

Reflections on the Legacy of Theater and Visual Art

In 1964 I had the pleasure of meeting Roger Furman, a playwright, set and scenic designer, and director. This meeting was held as part of a class on public speaking at the Harlem YWCA on West 125th Street in their intimate auditorium. The guest speaker, Roger Furman, spoke nostalgically of the 1940's and his days in the American Negro Theatre (ANT). He shared the history of Abram Hill and Frederick O'Neal, co-founders of ANT and the actors who were part of the company, including Harry Belafonte, Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, Isabel Sanford, Gertrude Jeannette, Clarice Taylor, Rosetta Lenore, and himself to name a few.

The ANT's goals were to develop a permanent acting company thoroughly trained in the arts and crafts of the theater focusing on their natural talents and gifts as African Americans. To present productions that mirrored Black society with integrity and relevance to its audience's current life. Roger Furman was brilliant in romanticizing that period. I was so moved by his presentation that evening I joined New Heritage Repertory Theatre, a new theater being launched by Furman, which was based on the ANT model. 1964-1965 was a time of social and civil unrest all across the country. Two of the movements that were also going on in Harlem during that time was a fervor in Black communities that "Black is Beautiful," and the Black Arts Movement.

There was an organization named the African Jazz Arts Society and Studios (AJASS). Within that group were the Grandassa models, featuring full bodied women with dark skin, kinky hair and full lips. They proclaimed their female models as beautiful and Black wearing clothes

by some of the most talented and creative Black designers using traditional African fabric and African inspired fashions. You could visit local libraries, museums, night clubs, cafes and stroll down 125th Street and see that there was a change coming and that change involved moving away from the Eurocentric image as a litmus test for what beauty is in communities of color.

During this time Roger created the New Heritage Repertory Theatre. The Black Arts Movement started percolating and voices like Leroi Jones, Larry Neal, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez and others inspired Black writers, visual artists and others to be more active in their communities, highlight their "Africaness," their history, their traditions and their culture. Theater groups, poetry performances, visual artists, musicians, and dancers were part of this movement and we were able to highlight multiple types of expressions through the media that was captured in our theaters, art galleries, newspapers, and clubs.

In the middle of this movement Roger opened our first home at 35 West 125th Street in a two story loft. One of the first things he did in designing our new theater space was to reach out to local visual artists to create a montage of Black faces that framed the entrance to the theater. This was the first time I noticed the collaboration between visual artists and theater in creating a cultural environment.

In that same building, across the hall, I would hear African drumming daily. Roger and I walked across the hall to meet our neighbor Master percussionist Babatunde Olatunji in his studio and it felt like we had walked

into an African village. Adorning the walls of his studio were huge murals and images created by a group of visual artists known as the Weusi Artists Collective, a group of African American visual artists who lived in Harlem and embraced African images, prominently using them in all of their creative endeavors. Since that time I have met a number of Weusi artists—Ademola Olugebefola, Oko Pyatt,

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James Sepyo and others. These artists became integral in the development of the Black theaters that began to sprout up. For example, in 1968 Emmett Wigglesworth designed the interior and exterior of the Bedford Stuyvesant Theater, Ademola designed collateral and promotional materials for several New Heritage productions and sets for the New Lafayette Theatre and the New Federal Theater. James Sepyo was a recipient of an Audelco Theater award for his set designs.

The collaborations between the visual artists and theaters still exist today. Both of these mediums—theater and the visual arts—symbolize the reflection of our community's values and our culture.

**—Voza Rivers
New Heritage Theatre Group**