

## INTRODUCTION

Theatre can't be some random exercise in finger popping. It has to represent the striving of men to try to raise themselves to a new level of thought, and it's not—I mean, we don't talk about theatre down here, or theatre up there as an idle jest but because it is necessary to pump life, blood back into our community—that's what we're talking about.

Amiri Baraka<sup>1</sup>

I am here between the voices of our ancestors  
and the noise of the planet.  
between the surprise of death and life;  
I am here because I shall not give the  
earth up to non-dreamers and earth molesters;  
I am here to say to you:  
my body is full of veins  
like the bombs waiting to burst  
with blood.

...  
I am here, and my breath/our breaths  
must thunder across this land  
arousing new breaths. new life.

Sonia Sanchez<sup>2</sup>

The 1960s throughout the 1980s have been, with no doubt, the most vibrant and prolific decades in Black Theatre both in the United States and in South Africa. A great number of plays burst out like a forceful waterfall of red blood—expression of a long time-held rage and expression of life. Houston A. Baker, Jr., has observed the significance of the sixties and seventies for African Americans:

At no time in the history of black America have so many spokesmen dedicated themselves in serious and informed ways, to a particular set of meanings and values. These men and women altered the existing face of society in a way that makes it impossible to begin the journey back as though blacks have always rushed eagerly into harbors of the white world. The texts of the sixties and seventies constitute a level of discourse where functional oppositions are readily observable.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Amiri Baraka, First Pan-African Cultural Festival, 1969, in Algiers, in *Black Theatre 5* (1969): 30.

<sup>2</sup> Sonia Sanchez, "Reflections After the June 12th March for Disarmament," in *homegirls & handgrenades*, Sanchez (New York and Chicago: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1984) 68.

<sup>3</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr., *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago, 1983) 131.

The Black Theatre Movement emerged after being gestated for almost three centuries and activated by the Black Power Movements in North America and by the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa. The plays of the Movement were breathing and pulsating so vigorously because its authors had something important to utter as the Black community's representatives. The Black community became the protagonist of the new theatre. Audience recovered its traditional and pivotal role as part of the theatrical event—a stylistic element almost non-existent in modern Western theatre.

About two decades earlier, Western theatre artists, such as Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht, had already commenced to question the validity of Western theatre and proposed the need to include new elements, which would eventually give birth to a new aesthetics. Artaud and Brecht observed the need to create a new theatrical language and asserted the importance to engage the theatre audience in a dialectical process with the action taking place on the stage. In the same line, the artists of the Black Theatre Movement realized not only the passivity played by the audience in the past but also the passive role imposed on the Black community in a society governed by White rule. These artists initiated a double task: the restoration of theatre audience and Black culture from the death imposed on them by Western imperialism—both political and intellectual. The Black Theatre Movement exploded as a spring of life freed by a new aesthetics created by artists who were committed to and voiced their community's needs.

Geneviève Fabre accurately points out that the emergence of African American theatre is "above all a sociocultural phenomenon and must be examined as such."<sup>4</sup> Fabre's assertion can be equally extended to the emergence of Black theatre in South Africa, and this is the approach that is ensued in this study. If, as already observed, audience/Black community and culture were enhanced by Black artists, consciousness became the main didactic goal that needed to be taken to the Black community, so that they could abandon their passive role and take action. In Fabre's opinion, African American theatre in the Harlem Renaissance did not give much attention to the African American community and "to the development of a cultural politics on its behalf," asserting that the question of "links between theatre and community seems to have been largely ignored."<sup>5</sup> Fabre remarks that in the sixties it was the Black community at large, the people of the streets, upon whom main attention was focused; whereas in the Harlem Renaissance, at an aesthetic level, the middle-class rejected the popular forms of expression and there was a "near absence of black audience." Moreover, the Black elite did not offer support to the African American artist.<sup>6</sup>

Fabre believes that the Black Theatre Movement of the sixties in the United States that brought African American intellectuals back to their community is best understood

in light of the experiences of the postwar generation, the "uprooted" generation. The international climate of war left blacks without the solid, though restricted, influence of the community. They were drawn further away from ethnic concerns, cut off from the past and a knowledge of their history, and set adrift in a nationwide no-man's land where their place was poorly defined or in a minority identity that continued to elude them.

