

Introduction

Interwoven Destinies: The Drama of Blacks and Jews

You cannot have a friendship unless everybody is tall and everybody is looking one another in the eye.

—Roger Wilkins

Maybe Jews and Blacks lock horns more than other groups because we are the only ones who take each other seriously, the only minority groups who still seem to believe that our destinies are interwoven.

—Letty Cottin Pogrebin

We could have called this collection of plays “divided stages” as well as “shared stages,” since the interaction of the characters within them is not always positive. The unusual relationship of Blacks and Jews, the two minority groups in twentieth-century America which have been the most inextricably linked to one another, has given rise to a variety of plays which depict that “interwoven” connection. Some reflect idealistic, even romanticized notions of how close the two groups are; others demonstrate actual coalitions and real hostilities between them. From the best dramatic literature on this subject produced in the United States in the past forty years, we have chosen ten plays that dramatize Black-Jewish relationships, some by Black playwrights, some by Jewish playwrights, and some by others. Set in urban and rural, northern and southern locales at various time periods in post-World War II to present day America, they concern characters of different ages, genders and life experiences. Through these dramas, the playwrights express various perspectives, illuminating the alliances and conflicts that have marked the dialogue of diversity on stage and off.

We have selected these plays not only to insure equality of representation, but to display the unique talents of these individual dramatists,

some established, some emerging, who create powerful, even unforgettable moments on the stages of our imaginations. Although these plays have had productions and, in some cases, individual publication, they have never before been included in the same collection. By placing them all in the same room to keep company with each other, we are inviting readers to test the truths of their own experience against the truths expressed in these plays. We hope readers will derive heightened meaning from their intimate association with this lively assemblage of characters, this resounding clash of symbols, this authentic forum of ideas.

Drama is a highly collaborative art. Taking up a play in a book presses the reader into creative service as director, set designer and actor performing all the roles. For the drama of Blacks and Jews, that means walking in the shoes of the markedly “other,” occupying the emotional space of say a Black woman who has been raped by a white man, of an eighty-year-old Jew who lies and laughs to survive, of a Black Vietnam veteran who sees his buddies destroyed in Asia and returns to find his family disintegrating in the Detroit urban ghetto. Making such psychic leaps transforms the reader. This identification with the often unfamiliar characters of minority drama may be demanding, yet it can set the stage for significant new dialogue in the real world.

American drama is best understood with some sense of its historical background, its connection to the real world of its time. We cannot, for example, appreciate one of the first successful American plays, the adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, without recognizing the struggle for emancipation and the Civil War which preceded it. Nor can we grasp the impact of *A Raisin in the Sun* without recognizing that housing integration in 1959 had not been achieved in the United States in the North or the South. Though great plays endure in spite of changing circumstances, the plays in this collection, crucially influenced by the shifting alliances between minority groups, require special understanding of their protean settings, their varying contexts.

Black-Jewish dialogue has changed throughout the twentieth century. From 1910 to 1964, “genuine empathy and principled alliances [existed] between Jews and Blacks.”¹ It was the period when W. E. B. Du Bois, editor of *The Crisis*, and Abraham Cahan, editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, could advocate for Black and Jewish rights in their respective publications, a time when Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., marched arm in arm to Selma, followed by an army of united Blacks, Jews and white Christians, all determined to achieve integration. This halcyon era of mutual appreciation and sympathy did not, however, prevail.²

After 1964, this period of Black-Jewish cooperation was not even remembered in the same light by both groups. According to Cornel

West, the image of Blacks and Jews united against racism is often “downplayed by Blacks and romanticized by Jews.” He claims that Blacks downplay this cooperation because they focus on the widening economic gap between the two. They see the rapid entree of most Jews into the middle and upper middle class as spawning “both an intense conflict with the more slowly growing black middle class and a social resentment from a quickly growing black impoverished class.” Jews, West finds, “tend to romanticize this period because their present status as upper middle dogs and some top dogs in American society unsettles their historic self-image as progressives with a compassion for the underdog.”³

Some Jewish playwrights tend to glorify the good old days when the two groups were united in a common cause, projecting a future when bigotry would not exist between them. In their generous treatment of Blacks and Jews on stage, it is as if these playwrights were allying themselves with those Jews who, in fact, supplied three-fourths of the money for Dr. King and constituted two-thirds of the white volunteers who went to the South to register Black voters. The playwrights we have chosen, however, offset exclusively positive sentiments with negative ones by including glimpses of the real inequities that have existed. They introduce dramatic moments of conflict, fear and anguish that have gone hand in hand with gestures of caring and mutual concern. In so doing, they provide a more authentic portrayal of the kind of sharing that has taken place between the two groups.

Some Black playwrights have used their Jewish characters as the target of their bitterness, resentment and even anti-Semitism. They scorn whites, including Jews who presume to understand Blacks, when these whites are the very source of their simmering rage. The Black playwrights we have chosen do not focus exclusively on rage. They show a spectrum of feelings on the part of Blacks and Jews. They depict not only hostility, but also compassion, warmth and genuine friendship.

