Chapter III

Ed Bullins: Toward a Community Theatre

In the previous chapter we saw the emergence of the Black Arts Movement as a result of the efforts by the younger playwrights under the leadership of Amiri Baraka. Baraka's theatre came to be known as "Revolutionary Theatre" whose objective was to shock and stun the white audience and to satirize relentlessly the white liberal and the white-oriented Blacks. His theatre of confrontation, which laid stress on the necessity of racial solidarity through cultural nationalism after his conversion from LeRoi Jones to Imamu Amiri Baraka in 1968, gave Baraka immense popularity as a cultural leader. Around this time another playwright, Ed Bullins came on the scene to propagate the cultural nationalism that had emerged with the Black Arts Movement. Both Baraka and Bullins were champions of cultural nationalism and tried to stress the urgency of establishing a Black nation within the United States, but their modes and methods of propagating Black Nationalism were different. While Baraka employed shock tactics with his use of violence, obscenity and hatred and accused the whites and white-oriented Blacks, Bullins turned his attention to the problems within the Black community. He is more oriented culturally than Baraka and became more prominent of the Black playwrights of the period.

With more than thirty plays to his credit, Bullins is the most prolific of the younger black playwrights in America. On the strength of his most popular plays, *Goin' a Buffalo," "In the Wine Time," "The Electronic Nigger," "The Duplex," "Clara's Ole Man," "In New England Winter," and "The Fabulous Miss Marie"* one may be inclined to suggest that he is the most well-known of the Black playwrights. Sometimes one is tempted to identify Bullins with some of his characters "whose strong and unsettling dramatization of life in the black

urban ghetto," as Jervis Anderson says, is similar to the circumstances in which the playwright grew up (40). The details of Bullins' life, however, are not very well known. One has only to depend for clues about himself upon his characters. Anderson says that he has no great enthusiasm for spoken communication. But whenever he speaks, he speaks with energy and force. As one of his characters from *The Duplex*, Steve Benson, says, "my poor brother, language is more than words... it is deeds and gestures... and silence." This statement might as well be taken as the playwright's.

As discussed in the previous chapter, while Baraka advocated shock tactics and sought to satirize whosoever was at fault in order to bring about a social change, Ed Bullins, after his initial experiments with the theatre of the absurd, turned his attention to the specific problems within the black community. Although he does believe, like the other playwrights of the Black Arts Movement, that the roots of the Black's problems lay in slavery, he thinks that the best way to bring about social transformation among the Blacks is not through confrontation with the whites but through an attempt to forge a sense of racial solidarity among the Blacks by focussing on the problems within the community. Bullins' role in raising the racial consciousness of the blacks in America with the help of theatre could be compared with the work done by black leaders in the political sphere. In his plays and productions he constantly employed language of the blues as a way of making the Blacks aware of their cultural heritage. This strategy is different from the one adopted by the playwrights of the Black Arts Movement, especially by Baraka, who had a militant tone and were openly hostile to the whites in their strong language of confrontation. Further, Bullins also admonishes the black people for their weaknesses, while praising their strengths.

The role of the New Lafayette is significant in Bullins' development as a playwright. Commenting on the importance of the Theatre's role Anderson wrote, "If the members of

today's black avant-garde describe themselves as New anything, it is certainly not Negroes, but the fact is that institutions like the New Lafayette for continuing the tradition of cultural nationalism begun by the First World War militants in Harlem, and picked up by the Negro Renaissance of the nineteen twenties"(43). The burgeoning black nationalism, which was slowly, but systematically developing under the impact of the Black Arts Movement was directed through the productions of the New Lafayette Theatre. Bullins produced most of his plays in this theatre. Leslie Sanders who calls Bullins "one of the most gifted and certainly the most prolific of the dramatists who emerged from the black arts movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s" lays stress on the "power and elegance" of his plays as well as on the mutual profitable relationship between the dramatist and the New Lafayette.

Another significant factor, which shaped Bullins' career, was his association with the group of writers and activists in the San Francisco bay area around 1964, the year when Amiri Baraka moved to Harlem from Greenwich Village. Baraka had already made strong impact on this group. Bullins collaborated with the members of the group in setting up a militant cultural-political organization called Black House. Among the revolutionaries in Black House were three young men who would soon become well known nationally as leaders of the Black Panther Party: Hoey Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver. Young Bullins worked as Minister of Culture for a short time, but soon discovered a conflict of purpose between the two factions, the artists and revolutionary activists. Anderson observes,

> The artists were interested solely in the idea of a cultural awakening, while the revolutionaries thought, in Bullins' words, that 'culture was a gun.' It was one of the earliest ideological clashes between what were soon to become known in the black movement as 'cultural nationalists' and 'revolutionary nationalists,' the latter arguing

> that poems and plays are poor instruments of social transformation unless they inspire people to pick up guns. (47)

"The political wing of Black House," Bullins recalls later, "particularly those Panthers who were Marxist-oriented, found it difficult to relate to the artistic wing" (Quoted by Anderson 47).

While other playwrights of the Black Arts Movement tried to theorize about their plays, Bullins worked from the opposite end and tried to provide substance to theoretical notions about the New Black Theatre. Leslie Sanders observes:

> A central figure for the black arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Bullins, however, avoided making theoretical statements to which other leading figures of the movement turned in seeking a rationale for the new writing and daring theatre that the movement produced. If one must label Bullins, the most accurate one is that of cultural nationalist, for the effect of his work is to give substance to the theory, to make possible a definition of cultural nationalism that has not yet been proposed. (*DLB* 60)

Bullins has, however, made occasional remarks about his concept of black theater, about the kind of role a black playwright has to play and about the race relations in the United States in the introductions to the collections of his plays and in his interviews. But one cannot call him a theorist in the way Baraka is a theorist. To him theatre as a praxis is more important than theatre as theory. But in the scattered remarks in his interviews and introductions to his collections of plays he has clearly defined the function of the Black Theatre in the United States. In his interview with Mervin X which is included in his collection, *New Plays from the Black Theatre* (1969), Bullins lays great emphasis on the *social function* (my emphasis) of the black theatre which, according to him, "is a part of all theatre, whether this fact is liked by

Black-theatre creators, or denied by ignorant Americans" (*TTB* "I" 13). "History may define Black theatre's social function," he writes further, "but being near the center, I can only believe, like others, that Black theatre's social function is immensely important"(11).

He firmly believes that theatre must work towards the building of a nation by establishing a continuity of the tradition of the old forms, which he calls the "collective forms." Explaining this function of Black Theatre he says, "In Black Theater, this continuity is achieved through *creative struggle* (his emphasis): ruthless dedication in creation of collective forms that will survive any single individual's life... to inspire the creation of the nation" ("I" 12).

This statement is significant because it suggests that the creation of a black nation on the basis of cultural cohesiveness of the race can be made possible through "collective forms" of symbolism that transcend the individual's attempt for self-expression. Again, in the introduction to his collection of plays, *The Theme is Blackness* (1973), Bullins calls the young *artists* (his emphasis) of the sixties the "inheritors of a radical Black political and social activist past in America, victims of their oppressors' system" (3). He finds fault with the existing system of the white world, which has taught Black artists the values, and norms, which were created as modes of exploitation and domination. He felt that there was an urgent need for developing a distinctive Black theatre through exploitation of specifically Black cultural and aesthetic paradigms. But by changing theatre into a means for a race war, the militant Black youths had turned a cultural arena into a political platform. Bullins calls "[a] segment of this ill-informed Black youth movement spurred on by the mass media that fed upon the urban ghetto upheavals of the times, [who] identified themselves with some species of Black Revolutionary Nationalism" (*TTB* 3). To the contrary, Bullins called himself a champion of the Black Aesthetic, which is an alternative mode of nationalism and a corrective for militant

forms of rebellion. According to Nicholas Canaday, the emphasis in this new Black Aesthetic, professed and practiced by the black Artists of the sixties, was on the community.

