Black drama of the sixties: A reflection of the Black experience in America

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BLACK DRAMA OF THE SIXTIES: A REFLECTION OF THE
BLACK EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
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During the decade of the sixties, America was confronted with the Black's resistance against white resistance to change and Black rebellion against a repressive social system. The sixties was a decade of change and the most profound change was occurring in the minds of Black people. Black consciousness was a first step in the liberation of Black people in America. The concept of Black consciousness became a movement and the manifestations of this movement began to flourish. One of the main tenets of the Black Consciousness Movement was the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms. In the context of aesthetics, the Black playwrights of the sixties made the same point. The Black playwrights of the sixties were joining with the masses of Black people in their cry for liberation. As Darwin T. Turner pointed out: "... so it (Black Drama) moved toward liberation during the 1960's -- liberation of the playwright from some of the stereotypes previously imposed and liberation from thought and aesthetic standards previously prescribed."¹ LeRoi Jones, James Baldwin, Douglas Turner Ward, Ed Bullins, Ron Milner, Ben Caldwell, Jimmy Garrett, and Charles Gardone are just a few of the Black playwrights who directed their plays at problems within America. In the Douglas Turner Ward plays, Happy Ending, Day of Absence and Brotherhood, the playwright utilizes the technique of satire to treat Black-White

relationships in America. In a more serious vein, Le Roi Jones' *Dutchman*, James Baldwin's *Blues For Mister Charlie*, and Ed Bullins' *The Gentleman Caller*, react to the racial and sexual conflicts between the races. Re-evaluating the concept of Christianity, Jimmy Garrett's *And We Own Then Night*, Ron Milner's *Who's Got His Own* and Ben Caldwell's *Prayer Meeting Or The First Militant Minister* present the question of the Old Spirituality versus the concept of the New Spirituality. The day to day living conditions of Black people in the ghettos are explored and exposed in the plays, *No Place To Be Somebody* by Charles Gardone and *In The Wine Time* by Ed Bullins. Whether the drama was of a serious nature or a comical nature, the message conveyed was a message to Blacks concerning their relationship with other Blacks, and with Whites. In essence, Black drama of the sixties reflected the experiences of Black people in America. As Larry Neal states:

> These plays, along with many others, constitute the basis for a viable movement in the theatre—a movement which takes as its task a profound re-evaluation of the Black man's presence in America.1

The basic fact that all of the plays included in this thesis are representative of a new mood (though *new* must always be regarded as a fairly relative term) and are part of a *new* Black theater that is still in the process of shaping and defining itself, needs to be underscored. It is also important to note that one of the major reasons that these plays reflect the Black experience in America is that they are products of:

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Black writers, totally disenchanted with outside interpretations and appraisal, insisting upon sizing up themselves, "doing their own thing" with the unmistakably important purpose of defining and redefining the meaning of black lives historically and in terms of the twentieth-century American and modern worlds.\(^1\)

In a more practical light, these plays: *Dutchman*, *Happy Ending*, *Day of Absence*, *Brotherhood*, *Blues For Mister Charlie*, *The Gentleman Caller*, *Who's Got His Own*, *And We Own The Night*, *Prayer Meeting Or The First Militant Minister*, *In The Wine Time* and *No Place To Be Somebody*, were selected because of their accessibility. All of the plays mentioned above, with the exception of one, appear in at least one Black drama anthology. Another factor taken into consideration is the selection of these plays was the amount of critical material available on each play. In researching for this thesis, this author was disappointed in the scarcity of criticism by Black critics. In the case of Black drama, a great deal more critical analysis by Black critics and reviewers is needed. Even though a new group of Black critics have developed over the past decade, it is still difficult to find criticism written by Blacks. But that critical material that is written by Blacks, makes a great contribution to the Black Aesthetic, not merely in polemics against white oppression, but also in reinterpretation of the Black experience.

Another point taken into consideration in the selection of these plays was that a number of them were presented professionally and in Off-Broadway productions. For example, *Dutchman* received its first

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\(^1\) Clinton Oliver and Stephanie Sills, ed., *Contemporary Black Drama* (New York, 1971), p. 23.
professional production under the auspices of Theater 1964 Playwright's Unit Workshop of Richard Barr, Clinton Wilder, and Edward Albee at the Cherry Lane Theater on March 24, 1964. Blues For Mister Charlie produced by the Actor's Studio, opened at the ANTA Theatre on April 23, 1964. Happy Ending and Day of Absence were Douglas Turner Ward's first plays to reach the professional stage. They appeared together at the St. Mark's Playhouse in 1965 with Douglas Turner (the author's stage name) assuming a leading role in each of the plays. As a result of these works, the author-actor won the off-Broadway Vernon Rice Drama Award for playwriting and an Obie Award for acting. The Gentleman Caller by Ed Bullins opened off-Broadway at Tambellini's Gate Theater June 30, 1969 along with three other one-act plays entitled A Black Quartet. Included in the impressive bill of four one-act plays was Prayer Meeting, Or The First Militant Minister by Ben Caldwell. (The other two plays were The Warning- A Theme For Linda, by Ron Milner, and The Great Goodness of Life (A Coon Show) by LeRoi Jones. No Place To Be Somebody began its professional run on May 4, 1969 at the Anspacher Theater. For his efforts, Charles Gardone became the third black person to win a Pulitzer Prize. In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, No Place To Be Somebody won for Gardone a Drama Desk Award in 1969. Ed Bullin's In The Wine Time was first produced at the New Lafayette Theatre on December 10, 1968. Who's Got His Own by Ron Milner was first presented at the American Place Theater in New York City. It was also the premiere show at Harlem's New Lafayette Theatre. And We Own The Night, although not an off-Broadway production, was first performed as part of the 1967 Black Communications Project at the Fillmore
Auditorium in San Francisco.

For the purpose of study, the plays are divided into categories, which in turn, make-up the chapters. There are four chapters with the themes of the plays as the title of each chapter. Chapter I is entitled "Black-White Relationships." This chapter includes the plays, Happy Ending, Day of Absence and Brotherhood. Chapter II is entitled "Racial and Sexual Conflicts," and includes the plays, Dutchman, Blues For Mister Charlie, and The Gentleman Caller. The plays, And We Own The Night, Who's Got His Own and The Prayer Meeting Or The First Militant Minister compose the third chapter entitled "The Assault Against the Old Spirituality." The last chapter, Chapter IV, contains two plays. They are No Place To Be Somebody and In The Wine Time. Since these plays are mainly concerned with life in the urban ghettos, the title of this chapter is "Survival in The Urban Ghettos."