Even in the best of times, shared stages of theater and American life have not always been equally shared. These ten plays reveal initially unequal relationships between master and servant, doctor and patient, lawyer and client. The Jew may start out with some social or economic advantage, but the Black may possess the basic wisdom to alter that situation. In many cases, as in *Driving Miss Daisy*, the relationship is transformed and redeemed by the end of the play. In *Sarah and The Sax* and *I'm Not Rappaport*, there is a ruefully comic sharing of contrasting life stories which transform misery into mirth. There is a compassionate union among victims of southern bigotry in *No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs* and a strained partnership between the common man and the professionals in *I Am a Man*. There is an exchange of healing music when racism and anti-Semitism injure innocent lives in *Soul Sisters*. In

The Day the Bronx Died, there is the joint suffering of the trauma of urban wars, and in *Medal of Honor Rag*, there is the shared torment of the Vietnam War, crippling the psyche on the home front. In *The Left Hand Singing*, there is the jubilant idealism of youth paired with the wrenching disillusionment of embittered elders. In *Fires in the Mirror*, there is the juxtaposition of hostile and friendly voices, cynical and idealistic ones, alternating on stage in monologue rather than dialogue. Through the complex sharing in all these plays, new stories with unforeseen dimensions emerge about who these characters have become, how they relate to each other and what the future might hold for them—and for us.

The capitalization of B in Black(s) varies from playwright to playwright. The editors of this volume have chosen to capitalize it in their introduction, but elsewhere in the anthology it varies according to the choice of the playwright. The same is true of stage directions and other stylistic choices made in different ways by different playwrights. We have tried to remain consistent within each play, but these may vary from play to play.

Common Ground

Focusing on the common ground, rather than the battleground, Julius Lester, in his essay, “The Lives People Live,” delineates six areas of common history and common suffering which unite African Americans and Jews:

- (1) Both groups begin their histories in slavery.
- (2) Both groups have been demonized by the white majority; both have been compared to the devil, complete with horns and tails; both have been denigrated as “sexually licentious.”
- (3) Segregation and ghettoization have been the fate of Jews and Blacks, with the word “ghetto” first used to refer to the section of Venice near the iron foundry (in Italian, *ghetto*) where Jews were forced to live. Later the urban enclaves in northern and southern segregated cities became the ghettos of the Blacks, with Blacks in the North sometimes moving into the same areas once tacitly designated for Jews.
- (4) Both Blacks and Jews were expelled from their original homelands, dispersed throughout the world and compelled to live in a Diaspora. Blacks, however, were enslaved from all parts of Africa and were unable to maintain a “common language” and “common memories,” while Jews, through the Hebrew language and a shared religion, were able to keep Israel alive for 2000 years. As Lester says, “For Blacks the Diaspora is permanent.”⁴

(5) Political oppression marks both groups. Blacks and Jews have been restricted by law, prevented from moving about freely, denied both a free choice of occupation and freedom of “social relationships.”

(6) Violent attacks, torture and deadly policies threatened both groups with genocide. For Jews, pogroms in Eastern Europe murdered and maimed hundreds of thousands. For Blacks, race riots, lynchings and casual neglect marked life in the Jim Crow South. Anti-Semitism, a useful political tool for centuries, became in the hands of Hitler’s Third Reich a program for extermination that led to the murder of six million Jews, the majority of the Jews of Europe. How many Africans died during the centuries of the slave trade? Though some have reckoned the toll as 100 million, Lester’s admittedly “conservative” estimate is 15 million.

But Blacks and Jews have fought back through oral and written literature and, when possible, through armed resistance. As Lester recognizes, “Blacks and Jews share much in how they resist and fight back against an oppressive value structure and preserve a sense of self and people-hood independent of the pariah status.”⁵ This resistance runs through all the plays in this collection, sometimes through the use of forceful arguments of social protest, sometimes through the shocking, fact-based dialogue of urban naturalism, sometimes through the wise parables of quasi-preachers and sometimes through the powerful weapons of self-defense: folklore, humor and music.

African American playwright John Henry Redwood resists and fights the oppression of racism and anti-Semitism through his social protest play, the very title of which—*No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs*—expresses an old derogatory connection between the two minority groups, particularly in the South. What startles us with a seeming exaggeration at the outset turns out to be a literal report of one way Jews and Blacks were yoked together in mutual dehumanization.

In the *No Play*, as Redwood abbreviates it, the Jewish Yaveni Ahronson, “disguised” as the gentile Jack Arnold, encounters this sign when he arrives at his new home in Mississippi:

YAVENI: “WELCOME TO THE TOWN OF HOLMAN IN THE GREAT MAGNOLIA STATE OF MISSISSIPPI.” A little further down the road, a larger sign read, “NO NIGGERS, NO JEWS, NO DOGS.” There it was in writing, Negroes and Jew, together, relegated to the same level as dogs. But I convinced myself that it didn’t refer to me, because I was a goy, and I was in a car with the most beautiful woman in the world whom I loved very much . . . and that was all that mattered.

Years later, in 1949, Yaveni, rejected by his Christian wife, makes his way to a small town in North Carolina, determined to reclaim his Jewish identity and his empathy for oppressed minorities. He befriends a Black family headed by Rawl and Mattie Checks with whom he feels an immediate kinship, recognizing their shared persecution as the hated outsider.

Redwood's Yaveni cannot stand idly by while whites torture Blacks, any more than he could dissociate himself from his own people at the time of *Kristallnacht*, the beginning of the Holocaust. In Yaveni's mind, Blacks and Jews must take action to change their lot. He realizes now that they must join together to eradicate such overt bigotry and prevent further victimization. The African American women in this play, who seem forced to accept their fate, cannot simply follow Yaveni's advice to destroy the "no" signs and reveal their violations by the white man.

