

DISPATCH

Making Experiences Our Own: A Review of *The Amen Corner*, 2021

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Abstract

The author reviews the 2021 production of James Baldwin's play, *The Amen Corner*, as directed by Whitney White at Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, DC. After situating the experience of engaging with Baldwin's art through a constructivist approach to art-based education and learning design, the piece turns to considering the impact of various interpretive materials and the director's artistic vision in the production. White's decision to include an epigraph in the production leaves a notable impact, particularly in conversation with Baldwin's essays, "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare" and "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity."

Keywords: *The Amen Corner*, "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare," Whitney White, Black futures, constructivism, learning design, arts education

I know you think I don't know what's happening, but I'm beginning to see—something.

James Baldwin, *The Amen Corner*¹

I will admit this here: I have been afraid of James Baldwin. I only feel encouraged to write this because I have not been alone with this fear. Eddie S. Glaude Jr., for instance, admits his early avoidance was a way to dodge the subsequent introspection and unearthed pain an encounter with Baldwin would invoke.² In Michael R. Jackson's musical, *A Strange Loop*, the main character, Usher, has visions of Black American cultural ancestors including Baldwin being so disappointed with him that they rise out of their graves to sing their disdain at him—which I found to be a surprisingly accurate depiction of my feelings as well.³ Similarly, in articulating his relationship with Shakespeare, Baldwin shares that at one point, he “feared him because, in his hands, the English language became the mightiest of instruments.”⁴ This fear parallels my own experience with Baldwin. I think I have been most afraid of not understanding Baldwin, of misinterpreting and even resisting his ideas. I held these sentiments as I attended the Shakespeare Theatre Company (STC) production of Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* in Washington, DC, in September 2021, feeling intimidated, a bit overwhelmed, and worried that I did not even know where to start.

Of course, if my undergraduate or graduate students came to me naming similar apprehensions about engaging with a piece of art, I know exactly where I would begin. I specifically teach courses that center around my students' experiences attending plays. Though the playwrights, actors, and crew of the performances have particular goals in mind or messages they wish to communicate through their art, that is not necessarily where I ask my students to direct their attention. As an arts-based educator and learning designer, I take a constructivist approach to teaching and learning experiences, operating with the assumption that students will learn and “make meaning” of an experience if they can, as George Hein puts it, “connect it with what [they] already know.”⁵

Hein goes on to describe constructivism as a teaching and learning model wherein “learners construct knowledge as they learn; they don't simply add new facts to what is known, but constantly reorganize and create both understanding and the ability to learn as they interact with the world.”⁶ Instead of assuming that knowledge is purely “independent of the learner,” a constructivist view embraces how a learner will retain new knowledge and understandings if this information speaks to what already exists in the learner's mind.⁷ What a learner might already know is vast; it can include content from their studies, memories, or life experiences. As art historian Sarah Elizabeth Lewis describes, arts-based engagements can shift something for an individual by reshaping how they see the world—the goal, as I see it, of the learning process itself.⁸ Therefore, I start my students down the path of focusing on their mental reorganizing to see where it leads them. I ask students to pay attention to the task of attending a play and the associations their minds make as they go through all elements of that journey—watching the play, yes, but also getting to the theater, what they see in the theater lobby, what they read in the program, and the thoughts they have beyond the curtain call.

In other words, I encourage students to make an experience with the arts their own. Moreover, in addition to being curious about how students go on a personal, internal journey that may prompt them to reconsider something in the world differently, I am also invested in how these internal thoughts begin to pivot outward toward agency and creating change in the world around them. Ultimately, I want to see if students, after making an experience their own, want, in turn, to make their own experiences.

For me, seeing *The Amen Corner* at STC, running for two weeks in September 2021 after its original run in early 2020 was cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was an opportunity for me to practice what I preach—or teach, as it were.⁹ In aiming to situate myself on the path I ask my students to follow, I decided to focus on two questions. First, what here allows me to make this experience my own? Secondly, how do those elements facilitate making my own experiences?

