ABSTRACT
AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES

JACKSON, VIRGINA M.  B.A. SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, 1992

AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE: AN AESTHETIC ANALYSIS OF FOUR CONTEMPORARY THEATRE COMPANIES

Advisors: Dr. Alma Vinyard and Dr. Shirley Williams-Kirksey

Thesis dated May, 1997

This thesis examined and aesthetically explored the significance of African American theatre in today's Black community. It defined how this theatre has culturally and artistically cultivated the Black community. This thesis exemplified an understanding of the intricacies and historical appreciation of African American theatre and the pivotal role it has played in the black community.

The study was based on four contemporary regional African American theatre companies in the United States: the St. Louis Black Repertory Company (St. Louis, Missouri), Jomandi Productions (Atlanta, Georgia), The Crossroads Theatre Company (New Brunswick, New Jersey), and Cultural Odyssey (San Francisco, California). Using Amiri Baraka's Aesthetic concept as the foundation, the four companies were examined in three categories: 1) Background, 2) Literature on stage, and 3) Beyond the mainstage. Each of the categories was examined in relation to a specific philosophy within Baraka's Black Aesthetic concept.
Based on the examination of the four companies, the conclusion of this study defined how these companies are collectively functioning within the Black Aesthetic parameter. The various categories specified how these companies are cultivating the Black community through the medium and why this theatre must continue to exist.
AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE: AN AESTHETIC ANALYSIS
OF FOUR CONTEMPORARY THEATRE COMPANIES

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

VIRGINA M. JACKSON

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
MAY, 1997
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER

1. INTRODUCTION ................................................. 1
2. THE BLACK AESTHETIC ........................................ 16
3. THE BACKGROUND ............................................. 23
4. LITERATURE ON STAGE ....................................... 39
5. BEYOND THE MAINSTAGE ..................................... 55
6. CONCLUSION ................................................... 67

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** .................................................. 70
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The vitality of African American expression derives the emotional force and spiritual energy African Americans invest in their personal and social interactions. African American cultural being is at its best in those situations that allow the connections, find spiritual release, and join forces in a symphonic expression of feelings and facts. These different dimensions of the expressive quality of African American life indicate the significance of action, involvement, creativity, performance, art, aesthetics and spirituality in African American culture. Therefore, African American culture is dramatic; it is engaging; it is theatrical.¹

African American theatre in America reflects the values of African American culture. Since an art grows out of a culture and reflects and perpetuates the values of the culture from which it emerges, the values of an art are inextricably connected to the cultural identities of the creators of the art. Therefore, culture transmits the system of values that influences thought and behaviors.

Georgia), Crossroads Theatre (New Brunswick, New Jersey), and Cultural Odyssey (San Francisco, California). Derived from the Black Theatre Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, these companies are culturally enhancing the African American community. These companies share certain characteristics and have a common ideology which begins to define a distinct aesthetic approach to theatre. They provide occasions to experience African American history, and to confront current issues, self-affirmation and communal sharing.

Since its inception, African American theatre has been an educational and entertainment institution for the African American community. Introduced to the public stage as stereotypes, and limited to various darky and coon roles, early Black performers had to establish their own contexts in which they could construct and participate in their “own” reality. The groups, which they founded, functioned as educational and cultural transmitters for a people deprived of seeing their own image in the public and popular media.

In 1817, William Brown opened a tea garden in what was by then a thriving community of free African Americans in New York. Among the early entertainers at the tea garden was a man named James Hewlett, whose entertainment consisted of portraying the roles of several different characters in one performance. By 1821, Mr. Brown had built a theatre seating three or four hundred people. In this theatre, a group called the African Grove Company performed. The formation of the African Grove Company, in the Greenwich
Village section of New York, is the first known African American theatre company.

Playbills of the African Grove Company’s performances indicated that they may have performed as regularly and charged as much as the other professional theatres. Still, the African Grove Company has been labeled, by a few White theatre historians, as a group of amateurs who made no significant mark upon the history of theatre.

A playbill announced that on June 20, 1823, the African Grove Company would present a play called *King Shotaway*. The play was billed as portraying a slave insurrection on the island of St. Vincent. It was based upon the actual experiences of Mr. Brown, who was both playwright and manager of the company. The production’s title character was regarded as a hero because he was the leader of a slave insurrection. The production sought to make a statement in opposition to the institution of slavery. Undoubtedly, many White people in New York in 1823 would have regarded a public statement by African Americans in favor of slave insurrection as insane or criminal.

Although the African Grove Company had been previously harassed by the New York Police Department, as well as members of the company being arrested and jailed, the harassment escalated after the performance of *King Shotaway*. The hostility of an influential segment of the White community in New York, as reflected in the newspaper coverage of the company’s encounters
with the police, would seem to suggest a possible explanation for its demise in 1823.

The African Grove Company’s early nineteenth century exploits do not fully expose the beginnings of African American theatre. The true beginnings of African American theatre involve the evolution of pure African art forms, a result of the impact of the slave experience in America. This evolutionary process occurred with relative rapidity because of the oppressive conditions of the slave experience. When African Americans openly used their traditional African modes of communication, such as the use of drums or speaking in African languages, the result was brutal punishment of various kinds - whippings, mutilation, or even the severing of various extremities. Survival demanded that African American art forms evolve within certain rigidly enforced specifications. That survival technique employed double meaning. The use of double meaning was a common characteristic among the practitioners of the early forms of minstrelsy.

Minstrelsy originally consisted of groups of White performers in blackface who sang, danced, told jokes, and put on comedic skits. By 1840, minstrelsy was a distinctive form of American entertainment. Minstrels used heavy dialect to portray Blacks as foolish, stupid, and compulsively musical. Although this form of entertainment made a mockery of African Americans, it became a survival tactic for slaves.
In 1842, Dan Emmett, along with four other actors, began what became known as Negro Minstrelsy. The original Negro minstrel performances were not only entertaining but made life tolerable for slaves in the United States by ridiculing, through the use of comic irony, the White slave owner - the key figure in the system who caused their oppression. The successful functioning of this type of theatre was a significant factor in the mental health and physical survival of African American people. Minstrels were exceptionally popular as well as successful for the remainder of the century.

By the turn of the century, African American performers were trying to get away from this form of entertainment. Minstrels were perceived as stereotypes of African Americans. In the early years of the twentieth century, new and more successful attempts were made to establish theatre for Black audiences. Several efforts to produce 'uptown' drama with Black performers were made in Harlem, New York.

The Anita Bush Players used the Lincoln Theater at 135th and Lenox, but the most notable group was the Lafayette Players, which began in 1914. Similar groups using Black performers started in other cities. The Pekin Theater managed to perform serious dramatic productions from about 1901 to 1909 in Chicago. Founded in 1916, the Karamu Theater of Cleveland, featured African American performers in its productions. Important as they were in providing theatrical experience for Black technicians and actors, these theaters were
hardly Black-oriented. For the most part, they managed to give conventional performances of White melodrama. Although these companies created a Black theatre audience, the plays produced by these companies were written by White playwrights.

Although there was a dearth of African American writers, producers, directors, actors, and technicians artistically developing themselves to the service of a Black audience, these small theatre groups had their value. There was no other place for African Americans to get theatrical experience. Fortunately, these companies created a Black theatre audience, which steadily increased from 1910 until 1927.

In the decade of the 1920s, African Americans became self-assertive and racially conscious as if for the first time. Those African Americans who were part of that decade of change - roughly between World War I and the Great Depression - saw themselves as principles in that moment of transformation from the old to the new. Thus, the expression “New Negro” told the world of his self-concept.³ African Americans characterized the “New Negro” as having shed the costume of the shuffling darky, the uncle and auntie, the subservient and docile. No longer could he be dismissed by contempt, pity or terror. He was, rather, a man and a citizen in his own right - intelligent, articulate, and self-assured.

The most striking thing about the “New” as opposed to the “Old” Negro was that he was urban rather than rural. Even if African Americans were still to be exploited in the cities, it would be a different kind of exploitation, permitting independence. A historical and cultural phenomenon was being created.

During this phenomenal period, known as the Harlem Renaissance, African American theatrical artists continued to develop. Many African American community theatres were established during this era. Such theatres include the Ethiopian Theater of Chicago and the Gilpin Players of Cleveland. W.E.B. DuBois, editor of the NAACP’s magazine, *The Crisis*, founded his Krigwa Players Little Theater Movement in 1925. DuBois believed the Negro movement had four fundamental principles:

- **Negro theatre must be about us.** That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. **By us.** That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. **For us.** That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. **Near us.** The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.

Other community theatres established during this era include the Harlem Experimental Theatre (1928), the Negro Art Theatre, the Harlem Community Players, and the Dunbar Garden Players (1929).

This overall impact of the Harlem Renaissance was tremendous. Theatre of this era reflected the “New Negro’s” determination to reject outwardly imposed

---

restrictions upon African American creativity. It forged a new Black theatre that expressed in meaningful ways the true voice and vision of African Americans. The cultural and artistic activity generally associated with the Harlem Renaissance reached its height in the last years of that decade. Unfortunately, the Depression of the 1930s left the mecca's foundation extremely unsteady.

