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# Dashiki Project Theatre: black identity and beyond

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DASHIKI PROJECT THEATRE:  
BLACK IDENTITY AND BEYOND

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

The Department of Theatre

by  
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## Abstract

At a cast party following a Dillard University theatre production in 1965, Guy West, a senior in theatre, stated that one of his dreams was to perform in his own theatre. These remarks by West proved to be the inspiration that began New Orleans' Dashiki Project Theatre. Prior to 1965, Free Southern Theater was the only theatre of the black experience in New Orleans. Through Dashiki Project Theatre, the black community found another opportunity to relate to black experience through the medium of theatrical performance.

In the mid-sixties Theodore Gilliam, a Dillard University professor, and his associates founded Dashiki Project Theatre in New Orleans. For more than twenty years Dashiki staged many plays, including new black plays as well as published traditional plays. This theatre proved to be the second most prolific black theatre in the South during the 1960s. Despite the important contributions of this theatre, only a minimum of scholarly research has examined its existence.

This dissertation chronicles the history of Dashiki Project Theatre, examines how the theatre related to the Black Arts Movement of the sixties and seventies, and highlights how the theatre established a more inclusive black identity in its structure as well as in its productions. To accomplish these goals, this work examines evidence in the form of books, articles, theatre reviews, playbills, and research in the form of personal interviews with key figures and constituents associated with Dashiki. Thus, this study results in the first comprehensive documentation of Dashiki's existence, the Black Arts Movement's impact on it, and the establishing of a unique black identity.

In focusing on the development and historical significance of Dashiki Project Theatre through the context of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, this dissertation explains how Dashiki Project Theatre reflected the tastes, the guidance, and the vision of Ted Gilliam. It

also explains how Dashiki Project Theatre avoided political posturing while subtly making choices that would impact New Orleans society, choices that did not always align with the philosophies of the more militant movements of the 1960s. This study, the first to deal with the impact and significance of this vital theatre, recognizes and documents the contributions of a notable black theatre operation that scholarship has ignored.

## Chapter One

### Hypothesis, Methodology, and Resources

From its initial conception as a performance ensemble to its maturation as a recognized, legitimate theatre company, Dashiki Project Theatre demonstrated a rare commitment to excellence and freedom in the arts of the South. Dashiki Project Theatre compellingly spoke to the needs of the black community, at a time when black identity was in crisis. Founded in New Orleans, a city of cultural fluidity, Dashiki Project Theatre proved an integral ingredient in the life blood that coursed through the artistic veins of New Orleans black culture, for this theatre nurtured music, dance, theatre, and poetry, and gave timely inspiration and purpose to the city's black population. Moreover, with a new style of writing, acting, and staging, the Dashiki Project Theatre, in conjunction with other black theatres of the 1960s, provided a model for black American artists everywhere, encouraging them to gain their rightful place in American society.

Theodore Gilliam and his artistic associates founded Dashiki Project Theatre in New Orleans in the mid-1960s. The theatre's earliest participants had been affiliated with Dillard University, an historically black college. These founders advocated an artistic rather than a political mission, one more focused on aesthetics and performance. The germinal seed of Dashiki took root at a cast party when one of Gilliam's students from Dillard University expressed a desire to continue performing after graduation. Gilliam honored this desire, and the company was born. Offering a much-valued venue for local performers, Dashiki Project Theatre produced many black works, new plays as well as published plays. In time, it became one of the most prolific black theatres in the country.



Dashiki Project Theatre's significance and uniqueness demand study. Dashiki Project Theatre was one of only two black theatres operating in the Deep South in the 1960s. For purposes of black legacy alone, this theatre deserves attention. In fact, Dashiki Project Theatre was the first legitimate black theatre to originate directly in New Orleans, a city with an enormous black population and an incredible history of black artists, jazz musicians, and gospel musicians. Kim Lacy Rogers in *Righteous Lives* states:

Musicians like Jelly Roll Morton began their careers in New Orleans—the birthplace of jazz—playing music in the bordellos of the notorious Storyville district. Morton and his colleagues were part of a long tradition of Creole and African-American musicians who fused African, Southern, and Caribbean rhythms into an indigenous American art form. (1)

Nationally recognized music performers Louis Armstrong and Mahalia Jackson spent many of their most successful years as artists in New Orleans. Rogers writes: “New Orleans remained a sensualist’s delight—the home of clubs, music, food, and pleasure” (1). Yet, no study has given significant recognition to any of the city’s successful black theatrical performers. Appropriately, this dissertation addresses that neglected aspect of the city’s black culture.

Free Southern Theater, Dashiki’s counterpart in the South, originated in Mississippi although it eventually made its home in New Orleans. Unlike the Free Southern Theater, however, Dashiki, while beginning with only black personnel, extended its outreach to include other races as the theatre grew. Departing significantly from the philosophy of the Black Arts Movement, Dashiki Project Theatre established a new and more inclusive philosophy of black identity and consciousness. The ambivalence surrounding this theatre in large part issued from Dashiki’s movement away from a

separatist stance, though it remained committed to an uplifting of the black artist in every way possible.

The goal of this dissertation is two-fold: one, to give an historical account of Dashiki Project Theatre and to, therefore, address the imbalance in scholarship regarding black theatre companies; second, to discuss how Dashiki Project Theatre's vision relates to the Black Arts Movement's understanding of identity, especially black identity.

Despite the important contributions of Dashiki Project Theatre, only a paucity of research has examined the company. This dissertation addresses that imbalance in scholarship. Most histories of modern American theatre either casually mention the formation of black theatres or exclude them entirely. In general, documentation of black theatres in America is scant. James Hatch in his article, "Here Comes Everybody: Scholarship and Black Theatre History," makes an interesting observation:

The handsomely illustrated, award-winning *Theatre in America: Two Hundred Years of Productions* by Mary C. Henderson is indexed to nearly 2,200 theatre artists, companies, and plays—15 are Blacks, and 6 of those are noted for their participation in white shows. Among the dozens missing are the internationally acclaimed Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge, the Ziegfeld Follies' star Bert Williams, Lorraine Hansberry and anyone from the cast of *A Raisin in the Sun*, Canada Lee from *Native Son*, and Lloyd Richards, head of the Yale Drama School. (Hatch 148)

Hatch goes on to cite the lack of information about black theatres in *The Encyclopedia of the American Theatre, 1900-1975*. He concludes: "These omissions of black theatre history from mainstream texts are typical" (Hatch 149).

*Dissertation Abstracts* records only a few studies of black theatres. Books on the history of black theatre or drama in America, if they mention Dashiki at all, give only a slight nod to its work. Such books provide fragmentary information concerning Dashiki's history and development. In his *African American Theater*, Samuel Hay mentions

Dashiki's production of Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* and a fashion show staged by Dashiki in 1970. Both references comprise a total of six sentences in Hays's entire book. Scholarly works offering general coverage of black theatres of the 1960s neglect Dashiki Project Theatre altogether. Much critical attention has been given to Norbert R. Davidson's *El Hajj Malik* and its production history, especially in theatres of New York. However, the texts that discuss *El Hajj Malik* omit the fact that Davidson's drama about Malcolm X had its beginnings with Ted Gilliam, Dillard University, and the Dashiki Project Theatre. Thus, the scholarship concerning this theatre and its history remains negligible. This present study, the first to deal with the impact and significance of this vital theatre, redresses this imbalance in attempting to claim an invisible history and the contributions of a notable black theatre that scholarship has ignored.

In addition to focusing on this omission, the dissertation confronts more compelling and theoretical questions: the problems of black identity and the politics of representation, especially in regard to how Dashiki Project Theatre addressed and responded to the ideology and aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement.

The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, headed by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), was a movement to establish a new black aesthetic. The white mainstream culture had long controlled the primary image and identity of African Americans. This identity consisted of negative images widely accepted by whites which promoted an acceptance of stereotypes that made African Americans ridiculous and even inhuman. Such stereotypes included the tragic mulatto, the joker or young buck, the mammy, Uncle Tom and others. Baraka and his followers felt that if black artists wanted change, they needed to contest these black images themselves. Thus, in face of the failings of mainstream

theatre toward African Americans, a contingent of radical black voices arose, intent on changing black images in American culture. These radical voices comprised the beginning of the Black Arts Movement.

In an effort to explain how his Black Arts Repertory Theater School (BARTS) would suit the movement, Baraka states:

We wanted an art that would reflect black life and its history and legacy of resistance and struggle!

We wanted an art that was as black as our music. A blues poetry (a la Langston and Sterling); a jazz poetry; a funky verse full of exploding antiracist weapons. A bebop and new music poetry that would scream and taunt and rhythm—attack the enemy into submission. (x)

Although Baraka was probably the most significant figure of the Black Arts Movement, other black artists made their contributions to that effort as well. These artists included poets, musicians, essayists, and other playwrights. In fact, the movement embraced diverse areas in the arts from its beginning:

The origins of the Black Arts Movement . . . are most effectively traced to a number of small, distinctively local communities of poets and intellectuals, which gathered in Philadelphia, New York, and Oakland in the middle years of the 1960s. These groups pursued a diverse range of projects, including research into African and African American folk, popular, and high cultures; readings of the most significant political, cultural, and aesthetic theories of their day (articulating what we would now call “cultural studies: almost a decade ahead of the ground-breaking work of the Birmingham School); concrete experimentation with poetic form; self-criticism; and consciousness raising. (Sell 59)

In addition, when Larry Neal introduced his philosophy and the origin of the movement in his essay, “The Black Arts Movement,” he enumerated a wide range of artists involved: “the political values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, and novelists” (29). Music occupied a prominent place in the

movement, a testament to the diversity of Black Arts Movement activity. Houston Baker, in his “Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature,” states:

The Black Arts Movement, therefore, like its ideological counterpart Black Power, was concerned with the articulation of experiences (and the satisfaction of audience demands) that found their essential character among the black urban masses. The guiding assumption of the movement was that if a literary-critical investigator looked to the characteristic musical and verbal forms of the masses, he would discover unique aspects of Afro-American creative expression—aspects of form and performance—that lay closest to the veritable emotional referents and experiential categories of Afro-American culture. (184)

In summary, this movement embraced diverse areas in the arts, with an eye to advancing black consciousness.

Neal provided further commentary in his 1968 essay, which stated that the movement opposed “any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community” (29). Citing it as “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept,” Neal directly identified the movement’s mission as one that envisioned “an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America” (29). Playwrights Ed Bullins, Ron Milner, the poet Don Lee, and other key figures made significant contributions to this effort through their plays, essays, and poems.

Besides its rejection of white values and ideas, the Black Arts Movement also projected, for the most part, a strong masculinity. It would be misleading to say that the movement did not recognize any women at all. Certainly, the writings of Sonia Sanchez or Nikki Giovanni are testaments to the recognition of women in the movement.

However, most of the movement’s important leaders were men, and these prominent men often made derogatory statements about black women. In addition, many of the writings advocated a return to or a re-claiming of manhood. That is not difficult to understand in

the light of how slavery emasculated the black male in the United States and problematized issues of masculinity. Therefore, a central question emerged for these artists, especially in regards to black masculinity: what kind of black identity should in fact be advanced or portrayed?

Given this new black consciousness established by the Black Arts Movement, which sought to refashion black images, a means or a vehicle was needed to effect this change, and theatre proved popular and effective. This theatre had the formidable task of conveying new representations and rhetoric. However, this project required a black theatre; it could not be accomplished in mainstream theatre. Lundeana Thomas, in her historical account of the National Black Theater, underscores and documents some of the “conflicts inherent in being African-American artists in the world of traditional American theater” (3). Mainstream theatre did not offer blacks many possibilities. In the eyes of many black artists, the establishment of a radical theatre could help shed the ills of cultural hegemony. To these artists, a radical theatre could be developed only through the use of innovative theatrical styles, both in writing and in production, aimed at forming new images and consciousness.

In his book, *Black Theater Present Condition*, Woodie King, Jr., founder and producer of the New Federal Theater in New York City, drew attention to the cultural biases in the country’s mainstream theatres, noting that the plays and the artists were “far removed from the lifeline of Black communities” (7). King declared: “Black communities must have their own art centers, because white values are not Black values” (10). It is perhaps stating the obvious to point out that African Americans have struggled

against traditions and standards of exclusion well established by the dominant white culture and its theatre.

Certainly, King was not the only person to observe that American theatre did not address the black experience. James Hatch indicates: “DuBois organized the Krigwa Little Theater to produce plays about, by, for, and near African Americans” (Hatch and Shine 380). Hatch also relates that in 1965 LeRoi Jones demanded a theatre “about, with, for Black people—and *only* black people” (380). Playwright Ed Bullins called for a National Black Theater in Harlem, a theatre to raise black consciousness in America. He claimed it would be an “institution for the black people in America who are a nation within a nation” (Marvin X, x). Many whites saw this project in terms of “reverse racism.” This claim, of course, is arguable; however, some theaters that were dedicated to the black experience did provide for the inclusion of white administrators and performers. But the aim was clearly to refashion black culture in America and establish an aesthetic that would address black identity.

African Americans in the South were also eager to establish this kind of black theatre. Tom Dent, Richard Schechner (white), and Gilbert Moses, in the preface to their book, *The Free Southern Theater*, also expose the inadequacy of mainstream theatre: “Broadway and regional theater are irrelevant to black lives. There must be a form in which the theatricality of the black church, the black freedom movement, black music, black militancy—black power in its widest and deepest sense—can be made into myth, allegory, public performance” (xi-xii). Therefore, Dent, Schechner, and Moses began the first theatre in the South that would portray the black experience in an open and

influential way. Their work would subsequently prove that theatre could indeed significantly express the ideology of the Black Arts Movement.

Free Southern Theater did not originate in New Orleans, and the troupe often toured and had no real city-base for a number of years. According to Janet Rose Kenney, in her dissertation, “The Free Southern Theater: The Relationship Between Mission and Management,”

The FST was a product of the Civil Rights Movement. It was born in Jackson, Mississippi in 1963 and in many ways owed its existence to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) which brought its three founders, Doris Derby, John O’Neal, and Gilbert Moses, together. (5)

With this kind of origin, it is not surprising that the mission of Free Southern Theater was political in scope. Kenney further indicates that by the 1970s, “Free Southern Theater put more energy into overtly political causes on a local and at times even global level” (7). The theatre became increasingly visible, especially involving themselves in the local media. Kenney continues: “The political activities of the group were manifested in the training workshop participants received, for the curriculum included black history and theories of economics and black liberation, in addition to training in theater” (7). Free Southern Theater advocates were intent on changing the political climate for blacks in the South. Also, being a product of the Civil Rights Movement, Free Southern Theater supported integration, the philosophy of that movement. Gilbert Moses wrote:

We wanted the theater to deal with black artists and the black audience. But its political aims reflected the political aims of the Movement at that time: integration. One of the first steps of rebelling against the Southern society, then, was to make an effort to integrate anything. A large part of the excitement generated by the idea for the theater was centered around the fact that it would be integration operating in the deep South, and integration operating in the mainly unintegrated American theater. (9)



Hence, Free Southern Theater, although considered by many blacks as politically incorrect, embraced the basic philosophy of the Civil Rights Movement, integration. As was happening in non-theatrical venues across the South, Free Southern Theater consciously reached out to include non-blacks.

Dashiki Project Theatre followed Free Southern Theater in relating the black experience through the medium of theatrical performance. The South in the 1960s proved fertile ground for theatre, as some of the most dramatic events in the history of Civil Rights occurred in this region. Dashiki Project Theatre emerged as a vital element in the overall dramatic landscape of the South. Founded on the campus of Dillard University in New Orleans, Dashiki Project Theatre began with a small nucleus of Dillard graduates and evolved into a larger, more inclusive group involving a number of the New Orleans community members. Set in a black neighborhood of New Orleans, the theatre later performed some its earliest productions in the bingo hall of the St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church, a predominantly black church located at the corner of Second Street and Loyola Avenue, in the heart of the inner city of New Orleans. Like other black community groups of the sixties, Dashiki Project Theatre did not have enough money or large enough budget to pay its performers, and it was impossible for the theatre to survive off gross box office receipts. And like other black community ensembles throughout the nation, the theatre began with an almost entirely black audience and administrative organization.

Dashiki Project Theatre is unique because it originally operated with exclusively black personnel (director, producers, playwrights, performers---all were black) although it did not remain separatist throughout its lifetime; Dashiki Project Theatre, in contrast to

Free Southern Theater, was not militant in scope; its aim was not to attack the inherent racism of the South. The theatre's aim was to establish a high-quality black aesthetic in the theatre and to provide training for young black artists who would, in turn, help to raise the consciousness of blacks in the South. Thus, the Dashiki Project Theatre was partially hewn out of the Black Arts Movement yet evidenced a uniqueness in origin, scope, and structure that ran contrary to other black theatres.

The problem that arises for this study concerns the question of how to square the mission of Dashiki Project Theatre with the ideology of the Black Arts Movement. Dashiki Project Theatre did not always fit the mold of the Black Power Movement or even the Black Arts Movement. The theatre made significant departures from the missions of those enterprises. For example, Dashiki Project Theatre did not always embrace a pure "Black" or "African" aesthetic. Although the theatre began with an all-black contingent, Dashiki later allowed whites to become participants, both as performers and as patrons. For instance, *New Orleans Times-Picayune* white theatre critic, David Cuthbert, reviewed productions of Dashiki from its inception. Later on, after recognizing the importance of Dashiki's mission, he took a more active role in publicizing and promoting the work of Dashiki Project Theatre.

Dashiki also expanded its own particular aesthetic in its selection of plays. The plays Ted Gilliam chose to direct were not exclusively written by blacks and not always exclusively about the black experience. Dashiki's earliest repertoire of plays included Jean Genet's *The Blacks*. Genet, a white French writer, dramatized "revolutionaries waging war against the White power structure they aspire to replace in all its grandiose dress and absurd customs" (Williams 126). Dashiki performed three other highly

successful plays that did not meet the criteria of the Black Arts Movement. Those plays included Jean Racine's *Phaedra*, Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. These plays embrace the entire human condition and, therefore, were appropriate for Dashiki Project Theatre's aesthetic and inclusive stance.

In spite of its commitment to inclusivity, Dashiki Project Theatre enjoyed its status as an important black theatre ensemble in the South. While including non-black plays, and occasionally non-black actors, Dashiki Project Theatre was a venue for important black plays, actors, and directors. It was this tension between Dashiki's inclusivity and its commitment to black advancement that insured its unique position in the theatre history of the South.

The study also gives significant attention to the inherent complications that emerged in the conception of black identity as advocated by the Black Arts Movement. Such tensions involved separatist as well as patriarchal stances. Certainly, it is no secret that Amiri Baraka and other advocates of the Black Arts Movement saw African Americans as a separate race that should have no connections to Eurocentric thought and ideas. However, ironically, in asserting their independence from the white mainstream, these same advocates applied the Eurocentric ideals of masculinity that disempowered black women, and also gays and lesbians.

This dissertation examines the embodiment of a black identity in Dashiki Project Theatre that advances and even challenges the definition of black identity as established by the Black Arts Movement. Dashiki Project Theatre tested and experimented with ideas that would lead to more flexible and inclusive stances in black consciousness. Thus, this

dissertation chronicles a history of one of two black theatres in New Orleans. It also discusses the emergence of a black identity in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, it demonstrates how Dashiki Project Theatre promoted a model of blackness that allowed for compromise, inclusivity, mixed communities, and flexibility, all the while giving voice and visibility to the black experience. Rigid and recalcitrant positions led to a gradual demise of the Black Arts Movement, while Dashiki Project Theatre continued to thrive into the 1980s and 1990s.

In documenting the history of Dashiki Project Theatre, and in attempting to incorporate that history in the era of the 60s, this study finds it necessary to establish a range of cultural contexts. Therefore, this dissertation includes varied subject areas and disciplines. First, a social and cultural history of the 1960s and 1970s and its effects on the American theatre provides a strong foundation for this study. Second, this work chronicles and explains the evolution of black identity and, specifically, the identity established by the Black Arts Movement. To account for this evolution, the dissertation examines theories of race and gender identity and how individuals often must negotiate competing identities. An examination of theatre history and black performance during the period is complemented and illuminated by these theories of race and gender. As stated earlier, finding books and other resources on black theatre proved a limitation upon the writing of this dissertation. As Hatch notes, “Bibliographies, dissertations, and histories came late to black theatre history” (159).

Texts relevant to the political history of the 60s and 70s and the black experience in New Orleans define the period chronologically and in terms of its major social and political issues. *The Eighth Generation Grows Up*, edited by John H. Rohrer and Munro

S. Edmonson, proved quite useful for this study. This text, the product of a research study by psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, examines the cultures and personalities of Negroes of New Orleans. An equally impressive book, *Sociology of the Black Experience* by Daniel C. Thompson, describes and interprets experiences among Blacks, using such factors as age, sex, and geographic location. Kim Lacy Rogers's *Righteous Lives* studies the Civil Rights Movement in New Orleans. Such books provide provocative insights about the changes and the conflicts in New Orleans during the time that Dashiki Project Theatre came into existence.

For an understanding of the evolution of black identity, this dissertation examines the works of such scholars as Larry Neal, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Frantz Fanon, Kimberly Benston, and Donald Bogle, as well as others. Neal's *Visions of a Liberated Future* presents essays on the literature of the Black Arts Movement and shares insights about the movement's effect upon the country. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* centers on the identity problem of black men, while Addison Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic* contains essays on the history of the new black identity. These works define the terms "blackness" and "identity" and illuminate the Black Arts Movement, tracing the development of a black aesthetic from the early twentieth century up through the 1970s.

Adding to this discussion of black identity, several books focus on minstrelsy and stereotyping. Some texts on the history of minstrelsy trace the evolution of the black image on the American stage. For such information this dissertation uses Eric Lott's *Love and Theft*. Lott discusses the history of the minstrel tradition, and he interprets how the tradition fits into the overall genre of popular culture. Another text, Donald Bogle's

*Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, introduces the five major stereotypes of African Americans that began in the theatre and were later transferred to the screen.

Books on black theatre history, although few in number, give the basic background for the black performance record in America. Genevieve Fabre's *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theater* provides a wealth of information on black theatre history. First published in French, this translation by Melvin Dixon analyzes American drama published from 1964 to 1974, an era of great importance to the Black Revolutionary Movement. Fabre's work features over sixty playwrights and over 120 plays in two categories: 1) the militant theater and 2) the theater of experience. Fabre argues that the emergence of black theater is synonymous with the quest for a black identity. Besides giving a discussion of the plays, Fabre examines relevant theoretical documents of black life and culture. Other texts which document the history of black performance include Loften Mitchell's *Black Drama, the Story of the American Negro in the Theatre*, Samuel Hay's *African American Theatre*, Mance Williams *Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s*, Harry Elam's *African American Performance and Theater History*, and Errol Hill's *The Theatre of Black Americans* and his *Shakespeare in Sable*, a document chronicling the history of black performers struggling to perform Shakespeare.

Of course, a study of Dashiki must involve examination of other black theatres of the period. For this purpose, this dissertation uses the following sources: Tom Dent, Richard Schechner, and Gilbert Moses's *The Free Southern Theatre by the Free Southern Theatre*, Woodie King's *Black Theatre Present Condition* and Lundeana Marie Thomas's *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre*. Dent, Schechner, and Moses' book

documents the history and philosophy of the New Orleans' Free Southern Theatre, the only other black theatre operating in New Orleans at the time of Dashiki's existence. King's book, written after the black revolution of the 60s and 70s, examines the successes and failures of the black theatres in America. *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre* chronicles the formation of a National Black Theatre while examining the philosophies, theories, and practices that gave this theatre life. Mance Williams' *Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s: A Historical-Critical Analysis of the Movement*, another major source of black theatre history, gives an overview of the most exciting period in the development of African-American theatre. This study, an informative analysis of the major tendencies in black theatre during this period, discusses the works of individual artists. This analysis includes a discussion of the philosophical and ideological structures operating within the Black Arts Movement. As already stated, the scholarship available on black theatre history is scant, but the few texts that exist provide considerable and accurate insight for this study.

Theoretical issues, especially those of representation and the politics of identity, inform this historical analysis. This dissertation employs scholarship from the area of cultural studies, especially those works related to race and gender theory. Such works provide theoretical background for evaluating the dynamics operating within the Black Arts Movement as well as within the Dashiki Project Theater. Since Dashiki Project Theatre acknowledged and included subcultures that the Black Arts Movement did not acknowledge, these texts provide an explanation of identity-negotiation in creating this black theatre. These resources, so broad and numerous, created some difficulty in specifically choosing what seemed crucial to the study and what seemed irrelevant or

extraneous. Any understanding of cultural representation is strongly informed by Stuart Hall's *Representations*. Hall discusses the representation of "difference" and attempts to explain the evolution of representations of "difference." He also poses the question of whether there can be an effective "politics of representation." Moving from this discussion of general representation, this dissertation uses texts which more specifically examine the politics of black representation. Two of the most impressive books about gender and cultural theory, bell hooks' *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* and *Aint I a Woman*, explore the diverse ways that black Americans, in particular, black women, suffer the pain of estrangement and alienation. Lisa M. Anderson's *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen* provides more theoretical framing. Anderson examines the representation of black women and their perceptions of this representation and how this representation impacts their lives. The theoretical discussion of this dissertation also includes references to texts by Jo A. Tanner, Michele Wallace, and Paula Giddings.

Besides the cultural and theoretical frames, the research of this dissertation gives the historical frame for Dashiki Project Theatre. Because there are no scholarly works devoted exclusively to Dashiki Project Theatre, this research has utilized such sources as articles, scripts, newspaper reviews, playbills, record books, photographs, letters, administrative notes, and oral histories. The Amistad Research Center at Tulane University archives many of these materials. Obviously, numerous problems associated with the research complicate matters. Published plays are easy to locate, but a number of the plays performed at Dashiki Project Theatre were never published and, thus, are difficult to find. A few lay on the bookshelves of some of the Dashiki participants, but



others are virtually nonexistent. Sometimes even those playscripts that could be found have been so revised since publication that they no longer indicate what the performance at Dashiki was like. Newspaper reviews are sometimes easier to locate, although some of the newspapers that reviewed Dashiki's performances no longer exist. This leaves a major gap in the production history of Dashiki because even the Amistad Library has an incomplete collection.

A further complication of the research concerns the incomplete records of Dashiki productions. Records were not always kept concerning the everyday operations of the theatre. When Ted Gilliam died a few years ago, other Dashiki members managed to salvage a few documents of the company. These, along with personal memoirs and other items, were then placed into the archives of the Amistad Research Center at Tulane. Such personal memoirs included programs, on which some notes were made, a few personal letters from donors or supporters, and some photos. These personal memoirs give a special and poignant touch to the research on this theatre.

Since published materials are so few, much of the research relies on the technique of oral history provided by tape-recorded interviews. Oral history allows for the collection of data that help to identify the contributions of Ted Gilliam, Norbert Davidson, and others, whose ideas, attitudes and ideologies were at the root of Dashiki. Those interviewed include performers, backstage workers, writers, directors, and newspaper reviewers. To collect the best evidence possible, all aspects of this theatre demanded investigation. Again, this method of research has its own inherent limitations. Often the interviewee's memory conflicted with the existing published records or with the memories of others. The research by oral histories is further complicated by the death

of major participants and/or by the length of time lapsed between one's active participation in Dashiki and the interview. In such cases, memories have faded or have become fragmented, and authenticity is doubtful. Valerie Raleigh Yow, in her *Recording Oral History*, cites a number of these limitations. According to Yow, an interviewer may receive a narrow picture from the interviewee. Often, the selectivity of the narrator causes problems. A third limitation lies in gathering retrospective documentation; there are deliberate as well as involuntary omissions (Yow 15-19). Nevertheless, oral history is valuable because it documents feelings and perceptions necessary to any historical account.

This dissertation divides itself into six chapters which provide background information on the black theatrical image, the period, and the mission and the work of the Dashiki Project Theatre. The study begins with Chapter One, which gives an overview of the importance of Dashiki and how that history is contextualized within the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. This chapter expresses the importance of the Black Arts Movement and its ideology. This chapter also states the major problems that the dissertation will address and establishes its methodology.

Chapter Two sets the historical and cultural context for this dissertation. The chapter highlights the tensions in defining black identity and attempts to explain the politics of representation involved in marking the "other." The chapter provides a brief history of minstrelsy as the theatrical origins of stereotyping. In discussing persistent stereotyping in later periods of theatre history, the chapter explains the needs of blacks to gain control of the image and to create their own representations. The chapter then traces a brief history of the evolution of these images up to the cultural revolutions of the 1960s.

A final discussion focuses on the Black Arts Movement and the tensions evident in its scope—its advocacy of male controlled, male dominated activities, its exclusive and separatist, often militant, stances, and its claims to authenticity.

Chapter Three focuses on the origin of Dashiki Project Theatre and the involvement of Dillard University at that time. The origin of Dashiki Project Theatre is marked by the collaboration of Ted Gilliam, Norbert Davidson, and Warren Kenner. The chapter describes the first production of Dashiki Project Theatre at Dillard University and the subsequent organizational meetings held at Gilliam's residence; this chapter further describes the involvement of the other founders of the theatre and how the theatre was expanded to include the greater New Orleans community. In attempting to present this history, the chapter focuses on the visions of the founders and their significant contributions to that vision. Moreover, the chapter traces the history of the theatre through several changes in facilities, as Dashiki Project Theatre moved from the St. Francis de Sales bingo hall to other production spaces. Chapter Three also examines Dashiki Project Theatre's idea of community. The community consisted of a larger representation or cross-section of the city's black culture and life. It was this inclusive community approach that laid the fertile grounds for Dashiki's orientation. Important to this discussion is the way in which Dashiki Project Theater interfaced with the community, the white community as well as the black community. This chapter makes use of the interviews of several participants and patrons who were involved in the various productions of the theatre. Here, personal observations, feelings, attitudes, and perceptions help to authenticate the varied experiences of both participants and audience.

Chapter Four discusses important Dashiki productions as they went beyond and even challenged the nationalist scope and mission of the Black Arts Movement. This chapter examines not only productions as they relate to gender, but also productions as they relate to world culture and adaptation. In addition, this chapter explains how the founders of Dashiki embraced not only this nationalist viewpoint, but embraced a global viewpoint as well, thus indicating how the black experience relates to the entire “human” experience. Productions that promoted this global viewpoint include Jean Genet’s *The Blacks*, Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Jean Racine’s *Phaedra*, and Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*.

Chapter Five provides an overview of the activities of Dashiki Project Theatre as they promoted empowerment of women as actresses, directors, and organizational leaders. This chapter, while also focusing on Dashiki’s beginnings, singles out accomplished actresses who made their mark at Dashiki Project Theatre. Moreover, this chapter examines the performances of these women as documented by the newspaper reviews of the productions and through interviews with some of the actresses themselves. In addition, the chapter analyzes Dashiki Project Theatre’s empowerment of women as directors. Reviews of productions and interviews with key figures prove helpful in providing this information. Chapter Five also examines the selection of a few important plays performed at Dashiki, plays chosen because of their strong women roles. This examination considers such plays as Ed Bullins’ *The Gentleman Caller* and Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. Finally, the chapter focuses on women in key leadership roles at Dashiki. Such a

discussion examines the female founders, women in charge of special presentations, and women who were instrumental to Dashiki as members of funding agencies.