To answer this first question, I usually turn to the interpretive, educational, or supportive materials alongside a piece of art—such as wall text, a playbill, a hands-on activity, or an interactive website—that can help mediate the experience a viewer might have with the art itself. Museum education scholars such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Kim Hermanson, Nina Simon, and Karin DeSantis and Abigail Housen articulate how an audience member's engagement with interpretive materials undergirds a compelling experience with artwork.¹⁰ It is by no means guaranteed that a potential audience member will automatically make a connection between their life experiences, interests, knowledge, emotions, or memories and a piece of art. Interpretive or educational materials, however, can help a viewer create a personally meaningful connection with the art itself. These tools can help facilitate some kind of personal, participatory engagement—whether that is in an intellectual, tactile, or affective capacity—that ultimately feels rewarding to the viewer. A given interpretive item or approach will not be of interest to everyone in all situations. Nevertheless, these kinds of items increase the likelihood of a viewer fostering an initial, additional, or enduring personal involvement with a piece of art that leaves them feeling like they have learned something, deepened their existing expertise, and ultimately addressed the curiosity that held their attention. I often hold a deep interest and appreciation for the design of these mediating and interpretive components. Even among my students, who have an intrinsic interest in a play due to their interest in our class—or the fact that they are being graded—there are nearly too many elements of the experience to absorb as well as a limited amount of information they can know about a performance before seeing the work itself. As a result, interpretive materials can be beneficially grounding or facilitative.

An initial avenue through which I was able to try to make this experience my own was through the curatorial choice by STC to stage *The Amen Corner* in the first place. Given that the play was first produced in Washington, DC, it seemed fitting for the production to be revisited in the district at STC for a few reasons. In 1955, Owen Dodson directed the first run of the play with a cast composed of the Howard University Players and performed at the university.¹¹ As David Leeming

notes in his Baldwin biography, the production received praise—or at least complaints that Baldwin interpreted positively—for its inclusion of “Negro English” and Black American syntax.¹² Additionally, Frank Leon Roberts describes Baldwin’s vision of the “black playwright ... to serve as a ‘witness’ to and for the black experience,” and capturing of Black lives.¹³

DC appears, then, to have been an ideal place for *The Amen Corner*’s debut. Just two years following *The Amen Corner*’s premiere in DC, the district became the first majority-Black major city in the United States.¹⁴ These demographics underscore the so-called “Chocolate City” as a site of Black culture, arts, and thought, and this appears to be something Baldwin himself experienced; during his stint at Howard with *The Amen Corner*, Baldwin connected with Black scholars and intellectuals who “demanded intellectual rigor” that differed from the work of navigating “white liberals” and “white intellectuals admiring his ‘surprising’ ability to articulate his condition.”¹⁵

Of course, DC’s racial demographics have changed in the last sixty years, and due to “the nexus” of “immigration, gentrification, and displacement,” the city, while remaining diverse and international, is also less Black.¹⁶ Moreover, despite the city’s diversity, we can expect its theater audiences to be predominantly white.¹⁷ As the director of the STC production, Whitney White, explains, there can be a tension in centering Black work and actors with white audiences. “[I]t’s a complicated thing,” White says, “the history of viewing the Black body in America ... And then you come to the theater, which is usually predominantly white audiences, and people are looking to digest entertainment, looking to have catharsis, looking to feast ... on the Black body in these ways.”¹⁸ Subsequently, there could be a risk of staging Black work in a way that ends up, per White’s language, “working so hard for the white gaze.”¹⁹

Thankfully, White’s cognizance of this tension allows the curatorial choice of staging this play at STC to be ultimately expansive. For instance, White notes that she aimed to “honor the truth of what it feels like to be viewed by a white audience” in her direction and, as a result, there are instances throughout the play where the all-Black cast and dancers have their backs to the audience that she connects to a sense of Black agency.²⁰ Even if Baldwin ultimately stopped perceiving Shakespeare as “one of the authors and architects of [his] oppression,” the sentiments of Western canonical literature or theater actively marginalizing historically othered populations continues to resonate.²¹ As a result, I find the choice to center Black art and Black work in DC’s current context to be affirming.

