

# **Lloyd Richards in Rehearsal**

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## Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the rehearsal process of Caribbean-Canadian-American director Lloyd Richards (1919-2006), drawing on fifty original interviews conducted with Richards' artistic colleagues from all periods of his directing career, as well as on archival materials such as video-recordings, print and recorded interviews, performance reviews and unpublished letters and workshop notes. In order to frame this analysis, the dissertation will use Russian directing concepts of character, event and action to show how African American theatre traditions can be reformulated as directing strategies, thus suggesting the existence of a particularly African American directing methodology. The main analytical tool of the dissertation will be Stanislavsky's concept of "super-super-objective," translated here as "larger thematic action," understood as an aesthetic ideal formulated as a call to action. The ultimate goal of the dissertation will be to come to an approximate formulation of Richards' "larger thematic action." Some of the artists interviewed are: Michael Schultz, Douglas Turner Ward, Woodie King, Jr., Dwight Andrews, Stephen Henderson, Thomas Richards, Scott Richards, James Earl Jones, Charles S. Dutton, Courtney B. Vance, Michele Shay, Ella Joyce, and others.

Keywords: action, black aesthetics, black theatre movement, character, Dutton (Charles S.), event, Hansberry (Lorraine), Henderson (Stephen M.), Molette (Carlton W. and Barbara J.), Richards (Lloyd), Richards (Scott), Richards (Thomas), Jones (James Earl), Joyce (Ella), Vance (Courtney

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Table of Contents .....	vii
Introduction.....	1
1. Preliminary Remarks.....	1
2. Locating Lloyd Richards.....	5
3. Framing Richards' Directing Methods.....	13
4. What is a Director?.....	18
5. Lloyd Richards, Artistic Director.....	21
6. Dissertation Structure.....	26
Part I. Russian Directing Theory and Black Theatre Aesthetics.....	29
Chapter 1. Russian and African American Concepts of Character.....	30
1. Russian Concepts of Character .....	30
a. "Active Image" and Cliché.....	30
b. Character and Type .....	32

c. From Realism to Alienation .....	34
d. Organicity, Voice and Movement .....	36
2. African American Concepts of Character .....	38
a. Character Signification .....	38
b. Allegorical Representation .....	42
c. Critical Objectivity vs. Symbolic Characterization .....	45
d. Embodiment, Ritual and Ancestor .....	50
3. Final Reflection: Character .....	55
Chapter 2. Russian and African American Concepts of Event .....	57
1. Russian Concepts of Event .....	58
a. "Inciting Event" and "Main Event" .....	58
b. Experiencing in Real Time .....	59
c. Adaptation .....	62
d. "Holding off" .....	63
2. African American Concepts of Event .....	65
a. Authenticating Narratives and their Signification .....	65
b. Rhythmic Asymmetry .....	70

c. Call and Response .....	74
d. Tarrying and Ritual Event .....	76
3. Final Reflection: Event .....	78
Chapter 3. Russian and African American Concepts of Action .....	80
1. Russian Concepts of Action.....	81
a. Impulse and Action.....	81
b. Thematic Task .....	82
c. Thematic Action .....	83
c. Larger Thematic Action .....	85
d. Action and the Director .....	86
2. African American Concepts of Action.....	88
a. Human Reference, Expressive Language and Expressive Gesture .....	88
b. Realism and the Ritual of Everyday Life .....	96
c. The Signification of Ritual and Action .....	100
d. Larger Thematic Action in African American Theatre .....	108
e. Richards' Larger Thematic Action .....	111
3. Final Reflection: Action.....	113

Conclusion: African American Directing Strategies .....	114
Part II: Lloyd Richards' Rehearsal Process .....	118
Chapter 4. Lloyd Richards and Character.....	119
a. The Actor's Creative Nature and Embodiment.....	120
b. Embodiment and Allegorical Characterization .....	127
c. Character Signification.....	136
d. Character and the Ritual of Everyday Life.....	152
e. Final Remarks: Lloyd Richards and Character .....	155
Chapter 5. Lloyd Richards and Event.....	157
a. Rhythmic Asymmetry and Call and Response.....	158
b. Tarrying and Rhythmic Asymmetry .....	171
c. Rhythmic Scoring.....	175
d. Strategies for Organic Emotional Response.....	183
e. The Juba and the Work Song: Ritual Event .....	193
f. Narrative Signification.....	197
g. Final Remarks: Lloyd Richards and Event .....	203

Chapter 6. Lloyd Richards and Action .....	205
a. Tarrying and Active Waiting.....	206
b. Expressive Gesture and the Ritual of Everyday Life .....	225
c. Signification by Indirection.....	236
d. Belief as Action.....	243
e. Final Remarks: Lloyd Richards and Action .....	246
Chapter 7. Conclusion: Larger Thematic Action.....	247
a. Lloyd Richards' Thematic Tasks and Actions .....	248
b. Richards' Larger Thematic Action.....	251
Notes .....	263
Bibliography .....	290

## **Introduction**

### **1. Preliminary Remarks**

This research project proposes to study the directing career of one of the most important theatre directors of the second half of the twentieth century, Lloyd Richards, with a view to discovering the major components of his rehearsal process through interviews with artistic colleagues who participated in his productions, and through the study of archival materials.<sup>1</sup> This will be an important contribution to theatre scholarship for two reasons: the first is that despite Richards' enormous influence on American and black diasporan theatre, there are no in-depth studies of his work. As Harvey Young says, in his essay "The Influence of Lloyd Richards," "The challenge of centering Lloyd Richards in any critical analysis is the relative lack of published material on the former longtime dean of Yale Drama School and former Director of the Eugene O'Neill Center. Theater history tends to privilege the playwright. [...] The majority of articles, either popular journalistic accounts or critical studies, that mention Richards focus on the playwrights with whom he collaborated. When present within these accounts, Lloyd Richards often appears relegated to the margins" (Young, "Influence," 23). This dissertation hopes to begin the process of filling this gap in the literature.

The second reason is that Richards' particular directing style, grounded in the Russian school of theatre directing, was always most compelling when it drew upon African American performance traditions. Studying his directing style, then, might lead to the

formulation of a particularly African American directing methodology. As a transitional figure, Richards is ideally located to study this possibility, because he was so well versed in both the Russian school and the African American performance tradition, and therefore his Russian-influenced methods as applied to African American plays, might clearly point to parallels between the two traditions.

This is why I propose to use Russian theatre concepts as categories to structure this dissertation, as guideposts to the concepts of the African American theatre: as a clarifying device, to show, by contrast and comparison, that in a very specific sense the African American theatre has its own directing tradition, for which Richards was a central beacon.

And it is also why I propose to rely, for my description of Richards' rehearsal process, on oral testimonies of artistic colleagues who were in rehearsal with him: to ensure that the theoretical formulations of the first part of the document are seen to be reflections of very concrete performance practices in Richards' rehearsals.

Though the dissertation will rely on a series of parallel concepts in the Russian and African American traditions, one of Stanislavsky's theoretical concepts will have a privileged place throughout, because of its particular usefulness as an analytical tool. That is Stanislavsky's concept of "sverkh-sverkh-zadacha." Literally the "over-over-task," it is the larger, social and ethical task of the theatre company, or theatre director, in producing a repertory of plays – its "larger thematic action." As will be shown, the concept is more specific than that of directing "style" or "vision," and therefore helps ground the study of

a director's work in very specific tasks and actions. Perhaps the most famous example in black American history is the "blues aesthetic," but there have been several "larger thematic actions" in that history: formulations that constitute both an aesthetic ideal and a call to action, which is why the concept is so particularly useful in the context of African American theatre practices, and in a dissertation of this nature.

The main focus of this dissertation, then, is to discover Richards' "larger thematic action" through his specific rehearsal strategies.

The original impulse for my interest in Richards is a very personal one. My professional life as a theatre director has led me to work in diverse contexts in Canada, France, Russia and Colombia. These experiences have been extraordinary, and the companies I have worked with extraordinarily generous, but when I look at the fundamental experiences that have shaped me as a director, there are two that stand out from the rest, in terms of what I learned. The first experience was the five years I spent sitting beside Peter Fomenko<sup>2</sup> and his disciples, in the dilapidated halls of the old State Institute for Theatre Arts (GITIS/RATI) buildings, or in borrowed spaces in the early years of his studio theatre in Moscow: if I became a true believer in the theatre, it was thanks to him and the astonishingly talented company and productions that he created. The second experience was sitting in rehearsals in the dilapidated halls and borrowed spaces of Del Valle University in Buenaventura, Colombia, in the heart of the Afro-Colombian Pacific, where Kikongo creoles are still spoken in some places (Patiño and

Friedmann, 1983), and where African American (in the larger, diasporan sense) performance traditions are very much alive. I was sent there to “teach” a Russian-inspired theatre program to young students, and was bewildered and overwhelmed, before the extraordinary talent of those young actors, by my own ignorance. Ever since, all of my reflections on the Russian theatre have been strongly transformed by that experience, and it has been impossible to read the Russian directing theory in the same way. What’s more, all that I would later study regarding black aesthetics in my research for this dissertation, I have been able to understand intuitively from memories of those six years travelling to Buenaventura.

My discovery of Lloyd Richards was through August Wilson, whose *Piano Lesson* I produced in Buenaventura in 2009, as directed by a young Afro-Colombian graduate of the program at Universidad del Valle, Manuel Viveros. Watching this talented young director lead the actors to discoveries about their own personal history through the Wilson material, I began to wonder whether there weren’t certain diasporan traditions that might affect the way a theatre director worked. When I discovered that the Wilson cycle had been directed by a legendary African American director who had been trained in the methods of the Moscow Art Theatre, I thought that studying his methods might be the perfect way of understanding the dynamics of that African American tradition, and perhaps show how that tradition, and Richards in particular, had applied the Russian tradition to come to new ways of approaching theatre rehearsal and performance.

What I discovered is the substance of this dissertation: a rich panorama of African American aesthetic ideals which have many parallels with the Russian tradition, which Richards navigated in his rehearsal processes in a very personal way.

In this introduction, I will outline the historical importance of Lloyd Richards, and then examine the methodological problems involved in studying his rehearsal methods. I will end the introduction with a reflection on Richards' legacy.

## **2. Locating Lloyd Richards**

Lloyd Richards was a North American theatre director whose active career can be located, approximately, between the year 1959, on the eve of the civil rights movement, and 1996, when a new culture war was in full swing. The first date corresponds to Richards' triumphant success on Broadway as director of *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, an important catalyst for the black theatre movement in the sixties. The second date corresponds to the premiere of *Seven Guitars* by August Wilson on Broadway; the sixth collaboration between Richards and Wilson, it would also be their last after twelve years of successful runs on Broadway.<sup>3</sup> This period of 37 years will be the context for this study.

If Richards had only directed *A Raisin in the Sun*, his place in the history of American theatre would have been assured. Though there had been artistic successes on Broadway by African American artists before,<sup>4</sup> none had ever achieved the same critical and popular acclaim that *Raisin* did. With its openly Afrocentric motifs and Hansberry's open and

public embrace of the burgeoning civil rights movement,<sup>5</sup> *Raisin* gave confidence to a new generation of African American theatre artists. At the same time, its very success polarized the black theatre community: the controversy surrounding the main character's lack of agency,<sup>6</sup> and the show's catering to a white mainstream audience,<sup>7</sup> made many in the younger generation decide that new, more radical devices were needed if the larger goals of the black theatre were to be achieved. Still, with time, the historical importance of the production became clear, and even its most radical opponents came to admit its influence.<sup>8</sup>

If Richards' only accomplishment had been his thirty-one-year tenure as artistic director of the Eugene O'Neill Playwrights Conference in Waterford, Connecticut, from 1968 to 1999, his place in the history of American theatre would also have been assured. Name any American playwright of note from this period, and they have been through the O'Neill, and have been trained or influenced by Richards and his disciples.<sup>9</sup> Name any theatre movement in the same period – black theatre, women's theatre, gay theatre, Asian-American theatre, Latino theatre – and Richards' nurturing energy can be seen to have allowed these playwrights to acquire their own voice very early on.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the exposure Richards gave to international playwrights such as Derek Walcott, Wole Soyinka, Athol Fugard and many other Caribbean and African playwrights and directors, played no small role in their international reputation.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the O'Neill was an experimental playground for an entire generation of young and upcoming directors, often, once again, from the widest possible range of American experience.<sup>12</sup>

If Richards' renown were based only on his twelve-year tenure as Dean of the Yale School of Drama, from 1979 to 1991 – the first African American to hold this position – once again a modest place in the history of the American theatre training would have been assured him. At Yale he implemented a new way of thinking about theatre training: his own experience as a highly reputable acting coach, and the application of his experience at the O'Neill to the training of dramaturgs and their involvement in every show the Yale produced, succeeded in injecting into a result-oriented system a measure of insistence on process.<sup>13</sup> As well, as Dean, his express commitment was to make sure that each and every student would have their first professional experience under his watch.<sup>14</sup> This often meant that teachers would give their students opportunities that might have contributed to their own careers, in order to ensure that the work being done was very much connected to the professional world.<sup>15</sup>

Even if *A Raisin in the Sun* had never happened, his contribution to the success of the black theatre movement would have guaranteed a place for him in the history of the black American theatre – as an acting teacher and actor's director. His reputation in this role began in the late fifties<sup>16</sup> at the Paul Mann<sup>17</sup> studio, a school which took in talented students who had been refused entry into the more eminent schools in New York – and therefore, the studio had more of its share of talented young black actors. Once again, these students make up an honour role of artists whose later recognition they would openly credit to Mann and Richards.<sup>18</sup> When some of these alumni – such as Douglas

Turner Ward, Woodie King, Jr. and Barbara Ann Teer – began organizing their own theatres, it was natural that they should invite Lloyd Richards as acting coach for their performers. The theatres of these three artists, the Negro Ensemble Company, the New Federal Theatre and the National Black Theatre, would become important motors in the development of the black theatre, and Richards' influence as an older more experienced voice was felt among their actors and directors from the very beginning.<sup>19</sup>

This reputation as a teacher, of course, was not limited to the black theatre, and his six questions and two re-directs which he used in his acting classes,<sup>20</sup> are famous among several generations of graduates from NYU, Hunter College (CUNY), The Actors Centre and his own studio.<sup>21</sup>

As it happens, Richards' lasting reputation is based on his success as dramaturge and director of six instalments of August Wilson' Century Cycle on Broadway, which began with the triumphant premiere of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 1984 – reflected in the abundant scholarship which continues to be devoted to August Wilson's works.<sup>22</sup> There is a sense that this premiere somehow encapsulates the aspirations of an entire generation of black artists, and brings together all the contradictions and conflicts within the black theatre over twenty years. Wilson is, after all, heavily indebted to Amiri Baraka, the most rigorous and eloquent theoretician of the movement and its most notorious *provocateur*,<sup>23</sup> and that other creator of a Twentieth Century Cycle, Ed Bullins.<sup>24</sup> Richards' embrace of this younger version of his old aesthetic adversaries might be seen by some of his

enemies as a kind of opportunism,<sup>25</sup> and the eventual breakup of the older master and the younger playwright certainly was influenced in part by the same old tensions within the movement, as will be shown, but there is no question that Wilson, under Richards' tutelage, "has changed the face of contemporary American theatre, of black theatre, most certainly, and of black theatre scholarship as well." (Elam, 2005, ix) In this sense, it is perhaps the third premiere in the cycle, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, which is the most significant.<sup>26</sup> Here was a play conceived and performed entirely within an African cosmological sensitivity, and despite the bafflement of the Broadway audiences,<sup>27</sup> it was still assured a fairly long and successful run on Broadway and throughout the regions,<sup>28</sup> and with time was generally accepted as Richards' and Wilson's greatest work – indeed, perhaps the most important black American play of the twentieth century. It is quite extraordinary that Richards, whose work energized the black theatre movement after 1959, should preside over its full and lasting national and international recognition in the years from 1984 to the late nineties.

How many directors can say they have transformed the theatrical landscape of their generation – twice? Or at least, for Richards' less generous critics, have been closely connected to two of its most important transformative moments? How many, at the same time, can do such a thing and still somehow escape the attention of mainstream directing studies – as if what Richards was doing were always somehow something else? – not directing but creating new plays or promoting an actor's career or influencing the allocation of funds on the National Endowment for the Arts. All of this he certainly did,

and to better effect than many, but all of it came second to his central commitment to directing. Richards' directing style has had a lasting influence on three generations of theatre practitioners, in the African American theatre and across the cultural board, and yet there are few scholarly studies<sup>29</sup> on his directing work beyond the research done on Wilson's plays and on other playwrights that he has influenced.

Perhaps this is not a bad thing: in the historically insular context of mainstream American theatre, myth-making around "great" directors such as Elia Kazan and Lee Strasberg, among many others, has been largely responsible for the narrow personalization of the American theatre, and for the evisceration of its main influence – the Russian school's – more socially-minded practices. In this sense, Richards' contrasting self-effacement can and should be read as method, and one of the goals of this study is to show that Richards was part of a larger African-American social-aesthetic movement which he was singularly capable, as artistic enabler, of communicating to a larger audience.

Richards, in fact, is an especially useful figure to study because he stood at so many aesthetic crossroads, and straddled them so effectively. To begin with, it is important to remember that Richards was always, in a sense, an outsider: this may seem hard to believe, because it is difficult for us to re-imagine the racialized circumstances of Richards' early life. But Richards was born in 1919, and the world he inherited was still very aggressively against his kind of aspirations. The courage and daring of his early

decisions – not least of which was his marriage to Barbara Davenport in 1957, in an era when mixed marriages were still highly censured – show a man who was constantly obliged to negotiate very complex social hierarchies in order to achieve his goals. Richards' Obama-style,<sup>30</sup> grassroots production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, where every penny counted,<sup>31</sup> is a case in point, but his subsequent run-ins with mainstream producers on Broadway and elsewhere confirm that despite a momentary parenthesis of mainstream success, he was obliged for many years to struggle against persistent racializing politics which affected his reach even when he became the Dean of the Yale School of Drama.<sup>32</sup> Denied his right to direct the movie version of *A Raisin in the Sun*, fired from at least three Broadway productions because of his refusal to let the producers interfere with his directing decisions,<sup>33</sup> Richards eventually left Broadway to take up more obscure positions at the O'Neill, at NYU and as fellow traveller to his younger artistic colleagues' experiments.

But at the same time, compared to most of his contemporaries, and especially his younger professional colleagues in the black theatre movement, Richards was as insider as you could possibly get under the circumstances. Richards himself puts it succinctly: "There are many moments, or incidents, in my career when I was discovered the first black person to do whatever. I never did anything that I did in order to receive that designation – it happened because I was attempting to do the things I wanted to do, and someone gave me an opportunity." (Graham Nesmith, 290) This made him a figure of suspicion for the movement's most vocal and influential theatre, the New Lafayette.<sup>34</sup>

Though he was respected for his achievements, he was often seen by the younger generation as too obliging to the white establishment, and of course, Richards' particular circumstances made the new generation's defiant aesthetic break with the white theatre world very difficult. And yet Richards never ceased to use his position of privilege – his insider status – to assist these younger companies whenever he could, and was often available to offer his own support as teacher and director. Hesitant to take up the revolutionary banner of his younger colleagues, Richards preferred to bring his experience to these companies, and help refine and shape their own aesthetic goals.

Richards was what you might call an outsider's insider, and an insider's outsider. And though this was not necessarily how he intended things to be, it did run parallel with his aesthetic: as an artist he embraced ambiguity. Trained in a theatre highly influenced by the Group Theatre, and working for many years alongside Paul Mann, Richards was as fluent in the idiom of the Russian-influenced mainstream American theatre<sup>35</sup> as he was in the traditional idiom of black aesthetics. Notoriously laconic, moreover, one sees in his own directing practice a stubborn avoidance of technical or aesthetic terms from any idiom, and his concerns were always towards the development of new texts for American lives<sup>36</sup> – and giving voice to idioms other than his own, even if that meant, on occasion, allowing a radical idiom that did not suit his temperament.

But his ambiguity does not stop there. It was, like his self-effacement, a kind of method which, as will be shown, was deeply coherent with his understanding of ritual,

conflict and action, and with the larger, necessarily ambiguous nature of African American double consciousness. His was not authoritarian directors', like Robin Phillips or Peter Brook, disingenuous feigning of aesthetic neutrality to control or manipulate.<sup>37</sup> His ambiguity arose from his deep respect for human impulse, which allowed him to contribute to a wide range of aesthetics without interfering with the organic development of the same. The fact that such widely divergent plays such as *Joe Turner, M. Butterfly*<sup>38</sup> and *The Heidi Chronicles*<sup>39</sup> passed through his mentorship and were acknowledgedly improved by it is testimony to the creative energy of his ambiguity.

All of this leads to a methodological impasse. When dealing with such an aesthetically protean figure, what is the best framework with which to study his directing methods?

### **3. Framing Richards' Directing Methods**

First of all, it would not do to draw simply upon the directing traditions of mainstream American theatre. Though Richards was very familiar with these methodologies, and one can see a continuity between this way of working with actors and scripts and his often very pragmatic approach, Richards' particular style resisted the mainstream theatre's excesses,<sup>40</sup> and at the Paul Mann studio, Mann and Richards trained actors in a style that was closer to the original spirit of Stanislavsky (Frick and Vallillo, 333-34),<sup>41</sup> as opposed to the Method.<sup>42</sup> In contrast to Strasberg's notorious lack of curiosity with regards to the original intentions of Stanislavsky,<sup>43</sup> Mann made an effort to discover what the Russian practices were, visiting the Moscow Art Theatre in the sixties and observing their work,

(Mann and Schechner, 84), and Richards' work as assistant to Mann for many years was informed by this first-hand research.<sup>44</sup> Their particular admiration for Michael Chekhov, whose acting style provided a model for much of Stanislavsky's musings on the theatre, and for Harold Clurman and Sanford Meisner, whose theoretical work was close to the original spirit of the Russian concepts, also points to Richards' and Mann's resistance to many of the mainstream practices. So the methods that Richards was developing in this very seminal part of his career were distinct from those of mainstream American directors.

Secondly, despite being well-versed in the mainstream theatre practices, Richards was steeped from the very beginning in the traditions of the African American theatre. Since so many of his famous premieres – *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Amen Corner*,<sup>45</sup> *Who's Got His Own*,<sup>46</sup> *Robeson*,<sup>47</sup> *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*<sup>48</sup> – were historically significant events in the black American theatre, studying his directing style might lead us to discover directing techniques which are unique to the African American theatre. Could one, then, draw solely upon the common trends in black aesthetics which influenced the African American theatre to describe Richards' directing work? There are good reasons why this would not be sufficient either. Though these aesthetic trends were often performance-based, they were rarely articulated in theatre or directing terms. Their explicit articulation as directing methods would require some basis in an extant directing theory.

A third methodological option, one that does not seem entirely unjustified in the context of the sixties, is to look at some of the avant-garde methods that were beginning to gain influence in the American theatre during the period.<sup>49</sup> Certainly Richards' non-verbal approach was highly consistent with younger contemporary colleagues such as Grotowski and Brook,<sup>50</sup> and he worked for many years at NYU, alongside Richard Schechner, during the sixties. It is also intriguing that his son Thomas Richards should become the heir to the Grotowski studio, and therefore tempting to look for parallels between Grotowski's work and Richards'. But as Ric Knowles points out in his *Intercultural Theatre*, the avant-garde's concerns were ultimately elitist, and re-inscribed old colonial relationships; and the rise of these avant-garde figures was very much in the same tradition of the director as "museum curator," which I will describe below, whose major concern was a re-interpretation of classical texts. Richards was always fundamentally committed to improving the conditions for marginalized cultural voices,<sup>51</sup> and though concerns and methods – ethics and aesthetics – aren't necessary consistent in the real world, Richards' project was not a personal journey but a social one.

One could take an even more radical position and suggest that Richards' method was entirely unique, and as an independent artist, his highly original style had grown, uninfluenced, from his own personal aesthetic convictions. The six questions and two re-directs that Richards was famous for in his teaching sessions, for example, could feasibly serve as the structural framework for this study – since most of his directing work was based on coaxing the answers to these questions out of his actors without ever really

asking them. But this methodology would not do because these eight questions clearly came out of Richards' training in Russian directing theory, and can be best understood in the light of that theory.

Finally, there are good reasons why applying the categories of the Russian directing tradition could be useful. The first is that Richards himself would have approved of studying a broader sphere of influence surrounding his work, not only because of his persistent dedication to intercultural and international theatre exchanges, but also because of his lifelong fascination with the Russian theatre tradition, which he explicitly applied to his work, and which he encouraged as Dean of the Yale School of Drama through exchanges with the Moscow Art Theatre and the Playwrights Colony in Schelykova. The second is that since the Russian theory is very systematized, it can amply describe all of Richards' approaches, and not just those that are particularly expressive of the African American tradition.

The solution, I believe, is to take our cue from Richards himself: use the Russian concepts as touch-points which structure methods more coherent with the African American traditions. This is how Richards himself applied Stanislavsky's idea of "given circumstances" to his actor training workshops. Instead of teaching the Russian idea that the actor must discover all the circumstances of a character's situation in order to play specific actions on stage, Richards developed a series of direct questions which he would ask the actor after they presented their work. This extraordinarily effective method will be

described in Chapter 5, but what's important here is how he took a simple Russian concept and found a parallel strategy that did the same thing but more in keeping with the particularity of his actors.

There are two further justifications for approaching the material in this way. The first is that many of the characteristic traits of the African American theatre have close parallels with this Russian directing theory, as I will show.<sup>52</sup> So the Russian concepts can help illustrate how the African American ideals work well as directing approaches. This might help us see that there is, in fact, a particularly African American style of directing, as practiced also by Richards, which could serve as a rich model for directing across cultures. Historically, the particulars of the African American context provide examples for the Russian concepts which are much clearer than they might be even in the high stakes of the Russian context – because the stakes for black actors in the United States were so much higher. Putting the African American practices into dialogue with the Russian concepts will help to get to the very marrow of the problems posed, and perhaps highlight the unique strengths of the African American methods.<sup>53</sup>

The second reason is, as a student and graduate of the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts' Faculty of Directing, I had the good fortune of spending many years observing rehearsals of one of the most important Russian theatre directors of the late twentieth century, Peter Fomenko<sup>54</sup> – a director who, like Richards, was renowned for his ability to obtain great performances from actors who loved and respected him deeply. I discovered

in those years that the most important aspect of the director's work was the most difficult to describe, because it was based on action and not words. I have since understood that any description of a rehearsal process must try to reconstruct, not only the simple tasks or structures that make up a director's method, but the essential thrust of their influence on the actor's creative nature. All of the interview work, therefore, was geared toward discovering this special, wordless quality that made Richards' rehearsals so effective.

In order to describe Richards' methodology, then, I will take several concepts of the Russian theatre school and put them into dialogue with the common aesthetic ideals that have informed the black American theatre, especially those articulated in the sixties when Richards' public career was beginning, in order to show the resulting practices can be seen as directing strategies, and reformulated as directing concepts. I will then describe Richards' directing methodology in terms of these directing strategies, drawing on the oral testimonies of Richards' colleagues to reconstruct the rehearsal process.<sup>55</sup>

There is still one question that must be dealt with briefly, however, in order to limit the scope of this research: what does a director do?

#### **4. What is a Director?**

This is a question posed by Simon Shepherd in his book *Direction* (2012), and his categories will help frame the emphasis of this dissertation. Shepherd does a brief overview of theatre directing, and shows that it really involves four professions: director as designer, director as dramaturge, director as company manager, and director as actor-

trainer. Shepherd does not elaborate on the director-as-designer, but Bradley and Williams (1-6) claim that the rise of the figure of the director runs parallel to the rise of modern theatre technology; with every new technical advance, it became more necessary to have one single person who was responsible for the overall vision of all the design elements; what's more, Bradley and Williams cite Planchon, who suggests that this view of the director's role is akin to the museum curator, whose function it is to "restore [classic] works and put them on show." "We may lament the fact, but the two things are linked: the birth of the classic gives power to the theatre director." (Bradley and Williams, 6) A review of the most important texts on theatre directing seem to confirm this view: the large majority of the plays discussed in these textbooks are from the classical repertoire, and directors working on new texts are rarely commented upon.

The second kind of director is interested in textual analysis and play development. Shepherd suggests that "this analytic tradition is less celebrated" than other directors because theatre disciplines "tend to define themselves against more book-based disciplines by placing the emphasis on 'practice' (usually thought of as anything but the practice of writing." (Shepherd, 6) Once again, this kind of director often does not appear in anthologies of play direction if the director does not also have a reputation as a stage director.

The third kind of director is the Artistic Director or Company Manager, who oversees the artistic development of a theatre company. I will come back to this category in a moment.

Finally, there is the director as shaper of the actor's work, and Shepherd says there are three possible activities in this kind of work: the director who doesn't intervene in the actor's work but shapes what the actor has prepared for rehearsal within the *mise-en-scène*, the director who has "no use for acting technique [...], who in some ways works against it," and finally

there is the most famous group, the directors who felt they needed to interfere with the technique of their actors in order to be able to make the sorts of shows they wanted to make. The director as actor-trainer begins most famously with

Stanislavski and his contemporaries, Meyerhold and Komisarjevsky. (Shepherd, 5)

Shepherd suggests that this kind of work can only properly be seen as directing theory, and not acting theory, when the assumption of the role of actor-trainer "contains several other assumptions" about the relationships between the actor's and the director's work. (6-7)<sup>56</sup>

This dissertation takes this view of the director as shaper of the actor's work, and embraces some of these "assumptions" about the relationship between the actor's and the director's work. One of these "assumptions" is that, if you believe in the social importance of the theatre, the problems facing actors are far too difficult for them to solve

without the help of artists with shared convictions, whether that be the figure of a director or a collective group of director-actors. A further “assumption” is that, in such a context, where the company of actor-artists is the principal conveyer of the dramatic action, there can be no clear division between acting concepts and directing concepts, because the actor’s personal work is inextricable from its social effect, and therefore must be mediated by the company’s first audience, the director and fellow actors. The concepts in the chapters on directing theory, therefore, will be closely linked to problems facing the actor, and the chapters describing Richards’ work will show how he tries to help the actor solve these problems.

This dissertation will address these problems in this way because Richards was in this tradition of director as shaper of the actor’s work. Though Richards did work as a stage director in the first sense of director-as-designer, and his works at Yale Rep especially involved stage versions of classical texts, these productions are of little historical significance. At the same time, Richards’ contribution to the American theatre, in the second sense of director-as-dramaturge and playwright-maker, are of great historical significance – but the rich and very important research that still must be done in this area is beyond the scope of this study.

Precisely because Richards’ most significant contributions as a director involved new plays that would perhaps never have gained the currency they did without his contribution as a director singularly capable of getting the best possible performances out of actors

who were often unknown before working with him, it makes sense to approach Richards' role, and his relationship to the theatre concepts which informed the actors' work, from the point of view of the director as actor-trainer.

Still, it is worth taking a final look at the breadth of Richards' practices as Artistic Director in the Russian sense, to provide a context for a final reflection, in this introduction, on Richards' historical importance.

##### **5. Lloyd Richards, Artistic Director**

A director, after all, brings together all of the activities cited above by Simon Shepherd. In the best of cases, it is someone who takes an unknown text which seems to have no significance, and fills the apparent contingency of these new impressions with a larger meaning for an audience in the context of that audience's strivings. The broader a net the director throws – the more everything done coheres around an aesthetic ideal or “larger thematic action” – the more a director becomes an artistic director, and in ideal conditions will end up with their own theatre company and their own dedicated audience. But this sense of fighting contingency never leaves the director – the director must start every show from scratch, with indifferent audiences, worried producers – unconcerned with the director's thematic action – and vaguely hostile critics always ready to make judgment calls from their own aesthetic, and not from the director's. Success is the occasional reward, but failure is the usual companion.

In the Russian theatre, this conception of the director who “stakes his reputation on” a larger thematic action, as Richards himself describes the role,<sup>57</sup> is what is most often meant when referring to the profession, and the conception is best translated as Artistic Director.

The Artistic Director in the Russian sense is one that is capable of transforming the theatre culture of a generation, not through a series of excellent shows with various casts, but through the development of an ensemble of artists working together for many years on a shared larger thematic action. It often implies as well someone who has inherited a rich theatre tradition, and who is capable of transforming that tradition and communicating its vital goals to a new generation.

The years involved in this kind of work are not at all secondary. A new generation of artists must be trained and gain experience on stage; they must evolve together over several years, using the repertory of plays not just as presentable results but as processes for the artistic development of the group of artists. Too intense a schedule of premieres, and the theatre will become a factory of clichés; too hectic a schedule of rehearsals, and it is impossible to know whether the new-found forms are just passing fashions or truly active images that answer to deeper social needs. The repertory theatre exists as a vehicle to avoid the mindless, project-driven clichés of the “commercial” theatre; it exists to serve social ideals, and not just artistic whims. With a “larger thematic action,” the Artistic Director sets the tone, and their theatre is forever trying, at all levels, to find forms that

are adequate to these social and aesthetic ideals. And achieving this balance is no simple task, requiring many years of searching and artistic collaboration.

Of course, the best directors throughout the world are Artistic Directors in this sense: and Lloyd Richards was in this tradition.

Long before Richards ever became the Dean of the Yale School of Drama, Richards was Artistic Director of an unnamed black American theatre that eventually produced, after years of preparation, the Wilson Cycle. Like all great Artistic Directors, he had several generations of disciples which he had trained beginning as far back as the late fifties. These actors and directors and playwrights accompanied him for years in the experimental processes at the Playwrights Conference, or in professional productions off-Broadway. Artistic Directors normally have control over a number of spaces that feed into each other: a main stage, where it presents its polished works; a studio space where it presents works-in-progress; a dramaturgy section where it is working on discovering new plays; a school space, where a new generation of actors is being trained, and the luckier, more talented students get a chance to participate in the main-stage productions; and a tour circuit, which ensures that the theatre is reaching out to a larger audience. When Richards finally became an Artistic Director in the Russian repertory sense, as Dean of the Yale School of Drama, his full control over several phases of production had been years in the making: his “repertory theatre” had its main space (Broadway), its studio space (Yale Rep), its dramaturgy space (the O’Neill), its requisite training space (the

School of Drama), and its touring circuit (the regions). Like a Russian repertory theatre, it had low-key opens for approval by the committee of directors (two-day run at the O'Neill); longer rehearsal runs for the audience at the studio space (Yale Rep); a tour through the regions as an extended rehearsal run to perfect the show (Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago); and finally an open on its main stage in Broadway. Throughout the process, a committee of directors and dramaturgs were involved from the beginning, and the actors were doing more than one show. But most importantly, it had its mix of older artistic colleagues and younger new disciples that were all working a larger thematic action that was finally beginning to give truly extraordinary artistic results.

Of course, this image is an exaggeration, but the point is pertinent: the run of Pulitzer prizes won by the Wilson/Richards collaboration (and never won again after their breakup) was no coincidence. The new collective process at Yale Rep was in fact the guarantor of at least twelve years of artistic successes. With a combination of good luck, hard work and the extraordinary talent of artists that were ultimately brought together by him after years of training, Richards had managed to be in a position where the energies of his various artistic circles could come together into one complete theatre movement and make one playwright's singularly successful bringing together of thirty years of dramaturgical development into a profoundly moving event with lasting influence.

If there was one aspect of Richards' extraordinary career which was significant, and merits emulation and study, it was his ability to recreate the conditions of the repertory

theatre as best he could in adverse circumstances – and to make self-effacement, and a singular ability to bring his generation's ideals to a larger audience, the basis for all his artistic work. And ultimately, this self-effacement, and Richards' essential ambiguity, is what makes him so difficult to write about. Still, Richards' was always very clear, and I hope that his clarity will speak for itself. As Amy Saltz, a fellow director, said of him:

He spoke sense. And he was so smart. And his beliefs came from such a place of deep feeling and belief and commitment and integrity. I don't know that I've met anybody else in the theatre that had the kind of integrity he had. (Saltz, interview)

Richards spoke sense, and spoke it with integrity. And occasionally, over his 57-year career, that sense and that integrity coincided with other circumstances that allowed his plays and his people to succeed with the larger public. This dissertation will examine the specific kind of sense he spoke in his rehearsals

## **6. Dissertation Structure**

In Chapters 1-3 in Part I, I will briefly describe Russian directing concepts of character, event and action, and then use these concepts as structural categories to describe African American theatre practices as directing strategies. It is important to note that the African American concepts described in this dissertation represent only a very small percentage of the vast panorama of African American performance practices, and they are chosen mostly for their relevance to the particular concerns and practices which informed Lloyd

Richards' rehearsals, and for their particular prevalence in the years when Richards was most active as a theatre director.

I will start with concepts of character in Chapter 1, because character is the most discrete aspect of theatre practice, and facilitates entry into the further, more complex discussion of stage event in Chapter 2, and stage action in Chapter 3. In each case, the analysis will begin with the smallest unit of analysis, and gradually move towards more complex concepts. I hope to show in this first part the ample coherence of African American performance traditions as directing strategies.

In Chapters 4-6 in Part II, I will then use the African American concepts as a structure to describe Richards' rehearsal strategies – though throughout I will continue to contrast these concepts with the Russian ones. These three chapters will organize the testimonies of Richards' artistic colleagues, drawn from fifty personal interviews conducted during this research, under the headings of the various rehearsal strategies formulated in Part I. Such was the concise nature of Richards' directing approach, however, that many of the examples apply to many of the strategies, and in several cases the same example will come up under different headings from a different perspective. In this second part, I hope to show Richards' consistency as a director with the African American performance traditions explained in Part I, as well as to show certain practices that were unique to him as a director.

In Chapter 7, as a Conclusion, I will briefly summarize Richards' directing method, and formulate a possible "larger thematic action" which informed his work as a director.

**Part I: Directing Theory and Black Aesthetics**

## **I. Russian and African American Concepts of Character**

This chapter will present five fundamental concepts in the construction of character in the Russian theatre: “active image,” “type,” “realistic” vs. “alienated” construction of character, and “organicity.” Though these concepts are closely connected to the actor’s work, the fundamentally social nature of the concepts requires the collaboration of a director who can help the actor address the complexities involved.

I will then show how these Russian theories of characterization, which originated in a social movement which resisted the racializing tendencies of the Russian elites,<sup>1</sup> have striking parallels to African American practices arising from a theatre tradition similarly limited by the racializing expectations of its audience, and similarly active in resisting those expectations. Five parallel practices will be described in the African American theatre, in the light of these Russian concepts. The African American practices will serve as urgent illustrations of the Russian concepts, and emphasize the fundamental importance of these aesthetic ideals in both theatre traditions.

### **1. Russian Concepts of Character**

#### **a. “Active Image” and Cliché**

To begin, a simple Russian concept: “obraz”.

“Obraz” can be translated in two ways: as “image” or “form.” The word has the same connotations as the Greek word “eidos:” it is at once “image,” “form,” “idea,” “ideal” and most importantly, “character.”<sup>2</sup> As in the Greek, there is an “activeness” to the concept, as

can be illustrated by the fact that the words “imagination” (*voobrazhenie*), and “training” or “education” (*obrazovanie*) both have “*obraz*” as their root. So when Russian professionals are seeking to find the ideal “*obraz*” for a stage action, setting or character, they are searching for a form and an image that is fully coherent with their artistic process – often involving specific tasks. In this document, when referring to the Russian idea of “*obraz*,” I will use the term “active image.”<sup>3</sup>

In Russian, the most common word used for character is not “*personazh*,” as one would expect, but “*obraz*.” The Russian word implies what might be called an “inner structure,” and another way of translating this word into English is the word “character” – which implies – especially when speaking of someone in particular – an inner structure or education and a disposition to action – i.e. such-and-such has *character*.

What’s useful here is to see how the concept of character involves a very public, very visible form, and the “character” or idea that this form represents. This was clear to the Russian directors, and the very title of Stanislavsky’s third book, *The Actor Works on the Artistic Process of Embodiment*, known in English as *Building a Character* (Stanislavski, 1989), implies this idea of searching for a specific form that is both physical and artistic in a concrete situation.

Not least in the search for just the right “*obraz*” is fighting against character clichés, and really finding new types of characters never seen before on stage – this kind of work, therefore, was useful not only for re-signifying classical characters like Hamlet or

Khlestakov<sup>4</sup> for a new generation, but also for the constant observation of new ways of thinking in the culture.

It is useful to point out that this work began in the realistic theatre of the 1860s, when the Russian theatre was fighting against the Eurocentric “ideals” of imported characters from the European, mostly French and Italian, companies – and where the depiction of Russian characters was openly viewed as vulgar for reasons of class distinction which in Russia, though not nearly as extreme, bordered on the kind of racializing divisions that afflicted the American theatre.<sup>5</sup>

The work, therefore, was very much against the kinds of class triteness that bring about these personal or social stereotypes, and very much for the creation of what Stanislavsky called “types.”

#### **b. Character and Type**

In the Russian theatre, the actor must look for character not as personal extension of self but as a human being, both realistic and symbolic, that the Russian modernists called *type*. (Stanislavsky, III, 158-177; Stanislavski, 2008, 516-535)

Stanislavsky says that the concept of type has three possible manifestations: first, he talks of actors who play in general, who play stereotypes of social classes such as “officers” and “aristocrats” in a very superficial way. (Stanislavsky, III, 174) His attack here is on stereotypical clichés, and this includes the kind of “craftsmanship” associated with the stereotypical representation of social classes. He then goes on, in a more

respectful way, to speak of “more observant” representational actors, who are able to pick and choose the common features of a certain social class, in order to put together a more active character image, a more convincing “type,” and not just a stereotype.

(Stanislavsky, III, 174)

Then he gets to the real work, the artistic he truly respects:

The third type of character artists possess an even subtler perceptiveness. These actors can take from among all military people, from a whole group of army soldiers, and choose one, particular Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov and give him typical features which are only peculiar to him, which cannot be found in any other soldier. Such a character of course is military “in general,” a soldier “in general,” but besides that he is also Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov. In this sense, in the creation of a particular individual, the only one who succeeded in class was Nazvanov.

(Translation mine. Stanislavsky, III, 175)

In the traditional Russian school, the character must have an “active image” – a form that is both an idea, a spur to action, and a reflection of our historical reality. And his “obraz” should reflect some recognizable “type” – not a stereotype, but a character that somehow represents a certain aspiration or need of our generation, entirely local and contingent, but also universal in its scope and depth.

### c. From Realism to Alienation

This concept, of course, arose in the nationalistic project of XIX-century Russia, as a means for giving value to “folk” traditions and resisting the Eurocentric concepts of character. The individual nature of this view of character changed, however, as the XIX-century nationalist project evolved into the twentieth century class struggle in Russia, and the broad concept of “type” took on different meanings for artists with varying degrees of social commitment. One view of “type” was eminently individual and realistic, another defined by social forces. I will look at these two views briefly here, as they will re-appear in the context of African American notions of folk theatre in the first half of the twentieth century, and notions of class struggle from the 1960s onward.

In its origins, the Russian theatre’s main concern was a search for characterizations from Russian “folk” life. Alexander Ostrovsky was the most important representative of this concern, and his plays range from historical dramas which re-signify historical characters, to proto-anthropological studies of life along the Volga, to the creation of a microcosmic world of the neighbourhood where he grew up, the merchant sector of Moscow known as “Across the River.” Much of this work was intentionally meant to counteract the stereotypes the European theatre had of Russian life, and it went hand in hand with contemporary social causes associated with the liberation of the serfs. The hundreds of character portraits that Ostrovsky created – and directed on stage at the Maly Theatre – were meant to show the “typicality” of a certain world of characters, and the

images/types which entered the theatrical imagination of the Russian people are still active to this day.<sup>6</sup>

These “portraits of folk life” was one way of creating character types; a second one, of course, was developed by the Moscow Art Theatre. Chekhov and Gorky, among a host of other turn-of-the-century playwrights, were often re-writing Ostrovsky for a new generation. In *The Cherry Orchard*, merchant Lopakhin is not just Lopakhin: he is also a variation on Berkutov in *Wolves and Sheep*, and Vassilkov in *A Huge Fortune*. So the directors, playwrights and performers were not only creating their own types: they were also fully aware how similar types had been played at the Maly Theatre, and how important it was to adjust these types for the new social circumstances of their generation.<sup>7</sup>

This idea of a socially active re-signification of character, as turn-of-the-century Russia moved towards the upheavals of the noughts, tens and twenties, had one more development, often thought to be independent of the Moscow Art Theatre, but in fact arising organically from it. Stanislavsky’s student and colleague, Meyerhold, in the spirit of his theatre, eventually took the struggle of the lower classes to heart, and understood, as many of his directing colleagues, that it was no longer tenable to stage the old classics, with some of their evident class prejudices, in the same way. The critical aspect of Meyerhold’s type-work, then, was much more prominent – re-casting the old privileged types of the Russian theatre in a new, often farcically tragic, light.<sup>8</sup> The main concept of

this work was taken from an important literary critic of the period, Viktor Shklovsky, and was called “ostranenie” – “estrangement.” The concept, of course, is very familiar to Western theatre professionals, ever since Brecht inherited the idea from Meyerhold in the 1920s, and imported the idea into his theatre work: it is known as “alienation.”<sup>9</sup>

#### **d. Organicity, Voice and Movement**

Stanislavsky’s insistence on organic development is often thought to involve the actors’ self-absorbed re-working of their personal story, but in actual fact he is referring to the nature of the actor *as artist*, and the organicity as it relates not only to their imaginary world, but to their embodied nature.

