Langston Hughes

--[107]--
Playwright

Interviewers: Reuben and Dorothy Silver

Karamu Theatre, Cleveland, Ohio

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[Ed` note: This interview was transcribed by Professor Susan Duffy of Speech and Communications, California Polytechnic State University and is published with permission of the Harold Ober Agency, New York City and Reuben and Dorothy Silver]

I'm not going to start at any attempt at order. Let me take the points as I've noted them down as the questions accumulated over the weeks.... The Harlem Suitcase Theatre -- did you found it?

I did, in 1937-39.

Anything we ought to know about it? This whole left-wing business that crops up in here, if you'd rather not talk at all about that we can just drop it. It's not important to me for the study; I'm fascinated by it as a person. The theatre was an attempt to do what?

The theatre was founded to present my play Don't you Want to be Free? made from my poems, and it was 99 ½ percent Negro.

By policy was it interracial? Would you have welcomed whites if they had wanted to...?

Yeah, we would welcome -- I welcomed anyone -- but it was in the middle of Harlem. There were practically no whites around.

According to this, the first bill was done with Paul Green's *The Man Who Died at 12:00.*

Not to my memory.

No? How about a thing called *The Slave,* for which I don't have an author.

I don't remember that. All I remember is my own material.

It was given thirty-eight performances, it says. Which is pretty damn good, *Don't You Want to be Free?*

Not right. Don't You Want to be Free was 135 performances on weekends.

Presumably not this first run. Well, maybe this is wrong. This is from the *People's World;* Meredith Hatcher wrote it up.

Well, that may have been, up to a certain point, but the theatre ran approximately, I believe, two years. And Don't You Want to be Free? was performed, oh, sometimes three or four times a week, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Sunday matinee. And it has the record of being the longest running play, to anyone's knowledge, in Harlem.

Now when you say two years, you mean that's the life-span of the Suitcase [Theatre]?

That was about the life-span of the theatre because I had to go away, and when I went away it was continued for a time in the library, I believe, the 136th Street Library. There was no other run. As you know, the theater is a full-time job.

But you went to Los Angeles and you started a theatre there.

I went to Los Angeles and started the Negro Theatre out there, which did the same play, and I think they probably had about thirty or forty performances of the play out there. And Clarence Muse directed it, by the way.

Clarence Muse?

Yes, the movie actor.--108--

But you directed it in New York?

I directed it in New York. We presented some other sketches at times. We did a satire on Imitation of Life called Limitations of Life, I wrote, and that has been recently revived again.

I'd like to read it. Also *Hector Jones. [Angelo Herndon Jones]*

Yeah, we did a lot of those short skits.

You have copies of all those?

Oh yes, I'm sure I would have them.

Are they worth reading?

Well, they were topical for that time.

How would they stand up?

They were topical. You know, Hitler was ascending in Europe.

But *Limitations of Life* sounds like it could be broader than all that.

Well, It's being done again by someone good in New York. I haven't seen it, so I don't know how they brought it up to date. But people say it's still funny. And we did all kind of little satires and we did a blues dance program and things of that nature.

Can you say that the Harlem Suitcase Theatre had impact and significance, and if so, how would you describe that?

Well, it was a sort of forerunner, I think, of the American Negro Theatre. And of the various little theatre groups that sprang up in. Harlem in the late '30s and '50s. It certainly had some impact, and encouraged a lot young people to try to write for the theatre, and out of it came two or three people who became professional actors. Perhaps the one who has worked most consecutively was Earl Jones, who most recently was in The Iceman Cometh at Circle in the

Square for many months. His son is now playing the lead in The Blacks, Earl James Jones Jr., that's Earl Jones's son. *[Ed. note: Hughes named Robert Earl Jones, and his son, James Earl Jones, as shown]*

How about on you as a writer? You'd already written, but the fact that you had a theatre encouraged more, or couldn't you say that?

No, I don't think so. I founded the theatre to put on the play I had already written.

But you didn't do any more writing simply because you had the theatre?

No, I did not.

You're quoted, Langston, in a couple of places, as drawing an analogy between the Karamu and the Abbey and saying you hoped Karamu would become a kind of Abbey Theatre in America. I was interested in this, but because Ridgley Torrence, who came here in 1939 as a playwright in residence under the Rockefeller grant, had been at the Abbey Theatre and presumably also had a similar point of view. Mrs. Jelliffe *[co-founder of Karamu with her husband Russell]* says she thinks we're more social than the Abbey ever was. How do you see this kind of idea now? Does it have any meaning? Is it worth pursuing?

I have never been to the Abbey Theatre. And I only know what I've read of it, and some of the plays that I've seen that were originally done there. But I suppose my comparison is more on the folk material, and folk material I mean in the broadest sense. I don't mean a southern Negro dialect material, but material of all of the Negro people. I have a feeling that there is urban folk material as well as rural. I have felt that Karamu was in an enviable position to be the--109--expressive theatre of the Negro people in America, particularly since most of the time there has been no other dramatic theatre functioning anyway, and Karamu, for a long time, was the theatre that presented practically all of the plays that were good about Negroes and by Negroes. And until it became a highly integrated organization and had its new building, it was primarily a Negro theatre really. And then came the period when, to my knowledge, they didn't do very much except rehashes of Broadway stuff, which I sort of regretted.

You lead me to the very next important question, which is, recognizing that there is an urban folk material, do you regret the turn Karamu has, in a sense, taken?

I think it is a much better field of activity for Karamu as a social settlement house.

Being interracial rather than all Negro?

However, since there is no place in America where primarily the accent is on the presentation of Negro drama and Negro creativity in the theater, I, myself, would have preferred to see Karamu, with its very beautiful plan and its ability to give beautiful expression to the Negro in the theatre, I would, myself, prefer to see it concentrate entirely on that, rather than doing things like Carousel or, what's the thing you did about the girl who had the abortion?

Oh, I don't know.

You directed something like that recently, didn't you.

The girl who had the abortion?

Well, in other words, things that had nothing to do really with Negro life, but simply used Negro artists. And Karamu has been a very great influence in the acting end of the theatre in relation to the Negroes, and many fine actors have come out of Karamu. And as a theatre school, if you want to use that term, it is, indeed, excellent. However there are many, or certainly there are several, very good, young Negro playwrights who are very talented, like William Branch, like Robert Lucas, like Walter Mitchum. And all of them have several scripts, and there are others scattered around the country who, to my mind, would develop in a place to see their work done -- would probably develop into something good too, you see? I would like to see this theatre be what a regional theater might be in Texas or Oklahoma or what Paul [Green's] or the folk theatre was.

For the Negro playwright?

Yes, primarily for the Negro playwright, or for people writing plays about Negro life, or the problem of the Negro in relation to American democracy. Which doesn't mean that it would be an all-Negro cast all the time. Anyway, I simply see no reason why Karamu or any other theatre primarily in a Negro neighborhood would do rehashes of Broadway plays, which the Playhouse in Cleveland does, which come on tour here. Anyway, what you see...

