didn't want things to stay the way they is. 'Cause it always meant he come out holdin' the short end of the stick—the Jim Crow end, the poor folks' end. ... And you tryin' to use me and my dead boy's memory to make out like everybody's all satisfied here in the land of the free, that we's all "one big happy family" who's just tickled to death with the American Way! ... Yes, Willie's dead and gone now, and I'm proud he was brave and helped save somebody else 'fore he got killed. But I can't help thinkin' Willie died fightin' in the wrong place. *Willie shoulda had that machine gun over here!* (470-71)

The narrator concludes the play by picking up the medal from the floor where Mrs. Jackson dropped it, holding it before the audience, and asking "Shall we make this medal *worthy* of Willie?" (473)

Not surprisingly, Branch shaped his play with some classic dramas of the 1930s in mind. Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) provided the basic agitprop format, a series of quick scenes in which people consider their lives in the absence of the title character, who never appears. The narrator, with his homey monologues and theatricalist descriptions of the town, was descended from the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938). And the play's pacifism and concern with soldiers killed in battle comes from Irwin Shaw's *Bury the Dead* (1936).[88]

But though structurally in the 1930s tradition, *A Medal for Willie* was unusual among civil rights plays. The Black soldier-hero, unlike those of (for example) *Deep Are the Roots*, *Jeb*, or *On Whitman Avenue*, is a truly average person. Attention must be paid to Willie Jackson not because he is extraordinary, but because, like Willie Loman, he is

[88] William Branch, interview with the author, 26 August 1994.

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typical. The play's tone is often sardonic, a refreshing change from the deadly seriousness of most civil rights plays. And the ending, in which Mrs. Jackson suggests turning machine-guns on American racists, was unusually militant for its time, worthy of the Black separatist movement of the following decade.

Shortly after Branch finished writing the play, Julian Mayfield, whom Branch knew from high school and who had acted in *Lost in the Stars*, brought a copy to People's Drama, which quickly optioned it. Branch, who now says he was "a very proud and even arrogant young man in those days," was infuriated when the white director insisted that the play needed rewriting. He pulled the play, and eventually the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, which had far more African American representation, agreed to produce it instead.[89]

A Medal for Willie opened at the Club Baron on 15 October 1951. To fill out the program, Chekhov's one-act *Swan Song* was used as a curtain-raiser. Elwood Smith directed, and the cast of seventeen included Julian Mayfield as the narrator, Clarice Taylor as Willie's mother, Charles Griffin as his father, Helen Owens as his sister, Jeanette Conliffe as his fiancée, Kenneth Manigault as the Principal, Engel Conrow as the Mayor, and Stefan Geirasch as the Superintendent of Schools.[90]

Ironically, Branch himself had received a draft notice while *A Medal for Willie* was in rehearsals, and was due to be inducted on 16 October, the day after the opening. After

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[89] Ibid.

[90] J. P. S., "Attack on Bigotry," *New York Times*, 16 October 1951; S. W. Garlington, "Young Bill Branch's New Play Thrills and Excites Audiences," *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 October 1951.

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recovering from the opening-night party, he showed up at the draft board a day late. The Army took him anyway.[91]

A Medal for Willie was a success with the critics, though some were discomfited by its message. S. W. Garlington wrote in the *Amsterdam News* that it was "a masterful play, well acted ... well worth anyone's evening in the theatre." But he found the language of the play's concluding scene so strong that "it almost sounded anti-American," and suggested that by censoring such language the Committee for the Negro in the Arts could reduce the "pro-Red smears" of which it had been a victim.[92] Brooks Atkinson wrote in the *Times* that though the production had "vivid and moving moments," the characters' "comic opera qualities ... detract from what should be the dominant note of the play."[93] But a very young Lorraine Hansberry, writing for Paul Robeson's left-wing newspaper *Freedom*, was unequivocal in her praise, calling the play "absolutely terrific," the "whole cast ... splendid," and hailing Mrs. Jackson's final words, which "strike home like a dynamite blast."[94]

The play drew a large, integrated audience, though both races were divided about it. For some, the play's conclusion seemed un-American, while for others—perhaps the union groups and left-wing groups that bought large blocks of seats—it rang as true as the Liberty Bell.[95] "Many [Black] pseudo-academicians," Loften Mitchell notes, "argued that the mother ... would have cherished the medal and cried over it. Besides, they added, we

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[91] William Branch, interview with the author, 26 August 1994.
[92] S. W. Garlington, "Young Bill Branch's New Play Thrills And Excites Audiences," *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 October 1951.
[93] Brooks Atkinson, "Attack on Bigotry," *New York Times*, 16 October 1951.
[94] Lorraine Hansberry, "'Medal for Willie' Deserves a Medal," *Freedom* 1:11 (November 1951).
[95] William Branch, interview with the author, 26 August 1994.

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don't want to show white folks how angry we really are." And others complained that the play perpetuated stereotypes by including a scene in which a Black woman straightened her mother's hair.[96]

In any case, *A Medal for Willie* was a box-office success. Originally scheduled for a three week run, it was held over until early December, and was only ended then to make way for a new show at the Club Baron. In January 1952, after the new show flopped, *A Medal for Willie* was revived, running for several months before closing for good.[97]

Ride the Right Bus

The play that interrupted the run of *A Medal for Willie* was Harry Wagstaff Gribble's *Ride the Right Bus*, which clothed a story reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet* in modern civil rights garb. Loften Mitchell, who directed the show, looks back on Gribble as "a hell of a theatre man, except ... he thought so much of the theatre was trickery and craft, without heart, which troubled me then, and troubles me now."[98] This calculating quality seems to have been at the heart of *Ride the Right Bus*, and was responsible, at least in part, for its failure.

The English-born Harry Wagstaff Gribble (1891-1981) began his career as an actor, but after moving to America in 1914, became a moderately successful writer, producer, and director. He worked on such plays as Elmer Harris' *Johnny Belinda* (1940), and also wrote the screenplays for several films, including *Stella Dallas* (1937). In 1944, he

[96] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 152.
[97] Ibid., 154.
[98] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.

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finally struck gold by directing the American Negro Theatre's production of Philip Yordan's *Anna Lucasta* (1944), which had a long Broadway run and toured for years.[99]

By the early 1950s, however, Gribble apparently felt long-overdue for a hit. Based on an idea from John Proctor, who had directed *Just a Little Simple*, he put together a play called *The Feast of St. James*, later retitled *Ride the Right Bus*.[100] It concerned an African American family, the O'Haras, who share their home with a family of newly arrived Irish immigrants, by sheer coincidence also named O'Hara. Both families are charming and get along famously, but they run into racial problems when their children cannot sit together on the Jim Crow school bus, where whites must sit in front, Blacks in back. The Black family's teenaged daughter falls in love with the Irish family's teenaged son, and eventually both lovers die tragically.[101]

Gribble and his partner, A. Raymond Gallo, first tried to produce *Ride the Right Bus* in the Greenwich Village area. They were stopped by the theatrical unions, which felt (apparently with some justification) that Gribble and Gallo were simply looking for an inexpensive pre-Broadway tryout.[102]

Next Gribble approached Loften Mitchell, claiming that his new play was "another *Anna Lucasta*," and offering to raise the money for the Harlem Showcase to produce it. A reading was arranged at a Salvation Army hall, with a cast including Frank Silvera, Frederick O'Neal, Rosetta LeNoire, and Earl Hyman. Though Mitchell says the show made him nervous from the beginning, he agreed to direct it under the Harlem

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[99] "Gribble, Harry Wagstaff," *Contemporary Authors* 102:235.
[100] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 153.
[101] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.
[102] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 153.

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Showcase's name. Neither he nor the Showcase had any idea, he says, that Gribble and Gallo "were going up to try to rent the Club Baron where Branch's play was being done, and I guess we got took."[103] The cast of *A Medal for Willie* was furious, convinced that the Showcase had stolen its theatre.[104]

By the time the show was being cast, Silvera had returned to Hollywood, O'Neal had taken another job, and LeNoire too had backed out, frightened that the show did not have Equity clearance. The final cast included Mitchell's wife Helen Marsh as the teenaged Black girl and Dermot MacNamara (later of the Irish Players) as the teenaged Irish boy, as well as Frances Foster, William Hairston, Alma Hubbard, Earl Hyman, and Richard Ward.[105]

As rehearsals began, several members of the Harlem Showcase's Board of Directors voiced criticisms of the play. Gribble added a number of scenes to explain various actions, and as the play grew the cast began to get the feeling that the show was in trouble. Mitchell recalls that even his baby son, brought to a rehearsal when a baby-sitter was not available, cried out "No! No!"[106]

Ride the Right Bus was booked for a run of two weeks, Monday through Thursday.[107] On opening night, Christmas Eve 1951, a boiler at the Club Baron broke, and there was no heat. The curtain went up at 8:40 p.m. and came down five hours later at 1:40 a.m. "Lordy," says Mitchell, "it was miserable!" The Harlem Showcase's press

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[103] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.
[104] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 153.
[105] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.
[106] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 153.
[107] N.a., "'Ride the Right Bus' Features Mixed Cast." *New York Amsterdam News*, 22 December 1951.

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agent grabbed the critics as they left the theatre, begging them not to write about the fiasco.[108]

To everyone's surprise, however, the following day—Christmas—the box office was swamped with requests for tickets. For a few nights, *Ride the Right Bus* played to full houses, but word soon spread that the show was a disaster. It closed on schedule, and was immediately replaced by the Club Baron's previous occupant, *A Medal for Willie*.[109]

Gold Through the Trees

Following *A Medal for Willie* at the Club Baron was Alice Childress' second show, a dramatic revue about the history of African people in different parts of the world at important moments in history. Though it had only a short run, *Gold Through the Trees* drew enthusiastic notices, and apparently influenced at least one other major playwright, Lorraine Hansberry.

Gold Through the Trees was billed as touching "in dance, songs and sketches, on the classic beauty of Africa, the story of Harriet Tubman's part in the Underground Railroad, and the present-day freedom movement."[110] Most of these sketches center on strong, independent women. In the opening scene, an African queen laments her kingly husband, who has been kidnapped into slavery following a great battle. A later sketch depicts Harriet Tubman encouraging a young girl weary from the hard work of raising money for the freedom movement: "Moses" recalls for her the elation of escaping from slavery to see "the gold shining through the trees." In another scene, a Haitian woman

[108] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.
[109] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 154.
[110] N.a., "Alice Childress Play To Open in New York," *Freedom* Vol. 2, No. 4 (April 1952).

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hawks her wares in a market while at the same time relaying news and passing materials for Toussaint L'Ouverture's rebellion. In yet another, a mother searches for her son, who has been lynched. Other scenes are set in the British West Indies and South Africa.[111]

Gold Through the Trees was produced by Ellsworth Wright for the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, and was directed by Clarice Taylor, who had performed in the Committee's previous productions, *Just a Little Simple* and *A Medal for Willie.* After a two-week rehearsal period, *Gold Through the Trees* previewed from 31 March to 3 April 1952, and ran from 7 April to 19 May 1952.[112] The cast included Vinie Burrows as the African queen, Alice Childress as the Haitian market-woman, Hilda Haynes as Harriet Tubman, and Theodora Smith as the mother of the lynch victim. Also in the show were Rosa Guy, Helen Martin, and Bill Robinson, as well as the singers Hope Foye and Osborne Smith, and the dancer Allegro Kane.[113]

During the play's run, Hilda Haynes told a reporter, "The entire production was a great source of inspiration. It renewed my faith in the theatre and human beings. For here was a handful of people with one idea in mind, and with intense hard work and unflinching spirit, got this show ready in two weeks. It has been an honor."[114]

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[111] L. H. [Lorraine Hansberry], "'Gold Through the Trees': CNA Presents Exciting New Dramatic Revue," *Freedom* Vol. II, No. 5 (May 1952).

[112] N.a., "'Gold Through the Trees,' New CNA Play at Baron," *New York Age*, 5 April 1952; n.a., "Alice Childress Play To Open in New York," *Freedom* Vol. 2, No. 4 (April 1952).

[113] N.a., "'Gold Through the Trees,' New CNA Play at Baron," *New York Age*, 5 April 1952; L. H. [Lorraine Hansberry], "'Gold Through the Trees': CNA Presents Exciting New Dramatic Revue," *Freedom* Vol. II, No. 5 (May 1952).

[114] Sonny Murrain, "The Play's the Thing," *New York Age*, 26 April 1952.

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Though its run was not long, *Gold Through the Trees* was apparently very effective theatre. Loften Mitchell said it was "beautifully mounted" and "pleased audiences."[115] Sonny Murrain of the *New York Age* called it "a terrific hit."[116] Lorraine Hansberry wrote in *Freedom* that "Alice Childress seems to know more about language and drama than most people who write for the theatre today," and that *Gold Through the Trees* is "probably the most worthwhile and entertaining show currently running in New York."[117]

In later years, when she became a playwright, Hansberry may also have been influenced by *Gold Through the Trees*. Both her *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Les Blancs* include fairly authentic elements of African culture.

Alice in Wonder *and* The Big Deal

In the summer of 1952, Maxwell Glanville and Julian Mayfield decided to produce an evening of three one-act plays. Mayfield had written two, *A World Full of Men* and *The Other Foot*, neither of which was about civil rights issues, but they rounded out the program with a third play, Ossie Davis' *Alice in Wonder*, which raised both civil rights and civil liberties concerns.

Ossie Davis (b. 1917) was raised in Georgia by working-class parents, who, he says, "were always involved in something, raising money for this cause or that protest."[118] He decided early on to become a writer, but the influential philosopher and theatre critic Alain Locke, with whom he studied at Howard University, encouraged him

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[115] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 154.
[116] Sonny Murrain, "The Play's the Thing," *New York Age*, 26 April 1952.
[117] L. H. [Lorraine Hansberry], "'Gold Through the Trees': CNA Presents Exciting New Dramatic Revue," *Freedom* Vol. II, No. 5 (May 1952).
[118] Quoted in Barbara Carlisle Bigelow, ed., *Contemporary Black Biography* 5 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1994), 79.

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to learn to act as a way of improving his writing. He came to New York in 1938, joined the Rose McClendon Players in 1941, and during the war wrote entertainments for military personnel, including *Goldbrickers of 1944*. After the war, the shows in which he appeared included *Jeb* (1946), the touring company of *Anna Lucasta, The Wisteria Trees* (1950), and a revival of *The Green Pastures* (1951).[119] In the early 1950s, apparently disgusted with some of the stereotypical parts he had been playing, he turned his hand again to playwriting. His first effort was *Alice in Wonder*.

Alice in Wonder is set in Harlem's Sugar Hill neighborhood in "the Present."[120] A Black woman named Alice Weatherscott is thrilled when her husband Jay, a publicity agent, is offered a lucrative ($25,000 per year) television contract by a national network called UBC. Her brother Mark, however, has been involved in unpopular political activities, including pressuring the government to restore the revoked passport of a militant Black singer. Mark's skepticism leads her to "wonder" about the ethics of Jay's new job, and sure enough, the network director soon demands that Jay go to Washington to denounce the singer and to speak on the Voice of America about the "free and happy" life of Black Americans. Both she and Jay's friends urge him not to "sell out," but he decides that his taking the job and keeping it "is really an advancement for the whole race." Alice, unwilling to compromise her principles, packs her bags and leaves him.

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[119] Michael E. Greene, "Ossie Davis," in Davis and Harris, *Afro-American Writers After 1955*, 81.

[120] No copies of *Alice in Wonder* are extant, according to Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre*, 299n6. The first page of the script is in the Ossie Davis Papers, Box 3, Folder "1199 Readings," Schomburg Center, New York. This synopsis of the play is derived from Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 156; Alvin (Chick) Webb, "Ruby Dee And Cast Shine In New Play," *New York Age*, 20 September 1952; Louis Funk, "The Big Deal," *New York Times*, 7 March 1953; and n.a., "N.Y. Theatre Fans Enjoy 'The Big Deal,'" *Freedom*, April 1953.

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Jay's dilemma, between doing what is right and doing what is profitable, is in the long realistic tradition of plays like Henrik Ibsen's *Pillars of Society* (1877) and Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947). And Alice's decision to leave him is descended from Nora's in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879).

This story line, however, was in major part a *roman à clef* inspired by recent political events. The title, *Alice in Wonder*, would appear to be a reference not only to the wife's dilemma of whether or not to support her husband's decision, but also perhaps to what David Halberstam has called "the Alice-in-Wonderland quality of that time."[121] In 1950, the great African American singer and actor Paul Robeson had had his passport revoked by the McCarthy-crazed State Department for saying in a speech that it was "unthinkable that American Negroes will go to war in behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations ... against a country [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to full human dignity." Shortly thereafter, several other prominent Blacks, including Jackie Robinson, were called to Washington by the House Un-American Activities Committee to denounce communism in general and Robeson in particular. Robinson testified that Robeson's statement was "very silly," that Black Americans were more concerned with ending Jim Crow than with helping communism, and that they "have too much invested in our country's welfare for any of us to throw it away for a siren song in bass."[122]

Glanville and Mayfield's program of one acts took *Alice in Wonder* as its title. The actor William Marshall, who had recently starred in a film, contributed one hundred

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[121] Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 18.
[122] Ron Ramdin, *Paul Robeson: The Man and His Mission* (London: Peter Owen, 1987), 154, 159.

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dollars to launch the venture, and Sidney Poitier agreed to sell tickets at Ribbs in the Ruff, the Harlem barbecue restaurant he was then running. Mayfield directed, and the cast included Ruby Dee as Alice, Maxwell Glanville as Jay, and Ed Cambridge as Alice's brother.[123]

The production opened at the Elks Community Theatre on Sunday, 14 September 1952. Originally slated for a one-week run, both critics and audiences liked it, and it ran for several weeks. It might have run longer, except that the balance-sheet turned red when the stagehands union insisted that one of its men be hired every night.[124]

Stanley Greene, a producer who had helped found the American Negro Theatre, and who was now working with New Playwrights, saw the show and felt that with some expanding, *Alice in Wonder* could stand on its own. He optioned the play and Davis rewrote it as a full-length.[125] Retitled *The Big Deal*, it opened at the Yugoslav Hall, 405 West 41st Street, on 6 March 1953. Julian Mayfield again directed. The new cast was headed by Milroy Ingram as Alice and Bill Robinson as Jay; the cast also included Ellyce Weir as Jay's maid.[126]

The political nature of the play was emphasized by this program note:

> Today's great truth, which is obscured and proscribed by the money grabbers, is the struggle of all peoples, here and abroad, for dignity, independence, equality and peace. The tears and laughter, the love and hatred, the anger and calm, the weakness and strength, the hopes and ambitions, which this conflict engenders, we want to present to you, our audience. It is also the story of all of us, for we too are these same exciting people.[127]

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[123] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 156.
[124] N.a., "Ruby Dee Stars In 'Alice In Wonder,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 September 1952; Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 158.
[125] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 158.
[126] *The Big Deal* program, Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.
[127] Ibid.

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Freedom, Paul Robeson's news monthly, predictably gave *The Big Deal* a good review, praising the play's political concern with "the problem of leadership ... one of the big questions in Negro life today."[128] The *Times*' Lewis Funke commented that Davis used the play's "central situation to unleash many ideas which, undoubtedly, are agitating members of his race," but complained that Davis "has not quite managed to harness his ideas to human beings, with the consequence that he has created more of a tract than a play."[129] *Phylon*'s Miles Jefferson agreed, finding the play "too bombastic, too militant a tract to pass as a play," and suggesting that Davis turn his opinions to "the lecture platform, the debating society or some other medium removed from the theatre."[130]

In any case, in its full-length guise, *The Big Deal* had only a short run.[131] But taken together, *Alice in Wonder* and *The Big Deal* were the first notable achievements in Davis' long and successful career as a civil rights playwright.

The Cellar

One of the longer-running civil rights plays of the early 1950s was inspired by a foreign film having nothing to do with race. Loften Mitchell's *The Cellar*, an atmospheric drama in which a Black character is symbolically trapped and killed in a basement, drew an interracial audience to Harlem for five months in the 1952-53 season.

Mitchell later recalled that as a very young man he saw the French film *Le Jour Se Leve* (1939), starring Jean Gabin. He was intrigued by this melodrama, in which a man contemplates his existence while barricaded in a room to avoid murder by his mistress'

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[128] N.a., "N.Y. Theatre Fans Enjoy 'The Big Deal,'" *Freedom*, April 1953.
[129] Louis Funk, n.t., *New York Times*, 7 March 1953.
[130] Miles Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1952-1953: Still Cloudy; Fair Weather Ahead," *Phylon* Vol. XIV, No. 3, 276.
[131] Bigelow, *Contemporary Black Biography* 5, 79.

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old lover. Several years later, while in college, Mitchell wrote a short story inspired by the film, but set it in a Harlem locale. He showed the story to a professor, who sent it to the *Birmingham News*, which in turn sent back a letter reading, "This is really a marvellous piece of writing. If the skies were brighter, I'd publish it. But we are dealing with a war, and maybe the writer can send us something else."[132]

Mitchell shelved the story until 1952, after the failure of Gribble's *Ride the Right Bus* left his Harlem Showcase in need of a new show. His full-length dramatization, *The Cellar*, opens with a Black fugitive from Southern injustice sleeping in the hallway of a Harlem apartment building. A mugger tries to rob one of the residents, a woman who works as a blues singer. The Southerner foils the mugging, and is invited in by the woman, who gives him food and friendship. However, the woman's fiancé, a brutal detective, is at the same time combing Harlem for a killer, and becomes convinced that the Southerner is the culprit. The Southerner flees to the cellar and barricades himself there, but the detective eventually gets in and shoots him dead. Almost immediately afterwards, news arrives that a Park Avenue playboy has confessed to the original murder.[133]

Mitchell intended *The Cellar* as a metaphor for the position of poor Blacks in American society. Hounded from his home by Southern injustice, then wrongly accused, pursued, and trapped by the authorities in the North, the lead character represented the experience of many Harlem individuals and families.

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[132] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.
[133] Ibid.; Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 158.

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The play was produced by the People's Showcase (another name for the Harlem Showcase) at the 115th Street Library. The cast included Mitchell's wife Helen Marsh as the blues singer, Richard Ward as the Southern refugee, a radio personality named Jack Stackhouse as the detective, and Willard Bartley as a lieutenant. Larney Rutledge, Freddie Simpson, and William Coleman also played small roles.[134]

The play opened in the fall of 1952, and was originally scheduled to run for three weekends.[135] I have found no reviews. But, Mitchell recalls, the first performance "blew up the house," and afterwards an enthusiastic young white woman in the audience collected the programs and other literature about the play to distribute to her friends. "The next night," he says, "I look around, and here's white America, there goes Black America." The box office was swamped with ticket orders.[136]

The run was extended to six weekends, and in November, after some rewriting, the show moved to a newly constructed theatre loft space called Don's Studio, at 290 Lenox Avenue at 125th Street. This space had been built by Don Tatum, a motion picture cameraman, and Raphael Lowman, a local businessman.[137] Theatre parties in support of *The Cellar* were organized by the Greenwich Mews Theatre and the Compass Club; the downtown press reviewed the show; and good crowds, both from Harlem and downtown, continued coming to see it.[138] It ran until late April 1953.[139]

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[134] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 158.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.
[137] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 158.
[138] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.
[139] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 158.

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Dry August

Dry August, a student play written by the young playwright Ted Shine, was one of the few plays dealing with racial issues to be produced outside New York during the McCarthy period. Shine, born in 1931 and raised in Dallas, Texas, studied playwriting at Howard University, the Theatre Department of which was then run by the gifted Owen Dodson. "Dry August" was produced at Howard sometime in 1952.[140]

Shine freely admits that "Dry August" was the work of a beginner. No script survives, but Shine offers these candid recollections of the play and the production:

> *Dry August* was a student directed production at Howard with no scenery and just a few props. It was presented at Spaulding Hall free of charge before a student audience. If we had programs at all they were mimeo copies. [Charles] Sebree allowed me to borrow the title after he decided not to use it for *Mrs. Patterson* (I have no idea what my original title was). It was probably the worst play ever presented at Howard. I attempted tragedy and the result was farce. It did not involve the civil rights movement as such, but was more in keeping with the anger found in Hughes' *Mulatto*. Maybe that was my inspiration. It did have a plantation, a cabin, howling bloodhounds and a lynching. It was epic in scope and very much 19th century melodrama. Baaaddd and best forgotten. ... Frankly, I remember very little about the play or the characters other than my audience finding my tragedy hilarious. I've blocked it from my mind all these years.[141]

Nothing more need be said.

Though clearly an extremely minor effort, "Dry August" shows that a younger generation of Black playwrights was becoming interested in theatre about racial issues, that they looked to Langston Hughes for inspiration, and that New York, though far and away the center of theatre about civil rights, did not have a complete monopoly on the subject.

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[140] Winona L. Fletcher, "Ted Shine," in Davis and Harris, *Afro-American Writers After 1955*, 251-252.

[141] Ted Shine, letter to the author, 22 August 1994.

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Take a Giant Step

The last play by a Black author to reach Broadway before the *Brown v. Board* decision was Louis Peterson's *Take a Giant Step*. Though in most ways a fairly mild psychologically oriented comedy about a youth's coming of age, it was also a civil rights play in that it examined some timely and unexpected ramifications of integration.

Louis Stamford Peterson, Jr. (b. 1922) was raised in a mostly white neighborhood of Hartford, Connecticut. His parents, both of whom had fairly menial jobs at a local bank, sent him to Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, which granted him a degree in English in 1944. The following year, he studied stage technique at Yale University's School of Drama, and coming to New York, soon landed his first leading role, as the young musician in Bronner's *A Young American* (1946). The following year, he received an M.A. in drama from N.Y.U., and appeared on Broadway in a minor role in Ward's *Our Lan'* (1947). He then studied acting with Sanford Meisner and Lee Strasberg, and in 1950 took a playwriting course with Clifford Odets. He completed *Take a Giant Step* in 1952.[142]

Take a Giant Step—originally titled *Merry Let Us Part*—is largely autobiographical.[143] In two acts of three scenes each, it centers on Spencer ("Spence") Scott, the sixteen-year old younger son of the only Black family in a tolerant white New England neighborhood.[144] He has always been on friendly terms with the local boys, but since they

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[142] Steven R. Carter, "Louis Peterson," in Davis and Harris, *Afro-American Writers After 1955*, 134-136.

[143] Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre*, 302*n*62.

[144] Louis Peterson, *Take a Giant Step*, in Lindsay Patterson, ed., *Black Theater: A 20th Century Collection of the Work of Its Best Playwrights* (New York: New American Library, 1971), 71-144.

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have become interested in girls, they have begun subtly to shun him. In addition, his older brother has gone away to college, leaving Spence feeling particularly alone. As the play opens, Spence has been suspended from school for challenging a white history teacher who claimed that slaves did not rebel against their masters because "they were stupid and didn't have sense enough to help themselves" (78). He borrows money from his grandmother, takes a bus to the Black part of town, goes into a sleazy bar, tries and fails to pick up a young woman, and winds up in a tenement room with a cheap whore whom he eventually pays *not* to have sex with him.

Returning home, Spence is lambasted by his parents not only for running away, but also for challenging his teacher. As his mother says, "you have no business talking back to white women, no matter what they say or what they do. If you were in the South you could be lynched for that and your father and I couldn't do anything about it" (116). Later, however, his Grandmother confronts his mother, saying that in Spence's defense that the boy is absolutely alone:

> You didn't know, did you, that all his little pals around here have taken to the girls and the little girls' mothers don't want their little daughters going around with a colored boy. ... And now you want to desert him completely by not backing him up. You moved him out of a slum and taught him to think of himself as something to be respected—and now you get mad when he does the things that you made it possible for him to do (118).

The action jumps forward two weeks. Spence, recovering from an unspecified illness, develops a romantic attachment to his nurse, a young Black widow from the South, with whom, it is implied, he has his first sexual experience. His mother, trying to reestablish his friendship with the neighboring boys, invites them over for a party, but most of them indicate obliquely to Spence that their camaraderie is a thing of the past.

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Spence preempts their rejection by telling them that he will be too busy with his schoolwork and college preparations to spend much more time with them (he does, however, remain on good terms with a Jewish chum who has also been the victim of their prejudice). As the play ends, Spence is resigned to remaining lonely until he goes off to college.

Some critics were later to interpret *Take a Giant Step* at its most obvious level, as being simply about a young man's coming of age. His Blackness is secondary to his youth: his minority status, both in color and in age, underscores the problems of growing up without significantly changing them. "The giant step that is taken," as Abramson puts it, "is from irresponsible childhood through frustrated adolescence into maturity still undefined."[145]

Such an interpretation, it seems to me, takes the play too literally and thereby misses some of its subtleties. It can also be seen as about the coming of age of the African American community. In this sense, *Take a Giant Step* is the first "second generation" civil rights play: it shows some problems that can result from integration. Ignoring the more blatant forms of prejudice, such as restrictive covenants, lynchings and miscegenation, it deals instead with the unexpected loneliness that can result for Blacks who have successfully become part of white society. It is significant, then, that the play depicts Spence, a bright young man who might be among Du Bois' "talented tenth," going on a little odyssey in which he rediscovers his Black roots.

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[145] Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre*, 238.

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Having completed a draft of the play, Peterson found two young producers, Lyn Austin and Thomas Noyes, who optioned his work for Broadway.[146] John Stix was hired to direct, and Eldon Elder to design the sets.[147] The cast was headed by Louis Gossett, then a high school basketball star from Brooklyn, as Spence. In addition, Estelle Hemsley was cast as Grandma, Frederick O'Neal and Estelle Evans as Spence's parents, Frank Wilson as the bartender, Jane White as the young woman in the bar, Maxwell Glanville as a man in the bar, Pauline Myers as the prostitute, and Dorothy Carter as the nurse.[148]

Take a Giant Step had a successful Philadelphia tryout.[149] It then opened at New York's Lyceum Theatre on 24 September 1953.[150] Most reviews were warm, though not ecstatic; none was poor. The critics agreed that the performances were superb, and most praised Stix' directing and Elder's sets. The *Times*' Brooks Atkinson was typical in calling the play "original and poignant," though marred occasionally by "awkward construction, monotonous overemphasis on quarreling and a lack of polish and fluidity."[151] Alvin "Chick" Webb, writing in the *Amsterdam News*, went so far as to say that judging by the applause following the opening night performance, "The Negro actor and playwright have both taken 'giant steps' in the fine art of pretending."

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[146] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 163; Robert Coleman, "'Take a Giant Step' Has Raciness, Humor," *Daily Mirror*, 25 September 1953.
[147] Robert Coleman, "'Take a Giant Step' Has Raciness, Humor," *Daily Mirror*, 25 September 1953.
[148] Alvin "Chick" Webb, "'Take a Giant Step' Gets Fine Reception," *New York Amsterdam News*, 3 October 1953.
[149] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 163.
[150] Alvin "Chick" Webb, "'Take a Giant Step' Gets Fine Reception," *New York Amsterdam News*, 3 October 1953.
[151] Brooks Atkinson, "Louis Peterson's 'Take a Giant Step' Is the Story of an Adolescent Negro," *New York Times*, 25 September 1953.

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Most critics were not so alert to the play's racial implications. Atkinson, for example, thought that Spence's problems "could happen to anyone." Among the major reviewers, the *World-Telegram*'s William Hawkins alone noticed the "infinite taste" with which Peterson addressed "one of our most difficult contemporary problems." He found *Giant Step* "a mature drama, rippling with fine comedy ... like *Ah, Wilderness!*, with immediacy and a whole new dimension."[152]

Despite good reviews, however, the play had trouble finding its audience. Barely two weeks after it opened, the cast took out a quarter-page ad in the *New York Age*, reading in part:

> We are the performers in Louis Peterson's "Take A Giant Step," the first play by a Negro playwright ever to receive the universal acclaim of Broadway critics. No play can survive without people lining up at the box-office to buy tickets and "Take A Giant Step" is no exception. We must urge you now to buy your tickets and we can honestly say that you'll be witnessing a bit of great American theatre. ... We want you to know that for us—and for future opportunities for the Negro in the theatre—it is NOW OR NEVER.[153]

Whether this ad helped or not is unclear, but *Take a Giant Step* ran another six weeks, closing 28 November 1953.[154] Peterson left the theatre for a time, turning first to television writing and then to film. No more of his plays were produced until his *Entertain a Ghost* was presented off-Broadway in 1962.[155] *Take a Giant Step* had a successful revival, however, which opened off-Broadway on 26 September 1956.[156]

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[152] William Hawkins, "'Giant Step' Shows Mature Touch," *New York World-Telegram*, 25 September 1953.
[153] Advertisement, *New York Age*, 10 October 1953.
[154] Kronenberger, *The Best Plays of 1953-1953*, 307.
[155] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 166.
[156] Cowan, "Off-Broadway," 302-303.

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In hindsight, it is fitting that *Take a Giant Step* was the last play on civil rights issues to premiere before the Brown v. Board decision. The play shows a young Black Everyman coming to terms with the racist realities of a world he did not create, and preparing to meet those realities with a long, slow and lonely struggle. What Spence does not expect—indeed, what no one at the time could have expected—is the speed with which the nascent civil rights struggle would accelerate into a mass, communal movement.

* * * * *

During the surge of civil rights plays produced between the end of World War II and 1950, it must have seemed to some that such plays had become a near-permanent Broadway fixture. In the early 1950s, however, the repressive political climate of the McCarthy period, combined with many producers' fears that civil rights plays could not earn back their investments, caused a virtual disappearance of these plays on Broadway. But despite these obstacles, such plays—most, for the first time, written by Black playwrights—continued to be produced by off-Broadway, Harlem, and some regional companies. Thus the flame of civil rights theatre was kept alive: though obscured from sight for a time, it burned in the end all the brighter.

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Chapter Three — A Popular Awakening, 1954-1959

> I propose that we sit down in mutual blindness and try to find a way to bring some splinter of truth to a prejudiced audience.[1]

The Supreme Court's pivotal *Brown v. Board of Education* decision launched a new era in civil rights theatre, which both in form and content mirrored the nonviolent but nonetheless revolutionary spirit of the growing civil rights movement.

African Americans now wrote most civil rights plays, and their work reflected both their growing activism and their increased theatrical sophistication. Several fairly radical plays were well-received off-Broadway by both critics and audiences, and one—*A Raisin in the Sun*—became a major Broadway success. A number of playwrights condensed the movement's recent history into short, hastily written plays—theatrical broadside ballads, in effect—which were then produced as unstaged "concert" performances. And one young playwright, later known as the controversial Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, anticipated the Black Arts movement of the mid-1960s by eight years with a pair of successful Black separatist plays.

A Sense of Decency at Last

On 17 May 1954 the United States Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. The *Brown* decision, hailed by many as the most significant of the twentieth century, set off an almost immediate series of challenges and counter-challenges to segregation not only in public schools, but in higher education, transporta-

[1] Manners, in Alice Childress, *Trouble in Mind*. Quoted in Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre*, 202-203.

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tion, voting rights, public accommodations, and housing. By the early 1960s, virtually every segregation law in America had been struck down.

The *Brown* decision came at a propitious moment.[2] With Stalin dead, the Korean conflict over, and thermonuclear weapons the newest arrows in the American quiver, international relations were less a daily worry for most Americans. Just a month after *Brown*, Senator McCarthy imploded on national television, sputtering only vitriol when asked by an opposing attorney "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at last?"[3] Though for more than another decade opportunistic politicians continued to swing McCarthy's anticommunist axe, at least its edge was dulled a bit.

Eisenhower was considered a conservative, but he expanded many of the expensive governmental programs begun during the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. By the time he left office in 1960, farm subsidies had risen to unprecedented levels, the ambitious interstate highway system was begun, and the new space program provided yet another forum for nonviolent—and expensive—competition with the Soviet Union.

Fortunately, the economy continued to grow explosively. After a decade as the world's major industrial producer, America was becoming more than ever a society of middle-class consumers. Car sales boomed to record levels. Suburbs proliferated, beginning for the first time to drain the middle class from the cities. Into the average home the television industry brought sitcoms, dramas, soap operas, game-shows, news

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[2] The history of the 1950s in general and of the early civil rights movement in particular has been told in many fine books. Some of the sources I have used in compiling this summary include: Branch, *Parting the Waters*; David Halberstam, *The 1950s*; Hodgson, *America in Our Time*; William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream* (New York: Bantam, 1990); and Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*.

[3] Hodgson, *America in Our Time*, 72.

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programs, and of course, commercials. Teenagers became a major force in the economy, cruising in jalopies and dancing to a form of Black popular music dubbed "rock and roll" by midwestern disc jockeys; no less an observer than Leonard Bernstein would later call the teens' favorite artist, an apolitical white Southerner named Elvis Presley, "the greatest cultural force in the twentieth century."[4] Though most of the successful rock bands were white, fans' knowledge that their music's basic form was Black may have made the younger generation more sympathetic toward the civil rights struggle than their elders.

Certainly teenagers were among those directly affected by the *Brown* decision, though the Supreme Court supplied no immediate schedule for desegregating Jim Crow schools. And when, in 1955, the court finally provided guidelines for school desegregation, it specified only that the process was to be carried out "with all deliberate speed." This vagueness—which the Court probably intended to minimize racial violence—was seized upon by conservatives, who used it to justify dragging their feet every step of the way.

Yet Blacks in many Southern communities, emboldened by the *Brown* decision, began refusing to acquiesce in their own subjugation. The first major public battle of the civil rights movement was the integration of the public bus system in Montgomery, Alabama. Rosa Parks, the secretary of the local NAACP chapter, was arrested in December 1955, for refusing to move to the back of a bus when a white passenger requested her seat. An economic boycott of the Montgomery bus system by Blacks,

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[4] Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 456. It is also worth noting that like *Brown*, the first crossover hit of a Black rythm-and-blues song came in 1954, when the Chords' "Sh-Boom" cracked the pop music Top 10. David Gonzalez, "A Doo-Wop Dream Lives, Even in Death," *New York Times*, 27 July 1995.

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originally scheduled as a one-day demonstration, was extended to over a year, finally resulting in the complete integration of the system. This early struggle, which inspired similar protests in other Southern cities, was organized by the newly formed Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), under the leadership of a young minister, Martin Luther King, Jr. King's philosophy of nonviolence, which merged Gandhian techniques with Christian teachings and Emersonian philosophy, gave the movement a solid spiritual center and helped protect it from the frequent charges that it was inspired by Communist agitators. Its combination of ethical and legal thought with highly dramatic public action proved the perfect format for confronting racism at home in the post-fascist, early television era.

Integrationists may have claimed the moral high ground, but white Southern conservatives did not hesitate to fight them with every available weapon. *Brown* dissolved the legal foundation that *Plessy v. Ferguson* had provided for almost six decades to one of the central principles of Southern social organization, and white reactionaries of all classes looked for ways of minimizing *Brown*'s effect. The Ku Klux Klan, which had for many years appealed largely to poor, undereducated whites, enjoyed a brief resurgence of popularity. More significantly, shortly after the *Brown* decision a group of Mississippians founded the White Citizens Council, which served in essence as a white-collar alternative to the Klan, providing a political outlet for more urbane Southerners embarrassed by the white sheets, red necks, and bloody hands of the Klansmen. Over the course of the following decade, the Council was the source of many of the civil rights movement's legal and financial obstacles.

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Violence remained some racists' weapon of first resort. In late June 1954, for example, the home of a prominent Black family in Louisville was bombed shortly after they moved into a white neighborhood.[5] In 1955, Emmett Till, a Black teenager from Chicago, was murdered in cold blood in Mississippi merely for having "sassed" a white woman. As the civil rights movement gathered steam, its leaders became frequent targets of violence: on a single night in 1956, for example, the homes and churches of many of the leaders of the Montgomery bus boycott were bombed. And in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when mass nonviolent demonstrations came into wide use, violent reprisals by mobs—sometimes aided or even led by the police—became common.

Another major confrontation of the civil rights movement took place in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, when segregationists seized control of the court-ordered school desegregation process. Governor Orval Faubus, who feared being turned out of office if the Little Rock schools were integrated, actually had the Arkansas National Guard surround one high school and keep Black students away at bayonet-point. President Eisenhower, though not a strong supporter of integration, felt compelled to send in federal troops to uphold the federal court order. The confrontation was heavily covered by national print and broadcast media, and thereby helped bring the civil rights movement to the center of the nation's consciousness.

By the late 1950s, the civil rights movement had won some major victories in the South, but much work remained to be done. Though the NAACP, CORE, and especially the SCLC were growing and becoming better organized, so were their opposition. The situation settled into a near-stalemate in which only painfully slow progress was made.

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[5] Max Gordon, "An Interview With the Victims of Racist Bombings," *Daily Worker*, 1

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This impasse remained until 1960, when grass-roots activists took the movement in a new, unexpected, and highly dramatic direction.

The View From the Stage

The middle to late 1950s were a fairly stable era for the American theatre, which held its own against competition from both film and television. Broadway continued to turn out successful musicals, including Abbott and Alder's *Damn Yankees* (1955), Lerner and Loew's *My Fair Lady* (1956), Bernstein, Laurents, and Sondheim's *West Side Story* (1957), and Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music* (1959). Broadway also produced a string of successful dramas, including William Inge's *Bus Stop* (1955), Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* (1955), Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), and Eugene O'Neill's posthumous *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956). The off-Broadway movement continued to grow, producing increasingly influential works, such as the Théâtre de Lys' revival of Brecht and Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* (1955), the Circle in the Square's revival of O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (1956), and the Living Theatre's *The Connection* (1959).

Considering the enormity of the changes taking place in *Brown*'s wake, comparatively few civil rights plays were produced in the middle to late 1950s, both off and on Broadway. One reason for the reduction in off-Broadway productions may have been cost: as one observer noted about the 1956-57 season,

> Budgets are rapidly rising—what with such matters as increased wages and theatre rentals and union contracts. Four years ago a production might cost $500; today anything from $7000 to $15,000 is not unusual. Shows used to break even with a

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November 1954.

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> 35% capacity; nowadays it takes a minimum of 50%. Rents used to be around $125 a week: these days landlords are asking—and getting—$575.[6]

This new situation must have been especially trying for producers of shows with serious political or racial themes, who (except for the brief period of the late 1940s) had never had financial resources comparable to those of more mainstream producers, and whose shows had rarely repaid their investments.

But though there were in general fewer shows per season, those that were produced were often more effective and more provocative than those of the McCarthy era. A new generation of Black playwrights was reaching its artistic and political maturity. William Branch, Ossie Davis, and Langston Hughes each turned out punchy, newsreel-style, anti-segregation plays that brought recent civil rights developments to audiences at political gatherings. Such works as William Branch's *In Splendid Error*, Alice Childress' *Trouble in Mind*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and Loften Mitchell's *A Land Beyond the River* were not just good propaganda, they were major works of theatrical art. And prefiguring the fragmenting of the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s, two surprisingly successful—and now virtually forgotten—Black separatist plays were written and produced by the Nation of Islam's fiery young Louis X.

During this period, Black playwrights achieved their highest proportion to date of produced plays on civil rights issues—roughly three-quarters of the nineteen civil rights plays produced in the middle to late 1950s were by Black playwrights. Four plays were written by women—two by Blacks and two by whites. With the notable exception of *A Raisin in the Sun*, however, Broadway remained the exclusive domain of white writers.

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[6] Kronenberger, *Best Plays of 1955-1956*, 55.

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Three of the four civil rights plays to appear on Broadway during this period were by whites, while four of the five to appear off-Broadway and all ten produced elsewhere were by Blacks. And as in previous eras, virtually all these plays were produced in New York.

The number of plays which touched on civil rights themes but cannot be called full-fledged civil rights plays also grew during this period. Charles Sebree and Greer Johnston's *Mrs. Patterson*, Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, and Stephen Sondheim's *West Side Story*, Saul Levitt's *The Andersonville Trial*, and even Hal Holbrook's *Mark Twain Tonight* touched on subjects related to civil rights issues. The number of plays peripherally related to civil rights demonstrates how pervasive the movement was becoming in the national consciousness.

In Splendid Error

The first civil rights play produced after the *Brown* decision was by William Branch. A historical drama in three acts, *In Splendid Error* tells the story of Frederick Douglass' association with John Brown, before, during, and after the latter's raid on Harper's Ferry. The issues it discusses—violent versus nonviolent agitation, activism as an instrument of public discourse, and the limits of personal commitment—made it highly relevant to the nascent civil rights movement, and among the most effective political plays of its time.

Branch recalls that he first became interested in Frederick Douglass while in high school in Charlotte, North Carolina. His interest grew after his family moved to Washington, D.C., where his homeroom teacher at Dunbar High School was Hailey G. Douglass, Frederick Douglass' grandson. After the success of his earlier *A Medal for*

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Willie, Branch turned to Douglass as a subject because he "wanted to write a play about a Black hero" at a time when there were few "full-fledged positive Black images." His sources and influences included Douglass' autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Shirley Graham's fictionalized biography of Douglass, *There Was Once a Slave*, and Robert Sherwood's play *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1938). Branch, in the Army when *A Medal for Willie* closed in 1952, began writing his play (then entitled simply *Frederick Douglass*) on board a troopship bound for Europe, and completed the first draft in 1953 while stationed in Nuremburg.[7]

Like many writers of historical dramas, Branch used his play to comment on his own time. "I was struck," he says,

> by a number of ironic similarities between the period of the 1850s and the period of the 1950s. The abolitionists of the 1850s were considered roughly in the same way that the communists were in the 1950s. ... There was slavery, of course, in the 1850s, but there were still segregation and discrimination in the 1950s which had to be defeated. ... As I wrote the play I deliberately tried to include an implied metaphor, an implied comment on what was happening in terms of the 1950s. It was not intended to be purely a historical re-creation alone: it was intended to offer some point of view on what was happening *now*.[8]

The *now* about which Branch wrote resembled the 1850s in one other respect, though neither he nor anyone else could then have known it then. Both eras of serious national discussion of how (or whether) to improve the lot of African Americans were followed by periods of profound change.

Later, as Branch revised the play, it seemed to him to become "more and more of a personal statement as to the differing roles people could play in a revolutionary

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[7] William Branch, interviews with the author, 26 August and 23 September 1994.
[8] William Branch, interview with the author, 26 August 1994.

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movement."[9] The question of violence versus nonviolence was becoming increasingly important to leaders in the incipient battle for civil rights. Furthermore, it was becoming clear—and would become painfully clearer over the next decade—that the personal commitment demanded by this movement was absolute, transcending friendships, spouses, children, even life itself.

The play takes place entirely in the parlor of Frederick Douglass' home in Rochester, New York, just before the Civil War.[10] The first act, set in the spring of 1859, opens with Douglass and his wife Anna, whose home is a stop on the Underground Railroad, helping several escaped slaves flee to Canada. Douglass then discusses his abolitionist newsletter, *The North Star*, with a wealthy white supporter, George Chatham, and a visiting newspaperman, Theodore Tilton, the skeptical editor and publisher of the *New York Independent*. After Chatham and Tilton leave, John Brown himself arrives and invites Douglass to join with him in his plan to begin a slave insurrection in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. Douglass immediately pledges his support, and Brown exultantly exclaims:

> Oh, Douglass! Douglass! I knew I could count on you! . . . As Moses led the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage to the land of Canaan, so shall we lead the children of Africa from Southern bondage to the land of Canada. It is God's will! Together—together we will free the slaves! (172)

The act thus concludes on a note of optimism and militance.

The second act is in three scenes. In the first, which takes place several months after the first act, Colonel Hugh Forbes, a British mercenary hired by Brown to help plan the insurrection, threatens to reveal the scheme to the authorities if he does not get his

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[9] William Branch, quoted in Hatch, *Black Theatre USA*, 587.
[10] William Branch, *In Splendid Error*, in Patterson, *Black Theater*, 145-206.

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back pay. In the second scene, a few nights later, Douglass, Brown, Chatham, and other supporters debate how to proceed now that Forbes has turned them in: Brown suggests arming his troops of escaped slaves with weapons seized from the government arsenal at Harpers Ferry. The others, including Douglass, fear that a direct confrontation with the U. S. government would be self-destructive, but Brown, with messianic fervor, argues that the slaves can only be freed by blood, and asks Douglass, "Will you fail me then? Will you fail your people? Or are you so far removed from slavery that you no longer care?" Taken aback, Douglass replies that

> I cannot cast away that which I know I can do for that which I know I cannot do. ... I should rather fail you, John, than feel within myself that I have failed my people. For them . . . I believe it is my duty to live, and to fight in ways that I know can succeed (185).

In the next scene, a few weeks later, news comes that Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry has failed. Douglass, who had gone to Virginia to try one last time to dissuade Brown, returns, but word soon arrives that a warrant has been issued for his arrest, and it is decided that he must flee to England until the crisis passes. Exhausted, he asks

> how long this night? How long this dark, dark night when no man walks in freedom, without fear, in this cradle of democracy, no man who's black? How will it happen, what will we have to do? Nat Turner tried it with guns, and he failed. Dred Scott went to the high courts, and they hurled him back into slavery. Old John said it must be by blood, and tonight he lies wounded in a Virginia prison. When will it end ... —how long this night? (192)

The act ends with Douglass departing just before federal officers arrive at his home.

The third act takes place six months later. Douglass, returned from England, is heartsick: his young daughter has taken ill and died in his absence, and he has come to doubt his decision not to stand at Harpers Ferry with Brown, who has since been executed. "I have discovered," he says,

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> that it is possible for a man to make a right decision, and then be tormented in spirit the rest of his life because he did not make the wrong one. There are times when the soul's need to unite with men in splendid error tangles agonizingly with cold wisdom and judgement... . it came to me in a rush that John, in his way, had succeeded! In splendid error he had startled the sleeping conscience of the nation and struck a blow for freedom that proves stronger every hour. (203)

Douglass is visited by Tilton, now a convert to abolitionism, and Chatham, who brings him a canvas package entrusted to him by Brown's widow to give to Douglass. The package contains Brown's old musket, the dirty, torn American flag he carried with him to Harpers Ferry, and a note: "Tell Douglass I know I have not failed because he lives. Follow your own star, and someday unfurl my flag in the land of the free" (205). An adoring crowd gathering outside demands to see Douglass, who, reinvigorated, strides outside to speak to them as they sing "John Brown's Body."

Most of Branch's play is based on historical fact, but the concluding passage, in which Douglass is cheered by Brown's bequests, was borrowed from Shirley Graham's novel *There Was Once a Slave*. Graham gave Branch permission to use the idea on the condition that the program credit it as hers.[11]

When Branch was discharged from the Army in 1953, he began shopping his play—now retitled *In Splendid Error*—around New York. He originally hoped for a Broadway production, but was unable to find a producer. Eventually he showed the script to the Greenwich Mews Theatre, an integrated (but mostly white) theatre group in Greenwich Village.[12] Operating out of the basement of the Village Presbyterian Church and Brotherhood Synagogue at 141 West Thirteenth Street, the Greenwich Mews had since

[11] William Branch, interview with the author, 23 September 1994.
[12] William Branch, interview with the author, 26 August 1994.

