James Baldwin and Theatre with Deirdre Osbourne and Anton Phillips

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IT: We're going to be here for this panel discussion and then we're actually going to the studio for a performance and discussion and this panel is exploring Baldwin and Theatre and we're really honoured to have Deirdre Osborne and Anton Phillips here to speak about Baldwin and Theatre but especially Anton's production and direction of *The Amen Corner* in 1987, James Baldwin's first play.

So, I'm just going to give brief bios and then I think Deirdre is going to give some context about Baldwin and his plays, I think is what's going to happen but you can read their full bios in the hand-out. So, Deidre Osborne is a Professor of Literature and Drama in English at Goldsmiths and an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and she's published in the field of Black British and Black American Theatre and Drama.

Anton Phillips, the founder and director of the Carib Theatre, has been an actor and produced plays here and abroad for the past fifty years. He directed *The Amen Corner* by James Baldwin at the Tricycle, now the Kiln Theatre and the Lyric Theatre in the West End of London in 1987.

So, thank you for being here both of you, I'll let Deirdre begin, thank you.

DO: I just wanted to honour two very important people who are now no longer with us. Una Howe who designed the costumes for the Race Today Renegades and also Michael LeRose who designed for the People's War Carnival Band for which Una did the drawings for publicity and of course Alex Wheatle and Alex was inspired by James Baldwin during his unjustified four months in prison, amongst other people like CLR James. Those are the people that formed his [recording cuts out], so just to honour their memory.

So, James Baldwin's plays, I'll be very brief because the main emphasis should be on Anton and the heritage that Anton brings to theatre and also because he directed two productions of *The Amen Corner*. So, the first play that James Baldwin wrote in 1943 was called *These Two*, a short play about two young Black men, one of whom commits suicide and one of whom is killed by the police. *The Amen Corner* was 1954 which we'll be focusing on today and in 1958, there was a staged version of *Giovanni's Room* directed by Elia Kazan at the Actors Studio in Greenwich Village.

The first play by Baldwin to be staged in the UK was *Blues for Mister Charlie* in 1964 performed by the Actors Studio Theatre Company of New York, at the Aldwych Theatre in 1965. But as Burt Caesar reminded us yesterday, the first production of *The Amen Corner* with an American cast in the UK of the same year was with the American Broadway cast and Brian Epstein, the manager of the Beatles attempted to enlarge his scope as an empresario and bought the Saville Theatre but unfortunately lost the most money on *The Amen Corner* when it was produced.

The other thing that I wanted to note as well was that of course, that *Blues for Mister Charlie* was performed or premiered with a British cast at the

Crucible in Sheffield directed by Clarke Peters in 1989 about whom we'll hear more because he's started in Anton's production of *The Amen Corner* and Burt Caesar who is here, he played Meridian for that production. Another production of that was directed by Paulette Randall for Talawa, the new Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich and the Tricycle in 2004.

So, the last final unpublished play, *The Welcome Table*, which goes back to the previous panel talking about this whole environment that James Baldwin's aura and his presence so beautifully created is something that Jenny and James describes as a capacious spiritual pause of love animated his last play and, quote, speaking to the Black, queer aesthetic that diverges from his previous dramatic works.

There are four copies of this play, one is held by Harvard University, another by Henry Lewis Gates Junior who is actually one of the characters employed, shall we say in various ways and of course, we have the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture with a copy and the fourth is owned by a private collector.

So, if we turn to you, Anton, you are…sorry, you are of a generation who really did set up the whole, I guess, possibility of Black British theatre, you are part of a generation of actors including a very select number of people I'm going to refer to, Carmen Munroe, who then of course stars in this. Rudolph Walker, Markeith and you all performed for the Unity Theatre post-war and were to become absolutely seminal to Black theatre, taking route in Britain and later, of course, as Isabel mentioned, you founded Black Theatre Forum and co-founded Carib Theatre.

So, may I ask you, what firstly was your route to Baldwin?

AP: Hi, thank you very much for being here, it's a pleasure to be here as well with you. My route to Baldwin? I finished school in America, I was born in Jamaica, my mother, she went to America, became a diplomat at the British Embassy in Washington DC and I subsequently went and joined her there. While I was in Washington that's when…I always had an interest in theatre but in Washington I had access to books, to play scripts which I didn't really have in Jamaica.

Amongst these play scripts which I collected was a copy of *The Amen Corner* which I read, I guess when I was about fourteen or fifteen. I subsequently went back to Jamaica after graduating high school and college in New York and took all my plays, which was a huge collection of plays back to Jamaica with me and I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't actually the largest private collection of plays at the time. At the time, I would have been about nineteen years old, I would say.