Like some of his contemporary playwrights, Bullins too had laid stress on revolution in his early plays but gradually shifted his emphasis toward the community-based continuous struggle for a social change. Keeping this objective in mind, he created his protagonists from the underworld of the inner city. For example, there is a glaring similarity between Steve Benson and Bullins. According to Richard Scharine, "The portrait of Steve Benson in the plays of Bullins involves one odyssey from a constricting, soul-destroying, white-oriented consciousness to a Black sensibility, aware of its inherent problems but determined not to sacrifice humanity to them" (106).

Bullins is conscious of the problems that the community was facing, and for that very reason he constantly concentrated on the social function of drama. He uses two powerful means for the purpose: the strong ghetto code of communication used by the street people; and their realistic portrayal highlighting their sense of alienation from the community. Jack, in *Clara's Ole Man,* for example, according to Canaday, "is clearly unable to cope with" the relationship between Clara and her 'Old man' or with the others who appear"(35). Nor is he able to communicate in the same language with the people he encounters in Clara's home and his effort "to imitate their street talk... merely brings upon him the mockery of the other young men, which he fails to comprehend" (Canaday 35). In most other plays also this satiric attitude at those who have become culturally misfit is very explicit. Henry Louis Gates's theory of the Signifying Monkey can provide us some insight into the understanding of the message that the playwright tries to give through the characters and their situations. Geneva Smitherman comments on this aspect:

> From the Oral tradition in Black culture, he extricates our trickster and bad nigguh types and infuses them with the life-blood literary characterization of, for example, a fearless, but sensitive urban dude like Cliff (of *The Corner*, *In the Wine Time*, *In New England Winter*, and *Duplex*).... Bullins' "message" has to do with synthesizing the values and thought patterns of the Black community. It has to do with articulating that community's dreams and aspirations. Portraying what he calls the "realities and contradictions" of black life, Bullins uses the blues motif as the central mechanism for conveying his message. (5-6)

By portraying what he calls the "realities and contradictions" of black life, Bullins has used blues motif as the central mechanism for conveying his message.

Geneva Smitherman divides Bullins' work into two stages: "We must look where we have been, re-examine the brutal Black experience—Stage One—and then we can 'transcend' it, not through adherence to philosophical formulations (such as Existentialism, the system commonly used to characterize nigguh existence), but through reconnecting with natural existence and the cosmic consciousness of our forefathers—Stage Two"(7). This division seems to be a correct perception of what Bullins has been trying to do in his plays. As we have already stated, Bullins' primary concern is to give a correct version of Black reality as a condition for understanding the dynamics of Black experience in the larger context of its relation to the "natural existence and the cosmic consciousness" of the race. According to Smitherman, Stage One is represented by plays in Bullins' Twentieth Century Cycle series—*Goin' A Buffalo*, *In the Wine Time*, *In New England Winter*, *The Corner*, and *Duplex*—which employ characters, themes, and motifs taken from the existing reality of the Blacks. Stage Two consists of ritualistic drama where Bullins goes beyond the immediate environment of the

Blacks to the futuristic state for "raising the dead and foretelling the future"(Smitherman 7). This projection of the Black fate into the future is linked with an awareness of the roots of the race.

For Bullins Black Art and Black Life are interchangeable and complementary. Stage One is full of bad Black "whoes" like Pandora of the magnificent box (*Goin' A Buffalo*); wine-drinkin' nigguhs like Steve (*In the Wine Time*); bulldaggers like *Clara's Ole Man*; or brilliant finance-company-rip-off-plannin' nigguhs like Ray (*In New England Winter*), all taken from the social realities of contemporary Blacks. All these characters are portrayals of those that are alienated from their community and represent the deracinated section of rootless individuals. Bullins portrays them with a satiric intent, while recognizing their pain and suffering. He considers their alienation as the result of the peculiar circumstances of their lives and not the consequence of their conscious desires. He seems to be trying to comprehend the complex fate of the Blacks caught up in the contradictions and confusions of urban ghetto existence. The alienated blacks are thus victims of their time and complex process of history. Bullins tries to recover from their long and tortuous history some archetypal metaphors of creativity, which could sustain them through the present and link them up to their future. Himself ghetto-bred, he painfully shares their predicament as they search for a viable condition for living by imitating the whites. Smitherman comments on this aspect:

> We in the Black audience realized that the street-culture nigguhs were our community "problems" because they were our potential (if not actual) mirror images. Their emotions and feelings constituted our collective sensibility. Their life-styles and actions seemingly bizarre, actually only 90 degrees removed from our own, heightened that sensibility and raised us to a new level of awareness. This conscious self-awareness

> aroused by Bullins' blues people speaks to and of black folks driven by white society to live only for survival, at any cost, in a world where everything is uncertain. (9)

We may discern in his plays at Stage one some autobiographical elements taken from his early life in the Philadelphia ghetto. Although he warns against such a reading, he has not denied the presence of some autobiographical details in his writing.

It is proper here to give a brief sketch of some of the incidents of his life, which may be helpful in understanding some of the details in his plays. One important aspect of his life was the influence of his mother on his creative sensibility. His experience in the navy, his life in Los Angeles, where he met some Black intellectuals and interacted with them are some of the aspects of his life which figure in his writings. As Leslie Sanders says, in Los Angeles "he first came into contact with a segment of black society he had rarely encountered: intellectuals committed to the study of black culture and history and engaged in various forms of cultural and political activity"(*DLB* 45). In Philadelphia, the narrator in his novel *The Reluctant Rapist* recalls, he had encountered and rejected the black middle class, finding them pretentious and vacuous, but the street people became suspicious of him when he displayed insights gained from his reading and travels. His new friends in Los Angeles encouraged his intellectual curiosity and artistic pursuits. Bullins continues to characterize himself as a "street nigger" and to value, even on occasions to romanticize the fundamental concreteness of street life. He did not write plays until he moved to San Francisco in 1964. According to Sanders, "[e] ach of his early plays—*How Do You Do?, Dialect Determinism (or The Rally)*, and *Clara's Ole Man*—foreshadows a direction his later work will take"(46).

His earliest plays—*How Do You Do?, Dialect Determinism (or The Rally)* and, *Clara's Ole Man*—all produced in 1965, are more political in nature and employ conventions

used by Franz Kafka, Edward Albee, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet and others. This ambivalent mode of representation consisting of crude political message and sophisticated theatrical conventions makes him move toward a more appropriate mode, which is germane to the Black experience.

In *How do You Do?,* Doris and Roger, both pretentious and aspiring to whiteness, bear similarity to the characters in Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano.* "*Dialect Determinism...* a pointed satire leveled at those who indulge in empty political rhetoric... depicts a rally during which the 'leader', Boss Brother, whips his audience into a frenzy, claiming to be a series of messiahs and glorying in the kind of illogic to which rhetoric without substance easily drifts"(Sanders *DBL* 46). "When the ghost of Malcolm X rises to confront him," Sanders adds further, "it is brutally attacked and ejected from the meeting, but immediately afterwards, the crowd, requiring a martyr, turns on Boss Brother with equal ferocity" (46). This play is very significant since it determines Bullins' major theme of what Sanders calls "the vehement antipathy to any rhetoric, particularly political rhetoric, that becomes a self-indulgent substitute for action and conceals an unwillingness to effect meaningful personal or social change" (46). In this play, Bullins is extremely satirical towards anybody who use rhetoric thoughtlessly. It is interesting to note that among the playwrights of the Black Arts Movement although he himself employed political rhetoric on occasion, he severely criticized its excesses.

