



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1993 Volume III: Twentieth-Century Multicultural Theater

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## **The Role of the African\* Playwright as a Griot**

Curriculum Unit 93.03.09  
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### **I. Introduction**

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In accordance with the African oral tradition, the griot is the guardian of his tribe's history. A station prohibited to females, this was a responsibility delegated exclusively to males . . . and then only the son of a griot. However, the role of the griot is significant since it is with him that we mark the beginning of African literary tradition as we know it. The tradition of recording one's perspective of his political, social, economic and physical environment is still very much alive and vibrant.

The intent of this creative writing curriculum is multi-faceted. First, and most obviously, it is designed to hone the writing skills of inner city African, Latino and white high school juniors and seniors. As a creative writing instructor at the Cooperative High School for the Arts and Humanities, I am developing a writing component which encompasses some aspects of African history to meet needs expressed by students themselves. Additionally, this unit of study is structured to enhance the African students' sense of self. It will provide them with an understanding of the evolution of African history on the continent and in the United States as well as influences/impacts on and from cultures abroad. Simultaneously, Latino and white students will be sensitized to the history of the African.

Students will sample and discuss the work of playwrights (past and present) of African descent in the United States in the motherland and abroad. This will be accomplished through reading assignments that will enable students to view the means by which African playwrights universally utilized their craft in order to fulfill their roles as "griots" (guardians of the tribe's history). Students will thereby:

- develop scripts to be submitted to the Yale Dramat competition and also the Drama and Video departments at the Cooperative High School of the Arts and Humanities to be considered for production;
- gain an appreciation for the richness of their history and culture;
- consider the responsibility the playwright has to present positive role models;
- examine the impact of the playwrights' place in society as individuals and how it influenced their work (i.e.: selection of subject matter, theme, characters, etc.);
- come to grips with their obligation to the community as a playwright/griot.

The significance of studying African History, the oldest history on the face of the earth, cannot be stressed enough. The continent, culture and people of Africa have been invaded for an extended period of time on three occasions:

- 1) in 332 BC. East Africa was penetrated by the Greeks;
- 2) the Arabs invaded Eastern Africa in 640 AD.; lastly
- 3) the 15th century marked the onset of European exploitation which continues to beset East, West and South Africa today.

The ramifications of the intervention and imposition of European culture on Africa brought about an all but virtually total omission of the history and contributions made by Africans to the benefit of civilization. The consequences of such a calculated omission has in turn resulted in Diaspora and generations of people of African descent ill-informed of their history. This has produced for them a grossly distorted view of their potential as individuals and as a race. This in itself is justification for focusing on African history as it occurred on the continent and in the West.

This curriculum will examine African history through the work of playwrights of African descent. Focus will be placed on the playwrights' place in society as individuals and members of a particular race. The playwrights' creative response to and observation of the times in which they lived, will provide students with a unique view of history and the Africans' part in it. Additionally, this curriculum will enable students to view the means by which these playwrights utilized their craft in order to fulfill their roles as griots.

Discussion pertaining to the African playwrights' dilemma to write for his peers or to be universal, as raised by Harold Cruse, in his book "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual" will take place. Reading assignments and exercises will be developed which will touch upon the early works of selected playwrights from Africa, and the United States. Discussions and review of the function of the playwright/griot as:

- spokesperson
- observer
- historian
- designer of standards, values
- and direction of society
- conscience of society or group
- reporter

are pivotal.

Equally pertinent are discussions about particularly significant time periods and the manner in which they were “recorded” by a specific playwright. For example, when examining the Harlem Renaissance it is imperative to examine the work of contemporary an African playwright from that era. This would allow students to gain a sense of the playwright’s observation of life in American during the 1920’s.

Reading assignments will be utilized to provide examples of writings of the period and as a springboard for the classroom exercises which will follow. The first reading assignment will be concerned with a work of indigenous+ African drama. It is not, however, a ‘play’ in the European sense of the word. Instead, it will be a section from “Indaba, My Children” by Vusumuzulu Credo Mutwa. The oral history of the Bantu of South Africa, this particular work is an excellent example of the narratives from which indigenous African drama has evolved. Additionally, it will provide an excellent segue in to the next topic: Slavery in the United States.

William Wells Brown’s play “Escape: A Leap for Freedom” will be examined 1) not merely for its significance as the first play (written in 1858) by an author of African descent in America but, 2) as an elegant protest piece that decries slavery. Langston Hughes’ history play “Don’t You Want to Be Free?” traces the history of the African from his roots in Africa to the Civil Rights Movement of the 60’s. This work, by one of the country’s most outstanding African writers, is an excellent example of the playwright as a griot. It provides one playwright’s perception of the political attitudes prevalent during the Harlem Renaissance; examines the place of people of African descent (politically, socially, economically, etc.) in America during that period, as well as presenting an example of the extraordinary work that was developed during the Harlem Renaissance.

Discussions pertaining to the cultural, historical, social and political significance of each of these particular time periods will take place. A review of the playwright as an individual will also be initiated. Writing exercises designed to provide students with the basics of play writing will be introduced. It is the intent that these exercises will familiarize students with: basic information about structure and format of a play; stage direction; dialogues, etc.

