

## A REFLECTION ON THE SIMILARITIES OF THE BLACK THEATER MOVEMENT IN THE USA AND IN SOUTH AFRICA



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The Civil Rights Movement and the several peaceful marches by Blacks to demand their rights both in the U.S.A. and in South Africa greatly contributed to the dawn of a the Black Arts Movement. The artists of this Movement realized the richness of African and African American cultural richness firmly embedded in their oral traditions and founded the bases for the creation of a new aesthetics which I have labelled as the Aesthetics of Self-Affirmation.<sup>1</sup> The artists of the Black Theater Movement were committed wo/men who wanted to restore theater to its social function and, thus, give the audience the essential role that it had occupied in ancient times. Scholars and intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon, Amiri Baraka in the U.S.A. and the leader of the Black Consciousnes Movement in South Africa, highly influenced and contributed to the birth of the Movement in both countries. Moreover, the artists of this time period also considered and adopted some of the theories by western theatre playwrights, actors and directors such as Artaud, Brecht or Grotowski, who had also observed the missing protagonism of the audience in western theater. Consequently, Black artists created a genuine type of theatre which combined western and traditional African theatrical techniques and returned theater to its original source: the people.

The Black Theater Movement<sup>2</sup> aimed to fight against a western artistic illness that had separated art from life and nature. As African American and Black South African artists, they realized they had the necessary potential to make theater breathe the way it had in Africa, or during the classic Greek period or the Middle Ages in western countries. The Civil Rights Movement and the several peaceful marches by Blacks to demand their rights both in the U.S.A. and in South Africa greatly contributed to the dawn of a the Black Arts Movement. The artists of this Movement realized the richness of African and African American cultural richness firmly embedded in their oral traditions and founded the bases for the creation of a new aesthetics which I have labelled as the Aesthetics of Self-Affirmation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> African Americans referred to Black Aesthetics and Black South Africans followed the parameters established by the Black Consciousness Movement to create theirs. I have comprised both within the Aesthetics of Self-Affirmation. For further information on the latter, see Barrios, *The Black Theater Movement in the United States and in South Africa: A Comparative Approach*.

<sup>2</sup> The Black Theater Movement in the U.S.A. mainly covered the 1960s through 1970s, and in South Africa, the 1970s through the 1980s. Among the playwrights included in the Movement of the States are Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Adrienne Kennedy, Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, and Douglas Turner Ward, to name a few. Some of the playwrights included in the Movement in South Africa are Fatima Dike, Matsemela Manaka, Maishe Maponia, Gcina Mhlophe, Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema.

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The artists of the Black Theater Movement were committed wo/men who wanted to restore theater to its social function and, thus, give the audience the essential role that it had occupied in ancient times. And Blacks South Africans and African Americans were certainly eager to participate and listen to what their playwrights, directors and actors had to communicate.

When examining the Black Theater Movement in the U.S.A. and in South Africa, it is important to bear in mind that there was no manifesto as such in South Africa which compiled the criteria of the Movement. Censorship and apartheid did not allow Black South Africans to formulate and write a manifesto as it occurred in the U.S.; but when the plays are examined there is a clear link that shows how the artist had the same committed artistic and social goals. Most Black South African actors learnt the dialogues by heart and performed their pieces from place to place without leaving written proof which might send them to jail.

Athol Fugard's plays, such as *Boesman and Lena* or Wintston Shona, John Kani and Fugard's *The Island*, reflecting the Black community experience in South Africa, were performed in the United States; as well as Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* or Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence* were taken to South Africa. Nevertheless, the exposure to the African American and Black South African experiences in both countries was not only a theatrical one. Stephen Biko, for example, was aware of the great repercussion that the Civil Rights Movement, Malcolm X and the Black Panthers had on the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, many African countries began to obtain their independence in the 1950s, which exerted a pivotal influence on African Americans to rise in defence of their rights.