Clara's Ole Man (1965) is the first play, which depicts with realism the street people and tenement dwellers. In this play Bullins attempts to present the Black reality in some detail. Here a middle-class aspirant, seeking an afternoon's romance in the absence of the girl's "old man," discovers that he has stumbled upon a lesbian life in a slum world. The play depicts a family consisting of three women: Big Girl, large and of "indeterminate age" is loud, aggressive

and quick-tongued; Clara, eighteen, attractive, insecure and self-deprecating, seems lonely and intimidated by Big Girl; Baby Girl, Big Girl's retarded sister, is an arrested, inarticulate version of Clara. Having taken a day off work, Big Girl sits at her kitchen table drinking wine, needling Clara, and pouring out their life stories to Jack, a young man who has come to call on Clara. Suddenly some neighborhood toughs escaping police who assault Jack join them. The denouement comes quickly: when Jack reveals he has come because Clara indicated her "ole man" would be at work, he learns Clara's ole man is Big Girl and, at Big Girl's command the neighborhood toughs brutally punish Jack for his ignorance. As Sanders observes, "In *Clara's Ole Man*... characters, like those in many of his later plays, emerge from brutal life experiences with tenacity and grace.... Bullins regards his people unflinchingly, revealing their deformities, and their beauty as well as their strength"(*DLB* 47).

The same kind of portrayal of Black life continues in *Goin' A Buffalo* (1969). This play takes place in the early 1960s in the West Adams District of Los Angeles and involves a group of hustlers of both sexes trying to score some "grand theft dough" so that they can make off for Buffalo, reportedly a high rolling, easy living, "boss" town. It deals with a black hustler, Curt, who is betrayed by the man he has befriended and trusted. Curt and Rich are partners in the narcotic world. Curt's wife Pandora, a dancer at the Strip Club and a white Junkie prostitute named Mamma Too Tight, formerly Queenie Bell Mack from Mississippi, are the women characters from the ghetto. Pandora has a box in which she keeps her dope, and there is a recurrent ironic motif in the play about good things rather than bad coming from Pandora's box—together with some obscene variations. The one alienated from this community, which is again realistically presented, is a stranger named Art, a man younger than the others who has just got out of the country jail. The gullible Curt wants to bring Art into the group and makes the effort to do so despite Art's aloofness. Tough, wise, cool, Art has

served in the Merchant Marine and he is the very opposite of Jack in *Clara's Ole Man.* He does not have the intellectual pretensions of Jack or of Michael in *A Son, Came Home,* although Curt tells the others (he is rather impressed) that Art reads too much, and Rich calls Art a "book reading faggot"(*FP* 88). Pandora speaks for the whole group: "Ain't heard of no body gettin' no money readin' "(*FP* 27). Meanwhile, Art ingratiates himself with the women by stopping Curt from beating Pandora and by telling Mamma Too Tight that most of all she needs "understanding." Yet what he is doing turns out to be playing his own game. While Art proves to be a foil to the gullible Curt, he also hints a connection with the trickster figure of the black mythology—the Signifying Monkey of the urban ghetto in America. For the white world he is a treacherous nigger, for the black community he is, what Paul Carter Harrison calls, "a mediator between the obstacles that endanger survival and the objects that might bring harmony with wit"(3), cunning and guile even if it means treachery. The choice he has to make is guided by the irresistible desire for life—whatever it means in the world where his life is always uncertain. Treachery, deceit or abuse by a nigger prepares one for greater dangers and shocks to which one has become oblivious of and carefree. This is not something new in African-American drama. Lorraine Hansberry clearly deals with this theme in her 1959 Broadway success *A Raisin in the Sun.* The blacks have to reckon with their own people before facing the world where survival depends on taking away what you want before somebody else gets it. Baraka's poem "Black People" is extremely pertinent in this regard. In this poem he implies that in order to survive in a tricky world one has to be a trickster. That's why, stealing and robbing are necessary modes of living in a country which practices those acts in a much more pervasive way. In response to Pandora's question to Art, "what are you waiting for? " the latter replies in this manner:

> Me? I'm just waitin' so I won't jump into somethin' too fast... just sit back and look around and wait a while. You don't have to do anything... baby, the whole world will come to you if you just sit back and be ready for it. (*FP* 56)

Art is a character Bullins would like his black audiences to emulate even if it means treachery to his own people. He is a diagonal foil to his friend Curt who compares himself with Art. Curt is impressed with his new friend, and in the light of the outcome of the play his speech to Art is heavily ironic:

> You're like me in a lot of ways. Man, we're a new breed, ya know. Renegades. Rebels. There's no rules for us... we make them as we break them. (*FP* 68-69)

This statement "we make them as we break them" is significant in the context of the pressing imperatives for the Blacks trying to survive in a hostile world through guile, trickery and cunning. Curt fails to understand at this point, of course, that he is describing Art, but not himself. Art betrays Curt and Rich to the police as the two make their big deal in heroin. He has now also taken over Mamma Too Tight without giving her any hint why he was actually interested in her. The last act presents Art as an entirely different person who slaps Pandora when she wants to do something to help the jailed Curt. Art is in charge; he orders Pandora to get packed and be ready to go to Buffalo with him and Mamma Too Tight. "A brutal takeover is the resolution of Art's alienation, a playing of the game without rules to his own advantage: deception, betrayal, violence, whatever cruelty is necessary"(Canaday 38).

The Electronic Nigger (1968) points its satire at the way certain kinds of jargon in the classroom obfuscate the sense of clarity and comprehension of the real issues. Bullins criticizes in this play the pretentious black students who imitate the rhetoric of the whites and are oblivious of the real nature of the Black experience. According to Sanders, the play's point

is the danger of rhetoric of any kind and particularly the "pseudo-objective rhetoric of the social sciences and the conventional, unexamined rhetoric of the humanities" because neither deal adequately with the problems posed by being black in a predominantly white culture (*DLB* 47). A major problem, Bullins seems to think, for the Blacks in the United States is the alienation of the young Blacks from their community. They seem to feel that by joining the mainstream of white culture and imitating its language, they can survive in a highly competitive society. But Bullins thinks that this self-inflicted alienation is not desirable for them and is counter-revolutionary. That's why he directs his satire against this tendency.

A Son, Come Home (1968) treats this theme in the most lyrical manner. It deals with the gentle and painful conversation between a religious mother and her estranged son and their alienation from each other. Bullins' purpose in this play is to show how certain forces have caused such an estrangement between the two generations of Blacks and to suggest ways for restoring cohesion in the family. Such cohesion at the familial sphere can go a long way in bringing about a similar cohesion in the community.

