

Africanisms in African-American Drama

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The concept of Africanisms in African-American art has evolved out of the pressing need for Black artists to resist stereotypes and redefine artistic forms that would address the unique conditions and struggles of their people. The process emphasizes the celebration of Black heroism and cultural values by tapping from ritual designs, musical and dance patterns, and themes influenced by an African world-view.

Africanisms derive from the disenchantment and deprivation that distinguishes Black American history from other sub-histories within America. From the 1920s-30s folk theatre through the revolutionary drama of the 1960s, African-American dramatists have responded differently to their collective history of oppression. But they remain connected by a shared experience and heritage, with Africa providing an important cultural and artistic resource. In this regard, W.E.B. DuBois' 1926 blueprint for Black drama is timely, as it prescribed a genre that would be: "About us...By us...For us...Near us..." (1926, "Krigwa Players," 134). African-American drama continues to evolve around the need for, means to, and implications of achieving a theatre about, by, for, and near Black people.

As far back as the 1800s when Black professional entertainers first appeared on the American stage, their curiosity about Africa was apparent. During this period slaves would gather in Congo Square, a large dusty space in New Orleans, where they sang,

danced, and played African drums on Sundays and public holidays. Reference to the Square as *Congo* – a region in central Africa – illustrates the connection the slaves established with their ancestry. Also in the early 1900s when African-American performers began to respond to their century-old typecasting, suppression, and prostitution by Euro-American prejudice, they showed a fascination with African themes. For this reason, some early 20th century Black musicals, like *In Dahomey* (1902) and *Abyssinia* [Ethiopia] (1906) by Bert Williams and George Walker, have been described as “back-to-Africa” musicals.

When Euro-American playwrights displayed renewed interests in Black themes between World Wars I and II (1914-1945), they merely succeeded in re-inscribing old stereotypes that depicted Black characters as brainless, unprogressive, and inconsequential. Prominent among plays that fall within this category are: Ridgley Torrence’s *Granny Maumee* (1914) and *The Rider of Dreams* (1917); Eugene O’Neill’s *The Dreamy Kid* (1919), *The Emperor Jones* (1921), and *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* (1920); and Earnest Culbertson’s *Goat Alley* (1921). Others are DuBose and Dorothy Heyward’s *Porgy* (1927); Jo Em Basshe’s *Earth* (1927); Marc Connelly’s *Green Pastures* (1930); and Paul Green’s *In Abraham’s Bosom* (1924). African-American dramatists were subsequently stirred to negate these false images and, as in the past, looked to Africa as a valuable counteractive resource, both culturally and artistically.

Africanisms in Black drama have sometimes been realized in the re-creation of original African settings. Influenced by the revival and commemoration of African histories and traditions during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, such direct delineations of Africa appeared in early pageants like Dorothy C. Guinn’s *Out of the*

Dark (1924) and Edward J. McCoo's *Ethiopia at the Bar of Justice* (1924), and in plays like Maud Cuney-Hare's *Antar of Araby* (1929) and Willis Richardson's *The Black Horseman* (1929). The pattern continued in the 1930s with plays like Shirley Graham's *Tom-Tom* (1932), Langston Hughes' *Emperor of Haiti* (1936), and pageants like Frances Gunner's *The Light of the Women* (1930). In later years the trend would be revisited in plays like William Branch's *A Wreath for Udomo* (1961), which is set in South Africa and focuses on the rise and fall of an African prime minister.

From pre to post-Civil Rights eras (1950s to date), the increased participation of African-Americans in all areas of America's socioeconomic, political, industrial, and intellectual life compelled Black artists to raise new questions about the role of Africa in creativity and in the quest for identity and freedom. Inspired by Civil Rights struggles and the emergence of Movements like the Black Arts and Black Aesthetics, African-American playwrights redefined forms that did not only expose their pain and resistance, but also venerated their cultural and artistic roots. The reliance on and portrayal of African symbols became an important aesthetic weapon in the hands of a number of playwrights like Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*, 1959 and *Les Blancs*, 1970), Amiri Baraka (*Slave Ship*, 1967), and Joseph A. Walker (*Ododo*, 1968). During the successive 1970s, the direct exploitation of African images continued to emerge in plays like Baraka's *Bloodrites* (1971) and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls* (1975).