Consider this quote by Stanislavsky:

These last allow for a terrible mistake: they forget that from the idea, principle, new foundation, no matter how right they might be, to their fulfilment, there is a huge distance. To bring them closer together demands a great deal of work, over a long period of time, on the technique of our art, which remains in its most basic state.

While our psycho-technique remains unformed, fear most of all to force your creative, organic nature, and its natural, unbroken laws. As you see, everything in our art strongly demands that each student who wants to be an artist should begin by thoroughly and elaborately, in theory and in practice, studying the creative laws of organic nature. (Translation mine. Stanislavsky, II, 289)

Notice that Stanislavsky is pointing, not to the personal nature of the actor, but “the creative laws of organic nature.” One’s authentic voice and one’s authentic physical impulses can only be developed by absorbing the tradition – both physical and imaginative – and the actor’s “organicity” is closely connected to re-discovering the tradition in oneself, including the discovered range of your imagination (“subtle, complex and multi-layered” as Stanislavsky calls life). The following passage by Efros might help to understand what Russian directors expect of their actors in this tradition:

These actors had a surprising characteristic – the ability to absorb literature into themselves, and the life that stands behind this literature. Even when Moskvina played in small roles, his acting came into your consciousness as something artistically enormous. Their creative natures were like a sponge. [...] It is necessary not simply to be a talented actor but also to possess a truly artistic nature, so that in your eyes, magnified on a television screen, a character’s heart will shine through. (Efros, I, 47.)

Two ideas are central here: “the ability to absorb... *the life that stands behind this literature...*” – and not just one’s own personal biography. The aesthetic call to actors is quite all-embracing. And the second idea: “Their creative natures were like a sponge...” Not just one’s emotional memory, but one’s endless ability to absorb the active images of life and the culture.

The implication here, of course, is that not everyone can be an actor, and even talented actors might come short of the ideal, which is to mirror the imaginary world of the character organically, “like a sponge.” Michael Chekhov’s idea that it takes many years of ensemble work to “open yourself” to others is similar to this idea – a constant feedback between one’s organic, artistic nature, and the larger imaginary world of the character, the play – or the tradition.

## **2. African American Concepts of Character**

The aesthetic priorities listed above all have their close parallels in the African American theatre. Because the stakes were so much higher in the black American context, the performance traditions laid out here illustrate the social urgency of the Russian concepts more clearly than in their original context.

### **a. Character Signification**

The connection between the problem of stereotype and the importance of creating an “active image” was particularly important in the African American theatre following the Harlem Renaissance, during Richards’ formative years, and despite the success of the black theatre movement of the 1960s in reclaiming the stage for a black audience,<sup>10</sup> the stereotypical images which abounded in the mainstream American theatre for much of its history still haunt the American stage, and are still a powerful factor in mainstream audience’s perception of the stage characters. What’s most instructive about discussions

surrounding stereotypical images in the black American theatre is that “character”, “action” and “image” are often synonymous in discussions of this kind. So when discussing character, the word “image” tends to appear much more often in black theatre theory than in white, in chapters and books dedicated to the discussion of character and persistent stereotypes in theatre, television and film.<sup>11</sup> One of the most influential texts of the sixties, “Black Arts Movement” by Larry Neal, puts iconology – the search for symbolic images – at the centre of the new aesthetic challenge. (Neal, 29) The word’s close association with the symbolic representation of religious or mythological figures is no accident.

From the beginning of the black American theatre, fighting stereotypes involved the careful nurturing of dignified externals that contrasted with the grotesque visuals of the stereotypes: whether it was subverting the grotesque mask of the minstrel character by “entering into the blackface caricature and refashioning it” (Krasner on Williams and Walker, 26), contrasting the ugly imagery with a naturalistic depiction where “all suggestions of stereotype are studiously avoided” (Sanders on Willis Richardson, 38), using parody and adopting a “rhetoric of signifying through language, gesture, or both” in order to turn the texts “back on themselves” and “complicate the issues of racism” (Krasner on Cole and Johnson, 37), black theatre professionals from the beginning had made every effort to stretch the limits of the clichés constraining their work.

Much of the work in the forty years leading up to the sixties fought stereotypical characterization as the Russian realistic theatre had: with realistic “folk” portraits, such as in the plays of Nora Zeale Hurston or Theodore Ward, and re-signified historical figures, such as in the works of Langston Hughes, working to improve the image of black characterization on a stage that was still designed for a white audience.

But at the beginning of the sixties, there was a realization that this kind of work would never be enough if the image presented by the actor didn’t involve some kind of agency. One can cultivate a “dignified” image – indeed, one can create a fully constructed, “three-dimensional” character – and still be seen through the veil of racializing symbolism by the audience. The “outer dignity” or “inner truth” of the character will do nothing to counteract this if the active image does not somehow counteract the traditional *roles* assigned to the black characters. In order to fight against the stereotype, the character must have agency, must somehow be fully involved in the play’s action.

One of the most important characteristics of this more difficult character signification is connected to the character’s ability to control their own destiny:

The dominant trait of such characters [Stepin Fetchit and Rochester] as these is their total inability (or unwillingness) to control circumstances for their own betterment. Because they are never in control of anything important, these characters are perpetual victims. [...] On the other hand [...] the title character in *Dr. B. S. Black* is a man of less than modest means who manages to rise above the oppressiveness of

his environment. He not only survives, but he also prevails. His ability to control his own fate through the use of imagination and verbal skill enables him to survive with panache. (Molette and Molette, 184-85)

This goes to the core of what is meant by the idea of an active image: where the character is simply symbolic, a broad comic or sentimental stroke, without any real aspiration or agency, there can be no real character but cliché – and in the African American context, a reversion to the old stereotypes.

*A Raisin in the Sun* caused a bitter debate among its cast members, and among the principal figures in the Black Arts Movement, because many thought that the play, in its construction of Walter Lee Younger, re-inscribed an old stereotype: the vital question was whether, in openly defying the white meddler at the end of the play, Walter Lee Younger really represented an unapologetically independent and outspoken black young man for the first time on Broadway, or whether, when Walter gave up his dream for a new business and gave in to his mother's wishes, the play re-inscribed the old stereotypes of the young man emasculated by an older Mammie figure, and thus made the play acceptable to the mainstream white audience on Broadway.<sup>12</sup> The controversy surrounding the nature of the play's success, therefore, reflected a new consciousness of the difficulties involved in character creation. It wasn't enough to struggle against a stereotype, because the danger of re-inscription was too great. It was necessary, rather, to create new types of characters for the stage.

## **b. Allegorical Representation**

One traditional way of doing this, which had succeeded in creating entirely new characters for the stage, is the allegorical representation of recognizable characters from the shared experience of the artists and the audience: taking character types and giving them an allegorical dimension. In a chapter called "Afrocentric Characterization," the Molettes have this to say about characterization in the black American theatre:

Following the opening performance of *Strivers Row* in Atlanta, a deservedly respected White critic who enthusiastically sought to encourage African-American theatre in that city posed some questions, in conversation, that he said were sincere concerns of his. He expressed concern over what he regarded as flaws in the character delineation of Joe Smothers. He asked whether Joe Smothers was a pimp, a thief, or an honest wage earner. The critic also questioned the depth and sincerity of Joe's possible romantic relationships with several of the female characters in the play. These are questions that never seem to occur to African-American people who have seen the play. Instead, those who are motivated to say anything at all about Joe Smothers assert that "I know someone who is just like Joe Smothers. (Molette and Molette, 201-2)

The authors go on to compare this aesthetic tendency with the white mainstream theatre, where it is believed that the playwright must dedicate considerable time to communicating the circumstances, often psychological, that would somehow explain the

character's behaviour, especially if the character's "dominant traits are negative" (202). What's important for black audiences, however, is the joy of recognition of characters who traditionally have not been given a voice, and the pleasure of seeing ordinary people imbued with heroic magnitude.

The actor's job, then, as in the Russian school, is to create a recognizable social type that the audience will immediately seize upon. But in the same way that Stanislavsky says that artfulness is not enough in the creation of character, the Molettes have established, in a chapter called "Heroic Values," that "a hero must be an important person. In other words, a hero must have magnitude" (170) and they show that the "verbal diplomacy" of characters like the Signifying Monkey or Shine have magnitude because they are "an allegorical representative of those who are small, weak, and oppressed" (176). Much of their argument points to the idea that the recognizable social type must involve some kind of allegorical representation with heroic magnitude.

The reviews of *New Yorker* critic Hilton Als illustrate the difficulty involved in living up to the demands of a well-constructed character type. Als is not afraid to point out the shortcomings of particular performances or stagings in the context of the playwright's intentions in the black American theatre – how, for example, an actor can come short of a character's conflict, and therefore re-inscribe an apparently anti-racist moment. The scene he describes in the next passage is the Trueblood scene from a new production of *Invisible Man*,<sup>13</sup> and his analysis in the article hinges on the actor's failure to express the

full range of the Invisible Man's emotional reaction to the revelation of Trueblood's incest:

But we can guess the Invisible Man's response even before we see it: Bougere acts out the predictable feelings of superiority and disgust. His Invisible Man looks down on this slack primitivism: it is everything he wants to rise above. But where is his self-loathing and his fear – fear that the Truebloods are just another version of his own slave-haunted past? The Invisible Man's indignation over Jim's transgression is as pat as Kate and Mattie-Lou's head rags and low, shamed moanin'. MacElroen has missed an opportunity to show how degradation actually happens; instead, his play about racism is a cliché, in which everyone is either angry or singing the blues. (Als, "Darkness Visible")

Als' critique is two-fold: he takes the actor to task for playing a cliché, and he criticizes him for lacking emotional breadth. And implicit in his critique is the inability of the actor to achieve a clear character type that the audience can both believe as real and recognize as someone "we have all seen" – something that Als seems to be looking for in good performances, as can be shown by the following passage in a review for Tracey Scott Wilson's *The Good Negro*:

On the other hand, it's a little difficult to locate Alexander's performance—perhaps because she's supposed to be, to some degree, emotionally opaque. Alexander has the right look and sound for the part—she's thin and neat, with barely suppressed

hysteria in her voice and eyes—but she lacks the inner tension to make the role as sickening as it should be. *We've all known some version of Yvonne: the girl who plays to authority while clambering over the heads of those she considers beneath her.* Yvonne is vengeful, a wolf in Barbie's clothing, and we should feel nothing but horror at her contrived "niceness." *That Alexander is not quite up to her character's complexity* may have something to do with the director, Loretta Greco, whose staging feels hesitant at times, as if she were intimidated by the beauty and technical flair of Wilson's script. (Italics mine. Als, 2003)

Here Als defines "type" in a nutshell: "we've all known some version of Yvonne" – then criticizes the actor and director for "not being up to the character's complexity" – that is to say, to the full expression of the type being portrayed. The actor must constantly work against the stereotype or cliché, in order to create a full, complex character, and this involves an emotional breadth and physical presence that many actors have no opportunity to develop.

As in the Russian theatre, however, since allegorical characterization is a fairly broad concept, there are many specific ways of doing this on stage.

### **c. Critical Objectivity vs. Symbolic Characterization**

Characterization in the black theatre had from its beginnings cultivated a necessary ambivalence in order to guarantee its own success with the hostile white audience, while enabling "codes to be communicated on a hidden level and helped to assure black

survival under oppressive conditions" (Krasner, 161). This historical character signification or re-signification by indirection and subversion, as the black theatre gained assurance and demanded of its practitioners a more open commitment to the cause of black affirmation, became less of an option for playwrights, directors and actors.

The core of the problem, in connection with this tradition of ambivalence in characterization, was character truthfulness. After all, the old stereotypes had been based on lies, distortions and simplifications, and it wouldn't do to combat this old negative mendacity with a new "positive" one. Two premieres of the period might help us establish the terms of this debate: the first was Lloyd Richards' second open on Broadway, *The Long Dream*, an adaptation of Richard Wright's last novel, and the second was Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*. Both plays were transitional plays, in the uncertain period between the success of *Raisin* and the open defiance of the New Lafayette Players, and both served as testing grounds for an emerging theatre practice.

The general failure of *The Long Dream* to repeat *Raisin*'s success among critics and audiences, and some of the venom it inspired among white and black critics alike, was closely connected to the nature of the characters presented. Two years after the show's performance run, one very perceptive reviewer from *Crisis* magazine used the show to make a point about genuine characterization:

Commenting on *The Long Dream* and *The Cool World*, [Reporter critic Marya Mannes] took the position that the theatre-going public is not going to pay to see

cripples paraded before its eyes. She then places an order for “Negroes of high intelligence and character who refuse to be animals...” [...] Sartre put the question why should men wish to live surrounded by images of themselves, “whether painted, sculpted, filmed or staged.” “The bourgeois,” Sartre continued, “wants to see his own image in the theatre, but he insists on identifying himself with it; he cannot tolerate a form of drama in which he is presented with anything approaching critical objectivity.” I suggest that it is precisely this sense of self-image seeking that limits the meaning of American life and drama and that it was Richard Wright’s gift for penetrating this narcissism that has made him the *bête noire* of the bourgeois culture gods. (Winslow, 162)

The swipe at bourgeois characterization, which had often been a tactic of middle-class playwrights such as Theodore Ward and Lorraine Hansberry to show the “normality” of black lives is important here: it reflects a new concern for social causes. The implication of the review is that Richards, in his staging of *The Long Dream*, has taken a new way of approaching character: “critical objectivity.” This option of presenting black life unapologetically, for a black audience, slowly gained traction between *The Long Dream*’s failure on Broadway in 1962, and the success of Richards’ production of Ron Milner’s *Who’s Got His Own*’s off-Broadway in 1966. In this play, the family conflict was more openly polemic, and the main character’s conflict with his mother was more openly defiant. When the New Lafayette Players took up and remounted *Who’s Got His Own* as

the inaugural production of their new revolutionary theatre, it set the tone for this new “critical objectivity” of their most prolific playwright, Ed Bullins.

The new characterization continued the older tradition of character ambivalence, but in a new way. In the next passage, Leslie Sanders talks of the new assurance of the black theatre, where there is no longer any fear to present character with “penetrating honesty”:

Bullins’ dramatic focus has remained consistent throughout more than fifty plays: the loving and relentless exploration of inner forces that constrain black people from realizing their freedom and potential. [...] The penetrating honesty of Bullins’ work indicates his imaginative and literary assurance. In his plays, a black stage reality and a black audience are assumed. The matters he takes up often are intimate, sensitive, and particular to the black experience. (Sanders, 2002, 177)

Beside this new objectivity, there was another tendency which drew upon the older allegorical characterizations in the black theatre, and it is best described by looking at *Dutchman*. Here there is nothing objective about the action: the characters are not realistic portraits nor allegorical heroes, but symbolic anti-heroes whose existence on stage is not meant to be taken entirely literally. This kind of characterization is called “symbolic” by Shelby Steele, and continues in the tradition of character signification but not by indirection, but by its opposite, by “calling out” the subterfuge, and exposing the social vice. A transitional play, *Dutchman* still has the feel of a realistic play, but Baraka would develop this kind of symbolic characterization more and more in his later plays, in order

to provoke his audiences, where the defamiliarization of the characters is more important than their "realistic" depiction.

Like the Russian theatre, then, the African American theatre embraces a panorama of characterization from the realism of "critical objectivity" to the "alienation" of symbolic characterization; but unlike the Russian theatre, they cannot be separated into two aesthetic tendencies by different artists. Rather, many artists integrated both tendencies into their work, according to the characters being depicted. Most of the examples of symbolic characterization described in Shelby Steele's article on the black theatre, for example, are white or black opportunists trying to be white. This reflects a consistent characteristic of the black American stage: in the African American theatre, the satire is often directed at white villains or black opportunists, and the critical objectivity of the black heroes tends to be more allegorical in the older sense, more ambivalent, less satirical.

In much of the African-American canon, there are deeply ambivalent characters which one would hesitate to call anti-heroes. On the English stage, Richard III and Edmund are attractive anti-heroes who are proud of their villainy; in North American white theatre and cinema, Ricky Roma and Don Corleone give satisfaction by their sleazy slickness.<sup>14</sup> But can we call Bigger Thomas or Tyree Tucker (*Native Son* and *The Long Dream* by Richard Wright), Walker or Clay (*The Slave* and *Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka), Art or Big Girl (*Goin' to Buffalo* and *Clara's Old Man* by Ed Bullins), Theo or even Sergeant

Vernon C. Waters (*Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* by Lonne Elder III and *A Soldier's Play* by Charles Fuller) anti-heroes? Their allegorical nature is too present on stage for these characters to have that kind of Shakespearian quality of villainous attraction, and their ultimately tragic situation is too present for them to acquire the more intellectual nature of satire or estrangement.

It is almost impossible to imagine a scene in the black theatre like the one in *The Godfather*, where Don Corleone cries real tears at the opera while his enemies are being killed off one by one: or rather, such satire is reserved for white characters like Sheriff Canley (from *The Long Dream*), Lula (from *Dutchman*), the Baron Docteur (from *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks) and George Murchison (from *A Raisin in the Sun*).

Ultimately, this emphasis on allegorical characterization is connected to the central place the ancestor has, historically, in black American culture. I will come back to ritual in the chapter on action, but it is important to touch on this point in discussing the more technical aspects of characterization.

#### **d. Embodiment, Ritual and Ancestor**

From its beginnings, gesture and language have been two fundamental aspects of character work. Even if the African theatre, with its lack of distinction between dance, music and expressive language hadn't contributed to the aesthetic of the black American theatre, the problem of physical action and expressive language would have been very important in its development.

The reason for this has been seen above: gesture and voice are the main components of character image, and therefore are inevitably tied up to fighting against stereotypes. This work involves more than just delving into one's personal biography: it involves carefully cultivating forms which have been studied, signified and re-signified in a long history of performance and representation. So in the same way that the Maly and Moscow Art Theatre's actors cultivated body and voice in order to be able to be specific in the portrayal of recognizable types, African American actors are profoundly aware of the implications of their gesture and language on stage. Recognizing Joe Smothers is not just a question of attitude and intent: it's a question of gesture and language, of being aware of how a certain way of being presents itself specifically. So expressiveness of body and voice is not just another possibility among many: it's an essential part of the work, and requires years of work and study.

Amiri Baraka's article on "Expressive Language" gives a precise description of the stakes involved in this kind of work. Baraka claims that expressiveness is not just a question of arbitrary spontaneity. Expressiveness in this sense he considers a luxury, and the artist who pilfers the forms of others as a means of expressive freedom is "confirming his hegemony and good fortune... or just calling the bank" (Baraka, 2009, 195). A way of being is not just a thought or an act; it's a relationship to the world. A given character is like a dying language: to adapt it without understanding its underlying forms is to distort it and ultimately destroy it.

I heard an old Negro street singer last week, Reverend Pearly Brown, singing, "God don't never change!" This is a precise thing he is singing. He does not mean "God does not ever change!" He means "God don't never change!" The difference, and I said it was crucial, is in the final human reference... the form of passage through the world. (Baraka, 2009, 195)

If ever there were an argument for the realistic depiction of character in the theatre, it is here; like Anton Chekhov's insistence that the essence of one of his characters was in his "checkered pants,"<sup>15</sup> true expressive freedom is in the ability to recognize the human reference and be up to the task of expressing this form of passage through the world as specifically as possible. The irony is that Baraka's avant-garde symbolism, especially in his later plays, tended to contradict this belief in the precision of language, and his colleagues and younger disciples would end up doing it much more successfully than he ever did.

Though this insistence on specificity of form was always true of the black American theatre, what distinguished the work in the sixties was the overt connection this character work had with ritual and ancestry. In his notes on ritual in the black theatre, Kimberley W. Benston quotes a significant passage in "Black Theatre – Go Home!" by Ron Milner, and then goes on to show how "going home" is connected to Larry Neal's re-discovering ritual forms and values:

“I won’t go into the demand for new dynamics, for a new intensity of language and form, that the material and the desired atmosphere will make on you; except to say that the further you go home, the more startlingly new and black the techniques become.”

To Milner’s nascent awareness of structural demands, Neal added concrete suggestion for a formally viable Black aesthetic. He directed the playwright’s attention to the cultural traditions of Afro-American and African societies. Spirit worship, whether embodied in African orishas, Voodoo, or Afro-Christianity, could provide a source of emotive energy; jubilees, blues, spirituals, and dance would allow for rhythmic and lyric expressiveness; shamans, preachers, musicians, hustlers, conjurers, poets, and various other “survivors” would stock a theatre with a complex amalgam of heroes and moral forces; and the collective folk consciousness in general would offer a plethora of responses to and transcendences of diasporic Black life. (Benston, 70-71)

Milner’s passage makes clear that the work is clearly one of “language and form” which will make demands on the artist, and more than just symbolic characterizations, this work on peopling the stage with “survivors” has a rooted connection to “spirit worship,” and would act as “moral forces” in the search for “responses to and transcendences of diasporic Black life.”

This idea of “survivors” is especially compelling: it implies not existing and known types but the search for new ones – and Neal’s fellow artist Ed Bullins’ work is almost entirely dedicated to the evocation of these survivors through the preciseness of language:

Bullins establishes this world, essentially, through language and music. As Lindsay Patterson observes, Bullins has a “wonderful ear for the language of the ghetto,” and the effect of his fidelity to that speech is not simply verisimilitude but also the creation of a *mise-en-scène* that is lively, earthy, volatile, and, because its violence is barely submerged, dangerous. [...] Bullins [...] delights in black street argot and reveals its lyricism while keeping its harshness and profanity intact. His plays disclose that ghetto speech ultimately reflects a brutality the speakers turn first on themselves, and that the speech is equally capable of eloquently expressing his characters’ search for love, affection, faith, and security. In Bullins’ plays black street argot comes into its own. (Sanders, 2002, 182)

Precision of form was so important to Stanislavsky because it was the most effective device in combating clichés: character types like Joe Smothers, allegorical or symbolic characterizations, signified or re-signified historical figures – all of these can fall into cliché, and therefore into stereotype, if the artist is not absolutely concerned with perfecting the forms involved, and the more poetically, the better. Another way of saying the same thing is this: character work must involve a good measure of ambiguity if it is to avoid stereotype. This will be very important in the discussion of action and conflict in

the next chapter; for the moment suffice it to say that the argument has circled back to signification by indirection, where the double-consciousness is now not a [not-so-]simple question of political protest against an oppressive, outside culture, but the more philosophical ambiguity of Elegbara within the culture itself.

### **3. Final Reflection: Character**

In this chapter I have shown the five Russian concepts of character creation to have parallels in five aesthetic practices in the African American theatre: character signification, allegorical representation, critical objectivity, symbolic characterization and ritual embodiment of the ancestor.

I have shown that the Russian belief in the importance of an actively created character image which resists stereotype has a clear illustration in the African American practice of character signification, where no character can be created without carefully considering how that character has traditionally been perceived. The concern for character agency in the African American tradition makes character signification a particularly forceful way of guaranteeing that the actor is fully engaged with the character and the stage action.

I have shown that the Russian emphasis on creating new “types” for the stage finds its parallel in the African American tradition of allegorical characterization. Once again, the aesthetic urgency of this concept is greater than in the Russian context: finding “heroic magnitude” (Molette and Molette, 170) in the characters being portrayed was an essential part of African American artists’ striving to give full voice to a culture historically maligned.

The Russian tradition continuum of character creation from realistic portraits to alienated figures has its parallel in the African American tradition which goes from “critical objectivity” (Winslow, 74) to satirically symbolic representation. Historically at least, these two ways of approaching character differed from the Russian tradition in that all playwrights tended to make their protagonists allegorical and realistic, while making their antagonists satirical and symbolic.

Finally, the central place of the organic mastery of voice and body in the Russia theatre, in order to accurately portray the “life of the human soul,” finds its parallel in the signal importance African American artists give to honouring “a form of passage through the world” (Baraka, 2009, 195), where there is, however, more emphasis on giving homage to the ancestor. Both traditions aimed at taking the techniques of popular experience and giving them poetic expression onstage.

## **Chapter 2. Russian and African American Concepts of Event**

Once again, I will use directing concepts from the Russian school as categories to show how some of the traditional black aesthetic conventions surrounding the stage event can be applied as directing strategies. Since in traditional Russian analysis, a determination of the play's events comes before the search for a play's actions, I will begin by analysing "event." Strictly speaking, however, it is difficult to divide the concepts of action and event, because they are two aspects of the same phenomenon: the action is the unrealised event, and event is the realised action. Since events are more connected to narrative and dramatic structure, it is easier to begin with a description of strategies related to the stage event, and then move on the concepts related to stage action. This is why in play analysis events are analyzed first, in order to help the actors get their bearings in terms of their actions. But concepts of event also are related to actions as "reactions," elements of spontaneity, improvisation and emotion.

The five Russian concepts which I will describe are: "inciting" and "main event," "experiencing in real time," "adaptation," and "holding off." The corresponding concepts in the African American tradition are: "authenticating narrative," "event signification," "rhythmic asymmetry," "call and response," and "tarrying." Here again, the African American concepts will be shown to be clear and urgent parallels of the Russian concepts.

## 1. Russian Concepts of Event

### a. "Inciting event" and "main event"

The commonly known concepts of "inciting event" and "main event" are taught as simple structural characteristics of the play, where the inciting event is that which determines the action of the play, and the main event is that which, in its traditional definition, "changes all the relationships between the characters in the play" (Carnicke, 159-60). In Stanislavsky, the "inciting event" is conceptually connected to the Russian Formalists' idea of "*fábula*," a secular myth that is closely connected to the social concerns of the audience at hand. (Carnicke, 201) In other words, the inciting event must be more than just the personal tragedy of a particular character: it must somehow be significant for all the characters in the play, create the action/conflict that moves all these characters, and consequently, must be closely connected to the main event in the play.

The playwright's task is to "estrangle" the "factual" events of the secular myth ("*fábula*") by creating a new version for a modern audience ("*siuzhet*").<sup>1</sup> This, for example, is the kind of work that often goes into modern adaptations of Shakespeare. These new versions could be done in an openly "distanced" fashion, or, as often was the case among Russian directors under the tsars or the soviets, in a veiled signification that the audience immediately understood.

This type of dynamic was often applied, dramaturgically, to the canonic stories of a theatre tradition. Chekhov's plays signified on Ostrovsky's plots, and *The Cherry Orchard* can be read as a re-signification of the events of *An Outrageous Fortune*. But it could also be applied, directorially, to the stories of canonic plays when they are restaged – and this was Stanislavsky's emphasis when he stressed the “chain of events” over the formalists' concept of “plot” (Carnicke, 200). So when Efros determines, in his Malaya Bronnaya production in 1976, that the inciting event of *Othello*<sup>2</sup> is *intrigue*, and stages every moment of the play in function of this inciting event, the audience immediately grasps the biting social criticism behind it, even though not one word of Shakespeare's play has been updated – in the spirit of his formulation of an ideal thematic action, below. (Efros 2-89) The main event of the play is more than just Iago's destruction of Othello: it is also a political class's destruction of the human spirit.

#### **b. Experiencing in Real Time**

A central concept in Stanislavsky was the concept of “perezhiyat” or “experiencing.” For Stanislavsky, “experiencing” for the actor was not just a question of believing what was happening to the character, but actually “creating” in real time, thereby ensuring that the theatrical event happens with every new performance. Carnicke explains this succinctly:

By doing so, he begins to think of the theatrical event itself as the source of the actor's genuine experience. Stanislavsky now equates “to experience” (*perezhiyat*)

with “to create” (*tvorit'*). He thus identifies the actor's time on stage with real time, hence life experience. [...] Actors “live” on stage, because they “create” on stage. (Carnicke, 144)

Stanislavsky always insisted that the actors be very clear in their full command of the “chain of events,” which he would ask them to “score,” and this improvisatory, scored “experiencing,” recreated in every performance, was vital for creating this inner structure of the play. As is clear in his exercises in Active Analysis, these events were not formal, structural events, dependent on a given line or phrase in the play, but a result of the players' actions in the scene.<sup>3</sup> His interest was fixed in this cumulative, non-narrative, performance event: his idea of the “life of the human spirit” underplayed the structural idea of event – as part of the plot – and gave much more importance to the event as perceived by the actors and the audience at every moment.

Stanislavsky gained this conviction in his observations of one of the great Russian actors, Michael Chekhov, so Chekhov's description of this creative work of the actor clarifies Stanislavsky's idea, in his chapter on improvisation in his book *To the Actor*:

Yet every role offers an actor the opportunity to improvise, to collaborate and truly co-create with the author and director. This suggestion, of course, does not imply improvising new lines or substituting business for that outlined by the director. On the contrary. The given lines and the business are the firm bases upon which the actor must and can develop his improvisations. *How* he speaks the lines and *how* he

fulfils the business are the open gates to a vast field of improvisation. [...] More than that, there are innumerable other moments between the lines and business when he can create wonderful psychological transitions and embroider his performance on his own, where he can display his true artistic ingenuity. (Chekhov, 36.)

It is important that the structure here, like a musical structure, does not need to change for the improvisations to work – what's important is the actor's ability to truly experience each moment.

The formal structural notes that Russian directors give their actors, because of this assumption of the actor's rhythmic ability to improvise within the structure, are often ones that help the actor react in real time: line readings, therefore, have always been a standard practice in the Russian theatre. What is meant here, of course, is not mechanical declamation, but an intonational score, as the Russians call it, based on real human reactions. Vakhtangov was famous for giving his actors the exact quality they required to give their role its full expression:

When Vakhtangov demonstrated some quality (gesture or intonation) to an actor, the actor felt that this was the exact quality he was missing in order to fully express himself. [...] They] felt it as *their own*. (Zakhava quoted in Malaev-Babel, 13)

When a director gives an intonation, it is not just a question of pauses or transitions between scenes, it also involves the (improvisational) rhythm of the given structure itself

– a reference to a very specific human experience which helps the actor identify with the character. The intonational scoring, then, is not in the text, nor even in some parallel to a musical arrangement – but in (rhythmic) performance.<sup>4</sup>

### **c. Adaptation**

Another one of Stanislavsky's concepts connected to this discussion is called "adaptation."

When we interact, words are not enough; they are too formal, lifeless. To give them life, you need feeling, and to open them up, and really communicate with your object, you need adaptations. They fill out the words, complete what has been left unsaid. [...] We will take this word – adaptation – to mean any inner or outer sly devices, which are used to help people to adjust to each other when interacting, and to have an influence on their object. (Translation mine. Stanislavsky, II, 217)

Whenever Stanislavsky illustrates the concept, it is always through an improvisation, a new and living tactic. These adaptations are improvised tactics "beyond words" which are sought in rehearsal to make the action clearer, and to intensify the communication amongst the actors to give the words and action a sense of living experience.

Michael Chekhov connects this idea of improvisation to ensemble work, and believed that an actor's talent was useless without a company. He thought that it was one of the most important parts of the rehearsal process:

The actor must develop within himself a sensitivity to the creative impulses of others./An improvising ensemble lives in a constant process of giving and taking. A small hint from the partner – a glance, a pause, a new or unexpected intonation, a movement, a sigh, or even a barely perceptible change of tempo – can become a creative impulse, an invitation to the other to improvise. (Chekhov, 41)

Every change of mood, every beat of the eyelash, must find a living, immediate reaction in the actor, each inner movement of the partner demands the “a corresponding adjustment of one’s adaptations.” The idea of adaptation is intimately connected to the idea of “being in the moment,” of adhering to the given circumstances of the play, but at the same time being alive to the stage dynamics at any given moment. The structure may be identical from night to night, but the adaptations from night to night are slightly different.

**d. “Holding Off”**

No discussion of event can be complete without discussing the concept of emotion. This is because whenever an event is significant, the corresponding emotional response will be strong. Since an important objective in the theatre is to portray a “complete action,” or event, and to make this event as significant as possible, then the effectiveness of the stage event will depend greatly on the actors’ ability to create (or carefully undermine) emotional truth.

The first important point to be made is that Stanislavsky's key examples in his chapter on emotional recall are group improvisations – the emotional truth depends on the group seizing, in the moment, all of the ramifications of the imagined situation. (Stanislavski, 195-200) The second point is that when Stanislavsky talks about his own experience, he refers to the constant evolution of the associations which his imagination calls up when he remembers a particular event (Stanislavski, 2008, 203-5) – in his description, emotional recall is connected to a constant openness to new associations as they come up from day to day in the real world outside the theatre. In terms of technique, then, Stanislavsky's discussion of emotion can also be understood with reference to the idea of "adaptation," and to the concentrated imagination of a group of actors working together.

This emphasis is consistent among a number of Russian directors, but they often use different terms to describe it. One is from Vakhtangov, and is connected to his idea that the actor must be alive to things alive.

It can only "happen" to an actor if the actor "leaves themselves alone," allows themselves full freedom of following their creative impulses, and yields to their creative intuition, courageously following its urges. (Malaev-Babel, 11)

Another is Stanislavsky's *vyderzhka* (literally – "holding off"): the idea here is paradoxical – it says, in order to find the right emotional response, you must deny it, hold it in, postpone it, as it were, hold it off. If you actively seek the impulse, you will crush it; if you wait for it, it will come.

Finally, Chekhov, in his chapter on atmosphere, says the following:

Avoid two possible mistakes. Don't be impatient to 'perform' or 'act' the atmosphere with your movement. Don't deceive yourself; have confidence in the power of the atmosphere and imagine and woo it long enough (it will not be long at all!), and then move your arm and hand *within* it. [...] It will stir your feelings by itself, without any unnecessary and disturbing violence on your part. (Chekhov, 56)

These three tactics, Vahkhtangov's "leaving yourself alone," Stanislavsky's "holding off" and Chekhov's "wooing the atmosphere," all connected to a general awareness of the gathering event on stage while still remaining in the moment, are tactics to help the actors react adequately, as a group, to the large events when they occur, both in rehearsal and in performance.

## **2. African American Concepts of Event**

### **a. Authenticating Narratives and their Signification**

In order to frame this discussion, I will briefly summarize Robert Stepto's concept of the "authenticating narratives" of African American literature.

In his canonic text on the influence of slave narratives on African American literature (1991), Robert Stepto talks of Frederick Douglass' "marvellously rhetorical omission" of certain key events in his life story, because he does not wish to "run the hazard of closing

the slightest avenue by which a brother slave might clear himself of the chains and fetters of slavery" (24). Stepto explains that

...it derives from the example of Douglass's tale and from his fulminations against those authors who unwittingly excavate the Underground Railroad and expose it to the morally thin mid-nineteenth-century American air. (Stepto, 25)

Stepto's argument has to do with narrative strategy and Douglass's control of his own story: since there is an atmosphere of mistrust which surrounds the veracity of the slave narratives, the authors of these narratives often had to resort to "authenticating devices" by white publishers in order for their stories to be believed and therefore contribute to the cause of abolitionism. But Douglass authenticates his story by *omitting* the description of key events that might influence the outcome of others' still evolving struggle for freedom. He then links this strategy with Douglass's downplaying of a central political event in the abolitionist movement, his speech at Nantucket in 1841 ("The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down." [25]) and shows that Douglass's rhetorical strategy supplants his abolitionist publisher as the definitive historian of his past. Stepto's book relates how Douglass's narrative (and others') offer tropes for succeeding generations of African American authors, such as Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright.

Stepto's structural analysis here is very sophisticated, and involves much more than this brief description can possibly summarize, but for the present discussion, Stepto's

illustration of the influence of the slave narrative on African American literature clearly indicates how fundamental the organization of events – what the Russian structuralists call “siuzhet” – has been for black American writers: events are described or elided in function of their influence on real world events, they are framed in such a way as to enhance the narrator’s perceived credibility and agency, and an all-too-apparent “inciting event” (in this case, Douglass’s bondage as a measure of his people’s) evolves into “main event” (his freedom) rhetorically and allegorically for a rich canvas of significations related to the theme of freedom. Finally, when these strategies form the metaphorical basis for the “authenticating narratives” of fictional literature, this second-order transition also involves re-thinking the events in function of the larger social aspirations of the new generation of readers.

The theatre, of course, is very much a part of this tradition, and the central place of historical events, and their rhetorical or allegorical signification, has been a fundamental aspect of black American theatre from its beginnings to the present time. In the introduction to her book of essays *Reading Contemporary African-American Drama*, Trudier Harris describes Hansberry as part of a long tradition of historical adaptation:

By finding her imaginative point of departure in an event that makes clear the intersections of history, white supremacy, and African American positionality, Hansberry joins many of her literary brothers and sisters. From their beginnings in

America, writers of African descent have found their subject matter in the historical events that shaped their lives. Playwrights are no exception. (Harris, xiii)

Though Harris's argument here is mostly connected to a re-signification of self "against a back drop of centuries of misrepresentation," more than one essay in the book show how black playwrights "signified" on earlier narratives or on historical events in order to address issues of identity in their characterizations.<sup>5</sup>

Black American history has been a series of life-shattering or life-affirming events that are ever present in the audience's memory and imagination. This urgent sense of history, of course, has given black American history a mythical dimension. The Middle Passage, the Emancipation, the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance – all of these historical events have provided inciting events for the plays, and given a larger dimension to the stories that they tell. There was never any need for a Danchenko or a Stanislavsky to point out the importance of the inciting event in the black American theatre, because of the inevitability of the historical background in African American story-telling. So *A Raisin in the Sun* is not just the purchase of a new house in a white neighbourhood. The event involved is much larger for the audience who is watching: it is the perceived promise of a new social acceptance during the civil rights movement. The fact that the play is explicitly criticized by Sidney Poitier because it stops before the characters move into the white neighbourhood and will have to deal with white hostility (Poitier, *Measure*, 149-51)<sup>6</sup> shows clearly that the playwright's choice of a main event, in relation to the

inciting event, is like Douglass's "marvellous rhetorical omission" in that it is a function of a certain attitude towards the real-world struggles, and of a certain perception of how the play's effect on the audience will influence that struggle.

As Chekhov reworked Ostrovsky's stories, so too black playwrights look back on earlier versions, earlier elaborations of these secular myths, as one might call them, and then signify, dramaturgically, on these events by adjusting the main events of their plays. *Who's Got His Own* not only signifies on *A Raisin in the Sun* in terms of characterization, by contrasting a defiant Tim, Jr. to a subservient Walter Younger, but also by reacting to a similar myth, the promise of integration during the burgeoning civil rights movement, with startlingly different events: instead of a father who has left a pension, there is one who has destroyed his family's happiness because he couldn't stand up to the white establishment; instead of Ruth Younger ultimately deciding against having an abortion, there is Clara who is forced to have one because her white boyfriend can't abide to have a child by her; instead of a leading man who respectfully stands up for his rights in front of the racist white visitor, there is Tim, Jr., who tries to explain his situation to his white friend, and ends up nearly killing him.

But of course, this signification can also happen directorially: Lloyd Richards directs *Who's Got His Own* for a white audience off-Broadway, and the events are played ambiguously enough to be successful with the white mainstream audience, who "saw it as a reflection more on race relations than on black consciousness" (Fabre, 135). More

extraordinary still: by choosing to direct this signification of an earlier play that he staged, Richards shows his ability to gauge just how much the white audience can accept in the evolving circumstances outside the theatre. At the same time, Robert Macbeth's more Brechtian and unambiguous version of *Who's Got His Own* is critically acclaimed by an entirely different audience a year later.<sup>7</sup>

#### **b. Rhythmic Asymmetry**

The Molettes, once again, have a concise description of how the "climax" is achieved in the African American theatre (here using the example of a preacher with a congregation):

In Afrocentric ritual theatre, the structure is based upon a dramatic premise. [...] The premise builds in emotional intensity as a result of the arrangement of actions within the presentation. Conflict through plot complication is acceptable, but not necessary, since there are other devices available to increase the emotional intensity. The emotional intensity eventually reaches a point of climax, causing an emotional release among members of the congregation or the audience. However, this point of climax and emotional release may occur at different points in time for different members of the congregation. This disparity is possible because the climax is not irrevocably connected to the transfer of cognitive information through the literal words or actions. (Molette and Molette, 137)<sup>8</sup>

Later, they have this to say in more technical terms about the same thing:

The element of rhythm is a dominant force in Afrocentric ritual theatre. The Afrocentric religious ritual is almost totally dependent upon tempo and rhythm as the means of ordering the presentation into a beginning, a middle, and an end. The tempo bulds to a climax and then recedes. In the process, the rhythmic ideal to be aimed for is asymmetry. [...] Further, the asymmetry of rhythm in Afrocentric drama is present in the dialogue as well as in the music. Frequently, the rhythm is an overriding factor with the choice of dialogue. Syllables may be added or deleted from words. Words or phrases may be repeated several times in order to create a more intense rhythmic response from the audience participants. (Molette and Molette, 139)

Though the Molettes are making a clear connection between African American “ritual theatre” and the black church, in order to de-emphasize the importance of standard structural modes of the American “well-made play” in the African American theatre, the structural analysis can apply to any play which relies on an improvisationally musical structure such as those many forms which had been evolving since the Harlem Renaissance. There are many parallels here with some of the ideals of rhythm and improvisation sought in the Russian theatre: the event is not dependent on “the transfer of cognitive information through literal words or actions” but “may occur at different points in time for different members of the congregation.” The event does not depend on “information” – on narrative elements of the story – because, as seen, the story is already known: “In Afrocentric ritual theatre, the structure is based upon a dramatic premise.”

Though there is no specific mention of form, the relationship between rhythm and structure is clear in this idea: “Syllables may be added or deleted from words. Words or phrases may be repeated several times in order to create a more intense rhythmic response from the audience participants.” The Molettes later clarify that this work on language is connected to the use of black speech patterns. “A syllable, or even a whole word, may be omitted from a phrase if it interferes with the rhythmic pattern. This rhythmic pattern is the origin of many of the idioms of ‘Negro dialect’.” The rhythmic variation is in fact an idiomatic improvisation based on the specific sounds of a particular way of speaking. It is tuned in to the audience both in terms of their language, and in terms of their emotional response.

Baraka makes the same connection between structure and rhythm – and specific human lives – in his reflection on expressive language:

But does *close-ter* (in the context of “jes a close-ter, walk withee”) mean the same thing as *closer*? Close-ter, in the term of its user is, believe me, exact. It means a quality of existence, if actual physical disposition perhaps... in its manifestation as a *tone* and *rhythm* by which people live, most often in response to common modes of thought best enforced by some factor of environmental emotion that is exact and specific. (Baraka, 2009, 195-96)

Notice that *rhythm* is the manifestation of a “quality of existence,” specific experience of living – and that conveying this experience is closely linked to a very specific form as

a response to some “environmental emotion.” The same is true when a performer “omits a syllable, or even a whole word” if it interferes with the rhythmic pattern – that is to say, with the living emotional environment as being experienced with the congregation at that moment, as connected to some current shared experience outside the church walls.

Stanislavsky’s “experiencing” and Chekhov’s “improvisation in the structure,” where this structure includes very specific intonations or rhythmic patterns, are akin to Baraka’s rhythm as a manifestation of a “quality of existence,” where there is an exact response which takes on a very specific linguistic or gestural form.