Around this time Bullins set to work for a cycle of twenty plays, the first of which was *In the Wine Time*, which deals with the problem of attaining manhood. "The best-known of Bullins' acknowledged plays," according to Turner, "is *In the Wine Time* (1969) dealing with the story of a black youth maturing in a ghetto with only the dreams provided by wine, an uncle-in-law who has been a sailor, and romance with an unattainable woman" (20). In this play, there are two alienated protagonists, the boy Ray and the older Cliff Dowson, married to Ray's Aunt Lou. The setting is a large, northern city called Derby Street, which resembles Philadelphia. Ray speaks a symbolic prologue, in which he is seen waiting many evenings on a street corner to see his ideal woman pass. He is under the illusion that this woman will meet

him whenever he is ready "out in the world." Ray wants to join the navy as his uncle Cliff had done, but his aunt does not allow him to do so as she fears that he is too innocent for a career in the navy and that the navy will make him miserable as it had for Cliff. But it is Cliff who tempts him to go out and to see the world and leave the place of drifting relationships, crime, alcohol and violence. But at another moment he changes the tone and asks him not to be trapped by these seductive forces.

> Nawh... nawh... I had my crack at the world... and I made it worse, if anything... you youngbloods own the future... remember that... I had my chance. All I can do now is sit back and raise fat babies. It's your world now, boy. (*NPBT* 156)

Finally, the tension is resolved at the end of the play by an act of random violence. Ray's girlfriend appears and announces that she is now the girlfriend of one of the members of the street gang: "Honey, these wine times is something else" (176). In the fight that ensues, Ray kills his rival in an alley but Cliff takes the blame for the murder when the police arrive. For this sacrifice he makes clear that he expects Lou to let Ray leave Derby Street. As Cliff is led away handcuffed, his words to the young man express his hope for Ray in an ironic echo of the prologue: "It's your world, Ray... It's yours, boy... Go out there and claim it"(182). The play is about Ray's maturation in an environment which has nothing to offer. At the same time it is also about Cliff's satisfaction at having saved Ray from a sterile ghetto confinement of which he himself was a victim. "Thus the last of these four plays of alienation," concludes Canaday, "seem to start again at the beginning, with the protagonist battered by the harsh realities of ghetto life. Still, Ray has learned much already, and so the full circle has spiraled to a higher beginning for him than for the other young representative male characters"(39). Ray is far too street-wise to be humiliated like Jack in *Clara's Ole Man,* and having spoken his determined prologue he will never have the purposelessness of Michael in *A Son, Come Home.*

"Finally," concludes Canaday, "because he has the example of Cliff's sacrifice, an act of love that frees Ray from Derby Street, he is unlikely to develop the ruthless self-centeredness of Art in *Goin' a Buffalo.* It may be that Ray will leave and then return to be a participating member of that black community that Bullins discovers and reveals in the next phase of his art and thought"(39).

Bullins depicts two kinds of characters. The first belong to a group which is rooted to the Black cultural and social ethos and define themselves in terms of their relationship to their community; the second are alienated, misdirected Blacks who seek comfort outside the community and drift apart. The members of the first group remind themselves of their share in the blues of the plantation life when the community was strongly united in spite of their physical separation from each other. Nicholas Canaday in his essay, "Toward Creation of a Collective Form: The Plays of Ed Bullins," says that Bullins has kept the social function of drama in mind and by portraying the protagonists alienated from the ghetto world of street niggers, he has tried to effect stronger bonds of community by suggesting the need to search for their cultural roots. Unlike the other playwrights of the decade who had advocated overt violence to counter white racism, Bullins advocates cultural nationalism as a pacifist ideology.

One of the best ways of raising the consciousness of Blacks about their condition, Bullins thinks, is to excite the audience to take part in what goes on on the stage. For example, as Nicholas Canaday says, the title play in *The Theme is Blackness* is what was called in the late sixties a "happening"(40). Leslie Sanders also corroborates this view: "Many of Bullins's plays not only invite dialogue with the actors and identification with their characters, but they challenge the audience to use the occasion of the play to extend its own sense of community to the world beyond the theater" (Sanders 49). Bullins' treatment of white characters is different from that of his predecessors. While he expects the blacks in the audience to involve

themselves with the characters present on the stage, he is more or less indifferent to the whites in the audience. Sanders adds further,

> While some of Bullins' plays also invite response from white members of an audience, most of them concern themselves with defining the world of and for a black audience... White members of an audience felt themselves interlopers, not because his plays attack whites but because they ignore them. (*DBL* 49)

Moreover, while other black playwrights of the 1960s showed extreme and overt hatred towards the whites, Bullins's treatment of the whites is relatively mild. His concern is not to pit the Blacks against the whites and to create a gap between them, but to make the Blacks conscious of the distinctive features of their race and their cultural expressions. His plays, seen from the perspective of Gates's theory of signifyin (g) which is rooted in the black cultural matrix, are full of blues motifs. The blues provide the same strength for survival as what their ancestors received when as slaves they lived a precarious life of domestic or field slaves. By trying to effect culturally shared beliefs and values through what Nicholas Canaday calls "the collective form" in his plays, Bullins performs the role of a cultural leader. His employs satire, violence, street language of the urban ghetto, and, above all, the blues as the central force of his drama. All these elements, however, mark the gradual progression of the playwright from his depiction of alienated and deracinated Blacks to that of culturally conscious Blacks proud of their rich genealogy.

Though they are not set in specific geographic locations, Bullins's plays display "the conceptual spatial environment" and "like Pandora's box [are] set within the larger compass of white American cities"(Tener 533). Tener further notes:

> In one sense the spatial environment of the plays swings across the country from California in *The Duplex, The Pig Pen, Electronic Nigger, and Goin'a Baffalo,* to Harlem in *Night of the Beast,* and *It Bees Dat Way,* and then moves down to Philadelphia in *Clara's Ole Man* and *A Son, Come Home.* At other times it is a nameless metropolitan city in *Death List, In New England Winter,* and *In the Wine Time.* (533)

But all the settings suggest one common motif, which parallels the memories of ancestral slavery and the century-old quest either to escape to or to long for a place of freedom.

One striking feature about his plays is that the setting, whether exterior or interior, is a closed area, which is reminiscent of the old days of confinement. According to Tener, "While most exterior scenes are restricted to narrow streets, compressing the action by narrowing its possibilities, all the interior spaces are even more confining of action and character with their box-like qualities"(534). Bullins's chief motive behind portraying the imprisoned characters—whether in the physical confines or emotional bondage—is to remind the people of his community that they are still under domination of their former slave masters socially, politically and economically. Moreover, his portrayal of the street niggers as drug-addicts; hustlers, pimps or even as treacherous has a justification in their poverty, ignorance, political subjugation and racism. Bullins wants to make his people conscious of their real or psychological confinement so that their desire for freedom becomes more urgent and expedient. He also strives to tell the world that the people of black community are not devoid of humanity, as they are portrayed as stereotypes in the writings of white writers. By examining the mode of his characterization, one can conclude that Bullins is essentially a moralist; he probes and questions cliches, the accepted values, stereotypes and romantic

illusions in order to test out their intrinsic values. In his treatment of the race relations, his focus is on the falsified images of the Black people created by the dominant culture as well as on the self-perpetuation of these images by the Blacks themselves. He also suggests that in the past the Blacks were helpless, but now they can assert themselves by replacing the false images with the true ones. Leslie Sanders' observations on this aspect are significant:

> Constant in his work is a questioning of the meaning of the idea of a people, a community, and its various definitions: the ideological definitions generated by the black nationalist movement of the 1960s and early 1970s; the traditional definitions of family and kinship networks; street definitions evolved from the partnerships and loyalties of neighborhood and street life; the looser definition suggested by the phrase with which he often concludes his list of characters: "[T] he people in this play are black. (*DLB* 50)

Initially, Bullins questioned the possibility of freedom for the Blacks because they themselves subjected them to psychological bondage by their willful acceptance of the stereotypes created by the whites. But the Black Arts Movement liberated them psychologically and created conditions for talking about freedom as a possibility.

