

## *AFROCENTRIC THEATRE.*

Carlton and Barbara Molette New Jersey: Xlibris, 2013. 301 pp.  
ISBN: 978-1-4836-3739-6.

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Carlton and Barbara Molette, both Professors Emerita at prestigious North American Universities, are a team of playwrights based in Atlanta, Georgia. Their plays have been continuously staged since the 1970s and include *Dr. B. S. Black* (1976) a musical, *Fortunes of the Moor* (1995), which has been presented at the *National Theatre of Ghana*, and an historical play, *Prudence* (2005), inspired by the actual events involving Prudence Crandall and the young ladies of color who studied at her academy in 1833-1834. *Prudence* received the *Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism's Artist Fellowship Award* in 2005. Though both Dr. Carlton Molette and Dr. Barbara Molette started out their careers as playwrights, teachers and production designers (at Spelman College in Atlanta and Eastern Connecticut State University, respectively), they are also well-known for their provocative critical thought with respect to Black theatre (*Black Theatre: Premise and Presentation* [1986]), now complemented with this new publication entitled *Afrocentric Theatre* (2013).

This latest groundbreaking book sheds light on several aspects of Afrocentric culture and the ways in which these issues have an impact on our understanding of African American stage performance. The authors propose that theatre, like any other form of art produced by African Americans, is a response to the oppression and racism that exists in North America today. They defend a conception of art based on a set of values which emerge widely from their understanding of Afrocentricity. This is what Molefi Asante calls "location" and "African agency," two of the most relevant concerns within the creative process of African Americans. The authors propose a new acronym that describes the contemporary oppression and hegemony of white supremacy in US culture and society: WEPPEO, which stands for "wealthy, elite, powerful persons of European origin." As the Molettes explain, "the WEPPEOs justified the Atlantic slave trade within the framework of Christian morality by creating a system that defined people of African origin as not fully human" (10). Carlton and Barbara Molette's new book adds to the work of scholars who claim that African Americans have a solid cultural heritage because "slavery did not destroy all vestiges of African culture among those subjected to its cruelties" (13).

In part I, the book *Afrocentric Theatre* looks into concepts related to the broader cultural perspective of Afrocentricity and its values, as they are important in order to understand aspects related to theatre and to the type of theatre the Molettes create. Grounded in their view that race is a social construction, the book explores the preoccupations and shared cultural values of African Americans, and analyzes topics such as Afrocentric location and African agency. These ideas aim to empower Black theatre artists to create alternative definitions of success based on the consciousness of their own cultural values and their cultural identity. By questioning Western rationalism, these playwrights do not depend exclusively on box office revenue to measure their success, but rather take into account the support and approval of the Black community.

Thereafter (Chapter 2), the book focuses in more detail on the social (not biological) construction of race, a particularly important argument in the Molettes' play *Legacy* (2012) and in one of their ten-minute plays called *Kin Ship*. These works expose how amorphous the notion of race is, and how in the US race is thought to be biological, scientifically measurable, and constant, when in reality, there is no such thing as "race." The American Association of Physical Anthropology (AAPA) states that the popular concept derives from 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century "scientific formulations," which are none other --as Ronald Takaki points out in his book *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (1993) -- than a set of rules and concepts devised by White men to impose boundaries of group membership by trying to define race in biological terms. In this way, if you are Black, then you are biologically inferior to a White person. As Franz Boas, the eminent anthropologist, pointed out in his book *Race, Language and Culture* (1940) there is nothing real about the concept of race. In order to exist, it simply requires that people collectively agree that it *does* exist. The irony is that race as a social construction is only a marker of status which privileges white skin, thereby affecting our social structure because it determines how we see reality around us and the kind of choices we make. As Frantz Fanon stated in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), many individuals claim they are not racist, all the while buying into the dominant racist ideology by accepting the benefits afforded them. Because "race" is engrained not only in the minds of people but also in the structure of society, as Lusca contends, we cannot suppose it will simply disappear with time, as Fanon had hoped. We have to come to terms with race, through consciousness-raising, awareness and understanding. We need to change the paradigm by shifting the ways we understand race and difference.