I don't feel that I do rehashes of Broadway plays, and I would really like to pursue that. Now I'm not talking about my dissertation, I'm talking about much more important things.

Well, I'm not talking about you, I'm talking about the theatre in general.

The possibility of doing a new script excites me as much as anything else I can think of. If they're good enough.

Well, the thing is that playwrights only get good by development....

All right, good enough as a new playwright, then. All right, I'll qualify it then. I know the problem.--110--
I don't know. If I'm not mistaken, for a time in past seasons, Karamu was doing more things that were not original, that were Broadway shows.

Well, you're right. The number of original plays proportionately is small compared to the other plays. But not the Broadway trash, certainly.

No, I did not say Broadway trash. I simply said that they were plays that had nothing to do with Negro life. They had nothing to do with the life of this community. There is simply no reason why Negroes shouldn't appear in Shakespeare or Bernard Shaw, or anything else. However, since there is such a scarcity of theaters that concentrate on the subject matter that I, myself, am interested in, leave those things to the other theaters, let them alone. And that is what makes Karamu famous. It's famous.

Yes, and there are many people who still believe that those are the plays we still do best.

The original function of Karamu seemed to be that, and that is what made it famous. Could we stop it a moment? *[Tape stops]*

In other words, the direction we should move is back towards a greater concentration on the Negro conflict play.

Yes. I don't think exclusively by any means. I think it is most interesting that Karamu has done such a variety of productions. But I do feel, for the reasons that I have mentioned, for the lack of such a theatre anywhere else in America, or the world, a theatre that could do superb productions of material primarily American Negro in origin, or orientation....

Could you get this fellow, Lucas, to send me scripts?

Oh, I'm not really speaking of just personalities, I'm speaking of the general trend....

All right, any good ones? Would you help us?

Of course I will, of course I will.

That's important to me. I would like nothing better. I have no reservations on this score whatsoever except, perhaps, the quality of the play.... Let me see if I want to pursue this Abbey and the Karamu idea at all. It's interesting. The Abbey will not do anything but Irish plays; any other plays that want to be done in Ireland are not done at the Abbey.

I don't think Karamu should be that way.

No, that would be like rolling back the clock.

Yeah, of course. And then it has three theatres to keep active. It would be very hard to find that much material.

That's right. All right, can I jump to some biographical [data] on you, Langston? You gave me some very good stuff, but this I don't have. Is it true that you taught young children art and block prints at the old theatre?

Yeah, I did, for a while, I did...

So, your first contact with Karamu was really as an artist and not as a writer?

Well, I used to come here anyway as a youngster, you know. I lived right around the corner from Karamu for quite a time.

Where did you live?

On Central Avenue near 36th, somewhere in there.

Yes, when you were a student at Central High?

Yes.

You came to the playhouse settlement to do a variety of things?

I just came for fun.--111--
Do you remember what activities?

Oh, not in very particular. And then Mrs˙ Jelliffe asked me if I would like to teach lettering to the kids because I was taking such a course in high school among others. I had a very wonderful teacher, still living, I think she's over on Northside. Clara Dieke.

D-y-k-e?

D-i-e-k-e or D-e-i-k-e, I forget the spelling.

She *[Mrs˙ Jelliffe]* only remembered Clara and couldn't remember the last name. She also said you'd remember Walter Solomon from the Council for Educational Alliance with some affecton.

Yes, I do, I do.

Did the Jelliffes or Karamu or anybody send you to the Council for Educational Alliance, or was that a... did you go over there for classes?

I don't remember. I went over there for a time. I've forgotten how it happened.

You don't remember any more. Did you do art work there?

Yeah, and "Young Writers." I don't think I went very long or very much. I came more often to Karamu House.

What years are we talking about when you were in high school?

We're talking about 1917-18.

You were born in 0-2?

I was born in 1902.

Your students were doing lettering and block prints too, then?

Well, I was learning those things myself at the time.

Did you have any talent, do you think?

I suppose a little bit, a least the art teachers at Central thought I had. Yeah. You know I did a number of block prints here, and a couple of them were sold at the Urban League auction. They had an auction of "Art by Well-Known People" some years ago, and I gave them my Karamu block prints.

You know somebody -- Elmer Brown, or Skinny Smith, or one of these guys that I keep hearing about -- did a block print to illustrate your "Merry-go-round" poem, which has rapidly become just about everyone's favorite when they hear it, I'm sure. I had it at home for a while. It belonged to Karamu and they knew I had it, so I couldn't keep it. It's a beauty, very nice. Who is Ben Haits?

How do you spell that?

H-a-i-t-s.

I don't know.

He is described somewhere as being a protégé of yours or a student in playwriting or a promising playwright. Mrs˙ Jelliffe doesn't know the name.

I don't know it either.

Before I get to *Mule Bone* I want to talk about Alain Locke a little bit. You might say that I've discovered him, in a sense of late, although I had heard of him and knew about him and vaguely recall someone telling that his family was still in Washington. It was in reading the *The New Negro,* parts of it for the first time, parts of it for the second and third time in

connection with this dissertation, that I really got excited about him. I developed in my mind an image of a man -- a real intellectual. A very dedicated, in a way -- sharp mind. And a lot of the things he's written in *Crisis* and in *The New Negro.* When I--112--talked to Mrs˙ Jelliffe, she said you knew him pretty well. She described him personally in a way that kind of interested me, and she said you used to enjoy taking him for a walk down Central Avenue, that he was, in appearance, an upper class kind of person, something of a dandy, apparently, and he was somewhat removed, or perhaps great deal removed from what we would loosely call the Central Avenue kind of...

He wore spats.

What can you tell me about him in terms of his influence on you, or yours on him, or impact on the Negro Renaissance?

He was very influential on many young Negro intellectuals because he was a kind of interpreter of the Negro Renaissance and interpreter of Negro writing and art. And, I believe, he was the first person to bring a really representative collection of Negro African art to America -- the Blondiau Collection. When would that be? In the late 20s, perhaps. At any rate, he was very well-known and highly respected and widely read among young Negro intellectuals just as James Baldwin is at the moment. He was the person most discussed by younger Negroes who read.

Yeah, the New Negro of today and the new Negro of the late 20s. Was he a true intellectual, Locke, or am I overrating him?

I don't know what you would mean. He was a Rhodes scholar.

When he makes observations about Negro material and the Negro field in relationship to the arts, is he speaking from theory or from personal experience and contact with these things?

He's speaking from a study of the arts themselves, certainly.

So he's sound on that?

I would think so. He certainly read everybody and he had a good deal to do, I guess, in discovering or bringing to public attention some of the young Negro poets and writers.

And Montgomery Gregory was, in a sense, a kind of a Locke disciple.

Yes, and Warren Kinney was, and Jean Toomer. Practically all of the writers who came out of the Washington.

