

1-1-1983

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Recommended Citation

Katz, Vera J. (1983) "A Conversation With Richard Wesley," *New Directions*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol10/iss2/5>

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A Conversation With Richard Wesley

By Vera J. Katz
and Taquiena Boston

The following was excerpted from a chapter in "Witnesses to a Possibility," a book (in progress) on the Black theater in Washington, D. C. — Ed.

"I make a living as a screenwriter, but I have to write for the stage," says Richard Wesley, playwright (*The Mighty Gents*), screenwriter (*Uptown Saturday Night* & *Let's Do It Again*), and teacher.

Wesley was back in Washington in November, his college hometown, to conduct workshops in theater, and to assist in preparations for the premiere of his play, *Strike Heaven on the Face*, at Howard University's Blackburn Center, November 17-21. The play [see box on page 29] depicts a soldier just back from Vietnam who is grappling with the question of his heroism. This drama, staged a week after Washington witnessed the honoring of Vietnam veterans, focuses on the indelible scar left on our perception of our own righteousness. The play's title refers to a line from *Macbeth* (Act IV, Scene II)—a line that likens the war in Vietnam to Macbeth's reign of terror: "Each new morn new widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows strike heaven on the face."

Prior to his trip to Washington, at his home in a suburb of New Jersey, surrounded by African sculpture and paintings by contemporary Black artists, Wesley explored his world as a playwright by using carefully selected phrases and animated gestures.

Lining the walls of his home were assorted memorabilia connected to the writer's career, and a yellowing newspaper clipping describing the adventures of a World War II pilot.

"That's my father-in-law," he beams. "I told him one of these days you're gonna appear in one of my plays, and he said, 'Just make sure I'm on the good side.'"

In his plays, Wesley uses characters to debate ideas. With dialogue that is both taut and forward, he asks his characters to grapple with choice in such plays as *Black Terror* (winner of the 1971 Drama Desk Award), *Gettin' It Together*, *The Past Is Past*, and *The Sirens*.

"Black theater" according to Wesley, "has always been an examination of how people cope with their everyday lives—the pressures that they find themselves under, and how they view their self-identity. Since 1970, Black plays have not had racial confrontation as their central theme."

In a review of *The Sirens*, *New York Times* critic Mel Gussow wrote: "As in all his plays that I have seen, the author elevates the seemingly commonplace into remarkably human drama."

But Wesley has often said that *The Mighty Gents* (or *The Last Street Play* as he calls it) was his best realized drama. "I really enjoyed when *The Last Street Play* came out. That play was such a bombshell that all the other playwrights were flocking to see it."

Wesley describes his relationship with Hal Scott, who directed the Broadway production of *The Mighty Gents*, as one of the "happiest" between a playwright and a director.

"I think the relationship that Hal and I have is the kind that every writer wants to have with a director. Hal's philosophy is that it's his job to realize the playwright's vision. He considers himself a success when no one can see his hand in the final product, when no one can see

where the playwright's work ended and the director's began."

But again, a playwright not only deals with the director of his work but must also consider the place where the work is to be performed.

"Aw, c'mon—Broadway. How many opportunities like this are you gonna get?" Wesley said to himself when he was offered the chance to move *The Mighty Gents* from the intimacy of the Manhattan Theater Club to Broadway.

"Instinctively I wanted to say, 'no, that would never work.' But instead I said, 'sure, fine.' I figured I could forestall any problems that might have arisen. Commercial decisions, I figured, I could get around easily enough. I wasn't exactly a novice in theater. There's a difference between what you do on Broadway and what you do off-Broadway.

"I fell into every pitfall and trap a writer falls into once I made the decision to go to Broadway. I didn't have any say over the type of house we wanted. The Eisenhower Theater [Kennedy Center] would not have been my first choice for Washington. I would've preferred the National or the Warner [theaters]. The Eisenhower was just too big. The minute I walked in and saw that house, I said, 'Oh no! What have I done? This has been a terrible mistake. This is not going to work.'"

