

For a Strong Negro People's Theatre

By Alice Childress

SEVERAL MONTHS ago Theodore Ward and I had a heated though friendly discussion concerning a Negro Theatre. He claimed that there was a definite need for such a theatre while I held to the idea that a Negro theatre sounded as though it might be a jimerow institution. Since that day I have given much thought to everything he said on that occasion and I believe that now I have an understanding of what he meant.

The word theatre is derived from the Greek, meaning to see or view. One obvious function of a Negro people's theatre is to give us the opportunity of seeing and viewing the Negro people.

TODAY in America the Negro actor attends drama schools which, like the public schools, take little interest in the cultural or historical background of the Negro people. The Negro actors, scenic designers, playwrights, directors, are taught only the techniques developed by the white artist.

We certainly need and feel an appreciation for this technique. But certainly too there should be additional instruction which would advance the white as well as the Negro actor and playwright in his knowledge of the Negro people's culture. What Negro director or actor today is capable of portraying an African on the stage? Most of us can only "suggest" an African because we have been divorced through education from much of our cultural heritage.

IN THE DRAMA class the Negro student usually does white roles taken from popular plays. He occasionally does a Negro part also taken from a popular Broadway play, while the white actors, for the most part, never do a Negro role.

The Negro artist has to turn within himself for guidance when he portrays his own people. But even this is of little help in the face of the director who is also searching for his concept of the Negro character.

Where is truth? Where are the schools that will teach us Negro art forms? We must create them and devote time, study and research toward the understanding and projection of Negro culture.

WE MUST not only examine African art, but turn our eyes toward our neighbors, the community, the domestic workers, porters, laborers, white-collar workers, churches, lodges and institutions. We must look closely and search for the understanding which will enable us to depict the Negro people.

I HAVE LEARNED that I must watch my people in railroad sta-

tions, in restaurants, in the fields and tenements, at the factory wheels, in the stores, on the subway. I have watched and found that there is none so blind as he who will not see.

My people walk in beauty, their feet singing along the pavement; my people walk as if their feet hurt, in hand-me-down shoes; some of my people walk in shoes with bunion pockets, shoes with slits cut for the relief of corns; and the children walk on feet that are growing out of their shoes; and my people walk without shoes.

My people move so gently and jostle rudely; they step gingerly, they walk hard; they move along with abandon and show defiance and there are some who move timidly.

I love them all but I love most those who walk as they would walk, caring nothing for impressions or fears or suppressions . . . those who walk with a confident walk. These things we must learn to duplicate.

MY PEOPLE stand weary with fatigue, half asleep, in the subway, my people have been scrubbing floors and washing walls and emptying, carrying, fetching, lifting, cooking, sweeping, shining, and polishing and ironing, washing, ironing, washing. But they fight drowsiness. No one must say they are lazy or sleepy or slow. What could be a more fruitful study in the craft of acting than to reproduce one of these weary people?

My people smile and think of death, frown and think of life, laugh and think of nothing. My people show a face calm and smooth and think of great plans, they pass by quietly and take great action. They pass each other and without speaking, say: I know, I understand.

My people eat scraps that we their children may grow strong in the face of adversity. We eat pig's tails, and feet and ears; we will not die. My people drink champagne and eat caviar and enjoy these things with a special enjoyment because we know there are those who do not wish us to have them and would keep everything for themselves. My people wear furs and diamonds and castoffs and old tattered jackets.

My people hope, build, love, hate, cater, plan and struggle. We watch the newspapers to see if some foreign power is worrying the rulers of the United States into giving a few of our people a "break in order to offset the "propaganda."

These things and countless others must be a part of our training that we may develop and grow into real people's artists. We must be sure that through our interpretation of the world and our next-door



ALICE CHILDRESS, distinguished Negro actress and author of *Just A Little Simple* and *Florence* will be seen in the important role of Esther Roan in New Playwrights' coming production of *Barnard Rubin's Candy Story*.

neighbor may see and view the Negro people.

YES WE NEED a Negro people's theatre but it must not be a little theatre. Its work is too heavy, its task is too large to be anything

other than a great movement. It must be powerful enough to inspire, lift, and eventually create a complete desire for the liberation of all oppressed peoples.

The Negro people's theatre must not condemn what it does not understand. We must seek out every artistic expression and if it does not conform to our present mode of production, we must examine it closely to see if it is a new form or some vague whispering from the past.

We must be the guide and light the way to all that we may glean the precious stuff from that which is useless. We must be patient and, above all, ever-searching.