But not Claude McKay.

Not Claude McKay, because Claude McKay was writing before Alain Locke discovered him, I believe, and writing in Jamaica even before he came to this country.

And writing well. *[Referring to books in a used bookstore in Cleveland]* I made a little short list that's in my library -- a collection, published in Cleveland, of young Clevelanders, Negro poets, called *Dominu* or *Dom Du.* Some kind of little anthology.

Oh really?

Do you know about it at all. I think it's something you'll want.

Sort of vaguely. I seem to remember that name.

I don't know any names in it. The editor published some of his stuff. The rest are all Clevelanders, men and women, *Don gu, Dom du?...*

Yeah, I sort of remember that name. I would like to see it.

I will buy it for you. I sounds like the sort of thing you'd like to have.

I certainly would.

Now, *Mule Bone.* I believe we have started on Zora Neale Hurston. She had a Ph˙ D from where? *[Ed˙ note: He means a B˙ A˙]* Do you remember?--113--
Barnard, I think.

And really sharp.

Oh, she was a very brilliant woman and a wonderful folk collector.

A good one.

A very good one, indeed.

Because the stuff that she writes about, sometimes she's so wild that I don't know if it's all imagination or all truth, or a compound.

[Hughes laughs]

Is it a compound?

What?

Of imagination and fact.

She wrote fiction, really. But her folk material much of it is quite wonderful and 90 percent authentic.

That's a high percentage. What happened to *Mule Bone?*

The story is in Big Sea, so why repeat it here?

But I wondered if you could add anything to it?

I don't think so.

No?

No, I tell the whole story there.

Of course it was never done.

Never. Never done anywhere as far as I know.

Yeah, well why, because of this feud over royalties?

Because of the dispute over authorship.

And do you think today any attempt to settle it would be fruitful, or is it a dead issue?

Zora Neale Hurston's dead?

But I mean in terms of estate, copyright, and so on.

Oh, I don't imagine there'd be anyone would want to do it. I haven't read it for years. I don't know what it would be like. It was never really quite finished. It was a draft that was running around.

Ever since I read it, I wanted to talk further about it, and I thought here I had a great opportunity to see if there's anything more.

Well, there's nothing more except a little anecdote that might be amusing. The last time I saw Zora Neale Hurston was in Washington, perhaps five or six years ago, at Georgia Douglass Johnson's home, and she was staying with Georgia Johnson, which I did not know. The Washington writers, those who were left around, including Mrs˙ Johnson, were giving a party for me, and it was to be a benefit at Johnson's home. She *[Mrs˙ Johnson]* decided she couldn't clean up her house, because she's about seventy-five, and they gave the party somewhere else. Meanwhile, I went to Mrs˙ Johnson's home to go to the party with her, and she had gone. And she had told me that day that Zora Hurston was staying there, and she was coming to the party. But when I got to her house they had already gone ahead to get things ready. Now, lying on the living room table, where Ms˙ Hurston was working and writing, was the script of a play -- I've forgotten the name of it now, a play, and I saw it sitting there, opened it, looked at it, saw it was by Zora Neale Hurston -- and just out of devilment, as she had once rubbed my name off of **Mule Bone,** I took the page out of the script and put it in the typewriter and typed "And Langston Hughes," except that I put my name at the--114--top "By Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston." I put it back in the script, so I never knew what she might have said when she saw it, but I imagined she laughed because she had a very good sense of humor. So, anyway, at the party she was very courteous, and we were very cordial, but we didn't mention Mule Bone, of course.

Well, those things happen. The wonder is that they don't happen more. I don't know the content of it, but if there's folk material involved perhaps it makes it easier to consider things like that in the public domain, although of course they're not. I've come across the name Willard Richardson...

Willis...

Willis Richardson, a good deal. The only play of his that counted was *Compromise,* and it was about the second Negro play that they did in 1926. Mrs˙ Jelliffe describes him as a kind of voice in the wilderness from Howard University, urging the retention of the Negro heritage through the arts. Is this a fair description, and what can you add?

Yes, it would be fair, I think. He still lives in Washington, and he has an anthology of plays, you know, which I believe was published by the Associated Publishers. And it seems to me that not too long ago he wrote a new play, three or four years ago. Wrote me about something or other. Anyway, he's still living; you can write him. Find out what he's doing

I will. It will have to wait until this is over. That is important to me. The whole question of opposition to the Negro play and support for it in the history of the Gilpin Players is forming a great part of my study. You know it all, I'm sure, in terms of the opposition to Gilpin, and

the *Emperor Jones,* and the Negro press here in town, and from within the group both support and opposition. Here's a man of letters, presumably, and a member of the faculty at Howard at the time, I guess. *[Ed' note: Richardson was not a faculty member.]* Is that right? Who was very strong for it? Who, as a Negro, believed in the retention of this past, when a lot of the Negroes were saying "no, don't remind me of it." So I wanted to know what you could tell me about it. Anything more biographically that I ought to know?

Now, I don't know too much about him as a man. I met him several times

But the books exist.

The books exist.

Is *Drums of Haiti* just another name for *Troubled Island?*

I think so. It was called Emperor of Haiti also.

And it's all the same play. The *Emperor of Haiti* was just done off-Broadway about a year and a half ago.

Yes, and it was an opera, Troubled Island -- music by William Grant Still. It was done at Civic Center. And because it was the opera title, I no longer use that on the play.

Well, there's a report in the papers of your going to California and stopping in Omaha on the way to give a speech. This was April 25th, 1937; you were en route to collaborate with William Grant Still on an operatic version of his play *Drums of Haiti.*

On my play?

Yeah, well, I'm quoting from the paper. Your play *Drums of Haiti* which was then called *Troubled Island.*

It seems to me that might have been the title used in Detroit on one of the productions. It was in Detroit, perhaps, that I stopped, not Omaha.--115--
"Langston Hughes to Talk Under Urban League Auspices In Omaha, Sunday, April 25th'"

Yes, I probably did.

I wrote it down simply to have the information in case you needed it for memory. The rest is biography. Oh, you got Rosenwald Foundation support.

I got a Guggenheim, too.

Are there any other foundations that you could say helped or influenced in terms of writing a play, or the writing of material that made you a playwright? I want to be able to say that Rockefeller gave Karamu money and so they helped you indirectly by helping the theatre.

Well, I don't think any of these were given to me for playwriting necessarily, just in general, you know.

Well, that's all right. I think I can mention these anyway. *Sold Away...*

Sold Away? I don't know...

"Sold Away. A play by Langston Hughes."

Soul Gone Home is a play by me.

Sold Away. I got several references. Let me see if any of them help at all. In 1941 after the fire burned down the Karamu Theatre, the Karamu group planned a production of a program of three plays: *Doomsday Tale,* by Owen Dodson, an unnamed comedy by Shirley Graham, which I discovered today was called *Track 13,* and *Sold Away,* by Langston Hughes.

Were those full-length plays?