MATTIE: You've been down here and known my family all of two months and you got the nerve to tell me how to keep my family going? You get your research done and you go back to Cleveland. But we'll still be Negroes down here in Halifax, North Carolina, trying to do the best we can while you go back to being white.

One of Redwood's great contributions to American drama is that he depicts African American women as strong and persevering, believing as he does that Black women are largely responsible for the survival of his people in America. They are the true heroes in this play. Patient and resilient, Redwood's African American women find their own way to gain retribution and prevent further humiliation. While sensitively capturing the anguish of the persecuted Jew, Redwood unflinchingly recognizes that Jews can sometimes escape violation and destruction when African Americans cannot. At least this is the case in America. Redwood's frank admission of inequalities between Jews and Blacks makes the moments of genuine caring in this play compelling. Redwood dramatizes conflict but illuminates the compassion each has for the other's plight—Jew for African American, male for female.

Verbal Weapons

In the arsenal of the oppressed, humor, satire and imaginative tales are the most potent weapons. Overtly laughing in private and covertly laughing in public at bosses, bigots, bullies and dictators have helped both groups to maintain their dignity and a sense of control in a world where they have been controlled and ridiculed.

Their unique humor is the best antidote to counteract the poisonous despair within them. As playwright Thomas W. Jones II explains in his Preface to the anthology *Black Comedy: 9 Plays*, and demonstrates in his own play *Wizard of Hip*, “African-American humor functions to heal, to clarify, to assert . . . using comic linguistic based art to bridge reality with mythic possibility. And this work is the work of generations healing the wounds. To laugh is to diffuse the powerful rage burning beneath the soul.”⁶ This laughter is not just a pale alternative to murder and violent retaliation. It is a major enhancement of life. With its therapeutic properties, its restorative powers, it is a boundless source of vitality and endurance.

Wry verbal mastery of intolerable reality takes the sting out of adversity in the riffs of the homeless Black character, The Sax, in Lewis John Carlino’s one-act, *Sarah and the Sax*. His makeshift lyrics, foreshadowing rap, disturb the silence of his solitude and amuse mainly himself.

THE SAX: (*Mumbling to himself as he crosses to the bench.*) Tom Mix, pick up sticks, get my licks, sweat my fix, watch the dicks—Tracy.

His unexpected audience of one sitting next to him on a bench in Central Park is his comic direct opposite: Sarah Nodelman, a plump, Jewish lady of about fifty-five. Every inch of her is an embodiment of the middle class. The Sax, who seems to have been expelled from the class system altogether, is a thirty-year-old, barefoot Black man wearing sunglasses; “his tattered old sweatshirt and denims are encrusted with grime of almost geologic age.” He carries an old saxophone on a string around his neck and plays it periodically.

A caricature of the overfeeding Jewish mother, Sarah Nodelman invites The Sax over for home-cooked meals. She promises to make all the kosher delicacies she has made for her son, Herbie. She assures The Sax her food and her company will be good for him, will make him less lonely. She effusively makes all the overtures to strike up a friendship, while he sullenly rebuffs her efforts.

The anger of The Sax escalates until Sarah is forced either to give up or confess that she has been lying, presenting a fabrication of herself. She has used a lie about her son as The Sax uses his music—to express unutterable grief and frustration, to ease his pain.

SARAH: I’m a phony. (*THE SAX turns towards her.*) I can’t help it. Listen. My Herbie don’t live on Long Island in a nice home with a nice family. And I can’t take his temperature and buy him sneakers. You see, my Herbie don’t live at all. He died in Korea in 1951. (*A long silence. THE SAX lets out a*

stream of air, not quite a whistle.) . . . I'm sorry I lied to you. (There is a long silence . . . Slowly THE SAX picks up his saxophone and begins to play. The music is a sad jazz and into it is woven "Home on the Range," along with old Hebraic melodies. These are notes of compassion and sorrow, not anger now. . . .)

The comic juxtaposition of two wildly different people becomes a poignant connection of two suffering souls, shifting ever so gradually with each gesture Sarah makes to have friendship with The Sax. Her willingness to expose her painful secret transcends the barriers of age, gender and race. The Sax now responds not to the stereotyped Jewish mother as over-zealous nurturer. With his "notes of sorrow and compassion," he seeks to comfort the more universal mother, still grieving over the loss of her son. By commiserating with her, he not only gains release from his alienated self; he is also able to accept her maternal solace.

Lying, fabrication, inventing identities is a form of the humor of verbal retrieval, the word triumphant over the situation, for both Blacks and Jews. What happens to them is far from funny, but what they say about it can transform disaster into drollery, woe into whimsy. In the case of Herb Gardner's play, *I'm Not Rappaport*, 80-year-old Nat Rappaport explains to his 80-year-old Black benchmate, Midge Carter, the necessity of lying for survival:

NAT: Not lies—(*Sits upright on bench.*) Alterations! I make certain alterations. Sometimes the truth don't fit; I take in here, I let out there, till it fits. The truth? What's true is a triple By-Pass last year at Lenox Hill, what's true is Grade Z cuts of meat from the A. and P., a Social Security check that wouldn't pay the rent for a chipmunk; what's true is going to the back door of the Plaza Hotel every morning for yesterday's club-rolls. I tell them it's for the pigeons. I'm the pigeon. Six minutes dead is true—(*Takes bunch of pages from briefcase.*) here, Dr. Reissman's bills; here's the phone number, call him. A fact. And that was my last fact. Since then, alterations. Since I died, a new policy!

