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Amiri Baraka, What He Taught Me

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While writing this piece on Amiri Baraka, I had stepped away from my computer and my daughter looking at the screen, asked, “Who is Amiri Baraka?” Good question. I would only add who he was to me.

It was the 1970's I was a new to the art of theater. It was a great time for theater folk. Money was available in bundles by way of illustration, the US Congress had in a brief fit of generosity provided artist with the CETA program which paid ten thousand dollars salaries to artists. Audiences really seem to clamor and enjoy live theatre. I myself meeting the Harlem playwright OyamO only a few years before and drawing from that relationship that theater writing was in fact in my bloodstream. Yes I am a playwright; however, I knew little about the craft. Heck, I went on a campaign of self education and improvement. Though I'm a black man seared in the imbroglio of the 1960's political counter revolutionary and dope couture of the time, believing my art could in some significant way improve on the “Negro” situation which like today was up a creek without a paddle. I devoted myself to reading as many play scripts as I could lay hand upon. This would include playwrights from ancient Greeks to the modern. I had yet to find a personal style. I was dismayed; many of the current black dramatists seem obsessed with pimps and fantasized rectitude of all that could go right in their theatre of noble and happy endings. I saw life with more of a jaundice view and fretted mightily about how my work would fit in the universe of theater. As I said, I read a lot of stuff. I had a light bulb moment reading a short play by Baraka entitled POLICE. This script was livid, and violently political but most of all, absurdly funny as shit. Yes, POLICE was impossibly funny. POLICE was totally politically incorrect. But most of all it had no chance whatever of being commercially successful, critically acceptable or socially suitable in the field of American entertainment. Ask yourself dear reader have you ever heard of or seen this script in production. I wager, no for most of you.

Baraka's political consciousness was tethered to the ghetto of Newark, New Jersey where the cover of Life magazine during the Newark riots, emblazoned a Newark cop gun in hand while a ten year old boy lay at his feet with rivulets of blood flowing from a wound in his head. Being a resident of the Harlem ghetto reading this play I could recall New York City's gendarmes fearfully called the “King Cole Trio” commanding the ghetto streets, three deep, and who were for the most part, armed thugs. I could relate to POLICE. Baraka's art was political not subtle. It was straight forward and in your face. It's a tough row to hoe and requires stamina that few would invest in a career that is mostly a crap shoot to begin.

Despite these fatal shortcomings the play shaped and contoured my aesthetic as an American

playwright. I begin looking at the works of writers like Albee, Shepard and Bill Gun among others. Learned from Baraka's crazy ass script that I am a political playwright; I too can and would have an individual voice of my own. I further learned from Baraka one never knows what impact your work will have on another human being anywhere on this planet in any generation in any context. Baraka was ten years my senior. Though I did not run in his circle and he appeared to know everybody—even me. We would meet up in different social or artistic functions for more than a quarter century. It was only a few months before his illness and death we were at another gala designating another well earned lifetime achievement award for Woody King that I finally related to him my POLICE story. It tickled him; he had an impish wink and pleasantly delighted smile and its impact on my creative sensibilities. He was glad to hear POLICE was the bomb for me and I was glad to tell him.



Playwright and poet Amiri Baraka (right) with Owa.

Top image: Amiri Baraka at the Miami Book Fair in 2007 (photo from Wikipedia).

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