While many playwrights of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s advocated violence as the means to fight against white racism, Ed Bullins tried to seek an alternative method to counter racism. This method is the solidarity expressed in the community "parties" where black people can come closer and try out their relationships. In fact, the party is an important metaphor in his plays. Bullins makes a tactful use of such situations as parties and gatherings as conducive to the temperament of the people of his community. Even when he presents individual meetings or encounters, he tries to forge among the individuals a sense of intimacy

as acts of faith. He implies that through such intimacy a communal harmony can be created which can lead to cultural nationalism.

Bullins's work can be divided into two distinct groups. The first group comprises plays, which deal with problems of the community but touch upon racial themes. Out of the ten full-length plays in the Twentieth Century Cycle six belong to the first group and "only allude to race relations"(Sanders 52). An early full-length play, which is not included in the Cycle, *Goin' A Buffalo* (1965), also belongs to this group. It depicts a community of street people whose hopes are brutally destroyed when they introduce into their midst a treacherous outsider, Art Garrison. Art enters into the world of Curt and Pandora, Mama and Shakey and betrays them through treachery and guile and finally destroys their world of simple living and shatters their hopes and aspirations. These four persons are drug-paddlers and street-dancers and make a living, as other poor Blacks in the inner cities do, through their underworld activities, which have no major impact upon their community. These activities are their "pipe dreams" which sustain them through misery and deprivation. But the entry of an outsider into their community destroys their homogeneous world and breaks down their relationships.

Goin' A Buffalo contains most of the themes Bullins develops later more fully. The themes involve the meaning of love and loyalty, the viability of dreams of people in the sustenance of their community, the affinity between the underworld activities and the need for love and romantic sense of masculinity tinged with the spirit of violence and domination. Violence is a major theme in Bullins' plays. He realistically portrays it as if it is an integral part of the life of the Blacks in an urban ghetto. *Goin' A Buffalo* also portrays scenes of violence in the activities of the characters. Sanders observes:

> Violence punctuates the action of the play; almost every conversation stops just short for a fight or ends in one. The characters are vulnerable because they deliberately blind themselves to the implications of their actions: Pandora denies she is a prostitute; Mamma insists Shaky love her; when Art himself warns Curt that an outsider has no bonds or loyalties, Curt ignores the warning, thus precipitating the play's shocking conclusion. (*DLB* 52)

One can notice a clear resemblance between Bullins' exhortation to the naïve characters like Curt and Pandora and Baraka's resentment at the Black's gullibility (as seen in Clay and Court Royal) a very sly and subtle manner.

In the Wine Time (produced in 1968) from the Twentieth-Century Cycle is set in the Philadelphia ghetto. The play deals with the difficulty in growing up in a Black community and explores the meaning of manhood through its positive manifestation. Ray Crawford, the nephew of Cliff and Lou Dowson is initiated into manhood through drinking. The play's motif is sounded in its prologue, which takes the form of a short story about a semimythical woman with whom the young narrator is fascinated and who promises him fulfillment when he is ready. Cliff encourages Ray's ambition to leave Derby Street and admonishes him for his love for this woman, which he says, will stand as an obstacle on his way to success. But Lou wants Ray to wait and attacks Cliff for his own failure in life. The quarrel between the husband and wife represents a general pattern of discontent in the Black family. Finally Ray kills a neighborhood-boy named Red because the latter takes away his girl and in the aftermath of this murder, Cliff is seen holding a knife, giving the impression that he had killed Red. The police take away Cliff mistaking him for the murder.

Bullins suggests in this play that when the male members of the community find it difficult to cope with the hardship of life in an environment full of misery and deprivation, they be forced to adopt strategies of survival through violence and underworld activities. But these strategies are only contingent measures and are not essentially inhuman acts. Like Cliff sacrificing his life to save Ray, many Black characters at the moments of such needs show their human concern and spirit of sacrifice. The play clearly shows that the attainment of manhood depends upon a readiness to act, not only for one's own self but also for others. Cliff's action is the reverse of Art's treachery.

In *In New England Winter,* the Cycle's next play (produced in 1971) continues Cliff's story after his relief from the jail. Cliff's selfless action is an answer to Lou's earlier accusation that Cliff is not fit to act as Ray's guardian. By saving Ray Cliff matures into responsible manhood as well as provides a model for Ray. Like *In the Wine Time,* this play moves out of a short story of the same name, which serves as its prologue. Its central characters are Cliff and his half brother Steve Benson, the man whose goal is to return to the woman he loved "in New England winter." The play alternates between two settings and two points in time: an unspecified Southwestern city in 1960 where the brothers and their two companions are rehearsing the robbery described in the short story, which will provide Steve the money to head north; and new England of 1955, where Steve had spent a month AWOL from the navy completely immersed in his relations with his woman Liz. In the summer heat, Steve and Cliff confront their tormented filial relationship, made complicated by Steve's having moved into Cliff's home while Cliff was in jail, presumably for killing Red. Cliff, easygoing and without malice, although bitter over Lou's leaving him, loves his brother but Steve, taciturn, precise, and driven, rejects Cliff's overtures. When Cliff accuses Steve of resenting the simple fact that Cliff was their mother's first child, Steve has no response. He later confesses: "You love me

so much... while I hate both of us"(*NBPT* 174). Their companions, Chuckie and Bummie, whose mutual antagonism ends in blows, amplify the tension between the brothers. But an older conflict between Steve and Bummie proves most explosive: when Bummie, in a bid for power, reveals to Cliff that Steve has fathered a child with Lou, Steve abruptly kills him. Cliff's admission that he had known about the child from Lou herself leaves Steve filled with bitter acknowledgment of his brother's love and his own self-hatred. "Behind Steve's callous exterior," observes Sanders, "lies his own guilt over betraying Cliff and his fear of being betrayed"(54). When a competitor, Crook, jealous of the relationship between Steve and Liz, turns him in to the shore patrol that take Steve away. Deeply unhappy, Liz is infantile in her need for care and security, and in confusion she takes Crook for Steve in the latter's absence. In this play, Bullins continues the community theme of the earlier play and unfolds the little drama in a Black household. This is a play about love, understanding and sympathy. The little drama in the family also involves some betrayal and suspicion, which are normal in a close-knit Black family.

The Duplex (produced in 1970) is his third play in the Cycle, which has Steve Dowson as its central character. It is set in a Los Angeles rooming house. Steve courts his landlady Velma, whose husband O. D. lives with another woman but regularly returns to rape his wife and to take whatever cash she has. Sub-titled as *A Black Love Fable in Four Movements, The Duplex* deals with Steve's growing love for Velma and his gradual assumption of responsibility for that love. Sanders says, "*The Duplex* elaborates on its theme by presenting a range of male-female relationships, most characterized by some degree of physical and emotional abuse"(55). Steve seeks healthier love, at first only in an idealized form, but gradually in a more concrete one. About halfway through the play, as a writer in this play, he reads Velma one of his stories. In response to the moment of intimacy that the story creates, Velma reveals to Steve that he

has made her pregnant. Steve does not want to abandon her and thus challenges the conventional attitude of his male companions. Steve's portrayal as a responsible black male serves as a pointer to the Black men who do not hesitate to abuse their women for trivial reasons. Steve's resolve to remain with Velma symbolizes his desire to confront reality rather than to content himself with romantic illusions. However, he fails to keep his resolve because O. D., who returns to claim his wife, is the stronger man and nearly kills Steve in their battle over Velma. Steve also fails because Velma is too tied to her abusive husband to accept the love Steve offers her. Here Bullins portrays the Black male as a responsible lover falsifying the conventional image of the Black man as irresponsible in his relationship with women. He also sympathizes with Black women for their longing for love and desire for emotional stability. These portrayals provide correctives against the stereotypical ones perpetuated in the literature of white Americans. The portrayal of Black men and women in white writings as unstable, incapable of sustained love and irresponsible is countered here through positive images. Bullins suggests through these characters that Black men and women have greater community feeling than their white counterparts and that at the moments of crisis they demonstrate their togetherness much more effectively, contrary to the accusations of the whites that they are diffuse and have no sense of communal bonding.