By the end of the 1950s, Frantz Fanon had established a revolutionary line of thought that African Americans, Africans and other scholars and artists from Third World Countries would adopt in their political, sociological and artistic expression. Fanon was determined to change the status, identity and history imposed on Black people by western culture. He advocated self-determination for his people and the peoples of the Third World against an intellectual and political imperialism that had colonized their land and their minds. He proclaimed the need of a national consciousness that could help the colonized unveil the lies by which they had been subjected to a dominant culture, which had denied and/or under-evaluated theirs. Fanon pronounced the need to look at their own past and to study and find new strategies for their present in order to build their future. Moreover, he envisioned the necessity for a reevaluation of their history by breaking myths and stereotypes dictated by colonizers, and by searching and discovering their true selves.<sup>5</sup> Intellectual imperialism generated an intellectual alienation upon the colonized, among which Africans and African Americans are included. Fanon believed that a person who takes a stand against this kind of death in a sense becomes a revolutionary (224). Amiri Baraka, main leader and spokesman of the Black Arts Movement, associated this death with western art and aesthetics and he proclaimed, therefore, the need of a new aesthetics for the art emerging out of the Black community in the 1960s. In his poem «Black Art,» he states:

We want live flesh  
and coursing blood. Hearts Brains  
Souls splintering fire (116).

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within the Aesthetics of Self-Affirmation. For further information on the latter, see Barrios, *The Black Theater Movement in the United States and in South Africa: A Comparative Approach*.

<sup>4</sup> For further information on Biko's theories and ideas, see Stephen Biko, *I Write What I Like*.

<sup>5</sup> For further information on Fanon's thoughts, see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, and *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Baraka sought a new art that poured life out of it; and Black art moved back to recover nature and life as an integral part of its formal expression.

In the same line with Baraka's definition of Black art, Bakary Traoré observes the social functions of African theater and asserts that African theater is «a mirror of life. Life in all its forms serves as an inspiration for the African theatre» (113). African traditional theater, on the one hand, «makes man conscious of his place in order to make him accept his social obligation». Its function is to help men become more conscious of themselves. On the other hand, it is also a means of reconstructing the history of family, clan or tribe« (Traoré, 65). This sense of family and community identity, in Houston A. Baker's opinion, should be the general goal of the African American scholar, that is to say, her/his construction of «a black, national script of empowerment» (143).

The call for the artist's commitment and action has impregnated Fanon's writings as well as African, African American and Third World writers since the 1960s. Following Fanon's conception, the African American and Black South African playwrights of the Black Theater Movement accentuated their active role and commitment to their art as an extension of their active role and commitment to their communities.

In spite of the lack of critical attention that theater has suffered, it has been theater that has played a central role in different sectors of African culture, as declared by the Institut Culturel Africain (ICA): «The evolution of theatre in Africa is the result of a cultural development in all regards.» Nevertheless, the colonial factor did not allow theater to develop harmoniously—language, for example, has been imposed and new cultural models were presented as the only valuable ones (11-12).

The artist's active role takes a significant light in African societies. Jacques Maquet affirms that the closest and primary contact between an African society and its environment is action, not contemplation, that is to say, «man must obtain from nature what is necessary for the group's survival» (6). In the same way, African theater, more than any other genre, encompasses a social function. African theater is a committed, political, «militant theater in the sense that was understood by Erwin Piscator: as a means to transform» (ICA, 141-142).

The Brazilian director, Augusto Boal, greatly influenced by Brecht's political theater, in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, explains that the main objective of *theatre of the oppressed* is to change the people, focusing on action itself (ix, x). The poetics of the oppressed, he declares, is mainly the poetics of liberation: «The spectator frees himself: he thinks and acts for himself! Theater is action» (Boal, 119, 155).

Boal's committed theater relates to both African theater and the Black Theater Movement whose quest stood far from creating art for art's sake. Moreover, the genre of theater is closer to oral literature. Mineke Schipper observes an inextricable connection between oral literature and theater. Oral literature recreates pauses, gestures, feelings, intonations and the reciprocal reactions of actors and audience towards each other, all of which is «inherent in theatre.» The African performance of oral literature, in Schipper's words, is «a total event» in which the people who are present take part, either by clapping in rhythm or by making music, or narrating (6, 7-12).

