

Hazel Bryant

Interview

Part II

By Claude Reed, Jr.

In Part I of this interview Hazel Bryant talked about her opera career in Europe, the formation of her own theatre and the work that was done during the early stages of this theatre. In Part II, the final installment, Ms. Bryant talks about her present work.

NS I want to ask you about your work at the Negro Ensemble Company. What were the plays that you directed there?

Bryant I worked at the Negro Ensemble Company in their new plays department, and I don't recall the names of the plays I directed for them. It's been about seven years since I had time to work with them, but they were new playwrights, and I worked with new as well as experienced, professional actors. But the Negro Ensemble, over the years, has kept a strong developmental workshop for new writers and directors, and I was also a part of that.

NS What are some of the accomplishments of the Richard Allen Center?

Bryant Well, the Richard Allen Center has been a part of the black theater and the black arts movement nationally and internationally. I would say that black theater, that of it which still exists (and we are much smaller as a movement than we were when we started in the late 60's), but the movement as an institution has accomplished the development of new actors, directors, and writers primarily. Many of these persons have now become working professionals in the theater, in this country as well as abroad. So I would say our greatest contribution has been as a consistently growing institution that has been able to employ performers, designers, directors, and management persons.

Our most recent accomplishment was in successfully producing a work that is a traditional American classic, with an all-black cast. There have been many serious producers who have attempted this in the past, and because of the time, I think, politically it was unacceptable, and it created such rage on the part of the critics that they wouldn't give it a fair hearing. Or the quality of the production was not professional enough, but for whatever reasons we had not before this season, to my knowledge, been able to produce as a black organization anywhere in this country, a classical work of the Amer-

ican theater. That was accomplished this season with "A Long Day's Journey Into Night."

NS Is there any other particular challenge that the production of Long Day's Journey presented to you in light of the fact that you did use an all-black cast?

Bryant Well, I would hope that eventually the challenge would be that we will be able as black theaters all over the world to develop and provide a showcase for black writers, directors, designers and performers, being able to use any of the repertoire in the theater of the world as it concerns African-American people, European blacks, Africans blacks or whatever. I would hope that there would be no area of theater that would be off limits to us, if we felt we wanted to produce a play because it was important. I would hope that we would be able to do those and do them well, because certainly, noth-

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ing stopped the Houston Opera from doing Porgy and Bess. Nobody said they shouldn't do that because it is a great work of the theater, and wonderful black actors and singers worked and designed and helped with the direction of that piece.

Well, if they can do it there should be no reason why we cannot do it. If we find the piece works in our community and works for our actors, we ought to be able to do it without being crushed to the ground critically.

The other challenge, is to develop plans for economic growth. Most of us have been involved in the arts for the sake of being in the arts. We have not dealt with our organizations as if they were businesses. So the challenge now is to survive, and what we've got to turn our minds to and our plans to are economical development. I hope that we will begin to try not only to produce in the live theater, but for television and for film. We should be able to find scripts, writers, directors, designers

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and performers that would make it possible for us to really participate in the field. For the first time now in the last three to five years we have black professionals involved in music crossover. In other words, before whites would come to our community, hear our mu-

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sic, take it back, modify it, dilute it. We used to feel, and then produce and it used to sell all over the world.

But the root of that was African-American, and none of us were involved in that crossover and that greater distribution outside of our community. Now, for the first time, we do have a handful of men and women, and I do mean a handful—because I don't even think there are five of them—but at least there are that many working in the music industry now, taking our music and adding elements to it that will make it sell to the general public. Now, that's something that we've complained about for years, saying they came and stole our stuff and then they take it and make all the money on it. Now, we've finally come to the point where musically we're part of it.

It should begin to happen in the theater as well. We must begin to develop scripts that have strong crossover possibility, and we should produce scripts of our own writers and of other writers that will make it possible for us to participate in the marketplace in a substantial and professional way. We've never had that before, and so that is a great challenge for us in the 80's.

NS In terms of "Long Day's Journey Into Night," did you decide that you wanted to do that particular play, or how did the whole idea of this play come about and be at the Public Theater and everything?

Bryant To tell you the truth, I had not made a decision to do a white play. A director, who has been a collaborator of mine over a number of years, Miss Geraldine Fitzgerald, asked me if I would consider producing that play. She had asked me about six years ago, and I said under no circumstances. We had too many black playwrights who were not being produced and that was it.

But when she asked me this last year I thought, well, maybe we could do one, because we've been doing one play a year for the last three or four years. We did "In White America," or "On Being Black in White America." So I thought, all right, the white work this year will be "Long Day's Journey," since Geraldine has requested it and has asked if she might direct it. So that's how it came to my attention.

NS What type of plans do you have for the future?

Bryant In the future I would like to be able to bring the theater, music and film of African-American people to

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