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BLACK DRAMA
BARBARA ANN TEER
FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL BLACK THEATER
CHARLIE L. RUSSELL
PLAYWRIGHT
NATHAN W. GARNER
EDITED, AND WITH NOTES BY

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BARBARA ANN TEER CHARLIE L. RUSSELL NATHAN W. GARNER

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FL 9712

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

BLACK DRAMA

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BLACK DRAMA

Black Theatre has become, during the 1970's, one of the most popular expressions of black culture. Playwrights, directors and actors are interpreting black culture for audiences all over the country.

This new exposure of black drama is significant for it acts as a counterpoint to the many poorly made and exploitive movies which purport to express the only thing of value and interest in black life. The black playwrights and directors are powerful and true voices that must be heard.

On this recording, Folkways records brings to the listener the wisdom of two leading black artists - Barbara Ann Teer, Founder and Director of the National Black Theatre and Charlie L. Russell, a playwright whose work incorporates humor, political consciousness and for real black characters.

Nathan W. Garner

Charlie Russell - Black Playwright

I started with writing about twenty years ago. I was in my first year of college, and I took an English course in which I had to write a satire, and until that time I had no idea that I would be interested in writing at all, because I never did that well in English in high school or anything, ya know, that kind of thing. So I wrote this satire, and the instructor flipped, ya know, he thought it was a gas, ya know, and he was making this whole big thing over me and so I wrote another one, I mean, another piece after that, and he also flipped out over that, he flipped out, you know, over that one too. Looking back, I can see that that frightened me. And I wanted to be a writer from that point on, but I was also afraid of being a writer, what that meant, I didn't know exactly what it meant, but it was like something in the back of my mind, I wasn't clear about what was. So for about the next -- two years after that, I flirted with being a writer. I'd start something and I wouldn't finish it. Ya know, I'd get involved and I wouldn't get involved, you know. And that was during the period -- after I got out of that period, I began, uh, I sought, saw, thought writing as mainly like a curse. It was something like I had to do. And I didn't really particularly want to do that, because I have like a conflicting kind of personality about that. I'm extra-extroverted sometimes, like to go out and party and dance and be with the fellas and the girls and so forth, you know. And writing is just like isolated, and it's an introverted kind of thing, you know. So there was always a clash. So, anyway, that's the biggest I got into it, I just started writing and it was just something I had talent for, and it just, in a sense, forced a way in my life. I mean, it's something I had to do.

I guess what I'm best known for now is Five on a Black Hand Side which is a play, but I've written (that's my first play) but I've been writing seriously about 7, maybe 8 years. I did a novella called A Birthday Present for Catherine Kinvada which I'm very happy about. It's sold in schools now. And at that time I sold two short stories two of which appeared in, well one of them appeared in Hughs' anthology on best Negro Short Stories and the other one is in something called Afro-American Fiction, you know. Most of my writing spiritis came from writing essays and things like that when I was writing for the Literator in the early sixties. I write everything except poetry and I've tried that too. I'm not very good at it, but like essays, fictions, plays, interviews, etc. I write all that.

I write for Black people, for a Black audience. I write for what I consider to be the workers, the masses, the Black people. I'm talking about clerks, bus drivers, you know, working people.

Like when I started I had no direction at all. As a matter of fact I went through - later on after I became interested in writing I went back to college and I majored in English. You know, I read the classics, I mean Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton them other cats, you know. I never read any kind of book by a Black

person. You know it's funny. I never even asked myself the question why. But when I came out I still had to write and I had what I call an intuitive Black thing. I knew I had to write a certain kind of way. And so what happened was that I just started reading people and my ideas just kind of evolved. I didn't have any kind of direction and I think that it was an intuitive kind of thing. Then I began reading other kinds of writers. Richard Wright and some of his short stories like kind of influenced me.

There's another writer who influenced me a lot and that was Chester Heins. Again he deals with Black people in a certain kind of way. Chester Heins is popular and he is not popular. And you have to read him a certain way also because his limitation is that he obviously hates Black people. I'm judging from his works; the way that he depicts himself and so forth. Once you understand that you can read him for the other positive things that he does. He does deal with Black people as people in a certain kind of knowledge he has of Black people. He has a very beautiful thing. And I think those are the writers that influenced me most.

I think that what happens is that all artists, you know, all writers, ball players, anybody learn from other artists and in the process of learning from them you become yourself. And I'm saying that by the time Five comes, that's me.