As you will see, each of these plays in each of the chapters reflect the Black experience in America. They are written by Black writers, for a Black audience, and with a specific message to that audience. The plays are about Black life styles and the various experiences Black people have encountered in America. As William Couch, editor of New Black Playwrights, states:

.. .we are fortunate that black playwrights today with renewed strength are undertaking to reveal us to ourselves more clearly than we have been able to perceive in our troubled history.1

CHAPTER I

BLACK-WHITE RELATIONSHIPS

The relationship between Blacks and Whites in this country underwent serious analysis during the sixties. This relationship was also the subject matter of three plays by Douglas Turner Ward. In each of these plays, Mr. Ward utilizes the art of satire in exploring the various types of Black-White encounters.

"Happy Ending is a realistic comedy, with rich, satirical overtones."¹ Vi and Ellie, two domestics, are terribly upset because they are on the verge of losing their jobs. There is nothing strange about this. Unemployment is a serious matter. Yet, the seriousness of this matter is undermined by the reasons that Vi and Ellie are upset. Just as the Harrison's, the white employers, have depended on Vi and Ellie to keep their household running smoothly, Vi and Ellie depended on their jobs to keep their household in tact. Because they had always handled food bills, and all the other domestic responsibilities, Vi and Ellie had allotted for the needs of their family in clothing, food, money and furniture. Junie, the nephew of Vi and Ellie is at first cynical and critical of his aunts as they cry over their misfortune. He reproaches them for their behavior when he says:

. . .Here we are--Africa rising to its place in the sun wit' prime ministers and other dignitaries taking seats

around the international conference table—us here fighting for our rights like never before, changing the whole image, dumping stereotypes behind us and replacing 'em wit' new images of dignity and dimension—and I come home and find my own aunts, sister of my mother, daughters of my grandpa who never took crap off no crackers even though he did live on a plantation—DROWNING themselves in tears. . . .

Junie, however, soon joins his aunts in shedding tears of despair when he learns that he will now have to find a job because Vi and Ellie will no longer be able to support him. Although the two sisters were underpaid and overworked, they collected what they called 'fringe benefits' at the expense of the Harrison family. Ellie makes this clear when she says:

I cook the food, scrub the floor, open the doors, serve the tables, answer the phones, dust the furniture . . . all for bad pay. . . money I git in my envelope ain't worth the time 'n the headache. . . But God Helps Those Who Help Themselves. . . I also order the food, estimate the credit, pay the bills and balance the budget. Which means that each steak I order for them, befo' butcher carves cow, I done reserved two for myself. . . Everyone of them high-price suits I lay on Junie haven't been worn more than once and some of 'em not at all.

Vi and Ellie are relieved when their employer calls and rehires them. In order to celebrate their good fortune, they bring out a bottle of champagne (from the Harrison's stock) to celebrate. The play is delightfully entertaining, yet Ward wields a double-edged sword in making some valid observations. First, one can see the theme of interdependence of groups in America. As Loften Mitchell points out:


2 Ibid., p. 39.
"Whites depend upon Negroes for their labor and Negroes use whites to promote their future. The question raised is: When will both groups learn the truth of their interrelationship and interdependence?"\(^1\)

Secondly, Clinton F. Oliver, editor of *Contemporary Black Drama*, sees *Happy Ending* as more than an extended vaudeville sketch as some critics claimed. Oliver uses the term 'parasitic' instead of interdependence in making his observation of the drama. He states:

> Junie, unquestionably is a clod and a parasite. . . . The whites are vicious and parasitically dependent upon the blacks for their existence. The blacks must counter parasitism with parasitism in order to survive.\(^2\)

*Happy Ending* like *Day of Absence* are dramas which launch lateral attacks on society with the aid of humor. "The humor in both cases often attaches to Blacks realistic appraisals of the hypocrisies and weaknesses of whites."\(^3\)

Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence* is subtitled *A Satirical Fantasy*. "It is an expressionistic situational satire, brilliantly conceived and mordantly comic in its vision."\(^4\) The setting of the drama is a small southern town. To their great consternation, the white people of the town discover that all of the black people of the town

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have disappeared. There occurs in the town a crisis that develops to such an extent that the economy of the town grinds to an immediate halt. The effectiveness of the plot is enhanced by black actors donning the white face in acting out the roles of the white stereotypes. Only two actors are portrayed in their natural state—the white announcer and the black character of Rastus.

The drama began to unfold as the black cast renders the numerous variety of Southern white stereotypes. There is the policeman whose record of two-jailed-"Negros-a-day" is broken due to the disappearance of the black populace. Then there is the young housewife, who without her baby's black mammy, is helpless in caring for even the basic needs of her baby. A distressful speech is made by the Club Woman who is concerned with 'the lily-white' images of Dixie femininity. As she says:

...Remember—it has always been pure, delicate, lily-white images of Dixie femininity which provided backbone, inspiration and ideology for our male warriors in their defense against the on-rushing black horde. If our gallant men are drained of this worship and idolatry--God knows! The cause won't be worth a Confederate nickel!

The Businessman also expresses his grievances by pointing out the damaging effect on the town's businesses. The Industrialist bemoans the loss of the cheap labor supply. He states in part:

...With the Negro absent, men are waiting for machines to be cleaned, floors to be swept, crates lifted, equipment delivered and bathrooms to be deodorized."


Ibid., p. 722.
The climax of the drama occurs when the Mayor makes a nation-wide appeal, threatening, begging and deceiving the vanished Blacks to return.

As he drops to his knees, the Mayor makes his final pitch:

... I'll be kneeling in the middle of Dixie Avenue to kiss the first shoe of the first one 'a you to show up. . . . I'll smooch any other spot you request. . . . Erase this nightmare 'n' we'll concede any demand you make, just come on back--please??!! ! . . . . PLEEEEEEEEEEEE?!!!

The day of absence ends with the return of the Blacks and a foreboding atmosphere hanging over the town that things will never be the same.

Like its companion piece, Happy Ending, Day of Absence contains its share of social criticism. Through the utilization of stereotypes and satire, Ward shows Blacks are at the lowest point of the scale in the area of employment. Blacks do the odd jobs and the dirty jobs for whites, in a system of exploitation that goes back to the era of slavery.

As one critic pointed out:

Ward uses sardonic humor and caustic laughter to attack the ways of white folk, yet underneath it all, he is broodingly bitter at the oppression and exploitation of Black folk by white folk in the American scheme of things.2

The fact that Blacks are still looked upon as second-class citizens cannot be over looked. The Mayor is representative of those politicians who 'play politics' with the lives of Black people by making vain promises which is all a part of the deception to get Blacks to do what they want them to do. In his observation of the drama, Clinton Oliver views Day Of Absence as:

1 Ibid., p. 735.

2 Doris E. Abramson, in Contemporary Black Drama, ed. by Clinton F. Oliver, p. 318.
... an original invention in which the author points up the interdependence of the races in the South and by inference in the nation as a whole, and bitterly satirizes the South's intransigence in his refusal to see the Negro as a dignified human being.1

