

Rising to Power

by David Hlavsa

We are beautiful people
with African imaginations
full of masks and dances and
swelling chants

.....
We have been captured,
brothers. And we labor
to make our getaway, into
the ancient image, into a new
correspondence with ourselves
and our black family. We need
magic now we need the spells, to
raise up return, destroy, and create.
What will be the sacred words?

— Imamu Amiri Baraka,
"Ka 'Ba," 1967

"The greatest mistake of the movement," said Malcolm X just before his assassination, "has been trying to organize a sleeping people around specific goals. You have to wake them up first, then you'll get action." Expecting Malcolm's usual refrain of "revolution by any means necessary," a *Village Voice* reporter prompted, "Wake them up to their exploitation?" But Malcolm had fastened onto a more basic revolution: "No, to their humanity, to their own worth and to their heritage."

In 1965, Malcolm X, always ahead of his time, was already composing a eulogy for the Civil Rights Movement. Soon, particularly after the murder of Martin Luther King in 1968, many others would follow suit. To the people who gather at Memphis Lee's restaurant in the 1969 Pittsburgh of *Two Trains Running*, it seems the last of the African-American heroes have been consigned to the earth. The Reverend Samuels, once a community leader of some standing, now lies in state at the funeral parlor across the street. Nearby, someone has organized a rally to commemorate Malcolm X on his birthday. Death hangs heavy in the air, and with it has come a crushing fatalism. Peaceful demonstrations seem pointless to Memphis. "All them niggers wanna do is have a rally," he says. "Soon as they finish with one rally they start planning for the next." Holloway's outlook seems no brighter. "Malcolm got too big," he says. "People call him a saint. . . . Same with Martin Luther King. . . . When you get to be a saint there ain't nothing else you can do but die."

But Holloway's words carry a double meaning. The death of saints implies a resurrection, a phoenix rising from the ashes. If at first the people of *Two Trains Running* feel all their saints have perished, they come to realize that heroism is not dead and



Sterling (Larry Fishburne) and Risa (Ella Joyce) share a tender moment in the Yale Rep's production of *Two Trains Running*. Photo: Gerry Goodstein

mourning soon gives way to new-found belief. As the grandchildren of slaves, as survivors of violence and bigotry, as African-Americans, they themselves are heroes. Their realization mirrors the discovery of many Black Americans who, at the end of the 1960s, lamented the passing of the Dream, then rose up to celebrate their own fiery awakening.

The mainstream Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and early '60s was founded on an uneasy alliance between African-American leaders and white liberals. This coalition formed the backbone of the movement — and its Achilles' heel. Leaders such as Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy believed in and made the most of what the liberal agenda had to offer. It was a movement based on faith — not only religious faith, but faith in federally-mandated integration as the means to justice, freedom and opportunity. While some civil-rights workers used direct action — sit-ins and boycotts — to eliminate such blatant symbols of Southern segregation as the whites-only sections of lunch counters and buses, others lobbied for the federal legislation they thought would guarantee and protect the civil liberties of African-Americans.

They made impressive gains. In 1963, campaigns in Birmingham and other cities across the South involved more than 100,000 people, led to nearly 15,000 arrests, and brought civil-rights issues to a new national prominence. In August of that year, in the

largest civil-rights demonstration in history, a quarter of a million marchers, both Black and white, gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to demand action from the federal government. Dr. King prophesied a time in the near future when the nation would "rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident — that all men are created equal.'"

But real change proved slow in coming. Despite the long-awaited passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, despite the bloodshed in Selma and Birmingham, social and economic opportunities for African-Americans, especially those living in the ghettos of the North, did not improve. By 1966, Dr. King's coalition was becoming increasingly strained. Only three years after the triumphal march on Washington, King was booed by young Blacks at a Chicago rally. He later wrote,

For twelve years I, and others like me, had held out radiant promises of progress. I had preached to them about my dream. I had lectured to them about the not-too-distant day when they would have freedom, "all here and now." I had urged them to have faith in America and in white society. Their hopes had soared. They were now booing because they felt that we were unable to deliver on our promises.