In the fourth play of the Cycle, *The Fabulous Miss Marie* (produced in 1971), Bullins turns his attention to the black middle class. His setting is Marie and Bill Horton's Christmas Party. The action is interspersed with monologues through which the characters reveal themselves their pasts. The guests include some familiar faces: Marco Polo Henderson and his girl friend, Wanda, Marie's niece; Art Garrison, identified as Steve Benson's cousin; and Steve himself, who ultimately replaces Art as Marie's lover and "house boy." Gafney, a new character, is a Bullins type: a black militant in love with his rhetoric. He represents the older

generation but is considered too militant by some of his peers, and is challenged as a sham by the con man, Art. An array of other characters—Bud, Toni, and Ruth, the women, childhood friends of Marie—completes Bullins's portrait of the middle class. Although a powerful, willful, and domineering woman, Marie is generous and vulnerable beneath her tough exterior. Bullins slowly unfolds this vulnerability in the course of the play. Childless because of a bungled up abortion, for which she still blames her husband, Marie is as much deeply wounded by her childlessness as by Bill's philandering—not because of his infidelity, but because he has fathered a child by his latest woman, who is white. By making most of the Black women childless, Bullins suggests that in spite of their inner vitality and strength, they be bereft of any consolation and hope for the future. He also seems to suggest that Black men are somewhat responsible in making these women vulnerable to their hopes and aspirations. But despite this threat to family bonding, Bullins suggests that the relationship between men and women is cordial and affectionate. "Infidelities and recriminations seem to fill the Horton marriage, but ultimately both are satisfied with the life they have built together, one solidly based on a bond of mutual respect and affection"(Sanders 57). Toughness is what *Fabulous Miss Marie* tries to celebrate. Bullins' message in the play is that it is ultimately the Black woman who, through her generosity and emotional maturity, is the savior of the Black pride and confidence.

Bullins started his Twentieth Century cycle of plays with the theme of community bonding, while occasionally touching upon the theme of race relations. Four of the Six plays in the cycle we have just examined belong to this group. In these plays his emphasis is on the inner drama of the characters within the limited sphere of the family and community. Bullins is not here romanticizing the positive aspects of a Black community; what he is trying to do in this play and other plays in the group is to deal with the actual conditions of the Blacks as they

try to cope with the difficult circumstances of their life in a hostile environment. Their life seem to be determined by the peculiar conditions of their surrounding, but even in a deterministic world, they try to face the reality with equanimity and candor. His main objective in these plays is to establish cultural affinity, with the help of blues motif, between the several groups of people. This cultural affinity is an important aspect of his Black Nationalism.

Bullins, unlike Baraka, is not overtly a political playwright; he uses the metaphor of the community as an effective ground on which the Blacks can build their future and solidarity. His notion of nationalism stems from this perception. He seems to be implying that once the Blacks are sure of their roles as members of their community they will be able to fight external forces with success. But the stability of their community is also threatened from the inside, by the misdirected-members of that community. Bullins wants the community to act as a bulwark against external forces of disintegration. That is why, it is but appropriate that he began the Cycle with the emphasis on the role of the community in the struggle for self-determination and moved on to questions of race. The next group of plays in the Cycle deals with racial questions.

The second group of his plays deals with race relations. Bullins turns his attention directly to the matter of race relations in *The Pig Pen* (produced in 1970) and *The Taking of Miss Janie* (produced in 1975). The former play also constructed around a party, centers on a racially mixed couple, Len and Sharon. Len is a Black man and Sharon is a white woman. Bullins sees in this relationship the miniature copy of the conventional White-Black relationship in which the white manipulates the Black. Bullins wants to make the Blacks aware of the fact that whenever there is such a relationship it is only the white that tries to take advantage of the Black, although on the surface it appears to be the reverse. "For Bullins... the image of the black man apparently in control of a white woman," observes Sanders,"... is bitterly ironic.

His first full-length play depicting race-relations, *The Pig Pen...* must be understood in this light"(1988; 193). Although the action, which takes place on the stage, is realistic, it assumes symbolic significance as it progresses. The action of the play centers round a party of mixed people, who talk about things happening around them and in the midst of their conversation try to manipulate one another. But Len is sensitive to his culture and history and during his conversation tries to make others aware of their cultural heritage. The group represents people with varying perceptions, and when the news of Malcolm X's assassination is brought to them by Mackman, the white man in the group, each character responds to the news differently. Sharon is delighted; Mackman, Margie and Ray mourn the death, while others ignore it. The play's title ostensibly refers to a white policeman who occasionally drifts across the stage blowing his whistle, a pointed reference to stereotypical, almost caricatured, American attitudes. Sanders locates a paragraph in the novel *The Reluctant Rapist* that elaborates the title: "The narrator observes pigs feeding and notes that they are so voracious, were a man to fall into their trough, he would be devoured alive"(*DLB* 58).

According to Sanders, Bullins "neither condemns nor advocates interracial relationships; he simply points out the sickness that permeates them"(58). What Bullins does in *The Pig Pen*, however, is more an admonishment to the black male than a challenge to the whites. "Len's self-emasculating relationship to Sharon," writes Sanders, "forms centerpiece of Bullins' portrait of relationships between blacks and whites" (1988; 194). The interracial and fraternal conviviality implied by the party, the play's central metaphor, is easily disrupted. Almost every conversation and encounter during the party ends in hostility. Bullins' portrayal of the interracial relationships through the metaphor of the play's party is extremely realistic. While the party in *The Pig Pen* represents the tenuous fellowship in American society where blacks and whites interact with apparent ease, the goings-on at the party suggest an underlying,

deadly mutual exploitation. Sanders also points at the other meaning of the slang "pig ," which means a loose woman, suggesting the hospitality that Len offers by sharing Sharon with any of the guests. This play, therefore, provides a convenient transition from Bullins' earliest plays dealing with the community to the plays where black-white relationship is prominently dealt with. By focussing on the community, which is deliberately mixed, Bullins suggests that it is difficult to keep the community values intact in the face of slow infiltration of white values into their community through inter-racial unions. *The Pig Pen* is historically located in a decade, which began black militancy in the USA. Although it directly avoids addressing political issues, it implies through indirect references to the outside world that politics and private lives cannot be kept apart.