The last play in the trilogy of Ward's satires treating Black-White relationships is Brotherhood. This drama takes a look at the hypocrisy of the white middle class liberal and the aspiring Black middle class. Tom and Ruth, the supposedly white liberal couple are the host to a black couple, Luann and James. At the beginning of the drama the reader is mystified by the frantic rush that Tom and Ruth are in preparing the room for their visitors. Instead of cleaning up, they are cleaning out the room, removing various artifacts and covering up paintings and other articles. Little by little the room takes on an empty appearance. When the expected couple arrives, the quartet go through various superficial social amenities, complementing each other to the highest degree. When James inquires about a covered painting, Tom explains it as the latest thing... called "Fabric Over Frame." This explanation is accepted by James and Luann who remarks:

That's fabulous. You must recommend us to your dealer so we can appraise one for possible purchase. It's fascinating!... Oh James! We have so much to learn! (Turns to Tom and Ruth) You have no idea how limiting our old environment was!2

The dialogue continues in this manner throughout the play. The crux of

1 Oliver, Contemporary Black Drama, p. 321.

the drama is disclosed when Luann and James leave the unusual home of Tom and Ruth. The opening scene is reversed as the couple run around returning all the objects to original positions:

The scene is one of controlled frenzy--In time, the room spills over with a grotesque menagerie of Negro Plantation statuettes: crimson-lipped, white eye-rimmed jockeys; bandanaed mammies; bare-assed astray blacks; . . . and a staggering profusion of diverse artifacts of "Niggerphalia."

The "Fabric Over Frame" painting is undraped and deliciously sadistic scenes of Negroes being brutalized dominate the motif.¹

After the 'unveiling' is over, the couple sit, contented, relieved and "relishing the scene." Beneath the facade of smiles, compliments and hospitality, lay the true nature of this couple. Tom and Ruth are the epitomy of hypocrites. Their racist attitudes are displayed throughout their home in ostentatious paraphernalia. Having the Black couple in their home was so more than mere tokenism, which is the antithesis of the meaning of brotherhood.

Ward, in the final lines of the play, points out that hypocrisy is not limited to the white couple. The Black couple, Luann and James are also guilty of being hypocritical. As Luann and James leave, they are shown making strange gestures. When one observes more closely, it appears that James is slashing an invisible knife, while his wife, Luann is concentrating on striking a hatpin in a voodoo doll likeness of Ruth. The drama, then, turns out to be about the complete entithesis of Brotherhood. What is shown and what is actually felt by the couples, are two different things. The reader sees bigotry, hatred, and

¹Ibid., p. 240.
Ward's point is well made. If the word, brotherhood is taken seriously, perhaps Black-White relations in this country will improve. As long as there is a perpetuation of stereotypes, especially those held by whites about Black people, White-Black relationships will never improve. It is not enough to just talk about brotherhood or, as in the case of Ruth and Tom, pretend to accept Blacks as people. Definite steps will have to be made by both whites and Blacks in achieving some element of brotherhood in America.

In summing up the first two plays, Happy Ending and Day of Absence, William Couch, essayist, states:

These plays superbly confine thesis with theater farce, establishing a real and sometimes surreal, world in which whites get their comeuppance from black folks whose sardonic cunning is mordant proof that they, like people in general, though less than angels are far more than fools.¹

¹ Couch, New Black Playwrights, p. xxi.
When dealing with the harsher realities of the Black man's life in America, Black playwrights of the sixties presented candid dramas of Black life. The Black playwrights of the sixties dealt with racial and sexual conflicts between the races. For example, LeRoi Jones, author of the play, Dutchman, "works in terms of parables, symbolist techniques, allegory and myth."\(^1\) James Baldwin, on the other hand, based his play, Blues For Mister Charlie, on the events of the Emmett Till case; the black youth who was murdered in Mississippi in 1955. Then, again, there is the play, The Gentleman Caller, written by Ed Bullins, in the symbolistic and expressionistic style of LeRoi Jones' Dutchman.

On one level Dutchman depicts an encounter between a black man and a white woman on a subway car in New York, her attempt to tempt him, their conversation and the black man's death at the white woman's hands, when he rejects her. As Toni Cade states: "Dutchman, the game between the man on the margin and the seductive assassin, said all there is to say about the whole continuous pattern of the lure and the murder of black people."\(^2\) Then, one must look at the characters, their dialogue and actions. Clay, twenty-years old, is the protagonist who is typical

1 Oliver, Contemporary Black Drama, p. 211.

of the young Ivy-League Black man in America. Lula, the antagonist, is a thirty-year old 'demented' white woman. She has been pictured as: "the Anglo-Saxon bitch-goddess, a siren, and a complete catalogue and storehouse of scornful Bohemianism," who is an "all-round vicious combination of inviting nymphomania and castrating rejection."¹ In the Clay-Lula conflict, one dimension of Jones' allegory is brought to the readers' attention. Lula enters the sub-way train after peering at Clay through the window, eating apples. She is the deceitful and beguiling Eve, and Clay, the Black Adam, will be destroyed by this temptress. Also, it has been pointed out that Lula's omniscience in her approach to Clay is significant. "It is the presumed omniscience of white America which purports to know the Negro, more fully than he knows himself."² Lula goes to certain lengths to remind Clay that he is a "Black Nigger." She states in the first act:

What've you got that Jacket and tie on in all this heat for? And why're you wearing a jacket and tie like that? Did your people ever burn witches or start revolutions over the price of tea? Boy, those narrow shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed by. A three button suit. What right do you have to be wearing a three-button suit and stripped tie? Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harvard.

I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger.³

Although Clay tries to define his way of life, one senses that it is a

¹ Oliver, *Contemporary Black Drama*, p. 212.
² Ibid.
fruitless attempt. Clay is, in fact, a threat to Lula, who can be seen as symbolically depicting the white world that must destroy the Black person, who is not a physical threat but an intellectual threat. One may ask why Clay let himself be subjected to Lula's abuses, when he could have left the scene. Jones, in a note on the play answers this question:

When he does try to leave is when he is killed. When he tries to leave, she kills him. . . . He figures that he can hang around and go through all of this and maybe he might get a little piece. And that, in a sense, is the middle-class Negro's problem in America. He's seduced by it, by what it seems to be. . . . Then when he really says what he feels, and tries to leave (when the intellectual denounces the society and says 'I have nothing to do with you any more'), that's when he's killed.¹

When Clay finally tires of Lula's insults, taunts and sexual gestures, he stops being the reasonable, Ivy-Leaguer and asserts his manhood, warning Lula that it would be easy to kill her. Clay states:

... you don't have any sense, Lula, nor feelings either. I could murder you now. Such a tiny ugly throat. I could squeeze it flat, and watch you turn blue, on a humble. For dull kicks. And all these weak-faced ofays squatting around here, staring over their papers at me. Murder them too.

It takes no great effort. For What? To kill you soft idiots? You don't understand anything but luxury.²

When Clay finishes his speech, Lula stabs him. Once he asserted his manhood, his individuality, he had to be destroyed. Actually, the entire play focuses on the issue of the Black man's manhood and his

¹ LeRoi Jones, in Contemporary Black Drama, p. 214.