Finally, in connection to Meyerhold’s trust in his actors’ ability to maintain the structure despite improvisations, the Molettes stress the importance of spontaneity in the black theatre:

Spontaneity is a valued aesthetic concept in Afrocentric ritual theatre. At least two prerequisites are necessary for the spontaneous creation of good art. These prerequisites are sufficient practice to have mastered the art form, and spiritual involvement in the performance event. Conversely, European-American theatre values the ability to pretend to create an illusion of spontaneity, as opposed to actual spontaneity. (Molette and Molette, 147)

Here again, there is a similar idea: a mastery of the art form – which involves structure – and “spiritual involvement.” There cannot be spontaneity if there is not a full mastery of form.

### c. Call and Response

Though nowhere is there any specific reference to an acting strategy parallel to the Stanislavsky's concept of adaptation, which depends on the actor reacting to every inner movement of the stage partner, "call and response," which has been an important part of the "blues aesthetic" in black American playwriting, is a performance-based concept which is very consistent with the idea of adaptation. Consider Paul Carter Harrison's discussion of "call and response" in his introduction to *Totem Voices*:

Thus, whether speaking in tongues during a sacred ceremony or issuing the word nonverbally through instruments [...] the storyteller must be cognizant of modifications in rhythm, pitch, and tonality, significance of motival intention implied by repetition, and the transcendental potential of word/song elicited through call and response. Call and response is deeply embedded in the traditional modes of communication in the black world. [...] (Harrison, xxxiv)

Harrison goes on to show the various forms call and response takes in African-American and African culture, showing that it is not limited to a preacher animating a congregation, but includes many different forms of interaction, including dialogue between two people and even "multiple personas in a single voice" (Harrison, xxxvi). The important thing is the connection of call and response with a cognizance of "modifications in rhythm, pitch, and tonality, significance of motival intention implied by repetition." The practice of call and response requires a very refined ability for sensing

other people's rhythms and even their "motival intentions" – and the feel of this description is very similar to Michael Chekhov's view of adaptation: the need to be sensitive to the "the creative impulses of others" such as "a glance, a pause [...] or a sigh." Since the call and response model is also a central form of theatre dialogue in black dramaturgy, it necessarily calls for a certain kind of performative sensitivity.

The call and response model adopted by the majority of songs thus provides the theatre with the patterns of interaction it seeks to establish with the community. A dialogue can take place between the group and the individual. Work songs made the call of the leader alternate with the response of the group; and even the blues continues the patterns of those first songs, for the solitary singer often answers his own voice. Moreover the polyphonic structure of black music adapts well to dramatization and to dialogue. [...] The movement in drama goes simultaneously from the playwright, who listens to his characters and orchestrates their voices, to the director, who listens to the actors in order to harmonize their interaction, and ultimately to the actor, who cannot ignore those around him. (Fabre, 221)

These "patterns of interaction" ensure that the performer and the group are together, and Fabre explicitly connects the concept to work in rehearsal between the director and the actors, and among the actors themselves.

#### **d. Tarrying and Ritual Event**

In this last discussion, emotion is discussed in terms of the emotional response of an audience with regards to the emotional climax of a sermon or a play. The concern is not so much with whether the actor can experience an emotion as whether, working rhythmically as group, the group – including the audience – can come to a collective emotional experience.

Consider the following quote by the Molettes from the same chapter:

The rise and fall in emotional intensity is very carefully organized throughout the entire order of service and is not a function of the sermon alone. For instance, the congregation may tarry for whatever length of time is necessary to arrive at a proper level of emotional involvement before the sermon begins. Tarrying is not simply a means of delaying the sermon until the late arrivals have been seated. It is an important initial step in the process of achieving a dramatic ritual climax. In each church the preacher or a highly respected elder will have the designated responsibility of determining when this proper level of involvement has arrived and taking some pre-determined action that both prompts the beginning of the sermon is about to begin. A similar function is accomplished in the presentation of secular poems and stories by having those who congregate to witness the presentation repeatedly encourage the presenter to perform until that initial tarrying step has

been achieved. The presenter must know when this occurs and offer to begin the requested presentation at that time. (Molette and Molette, 138)

This “tarrying” is like Michael Chekhov’s concept of “wooing the atmosphere” in that the preacher vigilantly waits for a sense of emotional readiness – except that here, it is the congregation which is “holding off” in “encouragement” of the preacher or poet, and the leader must simply be ready to intervene, must “know,” when a sense of emotional involvement has been achieved. A careful examination of Stanislavsky’s chapter on emotional recall shows that his concept is very much in the same spirit: he is concerned with the *company’s* response as a group, and its ability to create a collective emotional response that is convincing for the audience. The advantage of the African American concept of tarrying, over Stanislavsky’s often misinterpreted concept of emotional recall, is that it helps ensure the emotional connection of the players and avoids the kind of self-absorption which might deaden the full expression of the stage event.

A final note here, on the importance of emotion in the theatrical event of black theatre:

Afrocentric thought regards knowing and feeling as inseparable aspects of the whole process by which human beings receive stimuli from the outside world.

(Molette and Molette, 153)

They go on to say that the ritual participation of the audience is a fundamental aspect of this emotional work, stressing not so much the “ensemble” as the larger collective of

the actors in ritual communion with the audience. This problem of ritual is another central aspect of African American theatre, and it will be addressed in the next chapter.

### **3. Final Reflection: Event**

In this chapter I have contrasted five parallel concepts of event in the Russian and African American theatre traditions.

I have shown that the relationship of the main event to the inciting event, in the Russian theatre, as a dynamic re-working of the secular myth finds its parallel in the African American tradition of signifying on major historical events in authenticating narratives, but once again, the real-world consequences of these narratives in the black American tradition render the stakes of such signification much higher than in the Russian context.

I have shown the central importance in the Russian theatre of experiencing on stage in real time, as guarantor of a living stage event, has its parallel in the African American emphasis on rhythmic asymmetry as guarantor of the shared experience between the audience and the performers. In both traditions, improvisation within a repeating structure and rhythmic scoring are highly valued. The "quality of existence" of this rhythmic asymmetry is more connected to guaranteeing the shared experience of the audience response than in the Russian concept.

I have shown that the Russian school's concept of adaptation finds a parallel in the call and response traditions of African American performance, but once again, the concept here has a stronger emphasis on audience participation.

Finally, I have shown that various formulations of Stanislavsky's idea of "holding off" as guarantor of a genuine emotional response in the Russian tradition finds its parallel in the African American concept of "tarrying" with the extraordinary difference that the audience is a main participant in the provocation of this emotional response.

### **Chapter 3. Russian and African American Concepts of Action**

Of the three theatre concepts, character, event and action, action is the most important, and the most difficult to describe. I have chosen to describe action last because it will lead back to the discussion of the larger thematic actions in the African American theatre, and to how this dissertation will look at the rehearsal process of Lloyd Richards.

The four Russian concepts of action that will be examined here are:

“impulse/association,” “thematic task,” “thematic action” and “larger thematic action”. “Impulse/association” finds a very specific parallel in the African American concept of the human reference in expressive language or gesture. “Thematic task,” “thematic action” and “larger thematic action” have parallel concepts in the general concept of signification in the African American aesthetic: the signification of everyday actions, the signification of ritual and dramatic action, and the larger signification of African American life in general. These significations, however, though similar to the Russian concepts, are not exactly parallels: most of the performance practices of the African American tradition that have been described up to now, in fact, can be seen as thematic tasks or actions as well, as I will show. Both sections will end with a reflection on the director’s role in signifying the stage action, with the second reflection focussing on the particular actions Lloyd Richards had to signify. This will prepare the reader for the discussion in the second part of the dissertation.

## 1. Russian Concepts of Action

### a. Impulse and Action

For Stanislavsky, all “action” starts with an “impulse”. In his definition, an impulse is a “wanting” or “striving”. The term that best describes “impulse” as meant by Stanislavsky is Grotowski’s concept of “association” – neither “image” nor “form” nor “concept,” an association is a full-bodied apprehension of some experience in the world that is compelling for the performer.<sup>1</sup>

Action is defined, then, as an impulse or association with a result: one that has an effect on the world. What is important about the concept in Russian training is the intimate connection action has with “impulse.” For a Russian theatre professional, there is no action if there is no uninterrupted flow of creative impulses.

Despite Stanislavsky’s claim above that “impulse is not yet action,” he often was content to show pure impulse as action, through his myriad examples of action. The first and most famous of these, when the concept is first introduced in his fictional theoretical dialogue known in English as *The Actor Prepares*, is when his alter ego Tortsov simply sits down in a chair as if he were sitting at home, and the students are amazed at the truthfulness of it. Much of the Moscow Art Theatre’s work involved experimenting with these “inner urges” without *formal* action. So for Stanislavsky and his contemporaries, impulse itself was already action – and therefore, despite its social concerns, the aesthetic work was ultimately ambiguous.

## **b. Thematic Task**

The basic unit of action in Stanislavsky's terminology, usually translated in the American mainstream, as "objective" or "intention", is "zadacha" – "task." A task is something you do because you need to. It may involve a considered intention or objective, but it is neither of these. A task is a unit of action that responds to a need – to a motive or inner urge – in short, a task is a unit of action that follows an impulse.

The task is what the actor does to create the illusion of a real-life action. When the task is concrete, it both satisfies the actor's real-world "striving," and solves the particular scene at hand. In other words, a task is assigned to the *actor* so that the *character* will acquire an (illusion of an) action. And the task should be as compelling for the actor as it is necessary for the character.

A clear example of this is from an early production by Stanislavsky's self-declared heir Grotowski, of Calderon's *The Constant Prince*. Grotowski asked the actor Ryszard Cieslak to dedicate himself entirely to the task of putting himself in the situation of himself as a young child in the simple games he would play. The task was not necessarily simple, but it was concrete. This same action on stage, in situation in the figure of the martyred Prince Ferdinand, gave a feeling of purity and innocence to all the physical actions he did on stage. But the actor did not try to understand "purity" by looking at motives or intentions – he just dedicated himself to his task, which absorbed him

completely, and this task had a very specific effect on his fellow actors and audience.  
(Ceballos, 1998)

All of the African American performance practices that I have described up to this point – such as character or event signification – are in fact thematic tasks because they respond both to the needs of the scene and the larger interests of the actors.

### **c. Thematic Action**

When the task involves the full through-line of the play, Stanislavsky calls it the *sverkh-zadacha*, literally “over-task.” This concept unites the idea of the playwright’s thematic intention and the company’s specific means of achieving that intention. In mainstream American theatre, these specific means would be called “stage conventions”. I will translate “over-task,” however, as “thematic action” to stress Stanislavsky’s idea that the convention is not fixed but active, and must work towards some larger ideal.

The acting task satisfies both the actor’s creative nature and the present exigencies of a given scene in performance; the “over-task” does the same but for the given play. Here the actor must somehow find an action that will be creatively demanding for their artistic nature, coherent with the character’s role in the play, and satisfying for the particular social needs of the current audience. Perhaps the most famous “thematic action” in the modern history of theatre, a conceptual formulation that is both an ideal and an implicit task, is Brecht’s thematic action “*Verfremdung*” – “defamiliarization.” But when a thematic action has become easily named and identified, it has probably lost its original

social force and effective action, and has deteriorated into a simple, “decorative”, stage convention – a formal cliché, bereft of its original expressive force. Russian directors and companies try to re-define the thematic action for every new play they stage, to ensure the vitality and relevance of the stage action.

The following passage by Efros, one of the most important directors of the Soviet period, a protégé of Maria Knebel, and therefore Stanislavsky’s artistic grandson, describes a “third way” of producing plays which gives a sense of what is meant by “thematic action”:<sup>2</sup>

There are two types of classical productions. The first is old-fashioned, heavy-handed; earnest, honest, but boring and bad... The second is a transformation to a young, ‘modern’ style. Sometimes something wonderful occurs here. Out of all this foolishness something suddenly happens. But there’s a third way as well. An absolutely classical exterior, but an interior where everything suddenly feels new. In this kind of work the young spirit connects with wisdom. Such was Vilar’s *Don Juan* long ago. (Efros, III, 317. Cfr. Efros, 2009, 183)

Here it is clear that what is essential in the director’s search for stage form is not (necessarily) a transformation of older traditions (though he is more sympathetic to this than to museum-style stage conventions). Efros implies, instead, a thematic action where everything is “felt anew throughout.” The thematic action helps the actors find active

images and compelling actions that best respond to the play's impulses or associations – and to give the stage action a full coherent whole.

There is a final implication which arises from the idea of thematic action, which is important to mention here. Since thematic action involves finding the “positive” impulses behind the playwright's work, conflict is displaced as the centre of theatre action. For Stanislavsky, for example, Anton Chekhov's plays dealt with mean-spiritedness,<sup>3</sup> and therefore their thematic action was a striving for a better life. In other words, there must be a compelling reason which brings the characters together on stage – and the actors as well.

#### **d. Larger Thematic Action**

Stanislavsky then takes his idea even further: what he called the “over-over-task” – the thematic action of the company or playwright in their repertory of plays. This “larger thematic action,” which was briefly described in the introduction, is what makes the ensemble work truly take on a larger significance, because it gives time to a theatre to develop an inner group aesthetic through years of ensemble work; it is the larger, social and ethical task of the theatre company in producing its repertory of plays. Theatres require time to train and develop their actors, and their great artistic creations only can be achieved after years of work.

Once again, Brecht provides a useful example: the “epic theatre” – but once again, this larger thematic action of Brecht and his contemporaries has lost its original expressive

force, and has become a historical stage convention imitated by numerous companies, but outside the original context which made the stage action truly effective. Very clear examples of "larger thematic actions," which illustrate well the dynamic of the concept, can be found in the African American theatre, so I will complete the discussion of this concept in Section 2 of this chapter.

#### **e. Action and the Director**

Action is not only a question of the stage performance: action as a concept is also fundamental to the rehearsal process. The rehearsal's leader, the director, must constantly be in action if the actors are to succeed. But this does not mean, as described above, the kind of nervous and violent "energy" often associated with the directing profession. True action is impulse responding to a need; and this impulse will be snuffed out if violence is done to it: the director, then, is the first figure who must understand this idea of action.

Consider this anecdote by Jerzy Grotowski:

I remember the period when we were working on *Samuel Zborowski*, a play that has evolved through many incarnations into *Apocalypsis cum Figuris*. It was a very long and very precise work that lasted three years. I stayed seated for five months, watching my colleagues without saying a word. But they felt full well what I was watching them for. They understood that I was watching because I was expecting the best from each of them, and I didn't want to see things they already knew how to do. So it's wasn't worth saying: we're not there yet. It was better to say nothing

and be there watching. Until the moment *The Thing* arrives. And so it was clear when it did. There was a young researcher from the CNRT in Paris who was writing a thesis about *The Constant Prince*, of which he had only seen the performance and seen the rehearsals of the new work at the time. At the point when my silence was about to come to an end after five months, the young researcher, a very friendly and intelligent fellow, had to return to France. So he took me aside and he asked me: "Excuse me, could you tell me specifically how you direct?" I looked at him and I said: "By watching." He replied, "But you don't do anything." So I answered back: "Yes, but I wait for the performance to make itself." He left, and some time later returned to Poland to visit us and to watch *Apocalypse cum Figuris*. He asked me afterwards: "But when did you stage the performance?" "You were in the rehearsals." And he said to me again, "But you didn't do anything." "As I said, I wait for the performance to make itself. (Ceballos, 277)

In this example, the director does not intervene because that might involve interfering with the organic impulses of the actors; but non-intervention does not mean non-action. The "activeness" of this kind of director is not in the nervous hounding of the actor, but rather in the ability to intervene at precisely the right moment, in order to help the actor follow their associations. In this kind of work there is indeed little difference between Simon Shepherd's two categories of director as actor-trainer, and director as non-intervening shaper of the actor's artistic process.

In the Russian school, this idea of “active waiting,” this helping the actor follow their impulses without violence, comes up again and again.<sup>4</sup>

Thematic action starts with the director’s action. If the director can conduct their rehearsal in this same style of non-action leading to uncontrived creation, then the actors themselves will not force their solutions but will find them organically, and their performances will truly connect with the audience. It is not enough to block and organize and conceptualize – first and foremost, the director must know how to move an actor’s spirit, like Grotowski, by sitting and watching.

## **2. African American Concepts of Action**

### **a. Human Reference, Expressive Language and Expressive Gesture**

Ever since Langston Hughes’ call to black artists to look for aesthetic conventions that might carry the same expressive effect as black American music (Hughes, “The Negro Artist,” 1926) – in other words, ever since the “jazz” or “blues aesthetic” has worked as an ideal for black artists – the living association, described in the Russian school as the performer’s impulse, has been an important ideal for all of the African American arts. Hughes calls it the “eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul.”

Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. [...] Jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America;

the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul – the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. (Hughes, “The Negro Artist”, 35)

Hughes, of course, is looking for the performance impulse in the poetic line,<sup>5</sup> but his call to black artists to develop an aesthetic based on black music, with a clear call to theatre artists in his poem “Note on the Commercial Theatre” (*Complete Poems*, 214-15), extended to his own prolific work as a playwright. He sought for his theatre plays performances that themselves would have rhythm: “As if it were a rhythmic ballad, the overall conception of *Tambourines* must have rhythm. [...] This the staging must achieve. When the curtain falls, the final effect must be that of having heard a song – a melodic, likable, dramatic song” (*Collected Works*, 6, 281-2).

In the sixties, another poet/playwright, Amiri Baraka, who also struggled to apply the aesthetic of black music to his poems and plays, articulated with great precision how referential impulse of blues music can be used to make the word expressive. Consider the following quote:

Words’ meanings, but also the rhythm and syntax that frame and propel their concatenation, seek their culture as the final reference for what they are describing of the world. An A flat played twice on the same saxophone by two different men does not have to sound the same. If these men have different ideas of what they

want this note to do, the note will not sound the same. Culture is the form, the overall structure of organized thought (as well as emotion and spiritual pretension). (Baraka, 2009, 193-4)

Baraka uses a formal musical unit here – an A flat – and says that even such a simple formal unit, played on the same instrument by two different musicians, will have a different sound if “these men have different ideas of what they want this note to do.” The spoken word is the same: not only its meaning but its “rhythm and syntax” “seek their culture as the final reference for what they are describing of the world” – a reflection that closely resembles Stanislavsky’s idea that every phenomenon in the world has its own particular tempo-rhythm. The way a word is spoken, or an action carried out, can call up very specific associations from a shared life experience.

Perhaps the clearest example of the need for a living impulse in the use of language is profanity: and the performance of profanity in the dozens is particularly useful. When profanity is unsupported by impulse and rhythm, it is both harsh and dull. But when the performers are able to create associations with these impulse-driven words, the “result is poetry”:

[In “the dozens”], the important consideration is not the structure. Rather, it is the texture – how successfully such assertions are directly experienced by the audience. One of the most highly valued abilities in playing “the dozens” is the ability to create visual images with words. [...]

A great deal of the content of “the dozens” is sexually “suggestive” and the language is usually filled with four letter words. [...] One must understand that the performers must use the most inflammatory statements possible if the game is to achieve its ultimate social function: to instill in the participants the ability to maintain a calm and aware demeanor in the face of insult and abuse. (Molette and Molette, 178-79)

Here again it is clear how even the harshest human language can, when controlled by the ability to create poetic associations, become poetic, and more importantly, how this ability is fundamental for the survival of its users in real-world situations. In the same section, the authors point out that the “moral objectionability” of “the dozens” is ultimately superficial, and imply that moral ambiguity and real-world action are necessary companions.

Much of Ed Bullins’ work is built around this kind of poeticization of profanity:

Bullins establishes this world, in part, through language and music. As Lindsay Patterson observes, Bullins has a “wonderful ear for the language of the ghetto” [...] In 1961, in *The Toilet*, Baraka similarly used crude street language, but the effect was different; it was a challenge to his audience and a comment on the world depicted. Unlike Bullins, Baraka did not find the speech lyrical; rather, he used the play’s language to extend its unsavory setting. Bullins, however, delights in black

street argot and reveals its lyricism while keeping its harshness and profanity intact.

(Sanders, 2002, 183)

Here the connection between impulse and action is clear, how the performer's ability to use the language in certain ways can have very specific effects on the audience.

Another important African American form that depends greatly on impulse and association is repetition: repetition is, after all, the simplest rhythmic structure, and its successful performance depends a great deal on the ability of the performers make the repetitive structure vital through impulse. Here, the Molettes use a preacher's invocations to illustrate the dynamics of repetition:

A preacher may make a simple straightforward statement like, "The Lord is my shepherd." Now let us assume that he gets vocal acclamation from his congregation of low to medium intensity – a few "Amen's," a few "My Lord's." He may then repeat the statement, "The Lord is my shepherd," five or six times while using the intensity of his rhythm and vocal inflections to cause the congregation's vocal affirmation to grow in volume and intensity. What matters is the way he says it, not what he says. And if he says, "The Lord is my shepherd" six or seven times, he will say it a different way each time, with each new and different way aimed at soliciting a more unanimous and more emotionally intense vocal affirmation from the congregation. (Molette and Molette, 139-40)

What matters, then, is “the way he says it,” and this way depends on an active, sensitive and attentive desire, in the moment, to achieve a particular effect in the congregation. In the language of the Russian theatre, the impulse is constantly renewed in order to draw the congregation into the ritual.

Impulse, of course, is an eminently physical concept, but there is a difference between the physical impulse of the athlete, which expresses little except physical beauty, and the associative impulse of the physical performer. In the same way that the black theatre has turned to music to articulate the nature of expressive language, so they have turned to dance to articulate expressive gesture. Robert Farris Thompson’s article on the “aesthetic of cool” in West African dance, which appears in Errol Hill’s *The Theatre of Black Americans*, is in this spirit. It describes the “talking dances” of the West African cultures, the eminently percussive nature of dance gesture, and ultimately, the social-moral tendencies of the West African “dances of derision.”

Finally, the dance of derision sometimes breaks these rules in order to mime the disorder of those who would break the rules of society. Yoruba moral inquisitors do not really dance; they loom. Their shapes, their cries, their motions are unearthly, meant to startle, meant – quite literally – to frighten the hell out of people.

(Thompson, 110)

There is a continuity between this reflection and Baraka’s clearest – and typically provocative – example of association in movement, spoken by Clay, in *Dutchman*:

The belly rub? You wanted to do the belly rub? Shit, you don't even know how. You don't know how. That ol' dipty-dip shit you do, rolling your ass like an elephant. That's not my kind of belly rub. Belly rub is not Queens. Belly rub is dark places with big hats and overcoats held up with one arm. Belly rub hates you... Old bald-headed four-eyed ofays popping their fingers ... and don't know yet what they're doing. They say, "I love Bessie Smith" and don't even understand that Bessie Smith is saying, "Kiss my ass, kiss my black unruly ass." Before love, suffering, desire, anything you can explain, she's saying, and very plainly, "Kiss my black ass." And if you don't know that, it's you that's doing the kissing. (Baraka, 1971, 34)

Notice the associations that Baraka/Clay makes – “belly rub is dark places with big hats and overcoats held up with one arm” – refer to some shared experience. But he goes on to say that, at their most explicit, these associations can be a kind of coded signification, “Kiss my black ass.” Formal imitators of these very specific forms miss the point, but these forms suggest a panorama of associations which come up in real time as the artist is performing.

The effect sought, of course, does not have to be emotionally fraught – the “the tomtom” can be “of joy and laughter” as well as “pain swallowed in a smile.” Consider this next quote from Woodie King, Jr., in another text about the theatre:

The [rhythm and blues] group and the rhythm became easily identifiable. Their *sound* and their rhythm became their trademark. I cannot show you the background of the R & B groups, the choreographed steps, the *doo.wah-wo-oooh sa ra*, the harmony. It cannot be defined. [...] The Royal Jokers, for example, were known for throwing an imaginary bee on each other, then dancing and gyrating until it was found. (*Present Condition*, 54)

Here the association is sought by the group in an inner rhythmic improvisation, and the shared experience happens in real time – but once again, within the confines of very specific forms. Notice as well how the impulse involved not just the sound but the physicality. Impulse and association, in function of a specific apprehension of a tempo-rhythm in Stanislavsky's terms, are fundamental aspects of gesture in the African American theatre.

But perhaps the best example of pure physical impulse, akin to Stanislavsky's sitting in his chair but with much higher stakes, is the long tradition of expressive bodily stillness in African American history. A theme running through Harvey Young's book *Embodying Black Experience* is that of stillness as effective action. His first example sets the tone for the book: seven individuals, Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Jack, Jem and Renty, "with their shirts pulled down to their waist or entirely removed" (27), are obliged to act as models for "scientific" daguerreotypes for Joseph T. Zealy. Young convincingly shows that the unwavering gaze of the seven individuals, who often had to stand perfectly still

for up to three minutes in order to get a clear photograph, was provocative at a time where looking directly at a white observer could lead to violent consequences. Concrete examples of stillness and inaction are then described throughout the book as examples of stillness as action.

**b. Realism and the Ritual of Everyday Life**

The Russian theatre's emphasis on action as impulse, and its decentring of conflict for action in situation, find explicit parallels in the enduring interest in realism in the black American theatre, where cultural affirmation – the signification of cultural practices and daily activities – has been more important than the formal concerns of directed action leading toward a clear event. As Henry D. Miller puts it succinctly:

Realism, or realistic strategies when applied to blacks, as Baldwin has suggested, could lead to a self-examination that it is the American habit to almost religiously avoid; that way lies "chaos," given America's deep and historic ambiguities about race, ethnicity, gender, morality, and even democracy itself. We all would rather go to the mall. Thus, for the overwhelming majority of black audiences, it is an extraordinary, even an *avant-garde*, event in the American theatre when black characters in a realistic scene actually talk honestly to each other about something that really matters to them, something that is other than a rephrasing or subtextual expression of their history of oppression. (Miller, 229)

Notice that, in purely formal terms, the action is the event – and so the formal event becomes secondary. The truthful representation of everyday actions, without the primitivizing distortions of the white stage, or the “subtextual expressions of their history of oppression,” is liberating. Realism in this context takes on the nature of a larger thematic action, as it was in XIX-century Russia, seeking to fully express the “soul” of a “folk” that had been historically oppressed and maligned.

The fundamental characteristic of action, after all, is freedom; the very act of showing actions as they occur in real life participates in this impulse to freedom. In this sense, these significations of everyday tasks are thematic tasks, in that they satisfy both the needs of the scene, and the actor’s participation in these acts of cultural affirmation.

The blues was a model to follow because its fundamental impulse was precisely this liberating action of expressing life exactly as it is experienced. In Ralph Ellison’s words:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (Ellison, 78-79)

Like Ostrovsky’s brutally honest depictions of Russian life, coined by Dobroliubov under a new thematic action he called “realism” (Brockett and Hildy, 370), the blues aesthetic in the theatre ultimately strives to tell things as they were and are, but the

“performance aspects of the Blues” – blues action, as it were – can be distinguished from Russian realism because, according to Miller, it is holistic:

Long before their American experience, the humanist lessons of a cosmology that defined a universe full of dualities had been drummed into the collective African conscience. That precarious West African cosmos [...] defined a pre-Christian, blues-like oneness of the standard Western oppositions: good and bad, joy and sorrow, spirituality and sexuality, life and death, etc. [...] These synthesized opposites form fundamental aspects of the religious belief systems that not only created the Blues, but also were adapted into most forms of African American folklore and even into the traditional black Christian Church. These belief systems were not the result of oppression; rather, they were the means by which African American survived oppression. (Miller, 24-25)<sup>6</sup>

This holistic realism, according to Miller, involves various “levels of reality,” including the supernatural world. This absence of cosmological hierarchy, as it were, places the cultural practices of everyday life, the aesthetic forms of cultural activity, the traditional rituals of African American belief systems, and even the supernatural actions of a spiritual world in the same sphere of concrete actions, and “any ‘abstract’ manipulation of sets, lighting or costume would severely diminish the central assumption at the core of this kind of dramatic art” (Miller, 231). Miller’s ultimate point is that, despite one hundred years of debate concerning the means and ends of black American

theatre, this realistic, “blues-like” holism has always been an important impulse in the various currents of African American theatre.

The holism of the blues aesthetic anticipates contemporary performance studies in teasing ritual out of the practices of everyday life. One of the first artists to fully articulate this connection between the blues and ritual was Ralph Ellison:

The blues speak to us simultaneously of the tragic and the comic aspects of the human condition and they express a profound sense of life shared by many Negro Americans precisely because their lives have combined these modes. This has been the heritage of a people who for hundreds of years could not celebrate birth or dignify death and whose need to live despite the dehumanizing pressures of slavery developed an endless capacity for laughing at their painful experiences. This is a group experience shared by many Negroes and any effective study of the blues would treat them first as poetry and as ritual. (Ellison, 256)

Ellison’s close friend and colleague, Romare Bearden, developed this view of blues as ritual in his painting, and he expressed his philosophy of art – depictions of the everyday lives of African Americans, including their religious rituals but also their everyday practices – as the “prevalence of ritual.”<sup>7</sup> August Wilson would take up this view of the blues aesthetic and create plays which would expressly emulate Bearden<sup>8</sup> and celebrate the “rituals of everyday life” (Plimpton, 74).

### **c. The Signification of Action and Ritual**

Still, for much of its history, the African American theatre has been unable to avoid developing its varying aesthetic currents in relation to larger social goals imposed by a hostile context. As in the Russian theatre, therefore, especially under the Soviets but really throughout Russian theatre history, it has always been impossible to stage a play's action without being aware how that action has traditionally been portrayed, or how theatres have been officially obliged to play certain scenes – and signifying that action not only according to one's personal view, but apprehensive of how that choice will influence a given audience in the real-world context. Thematic action is such a central aspect of the Russian stage because of the risks involved in presenting certain actions on stage: Russian directors needed clear thematic actions because they were often obliged to signify on the actions they were representing – though not always. African American artists, on the other hand, have traditionally been obliged to signify their actions all the time: a certain level of clarity in the thematic actions, therefore, has always been a fundamental aspect of the work.

One important example of the signification of action is the performance of “elements of black culture,” and Eleanor W. Traylor's analysis of the minstrel theatre provides a clear statement of the difficulty involved in re-signifying a ritual in the context of a stage tradition which caricatures action:

The minstrel show [...] was a masking ritual. [...] What white performers spied down-field, up-field, or around the slave cabins was a masking performance. They “borrowed” the masking feature but not the signification of the mask. Moreover, they observed a performance not dependent on a *static* text. What they saw was an *ecstatic* performance guided by a fluid text. They “borrowed” the illusion, severing that from the reality which shaped it. (Traylor, 51)

In the same vein is the following statement by John Graziano regarding black musical comedy at the turn of the century: “Most black musical librettos during this period [...], though concerned with values and themes central to the black experience, were patterned on the farce and included broad comic exchanges” (Cited in Krasner, 38).

Traylor and Graziano say the same thing, essentially, as Baraka does above regarding Bessie Smith, but applied directly to the theatre: the original source for the ecstatic action, the shared experience, is trivialized and caricatured by a hostile environment – and the particular case of the masking ritual is tragically lost to history.

Though minstrelsy was eventually abandoned, its habits were not, and this same kind of “static borrowing” of an “ecstatic tradition” carried on into the mainstream’s tendency to “turn the plays into set pieces, in which folk characters display talents or customs for which they are ‘noted’ – generally, singing, dancing, or working themselves into a frenzy during a church service” (Sanders, 2002, 33).

There were three ways that black artists resisted this trivialization and re-signified these black cultural elements. One was to “simultaneously accommodate and resist the dominant culture,” and “the early black musicals” by artists like Cole, Williams, Walker and others developed their “ability to obtain recognition and mastery of the American stage” (Krasner, 39).

A second route was to down-play these “folk” elements in order to address more pressing issues – as Willis Richardson did with his folk plays:

Richardson does not explore and elaborate the elements of black culture included in his plays; [...] As Richardson does not see his characters primarily as “folk,” he is not particularly observant of “folkways,” nor interested in them for themselves. All four of his folk plays concern rather the integrity of the black family and by extension the black people of America. (Sanders, 2002, 33)

Just as Frederick Douglass intentionally omits certain events of his story in function of developing real-world events, so Richardson puts little importance on these elements of black culture in order to address more pressing issues for the black community.

A third way of signifying on these rituals, much later on, was to wipe the slate clean, and try to develop entirely new rituals, as did many of the companies of the black theatre movement. It was only after the black American theatre was able to create its own audience that authors like August Wilson could attempt to re-signify cultural rituals like the juba or the work song for an entirely new audience.

Still, the audience perception is persistent, and this kind of ritual re-signification depends a great deal on performance: religious music or ritual movement in African American plays can re-inscribe old stereotypes if the players do not actively seek to endow these ritual actions with their appropriate ritual significance – and this work, therefore, often needs clear thematic tasks from a director versed in the forms and substance of the ritual tradition.<sup>9</sup> Here is where “thematic action” in the sense described by Efros above is so important: on the surface the stage ritual may be as before, but the inner action is entirely different.

What applies to these cultural practices also applies to other specific “life actions,” so to speak, which have consistently required playwrights and directors to search for stage actions that will give a resonance or a significance which adequately express all the ramifications of these real-world actions. For black theatre professionals, this resonance or significance in the stage action will be intimately connected to the theatre company’s attitude towards real-world responses to these life-actions. One striking example of this is the problem of violence.

Looking at violence will help further clarify the concept of action, and the difference between ecstatic action and static structure (such as formal events). The great majority of African American plays are written against a back-drop of violence, though their plots may not have explicit violence at all; in other words, violence often constitutes the stage action of African American plays, though not necessarily their formal events.

*A Raisin in the Sun*, for example, was inspired by Langston Hughes' famous poetic question: "What happens to a dream deferred?" Watching the play, the audience should sense that Hughes final question/possible answer, "Or does it explode?" is a very possible outcome for Walter Lee Younger. The fact that he does not explode, that no violence actually occurs in the play, doesn't mean the internalized violence has to be any less active, or actively struggled against. Violence, then, should inform every moment of the play's action, and the audience must feel that at any moment Walter Lee or any other of the play's characters might lose control, or begin to fight. Without this, the play's formal events have no resonance. What's more, a director may make this violent action more or less explicit, and question or confirm the play's seemingly non-violent stance, by emphasizing or de-emphasizing certain details in the performance. Whether the play comes across as simply moving or border-line radical depends a great deal on these "thematic tasks." Poitier claims, for instance, that the adjustments he made to the performance of Walter Lee leading up to the New York premiere, gave the play a radical edge which the script tended to undermine. (Poitier, *Measure*, 156-57)

The stakes involved in these kinds of discussions are very high, because the signification of the unstated but clearly present action has so many thematic ramifications for the characters and the audience. As in the Russian theatre in the Soviet period, this thematic signification through performance tasks is a constant necessity in the African American theatre.

Such is the nature of stage action that the opposite is also conceivable: there may be violent events in the plot, but no real violence in the stage action, because of a lyrical or symbolic evisceration of the violent action. This is because of the conventional nature of stage action and image. In the same way that the symbolic beauty or astuteness of a ghost's image, effectively created by a good stage convention, may well weaken an otherwise gripping internalized action carried out by the actors, so the symbolic beauty or astuteness of stage violence may diminish the urgent effect sought by playwrights and directors seeking to give meaningful expression to stage violence. Much depends, in both instances, on the company's ability to translate their convictions into thematic actions.

For example, Henry D. Miller, citing Werner Sollors, shows that Amiri Baraka's revolutionary theatre tended to re-inscribe the violent prejudices of white middle-class culture rather than criticize them, by resorting to conventional and often prejudiced images of menace:

Werner Sollors explains: "In Baraka's works, the image of the devil-enemy appears in the shape of bums, policemen, immigrants, homosexuals, Jews, and women, whereas white Anglo-Saxon entrepreneurs are underrepresented." In other words, as Sollors adds, Baraka's "Black Cultural Nationalism... retains middle-class traits and prejudices." And these "middle-class traits," according to Baraka's own lights, are Negro inheritances from white bourgeois society. Looked at in this way, Baraka's protest drama, too, had the annoying habit – as Locke would have noted – of

subtextually pointing to the superior judgment or power of that oppressive “other.”  
(Miller, 219)

By relying heavily on symbolic images that ultimately re-inscribe violent prejudices, Baraka’s plays ran the risk of weakening the effectiveness of the stage action, and trivializing his call for a revolutionary struggle against the racializing violence of society. If he succeeded in being provocative, it was thanks to more than just the symbolic writing.

Like ritual and violence, the static image of nudity is another stage problem which is difficult to signify without a clear thematic action. Nudity, regardless of the playwright’s intentions, can contribute to a character’s humiliation. And, like visceral reactions to violence, nudity can blind the spectator to the developing stage action – and therefore undermine its dramatic effect. The impulse to turn away from the indignity of the stage action is a very justified audience reaction, but it keeps the audience from a real appreciation of what’s happening on stage. Here is one example among many of how the problem might be solved: in *Sally’s Rape*, Robbie McCauley prevents the scene from depending on the audience’s objectifying gaze, and makes them *participate* in the action.

The pivotal scene in *Sally’s Rape* had McCauley standing on a block, stripped naked, embodying her great-great-grandmother, while Hutchins led the audience in chanting, “Bid ‘em in! Bid ‘em in!” Then, in an attempt to understand McCauley’s emotions, tangled in the representation of Sally’s emotions, Hutchins climbed onto

the auction block herself and began to slip out of her own dress. However, just as she was about to complete the action, she stopped, slowly pulled her dress back on, and stepped down. The moment required little elaboration: Sally, McCauley's great-great-grandmother, had no choice; Hutchins did, and she refused to be degraded. (Sonnega, 93)

In an interview with Patraha, McCauley explains that the audience participation here, led by Hutchins, "means sharing the ritual. I'm not on exhibition. I'm doing it as part of a ritual and so it's like helping the drummer by dancing. Jeannie is the interlocutor at that moment, so it's up to her to get the people to participate" (Patraha, 226).

McCauley's thematic task of bringing the audience into the action is extraordinary in that it signifies on all three problematic themes mentioned in this section – ritual, violence and nudity. Apart from providing an example of signifying the characterization in such a way as to conserve the subject's dignity while representing their humiliation (the audience is very aware that the character is a family member of McCauley's), engaging the audience in the ritual aspect of this still unresolved historical trauma<sup>10</sup> prevents the material from becoming simply "sentimental" or "ambiguous" or "symbolic" in a general way – while at the same time preventing a re-inscription of violence in the audience's objectifying gaze. By bringing the audience into the action, it obliges them to come to terms with the stage violence by making them ask themselves – have I ever let this happen? Did my ancestors?

The director makes a specific choice for a specific scene, and this choice both depends on and contributes to the larger thematic action being sought.

**d. Larger Thematic Action in African American Theatre**

The signification of cultural practices as a larger aesthetic project of the African American community parallels Stanislavsky's concept of larger thematic action as both an aesthetic ideal and a call to action – which is why the concept is so particularly useful in the context of African American aesthetic history. Many of the most famous aesthetically and genealogically related formulations and re-formulations in the history of the black American arts – W.E.B. Du Bois' "propaganda play," Alain Locke's "folk play," Langston Hughes' "jazz aesthetic," Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray's "blues aesthetic," K. Anthony Appiah's "spiritual realism," Wole Soyinka's "Ogunian tragedy," among many others<sup>11</sup> – may be thought of as larger thematic actions because most were calls to working towards social ideals using very specific cultural forms.

Although most are aesthetic movements involving all the arts,<sup>12</sup> they lend themselves to the idiom of the theatre because of their heavy reliance on performative practices in African American and African culture. When such performative elements are strictly a question of received forms – like the dozens or the idiomatic use of language, this problem remains dramaturgical. But when these performative elements involve ritual or supernatural beliefs, the performance problem becomes particularly acute, because special effects are often insufficient for convincing a live audience of the truth of a

supernatural stage event. The responsibility of resolving these aesthetic ideals as thematic actions falls squarely at the foot of the director.

Consider one example of the many studies that have connected the thematic world of August Wilson's plays with an African cosmology. In her article "Yoruba Gods on the American Stage: August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*," Sandra Richards suggests that Wilson's play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* operates within Yoruba cosmology, follows Soyinka in invoking Ogun, and suggests that Loomis, as spiritual leader, like Ogun, "risks psychic disintegration in order to traverse the chthonic abyss" (Richards, 1999, 94). The Ogunian tragedy, as aesthetic ideal here, is a fascinating reading of Wilson's play, and like the best theatre criticism, is an invitation to theatre companies to take the convention and develop it fully. Indeed, black theatre criticism has been uniquely creative in suggesting new ways to approaching the stage action that connect to performance traditions. The difficulty for the director is that these aesthetic ideals must happen on stage, and the audience must understand them without necessarily sharing the particular belief. The themes must mobilize into actions, and must be viscerally understood. A measure of whether Richards succeeded as a director is whether he was able, in his premiere production of *Joe Turner*, of giving a sense of the character's descent to and return from the "chthonic abyss."

Even when the aesthetic ideals call for specific forms, like signifying in all its dexterous linguistic forms, and even when a play is successful in turning these dexterous

forms into engaging dramatic literature, the performance element, and therefore the director's role, is fundamental for the play to come alive on stage. Before you can sing the blues, you have to have lived in the twelve-chord progression for several years as a musician; before you can carry off the dozens, you need many years of experience on the street. Delving into a tradition is *work* – not some immediately accessible, essentialist talent, or some evocative image whose intrinsic power is enough – and the director is an important catalyst in encouraging actors to make the long difficult climb to embodying that tradition.

Certainly, living “passively” in a tradition can make things easier for performers: when director Amy Saltz began the first rehearsal for the juba scene in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* at the O'Neill in 1984, Mary Alice said, with kindness and humour, “Honey, sit down, we'll take care of it” – and the scene rehearsed itself. (Saltz) And yet: this “passive” facility didn't keep Lloyd Richards from inviting musical director Dwight Andrews in afterwards and having that same juba rehearsed and refined for months if not years afterwards. In other words, the director turns the aesthetic ideal into thematic action even in terms of smallest task assigned to the actor.

This is what makes directing, or at least the process of bringing the script to the stage, such a vitally important part of making a script have a genuine effect. Every task taken up by or given to the actor must contribute to the larger thematic action, or it will undermine it. And the thematic actions of a given play will come across only if the chain of thematic

tasks has consistently worked towards effecting the action. Thematic actions and larger thematic actions are necessarily generalizations – their test will always be in the specific tasks that work towards them. Determining a director's larger thematic action requires examining the specific tasks that the director gives to the actors to help them carry out the thematic actions the play demands. To understand Lloyd Richards as a director, it is necessary to understand the kinds of thematic actions the plays required, and the specific tasks Richards gave to his actors to successfully carry out these actions. Only then can one attempt to formulate Richards' larger thematic action.

**e. Richards' Larger Thematic Action**

What are the central actions of *A Raisin in the Sun*? Walter Younger defies his mother to become a free agent, but then defies the white man to defend his family. Of *The Long Dream*? Tyree almost breaks his son in his attempt to make him strong – but defies the white sheriff in order to save his son's life. Of *Who's Got His Own*? Tim Jr. defies his dead father and his mother, forcing her to confront his father's cowardice. Of *The Past is Past*? A young man goes in search of his father and forgives him. Of *Paul Robeson*? Robeson admits and confronts the special vileness of his betrayal of Charles Gilpin. Of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*? Levee defies the elders in order to defend his dignity (his defiance of God, in the context of the play, is secondary). Of *Fences*? Troy almost breaks his son's will in order to make him strong, and confronts death at every turn in order to reaffirm his freedom. Of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*? Herald Loomis crosses the abyss

to regain his lost sense of self. Of *The Piano Lesson*? – Boy Willie rejects the past for a better future, and Boy Willie and Beneatha confront the past and exorcise their demons. Of *Two Trains Running*? – this is much more difficult to identify, and I will save the discussion of this play for end of Chapter 5.

Many of these thematic actions – defying an elder to defend one's own dignity or freedom, breaking a child's will to make them strong, confronting the demons of a violent past, defying death to gain a reprieve, confronting one's own or another's treachery, losing and rediscovering oneself – are common thematic actions in the African American canon, and all of them are intimately connected to the major concerns, personal and social, of the black audiences of the time. All of the plays mentioned were staged by Lloyd Richards, and how he deals with these thematic actions in specific ways will help understand his particular positioning with regards to these concerns, and his particular contribution to the larger thematic actions of the black aesthetic. Particularly important in this discussion are, of course, the stage versions of Wilson's plays, considering Wilson's avowed subscription to the aesthetic emphases of Amiri Baraka – Richards' erstwhile outspoken critic and aesthetic adversary (in a manner of speaking).