This curriculum is designed to cover an eight week time frame with two weeks allotted for each the three designated periods in history, the final two weeks will be spent writing a one act play. The curriculum will include no more than three playwrights (one from each of the aforementioned periods). Additionally, it shall include an overview of the literary political and social conditions, contributions and history of people of African descent within each time frame noted above.

Students will be provided the various scripts and/or scenes from the aforementioned works to be read and utilized in class. These assignments will be given in chronological order and will focus on a script or scene by an African playwright from each of the following time periods: Antiquity, Slavery and The Harlem Renaissance.

## **II. Antiquity-Indigenous African Theater**

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### **A. Overview**

The concept that African theater began with “A Raisin in the Sun” by Lorraine Hansberry is not uncommon. Equally prevalent is the belief that if by chance anything did precede the aforementioned, it is of little

consequence. Both lines of thought are fallacies, to say the least.

It is quite possible to trace indigenous African drama all the way to antiquity. Despite conscious endeavors to disengage the historical bonds which exist between Africa and Egypt it remains indisputable that: "Egypt is African not only in geographic and linguistic terms but in a cultural and literary sense as well. The southern half of the country in the Upper Nile moreover is Nubian or Sudanese and therefore black." <sup>1</sup> For this reason the African claim to the world's oldest rituals ("the Memphite dramas and the birth and death of Osiris" <sup>2</sup>) as part of the rich African culture is just as valid as the claim on Greek mythology by Caucasians in the West.

At this juncture, in order to facilitate a meaningful discussion pertaining to indigenous African drama I feel it would be beneficial to examine the definition of the term "drama". To accomplish this objective students will be instructed to look the word up in the dictionary, record their findings and be prepared to discuss them in class. They will find that 'drama' according to Webster is defined as follows:

drama: 1) A literary composition that tells a story usually representing human conflict by means of dialogue and action to be performed upon the stage; a play. 2) Stage representations collectively; the art or profession of writing, acting or producing plays; the institution of the theater. 3) A series of actions, events or purposes considered collectively as possessing dramatic quality.

Keeping these definitions in mind the next step will be to consider some essential factors concerning indigenous African drama. For instance, much of Africa's indigenous drama evolved out of an oral tradition, long before many African societies had developed a written alphabet. Therefore, few indigenous African dramas were recorded in writing; instead they were passed down for generations by word of mouth. This was often the responsibility of designated individuals (griots), or groups (religious sects). There are a few examples of indigenous African drama which appear in published form; among them are two brief comic sketches one of which is "The 'Koteba' of Bamako" by Claude Meillasoux that appears in Volume No. 24 (pgs. 38-53) of "Presence Africaine " (English ed., 1964). <sup>3</sup>

Often in indigenous drama the identity of the performers is often secret. Attempts at concealing the performers' identity, sometimes include such measures as utilization of ornate and often cumbersome masks, and the use of "sotto voce" <sup>4</sup>, voice disguiser or bull rush to disguise the voice. These devices however, often obscure the actor's voice to such a degree that it is necessary for an 'assistant' to 'interpret' the speaker's words for the audience. This practice has in part resulted in the utilization of meager amounts of dialogue (by European standards) during the performances. Considering these factors Webster's first definition of drama is only partially applicable to this discussion.

Likewise, even if one defines a 'stage' in the most liberal fashion, that is, as a specific area reserved for the performers only, Webster's second definition (like the first) falls short of adequately defining indigenous African drama. In indigenous African drama the performers are readily accessible to the audience. Clad in elaborate costumes which expose only their hands and feet, these troubadours, instead of performing on a stage or within the confines of a designated area, usually move among the spectators dancing, singing, reciting poetry, narratives, etc., throughout the entire kraal (village).

Contrary to European theater the role of the audience in indigenous African drama is that of active participants. The performances are often quite intricate. Preparations required to produce a single production may sometimes take years to complete. For example, "the Ekong society of the Ibibio of southeast Nigeria have a performance . . . that required rehearsals that were conducted for several hours in a village square on

a specific day of each eight day week for forty-six weeks of every year for six years, in order to develop a seven hour routine.”<sup>5</sup> Bearing this in mind, I am sure it will come as no surprise that performers are highly disciplined and undergo rigorous training, sometimes beginning at childhood.

This is especially true in the case of the griot, who must memorize the entire history of the tribe verbatim. “. . . These people are told the history of the Tribes, under oath never to alter, add or subtract any word. Anyone who so much as thought of changing any of the stories of his tribe that he had been told fell immediately under a High Curse which covered him, his children and his children’s children. These tribal story tellers [griots] were called [by the Bantu] Guardians of the Umlando or Tribal History.”<sup>6</sup>

The griot recounts the tribal history as dramatically as possible, sometimes acting out the roles of all the characters. On occasions some tribes add performers who act-out the griot’s story as he narrates. “In the Congo, the Balaoga perform an epic in which a ‘singer’s’ narration is acted out in mimes. Much of the same can be found among the Ijaw of Southeastern Nigeria and the Ashanti of Ghana . . .”<sup>7</sup>

Webster’s third definition of drama encompasses the essence of indigenous African drama with all of its nuances and idiosyncrasies. Indigenous African drama like any art form in any given society is influenced by the perception of the world held by the community as well as the artist. Western societies “hold fast to the logic of cause and effect. Traditional societies on the other hand, perceive a logic of congruity between men, animals and seasonal cycles. The result of which are ordered relationships projected on to the universe.”<sup>8</sup> Because it seldom manifests qualities fundamental to European theater, indigenous African theater has been frequently misinterpreted, unidentified, disregarded, discounted or ignored. However, as an outgrowth of story-telling (praise songs of chiefs, heroes [real and spiritual], ancestors, and warriors), oral narratives (which include the tribes oral history or celebrate great hunts and battles), and religious rituals (the primary source of the African world view), indigenous African drama clearly reflected the African’s dynamic perception of the world/life. For the African: life is drama. Drama is life; it is interwoven throughout every aspect of the African’s existence and experience.

