

SHADES OF BLUES: A Season of Resurrected Writers and Reclaimed Music-the Blues

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Abstract

This essay was originally written at the request of, Kemati Porter, Executive Director of Chicago's eta Creative Arts Foundation. The major goal of the essay was to assist in explaining the particular theoretical concept of *blues aesthetics* in relation to the theatre's 2012-2013 season of revived plays and one emerging artist; (*The Amen Corner, Ceremonies in Dark Old Men, Florence & Wine in the Wilderness, Jar the Floor, Hoodoo Love*). The essay was placed on the theatre's online webpage to assist company members, audiences and patrons to understand how the six selected plays related to the overall theme, "Shades of the Blues." Another important intent was to provide information for Chicago theatre reviewers and critics with a frame and background by which to evaluate plays from the black theatre canon. The essay includes brief background information and definition of African-American dramatic theory and explains *blues aesthetics* as a legitimate literary critical theory. A hoped for outcome is that readers may also gain an awareness and respectful understanding of cross cultural art and aesthetics.

I believe that cross-cultural understanding of art is possible, but it requires us to study the worlds out of which that art comes. If we want to understand Bessie Smith's music, then we must devote ourselves to learning about not only her art but also the social worlds out of which her life and her art were formed. It is not always easy to understand the worlds of others, but then again, we must constantly cross borders to understand each other, even those closest to us.

James J. Winchester

Aesthetics Across the Color Line: Why Nietzsche (Sometimes) Can't Sing the Blues.

Introduction:

Too often and for far too long there has been a main stream belief that Negro theatre, black theatre and theatre created by and for African Americans has not been founded on clearly defined independently derived aesthetic principles. Theatre about black Americans has been attempted by many, including white writers of note. However, such "other" writers have used Negroes/ blacks/ African-American as *objects* for their own purposes rather than as truly authentic *subjects*. The prevailing belief had been that most theatre created by African-American

artists within the scope of their own perspectives and experiences has been either an imitation of European forms and structures (primarily realism), oddly abstracted and imitative African ritualistic stylings or creations based on not much more than emotional and melodramatic rants or simplistic comedic-musical entertainments. Neither of these assumptions is true, at least certainly not since the successes of award winning black dramatists like Lorraine Hansberry, Charles Gordone, August Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks and Lynn Nottage. Yet, beyond such a few well known aforementioned playwrights, these presumptions have continued to be held primarily by a majority of white Euro-centric critics and reviewers as well as by audiences, both white and black, and maybe saddest of all; by theatre teachers and students of all types.

Approaching the dawn of a new age of spiritual awareness (post 2012), the eta Creative Arts Foundation of Chicago devoted its 2012-2013 mainstage theatre season to the revival of plays from the black theatre canon that are reflective of an African-American blues aesthetic. The works of African-American playwrights of the past were resurrected and joined by current writers to illuminate a shared artistic sensibility rooted in the sorrow, pain and joy of blues music and a literary blues aesthetic. But such an endeavor stands in need of a look back at the foundations and development of both the music and the culture from which these artistic expressions have been collected - to help explain an aesthetic framework that supports a respect and deeper understanding of these works.

In the Spring of 1903, the tone and dilemma of African-Americans' attempts to project their own images in a universe that had been hostile toward such an endeavor was clearly articulated in the publication of W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. In this important first step toward a theoretical foundation and focus for self expressive Negro stage image, Du Bois proclaimed:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The anguish that Du Bois expressed is surpassed by the acknowledgement of a special duality inherent in the very idea of the African as American. This duality combined ancient African notions of intuitive power and spiritual awareness with "New World" ideals of progressive materialism in the constructed persona of Negro Americans, or the now more recognizable term, African-Americans. In Du Bois' opinion, the inherent dual nature of the African-American makes it possible to view the complexities of the world, and especially the United States, through unique eyes. With this dual vision, the curse of oppressive degradation could be overshadowed by a clairvoyant gift for "second-sight," or intuition. The physical and psychological oppressiveness of American cultural domination could be eclipsed by the African's

