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Joseph A. Walker

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10 Evolution of a Playwright

By Grace C. Cooper

Joseph A. Walker gives an autobiographical statement in one edition of his highly acclaimed play, "The River Niger." In the statement, clues to the influences on Walker in his choice of a career and his approach to his work are given. He states:

Born 6:44 P.M. on February 24, 1935, under the sun sign of Pisces, moon in Scorpio, rising Leo-Virgo via a Cancer mother and an I-don't-remember-what sign daddy, who was a bad-loud-talking dude of five feet eight inches tall, who I once saw beat up a man six feet five because he insulted my seven-year-old dignity by beating the day-lights out of me . . . my pop was some dude—used to sleep out on the back porch in the dead winter because he didn't want ma to know he was drunk, because my ma, man, was a scornful bittersweet lovable crazy lady . . .

These remarks note the two strong influences on Walker: his parents—especially his father—and astrology.

The influence of Walker's father is crystalized in "The River Niger." Walker believes that Black fathers are often not given the proper respect. In the dedication to the play, Walker writes: "This play is dedicated to my mother and father and to highly underrated Black daddies everywhere." In an interview published in the December 31, 1972 edition of the *New York Times*, he said, "It's rough being a Black and a father in the white world. I'm amazed more Black men don't commit suicide . . . I refute Daniel Moynihan's theory that the Black society is a total matriarch. Our women are strong but men like my father aren't weak. They're bitter, disillusioned men, forced to take on enormous responsibility and to abandon their own dreams."

The influence of astrology was to affect his choice of, and approach to a career.

He had at first chosen a direction other than drama-philosophy. He attended
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Howard University, majoring in philosophy and minoring in drama. It was while at Howard that he played a key role in the then new work by another playwright, James Baldwin. Walker portrayed Luke, the returned husband, in the first (1955) production of Baldwin's "The Amen Corner." Walker was building up his interest in theatre and was drawing away from philosophy. Later, both Baldwin and Walker were to receive the Guggenheim Fellowship award. "The Amen Corner" was not Walker's only stage experience at Howard. He appeared in other productions, including Tennessee Williams' "Summer and Smoke," before receiving the Bachelor of Arts in 1956 and continuing with graduate studies in philosophy and drama. But his interest in drama was stronger, and his belief in astrology enhanced his choice of a career. Leo, his rising sign, is the sign of the lion; it is also the sign of the stage. In his autobiography, he states: "I love lions 'cause they is so, so motherf . . . so goddamn motherfucking sweet. I started to become a professional philosopher . . . changed my mind on account of I got what you may stuffily call an artistic temperament and I like to do my thinking through plays and things."

Walker received the Master of Fine Arts from Catholic University in 1963. He is now studying for the Doctor of Philosophy in the Cinema Studies Department at New York University.

Like most writers, at least when they are starting out, Walker had to take non-writing jobs to make a living. He joined the Air Force and was enrolled in navigator's school, only to quit because he found himself preoccupied with writing poetry when he should have been completing the "night celestial examination." He worked for the Post Office for a while but was let go for talking too much. He then returned to teaching, which proved more compatible with his writing and dramatic aspirations. He taught high school in Washington, D.C., and also in New York City before moving on higher. For example, he was at Yale University from 1967 to 1970 as a day writing instructor,

and at Howard during the spring of 1973 as a visiting professor. Presently, he is an associate professor at the City College of New York.

Although actively engaged in teaching, Walker's first love is the stage. Besides writing, he has extensive experience as a professional actor and has appeared in such productions as "Once in a Lifetime," at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C.; "Raisin in the Sun" and "Purlie Victorious" at the Olney Theatre in suburban Maryland. Also, he has appeared as a singer in musicals such as the off-Broadway production of "The Believers," which he co-authored. His television credits include an episode on *N.Y.P.D.* and a narration for the program, *In Black America*.

Walker's experience as an actor no doubt added to the success of his playwriting. But teaching, acting and writing were not all that filled his developing days. In 1970, Walker and his second wife, Dorothy Dinroe-Walker, founded the Demi-Gods, a professional music-dance theatre repertory company based in New York. Walker served as artistic director and his wife as music director. The troupe was young and poor but full of talent and inspiration. This writer, seeing the Demi-Gods in a rehearsal in a warehouse in 1973, captured the following contrast of the drab setting and the shining talent:

"On a cold, rainy, grey Saturday in February; members of the Howard University Drama Department entered a grey, worn building in Harlem and sat on a cold, damp, grey floor to see a young company of actors, dancers and singers rehearse a production written by their founder-director with music written by his talented wife. The room was bare except for two long benches, an old piano and assorted articles of clothing and dishes. The room was bare until that old piano started playing and the performers came alive. For the next two hours, that grey, damp basement was transformed—transformed into Africa's jungles, the Southern plantations, the Northern streets. Transformed with the power and the

brightness of the aptly named crew—The Demi-Gods."

