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ED BULLINS' THEATER: MIRRORING THE BLACK AUDIENCE

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Ed Bullins' theater differs from his contemporary friend and colleague Amiri Baraka's in the sense that, instead of directing his hatred towards a White audience and himself, he places a mirror in front of the Black audience to show the violence and destruction Blacks are performing against themselves. This essay will show how the Black audience takes a pivotal role in Bullins' plays, demonstrating the playwright's commitment as a theater artist who simultaneously creates an aesthetics and technique that equally mirrors the culture of the Black community he presents in his works.

> One can easily find me. I am on the streets of the cities... I stand huddled in stupor in the doorways of transient hotels, occasionally freeing myself from the shadows, and pleading for pennies from pedestrians. I am found asleep in the early morning, in the waiting rooms of bus stations, last night's newspapers my sheets, the black-booted policemen tapping upon the soles of my shoes with nightsticks, awakening me to arrest or sending me on my unknown way... (Bullins 1971, 9-10)

In spite of Amiri Baraka's influence on Ed Bullins, the latter developed his own and unique style and technique and his characters are mostly Black —like the audience he addresses— leaving Whites as outsiders. Bullins' theater also abandons the intellectual talk that is observed in plays such as Baraka's *Dutchman* and *The Slave.* His are down-to-earth characters, common people taken from the streets with a street language, which parallels Bullins' definition of what *revolutionary theater* means:

> I believe as a revolutionary artist, that the revolution has to go on in the minds of the people concurrently with the revolution going on in the field, in the street, in the community, and art should be functional, it should be for the people, and when it's not, it's bullshit.[1]

Bullins' theater shares with Baraka's the same violence, rage and anger. He promoted a Black-oriented realism (Hill 1980, 67), which, in words of theater critic Mance Williams, is necessary because "Black Experience demands unadulterated reality, and [Bullins] further contends that since Whites are afraid of reality, their writers and artists try to avoid a confrontation with it" (Williams 1985, 24). Many times this confrontation is violent and/or hard to swallow for his audience.

[1] Bullins' statement in the "First Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers", 1969, in *Black Theatre* 5: 24.

The violence that appears in Bullins' plays, however, differs from Baraka's in the sense that the latter directs his hatred violently towards White society and towards himself. Bullins, however, holds a mirror in front of his Black audience to show the violence and destruction they are performing against themselves while repeating a number of blind actions as in a ritual that prevents them from developing a consciousness that might help them stop their self-destruction. But Bullins' plays not only examine the lives of the ordinary people who live in the ghetto, they also expose how the characters generate their own suffering. He confronts his audience by presenting them their own imprisonment —i.e., characters are enslaved by drugs, crime, or their individual problems regarding growth of manhood and/or expressions of love, as well as "romantic notions of machismo" (Sanders 1986, 174).

North American theater critic James V. Hatch asserts that Bullins' "primary intent is to depict life as it is lived —*truthfully.* He comes close to fulfilling what Emile Zola and the naturalists believed that drama should be— a slice of life objectively presented... Mr. Bullins writes about the black experience *as it is*" (1974, 827). But Bullins' attempt, by presenting Black experience, is to dramatize the character's journey "through [her/]his own psyche to reach [her/]his loss of innocence, self-awareness or illumination ... [in order to reach] what individually is called reality" (Sanders 1986, 176). The characters that are presented in his plays, as pointed out by Mance Williams, tell their own stories without the playwright taking sides or imposing his own point of view (Williams 1985, 24).