Indeed, there may even be a sentiment that stretches beyond affirmation to recalculation or even defiance about *The Amen Corner* in general that seeps into this staging. Dramaturgs Soyica Diggs Colbert and Drew Lichtenberg note that, by the time the play began its Broadway run in 1965—ten years after debuting at Howard—it was then “a play out of time.”²² Frank Leon Roberts, more starkly, describes the Broadway tenure as “doomed” and a “failure” because of how its construction deviated from other Black theater at the time.²³ Baldwin himself expresses some self-consciousness about being a novelist-turned-playwright,

though despite the prospect of failure, he remained compelled to write the play regardless.²⁴ Interestingly, Roberts proposes viewing Baldwin's theatrical work through a lens that situates failure as an asset. Roberts uses the lens of the specifically "queer art of failure"—which includes a "willful *refusal* to adhere to normative paradigms of 'success'"—in order "to suggest that theater is the space where Baldwin fails best."²⁵ Nontraditional elements—from the criticisms of the play's dramatic structure to Baldwin's apprehensions to the queering of failure—are thereby centered in this staging in ways that may not have been possible with a traditional Shakespearean offering.

Though I was unaware of much of this specific history and discourse before seeing the performance, I nonetheless suspect it shaped my personal, anecdotal observation that there was a Blacker audience at STC because of this play. For me, this seemed especially apparent during the Sunday matinee performance I attended, when I worried I was underdressed. I was reminded that in many Black American communities, Sundays are a day for church and therefore for dressing up in your Sunday best—as opposed to, say, wearing sneakers and an athleisure jersey onesie I bought from Instagram.²⁶ For the dressed up and underdressed alike, the ground floor lobby of STC's Sidney Harman Hall featured an oversized print of the production's promotional artwork with actor Mia Ellis as Sister Margaret Alexander, the play's central character, next to a "step-and-repeat" promotional backdrop, both optimal places for viewers to take photos documenting their experience at the theater.

On the second floor, near the theater doors and café, was a pop-up style gift shop. Between STC swag such as tote bags and mugs were copies of *Giovanni's Room* (1953), the Lorraine Hansberry biography *Radical Vision* (2021) by Diggs Colbert, and T-shirts featuring a kinky-haired Shakespeare. Obviously, a gift shop has commercial ambitions. Yet it was also a way to facilitate Black representation and engagement in a setting named after the same Shakespeare whom Baldwin had at one point found himself resisting. Instead of portraying the work and reach of Shakespeare as a "language [that] reflected none" of a Black experience, these choices reinforced White's goal of situating Baldwin's work as Shakespearean.²⁷

The choices made by STC in their curation, lobby, and gift shop created opportunities for visitors to connect their existing interests, traditions, thoughts, experiences, and identities with the artwork to come before even sitting in their seats. And inside the theatre, this experience continued. In her director's note, White names a desire for the audience to react and move to the songs throughout the play.²⁸ Though I sensed some hesitancy or restraint throughout portions of the audience, other viewers understood that clapping and singing along were welcome as soon as the cast started their first song, playing instruments, and dancing. I did not grow up within a Black church, but I recognized the design to include the audience into this special space as part of the congregation and encourage them to participate.

White's hope that the audience viscerally respond to the music might seem an interesting choice when considering some criticisms of other stagings of the play. From his viewing of the 2012 *Amen Corner* production at Chicago's Creative Arts

Foundation, E. Patrick Johnson notes that “the fact that the audience gets swept up in ... the music ... undermines a critical reading of the church as an institution, namely because of the ‘good feeling’ evinced by the music.”²⁹ Situating these observations alongside criticism from Baldwin scholars Carolyn Sylvander, Barbara K. Olson, and David Leeming, Johnson goes on to note that the music and invitation to the audience to engage in church rituals may mean that “the experience of the play becomes one of ‘going to church’—in the black vernacular sense of that phrase—rather than bearing witness to its hypocrisy and cruelty.”³⁰ Of course, the visceral experience is part of the goal: “Out of the ritual of the church,” Baldwin wrote in his *Amen Corner* notes, “comes the act of the theatre ... And I knew that 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.”³¹ Regardless of these potential outcomes from critical readings of other productions, I still found the invitation here to be immersed in the music and rituals of a Black church easy to accept. It was fun to witness and be in a joyfully reacting audience, and I also appreciated hearing other viewers participating in the call-and-response embedded in Margaret’s opening sermon.

