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DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

V O L U M E

6

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Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied
Dramatic Works from All the World's Literatures

VOLUME 6

Lawrence J. Trudeau, Editor

Margaret Anne Haerens, Christine Slovey
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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 92-648805

ISBN 0-8103-9288-7

ISSN 1056-4349

Printed in the United States of America
Published simultaneously in the United Kingdom
by Gale Research International Limited
(An affiliated company of Gale Research Inc.)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

D*rama Criticism (DC)* is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring interest. Furthermore, *DC* seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse body of commentary, the essays in *DC* offer insights into the authors and their works but do not require that the reader possess a wide background in literary studies. Where appropriate, reviews of important productions of the plays discussed are also included to give students a heightened awareness of drama as a dynamic art form, one that many claim is fully realized only in performance.

DC was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Gale's *Short Story Criticism (SSC)* and *Poetry Criticism (PC)*, which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *Drama Criticism* directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Gale series. Commentary on the works of William Shakespeare may be found in *Shakespearean Criticism (SC)*.

Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, *DC* assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Each volume of *DC* presents:

- 8-10 entries
- authors and works representing a wide range of nationalities and time periods
- a diversity of viewpoints and critical opinions.

Organization of an Author Entry

Each author entry consists of some or all of the following elements, depending on the scope and complexity of the criticism:

- The **author heading** consists of the playwright's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates. If an author consistently wrote under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction are any name variations under which the dramatist wrote, including transliterated forms of the names of authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.

- A **portrait** of the author is included when available. Most entries also feature illustrations of people, places, and events pertinent to a study of the playwright and his or her works. When appropriate, photographs of the plays in performance are also presented.
- The **biographical and critical introduction** contains background information that familiarizes the reader with the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her works.
- The list of **principal works** is divided into two sections, each of which is organized chronologically by date of first performance. If this has not been conclusively determined, the composition or publication date is used. The first section of the principal works list contains the author's dramatic pieces. The second section provides information on the author's major works in other genres.
- Whenever available, **author commentary** is provided. This section consists of essays or interviews in which the dramatist discusses his or her own work or the art of playwriting in general.
- Essays offering **overviews and general studies of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.
- **Criticism of individual plays** offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. In some cases, the criticism is divided into two sections, each arranged chronologically. When a significant performance of a play can be identified (typically, the premier of a twentieth-century work), the first section of criticism will feature **production reviews** of this staging. Most entries include sections devoted to **critical commentary** that assesses the literary merit of the selected plays. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety.
- As an additional aid to students, the critical essays and excerpts are often prefaced by **explanatory annotations**. These notes provide several types of useful information, including the critic's reputation and approach to literary studies as well as the scope and significance of the criticism that follows.
- A complete **bibliographic citation**, designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, precedes each piece of criticism.
- The **further reading list** at the end of each entry comprises additional studies of the dramatist. It is divided into sections that help students quickly locate the specific information they need.

Other Features

- A **cumulative author index** lists all the authors who have appeared in *DC* and Gale's other Literature Criticism Series, as well as cross-references to related titles published by Gale, including *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. A complete listing of the series included appears at the beginning of the index.
- A **cumulative nationality index** lists each author featured in *DC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *DC* volume in which the author appears.

- A **cumulative title index** lists in alphabetical order the individual plays discussed in the criticism contained in *DC*. Each title is followed by the author's name and the corresponding volume and page number(s) where commentary on the work may be located. Translations and variant titles are cross-referenced to the title of the play in its original language so that all references to the work are combined in one listing.

A Note to the Reader

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in *Drama Criticism* may use the following general formats to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to materials reprinted from books.

¹Susan Sontag, "Going to the Theater, Etc.," *Partisan Review* XXXI, No. 3 (Summer 1964), 389-94; excerpted and reprinted in *Drama Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), pp. 17-20.

²Eugene M. Waith, *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden* (Chatto & Windus, 1962); excerpted and reprinted in *Drama Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), pp. 237-47.

Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest authors to appear in future volumes of *DC*, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor.

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James Baldwin
William Wells Brown
Karel Čapek
Mary Chase
Alexandre Dumas (*films*)
Charles Fuller
Nikolai Gogol
Lillian Hellman
Christopher Marlowe
Arthur Miller
Yukio Mishima
Richard Brinsley Sheridan
Sophocles
Thornton Wilder

Volume 2

Aristophanes
Albert Camus
William Congreve
Everyman
Federico García Lorca
Lorraine Hansberry
Henrik Ibsen
Wole Soyinka
John Millington Synge
John Webster
August Wilson

Volume 3

Bertolt Brecht
Pedro Calderón de la Barca
John Dryden
Athol Fugard
Langston Hughes
Thomas Kyd
Menander
Joe Orton
Jean-Paul Sartre
Ntozake Shange

Volume 4

Pierre-Augustin Caron de
Beaumarchais
Aphra Behn
Alice Childress
Euripides
Hugo von Hofmannsthal
David Henry Hwang
Ben Jonson
David Mamet
Wendy Wasserstein
Tennessee Williams

Volume 5

Caryl Churchill
John Pepper Clark
Adrienne Kennedy
Thomas Middleton
Luigi Pirandello
Eugène Scribe
Lucius Annaeus Seneca
Sam Shepard
Paul Zindel

Volume 6

Amiri Baraka
Francis Beaumont and
John Fletcher
Ed Bullins
Václav Havel
Beth Henley
Clifford Odets
Plautus
Tom Stoppard

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Amiri Baraka

1934-

(Born Everett LeRoy Jones; has also written as LeRoi Jones and Imamu Amiri Baraka.) American poet, dramatist, short story writer, novelist, essayist, critic, and editor.

