

Subversive Inclusion: Ernie McClintock's 127th Street Repertory Ensemble

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Ernie McClintock (1937–2003), director, acting teacher, and producer, grounded his work in the Black Power concepts of self-determination and community, but in pursuing a more inclusive theatre company, he departed from common practices of the Black Arts Movement. This departure can be attributed to his queer positionality, which has left him on the fringes of Black Arts Movement scholarship. McClintock founded four institutions: in Harlem, the Afro-American Studio for Acting & Speech (est. 1966), the 127th Street Repertory Ensemble (est. 1973), and the Jazz Theatre of Harlem (est. 1986); and in Richmond, Virginia, the Jazz Actors Theatre (est. 1991). A landmark Black theatre institution, the 127th Street Repertory Ensemble ran from 1973 to 1986, demonstrating that the spirit and work of the Black Arts Movement extended well beyond 1975, the generally accepted end date of the movement. Over more than four decades in socially and politically charged environments, McClintock established actor training rooted in Afrocentricity,^[1] teaching Jazz Acting in the classroom and the rehearsal hall, which he considered an important training ground for actors. In this article, I argue that McClintock's theatre subverted two established norms: the English repertory model and the male-dominated, heteronormative representations of the Black Arts Movement.

McClintock's legacy challenges assumptions that the Black Arts Movement was broadly misogynist and homophobic. Therefore, my work is in conversation with scholars who aim to dispel such assumptions including La Donna Forsgren, Khalid Yaya Long, Mike Sell, and James Smethurst. In the early 1980s, McClintock continued to produce Black revolutionary drama, such as Amiri Baraka's one acts, while incorporating queer, womanist, and Afro-Caribbean voices into his seasons. The trilogy of plays performed in 1982, a pinnacle season for McClintock, exhibits progressive inclusion while upholding Black Power's principles of self-determination and community. The 127th Street Rep wanted to represent what Paul Carter Harrison calls the "kaleidoscope" of African diasporic memory.^[2] By bringing queer, Afro-Caribbean, and womanist voices together into one space, McClintock's theatre displayed a rich variety of Blackness. Black revolutionary drama stood side by side in his classroom and in his season planning with these more diverse voices, demonstrating that there was room for inclusive practices in the Black Power movement. These inclusive practices relate to his versatile season selection programming but also extended to his casting practices. McClintock employed actors from a variety of backgrounds and identities who were often left on the fringes of the Black Theatre Movement including queer artists, immigrants, and Harlem residents who, prior to joining McClintock's company, broke the law to make ends meet. Rather than approaching his company as a monolithic representation of Blackness, he invited each actor to leverage who they were as individuals while simultaneously acknowledged overlaps of experience within the "kaleidoscope". His productions answered the movement's call to establish institutions outside the white gaze and use theatre as a mode of social change in Black communities. However, as an openly gay man, whose long-term partner, Ronald Walker, was also his technical director, McClintock stood as an outlier in the movement. Marc Primus, historian and co-founder of the

Afro-American Studio, noted in an interview that he, Walker, and McClintock were “twice-marginalized” for being Black and gay.^[3] Ernie McClintock’s legacy provides a history of early Black queer activism in the theatre within a movement that was not known for embracing the LGBTQIA+ community.

Although homophobic attitudes were common in the Black Power movement, as they were across the United States, McClintock’s career and biography, relationships with other artists, acting technique, and groundbreaking productions dispel notions of monolithic homophobia in Harlem in the 1960s.

The 1982 season emblemizes McClintock’s Afrocentric aesthetic, leveraging and revising the repertory model as a pathway for inclusion. McClintock made subversive choices, amplifying voices often left out of the Black Arts Movement, including Afro-Caribbean, Black womanist, and queer Black masculine ones. This essay uses the 127th Street Repertory Ensemble’s 1982 season to analyze how jazz aesthetics upended the English repertory model. This season included Derek Walcott’s *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967), Ntozake Shange’s *Spell #7* (1979), and Peter Shaffer’s *Equus* (1973).

