



ENTERTAINMENT



BROADWAY BOUND

REPORT — Rage, Racism — Rhythm/Blues



By Garland Thompson

At last, rage, racism, rhythm-and-blues are the themes of Martin Jones' new play, "West Memphis Mojo," directed by Rick Khan. A Crossroads Theater production presented by the Negro Ensemble Company in New York City. Douglas Turner Ward, Co-founder and president of the NEC, which is one of the world's most respected Black theatre companies (at Theater Four, 424 West 55th Street, New York). The play comes to New York via the Crossroads Theater Company in New Brunswick, N.J., the company that introduced George C. Wolfe's wild new play, "Colored Museum," that I saw two years ago at Joseph Papp's Public Theatre in New York (It is scheduled to play in Portland, this coming season at the IFCC, in January). Remember that you

heard it here first in the Broadway Bound Report.

My friend and actor, Richard Gant, plays the barber in "West Memphis Mojo," and his teen-age shoeshine boy (Tico Wells) write songs, which they hope to sell with the help of a friend, who is a guitarist and singer (Tucker Smallwood). According to the New Times review, "emotionally, the characters have something in common with others in dramatic literature—most notably those in Lonnie Elder 3d's "Ceremonies in Dark Old Men," portraying people whose aspirations have been thwarted by frustration in this society. Mr. Gant is amply expressive of the pent-up rage of an Army veteran who has never had a chance to assert his individuality in peacetime, in White America."

The most affecting performance, states the Times, is given by Mr. Wells as the teen-ager. Trusting almost to point of self-injury, he is indebted to the barber and as his act of friendship, he carries him along on a dream of collaboration. Both of the older men are wise to identify the young man's budding talent and to be amused by his enthusiasm, a fact that provides the play with much of its humor.

"Ceremonies," which first ran here in Portland, last season (1987) at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, also spoke of "the prejudice endemic to the society of the day, the 1950's, not yet the time for a large-scale crossover of rhythm-and-blues. With the emergence of Elvis

Presley, however, more Black songwriters began thinking about the possibilities of having a broad, popular White and Black appeal. This is the dream in "Memphis," scene of Jones' play, set in West Memphis, Ark., a first, I'm sure without a doubt!

This same rights issue is one of the themes of August Wilson's play, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," that was presented last season at the Winningstad Theatre of the Performing Arts Center of Portland by the Storefront Theatre.

In Mr. Jones' play, a winner of the Foundation of the Dramatists Guild/CBS New Plays Program, depressed West Memphis is just across the river from the prosperous musical city of Memphis, and it is a wide symbolic distance. It was at a time when if Blacks could sell their songs, they have to forego authorship and royalties. The Times calls, "West Memphis Mojo," an articulate period piece with a sense of character and a sense of history.

Now from "the I'll bet ya don't know," dept. — Anthony Armstrong and Rick Jones, two strong Portland actors, are continuing to perform their production of the hit South African play, "Woza Albert," in touring to several Oregon cities, such as Corvallis, Oregon. The Storefront Theatre of Portland, presented the production successfully at the Performing Arts Center of Portland, this 1988 season.

Nina Lowry, Director of Education Activities at Portland State

University, will soon announce PSU's Summer '88 Program, the first Black Theatre Festival, with the opening of Langston Hughes' musical, "Simply Heavenly," August 18, 1988, 7:30 p.m., at Lincoln Hall Theatre, on Broadway, in Portland for the first time.

Now that show has some real "blues" tunes that haven't been heard on the West Coast in thirty years (since 1958). I ought to know, I was in the February, 1958 Hollywood production of "Simply," in California, as a teen-ager, like the character in "West Memphis Blues," I was looking to "make it" in bigtime showbusiness in America. Yes, a view of Black life in the 50's: its hope, pain and dreams. Is this the future? Stay tune, musical theatre lovers, for love is "Simply Heavenly!"

And from "the long overdue thanks" dept. — I recall a number of years ago, "Gimme a Break," TV Star and singer, Nell Carter, while she was performing in the original 1976 Broadway production of "Ain't Misbehavin'," is partly responsible with the cast, for the RCA Record Company presenting Black Theatre's Alliance, with checks of \$5,000 each, totaling \$10,000, when the cast album was released. Now that's "putting ya money where ya mouth is, Black Theatre fans, so support Black Theatre on your local stage, like our good sister, Nell Carter, and "Give us a break!" A good idea is to list your favorite theatre, such as IFCC of Portland, in your Oregon State tax return for support.

"New Film"



ment on casting though he indicated that major stars will be considered for the principal roles.

