Cultural Daily

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Dr. Henry Miller: Theorizing Black Theatre

Jaz Dorsey · Wednesday, May 23rd, 2012

For a 53 year old Caucasian Southerner, founding The African American Playwrights Exchange in 2007 set me off on a fascinating rediscovery of my country and culture as seen and reflected in the works and lives of over 200 contemporary African American dramatists. On this journey, I have been blessed to have as a guide and mentor the amazing Dr. Henry Miller who, among his many accomplishments, is recognized by his peers as one of the most important scholars and historians of African American theatre.

In 2011, Dr. Miller's take on this history became accessible to a greater public with the publication of his book, *Theorizing Black Theatre: Art Versus Protest in Critical Writings, 1898-1965.* Dr. Miller's book is not just an education in the history of African American theatre; it is a re-education in American history. I recently spoke with Dr. Miller about the roots of his book, and more.

What triggered your interest in the history of African American theatre and at what age did that interest seriously kick in?

I grew up in a South Bronx household mostly full of adults. Back then working folks could have those huge apartments that today would go for hundreds of thousands. But even then, extended families had to live together to pay the rent. So the adults in my home, all regular working class black folks, my father and mother, my maternal grandfather, and two of his sons, my uncles, from time to time lived in that seven-room South Bronx apartment.

Growing up with all those adult black people – or Negroes, as we were called then – who constantly discussed their personal histories and who fairly accurately forecast the events of the budding "Civil Rights/Integration movement"… well, I guess that gave me a very early and very deep interest in history or what today we'd call African American history.

And there were artists in that household, too. My father was a merchant seaman for a time and took up oil painting in his down-time on the sea and did it at home, too. One of my uncles, Walter Sherman Fluellen, wrote poetry and gave dramatic recitations at a number of local churches in the South Bronx and Harlem. I always thought that in another time and place — yes, and if he were of another race, if you know what I mean — he would have been a great actor. I guess that's what aimed me, so to speak, at the theatre when I was about 12 years old—Oh, here's some personal history: my uncle Walter's middle name was after the Civil War General who burned down Atlanta, William Tecumseh Sherman. Guess that gives you an idea of what my grandfather, who named him and was originally from Atlanta, thought of good "ole" early 1920s Georgia and why he left it.

Who were your mentors?

Looking back, now it's pretty obvious that my mentoring started in that South Bronx apartment with all those grown people. Especially the way I think about the arts and my participation in them.

I was about 14 when I joined St. Margaret's Little Theatre in the South Bronx. In that community Little Theatre a black woman with a Greek last name took me under her wing, Marilyn Tsouristakis. She ran the company and apparently thought I had some acting talent. Later, I played Phra Maha Mongkut, the king in *The King and I*, under Marilyn's mentoring when it came time for that Little Theatre to do a musical — I still remember most of "Is a Puzzlement," the song where the king questions how he should lead his country into the modern world. As a very important aside, this is where I met my wife-to-be, Stephanie: she played one of the king's 67 children — lots of parts for everyone.

My professional mentoring and training began about 4 or 5 years later when I joined the Bethany Lutheran Players, organized in another South Bronx church. Brunhild Mier was the head of that company, and she had been one of the top students at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, where Spencer Tracy and Robert Redford studied. I guess that's when I learned that, most of the time, in acting "less is more," as Jean-Luc Goddard, the internationally recognized French filmmaker who was still pretty big at the time, often said.

Brunie, as we called her, introduced me to Chekhov at a relatively young age; that is, perhaps, too young to be dealing with the Russian master of psychological realism. I played the title role in *The Brute*. But, despite my youth, maybe it worked on some level since this was one of Chekhov's farces.

Brunie was German. She was just a little older than me and her mother had apparently escaped Germany a little after the Nazis took over — violating the then-popular stereotype that all Germans who weren't Jews loved Hitler. As far as I knew they were the only white family living in the neighborhood. So, there it is, again: history. This time international history touching my relatively young life, and this time through the life of a respected teacher.

My grandfather's history in Atlanta had everything to do with me being born in New York, at the time the center of American theatre. So I get a teacher from one of most renowned theatre institutions in the country. "The future springs from the past" as the old African proverb tells us. I wonder if will it take another 250 years or so for most of us Americans to learn that lesson?

Long about the mid-60s I came down from the Bronx to Harlem, by that time New York's hotbed of the black Civil Rights revolution was playing itself out in black theatre. I joined Roger Furman's New Heritage Repertory Theatre and there, you guessed it, another woman, Claire Leyba, took me under her protective wing. A stunning actress, Claire had been a member of the American Negro Theatre (ANT), started just before the war in 1939, and for a time the premier African American theatre in the country.

As I think about it, Claire's probably the first person who made me deeply curious about the history of black American theatre since she was part of that history. I asked myself, where did this black woman learn all this stuff about the theatre? I was then still too shy to ask her that question directly. Probably didn't want her to know all that I did not know about black people in the theatre.

Who are your playwrighting mentors?

I guess my main mentors in playwriting are Phillip Hayes Dean and Arthur Kopit. I've studied with a number of other major dramatists: John Guare, A.R. Gurney, Terrence McNally. But Phil and Arthur gave me a lot of time and support that they really weren't required to do, and it would probably take another book to fully explain the craft stuff that I leaned from these two consummate theatre artists, one a realist, the other essentially an American absurdist.

They both are mentioned in my book; Phil much more extensively since his work forms an important part of African American theatre theory over the last half century or so, which is what the book is about.

What is the seminal reading for a person with an interest in this subject?

Ah, an easy one! The award-winning publication of the late Errol Hill and (still with us) James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre*, published by Cambridge University Press (2003). Frankly, I don't know why everyone who has any interest in American theatre, history, and culture would not have this book on their bookshelf. Perhaps the greatest compliment that I've received for *Theorizing Black Theatre* is that it "stands on the shoulders" of this seminal history of 200 years or more of African American theatre.

What prompted you to write *Theorizing Black Theatre?*

What can I say? All of the above. In the end an artist's life is a whole thing. Not a bunch of compartments. I was driven to study the theatre out of my practice of it, and I practiced it because that's just the way some folks are made, especially when they are born into a family that has a deep regard for the arts and for education, and for black folks' participation in these arenas over time. I hope its readers will learn as much reading it as I did writing it.

Click the cover to purchase Dr. Miller's book at Powell's:

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