

# The Talented Provocative Hazel Bryant

By Claude Reed, Jr.

Hazel Bryant is a well-known, nationally acclaimed theatre producer, playwright and directress who has had her own theatre workshop since the mid-sixties. Prior to this effort, she was a popular opera singer working in Europe. Recently, Ms. Bryant produced for the first time ever an all Black cast in Eugene O'Neill's "Long Day's Journey Into Night" (see National Scene—June issue). This production was so highly regarded that it is being produced for viewing on public television. Hazel Bryant, in our interview, proved to be both candid and thought-provoking. Due to the length and quality of our conversation, her interview will be presented in two parts. This is the first installment.

**NS** One of the things I would like to ask you about is your educational background. Where did you go to school?

**Bryant** Well, I was born in Ohio, and my parents are in the Amish church. My father is a minister. We moved to Baltimore, Maryland, and so I grew up for the most part in that city. I attended public schools in Baltimore, and then I went to the Peabody Conservatory of Music, and then Overland Conservatory of Music. Then I was very fortunate to go to Europe to study at the Mozartaum in Salzburg, Austria, to do graduate work, as an opera singer and as a musician. Afterwards, I came back to this country and studied at Columbia University to do graduate work in arts administration and studied with Stella Adler and Harold Clorman as an actress. So my education has spanned music, acting and administration.

**NS** When did you first decide that you wanted to get involved with the arts?

**Bryant** Well, I've always been interested in the arts, because, as I mentioned, I grew up in a preacher's house, and he always encouraged good music at the church. I was always in a choir of some kind, and of course, at the music schools I attended, so I always kind of thought that since I wasn't going to become a lawyer, (which is what my mother wanted) that I would become some kind of musician. So the bulk of my training is as an opera singer, and I went over to Europe and did that for a number of years.

But it wasn't until in Europe as a singer and being exposed to having to change my color in order to do operatic roles—you know, they would make me up with very white makeup and make me wear blonde and red wigs and I saw the ridiculous, man, the absurdity of my participating in a field that could



Hazel Bryant and production staff confer at rehearsal for an upcoming play, "Black Nativity" by Langston Hughes, from left to right are Ed Cambridge—director; Hope Clark—choreographer; Bryant and Howard Roberts—musical director.

not accept my black womanness. I decided that I would come back to America to study in the theater and perhaps be able to play what I know, and that's being a black person as well as a

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woman. I'm not saying that every important role in the world is that of a black woman, but being able to bring what I know about being a woman, which is a black woman, to bear on the preparation of that role. I didn't feel I could do that in opera in Europe at the time that I was there, which was in the early and mid-sixties, so I studied theater, and acting. When I had begun to move through that preparation and study to the point where I could audition and work on Broadway and take tours both here and abroad, I discovered that the same problems existed. The kinds of roles that I wanted to audition for were not proper for a black woman, or at least that's what I was told by the casting person. So I decided that it was important that we have a theater of our own, where we could develop our own plays and musicals and operas and be what we are and pull on what we know to help us. I finally dis-

covered that I would have to start a theater of my own, and in the mid and late sixties that was something a lot of people were doing. So I joined that host of people who were starting theaters.

**NS** When did you first get involved with singing opera?

**Bryant** I first started singing opera in 1959, and I hung in there with it until about 1965. I was fortunate in that at the time that I was singing in Europe, black sopranos, even though they made us turn into blondes with every performance, were very much wanted. So I worked a lot in European opera houses, and sang a lot of major and wonderful roles, but by 1967 I was ready to come back to America and deal with starting a theater that would enhance the opportunity for American artists, singers and performers to work.

**NS** I just have one more opera question. What were some of the operas that you performed in?

**Bryant** Well, my roles were Butterfly, Tosca and Fuere de Ligi, and Cosi Von Tutti. Primarily those were the roles I did over and over again. I also did Suzanna in Marriage of Figaro, and several modern operas.

**NS** When did you write your first play?

**Bryant** When I started my theater it was very difficult to get plays, because most of the leading black playwrights of that time were already connected with other theaters—LeRoy Jones, Ed Bullins, Charles Fuller—all of these

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