The final chapter, the conclusion, provides a summation of Dashiki Project Theatre's accomplishments, successes, and failures. This final chapter also speculates about why Dashiki Project Theatre was so inclusive and why Dashiki Project Theatre outlived Free Southern Theater and other black theatres supported by the Black Arts Movement ideology. The chapter attempts to answer some important questions: Was Dashiki's posture of inclusivity influenced by Ted Gilliam's personality, his lifestyle, or his education? Was it even possible for Dashiki to live on past the death of its founder? This chapter also makes predictions about the possible reorganization of the Dashiki Project Theater and the nature of black leadership in general.

On the surface, it would seem that Dashiki Project Theatre was not different from any of the other black theatres that began in the 1960s. Although all of these theatres had much in common, research has shown that Dashiki was substantially different from the others; indeed it established its own unique position in black theatre in America.

Because mainstream surveys of American theatre history exclude most all black theatres of the 60s and 70s, this study gives the history of Dashiki's unique historical contribution. Additionally, this dissertation illuminates the efforts of some of the most talented black theatre personalities in New Orleans and demonstrates Dashiki's commitment to black women.

This dissertation closes a personal gap in my own life, for I spent several of my most productive years as an actor performing at Dashiki Project Theatre. I began work with Dashiki Project Theatre very early in its existence. I entered Dillard University as a

theatre major in the fall of 1969. Having spent a year of college at LSU at Eunice in Eunice, LA, I was excited at the prospect of studying black theatre in a prestigious historically black college. Ted Gilliam was the director of the Dillard University theatre program. As a part of our regular university class work in theatre, Dr. Gilliam required that all theatre majors work in the Dashiki Project Theatre. There, as in the university program, we were to be trained in all aspects of theatre, from acting to backstage work. I went to work immediately backstage at Dashiki, and eventually I stage-managed several shows. My involvement with Dashiki then expanded into acting. I had several major roles in a number of Dashiki's productions. In fact, the bulk of my training in all areas of the theatre came from the work that I did at Dashiki Project Theatre, and this study is significant to my own legacy in the theatre.

## Chapter Two

### Tensions in Defining Black Identity

America has struggled with identity crises since the earliest days of this country. The American ideal promises a unified and common culture for each American citizen, regardless of race, creed, or religion. Americans have fought hard to fashion their identities out of a common culture, often experiencing frustration and exclusion in the process. As America has not in all cases “welcomed” its citizens, its different peoples have often turned to their ethnic cultures and racial identities for a sense of belonging. Nathan Huggins, an authority on the Harlem Renaissance, comments on those seeking basis for identity security:

Constantly dislocated in the flux of an ever-changing society, they have tried to translate the uncertainties of newness into what has been understood as traditional. Foreign or native, one sooner or later would find comfort in ethnic identification. (137-38)

For many people, the past involved a return to the old community, the old family, and the familiar surroundings. For the African American the past involved slavery, which, in many ways, established a firewall between the African American and his distant past, his roots, his “village.”

Defining the black identity in and through American culture has been a challenge throughout the history of the United States. In that history, which includes the disempowerment of African Americans as slaves, tensions prevail in forwarding and assessing the representation of blacks in all cultural areas, including theatre. How the black is represented, who determines that representation, and the reasons behind such representations are essential issues in any consideration of the images of blacks on the stage, and later of course in film. Accurate and truthful portrayal and representation

require integrity and understanding. A lack of integrity and understanding can perpetuate stereotypes and impede positive change.

Stuart Hall defines *representation* as

(T)he production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to *refer* to either the 'real' world of objects, people or events, or to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events. (Hall, "The Work" 17)

In short, in order to represent something or someone, one must describe the thing or person in question. It must be called up in the mind by "description or portrayal or imagination" (16). The language we use to describe things or people is what gives them meaning. The language also is our medium for making that representation known to others. Representation then, in this context, refers to words or images that stand for social groups and categories. At issue, however, is whether there is any misrepresentation or manipulation of images, either consciously or unconsciously, that will influence the understanding of the audience, reader or perceiver. Who represents whom, and for what purposes? And how does this concept or representation and its accuracy relate to the development of black theatre?

The history of black theatre in this country has been linked to the control of the black image and to group identity. Creating and controlling the image for specific purposes constitute the "politics of representation." This "politics of representation" complicates the interpretation of the black image on the stage. Not only is the politics of representation concerned with the creation and control of the image, but also with whether the image that is created is accurate or empowering.

Michael Pickering states that "the imprecise representations" involved in the "process on social dissemination create the illusion of precision, of order, of the ways



things should be” (4). It can be convincingly argued that white-dominated mainstream theatre in the United States has considered black theatre as “the other.” Lacking in the consideration and precision it might deserve, this representation was unacceptable to blacks.

Significant to any serious study of black theatre in America is the history and development of the black image represented in white mainstream theatre and later in black theatres across the country. This focus is important in considering Dashiki Project Theatre against the work of other major black theatres. Such a discussion necessarily includes the concepts of representation and stereotyping, recognizing that all black theatres in America began with a struggle to gain control of black representation. In focusing on concepts of representation, this chapter chronicles a history of minstrelsy in regards to stereotyping. It then focuses on significant instances where blacks have worked to erase the stereotypes. This chapter reviews Dashiki Project Theatre’s challenge of white control of black images and, thus, how the theatre aligned itself with the Black Arts Movement. However, Dashiki had other orientations, offering additional messages to its audiences by the selection of theatre pieces that spoke on other topics to a wider audience, an audience not exclusively black.

Because Dashiki Project Theatre and other black theatres were considered “the other” in American theatre history, an explanation of the term seems appropriate. In cultural studies, the “other” is considered that which is the opposite of the “normal” or “mainstream,” something that is out of place. Mary Douglas argued that “whatever is ‘out of place’ is often the ‘other’” (qtd. in Hall 258). For the dominant race, the ‘other’ includes anyone or anything on the margins of what is “considered as polluted,

dangerous, taboo” (258). This ‘otherness’ necessarily brings negative connotations. The other must be “symbolically excluded if the ‘purity’ of the culture is to be restored” (258). In some instances, the “other” is considered exotic. The dominant or “normal” culture is even sometimes fascinated with the “other.” For whites, “the other” is “non-white,” and in this case, more specifically, “black.” For men, the other is “women,” or any orientation that is not specifically “masculine.” In fact, Simone de Beauvoir considered that women were not just “the other” to men, but also to themselves, especially if they internalized male objectifications, “thus affirming men in their sovereign masculinity” (Pickering 64). For masculine heterosexual men, the “other” might easily be “gay men” as well as “women.”

Inherent conflicts almost always exist in representation of the “other.” When the “other” is portrayed by the mainstream culture, the culture creates the representation from its own perspective. For obvious reasons, that representation is often inaccurate or misleading. Sometimes, the misrepresentation is deliberate; at other times, it is unconscious. Usually, a deliberate misrepresentation is advantageous to the creator because the misrepresentation keeps the “other” outside or even subordinate to the norm or the acceptable or the “creator.” As Pickering indicates,

[Those who do the “othering”] occupy a privileged space in which they can define themselves in contrast to the Others who are so designated as different, with this designation reinforcing and prolonging the inequalities involved by seeming to confirm and prove them. (73)

Thus, the politics of representation may involve the use of misrepresentations to keep the “other” in a subservient and inferior position. The “other” always occupies an unequal position to those who do the “othering.” These misrepresentations of the “other” have

often supported a white effort to continue and justify the mistreatment and discrimination of blacks. Ed Guerrero in *Framing Blackness* declares:

For blacks have been subordinated, marginalized, positioned, and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white-dominated symbolic order and racial hierarchy of American society. (2)

If whites could keep blacks in inferior positions, then the whites could reasonably justify denying blacks the full rights and privileges of American citizens.

It has been forcefully argued that whites were able to enslave blacks because blacks were not considered citizens or humans; they were thought of as cattle or property. Representation, then, establishes a way to describe or think about the “other.” It produces meanings or nuances of meaning that characterize minorities as the “other” and thus keeps them “in their place.” In other words, it naturalizes “the other,” makes it seem the norm and thus perpetuates the other’s inferiority.

In order to reinforce their efforts to maintain control of the images of blacks, whites needed to perpetuate stereotypes. These stereotypes became imbedded and even accepted in the white mind, as fixed, natural types. They actually became reality for the white population. As Clyde Sumpter asserts in his study, “The Black Revolutionary Theatre Movement in the United States,”

Because the stage and literary images of the Negro became the most significant contact which most white Americans had with Negroes, these images took on a high degree of reality and acceptability. It is not remiss to acknowledge that the ‘realities’ of the nineteenth-century stage, perpetuated in twentieth-century movies, have been largely responsible for the dominant white American attitude toward and concept of Black men. (110)

Furthermore, media reinforce these attitudes by introducing these representations to the public. Lisa Anderson states in *Mammies No More*,

The racial stratification of the United States ensures that there are many communities in this country whose only exposure to black people is through the media. Media representations, as the only ones, form these people's conceptions of blacks. If there are a few blacks within these communities, they are anomalies, defying expectations. (1)

Thus, many people believe the stereotypes and accept them as accurate because they have no other relationship to blacks than that given them by the media.

However, stereotypes do not remain fixed. They are subject to change, depending on who has control. If meaning could remain fixed, then no counter-strategies or challenges to the images could follow. Meaning and stereotypical differences are in fact quite slippery and subject to transformation (Hall 236).

A classic example of stereotyping and controlling the image of black Americans appears in minstrelsy, the comic entertainment in which whites, who blackened their faces with burnt cork, mimicked Negroes. Minstrelsy had a profound effect on stereotyping the images of blacks in American culture. Edith Isaacs in *The Negro in the American Theatre* states that minstrelsy “helped to create and fix the Negro stereotypes—passive or scheming, over-dull or over-shrewd, but always irresponsible and caricatured—which have burdened our theatre ever since” (27). It is difficult to pinpoint the actual beginnings of minstrelsy. However, most scholars will agree that minstrelsy probably had its start on Southern plantations in the early 1800s with slave dancers and musicians. Sumpter has concluded that minstrelsy “reigned in one form or another as the most popular and commercially successful theatre fare for approximately a century, 1828 to 1929” (Sumpter 115) and impacted American culture by codifying the public image or images of the Negro as either the Fool or Sambo.

James Haskins, in *Black Theater in America*, describes three major stereotypes that appeared on the minstrel stage:

The first stereotype was of the southern Negro: a happy-go-lucky soul, full of “natural rhythm,” who shuffles his feet, loves watermelon, and has no ambition to leave the plantation, knowing that he is best off under massa’s care. The second stereotype was of the southern black who had made the mistake of leaving the plantation and going North. He is ignorant and bumbling and hasn’t a chance of surviving in the new environment. It is plain that he would be much better off back on the farm. The third stereotype is of the northern “dandy,” who over-dresses and thinks of nothing but women and good times. He has a ridiculous name like Count Julius Caesar Mars Napoleon Sinclair Brown and is given to talking in “stump speech” style. (26)

These minstrel images no doubt constituted unflattering pictures of blacks.

Other black theatre historians have identified additional stereotypes. Loften Mitchell cites two stereotypes which came into existence with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. These two images were “Uncle Tom” and the “tragic mulatto.” The character of Tom had far-reaching effects. Mitchell states:

Negroes began to resent the character Uncle Tom, and his name became a source of contempt on the lips of black people. An “Uncle Tom,” or “Uncle” is the most inflammatory, insulting thing a black man can be called. (34)

This character was to appear again and again on the American stage. According to Mitchell, the “tragic mulatto,” or “octoroon” became popular in abolitionist drama. But Lisa Anderson notes that the mulatto originated in the minstrel show (45-6). Anderson also mentions that the mammy figure is “probably the most recognizable and longest perpetuated image of African American women in American society” (9). That figure has pervaded the stage and screen for decades, even making appearances in contemporary black television sitcoms.

Before minstrelsy came to an end, Negro performers began to contest and challenge the images created by whites through their own black performances of the minstrel show. Negroes, offended by being characterized as ignorant, grinning, happy-go-lucky, and subservient, wanted to be considered real human beings. However, blacks could not perform minstrelsy on the white stage unless they wore the burnt cork on their faces and continued to perpetuate the stereotypes of themselves:

From beginning to end, minstrelsy was a white man's show—the white man's concept of the naïve, comic aspect of the plantation slave's life. Played for white audiences, it was careful not to disturb any nationally "acceptable" images. (Sumpter 116)

Even when blacks began writing their own plays for their own theatres, these stereotypes showed up in milder forms on black stages. Sumpter affirms: "Just as white America accepted the erroneous images of the Negro, often so did the Negro himself" (117). Even when provisionally claimed by Negroes themselves, the control of the black image was essentially determined and directed by whites.

Unfortunately, both white and black writers and performers have embellished and perpetuated all of these stereotypes throughout the history of blacks in the American theatre. More recently, some playwrights have modified and renamed them. For instance, Lorraine Hansberry's Lena Younger, the matriarch of *A Raisin in the Sun*, dominates the Younger family and resembles the mammy figure of earlier days. George Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* challenges those black stereotypes that have appeared on the contemporary stage. Oscar Brockett writes in *The Essential Theatre* that the "Mama on the Couch" play from *The Colored Museum*

is a satirical look at the stereotypes that had come to dominate black family plays in the wake of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, especially the strong, religious matriarch who valiantly holds her family

together while seeking to instill strong traditional values, and the son who complains continuously about his treatment by “the man.” (258)

The pop culture media has advanced and perpetuated the stereotypes even further, as witnessed by the early appearance on the screen of black icons and stereotypes. The movies exploited the black image and dehumanized the black figure in their depictions. Donald Bogle, in his *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films*, lists five different racial stereotypes that emerged in films: the Toms, the Coons, the Tragic Mulattos, the Mammies, and the Bad Bucks. Typically, the “Toms” were characterized as loyal, kind, Christian, and generous. Yet, they continued to be abused and misused in spite of their subservient personalities. The “Coons” were more given to ridicule. They were eye-popping, slapstick, lazy tellers of tales; they were usually portrayed as unreliable. Creatures rather than human beings, they were often depicted eating watermelons and stealing chickens. The “Tragic Mulatto” was a bi-racial woman, whose position in culture was tenuous. Beautiful and sexually attractive, she possessed mixed blood, which condemned her to a tragic ending, often suicide. The “Mammy” was “Mother Earth.” Commonly depicted as big-breasted, large, bossy, and even fussy to a certain extent, she was completely loyal to the white household. The “Bad Bucks,” commonly seen today in the films of directors like Spike Lee, were drug addicts and hoodlums, physically strong and big, over-sexed, savage and violent (Bogle 3-18).

All of these stereotypes were introduced to the movies with one film. According to Stuart Hall,

The film which introduced these black ‘types’ to the cinema was one of the most extraordinary and influential movies of all times, D. W. Griffiths’ *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), based on a popular novel, *The Clansman*,

which had already put some of these racialized images into circulation.  
("The Spectacle" 251)

Ralph Ellison in *The Shadow and the Act* states, "It was this film that forged the twin screen image of the Negro as bestial rapist and grinning, eye-rolling clown—stereotypes that are still with us today" (265). And some have argued that these negative stereotypes were what incited whites and gave strength to the KKK. The film created quite a stir each time it was to be presented. Negroes contested the showing of the film everywhere. Negroes considered the film demeaning and insulting to the black race; nevertheless, *Birth of a Nation* stands as a classic blockbuster of its time in spite of its stereotypical depictions of the black race.

It can be convincingly argued that the Negro stereotypes became more prevalent in film than they were in mainstream theatre. Movies like *Birth of a Nation* were so insidious because they continually promoted indignities toward the Negro. As Ellison underscores: "In the struggle against Negro freedom, motion pictures have been one of the strongest instruments for justifying some white Americans' anti-Negro attitudes and practices" (266).

Film, of course, is an extension of the stage, and these images prevailed on the stage as well. In fact, they were perceived to be more authentic on the stage because performances on the stage were live. Flesh was much more real than celluloid.

Although the minstrel show was not a black art form, perhaps blacks felt a sense of liberation when they took over its performance. They gained some measure of power when they authored and produced their own works, but not enough to make any significant changes. Though the stereotypes were demeaning, minstrelsy was, according to Isaacs, "our first authentic American theatre form. And it trained many of the next



generation of Negro singers, dancers, composers and comedians” (27). It might even be argued that there was some good to be found in minstrelsy in moving the race forward. Although blacks still faced much prejudice, they had finally been admitted to the American stage. Notwithstanding, the stereotypical images remained because Negroes had not yet fully been empowered to control their representation.

Whites’ efforts to control the Negro image and blacks’ efforts to wrestle away that control raised political and theoretical questions, questions of authority and authenticity. Were whites qualified to write about or perform as blacks? Could they accurately portray black life? By whose authority and with what authenticity could race be portrayed? Determined to correct this long-standing injustice, African American playwrights made a concerted effort to rid the American theatre of the Negro stereotypes that had long been accepted as reality. Writing about the Harlem Renaissance, Abu Bekka, in his thesis, *The Black Theatre Movement in the United States*, states:

During those years many plays were written by blacks, but few were ever produced. Even though it was becoming acceptable for black actors to work professionally, they quite often appeared on Broadway in shows written by whites. So while America’s attention was focused on the shores of Europe, before and during World War I, black actors took to the little theatres to fight for their place on the American stage. (33)

However, the white theatres gave blacks no authority over their images on Broadway. Further, the economics of the time made ineffectual the images they created of themselves. For if white theatergoers did not see the images they knew and loved, they boycotted the performances. And if white theatre patrons did not attend, the shows would never succeed financially on Broadway because white mainstream American theatre excluded blacks as theatergoers at the time.

Dominant mainstream theatre captured the black image and portrayed it the way the white mainstream perceived it. Whether or not the portrayal was authentic was not a consideration. Whites had complete control over the image.

Dashiki Project Theatre and other black theatres of the 1960s were doomed to face some of these same issues surrounding representation much later in the history of black theatre. However, early black writers did ask questions concerning the Negro's image. Jessie Fauset, in an article entitled "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?" asked,

Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint others? (393)

Efforts, however, to contest and challenge the black stereotypes did not begin with the Black Arts Movement or theatres like Dashiki Project Theatre. A significant effort by blacks to challenge white control occurred in the early nineteenth century. This effort was known as the African Theatre in New York. Then almost a century later, we witness another important instance, the Harlem Renaissance, a movement that appeared simultaneously with the rise of the NAACP. Four decades later, the Black Arts Movement took center stage in this effort. All three of these initiatives represent alternate examples to dominant mainstream theatre forms. Although each had its gains or its impact, each also had its problems. These gains and problems would repeat themselves in the 1960s with the rise of theatres like Dashiki Project Theatre.

The African Theatre in New York, one of the first to use black performers exclusively, owes its beginnings to three Negro performers: a Mr. William Brown, James Hewlett, and Ira Aldridge. Initiated shortly after minstrelsy had taken hold in America,

the African Theatre was “the first formal black theater company in America” (Wilson and Goldfarb 330). However, white antagonism to the African Theatre erupted, and the theatre was short-lived. Dominant white forces still forbade Negroes to perform in public (Isaacs 19).

The African Theatre, founded in 1821, actually sprang from an effort by a Mr. Brown to entertain New York blacks in his tea garden. The garden, initially named the African Grove, presented entertainment in the form of music and skits, and Mr. Brown served coffee and other delights (G. Thompson 3-6). Eventually, the African Grove became a theatrical company, the African Theatre. The theatre company itself, little more than a copy of the white theatre, often performed the plays of William Shakespeare. Their most popular production was *Richard III* (Isaacs 19).

Eventually, the company began to write, produce, and direct their own plays.

Mance Williams states:

Indeed, with the creation of the African Grove Theatre in 1821-22, Black theatre craftsmen had begun to realize that if a Black audience was to be built, and actors and playwrights of color given a chance to learn and develop, then Blacks were going to have to form their own “alternative” theatres. (11-12)

The first play recorded as written, produced, directed, and performed by blacks in America was *King Shotaway*, a play performed by the African Theatre.

The company played to black audiences, but they allowed white patrons in the balcony. This practice marked the beginning of serious problems for the African Theatre.

Haskins contends that

The idea that blacks had dared to start their own theater and were actually performing Shakespeare’s plays struck some whites as hilariously funny, and they went to the African Grove to laugh at and mock the players. When the management attempted to seat whites in the rear of the theater

because “white people do not know how to behave at entertainment designed for ladies and gentlemen of color,” the white hoodlums became even more determined to disrupt the performances. The policemen who arrived to restore order weren’t much better than the hoodlums. They would arrest the actors in the middle of a play and put them in jail. (*Black Theater* 7)

Haskins suggests that tensions surrounded the use of scripted material for the stage.

Whites were convinced that blacks had no claim to classic dramatic literature; thus, they were intent on keeping the African Company from performing Shakespeare (Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable* 12). This challenge to performance material would haunt theatres like Dashiki that believed in the cross-cultural and cross-generation meanings of classic literature. The constant disruptions to the African Theatre caused the theatre to move several times during its existence. The company, not able to withstand the political and social pressures, eventually closed its doors forever.

The African Company failed in its attempts to maintain exclusive control of the black image on the stage. The control of the image related closely to the power structures in social and political life. As clearly indicated by the antagonism of white audiences, blacks had little control of their lives and their destinies in the real world, let alone the world of make-believe. Many legal, political, and social problems for blacks made it difficult for the African Company to make any effective changes in representation. It became increasingly frustrating and problematic for blacks, who used the white theatre as their model, to fashion characters divorced from the stereotypes that they had seen. Thus, the stereotypes remained.

However, the African Company had made a few gains toward control of the black image. For the first time, blacks created dramatic characters; they directed and performed the plays. Moreover, the productions played to black audiences. Additionally, the

company produced two outstanding black entertainers of the early nineteenth century: James Hewlett and Ira Aldridge, the first great black tragedians in America. Mr. Hewlett did much to erase the comic and apish image of the Negro. He, however, disappeared altogether after 1831 (Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable* 15). Shortly after the closing of the African Theatre, Ira Aldridge, finding no opportunity for black performers, went to England, where he was praised and applauded by royalty for his performances. Aldridge proved that blacks could achieve success despite various degrees of racism against them throughout the world (Marshall and Stock 335).

Although Hewlett and Aldridge altered the course of black portrayal in the theatre, the African Theatre Company did not succeed in gaining control of the black image on the stage. Racism was too powerful in America. The economic and social conditions of blacks in America left them with no autonomy and little control over their lives, let alone their art. However, the theatre did promote and honor blacks as playwrights, actors, and directors. And the African Theatre did provide excellent role models for future black performers. The African Theatre, indeed, did much to set the stage for the Black Arts Movement and, eventually, for black theatres like Dashiki Project Theatre, which would grow out of the Black Arts Movement.

After the years of minstrelsy and after the demise of the African Theatre, Negroes made further attempts to control their own representations. The time was ripe for other efforts to challenge the images that whites created of blacks on the stage. This new challenge came in the form of a major artistic movement for blacks, the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance made concerted efforts toward more realistic, accurate, and powerful representation. Spanning the period between the first and second

world wars, this artistic renaissance gave birth to an even greater artistic and cultural awareness for blacks. It was a time of tremendous artistic and literary output by African Americans. The movement grew out of the political, economic, and social struggles of the Negro during the 1920s. Political, economical, and social shifts allowed for greater power in representation. The place for this new cultural explosion was Harlem, on Manhattan Island. The Harlem Renaissance inspired a flourishing of the culture of African Americans in writing, music, and art.

These years proved a time for African Americans to celebrate themselves. James Haskins in *The Harlem Renaissance* states, “It was an era in which African Americans celebrated their culture and enjoyed the unique experience of being celebrated” (*Harlem Renaissance* 13). Black writers, poets, artists, and musicians made attempts to reach the masses. The outpouring of black talent was recognized not only by Negroes themselves, but also by the white society in general (13). Negroes finally felt as if they had some control over their destinies. Negroes felt that they had “arrived.”

Haskins confirms the fact that

Before the Harlem Renaissance began, there were African Americans who distinguished themselves in various intellectual and creative fields. After it ended, many more continued to do so. But the sense among African Americans that they had the power to affect their own lives and that their culture should be celebrated was new to the people whose history in the United States had begun with slavery, and it was not to be repeated with a similar outpouring of creative self-assertion until nearly a half century later, after the success of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. (14)

Negroes felt much more powerful and in control. The coming together of so many African Americans in Harlem gave blacks a sense of unity and identity. The black culture of Harlem proved rich and diverse.

Occasionally during the Harlem Renaissance, as with the Black Arts Movement and its theatres of the 1960s, there was no consensus as to what was to be celebrated. On the one hand, there was a strong need for a pure black voice or aesthetic. On the other hand, some leaders believed that the race could make more progress if it proved that Negroes were no different from average white people.

Conflict even among Negroes themselves concerning race portrayal grew more potent. Some Negroes wanted to portray the race as intelligent, capable, and responsible, whereas others felt that the race should display its earthy and exotic qualities. Still, a small group of educated middle-class blacks felt that the good and bad characteristics of the race should be displayed. Meanwhile, the younger and more militant artists and intellectuals were leaning toward a distinct black style or aesthetic. In short, there was little consensus among the blacks themselves.

Another form of black entertainment, a very popular form, also failed to change or take control of the black image. By far, the most popular form of traditional theatre for blacks during the Harlem Renaissance was the black musical theatre. Black musical theatre originated during the days of minstrelsy. It was jazz music that gave blacks their most important entry into the legitimate theatre. One of the earliest popular black musical shows was Bob Cole's *A Trip to Coontown*. Haskins relates that it was "the first show to be entirely organized, written, produced, and managed by blacks" (*Black Theater in America* 37). Other teams sprung up, and more black musicals hit the stage.

Unfortunately, this flourishing of black theatre had little effect in changing stereotypes.

And so, nothing attempted in the Harlem Renaissance finally gave control of images to blacks. It is difficult to ascertain exactly when or why the Harlem Renaissance

ended. Haskins contends that several events led to the end of the Renaissance. The end of Prohibition, for one, probably was responsible for the exodus of the wealthy whites in the late 1930s and early 1940s. When whites exited Harlem, they took with them their money, money that had helped underwrite the Harlem Renaissance. The increase in gang violence in Harlem and the beginning of the Depression were also probable causes of the Harlem Renaissance's demise. Haskins advances an even more potent reason:

The real reason why the Harlem Renaissance ended was that the United States was a segregated society and the majority white population never accepted blacks as equals. Those few blacks who managed to gain a white audience ran the risk of having to cater to the paternalistic and condescending attitudes of that audience. (*Harlem Renaissance* 173)

A society that was segregated, unable to accept blacks as equals, would never allow them the autonomy to control their representations. However, progress was made during the Harlem Renaissance. Haskins sums up the positive results of the Renaissance:

As Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell wrote in 1987, in the introduction to the catalogue of an exhibition entitled *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*, "If they contributed anything, they contributed the sense that for the first time the Black artist could take control of the images of Black America." (166)

Not everyone agrees with Haskins' conclusion, however. In contrast, Larry Neal claimed that the Harlem Renaissance "did not address itself to the mythology and the lifestyles of the Black community. It failed to take roots, to link itself concretely to the struggles of that community, to become its voice and spirit" (39). Unfortunately, the Harlem Renaissance ended with many unanswered questions concerning the Negro image, questions which the Black Arts Movement would again ask in the 1960s.

Although the Renaissance had fulfilled some of the criteria for a black theatre, problems of control remained. The Harlem Renaissance had failed to establish a truly



authentic and black aesthetic. Many felt that the aesthetic was still too white. Nathan Huggins in *Harlem Renaissance* contends:

Seen through black men's eyes—whether in acceptance or rejection—the white eminence had been overwhelming. A white commerce had determined what was to be considered success in business, industry, and art. A white establishment had really defined art and culture. As long as the white norms remained unchallenged, no matter what the Negro's reaction to them, he always needed to return to the white judge to measure his achievement. It would have required a much more profound rejection of white values than was likely in the 1920s for Negroes to have freed themselves for creating the desired self-generating and self-confident Negro art. (306-307)

The theatre neighborhood was black, and the performers and audiences were black, but the material was still white. Lundeana Thomas states, “Blacks were interested in performing serious plays, but much of the material available was either by Whites or was at least Eurocentric in style” (15). White writers had set the standard criteria, and black writers were not secure enough to establish their own aesthetic. Plays about blacks that did succeed during this period often appeared outside of the black neighborhood, on Broadway, where they received support from white patrons who paid good money for what they were comfortable watching.

For some black radicals, a more forceful takeover of the representation was in order. Once again the black image was in trouble. The struggle to control the black image artistically had to be motivated by the power that was being exerted politically, socially, and economically. Artistic expression of the black community and the black aesthetic had to embody the desire for freedom. The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s paralleled the Civil Rights Movement; whereas the Civil Rights Movement empowered many marginalized groups, the Black Arts Movement empowered black artists. The most vocal leader of the Black Arts Movement was LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka). It was Jones'

conviction that the voice, spirit, and expression of the artist must be central to the Black Power Movement.

How did the Black Arts Movement come to represent such voice, spirit, and expression of the black race? In order to gain some perspective about the Black Arts Movement, one must examine the social, cultural, and political upheavals of the 1960s, and how that time helped to nurture the rise of black power. The decade of the 1960s saw a destabilization of power and the rise of a government that was rigid and unyielding in its attitudes and policies. Change, confusion, reform, progress, and decline characterized the period. John A. Andrew in *The Other Side of the Sixties* quotes Schlesinger:

The beginning of a new political epoch is like the breaking of a dam . . . The chaos of the breakthrough offends those who like everything neatly ordered and controlled; but it is likely to be a creative confusion, bringing a ferment of ideas and innovation into the national life. (quoted in Andrew 3-4)

Many events and movements of the time impacted the growth of the Black Arts Movement and sowed seeds of disagreement. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 left Lyndon Baines Johnson to lead the nation. Johnson pushed a strong domestic program through Congress, and the nation made rapid progress towards Civil Rights. The 1963 March on Washington, during which Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, advocated racial unity. Malcolm X advised racial separation and forceful overthrow. The struggle for equal rights became more militant as Black Panthers organized all over the country, and the result was riots, demonstrations, sit-ins, fires, and more assassinations. Walt Crowley states, “It was a period of tragedy, triumph, and transcendence for tens of millions of Americans” (xi).

Few writers and historians can concur on the definition of the sixties. However, most can agree that the sixties were shaped by:

Vietnam and the explosion worldwide of wars for national liberation; civil rights and emergence of “black power” and other cultural-identity movements; rock and roll and the rise of a youth-directed market for culture and products in tempo with the adolescence of the Baby Boom; and drugs and a Dionysian “counterculture” devoted to preindustrial values of love, experience, and community. (xi)

Certainly, all of these transformations impacted the political, social, and economic life in America. They also influenced the life of the artist, including the black artist.