“We Respectfully Challenge You”: Subverting the English Repertory Model

Jazz Acting, a technique and directorial strategy, affords performers the opportunity to consider shared experiences while also celebrating individuality. William J. Harris identifies the jazz aesthetic as “a procedure that uses jazz variations as paradigms for the conversions of white poetic and social ideas into black ones,”^[4] disrupting hegemonic structures and promoting Black modes of expression. Just as the jazz aesthetic converted white ideas, McClintock subverted the English repertory model, which allowed him to emphasize multiple Black perspectives in a given season, transforming a white institution into a Black one. Developed in the early twentieth century, repertory theatre is defined as “plays in rotation . . . offered to the public on a regularly changing basis.”^[5] A company will typically perform a different play each night, supplemented by premieres of new plays. Repertory theatres in Europe and the United States did not typically produce plays by Black playwrights.



Figure 1: 127th Street Repertory Ensemble's 1982 season poster

Source: Errol Hill Collection, Dartmouth College

The plays produced at the 127th Street Rep over twelve seasons[6] were discordant with white narratives; the 1982 season featured Afro-Caribbean, womanist, and queer voices. These representations were uncommon in both the white Western theatrical tradition and the Black Theatre Movement. *Equus*, for example, was written by a British playwright, but McClintock revised the story to center on Black queer sexuality in the US. Although other companies produced Walcott's dream play and Shange's homage to Black city life, it was rare to have all these voices represented under one roof, tying together themes of dreams, desperation, and desire (see figure 1). In publicity materials, McClintock states:

We present theatre that is INTRIGUING, STIMULATING, PROVOCATIVE, RELEVANT, and TRUTHFUL. The same as most Black theatres. But, our way of presenting is the big difference. We give you BEAUTY, STYLE, DARING, SURPRISES, CONTROVERSY, SENSUALITY along with high artistic standards. In other words, our theatre is IMMEDIATE, TODAY, VITAL,

VIVID, AND VIRILE. We respectfully challenge you to three (3) daring adult evenings of dreams, desperation and desire.[7]

The plays from the period traditionally understood to frame the Black Arts Movement, 1965–1975, embraced a Black revolutionary philosophy advanced by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal. Amiri Baraka's *The Revolutionary Theatre*, published in 1965, foregrounds both the aesthetic and the tangible, calling for

artists of African descent to come together and create art that connects to a Black cultural, spiritual, and historical dimension and works to destroy “the white thing.”^[8] Neal famously quotes Don L. Lee, saying, “[w]e must destroy Faulkner, dick, jane [*sic*], and other perpetrators of evil. It’s time for Du Bois, Nat Turner, and Kwame Nkrumah...” A hypermasculine attitude began to overshadow the revolutionary acts of these artists, and much of the literature and theatre of the Black Arts Movement included homophobic slurs and violence against women.^[9] Whatever the levels of misogyny and homophobia within in the movement, it is irrefutable that queer plays were largely absent from other well-known Black Theatre Movement institutions such as the New Lafayette Theatre, the New Federal Theatre, and the Negro Ensemble Company.

McClintock’s queer positionality provided a unique vantage point to create space for Black actors of various backgrounds, genders, and sexual orientations. The 1982 theatre season drew crowds to the Renny Theatre in Harlem, earning the ensemble nineteen AUDELCO^[10] nominations (see figure 2).

Dreams, Desperation, and Desire in Harlem

Dream on Monkey Mountain takes place on a nameless Caribbean island where Makak, a prisoner, has been conditioned by colonizers to disparage his race. In the end, he beholds a white apparition that has been haunting him and frees himself from his infatuation with whiteness. *Dream’s* inclusion challenged monolithic notions of Black identity, but McClintock’s inclusive practices did not stop at play selection; they also extended to the makeup of his ensemble. McClintock’s production included Afro-Caribbean actors, who were not typically hired in peer institutions.

AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIO'S
127TH STREET REPERTORY ENSEMBLE
Ernie McClintock, Dir.