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1952 been experimenting with color-blind casting: the Black actress Hilda Haynes, for example, had appeared as a Jewish mother in Les Pine's *Monday's Heroes*.[13]

The Greenwich Mews's artistic director, Osceola Archer, who had directed Chapin's *Sojourner Truth* (1948), took an immediate interest in Branch's play. Archer soon resigned, but Stella Holt and Fran Drucker, who assumed the administration of the company, remained committed to *In Splendid Error* and scheduled a production for the autumn of 1954. The director was Salem Ludwig, a character actor who would later play the Jewish shopowner in *Inherit the Wind* (1955). William Marshall, the barrel-chested, deep-voiced actor who had appeared in *Trial by Fire*, *Lost in the Stars*, and *Alice in Wonder*, and whom Branch had had in mind for the part while writing the play, was cast as Douglass.[14] The cast also included the established character actor Alfred Sander as Brown, Clarice Taylor as Mrs. Douglass, Louis Guss as Chatham, Howard Wierum as Tilton, Kenneth Manigault as a minister, and Maxwell Glanville as an escaped slave.[15]

Rehearsals were plagued from the beginning by political and personal differences. Marshall had recently lost both a successful television series ("Harlem Detective") and a film contract after being named a communist by the red-baiting newsletter *Red Channels*. At about the time he was hired for *In Splendid Error* he attempted to salvage his career by publishing an article apologizing for his dealings with the left. Holt and Drucker, pressured by several leftist union clubs and political study groups which normally bought group tickets to Greenwich Mews shows, fired Marshall. Branch supported Marshall, and

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[13] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 158; Lewis Funke, "In Splendid Error," *New York Times*, 27 October 1954.
[14] William Branch, interviews with the author, 26 August and 23 September 1994.
[15] Lewis Funke, "In Splendid Error," *New York Times*, 27 October 1954.

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threatened to pull the play. Eventually Marshall agreed to sign a statement designed to mollify the leftist groups, and was rehired.

At one subsequent rehearsal, however, Marshall snapped under the stress. Branch broke protocol by suggesting a line reading to Marshall while the director was out of the theatre. Marshall, a big man and a volatile personality, jumped off the stage, and after an exchange of insults with the slender young playwright, picked him up and, as Branch tells it, "threw me half-way across the room and then jumped on me." Glanville and other cast members pulled them apart. The next morning, Branch swore out a warrant for Marshall's arrest, and a police officer served Marshall a summons during a rehearsal a day or two later. Shortly before the opening, however, Branch dropped the charges.[16]

When *In Splendid Error* opened Tuesday, 26 October 1954, among the audience were Shirley Graham, her husband W. E. B. Du Bois, and Paul Robeson, whose young neice, Donna Liggins, was playing the part of Douglass' daughter Annie. According to Branch, the performance went well, though Marshall's Douglass was somewhat overshadowed by Sander's Brown.[17]

Reviews were respectful but mixed. Lewis Funke commented in the *Times* that "Branch writes with considerable eloquence and vigor," but that ultimately the play's "history speaks with strength but the characters of history, for all their flesh and bones, lack the inner spirit of human beings."[18] Harry Raymond acknowledged in the *Daily Worker* that "Branch has tackled a major dramatic problem," but he reproved Branch, for "enlarging on the tactical differences between Douglass and Brown," depicting Brown "as

[16] William Branch, interview with the author, 26 August 1994.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Lewis Funke, "In Splendid Error," *New York Times*, 27 October 1954.

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a man driven by wild fanaticism," and Douglass at the end as "contrite and deeply penitent."[19] The *Amsterdam News*' "Chick" Webb was both more supportive and more insightful: calling *In Splendid Error* "one of the best plays we have witnessed during the 1954 season," he noted that "a good bit of the dialogue ... is topical, and could very easily be associated with the tense state of current day affairs."[20] The critics agreed that the cast was excellent: Funke praised Marshall for playing Douglass "with both regality and humility," and Raymond and Webb concurred, though the latter felt that Sanders, as Brown, "came close to stealing the show" in his final scene.[21]

The production drew fine audiences, the largest in the Greenwich Mews' history.[22] It was originally slated to run only through Sunday, 5 December 1954.[23] It closed on schedule because the church and synagogue upstairs needed the space for their holiday activities.[24] The Greenwich Mews reopened the show 4 January 1955, and it ran about two more months.[25]

In Splendid Error was a pivotal play in the history of the Greenwich Mews Theatre, which itself was to become one of the most important civil rights theatre organizations. It

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[19] Harry Raymond, "'In Splendid Error,' New Play About the Anti-Slavery Struggle," *Daily Worker*, 1 November 1954.

[20] Alvin "Chick" Webb, "'In Splendid Error' IS Splendid Drama," *New York Amsterdam News*, 4 December 1954.

[21] Despite his good notices, Marshall, unlike some other victims of the McCarthy era, never regained his television or film career. He did, however, later put together a one-man show about Frederick Douglass, which he performed in schools for some years. William Branch, interview with the author, 26 August 1994.

[22] N.a., "'In Splendid Error' To Return January 4," *Daily Worker*, 4 December 1954.

[23] N.a., "Postpone Opening Of Mews New Play," *New York Amsterdam News*, 23 October 1954.

[24] William Branch, interview with the author, 26 August 1994.

[25] N.a., "'In Splendid Error' To Return January 4," *Daily Worker*, 4 December 1954; Cowan, "Off-Broadway," 266.

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was the first play produced there by an African American playwright, and was also the theatre's first *not* to use colorblind casting. In addition, its success paved the way for later Greenwich Mews productions such as Loften Mitchell's *A Land Beyond the River* and Alice Childress' *Trouble in Mind*, as well as Holt and Drucker's independent productions of several plays by Langston Hughes, including *Jerico-Jim Crow.*[26]

The People of Clarendon County

Just as the Greenwich Mews was evolving into an important civil rights theatre, Local 1199's annual Negro History Week celebration was becoming a crossroads for theatre and civil rights activists. This development was enhanced by the participation of Ossie Davis, who over a number of years contributed several original scripts and helped attract "name" talent to the event.

The 1955 gala was on Sunday, 13 February. Held in the union's recreation room on West 50th Street, it was reported to be standing-room only. The program included classical and folk singing, a poem read by William Marshall, and a speech about recent civil rights developments by Howard University professor Margaret Just Butcher. The dramatic event of the evening was the reading of a short agit-prop play written specially for the occasion by Davis, and performed by him, Ruby Dee, and Sidney Poitier. *The People of Clarendon County* dramatized the *Briggs v. Clarendon County* case, the most important of the five school desegregation cases that had been collectively brought before the Supreme Court as *Brown v. Board.*[27]

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[26] William Branch, interview with the author, 26 August 1994.

[27] N.a., "Negro History Week Affair to Highlight School Segregation Fight," *1199 Drug News*, February 1955; "Standing Room Only," *1199 Drug News*, March 1955.

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In 1950, when *Briggs* was first filed, Clarendon County's educational system had been a classic example of a separate but unequal funding. The county's white schools received over sixty percent of school funds, even though whites made up only a quarter of the student population. Led by Rev. J. A. DeLaine, and with the legal guidance of the NAACP's Thurgood Marshall, twenty Black parents (of whom Briggs was alphabetically the first) became parties to the suit, which asked not for desegregation *per se*, but only for Black schools to be given funding equal to white schools. In retaliation for the suit, white citizens exerted terrific economic pressure against the plaintiffs: bank loans were called, employees were fired, and stores refused to supply farmers with seed and harvesting equipment. DeLaine's home was torched, and he was forced to flee the state. Nevertheless, the plaintiffs remained with the case, which progressed through the courts until the *Brown v. Board* decision was finally handed down.[28]

The People of Clarendon County has four acting parts: a male narrator (Davis), DeLaine (doubled by Davis), and two of the plaintiffs, Mrs. Ragin (Dee) and Mr. Ragin (Poitier).[29] In living newspaper style, it opens by summarizing the *Brown v. Board* decision, and asking a series of questions about it: "How did it start, this fight which dealt old Jim [Crow] such a stunning blow? Who were the people that got the whole thing on foot and underway? What were they looking for, what did they seek? ... And how did the local people feel about it—listen!" (1).

The Ragins, it develops, are Black parents who are fed up with the crumbling Jim Crow school their son attends. DeLaine arrives and convinces them to sue for their

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[28] Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 19.

[29] Ossie Davis, *The People of Clarendon County: A Sketch*. Unpublished typescript, Schomburg Collection.

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rights. The balance of the play alternates between narration and dialogue as it recounts the search for other plaintiffs, the early progress of the suit through the courts, the economic retaliation of the local white populace, and the burning of DeLaine's home. Special emphasis is placed on the case's constitutional foundation: the narrator explains, in folksy but detailed terms, the legal implications of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. For example:

> The equal protection of the law. Amen, amen, amen. That means that in the eyes of the law, every man stands equal. ... You see it? You get it? South Carolina got two laws: one for whites, and another for black. But the 14th Amendment to the Federal Constitution says there can't be but one law, the same law—for white and for black. And no state can deny anybody the equal protection of that *one* law! (8-9)

In the final scene, the Ragins are overjoyed at news of a promising preliminary dissent in the case, in which a white South Carolina judge, J. Wates Waring, has sided with them. The narrator closes the play by promising to take the case "to the Supreme Court, and we'll keep it there 'til Carolina and all the other Southern states come back into the human race. And believe me—this is just the first step!" (14).

Like *Shame of a Nation*, *The People of Clarendon County* dramatized a recent well-known civil rights case. And like *In Splendid Error*, it depicted Blacks not as passive victims of racism, but as heroic, intelligent fighters for justice. Though it played only one night, it proved influential: from it Loften Mitchell drew the idea and many of the characters for his successful full-length play, *A Land Beyond the River.*

Trouble in Mind

The Greenwich Mews Theatre followed the success of *In Splendid Error* with Alice Childress' *Trouble in Mind.* Like Branch's play, *Trouble in Mind* is sophisticated in style

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as well as in content. Unlike *In Splendid Error* and most other civil rights plays, it is not straightforwardly realistic: instead, it makes its points through a complex and effective application of metatheatre.

Titled after a blues song of the same name, *Trouble in Mind* depicts in its two acts two rehearsals of a play about civil rights.[30] The central character is Wiletta Mayer, a middle-aged Black actress, who alone among the four Blacks in the cast finds her role at first inconsistent, and in the end, too repugnant to play. Her nemisis is the director, Al Manners, a white man who at first seems well-intentioned and unprejudiced, but who eventually proves a well-camouflaged bigot. The other cast members include an ambitious young Black actor; a young white actress just out of Yale's drama school; a vain Black actress; a semiliterate Southern Black character actor; and an established white character actor.

Conversations among the characters alternate naturally between the professional and the mundane, and show a keen awareness of current events in civil rights. The Montgomery bus boycott comes up repeatedly, and Martin Luther King is mentioned once by name (233). In addition, the script was updated after the Greenwich Mews run: the published edition sets the action in 1957, two years after its real-life opening. At one point, it calls for Wiletta to comment on a newspaper headline about the Little Rock school desegregation case, which did not occur until the fall of 1957. "Throwin' stones at little children," she says, "got to call out the militia to go to school" (214).

The play-within-the-play, *Chaos in Belleville*, is supposed to have been written by a white playwright. It concerns a young Southern Black man named Job who infuriates the

[30] Alice Childress, *Trouble in Mind*, in Patterson, *Black Theatre*, 207-269.

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neighboring whites by exercising his right to vote. When the whites form a lynch mob, Job, on his mother's advice, puts himself under the protection of a white judge. The mob, however, gets its hands on Job anyway, and murders him. Later, an upstanding white citizen named Renard shows the whites that Job's death was wrong, and they regret their violent act. (The plot of *Chaos in Belleville* may have been inspired in part by three well-publicized murders of Blacks that had taken place in Mississippi during the summer of 1955. Two NAACP organizers, Rev. G. W. Lee and Lamar Smith, were killed for having worked to register Black voters, and Emmett Till, a Black teenager, was lynched for having allegedly flirted with a white woman.)[31]

Wiletta plays Job's mother. Though she has misgivings about her part from the beginning, she goes into the first rehearsal planning simply to do her job and earn her money. As the rehearsals proceed, however, she finds her part increasingly difficult to act. Eventually she concludes that no Black mother would give her son up to a white segregationist for protection, and asks Manners to request a rewrite. Manners refuses patronizingly, and she blurts out "You are a prejudiced man, a prejudiced racist" (263). He angrily replies that "The American public is not ready to see you the way you want to be seen because, one, they don't believe it, two, they don't want to believe it, and three, they're convinced they're superior" (264). She asks whether he would send his own son out to be murdered like Job, and he furiously responds that Job has "three strikes against him," and that she should not "compare him with my son, they've got nothing in common!" (264). Realizing he has confirmed her accusation that he is a racist, Manners rushes offstage to arrange to have Wiletta fired. The play closes with her alone on stage,

[31] Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 39.

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reciting the 133rd Psalm—"Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity"—while the doorman, who admires her, cranks up the volume on an electronic applause machine for her.

According to Abramson, Childress' "definitive" text of *Trouble in Mind* includes an additional act, which gives it a more hopeful ending.[32] This act has not been published and was not produced at the Greenwich Mews. In it, Manners returns to the stage and tries to continue the rehearsal. Wiletta demands "I want the author, producer and director to see that this script gets some changes because I can't do it as it is." Manners fires her, and she convinces the Black actors to follow her in a walkout. Manners then backs down, and Wiletta tells him sincerely that she forgives and loves him. Chastened and humbled, he restarts the rehearsal process, saying that "I, a prejudiced man, ask you, a prejudiced cast, to wait until our prejudiced author arrives tomorrow. I propose that we sit down in mutual blindness and try to find a way to bring some splinter of truth to a prejudiced audience." The act ends with Wiletta singing "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder."[33]

Trouble in Mind confronts whites with what it presumes to be their deep-seated racial attitudes. The leading Black character is not a victim, however, but an activist. Stylistically reminiscent in some ways of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), *Trouble in Mind* examines the types of roles Blacks (and to a lesser extent, whites) play in everyday life. The artistic truth aimed for by the white actors (who see themselves as working in "the theatre") is juxtaposed with the tomming required of the Blacks (who see themselves merely as working in "show business").

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[32] Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre*, 300n33.
[33] Ibid., 200-203.

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Throughout, there is an atmosphere of thinly disguised mistrust between the Black and white characters. Ultimately, Wiletta realizes that she is being doubly demeaned: not only is she expected to behave unquestioningly as ordered by her white boss, but she is also required to accept the racist premise of the play in which she is performing. Her open revolt against both the director and the play, then, is representative of the new militancy taking shape among African Americans, who are refusing any longer to play their parts in the charades of segregation and racial inequality.

When *Trouble in Mind* was produced by the Greenwich Mews Theatre, it was still under the leadership of Stella Holt and Fran Drucker. Like *In Splendid Error*, but unlike most Greenwich Mews shows, the production used race-specific casting. It was directed by Childress and Clarice Taylor, who also played Wiletta. James McMahon played Manners, and the cast also included Hilda Haynes and Howard Augusta.[34]

The production opened 4 November 1955 and drew generally warm reviews. The *Times*' Arthur Gelb called it "a fresh, lively and cutting satire ... an original play, full of vitality," and "well worth the trip downtown." He praised Childress for having "some witty and penetrating things to say" about the place of Blacks in the American theatre, and for "except for the last ten or fifteen minutes, ... avoid[ing] any impassioned sermonizing."[35] The *Daily Worker*'s Harry Raymond called the play "real people's theatre" that "bubbles with humor and at the same time has deep meaning." He was clearly awed by the play's effect on the audience:

> The satirical scenes rocked and moved the audience until it became part of the action on stage. Many members of the audience were so moved that they vocally expressed dislike or approval of the actions and speeches of the characters on

[34] Arthur Gelb, "Trouble in Mind," *New York Times*, 5 November 1955.
[35] Ibid.

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> stage. I have not seen anything like it since I was a boy and sat in the gallery with other kids watching Wild West melodramas.[36]

Charles Marowitz—the same Marowitz who would later collaborate with Peter Brook on the Royal Shakespeare Company's Artaud-inspired "Theatre of Cruelty" experiments—thanked Childress in the *Village Voice* "for treating with wit and good humor the subject of racial prejudice; a topic which the social theatre has solemnized to the point of tears." In the same review, however, he took her to task for "sacrificing structure, credibility, character, and mood" to put her own message across.[37] *Phylon*'s Miles Jefferson agreed: though the first act was "witty and original," effectively "aiming shots at its easy target without dipping arrows in venom," he found that the second act "vitiated practically everything that had been so well accomplished in the first" because it "talked in circles and became riveted to the pulpit."[38] One wonders what Marowitz and Jefferson would have thought of the play's unproduced third act.

Trouble in Mind ran for several months, racking up a respectable 91 performances.[39] It was optioned for Broadway by Edward Eliscu, and scheduled for a Broadway production in April 1957, but—irony of ironies—Childress pulled the play after the new director demanded revisions that Childress found unacceptable.[40] Some years later the play was produced for television by the BBC, and was broadcast in Britain in October and November 1964.[41]

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[36] Harry Raymond, "Alice Childress Play at 'Mews' Sparkling, Witty Social Satire," *Daily Worker*, 8 November 1955.
[37] Charles Marowitz, "Trouble in Mind," *Village Voice*, 9 November 1955.
[38] Miles Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1955-1956," *Phylon* Vol. XVII, No. 3, 235-236.
[39] Hine, *Black Women in America*, 234.
[40] Harris, "Alice Childress," 69; Hine, *Black Women in America*, 234.
[41] Abramson, *Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre*, 259.

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Trouble in Mind is infrequently produced today, but not for lack of importance or stageworthiness. As Sally R. Sommer wrote in the *Village Voice* in 1979, the distance of years has only served to clarify the play's "double cutting edge: It predicts not only the course of social history but the course of black playwriting." Its plot concerns an incipient rebellion, and its stylistic elements—"multi-leveled language," "seething, funny role enactments," and "sermon-like arias for solo performers"—look forward to the robust style of much Black drama of the 1960s.[42]

What Can You Say to Mississippi?

The violent backlash against African Americans in the South—but especially in Mississippi—following the *Brown v. Board* decision convinced the organizers of Local 1199's annual Negro History Week gala to make Mississippi the focal point of its 1956 program. They invited as guest speaker Dr. T. R. M. Howard, a Black physician who had been instrumental in convincing witnesses to testify against the lynchers of Emmett Till. And Ossie Davis wrote another short play for concert performance, this one on the subject of the violence in Mississippi.

Only an incomplete script of *What Can You Say to Mississippi?* survives.[43] The extant copy opens with a scene in which several white men, one armed with a gun, scare four Black youths into "confessing" to having gone swimming with some white friends in a swimming hole owned by their landlords. Armed with the confession, the whites organize a mass meeting at which a resolution is passed that the landlords "stand

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[42] Sally R. Sommer, "Black Figures, White Shadows," *Village Voice*, 15 January 1979.
[43] Ossie Davis, *What Can You Say to Mississippi?* in Ossie Davis Papers, Box 3, Folder labelled "1199." Schomburg Manuscript Collection, New York.

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convicted of a most heinous crime against the whole white race; and are thoroughly undesirable."

Another sequence depicts the quiet and successful integration of a white high school. After hearing a segregationist speech by Senator Eastland, however, some local whites become so incensed—using "the old do-you-want-your-daughter-to-marry-a-Negro line"—that the high school is re-segregated.

Next, Rosa Parks narrates the inspirational history of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott. She quotes a remark that was rumored to have been made by her arresting officer, that "if this white lady wasn't in here, I'd give you a pistol whipping you'd never forget." Responding to a pessimistic voice that calls out "Alabama has outlawed the Supreme Court," Parks replies:

> There are 40,000 of us here, race prejudice and white supremacy, and white citizens councils and Eastlands and Talmadges are matters of life or death, it's them or us! If you're leaders—lead! If you're not get out of the way. Move—or die! There's no other choice!

The play's final sequence discusses the White Citizens Councils, linking them with the murders of the NAACP voting-rights workers, G. W. Lee and Lamar Smith, as well as with the lynching of Emmet Till. Finally, the narrator concludes:

> What can you say to murder? ... What can you say to Mississippi? What can you say to the shame, the horror, the repulsion ... to the foul and bottomless midnight of Southern justice? What can you say to the two men who did it ... and admitted they did it? ... to the jury which acquitted them ... to the Citizens Councils which promoted it ... to the sovereign segregated state which endorsed it ... to the entire unreconstructed southland which condoned it ... to the chosen leaders of our country, presidents now and presidents to be, who by their silence have accepted it ... What can you say? what can you say? ... You can say plenty!

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The fragmentary script concludes with statements of agreement from William Faulkner, Michigan Congressman Charles Diggs, and UAW president Walter Reuther.

What Can You Say to Mississippi? is in the same tradition as Davis' previous 1199 offering, *The People of Clarendon County*. Like living newspapers, both tell of controversial recent events, often directly quote prominent individuals, and build to conclusions calculated to motivate the audience to action. *Mississippi*, which recounts a number of related incidents rather than a single inspiring story, is more episodic than *Clarendon County*, but it is no less topical or fervent.

The Negro History Week program was held at 1199's headquarters on the evening of Lincoln's birthday, 12 February 1956.[44] It opened with a reading of Davis' play, with a cast including Davis, Ruby Dee, Sidney Poitier, Merwin Williams, and John Fleming. Later, Dr. Howard spoke on the status of civil rights in Mississippi, and Leon Davis, 1199's president, publicly entrusted to him a $5,000 loan from the union, to be given to a pro-integration Black undertaker in Mississippi whose business was being boycotted by the White Citizens Council.[45]

The 1199 newsletter later reported that "more than 500 members and friends packed every bit of seating and standing room while a loudspeaker brought the program to the overflow turnout seated outside in the hall." The same issue also included a letter from the novelist (and future civil rights playwright) John Oliver Killens, who considered the event "a success from beginning to end," and who specifically commented that Davis'

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[44] N.a., "Dr. T. R. Howard, Miss. Leader, to Speak at Negro History Week Program," *1199 Drug News*, January 1956.

[45] N.a., "'1199' Loan to Aid Mississippi NAACP Leader Highlights Negro History Week Program," *1199 Drug News*, March 1956.

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play was "powerful and poetic and filled to the brim with truth and reality." Other letters called the piece "marvellous," "wonderful," and "inspiring."[46]

The Ivory Branch

Late in the 1955-56 season a play called *The Ivory Branch* briefly appeared off-Broadway. Written by an obscure playwright named Sara Reavin, it pointed up the senselessness of racial hatred by centering on a mixed-race baby born to an apparently white Southern couple.

In two acts and six scenes, *The Ivory Branch*—the title refers to the child's pigmentation—depicts the child's birth and the adults' ensuing scramble to find a scapegoat.[47] First, the father's bloodlines are held responsible. Later, after some genealogical research, the burden of guilt is transferred to the mother. In the end, however, further investigation makes the source of the child's coloring forever unknowable, and the adults begin to question the relevance of their racial fears.

The Ivory Branch opened 24 May 1956, at the Provincetown Playhouse.[48] It was produced by a group called the TSR Theatre Company, and was directed by Bill Whiting. The cast was headed by Diana Barrymore (one of *the* Barrymores) as the mother, and also included Hal Burdick and Muriel Rahn.

Brooks Atkinson panned the show in the *Times* as a mere "thesis play" that did little more than demonstrate the silliness of racism. "As a piece of literature," he wrote, "'The

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[46] N.a., "'1199' Loan to Aid Mississippi NAACP Leader Highlights Negro History Week Program," *1199 Drug News*, March 1956.

[47] *The Ivory Branch* has never been published. This synopsis is derived from Brooks Atkinson, "'Ivory Branch' Opens at the Provincetown," *New York Times*, 25 May 1956.

[48] John Chapman, ed., *Theatre '56* (New York: Random House, 1956), 18.

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Ivory Branch' is claptrap. And the performance, under the routine stock-company direction of Bill Whiting, is a catalogue of clichés." Some of the dramatic situations, however, were "elementary and human enough to be moving," and some of the performances, including Barrymore's and Rahn's, were "direct and forceful enough to triumph over the direction."[49]

The Ballot and Me

Voting rights, ultimately perhaps the most essential goal of the civil rights movement, received less attention in the theatre than did more accessible issues such as housing and education. One exception to this generalization was a short play, *The Ballot and Me: The Negro's Part in Suffrage*, written by Langston Hughes and presented for one night at a Harlem church as the lead-in to a discussion of voting rights by members of different political parties.

Like Ossie Davis' 1199 plays *The People of Clarendon County* and *What Can You Say to Mississippi?*, Hughes' piece was geared for one presentation only. Like the Federal Theatre's living newspapers, Hughes used a considerable number of direct quotations from historical figures to make his political points. Unlike Davis' plays, however, the style of Hughes' work returned to the old tradition of Black pageantry, and the content was historical rather than topical.

The Ballot and Me calls for a narrator, six speaking parts (some very small), and no fewer than twenty non-speaking roles.[50] It begins with the narrator remarking that "The

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[49] Brooks Atkinson, "'Ivory Branch' Opens at the Provincetown," *New York Times*, 25 May 1956.

[50] Langston Hughes, *The Ballot and Me*. Typescript in The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

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right to cast a ballot, to exercise suffrage, to vote is one of the basic rights of citizens in a democracy," and then running through the history of the Black vote in the United States from 1787 to the present. Samuel Fraunces, the Black man who owned New York's Fraunces Tavern, enters in colonial attire and proclaims that he could vote; Sojourner Truth, however, speaks up from the audience and delivers her famous "a'n't I a woman?" speech, complaining that as a woman she could not vote (4-6). Moving forward to the Reconstruction era, Frederick Douglas enters and proclaims that there is "no chance of bettering the condition of the freedman until he shall cease to be merely a freedman and shall become a citizen," a status which must include the right to vote (7). When the North forces the South to allow Blacks to vote, fifteen men representing Southern Black congressmen enter, one of whom, Richard Cain of South Carolina, steps forward and states "All that we ask is equal laws, equal legislation, and equal rights throughout the length and breadth of this land" (10). Later in the Reconstruction era, however, when white supremacists instituted laws denying Blacks basic civil rights, the vote and thus most Black representation was effectively lost until well into the twentieth century. Bringing the play up to the present, the elections of Adam Clayton Powell, Charles C. Diggs and other Blacks to national office are discussed. The narrator then speaks directly to the audience: "Fellow citizens, your ballot has great value. Use it! When election time comes, to paraphrase by extension a young Negro leader in the South today, the Reverend Martin Luther King of Alabama, 'If you can't fly, run! If you can't run, walk! If you can't walk, crawl—to the polls and vote!'" (14). The play concludes with all present on stage chanting "Vote! ... Vote! ... Vote! ... Vote! ... Vote! ... VOTE!" (15).

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According to Yale's Beinecke Library, where Hughes' papers are currently located, *The Ballot and Me* was "written especially for St. James Presbyterian Church at the request of Dorothy Maynor."[51] Apparently speakers and candidates from different political parties were scheduled to appear at the church to discuss their positions on a number of issues, including voting rights for Blacks.[52] On the front page of the final draft, in what appears to be Hughes' own hand, is a notation that the presentation occurred on Friday, 29 June 1956. Unfortunately, nothing more is now known about the play or its production.

Too Late the Phalarope

After Norman Rosten's financially successful *Mister Johnson* (1956), Broadway's renewed interest in African affairs continued with the more substantial *Too Late the Phalarope*. Adapted, like *Lost in the Stars*, from an Alan Paton novel, *Too Late the Phalarope* concerned the tragic intersection of Blacks and whites under apartheid. It was the first Broadway play since *On Whitman Avenue* to concentrate on the damage done by segregation to whites as well as Blacks, but reviewers generally considered it a plodding drama, and it soon closed.

It was adapted for the stage by Robert Yale Libott, a successful film and broadcast writer.[53] In three acts and many short scenes, it tells the story of an interracial South

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[51] Notation on library index card labeled "Beinecke Library JWJ MSS Hughes," Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

[52] The play's first draft concludes with the narrator saying, "Now, friends, let us see what the current parties and current candidates of today have to offer us—you and me, the voters—to approve or disapprove, accept or reject, as is our privilege" (Draft 1, p. 10).

[53] Robert Coleman, "'Phalarope' Is Less Moving Than Novel," *Daily Mirror*, 12 October 1956.

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African dalliance and its shattering consequences.[54] Pieter Van Vlaanderen is a young Afrikaner police lieutenant who lives in the rural Transvaal with his wife, Nella, and their small son. Nella is cold and distant, retreating from Pieter's every expression of warmth, and shuddering whenever he mentions the word "love." Among Pieter's professional responsibilities is the enforcement of South Africa's vicious laws against race mixing. When Nella takes their son away for a three-week vacation, the affection-starved Pieter chances upon an unhappy young native woman, Stephanie, with whom he has an intense but loveless affair.

Pieter struggles for some time with this secret. Eventually, however, his relationship with Stephanie becomes known, and he is punished by being completely ostracized from the Afrikaner community. His aging father goes so far as to declare him no longer a member of the family, and nails his own front door shut in symbolic rejection of his son. Nella finally realizes she loves her husband, but not enough to join him in his banishment. As the play ends, Pieter is dragged off to prison for violating the very laws he was assigned to uphold. His ultimate fate is not told, though another man in a similar predicament is said to have committed suicide.

The play's title refers to the phalarope, a South African bird with an unusual mating pattern: the female courts the male, rather than the reverse. The title, then, indicates that Nella's realization of her love for her husband comes too late to avoid the disaster into

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[54] *Too Late the Phalarope* has never been published. This synopsis is derived from Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: Race Relations," *New York Times*, 12 October 1956; John Chapman, "'Too Late the Phalarope' Tragic In Intent but Lacking in Impact," *Daily News*, 12 October 1956; and Richard Watts, Jr., "Drama of South Africa's Race Laws," *New York Post*, 12 October 1956.

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which he has fallen in her absence. In a larger sense, perhaps the title implies that love has been forgotten under the inhuman but nominally Christian system of apartheid.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of *Too Late the Phalarope* was its illustration of the harmful effects of racism upon whites. Not since *On Whitman Avenue* had a Broadway play concentrated its full attention on segregation's damage to members of the privileged as well as the subjugated race. But the South African setting muted the play's immediacy to its New York audience: unlike *On Whitman Avenue*, it created no furor, and whether by design or omission, few major critics even mentioned its implications for the United States.

Too Late the Phalarope was produced on Broadway by Mark K. Frank, and directed by John Stix, who had previously directed *Take a Giant Step*. Josef Marais composed the incidental music, which unlike the score of *Lost in the Stars* was largely inspired by authentic South African music.[55] The sets and lighting were by George Jenkins, who had also done *Strange Fruit* and *Lost in the Stars*. Pieter was played by the film actor Barry Sullivan; Ellen Holly, a young actress who had appeared in several Greenwich Mews productions, played Stephanie; Laurinda Barrett played Nella; and the distinguished Scottish actor Finlay Currie played Pieter's father. Other notable cast members included Estelle Hemsley and Paul Mann.[56]

The play opened 11 October 1956. Virtually all the reviewers applauded the production and sympathized with the play's intent, but most criticized either Paton's basic

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[55] Harry Raymond, "Powerful Race Law Drama at Belasco," *Daily Worker*, 15 October 1956. The incidental music was later released as an album (Decca DL 9047) by the Decca recording company.

[56] Kronenberger, *The Best Plays of 1956-1957*, 322-323.

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story or Libott's dramatization of it. John Chapman, for example, wrote in the *Daily News* that the production was "splendid," with fine acting, set designs and music, but that the story lacked tragic force because there was no love "in this fateful crossing of the color line."[57] Brooks Atkinson, in the *Times*, agreed that the production contained "a lot of beauty," but felt that the play as a whole was "a rambling, over-produced drama" which, except in its powerful last scenes, had "taken in too much territory."[58] Of the critics for the major dailies, only the *Herald Tribune*'s Walter Kerr was unequivocal in his praise, finding the production as a whole "a sizzling electrical storm" behind which lay a "dramatic intelligence ... that distills a crisp, clear intensity out of every passing mood."[59]

The smaller papers and journals were both more supportive and more likely to connect the play with America's own racial problems. Miles Jefferson wrote in *Phylon* that, largely because it portrayed segregation as an "utterly ridiculous" social code, it was "the most interesting new serious drama of the season—a play deserving a longer run than it enjoyed."[60] The *Daily Worker*'s Harry Raymond found it "a powerfully moving tragedy," and referred to apartheid as the South African equivalent of America's "jimcrow [sic] race laws."[61] Jesse A. Walker admitted in the *Amsterdam News* that the play "dragged," but felt that the actors gave "some rather fine performances," especially

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[57] John Chapman, "'Too Late the Phalarope' Tragic In Intent but Lacking in Impact," *Daily News*, 12 October 1956.
[58] Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: Race Relations," *New York Times*, 12 October 1956.
[59] Walter Kerr, "'Too Late the Phalarope,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, 12 October 1956.
[60] Miles Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1956-1957," *Phylon*, Vol. XVIII, No. 3, 287-288.
[61] Harry Raymond, "Powerful Race Law Drama at Belasco," *Daily Worker*, 15 October 1956.

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Finlay Currie, whose "sobering" portrait of Pieter's father "might explain why any progress in the emancipation of the native there is a slow, tedious thing."[62]

In any event, armed only with mixed notices at best, *Too Late the Phalarope* never caught on, and closed after thirty-six performances, on 10 November 1956.[63] No more serious racial dramas set in Africa would appear on Broadway for over seven years, when Athol Fugard's *The Blood Knot* opened in March 1964.

Orgena and The Trial

Despite the great number of postwar plays which promoted progress in civil rights to one degree or another, there was virtually no counterposing dramatic movement led by whites against integration and tolerance. Certainly the theatrical status quo was regressive enough: "happy darkies," in the form of housemaids, butlers, chauffeurs, fieldhands, etc., continued to litter mainstream stages throughout the 1950s, though in somewhat diminishing numbers. To cite just two prominent examples, Joseph Fields and Jerome Chodorov's adaptation of Eudora Welty's *The Ponder Heart* (1956) includes "Sarah, the colored girl," whose main purpose is to sweep the veranda; and Tennessee Williams' *Orpheus Descending* (1957) includes a "conjure man," named only "Uncle," who uses bones (possibly human) as magical charms.[64]

Ironically, the Black Separatism movement of the 1960s would generate the only significant body of plays—some of them quite successful and well-known—opposing integration. But the first two explicitly anti-integration postwar plays were written in the

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[62] Jesse H. Walker, "Miss Holly Appearing in 'Too Late the Phalarope,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 October 1956.
[63] Kronenberger, *The Best Plays of 1956-1957*, 322-323.
[64] Ibid., 250; Kronenberger, *Best Plays of 1955-1956*, 238.

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mid-1950s, and have been entirely ignored by theatre historians, which is all the more surprising because their author has since become a major public figure in his own right. First produced in 1956 as motivational pieces for the Nation of Islam, *Orgena* and *The Trial* were written by a young man known as Louis X—now feared, loved, and in some cases reviled as Louis Farrakhan. Farrakhan's plays are important to the story of civil rights drama because in the mid-1950s they were the only overtly anti-integrationist voice in the American theatre, and because they anticipated by some eight years the Black Arts movement of the mid-1960s.

The Nation of Islam follows a separatist, nationalist philosophy and has always been strongly opposed to integration. W. D. Farad Muhammad, a mysterious figure believed by his followers to have been born in Mecca, founded the religion in Detroit in 1930 with the goal of preparing African Americans for the final battle of Armageddon, when the Black forces of goodness would be pitted against the white forces of evil. Farad encouraged self-respect and self-reliance, and urged Muslims to separate themselves from the primitive, demonic white race to create their own society. He argued that the very word "Negro" was created by whites to separate Blacks from other nonwhite peoples.[65] And to acknowledge and symbolize the loss of their forgotten African names, he asked descendants of slaves to drop their American family names and substitute a simple "X."[66]

Farad mysteriously disappeared in 1934. He was replaced by one of his followers, Elijah Poole, who later renamed himself Elijah Muhammad.[67] Enlarging on Farad's

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[65] Augustus W. Low and Virgil A. Clift, eds., *Encyclopedia of Black America* (New York: Da Capo, 1981), 632-633.

[66] Michael W. Williams, ed., *The African American Encyclopedia* (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1993), 1137.

[67] Low and Clift, *Encyclopedia of Black America*, 632-633.

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separatist philosophy, Muhammad repudiated integration as a practicable relationship between Blacks and whites, and condemned Christianity as a white scheme for subduing nonwhites.[68]

In the early 1950s, Muhammad chose Malcolm X, formerly Malcolm Little, to assist him in expanding the Nation of Islam.[69] Malcolm shocked many progressives by arguing for, in effect, separate but equal societies for Black and white Americans. "No *sane* black man really wants integration," he later wrote. "No *sane* white man really wants integration. ... *Segregation* is that which is forced upon inferiors by superiors. But *separation* is that which is done voluntarily, by two equals—for the good of both!"[70] In 1955, Malcolm recruited a charismatic young Boston entertainer named Louis Walcott, who as Louis X would serve as Malcolm's assistant. Louis X, known later as Louis Farrakhan, eventually assumed the leadership of the Nation of Islam in the years following Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975.[71]

Louis Eugene Walcott was born to a middle-class family in New York City in 1933. While he was a young child his family moved to Boston, where he attended integrated schools. An accomplished violinist who once dreamed of a concert career, he began studying the instrument at age five, won trophies for musical achievement, and competed on the Ted Mack Original Amateur Hour. He attended Winston-Salem Teachers College in North Carolina for two years, then returned to Boston, where he was known as "Calypso Gene" and "The Charmer," a singer and dancer in local night spots. In 1955,

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[68] John P. Davis, ed., *The American Negro Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 477.
[69] Low and Clift, *Encyclopedia of Black America*, 632.
[70] Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove, 1965), 245-246.
[71] Williams, *The African American Encyclopedia* 2, 568.

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recruited by Malcolm X, he joined the Nation of Islam, changed his name to Louis X, and acted as Malcolm's assistant. Shortly thereafter, he wrote and recorded what Malcolm called "our nation's first popular song," entitled "White Man's Heaven is Black Man's Hell."[72]

In 1956, Louis X wrote two one-act plays, *Orgena* and *The Trial*, both motivational pieces for the Nation of Islam. Little is known about *Orgena*, except that it deals with African American history and that its title is "A Negro" spelled backwards. A program note from an early production stated that "Orgena was not written out of malice toward any racial group, but ... to show the so-called Negro that he is someone with a great culture, history, and heritage."[73] A later program note called it "a recounting of the so called Negro's History, beginning with the days of his estrangement from his Oriental Culture. In moving song and words, the presentation traces the downward evolution of the American Black Man, into Slavery, into second class citizenship and finally into a desire to rediscover the roots of his beginnings."[74] According to an article in the *Amsterdam News*, the play "begins with the capture of happy Africans and their being placed aboard the Good Ship Jesus," and "concludes with a rousing realization that Mr. Muhammad's message holds the key to the black man['s] plight in America." The *Amsterdam News* also published the only photograph I have found of the show: depicting

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[72] Compiled from William A. Henry III, "Pride and Prejudice," *Time*, 28 February 1994; C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Beacon Press, 1961); *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 250; and Williams, *The African American Encyclopedia* 2, 566-567.

[73] E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for Identity in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 224-225.

[74] Louis X, *Orgena*, Carnegie Hall Program, 24 December 1960.

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"a slavery scene from 'Orgena,'" it shows two young Black men dressed in rags and weighted down with chains.[75]

Orgena, then, was a racial history pageant with a political intent. This would put it in the tradition of W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Star of Ethiopia* (1913), Owen Dodson's *New World A-Comin'* (1943), and Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship* (1967). To my knowledge, however, with the minor exception of Hughes' *The Ballot and Me*, it was the only such pageant written and produced between the end of World War II and the mid-1960s.

Somewhat more is known of *The Trial* than of *Orgena*. A program note later called it "the famous Muslim Play depicting the day of reckoning for those who have enslaved and tortured the peoples of the earth."[76] The play enacts the indictment and prosecution of a symbolic white man for his "crimes" against Black people in general and the Nation of Islam in particular. An all-Black jury listens to the charges against him, which culminate in the prosecutor's summation:

> I charge the white man with being the greatest liar on earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest drunkard on earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest swine-eater on earth. Yet the Bible forbids it. I charge the white man with being the greatest gambler on earth. I charge the white man, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, with being the greatest murderer on earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest peace-breaker on earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest adulterer on earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest deceiver on earth. I charge the white man with being the greatest trouble-maker on earth. So therefore, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I ask you, bring back a verdict of guilty as charged.[77]

The jury returns a guilty verdict, and the play ends with the white man being dragged offstage to be executed, wailing as he goes about all he has done "for the nigra people."[78]

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[75] N.a., "Muslim Play," *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 May 1961.
[76] Louis X, *Orgena*, Carnegie Hall Program, 24 December 1960.
[77] Louis Lomax, *The Negro Revolt* (New York: Signet, 1962), 181-182.
[78] *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 250.

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As one audience member later observed, "the white man finally pays for his crimes against humanity, and the Black Nation is restored to its former moral and cultural excellence."[79]

The Trial is unusual in form as well as in content. It is more symbolic than perhaps any other American play with a racial theme since Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* (1928). In the tradition of the medieval morality play, it depicts a conflict of good and evil and concludes with the defeat of the latter. And like McGlynn's *Caukey* and White's *Freight*, it is a reversal play, symbolically switching the races for a mock trial and execution not unlike the stereotype of Southern racial justice.

Orgena and *The Trial* were first performed in 1956 at Unity Parties, relatively informal Tuesday-night affairs held at Muslim Temples. Unity Parties welcomed both Muslims and non-Muslims, and typically featured either musical or dramatic performances. Presumably, no admission fees were charged. Louis X and another Temple member named Lonnie X co-directed *Orgena* and *The Trial*, which also starred Louis X, probably in the role of the prosecuting attorney.[80]

The plays were successful, and they continued to be performed periodically before large audiences in all parts of the country except the South.[81] They were presented at least three times in New York, including twice at New York's Carnegie Hall, first on Saturday evening, 24 December 1960, and again on Sunday evening, 14 May 1961.[82] One eyewitness reported that at the end of one of the Carnegie Hall performances, when the

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[79] Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 118.
[80] Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 224-225.
[81] Lomax, *The Negro Revolt*, 182.
[82] N.a., "Muslims to Repeat in "Orgena," *New York Amsterdam News*, 6 May 1961; Louis X, "Orgena," Carnegie Hall Program, 24 December 1960.

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jury in *The Trial* announced its guilty verdict, "the applause of the audience was so thunderous it drowned out the judge's voice as he sentenced the white man to death."[83] The Carnegie Hall programs also included a jazz band and songs by Louis X, including "Originals," "Black Gold," "Benefit of Unity," "Let Us Unite," "Pharaoh," and "Let Us Go."[84]

Together *Orgena* and *The Trial* fill a fascinating niche in the history of African American theatre. They antedate by some eight years the earliest major examples—James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* and Le Roi Jones' *Dutchman*—of the angry playwriting typical of the Black Liberation era. Sadly, however, little more is known of *Orgena* and *The Trial*. The plays have never been published, at least not in any edition that has been registered with the Copyright Office. And Minister Farrakhan has not responded to my request for more information.

Montgomery Footprints

The organizers of Local 1199's annual Negro History Week gala decided to focus their 1957 program on the Montgomery bus boycott, which after a long year had finally emerged victorious in December 1956. They invited as guest speaker Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy, the young Black preacher who as the first vice president of the Montgomery Improvement Association had been King's chief lieutenant throughout the boycott. Ossie Davis, then performing in *No Time for Sergeants* on Broadway, wrote another short inspirational play for the event, this one recounting the boycott's history and goals.[85]

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[83] Lomax, *The Negro Revolt*, 182.
[84] Louis X, *Orgena*, Carnegie Hall Program, 24 December 1960.
[85] N.a., "Montgomery Bus Boycott Leader; Stars of Stage, Screen To Appear at Negro History Week Program, Sunday, Feb. 17," *1199 Drug News*, January 1957.

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Like its predecessors, *Montgomery Footprints* resembles radio plays, and is designed for a concert-style reading.[86] The script calls for a cast of five: a narrator, two male readers, one female reader, and for the first time a musician, specifically a singer/banjo player. The play opens, appropriately, with a few verses of the spiritual "I Want to Be Ready to Walk in Jerusalem Just Like John," followed by several biblically-cadenced speeches about the redemptive power of walking. The narrator, supported by the other actors' voices, then launches into a detailed history of the Montgomery bus boycott, beginning with Rosa Parks' arrest and covering the founding of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the decision to protest nonviolently by boycotting the city buses, and the establishment of the carpool. Initially, the local whites are depicted as scornful of the boycott: "These darkies are just playing," says one, "Like a minstrel show to them, singing, shouting, fish fries. It's fly-by-night every bit of it. Can't last more'n another day or two" (9).

But as the months drag on, tensions escalate on both sides. The white reaction comes to include legal harassment against the boycotters and their organizers. The boycotters' resolve is renewed, however, by the realization that their historic resistance is being watched by the whole world. After a mass arrest of boycott leaders, the narrator says:

> It rained, it was cold, it was damp. But they turned their backs on their vehicles, and they left their cars by the roadside, and they walked the glorious walk of prayer, of peace, and of protest, and their footsteps made an answer to Alabama, to Mississippi, to the torturers of Autherine Lucy, to the murderers of Emmett Till, to James O. Eastland, to America, to all the world. ... For the first time in southern history a Negro community which only a few years before had seemed inert, backwards, and apathetic, without form, structure or backbone, had

[86] Ossie Davis, *Montgomery Footprints*, unpublished typescript in the Ossie Davis Papers, Box 3, folder labelled "1199," Schomburg Manuscript Collection, New York.

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> organized itself into a disciplined, articulate, and fighting union of iron ... without force, threats, or violence. The World looked on ... the World was astounded ... the World stood on its feet and applauded. For whatever else this mass arrest of Freedom Fighters accomplished it put the Negro question dead center in the stage of World history (13).

Next follow statements of admiration and support from national and worldwide leaders, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Ralph Bunche, Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, and even Z. K. Mathews of South Africa's African National Congress. After the Supreme Court rules that segregated buses are illegal, an outburst of shootings and bombings by Montgomery whites breaks out, and the play concludes with a demand by Black leaders that President Eisenhower speak out against violence in the South.

The Negro History Week gala took place Sunday evening, 17 February 1957 in 1199's Recreation Room. It drew an audience of over five hundred. In his speech, Abernathy described the new nonviolent techniques adopted by the boycotters, and repeated the demand that President Eisenhower condemn racial violence. *Montgomery Footprints* was performed by Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Frederick O'Neal, Will Geer, and folksinger Pete Seeger, who also led the audience in group singing.[87]

A Land Beyond the River

Loften Mitchell broke new ground in civil rights drama with his *A Land Beyond the River*. Many earlier plays, such as *Our Lan'*, *Nat Turner*, and *In Splendid Error*, had fictionalized history, and others, including *Trial by Fire*, Ossie Davis' 1199 readings, and Mitchell's own *Shame of a Nation*, had treated current events in primarily factual ways. *A Land Beyond the River*, however, though inspired in part by Ossie Davis' *The People*

[87] N.a., "Overflow Crowd at Negro History Week Program," *1199 Drug News*, March 1957.

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of Clarendon County, was the first postwar civil rights play thoroughly to blur the distinction between contemporary history and fiction.

According to Mitchell, after *The People of Clarendon County* was performed at Local 1199's Negro History Week celebration in 1955, he suggested that Davis expand the play to full length. Davis, however, was so busy with his acting that he had little time for writing, and offered Mitchell free rein to develop the play himself.

At first, Mitchell says, he hesitated. He did, however, contact Rev. DeLaine, the minister who had organized the original case.[88] At a 1956 meeting in a Harlem restaurant, DeLaine described for Mitchell the terrible reprisals—violent and economic—visited upon both himself and his parishioners by local whites after the *Brown v. Board* decision was handed down. With tears in his eyes, DeLaine told Mitchell that "maybe we didn't win it." Later, at a rally in Madison Square Garden, Mitchell saw DeLaine sit quietly on the dais without receiving so much as a mention from a parade of famous civil rights and labor leaders. That night, Mitchell recalls, "I saw why it had taken a bunch of country folks to stir the nation. The black and white Northern leadership had lost itself in high-sounding phrases while becoming very, very middle class." Wanting desperately to tell his parishioners' story, DeLaine considered holding a rally of his own, and asked Mitchell to write a script for it.[89] Mitchell finally decided that "this is a story that deserves to be told," and began working on the play, in part to raise money for DeLaine's parishioners.[90]

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[88] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.
[89] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 174-178.
[90] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.

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Originally titled *The Coming of the Lord*, Mitchell's three-act play covers four months in the life of a DeLaine-like South Carolina minister, here named Layne.[91] The nonrealistic set, which represents "a panoramic view of the entire country," includes all at once a home, a road, Layne's study, and a schoolroom or church. As someone comments early in the play, Layne has three important roles in his community and is "going to have to decide whether he's a school principal, preacher, or agitator" (310). In the first act, he organizes a crew of Black men to work late one night to repair (for the umpteenth time) the broken floor of the Jim Crow school. Realizing that the floor is rotten beyond repair, the men and their wives decide to go to court to demand equal school facilities for their children.

In the second act, which takes place two months later, the forces of reaction retaliate against Layne and his followers. Layne is fired from his job at the school by his Uncle Tom supervisor, and white thugs shoot at his house. People who have signed the petition demanding equal school facilities suffer economic reprisals, including being refused loans to buy seed for their fields. And the church itself is shot at during a late-night meeting. Some of the men want to defend themselves with their rifles, and Layne calms them, paradoxically, by questioning his own philosophy of nonviolence: "I don't know," he says, "if I've got the right to ask you to turn the other cheek" (368). As a group, they decide to change their suit to challenge not only the inequality of their schools, but the legality of segregation itself. Just then, however, word comes that

[91] Loften Mitchell, *A Land Beyond the River*, in William R. Reardon and Thomas D. Pawley, eds., *The Black Teacher and the Dramatic Arts* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1970), 301-396.

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Layne's home has been torched and destroyed. The shock of this news is too great for Layne's wife Martha, who suffers a heart attack and dies.

In the third act, two months later, Layne brings news that the court has agreed that Black school facilities must be made equal to whites', but that it has not questioned the constitutionality of segregation. Layne's followers are thrilled to have won anything, but Layne surprises them by bitterly agreeing with the court about segregation: "We don't want our kids going to school with their kids, where they can learn how to make bombs and burn homes and lynch folks! We don't want to be with them and their crucifying souls!" (384). Bill's son comes in, bruised from a beating by two white men, and Bill wants to hunt the men down and kill them. In convincing Bill to remain nonviolent, Layne finds his own faith again and resolves to carry the battle for desegregation all the way to the Supreme Court.

In the winter of 1957, Mitchell and fellow-playwright David Timmons met at the home of the Greenwich Mews' Stella Holt and Fran Drucker, to discuss Mitchell's almost-complete play. After hearing it read, Holt announced that the Mews would produce it, and with help from Timmons, Austin Briggs-Hall (one of the American Negro Theatre founders), and novelist John Killens, Mitchell soon finished writing it. The Mews' Board of Directors, however, "haggled, quibbled and fumbled." To break the deadlock, Holt and Drucker organized a reading, which convinced the Board to stage the play immediately.[92] Michael Howard, who had recently staged a revival of *Finian's Rainbow* for the Equity Library Theatre, was hired to direct.[93] The sets were constructed

[92] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 178-179.
[93] Jesse A. Walker, "Mitchell Play Gets Its Message Across," *New York Amsterdam News*, 6 April 1957.