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One aspect of the civil rights struggle that receives little attention is the contribution it makes to the whole society: The Negro winning rights for himself produces substantial benefits for the nation. Just as a doctor will occasionally re-open a wound, because dangerous infection hovers beneath the half-healed surface, the revolution for human rights is opening up unhealthy areas in American life and permitting a new and wholesome healing to take place. Eventually, the Civil Rights Movement will have contributed infinitely more to the nation than the eradication of racial injustice. It will have enlarged the concept of brotherhood to a vision of total inter-relatedness. On that day, Canon John Donne's doctrine "no man is an island," will find its truest application in the United States.

— Martin Luther King,
Why We Can't Wait, 1963

There are two types of Black people in this country. One who identifies with you so much so he will let you brutalize him and still beg you for a chance to sit next to you. And then there's the one who's not interested in sitting next to you. He's not interested in being around you. He's not interested in what you have. He wants something of his own. He wants to sit someplace . . . he can call his own. He doesn't want a seat in your restaurant . . . he wants his own restaurant. And he wants some land where he can build that restaurant . . . He wants something of his own.

— Malcolm X, 1963

. . . That photograph of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King shaking hands kept coming back to me. I had to find a way to tie these two great men into the finale.

King and Malcolm. Both men died for the love of their people, but had different strategies for realizing freedom. In the end, justice will prevail one way or another. There are two paths to that. The way of King, or the way of Malcolm

— Spike Lee, Epilogue, *Do the Right Thing: A Companion Volume to the Film*, 1988

Victories won at great cost had proved, in the main, more symbolic than substantial. As one disgruntled Urban League worker put it, "The Black cat in Harlem wasn't worried about no damn bus — he'd been riding the bus for fifty years. What he didn't have was the fare."

In the ghetto, rage against discrimination, economic conditions and police brutality frequently led to violence. In 1964, the year Martin Luther King won the Nobel Peace Prize, there were race riots in Jacksonville, Rochester, Harlem, Chicago, and Philadelphia. In 1965 (only five days after the passage of the Voting Rights Act), it took six days for National Guardsmen and police to stop a riot in Los Angeles' Watts ghetto. Four thousand were arrested in violence that left hundreds homeless, nearly a thousand injured and thirty-four dead. In the aftermath, when Andrew Young, Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King visited the area, a group of young people told them joyously, "We won." "How can you say you won," the civil-rights leaders asked, "when thirty-four Negroes are dead, your community is destroyed, and whites are using the riot as an excuse for inaction?" "We won," the youths insisted, "because we made them pay attention to us."

In 1967, King called for the Congress and the President to commit themselves to "the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty." But unlike the earlier drive for desegregation and voting-rights laws, this demand for economic equality failed to sway most liberal reformers, who held that the social order was already basically sound and that merit, rather than race or class, chiefly determined one's chances in life. Many liberals thought King had gone too far.

Yet, to many African-Americans in the movement, he hadn't gone far enough. Christian tolerance and nonviolent action were all well and good, but even by 1965, many of the hardest of civil-rights workers had grown tired of professing love for brutal sheriffs and racist mobs. During the 1964 "Freedom Summer" voter registration drive in Mississippi alone, three civil-rights workers had been killed, three were wounded by gunfire, eighty were beaten and more than a thousand were arrested. Sixty-six buildings, including thirty-five churches, were burned or bombed. For many Blacks, the violence of white backlash begged the question, as James Baldwin had put it, "Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?"

Many of the movement's younger leaders were trying to shift the focus away from passive resistance to more aggressive strategies. "I'm not going to beg the white man for anything I deserve," said Stokely

Carmichael. "I'm going to take it." In effect, Carmichael, chairman of the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), dismissed the Civil Rights Movement's early emphasis on coalition politics as a well-intentioned mistake: "The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. We been saying freedom for six years — and we ain't got nothin'. What we gonna start saying now is 'Black Power!'"