I then left Jamaica and came back here and I'd like to think that I had the copy of the play in my back pocket, I didn't bring any books but I thought I brought one or two plays, of which this was one. Eventually, years later, I was able to produce it but I was speaking to my daughter and showed her

this and she opened and she said, oh it says here one pound and I thought, well that's not the copy I bought in America. So, this is a second-hand copy which I bought over here for one pound back in the day.

When I looked more closely at this, it says, the prices are here at the back, it says UK 25p and in brackets, five shillings. So, this is probably just shortly after decimalisation came out. So basically, I've been travelling with Baldwin anyway for a very long time and this play in particular. *Blues for Mister Charlie*, I saw the London production when it came over here at the Aldwych and I have also directed it at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama as well. Does that help?

DO: Yes, I just heard some recorded noise for a second, yes it does help, sorry. Okay, so let's zoom in now on *The Amen Corner* because the first act made an appearance in print in a very different form, it was published in the magazine *Zero*, a short story *In My Father's House* and that then develops into *The Amen Corner*. In an interview with *PLAYBILL* in 1965, it states, I wrote my first version of The Amen Corner in 1952 when I came home [recording cuts out 9:02]. I finished the play in 1954 and in 1955, *The Amen Corner* was seen.

Now of course, yesterday, James Campbell talked about how Baldwin tried to get it performed or produced in London in 1955 and he'd envisaged Gordon Heath [recording cuts out 9:19] playing the main character and that didn't ever happen. So, I wondered if you've got something you would like to read there, Anton, about his struggle being a playwright.

AP: Well, the introduction to the play by him, it's a few pages but they are absolutely fascinating, they are autobiographical and he talks about his struggles as a young Black man. But he also talks about his relationship with theatre and I would quite like to read just the words he says about that.

He says, 'I knew for one thing that very few novelists are able to write plays and I really had no reason to suppose that I could be an exception to this age-old iron rule. I was perfectly aware that it would probably never be produced and furthermore I didn't even have any ambition to conquer the theatre. To this last point, we shall return, for I was being very dishonest or perhaps merely very cunning with myself, concerning the extent of my ambition. I have written one novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain,'* so as he returns to that last point.

'Concerning my theatrical ambitions and my cunning or dishonesty, I was armed, I knew, in attempting to write a play by the fact that I was born in the church. I knew that out of the ritual of the church, historically speaking, comes the act of theatre. The communion which is the theatre and I knew that I what I wanted to do in the theatre was to recreate moments I remembered as a boy preacher to involve the people, even against their will, to shake them up and hopefully to change them'.

‘I knew that an unknown Black writer cannot possibly hope to achieve this forum. I did not want to enter the theatre on the theatre’s terms but on mine. So, I waited and the fact that *The Amen Corner* took ten years to reach the professional stage, says a great deal more about the American theatre than it says about this author’. So, that I think is a really interesting little summary of what his attitude is to the theatre.

DO: So, what was your journey, in a way, to make contact with him to actually then produce…

AP: Well, it took me a while, I had my company at the time, Carib Theatre Company and eventually I felt I was in a position to do a play with a cast of almost twenty which was big money. I had the promise of the money from the London Arts Board which existed at that time. I approached Nick Kent at the Tricycle Theatre, the artist and director of the Tricycle Theatre and he liked the play, obviously.

The one thing I didn’t have was the royalties, so the rights rather, to do the play. So, I had to track him down, normally you would go to French’s, the book store, who usually know who…but they didn’t. I asked around and nobody could point me in the direction of who owned the rights to the play or who I should approach.

Finally, someone said, well why don’t you speak to Horace, Horace being Horace Ové who had made the film about Jimmy. So, I telephoned Horace and he gave me his number in France, outside Nice and I telephoned a voice answered and I said, hello may I speak to Mr Baldwin, this is he and I said, ah and introduced myself and I said, you know, I want to do a production of *The Amen Corner* but I can’t find who has the rights and I need to get the rights to it.

He said, well I do, baby. So, I said, well can I come and speak to you about it and he said, yes. Rushed downstairs from my office, at that time, we didn’t have the internet, so I went to a travel agent, I was able to book a flight for Friday, ran back upstairs, telephoned him again to say, if I come on Friday, how would that be. He said, yes, that’s fine.

So, I flew into Nice that Friday and surely at the airport, there was James Baldwin and Bernard, who you heard about earlier waiting for me. We drove up to his house up in the countryside and I spent the weekend with them, talking about the play, talking about the contract, talking about the characters. So, it was on its way.

DO: So, talking about the characters, James Campbell noted that Baldwin had in mind when he wrote it, the pastor of his own church, Mother Horn as a model for Sister Margaret and the role of Luke was especially written for the actor Gordon Heath. So, did you have any conversation about how he envisaged those characters?

AP: No, not really, I don't know how many of you are familiar with the play, with the story of the play, yes, no. So, very quickly, the story of *The Amen Corner*, it's a storefront church in Harlem and it's run…the Pastor is Sister Margaret who, if I read what is on the back of this. Margaret Alexander, the central character in this powerful play is a woman preacher in Harlem.

