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National Black Theater Festival, 1997*

[August Wilson](#)

My only real qualification for standing here is the same as any one of you . . . a robust concern for the state of Black Theater and by virtue of that a concern for the health of Black America, our material comfort, our culture and the strong and vibrant spirits that mark our grace and our welfare.

Black Theater. These words have a feeling to them. When you see them, you feel good. Black Theater. These words have a meaning. These words have a power. And not everyone is glad to see them. There are some in our society who feel threatened by them. Powerful segments of our society who feel threatened by the meaning these words have. Black Theater is Black America's imagination on display. Black America's intelligence on display. Black America's humanity on display. The field of manners and rituals of intercourse that Baldwin speaks of . . . on display. It is on this field that we have matured; it is on this field that we have come into our own. As survivors of a most difficult and profound history and experience that has altered and continues to alter the muscle of our hearts with its share of grief and love and loss and triumph. We are attendants to that history. We serve it because it is ours.

The old folks sang, "We have come this far by faith." And we are the inheritors of that faith. It is that faith that has enabled our survival. That is our greatest gift. That faith is born of hope and ennobled by the struggle to affirm the value of our lives, to exalt our presence in what the Honorable Elijah Muhammad called "the wilderness of North America."

I was recently at a meeting to talk about Black Theater, and someone remarked that we had to figure out where we fit into the larger struggle. Everyone nodded in agreement, including myself. But as I thought about it, I realized that there is no larger struggle. This is it. There are different fields of endeavor, different approaches, but there is no larger struggle than the affirmation and exaltation of our lives. Than the struggle for freedom, justice, and equality.

I first became involved in theater in 1968 with the idea of using theater as a tool to politicize the community and "raise the consciousness of the people," as we said then. Together with my good friend, Rob Penny, we founded the Black Horizon Theater in Pittsburgh. We took as our model the brilliant and provocative theater of Amiri Baraka and the Spirit House Players and Movers. It was a theater that sought to inform and provoke as well as entertain. It was a theater rooted in age-old storytelling, that sought to teach and inspire by providing examples of conduct sanctioned by the community **[End Page 483]** as we sought ways to alter our relationship to the society, a relationship that had begun as master and slave and had made little progress in the three hundred and some odd years since. We had inherited a mantle of struggle and felt honored by our call to duty, to man the stations, and not only alter our relationship to the society by acquiring the power to effect some control over our lives and our development as we moved toward this now approaching millennium. But first we had to alter the expectation we had of each other, and to bridge and expand what we knew to be possible.

We were joined by a Black America who felt the need in those heady days of the 1960s to seize the moment and launch its long march to power and self-determination. Along with this newly emerging theater, there was an explosion of poetry and art that made the Harlem Renaissance look like a tea party. It was Black America discovering its muscles and stretching them. We mouthed the words Black Power and stomped and danced to Archie Shepp, Ornett Coleman, Albert Ayler, and the Supreme brilliance of John Coltrane. Everywhere you looked our style, our stance, and our posture announced the presence of a new people reconnecting themselves, rekindling the fire and flame of our ancestors. We proclaimed ourselves as Warrior Kings and paraded through the streets, a testament to our strength and the triumph of our survival.

This is finally an inadequate description of those times. Suffice it to say "We were bad" in ways in which we had never been before and have ceased to be in 1997. Bad in an abstract of style that Baraka best described in a book called *In Our Terribleness*. And if Terribleness is past bad . . . we were that, too. Here now in 1997 our collective muscle is in danger of atrophy. But those who have their ear to the ground can hear the faint rumble of knocking dust. Or so I have been told by those whose regular commune is with the ancestors.

The ascension to our goals of the Black Power movement of the 1960s was halted by our immaturity, our inexperience, our lack of faith, and our own betrayals. That movement was a failure in that we did not achieve our goals of self-respect, self-determination and self-defense. But it laid the groundwork and pointed to some new areas of struggle, some new methods and some new ideas.

In 1965 when I left my mother's house, I went out into the community, out on the street corners, the bars and restaurants and barbershops to learn how to be a man, to learn what codes of conduct the community sanctioned and how I might best live a full and dedicated life.