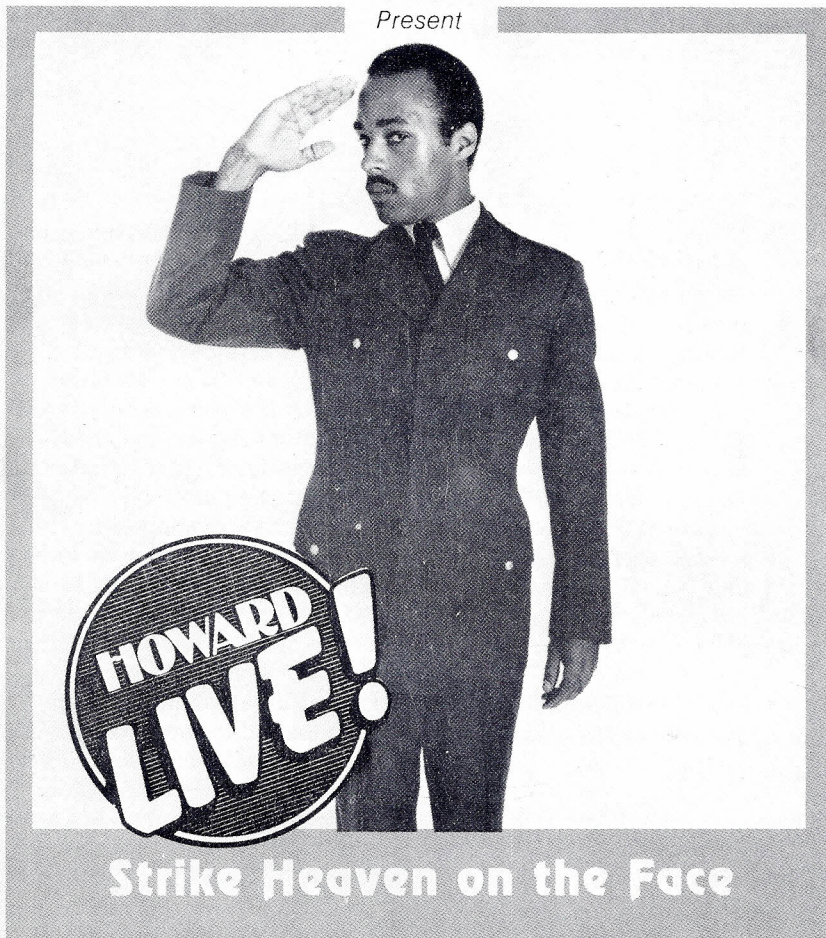
"Sidney Poitier taught me a great deal about motion pictures."

When Wesley enrolled for classes at Howard University in early 1960s, his ambition was to learn to write for film. But Owen Dodson, then chairman of the Department of Drama, steered him toward the theater—with this advice: "If you can learn to write for the stage, you can write for anything."

Later, Sidney Poitier, producer of *Uptown Saturday Night* (1974) and *Let's Do It Again* (1975), became Wesley's film teacher. When working with Poitier

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Richard Wesley's *Strike Heaven on the Face*, written in 1972, was inspired by a true but tragic story of a Black Vietnam veteran, Dwight Johnson, a medal of honor winner.

In the play, Hollis Jackson, a soldier back from Vietnam, is tormented by the horrors of a war he did not choose to fight, and haunted by frightening images of the Viet Cong and of his dead fellow soldiers. He is unable to extricate himself from guilt, day after day. And the tormenting images of the war cause him to explode in uncontrollable rage and violence that threaten to alienate him from his mother, his young wife, and his best friend.

When the army decorates Hollis Johnson as a hero and offers him a job to recruit new soldiers for the war and to make public speeches on behalf of the military, Jackson reluctantly accepts the offer, because he realizes that he has little choice to make a better living. He notes, though, that just as the front lines in Vietnam were disproportionately filled with Black soldiers, the unemployment lines back home are filled with desperate Black men.

In the end, Jackson's anger turns to violence and defeatism; he is shot dead as he tries to rob a local store.

Through a series of scenes that progress cinematically, the playwright communicates the ugly and dehumanizing ways of war, and exposes the society that grinds up young men in the name of patriotism. □

as a screenwriter—he states with a mixture of awe and respect—“Sidney Poitier taught me a great deal about motion pictures. He shaped my cinematic eye. He is a tough perfectionist, consummate businessman. I was learning from him about show business as opposed to the art of the theater.”

Wesley then recalls and laughs about his first meeting with Poitier. “He thought I was too young to be a serious writer.”

“I don't think any serious writer for the stage will be really happy in film until he is also the producer of the film, because, you're writing for a committee in film and television, and what you write is not always accepted, particularly in TV where 39 or 40 executives in New York and Los Angeles (whom you'll never see in life) have to approve your work. Your script has to be approved by the producer who hires you, who then makes up copies which he may send to both coasts. The majority of the replies have to be favorable before you can go to the next stage, which is, the vice president in charge of prime time TV. Then it goes to the vice president of prime time TV-movies, then to the network vice president, then to the president of the network, and then to the chairman. All those people have to approve your script.”

Spawned in the sixties, when Black theater was defined by Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) and Ed Bullins, Wesley accepted his first key job in the theater under Bullins at the New Lafayette Theater in New York, where he took over the editorship of *Black Theater Magazine*.