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by John Raymond Friemann from an original design by Romare Bearden. The cast of sixteen was headed by Robert Graham Brown as Rev. Layne, Helen Martin as Martha Layne, Richard Ward as Bill Raigin, and Jacqueline Barnes as Mary Raigin. The cast also included Diana Sands, Howard Wierum, and Charles Griffin.[94]

The production, which opened 28 March 1957, generally pleased the reviewers. Jesse H. Walker wrote in the *Amsterdam News* that it was "engaging" and well-acted, and hoped "with the desegregation fight so prominent on the American scene today" that "the play will enjoy a long run and be seen by many."[95] Harry Raymond commented in the *Daily Worker* that the play was "an important topical drama with a heart that beats with a passionate desire to improve human conditions," and found in it "a dignity which is lacking in the works of many playwrights who have dealt with problems of the Negro in the South."[96] Miles Jefferson, in *Phylon*, called it simply "the best new play of serious purpose during the year." Some more mainstream critics, however, were troubled by what they considered the play's crude dramaturgy. Brooks Atkinson, for example, wrote in the *Times* that the play was "awkward in construction and untidy," though its "vigorous characterizations" made it "human and likable."[97] And the *Village Voice*'s Jerry Tallmer, who complained that it was "a do-gooder's pamphlet, not a play," found it nevertheless "a rather vivacious pamphlet, sparked with humor and humanity and ... ably performed by an excellent cast."[98]

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[94] Brooks Atkinson, "A Land Beyond the River," *New York Times*, 29 March 1957.
[95] Jesse H. Walker, "Mitchell Play Gets Its Message Across," *New York Amsterdam News*, 6 April 1957.
[96] Harry Raymond, "Moving Desegregation Play at Greenwich Mews," *Daily Worker*, 1 April 1957.
[97] Brooks Atkinson, "A Land Beyond the River," *New York Times*, 29 March 1957.
[98] Jerry Tallmer, "Theatre: A Land Beyond the River," *Village Voice*, 3 April 1957.

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A Land Beyond the River was scheduled for a ten-week run, but it drew such good audiences that it ran until the early summer, when the hot weather closed it.[99] It reopened with the same cast in the early fall, its timeliness having been reemphasized over the summer by the racial incidents in Little Rock.[100] It became a popular fund-raising vehicle for activist and charitable organizations, including the NAACP, the United Jewish Appeal, and the National Committee for Rural Schools. Mitchell was particularly gratified that two United Automobile Workers theatre parties raised $11,000, which was used to buy a harvesting combine for the people of Clarendon County.[101]

After its New York run ended in late 1957, the show played New Haven and Great Neck, and Maxwell Glanville produced it in Brooklyn and Newark.[102] It also played Cincinatti, Chicago, Indianapolis, Alabama State University, and Mitchell's *alma mater*, Talladega College. Despite its large cast, it continues to be produced today, Mitchell says, in colleges and other "places where the economics of the theatre doesn't reach."[103]

Color Scheme

The first new drama about an interracial romance since *Too Late the Phalarope*, and the first one set in America since *Ride the Right Bus*, was Joe Eaton's *Color Scheme*. An awkward but apparently well-meaning attempt, it ran in Harlem for a week and then was forgotten.

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[99] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 179.
[100] N.a., "'Land Beyond' Reopens Oct. 5," *New York Amsterdam News*, 28 September 1957.
[101] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.
[102] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 179.
[103] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.

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Eaton, originally from Philadelphia, had written the screenplay for the film *Harlem Serenade* and was the co-chairman of the Harlem Y Writers Workshop.[104] In three acts and six scenes, *Color Scheme* concerns the romance between Janet Tallie, a young Black woman from the South who has been "passing" for white in New York, and Dean Garver, a young white attorney.[105] Other characters include Janet's darker-skinned sister (who pretends to be her best friend), and a Black lawyer who works for an organization similar to the NAACP. Problems arise when Janet is visited by her Black former boy friend, and intensify when Dean's employer's daughter smokes out Janet's true racial background. Dean himself finally learns of Janet's deception, but in the end (though existing sources do not say exactly how) the problem is resolved. The play had some comic moments, but whether it was a comedy or a drama is unclear.

Though *Color Scheme*'s cast of six was only half Black, Eaton claimed that he wrote the play in part "to give surplus dramatic talent in Harlem an effective means of dramatic expression." A production was arranged for the week beginning Saturday, 13 April 1957, at the Elks Auditorium on 126th Street.[106] A Miss Costa starred as Janet, and Richard Smyser played Dean.[107]

Eaton hoped that the production would draw enough attention to be brought downtown to off-Broadway.[108] Judging by Jesse H. Walker's review in the *Amsterdam*

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[104] N.a., "Play for Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 January 1957.
[105] *Color Scheme* has never been published. This synopsis is derived from Jesse H. Walker, "'Color Scheme' Now At Elks Auditorium," *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 April 1957.
[106] N.a., "Play for Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 January 1957.
[107] Jesse H. Walker, "'Color Scheme' Now At Elks Auditorium," *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 April 1957.
[108] N.a., "Play for Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 January 1957.

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News, however, it is no surprise that the play went nowhere. The usually sympathetic Walker wrote that the play was "uneven in spots and oftentimes the dialogue seems forced," and that among the several awkward moments, "the very least ... was getting the curtain to draw back properly on opening night." Still, Walker praised Eaton and the company for "trying to bring back to the community an interest in the dramatic theatre," and gave them an "'A' for effort."[109]

Simply Heavenly

Though not strictly speaking a civil rights work, Langston Hughes' *Simply Heavenly* made some significant comments about American race relations. Inspired both by his own Simple stories and, presumably, by the success of Alice Childress' earlier *Just a Little Simple*, Hughes adapted his novel *Simple Takes a Wife* into this light, often raucous musical comedy.

Simply Heavenly is a romance about love—the love of one's community as well as love of one's sweetheart. Set mostly in a friendly bar in Hughes' beloved Harlem, the play is as much about the neighborhood as it is about the slender plot, in which the carefree Simple is lured away from his respectable girlfriend Joyce by a seductress, then wises up, returns to Joyce, and marries her.[110] Race issues are never far from Simple's consciousness, and near the end of the play they surface strikingly when he predicts to his barroom buddies that in "World War III," he will be a general leading white Mississippi troops into battle:

> General Simple! I would really make 'em toe the line. I know some of them Dixiecrats would rather die than left face for a colored man, but they would left

[109] Jesse H. Walker, "'Color Scheme' Now At Elks Auditorium," *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 April 1957.

[110] Langston Hughes, *Simply Heavenly*, in Patterson, *Black Theatre*, 271-344.

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> face for me. ... Then I would have my picture taken in front of all my fine white troops—me—the first *black* general to pin medals on white soldiers from Mississippi. ... then when the war be's over, I would line my companies up for the last time and I would say, "Mens, at ease. Gentlemen of the Old South, relax. ... Well, I is colored. I'll forget that. You are me—and I am you—and we are one. And now that our fighting is done, let's be Americans for once, for fun. ... let's all drink to you brave sons of the South! Drink, mens, drink! And when we all stagger back to peace together, let there be peace—peace between you, Mississippi, and me! (341)

Simple enthusiastically organizes his buddies into a ragtag band, and they march out of the bar as if carrying banners. The scene ends with a humorous twist, however, when one of the remaining characters comments simply, "You know something—that boy is sick!" (342).

Simply Heavenly was produced—independently of the Greenwich Mews, apparently—by Stella Holt. Hughes' lyrics were set to music by David Martin, and the production was directed by Joshua Shelley.[111] Melvin Stewart, a veteran of Cleveland's Karamu Theatre, starred as Simple, Marilyn Berry played Joyce, and the cast also included Claudia McNeil and Charles McRae.[112] The production opened Tuesday, 21 May 1957, at New York's 85th Street Playhouse, at 150 West 85th Street.[113] The opening-night crowd included Ralph Bunche and Adam Clayton Powell, who reportedly howled with delight at a line in the play describing him as a Democrat with Republican stripes.[114]

Reviews were positive. The *Amsterdam News*' Jesse H. Walker wrote that the production "had me simply in stitches" and should be moved to Broadway. Brooks Atkinson lauded the show (along with *A Land Beyond the River*, which was still running)

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[111] N.a., "Simply Heavenly" advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 May 1957.
[112] Jesse Walker, "'Simply Heavenly' Provokes Laughs," *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 May 1957.
[113] N.a., "At the Theatre," *Village Voice*, 22 May 1957.
[114] Jesse H. Walker, "Theatricals," *New York Amsterdam News*, 1 June 1957.

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for its distinctive Black voice: "Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Hughes," he wrote with some surprise, "are not imitating white dramatists."[115] The *Village Voice* found the plot rather clichéd, but praised the show's "lovely and rewarding moments," and commended its humor, acting, and set design.[116]

The production drew good crowds, but after forty-four performances it had to fold because of license troubles and fire-code violations.[117] The show was moved to Broadway's Playhouse Theatre, where with most of its cast intact, it reopened Tuesday, 20 August 1957.[118] The reviews were mixed: some, such as Paul V. Beckley's in the *Herald Tribune*, found it a rollicking good time, while others, like Jim O'Connor's in the *Journal-American*, felt that the move to Broadway emphasized the show's problems and obscured some of its virtues.[119] It closed after sixty-two more performances.[120]

The Union Democracy Built

Ossie Davis followed his successful *Montgomery Footprints* with *The Union Democracy Built*, which he wrote for the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of Local 1199. A historical overview of the union's early years, *The Union Democracy Built* was primarily concerned with labor organizing, but one important passage dealt with 1199's contributions to civil rights.

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[115] Brooks Atkinson, n.t., *New York Times*, 2 June 1957.
[116] Millicent Brower, "Theatre: Simply Heavenly," *Village Voice*, 29 May 1957.
[117] Robert Coleman, "'Simply Heavenly' Is Fun," *Daily Mirror*, 21 August 1957.
[118] Kronenberger, *The Best Plays of 1957-1958*, 283.
[119] Paul V. Beckley, "'Simply Heavenly' in Move To Broadway's Playhouse," *New York Herald Tribune*, 21 August 1957; Jim O'Connor, "It's Far Easier To Score a Hit Off-Broadway," *New York Journal American*, 21 August 1957.
[120] Kronenberger, *The Best Plays of 1957-1958*, 283.

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Though structurally similar to Davis' earlier concert-style plays, *The Union Democracy Built* calls for a slightly larger cast, consisting of a narrator, five readers, and a musician/singer. As in *Montgomery Footprints*, the narrator typically introduces each sequence, the readers enact its high points, and the songs serve as bridges between scenes.

The play opens in 1932, with the founding of the drugstore workers' union during the worst years of the Great Depression.[121] It covers the early strikes, the many successes, and the few failures of the union. Toward the end, the play recounts a 1936 strike called by the union against Harlem drugstores for discriminating against Black pharmacists. A Black man named Bertram Roberts asks for a job in a Harlem pharmacy:

Boss	Yeah, what can I do for you?
Roberts	I'm here in answer to your ad.
Boss	My what?
Roberts	This advertisement here that you put in the help wanted section of the *Times*.
Boss	I advertised for a pharmacist, not a porter.
Roberts	I am a pharmacist, registered in the State of New York.
Boss	I said I wanted a pharmacist, not a porter.
Roberts	But I am a pharmacist!
Boss	Okay, have it your way. Only get out of here and don't bother me.

Roberts takes his complaint to Local 1199, which immediately sends a delegation to the drugstore. When the shopowner refuses to negotiate, a strike is called "with two major objectives: to organize Harlem drugstores, and to provide jobs for Negro pharmacists."

There is opposition to the strike even within the union. Some members fear that opening up the industry to Black pharmacists will reduce the white members' employment

[121] Ossie Davis, *Birth of 1199: The Drug Store Years*, sound recording of *The Union Democracy Built*, issued by Local 1199, 330 West 42 Street, New York. Quotations from the play transcribed by the author.

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opportunities. "Suppose the Negro I am fighting for gets my job—what then?" asks one frightened member. "Let us understand one thing," replies one of the leaders. "If we organize Harlem, we'll have more jobs, for Negroes and whites. Sure, maybe in some cases we'll have to share. If so, then that's the way it ought to be."

During the strike, a drugstore owner attempts to bribe the strikers to end their work action by slipping the Black strike captain an envelope stuffed with five hundred dollars. After his comrades' initial glee at the windfall, the captain bitterly refuses the money, saying:

> It makes me sick the way they think that a Negro's automatically so stupid and so dishonest he'd cut his own mother's throat for a couple of bucks. They've been doing this to us for years. And that's what I'm striking for, so that no snobbish, arrogant, prejudiced son of a gun can insult me because of my race. I say throw it back in his teeth, and tell him that this union and the people of this community are not for sale.

After seven weeks of striking, the narrator says, the owners backed down, and discrimination (at least overt discrimination) in Harlem drug stores was ended. "Today," the passage concludes, "Negros work as pharmacists, sodamen, sales clerks, not only in Harlem, but everywhere else in New York City."

The Union Democracy Built was performed as part of 1199's fiftieth anniversary celebration on 26 May 1957, before an audience of one thousand in the main ballroom of New York's Hotel Sheraton Astor.[122] John Randolph was the narrator; the cast included Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Will Geer, Gilbert Green, and Will Lee; and Pete Seeger sang and played the banjo.[123] Randolph stood behind a podium, and the other performers stood

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[122] N.a., "Mayor Wagner, AFL-CIO Leaders Salute '1199,'" *1199 Drug News*, July-August 1957.
[123] Davis, *Birth of 1199: The Drug Store Years*.

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and read their parts while clustered around a microphone.[124] The program also included speeches by Mayor Robert F. Wagner and AFL-CIO leaders.[125]

The dramatic presentation was very well received. *1199 Drug News* reported that "tears ... flowed unashamedly and gave way to cheers and waves of applause as old-time members relived their past."[126] Letters from members characterized the dramatization as "excellent" and "stirring."[127] And most tellingly, in later years the union issued a cassette tape of the performance, as evidence both of its stirring history and of its commitment to culture. Entitled "Birth of 1199: The Drug Store Years," the tape is still distributed today.

The Egghead

In 1952, at the height of the McCarthy period, Ossie Davis had merged the issues of civil rights and civil liberties in *Alice in Wonder* (later *The Big Deal*), and had decided strongly against the anti-communist hysteria of the time. Five years later, Molly Kazan's *The Egghead* examined the same two issues and reached precisely the opposite conclusion.

No doubt Kazan's inspiration came, at least in part, from the fact that in 1952 her husband, Elia Kazan, had "named names" before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. After his nineteen months as a Communist Party member in the mid-1930s, he testified, he was left with "the passionate conviction that we must never let the Commu-

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[124] Sam Reiss, photograph of performance of *The Union Democracy Built*, *1199 Drug News*, July-August 1957.
[125] N.a., "Mayor Wagner, AFL-CIO Leaders Salute '1199,'" *1199 Drug News*, July-August 1957.
[126] Ibid.
[127] N.a., "1199ers Applaud Anniversary Banquet, Dramatization, History," *1199 Drug News*, July-August 1957.

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nists get away with the pretense that they stand for the very things which they kill in their own countries," including "free speech, a free press, the rights of labor, racial equality and, above all, individual rights."[128] Molly Kazan must have been of one mind with her husband in these matters, for these same attitudes are the centerpiece of her play.

The Egghead depicts a liberal American college professor confronting the ugly truth about Communism.[129] Hank Parson, a sociology professor at a New England college, has invited a brilliant former student, Perry Hall, to speak before one of his classes. Hall, who is Black, is known for his radical views and has worked since graduation in a nearby factory. Before he appears at Parson's class, rumors begin to fly that he is a Communist bent on damaging the United States. Parson bravely defends both the young man's constitutional right to free expression and the principle of academic freedom, defying his wife, his teenaged son, the president of the college, and two FBI agents who are investigating Hall. Finally, however, Parson's wife proves to him that Hall is indeed a Communist. Parson, deeply hurt, asks Hall why he plays the stooge for his party leaders. "You should spend one day in my skin," Hall replies, condemning racism and explaining that his Communism is attributable largely to his miserable lot as a Black American. Hall adds, "I know they're using me," but says that his dreams of a better world "when we

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[128] Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason*, 494.

[129] *The Egghead* has never been published. This synopsis is derived from Frank Aston, "A Liberal May Be a Menace," *New York World-Telegram*, 10 October 1957; Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: 'The Egghead,'" *New York Times*, 10 October 1957; John Chapman, "'The Egghead' Badly Scrambled And Undercooked Stage Omelet," *Daily News*, 10 October 1957; Robert Coleman, "'Egghead' Fails to Completely Satisfy," *Daily Mirror,* 10 October 1957; Walter Kerr, "'The Egghead,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, 10 October 1957; John McClain, "A Compelling Drama That Had to Be Told," *New York Journal American*, 10 October 1957; Jesse H. Walker, "Theatricals," *New York Amsterdam News,* 28 September 1957; Richard Watts, Jr., "The Case of the Innocent Liberal," *New York Post*, 10 October 1957.

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take over" keep him loyal to the party. Parson decides that he has been taken in because he is an unrealistic "egghead," and resigns his professorship. In the end, however, he decides to continue teaching and resolves to advise his future students to be wary of the wiles of Communists and anyone else who would infringe on civil liberties.

The Egghead was a strong statement against Communism but was couched largely in the language of melodrama. Parson was probably meant to represent Adlai Stevenson, the comparatively intellectual Democratic presential candidate—often derided as an "egghead"— of 1952 and 1956.[130] And Perry Hall may have been named for Gus Hall, the Communist Party's perennial presidential candidate. The play depicts racism as weakening America in its undeclared war against the Soviet bloc.

The Egghead premiered in Cleveland, where initial reports predicted it would stir up controversy.[131] It opened at New York's Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Wednesday, 9 October 1957, five days after the Soviet Union launced Sputnik. Directed by Hume Cronyn, its cast of a dozen was headed by Karl Malden as Parson and Lloyd Richards (in his Broadway debut) as Hall.[132] Most critics felt the acting and directing were good, but they concentrated more on the play's content than its form. The *Journal American*'s John McClain called it "an articulate and compelling exploration of the reverse side of liberalism ... a play that had to be written," and added that "at this juncture of the world's history it took a stout heart to make the party member a Negro, to state the shocking credo of those subversives who believe any means justifies their end."[133] At

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[130] Schlesinger, *The Almanac of American History*, 531.
[131] Jesse H. Walker, "Theatricals," *New York Amsterdam News*, 28 September 1957.
[132] Kronenberger, *The Best Plays of 1957-1958*, 290-291.
[133] John McClain, "A Compelling Drama That Had to Be Told," *New York Journal American*, 10 October 1957.

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least two other critics, the *Daily Mirror's* Robert Coleman and the World-Telegram's Frank Aston, agreed. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Richard Watts, Jr. wrote in the *Post* that the play's "final point ... seems to be that intellectuals shouldn't be trusted and those who don't do so are well advised."[134]

In any event, *The Egghead* was either too intellectual or too controversial an enterprise for the Broadway masses. It played only twenty-one performances before closing 26 October 1957.[135]

Light in the Southern Sky

The series of concert performances of history plays about the fight for civil rights continued with William Branch's *Light in the Southern Sky*. Unlike Ossie Davis' original 1199 plays, this work was actually a rewrite of a television script that had already been broadcast on the NBC television network.

Light in the Southern Sky was a biography of Mary McLeod Bethune. Bethune (1875-1955), the fifteenth of seventeen children of a poor ex-slave couple in rural South Carolina, managed through talent and dogged perseverance to get an education and to set up a series of schools for Black students. Her most lasting achievement was the founding in the early 1920s of Bethune College, a coeducational Christian institution in Daytona, Florida, but she reached the height of her influence during the New Deal, as the director of the Negro division of the National Youth Administration. She also served as president

[134] Richard Watts, Jr., "The Case of the Innocent Liberal," *New York Post*, 10 October 1957.
[135] Kronenberger, *The Best Plays of 1957-1958*, 290-291.

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of the National Association of Colored Women and was an active member of the National Council of Negro Women.[136]

William Branch had been inspired by Bethune since his days as a student at Dunbar High School in Washington, DC, when he had attended a school assembly at which Bethune spoke. He recalls that she strode to the podium and put such emotion and assurance into her simple opening words—"I am Mary McLeod Bethune"—that the student body spontaneously gave her a standing ovation.[137] Branch was commissioned to write a television dramatization of her life by the Broadcast and Film Commission of the National Council of Churches.[138]

Branch's dramatization calls for a narrator, seven speaking parts, and several children.[139] In half a dozen short scenes, it tells the story of Bethune's education and of her founding the country school that would become Bethune College. Early on, she asks her mother "If we's free and ain't no slaves, Momma ... why don't we go to school?" (7). A motivated student, she walks five miles each way to a missionary school, earns a scholarship to a bible college in Chicago, and becomes a teacher. Feeling "the call to Christian greatness" (29), she resolves to found a school for Black children in a rural district. In the drama's most effective scenes, through a combination of charm and determination she convinces a redneck real estate agent (who comments that "folks 'round her don't hold too kindly with sendin' the colored to school" because "it spoils 'em for the field" (35)) first to rent her a schoolhouse, and later to sell her land for the college

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[136] Hine, *Black Women in America*, 113-127.
[137] William Branch, interview with the author, 23 September 1994.
[138] William Branch, letter to the author, 18 May 1995.
[139] William Branch, *Light in the Southern Sky*, unpublished teleplay, collection of the playwright.

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on very liberal terms. In the end, Bethune muses about "something bright and shining out there, that lights up the whole Southern sky ... the faces of thousands of boys and girls, walking through wide-open doors" (41).

In the fall of 1958, *Light in the Southern Sky* was broadcast live as a half-hour episode of NBC's *Frontiers of Faith*, a program about religion that ran from 1951 to 1970. Charles Van Doren, not yet discredited by the game show scandals, was the host. *Light in the Southern Sky* drew a very positive response, and later received both a Citation from the National Council of Christians and Jews and a Robert E. Sherwood Award.[140]

Shortly after the broadcast, Dorothy Height, the head of the National Council of Negro Women, called Branch and asked whether *Light in the Southern Sky* could be performed for the Council's annual meeting at the Waldorf. Branch reworked the script slightly and arranged an unstaged but costumed "concert performance version." Branch himself was the narrator, and Hilda Haynes starred as Bethune; the cast also included Elwood Smith, Lorenzo Tucker (often called "The Black Valentino"), a child actress who played the young Bethune, and a folksinger named Clarence Cooper. In the performance at the Waldorf, Branch stood to one side at a lectern, and the cast was seated in a row; actors stood up to read scenes in which they had parts.[141]

The performance at the Waldorf was a success, and the show later had at least three more performances, including one at at a school in Washington and one at a church in the New York area. The show's success had a sad and all too typical epilogue, however:

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[140] William Branch, interview with the author, 23 September 1994.
[141] Ibid.

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Branch later tried to obtain further writing assignments from NBC and the National Council of Churches, but neither organization ever hired him again. He was later told in confidence, he says, that someone in the Council "objected to the idea of a Negro writing programs for a majority white audience."[142]

The Rivalry

Even as the civil rights movement was heating up, the country was preparing for the Civil War centennial. The parallels between the two eras were obvious: slavery's sequel was segregation, civil rights workers were modern abolitionists, and the South was (on the most obvious level, at least) the perpetual seat of racial oppression. Among the first theatrical events associated with the centennial was a reenactment of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, the political stump-speeches which in 1858 summarized the positions of the mainstream pro- and anti-slavery forces several years before the War. In the new political climate of the civil rights era, the debates regained a timeliness and relevance that they had lost for almost a century.

The Rivalry, as the reenactment was called, was written by Norman Corwin, a well-known radio dramatist.[143] Corwin massaged the lengthy transcripts of the original Lincoln-Douglas debates into a playable theatre piece, editing and reordering the speeches, and adding connecting scenes and stage business. In Corwin's play as in history, the most central political issues of American democracy emerge as the ethical contradiction between human rights and property rights, and the constitutional tension between a strong central government and the privileges of individual states. The material

[142] Ibid.
[143] Norman Corwin, *The Rivalry* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1960).

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added by Corwin includes some narrative exposition (spoken by Mrs. Douglas), scenes depicting the candidates' off-the-record encounters, and some comic relief in the form of typical campaign speeches by lesser candidates of the time. The famous speeches are here: Lincoln declaring that "A house divided against itself cannot stand" (49), and Douglas arguing that "the signers of the Declaration [of Independence] never supposed it *possible* that their language would be *used* in an attempt to make this nation a mixed nation of Indians, Negroes, Whites and Mongrels!" (31). But perhaps the most telling interchange in the play is this one, between Lincoln and Mrs. Douglas:

Lincoln: ... If A can prove, however conclusively, that he has a right to enslave B, why may not B snatch the same argument, and prove equally conclusively that he has a right to enslave A?
Adele: Well—because A is white and B is black.
Lincoln: It's color, then? The lighter have the right to enslave the darker?—Take care. By this rule, you'd be a slave to the first person you meet with a fairer skin than your own.
Adele: Well, I didn't mean *color* exactly. I mean that the white are *intellectually* the superiors of the blacks.
Lincoln: Take care again. By this rule you'd be slave to the first person you meet with an *intellect* superior to your own.
Adele: But it's a question of *interest*, isn't it?
Lincoln: You mean if you can make it your *interest*, you have the right to enslave another? *(SHE does not answer)* By the same token, if he can make it *his* interest he has the right to enslave *you*.
Adele: Oh dear, I really should leave this sort of thing to my husband.
Lincoln: I'd a lot rather he left it to you (37-38).

This passage almost encapsulates the play as a whole: passion is tempered by reason, fury gives way to tenderness, and the arguments, for all their wit and relevance, remain always somehow aloof from the horrid reality of slaves' lives.

Nonetheless, *The Rivalry* dealt earnestly with a crucial aspect of American history. Unlike earlier plays about Lincoln, such as John Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln* (1919) and Robert Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1938), it used transcripts of real speeches

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to give a dose of something like reality to its portrayal of the most divisive issue in nineteenth-century America. Ultimately, however, what the play gained in accuracy it lost in theatricality. Furthermore, though no one, possibly including the playwright, seems to have noticed this at the time, it was spectacularly ironic that African Americans could figure only peripherally in a work which centered upon their fate as a people.

The Rivalry was produced by Cheryl Crawford (ex-triumvir of the Group Theatre) and Joel Schenker. Directed by Corwin, and with music by David Amram, it starred Richard Boone (Paladin in "Have Gun Will Travel") as Lincoln, Martin Gabel as Douglas, and Nancy Kelly as Mrs. Douglas. It opened at the Bijou Theatre on 7 February 1959.[144]

The reviews ranged from cautious to laudatory. Most agreed that Corwin had done a respectable job with troublesome material, and that the directing and acting were fine. Lewis Funke observed in the *Times* that "the questions that Lincoln and Douglas argued in 1858 ... are still with us. ... The sanctity of states' rights, the sanctity of the Supreme Court decisions, the rights of human beings of different color are still being argued."[145] Harold Clurman, Crawford's old partner and always a devotee of political theatre, agreed in the *Nation* that the "central issue ... states' rights versus human rights" was "still relevant."[146] But Walter Kerr feared in the *Herald Tribune* that Corwin had "selected what might prove entertaining or suitably sloganish at the expense of reasoned, orderly,

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[144] Kronenberger, *The Best Plays of 1958-1959*, 321.
[145] Lewis Funke, "Norman Corwin Play Staged at Bijou," *New York Times*, 9 February 1959.
[146] Harold Clurman, review of *The Rivalry*, *The Nation*, 28 February 1959. In Loggia and Young, eds., *The Collected Works of Harold Clurman*, 380-381.

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and persuasive analysis."[147] And the *Daily Mirror*'s Robert Coleman was equally dubious about the play's commercial prospects when he warned that "it's definitely not for those seeking escapist entertainment."[148]

These were not money reviews, but *The Rivalry* was not an expensive show to perform. It played eighty-one performances, closing 18 April 1959.[149] Its run might have been longer had it not been eclipsed after only four weeks by the best-received play of the civil rights era, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Fifty Steps Toward Freedom

In 1959, the NAACP dedicated its annual convention to commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of its founding. The New York Coliseum was chosen as the convention site, and for six days, from Monday, 13 July to Sunday, 19 July, attendees met in a variety of national, regional, political action, legislative, women's, ministers', youth, and other sessions. Among the speakers were were Nelson Rockefeller (then the governor of New York), A. Philip Randolph, Thurgood Marshall, Jackie Robinson, Roy Wilkins, and Mahalia Jackson. As part of the celebration, a radio-style drama by William Branch about the NAACP's accomplishments was performed for an assembly of the conventioneers.[150]

Fifty Steps Toward Freedom, as the play was called, was commissioned by the NAACP's National Office.[151] In style it closely resembles the short radio-style dramas written by Ossie Davis for Local 1199, but Branch's play is longer and calls for a larger

[147] Walter Kerr, "'The Rivalry,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 February 1959.
[148] Robert Coleman, "'The Rivalry': Abe vs. Douglas," *Daily Mirror*, 8 February 1959.
[149] Kronenberger, *The Best Plays of 1958-1959*, 321.
[150] N.a., "50th NAACP Convention," *New York Amsterdam News*, 11 July 1959.
[151] William Branch, interview with the author, 23 September 1994.

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ensemble. The main story is told by a narrator and a cast of sixteen, with help from a guitar-playing singer and a chorus.

The play both opens and closes with an appropriate verse of scripture: "And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you ... and ye shall not oppress one another" (*Leviticus* 25:10-14).[152] The narrator recalls America's—and especially the South's—miserable racial situation in 1909, when a Black woman, a white Southerner, and a Rabbi founded the NAACP to further the cause of racial equality in America. For the rest of the play, the narrator discusses a list of major historical issues addressed and improved in whole or in part through the efforts of the NAACP, including lynching, voting rights, due process of law, education, employment, housing, and public transportation and accommodations. The narrator's remarks alternate with songs and with short scenes dramatizing the conditions of life for representative or historical Black characters, such as a mother being told her son has been lynched; a man asked to recite the Preamble to the U. S. Constitution in order to register to vote; sharecroppers organizing to protect their property from the white overseers; a family fighting back when attacked by a mob for moving into a white neighborhood; Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus; and a housemaid being begged to return to work by her white boss, who fired her the day before for supporting the bus boycott. The play concludes with two stirring anthems, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

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[152] William B. Branch, *Fifty Steps Toward Freedom*, printed by NAACP, ca. 1959. Courtesy of William Branch.

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Fifty Steps Toward Freedom was performed on the second afternoon of the NAACP convention, Monday, 14 July 1959—Bastille Day, appropriately enough. The producer and director was Dick Campbell, the narrator was Ossie Davis, the calypso singer Johnny Barracuda and the Edna Gay Chorus provided musical accompaniment, and the cast of sixteen included Godfrey Cambridge, Lou Gilbert, Estelle Helmsley, Dotts Johnson, Kenneth Manigault, and Clarice Taylor.[153] The audience, according to Branch, was very large, numbering at least several thousand, and the play was well-received. Shortly thereafter, according to Branch, it was performed again by a group in the San Francisco Bay Area. Its topicality, however, made it even more time-limited than most other civil rights plays, and it had no further afterlife.[154]

The Man on Meeting Street

The fall of 1959 saw yet another civil rights play by William Branch in concert performance. *The Man on Meeting Street*, a tribute to the judicial career of the South's most prominent civil rights judge, J. Wates Waring, was produced by the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority at a testimonial for the judge at New York's Roosevelt Hotel.

Julius Wates Waring was born in 1880 to one of the most prominent white families in Charleston, South Carolina. After working for many years as an attorney, in 1942 he was appointed to the federal bench by Franklin Roosevelt. As a judge he scandalized the Southern legal establishment, desegregating his courtroom and handing down a series of decisions favoring equal pay, desegregated public educational facilities, and voting rights. His most important decision was probably his 1951 dissent in the *Briggs v. Clarendon*

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[153] Ibid.
[154] William Branch, interview with the author, 23 September 1994.

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County case, in which he argued—and the U. S. Supreme Court would eventually agree, in *Brown v. Board*—that separate educational facilities for Blacks and whites were inherently unequal. With each succeeding decision, Waring and his wife were further ostracized by the Charleston establishment. He finally retired in 1952 and moved to New York, where he remained active in civil rights work.

Alpha Kappa Alpha, one of the most prominent Black sororities, invited William Branch to compose a dramatic tribute to Judge Waring for their annual meeting.[155] The result, *The Man on Meeting Street*, is written for a narrator, three other actors, and a singer.[156] The play takes its title from the fact that Waring had lived on Charleston's Meeting Street during his years on the bench, and relates the facts of the judge's civil rights record in a fairly straightforward manner, adding many pithy quotations and telling anecdotes to the bare facts. For example, Mrs. Waring, a native of Detroit, helps alienate the Charleston establishment by saying in a public speech that Southern white racists are "sick, confused and decadent people ... introverted, morally low and weak ... represent[ing] a dying culture and an archaic way of life" (11). Shortly thereafter, Waring points out that "American delegates in the United Nations are being asked by other nations 'where is democracy in South Carolina and Mississippi?' We cannot plant the garden of democracy in the world until we clean up our own back yard" (12). When lightning happens to strike the house of one of Waring's neighbors, a sign is said to have appeared on the neighbor's lawn, reading "Dear God—he lives next door!" (11). At length, the Warings are entirely banished by white Charleston society and begin

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[155] Ibid.

[156] William Branch, *The Man on Meeting Street*, unpublished typescript, collection of the playwright.

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socializing with Black families instead. In New York, when the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision is handed down, Waring says to the visiting press that "I don't know why it took so long to discover that the Constitution meant what it said when it said that all men are created equal" (15). The play concludes with a ringing endorsement of Judge Waring's decisions, saying that "his invincible resolution to choose rightly and to deal justly has placed him among the immortals in the history of mankind" (16).

The Man on Meeting Street was performed on Sunday afternoon, 15 November 1959.[157] Ossie Davis was the narrator, Clarence Cooper was the singer, and the rest of the cast consisted of Ruby Dee, Rudd Lowry, and Jim Trigg (Davis and Dee, who were both starring in *A Raisin in the Sun*, must have had to run to make their Sunday matinée). Other speakers at the testimonial included Dr. Kenneth Clark and Rev. Joseph A. DeLaine, both of whom had been central figures in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Several thousand people were present at the event, which according to the *Amsterdam News* "ultimately ended up being as intimate [an] affair as if it had been just two devoted old friends having lunch on the terrace." The same story noted that *The Man on Meeting Street* was "among the highlights" of the testimonial.[158]

Though it was well received, *The Man on Meeting Street* was written for a very specific event and was not performed again.

Peripheral Works

As in earlier years, there were many plays which touched on civil rights themes but were not full-fledged civil rights plays. The first of these was Charles Sebree and Greer

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[157] William Branch, *The Man on Meeting Street*, cover page.
[158] Thomasina Norford, "AKA's In Honor To Judge Waring," *New York Amsterdam News*, 21 November 1959.

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Johnston's *Mrs. Patterson*, a musical version of *The Dry August*, an unproduced script Sebree had written in 1949.[159] It introduced Eartha Kitt as Teddy, a young Black girl whose self-respect is damaged by her realization that she is a second-class citizen compared to her mother's white employer. The play concludes with Teddy saying, "When I grow up I want to be a rich white woman" (670).

Though *Mrs. Patterson*, unlike many civil rights plays, is a gentle depiction of racial problems rather than a prescription for change, its attitude about race is similar to that of many sociologists and psychologists of the period, including those who helped the NAACP's legal team in its arguments before the Supreme Court. Dr. Kenneth Clark, for example, compiled data in Clarendon County, South Carolina, showing that Black children "saw themselves as inferior, and they accepted the inferiority as part of reality." Thurgood Marshall used Clark's findings as part of the evidence in the *Brown v. Board* case, and Chief Justice Warren specifically mentioned this evidence as an important factor in the final decision.[160]

One of the most successful musicals of the late 1950s was Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim's *West Side Story* (1957).[161] This innovative work brought up to date and home to an American setting the kind of troubled inter-ethnic romance that Oscar Hammerstein (Sondheim's mentor) had so successfully created in *Showboat*, *South Pacific*, and *The King and I*. Parallelling Shakespeare's *Romeo and*

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[159] *Mrs. Patterson* has never been published, but *The Dry August* was printed in Hatch, *Black Theatre USA*, 658-670. An original cast recording of *Mrs. Patterson* was released in 1954 as RCA Victor LOC 1017.

[160] Kenneth Clark, quoted in Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 20, 23.

[161] Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim, *West Side Story*, in *Romeo and Juliet/West Side Story* (New York: Dell, 1965).

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Juliet, a member of a white New York youth gang falls in love with the sister of the leader of the rival Puerto Rican gang, and after a series of accidental and revengeful deaths is killed himself. As usual for Broadway in this era, the love story is between a white and a darker-complected non-Black—in this case a Puerto Rican—and is represented as tragically doomed. But *West Side Story* was both more topical and more political than Hammerstein's shows, because like its Shakespearean model, it blamed the lovers' woes not on the fact of their love, but on society's refusal to countenance it. Also, perhaps not uncoincidentally, like Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*, it allows the dark-skinned woman to remain alive at the end as a witness to and a reminder of society's ethnic hatreds.

Another play touching peripherally on civil rights concerns was Saul Levitt's *The Andersonville Trial* (1959).[162] A courtroom drama based on—and at times using verbatim transcripts from—an actual court martial following the Civil War, it tells the story of Henry Wirz, a German immigrant who ran a Confederate prison camp at which a third of the 40,000 Union prisoners died. It becomes clear that Wirz is being tried for crimes ordered by his now-dead superiors, which leads the prosecutor to argue that Wirz should be convicted as an example to others, and Wirz to counter that he should be acquitted because he was only following orders. The shadow of the Nuremburg trials hangs heavily over this dark and disturbing play, but the prosecutor's near-fanatical abolitionism, Wirz's comments that Blacks are little better than beasts, and the play's final question—who would be prosecuting whom had the victory gone to the South?—keep the political

[162] Saul Levitt, *The Andersonville Trial* (New York: Random House, 1960).

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content current and never far from home. (In 1960, interestingly, after the play closed in New York, it was presented to great acclaim in Berlin.)[163]

The final play from the late 1950s with a civil rights subtext was another remembrance of the Civil War era, Hal Holbrook's *Mark Twain Tonight* (1959).[164] This one-man re-creation of the great writer's public persona starts gently, with down-home humor and nostalgic reminiscences of old times on the Mississippi; but in the second act it becomes darker, with several passages on slavery and lynching, including one from *Huckleberry Finn* in which Huck concludes that even if helping a runaway slave lands him in hell, it will have been worth it. *Mark Twain Tonight* proved a great success, running six months in New York and years on the road; in the late 1960s it was filmed for television. Holbrook kept the show fresh in part by preparing much more material than could be presented in a single performance, and then tailoring each performance to that night's audience. In 1962, for example, when he performed the piece at the University of Mississippi at Oxford, he "used the toughest material I could find" applicable to the racial crisis there, pointedly selecting Twain's invectives against moderate Southerners who did not speak out against racial injustice.[165]

A Raisin in the Sun

To conclude this chapter with *A Raisin in the Sun*, which opened in March 1959, is to bend chronology slightly, but the play deserves this added emphasis. *A Raisin in the Sun* was the most successful civil rights play not only of its decade, but arguably of the entire civil rights era. It was probably the first civil rights drama to make a significant

[163] N.a., "Premiere in Berlin for 'Andersonville,'" *New York Times*, 25 November 1960.
[164] Hal Holbrook, *Mark Twain Tonight* (New York: Ives Washburn, 1959).
[165] N.a., "Holbrook as Twain Wins Praise in South," *New York Times*, 11 October 1962.

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impact beyond the confines of the movement. Its run continued well into 1960, and its influence continued for years thereafter.

So much attention has been showered upon *A Raisin in the Sun* that in popular reputation—and unfortunately, even for some scholars—it remains the first major African American play. Widely produced, anthologized, and even parodied, its reputation as a politically moderate work has helped establish its place in the canon, though the playwright herself was among the most politically radical theatre artists of the civil rights period. The play's success, however, should not blind one to its virtues: a skillfully wrought realistic drama in the tradition of Ibsen and Miller, it captures a defining moment in the history of a people through the story of a single working-class family.

Like *On Whitman Avenue*, *Trial by Fire*, and *Take a Giant Step*, *A Raisin in the Sun* centers on housing, involving a Black family and its move to a white neighborhood. Unlike the earlier plays, however, *A Raisin in the Sun* concerns not the problems faced by the family in the wake of the move, but the wrenching and ultimately ennobling process of deciding to make the move in the first place. This simple change in focus, from reaction to volition, gives *A Raisin in the Sun*'s characters more control over their own lives—and therefore, in political terms, more personal *power*—than any dramatic figures in civil rights plays since the freedmen in *Our Lan'*.

Hansberry knew the issues associated with a Black family's move to a white suburb from personal experience. She was born in Chicago in 1930 to a middle-class, intellectually oriented Black family whose acquaintances included Paul Robeson, Duke Ellington, Walter White, Joe Louis, and Jesse Owens. In 1938 the Hansberrys flouted Chicago's restrictive covenants by moving out of their cramped apartment and buying a

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house in a predominantly white neighborhood.[166] Shortly after the move, Lorraine and her sister were playing together on their porch when a mob of local racists gathered menacingly in the front yard. The girls withdrew to their living room, but a brick soon crashed through the the window, narrowly missed Lorraine, and embedded itself in the wall. Friends stood vigil to protect both the house and the family, but the Hansberrys were later evicted by the Illinois courts.[167] Undaunted, they pressed their case to the U. S. Supreme Court, which in the 1940 *Hansberry v. Lee* decision held that restrictive covenants were unconstitutional.[168]

Hansberry began college at the University of Wisconsin, where she developed an interest in theatre after attending a production of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*. She dropped out in 1950, moved to New York, and worked for several years as a reporter, editor, and sometime theatre critic at Paul Robeson's radical newspaper *Freedom*.[169] In 1952, after Robeson's passport was revoked by the State Department, she spoke in his place at the Intercontinental Peace Congress in Uruguay, and had her own passport revoked in retaliation. In 1953 she married Robert Nemiroff, a young Jewish writer whom she had met on a picket line, and in 1956 she began work on the *The Crystal Stair*, the play which would eventually become *A Raisin in the Sun*.[170]

Both "The Crystal Stair" and "A Raisin in the Sun" were quotations from poems by Langston Hughes. The first title was taken from the poem "Mother to Son," in which a

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[166] Steven R. Carter, "Lorraine Hansberry," in Davis and Harris, eds., *Afro-American Writers After 1955*, 122.
[167] Anne Cheney, *Lorraine Hansberry* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), 4, n.p.
[168] Carter, "Lorraine Hansberry," 122.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Cheney, *Lorraine Hansberry*, n.p.

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Black mother declares to her son that "life for me ain't been no crystal stair."[171] The latter derived from the poem "Harlem," which warns that "a dream deferred" might "dry up / Like a raisin in the sun," or it might "explode." The implicit warning, that if America did not end racial discrimination it might suffer violent consequences, was, like the play as a whole, radical but understated. It was also, the nation would later learn, all too prophetic.

A realistic play consisting of six scenes in three acts, *A Raisin in the Sun* tells the story of a month in the life of the Youngers, a Black family living on Chicago's South Side "sometime between World War II and the present."[172] The family consists of Lena ("Mama") Younger, the matriarch; her son Walter Lee, a chauffeur, and daughter Beneatha, a college student; and Walter Lee's wife Ruth and their young son Travis. Shortly after the play opens, Mama receives a $10,000 payment from her late husband's life insurance. She wants to use the money to buy a home for her family and to pay for Beneatha to attend medical school. Walter, however, wants to buy a liquor store, which he sees as his family's best way out of poverty. This infuriates Mama, who laments that "Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it's money. ... In my time we was worried about not being lynched and getting to the North if we could and how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity, too" (61). She goes out the next day and buys a house, but is saddened by her family's reaction to her purchase:

Ruth	Clybourne Park? Mama, there ain't no colored people living in Clybourne Park.
Mama	*(Almost idiotically)* Well, I gues there's going to be some now.
. . .	

[171] Carter, "Lorraine Hansberry," 123.
[172] Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (New York: Signet, 1958), 10.

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Ruth *(Trying to recover from the shock)* Well—well—'course I ain't one never been 'fraid of no crackers, mind you—but—well, wasn't there no other houses nowhere?

Mama Them houses they put up for colored in them areas way out all seem to cost twice as much as other house. I did the best I could (78-79).

After their initial surprise, however, the news is welcomed by Ruth and the rest of the family except Walter, who accuses his mother of butchering his dreams. Over the next few weeks, however, she softens, and gives Walter the balance of the money to split between himself and Beneatha.

A week later, on moving day, a soft-spoken white man named Karl Lindner arrives at the Youngers' door. As a representative of the segregationist Clybourne Park Improvement Association, Lindner offers to buy back the Younger's house from them to prevent them from moving into the neighborhood:

> I am sure you people must be aware of some of the incidents which have happened in various parts of the city when colored people have moved into certain areas. ... I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn't enter into it. It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing, rightly or wrongly, ... that for the happiness of all concerned our Negro families are happier when they live in their *own* communities (96-98).

Walter Lee proudly orders Lindner to leave, but soon one of his friends arrives and reports that all their money—Beneatha's included—has been stolen by their partner in the liquor store deal. Walter, shattered and desperate, calls Lindner, tells him that he has changed his mind, and asks him to return to the apartment. He tells the family how he will accept the racists' money:

> ... I am going to say ... you people just put the money in my hand and you won't have to live next to this bunch of stinking niggers! ... Maybe—maybe I'll just get down on my black knees ... *(He does so ...)* Captain, Mistuh, Bossman. *(He starts crying)* A-hee-hee-hee! *(Wringing his hands in profoundly anguished imitation)* Yasssssuh! Great White Father, just gi' ussen de money, fo' God's sake, and we's ain't gwine come out deh and dirty up yo' white folks' neighborhood (124).

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When Lindner returns, Mama insists that Walter Lee put on his performance before the whole family, including his son. Walter Lee haltingly explains his decision to Lindner even while he is formulating it:

> What I am telling you is that we called you over here to tell you that we are very proud and that this is—this is my son, who makes the sixth generation of our family in this country, and that we have all thought about your offer and we have decided to move into our house because my father—my father—he earned it. ... We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes—but we will try to be good neighbors. That's all we got to say. ... We don't want your money (127-128).

The play thus ends hopefully, with Mama proudly commenting to Ruth that Walter Lee "finally come into his manhood today, didn't he? Kind of like a rainbow after the rain" (130).

A Raisin in the Sun works effectively on several levels. As a social issue play, its depiction of the Youngers' intended move to a white neighborhood is as current as 1950s headlines. (The "Clybourne Park Improvement Association" may be an ironic play on the Montgomery Improvement Association, which organized the famous bus boycott.) As a political statement, the play subtly but effectively urges radical, non-violent social action: the Youngers may be modest and seemingly apolitical, but their decision to move is an extraordinarily brave undertaking rife with disruptive racial, legal, and social implications. On the emotional level, the Youngers—especially Walter Lee—learn in the course of the play how to remain true to themselves and to their heritage.

What is more, unlike so many of its predecessors, *A Raisin in the Sun* accomplishes its goals subtly, as a psychological family drama in the tradition of Odets, rather than as a melodrama or an agit-prop piece. The Youngers are neither the perfect families nor the victims presented in *On Whitman Avenue* and *Trial by Fire*. Lindner is not an evil

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Southern senator or a lynch-happy cracker, but a small man who delivers his unpleasant message and then—twice—leaves the Younger apartment meekly after being ordered out of it. The final scene, in fact, in which Walter Lee grows up shortly after "rehearsing" his demeaning "performance," can be read not just as a personal coming of age, but as Black drama itself transcending the minstrel tradition. As *A Raisin in the Sun* ends, then, both the Black family and Black theatre are squarely in control of their own destinies: their success or failure are dependent not so much on outside forces as on their own strength of resolve.

In the fall of 1957, Hansberry read a draft of the play to her guests at a dinner party, and interested Philip Rose, a music publisher, in producing it for Broadway. Over the next year and a half, Rose took on a tax consultant named David J. Cogan as his partner, and together they raised the show's initial financing of $75,000 by persuading 147 friends and supporters to make small investments, few greater than $750.[173] Lloyd Richards was hired to direct what was to be his first Broadway production, and the veteran Ralph Alswang to design the sets. The cast was spectacular: Sidney Poitier, an old acquaintance of Hansberry, agreed to play Walter Lee; Claudia McNeil was cast as Lena, Ruby Dee as Ruth, Diana Sands as Beneatha, and Louis Gossett as one of Beneatha's suitors; and future playwrights Lonne Elder and Douglas Turner Ward also turned up in small parts.[174]

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[173] Cheney, *Lorraine Hansberry*, 25. The size of the investments is given in Samuel G. Freedman, "Yale Marking 25th Anniversary of 'Raisin in Sun,'" *New York Times*, 1 November 1983, and the number of investors is given in "The Producer," an unsigned article in an unnamed newspaper in the *A Raisin in the Sun* clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

[174] Kronenberger, *Best Plays of 1958-1959*, 328-329.

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Richards worked intensely with Hansberry on rewrites during the rehearsal process. Together they changed the play's focus from Lena to Walter Lee, cut out a character (an upstairs neighbor), removed an act (in which the aftermath of the move had been explored), and shortened the running time by forty-five minutes.[175] The show opened in the winter of 1959 with an unremarkable three-day run in New Haven and moved on to Philadelphia with only $600 in advance sales. But the City of Brotherly Love gave it excellent reviews and superb word of mouth, and the show began to find its audience, much of it Black. Richards later recalled his realization of the importance the show was taking on in people's lives:

> "Midway in the week, I walked into the lobby of the theater one afternoon and there was a line of people, and in that line was a black lady with a shopping bag over her arm. That was a badge. I recognize those bags. My mother used to have one.
>
> "Look at a busy corner in any city. On one side of the street you see all these white people, well-dressed, taking the bus downtown. And on the other side, you see these black women with the bags, with their work shoes in the bags, going to take care of the houses of those white people who are going downtown.
>
> "This woman in Philadelphia got to the window and asked for a ticket. It was, I think, $4.80. And she started into the theater and was surprised to be told she couldn't go in until 8 o'clock. So I engaged her in conversation. I said, 'Why are you paying $4.80 to come to this play?' She said, 'The word's going around my neighborhood that there's something here that has to do with me.'"[176]

[175] Lloyd Richards, interview with Ernest Wiggins, 8 December 1975. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.

[176] Samuel G. Freedman, "Yale Marking 25th Anniversary of 'Raisin in Sun,'" *New York Times*, 1 November 1983.