I began to make discoveries about myself. That my ancestors had arrived in America in chains as part of a labor system. They were forced to work on the vast agricultural plantations in the South. They made do without surnames and lived in dirt floor cabins. When they tried to escape, they were hunted down by dogs and men on horseback. They were denied the benefit of familial tutoring. They had lost their political will and with that the right to define their own person and their own destiny. They had lost the power to construct their own political history. They lost their moral personality and their language. They lived in a world that refused to recognize their gods, their manners, their mores. It despised their ethos and refused to recognize even their humanity.

Undaunted, and within the scope of the larger world that lay beyond their doorstep, they had begun to build a culture, to set down rules, and to urge a manner **[End Page 484]** of being that corresponded to their temperament and sensibilities. Life was to be lived in all its timbre and horrors, with zest and purpose. To live hard is still to live, and it was this life, worthy of the highest of possibilities, that was to be cultivated and celebrated. And it was this culture that I learned in Pittsburgh in my mother's house.

It was this culture that the African fought valiantly, at great cost, to preserve. He fought to preserve it not because it was fashioned out of pain and suffering but because he stood solidly on these shores as a testament to the resilience of his spirit and the nobility of his ideas. And it was this culture that I carried with me when I went searching for a way to dedicate my life. I found my dedication in the ideas of the Black Power movement and the old men, the elders of the community who would congregate in Pat's Place, a cigar store on Wylie Avenue. It was a simple dedication to live a clean, hard, useful life dedicated to the self-respect and self-determination and self-defense of the racial group into which I had been born twenty years earlier.

It was armed with this dedication that I left my home in Seattle and traveled to Princeton to give the keynote speech at the biennial TCG conference, in June of 1996. The Theater Communications Group is an organization made up of all of the regional theaters in the country. At first I had declined the invitation because I was busy writing a new play, and, as always, the requirements of art can be demanding. As I thought about it and what I might possibly have said, I thought about the lack of black theaters with significant resources to produce plays with high production values. As my thoughts became more focused, I realized that 65 out of the 66 theaters that make up the League of Resident Theaters were white, and I regretted that I had declined the invitation because I thought that it was something that my colleagues in the theater needed to address. I was of course then pleased when I was urged to reconsider the invitation. I am glad that I did.

That 65 out of the 66 LORT theaters were white meant that Black Theater artists were being excluded from the opportunity to develop their various talents in the same level of venues as their white counterparts. 65 out of 66 theaters meant that

something was dreadfully wrong.

Some see a central ground occupied by these 65 white theaters as the American Theater and into which others of whatever ethnic persuasion must be absorbed and made subservient to the single value system of Western thought they uphold and represent. I say that this central ground is not, and should not be, made up of any one ethnic or racial group, for America is the mixing of many cultures, all of which have contributed to the making of the American character and personality. The American Theater should be just that: "American."

I felt that 65 of the 66 LORT theaters being white theaters with no representation from Asian, Hispanic and other racial groups and only one from blacks gives us a theater not only skewed toward whites and the so-called classical values of European theater, but one that impedes the development of a truly American Theater and ignores the contributions being made by others of various ethnic and racial backgrounds.

The American Theater is not the property of any one race or culture as some people think. To have a theater that promotes the values of black Americans, our hard-won survival and prosperity, a theater that addresses ways of life that are peculiar to us, that investigates our personalities and all manners of our social intercourse and **[End Page 485]** philosophical thought, is not to be outside of the American Theater or outside of Western Theater any more than Ibsen's and Chekhov's explorations of Swedish and Russian culture makes them outsiders. Or David Mamet's insightful and provocative explorations of white American culture make him an outsider.