In many ways, America was in a state of disarray and many of the movements and events impacted the Black Power Movement. Many Americans felt disconnected from the government, from the dominant culture, from the traditional values they had been taught. These unsettled times fostered efforts at change, change that would redefine culture, values and maybe even government. The Vietnam War eclipsed the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1965 and of the Voting Rights Act in 1966. The War unsettled a nation that was already in conflict. Many felt that the nation had spent too much time on international affairs and not enough on domestic problems. Groups all over the country rose in protest. Not only had America failed its Negroes; it had also failed its youth, its women, its Native Americans, its Hispanics, and its gays. It was claimed that America denied rights to every “other” that was not considered part of the mainstream. Cultural revolutions sprung up all over the country. Youth, especially college students, protested the War in Vietnam. Women who felt that they were second-class citizens organized the Women’s Movement to secure their rights. Native Americans and Hispanics rebelled. Gays also felt marginalized. Trust in the government rapidly eroded. A growing credibility gap between America and its citizens increased. Indeed, during the 1960s

priorities were compromised, and power was destabilized. All of this foment fostered the development of black theatre companies, including a number of them that departed substantially from tradition.

The cultural revolutions of the 1960s included two of the most important social movements in American history: the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. Although they had differing philosophies and agendas, both movements had the same goal—achievement of equal rights for African Americans. Aimed at integration, the Civil Rights Movement sought to achieve equality for African Americans so they might stand side by side with their white counterparts. Negroes were looking for equal access to education, housing, employment, and affluent lifestyles. The Civil Rights Movement aimed to accomplish its goals through non-violent sit-ins, demonstrations, and marches. Its leaders, charismatic men like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rev. Ralph Abernathy, concluded that the time was ripe to expand the awareness of the American people. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the result of their efforts. This Act guaranteed equal rights to citizens of all races and ethnic backgrounds (Norman 657-58).

The Black Power Movement, on the other hand, was a separatist or a nationalist enterprise. It advocated “separate but equal” representation. It made no presumptions of seeking entry to mainstream culture; its advocates and followers did not want to be part of white America. Leaders of this movement held that black consciousness and black superiority would ultimately lead to revolution. Thus, the methods of this movement included physical resistance, violence in the form of riots and demonstrations (Norman 658).

The social, economic, and political power that blacks gained from both movements meant more power over the control of the public image. However, while aimed at reclaiming dignity for the American Negro, both movements experienced their own inner struggles. One of the chief problems for both was their exclusivity. Both movements had built-in biases, prejudices against certain subgroups of blacks. Neither movement allowed ample space for females or gays. The leaders were black heterosexual men, and the rhetoric was male-dominated. Both movements essentially aimed at empowering black males at the expense of the black subgroups. Importantly, Dashiki Project Theatre rejected this approach and mentality.

The history of slavery and its effect upon the black male helps explain the male biases of these African American movements. Blacks realized that they could not control their destinies without control of their representation. Slavery had stripped the black male of his dignity and his power in society, making him ineffective in his own home. Either he was absent from the home or powerless within it. The woman became the breadwinners in most black families, and the idea of the black matriarchy was born. Black women, not black men, were responsible for the cultural and spiritual survival of the black family for so many years.

In *Race Relations* H. H. L. Kitano indicates that slavery “stamped both slave and slave owner with an indelible mark that has been difficult to erase even though the Emancipation Proclamation is well over 100 years old” (106). The system denied black men and women power and identity. In particular, it emasculated the black male (both literally and figuratively). This process of emasculation, which has had effect for decades, has prevented the black male from achieving autonomy and gaining social

mobility. As a result, he is generally looked down upon by mainstream society as a poor father and husband. This notion is grounded in the experience of slavery and its residual effects and has created a complicated psyche in the black male.

Some argue that slavery destroyed the black family by subverting gender roles. The system of slavery imposed responsibilities on black women that were contrary to the conventional feminine role (that is subordinate to the male), granting them a perceived dominance over black men. This dilemma is well summed up by Doris Wilkinson and Ronald Taylor in their book, *The Black Male in America*:

Through . . . systematic denial of an opportunity to work for black men, white America thrust the black woman into the role of family provider. This pattern of female-headed families was reinforced by the marginal economic position of the black male. (136)

Moreover, by erasing the husband/father role, the system denied the black male a significant place and function in his family. Again Wilkinson and Taylor comment:

White society has placed the black man in a tenuous position where manhood has been difficult to achieve. Black men have been lynched and brutalized in their attempts to retain their manhood. They have suffered from the cruelest assault on mankind that the world has ever known. For black men in this society it is not so much a matter of acquiring manhood as a struggle to feel it their own. (137)

Majors and Gordon write: “Males in America still are expected to assume aggressive, competitive, dominant, and powerful roles in society” (17). So the black male, although deemed inferior to the white male, was still expected to assume a dominant stance in his own culture. In short, the black male was placed in a unique and contradictory position. On the one hand, a system that denied the black male his status in the family made any man’s sense of human dignity and self-respect difficult to achieve. On the other hand, the black man’s notions of family were rooted in Eurocentric ideas about patriarchy and

created the conundrum of the black male. This conflict between the ideal and the reality was another source of his frustration and rage at the dominant culture's stereotypical representations of black masculinity.

The position of the black male was further complicated by the separation between fathers and sons. As Huey Guagliardo, professor of English at LSU at Eunice, stated recently, "Ernest Gaines offered the profound observation that the black father and son were separated at the auction block, and they have been trying to reconnect ever since" (Guagliardo). Not only is this father physically absent from the family; he is emotionally absent as well. The inability to function successfully in the male role, frequently experienced as a loss in masculinity and social identity, has led black males to recoup by active involvement in the life of the streets or by leaving the household unit. Hence, black males, seeking autonomy in their lives, dominated these social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, trying to reclaim their manhood, and, in turn, control their own male images.

The 1950s through the 1970s saw the African American community troubled with problems of gender inequality. Black women had to fight to gain equal footing with black men. Even the right to vote was extended to black men long before it had been extended to black women. Thus, the Black Power Movement provided an opportunity for the black male to reclaim identity through the raising of black consciousness, a phenomenon that was significantly forwarded by theater companies across the country. However, this emphasis on male identity necessarily neglected the contributions of black women to that movement.

This internal conflict between black men and black women impacted the effectiveness of the Black Arts Movement. Energy expended on this tension was energy

not available for the larger goals of the Black Arts Movement. In fact, Michele Wallace, in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* states:

Perhaps the single most important reason the Black Movement did not work was that black men did not realize they could not wage struggle without the full involvement of women. And in that sense they made a mistake that the blacks of the post-slavery period would have been least likely to have made. Women, traditionally, want more than anything to keep things together. Women are hard workers and they require little compensation. Women are sometimes willing to die much more quickly than men. Women vote. Women march. Women perform tedious tasks. And women cannot be paid off for the death and the suffering of their children. Look at how important women have been to the liberation struggles in Africa. By negating the importance of their role, the efficiency of the Black Movement was obliterated. (81)

The involvement of women would have made the struggle more unified. And yet, the Black Arts Movement did realize certain successes. Although many black writers expressed the rationale for this movement, it was Larry Neal's essay, "The Black Arts Movement," that became a sort of manifesto. Neal proposed a "reordering of the western cultural aesthetic" (29). He connected the Black Arts Movement to the Black Power Movement in a shared goal, which he described as "the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood" (29). He continued: Black people must "define the world in their own terms" (29). Defining their own world would lead to controlling their own representations. Neal indicates that the concept of Black Power could find its expression in the artistic writings of the period. These writings were indeed propagandist literature, literature used to project and promote certain political ideas and actions.

It is important to note, however, that the literature of the Black Arts Movement was not to be protest literature. Neal quotes Brother Knight in explaining this assertion:

Now any man who masters the technique of his particular art form, who adheres to the white aesthetic, and who directs his work toward a white



audience is, in one sense, protesting. And implicit in the act of protest is the belief that a change will be forthcoming once the masters are aware of the protester's grievance" (the very word connotes begging, supplications to the gods). Only when that belief has faded and protestings end, will Black art begin. (qtd. in Neal: 30)

Protest literature did not speak directly to black people. It spoke to white people. It presumed that once white people were made aware, change would be forthcoming. But according to Neal, this notion was a myth. Change would not be forthcoming. Rather, the literature had to be an "awareness literature" for blacks; it had to create awareness within blacks. Neal again quotes Knight:

To accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live. The Black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along with other Black authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends (and purify old ones by fire). And the Black artist, in creating his own aesthetic, must be accountable for it only to the Black people. (qtd. in Neal: 30)

According to Neal and his cohorts, black people must be made aware of the contradictions that exist in the white mainstream culture. Again, Neal attacks the black writers from previous periods and suggests a remedy:

And much of the oppression confronting the Third World and Black America is directly traceable to the Euro-American cultural sensibility. This sensibility, anti-human in nature, has, until recently, dominated the psyches of most Black artists and intellectuals; it must be destroyed before the Black creative artist can have a meaningful role in the transformation of society. (30)

Thus, much of the drama of the Black Arts Movement advocated separation and destruction. This was usually acted out upon the stage through violence. A separatist movement left no room for integration. In other words, white mainstream was not being asked to move over and make room; it was asked to disappear.

Significantly, the Black Arts Movement, like the Black Power Movement, was male-dominated. Two men, LeRoi Jones and Ed Bullins, were its principal playwrights. The Black Arts Movement flourished in all of the various arts: writing, music, painting, and dance. Many of its prominent artists were members of UMBRA, a writing society of black artists. Included were such men as David Henderson, Ishmael Reed, Askia Muhammad Toure, Calvin Hernton, and Lorenzo Thomas. Among the musicians were Archie Shepp, John Coltrane, and Sun Ra, who dominated the jazz scene. Contemporaries of Jones and Bullins included the playwrights Don Lee, Ben Caldwell, Jimmy Garrett, and Ron Milner.

Black males dominated all of these areas of art, creating tension within the race and within the movement. How could a movement survive if only half of its members were allowed as participants? Only a few women ever achieved any significant status or recognition in the Black Arts Movement. Just two black women playwrights receive mention in Neal's essay. And the plays that Neal cites as representative of revolutionary Black drama have no praise of black women. In fact, the plays he mentions are used as propaganda to negate any contributions of black women to the movement. In reality, the women in the plays he discusses are perceived as obstacles to the black male's achievement of autonomy.

One example of this anti-feminism in black revolutionary drama is the play, *Who's Got His Own* by Ron Milner. Neal states that Milner is concerned with "legitimate manhood and morality" (17). The drama begins when the father of the family dies, leaving behind a wife and son. Neal claims that the central crisis of the play is

(R)ooted in the historical search for manhood. Tim's mother is representative of a generation of Christian Black women who have

implicitly understood the brooding violence lurking in their men. And with this understanding, they have interposed themselves between their men and the object of that violence—the white man. Thus unable to direct his violence against the oppressor, the Black man becomes more frustrated and the sense of powerlessness deepens. Lacking the strength to be a man in the white world, he turns against his family. (17)

Jimmy Garrett's play, *We Own the Night*, is another example of anti-feminism in black revolutionary drama. The play makes a strong statement about the place of black women. Police shoot Johnny, the main character, during a neighborhood confrontation. Johnny's mother accuses "the Brothers" for the assault on her son. Johnny verbally attacks his own mother when she tries to get him to leave the scene. Neal explains the male/female conflict in this play as it is seen historically:

The whole idea of Black people fighting white people is totally outside of her orientation. Johnny begins a vicious attack on his mother, accusing her of emasculating his father—a recurring theme in the sociology of the Black community. In Afro-American literature of previous decades the strong Black mother was the object of awe and respect. But in the new literature her status is ambivalent and laced with tension. Historically, Afro-American women have had to be the economic mainstays of the family. The oppressor allowed them to have jobs while at the same time limiting the economic mobility of the Black man. Very often, therefore, the woman's aspirations and values are closely tied to those of the white power structure and not to those of her man. Since he cannot provide for his family the way white men do, she despises his weakness, tearing into him at every opportunity until, very often, there is nothing left but a shell. (38)

The ideas espoused here by Neal are in line with the sociological ideas that explain the black male psyche.

In conclusion, the Negro has fought to control his own image since he first appeared on the American stage. Minstrelsy, the preeminent white control of the black image, came and went, though its stereotypes continue to haunt the American media. Control was in the hands of the white hegemonic mainstream. Even when blacks did

finally enter the performance arena, limitations keep them from control of their images; they could not erase the cork-burned faces.

The African Company wrought some change in the politics of the American stage, though the social and economic limits of the early nineteenth century in America kept the company from finding suitable venues and audiences for their performances. The company fought fierce battles with whites over what was to be performed. Although blacks wrote some of the plays, their writing basically mirrored early writing of the white playwrights.

The next attempt at control of the black image by Negroes, the Harlem Renaissance, gave birth to more realistic portrayals of blacks. But again, economics forced black theatres to comply with white standards. And the draw of white-dominated Broadway motivated some talented black performers to turn their backs on black theatres. This era spawned questions that continue to inform black representation: Who gives authority to change the black image? How authentic are black public images? Can whites really portray blacks without bias?

Few African American dramatists achieved any significant success in the control of the black image until the 1960s and the beginning of both the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement. The social and economic conditions for blacks had begun to change at last. Civil rights became the issue of the day. Political and social power would give blacks artistic power as well. The Black Arts Movement, having grown out of the Black Power Movement, became the chief artistic voice and expression of the black race, giving rise to black theatres all over the country.

In the South, Dashiki Project Theatre emerged in the wake of the Black Power and the Black Arts Movements. Dashiki recognized that any theatre company that could secure control over the black identity and its representation on the stage could indeed improve the image of the African American. In essence, success in the microcosm could translate to success in the macrocosm. Dashiki Project Theatre did establish an artistic identity and voice for African Americans. More importantly, Dashiki Project Theatre nurtured a forum that projected positive images for both black males and females, and added to its agenda a variety of subcultures of the black population that had been ignored. Its vital role and how it differed from other theatre efforts of the time are the essential subjects of the chapters that follow.

## Chapter Three

### The Genesis and Development of Dashiki Project Theatre

Dashiki Project Theatre began more than 30 years ago with five people, a collection of mainstream plays, a few unpublished black plays, no money, and quite a bit of enthusiasm. These elements bespeak the tone and direction that the company would follow for the next 25 years. The idealism of its artistic trio, Ted Gilliam, Norbert Davidson, and Warren Kenner, would sustain the theatre and help usher in a new black aesthetic on the New Orleans arts scene. The Dashiki Project Theatre, like other black theatres of the 1960s, focused on creating and maintaining a cohesive black culture. However, the black identity fostered by the group was one based more on interconnection than separation.

This chapter focuses on the special community that was developed around the Dashiki Project Theatre. A major component of this discussion involves the story of Dashiki's beginnings at Dillard University. How the performance space was secured, what kind of audience was first attracted to Dashiki, and what kind of funding supported the theatre: such questions will be explored in the chapter's treatment of Dashiki's meager beginnings. Crucial to this discussion is the fact that Dashiki's inclusive makeup did not entirely fit the criteria of the historical Black Arts Movement. The Dashiki ensemble recognized that there were images to be projected on the black stage beyond those allowed by the Black Arts Movement and beyond those prescriptions issued by white mainstream theatre. An examination of these factors explains the philosophy adopted by Dashiki Project Theatre, which contrasts with the philosophy of the Black Arts Movement.

Dashiki's inclusivity and its vision are clearly seen in the wide-ranging, cosmopolitan thinking of Theodore E. Gilliam and the group's other founding members. This vision is also evident in the group's choice of spaces, its selection of plays, and its financial and structural organization. Much of this survey of historical information about Dashiki Project Theatre comes from personal experience and interviews with many of Dashiki's prominent members.

It is interesting to speculate as to why Dashiki grew out of the Dillard University community. Dillard appears to have been the right place for such artistic innovations. It had been established as an institution dedicated to the production and nurturing of black arts. These arts included theatre, visual arts, music, and dance. Dillard was especially recognized for its music and theatre. Two prominent theatre artists, Dr. Floyd Sandle and Dr. Randolph Edmonds, both black drama professors with national profiles, had nurtured the university's theatre program. Both professors had long served as directors of theatre at Dillard University. Evidencing this strength in performer training, one of Dillard's earliest graduates, Bea Richards, went on to become a prominent black actress in professional theatre. Dillard was also the breaking ground for one of the earliest national black theatre groups, the National Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts, an organization that is still functioning today. In addition, Dillard University had established a popular festival in New Orleans. Known as the Black Arts Festival, it showcased black talent from the campus and from the larger New Orleans community. Groups from throughout the city came to Dillard University to perform, including choirs, theatre troupes, and dance troupes. Indeed, the festival provided an opportunity for black artists

who wanted local, state, and nation exposure. Many of the key individuals who would start Dashiki Project Theatre performed at this festival.

Gilliam, a young black graduate of Yale University's School of Drama, arrived at Dillard University in New Orleans, LA in 1962 (copy of a resume of Theodore E. Gilliam). Originally from Florida, he had earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in English and drama from North Carolina College and a Master of Fine Arts from Yale University (Cuthbert, "Director Ted Gilliam Dies"). Later, while teaching at Dillard, Gilliam received his Ph.D. in playwriting from Tulane University. In fact, he brought to Dillard from Tulane some fascinating ideas on theatre and playwriting.

When Gilliam arrived at Dillard University, Joe Greenhoe and his wife, both white professors, comprised the entire theatre faculty. A year or two after Gilliam arrived, the Greenhoses resigned, leaving the department of theatre essentially a one-man program. Ted Gilliam became the sponsor of the student organization, the Dillard Players Guild, and was the theatre's sole director (Cazenave).

A chance meeting of three men, Ted Gilliam, Warren Kenner, and Norbert Davidson, witnessed the beginnings of Dashiki Project Theatre. This meeting led to a friendship and partnership that would enrich the theatre productions at Dillard University, and, ultimately, those of Dashiki Project Theatre. When Gilliam arrived at Dillard University, Norbert Davidson, Jr., was enrolled there as a student. Warren Kenner, a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago, had been attending Dillard University theatre productions for a number of years. When Gilliam found out that Kenner was an artist, he invited him to help with the sets for the productions. Kenner accepted with enthusiasm, and he even acted in a Dillard production directed by Gilliam. Davidson graduated from



Dillard in 1966 with a B.A. in English, speech, and drama, and he went on to earn an M.F.A. in acting from Stanford University in 1968. Gilliam, Davidson, and Kenner were to become a “Triumvirate” of Dashiki Project Theatre, much like the “Triumvirate” that had launched the Provincetown Players in Massachusetts several decades earlier. Their cooperative spirit would set the kind of philosophy of inclusion that propelled Dashiki forward. This ideology was not unlike that of many of the other independent theatre movements of this country; however, it was rare among black theatre companies.

The three men melded their diverse talents in a very productive and effective manner: Norbert wrote and rewrote scripts, Ted directed the plays, and Warren designed and built the sets. Their first shows included the workshop production of Norbert’s historical drama, *El Hajj Malik*, a play based on the life of Malcolm X. Davidson used Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Malcolm Speaks*, a collection of Malcolm’s speeches edited by George Breitman, as his main resources for his script. Davidson indicated in an interview that the play had grown out of an acting exercise at Stanford, where he had written a one-hour version of the production. On his way back home to New Orleans from California, the production began to take shape more fully in his mind, and he planned the expansion of the one-hour version into a full-length play (Davidson).

The manuscript lay dormant, however, until a controversy surrounding taste prompted Davidson to finish the piece. Dillard University had hired Davidson to teach English in its pre-Freshman program that summer of 1968. He had been requested to submit titles of books for a reading list for the students. He submitted Alex Haley’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as one of the books. However, the university refused to

approve the work for freshmen reading because it was deemed too controversial. It was then that Davidson resolved to finish his play, *El Hajj Malik*.

It is not difficult to understand why some black and white conservatives rejected *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The book documents the life and philosophy of a prominent African American radical in the struggle for black liberation. The story, told from the viewpoint of a young black man (Malcolm) who witnesses the lynching of his father, seethes with passion, fire, and hatred for white people. Having been imprisoned for violence against whites, Malcolm X was hardly a role model for black or white students. To conservative Christians, he represented a threat because he was a leader of the Nation of Islam. These Black Muslims taught

hatred for the white man and supported the foundation of a separate black nation within the United States. After Malcolm X was suspended by Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad for making an unauthorized remark about the assassination of President Kennedy, he began searching for another method of voicing his protest against the civil injustices aimed at blacks in the United States. (Bekka 19)

To whites, the rhetoric of Malcolm X represented a real threat because it encouraged African Americans to fight physically and violently to gain racial pride. To conservative and integrationist blacks, the book represented an impediment to their advancement, because the language and rhetoric offended whites who supported their efforts financially and politically. Dillard University, a historically black university and a university backed by the United Methodist Church, depended heavily on financial and political support from white benefactors; Dillard University could not afford to jeopardize its base of support.

Kim Lacy Rogers offers another perspective of blacks concerning Malcolm X in her *Righteous Lives*. Writing about Lolis Elie, a young New Orleans civil rights leader of the 1960s, she states:

He [Elie] had begun thinking about black nationalism, and had begun to admire Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the black Muslims in America. He felt that he was different from many of the leaders of black Citizens' Committee: "I come from a different place; I was born and raised in Niggertown. I spent a year at Howard." Most of his colleagues, he said, were "an accommodating class. God knows, they felt that Malcolm X was a madman." (95-96)

Blacks were very divided in their opinions about Malcolm X.

Davidson, having decided to write his play in spite of controversial opinions about Malcolm X, needed a theatrical venue and performers willing to stage the work. That task would not be quite as easy as it seemed. Dillard University had requested that Gilliam direct a theatre production in the pre-Freshman program that summer. Davidson suggested that Gilliam examine his play. Gilliam did read the play, and together he and Davidson decided to workshop the piece that summer at Dillard University using pre-Freshmen students. Andre Cazenave, a Dillard University student, recalls becoming involved in the production of *El Hajj Malik*. Davidson had met Cazenave while she was a student worker in the pre-Freshman program. An office worker at Dillard, Cazenave had access to supplies and equipment, such as paper and photocopiers. Because Dillard University had refused to include Alex Haley's work on Malcolm X in their reading list, any subsequent efforts to expose students to that work had to be handled carefully. Davidson viewed Malcolm X as a sort of an Everyman, a man to be much admired, and this admiration gave him the inspiration to write his play. The play had to be rehearsed

quietly, and Cazenave had to make copies of the script secretly so that they could be distributed to the cast (Davidson, Cazenave).

It is interesting to note that although general histories of black theatre mention the production of *El Hajj Malik* by many other theatre groups, including a professional theatre in New York, not one resource mentions the fact that the play grew out of a workshop experience at Dillard University. Moreover, not one theatre history text, mainstream or black, mentions that the play received its second production in 1969 with Dashiki Project Theatre. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the play premiered on the stage of Dillard University in Coss Hall, the performance space of the Dillard Players Guild.

Other concerns at Dillard University by the late 1960s helped to set the stage for the emergence of Dashiki Project Theatre. Ted Gilliam had trained numerous actors and actresses at Dillard University. These students had gained much experience onstage and backstage, and years of excellence in theatre had brought recognition to the Dillard Players Guild throughout the state and the region. Graduates in theatre at Dillard University earned liberal arts degrees, which did not qualify them to teach. And, most of these talented graduates had no place to go after graduation to continue doing theatre. There was no market for their degrees in theatre and no venue for their talents. The only other choice was graduate school, which many could not afford. Guy West, one such graduate, expressed his desire, when he revealed at a cast party his dream of being able to continue performing “in my own theatre” (quoted from Davidson, “Ted Gilliam’s Legacy”). West had a strong desire to start a theatre and had simply articulated what others, including Davidson and Gilliam, had been thinking. In fact, while Davidson was

still a student at Stanford, he and Gilliam had often communicated about beginning a theatre. Former and current students of Dillard had expressed an interest in such a theatre (Wright, 13). They all shared the goal that this theatre would continue to promote and showcase the talent of black performers on the stage in New Orleans. Gilliam himself shared this vision; perhaps it was his life's goal to direct such a theatre, one in which he could promote and develop black talent outside of Dillard University. In a playbill of Dashiki's fifteenth anniversary, Gilliam wrote: "I feel that Dashiki Theatre has created me, for through it I have discovered not only many others who have become part of me but also I have discovered myself. And the process of discovery continues with each project each year" (*Dashiki Theatre Fifteenth Anniversary: 1968-83*).

The first meetings to create Dashiki Project Theatre were held in Gilliam's apartment, an upstairs dwelling in Gentilly Gardens, adjacent to Dillard University. A beautifully landscaped apartment complex, Gentilly Gardens was home for a number of Dillard University faculty members. Gilliam's apartment, a small one-bedroom apartment, provided the perfect setting for these early meetings. Drinking coffee with jazz music playing in the background, the founders of this theatre there discussed their plans. Cazenave, already active with the group, took notes. Eventually, others, mainly Dillard University theatre graduates, joined the meetings. These early meetings included other founders who subscribed to the development of Dashiki. Among them were Guy West, Jr., Thelma Cameron Hinson, and Percy Ewell. John Bennett, often mistakenly identified as a founding member, actually joined shortly after (Cazenave).

This initial group determined and articulated the purposes of the theatre as follows: to project the truth of the black experience; to foster new works by local writers;

and to “relate to people from all walks of life although addressed to a segment of the population still considered ‘invisible’ despite a history written in blood, sweat and tears but not without laughter” (*Dashiki Theatre Fifteenth Anniversary 1968-1983*). In addition, the founders planned for Dashiki to provide an artistic outlet for those who had talents but had no other venue for their expression.

*Black Theatre Magazine*, published by the New Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, summed up the objectives of Dashiki Project Theatre:

To place the experience and the image of the black man in the proper perspective of human events . . . to enrich the community culturally . . . To provide a forum from which audiences, black and white, can achieve common levels of communication, understanding, and recognition of common spheres of experience . . . to provide an outlet for the development of indigenous talent . . . to provide . . . a medium of vital entertainment. (5)

It is highly significant that a leading journal documenting black theatre experience in America had early on recognized the importance of Dashiki Project Theatre.

Naming their fledgling theatre was an important consideration for the founders. For certain they wanted a name that would connote freedom and identify the company as African. “Dashiki” seemed to encompass these two ideals. This descriptor was appropriate in that the English definition of Dashiki is “freedom.” Dashiki is also the name of a popular garment worn by African Americans during the Black Revolutionary Movement of the 1960s. The garment, a symbol of racial pride among African Americans, promoted a sense of national unity during a period when national unity was of utmost importance to African Americans.

The word “Project” was selected as part of the company’s name because the theatre would be located in the slums of New Orleans, where blacks lived in a large

number of poor housing projects. This location was described in one of the company's programs:

the lives of a people a large percentage of whom are still circumscribed by housing projects of some sort, whether low income or high rise. (*Dashiki Theatre Fifteenth Anniversary 1968-1983*)

On the program for *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, Gilliam wrote, "Project is used in the sense of 'opus,' a work of experimental nature designed to fit the needs of a particular idea or circumstance" (*Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*). It was the consensus of the founders that this theatre must move beyond the confines of the university and branch out into the larger metropolitan New Orleans community; the theatre had to be located among the black people of New Orleans. The name "Project" also suggested an endeavor, a work in progress, a group function.

So, Dashiki Project Theatre was born and was officially incorporated on March 18, 1969. On its playbills, Dashiki usually listed its founders: Andre Cazenave, N. R. Davidson, Theodore E. Gilliam, Thelma Cameron Hinson, Warren James Kenner, Percy Ewell and Guy West, Jr. Gilliam himself was the theatre's artistic director, Kenner was its art director, Davidson was its playwright-in-residence, and West was its producing manager. Having recently received a certificate in directing from the Pasadena Playhouse in California, West was well qualified for his role.

From its inception Dashiki Project Theatre avoided becoming a separatist institution. In fact, Dashiki welcomed people of all races, creeds, and color, as inferred from the theatre's objectives stated above. Non-blacks could be counted among the participants and audience. It is a confirmation of Dashiki's commitment to the "human experience" that non-blacks approached Dashiki voluntarily to participate. In the

twentieth anniversary program of Dashiki Project Theatre, Gilliam wrote, “Although Dashiki is a black theatre, its spirit, form and content is distinctly American” (*Dashiki Project Theatre: 1968-1988 The Twentieth Anniversary*). In short, the theatre accepted anyone who wanted to participate.

It is enlightening to note how other black theatres of the time contrasted to and compared with Dashiki’s interests and philosophy. In contrast to Dashiki Project Theatre, Bullins’ New Lafayette Theatre and Baraka’s Black Arts Repertory Theatre did not survive long. Both theatres, nationalistic in scope and philosophy, denied participation to non-blacks. According to Ellen Foreman in Hill’s *The Theatre of Black Americans*,

In both groups, ethnocentrism defined not only the audience addressed and admitted, but also the content of artistic expression. Black nationalist political philosophy offered too limited a perspective to ensure long-term existence. (271)

Bullins and Baraka’s theatres closed their doors after a short life. It appeared that, in order to be sustainable, black theatre needed to go beyond such limitations and have a broader vision.

Conversely, theatres like the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC) of New York did have a more extensive and inclusive vision, in that NEC, like Dashiki, opened its doors to all races. Even though it partially reflected the position of the black nationalists, the philosophy of the Negro Ensemble Company transcended the narrow vision of such a position. For Douglas Turner Ward, the NEC’s artistic director,

The audience need not be all-Black, to the exclusion of Whites, but for the Black playwright Blacks were “his primary audience, the first persons of his address, potentially the most advanced, the most responsive, or most critical. Only through their initial and continuous participation can his intent and purpose be best perceived by others.” (Foreman 272)



The Negro Ensemble Company would produce plays written by black playwrights about the black experience, but the theatre would not eliminate the best drama of world theatre, that material which reflected the concerns of humanity. Like Dashiki Project Theatre, the NEC would welcome the works of international playwrights, and they would adapt those plays to the black experience in America.

The conflicting philosophies of these theatres would give rise to contemporary debates about what is a truly “black theatre” and how “blackness” should be represented. The most important of these debates occurred recently between August Wilson, preeminent black playwright of the contemporary theatre, and Robert Brustein, the prestigious director of the American Repertory Theatre. According to Wilson,

To mount an all-black production of a *Death of a Salesman* or any other play conceived for white actors as an investigation of the human condition through the specifics of white culture is to deny us our own humanity, our own history, and the need to make our own investigations from the cultural ground on which we stand as black Americans. It is an assault on our presence, and our difficult but honorable history in America; and it is an insult to our intelligence, our playwrights, and our many and varied contributions to the society and the world at large. (30-31)

Wilson uses these statements to support his view that black theatre needs to be maintained as a separatist institution. He even rejects color-blind casting, calling it “the same idea of assimilation that black Americans have been rejecting for the past 380 years” (31).