The years between 1970 and 1975 are very significant in Bullins' career since each play written during this period suggests a crucial shift in the playwright's struggle to search for more theatrically viable and culturally relevant forms. For example, if *The Pig Pen* observes the beginning of the decade of black militancy, *The Taking of Miss Janie* marks its end. "A pointed, often comic, but essentially mournful, and even bitter reflection on the 1960s"(Sanders 58), T*he Taking of Miss Janie* relates the thirteen-year old relationship between its black hero, Monty, and the blond Janie, whose rape forms the play's prologue and epilogue. Once again Bullins's metaphor is the party. It is through the monologues that the characters reveal their pasts. Janie is attracted to Monty by the poetry he reads in their creative writing class. Monty invites her to his party with a hope that he will have her, but she insists on keeping their relationship Platonic. Her resistance, however, does not indicate sexual innocence by any means; at one point in their relationship, Monty helps her get an abortion done and nurses her through it, and she confesses of having had many lovers, both black and white. Monty's party consists of people having varying political perceptions. For example,

Rich is a strident Black Nationalist; Lonnie is a cool third-rate musician. Len and Sharon, the interracial couple of *The Pig Pen*; and, Peggy and Flossie, the two women in Monty's life. During the course of the play one learns that Len still considers himself a great teacher, but has turned a capitalist, that Monty's wife Peggy is a lesbian, that Monty has an illicit affair with Peggy's friend Flossie and that Mort Silberstein is a crazy drug dealer, and a composite mixture of a leftist radical, Beat poet and a hippie.

Through the portrayal of this assorted group of individuals Bullins gives a broad spectrum of the *dramatis personae* of the 1960s, whose lives intersect with one another. In the play Bullins provides space for a debate about the race relationship of the time and about the responsibility of the Blacks towards their community and history and about the nature of the peculiar attraction of the Black man for the white woman. The debate is interspersed with allusions to Freud, Marx, Einstein, Jesus, Mao, Fanon, and Voodoo, etc. The play concludes with the prologue to the rape with which it opened. In spite of all its dramatic value—a well-knit structure and a relevant theme among other things—Leslie Sanders finds the play out of context and of little social relevance:

> A comment on the 1960s, the period of powerful awakening of black consciousness and creativity and of apparent mitigation of the worst of white racism *The Taking of Miss Janie* sees little of lasting value... the effect of the play's structure is to suggest that the entire decade was little more than a stalking and a tease, for at its end, in spite of everything that occurred, all Monty wanted was Miss Janie. What is more important in *The Taking of Miss Janie* than the overt race-relations is the political message about the incapacity of the blacks to exploit the political awareness that was raised among the blacks during this decade. (*DLB* 59)

This is made clear in Peggy's response to Len:

> We all failed. Failed ourselves in that serious time known as the sixties. And by failing ourselves we failed in the test of the times. We had so much going for us...so much potential.... And we blew it.... We just turned out lookin' like a bunch of punks and freaks and fuck-offs. (*TMJ* 447)

What is significant, however, is that Bullins, who emphasized the social function of drama does not fail to point at the problematic Black man-white woman relationship. This is what Baraka also does in his portrayal of Clay and Lula in his *Dutchman.* The difference between the two plays is in respect of their social relevance. While *Dutchman* was extremely timely, *The Taking of Miss Janie*—not because of its intrinsic value—missed its focus. *The Taking of Miss Janie* will still have a great value for two reasons: one, even if one accepts Sander's view, the play's message to the black male is very specific in a period when cultural nationalism was at its peak; two, the play answers negatively to the charge of sexism leveled against the Black Arts Movement by the feminist writers who emerged very strongly at the time of its production.

Bullins returns to his Cycle with *Home Boy* (1976), that concerns an episodic series of encounters between two young Southern blacks, Jody and Dude, who plan to go to North. Initially neither, however, makes any attempt to fulfill his ambition except placing himself imaginatively in a northern setting, sitting on a street corner drinking wine. Finally, Dude actually makes it, while Judy's trip remains a fantasy. At the end, Judy asks a question, which the play does not answer, "Are we victims, survivors or the casualties? " This is a poignant question, which reflects the existential dilemma of the Blacks in a country that does not allow them any sense of imaginative space. They are victims of their own country; alien in their

homeland. Bullins returns to the theme of what community means to a Black with a renewed sense of urgency and immediacy after a brief excursion to the world of race relations.

The next play in the Cycle, *DADDY!* (1977), returns to the urban setting where Bullins's imagination is most at home and to a character, Michael Brown, whom he has not attended to since *A Son, Come Home.* When after a life of poverty and struggle, Michael's record hits the top of the chart, he and his girl friend Candy move to a posh Central Park West apartment in New York. His sudden rise to fame and affluence also threatens his relationship with Candy and forces him to confront his former wife and four children, still without money and living in the poor Newark neighborhood where he had left them twelve years before. The play examines Michael's new responsibilities after he became rich and famous, which involve the difficulty of negotiating with contrary demands of a complex family life. Ignorant of what constitutes the role of a father as the head of a family, he finds himself in a miserable condition of reconciling himself to his dual responsibility to his old family and to Candy, his girlfriend. He tries to make an attempt to take up the responsibility by bringing his two sons to New York to live with him and Candy, an attempt Sanders calls "a clumsy one" which results in disaster. Michael finally learns how to become a real father and husband from Carter, the patient and steadfast man who has been taking care of his alcoholic wife, Jackie, and finally fathering her twelfth child. While he continues his contact with and financial support of his family, Michael resolves to marry Candy, who is pregnant, and to begin anew, hoping to learn this time that aspect of manhood which is expressed in the word "Daddy." Thus in *DADDY!* Bullins emphasizes the necessity of communal bonds as a source of strength for the black male to solve his personal conflicts. Sanders remarks that "the play moves closer than did earlier plays to delineating the nature of the communal bond and its effect on personal and social identity,

or more accurately, how that bond is expressed or denied through love, loyalty, responsibility, and sexual identity"(*DLB* 59).

It is obvious from his plays dealing with community themes that "one of the concerns Bullins shares with many other playwrights of the Black Arts Movement and certainly with those who followed, is the conflict at the heart of his male protagonists between their sense of personal salvation and their subliminal commitment to the community which makes some demands on them"(Sanders 60). Bullins' protagonists try to create the image of a black male struggling to resolve the conflict between his responsibility to his family and to the community. For example, the protagonist of "*DADDY!* attempts to resolve that conflict, in part by revealing that the bonds of responsibility and freely given love ultimately supersede those of kinship and, certainly those of passion"(Sanders 60).

In all these plays, Bullins tries to emphasize that in their struggle for self-expression the Blacks need to identify with a larger context of a tradition and a community which provide resources for their struggle and their hopes and aspirations. These resources come from their inner ability to endure the daily vicissitudes of life. As slaves living miserable lives in plantations, they had to devise ways of survival. The "blues," "field-songs," etc. gave them such means. The "blues" provides Bullins a central metaphor for his theatre for its rich lyricism and evocativeness. Every significant event in his plays is accompanied by the "blues" music. The tunes and types selected are the soulful funky sounds of the blues-jazz tradition. The emphasis on Black music in Bullins' productions is not merely an "artsy" gimmick; it serves both as a symbolic representation of the psychological states of his characters and as a cultural affirmation of the integral part that Black music plays in Black life-style and survival. The blues create an environment in the auditorium and the audience is supposed to be under the desired spell. The Pandora's box scene in *Goin' a Buffalo* is accompanied by "Dalilah";

throughout the whole of the *Clara's Ole Man*, an AM radio plays rhythm 'n blues music; *The Corner* opens with King Pleasure's "Moody Mood for Love"; in *In New England Winter* music alternates from the jazz of Cannonball Adderly to Fat's Domino's singing "Blue Monday," with Steve finally heading to New England to the tune of Chubby Checker's "Do the Twist"; and, in *In the Wine Time*, Bullins exploits this important dimension of Black culture to the fullest. In the course of the development of his dramaturgy the blues also undergo corresponding changes. These changes were adapted to the immediate dramatic situations. "Surviving these changes comes to mean re-defining ourselves and our values outside that system which subjugates us," says Smitherman(10). The blues theme culminates in the dramatic tension between Cliff and Steve, the brothers in *In New England Winter* who represent conflicting value systems.