² Jones, Dutchman, p. 33.
castration in America. Larry Neal, critic and essayist, elaborates on this point when he says:

Symbolically, and in fact, the relationship between Clay (Black America) and Lula (white America) is rooted in the historical castration of black manhood. And in the twisted psyche of white America, the Black man is both an object of love and hate... Clay is doomed when he allows himself to participate in Lula's "fantasy" in the first place. It is the fantasy to which Frantz Fanon alludes in *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skins, White Mask's*: the native's belief that he can acquire the oppressor's power by acquiring his symbols, one of which is the white woman. When Clay finally digs himself it is too late.

The last moments of the play find Lula getting prepared to approach her next victim, another young Black man.

In *Dutchman* and the James Baldwin play, *Blues For Mister Charlie*, the playwrights deal with the subject of race conflict. Yet, in both plays, one finds that the racial conflict is drawn in terms of sexual attitudes. As on critic, Susan Sontag, states: "Baldwin has been very plain about the reason for this. White America, he charges, has robbed the Negro of his masculinity."  

*Blues For Mister Charlie* is the story of Richard Henry, the son of a Southern Black minister, who disgusted with his father's acceptance of the killing of his wife by whites as an accident, goes North. During the eight years he spends in the North, Richard, a musician, has a

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1 Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review: Black Theater*, XII (Summer, 1968), 34.

2 Susan Sontag, "Going to the Theater, Etc.," *The Partisan Review*, XXXI (Summer, 1964), 392.
series of sexual affairs with white women, becomes a dope addict, loses all his money and finally takes the cure at Lexington State Hospital. The play is chiefly concerned with Richard's return to his strife-torn home town, to which he brings an even more vengefulness and hate. The drama opens with Lyle Britton, a white storeowner, looking down on Richard's dead body and saying: "And may every nigger like this nigger end like this nigger--face down in the weeds!" Lyle is the murderer of Richard, although he is later acquitted by an all white jury.

Phillip Roth presents in the article, "Channel X: Two Plays on the Race Conflict," insight into the Lyle-Richard conflict. Mr. Roth states:

Lyle hates Richard for being black and arrogant, as Richard hates him for being white and arrogant--and for being a killer too, for Lyle had already murdered a Black man years ago and gone unpunished for it. After a couple of accidental but angry encounters, culminating in Richard knocking Lyle down in front of his wife, the white man comes hunting the black man with a gun. After Lyle has dumped Richard's body, the scene shifts to Black-town, and Rev. Henry's church. The reader discovers that the Blacks, especially the Black students, are boycotting stores, and engaging in non-violent protest headed by Richard's father, Rev. Meridian Henry. In flashback scenes prior to Richard's murder, Richard engages in a conversation with his grandmother, Mother Henry, in which he reveals his


hatred of whites, and his feelings about his mother's death. The dialogue reads like this:

Mother Henry: Richard, you can't start walking around believing that all the suffering in the world is caused by white folks!

Richard: I can't? Don't tell me I can't. I'm going to treat everyone of them as though they were responsible for all the crimes that ever happened in the history of the world--oh, yes! They're responsible for all of the misery I've ever seen and that's good enough for me. It's because my Daddy's got no power that my Mama's dead. And he ain't got no power because he's Black. And the only way that the black man's going to get any power is to drive all the white men into the sea.1

This portion of the conversation between Mother Henry and Richard gives a clue to Richard's action in the play. Richard has been demoralized by his failure in the North and as a result of this, Richard is pushed beyond endurance and his so called 'place' in that southern society.

Caught in the middle of Richard's hatred of the white man is his father, Rev. Henry. The whole philosophy of the civil rights-non-violent movement is seriously questioned. Rev. Henry is forced to re-evaluate and question his non-violent philosophy when his son is killed by the white man, Lyle. In the funeral sermon for his dead son, Rev. Henry ponders the future. He states:

... It is not that the days are dark--we have known dark days. It is not only that the blood runs down and no man helps us; it is not only that our children are destroyed before our eyes. It is not only that our lives from day to day and every hour of each day, are menaced by the people among whom you have set us down... it is not the past which makes our hearts so heavy. It is the present. Lord, where is our hope?... can I ask the children forever to

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1 Baldwin, Blues For Mister Charlie, p. 35.
sustain the cruelty inflicted on them by those who have been their masters, and who are now, in very truth, their kinfolk, their brothers, and their sisters and their parents?

But, my Lord, What of the children? What shall I tell the children?. . .1

At the end of the play, Rev. Henry has come to some conclusion as to future involvement in Civil Rights. After his funeral sermon, he urges the followers to "Learn to walk again like men." It is also revealed that Richard's gun now occupies the place in Rev. Henry's pulpit under the Bible. This, it appears, is the only solution in a situation where even Rev. Henry's long time white liberal friend, Parnell James, is powerless in preventing injustice.

Along with the racial conflict that is evident in the drama, Baldwin exposes a sexual conflict involving Lyle and Richard. The conflict reveals the theme of virility or masculine sexual prowess. James Baldwin has been criticized for incorporating the 'unpopular' sexual attitudes which Richard hurls at Lyle. Just before Lyle kills Richard, Richard affronts Lyle about his limited sexual prowess:

...Don't you know I've watched you all by life? . . .
And I know your women, don't you think I don't--better than you!
Why have you spent so much time trying to kill me?
Why are you always trying to cut off my cock? You worried about it? Why?
Okay. Okay. Keep your old lady home, you hear? Don't let her near no nigger. She might get to like it. You might get to like it, too. Wow!2

Some critics, like Susan Sontag, for example, believe that Richard did

1 Ibid., p. 105.

2 Ibid., pp. 156-157.
not have reason enough to introduce the theme of 'sexual envy' on the occasions that he does. But one must ask what more reason does he need than the fact that Lyle killed one Black man (Old Bill) because he believed that Bill was too old for his wife, with whom Lyle was having sexual relations. Racism and sex are not totally divorced of each other. As in this case, the matter of sexuality stems from the racist attitudes in the minds of the people. Lyle, on one hand, destroys Black men who threaten his sexual activities, while he can only find fulfillment with Black women. As Max Lerner says: "The picture that Baldwin draws is bleak--the whites, mean and narrow and hate-ridden, their men killing out of twisted impulse to follow the code and to prove (their) manhood."¹ The theme of racial and sexual confrontation in Dutchman and Blues For Mister Charlie is handled by another Black playwright, Ed Bullins. The Gentleman Caller, however, is written from a more revolutionary point-of-view.

In making a comment on his play, Ed Bullins stated that The Gentleman Caller is, "A Parable," so fierce in its intention that it is almost impossible to laugh at.² As mentioned previously at the beginning of the chapter, The Gentleman Caller resembles Dutchman in its symbolistic and expressionistic style. The backdrop of the drama is somewhat satirical. The living room decorated in red, white and black with American flags adorning the walls, is representative of America.