On the other hand, however, Brustein and others challenge and criticize Wilson for not practicing what he preaches. They show that his plays do not support his philosophy, claiming that his plays espouse the same behavioral patterns and issues of white life; the characters just happen to be black. In fact, they point out that his *Fences* is often compared to *Death of a Salesman*. Brustein contends that Wilson’s stance

oversimplifies the black experience, giving all black people in America the same experience, denying their individual unique lives and backgrounds. This oversimplification of race defines all racism. Dashiki Project Theatre and other black theatres of the 1960s battled over this same definition of “blackness.” There is merit to Brustein’s argument in that the debate continues into the present.

Another issue illustrating the problems faced by black theatre relates to theatre spaces and their location and configuration. The theatrical experience consists of much more than what happens on stage. Marvin Carlson in *Places of Performance* states,

The entire theatre, its audience arrangements, its other public spaces, its physical appearance, even its location within a city, are all important elements of the process by which an audience makes meaning of its experience. (2)

According to Carlson, we are likely to “look at the theatre experience in a more global way” (2). All of the elements of the experience must be included in an analysis of a theatre event. Making sense or meaning of the experience means that one considers the “scenery, the orchestra, the lobbies and bars at intermission, the programs, the ushers, the other audience members” (5). Spaces and audiences carry a wide variety and dimensions of meaning. Moreover, choices of spaces used for theatrical entertainment also reflect the economics of the times. Economic problems account for the many occasions that theatres change their spaces. Black theatres, almost from the very beginning, staged their performances in marginal spaces, often broken-down facilities in the black community. When the theatre had outgrown one space or could no longer afford the space, the theatre had to look for a less expensive and/or larger space.

If Dashiki was to be located in the slums of New Orleans as Gilliam intended, a performance space had to be found. John Bennett and Guy West, graduates of Dillard

University theatre, were on the board of the federally funded Economic Opportunity Corporation of New Orleans, an arm of Total Community Action, Inc. Bennett, later to become Dashiki's business manager, was the coordinator of cultural expression, and West was a team chief for community organization and worked for the Central City community, bringing artistic and cultural enrichments to the ghettos of New Orleans. Also serving on that board as its Vice President was Mrs. Marguerite Bush, a citizen of Central City, and Father Joe Putnam, then the white pastor of the all-black St. Francis DeSales Catholic Church of Central City. Mrs. Bush was also a parishioner of St. Francis and the mother of Carol Sutton, who later became one of Dashiki's most favored and talented actresses.

Due to these relationships, St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church housed the earliest productions of Dashiki Project Theatre. It was through the connection between Guy West and Father Putnam that Dashiki was able to secure the first performance space for Dashiki Project Theatre's productions. Putnam agreed to let Dashiki use the church hall, which also was used on Saturdays for bingo and other church socials. Both the church and the hall were located on the corner of Second and Loyola Streets in Central City. So, the theatre was indeed going to be located "near the black community."

Significantly, the St. Francis Young Adult Coffeehouse, a gathering of the predominantly black, young parishioners, also used this church hall. The coffeehouse, open only to those over 18, sponsored dances on Friday nights and gospel singing and jazz concerts on Sunday nights (when they did not conflict with a Dashiki production). From this coffeehouse came some of the first community residents who performed with Dashiki. So, it is generally assumed that the first production of Dashiki Project Theatre

was done in collaboration with the St. Francis De Sales Catholic Church and the Young Adult Coffeehouse (YACH) Black Heritage Festival. Father Putnam, in speaking of the church's role in bringing Dashiki and other activities to the community, remarked:

Man has to control his environment or it will control him. Formerly the church withdrew from the world . . . Now it is coming back based on a philosophy that salvation, though initiated in the church, must be worked out on the streets. (qtd. in "St. Francis De Sales TCB": 2)

As has happened throughout history and despite certain uneasiness between religion and theatre, the two institutions came together in a unified fashion. In many black communities, the black church and the black school represented the only institutions which blacks controlled. The St. Francis church hall easily sat 200 people. The ticket prices for the first productions of Dashiki were \$2 per person. The productions of Dashiki had to be scheduled for Thursdays, Fridays, and Sundays because Saturdays were the nights for bingo parties at the hall.

Dashiki Project Theatre's connection to the church was, in some ways, more secular than religious. Historically, the Catholic Church had been more open to secular activities than the Protestant institutions. Fundamental religious institutions patterned their philosophies after the Puritan ethic. They allowed no activities considered non-religious. Fortunately, the Catholics had fewer concerns about secular activities. In fact, the Catholic Church promoted bingo and other fund-raising activities. Predictably, the church welcomed Dashiki Project Theatre.

The St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church supported and encouraged the efforts of Dashiki Project Theatre. In the theatre's fifth season, with the production of *Entertaining Reflections*, the space at St. Francis underwent some changes. Cuthbert writes in an article for the *Times-Picayune*, dated June 3, 1973:

Flush against the side of St. Francis De Sales, at 2420 Loyola, is a peeling three-story annex building enclosed by a hurricane fence. Dashiki has used the ground floor as a storage space for some time, but now their use of the building will be expanded. The church is allotting Dashiki “indefinite” use of the ground floor, which includes two paneled rooms the theater may use as offices. And unless (or until) paying tenants appear, space on the other floors will be made available by the church and Gilliam has visions of a rehearsal hall and a dance studio. (Cuthbert, “Dashiki Assembles” 16)

Cuthbert maintains that the church was entirely supportive of the efforts of Dashiki Project Theatre because it knew what a huge contribution the theatre made to the life of the Central City community.

. Through Dashiki Project Theatre, Gilliam and his art director emphasized the nurturing of youth. It was a Youth Coffeehouse of the St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church that first helped Dashiki recruit actors and technicians for its performances. Dashiki repeated this commitment to young people throughout its history; hence its doors were always open to young people who wanted to act, direct, sing, dance and work as technicians. One youth program, called “Ethiopian Nights,” gave opportunities to two young African American brothers who are both directors of black theatres in New Orleans today. The young men wrote and directed plays that involved other youth from the community of the inner city. Other plays performed by Dashiki made use of the talents of the youth from the community, from actors to technicians and backstage workers. Children of the members sometimes played minor roles in plays.

Dashiki’s recruitment of its members from the talent pool of Central City further illustrates Dashiki’s commitment to inclusivity. Davidson writes, “At first it appeared he [Gilliam] was merely trying to satisfy the need for ‘warm bodies,’ but it quickly became evident he was attempting to expand the company beyond the Dillard core” (Davidson, “Ted Gilliam’s Legacy”). Some of Dashiki’s first performers, then, besides university

theatre graduates, came directly from the church and the Central City neighborhood. Noray Francois, Donald Matthews, Carol Sutton, and Pamela Blatcher, members of St. Francis DeSales Catholic Church and active members of the St. Francis DeSales Youth Coffeehouse, were some of the first community members to participate. Francois and Matthews volunteered their services first. Francois was a Dillard graduate and knew Gilliam, although he had never been in a play at Dillard. Sutton sat in the back of the hall and often watched while Dashiki rehearsed. She had always had a desire to act, but she was afraid to volunteer. However, Ted Gilliam, whose goal was eventually to involve the residents of that community, approached her and asked her to become a participant rather than just a passive observer. Concerning Gilliam's recruitment of Sutton, Davidson writes:

Ted cast her in "A Hand Is on the Gate," primarily because she could sing, but also because he knew she could do the part. Carol didn't think she could do it, however, and was in tears after nearly every performance. Ted was stern with her, wouldn't allow her to quit and repeatedly demanded more of her. Today, she is one of the city's top actresses. (Davidson "Ted Gilliam's Legacy")

Pamela Blatcher joined soon after Carol Sutton. The four newcomers (Sutton, Matthews, Francois and Blatcher) were thrown onto the stage, where they quickly learned the art of performing from experience and from watching the veterans. Hence, the first productions of Dashiki involved a number of Central City residents, as well as graduates of Dillard University.

Dashiki's first audiences, predominantly black, also came from the surrounding community of Central City. They embraced the theatre as an extension of their own neighborhood and church, though the theatre was an institution with which they had had very little former connection. Yet it was an institution similar to one they knew: the

church. It had a charismatic leader, followers, ritualized performances, a space for performers and audience. To Matthews, Francois, Blatcher and Sutton, as well as to other members of that community, it was familiar. The audience was about eighty to ninety percent black. The whites who attended were largely members of the intellectual and academic communities of New Orleans. Many of them were faculty members or other professionals.

Watching and performing a play at Dashiki was truly a community experience for its audience and participants. “Community” refers to involvement by people who share a common culture. The black audience brought its black culture right into the theatre. A black audience typically responds overtly to a theatrical production, much as they do in a rousing church service. The Dashiki audience was thrilled that a group of artists were projecting their story on the stage. They came to see their own personal experiences played out in front of them. They laughed; they cried; they gasped; they thought; they shouted. It truly was like a religious experience, appropriately housed in a church. On many occasions the audience behaved as if the story they were watching was real, and many verbally expressed their emotions and responses.

One of the most impressive audience responses at Dashiki came during productions of *El Hajj Malik*. Audience members would actually recite lines from the play with the cast; some of them had seen the play that many times. I personally remember one section of the show that repeatedly enthused the more excited members of the audience. During the part of the play when the performers started the Lindy Hop, audience members would recite along:

Aaaaahhh, sweet babies, it set me on fire  
I'd party all night and never get tired

I lost my job, cause o' tingling feet  
But then I had time to dance and be sweet (Davidson, *El Hajj Malik* 216).

The audience felt as if they were part of a team and established a strong connection with the performers. The audience sang spirituals, nodded their heads, giving feedback to the actors. It was the theatre of "call and response." This was the black audience at St. Francis.

According to Thomas Pawley, veteran black theatre director and university professor, the responses of the black audience, both verbal and nonverbal, can quite often be distracting, "ill-timed, unpredictable, and apparently unrelated to the mood or action of a scene, thus frustrating both the actors and a considerable portion of the audience" (308). Dashiki Project Theatre's audiences were equally inappropriate. However, this audience response did not frustrate Dashiki. Rather it encouraged the performers.

This experience of community did not end with the performance itself. A concession at the back of the theatre structure was like the local grocery stores where blacks shopped. Here Dashiki sold popcorn, candy, hot dogs and cold drinks. The smell of popcorn was constantly in the air. Moreover, the smell of cigarette smoke was everywhere because audience members could smoke while they watched the performances. Sutton recalled the large old, droning fan that sat in the middle of the floor behind the audience (Sutton, May 2001).

It seemed that the entire theatrical experience was simply an extension of communal life. Audience members often knew each other; many of them attended the same schools and churches. They behaved in the theatre quite often the way they behaved



in the community. In an article from *The Louisiana Weekly* in October of 1970, Kelly-Marie Berry documents the Dashiki experience:

We arrive 8:25 at St. Francis de Sales Auditorium for an 8:30 Dashiki preview of “Ceremonies in Dark Old Men.” “Yusef Lateef at Pep’s” plays audibly/pleasant and comforting. Director, Ted Gilliam resplendent in a bold black/white dashiki. 8:45 Kids munching oreos/crackers/sipping sodas/making B line to Johns. “I wonder what’s keeping them from starting???”

8:55 audience restless/no more potato chips/9:06 concession stand is crowded. James Brown, “Cold Sweat” plays/kids do dance bit from play/Father Putnam clears youngsters out of front row. 9:10 lights flash/9:11 Black Out. “Yeahs” from everyone.

(Berry)

Despite the fact that the production had been delayed, Berry indicated that the evening was still wonderful for several reasons:

Again, it’s the totality of the experience and once you are there you did on the activity all around/the milling about of the kids/the restlessness and the anxiousness of the adults/the humorous, youthful asides abounding from offstage in the midst of the pathos and real-down drama that is going on on the other side of the footlights. It’s everything. And Lonnie Elder, III, has seen to that in the excellent work of his that is currently being played so brilliantly by the Dashiki Project Theatre. (Berry)

This was community, thriving, lively, vibrant, at its best. And Dashiki Project Theatre was responsible for it all.

In another article on the Dashiki Project Theatre experience, S. Joslyn Fosberg states her impression:

Whatever the physical limitations of the plant, it has a certain charisma. And the audience at Dashiki, also largely beer-and-shirt-sleeves and a couple of kids and some popcorn, responds to everything it sees with audible gasps, loud applause, and tangible warmth. People in the audience seem to know this is their theatre, that what they see onstage has to do directly with their lives. Art, especially theatre, has always flowered most richly when it is in touch with the people—and this is one of Dashiki’s abiding strengths (another is their insistence on high artistic standards).

(10)

On the connection between performers and directors, Fosberg adds, “There is strength, too, in its closeness as a company—a family of actors and directors shifting roles to fit the occasion” (10). Drinking coffee and sharing conversation after the show by the audience and the cast and technicians further enriched the unique Dashiki experience. Dashiki Project Theatre was a “community” that grew out of a community.

Over the years, many celebrities were part of the audiences of Dashiki, including prominent actresses like Julie Harris and Cecily Tyson. Often their expressions of gratitude highlighted the communal experience of the theatre. A letter to Dashiki from Julie Harris illustrates this experience:

Dear Mr. Gilliam; Last Sunday night was a wonderful night for me, and I am so happy you invited me to see “Dark Laughter.” The plays are wonderful, and the actors played them with great style and feeling. I am so grateful you made it possible for us to see your work. This evening was one I will never forget—meeting all of you and having coffee after the performance. Thank you so very much for your work and great hospitality. My love and best wishes for the future of your Dashiki Theatre. Julie Harris.

As noted earlier, the experience at Dashiki Project Theatre involved the use of more than one space in the theatre’s lifetime. In fact, Dashiki took some of its earlier productions to other spaces for performance. For instance, in the summer and fall of 1970, Dashiki presented a production of Davidson’s *El Hajj Malik* at the New Orleans Repertory Theatre, located in downtown New Orleans. Here it attracted a very ethnically diverse audience. June Havoc, then artistic director of that theatre, made the invitation for Dashiki to relocate there. Warren Kenner, Dashiki’s scenic designer, with the help of Ted Gilliam and James Harris, converted the space, a former screening room at the Repertory Theatre, into an intimate theatre. Kenner’s improvement of the space allowed it to seat about 80 people. The new playing area seemed deceptively small. *El Hajj Malik* would

run there as long as there was demand, opening in July and running intermittently throughout the fall. Rewritten and expanded by Davidson, the play chronicled the life of the man, Malcolm Little, who heard the Word of God and emerged as an important Black Nationalist leader. The play was already running professionally in several other theatres around the country.

In a recent interview with David Cuthbert, he indicated that Ms. Havoc agreed that the relationship between Dashiki and the New Orleans Repertory Theatre would be flexible. Ms. Havoc also indicated that the Dashiki personnel would be entirely responsible for the mounting of their own productions. The cast of *El Hajj Malik* included Gilliam, Kenner, Thelma C. Hinson, Percy Ewell, Carol Sutton, Barbara Tasker, Noray Francois, Donald Matthews, Pamela Blatcher, Guy West, Jr., Stanley Coleman, William McDonald, Betty Ewell, Michael Price, Patricia McGuire, Michael Andry, Dorothy Singleton, Charles Ricard, John Taylor, and Mattie Stone. Gilliam directed as well as choreographed. A review in the *Vieux Carre Courier* on August 7, 1970, stated, “[Gilliam’s] dance is a good example of just one aspect of his talent in this field” (Toye 7). Dashiki planned several other productions for that space: *Dark Laughter*, the hit comedy-farce of one acts entitled “Short Fun,” “Contribution,” “How Do You Do?” and “The Further Emasculation of”; *A Hand Is on the Gate*; and *Tiger Tiger Burning Bright*.

However, the change of location caused tensions for Dashiki Project Theatre. The demise of a community, as Dashiki knew it, was eminent. Dashiki made a successful move to the New Orleans Repertory Theatre, but a different audience created a different atmosphere for a Dashiki production. No longer was the audience predominantly black. Dashiki had brought its productions uptown, and white people attended uptown theatre.

Not being descendents of the great oral tradition of the black Baptist church, this audience did not talk back to the actors; they did not sing with them; they did not clap their hands except at the end of an act or at the end of the production (Sutton, May 2001). Thus, Dashiki's scope had widened; however, at this point its mission shifted, because one of the primary purposes of Dashiki had been to bring culture, art, and education to the poor black community of Central City. A significant tension resulted. Dashiki needed the support of the wealthy white patrons, but it needed to continue to reach out to the black community of New Orleans. Could Dashiki continue to offer its productions for the community-at-large of New Orleans? Was Dashiki going to move? How could Dashiki's mission continue to be effective if black people refused to go uptown to see theatre? Location thus became one of the Dashiki Project Theatre's chief concerns in its attempt to create a vital black theatre for New Orleans.

Eventually, Dashiki did move to another location. Little did its members know that this move would lead to the inauguration of another important theatre space in New Orleans. The new site, the Contemporary Arts Center on Camp Street, had been used for artistic displays but had never been used for a performance space. Therefore, Dashiki had to carve out its own space in this building. The proprietors gave Dashiki the third floor of this building for storing props and costumes, but Dashiki had to create its own performance space. Under the supervision of Dashiki's set designer, Warren Kenner, the company built a platform stage and established a place for audience seating. In fact, it was during the creation of this performance space that Warren Kenner, a diabetic, bruised his foot; this bruise would unfortunately signal the beginning of his declining health (Cuthbert, 2001).

And so, Dashiki inaugurated the first performance space at Contemporary Arts Center, which is still used today for theatrical productions. Having gone through a remodeling of its physical structure, the Contemporary Arts Center hosted its first theatrical endeavor by Dashiki Project Theatre in 1984. At this venue, Dashiki Project Theatre staged Derek Walcott's *Pantomime*, Don Evans' *One Big Happy Family*, and *Siege on Duncan Street*, an original play written by a New Orleans female playwright, Phyllis M. Clemons.

The company would experience several other moves. In 1985, Dashiki relocated to a Fulton Street warehouse space while still retaining a presence at the Contemporary Arts Center. There, the company performed Ntozake Shange's *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion*. At the Contemporary Arts Center, they performed Dennis McIntyre's *Split Second*, a show that proved highly popular (Cuthbert, 2002).

In 1986, Dashiki briefly performed at Xavier University in New Orleans. However, the company still occupied a space and performed at the Fulton Street warehouse. At Fulton Street in 1986, they performed Paul Benjamin's *The Carrier* and *The Box*, while they performed Steve Carter's *Eden* and *Inacent Black* at Xavier.

In 1987, Dashiki moved yet to another home, an office/storage building at the corner of Bienville and Burgundy Streets in the French Quarter. There, the troupe performed "cameos" and scenes from plays the company had done over the years. The theatre was already beginning to perform in collaboration with other groups. Would plays about the black experience continue to interest white patrons? Could Dashiki survive?

The company's moves actually spurred growth and wider acceptance. From neighborhood attention, Dashiki gained national recognition by moving to other venues,

spaces that gave the theatre the chance to become more inclusive and to reach more communities. For example, the company's third production at St. Francis de Sales auditorium, Jean Genet's *The Blacks*, attracted such a following that the theatre received an invitation to perform the play at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette, Louisiana, for the Education Professions Development Act Institute of Negro History and Culture. Then, in August of 1970, Dashiki performed *El Hajj Malik* as the special guests of the first Black Lay Catholic Caucus at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., where the production received a standing ovation (*Dashiki Theatre Fifteenth Anniversary 1968-83*, 6). In the fall of 1972, the theatre participated in a national Black Drama Festival, "Black Quake" in San Francisco, California. In this venue the company presented several one-act plays, including "How Do You Do?" by Ed Bullins and two plays by Norbert Davidson, "Short Fun" and "The Further Emasculation Of." The festival and Dashiki received national press coverage in *Ebony Magazine* and in newspapers around the country (*Ebony*, 110).

The Dashiki momentum grew as two more of the company's productions received national attention. In 1979, Dashiki Project Theatre was selected to participate in the first John F. Kennedy Performing Arts Center Black Playwrights Project. During the same year, the theatre represented the South as one of fifteen black theatres around the country in the Black Theatre Festival, U.S.A. at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City. There the company staged Ed Bullins' *The Fabulous Miss Marie*, starring Patricia McGuire, veteran actress of Dashiki.

Without question, the economics of the times and the finances available to black theatres of the 1960s affected the choices of theatre spaces and venues for performance.

No theatre can operate without finances. It is not certain whether economics was even a consideration when Dashiki was first created. However, funding was certain to become a demanding and significant problem as the company grew, shifted directions and reached for larger audiences.

Mance Williams cites a major reason for inadequate funding in black theatres:

And not only were fledgling Black theatre companies hampered by inadequate facilities and often inferior equipment, they also lacked administrative expertise needed to secure funding from public and private agencies. Moreover, while many avant-garde theatre companies could afford the luxury of experimentation for its own sake, Black theatres had to prove their worth to the community. (40)

Confirming Williams' point, the major funding foundations often supported the efforts of white regional theatres with their "black" projects, while black theatres like Dashiki Project Theatre had difficulty securing the necessary funds from those same foundations. One reason for this funding prejudice against the black theatres is suggested by Hoyt W. Fuller in an April 1975 interview: "Black performing artists cannot expect to have financial returns equal to white artists unless they are going to perform before a white audience" (King, *Black Theatre Present* 67).

Dashiki Project Theatre did not feel this funding prejudice as strongly as other black theatres of the period because its audiences included some whites. There was, however, difficulty in securing funds because of a difference in perception of the company's mission and audiences as seen by Dashiki and its funding sources. Dashiki saw itself as a black theatre with an inclusive mission and philosophy, whereas funding sources often saw Dashiki as simply a "black" theatre.

And yet, Dashiki had other advantages with other funding sources that generated the needed financial support. Because of the strong administrative expertise of some of its

first board members, the National Endowment for the Arts (N.E.A.) became interested in the work of the company. Among Dashiki's board were public officials of the New Orleans community who were able to assist in accessing funding agencies. When the Economic Opportunity Corporation (E.O.C.) of New Orleans decided to fund community projects that used volunteers, Dashiki was well positioned because of its contacts with these board members. Importantly, the board members, as well as the members of the theatre company, were all volunteers, necessary criteria for organizations seeking funds. Total Community Action, the program that had spawned the EOC, decided to sponsor Dashiki Project Theatre on a thirteen-week trial basis. In fact, Dashiki staged its first two productions with \$300 given by Total Community Action. John Bennett, one of the EOC board members, had expertise in writing grant proposals, and he petitioned the National Endowment for the Arts for funds to operate Dashiki. Backed by the EOC board and several officials of the city and the state, Dashiki received important funding from the National Endowment for the Arts.

During the first few years of operation, Dashiki received well over \$60,000 in grants. A congratulatory letter from United States Senator J. Bennett Johnston documents the second of such awards:

The National Endowment for the Arts has just advised me that the Dashiki Project Theatre, Inc., is the recipient of a grant in the amount of \$40,000. The purpose of the grant is to support professional instruction and training in acting, production and theater management. I want to congratulate you on this good news and to wish you the best of success.

Senator Johnston had sent a similar letter the previous year, congratulating Dashiki on receiving a grant award in the amount of \$25,000 from the National Endowment for the



Arts. Because of his expertise in securing funds for the theatre, John Bennett became Dashiki's business manager.

There was another reason for the N.E.A.'s willingness to fund the efforts of Dashiki Project Theatre. Dashiki not only performed a wide array of plays, but it also staged those plays with a high degree of excellence. The acting often surpassed in quality the acting found in even the professional theatres of New Orleans. The critics' reviews attest to that fact. Warren Kenner built magnificent and artistically engaging sets out of cardboard and paint, while Ted Gilliam's directorial hand demonstrated his skill in staging and directing the performers. The N.E.A. wanted to reward such excellence in the arts, and Dashiki, fortunately, met their criteria.

Other sources of funding supported the efforts of Dashiki Project Theatre as well. These included, of course, gate receipts. Dashiki often used money it collected from attendance to survive from play to play. Unfortunately, such records of gate receipts do not exist any longer. However, interviews with former members provide verbal confirmation to the importance of gate receipts. According to the fifteenth anniversary program, before 1973, Dashiki "existed solely on the contributions of time and money from its members and staff, various donors, and donations at the door" (*Dashiki Theatre Fifteenth Anniversary 1968-83*, 4). One benefactor, Mrs. Muriel B. Francis, gave of her personal finances and used her influence to encourage other philanthropists to contribute to the support of the arts in New Orleans, including Dashiki. As well, Mrs. Francis, a member of the EOC board, became a strong supporter and patron of Dashiki Project Theatre herself. Many individuals gave small, recurring contributions. One such donation

came from Michael Taylor, a member of the Afro-American Congress of Tulane University. In a letter dated November 10, 1970, Mr. Taylor wrote:

I would like to express my enthusiasm for your group. I enjoyed both “Ceremonies in Dark Old Men” and “El Hajj Malik,” and I am sure everyone else enjoyed it! Also, I recognize that the black community is abundant in enthusiasm, yet lacking in finance. I arranged for a group of black brothers and sisters from Tulane to view “El Hajj Malik” not for the purpose of requesting lower rates, but for the opportunity to contribute . . . Included is a small check of 40 dollars.

Wisely, Dashiki Project Theatre honored small gifts as well as the larger ones. The leadership of the theatre company recognized that a donor’s commitment to the mission and philosophy of Dashiki was as valuable as his or her financial support. It was agreed that the level of commitment was not necessarily reflected by the amount of the donation. A donation of five dollars from a person with limited means could indicate a commitment as strong as a thousand dollars from a wealthier patron.

Even corporate support began to appear. In 1973 a playbill for *Entertaining Reflections: 4 One-Act Plays* stated that the production was “partially assisted by a gift from the IBM Corporation, and, as usual, the continued support of the St. Francis De Sales Church.” Other corporate and even governmental donors signed on, including Shell Oil Fund, the IBM Corporation, Antoine’s Restaurant, The City of New Orleans, the Louisiana Division of Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the John F. Kennedy Performing Arts Center. The playbill for the premiere of Ted Gilliam’s play, *The Purple Dust of Twilight Time*, lists additional donors to Dashiki that include Arts Council of New Orleans, the Southern Arts Federation, and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival Foundation.

Occasionally, the theatre received a designated, special grant to launch a special project. For example, during the 1975-1976 season, Dashiki received a grant from the New Orleans Bi-Centennial Commission to present five productions documenting the representation and participation of blacks in American theatre from its beginning to the present (*Dashiki Theatre Fifteenth Anniversary* 5). Norbert Davidson was the playwright-in-residence for such an ambitious project and the results were exciting and well received. This endeavor promoted Dashiki's reputation and commitment to high quality theatre, theatre that was historical, educational, and exciting.

In April of 1982, a letter from Al Head, Director for the Division of the Arts in Louisiana, to Ted Gilliam, acknowledged Head's support of the arts in Louisiana, Dashiki in particular:

I am in communication on a fairly regular basis with A. B. Spellman with the Expansion Arts Program and, as always, I will pass along my support for your activities. I also will be talking with Frank Hodsoll in the not-too-distant future and I will take that opportunity to express our strong feeling in Louisiana about the need for the continuation of the Expansion Arts Program. I will communicate to him that there are a number of groups in Louisiana that depend on and benefit by monies made available through the Expansion Arts Program. I can also truthfully tell him that the money that is provided is going for very worthwhile purposes and is having a very positive impact on the arts in Louisiana.

It was letters of support such as these that would insure the longevity of Dashiki Project Theatre.

Because funding was a crucial factor in the life of Dashiki Project Theatre, Gilliam recognized early in Dashiki's history the importance of a board of directors to solicit and to appropriate funds. The board frequently consisted of Dashiki patrons, Central City citizens, key civic leaders, and congressional leaders. Three prominent members of the Board of Directors were David Cuthbert, Muriel B. Francis, and the

Honorable Lindy Boggs a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. Cuthbert, a writer for the *New Orleans Times Picayune*, had begun as Dashiki's most frequent and respected reviewer. The board of directors elected officers and supervised the external operation of Dashiki Project Theatre. In 1983 Mrs. Francis served as the Chairwoman of the Board of Directors (*Dashiki Theatre Fifteenth Anniversary 1968-83*, 9).

A summary of Dashiki's earliest beginnings answers the question why Dashiki Project Theatre was unique in comparison to other theatres that grew out of the Black Arts Movement. From its inception, Dashiki closely aligned itself with the academic community. Its founder, Ted Gilliam, had received his theatre training from Yale University. He then established Dashiki Project Theatre as an outgrowth of the Dillard University Theatre Department. The mission of academia, its commitment to a global and broad perspective, and its embracing of various cultures had tremendous impact on the students who were trained in theatre at Dillard University. Those students became members, some founders, of Dashiki Project Theatre. Their training made a central, crucial impact upon the philosophy and the mission of Dashiki.

Dashiki Project Theatre survived alongside the demise of other black theatre companies of the period. Its inclusiveness and its embracing philosophy accounted for its survival. White-dominated funding agencies felt reluctant to fund companies that excluded part of the population. Separatist institutions had the reputation of being hateful and violent. Like Dillard University, Dashiki Project Theatre negotiated its position and philosophy to be more broad-based; its position made it easier to continue receiving the financial support from the national and local funding entities. Dashiki Project Theatre

promised artistic excellence, artistic freedom, black audiences, and training for the black artist, all without excluding whites.

Additionally, Dashiki Project Theatre, from its beginning, empowered women who were instrumental in the overall operation of the company. These women acted and directed, but they also made their impact in other ways. They helped in the decision-making processes, and they sat on the board of directors. They helped to create Dashiki's inclusiveness, a feature that was to strengthen its chances for sustainability.

Dashiki's internal strength and determination in large measure stem from the fact that it really was a community. The desire to be a "community" without pretension or clutter was apparent in the initial meetings held at the home of Gilliam, in the community atmosphere nurtured during rehearsals and performance, and in the late night post-production "family" parties. The dynamics of Dashiki Project Theatre were very much like those of a small black community. In reality, members of the company brought their community life into the realm of the theatre. Originally, Dashiki Project Theatre was located in a black community, and most of its members came from that community. In essence, it was a microcosm of the larger black community in which it was located. The Dashiki members laughed, joked, took care of, and nurtured each other both within and outside the company. They took care of each other's children when those children were brought to rehearsals. They assisted in the technical aspects of the show, such as building and painting scenery, hanging lights, and selling tickets and refreshments during performances. Also, during productions, this community mindset extended to the community-at-large. People from all walks of life came and participated as performers

and audience. The audiences participated in a very intimate way, often reciting lines and singing songs along with the performers.

The fact that Dashiki Project Theatre attracted black and white audiences allowed for a wider perspective on the part of its members. The academic community, mostly white, as well as the black community, came to the plays. It is unfortunate that when Dashiki moved from the black neighborhood, it lost some its black audience. However, circumstances did not allow the theatre to do otherwise. And those black audience members who hungered for black theatre followed the theatre uptown. It is not clear whether Dashiki Project Theatre had made any conscious effort to be so broad-based. Nonetheless, this was the path that the theatre would follow. As a result of this departure from traditional black theatre, Dashiki Project Theatre's fledgling efforts would change the course of black theatre in the South, especially in New Orleans.