Yet, despite the extent to which blacks influence the society, contribute to its spiritual welfare, and defend and uphold the principles of the Founding Fathers, our influence and contributions are not recognized by any gain in material culture that would allow us to further develop our arts and establish control over its dissemination. We do not have any theaters of comparable size, quality, and financial resources as our white counterparts that would allow us to support our artists and offer them meaningful avenues to grow and develop their talents and make the contributions to the body of world art of which they are capable. What we have instead is a furtherance of white hegemony and a truncation of our possibilities. Money spent "diversifying" the theater, developing black audiences for white institutions, developing ideas of colorblind casting, only strengthen and solidify this strangle-hold by making our artists subject to the paternalistic notions of white institutions, allowing them to dominate and control the art.

Once accepting the challenge of speaking to the lack of black theaters then, I had to go the whole way and speak to the historical condition that occasioned our art to be placed in the hands of someone else as custodians and to affirm the cultural battle that had been taking place since the early 17th century when we came to this country in chains and were perceived as being without language, art, culture and other trappings of civilization, to be without worth or value other than as

chattel and as part of a labor system. We all know the errors of such thought now, due to our fierce resistance of such conditions of servitude and our equally fierce affirmation of the value and worth of our beings.

We have enjoyed the privilege of the company of many whites in American society who have stood by us in making those affirmations in the spirit of friendship and brotherhood. Without them the journey that we have made from the hull of a ship to a self-sufficient and culturally robust people could not have been possible.

In November of 1994 *Time* magazine ran a cover story proclaiming a renaissance in black art. There was a photo of the dancer Bill T. Jones on the cover, the caption proclaiming black artists were free at last. The theme of the story was that black artists were no longer being "confined" by their blackness but were creating art that was not "limited" to black themes. That they had learned to transcend their blackness to pursue more universal expressions by embracing the values and norms of European culture. This universality, of course, is conferred on white artists automatically, and never is it suggested that white playwrights like David Mamet or Terrence McNally are limiting themselves to whiteness or that they are being confined in their art by pursuing white themes.

The idea that we are trying to escape from the ghetto of black culture is insulting. It is insulting to us, our parents, and their forebears who have fought to defend and preserve their manners and ways of life. This kind of freedom comes with chains that shackle the mind. It is a freedom that we vehemently reject. **[End Page 486]**

It is notions like these that lead our colleagues in the theater to believe that we are willing to forgo the obligations of ourselves and our cultural duty to preserve and promote the thought and values of our ancestors.

It became then a question of assimilation. I believe to assimilate into the society is harmful to the cultural self as it abandons the age-old investigation and accomplishments of our ancestors on the African continent and the continuance of those explorations here on the continent of North America. That our cultural contributions to what is known as American culture are many and inextricably woven into the fabric of contemporary life does not mitigate the loss, as the concerns of the culture are not our own and we do not participate in the privilege or power that they produce.

In other words, since the dominant culture is not our culture, we have no power no matter what contributions we have made to its spiritual growth or its material comfort. We are ennobled by our struggle to survive and prosper in what has been a difficult and sometimes bitter relationship with a system of laws and privileges which seemingly seeks to prolong our enslavement by denying us access to the tools necessary for productive and industrious life. It is the system of which we are all victims and to which we all bear an individual responsibility for its propagation.

If we choose not to assimilate, it does not mean we oppose the values of the dominant culture, but rather we wish to champion our own causes, our own celebrations, and our own values. So that the two cultures exist concurrent with one another, two entities contributing to the perils and pillars of the society.

From the response I received after saying these things, it became apparent that the denial of the moral personality of blacks from slavery and on into the early part of the century had marked and frozen the image of the Negro in the minds of whites as lacking in any meaningful cultural attributes. So that in response to my speech and trying to understand why on earth blacks would want their own theaters, some whites questioned whether blacks had a culture, whether blacks in America were Africans, and indeed whether blacks constituted a race, if they weren't after all simply as "American" as everyone else. And that there were just theaters . . . that there weren't any white theaters, then there needn't be any black theaters. Such thinking is to my mind an attempt to further hide the issues of white hegemony and to stave off any disruption or curtailment of white privilege. By suggesting that assimilating into the society was paying undue reverence to white culture and that black Americans needed to find ways to preserve and promote their own culture . . . to some people I had overstepped the bounds of common sense. Of what is perceived to be the natural order of things.