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In a separate interview, Richards commented that this episode "to me encompassed my entire reason for being in the theatre, for doing what I was doing. That was a moment that I felt that at least aspiration and fulfillment were somewhere in the same area."[177]

Richards was not alone in feeling that *A Raisin in the Sun* crystallized the hopefulness of the times. The Shubert Organization, impressed by the show's out-of-town success, contracted to move it to Chicago for four weeks, and then to Broadway, where after two weeks of previews it opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Wednesday, 11 March 1959.[178]

The reviews were excellent, more consistently positive that those of any civil rights plays since *Deep Are the Roots* and *Finian's Rainbow* over a decade earlier. Every element of the production—the writing, the direction, the acting, and the set designs—drew almost universal praise. Walter Kerr wrote in the *Herald Tribune* that it was "an impressive first play, beautifully acted" and directed "with a fluid, elusive, quick-tempered grace that permits no moment—and no shade of desperation—to pass unexamined."[179] The *Journal-American*'s John McClain called it "a stupendous unsegregated hit," and advised his readers "to take two handkerchiefs."[180] In the *Times*, Brooks Atkinson commended the play for telling "the inner as well as the outer truth" about Black family life, and even compared it—not unfavorably—to *The Cherry Orchard*: "Although the social scale of the characters is different," he wrote, "the knowledge of

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[177] Lloyd Richards, interview with Ernest Wiggins, 8 December 1975. Hatch-Billops Collection.
[178] Cheney, *Lorraine Hansberry*, 25-26.
[179] Walter Kerr, "'A Raisin in the Sun,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, 12 March 1959.
[180] John McClain, "Gives a 'Wonderful Emotional Evening,'" *New York Journal-American*, 12 March 1959.

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how character is controlled by environment is much the same, and the alternation of humor and pathos is similar."[181] Jerry Tallmer crowed in the *Village Voice* that "Hansberry has done nothing less than to pick her people up and shove them dramatically—as *people*, not as A People—into the middle of the twentieth century."[182]

Magazine critics were somewhat less impressed with the play than were the newspaper reviewers, but the majority still came down as supporters of it. Tom F. Driver wrote in the *New Republic* that it was "emotionally powerful" even though its technique was archaic, its characters stereotypical, and its success largely due to "our sentimentality over the 'Negro question.'"[183] Gerald Weales, in *Commentary*, praised the virtuosity with which Hansberry wielded the "old-fashioned" and "anachronistic" form of naturalism, and suggested that by centering her story on the American dream she had succeeded in writing "a play about Negroes which is not simply a Negro play."[184]

Most reviewers were content to praise the play's apparent political evenhandedness, its psychological insights, and its superb production. Few, however, noticed the profounder radicalism at the play's core. One exception was William J. Patterson, who observed in the *Worker* that "the tragedy of racism and the prevalence of the myths of white supremacy" were implicit in the play's dramatic circumstances and structure, though "the question of those social forces depriving them [the Youngers] of what in a

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[181] Brooks Atkinson, "The Theatre: 'A Raisin in the Sun,'" *New York Times*, 12 March 1959.
[182] Jerry Tallmer, "Welcome, Miss Hansberry," *Village Voice*, 25 March 1959.
[183] Tom F. Driver, "Theatre: 'A Raisin in the Sun,'" *The New Republic*, 13 April 1959 (reprinted in Gunton, *Contemporary Literary Criticism 17*, 182).
[184] Gerald Weales, "Thoughts on 'A Raisin in the Sun,'" *Commentary*, June 1959 (reprinted in Gunton, *Contemporary Literary Criticism 17*, 183).

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'free world' would be recognized as human rights as well as civil liberties is never raised aloud."[185]

Whatever the play's content, audiences poured into the theatre to see it. Barely three weeks after its Broadway opening, *Variety* reported that its entire investment (now totalling $100,000) had been recouped.[186] At the same time, Columbia Pictures bought the film rights for $300,000, with Hansberry herself slated to write the screenplay.[187] And a week after that, the play won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award over competition from Tennesee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, and Archibald MacLeish.[188] A London production was organized, and though it closed shortly after its August opening ("so slow it is, so pompous, so sentimental," the *Times* of London droned), this did not hurt the New York production.[189] When Poitier left the show for other work, the part of Walter Lee was taken over by Ossie Davis, a change which, according to one news item, "has caused no ill effects" because it brought to Broadway "for the first time in many seasons, an off as well as on stage husband and wife team."[190] In its first year on Broadway the show played to audiences totalling 372,600.[191] It then moved to the larger Belasco Theatre,[192] where it ran for three more months, and finally closed after a total of 530

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[185] William J. Patterson, *The Worker*, 22 March 1959.
[186] N.a., "'Raisin' Recoups 100G in 6th Wk.," *Variety*, 2 April 1959.
[187] N.a., "'Raisin in the Sun' Bought for Film," *New York Times*, 1 April 1959.
[188] Stuart W. Little, "Best-Play Prize Won By a Negro Girl, 28," *Herald Tribune*, 8 April 1959.
[189] N.a., "A Raisin in the Sun," *London Times*, 9 August 1959.
[190] N.a., "Seats Now Available As 'Raisin' Moves," *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 October 1959.
[191] N.a., "The Producer," unspecified newspaper. *A Raisin in the Sun* clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.
[192] N.a., "Seats Now Available As 'Raisin' Moves," *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 October 1959.

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performances.[193] The following year, when the film was released, Hansberry's play found an audience of millions.

In later years, some radical playwrights, actors, and directors came to look on *A Raisin in the Sun* as a hopelessly middle-class play, filled with characters whose only aspiration is to become *petits bourgeoises*. The critic Harold Cruse compared the play to a soap opera, and claimed that it "demonstrated that the Negro playwright has lost the intellectual and, therefore the technical and creative, ability to deal with his own special ethnic group materials in dramatic form."[194] It is ironically appropriate, then, and even touching, that Amiri Baraka, one of the most radical of the Black playwrights of the 1960s, decided almost three decades after its opening that *A Raisin in the Sun* was in fact the most effective Black political play of its time. So startling and so perceptive are his comments that they are worth quoting at length:

> We missed the essence of the work—that Hansberry had created a family engaged in the same class struggle and ideological struggle as existed in the movement itself and among the people. What is most telling about our ignorance is that Hansberry's play remains overwhelmingly popular and evocative of black and white reality—then and now. The masses of black people dug it true. ...
>
> Hansberry's play was political agitation. It dealt with the very same issues of democratic rights and equality that were being aired in the streets. But it dealt with them not as political abstractions, but as they are *lived*.
>
> The next two explosions in black drama, James Baldwin's "Blues for Mister Charlie" and my own "Dutchman" (both 1964), raise the militancy of the movement as it came fully into the Malcolm X era. But neither of these plays is as much a statement from the African American majority as is "Raisin." For one thing, they are both too concerned with white people. It is Lorraine Hansberry's play, though it seems "conservative" in form and content, that is the accurate telling of the real struggle.
>
> The Younger family is part of the black majority, and the concerns I once dismissed as "middle class"—of buying a house and moving into "white folks' neighborhoods"—are actually reflective of the essence of black people's striving to

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[193] Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to the American Theatre*, 566.

[194] Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 281.

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> defeat segregation, discrimination and national oppression. There is no such thing as a "white folks' neighborhood" except to racists *and to those submitting to racism!*
>
> The Younger family is the incarnation—*before* they burst from the bloody Southern back roads and the burning streets of Watts and Newark onto TV screens and the *world* stage—of our common ghetto-variety Fanny Lou Hamers, Malcolm X's and Angela Davises.[195]

Baraka's generous reevaluation of Hansberry's work inevitably resurrects an ultimately unanswerable question. Was the Black nationalism of the 1960s a necessary step toward liberation? Or, had its proponents better heeded the soft-spoken but no less radical message of the earlier civil rights movement—so effectively expressed in *A Raisin in the Sun*—might even more progress have been made? The answer, as Bob Dylan would sing in 1961, "is blowin' in the wind."

* * * * *

Like the growing civil rights movement itself, civil rights theatre of the middle to late 1950s tried a variety of approaches, and by and large succeeded more often than it failed. Ossie Davis, William Branch and Langston Hughes wrote short radio-style plays to bring news of the movement to political gatherings. Branch, Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Loften Mitchell wrote full-length works that explored more fully the movement's origins, implications and tactics. The young Louis X gave the theatre its first hint of the splintering the movement would suffer in the mid-1960s. Organizations such as the Greenwich Mews created a steady stream of quality off-Broadway productions, and the Broadway success of *A Raisin in the Sun* established several producers who continued mounting civil rights plays in the 1960s.

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[195] Amiri Baraka, "A Wiser Play Than Some of Us Knew," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 March 1987.

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By the late 1950s, the civil rights movement had won some major victories in the South, but great obstacles remained. Interstate transportation, public dining, and most importantly voting rights had scarcely been addressed during the 1950s. Dr. King and other leaders searched for specific issues and techniques with which to bring more participants into the movement, but to little avail. Not until early 1960, in fact, did the movement enter a new phase, and even then only because its leaders were creative enough to follow their flock.

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Chapter Four — The Mass Movement, 1960-1963

> ... Ol Cap'n, I am released of you—the entire Negro people is released of you! No more shouting hallelujah! every time you sneeze, nor jumping jackass every time you whistle "Dixie"! We gonna love you if you let us and laugh as we leave if you don't. We want our cut of the Constitution, and we want it now: and not with no teaspoon, white folks—throw it at us with a shovel![1]

The 1960s, in civil rights as in other political movements, was a decade of demands. Civil rights leaders no longer made—nor would their followers tolerate—modest requests for token shows of equality. The measured but steady evolution away from segregation that had been the goal of civil rights leaders as recently as the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 had by the early 1960s been transformed into an increasingly urgent call for full and immediate equality. No longer would all things come to those who waited; the watchword would be "Freedom NOW!"

Civil rights theatre in the early 1960s largely followed the movement's exuberant lead. Playwrights, both Black and white, interested in depicting civil rights issues on stage were increasingly willing to replace realism and melodrama with humor, satire, and nonrealistic modes of representation. The minstrel show, which had been all but dead since World War II, was resurrected as a new theatrical forum for civil rights issues. Youth and the student movement provided the subject matter for several shows, including two musicals. Off-Broadway remained the primary venue for civil rights theatre, but several important shows were first produced at regional theatres and on Broadway.

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[1] Purlie, in Ossie Davis, *Purlie Victorious*, in Patterson, *Black Theatre*, 494.

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The Movement Burgeons

From the 1960 sit-ins to the 1963 March on Washington, the movement accelerated, becoming a huge grass-roots effort with students, both Black and white, in its vanguard.[2] Integration remained the movement's monolithic goal, and despite occasional lapses, nonviolent civil disobedience remained its method. But many of its most important protests were conceived and led by Southern college students, and the most influential national leaders became those who, like the SCLC's Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy, were quick enough to keep up with their flocks.

This period of the movement's history coincided closely with the campaign and presidency of John F. Kennedy. Kennedy's youth and personal magnetism—bolstered by relative peace and a still-roaring economy—were enough to impart to his administration and to the new decade an aura of creativity and optimism. (Indeed, Lerner and Loewe's *Camelot*, which opened on Broadway just weeks after Kennedy's election, seemed to mirror both the high hopes and the romance of his presidency.) Neither international confrontations, including the 1961 Bay of Pigs fiasco, the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, and the small but ominous U. S. presence in Vietnam, nor inspirational sidetracks like his proposal to send Americans to the moon, significantly slowed Kennedy's domestic agenda of federal aid to the disadvantaged. He raised the minimum wage, supported raising social security benefits, proposed the creation of a medical program for the nation's elderly, and defended the expanding civil rights movement.

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[2] The sources I have used in compiling this historical summary include: Branch, *Parting the Waters*; Lorraine Hansberry, *The Movement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964); Hodgson, *America in Our Time*; William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*; and Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*.

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Kennedy's image reflected the increasing youthfulness of the country. Children born during the postwar prosperity—"baby boomers," as they came to be called—constituted one of the largest generations in American history. The average age nationwide dropped to under thirty. In the early 1960s, baby boomers and their older siblings began to graduate from high school and soon expanded a college and university population already swelled enormously by the G.I. Bill. As campuses became centers of the generation's social, political, and artistic expression, many students joined civil rights organizations.

Music continued to play an important role in the culture of the civil rights movement. A renewed interest in folk music revitalized the careers of older Black blues artists like Rev. Gary Davis, "Mississippi" John Hurt, and Josh White, and created new stars scarcely older than the students themselves, including Joan Baez, Oscar Brown, Jr., Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, and the trio Peter, Paul, and Mary. The work of these and other artists paralleled and cross-pollinated with that of civil rights theatre.

Stand-up comedy too provided a new and popular medium for civil rights performance. A number of comics, notably Lenny Bruce, Godfrey Cambridge, and Dick Gregory, expressed their support of the movement through their work. "Wouldn't it be a hell of a thing," Gregory asked his white audiences, "if all this were burnt cork and you people were being tolerant for nothing?"[3]

By the end of Eisenhower's administration, however, the momentum of the civil rights movement was stalling. In early 1960, eager to hurry the pace of change, Black college students in a number of Southern cities began organizing boycotts and staging "sit-ins"—demonstrations in which they sat down at segregated lunch counters and

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[3] Dick Gregory, *Nigger: An Autobiography* (New York: Pocket Books, 1965), 132.

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refused to move until they were either served or arrested. If arrested, they would be followed immediately by additional waves of students, until the jails were clogged and the news media were interested. The first sit-ins were carried out by students in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Nashville, Tennessee, and the strategy quickly spread to other cities. Sit-ins often unleashed considerable violence by white onlookers, but eventually resulted in desegregation of businesses in many towns. Many sit-ins were carried out with the help of CORE, the international Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), and the newly founded Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC—pronounced "snick").

During the 1960 presidential campaign neither Kennedy nor his opponent, Richard M. Nixon, made any significant statements about the civil rights movement. Rev. King actually considered supporting Nixon, who as Vice President was at least a known quantity. Shortly before the election, however, when King was in jail for participating in a sit-in, Kennedy called King's wife Coretta to offer his concern, and his brother Robert F. Kennedy called the judge in charge of King's case to try to expedite his release. King responded by throwing his support behind Kennedy, who was elected two weeks later by a slim margin of barely 100,000 popular votes.

In 1961, Black and white students, many of whom were members of SNCC, set out to integrate the interstate transportation system. A number of them undertook highly publicized "Freedom Rides," sitting in whites-only seats in Greyhound and Trailways buses travelling the interstate highway system through different parts of the South. (The strategy was not original: in 1947, to considerably less fanfare, FOR had sent the first interracial group of freedom riders on a Southern bus tour called "The Journey of Reconciliation.") In the deep South, especially in Alabama, the new freedom riders encountered

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violent resistance, including fire-bombings of their buses and brutal beatings by mobs while police stood by. President Kennedy intervened to assure the protection of the students, and finally the interstate transportation system was integrated.

In 1962 a Black Mississippi college student named James Meredith applied for a transfer to the all-white University of Mississippi. After he was rejected, the NAACP took up the case and obtained a federal court order for his admission. Governor Ross Barnett, a passionate segregationist, refused to comply, and made his refusal a political issue. The federal government sent marshalls to the campus to implement the court order; white supremacists, who had poured into Mississippi from all over the South, began a riot against them; and finally Kennedy ordered that federal troops be sent in. When the smoke cleared, two men were dead, twenty-eight marshalls had been shot and another hundred sixty injured, two hundred rioters had been arrested, and James Meredith had been registered as a student at Ole Miss.

The civil rights protest season of 1963 would become known as the "long hot summer" and would involve protests, beatings, a martyrdom, and the arrests of almost fifteen thousand demonstrators. The summer actually began in the spring, with King's campaign to desegregate Birmingham, Alabama. Birmingham's police commissioner, T. Eugene "Bull" Connor, fought the sit-ins and marches first with arrests and later with police dogs and fire hoses. Alabama's defiant new governor, George C. Wallace (who in his inaugural address had shouted "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!") supported Connor, and shortly created a new confrontation similar to Mississippi's when two qualified Black students requested admission to the University of Ala-

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bama. Wallace, however, a shrewder man than Mississippi's Barnett, was wise enough to avoid violence by accepting a compromise solution from the Kennedys.

The first political assassination of the 1960s occurred on 12 June 1963, the day after the Alabama students were enrolled and just hours after Kennedy announced on national television that he would ask Congress to pass a sweeping civil rights bill. Medgar Evers, the NAACP field secretary who had first taken up James Meredith's case and who was then working to desegregate Mississippi public schools, was shot and killed in front of his home as he returned from work. Black students attending Evers' funeral nearly rioted, and the numbers of those who questioned nonviolence swelled further a year later when Evers' killer, a white supremacist named Byron de la Beckwith, was freed after two mistrials.[4] As Malcolm X commented, "If they make the Ku Klux Klan nonviolent, I'll be nonviolent. If they make the White Citizens Council nonviolent, I'll be nonviolent. But as long as you've got somebody else not being nonviolent, I don't want anybody coming to me talking any nonviolent talk."[5]

The emotional high point of the summer of 1963 came with the March on Washington. A. Philip Randolph, who had run the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) since founding it in 1925, had on the eve of World War II conceived of a mass protest in Washington and had called it off only after Roosevelt agreed to issue an executive order banning discrimination in federal employment. After the violence in Birmingham, Randolph planned a new march to demand accelerated integration of the public schools, pas-

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[4] In 1994, Beckwith was tried again and, faced with new evidence and an integrated jury, was finally convicted and sentenced to life in prison. Ronald Smothers, "White Supremacist Is Convicted Of Slaying Rights Leader in '63," *New York Times*, 6 February 1994.

[5] Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove, 1965), 138.

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sage of the Civil Rights Act and the creation of a fair employment practices bill. Like Roosevelt, Kennedy at first tried to convince Randolph and his deputy, Bayard Rustin, to call off the march, but later reluctantly endorsed it.

The March on Washington took place on 28 August 1963, and was a highly dramatic if not theatrical affair. To its organizers' satisfaction, it drew an unexpectedly large, integrated crowd of over 250,000 people. Singers Josh White, Odetta, Mahalia Jackson, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Peter, Paul, and Mary performed, and the crowd heard a number of speeches, including a fiery one from SNCC's John Lewis, who promised to "splinter the segregated South into a thousand pieces, and put them back together in the image of God and democracy." Martin Luther King, Jr. then delivered his now-famous "I have a dream" speech, which for many was not only the crowning moment of the day, but represented the most perfect expression of the goals of the civil rights movement.

The Washington marchers' elation and hopes for peaceful change were to be short-lived. Two weeks later a bomb tore through a Black church in Birmingham, killing four little girls. Waves of more violence and recriminations followed. Then, three months later the entire nation was staggered by President Kennedy's assassination in Dallas. Some stunned civil rights supporters conjectured—entirely without evidence—that he had been killed for his advocacy of civil rights. President Johnson helped calm such speculation by proclaiming that the best eulogy for Kennedy would be passage of the civil rights bill, which was passed and signed into law the following year. "In death," Taylor Branch has

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written, "the late President gained credit for much of the purpose that King's movement had forced upon him in life."[6]

The Theatre Responds

A period of great changes for the American theatre began in the early 1960s. Broadway, beginning to suffer from rapidly inflating costs and changing public tastes, presented somewhat fewer productions than in years past, though the slowdown did not yet seem permanent. Certainly no truly unhealthy theatre could produce such varied and profitable shows as Lerner and Loew's *Camelot* (1960), Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (1961), Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), and Simon's *Barefoot in the Park* (1963). Off-Broadway continued to grow, presenting innovative and successful plays including Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1960), Genet's *The Balcony* (1960) and *The Blacks* (1961, discussed below), Kenneth H. Brown's *The Brig* (1961), and Arthur Kopit's *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You In The Closet And I'm Feelin' So Sad* (1962). The same motives that had earlier led to the establishment of Off-Broadway—lower costs and increased artistic freedom—now resulted in the creation of Off-off-Broadway, where Joe Cinno's Caffe Cinno and Ellen Stewart's La Mama produced hundreds of plays and spawned dozens of imitators.

Civil rights theatre during these years continued both to keep step with artistic trends and to mirror the changing movement. Thirteen produced plays centered largely on civil rights issues or on the movement itself; another nine (a significant increase) were peripherally related to civil rights concerns.

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[6] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 918.

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As in previous years, the vast majority of civil rights plays were produced in New York. Only two, Frings' *The Long Dream* and Davis' *Purlie Victorious*, were done on Broadway. Almost all the rest, notably Abel's *The Pretender*, Genet's *The Blacks*, Jackson and Hatch's *Fly Blackbird*, and Duberman's *In White America*, were produced Off-Broadway. *Fly Blackbird* was the only show to be both created and premiered outside of New York.

Both Black and white playwrights continued to write civil rights plays, but slightly more produced works were again written by whites than by Blacks. Perhaps, as in the late 1940s, this can be attributed to white playwrights' better access to producing organizations. The large influx of young whites into the movement in this period may also have made civil rights drama more marketable to the young, mostly white Off-Broadway audience. Few established civil rights playwrights contributed much new during this period: some, like Lorraine Hansberry, turned to other issues, while others, like William Branch and Alice Childress, were busy with other endeavors and temporarily stopped writing plays.

In both form and content, many plays of this era showed a marked change from previous years. Realism and the melodramatic view of American race relations were no longer the established standards for civil rights theatre. Blacks were depicted as victims only rarely: they were now college students, writers, civil rights preachers, professors, and fashion models; and even when employed as maids and laborers, they were rarely subservient, but wily, race-conscious and ultimately victorious adversaries of Jim Crow.

The plays' forms changed with their content. Genet's *The Blacks*, White's *Blue Boy in Black*, Moross and Eager's *Gentlemen, Be Seated!* and Harrison's *Pavane for a Dead-*

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Pan Minstrel played with costuming, makeup, and masks in exploring racial identities. Politically charged humor and satire were central components of Jackson and Hatch's *Fly Blackbird*, DeWindt and Santoni's *Raisin' Hell in the Son*, Davis' *Purlie Victorious*, and White's *Blue Boy in Black*. The minstrel show was reborn briefly in *Fly Blackbird* and *Gentlemen, Be Seated!* and Brown's *Kicks & Co.* also used popular music in its short-lived effort both to entertain and instruct. And the concert-style reading disappeared completely, presumably the victim of the excellent print and broadcast news coverage the movement was now receiving.[7]

Reviewers, too, struggled to keep up with the times and to understand the new plays. Some white writers, to be sure, could not comprehend productions that differed too much from conventional Broadway entertainments, but many looked at the new theatre with a broader perspective, paying unprecedented attention to Off-Broadway productions, including civil rights plays. No longer were they quite so likely to dismiss Black-written works simply because their dramaturgy differed from that of conventional European-American plays. At the same time, however, newspapers such as the *Amsterdam News* published fewer reviews of plays by Blacks or about civil rights issues; so paradoxically, even as the mainstream press turned its attention to Black theatre, Black critics' voices became less frequently heard.

Audiences, which as always changed from night to night and were rarely mentioned by newspaper reviewers and other observers, are among the least quanitifiable aspects of the theatre of this period. Many theatre companies are known to have striven actively for

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[7] Local 1199 and Ossie Davis continued to produce their annual Black history galas throughout the 1960s and 1970s, but though they often involved performances, the events were never again an occasion for premieres of new plays.

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integrated audiences, but in most cases audiences continued to be mostly white. The *Amsterdam News*' theatre reviewer Jesse H. White frequently urged that downtown producers consider presenting their shows in Harlem, but his suggestions were almost entirely ignored. So throughout the early 1960s shows suffered because the Black representation in the audience was small.

The Long Dream

The first civil rights play of the new decade was *The Long Dream*, adapted from a novel by Richard Wright. Riding Broadway's *Raisin*-inspired wave of interest in serious dramas about the African-American experience, it was dramatized by Ketti Frings (1910-1981), a successful screenwriter and playwright, and directed by Lloyd Richards. Though it drew some controversy, most of the New York daily reviewers panned it, and it closed after a very brief run.

Wright had begun his novel in 1956, and it was published in 1958.[8] Perhaps because of the well-publicized murder of Emmett Till in 1955, Wright set his work in Mississippi. The novel concerns a successful Black undertaker, Tyree Tucker, and his college-age son, Rex, nicknamed Fishbelly. Tyree has become financially successful by paying bribes and playing Uncle Tom for the local white police. Tyree's cozy relationships with both the police and his son sour, however, when the investigation into a fatal fire in one of his tenements brings his corruption into the open. Eventually Tyree is murdered by the police, and his son, Fishbelly, escapes to the north and takes a plane to Paris.

[8] Richard Wright, *The Long Dream* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958).

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Shortly after the publication of *The Long Dream*, Anthony Quinn wrote to Wright that he loved the book and wanted to star in a stage adaptation of it. (The role Quinn had in mind for himself is not clear: since he often played "ethnic" roles, he may have seen himself as Tyree.) With Wright's permission, Quinn suggested the project to a white writer named Ketti Frings, whose many screenplays included the adaptation of William Inge's *Come Back, Little Sheba*, and whose Broadway adaptation of Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* had won the 1958 Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. Quinn also elicited interest from the director Martin Ritt, who had staged *Set My People Free* in 1948.[9]

The story of Frings' first acquaintance with *The Long Dream* was told very differently by James Baldwin, who claimed to have heard it from a Black playwright:

> She [Ketti Frings] was sitting by this swimming pool, see, and reading this book and she thought: "This would make a perfectly darling play." So she wrote the first few scenes and called out her Negro butler, chauffeur and maid, and read it to them and asked: "Now, isn't that the way you poor, downtrodden colored people feel about things?" "Why, yes, Miss Frings," they answered; and, "I thought so," says the playwright—and so we go on. And on and on.[10]

This anecdote was clearly exaggerated for sardonic effect, if in fact it was true at all. It was indicative, however, of the growing distrust with which many Blacks regarded even well-intentioned whites, and signaled a shift from the days when many Black artists were so thankful for representation on Broadway that they were willing to overlook stereotypical parts.

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[9] Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1968), 363; Joan Cook, "Ketti Frings," *New York Times*, 13 February 1981.

[10] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 184.

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Wright lived in Paris and Frings in Hollywood, so their "script conferences" were necessarily held by mail. Despite the distance, however, the two writers apparently developed a good working relationship. She and Wright agreed that the story's center was in the character of Tyree, whose crises seemed to Frings "to pose a pertinent theme today—that the corrupted is as guilty as the corrupter." Though she made some significant plot changes, after he read the final script, Wright wrote that "I don't think I've ever seen a more faithful adherence to the meaning of a novel in my life. ... I've never seen a clearer or stronger play script on the Negro in America."[11]

Frings' play is in three acts and has roles for eighteen actors.[12] It opens with Tyree's seventeen year-old son Fishbelly returning home from college. Tyree, an intelligent, hard-driving man whose Tomming is merely an act to help him succeed, invites Fishbelly to join in his businesses, noting "this black belt's just full of nuggets," and boasting "he likes me!" when cuffed by the surly police chief to whom he pays graft. While considering the offer, Fishbelly falls in love with a prostitute who works at a dance hall/whorehouse secretly owned by his father and the police chief. The hall eventually burns down, killing her and forty-one other people and starting a relentless investigation which eventually leads to the police chief and to Tyree. The chief appears ready to scapegoat Fishbelly, when Tyree suddenly drops his subservient persona and threatens to

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[11] Judith Crist, "Ketti Frings Crosses Fingers on New Play," *New York Herald Tribune*, 14 February 1960.

[12] Frings' adaptation has never been published. This synopsis is derived from Frank Aston, "'Long Dream' Opens At the Ambassador," *New York World-Telegram*, 18 February 1960; Brooks Atkinson, "The Long Dream," *New York Times*, 18 February 1960; Robert Coleman, "'Long Dream' Sketchy, Rough," *New York Mirror*, 18 February 1960; Walter Kerr, "The Long Dream," *New York Herald Tribune*, 18 February 1960; Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 184-185; and Richard Watts Jr., "A Father and Son in Mississippi," *New York Post*, 18 February 1960.

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reveal the chief's corruption publicly. In a major change from Wright's novel, Fishbelly, torn between loyalty to Tyree and revulsion at his crimes, is killed by the police while trying to defend his father. The play ends with Tyree holding his dead son in his arms and telling the chief "I've been your nigger. I ain't going to be your nigger no more."

Clearly *The Long Dream* contains strong touches of melodrama. As one of its reviewers noted, however, this is not necessarily a negative quality, since "the manifestations of racial conflict in the sovereign State of Mississippi seem inherently melodramatic."[13] Though much of the play is more concerned with psychology and ethics than race, the main factor underlying much of Tyree's behavior is his awareness of race. Furthermore, his decision at the end not "to be your nigger no more" parallels the recent decisions by thousands of Southern Blacks to stop Tomming and to participate in the civil rights struggle.

Cheryl Crawford and Joel Schenker, who had produced *The Rivalry* the previous year, decided to produce *The Long Dream*. Anthony Quinn and Martin Ritt dropped out of the project, however, when the producers refused to meet their salary demands ($3,000 a week for Quinn, slightly less for Ritt).[14] To replace them, the producers hired Lloyd Richards to direct, and put together a good cast, including Lawrence Winters as Tyree, Al Freeman Jr. as Fishbelly, and Gertrude Jeanette as Tyree's wife. Helen Martin and Clarence Williams III also played small parts.[15]

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[13] Richard Watts Jr., "A Father and Son in Mississippi," *New York Post*, 18 February 1960.
[14] Webb, *Richard Wright*, 363.
[15] Brooks Atkinson, "The Long Dream," *New York Times*, 18 February 1960.

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The Long Dream opened at Broadway's Ambassador Theatre on Wednesday, 17 February 1960, and drew poor notices. Most of the reviewers sympathized with the play's purpose, but found little dramatic value in it. Brooks Atkinson, for example, noted in the *Times* that "the intent of the play ... is to comment on race relationships in Mississippi," but that "it seldom comes alive."[16] Walter Kerr, in what was probably the play's most thoughtful review, wrote in the *Herald Tribune* that the play "holds interest in the theater in much the same way that the lively, poster-bold documentaries of the 30's did," but "the severely neat editorializing ... seems a shade plain and detached in the more fleshed-out theater we have become accustomed to."[17] The *Mirror*'s Robert Coleman agreed that "What it has to say is more important than the way it says it."[18] The most positive review came from the *Post*'s Richard Watts Jr., who praised its "moving relationship between the father and the son, two men who would have been an honor to any community, but are forced into a suspiciousness and semi-hostile attitude toward each other by the pressures of white racism."[19] The most damning review was from the *Daily News'* John Chapman, who raged at the "cheap and lascivious attempt to degrade the sweet lady who came to the theatre with me—and to degrade a number of admirable Negro actors as well."[20]

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[16] Ibid.
[17] Walter Kerr, "The Long Dream," *New York Herald Tribune*, 18 February 1960.
[18] Robert Coleman, "'Long Dream' Sketchy, Rough," *New York Mirror*, 18 February 1960.
[19] Richard Watts Jr., "A Father and Son in Mississippi," *New York Post*, 18 February 1960.
[20] John Chapman, "1st Act of 'Long Dream' Shoddy and Lascivious," *Daily News*, 18 February 1960.

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The reactions of some Black theatre professionals were just as scathing. James Baldwin's comments have already been mentioned. Jesse Walker of the *Amsterdam News* was left with "the uneasy feeling that somehow Miss Frings doesn't quite come off with the stark, poetic realism that Mr. Wright intended."[21] Loften Mitchell went further, finding the play's conclusion both preposterous and insulting. In real life, he suggested, the police chief "would have been as dead as the Negro's son. But Miss Frings had her own notions of Negro life. She had read about how wonderfully nonviolent and moralistic Negroes were, and so she wrote a completely fabricated scene."[22] Many Black playwrights, of course, had also written contrived plays, but Frings', produced just at the start of a major new era of the civil rights movement—the Greensboro sit-in campaign was barely two weeks old on opening night—must have been particularly galling. The *Village Voice* spoke to this problem when it called the play "almost harrowingly artificial in every aspect of writing, acting, thinking and staging—the kind of show that is no less painful than angina to the very ones who would wish it most to succeed."[23]

The Long Dream closed after only five performances, on Saturday, 20 February 1960.[24] To my knowledge it has never been revived.

The Pretender

Civil rights theatre returned to the (usually) more-hospitable world of Off-Broadway with *The Pretender*, a comedy-drama by a well-known Jewish drama critic, playwright, and intellectual named Lionel Abel. Though it received weak reviews and apparently had

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[21] Jesse H. Walker, "2 Plays Have Short Broadway Sojourns," *New York Amsterdam News*, 27 February 1960.
[22] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 185.
[23] N.a., "The Long Dream," *Village Voice*, 24 February 1960.
[24] Kronenberger, *Best Plays of 1959-60*, 318-319.

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only a short run, it signaled changes in the content of civil rights drama which would be continued by some later, more successful plays.

Abel, who was born Lionel Abelson in 1910, is both a playwright and a theatre scholar. His early plays, *The Death of Odysseus* (1953) and *Absalom* (1956), were both produced Off-Broadway, and the latter won the 1956 Obie Award. As a critic, he is the author of *Metatheatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963) and the editor of *Moderns on Tragedy* (New York: Fawcett, 1967).[25]

The Pretender, a play in three acts and four scenes, is set entirely in the stylish living room of Jesse Prince, a successful Black novelist from the North who has moved to Mississippi with his wife Marianne.[26] Jesse feels that despite the evils of slavery, the South produced the only true American aristocracy, and he attempts to emulate its code of chivalry as closely as possible. His goal in Mississippi is to fight not only for equality with whites, but for superiority over them. Despite his culture and taste, however, he neglects Marianne, who tries to regain his attention by claiming one night to have been raped by a local white man. Jesse responds by making a speech about honor, donning evening wear, and deciding to organize his friends into a mob to lynch the accused man. Marianne's brother Henry, however, threatens to kill Jesse if he reveals her rape to any-

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[25] "Abel, Lionel," *Contemporary Authors* CD-ROM (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1994).

[26] Only the first act of *The Pretender* has been published: Lionel Abel, *The Pretender*, *Partisan Review* 26:4 (Fall, 1959), 534-551. The synopsis of the remainder of the play is derived from Brooks Atkinson, "Play About Negro Opens at the Cherry Lane," *New York Times*, 25 May 1960; Frank Aston, "'The Pretender' At Cherry Lane," *New York World-Telegram*, 25 May 1960; L. D. K., "Lionel Abel's 'Pretender' A Provocative Comedy," *Women's Wear Daily*, 26 May, 1960; Walter Kerr, "'The Pretender,' a New Play, Staged at the Cherry Lane," *New York Herald Tribune*, 25 May 1960; John McClain, "'Pretender' Falters," *New York Journal-American*, 25 May 1960; Jerry Tallmer, "Theatre: The Pretender," *Village Voice*, 1 June 1960; Richard Watts Jr., "Novelist With a Romantic Dream," *New York Post*, 25 May 1960.

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one; Jesse tell his friends anyway, and Henry attempts to shoot Jesse, though he is a poor shot and only succeeds in grazing his forehead. Jesse argues to his friends (who include a local civil rights organizer) that if America is ever to have racial peace, both whites and Blacks must have some violence in their past to give up. The friends scoff at this argument, dubbing Jesse a "pretender," and suggesting that he leave town. Eventually Marianne admits that she was not raped, only kissed; she and Jesse, reconciled, decide to leave Mississippi together to fulfill a speaking engagement at Middlebury College in Vermont.

The Pretender is a reversal play in the tradition of *Caukey*, *Freight*, and *The Trial*. Unlike these earlier works, however, its focus is more philosophical than emotional, involving a Black leading character who mimicks white racism not only in form, but also in intellectual underpinnings. The play also appears to have been intended as a Shavian comedy of ideas. As in so much of Shaw, most of the characters are intellectuals who are brought together on a flimsy, almost fantastical pretext to debate a single pressing social issue. In *The Pretender*, the major issue up for discussion is American racism, which is shown to include such complex sub-issues as (in the words of one reviewer) "the motives of liberalism and racism; the consequences of too much or too little racial, and even sexual, pride; the attitude of despair at having to fight so hard 'just to have lunch at Woolworth's.'"[27]

The Pretender was produced by Frank Perry and directed by Herbert Machiz. The cast of six was a fine one, including James Earl Jones as Jesse, Royce Wallace as

[27] L. D. K., "Lionel Abel's 'Pretender' A Provocative Comedy," *Women's Wear Daily*, 26 May 1960.

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Marianne, and Roscoe Lee Browne as the civil rights worker. The play opened Tuesday, 24 May 1960, at New York's Cherry Lane Theatre, at 38 Commerce Street in Greenwich Village.[28]

It drew bewildered reviews. The *Amsterdam News*' Jesse Walker found it "as confusing a bit of drama as we've seen in some time," and wondered why the "top drama critics" who had journeyed downtown to see it were unwilling to come to Harlem for superior fare.[29] Walter Kerr asked in the *Herald Tribune* whether Abel intended "a mordant comedy" or a "nervous and awkward melodrama."[30] Brooks Atkinson concluded that unlike Ibsen's "majestic fool[s]," Jesse Prince was "just a fool," but he praised the play for at least avoiding "narcotics, prostitution, knifings, beatings and other staples of the stereotyped Negro melodrama."[31] The *Village Voice*'s Jerry Tallmer found the play provocative but criticized both its outlandish dramatic situation and its unbelievable characters.[32] The reviewer for *Women's Wear Daily* alone hailed *The Pretender* as "a three-act Shavian comedy melodrama," an example of "Faulkner-in-the-Shavian-manner" that takes "a long, clinical look at the racial turmoil in the South."[33] The critics were divided about the acting, directing, and set design, though as a whole they were kinder to the production than to the play.

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[28] Brooks Atkinson, "Play About Negro Opens at the Cherry Lane," *New York Times*, 25 May 1960.
[29] Jesse H. Walker, "Drama Critics Should Come Uptown Sometimes," *New York Amsterdam News*, 28 May 1960.
[30] Walter Kerr, "'The Pretender,' a New Play, Staged at the Cherry Lane," *New York Herald Tribune*, 25 May 1960.
[31] Brooks Atkinson, "Play About Negro Opens at the Cherry Lane," *New York Times*, 25 May 1960.
[32] Jerry Tallmer, "Theatre: The Pretender," *Village Voice*, 1 June 1960.
[33] L. D. K., "Lionel Abel's 'Pretender' A Provocative Comedy," *Women's Wear Daily*, 26 May 1960.

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With these reviews, *The Pretender* must have had trouble attracting an audience. Abel himself later decided that "the play could not have succeeded at the time," because a play is most likely to fail at "when it is most controversial."[34] Though I have found no closing date, *The Pretender* disappeared from the newspaper record shortly after its opening.

Cabaret for Freedom

During the summer of 1960—the precise dates are no longer known—a cabaret-style show was organized as a fund-raiser for the SCLC at the Village Gate Theatre in New York's Greenwich Village. Called *Cabaret for Freedom*, it was organized by Maya Angelou and Godfrey Cambridge.

Angelou was born Marguerite Johnson in 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri. By the time she was twenty-two, she had been a teenaged single mother, a drug abuser, and a "madam." She then turned her life around, becoming first a professional dancer and then an actress, touring Europe and Africa in the Breen production of *Porgy and Bess*. She began to write poems and short stories, and became active in the civil rights movement. In 1960, she became the northern coordinator for the SCLC, and in 1961 she appeared in the original American cast of Genet's *The Blacks*. In the late 1960s and 1970s she had several plays produced, and wrote a notable series of autobiographies, beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1970). In 1992 she was selected as the inaugural poet by U. S. President Bill Clinton.[35]

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[34] Lionel Abel, *The Intellectual Follies: A Memoir of the Literary Venture in New York and Paris* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 235.

[35] Lynn Z. Bloom, "Maya Angelou," in Davis and Harris, *Afro-American Writers After 1955*, 3, 8; Hine, *Black Women in America*, 37; "Angelou, Maya," *Contemporary Authors* CD-ROM (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1994).

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Cambridge was born in 1933 in New York to West Indian immigrants. He acted on stage in the 1956 revival of Peterson's *Take a Giant Step*, and subsequently appeared in *The Blacks* and *Purlie Victorious*. He later starred in the films *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), *Watermelon Man* (1970), and *Come Back, Charleston Blue* (1972). He died of a heart attack in 1976.[36]

Early in 1960, Angelou and Cambridge attended an SCLC event at a Harlem church at which Fred Shuttlesworth, Ralph Abernathy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke.[37] Inspired by King's oration, they immediately decided to use their theatrical skills to produce a show to help the movement. They and the other performers would earn only the union minimum, and all profits would go to the SCLC. Within a few weeks, Angelou and Cambridge had (with the help of the SCLC's Bayard Rustin, Sam Levison, and Jack Murray) received a commitment from Art D'Lugoff for free use of the Village Gate on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday nights. They had also found a director, Hugh Hurd (1925-1995), an actor who, in Angelou's words, "knew everybody and had fabulous organizational skills."[38]

Angelou struggled to write a play, but found that the pressure of trying for "the complexity of *Hamlet* and the pertinence of *A Raisin in the Sun*" was too much for her.

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[36] Williams, *The African American Encyclopedia* 1, 265.

[37] Except where otherwise noted, this discussion of *Cabaret for Freedom* is based on Maya Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman* (New York: Bantam, 1981), 53-71.

[38] In addition to his notable acting and directing career, Hurd was later a founder and active member of the Committee for the Employment of Negro Performers, a group dedicated to expanding the job market and increasing the number of non-stereotypical roles for Black actors. Wolfgang Saxon, "Hugh Hurd, 70, Actor With Role In Early Civil Rights Movement," *New York Times*, 20 July 1995. Hurd and his wife Merlyn were also active in other civil rights organizations, and their daughter Denise (now a student in the CUNY Ph.D. Program in Theatre) was born during a CORE meeting at their apartment. Merlyn Hurd, interview with the author, 4 June 1995.

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At Cambridge's suggestion, she abandoned the script, and the two agreed instead to mount a revue called *Cabaret for Freedom*. It would present dramatic scenes, but would also include songs and comedic sketches.

In addition to Angelou, Cambridge, and Hurd, the cast eventually included the comedian Jay "Flash" Riley, the singer Leontyne Watts, and the white actor Orson Bean. The show began with comedy routines and romantic songs, then took its first serious turn with a scene from Langston Hughes' *Emperor of Haiti*, starring Hurd as Henri Christophe. The first scene of Loften Mitchell's *A Land Beyond the River* was also performed.[39] Later Watts sang "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," and the finale involved the entire cast—and often much of the audience—singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

The premiere of *Cabaret for Freedom* took place before a star-studded audience that included Sidney and Juanita Poitier, Lorraine Hansberry and Robert Nemiroff, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, and several Harlem politicians. The cast received a standing ovation, and it quickly became clear that the show was a hit. It ran from early summer until the end of the summer of 1960, playing before full houses for much of its run. It earned the SCLC a large sum of money, and not only from net profits—some of the actors, feeling both flush and inspired, apparently donated entire paychecks to the organization. According to one source, the SCLC's total profit on the venture was $9,000.[40]

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[39] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 21 October 1994.
[40] Wolfgang Saxon, "Hugh Hurd, 70, Actor With Role In Early Civil Rights Movement," *New York Times*, 20 July 1995.

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Little more is now known of the content of the *Cabaret for Freedom*. I have found no detailed mention of it in newspapers or secondary materials, and Angelou declined to respond to my request for further information. Clearly, however, *Cabaret for Freedom* was another early example of the new willingness to use humor and other popular entertainment techniques in examining civil rights issues on stage.

Fly Blackbird

One of the few successful musicals about the civil rights movement was conceived and developed not in New York, but in Los Angeles—though like almost all significant works of its era it eventually was produced in New York. *Fly Blackbird*, which focused on the youth protests of the period, was created by an interracial team of UCLA professors, C. Bernard Jackson and James V. Hatch. Their work used catchy tunes, humor, and a variety-like structure to accomplish the serious job of deconstructing American racial politics.

Jackson, who is Black, was raised in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, and worked as a sailor and refinery worker before getting an M.A. in music from UCLA. Hatch, who is white, grew up in Oelwein, Iowa, and earned a Ph.D. in Speech and Drama from the University of Iowa.[41] They met in 1960, when Jackson was a composer and pianist in UCLA's dance department, and Hatch was an assistant professor in the theatre department. Their collaboration was inspired in much the same way as Maya Angelou and Godfrey Cambridge's had been. Together Jackson and Hatch attended a civil rights rally at which Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke, and they immediately decided

[41] Nan Rosenthal, n.t., *New York Herald Tribune*, 4 February 1962.

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to work together on a theatre piece about American racism.[42] Hatch wrote the original scenario, but thereafter he and Jackson worked as a team, with Jackson having the final say in matters regarding the Black point of view.[43]

The result was a one-act musical fantasy/satire, called *Fly Blackbird* in homage to Lew Leslie's various *Blackbirds* productions of the 1920s. Set in an abandoned theatre, it concerns a white mountebank who sells a magical elixir to an assertive young Black man, promising that it will engender racial harmony.[44] The mountebank, who calls the young man "boy," sings:

> When I go walkin' with Mister Boy,
> I wear a smile on my face
> because there's nothin' better
> in the whole wide world
> than a colored boy in his place.
> ...
> Now I realize that the colored man
> hasn't always been treated right.
> But I can guarantee equality
> If we separate black from white (689).

The Black man is transformed by the elixir—but only temporarily—into a shuffling, lip-smacking minstrel named "Uncle Tom," the white man's image of a happy Black. He ends his demeaning performance after the chorus' singing of "No More Auction Block" and "O Freedom" reawakens his pride.

The one-act version of *Fly Blackbird* was produced by Jackson and Hatch in September 1960 at a 50-seat Los Angeles theatre aptly named the Shoebox. It was paired

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[42] Nathan Cohen, "The Negro Speaks," *Toronto Daily Star*, 2 May 1961.

[43] James V. Hatch, interview with the author, 25 February 1995. Except where otherwise noted, all information about *Fly Blackbird* is from this interview.

[44] The one-act version of *Fly Blackbird* has never been published. This synopsis is based on the dream sequence in the full-length version, C. Bernard Jackson and James V. Hatch, *Fly Blackbird*, in Hatch, *Black Theatre USA*, 671-694.

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with Sartre's *The Respectful Prostitute*, directed by and starring Bob "Ducky" Decoy, a Black graduate of the Yale School of Drama. *Fly Blackbird*'s small cast consisted mostly of members of a classical singing ensemble Jackson directed (among them a young graphic artist named Camille Billops, whom Hatch later married) and UCLA students. The show played on weekends, and ran for about a month, attracting a liberal, mostly white audience. It stirred up some controversy: many whites were upset with its "uncompromising tone and abrasive humor," while many Blacks worried that it "was rocking the boat of goodwill and brotherhood."[45]

Energized rather than cowed by the controversy, Jackson, Hatch and the cast decided to expand the show to two acts. In this version the mountebank-minstrel story becomes a dream sequence in the second act, while the frame for this sequence becomes the main plot. The new plot centers on the Blackbirds, an integrated group of high school and college age Los Angeles students who are picketing against segregation at a local five and dime. Early in the play Carl Eldridge, a bright young Black man, starts a riot by punching a white heckler who is harassing a young woman named Josie. Carl soon falls in love with Josie, who turns out to be the daughter of a Black actor named "Sweet" William Piper, known for playing stereotyped Black film roles. Piper offers to help Carl find work as a singer if he is willing to moderate his politics, and Carl is sorely tempted. After dreaming, however, that he has become the stereotyped Black character in the mountebank-minstrel story, Carl decides to reject Piper's enticements and continue his protests against segregation. At the play's close, Josie too chooses to be true to her heart and to stay with both Carl and the movement.

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[45] Nathan Cohen, "The Negro Speaks," *Toronto Daily Star*, 2 May 1961.

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The show also features two subplots concerning race. In one, some of the Blackbirds pretend to be stereotypical orderlies in an attempt to free from jail a Japanese American protester who was arrested in the riot. In the other, a Black police officer and a white librarian are both horrified to discover that they have the same Black grandfather.

The show makes frequent references to the history, tactics, and rhetoric of the real civil rights movement. The lyrics to the opening song might have been lifted from a civil rights speech of the day:

> We've waiting two hundred years or more
> But the time is drawing near
> When we will stand up and say
> Today is the day. The time is here.
>
> NOW! Not another hour
> NOW! Not another day
> NOW! Not a minute longer
> But now. Right Now. Right now! (673)

Later, a Blackbird berates Carl for failing to use non-violence in dealing with the hecklers at the demonstration:

> When you started swinging your fist we lost every bit of purpose and dignity we ever had. (*vocal agreement from group*) ... In Atlanta, Georgia, I saw a boy, 17, sit-in at a lunch counter. A heckler took a lighted cigarette and ground it into the kid's neck. He never moved. Never made a sound. He wasn't sitting in there for himself—he wasn't sitting in for the Negro—he was a white boy—but he was sitting there for something more important than one girl, or the personal spleen of Carl Eldridge. ... Going to jail for peaceful picketing. I'm for that, but to be jailed for a street fight—I'm against it (679).

Despite its humor, music, and fantastical sequences, *Fly Blackbird* never lets its audience forget that both it and they are rooted deeply in the real world.

The expanded *Fly Blackbird* broke important new ground in civil rights theatre. It was one of the first shows to use humor rather than melodrama or righteous indignation

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to undercut racist attitudes. It was one of the few—and the only successful one since the late 1940s—to feature original songs. It was also one of the few to be set in a non-Southern environment, and to recognize that American racial problems are not exclusively Black and white, but include other groups such as Japanese Americans and Chicanos. Finally, it was one of the first to center on the organized civil rights movement itself, and it was the very first to recognize the importance of the new student involvement in the movement.

This version of *Fly Blackbird* opened 10 February 1961—almost exactly a year after the beginning of the student sit-in movement—at Los Angeles' Metro Theatre, a 295-seat converted movie house in a largely Black neighborhood. Directed by Jackson and Hatch, it was choreographed by William Pillick (a colleague of Jackson's in the UCLA Dance Department), was designed by Barbara Cooper, and the master carpenter was the young Francis Ford Coppola. The cast included some holdovers from the one-act production, but also added some Equity actors, several of whom, including Jack Crowder, Micki Grant, Thelma Oliver, and George Takei, went on to successful acting careers.

The production earned good reviews. The *Los Angeles Times*' Charles Stinson wrote that it "may make you acutely uncomfortable at times as well as set you whistling at other times," but concluded "it's a salutary experience ... I recommend it highly."[46] *Educational Theatre News* praised it for offering "all of the worthwhile excitement of the Depression theatre, akin to the shock and fervor experienced by the audience of 'One-Third of a Nation,'" though the writer added in rather McCarthyesque terms that "'Fly

[46] Charles Stinson, *Los Angeles Times*, 18 February 1961, quoted in *Fly Blackbird* promotional literature, *Fly Blackbird* clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

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Blackbird' was a purer and richer evening because it was not marred by the grim overtones of Communist-style dialectics."[47] Probably the most thoughtful critique came from the *Toronto Daily Star*'s Nathan Cohen, who praised it as "a bold attempt to state today's Negro struggle for civil and social rights in terms of direct Negro experience ... it is not a play about Negroes for white people, but about Negroes for Negroes, to help the latter see themselves with more clarity and in a more significant context."[48] Similar comments would be made about other shows over the next several years—even, as with *Fly Blackbird*, when one or more of the creators was white.

