



## James Baldwin Gets 'Older and Sadder'

By NAT HENTOFF

FOR a long time James Baldwin, Public Figure, had consumed most of the energy and time of the private writer within. In recent months, however, the balance has begun to shift back. As a result Baldwin, just returned from Europe for the opening on Thursday of his play, "The Amen Corner," looked unusually rested and relaxed during a recent conversation in his spacious, sparsely furnished apartment on West End Avenue in the 80's.

With brimming pleasure, Baldwin spoke of multiple works in progress. "On the typewriter," he pointed across the hall to his office, "is the last of three new stories that will be part of 'Going to Meet the Man' which Dial will publish this year. I'm midway through the first book—or section—of a very long novel, 'When the Rest of Heaven Was Blue,' which will consist of three parts. It traces two families, one white and one black, from the Civil War to the Second World War.

"And," Baldwin paused to light

a cigarette, "I have one act done of a new play, 'The 121st Day of Sodom,' which Ingmar Bergman wants to put on in Stockholm and about which I've talked to Robert Whitehead in terms of a New York production."

Having charted the immediate future, Baldwin wrenched himself back into that part of the past distilled by him in "The Amen Corner." He had written the play in 1953 and 1954, and it was performed for a week the next year by a group of students at Howard University. "The Amen Corner" did not come alive again until March, 1964, when Frank Silvera produced it in Los Angeles where it ran until March of this year (along with a three-week side-trip to San Francisco). "I'd forgotten," Baldwin said, "Frank knew it existed and I was startled to hear it was going to be done again.

"I had begun 'The Amen Corner' after my first novel, 'Go Tell It on the Mountain,' and it was harder than that book because I was (Continued on Page Three)



Bea Richards portrays the role of Sister Margaret, minister of a Harlem storefront church in James Baldwin's "The Amen Corner," which arrives at the Ethel Barrymore on Thursday following a year's engagement on the West Coast.

James Baldwin, at the right: "We all lie to ourselves."

Richard Saunders from Scope. Bob Martin

The New York Times

Published: April 11, 1965

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much more scared. At that point I was being pressured as you are in this business—to write another novel, but I knew I shouldn't. I had to find out if I could write a play. I had to find out how to make people reveal themselves when there is no way to describe them except for them to describe themselves.

## He's Changed

"After all this time," Baldwin leaned back in his chair and smiled, "I was surprised when I saw it last year in California. I liked it more than I thought I would. Oh, there are probably a great many things wrong with it, but I can't do anything about that. I haven't changed it at all. You see, I'm not that boy any more. He was somewhat more open and more sanguine than I am now—and, of course, much less experienced. I think you get sadder as you grow older and begin to see your limits and the limits of the world. But you have to, or else you'd be living in a fantasy land."

The people in the play had been drawn from Baldwin's early years as a boy preacher in a storefront church. "I'd always been curious," he said, "about what those brothers and sisters were like when they weren't wearing their long white robes. And, as I wrote and thought about them it became clear to me that they weren't far from being what are now called Black Muslims. From the brute facts of their existence and aspirations, they had retreated into a kind of theology which gave them an illusion of dignity. But their church was insular and terribly defensive. What they had done was perfectly comprehensible but, nonetheless, monstrous."

## Major Plague

"In the play, one woman, Sister Margaret—based in part on an evangelist I'd known—does finally, at a great price, liberate herself. That church in 'The Amen Corner' is a kind of metaphor for the ways in which we—and I mean all of us—lie to ourselves. And the play

is about what happens to us when we do."

In retrospect, was "The Amen Corner" a preliminary testing ground for the later "Blues for Mister Charlie"? "No," said Baldwin, reaching for a can of beer. "It exists by itself. I don't think of my work in that way. Everything I've ever done has always been very hard. You do learn some things about craft if you write long enough, but I never learned enough to be helped when I start something new. The problems are always different."

Also different had been the route of this first professional production of "The Amen Corner"—from California to Broadway. "I certainly hope," Baldwin emphasized, "this may be a sign that plays can have a reasonable life somewhere else rather than have to depend on making it here. Because here," Baldwin rose and some of the former, familiar exacerbation in voice and gesture returned, "the theater is extremely depressing. I've got nothing against 'Hello, Dolly!' but when there's nothing but 'Hello, Dolly!' you have no resonance in the theater. People walk out exactly the same as when they walked in. And this corroborates and confirms the tremendous irreality which is the major plague of American life."

## A Question

"That irreality," Baldwin continued, "manifests itself in so many strange forms. 'Blues for Mister Charlie' opens May 3 in London as part of the World Theater Festival under the auspices of the Royal Shakespeare Company. And 'The Amen Corner' has been invited to seven European festivals. For both plays we've asked State Department cooperation. Not money, mind you, but the kind of cooperation that might help in certain kinds of emergencies and a recognition of the fact that these are American plays in international festivals. But so far the State Department has refused cooperation. In their letters they've been carefully vague. But I've heard unofficially that some people in the State Department feel my work doesn't represent American

life. What country do you suppose they live in?

"But getting back to the irreality of Broadway," Baldwin began to walk around the room, "'Blues for Mr. Charlie' made people react, made people talk to each other. I didn't give a damn whether they liked it or not, but I did want something to happen to them while they saw it. 'The Amen Corner' is a very different kind of play, but I hope it, too, gets people to look beneath the skin. It isn't," he grinned, "like 'Porgy and Bess' or 'Cabin in the Sky.' Or 'Hello, Dolly!'"

When Baldwin returns soon to his new apartment in Paris, he will resume playwriting. "But after I finish the new play," he said firmly, "there'll be a long pause and I'll be a novelist again. I still think of myself primarily as a novelist, and I do want to get that long novel out before I'm 80. But I can't tell exactly what percentage of my time from now on will be given to plays or novels. I

do not like to be corralled, to be told what I can and can't do—and when. And God knows, people are always trying to do just that.

## Adjustment

"Similarly," Baldwin said, "I don't know how much of a 'public figure' I'm still going to have to be from time to time. I do know that not much has changed since 'The Fire Next Time.' I am not impressed, for example, when the President uses 'We shall overcome' in a speech. I've heard so many speeches. What is crucial is that none of these slogans—'War on Poverty,' 'The Great Society'—mean anything unless there are basic changes in the redistribution of wealth and power. The vote by itself does not mean anything if you don't know how you're going to eat and if you don't know how you're going to get a job in an age of cybernation. And how can you talk of a War on Poverty if you're not really doing something about disarmament? And what if some

New York labor leaders go down to Selma? So long as they keep Negroes out of their unions here—baby, I'm sorry.

"As for me, then, who can tell? There may well be times when I'll have to do less writing than I want to. But I'm not as upset as I used to be about this role as a public figure. It's a fact of my life. I'll never get used to it, but it no longer bugs me. What used to bother me was that I myself might come to take it seriously, but I know now I'm not going to be misled about who I am and what I can—and can't do."

"The way it looks," a visitor interrupted, "LeRoi Jones is going to take some of that public figure weight off you."

Baldwin smiled broadly. "Anybody can have it who wants it. Me, I'm looking forward to middle age." He lit another cigarette. "I'll be 41 in August." Baldwin breathed deeply and stretched his legs. "I'm amazed I've lasted so long."