During the 1930s, established African American theatres continued to thrive in the communal realm. In addition to grass-roots theatre, a different kind of attempt to establish Black theatre for Black audiences became part of the work of the Federal Theater Project (FTP).\(^5\) The FTP, like many of the projects of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), focalized toward local communities. A result of its initial attempt to create community theatres was Negro units, which were theatres or companies of Black men and women, usually from and in the ghettos of large cities, especially Chicago and New York. Acting as a laboratory for African American artists, the Negro units of the FTP allowed African Americans to produce plays that would display Black talent and reflect Black themes.

Four Black theatre units functioned in New York City. In 1935, two of these units were housed at the Lafayette Theatre - the Federal Negro Theatre and the Negro Youth Theatre. In 1936, two more Negro projects were established - the Vaudeville Unit and the African Dance Unit. By the time the FTP closed its doors in 1939, twenty-two cities had acted as headquarters for
Black theatre units. Among them were: Boston, Newark, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Peoria, Atlanta, Detroit, Chicago, Seattle, Portland, and Los Angeles.

The 1940s did not experience as much activity in Black theatre as had the previous decades. Several Black theatre artists attempted to form community theatre groups. In 1940, two Black men with professional theatrical backgrounds came together to establish a community based theatre in Harlem. Abram Hill, a playwright, and Frederick O'Neal, an actor, wanted to build a theatre in which Black actors, directors, writers, and technicians held equal positions. Also the theatre was to provide a training program for young artists. Thus, the American Negro Theater was formed.

The American Negro Theater created excitement in Harlem with the promise of a firmly established community theatre. The establishment of the American Negro Theater was the fulfillment of a dream by Black theatre artists in search of a home to practice their art. This community theatre created an active, dynamic theatre, one that introduced new playwrights, trained actors and technicians, produced a number of significant dramas, and built Black audiences for the live theatre. Unfortunately, the American Negro Theater was short-lived. The initial energy for creating a theatre for Black people waned as the company gained in popularity and the actors reached for stardom. The company's Broadway success of *Anna Lucasta* contributed to the loss of many members. Success of this production also brought in many new members, whose agenda

---

5 Helene Keyssar, *The Curtain and the Veil: Strategies in Black Drama*, 9
lacked the commitment or community spirit that originally brought the company together. As its original focus changed, the company lost its creativity and impact. It had ceased production by 1947.

African American theatre was not a consistent occurrence during the 1950s. The more pronounced integration of troops after World War II, the Supreme Court desegregation decisions of the early 1950s, and the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott of 1956 helped to create a new context and potentially different audiences for African American theatre. These events and journalistic attention to the issues encouraged not only protest, but demands for integration to be more widely and clearly heard. African American playwrights during this decade began to think of their audiences as integrated. They could also imagine the possibility of increased support for and recognition of their work. These playwrights attempted to demonstrate the possibility of racial harmony. Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) is such a piece.

This play provoked much debate and controversy about what it was and what it was not. A part of the controversy to arise from the play was questions of whether it was a work of social protest or not or was it even a play about African Americans. Many Black critics felt this play was not indicative of what was actually going on in society. The Black family portrayed in *A Raisin in the Sun* was one defined for White America. Because this specific decade emphasized integration, Lorraine Hansberry attempted to demonstrate the possibility of racial harmony.

harmony while subtly protesting the specific ways in which this harmony had been limited.

African American plays of the 1950s suggested that the Black playwright, such as Lorraine Hansberry, attempted to persuade audiences to accept, understand, or approve integration. Even though an integrationist play like A - Raisin in the Sun did not generally include a positive solution of relationships between Blacks and Whites, this drama suggested the kinds of attitudes that could lead to mutual respect and acceptance. African American theatre of the 1960s derived in contrast to the aesthetic and ideological premise of this particular decade.

The emergence of African American theatre companies in the 1960s stemmed from the Black Arts Movement - a movement which envisioned the creation of an art form that reached out and spoke directly to the aspirations and needs of Black America. While Americans, in general, searched for freedom, justice and self-identification during the 1960s, the formation of Black theatre groups supported an ideology which advances the notion that the creative medium of theater should address works relating to the point-of-view of African Americans.⁶ According to Lerone Bennett:

The Movement (Black Revolution) was a rebirth of the Black soul, a reinvention of Black identity, and a challenge to white identity. For by

redefining themselves, Blacks forced a reappraisal of white identity in a world where the overwhelming majority of people are colored.\textsuperscript{7}

During the 1960s and 1970s African American theatre earned a reputation as one of the most controversial and dynamic movements in the world. Blacks founded hundreds of theatre groups that produced plays of over two hundred playwrights.

Ron Milner (1968) stated that African American theatre “must go home psychically, mentally, aesthetically, and physically.”\textsuperscript{8} According to Milner:

By psychically we mean coming away from your dues - paying to all those “outside - i.e., white influences” and going into the real, black YOU by way of those places, people, and experiences which began and had the most to do with the shaping of what is now yourself.....By mentally we mean understanding that you and your experiences are, in time and history, collective repetitions, have been repeated and multiplied many times..... Going home aesthetically will follow naturally after those first two steps - since your aesthetics come out of your mental and psychic environment... going home physically with the new theatre means just that..... For this theatre must be housed in, sustained and judged by, and be a usable projection of and to a black community.....\textsuperscript{9}

In 1965, Amiri Baraka (then Leroi Jones) organized one of the first theatre groups with a nationalist perspective, the Black Arts Repertory Theatre (BART).

As Blacks organized groups similar to BART across the country, Black theatre

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid, 306-312.
artists and critics refined and articulated the aesthetic for this emerging theatre movement. The movement's proponents viewed the theatre as an instrument to further the cause of Black Power within the African American community. The movement appealed to many African Americans across the country who started theatre groups which performed in auditoriums, churches, schools, lodges, private homes, and on the street. Local playwrights, directors, performers, designers, and technicians developed their skills while working with the community-based Black theatres.

The Black Theatre Movement of the 1960s and 1970s is significant in the founding of the St. Louis Black Repertory Company, Jomandi Productions, Crossroads Theatre, and Cultural Odyssey. Using Amiri Baraka's Black Aesthetic concept as the theoretical framework, this thesis traces the development of the four prominent African American theatre companies and their roles in presenting African American culture through the medium of theatre. Believing that such art is based on the unity of African Americans, Baraka's aesthetic concept specifies the need for the creation of educational and creative institutions. These institutions should:

1) Identify with the Black masses. The utilization of Black cultural elements, such as lifestyle and value system, should be implemented in developing these institutions.
2) Reject some Euro-American cultural values. Experimentation to discover new, unique forms and techniques peculiar to the Black experience must exist.

3) Recultivate the traditional African concept of "we" as opposed to the individualistic "I". These institutions should be base on the unity rather than the division of Black people.

4) Believe that art should be functional in achieving social, political, and economic goals. There should be an involvement of the Black community in the awareness of the power of these institutions.

An aesthetic examination of the four contemporary African American theatre companies gives an understanding as to why this theatre must continue to exist.

The study analyzes 1) the elements which motivated and inspired the founding of each company, 2) the significance of each company’s works, whether on or off stage, and 3) why African American theatre must remain an intricate part of the African American community. This thesis addresses the following:

1) What is the Black Aesthetic?

2) How are the four theatre companies functioning within the Black Aesthetic parameter?

3) Based on the four theatre companies, why must African American theatre continue to exist?
Chapter Two defines the Black Aesthetic. It also discusses Baraka's Black Aesthetic philosophies and their relevance to the functioning of each of the four companies.

Chapter Three examines the background of each of the four companies. This chapter also specifies the origins and missions of these companies.

Chapter Four reviews a specific piece of literature each of these companies has presented on the mainstage, whether they are original works or those of other playwrights. The intent of the playwrights and producers is also examined.

Chapter Five examines a program, workshop, or project sponsored by each of these companies. This chapter also indicates why such programs are an important entity with each company.

Chapter Six is the conclusion of this thesis. It summarizes how these companies are functioning within the Black Aesthetic parameter. It also indicates how these companies are significant to the existence of African American theatre.
CHAPTER TWO

THE BLACK AESTHETIC

All cultures impose parameters for what may or may not be considered beautiful. Those parameters differ from culture to culture. Therefore, aesthetic concepts that are used to evaluate art will vary according to the cultural context in which the art occurs. These aesthetic values determine the qualitative standards by which the art of any culture is judged.

The term “aesthetic” has been used interchangeably by African American writers and critics to mean:

1. A corpus of non-fiction and fiction, oral and written, which asserts the equality, differentness - and sometimes superiority - of Blacks and Black American ways of doing and perceiving things.

2. A set of political principles, primarily consistent in their outrage against inequality.

3. A brace of ethical and artistic criteria which sets guidelines for what will be considered valid or invalid by African Americans.