"dogged strength" and will to survive. The Americanization of the African motivated a new "creolized" spirit that aspired not merely to survive, but to live freely in the pursuit of happiness and beauty. According to Du Bois, living within the dual consciousness of an African-American (a Black-figure on a White-ground), does not totally reject all other ideas, but allows for the enrichment of those ideas with the insightful spirit of subconscious understanding and prophetic imagination. The challenge set forth in Du Bois' statements included finding means to expose the potentials that dwell within the dual spirit of the African as American and to assert the positive power inherent to such a reality.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois also wrote about the relation and importance of music in the lives of African-Americans. Chapters One and Fourteen of his book, which deal most directly with artistic endeavors, are titled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and "Of the Sorrow Songs," respectively. Spiritual music was and is a unique phenomenon drawn from the emotional and experiential realms of black American slaves. It is a music of sorrowful strivings that expresses profound determination and faith in things hoped for but impossible to see through ordinary materialist eyes. Spiritual music would later evolve into blues, jazz, gospel, then rhythm and blues (R&B or soul) and rap music, all of which express expectations of or belief in a mystical mode of escaping physical and psychological anguish. The expressiveness presented in all forms of African-American music and dance is a manifestation of the inherently unique spiritual nature of Africans as Americans and should be acknowledged and accepted as such. Du Bois felt that Negro people were "essentially musical, artistic, humble, and jocular;" traits that he felt provided a necessary complement to American cultural and artistic expressiveness.

Blues Background:

While it is now an accepted truth, that spirituals and blues music is considered to be one of the earliest indigenous arts forms of the United States, there is still a need to highlight connections with the heritage of this folk music style to its origins in Western Africa. Captured and enslaved humans from the shores of the great Niger River basin — flowing through the countries of Guinea, Mali, Niger, Benin, Nigeria — and transplanted to all areas of the southern colonies of the New World Americas brought with them cultural traditions, creative intuitions and sensibilities that would mingle and merge to form new and unique cultural expressions.

These African traditions and intuitive techniques of expression formed melodies and rhythmic cadences of the field hollers, work songs, harmonic rules and rhythmic patterns that were transformed into a sort of sacred or melodic cry that became Africanized versions of hymn songs of the Church of England. They were labeled simply, Negro spirituals. Following emancipation of slaves and the opening of another original American artistic form, the "minstrel show" format and tradition to black performers – with the accompaniment of the fiddle (or the European violin), the African derived banjos, guitars, sliding blue and bent note vocal expressions of joy and sorrow, and the snapping or clapping of hands and feet gave birth to something called "the swing feel." By the late nineteenth century this emerging folk music, first without accompaniment, from the depths of the intuitive creativity of slave populations located particularly between the Mississippi-Yazoo River Delta region came to be termed "*the Blues*." The origin of the term may have been associated with suffering and mysticism of blue indigo, which was used by many West African cultures in death and mourning ceremonies where all the

person's garments would have been dyed blue. This mystical association with African indigo and the indigo plants grown on many southern U.S. slave plantations, the blue stained hands of workers who picked the flowers of the plants, combined with the West African slaves who sang of their suffering as they worked on the cotton that the indigo dyed, resulted in these expressive songs being referred to as "*the Blues*."

Blues came into its own as an important part of the country's relatively new national popular culture in the 1920s with recordings, first of the great female classic blues singers (Mamie Smith, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, and Bessie Smith) and then, of the country folk blues singers of the Mississippi Delta, the Piedmont of the Carolinas, and Texas. As vast numbers of African Americans left the South between 1915 and the 1940s, the blues went with them and took root in the urban centers of the North (Detroit, St. Louis, Kansas City), and particularly in Chicago. A more urban electric blues developed that eclipsed the rural blues of the '20s and '30s and fed directly into both rock and roll and what would become known as rhythm and blues and soul music. With the folk revival of the 1950s and '60s, white audiences "rediscovered" and breathed new commercial life into the folk blues and made it the cornerstone of the tremendously popular British and American blues rock music of the next decade.

Blues Aesthetics:

The 1920s was not only the era that began recording careers for blues singers and musicians. It was also the era of widespread recognition for Negro creative artists of all types; painters, sculptors, concert performers, and writers of literary works and dramatic theory. The essays and manifestoes published during this time on Negro dramatic theory were the beginnings of a written tradition of African-American creative aesthetics. These philosophical writings had a particular focus in the realization of a need for African-American artists to define and assert themselves by their own standards and in their own words. The task was to protest through the means of artistic revolt against a constructed image of Negro characters and personas, which had been established by a white hegemonic theatrical structure (minstrel shows), and to assert a "New Negro" image of positive beings with spiritual depth and prophetic potential. The historic title and theme given to the cultural era of the 1920s, referred to as "the Harlem Renaissance" was then, among other things, the beginning of African-America's intellectual search for self-expressive identity in the arts and humanities.

