Black Theater Has Moved Beyond Revolution

By BERNARD CARRAGHER

To celebrate the recent gains of the black theater movement, the Richard Allen Center for Culture and Art, an Upper West Side company founded in 1968, is sponsoring a five-week festival of black music, dance, poetry and plays, beginning tomorrow evening at Lincoln Center's Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater and the Library and Museum of the Performing Arts.

Scanning the riches to be presented, it seems almost incredible that just 20 years ago there was no such thing in the United States as a successful black playwright or a black theater of general interest. The handful of black companies that did exist then were, for the most part, dedicated to producing plays by white American playwrights with black actors for black audiences. Black playwright Ed Bullins describes them as a state of "integration psychosis," when minority ethnic identity was taboo and black Americans had not yet discovered that their cultural roots could be a source of strength.

Then came Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun," a conventional play about the aspirations of a black family which, although it introduced black concerns to Broadway, was not a harbinger of the revolutionary things to come. Soon thereafter, however, the civil rights revolution burst upon the late 1960's. Sparked by this raised political consciousness, blacks began to develop new and dynamic theatrical forms charged with raw vitality and ideological freshness. An autonomous black theater movement was born.

James Baldwin's "Blues for Mr. Charlie" and "The Amen Corner," and Ossie Davis's "Purlie Victorious" were among the more commercially successful and visible productions, but the cutting edge of the movement was found in the works of Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) — plays such as "The Slave" and "Dutchman." During the past decade some of the best American dramas have been written by blacks, including the plays of Ed Bullins; "Ceremonies in Dark Old Men" by Lonnie Elder 3d; "The River Niger" by Joseph Walker; "The Black Terror" and "The Mighty Gents" by Richard Wesley; "For Colored Girls ..." by Ntozake Shange, and the first black play to win a Pulitzer Prize, Charles Gordone's "No Place to Be Somebody."

Ten years later the movement, aided by Federal "cool-out" funds to develop teen-age workshops, had spawned more than 200 black professional groups across the country. As black music changed the face of American music, black actors, playwrights and directors are changing the face of the American theater.

This Black Theater Festival at Lincoln Center, which is being produced by Hazel Bryan, will feature appearances by nine black regional theater companies. Opening the festival will be "When Hell Freezes Over I'll Skate," Vinnette Carroll's musical entertainment based on the works of black poets, with gospel, folk and contemporary music, presented by the Urban Arts Corps. This will be followed by "Langston," Mike Malone's musical tribute to Langston Hughes, with selections from his poetry, short stories and plays, presented by the 85-year-old Karamu House of Cleveland, the nation's oldest black theatrical producing unit.

Other works to be presented will be "Second Thoughts" by Lamar Alfred, a "life collage in music" which deals with a black artist's reminiscences of his Southern small-town boyhood, by the Richard Allen Center; "Incest, Black and the 5 Brothers" by Marcus Hemphill, a drama about middle-class blacks, by the Billy Holiday Theater of Brooklyn. "Puritans on the Mask: An evening of Ethiopian entertainment."

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The Black Theater Festival at Lincoln Center starts Tuesday with Vinnette Carroll's production of "When Hell Freezes Over I'll Skate," left. Also represented are the Richard Allen Center with a new musical, "Second Thoughts," far left, and the Karamu House Theater with "Langston," above.
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by Mike Malone which traces the history of the minstrel show back to its Ethiopian roots, by Workshops for Car- riers in the Arts of Washington, D.C., "Five on the Black Hand Side" by Charlie Russell, a comedic-drama about five cowboys who first per- formed by the American Place Theater back in 1969, by The Repertory, Inc. of Washington, D.C., "The Amen Cor- ner" James Baldwin's 1964 Broadway play concerning the struggles of Sister Margaret Alexander to maintain her position as a shepherd of her church against the petty, sniping members of her congregation, by the Kuumba Theater of Chicago; "The Fabulous Miss Maria," Ed Bullin's comedic- drama about a black woman's life and loves, by the Dashiki Theater of New Orleans; "Lady of the Lago" by Elia Kazan, a play with music, which presents Othello as seen through the eyes of Emilia and several other subsidiary characters, by the Inner City Arts Center of Los Angeles.