Many would secretly be pleased to see her humbled, her refuge is the love of God but in seeking it, she is in fact retreating from the love of her husband and trying to shield her son from the experience of the world. James Baldwin has named the King James version of the Bible as one of the main influences of his writing and echoes of the rich rhetoric combined with the deep, haunting rhythms of negro religious music, giving *The Amen Corner*, an immediate and unforgettable impact.

So, it is a story of this woman and her iron grip on this church and the tyrannical rule of this church and the congregation finds a chink in her armour and a chink is her husband who has returned. This saxophone playing, jazz musician returns out of the blue, it just causes her entire world to collapse around her and she loses control of the church but she gains herself. Again, in the introduction, Baldwin talks about that but we would spend the whole day reading the play but I won't do that.

DO: I believe there was some difficulty in getting the right instrument for your production?

AP: Yes, because there is a scene in the play where she brings in a trumpet player, especially for the transfer to the West End, I couldn't find an actor who could play the part of the son who is a crucial part of the play and also play the trumpet. As it happens, the guy that I had playing…the actor I had playing the son, Sylvester Williams, he plays piano in church. So, I mean we had a dumb piano on stage and a pianist backstage playing it and he would hit the dead keys.

I couldn't really double that up also with a trumpet but I did have a saxophone player, a good actor who played the sax. So, instead of trumpet player, I put a saxophone player and then when I met James Baldwin at the airport because he came over for the last week of rehearsals, I explained to him and I said, oh by the way, I've not been able to ask somebody who plays the trumpet in that part but I have a very good saxophone player.

He said, well you know, the trumpet is Angel Gabriel and all that, I said, I know, I know and that was it, he didn't pursue it. But I gather that he could have been quite fierce in rehearsals of this play but he was an absolute sweetie at our rehearsals.

DO: Also, because the play is very much about the traditions of the [recording cuts out], primarily a Black British cast, Baldwin himself has said in an interview with Kay Bonetti, 'the Black church is a very particular creation had nothing whatsoever to do with what white people think of when they come to church. It's the only institution first of all that our masters have let

us have, not so much let us have, as they couldn't prevent us from using. We created it against the will of the people who held us in captivity, the Black preacher was our first revolutionary, our first subversive'. I wondered how much, when you were working with your cast, in a London context…

AP: Okay, well I mean I would say probably fifty per cent of the cast were Americans, with people like Clarke Peters, Ellie Parsons and others. I have the cast list here, so Clarke, Clement is almost American, Earnestine Pearce, Morel Bernard, it's a long cast list, Al Matthews was a name, because he played the husband. Stacey Zuckerman, American, Alibe Parsons, Deirdra Lovell and so on. So, there are quite a few Black Americans actually in the cast which helped a lot of course because then they were able to bring a lot of authenticity to it and influence the English Black actors that we had there.

DO: So, when you were in rehearsal because Clarke Peters describes recalling the production, it's on the BBC but not currently available when you go and try there, sadly. He describes when James Baldwin came into the rehearsals and what the mood in the room was.

AP: It was terrific, I mean first of all, just being in the presence of James Baldwin is impressive enough and he's a very, very impressive person. He's five foot five maybe and very skinny with it but he fills up the whole room without saying a word, he fills the room. The thing which I very quickly discovered is, after five minutes in the company of James Baldwin, you felt as if you knew him all your life. He had that ability to embrace you or to make you relaxed and feel that this is a guy…and you called him Jimmy, you don't say Mr Baldwin or anything.

In the rehearsal room, he was there to support, he wasn't there to criticise or to correct or anything. He was there to say, I'm here, you go ahead, you do your thing. That gave a lot of confidence to the people in doing what they were doing.

DO: So, when you were envisaging it with your design and this space, *The Amen Corner*, has a very particular symbolism, how did you work together to get a British audience to understand the work?

AP: I mean the design, the stage design was actually quite brilliant because the Tricycle Theatre, I mean it's an ordinary proscenium arch and so we raised…what we envisaged is that the church itself was taking place in the front room of their apartment and downstairs was where the family lived, in the basement. So, the stage was raised, at the back, I think by about three or four feet to depict the upstairs apartment, and we had a beautiful picture of Jesus Christ, a very blonde blue-eyed, of course and the church set up and chairs with the piano and stuff.

Then at the back, were stairs leading down into the apartment where the kitchen, which was principally the kitchen and the bedroom off to the side. It just worked so well, we didn't have to move anything, which in a small

theatre is very, very, difficult to do. In a big theatre, you can have a whole apartment slide off and a whole kitchen slide on, we couldn't at the Trike. So, that design worked particularly well because the church also was always prominently displayed, even if it wasn't lit and that image our blonde blue-eyed Jesus dominated the whole scene anyway. So, even when the church was lit and we were in the kitchen, there was still this religious downflow coming out.