Significant to the presence of Africanisms in African-American drama is the utilization of ritual prototypes. As in African ritual practice, this approach provides a cleansing and transformational role, uniting and strengthening African-Americans in their struggles and solidarity. It is a trend that goes back to the early half of the 20th century

when dramatists like Jean Toomer, Thelma Duncan, Frances Gunner, Dorothy Guinn, Hall Johnson, and W.E.B. DuBois tapped from the concept of drama as ritual. Ritual has either been the main preserve of theatre companies, or has served as a fundamental aspect of plot development in traditional plays. Theatre companies like Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre (NBT) – founded 1968 – emphasized participatory rituals and the promotion of spirituality as a pathway to healing, and celebrated Black values through workshops in movement, dance, meditation, and spiritual release. At Brown University in the fall of 1970, George Bass and some students established a theatre troupe, Rites and Reason, which was committed to performing ritual dramas. The New Lafayette Theatre, established in 1966 at the original site of the Lafayette Theatre (which was established in New York in 1913), also produced improvisational ritual dramas.

In Black plays, ritual emerges as a sacrificial tool or as a basis for communal bonding, as is evident in the action of the freedom fighters in Hansberry's *Les Blancs*, the participatory folk song session in Hansberry's *Drinking Gourd*, the women's unanimity in Shange's *For Colored Girls*, the illusionary musicians in Shange's *Boogie Woogie Landscapes* (1981), the militant soldiers in Baraka's *Experimental Death Unit #1* (1965), and the Black chorus in Baraka's *Police* (1968). Similar group participation is nurtured in early pageants by DuBois, Dorothy Guinn, and Frances Gunner; and in the choral presence of religious devotees in plays by Hall Johnson, Langston Hughes, Ossie Davis, and James Baldwin.

The reinvention of Black and pro-Black heroes and heroines is also fundamental to the preservation of Africanisms in African-American drama, and becomes a foil to Black stereotypical characters. Through a reaffirmation of their historic achievements,

Frederick Douglas and John Brown are honored in William Branch's *In Splendid Error* (1953). Black heroes promoted in drama of the Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights period compare with those extolled by Hughes, Randolph Edmonds, Theodore Browne, and May Miller as early as the 1930s. Such legitimate Black heroes counteract characters like Othello – really a White hero in blackface – and replace submissive Black characters like Uncle Tom in George Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Emperor Brutus Jones in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1921). They also replace the various Coon, Sambo, Topsy, and Dandy stereotypes that were popularized by minstrel shows, and which have been reshaped and reused over the years. The African freedom fighters in Hansberry's *Les Blancs* and Hannibal, the anti-slavery hero of Hansberry's *Drinking Gourd*, resemble Baraka's 1960s violent Black revolutionaries who are anti-White, anti-Black compliance, and anti-Black bourgeoisie. They are also reminiscent of their forerunners: slaves who revolted on slave ships, Nat Turner who carried out a bloody insurrection in 1831, and the slaves who took up arms with John Brown in 1859. Black heroines are portrayed in Mama in *A Raisin*, the Woman dancer in *Les Blancs*, and several of Shange's women. Symbolizing strength and defiance like Ma Rainey in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982), these women refuse to be overcome by racism and sexism.

Through Africanisms in African-American drama, Africa becomes the cultural, geographical, and historical basis for the formulation of a theatrical genre that simultaneously belongs to and at the same time breaks away from mainstream American theatre. Africanisms afford African-American dramatists the opportunity to exemplify a commonality bound historically, culturally, and aesthetically to a shared history, myth,

and theatrical legacy. They also provide a channel through which to enter into a theatrical heritage that exploits the richness of indigenous dance, song, music, history, myth, ritual, story-telling and sermon traditions. But, most of all, Africanisms allow African-American dramatists to wage war against constraints imposed by European or Euro-American theatrical rules and models, which propose, define, and shape the values that are accepted as ideal, and which fail to give sufficient attention to the cultural peculiarities and sociopolitical needs and concerns of African-Americans.

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