I think there's a definite difference between what we call a Black play and a white play. And it all comes from the premise you start about what reality is. I start from the premise that Black people are oppressed in America. And that's the basis from which my writing flows. Now white people can't write from that position. I'm talking about that a white play doesn't come from that position that we are an oppressed people so that's what we come from. Once you start from that premise then everything else falls into play, that is a black play must deal with this oppression in a way. That's part of the function to deal with this oppression in some way. And there are a lot of ways you can do it.

I mean that there's not just one way. In Five on the Black Hand's Side I tried to do two things and that was raise the level of consciousness and two, like unify Black people. That's the way I wanted to deal with the oppression. But there are a lot of other ways. You know it's like dealing with oppression, putting down capitalism, materialism, racism; stressing the need for collective action to help the mass to be of one heart, one mind to overcome this oppression. So I'm saying to me that's what distinguishes a black play from the premise of a white play, because being an oppressed people naturally we would have different functions. I would have a different function than the white artist. I mean they're into making money with their art, so on and so forth. Now I see art as a primary tool for us to help our people to get free. I think it's a funny thing. The function of art changes all the time. Say that when we get free, that won't be the function any more. It'll be something else. It keeps changing, but it's always connected up with the people. Helping them in some way. Dealing with reality.

And I think that the whole thing about orientation, the whole thing about primarily writing about white people again, writing like white people, which dictates a certain kind of thing, because when you write to Black people as opposed to white people you deal with different issues and you deal with issues differently.

Well see, what I'm talking about is generally speaking if you say you were writing to white people, which is a trip anyway, you think about a certain kind of a stories, certain kinds of themes. In other words, you write to their prejudices. Like maybe big black buttons are in fashion, so you rip off one of those things. Or maybe they like to see Black people suffering. You know they're so hung up. There's so much beauty in suffering so it's oh wow look what we did to Black people and that whole deformed kind of thing they just nut off on that. They just go off on that. So when you write to them that's what you play to. You want money so you play to that. You play those fears. But the kind of writing I'm talking about they're not even relevant to what you're doing because you've got another whole kind of purpose. You're writing to Black people to help them begin to deal with that oppression. You have to help Black people to eliminate contradictions. In other words what I'm saying is that to me we're involved in a struggle for our freedom and it takes place on two kinds of basic levels. We have an external struggle (you know that's against society) and we have an internal struggle and we have things like values, attitudes within that keep us from getting our freedom, you know like negative, individualistic, materialistic, disrespect towards each other, the whole man-woman problem. I'm saying white people wouldn't be interested in that, probably. That's not totally what we should be doing, but it's an integral part of what writing should be dealing with. The internal contradiction as well as the external contradiction. And to me most emphasis has been on the external as opposed to internal.

I would say that generally speaking, Black playwrights fall into one or two broad kind of categories, that is on one hand they treat their characters as symbols where they're not people, they're just symbols so forth. On the other hand the characters are real, but they don't have a theme or message or if the message is there it's either muddled or negative. And to me I can't think of any playwrights off hand that have this kind of balance -- this kind of thing I'm talking who can deal with Black people, as people from a certain kind of conflicts and have something positive to say. I just don't get that. So from what I see, I don't think I'm talking about the same kind of thing they're talking about, but that's valid, because it takes all kinds of horses in the race, so to speak.

I think we should do what we have to do right now. That's what it's all about to me. If I had to have a model from which to do my writing, I'd model myself after the rhythm and blues artists. I mean there's your hit after hit after hit. Now I don't know what the top ten was last year, I can't even remember, but at the time I was right on it. It was valid, but things keep changing. History keeps changing. So I don't even know if we have to be concerned with those kinds of issues -- whether our works live. I think our works have a certain function and they should take care of that.

It's hard to talk about a Black art movement because well, when we talk about the Black art movement I mean anyway someone like LeRoy Jones. But I think he's a genius. He's very creative so on and so forth. In a sense I don't know if there is a movement. I think there are a lot of different people groping, trying to find a way. I think that LeRoy has propelled and rightly so in a certain kind of force.