DO: I notice that your lighting director was Larry Coke.

AP: Yes.

DO: So, there is this production and also the next time you do it is punctuated by people who have been a real staple of Black cultural production in this country. So, how did you assemble the designers, the creatives together?

AP: Well, Larry, I'd known him for some time and for instance, I'm trying to remember if it's before or after, but the first play which was done at the newly built National Theatre of Ghana, I directed and I needed a technical director and I invited Larry to come on over. So, he came over because there were huge technical problems with the building. The building was, just to divert a little bit, the building was made by the Chinese in Accra, it was huge, huge, the stage was the size of a football field.

The lighting equipment that they had there was all Chinese and so it was very difficult to replace any parts. You had to go to China to get it and in that building, this huge auditorium, thirty lamps were working and no more, thirty lamps because everything else had blown and they couldn't replace the bulbs. The few spare bulbs they had, the director of the theatre had locked in his desk so nobody could get them.

So, Larry came over and because of his experience, he understood the board which was weird and he lit that play which was a Trevor Roan play in fact, a Jamaican writer, The Old Storytime for those of you who might know it, he lit it with thirty lamps in that huge theatre. So, our experience of working together had been well established.

DO: Given one big space and then the Tricycle and then into the West End, what was the process there and adjustments?

AP: Well, oddly enough, the adjustment into the West End was dead easy, the set just sat in there, no changes had to be made, which really surprised me because going from the stage of the Tricycle, into the Lyric on Shaftesbury Avenue and you would think that it would get lost but it didn't. It just sat down there really beautifully, I didn't have to do hardly anything at all to it, perhaps the lighting equipment and the sound equipment might have been a little bit more sophisticated but that wasn't really a problem.

DO: I wondered, with the audiences in one space and then going into the West End, I mean Bob was very concerned with audiences, especially Black

audiences and he wrote, for example, of his dear friend Lorraine Hansbury, when he wrote and he talked about the importance of her work to Black people and his comments highlighted this real life power of its theatrical moment which might well have also happened with *The Amen Corner*. He described a current flowed back and forth between the audience and the actors.

Flesh and blood corroborating flesh and blood as we say testifying and I wondered if you were aware of that kind of dynamic in either of those spaces.

AP: Yes, it's interesting because what I suspect he's talking about there is really a Black audience seeing those plays. Over here, *The Amen Corner* and other plays done by Carib, by Talawa, by Black Theatre Cooperative, Temba, didn't largely get Black audiences. The majority of people at any given time would have been a white audience. So that relationship would be quite different and you notice that because also which takes place here in London and tours around are a series of plays which are created in South London mainly which are roots plays which come in from Jamaica.

They play at the Hackney Empire, one thousand five hundred seats, the Broadway Theatre in Catford, nine hundred seats, the Alexandra in Birmingham, I think and they are full of Black people. So, when I ran into the problems with the Arts Council because they didn't like me calling them lying racist bastards, very thin skinned, the payoff for that, is that they cut my grant infinitely but I knew they would.

Then I got invited to go and work with these producers, private people, no money Arts Council or anything else and the first time I went, I stood up at the very foot of the stage and looked up, this is at Hackney and the place was full, absolutely rammed, there were people queuing up outside for returns. You could count the number of white faces you saw on your two hands.

I thought, wow this is Black theatre, I thought the stuff that the rest of us have been doing all along, claiming to be Black theatre, is Black theatre but then I pressed it, who were we doing it for. My conclusion is, we're doing it for the critics of *The Guardian* and *Time Out* and *Ham and Hampstead* to get that theatre-going audience to come in and see it. These producers down south, they don't care about critics, they wouldn't know how to get a critic into the theatre. They don't care about reviews, what they care about is selling tickets and they do that extremely well.

DO: Do you think though…what do you think was James Baldwin's take on the idea of the popular theatre for the masses and then something, because he strived to position himself as a playwright, so it was a struggle and it was very much an intellectual and spiritual struggle. So, how do you think he did that?

AP: I think one of the things he said to me after the play opened and he saw it and he said, this is inspired me to go back and finish the play that I am writing which he had put aside which I think is that third play.

DO: The Welcome…

AP: That's right and he said, I'll send it to you but of course he got ill and passed away before he ever did and I've never seen it, so I don't really know what it's about. I remember, I think it was Joan Bakewell in an interview, a television interview and she asked, because we have mothers coming in with babes in arms and in one performance, one of the babes was crying.

This was obviously irritating and he was asked, what do you think about young children coming in and seeing the play and he said, of course they must come in and see the play, these are our stories we're telling. It's essential that at the earliest possible age, even before they know what's happening, that they come and they join the community.