4. A human code for translating the mute matter of a world in which certain races and inhumane systems combine to destroy other races and more humane systems.¹

Developing and articulating Afrocentric ideas about what culture is, what aesthetics does, and how aesthetics can function within a culture to control the
behavior of individuals and groups is important. An approach to an analysis of Afrocentric aesthetics includes four aspects: 1) works of art, the finished product, methods and materials of achieving the finished work; 2) the persons who create art; 3) the intended audience and its responses; and 4) other people’s theory and analysis of art and people’s responses to art.²

The Afrocentric concept of art is that art is inextricably connected to life. Art is supposed to be useful to society in contrast to the Eurocentric elitist art-for-art’s sake tradition. Therefore, art is to serve as some functional purpose in society. An artist cannot create a work of art that is not influenced by his or her own culture. The art-for-art’s sake philosophy provides a mechanism for ignoring or dismissing ideological content in art. The artist’s intent is to create a work which has both purpose and meaning.

The artist has two approaches when creating: the contemplative approach and the perceptual approach.³ The contemplative approach suggests turning inward to one’s own inspiration or insight or both, as a means of arriving at transcendental knowledge - that is, knowledge that transcends data. The perceptual approach takes data that can be perceived by the senses and measured, and attempts to organize and analyze that data by measuring it in some way. Both approaches complement each other.

---

³ Ibid.
Theoretical concepts within African American theatre have been varied yet oriented toward unification of ideological, emotional, and aesthetic impulses. If African American theatre is to be a vehicle of Black values, truly separate from the Euro-American mainstream, it must be shaped into forms which are rooted in historically valid expressions of the Black people it serves.

The 1960s initiated the evolvement in treatises on African American theatre from abstract discussion of existing institutions to an affirmation of unified Black strength and a fresh, more particularized dedication to constructing new traditions and new forms by reworking the best of the old. Writer Clarence Major wrote in the mid 1960s:

We must shake up not only our own black brothers but the superficial and shoddy people stumbling in the brainlessness of the Western decline. We must use our black poetic energy to overthrow the western ritual and passion, the curse, the dark ages of this death, the original sin’s impact on a people and their unjust projection of it upon us black people; we must lead ourselves out of this madness and if our journey brings out others - perhaps even white people - then it will be good for us all.

This assumption became bound inextricably into the Black Aesthetic.

The basic tenet of the Black Aesthetic was to create a whole new way of life for African Americans, based on the rejection of Eurocentric values. Writer Ed Bullins stated:

---


5 Martin, *Ishmael Reed*, 4.
... It is a post-American form of Black theater we Black Artists should be seeking. It is Black Art that is like a dagger pointed at the vitals of America, and through the rips “we” (US) can enter the New Epoch.⁶

Theorists of African American theatre began to address the need for a theatre of, about, and within the Black community. These theorists evolved into what can best be described as “Black artists,”⁷ using the Eurocentric theatre form as a medium to effect the most profound changes in Black people in the United States. At the same time, they revitalized the culture of theatre by attacking the intellectual and ideological premises of Western civilization. Their image of Black reality, the means by which they sought to depict a subject matter more truthful than that of either the conventional or avant-garde mainstream, brought about the development of the Black Aesthetic. With this particular aesthetic, Black theatre was to be a revolutionary instrument of change.

In 1965, Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) organized one of the first African American theatre groups with this perspective - the Black Arts Repertory Theatre (BART). Baraka's work was an inspiration to the core of the theoretical inquiry in the Black Arts Movement. Baraka, along with other African American artists of the 1960s, attempted to establish a Black aesthetic that would account for matters of politics as well as of art.

Created at a time when riots were breaking out in many cities, when militants like Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael were calling for urban guerrilla

---
⁶ Benston, “... Modern Black Drama,” 67.
warfare, and when liberation movements found a spokesman and martyr in Malcolm X, Baraka's theatre sent out a battle cry against White America and an alarm to blacks still threatened with pitiless repression. In his proclamation for a revolutionary theatre, Baraka defined the elements of his Black Aesthetic as 1) identifying with the Black masses, 2) rejecting Euro-American cultural values, 3) recultivating the traditional African concept of "we" as opposed to the individualistic "I" and 4) having art function in achieving social, political, and economic goals.  

In identifying with the Black masses, theatre transforms itself into a place of communion and of celebration dedicated to the creation of communal forms. This theatre draws its true inspiration from Black people, assisting and protecting them against others who deceive or mislead them. The only engagement art should endorse is the reciprocity between the theatre and the people. The artist should be reunited with the sensibility of his people, revive collective memory, and restore an accurate vision of the world. This theatre should be more than simply a theatre of the oppressed, for oppression encloses art in the restrictions of the oppressor and limits the theatre of experience to exposing threats directed against Blacks. The theatre must attest to the beleaguered but resilient spirituality of Black people and define itself as a spiritual experience.

---

Black theatre should offer Blacks an image of themselves that disputes the validity of images offered by the White world. It reveals the dynamism of a culture whose importance and authenticity have been denied, and attempts to develop structures from modes within Black culture. The theatre moves far away from the artistic values of the dominant society. In doing so, it establishes a different dialectical relation with the reality it examines. It does not pretend to act upon reality, but seeks to apprehend it. This theatre seeks to integrate all aspects of black life, specifically Black love, beauty and culture. Its context comes out of the life experiences of Black people. Therefore, this theatre must reject Euro-America cultural values and replace them with a Black value system.

This theatre must reclaim the collective memory, express the emotional situation of Black people, and retell the fundamental stages of the Black experience. The surge of Black expression on the stage is an intricate part of this theatre. The playwright should both represent the tensions that characterize relations between the races and that tear apart the Black community and suggest their possible resolution. The language of this theatre departs from the argument about these conflicts in order to affirm a “blackness” that is shared by all. The theatre should then perpetuate cultural unity by disregarding Euro-American universality and utilizing Black forms and techniques.

There is a need for reconciliation between the artist and his community. Theatre gives energy back to the very people who have given it life. Therefore, separation does not exist between the theatre and audience. Both talent and
theatre would be making a collective contribution to the community. If Blacks are to have quality education and participation in the theatrical art form, then those who bring art into the Black community must be a part of that community. The artists should educationally and socially raise the consciousness of the audience. This theatre should function as an institution in achieving social, political, and economic goals.

Baraka’s Black Aesthetic, culturally, has two purposes. It would first form all those creative and artistic expressions peculiar to Blacks into one well-defined aesthetic. His second function was to set up a criterion for the analysis and evaluation, on ethical and artistic grounds, of works created by Blacks and others committed to the concepts of Black self-determination and Black art. Therefore, Black art must respond positively to the reality of society.

Baraka defined three essential concepts within his Black Aesthetic - art, culture, and change. He specified that the Black theatre should lay the foundations of ethnic identity and build upon cultural heritage. This foundation is pertinent to the existence of the St. Louis Black Repertory Company, Jomandi Productions, Crossroads Theater and Cultural Odyssey. Based upon the elements of Baraka’s Black Aesthetic, the following three chapters will delineate how these companies are functioning within this aesthetic parameter.
CHAPTER THREE

THE BACKGROUND

African American theatre is an institution created to maintain and develop African American expression. Therefore, the audience for which this theatre was created becomes the focal point of this institution. The decision to speak primarily to an African American audience is the critical filter for a range of other choices, including physical location, production content and diverse community programs.

Although the four theatre companies are located in different geographical areas and all have slightly different missions, they are institutions that were created to fill a cultural void in the African American community.

The St. Louis Black Repertory Company

Founded in 1976 by Producing Director Ronald J. Himes, the St. Louis Black Repertory Company (commonly known as “The Black Rep”) is the largest African American performing arts organization in Missouri. It makes its home in the renovated 471 - seat Grandel Square Theatre, situated on the corner of Grand and Grandel Square in the Grand Center arts district.
In 1974, when Ron Himes was an accounting major at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, many of his friends in the theatre department complained that they were not receiving practical experience in campus productions, because of a lack of roles for African Americans. Himes and others began producing their own plays on campus. The plays and readings were from a Black perspective and began to receive attention from other college campuses and the surrounding communities. The company began touring to other college campuses and from this tour group the St. Louis Black Repertory Company was founded.

In 1981, the Black Rep eventually found a home in the Greeley Presbyterian Church’s former sanctuary, which the company converted to a theatre and renamed the 23rd Street Theatre. In 1992, the company moved into the renovated Grandel Square Theatre in the heart of Grand Center, St. Louis’ arts and entertainment district.

The mission statement of the St. Louis Black Repertory company is “to provide platforms for theatre, dance and other creative expressions from African American and Third World perspectives that heighten social and cultural awareness in its audiences.”¹ According to founder Ron Himes:

……the theatre is a place of conscience, a place of social and cultural equity and a place to put the community as well as society in perspective…. Our theatre is committed to heightening the social and cultural awareness of our community, which is plagued with issues of race. Yet I believe the preservation and the celebration of our heritage as well as the proliferation of cultural diversity can advance

¹ Fact sheet from the St. Louis Black Repertory Company.
solutions to the issues regarding race.....In order to help eliminate polarization in America, we must find common ground, common vocabulary and a common place to communicate. And the theatre can do just that. The theatre can be the arena for political issues and can help make America a better nation.²

During the early eighties, The Black Rep began hiring guest actors, directors, designers and choreographers, both locally and nationally. It also began presenting regional dance companies, as well as a music and film series. In 1986 the company became the only African American theatre in the Midwest to operate under a contractual arrangement with the actors and stage managers. By the late 1980s, the Black Rep narrowed its focus to producing African American live theatre.

