The Jazz Aesthetic of Aishah Rahman

An interview by Afaa Michael Weaver

On Sunday March 21, 1999, I travelled by Amtrak to Providence from Boston to interview Aishah Rahman. She met me at the station in her Volvo sedan, and from there we drove to the BookStore, an interesting assemblage of comfort and quiet near the campus of Brown University, where Aishah is Professor of English in the Graduate Writing Program. Much like the jazz that informs the interstices of her writing, Aishah is the composite motion of sound, brilliant and arresting, edifying and elusive, the answer and the question in tandem. Nestled in a comer of the restaurant that features sofas and a coffee table, we talked about her life and her work-in the improvisational blur of mysteries that speak thru all she lives and believes, mysteries such as Nina Simone or Abby Lincoln or Charlie Parker. This blur is the quick spark in her eye or the need for art to survive our histories.

Fourteen months earlier, we saw her play Only in America at Providence's Perishable Theater. Her characters are music incarnate.

AMW: What are your memories of growing up in Harlem?

AR: It was a lot of fun, walking the streets, seeing the different sights, and feeling the energy and hearing the music. The parades, the spectacle. I remember all the different kinds of parades on Saturday and Sunday that I would run and follow. Daddy Grace's parades were all down to 11 6th Street, where he would be baptizing people in the streets. Daddy Grace would have his long fingernails out, and each nail was painted a different color. He would took like those pictures of Jesus, white with long, straight hair. That's vivid in my mind. Going to all the different churches. Par-

ticularly for girls, sometimes the only way we Could get out of the house was to go to church, so church hopping was a pastime I write about this in my memoir, *Chewed Water.* As a result I visited the numerous types of churches in Harlem. The more theatrical, the better I liked them. of course was the Sanctified storefront church which filled me with a lot of terror and wonder at the same time. There was also the camaraderie I had growing up with boys and girls my same age. I really never knew anything about white people until I went to high school. I remember being wary of the prospect of High School. Until then I had attended schools in my neighborhood. To add to my anxiety, I had attended an all-girls junior High so High School would be quite a change, boys and white folks. I went to George Washington, which was considered one of the best public schools at the time. Going to and from High School was an emotional gauntlet because our school was in an all white neighborhood whose inhabitants did not even want us passing through. This was in New York City, mind you.

AR: Yes. Practically.

AMW: What year was this?

AR: I graduated high school in 1954, so it must have been about 1951; but the fun I had in growing up with boys and girls in high school and in church was great. Dancing at the Savoy. I loved to dance, dancing to Tito Puente's learning the Mambo and the Cha Cha. Staying on top of the latest dances ... dancing was our pastime, dancing and jumping rope. Double Dutch. We practiced our steps. We would go to somebody's house, roll up the rugs and dance. That was the topic of discussion, and we listened to rhythm and blues on the radio. We listened to Tommy, " Dr. Jive," Smalls, and his classic rhythm and blues radio show on the south part of the dial. The Moonglows, The Orioles, all the great groups and when we sang the songs, sotto voce, in the girls bathroom, so the "other" kids wouldn't bear they would hear anyhow and the white kids would ask, "What's that you're singing?" because then they didn't know anything about that kind of music.

AMW: When did you start listening to jazz?

AR: Do you remember your first breath? Music, religious and secular, was always in the air. I thought my older sister, was going essentially a Victorian woman who relished a dirty joke, loved the music of jazz saxophonist, Gene "The Jug" Ammons and danced the calypso all around our living room.

AMW: When did you become interested in theater?

AR: I wrote my first play in the sixth grade. It was a play about germs. It was National Health Week, and I had these germs come out on stage, these animated germs. I wrote it, directed it, and I was the star of the sixth grade assembly, which was good because usually I was the bad person. When I was writing plays, I loved it. This made me the star, and I was getting positive attention rather than the negative attention someone like me used to get. I talked too much. I always seemed to be in trouble. I was too verbal, and I was a conduct problem, meaning I talked too much in class. I was the class clown. My mouth was always going.

AMW: Was that the mouth of theater going?

AR: I think so. As far as I was concerned there was allegory and drama everywhere. Especially in comic books. Batman and Robin, Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman were my favorites. Comic books and fairy tales fed my theatrical imagination. It was the magic within those pages that I loved. As far as formal theater, the first play I saw were at The Harlem Y. Langston Hughes' *Simply Heavenly*. There were also performances at the Little Theatre of St. Martin's Church, where at a very early age I saw a play, Outward *Bound* about some dead people aboard a ship. Live performances and books because I could stage the text in my mind have generally 0 on always been more impactful on me than film.

AMW: Where exactly was your neighborhood?

AR: I lived on 120th Street and Lenox Avenue in the Mt. Morris Park area.

AMW: That's not very far from Frank Silvera's Writer Workshop.

AR: Not far at all. The Workshop is on 125th Street. I was one of its founding members. My godfather used to take me by the hand

we would walk up to 125 street where he would stand for hours listening to aged Black Nationalist soap box orators rehash the Italian-Ethiopian War.

AMW: This was a black world of self-love, and in it you grew up and became a playwright. What did you expect the world to be receptive to from Aishah Rahman?

AR: I wanted the world to listen to my characters, receive their voices and know their spirits. My desire was always to be a playwright but whenever I expressed it I was advised to take stenography or typing or nursing so when Hansberry's play exploded on Broadway, a minute before the sixties, she was a welcome role model. I don't mean to imply that success to me means a play on Broadway because it doesn't. My idea of success is the model provided by *The Fantasticks,* a play that has run for 30 years at the Cherry Lane Theatre, a small off-Broadway house.

