

ROOMER

The Newsletter of the Traditional
Drama Research Group.
Vol. 6 no. 6 1986



THE FUTURE OF ROOMER

Steve Roud

ROOMER is now at the end of its 6th volume, and it is 8 years old this year, so perhaps this is an opportune time to review its present state and to examine what its future is to be.

When ROOMER was launched, its editors felt that there was a real need for a regular channel of communication between individuals working in what seemed to be an exciting and progressive field. The Traditional Drama Research Group was formed soon afterwards for similar reasons. ROOMER's 36 issues to date have, I believe, carried a great deal of useful information which would otherwise have remained inaccessible or at least difficult to get hold of.

The main problem which has bedevilled the newsletter from the start has been the difficulty in sticking to the planned publication schedule. There have been various reasons for this, but in recent years it has been a distinct dearth of contributions from subscribers. So the question has to be asked whether or not ROOMER is fulfilling its original function, and if not what can be done to improve matters. Alternatively, if that function is no longer relevant, what should it be doing, if anything?

Practical improvements can be made relatively easily. From the start of Volume 7, we will be dropping the nominal 'six times a year' schedule and adopting a different approach. Subscriptions will now be for 4 issues, and we will aim for roughly quarterly publication (given sufficient material for inclusion). Each issue will have more pages than before, so that at least the same amount of information can be carried per volume. Twelve to sixteen pages per issue would give us more scope for varying the content of the newsletter, and less frequent publication will save on postage and other overheads.

But tinkering with the schedule will do no more than alleviate some of our administrative problems. If ROOMER is to continue, we, as editors, need to know what subscribers want from the newsletter, and we would welcome comments on what readers like or dislike about it and how they would like to see it develop in the future. And, above all, we need material for inclusion. Without feedback and contributions, ROOMER will most probably simply fade away.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY ON AFRO-AMERICAN FOLK DRAMA

Deborah Bowman Richards

[Reprinted with permission from *Ohio Folklife* NS 6 (1979/81) pp. 37-55]

Toledo's historic Old West End is a culturally and economically mixed community sandwiched between the downtown area and the University of Toledo. In 1976 Bea Womack, my next-door neighbor there, invited Thomas Barden and me to attend services at the New Light Missionary Baptist Church, a black congregation of which she was an active member (1). We were initially interested in chanted sermon and expressive worship styles in the context of the urban religious community, but soon after we became involved there our attention shifted to include traditional drama.

When Bea arrived home one day with pieces of odd-looking clothing draped across the back seat of her car, she responded to my interest: "Oh, one of the churches around here is going to put on an 'Old Ship of Zion' play" (2). We then learned that the New Light, along with most of the black churches in the area, performed the play once a year. Subsequently Reverend M.L. Gabriel, Pastor of the New Light Church, granted us permission to document their next performance of 'The Old Ship of Zion'. He informed us that on any fifth Sunday of a month, the evening service is left open. These unscheduled nights provide an opportunity for special programs, such as visiting choirs, guest speakers, or performance of 'The Old Ship of Zion', sponsored by the Women's Missionary Auxiliary.

As we began our investigation, we were told that other performances of 'The Old Ship of Zion' had been presented all over the South - in Florida, Georgia, Alabama - as well as in midwestern cities such as Chicago and Fort Wayne (3). We assumed that 'The Old Ship of Zion' had been studied, yet we found no literature on the play. However, there were accounts of dramas obviously related to 'The Old Ship of Zion' in both form and theme which have been performed all over the United States since at least the 1930s, comprising a corpus of traditional Afro-American folk dramas. Consequently I undertook a bibliographic search which I have synthesized here to present an integrated body of research on this neglected topic to encourage additional research on 'The Old Ship of Zion' and its sister plays.

The literature on black theater in America centers on three periods: Southern plantation-based, black-face minstrel tradition in the 18th century; the emergence of black participation in conventional Western theater after the end of the Civil War; and the establishment of professional black theater in New York at the turn of the century.

In the early 1900s, black artists in Harlem began discussing the concepts surrounding 'serious' (in the sense of racially authentic) black drama (4). The late W.E.B. DuBois and others felt that "Negro Art Theatre should be (1) a theatre about us, (2) a theatre by us, (3) a theatre for us, and (4) a theatre near us" (5). Thus, in 1924, DuBois founded the KRIGWA (CRISIS GUILD OF WRITERS AND ARTISTS) Players in the Harlem Experimental Theater at St. Philips Episcopal Church, expressly to preserve the black folk play (6).

Use of the term 'folk drama' by folklorists approximates what Felix

Sper refers to as "regional drama, or drama that depicts the life, customs, and speech of a certain region or culture" (7). (Alain Locke, in his delightful collection, The New Negro, includes just such a play, 'Compromise', which he refers to as a "folk play" (8)). However, folk dramas are defined by folklorists neither as regional nor as conventional, Western drama utilizing folklife materials to explore a group's cultural life. Instead, such dramatic forms are viewed as episodic performances which: (a) employ a variety of techniques to focus attention; (b) exist as public action of a small, community level group, sharing a system of understood motives and symbols; (c) have a fore-known resolution; and (d) are related to game, play, and ritual (9). While the dramatic elements of Afro-American conversational and play behavior are extensively documented (10), there has been little theoretical examination of Afro-American folk drama.