On its mainstage, the Black Rep produces works by both established and emerging African and Third World playwrights. The company has produced the works of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson, Athol Fugar and George C. Wolfe, as well as present famous musicals such as Ain't Misbehavin', Bubblin Brown Sugar, Eubie, The Wiz, and Purlie.

In addition to its six mainstage productions each season, the company offers an award-winning outreach program that includes free Noonday Series during lunch hour, featuring question and answer sessions with actors, directors and designers for the mainstage, student matinee of mainstage productions,

touring shows and residences, workshops in drama and movement for children and teens, and a Professional Intern Program.

The Black Rep introduced its free Noonday Series during the 1992-1993 season as a means of exposing more people to the new Grandel Square Theatre. There are panel discussions by members of the cast and productions staff from the current mainstage production. The successful series also includes free performances of The Black Rep’s touring shows. The public is welcome to bring lunch and questions to the theatre.

The company’s touring component performs more than 150 shows a year at schools, community centers, corporations and other organizations in the St. Louis area and throughout the Midwest region. The touring company not only presents workshops and has residencies in the schools but also provides six-eight week drama workshop classes in the summer and winter for children and teens.

For the past seven years, the touring company has been composed of recent college graduates and theatre students with sufficient stage experience who have been accepted into the company’s three-year Professional Intern Program. The program helps young actors make the transition from the academic to the professional world through performing in The Black Rep’s touring shows. The interns also take master classes with guest directors, performers, and playwrights.
Through its educational programs and mainstage productions, the Black Repertory Company annually reaches an audience exceeding 50,000. As a result of Himes' leadership, the St. Louis Black Repertory Company has become highly respected, for its quality productions from the African American perspective, both locally and throughout the United States.

Jomandi Productions

Jomandi Productions is Georgia's oldest and largest African American theatre company. Founded in 1978 by Thomas W. Jones II and Marsha Jackson, the company's intent is to present authentic and valid images of African Americans through the medium of theatre. According to co-founder Jones:

> With the rise of political activity (in the 60s and 70s), a lot of artists began to become much more self-determining in that if we were going to get accurate representation of our condition and our experience, we needed to be the storytellers. If we relied on another culture's depiction of us, in all likelihood, that depiction would be inaccurate or incomplete.³

Tom Jones and Marsha Jackson both were theatre majors at schools in Boston, Massachusetts when the company was created. Jones was attending Amherst College and Jackson was at Smith College. During Jones' senior year in 1978, his father, Dr. Thomas Jones, died. For his Amherst senior thesis Jones wrote, performed and directed a play called *Every Father's Child*. The play was later presented in Atlanta to endow a memorial scholarship fund for

Morehouse School of Medicine, where Dr. Jones had taught. That particular play was the company’s first production.

The name "JOMANDI" is an amalgamation of the names of the four members of Dr. Jones’ immediate family: JO for Tom Jones II, MA for wife Angie Jones, AN and DI for daughters Andrea and Diana. It was discovered sometime later that in the Senegalese language the word JOMANDI means “people gathered together in celebration.” Thus, from its familial roots, the company adopted the logo, “And the family is now”.

The following is the mission statement of this company:

Jomandi Productions exists in recognition of a need for professional arts institutions that offer, as a priority, a form for the preservation and presentation of the African American cultural tradition. Therefore, Jomandi was founded as a professional theatre company and chartered in October of 1978 as a non-profit organization committed to the following:

1) To nurture, as a priority, new work, and to showcase established works of high social consciousness in the portrayal of the African American experience.

2) To present the African American experience in forums wherein it expands the human vocabulary and appreciation of that experience by culturally diverse audiences through the innovative style of presentation and the vitality of the work.

3) To support a professional climate of training and employment for African American and other theatre artists and theatre professionals.

4) To restore the functionality and impact of theatre artists into the community-at-large, through programs of community service and outreach.⁴

⁴ Fact sheet from Jomandi Productions.
In its early years, Jomandi went where other companies would not go. They performed at prisons, schools, community centers and even the Internal Revenue Service. The offices of the company were first housed in the basement of Tom Jones' home. Five years later, the offices moved from his basement to a three-room office on Peachtree Street. From there, the offices moved once again to their present location: 1444 Mayson St., N.E. Atlanta, Georgia. Jomandi currently presents mainstage productions at the 14th Street Playhouse theatre in the Midtown section of Atlanta.

Under the leadership of co-artistic directors Tom Jones and Marsha Jackson, Jomandi’s artistic staff and performers have earned a reputation for exceptional performance with a repertoire that includes over twenty-five world premierses of work developed by the company. Their original work has included stage adaptations of literary works by writers including Sonia Sanchez, Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Jean Toomer and Langston Hughes. Original productions include The Wizard of Hip, Sisters and Madhearts.

Along with the mainstage productions, Jomandi has various community programs which serve all facets of the community. Those programs include a National/International tour, Outreach, Guest Artist/Teacher, Artist-In-Schools and Children's Theatre programs.
Touring shows have been an important part to Jomandi Productions. The National/International tour is a way of addressing one of the points of Jomandi’s mission - to expose their work to a global community. Performance tours not only cover local areas, but also locations from New York to Paris to Mississippi.

The Outreach Program works in cooperation with targeted schools, colleges, universities, social service and community-based agencies. Its Community Without Walls program maximizes the role of the arts in fields of education and community involvement.

The Guest Artist/Teacher program provides a home for Black Theatre Artists - writers, directors, actors, dancers, and technicians - who are influential in teaching the arts to a community-based audience. The Artist-In-Schools and Children’s Theatre programs target young audiences to be the next generation of theatre-goers by providing in-school theatre workshops for all grade levels and introducing students to the excitement of live theatre by offering special daytime performances for school classes.

Jomandi Productions encourages political and social consciousness by attracting a culturally diverse audience. Their programs reach audiences in Atlanta, both nationally and abroad, totaling over 35,000 annually.

The Crossroads Theater Company

The Crossroads Theater Company is considered one of the most significant and influential African American theatre companies in the country.
Founded in 1978 by Ricardo Khan and Lee Kenneth Richardson, Crossroads has presented positive images of African American life for all audiences.

In 1978, Ricardo Khan and Lee Richardson, two graduates of the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, decided that what downtown New Brunswick, New Jersey needed was a Black theatre. Both men shared a vision of providing a nurturing environment for African American theatre artists.

Ricardo Khan stated:

Like a lot of young people at the time, I wanted to change the world.... When I got out into the real world, I was in for a rude awakening. Agents, casting directors, producers in New York made it clear that as black artists our opportunities were extremely limited. So we decided that, rather than putting it off on someone else, we had to take charge ourselves. We wanted to create an environment where we and other black actors could do good, meaningful work in a professional and supportive environment.5

The only building the two men could find for their new theatre was an old warehouse in one of the most rundown neighborhoods in town. There was no parking, no lobby and a wood pillar in the middle of the stage. In 1991, the company entered a new stage when it moved from the century-old former garment factory to a new four million, 264-seat facility in downtown New Brunswick, in the heart of the New Brunswick Cultural Center.

The company’s mission is four-fold:

1) To provide a professional environment for artists in black theater to develop, explore and practice their craft.

5 Fact sheet from the Crossroads Theater Company.
2) To educate and to promote public interest in and support of professional Black theater, and the philosophy that Black Theater and culture are relevant to and should be shared by people of all backgrounds.

3) To present honest and positive portrayals of Black life, culture and art, thereby helping to build bridges of understanding between people in this society and the world.

4) To uphold the highest standards of artistic excellence in the production of professional Black theater.\(^6\)

Committed to presenting work that examines African American life and culture, the theatre at first produced revivals of African American plays and all-black productions of work by White playwrights. After a few years, Crossroads began to produce new work, a development that reflected the theatre's commitment to experimentation. By the end of the 1993-94 season, Crossroads had produced thirty-two world premieres and established itself as a leader in the development of new work for African American theatre.

Each season, Crossroads presents five full productions. The Associate Artists program provides a “home” for playwrights, actors and technical personnel to develop new work for African American theatre. Crossroads' associate artists include Ruby Dee, George C. Wolfe, Ntozake Shange, Avery Brooks and Harold Scott.

Outside of the mainstage productions, the company sponsors various community projects. “Genesis: A Celebration of New Voices in African

\(^6\) Fact sheet from the Crossroads Theater Company.
American Theatre is an annual festival which features a series of staged readings. Established in 1990, this festival has featured such works as Buses by Denise Nicholas, Oak and Ivy and Mothers, by Kathleen McGhee-Anderson, and The Disappearance, by Ruby Dee, all of which became mainstage productions.

Through its touring program, NewRoads, the company has reached out to new audiences in order to enrich diverse communities with the cultural and educational experience of fine African American theatre. Crossroads' productions have toured the country as well as abroad. Such productions include The Colored Museum, Spunk, The Rabbit Foot (Ground People), and Further Mo'.