Du Bois, the first trained Negro sociologist and cultural theorist, was quite taken with dramatic form as a means of social and political argument. He understood the enormous sociological potential of all Negro art forms, and he saw special potential in theatre as a means for the uplifting of his entire race. The high point of his search for a defining aesthetic framework toward the development of a Negro theatre beginning in the 1920s was an address given at the June 1926 National Conference of the NAACP held in Chicago, in which he announced his view that "all art is propaganda." This adage referred principally to Du Bois' deeply held belief in the ethical and political responsibility of art and literature as a developmental tool for the Negro race; a means whereby previous long standing negative images constructed during an American minstrel tradition could be re-constructed with positive purpose.

What Du Bois delivered in this address was essentially a manifesto of Negro/ black/ African-American art and theatre for all times. It might arguably be called "Du Bois's Poetics," or, a theory defining a prescriptive plan for the making and construction of works of art. Du Bois' idea was primarily concerned with the aesthetics or concepts of truth and beauty as related to a Negro/ black/ African-American world view. Yet, it was profoundly pragmatic as both a foundation for the development of such an artistic view, and a sustaining guide for future growth and development.

My own research in the area of African-American dramatic theory, which maps a chronological history of theoretical writings concerning African-American theatre throughout the twentieth century, makes it possible to clearly see an evolved history of social ideas and philosophical connections to spiritual awareness, sensibility and purpose inherent with the institution of black theatre in the United States. Further analysis of the institution of African-American theatre reveals five basic aspects or fundamentals of dramatic philosophy that include *protest, revolt, assertion, music* and *spirituality*. These five aspects highlight essential fundamentals or aesthetic principles. A list of seven periods, or developmental eras, is also definable. They are: the *Plantation or Slave* era (17th-18th centuries), the *American Minstrel* era (1830s-1900s), the *New Negro Renaissance* era (ca.1917-'29), the *Assimilationist* era (1930s-50s), the *Black Revolutionary* era (1960s-early 70s), the *Afro-centric* era (1970-80s), and a *New Age Post-Revolutionary Movement* (1990s-new millennium).

As part of the Black Revolutionary era (ca. 1960s), moving into the Afro-centric era (ca. 1970s-80s), the call for an authentic independently derived aesthetic theory took warranted importance for the institution of – what was then being called – “black theatre” as a replacement to the long held previous title and ideology of “Negro theatre.” During this time the theory of “*blues aesthetics*” emerged from the field of literary criticism as a means of understanding and developing dramatic philosophy. While much of what had earlier been referred to as folk art and folk drama since the 1920s might now have a more definitive foundational ground on which to stand. While most literary and cultural theory of the 1960s Revolutionary era focused on radical *protest, revolt* and *assertion*, the Afro-centric 1970s and 80s began to look toward inspiration from the essence of things more purely associated with cultural ties associated with “Mother Africa.” A truer African-American expressive doctrine was already present in the form of blues aesthetic theory. The task was to find an acceptable and accessible transfer of the philosophy for dramatic purpose.

Afro-centric theorist, Abiodun Jeyifous, explained the transitional and transformational need for a new aesthetic in a 1974 essay, “Black Critics on Black Theatre in America,” written for the highly respected publication, *The Drama Review*. He explained the problem of his era as follows:

Until 1965, when Imamu Amiri Baraka and others founded The Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School, there was *not* a black theatre but “American theatre of Negro participation” . . . The point, of course, is that the major playwrights, producers and directors in *this* black theatre were white. . . . This “theatre of Negro participation” played primarily, though not entirely, in a commercial theatre to a white, middle-class audience. . .

. Theatre was under the financial control of white producers and the artistic control of white directors, consequently – . . . – it constituted a white interpretation of black theatrical expression. These conditions spawned a distinctive kind of black theatre criticism. I call it, in well-meant facetiousness, “the criticism of Negro sensibility.” . . . There are marked differences in the contemporary black theatre.