What, then, are examples of black folk drama? Popularized minstrel traditions? Interpretation and translation of black culture to the American public? A simple, fundamental game such as the dozens? For the present purpose, I chose two primary criteria in selecting plays for classification as folk dramas. The first criterion is that the plays conform to the above theoretical model for folk dramas and that they exhibit the same methods of performance and transmission as other forms of Afro-American folk expression (11). The second criterion is that the plays be recognized by the community in which the play is performed as a genre with its own set of aesthetic features and expectations (12).

The body of plays to which 'The Old Ship of Zion' belongs conforms to the above criteria. They are largely religious dramas performed within the context of a church service. They are neither culturally interpretive nor conscious symbols of Afro-American identity, though certainly the plays speak to both these issues. Finally, they are not the property of professional artists. They are communally created performances which belong to and are perpetuated within the community itself.

One might ask, "Why in the church?" Researchers often have demonstrated that the church functions as the primary center for black community activity in America. Until recently, the church was virtually the only Afro-American community institution owned, controlled, and directed by blacks to serve blacks (13). William H. Wiggins, Jr. feels that religion forms the understructure of traditional black culture not only in America but also in West Africa, South America, and the West Indies (14). I would like to suggest that Christianity, expressed mainly within the confines of the Protestant Church, has served as the vehicle for expression of a traditional Afro-American world-view based on religious awareness (15).

As community institutions, churches also offer community entertainment. Joseph Washington states that it is characteristic of black churches to host "musicales, dramas, pageants, movies, concerts, suppers, and gospel singers" (16). From both the literature I reviewed and the informants I interviewed, it is apparent that these plays, performed in connection with the black church, differ in form from conventional drama and are community-oriented, transmitted and understood.

The criteria I chose resulted in a tightly focused definition for these traditional religious dramas. Such a focus is not designed to discount the existence of other kinds of traditional plays, but is used to reveal the existence of a particular cycle of plays of which there is

little published scholarship. For my literature search revealed that only a modest amount of information was available concerning these dramas.

This literature is separated here into four sections. The first concerns published work on plays which I know have been performed over an extended period of time. The second is comprised of unpublished work on this particular cycle of black religious dramas. The third concerns plays that are possibly idiosyncratic, in that they may not have been performed more than once, but still appear to belong to this cycle because of form and subject. And the fourth deals with accounts of plays which exist but have not been recorded in any published literature.

Published Works on Afro-American Folk Dramas

By far the largest body of information concerns 'Heaven Bound', 'In the Rapture', and 'The Old Ship of Zion', three plays which have been performed again and again since at least the 1930s. These dramas, like many of the plays mentioned above, employ spirituals interspersed with common symbols and themes. 'Heaven Bound' focussing on passing through the gates of Heaven; 'In the Rapture' on climbing up the mountain to Jesus; and 'The Old Ship of Zion' on getting aboard God's ship. These plays exhibit such similar characteristics that they no doubt are variants of one another; in fact, as we will see, 'Heaven Bound' and 'The Old Ship of Zion' have both been used as the title for a play which follows the 'Heaven Bound' story.

'Heaven Bound' has enjoyed the longest period of attention of the three plays. The first account was written by Zelda F. Popkin, 'Heaven Bound: An Authentic Negro Folk Drama Out of the Old Savannah', Theatre Guild Magazine 8 August 1931, pp.14-17. In a romantic and ethnocentric manner, she sketched the socioeconomic conditions of the black community in Savannah, Georgia, and compared the drama to medieval miracle plays as well as to the popular drama, 'Green Pastures'. She briefly described the set, costumes, spirituals, and characters of the play, calling it the "first great American folk drama". Popkin interpreted 'Heaven Bound' as the Negro's idea of Heaven, "the 'bye and bye' in which the colored man lays down his heavy load, dons golden crown and shiny white robes and sings with the saints and angels in glory".

Gertrude M. Shelby published an article four months later titled: 'Heaven Bound Soldiers': A Negro 'Green Pastures', Theatre Arts Monthly, October 1931, pp.855-861. She described a performance located in a Brunswick, Georgia, church. Shelby shared Popkin's miracle play analogy, along with the perception that 'Heaven Bound' is an authentic folk play "acted and directed by negroes for negroes". She remarked on the Devil's antics, the role of St. Peter, and the various other characters. She also made brief mention of the spirituals used in the play. Shelby felt that 'Heaven Bound' was remarkable for its improvisational quality and cited a "libretto" containing twenty-one episodes from which the play was constructed.

Life magazine ran two periodical accounts of 'Heaven Bound'. The 17 May 1943 issue, pp.26-27, contained an article titled 'Heaven Bound': Negro Baptist Church in Richmond Stages a Miracle Play'. This piece has, however, been unavailable for study. 'Diabolical Doings in Atlanta', Life 26 January 1953, pp.55-58, appeared next with the by-line, "a posturing Devil in Atlanta play tries to keep mortals from getting by the Gates of Heaven". This drama, the only 'famous' 'Heaven Bound' has been produced every year since 1930 at Big Bethel AME Church in Atlanta, Georgia. The

Life pictorial featured color photographs of the Devil and four other characters: the Pilgrim of the Cross, the Wayward Girl, the Gambler, and the Soldier in the Army of the Lord. There were twenty-four mortals in this performance along with a choir of angels.