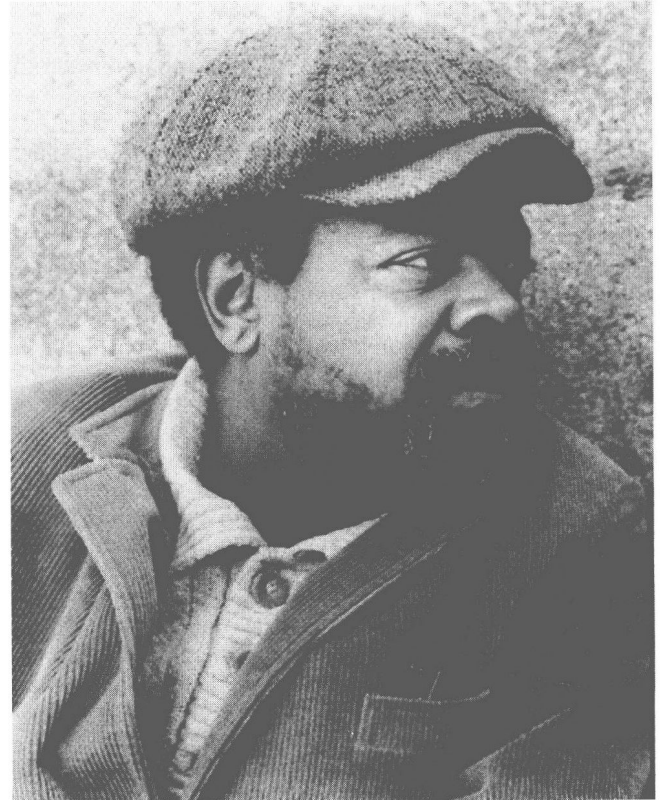
INTRODUCTION

A seminal figure in the development of contemporary black literature, Baraka is a controversial writer. According to some scholars, he succeeds both W. E. B. Du Bois and Richard Wright as one of the most prolific and persistent critics of twentieth-century America. His works, which cover a wide variety of literary genres, often concern such political issues as the oppression of blacks in white society and the oppression of the poor in a capitalist society. He received worldwide acclaim for his first professional production, "Dutchman," in 1964, and his subsequent work for the theater has provoked both praise and controversy. Various movements and philosophies have shaped Baraka throughout his life, from the Beat movement of the late 1950s to Marxist-Leninist thought which he has embraced most recently. The only constant in his life is change, making a study of his writing both a complex and challenging endeavor.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born Everett LeRoy Jones in New Jersey in 1934, Baraka excelled in his studies, graduating from high school at the age of fifteen. He enrolled in Howard University in 1952 and just before beginning his first year, started spelling his name LeRoi. At Howard, Baraka studied with such famous black scholars as E. Franklin Frazier, Nathan A. Scott, Jr., and Sterling A. Brown who is regarded as the patriarch of African-American literary critics. Despite these exceptional teachers, Baraka found Howard University stifling and flunked out in 1954. He then joined the United States Air Force. In 1957, after being dishonorably discharged, he moved to New York's Greenwich Village and became part of the Beat movement. That same year he married Hettie Roberta Cohen and together they founded *Yugen*, a magazine forum for Beat poetry. During the next few years, he also established himself as a music critic, writing about jazz for *downbeat*, *Metronome*, and the *Jazz Review*. Baraka first received critical acclaim as a poet, for his collection *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*. . . , which was published in 1961.

In 1960, he was invited to Cuba by the New York chapter of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee and the visit changed the young writer's life. Baraka came to understand that politics had a place in art and he made it his life's work to incorporate his political, social, and spiritual beliefs



into his writing. He would no longer be content with art for art's sake, but would use poetry and drama to teach the people, opening their eyes to reality as Baraka saw it. Following the murder of Black Muslim leader Malcolm X in 1965, Baraka divorced his white wife and move to Harlem. He dissociated from the white race and dedicated himself to creating works that were inspired by and spoke to the African-American community. This same year, he founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in Harlem. He married Sylvia Robinson, a black woman, in 1966. Around this time, Baraka's hatred of whites peaked. When a white woman asked him what whites could do to help blacks, he retorted, "You can help by dying. You are a cancer." In 1968, he converted to Islam and changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka, meaning "blessed spiritual leader."

In 1974, in another radical shift, Baraka dropped the spiritual title of Imamu and declared himself an adherent of Marxist-Leninist thought. Rejecting Black Nationalism as racist in its implications, he now advocated socialism as a viable solution to the problems in America. He also repudiated his past anti-Semitic and anti-white statements. He concluded: "Nationalism, so-called, when it says 'all non-blacks are our enemies,' is sickness or criminality, in fact

a form of fascism." In the fall of 1979, he joined the Africana Studies Department at State University of New York at Stony Brook as a teacher of creative writing. His autobiography was published in 1984 and *Money: A Jazz Opera* (1982) was one his latest dramas produced.

MAJOR WORKS

"Dutchman" is widely considered Baraka's masterpiece in the drama genre. The play received an Obie Award for best Off-Broadway play and propelled the playwright into the public eye. "Dutchman" centers around an interracial encounter between Lula, an attractive, flirtatious white woman, and Clay, a young, quiet, well-dressed black intellectual. The seemingly random meeting on a New York subway ends with Lula murdering Clay. "Dutchman" is considered by many critics to be Baraka's first successful integration of the themes and motifs of earlier, less-successful works, merging mythical allusions, surrealistic techniques, and social statement. Another of Baraka's well-known plays, "The Toilet," is set in the bathroom of an urban high school and concerns a white homosexual boy who gets beaten up by a gang of black boys for sending a love letter to the leader of the black gang. The play is exemplary of several recurring themes in Baraka's work: the drama of the sensitive, isolated individual pitted against the social code of his community; marginalized individuals' self-hatred as perpetuated by society; and the failure of love, or of the ability to love in our society. During Baraka's period of Black Nationalism, he produced a series of works with increasingly violent overtones which called for blacks to unite and establish their own nation. Experimenting with ritual forms in his dramas, he wrote *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant*, a vivid recreation of the passage of slaves to America that relies heavily on powerful images and music to help convey its meaning. His drama since 1974 reflects Baraka's latest political commitments to Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought and Communism. *S-I* and *The Motion of History* are reminiscent of the agit-prop dramas of the 1930s, particularly in their appeals to working-class solidarity and in their suggestion that working class revolution is society's only hope.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have praised "Dutchman" for its "power," "freshness," and "deadly wit." Others were outraged by its vulgar language, its perpetuation of interracial hostility, and its portrayal of whites. "The Toilet" also met with mixed reviews, described by one critic as an "obscene, scatological, bloody confrontation of the races." Many scholars, including William J. Harris, have observed that critical assessment of Baraka's work has fallen into two general camps. Harris remarked: "The white response. . . has been either silence or anger—and, in a few cases, sadness. . . . One general complaint is that Baraka has forsaken art for politics. . . . The reaction to Baraka in most of the black world has been very different from that in the white. In the black world Baraka is a famous artist. . . ." Whatever the reaction to Baraka, no one is left unaffected by his

