

# African Diaspora

The African Diaspora program was developed in 1973-74 to make a comprehensive statement about the dispersal of Black culture. The area pays tribute to the varied cultural contributions of Black American communities and documents how Black peoples and cultures flourish throughout the world.

Exploring those aspects of culture which link Black Americans to Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, we center on three activities common to all: *homelife*, *worship*, and *trade*. Each of these is represented on the Mall by an appropriate physical structure: a house, an altar setting and a marketplace. In each structure, the various artistic forms—music, crafts & material culture, dance, and the spoken word—depict Black culture as a dynamic, living force. The evolution of the culture is shown as Black artists of all ages carry out their skills be they traditional, evolved, or revival.



## "In The Rapture"

by Dr. William H. Wiggins, Jr.

"In the Rapture" is an Afro-American religious drama conceived in a dream some eight years ago by Mrs. Margarine Hatcher of Indianapolis, Indiana, which retains and adapts several elements of West African culture. Structurally, the pageant consists of ten or twelve gospel songs and spirituals strung together on a verbal thread of improvised narration. The play's drama springs from the character acting out the lyrics of the selected songs. The cast includes: a devil, an imp, a sinner, Jesus, four angels, a mountain climber, a temptress, a narrator, several soloists, a ninety-voice choir and a piano, electric piano, organ, electric guitar and drums musical ensemble.

Mr. William C. Hatcher, the husband of Mrs. Hatcher and producer of the play, has developed highly original props and scenery for the play: a heavenly scene backdrop, angels' wings, flood lights, a breakable red plywood heart, which is broken by the devil and mended by Jesus during the singing of "Heartaches," a three-tier mountain, which the devil and the mountain climber fight around as the latter character successfully struggles to reach the top while the choir sings "Lord, Don't Move That Mountain," and the mythical ship of Zion, which transports selected members of the audience to heaven while "Stood on the Banks of Jordan" is being sung. Each choir member wears a homemade white

**Dr. William H. Wiggins, Jr.,** a folklorist, is an assistant professor of Afro-American Studies and fellow of the Folklore Institute at Indiana University. He is currently researching and editing a documentary film of "In the Rapture" under grants issued by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Indiana Committee for the Humanities.

*The Rising Star Fife and Drum group, popular Festival participants for several years, will open the market area of African Diaspora at 11 a.m. the first two weeks of the Festival.*

robe whose symbolic significance is underscored at the play's opening by the choir's fervent singing of the spiritual "Trying to Get Ready" in an AAAB oral formula found in folk songs throughout the African Diaspora:

I'm tryin' to get ready  
Tryin' to get ready  
Tryin' to get ready  
Lord, ready to try on my long white robe.

The music of "In the Rapture" shares several other traits with the traditional music composed and sung by Blacks in America, the West Indies, South America and West Africa. Instrumentally, the ensemble's drummer plays a role similar to the West Indian and West African Shango drummers and the buzzing tone of his beaded cymbal is also heard in the West Indian gourd rattles and West African gonjes. Vocally, the call-response interactions between the soloists and the choir can be heard in the work songs of Black people throughout the world and all African Diaspora peoples make effective creative use of simple repetition like this section of the song "Climbing Up the Mountain":

You ought to pray sometimes.  
Yes! Yes! Yesyesyes!

The technique of dramatizing the sung word has parallels in other sections of the African Diaspora. Other Afro-American religious dramas which utilize this dramatic method include "The Old Ship of Zion," "The Devil's Play," "Heaven Bound" and "The Slabtown Convention." Trinidad Blacks have developed a similar type of drama in their carnival and emancipation day parades, using elaborate costuming and impromptu drama that evolves out of the creative interaction between the parade music, the audience and such folk characters as the devil, Ja Malaise.

It is not unusual for this miming to evolve into dance, a cultural expression found throughout the African Diaspora. The "In the Rapture" soloist who sings "He'll Understand and Say Well Done" effectively communicates the comforting message of





Devil, Joe Folson, gives sinner, Andy Crim, his staff and convinces him not to enter heaven.

Two members of the congregation step from the "Old Ship of Zion" and are led into heaven by Jesus, Mrs. Hatcher's son, William C. Hatcher. This boat was made by Mr. William C. Hatcher, Mrs. Hatcher's husband. All of this action takes place during the singing of "Stood on the Banks of Jordan."

Jesus, William C. Hatcher, extends his hand to help the struggling mountain climber, Miss Dovie Cunningham, whose hand is held by the devil's, Joe Folson. The soloist for this scene's music, "Lord, Don't Move That Mountain," William "Butch" Haliburton looks on.