Through its African American College Initiative Program, Crossroads works with theatre arts faculty and students at seven historically Black institutions - Howard University, North Carolina State University, Florida A & M University, Clark Atlanta University, Norfolk State University, North Carolina Central University and Hampton University. The program fosters the development of new talent through workshops, internships, faculty exchanges and arts advocacy. The Penelope E. Lattimer High School Internship promotes interest in the arts among young people, while Programming for Young Audiences brings theatrical pieces to schools and organizations. Crossroads also sponsors community forums and matinee youth summits to promote discourse on contemporary issues that are addressed on the stage.
Crossroads Theater is committed to continuing the future of African American theatre through its artistic and educational programming. Because of Ricardo Khan's approach to theatre production, the Crossroads Theater Company has built a reputation for presenting works that are culturally and artistically unique.

**Cultural Odyssey**

Cultural Odyssey is one of the Bay Area’s leading multi-cultural theatre companies. Since its inception in 1979, the company has been committed to the creation and production of original performance pieces by African American artists.

Founded by Antioch College graduate Idris Ackamoor, the company’s founding was inspired by Ackamoor’s own odyssey to Africa in 1972. Ackamoor stated:

It was my first exposure to the interdisciplinary nature of African culture - the integration of music, theater and dance. When I saw that holistic approach, with the storyteller - the griot - acting as musician, actor and dancer, I knew that this was the kind of performance I wanted to create. One that had no barriers.\(^7\)

When he left for Africa, Ackamoor was working as a musician, specializing in alto sax. When he returned to America, inspired both by African performance art and the integration of music, Ackamoor started to add other \(\text{\textsuperscript{7}}\) Fact sheet from Cultural Odyssey.

34
elements to his jazz group, the Pyramids - actors and dancers - and in 1979 Cultural Odyssey was born.

The mission statement of Cultural Odyssey is:

......to create, produce and present original experimental performance works that are firmly rooted in African American music, dance and theatrical traditions. Through our annual activities Cultural Odyssey stretches the traditional boundaries of American music, dance and theatre, presents an alternative, experimental approach to contemporary performance work and organizes neighborhood-based cultural programs that address the social needs and experiences of the African American community. To implement our mission we encourage, develop and stage interdisciplinary collaborative work, organize and conduct national and international tours, and operate a series of community-based programs serving ex-offenders and elementary and secondary school students.

Along with co-artistic director, Rhodessa Jones, Idris Ackamoor and Cultural Odyssey have premiered works developed and staged with nationally renowned artists such as choreographer/dancer Bill T. Jones, Obie award-winning playwright Ed Bullins, artist Keith Haring, director/playwright Brian Freeman and jazz percussionist Don Moye of the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Original works which have premiered at the company include The Rent Party, One Thousand and One Ideas, I think It's Gonna Work Out Fine, and An American Griot: The Life of a Jazz Musician.

In addition to the mainstage productions, Cultural Odyssey provides a wide variety of residency programs and workshops. Those programs include the African American Performance Art Festival and the Medea Project: Theatre for Incarcerated Women.
The African American Performance Art Festival began at the National Black Theater Festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina in 1993 as a forum for exploring the boundaries of theatre through interdisciplinary forms, performance poetry and social/political material. Initiated in 1994, the annual event is San Francisco's first African American performance art festival. The intention of the festival is to introduce African American artists to a San Francisco audience more familiar with a Eurocentric perspective on performance art. Featured artists have included Keith Antar Mason and the Hittite Empire, Laurie Carlos and Robbie McCauley, Rogar Guenveur Smith and Ntozake Shange.

The Medea Project offers a residency designed for city and county jails, halfway houses and prisons nationally. Founded in 1987 by co-artistic director Rhodessa Jones, the residency includes a staff of social workers, health care workers, and associate performing artists who work with incarcerated women, and ex-offenders to create a public theatrical performance. Their theatrical work with women in prison and on parole gives voice to the lives of African American female inmates in San Francisco's city and county jails.

Idris Ackamoor and Rhodessa Jones are two of San Francisco's most provocative and exciting performing artists. Cultural Odyssey's annual activities stretch the traditional boundaries of the performing arts by addressing the social needs and reflecting the experiences of the African American community.

---

8 Ibid.
The founders of the St. Louis Black Repertory Company, Jomandi Productions, Crossroads Theater and Cultural Odyssey envisioned a need to create an institution which had a source ("by us"), a target audience ("for us"), a particular content ("about us"), and a place in the community ("near us"). Each founder seemed to be driven by an inner force to make an enormous contribution to the African American community, through the medium of theatre.

All four companies had similar outlooks on how their institutions' missions would be implemented. Through their mission, each company placed emphasis in providing a creative outlet for the African American community. While the St. Louis Black Repertory Company provided a platform for various creative African American expressions, Jomandi Productions created an institution to preserve and present the African American cultural tradition. Crossroads Theater developed an environment for African Americans to develop their artistic skills, and Cultural Odyssey created an institution which was rooted in the African American artistic tradition of dance, music and theatre. Collectively, the four companies created institutions for African Americans to focus inward and develop culturally, artistically, and socially.

The founders of the St. Louis Black Repertory Company, Jomandi Productions, Crossroads Theater and Cultural Odyssey identified needs for these institutions in their respective communities. The positive imagery for and about African Americans was a major priority within these institutions. Therefore, the companies' need to identify with the Black masses was fulfilled.
through not only their foundings, but also through the theatre pieces each company presented.
CHAPTER FOUR
LITERATURE ON STAGE

As an instrument for reflection and analysis, theatre is viewed as a continuous means to rediscover, recapture, and reinvent African American cultural heritage. As a space where people can be confronted by their history, theatre reshapes and energizes the past. In dramatic disclosure, the past becomes an important element of the total history of African Americans, therefore, bearing both an historical and a mythical relation to time.

The creation of African American drama helps to raise an alternate image of conventional drama that defines the collective values and ideals, the conflicts within the group as well as its desire for understanding African American culture. African American drama is constructed around the double perspective of destroying the foreign code imposed by dominant ideology and developing its own familiar ideology relevant to the African American experience. In this instance, drama seeks to reunify group symbols and formulate them into a language or a model situation.

The social approach of drama is a reflection of society and culture. The world of a drama is a composition of people, actions, and events that are selected out of those in the real world. Therefore, direct relationships exist between African American literature and African American realities.
Through his work, the African American playwright, consciously and unconsciously, highlights certain motives, characters, settings, and strategies. A facet of African American life is reflected in the work produced. The St. Louis Black Repertory Company, Jomandi Productions, Crossroads Theater Company and Cultural Odyssey each exemplifies literary work as being cultural evidence that there is an intersection where social and cultural forces meet. Each piece of work examined exemplifies a realistic portrayal of the African American experience. With each diverse piece, the playwright defines his/her role in shaping and advancing African American life through the medium of theatre.

The Saint Louis Black Repertory Company


These men were a far cry from Amos and Andy and the Black Panther Party was definitely not the Brady Bunch, and they were not the NAACP. But ultimately, it was the same media that brought me those first images of the Panthers that distorted and destroyed all the Party stood for.¹

¹ Fact sheet from the St. Louis Black Repertory Company.
Originally named the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, this group was founded in Oakland, California by twenty-five year old Huey Newton and thirty-year old Bobby Seale. Seale was the Party’s chairman and Newton the Minister of Defense. The name, “the Panthers”, was inspired by Alabama’s Lowndes County Freedom Organization which first adopted the black panther symbol.

In addition to the teachings of Mao Tse-Tung, the Panther founders acknowledged Malcolm X among the leaders who influenced the shaping of the panther’s philosophical and political doctrine and teachings. Malcolm X’s emphasis on self-defense, effort to empower African Americans with knowledge, self-knowledge and self-determination “by any means necessary” undergirded the ideology and platform of the Party.

The Panther Party represented one of the first concrete attempts to spell out the meaning of “Black Power”. In 1968, the party began community programs for Black children, a petition campaign for community control of police, and efforts to establish free health clinics and liberation schools in the Black community.

For all of these reasons, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover singled out the Panthers as a threat to the internal security of the country. The Party was accused of assaulting and killing police, staging confrontations and inciting riots. Because of exploitation by the FBI and internal disputes, the party literally self-destructed.
Servant of the People: The Rise and Fall of Huey P. Newton took dramatic license to portray the infiltration of the party, the undermining of the public image of the leadership, and the demise of the Party and its leaders. As revolutionaries of thought, activists, and nationalists, the Black Panthers represented one voice in the liberation movement. Producing Director Ron Himes states:

I chose this play (to open our subscription season) because of its intense, often uncomfortable look inside one of the most controversial and misunderstood periods of African-American history, the Black Panther movement and its leader Huey Newton, the Supreme Servant of the People.²

Playwright Robert Alexander, who has been called “the Malcolm X of the theatre,” did not want audiences to view this play passively.³ He wanted to see arguments and discussions during the intermission. He wanted to create public awareness of problems. The playwright states, “If we don't do this in theatre, where are we going to do it?”⁴

The play placed a dramatic abstraction of the Panther Party within the context of images of today’s urban violence and its youthful perpetrators. Ron Himes notes:

The playwright, through detailed research, has put together a work that touches all sides of the debate and presents these historical figures as human beings, with moments of brilliance as well as moments of suspicion, self-importance and cruelty. I believe this play, through its combination of camera-like realism and stylized

---

³ Fact sheet from the St. Louis Black Repertory Company.
⁴ Ibid.
imagery, will offer a new level of understanding to those who supported the Black Panther Party, those who saw it as a threat to King’s legacy of nonviolence, an those of younger generations who do not know the history of the BPP but who replay its destruction every day in the streets.5

Jomandi Productions

The 1986-1987 season of Jomandi Productions opened with August Wilson’s Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom. The drama, developed at Yale Repertory, opened on Broadway in 1984. It won the New York Critics Circle Award for the season’s best play, catapulting Wilson to the forefront of new American playwrights.