We should, in this second half of the century, plan to turn out the largest crop of Negro artists in the entire history of America.

Our voices must be heard around the world. The Negro people's theatre must study and teach not only what has been taught before but found and establish a new approach to study of the Negro in the theatre, dance and arts.

We shall take advantage of the rich culture of the Chinese, Japanese, Russian and all theatres. We

shall study oppressed groups which have no formal theatre as we know it, but we must discover theatre as they know it.

Last but not least, there should be courses in the cultural background of the minority groups in this country. We must never be guilty of understanding only ourselves.

SO I SAY to Ted Ward: I have been thinking of the many things that were said that evening months ago. It is 1951 now and I hope you blaze the way in helping to build such a theatre. We'll all be watching, cheering and contributing. Remember People's Drama and Nat Turner, Committee for the Negro in the Arts and Just A Little Simple, the New Playwrights and Longitude, The Hammer, and the coming production of *Candy Story*. Think of Harlem's Unity Theatre and all the other groups that are striving for the development of all artists.

But above all, remember there will be no progress in art without peace, a lasting peace throughout the world.

(Reprinted, Courtesy of Masses & Mainstream)

'Age of Anxiety' Mystical Ballet at City Center

By Bob Melvin

THE N. Y. CITY BALLET opened its spring season Tuesday evening at the City Center. The company proved again that technically they are as good or better than any other company we have seen this season. The soloists are superb, the corps de ballet amazingly good, the costumes attractive, and the orchestra under the direction of Leon Barzin very capable.

WE MISSED the *Duel*, so cannot comment on that. But the two classical ballets on the program, *Sylvia: Pas De Deux*, exquisitely danced by Maria Tallchief and partnered by Nicholas Magallanes; and *Bourree Fantasque* proved again that when Ballanchine sticks to the classical form he can't be beat.

Bourree Fantasque, the final ballet, was a gay romp for the entire company from soloist to corps de ballet. The soloists, Tanaquil Le Clercq and Jerome Robbins; Melissa Hayden and Frank Hobi; and Janet Reed and Herbert Bliss merit special mention.

IT IS WHEN we get to the "serious" ballet of the evening that we run into serious difficulties. *The Age of Anxiety*, choreographed by Jerome Robbins with music by Leonard Bernstein was inspired, if that is the word, by the W. H. Auden poem of the same name, and is one of the most pretentious and basically reactionary ballets we have ever seen.

Danced in a half modern, half ballet, always half-baked style, and concerned, as the program notes

tell us, with "the attempts of people to rid themselves of anxiety," the four frightened leading characters in the ballet wander from anxiety to insecurity and sink deeper into the morass of superstition, mysticism and Freudianism. Watching this nonsense we are reminded of V. J. Jerome's pamphlet *Culture in a Changing World*, which speaks of bourgeois culture as a reactionary idealist ideology which separates form from content and would give primacy to the form above content.

AGE OF ANXIETY tries to clothe its sterility in meaningless symbolic cliches all pretending to be profound. Marxists and many other sincere people anxious to see a better world will be revolted by the subjective gropings in the mish-mash which completely disregards and denies the need for collective action today. They will also find it incredibly dull.

Affair Blum at ASP Movie Club

The powerful East German film *The Affair Blum* will be shown this Saturday night at the ASP Saturday Night Film Club, 111 W. 88 St. There will be three performances starting at 8:30.

Dance School Note

The LeMac School of Allied Arts (554 W. 146 St., corner of Broadway) offers varied scholarships in dancing and dramatics. Apply at the Studio, from 4 to 7:30 p.m. daily through Feb. 20. Call AUdubon 6-6799 for further information.

Art Treasures Stolen by Nazis Restored to Poland

MOSCOW, Feb. 15 (Telepress).—Valuable works of art which were stolen from Poland by the Nazi invaders and recovered by the Soviet Army after routing the Nazi armies, have now been handed back to Poland by the Soviet Union. Sixty-five fine paintings which had suffered badly from neglect were carefully restored by outstanding Soviet painters and art experts.

At a ceremony held in the presidium of the Academy of Fine Arts in Moscow, chairman of the Polish Artists' Union Krajewski stated that this was a new expression of Polish-Soviet friendship and solidarity.

He contrasted the noble policy of the Soviet Union with the practices of the Anglo-American imperialists, in particular the Canadian government, which so far has refused to return to Poland the precious Wavel tapestries.