¹ Max Lerner, in Contemporary Black Drama, p. 241.

² Ed Bullins, in Contemporary Black Drama, p. 370.
There are gun racks holding rifles and shotguns, and resting on spikes are the stuffed heads of an American Indian, a Black man, a Chinese and a Vietnamese. These are the trophies of the affluent white America—the trophies of oppression. Clayton Riley has called The Gentleman Caller, "a lazy effort filled with masked and painted ritual figures struggling amid the nation's mad living room. . . ."¹ Perhaps, Mr. Riley's criticism of the drama is due in part to the realm of satirical fantasy in which Bullins chose to write. As Clinton Oliver pointed out:

". . . This cryptic play will compel, although the speeches that round it out at the curtain may seem too stark and simplistic. They do, though, serve the purposes of the Revolutionary Black Theater and the play as a whole gives force to Bullins' view that: 'We don't want to have a higher form of white art in Blackface. We are working towards something entirely different and new that encompasses the soul and the spirit of Black people, and that represents the whole experience of our being here in this oppressive land."²

The gentleman caller is a young Black man, well-dressed, wearing dark glasses, and smoking imported cigarettes. He calls on a decadent rich white woman (painted in silver) and in the process of his visit, he does not say one word. The gentleman is met at the door by the maid, Mamie, who is dressed in a costume of the 'stars and stripes.' Mamie is not pleased at all to see the gentleman caller. She says to him:

. . . What you messin' wit me fo, ' boy?
. . . What you goin' round messin' things up for, huh?

² Oliver, Contemporary Black Drama, p. 369.
... I jest can't understand you's young' uns none.

Mamie admits the Gentleman, however, and when the Madame enters, she continuously babbles about her traditions, her family and her rank. The Madame is more decadent than Lula of Dutchman. She displays more maturity as she taunts the Gentleman with a seductive dance. When the Gentleman ignores the Madame's seductive advances, she becomes very upset and calls for Mr. Mann, (alias 'the Man' or Mr. Charlie). Mr. Mann is the Madame's husband, but he is no help, because he is dead. At this point in the play, one begins to understand the direction that the play is taking. Mr. Mann is already dead, and the Madame is dying. These deaths signify the death of the decadent American establishment.

But what about the Gentleman, who apparently seeks identification with the moribund establishment? It is evident that he, too, must be killed. Because the Gentleman Caller seeks identity with the Madames and Mr. Mann's of America, it is necessary for Mamie, the maid (who transforms from the Maid to the Queen Mother of the Revolution) to kill both the Madame and the Gentleman. As she said at first, he was 'messin' things up.' The real Mamie is revealed. As the Maid, she represented:

A loyal heirloom, dependent upon the noblesse oblige of the whites, but actually, she represents the black masses who although ostensibly servile to their masters are filled with hate and symbolically bent upon their destruction.2

The Maid and the Gentleman are analogous to Eldridge Cleaver's analysis...

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2 Oliver, Contemporary Black Drama, p. 369.
of the Amazon and the Supermasculine Menial. As Cleaver states in his book, *Soul On Ice*: "The Amazon finds it difficult to respect the Supermasculine Menial. She sees him essentially as only half a man, an incomplete man."¹

After she rids of the Madame and the Gentleman, the Maid throws off her bandana, a symbol of slavery, and displays a natural hair style. She also sheds the American flag garment and dons an African gown. All of this adds to the revolutionary climax of the drama. In the last lines of the drama, the Maid, now the Queen Mother, speaks:

... We are forming the foretold Black nation that will survive, conquer and rule under your divine guidance. We Black people are preparing for the future. We are getting ready for the long war ahead of us. DEATH TO THE ENEMIES OF THE BLACK PEOPLE! All praises is due to the Blackman.²

The Queen Mother's revolutionary actions at the end of the play are indicative of the trend of action taken by Blacks during the sixties. They, too, were breaking ties with the dying white establishment. American society in all its decadence, is still showing signs of dying. The playwright, Bullins, is warning Black people against being duped by the decadent white society. He is telling the Black people that their strength and future hopes are found in the Black race.

In each of these plays, *Dutchman, Blues For Mister Charlie, and The Gentleman Caller*, the Black experience is reflected by the fact that racial and sexual encounters between the races usually end in the

¹ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul On Ice* (New York, 1968), p. 188.

destruction of a Black life. This alone, tells Blacks that they must beware, be cautious, or they will be the victims.
CHAPTER III

THE ASSAULT AGAINST THE OLD SPIRITUALITY

The plays of Ron Milner, Jimmy Garrett and Ben Caldwell treat the theme of the old spirituality versus the new spirituality. The plays, Who's Got His Own, And We Own The Night, and Prayer Meeting Or The First Militant Minister, respectively, bare the contemporary attitudes of Black people concerning the old spiritual alliance and the new spiritual alliance in a search for a definition of life. In Ron Milner's Who's Got His Own, the Bronson family is "forced to examine the inner fabric of their lives: the lies; self-deceits, and sense of powerlessness in a white world."¹

Tim Bronson, Jr., his mother and his sister, Clara, tell their stories in order to try to achieve some semblance of balance as a family. The soul-searching gathering is prompted by the death of Tim Bronson, Sr. Each member of the Bronson family has lived with a secret hidden inside them, and these secrets have almost torn the family apart. Tim Bronson, Jr. is a brash, impatient young Black man. It is revealed that he is deeply hurt about the way his dead father accepted the insults of the white men at work. Tim saw the way in which his father was insulted by the white men at work; how they harrassed him about his job, cleaning the toilets in the factory. Tim wanted his father to stand up to these white men, show them that he was a man and not just a

¹ Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 36.
'Nigger-shit-house cleaner.' But there is a flaw in Tim's character. As Larry Neal explains, "He (Tim) would change the world, but without comprehending the particular history that produced his "tyrannical" father."¹ Tim could not understand why his father would not lift a hand to counter-attack the insults he received from the workers, yet, at home, he would beat everyone in sight, including his wife. Tim's problem is a rather complex one. The only way to solve it is to comprehend the history of his family:

He must understand why his father allowed himself to be insulted daily by the "honky" types on the job; why he took a demeaning job in the "shit-house;" and why he spent on his family the violence that he should have directed against the white man.²

Tim learns his family history through the secret his mother has kept to herself for a long time. Tim's mother is of that generation of Black Christian women who have understood the violence that lurked in their men. She explains first to Tim that his father's father stood up to the white men once in Mississippi. His life was taken by the Klan as his family, including Tim Sr., watched these hooded men shoot him, lynch him and burn his body. Tim's mother goes on to explain:

... But that wasn't what--what put the poison in him... What it was, was that some of them same white men, his mother knew 'em, had seen 'em when they took them things off their heads to laugh and drink under--under that tree, and he knew 'em too, knew their voices, said he could hear 'em in his sleep, couldn't ever forget 'em; well Jesus be my witness... some of them very same white men, nodded to 'em, spoke to 'em, telling his mother they

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¹ Ibid., 37.
² Ibid.
were sorry to hear about all the trouble she'd had. And nodded to him and spoke to him! That's what broke him, Tim Jr! . . . but every since then he couldn't stand to look at no white faces. . . They made him sick! . . . On, just' job after job! . . . He cleaned out their toilets! 'cause they let him alone there!  

