

DOMINIC TAYLOR

Don't Call African-American Theatre Black Theatre: It's Like Calling a Dog a Cat

I'VE BEEN TRYING to find a way to frame an idea, and I believe my somewhat pithy title above basically catches it.

When social upheavals occur, people do many things to find solace, including looking to pets for comfort. What is true of pets will also help us understand certain recent cultural phenomena. In short, what I have in mind is not just an assessment involving nomenclature or semantics; I'm thinking about what a work of art or entertainment fundamentally is. Dogs and cats are both contemporary domestic animals, yet anyone who has had either can attest to the fact that they are very different life forms.

With the election of the 45th president, a lot of well-meaning people in the American Theatre were trying to find progressive and positive ways to fight back. Many patrons and other power players in theatre today are loath to admit that the election of #45 was not a retreat, but instead a revelation of national tendencies, if not national character.

In a not-unrelated development, the theatre establishment recently has found a group of young Black writers that "challenge" the establishment. Many of these works have been getting a significant amount of attention, in major venues, such as the [New York Times](#) and the [Washington Post](#). One such play, *Fairview*, has won the Pulitzer Prize in drama, and another, *Slave Play*, is about to go to Broadway this month.

The assumption of audiences and critics is that, since the author is Black and the play is about Black people, these plays must be Black Theatre. They are not: these are works of African-American Theatre. This mistake is unfortunate, since such work is as far from Black Theatre as Leontyne Price is from hip-hop.

Why is this important? Two reasons, principally. First, the audience

for this work is not the African-American community. These texts are constructed either for a mythical multi-cultural audience or a White audience. Second, these plays are palliatives for a liberal, so-called progressive populace. They allow their audience to feel good about themselves, at a time when they should feel anything but.

To stay with my domestic animal analogy, very few people get cats for protection. The function of that animal, by and large, is not to fight off any would-be intruder.

Black Theatre and African-American Theatre do exist, but they are not the same.

WHAT IS BLACK THEATRE?

IN JULY OF 1926, when discussing the Krigwa Players in *Crisis* magazine, W.E.B. DuBois stated that Black Theatre needed to be, *about us, by us, for us, and near us.*

In 1968, in an essay published in *The Drama Review*, Larry Neal declared that Black Theatre must meet the *needs and aspirations of the Black community.*

These remain two useful pillars for any definition of Black Theatre, with the following implications:

1) Black Theatre must be taken from the culture and cultural practices of Black life; its aim must be to further enhance the behavior, practices, and beliefs of Black people.

2) Black Theatre is in the process of searching for the truth, as opposed to restating a fact. Black people have it hard in America: that is a piece of data, but not something to build a drama around. As W.E.B. DuBois said, truth is not merely an abstraction; it is a functional tool, *used to set the world right.*

3) Black plays do not resolve themselves conventionally; they end by opening to new possibilities. Characters and situations do not wrap up neatly in "closure"; they open to new roads. Like Harold Loomis in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, characters exit the world shining like new money, walking a new path of different possibilities.

4) Traditional conflict is eschewed in Black Theatre. There is no standard protagonist/antagonist dialectic in such work. Instead, the plays use tension, often through the building and release of pressures placed on collectives and social systems, as a substitute for plot. Consider *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, or *For Colored Girls who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*

by Ntozake Shange. Both plays are driven by tension, and they track how strain is navigated by their characters.

5) In *Black Theatre*, the characters all have robust internal lives and complex existences that fully engage with family and history.

6) The material and spiritual worlds in *Black Theatre* are often actively engaged. Spirit is a robust cultural force, not an ancillary to the physical world.

WHAT, INSTEAD, IS AFRICAN-AMERICAN THEATRE?

SOME CHARACTERISTICS WHICH make up contemporary African-American Theatre:

1) It uses an event to explicate personal pain, so that the Black person is removed from the collective and is made singular.

2) The function of such plays is to build bridges with other communities as opposed to addressing the Black community.

3) African-American Theatre often finds it imperative to examine Black life through a myth or a structure that has Whiteness as its core. You could swing a dead cat in most offices of regional theatres and knock up against a dozen African-American plays using Greek myth to explore black life.

4) These plays have White saviors or allies who are central to the narrative and fundamental for the Black subject to move forward.

5) African-American Theatre is most often developed in White institutions, directed by White people, and often lauded by White audiences and critics.

6) Many of these plays focus on the victimization of Black life. The goal is to highlight oppression, not to offer a proactive response to a given situation.

7) Finally, there is no attempt by the author, director or producer of African-American Theatre to have an honest and robust engagement with the Black community during the development of the work.

When I was an undergraduate, my late professor, George Houston Bass, director of the Rites and Reasons Theatre in Providence, Rhode Island, created a method of play development called *Research to Per-*

formance. His overall approach is very complicated, but when the play was ready to be heard by an audience, one important aspect was to get feedback from the community and to highlight the input of elders.

Now more than thirty years later, I've finally understood what he was saying to me. I remember, back then I asked, "Prof. Bass, if two old crazy Black people in Rhode Island have a note on my play, I have to change it?" He responded, "Absolutely. If the work is for them, you have to be in communication with them."

I was furious, and at that time in my life, I decided not to have my play produced there. I did not then understand the centrality of the collective. One of the lessons that Professor Bass was trying to impart was the responsibility of the writer towards the Black community.

Theatre is a functional art form. It makes things happen. Its aesthetic practice has real-life results. Whether consciously or not, the artist makes work that changes the world around it.

Consider, if you will, the difference in function between Shange's *For Colored Girls*. . . in 1974 and a new work such as Jeremy O. Harris' *Slave Play*. As I noted, Mr. Harris's play will be heading to Broadway in September.

In the former play, the goal was to heal women, through the modality of performance. People have discussed what Shange called her "choreo-poem" and its relationship to ritual, to multivalent understandings of diaspora, and to other concerns, yet one thing is clear. This work speaks with Black women. In Mr. Harris's play, on the contrary, the goal is to be *heard* by people, about a situation, and it uses Black subjects as the material to achieve that hearing.

You can be a dog person or a cat person, but you still need to make sure what it is you're getting. When you go to the pet store, you don't call a dog a cat. Or take another art form, for example, Black popular music. No one calls it neo-soul, or gospel, or jazz, or hip-hop; it simply gets categorized as Black pop music.

At the end of *Slave Play*, a character named Kaneisha is given the last line. Kaneisha, I will note, is described in the play as *28, a dark, black woman unafraid of what she knows and wants*. She says her last line to Jim. Jim is *35, a white man and inheritor of more than he knows how to handle*.

A lot happens in the world of this play, but its last line should suffice to elucidate my point. The play ends with these words, a Black woman who says to her White lover: "Thank you, baby. Thank you

for listening.”

A white lover who listens. . .

Enuf said.

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