Another distinguishing feature of Dashiki has to do with the manner in which plays for production were selected. At first, Gilliam was the only person who selected plays for Dashiki. This is not surprising, considering Gilliam's background. He received his degrees (B.A. and M.F.A.) from prestigious institutions and had been classically trained in literature. He was familiar with the plays of the black experience, as well as the plays of mainstream theatre. Since the Black Revolutionary Movement was well underway when Dashiki came into existence, Gilliam selected some of Dashiki's first plays from that movement. Thus, Dashiki's main focus was on plays written by and about blacks. Such plays included plays by Errol John, Roscoe Lee Brown, Ted Shine, Ed Bullins, Lonne Elder III, and Norbert Davidson. In addition, Dashiki performed a number of plays by black women playwrights.

However, it is important to note that Dashiki's plays were not exclusively African American, even those that would be considered "black" plays. Gilliam stated in an issue of *The Driftwood*, a newspaper of the University of New Orleans:

What we are concerned with for the most part is the actual experience of black people in this country and in other countries. For the past two years we have done an African play each season. This season our next play will be West Indian. So we are concerned with the total black experience that is ultimately a human experience. (qtd. in Montgomery)

While Gilliam chose plays that depicted or were related to the black experience, he never excluded plays that depicted human experiences common to other ages and cultures. However, when he selected plays outside of the canon of black theatre or outside the realm of New Orleans, he generally adapted them to the local black experience with the assistance of Davidson.

Dashiki's first production demonstrates Gilliam and Davidson's ability at adaptation: Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, a play set in the Caribbean. Gilliam had Davidson adapt the play and set it in the New Orleans area. Samuel Hay, in his *African American Theatre*, offers some explanation for this phenomenon, mentioning Dashiki's production:

Some theatres increased their audiences by adapting plays to familiar locales and events. The Dashiki Project Theatre of New Orleans (c.1965-), for example, in a 1967 production, changed the local of Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (1962) from Trinidad to a New Orleans slum. The successful production was critical of the New Orleans Public Service, Inc. (195)

In 1984 Gilliam adapted another mainstream theatrical piece to the local black experience of New Orleans. This was the critically acclaimed Dashiki Project Theatre's all-black production of Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Again, not trying to make a statement about race with this production, Gilliam suggested quite simply that the human

experience of shattered dreams was equally pertinent to and experienced by all races. Indeed, the human dilemma in *Streetcar* is common to all races and crosses many barriers. However, to stage the production from a black perspective, several changes in the script had to be made. Names of local places were changed and phrases were rewritten to reflect the local context. Again, the production was successful and its message one that was pertinent outside the black community as well.

In addition to conventional and unconventional plays written for the stage and for adults, Dashiki Project Theatre involved itself in a number of other “projects.” Because of Gilliam’s interest in drawing young people from the community to the theatre, he wrote a play for children entitled *What You Say! Or How Christopher Columbus Discovered Ray Charles*. The play, based on a joke by comedian Flip Wilson, is a satire on the discovery of America. Directed by Dashiki actress, Thelma C. Hinson, the play involved children between the ages of 8 and 15 years and was quite a success.

Another one of Dashiki’s “projects” was an Afro-American motif fashion show. Staged in Dillard University’s Coss Hall Theatre and at Dashiki’s St. Francis de Sales auditorium (produced during Dashiki’s second season), the show featured four categories of garments designed and made by Dashiki’s own members (Wright 13). The fashions themselves ranged from casual wear and dashikis to formals, for both men and women. Thelma C. Hinson and Barbara Tasker coordinated the show while Ted Gilliam directed. It also featured dances choreographed and performed by the troupe as well. The dances highlighted the black experience from Africa to the present. The fashion show, a fundraiser, was a marketing tool to build audiences for Dashiki’s regular offerings. Samuel Hay comments on the success of Dashiki’s venture:



The Dashiki Theatre, for example, had overflow spectators for its African-inspired fashion show called “Watu Wazuri” (The Beautiful People) in 1970. Divided into “Authentic,” “Roots and Slavery,” “The New Breed,” and “The Genteel Black,” the enormously popular show featured original music and dance. The affordable prices of the fashions made the event even more appealing. Although expensive and time-consuming to mount, the show worked because the organizers spent so much time planning it and developing community support.” (Hay 196)

In July of 1973, Dashiki Project Theatre gave birth to yet another theatrical endeavor, The Ethiopian Youth Workshop, a performing arts group, in a production called “Ethiopian Nights.” The group presented a program of mixed entertainment, including poetry, dances, songs, and skits. Two brothers, Anthony and Monroe Bean, led the workshop. Anthony, a former student of Dashiki actress, and Patricia McGuire Hill, wrote one of the plays entitled “The Committed.” Anthony’s brother Monroe wrote the other play entitled “Yes, Dear!” The technicians for that workshop were Pamela Blatcher, Noel Jones, and Robert Smith. Although there were some projection and pacing problems with the production, Cuthbert acknowledged that the performers were talented and that the production was worth seeing (“Ethiopian Nights” 4).

To conclude, Dashiki’s success as a theatre was due in part to the wide range of community involvement that it attracted. The company’s refusal to accept the dictates of The Black Arts Movement, its commitment to shared human experiences, its experimentation with adaptation, and its pitching to various and varied audiences all worked together to establish the unique and important role it has played in the history of black theatre.

## Chapter Four

### A Global Perspective: Dashiki's Departure from the Black Arts Movement

Ted Gilliam came to Dillard University and New Orleans and began a theatre that would change the perceptions of many people about black theatre in America. Gilliam's theatre was not militant or overtly confronting. Dashiki projected another vision, that vision much more global than the visions of other contemporary black theatre companies. Instead of making all decisions based upon what was acceptable under the Black Arts Movement, Gilliam considered other audiences, other performers, and other playwrights in guiding the company. Included in this global vision were black plays, playwrights, and audiences; however, they were only part of a larger philosophy. Gilliam held firmly to his belief that the power and potential of theatre transcend any particular ethnic agenda. The larger goal of Gilliam, which he actualized through Dashiki, was to present meaningful performances that spoke across cultures.

Because of the types of plays performed by Dashiki, as well as the diversity of the people involved, one might conclude that Dashiki Project Theatre was apolitical. Many people believe, however, that all art is political, and currents of politics and subversion did certainly flow beneath the surface of Dashiki Project Theatre. Theatre cannot exist without its audience; theatre, like a politician, needs its audience to survive. But, instead of making blatant statements that aligned with any of the contemporary thinking in the Black Arts Movement, Dashiki, under Ted Gilliam's prudent leadership, focused on the artistic selection of the plays and the high quality of the performances. Instead of being "militant" or proposing specific political policies, Dashiki Project Theatre chose a philosophy that valued aesthetics. Although Dashiki had a social impact upon New

Orleans society, it did not confront or lobby for political changes. It seems that Gilliam had little or no interest in challenging openly the basic tenets of the Black Arts Movement; he seemed to understand and wish to avoid the liabilities that overt political commitment has. By exercising his very independent artistic license, he managed to avoid alliance and identification with any of the powerful movements of his day. One might deduce that, in his wisdom, he recognized that his selections and decisions could offer more subtle political statements that wield a special power through their subtlety—sometimes more so than the overt statements that sometimes alienate rather than ally. By selecting plays that honored women, that were written by non-blacks, and that spoke to audiences across cultures, generations, and sexual orientations, he quite possibly made more powerful political statements than those of the more militant companies like Free Southern Theater.

A close look at Dashiki's experience nonetheless reveals Gilliam and Dashiki's enduring commitment to the black community. Dashiki had an artistic mission, one that involved creating an aesthetic for black art in New Orleans. It focused on how best to represent black America and at the same time serve black theatre patrons. Gilliam and the founders of Dashiki wanted to establish a theatre that would train black artists to embrace theatre and see themselves as a part of a wider theatre. These goals necessitated that Dashiki Project Theatre extend its vision to be much more inclusive than other black theatres of the 1960s. "Inclusive" here means not limiting the selection of plays to those from black playwrights, for black audiences, with black actors. Importantly, in reaching for these goals, Dashiki was not only inclusive but also, necessarily, highly innovative.

In committing to the dual objective of embracing black theatre and empowering black artists while selecting plays that were not necessarily by and for blacks, Dashiki was open to criticism. Many argued that such a commitment to the “universal” messages of plays marginalized blacks and black issues (Brockett 266). According to those critics, the notion of “universalism” erases or hides over differences. Additionally, many have used the idea of “universalism” to subordinate marginal groups, emphasizing a purported “sameness” while overlooking differences. Gilliam and his colleagues did not see these two directions as mutually exclusive. Rather they argued that the black experiences were unique in many ways but also and at the same time, like those of other cultures and ages. The benefits of integration outweighed any negative surrounding the fear of losing black culture. The proponents of the Black Power Movement failed to recognize the benefits inherent in a theatre company’s focus on shared values and experiences, or multiculturalism. Dashiki took a daring and unique position in the face of pressure for it to conform to the prescriptions of the Black Power/Arts Movement. Its convictions were vindicated by the success it enjoyed, often after other companies had folded.

An examination of the philosophies of both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement illuminates the development and direction of Dashiki. Central to these movements was the question of representation of blacks in America. Dashiki Project Theatre, in the context of its commitment to innovation and inclusion, also grappled with the issue of how best to represent black America. This chapter focuses on the way in which Dashiki Project Theatre departed significantly from the philosophy of the Black Arts Movement and certain elements of the Civil Rights Movement to include in its repertoire plays about non-black cultures and plays written by non-black authors.

Although some of the plays Dashiki produced dealt with the black struggle throughout the world, their theatrical forms were not entirely black. The Dashiki productions examined in this chapter include Jean Genet's *The Blacks*, Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Jean Racine's *Phaedra*. In reviewing these Dashiki efforts, this chapter reveals the ways in which these productions exemplify the mission of Dashiki Project Theatre, but challenge the philosophy of the Black Arts Movement. Finally, Dashiki Project Theatre's longevity directly relates to the strength and intelligence of this artistic mission.

Although they are related and share an ultimate goal, the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement at times espoused somewhat differing motivations and followed differing courses and even styles of action. The Black Arts Movement sprang from both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, both of which advocated political, social, and economic equality for black people. In 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on an Alabama city bus, she stirred a social revolution, the Civil Rights Movement. The movement had begun some years earlier, but this milestone event gave the movement more prominence and impetus. The Civil Rights Movement emphasized integration as its main focus. Negroes wanted to be included as a part of the mainstream, and they felt that they deserved the same rights and privileges as whites. As Bert Norman writes: "Its objective was the mingling of white and black people so that African-Americans could share the rights to education, employment, housing, respect, and affluent lifestyles" (658). The overt strategies of the Civil Rights Movement included sit-ins and peaceful demonstrations. The movement's most daring and vocal leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., received his inspiration from the nonviolent

Indian leader Mohandas K. Gandhi. Daniel C. Thompson in *Sociology of the Black*

*Experience* states:

Under the daring leadership of Dr. King, the civil rights movement adopted a radical philosophy of civil disobedience as the most direct and effective means of achieving true equality of citizenship. *Inherent in this philosophy was the assumption that equal citizenship for Blacks was only possible in an integrated society.* Thus, the new civil rights movement was committed to the annulment of all restrictive Jim Crow laws because they were deemed unjust and unconstitutional. (6-7)

This movement attempted to achieve equality for blacks in a thoughtful and peaceful manner.

In contrast, the Black Power Movement advocated separatism. It demanded more economic and political power for blacks, but proposed that blacks form a separate nation within a larger nation. Black nationalists had no intention of mingling with whites.

Because they believed that the white mainstream would destroy any black heritage, they argued for black consciousness. Maintaining an exclusive black heritage outweighed any other concerns. This movement's most illustrious leaders, Elijah Muhammad and

Malcolm X, preached black independence:

Muhammad said: "A prime requisite for freedom and independence is having one's own land. There can be no freedom without a people having their own land . . . The Black people throughout the earth are seeking independence for their own, not integration into white society." (D. Thompson 149)

To Muhammad and his followers, integration meant certain death. These black radicals challenged the black integrationists. Thompson contends that

Malcolm X pictured educated Blacks and traditional Black leaders as house Negroes or modern Uncle Toms. He charged that such leaders as Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, and James Farmer were being used by powerful white to prevent the Black masses from fighting for their rights. He accused them of "selling out the Black revolution" as house Negroes had done during slavery. (151)

According to Thompson, the common enemy of the black man was the white man. Any rights and privileges blacks gained as a result of the Black Power Movement provided more autonomy for Negroes. The movement demanded for blacks more independence; it raised the consciousness of blacks; and it also increased what Franz Fanon claimed blacks had lost, their self-esteem. Thompson relates that this movement encouraged “Black self-respect and self-reliance, strengthened family life, and inspired traditional civil rights organizations to adopt a much more militant stance than they had hitherto expressed” (152). Not only did the Black Power Movement reject the white mainstream, but it also focused on restoring dignity to the black male. Unfortunately, the movement empowered black males at the expense of black females. Thus, the movement also had its own internal tensions. And these tensions were important to understanding the innovation and inclusiveness of Dashiki Project Theatre.

The Black Arts Movement, like both of these earlier movements, aimed at raising the consciousness of black people. An outgrowth of the Black Power and the Civil Rights Movements, the Black Arts Movement expressed in art (words, music, paintings, dance and all other art forms) what both movements considered central to achieving a black aesthetic. The movement focused on literature that would project to the world the lives of black people, literature written and reproduced by black people. In its style and operation, The Black Arts Movement (BAM) more strongly identified with the Black Power Movement than with the Civil Rights Movement.

Kalamu ya Salaam, a scholar of the Black Arts Movement, writes: “In ways both obvious and subtle, both positive and negative, BAM can be considered Black Power in the literary and performance arts sphere” (Salaam 21). He argues that indeed the Black

Arts Movement owes its inspiration to the Black Power Movement. According to Lundeana Thomas,

The Black Power Movement of the 1960s nurtured and fueled the Black Arts Movement. Paralleling the marches, sit-ins, and picketing were the revolutionary works of Amiri Baraka, Douglas Turner Ward, and Ron Milner. (24)

Although The Black Arts Movement began as a vehicle for black poets, it later included black playwrights and novelists. Poets, novelists, and essayists identified early in the movement included Don L. Lee, LeRoi Jones (also known as Imamu Baraka), Brother Etheridge Knight, Larry Neal, and Maulana Karenga. According to Neal, playwrights who contributed to the movement included “Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, Ben Caldwell, Jimmy Stewart, Joe White, Charles Patterson, Charles Fuller, Aisha Hughes, Carol Freeman, and Jimmy Garrett” (37).

Dramatists too had a seminal role in the movement. Indeed, drama offered an excellent literary form for reaching a black audience and for advancing a black identity. Some argued that blacks would identify more readily with the world of the theatre than with the world of the poet or novelist. Ed Bullins states in an interview:

But now in the theatre, we can go right into the Black community and have a literature for the people, for the “people-people,” as Bob Macbeth says—for the great masses of Black people. I think this is the reason that more Black plays are being written and seen, and the reasons that more Black theatres are springing up. Through the efforts of certain Black artists, people are beginning to realize the importance of Black theatre. (Marvin X, viii)

According to Bullins, most black people did not read novels. Black literature circulated in a closed circuit. But in the theatre, one had a captive audience. The theatre was alive and so much more immediate and accessible to blacks. Hence, black audiences identified more quickly and completely with the world of the stage than with any other medium.



With theatre, one of the main goals of the Black Arts Movement was to move its audiences to action. Kalamu even stated that a number of actual civil disturbances followed some of the productions. One such disturbance occurred after a New York production of LeRoi Jones' *Slaveship* (Kalamu 24).

Black theatre was not new, but the idea that it could be part of the movement to raise consciousness and advance the black cause was new. A large number of black organizations and theatres preceded the Black Arts Movement but soon came under its influence. Such organizations and theatres included Free Southern Theater in New Orleans and Karamu House in Cleveland, Ohio. Free Southern Theater was well on its way when the Black Arts Movement began. But with the emphasis on civil rights and black equality, Free Southern Theater received increased impetus and influence. According to Dent, Schechner, and Moses, Free Southern Theater was established to "add a necessary dimension to the current civil rights movement through its unique value as a means of education" (6). Karamu began in 1949 and also came under the influence of the Black Arts Movement and its mission in the 1960s. Mance Williams states, "Karamu's continued existence attests to the longevity and continued survival of Black Theatre in America" (74). Other "Black Arts" organizations formed in the 1960s included Black Arts/Midwest, Black Arts West, BLKARTSOUTH, and the New Lafayette Theatre. All of these organizations and theatres followed the Black Arts Movement philosophy.

However, it became apparent that black theatres that projected a nationalist philosophy could not survive long, even with funding. Their vision and scope were too limited. Participation in such theatres was too exclusive, open only to blacks. Even the

communities such groups served were too exclusive. In addition, the skilled black artists in these theatres were too few in number, and those who had some theatrical and playwriting training were deficient in many other areas. In reality black playwrights were too few in number for such groups to consider only black plays for production. And there were even fewer black directors or producers.

Examples of these short-lived black theatres that advocated nationalism include Ed Bullins and Robert Macbeth's New Lafayette Theatre and Imamu Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theater School. Both were very exclusive in that they limited their audiences as well as the material they used. Advocating a separatist philosophy, these theatres admitted only blacks as audience and as participants. With some of his like-believers, Imamu Baraka, probably the foremost advocate of the Black Arts Movement, established, the Black Arts Repertory Theater School. According to Larry Neal, a number of other black artists including Charles Patterson, William Patterson, Clarence Reed, and Johnny Moore joined Jones in opening this theatre. Jones made it clear that whites were not welcome. And this exclusion included all activities of the theatre including with plays, poetry readings, and concerts (Neal 32).

Hence, the Black Arts Movement more readily aligned itself with the Black Power Movement. It was a nationalist movement with the goal of breaking all ties with the white mainstream theatre. Additionally, the black theatres that were part of this movement performed only plays written by blacks, portraying the black experience. Yet such plays often were the plays of the black revolutionary period, and they were aesthetically confusing and inadequate. These pieces of theatre, largely referred to as agitation propaganda plays, had non-traditional structure and dialogue. Black audiences

found it difficult to identify with their messages. As a result it was difficult for these theatres to maintain a following.

There also developed during the sixties black theatres that did not follow the philosophy of the Black Arts Movement. The Negro Ensemble Company and Dashiki Project Theatre were two of such theatres. Kalamu explains the rise of such companies: “The establishment defunded BAM institutions and established alternative ‘acceptable’ institutions. The target audiences for these philanthropic (sic) created (as opposed to grassroots created) organizations was the BAM audience” (25). Obviously, one thing these black theatres had in common was the critical need for government funding. The government provided funds to nearly every artistic group that began in the mid-60s. However, the government refused to provide funding for artistic groups that supported an exclusive philosophy. Essentially Dashiki, with its inclusive philosophy was well positioned for the government funding.

Dashiki’s orientation, which departed from the philosophy of the Black Arts Movement, was likely spawned by Gilliam’s personal philosophy and background. Always a visionary, he believed that the theatre experience of blacks was also an American experience and, ultimately, a “human” experience. He proposed that any theatre that embraced a global perspective from the very beginning promoted that belief. A mission statement of Dashiki Project Theatre published in *Black Theatre* explains Dashiki’s inclusive stance:

Black artists are seeking today to offset their limitations—and their exclusions—in establishment theatres, by erecting theatres of their own which, though not oblivious to the white experience (since that experience and culture weighs so heavily upon their own, and, indeed, still often shapes their own), will reflect their lives, hopes, joys, fears, triumphs, aspirations, and dreams from their point of view which is the only one that

can accurately convey it and provide a corrective to all the misrepresentations of the past that are persisting in the present, all the better to create the drama of men whose color is not the only measure of their humanity. (*Black Theatre* 5)

In a list of the theatre's objectives in the same article, the first objective reiterates this position: "To place the experience and the image of the black man in the proper perspective of human events" (*Black Theatre* 5). However, Dashiki also recognized its commitment to blacks, as the article goes on to say that

With the shortcomings and difficulties of similar theatres of the past in mind which have generally addressed themselves to whites, Dashiki seeks to avoid their pitfalls by remaining essentially a collaboration of theatre artists indigenous to and in the area—permanently and continuously rejuvenated by the wealth of talent and inspiration in generations now growing up in the area. (5)

Within that framework and direction, Dashiki Project Theatre expressed its philosophy of inclusion in several ways. Importantly, the theatre included whites in its operation. Whites served as board members of the theatre from time to time, and they orchestrated the funding and the grants awarded to Dashiki Project Theatre. Many of the exclusively black theatres of the Black Arts Movement did not seek such funding, even though they obviously needed funding to survive. In addition, whites performed in the productions of Dashiki Project Theatre and even helped develop an audience for the theatre. David Cuthbert, a white male critic of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* who wrote reviews of many Dashiki productions, later became a publicity agent for Dashiki.

Dashiki deviated from the philosophy of the Black Arts Movement in another way. Although begun in a black neighborhood, it did not remain there. The theatre changed its location several times in search of better facilities. One such location was the Contemporary Arts Center in downtown New Orleans. Dashiki Project Theatre has the

distinct honor of being the first theatrical company in New Orleans to create a theatrical venue in the Contemporary Arts Center (Cuthbert, 2001). Warren Kenner, Dashiki's designer, worked hard to create a space that would become "home" to the black theatre group.

As a result of these location changes, Dashiki Project Theatre's audience changed. No longer was the theatre serving a predominantly black audience. Recognizing its inclusiveness, its global stance and the quality of its performances, many college professors and artists joined its audiences. Dashiki Project Theatre's audience became much more inclusive, playing to audiences of all classes and ethnicities.

Of course, Dashiki would fall under harsh criticisms for its global stance, just as the Negro Ensemble Company of New York had a few years earlier. In large measure, these criticisms would come from the black community of New Orleans. Dashiki, although it was a black organization springing up from the black community, in the minds of many did not measure up to the criteria of "blackness" affirmed by the Black Arts Movement. Although there is no evidence of overt criticism of Dashiki Project Theatre, black leaders who identified with the Black Arts Movement did nothing to support Dashiki's efforts.

Dashiki Project Theatre's vision expanded the vision of the Black Arts Movement by including plays written not only by black playwrights and included plays written by white American and European playwrights as well. These latter plays included such works as Jean Genet's *The Blacks*, Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Jean Racine's *Phaedra*. Dashiki adapted these plays, emphasizing their global perspectives and molded them to fit the black experience.

Arguably, the most illustrative example of Dashiki's departure from the Black Arts Movement was its production of *The Blacks*. Jean Genet's *The Blacks* is a drama that unfolds as a "play within a play." Genet, a French playwright strongly influenced by Antonin Artaud, thought of theatre as a combination of symbolism and ritual. Artaud, a white Frenchman, believed that theatre must assault the senses of its audiences. Reorganizing the theatrical event and the theatre space, Artaud argued for more stylized and ritualized performances. Artaud greatly influenced the works of the black revolutionary playwrights. It was problematic for members of the Black Arts Movement to endorse Genet's *The Blacks*, given their belief that plays for black audiences should be written only by blacks. Mance Williams comments on Artaud's commitment to global messages,

Baraka strongly espoused the concept of "Revolutionary Theatre" as an alternative to the conventional type of Black Theatre, but much of the remainder of the theory depends on Antonin Artaud for its substance. "This should be a theatre of World Spirit," Baraka wrote, "where the spirit can be shown to be the most competent force in the world. Force. Spirit. Feeling." Again reflecting Artaud, Baraka conceives of theatre as a means of changing the essential nature of human beings. (21-22)

For these reasons, a play written by Genet would have much in common with a play written by the black revolutionary playwrights, in form as well as content. Williams further mentions that Bullins also agrees with Artaud that "the theatre must destroy all corrupt customs, morals, and values before a new awakening can be achieved by everyone witnessing the play" (22). These avant-garde and nontraditional concepts formed the foundation for much of revolutionary black theatre.

Yet the production of *The Blacks* was a daring one for Dashiki Project Theatre. Leslie Sanders writes that this play did not specifically address black people; nor was it about black people:

Rather, it uses them and their experience both as metaphor of more general aspects of the human predicament and as mask for Genet's personal experience and philosophy. (1)

Sanders accuses Genet of being exploitive and insensitive to the problems facing black artists on the stage. Genevieve Fabre further explains what made the play controversial:

The European play about blacks dealt with violence, a subject that was now reality. The play's violence, purely verbal and directed away from the audience, was easily accepted by American critics, who found the hostility inoffensive because it came from a white author and from a European tradition they respected. Blacks, however, reacted more to the play's message than to its ritual form. They accused Genet of knowing nothing about them or their history. Genet's solution for black liberation, in their opinion, was strictly theatrical and had no basis in American reality. (14)

Therefore, Dashiki's selection of a play written by a white European departed from the criteria of the Black Arts Movement.

An examination of the play's plot reveals another of the play's problems, its nontraditional approach. In the form of a mock trial, one group of Negroes performs a play for another group. The "spectators," playing white authority figures, wear incomplete white masks and dress in the official costumes of their stations: a Queen, General, Judge, and Missionary. While the mock trial occurs onstage, a real trial and revolution takes place offstage. The play enacted onstage is the ritual rape and murder of a white woman by the Blacks. The white figures then descend from their level to punish the Blacks, but they themselves are murdered. These assassinated figures then lift their masks to reveal their real identity as Blacks. They then become the new regime established by a successful revolution. It seems everything played onstage has been

simply a diversion, a distraction from the real revolution that has occurred offstage. A Black guilty of treason to the race has been executed.

*The Blacks*, a product of an avant-garde playwright greatly influenced by Artaud, is highly theatrical and at times difficult to understand. Its form is not traditional, and its message can be elusive. It is potent, threatening, and fiery. Its language is dense, full of contradictions and obscenities. Its dialogue is loaded; reversals abound, especially in the suggestions that black is beautiful:

To you, black was the color of priests and undertakers and orphans. But everything is changing. Whatever is gentle and kind and good and tender will be black. Milk will be black, sugar, rice, the sky, doves, hope, will be black. So will the opera to which we shall go, blacks that we are, in black Rolls Royces to hail black kings, to hear brass bands beneath chandeliers of black crystal. (Genet 106)

The language challenges the long-held metaphor that black is negative (and white positive), a powerful message for both black and white audiences.

The professional production of this play encountered both acceptance and hostility in New Orleans, as it had in other venues. Successful productions of *The Blacks* had been staged in both Paris and London, “although the English critics complained they had trouble understanding most of the actors, who came from Liberia, Nigeria and the West Indies” (White 438). An even greater success in New York, the play ran for four years Off Broadway (438). The New York cast included performers who would later go on to make their fame in the literary and theatrical worlds, such as Roscoe Lee Browne, James Earl Jones, Cicely Tyson, Godfrey Cambridge, and Maya Angelou.

Yet, the show met considerable challenges in America. For one, it appeared at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in America. Blacks were gaining access to amenities long considered the exclusive domain of Whites. The schools had been



desegregated, and the Civil Rights Bill had been signed. With this play, blacks had come to mainstream white theatre. The well-known and respected novelist and biographer, Edmund White, captured this reality when he said, “Their laughter, their participation, their pleasure during scenes expressing Black anger, contempt and desire for revenge startled the white members of the audience” (440). The play elicited similar reactions outside of New York.

Additionally, black nationalists distrusted Genet and his motivations for writing *The Blacks*. Genet considered himself a black nationalist and a militant; he actively supported the Black Panthers. He even referred to himself as a “white black.” However, Black nationalists did not accept his perception of himself. Ed Bullins in *Black Theater* bitterly attacked Genet for his work, as well as his personal preferences, when he wrote:

The editors of *Black Theater* magazine do not think that *any* Black people should see ‘The Blacks’. Jean Genet is a white, self-confessed homosexual with dead white Western ideas—faggoty ideas about Black Art, Revolution, and people. His empty masochistic activities and platitudes on behalf of the Black Panthers should not con Black people. Genet, in his writings, had admitted to seeing himself as a so-called ‘nigger’. Black people cannot allow white perversion to enter their communities, even if it rides in on the black [sic] of a Panther. Beware of whites who plead the Black cause to their brothers and fathers who oppress us; beware of Athol Fugard of South Africa and Jean Genet, a French pervert; disguised white missionaries representing Western cultural imperialism. Black people, in this stage of the struggle, have no use for self-elected ‘niggers.’ (qtd in White: 441)

Obviously, this black nationalist rejected everything that was white and non-masculine.

Genet himself realized the potential issues that would surface from his writing such a play. In a preface to the work, he states: “One evening an actor asked me to write a play for an all-black cast. But what exactly is a black? First of all, what’s his color?”

(Genet). Later Mance Williams was to discuss the problem in greater detail. He states that Genet had to try and capture the black frame of reference:

He had to define, for his own creative purpose, the Black Experience. Not that Black—in terms of defining human essence and existence—is an abstract concept. The Black actor perplexed Genet by being so specific in his request. Questions triggered by that request would be: What is so different about a play for Blacks that it has to be treated with special artistic consideration? Must a whole new aesthetic be created; a whole new consciousness be developed; Blackness be redefined in terms of human existence, essence, and experience? Genet's answer, if that is what he realized within *The Blacks*, merely reiterated stereotypical images and attitudes; the same old Blacks with a new anger. Still, the questions were important and destined to become a predominant intellectual and artistic concern during the decade of the 1960s and beyond. (11)

How could Genet, a white liberal homosexual, speak for blacks? Some of the same questions that had been raised in early twentieth century were raised again. Williams justified *The Blacks* in the face of strong opposition from members of the Black Arts Movement.

Even with this criticism, the play became a favorite of the Dashiki Project Theatre, a production that garnered support from the critics and from the large audiences it attracted. It was elegant; it was poetic; it was rhythmic; and it was potent. New Orleans theatre critics praised the Dashiki performers. Having directed the show at Dillard University in 1966, Ted Gilliam staged the play for its aesthetic values rather than any political ideology. The production was so moving and powerful that the company even took it on the road. When the Dillard Players Guild staged *The Blacks* at Loyola University in New Orleans, Matt Lanius wrote,

It is to the credit of the Dillard University Players' Guild that two packed houses of pleased fools were present in Marquette Auditorium last Monday and Tuesday for two evening performances of Genet's *The Blacks* . . . The Dillard production presented here was a mover. Ted Gilliam's conception and subsequent direction and choreography deserve the highest praise. (Lanius)

Under Gilliam's expert direction, *The Blacks* received an excellent staging by Dashiki Project Theatre. The cast at Dashiki featured many competent, black performers who would distinguish themselves in the theatre community of New Orleans, including Patricia McGuire, Carol Sutton, Barbara Tasker, Elizabeth Hansberry, Sara Landrum, Betty Tillman, Warren Kenner, Craig Mitchell, Alfred Dean Irby, Anthony Cebrun, Robert Richardson, Charles Ricard, Donald Matthews, Noray Francois, John Bennett, Thelma Hinson, Thelma Thomas, Ronald Johnson, Percy Ewell, and Norbert Davidson.