works. People bristle at his depictions of "white America," critics assert, because he mirrors the ugly facets of American society.

*PRINCIPAL WORKS

PLAYS

A Good Girl Is Hard to Find 1958
 "Dante" 1961; also produced as "The Eighth Ditch" 1964
 "The Baptism" 1964
 "Dutchman" 1964
 "The Slave" 1964
 "The Toilet" 1964
 "Experimental Death Unit #1" 1965
 "J-E-L-L-O" 1965
A Black Mass 1966
 "The Death of Malcolm X" 1966
 "Arm Yourself or Harm Yourself: A One-Act Play: A Message of Self-Defense to Black Men" 1967
 "Great Goodness of Life (A Coon Show)" 1967
 "Madheart: A Morality Play" 1967
 "Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant" 1967
 "Home on the Range" 1968
Police 1968
Four Black Revolutionary Plays: All Praises to the Black Man 1969
 "Resurrection in Life" 1969
Bloodrites 1970
Junkies Are Full of Shhh. . . 1970
Columbia The Gem of The Ocean 1973
A Recent Killing 1973
The New Ark's A-Moverin 1974
The Sidnee Poet Heroical or If in Danger of Suit, The Kid Poet Heroical 1975
S-I 1976
The Motion of History 1977
The Motion of History and Other Plays 1978
Selected Plays and Prose of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones (dramas and prose) 1979
 "The Sidnee Poet Heroical: In 29 Scenes" 1979
 "What Was The Relationship of the Lone Ranger to the Means of Production: A Play in One Act" 1979
Dim'Crackr Party Convention 1980
Boy & Tarzan Appear In A Clearing! 1981
Money: A Jazz Opera 1982
 "Song: a One Act Play about the Relationship of Art to Real Life" 1983

OTHER MAJOR WORKS

Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note. . . . (poetry) 1961
Cuba Libre (essay) 1961
Blues People: Negro Music in White America (essay) 1963
The Dead Lecturer: Poems (poetry) 1964
 "The Revolutionary Theatre" (essay) 1965; published in periodical *Liberator*