"NIGHT TRAIN" and "Alexander Nevsky" IRVING PL (near 14th St. GR 5-6975)

"Exciting"—H.T. "Powerful"—H.T. a new play by PAUL PETERS **NAT TURNER** with FRANK SILVERA

Prominently Cast In 'Candy Story'



Neil Polidori plays the part of "Al" one of the striking workers in *Barnard Rubin's The Candy Story* being presented by New Playwrights at their theatre, 347 E. 72 St., on Saturday evening, Feb. 24.

Mr. Polidori is a veteran of over 15 years in the people's theatre movement. He was last seen as the Southern sheriff in the People's Drama production of *They Shall Not Die*. He is also remembered for his work in *Waiting for Lefty* as presented by the same group. He has made numerous television appearances within the last year.

In addition to Neil Polidori *The Candy Story*, directed by Dolph Greene, features Alice Childress, Charles Zimmerman, Ruth Armstrong, Elbit Himes, and Herbert Armstrong.

"Freedom Road" HOOTENANNY and DANCE

featuring Laura Duncan, Al-Ye Trio, Ernie Lieberman, Frank Lopez, Louie Jeffers, Bob Claiborne, Rev. Gary Davis, Charles Riley, Bill Robinson, Rector Bailey

Sat. Feb. 17 At the Penthouse 13 Astor Pl. Tickets \$1.00 in advance (reserved), \$1.20 at door, at Bookshops, People's Artists, 106 E. 14th St. — OR 7-4818

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NEGRO HISTORY WEEK

Calendar of Events

- Saturday, Feb. 17:—People's Artists presents 'Freedom Road' Hootenanny and Dance at 13 Astor Pl. in commemoration of Negro History Week. Includes songs from Negro history, work songs, blues, spirituals and contemporary material dealing with struggle for Negro rights with special tribute to Paul Robeson. Program features Laura Duncan, Ernie Lieberman, Louise Jeffers, Charles Riley, Bob Claiborne, Frank Lopez and Rev. Gary Davis, blind Negro folk singer and guitarist. Bill Robinson from cast of *Just A Little Simple* will emcee. 8:30. . . . Negro History program at Macon St. branch of Public Library, 361 Lewis Ave., Bklyn. Sponsored by Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women Clubs—Nostrand Chapter. Public invited. 11:30 a.m.
- Sunday, Feb. 18:—Annual Breakfast of the Assn. for the Study of Negro Life and History. Grand Street Boys Club, 49 a.m.
- "Lift Every Voice," pageant of Negro History by CNA for Drug Store Employees Union, Local 1199, 250 W. 59 St. 8 p.m.
- Concert at Metropolitan Music School. Music of Negro composers and performers. Winner of Will Marion Cooks scholarship. 4 p.m.
- Monday, Feb. 19:—Negro History program. American Labor Party, Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, speaker. "Florence," one-act play by Alice Childress. 212 Eldridge Street. 8:30 p.m.
- Tuesday, Feb. 20:—"How Does Segregation Affect Our Children." Speaker and one-act play "Florence." Parkchester Comm. To End Discrimination in Housing. Chester House, 1384 Metropolitan Ave., Bronx. 8:30.
- Wednesday, Feb. 21:—Negro History Program. Fur Workers Union. Scenes from "Simple" by CNA. Dances by Dunham Experimental Group. Hotel Diplomat, 108 W. 43 St. 8:00 p.m.
- Concert by CNA Music Chapter. Library, 104 W. 136 St. 8 p.m.
- Thursday, Feb. 22:—"Cultural Aspects of Negro History." Charles White and other speakers. ASP Art Exhibit. Hotel Iroquois, 49 W. 44 St. 8:30.
- Friday, Feb. 23:—Testimonial dinner in honor of Dr. W. E. B. DuBois on the occasion of his 53rd birthday. 7 p.m. Essex House. For reservations call ENright 9-1488.
- Negro History Exhibit and meeting sponsored by United Public Workers at the Church of the Master, 86 Morningside Ave. Mrs. Willie McGee will describe the fight for freedom of her husband from frame-up rape charge in Mississippi. Speakers from Committee to End Discrimination in Stayviant Town and Civil Rights Congress will report on housing and civil rights issues. 8:30 p.m.
- Thursday, March 1:—"Negro in the Arts" Forum. Sponsored by NYU School of Education Student Council. Speakers: Mrs. Essie Robeson, Shirley Graham, William Patterson, Charles White. LaGuardia Hall, 1:30 p.m.