Undoubtedly, the company provided for Walker the necessary intimate contract with theatre—a contact of much value to any playwright because it provided the opportunity to test one's material before unveiling it to the public. And Walker's efforts paid off well. Although he is more known as the playwright for "The River Niger," his credit line is long. Let's just examine some of his earlier works:

"THE HARANGUES," one of Walker's first professional productions, opened the Negro Ensemble Company's (NEC) 1969 season, with the help of Moses Gunn, the actor, whom Walker had been understudying.

This play is actually a series of short plays and scenes put together under a common theme of the anger and frustration of the Black man at his oppression. There is a prologue in the form of a ritualistic drama, a look into the past at an African father who drowns his new-born baby rather than have the child captured by slave traders. There follows a play of a young Black man in love with a white woman whom he has impregnated and wishes to marry but whose father opposes the match. The young man plots with his fiancée to kill the father. Next is an interlude, a look into the future in which a Black revolutionary convinces his wife not to die with him but to live and raise their son as a freedom fighter. Lastly, there is a one-act play set in a bar and centered around the ranting and raving of a demented old man who, supposedly, utters truths during his wild-eyed harangues. The old man hurls accusations at Blacks as well as whites.

Writing in the *New Yorker* of January 24, 1970, Edith Oliver, compared the raving monologue of the crazy old man to a similar, in theme, monologue in LeRoi Jones' "The Dutchman," but deplored Black writers' "tradition" of "diatribes." Nevertheless, she saw real talent in Walker's first effort. Oliver wrote: "Mr. Walker is so far no LeRoi Jones, but there are many hints, scattered throughout, that he

12 is a much more talented, original and sophisticated playwright than he would have us believe." The critic went on to comment, however, that Walker appeared to be . . . "writing down to his audience in the manner of the worst of the old time propaganda writers . . ." Although Oliver was not impressed with the plots of the one-act plays, she found humor in many of the incidental lines and in the stage business.

Henry Hewes, writing in the *Saturday Review* of February 14, 1970, said he did enjoy the plots, and found amusing satire in all of the sections, especially the last section. Hewes noted lack of depth in character development. However, he found this not to be a real fault as the author's intent was to provide "harangues," ranting, passionate protest of the Black situation.

"The Harangues," therefore, represented a first step toward success in playwriting for Walker. Though it received much less attention than "The River Niger," this play, without a doubt, brought forth Walker's strengths as a playwright.

"ODODO," is another of Walker's early plays. When this play opened the 1970 season of NEC, many whites were offended, perhaps frightened, by it. [The Demi-Gods presented it at Howard in 1973.]

Commenting on the strength of the Black theatre, Ron Milner, playwright and director of the Spirit of Shango Theatre in Detroit, wrote in the introduction to *Black Drama Anthology*, "It will be a theatre having to do with love of one's self, and one's personal, national and international family, with wariness and hatred of one's personal, national and international enemies; which, ideally, points as to how to break their grip and splatter their power."

Walker, speaking of "Ododo" (and "Yin Yang") once said: "A lot of critics thought these plays were loveless. Not true, they were about the Black man's love and how it's thwarted, corrupted by racism . . . We start out loving everybody." A few lines from "Ododo" will show how it fits both

how it might be upsetting to some viewers. The following selections are from Act II:

*"Abe Lincoln, a hero?
Hell no, you Negro.
Let me write the books
The way it really looks
Not just to keep alive
That legendary jive . . .
He'd put you in your grave
To give this country peace and unity
It's dumb to say
He gave you your liberty."*

*"Hero with an afro
Major in indigo
Gonna overthrow
The status quo."*

*"You gotta dig yourself
Nyeusi, (Swahili word for black)
yeah."*

*"Remove hair from under most higher
mammals, you will find that the skin
underneath is pink or white. Black
skin is therefore—*

*Suprahuman!
White skin?
Subhuman.
Except for sheep, most higher
mammals
have straight hair. Kinky hair is
therefore—*

*Suprahuman
Straight hair?
Subhuman.
Most higher mammals, the gorilla
being the prime example, have wide
thin lips. Thick lips are therefore—*

*Suprahuman!
Thin lips?
Subhuman."*

"Ododo" is a revue, using music and dance and colorful costume, but sparse scenery. It is not at all as sophisticated as "Niger." At many points, it is adolescent in appeal. At times, one finds Walker again writing down to the audience. The emotional pitch is high, giving it high appeal to the young. The Walker in "Ododo" does not show the more subtle approach of the Walker of "Niger." Yet

in his forth play, "YIN YANG," the emotion at times is uncontrollable. Though this play was written after "The River Niger," it belongs more with Walker's earlier works.

