

The African-American Pageant: Revisiting a Medieval Tradition

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With the adoption and reapplication of the pageant tradition originating in medieval Europe, the early half of the 20th century witnessed a significant development in African-American drama. Following a history of slavery, post-Reconstruction disappointments, and Jim Crow laws Black dramatists turned to the pageant genre for the purpose of reaffirming cultural identity, instilling race pride, rectifying history, and venerating Black heroes and heroines. Both ritualistic and regenerative, Black pageants also served to re-link culturally and artistically with Africa, promote a Black aesthetic, and counteract ingrained social and artistic stereotypes. In the long term they became a propaganda tool, a means of distinguishing a complex Black culture from the dominant European.

The efflorescence and upsurge in Black economic, cultural, and artistic life in Harlem in the 1920s, popularly known as the Harlem Renaissance, provided the initial motivation that African-American dramatists needed. The European pageant, on the other hand, derived from more auspicious circumstances, gradually evolving from religious ceremonies to more secular performances where comedy, spectacle, and the confirmation of class were central attributes. This fact notwithstanding, Black playwrights and actors discovered in the pageant tradition fundamental elements that were germane to the type of functional theatre that they aspired for. Key among these elements was communal involvement; performer-audience interaction; improvisation; the emphasis on movement, mime, dance, music, and song; as well as a ceremonial and

episodic arrangement.

W.E.B Du Bois defined the Black pageant as “a great historical folk festival...with the added touch of reality given by numbers, space and fidelity to truth” (“A Pageant” 231). The Black pageant, like its European antecedent, was not confined to formal theatrical space, but could be produced outdoors, in churches, homes, and halls. Because it was able to gather people together in large numbers, it became an ideal public and communal medium for reaching a large African-American audience. However, a unique Black experience demanded stylistic and thematic changes in borrowing and transplanting the form.

In its original European setting, the pageant tradition underwent significant changes before Black dramatists exploited it. The liturgical roots of English drama around the 6th century A.D. flowered into the famous cycle plays beginning in the 10th century A.D. The cycle plays constituted the major pageants during the medieval period, having first shifted from a strict preoccupation with Biblical subject matter to more secular themes and styles.

The pageantry of cycle plays gave rise to other pageant traditions that made elaborate use of masks, movement, mime, and improvisation, marginalizing the written text in the process and encouraging collective participation. They were subsequently more elaborate, more vibrant, and more colorful than their precursor cycle plays, and emerged in the form of masques, mummings, the Italian intermezzi, and fetes. This rich legacy of post-cycle-play pageants remained popular well into the 19th century, five years after the medieval period ended. In England, the Elizabethan age and the reign of James I were famous for their festive air and the spirited ceremonies that sustained theatrical pageantry. Weddings, canonizations, coronations, funerals, military triumphs, state visits, and other such celebrations formed the bases for

pageanties during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. As a medium of hospitality, pageants ultimately reflected on and preserved the magnitude of status and nobility, which were further apparent in the flamboyance of masking and costuming, and in the introduction of extravagant feasts.

Operating within a more gloomy setting and detached from the fanfare and ostentation that informed the European pageant, African-American pageants filtered the European form, incorporating Black music and concentrating on issues, themes, and characters that were more passionately familiar to the Black community. Stock characters, common in Renaissance pageants, for instance, would be transferred to African-American realities and rematerialize in the form of character-types like Art, Invention, Literature, Business, Womanhood, Adventure, and Slavery. Their designations defined their messages and roles. Thus, unable to explore and preserve the aristocratic space, splendor, and wealth of European Renaissance pageantry, African-American dramatists were able to adopt certain components of the tradition that they adjusted to their unique circumstances.