When Tim, Jr. learns this, the family takes one more step to a closer relationship. Plus, Tim's mother is relieved of a heavy burden she had carried for a long time. For years, the mother had interposed herself between her man and the object of his violence—the white man:

Thus unable to direct his violence against the oppressor, the Black man becomes more frustrated and the sense of powerlessness deepens. Lacking the strength to be a man in the white world, he turns against his family. So, the oppressed, as Fanon explains, constantly dreams violence against his oppressor, while killing his brother on fast weekends.  

Tim's sister, Clara, is also involved in the development of the drama. She and Tim have, themselves, been guilty of keeping secrets from their mother. Clara, had an affair with a white upper-class liberal. This affair ended in Clara getting an abortion with the aid of Tim. After this, Clara rejected men, especially Black men. The rejection of Black men was due to Clara's resentment of her father. Not only did Clara reject Black men, but she tried to find refuge in the spiritual haven of the church attended by her mother. One playwright-critic notes: "Involved here is a rejection of the body-oriented life of the working class Black man symbolized by the mother's traditional religion."  

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1 Ron Milner, "Who's Got His Own," in *Black Drama Anthology*, p. 142.  
3 Ibid.
Who's Got His Own is rooted in the historical search for Black manhood. This drama is also concerned with bridging the gap between those of the new spirituality (i.e. Tim) and the old spirituality represented by the Mother. Tim's family worked toward bridging this gap, but there is a more pessimistic attitude toward bridging the gap in the play, And We Own The Night by the playwright, Jimmy Garrett.

We are unfair
And unfair
We are black magicians

Black arts we make
in black labs of the heart

The fair are fair
And deathly white

The day will not save them
And we own the night
-LeRoi Jones

As the play opens, the central character is involved in an armed insurrection. The protagonist, Johnny, is wounded and his brothers look for medical help. The antagonist, surprisingly, is Johnny's mother, who against his wishes comes to see her wounded son. As a representative of the old spirituality, Johnny's mother berates him, and his fighting companions, and their cause. She says:

I told you to stay home. Out here fighting the Police. Burning down white folks' businesses. I'm ashamed of you. God knows why you're doing this.

You're wrong boy. God knows you're wrong. You out here breaking' laws. Killin'. Look at what you've

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The mother in Garrett's play is a strong-willed woman. She can not possibly conceive of the idea of Blacks fighting white people. She explains her position:

... And you know how white folk's have always helped us. They're smart. They know what's right and what ain't. We got to trust them. They're good. They run the whole world don't they? ... I don't understand. ... You call yourselves men. Don't no men act like that. The white man don't crawl around, cussin' and stealin'! You ought to be actin' like the white man sted of trying to kill him.

Johnny, verbally attacks his mother for her 'love of the white man ideas,' and accuses her of emasculating his father. Johnny tells his mother this when he says:

... I should try to be a white man, huh?

And daddy. Don't you wish he was white too? Daddy's smarter than I thought he was. He had to decide between bein a white man and bein nothin' and he decided to be nothin'!

The white man's right no matter what he's done. Right Mama. I'm wrong from the time I was born. You love the white man. And I kill the white man.

In the new literature of the sixties, the mother's belief in the old ways are not applicable to the present times. The mother's ties to the white power structure has alienated her from her son, who rejects the white power structure. Johnny has also seen the way in which his

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1 Ibid., pp. 534-535.

2 Ibid., p. 537.

3 Ibid., pp. 537-538.
father has become a shell, because he was not able to support his family, like the white man. Because of all these things, Johnny's only hope lies in the revolution—the new way. Since Johnny and his mother see the world through entirely different eyes, communication between them is lost. Johnny's mother thinks he is a criminal and a heathen because he kill the white man. Larry Neal, critic and essayist, offers valuable commentary concerning this drama when he states:

The revolutionary imperative demands that men step outside the legal framework. It is a question of erecting another morality. The old constructs do not hold up, because adhering to them means consigning oneself to the oppressive reality. Johnny's mother is involved in the old constructs. Manliness is equated with white morality. And even though she claims to love her family (Her men), the overall design of her ideas are against black manhood.1

Milner's Tim and Garrett's Johnny are representatives of the New Spirituality produced by the oppressive conditions white America has forced upon Black America. They are "products of the new Afro-American sensibility, informed by the psychological revolution now operative within Black America."2 The mothers of Tim and Johnny represent the Old Spirituality, products of an era which preached Universal Humanity and innate goodness. Larry Neal supports this statement by saying:

The New Spirituality begins by seeing the world from the concise point-of-view of the colonialized. Where the Old Spirituality would live with oppression while ascribing to the oppressors an innate goodness, the New Spirituality demands a radical shift in point-of-view. The colonialized native, the oppressed must, of necessity, subscribe to a separate morality. One that will liberate

1 Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 38.

2 Ibid., 37.
him and his people.¹

Ron Milner and Jimmy Garrett treated the theme of the Old Spirituality vs. The New Spirituality in a serious manner. This same theme is seen in another play written by Ben Caldwell, entitled Prayer Meeting Or, The First Militant Minister. In this drama, the assault against the Old Spirituality is handled humorously.

The time setting for Prayer Meeting Or The First Militant Minister is in the late sixties when Black-White conflict is flaring in the cities. A burglar enters the well-furnished home of a Minister. As the burglar is checking out the haul he will make, the minister arrives, causing the burglar to hide behind a dresser. The minister is a civil rights leader, who preaches non-violence. He is greatly upset about a recent shooting of a Black man. However, his concern is more for himself than anybody else, because the Blacks are threatening to protest while the mayor warns him about any trouble that might occur. The minister discloses this while on his knees praying to God. The burglar hears this and becomes very angry with the minister for using Black people as a means of achieving fame and prestige. The burglar tells the minister to get off of his knees. The minister, thinking it is the voice of God, immediately rises and the conversation takes off from there:

The burglar begins to play on the preacher's old time religion. He becomes the voice of God insulting and goading the preacher on until the preacher's attitudes about

¹Ibid., 39.
The burglar exposes the reason that the minister is worried. He knows that the minister is only worried about himself. In his disapproval of the minister, the burglar (God) states:

Get up off your knees! And stop trying to bullshit me! You ain't worried 'bout what's gon' happen to your people. You worried 'bout what's gon' happen to you if something happens to your people. You so sure that if they go up 'gainst whitey and win, then they won't need you. Either way yo' game is messed up. So you want things to stay just as they are.