I suppose it's like what you would say, what do you think about mothers taking children to church, it would be the same sort of response and that's the kind of response he gave. So, yes, I can't intellectualise it but certainly he was all for theatre and for people attending theatre as a means of acquainting ourselves with our stories.

DO: We have a slide of the memorial that was organised at Lambeth Town Hall and I wondered if you had any reflections on that because this photograph was only…

AP: I can't see it from here.

DO: Sorry, yes so Leila Hassan shared this with us yesterday and I just wondered if you had any recollections of when you were all there?

AP: Yes, well one recollection I have is that they are too far back, they should have been at the front and I mean the main recollection of this is the fact that Maya Angelou had come over to be the main speaker at the memorial but also his brother, David came over as well and seeing and listening to those two was the highlight of it for me. We were just very, very pleased and honoured to have been asked to do that.

DO: What was behind the 2000 revival, when Nick produced this, because again that has remarkable people in the cast, Ray Shell, Corinne Skinner-Carter, [recording cuts out 33:08]…

AP: No, Carmen wasn't in that one. She was in the first one, we had an American actress whose name escapes me at the moment.

DO: Pat Bowie.

AP: Yes, Pat, who had worked at the Tricycle before with Nick and he recommended her and she was very good. Okay, so *The Amen Corner* is probably the most, up until that time, the most successful play done at the Tricycle Theatre. It was the very first play to transfer from the Tricycle into the West End. It sold out continuously, the run was extended at the Tricycle and what I was saying about Black audiences before, one of the problems we had is that Black people would turn up to see the play on the night and the show would have been sold out.

They would say, you have to book in advance and they wouldn't and they would turn up another night without having a ticket and be turned away again. So, we never really got the…while we did get good attendance, it wasn't ever a really strong Black audience. I mean that just makes me think of you know the controversy there was last year about the whiteout, is that what it's called? The blackout, I was thinking, maybe that's what we should have done but too late.

DO: Some of the critics in 1987's responses were, the answer to every playgoer's prayer from *The Daily Telegraph*, an experience on the grand scale said *The Independent* and one of the best plays I've seen [recording cuts out]. So, this is a spectrum of praise.

AP: It was terrific, I mean I should have retired after that, it's been downhill ever since but I think at the tenth anniversary of the production at the Tricycle Theatre Nottingham Playhouse decided to put on a production of it. So, that was that second production that we did which then transferred to Nottingham and ran in Nottingham for three or four weeks as well. That's how it goes, so for instance, whereas the first production, the MD was Basil Mead from the London Community Gospel Choir.

But in the second production, the gospel was rehearsed up in Nottingham and they came down and integrated in the play. So, they had their own MD up there doing the gospel music and so on and it was that and then everything shifted up to Nottingham. So, even just something like the music was split, much of it done up there and then brought down.

DO: However, a critic does note, it is a credit to Baldwin and the director, Anton Phillips, who was responsible for the first staging originally at the Tricycle that the play still has a resonance for the Black community and is a piece of art that can draw even those with no knowledge of the background or issues.

AP: It's a terrific play, a good story is a good story, whatever the background, the example I use of that, years ago, there was a film out called *Kes*, I don't know if anyone saw that, about this kid up in, where was it, Newcastle or somewhere, they had to have subtitles because the accent was so thick. It was a story which has captured the imagination of the whole world, this young boy, up there with a kestrel and it was just a good story, it reached out and I think this is what art is all about, if I can get a little pompous for a little.

Art is the attempt, in my opinion, the attempt to say some truth about the human condition. That's universal and its eternal which is why, still to this day, five thousand years later, we are looking at Greek drama, we look at *Antigone*, we look at *Oedipus Rex* because it says something about the human condition which is unchanging and which is true and it tries to encompass that truth.

Whatever form of art, whether it's a painting or it's music, it's the same thing, it's trying to pinpoint, it's trying to touch some truth about the human condition and when we do theatre, that's what we try to do. We don't often succeed or you might only succeed for a brief…that one scene or a moment in a scene when a blinding light goes off and you think, oh my god, yes, but that's what we aspire to, in theatre, in music, in painting, whatever it is, I think.

DO: Also, I just wanted to, before we have questions from our audience, point to what David Leeming wrote in his biography of James Baldwin, just seven days before Baldwin's death. He wrote that night Jimmy and I talked about theatre, if he could have started all over again, he might have concentrated on being a playwright and maybe an actor. He liked the immediacy of the stage, working with actors and it seems it's a really poignant way that he knows his life is ending and that's what he goes back to. It's fundamental and I wondered if you had any conversation with him about what it meant.

AP: Well, in a way, what I think illustrates is that I go into the theatre to watch the play and I would look over to the left and he would be standing in the corner at the back, looking at that stage and he wasn't looking at that…when you looked at it, you saw him looking back at his life. Looking at that boy preacher in Harlem from back in the forties or whenever and that was so clearly visible in him. Night after night, he would just come in and look at that play like that. So, I think that sums up his feeling, not only about *The Amen Corner* but perhaps about what theatre can do.