The most remarkable testimonial for the play, however, came from none other than Richard Nixon, who at the urging of *Fly Blackbird*'s publicist wrote that

> These young people are certainly to be congratulated for the enthusiastic and courageous way they have undertaken the production. ... I would like to convey my admiration to the members of the cast of 'Fly Blackbird' and my very best wishes for their continued success.[49]

When he wrote these words in May 1961, Nixon had just narrowly lost the Presidency, in part because he had been perceived as less sympathetic to the civil rights cause than Kennedy. Always the politician, Nixon immediately began to lay the groundwork for his eventual return to public office, and his comment on *Fly Blackbird* may have been part of that process.

Fly Blackbird was performed on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, ran for about six months, and again attracted—despite Cohen's judgment that it was "about Negroes for

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[47] N.a., *Educational Theatre News*, March 1961, quoted in *Fly Blackbird* promotional literature, *Fly Blackbird* clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.
[48] Nathan Cohen, "The Negro Speaks," *Toronto Daily Star*, 2 May 1961.
[49] Quoted in *Spotlight* (a publicity newsletter for *Fly Blackbird*), July 1961. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York.

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Negroes"—a mostly white, liberal audience. By the time it closed, it had aroused the interest of a New York producer named Helen Jacobson, daughter of the owner of the Sealy mattress company and wife of the head of Pocket Books. Though Jacobson had little producing experience, she convinced Jackson and Hatch to come east to rework their show for the Off-Broadway theatre. To direct she hired Jerome Eskow, whose relationship with Hatch soon turned rancorous: Eskow hired a mostly new cast, replacing all but four of the actors from the Metro production; he and Jacobson booked the 299-seat Mayfair Theatre, which though technically an Off-Broadway house was on West 46th Street, in the heart of the Broadway theatre district and far from what Hatch considered the show's more natural downtown setting; and after insisting on many script changes Eskow demanded—and received—credit for having adapted the show. In the end, Hatch was so disgusted by the experience that he returned to Los Angeles even before *Fly Blackbird*'s New York opening.

The New York version of the show added a number of new scenes and new songs, but the basic outline of the Los Angeles version was largely retained.[50] The setting was moved from southern California to New York City, with much of the action occurring in a park resembling Washington Square. The part of Sweet William Piper was enlarged significantly both to provide a foil for Carl and Josie's romance, and to emphasize Piper's role as a conservative Black authority figure: his opening song, "All in Good Time," contrasts starkly with the Blackbirds' "Now." The New York cast was headed by

[50] The New York version was published in Reardon and Pawley, *The Black Teacher and the Dramatic Arts*, 135-232.

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Avon Long as Sweet William, Robert Guillaume as Carl, and Mary Louise as Josie, and also featured Micki Grant, Thelma Oliver, and Gilbert Price.

The reworked show opened 5 February 1962 and received fairly good reviews. The *New York Times*' Milton Esterow found it "provocative and exhilarating," noting that "it is not written with bitterness," but "seeks to disarm you and to make you think."[51] *Cue* magazine's reviewer observed that "The same idea that made 'Purlie Victorious' so devastatingly funny works again here: segregation, properly understood—and scored—can be the subject of dazzling comedy."[52] Michael Smith, who began his *Village Voice* review with the ironic line "Them darkies has got rhythm in their bones," felt that the show's plot and characterizations were too slender, though "the performances, the direction, the choreography, [and] all aspects of the music are a marvel."[53]

The production played 127 performances, a fairly respectable showing considering that competition from *The Blacks* and *Purlie Victorious* probably reduced its potential audience.[54] It won a 1962 Obie Award.

To Follow the Phoenix

William Branch's next play—and his last on an American subject for a number of years—was *To Follow the Phoenix*. A dramatization of the life of Mary Church Terrell, it demonstrated Branch's continuing interest in African-American history as it reflected upon the present.[55]

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[51] Milton Esterow, "Fly Blackbird," *New York Times*, 6 February 1962.
[52] F. H., "Fly Blackbird," *Cue*, 17 February 1962.
[53] Michael Smith, "Theatre: Fly Blackbird," *Village Voice*, 16 February 1962.
[54] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1961-1962*, 322.
[55] The discussion of *To Follow the Phoenix* is based upon William Branch, interview with the author, 23 September 1994.

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Like many of Branch's earlier works, *To Follow the Phoenix* was written for a specific occasion. At the request of Osceola Archer, a founding member of the Black sorority Delta Sigma Theta, Branch agreed to write a play about Mary Church Terrell for the group's annual convention in Chicago. Branch was interested because, among other things, one of Terrell's grand-neices had been among his classmates at Dunbar High School in Washington. In researching his play, Branch also read Terrell's autobiography, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, and spoke to her daughter, Phyllis Langdon.

Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954) was an activist who worked for Blacks in general and for Black women in particular. One of the first Black women to graduate from Oberlin College, she settled in Washington, D.C., and in 1896 founded the National Association of Colored Women, which established day care centers, kindergartens and classes in child-rearing for working women. She also wrote many articles on lynching, chain gangs, voting rights, and other issues of concern to African Americans. Late in her life, she organized and participated in a sit-in that resulted in a 1953 Supreme Court decision barring racial discrimination in Washington restaurants.[56]

Branch dramatized Terrell's life in a full-length play. To ground the play's historical subject as deeply in contemporary events as possible, he framed it with scenes of modern students considering holding sit-ins in their city. As the discussion progresses, one young woman cites Terrell as a role model, and the scenes of Terrell's life story then unfold. The play ends with the students deciding to go ahead with their protest.

To Follow the Phoenix was produced at Chicago's Civic Opera House for Delta Sigma Theta's annual convention in 1960. It was directed by Osceola Archer, with a cast

[56] Hine, *Black Women in America*, 1157-1159.

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including Ellen Holly as Terrell and Frederick O'Neal as her father, as well as, in smaller roles, Shaunielle Perry (a first cousin of Lorraine Hansberry), Gail Fisher, Harold Scott, and Robert Graham Brown.

According to Branch, the show was considered a success, and for a time there were plans to tour it to major cities where Delta had chapters. For reasons that are no longer clear, the tour never materialized. A scene from the play was, however, included in Alice Childress' *Black Scenes*, and Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee have often included it in their programs of readings. In 1987, at Davis and Dee's request, Branch expanded the scene into a whole new play, *A Letter From Booker T.*, which became the opening episode of the Public Broadcasting System's "Ossie and Ruby" series in the late 1980s.

The Blacks

Virtually all the plays we have examined thus far have been largely or completely in the realistic style, which early in the century America had embraced as its own mode of classicism. One has to go back as far as Marita Bonner's one-act "The Purple Flower" (1928), which was strongly influenced by the German expressionist movement, to find a completely non-representational American play about race relations. Even the Federal Theatre's unproduced living newspapers dealing with civil rights issues—Ward Courtney's *Stars and Bars* (1938) and Abram Hill and John Silvera's *Liberty Deferred* (1938)—used non-realistic techniques only sparingly.

It is not surprising, then, that the first entirely non-representational play about race relations to be produced in post-war America was written by a foreign playwright. Though the political issues addressed by Jean Genet in *The Blacks*—changes in power relationships in the era of the breakdown of European colonial rule in Africa—were not

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American civil rights issues *per se*, they so paralleled American concerns that that play was perceived as relevant to America's civil rights struggle. Both a critical and a popular success, the play set a record with its three-year Off-Broadway run, and influenced a number of later theatrical works.

The story of *The Blacks* begins in the late 1950s, when the disturbed but brilliant French writer Jean Genet created *Les Nègres*, a ritualistic, symbolic examination of the relationship between European colonialists and their African subjects. Written for an all-Black cast, it was first presented on 28 October 1959, at the Théatre de Lutèce in Paris, under the direction of Roger Blin.[57] In 1961 Blin directed the play again in London.[58]

The Blacks is in a single long act. Genet's stage directions call for the play to be enacted on a split-level stage. On the upper level, upstage, is the "Court," five actors wearing stylized white masks and playing characters—Queen, Governor, Judge, Missionary, and Valet—who represent the major classes of white Europeans involved in African colonial rule. The lower level, downstage, is peopled by unmasked actors, most of whom seem to represent various aspects of native colonial society: among them, for example, are a man named Village and women named Virtue and Pardon. Racial tension exists not only on stage, but also between the actors and the audience: though all the actors are Black, the audience is expected to be mostly white—and even if no whites are present, Genet directs that white masks are to be distributed to the audience.

The central conceit of the play is that at every performance one of the native characters is to be ritually sacrificed for the amusement of the Court and of the audience.

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[57] Jean Genet, *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 5.

[58] Hartnoll, *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, 203.

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A man named Samba Graham Diouf is selected, and Village leads him offstage and kills him. After the killing, the Queen leads Diouf back onstage: now bedecked in a white mask and blonde wig, his death has made him honorarily white. The native characters demand that the nightly ritual killings end: they turn on the Court, and symbolically execute its members one by one. As one of the characters earlier said, "I order you to be black to your very veins. Pump black blood through them. Let Africa circulate in them. Let Negroes negrify themselves" (52). In the end, with the Court dead, the native characters are free to live their own lives and to explore their own Blackness.

The structure of *The Blacks* is a metaphor for the clash of European and native cultures in the third world, especially Africa. The nightly ritual killing represents the controlled blend of servitude and terror imposed on colonized countries, and the execution of the Court represents the third world's rejection of European rule, which was actually occurring at the time the play was written. The play is more about power relationships than about any intrinsic racial characteristics *per se*—in the published edition's dedication, Genet asks "But what exactly is a black? First of all, what's his color?"—and indeed the implication seems to be that once Blacks have achieved dominance they may behave every bit as savagely as whites.

The Paris production of *Les Nègres* was so successful, and so clearly relevant to America's racial situation, that arrangements were made to bring the play to the United States. The play was translated into English by Bernard Frechtman and published by Grove Press in 1960. Its New York producers were Sidney Bernstein, George Edgar and Andre Gregory. The director was Gene Frankel, set designs were by Kim Swados, and the music was by Charles Gross. The original cast—an astonishingly fine one—included

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Maya Angelou, Roscoe Lee Browne, Godfrey Cambridge, Charles Gordone, Louis Gossett, James Earl Jones, Helen Martin, and Cicely Tyson.[59] And over the course of the play's long run, most of the best Black actors in New York appeared in it at one time or another.

Frankel said at the time that he tried to make his version of the play more emotional and less intellectual than the Paris production. "I call it a 'hate therapy' play," he said, "in the sense that it activates people to do something about their prejudices." Following Genet's lead, he aimed his production specifically at a white audience, emphasizing what he called "the white sense of guilt toward the Negro." He also stated that he aimed the piece toward a white audience in part because he did not believe that a Black theatre audience then existed.[60]

Even discounting production differences, the American audience must have perceived the play very differently than had the original audiences in Paris. For example, the interracial hatred depicted in the play must have seemed very relevant at a time when Black rage was beginning to vie with pleas for racial tolerance in the public mind. Furthermore, the colonial setting must have given the play a metaphoric quality that it did not have for the French, who at the time were losing many of their African colonies. And the play's use of white masks for the Court must have seemed to many Americans a variation of the minstrel tradition, in which both white and Black entertainers performed in blackface for white audiences. For these reasons, though *The Blacks* was not, strictly speaking, a civil rights play, in America in the early 1960s it was *perceived* as one.

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[59] Kronenberger, *Best Plays of 1960-61*, 361-362.

[60] Stuart W. Little, "A Thought-Provoking Play, 'The Blacks,' Racks 'em In," *New York Herald Tribune*, 3 July 1961.

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The production opened on 4 May 1961 at the East Village's St. Marks Playhouse and immediately became the most discussed Off-Broadway play of the season.[61] The *Times*' Howard Taubman called it "a brilliantly sardonic and lyrical tone poem for the theatre," flowing "as freely as an improvisation, with fantasy, allegory and intimations of reality mingled into a weird, stirring unity."[62] Walter Kerr of the *Herald Tribune* found it "stunning to be reminded of the blunt garish compulsive power of the dramatic impulse at its most primitive level."[63] Louis Kronenberger called it "the first sophisticated play about the racial question to be written with no taboos in its use of words, images or ideas."[64] The *Village Voice* published a series of articles on it: in one, Jerry Tallmer reviewed the play in its own evocative style; in another, Norman Mailer called it "the truest and most explosive play anyone has yet written at all about the turn in the tide, and the guilt and horror in the white man's heart as he turns to face his judge."[65]

The Blacks was a financial as well as a critical success. It played to capacity crowds and did a significant repeat business from people trying to understand the play better. Not surprisingly considering the theatre's downtown location and Frankel's directing (which he consciously aimed at whites), the number of Blacks in the audience was generally small, though what Frankel called "the Negro intelligentsia—the writers and the actors"

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[61] Kronenberger, *Best Plays of 1960-61*, 42.
[62] Howard Taubman, "Play From the French at the St. Marks," *New York Times*, 5 May 1961.
[63] Walter Kerr, *New York Herald Tribune*. Quoted in an advertisement for *The Blacks* in the *New York Times*, 14 May 1961.
[64] Kronenberger, *Best Plays of 1960-61*, 44.
[65] Jerry Tallmer, "Theatre: The Blacks," *Village Voice*, 11 May 1961; Norman Mailer, "Theatre: The Blacks," *Village Voice*, 11 May 1961.

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did attend.[66] Both Black and white artists, however, appear to have been influenced by the play: themes and devices from *The Blacks* turn up in later works as disparate as LeRoi Jones' *The Slave*, Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe's *A Minstrel Show.*

Weathering almost constant changes in its cast, *The Blacks* ran for over three years, becoming the longest-running Off-Broadway drama up to that time.[67] It finally closed 27 September 1964 after 1,408 performances.[68]

Raisin' Hell in the Son

One of the early efforts at civil rights comedy, and probably the only play of the era overtly to satirize a major civil rights drama, was Hal DeWindt and Reni Santoni's *Raisin' Hell in the Son*. It opened in Harlem and was successful enough to be brought downtown to Off-Broadway, but there it died a rapid death.

In 1961 both DeWindt and Santoni were struggling young theatre professionals in New York. DeWindt, who is Black, had directed several summer stock productions; as an actor he had studied with Sidney Poitier, Paul Mann, and Lloyd Richards; and he had appeared in a City Center revival of *Lost in the Stars* and in Louis Peterson's *Entertain a Ghost*. Santoni was a television comedy writer whose work had appeared on the Jack Paar Show; he also performed for a time with a touring company of the comedy troupe *Second City*.[69]

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[66] Stuart W. Little, "A Thought-Provoking Play, 'The Blacks,' Racks 'em In," *New York Herald Tribune*, 3 July 1961.
[67] N.a., "'The Blacks' Begins Its Third Year," *New York Amsterdam News*, 4 May 1963.
[68] Guernsey, *Best Plays of 1964-1965*, 339.
[69] Playbill, *Raisin' Hell in the Son* (1962 Production), Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

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DeWindt and Santoni fashioned *Raisin' Hell in the Son* primarily as a sendup of Hansberry's already-classic *A Raisin in the Sun*, but also as a satire of suburbia, the theatre world, and even contemporary Black humor.[70] The first act is entitled "White Monday," and the second, "Black Tuesday." The plot centers on a Black family named Belafunky (obviously a twist on "Belafonte") that has moved into a white neighborhood, hired a Black butler and a white maid, and gotten caught up in a running gun feud with the rest of the community. The subplots involve a white liberal named Lagree, who befriends the family but turns out to be a vampire, and the son, a would-be actor who studies the Method and is involved with a light-skinned woman named Blanche Le Pass. Upon this slender, silly plot are draped a wide array of topical jokes, primarily about race, civil rights, and the theatre.

The play premiered in Harlem, at the American Community Theatre at 229 Lenox Avenue. It was produced by Maxwell Glanville, directed by DeWindt, and the cast of ten included Reni Santoni. It opened on Friday, 12 May 1961, and played three performances per weekend until Sunday, 4 June 1961.[71]

I have found no reviews of the production, but presumably it was well-received, because it was picked up for an Off-Broadway presentation the following year. Houston Brummitt, a practicing New York psychoanalyst, produced the revival, which was again

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[70] *Raisin' Hell in the Sun* has never been published. This synopsis is derived from Jerry Tallmer, "Theatre: Raisin' Hell in the Son," *Village Voice*, 5 July 1962; Paul Gardner, n.t., *New York Times*, 3 July 1962; and a publicity release for *Raisin' Hell in the Son*, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

[71] If the *Amsterdam News*' promotional item on the play was correct, the play's original title was spelled *Raisin Hell in the Sun* rather than the eventual *Raisin' Hell in the Son*. N.a., "'Raisin Hell In The Sun,' New Production Of ACT," *New York Amsterdam News*, 6 May 1961.

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directed by DeWindt.[72] Aside from Santoni and two other actors, the cast was all new, and included Barbara Ann Teer in what was apparently her first featured role.[73]

The show opened 2 July 1962 in Greenwich Village at the Provincetown Playhouse and drew mostly poor reviews. Paul Gardner wrote in the *Times* that despite a strong cast it was "an embarrassing failure ... as significant as a Bob Hope movie and not so funny." Apparently unaware that the show's first production had actually preceded *Purlie Victorious* (which had closed just weeks before after a successful run), Gardner presumed that DeWindt and Santoni were trying to mimic the "impish style" of Ossie Davis' "winning comedy."[74] The *Voice*'s Jerry Tallmer was kinder: he interpreted *Raisin'* as an exercise in high camp, found it "awfully funny" in places, and mused "How the hell this show is going to make it I cannot imagine, but I think it is. *Purlie Victorious*, meet Bela Lugosi."[75]

Tallmer was wrong. *Raisin' Hell in the Sun* closed after six performances.[76] Perhaps its failure was a demonstration of the adage "tragedy is easy, comedy is hard." But its two productions also demonstrated that both theatre artists and the public (the New York public, at least) were ready to look at race relations and the civil rights struggle through a more complex lens than they had in the past.

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[72] Playbill, *Raisin' Hell in the Son* (1962 Production), Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.
[73] Hewes, *The Best Plays of 1962-1963*, 313; n.a., "Off-Broadway," *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 July 1962.
[74] Paul Gardner, n.t., *New York Times*, 3 July 1962.
[75] Jerry Tallmer, "Theatre: Raisin' Hell in the Son," *Village Voice*, 5 July 1962.
[76] Hewes, *The Best Plays of 1962-1963*, 313.

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Purlie Victorious

A startlingly effective comic view of the struggle against racial oppression appeared on Broadway in the Fall of 1961. In *Purlie Victorious*, Ossie Davis turned farce to the service of the civil rights cause, and the result earned both critical accolades and a respectable season-long run.

Interestingly, *Purlie Victorious* was inspired in part by a Jewish play, and was originally intended to be the farthest thing from a comedy. In 1954, Davis had stage-managed and Ruby Dee had acted in a piece called *The World of Sholom Aleichem*, which its producers hoped would be the first of a series about ethnic minorities. Impressed by his experience, Davis set out to write a Black play for the series, intending it to be a bitter one-act about the hardships faced by Blacks in the South. As he wrote, however, the play transformed itself into a comedy. Davis recalled:

> I think the play was written out of an excess of anger at my own personal situation in white America. There was the Emmett Till case, and all of that stuff, and I sat down to write a very bitter play about the oppression of Black people. In my story, a mother was going to be required to come down to the police station and beat her child because the officers wouldn't let him go otherwise. It worked very well while I was writing it, but when I rewrote it, I became aware that I was really sort of piling it on, and I asked myself, is that really the way it happens? I mean, the whites were so white and so mean, and the Blacks were so Black and so noble, until finally something in me started to laugh, and said "Holy—that's bullshit, Ossie!" So little by little as the rewrites [progressed], other characters, other versions, coming from somewhere out of my subconscious, I guess, began to assert themselves. So finally the bitter play was pushed out of the way, and another play with another circumstance and another set of characters came in and took over.

Davis credits *The World of Sholom Aleichem* with introducing him to the "wise fools" of Chelm, who freed him to write a play about foolish characters, both Black and white. Of these fools, Davis said, "I still appreciate what they did for me. And I'm glad also that

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they released me from the bitterness and the cold agressive vengeance-seeking attitude that I was trying to express in my play." Davis also acknowledged the work of E. Y. Harburg, including *Finian's Rainbow*, for inspiring the many playful turns of language in *Purlie Victorious*.[77]

Purlie Victorious consists of three acts of two scenes each, and is set in the present, in various parts of a plantation in south Georgia.[78] The plot centers on a battle of wits between Purlie Victorious Judson, an energetic young Black civil rights organizer and would-be preacher, and Cap'n Cotchipee, the old-fashioned white plantation owner. Purlie needs $500 to buy a ramshackle local church, Big Bethel, in which he hopes to preach the gospel of integration; and as it happens, Cap'n Cotchipee owes $500 to Purlie's Cousin Bee, who recently passed away. Purlie convinces a teenaged girl named Lutiebelle Jenkins, whom he met during an itinerant preaching journey, to pretend to be Cousin Bee in order to get the money from Cap'n Cotchipee. Various comic situations also arise from Purlie's interactions with his brother Gitlow, whom Cotchipee has appointed "Deputy-For-The-Colored" because he is such an Uncle Tom (442).

After meeting with Cap'n Cotchipee, Lutiebelle reports that the old man grabbed and kissed her. Purlie runs out to seek vengeance, and when he returns claims to have beaten Cotchipee to death with his own bullwhip and taken the $500. Shortly, however, Cotchipee arrives alive and unscathed but distraught that $500 has been stolen. He is accompanied by the Sheriff and his son Charley, who supports integration, and who it turns out has bought Big Bethel for Purlie. When he learns this, Cap'n Cotchipee dies of

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[77] Ossie Davis, interview with the author, 20 December 1994.
[78] Ossie Davis, *Purlie Victorious*, in Patterson, *Black Theater*, 433-497.

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shock, standing up. The play concludes with Purlie's non-sectarian, integrationist funeral oration for Cap'n Cotchipee, whose casket is to be buried as he died, standing up.

The play includes frequent comments on the civil rights movement. One character recalls that Purlie wanted to support the Montgomery bus boycott, but that because "we don't travel by bus in the cotton patch ... Purlie boycotted mules" (446). Purlie says that "somebody beside the Supreme Court has got to make a stand for the everlasting glory of our people," and urges the U. S. to "snatch Freedom from the jaws of force and filibuster" to "make Civil Rights from Civil Wrongs" (451). When Charley Cotchipee does not resist a threat of violence from his father, the old man furiously asks, "You trying to get non-violent with me, boy?" (457). Purlie's final words are: "Now, may the Constitution of the United States go with you; the Declaration of Independence stand by you; the Bill of Rights protect you; and the State Commission Against Discrimination keep the eyes of the law upon you, henceforth, now and forever. Amen" (497).

Even at its most farcical, *Purlie Victorious*' topical comedy and social satire always shine through: the play is clearly in the tradition of the comedy of social issues. In fact, the disguising of the semi-literate Lutiebelle as the college-educated Cousin Bee recalls Shaw's *Pygmalion*, and Purlie's false brag that he has killed Cap'n Cotchipee resembles Christy Mahon's claim to have brained his father in Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. Every character in *Purlie Victorious* is a stereotype except Purlie himself, the catalyst who causes all the commotion; but lurking always behind the comic plot and characterizations is an awareness of the larger world and the civil rights movement, which in this play is ultimately the biggest motivator of all.

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Loften Mitchell reports that when Davis and Dee invited a group of people to their home for a reading of the play, "John Killens rolled on the floor and banged it, laughing. Julian Mayfield laughed and pounded on his chair, almost breaking it in. Sidney Poitier laughed and hit the wall with his fist, and Tina and Lonnie Sattin stomped their feet." Later, Davis showed the play to Howard Da Silva, who had directed and co-produced *The World of Sholom Aleichem*; and Da Silva in turn brought it to Philip Rose, who had co-produced *A Raisin in the Sun*.[79]

Rose immediately decided to produce *Purlie Victorious* on Broadway and hired Da Silva to direct it. The cast included Ossie Davis as Purlie, Ruby Dee as Lutiebelle, Godfrey Cambridge as Gitlow, Helen Martin as Gitlow's wife, Sorrell Booke as Cap'n Cotchipee, Alan Alda as Charley Cotchipee, and Beah Richards as Charley's nurse.[80]

The show opened at the Cort Theatre on Thursday, 28 September 1961, and drew mostly good reviews. Jesse H. Walker found in the *Amsterdam News* that the play paralleled "what comedians Dick Gregory and Nipsey Russell have been presenting on television and in night clubs," and noted that Davis' satirical "knife emerges through rather sharply at times, much to the enjoyment of the Negroes in the audience."[81] The *Times*' Howard Taubman called it a "miracle of uninhibited and jovial speaking out" which retained its humor even as it delivered "a powerful and passionate sermon."[82] Walter Kerr remarked on Davis' "wild, nervy, outrageous fantasy of tone," and marveled

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[79] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 189-190.
[80] Hewes, *The Best Plays of 1961-1962*, 256-257.
[81] Jesse H. Walker, "Ossie Davis' Play Is 'Barrel of Fun,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 October 1961.
[82] Howard Taubman, "Theatre: 'Purlie Victorious' Romps In," *New York Times*, 29 September 1961.

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at the effectiveness with which Davis, instead of deflating the stereotypes of Black and white Southerners, "has blown them up like Macy parade balloons."[83] Norman Nadel reported in the *World-Telegram* that the show's first and third acts were "triumphant" (the second was merely "serviceable") and that "as a satirical weapon, 'Purlie Victorious' is on target every minute."[84] Among the major reviewers, the only negative comment came from the *Post*'s Richard Watts, Jr., who complained that the play "seldom succeeds in being more than a far too intermittently amusing or pertinent minor cartoon on its timely subject."[85]

Like *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Purlie Victorious* became that rarest of activist plays: one that preached not only to the converted, but also to the middle-of-the-roaders most in need of its message. At the same time, however, within the community of civil rights activists the play had an uneven reception. According to Davis,

> ... some of our friends—the most ardent in the struggle, Blacks and whites—felt that this was no time to be laughing at the struggle: this was serious, this was revolution, this was all of that. I agreed totally with them. And even when the play was on board, I remember Ruby and me spending many a day in serious civil rights activities, marching, picketing, and whatever, and then that night coming in, putting on our costume, and going around laughing at the same indignities that we'd fought so hard against during the day.[86]

Controversial it may have been, but *Purlie Victorious* was also influential in its use of comedy as an artistic and political weapon in the civil rights movement. Its success told playwrights and producers that there was an audience for civil rights comedy: later plays

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[83] Walter Kerr, "'Purlie Victorious,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, 29 September 1961.
[84] Norman Nadel, "'Purlie' Bows At the Cort," *New York World-Telegram*, 29 September 1961.
[85] Richard Watts, Jr., "A Comedy of Racial Stereotypes," *New York Post*, 29 September 1961.
[86] Ossie Davis, interview with the author, 20 December 1994.

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such as Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence* were probably affected by it, and it may also have helped create an environment in New York receptive to the importation of *Fly Blackbird*.

In any case, *Purlie Victorious* drew good audiences and was rumored to have been runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize. It closed 13 May 1962, after 261 performances.[87] It was later filmed, with the original cast intact, and released in 1963 as *Gone Are the Days*.[88] In 1964 the Free Southern Theatre toured it through the South, and in 1970 it served as the basis for the Broadway musical *Purlie*, which also had a successful run.[89]

Kicks & Co.

The most financially ambitious civil rights play of the early 1960s was also the era's biggest casualty. *Kicks & Co.*, a full-scale musical by the popular entertainer Oscar Brown, at first seemed destined for a success comparable to that of *A Raisin in the Sun*; but poor planning and a disastrous out-of-town opening destroyed it before it arrived in New York.

Like Lorraine Hansberry, who later became closely connected with *Kicks & Co.*, Brown was a native of Chicago. He made a splash in the music world after his February 1961 night club appearance at the Village Vanguard, his Columbia record album *Sin and Soul*, and an appearance on Dave Garroway's nationally syndicated television program, the "Today" show.[90]

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[87] Hewes, *The Best Plays of 1961-1962*, 10, 256-257..
[88] Mick Martin and Marsha Porter, *Video Movie Guide 1990* (New York: Ballantine, 1989), 432.
[89] Bordman, *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 562.
[90] Stuart W. Little, "Musical To Be Previewed On Garroway's TV Show," *New York Herald Tribune*, 14 June 1961.

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Kicks & Co. was a three-act musical satire concerning the Southern sit-in movement.[91] Its title refers to its leading character, O. D. Kicks, a devil-like white businessman who publishes *Orgy*, a skin magazine resembling *Playboy*. Kicks is considering putting a Black model on the magazine's cover for the first time and tries to lure an attractive but self-centered young Black woman named June Young to pose for his photographers. In the process, he begins hanging around the campus of her school, Freedman University. While there he tries to corrupt the sit-in movement, goading students involved in it to drop their non-violent stance and fight back, and urging a discouraged young composer named Ernest Black to sell out. In the end, Kicks succeeds in convincing June to pose for his magazine. He apparently fails, however, to corrupt Ernest or to ruin the sit-in movement.

Little more is known about the plot, but clearly *Kicks & Co.* was intended in major part as a satire of the role of American business in racial politics and pornography. At least one song, "Turn the Other Cheek," explicitly drew the connection between American racism and lechery. Finally, like *Fly Blackbird*, the show centered on and glorified an interracial group of student civil rights workers.

Brown interested Lorraine Hansberry's husband, Robert Nemiroff, and Burt D'Lugoff in producing *Kicks & Co.* With Hansberry's help, they held a series of small backers' auditions narrated and largely performed by Brown. The prospectus distributed to attendees included testimonials for the show from such luminaries as Eleanor Roosevelt

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[91] *Kicks & Co.* has never been published. This synopsis is derived from Claudia Cassidy, "Of All 'Kicks' Ailments This One Is Lethal: It's Deadly Dull," *Chicago Tribune*, 12 October 1961; Hewes, *The Best Plays of 1961-1962*, 335-336; and Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 190.

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and Martin Luther King. Investments poured in, coming both from regular Broadway backers and from such unusual sources as university campuses and Chicago's South Side.

By mid-March 1961 the show had made some 90% of its then-vast $400,000 budget.[92] Then, on Tuesday, 28 March 1961, Dave Garroway gave Brown a full two hours of the "Today" show to repeat his backers' audition. This appearance was a great success, convincing investors from around the country to make up the last $40,000. By mid-June, the show had approximately 235 backers from at least 20 states, giving it one of the largest and most complicated lineups of investors for a Broadway show up to that time. Many small investors risked just $250, or 1/32 of 1%; the largest single investment was for $100,000. Many people prominent in civil rights theatre invested small amounts in the show, including Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee ($250), Sidney Poitier ($250), and Lorraine Hansberry ($750).[93]

With Vinnette Carroll directing, the show's enormous interracial cast of 45, headed by Burgess Meredith as Kicks and Lonnie Sattin as Ernest Black, began rehearsals 20 August 1961. The premiere was scheduled for 7 October at Chicago's 5,000-seat Arie Crown Theatre, on 23 Street and South Shore Drive; a Broadway opening was planned for sometime in November.[94]

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[92] Stuart W. Little, "Musical To Be Previewed On Garroway's TV Show," *New York Herald Tribune*, 14 June 1961.

[93] N.a., "235 Investors in 'Kicks & Co.," unidentified newspaper (probably *Variety*), 14 June 1961. From "Kicks & Co." clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

[94] N.a., "Open N.Y. Party Bureau To Pre-Sell 'Kicks & Co.," unidentified newspaper (probably *Variety*), July or early August 1961. From "Kicks & Co." clippings file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

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Soon, however, rumors began circulating that *Kicks & Co.* was in trouble. The Arie Crown Theatre was far too large for the show, and the performers had to be miked—using then-primitive amplification technology—to be heard. Then, just days before the opening, Vinnette Carroll was replaced as director by Lorraine Hansberry, whose directing experience was limited at best. The opening was delayed several days, and the show finally premiered on Tuesday, 11 October 1961.[95]

It drew ghastly reviews. The *Chicago Tribune*'s Claudia Cassidy, for example, decried its "clumsy book and awkward staging," and denounced the overall effect as "a poor excuse for a show ... dwarfed by the big theater and blasted into a forest of microphones." She felt that *Playboy* was already so campy that satirizing it was impossible, and that "ugly as the manifestations of segregation can be, it proves nothing theater-wise to label those who practice it as stupid, filthy and lecherous." Even the star, Burgess Meredith, she considered "painfully miscast ... as a kind of sulphuric leprechaun."[96]

The Chicago audiences apparently listened to their reviewers: *Kicks & Co.* closed on 14 October, after only four performances.[97] Brown, Nemiroff, and D'Lugoff, stunned but still game, quickly organized a last-ditch effort to raise more money to bring the show to New York. The Shuberts and David Merrick loaned them the Imperial Theatre, and on the afternoon of Thursday, 19 October, remnants of the cast, accompanied by a piano and drum, gave one last performance for potential backers. Before the performance, Hansberry explained to the crowd, which included many prominent producers and

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[95] Sam Zolotow, "'Kicks & Co.' Ends Tour in Chicago," *New York Times*, 16 October 1961.

[96] Claudia Cassidy, "Of All 'Kicks' Ailments This One Is Lethal: It's Deadly Dull," *Chicago Tribune*, 12 October 1961.

[97] Hewes, *The Best Plays of 1961-1962*, 335-336.

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performers, that the Chicago failure was the fault of the producers, not the show: "Nobody could hear anything" in the Arie Crown Theatre, she said, and "You can't try out a show in Chicago. They treat you like an opening." Louis Calta, who covered the run-through for the *Times*, commented that "if the reaction of the auditors, composed of producers, fellow artists, representatives of music publishing concerns and agents, indicated anything then 'Kicks & Co.' should be a 'shoo-in' for New York."[98]

But too much damage had been done in Chicago. Hansberry herself acknowledged that the bad notices ruined any chance of a New York booking.[99] "Tongues wagged," Loften Mitchell later wrote, "and the cocktail critics criticized, but the play died."[100] And whether coincidentally or not, it would be years before other musical comedies with civil rights subjects raised nearly so much capital.

The Blue Boy in Black

Perhaps the earliest play to poke fun at both racism and homophobia was *The Blue Boy in Black*, an early work by the gay writer Edmund White. Like Kenneth White's earlier one-act *Freight* and LeRoi Jones' later *The Toilet*, *The Blue Boy in Black* included an interracial homosexual sex scene; unlike them, however, it treated its subject matter satirically.

A prolific writer, Edmund White (b. 1940) was born in Ohio and attended the University of Michigan, where he earned his B.A. in 1962. He came to New York shortly thereafter, and now splits his time between New York and Paris. His fiction

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[98] Louis Calta, "'Kicks & Co.' Tries Backers Audition," *New York Times*, 20 October 1961.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 191.

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includes *Forgetting Elena* (1973) and the now-classic gay coming-of-age novel *A Boy's Own Story* (1982); his nonfiction includes *The Joy of Gay Sex* (1977), *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* (1980) and *Genet* (1993). He has taught writing at Johns Hopkins, Columbia, Yale, and George Mason Universities. Carter Wilson wrote of him in the *Nation* that "he is a gifted writer who has staked himself a distinguished claim in the rocky territory called desire."[101]

The Blue Boy in Black is White's only produced play.[102] In two acts and a wide range of dramatic styles, it concerns a shrewd Black domestic named Joan who schemes to take over the home of her white employers, Jim and Isabel Lawland. When Joan first appears, she is dressed in a maid's uniform, speaks in an exaggerated minstrel-like Black dialect, and is filing Isabel's toenails. Her scheme begins as she gives Jim, who is a novelist, ideas for the cheap thrillers he churns out; eventually she actually writes them for him, which makes him entirely dependent upon her. Feigning loyalty to Isabel, she hints that Jim is a homosexual, and arranges for Isabel to discover Jim in the arms of the Black gardener (dressed as a Roman soldier), after which Isabel leaves Jim in a fury. Jim marries Joan, and in time Joan publishes a successful novel under her own name. The final scene is a cocktail party in her honor, at which she chats with invisible guests while dressed in red satin and a Marie Antoinette wig. By this time it has become clear that Joan suffers a disabling psychological fixation on Gainsborough's painting "The Blue

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[101] "White, Edmund," *Contemporary Authors* CD-ROM (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1994).

[102] *Blue Boy in Black* has never been published. This synopsis is derived from Michael Smith, "Theatre: The Blue Boy in Black," *Village Voice*, 9 May 1963; Howard Taubman, "'Blue Boy in Black,' by Edmund White, Here," *New York Times*, 1 May 1963; n.a., "Viper on the Make," *Cue*, 11 May 1963; and n.a., "Off Broadway," *New Yorker*, 11 May 1963.

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Boy." In the end, Jim returns to Isabel, and Joan relapses into her original minstrel dialect in a final soliloquy of loneliness and despair.

The symbolism of the title and Joan's Gainsborough fixation is not entirely clear—the play's original reviewers were baffled by it—but it seems to involve the longing of underclass Blacks for social status. Clearly Joan is intended to symbolize the subservient position of Blacks in America, and Jim and Isabel to represent white society.[103] In addition, camp is used throughout as a comic device for exposing silly attitudes toward both race and sexual orientation.

Despite the play's up-to-date stylistic devices, it must be noted that the basic story line is a return to the old pattern of Blacks as victims. Joan may be a talented manipulator, but she remains flawed, unable to succeed in her quest to rule the Lawland family without plummeting into insanity.

The Blue Boy in Black was produced and directed by Ashley Feinstein, with a cast of seven that included Cicely Tyson as Joan, John Hillerman as Jim, Alice Drummond as Isabel, and Billy Dee Williams as the gardener. It opened 30 April 1963 at the Masque Theatre, at 442 West 42 Street in New York, and played for three weeks, closing after 23 performances.[104]

Reviewers were of divided feelings about *The Blue Boy in Black*, finding as much in it to censure as to commend. Most praised the cast, but some disapproved of Feinstein's directing, and many questioned the script's unevenness and exaggerated "literary" quality and considered it a victory of style over substance. Howard Taubman wrote in the *Times*

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[103] One wonders whether White intended Joan and Jim as satires of Lorraine Hansberry and Robert Nemiroff. If so, they are crude and tasteless ones.

[104] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1962-1963*, 335.

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that some moments were reminiscent of *Purlie Victorious*, others of *The Blacks*, and still others "smack of the self-satisfaction of a young writer who doesn't know when to let up on an amusing idea."[105] The *Voice*'s Michael Smith suggested that the play's style began well as "American Ionesco," but dragged on as "Genet at his worst."[106] The *New Yorker*'s anonymous reviewer felt that "Mr. White cannot handle smoothly enough its switches in style from satire to straight comedy to fantasy to serious drama," and concluded that "the play is so patently a writer's daydream rather than a writer's creation."[107]

Gentlemen, Be Seated!

One show produced in New York in late 1963 tried to blend entertainment and instruction, musical comedy and opera, minstrel techniques and civil rights values. Most reviewers felt, however, that *Gentlemen, Be Seated!*, by Jerome Moross and Edward Eager, was an interesting idea that accomplished few, if any of its goals. Yet the show was important as one of the earliest modern attempts to salvage the minstrel show—America's only indigenous theatrical form—from its racist roots.

Minstrelsy was born in 1842 in New York and quickly spread throughout the country. A populist variety entertainment, it featured a semicircle of seated performers, of whom the smooth-talking center man (Mr. Interlocutor) and the musical "end men" (Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones) were running stock characters. After the performers first paraded onto the stage, Mr. Interlocutor would intone "Gentlemen, be seated" and the

[105] Howard Taubman, "'Blue Boy in Black,' by Edmund White, Here," *New York Times*, 1 May 1963.
[106] Michael Smith, "Theatre: The Blue Boy in Black," *Village Voice*, 9 May 1963.
[107] N.a., "Off Broadway," *New Yorker*, 11 May 1963.

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entertainment would commence. The performers normally wore black suits and white gloves, and were always portrayed as being Black: the first minstrels were whites in blackface; after the Civil War, some troupes of Black minstrels appeared, but even they normally performed in blackface. The form began to dwindle in popularity in the late nineteenth century, and by the middle of the twentieth century it was largely discredited as archaic and racist.

About 1955, however, Jerome Moross (b. 1913), a New York composer and writer embroiled in a self-described "love affair with this country" decided that minstrelsy could provide an effective format for depicting the origins of the civil war. A member of the radical Theatre Union in the 1930s, Moross had written a dozen produced musicals and ballets, and had composed several film and television scores, including the theme for the TV series "Wagon Train." He convinced the eminent Broadway producer Roger Stevens, whose work included *A View from the Bridge* and *West Side Story*, to commission him to write the show.[108] Moross collaborated on *Gentlemen, Be Seated!*, as it was called, with Edward Eager (1911-1964), a playwright, lyricist and author of children's books.[109] In 1958, Norman Corwin, whose *The Rivalry* was shortly to be produced, also apparently was called in to help with the script.[110]

Gentlemen, Be Seated! opens in classic minstrel style, and closes similarly, with a walkaround.[111] The body of the piece is a pastiche of half a dozen dialogues (mostly

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[108] Richard F. Shepard, "The Civil War With Tambo and Mr. Bones," *New York Times*, 6 October 1963.

[109] "Eager, Edward McMaken," *Contemporary Authors* CD-ROM (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1994).

[110] N.a., "Gentlemen Be Seated!" *New York Times*, 6 June 1958.

[111] Although the Library of Congress lists *Gentlemen, Be Seated!* as having been published (New York: L. Kroll Agency, 1964), I have been unable to locate a copy.

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comic) and 28 musical numbers, all built around the origins and history of the Civil War, and with a special emphasis on the issue of slavery. Most of the jokes were culled from real joke-books published during the Civil War. The songs have titles like "In the Sunny Old South," "Freedom Train," "O, the Picnic at Manassas," "This Isn't a Gentlemen's War Anymore," "From Atlanta to the Sea," and "This Was the War, What Did It Do for Me and You?" Clearly the central conceit of *Gentlemen, Be Seated!* was to drop minstrelsy's traditional racism while retaining its considerable entertainment value.

Stevens tried to line up backers for *Gentlemen, Be Seated!* as early as 1958, but could find none, and eventually let his options on the work expire. Moross and Eager continued to shop the work around, and in 1963 they finally managed to interest the New York City Opera and the then-new Ford Foundation.[112] Robert Turoff was assigned to direct and Emerson Buckley to conduct; Dick Shawn as Mr. Interlocutor, Avon Long as Mr. Tambo, and Charles Atkins as Mr. Bones headed the cast of twenty-six.[113] Moross was careful to point out to a reporter that though the star was white, the end men were Black, the chorus was integrated, and no blackface was used. "Negroes don't object to minstrel shows," he said, "they object to whites doing blackface minstrels." He also asserted that though the show had been started eight years earlier, it included "a couple

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This synopsis is derived from Richard F. Shepard, "The Civil War With Tambo and Mr. Bones," *New York Times*, 6 October 1963.; Harold C. Schonberg, "Opera: 'Gentlemen' at the City Center," *New York Times*, 11 October 1963; Perdita Duncan, "Gentlemen, Be Seated!" *New York Amsterdam News*, 19 October 1963; and Hewes, *Best Plays of 1963-1964*, 348.

[112] Richard F. Shepard, "The Civil War With Tambo and Mr. Bones," *New York Times*, 6 October 1963.

[113] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1963-1964*, 348.

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of pieces that are very timely, as if you're reading the Birmingham headlines."[114]

Gentlemen, Be Seated! opened Thursday, 10 October 1963 at New York's City Center.[115] Because it was billed as an opera and was performed by a primarily musical organization, many newspapers assigned music critics to review it, which probably did not help its reception at all. The *Times*' Harold C. Schonberg liked the opening numbers, but ultimately found the show "nothing more or less than a slick musical comedy ... at basis banal, as literature and as music. And its smattering of social comment—it is easy to see where the authors' sympathies lie—fails to strike true against the banality of the treatment." He concluded by suggesting that the New York City Opera produce an authentic old-time minstrel show, which he expected (with more truth than he was aware) "probably would tear the town apart."[116] The *Amsterdam News*' Perdita Duncan was kinder, perhaps because "so many debuts [of Negro artists] were made that night that it was like a coming out party." She praised the performers and ventured that the show "might do well on Broadway," though only "after considerable rewriting."[117]

Far from making it to Broadway, *Gentlemen, Be Seated!* barely made it to the weekend, closing after just three performances.[118] Some activists briefly considered picketing it, but it closed before they had the opportunity.[119] But though the show failed,

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[114] Richard F. Shepard, "The Civil War With Tambo and Mr. Bones," *New York Times*, 6 October 1963.
[115] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1963-1964*, 348.
[116] Harold C. Schonberg, "Opera: 'Gentlemen' at the City Center," *New York Times*, 11 October 1963.
[117] Perdita Duncan, "Gentlemen, Be Seated!" *New York Amsterdam News*, 19 October 1963.
[118] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1963-1964*, 348.
[119] Jesse H. Walker, "Theatricals," *New York Amsterdam News*, 16 November 1963. Walker also implies that the show ran in repertory until early November.

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it presaged a flurry of others—Paul Carter Harrison's *Pavane for a Dead-Pan Minstrel*, Mike Todd Jr.'s *America Be Seated*, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe's *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel*—based in varying degrees upon the minstrel tradition.

What made minstrelsy suddenly so popular in civil rights oriented theatre in the early to mid-1960s? The national resurgence of interest in American history and folk culture must have had something to do with it. In addition, minstrelsy had for over a century provided America with much of its vocabulary—a nasty vocabulary in many ways, but nevertheless a rich and flexible one—for considering racial issues. In an era when the traditions of segregation and racial inequality were being exposed as outmoded shams, a timeworn theatrical form centered on racial play-acting must have looked very attractive to theatre artists interested in new ways of considering race in this country.

In White America

Smaller in scale, more conventional in its approach to its historical theme, and ultimately far more successful than *Gentlemen, Be Seated!* was Martin Duberman's *In White America*. Subtitled "A Documentary Play," *In White America* summarized the whole history of African Americans by using carefully selected historical documents as its text. Despite modest production requirements—a simple set, half a dozen actors and a folksinger—receptive critics and audiences made it a major Off-Broadway and touring success.

Martin Duberman (b. 1930) is a native New Yorker, a Harvard-trained historian as well as a playwright. He is the author or editor of many scholarly books on American history, including three on abolitionism, *Charles Francis Adams* (1961), *The Antislavery*

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Vanguard (1965), and *James Russell Lowell* (1966). His civil rights activism later modulated into gay rights advocacy; he "came out" with his book *Black Mountain* (1972), and his most recent book, *Stonewall* (1994), recounts the history of New York's Stonewall riots. Many of his plays, including *In White America*, *Metaphors* (1968), *The Colonial Dudes* (1969), *The Memory Bank* (1970), and *Elagabalus* (1973), merge his historical, civil rights, and gay rights concerns. In the early 1960s he taught history at Yale and Princeton; he now teaches at Lehman College and the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York.[120]

In White America was Duberman's first play.[121] A production note in the acting edition specifies that "the production should be mounted in the simplest possible manner, with a minimum of props," and that the cast should consist of "3 Negro and 3 white actors, 2 men and 1 woman in each case," as well as a "banjo-guitarist" (8). The actors take turns narrating and enacting scenes drawn from the history of Blacks in America, in virtually all cases reciting verbatim from historical documents. Over three dozen folk songs (mostly spirituals) are used as olios between sequences.

The first act begins with a series of quotations culled from current newspapers and expressing a variety of opinions on America's race problems. It proceeds to discuss the horrors of the slave trade, the institutionalization of slavery at the Constitutional Convention, the lives of slaves on Southern plantations, the uprisings led by Nat Turner and John Brown, the valor of Black troops in the Civil War, and the hope with which

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[120] "Duberman, Martin," *Contemporary Authors* CD-ROM (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1994).

[121] Martin Duberman, *In White America: A Documentary Play* (New York: Samuel French, 1964).

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Blacks welcomed the Emancipation Proclamation. Few of the passages quoted are well-known, and many are startling, such as Thomas Jefferson's racist comments on the incapacity of Blacks to coexist with whites under the same government, or Frederick Law Olmstead's recollection of a conversation about freedom with a Louisiana house slave.

The second act begins with Reconstruction, and touches on the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the near-institutionalization of lynching, and the efforts of leaders like Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Walter White to influence public policy and to offer African Americans hope for a better future. In a particularly striking passage, South Carolina's Senator Ben Tillman speaks in favor of lynching before the U. S. Senate: the rape of a white woman by a Black man, he says, is "the blackest crime in all the category of crimes," a sin "against the Holy Ghost" that fully justifies white men's urge to "kill! kill! kill!" (50-51).

The post-1954 civil rights movement is treated only briefly, but as the play approaches its conclusion it inspires a rousing call to action:

Negro woman	We are writing our declaration of independence in shoe leather instead of ink.
White man	We're through with tokenism and gradualism and see-how-far-you've-comeism.
White man	We're through with we've-done-more-for-your-people-than-anyone-elseism.
Negro woman	We can't wait any longer.
Negro man	*Now* is the time (66-67).

The play ends with a white actor reading the Preamble to the U. S. Constitution while a Black actress sings "Oh, Freedom" (67).

In White America owes much to the fervent agit-prop plays of the 1930s, the reportorial Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre, and the intimate unstaged

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"newsreel" plays of Ossie Davis and William Branch. Both its title and its content make clear that it is intended to help audience members—whatever their ethnic background—see American history through the eyes of African Americans. Its political message is strongly—indeed, almost myopically for 1963—pro-integration: among its pantheon of Black leaders only Marcus Garvey, not Elijah Muhammad or Malcolm X, speaks for Black separatism.

In White America was produced Off-Broadway by Judith Rutherford Marechal. She assembled sixteen backers who invested $12,000 to produce the show; a cash reserve of $3,000 from her previous production, *Call Me By My Rightful Name*, brought the total capitalization to $15,000.[122] The director was Harold Stone, and the musical direction was by Oscar Brand, who since 1945 had hosted—and continues to host—the radio program "The Folk Song Festival" on New York's public radio station WNYC. The cast included Gloria Foster and Moses Gunn.[123]

The production opened 31 October 1963 at the Sheridan Square Playhouse and drew almost universally good notices.[124] The *Amsterdam News* reported that with just one exception, all the New York daily newspapers and weekly magazines gave the show rave reviews."[125] The *Times*' Howard Taubman, for example, praised the directing and acting,

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[122] Charles L. Mee, Jr., "Off-Broadway: A Limited Engagement; An Interview With Judith R. Marechal," *Tulane Drama Review* 10 (Fall, 1965), 78-79.

[123] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1963-1964*, 350-351.

[124] The production "won rave reviews from all but one Metropolitan paper and the weekly magazines (Cue and the New Yorker) add to the critical kudos." N.a., "Earlier Sat. Show For 'In White America,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 16 November 1963.

[125] N.a., "Earlier Sat. Show For 'In White America,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 16 November 1963.