Individually Exceptional - Collectively Phenomenal

MAYBE NOW WE'LL BE ABLE TO CONVINCE YOU

19 AUDELCO BLACK THEATRE EXCELLENCE AWARD NOMINATIONS FOR
1982

AN UNPRECEDENTED HAPPENING IN THE 10 YEAR HISTORY OF THE AUDELCO AWARDS

DRAMATIC PRODUCTION OF THE YEAR- DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN
DRAMATIC PRODUCTION OF THE YEAR- SPELL #7
DRAMATIC PRODUCTION OF THE YEAR- EQUUS

DIRECTOR, DRAMATIC PRODUCTION -Ernie McClintock- SPELL# 7
DIRECTOR, DRAMATIC PRODUCTION -Ernie McClintock- EQUUS

Lead Actor, DRAMATIC PRODUCTION -Gregory Wallace- EQUUS

Supporting Actor, DRAMATIC PRODUCTION - Bruce Jenkins- DREAM ON MONKEY
MOUNTAIN

Supporting Actor, DRAMATIC PRODUCTION - Gregory Wallace-EQUUS
Supporting Actor, DRAMATIC PRODUCTION - Jerome Preston Bates- EQUUS

Supporting Actress, DRAMATIC PRODUCTION-Ceal Coleman- SPELL #7
Supporting Actress, DRAMATIC PRODUCTION-Lola Louis - EQUUS

CHOREOGRAPHY - Bernard Lunnon - DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN
CHOREOGRAPHY - Lydia Abarca - SPELL #7
CHOREOGRAPHY - Jerome Preston Bates - EQUUS

SET DESIGN - Ron Walker- DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN
SET DESIGN - Ron Walker- SPELL #7

LIGHTING DESIGN - Ron Walker/Geno Brantley- DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN
LIGHTING DESIGN - Ron Walker/Geno Brantley- SPELL #7
LIGHTING DESIGN - Geno Brantley/Ron Walker- EQUUS

For TOURING Information
Call (212) 289 5900
or write - 127th Street Repertory Ensemble
415 W. 127th Street
P.O. Box 979
N.Y.C. 10027

Figure 2: 127th Street Repertory Ensemble's 1982 AUDELCO Award nominations

Source: Errol Hill Collection, Dartmouth College

Lola Louis, an actor from the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, earned several AUDELCO nominations during her tenure at the 127th Street Rep, including best actress for Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (1957). In an interview, Louis emphasized that other directors did not typically include Caribbean plays in their seasons, let alone cast Caribbean actors. For *Dream*, McClintock asked Louis to devise a silent character so her perspective could be included in the story, which was written as an all-male cast. To prepare, Louis implemented Jazz Acting character observations, walking the streets of Harlem and observing homeless folks. She described the character she developed as constantly in motion, "fishing

through things and looking at people.”^[11] The audience recognized this character as belonging to Harlem, although the play was rooted in West Indian culture. To incorporate a female character on the margins of society further complicated and enriched Walcott’s play, and, for McClintock, was part of the “kaleidoscope” of his Harlem community.

McClintock’s unorthodox vision of *Dream* yielded praise from the critics. Lionel Mitchell’s *NY Amsterdam* review stated, “‘Dream on Monkey Mountain’ reveals a fine rep company.”^[12] He goes on to say that the ensemble is “an excellent group that has done a tremendous amount of homework, and who, despite slim grants and money problems, persists in doing some of the best theatre going!”^[13] Mitchell’s review and the praise he received from critics and audiences demonstrated the success of McClintock’s directorial aesthetic. McClintock chose a play that provided an Afro-Caribbean perspective, cast actors not typically hired, and devised an additional character who was an outlier in society. By casting an immigrant actor to play a devised homeless character, McClintock instituted the inclusive practice of considering actors and figures typically left on the margins of society. His eccentric practices paid off, earning the 127th Street Repertory Ensemble five AUDELCO nominations, including a nomination for Lola Louis for Best Supporting Actress.

Womanist poet-playwright Ntozake Shange describes her play *Spell #7*, which focuses on Black women’s experiences, as “in the throes of pain and sensation experienced by my characters responding to the involuntary constriction of their humanity.”^[14] Shange’s piece centers on a group of nine young actors, dancer-singers, and writers guided by a magician in coming to terms with their identities in a white supremacist society and embracing the richness of their Blackness. During the height of the Black Theatre Movement, women playwrights were largely left out of neighboring theatres, but from his early days of teaching in 1966, McClintock saw immense value in bringing a womanist perspective to the Harlem theatre community.