Nat's new policy is not merely to complain but to make comedy out of complaints, to amuse himself and Midge. In so doing he becomes one of those Jews and Blacks on stage able to laugh together at life and to laugh at the funny performances of the other.

In Gardner's *I'm Not Rappaport*, the comedy is bittersweet by the time both characters are laughing. This play is, in some ways, a variation on the vaudeville routines pairing two ethnics. However, Midge and Nat

are not just comic stereotypes of Blacks and Jews with exaggerated tell-tale physical features, predictable behavior and stock verbal responses. Gardner does not mechanically make them the butt of each other's jokes but allows them to be the originators of them in the most difficult circumstances. This time they are fleshed out humans, recognizable as Jew and Black facing the indignities of old age together in a predatory urban setting. At first, the voluble Jew's humorous fabrications keep the Black man entertained, making him the straight man in his senior citizen vaudeville routine. Through his interaction with Nat, the near-blind, taciturn Midge becomes more assertive, even taking on the bully of Central Park who is attacking the two old men. Though he's not entirely victorious, he holds on to a piece of the scoundrel's buckskin jacket and a powerful "chunk of satisfaction." He has the last laugh, a laugh shared by the two, now as equal friends. Gardner's vaudevillians thus join the ranks of the other suffering creatures on earth who invented laughter, who employ the comic to endure the painful conditions of their life.

"Is it an accident," asks Julius Lester, "that many of the most original and creative comedians in America are either Jewish or Black? Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor could have been brothers. Without Jews and Blacks, I wonder if there would be laughter in America."⁷ From minstrels to vaudeville comics to today's popular comedians: Woody Allen and Bill Cosby, Chris Rock and Jackie Mason, Bernie Mac and Gary Seinfeld, Jews and Blacks have used humor as a form of camouflaged hostility against the forces of oppression. Vacillating between the sneer and the smile, the grimace and the grin, they have belittled the towering strength of the giant majority and elevated their own status in the process.

Battlegrounds

Jews and Blacks have not always been jesting friends, despite their frequently shared status as outcasts and pariahs. Centuries of white Christian and later Islamic anti-Semitism shaped Black attitudes towards Jews, as racism, slavery and *realpolitik* influenced many Jews alternately to fear and denigrate Blacks. The nature of the sharing among Blacks and Jews, on stage and off, has frequently been ambivalent.

If Blacks drew inspiration from Exodus and used the enslavement and liberation of the ancient Hebrews as the basis for spirituals, escape and uprisings, they also picked up the stereotypes projected by Christians of the Jew as the betrayer and exploiter. Ralph Ellison has remarked on "the preference of the slaves in re-creating themselves, in good part, out of the images and myths of the Old Testament Jews,"⁸ but other writers have pointed to the tendency of Blacks to absorb the anti-Semitism

embedded in Christian culture. Richard Wright noted in *Black Boy* that “we had been taught at home and in Sunday school that Jews were Christ killers.”⁹ Both strands—identification with the ancient Hebrews and identification with white Christian hatred of Jews as the archetypal betrayers—became part of Black cultural heritage.

This ambivalence within the complex of relations between Blacks and Jews has found expression in the writing of both—but it has been expressed differently in different periods. Louis Harap, in his book, *Dramatic Encounters*, finds the shifting forms of the civil rights movement a major influence on the way writers have depicted Blacks and Jews. “In the proletarian 1930’s and 1940’s and the radical 1960’s, Jewish and Black writers were generally positively oriented toward each other and sensed their common goals.”¹⁰ The culmination of this union was the Mississippi “Freedom Summer” of 1964 when over half the young people participating in the movement for Black voter registration were Jewish, when Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner—part of this Jewish movement to work with Blacks—and James Chaney, a young Black man from Mississippi working with them, were murdered.

Jewish involvement in progress for Blacks has not always been completely altruistic. At times the coalition was motivated by self-interest, recognition that policies securing minority rights would benefit Jews as well as Blacks. Relationships were often skewed or paternalistic, satisfying egos rather than sufficiently recognizing Blacks’ needs to control their own lives. When it came to the Civil Rights Movement, as Andrew Hacker observes, “Blacks were always the junior partners, who were expected to accept not only the pace and goals deemed suitable by whites, but also to assume a demeanor which made whites feel at ease.”¹¹

In the musical *Soul Sisters*, Joanne Koch and Sarah Blacher Cohen dramatize a rocky friendship between Sandra, a Jewish established singer of Black music, and Cleo, a Black woman who displaces her as a singing star. Cleo becomes fed up with junior partnership and deference. When Sandra is asked to bow out of singing at a civil rights benefit and Cleo is invited to take her place, Sandra turns on Cleo and fires her. When Cleo’s star has risen and Sandra has retreated to drink and self-pity, Cleo finally vents her frustration and anger, insisting she has earned the right to move up: “We’ve been beaten because we’re Black, raped because we’re Black, lynched because we’re Black—why not a little pay back because we’re Black?”

Later, when the two women are together for the first time in years, preparing for an anti-apartheid concert, they still have crucial disagreements.

SANDRA: There’s a guy outside with a loudspeaker and a sign:
“Stop Whites and Jews from eliminating Blacks. Stop the

Genocide.” Since when did Jews destroy Blacks? And where do they get off using words like genocide?