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 of this dissertation, then, will look at the thematic tasks and actions that Richards assigned in his rehearsal process, as connected to the three large categories of rehearsal: character, event and action. The last chapter will consider the overall

patterns of these thematic tasks and actions, in order to attempt a general formulation of Richards' larger thematic action.

### **3. Final Reflection: Action**

In this chapter, I have contrasted four Russian concepts of stage action, "impulse/association," "thematic task," "thematic action" and "larger thematic action" with corresponding concepts in the African American tradition. I have showed that "impulse/association" finds a parallel in African American concepts of expressive language and gesture, where the smallest unit of expression, such as an A-flat, must call up particular human references that reflect a "form of passage through the world" (Baraka, 2009, 195). I have shown as well that "thematic task," "thematic action" and "larger thematic action" – all levels of the same essential idea – have parallels in the various levels of signification in the African American theatre. Though I have described the thematic tasks and actions of the African American theatre as related to the rituals of everyday life, the holistic nature of African American realism, and the careful stage signification of "difficult" real-world actions, the concept applies equally well to all of the African American stage significations which have been described so far with regards to character and event. Finally, I have shown that in order to discover a particular director's "larger thematic action," it is necessary to examine in detail the kinds of specific thematic tasks that a director gives to actors in rehearsal. This will be the subject of the second half of this document.

## **Conclusion: African American Directing Strategies**

In Part I of this dissertation, using Russian concepts as a structure, I have laid out a series of performance practices in the African American theatre that can be perceived as necessary concerns of the theatre director, and can ultimately be used as directing strategies in the rehearsal hall. Using these performance practices, I will now describe the directing strategies that the ideal director might apply in this tradition.

With regards to character, this ideal director guides the actor in creating an “active image” that resists traditional stereotypes, signifies on certain character types, and ensures the character’s full agency in the stage action. The director encourages the actor to find allegorical characterizations which are meaningfully recognizable to the audience. The director and actors can choose to do this in a critically objective, realistic way, or in a more satirical, alienating way, connected to their positioning on certain real-world situations. Finally the director encourages the actors to make the tradition second-nature, which requires a great deal of organic physical and vocal work, in order to do proper homage to the performance practise of the tradition, and give convincing embodiment to the “ancestors” which are being presented.

With regards to event, this ideal director helps the actors signify meaningfully on the historical events that exist as a background to the plays in the African American canon – according, once again, to their positioning in terms of evolving real-world interpretations of those events. The director has a profound sense of rhythmic asymmetry and

communicates this sensitivity to the actors, so as to help them make the stage experience more vital for the audience, and to draw them in. The director also allows for call-and-response strategies throughout the process, including from the audience, in order to help the stage events to come to their full expression. Finally, the director knows how to actively wait for the creative spark in the actor, and allow the group of actors to tarry as long as they need in order to arrive at the genuine emotional responses that the plays call for.

With regards to action, this ideal director helps the actor find full-body associations in their language and gesture, in order to ensure that even the smallest word or gesture expresses a “form of passage through the world” (Baraka, 2009, 195). The director helps the actor turn everyday tasks and actions into meaningful gestures with a ritual quality, a process that might be called “blues action.” The director helps the actor navigate the representation of difficult real-world actions – such as violence and humiliation – so as to ensure these actions do not re-inscribe their violent effect under the gaze of the audience. Considering the importance of supernatural beliefs and rituals in the “holistic” realism of the African American theatre, the director gives specific tasks which allow the actor to be convincing in such contexts, and ultimately helps them contemplate the larger implications of these beliefs where this might be necessary.

I would like to suggest that Lloyd Richards is this ideal director, and that he applied most if not all of these directing strategies which arise organically from African American performance traditions.

In the three following chapters, therefore, I will use the testimonies of Richards' artistic colleagues to describe the tasks and actions that Richards assigned in his rehearsal process, following the same structure of strategies I have just outlined. These descriptions will also be informed by my own viewing of excellent recordings of Richards' productions of the Century Cycle at the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive at the New York Public Library.<sup>13</sup>

When making these descriptions, most of the time, I will use the black theatre terms I have just laid out, but where no specific black theatre term applies, I will refer to the terms from the Russian school. For instance, allegorical characterization and character signification will be used instead of the more abstract terms "type," but when referring to the specific image created, which has no precise equivalent, I will use the term "active image." At the same time, since there is no explicit term for "impulse," "association," "thematic task," and "thematic action" in black theatre aesthetics, I will use these terms throughout.

Each of the three chapters will begin by examining Richards' own mastery of the concepts being described, as a director-performer, in his relationship to the actor in

rehearsal, and then transition into the director's relationship to the actor in connection to the particular character or scene work.

## **Part II: Lloyd Richards' Rehearsal Process**

#### **Chapter 4. Lloyd Richards and Character**

In Chapter 1, it was shown that the construction of character involved, in the Russian school, the building of an “active image” which sought to create a character that represented both a specific form and some form of social idea – and in the African American theatre, this involved the ability to signify on earlier versions or audience perceptions of the particular character involved – in such a way as to resist traditional stereotypes and satirical portraits. This “active imaging” was also shown, in the African American theatre, to involve allegorical characterization. This meant the search for “Joe Smothers,” as it were (Molette and Molette, 201-2) – people characteristic of African American cultural life, immediately recognizable by artists and audience alike. This allegorical construction might involve a “critical objectivity” (Winslow, 74) close to the reality of black lives in the real world, or a symbolic construction that criticizes or heightens the character’s actions (parallel to the two tendencies in the Russian theatre, critical realism and alienation). The importance was also shown, in the Russian school, of developing an organic embodied freedom before ever approaching the construction of character, so as to preserve the actor’s “creative nature” – this work on organic body and speech was shown to be particularly important in the African American theatre in order to do proper honour to the allegorical characters. Finally, the strong ritual current running through black American theatre explicitly connects character work to the homage of – and often re-signification of – the ancestor.

In this chapter, I will describe Lloyd Richards' work on characterization by looking first at Richards' "actor training" work on the creative nature of the actor in order ensure the coherence of the ensemble, and then I will then look at his work on helping his actors create character. Because of this, I will adjust the order of the character concepts presented earlier, beginning with the concept of organicity of body and voice, because it is so closely connected to actor training. I will then talk of allegorical characterization and character signification, and come back to the concept of embodiment and the ancestor in the last section. Because of the ambiguous nature of Richards' notes, the two processes of actor training and character construction are often difficult to separate into two distinct streams. Though I will move generally from the first tendency to the second in this chapter, most of the examples can be conceivably applied to both processes.

#### **a. The Actor's Creative Nature and Embodiment**

From the late 1950s, Lloyd Richards had been an acting teacher, or deeply involved in theatre training. So it would not be an exaggeration to say that Richards' actors were his students first, and his actors afterwards. Though this cannot be said to be literally true for many of his actors – and some might even forcefully protest – definitely from the beginning, his actors have come from an atmosphere largely guided by his influence.<sup>1</sup>

People who had gone into the theatre pursued Lloyd, with the awareness that he had [a real understanding] of what the theatre meant, what directing meant, what acting

meant. He tried to develop actors and train actors in New York. [...] We looked to Lloyd for direction and interest in the theatre. (Mason)<sup>2</sup>

This connection between his teaching work and his directing work, was a consistent part of his career for forty years, right up until his workshops at the Actors Centre in New York in the late nineties – and of course, came to a head during his time at Yale. But regardless of whether his actors had been trained under his sphere of influence or not, in his rehearsal process, Richards definitely began by helping the actors free themselves of their public personas, and trying to get at their true, creative natures. Charles Dutton speaks about his play analysis in the first rehearsals as an example of Richards' ability to get through to the actor's creative nature:

You start seeing the real people around the table [...] because now they are asking for help. [...] You find that the personality they came in with starts to go away, and they are comfortable with who they are in real life. [...] Lloyd was absolutely shrewd with it because now they trust the other person across the table. When you bring a group of people in there's a lot of feelings and egos. And they start trusting the other person because the other person is asking questions that they don't know either. Everybody just starts peeling away the falsehoods. And now you've just got these sponges. These actors that are pure sponges and there's nothing blocking the creative stimulus anymore. They are not prejudging and judging and predicting: now they are just open. (Dutton, interview)

Dutton is adamant in saying that these personas melted away “not because of his questions but because of theirs”: respectful of the actor’s autonomy, Richards lets their creative instincts lead them. Also important in this citation is the idea that this process of freeing the actor was very much a result of group members starting to trust each other, and the others’ creative natures – but once again, there is no pre-set program to “create an ensemble” because once again this might interfere with the actor’s organic work with their partner.

I don’t necessarily know if it was Lloyd making that happen. I think he made it happen in the sense that he put together people who were willing to be that open to each other, to be that loving to each other, to be accepting of each other’s faults and strengths. Because of him, he put that team together, so in that sense he was responsible. But he didn’t encourage us to go break bread together. (Santiago Hudson)

Perhaps Ella Joyce’s way of describing this general openness to the actor’s impulses best captures Richards’ ability, not to rely on the actor’s personal memories, but on the actor’s way of channeling their creative instincts:

[Lloyd] was supportive and encouraging of your natural energy. (Joyce)

The image of each actor being an instrument in an orchestra comes up more than once in the interviews,<sup>3</sup> and it seems, then, that it was Richards’ gift to allow each instrument

to be heard in harmony with the rest. In this passage from Michele Shay, it is clear the note goes toward creating an ensemble on stage:

But one of the most important things that Lloyd did was teach you how to be an ensemble. [...] He made us like a really fine orchestra where, again, you play to serve the entire piece and when it was your instrument's turn to take the lead, you took the lead. But it was really always being aware of the entire piece and creating that synergy. At least I can just say for us, with *Seven Guitars*, it was something that people would talk about all the time, and we won bunches of awards as a company *because* of that. And he would tell us to play for each other: don't play for the audience, entertain each person you know on the stage. (Shay, interview)

Shay later in the same interview talks about how difficult it was to comply with Richards' demand that character creation be closely connected to creating the character's relationship to the ensemble:

I don't want to say it wouldn't be frustrating. It would get frustrating too, but he didn't mind watching you suffer through. [...] That was a part of the process. You'd get frustrated because there is a level of simplicity and there is a level of serving the ensemble, which was not always easy, because you might want to do something that had more flair to it or something. But if it wasn't serving the scene... [...] Lloyd would not let an actor do anything that distracted from where the focus of the scene was supposed to be. (Shay, interview)

This “indirect” ensemble work, then, contributed to a certain discipline in character choices.

This idea of “entertaining each person you knew on stage” also describes well the table work, where the collective storytelling, more than any specific notes on what a given character should be like, helped the actors work towards the kind of allegorical characterization that the material often demanded. Here is Vance’s first impression of the table work during *Piano Lesson*:

Lloyd and the actors were just anecdoting all over the place. Having fun laughing and jesting. Head in script, and reading the page, and then coming up and, You know what, that reminds me of the time we were... and before you know it, we were in a major story. Lloyd was raconteur, and then it was James Earl, and then it was Frankie Faison, and then it was Mary, and everybody was laughing and having a grand old time. (Vance, interview, Jun. 2012)

The collective act of story-telling as rehearsal ritual releases tension in rehearsal, while at the same time clearly concentrating the actors’ attention on the specific task of creating the characters that were being anecdotally described.

The way Richards blocked is perhaps the most eloquent indication of this trust in the actors’ instincts. He would often begin by asking the actor to enter, and as the scene progressed, he would have the stage manager write down everything that the actor did, without interrupting them. (This of course, after long sessions reading at the table.)

Richards would then set this blocking down as the definitive blocking, and have the actor be faithful to their first instinctive set of movements. Here is the testimony from Ella Joyce, on the jukebox scene from *Two Trains Running*, with Laurence Fishburne:

EJ. The first time Fish and I got on our feet to block that one scene, we got up one time. One time and blocked it. [Lloyd] had the stage manager write down every place we went. And then after we did it organically that was it. We had to stick to it. It was beautiful.

ED. He did that with all the scenes?

EJ. Very seldom did he make a big change, especially if it was blocked out of such wonderful organic work. He wouldn't change it. Since you have blocked it that way, you've got to find the truth in that moment from now on. (Joyce)

This experience of getting up and blocking the scene at the first rehearsal on their feet and never needing to change it is common to many of the actors interviewed. Richards would then proceed to build on the character's line of actions by making small adjustments through questions.

The physical work was fundamental to this part of the process. Here is Lloyd Richards himself, from transcribed notes delivered at a directing colloquium given at Urbana, Illinois, in 1996:

Deal with what's happening now. Turn it loose and let it take you where it wants to go. Out of that, you may find the physical self of this character. Physical

characterization is sometimes something we put on, rather than finding it through what it stems out of. All physical characterizations have a basis. You must in the work do the things that begin to suggest the physical manifestations of the character. (To Ann) If I could tell you anything, it would be "Don't decide." You not only decided about the character, you judged her. That makes any work very difficult in terms of discovering her own validity within yourself. There is something very valid and very important about her. The things that she says may sound cliché, but they're not. Find what you like about her. Let the impulse take you. (Richards cited in Pearson, LRP, B134 F1537)

Here it is clear how closely-knit the idea of freeing the actor's impulses ("Deal with happening now...") is connected to physical characterization – and to being open to the character. Very important as well is the director's understanding that "cliché" often arises from a mechanized repetition of other people's words – "calling the bank" as Baraka calls it (Baraka, 2009, 195) – and that the real work is in finding one's own associations in the seemingly simplistic words: "Find what you like about her. Let the impulse take you."

This work is coherent with both the Russian and African American traditions of finding a truthful embodiment of the character. Notice, however, that Richards' emphasis – "There is something very valid and very important about her." – has a stronger sense of respect for the ancestor, and for the seemingly cliché but in fact "valid and important" discourse of everyday life.

In short, the work on the actor's creative nature and the ensemble work is geared towards leaving behind personal clichés, and ensuring the organic embodiment of characters which were deeply familiar to the actors.

#### **b. Embodiment and Allegorical Characterization**

It is well known that August Wilson was a master at capturing the truth of living dialogue from sitting in barbershops and on street corners, (Elam, 2004, 16) but Harvey Young points out the Richards' Detroit background also gave him a sensitivity to the poetry of "black men and women who lived within the industrial centers of the US" (Young, 25). Young cites Richards:

Hanging around the barbershop was akin to sitting around the fire with tribal elders.

It was a kind of civics education. (Richards cited in Young, 25)

During the first period of table analysis, Richards would regularly do character summaries that arose from this awareness of the "tribal elders." The story of Wilson's first rehearsal with Lloyd Richards of *Ma Rainey* is the most famous example of this:

And he went into rehearsal, and we read through the script, and the actors started asking questions. I'm all prepared to answer these questions, and they ask a question about Toledo. Not only was it correct, but it gave me some insight. I said, "I didn't know that about Toledo." This went on, but from that moment I visibly relaxed. (Elkins, 184)

The extraordinary sense one gets here is that Toledo does not belong only to Wilson, but exists as an independent, allegorical figure, much larger than the playwright himself has written, and very familiar to Lloyd Richards. And though the characters expressed in rehearsal are creations, the descriptions given are of historical figures – ancestors, as it were – immediately recognizable to the actors and artists involved. Here, for example, is a passage from John Beasley, who played West in the Chicago run of *Two Trains*

*Running:*

[Richards] gave me a little history on Mr. West, you know: Mr. West was the owner of a large funeral home in Pittsburgh, that's who the character was based on, and that he was quite a businessman, you know, he owned a large part of the community – but August has that in his work. (Beasley)

This character recognition seems to go without saying for many of the actors interviewed, as if the larger thematic action of allegorical characterization had always been obvious to the actors: as if it were clear to everyone that this was the kind of work that Wilson's texts demanded, like so many other texts they had worked on before. Michele Shay, who had worked with Richards from the early seventies, is one of the few who explicitly uses the expression of “invoking the ancestors” – but it seemed to be implied for everyone. She describes Richards' way of working as “letting the ancestor appear to you:”

It will invite you to a level of virtuosity and performance and being that you have never been in before. And that doesn't matter whether you are playing Ham in *Two Trains*, where your only line is, "I want my ham," and allowing this sort of nonverbal connection with our ancestors to just show up and speak to you. With Aunt Ester or any of them, each one of the characters have that, and that's what attracted Lloyd to wanting to direct it in the first place. So August was speaking for us in the way that no other playwright did. (Shay, interview)

When asked how Richards would help her and other actors "arrive at that nonverbal connection with the ancestor," she goes on:

First of all, by trusting you. And encouraging you, and definitely telling you when you went in the wrong direction. Also, by casting well, and because he cast fiercely awesome actors. (Shay, interview)

Once again two very practical considerations can be seen – and something ineffable: trust and choosing the right actor.

This sense that the actors chosen were looking for allegorical characterizations was connected to a recurring testimony that the actors *knew* the characters almost personally, an observation that came up again and again in the interviews I conducted, as well as in published interviews of Richards' actors. This, for example, is a testimony of Mary Alice from an interview done during the run of *Fences*:

A lot of who *I* am is also Rose. I know many women who are waiting, as she says, to bloom, and many will never bloom. I have bloomed as a person, more than Rose, I feel, because I have at least to some degree been able to follow my dreams. So there are little petals sticking up somewhere. Rose is not unhappy being the wife and the mother. She is contented, but this is something that people do; they say, this is my place in life, and they accept it. She is able to be happy with this until she finds out that her husband has betrayed her. And it's only then that she begins to deal with what she really wants, with the sacrifices she made in giving all, putting everything into her marriage. There was so much there, already in the script, and given a good director, it was very, very clear. (Henderson, 68-69)

This understanding from personal experience was perhaps what contributes to the kind of wordless trust mentioned above, and meant that specific note-giving was often unnecessary. Dutton talks here about his understanding of Herald Loomis, and Richards' very careful approach to Dutton's relationship to the character:

I understood Levee. I had seen this guy. So my style of acting was a visceral/physical one and I would say that Lloyd would shape these performances for me. Sometimes after a rehearsal he would sit down and talk to me. And would ask me what I am doing at this particular time. And sometimes my answer would be I have no idea. And he said, I didn't think you did. But it worked. And he would

leave it at that. He did tell me you have a way of hitting upon happy accidents that are right on the money. (Dutton, interview)

This is an extraordinary admission: director and actor acknowledging they don't know what they are doing – “but it worked.” And it worked in part because the actor “understood Levee. I knew this guy.” And Richards trusted this knowledge would be enough to lead the actor through.

This tacit understanding included the audience, whose own personal experience participates in the same kind of identification. This is clear in the following anecdote that Richards would repeat (taken here from a letter of homage, from Lisa Gay Hamilton, presented at the Actors Center Benefit in honour of Lloyd Richards in 2004):

Another pearl of yours that has shaped my sensibility about my role as an actor is, that it is not our job to judge the impact theater has on the individual. You cited the example of an audience member, who stood up during *Fences*, shouting at Troy as he held his newborn in his arms, "That's me. That's me!" You said to let the audience have their experience, whatever that expression may be. (LRP B139 F1647a)

Ella Joyce talks of an instance in rehearsals for *Two Train Running* where Richards' advice opened the character of Risa up for her, and clearly invoked a whole series of characters who worked “up there on 125<sup>th</sup> Street:”

I knew who she was up there on 125<sup>th</sup> Street. I had been in some of those soul food restaurants with sisters just take their time. *You ain't gonna rush nobody today. I*

*don't care where you gotta go. No we ain't got none of that. We got some beans today. What you want?* And that was just: I knew who she was. (Joyce)

Just as Dutton “understood Levee” and “had seen this guy,” and Mary Alice knew “many women who are waiting to bloom,” so Joyce “knew who she was.” And “who she was” was one of the “sisters just take their time.”<sup>4</sup> So, a short note “she’s got all the time in the world” frees the actor, points to the character’s “physical self,” and leads the actor directly to an allegorical characterization.

It’s important to point out here that Risa was very much a *construction* from Ella Joyce’s creative nature, and not a simple use of Ella’s persona on stage. Anyone who has ever had the pleasure of speaking to Ella Joyce knows that slowness of speech and dourness of manner are as far from Ella’s usual persona as one can possibly imagine: she is ebulliently cheerful, and irrepressibly talkative. This tremendous energy was channeled into a very disciplined construction where she was only allowed to smile once:

He told me one thing that I used in that play that I felt made Risa come alive. He told me she smiles one time and you show me where that is. [...] He didn’t tell me where. And once I found it, there it was. (Joyce)

Here it is clear how Richards’ ability to give specific tasks related to the character’s physicality helped the actors discover their characters.

At the end of the scene with the jukebox, [Sterling and I are] kissing when the lights go down. Well, you know when the lights come back up, it’s supposed to be the

next morning, and Lloyd doesn't like a long blackout. Well, honey, when that light went down, Lloyd had his crew [...] count that change down to the second, meaning that they knew how long it took to unzip a zipper, how long it took to untie a shoe, how long it took to do this, do that – and I'm right back out there, and this is supposed to be the next morning. And Lloyd says, she's got to come out looking different than the whole audience has seen her through the whole play. It was a *twenty-eight-second* change. And [...] it's got to look like it's the next morning, I'd have gone to bed, made love, I'd have come to work, I'm coming to work neat, I got lipstick on, I got a new dress, and I had to come in all slow like I'd been at work for a few hours, you know, and smiling, that was where I got my smile. (*Laughter*) That's where I put that smile! That's me smiling, baby! (*Laughter.*) So you don't have a lot of time, but Lloyd's somebody who knows how to show you where your skill level kicks in. (*Joyce*)

On one occasion, Richards has told her she can smile once, and on another has said that that must come on stage different from the rest of the play – after a physically demanding costume change – but still he insists she maintain the slow walking. And this channeling of Joyce's physical impulses makes for a very successful scene.

Richards' reliance on physical construction sometimes added to an effect perhaps not clearly visible to the audience, but central in reinforcing the connections between the

characters on stage. Courtney Vance tells the story of how, in the second run of *Fences*, after several weeks of rehearsal and performance, Richards gave him the following note:

Cory is the glue. And you've got to get him right. You've got to get that he wants to be better than his daddy but at the same time he needs his daddy so much. It's the vulnerability that you got to be the little boy. Nobody wants to be the little boy. [...] That's another part of Lloyd's directing: Lloyd waited until San Francisco to say, Okay, Courtney, find two physical gestures of James Earl and find the place to put them in the play. [...] I knew exactly which two to choose and exactly where they were going. One of them was: [James Earl] used take his hand and point his finger and make it loose and shake his wrist – that was one of his moves. And the other was when he would take his fist and hit his chest. *Go on and cut them boards*. I think I used it for Raynell: I said, *Go in the house, we going to papa's funeral*. And the other was in that scene where I tell mama I'm not going to the funeral, and she says, *Cory, you just like your father*. And I said, *I don't want to be like him, I want to be like me*. And when I did that the audience just went, *Ahhh*. And that was Lloyd's direction. He didn't give that to me at Yale. He knew I wasn't ready to find it. He didn't want to tell. And he knew that the play wasn't over so he didn't have to over-direct. You don't have to get it all the first time. (Vance, interview, Jun. 2012)

Like Risa's smile, this "innocent" note by Richards is almost too perfect for one to think he hadn't foreseen that Courtney would not put it exactly where he decides to in the

end – but if he had put it somewhere else, the observer would have had the same sensation. As a director, one often throws “lures” at the actor<sup>5</sup> in order to get them to do something you want, only to discover that the actor has taken a completely different tack from the very same hint. The example also shows that a note that starts as a simple evocation of family resemblance ends as an opportunity to express the character’s deepest needs. Notice, as well, how closely Vance connects gestures with specific lines, how character and physical action are deeply enmeshed in this work. Notice, finally, how character construction was a slow organic process that could be developed only over time, when the actor was ready for the next step.

What was particularly special about this kind of character construction was how the constant changes in the script had a double effect on the actor: first of all, it gave the actor an enormous amount of material to work with, even when that material was later cut; and this cut material served as an invisible structure which made the actor’s through-line solid and full.

MS. The other benefit of that, particularly with August, was even though something would be cut, you had it as part of the skeleton of the role even though the words weren’t there anymore. It helped you flesh out the character.

ED. Yes, kind of an invisible structure.

MS. Right, an invisible structure: and I know later doing *Gem of the Ocean* – after we lost both of them – there are pieces that are not in *Gem of the Ocean* anymore

that are for example critical to understanding the relationship of Aunt Ester to Eli. Fortunately, I was able to get that information from Todd Kreidler,<sup>6</sup> and I passed that on to other people. But this is in fact the living legacy in terms of August that is really critical to pass on between the people that are still alive, that were in the room with both of them you know. (Shay, interview)

The characters which eventually accrued over the months were built as much on the external line of actions as on the internal through-line, which, though it has been suppressed by the editing, remains as active impulse for the scenes that are still in the play. Most extraordinary, however, is what Shay goes on to say: the resonance that both voices, Richards' and Wilson's, continued to have after their deaths, during Wilson's later stagings such as *Jitney* or *Gem of the Ocean*. A speech rehearsed in the nineties reappears in a different play years later, and Richards' or Wilson's direction is remembered as a kind of internal oral tradition. Santiago Hudson makes the same remark concerning the material that reappears in *Jitney*: Richards' direction of the material continues after his death.

The interviews make abundantly clear the central importance in Richards' rehearsals of the search for allegorical characterizations:

### **c. Character Signification**

What kinds of "thematic tasks" did Richards give to help his actors signify on allegorical characters that the audience was well-acquainted with?

Richards was deeply aware of the stereotypical representations that have haunted the black stage, and nowhere is the subversion of these stereotypical images so obvious as in the performance of *The Piano Lesson* – where one of the playwright’s task almost seems to bring stereotypical images on stage in order to re-signify their poetic nature. Here is Charles Dutton, for example, on the arrival of Boy Willie and Lymon with watermelons in the first act of the play:

The watermelon thing was genius I thought. I had seen some directors do it where they actually had the actors eating the watermelon. I saw a production in Detroit where the watermelon was carved up and Lymon, Boy Willie and Doaker were sitting around the table eating watermelon. But it was not even a discussion if we were going to cut the watermelon up. It wasn’t a discussion. I can imagine Lloyd would have handled it having less to do with eating the watermelon on the stage; Lloyd being a practical man was it’s going to be such a messy clean up. I could hear Lloyd saying that. Seeds and things. I could just hear him say we don’t do it because it’s too messy. But there was never any discussion. And when Boy Willie talked about the watermelon and when Lymon talked about and whoever talked about it, I remember Lloyd saying: “It is nothing but a piece of fruit. So I don’t need to hear over-emphasis.” (Dutton, interview)

As with the tacit understanding of the search for recognizable characters, there is no discussion necessary regarding how to deal with the stage prop – the watermelon is left

untouched. The fact that Dutton points to other productions, though, clearly shows that this particular group of people, under Lloyd's understated guidance, knows exactly what to do. And yet, they still need direction, to make sure there is no hint, at all, of the lingering stereotype. "It's nothing but a piece of fruit. So I don't need to hear over-emphasis." Richards' almost obsessive insistence on getting the physical actions right – Doaker cooking his eggs, Risa cleaning her restaurant, Hedley making his sandwiches – in his productions is very much in this same spirit.

Dutton also speaks of Lymon in *The Piano Lesson*, and "these tight shoes":

There's a racial stereotype was a long as you give a nigger a good pair of shoes and he thinks he looks cool and his feet will be killing him he's still fine. (Dutton, interview)

Dutton goes on to say that there is a certain subversion of the stereotype in the situation created by Wilson, and the actors played more Wining Boy's manoeuvring than Lymon's desire to buy the shoes. But once again, a seemingly innocent note by Richards points to the kind of reaction he was looking for in the character:

Do you really think this character has ever had a new pair of shoes before? (Carroll)

Like Richards' asking his students to reconsider the words that seemed cliché in his workshop in Urbana, Illinois, here he asks the actor to reconsider the full implications of the seemingly stereotypical actions. A situation that "sounds cliché" turns out to have

“validity and importance.” Much of Richards’ work was devoted to re-signifying, restoring the poetry, to seeming clichés.

Of course, as this example shows, and as most of the interviews have shown, there was a constant appeal to common sense in these choices: acting against stereotype often simply involved acting *well*, in the truth of the given circumstances. But for Richards the special attention paid to a certain kind of dignity sometimes obliged the creative team to struggle in order to come to a satisfactory solution that defines the character. For example, the story of the evolution of the confrontation scene between Troy Maxson and Cory in *Fences*, begins with Richards objecting, early on in the dramaturgical process, to Troy confronting his son with a gun. This is how the scene’s eventual solution is told by James Earl Jones:

There was something unresolved in the second act in the scene when father and son physically confront each other. Their conflict is the crux of the play; the script’s flaw rested in its void of resolution. I could not argue the point very well without sounding as if I wanted Troy to die on stage. “What if we revive the gun?” I asked, referring to an early draft of the play which actually suggested that the father confront the son with a gun. Lloyd opposed the gun for social reasons. [...]

Convinced that the resolution must come when father and son have their final confrontation, I began to focus on that scene. Troy is an “outcast” after his infidelity. Even though he is still the man of the house, he is uncoupled from

everyone. His best friend does not see him anymore. His wife does not sleep with him anymore. The last person to break away from him is Cory. They stand on the brink of physical combat – then Rose intercedes. That is what is written in the script. One day I begged Lloyd to let us see what would happen, even with nothing written, if Rose does not come in. He agreed, and the scene became an improvisation – the symbolic and literal struggle between the father and son over a baseball bat. This was a symbolic sketch, not written by the playwright, and in that sense, not a legitimate part of the play. But it worked. In that sketch, the father and son learn that they cannot kill each other. The bond between them is too strong. (Jones and Niven, 327, 332)<sup>7</sup>

The extraordinary thing about this story is that the baseball bat appears only after a prolonged struggle by the actor to make his voice heard. In his protection of the playwright, and in his dignified desire to avoid a stereotypical image of a man turning a gun on his son, Richards in fact was allowing an important event to lose its expressive force. Once again, there is a temptation to see Richards as the all-foreseeing guru: his silence forces James Earl – for whom the character’s conflict was of special significance<sup>8</sup> – to propose an idea that was so brilliant that the playwright included it in his script. But the fact of the matter is, action is always a question of confronting an abyss, and it is not always the actor who shows resistance. Jones’ description of the scene – “one day I begged Lloyd to let us see what would happen” – feels more like Mozart with the

Emperor in *Amadeus* – the resistance is on the part of the leader, for reasons connected to Richards' larger thematic action. And yet, Joseph cedes, and so does Lloyd.<sup>9</sup>

There is a parallel between this situation and one that Dutton speaks about during rehearsals of *Ma Rainey*: how Richards, with one note, freed him up for the big blasphemous moment at the end of Act One. Dutton talks about Richards' view of the character, which was a determining factor in the note described, and it is similar to Richards' objection to the gun:

That was the only way that you could play Levee. [...] He has to be a man child. A man-child. Because if you play him as a big strong know-it-all man who can take care of everything then the final act becomes a murder instead of an act of passion. He's got to be a guy who's flawed, conflicted, can't take care of himself, vulnerable as hell, a big bravado charade, but is actually a little boy in total turmoil inside. And that's why you want to hug him. He's got to be a character that the audience wants to hug and say, Levee, *stop* that. Levee don't do that. [...] One time Lloyd gave me this wonderful [note] that had to do with tragedy [...] He said when you're doing tragedy, [...] (and I'm just paraphrasing now) an audience can handle the sufferings of an adult. No matter what a great actor you are, you could be the greatest actor in the world but if you are suffering and you're emotional and you can still be an adult, the audience can take it in and be moved, but as an adult going through it. But the one thing that audience can't handle and is devastated by is the sufferings of a child.

And even the big strong epic character in his or her tragedy, if they become a little child in their suffering and in their tragedy, then it really kills the audience. (Dutton, interview)

Just as Richards' does not want the audience to see a father confronting his son with a gun, diminishing the character's potentially violent image, so he wants to stress Levee's innocence for the same reason.

Still, Richards allowed himself to be convinced on occasion to go the full distance. Here is Dutton on two "dangerous" passages in *Ma Rainey* that Richards wanted to cut:

There were lots of concerns that Lloyd had in several plays, and particularly in *Ma Rainey*. I remember there were two passages that Lloyd actually said to August, Do we say these passages? One was the line when Ma Rainey tells Cutler what Irvin says, *(Taking on the intonation of the show.) Always talking about the Jews and the coloreds ought to stick together. Start sticking goddammit. Cause the only time, he's been my manager for six years, the only time he's had me in his house was to sing for some of his friends. [...]* That, and also the line that had to do with black people, that really made all the black people really uncomfortable. Maybe not August but it made me and Lloyd uncomfortable about what August was saying. And that was when Toledo says, *(Taking on the intonation of the show.) You know what, you cannot satisfy a nigger no matter what you do. You give a nigger some bread and butter he will cry because he aint got no jelly. You give him some jelly he*

*will cry because he ain't got a knife to put it on with. If there's one thing I learned in this life is that you cannot satisfy a nigger no matter what you do. A nigger is going to make his own dissatisfaction.* And I remember the first time I heard that, here, at the reading, and I said, Are we really going to say that? Because it was a thing that was in the black community that a lot of people said about other black folks, and did you want to put this out there? He said yep. That's just the way they are. I remember Lloyd and August talking about that and August was like (*imitating a mumbled protest*) and then Lloyd said, okay. (Dutton, interview)

One thing is Levee's strategic and understandable blasphemy, in the face of deep suffering. Another, however, is showing this kind of internal racism to a mainstream audience. But for all their differences, Richards and Wilson were both deeply committed to telling the truth, to showing people as they were without punishing them, but without making them heroes either – and ultimately, without worrying about what the audience was going to say. And though one senses here, again, Emperor Joseph giving in to Mozart, it was clearly in the interest of truth.

Richards' sense of dignity, of course, was also fundamental in his casting choices for the characters, and was closely tied up with his determined colour-blindness. Though Richards ultimately, as will be shown, let Wilson's sometimes dangerous language remain intact in his scripts, there was a limit when it came to the colour line *within* the black community. Jones quotes Richards during *Fences* again:

In the black community ever since slavery, tones of blackness have played a large role in the intricate social and political workings of intraracial conflict. There are phrases such as “The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice” to express an appreciation of the pure blackness of a woman’s skin. On the other hand, some black men choose “high yellow” women, women who look white. It is uncomfortable to play on those themes now, but the play was set in the fifties, and August had written that negative line about being “coal black.”

“I’ve worked too hard to bring black women into my theatre,” Lloyd said. “I don’t want that line to offend them.” So we struck it. (Jones and Niven, 329)

Jones goes on to show that there was an inconsistency in Richards’ positioning in these matters, what’s important here, however, is that Richards was clearly intolerant of making skin colour an issue in his productions. And when Jones later points out that he understood during this period that Richards, Wilson and himself all had different agendas, he was probably right. (Jones and Niven, 329)

The casting of Red Carter from *Seven Guitars* is a case in point: as I learned in this process, in the black community “red” refers to light skin. Roger Robinson points out that Richards’ casting of Tommy Hollis was against type:

Because [Lloyd] came up in the time he did, there was [an issue with] Red Carter. If you call a black person “red,” it is for one reason: because they’re red, they have a red tint to their skin. Do you know Stephen McKinley Henderson? He’s what we

consider “red.” He was called red. My grandfather had red hair. He was called red – and that’s why you call somebody “Red Carter.” Not because they wear red. Tommy Hollis was miscast. It should have been somebody light-skinned, like Stephen Henderson. Because every black person knows – you don’t even have to think about it, that’s why people are called red. It’s like if I said red-haired for a white person. So Lloyd ignored that because he liked Tommy. And I think that August was upset by that, because it was very specific to our culture, and Lloyd ignored that aspect. (Robinson)

Though he does not go so far as to suggest that this may have been one of the disagreements which led to their breakup during *Seven Guitars*, he does suggest that it was an issue. Richards, after all, had also dedicated his life to helping his actors break down the social masks that kept them from connecting to a larger inner truth – playing on such embodied distinctions would have contradicted the larger thematic action of his career.

All of these instances have to do with ensuring the stereotype is transcended, that a larger truth is seen beyond the historically distorted one, and that highly poetic stage images are achieved. This in itself is already a big task. But there is something else that Richards is working against in order to dignify his characters: satire. This arises organically from the first, but it is not the same thing.

As in the African American theatre tradition, in most of the plays that Richards directed, there are deeply ambivalent characters which an observer would hesitate to call anti-heroes. Their symbolic nature is far too present for their violent or foolish actions to be taken in a satirical light. And as a director, for most of his characters, Richards resists satire – the audience does not see the contradictions of his characters as something fundamentally disturbing – rather, there is a sense, always, that there is much more than meets the eye. One is obliged, in dealing with them, to withhold judgment until there is more information.

Comic characters that might easily become satirical, in Wilson's writing and Richards' directing, are treated with generosity. Take, for example, Avery, the preacher in *The Piano Lesson*. Dwight Andrews, the musical director for the production, has particular insight into this part of the work because he is an ordained preacher:

DA. But in some ways, August has very complicated ideas about the religious man and the preacher. One has to fight the stereotype of the jack leg preacher and black religion in general. And so I think he in a very profound way pushed the envelope for people of faith, [because] sometimes we have internalized these kinds of stereotypes, by not allowing us to accept Avery as simply a jack leg preacher who is going to make it in the world by being a jack leg preacher.

ED. Do you remember how Richards directed that character?

DA. No. That was Tommy Hollis. No. I don't remember except I just remember the tremendous joy which Lloyd would watch Tommy with, because I think Tommy just – he was Red Carter, he was Reverend Avery. He brought a certain kind of country earnestness. And Lloyd, I just don't remember him having to say very much. I remember sitting next to him, and he would slump in his chair, and he would literally, when he chuckled his whole body would just guffaw. When Avery would say, (*imitating Hollis*) *Well, come on now, Berniece, I'm up there, and you down here*. Lloyd would just take great pleasure in Tommy. I mean he enjoyed watching it and once again I'm certain he spent time with Tommy to make sure Tommy didn't take it in the wrong way, but there was a certain kind of truth to his character that I don't think Lloyd had to do very much with. (Andrews, interview)

In Andrews' voice you can hear the laughter that Hollis's characterization provoked in both Lloyd and Andrews – and yet, there is no sense of a character being mocked, rather a pleasure in the truth of his earnestness.

In the same way, the rich undertaker, West, in *Two Trains Running*, is never vilified for his profession or his wealth. Instead there is the "little history" as described by John Beasley above, and the fact that he was quite a businessman. West's accomplishments are stressed above all else, and the historical sense is never subject to the kind of satire which appears in other black American theatre.

Even when the character has some clearly despicable traits – like that other undertaker-cum-businessman among Richards’ staged characters, Tyree Tucker from Richard Wright’s *The Long Dream* – this resistance to satire is there. The more you learn about Tucker, the harder it is to make a definitive judgment on him. This “critical objectivity,” resistant to satire, which Henry F. Winslow ascribed to *The Long Dream* under Richards’ direction, can certainly be applied to any character in the Wilson canon that Richards staged. Consider Boy Willie. When I was overseeing the staging of *The Piano Lesson* in Buenaventura, Colombia, a question hovered constantly over the proceedings – was Boy Willie involved in the death of Sutter?<sup>10</sup> After all, in *Ma Rainey* and *Seven Guitars*, Levee and Hedley both commit murders on stage, and the audience is hard put to judge them. In *The Piano Lesson*, no satisfying answer was ever forthcoming, and ultimately, within the larger thematic action, it doesn’t matter – whatever happened at that well was much more complicated than any simple accusation of Berniece’s could possibly give justice to. And the very act of performing these characters involves a kind of redemption.

And this is certainly the case of Levee. Bill Moyers cites August Wilson as saying that “the most valuable blacks were those in prison, those who had the warrior spirit in the African sense” (Bryer, 78). And Wilson speaks of Levee having this warrior spirit despite his tragic decision to kill a community elder, Toledo. The fact that Richards casts Dutton in this part, then, is not just a question of casting “fiercely awesome actors,” as Michele Shay puts it, but finding an actor who could really tell the story of the character with truth and conviction. The fact, indeed, that Richards nurtures a very special relationship with

Dutton, and casts him in all the major characters of Wilson's plays from *Ma Rainey* onward, tells us much of Richards' non-judgmental search for historical authenticity: he needed an actor who could make us understand Levee, help us understand who he was – and Dutton could provide this first because of his extraordinary talent, and second because of his personal experience – a personal experience, however, that is never directly drawn upon in rehearsal.

This leads us to another common reference in the interviews: Richards knew how to cast – and the fact that he made actors' careers often had to do, precisely, with seeing something in an actor that no one else could see, because other directors were looking for talent in general (or for such things as “red” skin), while Richards, in the spirit of the Russian theatre, was looking at the actor's creative nature:

He was very smart about who he worked with. Lloyd would find *actors*. I remember seeing *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* for the first time, and an actor who is deceased now, I am trying to remember his name,<sup>11</sup> he had been working at Trinity Rep. I didn't even know anything about this guy. He was perfect for the part. The original Bynum. The guy who created the part. I was like, who is this guy? Where did he get this guy from? He would get people and put them in parts. It might be someone who hadn't worked in five years and they'd end up in a part. So I think he had an eye for what was required and he knew how to cast. (Jennings)

It is instructive to note that throughout Richards' career, his main characters have been ambiguous figures, who resist satire – and it is instructive to look at the list of extraordinary actors who performed them . Walter Lee (*A Raisin in the Sun*) by Sidney Poitier,<sup>12</sup> Tyree Tucker (*The Long Dream*) by Lawrence Winters, Tim Jr. (*Who's Got His Own*) by Glynn Turman, Freeman Aquila (*Freeman*) and Earl Davis (*The Past is Past*) by Bill Cobbs, Baroka (*The Lion and the Jewel*) by Richard Ward, Paul Robeson (*Paul Robeson*) and Troy Maxson (*Fences*) by James Earl Jones, Levee (*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*) and Boy Willie (*The Piano Lesson*) by Roc Dutton,<sup>13</sup> Herald Loomis (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*) by Delroy Lindo,<sup>14</sup> Floyd Barton and Hedley (*Seven Guitars*) by Keith David and Roger Robinson. In every case, the actors involved are both charismatic but deeply committed to the larger truth of their roles.

And if this larger thematic action of Richards', in terms of his character work, was colour-blind – then it was true of most of the main characters in the plays Richards staged outside of the African-American canon as well. Here again, there is an almost determined insistence on being fair-minded to the “worst” kind of characters, or a definite choice of ambivalent anti-heroes like the characters of O'Neill or Shaw: Glenn Griffin (*The Desperate Hours*), John Brown (*Moon Beseiged*), Garside the thief (*I Had a Ball*) the Forrester brothers (*The Yearling*), Bedford Forrest (*Bedford Forrest*), Richard III (*Richard III*), Dan (*Night Must Fall*), the misanthrope Timon (*Timon of Athens*), Hedda Gabler and Judge Brack (*Hedda Gabler*), Serebryakov (*Uncle Vanya*),<sup>15</sup> Cornelius Melody (*A Touch of the Poet*), Andrew Undershaft (*Major Barbara*), Ty Cobb (*Cobb*),

and Christopher Columbus (*Christopher Columbus*). Even when there are the more obvious villains in the plot – like George Murchison in *A Raisin in the Sun* or Sheriff Canley in *The Long Dream* – they are always given a fair hearing.

The simple fact that so many of Richards' plays had titles which corresponded to their main characters, and those that didn't could have had, points to certain priorities in Richards' character choices.

There is one instance, however, where it is probably true that Richards' "sense of dignity" in fact was a disingenuous evasion, and though there is no reason to believe that Richards was homophobic (his work at the O'Neill shows this),<sup>16</sup> his "reserve" perhaps led him to fear the homophobia of his audience. And so more than one interviewee<sup>17</sup> points to the suppression, on Richards' insistence, of the true relationship between Ma Rainey and her protégée Dussie Mae. His refusal to "judge" meant, in this instance, a refusal to speak the "blasphemous" truth – a refusal which informs his generally ambiguous relationship to certain social truths.

Still, all of these examples make abundantly clear the fact that character signification was never just a question for Richards of ensuring excellent performances through the Russian tradition of creating active images of known social "types," but there was also a personal conviction that these characters, no matter what they have done, deserve our respect. Once again, this search for historical authenticity, this desire to communicate the

voices in the barber shop as if they were “tribal elders” around a fire, is very much connected to the African American tradition of honouring the ancestor.