In indigenous African societies no distinction is made between ritual and drama. They are usually presented as a part of a religious festival or for some domestic celebration such as a marriage, birth, death, accession to adulthood, etc. Mythology suggests that the spirits and or ancestors created the performance and simply permit people to imitate them. Additionally, it implies that the performances are not presented for the entertainment of mere mortals but possibly to entertain and/or appease the spirits and/or ancestors. Nonetheless, “performers are considered the guardians of community values, historians (griots) sometimes acting out historical events.”<sup>9</sup> The performers who are one of the vehicles through which the history of the tribe is depicted and kept ever alive.

## **B. Reading Assignments:**

### **“Indaba, My Children” by Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa**

#### *1. Prologue & Introduction*

#### *2. Cast of Characters*

When the woman he’d hoped to marry was shot to death in March 1960, by the police during the massacre at Sharpeville, South Africa, Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa was moved to take a ‘Chief’s Blood Oath’. He swore to tell the world the real story of the Bantu people. In effort to fulfill his oath Mutwa set out to make the oral history

of his people widely accessible. The result was “Indaba, My Children.” By writing this book, it is noted in the preface, “according to tribal laws he [Mutwa] has become a traitor to his people . . . an outcast.” However, the world is richer for his sacrifice.

Students will first be provided copies of the prologue and introduction which will be read aloud and discussed in class. I have decided to utilize these two vehicles because they discuss the manner in which the oral history is usually disseminated, supply biographical information about the author and refer to the historical and socio-political influences which inspired Mutwa to undertake this project. The cast of characters (which in itself is six pages long) will be provided to help students to come to grips with the griot’s enormous responsibility and also to allow them to get some idea of how the characters are inter-related. It will moreover be utilized to facilitate explanations regarding certain social customs prior to reading the primary material. For example: when reviewing the cast of characters it is evident that Lumbedu (a witch doctor) has four wives. This could very easily lead to a lively discussion about the practice of polygamy. Also, the role of the Tribal Avengers in comparison to that of law enforcement officials as we know them today will provide for rich discussion.

To ensure that students get a realistic perspective of African culture a representative from the Yale African Studies Center will be invited to speak to the class. Once they have been immersed in the ‘experience’ (by the end of the first week) they will be given a chapter from “Indaba, My Children” to read as homework over the weekend.

### 3. *“The Coming of the Strange Ones”*

The selection from “Indaba, My Children” that I have chosen for my students to read is entitled “The Coming of the Strange Ones”. Approximately 30 pages in length, this chapter is “the story of the Lost Phoenician Empire in Southern Africa.”<sup>10</sup> In the introduction to this story Mutwa states: “Badly rusted and crumbing swords of ancient Greek manufacture, old gold coins and parts of bronze shields and helmets, bronze spears and Egyptian battle axes, all of which are in the secret possession of witch doctors throughout Southern Africa, confirm the truth of the story.”<sup>11</sup>

## **C. Exercises**

### 1. *Characterization*

In addition to the reading assignment students will be instructed to select any character of their choosing from the excerpt and write a character sketch. They will be asked to pretend this is character is someone they just met and are attempting to describe them to one of their ‘old’ friends. To help them in the visualization process it will be suggested that they think about the character’s physical appearance, their facial features, height, weight, age, etc. Additionally they will be asked to consider how the character behaves to determine their personality traits. For example:

- Are they bossy? cruel? sneaky? trust worthy? smart? etc.
- What was it about their behavior that made you reach this conclusion?
- If you could hear the sound of their voice what would it sound like?
- Do you know anyone who reminds you of this character?
- Is this character in any way similar to you? How?

Each student will share their completed character sketch with the class.

## 2. Building Dialogue

“Indaba, My Children” is rich with dialogue. However, much of the dialogue is stilted and formal. Nevertheless, it is ideal for the purpose of adaptation. Already divided into sections much like the scenes of a play, it can easily be divided among the students who can be assigned to work either individually or in pairs to “rewrite” the dialogue. The previous character sketches will prove to be of assistance to students for this exercise. First, the students will be asked to consider the personality type of the character[s] whose conversation they will be adapting. They will then be instructed to place themselves in the character’s “shoes” as it were, and imagine how they would react if they found themselves in the position the character is now in. What words would they say? Would they remember to be courteous? Would they just blurt out the words without thinking? Would they take their time to get to the point? Or would they avoid “beating around the bush” and get directly to the point? It will also be suggested that they consider the character’s actions when writing their dialogue.