- The System of Dante's Hell* (novel) 1965
Home: Social Essays (essays) 1966
Black Art (poetry) 1967
Black Music (essay) 1967
Tales (short stories) 1967
Black Magic: Sabotage, Target Study, Black Art; Collected Poetry, 1961-1967 (poetry) 1969
Black Spring (screenplay) 1968
In Our Terribleness (Some Elements and Meaning in Black Style) (poetry) 1970
It's Nation Time (poetry) 1970
A Fable (screenplay) 1971
Raise, Race, Rays, Raze: Essays since 1965 (essays) 1971
Strategy and Tactics of a Pan-African Nationalist Party (essay) 1971
Supercoon (screenplay) 1971
Kawaida Studies: The New Nationalism (essay) 1972
Spirit Reach (poetry) 1972
Afrikan Revolution (poetry) 1973
Crisis in Boston! (essay) 1974
Hard Facts: Excerpts (poetry) 1975
Three Books by Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): The System of Dante's Hell, Tales, The Dead Lecturer (novel, short stories, and poetry) 1975
AM/TRAK (poetry) 1979
Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones (poetry) 1979
 "Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle" (essay) 1980; published in periodical *Black American Literature Forum*
 "Confessions of a Former Anti-Semite" (essay) 1980; published in periodical *Village Voice*
In the Tradition: For Black Arthur Blythe (poetry) 1980
Reggae or Not! (poetry) 1981
In the Tradition (poetry) 1982
 "Sounding" (poetry) 1982; published in journal *Black American Literature Forum*
The Descent of Charlie Fuller into Pulitzerland and the Need for Afro-American Institutions (essay) 1983
The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones (autobiography) 1984
Daggers and Javelins: Essays, 1974-1979 (essays) 1984
 "Wailers" (poetry) 1985; published in periodical *Callaloo*
 "Why;s/Wise" (poetry) 1985; published in periodical *Southern Review*
The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues (essay) 1987
 "Reflections" (poetry) 1988; published in periodical *Black Scholar*

*Works before 1967 were published under the name LeRoi Jones.

AUTHOR COMMENTARY

The Revolutionary Theatre (1965)

SOURCE: "The Revolutionary Theatre," in *Home: Social Essays*, William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1966, pp. 210-15.

[In the following essay, a reprint of the original which appeared in *Liberator* in 1965, Baraka outlines the goals and responsibilities of Black Revolutionary Theatre.]

The Revolutionary Theatre should force change; it should be change. (All their faces turned into the lights and you work on them black nigger magic, and cleanse them at having seen the ugliness. And if the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves.) We are preaching virtue again, but by that to mean NOW, toward what seems the most constructive use of the world.

The Revolutionary Theatre must EXPOSE! Show up the insides of these humans, look into black skulls. White men will cower before this theatre because it hates them. Because they themselves have been trained to hate. The Revolutionary Theatre must hate them for hating. For presuming with their technology to deny the supremacy of the Spirit. They will all die because of this.

The Revolutionary Theatre must teach them their deaths. It must crack their faces open to the mad cries of the poor. It must teach them about silence and the truths lodged there. It must kill any God anyone names except Common Sense. The Revolutionary Theatre should flush the fags and murders out of Lincoln's face.

It should stagger through our universe correcting, insulting, preaching, spitting craziness—but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments. People must be taught to trust true scientists (knowers, diggers, oddballs) and that the holiness of life is the constant possibility of widening the consciousness. And they must be incited to strike back against *any* agency that attempts to prevent this widening.

The Revolutionary Theatre must Accuse and Attack anything that can be accused and attacked. It must Accuse and Attack because it is a theatre of Victims. It looks at the sky with the victims' eyes, and moves the victims to look at the strength in their minds and their bodies.

Clay, in "Dutchman," Ray in "The Toilet," Walker in "The Slave," are all victims. In the Western sense they could be heroes. But the Revolutionary Theatre, even if it is Western, must be anti-Western. It must show horrible coming attractions of *The Crumbling of the West*. Even as Artaud designed *The Conquest of Mexico*, so we must design *The Conquest of White Eye*, and show the missionaries and wiggly Liberals dying under blasts of concrete. For sound effects, wild screams of joy, from all the peoples of the world.

The Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them a reality. It must isolate the ritual and historical cycles of reality. But it must be food for all those who need food, and daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind. It is a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dim-witted fatbellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on.

This should be a theatre of World Spirit. Where the spirit

can be shown to be the most competent force in the world. Force. Spirit. Feeling. The language will be anybody's, but tightened by the poet's backbone. And even the language must show what the facts are in this consciousness epic, what's happening. We will talk about the world, and the preciseness with which we are able to summon the world will be our art. Art is method. And art, "like any ashtray or senator," remains in the world. Wittgenstein said ethics and aesthetics are one. I believe this. So the Broadway theatre is a theatre of reaction whose ethics, like its aesthetics, reflect the spiritual values of this unholy society, which sends young crackers all over the world blowing off colored people's heads. (In some of these flippy Southern towns they even shoot up the immigrants' Favorite Son, be it Michael Schwerner or JFKennedy.)