One of the most memorable aspects of McClintock’s production of *Spell #7* is its focus on Black women’s relationship to beauty. In reaction against the trend of processed hair in the 1940s and 1950s, the 1960s saw a reawakening of Africanity as many women and men celebrated their African roots, fashioning dashikis and Pan-African styles along with natural Afros and textured hair. Shange explores this dilemma of beauty as it relates to Black authenticity and femininity. Yusef A. Salaam acknowledged this in his review: “an antidote which says that the African woman/African nation must look in the mirror and start liking what she/it sees.”^[15] Jazz Acting asks actors to integrate their lived experiences into character creation so the performers enriched their characters with their own experiences as Black women. McClintock’s experience as both a queer man and a proponent of Black nationalism living in a white supremacist system helped him straddle these binaries.

Trust is an essential component of Jazz Acting. Members of the ensemble must trust each other if they are to feel safe to bring their own lived experiences to their art. McClintock’s breathing and articulation exercises were designed not merely to teach actors how to project on stage but also to help them develop the self-confidence to access their individual voices. Bolanyle Edwards, who portrayed maxine in *Spell #7*, explained that voice training “was part of his technique to loosen up the articulators and to breathe. It’s getting in touch with who you are.”^[16] This approach countered commonly held ideas about what constituted “a good voice.” McClintock states, “Contrary to the beliefs of some, it is not ‘white’ or ‘European’ to speak well. At the same time, the Black idiom should be used as much as possible but the actor must theatricalize his vocal efforts.”^[17] In McClintock’s production, the actors focused on finding

rhythm and tempo from a place of individual truth to theatricalize vocal expression.

As the third play in rep, McClintock's production of *Equus* revised a white European play to tell a story of Black queer sexuality. The Black Theatre Movement offered a paucity of plays exploring Black queer sexuality, so McClintock reimagined Shaffer's Broadway hit with a dual focus on the Black Power principles of self-determination and community. *Equus* became a story about Black repressed sexuality and, in certain moments, showed audiences the beauty of male queer sexuality and the inner struggle of a gay teenage boy in a fundamentalist household. The actors executed this vision through both ensemble work and self-expression.

The bold choice to bring this taboo subject matter about a marginalized group to the stage astonished audiences, and theatre patrons made the pilgrimage to Harlem to witness Gregory Wallace play Alan Strang and see the six nearly naked Black men who played the ensemble of horses. Part of the production's depth is attributed to the absence of a Black buck stereotype,^[18] a stereotype that suggests Black men are barbaric, aggressive, and feral. As Cornel West explains, "White fear of Black sexuality is a basic ingredient of white racism."^[19] Instead, McClintock understood the relationship between Alan and his favorite horse, Nugget (played by Jerome Preston Bates), as a tragedy of repression and oppression interspersed with moments of reverence for the Black body. In an important departure from the Broadway version and in a move crucial to subverting the Black buck stereotype, the horses did not wear masks. By unmasking the horses and providing space for the actors' self-expression, McClintock created nuance and humanity instead of a one-dimensional stereotype of sexual aggression.

The staging of the production reflected jazz aesthetics by converting "white poetic and social ideas into black ones."^[20] An essential component of jazz is the work of creation, and this directorial style brought this into every aspect of the theatre. McClintock's actors recall that this creative experimentation with the work never stopped, even in production. For example, in a rehearsal one week prior to opening, McClintock blasted jazz music to create a sexually charged environment.^[21] The director also staged *Equus* in a way that maintained focus on the ensemble, having all the actors sit on the edge of the stage in plain sight of the audience.^[22] This staging emphasized the collective rather than the individual, standing in opposition to the star-centric productions on Broadway.^[23] McClintock's aesthetic valued process over product, a stark contrast to commercial theatre that uses rigid blocking to ensure theatre goers have the same performance night after night.

Conclusion

The 127th Street Repertory Ensemble's productions in the early 1980s reveal that McClintock's play selection and directorial approach modeled a more inclusive theatrical enterprise. Inclusion extended to Black women, queer folks, and Afro-Caribbean identities. Through jazz aesthetics and the revision of the English repertory model into a Black repertory theatre, McClintock brought together three plays representing three distinct Black perspectives while still remaining firmly rooted in Black nationalist precepts of self-determination and community. McClintock revolutionized the model to present a multiplicity of identities and challenged the actors to navigate the nuances of those identities through the practice of Jazz Acting. By featuring *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, *Spell #7*, and *Equus*, McClintock expanded the possibilities of Black theatre and welcomed marginalized voices, offering artists and educators a model for our own artistic and pedagogical practices

[1] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, rev. and exp. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), xiii. Afrocentricity is defined as placing African ideals at the center of any study of African culture and behavior, situating Africans as subjects rather than objects of human history.