For Wilson, the blues is the African American community’s cultural response to the world. The blues is a connective force that links the past with the present, and the present with the future. According to Wilson:

……blues is the best literature we have. If you look at the singers, they actually follow a long line all the way back to Africa, and various other parts of the world. They are carriers of ideas - like the troubadours in Europe. Except in American society they were not valued, except among the black folks who understood. I’ve always thought of them as sacred because of the sacred tasks they took upon themselves - to disseminate this information and carry these cultural values of the people. And I found that white America would very often abuse them. I don’t think that it was without purpose, in the sense that the blues and music have always been at the forefront in the development of the character and consciousness of Black America, and people have senselessly destroyed that or stopped that.

Then you're taking away from the people their self-definition - in essence, their self-determination.\(^6\)

The concept of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* derives from this comment. Although August Wilson’s 1984 critically-acclaimed play revolved around the life of the one-time blues legend Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, it was not a biographical piece. The occurrences in her life are relevant to the plot of this production.

Gertrude “Ma” Rainey was born April 26, 1886, in Columbus, Georgia. Rainey, while on circuit in 1902 in a small Missouri town, heard a woman sing “a blues”. Rainey liked the song and incorporated it into her act, calling it simply “the blues”.

Her popularity in Northern cities during the mid-to-late 1920s was supported largely by Southern Blacks, who found in her blues songs comfort from the alienation and disillusionment of city life. Her down-home, earthy style, her naughty lyrics, and her rugged looks were welcomed by weary Southern Blacks, no longer impressed by the deceptive glamour of the North. Her blues, therefore, was a gift to her people, for she intimately understood their miseries.

Ma Rainey, along with other women singers of that era, came to the forefront when the recording industry discovered their high profit potential in the

race market in 1920. Their records were to be sold exclusively in the Black community. Their careers were influenced greatly by the record industry, and in most cases, the industry also contributed to the demise of their careers as the shift was made to the recording of male blues singers and the increasingly popular dance bands in the last years of the 1920s and the early 1930s.

Ma Rainey’s importance was only beginning to gain recognition at the time of her death of coronary heart disease on December 22, 1939, in Columbus, Georgia, at age seventy-three.

By singing the blues, Ma Rainey and other women singers became their own cultural historians. Based on this theory, Wilson, through Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, positioned African Americans as the subject of this play, offering a countertext to traditional American history.

The play highlights the events of the rehearsal prior to the actual recording session in Chicago 1927. Detained by a freak car accident involving her nephew, Ma Rainey came late to a recording studio where she was scheduled to perform several of her popular works for an album. Already irritable because of this, her White promoters, Sturdyvant and Irvin, grumbled as she continued to stall by demanding a Coca-Cola, complaining about the chilly studio, and insisting that her stuttering nephew Sylvester be allowed to announce her on the album before she sang.

While Ma Rainey tried the patience of her two promoters, her musicians, all of whom were African Americans, waited in the basement band room. Their
conversations gradually intensified and unexpectedly erupted in a fatal stabbing. In a gradual chain of events, this otherwise commonplace incident led to murder.

The play was about racism in the recording industry in the 1920s when, at least for African Americans, singing the blues was a reflection of their everyday circumstances. Record company owners were interested in their Black artists only for monetary reasons. According to Tom Jones, Jomandi's co-artistic director and director of the play:

The show is a totally engaging and, at times, amusing variation on the themes of racism in the recording industry in the 1920s. That's when "race records" were invented. They were recordings primarily of Black female singers, and the records were sold in the Black community. I'm using the blues to underscore the action of the drama. Eighty percent of our music will be performed live.7

With Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, the playwright uses the blues to constitute an expressive matrix that reflects the complexities of African American culture. The blues is significant in defining the social structure of America. Through the recording session, the characters exemplify the plight of institutional racism. This piece of work functions as a tool in order to reawaken cultural consciousness. August Wilson challenges the secondary position of African Americans within American history by conceptualizing Ma Rainey's experiences and, in turn, creating an opportunity for the Black community to examine and define itself.

The Crossroads Theater Company

Sheila's Day, which takes place in the U.S. South of 1965 and the South Africa of 1972, is a joint narrative of two women innocently swept up in the civil and human-rights struggles in their respective countries. It sets the periods of American civil rights protests in the fifties and sixties alongside the overt breakout of the South African revolutionary struggle. Written by Soweto-born playwright Duma Ndlovu and directed by Mbongeni Ngema of Sarafina fame, it premiered at Crossroads Theater in September 1989, becoming the first play in which African American and South African actors shared that stage.⁸

Qedusizi Maphalala, arriving in Johannesburg from Xululand to seek work, found herself caught in a protest by 20,000 women against the passbooks that Blacks must carry. She did not find work, but South African justice: six months in prison, digging potatoes with her bare hands, being sexually abused by a guard. Released, she found herself working as a "Sheila," the name domestics were known by because their White employers did not want to bother learning their real names. After long and faithful service, she asked her employer to help her get a legal work permit, but was summarily fired when her prison past was revealed. Back among her people, she was trapped in the

⁸ Fact sheet from the Crossroads Theater Company.
Sharpville massacre, where a child was blown to bits before her eyes and her cousin was shot to death.

Mary Ruby Lee Thomas was the handmaiden of history, even if by accident. On a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, on her way home from her first job as a domestic, she was witness to a dispute between the driver and a Black woman who refused to move to the back. The next day Ruby Lee was fired for arriving late to work because of the bus boycott touched off by Rosa Parks, a Black woman.

Ruby Lee was hired as a dishwasher in Woolworth's. It was the one where the lunchcounter sit-ins began in 1958. Once again, she lost her job. In 1961 she left her position as a maid to take a bus home to Marion, Alabama to visit her ailing mother. The bus from Montgomery, carrying freedom riders, was firebombed by bigots. Back in Marion, she was in the company of a childhood friend who was killed by Whites on the rampage at a voter-registration drive.

Although these two women were thousands of miles apart, there were startling similarities which were explored through the intertwined tales of these women. They both left their rural homes and headed for the big city desiring nothing more than a job. What they found instead was abuse, discrimination, poverty, and misery. Even though neither of them was politicized to the point of becoming activists, they, and the millions like them, were in themselves the focus of the whole struggle.
**Sheila's Day** was a drama that connected the struggles in the Black diaspora through the women who had borne witness to them. The unfolding of the two women's respective tales offered the opportunity for the splendid mingling of music and were told with a moving directness and simplicity.

Since its development at Crossroads Theater by playwright Duma Ndlovu and director Mbongeni Ngema, the play has played in New York, Toronto, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and - most impressively - in Grahamstown, South Africa, at the famous Standard Bank National Arts Festival.

Playwright Ndlovu stated:

> The South African engagement of Sheila's Day is the only time I am aware of, that a theatrical co-production - a collaboration between American and South African theatre artists - has been presented in South Africa.\(^9\)

**Sheila's Day** is a groundbreaking piece for Crossroads Theater.

According to artistic director Ricardo Khan:

> We’re forging new territory with Sheila’s Day. One day, preparing to open the play, one of the South African actresses in the show told us that her grandmother used to tell her stories about how young children were taken away to be sold into slavery. She felt at that moment, working on Sheila’s Day that she had ‘found’ those children. At that moment, for me, there was a great realization that, in fact, we weren’t dealing with two separate cultures, but that we were dealing with one. For a moment, I really understood what it meant to be an African American. We have been cut off from our history and are, in a sense, journeying back to reconnect ourselves. From the start we all had the need from both sides of the ocean to reach toward each other. This is why the two-continent nature of the play has been so important to us, because it’s been about cultural reconnection. Finally, we were able to go beyond the stage and take us all home.\(^10\)

---

\(^9\) Fact sheet from the Crossroads Theater Company.  
\(^10\) Ibid.
Sheila’s Day is a polished work which reflects parallel struggles and spiritual triumphs of Black women in both South Africa and the United States. It celebrates the inextricable bonds that South African and African American women discover. It shows that African peoples benefit from the African traditions of viewing error as a learning tool, and of declaring commonality through an in-depth knowledge about ancestors. Sheila’s Day demonstrates that lessons offer commonalties to peoples, regardless of time and space. Therefore, this play reflects a tangible bond within the Black community.

Cultural Odyssey

In 1990, Cultural Odyssey premiered its original work Big Butt Girls, Hard-Headed-Women. Since its premiere, the play has toured such cities as St. Louis, Baltimore, St. Paul, Minnesota, and New York. Created by co-artistic director Rhodessa Jones, this play and Cultural Odyssey were awarded a 1993 Bessie Award, which is the New York Dance and Performance Award.