AMW: How do you respond in the music of your plays to these forces that are set against you?

AMW: My plays, so far, have been about men and women whose voices and therefore their lives have been muted. Their body beats are music, whether its in the way they speak, move deal with each or or their world view- It's in the improvisational way that have been forced to deal with life. My characters are not linear folk.

AMW: In improvisation we can talk about Charlie Parker's harmonic play or Billie Holiday's lifting melody away from the beat. In seeing Only in America,. I was impressed by all the music, but also I was impressed by the poetry. It's as if the characters are so fluent they fly in space.

AR: That's what I hear when I bear black people talk. There's poetry and rhythm in their speech, and it all amounts to music. It's an integral part, and it's hard to disconnect or separate into categories.

AMW: This includes everything from street vernacular to the Baptist preaching to the philosopher's soliloquies?

AR: Absolutely.

AMW: In *The Mojo and the Sayso*, Axle says, "Don't badmouth my car." Where does that come from, Aishah Rahman?

AR: *(laughing)* Enough said. Well, you can't talk about the man's car. Might as well talk about his mama. just like wings and feathers are a symbol of freedom in Native American cultures, cars are a symbol of fertility in ours. And I've never met a car that was a man.

AMW: Yes, cars are always women. Let's move from cars back to people and your concerns for black women and men.

AR: My concern is that we are sliding toward mental genocide. The price for success in America, in too many cases is self-annihilation, self hatred. It is infused in our kids very early by, among other things, a mis-educational system through its sins of omission as well as commission and a short-sighted world view. An educational system that ignores the truths of American history and culture, that purposefully ignores/and or distorts the accomplishments of people of color. By the time they reach high school, kids in America, black and white, have gotten the message that, generally, to be black is not to be superior, educated or intellectual.

AMW: What are your thoughts about acting?

AR: I think the actors have far too much say. *(laughing)* I think ours is an actor-oriented theater. The playwright is the least-respected in this whole collaboration.

AMW: Do you think this is related to the consumer nature of American society?

AR: Probably. But it's difficult for an actor to rise above his director and there is where the disrespect for playwrights is centered. Today, most directors don't even bother to do any meaningful "table-work" with their actors. They have the actors on their feet and are blocking the show without even bothering to discuss, in depth, the text. This is more the rule than the exception. Also, they have problems with language driven scripts. They are familiar with

Shakespeare and iambic pentameter but can't see that jazz language in plays like *Only In America* should be approached with careful attention to the rhythm and meter.

AMW: It sometimes seems that if one is a "serious" black artist, she or he must deal with a smaller audience. How do you feel about this?

AR: We artists are responsible for the choices we make in the art we produce. I am not saying that art that is successful, that works and is commercial is automatically bad because that is wrong headed attitude replete with sour grapes but success is journey, not a destination.

AMW: How do you feel about this title of yours, *Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage*?

AR: The title? ?I It's Only A Bird In A Gilded Cage" is a song my mother used to sing. The phrase, "Unfinished Women" was inspired by Lillian Hellman's novel.

AMW: We have talked informally about your interest in the vitality of life outside the campus while a student at Howard? What do you really know about street life?

AR: Not much. But a great part of writing is observation. Even though I lived a very sheltered" ghetto life" on 120th Street I aware of the street life and its denizens. By the way I use the word, "ghetto," ironically. During my childhood, we never used it, or felt like we lived in one. In college I learned I was poor, culturally deprived and lived in a "ghetto."

AMW: You were the young lady who knew people like Norman Lewis?

AR: I was always around art. I was always around people who were doing art and who were doing music and who were doing politics. For me these things have always been mixed together, going to rallies, going to shows, going to dances.

AMW: This was a fully integrated black world?
AR: Yes, and it led to the liberal world. In the sixties I was part of a

group for Cuba. I was a part of CORE. It felt natural to me. I was part of SWP, the Social Workers' Party. There was the split in the Village between the blacks and the whites. I was always in the mix of things.

AMW: It was interesting to see the woman's victory as the silencing of the man in *Only in America*, a play where there is also a cage. Can you comment on that play with that cage?

AR: That cage represents the silence that's enforced on black women, particularly in the black community And yes, Cassandra's victory of speech does silence Oral, a man who benefited by her speechlessness.

AMW: The theater is a man's world in world in a very thorough and oppressive way. The anthologies done by black editors, until recently, have largely ignored black women. Margaret Wilkerson's *Nine Plays by Black Women* is the first anthology of black female playwrights. Can you comment on this dominance?

AR: It shows the alienation between us.

AMW: I think your plays speak to this alienation. Do you think firs alienation comes back to us in the price we pay for success?

AR: It is the alienation that, some of us *think* we have to pay for success no matter how small it is.

AMW: In closing could you say something about black theater?

AR: Black Theater" is a misnomer for what exists today. To me, ideally, the term Black theater means a theatrical institution is produced and financially supported by black people, nourishes black playwrights, directors, theater technicians and critics who truly understand all aspects of American culture including the African American one and whose world view enables them to intelligently analyze plays written by African American playwrights. A theatrical institution whose artistic standards eschews mediocrity and reflects a tradition of theatrical innovation and excellence.

AMW: When you lived in Africa in the early seventies, what moved you

more than anything else?

AR: I lived in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Senegal. Everywhere I went I was generally received with genuine human warmth, I was impressed by the communal spirit that reigns in the culture. My fondest memories are dining with my friends in Senegal and eating from a communal bowl. It was very spiritual.

AMW: What is your hope for theater?

AR: That it will improve and the American theater will finally catch up to the wealth of stories of its varied peoples.