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and called the production "a flaming editorial," an effective reminder "that there is no hiding place down here from an issue that affects our politics, economy and morality."[126]

Armed with a timely theme and strong reviews, *In White America* settled in for a long run. It played 493 performances, closing 3 January 1965; it then toured colleges for several months—"probably the longest tour that any Off-Broadway kind of production has gone on," according to Marechal—and in the Spring returned to New York, where it ran another month, from mid-May to mid-June.[127] In Summer 1964 the Free Southern Theatre toured a version of the play—with an added passage about Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner—through the deep South.[128] In late 1964 a production featuring the expatriate Gordon Heath (who had starred in the original production of *Deep Are the Roots*) also drew good notices in both London and Paris.[129] In 1970 the show was filmed for television.[130]

Despite *In White America*'s notable box-office success, Marechal maintained that Off-Broadway economics prevented the show from turning a profit. It never did better than to break even, she said, and ultimately was lucky to repay the investors their initial $12,000 investment.[131] It did, however, accomplish an artistic goal at which many civil

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[126] Howard Taubman, "'In White America' Has Premiere in 'Village,'" *New York Times*, 1 November 1963.
[127] Guernsey, *Best Plays of 1964-1965*, 338; Mee, "Off-Broadway: A Limited Engagement," 79.
[128] N.a., "Dialogue: The Free Southern Theatre," *Tulane Drama Review* 9:4 (Summer 1965), 63-69.
[129] N.a., "'White America' Run Extended," *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 December 1964; Guernsey, *Best Plays of 1964-1965*, 89, 96.
[130] "Duberman, Martin," *Contemporary Authors* CD-ROM (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1994).
[131] Mee, "Off-Broadway: A Limited Engagement," 79.

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rights plays since the 1940s had aimed: it found a wide audience for a documentary-style presentation of the struggles of African Americans for liberation.

In White America was also the last major civil rights play of the 1945-1965 era to be written by a white American. The rise in the mid- to late-1960s of the Black separatist movement may have made civil rights plays by white playwrights seem irrelevent. Furthermore, the escalation of the Vietnam war and the ensuing protests distracted many white writers from civil rights concerns.

Pavane for a Dead-Pan Minstrel

American minstrelsy provided the format for an early work by the prominent Black playwright, screenwriter and educator Paul Carter Harrison (b. 1936). More radical both politically and artistically than its predecessor *Gentlemen, Be Seated!*, Harrison's *Pavane for a Dead-Pan Minstrel* used the lens of minstrelsy to focus attention on modern problems of race relations.

The play depicts the conclusion of a seduction contest between a Black man named Mr. Brown and a white man named Mr. Smith.[132] To break their long-standing tie, the two exchange racial identities by whiting and blacking up, respectively, and attempting to seduce a young white woman named Polly. By adopting Black dance techniques, Smith wins the contest, and Brown, mimicking the traditional white response to the defilement of a white woman, kills Smith.

[132] According to Steven R. Carter, *Pavane for a Dead-Pan Minstrel* was published in 1966 in the Dutch magazine *Podium*, but I have been unable to obtain this issue. This synopsis is derived from Steven R. Carter, "Paul Carter Harrison," *Afro-American Writers After 1955*, 135.

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The play combines the standard dramatic device of race reversal with the newly revived format of the minstrel show. It is among the first to acknowledge without melodrama the powerful and complex roles of sex and sexuality in American race relations. And like Farrakhan's *The Trial* and Genet's *The Blacks*, it prefigures much of the theatre of the Black Power movement by having the Black character kill the masked white character, both as a sign of his anger and as a symbolic refusal to continue to be victimized by him.

Pavane for a Dead-Pan Minstrel was produced at some point in 1963 by the Actors Studio in New York.[133]

Peripheral Works

The Cool World, an adaptation by Warren Miller (1921-1966) and Robert Rossen (1908-1966) of Miller's 1959 novel about Harlem gangs, appeared on Broadway in February 1960. Essentially a non-musical answer to *West Side Story*, it was, according to the *Times*' Arthur Gelb, "enough to scare hell out of all Northern armchair liberals who wax indignant over the integration issue in the South but who are blind and deaf to what goes on at home."[134] Poor reviews closed it after only two performances, despite a remarkable cast that included Billy Dee Williams, Alice Childress, Roscoe Lee Browne, Hilda Simms, and Maxwell Glanville.[135] The *Village Voice* later decided that the show's "chaotic, destructive pointlessness" had made it a "disservice" to the Black race, and

[133] Carter, "Paul Carter Harrison," 135. The Actors Studio may have records of the production, but when I contacted them in spring 1995 their archives were inaccessible, locked away in a Manhattan storage facility.
[134] Arthur Gelb, "New Drama Depicts a Juvenile Jungle," *New York Times*, 23 February 1960.
[135] Kronenberger, *Best Plays of 1959-1960*, 320-321.

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feared that its failure would cloud interest in further theatrical representations of "the smothering environment in which most Negroes are trapped."[136]

Semi-Detached, by the Canadian playwright and novelist Patricia Joudry (b. 1921), made almost as brief an appearance on Broadway in March 1960.[137] It deals with the relationship between an English-speaking and a French-speaking family who share a two-family home in Canada. Their differences at first seem harmless and amusing, but in the end prove tragic: their two teenaged sons sail away together in a homemade boat to escape their parents' prejudices, and one of them is drowned. The play was produced by Philip Rose, co-producer of *A Raisin in the Sun*, and was clearly intended to make a comparable statement about ethnic bigotry. It was a failure, however, due both to its comparative lack of relevance to America and to what Brooks Atkinson called the "commonplace" character of its writing.[138]

A month later another musical about a romance between people of different races—as usual, neither of them Black—appeared on Broadway. *Christine*, an adaptation by Pearl S. Buck and Charles K. Peck, Jr. of Hilda Wernher's *My Indian Family*, cast Maureen O'Hara as an Irish grandmother who travels to India and falls in love with her widowed Indian son-in-law. Brooks Atkinson thought it well-acted and well-produced, but consid-

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[136] M. S., "Theatre Post-Mortem: The Cool World," *Village Voice*, 2 March 1960.
[137] This is *not* the play of the same name by David Turner in which Laurence Olivier starred in London in 1962. See T. C. Worsley, "London Sees Olivier in 'Semi-Detached,'" *New York Times*, 6 December 1962.
[138] Brooks Atkinson, "Drama on Prejudice at the Martin Beck," *New York Times*, 11 March 1960.

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ered it basically a brassy Broadway musical with exotic trappings.[139] It lasted twelve performances.[140]

The subject of Black-white romance was finally confronted squarely in *Call Me By My Rightful Name*, a play by Michael Shurtleff (b. 1930) suggested by S. F. Pfoutz' novel *The Whipping Boy*.[141] A love-triangle involving a Black man, a white man, and a white woman, *Call Me By My Rightful Name* was among the first plays to present interracial sex as a valid adult option, albeit one weighted with enormous amounts of societal baggage. Despite its race-conscious casting, however, Shurtleff himself intended the play to be basically about love and honesty, not race or civil rights.[142] A superb cast including Alvin Ailey, Robert Duvall, and Joan Hackett performed the piece Off-Broadway at the One Sheridan Square Theatre for four months beginning 31 January 1961.[143]

Jack Kirkland's *Mandingo* seems to have been more an attempt to capitalize on the currency of the civil rights movement than a civil rights play in its own right.[144] Kirkland, the author of the successful *Tobacco Road*, based the play on a bestselling novel of

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[139] Brooks Atkinson, n.t., *New York Times*, 29 April 1960.
[140] Kronenberger, *Best Plays of 1959-1960*, 339.
[141] Michael Shurtleff, *Call Me By My Rightful Name* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1961).
[142] J. M., n.t., *New York Herald Tribune*, 1 January 1961.
[143] Kronenberger, *Best Plays of 1960-1961*, 357.
[144] *Mandingo* the play has never been published. This synopsis is derived from Frank Aston, "'Mandingo' Offered At Lyceum Theatre," *New York World-Telegram*, 23 May 1961; John Chapman, "Tone Is Splendid in 'Mandingo,' A Rough, Absorbing Melodrama," *New York Daily News*, 23 May 1961; Robert Coleman, "'Mandingo' Is Lurid, Cheap," *New York Mirror*, 23 May 1961; Walter Kerr, "'Mandingo,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, 23 May 1961; John McClain, "'Mandingo' Is a Heady-Drama," *New York Journal-American*, 23 May 1961; Howard Taubman, "Theatre: Era of Slavery," *New York Times*, 23 May 1961; and Richard Watts, Jr., "Sex, Sadism and Violence On a Southern Plantation," *New York Post*, 23 May 1961.

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the same name by Kyle Onstott. Set in the American South in 1832, the play is a three-act orgy of slave-breeders and slaves variously seducing, raping, impregnating, beating, torturing, and killing one another. There are some nods in the direction of civil rights era sensibilities, including a sympathetic young white man who confronts and is ultimately killed by his monstrous slave-owning father, and a recognition that slavery was an evil that damaged whites as well as Blacks. But the play as a whole seems to have been, as the *Times'* Howard Taubman put it, "a crude, sensationalized effort to capitalize on a newsworthy theme."[145] Almost all the reviewers panned the play after it opened at Broadway's Lyceum Theatre on 22 May 1961, and it eked out only twelve performances.[146] In 1975 it was released as a film (a terrible one, according to most observers) starring James Mason.

The distinguished educator, critic, poet and novelist Mark Van Doren (1894-1972) chose the end of the Civil War as the subject for his first play, *The Last Days of Lincoln*.[147] A plodding work in verse and prose, it is remarkable for its almost complete lack of interest in and sensitivity to issues surrounding slavery and slaves. When Lincoln dies, for example, lamenting Blacks wail "Oh, Lord, Massa gone," "Massa Linkum, gone to glory," and "Oh, Lord, Mercy on us, Mercy on us" (150). The play's October 1961 premiere took place in a segregated Southern educational theatre at Florida State University, and was presented to Tallahassee's Black citizens only later, in a special

[145] Howard Taubman, "Theatre: Era of Slavery," *New York Times*, 23 May 1961.
[146] Kronenberger, *Best Plays of 1960-1961*, 341-342.
[147] Mark Van Doren, *The Last Days of Lincoln: A Play in Six Scenes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1959).

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performance at Florida A & M.[148] In April 1965, however, it was revived at the Library of Congress in Washington and then briefly at the Théâtre de Lys in New York.[149]

Interracial romance returned to Broadway in Richard Rodgers and Samuel Taylor's *No Strings*.[150] This musical, for which Rodgers wrote both the music and lyrics (Oscar Hammerstein having died in 1960), concerns two American expatriates who fall in love in Paris. The woman is a Black fashion model originally from Harlem; the man, a white novelist from New England. In the end they agree to part when both realize that he must return home to complete a novel, but that she would not be welcome in his conventional Maine home town. Most critics were supportive of Rodgers' first solo effort, and the show ran for well over a year after its March 1962 opening. Walter Kerr observed that "it is very much the point of the evening that almost no point is made" of this interracial love affair.[151]

Louis Peterson's second play, *Entertain a Ghost*, lasted a week Off-Broadway in April 1962.[152] Like his first play, *Take a Giant Step*, this was an introspective work with some autobiographical elements; but unlike its predecessor, it had only peripheral racial content. It concerned a self-centered young actress rehearsing her husband's play, which was about an unhappy interracial couple. The *Times*' Howard Taubman called *Entertain a Ghost* a "heavy-handed and pretentious" work from which "warmth and humor are

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[148] N.a., "Van Doren's Play Given in Florida," *New York Times*, 19 October 1961.
[149] Guernsey, *Best Plays of 1964-1965*, 301; n.a., "Off Off-B'way," *Village Voice*, 15 April 1965.
[150] Samuel Taylor and Richard Rodgers, *No Strings* (New York: Random House, 1962).
[151] Walter Kerr, "'No Strings,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 March 1962.
[152] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1961-1962*, 328.

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almost entirely absent," and concluded that it was not "even a worthwhile fragment of a play."[153]

Haitian history returned to the stage in *Defiant Island*, an unusually effective tragedy by the Scottish dramatist James Forsyth (b. 1913).[154] It deals with the noble but ultimately unsuccessful attempt by the revolutionary Henri Christophe to shuck France's colonial yoke and bring Haiti into the community of civilized nations. Though fairly traditional in structure, the play echoes several of the themes raised by Genet in *The Blacks*, including anticolonialism and the meaning of Blackness within a white power structure. It also implies support for nonviolence by positively depicting Christophe's attempt to set aside vengeance in dealing with both white and Black opponents. *Defiant Island* premiered in late April 1962 at Howard University, where it was directed—with uncharacteristic laxity, according to some—by the often-brilliant Owen Dodson.[155] A revised version was produced in 1965 at Cleveland's Karamu House in a production directed by Reuben Silver.[156]

A play which in subject and perspective owed more to the 1940s than to the 1960s was *Walk in Darkness*, by the actor, director and playwright William Hairston. Based on the 1948 novel of the same name by Hans Habe, the play's *Romeo and Juliet* plot concerns Washington Roach, a Black American corporal who falls in love, marries, and has a child with a white woman in postwar Germany. By threats, beatings, and even the claim that his wife is a Nazi, the Army attempts to separate Roach from his family.

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[153] Howard Taubman, n.t., *New York Times*, 10 April 1962.
[154] James Forsyth, *Defiant Island* (Chicago, IL: Dramatic Publishing Co., 1975).
[155] Hatch, *Sorrow Is the Only Faithful One*, 211-212.
[156] Publicity release, clippings file for *Defiant Island*, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

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Distraught, he goes A.W.O.L., joins a gang that robs Army supply depots, and eventually makes his way to his wife's home only to find that she has indeed rejected him and has sent their child away in shame. The play ends, in Howard Taubman's words, with "a rather melodramatically tragic denouement for the corporal and his bride." Despite an unusually direct treatment of interracial marriage and racial prejudice, the play resembled older civil rights dramas both in time period and in portraying its Black hero as a victim. Produced by Stella Holt, it was directed by Sidney Walters, designed by Ming Cho Lee, and starred Clarence Williams 3d. It opened 29 October 1963 at the Greenwich Mews Theatre, drew sympathetic but unenthusiastic notices, and had a short run.[157]

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"What I did," Ossie Davis has said of his involvement with the civil rights movement, "I did with the passion of a combatant."[158] Until the mid-1960s the movement's power derived largely from channeling its participants' combative energies into nonviolent demonstrations and civil disobediences. The theatre followed suit: from *Deep Are the Roots* to *A Land Beyond the River*, *A Raisin in the Sun* and Davis' own *Purlie Victorious*, Black and white theatre artists created a body of work single-mindedly dedicated to the the peaceful war for integration. Cracks in the nonviolent integrationist facade occasionally appeared—*Orgena* and *The Trial* were early examples, *Pavane for a Dead-Pan Minstrel* a later one—but they were rare and easily plastered over.

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[157] Jack Thompson, "Dull Stretches Slow a Fine Effort," *New York Journal-American*, 29 October 1963; Howard Taubman, "'Walk in Darkness' at the Greenwich Mews," *New York Times*, 29 October 1963.

[158] Ossie Davis, telephone interview with the author, 12 December 1994.

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Less easily repaired were the cracks that would develop in the civil rights coalition after the murders of the four little Birmingham girls and Kennedy's assassination. Feelings of rage and impotence would be translated more and more often into violence; choruses of "We shall overcome" would provide the bass to chants of "Black Power!"; the Vietnam war would sap precious lives and energies; and struggles for dominance would sometime threaten to overshadow the movement's quest for equality.

And the theatre, which so often flourishes on conflict, would thrive amid the confounding array of new antagonisms.

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Chapter Five — The Changing of the Guard, 1964-1965

> If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn't have needed that music. No metaphors. No grunts. No wiggles in the dark of her soul. ... Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane.[1]

> I do not wish to see Negroes become the equal of their murderers. I wish us to become equal to ourselves. To become a people so free in themselves that they will have no need to—fear—others—and have no need to murder others.[2]

For many, the murders of Kennedy, Medgar Evers, and the four little girls in Birmingham raised questions about the very nature of America. For some—largely young people, and especially young Blacks—the image of a benign nation in which ethical reforms could be peacefully achieved began to fade before the spectre of a violent, repressive, racist regime which would change only at the point of a gun. Although the civil rights movement won its greatest victories during this period, the killings of Malcolm X and of numerous civil rights workers, coupled with the escalation of the conflict in Vietnam, convinced some that integration was a fallacious goal and nonviolence a self-destructive method. By the end of 1965, the extraordinary coalition that had been the civil rights movement was breaking down.

The theatre followed these trends closely. Plays advocating the traditional civil rights virtues became rarer and rarer, while militant Black nationalist works became ever

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[1] Clay, in LeRoi Jones, *Dutchman*, in *Dutchman and The Slave: Two Plays by LeRoi Jones* (New York: William Morrow, 1964), 35.

[2] Meridian, in James Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie* (New York: Dell, 1964), 135.

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more common. Hughes' *Jerico-Jim Crow* was one of the very few new shows to project an unalloyed positive image of the movement, while LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman* and other plays rejected integration and nonviolence outright, depicting whites as brutish victimizers with whom peaceful coexistence was impossible. So polarized did the racial atmosphere become that even James Baldwin's dark but basically integrationist *Blues for Mister Charlie* developed a reputation—wrongly—as advocating violence and separatism. Finally, white playwrights, who in previous years had played an active role in creating civil rights plays, dropped from the picture almost completely.

The Movement Peaks and Splinters

Kennedy's death, ironically, set the political stage for the accomplishment of many of the goals he was unable to achieve in life.[3] The country was at peace, the economy continued to soar, and the Democratic party held a firm majority in both houses of Congress. Lyndon Johnson, the chosen successor of a President widely considered a martyr, intended to wield his new office much as he had brandished his influential role in the Senate, with skillful bargaining bolstered by the force of his powerful personality.

Johnson's goal was to mold America into a liberal utopia which he called the "Great Society." To achieve this end, he issued an enormous number of administrative directives and flooded the Congress with proposed bills, many of which it quickly passed. In his first two years in office, money was appropriated to declare a "war on poverty," to create the Office of Economic Opportunity, to establish a program for financing higher

[3] The sources I have used in compiling this historical summary include: Hodgson, *America in Our Time*; Alton Hornsby, Jr., *Milestones in 20th-Century African-American History* (Detroit, MI: Visible Ink Press, 1993); Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream*; and Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*.

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education, and to establish the Medicare health-care system for the elderly. Not the least of Johnson's accomplishments was his ushering through Congress of Kennedy's Civil Rights Bill, which he signed into law in the spring of 1964: the most significant federal civil rights legislation since Reconstruction, it outlawed discrimination in all public accommodations.

The Civil Rights Act was incomplete, however, in the area of voting rights. Despite good intentions, it left enough loopholes for segregationist states to continue to block most Black participation in the electoral process. Accordingly, soon after the Civil Rights Act became law, a Voting Rights Bill was proposed to close the loopholes, and civil rights organizations plotted direct-action campaigns to make the public aware of the need for the new bill.

These campaigns led to some of the most ambitious efforts of the civil rights movement, the Mississippi Summer Projects of 1964 and 1965. Originally conceived as symbolic efforts to register voters in the state with the least Black voter representation, the Summer Projects were run by an *ad hoc* alliance of existing civil rights groups known as the Congress of Federated Organizations (COFO). In practice, the Summer Projects developed into veritable crusades in which a mostly white, mostly Northern and Western population of college students attempted to bring democracy to rural Mississippi—ten weeks at a time.

The Summer Projects had an undeniable missionary element, but their accomplishments were truly extraordinary. Their Freedom Schools taught basic literacy and civics to great numbers of poorly educated rural Blacks. Their voter registration efforts signed up thousands, some in the real electoral system, most in a shadow system called the

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Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). And, with tragic irony, the Projects' white martyrs, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, who were killed along with their Black colleague James Chaney, helped bring the plight of Mississippi's Blacks to the national consciousness as never before.

A final gesture of the 1964 Summer Project was the journey of a group of MFDP representatives to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where they demanded to be seated instead of the legally elected delegation. Their presence was a significant disruption to the nationally televised convention: the MFDP leaders were repeatedly ejected, but sneaked back in with borrowed passes; one of them, Fanny Lou Hamer, even led the convention in freedom songs. Despite much wrangling the MFDP delegates were never permitted to vote at the convention, but their vocal and controversial presence would change the nature of Democratic conventions for decades to come.

The civil rights movement acquired further influence in November 1964 when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Martin Luther King, Jr., the youngest man in history and only the second African American ever to win the prize. The award was an acknowledgment that the world considered King the heir to the nonviolent tradition of Mohandas Gandhi.

That tradition would be sorely tested in the coming months. In February 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated during a Harlem speaking engagement. Though Malcolm had split with the Nation of Islam a year earlier, and though three Black Muslims were later convicted of the murder, rumors flew that his death had been the result of a government conspiracy. His message of liberation for Blacks not exclusively by nonviolent means, but

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"by any means necessary," would become a mantra of the Black separatist and Black power movements.

That same winter, the leaders of the civil rights movement targeted the city of Selma, Alabama, which continued to allow only a handful of its Black citizens to vote. Seven hundred demonstrators undertook to march from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery to protest the denial of voting rights, but they were brutally turned back at a bridge on the outskirts of Selma by police armed with clubs, tear gas, whips, and cattle prods. Weeks later, after a federal judge forbade Alabama officials from interfering with the protesters, the march was resumed successfully with thousands of new participants.

In March, President Johnson spoke before a joint session of Congress to propose a Voting Rights Act guaranteeing the right to vote to every adult American with an eighth-grade education. He shocked many by concluding that "it's not just Negroes, but it's really all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we *shall* overcome."[4] By late June, the Act had been passed and signed, and an exultant President promised finally to bring African Americans into the mainstream of American life.

Even as Johnson began enacting his domestic agenda, however, he squandered his chances of completing it by escalating the conflict in Vietnam. Even more than Kennedy, Johnson put his Vietnam policy in the hands of hawkish and myopic advisors who were blind to the depth of the quagmire into which their counsel was plunging the nation. By the summer of 1965, 125,000 Americans were in Vietnam, the size of the military draft

[4] Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 278.

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was doubled, and the student antiwar movement that would eventually help topple the Johnson Presidency had begun.

Kennedy's and Malcolm's assassinations; the deaths of civil rights workers and of the little girls in Birmingham; the vortex of Vietnam—all these were changing the atmosphere of the nation even as the civil rights movement achieved its greatest victories. In the deep South, the very severity of Jim Crow had given the movement clearcut goals around which to organize. By early 1965, civil rights protests had begun cropping up in the North and West, where not only would the issues be more complicated, but the more heterogeneous social fabrics, the problems of urban life, and the rising disgust of many Blacks with the principles of nonviolence and even desegregation would make peaceful protesting difficult, sometimes even impossible. Since Medgar Evers' death, many civil rights field workers in the South had quietly begun carrying guns; now young Black leaders advocating separatism and violence took over several major civil rights organizations, including CORE and SNCC, and founded a new one, the Black Panther Party. In mid-August, as if to symbolize the decay of the old order, the Watts section of Los Angeles erupted in a ten-day riot that resulted in three dozen deaths, hundreds of injuries, and thousands of arrests.

The civil rights movement was ending. For decades it had been dedicated to non-violence and integration, and through extraordinary effort and forbearance had accomplished much of the social revolution at which Reconstruction had failed. Now it was giving way to a more confrontational era, both the wisdom and efficacy of which remained to be seen.

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The Theatre Follows Suit

American theatre in the mid-1960s continued the trends that began earlier in the decade. Broadway continued to feel the subduing effects of rising costs, but investors still made back their money on a number of notable shows, including Gilroy's *The Subject Was Roses* (1964); Miller's *After the Fall* (1964) and *Incident at Vichy* (1965); Simon's *The Odd Couple* (1965); and Stein, Harnick, and Bock's *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964). Off-Broadway, Off-off-Broadway, and regional companies also continued to grow in importance.

Civil rights theatre, like the civil rights movement itself, achieved some of its most important contributions even as it began to dissolve. Langston Hughes' *Jerico-Jim Crow* was the last new play of the era to look with untarnished admiration at the movement. The Free Southern Theatre was founded to give the deep South its own Black political theatre, but after two seasons of touring integrationist works through Mississippi and Louisiana, it turned to more militant, separatist plays. James Baldwin's wrenching *Blues for Mister Charlie* accused both whites and, to a lesser degree, Blacks of extraordinary callousness and inhumanity toward one another, but concluded that for all its flaws, the civil rights struggle remained the fastest and most ethical route to a better society. So split, however, was the country becoming over racial issues that Baldwin's play was widely perceived as a separatist tract.

The plays of LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) truly were extreme. Jones, like Baldwin, depicted American race relations as elemental contests between fierce hatreds and powerful attractions, but his *Dutchman*, *The Slave*, and other short plays seemed to suggest that violence was the only possible outcome of racial interaction. A skilled

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playwright, poet, and polemicist, Jones was to become the most influential figure in the separatist and militant Black Arts movement: his fiery essay "The Revolutionary Theatre," written and circulated during this period, explained his project's goals:

> The Revolutionary Theatre should force change; it should be change. ... White men will cower before this theatre because it hates them. Because they themselves have been trained to hate. ... Our theatre will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are the brothers of victims, and that they themselves are victims if they are blood brothers. ... The force we want is of twenty million spooks storming America with furious cries and unstoppable weapons. We want actual explosions and actual brutality: AN EPIC IS CRUMBLING and we must give it the space and hugeness of its actual demise.[5]

This philosophy, the antithesis of everything the civil rights movement stood for, was to influence other young playwrights, including Ben Caldwell, Paul Carter Harrison, and Marvin Jackmon (later Marvin X).

Almost all civil rights and racially oriented plays of this period were written by Black men. The only American work centering on racial issues and created primarily by whites was *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel*, by the radical San Francisco Mime Troupe; the only one written by a Black woman was J. E. Franklin's *First Step to Freedom*, produced in Mississippi during the Summer Project in 1964. Not only were whites excluded (and in many cases probably excluding themselves) from the increasingly divisive field of civil rights theatre, but the more radical Black theatre organizations, like their political counterparts, systematically relegated women to subservient roles. Indeed, Doris Derby, one of the three founders of the Free Southern Theatre, resigned after charging that she had achieved only secretarial responsibilities.

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[5] Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones, *Selected Plays and Prose of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones* (New York: William Morrow, 1979), 130-132.

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The trend toward the appearance of new civil rights plays outside New York intensified in the mid-1960s. The Free Southern Theatre and the Kaleidoscope Players established civil rights-oriented touring companies in the deep South; the San Francisco Mime Troupe created *A Minstrel Show* in the Bay Area and toured it through much of the country; and J. E. Franklin, Marvin Jackmon, and William Wellington Mackey all had plays produced outside New York.

By the end of 1965, the civil rights theatre movement had given birth to, and had begun to be replaced by, a culturally centered, politically conscious—but not necessarily overtly political—style of Black theatre that was championed for the next two decades by the Negro Ensemble Company. In a sense, civil rights theatre also helped spawn its angry sibling, the militant, separatist theatre of LeRoi Jones and other playwrights. Without the civil rights movement itself, however, civil rights theatre, a form of political art that reflected and attempted to shape perceptions of current events, no longer really existed.

Jerico-Jim Crow

The first civil rights play to open after Kennedy's assassination was one of the last to fit the classical integrationist mold. A sort of musical counterpart to *In White America*, Langston Hughes' *Jerico-Jim Crow* was an impressionistic history of segregation told—like Hughes' earlier *Don't You Want to Be Free* (1938) and *Black Nativity* (1961)—through many short scenes and new and traditional African American songs.

Jerico-Jim Crow includes roles for a young Black couple, an older Black couple, a Black woman, and a white man.[6] The Black actors all play multiple parts as they narrate,

[6] Langston Hughes, *Jerico-Jim Crow*, Folkways Records FL9671 (script published with record album).

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act and sing their way through the history of slavery, segregation, and the civil rights movement. The young couple, predictably, represents the younger generation, and the older couple, the older generation. United in their dream of an integrated America, their nemesis is the symbolic, devil-like figure of Jim Crow, the only role played by the white actor. This Black-white, good-evil juxtaposition, along with the gospel style of many of the songs, gives the show the feel of a morality play. At one point Jim Crow even dons a minister's garb and preaches:

> Cullud folks better stop singing about freedom and equality and such, and sing about their immortal soul. Down in the gutter of sin where they are, they better be thinking about salvation, not equality. ... Ignorant, trifling, dumb, diseased, impudent, dangerous! ... Dangerous to you and me and our way of life and the Free World. Why they even want to vote down there in Dixie (5).

The young Black man says, "They know we'd vote segregation out, if we had the chance" (6). The Black characters also answer Jim Crow by singing spirituals, but in many cases the lyrics are updated to fit the times. For example, the songs make clear that God will exact a costly retribution against segregationists who practice violence:

> Go tell your long-tongued liars,
> Go tell your midnight riders,
> Tell your bombing rambling dynamiters,
> Great God a-mighty's gonna cut you down (5).

As the play progresses, the Black characters speak and sing more and more about earning freedom through nonviolent protests:

> We went down to the dime store
> To get a bite to eat.
> They put us in the jail house,
> Said we took a white man's seat (6).

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The young man, leading a demonstration in a late scene, announces that

> Governor or no governor, sheriffs or no sheriffs, police dogs or no dogs, Ku Klux Klan or no Klan, we are going to march! March! Walk and sing! And now that the new Civil Rights Bill's been passed, we got to march and we've got to prove that it's gonna work everywhere (6).[7]

In the end, the Black characters resolve no longer to accept second-class citizenship from Jim Crow, but to work together to break down the walls of segregation. In new lyrics to "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho," Joshua is joined by Du Bois, King, Meredith, Randolph, Kennedy, and others in fighting to make "the walls come tumblin' down" (7).

Stella Holt of the Greenwich Mews Theatre agreed to produce *Jerico-Jim Crow*, with assistance from Fran Drucker. In a publicity coup, the production was jointly sponsored by CORE, the NAACP, and SNCC: all three organizations approved the script, sent representatives to rehearsals and shared in the net profits.[8] The show was co-directed by Alvin Ailey, the choreographer, and William Hairston, whose *Walk in Darkness* had just recently closed at the Greenwich Mews. The cast of twenty included Gilbert Price and Hilda Harris as the young couple, Joseph Attles and Rosalie King as the older couple, Dorothy Drake as the woman, William Cain as Jim Crow, and the Hugh Porter Gospel Singers.[9]

Jerico-Jim Crow opened 12 January 1964, in the sanctuary of the Village Presbyterian Church and Brotherhood Synagogue at 143 West 13 Street. It was scheduled for two performances a week, on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, and was also to tour

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[7] The published script's references to the Civil Rights Bill must have been late additions, because the Bill was not passed until six months after the play's premiere.

[8] Stuart W. Little, "'Jerico-Jim Crow,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, n.d. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

[9] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1963-1964*, 356.

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throughout the New York metropolitan area. It drew warm reviews. Jesse H. Walker wrote in the *Amsterdam News* that it was a "ringing presentation ... of a desire for equality and brotherhood."[10] The *Times*' Richard F. Shepard called it "rousing" and "unabashedly sentimental," and marveled that with its energetic singing and dancing "the plaster didn't fall from the ceiling."[11] The *Saturday Review* found the dramaturgy and staging "rudimentary," but the music "so filled with pure aliveness that we find ourselves joyously and inexplicably in tears."[12]

Shortly after *Jerico-Jim Crow* opened, Stella Holt was offered the opportunity to transfer it to an off-Broadway theatre for a standard run. She turned the offer down, concerned that in a more conventional environment the show might come to seem conventional itself. Instead, she stuck to her original plan, retaining the church sanctuary as the show's home base, and touring it to Black neighborhoods and civil rights fund-raising events in and around New York City.[13]

Jerico-Jim Crow seems to have run for five or six months at the sanctuary, and to have had a much longer life as a touring show. As late as March 1966, still featuring the Hugh Porter Gospel Singers, it was the main presentation at 1199's Salute to Freedom (previously the Negro History Week gala).[14]

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[10] Jesse H. Walker, "They Might Hear 'Jerico' All The Way Up On 113th St.," *New York Amsterdam News*, 18 January 1964.
[11] Richard F. Shepard, "Langston Hughes Play With Music Opens," *New York Times*, 13 January 1964.
[12] N.a., n.t., *Saturday Review*, 18 April 1964. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Advertisement, *1199 Drug News*, January 1966.

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Funnyhouse of a Negro

Two days after *Jerico-Jim Crow*'s premiere, Adrienne Kennedy's first produced play opened a few blocks and a few light-years away. *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, a curious but powerful work, did not deal overtly with civil rights issues, but alluded to them poetically through a nightmarish storyline, hypnotic language, Genet-like masks, and a main character literally sickened to death by her own Blackness.

Adrienne Kennedy (b. 1931) grew up in a middle-class area of Cleveland, Ohio. She graduated from Ohio State University in 1953, and later studied creative writing at Columbia University, the American Theatre Wing, and the Circle-in-the-Square School. Her dramas—which beside *Funnyhouse of a Negro* include *The Owl Answers* (1965), *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (1976), and *The Ohio State Murders* (1992)—are poetic, evocative, and often shocking expressions of herself. For her, she says, writing is "an outlet for inner, psychological confusion and questions stemming from childhood."[15]

Kennedy began writing *Funnyhouse of a Negro* while on a trip to West Africa, and completed it in Rome. The title, she says, was inspired by a Cleveland amusement park whose "funnyhouse" featured two huge white laughing figures.[16] The play (which like virtually all Kennedy's works is in one act) centers on Sarah, a sensitive young woman of mixed race who lives on New York's upper west side.[17] She announces early on that she would like to be white, "even a more pallid Negro than I am now ... soulless, educated

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[15] Adrienne Kennedy, quoted in Margaret B. Wilkerson, "Adrienne Kennedy," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 38, 164.
[16] Ibid., 165.
[17] Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, in *Adrienne Kennedy: In One Act* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 1-23.

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and irreligious" (5). She is plagued by apparitions of different parts of her self: Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg, decrepit mother figures in sickly white masks or whiteface; Jesus, a powerless savior ashamed of his Blackness; and Patrice Lumumba (named for a hero of African liberation movements), a father figure said to have raped Sarah's mother. The Queen, the Duchess, and Jesus are all ashamed of their kinky hair, which as the play progresses falls out in clumps until they are totally bald. In the end, Sarah can no longer endure her emotional torment, and hangs herself in her apartment. She is discovered by her laughing landlady and her "funnyman" boyfriend, whom she had earlier described as a Jewish poet "very interested in Negroes" (6).

In form and content, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* owes much to earlier plays. Like Peterson's *Take a Giant Step*, it is about a sensitive young middle-class Black person torn between Black and white society. Like Sebree's *Mrs. Patterson*, it centers on a heroine who fantasizes of becoming white. And like Genet's *The Blacks*, it uses highly theatrical, non-realistic devices including masks, whiteface, and wigs to explore the nature of Blackness on stage. Yet despite its nods to earlier works, Kennedy's play is no rehash: through startling images and stark language it creates a rich portrait of a modern woman tangled up in the contradictions of both a racist society and her own psyche. Indeed, Sarah's nightmare need not be read solely as that of an individual: it can as easily be seen as America's.

Kennedy showed her play to Edward Albee in 1962, while studying playwriting with him at the Circle-in-the-Square School. Impressed, Albee arranged for readings of it

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in his class and at the Actors Studio in 1963.[18] Theatre 1964, which Albee ran with Richard Barr and Clinton Wilder, then presented the play off-Broadway at the East End Theatre, at 85 East Fourth Street. The director was Michael Kahn, who had directed both the earlier productions, and the cast included Billie Allen as Sarah, Ellen Holly as the Dutchess, and Gus Williams as Patrice Lumumba.[19] Despite its 45-minute length, it was not paired with another one-act: Kahn said that he and the producers "didn't feel anything could follow it and we felt nothing should precede it."[20] It opened 14 January 1964, playing—with Actors Equity's permission—two shows a night, six nights a week.[21]

The press was receptive but, perhaps because of the play's unusual form and racial content, unusually careful in its criticisms. The *Voice*'s Michael Smith, admitting that "I do not know how to evaluate the play as art or craft," judged it instead as "an obsessive, cruelly honest statement of self," and found it "extraordinary and devastating."[22] Howard Taubman saw the piece as a sociological treatise exposing the inner thoughts of downtrodden Blacks: "Sarah," he wrote in the *Times*, "in extremis in her suffering ... reflects what it is to be a sensitive Negro ... who cannot make peace with herself or her alien

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[18] N.a., "Kennedy Play Read," *New York Herald Tribune*, 19 July 1963; n.a., "Reflections of Sarah," *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 December 1963. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

[19] Howard Taubman, "Adrienne Kennedy Play Opens at East End," *New York Times*, 15 January 1964.

[20] N.a., "Reflections of Sarah," *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 December 1963. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

[21] Sam Zolotow, "Actors Equity Gives New Play Permission for Twelve Weekly Shows," *New York Times*, 12 December 1963; Howard Taubman, "Adrienne Kennedy Play Opens at East End," *New York Times*, 15 January 1964; n.a., n.t., *New York Herald Tribune*, 24 January 1964.

[22] Michael Smith, "Theatre: Funnyhouse of a Negro," *Village Voice*, 22 January 1964.

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world."[23] Harold Clurman saw the play's nightmarish form as an apt metaphor for the unsettled status of American Blacks: he wrote in the *Nation* that *Funnyhouse* "embraces far more than plays of similar theme when they are couched in terms of pathetic appeals for 'tolerance' and fair play. The torment of the colored girl in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* parallels that of all people who suffer the pathology of minorities."[24]

The reviewers' respectful bemusement apparently affected ticket sales, which were poor. Little more than a week after the opening the play was set to close, when an "angel" came forward in the form of Isabel Eberstadt, the wife of a society photographer and a daughter of Ogden Nash. Eberstadt put up $5,000 to guarantee the play's run for at least another two weeks.[25] With this capital infusion (as well as the publicity it generated), the play seems to have finally earned a respectable run.

The Blood Knot

The interest of American producers and audiences in plays with African subjects continued with *The Blood Knot* (later renamed simply *Blood Knot*), Athol Fugard's fifth play, and his first to be produced in the United States. Though written for and about South Africa, *The Blood Knot*, like *The Blacks*, was widely perceived by American observers as relevant to America's racial problems.

Fugard (b. 1932) was born and educated in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. After a brief stint as a crew member of a cargo ship traveling between Sudan and the Far East, he settled into the theatre, where he worked successfully as an actor, director, and play-

[23] Howard Taubman, "Adrienne Kennedy Play Opens at East End," *New York Times*, 15 January 1964.
[24] Harold Clurman, "Theatre," *Nation*, 10 February 1964.
[25] Stan Koven, "Off-B'way Play Saved by an Angel," *New York Post*, 30 January 1964.

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wright.[26] Most of his works, including *The Blood Knot*, *Boesman and Lena* (1969), *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* (1972), *A Lesson from Aloes* (1978), and *"Master Harold" ... and the Boys* (1982) center on the evils of South Africa's system of apartheid. Many have been produced successfully in the United States, where they have at once helped popularize Fugard's anti-apartheid position, and placed America's racial problems in the spectrum of European colonial domination of native peoples.

The Blood Knot, a full-length play in seven scenes, is set entirely in a one-room shack in a nonwhite neighborhood of Port Elizabeth.[27] In the shack live an impulsive, dark-skinned man named Zachariah, and his more controlled, light-skinned brother Morris. Zach works as a guard at a municipal park, where his duties include picking up litter and chasing away Black children who try to play there. For the past year he has been supporting not only himself, but also his brother, who has been helping him save his pennies to buy the two of them a small farm. Zach, however, is tired of waiting for the future: he wants to enjoy himself now. At Morris' suggestion, he finds a female pen-pal in a newspaper and begins corresponding with her. When she turns out to be a young white woman, Morris is terrified of the potential consequences, but Zach is fascinated, and insists on spending a large part of his savings on a second-hand suit to wear when she comes to visit. Eventually the young woman writes that she is canceling her trip because she is engaged to be married. In the play's last and most significant scene, the brothers play-act as they did as children. Morris dons the suit and pretends to be a white

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[26] Russel Vandenbroucke, *Truths the Hand Can Touch: The Theatre of Athol Fugard* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), 1-36; "Fugard, Athol," *Contemporary Authors* CD-ROM (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1994).

[27] Athol Fugard, *Blood Knot*, in *Blood Knot and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1991), 1-73.

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man observing Zach at work: he calls his brother "*swartgat*" (literally "black-arse," the Afrikaans equivalent of "nigger"), and admits that "just the sight of you crawling around like some ... thing ... makes me want to throw up" (67). Immediately ashamed of himself, Morris reveals that before coming to stay with Zach he had been "passing" for a number of years as a white man.

The Blood Knot is at once a symbolic, political, and psychological work. Zach represents all South African Blacks who work to support themselves from day to day, while Morris stands in for colonialist parasites whose livelihoods depend upon managing and controlling the labor of their Black countrymen. The play is not, however, simply an agit-prop piece with shallow cardboard characters: though Zach and Morris are locked in a troubled relationship, their love for one another is very real. As Morris notes at the end of the play, he and Zach—like all South Africans, and by extension, like all human beings—are "tied together" with "the blood knot ... the bond between brothers" (73).

The Blood Knot was first produced in 1961 in a makeshift theatre in Johannesburg, where its interracial casting as well as its theme made it controversial. South African audiences, Fugard later said, were so moved that after each show they would "either say thank you or they'd cry." The play was soon produced in London, where it met with a cool response.[28] Nevertheless, the American producers Sidney Bernstein and Lucille Lortel decided to bring it to an off-Broadway house in New York. They hired John Berry to direct, James Earl Jones to play Zach, and J. D. Cannon to play Morris. Their

[28] "Fugard, Athol," *Contemporary Authors* CD-ROM (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1994).

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production opened 1 March 1964 at the Cricket Theatre, at Second Avenue and 10 Street.[29]

Most American reviewers responded warmly to the play, though some felt its structure was too artificial. Howard Taubman wrote in the *Times* that "no play in town is simpler and more penetrating, tenderer and more bruising," and warned his readers not to "think that what Mr. Fugard reveals of the souls of white and black brothers living uneasily together involves only South Africa."[30] The *Amsterdam News*' Jesse H. Walker agreed both that the play was emotionally wrenching and that "the same situation could exist right here in the United States and not South Africa."[31] Michael Smith of the *Voice*, however, largely ignored the play's political content, concentrating instead on its structural progression from realism to symbolism, which he found strained and overly literary; in his view, in fact, the production was only saved by Jones' "eloquently detailed and complete" performance, which "makes the play better than it is."[32]

The play's central metaphor—of society as a family—was rather new to American civil rights drama. Society considered as a neighborhood had appeared in plays from *On Whitman Avenue* to *A Raisin in the Sun*. *The Blood Knot*, however, was the first fully developed work produced in America (*The Ivory Branch* was an earlier, much more awkward example) that treated society as a family, with the whole complicated mix of loyalties and jealousies that that metaphor implies. With the notable exception, in fact, of

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[29] Howard Taubman, "'Blood Knot,' by South African, in Premiere," *New York Times*, 3 March 1964.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Jesse H. Walker, "'Blood Knot' Is Play That Digs Very Deep," *New York Amsterdam News*, 14 March 1964.
[32] Michael Smith, "Theatre: The Blood Knot," *Village Voice*, 5 March 1964.

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James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* (which opened in New York shortly after *The Blood Knot*), few American civil rights plays have explored the simultaneous love and enmity between the races so effectively.

The New York production of *The Blood Knot* earned a respectable run of almost seven months. It closed 27 September 1964—the same date as *The Blacks*—after 240 performances.[33]

Anger

Only a few tantalizing facts are known about Robert L. Steward's *Anger*. Described in a brief *Amsterdam News* promotional piece as "about a poor family in Harlem which becomes involved in an argument over Black Supremacy," it was apparently among the earliest dramatic considerations of the movement which would shortly tear the civil rights coalition apart.

Anger was performed only once, on 7 March 1964 at Carnegie Recital Hall in New York. The author both directed the production and was a member of the cast, and Granville Lee arranged the music.[34] I have found no further information about the play, the playwright, or the production.

Dutchman

LeRoi Jones' controversial, influential play *Dutchman* burst upon the scene later in March. Though it was the most successful African American play since *A Raisin in the Sun*, in both dramatic structure and political philosophy *Dutchman* could hardly have been more different from Hansberry's work. A one-act, two-character play of jarring poetry

[33] Guernsey, *Best Plays of 1964-1965*, 339.
[34] N.a., "'Anger' At Recital Hall," *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 March 1964.

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and stark symbolism, it rejected the civil rights movement's calls for racial integration and cooperation, and suggested that racial warfare in America might be inevitable.

Amiri Baraka (b. 1934) is a Newark-born, Howard-educated playwright, poet, and essayist. As LeRoi Jones, he began his career as part of the downtown beat movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s. His work was always built on the rhythms of African American music and language, but did not emphasize confrontation with whites until 1964, when his plays *Dutchman* and *The Slave* were first produced. In 1965 he left his Jewish wife, published his seminal essay "The Revolutionary Theatre," and co-founded the Black Arts Repertory, which became the center of the separatist Black Arts movement. In the later 1960s he took the Muslim name Amiri Baraka, remained active in both political and artistic movements concerned with Black independence, and produced a number of plays, notably *Slave Ship* (1967). In later years he became a socialist and renounced separatism.[35] He now lives and works in Newark.

In 1963 Jones, like Adrienne Kennedy, was a participant in a playwriting workshop led by Edward Albee as part of Albee's Theatre 1964 Playwrights Unit. One evening, Jones later said, he sat down to write a play and had completed it by the following morning.[36] The result, *Dutchman*, is structurally reminiscent of Albee's *Zoo Story* (1959): both are short two-character plays involving seduction and murder in public places in New York City. Unlike *Zoo Story*, however, *Dutchman*'s theme is racial conflict; an angry, militant, and in many ways highly personal work, it pitted Black against white in a power struggle to the death.

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[35] Kimberly W. Benston, *Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 186-187.

[36] Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (New York: Freundlich, 1984), 187.

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Both acts of *Dutchman* are set in a New York subway car. In the course of the play passengers occasionally get on and off the train, but the focus is on the only two speaking characters, a college-age Black student named Clay and an attractive thirty-year old white woman named Lula. As the play opens, Lula sits down beside Clay and starts a conversation with him. From his dress and demeanor, she quickly (and to some extent correctly) reduces him to a cultural stereotype: he is a student from New Jersey, fancies himself a poet, and is on his way to a party to see a Black friend who affects an English accent. She begins to tease him seductively, first offering him an apple and finally inviting him to her tenement apartment to "do the nasty" and "rub bellies" with him (30). At the same time, however, she belittles him as a Black man, tossing at him racial epithets including "black nigger" (18), "escaped nigger" (29), and "Uncle Tom Big Lip" (33), and accusing him of using white culture to hide his Blackness even from himself. "What right do you have," she asks, "to be wearing a three-button suit and striped tie? Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harvard" (18-19). Her verbal assault builds to a feverish level of excitement, culminating with her accusation that Clay is "afraid of white people" (33).

Until this point Clay has listened to Lula with remarkable passivity, responding with wry amusement to most of her antics. Now, however, he slaps her across the mouth as hard as he can, tells her to "shut up and let me talk" (33), and launches into a long, furious monologue in which he explains that his "white" demeanor, like the musical expressions of blues and jazz artists, is "an act ... to keep myself from cutting all your throats" (34). Whites, he says, who claim to love the blues "don't even understand that Bessie Smith is saying, 'Kiss my ass, kiss my black unruly ass,'" and that if she "had

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killed some white people she ... could have talked very straight and plain about the world" without burying her message in artistic metaphors (34-35). Eventually, he promises, once they have learned to kill, "all those ex-coons" will "murder you ... cut your throats, and drag you out to the edge of your cities so the flesh can fall away from your bones, in sanitary isolation" (36).

Lulu responds by quietly and efficiently plucking a small knife from her purse and stabbing Clay to death with it. The other passengers throw his body off the train at the next stop, but then another young Black intellectual enters the car, perhaps also to be seduced or murdered by Lula. As the play ends, a Black conductor walks slowly through the car, a caricature of the shuffling stage darky of older times.

Dutchman highlights in the starkest terms the racial conflict that was developing in the mid-1960s. In the play's world, interracial relations inevitably devolve into power struggles in which whites, who at once detest and are attracted to Blacks, are the instigators and aggressors. Even those who mouth liberal platitudes about interracial cooperation are still, like Lula, essentially bigots, who cannot tolerate assertiveness by Blacks and who figuratively (and in some cases literally) murder Blacks who deny the whites' superiority. Clay is a victim, like so many Black characters in earlier plays, but with this difference: he is killed not because he "acts white" or because he considers sleeping with a white woman, but because he consciously chooses not to behave as a slave to Lula's master. His proposed solution to Blacks' predicament in America—killing whites—is merely an in-kind response to what he considers whites to have been doing to Blacks for centuries. In such a world, neither the nonviolent means nor the integrationist goals of the civil rights movement are desirable or possible.

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The play's title has been the cause of much scholarly speculation. Julian C. Rice suggests that "a 'Dutchman' in underworld jargon is a killer whose duties include disposing of the corpse."[37] Baraka himself has stated that the title was inspired by the mythical ship the Flying Dutchman, a Hollywood film about which had been released several years before he wrote the play.[38] "*Dutchman* is a portrait of America," he says, "and it was meant to be. It is not just a tale about being seduced by a white woman; it's a tale about the kind of seduction the black middle class, particularly black intellectuals, experience."[39] Like the ship, the play's subway and its riders—and in a larger sense American society—seem trapped in an endless, ever-repeating journey of cultural alienation and death.

Baraka showed *Dutchman* to Albee, with whose blessing Theatre 1964 gave it two workshop performances at the Village South Theatre in mid-January 1964. Edward Parone, the managing director of the Playwrights Unit, directed the piece, which starred Al Freeman, Jr. as Clay and Jennifer West as Lula.[40] It must have been well-received, because Albee and his partners shortly decided to produce it off-Broadway.[41] Parone again directed, and West again played Lula, but Robert Hooks took over the part of Clay from Freeman, who was then rehearsing James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*. *Dutchman* opened at the Cherry Lane Theatre on 23 March 1964, the last play in a triple

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[37] Julian C. Rice, quoted in "Jones, LeRoi," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1973), 163.
[38] Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 187.
[39] Quoted in Charlie Reilly, *Conversations with Amiri Baraka* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 256.
[40] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1963-1964*, 370.
[41] Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 187.

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bill that included Beckett's *Play* and Arrabal's *The Two Executioners*.[42]

Reviewers were strongly divided about the play, less over its artistic merit than its political implications. The *Times*' Howard Taubman found Jones a promising but undisciplined writer whose play was "a mélange of sardonic images and undisciplined filth." Taubman admitted, however, that "if this is the way the Negroes really feel about the white world around them, there's more rancor buried in the breasts of colored conformists than anyone can imagine."[43] Michael Smith wrote in the *Voice* that *Dutchman* was "an exceptionally provocative piece" that "cuts deep, entering areas beyond the reach of most theatre," but Smith refused even to speculate about what the play might mean to Blacks since "I as a white man am totally in the dark ... because I don't live in the same world."[44] And in the *Nation*, Harold Clurman hailed Jones' "turbulent talent" for igniting rage in his audience, though he found its ending "too pat, too pointed in its symbolism."[45]

Dutchman was an immediate success. In May 1964, it won the Obie for best American play, while *Play* was named best play.[46] *Dutchman*, however, had received so much more attention in the press than its companion pieces that weeks earlier, in late April, Theatre 1964 had replaced them with a revival of Albee's *The American Dream*—and then, in November, replaced that with a revival of *The Zoo Story*.[47] In December, Robert Hooks and Jennifer West, both of whose roles had by now been taken over by

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[42] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1963-1964*, 362.
[43] Howard Taubman, "Drama Opens on Triple Bill at Cherry Lane," *New York Times*, 25 March 1964.
[44] Michael Smith, "Theatre: Three at the Cherry Lane," *Village Voice*, 2 April 1964.
[45] Harold Clurman, "Dutchman, Funny Girl," *Nation*, 13 April 1964.
[46] N.a., "Ninth Annual Obies," *New York Herald Tribune*, 25 May 1964.
[47] Hewes, *The Best Plays of 1963-1964*, 364; Guernsey, *Best Plays of 1964-1965*, 340.

