
Theater

By Martha M. Jones



Tony Eaton

Barbara Ann Teer: "The Revival is Coming"

Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theater

The crisp, white, flowing dress that adorned the delicate figure of Barbara Ann Teer, Prime Mover of the National Black Theater: Temple of Liberation for a Black Nation in Harlem, must have been an unsubtle reminder to winter that it had, indeed, outstayed its welcome. After all, this was the first of May, and he lingered still! But there were still more, unsettling, contrasts to be spoken of: "Black consciousness is on the rise. We have seen it rise steadily in the last four years that we've been in Harlem. People are dressing in African motifs; the naturals are now very common, the black, red and green flags and buttons are displayed all over. But these realities exist along side an increasing crime rate, a proliferation of drug addicts, dirtier streets, more and more homicides and the organizing of vigilante teams to get people home safely. These latter situations have not decreased, as should be expected, with the increase in Black

consciousness. What is the reason for this situation? How come, if everybody is so Black and proud, Harlem, the largest Black community in the United States is dying."

Such were the observations made and questions asked by Miss Barbara Ann Teer and members of her group. Because NBT wanted to find the answer to these questions and many more, they devised a questionnaire to find out from Black people in Harlem information about how Blacks view their present condition and future direction, i.e. the ultimate survival of our race. One hundred volunteers have been trained to conduct this survey.

The questionnaire poses such questions as: "What things brought about this new and heightened feeling of [Black] consciousness? Have you noticed a change in your community since this new surge of Black pride? What do you think is keeping Black folks from removing the negative conditions in our community? How do you honestly feel about junkies, prostitutes, winos, etc. in your community? Circle the basic similarities you feel we as a race of people collectively share, i.e. have in common. . . .?"

The information that will be compiled from this "massive study" (the first of its kind), will serve two essential purposes, says Barbara. "It is, most importantly, the first act of our *Revival* which is a new art form devised and designed to clarify issues, raise the level of [Black] consciousness and strengthen the mind. The questionnaire is the first phase of an attempt to revitalize Harlem, to have a massive love affair with the Black community. The questionnaire, we hope, will help to open up the channels and get a communication flow among Black people. We are saying that people in the Black community do not talk enough to each other. Women do not talk to women enough; men do not talk to men enough. Women do not talk to men enough and vice versa; old do not talk to the young, and the other way 'round. Everybody walks around keeping their feelings inside, going through the evil school and the cool school, and afraid to cause hassles, or afraid to ask questions because somebody may not understand where you are coming from."

The NBT has its own, if abstract,

answer as to why Harlem is dying: "It is a community without love, and a community needs love to live. I say that because if we had love for ourselves and those like us we would not commit negative acts nor tolerate negative conditions as we do."

The NBT's activities are radically different from those of other theater groups with which you are familiar. Let Barbara explain. "Our original attention was theater, but we soon realized that the theater, as traditionally viewed, was too narrow a concept to house what we think of as the Black experience. So in one sense the term theater is inadequate and inaccurate. But because we did not want to confuse people, we kept the name theater. And we know that people have preconceptions about what a theater is for. When the time comes we will take the title theater away totally. For, in fact, we are a multi-faceted institution, an educational institution, which uses the theatrical experience to help decrude ourselves and to help reverse the process of negative thinking. But in the meantime we are trying to expand the concept of theater. We live in the West where theater, as is everything else, is defined, put into neat boxes and if activities take place outside of those boxes, then it is no longer correct, or it is not theater, in this case. But we are trying to blast through those neat little arrangements. Theater can be anything you say it is. It does not have to take place on a stage with an audience facing actors, actors looking out at the people! The NBT is much more encompassing than just a theater where a group of people get together and perform plays. In fact no one has yet come to NBT and seen a play."

Then, what should one expect when he goes to NBT? Who should go? Well, it depends. According to Barbara Ann Teer, the NBT does not pretend to be all things to all people. "Each person or group who has founded or run a theater, conducts it according to their ideology or goal," says Barbara. "Our goal is to establish an African/American Art standard—a way of working Blackly—so that an artist can work naturally from his own spiritual energies. All our techniques are geared towards decruding the Black individual and putting him in touch with his natural, organic, spiritual self. Black

people need to release this spiritual power. Christianity has so turned us off from religion that we don't believe in anything, not even ourselves. And we need to believe in ourselves. To do this we need to learn to love ourselves. And it is not easy to love yourself. It is a hard, slow, tedious process that takes a tremendous amount of care, energy, discipline and concentration. And that's our goal—to learn to love and understand our Black selves and our brothers and sisters. For only by loving each other can we gain the will, the power to eliminate our oppression."

NBT offers a Liberation Workshop for those who feel a need to be more honest and in touch with themselves, to love themselves more, in order that they might be able to skillfully effect a more harmonious relationship within themselves and within the Black community. An atmosphere and environment is set up where people can be free and relaxed, grow and unfold, talk about and experience and experiment with and probe into themselves so that they can become effective, valuable human beings.

Barbara states that the NBT has developed standards/techniques, or what may be called a "science of liberation which is fool-proof" to effect these ends. These standards have evolved from "studying Black life cycles/styles in the streets, bars, barber shops, churches, etc.; they run the spectrum—from the nigger to the revolutionary. Before becoming eligible for membership in the NBT Performing Company of Liberators/Healers one must study the characteristics of these cycles. Varied exercises are designed to help the individual to understand these cycles.