In 1987, as part of her work for the California Arts Council, Ms. Jones taught aerobics at the San Francisco County Jail. Ms. Jones shifted the focus of the class from exercise to communication, in which she and the inmates began sharing their experiences. Jones was not allowed to tape-record her conversations in the jail so she would go home at night and write down what the women said. According to Jones:
We had to communicate. I knew as an artist that this was a fertile place. I felt it important to find a way for these women to have a voice. The drama was always there, inherent in the monologues. I would come home some nights and cry my eyes out. So I had to work to bring out the comedy that was there in the midst of all the tragedy. It is not pretty at times.11

**Big Butt Girls**, **Hard-Headed Women** was derived from her experience at the county jail.

Her admiration of women who refuse to bend to societal norms led to the title she selected for the show. The title first came to her when she was at the jail waiting for her class to begin, and a large, shackled woman was being taken somewhere by a guard. As the woman passed by, Ms. Jones timidly said, “Take care of yourself,” and the woman responded, “Girl, don’t worry about me.” Ms. Jones watched her walk away, thinking how strongly and confidently this particular “big-butted” woman marched onward.12

Jones and co-artistic director Idris Ackamoor, the show’s musical director, fashioned an eighty-minute piece that told the stories of four women - composite portraits in some cases. The women are Regina Brown, Mama Pearl, Lena Serentina and Doris. Jones’ solo performance also included bits of Jones playing herself and her psyche, which she presented as a separate character who talked to the audience. Ackamoor’s saxophone was like a separate voice in the performance, helping to move the piece from one character to another.

11 Fact sheet from Cultural Odyssey.
12 Ibid.
The show was inspired and dedicated to Brown, a prostitute who was murdered one year after her second release from jail. She portrayed Brown as tough and wary, a woman whose body was her weapon and whose anthem was, "Any and everybody will use you. So you best get usin' first."\textsuperscript{13}

Mama Pearl was the old-timer in the group, bewildered by the naiveté of the young women in jail. As Mama Pearl, Jones aged forty years by literally turning around and looking up to meet the gaze of the character. This transformation, done with no makeup, costumes or props, was one of many startling changes during this one-woman show.

As Lena Serentina, Jones stepped out of a detox cell to receive honors as valedictorian of her high school class, then showed in a matter of moments how she lost her dream of dancing on Broadway, became hooked on drugs, was cast out from her family and lost connection to the world. With a simple gesture, she returned to the reality of her nightmare behind bars. Young Doris, another character, was a nineteen-year-old who constantly sucked her thumb and cried for her mother.

Although much of the subject matter involved heavy doses of life-threatening violence, adult situations and strong language, Jones managed to

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
find ironic humor in her seemingly misplaced role as she led her exercise class from hell through its daily paces. More importantly, Big Butt Girls, Hard-Headed Women suggested that physical awareness held the seeds for spiritual development and growth. The commitment of Jones’ impersonations gave the incarcerated women an uncanny sense of realism. The portrayal of even the coarsest women, however, was as poetic as it was realistic.

Interracial relations, manifestations of oppression, forms of injustice, and manipulation of ethnic identity by White institutions were reflected in each company’s work. The dramatization of the diverse stories were largely affected by the playwright’s perception of American society. Although the St. Louis Black Repertory Company’s Servant of the People: The Rise and Fall of Huey P. Newton and Jomandi Productions’ Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom were relatively based on two prominent African American historical figures, the works contextually identified social ills that were occurring during those particular eras. Crossroads Theater Company’s Sheila’s Day was also from the socio-political context from both American and African societies during a specific time in history. Through Big Butt Girls, Hard-Headed Women, Cultural Odyssey reflected on contemporary social challenges based on the four incarcerated women.

These works embraced the goals of restoring historical continuity. Each piece of work examined was created to offer metaphorical reflections on historical and contemporary events. Each work has a linkage with the African
American experience. Although the playwright may have bent certain aspects of social reality to fit his/her social and political commitments, each work is pertinent in defining African American culture.

The playwrights of the various plays developed these works as cultural expressions combining literature, art, and sociology. They each collected, analyzed and described authentic information based on the African American experience. From the information, the playwrights disseminated a historical context to the African American audience through the mainstage productions. The productions were then the occasions for discussing a broader agenda in the African American community.
Community-based art is significant in serving the community which supports it. It is the duty of the community artist to help advance the social, political and economic progress of the African American community. The role of the community artist, who carries progressive African American traditions, must be elevated as a priority for preservation, support and development. Therefore, that artist must diligently work to identify methods to support and expand centers of progressive artistic and cultural entities within the African American community.

The St. Louis Black Repertory Company, Jomandi Productions, Crossroads Theater Company and Cultural Odyssey have gone beyond the mainstage to artistically cultivate the African American community. The artists within the companies are redefining these institutions by unleashing the full power of art to transform the community. Their diverse community projects illustrate how each company is functioning as an institution in achieving social, political, and economic goals within the African American community.
The Saint Louis Black Repertory Company

Since its inception in 1976, a mission of the St. Louis Black Repertory Company has been to tour, teach, and perform for young people and families. The Black Rep has one of the most extensive Education and Community Programs of any performing arts organization in St. Louis. They offer several programs including workshops, residencies, storytelling, and professional intern programs. A significant part of the Education and Community Programs is the award-winning Touring Company.

The main goal of the Touring Company is to provide quality performances and dramatic instruction for young people, thereby cultivating future audiences through early exposure. The target groups range from the inner-city and rural students who have less opportunity for exposure to the theatre experience, to students attending the Visual and Performing Arts schools, as well as county, parochial and private schools.

The Black Rep’s award-winning Touring Company performs more than 150 shows each year for schools, community centers, corporations, churches and other organizations in St. Louis and throughout the midwest region. Over 50,000 children are served. The touring shows are designed according to grade

---

1 Fact sheet from the St. Louis Black Repertory Company.
level appropriateness and are developed to complement certain curriculum studies, such as language arts and social studies.

The Touring Company performs five 55-minute shows per season. These shows are comprised of members of the Professional Intern Program. The performances range from *The Island of Yaki Yim Bamboo*, a show for grades Kindergarten through Six, to *Stamping, Shouting, and Singing Home*, a show for grades six through adults.

The performance is accompanied by an education packet including information and pre- and post-show activities designed to inform and enlighten instructors and students. The performance experience can be used to develop post-show activities that:

1. develop the imagination;
2. stimulate further practice in writing, thinking and oral skills;
3. foster interest in participating in the arts;
4. encourage study in history and literature, specifically African American;
5. develop appreciation for the unique artistic expression of diverse culture.²

Through the Touring Company, the St. Louis Black Repertory Company offers the community an outlet for artistic development. It not only expresses the artistry of the company, but also gives the community audience an opportunity to

² Ibid.
become part of the production. Therefore, community involvement plays an intricate role within the Touring Company.

Jomandi Productions

Jomandi Productions’ Community Without Walls maximizes the role of the arts in fields of education, social service, and community involvement. Working in cooperation with targeted schools, colleges, universities, social service, and community based agencies, Jomandi’s artists assist in the development of creative approaches unique to each agency. They serve the needs of special constituencies including youth, senior citizens, the economically disadvantaged, and students seeking internships and professional careers in the arts. The components of Community Without Walls are In-School Arts Programs, Performance Observations and Forum Series, Student Internships, and Arts-In Service. Another aspect of Jomandi’s commitment to the community is through its volunteer program.

Volunteerism has played an important role at Jomandi. Organized and supervised by the Development Director, the volunteers are assigned a variety of duties. These duties consist of ushering, office work and distributing flyers. According to co-founder Tom Jones:

This is my feeling about what volunteerism is. I’ve kind of broken the tradition on feeling that every theater should have a volunteer crew, and I may be a minority in my own organization, but I don’t think you need a lot of volunteers. I think what you really need is to identify
those people on a project-oriented basis, which has a beginning, middle and end, in terms of periods of time. After that, the job's done. If they want to stay on, then they stay on for as long as they can stay on, to do whatever it is they want to do.³

Volunteers at Jomandi are appreciated for their time and effort. At the end of each season, volunteers are invited to the annual company picnic and are occasionally invited to cast parties given at Tom Jones' home. According to Jones:

There's nothing structured that we have where we say, at the end of a volunteer's term that we are going to do this to make sure we reward them. We say thank you. If people come to you, they come to you because their reward is the fact that they're doing something to make a contribution..... I figure that people do things because they have a profound wish and need to, so if they're not getting any gratification out of doing their volunteer work, then they shouldn't do it. And me trying to gratify them to keep on working and contributing isn't going to give them any satisfaction.⁴

Through the Volunteer Program, Jomandi Productions signifies the importance of community involvement and participation in African American theatre. This program allows the community audience to make a contribution to the company. They are putting forth an effort to become involved in the totality of Jomandi Productions.

---

⁴ Ibid, 44-45.
Crossroads Theater’s Community and Education Department has the goal to expose new audiences to positive portrayals of African American culture, history and art. The program also serves to enrich the lives of students by enhancing self image and reinforcing curriculum and subject areas. Such a program that exists under this department is the African American College Initiative Program (A.A.C.I.P).