The differences of which Jeyifous referred highlighted a “coming home” of black theatre to its communal and spiritual roots within a black community of artists, theatres and audiences. This theatre needed to find a way to function within a freer artistic environment. Therefore, it would need a more personal and familiar philosophical and artistic ground on which to build.

By 1984 literary critic and theorist, Houston Baker, Jr., had worked out the relationship of blues music to social and literary usages for Afro-American expressive culture. In his book, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, he offered a basis for the broader study of black authors. Baker went on to analyze theories from the Harlem Renaissance to the black aesthetics of the Revolutionary period in another full length study titled, *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic*. In the following passage he highlights a possible connection to blues aesthetics in the following way:

Blues – always the blues and its singers – stand as modal norms for the public person of Afro-American culture – whether that figure is a preacher, politician, or poet. For the blues’ awesome genealogy makes them the signally legitimate expressive form of Afro-American culture. They are God-given, God-bearing resonances that survived the Middle Passage and provided coherence for black experience in the New World. (157)

Here, Baker points out a specific, yet basic notion of the authenticity of blues as an inherent and deeply embodied part of African and African-America heritage. In this same study, Baker analyzes the essays of Revolutionary poet, theorist and dramatist, Larry Neal. Neal wrote about his perspective of literary uses for a blues aesthetic in the following way:

So, that’s *my* metaphor – the blues god – it’s not nobody else’s metaphor. It’s mine. . . . The blues god is an attempt to isolate the blues elements as an ancestral force, as the major ancestral force of the Afro-American. What I always say about the blues god is that it was the god that survived the middle passage. It’s like an *Orisha* figure. Because even though the blues may be about so-called hard times, people generally feel better after hearing them or seeing them. They tend to be ritually liberating in that sense. (17)

It seemed a way had been found to justify and marry the passionate and emotionally expressive and experiential storytelling nature of blues music with poetic and dramatic sensibilities. The metaphor of a “blues god” allowed for the sorrowful and joyful elements of black life and experience to find peace with itself in the form of a dramatic

philosophy that would no longer need to apologize or be ashamed for what or how aspects of black characters might be presented.

Playwright, August Wilson, made headlines by proclaiming his kinship with revolutionary theories of Baraka, Ed Bullins and blues, among other inspirations. Wilson was a well known proponent of blues aesthetics and made beautiful uses of it in his works. In his play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982), the title character makes the following prolific statement about the feel and impact of blues music, and consequently the blues aesthetic, in Act two of the play.

White folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life. . . . The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. Something's been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something.

This passage of dialogue from Wilson's play expresses the feelings of a larger identity group of African-Americans, both for the period of the origins of blues music, and also for the time of the play's production in the early 1980s and beyond. The statement here by the writer and the character expresses a freedom that is fully honest and true to the totality of the spirit of an entire race or people. It also speaks to a philosophy of art and of life.

The eta Season of Plays:

Chicago's eta Creative Arts Foundation selected six plays from the historic canon of black drama to highlight blues music and the blues aesthetic for its 2012-2013 production season. The association of the historic Chicago urban blues style as location for this revival and restoration of these plays, provided an open sea of possibilities for examination and evaluation of these works, in relation to the their (re) production and (re) evaluation in conjunction with several ports of entry; (metaphors intentional).

The Amen Corner was famous ex-patriot writer James Baldwin's first attempt at dramatic writing for the theater. The basic plot of the play shares at least a similar story with his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The play was first published in 1954. It has been produced by several universities, community and regional theatre companies, but never revived in a serious Broadway production. In 1983 a musical adaptation of the play was produced on Broadway under the title, *Amen Corner*. The story is set in a storefront Harlem church and concerns the effects of religion on the lives of the church's female pastor, Sis. Margaret Alexander, her sister Odessa, her son David, her estranged husband Luke, and members of a community gospel church. Sister Margaret's blues is self imposed and her challenges involve her attempts to keep everyone around her within the circle of her turmoil. Gospel music is a true-blue part of this dramatic play. The examination and evolution of conflicted spirits that inhabit the world of this play are testament to the hypocritical nature of certain religious convictions.

