BLACK DRAMA

BARBARA ANN TEER

FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL BLACK THEATER

CHARLIE L. RUSSELL

PLAYWRIGHT

EDITED, AND WITH NOTES BY

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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 counterpart to the anti-poverty, anti-war and exploitive scenes which purported 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.

Sakon N. 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 then at 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, you know, that kind of thing. So I wrote this satire, and the instructor flipped, ya know, he thought it was a gag, 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, 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 I 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 thought, oh, thought writing was 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 fellows 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, no, anyway, that's the biggest I got into it, I just started writing and I 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 best know for now is to "Live in the Black Side" which is a play, but I've written that's my first play, but I've been writing seriously about 7 or 8 years. I did a novel called A Birthday Present for Katherine Dunham 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 Hugo's anthology on best Negro Short Stories and the other one is in something called Afro-American Fiction. You know, most of my writing so far have been writing poetry or things like that when I was writing for the literateur 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 than 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 don't know 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 Himes. Again he deals with black people in a certain kind of way, Chester Himes is popular and he is not popular. And you have to read him a certain way because his limitation is that he obviously hates black people. I'm judging from his work 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 Fire comes, that's me.
I mean that there's not just one way. In the world of writing, there are different things that can be done, and I think that's one thing that can make a difference. When you write, you have to be careful what you say, and how you say it, and to whom you say it. I think that's important.

And I think that the whole thing about orientation is the same. Writing about black people, writing about white people, writing about black people as opposed to white people, it's different. You have to deal with different issues and you deal with issues differently.

Well, to answer your question: I never had any training in writing, so I had to learn by doing. And I think that's important. You have to learn by doing. You can't just sit around and think about it, you have to do it.

Barbara Ann Terrell

I was 15 when I graduated from high school and I was 15 years old, and I was 15 years old because I was 15 years old. My parents didn't want me to go to college because they thought I was too young.

But I never felt lonely and I never felt bored. I was very lonely and I was very bored, and I was very isolated because I had a lot of rules and regulations which just didn't fit with me. I had to wear glasses and hats and make sure that I was in 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 Teen, you 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 because I never had any knowledge, the concept of dancing around a table -- table -- circle -- circle is completion, circle is wholeness, KOPP, that kind of thing, but the music and the movement around the table really -- when I finished I always felt great. Now I say that that was a form of unconscious therapy, but all I knew was that I felt released, I felt uplifted. 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
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 protege kind of thing. And she took me back to Berlin with her. I stayed there over and studied the Béjart technique. Mary Béjart was a pioneer even older than Martha Graham in the field of modern dance. Anyway, I stayed over there with them. I studied pastime with a shore Drew and participated in festivals in Switzerland and Italy. I got a telegram at the end of about five months or five 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. I wanted to have a company of my own. But my parents were very educated oriented. They'd say if I heard me, saying they'd say I play the king's English which I do for a purpose. But at any rate if I stayed, I was in New York the area, I was going to be working on my master's. So I went to Sarah Lawrence and was going to get a master's degree in dance drama. I wouldn't stand school after that 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 Alice Nizzoli. Nizzoli is kind of famous now but in those days he wasn't. That was late '19. The reason I went to Nizzoli was because Nizzoli was a protege of Rena major whom was a protege of Mary Pigment. 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 a painting or a portrait which means a theme, and create a dance from it, a composition. 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 the Negro cycle then and so I finally found something. Anyway, I finally used Miles Davis' music as an inspiration and my criticism was that -- you know, that's like a night sale, you know. And it 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 Vitalist and cage you know, and all these kind of people. So around that time my knee which at that time was tiny and now it's huge. So there was no chance for me to do anything. But my dad was successful. And my father came to New York, and he had a long talk. They knew some people. Anyway, to make a long story short, I set on some people, and we were dealing with Vitalist and cage you know, and all these kind of people. 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 the whole modern dance thing and started reading books, political books, books about black people and their relationships 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 Higgins, and I really loved him and he was very good to me. I was a father and I used to sit there all day long and listen to all these beautiful black voices. And I thought I wanted to be a singer. So in the meantime I went into a Broadway show with Agnes deMille as dance captain, because I had all this ability to take demotion and all that other nonsense. And it was a show called Quinter and we had Africam consultants and we learned all kinds of chants and we began to -- I 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 new to us, we were. And then after that, I started traveling a lot. I went out to Vegas with Pearl Bailey. I went to Brazil with Alvin Alley and I danced with Louis Johnson; a lot of people, but the dancing wasn't fulfilling me. So my other friends said to me, Barbara, why don't you study acting? Cause you really have to be a good actress. But we've got all this extra, all this feeling. So I started studying acting. And I studied with Lloyd Richards, who directed a show in the Sixties. And then I went to Stanford University, at the neighborhood Playhouse, where I really don't care for four years till he kicked me out, cause there was nothing else I could learn, and I decided I needed 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 meaningfulness, because now the standing tall and place with the music, with the acting, and I have a natural, imperious kind of authority, and I begin to ask why am I doing this, and why do we do this. And as a blank person, I wasn't getting too many answers. So 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 not like something, that you really aren't. It's like a falseness, like a made personality. And since while 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 mailing 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 people wrote who had no idea that, who I was. Or not me individually, but as a Black Woman. So you either end up behind a tree, breathing deeply, like Lena Horne, if you look like her, or a Jigle Kenny in some sitcom line, you know, coming out of their concept of exotic, or their concept of sex. So you know, you have become a maid, which -- they don't understand that. I mean you've not a human being, you've become a maid. Or you have become successful enough, you become a matron. And you know, I had all this technology, all this ability; and I could not make it into these narrow one-dimensional characters. I couldn't. On the other hand, I did do a Broadway play, and Harold Cramer at the time was the director. It was an Irene play with William Davis and Clements said to me, Barbara, you have enough energy to do become a married woman at some point. So I just wanted 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 tambourine pattern 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 people -- my father is a teacher, my father's a teacher, all my uncles and aunts are teachers, and I love to teach. So my friends, who were actors at the time, and particularly Hubert Howard, who was in the theater, and a lot of kids used to come down and watch the play. And we decided we were going to start a theater workshop for 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.
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, shoe-biukes, 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, Innes Anitri Baraka, you know, it...

It involved black people who were sick and tired of — how can I say it — just no 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 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 slave personality; I don't want to be a one-dimensional. 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 dehumanizing black people. Oh, we are forced to do what is considered the creative 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 want to do it, as opposed to having someone else continuously dehumanize 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 were interested in becoming a mathematician, I would give them the same advice, and that advice would be 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 conflict. 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-activated. And when you become self-activated, there ain't nothing you can't do, you know. So any sense 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. Now, Leonard J. Newel gave me 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 Theatre is to have a love affair with yourself. And the next thing is to begin to try to love one another. And it's very hard because it takes two people to tangle, you know, but to the degree that you give love, you know, to the degree that you get love back. So if I ain't go none in me, I can't go none out. See, so that's the advice I give them too because if we don't become self-activated people, we just keep depending on white people to take care of us, to support our theaters, to give us grants. We're drinking and living and so. I would say, you know, there are examples of love forced like Marvin Gaye, you know, Althea Franklin, Petrolator, Nina Simone, you know, Roberta Flack, Sandy Braitwatt, John Coltrane, Alice Coltrane, if they want to be those kind of master craftspeople, then they got to go into themselves and find a spirit as Aveda 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 doctors, lawyers, doctors, clerks. It's not as much as an actor or I am a doctor, it's equal. And if I am, (chuckles), you know, there ain't nothing else that is important. GET