CLEO: What would you call the systematic killing and enslavement of millions of Blacks?

SANDRA: But Cleo, this guy is saying 200 million were killed in the “Black Holocaust.” Where does he get a number like that?

CLEO: If you count all those since the beginning of slavery then . . .

SANDRA: Well, if we counted all the Jews who were killed since Roman times, we’d be getting way past the six million of the real Holocaust.

CLEO: Jews can usually hide. We can’t. Don’t get me wrong—we don’t want to. Anti-Semitism is bad, but how do you compare that to the hatred against Blacks?

SANDRA: Jews were hated way before America was discovered.

CLEO: You think Americans are the only ones who hate Blacks? Look at how the Europeans carved up Africa.

SANDRA: And then they decided to carve up the Jews—(*A beat of strained silence.*) Warring holocausts . . .

Warring holocausts will come up again and again in these plays. Each minority group thinks it was the most persecuted, endured the most indignities, withstood the most atrocities, suffered the most fatalities.

Music offers a way to temper the animus of warring holocausts. In a collection by and about Blacks and Jews, we could not omit the importance of music. Its unifying effects appear in the actions of Carlino’s *The Sax*, with poignant melodies replacing strident words. OyamO tells us that his character of the Bluesman is the source “from whom the entire story of *I Am a Man* emanates.” In *Soul Sisters*, music facilitates the journey into the world of the other and serves for its two principal characters as the only path to self-discovery. Sandra’s immersion in Black music draws her to the Civil Rights Movement. Her singing of Yiddish and Hebrew songs allows her to reclaim her own roots in Eastern Europe and the Holocaust. For Cleo, music is her ticket to success, her means of grasping the African in her African American identity, her source of comfort when tragedy strikes. The inequality of her relationship with

Sandra—first as her secretary, then her replacement, then her rival and superior—is finally negotiated through music. As Mark Elliot’s lyrics in the song “Soul Sisters” express it: “If we’d look beyond the pain inside us, we’d see there’s so very much that binds me to you.”

Soul Sisters is a musical drama of Black-Jewish sisterhood. Bound together with ties of pain and exhilaration, the women protagonists are ultimately energized by each other, strengthened by each other’s resolve. They take risks to go on the front line of their battle against racism. They initiate the healing concert. They make the impassioned plea for unity.

Unequal Roles

Jews and Blacks in literature and life have often shared a teacher and student relationship, based on the fact that Jews were, at certain key moments, in a position of having the educational wherewithal to counsel and defend Blacks, as well as having the shared suffering to understand their plight. Arthur Spingarn, fighting the legal battles for the NAACP, Samuel Leibowitz defending the Scottsboro boys in the 1930s, Jack Greenberg bailing out Rosa Parks and thousands of other Blacks from Southern jails during the Civil Rights Movement¹²—these are just a few of the advocates who provide actual models for such characters in plays, novels and films.

In Richard Wright’s novel, *Native Son*, when protagonist Bigger Thomas refuses to reenact events for police because they “hate black folks,” his Jewish lawyer, Boris Max, replies,

They hate others too . . . they hate trade unions. They hate folks who try to organize . . . They hate me because I’m trying to help you. They’re writing me letters calling me a “dirty Jew.”¹³

In literature, as in the pre-wartime devastation of the forties, failure to see is a prelude to destruction. This is the case in Arthur Miller’s novel, *Focus*, as it is unforgettably in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. The racist is incapable of seeing the Black person or the Jewish person as an individual human being. As Louis Harap has pointed out, bigotry is blind. “Just as the racist doesn’t see the individual Black (the ‘invisible man’) but only his stereotyped notion of one, so the anti-Semite—frequently also the same person—does not see any given Jew but only ‘Jews’ as conceived by the stereotype.”¹⁴

The Mayor of Memphis, as depicted by Oyama in his play, *I Am a Man*, illustrates the blindness of the hater. The hero of this play, O.T. Jones, is head of the local garbage workers’ union, a union comprised of

Blacks. He boldly stands up to the Mayor, even before help arrives from union headquarters in New York.

JONES: I'm in control here!

MAYOR: (*Derisive chortle.*): In control, is it? I'll tell you what. I'll go over to that meeting and personally explain what I've been trying . . .

JONES: You will do no such a thing. Dem mens won't hear a word you say lessen I authorize you ta speak.

MAYOR: Unless you what me?

JONES: I believe you heard me.

MAYOR: (*Out of control.*): I don't need some nigger to authorize me to do anything!

(JONES slaps the MAYOR's face resoundingly which literally knocks the MAYOR on his ass. The MAYOR is both emotionally and physically stunned and then a bit fearful as JONES hovers over him.)

JONES: I ain't no nigga! I am a man. You hear what I say?
I AM A MAN!

Jones is clearly the protagonist of this drama, one who has many antagonists—not just the obvious ones, including the Mayor, but also the people who have come to Memphis, Tennessee, to advise him on the alien art of negotiating with the white establishment. OyamO's Jewish character, Joshua Solomon, is genuinely concerned and engaging. He's a tough Jewish labor negotiator from New York who knows how to confront rednecks and how to unmask the Mayor of Memphis, whom he reveals to be a Jewish convert to Episcopalianism. He charges the Mayor with resisting the minimal demands of the garbage workers union as part of his sell-out to the white power structure.