They say a series of three plays...

Yes, then that was De Sun Do Move. That's eventually what it was called...

And The Sun Do Move.

De Sun -- "D-e."

De Sun Do Move by Langston Hughes, a full-length play?

A full-length play. The title's taken from the old John Jasper sermon. The famous old sermon of the Negro minister in Richmond, and it was produced. In fact that's why I founded the Skyloft theatre in Chicago to get my own play produced. Whenever I want to put on a play and nobody else does, I... The play was called De Sun Do Move and I founded the Skyloft Players at the Good Shepherd Community House in Chicago in 1941, and the day that the war broke out we were rehearsing De Sun Do Move.

And that killed it, huh?

No. It didn't kill it at all.

You went on with it?

Of course we went on with it.

How long did that group last?

I think it still goes on, although the community house is no longer there, I don't believe, but the last I heard the Skyloft Players were sure in existence. They did many plays and went on for a number of years, and still are going on if I'm not mistaken, and the wife of the producer of The Blacks, Madame Mouzon, was my leading lady in De Sun Do Move.

You mean you directed and acted in it?

No, I did not act in it. She was my leading lady. The Blacks, which is now being done in New York, is produced by her current husband, Sidney Bernstein, and she is going to be in The Blacks in London. I understand she's rehearsing in the London company right now.--116--
Oh boy. Max Finewell is the stage manager, I know. Well that's brand new to me. But *Sold Away,* you suspect, was the original title?

I think that it was the original title because it's about the underground railway and Negro slaves' being sold down the river, and so on. And the opening was in some way sponsored by the Rosenwald Foundation. The Rosenwald Foundation was very interested in Horace Caton, who was director of the Community House at the time, and they helped the Community House with a number of their projects. And the opening was attended by Mr˙ Embree and numbers of the

Rosenwald people, and some of the tickets of the opening were sponsored by them. In a sense, it was the Rosenwald opening.

Do you remember being picked as one of America's twenty-five most interesting people?

By Mr. Beard? Yeah, Charlie Beard.

And all through this the references to the Writers' Conferences in Spain.

There's a guy here in town.

I met him last night. He was in Spain. He was at the theatre.

This fellow is a white lawyer named Sam Handelman. He had arranged to talk to you at City Club in '37. And he took you to the Carter Hotel to register you, and they wouldn't let you in at the Carter, and he wanted to start a suit. He was a lawyer, and you said "No, forget it." No, it was the Cleveland Hotel, the Cleveland was where they wouldn't let you in, and then you went to another hotel -- the Carter, and they registered you without any problems. It may be naïve of me, Langston, but when I stop and think how recent these things are in Cleveland, it's not like hearing about it happening way back or someplace else. But '36 and '37. Harry Jackson, who's a judge in town, had the same thing happen to him at a dinner when he was the one Negro in a group of four, five, six people who went to dinner in a downtown hotel twenty years ago, well, twenty-five years ago, and they wouldn't serve the party.

Yes, that would have been true at that time.

So one hotel would and one wouldn't, is that it?

But by and large Cleveland was not what you'd call a very prejudiced town, ever. But there were such incidents back in the '20s and early '30s.

Oh man. There's wonderful stuff here about visiting your mother in Oberlin.

Things you may have forgotten. This is '35.

From what?

"Langston Hughes spent several days here last week at the invitation of the Women's City Club for talks. He visited with his mother at Oberlin, gave several talks, much socializing, leaves for Spain early in '36 for study and research."

Study and research. *[laughs]*

Then, of course, then comes the other article about Spain with Louise Thompson. On the tour with Louise Thompson with the IWO.

Where?

Visit to prison camps and hospitals in the Spanish Civil War.

Yes, I was in Spain as a reporter for The Baltimore Afro-American. Not for study and research.

"Langston Hughes visiting Moorish prisoners formerly in Franco's army."

Hmmmm. Very interesting. I had a very interesting time.

I can imagine. Let me just wrap this up. I'm saving one big question on *Little Ham,* and a couple of minor ones. Oh, Wayne State. Now that was something--117--in '43, and I'm interested because that's my college. I got my B˙ A˙ from Wayne in Detroit. "American Firsters picket Langston Hughes speech. Call poet a Communist. Address at Wayne State 100 pickets claiming Hughes is an atheistic Communist, a self-confessed Communist, a self-confessed blasphemous poet?"
Mothers of America, they were.

Were they? And Wayne State University, as you may know, is one of the real liberal...

Yeah, but they had nothing to do with the university, and the university furnished adequate police protection.

The speech went on?

Oh yeah, the speech went on, the hall was crowded, and I was escorted home by two or three police guards.

How were the police? Did they behave all right?

They were nice.

The question about *Little Ham* runs like this: When it was done there were interviews with you about the Negro drama in which you pointed out that many of the previous Negro plays had been written by white authors and that furthermore, quote "There is little humor in the theatre about the Colored race; most of the plays have been tragedy or fantasy such as *Green Pastures.* "There seems to me," you said, "to be a grand opportunity for someone to write folk comedy about Colored life in the modern city. That was my idea in writing *Little Ham."* And later other writers wrote "This is just a funny play, a comedy. There's no serious purpose. It has no serious reason for being." I don't believe that.

Well, one of the critics got quite clearly the serious undertone of Little Ham.

There is one.

Of course there is *[a serious tone].* There is in all my plays.

I resented this. Langston, I wrote down one quote after another.

Well, surely there should be one review that got it...

I'll have to double check. I've got the reviews.

... that mentioned that fact that it was about the numbers and the seamy side of life on Central Avenue South.

But not just that. When you write about people who are poor and still gamble, you're writing about a philosophy of hope that as long as you might hit tomorrow, you go on living even though life is pretty miserable. Am I putting that right?

That would be partially true, yeah.

There is a serious. See here's a quote: "No serious reason for being." Another quote: "It is just for laughs, and in laughing to be happy."

Well, that's very good for box office. But not much depth.

All right, this just out of curiosity; it says "Hughes just finished a book for a musical comedy of his race. In all probability Duke Ellington will write the music," 1936. Do you have any memory of what that might have been?

1936?

That was from a little talk with a guy named Charles Schneider who quoted you. I wondered if anything ever came of it.

Oh yeah, that was a story that a Swedish woman named Kai Gynt had, which I collaborated on with her, and the book and lyrics were to be by myself and Kai--118--Gynt˙ No, the book was to be by myself and Kai Gynt and the lyrics were to be by me. Duke Ellington did do the music for two or three of the lyrics. Meanwhile, Miss Gynt wanted Paul Robeson for the leading role. Because Paul Robeson at that time was like Harry Belafonte is now. And every play that came up that had a male Negro lead in it was for Robeson. Everybody wanted Robeson -- like Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte and Nottingham -- he got a hundred offers a month, and was very expensive, if I recall correctly, and went to London, or was already in London or about that time went to London, where he became more famous than he already was here, and Robeson was unavailable. Therefore, they could not raise the money for the production without Paul Robeson because there was no other Negro male star of equal stature. Therefore, Mr˙ Duke Ellington, who was always very busy, went no further with the music. I went no further with the book and Miss Kai Gynt could get no further with her play and for years and years and years she tried to get it put together in one place or another, which is a story of many, many plays.