In the third chapter, the Molettes claim that the roots of Afrocentric theatre are not to be found within Eurocentric traditions originating in ancient Greece, but in alternative traditions rooted in African cultural identity such as *Kemet*. *Kemet* is the ancient name for Egypt meaning Black Land, in reference to the fertile banks and fields surrounding the Nile River, as well as to the skin color of its original

inhabitants. The theatre of ancient Egypt, allegedly the origin of Afrocentric theatre, was governed by the guiding principles of the goddess *Maat*: “truth, justice, and righteousness” (53). Yet *Maat* refers to a wider abstract concept of universal justice, harmony, and cosmic wholeness present in the universe from its beginnings. While the Greeks valued dramatic contest and competition, Egyptian theatre was governed by ritual. Historical evidence shows that theatre art existed in *Kemet* by 2,500 BC and continued for at least 2,000 years. The Molettes’ arguments establish that there exists a cultural connection between Kemites and African Americans because the people of *Kemet* were Black and not Caucasian, as scholars of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had argued. The Molettes’ thesis proves valid because they have established a necessary connection to West Africa from which most of the ancestors of African Americans have originated.

The need to explain the aesthetic foundations of African American culture in order to evaluate African American theatre is the topic of chapter 4. Offering a harsh critique of constructs such as cultural imperialism and manifest destiny, the authors allege that these terms alone have led to the justification of political and economic oppression through self-perpetuating interdependent ideologies of objectivity and universality. From a Eurocentric perspective, the works of art created by African Americans have adjusted and adapted to white audiences in such a way that the boundaries between those who create the art and those who imitate the art form become unclear. Thus, the concept of artistic creativity is manipulated by those who evaluate the art (using Eurocentric standards) which define the value, the validity and the quality of the art. Hence the relationship of Afrocentric art to Eurocentric recognition has little to do with Afrocentric standards of quality because “the bestowing authority and the determining standards are always Eurocentric” (85). The authors give several examples of this when they refer to Elvis Presley’s use of Big Mama Thornton’s song *Hound Dog* or Chubby Checker’s successful (re)interpretation of The Midnighters’s song, *The Twist*. The appropriation of African American cultural production and artistic creation and their adaptation to mainstream aesthetics amount to little more than another form of oppression. Thus, there is a link between the aesthetics used to evaluate the artistic creation and oppression. Through exploring the ways in which Eurocentric aesthetics functions to control individual and group behavior, the authors conceive their art as a reaction to yet another form of oppression.

The second part of *Afrocentric Theatre* entitled “Presentation” questions the idea that white artistic standards are universally appropriate, and denounces the process of mis-education to which African Americans have been subjected for centuries in the West. The authors also assert the right of African American artists and playwrights to confidently explore Black cultural legitimacy without being accused by WEPPEOS of “racism in reverse” (129). They therefore insist on the right of Black playwrights to avoid the “clash of concepts” or rather, according to

Efua Sutherland, the misunderstandings that are created by imposing Eurocentric terminology on African dramatic expressions (130). In this way, as stated in chapter 6, the parameters of Afrocentric values include ritual as an important event which seeks to “adapt traditional African ritual concepts to contemporary African American cultural needs, and evoke the spiritual responses traditional African rituals evoke in their own environment” (138). Moreover, rituals require community; they must find a permanent place in the hearts and minds of a significant segment of the Black community. For instance, Black theatre groups such as *The Art Ensemble of Chicago* during the 1960s and 1970s deliberately sought to change the values of African Americans by exposing the fallacies in this process of mis-education. The challenge of these performing artists was to strengthen their community’s desire to retain their own cultural heritage without renouncing their aspirations to material comfort and social status.

Locating contemporary African American theatre within an Afrocentric cosmology transforms theatrical performance into a potent political tool. The transformative nature of Afrocentric theatre calls for community bonding which is realized through *Nommo*. According to Molefi Assante, the concept of *Nommo* reflects African society’s search for harmony and wholeness through the spoken word, as the force and integrity of the drama is realizable, according to Lewis Nkosi, only in its performance. As reported by Jahnheinz Jahn (*African Culture and the Western World*, 1994), *The Magara Principle* states that it is through *Nommo*, the power of the word, that the human being becomes a *Muntu*: a being endowed with spirituality, that is, with intelligence and soul. *The Magara Principle* or spiritual life refers then to a person’s well-being and happiness, thus connecting the living man and woman with their ancestors, as *Muntu* includes the living and the dead, as well as the gods, and is an active force which causes and maintains all movements of things.

The ritualistic nature of Afrocentric theatre requires spontaneity and spiritual involvement in which African American performers develop the capability of becoming one with the event, the other performers, and the audience. This Afrocentric ideal of evoking audience participation requires special considerations regarding the concepts of space and time as the authors explain in chapter 7. In Afrocentric thought the ideal of spatial unity calls for open architectural spaces which increase the audience’s perception of accessibility to the performers as this elevates the potential for overt empathetic response, a crucial Afrocentric value.