Redding S. Sugg, Jr., treated us to a full text of the Atlanta 'Heaven Bound' in his article 'Heaven Bound', Southern Folklore Quarterly 27 (December 1963), pp.249-266. He reviewed the play's known history, attributing its adoption to the suggestion of Mrs. Lula Byrd Jones. (According to Popkin, Mrs. Jones received the play in a dream in Florida). Sugg cited only the 1953 Life article. He termed 'Heaven Bound' a religious pageant featuring "music and pantomime keyed to the lyrics of the hymns and spirituals". Sugg also stated that the play is connected to no dramatic tradition and exists as an "extra-liturgical" expression of Protestant morality. Although he did an excellent job of providing a written 'text' of one particular performance, Sugg offered little interpretation and no analysis.

William H. Wiggins, Jr., has broken the ground for future work with his scholarship on 'In the Rapture', a drama conceived in dream by Margarine Hatcher and constructed with help from her entire family (18). In 1976, with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Wiggins prepared a beautiful and moving film entitled 'In the Rapture' (Indiana University Audio Visual Dept., CS2662). This film presents the play and also includes an interview with members of the Hatcher Family.

Wiggins' first article, also titled 'In the Rapture', appeared in the pamphlet Festival of American Folklife, for the Smithsonian Institution's 1976 festival, to which Wiggins brought the play (Washington: Smithsonian Institution and the National Park Service, 1976), pp.16-17. His emphasis was on Afro-American cultural parallelisms. Musical, vocal, rhythmic, and kinesic similarities were stressed, along with dramatization of the "sung word". He commented that use of the Devil as a trickster figure follows Br'er Rabbit and Legba, the Yoruba trickster god. The characterization of an emotionless Jesus, who "never said a mumbling word", parallels the West African/West Indian Mask tradition. Wiggins also stated that the communal aspect of the drama, in which creative tension exists between the artist and the audience, is essentially West African. Perhaps most importantly, he pointed out that aesthetic success is achieved in all traditional black cultures when the audience's and the artist's "mental, physical, and emotional beings have been joined in a creative communal concord".

Wiggins' next article, 'In the Rapture: The Black Aesthetic and Folk Drama', Callaloo 2 (February 1978), pp.103-111, is a symbolic aesthetic analysis of the Rapture play. His thesis is that black folk art and fine art share a culturally based aesthetic pool of symbols, images, and narrative devices. He discussed the symbolism of the mountain, the angels' wings, 'Amazing Grace', the heavenly ship, water, Jesus, and Satan, in light of their treatment in black novels, comedy and music. Wiggins also points out the use of folk narrative devices such as first person, personal experience, and repetition in both 'In the Rapture' and black fine arts. He elaborated on the pamphlet article with statements concerning communal aesthetics, stating that art "evolves out of the creative call-response interaction established between artist and audience". Wiggins touched all too briefly on humor and the use of gesture. The play, finally, is largely incidental to the article, other than as a basis from which to compare artistic expression in folk art and fine art.

Wiggins' most recent article is 'Jesus Has Planted the Seed of Carvin' in Me: The Impact of Afro-American Folk Religion on the Limestone Sculpture of William Edmondson', in William Edmondson: A Retrospective, ed. Georganne Fletcher, (Nashville: Williams Printing Co., 1981) pp. 31-42. In this he compares patterns of creative response in the work of Afro-American folk artists. Addressing the importance of religion as Edmondson's source of creativity, Wiggins uses examples of sermons, songs, quilts and folk dramas to discuss common images and themes found throughout various genres of Afro-American folk art. He examines Edmondson's utilization of common symbols such as birds and snakes, such characters as Jesus, the Devil, angels, sinners, and preachers, and themes of social justice and the struggle between good and evil. 'In the Rapture', 'Heaven Bound', 'The Pageant of Birds', 'The Slabtown Convention', 'Women out of the Bible', and 'Ethiopia Before the Bar of Justice' are the plays Wiggins uses to explain images and symbols utilized in the dramas; yet the plays themselves go unexplored.

'The Old Ship of Zion' is conspicuously different from both 'Heaven Bound' and 'In the Rapture' for its dramatic simplicity. In most other respects it is strikingly similar. While the scholarship remains unpublished, the following work on 'The Old Ship of Zion' is an important contribution.

Unpublished Works on Afro-American Folk Dramas

Reverend William Walker of Chicago printed a written script of 'The Old Ship of Zion' (xeroxed copy of pamphlet in author's possession, no bibliographic information) which gives rather specific instructions for producing the play. Walker's script includes sections on "Helpful Hints", "Stage Arrangements", "Costumes", and a text which contains dialogue and song titles, with instructions for the performers' entrances. This play contains characters such as "The Christian Pretender", "The Captain of the Ship", "The Pilgrim Traveller", "The Tattlers", "The Devil", and a host of others, along with representation of the Ship and Hell. This text closely resembles a 'Heaven Bound' or an 'In the Rapture' performance. Its closest resemblance to a 'Ship of Zion' lies in its use of the Captain and the metaphor of the Ship. As in other 'Ship of Zion' performances, getting on board is stressed. The following is an excerpt of the 'Ship of Zion' theme as Walker has it, recited in verse by the Captain:

The Old Ship of Zion is a similarity of the Church, someone should get on board...There is no danger in this water, get on board, get on board. This ship has landed your dear old mother, no doubt your father too.

This play stands as an example of the kind of borrowing evident in all these plays. Each of these plays draws from a common pool of symbols and themes and shares a common form. All the possibilities of situations, images, and themes seem to be the composite form from which each play is created, although regularities for each kind of play - 'Heaven Bound', 'In the Rapture' and 'Old Ship of Zion' - do exist (19).

