

If It's Anger . . . Maybe That's Good: An Interview with LeRoi Jones

Judy Stone/1964

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"My God where are we? What is this place? What is the reason . . . and in this most prosperous of all utopias . . . for the existence of filth, ignorance, cowardice?"

—LeRoi Jones

It was not a comfortable prospect to face an interview with LeRoi Jones while still feeling the shock, the power, the hatred, the yearning and the terrible perception of his two plays, *Dutchman* and *The Slave*.

Everywhere at the Negro Writers' Conference in Asilomat, people were talking about Jones, about how he shook everybody up. So that finally, when we met, in a room strewn with the debris of the farewell party, it was the softness of his voice that that was startling, his composure and the very slightest tinge of anxiety under the curiosity when he asked, "You didn't think I was hateful, did you?"

We had been talking about *The Slave*, which will open on Broadway along with another of his plays, *The Toilet*, on October 7, his 30th birthday. *The Slave* will be published this week along with *Dutchman* (the seduction in the subway play that shocked white critics last season and won the annual Obie Award for the best American play done Off-Broadway). *The Slave* is set in a white professor's home under siege of a black revolutionary army. Walker Vessel, its leader and a poet, confronts his former wife, a white woman who is the mother of his two children, and her husband, the professor and Vessel's former friend. The encounter is black, terrifying, hopeless and poignant.

"People have said about me that I'm hateful and bitter," Jones said. "Sure I'm bitter about a lot of things. I'm trying to work with complications of feelings, love and hate at the same time. . . . What I'm after is clarity: if it sounds like anger maybe that's good in a sense."

But this business of being a Negro writer, "that's finally the worst of it, because you have to be faithful as an artist but you have to carry the

weight around of knowing that anything you say is going to be misunderstood simply because you are a Negro. They have to be racial dramas because they're about Negroes.

"Then people want to take your plays and make them strictly social. Melville was a social writer in the same way I strive to be. But no one would call *Pierre* a novel of racial protest, or *Omoo*. Jesus, nobody calls Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* a novel of racial protest, but the comment it makes on what they call race relations is pretty strong. It's a wild book. I've never seen anything so strong. Nobody would say that's social protest, but it's more so than *The Toilet*."

Jones seemed to be thinking back to Twain admiringly and said, "The best aphorism from Twain is from Puddn'head's calendar: 'It was great to discover America but it would have been better to have missed it . . . which is pretty good,'" he grinned, "'for Columbus.'"

Jones didn't discover he was meant to be a writer until his Army experience; the army shocked him into it. [Actually, Jones served in the United States Air Force.] As a kid in Newark, New Jersey, the son of a postal supervisor and a social worker, he had fooled around with writing comic strips and science fiction, won a scholarship, and went for a year to Rutgers University.

The effort of trying to prove himself in an essentially mediocre situation and the experience of always being an outsider in any school social activities made him transfer to Howard University. At first he was going to major in Religion because he thought what he was feeling was religious: "It was the only reference I had." But he switched to Chemistry, with medicine in mind, and then on to Philosophy and English.

"The Howard thing let me understand the Negro sickness: they teach you how to pretend to be white. But the Air Force made me understand the white sickness. It shocked me into realizing what was happening to me and to others. By oppressing Negroes the whites have become oppressors, twisted in the sense of doing bad things to people and finally justifying them, convincing themselves they are right—as people have always convinced themselves."

In 1958, then married and the father of two, he wrote his first play, "Revolt of the Moonflowers," but the manuscript was lost. "It was a bad play anyway," he said with a shrug. Mostly he wrote poetry, published *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, *Blues People*, *Negro Music in White America*, and *The Dead Lecturer*.

"I have to write poetry," he said. "I'd last about maybe a day if I didn't. I'd go crazy. Any artist has a lot of energy that won't respond to anything else. The reason I'm not a violent man—that's what I'm trying to say in *Dutchman*—is that art is the most beautiful resolution of energies that in another context might be violent to myself or anyone else. Artists are out of their minds. They're crazy. When I was in high school. I used to drink a lot of wine, throw bottles around, walk down the street dressed in women's clothes just because I couldn't find anything to do to satisfy myself. Neither sex, nor whiskey, nor drugs would do it. People need something to do. If you really have something to do and really want to do it, you use up all that energy and violence in making sure you do it right."

In 1960 he started working on a book of fiction—*The System of Dante's Hell*, which Grove Press will publish later this year—as well as two other plays, *The Baptism* and *Experimental Death Unit No. 1*.

In six inspired hours one night he wrote *The Toilet*, "the story of some northern Negro and white boys, about how they love and hate and desire and suffer in the limited world they know—the only place where they can be themselves."

"I like it best," Jones said, "it came so much out of my memory, so exact. Just like I was a radio or something and *zoom!* I didn't have to do any re-writing. That's a wild experience. You know you've really been touched. But it becomes increasingly difficult to do that; it become more complicated, more difficult. *The Slave* is much more complicated and finally I wasn't ready for it yet. It's O.K. I respect it. But the complexity has to be worked on."

In his plays, there is the sense of the frightening abyss between black and white, the violence, a complete involvement in saying something meaningful today.

"In New York," said Jones, "I have a lot of friends—Larry Rivers, William de Kooning—people who say you shouldn't get involved in politics. People say 'Just stick to your poetry.' There is a constant argument: 'Why are you getting involved?'"

"You have to be involved, whether you say you are or not. I'm black. I have to be involved. When I walk down the street, a man doesn't say, 'There goes a cultured nigger.' He says, 'There's just another nigger.'"

"All the white friends I have, people I genuinely love, probably only one or two understand what I mean. I was having an argument with

Edward Albee one night and he kept calling me Chinese because I was praising Mao—I was praising him because I think he's a wise man—and Edward said, 'You talk like you don't trust me.' I said, 'There is only one white man in New York I really trust—that's Allen Ginsberg. I trust him and love him completely in that sense, and Allen and I argue all the time.' Edward thought I was putting down white people, but it wasn't that at all.

"The most valuable writing is by the outlaws like Ginsberg. The reason I always associate with the people thought of as 'beats' is that they are outside the mainstream of American vulgarity. The thinking of the *New York Times* is, finally, what the so-called cultivated American thinks of as being valuable expression. I edited a book of prose called *The Moderns* and [found that] one of the great values of these writers is that they talk about the Americans who have a vested interests in maintaining some finally invalid image of what America really is.

"It's the whole thing. The whole Civil Rights thing again. The majority in America are satisfied with what they think America is. But there is a part that isn't, the Negro. That's why things are so difficult for the Negro writers: because the others, the whites, don't want to credit their versions of the world. If they credited it, they would shoot themselves.

"America is not a white middle-class country in toto and that's why we are getting ready to be blown up It's the same thing as asking a comfortable white middle-class man to describe what America is and asking some poor ghetto Negro [the same question]. Finally, we are talking about two different Americas. If they admitted that, finally, they would admit they are evil people.

"They would be frightened if they thought about the parallel between Nazi Germany and America—about what's coming. All these white people saying, 'I didn't know you were suffering.' The majority of whites think Negroes enjoy being poor and suffering. The middle-class German Jew with a vested interest in Germany was in the same position as the middle-class Negro today. A middle-class Negro, as Arna Bontemps says, 'It's all right, it's all right.' Well, maybe it will be and maybe it won't."