The wisdom of Gilliam's commitment to this piece of controversial theatre was evidenced by its reception. A review of the production in *The Louisiana Weekly* stated:

The theatre found enthusiastic and generous response in attendance and donations from the community. According to the theatre's artistic director, Ted Gilliam, the group was "surprised and elated by the fact that even children made contributions and were eager to return for the next performances." ("6 Performances" 10)

Further, Gilliam was quoted as saying,

We have been pleased to find many people returning for a second time, some twice on Sunday, because they enjoyed the play so much the first time, and also because they wanted to see the differences in our double-cast arrangement. (10)

*The Blacks* has been generally recognized as one of Dashiki's outstanding productions, and the company was to perform it several times in repertory.

Very importantly, however, Genet's *The Blacks* contributed monumental changes for blacks in the theatre. Mance Williams indicates that

*The Blacks* (1959) does stand as a milestone in the history of the "New Black Theatre." Besides showcasing Black actors and giving them steady work for a while, the play demonstrated the power inherent in ritual drama and showed producers that a new White audience had arrived. Also, *The Blacks* was important in opening vistas for the eventual birth of more radical theatre forms that were to be therapeutic and participatory. (13)

Despite the controversy about the importance of *The Blacks*, the play heralded significant changes in the meaning of black theatre. According to Edmund White, black playwright Charles Gordone admitted that *The Blacks* “dealt with very real problems having to do with Black and white and it introduced a force of talented, competent Black actors who went on to influence change in all the entertainment media” (441).

The play was important to Dashiki’s mission in that it presented opposing messages. On the one hand, the play, a statement about colonialism, did exact revenge for mistreatment by whites. Blacks executed whites for their mistreatment of Negroes. But blacks also executed blacks who were traitors and who had abandoned the struggle for equality. Williams states, “Genet’s Blacks, for instance, are revolutionaries waging war against the White power structure they aspire to replace in all its grandiose dress and absurd customs” (126). There is irony in Dashiki’s presenting such a militant play when in actuality, the philosophy of the company did not embrace militancy and nationalism. One can deduce that the play was selected to assure black audiences of Dashiki’s awareness of their issues. However, a close examination of the overall pattern of Dashiki’s selections assures one that its philosophy was neither militant nor nationalist.

On the other hand, the legitimate question can be asked, “Why would the company select a play that ran contrary to its philosophy, albeit an important play for the audience?” The likely answer is that Dashiki saw *The Blacks* as representing a phenomenon that crosses cultures and generations: when the vanquished become the victors, they soon will exploit those they have overcome. As Williams asserts, “Genet sees the oppressed becoming oppressor as a vicious cycle and a metaphysical incongruity” (126). In other words, civilization does not change. Human behavior

remains the same, no matter what race or creed. It is shown that when the Blacks come into power, they will do the same thing that Whites have done. This viewpoint, a global viewpoint, fits the overall mission and outlook of Dashiki Project Theatre. The play, true to Dashiki's more inclusive vision, became a favorite production of the company.

Dashiki made its greatest statement of "global outlook" with a 1984 production of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The significance of this production lies in the fact that it was staged when cultural diversity was still not widely embraced. America had accepted itself as a melting pot of cultures but had not yet acknowledged that not all marginalized groups enjoyed full participation in the mainstream. Oscar Brockett, distinguished theatre historian, writes:

Since the 1960s, most of these groups have rebelled against marginalization and have asserted their determination to have their worth acknowledged and their needs met in the theatre. Some of these groups have come to question the desirability of absorption into the "melting pot" if that means denying or abandoning their own cultures, traditions, and esthetic sensibilities. (254)

Yet, the black nationalists did not want assimilation and therefore did not favor abandoning their own culture to embrace the culture of some other group. Because Ted Gilliam and others at Dashiki saw the theatre as having universal appeal, *Streetcar* would make an appropriate addition to their repertoire.

Additionally, central to Dashiki's production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* was the idea of nontraditional casting, an important element of Dashiki's productions that bears some examination. One approach of nontraditional casting is that of colorblind casting, or casting people solely on the basis of talent, ignoring race or ethnic background. According to Brockett, for some, this kind of casting "leads to mixed-family groups" and denies "social realities" (329). To others, color-blind casting

shifts the question of minority underrepresentation to casting and away from the failure of plays to include minority characters. Others charge that color-blind casting allows cultural differences to be ignored by absorbing representatives of other cultures into the dominant white, Eurocentric culture. (329)

Brockett then explains another form of non-traditional casting:

Another approach is “conceptual” casting, which often involves changing the race or ethnicity of some or all characters to bring a new perspective to a play. (329)

This latter type of casting is what informed Dashiki Project Theatre’s production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Such was sure to inflame the sensitivities of those followers of the Black Arts Movement.

Dashiki’s production was such a memorable production that Philip Colin, a prominent Tennessee Williams scholar, wrote about the work in his book on noteworthy productions of *Streetcar*. Others might argue that this production stands as one of the most important deviations of Dashiki Project Theatre from the Black Arts Movement agenda. Not only is the playwright a white American, but the plot unfolds as the story of a white Southern family, and it presents provocative material that would be reminiscent of a time when blacks were still part of the “old plantation” world.

From its beginning, *Streetcar* is a white play about white life. The plot is well known to American theatre audiences. Blanche DuBois, a Southern gentlewoman, arrives at the home of her sister, Stella, in New Orleans. Blanche, a refined and oversensitive aristocrat, has lost everything. She finds herself pitted against the masculine and animal-like Stanley Kowalski, Stella’s husband. Blanche has lost the old plantation in Mississippi, which angers Stanley who had his sights set on obtaining the property. Because he fears that Blanche is coming between him and Stella, Stanley sets out to

destroy Blanche's reputation by exposing her common and shady past. Once he has effectively destroyed her credence with everyone, he then turns on her physically and rapes her. Blanche loses her sanity over this final act of violence.

Williams intended that the play represent the lives of white Southerners whose passions can override their rationality. Ted Gilliam, already established as a "boundary pusher," expanded the concept of plantation life to include blacks as owners. He chose to cast Dashiki members in the roles of Williams' *Streetcar*. The result was a most provocative production of Williams' play.

When asked to explain his reason for staging the play with Dashiki performers, Gilliam claimed that he was not trying to make a statement about race, but his casting could challenge the ownership of the black image. In explaining his breaking traditional boundaries for *Streetcar*, Gilliam stated:

"The conflict in *Streetcar* between Blanche and Stanley is universal," he stressed. As Richard Dodds affirmed, "That Blanche could be black is reasonable; no race has a monopoly on shattered dreams." (Kolin135)

Gilliam went on to explain the universality of the work. He did not see *Streetcar* as

"a white play. I see it more simply as an American work. We don't give enough attention to the fact that Americans, regardless of their backgrounds or complexions, are Americans with common experiences that cross all barriers." (135)

Gilliam felt that the basic human situation of the play crosses all barriers, that all ethnic groups are similarly affected.

In order to do justice to the play and bring plausibility, Gilliam had to make some changes in the script. Not unlike other plays Dashiki had performed, *Streetcar* underwent some changes in order to give the play more of a black perspective. There was no attempt to do a "black" *Streetcar* or even to make the play "black." However, Gilliam wanted to

remain faithful to the spirit in which the play was written, seeing its message as a universal one.

Of the changes he made “to stage *Streetcar* from a black perspective,” (Kolin 135) the following are illustrative. The names of several places were changed in the script. Instead of eating at Galatoire’s, Stella and Blanche eat at Mule’s, a black establishment in New Orleans. The white YMCA was changed to the YMCA on Dryades, which was owned and operated by and for blacks. The changes in place names added a more authentic touch to the play, especially for black audiences, who saw on the stage a mirror of their daily lives. They could also identify with place names that they themselves knew so much about.

The one problem most critics had with the black production involved ownership of the plantation. Most critics thought it absurd and unrealistic that a black woman could become the owner of a plantation in the 1940s or 1950s. The beginning of the play is partially focused upon Blanche’s loss of the plantation. That she could possibly be the owner of the plantation might be questionable for a woman of any race. Few women, black or white, were economically independent in those days. Of course, plantation ownership by a white woman is more likely. However, Gilliam did state that there were a few situations in the South in which black women actually could have inherited properties (Kolin 135). In fact, that the plantation is finally lost might make its ownership by a black woman a bit more plausible. Interestingly, according to a recent tour guide at Oak Alley Plantation, a plantation near New Orleans, two black women once owned the property.



In addition to the plausibility of a black woman's ownership of the plantation, critics noted the actions and characteristics of several of the white characters were ironically those ascribed to black stereotypes. Blanche's questionable background might suggest the stereotype of the black prostitute, when the character was portrayed as a black. When Stanley confronts Blanche with information that he has learned about her past, Blanche has to justify her various liaisons. Signi Falk and Sylvia Bowman write:

She says that soft people have to seek the favor of hard ones, have to play a seductive role, have to resort to magic—to pay for a night's lodging. She has been running from one shelter to another while trying to escape the storm. She has depended on men's lovemaking to give her a sense of existence. (56-57)

Characteristics and actions that are ascribed to prostitutes in one culture or race are written off as merely shady or slightly immoral in another. In this sense, using black characters could make the play even more powerful and/or problematic.

Another black stereotype that could be construed in an all-black production of *Streetcar* was that of the angry, brutal black male. In fact, the angry, brutal black male was just an extension of the rebellious black slave. Bogle called him the young buck (10-18). He was macho and angry, most of the time abusive to his women as was Stanley Kowalski as portrayed by Marlon Brando.

Yet, Harold Sylvester, Dashiki's Stanley, did not portray the character in this way. Sylvester was much more interested in giving his own, unique interpretation of the role. Critics referred to Sylvester's portrayal as more "sullen" and "subtle." "Unlike Brando, Sylvester did not swagger or mumble; he injected considerable tenderness and wit in the role" (Kolin 137). Although Brando's interpretation would have translated as the black male stereotype when acted by a black, Sylvester's interpretation did not.

An examination of these characterizations by Dashiki reveals some irony. Although Williams intended that these two characters be less admired in the play, the Dashiki production, by avoiding the stereotypes, actually gave them more depth and warmth. One of the critics contended that even the rape did not seem quite so violent an act in this performance (Kolin 137). That these characters had such power and gave such messages to Dashiki's black audiences underscores the universality of *Streetcar*. By focusing on the human predicament, Gilliam again highlighted that universality.

Despite its challenges, the black production of *Streetcar* by Dashiki Project Theatre earned considerable praise. Kolin concedes that the reviewers thought

it succeeded. The transition from an all-white to an all-black cast was not frustrated by Williams's script but actually aided by it, according to Richard Dodds: "most of the time, the Kowalski household at 632 Elysian Fields is right at home in a black environment . . . almost stereotypically so." Edward Real similarly asserted that "there is much here that reflects the black experience, or at least popular notions of that experience," including "Stanley's self-consciously macho bearing, the domestic passions and violence of the Kowalski's and their neighbors, [and] the strong matriarchal influence in Mitch's family." (136)

Dashiki's production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* was successful, but not without detractors. In general, however, its audiences favorably received the production.

Although Dashiki's production had been successful, *A Streetcar Named Desire* would never have been considered appropriate (or politically correct) material for a theatre of the Black Arts Movement. First and foremost, Williams, a white American male, wrote the play. In addition, Tennessee Williams was an openly gay man; the Black Arts Movement advocates would never have accepted his work. Moreover, Williams had not written the play to address concerns of the black community.

And, yet, *A Streetcar Named Desire* spoke directly to the vision of Ted Gilliam and Dashiki Project Theatre. The play presented truths that concern people of all races and ages. Blanche discovers that reality always triumphs over fantasy although fantasy is useful; fantasy can merely shield one from the harshness of reality. This is a truth that confronts all human beings at some time in their lives, regardless of race or creed. Another theme of the play, that of women's dependence upon men for sustenance and self-image, also links women of all races. Institutions and attitudes in America have placed restrictions on the lives of all women. Because it presents the human experience and some interesting human dilemmas, the play has global implications. This production thus became one of the major representations of Dashiki Project Theatre's vision.

Other plays adapted and performed by Dashiki Project Theatre did not meet the criteria for plays of the Black Arts Movement. Plays were selected because they spoke to experiences common to different cultures. This outlook informed Dashiki's selection process, which led to the production of a diverse list of plays: Jean Racine's *Phaedra*, *Striptease*, an adaptation by Norbert Davidson, and *Boesman and Lena*, written by Athol Fugard. *Phaedra*, Racine's best known play, has been considered a model of neoclassicism. Racine was a white European playwright, but *Phaedra* is a play about all-consuming human passion, an experience not unique to any culture. Gilliam had directed the play at Dillard University, and he felt the play spoke of hidden and forbidden passions that are common. He thus selected the play to direct for Dashiki.

*Striptease*, although adapted by Norbert Davidson, is another play that was written by a white European playwright, Slawomir Mrozek. The play presents an absurdist's view of the control of man by machines. This theme has been seen in the

literature of many cultures and ages since the advent of the wheel. The play, thus, appropriately takes its place in the absurdism of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Once again, one notes Dashiki's tension between its commitment to black issues and its commitment to issues with larger applications. *Boesman and Lena*, written by white South African playwright, Athol Fugard, is the story of a Hottentot couple's struggle to survive and endure. Both plays, and others like them, became noted works in the repertoire of Dashiki Project Theatre.

One can speculate why Ted Gilliam chose to direct these plays at Dashiki. Could Gilliam have selected these plays for the commonality of the experiences portrayed? They are about oppressed and troubled people. They are about people who struggle not only with the establishment and the mainstream, but people who struggle with themselves as well. The plays all had the same immediacy in the black community as they did in other communities. They underscore the reality that human beings are not alone in this world, that all experiences are shared experiences.

In selecting *The Blacks*, Gilliam spoke to his predominantly black audience; however, the theme of the play, that the oppressed become oppressors when they gain power, speaks to many audiences of cultures and ages. Most likely, this second feature of the play was Gilliam's primary motivations in presenting it.

It can be inferred that Ted Gilliam's background at Yale and Tulane gave him an appreciation of theatre as a vehicle for expressing major themes common to cultures through the ages. His education involved the study of the classics, and he was probably moved to realize that people in other places and times have shared experiences, regardless of place in history, race, ethnic background, or social status. People of

different time periods and cultures have found the messages in Shakespeare's plays useful in understanding their own experiences. Like other African American scholars and professionals, including Lloyd Richards and James Earl Jones, Gilliam found a broad view of human experience common to many cultures and times.

Finally, unlike Free Southern Theater, Dashiki Project Theatre's mission did not involve political conflict or posturing for political advancements. Many of the power structures in New Orleans in the 1960s feared and were skeptical of Free Southern Theater because challenging traditional politics was one of its mainstays (Cuthbert, 2001). Free Southern Theater (FST) pushed a political dogma; the group was more concerned about blacks getting political power in the South than they were about performing theatre. Williams states,

To the founders of FST, starting a theatre in the Deep South was a logical step in the movement to produce political, social, and economic changes in the lives of southern Blacks. Their intentions were obviously humanitarian and inspired by a recognition that Blacks in the South were also deprived culturally. (57)

This statement suggests that one of the theatre's underlying goals was political, that the theatre was committed to "social progress and to an activist strategy" (58). On the other hand, Dashiki Project Theatre expressed more interest in universal lessons and truths conveyed with artistic quality. An undated playbill from the theatre's sixth season sums up the mission:

The Dashiki Project Theatre is a theatre of the black experience which addresses itself to the human condition. For five years Dashiki audiences have grown to expect exciting, varied and relevant drama, and they haven't been disappointed.

David Cuthbert, of *The Times-Picayune*, stated in one of his reviews:

You don't go to Dashiki to be seen, you don't go to be "amused" (although there is plenty of authentic humor always on hand), you go to see plays. You go to see a story enacted. If you're black, you may identify, you may get a better image of yourself. If you're white, you may learn something." I've never attended this theater and NOT learned something. (Cuthbert, "Exciting Fare")

Hence, Dashiki Project Theatre entertained and engaged both white and black audiences, and at the same time was able to portray themes that spoke across cultures and periods.

Attending plays at Dashiki Project Theatre was a passionate learning experience because its productions were inclusive and embracing. Plays like *The Blacks*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Phaedra*, *Striptease*, and *Boesman and Lena* all testify to the broad spectrum of plays that Dashiki staged. The plays all have one thing in common: they did not follow the mission and philosophy of the Black Arts Movement. Many of the playwrights selected by Dashiki were white, either American or European. Each of them addressed issues that the Black Arts Movement advocates would argue were irrelevant to the black experience. It is notable that Dashiki Project Theatre found merit in such plays and adapted them to address the black condition in America. There are human experiences common to various cultures and times in history.

It could be argued that the artistic excellence of Dashiki Project Theatre was measured against "white" standards of literary and theatrical criticism. However, the enthusiastic acceptance of Dashiki's work by the black community, who identified with the messages onstage, argues that it also met their standards. Further, the reviews of Dashiki's productions underscore the wide range of audiences that came to enjoy the company's performances. Resonating with cross-cultural audiences, providing those audiences with quality entertainment, and offering major themes relevant across ages and cultures were the hallmark of Dashiki's success.

## Chapter Five

### Women at Dashiki Project Theatre

Black males, seeking autonomy and self-affirmation, dominated the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, the African American community struggled with problems of inequality in gender. Black women had, in fact, long fought to gain equal footing with black men. Even the right to vote had been extended to black men long before it was extended to black women.

History reveals a number of strong individuals leading the effort to ensure equal rights for black women. One example is Sojourner Truth, a fighter for women's rights, who opposed this sexism and declared: "if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before" (Lerner 569). In contrast, another black suffragette, Frances Ellen Harper, supported the move to give black men the right to vote. She understood that "the rights of Black men had to be secured before Black women could assert theirs" (Giddings 68). While black men fought to reclaim their status in the black community, they subtly adopted the patriarchal attitudes of their white counterparts. bell hooks, a leading black feminist theorist and cultural critic, has pointed out this inequality:

Although black women and men had struggled equally for liberation during slavery and much of the Reconstruction era, black male political leaders upheld patriarchal values. As black men advanced in all spheres of American life, they encouraged black women to assume a more subservient role. (*Ain't 4*)

As seen in the issue of voting, black women often took a back seat to black males. And this pattern can be seen in black theatre as well. While some women were willing to

accept a secondary role, others were not. Notable among the latter were women of Dashiki Project Theatre.

In the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the Black Revolutionary Movements, black women were denied the opportunity to hold positions of acclaim or authority. Often they were not even mentioned in the historical accounts of those movements. hooks states that

Black male activists publicly acknowledged that they expected black women involved in the movement to conform to a sexist role pattern. They demanded that black women assume a subservient position. Black women were told that they should take care of household needs and breed warriors for the revolution. (*Ain't 5*)

These two movements fueled a black male patriarchy instead of equality for all black people. Dashiki Project Theatre departed from the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts Movement on aesthetic matters. Dashiki also departed from these movements in the role women enjoyed in the company.

At a time when many in society would not acknowledge the contributions of African American women in the struggle for equal rights, Dashiki Project Theatre included women as performers, directors, and administrators. In addition to empowering women, this inclusion promoted meaningful and authentic images of the black female.

This chapter focuses specifically on the role and resultant image of women in the Dashiki Project Theatre. That role and image contrast with those promoted by the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the Black Arts Movement. Ted Gilliam and Dashiki Project Theatre realized that black women's active participation in the productions would enrich the theatre's ability to achieve its goals and enhance its overall position in world theatre. Dashiki Project Theatre ignored the male-oriented



traditions of the time by including women as performers, directors, and staff.

Additionally and importantly, Gilliam and Dashiki selected plays that offered powerful roles for women.

The decision to include women in Dashiki with equanimity was not that of Dashiki's men alone. In fact, the women advocated on their own behalf. These women exhibited a high quality and standard of performance that gave Dashiki Project Theatre its prominence. As directors, they challenged any practices that kept them from sharing equally with the men. Not satisfied just with creating images of black women on the stage, some of these individuals wanted to be part of the decision-making processes. This chapter highlights key women figures in Dashiki Project Theatre and their contributions. This chapter, through the reviews of productions and through personal interviews, demonstrates the value of the women's contributions. The reviews attest to their quality of acting; the interviews confirm the depth of background and experience these women brought to Dashiki. This chapter also discusses two plays chosen by Gilliam to showcase the contributions of black actresses.

Black women often face two hurdles in theatre, constraints linked to gender and race. Not only must the black woman confront the portrayal of herself as "woman" on the stage; she must equally confront her portrayal as black woman. Jo A. Tanner remarks in *Dusky Maidens*: "In addition to sharing all the restrictions of sex oppression with White women, they have been further handicapped by the restrictions of race oppression shared by Black Americans" (1). In many ways the challenges that women face on the stage reflect the challenges they face in everyday life. Traditionally, men have dominated the theatre arts. Male roles are far more prevalent in most plays; male performers generally

command higher salaries than their female counterparts. Uniquely, Dashiki Project Theatre recognized these impediments, whether consciously or subconsciously, and gave women strong opportunities to act, to direct, and to be a part of the decision-making process of the company.

Reviews of many productions confirm that Dashiki women often gave excellent performances. David Cuthbert, New Orleans theatre reviewer for *The New Orleans Times Picayune*, cited the quality of performance as well as the tenacity and commitment of the women of Dashiki Project Theatre. While many Dashiki men left the company over the years, many of the women remained for a considerable time. Cuthbert identified many of these women:

When one thinks of Dashiki, one thinks of Carol Sutton, Patricia McGuire Hill, Adella Gautier, Barbara Tasker, Claudia Miller, Francesca Roberts, and to a lesser degree, Pamela Blatcher and Gwendolyn Foxworth. Those were the Dashiki Divas. (Cuthbert, 2001)

An argument could be made that these women, in fact, kept Dashiki Project Theatre alive.

Both reviewers and the men of Dashiki Project Theatre recognized the talent of its women. In an interview, Percy Ewell, one of the group's founders, indicated that the women of Dashiki had strong personalities, and that they were highly opinionated. Ewell stated, "They strongly protested any emphasis on just males." He went on to say that they even contested any roles that they felt to be demeaning (Ewell, 2001).

The quality of the acting and directing talent of the Dashiki Project Theatre women is seen in the reviews of its various productions and in interviews with a number of its leading women. Carol Sutton, Patricia McGuire, Adella Gauthier, Claudia Miller, and Barbara Tasker are examples of these strong female contributors to Dashiki. Each

managed to claim a prominent position within the theatre company, giving credence to Dashiki's vision of empowering women.

Carol Sutton is a prime instance of a strong Dashiki woman. She had an active career at Dashiki Project Theatre as both an actress and a director. Her experience with Dashiki prepared her for the status she enjoys today, as a prominent performer both on stage and in film. A look at Sutton's early career illustrates how Dashiki Project Theatre willingly shared power with its women.

In a May 2001 interview, Sutton explained her earliest background and fascination with performing. She related that she always knew she wanted to act, "but there was no outlet." She had had small parts in school plays and in the school choir, but she had never been cast in a major role. Her cousin and music director at Booker T. Washington High School in New Orleans, Gladys Hill, had encouraged her to try the theatre. But she had never dared to try theatre primarily because no opportunity had arisen.

Dashiki Project Theatre was to present that opportunity as Sutton recalled: "I was a member of the St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church and a member of the Young Adult Coffeehouse. We were a very active group under the direction of a progressive pastor by the name of Father Joe Putnam." Putnam offered Dashiki the use of the church hall, and Sutton started unobtrusively watching the rehearsals. Sutton shared: "And then, finally, one day, Ted spotted me and came over and said, 'Do you think you can do that?' And I said, 'I know I can do that.' And the next production, he put me onstage and that was it" (Sutton, May 2001). And thus, Sutton's multi-year career with Dashiki Project Theatre began.

Sutton, who played a minor role in the 2001 award-winning movie, *Monster's Ball*, credits her theatrical career and much of her training to Ted Gilliam and to Dashiki. According to Sutton, Gilliam allowed his actors great latitude and thus facilitated learning. He encouraged performers to trust their own instincts, allowing them to frame their characters themselves. Should a performer become frustrated with his or her efforts, Gilliam would step in to guide the process. Sutton claims this is how she learned to be a responsive performer (Sutton, May 2001).

From the reviews of her work, it is apparent that Carol Sutton became an accomplished actress under Gilliam's influence. Although disappointed with the production of *Song of a Goat*, Joseph Larose of the *Clarion Herald* gave a favorable report on Carol Sutton's performance: "Carol Sutton as the mother was the only character who reached the potential of the tragedy . . . but the male leads of the husband and brother were ineffectively handled by Percy Ewell and Charles Ricard" ("Film" 5). Cuthbert echoed Larose's compliments in his review of the same show:

Carol Sutton's abrasive Adele is a beautiful performance, I think. She captures the weary dilemma of her character as well as the girl's self-realization of her masochistic life-pattern. Miss Sutton is a major asset of the Dashiki Company. ("Dashiki Kicks Off" 13)

And in regard to *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, an unidentified review found in the Tulane Amistad Library described Carol Sutton as "lovely to watch." The writer mentions that she turned in a "strong performance as a girl (woman) . . . supporting three men who held more than her share of love and concern, as well as sympathy, for their plight." Once again, Cuthbert underscored the quality of Sutton's acting ability and the prominence Dashiki Project Theatre gave women. In a review of "Spook Boy, Spook

Baby, Spook Man,” three one-act plays staged by Dashiki, Cuthbert wrote of Sutton’s ability to move audiences:

“Powerful” is a small, inadequate word to use in describing Miss Sutton’s emotion-charged scenes as mother whose children have been violently wrenched away from her by Life. Audiences should be traveling across the city to see Miss Sutton, if nothing else. The first scene she shares with Kenner generates a genuine warmth and naturalness that are astonishing. (“Exciting Fare” 22)

Additionally, Dashiki gave Carol Sutton a venue for her accomplished singing voice. In *Falling Scarlet*, Dashiki Project Theatre’s original musical, reviewers acclaimed Sutton’s performance:

Among many totally talented actors and actresses, the foremost is Ms. Carol Sutton (Queen Hefer). She is earth-mother, common-sense philosopher and black womanhood all rolled into one incredibly beautiful and accomplished package. Her lines were delivered with the ease and facility of a seasoned professional artist. Her songs are something very dear to her, to be dearly shared with her audience. The lady does give. (Wood 7)

This account of Sutton’s performance illustrates the robustness and richness of the performances of Dashiki’s women. Cuthbert made a similar assessment of Sutton in *Falling Scarlet*:

As usual, Dashiki’s feminine contingent takes the acting honors, led by the always impressive Carol Sutton, who is not a shred less than magnificent as Queen Hefer. (“Musical Play” 2)

These and other reviews attest to both Sutton’s remarkable talents and Dashiki’s eagerness to give that talent a venue.

Looking at the sheer volume of positive reviews, one could justifiably conclude that Sutton was the company’s foremost actress and woman director. In his review of *Losers, Weepers*, a series of one-act plays in Dashiki’s 1973-1974 season, Cuthbert contrasted the average performances of the men with the strong performances of the

women. One of those women was Carol Sutton, who played the “revolutionary” maid in Bullins’ *The Gentleman Caller*. Although he saw the play as “dated and a little obvious,” he recommended seeing it for Sutton’s performance (“Losers, Weepers”).

Further evidence of the prominent acting opportunities for women appear in Cuthbert’s review of *The Amen Corner*. Though he does not ignore the performances of the males, he singles out several female performers, giving special credit to Sutton’s creativity: “Miss Sutton and director Gilliam have given virtuous Sister Moore an eye-opening dimension only hinted at in Baldwin’s text” (Cuthbert, “‘Amen Corner’” 16).

Ted Gilliam relished and rarely relinquished his role as director of Dashiki’s plays. Few male company members were allowed to direct; Carol Sutton was one of the anointed few members allowed this opportunity. This fact is even more eventful, considering her gender. And Sutton did not disappoint Gilliam. In the production, *Entertaining Reflections: 4 One-Act Plays*, Carol Sutton made her directorial debut with the staging of Don Evans’ one-act play, “Sugar Mouth Sam Don’t Dance No More.” Cuthbert, already intrigued with Sutton as a performer, had much to say about her directing. He noted Sutton’s positive relationship with the performers:

“Carol has strong feelings about this relationship,” Kenner said. “I say the man is definitely not a heel. He’s the more sensitive, the weaker of the two. Carol feels just the opposite and—well, she is the director.” “I had something in my mind that I wanted to see up onstage,” says Miss Sutton, one of the theater’s most dependable performers. She seems to be collaborating with Miss Gautier in a personal statement on what it means to be black and female. When Miss Gautier delivered the line, “It’s too late, Sammy,” Miss Sutton told her sharply: “No, don’t you hang your head on that. It’s quiet but not sorrowful. You’re not a beaten woman yet. You’re still putting up a fight.” (Cuthbert, “Dashiki Assembles” 16)

Gilliam’s confidence in Sutton led him to ask her to co-direct August Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Dashiki Project Theatre’s final production. Gilliam was in

declining health and needed someone to take over this production. Sutton recalls that task as one of her most memorable at Dashiki Project Theatre and appreciates Gilliam's confidence in her as a woman (Sutton, May 2001).

Although arguably the most prominent Dashiki woman, Sutton represents but one example of female empowerment in the company; indeed a number of other women achieved similar status. Patricia McGuire, another of Dashiki's Divas, distinguished herself on Dashiki's stage. In a recent interview, McGuire, now a high school drama teacher and an actress in the New Orleans area, related her earliest experience with theatre: "Paul Lawrence Dunbar was my specialty. I often recited his poems in my church" (McGuire, October 2001). McGuire's godmother influenced her performances in church and in elementary school. She had always been a willing performer, enjoying the spotlight whenever she got a chance. Through her junior high school and high school years, McGuire participated in the LIALO Literary Festivals, reciting poems and dramatic monologues. She recalls her first experience seeing university theatre:

I went to Dillard University for our high school senior day when I was a student at Clark, and I saw *A Raisin in the Sun*. And from that day to this, I have not been the same. (McGuire, October 2001)

When McGuire graduated from high school, she decided to attend Dillard University and major in drama. There she met Ted Gilliam and soon played the title role in Gilliam's production of *Phaedra*, a role she would reprise later at Dashiki Project Theatre.