Barbara Ann Teer

I was 15 when I graduated from high school and because I was 15 my parents didn't want me to go to college right away so they sent me to a finishing school in the South. And I didn't dig that too much you know. I was very lonely and I was very bored. I was very isolated because they had a lot of rules and regulations which just didn't fit with me you know. You had to wear gloves and hats and shake hands a certain way and I remember when the president of the college called me in the first time because I ran everywhere I went and he said "Miss Teer, young ladies don't run." You know -- that kind of thing. It inhibited me very much. Anyway, I became part of a dance group there because I was very, very lonely and it was a form of relaxation and it was a form of emotional release. My teacher really thought that I had a gift. She started to encourage me to continue my dancing. Dancing for me -- all my life I've been dancing -- it was always a social kind of thing. And now that I look back in retrospect, I know that whenever I was unhappy, not feeling well, or depressed, I would dance. I usually dance around a table. And now that I have more knowledge, the concept of dancing around a table -- table -- circle -- circle is completion, circle is wholeness, 360° that kind of thing, but the music and the movement around the table and around the table -- when I finished I always felt great. So now I say that that was a form of unconscious therapy, but all I knew was that I felt raised; I felt lifted. So I loved to dance all of a sudden. It became my life. It's like liquor raises your spirits, well dancing for me raised my spirits and so they kept pushing me into

the field of dance. Naturally my parents thought you know, you can't go to college and major in dance. What is that? But after the first year my parents talked to my teachers and I had very good grades. I was a straight A student and they collectively decided that I should leave that school and go to the University of Illinois and major in dance because at that time they had a very good dance department and because I was from Illinois anyway and my sister was already at the University of Illinois, I would have more companionship and so forth. And so I got hung up at the University of Illinois majoring in dance. I realized, once I began to take my art form seriously, that the divinity would rap through me when I dance. I remember the first concert I did, the dance was called Ritual for One. None of those things made too much sense to me; the only reason I stayed in it was because it made me feel good. And that's basically how I got involved in the creative arts because originally my major was going to be biology. So I veered from that.

I graduated from the University of Illinois with a degree with highest honors and they sent me off to Europe. I went to five universities in this country searching and then finally my dance teacher who was at the University of Illinois, who was the reason they sent me there in the first place was a guest professor from Berlin and she was on a five-year visa. When I graduated her five years was up and I became her protegee kind of thing. And she took me back to Berlin with her. I stayed over there and studied the Vigmont technique. Mary Vigmont is a pioneer even older than Martha Graham in the field of modern dance. Anyway I stayed over there with them. I studied pantomime with Dick Crew and I participated in festivals in Switzerland and Italy. I got a telegram at the end of about 6 months or 5 months from my mother saying it's time to come home. So I came back. When I got back I didn't want to go back to St. Louis and in the back of my mind I really wanted to become a "professional dancer" and I wanted to have a company of my own. But my parents are very educatedly oriented. They'd die if they heard me talking cause they'd say I slay the king's English which I do on purpose. But at any rate, they asked me if I stayed in New York the condition was that I would work on my masters. So I went to Sarah Lawrence and was going to get a masters degree in dance drama. I wouldn't stand school after this point. It was just too inhibiting. So they collectively decided that I could go and study at the Henry Street Playhouse which I did with Allen Nicolli. Nicolli is kind of famous now but in those days he wasn't. That was late '58. The reason I went to Nicolli was because Nicolli was a protegee of Hanya Holm who was a protegee of Mary Vigmont. Okay? So it's the family. Right? And they are a very serious kind of artists. They approach their craft as if it's a way of life. So I didn't get to socialize very much. You know I really was into this thing. I really was into it. And I think that I really began to wake up when we had an assignment and everybody was supposed to go to the Museum of Modern Art and choose from a painting a gestalt which means a theme and create a dance from it, a composition. All my friends went to this museum and they created all these great big -- and I was very unhappy because you know you want to prove yourself - I was in my Negro cycle then - and so I finally found something. Anyway, I finally used Miles Davis' music as inspiration and my criticism was that - you know that's like a nightclub routine, Barbara. And I worked very hard on that piece. And that was the thing that did it. It crushed me. They didn't even know who Miles Davis was. I mean we were dealing with Vivaldi and cage you know and all these kind of people. So around that time I hurt my knee which at that time was tragic but now it's the greatest thing that ever happened. So I had to stop dancing for awhile. And