This notion of common sense is strong and hallowed. But if the natural order of things is a violation of the notions of decency and fair play as taught to me by my mother, then I have a duty to oppose that. To replace it with something in my cultural trust or storehouse. Affirmative action is after all an attempt by the government to force fairness, to legislate it by law. You cannot legislate fairness. It flows from an innate sense of well-being that is a testament to the common good. If blacks are outside that notion of what is common, as it is my belief they are, stemming from our history as slaves, then the norm and the values of decency and fair play do not come into practice **[End Page 487]** . . . blacks do not count in the assessment of laws and privilege. They may benefit from them . . . to the extent that they benefit all citizens who are not excluded, but their condition, their needs, their cultural status is not taken into account when the system of laws and privilege are constructed or invoked. Blacks are truly left over from history and have very little political will that they can use to alter their relationships with the society and with their fellow citizens with whom they share the table of fellowship.

For blacks to have the power to control essential and simple aspects of their lives would mean for many whites a total change and fundamental reordering of reality and of the world. A reordering of the way things are done. And the way things are done rewards whites with a privilege and access to the resources that enable industry and progress. Any gain made by blacks is seen as an encroachment of white territory. So profound is this idea that white workers in the 1920s would strike not for higher wages, not for better working conditions, not for safety in the workplace, but to demand that black workers be paid 35% less in wages to maintain the disparity in their economic status.

Apparently the wide disparity in the American Theater of 66 LORT theaters that promote white culture and 1 that promotes black culture is acceptable . . . because it makes common sense. Because it maintains the status quo.

But we are girded and licensed by our faith. All around us we can see evidence of slavery. We can see evidence of a triumph over that history. We do not seek to blame. If the African who arrived in America chained and malnourished in the hold of a 350ft vessel is still chained and malnourished after 378 years, it cannot be anybody's fault but ours. Our culture is the ladder by which we have climbed into the New World. We were first a commodity of flesh and muscle which has lost its value in the marketplace. We are trying to place a value on ourselves as freemen. Our cultural products, our song and dance, our literature, our theatrical endeavors aid in that. Since the days of the early 17th century, our humanity and our intelligence have been questioned. They continue to be so today. Excluded from financial and political privilege, our artistic life, the health of our spirits cannot be beholden to anyone other than ourselves. The resources of this society . . . scarce or otherwise . . . cannot flow as a privilege that is based on race and culture . . . they cannot be the province of one racial group at the exclusion of the other. It is necessary to our spiritual health that we share in what our hands have wrought. The barrels can no longer be carted away to the cellar while we are made to drink from the fountain of bitterness . . . in a Christian country . . . in which every right in law has been given grudgingly. It is ultimately not about theater at all. It is about the way in which the fundamentals are exercised, and the ruling ideas, the notions of common, perpetuated images that posit blacks as without value and as a menace to society. Such ideas are harmful to our prosperity. They are assaults and cannot continue unchallenged. We cannot allow others to have authority over our cultural and spiritual products. We reject . . . without reservation . . . any attempts by anyone to rewrite our history so as to deny us the rewards of our spiritual fruits and to become the cultural custodians of our art, our literature, and our lives.

There is a contradiction to America's commitment to justice and equality and the way it treats its black citizens. The contradiction has grown more fierce and exposes all the places in which we are lacking in virtue. **[End Page 488]**

The privilege that White America enjoys can no longer be free. It is at our expense that the advantage is gained.

Black Theater is like a chained giant. We have only glimpsed its power. Like Samson it is chained to the false pillars of society and like Samson there is no telling what it can do with the jawbone of an ass.

It is evident that things can no longer continue as they are. Our talents have grown. We have gotten stronger and more secure in our endeavors as Black Theater empowers itself by hard work and intelligent struggle. We have come a long ways, and we still have a long march toward the future. We are breaking our chains as we affirm the value of ourselves.

That affirmation of self and the exaltation of our presence is our first duty in the face of those who hold us in disdain and would deny us the fruits of our labor and the triumphs of our history . . . that sanction of our manners . . . that value of our blood.