Patricia McGuire brought her particular talents and enthusiasm for performance to the Dashiki stage. It is admirable that she was able to distinguish herself when sharing the stage with the remarkable Carol Sutton. Cuthbert highlighted a different set of abilities and features when he reviewed the work of McGuire, underscoring the uniqueness of her

contribution to Dashiki's success. In his 1971 review of Ed Bullins' *The Duplex*, Cuthbert referred to Patricia McGuire as "gorgeously gaudy" in her role. (Cuthbert, "Duplex Is Fistful" 2) But it was McGuire's subtle portrayal in *Tiger, Tiger* that truly caught Cuthbert's attention:

Patricia McGuire was Thursday's Mama Morris (most of the roles are double-cast with the actors alternating in them). She is a valuable member of the company and gave a surprisingly effective portrayal considering she chose an understated approach. (Cuthbert, "Dashiki Plays Revived" 16)

He then describes the physical aspect of McGuire's characterization: "Miss McGuire makes good use of her hands and body in this characterization, light years away from her memorable Miss Marie in 'The Duplex'" (Cuthbert, "Dashiki Plays Revived" 16).

Cuthbert was not the only reviewer that recognized McGuire's unique acting abilities. Although he disagreed somewhat with Cuthbert's assessment of McGuire's portrayal, Joseph Larose of *The Clarion Herald* found her portrayal "imposing" and "sympathetic" (Joseph Larose, "Review of 'Tiger, Tiger'").

Probably McGuire's greatest acclaim as an actress came with her performance in a play that drew a national spotlight to Dashiki. The play, *The Fabulous Miss Marie* by Ed Bullins, starred Patricia McGuire in the title role. Because the play is structured like a jazz composition, having no plot, the demands on the lead actress were great. Foremost of those demands was the ability to establish and maintain the rhythm of the play.

According to Hay in *Ed Bullins: A Literary Biography*,

The play, like a jazz number, has a head, a body, and an end. While stating the melody and theme, the head introduces each of the ten musicians making up the combo: The leader is Miss Marie Horton, a mid-forties clubwoman who drinks Ambassador scotch, loves young men, and collects friends. She meddles, all the while not missing a beat in either her front-line or rhythm sections. (190)



And McGuire was up for the challenge, as further evidenced by Jon Newlin's *Figaro* review:

Patricia McGuire Hill is a magnificent, perceptive actress, and she takes over a stage so easily with her provocative delivery that you have to see it to believe it. (Newlin 10)

The loose structure of this particular play challenged the capacities of each of its performers, but most especially the lead. McGuire's strong performance was a major factor in the selection of *The Fabulous Miss Marie* to represent the South in the first Black Theatre Festival U.S.A. at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City in 1979.

Patricia McGuire's career again exemplifies Gilliam's belief in the women of his company and of their strong capabilities. Others among the Dashiki Divas shared the limelight with Sutton and McGuire. A good balance existed among the various actresses. Although Sutton and McGuire gained a high profile, a look at further reviews of Dashiki's performances reveals that other female performers were able to hold their own.

A number of the younger women performers came from the university where Gilliam taught. One such woman was Claudia Miller. Miller had met Gilliam at the Dillard University theatre department, where she played a number of leading roles. When she started performing with Dashiki Project Theatre, she was thus a veteran to the stage. Miller also gained many accolades from reviewers. In a review of "Spook Boy, Spook Baby, Spook Man," Cuthbert praised Miller: "Claudia Miller gives ample demonstration that Dashiki is a veritable breeding ground for promising talent—she attacks and inhabits her role with a relish of a Bette Davis or a Cecily Tyson" ("Exciting Fare" 22).

Cuthbert also recommended Dashiki's 1971 production of *Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright*. Once again Claudia Miller earned his most complimentary remarks: "Commanding attention was Claudia Miller, in the role of the slick opportunist Adelaide Smith. Miss Miller's is a vivid, insinuating performance—the kind that sends off sparks and gives the audience gooseflesh" ("Dashiki's Plays Revived" 16).

Not only Cuthbert recognized Miller's acting abilities. In his review of the same production, Joseph Larose of *The Clarion Herald* stated, "Claudia Miller composes her portrayal of the brassy temptress Adelaide with remarkable vitality and poise" (Larose, "Review of 'Tiger, Tiger'"). Again, according to the critics, the women of Dashiki outshone their male cohorts in *Tiger, Tiger*.

In another instance, Miller caught Cuthbert's eye for her work in a Dashiki production. In his review of *Losers, Weepers*, Miller, who portrayed the unsuspecting Madame in *The Gentleman Caller*, shared the reviewer's accolades with Sutton. Cuthbert refers to "Claudia Miller's outstanding mistress, in silvery white-face and shimmering costume to match" (Cuthbert, "Losers, Weepers").

Gilliam also encouraged Claudia Miller to try her hand at directing at Dashiki Project Theatre. In fact, Miller made her directing debut the same time as Sutton. Miller directed the one-act play, "Striptease," N. R. Davidson's adaptation of a play by the Polish playwright, Slawomir Mrozek. The play was one in a series of four pieces that Dashiki was performing on one bill. Miller's direction of "Striptease" marked the first time that a woman at Dashiki directed Ted Gilliam as an actor. Commenting on Miller as a director, Ted Gilliam had this to report:

“Claudia has been, to use the modern terminology, ‘a trip.’ But she hasn’t let me run away with anything. I think she definitely has her own conception of what the play’s about.” (Cuthbert, “Dashiki Assembles” 16)

Two Dashiki men directed the other plays in this series; however, Miller now joined Sutton as a successful woman director for Dashiki Project Theatre.

Another example of Gilliam’s commitment to making opportunities for women at Dashiki is Adella Gautier. In an interview, Gautier spoke of her early background and involvement with theatre. Gautier’s first performance in a major role at Dashiki was her portrayal of Sister Margaret in James Baldwin’s *The Amen Corner*. According to Gautier, “The women of Dashiki were legendary, so to be finally considered for a leading role was a humbling honor.” In this production, many of the women were much younger than the roles they played. Therefore, Dashiki women needed significant experience to perform successfully these challenging roles created by Baldwin (Gautier, 2001).

Although her background had little to do with the theatre, the stage attracted Adella while she was studying at Dillard University. She became involved in theatre in her junior year and received most of her training from Ted Gilliam. Early on, she was not a part of Dashiki because it was organized after she left New Orleans. However, when she returned in 1971, she portrayed a small role in her first play at Dashiki, Derek Walcott’s *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. Today, Gautier, a professional storyteller in the New Orleans area, credits Dashiki Project Theatre for her skill in acting and storytelling.

Gautier also learned to give excellent “sight readings” or “impromptu performances” from her experience in *The Amen Corner*. She recalls one of Gilliam’s lessons in improvisation:

As Sister Margaret in *Amen Corner*, I had to deliver one of my speeches in the play that included the line, “I thought I was Joshua and could make the

sun stand still.” I had that entire speech taped in the Bible that we were using on stage. I didn’t know anyone knew that I had the speech taped there. On this night, as was the case usually, I turned to the page in the Bible where I had taped the speech when it came time to recite it. And behold, I had a surprise. The speech was not there. I glanced off to the side of the stage in panic, and there was Ted, in the wings, smiling, with the piece of paper in his hand. He had found it and had removed it, and I had to stand there and deliver that speech mostly from ad libs and what little memory I had of the exact words. I knew more of it than I thought. That night, Ted Gilliam taught me a valuable lesson in confidence. I never had to use the paper again. (Gautier, 2001)

Gautier had great respect for Gilliam, his confidence in women and his amicable manner. She referred to his directing as a “forceful” gentleness. “He would just let you try things, and then he’d gently steer you in the right direction. You discovered it yourself” (Gautier, 2001).

Even when he was not totally complimentary, Cuthbert found encouraging comments to write about the acting skills of Dashiki’s women. About Adella Gautier’s performance in *The Amen Corner*, he stated, “While there is not much variety to Adella Gautier’s Margaret, hers is an effective performance nonetheless; moving, alive with missionary zeal and flashing-eyed hints of the woman she used to be” (Cuthbert, “‘Amen Corner’” 16). Shirley Harrison, in her *Jewish Civic Press* review, also cites the performance of Gautier:

Adella Gautier shows histrionic prowess as Sister Margaret, the pathetic woman who blindly clasps the Lord in an effort to snuff out the inequities of life about her. (16)

Gautier had a greater interest in acting than directing. But she certainly relished Gilliam’s instructions in directing. Gautier praises Gilliam for giving people opportunities. She credits Gilliam with the enthusiasm and skill to face directing challenges. Her directing approach found its origin in the example of Gilliam. That

gentleness of spirit and that nurturing of the talent—she learned it from Gilliam and used it in her own directing (Gautier, 2001).

Ted Gilliam’s impact on the careers of Sutton and Gautier was to extend well beyond his life and the life of Dashiki Project Theatre. After their Dashiki experiences they shared the stage in the mid-nineties as the Mann sisters in a production of *Having Our Say*, which toured New Orleans and surrounding areas. David Cuthbert, the reviewer of the local production stated, “The easy camaraderie was fostered by their early work together at Dashiki.” As Gautier remarked, “For sure Gilliam’s ghost smiled as the Dashiki Divas were at it again” (Gautier, 2001).

Other Dashiki women distinguished themselves not only for their acting and directorial talents, but also for their contributions in other areas of the theatre operations. These contributions included serving as founding members, providing administrative support, working behind the scenes, and assisting in the actual operations of the company.

One of these women was Thelma Hinson, an actress who also took a leadership role in the founding of Dashiki Project Theatre. Her introduction to Gilliam was through her participation in the Dillard University theatre productions of the early 1960s. This involvement led to her position on the first board of directors of Dashiki Project Theatre. She helped with refreshments for some of the formative meetings held early in Dashiki’s history and was a strong supporter of Gilliam as he realized his dream to start the company. Early on she helped organize and manage the fashion show Dashiki sponsored as a fundraiser for the company.

Another woman who helped lead Dashiki was Andre Cazenave from New Orleans. She too was a founding member of Dashiki Project Theatre. A Dillard University student, Cazenave became involved in the production of Norbert Davidson's *El Hajj Malik*. Controversy over a reading assignment actually brought the two together, an event that was to lead to her involvement with Dashiki. Davidson had met Cazenave while she was a student worker in the pre-Freshman program. As a student on the work-study program, Cazenave had access to supplies such as paper and photocopiers which were needed to copy scripts of the play. Because Dillard University had refused to include Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* on the approved reading list, any efforts to make that work known to students had to be handled carefully. The play had to be rehearsed quietly, and Cazenave secretly made the copies of the script. Because of this involvement, when the meetings for the organizing of Dashiki were announced, Cazenave was invited (Cazenave).

In an interview Cazenave indicated that she had done only minimal theatre work at the Walter L. Cohen High School in New Orleans. She played the "girl in the red dress" in a one-act play called *Balcony Scene*. To Cazenave her high school experience with theatre had been fun; it was also liberating. It suggested to her a kind of freedom that she had not known before. Importantly, she had attended many Dillard University theatre productions with her high school class group (Cazenave).

However, it was her work with the Free Southern Theatre in a summer workshop for high school students that really boosted her interest in theatre. That workshop, a poetry class, featured Tom Dent as the writing instructor. Concerning her efforts at writing poetry during the workshop, she indicated that she had patterned her work after

the playwright, Ntozake Shange. Apparently, Dent, a member of Free Southern Theater, liked her work and encouraged her to continue writing.

Cazenave related an early personal experience that exemplifies Dashiki's attitude toward women. At the end of the first semester of her studies at Dillard, she learned that she was pregnant, a condition that disqualified her from continuing her studies. After having the baby, Cazenave found her status as an unwed mother made her a social outcast on Dillard's campus. She found some solace in attending plays and cast parties of the Dillard Players Guild.

This association with Dillard Players Guild led Cazenave to seek acceptance with Dashiki Project Theatre. She offered to take notes and document the organizational proceedings. Indeed, she became a founding member of Dashiki Project Theatre, making charts, schedules, and appointments. Clearly, Cazenave's involvement with Dashiki nurtured her as a young woman:

Dashiki felt like community. I had had a child. Dashiki accepted me, even though others did not. They were nonconformists themselves. Most of that group didn't fit in anywhere. My son, Michael, as a young boy was like an appendage to me. He went with me everywhere. So, of course, he went to rehearsals. He grew up around Dashiki Project Theatre. Everybody there admonished him, hugged him, and kissed him. Michael was their first kid. The community of Dashiki was raising this child. (Cazenave)

The experiences of Andre Cazenave highlight the communal spirit of Dashiki and is another example of its valuing its women. Although she was not a leading artist on the stage, she did find expression and recognition as both a founder and staff member.

Before completing this discussion of Dashiki women who distinguished themselves as actresses, one should recognize a few other significant female company

members. Joseph Larose of the *Clarion Herald* in his review of the production of *Song of a Goat*, compliments Barbara Tasker:

Barbara Tasker as the wife also had some fine moments, but the male leads of the husband and brother were ineffectively handled by Percy Ewell and Charles Ricard. (Larose, "Film, Stage Ratings" 5)

Again Barbara Tasker received praise in Cuthbert's 1971 review of Ed Bullins' *The Duplex*: "Barbara Tasker is in the Dashiki tradition of proud, beautiful actresses who can't help but radiate strength even when acting as she does here the downtrodden housewife" (Cuthbert, "Duplex Is Fistful" 2). Cuthbert in a review of *The Amen Corner* stated, "Barbara Tasker plays the stoic, feet-on-the-ground sister, another role in which she sacrifices appearance to well-crafted characterization" (Cuthbert, "'Amen Corner'" 16). Another important company member was Francine Turner. Joseph Larose of *The Clarion Herald*, in his October 14, 1971 review of Dashiki's production of *Tiger, Tiger*, found Francine Turner "pathetically compelling as the long-suffering, docile daughter" (Larose, "Review of 'Tiger, Tiger'").

One very strong indication of Dashiki's commitment to women was its selection of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, which calls for an all-women cast. Each of the women's roles in this play enjoys equal prominence. Further, this demanding piece of theatre requires that each woman understand and express both the rhythm of the choreography and the rhythm of the language—no small feat. According to Cuthbert, this play was perhaps the apex of Dashiki Project Theatre's production history (Cuthbert, 2001). Richard Dodds, a *Times-Picayune* theatre reviewer, corroborates this point: "The fact that the work was written for women makes it an ideal vehicle for Dashiki, which has always displayed distaff



strength” (Dodds). That production, featuring a cast of 7 women (with alternates), enhanced Dashiki’s reputation for showcasing strong female performers. *Colored Girls*, a phenomenal show, played for many months in New Orleans and in the surrounding areas. The production featured such Dashiki women as Barbara Tasker, Pamela Blatcher, Evangeline Armstrong, Marie Slade, Benita O’Hare, Linda Pierce, Barbara Hunter, Sharon Ford-Metcalf, and Caroline Dotson, and could be considered Dashiki’s strongest statement of support for women in theatre.

Indeed, Dashiki Project Theatre continually evidenced its commitment to women by selecting and performing other plays with strong female characters. In fact, Ed Bullins’s *The Gentleman Caller* (1969), had roles for two strong actresses. Dashiki Project Theatre staged *The Gentleman Caller* several times over the years. Dashiki selected this play, one which features a black woman revolutionary and a caricatured white woman, because it offered powerful and demanding roles for women.

*The Gentleman Caller* depicts a white Madame who entertains her black Gentleman Caller while her “devoted and faithful” black Maid looks on. The Maid, tired of Madame’s abuses and tirades, first slits the throat of her boss’ husband and then shoots Madame in the head. Forcing at gunpoint the black Gentleman Caller to help her dispose of the bodies, the Maid then shoots the Gentleman Caller, suggesting that she is a militant within the black revolution.

One can examine the play within the context of the larger Black Arts Movement. Ed Bullins himself stated the purpose of the new black theatre as follows:

It would be a medium for communication to raise the consciousness throughout the nation for Black artistic, political, and cultural consciousness. It would be an institutional base to lay the foundations of our society and our culture and our nation . . . It would be power in the

sense of welding together Black artists of many disciplines. (Marvin X, x)

Recognized as a revolutionary play central to the Black Arts Movement, *The Gentleman Caller* carried its message of revolution through the person of a woman. This, however, was not in keeping with the prevalent attitude of the Black Arts Movement, which like both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, did not acknowledge the contributions of women. Hence Dashiki's selection of *The Gentleman Caller* demonstrates the company's commitment to supporting women and their part in the movement.

The prominence of women in this particular play is worth examining for two reasons. For one, in most of Bullins' plays, women are marginalized and given a status below that of black men. Therefore, one can conclude that Bullins stepped out of his own tradition in writing a play that included a strong militant woman. A closer examination of the play suggests that Bullins actually did intend a sexist message, because in the play's final speech, the audience discovers that a man actually is directing this "strong" woman, and she, in turn, gives praise to the "Blackman." In earlier publications of the play, this speech was omitted. True to its own convictions, however, Dashiki quietly omitted this final speech and left its heroine fully in power.

The other reason this play fits Dashiki's tradition for women is the strength of the two central characters, the Maid and the Madame. One of the drama's first conflicts arises between these two characters. This conflict manifests itself in a singing competition between the two. As the Maid exits to inform Madame of the Gentleman Caller's arrival, "Madame's voice is heard warbling 'America.' The Maid's voice is heard mumbling or is not heard, being lost in the mumbles, then bursts forth in a vigorous

chorus of a Negro spiritual” (Bullins 238). It is significant that her voice overpowers that of the Madame.

Much of the play’s power lies in the dramatization of these two main characters. Dashiki’s exaggerated portrayal of the white Madame by a black actress provoked laughter, while her “wise-cracking” Maid was somewhat reminiscent of the stereotypical Mammy. Even the name “Mamie” implies the old stereotypical role.

Bullins endeavored to turn the stereotype inside out to fit his revolutionary theme. He introduces the Mammy, with all of the familiar traits. The audience expects the stereotype to be consistently portrayed to the end of the play. However, just before the play’s conclusion, Bullins subverts expectations and turns the image into an aggressive revolutionary figure. Although Bullins was not the first artist to turn stereotypes inside out to create more positive images, he was probably one of the first playwrights to appropriate power and dignity for the Mammy stereotype.

Mamie is an excellent example of the new revolutionary leader envisioned by the Black Power Movement; although she certainly is not the typical repressed female that one would expect. The Madame indicated so herself. Concerning Mamie’s qualities, she tells the Gentleman Caller,

Do you know that even when I was just a little girl I never feared . . . for Mamie was there! She was like the mountains, unchanging. Like time, limitless. Always faithful, always the source of inspiration. Young . . . man, you can be proud you sprang from her loins. (Bullins 247)

What Madame does not realize is that she herself is describing the new revolutionary leader. Genevieve Fabre writes that

This cliché-ridden language reveals—through the words of her employer--the real nature of the monumental Mammy; mother of the revolution, harbinger of change, she is an inspiration for the struggle. Each term of

the portrait takes on an ironic meaning. (95)

Mamie, the “Mammy,” is a leader, one who brings about change. The progressive struggle is rooted in her enthusiasm. She can be depended upon to take arms, become violent, if necessary. Obviously, Mamie is not a character that the black nationalists would endorse as a leader of the revolution. Dashiki’s selection of this particular play is significant and evidences its commitment to women, to empowered black women in this important time.

Another illustration of the play’s central issues concerns the relationship between the Gentleman Caller and the Maid. Issues of black manhood have long been challenged by the relationship between the black male and the black female. Why did Bullins deliberately choose a woman to lead the revolution? Does this action suggest that the black male cannot do so? Was Bullins suggesting that black men and women must work toward the same cause to be effective? If so, why does the Maid shoot the Gentleman Caller?

bell hooks’s essay, “Representations,” seems to provide a partial answer:

Most black men would respond with intense defensiveness when they perceive other groups gaining “control” over representations of black masculinity. Those black men who approach the issue from patriarchal mindset fundamentally disapprove of autonomous black women creating images without first seeking their approval. From a sexist perspective, that in and of itself is seen as an indication that black men have no power, since it suggests that they can’t control “their women.” (*Yearning* 70)

Although hooks is not directly addressing the black revolutionary leadership, clearly leadership by black women in any artistic or political movement that is specifically black challenges the position of and domination by black males in that movement. Walter Kerr,

in his 1969 *New York Times* review of the play, drew his own conclusions about why the Gentleman Caller must be killed:

This last death seems startling at first. Since the caller has in no way responded to any of (the Madame) Mrs. Mann's overtures but has merely sat with his legs crossed, listening politely and rather menacingly, there seems little reason to gun him down. But he is, perhaps, too "gentlemanly." He has listened to a white without taking action, he has shared the furniture for a while. In Mr. Bullins's mind or in Mamie's, even that may be too much sharing. (Kerr)

And so, yet another conflict, that of the black male versus the black female, is resolved in an unexpected manner, giving dominance to the black female.

The play, of course, has its own controversies and conflicting ideologies. Black women at the forefront of the revolution would not be acceptable to leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, or the Black Arts Movement. Why Bullins stepped outside of his traditional downplaying of black women, if indeed he did so, is hard to determine. But this play remains one of his most interesting because it flies in the face of the general misogyny of the Black Arts Movement.

Dashiki further demonstrated its commitment to women and women's issues in many other selections of plays for performance. Included in this number are *Falling Scarlet*, *Sugarmouth Sam Don't Dance No More*, *Steal Away*, *Purple Dust* and *The Amen Corner*, each of which had strong, leading roles for women performers.

Once again, Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* underscores Dashiki's commitment to women. In addition to providing major roles for women, it powerfully portrayed black women's issues. This was one of the first plays of the American Theatre to shed light on the problems of black women in this country. *Colored Girls* opened at the Booth Theatre on Broadway on

September 15, 1976 after it had enjoyed a popular run in amateur theatres. The play, essentially a choreographed poem, is a celebration of black womanhood. But this play has a double voice. The play shows how black women survive, despite the pain and abuse they receive, both physically and emotionally. The play celebrates the triumphs of these black women as they encounter their hardships and move beyond them to discover their own self-worth, achieving in the process a sense of pride. In other words, the play represents women moving from self-degradation into self-knowledge. Much of the play shows the negative experiences that propel black women to consider self-destruction. However, the play also shows the changes they make in their attitudes and self-regard. The title clearly suggests the polarities of their lives. They are “colored girls who have considered suicide” because they have been abused and mistreated. But they are also “colored girls” who have found that “the rainbow is enuf.” So, for these women the rainbow represents a kind of hope—a metaphor for a collective voice of many colors. The play ends on a note of triumph as the women have “found God” in themselves and “loved her.” *Colored Girls* makes a powerful statement about the plight of black women, presenting a negative view of their treatment from black men, while affirming a positive view of their stance against such treatment and their eventual triumph.

*Colored Girls*, first of all, tells the story of lives that are on the margins of society. The women of the play are women who not only must deal with the fact that they are women; they must deal also with the fact that they are “colored.” They are neither treated like white women nor black men. These women have had to struggle to have their voices heard. Very early in the play, the women locate themselves in marginal places. In essence, they share an “outside” or marginal status in their lives (Shange 232). This

position on the stage suggests that all “colored girls” are denied the privilege of being center. Because these women share common experiences, they remain onstage for the entire play, functioning much like a Greek chorus, dancing, observing, and commenting on what happens. Not lost to Dashiki was the power and irony of lamenting the marginalizing of women in presenting a play with seven strong female characters and no men.

One of the many themes threaded throughout the play concerns the physical abuse that black women have suffered at the hands of black men, white men, and white women. In one of the earliest poems, the Lady in Yellow speaks of her first sexual encounter, often a pivotal experience in a woman’s search for her identity. Although this sexual encounter appears satisfying and fulfilling to her, there is a hint of irony in her tone. For this woman, what appears to be satisfying is also potentially disheartening. Such women have found themselves emotionally and psychologically abused by men for being so vulnerable.

Several of the women express disappointment in men who fail them. The lady in blue loses confidence in Willie Colon for failing to show up for a dance she was supposed to attend. Her plight emphasizes a woman out of control—a woman who has no choice but to nurse her hurt in memories, memories of Willie Colon’s music. Following the lady in blue, the lady in red expresses distress over a one-sided relationship. This woman’s resentment comes from her own emotional investment in a man who has given “no assistance” in promoting the relationship. She tries to justify the extent she has gone to maintain this relationship:

i want you to know  
this waz an experiment

to see how selfish i cd be  
if i wd really carry on to snare a possible lover  
...if i cd stand not being wanted  
when i wanted to be wanted (Shange 239)

Although she obviously still loves this man, she finds it difficult to continue trying to hide her hurt and anger. But this woman is different from the lady in yellow. She has the insight to end a relationship that has not proved good for her.

with no further assistance & no guidance from you  
i am ending this affair  
this note is attached to a plant  
i've been watering since the day i met you  
you may water it  
yr damn self (239)

This woman comes to a painful self-knowledge that enables her to maintain some semblance of dignity. The other ladies join her in declaring dance as the soothing remedy for pain.

Certainly, the diversity of the struggles facing these women would hold fascination for Dashiki. A few of the women allow themselves to be placed in demeaning circumstances by their vulnerability. The woman portraying Sechita examines her status in a degrading job in which men throw coins at her. She despairs in her disillusionment and directs her anger toward God (Shange 245-246).

Some of the vignettes are about abuses perpetrated upon women by society. One of those episodes defines the new "rapist." He is someone you know, a "friend," someone you have danced with or even kissed. The actresses become the voices of society's indictments: The legal system seems to legitimize the male's aggressive behavior and relieves him of any responsibility for his actions. Instead, the woman is seen as loose, inviting and even provoking such attacks (Shange 240-243). One could speculate that



such violation of women was a factor in Dashiki's selection of this particular play. How better to underscore the company's honoring of women than by enlightening the audience of the impact of such violation of women?

The vignette very conveniently segues into a description of another uniquely female problem—abortion. Shange is very graphic and brutal in her descriptions: the suffering the raped woman experiences includes pain and shame, self-inflicted because of society's expectations, a pain and shame that males usually do not have to share (Shange 244-245). The implication is clear: a man may create a child and then continue on his way without a responsibility in the world. But the mother's life is inextricably bound to the child's and determined with the choices she must make on behalf of herself and this child.

Another woman who deludes herself into a pattern of revenge is the lady in red—the Passion Flower. Although she calls men the "schemers," it is she who schemes, who pretends to be what she is not. Obviously, the pain of her own abuse haunts her so much that she avoids a sincere relationship. She simply wants to get even. But even after all of her scheming, she still was in pain (Shange 251-254).

True to Dashiki's commitment to women, *Colored Girls* underscores black women's perseverance. No matter how tough things get for all of these women, they maintain their hope for the ideal. Much of the triumph experienced by Shange's ladies includes self-acceptance and self-knowledge. The lady in purple relates her plight as a woman who has always lived up to everyone's expectations. She comes to a self-knowledge when she realizes that she must be herself. She begins to understand herself and comes to a new acceptance. The lady in yellow is equally accepting of her true self.

All of the women join in their self-knowledge by recognizing their love as being valuable. The lady in green accuses a man of “almost” stealing her identity. Yet, she takes responsibility for allowing another to attempt to steal her identity, and she asserts her ownership of that identity. She claims that she is “the only one/can handle it” (Shange 265).

Most theatre critics would agree that *For Colored Girls* is the quintessential and most elaborate expression of Dashiki Project Theatre’s commitment to featuring powerful women in powerful roles on its stage. The many demands on its actresses challenged and gave these women the opportunities to demonstrate their competencies in many areas: dancing, singing, and acting. The characters represented by the Dashiki actresses demonstrated remarkable insight to their men’s inner motivations.

By presenting many plays written by women, Dashiki demonstrated once again its including women throughout its operations. The tradition of the Black Arts Movement predominantly valued plays written by men: Jones, Bullins, Caldwell, and Milner, among others. However, Dashiki Project Theatre sought out plays written by black women as well, black women of different generations and black women of other cultures. Importantly, local black women wrote some of these works, and Dashiki gave these women an opportunity to have their plays performed. Hence, Dashiki Project Theatre’s range of women playwrights included great diversity and provided an opportunity for the expression of issues important to the black community. Such Dashiki plays written by women include *For Colored Girls* by Ntozake Shange, *Dilemma of a Ghost* by Ama Aidoo, *The Man Nobody Saw* by Elizabeth Blake, *Wedding Band* by Alice Childress, *The*

*First Breeze of Summer* by Leslie Lee, *The Moving Violation* by Sharon Stockard Martin, *Steal Away* by Ramona King, and *Siege on Duncan Street* by Phyllis Clemon.

Many women are prominent within the history of Dashiki Project Theatre. Although there were many powerful actresses in the company, the contributions of women were not limited to performance. Dashiki women were founders, board members, directors, staff, managers, and volunteers. It is hard to imagine Dashiki Project Theatre without its women. This innovative and daring company often went against the orientation and prominence of the men evident in the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement. Although the names of Carol Sutton, Patricia McGuire, Claudia Miller, Adella Gautier, Barbara Tasker, Andre Cazenave, Thelma Hinson are prominent in its history, many other women made large and small contributions to the theatre company's success.

Gilliam's vision and his willingness to go against the grain of male dominance in black theatre guided Dashiki Project Theatre to its unique position in American theatre history. His honoring femininity and feminine values gave many black women their opportunity for expression. And that opportunity fostered talents that are still seen on the stage and in film today. In recent interviews, several of the women have thanked Gilliam for these opportunities, and they continue to keep his vision and values alive today.

## Chapter Six

### Summary and Recommendations for Further Study

Dashiki Project Theatre was a product of its times. The theatre began in New Orleans during a period of great change for the South, for America. Marginal groups seeking recognition and representation found the time ripe for questioning the ownership of power over their lives and work. Black theatre advocates of the sixties raised DuBois' banner demanding that black theatre be *about* black people, *for* black people, and *near* black people.

Although this approach to theatre for black Americans had flickered earlier, it was not fully realized until the mid-1960s. The reasons for this are numerous: plays about blacks were limiting and not interesting to the general white audiences; black people did not wholly support theatrical arts in their communities; the number of blacks who had any kind of training in theatre was few; and funds to support black theatre were often controlled by whites. Black theatre never reached prominence in America until inspired by the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement. The Black Arts Movement demanded more autonomy for blacks, more control of their images on the stage.

Although Ted Gilliam's Dashiki Project Theatre took form during this time and subscribed to many of the tenets of the Black Arts Movement, its approach and methodology were somewhat different. Gilliam wanted to move his ideas beyond the confines of the college campus. Hence, he needed a theatre where his former students could participate along with representatives from the wider New Orleans community. He called together his colleagues, his current and former students, and he guided the formulation of a theatre that was to become Dashiki Project Theatre.

Dashiki's commitment to some tenets of the Black Arts Movement early on is obvious. From its beginning, it was a resident theatre. It was a small community in the midst of a larger community. Because the theatre was relevant to black life, it portrayed black life with honesty and integrity. Like other black theatres of the time, Dashiki Project Theatre challenged the negative stereotypes of blacks as perceived in the white mainstream theatres.

From its inception, Dashiki Project Theatre committed to producing works of high quality. Gilliam, with his classical theatrical training and his highly-skilled artistic staff, had a dream of excellence, and the theatre provided an opportunity for him to fulfill that dream. The reviews and the audience responses evidence Dashiki Project Theatre's commitment to excellence in training and production. The theatre provided oversight and exposure that were not available elsewhere in New Orleans. Mentorship was Gilliam's specialty. It was Gilliam's mentoring of Carol Sutton and Claudia Miller that prepared them to direct plays later at Dashiki.