At the 1977 American Folklore Society Annual Meeting, Barden and I presented a slide-tape of the play as it was performed at the New Light on July 31, 1977 (20). This performance was photographed, audiotaped and videotaped for the purpose of providing a visual and aural text of the event. Accompanied by a written introduction, the slide-tape program was

an initial attempt to create an accurate transcription of the event (21). Primarily descriptive, it cited some interpretation offered by members of the New Light congregation as well as some of the available scholarship.

'Do You Have Your Ticket Tonight?: A Presentation of the Black Folk Drama The Old Ship of Zion', was prepared by the author in spring, 1978, as a transcript to accompany the slide-tape program. Length of utterance, voice pitch, and audience response were included, along with information on the play tradition, a description of the evening performance, and some background on the New Light community.

'Form and Performance in The Old Ship of Zion' was presented at the 1980 American Folklore Society Annual Meeting (22). This paper is an analysis of the dramatic and ritual features of the play as they function to produce a state of "emotional transcendence and unification of self and community". The play is described as an elastic, communal creation whose form is held in the mind of the community, whose performance emerges out of a pool of possibilities, and whose final form is created "much like the jazz session in which the chord structure and shape of the music are so well known to the musicians that improvisation and spontaneity become the basis for performance". The structure of the play is described as having fixed and fluid elements which work together to reach behavior and belief and which unify the individual with the community. The fixed elements of song, story, setting, props and costumes provide the dramatic ritual context in which the play's internal (and affective) action occurs. The fluid elements - format of song and narrative, body of symbols and themes from which the content is drawn, number and type of characters - all function to connect the event with personal experience. A sacred context is produced, providing the ritual base from which a religious experience is sought (23). Use of disguise, framing, and metaphor also are discussed. The emphasis on communal knowledge, spiritual expression and aesthetic creation in a sacred context is suggested as a defining feature of Afro-American folk drama.

Published Accounts of Afro-American Folk Dramas

There is an account in Texas Stomping Grounds, edited by Frank J. Dobie, Mody C. Boatright, and Harry H. Ransom (Austin: Texas Folklore Society, 1941), pp. 126-140, of an episodic Biblical play collected by John H. Faulk. After witnessing a religious play at a convention, Reverend J.C. Travers, Pastor of a Baptist church outside Austin, thought to himself that such a play was "just the thing" to capture both the conscience and the imagination of his congregation. In a week, he worked out 'The Life of Jesus Christ in Ten Acts'. Faulk gives a limited description of the four acts of the play that were performed before "it got late and Satan fell asleep". He attempts to recreate in the local dialect the circumstances as well as the characters of the play's events. 'The Life of Jesus Christ in Ten Acts' consists of scenes from the Bible, such as Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, the curing of a dead child, and the wedding in which water was turned into wine. All are interspersed with hymns and spirituals.

In 1933, while Eudora Welty was employed by the Works Progress Administration, she photographed a processional drama called 'A Pageant of Birds'. The play was written by Maude Thompson and performed at the Farish Street Baptist Church. Welty published the photographs along with a descriptive recollection in a small pamphlet for which I have no bibliographic information. However, in the 25 October 1943 issue of New Republic, 109, pp. 565-567, the essay appeared without the photographs.

They were reprinted in One Time, One Place, a collection of Welty's WPA photographs (New York: Random House, 1971), pp.88-91. Welty's article, 'A Pageant of Birds' gives a perceptive account of this play, in which members of the congregation strutted up the aisle, pantomiming the part of the bird of their choice. The church was filled with greenery, and "pinned all around the walls were drawings of birds - bluebirds, redbirds, quail, flamingos, wrens, love-birds - some copied from pictures, and the redbird a familiar cover taken from a school tablet".

Welty invited the reader to watch with her as the birds paraded to syncopated music and sang their song, "And I want TWO wings to veil my face...". Welty stressed the air of comedy and seriousness that pervaded the performance: "You ever see a bird smile?" asks Maude Thompson. That issue is taken up by Jeane R. Nostrandt in 'Eudora Welty and the Children's Hour', Mississippi Quarterly 29 (Winter 1975/76), pp.109-118. She also discusses flight as a symbolic gesture of freedom in a time of economic depression and social frustration.

Alfred Appel, in a short paragraph from A Season in Dreams: The Fiction of Eudora Welty (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), pp.164-166, refers to 'A Pageant of Birds' during a discussion of Welty's female characters. He states that she "seems to feel the Negro's endurance in the South has had much to do with the strength of Negro women".

Finally, William McDonald published 'Eudora Welty's Revisions in the Pageant of Birds', Notes from Mississippi Writers (Spring 1977) pp. 1-10, which I have not seen. This article may provide even more insight into the play.

Hortense Powdermaker reported several dramatic performances in her ethnography, After Freedom: A Cultural Study of the Deep South (New York: Russell & Russell, 1939), pp.283-284. She briefly described the Biblical plays she witnessed in Cottonville, Mississippi, which were always concerned with the struggle between Heaven and Hell. One such play contained twelve virgins, six of whom were wise and six foolish. Hell and Heaven were on opposite sides of the 'stage'. Devils chased and captured the foolish virgins, who had "no oil in their lamps". The other play gave brief scenes from the Bible, with Judas striding across the stage in a pink kimono wailing, "I didn't want to do no harm, I just wanted the money", and Joseph appearing dressed in a patchwork quilt. Other familiar Biblical characters were also portrayed in appropriate costume.