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other actors, took *Dutchman* to Berlin, where one performance was broadcast by West German television.[48] The New York production ultimately ran 366 performances, and did not close until 6 February 1965.[49] In the ensuing years, *Dutchman* has been produced frequently, printed in countless anthologies of modern American drama, and made the subject of many scholarly articles.

The play did not fare so well, however, when it was produced in Harlem by the Black Arts Repertory Theatre later in 1965. As the civil rights movement splintered, the attitudes expressed in *Dutchman* and some of Baraka's other writings came to symbolize for many whites the worst excesses of the growing Black nationalist movement. Black Arts' agit-prop street performances of *Dutchman* in Harlem drew the wrath of the federal government's Office of Economic Opportunity, then headed by Sergeant Shriver, who branded the play racist and withdrew financial support from the troupe.[50] "Downtown," Baraka bitterly recalls, "I was an important new mind, someone worth paying attention to. Uptown I became a racist, someone to keep impressionable minds away from."[51]

Dutchman's message, however, was not muffled by attempts to censor it. Over the next several years, a number of militant Black playwrights emerged for whom Baraka was perhaps the single most important influence. These writers included Ben Caldwell, author of the satirical one-acts *Prayer Meeting, or the First Militant Minister* (1968) and *Family Portrait, or The Black Nationalist* (1969); Paul Carter Harrison, author of *Pavane for a Dead-Pan Minstrel* (1963—see previous chapter) and *The Experimental Leader*

[48] N.a., "Playing Germany," *New York Amsterdam News*, 12 December 1964.
[49] Guernsey, *Best Plays of 1964-1965*, 340.
[50] Reilly, *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, 135-136.
[51] Quoted in Reilly, *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, 258.

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(1968); and Marvin Jackmon, author of *Flowers for the Trashman* (1965—discussed later in this chapter).

Blues for Mister Charlie

One of the most powerful and influential civil rights plays of the 1960s was based on the almost decade-old murder case of Emmett Till in Mississippi. James Baldwin, already well-known as a novelist and essayist, proved he was also a talented dramatist with his first Broadway play, *Blues for Mister Charlie*.

The son of a preacher, James Baldwin was born in 1924, grew up in New York, and after graduating from high school worked at a variety of odd jobs while struggling to become a writer.[52] In 1948 he moved to Paris, which both as an African American and as a homosexual he found liberating. The subject of almost all of his work, however, remained American race relations: as one critic later noted, his writing's central preoccupation became "his insistence on removing, layer by layer, the hardened skin with which Americans shield themselves from their country." By the late 1960s, after the publication of his novels *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Another Country* (1962), and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), his nonfiction works *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), and productions of his plays *The Amen Corner* (1955) and *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964), his reputation as a major writer was secure. He died in Paris in 1987.

The highly publicized lynching of Emmett Till in 1955 was the germ of the idea for *Blues for Mister Charlie*. In August 1955, Emmett Till, a brash 14-year old from

[52] This account is based on the Baldwin entry in *Contemporary Authors* CD-ROM (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1994).

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Chicago, visited his uncle near the small town of Money, Mississippi. One day, while chatting with some local kids in front of a grocery store, he showed a picture of a white girl and bragged that she was his girlfriend. Then, on a dare, he went into the store and called the white woman behind the counter "baby." Several days later, the woman's husband, Roy Bryant, and another white man kidnapped Till from his uncle's house. On the banks of the Tallahatchie River they beat him, shot him, tied his body to an old cotton gin, and sunk it in the river. After being acquitted of the crime by an all-white jury, they admitted that they had tried to scare Till, but that when he refused to repent or to beg for mercy, they had felt obliged to kill him.[53]

Baldwin later wrote that he was less fascinated with the facts of the Till case than with the challenge of "draw[ing] a valid portrait of the murderer. ... Something in the man knows—*must* know—that what he is doing is evil; but in order to accept the knowledge the man would have to change. ... The human being, then, in order to protect himself, closes his eyes, compulsively repeats his crimes, and enters a spiritual darkness which no one can describe."[54] Shortly after the assassination of Medgar Evers, whom he had met several times, Baldwin decided to complete the play, then titled *Good Bye Blues for Mister Charlie*.[55]

Baldwin followed much of the basic outline of the Till case, but made a number of changes to intensify the story's political content. Most importantly, he changed the lynching victim from a saucy boy to a politically involved young man, and the setting from a sleepy backwater to a town already polarized by the civil rights movement. The

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[53] Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 41-46.
[54] Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, 6.
[55] N.a., "Baldwin Powder Keg," *Variety*, 5 June 1963.

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plot centers on the efforts of Parnell James, a white liberal who edits the town newspaper, to determine whether his lifelong friend Lyle Britten, a white shopowner, murdered Richard Henry, the son of the local Black minister. Parnell undertakes this quest at the behest of the minister, who advises him to learn the truth both for the sake of their friendship and for the sake of his own soul. Through several conversations with Lyle, Parnell learns that Richard, who had recently returned from New York to cure himself of a heroin addiction, insulted Lyle's wife and picked a fight with Lyle shortly before being found dead. Lyle is arrested, a kangaroo court acquits him, and he finally admits to Parnell that he killed Richard for refusing to apologize. The play ends with Parnell ending his friendship with Lyle and joining a civil rights protest march in Richard's memory.

Like the society the play depicts, the stage itself is segregated: white characters appear primarily on one side and Black characters on the other. The first two acts move flowingly among the church, a Black nightclub, Lyle's home and store, and various other locations around town as Parnell attempts to determine for himself Lyle's innocence or guilt. The third act is set entirely in the segregated courthouse, where both prosecution and defense attorneys vilify Richard, his family, and friends rather than Lyle.

In structure, the play owes much to Greek tragedy. Throughout, a divided chorus of Black and white townspeople chant comments on the developing tale of murder and recrimination. As in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the plot centers on a murder mystery to which the audience knows the answer all along, but which ultimately reflects profoundly on the investigator himself. And as in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the final passage is a stylized trial sequence at the end of which the killer is set free.

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The major characters are based on types, but they and their relationships are subtly and fascinatingly nuanced. Parnell, representing the "thinking" South, begins the play considering himself better informed and more principled than the mass of white townspeople; on the witness stand, however, he cannot find the strength to refute Lyle's wife's false claim that Richard attempted to rape her. Lyle and his wife are poor Southern crackers, but they share an authentic love for one another and a real (if utterly misguided) desire to build a better world for their children. Richard Henry is talented and charismatic, but is driven by his abiding hatred of white people to collecting white girlfriends like trinkets, to punishing himself with heroin, and finally to precipitating his own death by manufacturing the confrontation with Lyle. And Richard's father, Meridian Henry, comes seriously to question his own position both as a minister and as the town's leading advocate of nonviolence.

Sexual attractions among the play's characters are more explicit, more pervasive, and more frequently interracial than in any previous civil rights drama. Richard brags and shows photographs (described by some as pornographic) of the many white girlfriends he had in New York. Both Meridian and Parnell lust after Richard's current girlfriend Juanita, who is Black. Lyle and Parnell often discuss the Black women who in their younger days they used as sexual toys, and Lyle is rumored to have murdered the husband of one of these women. Parnell's current white lover accuses him of naming, during orgasm, a former, possibly Black lover. Indeed, almost every character in the play is in some way attracted to almost every other character, thus making sexual longing the counterweight against which the town's racial hatred is balanced. And as a result of all this race mixing, Meridian notes in a sermon, the people against whom the Blacks are strug-

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gling "are now, in very truth, their kinfolk, their brothers and their sisters and their parents" (105).

As a strongly political work, Black and white perspectives on Jim Crow and the civil rights movement fill the play. In the first scene, a nonviolence training session at Meridian's church, one Black activist—who was recently released from a chain gang for "trespassing in the white waiting room of the bus station" (123)—complains that all they have accomplished in a year of nonviolent protest is that now "they'll let us into that crummy library downtown which was obsolete in 1897" (15-16). Shortly thereafter, Lyle and his wife discuss ways for the town's white businesses to survive a Black boycott (20-21), and Lyle later recalls the good old days when "you could always get you a nigger to help you catch a nigger" (69). White racists, led by the white preacher, accuse the civil rights movement of being a "Communistic" plot of "northern agitators," who use the courts and federal marshalls to help get their way (78-79, 113). After his son's death, Meridian wonders whether "I was wrong not to let the [Black] people arm" (55), and accuses even Parnell of complicity, saying "*All* white men are Mister Charlie" (59). At the trial, he testifies that Richard was undone by "*your* guns, *your* hoses, *your* dogs, *your* judges, *your* law-makers, *your* folly, *your* pride, *your* cruelty, *your* cowardice, *your* money, *your* chain gangs, and *your* churches" (137). And the play closes with a protest march.

Elia Kazan, who had originally encouraged Baldwin to write a play about the Emmett Till case, hoped to direct *Blues for Mister Charlie* at Lincoln Center. However, Rip Torn, a member of the Actors Studio, convinced Baldwin that the Lincoln Center organization was (in Kazan's words) "altogether too lily-white" and that the Actors

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Studio should produce the play instead. The rehearsal process proved excruciating both for Baldwin and for the company: while cutting the script down from its original five hours of stage time, Baldwin agonized over whether to make the play anti-white; at Baldwin's behest, the director, Frank Corsaro, was replaced by Burgess Meredith; and Baldwin once even snapped under the stress, climbed a ladder on stage, and harangued Lee Strasberg and the company for a full forty-five minutes.[56]

Despite its troubled rehearsal process, the play's opening was a major event. The superb twenty-four member cast included Torn as Lyle, Pat Hingle as Parnell, Percy Rodriguez as Meridian, Al Freeman, Jr. as Richard, and Diana Sands as Juanita. The play opened 23 April 1964—the quadricentennial of Shakespeare's birth, incidentally—at the ANTA Theatre at 245 West 52 Street.[57] Baldwin dedicated the play, in a program note, "to the memory of Medgar Evers, and his widow and his children, and to the memory of the dead children of Birmingham."[58]

The play drew mixed, but mostly positive notices. To the *Amsterdam News'* Jesse H. Walker it was "a surging, angry, powerful drama" that "has now stunned and conquered Broadway."[59] To Leonard Harris, writing in the *World-Telegram*, Baldwin went "beyond eloquence and power all the way to tenderness," engendering if anything "more pity for Mister Charlie than for his victims."[60] And to the *Times'* Howard

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[56] W. J. Weatherby, *James Baldwin: Artist on Fire* (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1989), 236-255.

[57] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1963-1964*, 335.

[58] Howard Taubman, "Theater: 'Blues for Mister Charlie,'" *New York Times*, 24 April 1964.

[59] Jesse H. Walker, "Baldwin Stuns Broadway With His Powerful Play," *New York Amsterdam News*, 2 May 1964.

[60] Leonard Harris, "Baldwin's 'Blues' Powerful," *New York World-Telegram*, 24 April 1964.

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Taubman the play was reminiscent of Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*, "a thunderous battle cry ... a summons to arms in this generation's burning cause—the establishment in this country of the Negro's full manhood."[61] Some writers quibbled with the play's novelistic structure: the *Daily News*' John Chapman considered its intentions "admirable," but found it an "often confusing" work "couched in the scenery-chewing terms of the turn of the century."[62] And though in the *Herald Tribune* Walter Kerr hailed Baldwin's "fierce rhetorical passion," after the first act he felt the play was marred by longwindedness.[63]

Some white observers, however, were plainly worried by the Black rage the play revealed, and responded to it—much as the play's white chorus overreacts to the civil rights movement—as if it were far more confrontational and militant than it actually was. The *Post*'s Richard Watts, Jr. acknowledged Baldwin's literary abilities, but labeled him a "polemicist" who overstated his message "of furious and completely unrelenting resentment and contempt."[64] John McClain of the *Journal-American* felt that the racial animosity displayed in the play was "based on sheer ignorance and the sort of animal violence that has very little bearing on the infinitely larger dilemma facing us ... if we are to make any headway in our present crisis it will not be aided by exploiting such highly inflammable ingredients."[65] And the *Reporter*'s editors agreed, refusing to print a

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[61] Howard Taubman, "Theater: 'Blues for Mister Charlie,'" *New York Times*, 24 April 1964.

[62] John Chapman, "Baldwin's 'Blues for Mr. Charlie' Impassioned but Disorganized," *Daily News*, 24 April 1964.

[63] Walter Kerr, "Kerr on 'Blues for Mr. Charlie,'" *New York Herald Tribune*, 24 April 1964.

[64] Richard Watts, Jr., "The Angry Drama of James Baldwin," *New York Post*, 24 April 1964.

[65] John McClain, "Bitterness and Anger," *New York Journal-American*, 24 April 1964.

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positive review written by Tom Driver, who immediately resigned in protest.[66]

Despite generally favorable reviews, positive word of mouth, and the element of controversy, the play did not draw audiences, and *Blues for Mister Charlie* struggled through its run of 148 performances before closing 29 August 1964.[67] Nevertheless, the following spring the Actors Studio brought the production to London, where it was an unmitigated disaster. The opening night audience at the Aldwych included members of the rightist British National Party who shouted "Go back to Africa!" at the actors.[68] The English press was so critical of every aspect of the production (especially its "method" acting, billed as the first London had ever seen) that Lee Strasberg, the founder of the Actors Studio, cravenly blamed its failure in part on Baldwin because the play "does not sufficiently convey the human conflict."[69]

The London failure damaged the play's commercial value, and its political value became questionable in the later 1960s when Black separatists characterized Baldwin's support for desegregation as Uncle Tomming. Eldridge Cleaver, for example, in *Soul on Ice*, accused him of hating Blacks and of harboring "a shameful, fanatical fawning" love of whites.[70] Probably because of its checkered financial and critical history, as well as its large cast, the play was rarely produced in later years; not until 1979 was it seen again in New York, and then only in a small Off-Broadway production.[71]

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[66] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1963-1964*, 6.
[67] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1964-1965*, 294.
[68] James Campbell, "Darkness Falls on Plaguetown," *(London) Times Literary Supplement*, 30 October 1992.
[69] James Feron, "'Charlie' Scored by London Critics," *New York Times*, 5 May 1965.
[70] Eldridge Cleaver, quoted in "Baldwin, James," *Contemporary Authors* CD-ROM (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1994).
[71] Howard Thompson, "Going Out Guide," *New York Times*, 30 June 1979.

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Nevertheless, *Blues for Mister Charlie* remains one of richest and most provocative of civil rights plays. A world-weary counterpart to *A Raisin in the Sun*, it is long overdue for a major revival.

The Free Southern Theatre—Summer Tour, 1964

The most ambitious, complex, and problematic theatrical enterprise of the civil rights era was the Free Southern Theatre (1964-1978). Founded, funded, and largely run by Northerners, its goal was no less than the creation of an indigenous Southern company which would bring theatre to—and create theatre with—rural Black communities. That the company ultimately failed is not surprising, considering the political, social, financial, and artistic obstacles it faced; but that it succeeded even briefly is a tribute to the creativity, dedication, and indeed the youthful *hubris* of its members.

Because of its excellent publicity apparatus and close ties to academia, the FST was and is one of the best-documented alternative theatres of its era. In addition to numerous newspaper and magazine articles, the ensemble has been the subject of one book, several dissertations, and many scholarly papers. As regards the FST, therefore, the project of this dissertation is to present an outline of the company's history and accomplishments in the context of the civil rights theatre of its time.

The FST was founded in 1964 by three northern Blacks who had met the previous summer while working for SNCC in Jackson, Mississippi.[72] Gilbert Moses, an Ohio-born

[72] Except where otherwise noted, this history of the FST is summarized from Thomas C. Dent, Richard Schechner, and Gilbert Moses, eds., *The Free Southern Theater by The Free Southern Theater* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969); and Clarissa Myrick Harris, "Mirror of the Movement: The History of the Free Southern Theater as a Microcosm of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, 1963-1978" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1987).

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actor who had performed at Cleveland's Karamu Theatre, had worked as a reporter for the SNCC's Jackson-based newspaper, the *Mississippi Free Press*. John O'Neal, an Illinois native, was an aspiring playwright who had spent two years working in SNCC offices across the South. And Doris Derby, an elementary school teacher and sometime actress from New York, had run SNCC's adult literacy program at Tougaloo College, a predominantly Black institution near Jackson.

Moses, O'Neal, and Derby agreed that the civil rights movement's political initiatives were far ahead of its cultural enterprises. To help provide the needed balance, they decided to found a new theatre company in Jackson to address the needs of Southern Blacks. According to O'Neal, the Free Southern Theatre was so named not only because it was to have no admission charge, but also because "we are seeking a new kind of liberation—a liberation from old forms of theatre, old techniques and ideas. A freedom to find new forms of theatrical expression and to find expression in people who have never expressed themselves in theatre before." Furthermore, the FST's founders, though inspired by the civil rights movement, did not aspire to an agit-prop aesthetic: instead, their goal was to stimulate their audiences to "things that come, logically at least, before action: thought, reflection, criticism."[73] They wrote a manifesto laying out the company's goals of presenting plays combining "art and social awareness," and of developing "a theatrical form and style ... that is as unique to the Negro people as the origin of blues and jazz."[74]

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[73] N.a., "Dialogue: The Free Southern Theatre," 65.
[74] "A General Prospectus for the Establishment of a Free Southern Theater," in Dent, *The Free Southern Theater*, 3-4.

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Once the decision to found the FST had been made, the company was created with remarkable speed and energy, albeit with a number of false starts. By the early spring of 1964, Moses, O'Neal, and Derby had organized weekly meetings and theatrical workshops at Tougaloo College for prospective company members. They had planned a ten-week summer pilot in Jackson as well as a full September-to-May touring season, and had selected seven plays for production, including Ossie Davis' *Purlie Victorious*, Langston Hughes' *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, John O. Killens' *Lower Than the Angels*, Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence* and *Happy Ending*, Ann Flagg's *Great Gettin' Up Morning*, and a modern adaptation of *Antigone*.[75] They had rehearsed scenes from several of these plays and had begun to scout Mississippi towns for a tour. SNCC's national publicity and fund-raising network had helped find them New York office space, volunteers, and well-known sponsors including Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Ossie Davis, James Baldwin, and Odetta.[76]

In late spring or early summer, Derby dropped out of the FST: as a woman, she charged, she had been relegated to degrading administrative functions. She was quickly replaced by Richard Schechner, then a young white theatre professor at Tulane University in New Orleans. Schechner's participation in the FST changed the organization in several important and controversial ways. His very presence integrated the leadership, emphasizing the FST's message as an integrationist rather than a separatist organization. In the fall of 1964, largely at his insistence, the company moved its headquarters out of Mississippi to New Orleans, where he felt it would have better access to publicity and

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[75] Stuart W. Little, "They'll Take Drama Into the South," *New York Herald Tribune*, 2 April 1964, in Dent, *The Free Southern Theater*, 12-14.

[76] N.a., "Meeting," *New Yorker*, 11 April 1964.

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backing from the Black middle class. Finally, his input into the play selection process probably gave the company's work more of an avant garde and (for want of a better word) Eurocentric tone than it would have had otherwise. These changes probably helped the FST in its crucial publicity and fund-raising activities, but may have also limited its artistic vision and therefore its chance of long-term success.

In early July 1964, just as the Mississippi Summer Project was getting into high gear, the FST's leadership realized that disorganization and insufficient resources had ruined any chance of the group accomplishing its ambitious summer pilot season. In a scramble to salvage what they could of the summer, Moses and O'Neal assembled an integrated cast of half-a-dozen actors plus a guitarist, and put *In White America* into rehearsal. The show was selected both to educate white audience members and, Schechner said, to give Blacks "an awareness of the process of history as well as outline for them a rational means of changing it."[77] Also, because *In White America* is less a play than a series of brief scenes and songs, it was a fairly easy show to stage quickly. The script was rewritten slightly to give it a more militant perspective, and a week into the tour, after the bodies of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner were discovered, a new scene was added about the movement's newest martyrs.

The production was a classic seat-of-the-pants endeavor. Virtually every actor had multiple responsibilities: Moses directed, O'Neal produced, Susan Tabor (the one professional in the cast) sewed costumes, etc. On 31 July 1964, at Tougaloo College, the FST gave its first performance. Over the next month, on makeshift stages in churches,

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[77] Quoted in Stuart W. Little, "South to See Int[egrated Theatre]," *New York Herald Tribune*, 30 July 1964.

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fields, movie theatres, community centers, and freedom schools, the company appeared in over a dozen towns and cities at the core of the Summer Project, among them McComb, Hattiesburg, Biloxi, Meridian, Jackson, Greenwood, Ruleville, and Indianola.[78]

Most audiences consisted of Black sharecroppers and farmers, community activists, and a scattering of Black and white civil rights workers. Few had seen a play before—in fact, a performance in a movie theatre was disrupted by youths disappointed at the show's lack of chase scenes and violence. More often, however, audiences responded as they might have in church, with frequent shouts of "That's right!" "Amen!" "You tell it!" The few local whites who attended performances were usually northern-educated liberals or, as happened once, members of a Mennonite sect. In Indianola, the birthplace of the White Citizens Council, twenty-five Council members, escorted by forty-two white policemen, arrived *en masse* to investigate reports that the Summer Project was communist-infiltrated. Polite and quiet throughout the performance, they found *In White America* well-acted, historically accurate—and Red.[79]

Northern journalists—especially those writing for the New York papers—showed their fascination with the FST in a series of articles praising the company's careful planning and long-range goals. Surprisingly, however, hardly any seem to have ventured to Mississippi to attend performances. Elizabeth Sutherland, one of the few who did, wrote in the *Nation* that the FST production of *In White America* was "highly professional and compared very favorably to the original."[80] Sutherland's appraisal was

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[78] Dent, *The Free Southern Theatre*, 19-20.
[79] Elizabeth Sutherland, "Theater of the Meaningful," *Nation*, 19 October 1964, in Dent, *The Free Southern Theater*, 24-29.
[80] Ibid., 25.

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surely an overstatement—the mostly amateur cast was, after all, performing under extraordinary circumstances—but it probably reflected the level of excitement the tour generated for both performers and observers.

The tour answered a number of questions for the FST and its supporters. It showed that there was a real audience for theatre—indeed, activist theatre—even among impoverished and poorly educated rural Blacks. It demonstrated that a young, mostly amateur group of performers armed only with "two boards and a passion" could excite such an audience. It suggested that under the right circumstances art and politics could be combined to the detriment of neither. In sum, as far as the company and its backers were concerned, it proved that the FST should continue.

The last performance of the pilot tour was in New Orleans, which despite misgivings about its distance from Mississippi, the FST had selected as its new headquarters. In New York, Schechner auditioned new recruits, and shortly a stream of new members began to make its way to Louisiana to help build the company at salaries of $35 per week.

We will pick up the FST's story again several months later, as it prepared to open its first season.

Kaleidoscope Players

Though the Free Southern Theatre was the most ambitious Southern theatre company dedicated to civil rights goals, it was not the only one. The Kaleidoscope Players, an integrated troupe founded and directed by a white Alabama drama professor,

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also performed for integrated audiences throughout the South for several years in the early 1960s.[81]

Kaleidoscope was founded about 1960 by William Fegan, then the head of the Theatre Department at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. From the beginning, the company integrated both its casts and its audiences—then a fairly radical practice for the deep South. Most of the company's early productions, however, were of fairly standard works, including *Androcles and the Lion*, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, and *Paint Your Wagon*. In later years, Kaleidoscope received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and produced plays more clearly associated with the civil rights movement, including *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Purlie Victorious*.

Kaleidoscope also attempted, with limited success, to use nonviolent tactics to integrate other audiences than its own. On at least one occasion in the spring of 1964, for example, a group of well-dressed local Black and white youths led by Fegan tried to attend a play in a segregated Tuscaloosa high school. The gatekeepers, claiming the show was a "restricted performance, not open to outsiders and troublemakers," refused them admission. Fegan, not wanting to endanger the group by escalating the confrontation, withdrew.

Little more is known of this almost-forgotten company, but its very existence indicates a grass-roots level of support for civil rights theatre that has been largely overlooked.

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[81] All information included here on Kaleidoscope is based on Tom Engatti, interview with the author, 6 July 1994. Engatti worked as a volunteer with the company in the spring and summer of 1964.

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First Step to Freedom

At some point during the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project, a play entitled *First Step to Freedom* was produced to help interest students in reading. Written by J[ennie] E[lizabeth] Franklin (b. 1937), the play was performed under the sponsorship of CORE and SNCC at the Sharon Waite Community Center in Harmony, Mississippi.

Little else is known of the play. Judging by its title, its sponsoring organizations, and its context, it probably drew the connection between the ability to read, the right to vote, and the political power that could grow from the exercise of voting rights. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, J. E. Franklin became an active Black feminist playwright whose works included *The In Crowd* (1967), *Black Girl* (1969), *Mau Mau Room* (1969), and *Cut In the Lights and Call the Law* (1972).[82]

Ballad of the Winter Soldiers

In the late 1950s *A Land Beyond the River* helped raise money for several civil rights organizations, and in 1960 *Cabaret for Freedom* did the same for the SCLC. In 1964 CORE entered the fray by commissioning *Ballad of the Winter Soldiers*, an ambitious pageant that including historical readings, singing, dancing, and orchestral music.

Earlier in the century, beginning with Du Bois' *The Star of Ethiopia*, pageants had been popular among African American playwrights for depicting political and historical issues. The form was well-suited for political rallies: it was simple, symbolic, could use

[82] Geneviève E. Fabre, *Afro-American Drama, 1850-1975*, in *Afro-American Poetry and Drama, 1760-1975* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1979), 365-366; James V. Hatch and OMANii Abdullah, eds., *Black Playwrights, 1823-1977: An Annotated Bibliography of Plays* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1977), 87-88.

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enormous casts, and rarely required much line memorization. It is rather surprising, then, that pageants were virtually ignored by civil rights playwrights for two decades following World War II. Perhaps they had come to seem old-fashioned; perhaps they required larger casts and audiences than were usually available; or perhaps they smacked too strongly of agit-prop for the red-baiting 1950s. In any event, with the minor exception of Hughes' *The Ballot and Me*, *Ballad of the Winter Soldiers* was the first American civil rights pageant since Owen Dodson's *New World A-Comin'* in 1944.

In mid-1964, CORE granted the Black writer John Oliver Killens (1916-1987) a $400 commission to write a play for a fund-raising event to be held at Lincoln Center. Killens, who was best known for his novels *Youngblood* (1954) and *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1962), turned for help to his friend Loften Mitchell, the author of *A Land Beyond the River*. They split the commission, and the result of their collaboration was *Ballad of the Winter Soldiers*, a pageant that placed the civil rights movement in historical perspective with other liberation movements.

The title of Killens and Mitchell's play is an inversion of a famous phrase of Thomas Paine, who warned that "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country."[83] In the context of the play, "winter soldiers" are activists whose commitment survives time and adversity. In the classic civil rights mold, *Ballad of the Winter Soldiers* advocates integration rather than separatism, and includes passages about Irish rebels, the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, as well as the modern

[83] *Ballad of the Winter Soldiers* has never been published. This synopsis is derived from Robert Shelton, "Pageant Is Given to Benefit CORE," *New York Times*, 29 September 1964.

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heroes of the civil rights movement. Its spoken passages are intended to alternate with choral music, orchestral music, and dancing.

Ballad of the Winter Soldiers was presented as part of CORE's fund-raiser at Lincoln Center's Philharmonic Hall on 28 September 1964.[84] It was produced by Dorothy Pitman, directed by James E. Wall, and featured an 18-voice chorus conducted by Howard A. Roberts and an orchestra conducted by John Richards. The all-star cast included Ruby Dee, John Henry Faulk, Dick Gregory, Lincoln Kilpatrick, Frederick O'Neal, Robert Ryan, Madeleine Sherwood, Frank Silvera, Calvin White, Shelley Winters, and Joseph Wiseman. *Ballad of the Winter Soldiers* was followed by satirical skits (by an unspecified author) about sit-ins, and a speech by CORE's James Farmer. With ticket prices ranging as high as $100, the audience, according to Mitchell, was "swank" and "sharp." Because the show started late and included a number of false starts and flubbed lines, there was a general impression that the production had had insufficient rehearsal time. Nevertheless, the audience reacted so positively that the possibility was raised of moving the show to an off-Broadway house. A policy dispute between Pitman and CORE, however, scotched any chance of the show's transfer to off-Broadway.

The Free Southern Theatre—Fall/Winter, 1964

The Free Southern Theatre spent the better part of the fall of 1964 establishing itself in New Orleans and preparing for its next tour of Mississippi. Several of *In White America*'s cast members left the company, but many more new ones arrived (mostly from

[84] This summary of *Ballad of the Winter Soldiers*' New York production is based upon Robert Shelton, "Pageant Is Given to Benefit CORE," *New York Times*, 29 September 1964; Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994; and Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 202.

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the North), bringing the full-time staff to eight, plus several part-time volunteers. Two of the new members were experienced professionals: Severn Darden had performed with Second City, and Murray Levy was a veteran of Broadway and Off-Broadway whom O'Neal described as "a Jewish Black nationalist."[85]

The original plan of five to seven autumn plays was quickly trimmed to a more realistic two. The first of these was Davis' *Purlie Victorious*, which, in keeping with their founding aesthetic, Moses, O'Neal, and Schechner chose over Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* because they thought it more likely to provoke the audience to productive thought than to destructive action.[86] More problematic was the second play, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Selected partly for its brilliant, stylized depictions of power relationships, and partly as a barometer of the rural audience's limits, wildly varying audience responses to *Godot* would cause many in the FST to question the company's direction. (A third play, an improvisational piece by Darden called *The South Shall Rise Again*, was also originally scheduled and appears to have been partially rehearsed, but was canceled before its premiere.)[87]

Rehearsals were held first in various members' homes and later in Black churches. They began in late September and lasted eight weeks—primarily because the tour was timed to begin the third week of November, after the end of the Mississippi cotton picking season. As with *In White America*, virtually every company member had multiple responsibilities: Moses, O'Neal, and Schechner served as co-producers, Schechner directed *Purlie*, and an actor named James Cromwell directed *Godot*.

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[85] Dent, *The Free Southern Theater*, 36.
[86] Harris, "Mirror of the Movement," 37.
[87] Dent, *The Free Southern Theater*, 37.

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The tour began in New Orleans on 11 November 1964 and ended two months later in New York City. Many of the twenty-eight destinations were Mississippi towns that had hosted *In White America* the previous summer. Memphis, Atlanta, and (to the disgust of some company members) New York appear to have been added largely for publicity and fund-raising purposes. Most stops were scheduled for two days, with *Purlie* usually presented first and *Godot* second.[88]

For the smaller towns, the arrival of the FST was a notable social event. The town of Hattiesburg, for example, was plastered with signs saying "The Free Southern Theatre, the Theatre of Our Own Coming Back."[89] The actors observed that audiences in towns of under 10,000 were consistently more excited by the FST than those in towns of 20,000.[90] Like the previous summer, Mississippi audiences were mostly Black, while those in the large cities were integrated.

The audience response to *Purlie* was predictable: despite what the company considered the raggedness of the production, audiences loved it, catching every nuance and roaring with laughter at every joke. Written by a Black man from rural Georgia and set on a cotton plantation, it was about them. To drive home the reality even further, in at least one performance (in Indianola) the character Gitlow made his first entrance from a real cotton field, with cotton overflowing from his pockets.[91]

Godot was a different story. Some audiences were fascinated by it, while others were bored, shocked, and mystified. The actors noticed that the more aware an audience

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[88] Ibid., 38.
[89] N.a., "Dialogue: The Free Southern Theatre," 75.
[90] Dent, *The Free Southern Theater*, 57.
[91] Ibid., 53.

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was of *Godot*'s reputation as "deep," the less likely that audience was to enjoy the play's broad, vaudevillian humor. In some towns, audiences would laugh at and with the characters, shouting "We're not waiting!"[92] In Ruleville, however, after a very successful first act, Fanny Lou Hamer stood up at intermission—without having been invited—and announced that "everyone should pay strict attention to the play because it's due to waiting that the Negro is as far behind as he is." After that, the second act dragged as the audience struggled to analyze the play's enigmatic symbolism.[93]

The most unusual aspect of the production of *Godot* was the integrated cast's experimentation with different combinations of blackface and whiteface. Gogo and Pozzo were played by white actors, Didi and Lucky by Blacks. At the start of the tour, no special makeup was used, but after a month on the road, director Cromwell (who played Pozzo) tried performing in whiteface to foreground issues of race and power. According to Moses, the effect on the audience was so powerful that it detracted from the play: "the image of the white man holding the rope around a Negro's neck shocked them out of comprehension." Various other permutations of whiteface and blackface were tried, but none entirely pleased Cromwell and the cast. "Finally," O'Neal later recalled, "we rejected the idea of whiteface, but kept it anyway because there was no other way to deal with the problem of racial hangups."[94]

The racial elements of the production of *Godot* may have been unsatisfying to the actors, but many audience members found them highly provocative. During a discussion following one Mississippi performance, a man stood up intending to make a comment on

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[92] N.a., "Dialogue: The Free Southern Theatre," 70.
[93] Dent, *The Free Southern Theater*, 53.
[94] N.a., "Dialogue: The Free Southern Theatre," 71.

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the play, but was so filled with emotion that he could only blurt out "slave ... whupped him ... no! ..."[95] And in another town, a man asked "When Pozzo puts the cap on Lucky's head to make him think, does that mean that the FST wants to put the thinking cap on us?"[96]

The FST finished its tour in February in New York, a city about which the company had strong but divided opinions. Some denounced it as the zenith of empty bourgeois culture. Others, fearing that the critics would pan their crude *Purlie*, argued that only *Godot* should be performed there. Finally, two separate benefit performances were agreed upon, the first at the New School and the second at the American Place Theatre.[97] Despite the fact that much of the FST's funding came from New Yorkers, Schechner disparaged the New York audience as "people [who] came to do their Movement duty; we helped them cope with their hangups and they gave us money."[98] And Levy, playing Gogo, actually spat at the audience as he delivered the line "What, in this muck heap?"[99]

As the FST concluded its first season, its leadership and backers weighed its accomplishments. On the negative side, the summer tour had lasted just one month and the fall-winter season two; only three plays had been done rather than the hoped-for seven or eight; no new works had been produced; not enough Southerners had joined the company; and the productions and performances, though energetic, were workmanlike at best. On the other hand, the company's entire budget for the year had been a minuscule

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[95] Ibid., 68.
[96] Dent, *The Free Southern Theater*, 53.
[97] N.a., "Free Southern Theatre Playing 2 N.Y. Benefits," *Variety*, 3 February 1965.
[98] N.a., "Dialogue: The Free Southern Theatre," 69.
[99] Dent, *The Free Southern Theater*, 61.

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$20,000; company members had suffered no violence at the hands of white supremacists, as many had feared; and thousands of people—many of them illiterate and with no prior exposure to live theatre—had attended FST performances.

The leadership decided that the concept and purpose of the FST were so profoundly important that even a checkered first season had to be considered a success. "The real distinction of the FST," Schechner said that spring, "would be that it goes out and seeks its audience rather than waiting for an audience to come to it—truly popular theatre whose audience is coming to the theatre for the first time."[100] Marshall MacLuhan would soon popularize the idea that "the medium is the message"—that the means by which a message is conveyed often communicates more than the message itself. In the case of the FST, the message of an integrated ensemble bringing free theatre to rural Black towns was as important as any message contained in its plays.

As the winter and spring drew on, then, the FST prepared for its next season as "the Theatre of Our Own."

The Toilet *and* The Slave

LeRoi Jones' next two plays, *The Toilet* and *The Slave*, were presented together Off-Broadway in December 1964. Unlike *Dutchman*, these plays depict Black characters who achieve power (or at least feelings of power) by victimizing whites who love them. Though both plays must have been inspired in large part by the collapse of Jones' own interracial, interfaith marriage, they also expressed the anti-white rage then beginning to be publicly acknowledged by a growing number of Blacks.

[100] N.a., "Dialogue: The Free Southern Theatre," 76.

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The Toilet, a one-act play, is set in the boys' bathroom of an urban high school.[101] Its simple plot concerns the beating by a Black gang of a Hispanic youth for having sent a homosexual love-letter to the gang's leader. Early in the play the gang drags Karolis, the Hispanic, to the bathroom to fight their leader, known as Foots. Foots, hesitant to hurt the young man who obviously loves him, but also afraid to lessen his authority by refusing to fight, tries to avoid the contest altogether by claiming that Karolis has already been beaten too severely to defend himself. Karolis, furious at being patronized, insists on fighting and quickly begins to get the best of Foots. Just then, however, the gang swoops down on him and beats him unconscious. The play ends with Foots alone with Karolis, weeping and cradling his head in his arms.

The Toilet contains little overt racial content—indeed, most of the characters are not described as being of any particular race, and only a careful reading reveals that the gang is Black and that Karolis is lighter-skinned. The play's overtones of racial politics, however, are inescapable: a white youth is said to have been beaten because he called a gang member a "nigger" (50); Karolis is described as liking to "rub up against half-dead white boys" (50); and the gang is said at another point to intend to "lynch" Karolis for writing the love-letter to Foots (54). In the light of these references, *The Toilet*'s plot can be seen as a reversal of the standard Southern lynching story: instead of a white gang killing a Black for making sexual advances toward a white woman, a Black gang attacks a non-Black for making sexual advances toward one of its own.

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[101] LeRoi Jones, *The Toilet*, in *The Baptism & The Toilet* (New York: Grove, 1966), 33-62.

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The Slave is also in a sense a reversal play. Its two short acts are set entirely in the living room of Bradford and Grace Easely, fortyish white liberal academics in a suburban university town under siege by a Black army.[102] As the play opens, Walker Vessels, Grace's ex-husband and the leader of the insurgency, breaks into the house, drunk, to kidnap his mixed-race daughters, who are said to be asleep upstairs. Surprised by Bradford and Grace, he draws a pistol and in effect holds them hostage while they try to convince him not to take the girls.

The couple's initial attempts to reason with Walker quickly escalate into verbal and physical violence. Bradford warns him that "if I get the slightest advantage, some cracker soldier will be bayoneting you before the night is finished" (52); Walker responds by beating him savagely; and Grace shrieks that Walker is a "nigger murderer" (54). As they rail against one another's shortcomings, it emerges that Walker is horribly divided within himself: he continues to love Grace and is furious with her for not having supported his decision to become a Black nationalist. "I was crying out against three hundred years of oppression; not against individuals," he explains, to which she responds simply, "But it's the individuals who are dying" (72). In time, Walker sits down drunk and exhausted, and appears to go to sleep. Bradford is preparing to jump him when he awakens, and in the ensuing struggle Bradford is shot dead. Moments later, the house is hit by a mortar, and Grace is crushed beneath a collapsing ceiling. As she lies dying, Walker callously tells her that their children are dead. He then exits, but as the lights dim, a child's cry is heard. After the sound of further explosions, however, it is silent.

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[102] LeRoi Jones, *The Slave*, in *Dutchman and The Slave: Two Plays by LeRoi Jones* (New York: William Morrow, 1964), 39-88.

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The Slave reflects, even more directly than *Dutchman*, the growing fury felt by some Blacks against white injustice. Though Walker sees Grace and Bradford as representatives of an oppressive system, and though like many radicals he finds their liberalism threatening, he is in no sense victimized by them personally. Instead, he is a sort of intellectual Bigger Thomas, channeling his wrath into an organized rebellion rather than into a single, self-destructive spree. At one point, in fact, Grace remarks that "Mr. Vessels is playing the mad scene from *Native Son*" (57). Echoing *Dutchman*, Walker recognizes that "I have killed for all times any creative impulse I will ever have by the depravity of my murderous philosophies," and like Genet in *The Blacks*, he fears that Black rule will merely "change, ha, the complexion of tyranny" (66). But like Macbeth, his regrets and misgivings do not sway him from his course of bloody retribution: he is heroic in large part because of his awareness of his sacrifices.

The Toilet and *The Slave* were produced Off-Broadway by Leo Garen (who also directed) and Stan Swerdlow. In *The Toilet*, Hampton Clanton played Foots, and Jaime Sanchez played Karolis. In *The Slave*, Al Freeman, Jr. was Walker, Nan Martin was Grace, and Jerome Raphel was Bradford. The shows opened at the St. Marks Playhouse on 16 December 1964.[103]

Both plays drew mixed but generally poor notices. I have found no Black-written reviews, though Loften Mitchell later wrote approvingly of Jones' message that "American society is a foul toilet, a slave society."[104] The *Saturday Review* expected many ticket holders to walk out on *The Toilet*, though it promised that "those who stay

[103] Howard Taubman, "'Slave' and 'Toilet' by LeRoi Jones Open," *New York Times*, 17 December 1964.
[104] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 204.

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... will have experienced a vivid and indelible work of art."[105] The *Times*' Howard Taubman recognized that "Vessels is the violent, uncompromising voice of the Negro in furious rebellion," but found Jones' playwriting "about as unsubtle as the law will allow," and wondered "whether his rage is not at war with his instincts as an artist."[106] The *Morning Telegraph*'s Whitney Bolton agreed, contending that the plays' only purpose was to say to whites "We are angry at you."[107] And the *New Yorker*, comparing the plays to *Dutchman*, remarked that "the wit is curdled by spite, the passion has dwindled into brutality and sexual swagger, the rage sounds prefabricated, the characters are nebulous, and the only surprise is that both plays are so boring."[108]

Those who see art as something to be controlled were not in the least bored by *The Toilet*. Soon after the plays opened, the New York City License Department charged that *The Toilet* was obscene and asked the District Attorney to file formal charges. The D. A. demurred, a surprise considering that his office had recently tried and convicted the comedian Lenny Bruce for performing obscenely in a Greenwich Village coffee house.[109] Perhaps the D. A. decided that one such public conviction was enough; or perhaps the more "artistic" context of the theatre protected *The Toilet* (in this case at least) from the accusation of lacking any redeeming social value.

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[105] N.a., "Crossing Lines," *Saturday Review*, 9 January 1965.
[106] Howard Taubman, "'Slave' and 'Toilet' by LeRoi Jones Open," *New York Times*, 17 December 1964.
[107] Whitney Bolton, "Negro Playwright's Ideals Lost in Unbridled Ferocity," *New York Morning Telegraph*, 12 December 1964.
[108] N.a., "Off-Broadway: Bang! Pow! Nope!" *New Yorker*, 26 December 1964.
[109] Paul Hoffman, "DA Refuses To Act Against Off-B'way Play," *New York Post*, 20 January 1965.

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In March, however, Burgess Meredith's Los Angeles production of *Dutchman* and *The Toilet* did not escape so easily. First, the owner of the Las Palmas Theatre, where the production was to appear, objected to some of *The Toilet*'s dialogue and stage business and refused to allow the show to open.[110] Then the producer, Gene Persson, moved the show to the Warner Playhouse, where it was raided by the vice squad on its opening night, 25 March 1965.[111] While the legalities were being untangled, the city authorities permitted further performances only "on a non-charging basis," though donations were allowed.[112] Finally, both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Hollywood Citizen-News* refused to run ads for the show, and the licensing board threatened to suspend the theatre owner's temporary license if he let the show continue.[113] Beset from all sides, the production finally folded.

Why censor *The Toilet*? The language of *Dutchman* and *The Slave* is fairly explicit both sexually and politically, and both plays' plots involve on-stage murders. The language of *The Toilet*, on the other hand, though it includes a large amount of suggestive slang, is comparatively mild; its political content, while real, is almost entirely subtextual; and its action, though it includes physical violence, has no suggestion of murder. The censors claimed they objected to the play's foul language and homosexual subject matter—but veiled homosexual subjects had been tolerated on stage for years, certainly since Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). It is hard to escape the conclusion that the censors aimed their darts at *The Toilet* not because they found its message or format so

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[110] N.a., "Theatre Nixes Toilet," *Variety*, 17 March 1965.
[111] Howard Atlee, "LeRoi Jones' 'The Toilet' and 'Dutchman' Closed by Vice Squad in Los Angeles" (press release), Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.
[112] N.a., "L.A. Crackdown On 'Dutchman'-'Toilet,'" *Variety*, 31 March 1965.
[113] N.a., "'Harassment' Hurts LeRoi Jones Plays," *New York Times*, 6 April 1965.

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objectionable, but simply because its language and content made it more vulnerable to puritanical attack than Jones' other plays. In any event, the New York production outlived the Los Angeles debacle. It ran for a respectable 151 performances, closing 25 April 1965.[114]

A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel

The San Francisco Mime Troupe entered the race-relations fray in mid-1965 with *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel*. Like *Fly Blackbird* and other recent productions that had updated minstrelsy to make political points, the Mime Troupe's show highlighted the absurdity of American racial stereotypes by presenting them in a modern political context. Though other predominantly white groups had already produced Black-written shows with messages bordering on Black nationalism, the Mime Troupe was the first white organization to develop such a show collaboratively.

In 1959 the dancer, actor, and avowed Marxist Ron Davis had founded the Mime Troupe (pronounced *meem*, as in French) as an alternative to the San Francisco Actors Workshop, where he had worked for several years and which he had come to consider hopelessly bourgeois. For its first few years the company specialized in avant-garde left-wing mime performances, including a Brechtian version of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. In 1962, however, it embraced *commedia dell'arte*, arguing that the Italian Renaissance form's stock characters, broad gestures, and farcical plots made it a perfect street entertainment with which to poke fun at the ruling classes.[115] Most of the company's productions have been done in *commedia* style, including an antiwar adaptation of Goldoni's *L'Amant*

[114] Guernsey, *Best Plays of 1964-1965*, 350.
[115] Taylor, *People's Theatre in Amerika*, 284-287.

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Militaire (1967), the feminist *The Independent Female or a Man has his Pride* (1970), the anti-yuppy *Hotel Universe* (1977), and the anti-Reagan *1985* (1984).[116]

A Minstrel Show was typical of the company's political radicalism, but anomalous in using minstrelsy as its format. In 1964, when Davis and the Mime Troupe's other leaders decided to do a show about American racism, they at first had in mind a West Coast production of *The Blacks*. For a variety of reasons, however, including their complaint that Genet's New York producers "made sure that no one did the production unless they profited," they decided instead to do a minstrel show. "Whereas our commedia poked holes in American stuffiness," Davis later wrote, "the minstrel show upchucked the unmelted pieces from the melting pot." The goal was to "get right into the problem of racism—ours and everyone else's—by unearthing those stereotypes, clichés, cornballs and all that Uncle Tom jive."[117]

In October 1964, before the script had even been written, the Mime Troupe began casting and rehearsing the show.[118] The most important role, that of Mr. Interlocutor, went to Robert Slattery, a white Bay Area longshoreman and political activist whose imposing persona, resonant voice, and "great, mature, stone WASP-ish face" projected, according to Davis, the essence of "white America." Other cast members were selected for their skill at playing stereotypical Black characters—Uncle Tom, Stepin Fetchit, even radical Blacks—against Slattery's "Mr. America." The final cast, which was all male, consisted of Slattery, three Blacks, and three whites. As the nine month-long rehearsal

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[116] Eugène Van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 24-42.
[117] R. G. Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe: The First Ten Years* (Palo Alto, CA: Ramparts Press, 1975), 49, 52.
[118] Ibid., 199.

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process progressed, Davis and Saul Landau, another Mime Troupe member, collaboratively shaped a two-act show, using old-time minstrel routines and songs as their foundation. They also added additional scenes, written by them or improvised by the cast, as well as a short film. They called the final product *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel.*[119]

The first act includes a good deal of traditional minstrel material, from its cake-walking entrance to comic dialogues, songs, and a satire of a politician's stump speech.[120] The tone begins to turn sardonic with a rendition of "Old Black Joe" during which—to the lyrics "I'm comin', I'm comin'"—one character mimes masturbating himself to climax. Then follows a passage called Nego [sic] History Week, intended to deflate patronizing recitations of Black accomplishments (possibly including such works as Duberman's *In White America*): it concludes with the minstrels banging chairs and yelling "Black is beautiful. Blood in the streets. Revenge." Next is a LeRoi Jones-like "chick/stud" scene: a Black man meets and quickly beds a white woman, but when she begins to grow attached to him he says "Sheeeeet, you been reading too much James Baldwin" and tries to strangle her. The act concludes with a comic film, *O Dem Watermelons!*, in which watermelons that have been stabbed, kicked, chased down hill, and sexually abused pull themselves together to become the aggressors. In performance, the film was accompanied by a chant (performed live by the cast) written by the minimalist composer Steve Reich.

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[119] Ibid., 50-52.

[120] *A Minstrel Show* has never been published in its entirety. This synopsis is derived from Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 53-63; Taylor, *People's Theatre in Amerika*, 289-292; and Remy Charlip, "Theatre: A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel," *Village Voice*, 27 October 1966.

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The second act is less varied than the first, consisting of two short playlets. The first is based on the shooting by police of a Harlem youth, a real incident that touched off race riots in New York in 1964. The second is a bathroom scene, in part a satire of LeRoi Jones' *The Toilet*, in which a liberal white man (wearing a sign labeled "White) and a tomming Black (labeled "Negro") politely debate who will use the urinal first. They are joined by a less inhibited Black (labeled "Nigger"), who disgusted by both of them, pulls out a razor and shouts, "One of you is going to get it, maybe both. All I gotta do is figure out which one of you I hates the most."

In production, the company made a number of choices which strongly enhanced the effectiveness of the script. All the characters except Mr. Interlocutor performed in black-face and white gloves so their "true" races would not be apparent. During the inter-mission, the minstrels pulled women—especially white women—from the audience and danced lewdly with them to the beat of Louis X's Black Muslim rumba, "White Man's Heaven is a Black Man's Hell." And during the curtain calls, after the minstrels took off their gloves to reveal their "real" races, the white actors ordered the Blacks (who continued shuffling) to sweep up.

Concerned that some of the show's sequences might not be "on the right track," the company held a number of previews for invited audiences. One CORE worker com-mented that the show was not "correct," while a SNCC worker wanted to take the whole show on the road to SNCC offices throughout the South. According to Davis, the com-pany used comments from such guests to correct and clarify the show's political points.[121]

[121] Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 57-58.

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A Minstrel Show opened 17 June 1965 at the Commedia Theatre in Palo Alto, California.[122] Kenneth Rexroth, writing in the *San Francisco Examiner*, condemned its "moral frivolity," and the same paper's editorial writers not only denounced the show's "smut ... filth ... bad theater and bad taste," but even suggested that "taxpayers" should apply pressure to eject the troupe from its borrowed theatre.[123] But despite (or perhaps in part because of) the mainstream press' aversion to it, *A Minstrel Show* was a money-maker for the Mime Troupe, which constantly modified the production's content to keep up with current events such as the Watts riots.[124] Despite its success, however, the show seems have appealed primarily to white audiences: the rare newspaper accounts that mention Black attendance almost invariably characterize it as low.