It is important to understand that Ted Gilliam never intended Dashiki to become a separatist institution. All persons, regardless of race or creed, were welcome. Catholic, Baptist, and Jewish individuals were members of Dashiki Project Theatre. Whites and blacks were participants onstage and backstage. And, of course, Dashiki Project Theatre gave prominence to women in its ranks.

In addition, Ted Gilliam's homosexuality somehow impacted this philosophy of inclusiveness at Dashiki Project Theatre. In the context of the sixties, being openly gay would have hindered the potential for developing a theatre company. Black liberation was honored more than gay liberation. Ted Gilliam was a savvy enough businessman not

to risk or sacrifice the potential for Dashiki Project Theatre by being openly gay. However, one might further infer that his gay orientation informed many of the decisions that he made. For example, his selection of a few plays with gay characters could be considered a covert political statement. On a subtler level, one might infer that Gilliam's gay sensibilities dictated Dashiki's feminist posturing, directing his selection of plays that honored women and plays that were outside the traditions of the Black Arts Movement. Gilliam's sexuality was quite possibly the major reason why Dashiki was so inclusive in its operations, offering a safe space for persons such as gays and women who were marginalized by the Black Arts Movement. In essence, Gilliam prudently recognized that using Dashiki as an instrument for pushing the gay issue could hinder the company's development; however, he was enough of an activist to voice his beliefs in a more oblique, subtle manner.

Dashiki's inclusiveness flew in the face of the philosophy of the Black Arts Movement. The Black Arts Movement, headed by such nationalists as LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Ed Bullins, did not promote a philosophy of integration. The movement emphasized exclusiveness and separatism. Whites could not participate in this venture because they would contaminate the efforts of black nationalists. Also, the movement did not give women prominence. To say that women were never a part of the Black Arts Movement would be misleading. But the movement seldom recognized the contributions of women.

In contrast to Dashiki Project Theatre, Free Southern Theater, a contemporary of Dashiki, eventually patterned its philosophy after that of the Black Arts Movement. Although it eventually settled in the city, the Free Southern Theater did not begin in New

Orleans. Instead, the theatre began in Mississippi, and its founders were both black and white. It began as an extension of the Civil Rights Movement and not the Black Arts Movement. This Southern theatre, also committed to raising the consciousness of black people, toured the South, delivering its political statements. After traveling across the South for a few years, the theatre decided to settle in New Orleans. There was some disagreement among its members; some rejected the old notion of integration and inclusiveness. Still others wanted the theatre to remain more inclusive. Over time Free Southern Theater began to succumb to these inner tensions, and it became more radical in its outlook. It rejected white management, white membership, and white audiences. It became more political in its pursuit of social, economic, and political equality for blacks. The Free Southern Theater at that point fully embraced the philosophy of the Black Arts Movement, and possibly that philosophy of exclusivity was responsible for its early demise.

Of course, crucial and critical to both of these New Orleans black theatres was funding. Theatres committed to the philosophy of the Black Arts Movement at first were funded by the federal funding agencies. But, as these theatres became more and more radical, they lost the confidence of the agencies and, in turn, lost funding. Dashiki Project Theatre, on the other hand, survived much longer because of its inclusive philosophy. Funding agencies were quite comfortable giving funds to Dashiki so that it could continue to operate.

Dashiki Project Theatre realized its inclusive philosophy in several ways. First, its selection of plays did not always address the black dilemma. As well, some plays selected did not have black characters. The Black Arts Movement shunned such plays, because of

their authorship and their subject matter. According to the Black Arts Movement, plays selected by black theatres should be about black life and written by black playwrights. The members of the movement argued that whites did not know anything about the black experience. How could a theatre claim to be concerned with the black agenda if it did not select plays that met the criteria?

And yet, Dashiki Project Theatre selected plays that were of international origin, often plays that were written by non-black playwrights. Two such plays were Jean Genet's *The Blacks* and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Genet was a white European, and the message of his play was one that angered the advocates of the Black Arts Movement. Williams too was a white playwright, and his play had little to do with black life. By presenting these two plays, Dashiki Project Theatre emphasized its goal of inclusiveness and universality. In choosing *The Blacks*, Gilliam affirmed that Genet had created some excellent roles for blacks on the stage. He felt *The Blacks* offered an excellent opportunity for developing black talents. The professional production of this play had already given prominence to a number of professional black performers, and Gilliam hoped the same for his troupe. With *Streetcar*, Gilliam faced a different challenge. He felt that *Streetcar* presented a common human experience. Gilliam's philosophy accorded with that of the Civil Rights integrationists—no matter what, we are all Americans, black or white, and human behavior is common across cultures and time. This belief guided his selection of plays.

Another important way in which Dashiki Project Theatre departed from the ideology of the Black Arts Movement was in its acknowledgement and empowerment of women among its ranks. From the beginning, women were involved in the creation of



Dashiki Project Theatre. In most listings of its founders, Dashiki Project Theatre recognized two women, Thelma C. Hinson and Andre Cazenave. David Cuthbert, in his articles, often recognized other women as founders, even though they were not in the early development of the company. However, women did impact Dashiki's development: three women served on the 1968 Economic Opportunity Corporation board, the board that first helped the theatre to realize its goals: Marguerite Bush, Shirley McDow, and Winifred A. Edwards. Over the years several women served on the theatre's board of directors, including Muriel B. Francis, Shirley Trusty Corey, Mickey Easterling, Shirley Harrison, Marla McKain, Bette Moore, Carol Sutton, and Patricia McGuire (*Dashiki Theatre Fifteenth Anniversary 1968-83*). As well, women remained prominent behind the scenes.

Another strong evidence of the role of women in Dashiki is the fact that very few of Dashiki's plays did not have powerful women characters. A number of plays either had only women characters or women characters who were stronger than their male counterparts. As well, several plays that Dashiki performed had strong matriarchs. Plays like *Tiger*, *Tiger Burning Bright* and *Contribution* are examples. Plays like *The Gentleman Caller*, *The Amen Corner*, *My Sister*, *My Sister*, and *Wedding Band* had strong women characters who were not matriarchs. Among other plays, *For Colored Girls* and *Steal Away* had only women characters. *For Colored Girls* was about black women and the way they are treated by black men, a play most likely rejected by the Black Arts Movement. On the other hand, *Steal Away* did not present a threat to black men because it was not critical of them. Without taking men to task, the play simply made strong suggestions about the power and autonomy of black women.

Women were also central to the company as performers and directors. The plays that Dashiki Project Theatre selected gave great opportunities to women to perform and garner praises from the media. From Dashiki's inception, theatre critics in the New Orleans area were fascinated by the performances of the women. Numerous critical and positive reviews give evidence of the power of these actresses. Critics like David Cuthbert acclaimed the performances of such Dashiki notables as Carol Sutton, Patricia McGuire, Claudia Miller, Adella Gautier, Barbara Tasker, Thelma Hinson, and Andre Cazenave. As well several Dashiki women made their artistic statements by directing plays. Ted Gilliam mentored these women by giving them opportunities to direct. The two women directors most remembered are Carol Sutton and Claudia Miller. Because of the opportunities Dashiki afforded them, these actresses and directors have enjoyed successful theatrical careers in the New Orleans area, some even to this date.

Dashiki's mission and goals were in tension with the Black Arts Movement in still another aspect—the cultivation of a “black only” audience. Dashiki's audience was determined not only by the selection of the plays themselves, but also by the different venues in which the company performed. Dashiki Project Theatre had started in the heart of the inner city of New Orleans, in a black neighborhood. Obviously, it had followed the Black Arts Movement's mission to “place the theatre in the heart of the black community.” Hence Dashiki's first audiences were predominantly black. However, changes in venues occurred because of financial and other reasons. The theatre was forced to move to other spaces. This, necessarily, changed the audiences, actually widening the audience base of Dashiki. At this point Dashiki was not playing primarily to a black audience, but to a mixed audience. This is not to say that Dashiki Project

Theatre's audience was not mixed when it was located at St. Francis de Sales auditorium. Indeed, Dashiki attracted many "liberal" whites who felt a part of this very innovative and experimental theatre. But when Dashiki moved, for instance, to the New Orleans Repertory Theatre for a short engagement, its non-black audience increased significantly. The moves did not necessarily diminish the black audience; they just added more whites in attendance.

Although a number of white mainstream theatres often provided Dashiki's new venues, it is interesting to note that those theatres had no control over Dashiki's artistic selection. In fact, some might argue that the more revolutionary, avant-garde, and experimental the shows were, the more welcomed Dashiki was to use those white venues. Many of the white-oriented theatres, like the black theatres, of the 1960s and 1970s were themselves revolutionary, avant-garde, and experimental. All of these theatres shared a common feeling: a mutual distrust of and frustration with mainstream theatre.

Dashiki Project Theatre became well known as a black theatre company. It received and accepted invitations to perform in national conferences, receiving considerable recognition. By the year 1975, Dashiki Project Theatre was known in New Orleans as "New Orleans Most Productive Theatre" (*Dashiki Project Theatre Fifteenth Anniversary 1968-83*). In 1971 Dashiki was the special guest of the first Black Lay Catholic Caucus at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. Then, in 1972, Dashiki Project Theatre participated in the national Black Drama Festival (Black Quake) in San Francisco, where the theatre presented several one-act plays. By 1979, the theatre was receiving further national attention. It was selected as one of fifteen black theatres from across the nation to perform in the Black Playwrights Project held at the John F. Kennedy

Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D. C. Dashiki also performed Ed Bullins' *The Fabulous Miss Marie* in the first Black Theatre Festival, U.S.A. at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City. The quality of Dashiki's performances garnered strong recognition for the company. In his Emmy acceptance speech, the director of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, John Korty, credited Dashiki Project Theatre with much of the film's success (*Dashiki Theatre Fifteenth Anniversary 1968-83*, 6). Dashiki was helpful in securing performers and other needed support for the shooting of the movie.

Dashiki Project Theatre had a visionary founder, hard working members, support from the community, and outstanding performances. However, another factor helped propel Dashiki Project Theatre forward. This was the work of the media. One reviewer, David Cuthbert, is most prominent. The *New Orleans Times-Picayune* critic had no idea what turn his own life would take as a result of being given the task of reviewing Dashiki Project Theatre's productions. Interestingly, a white man, Cuthbert was Dashiki's most frequent and honest reviewer. Cuthbert has enjoyed a prominent status among regional theatre reviewers for over thirty years. He guided the selections of many informed theatre patrons. He, of all of the theatre critics in New Orleans at the time, most consistently followed the productions of Dashiki Project Theatre. He took note of the nuances, the subtleties of the productions, and he wrote objectively about the Dashiki Project Theatre and Ted Gilliam. Over the years, Cuthbert came to trust the Dashiki Project Theatre and the vision of its artistic director. He had witnessed the level of commitment of the Dashiki members, and he honored that commitment with sincere and intelligent feedback. There was little that Cuthbert saw at Dashiki Project Theatre that he found serious fault

with. For sure he came to believe in Dashiki Project Theatre's mission. He felt comfortable attending and reviewing the production. In fact, he believed so much in what Dashiki was doing that he volunteered to serve on Dashiki Project Theatre's board of directors. For a few years, he promoted subscription sales to audiences of Dashiki.

About Gilliam and his inclusiveness, Cuthbert speculated:

The difference may be that Ted's mind-set was this: I respect my people enough to give them a multiplicity of viewpoints, many voices, many different kinds of drama and comedy, because they deserve it ALL. They may not like it all, but they DESERVE it all. They deserve to see themselves represented, they deserve to hear stories told that don't get told elsewhere. They deserve to revel in earthy humor and see themselves in the mirror of the stage, to be angered at injustice, to cry at familiar domestic drama. He knew that he was making political statements, but that wasn't his *raison d'être*. It was theater for its own sake, for the rawness and beauty of expression inherent in the voices of the playwrights he chose, the actors he developed, the many kinds of stories he told. All of this helped give his company a true personality, which is very rare. (Cuthbert, 2002)

Cuthbert's faith in Dashiki Project Theatre and its director remained strong.

It appears that events as early as 1987 portended Dashiki's demise. Having moved already several times, Dashiki Project Theatre was now limiting its number of performances per season. Not only was the company beginning to have trouble finding suitable spaces for performances, but it also felt the pressure of a decrease in funding. The company no longer performed five plays a year as in earlier seasons; two plays were its maximum. It also was during this time that Dashiki co-produced some of its offerings with other companies. Was this new trend another indication of its cessation?

One of those shows, *Agnes of God*, was co-produced with Alpha Productions at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) in New Orleans in 1985. This piece employed staff from both companies. Roy Tagliavore directed the production, and it featured a Dashiki

actress, Gwendolyn Foxworth, as the psychiatrist. Clarence Wren, Dashiki's lighting designer/teacher, designed the show. In 1988, Dashiki co-produced *The Colored Museum* with the CAC. By 1990, Dashiki Project Theatre had no space in which to perform. It had moved from its last space, an office/storage space on the corner of Bienville and Burgundy Streets. Unable to afford another venue, Dashiki Project Theatre filed for Chapter Seven Bankruptcy (Cuthbert).

How much of the sustainability of Dashiki can be directly tied to its leadership in Ted Gilliam is open to conjecture. In 1991 Ted Gilliam, Dashiki Project Theatre's artistic director, died of complications from AIDS. But this would not happen before Gilliam had tried one last time to keep Dashiki Project Theatre alive. At the time of his death, he was directing August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. The play, produced at NORD (New Orleans Recreation Department) Theatre in Gallier Hall at 545 St. Charles Avenue, marked the first time that an August Wilson play was produced in New Orleans. Gilliam's assistant was his directing protégé, Carol Sutton. She took over the duties of directing because Gilliam was quite ill during the rehearsals. Sutton finished directing the show after Gilliam expired (Sutton, October 2001, Cuthbert 2001). The show, another of Dashiki Project Theatre's successes, was the last Dashiki Project Theatre production to this date. After over twenty-two years of influencing black consciousness in the New Orleans area, Dashiki Project Theatre closed its doors and disbanded its troupe. Although Dashiki no longer existed, Gilliam's legacy lived on. Few would not agree that Gilliam had left behind a record and model of quality black performance in New Orleans and the South.

Today, Dashiki Project Theatre does not exist. There have been several attempts, possibly not well planned and therefore not successful, to revive the theatre, most by former members. More recently, other theatres have attracted former members of Dashiki and staged productions, hoping that the new collaborations would revive Dashiki Project Theatre. In February 1999 Dillard University staged a production of Davidson's *El Hajj Malik*, probably Dashiki's signature production. The Dillard Players Guild invited former Dashiki Project Theatre members to attend that production. At the opening night's performance, Alexander Marshall, Dillard University's theatre director, made an impassioned plea for the revival of Dashiki Project Theatre. Former Dashiki members attending that production met Marshall's fiery comments with excitement and enthusiasm. However to date, his plea has gone unheralded.

Although Dashiki Project Theatre no longer exists, its spirit still maintains quite a presence in New Orleans in the lives of performers, directors, and theatres. To wit, a number of Dashiki actresses still perform in the New Orleans area. These performers include Carol Sutton, Adella Gautier, Gwendolyn Foxworth, and Patricia McGuire. A few years ago, Carol Sutton and Adella Gautier portrayed the Mann sisters in the play, *Having Their Say*. The play toured the southern area of Louisiana. Sutton has also portrayed the matriarch role of Aunt Emma in a stage adaptation of Ernest Gaines' award-winning novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*. Additionally, Sutton has performed in movies, including *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *Monster's Ball*, the movie that garnered a best actress Oscar for its leading black female star, Halle Berry. Gautier, although seldom seen on the New Orleans' stage today, uses her talent that was cultivated at Dashiki Project Theatre in the form of storytelling. Gautier, an accomplished

storyteller, performs her tales nationally. Both Gwendolyn Foxworth and Patricia McGuire have had leading roles with several contemporary black theatre companies in New Orleans. Now living in California, Harold Sylvester, also a former actor of Dashiki Project Theatre, acts professionally on the stage and in movies. Two other male performers of Dashiki Project Theatre currently direct black theatres in New Orleans. Anthony Bean and his brother, Kenyatta Bean have directed Dashiki performers recently. Kenyatta Bean is the director of the Ethiopian Theatre in New Orleans, while his brother Anthony is the director of the Anthony Bean Community Theatre also in New Orleans. Anthony, in fact, has a school of acting, the Anthony Bean School of Acting, in which he trains young people for the stage very much like his mentor Ted Gilliam. Gilliam's legacy lives on.

Considerable speculation has been made about the demise of Dashiki Project Theatre. Funding has challenged many if not all artistic projects. Dashiki Project Theatre could not survive without continued funding for its efforts. The efforts to find a playing space and to finance projects of the company were just too great without the support of an arts benefactor.

Other problems plagued Dashiki Project Theatre. A common problem throughout the history of the theatre in this country has been the lure of the movie industry. This lure was one reason why the Group Theatre of the 1930s could not survive. Hollywood offers much more money and the possibility of more fame to its performers. Obviously, more people watch a movie than watch a play on a stage; the possibilities for recognition are infinitely greater in film. Performers who are trying to "make it big" can easily be seduced by the glamour and money of the movies. Although they were committed to



Dashiki Project Theatre, many performers were easily distracted by film opportunities. Such distractions certainly diluted the commitment to the work of Dashiki Project Theatre. Such performers as Carol Sutton and Harold Sylvester were easily wooed away from time to time in the history of Dashiki. Sylvester was finally wooed away entirely.

Another speculation about the demise of Dashiki Project Theatre may have the greatest credibility. In 1991, with the death of Ted Gilliam, Dashiki Project Theatre lost its visionary leader. History suggests that a “dream” can live on after “the dreamer” dies. A case in point is the “dream” of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that lives on in the hearts and minds of his survivors. Certainly, the adage seems to hold a certain truth. Some would argue, however, that a dream lives on only when the “dreamer’s” survivors continue the dream. King, while a visionary and a leader of black people, made the dream a reality by insuring that black people everywhere understood and were motivated to pursue that dream. Such a commitment requires preparation by the “dreamer.” The crucial question remains about Dashiki: Did Ted Gilliam share his vision with any of his followers? Did Gilliam prepare anyone to hold on to the vision that he saw for Dashiki Project Theatre? Tragically, history suggests he did not.

Some might suggest that Dashiki Project Theatre was an institution based in a cult of personality. Ted Gilliam, as its founder and visionary leader, had a philosophy and specific goals for Dashiki. He knew where he wanted the theatre to go. He frequently articulated his vision for Dashiki Project Theatre. Yet, no one at Dashiki fully understood and therefore committed to that vision. Gilliam never detailed his long-range goals nor made plans for others to have an active role in their realization. Interestingly, Dashiki Project Theatre had a managing board of directors for a number of years, yet that board

probably never fully understood Gilliam's aspirations. Gilliam's vision had to become a cause, one espoused and taken up by personalities with a real stake in the future of Dashiki Project Theatre.

The founder's goal for any organization must be understood, adopted, and sought by individuals who actually perform the work of that organization. For Dashiki, Gilliam's goals needed to be embraced by the performers, the directors, the theatre technicians, and others who could then take active steps to see that the theatre continued.

On the surface, it would seem that Gilliam had imparted his future plans to others. Surely, individuals like Carol Sutton, Patricia McGuire, Adella Gautier, Claudia Miller, and others had the skills to perform and direct. However, successful performance and/or directing does not insure one's embracing and advancing a theatre company's goals. Much more is needed, including an understanding of the mission, the goals, and the philosophy. Also needed is an innate ability to see into the future, while recognizing the internal and external forces impacting an organization. An organization that operates with a cult personality is usually quite tenuous. Others must share the vision. Bill Winkley, organizational consultant with Options International, stated in an interview:

A great dilemma for many non-profits is the strong personality of its founder. Often the strength of personality of these individuals is absolutely necessary for the survival of the organization throughout its very tenuous beginning years. For the leader-founder to be able to keep focused on the mission of an organization when so much works against its survival is often the single factor determining sustainability for new non-profits. However, once the future of the agency is assured, it is often the case that this powerful personality will not step back, will not share that power with others in the organization, will not begin training replacement leaders. Many such groups run the risk of becoming almost personality cults, where the strong personality critical to initial success and sustainability, now virtually prevents the possibility of survival without his or her being at the helm. What is initially a necessary asset becomes a liability that can bring down the organization. (Winkley)

Possibly because Ted Gilliam did not train or nurture visionary leaders for Dashiki Project Theatre, the theatre could not survive.

The truth of this possibility was underscored by one of Dashiki's leading members, Adella Gautier. In an interview Gautier agreed that the leadership problem was the major cause of Dashiki Project Theatre's demise. According to Gautier, Gilliam had not passed the reins on to anyone who understood and shared his vision. She stated that she feels this is a major problem with many potentially great black institutions. Black leadership is very strong in an institution (such as the black church) as long as its leader survives. But some would argue that many black institutions are overly dependent upon one individual. There is one visionary leading the institution; when that visionary leaves, there is no one to take his or her place. Because there is no replacement, the followers are not sure of the future direction. The emergence of a follow-up leader is possibly the major reason why Dashiki Project Theatre closed.

The Black Arts Movement, with its counterpart, the Black Power Movement, lost momentum in the early 1970s. As social, economic, and political changes in America created new opportunities for blacks, these movements lost their impetus. There was no longer a strong need to be so vocal. The tides were changing, and America started recognizing black potential everywhere. At a time in U.S. history when most marginalized groups were demanding inclusion, the exclusive separatist orientation soon lost its sustainability. White Americans were slowly becoming interested in black theatre, and those theatres that accommodated this new interest had the best opportunities for survival. Such was the case for Dashiki.

Although the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement died, many of the theatres remained. Because the theatres were still alive, so was the ideology of the Black Arts Movement. In fact, the ideology of Black Power extended well into the 1990s. Dashiki Project Theatre still continued to grapple with that ideology. While black theatres came into existence and then were extinguished because of their limited viewpoints, Dashiki Project Theatre outlived many of these initiatives. Throughout its life, Dashiki Project Theatre remained committed to a black aesthetic, one in which black people would be honored and one that provided opportunities for black expression. Importantly, this theatre remained inclusive and open, sharing its talents and experiences with people of all races and backgrounds. At the same time Dashiki maintained excellence in its performances. Dashiki remains a strong example of commitment and achievement of excellence of black people in New Orleans, in the South, in the nation, and in the world.

This dissertation has explored two major features of the founding, development, and operation of Dashiki Project Theatre: its departure from the Black Arts Movement and the role of women in the theatre company. Further, it has been suggested that the leadership of its founder, Ted Gilliam, was the source of both its strength and its weakness. However, there are three other areas of research that could enrich an understanding of this unique theatre company: (1) further research related directly to Dashiki Project Theatre, (2) research related to black theatre in general, and (3) research related to black theatre as a part of other theatrical innovations. Possible topics could include:

- (1) Research related directly to Dashiki Project Theatre:
  - The role of men in Dashiki Project Theatre

- The impact of Ted Gilliam's sexual orientation on the concept and the life of Dashiki Project Theatre, especially in the choice of plays and in Dashiki's commitment to women

(2) Research related directly black theatre in general

- The role of black women in the Black Arts Movement
- The role of funding agencies in the demise of the Black Arts Movement
- The role of black theatre post-Black Arts Movement
- The power of the media in the sustainability of a black theatre company
- The objectivity of white theatre critics in reviewing black productions
- The role of black theatre critics in the life of a black theatre company
- The role of black women directors
- Contemporary black women performers on the stage
- The importance of venue to the success of a black theatre company
- The role of the church in promoting black art
- The impact of the black theatre university professor in attracting black youth to theatre

(3) Research related to all theatre

- The balance between a university-based theatre department's responsibility to the students and to the larger community
- The role of a founder in insuring the sustainability of a new theatre company

- The relationship between a theatre company's commitment to its artistic mission vis-à-vis its commitment to delivering messages or promoting of a movement

In recent gatherings of the Dashiki "alumni," many, if not all, expressed an interest in resurrecting the company. Nostalgically, several reviewed the many strengths of Ted Gilliam, the risk-taking of the artistic decisions, and the joy of being one of its members. Although he is no longer alive, Gilliam's presence was strongly felt. These alumni seemed to share his commitment to presenting theatre that honored and showcased women, that was *of, for, and by* the black community, and that presented messages that often were not tied to any one culture or generation. One came away from these gatherings with the feeling that still missing are persons who understand and are ready to advance Gilliam's vision. The question remains: Can Dashiki Project Theatre exist without Ted Gilliam?

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## Appendix

### Dashiki Project Theatre's Production Record

- 1968-69 MOON ON A RAINBOW SHAWL (Errol John)  
A HAND IS ON THE GATE (Arr. Roscoe Lee Browne)  
THE BLACKS (Jean Genet)
- 1969-70 WANTU WAZURI (Fashion Show – Members)  
DARK LAUGHTER (Norbert Davidson, Ted Shine, Ed Bullins)  
EL HAJJ MALIK (Norbert Davidson)  
SONG OF A GOAT (John Pepper Clark)
- 1970-71 CEREMONIES IN DARK OLD MEN (Lonne Elder III)  
THE DILEMMA OF A GHOST (Ama Aidoo)  
THE DUPLEX (Ed Bullins)  
SPOOK BOY, SPOOK BABY, SPOOK MAN (Gunn, Davidson)  
THE MAN NOBODY SAW (Elizabeth Blake)
- 1971-72 TIGER TIGER BURNING BRIGHT (P. Feibleman)  
A SYMPHONIC HAPPENING (N. O. Symphony)  
DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN (Derek Walcott)  
FALLING SCARLET (Norbert Davidson)  
THE BLACK TERROR (Richard Wesley)
- 1972-73 FALLING SCARLET (revised by Norbert Davidson)  
ENTERTAINING REFLECTIONS (Martin, Ward, Evans, Davidson)  
LIFE AND TIMES OF J. WALTER SMINTHEUS (Edgar White)  
MORNING, NOON, AND NIGHT (Ted Shine)
- 1973-74 THE PRIDE OF LIONS (Ted Gilliam)  
BOSEMAN AND LENA (Athol Fugard)  
LOSERS WEEPERS (Goss, Davidson, Bullins)  
THE AMEN CORNER (James Baldwin)  
MY SWEET CHARLIE (David Westheimer)  
THE FABULOUS MISS MARIE (Ed Bullins)
- 1974-75 WEDDING BAND (Alice Childress)  
JAKE JACKSON'S REVOLUTION (Warren Burdine)  
A NICE PLACE TO BE SOMEBODY (Charles Gordone)  
STY OF THE BLIND PIG (Philip Hayes Dean)



- 1975-76 THE CARICATURES (Davidson)  
 THE BADGE OF COLOR (Davidson)  
 PORK CHOP HEAVEN AND HELL (Burdine)  
 MAYBE PROMETHEUS IS A NICE FELLOW (Davidson)  
 SO WE'VE KILLED THIS WHITE WOMAN (Davidson)
- 1977 FIRST BREEZE OF SUMMER (Leslie Lee)  
 SIZWE BANSI IS DEAD & THE ISLAND (Fugard, Kani, Ntshona)  
 MY SISTER, MY SISTER (Ray Aranha)
- 1978 PHAEDRA (Jean Racine)  
 WHAT THE WINESELLERS BUY (Ron Milner)  
 SHOWDOWN (Don Evans)  
 A HAND IS ON THE GATE (Browne, Gilliam – 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Show)  
 THE MOVING VIOLATION (Sharon Stockard Martin – J. F. Kennedy  
 Performing Arts Center Black Playwrights' Project '79)  
 THE FABULOUS MISS MARIE (Ed Bullins – Black Theatre Festival  
 U.S.A., Lincoln Center, New York)  
 THE DREAM FACTORY (Howard L. Moore)
- 1979-80 FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE WHEN  
 THE RAINBOW IS ENUF (Ntozake Shange – also featured at Mason's  
 Flying Fox Club)  
 ONE MONKEY DON'T STOP NO SHOW (Don Evans)
- 1980-81 SPELL #7 (Ntozake Shange)  
 EVERY NIGHT WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN (Philip Hayes Dean)  
 STAGGERLEE (Don Evans – First Run)
- 1981-82 STAGGERLEE (Revised)  
 HOME (Samm-Art Williams)  
 NEVIS MOUNTAIN DEW (Steve Carter)  
 A TRIBUTE TO MAHALIA JACKSON (Gilliam – with Desire  
 Community Housing Corporation)
- 1982-83 STEAL AWAY (Ramona King)  
 LAND OF SUNSHINE (David Lambert – teleplay with WYES-TV 12)  
 A LESSON FROM ALOES (Athol Fugard)  
 SIEGE ON DUNCAN STREET (Phyllis Clemon – staged reading)  
 A LOVESONG FOR MISS LYDIA (Don Evans)  
 MAHALIA (Gilliam – Jazz and Heritage Festival)
- 1983-84 THINK OF ME AS YOUNG (N. R. Davidson)

- 1984 PANTOMIME (Derek Walcott)  
ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY (Don Evans)  
SIEGE ON DUNCAN STREET (Phyllis M. Clemons)
- 1985 A PHOTOGRAPH: LOVERS IN MOTION (Ntozake Shange)  
SPLIT SECOND (Dennis McIntyre)
- 1986 THE CARRIER (Paul Benjamin)  
THE BOX (Paul Benjamin)  
EDEN (Steve Carter)  
INACENT BLACK
- 1987 CAMEOS AND SCENES FROM FORMER PRODUCTIONS
- 1988 ONE MONKEY DON'T STOP NO SHOW (Don Evans)  
STOOPS  
PURPLE DUST AT TWILIGHT TIME (Ted Gilliam)
- 1989 MISS EMMA'S KITCHEN (Phyllis M. Clemons)  
THE BLACK PICTURE SHOW (Bill Gunn)
- 1990-1991 JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE (August Wilson)

## Vita

Stanley R. Coleman, a native of Port Arthur, Texas, attended the public schools of Eunice, Louisiana, and graduated from Charles Drew High School in 1968. He attended Louisiana State University at Eunice for one year and received his Bachelor of Arts degree in speech and drama from Dillard University (1972) and his Master of Science degree in speech with a concentration in theatre from University of Southwestern Louisiana (1979).

His teaching career spans over twenty years, beginning in 1973 with St. Edmund High School in Eunice. He taught at Eunice High School from 1978 to 1990 and at Louisiana State University at Eunice from 1990 to 1999. In all three schools he taught theatre, speech, and English, and he directed the theatre program. Presently, he teaches speech and theatre at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana. He is also the Director of Theatre at Nicholls.

In addition to teaching, Mr. Coleman is a singer, actor, and pianist, having performed the one-man show, *Paul Robeson*, throughout Louisiana and in the New Mexico area. He is a member of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education and a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.

Mr. Coleman is a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in theatre from Louisiana State University in August 2003.