Powdermaker also mentioned 'The Brideless Wedding', a mock ceremony enacted by men, and the 'Jolly Follies of 1933', a varied series of short, unrehearsed acts where performers don costumes and recite poems, sing spirituals, etc. (These performances are simply mentioned in the text and are included here for the reader's information).

Unpublished Accounts of Afro-American Folk Dramas

In addition there are a number of accounts which have not been recorded. These are included here to strengthen evidence that a vital tradition does exist in communities in at least the midwestern, eastern, and southern portions of the United States.

In May, 1979, I attended an 'Old Ship of Zion' performance at St. John's Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee (24). The Memphis performance

held to the basic action and theme of the Toledo plays but differed in interesting ways. For instance, while in the Toledo play only the performer responsible for singing 'The Old Ship of Zion' song wore a choir robe, all Memphis performers wore robes. The Toledo performance featured a ship painted on a large piece of ply-wood, while the Memphis performance utilized a ship painted on a hand-held fan, which performers flourished on their way up the aisle of the church. At the end of the Memphis play, with the first person holding the ship, all performers formed a chain, singing the 'Ship of Zion', and swaying from the front to the back of the church. The Memphis performers utilized more scripture reading, less narrative improvisation, and more use of gesture than the performers in the the Toledo plays did.

I attended one other play of this kind in Memphis, at the Greater Hyde Park Baptist Church, also in May, 1979. Called 'The Twelve Gates to That Beautiful City', the play was similar to both 'Heaven Bound' and 'In the Rapture'. This performance featured a Devil figure dressed in a red suit. Singing and personal testimony revolved around themes such as Faith, Love, Temptation, Hope, Charity, and Humility. Prior to the performance, Mrs. Daisy Cooper, the moderator, asked for volunteers from the congregation to participate. Significantly, I was urged to participate, even though, to all but Reverend C.E. Thomas and Mrs. cooper, I was a stranger and Caucasian. While sitting in the congregation, each of us was given a sheet of paper which listed one of the above-mentioned themes. The narrator read a scripture pertaining to a theme, then asked the performer holding that theme to choose his song and begin his journey. As the performers proceeded up the aisle, the Devil tempted them with furs and jewelry. Like most 'Heaven Bound' and 'In the Rapture' plays, no one was tempted, but everyone greatly enjoyed the comic nature of the Devil's antics.

As a closing note: I have been told of the existence of several other plays, though I have no further information on them. 'Noah's Ark', 'The Devil's Funeral', and 'One Day Too Late' are plays which have come to my attention through interviews conducted by Barden at the New Light Church in 1977 (26). Folklorist Mary Hufford recorded an 'In the Rapture' performance at a Pine Barrens church in New Jersey which featured both Hell and the Devil (27). When folklorist Marjorie Hunt was riding to the University of Pennsylvania in 1980, a woman on the bus reported a performance of 'In the Rapture' in a West Philadelphia church (28). When I described my research to Memphis poet Akiba Patton, she exclaimed, "Oh, THOSE plays! I didn't know that what was you meant. I've seen those plays since I was a baby girl!" (29).

The preceding discussion and bibliographic review reveals the existence of a genre of Afro-American folk art virtually unexplored by scholars. Like folk drama in other cultures, Afro-American folk drama is a complicated form, incorporating multiple genres of black folk expression. Visual art, oratory, gesture, song, music, and the ritual production of religious experience are typical features of these productions. The evidence suggests that these plays have circulated through traditional channels of communication since at least the 1930s, in possibly the South, East, and Midwest. Little is known, either in regard to the nature of the form or its meaning and function within the community. We might ask, for example, what relation these plays have to other Afro-American pageants, such as black coronation festivals (30). What connection do these plays have to African traditions? What relation do the characters have to African religious figures? These are only a few of the most basic

questions raised by this cycle of plays.

The vast majority of the literature reviewed here was not written from a folkloristic point of view. Rather, it was seen through the eyes of the enthusiastic tourist. While this provides much valuable information, there has been little academic scholarship. Wiggins is currently the best informed scholar on the subject, and it is to him we should look first for productive directions in research. Still, the true vitality of the form is participation. Attending a black folk play is a thrilling experience, for these dramas are vital and complicated expressions of cultural life among both rural and urban Afro-Americans.