If Baraka's plays deal more closely with the rhetoric of Black Power those of Bullins attempt to challenge the African American community's daily problems in order to create a solid foundation upon which a political basis may be constructed. In this regard, in Bullins' *The Electronic Nigger,* there is a significant words exchange between Mr. Carpentier —a student— and Mr. Jones —his teacher—:

> MR CARPENTIER: ... This is the age of the new intellectual assisted by his tool, the machine, I'll have you know!
>
> MR JONES: *(Furious)* Carpentier! ... That is what we are here in this classroom to fight against ... We are here to discover, awaken, search out human values through art! (1969, 232)

Mr. Jones realizes the human being's alienation in a technological society and, it is the artist who is responsible for offering the help necessary to recover human values:

> MR JONES: Does not the writer have some type of obligation to remove some of the intellectual as well as political, moral and social tyranny that infects this culture? What does all the large words in creation serve you, my Black brother, if you are a complete whitewashed man? (Bullins 1969, 239)

Clearly, Bullins rejects the talk-and-speech-based Western culture, which the Spanish poet García Lorca had already observed in North America as the epitome of machines and automatons (Garon 1979, 27), only redeemed by the spiritual side offered by the African American culture.

In his portrayal of the ghetto, Bullins achieves two purposes. First, as previously mentioned, he holds a mirror to raise consciousness in the audience about the destruction they are perpetrating upon their loved ones and upon themselves. Second, by presenting a life-style, language, emotional characters and their strong-based bonds, he is asserting the existence of a culture being shaped by the Black experience with its own values, beliefs and problems. Thus, Bullins does not romanticize the glorification of that "street culture," as affirmed by theater critic Clayton Riley (1970, xx) for he presents the problems that originate from within the community. Bullins is totally committed to his audience, who plays a focal role in the performance of his plays.

Most of Bullins' plays, theater critic Leslie Sanders asserts, not only invite to a dialogue with the actors, they also "challenge the audience to use the occasion of the play to extend its own sense of community to the world beyond the theater" (Sanders 1985, 49). Hatch equally observes the electrifying effect Bullins' work has upon the audience: "The group response is earnest, laughing, crying, commenting on the action, or sometimes talking back to the characters. ... It is a theater ... emotionally involving the audience, a sharp contrast to the frigid, polite response that most [North] American theatergoers are accustomed to" (Hatch 1974, 826). Riley claims that it is the playwright that "manages to terrify by implication, perhaps the most effective way to do it; he weaves possibilities into the spectator's imagination, makes audiences believe in the unavoidable arrival of disaster, a crashing, all-inclusive horror dwelling somewhere behind the grim faces of the street (Riley 1970, x).

Sanders, Hatch and Riley proclaim that the audience take an active part in the performance of Bullins' plays. Audience participation occurs as a result of a specific theatrical form and language that activates the spectator, as Riley points out: "[Bullins'] form of theatrical experience is physically draining, an exhaustive encounter which allows only rare opportunities to relax, to simply be an onlooker" (1970, x). This theatrical form used by Bullins might be denominated *ritual action.* In the communion of actors/characters and audience, like in the Mass, all come together and participate as one.

Most of Bullins' plays have a circular structure, like Baraka's, which imply the repetition that exists in life and in nature, in the seasons. This circle image is mentioned by Ray in the Prologue of Bullins' *In the Wine Time:*

> Summer and Cliff and Lou and me together —all poured from the same brew, all hating each other and loving, and consuming and never forgiving— but not letting go of the circle until the earth swung again into winter, bringing me closer to manhood and the freedom to do all the things that I had done for the past three summers. (1969, 104)

The idea of the circle may comprise a double intention. On the one hand, the idea of oneness, of bringing people together; on the other hand, it may suggest an enclosed space, that imprisons and/or oppresses the people in it. Consequently, while Bullins celebrates a street and/or ghetto life and culture —its values of togetherness and sense of community—

he simultaneously warns of the danger found in repeating the same mistakes. The African American community needs, then, to keep the values existing within it, but change what causes their imprisonment and keeps them away from freedom. Commitment is indispensable in order to take an action and stop the self-destruction observed within the community. Commitment, too, applies to the artist in the same manner.

In *Goin' a Buffalo,* the play opens with Pandora living with her husband, Curt. By the end, she has no choice and, against her will —but without offering any resistance, is taken by another man (Art) to another place. Place, then, is not what delimits the circle; it is the action itself taken on the loved person by two different men whose only objective becomes Pandora's exploitation for their own profit.