Here OyamO dramatizes one of the underlying themes of plays about Blacks and Jews. Integration for Blacks and assimilation for Jews may be necessary, expedient, politic, but they often have at their root an element of self-hatred. Integration is regarded as an insult by those Blacks who lack the means to rise into positions of power; assimilation is an affront to those Jews who risk discrimination by keeping their names and their religion and even making a conspicuous show of it.

Solomon is a well-intentioned negotiator, as is the Black and brilliant Willins who “calls the shots” on union strategy. But Willins insists and Solomon agrees that having Martin Luther King Jr., in Memphis, speaking and leading marches, is the way to achieve a raise for the local garbage workers. The uneducated, impecunious Jones wants to leave the famous Dr. King out of the fight and handle the battle with his own people. The national advisors, the middle-class Black Willins and the Jewish Solomon, and, by implication, the northern-based national officials, prevail. King is assassinated. The garbage workers wind up with an 8-cent-an-hour raise. Jones feels he’s lost everything and indirectly caused the death of his people’s leader, but he reluctantly leads his men back to work, recognizing that this is the first time in the history of the entire South that the city has made an agreement with a public employees’ union. Jones can no longer afford to be the “student” to either the Jewish teacher or the better-educated middle-class advisor. In an existential moment, in full awareness that the boulder must be rolled up the mountain once more, alone and unaided by middle-class Blacks and well-meaning Jews, this ordinary man chooses faith and joy over despair and bitterness.

In this play, Jones finally acquires one of the most valued virtues in drama: self-knowledge. He recognizes the failures of his advisors and his own foolishness for allowing the “other” to dictate his destiny. From OyamO’s perspective, Jews, educated Blacks and radical Blacks can only go so far in helping to uplift the common Black man. The playwright stands close to his protagonist, supporting him with the music of *The Bluesman*. OyamO emphasizes the need for the ordinary man to improvise with his own instruments, rather than follow the formal beat of some established score.

In *Medal of Honor Rag*, playwright Thomas Cole cares about his hero, but is forced to view his situation from the perspective of the outsider, the white man confronted with this question: How does a Medal of Honor winner wind up dead in an attempted armed robbery? Cole’s answer is: He returns from the Vietnam War to the ghetto wars of the U.S.A. Cole’s drama is based on the true story of Dale Jackson, a decorated Black Vietnam veteran from Detroit who is suffering from many social and psychological ills, some of them identifiable, such as post-traumatic-stress syndrome. Others have something to do with being given national recognition for bravery, while the nation refuses to recognize his immediate need to pay his wife’s hospital bill. Cole’s play is a stark therapy session, unrelieved by intermission or humor, during which Doc, a Jewish therapist, tries to reach D.J. He reads from D.J.’s file, finding one source of D.J.’s psychological damage in the mission America sent him to carry out.

Doc: This man was sent by his country to fight in a war. A war unlike any war he might have imagined. Brutal, without glory, without meaning, without good wishes for those who were sent to fight and without gratitude for those who returned. He was trained to kill people of another world in their own homes, in order to help them. How this would help them we do not really know.

Unable to get Dale to open up to him, Doc tries to relate his own suffering to the fate of this African American devastated by the meaningless carnage of the Vietnam War. Doc's parents perished in Auschwitz while he, sent to America, survived. He tells D.J., "I had my own case of survivor guilt."

Why can't Doc help Dale recover his honor? Why can't the old tradition of Jewish professionals coming to the aid of beleaguered Blacks work in this situation? What happened to the common ground? The doctor, whether perceived as Jewish or as representative of concerned middle-class whites, is rendered helpless in the face of forces working against the Black veteran. During the late sixties and early seventies, Blacks were fighting and dying in Vietnam in record numbers. (Blacks comprised 14% of the 58,000 deaths in the Vietnam War, though they were 11% of the young male population nationwide.)¹⁵ This play stands as a symbol of the maltreatment of Blacks during and after their service in America's wars.¹⁶

The enormous sacrifice of Blacks in Vietnam came at a time when conditions were worsening in Black urban enclaves. The looting and fires in Chicago, Detroit, New York and other cities after the 1968 murder of Dr. King devastated these communities. In the case of Dale Jackson, the sheer frustration of being unable to raise the money to take care of his wife, of no hope of economic progress after being paraded around the country as the poster-boy for recruitment to Vietnam, triggered an attempt at robbing a grocery store that may actually have been a form of suicide.

Doc: He took out a pistol, but never fired a shot, while the manager empties his own gun, at point-blank range, into D.J.'s body. . . . His body went on a last unexpected jet airplane ride to Arlington National Cemetery, where he was given a hero's burial with an eight-man Army Honor Guard.

Playwright Cole makes no attempt to soften or sentimentalize the outcome for D.J., just as he doesn't allow Doc to make any meaningful connection to the beleaguered veteran, forced to fight for economic survival on the urban home front after barely surviving combat in Vietnam.

Doc is unable to cure D.J., though other similar post-war dramas, such as Arthur Laurents' play *Home of the Brave*, have more optimistic conclusions.¹⁷ Cole's theme is alienation and disconnection. The conversation doesn't flow freely, as it does between Gardner's Nat and Midge. Nor are there arguments that produce greater understanding, like those between Redwood's Yaveni and Mattie, or ultimately between Koch and Cohen's Sandra and Cleo. Doc's tortured communication with D.J. gives him a glimpse of the torment of the war abroad. Doc can only guess at the torment of the war at home by D.J.'s obituary. When he reports the tragic outcome for D.J., Doc does so with a sense of inevitability, recognizing that diseases bred of despair and poverty can be fatal.