NOTES

1. I wish to thank Thomas E. Barden, Associate Professor of English and Folklore at the University of Toledo, whose collaboration, cooperation, and assistance in the field made this project possible.
2. Personal communication, April 1977.
3. Interview with Sallie Wilson by Barden, 7 November 1977.
4. Alain Locke, The New Negro (New York: Atheneum Press, 1968) p.156.
5. Loften Mitchell, Voices of the Black Theatre (Clifton, NY: James T. White & Co., 1975) p.63.
6. *Ibid.*, p.70.
7. In Bonnie Stowell, 'Folk Drama Scholarship in the United States: A Survey', Folklore Annual 2 (1970) p.61.
8. Locke, The New Negro, p.168.
9. Roger D. Abrahams, 'Folk Drama' in Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp.353-355. See also Thomas A. Green, 'Introduction', Journal of American Folklore 94 (1981) pp.431-432. Volume 94 of Journal of American Folklore gives an up-to-date account of folk drama research.
10. See Roger D. Abrahams, 'The Complex relations of Simple Forms', Genre 2 (June 1969) pp.104-128, in which Afro-American folk traditions have been amply documented. The spectrum of performance genres rises out of Abraham's special familiarity with Afro-American folklore.
11. For a short discussion on major characteristics of Afro-American folk arts, see John Michael Vlach, The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts (Cleveland: Great Lakes Lithograph Co., 1978) pp. 2-5.
12. Thomas A Green, 'Introduction', p. 428.
13. Joseph Washington, Black Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966) p.43.
14. William H. Wiggins, Jr., 'In the Rapture', Festival of American Folklife (Washington: Smithsonian Institution/National Park Service, 1976) p.17.
15. Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) pp.30-80.
16. Joseph Washington, Black Religion, p. 44.
17. Quotes from the following articles will not be footnoted, since bibliographic information is included in the synopsis.
18. Creation of many Afro-American folk art forms is often attributed to dreams or visions, even though the particular work may be traditional in nature. For a discussion of dreams and individual creativity, see William H. Wiggins, Jr., 'Jesus has Planted the Seed of Carvin' in Me: The Impact of Afro-American Religion on the Limestone Sculpture of William Edmondson in William Edmondson: A Retrospective, ed. Georganne Fletcher (Nashville: Williams Printing Co., 1981) pp.31-33.
19. Both directors on the New Light play, Selfie Chappelle and Bea Womack

- initially said that they created the play with the script version printed by Reverend Walker. Yet when the actual play is compared with Walker's script, large differences emerge. Walker's references to Satan and a setting depicting Hell do not appear, the singers do not adopt flat characters, nor do they deliver lines or predetermined dialogue. When questioned further, both women confirmed that they do not actually use the script. When Reverend Gabriel saw Walker's version, he said it was 'Heaven Bound', not 'The Old Ship of Zion'. Any comparison of all of these plays reveals the extent to which they draw from a similar source, a deep structure of images, if you will.
20. Deborah Bowman Richards and Thomas E. Barden, The Old Ship of Zion, 1977.
 21. For information on problems of oral transcription see Dennis Tedlock, 'On the Translation of Style in Oral Narrative', Journal of American Folklore 84 (1971) pp. 114-133. For an interesting transcription of a black sermon, see Peter Gold, 'Total Transcription', Alcheringa 4 (Autumn 1972) pp. 1-14.
 22. Paper delivered by Deborah Bowman and Thomas E. Barden, Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society, October 1980.
 23. Presence of the Holy Ghost, evidenced by shouting, dancing, "getting the spirit", or speaking in tongues, is a desired effect in many Afro-American religious rites. Robert J. Smith states that "the attainment of these states is an end in itself and any sociological binding that may be a result of it is secondary". The Art of the Festival, Publications in Anthropology 6 (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1975) p. 131. See also Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973) pp. 87-141; see Victor Turner's discussion of "communitas" in The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1969) pp. 131-165.
 24. Fieldnotes, 20 May 1979.
 25. Fieldnotes, 12 May 1979.
 26. Personal communication, 1977.
 27. Personal communication, 1980.
 28. Personal communication, 1980.
 29. Personal communication, 1979.
 30. Melvin Wade, 'Shining in Borrowed Plumage: Affirmation of Community in the Black Coronation Festivals of New England (c1750-c1850)', Western Folklore 40 (July 1981) pp. 211-231.

CORRESPONDENCE

from Craig Fees

There is nothing wrong with Maureen Voigt's 'Structural Analysis of an Irish Mumming Play' (Roomer 6:5, pp.35-39) to the extent that it concerns itself with one play and is understood to be an intellectual exercise. It is wrong when it attempts to speak in generalities about mumming play or folk dramas as such, as when attempting to posit a genre 'folk drama' in contradistinction to 'legitimate theatre', or speaks of folk drama as such in terms of myth and ritual.

It may facilitate a structural analysis to transform folk play into myth, but the concept of folk play as ritual-enacting-myth preceded deep studies of individual customs by many years, and it would be damn difficult to prove from adequate field research that "all the mumming plays are variations on the same myth, namely the victory of life over

death". The literature is so heavily pre-informed with the belief that folk drama is myth and ritual that any citation from it is suspect, and the question must always be asked of any source "what would the observer have seen if he/she had not already believed it was ritual? What detail would have been reported, what statements recorded, what actions noted, what other explanations given?".

The fundamental problem is that the research base underlying Mummung scholarship is generally poor, and any intellectual exercise based on it is almost certain to go astray. Structural analyses are to be welcomed. Indeed, any analyses are to be welcomed, as long as they deal with the thing itself and do not become entangled in the scholarly traditions about the thing, which are impoverished by the poverty of the field work.

Voigt's argument would be stronger if she could draw a clear distinction between mummung and folk drama in general, and the particular custom which Glassie examined with exemplary care. She also needs to reexamine some of the concepts she uses - "Because the setting is so intimate, the audience is much more involved in the action than they would be in a performance in a legitimate theatre", for example, does not stand up to scrutiny. Intimacy leads as easily to alienation as to participation and legitimate theatre becomes as exciting as it does precisely because the audience is involved in what is going on. It is wrong to contrast legitimate theatre with folk drama as if it were a given that they are in oppositional pairs. If this opposition exists, it needs to be demonstrated, not taken for granted.