The integrated connection of music and dance is an inherent part of African based dramatic communication, two elements incorporated to most of the plays of the Black Theater Movement (Shange's in the U.S. and Manaka's in South Africa, are the best exponents of this combination of elements). Karen Malpede affirms that dance shows a «wish to live» (13) and love, elements that are essential in the plays of the Black Theater Movement. The dramatic use of music and dance finds its more elevated expression in the dance drama, which Kwabena Nketia identifies as «mimed actions incorporated into the dance or

used as extensions of the dance proper... [Dance drama] may be *based on one or many themes, without necessarily having a single coherent story line*» (189, 217, emphasis added). Emphasis on a lack of a single story line is a crucial point when examining African and African American plays (such as Manaka's, Mtwa's, Kennedy's or Shange's) which have been admonished by western critics for their lack of plot story line. These critics were not aware of the aforementioned component as characteristic of traditional African oral literature and dance drama; an important constituent that has been incorporated into contemporary African American and African theater.

Art and literature in Occidental countries during the Middle Ages were intermingled with life; and performance, to be more specific, remained in a very close contact with the audience. In the Middle Ages there were bards, minstrels, passion and mystery plays, street mimes—like the Commedia dell'Arte troupe. After 1661, Arnold Hauser observes that «art and literature lose their relationship with real life [and] form enjoys a preference over content,» losing their dialectical relationship (192-193). Furthermore, the audience lost its active role and protagonism. It is the playwrights of the Black Theater Movement, both in the U.S. and in South Africa, who observed the aforementioned loss, the lack of harmony in human beings—totally detached from nature, from feelings, from emotions, from their soul—and wanted to stabilize again the lost equilibrium. Consequently, they proclaimed the creation of a new aesthetics in order to fight the western parameters of art by which people were being dehumanized and alienated from one another and from nature. This new aesthetics was denominated Black Aesthetics in the U.S. and is confined here within the Aesthetics of Self-Affirmation. These artists attempted to reconstruct their past and construct their future by analyzing their present condition, committing themselves to social change through their art.

The Aesthetics of Self-Affirmation is established through a search and affirmation of oneself and of the community to which an artist belongs. This Aesthetics restores people's protagonism, as they had possessed in traditional Africa and in Europe's Middle Ages. The Aesthetics of Self-Affirmation brings back spirituality and soul to the people, and music, poetry and dance become part and parcel of this new expression.

At this point, it is fundamental to mention a few western theater artists who have been a landmark in the evolution of western theater in the twentieth century in their search to find new theatrical venues that western theater lacked. Artists such as Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski or Erwin Piscator turned their eyes to traditional theatrical forms of Asian and African countries, and these figures exerted a great influence on the playwrights, actors and directors of the Black Theater Movement.

In Artaud's opinion, theater was missing something essential. Artaud tried to infuse the spirit he realized was absent in western theater and that he acknowledged as the core element in some oriental cultures, such as the Balinese. He was firm in his attempt to acquire a new language that did not need words to express the human being's emotions and feelings. The French artist realized how gesture and voice in the Balinese spectacle acquired new inflections he had never observed in western theater: «There is [in the Balinese performance] something of ceremonial quality of a religious rite, in the sense that they extirpate from the mind of the onlooker all idea of pretense, of cheap imitations of reality» (55-60).

Artaud's conception of theater very much approaches the idea of theater as conceived by the playwrights of the Black Theater Movement.<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising, then, that most

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<sup>6</sup> Baraka's, Kennedy's and Shange's plays show part of Artaud's influence. Among the many plays in South Africa, *Survival* by the group Workshop '71 is a clear example.

of the African American and Black South African playwrights during the time periods examined in this essay acknowledged Artaud, for they were committed to the same search in order to create a theater which could offer a new language and function for the spectator.