The Amistad incident is considered the most important court case involving slavery with the exception of the landmark Dred Scott case. It began in Sierra Leone in 1839 when 53 men women and children were kidnapped into slavery by a Portuguese ship and transported to Havana for sale. They were bought by the owners of "La Amistad" which means "Friend ship" in Spanish, who shipped them to another port in Cuba.

En route, the mutiny occurred. The Africans, led by the legendary Cinque, took over the ship, killing all the crew except for two men who were spared in order that they might sail the ship back to Africa.

The Spaniards deceived their captors, sailing into the sun as ordered by day, but heading north and west at night. A prolonged journey ended off the coast of Long Island on August 26, 1839, where the Amistad was spotted and seized by a U.S. Navy brig and all aboard were taken to New London, Connecticut.

The Africans were arrested and charged with murder and mutiny and taken to New Haven for trial.

The case became a cause celebre for both sides of the slavery controversy then raging in the U.S. Extensive legal battles followed. Eventually, John Quincy Adams, former President and then Congressman, represented the Africans in court. In the background, relations between Spain and the U.S. grew sensitive as the state government, through behind-the-scenes and often illegal intrigue, tried to settle the affair to Spain's satisfaction.

On February 24, 1841, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Africans, who were freed and returned to their homeland.

The Amistad Incident, an 1839 mutiny on the high seas, staged by Africans kidnapped into slavery will be the focus of a major motion picture. The incident resulted in international intrigue, increased conflict between pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces in the United States, and a precedent-setting Supreme Court decision. The film project was announced at a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

Prize-winning filmmaker St. Clair Bourne, who will direct the feature film, said that production will begin in the spring, 1989. He was joined at the press conference by his collaborators in this unique feature film venture, including screen writer Lou Potter and Congressman Michael Espy of Mississippi, where the bulk of the production will take place.

Representatives from the National Endowment for the Humanities, whose initial grant helped launch the project, also attended. Professor Ronald Bailey, Director of Afro-American Studies at the University of Mississippi, initiated the project through extensive original research, planning, and organizing project staff and consultants. Maida Morgan, Director of the Mississippi Film Commission, confirmed that the Commission will provide significant assistance to the production.

Bourne said that the production, which will be budgeted around \$4,000,000, will film all its exterior scenes in Mississippi which can provide the architecture of the period and the coastline to represent the Caribbean where the mutiny took place. No decision has been made as to where the studio shooting will take place.

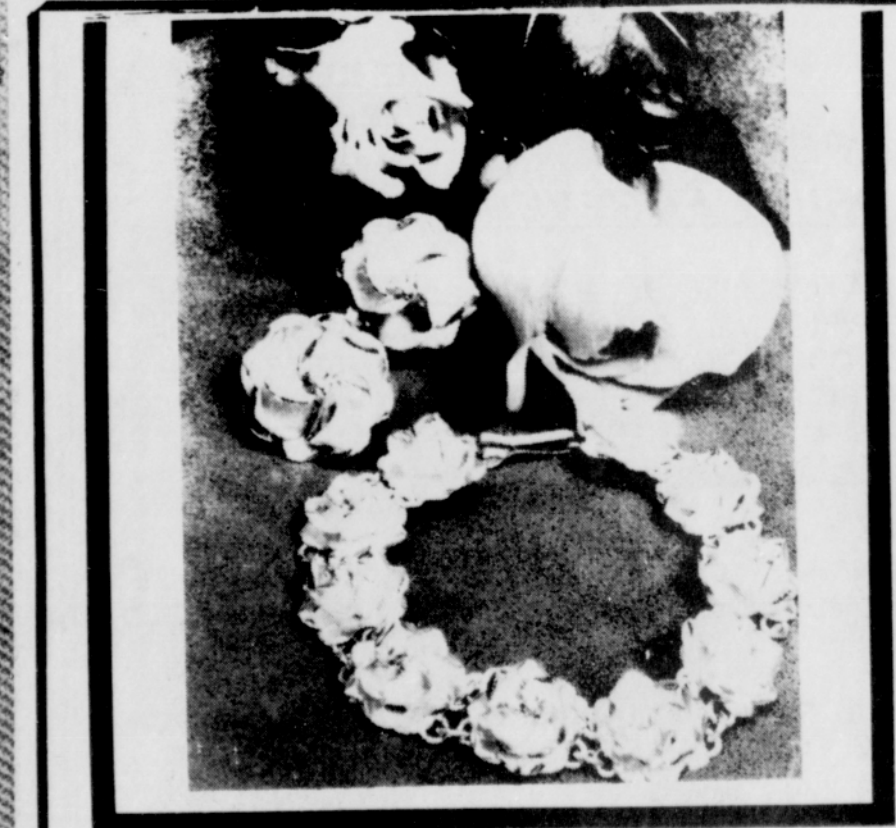
Bourne also refused to com-



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