We are what we imagine ourselves to be. The concerns of the dominant forces in the society blunt, restrict, and stifle that imagination. It denies it any value. The quality of life that it supports is not considered to be very high. Again we do not count. Our concerns, our cares, our needs are not taken into consideration when the rules are being made.

The point need not be labored. It is proven over and over again by the condition of Black Theater and the present assaults on its integrity and its presence.

If it is not to be labored, it must be stated in its clearest terms. If Black Theater is subordinate to the values of European Americans, it cannot come into its own. If the condition of its art is dependent upon the benevolence of White America, it has lost its self-determination. If its control lies outside of itself, then it has lost its political will. If it has lost its political will, then it must struggle to regain it. There is no other reason for being.

We have an honorable history in the world of men and women. We seek to give expression to that thing that beats inside us, that pulsating muscle of indelible passion that informs our intellect. Theater is the spiritual fist of the culture. An intelligent, responsible fist of fierce purpose that is searching for tools to build institutions . . . to build palaces for our art.

Prior to coming to the Festival, I did three interviews. Two of the interviewers asked me the same identical question.

Does Black Theater have a future? I find the question insulting. I cannot imagine them asking if Black Music has a future. If White Theater has a future. If Michael Jordan has a future. Put that with the article a recent issue of *Atlantic* magazine titled "Toward the End of Blackness," and I begin to get paranoid and sharpen my vigilance. This field of endeavor . . . Black Theater . . . on which we have labored from the early 17th century and which has borne so much fruit, so much abundant sweetness, this field of endeavor in which we have made do with next to nothing, in which we have made theater with scraps, and made it with zest and joy. This theater which we have made in church basements, barrooms and gymnasiums . . . which we have lit with \$1.99 floodlights . . . costumed from our closets and the Salvation Army, this theater which we have made with genius and ingenious . . . this theater which we have made with the same force of creativity as James Brown and the Fabulous Flames Charlie [End Page 489] Parker and Duke Ellington . . . this theater which we have jump-started with the sheer force of our verbal agility . . . and fueled with the blood of Africa . . . the muscles of our hearts plying its trade, the blood racing to all of its legal appointments. Does it have a future???

It is so painfully clear that what we think of ourselves is so vastly different from what White America thinks of us. Somebody thinks we are on the wrong territory. The wrong turf. The world of ideas and their bold and ingenious expression is something so drastically new to you that we are worried about your survival, your ability to maintain sufficient speed on the highways of Shakespeare and Ibsen, Miller and Williams, Mamet and Shepard. Does Black Theater have a future?

Such paternalistic attitudes and practices keep us in a subordinate and sometimes subservient position to the ambitions of European America. Their agendas are valid. But so are ours. If our goals are opposite, then we need to sit down and talk. To find some commonality in our needs or to negotiate a path around each other. There are, however, some things which we are not willing to talk about. There are some things that are not on the table. We are not willing to talk about the end of blackness. We are not willing to talk about a single value system that posits European Americans at the center of the universe, a value system that deems our lives as lacking because we are not Caucasians. We can talk about a single value system that recognizes and encompasses the contribution that all of the various ethnic groups in America have made toward the material and spiritual health of an "American" culture. Then we can talk about creative ways of restructuring the ways in which theaters are funded that give everybody access to the resource to develop their artists and their ideas. We cannot talk about renting our bodies to celebrate European culture as some kind of ideal toward which we all must strive and to which homage is due.

I belabor the point, but it needs belaboring. We are not the servants at the party.

From the hull of a ship to a culturally robust and self-determining people . . . that is the journey we are making.

White America wants us to pay our cabfare in advance when so much of who we are, our spiritual endeavors, has bought the tires, the gas, and the oil; so much of our labor has been put into the service of the fleet, the maintenance of the engine, the air conditioning . . . our music is on the radio, so much of what we do providing comfort, etc., for White America. We don't mind paying, but it is insulting to ask us to pay in advance. It is insulting to question our integrity when our labor, our trust, and our good faith has made it all possible.