In 1965 the younger generation was caught up in an outburst of violence that hit the black community harder than any of the wars in which people had fought. Not since the Harlem riots of 1935 had such a

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<sup>4</sup> Geneviève Fabre, *Drumbeats, Masks and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre* (Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London (England): Harvard University Press, 1983) 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

crisis swept through northern urban ghettos. Faced with explosive discontent and the repression that followed, the young artist and intellectual was forced to reexamine the relation of his art to the community.<sup>7</sup>

It was in the sixties that the dialectical relationship of theatre with its audience was restored. The Black Theatre Movement in the United States was geared towards a specific audience, which did include neither Whites nor the African American bourgeoisie—which had assimilated the values of the dominant society. The theatre of the sixties envelops both the condemnation of bourgeois complicity with White America and the celebration of its ultimate redemption.<sup>8</sup>

African American theatre has had a long history that could be traced from the times of slavery; and the church, as a formalizing agent, has played an indelible part that has strengthened its development.<sup>9</sup> Fabre believes that the theatrical character of religious services has not been adequately analyzed, stating that “all elements of the future dramaturgy are there.”<sup>10</sup> In the past, the church had offered the shelter where African Americans were able to perform, combining improvisation and ritual. The religious services evoked audience participation and forms of theatricality that theatre could utilize.<sup>11</sup> The theatre that was performed in the plantations, the minstrels, the short-lived African Grove Theatre of the turn of the century, the musicals of the 1920s—and more concretely *Shuffle Along* in 1921, the Black theatres that were opened in Harlem during the Renaissance, the Lafayette Theatre Players and the Federal Theatre Project in the 1930s, Langston Hughes’ the Harlem Suitcase Theatre (1937) and finally Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, awarded the Critics Circle Award in 1959, offer an idea of the long tradition and development of African American theatre. Continuing with this legacy, the sixties enhanced the background necessary to witness another renaissance, this time with a more clearly political and community-oriented commitment as the goal undertaken by its artists.

Unfortunately, the history and tradition of Black South African theatre still needs wider research. It has been only recently that Tim Couzens has brought to light the contribution of H.I.E. Dhlomo, born in 1910, and his work—including his plays<sup>12</sup>—asserting its significance in South African literature written in English. Other than Dhlomo’s plays, Black theatre in South Africa commenced to occupy a prominent place in the sixties with the musicals that followed the example of *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera* in 1957. Athol Fugard’s plays took a turn from the musicals and presented a new theatre which greatly influenced the subsequent birth of the Black theatre that paralleled the Black Consciousness Movement. The political situation under which Black and Colored people are forced to live in South Africa under apartheid has definitely hindered the work to be carried out by scholars and writers to restore the history and tradition of Black South African theatre. The reconstruction of a past, of an African culture, was precisely the endeavor undertaken by the playwrights of the Black Theatre Movement, closely following

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> See Beverly Robinson, “Historical Arenas of African American Storytelling,” in *Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African American Storytelling*, Goss and Barnes, eds. (New York: Simon and Schuster/Touchstone, 1989) 211-216.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Couzens, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), and *H.I.E. Dhlomo Collected Works*, Visser and Couzens, eds. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985).

the goals and ideology divulged by the Black Consciousness Movement, under Stephen Biko's leadership. Although the Black Consciousness Movement reached its peak in the seventies, it had begun to be gestated by the end of the 1960s.

The 1960s was an internationally significant decade. Carl G. Jung asserts that in the late part of this decade, the anima (or feminine side of male's personality) in the males and the animus (or masculine side of female's personality) in the female "began to accelerate with greater acceleration. At the same time the persona started to undergo a deflation, and the expansion of consciousness became an aim of the generation born during the postwar years."<sup>13</sup> Jung claims that a system of personality proceeds to individuate only when it becomes conscious.<sup>14</sup> This need to achieve an individual and collective consciousness in order to initiate a self-reflection and self-determination journey was observed in the writers of these decades. Only through personal self-reflection—closely following Frantz Fanon's theories applied to Third World cultures—could the artist reach her/his audience and help conscientize them about the situation and active role they should learn to play within the Black community.

Consequently, the artists regarded their art as a committed endeavor that needed to be taken to and help their community to stand up and abandon their submissiveness, asserting their cultural and historical values. Furthermore, in the process of the Black community's conscientization, the artists found indispensable to examine and restore their history and cultural values, which had been belittled, denied and/or suppressed by the imposition of Western cultural and artistic values. The artist, then, took a political stand that was inextricably connected to the commitment to and creation of her/his art.

Black theatre artists were determined to abandon their silenced position and voice with energy and power the beauty of Blackness. They were determined to destroy the falseness and simplicity of stereotypes created by White society and to show the complexity of their real selves. And they were determined as well to lead their community out of darkness, reassuring the history of their past; a past that needed to be examined under the light of their present historical moment in order to formulate their future. Hope and celebration of Blackness, then, together with the activation of the audience's consciousness, became pivotal elements of a new theatre aesthetics that totally rejected the demarcations dictated by Western artistic parameters. African Americans artists spoke of the creation of Black Aesthetics; Black South Africans spoke of Black consciousness and the Theatre of the Dispossessed (analyzed in Chapters four and six of this study respectively).