#### **d. Character and the Ritual of Everyday Life**

In this context, it is worth revisiting the character of Risa. Her character is built almost exclusively on “not doing” – on a kind of resistance to action. When she can, she prefers to be still. But as seen in the chapter on action, this resistance has a powerful effect on the other characters and on the audience as well. And what fascinates us about Risa is what she is, not what she does.

The carefully elaborated realism of the character of Risa’s speech and gesture has a quality of ritual homage to it which is very much in keeping with Ellison’s call for a blues aesthetic reflecting the ritual of everyday life, and more than anything else transforms “being” on stage into the ritual action of calling up the ancestor.<sup>18</sup> Like Stanislavsky’s extraordinary ability to simply sit in a chair as if he were sitting at home, the active waiting of many of Richards’ characters on stage are distillations of people’s spirit in the simple being of their daily existence

Many of these characters speak little and move slowly: Risa’s taking her time to serve Holloway listening quietly in his booth, Cutler and Slow Drag listening to Toledo and Levee in the studio as they wait for the recording session to begin, Rose sitting on her back porch, Doaker actively listening and resisting the work song – stillness and slowness and laconicity are the visible manifestations of character in Richards’ productions. And

just as often there is “ritual” physical action in the characterizations, so there is “ritual” stillness as well. These characters’ stillness or slowness tells us a great deal about them, not only their life resignation, but also their need to share in the community – both resistance and participation. And in some cases, such as Mary Alice sitting on her porch as Rose, or Roscoe Lee Brown sitting in his booth as Holloway, it seems one can watch them forever, and the effect is extraordinarily moving. The character’s embodiment is so complete that there is no need for movement of any kind.

This is also true of the careful construction of different levels of the characters’ very specific articulateness. Here is Richards again on the “old-time barbershops”:

You heard unique points of view, and you heard a combination of people – the articulate who had a large vocabulary and the articulate who had a small vocabulary. I say the articulate in each case because in the quest to express a complicated idea with a small vocabulary, one needs to use that in a very selective and special way. (Richards cited in Watlington, 2006, 87)

This “very selective and special way” of articulating ideas, in Richards’ careful stage elaborations, have a ritual quality to them as well, especially notable in an important recurring character in the Wilson plays under Richards’ direction – the most symbolic characterizations of the Century Cycle, what August Wilson calls his “spectacle characters”<sup>19</sup>: Gabriel in *Fences*, Bynum in *Joe Turner*, Hambone in *Two Trains Running*, and Hedley in *Seven Guitars*. These are characters who “will agitate emotions and force

recognition of an otherwise suppressed truth” and who, like Gabriel, enjoy “a direct line of communication with the spiritual world” and become “a necessarily visible conduit to the African past” (Shannon, 2003, 101-102).

Throughout this chapter, Richards has been shown to be a very pragmatic director: but his pragmatism did not prevent him from insisting, usually indirectly, but sometimes openly, on the ritual and spiritual nature of the characters’ actions. Consider the following note that Richards gives Frankie Faison, the actor playing Gabriel, when he has to perform his character’s final “atavistic and ritual” dance (Wilson, *Fences*, 101): “You are here to shepherd your troubled brother into heaven” (Jones and Niven).<sup>20</sup>

The spiritual signification of these “spectacle characters” required more than just adjusting an intonation or cutting a phrase in order to convince a suspicious mainstream audience. It required Richards as a director to inspire his actors’ ability to contemplate the larger ramifications of their characters’ actions. So Richards’ style involved more than just carefully crafted “ritual” physical action, and more than being vigilant that the actors were not abusing the potentially comic aspects of these characters;<sup>21</sup> it also meant accompanying his actors on some very difficult spiritual journeys.<sup>22</sup> Roc Dutton describes this kind of hallucinatory work in his performance of Herald Loomis, from *Joe Turner*.

Lloyd had mentioned once this was going to be an extra size in choices, because of the darkness and mysteriousness of the character. [...] It had a contained kind of stoic energy. [...] This is a guy who’s seen something somewhere, through that

water and ocean, and walking through the woods and making a wrong turn, and now he's come up on the ocean and all these skeletons come out. So if he saw the vision and that's real for him, then what makes him so scary or why does he stare at people so much? And I just put it in a simple way for myself as an actor. He can no longer tell the difference between you and a bones person. [...] To bring that person I've got to be fully in character off stage. There are no breaks even though you are offstage. [...] When Delroy took over I said Delroy one word of wisdom: somehow find a way to leave him in the dressing room. (Dutton, interview)

Richards has told Dutton that he has to make extra-big choices for this role, and it is clear that this work means going beyond a simple "representation" of Herald Loomis. With both Dutton and Lindo, there are no specific notes to help them make this journey: there is simply an expectation that this is what the character requires. I will elaborate on this kind of silent expectation in the chapters to come.

#### **e. Final Remarks: Lloyd Richards and Character**

In this chapter I have shown that Richards' rehearsal strategies, fully coherent with notions of character in the Russian directing tradition, lean heavily on certain emphases in the African American tradition: a concern for the organicity of body and voice as an extension of respect for the actor and the ancestor; a search for allegorical characterizations from a shared knowledge and desire to give "validity and importance" to marginalized voices and their different "levels of articulateness" (Richards cited in

Pearson, LRP B134 F1537); and character signification which both fights stereotype, re-signifies apparent clichés and resists satire in order to show characters with a certain "heroic magnitude" (Molette and Molette, 170). Finally, there is a ritual element in the creation of character, related to the careful construction of the "ritual of everyday life" in speech and gesture (Wilson cited in Plimpton, 74), and to certain characters' "direct line of communication to the spiritual world" (Shannon, 2003, 101-102).

## **Chapter 5. Lloyd Richards and Event**

In the Part I, Chapter 2, it was shown that the concept of event is most clearly understood as a performance phenomenon, as opposed to a structural form: since an event involves an impulse/reaction in real time, its success can only be fully measured in performance (whether that performance be in rehearsal in front of the director, or on stage in front of the audience) and not on the page. As was shown, since the event is a reaction, and reactions are actions, then all events are actions, and everything addressed in this chapter can be taken up as well from the perspective of action. The emphasis in this chapter, however, will be on how Richards gave specific tasks to help his actors create the stage events.

The concepts related to stage event, as laid out in chapter 2, were as follows: the relationship between the Russian concepts of inciting event and main event, fundamental in the African American theatre, was seen to play out in a dynamic of narrative signification; the African American theatre concept of asymmetrical rhythm development was seen to parallel Stanislavsky's concept of experiencing in real time, involving improvisation within a repeating structure and rhythmic scoring in both contexts; the renowned African American concept of call and response was shown to be a more active form of Stanislavsky's concept of adaptation; and the Russian concept of emotional "holding off" as a guarantor of organic emotional response was shown to have a parallel

in the African American concept of “tarrying,” where the collective participation in the emotional event, however, has a more privileged place.

In this chapter, I will look at how Richards’ strategies to create stage events in his rehearsals, formally consistent with the Russian theatre concepts, were particularly successful adaptations of African American practices. As in the last chapter, I will begin by showing how Richards himself was capable of creating a rehearsal event, before showing how he used the same strategies to create the narrative events on stage. Most of the strategies mentioned, more so than in the case of characterization, are involved in all of the examples given, which makes it difficult to follow a specific structure of conceptually categorized examples. This is why, for example, I will deal with rhythmic asymmetry and call and response in the same section, for example, because the examples so often coincide. Once again, I will begin with concepts more closely related to Richards’ mastery of these concepts in his relationship to the actor, then show how he helped his actors create the stage event. Only towards the end, will I address the concept of narrative signification.

#### **a. Rhythmic Asymmetry and Call and Response**

Rhythm and improvisation within a repeated structure is difficult to describe, but one can infer its presence through its effect in certain circumstances. This anecdote about Lloyd Richards at the Eugene O’Neill, as told by Roc Dutton is a good example:

Before every play started [Richards] would make a speech and he would talk about how this place used to be a farm when he first came here and how the amphitheatre here was the original cow barn. And he would talk about how it took months, shoveling out all of the cow shit. And he said some people accused us [...] with all these plays [...] of shoveling it back in. But he made this speech every night. [...] He talked about that moment, and the potential in a prospective writer, and every night it was the same speech. For years. For thirty years, the same speech, but guess what, every time you heard it, you could hear it twice a week for those 4 weeks but every time you heard it and you knew Lloyd was coming in to make his speech; every time you heard it was fresh and you knew every word of it and you knew when the cow shit line was coming up but guess what, somebody in the audience every time was hearing it for the first time. Every night for thirty years during those summers, during those thirty summers, someone was hearing it for the very first time. And that's why Lloyd did it. (Dutton, interview)

Many of the people interviewed – and a great majority of Richards' colleagues were involved in the O'Neill experience – spoke of the same thing.<sup>1</sup> Here, for example, is Amy Saltz's testimony about waiting backstage before the open of *Joe Turner* at the O'Neill:

I was sitting right before the show started, and Lloyd would do an announcement every night, reminding us and the audience why we were there. And it always was

important. I heard that announcement every night for 17 summers and it always did something to me, always.

“It always did something to me.” Richards was able, night after night for thirty years, to create a sense of event for the audience, in the simple retelling of a story. Many of us, in a similar situation, would fear the repetition, and want to “jazz it up”; few of us would be able to sustain the freshness of the text for even a few years. Director Richards maintained that freshness for thirty years. The event of that first season at the O’Neill, week after week, summer after summer, was made real and alive again for a new audience or a new generation of actors. This kind of repetition, where the outer structure, so to speak, is unchanged while the inner structure is mobile, is a theatre ideal which makes for a living event every night.

This living repetition was a fundamental part of how Richards worked, and it extends to every part of Richards’ process.

All of those interviewed who had experienced Richards in the classroom speak, for example, of how a seemingly dull insistence, over the course of forty years, on posing the same questions and not giving notes led to transformative events in the actors’ creative lives. Those questions were almost banal, as can be seen from this testimony from Woodie King Jr. about his time as an acting student in Richards’ classes in the early sixties:

Well, in his acting classes he would really ask questions to get out of you what you were working on and trying to do in that scene. And that gave you a kind of confidence that if it came organically out of you, then you could always go back and recapture it again. [...] You would work on the scene, [...] you would get up before the class, you would do it, he would ask you certain questions, if you couldn't answer all the questions, then the next week you would come back, and try it again, if you didn't do it you would try it again, and so people worked on scenes for months... (King, interview)

These "repetitive" questions always circled back to the same six ideas revolving around action, event and given circumstance without ever using these terms. One might expect that the young director, after considering his method, might fine-tune it after forty years, change some tactics, do things differently. But here is a quote from Stephen Henderson from his experience of similar acting classes in the year 2000 at the Actors Centre:

The main thing are the six questions: where or what experience am I coming from? Where or what experience am I coming to? What have I come here to do? Why? and why now? "Why now?" is the one that you really need to realize. That's where he hung his hat. That's the immediacy, you know, it is a "Why? Why now?" and then, "What do I expect to gain from it?" You know there are various ways to state those six questions but they come down to that. [...] See now, this is the thing about

the format. After a scene was done, Lloyd would ask these two questions: what were you working for and how did it go? (Henderson, interview)

Notice that Richards “really hung his hat” on the question of “Why now?” – the question most connected to the concept of event in real time. Henderson’s whole thrust, as with many others, was how much Richards was able to transform the actor with the simple, persistent repetition of these questions.

I would like to consider a piece of video that I myself witnessed, which though it involves Richards’ teaching method, might give us a sense of how he was in rehearsal. This video is from a recording made by Michael Schultz of a workshop given at the Actors Centre, New York, in the year 2000. Scott Richards, Richards’ first son, who played Sylvester in *Ma Rainey* and watched his father direct all his life, said to me at our first meeting that by the time his father was doing the Actors Centre workshop (at the age of eighty-one), “he had lost some of the old fire.”<sup>2</sup> His implication was that it would be difficult for me, watching the Actors Centre excerpts, to get a sense of what his father was really like as a director. If that is the case, then what was the fire like? One watches the documentary footage done by Michael Schultz on that workshop, and one gets the impression of a very passionate director – above and beyond the stillness and concentration one has been led to expect, one also sees in Richards an actor who truly believes.

In the following excerpt, I will try to describe the dynamic of one section of that footage, and the effect will be somewhat like a director's copy of a stage production. The strongest impression I had was that it felt that he were asking these questions for the first time:

Faida Lampley gets up and does a monologue by Hermione from the end of Act III of *A Winter's Tale*.<sup>3</sup> She does it with a certain hesitating sincerity, though she is often struggling with her lines, and going in and coming out of the action. Richards never interrupts and closely follows her, reacting slightly to every shift in mood. When Faida finishes, she says with modest pride that it is the first time in her life that she has done a monologue by Shakespeare. There are smiles.

Lloyd Richards: *(not mocking or suspicious, but not entirely without slyness either)*  
What were you working for?

Faida is clearly a little intimidated, and her answers in this whole first section are a little hesitant. Her answer here is that she didn't feel the need to look for the emotion; she was concerned with the language, and with making it feel "like me."

Lloyd Richards: *(same ambiguous tone)* How did it go? What worked and what didn't work?

Faida is unsure. She tried to say the words not in a "big chunk". She was trying to do that "acting thing" where you stand still. Lloyd Richards laughs, but asks again:  
How did it go?

She starts to answer, but he interrupts her: What about the thoughts? When she starts to answer again, he interrupts her again: were you going thought by thought?

She answers, searching for words, that it was somewhat "chunky."

Lloyd Richards: *(there's an ever so slight impatience to him)* Rather than a through thought. *(Pause.)* What are the circumstances?

Faida talks of her husband's jealousy, gives the circumstances of the scene.

Throughout, it is clear that she is vulnerable, very open to Lloyd Richards's comments, and visibly happy, somewhere inside her, to be here.

Lloyd Richards is very insistent here: *Why? Why?* What happened? There is a sense here that Richards is in situation himself, and it is difficult to say at what point he suddenly entered the circumstances of the play.

Faida says that the situation is fantastical – she says it partly as Faida, and partly as Hermione – the first inner movement that will put her into the situation.

Lloyd Richards: *(a certain pouncing quality, but gentle)* What is fantastical?  
*(Insistent, urgent in his tone)* What happened?

Faida: My husband has lost his mind.

Lloyd Richards: That you know. That's all you know. The man I love has lost his mind.

Faida paraphrases the text that her husband has said, finishing with a very strong, “die, whore!”<sup>4</sup>

Lloyd Richards (*reacting beautifully to this expression of sincere emotion, as if someone had shaken him a little*): Oh! You loved him? (*Then, again, insistent.*)

Where did you come from?

Faida: (*A certain calm, as if realizing where this was going. The tone changes.*)

From nursing my baby.

Lloyd Richards: You are coming from your baby. (*Then.*) Who are these people?

(*Again, it is difficult to say at what point this happened, but Richards is very much in the scene, at the court, in real time with these questions, like a close friend of Hermione's who is asking who they are.*)

Faida: (*Again, the serene realization.*) They are friends, but they are judges.

Lloyd Richards: Have they been to your place for dinner?

Faida: (*Her slow realization is causing her to enter in situation.*) Yes.

Lloyd Richards: (*Always in real time, insistent.*) Where are they, who?

Faida: My friends.

Lloyd Richards: And they are here to do what?

Faida: To decide whether I live or die.

By this time, the actress is visibly moved by what she is realizing, and by Richards' indignation at her situation.

Lloyd Richards: (*Insistently*) They are here to make that decision?

The repetition is not exactly for emphasis, but because he is in situation. At this point the actress begins to use some of Hermione's words to describe her situation, "haled out to murder: myself on every post/Proclaimed a strumpet."

Lloyd Richards: This is not supposed to happen to you.

Faida: No.

Lloyd Richards: (*In situation.*) What did they say to you? These people have eaten your food.

Faida: Yes.

Lloyd Richards: That's what you've come to deal with. Yes? (*Coming half out of situation, teacherly.*) Oh! (*Then back in.*) Which are your friends? Point to them.

Faida: (*Pointing to classmates in the workshop.*) There. And there. And there. And over there.

Lloyd Richards: Is or was your friend? Is that still your friend? You're coming to be judged.

Throughout Faida agrees with Richards, visibly moved, as they pursue the line of thoughts.

Lloyd Richards: *(He has asked it before, and the repetition is almost ironic for the absurdity of the situation – almost lawyerly.)* Where are you coming from?

Faida: *(Confirming her realization.)* From nursing my baby.

Lloyd Richards: And you had to give the baby to the soldiers.

There is a certain feeling of outrage to his tone, but always persistent, forward-moving, concrete. Again Faida agrees, again visibly moved by her situation that Richards is feeding her. Faida explains here that she needs to know if he hears me, and she sees the expression of their faces.

Lloyd Richards: *(Insistent with the same question.)* Where are you coming from?

Faida: *(The repetition is getting to her, emotionally, as if the more she considers it, the more it appalls her.)* From nursing my child.

Lloyd Richards: *(Stepping back, teacherly again.)* All of that is where you are coming from, from that experience. (“Michael Schultz Documentary”)

To see this video is to understand what most of the actors interviewed mean when they say that it is difficult to describe the effect he has on you. Reading some of the critical work on Richards, for example, one begins to think that there is a distant slyness to Richards, a teacherly detachment.<sup>5</sup> Though there is truth to this, the actors give a sense of a man who put fire into them. Of all the descriptions, the best is in this documentary

footage itself, by Cecily Tyson, who says that there are many teachers, but few of them can teach.

Lloyd Richards was a master at giving you exactly what you needed at a given moment. He was never judgmental when he asked you questions, but he was constantly "stoking you." [...] He stokes the actor, makes you find what you need, and when you find it, the sparks fly. ("Michael Schultz Documentary")<sup>6</sup>

Many talented directors have this quality, which you might call "like a dog with a bone" – but in many this quality turns into a kind of hounding of the actor. And certainly on occasion Richards had this hounding quality as well. (Tyson says at another point in the footage that he was such a gentle man, but when he critiqued a scene he could become a totally different person, he could be completely repulsed by what he saw.)<sup>7</sup> But it is clear, when you see the video, that Richards is more concerned with preserving the actor's sense of being in the given circumstances so as to allow them to react to an imaginary world. In other words, hounding the actor may generate action, but it will never generate an organic event in the actor. The mixture of dialogue and rhythmic repetition seems to be a textbook example of call-and-response, which gives Richards his ability to move towards a shared event in rehearsal.

Notice that it is the repetition itself that drives home what has happened, the event coming alive by the very act of insistent repetition. Just as in the Molettes' description of the preacher with the congregation, it is the very repetition here that gives weight to the

circumstances, makes them more real each time for the actor, making the words come to life.

Of course, Richards did not rehearse as he conducted his classes,<sup>8</sup> but certainly dialogue was nurtured in his rehearsals, as Courtney Vance's example, in the last chapter, on the anecdoting at table analysis, shows. And his method shows that he had a simple faith in this kind of living repetition.

The belief in repetition is the spirit behind the constant return to the table to read the play again and again: a simple faith that, with each repetition, something more will settle into conviction. During this table period, Richards would ask questions without expecting answers, and many of the players would tell stories from their experience to comment on the scenes being read, so the actors now get a chance to sit and take their time reacting to what is alive in the text. And like Richards' questions in his interrogation of Lampley, these anecdotes would help, with each return to the text, give each line more fullness and breadth – more circumstance in the character's imaginary memory – to help the actors react to what they are saying in real time. “We spent a week around the table and just got the emotional grounding of the play” (Vance, interview, Oct. 2012). This expression “emotional grounding” is not self-absorption, but a repetitive but living contemplation of circumstance through a constant dynamic of call and response.

Just he was consistent, Richards taught his actors to be consistent, so naturally they would think of his observations even once he was gone. This consistency in terms of character choices allowed Richards' actors to arrive at the tragic core of the characters:

And when we were doing a play for that long, the other great thing he would say is, Don't change the choice, just go deeper into the same choice. And I found for myself that even when we closed on Broadway I was still finding things and I took that as a tribute to the synergy of August and Lloyd together. (Shay, interview)

This is the sense one gets when reading this next passage from Mary Alice, whose performance in *Fences* acquires tragic dimensions – simplicity and tenacity taken together makes for a very powerful effect:

She is able to be happy with this until she finds out that her husband has betrayed her. And it's only then that she begins to deal with what she really wants, with the sacrifices she made in giving all, putting everything into her marriage. *There was so much there, already in the script, and given a good director, it was very, very clear.*

(Henderson, 68-69. Italics mine.)

In the theatre, one hears this often: Stanislavsky's idea of returning to the script again and again to dig out its given circumstances is often repeated in theatre rehearsals. But rare is the director who succeeds in turning Stanislavsky's somewhat technical idea into a living trust in the simple truths of the script which can lead to full emotional responses. When referring to betrayal, Alice is talking about the moment in the second act when she

realizes that Troy is with another woman, and for the first time in her life she confronts Troy with all the emotions that have built up over the years. (Later in the same interview she speaks about how draining this “cathartic” moment is.) And yet at the same time,

The subtext is there, but you don’t have to play that. You don’t have to worry about it. You know who you are, what you want, what your relationship is, and before you know it the moment changes; you’re laughing at one moment, and the next moment it’s serious. It’s so real; that’s how people are. (Henderson, 70)

The actress finds, by digging a little deeper into the simple choices before her, and re-experiencing them simply every time, the tragic dimensions of her character. And finding this tragic dimension in the everyday situations of these characters is very much what Richards is looking for with his simple but often devastating questions: the tragic dimension in the childlike innocence of the character’s simple “contented” life.

#### **b. Tarrying and Rhythmic Asymmetry**

Here is a quote from Lloyd Richards, from a workshop he conducted at Florida State University in 1974:

You have to be free to respond to the stimulus of the moment, rather than respond to the way you planned to do it. You're all so ready with the next line! There are lines between the lines. Where are they? Deal with what's happening now. (LRP B134 F1537)

Like Richards' "Why now?", the direction is intended to help the actor find "the lines between the lines" – the freedom the actor has within the structure of the play. This involves a very specific way of coaxing in a rehearsal setting, as shown by the following description, by Courtney Vance, of James Earl Jones, Mary Alice and Lloyd Richards rehearsing the scene in act two of *Fences* when Troy tells Rose he's going to have a baby with another woman. It is worth quoting the description at length, because it illustrates well the kind of soft-stepping anticipation that Richards used with his more experienced actors. When describing the scene, Vance constantly went into and came out of the actors' intonations, and these flashes of remembered life makes the listener feel the truth of the moment at the time. These flashes are in italics in the citation, and when Vance changes from one character to another (without, of course, changing the quality of his voice, only his intonation), it is marked with a slash. I have left the searching and interrupting quality of Vance's description to give a sense of the difficulty of reviving the truth of a remembered scene.

So I know that scene started just like all of us have to start in kindergarten. They started trying to figure it out, and Lloyd let them figure out how the blocking was going to go. All they know is *I've got something to tell you, Rose./Well, Troy what you talking about?* And just the navigation from the flutteriness. [...] You know, just the *Troy, what you talking about. I got to get back in the house, Troy. I got things to/Woman, woman, woman, I'm trying to talk to you./Alright Troy.* She pushed that as far as you can push it. There was no [different intonation, more

direct] *What you talking about Troy?* She was, she was like [as before] *This is another day, I have things to do. What are you going to... Troy! Tro-o-oy! Troy!* So that he had to work to tell what he – *Woman, would you STOP it. I got something to tell you. I'm trying to figure out how to tell you.* And she still just fluttering with that rose which was just given to her by Gabe, she's got a rose in her hand and playing with that rose and just has no idea what's coming. And that's the blocking part of the rehearsal of the scene. How the information is conveyed. How long do I push it? How much do I know? Do I know anything? How do I receive it? And when I do receive it. *Troy, you're not telling me this? You're not telling...* And then it reverses and she starts babbling and he's got to *Rose, Rose.* And just the whole dynamic of how she's sitting there he's standing up. He sits down and then sitting there together and they are sitting there closely and there's the dynamic of they are in the alley, that means the neighbors, and they've got to keep their voices down. And he's, you know, adding that in, *Rose, Rose,* now he's trying to take care of her. *Rose, I didn't – Troy, you know I ain't never wanted no half nothing in my family. My whole family is half. And my mama and your mama and your sister and my brother and your brother. You know I aint wanted none of that....* It's the most genius thing, and they would go over it and stop... *But Lloyd is it this...* they were so gentle with each other. (Vance, interview, Oct. 2012)

One senses that, exactly as Vance goes in and out of the action, playfully, so Mary Alice and James Earl Jones are going in and out of the action, feeling the scene out,

taking it step by step without ever pushing it. “Holding off” the emotional response, in the Russian sense. Or more specifically, tarrying – since the three are working towards the emotional outcome as a group.<sup>9</sup> Ever sensitive to each other’s impulses in the Russian sense, but not in silence, talking it through – in the tradition of call and response. Not wanting to go there yet because they know it will come anyway, and it will probably exhaust them. Stalling, of course, because no one wants to go there even in life, so pushing it wouldn’t be true on stage either. And in the meantime, there are careful questions and suggestions, gentle prodding, “dancing around it,” as Vance puts it. Lloyd Richards standing on stage with the actors so near that the other players can’t really hear what’s being said. And they try to find the “physical touch points” as Vance puts it later: “They just marked it. They’re like opera singers. They were just marking. They know the emotions, [...] but they got to figure out, what are the physical touch points that will ignite the emotion.” This was often the way Richards blocked – gently walking through things, again and again, waiting for the rehearsal event, the actor’s discovery, to happen. When Vance describes hearing this scene from back-stage – a scene he witnessed 500-600 times – he still gets emotional when he remembers it.

Now, of all the scenes that I saw in the Lincoln Centre recording of *Fences*, the one I remember the most is this scene, and what I remember the most are precisely the things that Vance is talking about here: Rose’s fluttering, her explosion and hitting him from the side, the transition into lifting her up and the ambiguity of the end of the scene – I remember not because the style of the scene was any different from the rest of the play,

but because, even on the recording, the living impulses of the actors were evident and overwhelmingly true. When you try to describe the scene, you fall into the same kinds of hesitations, interruptions, imitations, and other circumlocutions that Vance shows here – because you are describing something in full motion, and any set way of describing will take away its emotional truth. These “hesitations and interruptions” that can be relied on to create living events on stage are fundamental aspects of rhythmic scoring, a common characteristic of Richards’ rehearsal process which contributed to the precise “physical touch points” which “ignited the emotion” in the actors.

### **c. Rhythmic Scoring**

Richards almost never gave line readings to his actors, as the Russian directors often do, but it is clear that as a director, he worked like a conductor, making strategic suggestions first to his playwrights in the dramaturgy process, then later to his actors, in order to “shape the emotional arc,” as Richard Wesley so adequately puts it here:

You go and look at the work that he did in *Fences* or the work that he did with *Ma Rainey*, or the work that he did with *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, that’s where you start to see Lloyd’s style. I used to refer to the declamatory delivery of the actors – (*imitating*) “The volume is always up here”. And it was almost like you could put into music the way in which he wanted his actors to speak, like there’s always a punch in it. A kind of “do you know who you’re talking to?” – it’s hard to...I’m really not an actor, so I can’t imitate it, but whether it’s Dutton, whether it’s

Sidney Poitier, whether it's James Earl Jones, you suddenly notice the similarity in style, the similarity in delivery, even though they are three very distinct actors. [...]

Lloyd's touch starts to manifest itself in how he needs the actors to deliver those lines, where he needs the punch to come from, where he needs the emphasis placed, where he needs them to pull back. So he is like a conductor who is fine tuning an orchestra. He decides when and where he's going to place the emphasis and the music, where the bass is going to come in, how the tympanus were going to sound just so. (Wesley, interview)

Dwight Andrews concurs with Wesley:

And so yes Lloyd understood the music and the play. The music of the play and in a sense directed that way so that ultimately as the production is sculpted like music you would hear a refrain that kind of strengthens or reinforces something even as another verse is spun out. Lloyd does think of his work that way. But not in any literal way. (Andrews, interview)

This "punch," this "musical reinforcement," is not just a question of taking Wilson's rhythmically patterned scripts (which, it must be remembered, Richards had a close hand in shaping as well) and helping the actors "respect the words." It was a question of giving the actors freedom. Nor is it one imposed by Richards, but one encouraged out of the actors – like Faida Lampley's "from nursing my child."

Lloyd had a way of, not necessarily showing, but of letting you know that speeches, monologues, and soliloquies had to be musical in your delivery. They couldn't be linear. He would tell you that. He would say find the vocal music. Find the vocal music in the speech. And the first thing you think of is singing. But he never really meant that. Then once you did find the vocal music, once you understood what he was going for, you really felt like it's not a long speech anymore. (Dutton, interview)

What's important here is the actor's experience of time: getting at the "vocal music" means suddenly feeling that time goes by quickly. Getting the rhythmic sense surprises the actor, and opens them up for things to happen. Michele Shay talks about something similar in the next passage, describing how Richards worked language with his actors when doing August Wilson:

I'm trying to figure out how to articulate this to you: there is a place you have to drop into with the text that really has nothing to do with acting. It has to do with being and allowing the rhythm in particular... to find you, and the meaning will come through the rhythm. Like the blues, you know: we talked about that, because the music is so in it. His work is an invitation to a place of being. (Shay, interview)

Rhythmic scoring allows for a "place of being" where the meaning will come through. A good scoring is precisely one that the actors love to repeat, and that gives them a freedom and sincerity each time they perform it, because it obliges them, by its

combination cliff-hanging difficulty and complete freedom, to stay alert, and therefore stay in situation. Courtney Vance says that the most difficult part about Cory is his innocence – and one could say, it is also the most difficult part about Troy as well. In the following excerpts from the two interviews I did with Courtney Vance, there are two things worth noting. The first is that Vance would suddenly drop into the intonation of the scene from twenty years before, and immediately conjure up the scene. Not only would the intonations come alive, but Vance, like Richards in class described above, kept going in and out of situation.

*How come you, can I ax you a question?* After he goes and comes back and he puts his finger on the fence pole that is not built yet. But the post is there. I got my finger on the post, I'm in the alley, and I say, *can I ax you a question*. Not "ask" you – "ax." *What you got to ax me? Mr. Stawicki the one you got the questions for.* And the question, even today, I still get choked up when I ask. Because it's that question that no son wants to be able to ask their father and no father wants to be able to hear from their son. (*Articulating, but softly.*) *How come you ain't never liked me?*

(Vance, interview, October 2012)

It's as if the scene were a living thing for Vance, and simply calling up the intonation brings him back into the emotion of the scene. The second important point here is the way both actors delivered the word "ax." Both Jones and Vance deliver the word in the same way, stretching it out, somewhat awkwardly, as if there were a slight braking at the

beginning of the word (in phonetics, it would be a kind of glottalization). This somewhat awkward stretching out of the word, delivered the same way by father and son, made both characters suddenly seem like each other, and seem innocent a moment before one of the most confrontational expressions of love occurs in the play. The word actually helps both of them transition into one of the most serious moments of the play, by its very delivery.

One immediately remembers Amiri Baraka's street singer, and how "God don't never change" is a testament to a very specific human experience. The word appears, in Wilson's published script, as "ask" (Wilson, *Fences*, 37) – so even Wilson's "musical" scripts required the actors to bring it alive with specific vocal adjustments in performance.

Again, it is difficult to determine whose idea this was – the actors remember their script as such, and neither Richards nor Wilson are here to explain the change from script to performance. But certainly, according to Vance, Richards asked him to find things in Jones' performance to imitate,<sup>10</sup> and the similarity is certainly coherent with the general thrust of the work.

What else is involved in what Wesley calls Richards' "punch"? Most of the interviewees agreed, and seemed to draw on a larger consensus, that Wilson's plays were just not the same after the breakup in 1996. This is often connected to the idea that Richards was no longer dramaturging the plays, and they lost terseness in their structure. But when you compare the first to later productions, it becomes more certain that the acting, under Richards' guidance, was also fundamental in the success of these scripts. It

is instructive, for instance, to watch Denzel Washington in the part of Troy Maxson under the direction of Kenny Leon, and to observe the audience reaction to the same scene described by Courtney Vance above, with Chris Chalk as Cory – as one clever observer has done, juxtaposing the two scenes on Youtube, and noticing the difference in the audience’s reaction. (“Fences “How come you aint never liked me?”)<sup>11</sup> The revival scene with Washington has exactly the same kind of musicality as the original does – Wilson’s text is so well written that there is an intonational score that immediately protects the actor. But there is one fundamental difference: Washington “marks the periods” – he plays the tempo as it were, while James Earl Jones is creating “perspective” in the Russian sense: he often doesn’t mark the periods, there are “psychological pauses,” and there is a constant rhythmic shifting. The text moves forward and two or three sentences merge into one, even when you would expect a pause to make sense, such as just before he says “Answer me when I’m talking to you” – elided and not giving *time* for Cory to answer. Washington, on the other hand, puts every period in its place, and the audience laughs right through it. It’s as if each period were carefully placed to make the audience laugh.<sup>12</sup> No director here saying, “O-kay, Chris. O-kay, Den-zel. Let’s take it again” – as Lloyd will be seen doing with Courtney and James Earl in the next section. So in Washington’s performance, the text plays “musically” well, on a formal level, with an elegant intonational scoring by the playwright, but the action goes out of it – and so does its “punch” – its emotionally powerful effect, the event.<sup>13</sup>

One could argue, in fact, that Wilson's long speeches, in formal terms, are "badly written," and it was the direction and the performance which made the speeches work. Consider this testimony, by Rocky Carroll, about Samuel L. Jackson's struggle with Boy Willie's long last speech in *The Piano Lesson*, and one of the few times Richards ever demonstrated a scene:

I remember Sam having a hell of a time at the end because Boy Willie has whipped himself up into such a frenzy in the last scene, and he's talking non-stop, basically about giving his world view and about why he's going to take the piano out of the house, and it's this incredible diatribe about life and death and white and black, [...] and Sam was really struggling with some of the variations of it. It's like a ten-minute guitar solo, and that was the first time I ever remember Lloyd actually embodying the role, and basically coming and taking centre stage – because Sam was stuck on, how do you do this without making it redundant, how do you do this when you're talking so long without making the audience want to pull their hair out? And I guess Lloyd was trying to show Sam in his doing it is that the speech was not just one long proclamation: some of it was stream of consciousness, some of it the character was kind of speaking to no one in particular, sometimes he was speaking to himself, sometimes he was talking directly to people in the room, and sometimes it was just a man with no filter who was speaking these random thoughts that somehow all kind of came together [...] It was a solo, it was a riff, it was a jazz solo. [...] He was basically demonstrating and at the same time explaining to Sam

that there were variations in the speeches. [...] And he was a very good actor.

(Carroll, interview)

Here is an example of Richards actually scoring a long “redundant” monologue with the actor, in the Russian style, but with a difference: it is not accidental that Carroll should compare the monologue with a jazz riff: the problem was not so much in the written text but in the inability of the actor, at first, to make the monologue a living rhythmic piece – of making sure Jackson didn’t smooth out the rhythmic line. And consider that this is the climax of the play: the scene which leads to the play’s main event.

Now, the skeptical reader might say: this discussion of rhythmic scoring is misleading. It is better for directors and actors to concentrate on their action, believe in the given circumstances, and not worry about rhythmic considerations. And yet: Jones and Washington are both in the given circumstances, fully concentrated on their action, sensitive to their partner, and believe what they’re saying. And yet Jones gives a brilliant performance and Washington gives a good one: that is because the rhythmic element – the jazz technique as it were, the highly technical sense of rhythm – is masterfully performed by Jones, under Richards’ watch, and not by Washington, under Leon’s. Washington is comfortable, as it were, Jones is always somewhat precariously off-balance, in the Thelonius Monk sense – he’s always hitting the wrong note, but it comes out beautifully right.<sup>14</sup>

I also think that this distinction is precisely where the shortcomings of a theatre culture that has too much respect for the playwright, and not enough for the director, becomes clear (though certainly Richards himself, whose work at the O'Neill was entirely predicated on the self-effacement of directors and actors and on respect for the play, contributed significantly to this culture). I don't think, for example, that *Radio Golf* or *Gem of the Ocean* are necessarily more poorly written than *Fences* or *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* – as the consensus seems to go, mostly in defense of Richards. I think that's unfair to Wilson as a playwright – all the plays adhere to the highest standards – but more importantly I think it's unfair to Richards as a director. The implication is that his real work was finished with his last dramaturgical adjustment. But remember it was in performance, as a director, that Richards made these final dramaturgical adjustments;<sup>15</sup> and remember that Richards' direction made these plays come alive in a way they never would again. He wasn't just lulling the audience into laughter and tears by having the actors sing their respective parts – as Washington does here. He knew how to make incremental adaptations over months of rehearsal and performance that kept the actors fully aware of the imaginary world they were in. And he knew how to make the actors highly sensitive to each other and to the audience with these adaptations.

#### **d. Strategies for Organic Emotional Response**

Richards' actors were known to give him emotionally powerful performances, in a number of memorable instances,<sup>16</sup> and yet when asked how Richards helped them arrive

at these powerful reactions, the actors would say things like, Lloyd never raised his voice, or, he would talk them through it, or, simply, as seen above, he would just leave us alone. Michele Shay, when asked how Richards helped her with a strong emotional scene in *Goin Thru Changes*, responded as many of the actors did – with bewilderment:

You know, I don't remember how he helped me, but I do remember, one of the biggest challenges that I had was this scene where Darnell came in and I was supposed to scream, or something. [...] And I could not figure out how to do that. And just one day I dropped into this place where I started screaming and it was funny at the same time. Don't ask me how I did it. (Shay, interview)

And yet she goes on to say that Richards did in fact help her:

It is just that somehow the way that he would set us up in the structure of the scene, you were able to maintain that, because of the power of that structure through the whole run of the play. (Shay, interview)

Again and again, the actors' testimony was the same: he got me to a place, and I don't know how he did it.

Theatre director Barbara Ann Teer discussed her memories of working with Lloyd Richards in a letter to the director on July 8, 1985:

I first met Lloyd Richards when he was directing *A Raisin in the Sun*. He was a superstar of directing and of course it was every actor's dream to be in one of his plays. I studied acting with him for at least one year. I had the pleasure of

performing the lead in a play written by Ron Milner called *Who's Got His Own?* and Lloyd directed me in that production. As I recall, he was a gentle director; he gave his actors the opportunity to be truly creative. He made very few demands on my choices. It was an extremely emotionally taxing role that I played and it required me crying for almost two hours without stopping. He never allowed me to indulge myself in self pity of any kind. I was eternally grateful to him for this. (LRP B137 F1614)

The fact that the emotional work is both demanding and never indulged says something about non-personal nature of the emotional work, “knowing the difference between yourself as the actor and as the character” as Sidney Poitier puts it in an interview about Richards (Rand and Scorcia, 234) Whenever the actors interviewed spoke of the emotional moments of the performances, they usually spoke in terms of two or three actors or characters – how the actors worked together, in a call and response style, to come to an organic emotional response.

One of the most extraordinary anecdotes on the shared nature of the emotional response comes from Courtney Vance:

And so he blocked that amazing scene, *How come you never liked me?* And Lloyd let James Earl and I [...] laugh through that scene for about two weeks. Whenever we got to the moment, *How come you never liked me*, whenever we got to the heavy parts of the scene, we would laugh, we couldn't help it, it was too serious for us, we

started giggling. I don't know why we were laughing, James didn't know why, he and I just started giggling. [...] And Lloyd let us laugh and laugh, for two weeks he let us laugh. And then finally he said, "O-kay, Cour-tney. O-kay, Cour-tney. Jimmy, let's go into it." And then the tears flowed, if I do that scene now, they would flow, James and I were just connected, you know. (Vance, interview, Jun. 2012)

Not only does Richards tarry, letting the actors work things out themselves, he lets them play the scene *completely out of situation*, as it were, for two weeks. Many actors have experienced the ire of directors in rehearsal when they "break up" in a serious scene even once. But two weeks is more than just patience or tolerance (both of which imply a kind of condescension toward the actor): it is an intuition that laughter and tears are much more connected than most of us are able to imagine – that emotional connection between the actors is rare enough, it must be nurtured in any of its forms, and this will guarantee that the actors will deliver the fire when it is needed. This call-and-response aspect of tarrying was one of Richards' unique abilities as a director.

The ability to nurture emotional connection was also true with regards to the audience. At his best, Richards didn't let the emotional event shut the audience off – part of the art in his "shaping the emotional arc" was making sure the audience was able to connect with the actor regardless of the event being witnessed.

The defining moment of *Ma Rainey*, for example, the blasphemy scene at the end of the first act, involves one of the most daring pieces of writing in all of Wilson's plays,

and how a director guides the actor in handling this scene determines much of the audience's experience of the event:

Cutler's God! Come on and save this nigger! Come on and save him like you did my mama! Save him like you did my mama! I heard her when she called you! I heard her when she said, "Lord, have mercy! Jesus, help me! Please, God, have mercy on me, Lord Jesus, help me!" And did you turn your back? Did you turn your back, motherfucker? Did you turn your back? (*Levee becomes so caught up in his dialogue with God that he forgets about Cutler and begins to stab upward in the air, trying to reach God.*) Come on! Come on and turn your back on me! Turn your back on me! Come on! Where is you? Come on and turn your back on me! Turn your back on me, motherfucker! I'll cut your heart out! Come on, turn your back on me! Come on! What's the matter? Where is you? Come on and turn your back on me! Come on, what you scared of? Turn your back on me! Come on! Coward, motherfucker! (*Levee folds his knife and stands triumphantly.*) *Your God ain't shit, Cutler.* (Wilson, *Ma Rainey*, 78)

Roc Dutton tells that for this scene, Richards left him mostly to his own devices. And yet, as is often the case with the Richards anecdotes, there was one, single note that was fundamental:

Because I do remember once in *Ma Rainey*, when I finished the big blasphemous speech, Levee has that line that says, "Your god aint shit." After he finishes this

thing, he's got the knife and says, "You coward motherfucker" and turns around and looks at Cutler and says, "Your god aint shit." After doing it that way for a week or so Lloyd pulled me up and said, "The blasphemous speech, proportionally it's Greek tragedy, it's Prometheus bound. It's going against the god." He says, "That's all nice and well but when you get to that last line, 'Your god aint shit,' and make that part of the railing which you have just done, and the audience is like oh my god, then you've lost them for another five, eight minutes, until they come back around. You have to become a little boy on that last line." [...] So the next time I did it, I did a 360: when I started the audience was here and I still was at an angle but when I turned back around by the time I faced them again on that last line (*he smiles broadly*), it – it was all a charade. And the audience would roar. Roar with laughter. Because you had them like this (*clenching his fist*) and then you let them off the hook, relieving them in that last line. (Dutton, interview)

Dutton then goes on to explain how this note "freed him up," – that he had felt uncomfortable about the monologue up to that point, but the note helped him discover Levee's innocence, and helped make the ending of the play – an act of passion, not an act of murder – much easier to play. Richards gives one single note, framing it in terms of the play's circumstances, the audience's reception and the actor's needs, and it has a double effect. Playing against Wilson's melodramatic "stands triumphantly" and the italics that follow, Richards asks the actor to smile. Now perhaps, on reflection, this is wrong, and one is reminded again of Phillip Hayes Dean's criticism of Richards.<sup>17</sup> And yet the actor,

no stranger to violence, had been uncomfortable with the last moment and says it freed him up: freed him up so much and so well, in fact, that it is remembered as one of the most important stage events in Wilson's and Richards' career.

It is, in fact, a perfect example of thematic task in the Russian sense: the director assigns a task that seems to go against the "seriousness" of the play and the situation, but in responding to an actor's need for accommodation, frees him up and makes the scene much more powerful than it would have been.

Finding the right thematic task in order to free up the actors in highly charged emotional scenes is not easy, especially when the stage event being performed involves some spiritual or supernatural element beyond the audience or the company's belief. In *The Piano Lesson*, for a convincing emotional reaction to the ghost, it was imperative the actors not to fall into a stereotype. The ghost in *The Piano Lesson* was one of three particularly difficult images – the other two were addressed in the last chapter – where the players had to make a special effort to make sure they didn't fall into a stereotype:

One of three problems that all centered around racial stereotypes. [...] Number three was the biggest one. You could easily fall into Amos and Andy. Whoa Lord there's a ghost, holy mackerel there's a ghost there. And so we constantly and Lloyd constantly talked about that. (Dutton, interview)

Richards was determined that the actors should treat the ghost as something very real – and that at least one actor should not fall into buffoonery<sup>18</sup> - among other things, in order

to ensure that the characters' dignity be maintained. The task is clearly thematic because it requires the players to concentrate on the director's and their own larger thematic action, and it required the whole team to work together to create an active image.