The African American College Initiative Program is a program that deals with students and faculty at historically Black colleges and universities or institutions offering African American theatre programs. A.A.C.I.P.’s mission is to:

1. Establish a professional collaboration between Crossroads and African American academic institutions as well as institutions with Black theatre departments, that are actively involved in the education and promotion of the arts.

2. Sustain the future of the African American experience in American theatre by empowering future generations to support and protect cultural institutions.

3. Provide training grounds for future leadership in the arts.

4. Sensitize audiences to the importance of art as a vital component of quality education.


6. Provide resources and support systems for the artistic collaborative team in the exploration of production concepts and script development. 

---

5 Fact sheet from the Crossroads Theater Company.
6 Ibid.
A.A.C.I.P. was formed in 1990 when a conference was held on the campus of Howard University in Washington, D.C. to begin the dialogue for bridging the gap between theatre and academia. A variety of African American university professors and members of Crossroads' staff engaged in a two-day conference designed to identify ways to collectively promote and preserve the African American art form. The outcome of this effort resulted in the formulation of A.A.C.I.P.'s structure.

Through the four components of arts advocacy, workshops, faculty/student exchange and internship, theatre students receive hands-on experience in administration or production auditions and information on actors' unions, participate in retreats and engage in rap sessions with Crossroads staff. According to Crossroads co-founder Ricardo Khan:

Our goal is to generate a body of people in our society who will be able to support and protect the keepers of culture. It's a self-empowerment project, in global terms. I consider Crossroads a global theatre..... Our challenge is to reverse the trend of history of now support from individuals, cultural and educational institutions. It must be started in the hearts of young folks.7

What began as a modest internship experiment has grown into a multi-faceted program that involves students and professors from Howard University,
North Carolina State University, Florida A & M University, Clark Atlanta University, Norfolk State University, North Carolina Central University and Hampton University. According to Melanie Daniels-Ford, A.A.C.I.P.'s director:

The whole concept is to create a mechanism through which African American theatre is supported, protected, and preserved. We expose students to theatre, and hopefully, in the long term, they will protect and support all of our cultural institutions.\(^8\)

Through the African American College Initiative Program (A.A.C.I.P.), Crossroads Theater Company is helping to empower a future generation of artists. The program emphasizes on the development of viable career skills and the importance of art as a vital component of a quality education. The A.A.C.I.P. enhances the Black community by enriching the artistic talents of professionals, educators and students.

**Cultural Odyssey**

The African American Performance Art Festival affirms Cultural Odyssey's commitment to providing a responsive environment that nurtures the presentation and creation of new work representing a broad spectrum of American culture. The Art Festival is the first dramatic festival in the Bay area devoted exclusively to the field of African American performance.\(^9\)

---

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Fact sheet from Cultural Odyssey.
The Art Festival stems from Cultural Odyssey's 1993 participation in the National Black Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Co-artistic director and festival director Idris Ackamoor wanted to introduce new performances to the rather traditional Black Theater Festival. According to Ackamoor:

There had been a concern that the work showcased at the Winston-Salem festival was too traditional. It was standard Black-theater fare, musicals and dramas. But there were 40,000 or 50,000 Black people descending on this town, and we wanted to show them something special.¹⁰

After presenting his idea to Larry Leon Hamlin, the festival's director, Ackamoor began to develop a week-long program which would feature innovative, shocking and confrontational performances. Encouraged by nightly sold-out performances, Ackamoor decided to duplicate the festival in San Francisco.

The annual African American Art Festival features dozens of Bay Area and nationally-recognized African American dancers, musicians, actors and poets. This five-day festival is a forum for exploring the boundaries of theatre through interdisciplinary forms, performance poetry and social/political material. It includes workshops, lectures and post-performance discussion to introduce local and national artists to a San Francisco audience. Ackamoor says of the festival:

This may be too much for many Black audiences. Many Black theatergoers are used to Raisin in the Sun or August Wilson. This

¹⁰ Ibid.
festival is somewhat experimental, but it's about contemporary issues. It's all in the here-and-now. We're pushing the envelope here, but that is the essence of this festival.11

The African American Art Festival works to stretch the boundaries of theatre through new works representing a broad spectrum of American culture. The intention is to present Cultural Odyssey and the works of his artistic peers to a wider audience, both Black and White. This festival enhances the Black Community through an innovative approach to the performing arts.

The theatrical experience in the African American community does not limit itself to mainstage productions, and should not be considered apart from its audience. The emphasis on audience requires that artists develop innovative methods for analyzing and comprehending the nature of theatre in the African American community. The four companies created programs that would enhance the African American community.

The St. Louis Black Repertory Company's Touring Company strives to give a young audience a chance to expand their artistic horizons. The company gives them a little perception of the arts as educational and entertainment endeavors. It helps the young audience to become a part of the theatrical experience. Jomandi Productions' Volunteer Program gives those in the community the opportunity to play a supportive role in the functioning of the

11 Ibid.
theatre. This program allows volunteers to examine which steps are taken before a production is presented on stage. Volunteers are essential in their contributions of time and are an integral part of the theatre’s survival.

Crossroads Theater Company’s African American College Initiative Program collaborates with some Black historical colleges in order to train African American theatre students in a professional climate and provide mentorship and contacts for young people hoping to succeed in theatre. The program empowers a future generation of artists who will continue to revitalize African American theatre in the Black community. The African American Performance Art Festival, presented by Cultural Odyssey, serves as an act of public communion by sharing and presenting adversity of African American artists to the community. The festival presents artists who are offering innovative ways in creatively expressing themselves. These innovative expressions are an intricate part of increasing the community’s knowledge of African American theatre.

Although the four companies have various community projects, they collectively serve to achieve social, political and economic goals for the African American community. The project is significant because of its role in artistically enhancing the Black community. They have a well-defined concept of cultural progression and see theatre as having an edifying purpose beyond entertainment. There is a deeper meaning to lend direction to the revitalization impulses emerging from the African American community. Therefore, these companies have built on the well-established tradition of extended families in the
African American community. The theatre interest then becomes the nexus for the growth and development of those in the community.
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

This thesis has aesthetically defined four contemporary African American theatre companies. Examining the St. Louis Black Repertory Company, Jomandi Productions, the Crossroads Theater Company and Cultural Odyssey, this study has defined how these companies are functioning within Amiri Baraka’s Black Aesthetic parameter.

While Chapter One gave an historical overview of African American theatre and provided the theoretical framework for this study, Chapter Two defined the Black Aesthetic, with emphasis on Baraka’s aesthetic concept. The following three chapters specified a philosophy from Baraka’s Black Aesthetic to define how the four companies are functioning within this parameter.

Chapter Three defined how the four companies were founded in order to establish ties with the Black Community and African American culture. Beginning with a radical assessment of the function and practice of dramatic art in American society, the four companies sought to modify the perceptions and the procedures of African American theatre. The founding of the four companies helped to institutionalize an exploration of Black culture through the theatre.
The productions that were examined in Chapter Four exemplified how the four companies are projecting the African American experience. Through the literature presented on the mainstage, these companies are exclusively giving a voice to the Black audience. African American drama reclaims the unquestionable right to express a life that no one else can experience and properly convey. Therefore, the works the four companies presented reflect a shared language by those in the African American community.

Chapter Five emphasized the various community projects the four companies sponsored. The various projects encourage the participation of those in the Black community. These projects not only allow the Black community to participate in the theatrical experience, but also serve as social and educational outlets within the community.

The St. Louis Black Repertory Company, Jomandi Productions, the Crossroads Theater Company and Cultural Odyssey are sociocultural institutions that share a vision to present authentic African American heritage. These companies have collectively made an impact in African American theatre. They serve as tools for research into ethnic identity and as means of artistically expressing that identity. Their philosophies derive from the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and are a combination of African tradition and contemporary American culture.

Theatre in the African American community is an event and an occasion to explore the many nuances of existence as experienced by African Americans.
African American artists have a community which shares a cultural framework and a unique history. It is a community filled with passionate energies and natural expressiveness. Therefore, the artists must continue to build cultural institutions on those insights.

   In order for this cultural institution to continue its existence, African American artists must:
   
   1. have an immersion of their spirits and intellects in authentic forms of Black expression;
   
   2. possess an understanding of the essential characteristics of that expression which strikes responding chords of recognition and participation of the African American audience;
   
   3. be familiar with the color of Black verbal expression in order to produce mainstage productions;
   
   4. have communal gatherings to show they are educators within the African American community.¹

   The continued sharing of these strategies will serve to strengthen African American theatre as it prepares to go into the twenty-first century. Recognition of these functions exemplifies why this theatre must continue.

¹ Errol Hill, “Black Theatre in Form and Style” The Black Scholar Volume 10, Number 10, July/August 1979: 30-31.
Bibliography


Bond, Frederick W. *The Negro and the Drama: The Direct and Indirect Contribution Which the American Negro Has Made to Drama and Legitimate Stage, with the Underlying Conditions Responsible*. Maryland: McGrath Publishing Company, 1969.


Cultural Odyssey fact sheet, n.d.


Jomandi Productions fact sheet, n.d.


The Saint Louis Black Repertory Company fact sheet, n.d.