## II. Slavery in the United States A. Overview

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Once slavery reared its ugly head, the existence of the African became consigned to that of chattel. Only their spirit, their indomitable will . . . nay their determination to survive remained. This alone was the African’s only recourse, their only hope of maintaining some semblance of self. Once locked into the grasp of the American slave system the African was not merely denied access to his independence, history, culture, religion, language and dignity but he was robbed of his identity as well.

One of the primary tenets of the American slave system was to keep the African ignorant at all costs. “If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now . . . if you teach that nigger . . . how to read there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable and of no value to his master as to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.”<sup>12</sup> To be discovered teaching a slave to read was punishable by law. In some locations to educate a slave was considered such a serious offense that the penalty for being found guilty of such behavior could be as severe as death. So intent was the desire to keep Africans ignorant that in some southern states (such as Georgia) it was against the law to teach a free African to read and write. “A white man is liable to a fine of five hundred dollars and imprisonment . . . for teaching a free negro to read and write; and if one free negro teach another, he is punishable by fine and whipping; or fine or whipping.”<sup>13</sup> Such was the environment from which William Wells Brown emerged and that he recorded for posterity in his play “Escape: A Leap for Freedom.”

I believe it is important to impress upon the students that one of the methods utilized to maintained the African’s status as a slave was to withhold education. This is a good opportunity to discuss with them how important it is for them to get an education so that they may be a productive, self-reliant member of society as opposed to being dependent and vulnerable to it.

### B. Reading Assignment

## **“Escape: A Leap for Freedom” by William Wells Brown**

A victim of the American slave system, Brown states in the preface of “Escape”: “The play, no doubt abounds in defects, but as I was born in slavery, and never had a day’s schooling in my life, I owe the public no apology for errors.” *Escape*, is unmistakably autobiographical. The parallels between Brown’s “own experience of eighteen years at South,”<sup>14</sup> and the characters and incidents in the play are shamelessly obvious. For example: Brown was born a slave near Lexington, Kentucky on the plantation of John Young, a physician. Conceived as the result of a union between his mother (a mulatto slave) and a relative of his master it is safe to assume that he was particularly sensitive to the conditions which African females were subjected to under slavery. Like the characters of Glen and Melinda, Brown “was a house servant. He also worked as an apprentice to . . . the editor of the *St. Louis Times* [which no doubt enabled him to develop his writing skill]; . . . and assistant in Young’s medical office; and as a factotum to . . . a Missouri slave trader, whom he accompanied occasionally to the New Orleans flesh markets.”<sup>15</sup> The experience he gained from the latter was conceivably drawn upon when he developed the character of Bill Jennings, a slave speculator, for his play. To go even one step further, I don’t think it would be too farfetched to assume that he put together information he acquired on his “excursions” with the slave trader to plan his escapes. It was not until his third attempt that he successfully escaped the grips of bondage. Each time that he failed and was recaptured Brown was severely punished. “His first recapture resulted in “Virginia play,” a punishment in which the slave was tied in the smokehouse, flogged, then smoked by setting piles of tobacco stems afire. After the slave had coughed his lungs out, he was untied and sent back to work.”<sup>16</sup>

The work of a true griot, “*Escape*” is not just a condemnation of slavery but, a record of a portion of Brown’s personal history. The very climax of the play is a battle between the escaped slaves and their pursuers which ends with a frantic leap into a boat as it sets sail for freedom. This scene is a re-enactment of an actual fight waged between Brown and friends in Buffalo, who fought authorities to keep them from capturing fugitive slaves.

The play is great fun to read aloud in class. Students are very receptive to it (I would imagine this is partly due to the Brown’s use of dialect which is not quite as difficult to ‘translate’ as Paul Lurance Dunbar’s can be). The approximately 26 roles may be distributed quite easily among students with roles suitable for varying reading skills. Because some of the characters only appear once in the play, students may be requested to play more than one role if necessary without any confusion at all. However, you should be forewarned that some of the soliloquies of Melinda and Glen tend to be slightly stiff (bordering on lofty). Reading their particular monologues could be an excruciatingly painful experience for all concerned if assigned to students who have limited reading abilities.

### **C. Exercises.**

#### *1. Stage Directions*

To facilitate discussion of stage directions provide students with a copy of the diagram marked Appendix A (see attached) and a list of basic Theater Terms which you can compile yourself using a theater or literary dictionary. Often a glossary can be found in the back of various drama reference books (see bibliography). Discuss both the terms and stage directions with students in depth. To assist them in grasping the concepts of stage right, left etc., suggest that they visualize the action from the perspective of the actor on stage facing the audience. Once the basic stage directions have been discussed, take slips of paper, on which you should have previously written stage directions, for example:



Enter stage left, move to center stage take a bow, exit stage left . . . . .

The paper should then be folded and placed in a box, hat, etc. Designate an area in the room to be ‘the stage’. Select students one at a time to select a slip of paper from the hat and follow the directions that appear on the paper. After each actor completes his assignment ask the class to tell you what stage directions the actor has been following.

## 2. *Blocking*

Pass out copies of blank stage diagrams marked Appendix B (see attached). Ask students to select a scene in which their character appeared and using symbols (i.e. x’s; o’s; etc.) and colored pencils indicate the stage directions for all the characters in the scene entrances, exits and so on. See sample identified as Appendix C. Tell students to include a key and indicate any props or sets that they feel would be appropriate.

Once the students have completed this exercise instruct them to write out all applicable stage directions for each character in the scene. Ask them to make the directions as explicit as possible so the reader can clearly envision the picture they are relating.