"Yin Yang's" 1973 premiere performance was at Howard's Ira Aldridge Theatre, on an alternating bill with "Ododo." It is the most non-traditional of Walker's plays. Writing in the *New York Times* of August 5, 1973, Walker had this to say: "It ("Yin Yang") is a highly stylized, surrealist piece which attempts to dramatize the ago-old battle between good and evil. Good is represented by God, a hip-swinging, fast-talking Black mama. She is in conflict with Miss Satan, who is also a Black female swinger." Walker's play is not, as it may appear at first glance, a fantasy for children. The allusions are too obscure for them. Also, the language would cause many a parent to scurry youngsters out of the audience. Walker once confided to this writer—just before the Howard Drama Department presented the Demi-Gods in "Yin Yang"—that the work was the result of a dream he had while on LSD. This description is often the only logical explanation for some of the words and actions of the characters, words and actions which often are carried out at a fever pitch seemingly unmotivated.

Walker draws from the books of *Job* and *Revelations*. "Yin Yang" is a zen term, *Yin* meaning destruction (evil); *Yang* meaning construction (good). The playwright's note to the New York production of the play asks several questions: "Is God Satan and is Satan God?" "Why didn't God completely destroy his arch rebel?" "Or is Satan eternal and, therefore indestructible?" From questions about general Biblical topics, Walker turns to the influence of the church on Black life and writers: "Why not utilize the church for revolution? . . . There's a lot of power in the Black Jesus bag." He has, according to him, long felt a symbolic parallel between *Job* and Black people, for both continue to believe no matter what their level of suffering. Also, he points out in the program of the New York

Joseph Walker as "Luke" with "Sister Margaret" (played by Mildred Ellis) in the premiere performance of James Baldwin's "Amen Corner."



Joseph Walker as "Reverend Winemiller" in Tennessee Williams' "Summer and Smoke."

production that Satan, according to the *Revelations*, was cast out to earth.

In the *New York Times* article, Walker gave the following critical and lay reaction to "Yin Yang's" premiere and subsequent performances: "The critical and lay reactions to this play were really a 'yin yang.' A few of my white friends and associates hated it. An equal number felt that it was my best work. But most Blacks were enthralled by it, and they expressed their approval vocally . . . the first night the house was about 60 percent full, the second night it was close to 80 percent, and the third . . . it was standing room only."

It is "The River Niger," of course, that brought Walker national recognition and that showed his development as a playwright. This award-winning play expresses many of the same strong feelings of earlier works, but screams less loudly. Thus, Walker is able to get his point across to a larger audience. Despite its wider appeal, "Niger" is not a washed-out capitulation to whites—as Woodie King and Ron Milner say (in *Black Drama Anthology*) about Black plays that succeed on Broadway: "She (Broadway) wants you to be a singing hyena, dancing on the graves of yourself and everyone you know."

Walker presents his characters realistically. He shows a true view of Black life. A treatment of "Niger's" depiction of real Black life is shown in the following excerpt from a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*:

"The other night I saw 'The River Niger' and I was so transported, right out of the present time and place, back to my childhood in Harlem . . . The sense of identification I felt through the play, the nostalgia it so delightfully evoked, linger on . . . There were no exaggerations or distortions in the story . . . I'm still chuckling to myself about episodes that I swear took place in my own childhood . . ."

For all its adherence to Black life, "Niger" has those elements of universality and realism that give it a wide appeal.

The realism of the play is derived in part from Walker's reliance on his own experiences as references for the play. As stated at the beginning, Walker's family had a great influence on him, especially his father, whom Walker uses as a model for Johnny Williams, the father in "Niger." Most of the play is, indeed, autobiographical although Walker's father never shot anyone and Walker grew up in Washington, D.C., rather than in New York where the play is set. The father in "Niger" and Walker's own father were both house painters and alcoholics; both had two years of college education and spent their time constantly "railing against the system" (from a 1973 *Washington Post* interview) "and reducing all arguments to the nitty gritty . . . reduce bull . . . to ashes . . . (being) poetic because of the way he said things, a poet in his soul."

Besides using his father as a role model, Walker draws his characters from a variety of Black backgrounds, reflecting a Black cross-cultural interchange that whites often do not note. Thus we have a Jamaican doctor, a Black South African girl and an elderly lady who proclaims loudly of her "Indian blood." One critic, Henry Hewes, writing in the *Saturday Review of the Arts*, February 1973, made a passing reference to this array of Black characters while admiring the "biting humor, rich dialogue, and honest statement of how things look from a variety of Black positions."

Language is an important aspect of realism in characterization. Walker pays attention to style as well as grammar and syntax of different dialects. At times, whites find it hard to grasp the total meaning, yet the use of stylistic features deepens the sense of realism.

"The River Niger" was one of the few financial successes for the Negro Ensemble Company. And Walker's success is not just his own; it is for all Black people. □

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