As I have started to touch on, White’s directorial vision was an undeniably influential mediator of this experience of Baldwin’s work. With her writing in the program, she explicitly identifies some of the associations she made while encountering this piece of art. For instance, White points directly to David’s journey within the play—a potentially helpful hint for viewers who notice that he seemingly disappears for large portions of the production, or may not otherwise know where to focus their attention.³² Additionally, her emphasis on David seeking to be out in the world seemingly mirrored my emerging thoughts on personalizing experiences to eventually make new ones of our own; it felt encouraging.

However, perhaps the most fascinating choice White made was the decision to add an epigraph.³³ In the moments before the chorus started singing the first hymn, as the house lights dimmed, audio of Baldwin’s voice preceded the play’s opening: “And Shakespeare said—and this is what I take to be the truth about everybody’s life all of the time—‘Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety.’”³⁴ When I think about the function of an epigraph or how I relate to it in a printed text, I immediately get tactile. I picture my thumb bending a book cover, the sound of pages shuffling, intentionally blurring words to revisit, reread, and reexamine what I’ve since encountered. Yet the audio hardly felt palpable, and with the crowd not yet silent, it was additionally fleeting. Upon revisiting the audio later, I realized that the quality of the recording shaped this experience as well; the volume drops right before Baldwin quotes Shakespeare, sounding as though he is further from the microphone and giving the passage a more sepulchral quality.³⁵

Had I not been scribbling notes in the dark, I easily would have missed or forgotten this moment. However, my learning designer mind was intrigued. In thinking about engaging in and mediating experiences, I became so curious about this artistic design choice. How might the average playgoer have interacted with the epigraph? What might yet another audience member think of it? Was it

intended to speak to folks with a longer history with Baldwin's work? Was it intended to be transitory, akin to a subliminal message?

At the very least, I saw White enacting the process of making an experience her own with this addition and, by doing so, adding an interpretive and mediating component for her audience. And though I am unsure how many other audience members consciously captured the epigraph, I certainly did, and I ultimately found the framing offered by the epigraph to be very effective as a mediating tool. Throughout the performance, it was easy to track Sister Margaret's desperation to cultivate what she perceived to be a sense of safety. Actor Mia Ellis's stellar performance of Sister Margaret's turmoil reminded me of building a sandcastle in the surf: the façade of structure and restraint destined to crack open—and the instinct to reconstruct while we watch it continue to give way. Near the end of Act I, the script describes one of Margaret's "praise the Lord" lines to be said "dangerously" to her congregants, and Ellis adeptly delivered.³⁶ Scenes like these, with Margaret interacting with her congregants and son, David, highlighted her restraint. However, between Ellis and Chiké Johnson's Luke, especially in the third act, the actors portrayed not only the painful reasoning behind Margaret's quest, but also how specifically sad and heartbreaking those consequences were.³⁷ Between Luke imploring Margaret to consider what her leaving him did to his soul, asking what they had done to be cursed by God, and Margaret describing their stillborn child dying inside of her, their grief was embodied and shared with the audience.

Going back to Acts I and II, we could see hints from the other characters about the limitations of Margaret's artifices as well. Conversations between Sister Moore, Sister Boxer, and Brother Boxer—respectively portrayed by E. Faye Butler, Deidra Lawan Starnes, and Phil McGlaston—were enjoyable to watch. These characters may not have been "doing a thing but talking like a Christian" in these scenes, but we know exactly what Sister Boxer thinks of Sister Margaret's sex life and why "that woman make so much noise when she get up in the pulpit."³⁸ In addition to the levity and fun of stretching the scripture, creating innuendos, and repurposing their church language for their own needs, these characters simultaneously betrayed the limits of strict piety.