The trouble is of course, theatre is a fleeting thing, you go, you see it on the night and you think, wow wasn't that terrific, whatever the play is. Whereas, this and the books last forever, people will forget the production of *The Amen Corner,* there was talk about it being filmed, there is a television company who expressed an interest in it which nothing ever came of that. But with a play which is over three hours long, I suppose you would do a three-part series really on television but as I say, nothing ever came of it.

I mean talk about it being three hours long, I remember when we transferred to the West End, one of the West End producers came to me and he said, you know this play is too long, you need to cut twenty minutes from it. I said, what and he said, yes, it's too long, people are going to be looking at their watches for tubes and buses and so on, you need to cut twenty minutes. I said, you see that little Black man over there, go and tell him to cut twenty minutes, pointing at Baldwin of course. So, we never heard any more about that.

DO: Before we turn, Anton has kindly agreed to two poems by James Baldwin because poetry is of course at the heart of theatre, the idea of handing that baton on with your verbal virtuosity and so on. I just thought, before you read those, was there any particular ways in which the poetics of *The Amen Corner* really grabbed you that have never let go?

AP: I suppose the combination of text and gospel music was just so important, the music in the play, because it's peppered throughout with gospel songs. That's like the blood in the vein of the piece and certainly when I think of *The Amen Corner*, there are certain scenes I think of but always, always the first thing I remember is that powerful music, those terrific people on stage were able to produce and the play starts with a gospel song.

The audience comes in, the stage is lit and the congregation comes in and Sister Margaret comes out and they all take their places and Clarke stands in front and he goes…and they go into Glory, Glory, Hallelujah. If you can imagine twenty people belting that out around the piano and it just makes you sit up and take notice right at the start. That's how it is throughout the whole play as well.

I say sit up and take notice, I mean my mother came from Jamaica to see the play because here it is, her son has a play in the West End, wow, so she flies over from Jamaica and she wasn't very well. So, I thought, it's probably easiest to take her by tube rather than try and negotiate traffic and parking. So, we got out at Piccadilly and slowly walked up to the Lyric, which isn't very far, greeted by the Front of House manager in his tuxedo and bowtie, welcome. Escorts her to her seat in the stalls, lights go down, cast come on stage, lights up, hit into Glory, Glory and my mother went [snores], she was very tired.

DO: Had Baldwin died by the time the transfer happened?

AP: No, he was at the West End.

DO: Oh, he was at the West End, oh sorry.

AP: No, he was there and acknowledged.

DO: Oh, so tell us about that moment when he was there.

AP: Well, I mean we were sitting in the box at the side and the cast…

DO: Oh, okay and what was his response, how did he, given the travel of getting the play on the stage?

AP: You know that grin of his, which I think was on that picture before, I mean his grin filled up his face completely, obviously he was really pleased with it.

DO: I wondered about the arc from 1955 when he was writing it and there it was, in the West End, it just have touched his spirit. Alright, so Anton, the two poems, just because we haven't necessarily had poetry, except for when Kadija did her presentation that was centralised and poetics of his drama, of course have an echo of poetry formally written. So, there are just two short ones.

AP: Okay, this is one is *3.00am (for David)*. 'Two black boots, on the floor, figuring out what the walking's for. Two black boots, now, together, learning the price of the stormy weather. To say nothing of the wear and tear on the mother-fucking leather'.

DO: What is the sense of, I guess his life was closing and it's called Amen

AP: Amen; 'No, I don't feel death coming. I feel death going: having thrown up his hands, for the moment. I feel like I know him better than I did. Those arms held me, for a while, and, when we meet again, there will be that secret knowledge between us'.

DO: Thank you, Anton.

AP: Very short, but very…[clapping].

DO: Are you ready to take questions?

AP: Yes.

DO: Excuse me pointing, one, two, three.

Q: I just wanted to know, who owns the rights to *The Amen Corner*, as it hasn't been staged for some time?

AP: I guess his Estate does because he had a large family, he didn't obviously have any children of his own but he did come from a large family. I mean in this he talks about his eight siblings but I think his favourite was David, his brother David but he has also now passed away, I think.

M: Just a quick one but just to say something about the Estate, the Baldwin Estate is in some transition in the sense that it was run by one of his sisters, Gloria Karefa-Smart, who is passing on the baton to the younger generation. There is an email address which I have and if anyone wants to…I mean I can't promise anything, I'm not part of the estate but please get in touch.

DO: There was a 2013 production of course at the National Theatre with Sharon D Clarke as Sister Margeret.

AP: Unfortunately, she wasn't, it was…

F: Marie Jean-Baptiste.

AP: She ought to have been, that's my feeling.