Did it have a name?

The eventual name was Cock o' the World, a play on "Cock of the Walk." It was about a wandering Negro minstrel type who went all around the world, and he was a seaman and a roustabout and a wanderer, and there were various scenes laid in New Orleans, the port of New Orleans, and Hong Kong. It was, I think, very colorful and beautiful.

It drew on your experience a lot on the maritime.

Well, not necessarily. Yes, I could collaborate on it because I had been in many ports, too. But it was her original idea, Kai Gynt, and it was a charming idea. There was one very charming scene in New Orleans for which Duke did some music of the serenade wagons where the musicians rode on wagons -- you know, where you get the tailgate trade -- trombonists play on the tailgate of the wagon. That would have been quite lovely, and I wonder if Mr˙ Ellington still has those songs, because the two or three that he did were quite charming. Anyway, Kai Gynt died quite tragically. She had a heart attack in a bathtub a few years ago and drowned. She was a good friend of Greta Garbo's. In fact, I think she came to America at about the same time.

Miss or Mrs˙?

Professionally, Miss˙ But she was married. She married a singer named Edward Fowler, who had a very beautiful baritone voice. Did some concertizing, got to be fairly well-known

She lived in America.

She lived in America, in fact she died in New York, not too long ago.

The Gilpin Players program, *Little Ham,* quote: "It is a play without a serious reason for being, it is just a laugh and in laughing to be happy." Not true.

Good. What does the phrase "born with a veil" mean? Is it Negro folklore?

Born with a veil over your face? It means a person with a second sight, a clairvoyant. And it is said that such people are born with a veil over their face.

It appears in *St˙ Louis Woman.*

Yeah, it's a folk phrase.

But the big thing, even though you've touched on it, if you don't mind, for the record. What did Karamu and its existence mean to you as a playwright? I'm talking then.--119--
Oh, it was immensely valuable. Which is why I'm putting in a plug for a return to the same thing. It's doing more good for young Negro playwrights because the white playwright has all of the theaters in America in which to attempt to get his material on the stage, and it's not easy for anyone. The Negro playwright has a very limited field in which he might even hope to be presented, and therefore, since this is a social service institution, and one of the great ones in America, in many ways I feel that by continuing what used to be an old policy, in reviving it and not reviving it a hundred percent, because I said that one should not be limited in anything that one does, certainly, I'd like to see young Negro actors have a chance to do Shakespeare or Shaw or anything that develops that is fine and worth doing. On the other hand, I think it would be quite worth Karamu's while to go out of its way and to make a very intensive effort to develop the Negro playwrights. It's been invaluable to me, and I think it would be invaluable to others, to those who are young now who are beginning in the theatre and who find Broadway almost insurmountable, and off-Broadway almost insurmountable if it's a play with a largely Negro cast, you know? Or if it's on a Negro theme. At the moment in New York, it looks as though there might be possibly another kind of vogue for things Negro, I don't know. But the playwrights do not have to depend upon the season or two when the Negro theme is popular, because if he lives as long as I have, he will be writing over quite a span of time, and he needs somewhere to present his plays over the span of a quarter-century or more, you know.

My feeling is not only should a Negro theatre, if we want to use that term, do plays by and about Negroes, but it should do plays slanted toward the community in which it exists. It should be in a primarily Negro community since that is the way our racial life in America is still. It should do material of interest to that community.

You have shown no reluctance in founding groups to do your own plays. Can we say if you didn't have Karamu, you would have started one somewhere?

I probably would have. I wanted to see them. I wanted to see what they looked like done live. I wanted the experience of learning from them, and as you know a play on paper is one thing; a play in the theatre is quite something else. And the playwright can learn a very great deal through production. In fact that's almost the only way you do learn. Because speeches on paper look short and on the stage they sound long. Or they may be long on paper, and if they're good speeches, they may sound short on stage. You have no way really of judging until you see a thing come alive through acting and directing, you know?

And that was the thing in those years that Karamu gave?

Yeah. And I think it is a cultural shame that a great country like America with twenty million people of color has no primarily serious Colored theatre. There isn't. Karamu is the very nearest thing to it. The American Negro Theatre in New York developed a number of fine actors, and one production went to Broadway, Anna Lucasta, and became very commercial-minded, and suddenly everything turned Broadway after that, which is the wrong slant. My feeling is not only should a Negro theatre, if we want to use that term, do plays by and about Negroes, but it should do plays slanted toward the community in which it exists.--120--It should be in a primarily Negro community since that is the way our racial life in America is still. It should do material of interest to that community. Which doesn't mean that it should pander to the bad taste of some of the members of the community, or to the narrow mindedness of them. Because they think it should not be a theatre that should be afraid to do a Negro folk play about people who are perhaps not very well educated because some of the intellectuals, or "intellectuals," in quotes, are ashamed of such material. They should do the play anyway and the "intellectuals" in quotes, will sometimes be very impressed and come to the viewpoint and see that this is a wonderful and beautiful play, even though they may not agree with it when they read it or on first seeing of it, you know? It's the same with the Irish. It's unfortunate how the Irish public threw stones at the Abbey Theatre and rioted in the theatre, and that kind of theatre I think is much more exciting than a theatre that simply does The Corn is Green. Or something that has no relation to the people, no relation to the community.

I see your point. I think they picked the play which they moved into the West Virginia coal mining hills, took it out of Wales and made it a West Virginia coal mining play, and I guess this is ten years before I came and adapted it to a Negro situation. But, nevertheless, your point is well taken. Would you agree with me, Langston, that you have to walk a tightrope, though, not to go back? You don't want to go back to a segregated theatre, you don't want to go back, or do you, into an all-Negro theatre?

No, no, no, no. Not at all.

To you as a playwright, what does Karamu mean?

It means still an opportunity to see my work in the theatre more frequently than I otherwise might. That's why I'm here this week. It's gratifying to me.

Okay. Now can we talk about *Shakespeare in Harlem.* I found last night that all the actors who weren't talking to you were coming up to me saying: "What'd he say?" What'd he say?" And I said "I think he liked it," but I said they had to talk to you.

I did like it. I liked it very much.

Talk with the same frankness that has marked our discussions several years ago about*Simply Heavenly.*

It was a production quite different from the one done in New York. Both productions are admirable. Shakespeare in Harlem was done originally at the White Barn Theatre.

I have a tape of three quarters of that at home and an interview with you.

Yeah, and that was done for ANTA and for the third edition that was done effectively on Broadway, but in an off-Broadway theatre near Times Square.

On 48th Street?

