

PLAYWRIGHT AT WORK

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PLAYBILL: Let's start from the beginning—your birth.

JAMES BALDWIN: I was born in Harlem Hospital, and I've lived in New York all my years except for 1948 to 1957. I spent them in Paris. It saved my life.

When did you turn from the printed page to the stage?

I wrote my first version of *The Amen Corner* in 1952 when I came home from France to sell my first novel — *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. I finished the play in 1954, and in 1955 *The Amen Corner* was produced at Howard University.

How was it received?

Very good reviews, but I was told that Negro plays don't succeed in America. I put the script in my trunk, where it stayed until this year. Now I hear that it's a hit in Los Angeles.

What happened after *Amen Corner*?

I decided that I might try to continue to work in theatre—if America had one—but I was not *about* to undergo the drab Shubert Alley scene.

Didn't you dramatize your second novel?

Yes, John C. Wilson optioned *Giovanni's Room*. I wasn't too interested in the script until I saw the dramatization. I knew I couldn't do worse, so I wrote my own version—as a project for the Actors Studio.

That was before you were "apprenticed" to Elia Kazan?

Yes, he'd read my writing and told me that he thought I should work in theatre. I was paid a nominal sum to carry his clip-board and take his notes in the production of *J.B.* and then *Sweet Bird of Youth*. It was very useful training.

What did you learn?

The inner mechanics of how a play works—and other things. One of the most important was how essential it is to get along with the crew and stage-hands. If they don't like you, you've had it.

When and where did you write *Blues for Mister Charlie*?

I started in Istanbul in April 1963, and then had to fly home for the March on Washington in May. I wrote the play in less than a year, working on it between civil rights meetings and appearances. I was afraid that if I didn't do it I wouldn't be a writer anymore. In the middle of it, Medgar [Evers] was shot and I knew I had to finish it.

Literally, how did you write it?

On pads in planes, trains, gas stations—all sorts of places. With a pen or pencil. Walter, this is a *hand-written* play. Then I typed it, editing in the process, and wrote it again—and typed it again. I've been rewriting and rewriting since the end of 1963. In the weeks before the opening, I did a lot more cutting and rewriting. I was buried in the tunnels under the ANTA Theatre so long that it seems as if I'd been born there.

Again literally, how did you *feel* when writing this play?

Scared. I'm always scared when I'm writing. Both ends of my digestive tract tense up. I hardly ate a regular meal in months.

Is it like that for other playwrights?

I don't know. I'm not sure that American theatre has many playwrights. As a result, the vacuum is filled by experts who can't read or write. The eminence of producers and directors in the U.S. theatre is the playwrights' fault.

Are the producers and directors solely responsible for the state of the American theatre?

The people who make the decisions think that they know what a play—or a book—is, but they don't. They are genuinely *illiterate*. The only reason they are in theatre is because there is almost no genuine theatre in this country.

Do you have any personal philosophy as a playwright?

I agree with Shakespeare: The Play's The Thing. It is the key, but it is the actors who bring it alive. A playwright and the performers should work in joy—with a common goal. You tell me—the audience—something I don't know.

Must the *something* be true or real?

According to my definition, you write a play or you don't. If it's worth anything, it's real. There can't be an unreal play. Our theatre is not real, and when a people get this divorced from reality they can do *anything*. The state of our theatre is a sign of an unhealthy society.

Does our theatre reflect the truth about 1964 America?

We see in the theatre what most people think Democracy is, but Democracy is not that simple. Unfortunately, the only virtues most Americans seem to respect are youth and ignorance. It is a crime to grow up, and "culture" is a dirty word. Remember that other country where "culture" was a dirty word? They exterminated 6 million people.

Is the yawning flaw unreality or lack of proper proportion?

Both. If we were living in a civilization with any sense of proportion, a non-writer such as Arthur Miller could never achieve any eminence. It's not Arthur Miller's fault that we think he's an artist. He's watered-down Clifford Odets. His "love" is some panic-stricken attempt to hang onto his boyhood.

I cannot concur, although his latest play is plainly not his finest.

After the Fall is the only play I ever walked out on. Anybody who could read it and not burn it obviously cannot be taken seriously as a theatre person. I'd say the same about anyone who could read *J.B.* and not realize that it was simply not a play.

To go back to *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, is it true that the Lincoln Center Repertory wanted to produce it?

Yes, Kazan asked for it but I had an ethical commitment to the Actors Studio. I know that if I'd written this same play 10 years ago *nobody* would have produced it—certainly not on Broadway. It is now born as a result of a meeting in time, a historical conspiracy or coincidence. The cast is also extraordinary. Take Diana Sands, a great actress. I wrote her part—every word—and she overwhelms me with her performance.

Will you write for the stage again?

I will do more plays. I am now finishing a book with Richard Avedon on the way we now live in America. His pictures, my text—titled *An Essay*. Then I have a long article to do on the F.B.I. and how it treats Negroes. It will be called *The Blood Counters*, which is the Negroes' nickname for the F.B.I. After that, perhaps a play.

Thanks for an interesting and provocative interview.

Do you know why it worked? Because you talked to me as a *writer*.

Doesn't everybody?

No, Walter, not anymore.