In "Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare," Baldwin heralds the inventiveness of the "black ancestors, who evolved the sorrow songs, the blues, and jazz, and created an entirely new idiom in an overwhelmingly hostile place."³⁹ In a conversation with David, Luke reiterates this idea when explaining that "[t]he things that hurt you—sometimes that's all you got. You got to learn to live with those things—and—use them."⁴⁰ Overall, I tracked this bending and creation of language as a way to deal with a challenging environment through the congregants as well as the play's music. Yet in navigating this language, Sister Margaret is not surviving; she is depriving herself and, as Luke and David articulate, is at risk of hamstringing her son's life. In the line that follows White's epigraphic selection, Baldwin asserts that "safety is an illusion."⁴¹ This sentiment is echoed in other writings—for instance, his 1962 essay, "The Creative Process"—but notably in the introductory notes for the script.⁴² With the framing, mediating lens of the epigraph in

conjunction with White's essay, I felt compelled to pay attention to David's final monologue. Antonio Michael Woodard delivered David's halting, emerging, and nascent stream of thoughts in this scene in a way that felt familiar—partly because I work with young adults, but primarily because in wanting to be “in the world out there,” he truly did sound like someone wishing to make their own experience.⁴³

In encountering David's language, I could not help but think of the critical notions of Afrofuturism and Black futures. Baldwin wrote about being “in danger, most literally, of *thinking* myself out of existence. I was not expected to know the things I knew ... or to do the things I did.”⁴⁴ This was echoed in Margaret's efforts and Luke's recollections of the woman she used to be. But I was also reminded of how one of the goals of white supremacy is to constrict Black imaginations into thinking we can *only* survive so as to ultimately kill Black imagination entirely.⁴⁵ This is why it remains radical to assert: “There Are Black People in the Future”—creating it, shaping it, being full human beings in it.⁴⁶ Without Black visions or the active practice of pursuing dreams, we are unable to pursue a liberated future.⁴⁷ David describes seeing his parents' and others' faces when he plays music, but it is his desire to capture and communicate this imagery that centers the Black future. And because wanting Black futures and agency is not existentially, physically, or spiritually safe, this is also why David must create art to “help one bear” this truth.⁴⁸

From here, I found myself sitting in a liminal or transitional space between the two questions I offered myself at the top of this journey. I found connections between the artwork and my existing knowledge and interests. I reconsidered what I already knew in light of my engagement with the art, creating new questions and understandings aligned with the tenets of constructivism. Indeed, I think I made my own experience within my personal landscape.

However, I remain struck by how White describes David's drive as brave.⁴⁹ Baldwin made clear the mediating power of fear through Margaret's storyline in *The Amen Corner*, how it might preclude us from recognizing the artifice of safety. Understanding David's visions, a desire to create an experience and language, and a wish to ensure that it is seen by others in the world is surely a brave undertaking. Amid such bravery, I cannot help but wonder if we can simultaneously discern the presence of fear. We can infer some fear from Glaude, who writes about the need to find his courage.⁵⁰ I suspect that if I am going to ask my students and myself to attempt to “say something ... that's never been said before” in order to help mediate the challenges of our world for others, then I, too, will need to engage with my fear to see how I might, as Baldwin described for himself, “slowly ... open, perhaps the way a flower opens at morning, but more probably the way an atrophied muscle begins to function, or frozen fingers to thaw.”⁵¹

Notes

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- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
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- 33 Drew Lichtenberg, email to author, January 20, 2022. A special thanks to the STC dramaturgy team for this production, associate director Soyica Diggs Colbert and resident dramaturg Drew Lichtenberg, for their help, insights, and generosity in confirming this information as well as helping me make sense of my notes for this section.
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- 36 Baldwin, *Amen Corner*, p. 26.
- 37 Note: this is clear in the storyline of Mrs. Ida Jackson, played by Jasmine M. Rush in this production, as well.
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