Yes, no, not 48th Street. It was 41st. At any rate, the theatre is right in the shadow of the Times Building, but it's off-Broadway and down in the basement. It had really three productions that I have seen. This marks the fourth. Each of those productions was directed by Robert Breen, each of the ones in the east. His feeling about the material is one largely, I should I say, it was largely of sort of serious folk. His productions were very funny, very beautiful, very moving, part of them. Not very humorous. He did not accentuate or develop the humor of many of the lines in the poems, and that is the difference between his productions and yours here at Karamu. Here, a good deal, ninety percent of the humor that I had intended comes out here, and this production here is, therefore,--121--I think this production is more box-office safe. It's more entertaining to the general public, whereas the New York productions were a delight to the connoisseurs and lovers of poetry. I think we might say it that way and be fair to both productions, because both were quite beautiful. This one is extended in that there is more music, more dancing interludes.

More movement?

More movement. Yeah, more movement.

I tried. That was of course all deliberate.

Which I think is all very good for a populist theatre. And this extends the possibilities of the script even further than the original productions did, and it shows what one can do with nothing but poetry, really. It's very good. And the whole thing is made up of a stringing together of my poems. And I think Robert Breen did a very fine job in selecting them and putting the poems together in the sequences in which he does.

Yes, he does.

And I added nothing to it at all; I simply wrote the original poetry and what has resulted is the theatricalization of poetry, which I think...

It works.

... works and this shows off how much further it can work in that new elements have been developed in this production which are not present in productions in New York.

I'm very pleased. I want to get that other ten percent of the humor. I'll settle for ninety percent. I was conscious of the movement. It was apparent that with less attention, I won't say less care, it can be very static.

It can be very static. It can be almost a reading. You know, like a dramatic reading of plays they've been giving of late and can be quite a bore. I saw The Songbird with Bette Davis.

We saw it here. It was good.

It was good, but it was sort of a sleepy on the whole, and this could easily have been equally sleepy, but the direction is what.

I suppose. I do know that I tried. Did the idea of the community come across?

Oh yes, I saw that.

This poetry spans a long period.

Most of the poems used here are from Montage of a Dream Deferred. No, it doesn't span a long period.

Well, aren't' there some which you wouldn't want staged?

No, why would you say that?

Well, I don't know. This is the question that I hinted at the other night and wanted to discuss.

I don't write exactly the same as I did ten years ago, but there is nothing that I wanted *[to change].*

So that this is a satisfactory reproduction and a satisfactory image from this race-conscious point of view. That's really what I'm saying.

Satisfactory to me. I don't know if it would be satisfactory to everyone.

Sure, sure. You know we had a lady who called up about *A Raisin in the Sun.* This will kill you. She said, "Mrs˙ Jelliffe, I'm so and so." (I don't know who she was). She said, "Mrs˙ Jelliffe, I want you to know that there are those of us in the Negro community who are not pleased by this play." Mrs˙ Jelliffe said,--122--"Well, what play are you talking about?" She said, *"A Raisin in the Sun."* Mrs˙ Jelliffe said, "Why do you object?" She said, "We do not want to see a play in which Negroes are presented like that." Mrs˙ Jelliffe said, "Well, I beg your pardon. Have you seen the play?" The woman said, "No, but I have people tell me." Mrs˙ Jelliffe said, "Well, what is it in the play to which you object?" This woman said, "Is it true that in the play there is an embezzler who takes this man's money and runs away with it? You know Bobo -- not Bobo -- the other guy who doesn't appear." Mrs˙ Jelliffe says, "Yes, there is." She says, "Is he a Negro man?" Mrs˙ Jelliffe says, "Yes he is." She says," Well, this is what I mean. What's his name? Willy? Don't-do-it-Willy?" A wonderful scene. My god! And of course, I don't know what they'd call it, lunatic fringe, or a misunderstanding completely. Here's a play about which it's a cliché now to say that this presents the Negro in a pure human light, without the Negro consciousness that has marked some of the race and agitation plays of Negro life. It does represent a different approach, and here's a woman who still thinks it represents the same old thing.

Well, she hasn't seen the play.

Yeah, that explains a lot, but the question is, if she saw it, would she like it?

I think she probably would have liked it.

I hope so. Because as you pointed out in talking about *Shakespeare in Harlem,* it is entertaining. This is the same as saying it is well done in a general way. And yet the excellence of the thing frequently is like the painting of a slum child or a good photograph. The soul comes out. In other words, here's a college scene. Here's the birdcage, here's the blues man. If you see beyond the surface to the human being, then you know he's human and you don't even see anything good or bad.

I would think.

Where do we stand? About ready to...

Are you finished?

I've got everything.

If you've got everything, don't keep going.

No I don't. I don't want to go beyond except I'm curious about a lot of things that don't end up in this study. I'd like to know about your playwriting methods. I'd like to know a little about rewriting and what kind of rewriting. I'd like to know why you are so generous about letting me change a line or juggle, where other playwrights are not.

[Tape ends. Tape begins again in the Silver home. Dorothy Silver, Reuben Silver, and Langston Hughes present]

What would you like to know, really?

Ask him about *Mulatto.*

Dorothy S: Here's the question: According to our dates, *Mulatto* was offered to Karamu ten years before they did it, before Karamu did it, and in the intervening period it had a Broadway production with which we understand you were unhappy.

Yeah.

Dorothy S: Why?

Because the Broadway production was considerably distorted from the original script, in my opinion. And the portions of it were written without my knowledge or permission, inserts and changes were done while I was not in New York and unaware of the fact that the play was about to be presented.--123--
Dorothy S: Unaware that the play was going to be done. Not exactly standard procedure.

Yeah. I wasn't even aware that it was going to be done. So when I became aware of the changes, I was surprised, to say the least, and it being my first play, however, I had no great power from stopping it from being made. The producer and I disagreed on a number of points. I had intended the play to be a poetic tragedy, and his viewpoint about it was that it was a sex melodrama. And he wanted to make it into a sensational play like White Cargo, which he had previously produced. So eventually, when it got to Broadway, most of its original intention was contained in the storyline, but there were certain embellishments and overtones which I, myself, did not entirely approve. Although, that is not to say that in a sense he might have been right, in that it did have box-office appeal, apparently, because it did run for a year in New York, and from the commercial viewpoint, perhaps some of his changes helped it.

Writers are starting to realize that there are so many social problems that need to be stated forcefully and strongly, and social material has not been fashionable since the McCarthy era because it has been dangerous to use it.

Who was the producer, Langston?

Martin Jones. Who is now, I think, a television producer. Anyway, the whole story is told in I Wonder as I Wander, my second autobiography. In fact, it has the whole story of the production. And it [Mulatto] no doubt was offered to Karamu shortly after it was written. Because it was written about 1929-1930 for Jasper Dieter, who had his own theatre. And Jasper was not able to

put it on at that time because most of the good Negro actors that he hoped to use were engaged in Broadway productions. So all of my plays have been offered to Karamu, and Karamu's done almost all of them.