Northern and Southern Exposures

Looking back at *Medal of Honor Rag* and forward to *The Day the Bronx Died*, we confront a kind of poverty which worsens among many urban and rural Blacks after World War II, even as the Black middle class and other minority groups are prospering. As Julius Lester wisely points out: "To speak of Black-Jewish relations without addressing the concrete despair of Blacks is to indulge in nostalgia for a time that never was. Poverty does not ennoble; it embitters. It embitters until people are left with no power except that of hatred and destruction."¹⁸ Statistics of poverty, such as, "Death or incarceration claims one third of Black men before the age of 30,"¹⁹ may be greeted with indifference. Yet when that translates into the real fate of an individual, such as Dale Jackson, and when that fate is dramatized by a skilled playwright, the statistic takes on tragic significance.

Cole's Jewish doctor and Michael Henry Brown's Bronx-born Manhattan condo resident represent those Americans who have moved up and away from a core of Black people whose lives are virtually hopeless. The fact that most Jews once lived in the dire poverty of Eastern European restricted communities or *shtetlach*, and also faced poverty when they first arrived in this country, no longer provides common ground with Black residents of contemporary urban ghettos. In the sixties and seventies, those *shtetls* were seen by many American Jews through the rose-colored glasses of nostalgia, in musicals like *Fiddler on the Roof*. Meanwhile, many Jews and other whites were moving out of mixed neighborhoods, like the Bronx, to more affluent all-white areas. This "white flight," as it's been called, is not merely a product of Jews and others running from their onetime neighbors.

According to playwright Michael Henry Brown, the transition from livable neighborhoods to blighted Black ghettos was not entirely the fault of fleeing, indifferent whites. Indifference and destructive rampages

on the part of Blacks were equally to blame for the death of shared communities. In Brown's play, *The Day the Bronx Died*, the African American man Mickey looks back on his youth in a Bronx neighborhood just beginning to suffer from urban blight. His vantage point now is middle class, a nice building in Manhattan, and a good job, but his 13-year-old son has been hospitalized, struggling to survive a brutal subway mugging. Back in 1968, when Mickey was young, he was friendly with Billy Kornblum, both boys sharing a passion for baseball. Mickey's mother condoned the friendship because a Jew, according to her, was not like other whites.

MOTHER: Now a Jew, he be a different kind of white animal . . . Fact, he not like white people at all. . . . No, no, the Jew be a different breed all together . . . more . . . human . . . almost . . . colored . . . Yes, Sir, the Jew, he be alright.

In Brown's play, Alexander, the toughest kid in their mixed Black and Jewish Bronx neighborhood, conveys the negative stereotypes of Blacks who saw the Jew as just another oppressive boss. While white Christians dominated corporate entities which supplied the energy and goods to Black urban areas, Jews were frequently the white bosses or storeowners whom Blacks encountered in the Bronx or Harlem. In Harlem, for example, even though more than 50% of the stores were owned by Blacks and other non-whites, Jews owned about 40% of the stores.²⁰

ALEXANDER: They're all cheap. My Moms says they're like squirrels . . . they store away every penny like a squirrel do nuts. It's all a plot, man. That's why they don't believe in Christmas . . . so they don't have to buy presents."

Yet Alexander is the one who dies preventing a gang thug from killing Billy Kornblum, the Jewish friend of Mickey who threatens "to blow the whistle" on the gang guy's killing of a white cop. The Bronx dies when Alexander is killed, because even though Alexander flirted with violence and was ambivalent about Jews, he had a sense of decency, a sense of justice that seems to be gone forever. The Jewish boy, Billy, moves to Larchmont at the end of the play. Big Mickey, though living with his own family in fashionable Manhattan, high above the fray, faces their vulnerability. His own son, injured by the same kind of gang thug who killed Alexander, may not survive the death of decency.

Michael Henry Brown is a playwright who holds the mirror up to his own people and is not afraid to comment on the blemishes he sees. This honesty is rare in political rhetoric, but a requirement for authenticity

in enduring drama and literature. Initially, Sandra in *Soul Sisters* is a self-centered woman who disavows Jewish causes. She is a flawed individual rather than an exemplary representative of her people. Willins in *I Am a Man*, though an educated and successful Black man, provides advice that turns out to be disastrous. In a climate of political correctness, writers might be tempted to put forth characters in their ethnic dramas who are washed of all impurities, the perfect African American, the perfect Jew. It is natural that contemporary dramatists would want to avoid any implication of racism or anti-Semitism, but they can't produce believable characters unless they create them with all their imperfections.

BIG MICKEY: . . . You see . . . a disciple of peace dies in Memphis and it leads to rage in the Bronx. Come 3 o'clock, if you were white, your ass was grass. Nobody black stood up when Spectre Gestapo'd the neighborhood supermarket. They destroyed it. Nobody black said a damn thing when Milton Friedman got the shit beat out of him as he opened his bakery one morning. No one black, of good conscience, said a fucking word.