In contrast to the Black Theatre Movement that emerged in North America, whose targets and artistic goals were registered in a written manifesto, the targets and artistic goals of the Black Theatre Movement in South African were not transferred into a written pronouncement. The continuous censorship and imprisonment of theatre artists—actors, directors and playwrights, has restricted any official written declaration that belonged to the Movement as such. Every single attempt to establish a theatre group or movement was continuously hampered by the South African government. This study, however, will prove that, in spite of the absence of a written declaration formulating a theatre movement, the playwrights and their works displayed an aesthetic, commitment and goals that were shared by most of the plays that appeared in the seventies and eighties.

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<sup>13</sup> Calvin S. Hall and Vernon J. Nordby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology* (New York and Scarborough (Ontario): New American Library, 1973) 88.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

Only a short article by Cedric Callaghan written in 1983, entitled "Black Theatre in South Africa: Links with the United States,"<sup>15</sup> has lightly questioned the possibility of a comparative analysis between the theatre of these two countries. When examining the socio-political background closely, it can be easily noticed that a very similar historical background had sowed the seed out of which the Black Theatre Movement grew and flourished in both countries. In addition, although much discussion has arisen about whether the use the term Black theatre is appropriate, Black artists have clearly demonstrated the existence of differentiated cultural attributes that characterize their community, both in the United States and in South Africa. The historical parallelisms—i.e., racism and White rule—between both countries are briefly displayed and examined in Chapter one.

This study will analyze the different elements comprised in Black plays both in North American and in South Africa. From Black theatre emerged a new aesthetics that is examined here as the Aesthetics of Self-Affirmation. The Aesthetics of Self-Affirmation—examined in Chapter two—embraces a heterogeneity that expresses the unique and particular components which have shaped Black theatre in the United States and in South Africa. By self-affirmation, it is understood that a writer, as representative of her/his community, is asserting the specific characteristics that distinguish her/his culture and her/his gender. Moreover, theatre, as a public genre became precisely the appropriate catapult to make public and voice the existence of a culture that had been continuously undermined by White rule and models. Furthermore, theatre was simply the continuation of a long African oral tradition which the writers were familiar with as part of their African background. This study, however, will demonstrate not only the relationship but also the differences existing between the Black theatre works that emerged out of two different countries. Black theatre in both countries have comprised the combination of African and/or African American and Occidental components in a dialectical relationship with their historical time period—i.e., their socio-political and cultural milieu.

This study also illustrates the necessity to continue with further research to provide more theatrical theories that incorporate new formulas with which Black theatre can be analyzed. It is the genuine combination of elements expressed in the plays of the Black Theatre Movement that needs to be approached from a different critical perspective, other than the Western models created to be applied to Western works. The playwrights of the Movement proposed a new aesthetics that they tried to apply into their own works. Most theorists who examined those plays, however, did not really define the lines of their critical approach. Most of the plays were simply considered agit-prop or protest plays, without scholars having conducted a more profound investigation of the theatrical elements plunged into them. Although much more expansive critical trends were developed in the eighties to approach African American literature, especially fiction, there is still an eminent need of devising new methods that help us explore the validity of African American theatre from a more theoretical stand. With regard to Black South African theatre, scholars were encouragingly challenged to find more theoretical approaches that seem to have been lightly activated by the end of the eighties.

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<sup>15</sup> Cedric Callaghan, "Black Theatre in South Africa: Links with the United States?," in *Black American Literature Forum* 17, 2 (Summer 1983).

A significant difference in the development of the Movement in both countries is acknowledged in this study. On the one hand, African American theatre included plays by men and women playwrights, even if the women were not aligned with the Black Theatre Movement. This significant factor takes us to think also of a different aesthetics developed by male and female playwrights. On the other hand, Black South African theatre contains a majority of men playwrights as well as actors and directors. Only Fatima Dike's work received considerable attention in the seventies, and Gina Mhlophe's plays began to be produced at the end of the eighties.

This study establishes the differences existing in the aesthetics developed either by male or female playwrights. Female playwrights, using their personal experiences, widened and completed a simplistic view and broke with the old stereotypes observed in the male playwrights' works of the Movement. These women playwrights offered a more complex picture of their society by voicing the female experience, absent in plays by male playwrights. It is necessary to consider this difference when approaching plays written by males that include a woman's voice. This study asserts that a feminist consciousness grew out of the parameters activated by the Black Power and Consciousness Movements. Black female playwrights manifested a double consciousness that embraced their cultural background as well as their gender. Plays written by African American and Black South African women playwrights are examined in Chapters four and six respectively under the light of a female aesthetics.