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LeRoi Jones / Amiri Baraka, 1965

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# THE REVOLUTIONARY THEATRE

*Liberator*, July 1965

This essay was originally commissioned by the *New York Times* in December 1964, but was refused, with the statement that the editors could not understand it. The *Village Voice* also refused to run this essay. It was first published in *Black Dialogue*.

LeRoi Jones

The Revolutionary Theatre should force change, it should be change. (All their faces turned into the lights and you work on them black nigger magic, and cleanse them at having seen the ugliness and if the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves.) We are preaching virtue again, but by that to mean NOW, what seems the most constructive use of the word.

The Revolutionary Theatre must EXPOSE! Show up the insides of these humans, look into black skulls. White men will cower before this theatre because it hates them. Because they have been trained to hate. The Revolutionary Theatre must hate them for hating. For presuming with their technology to deny the supremacy of the Spirit. They will all die because of this.

The Revolutionary Theatre must teach them their deaths. It must crack their faces open to the mad cries of the poor. It must teach them about silence and the truths lodged there. It must kill any God anyone names except Common Sense. The Revolutionary Theatre should flush the fags and murders out of Lincoln's face.

It should stagger through our universe correcting, insulting, preaching, spitting craziness . . . but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments. People must be taught to trust true scientists (knowers, diggers, oddballs) and that the holiness of life is the constant possibility of widening the consciousness. And they must be incited to strike back against *any* agency that attempts to prevent this widening.

The Revolutionary Theatre must Accuse and Attack anything that can be accused and attacked. It must Accuse and Attack because it is a theatre of Victims. It looks at the sky with the victims' eyes, and moves the victims to look at the strength in their minds and their bodies.

Clay, in *Dutchman*, Ray, in *The Toilet*, Walker in *The Slave*, are all victims.<sup>1</sup> In the Western sense they could be heroes. But the Revolutionary Theatre, even if it is Western, must be anti-Western. It must show horrible coming attractions of The Crumbling of the West. Even as Artaud designed The Conquest of

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<sup>1</sup> Victim characters in Jones's three plays.

Mexico,<sup>2</sup> so we must design *The Conquest of White Eye*, and show the missionaries and wiggly Liberals dying under blasts of concrete. For sound effects, wild screams of joy, from all the peoples of the world.

The Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them a reality. It must isolate the ritual and historical cycles of reality. But it must be food for all these who need food, and daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind. It is a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on.

This should be a theatre of World Spirit. Where the spirit can be shown to be the most competent force in the world. Force. Spirit. Feeling. The language will be anybody's, but tightened by the poet's backbone. And even the language must show what the facts are in this consciousness epic, what's happening. We will talk about the world, and the preciseness with which we are able to summon the world, will be our art. Art is method. And art, "like any ashtray or senator" remains in the world. Wittgenstein said ethics and aesthetics are one. I believe this. So the Broadway theatre is a theatre of reaction whose ethics like its aesthetics reflects the spiritual values of this unholy society, which sends young crackers all over the world blowing off colored people's heads. (In some of these flippy southern towns they even shoot up the immigrants' Favorite Son, be it Michael Schwerner<sup>3</sup> or J. F. Kennedy.)

The Revolutionary Theatre is shaped by the world, and moves to reshape the world, using as its force the natural force and perpetual vibrations of the mind in the world. We are history and desire, what we are, and what any experience can make us.

It is a social theatre, but all theatre is social theatre. But we will change the drawing rooms into places where real things can be said about a real world, or into smoky rooms where the destruction of Washington can be plotted. The Revolutionary Theatre must function like an incendiary pencil planted in Curtis Lemay's cap.<sup>4</sup> So that when the final curtain goes down brains are splattered over the seats and the floor, and bleeding nuns must wire SOS's to Belgians with gold teeth.<sup>5</sup>

Our theatre will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are the brothers of victims, and that they themselves are victims, if they are blood brothers. And what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught. We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means some soul will be moved, moved to actual life understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be. We are preaching virtue and feeling, and a natural sense of the self in the world. All men live in the world, and the world ought to be a place for them to live.