## **IV. (1920-39) The Harlem Renaissance**

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### **A. Overview**

By the year 1919 World War I was over. The country was experiencing the Great Migration. Africans were abandoning the South in droves and heading North in search of a better way. Seventy-four [Africans] were lynched <sup>17</sup> that year. Riots broke out in twenty-five <sup>18</sup> cities across America and the summer of 1919 was dubbed the Red Summer. The Liberator Magazine published a poem by Claude McKay entitled “If We Must Die” and the sprouts of the Harlem Renaissance were planted.

Germinated in Harlem, New York the “cultural capital of the black world,” <sup>19</sup> the Harlem Renaissance was cultivated by conditions which would traverse cultural, social, political, racial and economic areas, all of which were nurtured by an air of self-awareness, pride and the determination of the Africans as a whole. The artists, musicians and writers of this era were bound and determined to interpret and record the stories of their lives, their people, their history, their observations and experiences on their own terms and without apology to anyone. Langston Hughes expressed these feelings quite well. In an article titled “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” published in the “Nation” in 1926 Hughes wrote:

“We Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame . . . We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.” <sup>20</sup>

It was a time when Africans began to affirm their blackness; explore their uniqueness and individuality; take pride in their heritage and race; revel in their independence and demand their rights as human beings.

The Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded by Marcus Garvey, provided the Africans with never before explored options (even though short-lived) and reinforced their self-esteem. Garvey extolled everything

black. He did not believe the African could ever receive true freedom or justice in America. Thus, he urged they return to the motherland . . . Africa. In addition, to a private army Garvey set up cooperatives and organized factories. He also proposed the development of the Black Star Line, a commercial steamship company whose primary objective would be to carry the lost children of Africa back home. However, before he could implement his plan, Garvey was arrested for mail fraud, thrown into federal prison and eventually deported to Jamaica (his place of birth). He died 1940 in London. However, the impact he had on the Harlem Renaissance must be acknowledged.

Even if the artists, writers and etc. were not in total agreement with Garvey's philosophy he offered them something to think about and they did. Which is evidenced by the fact that much of their work reflected a glance back to their roots—to Africa.

The energy and creativity of the Harlem Renaissance spilled over into the dominant society. "It was a period when the [African] was in vogue." <sup>21</sup> As interest (or should I say fascination) with the Harlem Renaissance grew among whites, the African artists gained easier access to publishers and other powerful devotees of the arts. Some found patrons who provided them with financial support. While this support, in most instances, was meager it did enable the recipients to live in relative comfort while pursuing their craft. Occasionally, the sponsors felt their financial support afforded them the right to impose their opinions on the artist. Such a mistaken assumption usually brought about a swift parting of the ways.

One of the Harlem Renaissance writers to be the beneficiary of a patron was Langston Hughes. His patroness (who identified herself as "godmother" when she wrote <sup>22</sup> and Hughes refused to name) was generous. She lavished him with fine food; expensive paper; and a chauffeur driven limousine as well as monetary assistance. However, Hughes abruptly ended the arrangement when it became apparent that she expected him to write according to her guidelines.

Born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902, Hughes first came to Harlem in 1926 in route to Lincoln University. But he belonged to Harlem long before that. In 1921 his poem "The Negro Speaks Of Rivers" was published in the Crisis magazine. Hughes would travel to Harlem on weekends while he was attending Lincoln University. Once he matriculated in 1929 he took up residence in Harlem where he remained for nearly 40 years. Hughes was one of the pivotal components among the talented gentry which comprised the Harlem Renaissance. His first book (a collection of poetry) entitled "The Weary Blues" was published in 1926. An extraordinary and prolific writer, Hughes wrote in every conceivable genre.

The list of his compositions from 1929 until his death in 1967 was remarkable in its quantity and quality as well as variety. A comprehensive list of his work may be found in "A Bio-Bibliography of Langston Hughes, 1902-1967" by D.C. Dickinson published by Archon Books (Hamden, CT.) in 1967. Most often noted for his prowess as a poet, his plays were his most important and favorite endeavors.

## **B. Reading Assignment**

### **"Don't You Want To Be Free?" by Langston Hughes**

Among the lesser known plays by Langston Hughes is "Don't You Want To Be Free?" Written in 1938, this history play has manifold significance. Subtitled "Don't You Want To Be Free? From Slavery Through The Blues to Now—And Then Some! With Singing, Music and Dancing," the play was written for the Harlem Suitcase Theater which he founded the same year. "Don't You Want To Be Free?" is an agitprop play styled after the plays he saw during a 15 month stay in Russia from 1932 to 1933. "The theater that fascinated me most of all

was Oklopkov's Drasni Presnia, the most advanced in production styles of any playhouse I have ever seen. Arena staging was the least novel of its innovations . . . From the young Oklopkov and the older Meyerhold . . . I acquired a number of interesting ways of staging plays, some of which I later utilized in my own Negro history play, "Don't You Want To Be Free?" done in Harlem without a stage, curtains, or sets." <sup>23</sup>