Lonnie Elder III's, *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* is a play very much associated with the historic Negro Ensemble Company (NEC). Written in 1965, it was first produced at the St. Mark's Playhouse home of the NEC as part of their 1968-69 season. It was later extended for a successful long-run commercial production and adapted for television in 1975. The play concerns the ritualistic ceremonies of survival, of friendship, of deception and manipulation, of self-deception, of black male friendship, of shifting intra-familial allegiances, of black manhood, the marginalization of and dependence on black females, and a constant game of checkers, stories and lies. Set in a floundering Harlem barbershop, the plot revolves around Russell B. Parker, his two hoodlum sons, his working class daughter, his checker playing buddy Mr. William Jenkins, and includes a business venture with a local gangster type Blue Haven. Parker's constant singing of the refrain of a blues tune, "I Have Had My Fun," and a James Brown recording, "Money Won't Change You, But Time Will Take You On," provide notable pieces of musical food for thought in this dramatic piece of tragic ghetto realism.

Alice Childress was an original member of the American Negro Theatre Company of Harlem, 1940-49. As the first African American female playwright to receive a professional production in New York (*God Through the Trees*-1952), well before the Broadway debut of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*-1959), Childress' contributions to the canon of African American drama is significant and profound. She was a novelist, activist, Tony award nominated actress (for *Anna Lucasta*-1944) and prolific playwright. Two of her full length plays, *Trouble in Mind* and *Wedding Band*, are well known production pieces. Nonetheless, et a chose to present two powerful one act plays by this remarkable black female writer. *Florence* (1949) was part of her adaptation of Langston Hughes's *Simple Speaks His Mind* for the Committee for the Negro in the Arts. Called, *Just A Little Simple*, the play opened at Club Baron in September 1950. *Florence* is about rejecting stereotyped roles, like that of maid, in favor of more forbidden and challenging roles, like that of dramatic actress. *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969) is a play that united inner-city and middle-class blacks brought together by a ghetto heroine, an uncultured black woman, who represented the answer to the cultural revolution. In *Wine in the Wilderness*, Tommy, a feisty "Sapphire type," gives some bourgeois Negroes an unforgettable lesson in black history, cultural authenticity, and human kindness. In both cases, the black women who are the central characters in these plays represent the ordinary, often uneducated woman whose knowledge of life gives her a better command of reality and a stronger sense of humanity than those with more training and money; much like Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith.

Jar the Floor is a comedy/ drama by Cheryl L. West, that does a good job of illustrating how an ingrained pattern of behavior in a family can become as insidious as a blood-borne illness. Four generations of women turn a birthday celebration for the 90 year old MaDear into a true woeful-blues party. This urban blues story leaves some laughing and some crying and everyone thinking about the worth of the past in a present context.

Hoodoo Love, written by celebrated young playwright Katori Hall, is a love story steeped in the blues, set in the South during the Great Depression. It's also a tale of ambition, the heavy weight of the past and how important a little mojo can be. Toulou, is a young woman who has escaped the Mississippi Delta cotton fields to pursue her dream of becoming a blues singer in Memphis. On her way, she falls for a rambling blues man, Ace of Spades, and with the help of a

former slave known as The Candy Lady, she calls upon some hoodoo, or African-American folk magic, to win his love. Although it's not a musical, *Hoodoo Love* is a play with blues music. It was a most appropriate way to round off a season that revived a focus on “*the blues!*”

For a theatre with a mission to develop and produce new works by emerging black theatre artists, a season of revival plays from the black theatre canon was an important yet challenging undertaking. The plays of Baldwin, Elder and Childress are true classics of African-American dramatic literature that may not be well known to many current critics or current theatre goers. The writings of Ms. West and Ms. Hall are symbols of developing writers whose place in history will be reflected in how they might be presented, reviewed and accepted in the present. Overall, eta Creative Arts Foundation provided opportunities to reassess these works, in both production and viewing, with present perspectives. This theatre company plays a major national role within the location of a major urban cultural environment; the city of Chicago. This writer can only imagine the pride that W. E. B. Du Bois might feel in knowing that his message delivered almost ninety years ago to a national convention in this same city concerning the potentials of Negro/ black/ African-American theatrical arts has engendered such serious and respectful attention and promise.

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Plays:

Baldwin, James. *The Amen Corner* (1954)

Elder, Lonnie, III. *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men (1965, 1969)*

Childress, Alice. *Florence (1949)*

Childress, Alice. *Wine in the Wilderness (1969)*

West, Cheryl. *Jar the Floor (1989, 1999)*

Hall, Katori. *Hoodoo Love (2007)*

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