A spiritually broken sinner, Andy Crim, walks slowly down the aisle as the choir sings "Heartaches" behind the duet of Mrs. Betty M. Beck and Mr. Charles Anderson.

"In the Rapture" stills are from the documentary film of the same name produced under grants issued by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Indiana Committee for the Humanities. The completed work will be available in the autumn and may be obtained through Dr. Wiggins at Indiana University.

her song by triumphantly dancing up and down the aisle singing her testimony to the congregation. This bouncing movement has given to New World culture the American jitterbug, Charleston, twist, bump and hustle, as well as the West Indian beguine, calypso and pique. In West Africa it has kept alive the centuries-old traditions of bongo, Shango and the many other dances associated with death, the breaking of the bush school, and marriage.

African Diaspora cultural attitudes are reflected in the actions of "In the Rapture's" devil and Jesus. The former is an extension

of the trickster hero extolled in West African and African Diaspora oral literature. The devil is dressed in top hat, sunglasses, black cape with red satin lining, maroon bow tie and cummerbund, white pleated shirt, black shoes and formal pants. He carries a wooden pitch fork and each of his fingers wears a sparkling ring. During the play the devil tricks the sinner with a diamond ring that proves to be less than "pure glass," an expensive car that will not run, a large bundle of money that is counterfeit, and a beautiful woman who turns out to be a tyrant who makes the duped sinner do both the domestic and the breadwinning chores. Comparable tricks are revealed in the Brer' Rabbit and John/Efan folktales of Black America, as well as the spider trickster Anansi folktales told in the West Indies, South America and West Africa. The play's devil also closely parallels the actions of Legba, the trickster deity of Yoruba religion.

Jesus' cool demeanor is a continuation of the West African and West Indian mask tradition. Patterned after the Western image of Jesus, the play's barefoot Christ wears a crown of thorns atop his long hair, his face is bearded, his body covered with a floor-length white robe, which is partially covered by a purple stole that covers his chest and back. However, his actions are those of the long-suffering Black American Christ who "never says a mumbling word" nor allows any emotion to register on his face. This masking of emotions is evident in the cool urban black American life-style, the Jamaican John Canoe masked Christmas dancers, as well as the elaborate Nigerian Geleda masks and Liberian devil mask traditions.

The play is firmly based on an improvised oral tradition, a cultural characteristic found throughout the African Diaspora. Utilizing the black preaching techniques of such folk preaching heroes as the Reverend "Sinkilling Jones," the narrator spins an impromptu thread of narrative between songs that makes her listener cry, laugh, reflect

and dream. Similar oral dexterity is evident in the story-telling styles of the West Indian and South American Anansi storyteller, as well as in the cante-fable creations of the West African griot and praise singers, which creatively mix the spoken and sung word in a powerful oral form.

There is also a communal aspect of "In the Rapture's" artistry which is a part of all African Diaspora oral art. Like most other African Diaspora verbal folk expressions the audience's interaction with the artist determines the length and quality of each play's performance. A "cold" and formally distant audience that gives little verbal encouragement to the cast will cause them to give a performance lacking in emotion and improvisation. But a "warm" audience that consistently encourages the singers, and actors with injections of approving laughter, shouts and "amens" will cause the players to come alive and creatively soar like a soloing jazz musician responding to his listeners' commands to "blow!" This same sort of fragile but necessary creative communal tension must exist between the players and listeners of West Indian reggae. And in West Africa the performances of the storyteller, praise singer, and griot are all based on a similar creative oral artist-audience interaction.

In all areas of the African Diaspora this improvised interaction between the folk artist and his audience often climaxes with both participants being possessed by this creative spirit. Some past performances of "In the Rapture" have ended with both the cast and congregation "caught up" in the spirit. Similar behavior can be seen in the possession of Jamaican Kumina or Haitian voodoo dancers who, during the course of their dance ritual, are "ridden" by their patron spirit and the Ghanaian fetish priest who is overcome by the spirit as he dances in search of a cure for an ill member of the tribe. Perhaps, the most misunderstood element of African Diaspora culture, these ejaculations merely demonstrate the high

regard in which emotion and intellect are held by Black people throughout the world. In the final analysis the audience and artist cannot emote until their mental, physical and emotional beings have been joined in a creative communal concord. It is only after this union that the Black preacher can "whoop" in traditional cadences and images, the Shango drummer find his drumming "groove" or the gonje player truly wed his words and music in powerful oral poetry. This African Diaspora wide respect for the creative merger of human intellect and emotion is aptly summed up in the Afro-American saying: "I burned before I learned."

Religion undergirds the traditional cultures of black people in America, the West Indies, South America and West Africa. The Afro-American religious drama "In the Rapture" further underscores the fact that people of African descent who live in these four areas of the world still share many West African cultural traits.

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