What is called the imagination (from image, magi, magic, magician, etc.) is a practical vector from the soul. It stores all data, and can be called on to solve all our "problems." The imagination is the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as "things." Imagination (image) is all possibility, because from the image, the initial circumscribed energy, any use (idea) is possible. And so begins that image's use in the world. Possibility is what moves us.

The popular white man's theatre like the popular white man's novel shows tired white lives, and the problems of eating white sugar, or else it herds bigcabossed blondes onto huge stages in rhinestones and makes believe they are dancing or singing. *WHITE BUSINESSMEN OF THE WORLD, DO YOU WANT TO SEE PEOPLE REALLY DANCING AND SINGING??? ALL OF YOU GO UP TO HARLEM AND GET YOURSELF KILLED. THERE WILL BE DANCING AND SINGING, THEN, FOR REAL!* (In *The*

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<sup>2</sup> Antonin Artaud, French playwright and film scriptwriter (1896-1948), espoused a "theater of cruelty," i.e., intense visual and psychological stimuli for the audience, as a mode of revolutionizing theater; he wrote the drama *The Conquest of Mexico* in 1933.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Schwerner. Of the three civil rights workers murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi in 1964, Schwerner was the white victim.

<sup>4</sup> Curtis LeMay: U.S. Air Force general who advocated aggressive military policies during the Cold War and, in 1965, in Vietnam.

<sup>5</sup> Many Belgian priests and nuns were massacred in 1960 during the Belgian Congo's tumultuous transition from colony to independence.

*Slave*, Walker Vessels, the black revolutionary, wears an armband, which is the insignia of the attacking army . . . a big red-lipped minstrel, grinning like crazy.)

The liberal white man's objection to the theatre of the revolution (if he is "hip" enough) will be on aesthetic grounds. Most white Western artists do not need to be "political," since usually, whether they know it or not, they are in complete sympathy with the most repressive social forces in the world today. There are more junior birdmen<sup>6</sup> fascists running around the West today disguised as Artists than there are disguised as fascists. (But then, that word, Fascist, and with it, Fascism, has been made obsolete by the words America, and Americanism.) The American Artist usually turns out to be just a super-Bourgeois, because, finally, all he has to show for his sojourn through the world is "better taste" than the Bourgeois . . . many times not even that.<sup>7</sup>

Americans will hate the Revolutionary Theatre because it will be out to destroy them and whatever they believe is real. American cops will try to close the theatres where such nakedness of the human spirit is paraded. American producers will say the revolutionary plays are filth, usually because they will treat human life as if it was actually happening. American directors will say that the white guys in the plays are too abstract and cowardly ("don't get me wrong . . . I mean aesthetically . . .") and they will be right.

The force we want is of twenty million spooks storming America with furious cries and unstoppable weapons. We want actual explosions and actual brutality; *AN EPOCH IS CRUMBLING* and we must give it the space and hugeness of its actual demise. The Revolutionary Theatre, which is now peopled with victims, will soon begin to be peopled with new kinds of heroes . . . not the weak Hamlets debating whether or not they are ready to die for what's on their minds, but men and women (and minds) digging out from under a thousand years of "high art" and weakfaced dalliance. We must make an art that will function as to call down the actual wrath of world spirit. We are witchdoctors and assassins, but we will open a place for the true scientists to expand our consciousness. This is a theatre of assault. The play that will split the heavens for us will be called *THE DESTRUCTION OF AMERICA*. The heroes will be Crazy Horse, Denmark Vessey, Patrice Lumumba,<sup>8</sup> but not history, not memory, not sad sentimental groping for a warmth in our despair; these will be new men, new heroes, and their enemies most of you who are reading this.

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<sup>6</sup> Junior Birdmen of America: one of several model airplane clubs for boys created in the 1930s (Junior Birdmen created by the Hearst newspaper chain); used as a pejorative term for national youth associations that stress conformity and reward personal identification with group ideals.

<sup>7</sup> Bourgeois: "middle class" (French); used as a pejorative term for those whose values are conformist and materialistic.

<sup>8</sup> Crazy Horse: leader of Lakota resistance against the U.S. government, mid to late 1800s.

Denmark Ves[s]ey: free African American leader of a South Carolina slave revolt, 1822.

Patrice Lumumba: African anti-colonial leader in the Belgian Congo and later prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, early 1960s.