my father came to New York and we had a long talk. They knew some people. Anyway, to make a long story short, I met some people who were actors, who were in the theater and who were doing Raisin in the Sun and because of that I got very involved with blackness and black consciousness. And I began to see what was happening to me in that atmosphere. My whole freedom thing had been geared toward another kind of standard, a European kind of thing and I was not really developing the way I wanted to, so I started studying Afro-Cuban dance then and jazz and I just broke totally away from that whole modern dance thing and I started reading books, political books, books about black people and their relationship in this country. And my whole thing changed. So I didn't know what to do at that point. So I started studying singing. And my teacher was a black teacher, Edward Bogner and I really loved him and he was very good to me. He was like a father and I used to sit there all day long and listen to all those beautiful black voices. And I thought I wanted to be a singer. In the meantime I went into a Broadway show with Agnes deMille as dance captain, because I had all this ability to take denotation and all that other nonsense. And it was a show called Quamena and we had African consultants and we learned all kinds of chants

and we began to -- this was in '61 -- and we began to dress in African clothes and make African sounds and became a part of us, the whole company. We really enjoyed it because it was more me, I guess. Then after that, I started traveling a lot. I went out to Vegas with Pearl Bailey; I went to Brazil with Alvin Ailey and I danced with Louis Johnson; a lot of people. But the dancing wasn't fulfilling me. So my actor friends said to me, Barbara, why don't you study acting? Cause you really would be a good actress. You've got all this emotion, all this feeling. So I started studying acting. And I studied with Lloyd Richards, who directed Raisin in the Sun; Paul Mann; and then I went to Sanford Meisener, at the Neighborhood Playhouse and I stayed there for four years till he kicked me out, cause he said there was nothing else I could learn and that I needed to just get out and work. But acting gave me discipline. It gave me an ability to expand my mental power because then I could begin to look into, to analyze, to prove why people do things; what are people's attitudes. And all of this gave me a sense of totalness, because now the dancing fell into place with the voice, with the acting. And I have a natural, impersonal kind of curiosity, and I began to ask, why do we do that, and why do we do this. And as a black person, I wasn't getting too many answers. Because all of the scenes we would do in class, and all the plays that I was doing, or being hired for, never really dealt with me as an individual. This kind of a mass culture

we live in, and it makes you look like something, or act like something, that you really aren't. It's like a falseness, like a mass personality. And since white people were writing all the plays, you would get one-dimensional characters -- the black people anyway. So that the only thing I could play was a maid. Or, when I get old enough -- you know, I wrote an article for the New York Times about four years ago; then they started asking me to write a lot of articles, but the first one was, "The Black Woman: She Does Exist" -- because I was tired of playing one-dimensional characters that white people wrote who had no idea that..who I was. Or not me individually, but me as Black Woman. So you either end up behind a tree, breathing deeply, like Lena Horne, if you look like her, or a jungle bunny in some chorus line, you know.. coming out of their concept of exotic, or their concept of sex symbol, you know. Or you become a maid, which -- they don't understand that. I mean you're not a human being. Or if you get old enough, you become a matriarch. And you know, I had all this technique, all this ability; and I could not force it into these little narrow, one-dimensional parts, I remember I did a Broadway play, and Harold Clenman??? was the director. It was an Inge play; William Inge, and Clenman said to me, Barbara, you have enough energy to do ten of these parts at once; we just want one part. And they always used to tell me, sit on your hands, sit on your hands, you've got too much emotion. So I started doing the classics. And the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare, and the standard English of it all, just made me so narrow that I couldn't do myself, again, justice. So I found that I was a very unhappy person again. And all my life I've been around teachers -- my mother is a teacher, my father's a teacher, all my aunts and uncles are teachers; and I love to teach. So my friends, who were actors at the time, and particularly Robert Hooks, who was in the Dutchman, and a lot of kids used to come down and watch the play. And so we decided we were going to start a theatre workshop for the young kids, because my mother had said to me, Barbara, you feel better when you're doing for other people. So that was really the basis of it all.

So I started working with teen-agers and they were all black kids from the Chelsea area. And I realized they had all this emotion and all this power and energy. And the technique that I had acquired could not channel it. They didn't even understand what I was talking about, because I was coming out of some kind of European puritanical thing, you know. And it just turned them off.

So I either had to get with it, or get out if it. And my need to get with it was much more powerful than leaving. So I began to "de-crud" myself, as we say in the National Black Theatre, because the kids taught me an awful lot. And I began to create forms for them to express themselves through, because there were none. There were no books; there was no research for what to do with black kids. The problem came in that they were very successful, you see; the whole project became very successful, and, uh, I think it was Joe Papp who decided to produce my first production, which was called "Be Real Cool," which was based on a poem by Gwen

Brooks. I used to use poetry, because I couldn't find any plays that would express what I wanted to express. And he put it on the mobile unit and it traveled all over the city. And the kids began to change. They began to get very professional, show-biz like, and they began to compete for parts. And they even began to compete with me for parts! You know, kids that I'd taught.