All mummung texts have a death, and most have a rebirth, but this is not to say that all are variations of the same myth unless we are speaking at the rarified level of Jungian psychology when all acts of life and death have a mythic dimension. If we are speaking at the historic level, and mean literally that there has been a myth which has developed variations, then the problem arises that there is no mummung text known before the 18th century, and no adequate connection has ever been made by historical study of mummung plays with particular myths. The assertion is easy, the demonstration is hard.

Death and resurrection is not in itself symptomatic of myth. It can be seen instead as a thatrical cliché, and why not?

But a structural analysis does not depend on myth, and if one throws away all the hocus pocus of myth and ritual and simply takes the custom as one finds it, the structural analysis provides a useful tool.

THEATRE MUSEUM

[From the Times Educational Supplement, 1st May 1987, p.32]

THE THEATRE MUSEUM is open at last. After years of lobbying, despite many setbacks, the dream of Gabrielle Enthoven (1924) and Laurence Irving (1955) is a reality.

It is housed in Covent Garden's old Flower Market where Russell Street joins Wellington Street. The Russell Street entrance leads into a theatrical fantasy in pink, white and gold. There is the gilded angel of

the Spirit of Gaiety rescued from the demolition of the Strand's Gaiety Theatre. Cecil Beaton's fantastic Box-Office from the old Duke of York's Theatre, and one of 'Matchless Matcham's' double-tier boxes (voluptuous nudes/elephants' heads) from Glasgow's Palace Theatre.

Passing the pretty shop, down the curved ramp to the main exhibition galleries, a picture foyer and a studio-theatre. To the left is the Beard Room (Reference Collection of juvenile drama and cleverly mounted prints). Then the Main Gallery: a dark rectangular subterranean passage through windowed boxes arranged chronologically from Shakespeare to the present. The boxes are crammed with memorabilia: a First Folio, Kean's death-mask, Taglioni's ballet shoe, Mick Jagger's jumpsuit. Inside the Main Gallery, the Gielgud Gallery houses a temporary exhibition of rare designs for a court ballet. The Irving Gallery (dark) will also house temporary exhibitions.

It is a treasure house for theatre addicts. Perhaps the display cases are too many, too crammed and too close together to make viewing easy. A pity that British drama appears to begin with Shakespeare: imaginative use of models might have established the Quem Quaeritis, the Mysteries, the Interludes. Sound imagery could have added another dimension.

Open Tuesdays to Sundays 11.00 to 19.00. £2.25 (Concessions £1.25).
School parties (pre-booked) free. JOHN JAMES.

POSSIBLE ORIGIN FOR THE NAME 'TIPTTEERS' OR 'TIPTTEERERS'

Peter Millington

A chance encounter has suggested to me another possible explanation of the enigmatic term 'Tiptteers' or 'Tiptteerers', a name given to the actors for a number of plays in Sussex (1). My idea may not be any more convincing than the other ideas which have been suggested in the past, but I present it anyway.

The chance encounter was with an Open University textbook by A. Hughes (2), which gives the full text, and reproduces a woodcut from a satirical play entitled 'A New Play Called Canterburie and His Change of Diot', dated 1641, and thought to be by Richard Overton. The list of Acts includes:

I Act: the Bishop of Canterbury having a variety of dainties is not satisfied till he be fed with tippets of men's ears

I zoomed in on the "tippets of men's ears" phrase. It takes no great stretch of the intellect to transform this into "tippet ears" or "tipped ears" and into "Tiptteers". That this is associated with a play text - evidently published in pamphlet or chapbook form; that the cast list yields a "Doctor of Physicke"; that the subject-matter of the play (of which more later) has theatrical connotations; all add circumstantial evidence for the idea.

The play is a satirical protest on the excesses of the Star Chamber, an ecclesiastical court headed by Archbishop Laud, with pretty horrendous powers. William Prynne (the Lawyer), John Bastwicke (the Doctor of Physicke) and Henry Burton (the Divine) were zealous Puritans, who pub-

lished works critical of the Church and the Monarchy. They all seem to have been pains in the necks of the Establishment. Prynne was particularly obnoxious.

As a result of their publications, in 1637 all three were arraigned in the Star Chamber, and given sentences which included imprisonment on remote islands, and having their ears cut off in the pillory. Prynne had already had his ears clipped by the Star Chamber in 1634 for publishing his book Histrion-Mastix (1633), a particularly venomous attack on stage plays in general, and with implied insults to the Monarchy. So for Prynne's second sentence, the stumps of his ears were shorn, and his cheeks branded with the letters "S L" (Seditious Libeller).

Prynne's first punishment appears to have been a not unpopular move, but the severity of the later joint punishments provoked popular sympathy and protest. The eventual result was the release of the prisoners in 1640, and the abolition of the Star Chamber in 1641. Prynne and Burton landed at Southampton on their return from imprisonment, and were met with popular celebrations during their procession to London.

Richard Overton, cited as the probable author of the above play, was clearly a sympathiser, and was later a leader of the Leveller movement.

No doubt his play was performed as a protest against the Establishment, and I could easily see the actors using the epithet "Tippet Ears" by way of cocking a snook. Contrariwise, the term could have been used by Royalist sympathisers and/or theatrical aficionados after the restoration to rub the Puritans up the wrong way. Of course, the 1640s is virtually 'prehistory' in the evolution of the English folk plays, so one has to wonder how the name could have been transmitted to more modern times.