He refers to Bullins as his mentor. “I really idolized [him] more than any writer I can think of. And then we have other strange ties: we both were born in years ending in five, our birthdays are nine days apart, and we're both left-handed. We have attitudes and outlooks on things that are almost identical.”

Being in the [Lafayette] theater almost around the clock, enabled Wesley to ob-

30 serve first-hand the intricacies of running an artistic institution.

"Art is not a democracy. It's a dictatorship, and the person who's at the head of the organization is the one whose opinions will prevail. A writer wants to grow in a particular direction or at his own particular pace. The most independent writer will probably leave (an institution); they just won't sublimate their character. (Mockingly) Theater institutions are an anathema to Aries who are not the leaders. Aries who founded the theater have no problem. But the Aries who is second lieutenant—well, we lost quite a few Aries at New Lafayette."

Wesley is candid in his praise of other writers with whom he maintains close friendships. Many of these friendships came out of his association with the New Lafayette. He speaks admiringly of Charles Fuller (1982 Pulitzer Prize winning playwright of *A Soldiers Play*).

"Fuller's and my relationship revolves around a very warm friendship. Charlie and I will invariably approach the same themes in plays at almost the same time. It's only a question of who gets that theme out first."

Wesley is now working on another play, *The Talented Tenth*, which he feels is indicative of the new course of Black theater. The play is about "people in their middle thirties, college graduates living in a suburban community with government jobs—professionals—debaters of world crises and political controversies. I've been working on it for four years. . . I seldom leave it alone." Further, he explains, "it's only within the last couple of years that there has been a group of writers who are determined to move into this heretofore unexplored realm which is the Black middle class. People want to see history, biography and something about other lifestyles."

Personally, Wesley, at 37, has moved into a new realm in his role as husband and father of two daughters as testified by his wife Valerie. She relates that while she is pursuing an advanced degree, Wes-

ley has assumed some of her household chores.

"My parents gave me a strong sense of responsibility and self-discipline," notes Wesley. "They both came from families that had a lot of land, and, as children, they had to work that land which engendered its own kind of disciplinary behavior which they passed onto my brother, and sister, and me. When my children ask me 'How long will I have to stay in school?', I say until you're 21, which is what my mother told me. Both girls want to go to Howard, and Val and I are quite pleased about that."

"My parents gave me a strong sense of responsibility and self-discipline."

Wesley believes that institutions like Howard University will educate the next generation of theater personnel.

"We were taught to be professional in whatever we did, whether we were going to do theater in somebody's backyard, a storefront or on Broadway. Because of the training I received at Howard University in theater management, I could do things like organize the box office. I knew about lighting and sets, so I was able to move in all those areas."

The university holds the same excitement for Wesley as it did when he came as a freshman three weeks after the 1963 March on Washington.

"Howard, overall, was very exciting. I got there during the height of (Stokely) Carmichael's day as a student. Two of my classmates became high ranking lieutenants in SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee); one of them took over SNCC after H. Rap Brown went to jail. Nathan Hare and Sterling Brown were on the faculty. Every person teaching in the philosophy department over the age of 40 had been a student of Alain Locke. It was like Valhalla—a perfect place to be."

In his sophomore year, Wesley won the Samuel French Outstanding Playwright Award for *Put My Dignity on 307*. It was

so rare that an underclassman should write a play that was ready for production that the playwright had to wait until his senior year to see his drama presented.

Drawing upon the encouragement he received from professors Owen Dodson and Ted Shine, Wesley has always been passing on advice and inspiration to other young writers.

"You have to have someone who's trained to replace or move on with you. You have to have new blood coming into the theater each year. Discipline, discipline, discipline. That's what I stress. You have to work for, plan and keep a clear head about where you're going."

He holds up another successful Howard alumna, Debbie Allen of *Fame* (She also choreographed the opening dance of *Black Terror* when it premiered at Howard), as he asserts: "You have to know where you're going at every juncture of your career."

Yet Wesley warns the overly ambitious writer against compromising quality for success.

"I would say that it's better for a writer to have his name attached to quality all the time. It's a safer way to go. You can get known for being 'the purveyor of schlock,' and that's all you're going to be offered. You'll never get the good projects that a writer wants to do.

"One of the things that I feel very good about is that we (Black playwrights) have succeeded in creating a body of work that, if it's put together by future historians or sociologists, will present a much clearer picture through literature of the Black community than we've ever had before."

It is obvious that the plays of Richard Wesley will significantly shape the perception of his people. And the warm and unselfish nature of Richard Wesley will shape those he comes in contact with—those who will in turn become shapers of their community. □

Vera Katz is a professor with the Howard University Department of Drama; Taquiena Boston is an alumna.