One caveat that the founder of NBT has for anyone interested in becoming a Liberator within the NBT (a Black person who is evolving toward a more honest, free, righteous person, who conducts his life in a positive fashion) is: "Don't come to get; come to give of yourself, your thoughts, of your creative ideas, even your hang-ups." There was no indication from Barbara, as from another of our historical figures who comes to mind, that she feels the only way to gain spiritual renovation is through the NBT. She expressed, rather, that there are several paths, all necessary. She feels confident, however, that the NBT

is one of the more effective vehicles around for taking the "size 5 dresses off our size 15 bodies," for getting Black people to become what they were born to be, spirited, intuitive, organic, equivalent gods.

Is that who we are? Wouldn't it be just too good to be true, like at Christmas when you were a kid and got the doll you had written letters to Santa for all year long? How does the NBT help you to find out if what they say about our being intuitive, and organic, and hooked up with universal elements, and god-like is true? You can only know, really, through experiencing it, right? Well, this is what the Director of NBT says about that. "One of the functions of our liberation classes and symposiums is to devise exercises for the purpose of releasing and directing energy. I think the releasing of energy is a natural necessary phenomenon. You cannot keep energy penned up inside you and never let it go without being adversely affected by it. This frees you to fill up with a loving feeling which in turn puts you in touch with natural, intuitive, psychic powers. We use drums and other rhythms a lot in order to help people release themselves. We use psychic movements a lot. A lot of this is something new for us Blacks here in the West, but it works."

What is the significance of such NBT activities such as occult study and fasting for example? "We study the occult sciences because we want to find out more about our innate abilities. We are not so concerned with the surface. We are concerned with the universal laws: what they are, how they function. We have set up our structure, based on the structure of nature, the universe. Fasting is the method we employ to clean the mind as well as the body, a discipline to aid concentration. Our bodies and minds are the vehicles with which we get our work done. Fasting can be likened to a house cleaning; you feel better about a clean house. And finally, but not least, fasting is a spiritual experience as well as a healthful one."

We have been advised before that the NBT is a multi-faceted, educational institution. So let us look at another facet of it, the Symposium. The Symposium is designed to bring the "Black community together in a harmonious atmosphere to dig on cul-

tural performers and to hear Black scholars, educators, religious people, and community groups of different persuasions to express their views and opinions and insights, and to exchange information and visions on specific subjects. This aspect of NBT is designed to fill a vacuum left by the media that *do* not accurately write stories concerning the Black community. The Symposium is an open forum where Black people can come and find out directly from the people involved in cultural-political-economic etc., activities what they are about.

For example, in the past James Forman talked about his rationale for walking into the white churches and interrupting business as usual; Stokely Carmichael spoke about Africans and Afro-Americans alike; Biafrans talked about the "Nigerian War"; the "Gangs" talked about their ideology; Alice Coltrane talked about what motivates her music; Imamu Amiri Baraka discussed his political views; Don L. Lee related the purpose and content of his poetry; welfare mothers related the reality of their lives. There has also been a whole series of programs on drug addiction. NBT Symposiums have dealt with almost every type of situation that exists in the Black community—some controversial, others not. The Symposium's structure is set up so that communication takes place on all levels: spiritual, intellectual, and physical.

A Sunday afternoon at NBT proceeds thusly: "People come in around 2:00 and they walk through Liberation Path where they are exposed to drinks that help make their bodies healthier. They are exposed to African/American artifacts made by the people at NBT and others. There are also books and other conscious-raising material on display. Then they may go to the altar and make a wish for liberation. Now it's time for the Symposium to start. It opens with meditation so as to open the space to make the vibrations harmonious and warm and receptive. Announcements about what activities people should see and/or support. Speaker next. Intermission. Mingling with each other and the drinking of health juices, etc. Afterwards there is a question, answer and discussion period, at which time people can talk to one another and to the speaker. Sometimes the second half of the afternoon

is spent seeing a concert of dancers, singers, poets, or maybe hearing a second speaker. This depends on how much time the first speaker uses. The Symposium is closed with a meditation. (I heard someone say the Sunday I was there, that it was just the one they needed that day.) We close the space and thank God and ourselves for being loving and harmonious. People can stay around and eat. We have a restaurant where you can eat, socialize some more, hang out, dance and generally have a good time."

Sure reminded me in a lot of ways of one of the fondest memories of my pre-North days—Camp Meeting time at Mt. Hope Methodist Church! Amen! It was not my intention upon visiting the NBT to get spiritually rejuvenated, but rather, to check it out. I must confess/testify, I'm going to check it out some more. If not sooner, surely at Revival time.

For the last couple of months or so, I've been seeing notices: THE REVIVAL IS COMING. You have too? Well, Barbara assures us that it is, indeed, coming. "The concepts that we are dealing with are massive, so it is taking longer to get it together than we had originally planned, but it's getting there." Since I have preconceived notions about what a Revival is/was—have not heard of any lately—I asked again, to get into NBT's frame of reference: what it is? With patient understanding the Sister related: "The Revival is an art form that grew out of NBT techniques for liberating our minds and spirits. These techniques have been worked into a structure that allows us to share our techniques of liberation with Black people in an educational way. Unlike the Ritual which we have performed for the last three years, the Revival has a plot, worked out by Charles Russell. It is a theatrical experience, an attempt to visualize situations we find ourselves in, heighten some of the contradictions of our lives and to clarify some issues and try to give some solutions to the problems; to say something politically, to offer solutions to some problems, to entertain and to educate. We are trying to do an awful lot of things."

That is plenty to look forward to.

If you think your involvement in a "love affair" is past due, the NBT says that one is right around the corner. THE REVIVAL IS COMING. ■