Our ambitions are not limited. They are not second-class ambitions. Our lives are not truncated versions of humanity. We are not a useless appendage to this society as many would have us believe. We are the fire and the fury, the heartbeat, the muscle, and the fiber. Our contributions to the spiritual welfare of America are enormous and without parallel and weighted with the blood and bones of our ancestors. We are not the servants at the party. Our lives and our talent are not to be made to wither on the vine in the midst of plenty, among a cornucopia of riches.

Our ancestors brought advantage to America. For 400 years we blacks have

labored in the vineyards, pruning and cutting, coaxing the grapes into ripeness. Our parched **[End Page 490]** and blistered lips have been braced only by the taste of cool water as the taskmasters carted the barrels away to the cellar. The divide of economics and privilege has grown with each successive harvest.

We did not sit on the sidelines while the immigrants of Europe built America into an industrial giant of the 20th century. It was our labor that provided the capital. It was our labor in the shipyards and the stockyards and the coal mines and the steel mills. Our labor built the roads and the railroads. And our boots were strapped on and our blood left to soak into the soil of places whose names we could not pronounce, against an enemy whose only crime was ideology.

We are tired of bleeding. Our blood has soaked the clay of Georgia red. It ran rivers in Mississippi and Alabama and Virginia and Arkansas and Tennessee and Texas and Florida and Louisiana. Our blood has splattered the sidewalks of Newark and Detroit and Cleveland and Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and Harlem and Chicago. We left our blood in France and Korea and the Philippines and Vietnam, and our only reward has been the deprivation of possibility and the denial of our moral personality.

How long? How long? How long can we maintain our faith in America's willingness to live up to the meaning of its creed?

If the train don't hurry, there's gonna be some walking done.

Are we to subjugate ourselves to the European-American version and vision of the world? Or are we gonna demand equal time, equal vision? We need theater to recreate an image of ourselves as positive and industrious life. If you are the spiritual heritage of Africa, what is the context to which you owe your identity, your life, your struggle? Wherein lies your duty? If theater as art expresses, contains, and is itself a part of that energy which is life, which is fueled by the blood of Africa and has been kept alive on the continent of North America for 386 years in the faces of those who would deny your manners, your mores, and even your humanity, then it is theater and art whose concerns are different than the concerns of European Americans who are distrustful of other sources of vitality . . . even though our fate is inextricably woven together. Those among us who would doubt our self-sufficiency . . . well . . . if you had a door marked "Oblivion at 7 o'clock" . . . there are those who would show up early. The rest of us know that there is no culture that can continue to live if its political destiny is not in its own hands.

I urge you to find your duty. Whatever it is and wherever you find it. As you go through the Festival and look at these creations of Black America, know that blood pours on the page to arrive at these splendors. These remakes of light and love. These ancient echoes of lost speech. The ancestors talking through our mouths, as Baraka says. Blood and the fury, the fire of redemption we have earned these last 386 years. It is all ours. We are the inheritors. The keepers of the flame lit eons ago on another continent. We cannot squander or betray the best hopes of

our parents. Even besieged with travesty set upon us by marauders who have run amuck through our history wreaking havoc on the cities of our fathers. We know all too well the consequences of the failure of our vigilance. We have ample proof of the dire circumstance that accompanies the failure of faith. It is we who are at the crossroads. The defining moment that parallels our future. This is the history that we are making. Each and **[End Page 491]** every day. There are millions of children born and unborn who will travel roads we have hacked out of the underbrush of America's paranoia. It is we who decide whether their tools to a productive life will be meager or sufficient to the prodigious task ahead of them. I urge you to your duty. Wherever you find it. Duty emboldens. Duty inspires. Duty empowers. The time is now. Thank you. The struggle continues.

[August Wilson](#) is author of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running*, and *Seven Guitars*. For his plays, which have been produced at regional theaters across the country as well as on Broadway, he has received numerous awards and fellowships, including Pulitzer Prizes for *Fences* (1987) and *The Piano Lesson* (1990), the Tony Award for *Fences*, New York Drama Critics Circle Awards (for each of his plays), the Whiting Writers Award, Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship, and the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. An alumnus of New Dramatists, he is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. August Wilson lives with his wife and children in Seattle, Washington.

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