The minister is rebuked for having kept the Blacks from defending themselves. The Old Spirituality does not work for the Black people. The minister, in order to lead the Black people, must also adopt the New Spirituality—the new gospel of the new militancy. In each of the three plays in this chapter, it has been the conclusion of the playwrights that the Black experience is America entails the incorporation of the New Spirituality—the New Afro-American Sensibility. In order to combat the oppressive conditions that Black people face, it is necessary to abandon the old ways for new ones.

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1 Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

SURVIVAL IN THE URBAN GHEITOS

The plight of Blacks in the urban ghettos is explicitly connected with the Black experience in America. The playwrights of the sixties recognized this fact. Since they were dealing with aspects of the Black experience, Black life in the urban ghettos could not be ignored. In this chapter, two playwrights, Charles Gardone, author of No Place To Be Somebody, and Ed Bullins, author of In The Wine Time, recognized those Blacks who were struggling to survive, 'to make it,' in the concrete reservations of the cities.

No Place To Be Somebody, A Black Black Comedy has been described as: "a black panther of a play," which "stalks the off-Broadway stage as if it were an urban jungle, snarling and clawing with unbridled fury at the contemporary fabric of black-white and black-black relations." The drama takes place over a period of fifteen years in a West Village bar run by a young black pimp, Johnny Williams. At the beginning of the play, the reader is introduced to Gabe Gabriel, a poetic, philosophical figure who is the narrator, writer, chorus, and actor in the play, itself. Gabriel, seated at his typewriter, puffing on a marijuana cigarette, addresses the audience:

Right now I'm working on a play. They say if you wanna be a writer you gotta go out an' live. I don't believe that no more. Take my play for instance. Might

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1 Oliver, Contemporary Black Drama, p. 384.
not believe it but I'm gonna make it all up in my head as I go along... An' no matter how far out I git, don't want you goin' out'a here with the idea what you see happenin' is all a figment of my grassy imagination. 'Cause it ain't!

From Gabriel's speech, one can conclude that the play functions on two levels: on one level, the action takes place in Johnny's bar; on the subjective level, the action also exists in Gabe's mind. As one critic notes:

The physical action is presented as a part of a play being written by Gabe Gabriel, a black but fair-skinned actor, who is unsuccessful in getting parts because he is too white for black roles. Gabe the raconteur is also the raisonner: the spokesman of the author, he is also the contemplative counterpart of the rough, unprincipled, violent Johnny Williams, the central figure of his play.

Johnny Williams (Jay Cee ag'inst the worl'!), is the character who is searching, for a place to be somebody. He sees this 'place' in the world of the Mafia. Johnny's dream is to set up his own black Mafia. The seed of this dream was planted in Johnny's mind when he was a young boy by Sweets Crane, the legendary black leader of the rackets in Harlem. Sweets is Johnny's idol. Although Sweets was sent to prison, Johnny waited for his return. As Johnny says:

Man, what you think I been doin' the ten years Sweets been in the joint? I tell you the scheme is together. Me an' him gon' git us a piece 'a this town.

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2 Oliver, Contemporary Black Drama, p. 386.

3 Gardone, "No Place To Be Somebody," in Black Theater, p. 416.
However, when Sweets Crane returns to Johnny's bar after ten years in "the slammers," Sweets is a changed man—he is ill, reformed and broken in spirit. Johnny barely recognizes him in his tattered clothes.

Clinton Oliver sees the character of Sweets Crane in this light:

If Gabe Gabriel is the reconteur, the raisonneur, and the chorus of his play, and if Johnny Williams is the protagonist and the doomed victim, Sweets Crane, another victim is in classic theater terms, the moriturus. A father figure and a kind of tribal god, Johnny worships him as the only father he has ever known, and as the man who has taught him all he knows. . . As the moriturus he is the solemn voice of wisdom and thus becomes a second raisonneur in the play, who, on the verge of death, hands down the sum of his experience to the next generation.¹

Johnny's bar is patronized by a number of sundry characters, blacks and whites, ex-cons, civil righters, gangsters, and prostitutes.

Johnny's bar, the setting of the play, is important in that:

The setting is organic to the meaning of the play, a kind of lower depths, it is a microcosm of the culture, the society, and the world of the people who frequent it and find sustenance in its being.²

At first, when the characters go in and out of Johnny's bar, they seem to be at loose ends. However, as the drama unfolds, they begin to relate to Johnny in varying degrees and then pair-off which presents to the reader insights into the inner meanings of the play. The large mixed cast includes, Cora Beasely, a black nurse in search of a white lover, who is portrayed by Shanty, a young bartender in Johnny's bar, who yearns to be Black. There is also Evie, Johnny's black prostitute,

¹ Oliver, Contemporary Black Drama, p. 389.
² Ibid., p. 387.
and Dee, his white prostitute. Melvin Smeltz is the black pseudo-
artist interested in white culture. Gardone says of his characters:

They are dispossessed. After a few drinks, they feel
like somebody for a while. It's like they're trapped in
themselves and there is no exit.\(^1\)

The plot of the drama is complex, sometimes episodic, but with some
type of design. All of the characters are victimized by what Sweets
Crane calls 'Charlie Fever.' Johnny has 'Charlie Fever' so bad that he
is warned by Sweets that the 'fever' will destroy him. Sweets says:

You got the Charlie fever, Johnny. Tha's what you
got. I gave it to you. Took you' chile's min' an' filled
it with the Charlie fever. Givin' you a education or
teaching' you to dinner-pail, didn't seem to me to be no
way for you to grow up an' be respected like 'a man. Way
we was raised, husslin' an' usin' yo' biscuit to pull
quickies was the only way we could feel like we was men.
Couldn't copy Charlie's good points an' live like men.
So we copied his bad points. That was the way with my
daddy an' his daddy before him. We just pissed away our
lives tryin' to be like bad Charlie. With all our fine
clothes an' big cars. All it did was make us hate him all
the more an' ourselves too. Then I tried to go horse-to-
horse with 'em up there in the Bronx. An' ended up with a
ten. All because 'a the Charlie fever. I gave you the
Charlie fever, Johnny. An' I'm sorry! Seems to me, the
worse sickness 'a man kin have is the Charlie fever.\(^2\)

Johnny does not heed Sweet's warning and persists in carrying out his
plan of taking over the rackets in Harlem. In the course of the play,
Johnny's doom is foreshadowed many times. However, in the third scene
of the final act, it is implicit when Machine Dog appears. Machine Dog
is the black militant, who appears on a number of occasions, seen only
by Johnny. He represents Johnny's deeper conscience. When Machine Dog

\(^1\) Ibid.
\(^2\) Gardone, "No Place To Be Somebody," in Black Theater, p. 424.
enters, he says to Johnny:

   By the powers invested in me by the brothers I hereby deliver to you the edick! Brother Williams. The brothers have jus' sennumced an' condemned you to death!¹

The final confrontation occurs after this scene. Johnny has become a threat to the Mafia, so therefore he must be destroyed. Before Johnny dies, at the hands of Gabe, he kills some of the Mafia men, who have invaded his bar. After Sweets is shot, Johnny and Gabe are the only two left. Johnny forces his gun in Gabe's hand and demands:

   Take this gun in yo' han'. Feel that col' hard steel. Bet you ain't never held a heater in yo' han' like that in yo' life. Well, you gon' have to, Gabe. They gon' make you do it. Cause we at war, Gabe. Black ag'inst white.²

Gabe refuses the gun, but Johnny screams:

   You ain't got the guts! You wanna believe you kin sell papers an' become President! You're a coward, Gabe! A lousy, yellow, screamin, coward!³

Gabe becomes so enraged that he pulls the trigger and kills Johnny, his blacker counterpart.