DO: Oh, that's my second big mistake.

F: I remember, I think something else that Sharon did, the old Jazz singer.

AP: Ma Rainey.

F: Yes, Ma Rainey.

DO: Oh yes, my apologies.

Q: My question was, would you consider this play or do you think Jimmy would have considered this play to be a musical, seeing as there is so much musicality involved in it?

AP: Would I consider it?

Q: To be a musical.

AP: It's a play with music, I would say, in as much as it's not the music which is driving the play along but it is a vital part of the play.

Q: Hey, hi Anton, just thank you for that, I was just saying to Campbell, obviously you are huge figure, I remember when I was a kid, you were one of the people that I wanted to work with when I started looking around…

AP: And it still hasn't happened.

Q: When I started at college, so it's brilliant to hear the history that you talked about and also obviously here with Jimmy, at the centre of that and I'm also an archivist. So, I was interested in the archive really, of the production, we've only seen three photographs, I just wondered about the rehearsals, was it archived, was it in France, archived, photographically speaking. Is there anything else that is there?

AP: I don't know if you know Josephine Melville, she had put together an exhibition of photographs, posters, programmes and stuff for Black Theatre and I gave her some of the best pictures, I loaned her some of the best pictures from *The Amen Corner* and they're still in the possession of her estate. One of the things I would love to do is actually get that exhibition up and running because she had some terrific stuff in there.

Q: Is there anything of your visit to France though, was there anything?

AP: No, unfortunately, in those days, these little cameras that we carry around with us now, didn't exist and even as I'm sure you all know, the house in France has been demolished and I think a woman in Scotland heard about it and rushed down there and managed to salvage stuff from inside the

house before it was destroyed. You just think, how could that happen, how could that have happened. That house which had probably every famous Black artist at the time and intellectuals, in there at some time, being entertained or having sessions with James Baldwin and they just bulldozed the place down.

Q: I was interested in your fleeting report that you saw the production of Blues for Mister Charlie in 1965. I just wanted to ask you a bit more about that and what were you doing at the time, were you directing, how did you compare that to your life then?

AP: Sixty-five, I think I was working for the British Actors Equity Association as an accountant which set British Actors Equity Association back several years.

Q: What were your memories, do you have any memories of the production?

AP: It's not a play which I particularly like because I think it's very targeted. So, even for instance when we did it at Central, unless you know about Emmett Till, the teenager who was murdered in the South on which the play is based. It's not as tight a story, I don't think as this and it's quite different to this which isn't surprising because again in this, one of the reasons Baldwin says he wrote a play, after Mountain, after *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, he wrote a play because he didn't want to spend his time writing different versions of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

So, I suppose a second play, again would satisfy that criteria of not wanting to reproduce this kind of story. So, the story of *Blues for Mister Charlie* is all together different, the stage is divided, the town is divided…again does anyone know that play, *Blues for Mister Charlie* or not know it. It's about a young man being murdered in this town and the town is divided…he describes it as two tribes. A Black tribe and a white tribe and it's this tribal conflict of where the power lies and so on that he looks at in that play, I think. Whereas in this one, it's a much more crystal experience…I'm not sure I remember the question even now.

Q: I just have a question as an ignorant white person but I went to the National Theatre to see an adaptation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* which was adapted by a Nigerian playwright, his name I can't remember.

F: Inua Ellams.

Q: The public was…it was about Black and white even though there were a lot of Black people there. When things happened on the stage, that were maybe not good, the Black members of the public would respond and it was really moving because when something happened they didn't approve of, they would say, ohhhhh and it was a bit toing and froing between the public and the play. Is this something you've experienced?

AP: Oh, all the time, when I was acting, I remember being in an Alfred Fagon play with Mona Hammond and Carmen Monroe's son and I have to slap Mona, you do that sort of thing and she does that and a woman at the back went, hit him back, hit him back.

M: The *Washington* talks about how recently in America, they were doing a version of…and the response there when Denzel did something, what's the play…

AP: *Fences*, was it?

M: Fences and he slaps his wife and the audience were like, oh Denzel, it's a cultural community theatre, we're talking about the brief theatre. In terms of the West African traditions of gathering and approving tonal, the vocal is as much a part of the sense of how we connect, not just language but in a communal space is a lot of how we are and how we make it work really. It's not just in theatre, it's in film, when we see films, it's also in the club spaces when we put our hands in the air, it's when we clap, when we're here.

AP: You mentioned films for instance, I know in Jamaica, the cinemas which are in downtown Kingston, which are…if there is a gunfight, the gunmen pull out their guns. Those cinemas are all shot up because they are shooting, they shoot the screen. I did a play called *Two Can Play* which transferred to the Theatre Royal Stratford, it went there after the Black Theatre season. But I went back to see the play, after a week or so and Corrine Skinner-Carter was in it and Alistair and I said to him, what have you done, you've changed the timing of all the scenes. They said, we have to, because when we're coming up to the punchline, the audience shout it out before we do. So, we try and get it in before the audience. So yes, it is a living theatre.