Black leaders in the more conservative civil-rights groups like the NAACP observed the rise of Black Power with increasing alarm. At best, they saw it as, a slogan without a program and, at worst, a threat to the gains already made by a movement based on restraining and re-channeling rather than acknowledging African-American anger. White reaction to Black Power was, predictably, a mixture of bewilderment and fear. As Carmichael wrote, "To most whites, black power seems to mean that the Mau Mau are coming to the suburbs at night. The Mau Mau are coming, and whites must stop them. Articles appear about plots to 'get whitey,' creating an atmosphere in which 'law and order must be maintained.'"

But though anger was certainly an aspect of Black Power, those who heard only an angry slogan did not comprehend the full significance of the idea. To Carmichael and groups like the SNCC and CORE, Black Power meant *empowerment*; it meant political action and community pride. In a society that had stripped African-Americans of their culture and denied them respect for three and a half centuries, Black Power was not just a chant, but a way of asserting and affirming self-respect.

To August Wilson, who came of age at the height of the Black consciousness movement, "the real struggle," for Black Americans, "has been . . . an affirmation of the value of oneself." In his work as a playwright, Wilson has dedicated himself to bringing the heritage, the common historical experience of African-Americans to the stage. For Wilson, the discovery of power in the Black community is inextricably linked with the recovery of the past. "Can you acquire a sense of self-worth by denying your past?" he asks. "I don't think you can."

Though people in *Two Trains Running* do not take their cause to the streets, they nonetheless discover Black Power. At their bleakest moment, when doubt and shame threaten to overcome them, both Memphis and Sterling go to see Aunt Ester, a mysterious offstage presence, a seer who claims to be nearly 350 years old. Wilson calls Aunt Ester an "emblem of African-American consciousness.

... People go to see her when they need to get right with themselves and the world." Her advice, based in the customs and spiritual ideas of another continent and another time, allows Memphis and Sterling to recover their sense of purpose and self-worth by getting in touch with their heritage.

For Wilson, the path to economic and social equality for Black Americans is not one of integration or assimilation but of continued struggle to be recognized as Africans. "The problem as I see it," he says, "is simply that Blacks in America are not allowed their cultural differences." Power will not come to Black Americans by acting like white Americans, but by teaching themselves and their children to take pride in and celebrate these differences.

"There's a part of the Passover. It starts off, 'We were slaves in the land of Egypt.' . . . [Jews] are constantly reminding themselves of what their historical situation has been. I find it criminal that we, after hundreds of years in bondage, do not celebrate our Emancipation Proclamation. That we do not have a thing like the Passover where we sit down and we remind ourselves that we are African people, that we were slaves. . . . If we did something like that, it would say: This is who we are — we recognize the fact that we are Africans, we recognize the fact that we were slaves, and we recognize the fact that since we have a common past, we have a common future also."

Postscript

The rise of conservative politics that began when Richard Nixon was elected on a "law and order" ticket in 1968 (with only fifteen percent of the African-American vote) has resulted in a gradual and quiet dismantling of

policies developed to combat racial discrimination. Between 1981 and 1985, for example, the number of lawyers in the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division fell from 210 to 57. In the same period, the Justice Department recorded a rise in the number of racially motivated attacks from 99 to 276.

In 1990, the median income of African-American families is barely half that of whites, and Blacks are three times more likely to be poor. In the South, two-thirds of all Black workers, compared with one-third of all whites, hold low-income jobs.

The government's fiscal policy during the 1980s has been hard on the inner-city poor. Though less than twenty percent of government spending had been slated for programs such as welfare, food stamps, and child nutrition, they suffered nearly sixty percent of the 1981 budget cuts. Between 1980 and 1983, the cumulative impact of President Reagan's fiscal counterrevolution involved a \$25 billion transfer in disposable income from the less well-off to the richest fifth of Americans, and a rise in the number of poor people from 29.3 million to 35.3 million.

In Watts, according to census figures, unemployment rose from twelve percent in 1960 to twenty percent in 1980. Recently, unemployment in the ghetto has been estimated at thirty percent for adults, fifty percent for teenagers. As one Watts resident remarked, "There ain't no middle class right now — either you're up or you're down."

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Hambone (Sullivan Walker) is thrown out of the restaurant Memphis (Al White) owns in the Yale Rep production of *Two Trains Running*. Photo: Gerry Goodstein

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