Dorothy S: Why did Karamu refuse *Mulatto* at the point at which you offered it to them?

I don't remember it at all. Perhaps they considered it too controversial; I don't remember now why it was not done *[at Karamu]* before Broadway. That was more nearly like the original version of the play. The present version is more nearly like the original version was. For example, in my version, the girl goes away to school and doesn't come back in the first act. In the Broadway version, the girl, the beautiful daughter, is running all through the show, and the producer's reason for that was, you need a pretty girl going all through the show. So they have her miss the train; instead of going away in the first act, she misses the train and comes back home. So I said, "What will you do with her in the end?" and they said, "Oh well, we decided to have her raped."

Dorothy S: At the very end?

Yeah, in the third act she gets raped.

We don't need her after that.

So that's what they do occasionally on Broadway to young authors and their plays.

Dorothy S: Tell me, we ran across little clippings that said that *Mulatto,* it was *Mulatto,* was banned in Philadelphia?--124--
Yeah, I think it was banned there, and it was nearly banned in Chicago on the grounds of obscenity and sex, which delighted the producer because the producer, you know, great publicity, people rushed to the box office thinking they were going to see a dirty play, which was the last thing that I intended.

Dorothy S: This was in the period of the professional production, of the Broadway production...

Yes, this was the period that the Broadway production went on tour. It toured the whole United States. It ran a year on Broadway and had about eight months on the road, a whole season, and it was revived subsequently for a further New England tour and so on. It's now an opera, the opera The Barrier.

Lawrence Tibbett made it.

Tibbett and Muriel Rahn signed, so it's had a long, long life. And I wish the Karamu would do it again. It's very timely. It's about prejudice and segregation and all the things that the present sit-ins are about, you know. In fact it begins with a boy who's refused a Coca-Cola or something and can't drink a Coca-Cola in a cross-roads store. The very thing the sit-ins are about, so I would like very much if Karamu did it again right now, because it's timely. If they would do it again, I would come out to see it.

This is a very tough question. Well, in looking over some of the writing, critical writing on your plays, and looking over the body of the plays as we know them from the Karamu history, it would appear that you've moved from the kind of play represented by *Little Ham* to a play like *Mulatto.*

No, that's in reverse. Mulatto was written first.

I'm sorry. Let me go back. From a grimmer kind of play, if you want to call it that, to the kind of comedy represented by *Little Ham* with *Front Porch* as a, perhaps a play in between, in terms of a combination of, I don't want to say underlying seriousness of purpose, because we agreed we had it in *Little Ham.* But what I'm getting at is this movement from what somebody called a play of hero-modern times to a serious, deliberately grimmer, maybe if that's the right word, kind of play. Do you find your writing settling down in one or the other of these veins, or don't you consider them separate veins.

No, I don't think there's any separation. In my own mind there's not, at any rate.'

Despite the superficial appearance of the separation?

To me that question has no real meaning. To me, most of my plays are similar in intent and purpose although the treatment may be lighter or heavier or melodramatic or comic.

Dorothy S: Do you feel that one approach or another, or a light approach or a heavy approach, makes the point better than the other?

I think it depends on the character. A character like Simple is one approach, and a character like the mother in Mulatto is a more serious approach and poetic approach. It depends on who you're writing about or the situation you're writing about.

But aren't you reaching your audience in different times? Through *Simply Heavenly,* you indicate that the way to make these points now is by humor.

Not at all. I would write a serious play and not feel as though I had a subject in mind that I wanted to use in a serious manner. It's not a conscious aiming at the audience in a conscious form with me. It's writing what I have at the moment that I want to write about.

Perhaps I'm attaching too much importance to a play like *Raisin in the Sun* when I say that it represents a shift in the approach to the treatment of the--125--Negro in the modern drama. Am I right or wrong about that?
Well, it's written in the first place by a Negro playwright who has a different viewpoint from Paul Green, or the people who wrote the popular dramas in the late '20s or '30s. But I think it depends entirely on the writer or the person. I, myself, am not in relation to my own works at any rate. I don't think there is any conscious change in writing in order to reach a new public.

Can you go back? Can American theatre go back to the so-called propaganda or agit-prop plays after plays like *A Raisin in the Sun,* which represent more sophistication in a way, have been done?

I don't see why it couldn't have such agit-prop plays if one wanted them or needed them. In my opinion, there's a need for them right now. There is a shift at the moment from material that was not very socially conscious for a decade. To me, it seems very dark. You can detect it in poetry or the theatre in New York now, to socially conscious material again. Although it's not very clear in material right now. But I think writers are starting to realize that there are so many social problems that need to be stated forcefully and strongly, and social material has not been fashionable since the McCarthy era because it has been dangerous to use it. But I think there is

now a going into it again. Probably in different form. It won't be like Mark Liftson's No for an Answer. But it will again come into our theatre, I'm sure.

Like *Stevedore* or like *Peace on Earth.*

And everything goes in trends or waves.

I'm sure producers were besieged with imitations of *Raisin* when it came out.

Oh, I don't know. I haven't seen them myself.

Maybe not. I was under the impression that they would follow, flock, to present this kind of play. Rather than a play like *Native Son,* say, or *Deep Are the Roots.*

Dorothy S: They may be looking for plays like this. I doubt that there are hundreds of them floating around. Do you know anything about *Little Ham* touring to Detroit from Karamu?

No, I don't remember that it did. It may have.

I have to ask Mrs` Jelliffe.

I don't think so.

They may have planned to, which is often what happened with Karamu. How often did you come to Karamu, Langston, in the late '30s, just to see the plays, or did you come to rehearsals?

In the late '30s. Let's see. I came out to see Little Ham, I know. No, I'm not a great one for going to rehearsals. I leave the rehearsals alone. After all, one writes the plays and I, myself, do not like particularly being involved with rehearsal difficulties and personality difficulties. I much more enjoy seeing the finished product and seeing what has been done with it and to see it grow.

Well, your visits then were to see the plays?

To see the plays, yes. If I was here, I very seldom went to rehearsals. I avoid rehearsals as much as possible in New York or elsewhere. Once a director's chosen, I trust my work to the director.

Here's a thorny one in a way. Do Negroes have a natural rhythm?

Hey! *[Laughs].*

Do they have a natural rhythm by virtue of race?

How would I know? I don't know what makes anything. But they do have a rhythm, I know.--
126--
I threw it at you without the background. The background of course for me in this study is that the Jelliffes have been quoted rather widely in the '20s that they saw, in playing with white and Negro children in telling stories, a greater imagination on the part of Negro children, a greater rhythm, a greater... oh, he calls it a kind of "motorness." She has called it "emotional vitality," "emotional immediacy." This, when I read it, jarred me because I was brought up in the tradition that you don't make generalizations about peoples because most of the generalizations that are made are unfavorable and stereotypes, and we don't want to do that. Then here comes along someone who is making a generalization in a favorable way, and I don't know how to take it. I don't know how to react. So I asked everybody about it. I think in my own mind I have an

answer, have had for years, I expect, but in doing this study I came smack up against it again, and I wanted to know if you'd care to comment about it.