Dutton's further explanation shows how much work goes into fulfilling this kind of work:

That thing went through many metamorphoses. I'll be honest and Lloyd would be the first one to say so. In the Yale Rep production that whole ghost thing was very bogus. And even he was trying to figure it out – how to make his ghost thing work. In other words the first time, [...] the curtains were flittering and stuff was falling and it looked like somebody was pulling at them and it looked hokey and I think a critic or two said so. [...] Well, it's a ghost how are you going to do it differently? You can't do Hollywood special effects with it. [...] And I remember doing one thing in the Boston run in rehearsals, particularly once we got on the set. I got upstairs and I did a slow push off and flew back. Nobody could see me I sort of took a step back and pushed off the stairs and I fell back and looked and everybody thought I was hurt but I was fine... I never really flipped but I did go back, protecting myself, to the second landing. I flung myself backwards and landed on the first landing. And then when I would charge up and run again, Doaker would grab me and I would struggle or whatever. When Lloyd saw that I gave it another effect without having to put an effect on it, [he was satisfied]. The ghost threw me down the stairs. [...] No one called it hokey. (Dutton, interview)

The director insists on struggling against a stereotype, and the actor, instead of working on emotional recall, does a very specific physical action that creates the illusion of a man fighting with a ghost, and puts everyone in situation. Beyond this, however, Richards gives another instruction – to concentrate on the “positive” ghost – the ancestor. Dwight Andrews describes the kind of work Richards expected of him as he worked with Berniece on the play’s musical finale, when she goes to the piano in order to confront the ghost:

But so what she had to do was call on the ancestors. Which is religion in a way. So how Berniece in the midst of all of this starts calling the names: *mama Berniece*, *mama Ola*... And as she says that, she sees that the ancestors are on the piano. She has to touch the piano. She has to invoke the spirits and how that happens is in a way that seems real to the play we had to discover. She just couldn’t go to the piano and play something: in fact what she played couldn’t be music – but it was music and text and the frenetic energy of a woman who doesn’t play piano. She hasn’t played since mama Ola died. So I have to really stay so close to the play so I don’t go and say, What kind of song does she sing, but rather, What happens when your energy and your terror brings you to the piano. So we had her just play these chords that her fingers would be going to, but these really weren’t traditional chords. They was all kinds of dissonance. It was really finding the touch of the piano. She goes, *Mama Ola* and ultimately what we found is that linked her energy to the intention to

call up the spirits from the train and the ghosts of the yellow dog. (Andrews, interview)

Again, following Richards' thematic action, Andrews finds a way of guiding an actress who is not a musician to an active image – not worrying about playing well, but about using the “dissonant chords” to call to the ancestors: using an active image to carry out a specific action, and to create a very moving stage event.

Still, ultimately, Richards would resort to questions which would constantly bring the actors back to the given circumstances of the play, and breaking the action down to the smallest tasks. Karen Carpenter refers to Delroy Lindo's struggles with Herald Loomis, and Richards' simple persistence in encouraging him:

I think the way that Lloyd helped him was by accepting at each go that there were gains that were made in that go-round. Because Delroy was a powerful actor. And the character is profoundly angry because he has lost his faith. And so nothing about it could be intellectual. [...] But then Lloyd would try to fine-tune also: how long it took, you know, the shape it took. And so it was a real lesson in patience for him because it required such effort to do it each time. [...] He would say very easily, “You can do this. Can you do this? Can you do this? And this happened, and this happened, and this happened.” And then he'd ask him a question about [...] the actual event of losing his faith in the chain gang. [...] He would say, what happened in the chain gang? What was the very moment you lost your faith? And what were

you doing? What was being done to you? What was being said to you? What thing was it? To search for specific things about that moment so that he could evoke it, so he could own it, so he could own the choice. (Carpenter, interview)

The strategies here are similar to those in the rehearsal with Faida Lampley, where the series of questions leads the actor to living in the truth of the moment, and allows them to react with emotional conviction. But most importantly: these questions would not rely on any personal memories of the actor, but rather help them create the imaginary world of the play, in much the same way Michael Chekhov advises the actor to “woo the atmosphere” by developing his creative imagination.

Richards sets up a structure so that Michele Shay can suddenly fall into a strong emotional response; Richards asks Dutton to make a small adjustment at the end of a powerful emotional speech; Richards asks Mary Alice to make an apparently simple physical adjustment; Richards and Andrews encourage Merkerson to “play the wrong notes;” Richards keeps gently prodding Faida Lampley and Delroy Lindo with simple questions – and this “fine-tuning” makes all the difference in terms of the emotional impact of the actions and the characters on the audience.

#### **e. The Juba and the Work Song: Ritual Event**

The adaptations and intonations that have been described in this chapter have been “musical” in nature, and are concrete examples of what the blues aesthetic involves – but no chapter on stage event in Richards’ directing would be complete without briefly

examining the role music has played in his direction and staging, where the musical scenes were often the central events of his plays.<sup>19</sup>

Two of the most memorable moments in Richards' career as a director were musical moments: the juba in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and the work song in *The Piano Lesson*. These moments were far from being simple musical interludes: in many ways they very much represented everything that was being sought in August Wilson's century cycle.

When I first began this research, my thesis advisor Lisa Wolford was curious to discover how much of a part Richards played in getting this kind of music into the script. It has already been shown how difficult it is, in living processes, to determine where an idea originates – but judging from my interview with Dwight Andrews, it is highly unlikely that the original impulse for the juba came from Richards. Wilson, in fact, gave the original impulse: though not a musician, he had a more or less specific idea of what he wanted, specific enough, at least, for Andrews to know what to search for – but certainly Andrews' search was done under Richards' guidance.

What August really was pointing to was a kind of praise worship where people in very rural settings don't really have a church, they go to Aunt Susie's house for church. They meet at the kitchen table and somebody prays and somebody testifies and somebody raises a hymn and then they [sings and beats the table, in the style of a juba] and so I listened. I studied and internalized that world. And then created a

fictional world in which I had to collapse the time that could happen in an hour or two in a real life setting and it had to be condensed into four or five minutes.

(Andrews, interview)

Two things are of interest here: first of all, when Andrews talks about condensing two hours of experience into an intense six or seven minutes, he is talking about turning a ritual into an event. Much of performance studies has been interested in examining this question, but one theatre theorist who makes this process very clear is Grotowski's heir, Thomas Richards – Lloyd Richards' son. This is how he describes the effect of the Afro-Caribbean songs used in Grotowski's production of *Action*.

Some years ago we were in Brazil doing a project and a reputed priest from the Candomblé tradition, one of the African-based traditions in Brazil, came to see *Action*. He is a master of a line of tradition that, like many of the Afro-Caribbean traditions from which some of the songs in *Action* come stretches back to Africa. His point of view was: "It is fascinating, you've managed to create a structure that contains certain peak moments, something similar yet different than the peak moments we find in Candomblé. Yet in Candomblé, the process is very long, the peak moments happen (Richards, 2008, 156)

This idea of distilling the peak moments of a ritual practice is one possible way of describing the director's (or in this case the conductor's) function. The director, in a sense, wants to share a fascinating human experience with a larger audience, but to get

there needs to find an organic structure that turns this larger phenomenon into an event. The director's function in rehearsal is to distil larger ritual actions into discrete events.

The second point is that the search for authenticity, in Andrews' description, is not for some "pure" original form, but rather for some structure that would convey, concisely, the original event – an attempt to bring back the living dynamic that occurred in that kitchen 100 years ago, the distillation of that event into a musical form powerfully evoking that other time. This is very much what the search for authenticity was for Richards, as an ideal – as will be shown in the next chapter. Again, one thinks of Grotowski, and his essay "Tu es le fils de quelqu'un"<sup>20</sup> – though in this essay, Grotowski is looking for the ancestor and not the event, as it were, the search is similar: to rediscover something vitally important that perhaps has been forgotten. Not for some ideal essence, but for some shared vital experience that all would do well to remember, and using technique to make that moment come to life for an audience that has never experienced anything like it – and in this particular case, make them look again with deeper admiration at a cultural practice that had traditionally been under-valued.

This testimony by Roc Dutton shows the director's role in helping the performers reconnect with the full ramifications of ritual – here musical - structure:

Well he hired Dwight Andrews to do the music, but interestingly enough Lloyd knew of the songs. He knew of the *Ma Rainey* songs and he remembered those songs. He knew the "Berta Berta" chain gang song – he knew what it was about.

Because as a matter of fact he brought in a ten-pound hammer. When we first did the song I guess we were trying to be a little too cute and we were harmonizing. Lloyd had the property master bring in a big wooden chopper, a big wooden block, and a ten pound hammer. And he had actually had us hit it for about eight, nine, ten times and then he had us sing the song. And it went from the Four Tops to the song's pain, and that's where the problem with that play lies. When I see productions of it, people still sing that scene, the "Berta Berta" scene, like it's the Four Tops instead of a song that is about pain... (Dutton, interview)

Here again, there are two important moments. The first is the subversion of a stereotype. This version of the work songs is as far as you can possibly get from minstrelsy – and yet it uses a form, according to Dutton, that at the drop of a hat can fall back into the stereotype of the contented Southern worker, if the players and the director are not paying attention. And secondly: the most important element here, the element that gives full value to the event on stage, is in the stage action – and not simply a faithfulness to Wilson's original impulse and to Andrews' masterful arrangement. What makes the moment true is the director's thematic action, invisible in performance, but at the root of the rehearsal process and what makes the performance, ultimately, so overwhelming.

#### **f. Narrative Signification**

It is difficult to reconstruct the particular stage directions that might have nuanced Walter Lee's defiance of George Murcheson, Tyree Tucker's revenge against Sheriff

Canley or Tim Jr.'s confrontation with his mother. But it is possible to re-construct the performance details of the main events of August Wilson's plays – as well as Richards' interventions in the structuring the plays' events.

I have shown how Richards deals with two important events of Wilson's plays: at a critical moment in *Ma Rainey*, Levee turns and smiles at the audience. At a critical moment in *Fences*, Richards takes the gun away from Troy, and only on the actor's insistence returns a baseball bat to him. In both cases, it was as if Richards were intentionally turning these openly violent moments into more uncertain, more ambiguous events – as if he were seeking to de-emphasize their violence.

Both of these events occur midway through the action, and in many of Wilson's plays, "strong events" such as these happen early on in the dramatic structure. These other scenes are: Loomis' seizure and descent into the "chthonic abyss" in *Joe Turner*; Berniece's accusation that Boy Willie "killed Crawley just as sure as if you pulled the trigger" (Wilson, *Piano Lesson*, 52); Memphis' rant against the powers which are refusing to give him a good price for his restaurant in *Two Trains Running*; and the ritual killing of a rooster by Hedley in *Seven Guitars*. All of these central events occur at the end of act one in each play.

But since it is well-known that Wilson's plays are intentionally constructed as jazz or blues improvisations, one must be cautious about considering "strong" events as the main events of the play. For the same reason, in fact, one must be suspicious of the later events,

which may or may not be the plays' main events, but not because of their structural positioning. In both *Fences* and *Seven Guitars*, the death of the main character is moving and dramatic, but they die alone, and the world seems to change little after their death. The same is true of Loomis "finding his song" at the end of *Joe Turner*, the exorcism of Sutter's ghost at the end of *The Piano Lesson*, and the sale of the restaurant at the end of *Two Trains Running*. In every case the midway event seems – formally speaking – stronger than the final event. Even the abrupt ending of *Ma Rainey*, with the murder of Toledo, has a feeling of too little, too late, and wrong victim – not a tragedy but a terrible mistake.

At the same time: Richards asks his actors to rehearse the work song with a ten-pound hammer. And the ritual exaltation of these songs, profoundly connected to the players' and the characters' shared experience, is arguably more compelling than anything in the formal dramatic structure. Gabriel's mute trumpet and silent dance, or Floyd Barton's song of prayer, were, as Dwight Andrews points out, genuinely religious moments very much connected to African American traditions.

So Richards' strategy of nuancing two strong moments of violence seems to follow the plays' tendency to downplay – at least structurally – the violent events of the action. This down-playing of the violent event seems particularly important for one of Wilson's less celebrated plays: *Two Trains Running*. In order to show the way Wilson signifies on historical events, and to show how this signification requires a director capable of

building an inner structure that is little dependent on the formal structures of dramatic narrative, I will do a brief analysis of this play.

What is the inciting event of *Two Trains Running*? Formally it's the decision to tear down Memphis's restaurant against his will: and of course, there is a sense that this inciting event affects everyone in the play – Risa will be out of a job, Hambone will no longer have a safe haven, Holloway will have nowhere to drink his coffee, Wolf will have nowhere to run his numbers. And the main event – Memphis's surrender, and his acceptance of the city's offer means that the life in this restaurant will soon be over. The dramatic suspense of the play is therefore created by everyone's concern over whether Memphis is going to fight the city's decision or accept their offer.

It is concrete and possible to play this. It is, however, also banal, and this kind of analysis might lead to a banal performance. This is because the play clearly touches on larger concerns than Memphis' restaurant. In an analysis which includes the larger social picture, the inciting event might better be determined as the double assassination of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and the violent reaction to the dream of the civil rights moment. But the inciting event must be tied to the main event, and at least in the play, nothing comes of the death of these two central figures. These two absolutely central figures die and... nothing happens. Or rather, Memphis sells his restaurant, Hambone dies unredeemed despite the last moment of the play, and Risa and Sterling start a tentative relationship together.

Certainly the double assassination is meant here, like other historical references in Wilson's plays, as a symbolic reflection of the play's more concrete events. So another analysis might be to formulate the personal events in terms of the social, world-shattering ones. That is to say, in these people's lives, what has happened that is reflected in that larger catastrophe? It seems to me that, with the exception of West, there is something about all of these people that indicates their dreams have been shattered. King and Malcolm are gone, the restaurant's being torn down, Hambone didn't get paid for his work, Risa has come to a dead end, Sterling is still reeling from prison – a sense that, in their personal lives, the sixties didn't work. The dream of a bright future for this community has failed. This I propose as the inciting event of *Two Trains Running*: a dream destroyed for this community of people. Both the impending destruction of the restaurant and the double assassination are representative of the failed hopes of an exciting time.

What then is the action of this play? Hambone rocks back and forth, and demands his ham; Risa stubbornly takes her time doing what life has forced her to do; Sterling is biding his time, seeing what's next, after getting out of jail, and Memphis wonders if he should fight for his restaurant. Hambone dies, Memphis surrenders, Risa kisses Sterling, and life goes on.

Is it possible to play this as a main event? Life goes on? In *Waiting for Godot*, the inciting event, in my opinion, is that they have discovered they are dying, and the play is

a long struggle with death – the play is ultimately so moving because at the end the characters accept they are going to die, and they gain peace.

I would like to suggest that *Two Trains Running* is similar: these characters have been defeated, and the main event of the play is their decision to go on: there is something extraordinarily celebratory about this play, in Richards' direction, and I think this is because the main event of this play is a "coming together," as Michael Chekhov would say, and not a "falling apart." They have been defeated, but life goes on, and they accept what's coming, though they have no idea what it is.

In other plays by Richards, this defeat followed by acceptance usually happens in the peripatetic structure of the plays themselves – in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter Lee doesn't kill himself, but "becomes a man."<sup>21</sup> in *The Past is Past*, Eddie Green doesn't throw his father's absence in his face but ultimately forgives him. For every Levee who kills Toledo, there is a Herald Loomis who walks away purified, a ghost that is exorcised, a family that is reconciled. This is true even when Richards gets into classical repertory – O'Neill, Ibsen, Chekhov. Bitter comedies that ultimately resolve themselves with uncertain endings that look to the future. Uncertain comedies.

*Two Trains Running* is different because all the terrible things have already happened before the play begins. And the production is revealing because in a sense it is Richards' most characteristic production – and its success, despite some literal-minded complaining

about its loose structure, indicates the importance of the director's larger thematic action in terms of a ritual coming together, in making a "loose structure" come alive.

Wilson signifies on the primeval myth of the double catastrophe by showing the resilient hope of the people for whom these figures died. Richards turns this idea of resilient hope into a stage event by concentrating all of his work on bringing out the ritual beauty of these characters' simple actions and desires. Richards' stage production of the Wilson Cycle often signifies the stage events – and echoes his own earlier productions – in this same way: the poetic beauty of the ritual of everyday life gathers into an event of overcoming the violent actions the plays glancingly or openly treat.

For at least some of the more striking stage events under Richards' direction, there is certainly a ritual dimension – a blues action, as it were. And that the difference between popular directors in the North American tradition and Lloyd Richards is the difference between formal conflict and moving ritual – between "confirming one's good fortune and hegemony" and wielding a ten-pound hammer as you sing a painful ancestral song.

#### **g. Final Remarks: Lloyd Richards and Event**

In this chapter I have shown that Lloyd Richards' rehearsal strategies, coherent with Russian concepts related to event, emphasize certain more social and rhythmic aspects of these strategies from the African American tradition. The concept of intonational scoring, for example, becomes a more rhythmic scoring, where Richards manages, without giving line readings out of respect for his actors, to help shape the emotional arc of his actors'

characters through work on rhythmic asymmetry in the text. Richards uses rhythmic repetition – rhythmic asymmetry within a repeated structure – to keep the analysis of the given circumstances of the character very real for his actors, and helps his acting collectives come to the necessary emotional events of the plays through a combination of tarrying and call and response. Call and response, indeed, as a somewhat more active and social version of Stanislavsky's idea of adaptation, is one of his main strategies throughout the process, from script analysis to handling of audience response. Finally, I have tried to show that Richards signifies on the tragic events of his plays by strategically downplaying certain formal structural elements and key violent moments in that structure, and by emphasizing a less obvious structure of ritual language and gesture in order to create main events which celebrate a past which has been confronted and overcome.

## **Chapter 6. Lloyd Richards and Action**

In Chapter 3, the concepts related to stage action were laid out as follows: action was seen to be vitally connected to the actor's ability to follow their impulses and associations, and to the larger concerns of the real world. These impulses/associations, in the African American theatre, were expressed as the "human reference" in the smallest units of expressive language and gesture. Conflict was seen to be less vitally important, in the Russian theatre, than the artist's "larger thematic action." This is reflected in the African American theatre tradition of cultural affirmation, as well as its emphasis on the rituals of everyday life in the blues aesthetic. The vital connection of action to real-world concerns was discussed in the context of ritual in its stricter sense, as well as social problems such as violence and humiliation, and shown to need very specific "thematic tasks and actions" as I have translated the Russian concepts, or active signification from artists as it might be called in the African American tradition, because of the high stakes involved. Still, the two concepts are distinct: the nature of thematic tasks and actions was seen, in the Russian school, to respond to some tacit need common to the director, the company and the audience. In the African American theatre, pressing historical needs made active signification, where the stage action is strategically represented so as to change audience perceptions of that action, the most common style of thematic action, but the two concepts are distinct.

In this section, I will describe Richards in action in rehearsal, and the thematic tasks he gives to his actors.

As in the last two chapters, I will begin by showing how Richards himself was capable of using impulse and association to help his actors arrive at the human reference through expressive language and gesture. His central strategy in this process, and indeed throughout his rehearsal, was “tarrying” in a broader sense, an “active waiting” similar to Grotowski’s rehearsal process described above. (89-90) I will then examine Richards’ use of signification by indirection to help his actors carry out their stage actions. In describing these two rehearsal strategies, I will show the kinds of thematic tasks and actions which were important to Richards’ work.

At the end of the chapter, I will look again at how Richards’ work on action connects to the ritual theatre, and to the larger debates in the African American theatre. But how these tasks and actions give a sense of Richards’ larger thematic action will be only be examined in the next and final chapter.

#### **a. Tarrying and Active Waiting**

In the Chapter 5, it was shown how Richards was able to “tarry” in order to help his actors come to an organic emotional response: but “tarrying” as an impulse-driven, active waiting informed almost everything Richards did in and around rehearsal. His patient accompaniment of the actor’s process could sometimes last for weeks or months before an actor made an important discovery, and in this sense, the strategy is very much like

Grotowski's process of staging *Apocalypsis cum Figuris* described above. (89-90) This active waiting included everything from working with the design team to dealing with administrative assistant to conducting his rehearsals – and was extremely effective.

Richards did several shows, for example, which involved enormous casts, and yet he was famous for never raising his voice. Walter Mason, who was Richards' stage manager on several of these large productions in the fifties and sixties, said that the technical planning and table analysis were so thorough that getting those plays on their feet would almost happen by itself, "and this was his mode of operations in all plays I had the good fortune of working with him on" (Mason, interview).<sup>1</sup> Dwight Andrews compares Richards' work at the Yale Rep – where his first production, *Timon of Athens*, also involved a huge cast – to the earlier style of Robert Brustein:

I do remember watching Lloyd's process even then because it was very unlike many of the more dramatic directors I worked with, like under Brustein where every day was an adventure or a drama of its own. Lloyd was very quiet how he worked. [...] First of all he didn't really have a big voice, a booming voice and so very rarely would he project something into the rehearsal. Except when there were moments that were so ridiculous he would say "We won't do that." And I can remember that would be both an intentional direction but it would make us all laugh because it was so rare that he would say "We won't be doing that on stage." It was a way of telling us no buffoonery here or no shortcuts. (Andrews, interview)

Richards trusted his teams to work things out separately, and then had them come together. He took people at their word, but his active presence also made them keep their word. Much of the cast that went to Broadway with *Ma Rainey*, for example, was put together by its first director at the O'Neill (with some obvious suggestions by Richards, like Dutton), William Partlan. His casting director in the Wilson years, Meg Simon, sometimes sent him an actor without him bothering to audition them.<sup>2</sup> But at the same time, his trust was daunting, and therefore, people went to great lengths to deserve that trust. He was capable of influencing people's behaviour even when he wasn't there. Most of the people I interviewed who had worked with him at the O'Neill put this powerful influence like this: "Lloyd was very very aware of everything that was going on. He would look out his window, and he could tell you what everybody was doing" (Goldfarb, interview). He had a way of making people want to make him feel proud, not disappoint him:

His beliefs came from such a place of deep feeling, and belief and commitment, and integrity. [...] And that's also why the O'Neill became the O'Neill, because everybody was trying to live up to Lloyd's integrity, and you know, we all wanted Lloyd to respect us. And that took a lot. You know, maybe not as much as we thought, but you know everybody was working their damndest to get Lloyd's respect. (Saltz, interview)

This kind of certainty and calm meant that if someone made an unintentional mistake, he would not chastise the person. Sound designer Tom Clarke talks of a production meeting after a first “disastrous rehearsal” of *The Piano Lesson* in Washington in 1989:

We had put together this complex [sound] system and got to Washington, and had very little time to rehearse the show on stage before the first performance. And the system failed completely [...]. And I remember clearly at a meeting after the first disastrous rehearsal that Lloyd said to me, This is what happens when you have NTT – no tech time. He decided that the best way to proceed would be to cut all of the sound except for the transition music cues, [and we] tested the entire run with no sound effects at all. And this of course was a great disappointment to me, but it turned out in the end to be very instructive for Lloyd and August, because we got a couple of weeks into the run in Washington, and Lloyd said to me, You know, I had hoped that we could actually do this show without sound, but I’m seeing a performance that we can’t, really. This particular piece requires something to help evoke the ghosts. (Clarke, interview)

At least two things are extraordinary about this story: the first is that Richards blames the circumstances, not the human failure, for the mishap – he understands that rehearsal ultimately requires *time*.<sup>3</sup> The second is, instead of panicking as others might do, he takes the failure as an opportunity to experiment. Clarke goes on to say that he had expected to be fired. Instead, Richards hired him for his next show, *Cobb*.

This calm also allowed him to be very balanced in money matters. Since people did what was expected of them, they deserved to be paid for their labour. This is obvious reasoning, but for most people it does not have the philosophical edge that it seemed to have for Richards. Consider these testimonies:

No reaction. Lloyd stayed above the business. Only once did he feel he needed to intervene and that was with *The Piano Lesson*. I wasn't at the first day of rehearsal because I had been offered a terrible deal and I was so astounded and unhappy about it that I didn't show up. And clearly when I got offered this deal Lloyd was not privy to that because when he called me at home – I was in Atlanta, I remember it like it was yesterday – he said, Why aren't you here? And I said Lloyd I'm not there because the contract offered me was an insult to all the work that we have done together over these few years. I can't come for that. Because I think that coming would mean that I am not a valued member of this team. And Lloyd said I will take care of it and he didn't say anything more. And the next day it was all worked out. (Andrews, interview)

It is extraordinary to consider that one of the best moments in *The Piano Lesson*, the performance of *Berta Berta* under the musical direction of Andrews, might not have happened if Richards had reacted badly to his colleague's action, or had not prevailed with the producers. In general you see a director who is always ready to defend his talented colleagues even in the face of difficult conflicts:

Now I know, for instance, we didn't have a difficult rehearsal but we had a moment when an actor who had been in the original cast of *Joe Turner*, every time I was doing the end scene of act one, trying to work my way physically through it, but [this actor] would always cut me off. And I'm constantly saying: you've got to let me finish it. Oh I'm sorry, I'm sorry. So after about the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> time I just tried to work it through and said, God dammit, let me finish. Later, when we were coming back from lunch, the actor quit. [...] He was a very theatrical guy about everything, and when I walked out, he said, *And you, I don't ever want to work with you again. I've been in this business for 40 years, I've never been talked to like that. I've worked with the great actors all over the globe and nobody has ever told me to let them finish.* And so I stood there and I was a little stunned that he was going off like this. And so Lloyd listened and listened and said: I would like you to stay but if you don't want to I wish you well. And the actor gathered his stuff up and I went to apologize to Lloyd and Lloyd says, No need to apologize. (Dutton, interview)

The absolute lack of moralization, the ability to look at a difficult conflict without flinching, a certain impatience with volatility,<sup>4</sup> a very respectful response to an angry reaction – for many directors, this moment might have led to a crisis. Instead, “Lloyd was on the phone right away” and the next day, the new actor was there as if nothing had happened.

In a sense, this overwhelming calm was what also made him a great administrator – in every capacity, where his influence could change the circumstances of the theatre, Richards was determined.

I served on a panel for a State Arts Council with him, and again he taught me, he wanted everybody to get money, and he said even if it's a little bit, because it's going to help them get more money. Every one of these theatres is fighting for their lives, so help them. (Saltz, interview)

This calm was accompanied by a sense of awareness: because he knew what was going on, he often was well prepared to react – his awareness led him to be ready when the moment came. Kevin Geer, an actor at the O'Neill, puts it in a way that kept recurring in the interviews – evocations where the words are inadequate:

He wouldn't do anything, he would just... You were aware that he was aware that things were... you know. You were aware that someone was always looking out.  
(Geer, interview)

He was always calmly *aware*: and waiting for something to happen.

The general sense of all the actors interviewed was that he never gave a note unless he had to, and sometimes he never gave a note at all.<sup>5</sup> Courtney Vance says, for example, that he didn't get a note until a full two weeks after rehearsals had started: "I discovered that he was waiting for me to show him something so he could direct me" (Vance, interview, Oct. 2012). This is put more succinctly by Ruben Santiago Hudson: "He starts

when you start.” Even if what the actor was doing wasn’t working, Richards would let them continue without intervening. One actor, for example, talks about a colleague who seemed incapable of learning his lines during *Moon for the Misbegotten*: Richards just let him struggle, and finally, when it was clear the actor’s lack of memory might compromise the production, he put a prompter backstage – the actor rarely forgot a line again.<sup>6</sup>

This idea of Richards letting the actors flail comes up again and again. Vance, for example, talks about his first entrance as Cory in *Fences*:

It just says Cory enters, and he didn’t help me. [...] He didn’t take the time to try to help. He figured you were an actor and you were very good. All he would say was, *Okay, Cory, time for Cory to enter*. And go. And Cory enters. And eventually I was just entering in the scene, *Hey mama. Cory*, she would start. And then we would go into the scene and it would be bad. I knew it was bad and Lloyd knew it was bad but he didn’t say anything. (Vance, interview, Oct. 2012)

Any director who has been in a rehearsal hall knows the kind of nervous tension that begins to grow when everyone senses that things are going badly – but it is a very special director who is not afraid to let the actor “fail” and who makes sure the company is supportive in that failure – understanding that this is not failure at all, but the actor’s creative nature that has to be dealt with. Many of the actors talk about Richards’ initial silence at the beginning of a process with him. The sense for many of them is that he was waiting, first, to get to know them. The following passage by Charles Dutton, seen in the

chapter on character work, is brought here to show how Richards' "tarrying" had a very specific effect:

Well during that time you would hear him talk because that was a time to ask questions and so when it was all said and done, Lloyd had a philosophy about actors I guess. That if you started off, actors put up a persona of who they want you to think they are. So if a guy is gay he will come in as straight as 6 o'clock. If he's straight he may want you to think he is feminine. To get along, to get in or whatever. People are crazy sometimes. If a girl is mean-spirited she may come in to be so sweet and nice. Or vice versa. Actors all have these things they want you to perceive them as. And if you start off reading the play a couple of times and you start on the floor you're going to spend the entire rehearsal process being that person that they want you to perceive. And what Lloyd would do in the course of the first week around the table all of that stuff started melting away [...]. You [would] start seeing the real people around the table when they drop that stuff because now they are asking for help. (Dutton, interview)

The actors describe their sense of being closely watched. Anthony Chisholm speaks of Richards' extraordinarily attentive – and disconcerting – gaze during these first rehearsals:

Lloyd would be at the table, during the rehearsal period, especially the first week we're at the table in each city [on tour], and he'd look at each actor slowly under his

half-moon glasses, and I'm telling you, you have to be at the receiving end to know what I'm talking about, because you didn't know what he was thinking. (Chisholm, interview)

The sense is that Richards is waiting to see what the actor can do, and when he sees that, he gives them only so much, and keeps observing. This from Courtney Vance:

He knew that the play wasn't over so he didn't have to over-direct. You don't have to get it all the first time. You get what you get. [...] And if there's a second time we've got places to go. But [directors] tend to feel like we need to get it all, and the actors are overwhelmed: they don't know what to think and what to choose because it's so much you're putting it all in there. There's only so much you can get in in that period. (Vance, interview, Jun. 2012)

This sense of observing the actor, getting to know them and letting them do their work without intervening was even true when the actor was being brought in to replace someone, and there was almost no time to rehearse – as in the case of S. Epatha Merkerson when she replaced Starletta DuPois in *The Piano Lesson* – all the more incredible when you remember that Richards was working with her for the first time, and hadn't even auditioned her:

**ED:** So, in those nine days, did he spend a lot of time with you since the other actors had been rehearsing before?

**SEM:** No, not really. You see, the wonderful thing about Lloyd is that he sort of let me be because they had already done the play. And so I had to catch up with them in seven days because on the ninth day we would be performing and on the eighth day we would be travelling. [...] So he really sort of let me fly... (Merkerson, interview)<sup>7</sup>

When Lloyd Richards finally did speak, it often came in the form of a simple note, sometimes quite physical. Vance continues about his first entrance as Cory:

Nobody told me what to do, [...] so I started saying a little ditty to myself. I figured I was a football player, a quarterback coming from practice and I'm doing my plays as I'm coming in the gate. I said, *blue ten hut one, hut two*. And I think Rose said, *Cory, where you been boy*. And so Lloyd heard me say it to myself. He said, *What are you saying?* And I said, *Uh oh, he said something to me, I'm scared*. He hadn't given me any notes. He didn't talk to me because as I had come to find out he was treating me like the 17-year-old. [...] He just said, *What did you say?* I said, *Nothing*. He said, *No, you just said something, what did you say?* I said, *Oh, I was saying football cadence*. He said, *Say it louder*. That's all the note I got. He gave me the license. He just told me I was doing right. Oh. He couldn't stop me now. *Blue 15. Blue 45. Hut!* And it turned into a whole [routine]. I'd come in. *Touchdown. We bad!* It was a whole thing that I developed and Rose sat there and watched me do that whole thing and she said her line: *Cory, you look good. Where*

*you coming from?* And we were off and running. And he needed to get me to go further than what I was doing, but he wasn't going to tell me what to do. (Vance, interview, Jun. 2012)

There are three important moments here. The first is that Richards sensed that Vance's paralyzed bewilderment *was coherent with Cory's character*. In life, as well, people are "passive" – which does not mean they are doing nothing. Working with the real impulses of actors in their working situation, and transforming that real impulse is the shortest route to the actor's creative nature. The second is that he knew something would eventually happen, and when it did, he would be ready and waiting. The third is that the freedom Vance is given to follow his impulses allows him to give full physical and vocal expression to a rhythmic routine which was not in the original script: "*Blue 15. Blue 45. Hut! Touchdown. We bad!*" The freedom to follow one's impulses leads to an inspired sense of the human reference.

Thomas Richards has a lovely description of this ability of his father to wait for exactly the right moment to give exactly the right note, using the actors' own impulses in real time:

I remember then about his skill in rehearsal. It was a rehearsal for a production of August Wilson that was going to Broadway, I don't remember which one. It was in New York and they were already staging a scene and he was trying to have an actor understand what the thought process of the character was in the

given moment. And as they were speaking together – he was speaking from the director’s position, they were on stage, on the upstage part – he just said, “It’s like that.” And that actor didn’t understand and said, “It’s like what?” And he said, “You see, for one moment, you are listening to me now and there were some sounds in the street and just for one split-second your attention went to the sounds on the street and you were no longer with me, no longer listening to what I had said, but as your attention went to the street, your thoughts went somewhere.” And the actor suddenly understood what was happening to this person at this moment in this scene. It was a very strong moment for me. He was like a tiger using the split second of the moment so that the actor understands what is happening. Just from his behaviour, he caught him in the moment, but it was really soft, really understated. Even though he was somehow pointing out to the actor the quality of the silence that was needed at this moment of the scene, it related to where his thoughts were going and where the actor’s attention needed to go. It was a very strong moment but very subtle. (T. Richards, interview)

Of course, one senses that Richards’ tarrying was likely difficult for some actors who wanted more analysis – a sense one gets speaking to James Earl Jones, for example. One actor I interviewed has suggested that a fellow actress, who has since become famous in Hollywood, was often frustrated in her search for direction from Richards, and her performance suffered because of it.

This waiting to really get to know the actor well also involved waiting to let the actors get to know each other. In reference to this, Brent Jennings says:

He often knew that there was something happening between the actors that wasn't what it appeared; knew that the actors had to get comfortable with each other first before they could do it. (Jennings, interview)<sup>8</sup>

Ella Joyce says that for the intimate scene in *Two Trains Running*, Richards let Laurence Fishburne and her, in the roles of Sterling and Risa, take their time before getting up on their feet, and one senses Richards' delicacy in dealing with this love scene:

We had been sitting around the table for like 2, 3 weeks. Two or three weeks of just reading. Looking at each other. Talking to each other. Learning what the play was about. August would come back with new pages every day. They would go out at night and sit and talk and he'd come back every day with pages and pages. We were learning the script while we were sitting there at that table. From the first time we got up to do the blocking, that scene has never changed. It was magic that happened between us. It was total magic. (Joyce, interview)

This tarrying often involved a refusal to stop rehearsing. There was never a sense of failure, but there was never a sense either that they had finally arrived at a satisfactory level of performance. Every time they picked up rehearsals for the next run in a new city, they would go back to the table to read again – often because the script kept changing from performance to performance, and even sometimes from night to night:

**RSH:** Lloyd and August would talk privately about what they thought they needed to do, they would come in, and then they would tell us what they had changed. Those changes went on as we performed. They would cut that night and the next day we would have to make a change, and that made it very difficult because we'd be like, "You cut a certain chunk and I've got to go on stage that night. I've got to be on my toes." You know, a real insecurity about if I'm going to be on track.

**ED:** So, you were rehearsing right through the Broadway?

**RSH:** Yes, we did. When we rehearsed on Broadway, August was still cutting. And previously, August cut something of mine on the opening night in Chicago.

**ED:** Before you went on?

**RSH:** Yeah, and he said, "You don't have to put it in tonight if you really don't think you can do it." And I said, "I think I can do it." So, I took the cut and I did it.

(Santiago-Hudson, interview)

In any case, even if the work had advanced, Richards would never insist on perfection, and would get the actor as far as he felt was possible until the next set of rehearsals. His belief in the "organic development of their work" meant thinking of the actor's process in terms of months or years, instead of mere weeks. This work goes back to the nineteen-fifties, as shown by Walter Mason in the following passage:

He would allow you to discover why you were there and what you wanted and how you could go about getting it but never forcing you to attain any level of

understanding before you were able to on your own. He would guide you in a fashion that was very gentle but very firm and make you come to your own "Aha!" moment. (Mason, interview)<sup>9</sup>

This persistent quality never desisted, and sometimes meant staying alert until the very last performance on Broadway:

So I went and it was a matinee show. The last week of the run. It was a Wednesday matinee. The show was going to close on Sunday. The last person I expected to see at that production was Lloyd Richards. I walked in and I would have known him even though I didn't know what he looked like because he was sitting on the aisle in the back with a notepad. He was still working on that show. A week before closing. And that just says everything about Lloyd because[...] what you want to put on that stage is the very best [...] and he did not want any of those actors to take a we-are-about-to-close-attitude about anything that goes up there, so that's why he made his presence known. (Henderson, interview)<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the best example of Richards' single-minded ability to take his time was in his table work, the pre-conference weekend for the Playwrights Conference being the most single-minded example:

The playwrights would read each play aloud, the playwright himself would read his/her own play to the rest of the playwrights and directors and sometimes, ideally,

the designers. It was a marathon over a weekend of sheer hell for everybody to sit for 12 hours and listen to playwrights read their plays out. (Partlan, interview)

When you remember that Richards was in pain for most of his period at the O'Neill, because of a serious ailment in his hip, this highly concentrated work becomes all the more incredible. This play-reading marathon was an essential tradition of the O'Neill (now abandoned),<sup>11</sup> just as extended table work was an essential part of Richards' rehearsal process. There were occasions where for a four-week rehearsal process, the actors would stay at the table for an entire week. This kind of "drawn out" table work – habitual in much of the world – is extraordinary in the North American context:

The first two days, we sat around the table and read the play. He was very strong on reading it. We'd come in and read it till the lunch break, relax, we cut all through it, the next day we would come and repeat ourselves. Now that's two days of reading the script, before we get on our feet; and I loved that because by the time you got on your feet after those four readings there, or maybe five, you were very comfortable in the life of the play. So you wasn't jaggig, you were there. (Myers, interview)

This was something he had clearly been doing for years, as seen by Walter Mason's testimony above. Michele Shay also recalls working this way on *Goin Thru Changes* by Richard Wesley in 1973 – where she speaks of spending an entire week at the table:

We used to sit around the table for almost a week at least. Just reading and responding to the text. At first he would not stop the read though and then

eventually he would go see scene by scene and ask you questions about what your response was. (Shay, interview)

There is a sense that with the younger actors, this insistence on table work also helped them to be patient themselves, to focus on the action and to get beyond the show person they brought into a high-profile rehearsal situation. One is reminded in the next passage of the marathon reading sessions at the O'Neill.

Well you sit around the table first reading the play twice sometimes three times a day. The NY actors would come, we would read the play from 3 to 5 and take a break come back again and read it from 7 to 9 and then for 9 to 11. And then they get back on the train and head back. And sometimes three times a day but mostly twice. And sometimes I used to hate it because after day three or day two I'm ready to get up on the floor. But it's now the way I work as a director on film. When I'm directing a film we sit around the table for the first week reading the script. (Dutton, interview)

There is no doubt that Richards was constantly trying to locate the actors in the "given circumstances" of the play, in the Russian style of script analysis, but there was never anything literal or intellectual in the table work – nor was there the kind of "active silence" one associates with other quiet but determined directors like Grotowski. Though the actors interviewed often say that Richards was a man of few words, there is no sense at all that his rehearsals were silent. In fact the sense one gets is that it was lively and full

of dialogue. And it consisted often of storytelling – this testimony from Vance, seen in the chapter on character, is worth taking up again:

Lloyd stayed around that table. I didn't know what was going on. You're not on your feet. Lloyd and the actors were just anecdoting all over the place. Having fun laughing and jesting. Head in script, and reading the page, and then coming up and, *You know what, that reminds me of the time we were...* and before you know we were in a major story. Lloyd was raconteur and then it was James Earl and then it was Frankie Faison and then it was Mary and everybody was laughing and having a grand old time. I didn't know what they were doing. I didn't know what was what and who was who. I just know that I was bored. I didn't know why they just couldn't get up, but nobody was talking to me because I didn't have anything to add. I didn't have any stories to tell. I was the young buck and they treated me like that. I wanted to be one of the boys and add in. every time I tried to add in they all looked at me like: *And what are you talking for?* (Vance, interview, Jun. 2012)

Directors often tend to dispense with table analysis out of a fear that it will stifle the actors' impulses. But here, the anecdotal nature of the table analysis, the freedom the actors feel to follow their impulses when first encountering Wilson's language, establish impulse, association and action as the essential tools for making the text come alive.

The overwhelming sense, in these testimonies, is a process less concerned with conflict, and more concerned with people coming together – the rehearsal ritual (as defined above)

flowing into the stage ritual, and the stage conflicts arising organically from this more important first step.

#### **b. Expressive Gesture and the Ritual of Everyday Life**

This ritual quality not only involved the story-telling among the actors, but also the work on the actors' physical embodiment and stage actions: once the actors were on their feet, you get this same sense of going over things again and again.

You see here is the thing about [Lloyd] that I really admire and that I cling to myself as a director. Doing, doing was more important than talking about it. Doing, and doing, and doing again, and doing again, and doing again. (Carpenter, interview)

So active waiting often meant a commitment to repeating scenes again and again until he felt they were right and it is here where the director's "rehearsal action" ties into the director's attempt to create an authentic stage action. When blocking started, instead of insisting on situation, Richards would often simply ask the actors to be precise in their physical actions until he felt they were right, and the "rightness" of the actions had to do with their historical authenticity. The "selective realism"<sup>12</sup> of these activities – Risa's constant clearing away or setting up the restaurant in *Two Trains Running*, Charleston's physical warmup in *Cobb*;<sup>13</sup> Carl Gordon's onstage cooking as Doaker in *The Piano Lesson* – simple tasks from daily life made to seem elegant, was an essential part of

Richards' work, where there was an almost sacred feel to the historical truth that he was seeking from his actors.

Consider this testimony of rehearsals for the card game in *Seven Guitars*:

**RSH:** Absolutely. Just getting the sequence down in the card game was difficult.

[...]

**ED:** Were you actually playing cards?

**RSH:** We were playing a real game. [Of course], sometimes the cards got wrong because we actually had to say certain lines. We would get into the game sometimes and we'd be so caught up in the game because we were all competitive. You know, Viola was competitive, I was competitive, Keith was competitive. So, we would have a little card game going on...and Tommy Hollis was competitive. We'd be playing cards and laughing. It was a good time.

**ED:** What game were you playing?

**RSH:** We were playing whist. And Lloyd actually played whist; Lloyd liked whist. [...] He wouldn't play with us, but he would talk about this whist game. You know, he would say something like, "Oh, I ran a couple of Bostons in my day." And, Lloyd, tell us about that, and he'd like flag it off. (Santiago-Hudson, interview)

Two things are striking about this story. The first is that the stage activity should be real – but not in any mechanical sense. Both the characters and the actors are actually

playing cards, and enjoying the competition of the game – and this enjoyment on the part of the actors gives a particular atmosphere to the scene. This is one reason why these scenes have to be rehearsed again and again, because they also had “to say certain lines” – so the technical aspect of rehearsal was closely connected to the organic aspect.

The second striking thing is this: this atmosphere of bonding among the characters/actors is one of ritual. The whist is just one of the innumerable examples of everyday rituals that run through Richards’ work as a director, and his attention to detail in these situations has to do with his desire to ensure the characters/actors are working together.