In general, Black pageants, like their medieval predecessor, were different from conventional plays. Ranging from comedies to tragedies, they relied on sizeable casts, elaborate sets, outdoor or large space performances, improvisation, and processional finales that featured historical figures or qualities like Truth and Freedom. Standard plot development was replaced with episodic presentations that utilized prologues, tableaux, and vocal or orchestral musical interludes. Character depictions were often symbolic of people and values that were important to the community, while storylines sometimes commemorated important events that took place as recently as the year of the production. Communal involvement was reinforced by neighborhood participation in making costumes, painting sets, posting notices, practicing musical scores,

researching histories and characters portrayed, and working onstage and backstage. Shows were frequently advertised in *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), making them easily accessible to the people. Through pageants, Black audiences and performers were therefore offered the opportunity to encounter and learn from situations, experiences, and characters that were close to and belonged to them, and which they could quite easily appreciate and learn from.

Two Races [n.d.] by Inez M. Burke, a pageant specifically written in the interest of seventh and eighth grade children, sets out to rewrite history and acknowledge historic Black achievers who are otherwise excluded from standard educational curricula. The pageant relies on a combination of character types that are conventional, symbolic, and allegorical. Typical of Renaissance pageants, action and storytelling take precedence over dialogue in *Two Races*, while music and song complement this approach.

Dorothy C. Guinn's pageant, *Out of the Dark* (1924), was written primarily for high school students. It lauds African-American ingenuity despite its history of desperation and struggle, providing information generally lacking in mainstream history books. Comprising a Prologue, four Episodes, and an Epilogue; *Out of the Dark* traces the history of African-Americans from Africa through slavery to post-slavery and modern times, thus documenting their exploitation, sufferings, struggles, survival, and accomplishments. The main characters represent major African-American heroes and heroines, as well as sociopolitical and artistic facets of the Black experience. A truly composite piece extensively employing the storytelling tradition, pantomime, dance, music, song, poetry, and tableaux, *Out of the Dark* is one of the more elaborate African-American pageants.

Frances Gunner's *The Light of the Women* (1930)—subtitled *A Ceremonial for the Use of Negro Groups*—was mainly written in the interest of junior high and high school girls. Much like the Morality play (a secularized offshoot of medieval cycle plays), the characters here are allegorical and symbolic of the historic achievements of Black women in America. All the characters in the drama are either women or girls who are reincarnated on stage to reeducate and relive the glory of their past. Besides individual representations, a communal effect is delineated and sustained through the presence of an active crowd. *The Light of the Women* also relies heavily on action, movement, music, song, and storytelling, while keeping dialogue to a minimum. None of the eulogized women from the past or present have speaking roles. Like imaginary, expressionistic figures, they simply emerge and fade away after their accolades are announced. While hymns are sung to complement the sacred dimensions of the drama, they also recapture the soothing and inspirational role of spirituals and gospel music throughout African-American history. In the end the pageant becomes a ritual of rejuvenation and hope, one that envisages limitless possibilities for Black women.

Edward J. McCoo's pageant, *Ethiopia at the Bar of Justice* (1924), employs perhaps more dialogue than was common in African-America pageants of the 1920s. But the large number of characters present, the allegorical casting, the use of narratives, and the interspersing of music and song in the pageant retain the holistic and rite-of-passage attributes that are typical of the form.

In spite of the secularization of drama during European Renaissance and post-Renaissance periods, religious ideals were not completely lost even if they were not strictly applied. African-American pageants also preserved a religious angle either in the utilization of direct Christian principles, or in the creation of sacred icons and precepts. Ultimately, a sacred ambiance was achieved and presupposed the

deliverance of Blacks through methods that were not just tangible, but that were also divine. This spiritual paradigm would have a strong impact on future African-American drama, especially during the critical periods of the 1960s and the post-1960s. Dramatists like George Wolfe, Barbara Ann Teer, Amiri Baraka, Ntozake Shange, and George Houston Bass subscribed to styles that leaned on ritualistic patterns, some of which were similar to those that featured in earlier pageants.

-- Philip U. Effiong

Sources

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