After performing *A Minstrel Show* around San Francisco for about a year, the Mime Troupe took it on the road with a mostly new cast. From the fall of 1966 to the spring of 1967, several profitable tours—primarily to midwestern colleges, but also including stops in Denver, Chicago, and New York—helped subsidize the company's free performances in the Bay Area.

Middle America, however, was much less tolerant than the Bay Area, and the Mime Troupe quickly found itself the target of would-be political censors. Early in *A Minstrel Show*'s first tour, in September 1966, in Denver, Colorado, police arrested several cast members at the end of a performance, charging them with "simulated acts of perversion."[125] As the audience watched, the performers turned their arrests into a political

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[122] Ibid., 200.
[123] Both articles quoted in Lloyd Zimpel, "Surprise in the Wings," *Nation*, 7 March 1966.
[124] Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 71.
[125] Ibid., 72-73.

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spectacle, singing "We'll walk all over this big white world, and I'll let it shine, let it shine," and screaming "You want to know what obscenity is—it's a 16 year old boy shot down in the street—it's Vietnam!"[126] The following February, when the case came to trial, the Mime Troupe's lawyers argued successfully that (as Davis put it) the show's "string of obscenities, simulated sex acts and other garbage was sewn together for the *elevation* of free speech (or civil rights)."[127]

The company retired *A Minstrel Show* in the spring of 1967. By that time, according to Davis, it had become "exhausting to perform" and had begun "to drain the energy of the company what with new cast members, costume repairs and text changes to keep up with changing political developments."[128] By that point too, for many the Vietnam war had replaced the civil rights movement as the most critical national issue, and indeed the Mime Troupe's next major work was an anti-war adaptation of Goldoni's *L'Amant Militaire*. Racial issues, however, have remained important aspects of many of the company's productions, and in 1992 it produced *I Ain't Yo Uncle*, a retelling by playwright Robert Alexander of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from a Black perspective.[129]

The Free Southern Theatre—Summer, 1965

The Free Southern Theatre planned its offerings for the summer of 1965 under the theme "The Year of Revolt."[130] This designation would prove even apter than expected, as over the course of the year the company would experience internal battles over artistic

[126] Remy Charlip, "Theatre: A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel," *Village Voice*, 27 October 1966.
[127] Davis, *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, 72-73.
[128] Ibid., 73.
[129] N.a., "I Ain't Yo Uncle: Revises 'Cabin,'" *Ridgefield Press*, 19-20 February 1992.
[130] Harris, "Mirror of the Movement," 43.

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policies, external harassment from Southern reactionaries, and funding problems that would nearly destroy it.

The New York performances of *Purlie* and *Godot* in February 1965 created an enormous amount of activity in the FST. New actors and directors joined the company, swelling its ranks to fifteen, and volunteers arrived from all over the country to help out. The troupe obtained a semi-permanent space, the top floor of an ancient wooden building (nicknamed The Pentagon) in the Creole section of New Orleans. And plans were drawn up for another two-month summer tour, which was to feature three full productions—Brecht's *The Rifles of Señora Carrar*, O'Casey's *Shadow of a Gunman*, and a reprise of *In White America*—as well as *ad hoc* improvisational dramas based on the experiences of Blacks in Mississippi towns.[131] Not wanting to repeat the exhausting two-night stands of the previous winter, and needing time to work with local people on the improvisational plays, the company planned the tour for more leisurely four-day stops.[132]

The FST's expansion, however, was not without problems. Many within the company were uncomfortable with the choice of plays: *In White America* already seemed dated, *Shadow of a Gunman* and *The Rifles of Señora Carrar* were European works, and all three were by whites. This not only seemed ridiculous in the context of the FST's charter, it hinted at a missionary attitude which the company wanted to avoid. In addition, financial worries were constant: despite paying rock-bottom wages, the company rarely had more than a few weeks' reserve, and ultimately had to cancel one of its productions and abbreviate its tour for lack of funds.

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[131] Dent, *The Free Southern Theater*, 67-68.
[132] Ibid., 56, 80.

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There were external problems as well. To the company's embarrassment, it was never able to establish a rapport with the Black community in which it was headquartered. In fact, its northern, radical orientation—what one new member called "the Movement ideas, the integration, the disrespect for social convention in dress and behavior"—had the effect of alienating the neighbors, who ignored the troupe, apparently in the hope that it would move away.[133] Worse, unlike the previous year, company members were subjected to constant police harassment, which took a comparatively mild form in New Orleans, but which in one Louisiana town grew truly sinister and terrifying.

All three plays were directed by the company's new artistic director, a Belgian émigré named Robert Cordier who had served as the musical coordinator of *Blues for Mister Charlie*. After three months of rehearsal, a financial shortfall forced the cancellation of *Shadow of a Gunman*, though the company hoped (in vain, as it turned out) to replace it with Molière's *George Dandin* and possibly a revival of *Godot*. After previews at New Orleans colleges and churches, the two remaining plays premiered in Jackson, Mississippi on 1 August 1965. Over the next four weeks, the company appeared in five other Mississippi and Louisiana towns with active civil rights organizations. In addition to presenting their two full productions, they worked with the residents of two Louisiana towns to create improvisational dramas entitled, respectively, *The Jonesboro Story* and *The Bogalusa Story*.[134]

While in Jonesboro, FST members experienced the most severe police harassment in the history of civil rights theatre. Late on the night of 15 August 1965, after a rousing

[133] Ibid., 67-68.
[134] Ibid., 78-80, 88.

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performance of *In White America*, three of the company members—Cordier, a foreigner; Joseph Perry, a Black; and William Zukof, a Jew—were driving home from a restaurant when they were stopped by the town's two Black policeman. Guns drawn, the officers sent for the rest of the police force, who took the three to the station house. There, in an abusive ninety-minute interrogation, they accused the whites of homosexuality and the Black of miscegenation. Several of the police made telephone calls to friends—possibly Klansmen—and at 2:45 a.m. released the detainees without their car. Afraid of being ambushed on the long walk home, the three left the road and hid in the woods, from which they could clearly see a police car and two other cars full of armed men searching for them. They eluded the searchers for three hours, and finally went into a house and used the phone to call the Deacons, a local group of Black vigilantes, who rescued them. A CORE official later told them that had they been recaptured, all would certainly have been beaten, and at least one probably killed.[135] Indeed, the story of their detention and release was eerily similar to that of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner the previous summer.

Two weeks later, when only half-way through its planned itinerary, the FST ran so low on funds that it had to lay off several actors and cancel the rest of its tour. The remainder of the company regrouped in New Orleans and launched an all-out effort to raise money. O'Neal tried to cajole more cash from the fund-raisers by blaming the company's artistic shortcomings on its chronic shortage of cash: "We found ourselves drifting artistically," he wrote to the New York committee, "forcing work out in a rather

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[135] Norman Nadel, "An Experiment in Courage," *New York World-Telegram and Sun*, 15 September 1965; Dent, *The Free Southern Theatre*, 85-87.

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hackneyed fashion, coming up with clichés rather than clarity, surface slickness rather than depth, not being able to meet our repertory needs under the pressure of disrupted schedules."[136] But despite his entreaties, by the end of October the lack of money compelled the FST to shut down virtually all operations.[137]

No new funding arrived for several months, until well into 1966. During that time the moderate O'Neal had to leave New Orleans to fight for his conscientious objector draft status, and Moses, increasingly influenced by Black nationalism, began to pull the company in a much more radical direction. Both the troupe and its standards, Moses charged, had become "academic and white." The free admission policy was patronizing to its audiences: "we should dare to be supported by the people we play for." The company should point itself "in a different, non-integrationist direction," should rename itself The Third World Theatre, and should perform more radical African American plays such as Branch's *A Medal for Willie*, Jones' *Dutchman*, and Ward's *Day of Absence*.[138] It should even consider barring whites from performances.[139]

By the time the Free Southern Theatre began to rebuild in 1966, it had begun to consider civil rights in its traditional sense passé. Predictably, over the next several years the company positioned itself less as a civil rights theatre and more as a part of the Black pride, Black arts, Black consciousness, and Black power movements.[140]

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[136] Dent, *The Free Southern Theatre*, 91.
[137] Stuart W. Little, "Free South Theater Halted by Fund Lag," *New York Herald Tribune*, 25 October 1965.
[138] Dent, *The Free Southern Theatre*, 93-97.
[139] Harris, "Mirror of the Movement," 66-74.
[140] Ibid., 66-74.

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Behold! Cometh the Vanderkellans

A play which devoted significant attention to the civil rights movement, yet which also seems to have indicated a lessening interest in the movement as a dramatic subject, was William Mackey's *Behold! Cometh the Vanderkellans*. In an early scene, the play depicts a heated confrontation between civil rights demonstrators and a scion of the Black aristocracy, but as the story progresses its political concerns are pushed into the background by philosophical and personal issues.

William Wellington Mackey was born in 1937 in Miami, Florida, and grew up in the deep South. In 1959 he received a B.A. in Drama at Southern University in Baton Rouge, taught high school for several years in Miami, and in 1964 earned a master's degree in recreational and drama therapy at the University of Minnesota. While in Minnesota a student group produced his first play, *Requiem for Bay Alley*, a work about ghetto life. Mackey then moved to Denver, Colorado, where he worked as a recreational therapist while completing *Behold! Cometh the Vanderkellans*, which he had begun in 1962. The play was produced in Denver in 1965, and over the next seventeen years theatres around the country staged five more of his plays, notable *A Requiem for Brother X* (Chicago, 1968) and *Family Meeting* (New York, 1972). Both in *Vanderkellans* and in his later works, Mackey's dramas are notable for concentrating on representative Black families to delineate the historical struggles of Blacks in America.[141]

[141] N.a., "Puebloan's Play To Get Public Test," *Pueblo Star Journal & Chieftain*, 27 August 1965; Linda E. Scott, "William Wellington Mackey," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 38, 175-176; "William Wellington Mackey," *Contemporary Authors* CD-ROM (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1994).

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A single-set drawing-room play in three acts, *Behold! Cometh the Vanderkellans* depicts a day and night in the home of the Vanderkellans, a bourgeois Black family in Virginia.[142] The year is 1960. In the first act, Dr. Vanderkellan, the president of all-Black Holden University, has summoned his two sons, Gregory and Luiz, and a daughter, Desiree, home to help deal with a political crisis: the students, inspired by the beginnings of the sit-in movement at Greensboro a few weeks before, are considering similar demonstrations and are even threatening to march on the state capitol. Dr. and Mrs. Vanderkellan fear that such actions would damage the school's good standing with the Governor, and they want their children's help in defusing the situation. The students, furious with their president for "tomming," march onto his lawn, scream epithets at his family, torch the car, and threaten to burn down the house. Finally, in desperation, Dr. Vanderkellan calms them—and closes the first act—by promising to resign if they go home before the police arrive.

The political crisis having been averted, the play's remaining two acts concentrate on the Vanderkellan family. As the evening and night wear on, the children get roaring drunk and berate first one another, next their parents, and finally all of American society. Luiz turns out to be gay, Gregory an educated "tom" in his father's mold, and Desiree a prostitute. They also turn out to have a sister, Regina, who was disowned by Dr. and Mrs. Vanderkellan for marrying a white man. Luiz, Gregory, and Desiree finally agree that they love one another and their parents, but that among the greatest threats faced by Blacks in America is the Black bourgeoisie, which their own family exemplifies. "We're

[142] William Wellington Mackey, *Behold! Cometh the Vanderkellans* (Denver, CO: Azazel Books, 1966).

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not Negroes!" Desiree screams, "We're, we're just like them! Too much like them! ... There was a time when all that existed that could save the country was the niggers themselves! But what happened? We've gotten too caught up in the middle of this sick dream!" (78-79). Finally the family goes to bed, and the play concludes with the sound of a voice reading a passage written by W. E. B. DuBois: "Comme triste le bourgeoisie noir. Pity ... How sad the black bourgeoisie" (83).

Even more than Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*, Mackey's play focuses on the dark side of the civil rights movement. An aura of hopelessness pervades it: political rights, social justice, and personal growth all seem stymied by the Vanderkellans'—and by extension, by America's—bourgeois complacency. Curiously, in contrast to the elder Vanderkellans' haughty conservatism, the play depicts the Southern struggle of 1960 less as a disciplined, nonviolent political project than as an explosive, Watts-like mob. This historical revisionism is remarkable coming so soon after the real events: presuming that Mackey was aware of the degree to which both the movement's and the country's moods had changed in five years, he must have felt that the anachronism was justified by increasing the play's relevance to its 1965 audience.

In fact, the play's plot structure parallels much of what was happening in Black theatre and in Black America in the mid-1960s. Just as to many activists the quests for equal rights and desegregation were coming to seem less central—or at least less interesting—than the Black consciousness movement, so in Mackey's play civil rights issues are raised early but are quickly replaced by personal and cultural concerns. By the end of the play, the discussion is less about civil rights than the souring of the American dream. Like Edward Albee, whom Mackey listed as among his influences, Mackey's

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chief target is the American bourgeoisie—and he has stated that he hoped his play would be a Black *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.[143]

In searching for a company to stage his play, Mackey contacted Eddie Dowling, the producer and director who had brought *Our Lan'* to Broadway in 1947. Dowling was interested in gauging audience reaction to the play before staging it in New York, so he apparently subsidized a Denver company, the Eden Theatrical Workshop, to produce it. The director, Donald Todd, and the cast were all local except for Myrtle Marie Scales, a New York actress who was said to have once played Desdemona to Paul Robeson's Othello.[144] The play went into rehearsal in early September 1965, and opened 12 November at the Eden Playhouse on Fairfax Street in Denver. Probably because of the play's explicit sexual language, no one under eighteen was admitted.[145]

I have found no reviews or further information about the production. Dowling never brought it to New York as he had originally intended, so it is a fair assumption that it was not a great success in Denver. Six years later, however, the Black producer Woodie King staged it in New York at the Théâtre de Lys.[146]

Flowers for the Trashman

The next theatrical statement of the growing Black nationalist movement appeared in San Francisco. Patterned after LeRoi Jones' early plays, Marvin X's *Flowers for the*

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[143] N.a., "'The Vanderkellans': Eden Play Probes Middle Class Negro," *Denver Post*, 1 November 1965.
[144] N.a., "Eden Workshop Slates Mackey Play as Opener," *Denver Post*, 31 October 1965.
[145] N.a., "'The Vanderkellans': Eden Play Probes Middle Class Negro," *Denver Post*, 1 November 1965.
[146] Publicity release by Howard Atlee, 5 March 1971. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

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Trashman expressed a similar opposition to integration.

Marvin X (born Marvin Jackmon and now also known as Nazzam Al Fitnah Muhajir and El Muhajir) is a playwright, poet, essayist, and lecturer. Born in 1944 and raised in a rural, mostly white California town, he became interested in Black nationalism while a college student in the early 1960s, and decided to devote himself to the movement's literary and theatrical aspects. In 1966, along with Ed Bullins and Eldridge Cleaver, he founded Black Arts/West (later Black House), the California branch of LeRoi Jones' Harlem-based Black Arts. In 1967 he joined the Nation of Islam, adopted his Muslim name, and founded Al Kitab Sudan Publishing, which has released most of his nine books of poetry and proverbs. *Flowers for the Trashman* was his first work for the stage; his other produced plays include *Come Next Summer* (San Francisco, 1966), *The Trial* (New York, 1970), *How I Met Isa* (San Francisco, 1975), and *In the Name of Love* (Oakland, 1981). In 1971 he founded and directed Your Black Educational Theatre in San Francisco.[147]

The four short scenes of *Flowers for the Trashman* are set in a jail in an unnamed American city.[148] The two main characters, a college student named Joe Simmons and his friend Wes, are Blacks who have been arrested for taking part in a minor brawl at a night club. In the first scene, Joe waits to be allowed to make a phone call to his father, who he hopes will put up their bail. His father's business, a flower shop, is failing, Joe says, and his family relationships are deeply troubled: "I feel sorry for the dude: sixty years

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[147] Lorenzo Thomas, "Marvin X," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 38, 177-182; "El Muhajir," *Contemporary Authors* CD-ROM (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1994).

[148] Marvin E. Jackmon, *Flowers for the Trashman*, in LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, eds., *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (New York: William Morrow, 1968), 541-558.

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old; ma old lady done left him; all his damn children against him; one son in prison; his daughter's on the block" (549). The scene ends with the jailer—who jokes "Who you gonna call, the NAACP?" (550)—letting Joe out of the cell to make his call.

The second scene finds Joe on the phone with his father, who ashamed of his son for getting into trouble, refuses to bail him out. Joe curses him, and in the next scene, back in the cell, he vents his anger by blaming all his (and Black America's) problems on a middle-aged white inmate whom he calls "Charlie":

> What the fuck's wrong wit you, you blue-eyed devil? You done everythin' to me, man. Every goddam thing in the books: slavery, murder, castration, starvation, frustration, humiliation—everything—you (*points finger in man's face*) done to me. Don't talk that bullshit 'bout you ain't done nothin' to me. Standin' in that corner like you innocent. You guilty, motherfucker! ... You made me, baby. Think on that. You made me. I'm your creation. You defined me, told me my limits, my possibilities. Yeah, everythin' I believe in: God, the devil, democracy, all that bullshit, you gave to me ... You don't dig integration after all, do you, Mister White Man (552-553).

Minutes later, a new Black inmate (called the "Negro" in the stage directions) is thrown into the cell. Joe mentions to him that he aspires to be a writer in the mold of James Baldwin, whom he calls "honest ... a writer that wants to be a man" (555). In the play's last scene, the jailer informs Joe that his father has died of a heart attack while on his way to get him out of jail. Suddenly Joe realizes how much his father meant to him, and vows that when he has sons he will work to maintain a closer relationship with them.

Flowers for the Trashman is a good example of the kind of Black nationalist theatre that was spreading across the country in the mid-1960s. In content it is notable for praising James Baldwin, for quoting Malcolm X (who often called whites "blue-eyed devils"), for echoing the Nation of Islam's position against integration, and for exhorting Blacks to pay renewed attention to their own community. In structure it resembles LeRoi

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Jones' stark, symbolic, single-set racial commentaries, though its language and characterizations lack Jones' poetic insight.

Flowers for the Trashman was first performed sometime in 1965 at San Francisco State College. I have found no reviews of the production, but over the next several years the play achieved some notoriety as a motivational agit-prop piece for the Black nationalist movement.[149] In 1971 a musical version called *Take Care of Business* was produced in Fresno at Your Black Educational Theatre.[150]

Happy Ending and Day of Absence

This twenty-year history of civil rights theatre closes with a production that helped shape the development of African American drama for the next twenty years. Douglas Turner Ward's one-act plays *Happy Ending* and *Day of Absence* both took comic, satirical views of the close social and economic interdependencies of Black and white Americans, but did so from a distinctly Black point of view. The success of the Off-Broadway production was key to the establishment by Ward and others of the Negro Ensemble Company, the most ambitious effort since the American Negro Theatre to create a theatre about, by, and for African Americans.

Ward's life story is a compelling drama in itself. He was born Roosevelt Ward in 1930 and was raised on a Louisiana plantation. After attending high school in New Orleans, he spent one year each at Wilberforce University and the University of Michigan, where he was first exposed to left-wing political activism. In 1948 he moved to New York and began writing articles for the *Daily Worker*, comic sketches for small

[149] Thomas, "Marvin X."
[150] Ibid.

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political meetings, and even a musical cantata (*Star of Liberty*) about Nat Turner for a large political rally. In 1950, however, during the Korean War, he was arrested and convicted of draft evasion, and spent two years in Louisiana (including three months in prison) before the U. S. Supreme Court overturned his conviction.[151] Deciding to work in the theatre, Ward renamed himself Douglas Turner (possibly after Frederick Douglas and Nat Turner) to escape the McCarthy-era blacklist.[152] After studying acting with Paul Mann, he understudied Robert Earl Jones in *The Iceman Cometh* and Sidney Poitier in *A Raisin in the Sun*, and played leading roles in Loften Mitchell's *The Land Beyond the River* and Genet's *The Blacks*. He wrote his first plays, *Happy Ending* and *Day of Absence*, circa 1960.

In form, *Happy Ending* is a fairly standard one-act, single-set comedy.[153] The action takes place entirely in the kitchen of a Harlem apartment where two fortyish Black sisters, Ellie and Vi, live with their grown nephews, Junie and Arthur. As the play opens, the aunts sit at the kitchen table in tears, grieving because the Harrisons, the rich white couple for whom they work as domestics, have decided to get a divorce. Junie arrives, and learning that Vi and Ellie begged the Harrisons to stay together, berates them for harboring sympathy for the white oppressors:

> Here we are—Africa rising to its place in the sun wit' prime ministers and other dignitaries taking seats around the international conference table—us here fighting for our rights like never before, changing the whole image, dumping stereotypes behind us and replacing 'em wit' new images of dignity and dimension—and I come home and find my own aunts ... DROWNING themselves in tears jist 'cause boss man is gonna kick bosslady out on her nose (12).

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[151] Stephen M. Vallillo, "Douglas Turner Ward," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 38, 264-265.
[152] William Branch, interview with the author, 23 September 1994.
[153] Douglas Turner Ward, *Happy Ending* and *Day of Absence* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1966).

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Vi and Ellie retort that if the Harrisons split up their own jobs will end, and with them the systematic theft of food, clothing, furniture, and cash that has kept their family—including Junie—comfortable for many years:

Ellie: ... Every time I pleaded "Think of your love!—"
Vi: She meant think 'bout our bills.
Ellie: Every time I begged "Don't crack up the home!—"
Vi: It meant please keep *ours* cemented together!
Ellie: "Don't victim the children!—"
Vi: By all means insure the happiness of *our* li'l' darlings! (19)

Convinced, Junie joins his aunts in grieving. But when all seems lost, Mr. Harrison calls to announce that he and his wife have decided to stay together. Ellie, Vi, and Junie heave a collective sigh of relief, and as the play ends, Junie opens a (stolen) bottle of champagne and toasts "To the victors and the vanquished, top-dog and the bottom-dog! Sometimes it's hard to tell which is which!" (22)

Day of Absence, stylistically a much more complex play, tells the other side of a similar story. Whereas *Happy Ending* spoofs a Black family's economic reliance on a white family, *Day of Absence*—which was inspired by the Montgomery bus boycott—satirizes the dependence of white people on Blacks in an entire Southern town. The published edition describes the play as "a reverse minstrel show" in which all the white parts—except one, a television announcer, to "subvert any charge that the production is unintegrated"—are to be performed by Blacks in whiteface (29). Aside from whiteface and a sendup of racial stereotypes, however, the play has little in common with traditional American minstrelsy; it owes much more to Genet's *The Blacks*, in which Ward had performed for a time, and which he considered more honest than many African

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American works that tried to present positive images.[154]

Day of Absence calls for no special set and only minimal props. In twelve scenes, it depicts twenty-four hours in a Southern town from which, inexplicably, all the Blacks and several prominent whites have simply disappeared. It opens with two country crackers noticing that the Blacks who usually tromp by their store on the way to work are missing. They and the other white townspeople spend much of the day searching, with rising agitation, for the Blacks on whom they rely. Without Blacks, who will change the babies' diapers? Who will perform the hard labor? Who will provide an outlet for the malice of the Klan? As the Mayor observes, "the South has always been glued together by the uninterrupted presence of its darkies. No telling how unstuck we might git if things keep on like they have" (51). By early afternoon, the townspeople realize that the missing whites are actually light-skinned Blacks who have been passing as white, "secret Nigras all the while" (44). Neighboring communities refuse to loan any "surplus" Blacks, and even Black prisoners sent to relieve the shortage disappear when they reach the town limits. By late afternoon, a Klan leader, a preacher, and the Mayor himself make television appeals to "their" Blacks to come home, but all to no avail. Finally the white townspeople go on "a frenzy of rioting, looting and all other aberrations of a town gone berserk" (56). The final scene takes place the following morning, when the two crackers from the first scene spot Rastus, a stereotypical Black character, shuffling down the road. When they interrogate Rastus about his disappearance, he just grins, says "I didn't know I had skipped a day," and shuffles off (57).

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[154] Stephen M. Vallillo, "Douglas Turner Ward," 266.

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In addition to its satirical structure, the play is filled with comments—mostly made by the Mayor—on the civil rights movement. He complains that "At this moment the Supreme Court's trying to put Nigras in our schools and the Nigra has got it in his haid to put hisself everywhere" (50). Inverting the recent history of federal involvement in Southern civil rights disputes, he announces that the President has sent the National Guard to help protect the whites from themselves (50). And he proclaims that the Blacks in town love him even though "we wouldn't let 'em march to the polls and express their affection for me through the ballot box" (52).

Both plays, then, address themselves to the interdependence of Blacks and whites in America. This interreliance is largely economic: as Loften Mitchell puts it, "Whites depend upon Negroes for their labor and Negroes use whites to promote their future."[155] But the relationship is also social and personal. Were it not for Blacks, white families, white businesses, and indeed all white society would disintegrate. Though cultural documents aimed very much at a Black audience—and this would later become a critical issue in the Ford Foundation's decision to fund the Negro Ensemble Company—the plays are not separatist or supremacist tracts. Only by acknowledging both our differences and our reliance upon one another, the plays seem to be saying, can America hope to change its dysfunctional inequality to a more robust and efficient mutuality.

In 1960, after Ward completed his original drafts of *Happy Ending* and *Day of Absence*, Philip Meister, who had been stage manager for *The Iceman Cometh*, tried unsuccessfully to raise money to produce them.[156] In 1964 the Free Southern Theatre

[155] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 210.
[156] Ibid., 209.

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intended to stage them as part of its first season, but dropped the plan when budget realities sank in.[157] Also in 1964, however, Robert Hooks, whom Ward knew from the touring company of *A Raisin in the Sun*, gave the plays a workshop production and then decided to produce them professionally.[158]

It took Hooks and his associate producers Juanita Poitier and Doris Kuller another year of fund-raising before the plays actually opened Off-Broadway.[159] Meister was the director, and the stage manager was Hal De Windt, co-author of *Raisin' Hell in the Son*. *Happy Ending* featured Frances Foster as Vi, Esther Rolle as Ellie, Hooks as Junie, and Ward as Arthur. The cast of *Day of Absence* included Adolph Caesar, Lonne Elder, and Barbara Ann Teer, as well as Foster, Hooks, Rolle, and Ward. The production opened at the St. Marks Playhouse on 15 November 1965.[160]

The plays received a mixed critical response. The *Times*' Howard Taubman felt that Ward was "not yet a devastating satirist," though he was "on the right track" in "using sardonic laughter to express his resentment at years of forced inferiority and to articulate his passion for change." Taubman faulted Meister's directing: "the acting is often too broad, and the actors have evidently been encouraged to use Negro diction so exaggerated that they are difficult to understand."[161] Tom Prideaux, in *Life*, placed the aunts of *Happy Ending* in the tradition of "the smart-apple servants" of Molière and Goldoni, and suggested that *Day of Absence* "nudged the audience, which was mixed Negro and white,

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[157] Harris, "Mirror of the Movement," 26.
[158] Stephen M. Vallillo, "Douglas Turner Ward," 266.
[159] Ward, *Happy Ending* and *Day of Absence*, 3.
[160] Guernsey, *Best Plays of 1965-1966*, 426.
[161] Howard Taubman, "Douglas Turner Ward's Plays at the St. Marks," *New York Times*, 16 November 1965.

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a little closer together."[162] The *Amsterdam News*' Candace Womble praised the plays for giving her the experience of being "the one who laughs last for a change," and for setting the St. Marks' rafters "ringing and wringing with laughter ... from BOTH sides, yet!"[163] But the *Village Voice*'s Michael Smith had an opposite experience, feeling "alienated" from the enthusiastic response of "most people in the audience, both Negro and white," because he found both plays stylistically boring and politically "condescending and even hostile toward whites."[164] And Martin Gottfried agreed, in a *Women's Wear Daily* review that should become a classic of culturally biased reporting: coolly noting that Ward's plays were "designed for the special taste and background of the Negro, as in 'race records,'" Gottlieb called the works "derivative, contradictory, childish, dull and silly," the playwright's "borrowing" of whiteface from "a royal artist like Genet ... presumptuous and ... obscene," and the plays' public display a disservice to "Mr. Ward's best interests."[165]

Despite the uneven reviews, the production quickly found an audience—one which, according to Ward, was racially mixed, averaging close to fifty percent Black.[166] Some Black attendees were said to object to Ward's perpetuation of negative stereotypes in *Happy Ending*, and some whites must have been discomfited at being satirized in *Day of Absence*.[167] Nevertheless, Ward won two 1966 Obie Awards, one for writing the plays

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[162] Tom Prideaux, n.t., *Life*, 28 January 1966. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.
[163] Candace Womble, "'Happy Ending'—'Day of Absence' Have St. Marks Rafters Ringing," *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 November 1965.
[164] Michael Smith, "Theatre Journal," *Village Voice*, 18 November 1965.
[165] Quoted in Hatch, *Black Theater USA*, 695.
[166] Douglas Turner Ward, "American Theater: For Whites Only?" *New York Times*, 14 August 1966.
[167] Stephen M. Vallillo, "Douglas Turner Ward," 268.

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and one for acting in them, and the production survived a subway strike to run until January 1967, a total of 504 performances.[168]

In August 1966, largely on the strength of the plays' success, the *New York Times* published an article by Ward that would prove seminal in the history of African American theatre. Entitled "American Theater: For Whites Only?" it accused the American legitimate theatre of being "essentially a theater of the Bourgeois," and proposed the establishment of "a theater concentrating primarily on themes of Negro life." Carefully noting that his proposal was "not a plea for either a segregated theater, or a separatist one," he left the door open for whites to participate "if they found inspiration in the purpose."[169] The Ford Foundation, intrigued by the proposal, contacted Ward, and over the next year arranged to grant Ward, Hooks, and Gerald Krone (Hooks' manager) $1.2 million over three years to found the Negro Ensemble Company.[170]

For the following two decades the NEC was one of the country's most influential Black theatre organizations. It produced dozens of shows, notably Lonne Elder's *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* (1969), Joseph Walker's *The River Niger* (1973), and Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play* (1981), as well as Ward's own *The Reckoning* (1969). Since the late 1980s, however, continuing financial problems have diminished the NEC almost to the point of nonexistence.

Peripheral Works

A handful of other plays also touched upon civil rights and racial issues. Curiously,

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[168] Ibid..
[169] Douglas Turner Ward, "American Theater: For Whites Only?" *New York Times*, 14 August 1966.
[170] Stephen M. Vallillo, "Douglas Turner Ward," 268.

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although almost all the major plays of this period were by Black writers, three of the five peripheral works were by whites. This would seem to suggest that many white playwrights remained interested in such issues, but not necessarily enough to dedicate entire plays to them.

Frustratingly little is now known about *America, Be Seated*, a modern minstrel show which was presented as part of the 1964 World's Fair at Flushing Meadow Park in Queens, New York. The show's producers, Michael Todd, Jr. and Leonard Gaines, intended it to retain (like its predecessor, *Gentlemen, Be Seated!*) "the flavor of an old-time minstrel show but without any of the Uncle Tom clichés." Beyond this, however, it is unclear whether *America, Be Seated* had any racial or civil rights content. The show went into rehearsal in early March 1964, and presumably opened in April.[171]

Just a month after Fugard's *The Blood Knot* arrived off-Broadway, his countryman Alan Paton's third Broadway play, *Sponono*, opened at the Cort Theatre.[172] Based on several short stories by Paton, and written in collaboration with the Indian playwright and director Krishna Shah (b. 1933), *Sponono* is less a civil rights play than a meditation on social class and Christian justice in a racially divided society. Set in a reformatory for Black boys, it pits a charismatic but often violent youth named Sponono against a white principal who is torn between punishment and forgiveness. The final act is a dream sequence in which Sponono presides over the principal's trial: at its conclusion, Sponono is dragged away to prison, but he and the principal stretch out their hands to one another in friendship and love. *Sponono* was first produced in South Africa in December 1962,

[171] Jesse H. Walker, "Theatricals," *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 March 1964.
[172] Alan Paton and Krishna Shah, *Sponono: A Play in Three Acts* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965).

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and with the help of the Broadway producer Mary K. Frank and several South African business concerns, its cast of one white and twenty-five Black actors was brought to Broadway in early April 1964.[173] The production drew generally respectful but unenthusiastic reviews, but it was a flop with both Black and white American audiences. Frank, distraught, ran an ad in the *Times* asking "Where are the liberals? Where are the Negroes? ... Is there an arranged boycott?"[174] The show ran for only two weeks.[175]

Lorraine Hansberry's next play—the last produced during her lifetime—explored the pull between self-interest and social responsibility among Greenwich Village artists, intellectuals, and political activists. *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* centers on a young alternative newspaper publisher who, tired of protesting, is tempted to let his paper slide into unobjectionable mediocrity, but who in the end decides to return to the political fray.[176] The play's many issues include political corruption, adultery, homosexuality, "method" acting, naturalism, and racism, with no special attention given to civil rights. A light-skinned Black character, however, gives a very nearly nationalistic speech—anathema to Hansberry, an ardent integrationist—when he refuses to marry his white girlfriend after learning that she was once a prostitute: "I got this color from my grandmother being used as a commodity, man. The buying and the selling in this country began with *me*. ... I don't want white man's leavings" (280-281). The play opened at New York's Longacre Theatre in October 1964, when Hansberry was gravely ill with

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[173] Sam Zolotow, "Paton-Shah Play to Open March 30," *New York Times*, 25 February 1964.

[174] Advertisement by Mary K. Frank, *New York Times*, n.d. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

[175] Hewes, *Best Plays of 1963-1964*, 330.

[176] Lorraine Hansberry, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, in *A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (New York: Signet, 1966), 131-318.

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cancer. Though it received mixed notices, the producers, actors, and others in the theatre community managed to keep it running for 101 performances, until the day of Hansberry's death.[177]

Another play that considered the plight of Blacks in America as just one of many social concerns was William Hanley's *Slow Dance on the Killing Ground*.[178] The play's three characters—a middle-aged German refugee who abandoned his Jewish wife and child to the Nazis, a brilliant young Black man wanted by the police for murdering his mother, and a pregnant Jewish college student in search of an abortionist—meet in the refugee's Brooklyn luncheonette, where they explore their own personal guilts and rages. Produced by a consortium including Hume Cronyn, *Slow Dance* was directed by Joseph Anthony, and starred George Rose, Clarence Williams III, and Carolan Daniels.[179] It opened to good notices at New York's Plymouth Theatre in December 1964, but never developed an audience, and closed in mid-February.[180] Though its original Broadway production failed, it has been revived a number of times.[181]

Lonne Elder's *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, a picaresque comedy-drama about a destitute Harlem family's forays into crime, was first produced in mid-1965 in Staten Island, New York. It has little overt political content, but a recurrent theme is the economic oppression of Blacks in American society. Tellingly, the play's flashy under-

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[177] Guernsey, *Best Plays of 1964-1965*, 18, 307.
[178] William Hanley, *Slow Dance on the Killing Ground* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1965).
[179] Jesse H. Walker, "'Slow Dance' Reveals 3 Excellent Players," *New York Amsterdam News*, 12 December 1964.
[180] Guernsey, *Best Plays of 1964-1965*, 14-15, 205.
[181] The play's more significant revivals have been in Cleveland (1965), Baltimore (1969), Chicago (1986), and New Brunswick, NJ (1992). Press releases and playbills courtesy the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York.

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world figure refers to his moonshine and numbers racket as "the Harlem De-Colonization Association," the nationalistic goal of which is "to drive 'Mr. You-Know-Who'"—Mr. Charlie, presumably—"out of Harlem."[182] Elder's play received its first public reading at the New Dramatists Studio in New York in early June 1965, and was first produced the following month at Wagner College in Staten Island, New York. Four years later, it became a major success for the Negro Ensemble Company at the St. Marks Playhouse.

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It is appropriate to conclude this history by mentioning not a theatre that was, but a theatre that might have been. During the year between his break with the Nation of Islam and his murder in early 1965, Malcolm X had several discussions with Loften Mitchell toward developing a series of plays, by various playwrights, about the African American experience. These were to be performed not only in America, but around the world, possibly under the auspices of Malcolm's Organization of Afro-American Unity. Malcolm's murder, however, put an end to the plan.[183]

What might such a theatre have achieved? According to Mitchell, Malcolm was interested in works with a broader scope than Louis X's *Orgena* and *The Trial*. It seems unlikely that Mitchell, himself an ardent integrationist, would have considered working exclusively on separatist plays even for so eminent a figure as Malcolm. Had Malcolm lived, then, might Black theatre in America have developed in a new direction, more militant than the Negro Ensemble Company, more egalitarian than Louis X and Marvin X's works, more global in outlook than the Black Arts movement? We can never know.

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[182] Lonne Elder, III, *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men: A Play in Two Acts* (New York: Samuel French, 1969), 35-36.

[183] Loften Mitchell, interview with the author, 7 October 1994.

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The question, however, suggests what so many civil rights organizers, workers, playwrights, actors, and audiences had for so long taken as an article of faith: that peace is not merely a pleasant alternative to violence, it is imperative for the fullest development of human potential.

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Conclusion

> The real tragedy between blacks and whites in America is not that we hate each other. Hatred by itself is a pretty shallow force and can only cut so deep. The real tragedy is that we love and admire each other. ... Like a Greek play, there would be no tragedy if it weren't for the love.[1]

The civil rights movement was a success born of failure, a sparkling response to the shameful treatment accorded African Americans throughout U. S. history. In the decades between 1945 and 1965, the movement used nonviolent methods to strip segregation of its legal foundation and to make a start toward reducing institutionalized racism in education, transportation, housing, employment, and the polls. The theatre followed the movement closely, creating a large body of works—over eighty original productions in all—that commemorated victories, lamented losses, educated doubters, reinvigorated supporters, raised money, and motivated political action. Ultimately, faced with heightened violence, an unpopular war, and the move from the rural South to the urban North, both the movement and its theatre were replaced by new institutions that, at their most extreme, advocated separatism and the use of force as vigorously as the movement had championed integration and nonviolence.

The modern civil rights movement and its theatre both had their roots in World War II. American progressives seized on the worldwide anti-fascist campaign as an opportunity to extend freedom to the victims of discrimination—primarily Blacks and Jews—at

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[1] Lloyd King, quoted in Studs Terkel, *Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel About the American Obsession* (New York: The New Press, 1992), 397.

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home. Several plays produced in New York between 1941 and 1945 were built upon this "two-front" conception of the war: of these, Dodson's pageant, *New World A-Coming*, showed that theatre could play an important role in civil rights organizing, and the musical *Bloomer Girl* by Herzig, et al. demonstrated that a show with civil rights content could make a tidy profit on Broadway.

Between the end of the war and the beginning of the McCarthy period, many more playwrights turned their attention to the discrimination suffered by African Americans. Black soldiers returning home to a segregated America were featured in *Deep Are the Roots*, *Earth and Starts*, *Jeb*, and *On Whitman Avenue*. Current civil rights activists were portrayed in *Earth and Stars* and *Trial by Fire*. Plays inspired by nineteenth-century African American freedom fighters included *Our Lan'*, *Sojourner Truth*, and *Set My People Free*. *Finian's Rainbow* was an early and notable example of the effectiveness of satire and comedy in making civil rights points. And *Lost in the Stars* was the first of several plays which recognized the parallels between South African apartheid and American segregation.

In the early 1950s, the ascendancy of Joseph McCarthy and other governmental witch-hunters cast a deep chill over civil rights theatre and most other forms of American political expression. *Dry August* and *Take a Giant Step* were both gentle depictions of Black children lost within their white environments. But paradoxically, most civil rights plays produced during this period were no longer reformist works, but activist tracts demanding racial justice. *Longitude 49* linked racial equality and socialism; *A Medal for Willie* demanded that the government help end racism; and *Alice in Wonder* criticized Blacks who cooperated with congressional red-baiters. As often happens during periods of

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political repression, plays about history took on extra significance: *John Brown* and *The Moon Besieged* both concerned the abolitionist's attack on Harper's Ferry, and *Nat Turner* centered on U. S. history's bloodiest slave uprising.

Beginning in 1954, after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision voided a major category of segregation laws, the civil rights movement and its theatre entered a new and more activist phase. William Branch, Ossie Davis, and Langston Hughes each turned out short, newsreel-style plays that presented recent civil rights developments to audiences at political gatherings; one such play by Davis about the origins of the *Brown* case inspired Mitchell's full-length work *A Land Beyond the River*. *In Splendid Error*, about the relationship of Frederick Douglass and John Brown, explored the relative merits of force and nonviolence in effecting political change. The theatre itself became a metaphor for segregation and the civil rights movement in *Trouble in Mind*. *Orgena* and *The Trial*, written and produced by Louis X (later Louis Farrakhan) for the Nation of Islam, prefigured later developments in Black separatism. And *A Raisin in the Sun* helped popularize the movement to the general public through the microcosm of an inner-city Black family's decision to move to a white suburb.

Beginning in 1960, the tone of civil rights theatre changed as students took a more active role in the movement. Youth and the student movement provided the subject matter for several shows, including two musicals, *Fly Blackbird* and *Kicks & Co*. Politically charged humor and satire were central components of *Fly Blackbird*, *Raisin' Hell in the Son*, *Purlie Victorious*, and *Blue Boy in Black*. *The Blacks*, *Blue Boy in Black*, *Gentlemen, Be Seated!* and Harrison's *Pavane for a Dead-Pan Minstrel* played with

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costuming, makeup, and masks in exploring racial identities. And the minstrel show was reborn briefly in *Fly Blackbird* and *Gentlemen, Be Seated!*

Kennedy's assassination, the murder of four Black girls in Birmingham, the Watts riots, and the escalation of the Vietnam war changed the mood of the nation, the movement, and the theatre. Antipathies and suspicions between Blacks and whites increased, leading to the rise of the Black Power movement and a concomitant scarcity of plays advocating integration and nonviolence. *Jerico-Jim Crow* was one of the very few new plays to project an unalloyed positive image of the civil rights movement, and the Free Southern Theatre toured integrationist shows throughout the deep South as part of the Mississippi Summer Projects of 1964 and 1965. More typically, however, plays such as *Dutchman*, *The Slave*, and *Flowers for the Trashman* rejected integration and nonviolence outright, depicting whites as brutish victimizers with whom peaceful coexistence was impossible. So polarized did the racial atmosphere become that even the dark but basically integrationist *Blues for Mister Charlie* developed a reputation—wrongly—as advocating violence and separatism. Finally, white playwrights, who in previous years had played an active role in creating civil rights plays, dropped from the picture almost completely. By the end of 1965, the civil rights movement and its theatre were, to all intents and purposes, things of the past.

Looking back over two decades of civil rights plays, a number of common subjects and themes emerge. The movement's central concerns recurred frequently: housing was addressed in *On Whitman Avenue*, *Trial by Fire*, and *A Raisin in the Sun*; education in *The People of Clarendon County*, *A Land Beyond the River*, and *Light in the Southern Sky*; employment in *Jeb*; voting rights in *The Ballot and Me* and *First Step to Freedom*;

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and lynching in *Strange Fruit*, *The Respectful Prostitute*, *Freight*, *What Can You Say to Mississippi?*, *The Pretender*, and arguably *Dutchman*. Historical battles for civil rights were covered by *Our Lan'*, *Sojourner Truth*, *Set My People Free*, *Blood in the Night*, *John Brown*, *The Moon Besieged*, *Nat Turner*, *In Splendid Error*, *The Rivalry*, *Fifty Steps Toward Freedom*, *In White America*, and *Jerico-Jim Crow*. Recent political developments—both historical and fictionalized—were central features of *Earth and Stars*, *Shame of a Nation*, *Longitude 49*, *A Land Beyond the River*, *Fly Blackbird*, *Kicks & Co.*, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, and *Ballad of the Winter Soldiers*, as well as the many radio-style plays written by Branch, Davis, and Hughes. Plays opposing the movement's goals and methods included *Orgena* and *The Trial*, *Dutchman* and *The Slave*, and *Flowers for the Trashman*.

Playwrights couched their civil rights arguments in a wide variety of dramatic forms. Melodramas and tragedies, which were popular during the movement's early years, almost always presented admirable Black figures brought down by contact with racism: examples of the former included *Deep Are the Roots*, *Jeb*, *A Young American*, and *Trial by Fire*; of the latter, *Strange Fruit*, *Our Lan'*, *Set My People Free*, *Lost in the Stars*, and *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Ibsen-like social problem plays, such as *A Young American*, *Earth and Stars*, *On Whitman Avenue*, and *A Raisin in the Sun*, were common in the movement's early and middle years. Many newsreel-style plays, such as *The People of Clarendon County*, *The Ballot and Me*, and *Fifty Steps Toward Freedom*, were written and produced in the mid-1950s, after the *Brown v. Board* decision but before the movement had begun receiving significant press coverage. Comedies and satires, common in the 1960s, attempted to diminish the power of racism by poking fun at and/or decon-

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structing it: examples included *Finian's Rainbow*, *Fly Blackbird*, *Purlie Victorious*, *The Blacks*, and *A Minstrel Show*. The dramatic conceit of swapping the traditional power roles of Blacks and whites was used in many plays, including *Caukey*, *Finian's Rainbow*, *Freight*, *The Trial*, and *The Pretender*.

Depictions of Black characters evolved significantly in civil rights plays, and tended—with some exceptions, to be sure—to differ according to the playwrights' race. In the late 1940s, most white playwrights created admirable Black characters—honest, industrious people, often veterans—who through no fault of their own lost their homes, their livelihoods, and sometimes their lives to racist attacks. *Deep Are the Roots*, *Strange Fruit*, *Jeb*, *Trial by Fire*, and *On Whitman Avenue* included such depictions of Blacks as victims. During this period, in such plays as *Earth and Stars*, *Blood in the Night*, *Our Lan'*, and *Whole Hog or Nothing*, Black playwrights drew Black characters who, though more assertive and complex than their white-written counterparts, invariably lost their battles with racism as well. In the 1950s, white-written plays continued to depict Blacks as powerless victims, but Black-written plays—*A Land Beyond the River*, *Light in the Southern Sky*, and *A Raisin in the Sun*—were increasingly likely to involve strong Black characters who won their fights against racism. In the early 1960s, white playwrights, in works such as *The Pretender*, *Fly Blackbird*, and *In White America*, finally began to approach parity with Black playwrights in depicting Blacks as strong, assertive, and victorious. Finally, in the mid-1960s, some Black writers—perhaps responding to the heightened levels of violence against civil rights workers, and perhaps attempting to startle audiences distracted by media coverage of the Kennedy assassination, Vietnam, and other

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national issues—again began depicting Blacks as victims in such plays as *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, *Dutchman*, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, and *Flowers for the Trashman*.

Whether or not civil rights playwrights were concerned about questions of dramatic theory and structure, their work was shaped by their conceptions of what theatre—especially political theatre—should be. Their plays demonstrate that, like Horace and Schiller, they felt that the theatre should be at least in part a moral institution; like Hebbel, Hauptmann, and Ibsen's social plays, they took as subjects common people beset by societal ills; and like Shaw and Brecht, many of them aimed to motivate their audiences to undertake political change in the real world.

The greatest influence on civil rights plays clearly came from the left-wing American drama of the 1930s and 1940s. Echoes from agit-prop pieces like Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) and family-centered works like Ward's *Big White Fog* (1938), Hellman's *Watch on the Rhine* (1941), and Miller's *All My Sons* (1947) reverberate through civil rights dramas from *Deep Are the Roots* and *On Whitman Avenue* to *A Medal for Willie* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. Realism remained the established form for civil rights plays somewhat longer than in American theatre as a whole, probably because most civil rights playwrights saw the form as the most direct and accessible way to depict real problems. Loften Mitchell went so far as to accuse the avant-garde theatre of being a world "of tricks, of inventions, showing little or no empathy for human beings."[2] Not until *The Blacks* shook up the civil rights theatre world in 1960 did non-realistic civil rights plays—musicals like *Fly Blackbird*, comedies like *Purlie Victorious*, satires like *A Minstrel Show*, and allegories like *Dutchman*—begin appearing in any numbers.

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[2] Mitchell, *Black Drama*, 187.

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Although most civil rights playwrights and theatre companies hoped to change their audiences' hearts and minds, in practice most of their plays seem largely to have reinforced political views already held by their audiences. In most cases, the limitations imposed by venues and producing organizations effectively constrained shows to play before sympathetic crowds. It would be easy to dismiss such works as wasted efforts, mere "preaching to the converted." The sheer quantity of such plays, however, suggests that they must have had a more positive role. In fact, many of these plays seem to have functioned in performance much as did the sermons preached by civil rights ministers: in addition to providing a human focus for a political event, they helped to keep up morale among the faithful. Fear, hopelessness, boredom, and sheer exhaustion are common side-effects of political activism; without frequent renewal an individual's commitment can easily flag. More than simply preaching to the converted, then, these plays were political booster shots to remind civil rights supporters of the need for their continued commitment. James V. Hatch suggests acknowledging this role with the term "theatre of affirmation."[3]

In the years following the dissolution of the civil rights movement, a great variety of new protest and liberation movements sprang up in its place. Virtually every one of these movements—the Black Power movement, the student and anti-war movements, the feminist movement, the gay rights movement, the Native American rights movement, the environmental movement, and even the conservative anti-abortion and militia movements—learned important lessons about grass-roots organizing, civil disobedience, and media manipulation from the civil rights struggle. The theatres spawned by these move-

[3] James V. Hatch, interview with the author, 9 August 1995.

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ments naturally followed different courses, as dictated by different circumstances, purposes, and personalities; but they owe a debt to earlier American political theatres, including that of the civil rights movement, for helping establish and maintain the theatre as an outlet for free political expression. Acknowledgment of this debt is rare: many 1960s-era artists conveniently forgot their forbears in their eagerness to be perceived as original. Furthermore, the enormous growth of African American theatre in the later 1960s may have helped obscure the memory of the interracial theatre movement that preceded it. It is essential, however, to developing a complete understanding of modern political theatre movements.

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"In a manner of speaking," the civil rights historian John Egerton has written, "there are essentially three kinds of history: what actually happened, what we are told happened, and what we finally come to believe happened."[4] Any well-executed work of history must contain elements of each: one of the historian's subtlest tasks is to delineate where one ends and another takes over.

Political theatre works on all three levels at once, blurring the distinction between past and present, belief and disbelief, fact and propaganda, reality and imagination. Political plays have sometimes effected enormous changes in public perceptions of established facts: the destruction of the reputation of England's King Richard III by Shakespeare's history play is just one well-known case in point.

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[4] John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1994), 11.

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Certainly civil rights playwrights, producers, directors, actors, composers, and scenic designers did their share of twisting reality to their own artistic and political ends. By and large, however, their theatre was more motivational than inflammatory, more enlightening than libelous. Indeed, it consistently told one truth about the movement that other media rarely did: that its participants, the exceptional and the average, the famous and the forgotten, were partners in an extraordinary and often-heroic process that brought America a step closer to its principles.

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