OK, so why are there Tipteers plays in the Sussex area (and only that area)? I don't know. I've had a reasonable delve into the story, and I've checked the biographies of the main protagonists. There are no obvious geographical associations with Sussex. Any ideas?

NOTES

1. The name 'Tipteers' (or something similar) is concentrated in Sussex, but is also found in Surrey and a short way into Hampshire.
2. A. Hughes, Seventeenth-Century England: A Changing Culture; Vol. 1, Primary Sources (London: Ward Lock, 1983). A copy of Overton's play is in the Bodleian Library.

TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP PUBLICATIONS

ROOMER: THE NEWSLETTER OF THE TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP

Research in any field is, as often as not, hampered by lack of communication between individuals, and Traditional Drama is no exception. We are acutely aware that there are many people doing valuable work who have little or no contact with others in the field and, consequently, no opportunity to compare notes or air their views.

Published six times a year, ROOMER is designed to fill this gap by providing an informal forum. It includes notes and queries, details of publications, out-of-the-way texts, information on work in progress, in fact anything that may be of interest to those working in the field of Traditional Drama. As such it relies heavily on participation by the subscribers. If you have any contributions please forward them to the editors.

Volume 1 (1981)	£3.50 (£4.50 overseas)
Volume 2 (1982)	£3.50 (£4.50 overseas)
Volume 3 (1983)	£3.50 (£4.50 overseas)
Volume 4 (1984)	£3.50 (£4.50 overseas)
Volume 5 (1985)	£3.50 (£4.50 overseas)
Volume 6 (1986)	£3.50 (£4.50 overseas)

THE PEACE EGG OR ST. GEORGE: AN EASTER PLAY

An original chapbook from Edwards & Bryning with a brief history by Peter Stevenson (1982)

OUT OF PRINT

AN INTERIM LIST OF NOTTINGHAMSHIRE FOLK PLAYS AND RELATED CUSTOMS

by Peter Millington (reprinted 1984)

£2.50

MUMMING PLAYS IN OXFORDSHIRE: AN INTERIM CHECKLIST

by Steve Roud (1984)

£2.50

RESEARCH GUIDES

Although the guides have been prepared with Traditional Drama in mind, they are also of relevance to other areas of Folklore research. The guides may be reproduced for free circulation providing the Traditional Drama Research Group is acknowledged.

For free copies of the guides please forward an A4 s.a.e.

1. Basic Questions to Ask by Peter Millington
2. Biographies by Paul Smith
3. Tracing Photographs by Paul Smith
4. Surveys through Newspapers by Derek Schofield, Peter Millington and Dave Bathe.

Please make all cheques payable to Traditional Drama Research Group. Overseas customers are asked to make all payments in Sterling.

PUBLICATIONS NEWS

Anthony Gerald Barthelemy, Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne (Louisiana State University Press, 1987) ISBN 0 8071 1331 X, 232pp. Hbk., £26.15.

Walter Burkert, Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrifical Ritual and Myth (University of California Press, 1987) ISBN 0 520 05875 5, 361pp. Pbk., £9.75 (first pub. in Hbk., 1983).

Elizabeth Warner, Folk Theatre and Dramatic Entertainments in Russia (Chadwick-Healey/Consortium for Drama & Media in Higher Education, 1987) 125pp., 50 slides, ISBN 0 85964 191 0. "The set examines a wide range of folk theatre, traditional seasonal customs and entertainments in Russia: the wandering minstrels; the revels for Christmas and Shrovetide; the great fairs; performing bears; the peasant wedding; puppet shows, including Petrushka and the Vertep (Nativity plays); the 'Boat'; and 'Tzar Maximilian'. Few of the illustrations included have previously been seen outside Russia".

Glynne Wickham, The Medieval Theatre (3rd Edn.; Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Lisbet Torp, 'European Chain and Round Dances: A Comparative Study', Dance Studies, Vol. 10 (1986) pp.13-48.

New Books in Folklore, a current awareness service from the Folklore Society Library. Regular bulletins are issued which provide bibliographic details of new and forthcoming publications in Folklore and related fields. Subscription rates: Society members £2 (£3 overseas), non-members £3 (£5 overseas). Available from The Folklore Society Library, c/o University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT.

ROOMER: THE NEWSLETTER OF THE TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP

ISSN 0262-4095

Research in any field is, as often as not, hampered by the lack of communication between individual researchers, and Traditional Drama is no exception. We are acutely aware that there are many people doing valuable work who have little or no contact with others in this field and, consequently, no opportunity to compare notes or air their views.

ROOMER then is designed to fill this gap by providing an informal forum. It includes notes and queries, details of publications, out-of-the-way texts, information on work in progress, in fact anything that may be of interest to those working in the field of Traditional Drama. As such it relies heavily on participation by subscribers. Therefore, if you have any potential contributions we would be most grateful to receive them.

Back volumes of the newsletter are currently available at the cost of the annual subscription. For further information regarding ROOMER and the work of the TRADITIONAL DRAMA RESEARCH GROUP contact:

Steve Roud, 18 Amberley Grove, Addiscombe, Surrey. CR0 6ND (01-654-6233)

Paul Smith, Laburnum House, Main Street, West Stockwith, Doncaster. DN10 4HB (0427-890042)

The views expressed by the contributors to Roomer are not necessarily those of the editors or of the Traditional Drama Research Group. © 1986 The Authors