Ritual action has another implication and it is related to Sanders's affirmation that *Black* itself implies a geography, a culture, without considering a physical and concrete territory. Black culture exists where Black people are (1988, 184-85). As a result, the title *Goin' a Buffalo,* which implies an action, may equally imply the move of some people from one place to another, carrying with them a style and a way of life wherever they go. By the same token, Bullins is warning about the possibility of repeating the same mistakes in a different place. Repetition of mistakes, ritual action, is paralleled by Bullins' device of using the same characters in different plays, going from one play/place to another.

In *Goin' a Buffalo,* we learn that Pandora was taken by Curt and she has stayed with him in a faithful bondage, as Curt himself asserts: "She and I are a team" (Hatch 1974, 850). Both have been living in Los Angeles. When Art arrives and finally betrays Curt, he takes Pandora with him to Buffalo. Thus, Pandora, although moving to a different place, continues to be chained to another man who will continue to exploit her. The mistake is committed in the action itself, suggesting that action does not necessarily mean change. In Bullins' plays, characters are wanderers presented as metaphors of blind actions that are performed without giving them a thought.

The term *ritual action* has been actually adopted from one of Bullins' plays, *Clara's Ole Man.* In the play, Big Girl (one of the main characters), explains to Jack how medicine is exercised to cure madness. She is referring to electro-shock and insulin which do not really cure but only help quiet a patient:

> BIG GIRL: Ya see workin' in the hospital with all the nuts and fruits and crazies and weirdos I get ideas 'about things ... [When] the docs start shockin' them and puttin' them on insulin they quiets down, that's when the docs think they are gettin' better, but really they ain't. They're just learn'n like before to hold it in ... just like before, that's the reason most of them come back or are always on the verge afterwards of goin' psycho again.
>
> JACK: *(Enthusiastic)* Wow, I never thought of that! That ritual action of purging catharsis can open up new venues of therapy and in learning theory and conditioning subjects ... (1969, 256-57)

Big Girl's and Jack's words exchange denote various implications.

First, Bullins is attacking a technology that is acting blindly on human beings and, consequently, it is sickening more than improving health problems— specifically mental problems that are, paradoxically, the result of our modern age of technology. Second, he is attacking a society which deprives human beings from their freedom, detaching them from their culture and community and from themselves by conditioning their behaviors, either through psychological or colonialist and imperialist conductivism. Finally, Bullins is attacking a Western aesthetics as stated by Aristotle, applied to theater since the Renaissance and characterized by a linear plot and by what Bullins calls "purging and catharsis". The linear plot, purging and cathartic effects conduct the audience throughout the entire performance and, as a result, excludes its participation.

The Aristotelian aesthetics was equally rejected by playwrights such as Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht, who also realized the brain-washing such technique was exercising on the audience, where the audience remains passive through the emotional empathy created by the characters on stage that prevents them from questioning what they are watching. Bullins, too, is criticizing the ritual action or repeated action taken by Western thought upon other cultures as well as the ritual action performed by peoples under the social, political, historical and artistic indictment of Western imperialism, without ever reacting or questioning its action. Bullins exposes the need to stop blind ritual action exerted upon African Americans by outsiders and by themselves. And in order to stop blind actions self-reflection and introspection are needed.

Bullins reverses the meaning of ritual and action. A ritual which, instead of reinforcing communion and togetherness, detaches people from the members of their own community and from themselves. And, an action which, instead of bringing change, is blindly taken and repeats in the form of ritual. Blind actions taken by the characters on stage actually mirror those of the audience, and those actions should provoke a reaction in that audience and make them question why those characters keep committing the same mistakes. The audience must realize that their lack of questioning leads them to their own destruction, as it is the case of Pandora and Mamma in *Goin' a Buffalo,* where these two characters simply follow Art's commands without conceiving the possibility of shaping their own destiny. Consequently, it is actually the audience who is forced to find new alternatives and solutions that can bring them individual and social change beyond the auditorium walls.

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