That was the beginning of my directing.

I considered myself always a part of the black arts movement, because most of the plays I did were black plays, now that I look back on it -- Douglas Turner Ward, Ron Milner, Imamu Amiri Baraka, you know, it..

It involved black people who were sick and tired of -- how can I say it? -- just as black people had to pull out of the white church, because the church was no longer relevant to them, well, black people began to pull out of western theatre or American theatre for the same reasons. Many of them, if they couldn't see it, they could just feel it naturally; they had a need to belong to a group of people where they could fulfill their potential; where they could identify with certain kinds of things that they could not identify with in another situation. A need to be in an atmosphere that is free, that is open, that is striving for truth and not somebody else dictating to you how to do your thing which you know how to do better than anybody else.

A good example: Chinese people don't come into the black community telling them how to do their thing, you know. Black people can't, wouldn't, wouldn't dare to go into a Jewish community and tell them how to do their thing. The only group of people that seemingly keep telling people how to do their thing is white people in the theatre. So that black people who had a certain amount of knowledge and skills began saying, well, look, I want to do this the way I want to do it.

I want to determine my own destiny; I want to determine how I'm going to speak on the stage; I don't want to be a mass personality; I don't want to be a one-dimension. I wanna be me, I wanna be human; I don't want to be a slave to European culture, that's not me anyway. I say it's three degrees removed: it's black people imitating white people imitating who are imitating Europeans, you know. And we're three degrees removed from Africa, and we're African people, you see. So that the black arts movement developed I think out of the need to be in an atmosphere that is free, that is open, that is devoid of dictators telling you how to do your thing.

It's a development of everything that is included in the creative arts. It's a movement which strives to stop depersonalizing black people. Uh, we are forced to do what is considered the attractive thing to do, because somebody else's culture says it is: we dress a certain way, we paint a certain way, we make love a certain way, you know...All of these things we do in a different, unique, specific way that is personally ours. And we decided that it was time for us to take over our own lives and do it the way we know we want to do it, as opposed to having someone else continuously depersonalize us and tell us how we're supposed to do something, because they're viewing us through their eyes, not through our eyes.

I took it upon myself to start a National black theatre.

Now I'm trying to become a master in an African-American standard, which at National Black Theatre we evolved before we did anything else; we evolved the standard.

An inspiring young person who wants to go into the theatre? I wouldn't isolate the category. Any aspiring black person who came to me and said they were interested in the creative arts. If they came to me and said they was interested in becoming a mathematician, I would give them the same advice, and that advice would be to first learn to love yourself. That is, your real self. And that is very hard to do. I'm still trying to do it because, #1, the process of change is very painful, is very slow. The process of change comes through conflicting, you know, suffering sometimes, even, but being aware, observing yourself, watching yourself, so that you can begin to love yourself. And if you can love yourself, that's the first step. Then you become self-motivated. And when you become self-motivated, there ain't nothing you can't do, you know. By any means necessary becomes no longer a slogan because there's a driving force. I love myself so much, you know that I could start loving you. That you can start loving me, you know. Bevel, Reverend J. Bevel gave us that slogan when he came to lecture to us once and it's a very clear slogan. The first thing one is told when they come to the National Black Theater is to have a love affair with yourself. And the next thing is to begin to try to love someone else. And it's very hard 'cause it takes two people to tangle, you know, but to the degree that you give love, you know, is the degree that you get love back. So if I ain't go none in me, I can't get none back. See, so that's the advice I would give them because if we don't become self-motivated people, we just keep depending on white people to take care of us, to support our theaters, to give us grants. We're chucking and jiving and so, I would say, you know, there're examples of love forces like Marvin Gaye, you know, Aretha Franklin, Priestist, Nina Simone, you know, Roberta Flack, Randy Braithwaite, John Coltrane, Alice Coltrane. If they want to be those kind of master craftsmen, then they got to go into themselves and find a spirit as Aretha says, in the dark. You know...and once they get that spirit, cause I'm talking about spirit power. It don't matter whether they are doctor, lawyer, Indian chief. It's not I am an actor or I am a doctor, it's I am. And if I am, (chuckle), you know...there ain't knowing else that is important. OK?

design/wasserfish