The third striking thing is this: the authenticity sought here is not some abstract ideal, but the historical authenticity of a shared experience – the human reference brought alive through expressive gesture. “Oh, I ran a couple of Bostons in my day” is probably among the most extraordinary notes a director can give – and the sensitive actor who for some accident of history knows not what a Boston is will scramble to find out not because he must – but because he does not want to miss out on something he feels might be important.

Again and again, this sense of stage actions that took on a sense of the ritual of everyday life came up in the interviews, bringing Wilson’s “blues aesthetic” into the details of the performance. Often, this detail work was connected to the preparation and partaking of food on stage. Raynor Scheine, for example, recounts that he loved the

biscuits he was served in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* so much that he would pocket them and have them for lunch after rehearsal. As it turns out, according to Scott Bradley, the show's set designer, Richards insisted on a certain biscuit from a certain bakery, and was very particular about the preparation of food on stage:

Inevitably we went through so many kinds of biscuits, because we had suppliers that offered their services to get advertising. We picked up all the biscuits and we tried hundreds of different people's commercial biscuits and we decided upon Popeye's biscuits because everyone loved them. They were too big so we had to cut all of them down once they arrived, down to a smaller size biscuit. This was something Lloyd was very particular about. He was like "They wouldn't have made such huge biscuits, like this big. They would have been that big." That was a big specific. The whole discovery of the silverware in the glass jar, that was once we moved into the theatre. The size of the skillet on the stove and how Bertha was going to be stirring scrambled eggs with a fork or a wooden spoon, as it turned out it was a wooden spoon. (Bradley, interview)

This ritual importance of food runs through Richards' aesthetic from the early years until his last productions: Ruby Dee as Ruth Younger prepares breakfast on stage for Walter in *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959; Estelle Evans as Teresa Aquila prepares breakfast for Dotts Johnson as Ned Aquila in *Freeman* in 1973; and Carl Gordon as Doaker prepares breakfast on stage for Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* in 1990. My own

impression of the scene in the Lincoln Centre recording is the slow meticulousness of the action, and its level of *comfort* – once again, a sense of ritual hospitality running through the plays.

The character of Risa in *Two Trains Running* was almost entirely built on this kind of ritual quality, and they in fact, helped determine the stage conflict.

And when Lloyd told me one day, you ain't got to rush, you got all the time in the world – well, I had the audiences falling out. Like that scene when [Memphis] comes in and Risa is sitting down on the barstool reading a magazine. Aint nobody in the restaurant. And Memphis comes in hollering and he goes straight to the pot of beans and he says, *What's that burning, Risa?* And still screaming and cussing. And I just finish reading the little magazine. Close the book. Not to disrespect him. I close my little magazine, put it up on the counter, get down of the barstool, walk around, look at him, because he is standing right in front of the pot of beans. *Okay, all that hollering you doing you could have turned the beans off.* I just walked around slow and looked at the beans, turned them off, looked back at him and walked away. He didn't have nothing to say during that whole time. He was just standing there with steam coming out his nose. The audience fell out. (Joyce, interview)

The precision of the stage movements here – retold in detail twenty years after the fact from Joyce's memory of the moment – indicates how deeply experienced they probably

were, and is a small example of what the character did throughout – what makes Risa the most eloquent character on stage, though she has the fewest lines. Note as well the deeply pleasurable use of “I” – where the first person identification with the character is not an exercise from a book on Stanislavsky but an embodied memory which clearly shows the thematic task given was deeply satisfying to the actress.

Joyce goes on to explain how, in the first rehearsals on their feet, Richards would have the stage manager carefully set down what the actors had improvised – and then help them structure these improvisations in situation, as the example shows – improvisations often set off by one “illuminating” note (Joyce’s word) such as “You ain’t got to rush, you got all the time in the world” – seen above in the chapter on character. The stage action takes on forcefulness by its slow and determined repetition, its ritual quality.

In other words, there is a family resemblance, as it were, between the most clearly ritual actions in Richards’ stagings – such as the juba or the work song – and the ritual quality of Risa’s situationally-charged daily chores.

Equally important in Joyce’s testimony is her recounting that once you had chosen a certain way of doing something, he would insist on you sticking to your own choice, and would not let you doubt it. In other words, if Richards was stubbornly wed to certain ideal-images, this stubbornness involved defending the actor’s organic choices.

What is interesting about the following story by Daniel Martin, in his portrayal of Oscar Charleston in Lee Blessing’s *Cobb*, is that Martin’s choice of working out as a

method of punctuating the dialogue is never put into doubt – the problem is entirely one of making it work with the text. It is worth citing the actor at length, because it gives a sense of the repetitive nature of Richards' rehearsals, where the director is actively waiting for the structure to make sense in the situation:

There's this one scene where my character Oscar Charleston comes up and confronts the older man Cobb, and [...] I come out on stage and I'm doing an exercise routine: I do jumping jacks, I do push-ups, I do a whole series of exercises in the course of working with and talking with the Cobbs. Now [...] I'm an athlete at this point in my life, [...] so I'm doing my football workout, I'm working, I'm doing all this stuff, and Lloyd said to me, after rehearsal, *You know what, that was just wrong, you really need to find something.* [...] So, I started over, I came back, I did another routine, I worked it, I thought about it, and he says, well, (imitating Richards hemming and hawing), *Not quite right, keep working.* [...] And this is what he said: *Bring it down.* That's all he said, just *Bring it down, bring it down, bring it down, bring it down.* So I [...] came in and did this series of jumping jacks, and I had to work my breath, so that I could be projecting to the back, getting every jump [without running out of breath], and working so that when you stop, you find that line, *pum* – you stop right then, at the right point. And I did stretches, and that enabled me to catch my breath – in fact, after the jumping jacks, I did stretches, and then, during the other guy's [...] monologue where he hollers at me, I turned over – I don't have anything to say right now – and I just did this series of push-ups. And I

turned out about twenty-five, thirty push-ups during most of this guy's speech, and then when he's done, I did this slow step-up, and by that point, my lines are pretty well all done, all I have to say are two or three things, da-don-da-don-da-don-da-don-da-don – I don't remember what the words were, and then I was able to go off stage. And I was back there collapsing, because I had pushed it. [...] And Lloyd kind of looked at me, and at the end he said, *Yes, yes, I think that was it. Moving on.* (Martin, interview)

Like Joyce/Risa's slow approach to the pot of beans, Martin/Charleston's turning over to do push-ups takes on a sudden meaning, which organically arises in rehearsal. What's important here is the persistence with which director and actor work a structure until the actor is finally free enough to make the situation come to life.

Richards liked to stage scenes through physical action, which is why plays like *The Past is Past* by Richard Wesley (1973) (a father and son reunion around a pool table), or *Cobb* where baseball training was an important circumstance, or the plays of Hansberry or Dean or Wilson, where the stage canvas is rife with simple domestic activities, were natural choices for him as a director.

This single-minded insistence on authenticity implied another kind of "active waiting" – a demanding expectation that his design teams would provide him with only the most authentic materials. In the "conventional" world of the theatre – a world where tacit convention usually replaces authentic reality – theatre professionals often "make do" with

lesser materials or “inauthentic” items, and so an insistence on authenticity often requires extra special work on the part of the design team, and sometimes, extra convincing on the part of the director – not only because of the expense, but because of the research involved. Consider again, for example, what was involved in trying out “hundreds” of biscuits for *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Directors who insist on this kind of extra-special item often have to be quite strong-minded. Tisch Jones, for example, speaks of the special wig she needed to acquire for the little girl in *The Piano Lesson*, which had to be ordered specially from a manufacturer which made wigs from real human hair, and shipped in for the run of *Piano Lesson*. (P. C. Jones)

The task assigned is thematic because it involves much more than just acquiring a pretty wig or an edible biscuit: it obliges the artists to consider the larger ramifications of the stage elements brought into play. Thematic task, then, often implies that extra special attention to detail.

In the same way that the design team has to make that extra effort to make things authentic, so actors often have to make a special effort to comply with a thematic task linked to the “authentic” nature of the performance – and Richards was well aware that this takes time. Consider this testimony from Michele Shay:

But I can tell you a funny story about *Goin Thru Changes*.<sup>14</sup> I was playing a young, married, pregnant woman. I had never been pregnant and I didn’t know what it was. And so I just remember him asking me one day, “When do you plan to deal with all

this?" (*Laughs.*) I was terrified. So what I did, I was living in New Jersey at the time and I ran to our next-door neighbor Brenda, who had been pregnant and asked her questions about it. I bought myself a pillow and I would stick it underneath my clothes in a bodysuit and practice walking around pregnant. I would be in a subway or walking down the street on my way to rehearsal, and I kept doing that until I got to the point where people actually thought I was pregnant. [...] Lloyd was a man of few words. He would only need to say things to you once for you to get it. He would get a tone in his voice that let you know what he expected of you because he required excellence, he demanded excellence, and he inspired excellence. (Shay, interview)

Richards asked one simple question, and his "tone" set his actors to action. This even happened before rehearsals even started: in the audition for *Seven Guitars*, for example, Santiago Hudson tells of how Richards gave him two tasks: one was to learn harmonica, and the other was to lose weight.

So I did my audition [...] Then Lloyd asked me, "Can you play the harmonica?" I said, "Yes." I had played the harmonica but I couldn't really play it. I could blow on it, but I never could play it. So, he asked me to play a little bit and I played it. He kind of had a little smile on his face and he said, "Ok, I want you to come back and *really* play something." Like I didn't fool him. [...] As soon as I walked out of the room, I went and picked up every blues harmonica player that I could from this

used CD store and I just inundated myself with blues harmonica. I tried to find out if I could only play one thing good, one little riff, maybe it would be impressive enough. I was eight hours a day just hitting the little licks and playing and listening. ‘Oh, I can’t do that. Let me try this.’ And I found a little piece I could do, Howling Wolf. It had a little riff that he would do in what he called the “Wolf Call,” so I learned how to do that. I came in and played the one little riff decently, not incredibly impressive, but decently. Ultimately though, I think he was more taken by my truth and honesty in the portrayal of the role. (Santiago-Hudson, interview)

Hudson’s active pursuit of satisfying this almost offhand request by Richards is a perfect example of the kinds of actors Richards was looking for, and the effect he had on them. The actors he nurtured needed little encouragement to do their best work. Notice as well that this active perfecting of a form is connected to Stanislavsky’s very concrete idea of the truth and honesty in the portrayal of the role. (Stanislavski, 2008, 16-36) Since for some, playing harmonica is second nature because they are musicians who have played all their lives, the actor has to work hard to create the illusion of this second nature: the illusion of authenticity takes a tremendous amount of work, and it was the kind of work that Richards encouraged through the thematic tasks that he assigned. But the ideal of authenticity also meant understanding the original forms were already complex elaborations in the first place – an understanding that truth is more elaborate than fiction.

### c. Signification by Indirection

The passage to flight, the moment when the actor suddenly understands something and takes flight in rehearsal, is often described in the interviews as a single, illuminating note or a series of precise questions, that lead the actor to their own personal discovery.

Frances MacDormett puts it this way: "Lloyd doesn't waste words. What he does is offer these little gems, these *bonbons* of intuition" (Hartigan, 12).

Many actors and colleagues speak of "these little gems," of this oracular quality, of Richards giving one single note that changes everything, and a collection of these thematic tasks could be collected into a book of aphorisms. The most famous one, of course, is told by Wilson in various contexts, about Richards' advice to him regarding *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*:

We were doing a play, and I said to him one day, 'There's one scene too many... and I went about doing what I was doing. And he waited and waited for me to tell him which scene was the one which should be cut; I never told him which one was too many.' (Elkins, 227-28)

This was his usual method for solving a specific acting problem. This anecdote from Karen Carpenter, about Jeremy's proposal to Molly Cunningham in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, as performed by Bo Rucker and Kimberly Scott, illustrates this well:

Lloyd watched the scene and then he thought about it for a moment and then he said, "Okay, let's go at it again." And he pulls Bo aside, who's playing Jeremy, and

he says, "I want you to go at it again but this time you will only have a nickel in your pocket. Now play the scene." And that to me is one of the most profound pieces – I am going to choke up as I say it just because I learned so much from that moment: about modifying behavior by changing circumstances. [...] It is not a note to be thought about. It is not an intellectual idea. It was a tangible practical circumstance and that to me says volumes about the way he was, because that's the way an actor was. And what Lloyd was trying to do was: Bo was too cocky for Lloyd's taste, he was trying to knock him down a peg. He was very full of himself and very, you know, lording it over her, and Lloyd wanted him to be keenly aware of the difference in their status. (Carpenter, interview)

What is extraordinary about this testimony is how Carpenter remembers the rehearsal moment so vividly that it "chokes her up." Richards' simple thematic task brings on an important stage event that the stage manager remembers twenty-five years later.

Richards' questions often involved circumstantial details that fully informed the moment being rehearsed:

Lloyd would oftentimes ask a question. An actor would say, why does he say XYZ. And then Lloyd often times would not give an easy answer he would say I'm trying to give you an example and not make one up. I remember Courtney for example would have some questions about Lymon and Lloyd would oftentimes give him one sentence like, *Do you think he ever had new shoes before?* And invariably then all

of a sudden those shoes Wining Boy sold him were shining. You can't get shoes like that in Memphis. You can only get shoes like that in Chicago. They were Florsheims. Yes, for black people moving into the city Florsheims were *the* dress shoe. If you could afford Florsheims you had some shoes. (Andrews, interview)

The question would help the actor understand the significance of a stage element in the given circumstances of the play, a stage element which seemed banal (or, as seen above, stereotyped). And often Richards didn't want the actors to respond to his questions, except in actions – this from Santiago-Hudson:

He would ask me how I felt about Vera, and I would tell him that I love her. And he said, "Well, how do you feel about Floyd?" and I would say, "Well, I love him as a brother." He said, "Well, how do you feel about Vera loving Floyd?" And he would ask me things like, "Who do you think is the best for Vera, you or Floyd?"

Sometimes he wouldn't let you answer though. And when you went to answer, he'd put his hand up and kind of smile and wave you off and say, "We're going to do it again." (Santiago-Hudson, interview)

Even when the situation seemed to warrant a reprimand, like playing the audience too much during a performance, Richards would resort instead to indirection. Hudson is referring to just such a situation in the same interview:

He would say things like, "What happens to those people up there..." and he would point to the stage, "What happens to those people up there, happens up there." Like

I say, he would leave it to you to feel anything. That means quit playing to the audience. You would have to interpret what he just said, and let it happen.

(Santiago-Hudson, interview)

The hardest thing for a director, sometimes, is to let an actor know that they are overdoing something – because after all, the actor is trained to give their all, and when their all is misguided, the actor can become deeply confused. Here, then, though he is not using his six questions, Richards uses the same “call-and-response” style, repetitive dialogue from his classrooms. The effect of the dialogue, as above, only makes sense if it is quoted at length:

Once an actor was crying a lot in a scene. So, he asked the actor, “Well, when did your father die?” because the actor was doing a monologue about his father. He said, “How old were you when your father died?” And he said, “I was fifteen.” And he said, “So, how old are you now?” And he said, “Well, I’m 50 years old.” And he said, “So, when your father first died, how did you feel?” And the actor said, “Well, I was destroyed.” And he said, “So what happened?” The actor said, “I cried, I cried, I cried. In the text it says that I cried a river of tears, but he was too heavy to float on them, so I dragged him across an ocean.” He said, “So you cried how many tears?” And I just said, “A river.” He said, “Oh my God, that’s a lot of crying.” So then Lloyd said, “Have you told this story to other people?” And the actor said, “Yeah.” He said, “How much?” They just went on and the actor said, “A lot.” He

said, "And every time you tell it, do you cry that river of tears?" And the actor said, "No, but sometimes I do cry." And he said, "Ok, so you've told it a lot of times already, so alright. And you've cried a lot about it. Ok, let's do this thing again."

He was trying to tell the actor, "You don't have to cry through this. You've cried this out." Which is what some directors would actually say. The actor picked it up—a very smart actor—and he didn't cry. [...]

So, Lloyd came back and said, "How old were you when your father died?" And the actor probably said, "You know, sometimes I get emotional and I have to cry." And Lloyd firmly just said, "Listen to me. The only person that wants to cry in front of a group full of people – 'want' being the operative word – is an actor." (Santiago-Hudson, interview)

There is firmness at the end, but it comes *after* the actor has understood on his own terms, when he is prepared for it. Richards appeals to the actor's intelligence without ever suggesting that there was anything "bad" about the emotional performance given.

In the cases cited, Richards was trying to solve a specific problem and signified by indirection. But Richards' oracular notes didn't always imply he knew specifically what he wanted. The example from August Wilson above is a case in point. Richards doesn't imply that he even knows which scene should be cut in *Ma Rainey*; he just senses there is one too many – as he says later in the same interview, "So I say as little as possible in the beginning about structure, because I don't want him to write my play, I want him to write

his play” (Elkins, 229). Many actors and directors feel that directors should “know what they want.” But action, by its very nature, involves uncertainty – where there is certainty, there is only one way of doing things, which means there is no action, and in the theatre, there is cliché. But Richards doesn’t “want the actor to give my performance, I want the actor to give his performance.”<sup>15</sup> His tasks were open-ended, and tied to the thematic action of the actor/character, and the play: they were thematic tasks.<sup>16</sup>

Because of this sense in rehearsal of a thematic action, the note itself is not always necessary: what’s important is letting a solution appear in rehearsal. Zhenovach used to say that with a good director, you never know where an active image comes from. Observe how Vance is uncertain about how the image of Mary Alice’s hitting from one side appears in the rehearsal of the confrontation scene between Troy and Rose in *Fences*:

Well the major note was when she has to do something physical to him. And initially she was standing in front of him and hitting him with two hands and Lloyd let that go on for a while. But I know Jimmy and Lloyd talked about what the physicality is and how the explosion happened. *But you take, you take, and you don't even know nobody's giving.* [...] They talked through that for a long time. Until maybe the last week of rehearsal when Jimmy was able, and when Lloyd was able, to introduce... and you know Jimmy probably introduced it, that she stands on the side of him. And with her right hand she hits him in the chest. He’s just standing there and she comes up to him and hits him in the chest with the right

hand. And she just hits him and hits him and he just stands there and takes it. [...] And eventually Mary Alice was like *I don't want to hurt you*. And they would be like, *no, Mary you can't hurt him*. [...] *let's just see how it goes*. (Vance, interview, Oct. 2012)

Once again, there are two extraordinary moments in this testimony.

The first is Richards' willed uncertainty. Because Richards doesn't like saying "don't" to an actor, he can't say, "Don't hit him straight on." What follows is a ritual negotiation over a physical action that will solve the scene, and observe how long it takes them to get to the solution – not until the last week of rehearsal. There is no sense here even of a "subtle imposition" – to borrow Sandra Shannon's phrase (Elkins, 183-199) – because imposition implies that Richards knows exactly what he wants. Instead, Richards observes Alice hitting him with two hands, and "lets that go on for a while" – we sense a director who knows something could be more specific. He lets them go at it, and waits. But there is nothing in Vance's testimony that suggests Richards knows what he wants (nor, for that matter, the opposite). There is, rather, a sense of active waiting – a certainty that something will come, and a holding back, and sense of an actress's concern for her partner. And the solution found here is probably the best scene in the production. And the solution happens there among the two actors and their director.<sup>17</sup>

The second moment is Vance's combining of Richards and Jones in his memory: "Until maybe the last week of rehearsal when Jimmy was able, and when Lloyd was able,

to introduce... and you know Jimmy probably introduced it..." It is as if the rehearsals directed themselves, collectively, and no one, ultimately was ever able to say how the work came about.

#### **d. Belief as Action**

This case is also an example of what is most memorable about Richards' productions: his ability to make his actors believe.

Richards had a gift for getting performances from actors that other directors couldn't – and this connects to Richards' ability to be completely there for the actor:

You felt okay to talk about your own personal stuff because you weren't going to be judged and then through that process when you finally got on the floor you felt it was okay to embarrass yourself in a moment. To go for something. To have an impulse. What happened to a lot of actors was Lloyd would work these wonders. A lot of actors stifle their instincts and they see it and they want to go for it. But you were able to feel comfortable and you didn't feel like you would be judged.

(Dutton, interview)

Richards' ability to accept everything the serious actor tried, without ever making them feel judged, allowed his actors to take risks they might never take in other contexts. His active accompaniment of the actor in moments of high emotional risk was all he did, because anything else might shut the actor down, or make them start to tense up. So not only were the actors inspired to play harmonica, or get the physical detail right, they

would risk going places they would never dare going in other circumstances – even if it involved contemplating things beyond their everyday lives.

I have already shown, for example how Richards accompanied Delroy Lindo in his performance of Herald Loomis. Perhaps the most difficult character in the Wilson canon, it required an understanding of the nature of despair, in order for the actor to pull off the final sense of redemption. Richards understood the tremendous spiritual work this sometimes required of his actors. This meant helping them give him as much as they could, never tolerating automatic frivolity, and using an active patience to help them believe. Dwight Andrews gives a glimpse of the larger implications of Richards' ritual work – a glimpse into his “larger thematic action” – when describing an observation Richards gave to the actors performing the work song in *The Piano Lesson*:

I think early on we did not connect that Parchman Farm was a common experience for all of the men. It was a part of what binds them together. And I don't think I'm imagining that when Lloyd one time said Parchman Farm is something that they all shared, the light went on immediately for all of the guys. The moment became different because they had now just connected a dot I don't think we had completely connected. [...] But I knew that work song needed to be a moment of recollection for all of them. They all had different experiences from Parchman Farm and virtually none of them good. That's why Doaker doesn't want to sing, because Doaker's had a messed up experience. And that's why unfortunately sometimes if a

director misses that point he makes the moment a kind of musical relief. It becomes a fun moment and it's exactly the opposite. The power of that moment is this is a part of their shared experience that makes them one but it's not a happy experience. It's a complicated dense experience. But it has its own momentum. It's part of what has forged them. So when they come down on that hammer, when they acknowledge both their strength and the coordination of what a work song is then it becomes more than just peonage, it becomes, yes, I am a man and this is part of what I have lived through. And so I think my great blessing with that work was to discover that with those actors and to watch the transformation happen as they discovered what it is they were doing and why. (Andrews, interview)

“What it is they were doing and why” is taken to be an acknowledgement of their experience, “Yes, I am a man, and this is part of what I have lived through.” This action of acknowledgement of their experience requires courage – both on the part of the characters and on the part of the actors. Much of Richards' work, in all the plays he directed, involved this kind of confrontation of a difficult past in order to be able to continue living – and much of his work with the actors in these dramatic situations was to give them the courage to confront their own experiences and give them the courage to put them into *play*. Without forcing them – but without frivolity. What is being sought in rehearsal is hard to define, and Andrews' description is good precisely because of its evocative ambiguity: it gives us a sense, just possibly, of what Richards' larger thematic action was throughout his career.

### **Final Remarks: Lloyd Richards and Action**

In this chapter, I have tried to show, more so than in earlier chapters, Lloyd Richards in action. The emphasis was put on two central rehearsal strategies in Richards' work: one was "tarrying" as used in a broader sense, applied to all levels of the rehearsal process; this "active tarrying" was shown to be similar to the "active waiting" of Grotowski's process. The other was "signification by indirection," Richards' particular way of helping his actors solve the various stage problems presented to them.

Most of the chapter is dedicated to how Lloyd Richards, through a combination of tarrying and signification by indirection, assigned a variety of thematic tasks to his actors. Many of the thematic tasks Richards assigned in this way were closely connected to expressive gesture and language involving rituals of everyday life, but they also involved ritual in its stricter sense, and one of the most important contributions of the Richards/Wilson productions is how they succeeded in re-signifying African American rituals and beliefs for a broad audience. Richards was signally capable of instilling a sense of conviction in his actors that gave the ritual aspects of his performances a very special resonance.

The panorama of thematic tasks described in the last three chapters have given a sense of Richards' larger thematic action. In the next chapter, I will review these thematic actions, and try to define this larger thematic action.

## Chapter 7. Conclusion: Lloyd Richards' Larger Thematic Action

"Now, that's why I'm in the theater. To take those lives, to reveal them. Not just those lives, any life. And that's what's important about theater, or should be. It does reflect the lives of a totality of a community that exists out there, and does speak to the totality of that community. Not all at once, but through its own particularness, which is what *Raisin* did. Other people were able to find themselves in it. I remember when we first did *Fences* at Yale Rep. My promotional manager, a wonderful woman, she had come to see a run-through, and she sat with me afterwards. She said, "Do you know, I looked at the play, and I looked at that role that James Earl Jones is playing, and I said, you know, that's the man down the street. I know him, that's the man down the street." A little further into the play, she said, "No that's not the man down the street, that's my brother." And a little further, "No, not my brother, that's my father." At the end of the play, she said, "I said to myself, no, that's not my father, that's me." And it's that kind of universality, that stems from particularity, that makes a work of value and reach out beyond itself. Not by trying to reach out beyond itself, but by reaching deeper into itself, to its own truth. And that's what's wonderful about theater for me" (Richards cited in Academy of Achievement, "Broadway's Groundbreaking Director", 1991).

### **a. Lloyd Richards' Thematic Tasks and Actions**

Here is a brief overview of the thematic tasks and actions which Richards assigned in his rehearsals in relation to character, event and action.

Richards' character work was very much in keeping with the Russian and African American theatrical concern with the public nature of character. The work involved the creation of allegorical characterizations which were rooted in a very specific historical community, and based on "character signification" – active images that helped the actors transcend stereotype and satire and connect to a specific human reference – to the ancestor. Richards used a "heightened" or "selective realism" to assist the actor in creating an authentic sense of what these characters were like, often going to great lengths to ensure that the specific details of the stage properties or the character's physical actions were historically accurate and deeply pleasurable for the actors.

In terms of action, Richards was more concerned with organic impulse and ritual texture than with open conflicts – but this ritual gave the conflicts of his plays a particularly moving fierceness because the characters on stage were so clearly connected. Though his concern for ritual was mostly limited to the expressive gestures and language of everyday life, it occasionally embraced more openly "religious" actions which eschewed any kind of frivolity on the part of the actors – and guarded them against stereotype and satire, and gave a tragic note to the characters on stage. This ritual concern also extended to his own style as a director, where rehearsals were organized as places

where his actors could play and risk freely, without the often stressful demands of a competitive theatre world; and to an active accompaniment of the actors in their difficult search for solutions to sometimes very complex stage problems. He helped his actors achieve this sense of ritual action through specific thematic tasks, giving simple daily activities on stage a sense of embodied truth from a shared historical memory, and was meticulous in recreating active images beyond clever stage devices. These physical actions and precise phrasings were so fully embodied that some of the actors could remember with exact precision what they had done on stage thirty years later, in exactly the same intonation. All of this was done through "signification by indirection," and a call-and-response style questioning where the insistent repetition of simple key questions helped reinforce the actors' emotional conviction. He nurtured the creative nature of the actor, avoiding authoritarian tactics his community had been subjected, and insisted on developing the action as organically as he could, even if that meant that the work was "incomplete" when it came to the first run of the play. Like the Russians, he seemed to see the first runs as "rehearsals with the audience" where the most important work was still to be done – and like the Russians, though he did not necessarily give notes, he was sure to accompany the runs of the show right through to its very last performances.

In order to create the stage event, Richards was very concerned in making sure that the actors were reacting to each other in real time – tarrying like a preacher in front of a congregation, actively waiting for a sense of their collective emotional readiness, and helping his actors acquire the habit of constantly adapting to the new circumstances of

each rehearsal. This tarrying was especially important in creating the highly emotional events of his plays, where some of the actors, in the interviews, still expressed bewilderment at how he managed to get them where they needed to go. In creating a sense of stage event, there was constant work on rhythm and improvisation within the stage structure, and though Richards only occasionally showed his actors how to create this “rhythmic scoring,” his ability to encourage in his actors the ability to follow their impulses freely often led to rhythmically expressive solutions in text and action that enriched the already keenly accurate conversational poetry of the written texts. These “rhythmic scorings” guaranteed the power of the stage event, and were still alive thirty years after the productions in the testimonies of the actors, who often dropped into them and gave a surprisingly vivid sense of what had happened at the time. The work also included a ritual stillness or slowness which heightened the stage action – where the stage tarrying contributed to the tremendous power of Risa’s and Sterling’s kiss, for example, or for preparing the extraordinary reaction of Rose to her husband’s betrayal. Finally, Richards tended to signify on the events in the plays he directed by subtly down-playing their violence, while at the same highlighting the beauty of the everyday rituals of his characters, so as to contrast the violence with a stronger, more compelling celebration of Wilson’s ancestral voices in ritual communion. Though this is true of all of Richards’ productions to a certain extent, it is particularly true in Richards’ production of *Two Trains Running*.

It has become clear in describing Richards' rehearsal process that, though his work was constantly informed by the Russian school of theatre, his directing strategies were fully coherent with African American performance traditions that can stand as directing strategies in their own right, and this directing tradition calls for further research.

**b. Richards' Larger Thematic Action**

In one of Richards' most famous productions, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, though clearly a tragedy, the notes given the actor point to a director more interested – *ultimately* – in forgiveness than in despair. Richards asks Dutton to undo the terrifying impression he had made with his blasphemous speech against God, and Dutton describes the effect like this: “You had them like this (*clenching his fist*) and then you let them off the hook, relieving them in that last line” (Dutton, interview).

In other words, though there is an often highly dramatic outer structure in Wilson's plays, with emotionally charged events, this is not the essential action of these plays under Richards' direction. This is why with August Wilson in particular, there was often so much trouble with structure and finales: because the structure itself was only ever an excuse for something else which was much more riveting and much more difficult to define. In *Two Trains Running*, Hambone's death is just as “symbolic” as Malcolm X's and Martin Luther King's – it is the passing of an era – and Sterling stealing the hambone for Hambone's burial is a nice final touch. But these structural finesses are really quite secondary. Anyone who has experienced the show is much more thrilled by everything

that happens to Risa – and yet nothing particular happens to Risa. The almost accidental kiss – like the almost accidental kiss in *The Piano Lesson* – is a thrilling structural climax to a fascinating line of actions because each action has been fully played throughout. Rocky Carroll's metaphor of distillation is perfectly apt for Joyce/Risa's work: the slow drip-drip of apparently insignificant but fully meaningful moments slowly gather into pure joyful life.

I'd read this somewhere about Lloyd, is that he was a great distiller of August's work. He could ignite it. You know, you take this moonshine, or sourmash, or whatever it is, and you know it's good, you know it's got a real kick to it, but how do you distill it, how to make it so it's a little easier to go down? And that was Lloyd's expertise. He could distill this very powerful liquid, this very powerful text that August had and make it accessible, and make people who weren't even of the black culture walk away from it going, Wow, I just experienced something so amazing, which related directly to me even though it was about black culture, that was Lloyd's expertise. (Carroll)

To maintain this kind of living distillation from moment to moment is much more difficult than performing so-called well-made plays, and I have tried to show that Richards (and, naturally, Wilson) relied on musical structural devices to support the action and create the cumulative events. But these directing and dramaturgical devices arise out of the larger thematic action, and not vice-versa. The search for physical-

historical truth – a nickel in your pocket, an untouched watermelon, a biscuit quietly hidden – is intimately tied to the characters' situation: trying to make it after getting out of jail, trying to recover one's sanity after a lifetime of forced labour – so that every moment becomes physically true for the actor, and even the smallest actions become meaningful. And the repetition becomes a reaffirmation of that historical truth – the very ritual repetition that has brought the company together. Doaker turns the eggs – but doesn't want to sing. It is central here that Doaker doesn't want to sing – his resistance is not just tasteful modesty. It's the same reason Berniece doesn't want to play the piano – facing the past is too difficult. But sing and play, but face the past, they must – and do.

In the initial days of writing this thesis, I was in a bar speaking to an acquaintance of a friend, and it turned out he had seen *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* in its run at the Los Angeles Theatre Centre in spring of 1989. Despite my best efforts, he could not remember anything about the play. All he remembered was that at one moment, the characters came together and began to dance, and he said, "And I remember thinking to myself, Oh, that's what this play is about."

There is in this thirty-year-old memory an important truth about the theatre. Of course, part of the effect of giving full value to meaningful historical references is having an audience who remembers these details – or wants to discover them. The audience is fully committed to these invocations. A white audience from another context remembers nothing and sometimes gets lost because there is no particular story – like all of Wilson's

plays, the structure is an excuse for something else – but the outside audience *will* remember the company coming together in ritual, and ultimately understand what the play is about.

The best kind of theatre is usually lost on a wider audience – because the language changes, and I'm not talking about simple words, but the worlds evoked by them. There is much talk of the impossibility of translation from one language to another, but if it is true Barthes second-order languages are equally coherent, then cultural mythologies are also mutually mystifying. Just as Pushkin is impossible to translate, Fomenko is ultimately lost on his non-Russian audiences – even with the best English surtitles. And so it is for the full effect of Richards' productions. An accident (plus hard work and talent) put him in the mainstream – twice – and audiences gave him a chance. They were able to be moved by moments like the juba and work song, but also by Roscoe Lee Brown's quiet witnessing in *Two Trains Running*, or Mary Alice's contained presence on her porch in *Fences* – being there. Being “where you are” as Richards advised Wilson and Dutton and certainly so many actors and playwrights before and after (Hartigan, 12; Dutton, interview). Intrigued, this mainstream audience could therefore be engaged enough to keep watching, and fully appreciate the juba or the work song. But all the work in these plays had the ritual, deeply moving repetition of the juba or the work song. Actors and audiences have shown how deeply moved they have been by this work, and in Richards' staging, it is because every plate that is set, biscuit that is served, every card trick that is taken or pool ball that is shot, has been considered in just the same way as the work song

has – with their own equivalent of the ten-pound hammer, with their own oracular note spiralling out to a larger circle of meaning.

In this kind of theatre, with this kind of larger thematic action, conflict is secondary. Being together and witnessing the truth comes first. This homage to truth is precisely what makes this kind of work highly resistant to satire. Of course, there is conflict – because conflict is true. But the conflict between Boy Willie and Berniece will make no sense to an audience if it doesn't see in every line their *connectedness* – they are bound to each other, and this is not any source of unhappiness or happiness, as it might be in Chekhov, but a source of meaningfulness. This preoccupation with connectedness was so central to these plays that it drove James Earl Jones to distraction – he needed to know if Troy Maxson was capable of killing his son – and when he discovered, in the improvisation, that they were bound together, he could then perform one of the greatest scenes of his career.

So Lloyd would say – as I try to do that synthesis, if you will, of all these different strains that August was pointing to – what Lloyd was looking for was, does this fulfill the dramatic moment? And the dramatic moment was that the people ultimately lose themselves to the Holy Spirit like they would in praise worship. And it's into that rapture that Loomis comes in and cuts through it like a knife.

(Andrews, interview)

This description of the juba rehearsals, where Andrews and company were working towards a synthesis of a dramatic moment where “people ultimately lose themselves to the Holy Spirit,” might well be applied to all of Richards’ work. And Loomis’ tragedy is that he cannot participate in the ritual until he has crossed the chthonic abyss and recovered his sense of self.

It is easy to play superficial conflict; to play connectedness, and then play highly volatile conflict is much more difficult. I have tried to show how Richards accompanied his actors in these difficult scenes, how he tried not to interfere, how important it was for him to let something organic happen between them. This isn’t just a directing exercise or theatre game, a tactic to create an “ensemble”: Richards seemed to find those kinds of practices distasteful. Rather, his riddling presence, his own ambiguous connectedness, was a clear thematic action that made the material come alive.

This argument leads us to another concluding point: Richards’ profound ambiguity. One could say that it is impossible to say whether the Berta Berta stages a ritual or a conflict – whether the re-enactment of the song from Parchment Farm does not try to stage the continued impossibility of these characters to overcome the burden of their shared suffering. It is well-known that language, by its very nature, is ambiguous; but its performance is as well – and this has long been an important characteristic of African American performative practices, which involved the ambiguities of both “double-consciousness” and African cosmological concepts related to Elegbara.

A declaration of love, said with full-bodied impulse and conviction, can seem to someone from another language to be an insult or a lament. Richards' work on language, and his search for organicity, was highly dependent on the power of the word. His plays always rode the line between prayer and blasphemy because in his methodical way, the actors were slowly led to give a full conviction to every word that was repeatedly rehearsed – each time “going deeper” into an original choice – over weeks and months and years. And because the impulse in each word, at least ideally, expressed the fullness of life, in all its rich ambiguity – then this kind of material resists the kind of prosaic or literal “visions” or “readings” that give rise to normal stage conventions in mainstream productions. The ambiguous signification by indirection in the note-giving takes root in every sentence – in the aspiration, not necessarily in the execution – and provides a riddling feeling to the stage action that makes it very difficult for audiences to make definitive judgments on these characters' actions.

In the same vein, it is difficult to define exactly the action of a play like *Seven Guitars* – are they just mourning? Or is there not, here as well, a tendency to confront the dead with their sins – like Cory still angry before his father's funeral. In the Colombian regions of South America, there is a tradition called the *alabao* – an Afro-Colombian tradition of mourning the dead in celebration and song; and speaking openly of the deceased's misdeeds is not unusual. There is a sense where Wilson's plays are *alabaos*, with all their ambiguous connection to the dead – and Richards was able to help his actors make these *alabaos* resonate.

This being together to contemplate lost family members is closely connected to the anecdoting that I have indicated throughout, that filled, indeed, my interviews. The actors tell their stories of their cousins and aunts and grandparents, and the designers create sets based on an old black-and-white picture, or a restaurant in the Hill District. The thematic action is continuous from analysis at the table through the design work to the choices the actors make on stage. Joyce has been to those restaurants, and understands Risa's maddening slowness. Her work is ultimately contemplation – and not comedy or tragedy – because Joyce wants us to recognize the beauty of this forgotten character. Richards' work is was dedicated to showing the beauty and worth of forgotten and even despicable characters.

Richards' consummate respect for the actor was of a piece with his respect for the character (and for the playwright, and for every other artistic colleague he had dealings with). The resistance to satire, again, is not just a liberal-minded concern, but a thematic action deeply connected to a commitment to restoring a sense of recognition to a community which had been historically denied it, and which generally did not respond well to the kinds of arbitrary and arrogant strategies of mainstream directing tendencies.

This resistance to satire is not a politically-minded concern for a formal recognition – but a fascination for human beings whose presence mattered – Baraka's "form of passage through the world" (Baraka, 2009, 195). Richards was deeply concerned with these forms of human passage – as long as they did not re-inscribe, in his opinion, the kinds of

attitudes which had made that passage so violent. His “colour-blind casting” of Tommy Hollis, his finessing of Ma Rainey’s sexual life and his suppression of Troy Maxson’s gun were wrong-headed only if you put aside Richards’ larger thematic action, which was urgently concerned with re-casting traditional perceptions for the specific audience he was addressing – and the success of those plays is a measure of that commitment to this larger thematic action.

Lloyd embodied the integrity of our ancestors. He embodied the integrity of our ancestors that go way back to Africa. He restored a faith in me that we were an incredibly accomplished, incredibly intelligent, incredibly profound and prolific people. He restored in me that it did matter what we said and how we conducted ourselves. (Santiago Hudson, interview)

His respect did not limit itself to his ancestors – in any case, Richards certainly would have been more inclusive than most in that area.<sup>1</sup> – or to his more positive protagonists, but even to his evillest characters, black or white, who were always given a fair hearing. There was clearly something that fascinated Richards about villains, and he was the devil’s advocate even for white devils like Bedford Forrest and George Murchison.

Is it possible to resume all of these tendencies, in Richards’ larger thematic action, to one clear expression?

There is this story that Richards loved to tell over and over again:

It's one of my favorite stories in the theatre. When we opened in Philadelphia with *A Raisin in the Sun*, the audience was about 90% white. In three days that audience was over 50% black, and that's where the story came in, I was standing in the lobby of the theatre looking at the people lined up to buy tickets. There was a woman who was at the ticket window who gave the treasurer one dollar. The treasurer told her the ticket is \$4.80. She exclaimed, "\$4.80? I can see Sidney Poitier around the corner in a movie for ninety-five cents." She went into that pocketbook and got out the rest of her money and bought a ticket and started walking into the theatre. It was only 3pm, so the treasurer tells her that she couldn't go in now, she'd have to come back at 8:30. I stopped her and asked her why she was paying \$4.80 to see Sidney when she could pay ninety-five cents around the corner. She said "the word's out in my neighborhood that something's going on down here that concerns me, so I had to come down and find out what it was all about." At that moment I knew why I was in the theatre, and what I was doing there. (King and Richards, 3)

This, better than any concise formula, perhaps best describes Richards' larger thematic action: "Something's going on down here that concerns me."

Richards knew well how to talk the formal language of directing, but in rehearsal he preferred not to. And if, ultimately, he preferred his dramatic structures to be somewhat precarious, bringing his shows to audiences with uneven dramatic lines and uncertain endings, it was well worth it as long as the action was of concern to the audience, and the

human being was dignified in the process. Actors loved him because he made them discover their artistic and human worth.

How do you systematize a method that hinges on this kind of conviction? The misunderstandings that have surrounded Stanislavsky's writing may well have arisen from mistranslations, but the main problem always was this: his method hinged on belief and belief cannot be systematized. Neither, really, can Richards'.

Richards would do simple things, but these things would be imbued with significance and concern. He would bring in a ten-pound hammer into rehearsal to make sure his actors understood the significance of a simple song sung by their ancestors. And he would do the same with actors, playwrights, designers, even administrative assistants: he would ask a simple question or set a simple task, and actors would be moved at the depth and meaningfulness of their own existence as human beings and artists. And beyond the enormous influence he exerted on the North American theatre in the second half of the twentieth century, what is most extraordinary is the enormous amount of love and respect he inspired in his countless colleagues over that same period. Perhaps this is of little importance, ultimately, for theatre professionals. But perhaps the enduring problem with the theatre is that there is not enough love and respect to make the technique at all meaningful – and what made Richards' contribution so signally important.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These materials include video-recordings of performances, print and recorded interviews, performance reviews, and unpublished letters and workshop notes.

<sup>2</sup> P. N. Fomenko (1932-2012) is considered one of the greatest Russian directors of the turn of the late twentieth century. See his obituary in the *Moscow Times*: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/blogs/432775/post/remembering-pyotr-fomenko/466393.html>, and the website for the Fomenko Studio Theatre: <http://fomenko.theatre.ru/>

<sup>3</sup> The breakup would not be unconnected to the climate of culture war going on. 1996 was the year of the debate between Robert Brustein and August Wilson. See analyses of this debate in Miller (11-13) and Gates (132-134).

<sup>4</sup> Most notably *Mulatto* by Langston Hughes, which ran for 373 performances in 1935-36, and *Anna Lucasta* by Abram Hill in 1944, which ran for 957 performances. (Hill and Hatch, 313)

<sup>5</sup> Listening to the following interview by Mike Wallace, one can hear Hansberry's fighting spirit: <http://rhonedifies.blogspot.ca/2011/05/blog-post.html> (consulted June 29, 2013). Amiri Baraka, too, points to Hansberry's participation in the spirit of black power: "It was of someone like Malcolm that Walter Lee spoke as in a trance in prophecy while he mounts the table to deliver his liquor-fired call to arms. (Nation of Islam headquarters was Chicago where the play is set!)" ("Enduring Passion," 18)

<sup>6</sup> Sidney Poitier eventually left the production after the Broadway run in protest; the character was taken over by Douglas Turner Ward. See my interview below with Ward, and Poitier's description of the events in his *This Life* (233-238) and *Measure of a Man* (147-158).

<sup>7</sup> Baraka on his generation's opinion of Hansberry: "We thought Hansberry's play was part of the 'passive resistance phase of the movement, which was over the minute Malcolm's penetrating eyes and words began to charge through the media with deadly force. We thought her play "middle class" in that its

focus seemed to be on 'moving into white folks' neighborhoods,' when most blacks were just trying to pay their rent in ghetto shacks." ("Enduring Passion," 19)

<sup>8</sup> Baraka's reevaluation is all the more extraordinary in that he diminishes the importance of his own play *Dutchman* as a game changer in the period: "We missed the essence of the work -- that Hansberry had created a family on the cutting edge of the same class and ideological struggles as existed in the movement itself and among the people. What is most telling about our ignorance is that Hansberry's play still remains overwhelmingly popular and evocative of black and white reality, and the masses of black people dug it true. The next two explosions in black drama, Baldwin's *Blues for Mr. Charlie* and my own *Dutchman* (both 1964) raise up the militance and self-defense clamor of the movement as it came fully into the Malcolm era: Jimmy by constructing a debate between King (Meridian) and Richard (Malcolm), and I by having Clay openly advocate armed resistance. But neither of these plays is as much a statement from the African American majority as is *Raisin*. For one thing, they are both (regardless of their "power") too concerned with white people." ("Enduring Passion," 19)

<sup>9</sup> John Patrick Shanley, Lee Blessing, Christopher Durang, John Guare, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, Lanford Wilson – to name but a small number. Since the Sundance Film Festival was based on the O'Neill system, one could say that Richards has also had an indirect influence on the American experimental cinema as well.