According to Hughes, "Don't You Want To Be Free?" was performed 135 times in 1937-38, and held the record for a Harlem run of any play." <sup>24</sup> . Like the majority of his scripts the primary impetus of "Don't You Want To Be Free?" was that of "affirmation rather than reaction—a desire to give voice to the ordinary [Africans]." <sup>25</sup> The play requires no set and few props. The foundation of the play is built around Hughes poetry, the bulk of which was gathered from two previous published collections "The Weary Blues" (1926); and "Fine Clothes to the Jew" (1927). In this particular work he "recreates the traditional relationship between the . . . storytellers [i.e. griot] and their listeners" <sup>26</sup> a prerequisite of indigenous African theater. "Don't You Want To Be Free?" enabled Hughes to articulate the aggregate voice of the African. Likewise, he succeeded in translating the African reality onto the stage. "Don't You Want To Be Free?" turned out to be the archetype of many of the plays Hughes would write over the next fifteen years. A classic example of a work which takes on a life of its own, "Don't You Want To Be Free?" was revised on a number of occasions between 1938 and 1963. The unique purpose for the revisions was to record developments in African history as they transpired over the years. For this reason "Don't You Want To Be Free?" is an exceptionally fine example of the playwright as a griot. Thus, my reason for opting to use this particular work by an outstanding contributor to the Harlem Renaissance, despite the fact that the play was written a few years later. The content of the play can best be described by the opening speech given by a Young Man:

Young Man:

Listen folks! We're going to put on a show . . . Now, I'll tell you what this show is about. It's about me, except that it's not just about me now standing here talking to you. It's about me yesterday and about me tomorrow. I'm colored, I guess you can see that. Well this show is a about what it means to be colored in America." <sup>27</sup>

The hour long play, while about being an African in America, additionally touches upon the connections to Africa prior to the commencement of slavery. The concept of 'everyman' permeates the play even with regard to the characters who are identified as: A Young Man; A Boy; A Girl; A Woman; A man etc. The only version that I was able to locate in published form was the original 1938 version (see bibliography). While this remains a powerful version, some critics tend to feel it is weaker than the renditions which followed "because he stopped expressing his political and social beliefs in a overtly Marxist fashion." <sup>28</sup>

The revisions made in 1944 speaks to the restriction of Africans from the factories; segregated units in the armed forces and the manner in which such practices hindered the war effort. In 1946, the conclusion of the play was revised. In lieu of the Africans participation in the war effort, Hughes wrote a plea that equal rights be granted to all. The 1952 version depicted the Harlem riots, and contains a conversation pertaining to the number of Africans who died fighting for the U.S. overseas and in the riots at home. This exchange takes place, oddly enough, between The Young Man (a black character) and a Dixicrat. The alliance between African and white workers which Hughes presented in earlier versions is deleted at this time. Instead a focus is placed on the repressive political climate. Hughes also takes a stand for integration with this particular revision.

The final revision was made in 1963 in “conjunction with the Centennial of the Emancipation.”<sup>29</sup> One minor change seems to have been made to the script at this time. When an audience member queries of The Young Man what to do, the character suggests the NAACP or CORE. Having located and secured a copy of the original 1963 manuscript from the Bienecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, I have opted to allocate this version to my students as a reading assignment. The decision to use this version was made because I felt my students could identify with references to Malcolm and Martin, etc., and also because it includes such additions as: production notes; casting notes; music cues; costumes notes; sound and light effects as well as sheet music which is not available in the published version of 1938. A copy of the 1963 version will be available at the Yale New Haven Teacher Institute office for interested teachers.

### **C. Exercises**

1. Review previous lessons. Make sure students are comfortable with them. Then ask them to complete the following tasks:

A. Instruct students to think of a problem, issue, situation, misunderstanding or conflict which could be the basis of a plot for play. Tell them to write their idea down on a piece of paper (keeping in mind that the conflict does not have to be negative). To assist with that particular concept give them examples such as: which date to take to the prom? Should you go to your football award dinner or to your Grandmothers birthday celebration? You are informed that you will soon have a new baby brother or sister? You have just invented a device that will render non-existent every military device in the world, do you use it immediately or wait and see if the world can police itself. State the plot (conflict/problem) in one sentence.

B. Who are the characters who will struggle to fix or solve the conflict/problem? Describe the physical attributes and personality of each in one paragraph.

C. Write a scene in which the characters discover there is a conflict/problem.

D. Why do they want to resolve the problem/conflict? How are your characters effected by this conflict/problem?

E. What means do they use to resolve the problem/conflict?

F. Write a scene in which the problem has at long last been resolved.

2. Final product a one act play will be completed in the last two weeks of the semester.

## Terminology

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Apron—that part of the stage which projects beyond the curtain line

Blocking—the movement on stage by actors according to the stage directions in the script or as determined by the director

Character—the individuals in the play portrayed by the actors

Conflict—the force that makes the play move from beginning to end. It is the issue or problem that must be solved, resolved or rectified. Once this happens the play ends. The story is over because after all it was the reason there was a story.

Dialogue—lines in a play written by the playwright and spoken by the actors

Down stage (DS)—that end of the stage closest to the audience

Left stage—that part of the stage which is to the actor's left when he is on stage and facing the audience

Monologue—a long speech that is given by one actor without interruption . . . sometimes it is referred to as a soliloquy

Narrator—person in the play who explains either what is going on, what is going to happen or both.