> Cliff: You're all knowledge you learned from some books you borrowed from the library and never returned. I'm not just talkin' about how you plan jobs, Steve. It's how you live... that's part you can keep. (*NBPT* 140)

The second scene, which best illustrates the significant place the blues hold in Bullins' plays is in *Duplex*. In a scene of intimacy, Steve reads to his woman, Velma (who is also the landlord's wife) one of his stories. The scene is characterized by the blues tunes making it a real love scene. The stage directions, "*Lights lower and change. Music rises and the words 'Save me, baby' are sung. Short interlude for the shift in time then lights up on Velma sleeping beside Steve as he reads,*" informs the audience of the significance of the blues songs in the affinity that they create among the black people.

Finally Smitherman remarks, "For Bullins/Stage One, the ritual of the blues was a vehicle for reaching the masses of black folk (plus the Black academicians and intelligentsia

who could dig it)"(12). Larry Neal also corroborates with this view that the blues music is the best way for an African-American playwright to reach the heart of the black masses. He writes:

> A cultural revolution that does not include and absorb blues feelings and modes of sound will surely fail. The blues sound is the blackest part of our existence here in this land of the beasts. Considering the pervasiveness of the Black sound, why is it that there are no revolutionary Black musicals? Where is the ritual; the ritual that informs our daily lives, the ritual that moves the people in the Apollo theatres of Black America? Where is the sound of James Brown, Junior Walker, and Smokey Robinson? How can we unify these vectors of Black cultural life, and a relevant theatre out of them? Ed Bullins had his hand on something in *In the Wine Time*. (Neal 14)

Unlike many playwrights of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, Bullins, with the help of blues-rhythm, sought to create an environment on the stage, which would infuse racial pride and unity. In the play called *Street Sounds* (1970), Bullins gives a panoramic picture of the cross-section of the Black community under the title "The People" which include pigs to politicians and poets. As many as forty categories of black people are represented before the audience and there is no fourth wall. The audience is a part of what goes on on the stage and they identify with one another. Bullins's method here is ostensibly to expose those people whom he thinks responsible for the harm done to the community. The words of the Harlem Politician in *Street Sounds*(included in *The Theme is Blackness*), for example, clearly show the playwright's anger and bitterness at those who have no scruples to deceive their own people:

> So I take a little graft... so what... my constituents know me. They know my record on Civil Rights. They know what I have done for them down through the years.... They

> know that I'm their man... a *race* man... and that I can be counted upon when the going gets rough. That's why they return me to office term after another. (*SS* 147).

There is always a hidden message in the rhetoric Bullins employs—totally unlike the one used by the ideologically hollow and deceitful political activists. Whereas he lashes the deceitful Harlem Politician, the words of the Non-ideological Nigger tell much more than their denotative announcements:

> Black is more to me than a political/cultural/sociological/psychological/ existential matrix, my brother... its spiritual essence transcends the mere limitations of the definable.... To me, to be without an entrapping set of dogmas is the freedom of the highest order. (*SS* 154).

But the very last line of his speech—"... being that my wife is white"—puts him in true color and the audience is able to grasp the other side of what Bullins aims at. Bullins has the "Black writer" also in a crowd of people—a kind of person who dreamed and was taken to be a strange man for forgetting the world for his dream to be a "real author." It is only when he stopped writing and took a job at the post office, bought a car that the family, his mother, father and even his girl, thought he was back to normalcy. Bullins brings in a "Woman poet" and a "Black Student" too who give voice to the female section of the community. While the Woman Poet talks of the "basic" difference between male writers and them, the Black Student voices what goes on and has gone by on the university campuses:

> I'm a pretty together sister. But the students aren't together, yet. I got most of the brothers and sisters on our campus out of those fraternities and sororities.... Even had some on-going programs in the ghetto, completely staffed by B. S. U. members. Then we began to take over student government.... Then Black Power came on campus...

> that was a fight... then Black Studies... it's along story... and it's been a hard fight. (*SS* 162)

Bullins's love for his community is clear from the concern that he shows for it in his plays. His concept of the black theater—Black national theatre—is the first step towards building unity among the Blacks. He scorns those who use the political rhetoric. Instead, he emphasizes that it is the language that employs cultural alphabets. In the introduction to *The Theme Is Blackness,* he clarifies that the language of the blues—which creates an emotional ethos—is central to his plays:

> Some of the alphabets that make up the alphabet of the secret language used in Black theatre are, naturally, rhythm—black, blues, African; the racial consciousness and sub-consciousness of Third World peoples; Black Cultural Nationalism, Black Revolutionary Nationalism and traditional Black people's familial nationalism; dance, as in Black life style and patterns; Black religion in its numerous forms—gospel, Negro spiritualism to African spirit, sun, moon, stars, and ancestor worship; Black astrology, numerology and symbolism; Black mysticism, magic and myth science; also history, fable and legend, vodun ritual-ceremony, Afro-American nigger street styles, and, of course, Black music. (9)

Bullins is convinced that theatre, with all its privileges—talking directly to the audience, creating a spell to affect them as desired, using varieties of language—has a magical power to change the Black consciousness and to usher in a slow revolution in sensibility which will eventually establish a Black nation within the multi-cultural ambience of America.

Regarding the evolution of the future form of the black theatre also Bullins has very high hopes. If Bullins thinks that the future black theatre will have still stronger impact in

altering the consciousness of the African Americans, he is not at all exaggerating. "The future of Black theatre," he observes in *The Theme is Blackness*, "will be in its evolution into a profound instrument of altering the slave mentality of Black Americans. In an evil, white world of ever shifting values and reality, for the Black man there must be a sanctuary for re-creation of the Black spirit and African Identity. In racist, madmen America, the Black theatre has carved out this part of the future for itself" ("T" 14).

To sum up, Ed Bullins is essentially a cultural nationalist and is more focused than any other playwright of the Black Arts Movement in his message of achieving racial solidarity by reinforcing the bonds with African cultural heritage. If Baraka concentrated on race relations in his Revolutionary theatre, Bullins turned inward and concentrated on the problems within the community. As a result, as Leslie sanders and Genevieve Fabre have described, his theatre rightly came to be called the "theatre of Black reality or Black experience." His major concern was to exhort his audience about the inevitability of healthy relationships, especially between black men and women. Moreover, just like the other playwrights of the Black Arts Movement, Bullins offers a serious critique of the hollow political rhetoric, black family, religion, and, above all the social alienation of a section acting as a strong counter-revolutionary force within the community. However, Bullins is not completely unsympathetic towards the alienated section among the Blacks. Bullins offers solutions to this split in the form of social and communal parties that form the setting of many of his plays. His treatment of white characters is also different from those of more militant playwrights like Baraka in the sense that he encourages the Blacks to take a broader view of the black-white relationship. His portrayal of the black male as a more responsible and introspective member of the society may appeal to those who have been socially paranoid and have lost connections with their past. His plays, however, are constructed in consonance with the notions of the black aesthetic upheld by the

Black Arts Movement. His shift towards what Nicholas Canaday calls the "collective form" shows the extent to which his social commitment is reflected especially in his later plays. His emphasis on the cultural matrix as a basis for all art is in tune with the needs of the community whose greatest danger seems to come from their temptation to co-optation by the while establishment. His contribution to the furtherance of the tradition of Black nationalism lies in his message expressed in the introduction to his collection *The Theme is Blackness*, "the ruthless dedication in creation of collective forms that will survive any individual's life... *to inspire the creation of the nation*"(12).

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