When speaking of decency, Michael Henry Brown demands as much of his Black characters as he does of his Jewish characters. Brown takes the unpopular view that the decimation of Black neighborhoods, such as the Bronx, is caused in part by Blacks venting indiscriminate anger, albeit at intolerable conditions. Then, when nothing is left but a shambles, there's what Brown calls the "blame-everybody-but-your-fuckin'-self" attitude. Young Mickey and Billy could be good friends in a Bronx which had decency. In such a place, they were equals.

Genuine friendship between Jews and Blacks of the type author Roger Wilkins described where "everybody is tall and everybody is looking one another in the eye"²¹ rarely occurs in plays by Blacks, plays by Jews or plays by other white writers, because it has rarely occurred in life. But some playwrights and some plays hold out a promise of such equally shared lives. Whether this promise is a mirage or a vision of the future is for the reader or the audience to decide.

Alfred Uhry's *Driving Miss Daisy*, winner of the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, is such a play which portrays this miraculous sharing. In it Hoke Coleburn is the Black chauffeur foisted on the 72-year-old Daisy Werthan by her son, Boolie. They go through twenty-five years together in the course of the play, moving from a servant-mistress relationship in the beginning to something very different at the end. Each scene brings the relationship to a new point of understanding until finally Hoke is not just a friend. He's the only true friend Miss Daisy has.

Trust grows gradually between the two, but not without suspicion, anger, false starts and wry comedy. Tending the grave of her husband at the cemetery, Daisy, the feisty realist, recognizes she is aging and cannot depend on her son, Boolie, to care for her in life or at her burial plot in death. With bristling humor, she acknowledges that Boolie will take care of her out of obligation, not out of love. Hoke, the steadfast man of feeling, thinks the family, not a stranger, should be the caretaker. Ironically, Hoke, the stranger, will prove to be the most attentive to Daisy's needs.

DAISY: Boolie's always pestering me to let the staff out here tend to this plot. Perpetual care they call it.

HOKE: Doan' you do it. It right to have somebody from the family lookin' after you.

DAISY: I'll certainly never have that. Boolie will have me in perpetual care before I'm cold.

Daisy is the grateful receiver of Hoke's services but repays him in many ways. Boolie may pay him with money for his chauffeuring, but Daisy, a former teacher still mentally alert in her late seventies, teaches Hoke how to read. Teacher and student are both enriched by the experience. Daisy discovers she still has something of value to offer another human being, and Hoke gains access to books and the expanded world they provide.

Despite the growing appreciation they develop for one another, the two don't glide smoothly toward comfortable sharing. When Hoke has been driving from Atlanta to Mobile and needs to stop to relieve himself, Daisy urges him to wait. Hoke explains that being colored he couldn't use the toilet at the Standard Oil Station, but Miss Daisy, still imbued with Atlanta's longstanding prejudice towards Blacks, orders him to wait. She can't fathom the indignities he faces. Hoke loses his temper.

HOKE: I ain' no dog and I ain' no chile and I ain' jes' a back of the neck you look at while you goin' wherever you want to go. I a man nearly seventy-two years old and I know when my bladder full and I gettin' out dis car and goin' off down de road like I got to do. And I'm takin' de car key dis time. And that's de end of it.

Years later, when an ice storm hits and the power goes out, Hoke surprises Daisy by showing up just to bring her coffee and keep her company. Daisy

is genuinely touched and pleased to be able to tell Boolie she doesn't need him. But what Daisy does realize ultimately, as she declines into old age, is that she does need Hoke, that his tenderness is just as vital to her as the compassionate music of *The Sax* was to Sarah.

Driving Miss Daisy is also representative of the plays in this collection which are influenced by the region of the playwrights' upbringing, as well as their ethnicity. Southern Jews tended, like Daisy's son, Boolie, to follow the pattern of southern culture, even though they were despised as a group by many southern whites. Before emancipation some owned slaves. During the Civil War some Jews held office in the Confederate government and fought on that side. After the war, those who were more affluent had Blacks as servants. Those who were merchants had Blacks as customers because they would allow them to try on merchandise, whereas other whites wouldn't permit that. Thus, Boolie and Daisy, despite a gloss of liberalism, relate to Hoke at first as a servant, not as a man. It can be argued that Uhry's view of Hoke and Daisy is a product of his perspective as a southern Jewish man growing up in Atlanta during the forties and fifties. Does the tenderness of the relationship which finally emerges show that Blacks and Jews can overcome the southern legacy of racism, or is it a romantic view of what remains a master-servant relationship, with the servant simply enduring his suffering more stoically than the white? Is Hoke really driving Miss Daisy in new directions, or is he being driven by the forces of southern prejudice to stay in his place?

Advocates of Peace, Fomenters of War

Driving Miss Daisy, despite a few references to racial unrest and anti-Semitism in the twenty-five years spanned by the friendship, doesn't focus on political issues which came to a head in 1964. At this time the ideal of Blacks and Jews together reached its zenith and began to decline. In that critical year, the first African American woman to have her play done on Broadway wrote her last play, which expressed an eloquent plea for intergroup understanding.

Lorraine Hansberry was a pivotal figure for African Americans, for women and for Jews. In her plays and other writings, Hansberry expresses a guarded hopefulness about the future for Blacks and women and a solidarity with Jewish aspirations and Jewish pride. Hansberry was not only the first Black woman to receive a Broadway production with her play *A Raisin in the Sun*; she also won the Drama Critics Circle award for best play. *Raisin*, as Sydne Mahone points out, "introduced the Black experience as subject matter worthy of dramatic treatment and