F: Let me just add something, I was in that play and we had that all the time in *The Three Sisters* and there was one time when a young man was sending me away and the whole of the front row jumped up and I'm trying to be serious and they jumped up and they said, don't listen to her, it's his wife, it's his wife, it's his wife. So, as an actor, being on stage, having to wait for all that to go on, it's really difficult. But it was a whole different…people were going to the theatre. They used to come with their food and everything, so they would eat and watch the show.

Q: This conversation leads perfectly into my question because my question was more about the actors and also the USA, James Baldwin's place in African American…it's about the African American experience and in the UK, we have the Black community, they are all from different countries. As I'm sure we can glean from the actors on the stage, they are all from different countries.

My question is more or less, if you could please indulge us by taking us into the dressing room, the rehearsal for the play, how do they actors first engage with the play and how did they…was there a transition with the

acting immersive experience into that play. Also, them being on stage and engaging with it all. So, effectively what change did you experience with the actors from first engagement and the production?

AP: I mean essentially, you're working, as with most plays, that one, everything, you are working with a group of professional actors who have a job to do and the job description is, this and this and this and they do their research, they do their homework. So, if you are supposed to be a churchgoer in Harlem, they've done research on that, they know what they dress like in that period. They know the vicissitudes of life and that's what they come to the rehearsal room with and gaps are filled in during that rehearsal period.

So, you approach it in a very professional way, as director, you are saying, we've got to achieve this end, you've got that end in the back of your mind…in the front of your mind, even. The actors, using their skills and talents and their research, all contribute to that final event you see on stage.

Q: May I please ask a follow-up, I think what I'm asking for is maybe an anecdote about an actor's response to a scene in the play, do you know what I mean. Take us to the room and just give us an anecdote.

AP: I can't pull one out just now, from that play because the thing about this production of *The Amen Corner* is that everything just fell into place so well. The cast was ideal, the musical director, the singing, everything just fell right into place perfectly. So, you remember the highlights and the good bits and I don't think there were any bad bits, we just tackled problems and issues as and when they came and things just solved to make a good piece of theatre on stage.

Q: Hello, I think I've forgotten what I was going to ask.

AP: That's alright.

Q: I definitely have forgotten what I was going to ask but also, in terms of the audience responses, that's what I was just thinking about just now, that's not the question. The other day when I was at the BFI, I can't remember even what the film was that we were watching, it was me and my sister and we were doing that commentary as the film was going on. A white lady in front turned around went, shhhh and it was nearly a fight because we were outraged.

AP: I mean it can be distracting and especially in a play, especially in a serious play. I mean I went to see *Alterations* last week at the National Theatre and there is a couple that came in late, sat down in front of us and proceeded to have a conversation. Completely nothing to do with the play and what was going on, on stage. But they thought it was alright to sit down and have a chat like this and so on and one was looking at his phone. You do want to turn round and say, shut up but then they would probably get vexed and curse you off.

Q: That wasn't really…that was just part of a previous thought, I actually thought it might be…I wondered whether it might be worth you actually mentioning what you are doing now.

AP: Well, very briefly, I'm casting for a play at the moment which is going in at the Hackney Empire and other venues called *The Cool Ruler*, which is about the reggae superstar, Gregory Isaacs.

F: Everyone is listening.

AP: We start rehearsing that in April, it opens on the 25th May.

F: It will be sold out tomorrow.

AP: Sorry?

F: Who has written that, Anton?

F: Somebody.

AP: Somebody wrote it, yes, I actually wrote it.

F: How do we find out more about that?

AP: I mean it's online.

F: Yes, it's on the Hackney Empire's website.

AP: The Hackney Empire, I happen to have a couple of leaflets here if anybody wants one.

F: The next one on Dennis Brown.

AP: I'm not producing, I'm just directing.

DO: Any other questions. I guess my last question to you Anton is, looking back at the time with James Baldwin, is there something that you feel altered for you as an artist because of your work with him, that you've carried into now, perhaps?

AP: Yes, well just the privilege really of having met him, spent time with him, going out to dinner with him in the evenings and him coming in and becoming a part of the production. It really is a highlight of my life, I am now eighty-one years old, so for that to be a highlight is, in all those years, is to be cherished. I mean not everyone, and even I didn't expect that that sort of relationship would ever happen.

I mean one of the things which I've never actually said before is that I think the death of Martin Luther King Jr, was such a blow to him. I don't think he ever recovered from that and made him…there is a pool of sadness

hanging over him because of that and we only spoke briefly about it but you could see that was something that had changed his life, in a way.

DO: Join with me in thanking Anton. Thank you.

End of transcript