[2] Paul Carter Harrison, *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 7.

[3] Marc Primus, Interview by Elizabeth Cizmar, August 25, 2015.

[4] William J. Harris, *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), 13.

[5] George Rowell and Anthony Jackson, *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1.

[6] Ernie McClintock Resume. 2000. Box 53, Folder 11. Barksdale Theatre Records, 1945–2006 (bulk 1954–2004). Accession 41088, Business Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

[7] Publicity materials from the Private Collection of Geno Brantley.

[8] Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *Drama Review* 4, no. 12. (Summer 1968): 30, doi: 10.2307/1144377.

[9] Scholars such as La Donna Forsgren have uncovered the critical contributions women made to the Black Arts Movement. Women such as Sonia Sanchez, Barbara Ann Teer, J. E. Franklin, Martie Evans-Charles, and others advanced Black feminist and womanist perspectives within the Black Nationalist movement. See *In Search of Our Warrior Mothers* and *Sistuhz in the Struggle*.

[10] Vivian Robinson established the AUDELCO organization in 1973 to support the performing arts in Black communities, with annual awards acknowledging excellence in Black theatre. AUDELCO has continued to produce an annual award show in Harlem to honor African American achievements in theatre. McClintock was a co-organizer of the first AUDELCO ceremony, held at the Afro-American Studio for Speech & Acting. For more information, see www.audelco.org.

[11] Lola Louis, Interview by Elizabeth Cizmar, September 2, 2015.

[12] Lionel Mitchell, “Dream on Monkey Mountain Reveals Fine Rep Company,” *NY Amsterdam*, July 24, 1982, 36.

[13] Mitchell, “Monkey Mountain,” 36.

[14] Ntozake Shange, *Three Pieces* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 69.

[15] Yusef A. Salaam, “Spell #7: Antidote for Abuse of Black Image,” *NY Amsterdam*, July 3, 1982, 34.

[16] Bolanyle Edwards, Interview by Elizabeth Cizmar, August 25, 2015.

[17] Ernie McClintock, "Perspective on Black Acting," *Black World* May 1974, 79–85.

[18] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 10. Donald Bogle traces stereotypes from their inception to contemporary manifestations. Bogle argues that Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* cemented this stereotype in the social conscience.

[19] Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 86.

[20] Harris, *Poetry and Poetics*, 13.

[21] Gregory Wallace, Interview by Elizabeth Cizmar, September 16, 2015.

[22] Abiola Sinclair, "McClintock's 'Equus' in Theatrical 'Mane-Stream,'" *NY Amsterdam*, August 7, 1982, 50.

[23] John Gruen, "Equus Makes a Star," *New York Times*, October 27, 1974, 1.

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Table of Contents:

- “Subversive Inclusion: Ernie McClintock’s 127th Street Repertory Ensemble” by Elizabeth M. Cizmar
- “Earle Hyman and Frederick O’Neal: Ideals for the Embodiment of Artistic Truth” by Baron Kelly
- “A Return to 1987: Glenda Dickerson's Black Feminist Intervention” by Khalid Y. Long
- “An Interview with Elaine Jackson” by Nathaniel G. Nesmith
- "Playing the Dozens: Towards a Black Feminist Dramaturgy in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston" by Michelle Cowin Gibbs
- "1991: Original Broadway Production of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston’s Antimusical The Mule-Bone Is Presented" by Eric M. Glover
- ““Ògún Yè Mo Yè!” Pathways for institutionalizing Black Theater pedagogy and production at historically white universities" by Omiy?mi (Artisia) Green
- "Dancing on the Slash: Choreographing a Life as a Black Feminist Artist/Scholar" by Lisa B. Thompson
- "Newly Discovered Biographical Sources on Ira Aldridge" by Bernth Lindfors
- "Guadalís Del Carmen: Strategies for Hemispheric Liberation" by Olga Sanchez Saltveit
- "A Documentary Milestone: Revisiting Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement" by Isaiah Matthew Wooden

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