[Laughs] Whatever I say would be wrong.

Well, let me ask you this. Are the Negroes in the constant assimilation process which takes place in this country? Is the Negro today less whatever he was than he was twenty years ago? Is he losing any of the things he had as a Negro?

Some are, yes.

If you entertain, what does it matter what the review says? If the audience likes it and sits there to the end and applauds at the end and goes home feeling good and tells other people to come, it doesn't matter if it's turned upside down, as long as it's something that holds the people, and you're able to say what you want to say. So I'm not a proponent of the well-made play myself.

Is this the end of a kind of a folk period or folk phase?

It's in transition certainly, and some of the qualities of rhythm and spontaneity, shall we say, are becoming highly self-conscious, of course. Much more anglicized, Americanized, and culturized. Which happens to any folk people. But I would say yes, that by and large, the American Negro has retained a certain rhythmical quality which no doubt comes from the African heritage, which no doubt has gone into jazz, which has gone into the Negro dancing, which comes out in other ways, too, probably in children's play and so on. I see nothing wrong in it in the stereotype, either. Various ethnic groups have qualities of their own.

Are they ethnic, are they cultural, are they environmental?

I cannot analyze that because I don't know. There's a long discussion about that. It may be environmental, but a thousand years of environment produce it and therefore it becomes cultural -- just like the Spanish gypsies. Flamenco is Flamenco and, you know, Eskimos don't have it. So I don't see anything to be ashamed of in the beauty of the Negro heritage. Although a lot of people seem to, which you just imparted, stereotype or stigma, but stereotypes are often true, unfortunately. Unfortunately when they're bad, and fortunately when they're good.

Here's another thorny one. In Cleveland, where many of your plays had their first performances, and this, of course, will explain some of the criticism, in a--127--couple of the reviews; there's a repeated criticism that the end of your plays are weak. That they rattle off towards the end. McDermott says it once or twice; a guy named Schneider says it at another time. Do you recognize or admit this as a weakness, and if so, is it the kind of thing that rewriting corrected in later productions, or is it just one man's opinion?
No, I wasn't aware of that excerpt.

I found one or two, or one, anyway.

It may be true. I'm told that every playwright has weakness.

I wonder if in your own writing you find the ending of a play is the chief trouble. Some people say the first act is trouble. Some people say I can't write a second act. Some writers say starting the play the toughest thing. I wondered -- if for your endings -- I wondered if you recognize any validity in that comment as it reflected on your writing procedures.

All I can say is that I'm not conscious of it. I don't write in terms of acts. I write in terms of the story, and then when I get what I want on paper, I divide it up into acts because you do have to have your information somewhere.

Dorothy S: This is infuriating. Go on, read it. That's all bits and snatches. McDermott...

[reads review] Little Ham... Negro poet... the players are earthy... doesn't quite follow through... lacks sharpness and impact... Yes, well that's what's been said about Simply Heaven, too, and I think that is based on the, what seemingly has been, or what has been for a long time the American conception that the play has to be well-made, but that is passing out. The off-Broadway theatre now in New York is almost formless in relation to the older forms of theatre. My play Mulatto, for example, is more nearly what you might call a conventional structured dramatic play, building up to a climax and having a big ending and so on. But it doesn't always seem to be necessary that everything in the theatre be done in that way, and one such criticism of a play like Shakespeare in Harlem is offered, which it was. It was said it was formless and shapeless and what not. It got wonderful reviews, and the critics who said these things also said it was entertaining. Now, if you entertain, what does it matter what the review says? If the audience likes it and sits there to the end and applauds at the end and goes home feeling good and tells other people to come, it doesn't matter if it's turned upside down as long as it's something that holds the people and you're able to say what you want to say. So I'm not a proponent of the well-made play myself, in a conventional sense. And I think these critics are right in that Little Ham wasn't a well-made play in that sense, but in my opinion it doesn't matter if it is a successful theater evening.

There is one other comment to that effect.

Yeah, no doubt. They might have thought that way, and they have a right to if they want to. But they were kind otherwise, so. You very seldom get 100 percent rave notice on anything. That's what a critic's for, to find something wrong somewhere. Otherwise they wouldn't get paid.

Do you think of yourself either as a poet or playwright or as a man of letters, period?

I don't think either, any of it. I just write because I like it. Whatever I am termed, it doesn't really matter.

But you say if you had a play in you now, you'd write it, and next week if it were a poem, you'd write it.

Yeah, oh sure.--128--
Simply Heavenly does not represent a reversion to any particular kind of play?

In my conscious mind, no. But my sub-conscious mind is another matter for psychoanalysis.

Dorothy S: When *Simply Heavenly* was done -- and I haven't been around to hear about *Shakespeare in Harlem* -- white audiences, people, white members of the audience frequently made the point of being excited by the fact that here was this Negro playwright and Negroes onstage who had the ability to laugh at themselves and to seem to make the point, the social point almost more effective.

It was as if they were suddenly let in to an "in group" humor.

Dorothy S: Yes, and whereas at first, if you got a predominantly white audience there would seem to have been a reservation, a holding back, but within a matter of ten or fifteen minutes they would begin to laugh with a kind of freedom and excitement, you know.

Yes, I understand.

Dorothy S: I didn't hear this portion of the tape yesterday, but Reuben said that you felt that one of the responsibilities of Karamu was to new playwrights, particularly Negro playwrights, in giving them a production place, an audience, even if the plays weren't very good, that this was a way for Negro playwrights to develop.

Yes, it's very important that they have a place to develop. I think it should be like Margo Jones's theatre was in Dallas, where a number of the southwestern people came out of there. Robert Breen, who adapted Shakespeare in Harlem, came out of that environment.

Did he direct the Negro theatre in Dallas?

I think, it seemed to me, that there was a Negro group that he directed.

He is white, isn't he?

He is white and Margo Jones, as you know, is a white southerner, and she was most interested in helping to develop Negro talent down there. If conditions had permitted, or if she had lived, there might have been Negro company in connection with her theatre, a regional Negro company.

Dorothy S: Do you feel that Karamu also has this responsibility on staff level, in terms of directors?

I would think on all levels. That has been one of the great values of Karamu, that a number of young Negroes have gotten technical training here that was practically unavailable to them in the commercial theatre. And I would think that since Karamu is located primarily in a Negro neighborhood, its whole growth has been from the Negro community upward and outward, that the more responsibility it has towards its original ethnic base, regional base, in terms of urban community neighborhood. Because there's no other agency doing that. And for them to, at times, veer quite a way off from it is to lose something of that rhythm and vitality that you were talking about.

If it exists.

Oh it does. It exists. *[Tape ends]*