Chapter 8 discusses the rhetorical skills employed by traditional Afrocentric heroes such as *The Signifying Monkey* which survive in “the dozens.” These particular skills have the social function of encouraging and strengthening young men’s capacity to retain self-control in the face of insult and abuse. In other words, this interaction with *Nommo* turns into a survival technique for young African Americans. In the same way, the heroes of Black plays are able to control their

destiny while exhibiting wit and comic irony. According to the authors, when evaluating Black characters, one must ask one crucial question: Who is in control? To this end, audiences must discriminate between a play that makes fun of Black stereotypes and a play that uses Black comic stereotypes to expose an issue of concern to Black people. The authors point out that when a Black audience recognizes that a play uses stereotypes to make fun of Black people who disrespect other Black people on the basis of skin color and social status, they are comfortable laughing at those stereotypes because they recognize and appreciate a good example of Afrocentric comic heroism.

Aware of the fact that audiences respond similarly to visual images in motion pictures and television, in Chapter 10 the authors give the reader an overview of "Images in Theatre and Media." They focus on the ways in which Black male stereotyping such as "Uncle Tom" is still an image that presents Black males in the entertainment industry as submissive and asexual. The authors also explain significant social and historical contexts through visual images of Blacks in popular culture. The "coon" artist, that marketed the Black stereotypical fool through images as powerful as "Jim Crow," went beyond the entertaining business to strongly influence the political arena as the Jim Crow segregation laws were implemented to reinforce racism and disfranchisement among Blacks in the US. The stereotype of the fool reached successful TV sit-coms such as *The Cosby Show* in the mid-1980s, becoming part of the Eurocentric tradition because it offered the viewers the opportunity to laugh at a Black man, even though that Black man is portrayed as having both economic and social status. Along with the functions of the fool, the "superNegro" image is analyzed, which the authors claim is a modernization of the noble savage stereotype exemplified by Sidney Poitier in such well known films as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1967). Among these stereotypes, one could include the image of the so-called "magical Negro" in films like *The Green Mile* (1999). One cannot help but wonder, does this stereotype suggest that Black excellence is so shocking it can only come from a supernatural source? It is clear that this image is linked to the subservient, inferior "Uncle Tom" stereotype which allows white America to like individual Black people, but not Black culture. This chapter offers serious analysis of how the pervasive use of Black stereotyping sustained over time affects the ways in which Blacks perceive themselves through images that have been manipulated by a Eurocentric interpretation of reality. The book establishes the necessity and urgency of Afrocentric theatre as a force to encourage critical thinking, recognizing that most of life's questions do not have simple, nor easy answers. Yet surely readers would have appreciated finding an equally in-depth discussion regarding the status of the Black heroine, which for the most part is missing. The authors could have included in their discussion the varied roles and representations of the Black heroine in recent plays by Black women playwrights who are struggling against stereotypes of Black womanhood. Except

for the discussion of the character of Mama Lena Younger in Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* (1959) this debate is nonexistent in this book.

The last chapter of this critical work offers a thorough and comprehensible guide to analyzing plays critically when considering certain fundamental topics, especially when addressing issues of stereotyping. Sometimes, or rather many times by focusing on the universal, we miss or tend to overlook the differences in cultural perspective because we are trained to evaluate art independently of the specific culture from which the creative piece emerges. We should be able to describe or evaluate the fact that theatre differentiates entertainment, whose primary purpose is to make a profit, from art which disseminates truth. These are very useful questions as guides for examining plays critically within the classroom, not only African American plays but plays in general. Asking basic questions of style, texture and structure can and will help us appreciate dramatic art from more than one cultural perspective. We need to cope with and recognize the world's complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties. In other words, we need to learn to argue differently about difference. As Audre Lorde reminded us, theorizing difference must be a transformative endeavor because difference is a weapon for survival and change.

The book *Afrocentric Theatre* is a valuable addition to the field of African American theatre because the authors' thorough understanding of their extensive research is enhanced by their position as playwrights. This enables them to claim a conscious legacy within which their writing becomes a political act. The Molettes' critical work and their thought-provoking plays encourage us to question our "givens," to develop critical thinking and to change our patterns of thoughts. We are grateful for their effort and their vision.

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