The Revolutionary Theatre is shaped by the world, and moves to reshape the world, using as its force the natural force and perpetual vibrations of the mind in the world. We are history and desire, what we are, and what any experience can make us.

It is a social theatre, but all theatre is social theatre. But we will change the drawing rooms into places where real things can be said about a real world, or into smoky rooms where the destruction of Washington can be plotted. The Revolutionary Theatre must function like an incendiary pencil planted in Curtis Lemay's cap. So that when the final curtain goes down brains are splattered over the seats and the floor, and bleeding nuns must wire SOS's to Belgians with gold teeth.

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. And what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they will find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught. We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means some soul will be moved, moved to actual life understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be. We are preaching virtue and feeling, and a natural sense of the self in the world. All men live in the world, and the world ought to be a place for them to live.

What is called the imagination (from image, magi, magic, magician, etc.) is a practical vector from the soul. It stores all data, and can be called on to solve all our "problems." The imagination is the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as "things." Imagination (Image) is all possibility, because from the image, the initial circumscribed energy, any use (idea) is possible. And so begins that image's use in the world. Possibility is what moves us.

The popular white man's theatre like the popular white man's novel shows tired white lives, and the problems of eating white sugar, or else it herds bigcaboosed blondes onto huge stages in rhinestones and makes believe they

are dancing or singing. WHITE BUSINESSMEN OF THE WORLD, DO YOU WANT TO SEE PEOPLE REALLY DANCING AND SINGING??? ALL OF YOU GO UP TO HARLEM AND GET YOURSELF KILLED. THERE WILL BE DANCING AND SINGING, THEN, FOR REAL!! (In "The Slave", Walker Vessels, the black revolutionary, wears an armband, which is the insignia of the attacking army—a big red-lipped minstrel, grinning like crazy.)

The liberal white man's objection to the theatre of the revolution (if he is "hip" enough) will be on aesthetic grounds. Most white Western artists do not need to be "political," since usually, whether they know it or not, they are in complete sympathy with the most repressive social forces in the world today. There are more junior birdmen fascists running around the West today disguised as Artists than there are disguised as fascists. (But then, that word, *Fascist*, and with it, *Fascism*, has been made obsolete by the words *America*, and *Americanism*.) The American Artist usually turns out to be just a super-Bourgeois, because, finally, all he has to show for his sojourn through the world is "better taste" than the Bourgeois—many times not even that.

Americans will hate the Revolutionary Theatre because it will be out to destroy them and whatever they believe is real. American cops will try to close the theatres where such nakedness of the human spirit is paraded. American producers will say the revolutionary plays are filthy, usually because they will treat human life as if it were actually happening. American directors will say that the white guys in the plays are too abstract and cowardly ("don't get me wrong . . . I mean aesthetically . . .") and they will be right.

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. The Revolutionary Theatre, which is now peopled with victims, will soon begin to be peopled with new kinds of heroes—not the weak Hamlets debating whether or not they are ready to die for what's on their minds, but men and women (and minds) digging out from under a thousand years of "high art" and weak-faced dalliance. We must make an art that will function so as to call down the actual wrath of world spirit. We are witch doctors and assassins, but we will open a place for the true scientists to expand our consciousness. This is a theatre of assault. The play that will split the heavens for us will be called THE DESTRUCTION OF AMERICA. The heroes will be Crazy Horse, Denmark Vesey, Patrice Lumumba, and not history, not memory, not sad sentimental groping for a warmth in our despair; these will be new men, new heroes, and their enemies most of you who are reading this.

On Black Theater (1978)

SOURCE: "On Black Theater," in *Theater*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Spring, 1978, pp. 59-61.