<sup>10</sup> To name a few playwrights in each case: Regina Taylor, Wendy Wasserstein, Paula Vogel; Tom Oliver Crehore, David Henry Hwang; Julia Cho, David Henry Hwang; René Marquez, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa.

<sup>11</sup> In the case of Soyinka, Richards' influence was political as well: according to George White, Richards and White helped get him out of prison in Nigeria in 1969. (White, interview)

<sup>12</sup> Two of the most important of these figures were Harold Scott and Dennis Scott.

<sup>13</sup> See George White's discussion of the relationship between the O'Neill and Yale in connection with dramaturgy. (White, interview)

<sup>14</sup> "Richards [would] say his tenure at Yale involved an unspoken but moral commitment to provide every student with his or her first job in the profession. 'The Rep becomes the primary teaching tool of the school.'" (Hartigan, 17)

<sup>15</sup> "Michael Yeargan, who was second in command in design, didn't design any shows for Richards at Yale, and neither did Ming [Cho Lee] because they wanted the students to get all the perks." (Bradley, interview)

<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to determine exactly what years Richards taught at the studio, because his own official curriculum vitae, among his Yale papers, says the following: "Assistant Director/Teacher, Paul Mann Actor's Workshop, 10 years." (LRP B63 F749).

<sup>17</sup> In Gus Edwards' book on Douglas Turner Ward – and in the interview the latter gave me – Ward is eloquent about the importance of Paul Mann in the black theatre movement, and it would be well worth researching this actor-director who was unable to get work on Broadway because he had been black-listed in the fifties for being a communist. This also from Sidney Poitier: "During the filming of *In the Heat of the Night*, Rod Steiger's work was a constant reminder of how lucky I was that I had found my way to two of the greatest teachers of any era, Paul Mann and Lloyd Richards." (Poitier, *Measure*, 142)

<sup>18</sup> Michael Schultz on Richards' influence as an acting teacher: "Many of the actors that I have worked with before I was already with the Negro Ensemble Company have been trained by Lloyd. So I knew of him and of course from *A Raisin in the Sun*. [...] And the fact that he trained Sidney Poitier and Cicely Tyson and Lou Gossett Jr., all these people whose work I admired, and that he was in my time the first black director on Broadway. Of course, he was a role model." (Schultz) Richard Wesley says as much in his interview. It is useful to note that both worked with the New Lafayette Theatre.

<sup>19</sup> A notable exception to this influence is the New Lafayette Theatre, though many of the actors who worked with Macbeth had been trained or had worked under Richards – including Estelle Evans, who performed Clara in both productions of *Who's Got His Own*. Robert Macbeth has this to say of Richards' relationship to the New Lafayette: "Didn't know Lloyd Richards personally. Never worked with him. No, he never visited the New Lafayette. I saw the production of *Whose Got His Own* at the American Place and liked the writing, but not the 'fourth wall/proscenium theatre' style that Milner had written it in. I did some rearranging and made it more 'Brechtian'. It was the sixties and the "Revolution" was going on." (Macbeth, interview)

<sup>20</sup> They will be described in Chapter Three, "Event."

<sup>21</sup> Richards was Head of the Acting Program at NYU for six years (1966-72), a professor at Hunter College from 1972-79, an acting coach for the Actors Centre from 1997 until his death, and of course he ran his own acting studio "for ten years" in the sixties. (LRP B63 F749) As with American playwrights, the number of American actors who have been trained with him is very high. "Anyone who has ever worked with Richards as an actor, playwright or designer - a number that must be somewhere in the thousands – would recognize that conversation with Wilson as quintessential Lloyd Richards." (Freedman, SM38)

<sup>22</sup> The success is, however, is qualified by the fact that the great majority of the scholarship concentrates on Wilson's poetics and usually only pauses on Richards' contribution as an enabler and structurer of Wilson's creative nature.

<sup>23</sup> The formula appeared for the first time in an article in *The New York Times*. (Wilson, "How to Write a Play...") He repeats it in several interviews, and in one for the *Paris Review* he adds two more "B's": James Baldwin and Ed Bullins: "My influences have been what I call my four Bs – the primary one being the blues, then Borges, Baraka and Bearden. From Borges, those wonderful gaucho stories from which I learned that you can be specific as to a time and place and culture and still have the work resonate with the

universal themes of love, honor, duty, betrayal, et cetera. From Amiri Baraka I learned that all art is political, though I don't write political plays. That's not what I'm about. From Romare Bearden I learned that the fullness and richness of everyday ritual life can be rendered without compromise or sentimentality. (Plimpton, 74)

<sup>24</sup> The quote above on the four *Bs* continues: "To those four *Bs* I could add two more. Bullins and Baldwin. Ed Bullins is a playwright with a serious body of work, much of it produced in the sixties and seventies. It was with Bullins' work that I first discovered someone writing plays about blacks with an uncompromising honesty and creating rich and memorable character. And then James Baldwin, in particular his call for a "profound articulation of the black tradition," which he defined as "that field of manners and rituals of intercourse that can sustain a man once he's left his father's house." I thought, Let me answer the call. A profound articulation, but let's worry about the profundities later. I wanted to out that on stage, to demonstrate that the "manners and rituals" existed and that the tradition was capable of sustaining you." (Plimpton, 74) But as Harry Elam, Jr. says, "While other American playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill and Ed Bullins have attempted to construct historical cycles, Wilson stands alone in having achieved this aspiration. Thus, his history cycle will live on as his enduring legacy." (Elam, "A Black Thing," ix)

<sup>25</sup> This was Phillip Hayes Dean's interpretation of Richards. (Dean, Interview)

<sup>26</sup> This sentiment was reiterated by most of the fifty-two artists interviewed for this study.

<sup>27</sup> The reviews were generally favourable (see Frank Rich's review, "Panoramic History"), but there were no known stars in the cast, and "with its themes of redemption and rebirth, 'Joe Turner' is somewhat more abstract than 'Fences'; the low attendance figures suggest that the word of mouth on the show is not uniformly positive." (Gerard, C27)

<sup>28</sup> The play ran from March 27 to June 26, 1988, at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway, and had runs in New Haven, Boston, Washington, Seattle, San Diego and Los Angeles.

<sup>29</sup> The fullest extant study of Richards' work as a director is a literature review by Browning, which follows Richards' career up to 1984 – essentially looking at reviews of his productions. (Browning, 1985) Otherwise, most of the material on Richards are interviews and profiles. There are very few interviews with actors about his rehearsal process, and generally cryptic or laconic references to his contribution as a director. Richards appears in only one collection of "interviews with directors" (Bartow), and otherwise the interviews regarding his directing legacy all occur as part of a project to highlight the accomplishments of certain playwrights.

<sup>30</sup> I'm indebted, for this comparison, to Amy Saltz, one of the directors who worked under Richards at the O'Neill, and who premiered many of the first readings of Wilson's plays. (Saltz, interview)

<sup>31</sup> For a description of this process, see Graham Nesmith's interview with Lloyd Richards, p. 287.

<sup>32</sup> In the year 1987, producer Shorenstein tried to remove Richards as director on the eve of *Fences*' premiere on Broadway. (Shannon, "Dramatic Vision," 112) At the time, Richards was Dean of the Yale School of Drama, and 68 years old. It is difficult to imagine this happening to other directors of his generation with similar reputations.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Wesley on Richards' relative obscurity after the mid-sixties: "Lloyd had already fought some very heartbreaking battles. I think that's the way I would describe it. They had to have been heart breaking. This was a man who directed one of the major plays of the 1950s. Which was an incredible decade for American playwriting, in the American theatre. And yet he virtually disappeared for 15 years. In all that time through the 1960s and the early 1970s, I can only remember one time a TV movie that Lloyd directed. No motion pictures. And I think he had every reason to believe that he was going to get asked, and yet not one single opportunity seemed to present itself." (Wesley, interview)

<sup>34</sup> Richard Wesley has this to say about the New Lafayette's hesitation to work with Richards: "There were a number of strong political playwrights who came up during that time. Larry Neal. Ed Bullins. Amiri Baraka, certainly. [...] I think [Lloyd] would have loved to direct some of those plays if he had been asked but I don't know if he was. I think he would have been a fantastic director of Baraka's play *Slave Ship*. I think he would have loved at least the challenge of that. That play has epic sweep and requires an incredible imagination in terms of how to stage it and Lloyd certainly would have risen to the challenge of that but he wasn't asked." (Wesley, interview)

<sup>35</sup> The directing curricula that he implemented in various schools show a full continuity with this idiom. Here is an excerpt from the directing curriculum drawn up for Hunter College: "2. Develop and state and directorial theme. a. Substantiate the validity of this selection through an historical examination of the verities of time and place. 1) politically 2) socially 3) economically 4) culturally (music and art) 3. Develop a production concept that fulfills the thematic concept in respect to: a. set design b. lighting design c. costume design d. music e. character concepts f. movement." The connection between this and the concept of "thematic action" discussed below is clear. (LRP, B65 F761)

<sup>36</sup> I'm indebted for this formulation of Richards' work to Honor Ford-Smith.

<sup>37</sup> See Ric Knowles critique of Robin Phillips disingenuousness in *Reading the Material Theatre*, 26: "My name is Robin Phillips and I don't know what the play is about." Brook's directing style is well documented in Shomit Mitter's *Systems of Rehearsal*.

<sup>38</sup> By David Henry Hwang.

<sup>39</sup> By Wendy Wasserstein.

<sup>40</sup> One only has to read the personal rehearsal notes of Strasberg (*Tape-Recorded Sessions*) and Kazan (*Kazan on Directing*) to see the distance there is between their aggressive styles and Richards' gentle prodding.

<sup>41</sup> The following description by Paul Mann is very consistent with the "étude" or "improvisational" training of the Moscow Art Theatre: "The second year should continue this basic work and add to it simple improvised scenes, leading to work on contemporary scenes from American and English plays. These plays are used because there the milieu is closest to the actor's own. By creating simple scenes with very clear objectives and direct actions the actor is learning to set tasks for himself which involve precisely the same procedures as those he will use when working with a text." (Mann and Schechner, 86).

<sup>42</sup> Paul Mann, who set the tone for the studio's work, was highly suspicious of how the Method was taught in the United States.: "Despite a few notable exceptions, the teaching of the Stanislavski System is chaotic, commercialized, opportunistic, anarchic, and unrelated to any theatre. [...] The majority of so-called professional school and studios are dramatic cafeterias catering to cash customers. You can get a course in any aspect of the Method, and on any level, if you have the money. If you want a course in 'advanced scene work' or 'elements of characterization,' just plunk down your bucks." (Mann and Schechner, 84)

<sup>43</sup> "As Robert Lewis reports, Strasberg reacted by calling a counter meeting on the next day to announce that 'he taught the Strasberg Method, not the Stanislavski System.'" (Carnicke, 60)

<sup>44</sup> In the sixties, Richards became increasingly more interested in the dramaturgy of the black Atlantic, and his travels, for the O'Neill, would take him to Africa (LRP B62 F736-737). When he was in dialogue with Russia, it was with the famous playwrights' colony in Russia at Schelykova, great Russian playwright Alexander Ostrovsky's old estate. (LRP B79 F904)

<sup>45</sup> Richards' tour of James Baldwin's 1954 play to Europe and Israel in 1965 was highly successful, and "Mr. Baldwin said this was the first time he had really seen the play as he conceived it." ("Play by Baldwin...")

<sup>46</sup> The success of Richards' production brought it to the attention of Robert Macbeth and the New Lafayette Theatre, and it became their inaugural production.

<sup>47</sup> *Robeson*, by Phillip Hayes Dean, was Richards' re-entry into Broadway, and though the play caused a scandal at the time, it has become an important play in the history of African American theatre.

<sup>48</sup> By August Wilson, the premiere of this play at the Cort Theatre on Broadway, on October 11, 1984, launched Wilson's national reputation, and re-established Lloyd Richards as a major directing figure.

<sup>49</sup> Certainly an argument can be made for the connections between the Black Arts Movement and the avant-garde: see Leslie Sanders' chapter on Amiri Baraka, and the discussion of his connection to the avant-garde poets and the "theatre of cruelty" of Artaud (*Shadows to Selves*, 123-131). Also see chapter in Mike Sell's book *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement*, called "Was the Black Arts Movement an Avant-Garde?", 276-90.

<sup>50</sup> Two of the eight books in the bibliography for his directing syllabus at Hunter College in 1979 are by Brook and Grotowski: *The Empty Space* and *Toward a Poor Theatre*. The list, in fact, pointedly resumes Richards' sphere of influence: *On Directing* by Harold Clurman, *The Fundamentals of Play Directing* by Alexander Dean and Lawrence Carra, *Play Direction* by John E. Dietrich, *Stanislavsky Directs* by Nikolai Gorkachov (based on Stanislavsky's directing lectures), Magarshack's translation of *The Seagull – Produced by Stanislavsky* and *Directing the Play* by John Wray Young. If you discount the books by Dean/Carra, Dietrich and Young as directing manuals for beginners, three books are from the Russian school (Clurman, Magarshack and Gorchakov), and two are from the European avant-garde. (LRP B65 F761)

<sup>51</sup> Consider this, as well, with regards to Richards' relative obscurity as a director: "There are few directors who have successfully dedicated their career to working with contemporary playwrights, and even less who have succeeded internationally as a result." (Delgado and Heritage, 8)

<sup>52</sup> This work will also contribute to fill an investigative gap in the research already done on the larger similarities between the Russian and African American cultural traditions, in the spirit of a book which was something of an inspiration during my research: *Up from Bondage: the Literatures of Russian and African American Soul*, by Dale E. Peterson, which draws very compelling parallels between the two artistic traditions, but which from my perspective is missing a fundamentally important chapter on the theatre.

<sup>53</sup> Historically, there were many intriguing connections between the Russian theatre and the African American theatre, perhaps the most important of which were Langston Hughes' observations of Meyerhold's rehearsals in the 1930s, as described by Leslie Sanders in "Interesting Ways of Staging Plays." Hughes and Russian Theatre." But also, the Soviet courting of African American artists (Mukherji, 120-141), and Meyerhold's interest in jazz (Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, 118).

<sup>54</sup> See footnote number 2, above.

<sup>55</sup> Over the course of the twelve months during which I conducted the interviews, a number of ideal criteria were kept in mind, though it was not always possible to apply them in every interview. One ideal, for example, was to do as many interviews in person as possible, in order to establish an atmosphere of trust which is more difficult in media such as Skype or telephone. I therefore travelled as often as financially possible to several cities in order to conduct the interviews: New York, New Haven, Waterford (CT), Los Angeles and Buffalo. Fifteen interviews were carried out in this manner – roughly one third. Still, some of the most important contributors gave interviews by telephone: Courtney B. Vance, Ella Joyce, Ruben Santiago-Hudson and Michele Shay, whose testimonies were central to the arguments put forward in the second half of the document, all gave long and very articulate interviews by telephone. These interviews

were done later in the process, when I had learned to guide the interview as little as possible and let the interviews find for themselves what they thought was most important when reflecting on Richards' rehearsals.

Another important criterion was to speak to as many colleagues as possible who had been in the rehearsal hall with him, and not just with the most famous names. I discovered early on that stage managers, designers, assistant directors, former student, understudies and even administrative assistant had insights which were as valuable as those of other participants who were more fully involved in the rehearsal process. The way in which these testimonies mutually reinforced each other, despite being from very different angles, guaranteed a level of reliability in the reconstruction of rehearsal processes.

Another important criterion, in the transcription of the interviews, was to edit the oral testimonies as little as possible (though the interviewees were given the option of editing their own testimonies). This was for two reasons: the first was to let the interviewees speak for themselves, with as little intervention as possible on the part of the researcher. The second was in order to convey a dynamic feel to the memory work, to show how the interviewees were still reacting to the living actions and events of these rehearsals thirty years later: perhaps the most concrete example of the living nature of Richards' rehearsal process.

<sup>56</sup> Shepherd does not mention a fifth possibility, the company of director-actors which constitute theatres of collective creation. His division of the director into discrete roles reflects the limited nature of the directing function in the North American commercial theatre.

<sup>57</sup> In a scribbled note from his agenda of 1990, Richards has this definition of an Artistic Director: "AD stays in terms of responsibility and tries to convince others to do so too. Stakes his reputation and his future on his choices." (LRP, B83 F951, Agenda 1990, July3-4, 1990)

## **Part I. Russian Directing Theory and Black Theatre Aesthetics**

### **Chapter 1. Russian and African American Concepts of Character**

<sup>1</sup> See Dale E. Peterson's discussion of constructions of race in XIX century Russia, and their parallels with the African American context, in his book *Up From Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul* (2000)

<sup>2</sup> For an English explanation of this last connotation, see Carnicke, 2009, 214. The rest can be found in any bilingual dictionary.

<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of my research, I discovered a dissertation entitled "The Russian Pre-Theatrical Actor and the Stanislavsky System." The author, John Wesley Hill translates "obraz" as "image of action." ("Chapter 5: Image of Action," 186-218).

<sup>4</sup> Main character in Gogol's *The Inspector General* – one of the most renowned central characters in the history of the Russian theatre.

<sup>5</sup> Dale E. Peterson's comparison of the racializing contexts of Russian and African American aesthetic strivings is subtle and complex, but the following passage might give an idea of the thrust of his argument: "The first stage of nationalist theorizing, as embodied in the exemplary figures of Peter Chaadaev and Alexander Crummell, was similarly Eurocentric and 'civilizationist.' The earliest claims for an exceptional Russian and African American manifest destiny gave new content to the scriptural promise that the last would be the first in the kingdom of heaven. Read allegorically as a reference to the belated and unredeemed peoples who had not yet been gathered into the providential history of Christendom, it became possible for religious minds to conceive of Russians and African Americans as most favorably positioned to complete the missionary advance of the one universal civilization. Belief in the privilege of such a history-making belatedness was purchased as a price, however. The journey up from slavery and up from Slavdom was thought to require a radical reconstruction of racial traits and heathen custom. (Indeed, the word 'slave'

derives from the Latin *sclavus* for 'Slav.') Converts to 'civilizationism had to deny the existence of any previous indigenous culture of significance or value. It was that denial of ethnic 'soul' that led directly to the second major phase in Russian and African American nationalist thinking." (Peterson, 2000, 7)

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Ostrovsky's significance in the context of XIX century social reforms in Russia, see Kate Sealy Rahman's "Aleksandr Ostrovsky. Director and Dramatist." in Leach and Borovsky, 1999, 166-81.

<sup>7</sup> The influence of the Maly Theatre on the artistic practices of the Moscow Art Theatre is amply shown in Stanislavsky's *My Life in Art*, where constant references are made to the actors and directors of the Maly theatre. Stanislavsky talks in his diary about Chekhov reducing a long monologue by Andrey Prozorov about his wife to a few words: "A wife is a wife." At GITIS in Russia, we were taught that Chekhov did this because he did not want to repeat what several playwrights had been doing over the last fifty years, and that this was one example of how he considered other playwrights when he wrote his plays. The examples given come from my own interpretation of these plays.

<sup>8</sup> See Meyerhold's rehearsal notes from the twenties and the thirties, *Meyerhold Rehearses, Vols I and II*. (Moscow 1993)

<sup>9</sup> The concept first appears in Shklovsky's *The Theory of Prose* (Shklovsky, 1-14) For Meyerhold's influence on Brecht, see Katherine Eaton's convincing argument in "Brecht's Contacts with the Theatre of Meyerhold." (1977)

<sup>10</sup> Leslie Sanders argues that a key playwright in transforming audience perception of the black stage was Ed Bullins. See "Like Niggers: Ed Bullins' Theater of Reality" in Sanders, 1988, 176-228.

<sup>11</sup> "Social Protest and the Politics of Representation" (Elam and Krasner, 17-98), "Images in Theatre and Media" (Molette and Molette, 235-253), "The Image Makers: Plays and Playwrights" (Hill, 113-209), "Distorted Images" (Effiong, 5-7), among others.

<sup>12</sup> This analysis of the reaction to *Raisin in the Sun* is described in Miller, 2011, 140-178.

<sup>13</sup> The same passage that is famously commented upon by Houston A. Baker as an example of the complexity of the vernacular tropes in black American literature (Baker, 172-99)

<sup>14</sup> Respectively, from *Glengarry Glen Ross* by David Mamet and *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola.

<sup>15</sup> The story appears in *My Life in Art*: when Stanislavsky asks Chekhov what he thinks of his performance as Trigorin in *The Seagull*, Chekhov replies that everything is fine, but he needs to wear “shoes with holes in them, and checkered pants.” This later becomes a revelation to Stanislavsky, as the true secret to the character of this fashionable writer. (Stanislavsky, I, 164)

## Chapter 2. Russian and African American Concepts of Event

<sup>1</sup> “For the formalists, the *fābula* was only the raw material which was then elaborated into the organization of the story (*siuzhet*) towards an “estrangement,” the heightening of the outer sensation of the dynamics of the story-telling. In connection to this, there is a set division between “siuzhetny” works and “fabulnyi” works, depending on a greater or lesser sharpness of the “siuzhetny” devices.” (Translation mine. Lebedev-Polyansky)

<sup>2</sup> Done, unfortunately, in blackface without any kind of subversion of the blackface mask.

<sup>3</sup> Stanislavsky, towards the end of his career, often began the rehearsal process by having the actors improvise the play’s events without giving them the actual script – with the intent of eventually returning to the script. (Carnicke, 202-3)

<sup>4</sup> A common example of rhythmic scoring that obliges the actor to live in the moment is the tactic of “taking out the periods.” (Golitsyna, 7) Russian directors ask the actors to plough forward, without taking

the logical periods into account, so that the truth of the words will not be inhibited by the formal structure, in its logical and therefore primitive musicality. Stanislavsky's "psychological pause" is another example in the same vein: it involves putting a pause where it doesn't belong, often on impulse, in order to highlight a suddenly felt significant moment, and it is to help the actor understand that the meaning of any word happens first in silence, and then is *completed* by the vocalization of the word, but not determined by it. (Stanislavski, 2008, 420)

<sup>5</sup> Even Larry Neal's manifesto "The Black Arts Movement," which famously called upon his artistic colleagues "to create a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology," (Neal, 29), in calling for a newly conceived African American mythology, seeks to re-define the nature of the event in African American aesthetics.

<sup>6</sup> See Henry D. Miller's criticism of the play along these same lines, 163-65.

<sup>7</sup> "After Robert Macbeth chose *Who's Got His Own* for the premiere of the 1966/67 season for the New Lafayette Theatre, it gained the distinction of being the first black play to be produced downtown in a white theatre and then produced uptown in Harlem. It won critical acclaim in both arenas." (Milner, 13)

<sup>8</sup> "There is something cruelly truthful in what Lloyd Richards made evident to his son Thomas – that church ceremonies are often made up of bad acting – an observation that Thomas refers to on occasion with a smile. I find this statement important as it indicates that for competent theatre artists liturgical rituals can in moments register as ineffective performance. The symbolic gestures and props without the believable deed do not hold the reoriginating effect desired from ritual." (Salata, 111)

### **Chapter 3. Russian and African American Concepts of Action**

<sup>1</sup> In his interview with Richard Schechner and Theodore Hoffman (Wolford and Schechner, 38-55), Grotowski sometimes conflates "association" and "memory," sometimes distinguishes the two, but the most

important idea is that the association must be recognized “not in thought but through my body’s impulses.”  
(39) Strictly speaking then, impulse is a function of association, but they are not exactly the same thing.

<sup>2</sup> For an understanding of the importance of Knebel and Efros, and the influence of their development of Stanislavsky’s ideas on the Soviet theatre, see the introduction to James Thomas’ translations of Efros’ books. (Efros, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> This is my translation of “poshlost” which can also be translated as “banality,” “small-mindedness,” “vulgarity” or “mediocrity.”

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Malaev-Babel citation of Sulerzhitsky’s formulation of the same idea, Malaev-Babel, 12.

<sup>5</sup> One critic describes the dynamic well in a description of Hughes’ poem “Young Gal’s Blues”:  
“Instead, Hughes simulates the spontaneity of oral performance by having his speaker step outside the heretofore orderly pattern of the poem and expand on her fear of loneliness.” (Chinitz, 71)

<sup>6</sup> Still, John Wesley Hill (2009) argues that the supernatural was also an important part of Stanislavsky’s rehearsal process.

<sup>7</sup> “Marie Schmidt Campbell noted that the ‘prevalence of ritual’ was Bearden’s name for his philosophy of art and that ‘it remained the unifying basis of his art until the end of his career.’ Ralph Ellison, in his own work, characterized his friend’s images similarly, as ‘abiding rituals and ceremonies of affirmation.’” (Price et al., 123)

<sup>8</sup> Both *Joe Turner Has Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson* were based on collage paintings by Romare Bearden (*Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket* and *The Piano Lesson*, respectively.) (Bryer, 17)

<sup>9</sup> Again, Richards’ reflection cited above on church ritual is pertinent here: “that church ceremonies are often made up of bad acting” (Salata, 110)

<sup>10</sup> Still unresolved because never sufficiently addressed, especially by the white community (which still can talk of Jefferson's love for Sally). See Elam's thoughtful consideration of this problem in the context of *Sally's Rape* in Elam/Krasner, 94-95)

<sup>11</sup> For W. E. B. Du Bois's reflections on the theatre, see "Criteria of Negro Art," a speech where he calls for a theatre "about us, by us, for us, and near us" (Du Bois, 290-97). For Alain Locke's call for the "folk play" see his essay "The Drama of Negro Life." (89-90). For Hughes' formulation of the "jazz aesthetic, see "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." For an influential description of the "blues aesthetic," see Ralph Ellison's chapter "Richard Wright's Blues" in *Shadow and Act* (77-94). For Appiah's study of Ben Okri and Toni Morrison through the lens of "spiritual realism" see the essay of the same name in *The Nation* (1992). Finally, for Soyinka's description of the Ogunian tragedy, see his chapter "The Fourth Stage" in his book *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*.

<sup>12</sup> Some, of course, like Du Bois, Locke and Soyinka were speaking directly to theatre artists.

<sup>13</sup> The only exception to this is the recording of *Joe Turner Has Come and Gone*, which has been lost.

## **Part II: Lloyd Richards' Rehearsal Process**

### **Chapter 4. Lloyd Richards and Character**

<sup>1</sup> Of course, having studied with Richards never guaranteed that an actor would acquire a part – he had too many students for that to be possible. Anthony Chisholm tells the story of how he auditioned for Richards twenty years after taking his classes: "It had been 22 years since [I had seen him], or 21. Because I finished studying somewhere in '69. This is 1990. So I get introduced to him and there was a reader and I don't know who else was in the room but anyway I did my scene and Lloyd said, thank you very much. As I was leaving the room, he grabbed me by the sleeves. He said, excuse me, I see on your resume here you say you studied with me. When did you study with me? I said, Come on, Lloyd. I said, Man, 1969. NEC

[Negro Ensemble Company] and Mary Alice. And he said, Oh my god. That was 100 years ago. He said thank you. And I left. And that was in January of 1990 but Sam Jackson got that role.” (Chisholm)

<sup>2</sup> Michael and Gloria Schultz, who worked with him later on in the sixties, hold a similar view. (M. Schultz/G. Schultz)

<sup>3</sup> Dutton: “And then [Richards] just said, You’ve got to remember that in the band everybody’s an extension of their instrument.” (Dutton, interview)

<sup>4</sup> I have done my best to reproduce Joyce’s performative style in my transcription – though the full effect is impossible to convey without detailed “stage directions” as it were. What’s important here is that she often, in the interview (as many did) entered and exited the character to illustrate a point, and when this happened, her whole attitude changed – it was like she (and they) were reliving the moment performed twenty years before.

<sup>5</sup> Carnicke’s translation of Stanislavsky’s concept of “manki” – means for prodding the actor’s creative nature.

<sup>6</sup> Wilson’s dramaturg from 2000 to 2006. (Zaytoun).

<sup>7</sup> In our interview, Jones describes Richards’ refusal to have Troy confront his son with a gun in less ambiguous terms: “August’s original script had a gun involved. The father pointed a gun at his son. Lloyd being the Dean of Yale, being a responsible leading citizen of the community, did not want to impose the image of a black man pointing a gun at his son in the black community. Which is bullshit. The attitude is bullshit. I said we should have that gun or something in that scene to help the resolution. And so the baseball bat became the weapon.” (J. E. Jones, interview) This take on the situation makes the final, poetic solution – one that Jones takes credit for – all the more contradictory.

<sup>8</sup> In *Voices and Silences*, (Jones and Niven, 328), Jones speaks of his relationship both to his father and his son, and how performing the role of Troy was vital for him to understand and resolve these relationships.

<sup>9</sup> One could speculate whether *Fences* would have been as successful as it was without Jones' "resistance" (or for that matter, whether *Raisin in the Sun* would have been as successful as it was without Poitier's "resistance" - see Poitier's curiously parallel story of his conflict with Richards over the evolution of Walter Lee in *This Life* [233-238]). But again, what is certain is that in rehearsal, the tensions between the actor, the director and the playwright definitely contribute the construction of character.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, Wilson himself says, in Bryer (52), that "none of [the men in *The Piano Lesson*] have ever really committed a crime that you would put someone in a penitentiary for."

<sup>11</sup> Jennings is referring to Ed Hall.

<sup>12</sup> Also performed by Douglas Turner Ward in later runs.

<sup>13</sup> Also performed by Samuel L. Jackson.

<sup>14</sup> Also performed by Charles S. Dutton at Yale.

<sup>15</sup> Richards used a version by Constance Garnett which does not seem to have been published.

<sup>16</sup> The O'Neill, in fact, was central in contributing to giving full voice to gay playwrights from the sixties onward, and Richards himself directed at least one play called *Just Before Morning* by Tom Oliver Crehore, about an old man talking to his young self about his emerging homosexuality.

<sup>17</sup> Among others, Philip Hayes Dean (Dean, Interview) and Roger Robinson. (Robinson)

<sup>18</sup> Character is plot, says Owen Dodson of black theatre aesthetics. (Dodson, 22)

<sup>19</sup> The expression first appears in Shannon's 1993 interview with Wilson, "Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An Interview with August Wilson." (552)

<sup>20</sup> Jones' citation of this is a case in point – it is subtly ironic, and is told in the context of the conflict with producer Shorestein – during which Jones sided with the producers.

<sup>21</sup> Lou Ferguson has this anecdote about Roger Robinson in the character of Hedley in *Seven Guitars*: "One day in rehearsal, when I came in as an understudy, Roger had a thing he used to do when talking about his grandmother. And he used to say: his grandmother used to rub her chest. He was rubbing up by her breasts. I remember the show went on at night and when he did that everybody was laughing in the audience. The next day Lloyd told him, 'Roger that's a very nice little piece you have there. Very nice. But I don't think your grandmother would appreciate it.' And it's because the language and the respect was – sometimes we forget that and Lloyd is so sharp and clever: he's a prude one. But I think it made the language work, because August writes in such poetic sentences. There's beauty in there and that's what Lloyd wanted. He wanted the beauty of the line not the rubbing of the chest, not him demonstrating with his hands with that rubbing. He trusted that line." (Ferguson, interview)

<sup>22</sup> Certainly, despite this work, the mainstream audiences remained suspicious. See Sandra Shannon's excellent analysis of the critical reviews of August Wilson's plays on Broadway in Elam, 2001 (pgs. 149-167) as well as Sauer and Sauer's overview in Bigsby, 2007 (pgs. 193-201).

## **Chapter 5. Lloyd Richards and Event**

<sup>1</sup> Here is a third of many similar passages describing the same speech, by Alessandro Nivola – the "you" here is Lloyd Richards: "...you are standing under the giant roof of a blacked out barn, lit by a round white spotlight. You speak in a lulling voice and say things you've said many times before, making the speech sound like a sort of ritual incantation. You have a relaxed posture but it's a trick because we can feel that

what you're saying is very important. And when the light goes down, a play begins." June 22, 2004 (LRP B139 F1647a)

<sup>2</sup> This from a short, unrecorded, personal interview, October 1, 2011, New York.

<sup>3</sup> "Hermione: Sir, spare your threats./The bug which you would fright me with, I seek./To me can life be no commodity;/The crown and comfort of my life, your favor,/I do give lost, for I do feel it gone,/But know not how it went. My second joy/And first-fruits of my body, from his presence/I am barr'd, like one infectious. My third comfort/(Starr'd most unluckily) is from my breast/(The innocent milk in its most innocent mouth)/Hal'd out to murder: myself on every post/Proclaim'd a strumpet; with immodest hatred/The child-bed privilege denied, which 'longs/To women of all fashion; lastly, hurried/Here to this place, i' the open air, before/I have got strength of limit. Now, my liege,/Tell me what blessings I have here alive,/That I should fear to die? Therefore proceed./But yet hear this: mistake me not; no life,/I prize it not a straw, but for mine honour,/Which I would free, if I shall be condemn'd/Upon surmises (all proofs sleeping else/But what your jealousies awake), I tell you/'Tis rigour and not law. Your honours all,/I do refer me to the oracle:/Apollo be my judge!" (Shakespeare, 1582-3, 89-116)

<sup>4</sup> "Leontes: Your actions are my dreams./You had a bastard by Polixenes,/And I but dream'd it. As you were past all shame/(Those of your fact are so), so past all truth;/Which to deny concerns more than avails; for as/Thy brat hath been cast out, like to itself,/No father owning it (which is indeed)/More criminal in thee than it), so thou/Shalt feel our justice, in whose easiest passage/Look for no less than death." (Shakespeare, 1582, 83-91)

<sup>5</sup> Typical of this tendency is Sandra Shannon's (marvelous) description of Richards' dramaturgical style in "Subtle Imposition: The Lloyd Richards-August Wilson Formula," in Elkins, 1994, 183-198.

<sup>6</sup> In the masterfully edited footage by Schultz, these texts run parallel to the moments when the actress begins to acquire eloquence and conviction in her delivery. It is always possible that this affected my

appreciation of the class. At the same time, Schultz knew Richards as a director, was influenced by him, and knew the effect he had, and his film tries to get that precise sense. It is a treasure of a document that urgently needs to be released to the widest possible audience.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Lisa Gay Hamilton, June 24, 2004: "There was one moment that stands out for me during *The Piano Lesson* run. It was a note session at the Kennedy Center after a performance . Your note to me that evening was a scolding. I don't think I ever saw you that mad before and have not since in my encounters with you. You looked me in the eyes and said, 'Don't you EVER do what you just did on that stage this evening. You do THIS play, the play we rehearsed. We don't play for laughs in this production nor should you ever, in theater!' My heart raced and I left that session crying, knowing all too well what you were referring to. I have never forgotten those words and I have remained true to them as well." (LRP B139 F1647a)

<sup>8</sup> Ruben Santiago Hudson: "No, very different. He conducted both of those very differently." (Santiago Hudson, Interview)

<sup>9</sup> In contrast, method actors who misunderstand Stanislavsky will work alone in a corner and try to arrive at an emotional disconnected from the other actors in the rehearsal hall.

<sup>10</sup> See the last chapter on character work.

<sup>11</sup> See also "Fences," 1987 and "Fences," 2010.

<sup>12</sup> In a letter concerning the Detroit opening of *Raisin in the Sun* at Great Lakes Festival, the stage manager Kenneth Schwartz says that Douglas Turner is making the audience laugh too much and does a disservice to the play. (Dated Oct. 19) (LRP B24 F424)

<sup>13</sup> James Earl Jones' observation of this production, though he speaks admiringly, is also connected to rhythm and to Washington's charisma: he says that they rushed through the scenes, because of the reaction

of the women in the audience “who had a tradition of throwing panties on the stage.” So perhaps there was another problem here altogether. (J. E. Jones, Interview)

<sup>14</sup> This is an allusion to Ajay Heble’s *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice*. (New York : Routledge, 2000)

<sup>15</sup> There has been ample description of the long process and ensuing conflicts involved in the endings of *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. For a description of the *Fences* conflict, see Shannon’s “Subtle Imposition” in Elkins, 2000, 183-198. For a description of the difficulties getting to a proper finale for *The Piano Lesson*, see Wilson’s own description in his interview with Pettengill in Bryer, 2006, 169.

<sup>16</sup> To name a few: Sidney Poitier in *Raisin in the Sun*, Al Freeman, Jr. in *the Long Dream*, Bill Cobbs in *Freeman*, James Earl Jones in *Robeson*, Roc Dutton in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Mary Alice in *Fences*.

<sup>17</sup> Dean claims, for example, that Richards eviscerates the truly provocative part of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* by taking out any reference to Ma Rainey’s homosexuality. (Dean, interview)

<sup>18</sup> Lou Myers speaks at length of Richards’ work with his fellow cast members and himself on the ghost scenes – and according to others interviewed, this was due to Myers’ tendency to play the comic side of the final scene. (Myers, interview)

<sup>19</sup> The inclusion of traditional black music in African American productions does not necessarily imply – even when the characters are singing the blues – what is meant by the blues aesthetic. In Richards’ case, however, the work on the music followed the same thematic action which informed the main dramatic work, and Richards’ emphasis on re-discovering the original impulses for these songs was very much in the tradition of the blues aesthetic.

<sup>20</sup> In this essay, Grotowski elaborates on his belief that when the actor makes an effort to reconnect to their physical, organic reality – rediscovering their voice, rediscovering their physical impulses through

association, there will suddenly appear an ancestor, some way of being that has long been forgotten.  
(Grotowski, 1989)

<sup>21</sup> In other lesser known plays directed by Richards this is also true: in the O'Neill's inaugural production of *Bedford Forrest*, about the Confederate civil war general who helped found the KKK, Bedford's freed slave Dangerfield doesn't get revenge on the general, but stands at his funeral without exactly forgiving him. (Oliansky, LRP B2 F13)

#### Chapter 6. Lloyd Richards and Action

<sup>1</sup> The plays Mason stage managed and/or performed in were: *The Long Dream*, *The Moon Besieged*, *The Yearling*, *The Amen Corner*, and *Bedford Forrest*.

<sup>2</sup> This was the case, for example, of John Beasley, who went in to replace Chuck Patterson in the role of West in *Two Trains Running* in Chicago. The same was true for S. Epatha Merkerson, when she came in to do Beneatha in *The Piano Lesson*. Both claim they met Richards at the first rehearsal.

<sup>3</sup> Extraordinary as well that Richards seemed to have more technical rehearsal time than most – this from Ella Joyce: “Tech week would be a real tech week. It might go on maybe two weeks. Most people are lucky to know what kind of play you are in. You are lucky to get 48 hours of a tech. Some shows do tech right in front of the audience. We had a lot of tech rehearsal which I began to understand was part of their secret. Why when those plays opened up on Broadway they were singing and they were tapping. A lot of producers didn't understand back then how important it was to spend the money to have a good long tech. because you got to make sure that your actors are comfortable in what they are doing.” (Joyce, interview)

<sup>4</sup> “Lloyd abhorred volatility. He didn't like surprises. He didn't like people going off. Having a tantrum. And that was not the environment we created.” (Andrews, interview)

<sup>5</sup> If we can believe Raynor Scheine, who played Rutherford in *Joe Turner*, and Lou Criscuolo, who played Irvin in *Ma Rainey*. (Scheine, interview; Criscuolo, interview)

<sup>6</sup> Still, it's important to note that the show did not go well, precisely because this actor could not remember his lines. "Hogan, a manipulative and unpleasant Irish-born farmer transplanted to Connecticut, committed no crimes so grievous as to deserve the interpretation he got from actor Roy Cooper, who blew lines like bubbles and so totally lost track of what he was doing onstage one night that the performance had to be stopped entirely." Review by Margaret Spillane, "*A Moon for the Misbegotten*," *The Nation*, Vol. 253, No. 1 (July 1, 1991)

<sup>7</sup> Of course, Richards did eventually get somewhat nervous with her during the run: "And so if I can think of one moment where he gave me a note, he was like you know, 'I don't know you and I don't know right now if you can concentrate.'" (Merkerson)

<sup>8</sup> This citation occurred after the recorded session with Jennings had finished.

<sup>9</sup> There is evidence that Richards' run-ins with the producers on Broadway were connected with this desire to allow the actors to develop organically. During the tour of *The Moon Besieged* to one of the regional theatres (it is not clear where), after Lorin E. Price overstepped his role and spoke to the actors, Richards wrote a letter of resignation, which shows his interest in the actor's creative nature in 1964: "Dear Lorin: My very best wishes. It is my hope that you successfully complete the capitalization of *the Moon Besieged* this afternoon and continue to a New York opening. However, for myself, regardless of which way this afternoon should go, it is at once apparent that the series of setbacks culminating in your meeting yesterday with the cast has so affected their spirit *and the organic development of their work* that it would be impossible for me to achieve a production personally satisfactory to me and *rightfully due to them* by December 1<sup>st</sup>./I must therefore state that with the completion of today's rehearsal period, I will have completed my services to this production of *The Moon Besieged*. Sincerely, (Richards, 1962. Italics mine.)

<sup>10</sup> Richards was never openly critical – but he was never openly complimentary either. This steadfast suspicion of excessive praise or encouragement was another constant of Richards’ respectful treatment of actors. Most often, if he was silent, it meant that the actor was doing well. Whenever Richards signified, by indirection, that the actor was indeed doing well, the effect was very powerful for the actor. When asked if Richards gave him any notes about his acting, Santiago-Hudson gave this testimony: “Lloyd never was a man who would come up and give you a straight compliment, things like, I love the way that sounds. [...] The biggest compliment Lloyd gave me that I remember...I was going into the theatre in L.A. [...] and he was standing outside smoking a cigarette. I said, “Lloyd, I didn’t know you smoked.” He said, “Every now and then I’ll have a little.” And as I grabbed the door, he said to me, “You know, I went to the theatre last night...” And I turned around and looked at him and he said, “...and I saw a young man on stage. Very impressive.” He didn’t say, “You were great last night; you were impressive.” He said, “I saw a young man on stage.” Now, of all the guys out there, I’m the youngest, so he was talking about me. (Santiago-Hudson) He goes on to say: “I ran into the theatre and ran up the stairs and ran into my dressing room and I was like, ‘Yes! Yes!’”

<sup>11</sup> See interview with Helene Goldfarb.

<sup>12</sup> The expression is the one used to describe Ming Cho Lee’s “thematic action” as stage designer (Bradley, interview) – and of course, Richards and Lee had been colleagues since 1962.

<sup>13</sup> Mostly performed by Delroy Lindo, but described in my interview with Daniel Martin.

<sup>14</sup> By Richard Wesley, performed as part of a double bill with *The Past is Past* in 1973.

<sup>15</sup> To rephrase Richards’ comment above about wanting the playwright to write “not my play, but his play.”

<sup>16</sup> A good example of this from Richards’ work as a dramaturge is given by Richard Wesley: “And I came to talk to him about it, and he never said a word, he just said ‘Richard, tell me about the problem.’”

And as I described my problem to him I suddenly realized I was answering my own questions. I remember one time I just sort of stopped, and he waited for me to continue, but I didn't continue. And I had the look on my face, but I guess that he knew that I knew, I just answered my own question. He would just sit there smiling – ‘You see? You can do that!’ [laughs].” (Wesley, interview)

<sup>17</sup> Still: Richards ultimately claims responsibility for these ideas: “My desire is to lead the actor to discover what I want him to discover so that he thinks it is his own. He has to perform it, so it should come out of him rather than out of something I impose.” (Hartigan, Patti. “The Richards Mystique.” *American Theatre* July/August 1991 (13)

#### **Chapter 7: Conclusion: Lloyd Richards’ Larger Thematic Action**

<sup>1</sup> On a form he had to fill out for the position of Visiting Professor at Wesleyan University, dated August 20, 1999: “Race/Ethnic Self-Identification: [in LR’s hand-writing:] HUMAN – MANY ETHNIC CONTRIBUTIONS – SIMPLIFIED – BLACK” (LRP B65 F772).

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