Theatergoers attending the festival will get a retrospective view of American black theater. What began as a militant revolutionary thrust at the beginning, the black theater companies have evolved into a quiet exploration of personal themes and African and Afro-Ameri- can culture. Sensing this new mood, Walter Kerr, in his review of Gus Ed- wards' "Black Body Blues" last year, asked "Have black playwrights surren- dered the single note of rage for a much more complex view of things?"

Douglas Turner Ward, a co-founder and director of the 13-year-old Negro Ensemble Company, believes this to be the case. "It simply had to occur," he says. "The creativity could not sustain itself on the energy of the past alone. Today black theater is much more complex and varied than it was before. But some black artists challenge this statement. The most vociferous spokesman for black revolution is still Imamu Amiri Baraka, who in 1965 founded the Black Arts Theater which despite its short and stormy his- tory is generally believed to have launched the black theater movement. "We conceived the black theater movement as a revolution to overturn the system of racism," said Mr. Baraka the other day. "What the black theater is concerned with now is not so much revolution, as it is a struggle for the black people who have been denied the right to live and die as human beings."

Despite this, the black theater is still a movement in the making. Even though the black theater movement has grown in the past decade, it is inevitably facing financial problems. One of the main purposes of the festival is to attract more funding because, as Miss Bryant explained, "We can't depend on the National Endowment for the Arts to support our work."

Another problem has been that since the initial emergence of the black thea- ter movement, other ethnic theaters have crowded the arena vying for the pub- lic's interest and support. "Black peo- ple are no longer popular," said Alex McGuire, executive director of Karamu House. "Somehow in the early 70's black art- 

ight," explained Miss Bryant. "The festival is made up of working black theater companies who were going to be different. The discovery of the beauty of our blackness gave us a kind of security and strength to develop our own work for ourselves and not to feel that only European and Anglo-Saxson influ- ences were valid. It made us realize that some of our own Afro-Saxon influ- ences were valid too. All that gave us a great sense of hope. We could work. We could bring work into the market place and make it profitable."

"I seem to detect a change now," she went on. "More blacks should be inte- grated into the theater now but that doesn't seem to be happening. Maybe it has to do with the fact that we don't seem to have any positive black images anywhere. Also we don't seem to be getting very much money or work."


Joseph Papp, who has long been a pioneer in black theater and who this year added a black-and-Hispanic troupe to his New York Shakespeare Festival, feels that "somehow the 'get Whitey' pressure of the 60's was better than what we have today, which is no pressure at all. The quiet seems very unhealthy. There was a lot of action going on in those days but at least there was a struggle. Things are a little bit too comfortable for me these days and that's not good for the country. We are in a real state of change. Things are happens, but they are not being expressed. The frustration has been turned into a negativeness that doesn't ex- ist. And you don't see enough of the cool it down. This leads to another kind of riot that is much more destructive. It exposes itself in non-political terms like anti-social behavior, criminal activ- ities and a kind of suicidal mania that drives a lot of people crazy. It's a real malaise and it makes me sick. They say you can tell how healthy a country is by how well it treats its old and young. I feel you can tell how healthy the United States is by how well it treats its blacks."

 Granted, the principal concerns of the movement are at a stage where they need to be redefined. Many of the performers, directors and playwrights have gone into other mediums. The original purpose of the black theater movement was the development of a theater that served the needs of the black community and the people who lived in it. But as some of the artists have gone on to become successful in the commercial world, the original in- tention has become blurred. "The idea of the black theater movement," said C. Bernard Jackson, artistic director of the multi-ethnic Inner City Arts Center of Los Angeles, "is not about making it on Broadway or prepping for go to into commercial films. Our main function is to find ways to make statements, to relate our con- 

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the 60's, June 1979, the festival's first year, since then the festival has been very successful, enjoying more than 20,000 attendants. But the festival is not just a celebration of black theater; it is also a platform for black artists to express their ideas and concerns. The festival is a place where black artists can be heard and their voices can be heard. It is a place where the black theater movement can continue to grow and develop.