In making a comment on what the statement of the play was, Gardone responded that it has to do with the question of identity and where we are today. As he states:

   We're all of us looking... for a slot... to try to find out just who and what we are. Sometimes we're stumped... we're stumped by the obstacles that are put

¹ Ibid., p. 445.
² Gardone, "No Place To Be Somebody," in Black Theater, p. 449.
³ Ibid.
in our way. And if we can, sometimes we invent fantasies that somehow for the time suffice us but it never does.\footnote{Oliver, Contemporary Black Drama, p. 387.}

Certainly, Johnny was looking for his slot—his place to be somebody in this world.

\textit{In The Wine Time} takes a look at Black life in the ghetto of South Philadelphia. It is autumn, the last wine time of the year, for Cliff Dawson, his wife, Lou, and her nephew, Ray. Ray might be called the protagonist, because it is in the prologue to the play that Ray introduces the reader to the last days of the wine time. He says:

\begin{quote}
Summer and Cliff and Lou and me together—all poured from the same brew, all hating each other and loving, and consuming and never forgiving—but not letting go of the circle until the earth swung again into winter, bringing me closer to manhood and the freedom to do all the things that I had done for the past three summers.\footnote{Ed Bullins, "In The Wine Time," in \textit{Five Plays By Ed Bullins} (New York, 1968), p. 104.}
\end{quote}

As the drama opens, Lou, Cliff and Ray are sitting outside drinking wine. The peacefulness of the late autumn evening is periodically interrupted by arguments that develop between Cliff and Lou. One of the most reoccurring arguments is that one which concerns Ray and his future. Cliff believes that if Ray joined the service, his chances of having a better life would be greater. Lou does not like this idea at all. Ray is at that stage where he is too young to join the service without an adult signing for him and too old to be told what to do by his aunt, Lou. It is not that the service will provide a new life for Ray, but it does mean that Ray will not have to sit on that Derby Street
porch each summer, wasting his years of youth. As Cliff states:

It's what Ray wants that counts. He's got to get out of here. . . don't you, Ray? Off 'a Derby Street and away from here so he can grow up to be his own man.¹

Cliff does not want Ray to become trapped like him. From his own experiences, Cliff knows that Ray has a good chance for a better life; a life that will not restrict him to the Derby Streets of the urban cities. Ray is young, and his life is just starting. Cliff makes this clear when he says:

... I had my crack at the world. . . And I've made it worse, if anything. . . you youngbloods own the future . . . remember that. . . I had my chance. All I can do now is sit back and raise fat babies. It's your world now boy.²

Ray's chance to make a better life for himself is threatened when he gets in a fight with Red, a member of the street culture; the most basic element of Black society. Ray and Red begin fighting in a nearby alley, when Ray finally emerges from the alley, his shirt is covered with blood. By this time, the Derby Street inhabitants have gathered: Tiny, Silly Willy Clark, Bama, Doris and Bunny Gillette. They too, are members of the street culture, and they have gathered to witness the murder of one of their members. When Cliff realizes what has happened, he retrieves the knife that was used to kill Red and announces that he is the killer. Before Cliff is taken away, he turns to Ray and says: "It's your world, Ray. . . . It's yours, boy. . . . Go on out there and claim it."³ Ray may very well be the protagonist of this drama,

¹Ibid., p. 135.
²Ibid., p. 156.
³Ibid., p. 182.
but without a doubt, Cliff is the hero. Bullins has managed to glorify him without romanticizing. Cliff is a man who does what he thinks is right. On the Derby Streets across America, there are a number of 'unsung' heroes like Cliff. Clayton Riley points out that:

Bullins completes his play by offering two distinct realities: one for those who see themselves portrayed in his work, and another for those who see someone else's life being presented on stage. For the former, he has continually shown that beauty exists in where you are—backstreet, rented room, poolroom, alley or wine bottle.1

In The Wine Time can be summed up as a play that deals with:

... basic Black folks, the people in the phrase 'All Power To,' those souls whose existence in this country touches all... bases in the ball game, who know life from a continuing physical confrontation with it—no quarter ever given, no point missed in the range of things; pain, joy, anguish, terror, love—all these; the survivors, a collective will to continue in spite of, by all means, with any tools, having defined morality, sophistication, courage, as attributes as well determined (if not better) by the curriculum fashioned in the streets as by any other.2

In the plays, In The Wine Time and No Place To Be Somebody, the playwrights show that survival in the urban ghettos is not easy. At times the price is high; the cost of a life. Johnny (Jay Cee ag'inst the worl') did not make it. His goal, a place to be somebody, was aimed too high. Perhaps, Ray will succeed if he comes to realize the high price that was paid for his freedom—his chance to 'make it.'

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CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

The Black experience in America is multi-faceted. The different views on society as seen in the plays verify this fact. The playwright, Ward, for example, chose to depict the various Black-White relationships in this country while raising the issue of the interdependence of the races and the hypocrisies displayed by Blacks and whites. The writers, Milner, Caldwell and Garrett emphasized the need for a new definition of life—a new Spirituality. Their plays hurt when looked at and listened to carefully, because they "explored that painful break between the young who are Black, and their elders—parents—who were not allowed to be." 1 The artists, Bullins and Gardone, created what is best described as 'street nigger royalty'—"all the uncool, incorrect, funky Black-urban field hand life style elevated to the averted eyes of Negro America." 2 Racial and sexual encounters were examined by LeRoi Jones and James Baldwin. What they said and what Bullins was saying in a different way in The Gentleman Caller was that:

... one can not ever lose sight of how perilous the journey into manhood is in this country... for anybody. And for anyone professing the positive nature of his Blackness, that journey is longer and immeasurably more dangerous. 3

1 Riley, A Black Quartet, p. xvi.
2 Ibid., p. xx.
3 Ibid., p. xvii.
These Black writers have much "black experience" and they have
desired to understand it, to make it beautiful and to transmit it to
others. As Hoyt Fuller states:

Drawing from an experience that is far wider than that
of the white American, and understandably beset with an
ambivalence more painful than artists anywhere have known,
the black writer is about his work.¹

The special beauty of these plays in this thesis is that they exist as
testaments to and from Black people creating and reflecting a new art
out of a consciousness durably shaped by a continuum of the Black expe-
rience in America.

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