Plot—the story which the play is about

Right stage—that part of the stage which is to the actor's right when he is on stage and facing the audience

Set—the scenery

Setting—the make-believe place where the play takes place (for example: Never-Never-Land in Peter Pan)

Stage Whisper—occurs when an actor speaks and is clearly heard by the audience but his words go unnoticed by the other actors on stage

Up stage (US)—the end of the stage farthest away from the audience.

Appendix A

(figure available in print form)

Appendix B

(figure available in print form)

Appendix C

(figure available in print form)

## Notes

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\*The term African is utilized throughout this paper in lieu of black, Afro-American or African-American. It is intended to encompass all people whose biological ancestry may be traced to Africa.

+Please note that the term “indigenous” will be utilized throughout this paper in lieu of “traditional”, because the indigenous African culture is very much alive and vibrant in the motherland. To utilize the term “traditional” would imply that this particular form of drama has become stagnant, lost to the evolution of time and intervention of contemporary living which is not at all the case.

1. Alan Lomax and Raoul Abdul, eds, “3000 Years of Black Poetry,” 42.

2. Leo Hamalian and James V. Hatch, eds, “The Roots of African American Drama: An Anthology of Early Plays, 1853-1938,” 16.

3. Anthony Graham-White, “The Drama of Black Africa,” 11.

4. Ibid. 29.

5. Ibid. 35.

6. Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa, “Indaba My Children,” vii.

7. Anthony Graham-White, “The Drama of Black Africa,” 27.

8 Ibid. 15.

9. Ibid. 34.

10. Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa, “Indaba My Children,” 48.

11. Ibid. 48.

12. Frederick Douglas, “The Life and Times of Frederick Douglas” 70.

13. Helen Tunnicliff Caterall, “Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro,” 33.

14. William Wells Brown, “The Escape: A Leap For Freedom,” (Preface)

15. Leo Hamalian and James V. Hatch, eds, “The Roots of African American Drama: An Anthology of Early Plays, 1858-1938,” 38.

16. James V. Hatch and Ted Shine, eds, “Black Theater, U.S.A. Forty-Five Plays By Black Americans 1847-1974,” 34.

17. Thomas R. Frazier, “Afro-American History: Primary Sources,” 261.

18. Arna Bontemps, “The Harlem Renaissance Remembered,” 31.

19. Genevieve Fabre, “Drumbeats, Masks & Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theater,” 8.

20. Arna Bontemps, “The Harlem Renaissance Remembered,” 276-77.

21. Ibid. 91.

22. Ibid. 23.

23. Leslie Catherine Saunders, “The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves,” 97

24. Langston Hughes, “Don’t You Want to Be Free?” (Centennial Version. Revised 1963). Preface.

25. Saunders, Leslie Catherine, “The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves,” 63

26. Ibid. 25.

27. Langston Hughes, "Don't You Want to Be Free?" (Centennial Version. Revised 1963), 1.
28. Leslie Catherine Saunders, "The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves, ??"
29. Langston Hughes, "Don't You Want to Be Free?" (Centennial Version.) Revised 1963), Title Page.

## Suggested Reading for Students

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Brown, William Wells. "Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom: A Drama, in Five Acts." Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1858. The first play written by an African in America. A protest piece, it was used by abolitionist in their efforts to end slavery.

Hughes, Langston. "Don't You Want to be Free?\*" James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library Yale University. 1938. Revised 1963. A history play.

Lamb, Wendy. ed. "Sparks in the Park and Other Plays From the 1987 and 1988 Foundations of the Dramatists Guild Young Playwrights Festivals." New York, Laurel Leaf Books, 1989. Anthology of award winning plays written by teenagers.

Mutwa, Vusamazulu Credo. "Indaba, My Children." London, Stanmore Press, 1966. The oral history of the Bantu of South Africa as recorded by Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa a "Guardian of the Umalando or Tribal History."

\*\*If unavailable see annotated bibliography to locate published copy of 1938 version.

## Annotated Bibliography

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Abramson, Doris E. "Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre 1925-1959." New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1969. A review of African Theater in America from 1925 through 1959. "The first attempt to examine African plays/playwrights in a social as well as artistic content." Includes a brief look at works by Africans in the U.S. as early as 1858.

Bond, Frederick W. "The Negro and the Drama." Washington, D.C.: McGrath Publishing, Co, 1940. An overview of African Contributions to drama from slavery to Federal Theater.

Bontemps, Arna. "The Harlem Renaissance Remembered." New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1972. Bontemps looks at the Harlem Renaissance in hindsight. Considers its accomplishment and shortcomings . . . included are observations of its contributors and catalysts.

Brown, William Wells. "Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom: A Drama, in Five Acts." Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1858. The first play written by an African in the U.S. A protest piece it was used by abolitionist in their efforts to end slavery.

Cantron, Louis E. "The Directors Vision: Play Direction From Analysis to Production." Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co.: 1989. Textbook used in directors course informs students of the basic skills and responsibilities of a director.

Catteral, Helen Tunnicliff, ed. "Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro Vol. 3. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1932. Presents cases pertaining to the slave trade and slavery "from the Courts of Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana."

Douglass, Frederick. "The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass." Hartford, CT.: Park Publishing, Co. 1881. The autobiography of a runaway Slave, Frederick Douglass, which was praised by abolitionists of his era.