Artaud, Boal and Brecht offered the audience a protagonism that was missing since the Middle Ages in western culture. Inspired by Chinese acting, Brecht created a new aesthetics—epic theater. Brecht's conception of epic theater not only comprises an active role for the audience, but for the actor as well. He sought an awareness that both actor and audience should acquire when acting and when watching a play. Against blind automatism in acting, he was advocating for a more arduous mastery of technique requiring an actor's awareness and control of the character represented by the actor, and not vice versa. Away from the empathy that Stanislavsky's actors and audience feel, Brecht employed the alienation element for not only the audience, but also for the actors to use it in their own acting.<sup>7</sup>

Coinciding with Brecht, Grotowski introduced a much more developed basis to help the actors broaden their acting skills, enunciated in his book *Towards a Poor Theatre*. It is significant to notice that most African American actors<sup>8</sup> remained more faithful to Stanislavsky's method combined with other African and African American traditional elements, whereas in South Africa, they very closely aligned themselves to Grotowski's method—extensively employed by Athol Fugard and the Serpent Players and Workshop '71. Here, a question must be posed: whether South African theater artists adopted Grotowski's method of *poor theater* because they lacked any financial support from the government or because Grotowski's conception and emphasis on the actor's skills was precisely closer to the African oral tradition, in which gesture, song and movement are indispensable skills in the performer. Both assumptions can be comprised as the answer to the question posed, for both factors were inextricable to the Black South African artist's experience during the time period examined.

Grotowski's theater principles, as opposed to Stanislavsky's more internal method, establishes the emphasis on the actor's physical training and body expression. Grotowski found the training techniques of traditional Oriental theater very stimulating, especially the Japanese Noh theater, the Indian Kathakuli and the Peking Opera. Under this light, he considered that the scenic and personal technique of the actor were «the core of theatre art.» In the definition of his *poor theater*, he claimed that theater can exist «without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. [But] it cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, 'live' communion.» Thus, for instance, an actor, by his controlled use of gesture, «transforms the floor into a sea, a table into a confessional, a piece of iron into an animate partner, etc.» (1968, 16, 19, 21).

The total absence of elements such as make-up, lighting and sounds effects, the direct relationship between actor-spectator and the controlled gestures of actors is certainly true of the Black Theater Movement in South Africa—i.e., Percy Mtwa, *Bopha!* or Mtwa's, Ngema's and Simon's *Woza Albert!*, or Manaka's *Egoli*. Grotowski insisted that theater is a place of provocation, where the actors, by using their roles *as a trampoline*, examine

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<sup>7</sup> In South Africa, Maponya has closely followed Brecht's theories—*Gangsters* is the best example; in the States, Barka, Shange and the forerunner of the Black Arts Movement, Lorraine Hansberry, are clear examples of the use of Brechtian techniques.

<sup>8</sup> Of course there were some exceptions, such as the Free Southern Theatre, a theatre group whose work was mainly based on bodily expression and improvisation.

what is hidden behind their daily masks—the inner essence of their personality, so they are able to sacrifice it and expose it (1976, 186).

Artaud, Brecht and Grotowski were committed to create a new western theater that could offer more meaning and create a communion between the actor and the audience, reflecting the social concerns of their times. Michael Etherton mentions Brecht (who has exerted a great influence in African theatrical literature, especially in East Africa) as an example to follow. He proclaims that Brecht managed to link «both tradition and revolution in the concept of popular.» This concept of popular is described by Brecht as «taking over [the people's] own forms of expression and enriching them ... a way that can take over the leadership ... linking with tradition and carrying it further» (355, 234). By combining western and African and African American elements of their oral traditions, African American and Black South African theater artists created a new aesthetics genuine to the Black Theater Movement.

The artists of the Black Theater Movement in the U.S.A. and in South Africa were committed theater writers, actors and directors who took theater back to its social function and the audience to its central role almost absent in western theater. Black artists recovered, thus, the lost harmony between nature and art, and was given back to the original source where theatre came from: the people.

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