Fabre, Genevieve. "Drumbeats, Masks and Metaphor: Comtemporary Afro-American Theater." Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983. This book considers the premise that " . . . black theater is above all a socio-cultural phenomenon" and sets out to examine it as just that. It considers "theatrical production by blacks that serves as a tool for research into ethnic identity and the most appropriate means to express it." Fabre looks at the ties to tradition, the militancy of black theater of the 1960's and its



precursors.

Frazier, Thomas R., ed. "Afro-American History: Primary Sources." New York: Harcourt Brace & World, Inc., 1970. This book is intended to serve as an introduction to the history of Afro-Americans through the use of historical documents that originated in the black community. . . . The material is arranged chronologically in fourteen sections . . . from the colonial period to present [1970]."

Graham-White, Anthony. "The Drama of Black Africa." New York: Samuel French, Inc. , 1974. Provides historical information and critique of West African Theater. Graham's survey includes traditional drama, drama of the Colonial Period, drama seeking independence, the works of Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark, etc.

Hamalian, Leo and James V. Hatch, eds. "The Roots of African American Drama: An Anthology of Early Plays, 1858-1938." Detroit: Wayne State University Press. 1991. Collection of 13 plays by Africans in the U.S. "Five of the thirteen plays published here have never been in print, and only three others are presently available anywhere. Includes "Escape: or A Leap for Freedom."

Hatch, James V. and Ted Shine, eds. "Black Theater U.S.A. Forty-Five Plays: 1847-1974." New York: Free Press, 1974. Collection of plays written by Africans. Includes: "Escape: or A Leap for Freedom" by William Wells Brown (1847); "Don't You Want to Be Free?;" by Langston Hughes (1938); "Amen Corner" by James Baldwin (1954); "Day of Absence" by Douglas Turner Ward (1965); and others. Brief biographical sketch and/or synopsis of the play precedes each work.

Hughes, Langston. "Don't You Want to be Free?" (Centennial Version.) James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, 1938. Revised 1963.

Huggins, Nathan Irvin. "Harlem Renaissance." New York: Oxford University Press, 1971. Overview of the Harlem Renaissance includes examination of the visual artists: painters, sculptors, etc.; as well as writers. Black and white photos are illuminating, as are examples of the poetry of the era.

Judy, Susan and Stephen. "Putting on a Play: A Guide to Writing and Producing Neighborhood Drama." New York: Charles Scribner's & Son's, 1982. Includes writing exercises, theater games, ideas for plays and glossary. Designed primarily for younger children, a good many of the ideas presented here may be adapted for high school children by using a little imagination. For instance the exercises may be adapted and utilized to teach teens how to write for younger children.

Lamb, Wendy, ed. "Sparks in the Park and Other Plays From the 1987 and 1988 Foundations of the Dramatists Guild Young Playwrights Festivals. New York: Laurel Leaf Books, 1989. Anthology of award winning plays written by teenagers.

Lomax, Alan and Raoul Abdul., eds. "3000 Years of Black Poetry. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, Inc. 1970. Anthology of works by Africans spanning the first work ("The Hymn to the Sun")written by an individual of African descent (Pharaoh Akhenaton) in 1372 B.C. through 1960. Includes representative work of Gwendolyn Brooks, Jean Toomer, Aime Cesaire, Phyllis Wheatley, Leopold Senghor, Wole Soyinka, Alexander Puskin, Alexandre Dumas Fils, etc.

Mayfield, William. "Playwriting for Black Theater." Pittsburgh: Wm. Mayfield, c1985. "This book is written by a black playwright to explore this unique process in black theater . . . may be used as a supplement in the analysis of published black plays, and in the creation of your own . . ."

Mutwa, Vusamazulu Credo. Indaba, My Children. London: Stanmore Press, 1966. The oral history of the Bantu of South Africa as recorded by Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa a "Guardian of the Umalando or Tribal History.

Rampersad, Arnold. Life of Langston Hughes (Vol. II). New York: Oxford University Press, 1986-1988. Biography of Langston Hughes from February 1, 1941 (his 39th birthday) to May 25,1967 when he was cremated at the Ferncliff Crematory in Hartsdale, New York. Includes photos, excerpts of personal correspondence and examples of his poetry and lyrics as well as references to his plays,

articles etc.

Sanders, Leslie Catherine. "The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves." Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988. A study of the development of black theater in America, it "approaches the history of black theater as the process of creating a black stage reality, of freeing black figures of their metaphoric burden and making ground on which they stand their own". Sanders looks at such pioneers and playwrights as Willis Richardson and Randolph Edmonds, Langston Hughes, LeRoi Jones and Ed Bullins.

Schoener, Allon. ed. "Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America 1900-1968." New York: Random House, 1968. This book, the outgrowth of the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition of the same name, "documents the struggle to establish a urban black culture in the midst of our twentieth-century industrialized society", through the use of photographs and newspaper clippings.

Scott, A.F. "Current Literary Terms: A Concise Dictionary of their Origin and Use." New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979 Dictionary of common literary terms, including theatrical terminology.

Sklar, Daniel Judah. "Playmaking: Children Writing & Performing their Own Plays." New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1991. A handbook for teachers of grades 4-12. This book contains classroom lessons which may be used "as a drama unit or integrated into English or social studies . . . it is a carefully developed and rigorously tested technique for kids writing . . . their own plays."

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